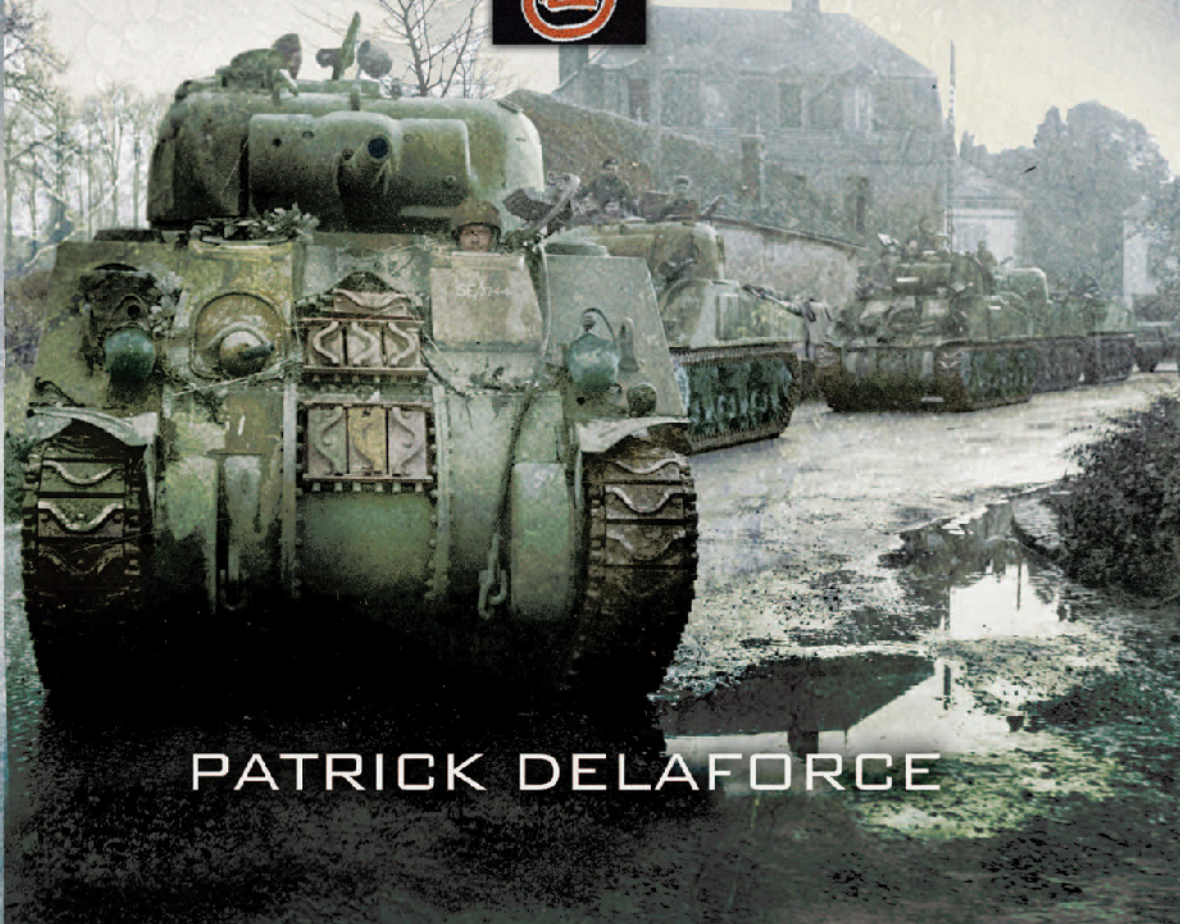


CHURCHILL'S DESERT RATS IN NORTH-WEST EUROPE

FROM NORMANDY TO BERLIN



PATRICK DELAFORCE

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Pen & Sword
MILITARY

First published in the United Kingdom by
Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd in 1994

Republished in this format in 2010 by
Pen & Sword Military
An imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 184884 111 6

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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Introduction

First In, Last Out of the Battle

May your glory ever shine! May your laurels never fade! May the memory of this glorious pilgrimage of war which you have made from Alamein, via the Baltic to Berlin, never die. It is a march unsurpassed through all the story of war . . . *May the fathers long tell the children about this tale.*

These were Winston Churchill's dramatic words to the British 7th Armoured Division – his favourite – on 21 July 1945. They were spoken in the ruins of Berlin, to celebrate the final Victory Parade of the Second World War.

The Desert Rats, who took their name from the long-tailed African desert rodent, wore their insignia of the Jerboa with great pride.

As their GOC, Major-General L.O. Lyne DSO, wrote:

No division has contributed more to the downfall of the Axis Powers and to the total defeat of Germany. The Desert Rats saw service in the Middle East when Italy declared war on us in 1940. They fought with great distinction all through the long campaign which culminated in the victory of Alamein. They took a leading part in the pursuit of Rommel's defeated forces and in the final breakthrough to Tunis.

The division was the first British Armoured Division to land in Europe when it took part in the assault landing at Salerno. It served through the Italian campaign till brought back to England early in 1944 to prepare the great assault on Western Europe.

Churchill's Desert Rats is the story of the final campaign from Normandy to Berlin, told by dozens of individual Desert Rats – troopers and privates, sergeants, young troop leaders and company commanders. It was a terrible struggle in Normandy, followed by the Break-Out and Great Swan to liberate all of Northern France and Belgium. Ghent was taken, followed by months of dour fighting in the Peel country of Holland, the crossing of the Rhine and the fierce hot pursuit through Germany, the capture of Hamburg and the final entry into Berlin.

The roll-call of famous regiments was deeply inspiring: the Cherry Pickers (11th Hussars, Prince Albert's Own), 8th Kings Royal Irish

Hussars, the 1st and 5th Royal Tank Regiments, the Queens Infantry Brigade, 1/5th Queens Royal Surrey (Guildford), 1/6th Queens (Bermondsey) and 1/7th Queens (Southwark), the Sharpshooters (4th County of London Yeomanry), 1st Battalion of the Rifle Brigade, 3rd and 5th Regiments of Royal Horse Artillery, the Norfolk Yeomanry 65th Anti-Tank Regiment RA and the Skins (5th Inniskilling Dragoon Guards), who joined in August 1944.

The German army regarded the Desert Rats as the élite of the British Army. Indeed Monty thrust his three desert divisions, including the 7th Armoured, straight into Operation Overlord to push out of the initial vital bridgeheads. But many of the Rats – quite rightly – thought that they had done far more than their fair share of fighting. They knew all about dying in the desert and in Italy and, having survived, felt little inclination to die in the Normandy bocage, outgunned in their Cromwell tanks by mighty Panzers – Tigers and Panthers – and the deadly 88mm A/Tank gun. After all there were another dozen British and Canadian divisions waiting in the wings untouched by the scars of war.

This is a story of courage. If you know at first hand of all the dangers from snipers, mines, Nebelwerfers, Panzerfaust, 88mm guns and Panzer fire, it takes enormous guts and instinct for survival to keep pushing down the centre lines. In their long final eleven-month campaign the Rats took grievous casualties. The Sharpshooters in Normandy and the Queens Brigade in Holland had to be merged, even disbanded, because of their losses. The division was stretched to the very limits of endurance but still, as Monty put it, 'they were in at the kill'.

Churchill's Desert Rats is dedicated to the memory of the thousands of Rats who are buried in well-tended, green-pastured cemeteries.

I was fortunate to fight with 11th Armoured Division, the 'Black Bull', from Normandy to the Baltic with 13th RHA, and then on their disbandment, I moved in late 1945 to spend eighteen months with the Desert Rats as a troop commander in 3rd RHA. In all the great battles in north-west Europe the Black Bull and the Desert Rat fought side by side against a ferocious determined foe. We won.

If there are errors of names, dates and places, they are mine alone. At the end of the book I have referred with many thanks to the score or two of Sharp End soldiers – usually with sand in their shoes – who have made this book so interesting.

The Old Soldiers

The First World War song, ‘Old soldiers never die, they only fade away’, may have been applicable to the Desert Rats, but their own motto was ‘An old soldier is a cautious soldier, that is why he is an old soldier.’

Made famous by Jon’s ‘Two Types’ cartoons and loaded with battle honours they arrived back in the UK from Italy on 7 January 1944. A race apart with brown faces (and knees), to many people they appeared rude, cocky and arrogant – a law unto themselves. They spoke a foreign language with strange words like *shufti*, *shai*, *maleesh*, *imshi*, *sayeda*, *buckshee*, and of course *ackers* and *bints*! They sang peculiar songs such as the haunting Wehrmacht marching song ‘Lili Marlene’, albeit with unusual and vulgar words! Their army costume was bizarre – gaudy coloured silk scarves, brilliant pullovers, and a peculiar array of headgear. Their officers wore scuffed ‘brothel-creeper’ suede shoes, highly coloured corduroy trousers, and some sported luxuriant moustaches and carried fly whisks. They all claimed still to have sand in their shoes – in East Anglia. The pale-faced British army who had not yet soldiered outside Britain winced at the arrival of these jaunty, swashbuckling Desert Rats. But war-weary Britain made much of the victors of Alamein, Tobruk, Benghazi, Tripoli, Mareth and Tunis, and more recently Salerno, Naples and Volturno.

Monty had a little *div*
He called the Desert Rats
And now they are going home
They’ll all put on their hats.

They’ll all wear hats of different kinds
So you cannot tell by that
You’ll only know they’re Monty’s boys
By their little Desert Rats.

Divisional doggerel!

Sergeant Major ‘Knocker’ Knight of ‘B’ squadron 5th RTR suggested to Trooper Norman Smith that he might be shot as a spy as he was not wearing regulation uniform. He *did* wear his tank beret and army trousers, but shoes instead of boots and a leather jacket and coloured silk scarf instead

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of conventional battledress top. One tank commander sported a black silk top hat, and passing his brigadier, raised it most elegantly as a salute. Trooper Duce was a gunner/mechanic with 8th Hussars and noted: 'No trouble spotting the difference between the old hands and replacements. For one thing they were about ten years older; also they were deeply tanned. In addition they all wore the Africa Star Medal Ribbon. Young replacements were treated with complete indifference at first and during off-duty hours they tended to keep to themselves . . . I was glad to be with these people. They seemed to ooze experience.'

Gordon Johnson wrote: 'I was transferred as a wireless operator along with 250 eighteen-year-old reinforcements from 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards to 5th Royal Tank Regiment on their return in Jan 1944 from Italy. After the stricture of a cavalry regiment, the 5th were a new world with scant respect for Authority, Military Police and Americans, not necessarily in that order! We were issued with Cromwells which would hardly keep out the rain, and Fireflies which were some use.'

For the first few months of 1944, after some welcome home leave, the division found themselves temporarily billeted in the black fenlands and blasted heaths of East Anglia. A far cry from the winds and dusty sands of the desert, but alas there were few pubs or cinemas. The Nissen huts in that cold winter were only just preferable to tents and bivvies. Conditions were such that graffiti appeared on walls saying 'No leave, no second front.'

Major John Edney, later DAA and QMG of 131st Queens Brigade, wrote: 'We all considered that we were by far the best division of the British Army and every man was proud of it. When we, together with 51st Highland Div and 50 Div left the 8th Army, its real backbone returned to England for the last and greatest battle. . .'

A friend of Norman Smith, 5th RTR, who was a sapper major in Italy, said that when he first went up to the fighting among the Desert Rats 'they had a special aura about them which you could not help noticing.' Norman was told that in peacetime the regiment had been known as 'The Shitty Fifth', as their ceremonial guard turnout at Buckingham Palace had been sloppy. Perhaps the RTR colours are apt – brown, red and green (through mud and blood to the green fields beyond).

Major-General 'Bobby' Erskine DSO was particularly irked at having to surrender some members of his highly experienced, well-knit team. His GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Hobart, went to the Guards Armoured Division and his OC Signals was also posted. On 27 January Brigadier 'Bolo' Whistler, CO of 131st Queens Brigade was posted to 3rd British Division. Major John Edney wrote:

Maurice Ekins of the Royal Fusiliers was the new Brigade commander. He had not been out of England during the war and had a peacetime attitude to soldiering and an adherence to the rule-book. He would



Major-General Bobby Erskine
DSO, GOC 7th Armoured
Division.

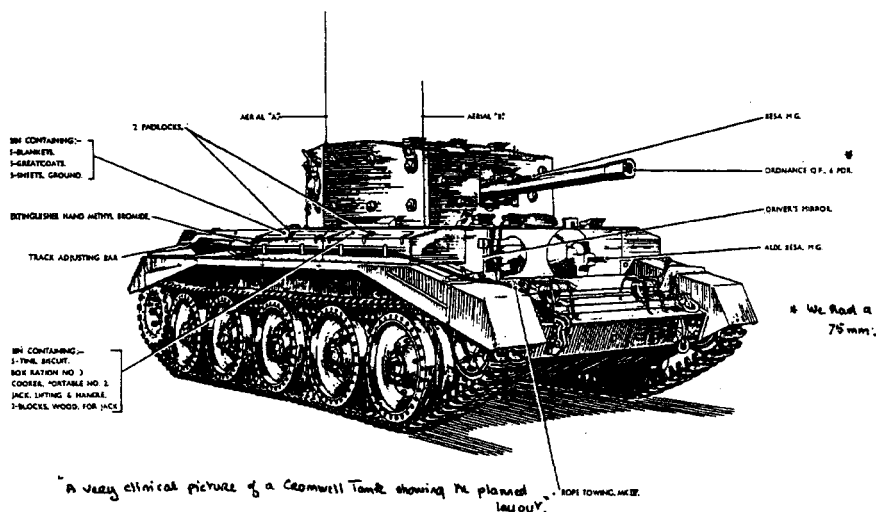
look at us at times *as if we were from another planet*. With our battle experience, he must have realised that we had the edge on him. Even later on in battles it took him a long time to learn and fortunately he did not stay very long with us.

On 3 July after three weeks in Normandy, he was replaced.

The GOC addressed all divisional officers on 11 February at Mumford cinema. He told them of the coming invasion of Europe, their role as immediate follow-up division after the initial landings and the training programme ahead. The armoured regiments would have to go north to Kirkcudbright in Scotland to do their gunnery training and maintenance. After their brisk two months in action in southern Italy with Sherman tanks it was of course inevitable that the division would be re-equipped with *Cromwell* tanks. One Sherman Firefly equipped with the new 17-pounder gun was a distinct bonus. Most squadron HQs also employed two *Cromwells* armed with 95mm howitzers.

Trooper Duce wrote:

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A Cromwell tank, with points of interest marked.

The Cromwell (heavy cruiser) tank was the first real advance in design and technique that our people had come up with. The Rolls Royce Merlin converted to tank use was called the Meteor, produced 540 bhp at governed revs coupled to the Merit Brown epicycle gearbox and Christie suspension system, 77mm max-armour plating, 75mm dual-purpose gun, plus secondary armament of two heavy base machine guns . . . The Cromwell was also very fast with power to spare, even with governors fitted to keep speed down to 40 mph. This was still some speed for a 28-ton tank and in the breakout from Normandy even wheeled vehicles were pushed to keep up with them. With regard to tank guns the Germans always seemed to be one step ahead of us. When we had the 2 pdr, they had the 50mm in their Mk IIIs and 75mm in Mk IVs. Now we had the 75mm and 17 pdr, the enemy had the 75mm long special and the formidable 88mm on their massive Tigers, the Panthers taking the special 75mm. Good as the Cromwell was, it was no match for any of these enemy tanks in a tank-to-tank situation in gunpower alone, apart from the thinner plating, but then neither was the Sherman really. The Cromwell's strong points were its speed and reliability.

The 8th Hussars were officially an armoured reconnaissance regiment but having identical equipment of Cromwells and Stuarts, were regarded as the fourth armoured regiment.

Norman Smith, 5th RTR, had definite views on their new Cromwells, having just got used to the Sherman. The driver's escape hatch was covered



'C' Squadron 5th RTR with Cromwells, training for the invasion. They are pictured in Shakers Wood, Brandon, Norfolk.

by the turret when the gun was in certain positions: 'Our lads were not going to stand for that.' The other defect was that the armour around the turret was perpendicular, thus considerably reducing the chances of AP shot glancing off. Sloping armour (glacis) was the ideal with some chance of shot bouncing off and not penetrating.

Corporal Peter Roach was initially with the recce troop of 1st RTR.

The new Humber scout cars we condemned as soon as we saw them, too little armour, poor across country and a driving position which was almost impossible to leave in a hurry. Where were our beloved Dingos? Then the first of the Cromwell tanks arrived. This was the crunch for this was to be the strength of the unit. There was gloom. A vehicle recognition class was taken by our OC, in which we questioned him about thickness of armour, weight of projectile and muzzle velocity of the respective tanks, ours and the Germans. He was an honest man and when he had finished, there was silence. Each sat quietly brooding. Again we were to be hopelessly outgunned and after our brief period of equality this was a bitter blow . . . [Later] new hatches were devised and fitted to enable the driver to escape with some alacrity – to men who had watched their friends incinerated, this improvement helped morale.

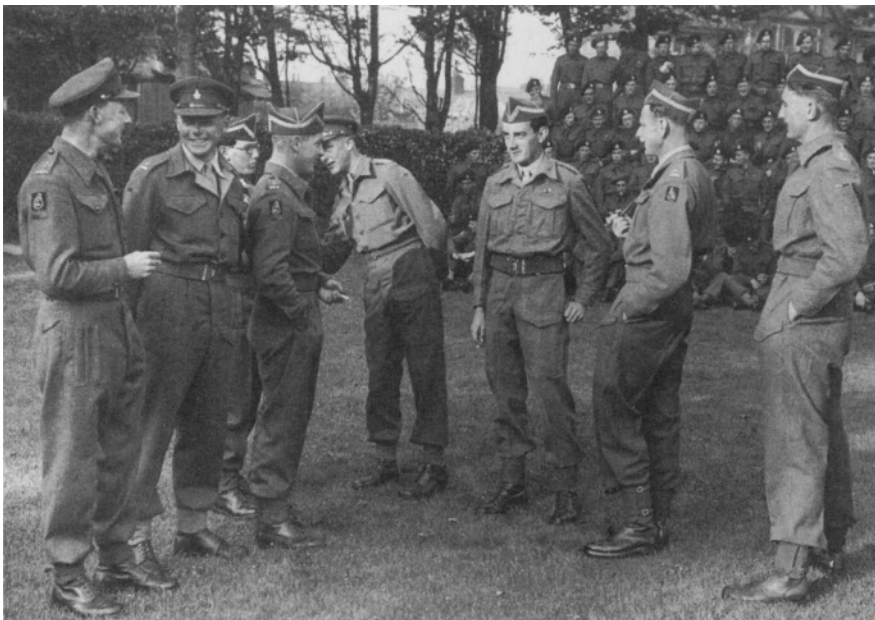
Monty came to see his favourite division on 16 and 17 February and visited and inspected every unit on a bitterly cold, snowy day. 'The great man stepped out, waved and peeled off his sheepskin flying top so that we

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could all get a good look at his medal ribbons,' noted Trooper Norman Smith. 'He wore two badges in the black tank beret he sported, the Royal Tank Regiment badge and the General Staff badge.' 'Tankies' disapproved of him wearing the black beret and RTR badge to which he was not entitled! A week later the monarch came to see that rare species – Desert Rats in England. Sergeant Harry Ellis, 15th LAA Regiment RA, recalled that HM King George VI inspected all four gunner regiments at Sandringham: 'The 7th were very experienced fighting men and we felt we had been selected to take part in the coming invasion because of our experience.' The Cherry Pickers were inspected on 24 February by Monty, Ike and Tedder and were entertained in the Mess with port and plum cake.

When young Bill Bellamy rejoined the 8th Kings Royal Irish Hussars after dysentery had put him in hospital, he reported to the adjutant in West Tofts camp near Thetford, Norfolk. 'To my horror I found that the 15 cwt truck allocated to me was driven by the same trooper, Bob Weir MM, who had greeted me when we arrived in Benghazi. He saluted me most respectfully and then said "A little fucker like you needs protecting, I'll look after you."' Weir was eventually kicked out of the regiment, but then won a DCM for extreme bravery while serving with the 5th Dragoon Guards, the Skins!

The next VIPs to visit the division were a Russian delegation who stayed for lunch with the 8th Hussars. The Russian general sat next to Colonel



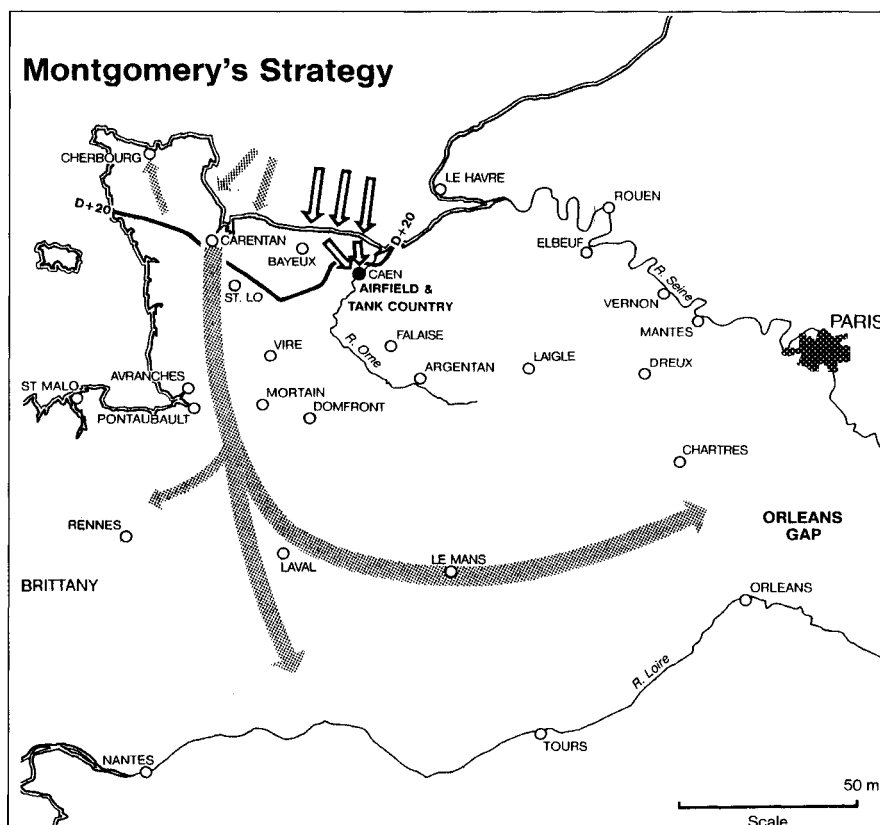
'A' Squadron 8th Hussars, June 1944. Left to right: 'Goon' Gadsby ('C' Squadron), Bill Evans, Bill Talbot-Hervey, Bill Bellamy, Dallas Barnes, Tony Hind, 'Piff' Threlfall, Mike Brown.

'Cuthie' Goulburn, who during lunch pointed to the Balaclava battle honour embroidered on the tablecloth in front of him and said: 'We celebrate that as a great victory, General.' 'So do ve Colonel,' replied the Russian general, 'So do ve!'

During that cold winter and spring large scale exercises called 'Shudder', 'Shiver' and 'Charpoy' took place.

Brigadier Herbert, on Monty's staff in May 1944, saw 7th Armoured Division troops driving by Monty's HQ at Southwick heading for Farnham:

I felt the troops were not altogether right. Now two or three people came up to me and said "Do you realise that these people are out of hand?" They were responsible senior fighting soldiers and they were really worried about it [indiscipline]. And I went out and had a look and I agreed. They were not under control – they were forcing people off the road, assing about generally – *in a way that experienced troops going into battle would not behave!* I mean they were the Desert Rats, the most famous division in the British Army, and they were fed up and



irresponsible. So that there was some reason to be uncertain as to whether everything was all right or whether it wasn't!

Colonel Duncan Riddell, formerly with the Desert Rats in North Africa, wrote of them:

They were an experienced division; perhaps too experienced. They had seen a lot of war and a lot of death. Most of the other units unlike 7th Armoured and 51st Highland Division had spent the war training in the UK. To units like the 11th Armoured and 15th Scottish, war was still an adventure, and they were eager for the fray – for a while at least. 7th Armoured and the 51st Highland had long since realized that war is a nasty, bloody business!

Later that month the division left their concentration in Norfolk and moved into immediate invasion areas to complete tank and vehicle waterproofing, the Queens Brigade with all the gunner regiments, sappers and RASC to West Ham and Brentwood near the London docks and the 22nd Armoured Brigade to Ipswich. Divisional TAC HQ arranged themselves in Ashley Gardens near Victoria Station to finalize shipping plans, study intelligence reports, prepare maps – and just possibly visit the fleshpots of Soho. On 28 May the GOC briefed all officers in the



Skins prepare their tanks, June 1944.

Brentwood garrison cinema. The 22nd Armoured Brigade plus 5th RHA (with their Sexton-Ram SP 25-pounders) were to land first on 7 June (D+1) and, assuming that 50th (Northumbrian) Division had secured a bridgehead and captured Bayeux, move down the Bayeux to Tilly-sur-Seulles road towards the vital Mont Pinçon.

The prime minister and Monty had the utmost confidence in their three desert veteran divisions – at first. Churchill wrote to Marshal Stalin on 7 June 1944:

There was a tank engagement of our newly landed armour with 50 enemy tanks of the 21st Panzer Grenadier Division late last night towards Caen as the result of which the enemy quitted the field.

The British 7th Armoured Division is now going in and should give us superiority for a few days. *The question is how many can they bring against us in the next week.*

Morale and Reputation

Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks wrote in his autobiography:

As the leaders take the most risks they tend unfortunately to become the first casualties and as more and more of them are killed or disappear into hospital, so the offensive power of their unit wanes . . . The problem of what might be called divisional psychology requires constant attention in war. A division may go into its first battle well-trained and full of enthusiasm but lacking in front-line experience [this certainly applied to 11th and Guards Armoured Divisions]. If it can have a quick success when it is still at the peak it will probably develop into a magnificent fighting formation. But some divisions never recover from a first unfortunate battle *or* from being left in the line too long. To decide on the right moment at which a division should be pulled out of the line for a rest requires nice judgment on the part of a superior commander.

During 1944 Winston Churchill wrote to the War Office (CIGS and Secretary of State for War):

It is a painful reflection that probably not one in four or five men who wear the King's uniform ever hear a bullet whistle, or is likely to hear one. The vast majority run no more risk than the civil population in southern England. It is my unpleasant duty to dwell on these facts. *One set of men are sent back again and again to the front*, while the great majority are kept out of all fighting, to their regret [well, perhaps!].

Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Carver (to become Field Marshal Lord Carver), himself a desert veteran commanding 1st Royal Tank Regiment with 7th Armoured Division, noted:

In the regiments which had been in the Middle East as many as half and often more than that had been doing it for four years. Many who had been brave as lions and still were prepared to be on occasions, either had lost their nerves – they usually went fairly soon – or had a pretty shrewd judgement as to what risks they could take and still have a fairly good chance of surviving.

The Desert Rats, who were extremely battle-weary before D-Day, were now to face severe criticism.

Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks, perhaps Monty's ablest Corps Commander, wrote later in 1944:

Another disturbing feature was the comparative lack of success of the veteran 7th Armoured and 51st Highland Divisions. Both of them came again later on and finished the war in magnificent shape, but during the Normandy fighting they were not at their best . . . The danger signal comes when the troops begin to say 'Is nobody else fighting this war?' The 7th Armoured and 51st Highland Division, *after being lionised in the UK*, came out to Normandy and found themselves faced with an entirely different type of battle fought under different conditions of terrain. And they began to see the difficulties all too clearly. A racing enthusiast once described this condition as 'like an old plater who won't go in the mud'. All the more credit to them that they eventually staged a comeback and regained their Middle East form.

After the 11th Armoured Division under General 'Pip' Roberts had smashed 12 miles through the German front at Caumont in less than thirty-six hours, Monty wrote to the US General Simpson at the start of Bluecoat that 7th Armoured had simply failed to push out its flanking shield in time:

I fear I shall have to remove Erskine from 7 Armoured Div. He will not fight his division and take risks. It was very easy in the desert to get a bloody nose and a good many people did get one. The old desert divisions are apt to look over their shoulders and wonder if all is OK behind or if the flanks are secure and so on. 7 Armoured Div is like that. They want a new General who will drive them headlong into and through gaps torn in the enemy defence – not worrying about flanks or anything . . . We want Generals now who will put their heads down and go like hell.

When Major-General G.L. Verney took command of the division in Normandy on 4 August 1944, he wrote:

Two of the three divisions that came back from Italy at the end of 1943, the 7th Armoured and 51st Highland, were extremely 'swollen-headed'. They were a law unto themselves: they thought they need *only obey those orders that suited them*. Before the battles of Caumont I had been warned to look out for the transport of the 7th Armoured on the road – their march discipline was non-existent. Both these divisions did badly from the moment they landed in Normandy. They greatly deserved the criticism they received . . .

Major-General 'Pip' Roberts, who commanded the dashing 11th Armoured Division, the Black Bull, which was an outstanding success in the Normandy-Baltic campaign wrote: 'Monty's principle of including *experienced* formations and units in the invasion force was *unsound*; much better results would have been achieved if *fresh* formations, available in England, had been used in their place . . . I noticed on several occasions the differences in dash between formations which had been fighting a long time and those who were fresh.' (Letter to Liddell Hart, 1952.)

Peter Roach served in the recce troop of 1st RTR and wrote:

We were sure of ourselves, with an inner calm that was often taken as conceit, but was a very different thing. We had mainly come to terms with our life and with the many faces of death . . . There seemed no need for enthusiasm and histrionics. *We took unkindly to learning new techniques* for we all knew that death was the lot of every one of us whether in the near future or in our old age. [And later] There was a feeling that because we had done well in the past this was no reason that we should be expected to carry the burden now. There were too many men who had done enough to warrant an easier passage.

During the eleven month campaign Monty, acutely disappointed by the division's *initial* performance, changed the 'management' frequently. Three GOCs, seven brigade commanders, two CRAs and a hundred officers cross-posted just before Operation Bluecoat – all to little effect.

Field Marshal Rommel criticized the British Army for always chopping and changing their commanders. He was probably right! Peter Roach again: 'The regiment [1 RTR] was tired, yet like an old war horse at the smell of powder, it raised its head and would not be left behind.'

In the first three weeks in Normandy the division suffered 1,149 casualties.

An Armoured Division's Role in Battle

When Rex Wingfield joined 1/6th Queens he was given a very good brief by his new 'muckers':

The job of an armoured division is a highly specialised one. It is a spearhead. The point is three regiments of tanks and in close support of each of them is a company of the 1st Rifle Brigade in halftracks (and carriers). The blade is you, riding in Troop Carrying Vehicles (TCVs) – three battalions of infantry. You now belong to the 1st/6th Queens Royal Regiment. You also belong to 131 Lorried Infantry Brigade of the 7th Armoured Division. An armoured division probes and pushes its way through or around opposition. It does not bash blindly ahead. It does not stop to 'mop up'. It moves on and hopes to God that its supplies last out, or catch up. The limit of the advance is the limit of those supplies. An armoured division is basically restricted to main roads but it can use good firm tank-country. Tanks make their way ahead. If they meet machineguns they deal with them. If they bump anti-tank guns or anti-tank ditches – it's the infantry's job to deal with those. Anti-tank guns are cleared by infantry flank attacks. Infantry also clear and hold anti-tank ditches until AVREs (armoured vehicles Royal Engineers) bring up tank bridges or 'fascine' tanks to fill up the ditch. At night the tanks laager on some prominent feature or natural obstacle such as a hill or river. Round them in all-round defence are the infantry. During the night supply columns battle their way to you – we hope! By next day your TCVs have brought up an *ordinary* infantry division to relieve you and on you go again! From dawn to dusk you have rocket-firing 'Tiffies' constantly circling round – and all the division's artillery to play with. We don't have to worry much about wood or street cleaning. That's not our job. That's for ordinary infantry divisions – very costly in men. If *our* tanks go and play with someone else we're taken out of the line because we're not strong enough to hold anything.

Tactics

Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Carver (later Field Marshal), who commanded 1st RTR in Normandy, wrote about the problem of tank-infantry co-