**The North Irish Horse Battle Reports**

**The Battle of Longstop Hill**

23rd April 1943

By 0530 hours, 23rd April, 5th Buffs reached their objectives but heavy machine-gun fire prevented 6th R.W.K. from going beyond Chaibine, making it impossible for 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to carry out their original plan before dawn. It was not until 0800 hours that 6th R.W.K. were able to reach both objectives after B and C Squadrons N.I.H. had been sent forward to occupy the Chaibine, where they dealt with machine-gun nests and were then accurately shelled and mortared. Early on 23rd April the Brigadier, with Lt. Cols. Thomas and Dawnay, went forward to make a new plan which was for 8th A. & S.H. followed by 1st Surreys with N.I.H. in support to assault Djebel Ahmera, the western feature of Long-stop. At 1330 hours after heavy artillery concentration the assault started. The 8th A. & S.H. went up the hill with great dash through heavy machine-gun fire. Casualties were heavy, including the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. McNab, the I.O., Capt. Erskine, and the Adjutant, Lieut. McLeish, killed. By 1530 hours after going in with the bayonet, the Argylls captured the hill.

Meanwhile “A" Squadron N.I.H. worked round towards Point 196 destroying en route a machine-gun which had held up 1st Surreys. One tank of 5th Troop crossed the wadi and contacted 5th Buffs, eventually reaching a spot from which the commander dominated the valley and Point 196, and from where, despite heavy shell fire, he managed to shoot up certain positions indicated by the Buffs. B and C Squadrons supported the attack from the right flank near Chaibine. By the Evening Djebel Ahmera was held by the 8th A. & S.H. and 1st Surreys, both battalions being very much under strength, and by 6th R.W.K., who had moved forward in support, the whole force being under the command of Lt. Col. Wilberforce, D.S.O., 1st Surreys. In order to protect the right flank and the road running South of Chaibine, a com­posite force composed largely of H.Q. Company personnel from 1st Surreys and 6th R.W.K., a section of Brigade Defence Platoon and anti-tank guns from 2561th Battery, under command of Capt. Stewart 6th R.W.K., took up a position on ridge south of Chaibine. This force remained in position until the brigade was relieved by 9th Infantry Brigade. During the night an attempt by 6th R.W.K. to capture Djebel Rhar failed owing to heavy mortar fire on the forming up point.

24th April 1943

On the morning of 24th April a composite Squadron N.I.H., with R.H Q Troop to help with covering fire was assembled on the southern slopes of Longstop to support the infantry - they.remained there to take part at mid-day in an operation by 1st Surreys to clear Mosque Ridge, and by 6th R.W.K. to capture Djebel Rhar the eastern feature of Longstop. Intense mortar and machine-gun fire was put down on the infantry as soon as they attempted to advance, the fire from Djebel Rhar being such that it was impossible for 6th R.W.K. to advance. A very small party of 1st Surreys and R.Es. was able to reach the ridge after it had been cleared by the tanks, one of which was damaged by a mine outside the main minefield running down to the road. This tank was successfully evacuated by Capt. Griffith under machine-gun fire. Another tank was brought up, personal weapons were got out and the crew very cleverly transferred to the supporting tank. Just before dark the tanks withdrew from the ridge, the damaged one being protected by infantry patrols.

During the morning a warning was received from an intercept that the enemy might counter attack Point 196 held by a Company of 5th Buffs. This attack did not materialize but two Troops of tanks were sent to support the Buffs in case of trouble. Through-out the night 24th/25th April two Troops remained on the southern slopes of Djebel Ahmera.br

25th April 1943

During 25th April the Boche had shown signs of withdrawing in front of 38th Infantry Brigade on our left, so it was considered possible that Djebel Rhar might be abandoned during the night. A reconnaissance patrol sent out by 6th R.W.K. to confirm whether this was so was soon very forcibly shown by machine-gun fire that the Boche was still in occupation of the position.

 The plan for the capture of Djebel Rhar, which was based on most accurate information obtained by reconnaissance patrols from 6th R.W.K. during the night, consisted of a diversion round the right flank from Mosque Ridge by C Squadron N.I.H. and a strong fighting patrol from 8th A. & S.H. followed by the main assault by 5th Buffs supported by N.I.H. less C Squadron from the left flank. The Brigadier went forward to fight the battle from Lt. Col. Dawnay's tank.

26th April 1943

The attack started at 0830 hours on 26th April, the Boche bringing down the usual heavy mortar fire which delayed the advance of the Argyll patrol, but the C Squadron tanks pushed on to the ridge north-east of Mosque Ridge from which the forward ob­servation officer had very good shooting throughout the day. Later the Argylls worked their way forward and cleaned up a number of snipers in the gulleys, capturing about a dozen pris­oners. This diversion was most successful as it had the effect of pushing the Boche into the arms of the main attacking force on the other flank and also prevented any withdrawal to the north­east.

On the left the 5th Buffs formed up near Point 196 at 0830 hours with B Squadron N.I.H. in front. Boche shelling began before 5th Buffs started to advance, but soon after 0900 hours the battalion moved forward with A Company on the right, D Company on the left, B Company in reserve, and B Squadron N.I.H. in support. The infantry advanced along the upper slopes, with the tanks pursuing a parallel course on the lower slopes of Djebel Ahmera. As the advance progressed two Troops of tanks worked forward. No. 4 Troop on the right silenced a machine-gun post in a re-entrant and then, after Lieut. Brownfield Pope had transferred to another tank owing to his own breaking a track, went on to engage two machine-gun posts, which surrendered. Immediately the Buffs appeared on the north-west slopes of Longstop the battalion was heavily and accurately shelled by infantry, self-propelled and medium guns.

At times whole platoons were hidden by bursting shells but they pressed on with magnificent spirit as though taking part in peace­time maneouvres. A machine-gun post then threatened to hold up the advance but immediate action by No. 4 Troop silenced it and Sjt. O'Hare, climbing high on the southern side of Point 289, dealt with three more such posts. Major Russell, com­manding B Squadron, then ordered No. 4 Troop to proceed round to the west of the Rhar to find a way up. At the head of the saddle between the Ahmera and Rhar, Lieut. Pope encountered another machine-gun and mortar post and, finally, a 75 mm. gun badly sited to fire down the western re-entrant, after one round of 6-pounder H.E. and a burst of Besa the crew surrendered. Sjt. O'Hare then tackled the ascent and on reaching the summit after a magnificent climb took over 50 prisoners. Lieut. Pope meantime was working round the western side of the Rhar. Sjt. O'Hare then moved on down the northern slope, shepherding the prisoners along with him.

The forward companies of the Buffs now moved on to their objectives and B Company moved up in support of A Company. As they moved on to Point 243 and the feature to the left of it, A and D companies received the surrender of an embarrassing number of prisoners, including the C.O. of 111-754 Grenadier Regiment and his four Company Commanders. On the left, Major Russell aided by Lieut. Pyl and Lieut. Brown, each of whose Troops were now reduced to a single tank, moved on to a spur to cover the northern side of the Rhar plain from Rhar to Sidi Ahmed, thus preventing the Boche withdrawing. It is very unlikely that any of the Longstop garrison escaped.

Whilst re-grouping on the spur, the Squadron was accurately shelled by a heavy gun but No. 2 Troop leader spotted the flashes and was able to get the artillery on toil. Unfortunately the F.O.O. was killed whilst directing his guns. The Buffs consolidated on Djebel Rhar, adapting the existing Boche defences and blasting new positions with " Beehives." Whilst the Buffs were consoli­dating, A Squadron 56th Reconnaissance Regiment moved up the road from Chassart Teffaha towards the forward position of C Squadron N.I.H. where the Squadron commander was able to indicate to the Reconnaissance Squadron some enemy still holding out. These were rounded up, four being killed and about 30 captured. On Longstop over 300 prisoners were taken at a cost to the Buffs of 40 casualties.

Throughout the operations from 22nd to 26th April detachments of sappers from 256th Field Company did excellent work with the infantry, tanks and reconnaissance Squadron, lifting mines and supervising the blowing of positions with "Beehives" Very fine work was done by 217th Field Ambulance evacuating casualties, and the speed with which this was carried out was greatly accelerated by the use of a pro­portion of carriers from each battalion.    The final operations, resulting in the capture of Djebel Rhar, were an example of perfect co-operation between all arms, particularly between tanks and infantry. Targets were success­fully indicated to the tanks by means of verey lights fired at machine-gun posts, and in one case a 75 mm. gun was dealt with in this manner. The method by which the tanks moved in echelon along the hillside with those higher up moving ahead of those in the valley enabled anti-tank guns to be engaged before they were able to fire on the tanks in the valley.

It is impossible to speak too highly of the support given by N.I.H. or of the steady advance of the Buffs under heavy shell-fire, two factors which made the capture of Djebel Rhar possible.

In the prisoner of war cage the German battalion commander who was responsible for the defence of Longstop, on being questioned about his defences made the following statement:

*" The Djebel Rhar is one of the strongest defensive positions that one could ever hope to occupy. I would have been prepared to hold it against a full scale British infantry brigade attack. When it was apparent that tanks were being used over the high ground I knew that all was over."*

Another German officer is reported to have stated:

*"When information was first received that tanks were being used on the high ground at Longstop it was not believed by the officers."*

Report on action by 1st Troop A Squadron, under Capt. R. H. Bowring, during period 23rd-26th April is given as an Appendix to this section.

After three quiet days, commander 78th Division was ordered to push forward along the valley towards Tebourba. C Squadron N.I.H. supported this advance and the following action took place: At 1000 hours, 30th April, C Squadron N.I.H led the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on to Points160, 177 and 202, which necessitated the crossing of two difficult oueds. By 1115 hours the tanks were on Point 160 and Point 177 and the pre-arranged signal was given to the A. & S. H. to advance. During their advance the infantry met with some machine-gun fire from the gulleys in the high ground north of Points 177 and 202 but succeeded in getting on to these two features.

At 1145 hours three Mark IV German tanks appeared from the direction of Sidi Zekri. These tanks were engaged and hits were seen on two of them. All three tanks then withdrew to the wadi. At about 1215 hours a Mark IV, equipped with a long barrelled 75 mm. gun, appeared round the right-hand side of Point 177, knocked out Sjt. Elliott's tank, killing the gunner, Cpl. Dickson, and holed Lieut. Mann's tank. Sjt. Elliott's crew baled out and went to ground but 2nd Lieut. Mann's crew stayed put and the co-driver, Trooper Eastwood, drove the tank back out of action but unfortunately overturned it in the bad oued at the bottom of the hill. It was then found that Lieut. Mann and Trooper Whalley were dead.

Just after this, another Mark IV appeared over the rise and was hit on the cupola by Major Welch's 2-pounder. It immediately went backwards down the hill and at least one man baled out. No more tanks were seen during the afternoon but heavy shell fire was put down by a big gun which blew a track off Sjt. Johansen's tank. When ordered to withdraw, Cpl. Bone picked up Sjt. Johansen's crew and withdrew first. Major Welch then withdrew the other two tanks to a position south of Sidi Ahmed at 1900 hours and returned to harbour. The infantry had withdrawn about an hour previousl Sjt. EllioFtt reported in at about 2400 hours, having waited until it was dark and then made his way down to the A. & S. H. position. In the early hours of 1st May Troopers Rooke and Chapman, the latter wounded, also got back. During this action it is estimated that ten enemy were killed, fifty prisoners were taken, and several hits were scored on three enemy tanks.

1st May 1943

From 1st May it was obvious from various Troop movements that 18th Army Group was regrouping. Rumours were circulating freely as to the composition of the break through force and the direction of the attack. We first of all thought that we were to assist in the break through to Tunis but, after order and counter order, to our extreme disappointment, we were finally split into three parts, R.H.Q., and A Squadron coming under command of 78th Division, B Squadron under command of 1st Division and C Squadron under command of 142nd Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps who were to support the 4th Indian Division in the big attack.

4th May 1943

The Regiment moved to its new harbour areas on the night of 4th May after handing over seven tanks to 145th Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps.

5th May 1943

5th May was taken up with reconnaissance by B and C Squadrons and final preparation for the big attack by C Squadron. In the evening, at 1700 hours 1st Division, with a Squadron of 142nd R.A.C. in support, finally occupied the Djebel Bou.

6th May 1943

At 0430 hours on 6th May the big attack started. The 4th British Division was on the right and 4th Indian Division, supported by 142nd R.A.C., with N.I.H. C Squadron vice their A Squadron, and 145th R.A.C., were on the left. 145th R.A.C., supported 5th Indian Brigade and 142nd R.A.C. the 7th Indian Brigade. C Squadron N.I.H. passed through the Gab Gab Gap and moved forward to an assembly area. By 0600 hours the first phase of the attack had proved successful and 142nd R.A.C. pushed through the Gap at about 0800 hours. C Squadron N.I.H., whose role was to protect the left flank, formed up behind Souissi but the advance was slightly delayed by the infantry, who were late.

By 1000 hours 7th Indian Infantry Brigade were on their first objective and immediately afterwards they pushed right on to Aoud Zriga. During this action C Squadron captured six 88 mm. anti-tank guns, two of whose crews did not fire a shot.

As C Squadron reached the final objective the leading elements of 7th Armoured Division were starting to pass through the hole which had been punched. At the same time 6th Armoured were streaming through on the right. The timing of the whole operation was extraordinarily good and the work of the artillery against enemy anti-tank guns extremely effective and splendidly executed. Only five enemy tanks were seen and they were engaged as they moved away from the final objective which was immediately converted into a firm base by our infantry and anti-tank guns. By 1500 hours C Squadron was on its way back to harbour.

7th May 1943

On 7th May C Squadron joined B Squadron under com­mand 1st Division and in the afternoon advanced to put the King's Shropshire Light Infantry into El Bathan without loss. Lt. Col. Dawnay arrived to take command of this operation but had to return again to 78th Division that night. At 1900 hours C Squadron was ordered by commander 3rd Infantry Brigade to carry a Company of the Forresters to an area near Djedeida. This was done and C Squadron then formed close laager at 0200 hours on 8th May.

8th May 1943

On 8th May Lt. Col. Dawnay was ordered to meet commander 78th Division at Mornaghia at 0600 hours to receive orders concerning the entry into Tunis, which had been entered by the leading elements of the armoured divisions the previous evening. A Squadron moved off at first light and was routed via El Bathan. Lt. Col. Dawnay at Mornaghia received orders that a Squadron of 142nd R.A.C. was to come under his command and that one Squadron of tanks was to go under command of iith Infantry Brigade and one Squadron under command of 38th Infantry Brigade.

During the morning all resistance ceased in Tunis and British Troops began to pour into the town. A Squadron N.I.H. arrived in the afternoon and Lt. Col. Dawnay then received in­structions to send this Squadron through the centre of the town to an area near Carthage. A Squadron, therefore, had the luck to have a triumphal drive through Tunis. The enthusiasm of the crowds knew no bounds and they received a truly magnificent reception.

Meanwhile Major Welch was early astir at 0430 hours to make a reconnaissance of Djedeida. Brigadier Moore, commanding 2nd Infantry Brigade, decided to attack at 1000 hours and ordered C Squadron to support the infantry across the river. Major Welch supported this attack very successfully, his own tank having the special task of dealing with a pillbox which was knocked out by 6-pounder A.P. followed by H.E. A very effective smoke screen was put down by the close support tank. Our infantry got across very quickly and took about fifty prisoners.

Major Welch then reconnoitred for a crossing and found a rather deep ford. Capt. Thomas and No. 1 Troop got cross immediately and the remainder of the Squadron was put over in a short time. The Squadron then deployed and worked round and through build­ings and woods in the vicinity. Immediately the tanks appeared about 200 more prisoners were rounded up. No. 4 Troop then carried a platoon of the Gordon Highlanders through Sidi Ab-dullah and No. 3 Troop took another to Chuart, both of these places being quickly occupied. Meanwhile Capt. Thomas and another Troop were rounding up more prisoners in the corn fields. Shortly after this B Squadron arrived and both Squadrons went into harbour in Chuart.

9th May 1943

On 9th May after harbouring the night near Headquarters 78th Division which was just north-east of Mornaghia, Lt. Col. Dawnay was informed that there was to be no movement that day for his H.Q,. and A Squadron. B and C Squadrons were still under command 1st Division and remained in the vicinity of Djedeida During the afternoon the Squadron of 142nd R.A.C. was ordered to return to its Regiment which was still under command of 4th Indian Division.

10th May 1943

On 10th May the Regiment received orders to concentrate in an area near Ain El Askar. A Squadron had to make the return march through Tunis and received another ovation on their way back. Before midnight the Regiment was safely in harbour.

During these last two days the 6th Armoured Division, who had been directed south east towards Hammamet, had carried out a brilliantly executed action against Hammam Lif, which was defended by many anti-tank guns and considered impregnable by the Germans. The 6th Armoured Division then continued on its way to Hammamet. Meanwhile 1st Armoured Division, having worked its way across the hills, arrived at Grombalia and the 4th Division made a circuit of the Cape Bon Peninsula. To the north the 7th Armoured Division moved north to meet the Ameri­cans who had captured Bizerta. During these days there were literally hordes of prisoners choking every road. Many units surrendered complete with all their equipment and were allowed to drive their lorries to the nearest prisoners' cage where they made their own cooking and sanitary arrangements. At one particular cage a German band arrived complete with instruments and in a very short time was regaling captors and captives alike with classical music.

11th May 1943

After a quiet morning, on 11th May we were informed that Generals Alexander and Anderson were going to take no chances whatsoever with the opposition that remained. General Von Arnim with his personal staff had surrendered, but had stated that he now had no control over his troops who had been ordered by the Fuhrer to fire to the last round and then surrender. Orders were consequently received that the Regiment was to come under command of 1st Division, which was to move to an area near Creteville.

This movement took place throughout the night 11th-12th May, and the Regiment reached their new harbour before first light on 12th May. During this day tanks were not required and the country around was combed by 4th Indian Division, 3rd Brigade and 128th Brigade which had come under command of 1st Division. Lt. Col. Dawnay with the assiostance of the Recon­naissance and Inter-Communication Troops, helped to marshal many thousands of prisoners and to despatch them with escorts to the various cages that were being hastily prepared.

12th May 1943

On the evening of 12th May the Regiment was ordered to put one Squadron under command of 128th Brigade for a final round up of the enemy in the area south east of Djebel Ressas. A Squadron was detailed for this job and moved out at first light on 13th May. No opposition was encountered and A Squadron were back in harbour again by the afternoon.

13th May 1943

The operation on the 13th May proved to be our last in the campaign and the Regiment moved to an olive grove just to the west of Hammam Lif on 14th May.

25th Tank Brigade arrived very shortly afterwards and for the first time since leaving England the Brigade found itself concentrated. After two days of intensive maintenance, rest was the order of the day until news of the Victory Parade reached us. At very short notice 30 tanks were made spotless, a Regimental flag was produced and the party left for Tunis.

20th May 1943

The Victory Parade on 20th May was a great success. Opposite the dais, which was flanked by two Churchill tanks, was formed up a Squadron of Churchills in serried Tanks. The route was lined by Churchills, Shermans and guns, and Guards of Honour of the Grenadier Guards, the Americans and the French were drawn up. General Eisenhower, General Giraud, General Alexander, General Anderson, Admiral Cunningham and Air Chief Marshal Tedder took the salute.

First came the French, preceded by a large band which played very martial music. They were splendidly received by the crowd and it was grand to hear the magnificent reception which the Goums were given by the British spectators - a fitting reward for their many daring exploits during the Campaign. There followed the Americans who had sent a few picked men from Bizerta, and then came the British contingent, headed by Commander 5th Corps, Lieut.-General C. W. Allfrey, D.S.O., M.C. The British Troops looked very proud as they marched by the saluting base to the music of drum and fife and bagpipe bands. The wheeled and tracked vehicles and the guns came right at the end of the procession and were magnificently turned out. A fly-past by the R.A.F. half way through the proceedings was very well executed and most thrilling to watch.

Thus ended the North African Campaign in which our Churchill tanks played a notable part both in defence and attack. Their effect on the morale of the enemy and the way they raised the morale of our own infantry was truly remarkable. Their feats of climbing and fire power proved most disheartening to the enemy. The Churchill tank made its name in no uncertain fashion.

**Epilogue**

The North Irish Horse came through the campaign with flying colours. The Regiment helped to stop a most determined attack on Beja and Djebel Abiod, took part in the very successful operations from Oued Zarga which culminated in the capture of Point 667, the highest peak in North Africa, and the Djebel Rmel; played a magnificent part in the capture of Longstop and, with C Squadron, helped to support 4th Indian Division in the final break through to Tunis. Considering the severity of the fighting, casualties both in personnel and tanks were remarkably light. The Regiment fought as a team and the spirit of all ranks was admirable. The Commander of 5th Corps, Lieut.-General C. W. Allfrey, D.S.O., M.C., could not have paid greater tribute to the Regiment when he said to Lt. Col. Dawnay:

*"Your Regiment has done extra­ordinarily well, every formation which you have served speaks well of you. I consider that a great compliment."*

**APPENDIX A.**

Report by Capt. R. H. Bowring on the action of No. 1 Troop A Squadron, which was detached from the Regiment on 23rd April and came under command of 38th Irish Brigade.

On the morning of 23rd April, soon after arriving at Chassart Teffaha, No. 1 Troop A Squadron was ordered to move to Kelbine where it would come under command of 38th Irish Brigade. As this Troop only had two tanks Serjeant Graham's tank from No. 5 Troop was added to it. No. 1 Troop moved by steep and winding tracks and en route had some difficulty in crossing a wadi. After some excellent work by the R.Es this was safely accom­plished. Capt. Bowring then reported to Brigadier Russell and was immediately taken up on to the height of Bettiour to see the enemy positions. As a result of this reconnaissance, Brigadier Russell decided that the tanks could reach Heidous and they were sent up to the head of the valley. As soon as they showed them­selves they were accurately shelled by a light gun and withdrew after Serjeant Graham's tank had suffered a direct hit.

On 24th April the Troop remained in harbour behind Bettiour. The officer commanding Royal Irish Fusiliers that day sent in a report that there was possible tank country along the Kef El Tiour. Brigadier Russell then planned an attack to take place the next day at 1000 hours to capture Buller's Hill; the Troop was also to shoot the enemy out of the rocky face of the Djebel Tanngoucha so as to enable the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers to advance on the other side.

During the night of 24th-25th April the enemy withdrew from Heidous. The attack went in according to plan; both objectives were captured and approximately 150 prisoners were taken. In the course of this assault an enemy anti-tank gun was met near Heidous but the crew had all been killed by our shell fire. The Troop remained in a counter-attack role until last light and then returned to harbour.

No. 1 Troop rejoined A Squadron at Chassart Teffaha on 27th April.