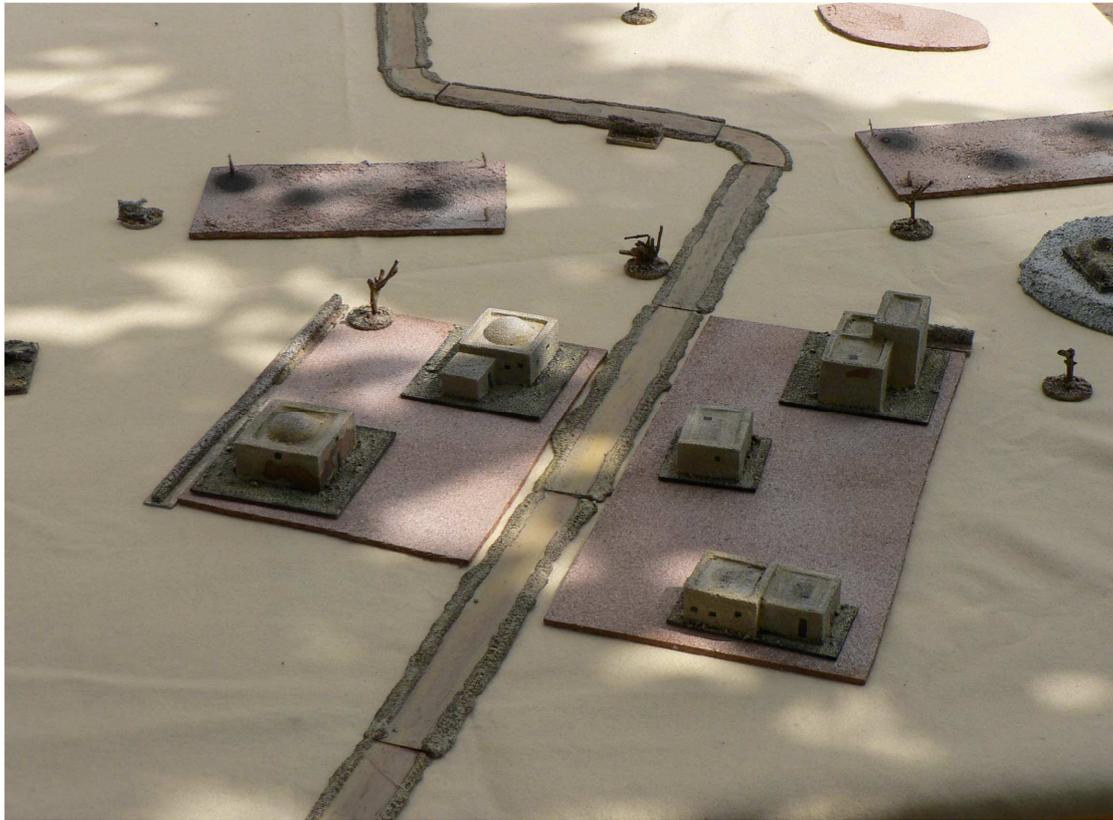


Rearguard

By Dean Lampard



"Can u hear me at the back?"

"YES Sir" came the resounding shout from the company. We had stood to about an hour ago when we saw the artillery on the horizon and knew that something particularly nasty would end up coming our way.

"Well" said Lt Niven "the major has asked me to put you all in picture. Brigade has pulled out as have the rest of Div. As you can all see" pointing at the sky line lighting up with flash after flash. "Things up front are a getting a bit warm. The East York's and the Green Howard's are holding there own just about but we expect them to come racing down that road in about 3 hours or so. When they do the only troops in front of us will be Rommels."

"The engineers have laid a couple of hasty dummy minefields and made them look like the real thing to our front so that should hold them up for a while but it will be down to us."

"We are to hold this village to allow Brigade to establish defensive positions to hold Rommel from reaching the Delta. We will dig in here with the other two companies occupying the Hills on either side. We will have support from a couple of AT sections and 2 battery's of 25pdrs. There will be some armour support on each flank. The battalion will hold this position till midday. We will the withdraw down the road for 2 miles were our transport will take us back to Brigade. The signal for withdraw will be 3 short blasts on my whistle"

"Any questions?"

"Yes sir"

"What Walker?"

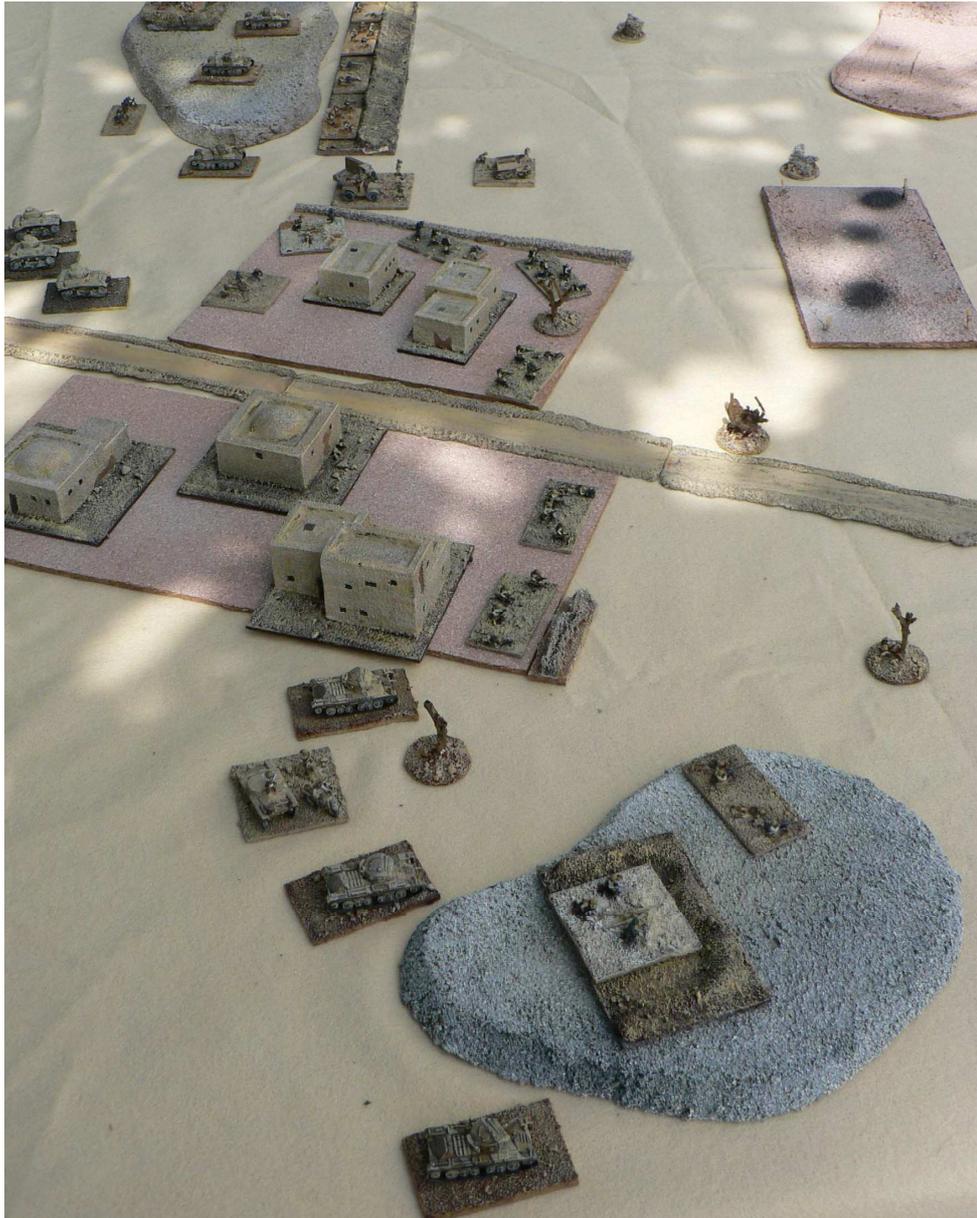
"Sir, is it to late to apply to transfer to the navy"

"Walker" growled the CSM

"All right sergeant major, stand them down by section so they can get a brew and then its battalion stand to at 04.00" and off walked Mr Niven and I could have sworn there was a slight smile under that pencil moustache of his.

The CSM his face visibly crimson even in the darkness turns and looked at the platoon .

" WALKER here now you HORRIBLE little man by the time I've finished with you....."



DAWN

Well we are all dug in nice and comfy like. I've got a nice little hole in the ground which I share with my No2, spare ammo for the bren and a little Jerboa. Dawn is about on us and we have been stood to waiting for what seems like ages I say to Chalky, my No 2, that with sun up at least we will get warm.

"sch" says Chalky "can you hear that?"

I strain to listen my ears are still a bit shot after standing so close to that Valentine that brewed up last week. Then I hear it that unmistakable noise that has

pushed us backwards and forwards across this god forsaken land for the past 13 months.....PANZERS!



Shouts go up and down the line "here they come" "enemy armour to the front"

"Easy lads easy" shouts Mr Niven "its not us, there going for the Djebel to our left"

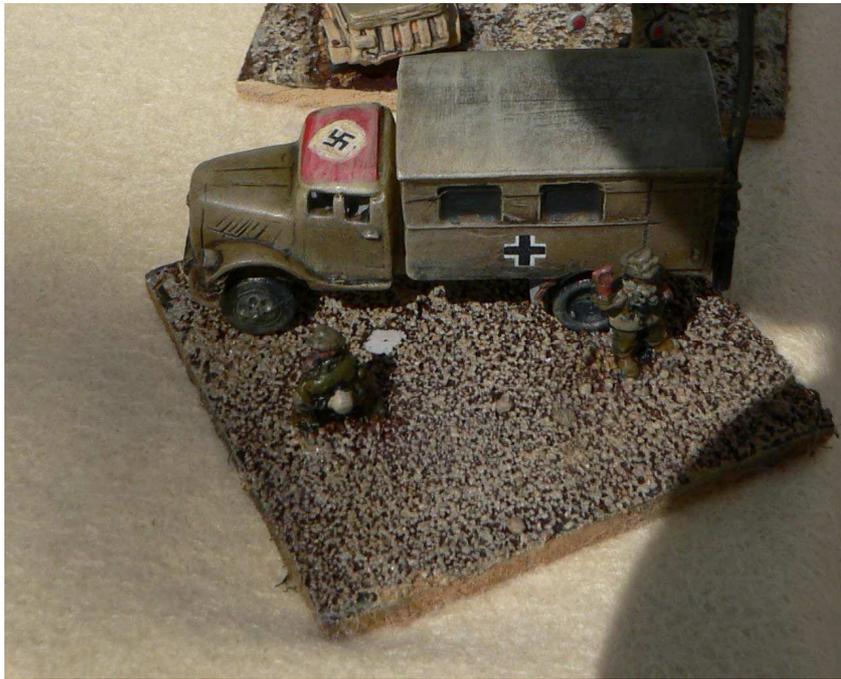
"Poor bloody bleeders in B are narf going to cop it" I whisper to Chalky.

"Strange" says Chalky "its only the armour, were is the infantry and his support weapons. Guess they must have issued the wrong orders or sumthin."

Still the armour came on and at the front was an armoured car. Then those idiot tankers did something really stupid. Showing they were still white above the knees, dug in like that were on that hill they could not be seen and could have plastered jerry as he closed. But they had a rush of blood to the head and they took out that recce unit.



Well that about did it the next thing we knew Jerry had the armour zeroed in, his FAC had seen were the shots had come from



and called in the Stukas



I will never forget the cheers that went up as that Stuka flew over our heads. For as it passed the lads from the ack ack platoon ripped off the camo nets from the Bofors and pumped shell after shell into the plane. The last we saw of it the thing was screaming across the sky back towards where it came. We never saw it again and I reckon it never saw its home again either.



That seemed to get Jerry goat somewhat for next artillery begin to rain down upon B company.



The German infantry and support weapons had still not made an appearance. The armour through carried on its advance and the boys in B company and the support armour were in for a pasting.



First one Valentine and then a second brewed up. At that the German Centre made its 1st appearance. They begin to push forward and then we saw it an 88 now the tank boys were for it.



So far it was only B company that had been hit and their armour support but with that 88 deploying I knew it would not be long before the rest of us begin to feel the heat from the German centre. Half tracks PzIV's and some lorries were all advancing on us. Just then to make things worse a whole battalion of German infantry finally appeared.

If only we could tie them down for another couple of hours.



The German advance on our left was relentless now. The armour supporting B company was all KO'd. That left a 25pdr battery firing over open sights holding back an entire panzer battalion. Shot after shot went into those panzers Capt. Carrington RA had said he would hold em and he was doing just that. Cheer after cheer went up but soon the battery was down to just one gun. Still it held them back.

The German commander must have been getting worried



Then the 25pdr had a stoppage that allowed the PZ III's to open up and the result was.



It was gone just wiped from the face of the earth. Only the Capt. and a bombardier survived. B company were really up against it those panzers could just stand off and shoot those lads to pieces. Which is what they did. They couldn't hold long and to make matters even worse a company of PZ II's flanked the hill. Right into our rear area.



As they rounded the corner of the hill they ran smack bang into the motor platoon those lads were cut to pieces.



Also our line of withdraw was under threat. It looked like we were about to be surrounded.

The German infantry still hadn't made any progress and were getting harassing fire from C company which was slowing them right down. But the Jerry armour was now on the Hill pouring fire down onto us. Shells were slamming into us the 2 pdr went down then the ack ack. Things were getting hairy I didn't think we would make it and then just as I thought out number was up.



The armour supporting C company swung across from the right flank and engaged the German armour.

"That's it" said Mr Niven as he blew his whistle 3 times.

"OK boys time to move, make your way as best as you can back to the transport. We've held them for as long as we were supposed to and that armour is holding our escape route open. All right sgt-major get them moving"

As we moved off at the double I looked around B company was completely gone and only 3 sections of my company moved away from the village the others were all pinned down and ended up in the bag. The lads on the right all made it out though. Chalky had been with me as we got up to run but as we left the village I couldn't see him nor was he with us when we made it back to the lorries. I hoped he would join up with us as the odds and sods came in over the wire in the next week or so.

Thank god that German infantry never made it up to the line and the support didn't arrive for quite some time. Otherwise I think we would have all been in the bag.

Chalky didn't make it this time. I later learned he had gone into the bag having fallen and twisted his ankle as we pulled out. He managed to hide himself from Jerry as they followed up on the assault only to be picked up by an Italian mobile laundry a day later. He ended up in an Italian POW camp and later married a local girl and set

up a bar in Naples after the war. Joe Walker became my No2 on the bren but that's comes later in my story. As for Mr Niven well we all know what became of him and Capt. Carrington got promoted and the medal he is now famous for.

Taken from A Cockney Rifleman. The memoirs of a rifleman from the 7th Battalion (London) Rife Brigade in North Africa.