

40TH ROYAL TANK REGIMENT AT EL ALAMEIN

During the battle of El Alamein, the 40th Royal Tank Regiment, armed only with 2-pounder guns, kept at bay a strong party of Mk III's and IV's throughout a long day of battle, and prevented the undoing of important work accomplished by the 9th Australian Division the previous night.

On 31 st October, the tank regiment moved forward at first light to support, with the help of 121st Field Regiment, the Australian infantry who had the task of assaulting the rear of the enemy defences. At 4 o'clock in the morning the tank battalion's advance was hampered by mines which were cleared by sappers, so that it was possible for the armour to go forward slowly, until shortly before 6 o'clock one Squadron of the Battalion was ordered to take another route which would bring them more quickly into contact with the advancing Australians.

The mine-clearing party worked fast, and the rest of the tanks reached an enemy locality known as "Thompson's Post" by 6 o'clock and pressed ahead in the wake of the Australian troops. It was, however, difficult for them to concentrate in support of the infantry battalions, because their movements were much restricted by the mine-fields. The Squadron which had been sent forward by the short cut did, however, succeed in contacting the infantry, and remained in support throughout the day.

Sappers were sent forward to arrange the clearing of mine-fields to the east of "Thompson's Post", and thus open a passage along the railway and main road which traversed the area, down which the tanks could move to the support of the infantry. The danger from mine-fields can be gauged by the fact that before mid-day the Officer Commanding the tank battalion in trying to contact an Australian infantry battalion, which had retired westward during the day, was blown up on a mine-field for the second time during the morning. He at once went forward on foot to contact a Liaison Officer from the Australians.

A quarter of an hour later the two tank troops which had been pushed out north-west of "Thompson's Post" reported that a force of 12 to 15 enemy tanks was forming up some 2,000 yards from their position.

Less than two hours later the 40th R.T.R., with the exception of their advanced Squadron, gave battle in this area against an enemy force, superior in fire power, which was reinforced during the afternoon. Throughout this hard-fought engagement, which lasted until nightfall, our tanks were subjected to intense shell fire, but they grimly held the position in spite of heavy casualties. During the day their casualties amounted to 21, while the enemy lost 5 tanks for certain as well as one probable.

The Battalion's Commanding Officer had an afternoon as full of incident and danger as his morning had been, for at 4 o'clock he met his Brigade Group Commander and received orders from him, but as he returned to the tank battle he had his tank knocked out from under him by an anti-tank gun, and was unable to rejoin his unit or communicate with them during the rest of the day. It fell to the Officer Commanding "B" Squadron who was commanding the regiment in his absence to withdraw the unit from the ^{tank} battle to leaguer in a nearby orchard where it was rejoined by the Commanding Officer.

Though it had suffered heavy casualties, the 40th R.T.R. had done a splendid service in preventing a strong party of German tanks from undoing the work the Australians had accomplished during the previous night, and had earned a fine reputation for itself which it was to maintain throughout the campaign stretching ahead from these first testing days at El Alamein to the final victories in Tunisia.

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