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Army: The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) - 2nd Battalion by WW2_Database

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Facts and figures

Unit name: 2nd Battalion

Force: Army

Designation: Battalion

Type: Infantry

Chronology

September 1939 - October 1941: Palestine, East Africa, Crete and Syria

On the outbreak of World War Two the 2nd Battalion was in Palestine on anti-terrorist duties. On 3 May 1940 it was moved to positions along the Suez Canal. The fall of France in June and the formal entry of Italy into the war threatened British and French Somaliland. On 1 July the battalion moved first to Aden, where it remained until 6 August, and then to Berbera in British Somaliland. By the evening of the 10th it had taken up positions at Laferug, a few miles south of Berbera, and was strafed (without suffering any casualty) by nine Italian bombers (one of which was shot down with small arms fire) and three fighter aircraft. Two days later it was digging in at a pass in the Barkasan hills through which the King's African Rifles had to withdraw in the face of the overwhelming strength of the Italian army advancing south from Jibuti. The first sight of the Italians was on the 17th when they were repelled with bayonet and Bren gun but remained in large numbers just below the forward company position. A roaring bayonet charge down the hill scattered the enemy completely. For the rest of the day the Italians, in numbers and armament far exceeding those of the Black Watch, made ineffectual attempts to dislodge the battalion. But by evening it had become clear that the Black Watch position was untenable and withdrawal to near Laferug was ordered. Later that evening the battalion was ordered to withdraw to Berbera on the coast and was then shipped to Egypt. After a little over two months in Cairo the battalion was landed at Suda Bay at the extreme western end of Crete on the 19th November, moving during March 1941 to Heraklion. The Germans launched a major airborne invasion in May. The 2nd Battalion was defending the small airfield just to the east of Heraklion and first came under severe attack on 20 May. It was able to inflict much damage on the enemy, but eventually the waves of airborne troops made further resistance impossible and during the night of the 28th evacuation by the Royal Navy was organised. These ships, however, came under severe air attack after daylight and direct hits were scored on both HMS Orion and HMS Dido which were carrying men of the battalion, resulting in many casualties before they could reach the safety of Alexandria. Still considerably under strength the battalion was sent on 7 July to Syria where the French mandatory authorities had decided to recognise the Vichy government. Reaching the area of Damascus on 12 August, the battalion expected to be sent into action against the Vichy French position high up on the Jebel Mazar. Fortunately an armistice was agreed between

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the British and Vichy French commanders two days later and the battalion spent the next two months peacefully enjoying training and relaxation near the small town of Zahle in the Bekaa.

19 Oct 1941 - 02 Jan 1942: Tobruk

On 19 October 1941 the battalion set off for Tobruk, the port on the North African coast which had been by-passed in April by Rommel's forces on their way east towards Egypt. Ever since then it had been held by the 9th Australian Division and the time had come for it to be relieved. The battalion went overland via Acre to near Alexandria, from where on the 22nd it was taken in three destroyers and a fast minelayer of the Royal Navy to Tobruk, which could be supplied only from the sea under cover of darkness. It was relieving the 2nd/4th Australian Battalion which was able to leave two days later and the 2nd Black Watch moved up to the perimeter of the besieged town on 29 October. On 7 November it was withdrawn to reserve and two days later told of the task which lay ahead, which was to play a leading part in the sortie which was being planned to coincide with the 8th Army's great offensive from Egypt and, as it was put, 'give the disorganised Germans a kick up the backside as they retreated westwards'. In the event it all went wrong. B Company of the battalion set off at 6.30am on the 21st from the perimeter towards the first of its objectives in a virtually featureless desert some 4,500 yards (4,100m) away to the south east, without the supporting tanks which arrived four minutes late. These then took a wrong direction through the minefield and in the resulting confusion the company, unsupported by armour, had to mount a bayonet charge against a hail of fire from a German position on the way to its ultimate objective. It succeeded in overrunning this, but only at the cost of losing almost the entire company killed or wounded. D Company followed through, with the other two companies close behind, but after suffering further severe losses those that remained had to go to ground in the face of withering fire from the main objective still some distance away. At this moment the CO managed to round up some tanks and direct them onto the battalion's objective with the few remaining infantry behind. The objective was captured, but of the 32 officers and 600 men who had set off that morning only 8 officers and 60 men had survived to occupy and hold it. A major of the Royal Horse Artillery who had seen the whole action later said: "I class this attack of the Black Watch as one of the most outstanding examples of gallantry combined with high-class training that I have ever seen." Eventually what remained of the battalion was shipped back to Egypt on 2 January 1942

February 1942 - 19 Aug 1944: India and Burma

As part of 70th Division the battalion went late in February to Bombay and spent the next 19 months on security duties in India. The division was then converted into 'Chindits', the force under General Wingate with the task of penetrating behind Japanese lines in Burma. This involved breaking up the normal formation of the battalion into two raiding 'columns', which were numbered 73 and 42. Training in this new role began in October 1943 in the Central Provinces of India. Over five days from 21 March 1944 the two columns were flown from Lalaghat to a landing strip (called 'Aberdeen') in the Meza valley, only two days' march from the Japanese garrison of Indaw. The first serious action was a successful ambush of Japanese travelling in three trucks during the night of 5/6 April. By this time there were already numbers of sick and wounded men, some of whom were successfully operated on in primitive conditions by the two medical officers before being evacuated by air. The next engagement was on the 10th when 42 column carried out a successful raid on a Japanese dump supported by coordinated and immaculately timed air attacks by American bombers and fighter aircraft. There followed some weeks of confused marching and counter-marching in increasingly hot and wet jungle conditions before another successful ambush, set up by 73 column during the night of 5/6 May, inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese. This was followed by an even larger ambush early on the 8th when it was discovered that the Japanese greatly outnumbered the Black Watch. This led to a prolonged battle in which large numbers of Japanese

were killed and wounded, and the remains of 73 column did not reach the 'safe harbour' held by the rest of the battalion until nearly 3.0pm next day. Although these units were now reaching very near the limit of time which General Wingate (who had been killed some weeks earlier) had decided was the maximum troops should operate in jungle conditions at one stretch, they were given no respite. After moving north on foot in extremely bad monsoon conditions they reached the top of Kyusunlai Pass on 26 May. There they endured frequent Japanese raids and themselves carried out patrols, some lasting several days. On 22 June heavy demolitions were carried out on the Pass and they began a series of moves further north in even more atrocious conditions. They suffered some casualties in short engagements with small parties of Japanese, but over the next few weeks even more from sickness and fatigue. Although pitifully under strength a successful full scale attack to drive the Japanese out of a strongly held village was mounted on 6 August. On the 19th what was left of the battalion was flown back to Assam.

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