

Kenneth FitzGerald Simonds (1920-2006)

Oxford University & the War Years

1938 – 1946



Kenneth at Oxford, 1938-1939

Magdalen College

When I came up in 1938 [John Redcliffe-Maud](#) was Dean (later Baron Redcliffe-Maud, GCB, CBE of the City and County of Bristol & High Commissioner to the Union of South Africa) and he was a good friend of my Eton Housemaster, [Harry Babington-Smith](#). (later Sir Henry Babington-Smith GBE CH KCB CS, a director of the Bank of England) They had both been King's scholars at Eton and I think I'm right in saying that John had fagged for Harry. It was this friendship that brought me to University and short though my time there was I never regretted it.

The Master was [Sir William Beveridge](#) (later 1st Baron Beveridge, KCB, Labour politician who founded the welfare state). The Dean was John Maud who was my political tutor and [George D.H. Cole](#) (A libertarian Socialist, author & member of the Fabian Society) taught me Economics. It all added up to a pretty powerful team. I had opted to read PPE and found myself in the hands of one of the two newly appointed bright young Dons who The Master had brought into the college. A certain [J. Harold Wilson](#), (later Prime Minister and Baron Wilson of Rievaulx, KG, OBE, PC, FRS, FSS) was about 5 years older than myself. I can't claim to have had an exactly close relationship with him - he operated on a different intellectual plane to myself – nor did I absorb much in the way of economics, but in the fateful summer of 1939 we were both guests at a week-long economics working party, along with the Master. Our hostess was Mrs Mair, herself a powerful economist, who much later became Lady Beveridge. We gathered at Avebury on the Wiltshire Downs, an ancient site which I have come to prefer even over Stonehenge and for that week I shared a bedroom with a Prime Minister in waiting – in retrospect it was quite a momentous week!

Our paths never crossed again. Harold Wilson's mighty brain kept him in a reserved occupation through the war years and thereafter his rise to power was remarkable. But I twice had contacts with him which were a great tribute to his legendary memory:- my brother Duncan had been at a luncheon at the Café Royal on Regent Street, at which Wilson was present in his capacity as Leader of the Opposition. After lunch my brother's office car picked him up and drove him down Regent Street. Wilson was standing on the pavement looking for a taxi, so he picked him up and drove him to Westminster. Wilson's response to my brother's opening enquiry was immediate. It must have been 15-20 years since he had known me and he must have known a large number of much more important people in the interval, but he had instant recall & remembered me precisely. And when he became Prime Minister I

wrote him a congratulatory letter, to which his immediate reply was in terms which only he could have written, recalling the events of 1938-39 when he could not have had any infrastructure to brief him. It was a most human and remarkable response.

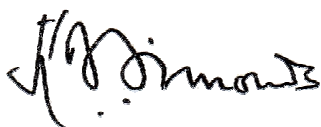
My generation was especially hard hit in WWII and there are few of us still around, but at University I did make 2 special friends. R.C. (Bobby) Fenwick arrived with me as an already famous cricketer. I had seen him that July make a century for Harrow against Eton at Lords. I had no cricketing prowess at all, but he was the nicest of men and we became the best of friends for one short academic year. I only saw him once again when I went down from Catterick to visit his home and meet his family in Easingwold, Yorkshire. Thereafter we went our separate ways, and it was not until a post war visit to Oxford University that, sadly, I found his name on the Roll of Honour. I went to see his family again at Easingwold and learned that Bobby had gone back for a term or two and then enlisted. He had been commissioned, good Yorkshireman that he was, into a Yorkshire Regiment. They had been sent to the Far East and had very heavy fighting in Arakan against the Japanese (now Rakhine State, Burma). Bobby survived and was sent back to Poona in India for rest and training. It was there one Sunday morning that he went to Holy Communion and was sitting on the tailboard of a truck when it collapsed. He fell on his head and was killed – a tragic end to a great & good life.

My other great & enduring friend was Peter (George) Cantlay. He came up from Radley at the same time. He too went to Catterick and was posted to the old Surrey & Sussex Yeomanry, by then the 144th Field Regiment R.A. in March 1940. We were in different Batteries but had very similar careers thereafter for the rest of the war – Italian East Africa, Tobruk & The Western Desert. He became Adjutant and I followed him. We came home together and soldiered on as Territorials. He was able to carry on much longer than I did and ended up as Colonel of the Surrey Yeomanry. I was his best man when he married Anne. George was sadly a victim of Alzheimer's – hugely supported by Anne.

Of the rest as far as University and even the Yeomanry - there's little more to tell. These account for a little over 1% of my life and I came down from University over 65 years ago! But we were marvellously cared for, good food in halls, Fred the head Porter was everyone's friend but when the need arose, a disciplinarian, whilst Maurice, my Scout, was perfection. I distinguished myself not at all and the only sporting activity I took up was Real Tennis for the sole reason that the Oxford Real Tennis court was conveniently located just behind my University buildings and very few people attempted to play. So even if only marginally successful it would produce

a blue - mathematically the easiest way by far to achieve this distinction. It seemed to me to be well worth a try!

By the time of my demobilisation not only had I been away from Oxford for nearly 7 momentous years, but I had a job to go to and little urge to return to my books. I had further deterrent in the shape of a letter from the college, I think it was in the summer 1943 and certainly I was in Iraq, which, in high summer, is no place for rational thinking. It came at a time when mail was a rarity and I was as much surprised by its arrival as by its contents. Couched in fine academic language, it's advised me that, by virtue of having completed my first public examination and year in residence, I was thereby entitled to a degree. It would not be in any Class or Subject, but I could call myself BA (Oxon). I wrote back and accepted. The catch soon followed in the shape of a further letter from the college with a bill for degree fees of, I think, £50, with the option of a Master's degree for a further larger sum. This was money which, at that period, I certainly could not myself afford and I was quite unwilling to solicit parental support for what looked to me to be nothing short of academic sharp practice!



Kenneth Simonds
June 12th 2004

IL 'VI - 04

4 New Court
Sutton Scotney
Winchester
Hampshire SO21 3JB
Tel:01962 761 121

Editor Note:

Kenneth left this in manuscript, discovered long after his death.

Raymond Simonds

**Kenneth FitzGerald Simonds served as
Gun Position Officer of 'D' Troop
390 (Surrey Yeomanry Battery), Royal Artillery**

**The Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry (144th Field Regiment RA)
in the Italian East African Campaign, The Western Desert & The Near East.
1939 - 1945**

I joined the Oxford University OTC (Officer Training Corps) on arriving there in October 1938. I scurried back to the OTC Orderly Room at Oxford at the outbreak of WWII in September 1939, I was told by a very imposing Sergeant-Major that I was far too young at 19 to be called up for at least a year, that I should go home, and come back to my college at the University at the beginning of the Michaelmas term in October. Home I went and 10 days later I got my calling-up papers to report forthwith to the Officer Cadet Training Unit RA in Catterick Camp, North Yorkshire. Thus ended my university career and I was thereby guaranteed the longest possible war service, from October 1940 to April 1946. My brother Duncan was called up to a similar OCTU in Scarborough about six weeks later and we contrived to meet there in early 1940. (On passing out he became 2nd Lt & was promoted Captain in 1943.)

It was the coldest winter of the century on the North Yorkshire moors and highly unpleasant. I was commissioned in early March and posted to my Regiment, which was then stationed in Brighton and Hove, with Regimental Headquarters in The Sackville Court Hotel and most of the action on Hove Cricket Ground.

We trained busily at several locations to the point where it seemed likely that we would go to France, but we were saved by Dunkirk which happened just before we were shipped there – a merciful happening from our point of view, as we would have been massacred had we gone. From June to September we were busy rescuing the battered remnants from Dunkirk and then training ourselves, and the strong rumour was that we were going to either Iceland or the Middle East.

In September, we were stationed in Amersham, Bucks, and a Regimental Parade was called in the High Street where the fine old Market Hall was our Quartermaster's Store. It soon transpired that we had been summoned for the issue of Solar Topees and when we marched away with them, any security about our going to Iceland was effectively blown.

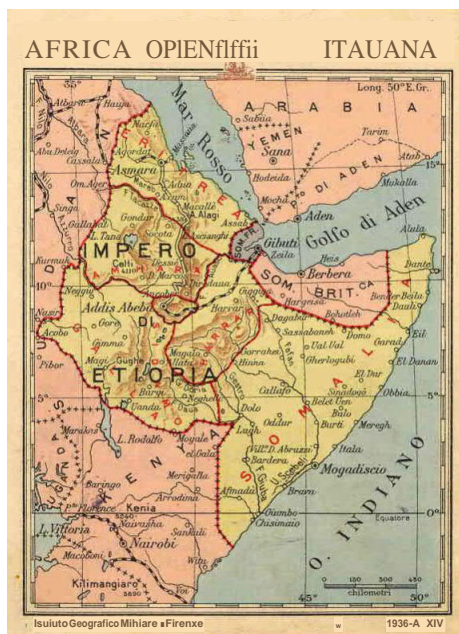
On 30th September we were paraded one evening with all our kit and marched up the hill to Amersham station, whence a train took us through the night to an unknown destination. On arrival, we found ourselves in Liverpool Docks where a convoy was forming, but overnight there had been an air-raid which had put our ship out of action with a bomb down its funnel, so the convoy sailed without our contingent of about 600 men. With commendable speed an alternative was found and converted to troopship use – the Royal Mail ‘Highland Brigade’, a freezer ship just in from South America with a cargo of meat, and we sailed alone 3 days later with a single destroyer escort into the submarine-infested North Atlantic. For four days we went flat out west until we were deemed to be in safe waters, when the destroyer left us, then South and then East to Sierra Leone, a journey of 14 days & surviving 2 torpedo attacks by U boats, where we joined the original convoy, and set off South for Cape Town in a convoy at about 5 knots with a full naval escort landing on 27th October. There we had two very happy days ashore with great hospitality dispensed, before rounding the Cape in a gale and then up the East coast to the Red Sea and our destination at Suez / Port Tawfiq on 17 November, some 6 weeks out from home. At Suez we unloaded and went to the Royal Artillery Depot at Almaza, on the Eastern edge of Cairo, where we sorted ourselves out, re-trained, and then back to Port Tawfiq to embark on an ancient troop ship from the Boer War, the HMT Empire Trooper (which might well have carried my father). This took us very slowly to Port Sudan. There we entrained again to Haiya, where we lived for a couple of weeks in a dust-storm. All were convinced that it was the hottest place in Sudan and that we had been sent there just to acclimatise to the desert conditions. At Haiya the railway divides – West to Khartoum and South-West to Kassala on the Eritrean border.



In June the Italians invaded Sudan – up to a point, really just the border area with Eritrea and the principal border town called Kassala, but they were not very active. So we were parked in an oasis called Mekali Wells. There was abundant water and the locals were very friendly. Here we spent Christmas 1940, with the totally primitive local tribesmen. A culture unchanged in a millennium. From Mekali we made occasional raids on the Italians.

We left the train at Aroma, about 30 miles North of Kassala and established ourselves in the delightful oasis of Mekali Wells, which was full of wildlife and humans in primaeval conditions. For the short time we were there, it was a friendly and delightful place to be. There was some mild skirmishing along the Sudan frontier and I specially recall an expedition to go bathing in the river Atbara, a tributary of the Nile from the town of Atbara, North of Khartoum, and Christmas at Mekali Wells. Meanwhile there was a steady build-up to the main attack. We were the artillery component of what might now be called a 'rapid reaction force' or a 'rapid advance guard' called the 'Gazelle Force' that was set up at the end of 1940. It was an ad hoc, multiracial formation of Sudanese, Indian, Scottish and English troops, mobile and fast moving, commanded by the great Colonel Frank Messervy of the Indian Mechanised Cavalry Regiment, Hodson's Horse. He sure did lead from the front and with the invariable cry 'Bum on – bum on!'. He later achieved great renown and promotion in North Africa and the Far East, and I remain in touch with his daughter in Sussex. Our objective was the Italian East African empire comprising Abyssinia, Eritrea & Somalia.

We initially comprised only mechanised infantry and cavalry, in 15 cwt trucks with machine guns plus supporting services, and later we had the benefit of 3 Matilda tanks.



The force was called 'Gazelle' after the fast moving deer which inhabited the desert and a pair of whose horns Colonel Frank Messervy carried on the bonnet of his truck! By 1948 he was C. in C. of the Pakistan Army, but this image is from 1940.

The advance started on January 19th. Kassala is a city of the plain and quite indefensible and the Italians evacuated it without a fight, withdrew to the mountains to the east and established a stronghold in a Keru Gorge, which we reached on the evening of January 21st, when we put our 25pdr guns into action, dug ourselves in and went to sleep. We stood to at dawn on the 22nd, with light scrub all round and the Indian cavalry up front. To our amazement, there was soon the crackle of small arms fire and grenade explosions and a number of people

who were supposed to be protecting us and should have known better, came back rather too fast through my gun position, shouting to us to withdraw, but we stood our ground. The noises increased and got closer until to our amazement, a squadron of native horsed cavalry, led by an Italian officer on a white horse, burst through the scrub and charged my gun position. At this point my batman ran over from my tent carrying my revolver. 'You might be needing this Sir,' he said. I had to use my 'useless' officer's .38 revolver to engage them, firing over the guard of the guns, when the horses came too close! Now whilst we had been trained in the engagement of tanks, armoured cars and infantry, horses had been phased out long before, moreover our ammunition was fused for distant rather than short range explosion. However, we did the only possible thing and blasted off at them at close range and they turned around and disappeared back into the scrub whence they came – leaving heavy casualties for whom we later had to dig large holes. Their Officer, the amazing Barone Amedeo Guillet, rode a beautiful white charger, which was hit by my batman firing an anti-tank gun. In his biography 'Amedeo' by Richard O'Sullivan. (see p155 – the officer who shouted 'Troop Gunfire' was me)

He was injured and returned home to Rome. He later engineered a transfer to Eritrea with his horses & troops and then recruited more locals into an almost private army. A superb horseman, he was in the 1936 Italian Olympic team before going to fight in the Spanish civil war. In October 2003 and after a family wedding in Dublin, I had the pleasure of visiting Amedeo at his home where he still kept horses, for lunch and a five hours talk with him – and that guy sure does love his enemies!

This was the last time in history that British troops had been engaged by horsed cavalry. After this excitement, the advance continued with a major engagement at the fortified town of Agordat, which finally surrendered on February 1st.

The advance then progressed through increasingly mountainous country to the approach to the town of Keren where both road and rail ran through a steep gorge between high mountains. The advance had been delayed by the destruction of a major bridge, the Ponte Mussolini, over the river Barka, which, though dry at the time, had been heavily mined, and this had given the Italians time to make a great job of blocking the gorge which had been both impassable and heavily fortified for some 200 years, with mountains rising sheer to 2500 feet on either side. By then, the Italians had deployed their crack mountain troops, including the Bersaglieri, the Alpini, the Savoy Grenadiers and subsequently the crack 11th Blackshirt Legion, which were as good as any anywhere and not your typical runaway Wops.

All efforts at a quick breakthrough were abortive, and a pause was called for rest and reinforcements. At this point Gazelle was disbanded and the component units returned to their own regiments, with a holding operation at the gorge. In our case we withdrew almost to Kassala for rest and refurbishment and I celebrated (though that is hardly the word) my 21st birthday on 23rd February 1941, within range of some Italian guns at the dried out River Gash [a river with no end as it just dries up in the desert] at Teseney.

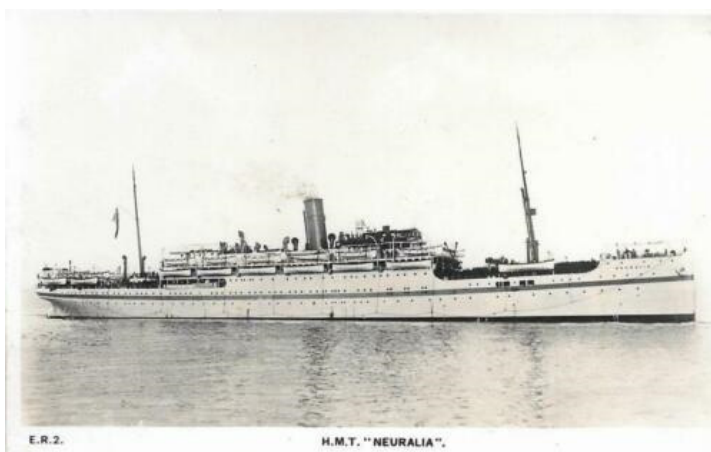
The main attack started on March 15th, with 4th and 5th Indian divisions and their support troops involved. The battle raged and I recall especially an Observation Post on Fort Dologorodoc. By the 26th the Karoo gorge had been cleared, white flags flew next morning from the Italian positions and our tanks entered Keren on the 27th.

It was then on to Asmara the capital, via three road blocks and a minor engagement at Adi Tekelezan and on April 1st our troops entered the city – and the locals were then obliged to drive on the left!

By April 1941, there remained only the Red Sea port of Massawa in Eritrea, 50 miles from Asmara and 7500 feet below it down an amazing mountain road such as only the Italians could have built. Admiral Bonnetti, the Commander asked Rome for permission to surrender, but he was told to put up a show, so on April 5th we put in a full attack – a barrage by us Gunners covering a massive infantry advance. It was all over by around 10.00am and the message reached us that we could stand down.

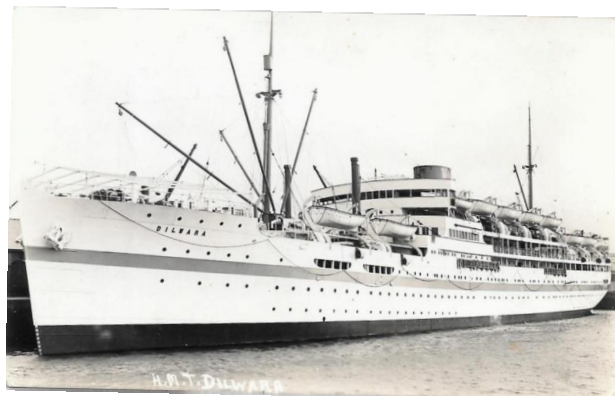
But soon after we had got out of our slit trenches, to wash, shave and have breakfast, a shot was heard from far off and a shell landed, with a big explosion, right in front of me. I realised that I had a bleeding left shoulder, so took it off to see the MO who insisted I went back to Asmara hospital. So I became the very last casualty of the Eritrean campaign. This, of course, was the pre-antibiotic era. There followed, amazingly, six weeks in hospital in Asmara with Italian nuns & Indian staff, for three

operations on a very minor wound. It was followed by an attack of infective hepatitis that I clearly caught from other patients in the ward, leaving me quite weak and with the prospect of a long sick leave. This however took me, very happily for 6 weeks leave, getting a ride on a troop ship, HMT Neuralia to



Port Sudan, then another, HMT Dilwara heading South to Durban.

By extraordinary coincidence my injury and that of my brother Duncan were reported in the same Royal Artillery casualty report in The Times of June 2nd 1942, almost 2 months later.



THE TIMES MONDAY JUNE 2 1941

THE ROLL OF HONOUR

ARMY CASUALTIES

The Army Council regrets to announce the following casualties. The next-of-kin have already been notified:—

OFFICERS

KILLED

M. Aft. [TH] HGHS "R. uh. Maj. F. G. [T]fcA.o
R.A1» C.—Brooke, W.S. Limit. Maj. S. J. M.C.
M. M. A. W.; korttrht.

WOUND! D

R ARTILLERY.— Adami Sec. Lt. H. A. W.; Bec.
Lt. J. W. G.; Douglas,
Lt. J. M.; Holderness,
Lt. D. L.; Simonds Sec. Lt.
K. E. Stranack, A/Capt.

*Quite (L trs'ence /TfcA.o
especially as we were 1000ft,
of miles apart in different theatres.
I was 1 y o. March SIT 9
quite glorious battle of Passana,
Ethiopia, & Duncan a couple of months
later in NIT'Africa,*

KFS

Kenneth & Duncan reported wounded in the same paper.

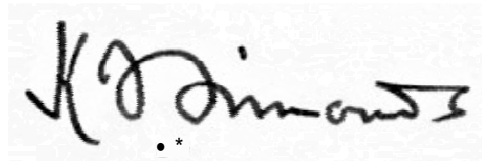
I finally re-joined my Regiment at Burg-el-Arab, Egypt, in August, busy digging the defensive position at el Alamein. A few weeks later in September 1941, we were shipped off in destroyers on a dark night, into fortress Tobruk, then under siege and accessible only by sea & at considerable risk, to relieve an Australian regiment. We found ourselves with a battery of Italian 75mm guns, that we first had to work out how to fire! 'Home' for the next three months was a cave – a useful base given regular visits from German dive bombers – all a most uncomfortable experience, but that's another story. We were relieved by Christmas and went up into the Western Desert.

Advancing out of Tobruk through the Western desert in about early 1942, we came across a regiment of British Artillery in camp. They turned out to be the 4th RHA. I asked if they had an officer Simonds – and there was my brother Duncan! I got only about half an hour with him, before having to move on.

We were then sent to join the British 10th Army in Persia, where our advance north was held up by the appalling weather and snow, so we were diverted to Southern Iraq where we worked closely with the Indian Army & Gurkhas.

Ed note: Kenneth gave no details of the rest of his war service in the Near East Theatre, save for a detailed list of the extensive travel involved in what were often appalling conditions, shown in his travel diary. He finally sailed for home aboard HMT Alcantara from Alexandria in May 1945.

The history books do not record much about our war against the Italians in Eritrea & Sudan, but we were proud that the East Africa campaign, which lasted from about November 1940 to June 1941 and was fought against the professional Italian army and was the first totally victorious British campaign of WWII – we won and it was never regained, all in the course of a six-month, hard fought campaign, with the battle of Keren in Eritrea an epic victory, comparable with Monte Cassino.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Simonds', with a small dot and asterisk below the signature.

Kenneth Simonds
June 2005

Notes:

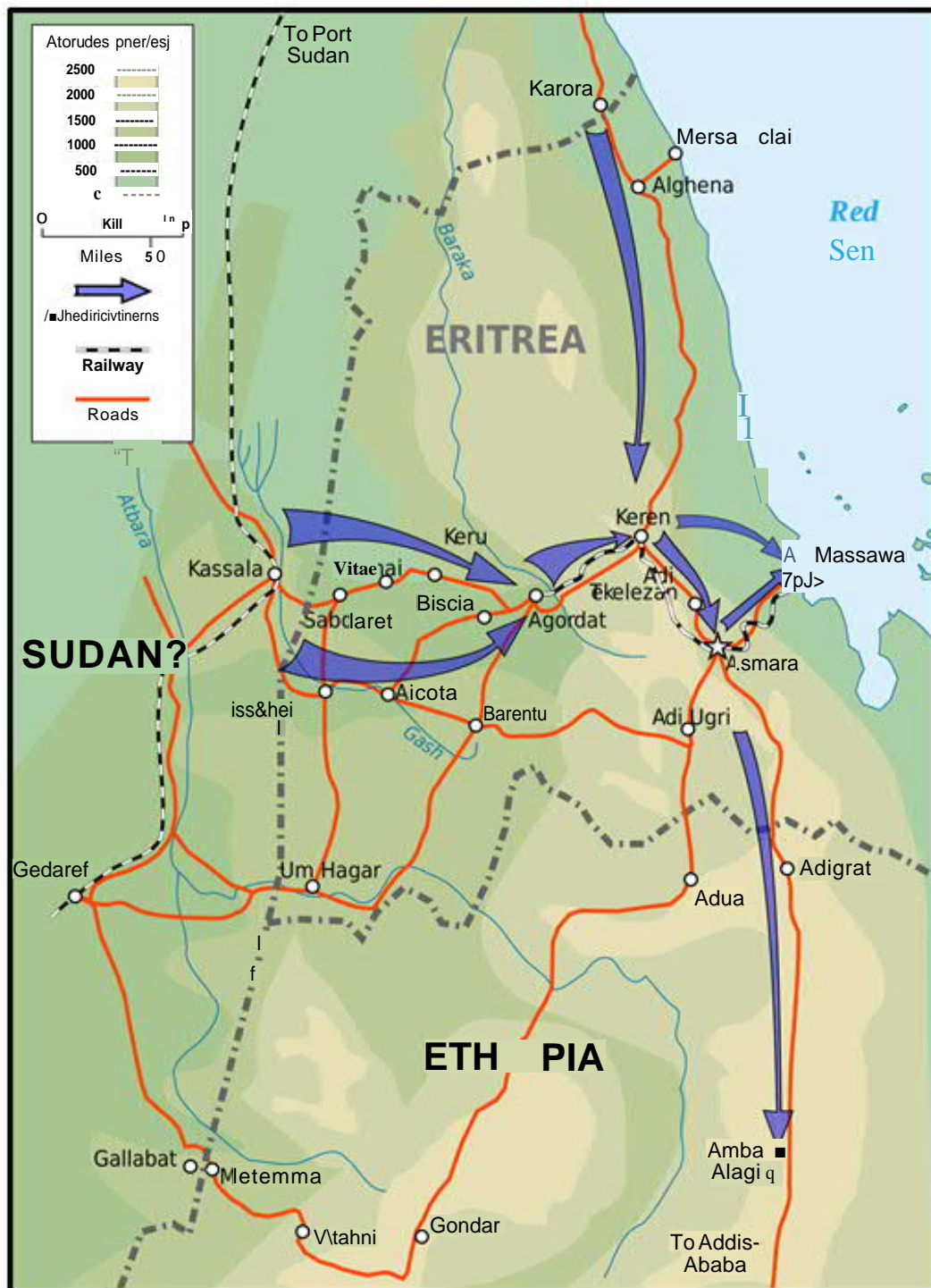
Brother Officers of interest and who witnessed that final cavalry charge:

Lt-Col Douglas Gray (1909-2004) Then a Captain in the Indian Regiment, Skinner's Horse, the 1st Bengal Lancers and part of 'Gazelle Force'

Lt-Col Walter B.E. Brown (1913-2003) Sultan's Defence Force, 5th Indian Division.

General [Sir Frank Messervy](#) (1893-1974) Then Colonel of 'Gazelle Force' & later General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Northern Command, India. Became the longest serving General in WWII. His full biography with detailed coverage of the campaign and the appallingly difficult & costly assault on the Italian Divisions entrenched on a series of high ridges to defend Keren – which victory ensured the defeat of the Italian Army in East Africa of over 200,000 men. Spearhead General, by Henry Maule [Corgi Books]

Allied movements in East Africa 1941



Editor Note:

Kenneth dictated the bulk of this to me in stages and later proof read it.

Raymond Simonds

Mentioned in Despatches, December 1942



By the *KING'S* Order the name of
Leutnant K.3. \$un ends,
Royal Artillery,
was published in the *London Gazette* on
15 March 1942.
as mentioned in a Despatch for distinguished service.
I am charged to record
His Majesty's high appreciation.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, likely belonging to the Secretary of State for War at the time.

Secretary of State for War

In full retreat from Rommel, advancing from Benghazi in 1942.
Kenneth's battery held up the advance.

Wartime images



Cairo 1942





Western Desert 1942



Promoted Captain, 1943



Kenneth Simonds 1946

Transcript of a travel diary by Kenneth FitzGerald Simonds 1940 – 1945

1940

Departed Amersham (Bucks) 30 Sept '40.

Arrived Liverpool 1 Oct and embarked on the HMT Highland Brigade.

The Regiment had been due to travel on the HMT Empire Trooper but this vessel was out of action¹ so the 'Highland Brigade' was pressed into service at short notice. Emergency fittings were rapidly installed to accommodate troops and the ship was victualled & sailed 2 days later. She was escorted for 4 days by destroyer & then moved independently to Freetown (Sierra Leone), arriving 14 days later, notwithstanding 2 torpedo attacks by Uboats.

Sailed in convoy from Freetown to Cape Town. Arriving the last Sunday in October. [October 27th] Ashore in Cape Town on Sunday afternoon & Monday morning.

Sailed from Cape Town Monday evening & thence direct to Port Tawfiq without incident arriving on 17 Nov.

By rail to Helmet station, met by 2 Scots Guards & drive to Almaza Camp.

Departed Port Tawfiq in HMT Lancashire in early December & reached Port Sudan in 6 days.

Port Sudan by rail to Haiya, Eritrea. Departed Haiya 10 days later for Aroma & Mekali Wells as 3rd Adv: Pty.

1941

Concentration at Mekali Wells.

Moved to camp at Goz Regeb.

Concentrated late January '41 for advance to Eritrea, Wachai - Keru² - Agordat

Arrived outside Keren about 15 Feb & later returned to Tesseney [Teseney] to rest & rejoin rest of Regt. KFS 21st Birthday in the (dry) bed of Wadi Gash.

Moved with whole Regt in mid-March & deployed for attack on Keren.

Entered Keren end of March & proceeded to Asmara, thence to Massawa.

Battle of Massawa, wounded 5 April & returned to Asmara hospital.

In hospital Asmara April, May & early June.

Asmara to Massawa 2nd week in June. Thence in HMT Neuralia to Port Sudan.

Embarked a week later in HMT Dilwara & arrived Durban in 12-14 days.

Durban about 3 weeks, stayed chez Van A*** and Proudfoot.

Embarked end of July on HMT Arundel Castle & sailed in convoy to Port Tawfik via Aden (ashore 1 day)

1 night at Suez & thence to Cairo, rejoining regt at Burg el Arab after short delay at Almaza Camp.

Spent 3 days in Cairo in early September.

About 20 Sept, Regt moved to Amriya camp & the following day embarked in destroyers in Alexandria for Tobruk, arriving late at night.

1942

Tobruk to Jan '42 with interludes at Bardiyah, [Libya] Hazfaya & Benghazi.

Regt departed Tobruk for Jebel country West of Derna & in action at Marawa**, then withdrew to Gazara line.

¹ The Empire Trouper had been hit by a bomb down the funnel on the previous night

² Keru, the scene of the cavalry charge

Regt withdrew to Bardia area in May '42.
 Then to Cairo and 5 days leave, rejoining the Regt at Kantara en route to Iraq.
 by rail Kantara to Haifa.
 by road (gun trailer) Haifa – Rutba - Habbanya
 by road in July, Habbaniya - Detrezzor [Syria] – Aleppo (Euphrates valley route)
 July & August '42, Aleppo area & Turkish frontier.
 Departed by road, late August, Aleppo – Kadya – Oms – Damascus – Rutba –
 Habbaniya – Baghdad – (Persia) Khanaqin – Kermanshah – Bisctorov
 Late September left Regt for Cairo.
 by UKCC lorry Kermashah to Khanadin
 by rail Khanadin to Badhdad
 by Nairn bus Baghdad to Damascus
 by staff car Damascus to Haifa
 by train Haifa to Cairo
 Short- hospitalisation at Helmeih Oct '42.
 Leave in Cairo & Alexandria Oct / Nov 42
 First Flight - Early Nov '42 returned by air. Heliopolis – Lydda – Habanniya.
 Thence by road to Baghdad & by rail to Shuaipa ** & rejoined Regt advance party.

1942 / 1943

Departed Shu'aiba** April'43 by road via Babylon, Kut, Baghdad, Tikrit to Quaiara.
 Occasional expeditions from Qaiara to Mosul & the north (Doffuk) with views over
 Kurdistan & the Turkish frontier.
 Departed Qaiara Oct '43, to Tikrit – Badgdad – Habbaniya – etc to R**?? Palestine
 & over the Sinai desert to Cairo³ (Almeza Camp), arrived a fortnight later.
 1 December '43 by road to Burg el Arab

1943/44

Feb '44 by road to Cairo – Ismailia – Sinai – Beersheba – Hebron – Jerusalem
 – Jericho – Transjordan for ex Crocodile
 Thence by road via Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Qunattra to Aarjouz (Nr Damascus)
 arriving late March.
 In May by road to Homs – Tripoli to School of Mountain Warfare.
 May / June by road to Tripoli. Leave at Ehden (Cedars of Lebanon)
 Sept, by road to Sidon
 Dec, by road to Baalbeck.

1945

End of January '45 leave, by road to Haifa by train to Cairo
 by train to Luxor (leave with David Reid)
 returning early February to Baelbeck, same route.
 April, short leave to Jerusalem.
 Return to Baelbeck & thence to Cairo by road
 Short leave to Cairo.
 Moved to Alexandria, May 1945 for embarkation HMT Alcantara for HOME.

R. Simonds note:
Diary was kept in a loose leaf school binder, probably contemporary or written soon after.

³ Met brothers Louis & Duncan for the first time since Sept 1940, this was the photo opportunity on family file.

The First Victory - *The Eritrean campaign of 1941*

by a geriatric former (and forever) member of St. John's who was there at the time -----

With D-Day fresh in our minds and tales of the young of to-day having little knowledge of who was fighting who, it's worth recalling that there was war before D-Day - some five years of it - and over those five years, some we won and some we lost.

of World War II
Perhaps the least known of all the early campaigns, and the first wholly successful one, started in East Africa in early 1941. Mussolini had occupied Ethiopia in 1935 from his adjacent colony, since 1890, of Eritrea, an ancient land with the Red Sea port of Massawa, whereas Ethiopia was entirely land-locked. By the time Italy entered the war on June 10th 1940, there had been built up in these territories a military presence of some 300,000 men, 400 guns, 60 tanks and 250 aircraft. Of these, 100,000 troops and supporting arms were available for the Sudan frontier - odds of 10:1 in that sector. The Sudanese frontier town of Kassala was their first objective and was the victim on July 4th of a massive bombardment. The miniscule force of British and Sudanese troops withdrew leaving 500 casualties and six destroyed tanks behind them, with only one killed and three wounded themselves.

Neutralisation of the Italian forces had now become strategically critical. The Mediterranean was effectively closed and the Red Sea was the supply line for the whole Middle Eastern theatre. An Italian advance up the Red Sea littoral could have been disastrous.

The remainder of 1940 saw skirmishing on the Eritrean frontier and a build up of mainly Sudanese and Indian troops around Kassala, with a steady influx of reinforcements from many lands. A highly mobile, decidedly polyglot, attack force was formed by Colonel Frank Messervy. Called 'Gazelle' after the most familiar of desert inhabitants and by far the most fast-moving, it included Sudan Defence Force and Indian Cavalry motorised units, and the Surrey Yeomanry battery of Field Artillery with 25 pounder guns. Air cover at first appeared to be no more than three elderly Gloster Gladiator biplanes.

More importantly, there came a steady build-up of all arms, some down the Nile, others by the Red Sea and Port Sudan, others direct from Britain via the Cape. Outstanding was the 4th Indian Division which arrived from the Western Desert with a most gallant reputation, and including the great 2nd Battalion of the Cameron Highlanders.

On the night of January 17th 1941, The Italians evacuated Kassala and Tessenei, the next town up the road, and two days later Gazelle advanced into Eritrea. For many of the superb Sudan Defence Force their desert training had never included road driving and there were unusual problems over which side ^{as} to use, ~~and~~ the Italians had, as of old, built amazing roads where none had been before. By the night of January 20th, Gazelle had reached the defended gorge of Keru and in a bizarre encounter next morning their guns were charged by a troop of Eritrean native cavalry, lead by an Italian officer on a white horse. This, the last such attack on British forces, was embarrassing as Cavalry charges had long been written out of the drill book in favour of tanks and armoured cars but somehow we won and the cavalry withdrew with heavy casualties and were never seen again.

The advance made rapid progress. The defended fort at Agordat was taken on February 1st by troops greatly strengthened by the arrival of tanks, infantry and Hurricane fighters and the next day Gazelle and the 4th Indian Division reached the mighty and very frightening mountain fortress of Keren - as impregnable a natural defence as you could imagine behind a 6000ft mountain with the only approach road efficiently blown. Mobile warfare was over and a set-piece attack was staged. The Italian Viceroy, the greatly respected Duke of Aosta, had sent his best troops, including the Bersagliere with their plumed hats, and success had to wait for reinforcements and long preparation.

On March 16th a second attack was staged, by a heavily reinforced British force against heavily reinforced Italians. The battle raged with severe casualties on both sides until the 26th when white flags were seen flapping above the highest peaks.

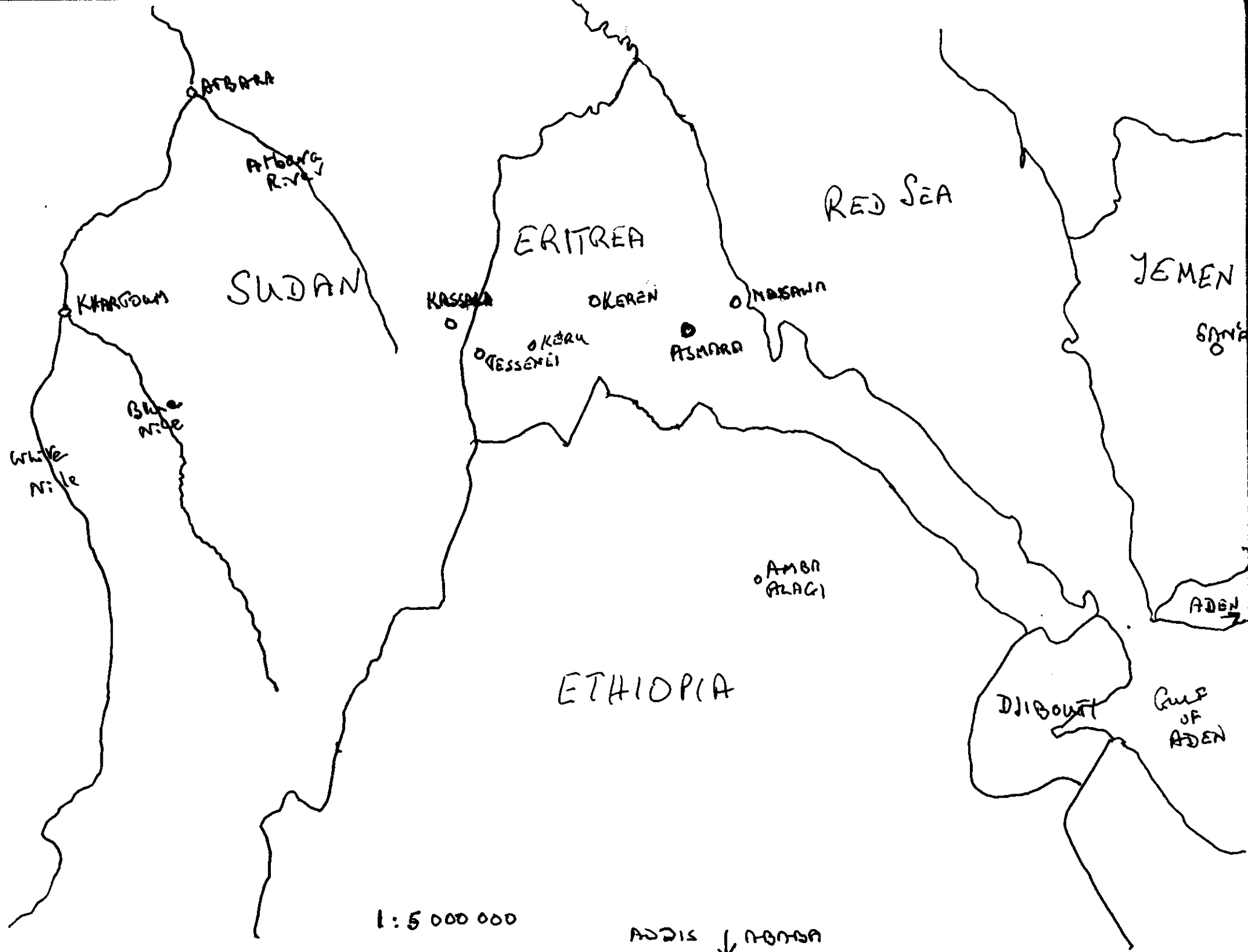
From then on the road to Asmara, the Capital, 50 miles to the East, was easy going with little resistance, and Asmara's surrender on April 1st was reported to Headquarters in Khartoum as 'NOT, repeat NOT an April Fool'

It remained only to take the port of Massawa with its garrison and naval forces, approached by another ^{was} amazing Italian-built road which dropped some 7000ft in 30 miles and only partially blocked. Admiral Bonnetti commanding the port had been invited to surrender, but on referring the matter to Il Duce in Rome had been told to 'put up a show' and to scuttle the ships in the harbour. And so, on April 8th there ensued a rather perfunctory battle in which the allies were joined by the Free French who had advanced from the North and had already played a considerable part in the campaign (encouraged by General de Gaulle in person), and supported by the RAF and the Navy from Aden. By lunch time it was all over and General Bonnetti was found in a deckchair by the harbour side, beside him his sword, bent, not broken. And his fleet of seven destroyers, which had set out in a forlorn attempt to attack Port Sudan on April 2nd, were all scuttled or destroyed by the Royal Navy.

Thus ended the Eritrean Campaign - a strange contrast to modern warfare. **And** meanwhile Ethiopia was falling. British troops had fought their way through from the West, and South African and East African units advanced through Somaliland and Kenya. Addis Ababa fell on April 6th and the final assault on the great fortress of Amba Alagi, an 11,000 ft mountain 170 miles south of Asmara began. It was defended stoutly under the personal command of the Duke of Aosta who surrendered 'With Honour' on May 16th and was accorded the honours of war. And then it was back up North to Egypt and the Western Desert,

Two surprising footnotes:-

1. Many years later the Surrey Yeomanry came into contact with the Italian cavalry commander at Keru, and he subsequently dined with the officers in London.
2. At the triumphal re-entry of the Emperor Haile Selassie to his capital, the official banquet which, in earlier years would have been a much more informal affair, was presented, after five years of Italian occupation, as a full eight course banquet - but in the reverse order.





My drawing of a Sudanese soldier 1941

Christmas 1941

New Year 1942

144th (SURREY AND SUSSEX YEOMANRY)
ARMY FIELD REGIMENT, R.A.
M. E. F.



KASSALA

KEREN

GALLABAT

KERU

MASSAWA

WAHNI

AGORDAT

AMBA ALAGI

AD TECLESAN



Sincere Greetings and Best Wishes

THE TIMES MONDAY JUNE 2 1941

THE ROLL OF HONOUR

ARMY CASUALTIES

The Army Council regrets to announce the following casualties. The next-of-kin have already been notified:—

OFFICERS

KILLED

N. STAFFS REGT.—Matthews, Maj. F. G.
SEAFORTH HIGHRS.—Ritchie, Maj. S. J., M.C.
R.A.S.C.—Brooke, W.S/Lieut. A. W.; Kortright, Maj. M.

WOUNDED

R. ARTILLERY.—Adams, Sec. Lt. H. A. W.; Bee, Sec. Lt. J. J.; Birkbeck, Sec. Lt. J. W. G.; Douglas, T/Lt.-Col. J. S.; Eadie, Sec. Lt. J. M.; Holderness, T/Maj. J. A. A.; Horton, Lt. D. L.; Simonds, Sec. Lt. E. D.; Simonds, Sec. Lt. K. E.; Stranack, A/Capt. R. M.

Quite a coincidence this, especially as we were 1000s of miles apart in different theatres. I was hit on March 31st at the quite inglorious battle of MASSAWA, Eritrea, & Duncan a couple of months later in North Africa.

K.F.S

Kenneth & Duncan reported wounded in the same paper. Kenneth near the end of the Eritrean Campaign at the battle of Massawa. Fighting stopped, Kenneth emerged from his trench and an Italian shell gave him a splinter in the arm. After 6 weeks in hospital in Asmara, with Indian staff and Italian Nuns Kenneth got 6 weeks leave & went to Durban.



By the KING'S Order the name of
Lieutenant K. J. Simonds,
Royal Artillery,
was published in the London Gazette on
15 December, 1942,
as mentioned in a Despatch for distinguished service.
I am charged to record
His Majesty's high appreciation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. J. G. G. G.'.

Secretary of State for War

1940

Departed AMERSHAM (Bucks) 30 Sept 40.

Arrived Liverpool 1 Oct

and embarked on HMS HIGHLAND BRIGADE.

The Regiment had been due to travel on HMS EMPIRE PROPER but this vessel was out of action & the 'Highland Brigade' was pressed into service at short notice. Emergency fittings were rapidly installed to accommodate troops, & the ship was refitted & sailed 2 days later. She was escorted for 4 days by Destroyer, & then moved independently to FREETOWN (Sierra Leone), arriving 14 days later, without sustaining 2 torpedo attacks by U-boats.

Sailed in convoy from Freetown to CAPE TOWN arriving the last Sunday in October. Ashore in Cape Town on Sunday afternoon & Monday morning.

Sailed from Cape Town Monday evening & thence direct to PORT TEWARI without incident, arriving (?) 17 Nov.

By rail to HELMERS station, and by 2 Suto guards & drive to Almage Camp.

Departed ~~by~~ Port Tewfik in HMT LANCASTER
in early December & reached Port Sudan in
6 days.

Port Sudan by rail to HAIYA.

Departed HAIYA 10 days later for ACROTA & NERAZI
WELLS as 390 AMV: PK7.

1941

Concentration at NERAZI WELLS.

Moved to camp at GOZ REGB.

42nd Div

Concentrated late January/41 for advance into
Eritrea. WACHAI - KERU* - AGORDA.

Arrived outside KEREN about 15 Feb
& later returned to TESSENNEI to rest & repair
rest of Regt. KFS 21st Birthday in the (dry) bed of WASI Gash
Moved with whole Regt in mid-March &
deployed for attack on KEREN.

52nd Div

Entered KEREN end of March & proceeded
to ASHARA, thence to MASSAWA.

Battle of MASSAWA, wounded SAgnt
returned to ASHARA hospital.

In hospital ASHARA April-May &
early June.

ASHARA to MASSAWA 2nd week in
June. Thence to HMT NEWARKA to

* KERU The scene of the Carabin Charge

1941

PORT SUDAN.

embarked a week later in HMT DILLARA
& arrived DURBAN at 12-14 days.

Durban about 3 weeks chez Van Aardt
& Proust.

Embarked end of July on HMT ARUNDEL
CASTLE & sailed in convoy to PORT TEWARIK
via ADEN (ashore, day)

1 night at Suez & thence to Cairo,
rejoining regt at BAR EL ARAB after
short delay at ARFAZA camp.

Spent 3 days in Cairo in early
September.

In about 20 Sept, Regt moved to
AMRIYA camp & the following day embarked
in destroyers in ALEXANDRIA for TOBRUK
arriving late at night.

TOBRUK to Jan '42 with interludes at
BARBIA, HAZFAYA & BENHAZI.

Regt departed TOBRUK for Jebel country
W of DERVA & in action at FARANA, thence
withdrew to GAZARA line.

Regt withdrew to BRANDIA area in May '42.

1942

9 AMB

270 Div

4 Div

102 Div
Port

1942

Then to Cairo on 5 days leave, rejoining
Regr at KANIARA en route for IRAQ.

by rail KANIARA - HAIFA.

by road (Gun truck) HAIFA - RUIBA - HABANIYA

by road in July HABANIYA - DEIREZZOR

○ Syria - ALEPPO (Euphrates valley route)

ALEPPO area & Turkish frontier, July
& August '42.

Persia
Departed by road, late August, ALEPPO - ~~HAIFA~~
HAIFA - HIRYS - DAMASCUS - RUIBA - HABANIYA -
BAHADAD - KHANADIN - KERMANSAAH - BISCUN
late September, left Regr for Cairo.

by WCC bus KERMANSAAH to KHANADIN.

by rail KHANADIN to BAHADAD

by AIRR bus BAHADAD to DAMASCUS

by staff car DAMASCUS to HAIFA

U
by train HAIFA to CAIRO.

short hospitalization at HELIOPOLIS Oct '42.

leave in Cairo & Alexandria Oct/Nov 42.

Early Nov '42, returned by air. HELIOPOLIS -
LYBDA - HABANIYA. Thence by road to
BAGHDAD & by rail to SHARIBA & rejoined
Regr advance party.

Int Flight

1942/
1943

Departed SHU'ARBA April '43 by road
2 via BABYLON, KUT, BAGHDAD, TIKRIT
to QAIARA.

Occasional expeditions from QAIARA to
Nasir & the north (Dohuk) with view
over KURDISTAN & Turkish frontier.

Departed QAIARA Oct '43, - TIKRIT -
BAGHDAD - HABANIYA - etc to B. Transjordan
Palestine & over the Great desert to
CAIRO (Almaza Camp), arrived at fortnight later.

1 Dec '43 by road to BURJ EL ARAB

FEB 44 by road to CAIRO - ISTANBUL -
SUNAT - BEERSHEBA - HERZLON - JERUSALEM -
JERICHO - TRANSJORDIA for ex ROUTINE

Hence & by road & via JERUSALEM, TEL AVIV
HAIFA, QUNATRA to ANTIOCH (M DAMASCUS)
arriving late MARCH.

In May by road to HOMS - TRIPOLI to
School of Arabian Warfare.

May/June by road HOMS - HAIFA - ALEPPO
June/July returned to TRIPOLI. Leave at EHDEM
Sept, by road to SIDON

Dec, by road to BAAZBEK.

(The Cedars of
Lebanon)

1945

end of January '45 leave. by road to HHA.
by train to CAIRO
by train to Luxor (leave with David Reid)
returning early February to Baalbek, same
route.

April. short leave to Jerusalem.

return to Baalbek & hence to Chindypur
short leave in Alexandria,
returned to Cairo.

Moved to Alexandria, May '45 for
embarkation HMS ALCAVIRA for HOME.



10 Downing Street
Whitehall

14th May, 1965.

Dear Kenneth,

Many thanks for your letter of the 23rd April. I am very glad to hear that you are in such good form and have such absorbing work. Yes, it is, in fact, twenty-six years since we were at Avebury together.

I have always asked about you when I met your brother and been glad to hear that you are getting on well.

Yours,

Harold Wilson

Kenneth Simonds, Esq.,