

A RIDGE TOO FAR?
Operation Greenhouse
Dec 1940



"The plan gentlemen is simple its aim to finish the war in the Desert by Christmas. Our job to seize the ridge's.....its all a question of ridges....6th Rajputana Rifles will seize the first Ridge code name Westminster....they will hand on to 9 Ghurkha who will seize Tower and the prize well the prize is Kensington, Kensington Ridge, and that Roy will be yours with the armour. Your cruisers will take and hold Kensington until the infantry catch up and relive you."

"How long for Sir"

"A couple of hours Roy, the rest of the Brigade will be up with you by then"

"A couple of hours mmm we can do that".

"Once we have seized the Ridges WDF will be able to sweep round the rear of the enemy cutting him off leaving him with no choice but to surrender"

"If we know how important these ridges are sir the enemy will as well, they will be defended?"

"Cairo assures me the only defence are a few old men and young boys and any tanks they have are broke or worn out"

"Any more questions.....no...We go in three days time".

Next Day

"Sir these reports sir they say there are enemy troops dug in on Westminster. That is infantry dug in behind barbed wire Sir"

"Don't worry laddie, as the general said old men and boys"
"There might be tanks sir"
"You have been working too hard lately laddie might be time for you to take a break"
"But I want to go sirI don't want to miss out"
"Out of my hands laddie....come on time for you to go"

The day before

"Any change in orders sir"
"Yes Harry"
"Sir, minor one's sir?"
"According to GHQ they are minor but that is a typical GHQ understatement,... they are massive, we have lost two squadrons of the cruisers back to the WDF. They are being replaced with a squadron of infantry tanks and two of lights"
"But how can we seize the ridges now sir the lights don't have the firepower and the infantry tanks are too slow"
"Each battalion is to have a special carrier company made up from Div to seize the ridges whilst the infantry follow up."
"Will that work sir?"
"So long as there's no enemy tanks Harry...so long as there are no tanks or... infantry dug in, it will work...its got to work".

H-Hour

Westminster Ridge

The Rajpentina Rifles successfully deployed with Matilda II's leading the way.



As per plan the special transport company speed ahead for the ridge. There had not been enough carriers for a full company so light trucks as well had been assigned. One of the carriers thought it saw some movement but following a pause for an observation check no enemy were seen.



That was the first but not the last blunder of the day. Almost straight away machine gun and rifle fire rained down from the ridge taking the transports completely by surprise. The carriers had some protection not so the trucks, with the trucks went the weapons platoon.



The enemy were dug in on the ridge and if they were on the ridge what was behind it?



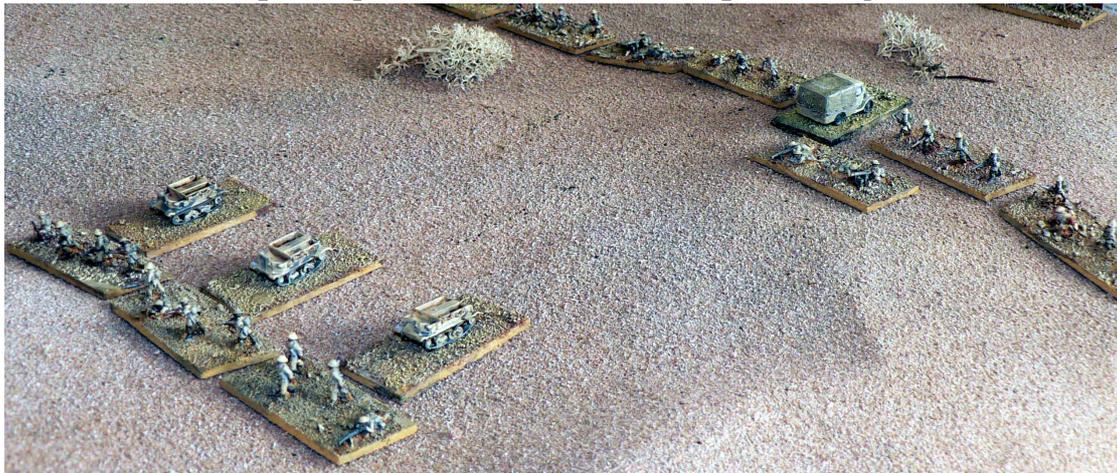
The battalion stalled coming under further fire from the Italians on the ridge. It was clear that the carriers could not go forward so they would have to debus the infantry now and return fire until the rest of the battalion moved up in support. Then things went to hell. The major was caught in a cross fire and the entire command group was killed. The Rifles were in real trouble under fire and without any command.

Tower Ridge

Just as the rifles lost their commander 9 Ghurkha arrived and started to deploy. Its colonel could see the rifles

were hung up. Did he take command of both battalions and try to capture both objectives and perhaps lose both or did he try to ensure at least one of the ridges was captured. Splitting command would ensure nothing but complete disaster, no he would carry on and do his duty and capture Tower. The squadron commander of the Matilda's would have to take command of the infantry and take Westminster.

So the Ghurkhas advanced. But only the carriers the trucks debussed straight away, the Colonel didn't want to lose his heavy weapons in the same way 6th Raj had.



The battalion advanced on Tower and this time they spotted the defenders and open fire upon them first. Mortars, heavy machine guns and rifle fire rained down on the dug in defenders.



Westminster Ridge

The advance company had been ambushed, the commanding officer killed and now the battalion was being given orders by a Rupert in a Tank, other battalions may have been rocked and knocked onto their heels. Not the 6th Raj the battalion's response was simple, it lost its temper. In response to the defenders on the Hill it delivered a devastating fire which cleared the hill and would now allow both the tanks and infantry to advance.

It was at this time that the main armour arrived with the aim of pushing forward and taking Kensington.



The late addition of the lights meant that there had been no detailed briefing and in the heat of battle one ridge looked very much like any other. They got the objectives muddled and instead of moving forward through the infantry to take Kensington they made a 45 degree turn and headed across the battlefield towards Tower Ridge and the nearest visible enemy.



Controlling his tanks and the infantry was proving a strain on the commander of the Matilda's. Mistakes were bound to happen. The ridge was cleared and recce reported back there were substantial forces on the other side. Well dug in infantry armour and artillery.



The plan was therefore a combined arms advance both armour and infantry together. Mutually supporting and with enough fire power to clear both tanks and infantry. What happened was anything but this. The carriers having failed to take Westminster misunderstood the orders and charged unsupported over the ridge.



Tower Ridge

With both the Ghurkhas and the main armour now moving on Tower it could hold out for long.



A company of Italian tanks moved up in support of their infantry



but they were facing:



The Italians though fired first and something seemed to be wrong with the British tanks.



What was left returned fire but it was only 1 platoon against a full company.

But it wanted revenge.



and it got it, shooting as through on a firing range it knocked out a complete company.

Both Tower and Westminster were now clear. Kensington was heavily defended and the Brigadier decided that both infantry battalions and the armour were required to clear it. He orders were clear...advance and close with the enemy.



The rest of Italian armoured were knocked out by the Matilda's as they crested Westminster.



The Italians were close to breaking whilst the infantry on Kensington was still dug in the troops on the other two ridges had been killed and all the armour had now been KO'd. There was through one last sting in the tail. Over open sights an Italian field gun opened fire...



and first one light tank brewed up followed by a second and then the last cruiser was gone as well.

That though was the last throw of the dice for the Italian defenders. Their losses had been too great and they broke.

All ridges had been taken.