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THE CAMERONIANS

The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) are a hard-fighting regiments, with a splendid record of active service in many parts of the world.

In the Four Years War they sent overseas 27 battalions to win honours in all the great battles of the western front, on Gallipoli, in Macedonia, Egypt and Palestine. They were the first British regiment to land in France in August 1914. One of the leading party was the recently joined 2nd Lieutenant Douglas Alexander Henry Graham. Twenty five years later in a still more desperate war a Cameronian battalion disembarked in France at the head of another British Expeditionary Force. It was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel D.A.H. Graham. In the Second World War the achievements of the Cameronians have been not less remarkable than they were in the first.

In France and in Belgium in May, 1940, the Cameronians were part of the 5th Division which won lasting fame at Arras and on the Ypres-Comines Canal. Between 10,000 and 20,000 British troops, commanded by Major General H.E. Franklyn and confronted by much larger German numbers and an overwhelming enemy superiority in aircraft, armour and artillery, held their ground during several days bitter fighting and made possible the safe withdrawal of other formations to Dunkirk.

At Arras the 5th Division (and the 50th) first counter-attacked southeastward and captured the crossings over the Scarpe. Then they clung to the captured positions, denying to the Germans for many precious hours a vital road and rail centre. On May 26th-27th, and 28th along the Ypres-Comines Canal much less than a full British division in numbers flung back repeatedly at least an army corps of the enemy. The struggle was often hand-to-hand. At one critical moment the commanding officer of the Cameronians led a bayonet charge up the flank of a dominating ridge and put to flight the Germans who had reached the crest. The cost was heavy but the British line was reestablished. In a Special Order General Franklyn told his division

"The Commander, Second Corps, has asked me to convey his warm congratulations and thanks to the Division, and to other troops who fought so gallantly in co-operation with the Division on May 27th and 28th. It is his opinion that it was entirely due to our action that the whole Corps was able to effect a withdrawal, and that unless we had held the Ypres-Comines Canal so successfully the safety of the whole B.E.F. might have been in serious danger. I am confident that this fact will be confirmed by history."

"It is a matter of great satisfaction to all of us that we were able to carry out such a vitally important task with complete success. It was not done without heavy losses; this must be so always when troops are asked to hold wide frontages to the last."

"It is sad to see such fine units reduced by casualties to their present small numbers, but it would be much worse if they had not achieved a vital task, and inflicted far heavier losses on the enemy."

"I am indeed proud to have under my command such a splendid body of troops, and to all commanders and troops I offer my sincere congratulations and thanks".

From/

From the North sea to Eastern Asia is a far cry. It is typical of a workaday infantry regiment such as the Cameronians that their next appearance on the battle-fields of the present war should be in Burma. On February 24th, 1942, a Cameronian battalion was rushed eastward from Pegu to the Sittang River. The Japanese were gaining considerable successes in their first attack in force westward from the Thailand frontier. They had thrust back the small British field army against the Sittang and by a disastrous mistake the bridge was blown too soon. Two brigades were encircled on the wrong side of the wide and deep and swift-running river. The task of the Cameronians was to help the troops who were cut off to break through. They took up a position on the bank and covered the withdrawal of successive bodies of British troops who fought their way to the water and managed to cross in country boats or on emergency rafts or by swimming. Back at Pegu the Cameronians made part of a column of tanks, guns and infantry who found themselves threatened with destruction as soon as Rangoon fell and the Japanese began to close in on them from all directions. Once again steadiness and hard fighting saved the position. The Cameronians, acting as rearguard, had to go without food or rest for days at a time. At the worst period they had only two meals of cold bully in 70 hours. When hope seemed almost gone a most formidable Japanese road block was stormed and the way was opened to Prome and the Irrawaddy route to the north. At Prome there was another crisis when the Japanese in vastly superior numbers managed to cut the British line of retreat. Attacking in disregard of very heavy losses the Cameronians drove the Japanese from the woodland ambushes in which they were lurking. With trees set on fire around them parties of Japanese made wild dashes for safety. The road blocks were broken and the retreat went on. Northwestward to the Chindwin River and through the border mountains to Assam the Cameronians suffered first many battle losses and all the time from hunger exposure and disease. Only seven officers and 48 men remained on their feet when the stubborn remnant arrived in India. Madagascar gave the Cameronians another opportunity to distinguish themselves. They landed on the eastern side on the southern tip of the great island and joined in the rapid thrust westward which captured Antsirane and removed the danger of a Japanese occupation of the wide bay of Diego Suarez.

Now in Sicily the Cameronians have done even better work. Going ashore on the south-eastern beaches on July 10th, they pushed on towards Syracuse at once. Their division was in the town before dark. The infantry went forward with such dash that enemy tanks and heavy guns were overrun without artillery support. One party attacking with machine guns, rifles and grenades knocked out two tanks.

From Syracuse the division fought towards Mount Etna on the western flank of the Catania advance. They forced the passage of the Simeto River, took Paterno, and, circling the huge mountain mass by the highest road, entered Trecastagni and Tremonte, which dominate the east coast route from Catania and Messina.

The Cameronians proud of their link by name and character with the Scot Covenanters of the Seventeenth Century have proved in Sicily that the old combatant spirit in a good cause burns undimmed.

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