

First Contact - September 1940

by Dean Lampard

Dawn, almost. 5 months since he had disembarked at Alex and he still couldn't quite believe that night time was so cold. It would be warm soon though and then just another 8 hours and he would be on his way back to Battalion and pure delight, a bath. It could have been worse so much worse. He hadn't thought that at the time, he had wanted to go to France with the 1st Battalion, and how he had envied the others from his class that had been posted to the BEF. He still recalled the looks of pity he got from them when his posting was to the 2nd Battalion and Palestine. It all changed during those ten days in May. Only 3 officers and 149 O R's made it back from France and there was not a subaltern's amongst them. Then Italy declared war and his chance had come, the battalion had been moved from Palestine to Egyptian border.

"Char Sir" said Sgt French

"Thank you French, full light in about 10 mins then stand the men down and let's start getting cleared away. I want to get away quick when the Rajputana Rifles get here."

"Yes, sir I won't be sad to get away from this dust blown rat hole"

"I doubt even a rat would want this place Sgt"

7 days they had been on the border watching for Mr Mussolini's Army and all they had seen were flies, flies and more flies. His first independent command and how quickly excitement had turned to boredom.

Something deep inside him knew what that high pierced whistle was before his brain even registered it, generations of his solidier family called out to him like some distant race memory. It took time for that impulse to go from his brain to the rest of his body which would cause him dive into the safety of the dug out. It would take just a fraction of a second but it was a fraction to long. The 75 mm shell exploded lodging a fist sized piece of shell casing in his stomach. As he fell he heard French scream to the w/t operator "there coming over the wire, tell Battalion..." and then it started to go dark, no pain yet at least, he was thankful for that and all he could think was.....it wasn't supposed to be like this.

"OK chaps can you all hear me?"

"Yes" we all shouted back at the Colonel.

"Well as you have heard the Italians crossed the wire at dawn. The border posts have all been overrun. We and the rest of the QRF are going to pull out in 30 mins. We are to go forward and make contact with the enemy, determine his strength and then force him back across the border. If we can not then we check him and make him pause, then retire in good order back here and meet up with brigade which will be here at 0200."

"For some of you this will be your first time in action, others have been on active service since our operations in the Khaisora Valley back in 37. One or two of us have had this sand in our boots before. The Subedar Major and I were here with Allenby in 17. This is going to be a long war so do nothing stupid and yes I'm looking at you Mr Perry."

All heads turned to me and I could feel not just the tips of my ears burn bright red. I had hoped he hadn't heard about the little incident with the seltzer bottles and the donkeys. Donkey jousting was not the colonel's thing obviously.

All I could manage in reply was a tiny squeak "Sir"

The colonel his eyes no longer on me continued, "Listen to your men and remember we are the finest regiment in the Indian Army and best battalion in that regt. Do your duty gentlemen I can ask nothing more of you.

Gentleman, The King Emperor"

We all stood and replied with the time honoured retort, "The King Emperor".

My war had started.

Three hours later I was in a Morris truck with my platoon driving along a dusty minor road towards the border. The QRF comprised one battalion of motor infantry, a battery of 25 pdrs and a couple of squadrons of Yemoray in Light tanks. As we advanced towards the border posts the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars were out front in there Rolls Royce armoured cars.

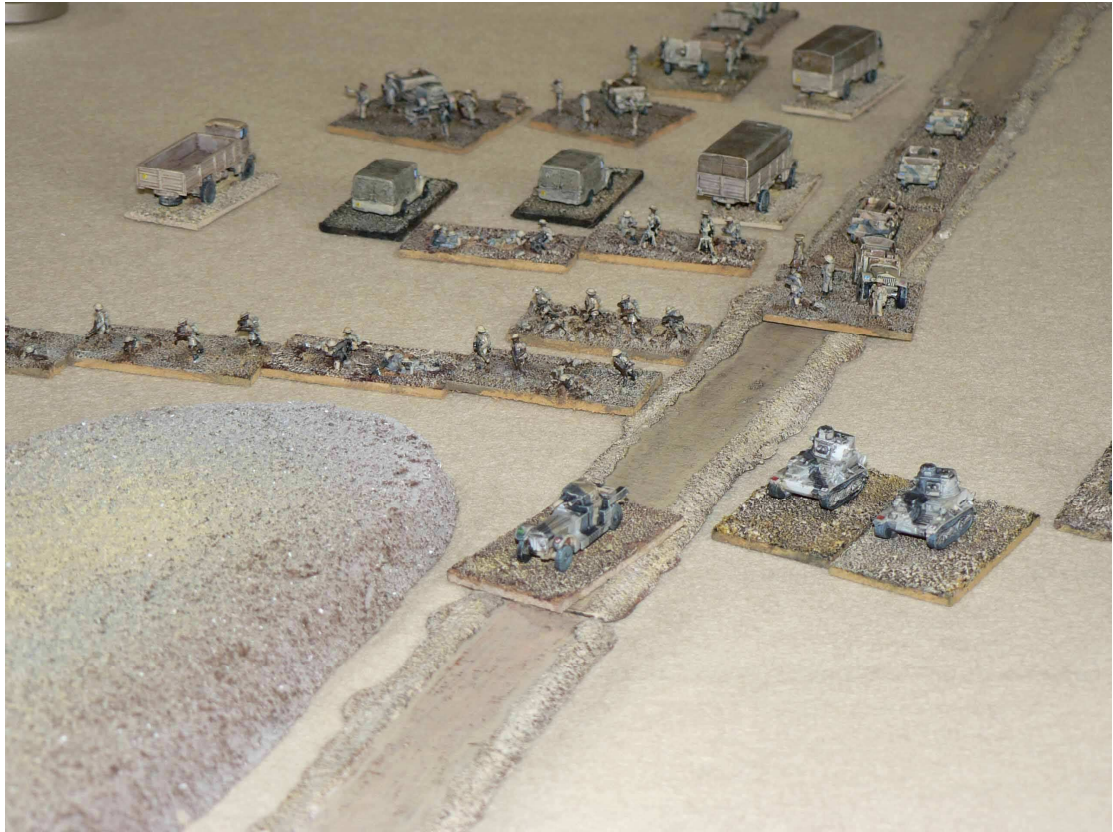


The Morris halted with a sudden jolt. I looked up and saw Capt Brooks, the company C O, running to my open window.

"Alan the Hussars have spotted the enemy round that bend and it appears to be a brigade sized force. Deploy your men and get dug in, you know what to do."

"Sir", I replied

The QRF deployed as per the battle plan. The Yemory moved off the same way Cavalry had always done, providing a screen whilst we deployed.



For some reason the carriers stalled so the colonel deployed the rest of the infantry across Hill 32. He was everywhere at once, getting the HMG's set up, overseeing the mortar platoon and trying to get the carriers moving.

The Italians seemed to be taking an awfully long time to deploy. Perhaps this might not be as bad as I had thought. Then I heard rumble of trucks.



And the sound of tanks.



At that there was an almighty bang and our tanks began to blow up. The Italians had first blood. The MG and mortar platoons responded to the AT fire.



In the meantime the Italian infantry begin to move slowly forward. The cavalry charged and we cheered what a sight to see that charge I could almost imagine Uxbridge looking down from the heavens crying "go my boys go".



Within minutes though half them ceased to exist.



The mg and mortars were doing well keeping the Italian heads down but the odd shot was coming in and I could see the fire from the hmg's beginning to slow then one section was down and then a second. What happened next was totally unexpected. The colonel and his command group re-deployed to the rear! What was wrong with the old man?

"Steady Steady", I shouted to my men as a mummer went down the line. Our mortar fire ceased and the Italians sensing there chance advanced across the entire front.



The command group halted by the 25 pdr battery paused and then returned.

Capt. Brooks dived down next to me.

"The Colonel has had a stroke he just dropped down dead, Major Jacobs has taken command steady your men we are still holding them." And then he was off down the line. This is what it was going to be like one minute here the next someone else was doing your job.

The Major had the RHA battery moving up to give us direct fire support.

The Yemoray, what was left of them took post on our flank. The battalion was dug in and the enemy came over the top of the hills. There was a metallic rattle down the entire line as bayonets were fixed onto the end of Lee Enfield's.



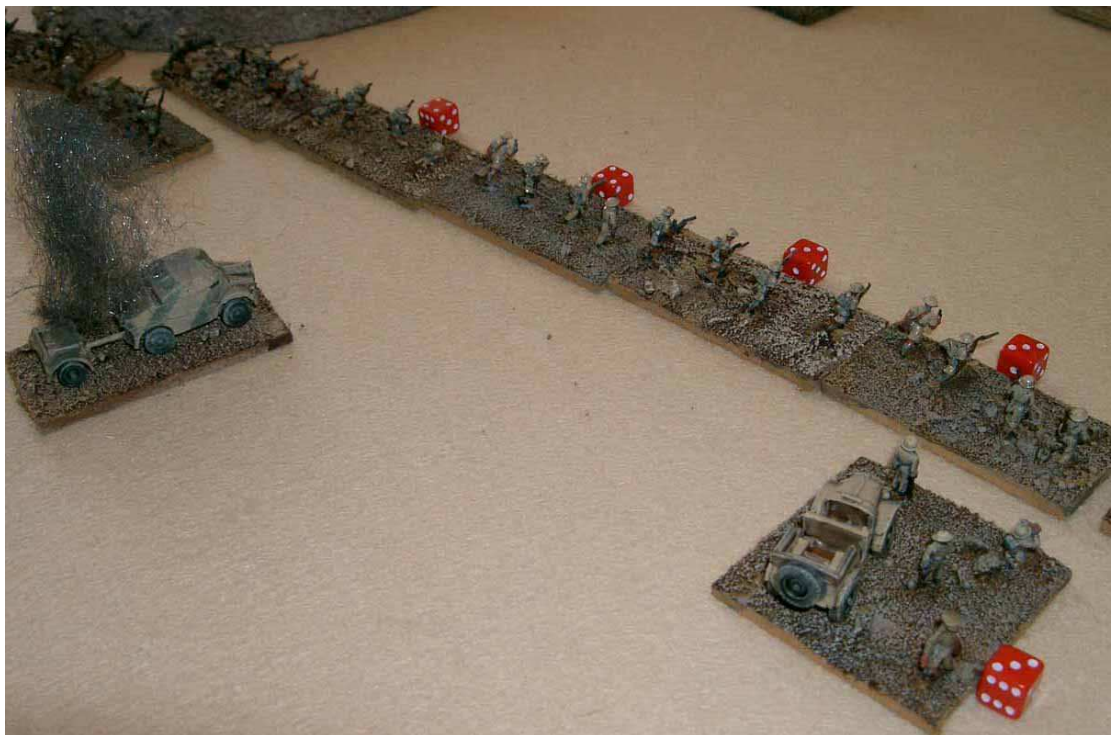
We were ready the AT boys nailed 3 of those tiny tanks and it was looking good.



The ITA artillery then made its first and only appearance of the day; 75mm shells fell around us and by the time we were able to get our heads up again the hills were full of infantry and tanks. The ITA armour fired,



and the RHA battery was gone before it could re-deploy.



Over on the left another ITA battalion appeared. We were still dug in but our flank was about to be turned and we were facing armour and infantry to our front.



Our orders to force them back across the border were clearly not possible, we had held them up and Major Brooks decided to withdraw the Battalion whilst there still was one to withdraw.

We withdrew by company, the carriers to make up for the earlier failure charged the Italian line to hold them back. We soon learnt that carriers can not hold tanks.



Thankfully the Italians clearly had no more stomach for a fight for except for the odd shell most of them stayed where they were.

With the carriers gone we doubled up on transport and soon all we could see of our first battlefield was black smoke in the distance.

The colonel was dead, and the carriers and half the Yeomanry had gone along with the RHA and AT batteries. The Battalion though was largely intact and we would be back this time with the whole Brigade.