

Preface July 2023

This document was retyped by my wife and amendments made – where abbreviations were used, such as Bn. for battalion. Secondly where the carbon copy is illegible some words have been added in a few places. One line is missing in the photographs and is italicised. Place names are in capitals and have not been changed.

A number of footnotes have been added, most refer to Wikipedia entries which may help the reader.

Report on action of 18th Indian Infantry Brigade¹

At Bir-el-Sheir², 1st July 1942

Handwritten note: Deir-el-Shein

18th Ind. Inf. Brigade Group, Commander Brigadier R. Lockner³, M.C., was composed as under:

121 Field Regiment. Royal Artillery

2/5th Battalion. The Essex Regiment.

2/3rd Gurkhas

4/11th Sikhs

Plus Field Ambulance, Work Section, Brigade Transport Section.

It left ERBIL (North Iraq) on June 6th, 1943, and proceeded overland (all Infantry Battalions). Lifted in 8th Indian Division Royal Indian Army Service Corps (R.I.A.S.C.) to Palestine, via MOSUL, DER-EZ-ZOR, DAMASCUS; and was distributed in and around HADERA with 2/5 Essex in Barracks at ACRE. The Brigade was, therefore, a reinforcement for IXth Army. The Brigade remained in Palestine one week when it was ordered to proceed to the Western Desert. Units left on 25th June, with the exception of 121 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery which left two days earlier for MERSA MATRUH.

Brigade Headquarters and all Unit Motor Transport proceeded by road via SINAI DESERT to MERSA MATRUH. Each battalion left by special train ex PALESTINE via KANTARA for Western Desert. My Battalion (2/5 Battalion. Essex Regt.) was in the first train. No stop was made at AMRNAH to off load light baggage. The normal procedure for units entering the Western Desert is to drop all baggage there with a rear party and to proceed forward in operation order only. My train eventually reached the first station beyond the West of DABAA when it was stopped by the Station N.C.C.⁴ actually in the station.

¹ The author is Lt. Col. Kenneth Ferguson May, C.O. 2/5th Battalion, Essex Regiment, the report is dated 12th April 1944 – when he was no longer a Prisoner Of War.

² This spelling has not been altered in the text.

³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rupert_Lochner

⁴ Probably National Control Centre, which applies to railways

This was at about 21.00 hours on 26th June. In addition to my train, there was a goods train and a line of wagons also halted in the station, with the result that the whole three made a good target. The station was bombed and the line out a few miles west of it. I got my Battalion out of the train and quickly dispersed. Well off and away from the track and ordered the driver to move his train $\frac{1}{2}$ mile west of the Station to break up the target. Casualties were 2 killed and 4 wounded but in the other train in which was a mixed personnel, chiefly Indians, there were several casualties. Night was spent in rendering First Aid and checking up Sub-units. Railway staff could not be found but eventually in small hours of the morning, a captain of R.B's⁵ arrived and said all trains would be turned around and proceed to EL-ALAMEIN. The train containing 4/11 Sikhs was a mile in the rear of mine, and east of this station. As they had several casualties their train proceeded first, followed by mine. I arrived at EL ALAMEIN at about 08.00 hours on June 27th and I ordered 4/11 Sikhs and my Battalion to disperse well astride the railway line in an area about 1 mile from the station.

I would state here that Brig. Lockner was sick and remained behind in Palestine. Lt. Col. C. N. Grey, 2/3 Gurkhas was Acting Brigadier, and had he proceeded with Brigade Headquarters and all motor transport independently, to MERSA MATRUH. On arrival at EL ALAMEIN I was the Senior Battalion Commander and having found that the 2/3 Gurkhas had already been detrained there and were bivouacked off the line, I went off to contact Lt. General Willoughby Norris, Commander XXX Corps (30th Corps) who was at Headquarters 1st South African Division.

It will be seen that Battalion Commanders were not told their train destination but it was assumed that Movements would inform them.

I contacted General Norris and reported that the three Battalions of 18th Brigade were at EL ALAMEIN but that Brigade Headquarters and all motor transport including unit motor transport and 121 Field Regiment had proceeded by road and were probably making for MERSA MATRUH if not already turned back. At this time there was a big retrograde movement along coast road and great congestion of traffic.

He ordered me to keep Brigade where it was and asked for a liaison officer. I sent Major Hawkins, 1/4 Essex. At about 07.00 hours 28th June a Staff Officer from XXX Corps arrived with an operation order and maps. The gist of its contents was as follows. 18th Indian Brigade was to take up a defensive position at, BIR-EL-SHIER at once. BIR-EL-SHIER is approximately midway between El Alamein and Kut Putara. I was to reconnoitre a position for this Brigade plus one for a Brigade of 50th Division which was expected to be pulling in any hour. Check posts were to be established at certain points to collect and direct units withdrawing across the desert. No transport was available to move the battalions, and a delay of about 2 hours was caused until unit motor transport Sikhs and my own reported. A shuttle service was therefore maintained in ferrying all three battalions. to BIR-EL-SHEIR and by midnight, 28/29 June, the whole of 18th Indian Infantry Brigade had arrived there less 121 Field Regiment.

⁵ Possibly Rifle Brigade

In the meantime, I had gone ahead with O.C's 4/11 Sikhs and 2/3 Gurkhas had reconnoitred (for a) brigade (coming) from 50th Division the dividing line being the macadam track which runs due EAST from DABAA about 14 miles inland from coast road and which in fact cuts through the depression south of BIR-EL ALAMEIN.. Water had to be drawn from EL HAMMAN, 50 miles away and unit motor transport delivering it to sub-units. This was carried on right up to contact with the enemy and explains why unit B Echelon⁶ motor transport was not withdrawn. On arrival I was warned that the enemy was to be expected in 48 hours; only 4 bulldozers were available for the Brigade and the ground at BIR-EL-SHEIR could only be dug down 2 ft. when after that one came to rock. Pneumatic picks were not available.

Sufficient dannert⁷ (barbed) wire was obtained to make a triple coil obstacle all round. There was a great scarcity of mines and they only arrived in small packets. Brigade was assisted by South African engineers in laying same. 1000 yards of my Battalion front was without mines. Four anti-tank 2-pounder guns were available, minus sights and ammunition was limited. In addition, positions were dug to take 6-pounders (number unclear) per Battalion which were promised, and in fact, arrived, in the night 30 June / 1st July. There were manned by The Buffs⁸ and those in my Battalion area did excellent work in the battle on July 1st. Guns and sticky bombs were not available. Eighteen 25-pounders arrived on evening of 30 June made up from three Field Regiments viz. 121, 124 and (97) Kent Yeomanry. Very little opportunity was available for reconnaissance and the primary role for all these 25-pounders was anti-tank defence. During the period, the Battalions, was organising its defensive box, armoured cars of The Guides⁹ were in observation South and West of the position. No patrols were pushed out as every available man was employed in digging in, wiring, laying mines and digging gun sites. Time was against us from the start, and it was impossible to dig positions for 25-pounders as well. This will explain the fairly high casualties amongst Royal Artillery personnel.

As regards reserve SAA (small arms ammunition), all the Battalions had, was that carried from IRAQ as per G.1098: no other was available. In the case of most field batteries, they had already expended some ammunition prior to pulling into the Brigade box.

On the evening of 30th June, I received a signal from Brigade that probably (my) battalions. would be withdrawn by motor transport and that guides were to report Brigade Headquarters the next day - time to be notified later. This order in fact was not completed as will be seen later.

Morning of July 1st was dusty and visibility bad, I would state that since the Brigade's arrival at BIR-EL-SHEIR various bits of units and formations including a large part of 1st Armoured Division¹⁰ had pulled through the Brigade Box and were to rendezvous to the EAST pf BIR-EL-SHEIR. This continual movement did not improve visibility.

⁶ B Echelon – Contained the personnel and vehicles necessary to collect, breakdown and distribute stores and supplies for the regiment. Vehicles that could conveniently be left out of battle were also located with this echelon. From: <http://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/a-b-and-f-echelons.29188/>

⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concertina_wire

⁸ See: See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffs_\(Royal_East_Kent_Regiment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffs_(Royal_East_Kent_Regiment))

⁹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guides_Cavalry Deir el Shein is not mentioned

¹⁰ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Armoured_Division_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Armoured_Division_(United_Kingdom))

Towards 10.00 hours, July 1st, a large column of dust was reported moving up from South-west and armoured cars of (The) Guides (*line missing on photographed copy*) advancing from that direction and that they were pulling in.

At about 11.00 hours one of my forward Company Commanders reported that a Bren carrier was moving towards our lines flying a white flag. In due course two men were blindfolded and brought into my Command post. Lt. Col. Grey had just arrived. There wore no rank but stated that they were two officers of 50th Division who had been captured by 15th Panzer Division¹¹ and had been sent by (the) German Division Commander to order us to surrender with 1/2 hour to save needless bloodshed. We said we would fight it out. At that moment, Brigadier J. S. Nichols¹² temporarily commanding 10th (Indian) Division¹³ which we did not come under, rang up from Brigade Headquarters he was told the situation and ordered the two officers to be sent down to him as he had recently commanded 151 Brigade¹⁴ in that division. These two officers stated 15th Panzer Division had about 60 tanks, a lot of 25-pounders, 6 and 2-pounder anti-tank guns, and much captured motor transport with plenty of petrol and water. At 11.30 hours the enemy commenced light shelling on my Battalion front and some of his forward elements nosed up to the wire on (B Echelon) front (see sketch). He wrote off about half a dozen vehicles on our mines until he got into a depression about 1/4 mile west of B Echelon.

B Echelon had no mines in front of its position for reasons already stated. He then increased his shelling and stiffened it up with heavy mortar fire. Under cover of this, the enemy endeavoured to place Bangalore torpedoes¹⁵ in our wire but our own mortars put down a heavy concentration and beat them off. At this time every available men, cooks, mess staff, clerks, B.T. (battalion transport) personnel and Q.M. (Quartermaster) and his staff were firing steadily and there is no doubt they took steady toll of his infantry who tried to force a gap. It has already been mentioned that the Battalion only had the ammunition it had brought from IRAQ. Towards 13.00 hours. the ammunition situation was getting desperate and finally the enemy got a lodgement, blew the wire and formed a gap, and exploded it with tanks. However, he had not had it all his own way. The 25-pounders had some excellent targets, some at point blank range. Maj. Paul, R.A., key link Battery Commander told me his guns shot up at point blank range some tanks and 25-pounders in enemy hands. I cannot speak too highly of the action B Echelon put up. They fought until practically all their ammunition was expended, and certainly extracted a heavy price from the enemy infantry, but against tanks, it was impossible and our 25-pounders and anti-tank guns were very thin on the ground.

The effect of this breakthrough meant that my right Company. ("C" Company.) had an open flank, and there was now a large gap between it ??? left flank of 2/3 Gurkhas, which had previously been held by Essex B Echelon.

¹¹ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/15th_Panzer_Division_\(Wehrmacht\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/15th_Panzer_Division_(Wehrmacht))

¹² See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Nichols_\(British_Army_officer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Nichols_(British_Army_officer))

¹³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/10th_Indian_Infantry_Division makes no mention of J. Nichols

¹⁴ See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/151st_Infantry_Brigade_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/151st_Infantry_Brigade_(United_Kingdom))

¹⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangalore_torpedo

From information I obtained after capture from Lt. Col. Grey, the enemy then pushed East and into the box and towards Brigade Headquarters. Where there was quite a lively battle. Possibly he saw some of our 7 Matilda tanks which joined the Brigade. on the evening 30th June. At the same time the enemy tried to infiltrate into "C" Company's. area, but was driven off. By this time (approximately 1400 hours), shelling both from guns and mortars was pretty stiff, but it was apparent to me that so far the enemy had not employed his tanks in any strength against my battalion. front. I was still in touch by line with all Companies. No 18 radio sets would not function. "C" Company. reported that enemy machine guns were concentrating on his area but except for tanks stuttering about in the distance he was in no immediate danger. Visibility was still not good. Towards 16.00 hours, "C" Company reported that tanks were moving up against him and from his right rear too. Shelling from mortars was intensified not only on "C" and "B" Companies position, but also round Command Post and Signal centre.

The enemy did not press his attack though. The 6-pounders manned by The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) were doing very good work and in addition he may have suspected minefields which undoubtedly would have been laid for all round defence of companies had the mines and time been available. It was not until about 17.00 Hrs that he finally overrun "C" Company., and then commenced attacking "B" Company. It will be seen from the sketch that the enemy had now bitten rather deeply into the Battalion defences. Soon after, Col. Grey rank me up to say 1st Armoured. Division were counterattacking shortly and this information certainly put additional spirit into the men. At about 17.30 hours. The fight round Brigade Headquarters appeared to be getting hotter and there was intensive shelling everywhere, and the line to Brigade Headquarters was cut. At about this time too, I looked out from my Command post towards the 4/11th Sikhs area, and I saw lines of men running towards their own wire, waving white turbans. No firing was coming from the battalion area, but the effect of it was to allow the enemy to pass round Brigade Headquarters, overrun the Sikhs position without opposition, and take the remainder of my battalion in the rear and left flank. Coupled with this "B" Company now the right flank of the battalion. as "B" Echelon and "C" Company had gone, reported that enemy tanks were bearing down on them and gun and mortar fire was becoming very intense. Heavy machine gun fire was sweeping the ground and signals soon had casualties on (the telephone) line parties. By this time too, our own artillery fire was slackening. It could have only been due I am sure to lack of ammunition. In spite of this the enemy made his final attack as far as my Battalion was concerned very deliberately. It was only when those elements of his which had filtered through the Sikhs without opposition were able to come in on the remainder of the battalion's rear that it was then all over. By 19.30 hrs the fighting had ceased.

I am bound to say this. Had the Sikhs fought, we stood a very good chance of breaking off the action under cover of darkness and re-organising or pulling out if no further ammunition could be got up.

As it was, the final end to the battle was too one sided. Most supporting weapons had shot off their ammunition, and the majority of my anti-tank guns were knocked out. Added to which, we had no sticky bombs to hand out to the enemy. He does not like that form of attack from infantry. Lt. Col. Grey who was also captured told me he considered the brigade knocked out 12 tanks, and that the Brigade. Supply and Workshop Section plus Field Ambulance and some Indian Troops had got away. I am unable to say what the total casualties were in the Brigade.

The majority of my battalion was captured as eventually the battalion areas was completely surrounded. This is the first opportunity I have had to report on this action as I have just recently escaped from enemy hands, and until such time as all my officers are free I am unable to present to submit the names of any officer or man for recognition or award. This will be done at a later date. Certain instances of bravery were reported to me by my officers whilst I myself was a P.O.W.(Prisoner Of War). These statements will be verified in due course. The counterattack put in my 1st Armoured. Division arrived too late to relieve the Brigade. At about 20.00 hours, whilst a prisoner, I saw the enemy check for a considerable period and then he switched his advance from East to North-East.

In conclusion, I would state that for the greater majority of my men, this was their first action, and taking into consideration that the position was hastily defended without sufficient mines, and also that we were very short of supporting weapons, I consider that they fought their best with the tools available under difficult conditions. I think these remarks apply equally to 2/3 Gurkhas.

(Sgd.) K.F. May. Lieut. Col.

Commanding 2/5th Battalion the Essex Regiment.

London

April 12th 1944

Copy to : Lt. Gen. Sir Geoffrey Howard, K.C.B., D.S.O.,

Colonel The Essex Regiment

Lt. Gen. Willoughby Norrie, C.B.E. D.S.O.

Commander. XXX Corps,

File (two)