

THE STORY OF 4th RHA IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

Introduction

This does not set out to be a methodical or even a particularly accurate regimental history. It is simply a record of events in chronological order as I saw them or heard of them; or, more precisely, as I recollect seeing or hearing of them. The events related go back to more than four years ago, and I have no notes, diary, maps, or even another brain or memory to consult; so I cannot guarantee complete accuracy. However, the story should not suffer on that account, as it will apply only to small details such as dates etc. I will probably mention a number of dates quite categorically, and it may be possible to prove lots of them wrong if anyone takes the trouble, but why worry? They will only be a few days out, and the war has gone on for years already. On the other hand, I will not allow the admitted lack of accuracy to run me into romancing: everything I write is in good faith and is what I believe did happen in sober truth.

A word about any people who may crop up in this story. I won't attempt to cover every officer and man who passed through the regiment during this time; at a rough estimate I should say there were at least 120 officers and 1200 ORs. Nor will I exercise any particular discrimination. Different people will appear from time to time according to the whim of the moment, or as they seem necessary to complete the picture. I may have quite a lot to say about some of them, *and here I realise I am on dangerous ground*, as of course any opinions I may express are of necessity my own entirely. They may therefore be completely wrong, and I may be maligning some and giving undue credit to others; but as I am recording events simply as I believe them to have happened, so I will record my impressions of people as I believe them to have been.

If this story has any value at all then it is a personal value as being the views of one chap on the efforts of a fine regiment during a long and trying, but ultimately triumphant time.

Beginnings

4th Regiment RHA was formed in Cairo in May 1939 by the brigading together of C and F(Sphinx) Batteries. Both these Batteries were recently from India where they had left behind them their horses with the intention of being mechanised in Egypt. I fancy that the loss of the horses was mourned far more by the officers than by the men who reckoned that a horse is too much trouble to look after, though there were of course exceptions.

The Batteries were organised on the new establishment of three troops each of 4 guns, ie 24 guns in the regiment. This meant a considerable expansion from the old 6 gun battery organisation and in order to effect the necessary increase, G Bty, also from India, was split up and merged into the other two, its identity being completely lost except for one troop of F Bty, which continued to be called G. Little more than the name of G returned to England to be reformed there and find a place in 5 RHA.

The process of mechanisation went very slowly as everything else in the army in those days. The regiment received no guns and only enough vehicles to draw the daily rations, train a few drivers and so on. Consequently, this transition period was a very trying time as there was little to occupy the troops and crime increased at an alarming rate, as it always will when troops have nothing to do, whatever they may say to the contrary; this at any rate applies to regular troops. However, the regiment received one priceless asset

during this period in the form of Major J C Campbell MC as he was then, but even at that time known to all and sundry as 'Jock'. He came from a coast defence battery, which he had brought out from England, to take over C Bty, on which he exercised a most electric influence.

The Germans invaded Poland on September 1st 1939 and the repercussions on 4 RHA were immediate. C Bty were mechanised instantaneously in one day, and F shortly afterwards. C were actually told to draw up guns and vehicles from ordnance one night, and two troops set off for Mersah Matruh the following morning, a distance of some 320 miles. That they arrived without casualty must have been due more to luck than good management, as few of their drivers had had more than elementary instruction.

While at Matruh and beyond the battery began intensive training with its new guns and vehicles, thus getting its first introduction to that Western Desert which was to be its home and hunting ground for so many years to come. The guns, by the way, were converted 18/25 pdrs pulled by 'Dragon' tractors powered by a Meadows 22 hp engine. Jock Campbell's goal in all the training was that C Bty should join the 7th armoured division. At that time the division was commanded by the great General Hobart, one of the most forceful pioneers of the armoured division. He was not, however so great that he realized the necessity of artillery in support of armour; incredible though it may seem now, the current idea was that tanks could bash their way through any opposition without artillery support, and that anyway they would move so fast that no guns would be able to keep up with them. Jock though otherwise; his ambition was to cultivate such efficiency and speed in his battery that they would prove themselves invaluable to the division, and so win their way into it. It is hard to appreciate now how much he and his associates realised the revolutionary influence which their ambition to prove the RHA, as ever, second to none, and at the same time to establish for it a definite role in the mechanised army, would exert on the whole trend of ideas in this important field of military theory. He was of course successful, and C bty – but not the rest of the regiment – became part of the division in the New Year.

Their training being well advanced, and the 'flap' about Italy coming into the war having died down somewhat, the two troops rejoined the regiment in Cairo after Xmas.

Here, I think, the story of 4 RHA proper will have to be interrupted to relate the circumstances of my own arrival in Egypt and joining of the regiment. I left England on 29th of March 1940 as one of a draft of 30 officers and 220 men. These 30 officers were all newly commissioned subaltern fresh from OCTU and incredibly green and frightened young men they were. Our route was Southampton, Le Havre, Marseilles, Malta, Alexandria, Abbassia. Now, green and frightened though we were, we were the very first OCTU officers ever to arrive in the Middle East, and as such something of an event. So on 6 April, when we arrived at Abbassia there was quite a little reception committee to welcome us consisting of the late Capt C P Hamilton, famous army cricketer, who was Staff Captain RA, and the late Capt Paul Hobbs, equally famous as one of the great Hobbs brothers, all of whom played rugger for the army.

We lined up our men and ourselves feeling horribly hot and self-conscious in front of these elegant officers in their light grey uniform. (I remember Paul gently and so politely advising us that in the Middle East officers did not usually wear gloves!) Ham made a nice little welcoming speech, the men were whisked away to their various regiments for the night, or to the Continental Hotel. Norman Smith, Peter Rodier, Dick Judd and myself were taken to the 3 RHA mess right next door, and taken care of in that hospitable manner which one would expect of such a fine regiment. Our anxieties were soon dispelled, and we were

made to feel so much at home that I retain a clear impression of the four of us before very long sitting back in the four most comfortable armchairs in the mess telling an attentive audience of senior officers just what an advantage the OVCTUs would be to the Royal Regiment.

Compare this reception to that which an officer would receive two or three years later. He would arrive as one of a crowd of about 200; be met, if he was lucky, by 5 3-tonners; carted off to the base depot; pushed into a tent with seven others, the whole eight being committed to the tender care of a self-styled 'suffragi' who had probably been raked off the streets only a week or two before, after which he would be left to stew in his own juice for anything from one to six months.

By contrast, first thing next morning we were all taken off (despite its being Sunday) to an interview with the BRA, Brigadier Graham. He saw us all separately, and amongst other questions asked us what branch of the artillery we preferred to join. I, thinking that the best was good enough for me naturally jumped at the Horse Artillery, thinking that everyone else would do the same, and without much hope of being accepted. However, it turned out that I was the only one of the thirty who had the nerve to ask for the best. I think the others had a hazy idea that they would be expected to play polo all the time or something. Brig Graham therefore said that I should go to 4RHA and of the rest he decided to select the older and presumably more responsible members of the party to fill the RHA vacancies. As I was one of the youngest of the whole party, I was very lucky to make up for a lack of years with a bit of extra cheek. Accordingly, Dick Judd, John Croft and I were posted to 4RHA and Ken Watt, Norman Smith and Peter Rodier to 3RHA. I would like to mention briefly what I know of the varied histories of these five others since that time. Dick Judd was obviously cut out for the staff, where he eventually found himself. A most capable officer, he is now DAAQ of 13 Corps, and a Lt Col. Norman Smith was down-graded a few months later on account of defective eyesight; he drifted through various jobs on the Q staff in Cairo, and was when last heard of, also a Lt Col. Peter eventually commanded a battery in 1 RHA, was badly wounded in the arm at Alamein, and has been invalided out of the army. Ken became Adjutant of 3RHA, lost a leg at Alamein, and has also been invalided out. John Croft became Intelligence Officer of 7 Support Group (under 'Strafer' Gott), but contracted spinal meningitis and was invalided home in Jan 1941. I have not heard of him since. I feel that the combined record of our little batch is quite impressive, and that the faith placed in the early OCTU entry was not misplaced.

This brings us to the point where we can join 4RHA again in our story, which the three of us did that very afternoon in fact. The regiment was stationed at that time at Helmieh, some 8 miles out of Cairo. The greater part of this camp including the barrack miles out of Cairo. The greater part of this camp including the barrack buildings had been turned over to a general hospital, the officers mess being given to the sisters. The troops were therefore in tents and huts, and the officers were living as guests in the doctor's mess. Helmieh at that time was a lovely place, and a very nice station even if one did get a certain amount of appendectomy etc with one's meals. After an interview with the CO, Dick and John were posted to F bat, and myself to C.

A number of changes were taking place among officers in the regiment just at this time as the hopeless tangle of the promotion of regular officers began to sort itself out in the expansion of the wartime army. Until shortly before I joined there were

ED Simonds

[Transcribed from notes he started in about 1947 but never completed]

Appendix 1

ROLL OF HONOUR (OFFICERS)

Killed	Wounded	POW
Maj D C R Puckle Capt R G Cook MC (C) Capt A H Wood MC (C) Capt J R Barton MC (C) Capt D Mcvey MC (F) Lt A M Wilson (C) 2/Lt W K Evers (C) 2/Lt P Crane DSO (RHQ) 2/Lt J Thorburn (C) 2/Lt E Dainty (DD) 2/Lt M Kershaw (DD) Total 11	Maj H L Cowan (C) Capt J Crowe (F) Capt J H Weller-Poley MC (C) Capt J O K Denny MC (DD) Capt E D Smith (DD) Capt W A P Warden MC (C) Capt E D Simonds (C) Lt J Henderson R Sigs (RHQ) Lt P Matthews (C) Lt B F Pantin (C) Lt R Stevenson (F) (2) 2/Lt J Feast (DD) 2/Lt R Stevens (F) 2/Lt R W Okell (F) 2/Lt Halliwell (RHQ) 2/Lt B Potter (RHQ) 2/Lt Brigden (C) 2/Lt R dodd (F) Total 18	Maj G H Goschen MC (C) Capt L Howe RAMC Lt (QM) Studley (RHQ) Lt Harrison (C) Lt Lyte (F) 2/Lt D McCormick (F) 2.Lt P Foden (DD) 2/Lt A Collins (F) Total 8

Appendix 2

AWARDS – OFFICERS

VC	DSO	MC
Lt Col J C Campbell	Lt Col J C Campbell & Bar Lt Col J C Currie Lt Col J C Christopher* Maj R A Eden* 2/Lt P Crane	Lt Col L J Livingstone* Learmonth & Bar Capt R G Cook & Bar Capt J A T Sharp & Bar Maj H C Withers Maj G H Goschen Maj G J Lomas Maj A H D Barrow Capt W A P Warden Capt A H Wood Capt D Mcvey Capt J R Barton Capt P Greenfield Capt A A Banks Capt G Chilver-Stainer Capt J O K Denny Capt K Woods Capt J H Weller-Poley

* These were awarded in a previous unit.

AWARDS – ORs

DCM	MM
BSM Marlow (C) Sgt Cooper (C) Gnr Newhouse (E)	BSM McCorquodale * (C) BSM Johnston* (C) Sgt Oldham (C) Sgt Chivers (F) Sgt Bradley (F) BSM Crocker (C) Sgt Clarke (C) Bdr Place (C) Bdr Smith (DD) L/Bdr Gray (C) L/Bdr Baker (C) Gnr Tallentyre* (C) Gnr Rogers* (C) Gnr Windle (F)

*This is rather a difficult list, and it is quite possible that there may be some omissions in it.

Appendix 3

LIST OF OFFICERS IN THE REGIMENT WHEN WE MARCHED TO WAR AGAINST THE ITALIANS ON JUNE 10, 1940

RHQ	C	7
Lt Col E Latham Maj J C Campbell Capt M C Lewis Lt (QM) Studley 2/Lt V Wolfson Lt Bull (RAMC)	Maj Thomas Capt Gorchen Capt Morton Capt Warden Capt Lefevre Lt Cook Lt Griffiths Lt Doe 2/Lt Hughes 2/Lt Evans 2/Lt Simonds*	Maj Sheppard Capt Grove Capt Lewin Lt McVey Lt Pillons Lt Shorton 2/Lt Greenfield* 2/Lt Judd 2/Lt Croft 2/Lt Russell*

OFFICERS IN REGIMENT AT TIME OF FALL OF TUNIS MAY 13, 1947

RHQ	C	7	DD
Lt Col Livingstone Learmonth MC Maj Rudd-Clark Capt Russell* Lt (QM) Marlow Lt Hutchinson Lt Mather Lt Lambert (RAMC) Lt Iron (RAOC) Lt Birkenshaw (R Sigs) Padre ?G Winder	Maj Hankey Capt Sombell Capt Sharp MC Capt Curry Lt Brigden Lt Foster Lt Edwards Lt Bowen Lt Johnson	Barrow MC Greenfield MC* Banks MC Simonds* Stevenson Kershaw Morden O'Kell Wells Wethon English	Eden DSO Cooper DCM Sainsbury Chilver-Stainer MC Atkinson Howell Sheppard Hannen-Clark

Footnote:

This story was transcribed from a manuscript handwritten written by Duncan Simonds and found amongst his estate papers on his death in August 2002. The manuscript appears to date from the immediate post war years and is clearly a project that he abandoned for whatever reason and had never discussed with his family.

R. Simonds 2005