

THE ROMMEL RAID

A diary

by

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Nº.7 Commando

NOVEMBER 1941.

Sunday 9th.

We start tonight. Everyone very busy all day. Extra, necessary kit issued. Every man issued with a Senoussi Ghurd (a special blanket worn by the Senoussi Arabs of Libya, worn like a Roman Toga), 2 tins Iron Rations, Field dressing, Shell dressings, Water sterilising outfit, Sgts. issued with Binoculars, Compass & Flash lamp. Full dress parade in full equipment with bundle wrapped in a ground sheet or gas cape (bundles contain Ghurd, boots, haversack, three days rations, 2 iron rations, shell dressing and spare socks), arms and ammunition, cap comforter, P.T. shoes, at 2-0pm. Parade at 5-0pm to proceed to Transport which is to take us to our final destination, practically to the scene of the Operation.

Monday 10th.

We joined the Transport at about 6-30pm last night and moved off at about 8-0pm. Slept very well considering conditions. Meals are very good, Bacon and Tomatoes, bread and butter, Jam and tea, for breakfast. Corned beef, pickles, cucumber and tomatoes, bread and butter, tea, for lunch. Bread and butter, Marmite and Jam, coffee, for tea. Roast potatoes, boiled potatoes, sprouts, peas, roast lamb and mint sauce, gravy, followed by peaches and custard as sweet, for supper, it's very good. Tomorrow Col. Keyes is going to tell us about the Operation.

Tuesday 11th.

Heard about plans today. 25 men and 3 officers to attack the German H.Q. at Beda Littoria. 13 men and 1 Officer to attack Italian H.Q. at Cirene. 12 men and 1 Officer to attack Italian H.Q. at Appolonia. Senior N.C.Os. to have conference with Officers, tomorrow. A Capt. Hazleton is to meet us if possible.

Wednesday 12th.

Operation explained to us more fully at conference. Discussed ways and means with maps. Decided to establish Base on 15th, start first easy stage of march on 16th, second stage to bring us within observation and striking distance, if possible, all parties to attack at Z. H. 18th. Plans to be fully explained and maps shown to men tomorrow.

Thursday 13th.

Men fully understand plans now. My own job is to cover road to east of Beda Littoria, coming from Benghazi, to prevent anyone coming out or anyone going in while the party is in action. Tomorrow we start.

Friday 14th.

We established Base about 10-0pm at first. I was on outpost sentry from 8-0pm till just after 4-0am in the morning, it was bitterly cold. Capt. Hazleton was waiting for us according to plan and gave us a bit more information about objectives.

Saturday 15th.

Spent a pretty uncomfortable night. Each man issued with further three days rations. Explosives distributed amongst parties. Plans changed, Cirene and Appolonia to go by the board, an Officer and three men attached to my party, we have a new objective, a Telegraph Pole standing at cross-roads, wires running north to Cirene and Appolonia, west to Derna, east to Benghazi and south to Faed, an important line of communication which must be blown down and cut. Start first stage of march at about 6-0pm tonight. Ate one of the Days Rations today, it is very substantial, containing one tin of Bully, one packet Biscuits, two bars chocolate, 4ozs Raisins, 20ozs boiled sweets, one portion cheese, one packet cocoa sugar and dried milk, Whole ration being 31ozs food weight.

Sunday 16th.

Marched last night from 6-0pm till 12-30am, halted, lay down and slept till 4-0am, started again, marched till 7-0am, found ourselves in a wide wadi, we scattered in small numbers on the hillside under bushes. A number of Senoussi Arabs gathered round, Our interpreter arranged with them to kill a goat and boil it for us, it turned out very nice. Slept all afternoon till 5-0pm. Start again on

second stage of march at about 6-0pm, with two of the Senoussi to act as guides. They know of a cave where we can stay all day tomorrow.

Monday 17th.

We arrived at cave about 2-30am this morning, all slept till 9-0am. 9-30am Keyes, Campbell and the other two Sgts. and one guide go out to make reconnaissance, came back unable to see anything. Rain started about 10-0am, got heavier in afternoon, cave being underground, water began to run in. Last instructions run through this afternoon. Due to start at 5-30pm. Rain was coming down in torrents, it was decided that my party, consisting of Lt. Cooke, Cpl. Kerr, L/Cpl. O'Hagan, L/Cpl. McCrae, Gnr. 3.Gornall, Pte. C. Paxton and myself, will accompany the main party to Beda Littoria, then follow the road to the cross-roads, ten miles away. If possible stop and use a car. The Lt. gave all the party a Benzedrine tablet a drug to keep up the spirits and keep you going under extreme conditions.

Tuesday 18th.

Yesterday evening we started on the march to the objective at 5-30pm. The rain was pouring down and our dress was B. D., Puttees, Gym shoes, Equipment, Arms and Ammunition. We had only been started 15 minutes, when we were wet through, it was a terrible journey, 6 miles as the crow flies, but following the windy path over the third escarpment, knee deep in rushing water, it was nearer 9 miles. The night was moonless and pitch black, making it necessary to hold onto the bayonet scabbard of the man in front, to keep in contact, the whole party being in single file. We arrived on the outskirts of Arab Village at Beda about 11-20pm. Col. Keyes came back and told Lt. Cooke we should make a detour to the west and strike the road. I collected party together to find O'Hagen had lost gym shoe in the mud. At 11-45pm we made contact with road. First Job was to cut communication running east out of Beda. Gornall climbed up telegraph pole and cut down all wires. Continued march up road. O'Hagan asked for a rest, his foot was painning, so stop 10 minutes then carried on. O'Hagan dropping back, can't keep up. Lt. Cooke decided that he should start to make his way back immediately, so he detailed Cpl. Kerr to accompany him taking my compass with them, remainder to carry on. After travelling about 6 miles we observed two lorries parked on side of road, on trying to start them, find we can't, no starter, no starting handle. We marched on, still raining and cold wind blowing from north-western direction. Just over 3, miles further on we saw lights of car coming along the road, Lt. Cook decided to try and stop it. Gornall in road shining torch, rest of us in ditch, car slowed down as it neared we jumped out of ditch, driver must have suspected danger and accelerated. Gornall jumped out of way, I fired Tommy-Gun through side window head high and more shots as it was going away. Car ran off road into ditch and stopped,

we approached slowly and carefully no one in car, left hand door open, tried starter, would not work, couldn't push car out of ditch. Not far to cross-roads decided to. push on, broke car headlights and rear light with rifle and carried on. At 3-10am we arrived at telegraph pole which was objective, scouted round, no sentry or police post around, decided to lay charge of plastic right away, pole consisted of 4 poles of same thickness from base to top, strengthened with crosspieces of same thickness, and wires running north, south, east and west. Laid charges on each pole, Joined together by cordtex and attached to two 12 inch lengths of Match-Head. Bickfords struck one and retired to bushes, Misfired, fuse wet. Tried to strike other but matchbox wet, then tried to explode it with Grenade, first one a misfire, second one exploded but charge did not explode, Gornall asked me could we use an Incendiary Bomb, it was a very good idea. Lt. Cooke and I went back to poles, I attached 2 new lengths of Bickford Fuse and Detonator to Cordtex, and struck Incendiary on stone and laid it on the Fuse and retired, we had only gone 5 yards when the Incendiary burst out and the whole place was lit up over an area of about 200 yards diameter, on reaching the low bushes about 150 yards away, we threw ourselves down and after 60 seconds the charge went off and we heard wires dropping on the road, we knew the Job was done. We all set off right away, struck the road, turned right, and we came to the Cross-Roads and on turning right we noticed that the pole wasn't down properly, but it had a list on it and was only holding up by one pole, somehow or other there had been a misfire. I think the Incendiary had cut the Cordtex Lead, we carried on as fast as we could expecting showers of Italians and Germans around our ears any minute. About 4 mile along the road we came across a motor cycle combination and so immediately veered right and struck across country in a wide detour, hitting the road again about a mile further on, we carried on along the road until dawn broke, at about 5-0am then we struck across country again in a North-Westerly Direction we kept on going until 7-0am it was now broad daylight. I was absolutely exhausted and could hardly stand up let alone struggle through the small bushes which stand waist high, the others were in a similar condition and we decided to halt and hide up for the rest of the day, on looking around we found there were a number of tombs around and soon found one we could crawl into, it was a small opening with a low roof, but when we got inside we found it opened onto 4 chambers which you can stand up in, the rain stopped about 5-30am but of course we were still wringing wet we took off our equipment and B. D. Jackets, and took Wallets, Note Books, Maps and other sundry things out of our pockets and spread them out to dry we partook of some chocolate and raisins and a few sweets for breakfast then we made futile attempts to get warm, then we all set about cleaning our weapons, I then repaired Lt. Cookes, 45 auto-colt. We had some-more chocolate for dinner, this time opening our Emergency Rations for it. We sit huddled together for warmth talking of what we'd do when

we got back to Alex' to recompense us for this discomfort we were undergoing. About 5-0pm we had some more chocolate, then collected our things together and got dressed ready to start out at 6-0pm on the march over the escarpment first going west for a mile crossing the other Beda-Cirene road on the way, then we must strike North-West right over the escarpment. Cirene landing field is due North of this tomb we are in, planes have been flying over all day and if we go outside we can see them landing.

Wednesday 19th.

We left the tomb at about 6-0pm striking due west over fairly rough flat country, the sun had been down about 15 minutes and it was practically pitch dark then, we crossed the other Beda-Cirene road after about 10 minutes march, it is marked on the map as a first class road and it turned out to be just a cart-track. We carried on for climbing to about 300ft. we began to go down, then suddenly we were confronted by a ravine 40 or 50ft. deep we couldn't see the bottom although we could see the other side, from the sound of running water we concluded there was a rivulet at the bottom. The sides of this ravine were steep almost sheer in fact, it would have been suicide trying to climb down them in the dark, it was then we decided that the maps were useless because there was no ravine marked on it at all, also a footnote in one corner said that they had been copied from Italian Military Maps. After a discussion we decided to bear right towards Cirene to see if we could go around it, if not, to see if we could find a place to climb down.. We followed this ravine for 4 hours. twisting and turning getting nearer Cirene and still no possible way of getting across. About 1-0pm we decided to rest for a few hours, we all huddled together beneath an over-hanging rock and tried to sleep. We woke about 3-0am terribly stiff and sore. had a few pieces of emergency choc. and carried along the edge of the Ravine for half a mile then we came to point where the edge had crumbled and it seemed less steep here so we decided to try and get down we had already wasted too much time, when we were half way we heard the drone of planes and then flares began dropping in the direction of Appolonia lighting the place like day although Appolonia must have been about 3 miles away we were able to pick our way down the ravine by this light The ravine was about 70 to 80ft. deep at this point we climbed up the other side and hurried off in a Westerly direction anxious to make up for lost time. When dawn broke we were picking our way down the foothills onto the flat ground we traveled on for 3 hours despite the fact it was daylight, we were too near Cirene for comfort, about 8-30am we saw a Senoussi Shepherd and speaking what Arabic we knew between us we asked where we could find a cave, he went away and came back with another Arab about 30 and an old man about 60 after the usual greeting of "Salaam Alikum" to which we answered "Alikum Salaam" we all shook hands, the young Arab who seemed to be the chief beckoned us to follow him and he took us to a cave which was cut out of rock below the level of the ground, then he told us to sit down sent an old woman out to boil some water. We explained we were "Inglesi" and wanted to get to the sea, he asked us if we were "Paracadutisti" thinking it easier to say yes we nodded our heads. When we had told him we were "Inglesi" he said "Inglesi bono", Italianos no bono" and made a gesture of cutting his throat he then lifted up his shirt and showed us two bullet wounds in his chest and one in his neck saying "Italianos bang-bang" then the old woman brought in a small enamel tea-pot, some small glasses and a bottle containing sirop also a packet of coffee and the chief made and we all had two glasses each. After carrying an a pidgin conversation for about .3 of an hour, the old woman came in again with wicker tray on which were a dozen chapatties fresh made, and a bowl of stew which the chief made signs we should eat so after the style of the east we squatted down in a circle with the bowl in the middle we ate as much as we could taking a chapatties breaking a piece off dipping it in the stew with our fingers then eating it, all of us remarking that we would look well eating like that in a first class hotel or restaurant. When we had finished the chief took out a pocket watch pointed to the 10 then made a gesture of sleep pointing to us then pointing to 12 on his watch pointing to himself and us making the gesture of walking from which I gathered he wanted us to sleep from 10 till 12, then he would guide us to the beach, it was then about 9-50am. We had Just settled down when a shout came from outside where he had posted a sentry as he said the Italians had been searching the previous day and might be around again today, he dashed outside, he called for me "shaweesh" so I followed and looking where he pointed saw 2 Italians about 600yds away. I went inside and Lt. Cooke who gave orders to collect our weapons. The Arab came in and motioned us to remain where we were and picking up his Italian Rifle pointed to himself then outside and said "Bardin bang bang Italians manfeesh" he then went outside after few minutes we followed and then we heard 3 shots from nearby answered by a volley of about 20 from the distance so I said to Lt. Cooke "there's more than two out there" he answered "lets see" we went right outside then and saw 30 or 40 men moving about the bushes and there was quite a bit of firing going on so we went back into the cave hoping the Arabs would draw the Italians away but it was no good, they were coming nearer we could hear their voices, we took cover in the cave hoping they might look in then go away but they came right inside. Lt. Cooke fired two shots from his automatic and hit both Italians in the leg, they rushed out screaming, I shouted "Look out for Grenades" the words were no sooner out of my mouth when the first landed about 3 feet from my head followed by 4 more in quick succession all exploding with a loud bang and filling the cave with dust and the smell of burning powder then another 4 came in one exploding about 18 inches in front of the small rock behind which I was taking cover, by this time my ears were ringing and I had the impression that my ears and nose were bleeding

McCrae said he had been hit with a piece of shrapnel, Gornall said he had been hit too. Lt. Cooke said it was no use hanging out as they would bomb us till we were senseless then another two grenades flew in the doorway so Cooke shouted "surrender, surrender, camarad, amico" there was babble of voices outside but the bombs stopped, Cooke shouted again "surrender surrender" then another two grenades burst nearby so Lt. Cooke said he was going, "If they shoot me you had better dash out and get as many as you can and go down fighting." So dropping his automatic he walked out with his hands up, about 2 minutes elapsed during which time a terrific noise of voices ensued then I heard Cookes voice saying "come out with your hands up" So the four of us walked out Gornall was bleeding from the cheek and forehead, McCrae was bleeding from the scalp and hand, Paxton was intact and my nose and ear bleeding was an illusion. Outside I saw 2 Breda Machine Guns trained on the cave entrance so we wouldn't have got very far if we had run for it. The Italians lined us up searched us, tied our hands together and told us to sit down, a Medical Sergeant Maggiore gave us drink of cognac from his bottle, we sat there till 3-0pm then they all came in and started to march us to Cirene about 10 or 12 kilos away we arrived there at dusk took us into a guardroom and gave us a big square biscuit and a tin of bully each. Several offices came in to see us.

Thursday 20th.

We slept on the floor with a ground-sheet as a covering. They woke us at 8-0am gave us a glass of coffee chained us all together and took us outside and put us in a truck. A few minutes later half a dozen Arabs were put into the truck also, one of them was the old man we had met yesterday. We started off, the guards saying we were going to Appolonia. On the road which twisted and turned down the escarpment, we passed some very old ruins, upon which excavation work was being done, there were several tall pillars and walls of ancient Greek architecture, this is the site of old Cirene mentioned in the Bible. We arrived in Appolonia, taken to a barracks and put in a cell together.

