PETER HART

AT CLOSE RANGE

LIFE AND DEATH IN AN ARTILLERY REGIMENT, 1939–45

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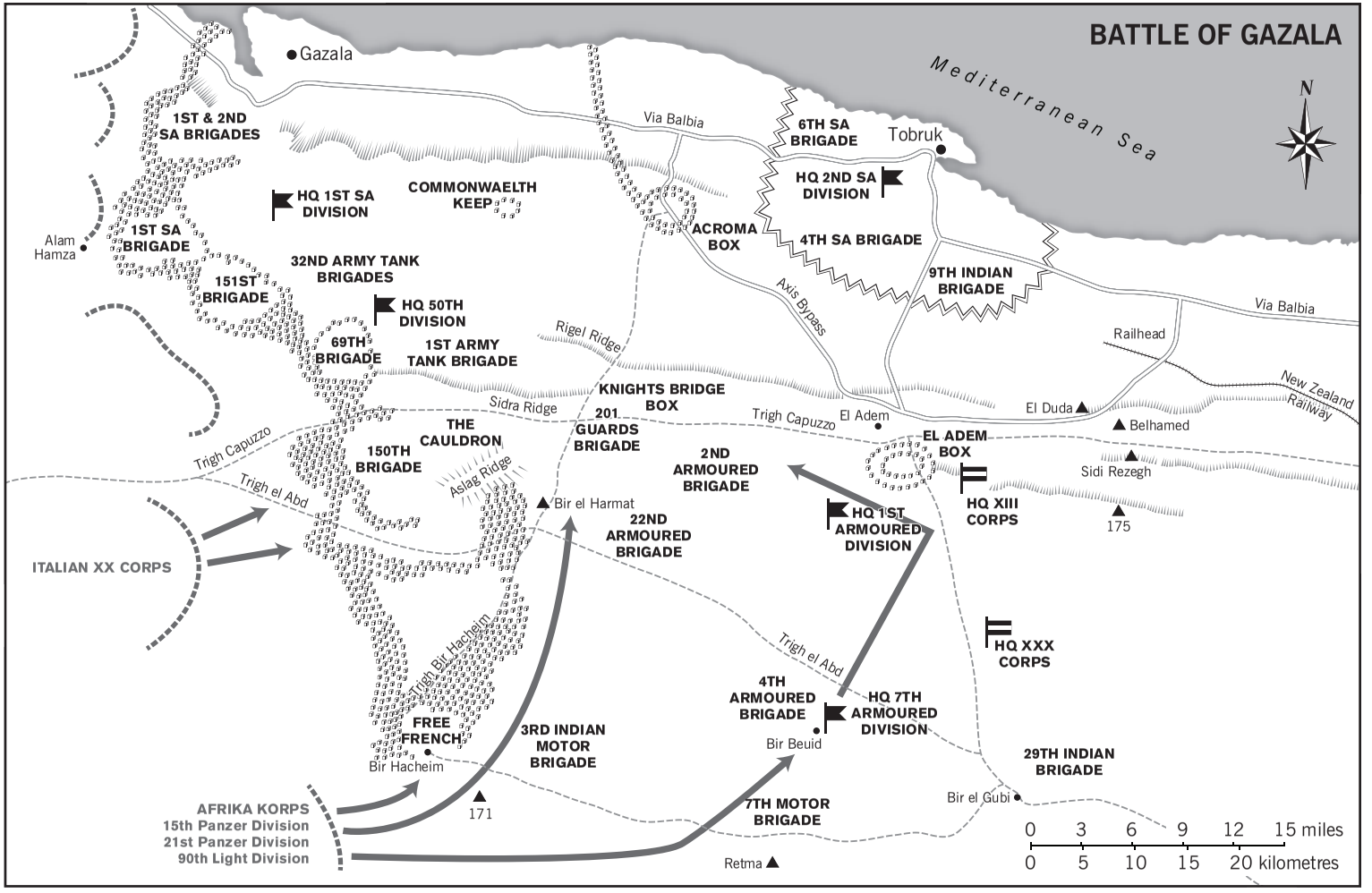
BATTLE OF GAZALA
Mediterranean Sea
N
Gazala
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Tobruk
1ST & 2ND SA BRIGADES
6TH SA BRIGADE
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HQ 1ST SA DIVISION
COMMONWAELTH KEEP
ACROMA BOX
4TH SA BRIGADE
Alam Hamza
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Rigel Ridge
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201 GUARDS BRIGADE
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Bir Hacheim
29TH INDIAN BRIGADE
AFRIKA KORPS
15th Panzer Division
21st Panzer Division
90th Light Division
171
7TH MOTOR BRIGADE
Bir el Gubi
Retma
0 3 6 9 12 15 miles
0 5 10 15 20 kilometres

PREFACE

THIS BOOK COVERS THE ADVENTURES of just one regiment of the Royal Artillery during the Second World War. What matters here is the men who fought the battles: not the grand strategy, the operational theories, the tactical minutiae – all fascinating enough in themselves – but the heart of this book is the experiences of the soldiers, from the traumatic excitement of action to the banalities of life as a soldier at war. The men that sweated over their guns, mastered the abstruse technicalities of gunnery, cursed the diving Stukas, sheltered from German counter-battery fire, flinched at the howl of the nebelwerfer and faced tanks over open sights. These men are the real story. Most of my generation thought little or nothing about Second World War veterans as we were growing up. They were 'everyman' – the middle-aged chaps we saw on our streets, at football matches and in the local pubs. Our own parents and uncles. I myself was obsessed with the Great War: it seemed so much more interesting; far more remote; such a tragic waste. There seemed nothing special about the numerous Second World War veterans that surrounded us – or so I believed as a callow youth.

I was wrong.

In the late 1980s, as one of the oral historians with the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, I began interviewing Second World War veterans. I soon found that they too had a great history to tell, one just as fascinating, just as exciting as those

from the Great War. But they were younger – in their sixties or seventies – not in their nineties. Their voices were vigorous, their memories vivid, their grip of details still firm. I managed to interview some fifty veterans from just one artillery regiment: the South Nottinghamshire Hussars. By combining their memories, I could examine battles from multiple angles: blending their stories together, much as a director edits a film.

It allowed me to get 'up, close and personal' to the essence of their experience in a manner rarely found other than in fiction. To vicariously share veterans' hopes and fears; the deafening explosions of the shells, the screams of the wounded; the pleasure of good comradeship and the despair at friends lost for ever. It was a pleasure and an honour to meet men like Ray Ellis, Bob Foulds, Harold Harper, George Pearson, John Walker and all the others – ordinary young men from Nottingham who had to face up to the challenges of war service with 107th (South Notts Hussars) Regiment, Royal Artillery in September 1939. Taken from their families, exposed to the rough camaraderie of military life, they were taught their various trades as gunners, signallers, drivers, cooks, NCOs and officers, then thrust into the North African desert campaign in 1940. We chart their endless hours of training initially on first 18-pounder and then 25-pounder guns, their first experiences of battle, the prolonged privations during the Siege of Tobruk in 1941, then the slaughter and despair as they were overrun by German tanks during the Battle of Knightsbridge in June 1942. The unit soon reformed as 107 Battery, part of the 7th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery. The survivors of the carnage at Knightsbridge were joined by men from all over the country, often conscripts, but all keen to build a new spirit and ready for the challenges of mastering their powerful new 5.5-inch medium guns. A whole raft of new characters joins our story: Reg Cutter, David Elliott and Ken Giles among them. Their guns would blaze out again to great

effect during the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, then time and time again in the battles to finally clear the Germans out of North Africa in 1943. They fought alongside the Canadian Corps throughout the Battle of Sicily, until they finished up firing across the Straits of Messina in support of the Eighth Army landings on the Italian mainland on 3 September 1943. Then it was back to England. Here the 107 Battery left 7th Medium Regiment to merge with the 16th Medium Regiment, thereby creating – like a phoenix rising from the ashes – a new 107th (South Notts Hussars) Regiment. Soon they were in the thick of it again when they landed in Normandy in July 1944. In the fighting to take Caen, they fired some 20,000 shells, usually in a counter-battery role attempting to silence the German guns that were holding up the advance. In the summer of 1944, the British artillery was once again the war-winning force it had been at the end of the Great War – the massed guns grinding down German resistance in conjunction with airpower. After the capture of Caen the regiment had one of its more gruesome successes in the war, when shells were poured into the Falaise Gap through which the Germans were retreating in August. The advance was then rapid, until they took part in the clearance of the Channel ports in September 1944. Next was the drive to free the port of Antwerp as a logistics hub. After crossing the Leopold Canal, the 107 Regiment RA provided covering fire during the hazardous missions to capture South Beveland and Walcheren Island at the end of October. Already, they had fired some 70,000 shells – around 4,400 100lb shells per gun. Then the Allies pressed towards Germany. The fighting was hard, as counter-battery fire, bombing raids and strafing attacks all made their presence felt. One of the most tragic losses of men was caused by bombs jettisoned from a crippled Allied aircraft. This was no cakewalk to victory. After crossing the Meuse and then the Rhine in March 1945, the advance continued deep into

Germany – and then 'suddenly' it was VE Day and on 8 May 1945 hostilities ceased. During the period of occupation in Germany, the men suffered a much-resented return to spit and polish, as the regiment gradually faded away under a phased demobilisation programme. At last those that had survived could return to their homes, their families and their friends. Their war was over.

The book is limited firstly to those that survived and left their memories, whether on my tape recorder, or in printed form. Our story is therefore not academically 'balanced'. There are not many quotes from the older generation of NCOs and officers, nor from the miners of 426 Battery who suffered the early deaths common to their trade. Wartime incidents cannot be covered if no witnesses left usable accounts. Let us not regret what we have lost, or could never have, but instead concentrate on the treasures that exist in these pages: not thanks to the author, but thanks to the unstinting efforts of the veterans themselves in making the IWM recordings – totalling in all some 356 hours. They also created the South Notts Hussars museum at Bullwell Barracks, still managed to this day by the next generation of dedicated volunteers.

Their collective story allows us to sense how our country responded to the stress of war. Not everything went well. There were disasters. Some men let themselves down under the terrible pressure. Many were killed, dreadfully wounded, or all but lost their minds. Several were taken prisoner. Few were totally unscathed by their experiences. But in the end, most endured and did their duty as best they could in what – in the end – proved a victorious battle. When collected together their voices are the distillation of what the British soldier endured in the war against fascism. As the military historian Major Gordon Corrigan recently remarked, 'This is a British Band of Brothers'. The phrase has been hijacked somewhat by the Americans in recent years, but it is worth recalling its origins in Shakespeare's

version of the powerful call to arms made by Henry V in his speech before the Battle of Agincourt:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition

The speech also includes the poignant line:

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot

But we must try not to forget. The old veterans themselves rarely forgot their wartime exploits. They were sometimes ignored by their families: as typified by 'Leave it out, Uncle Albert!' the response from Del and Roderick Trotter whenever their uncle tried to tell them his war stories in the popular comedy *Only Fools and Horses*. Only when they were dead did the veterans' surviving relatives and friends attempt to defuse any slight residual guilt with the cliché, 'He never liked to talk about it!' They *did* talk about it – mainly to those that understood and shared the horrors of war. Most maintained close friendships with their old wartime comrades for the rest of their lives, through the regimental association and Royal British Legion.

Does it matter that this book is centred on what some might consider a relatively obscure regiment? Not really. These men stand as representatives of all British soldiers in that five-year battle to save the world from Nazism. Sometimes we forget what was at stake in the Second World War. We are so used to modern wars, launched without a formal declaration of hostilities, sometimes with cloudy motives, and with our forces wielding armaments futuristic in comparison to those of their opponents. But eighty years ago, British troops fought to stop

Hitler and his evil creed of Nazism; they may have seemed 'ordinary', yet these men were anything but ordinary. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude.

1

AS BAD AS IT GETS

AFTER ENDURING THE LONG SIEGE of Tobruk in 1941, the men of 107th (South Notts Hussars) Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery were desert veterans – confident they could cope with anything the Germans could throw at them. They had faced screaming dive-bombing Stukas, heavy shellfire, mass panzer attacks and had survived relatively unscathed. But on 6 June 1942 everything changed: they were trapped with their 25-pounder guns in shallow gun pits scratched out in the stony ground in the Cauldron, a saucer-shaped depression deep in the Libyan desert. Surrounded by overwhelming German forces, they had been ordered to fight 'to the last round'. Among them was an ordinary Nottinghamshire lad, Sergeant Ray Ellis of A Troop, 425 Battery.

> They brought in their artillery and we heard it open up. You think, 'Oh, bloody hell!' Then that started to fall among us. Then we took cover. That's when you get in your slit trench and you hide behind any little rock you can find. If you press flat, you could probably get your body under the ground, but the hams of my bottom were probably just sticking above the surface! They called in their air force as well, and it was absolutely devastating. The noise, the bombs were crashing

> down, the shells at the same time – all on to the area round the guns.[1]

Then the German tanks began to rumble forwards. Now they had no choice but to get out of their shallow trenches and man their 25-pounder guns.

> You're very excited, not afraid, you're involved; it's before and after that you're afraid. In the actual battle you're trying to get things done quickly. If a high-explosive 25-pounder shell hits the track of a tank, it is going to blow the track off and the tank will slew and stop. That means you can put another one into it, bang one in the back of him – and he'll explode and brew up. Horrible: black smoke, red flame – an awful sight. By this time, you can see something coming over from the left getting close to you, so you whip the gun round to have a go at him. Sometimes the shell will hit the tank, explode – and the tank would keep coming. It's probably given everyone in the tank a headache, but it didn't stop the tank, or kill them all – and they could keep coming. But you're not just firing at one tank, you've got tanks all over the place! You think, 'I'd better have a go at him – he's getting a bit close!' To be honest, all you're looking at are the few tanks that are coming near your gun. All you're thinking about is knocking out any tanks that look dangerous to you – not saving the British Empire![2]

Soon they came under extremely heavy fire.

> The air was just alive with red-hot steel. I remember hitting a Mark IV tank and it slewed round and burst into flames. The next thing I was in the air – as if someone had picked me up and thrown me in the air – spinning in the air! We'd had a direct hit on the gun. I dropped, 'WHHOOMPH', on to the ground. I lay there a second or two dazed and then, before I picked myself up, I went up spinning in the air again and

> dropped again. This time I think I was unconscious for a short time.[3]

A German 88mm gun had dropped two shells right into their gun pit. Ellis slowly regained his scrambled senses; only to be confronted by a scene of horror.

> I can remember kneeling and hearing the battle going on in a dazed sort of way. I stayed like that for quite a long time. Then it went quiet again and I realised the tanks had been fought off. I looked round and my gun was upside down and the crew were draped on the floor all round. I thought I must be wounded but I couldn't feel anything. My shirt and body were all black, my clothes were all bloodstained, and I was in a hell of a state. I staggered round to look at the crew – some were obviously dead – and as I went round, I realised that I was the only one to have survived – the whole crew had been killed. My next thought was for self-preservation – a very strong instinct – 'Get your head down, Ray!'[4]

Still stunned, he found a small hole in the ground and began to scrabble away, trying to dig down and piling up small stones all around the edge – desperate for any cover no matter how scant. Then he saw a shell burst right over the No. 1 gun section close by. Against all his natural instincts for self-preservation, Ellis found himself propelled forward to rejoin the battle.

> The crew just fell to the ground and nobody moved. It occurred to me that with two guns out of action that was half the strength of the troop gone and the next time they put in an attack, this could mean they would get through. With a great deal of reluctance I got out of my hole and went over to No. 1 gun. The gun was in a parlous state: the shield was all riddled, at least one of the tyres was flat, but it was workable. Other people must have noticed because from somewhere men started to

> appear – they were signallers, or specialists, or drivers, but they helped to man the gun. These men were not gunners, but you could tell them what to do.[5]

His makeshift gun team was still under heavy fire as the German tanks drew closer. Death was all around him; but Ellis himself seemed to have a charmed life.

> As one man was mown down, then somebody else appeared. It eventually got to the point where they were not just South Notts Hussars, they were strangers. I remember a man from the Royal Corps of Signals coming on to the gun position in the late afternoon. This man caught a burst of machine-gun fire right in the bottom part of his body, he jumped in the air – an instinctive muscle movement – then fell to the ground. I looked at this lad and he was frightened – his eyes were terrified. I crouched down to try and trying to console him with all the noise going on round, 'You're all right lad, you're all right, don't worry you're not badly wounded, we'll soon have you away. I reckon you've got a Blighty!' Trying to ease his fear. While I was talking, I noticed the sand was settling on his eyes. He was dead. He died in my arms.[6]

By around 18.00, the situation was beyond desperate. His battered gun was in a terrible state, and they were fast running out of ammunition. But still Ellis fought on.

> I was left with just one man on the gun, everyone else had been killed. He was a complete stranger; I don't know who he was or where he'd come from. He wasn't a South Notts Hussar. He was standing on the right of the gun opening and closing the breech. I was loading, pulling the gun round, aiming at a tank then running and getting on the seat, aiming it and firing it. I'd just fired a shell and I'd gone back behind the gun, got hold of the trail arm, when I heard a machine gun which sounded

> as if it was a few inches behind me – it sounded so close! This man was just splattered against the inside of the gun shield. I looked behind and I could see the tank within 20 to 30 yards behind me – with the machine gun still smoking. I tensed myself and waited for this burst of fire – which never came. I shall never know whether the gunner had compassion, ran out of ammunition, saw something that distracted him – I like to think he had compassion![7]

After all his terrible experiences that day, Ray Ellis was in a state of shock. The guns had finally fallen silent and their war was over.

> I was very, very thirsty and I walked over to Peter Birkin's armoured vehicle. In it were the bodies of the driver and Jim Hardy. He had been cut in two, but his water bottle was sort of hanging there. I got my knife, cut his webbing, took the water bottle and drank this lukewarm water from old Jim's bottle. I looked down at his lifeless face and I just burst into tears – reaction I suppose – seeing an old pal from the day I joined the regiment.[8]

Many more had died; most of the rest, including Ray Ellis, were taken prisoner. It was 6 June 1942; the worst day in the history of the South Notts Hussars. The men that survived never forgot it.