

The 4th and 5th Battalions, The Green Howards, 1938-42

Organisation, Recruitment and Training

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List of abbreviations

2Lt – 2nd Lieutenant

2 i/c – Second in Command

ATS – Auxiliary Territorial Service

CO – Commanding Officer

CSM – Company Sergeant Major

GHG – Green Howards' Gazette

GOC – General Officer Commanding

JDOTC – Junior Division Officer Training Corps

JNCO – Junior Non Commissioned Officer

LMG – Light Machine Gun

MT – Motor Transport

NCO – Non Commissioned Officer

PSI – Permanent Staff Instructor

PSM – Platoon Sergeant Major

QM - Quartermaster

SNCO – Senior Non Commissioned Officer

TA – Territorial Army

TEWT – Tactical Exercise Without Troops

Preface

This dissertation has had something of a long gestation period. My initial interest in this topic was raised when as a newly enlisted Private TA soldier in the 4th/5th Battalion, The Green Howards, I noticed a framed timeline of the service of the 4th and 5th Battalions during World War Two. The destruction of these two battalions was noted prominently on them and I wondered at the circumstances around this battle. As time went by and I gained more experience in the volunteer military, I began to think a little more deeply into how these two battalions were recruited and trained, knowing the limitations and problems their predecessors face today.

I wish to thank Major Roger Chapman (Ret) curator of the Green Howards Museum in Richmond, North Yorkshire for the access and help given by his staff and himself whilst researching this dissertation.

Introduction

The 4th and 5th Battalions of The Green Howards, Alexandra, Princess of Wales' Own Yorkshire Regiment were perhaps typical pre-War Territorial Army infantry battalions. They were recruited from volunteers of the North Riding of Yorkshire who were willing to give up one evening a week, every other weekend and two weeks a year for military training. In the inter-war period this was often a thankless task with little reward and obsolete equipment.

However when war came to Europe these soldiers were soon mobilised and after a period of training dispatched as part of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division to join up with the regular divisions of the British Expeditionary Force in France. They would see substantial action during the Fall of France and were among the last British units off the beaches of Dunkirk.

Reorganised and retrained upon repatriation these two battalions would again be sent overseas with the 50th Division as part of the first Territorial formation to serve in the Middle East, indeed at one time they would be the only British infantry in combat anywhere in the world. However these two battalions would not survive the war, eventually destroyed by elements of 5 Axis divisions personally commanded by General Rommel on the 1st of June 1942.

This dissertation aims to examine the organisation, recruitment and training of these two battalions between 1938 and 1942, matters that directly relate to their operational performance during this period.

The work is mostly drawn from the pages of the Green Howards' Gazette, the regimental magazine which at the time was published monthly and compiled with

contributions from serving soldiers. Where the Green Howards' Gazette does not cover the subject I have fallen back on a number of published works.

Chapter One

A Brief History of the 4th and 5th Battalions before 1938

Like many regiments of the British Army, the Green Howards have a long and mostly distinguished history. Formed in 1688 by Sir Francis Luttrell to support the Glorious Revolution, the regiment can trace an unbroken and un-amalgamated lineage back to this date. The regiment has been known under various names since then, most notably as the 19th Regiment of Foot and as the Princess of Wales' Yorkshire Regiment, before its long running nickname was finally adopted as the official title in 1920¹.

The regiment's links with Yorkshire only began in 1782 after a misunderstanding by a Commanding Officer unaware of the regiment's history declared that the regiment had been raised in Leeds². Indeed the regiment only set down roots in Yorkshire when the regimental Depot was established in Richmond, North Yorkshire in 1874³. However at this time the regiment was an entirely regular entity tasked for service overseas.

That would change in 1881 with the findings of the Ellice Committee on the Formation of Territorial Regiments⁴ as a conclusion to the Cardwell reforms⁵. This created amalgamated regiments based on regular battalions of the old numbered regiments with militia and volunteer battalions attached on a geographical basis.

While the militia had a long history as the country's home defence force, the volunteers had a more recent pedigree. With Napoleon III in power in France an invasion scare had arisen and in 1859 authorisation was given to raise volunteer rifle

¹ I S Hallows, *Regiments and Corps of the British Army*, (London, 1991) pp. 157-158

² G. Powell and S. Powell, *The History of the Green Howards*, (Barnsley, 1992) pp.56

³ G & S Powell, *History of the Green Howards*, pp.100

⁴ P J Haythornthwaite, *The Colonial Wars Sourcebook*, (London, 1995) pp.20

⁵ F Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945 The Evolution of a Fighting Force* (Poole, 1983) pp.126

corps to defend the country⁶. Enthusiastic, if barely trained and sparsely equipped the volunteers soon supplanted the moribund militia. In 1883 the 1st Yorkshire North Riding Rifle Volunteer Corps based in Richmond and the 2nd Yorkshire North Riding Rifle Volunteer Corps from Scarborough became respectively the 1st and 2nd Volunteer Battalions of the Princess of Wales' Yorkshire Regiment⁷. This was the first link between the volunteers and the regular Green Howards.

Renamed as the 4th and 5th Battalions in 1908 with the formation of the Territorial Force, they became part of the Durham and York Brigade (later 150th Brigade) of the Northumbrian Division (later 50th Division)⁸. The battalions were sent to the Western Front in 1915 and were thrown into action at St Julien near Ypres after French forces collapsed under German gas attacks. It was in this first counter-attack that these territorials received the accolade of the title 'Yorkshire Gurkhas' from a flanking Irish unit⁹.

These battalions amassed a fine record during the war before being wiped out on the River Aisne in one of the last German offensives of the war in 1918. Recuperating in a supposedly quiet French section of the line near the Chemin des Dames the 4th and 5th Battalions were bombarded, isolated and overwhelmed¹⁰. A fate both battalions' successors would suffer in the next war.

The Green Howards territorials were reformed in 1920 as the 4th and 5th Battalions, The Green Howards (Alexandra, Princess of Wales' Own Yorkshire Regiment). However the inter-war period was not one conducive to volunteer soldiering. Equipment and uniforms were drawn from Great War stocks. Funding for wages and training was limited and during the early 1930's annual training was

⁶ W J Tovey and A J Podmore, *Once a Howard Twice a Citizen*, (Middlesborough, 1995) pp.1

⁷ Tovey and Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.160, 163

⁸ Tovey and Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.28

⁹ M Marsay, *Baptism of Fire*, (Scarborough, 1999), pp.41

cancelled repeatedly to save costs¹¹. Only in 1936 did this situation slowly begin to change with the realisation that war was again a serious possibility.

¹⁰ Tovey and Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.56

¹¹ Tovey and Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.61

Chapter Two

A brief history of 4th and 5th Battalions from 1938-42

In 1938 the 4th and 4th Battalions of the Green Howards together with the 4th Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment made up the infantry component of the 150th Infantry Brigade of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division.

At the end of 1938, the 50th Division was chosen to become a Motorised Division trained and equipped to operate closely with the new armoured forces. Equipment and training were somewhat slow in arriving¹ but the division was marked out as being one of the higher readiness formations of the Territorial Army.

In March of 1939 the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hoare-Belisha, summarily decided to double the size of the TA authorising existing battalions to raise duplicate units². Subsequently the 4th Green Howards raised the 6th Battalion and the 5th, the 7th. Almost all of the commissioned and NCO leadership for these units were drawn from the parent TA battalions, reducing the number of experienced commanders in those formations. At the same time all the TA battalions experienced a surge in recruitment.

The 4th and 5th Green Howards were embodied for war on 1 September 1939 and were initially dispersed on guard duties across the north-east of England. However along with the rest of the division they were soon dispatched to the Cotswolds for a period of concentrated training³. After Christmas the battalions were deployed to France as part of the BEF.

¹ Tovey & Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.62

² Tovey & Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.62

³ Tovey & Podmore, *Once a Howard*, pp.62

The 50th Division was involved with the BEFs initial advance into Belgium in response to the German assault on the west. However they were swiftly re-tasked to defend the open right flank at Arras following the breakthrough at Sedan. The 4th Green Howards was to defend bridges over the River Scarpe whilst the 5th Green Howards was involved in defending Arras itself. Following the abortive British counter-attack both battalions withdrew through closing German forces and retreated first to Lille and eventually to the Dunkirk perimeter. Elements of the 5th Green Howards formed a cordon on the Mole and were the last formed British infantry unit to embark⁴.

On their return to the UK the battalions concentrated first in Cheshire to recuperate and then were dispatched to the south-west of England to help man the invasion defences initially as part of V Corps under a certain Lieutenant-General Montgomery. Over the winter period the battalions trained extensively and received their issue of tropical kit. In April 1941 the two battalions were dispatched to the Middle East from Liverpool via the Cape⁵.

The battalions had a period of acclimatisation and training in the Nile Delta before embarking with the rest of the division to undertake the defence of Cyprus. In November the division moved from Cyprus to Palestine. Most of the 50th Division then deployed to Iraq and Persia, however the 150th Brigade was instead dispatched to the Western Desert. It gained important experience and training in operating in desert conditions before being rejoined by the rest of the division in February 1942⁶.

The 50th Division was put into the line against Rommel's German-Italian forces taking its position in the Gazala Line defences between the 1st South African Division and the Free French Brigade in a series of fortified defensive positions known as 'boxes'.

⁴ Powell & Powell, *History of the Green Howards*, pp.190

⁵ W A T Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards 1939-1945*, (Richmond, 1952), pp.60-61

150th Brigade was given responsibility for a Box at Got el Ualeb, a position isolated from any mutual support.

On 26 May 1942 Rommel launched an offensive, bypassing the Gazala line and striking at the British armoured reserves to its rear. Although he defeated the British tanks he found himself without supply as his logistics convoys could not penetrate Gazala line. Probes finally located the 150th Brigade and a series of increasingly heavy attacks were organised by elements of three German and two Italian divisions. Finally with the enemy under the direct leadership of Rommel and with ammunition expanded, the 150th Brigade was overrun on 1 June 1942⁷.

Casualties were relatively light but virtually the whole 4th and 5th Green Howards were taken prisoner and were sent to Prisoner of War camps in Italy. The battalions were reduced to cadre status and formally disbanded in Richmond, North Yorkshire in November 1942⁸.

⁶ Powell & Powell, *History of the Green Howards*, pp.192

⁷ Powell & Powell, *History of the Green Howards*, pp.193

⁸ Syngé, *Story of the Green Howards*, pp.xxii-xxiii



Fig.1. A Vichy French propaganda showing British soldiers preventing French *poliu* from escaping onto the ships at Dunkirk at bayonet point. A company of the 5th Green Howards performed this duty in the last days of the evacuation. (Reproduced in W. Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, (London, 1983) from the *Musée des Deux Guerres Mondiales – BDIC, Universités de Paris*)

Chapter Three

Organisation

In 1938, the 4th and 5th Battalions of the Green Howards were organised in a way typical to most Territorial Army infantry battalions in the United Kingdom. They were based in a distinct geographic area with the HQ in one major town and with detachments across the local region.

At a higher level the battalions were subordinate to the 150th Infantry Brigade which was based at Malton in the North Riding. Initially comprising four battalions; 4th Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment, 5th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry and the 4th and 5th Green Howards. The 150th Brigade had been reorganised in 1936 to a three battalion organisation with the 5th DLI transferred to the 151st Brigade¹.

150th Brigade was in turn assigned to the 50th (Northumbrian) Division based in Darlington². 50th Division was a first line territorial division with a proud record of service from World War 1. In 1938 the division was chosen to be converted to a motorised formation and consequently lost one of its brigades but gained two Troop Carrying Companies with sufficient lift in theory to move the two remaining brigades³; the 150th and 151st.

By 1938 the Division had its brigades drawn from Yorkshire and County Durham. Its artillery was largely drawn from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, its Royal Army Service Corps support was recruited from Hull and its reconnaissance element from Northumbria in the shape of the 4th Battalion, Royal Northumbrian Fusiliers⁴.

¹ Tovey & Podmore, *Once A Howard*, pp.61

² Tovey & Podmore, *Once A Howard*, pp.61

³ E. Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, (Aldershot, 1950), pp.5-6

⁴ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.5

Whilst the division had fought through the Great War wearing the sign of the unicorn it had since adopted as its sign the famous red on black 'TT' flash which it was to wear throughout World War 2. Designed from an idea by the Division GSO2 Major Freeman Attwood⁵ the flash incorporated the letters T, T and, when viewed from the side, H. These stood for the Tyne, Tees and Humber rivers which defined the recruitment area of the Division.

By the end of 1938 the 4th Green Howards had finally finished transferring their Battalion HQ from the county town of Northallerton to Middlesborough alongside the HQ Company. Of the rifle companies; A Company was based in Redcar and Yarm and C Company in Skelton all around the outskirts of Middlesborough. B Company was stationed in Guisborough on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors and Thirsk in the Vale of York. Finally D Company was in Richmond close to the Catterick Garrison and the location of the Green Howards Depot and Northallerton near Thirsk⁶.

The 5th Green Howards were based in Scarborough and along the East Coast of Yorkshire. A Company was also based in Scarborough with a detachment at Whitby. B Company was located in Bridlington and Driffield. C Company was at Beverley, Market Weighton and Pocklington. D Company was inland at Malton, Pickering and Sand Hutton⁷.

In 1937 a new establishment was authorized for British infantry battalions⁸. The two major changes involved a change from the old Headquarters Wing to a Headquarters Company, and the return of the fourth rifle company. As both of these were in use with the 4th and 5th Green Howards in 1938 it is reasonable to assume the

⁵ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.5

⁶ *The Green Howards Gazette*, Volume XLVI, No.537, pp.167

⁷ Tovery & Podmore, *Once A Howard*, pp.161

⁸ F.Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945 The Evolution of a Fighting Force*, (Poole, 1983), pp.197

battalions had transitioned to the new establishment, at least in terms of organisation if not yet in actual equipment.

The idealised structure of the rifle companies was of a small Company HQ and four rifle platoons. Each of the rifle platoons now comprised three sections instead of the previous four. In addition the platoon was to be equipped with one 0.55in Boys Anti-Tank Rifle and a small 2in Mortar. The rifle sections were to be built around the new Bren light machine gun⁹. However there is considerable evidence that these weapons were not initially available for the TA, the 5th Green Howards had to borrow Bren Guns and instructors from the East Yorkshire Regiment Depot at the end of 1938¹⁰.

The HQ Company was supposed to be composed of a Signals Platoon, an Anti-Aircraft Platoon (which doubled as the Drums Platoon), an Administrative Platoon and a Mortar Platoon equipped with two 3in Mortars¹¹. The aim also was to have a Pioneer Platoon and a Carrier Platoon. Once again there must be doubt as to whether some of these platoons were equipped properly. In April 1938 the 5th Battalion's Mortar Platoon were noted in the Green Howards Gazette to be conducting their training using a dummy mortar constructed by the Platoon Sergeant¹². There is evidence that the 5th Green Howards also had a Carrier Platoon by late 1938¹³.

In addition to maintaining the same establishment as their regular counterparts, the TA battalions also had a number of Permanent Staff Instructors assigned to them. These PSIs were regular army soldiers assigned to the TA to conduct administration and organise training throughout the week when the TA soldiers were at work. There was usually one Sergeant with each company, for example in June 1939 Sergeants

⁹ Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.198

¹⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XLVI No.538 pp.189

¹¹ Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.197

¹² *GHG*, Vol XLVI, No.530, pp.31

Freeman and Smart, formerly with the 1st Green Howards, were transferred from the Depot to HQ Company and D Company of the 4th Green Howards respectively¹⁴.

As war approached there came about several changes that affected the way the two battalions operated. The first of these was the creation of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS. The ATS was the female counterpart to the Territorial Army and was established in September 1938. The ATS were co-located with the TA and used their drill halls and called upon TA instructors in areas such as drill. While there was certainly some grumbling about this state of affairs it is clear that a relationship grew up between the two bodies. As one ATS officer noted, they were '*attached – in some cases deeply attached*'¹⁵ to the Green Howards.

More significant to the TA Green Howards was the decision taken by in March 1939 by the Secretary of State for War Leslie Hore-Belisha to double the size of the Territorial Army across the board¹⁶. This increase from 170,000 to 340,000 caused serious organisational difficulties as there had been no prior plans to implement this change.

In response to this directive the existing TA battalions were directed to each raise a duplicate battalion. Consequently the 4th Battalion was to raise the 6th Battalion and the 5th Battalion to raise the 7th Battalion. However both these new units took time to bring themselves up to strength, never mind train to reach the required standards.

The 6th Green Howards were initially to share the 4th Green Howards' HQ in Middlesbrough while it established itself. In the June edition of the Green Howards Gazette it was reported that the 6th Green Howards was now established and had its companies co-located with their counterparts in the 4th Battalion. A Company at

¹³ *GHG*, Vol .XLVI, No.538, pp.189

¹⁴ *GHG*, Vol XLVII, No.544, pp.67

¹⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XLVII ,No.547, pp.124

¹⁶ D. Chandler et al, *The Oxford History of the British Army* (Oxford, 1994), pp.267

Richmond and Thirsk, B Company at Guisborough, C Company at Skelton and D Company at Yarm, Northallerton and Stokesley. HQ Company would be located in Redcar and Skelton¹⁷.

The 7th Green Howards followed a slightly different pattern. The HQ was established at Bridlington and the battalion took over the drill halls in the southern part of the old 5th Battalion region in the towns of Drifffield, Filey, Beverley and Pocklington. The 5th Battalion remained in Scarborough with its companies in Scarborough, Whitby, Pickering and Malton¹⁸.

In addition to sharing buildings with the new unit, the old battalions also had to find the manpower and leaders to form the new unit. In total 11 officers and 200 soldiers were transferred from the 4th Battalion to the 6th¹⁹. Indeed of the new battalion's complement of 22 officers only two above the rank of 2nd Lieutenant had not come from the 4th Battalion. Indeed these two were the Medical Officer and the Adjutant who had been posted in from a regular battalion.

Although not as well documented the situation for NCOs must have been very similar. At least the new Acting Regimental Sergeant Major was former CSM E.T. Hughes from the 4th Battalion as was the Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant²⁰. It seems reasonable to assume that the 200 Other Ranks transferred to the 6th Green Howards included a large number of the 4th Battalion's senior and junior NCOs. The 5th Battalion also had similar problems in regard to the establishment of its duplicate unit.

The effect that this would have had on the Green Howards territorials can be easily imagined. At a time when tensions were rising across Europe and serious

¹⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.47

¹⁸ Tovey & Podmore, *Once A Howards*, pp.161

¹⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545 pp.88

²⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545, pp.88

preparations for war were being made, frontline TA battalions were being shorn of half of their trained leadership cadre. Whilst the size of the military force had been rapidly increased their effectiveness had been badly damaged. Without effective leadership units treated like this could go to pieces.

For example the 1/4th Battalion, The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, a South Yorkshire based territorial battalion suffered such a fate. In spite of a good pre-war reputation by January 1940 1/4 KOYLI was reported to be '*in a very low state of training and discipline, with a large numbers of officers and other ranks physically unfit*'²¹. While there is no evidence that the 4th or 5th Green Howards suffered as badly as this, the task of preparing for war cannot have been aided by these circumstances.

Both battalions were embodied on 1 September 1939. The establishment on which they mobilised was only slightly different from that of the preceding two years. The main change was dropping the number of platoons in a rifle company down to three, although there remained four rifle companies. The HQ Company was formalised with six platoons; Signals (No.1), Anti-Aircraft (No.2), Mortars (No.3), Carriers (No.4), Pioneers (No.5) and Administrative (No.6)²².

The rifle companies were supposed to be organised with three officers and 97 other ranks. The Company HQ consisted of two captains, one the Officer Commanding the other the Second in Command, the Company Sergeant Major, the Company Quartermaster Sergeant and six soldiers. The rifle platoons each had either 30 or 29 soldiers depending on whether it was commanded by an officer or a Platoon Sergeant Major, as the officer was entitled to a batman that the PSM was not²³.

²¹ B. Ash, *Norway 1940*, (London, 1964), pp.26

²² Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.199-200

²³ Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.200

The Platoon Sergeant Major had been brought in as a Warrant Officer 3rd Class grade position before the war in response to a major shortage of officers²⁴. In the regular army a PSM commanded 2 out of 3 rifle platoons in a company, in addition they commanded half of the platoons in the HQ Company²⁵.

In spite of being relatively strong in subalterns, the 4th and 5th Battalions had around 16-18 each at the end of 1938²⁶ and many more had been commissioned since then, the PSM system was also in use in the territorial battalions. By the winter of 1939-40 the 5th Battalion had PSMs commanding two platoons in A and B Companies, one platoon in C Company as well as the Pioneer, Anti-Aircraft and Mortar platoons²⁷. In the rifle companies this gives a ratio of 5 PSMs to 7 commissioned platoon commanders, compared with 8 to 4 in a 'typical' regular battalion.

While the relative merits of having platoons commanded by Senior NCOs or junior officers can be debated, it appears that at this stage in the war the 5th Green Howards had chosen to give command positions to PSMs rather than to some of their junior officers of whom there were enough to fill all the platoon commander vacancies. This appears to be a deliberate choice of experience over 'senior' but more inexperienced personnel. Most of the new 2nd Lieutenants had been commissioned solely on their experience in Public School cadet, or Junior Division Officer Training Corps, forces.

Mention should also be made of the links the two territorial battalions had with the regimental depot in Richmond. The depot was involved in providing some training for the territorials, most prominently in running Tactical Exercises Without Troops

²⁴ Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.198

²⁵ Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945*, pp.199-200

²⁶ Green Howards Gazette 250th Anniversary Supplement 19 November 1938

²⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.551, pp.194-195

(TEWTs) for officer training²⁸. It also appears that the depot showed a remarkable degree of flexibility at times. For example in December of 1939 the depot took on 25 territorial recruits for a fortnights training at very short notice²⁹. The helpfulness of the East Yorkshire Regiment depot in providing Bren guns and instructors for the 5th Green Howards has already been noted. So while the depots did not have a hand in the day-to-day training of the territorial battalions they represented a valuable resource of training support should it be required.

On the return of the two battalions from Dunkirk there was little major official change in organisation although it was a time of experiment in many battalions of the British Army³⁰. The 4th Green Howards at least formed an extra company, X Company, as the nucleus of a reinforcement company³¹, a not unreasonable measure given the casualties suffered in the campaign in France. However X Company did not survive long and was no longer a part of the battalion when it deployed to the Middle East.

The 4th Green Howards also introduced a short lived platoon of motorcycle riders whilst on defensive duties in the south-west of England in the autumn of 1940³². Described as ‘32 dirt track riders whose enthusiasm and cross country performance is excellent’³³ The platoon soon developed an esprit de corps that shone out through its contributions to the Green Howards Gazette, but was disbanded with some of its members filling out the Carrier Platoon by December 1940³⁴.

One longer term matter was the disappearance of the Platoon Sergeant Major due to the sheer number of newly commissioned officers now being produced from the

²⁸ GHG, Vol.XLVII ,No.541 , pp.10

²⁹ GHG, Vol.XLVI, No.538, pp.189

³⁰ Myatt, *The British Infantry*, pp.200

³¹ GHG, Vol.XLVIII, No.559. pp.131-132

³² GHG, Vol.XLVIII, No.559. pp.131

³³ GHG, Vol.XLVIII, No.559. pp.131

³⁴ GHG, Vol.XLVIII, No.562. pp.213

system³⁵. By the time the battalions departed to the Middle East there were no more PSMs in its ranks.

Once in the Middle East, the 4th and 5th Green Howards would fight with much the same organisation as they had fought with in France. One major deficiency was in the lack of anti-tank guns integral to the battalion which would prove to have serious consequences in the Western Desert.

³⁵ Myatt, *The British Infantry*, pp.201

Chapter Four

Recruitment

Before the war the territorial Green Howards were recruited from volunteers from the local communities. These were people who were willing to give up some of their spare time to undertake military training. The strength of the 4th and 5th Green Howards in the years since their reformation after the Great War was largely poor due to a general war-weariness across the Britain. In addition to this funding was very limited, training was curtailed and the annual bounty payment stopped.

In October 1937 the strength of the 5th Green Howards stood at 420 all ranks, and had run between 420 and 460 for some years¹. This was well below the establishment figure of 588² but a dramatic improvement on the 310 the battalion's numbers had fallen to in the period when the bounty payment had been stopped³.

While some of the pre-War territorials may have enlisted for patriotic reasons alone, it is clear that financial reward and worthwhile training was also an incentive. After all, territorial soldiering has never been a particularly glamorous business. While the TA has been described as the 'moral elite', its members are more frequently dismissed as 'weekend warriors'. In 1936 the annual bounty, paid to soldiers who completed a specific amount of training each year, was doubled in value to £3. Daily pay rates were running at 2/ for private soldiers and 6/ for sergeants⁴. It was also clear that the rising tension across Europe contributed to an upturn in recruiting.

In April 1938 the 4th Green Howards, usually the strongest battalion in 150th Brigade, could muster 580 all ranks. The battalion was reporting that HQ in

¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.532 ,pp.65

² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.530 ,pp.30

³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.532 ,pp.65

⁴ Tovey & Podmore, *Once A Howard*, pp.62

Middlesborough had 158 soldiers. A Company had 64 at Redcar and 32 at Yarm for a total of 96. B Company totalled 105 with 61 in Guisborough and 44 in Thirsk. C Coy had 120 at its Skelton location. D Company had 101 split between 75 at Richmond and 26 at Northallerton⁵. At the same time C Company of the 5th Battalion was proudly proclaiming that it had reached a strength of 100 soldiers '*for the first time in years*'⁶.

By June 1938 the 5th Green Howards had made great strides and was now reporting a strength of 520 soldiers, their highest for 26 years and an increase 100 soldiers in 8 months. Detachments that had previously been on the verge of disappearing were now beginning to thrive. A Company's Whitby detachment had reached a strength of 37, while D Company's Detachment at Pickering under the newly commissioned 2Lt Chadwick was up to 30⁷.

In July 1938 the 4th Green Howards took away 528 soldiers of all ranks including 20 officers to their annual camp in Northumbria⁸ or around 90% of its nominal strength. D Company of the 5th Battalion had 3 officers and 69 Other Ranks on camp from a total of 3 officers and 71 ORs on the books, some 97% of the total⁹. This level of attendance greatly aids the training process as sub-units can train complete without needing to form composite units or operate under strength.

The November 1938 Green Howards' Gazette notes that the 4th Battalion were very pleased with their new band¹⁰. So it seems that recruitment was going well across the board. This is unsurprising given the general trend and the time and considering September's Munich Crisis had brought war very close. That same month the 4th Green

⁵ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.530 ,pp.30

⁶ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.530, pp.30-31

⁷ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.532, pp.62

⁸ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.533, pp.89

⁹ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.111

¹⁰ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.536 pp.147

Howards were given authorisation to recruit to 120% of their establishment¹¹ or 705 all ranks.

The general push towards war was having further effects. In December 1939 the 5th Green Howards reported that 30 of their soldiers had transferred to regular service¹². It is clear that for some the possibility of eventual mobilisation in the territorials was not sufficient and the regulars offered a better option. It was in this same month that the Green Howards depot in Richmond trained 25 territorial recruits from the 5th Battalion at short notice¹³.

Progress was also being made to increase the profile of the TA in the local community and showcase the all important social side of territorial service. Pickering's energetic 2Lt Chadwick organised the first TA dance in that town for ten years, raising money for a drum to be presented to the battalion and raising a respectable £20 from the 300 citizens of Pickering who attended¹⁴.

By March 1939 the 5th Green Howards had overtaken its Teeside rivals and become the strongest battalion in the brigade. They reported that they now had 658 soldiers on the books, an increase of 138 in less than a year. The 4th Battalion was noted as being at 640 an increase of 60 in the same time period. On the other hand Hull's 4th East Yorkshires were mustering 518, although it was noted that they had significant competition from other units in the city¹⁵.

The 5th Battalion had achieved this increase by a number of innovative measures. One was the opening of a recruiting office in Scarborough solely for the TA and the ATS and manned during the working day. This brought in many interested potential recruits who otherwise would not have come forward. The financing of this

¹¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.537, pp.167

¹² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.538, pp.189

¹³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.538, pp.189

¹⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.538, pp.189

operation was done on a wing and a prayer. The rhetorical question was asked: ‘*Who is paying for this? We don’t know – let’s get the recruits and argue about the money later on.*’¹⁶,

In addition to this, ‘outreach’ methods were being used. Captain PVV Guy, the 5th Battalion’s Adjutant, was making visits to both the Scarborough and Old Scarborough Rugby Clubs in search of new recruits. Rugby players were noted to be prominent in the Scarborough based HQ Company in the Intelligence Section and the Carrier Platoon and in D Company’s Malton Detachment¹⁷. Presumably the battalion intended to further tap into this resource.

The 7th Battalion undertook similar methods. One of their officers, Major Lister, was the senior master of Bridlington School, and in response to an appeal no fewer than 38 members of the school cadet force enlisted¹⁸. The former schoolboys went on to form the nucleus of the 7th Battalion’s HQ Company throughout the war. Recruiting was also running on family lines, as the 4th Battalion’s CSM Smith now had all three of his sons enlisted¹⁹

Wherever the recruits were being drawn from they were certainly coming through the doors with the 5th Battalion’s HQ Company passing 68 recruits in the space of two months. This influx was causing almost inevitable problems with already limited resources being stretched even further. In addition to the TA recruits there were some 45 ATS women also on parade at Scarborough. It reportedly required the combined efforts of both the Regimental Sergeant Major and Company Sergeant Major to ‘*sort them out*’²⁰!

¹⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.11

¹⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.11

¹⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.11-12

¹⁸ Tovey & Podmore, *Once A Howard*, pp.62

¹⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.542, pp.28

²⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.12

A further commitment that required TA resources and floor space was the establishment of a National Defence Company for which 25 recruits came forward in a mere three weeks. Nine of these were brought in by the redoubtable 2Lt Chadwick. Complaints were raised that the drill hall was too small and that there were too many things going on to train properly²¹.

The lead established by the 5th Battalion was soon overtaken by the 4th Green Howards. As on 26 April 1939 the 4th Battalion stood at 812 personnel with the excess about to form the basis of the duplicate 6th Battalion²². The next month recruiting for the 4th and 6th Battalions proceeded apace with the former up to strength and the latter almost so. Middlesborough in particular reported a busy month in recruiting terms²³.

By now the 4th and 5th Green Howards were up to full strength and any further recruiting was being fed into the duplicate battalions. Indeed the doubling of the TA, a sign of the seriousness of the situation in Europe must have been a powerful incentive to recruiting. However both battalions had large numbers of inexperienced soldiers in the ranks. When the 4th Battalion deployed to its July 1939 annual camp at Halton most of its recruits had joined the battalion only within the last 3 months²⁴.

The expansion of the TA created a requirement for junior officers to fill leadership positions. An appeal had gone out: *'for all ex-officers with previous service or men with special qualifications, as well as those who had gained certificates in the Officers' Training Corps in officer-producing units of the Territorial Army.'*²⁵ This was to be a stop-gap measure until the flow of newly commissioned officers from the ranks and through the officer cadet training units could take up the slack. The use of Platoon Sergeant Majors would also take off some of the pressure.

²¹ GHG, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.12

²² GHG, Vol.XVLII, No.542, pp.28

²³ GHG, Vol.XVLII, No.544, pp.47

²⁴ GHG, Vol.XVLII, No.545, pp.87

The consequent arrival in the battalions of newly commissioned officers with previous experience in up-scale school cadet forces, or Junior Division Officer Training Corps, is noted in extracts from the London Gazette. What is a steady trickle throughout 1938 becomes a veritable flood in the spring of 1939. Two 2nd Lieutenants with experience with the Fettes College and Ampleforth contingents of the JDOTC were commissioned in to the 4th Green Howards in March 1939²⁶. In May no fewer than five former members of the Durham School JDOTC were commissioned as 2Lts into the 4th Battalion's 2nd Line, soon to be the 6th Battalion. In the same month the Marquis of Normanby with previous experience in Eton's JDOTC was commissioned into the 5th Battalion²⁷.

In addition to these former cadets the territorial battalions were also commissioning people with no previous military experience. There were also a few people being commissioned from the ranks, starting with Private G S Piper of the 4th Battalion in May 1939²⁸. One Member of Parliament, (Robert Turton, who was the MP of Thirsk and Malton for 45 years, won a Military Cross during the war and was the future Lord Tranmire) with experience from Eton JDOTC was commissioned in June into the 4th Battalion²⁹. A final source was the transfer of officers from the TA Reserve of Officers to the infantry battalions.

A change occurred in the pattern of commissioning in the 5th Green Howards in July³⁰. Increasingly soldiers with JDOTC experience were being commissioned from the ranks having enlisted as private soldiers before being put forward for commissioning. This trend moved to the 4th Battalion in the next month.

²⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.550 ,pp.185

²⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541 ,pp.21

²⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.543 ,pp.56

²⁸ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.543 ,pp.56

²⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545 ,pp.95

³⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545 ,pp.95

From April 1938 to November 1939 there were 63 people commissioned into the territorial battalions of the Green Howards. Of these 16 (25%) were commissioned with no previous military experience, 27 (43%) had JDOTC experience, 7 (11%) were commissioned from the ranks and a further 6 (10%) commissioned from the ranks but also had JDOTC experience. Of the remainder 3 had previously been officers, 3 had been commissioned from the ranks of Senior NCO to fill Quartermaster positions and one transferred from the TA Reserve of Officers.

One factor marked out those who volunteer to serve in the Territorial Green Howards in the first half of 1939, their quality. One regular soldier Major E.W. Shepard noted *'the extraordinarily high standard set by the last batch of voluntary recruits to the Territorial Army, which formed perhaps the best human material that has ever offered itself to the British Army in peace or war, with qualities that came as a revelation to all who came into contact with them.'*³¹

However with the establishment of national service the possibility of volunteering soon ended and the territorial battalions, like their regular counterparts were to be fed by conscripted 'militiamen' fed through the Depot, now renamed an Infantry Training Centre.

³¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.550 ,pp.185

Chapter Five

Training from 1938 to April 1940

With the exception of the training undertaken by certain specialist forces such as the Commandos or Airborne troops relatively little has been written about the training of the British Army during WW2. Timothy Harrison Place's book *Military Training in the British Army 1940-1944*¹ is an honourable exception although it concentrates largely on the development of doctrine and the Battle School movement after Dunkirk and its effect on the performance of British units in north-west Europe in the last years of the war.

The training a military unit receives is of prime importance in the way in which it performs on the battlefield. History is full of examples of small, well trained forces triumphing over larger but less well trained armies. The historical perception is that the British Army of World War 2 is of an army relatively poorly trained in the art of war when compared with its principle enemy, Germany. It is interesting to examine what sort of training these typical Territorial Army battalions received during the time period being considered.

Pre-war training is relatively easy to assess as this is often laid out in some detail in the pages of the Green Howards' Gazette through contributions written by members of the battalions concerned. What is initially notable about these is the sheer detail and time given over to recounting the details of various sporting competition the units were involved in. While sport is useful for building fitness, competitiveness and team spirit it is far from the best training for armed combat with a competent and tactically astute enemy.

¹ T. Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army 1940-1944*, (London 2000)

In 1938 the training often includes Tactical Exercises Without Troops, or TEWTs, for the benefit of the battalions' officers. These are noted as being run on 13 March² by the Depot in Richmond and on 9-10 April³ in Harrogate. A further TEWT organised by Brigade was run on the 1 May at Catterick⁴. TEWTs are a method of conveying the basics of tactical instruction and procedures without requiring the presence of large bodies of troops. This is a method still used in the modern British Army, but obviously one that still has limitations, primarily as they rarely prepare the student for the real confusion of manoeuvring troops on the ground. However at least it is a sign that higher formation commanders were taking steps to disseminate key tactical knowledge to subordinate commanders.

More advanced training in the pre-War period seems to have been conducted through external training cadres conducted by a variety of formations outside of the battalions. For example in March 1938, 2nd Lieutenant Rowe of the 4th Battalion attended a two week Motor Transport maintenance course with the Manchester Regiment at Strensall camp near York⁵. In April of the same year three NCOs of the 5th Green Howards attended a annual Machine Gun cadre, presumably on the new Bren Gun, at Hornsea and returned to the unit as Machine Gun instructors⁶. Perhaps more unusually Company Sergeant Major Jaye was sent on a Kodascope course to master the use of film projectors⁷.

May 1938 saw a corporal of the 4th Battalion's support company being dispatched to Neatheravon on a Vickers Gun course, a weapon not on issue to the

² *GHG*, Vol.XLVI, No.529,pp.16

³ *GHG*, Vol.XLVI, No.530, pp.30

⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XLVI, No.531, pp.48

⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XLVI, No.529, pp.16

⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.530, pp.30

⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.530, pp.30

battalion⁸. In July a sergeant from the same battalion was sent to Porton Down on an anti-gas course⁹.

The use of external courses reflects the lack of expertise within Territorial battalions to teach these subjects, a state of affairs that was probably largely replicated within the regular army as well. It also reflects the introduction of new equipment and roles with the Bren Gun replacing the Lewis Gun and the increasing motorisation of the wider army.

The experience gained on these courses was disseminated back to the battalion in routine training on drill nights and weekends. In the 5th Battalion there was a series of courses organised on the use of rifles in the anti-aircraft role, anti-gas and decontamination¹⁰. As has already been mentioned Scarborough's Mortar Platoon was practising its drills with a dummy mortar tube made by their platoon sergeant.

Skill at arms and marksmanship training also took place. In June 1938 a team from the 4th Battalion was placed 8th in the Yorkshire Territorial Team and Rifle Association meeting at Strensall. While a week later the 4th Battalion had its own Rifle Meet at Eston ranges¹¹.

The most important in a Territorial battalion's annual training programme was, and remains, its two week Annual Camp. A period when concentrated training with, hopefully, a full complement of troops can take place. 150th Brigade's annual training for 1938 took place at Shilbottle in Northumbria to where the battalions deployed by train¹². Short notes from the 4th Battalion in August's Green Howards Gazette insists

⁸ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.531, pp.48

⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.531, pp.48

¹⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.530, pp.31

¹¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.532, pp.65

¹² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.109

that the ‘tactical skill of the battalion’ improved during this period but gave few details¹³.

A more detailed examination of the training programme revealed a schedule that would not look out of place in the Territorial Army of the early 21st century. The first week was given over to a variety of training cadres. At Brigade level a number of courses were run such as a Brigade Section Leading Course for Junior NCOs and a Brigade Mortar Course with the latter training no fewer than 134 soldiers over the fortnight¹⁴. Instruction on other weapons was also undertaken with a Sergeant from the Green Howards Depot present to pass on his knowledge on the Bren Gun and Boys Anti-tank Rifle¹⁵. This latter instruction was on a ‘train the trainer’ basis with those on the course to pass on their newly acquired knowledge on in turn.

Perhaps naturally in the pre-War territorials sport played a key role in the camp with ‘... *many exiting battles... on the football and sports fields*’¹⁶. In addition the battalions were allowed a period of Rest and Recreation in the bright lights of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Tactical training was concentrated in the second week of camp. However only one period of night exercises was included in the training, occurring on the Monday night of the second week. The rest of the week was given over to a number of Company and Battalion level daylight manoeuvres culminating in a battalion attack on the Friday¹⁷. However detail on the nature of these evolutions is very sketchy. The 5th Battalion notes that the battalion attacks were ‘*against time*’¹⁸, which considering all attacks are constrained by time seems to suggest a certain lack of urgency in normal

¹³ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.533, pp.89

¹⁴ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.111

¹⁵ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.111

¹⁶ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.109

¹⁷ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.110-112

¹⁸ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.112

training. However they also point out the use of the battalion's Motor Transport assets in some of the exercises which seemed to have been something of an innovation¹⁹.

One point of note is that all of the training conducted on the annual camp was organised by the battalions' Adjutants²⁰. Given their routine duties as the Commanding Officers' principle staff officer they must have been busy men indeed.

Whilst this annual camp was no doubt enjoyed by those attending, there must be some doubt over its efficiency in training men for battle. Whilst support weapon handling must have improved, doubts must remain about the realism of the tactical training undertaken. With very limited periods of night operations and troops returning to camp at night time this was surely not the best preparation for operations but is probably indicative of the type of training that preceded it on previous annual camps.

With the annual camp over, training returned to its usual routine. A further TEWT, this time under Divisional auspices was organised in Harrogate in October 1938²¹ while in the same month two junior officers were sent on signalling and Physical Training courses.

The slowly increasing availability of new equipment types also increased the value of training. The 5th Battalion had access to three Boys Anti-tank Rifles from September 1938 and was able to train more than 70 soldiers on the drills. However of this number only 19 soldiers, including 3 officers, were able to fire the weapon live at Strensall in December of that year²². As has already been noted the 5th Battalion's C Company had arranged access to Bren Guns and instructors from the East Yorkshire Regiment's Depot around this time.

¹⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.112

²⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.534, pp.112

²¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.536, pp.147

²² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.538, pp.189

February 1939 saw the 4th Battalion continue to train both officers and men on the new weapon systems whilst noting a notable improvement in drill attendances²³. Attendance on external courses continued with another NCO returning from the anti-gas school at Porton Down and two NCOs returning from small arms courses at Catterick.

March saw the Green Howards Depot run another 150th Brigade sponsored TEWT for the officers. A 'sand table' exercise, similar to a TEWT but indoors, was put on for a visit by Major-General Martel to Middlesborough. Whilst this was no doubt a bit of theatre for the visit of a General, it demonstrates that this sort of theoretical instruction was far from unknown. Finally the 4th Battalion was laying plans to take its new weapons onto the range at Eston, suggesting that range work occurred relatively infrequently²⁴.

It is then clear that for the next few months the concentration of the battalion was on recruiting and the difficulties experienced in forming the new battalions, as well as supporting the ATS and national defence platoons. Indeed the 5th Battalion specifically claimed that the drill halls were so crowded that 'proper' training was impossible²⁵. For four months there is not a single mention of training for the territorial battalions in the Green Howards Gazette, although some most have been undertaken. It is likely that the effort was targeted at getting the influx of new recruits up to speed on the basic skills.

Annual Camp in June 1939 was held at Halton and was much less well documented than that of the previous year. Note was made that most of the junior soldiers had enlisted only in the last three months. The physical toughness of the training seems to have been increased with the digging of '*man and weapon*' pits or

²³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.540, pp.223

²⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.541, pp.11

‘shell scrapes’ introduced into the repertoire. On the other hand realism of the tactical training seems to have declined with the numbers of umpires, a vital part in ensuring realism in exercises, being almost nonexistent²⁶.

However the social side of the camp continued unabated with the Sergeant’s Mess of the 4th Battalion lamenting that mess life was quiet due to the closeness of the bright lights of the north-west coast. The Thirsk and Northallerton Detachments of the battalion also appeared to have arrived at the trains to go to camp if not drunk, then certainly extremely rowdy²⁷, a tradition that continues in their successor units to this day²⁸.

The 1939 annual camp at Halton is the last training mentioned, and was probably the last opportunity to undertake meaningful collective training until the outbreak of war and the mobilisation of the battalions on the 1 September 1939.

Summing up the pre-war training, it is difficult to note much concentrated tactical training that would later stand these units in good stead against the Germans. Much time and effort was given over to sporting events and football, with some units participating in local leagues as well as inter-unit competitions.

It seems that technical subjects were given a great deal of time in the training programme. The effort to master the new Bren and Boys weapon systems is noteworthy, as is Scarborough’s Mortar Platoon’s drive to practice 3in Mortar drills. Similarly anti-gas and decontamination drills were taught and practiced. Numerous personnel were dispatched on external training courses to learn skills that could not be taught within the battalions. However practical application of these subjects seems to be less

²⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.541, pp.12

²⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545, pp.87

²⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.545, pp.87

²⁸ The author commanded the Northallerton Detachment, A (Green Howards) Company of the Tyne-Tees Regiment from 2000-2002

commonplace. For example the all important, for infantry units, range work seems to have been less frequent than it perhaps should have been.

One notable absence from the training documented is that of foot drill, normally a mainstay of military training of the era. Primarily for its disciplinary and team building qualities but also as it is perhaps the cheapest form of military training available. It is absent perhaps mainly as it was so commonplace that it was not worth noting.

Tactical training seems to have been very infrequently practised. Indeed the only worthwhile periods of tactical training seem to have taken place during the annual camp periods. This may well have been due to the difficulties in massing the battalions for training at weekends and in the availability of training areas. However field craft at the unit and sub-unit level does not seem to have been well practised. There is evidence that sand tables or 'rock drills' were used to pass on tactical procedures to the troops but this is no substitute for the real thing.

The tactical training that was undertaken also seems to have lacked realism. Night operations were only practised once every year, and only in 1939 does the simple practise of digging shell scrapes become part of the battalions' tactical drills. In the same year the 4th Battalion's exercises were noted as having very few, if any, umpires. This means that even rudimentary realism and control of exercise conditions could have been avoided.

While practical exercises in the field do not seem to have been a frequent occurrence, the Tactical Exercise Without Troops was much more commonplace for the officers. At least most of the officers will have been aware of procedures used for battalion, brigade and division level operations even if they will not have practised

them. The value of these sorts of TEWT at the sub-unit level and above is greater than that of the section or platoon level 'rock drill'.

What has not yet been discussed in this context is the effect of creating the two new TA battalions on the training undertaken by the rest. With upwards of 60% of the strength of the battalions being recruits with less than a year's experience most of the routine training in the first half of 1939 must have been directed at bringing these up to basic skill levels. Indeed comments made concerning the numbers of recruits and the difficulty in training in crowded drill halls has already been noted. Therefore much of the good training done in the preceding year may well have been lost to 'skill fade' and the break up of existing teams of soldiers.

It is a matter of faith to most reserve soldiers that should they be called up the 'training gap' between themselves and the full time soldiers will be rectified by a period of intensive training after mobilisation and before being committed to operations. The 4th and 5th Green Howards had over four months between being mobilised and sent to France, so it is interesting to see what use was made of this training time.

The order to embody the battalions was received at 2pm on the 1st of September and the 4th Battalion was on its way to its war station at 10pm the same day²⁹. They and the other units of 150th Brigade were then to spend seven weeks defending the area of Teeside and Hartlepool with special attention paid to the chemical works of Billingham³⁰. Engaged in civil defence and point defence duties against possible sabotage the battalions were dispersed in small units around the area. Consequently the only form of training possible was on an individual level³¹.

²⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.549, pp.153

³⁰ R.W. Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams: A Soldier's Six Year Journey Through WW2*, (Burnstown, Ontario, 1997) pp.3

³¹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.549, pp.153

Towards the end of September 1939 the units were dispatched to the Cotswolds where the 50th Northumbrian Division was concentrating to conduct training prior to its move to France. The divisional history waxed lyrical about the training undertaken in the Cotswolds.

*'Technique for movement and acting in co-operation with armoured forces was studied and practised in every detail. The Division had visions of forming part of a great mechanised striking force in France, driving deep into the enemy positions, cutting his communications and carrying out the type of mobile armoured warfare which many of those in the division had cherished for a long time.'*³²

This concept for the aggressive deployment of the Division in the motorised role was no doubt the brainchild of Major-General Martel the GOC, a proponent of armoured warfare³³ who would later go on to become the Commander of the Royal Armoured Corps³⁴ and had previously even designed his own model of tank.

However, even the divisional history acknowledged some difficulties were encountered: *'The training was handicapped by a lack of equipment. To a large extent this was inevitable, but it was increased by the peacetime system of indenting on which the Ordnance insisted and which caused great difficulty and delay. Many units received large issues of equipment which were delivered at their billets after they had left for France, which caused further trouble and correspondence later.'*³⁵

The experience of those that underwent the training inevitably differed from the opinion gained at divisional level. The memoirs of Bob Metcalfe, then a Captain in the

³² Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.6

³³ P. Wright, *Tank*, (London, 2000) pp.206-207

³⁴ T Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, pp.88

³⁵ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.6

4th Green Howards mentions nothing of the training in the Cotswolds, only the hospitality of the local Gloucestershire folk³⁶.

The notes of the 4th Battalion as relayed to the Green Howards' Gazette, somewhat hampered by censorship, reveal a less than hectic programme of training. Naturally their main interest was in sport with squash and football foremost in their minds although some of the soldiers were beginning to learn how to ride motorbikes. Of military training only exercises up to the company level had been completed. Organised by brigade these evolutions were regarded as being a tough test, '*the brigade Company Commander breaking machine*'.³⁷ For their part the 5th Battalion had absolutely nothing to say on the subject of training over these months.

Higher level training was in the pipeline, with battalion level training due to begin in the new year and brigade level training to follow after. Although there is no evidence that these schemes actually occurred as advance parties from the division were dispatched to France in January 1940. One sort of training not in short supply was once again, the TEWT, usually organised at the divisional level. The accuracy and usefulness of these TEWTs was questioned openly, as in these pretend manoeuvres the units '*advance incredible distances at incredible speeds*'.³⁸ It is highly likely that Martel's enthusiasm for manoeuvre warfare was outpacing the current capabilities of his division.

The divisional history confidently asserted that 50th Division was 'well trained and ready for war by the end of 1939'.³⁹ This seems far from the true state of affairs with only limited training at the sub-unit level and even less at higher levels. While the individual soldier may well have mastered his personal weapon and drills there seems

³⁶ Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.5

³⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.550, pp.175

³⁸ *GHG*, Vol.XVLII, No.550, pp.175

³⁹ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.6

to be no indication that the battalions were approaching any level of proficiency at the drills that counted. Even worse TEWTs being held for the benefit of the officers were too idealistic and out of touch with reality.

Both the 4th and 5th Green Howards were in position in France in February 1940 where the division was initially assigned to II Corps. Closer to the front, training for battle still continued in a rather desultory way. The 4th Battalion reporting that by March it had been involved in road building and repairing duties even though they were far from skilled in these tasks⁴⁰. They had quickly settled in and sporting competitions had resumed. Most importantly a match between the battalion and a French regiment of engineers which contained a French international goalkeeper most excited the imagination. For their part the 5th Battalion had little to report that they felt could get past the censor's 'green pencil'.

More detail emerged of their activities in April. Indeed the 50th Division as a whole was engaged in the construction of defensive positions in north-eastern France including the II Corps reserve line. These positions included a large anti-tank ditch and numerous concrete pillboxes⁴¹. It was a task that involved a 10 mile march to the location of the defences, a full day's work and then a 10 mile march back, a routine that the battalions were to have for nearly 3 months⁴². It was a task at which the division as a whole excelled, performing far beyond people's expectations. Indeed so well did they do that some feared they had made a rod for their own backs should such a task again come up⁴³. Nevertheless such activity must have done wonders for the physical conditioning of the soldiers involved.

⁴⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.553, pp.5

⁴¹ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.8

⁴² Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.11

⁴³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.554, pp.31

More military training was harder to come by however. The battalions received little practise of marksmanship with the 5th Battalion reporting only one instance of the unit being dispatched en-masse to ranges by the sea for a solitary weekend in April⁴⁴. The task of constructing defences seemed to be all consuming for the early months of 1940. Relief from this ‘navvying’ came in the form of the ubiquitous sporting competitions, although the officers of the 5th Green Howards managed to escape to do a tour of the World War One battlefields⁴⁵.

While most of the battalions’ soldiers were stuck on labouring duties, some were managing to gain some experience of operations. A number of officers were attached to regular British formations serving stints on parts of the Maginot Line in close contact with the Germans. These officers took part in patrols and other minor operations and brought their experience back to their parent battalions⁴⁶.

In May, relieved of their labouring duties, the 4th Battalion noted that training continued right up to the German invasion of Belgium and France. Long road marches were undertaken by the men, while the NCOs were occupied with cadre classes. Each of the rifle companies also undertook a ‘simple’ night exercise with the exception of A Company. Instead they had been called out for real to chase down the crew of a shot down *Luftwaffe* aircraft⁴⁷.

The divisional history notes indicate that there was ‘*intensive training*’ during the first months of 1940⁴⁸, however there is no evidence of this actually occurring on the ground or of any attempt being made to turn Martel’s ideas of the Cotswolds TEWTs into reality. Indeed at the time only elements of one under strength Army Tank

⁴⁴ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.554, pp.32

⁴⁵ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.554, pp.32

⁴⁶ Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.11

⁴⁷ GHG, Vol.XVLI, No.556, pp.71

⁴⁸ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.8

Brigade were in France, with the 1st Armoured Division yet to be dispatched⁴⁹. There was precious little armour for the 50th Division to support.

The overall picture of the training must be of inadequate preparations for the task ahead. The troops were physically fit and reasonably trained in their individual skills. However realistic tactical training and even the basic rifle marksmanship training the British Army prides itself on were sadly lacking.

⁴⁹ L.F. Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders 1939-1940*, (London, 1953) pp.359

Chapter Six

Training from May 1940 to April 1941

The experience of the 4th and 5th Battalion during the French campaign of 1940 offers several insights into the efficiency of the training they received before the start of operations.

The physical fitness of the battalions, honed by so many days marching and digging defensive positions proved itself of excellent value during the division's move out of Belgium from positions around the River Dendre on the 18 May. The Brigade's attached Motor Transport from the 11th Troop Carrying Company had been given another task so the battalions had to march. The first day's march across the hard *pavé* through crowds of refugees took them 30 miles, the second day covered another 14 without a single man falling out¹.

Some days later when in defensive positions around Arras, PSM Upton of the 4th Green Howards' D Company achieved the signal feat of knocking out a German *panzer* with a Boys anti-tank rifle². A few days later this was matched by 2Lt Hewson of the duplicate 6th Green Howards' C Company who was killed after knocking out a *panzer* at Gravelines³.

Whilst showing commendable bravery and weapon handling the question must be asked why platoon commanders were having to personally fire the only anti-tank weaponry available to the battalions? The answer must surely be that they were the only personnel trained or willing to use them. Although in Hewson's case he wasn't trained to use the weapon either, resulting in him taking up the exposed firing position that led to him being killed by return fire. All the work that the battalions put into training on the

¹ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.29

² Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.31

new weapons in late 1938 early 1939 had obviously gone to waste. However it is more damning that in the eight months since they were mobilised there had be no effective training on a weapon that, for all its dubious effectiveness, was the only defence from armour available to the troops.

The equipment state of the battalions was also lamentable. The 5th Green Howards had only one operable 3in Mortar, the main indirect fire support available to the battalion, whilst at least one of their 2in Mortars was unserviceable⁴. However there is evidence that at least they had some of their compliment of Bren Gun carriers⁵.

Whilst not directly involving the territorial Green Howards, elements of the 50th Division were involved in the only major British counterattack of the war. Under command of Major-General Martel units of the 1st Army Tank Brigade and the 151st Infantry Brigade attacked to the south of Arras into the flank of the attacking German armoured formations⁶. This counter-attack had an effect out of all proportion to the limited resources committed to it. However the Matildas of the Royal Tank Regiment soon outpaced the supporting battalions of the Durham Light Infantry and both arms fought in an uncoordinated manner.

The 151st Brigade had presumably undergone the very training for cooperation with armoured forces that the 50th Division historian considered to have been '*practised in every detail*⁷'. Either the training had left a lot to be desired or had in effect been none existent outside of TEWTs, or the 151st Brigade performed very badly. Contradicting his earlier assertions about the quality of training, the author of the divisional history admits that the DLI battalions at Arras; '*had never had any previous*

³ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.43

⁴ R. Atkin, *Pillar of Fire, Dunkirk 1940*, (London, 1990), pp.45

⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIII, No.554, pp.31

⁶ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, pp.89-90

⁷ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.6

*training in working in a mobile column with tanks*⁸. Considering it was a division tasked with supporting armoured forces and led by a proponent of mobile warfare this was certainly a poor state of affairs to say the least.

While the 151st Brigade was engaged in the counterattack at Arras the Green Howards of 150th Brigade were in defensive positions inside and to the east of Arras. After holding their own against probing German attacks they were told to withdraw to positions further north. These night time moves through countryside in which the German forward elements were operating were only partially successful. The 4th Battalion lost almost the entirety of their C Company⁹ while the 5th Battalion lost most of its D Company¹⁰, along with its commander the now Captain Chadwick. These sub-units were separated in the night moves and eventually taken prisoner. Withdrawals, especially those conducted at night, are especially difficult operations of war and it is perhaps not surprising that with such limited experience in night operations this loss of 25% of the battalion's combat power occurred. However it points out a serious deficiency in the pre-operational training package.

In spite of these failures in training the 4th and 5th Green Howards performed creditably during the campaign in France and were evacuated from Dunkirk as formed units. The 5th Battalion in particular forming the last British cordon on the Mole and were tasked with regulating access to the ships loading there at bayonet point. This overall performance can be credited to the quality of the volunteer soldiers in the ranks of the battalions rather than to any training they had received.

After their return from Dunkirk both battalions were dispatched to the North-West to recover their strength, but were soon on the move down to Dorset to

⁸ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.14

⁹ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.33

¹⁰ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.38

defend against a potential invasion¹¹. Training began once again, this time with seemingly more knowledge of what was required in battle.

In August 1940 the 4th Battalion noted that: *'Day by day work and training proceeds. Rifle, bayonet and LMG are constantly in use. Skilled hands grow more skilled and provide an example for emulation of the clumsier neophytes – for we have a little new blood coming into the battalion now and again. Daily over the hills in the bracken or amid the crackling woods, silhouettes of soldiers can be seen practising formation and movement, the tactics of attack and defence.'*¹²,

Once again a major effort was put into the construction of defences and digging again stood large in the routine of the battalions¹³. The initial chastening impulse to train hard appears to have dissipated with the take over of defensive duties. However training exercises at the battalion level were taking place *'periodically'*. These were looked forward to primarily as a change of scene from manning trenches and an opportunity to gather wild fruit¹⁴. The battalions also resumed sending their officers and NCOs away on training courses. The 4th Green Howards alone had no fewer than 15 personnel so employed in September 1940 on subjects including a company commanders course, small arms, unarmed combat, physical training and cooking¹⁵.

The 5th Green Howards also found the routine relatively undemanding in this period recording occasional air battles, a few exercises, some heath fires and one or two demonstrations as being the only variations on days of *'digging and wiring, and waiting for the arrival of barge-loads of seasick Germans.'*¹⁶,

¹¹ Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.38

¹² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.558, pp.108

¹³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.558, pp.118

¹⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.559, pp.131

¹⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.559, pp.132

¹⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.559, pp.134

The pace of training began to pick up in October with one 48 hour brigade level exercise featuring a night time battle against another of the division's brigades. A further exercise of this nature was also planned. The 5th Battalion was also engaged in training with assault boats for river crossings¹⁷.

November saw the 4th Battalion in the midst of a programme of concentrated individual training. Weapon handling was particularly marked out for improvement; especially with close combat weapons such as the bayonet and grenade which it was ruefully admitted had been '*a little neglected in the past.*' Physical conditioning continued to be stressed with the usual route marches being supplemented with compulsory weekly five mile cross-country runs. The sand table/rock drill method of instruction within the battalion continued to be used with the Intelligence Officer having a purpose built model on which to conduct such training¹⁸.

This step up in the pace of training can largely be credited to the commander of V Corps, Lieutenant-General Montgomery under whom the 50th Division found itself. In October Montgomery had set his units the target that they must: '*...be able, by March, 1941, to fight any enemy, anywhere and at any time. Each battalion must be able to move sixty to eighty miles in Mechanical Transport, march twenty five miles, and fight a battle at the end of it.*'¹⁹,

In December the division moved to Somerset where it came under the command of Lieutenant-General Franklyn's VIII Corps. This was allegedly part of deal with Montgomery whereby Monty's Corps would take command of his old 3rd Division and Franklyn, Colonel of the Green Howards, would get command of the 50th Division which then contained four Green Howards battalions²⁰.

¹⁷ GHG, Vol.XVLIII, No.560, pp.154

¹⁸ GHG, Vol.XVLIII, No.561, pp.173

¹⁹ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.61

²⁰ Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.41

Whatever the reasons for the move the training got even harder. The divisional history describes this training once more as ‘*intense*²¹’ and this time it seems it merits this description. By December the 4th Battalion reported that : ‘*we are not quite able to run twenty miles, march ten, dig for three hours and fight at the end of it we may think we are near...*²²’. The standards used in PT also increased, they no longer ran the 5 milers across country in PT kit, but now ran 5 miles on roads wearing hobnail boots²³.

The next month the elements were combining with the tough training to further harden the troops. On one occasion the 4th Green Howards marched for 23 miles through a blizzard before going into a mock attack. The tempo of training quickened noticeably with progressive training being implemented, the 4th Battalion being pushed through individual, platoon and company level exercises at this time. This hard training was welcomed by ‘*nearly everyone*’. However the old Army had not gone away altogether as time was found to hold a foot drill competition²⁴.

It was in this same month that perhaps the greatest innovation in tactical training reached the battalions, what is now known as ‘field firing’. This is a combination of tactical manoeuvre and the firing of live ammunition, which is still regarded as the pinnacle of infantry training. A and B Companies of the 4th Battalion were dispatched to Dartmoor and were the first to be through this evolution:

‘At the crack of dawn, in rain, the companies moved off to the moors; and under drenching conditions they made their uphill attack, with 3inch mortars and carriers supporting them. Real bullets and bombs kept everyone ‘on his toes,’ and the result was a keen training event, and thoroughly enjoyed by the troops.’²⁵

²¹ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.39

²² *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.562, pp.215

²³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.564, pp.235

²⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.564, pp.233

²⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLI, No.564, pp.233

Once the bullets stopped flying the training was far from over as the troops had to march a further 5 miles through fog to meet up with their transport. C and D Companies from the same battalion were run through the same scheme. Finally the troops were receiving the sort of training they would require to be successful against a first rank enemy.

February 1941 saw a continuation of exercises across Dartmoor, often through snow and crossing large distances prior to crossing the 'start line.' Smaller scale exercises were also pursued, the 4th Battalion staging platoon level schemes lasting two days, covering 40 miles and fighting a number of 'battles' on the way all the time harassed by the battalion's Battle Patrol. Although one platoon finally lost its patience with this harassment and stole the Battle Patrol's carriers in retaliation. During this exercise the Battalion 2 i/c and other officers would appear to conduct impromptu TEWTs with the platoon commander²⁶.

The 5th Battalion was undergoing a similar programme of training. They found that attempts to give the Corps exercise a Libyan setting were somewhat undermined by all the snow but overall found it '*all very stimulating and hardening.*' They too were dispatching platoons to march across Dartmoor for 48 hours at a time²⁷.

In April there was a brigade exercise that involved a 40 mile rapid move by Motor Transport, and further field firing on a company level into which Tommy Guns were introduced for the first time. However the key events were visits and inspections by the King and Lt-Gen Franklyn as the 50th Division was finally, after months of rumours, to deploy to the Middle East²⁸.

After a slow start the training undertaken by the 4th and 5th Green Howards during the period from their return from Dunkirk to being dispatched to the Middle East

²⁶ GHG, Vol.XVLIX, No.565, pp.8

²⁷ GHG, Vol.XVLIX, No.565, pp.9

was significantly superior to that which had preceded the campaign in France. Whilst physical fitness was still strongly stressed, tactical training at all levels was much more commonplace and realistic. In particular the introduction of field firing was a major advance, a much needed complement to the numerous TEWTs that had predominated in 1939. Finally the troops were receiving the sort of training that would help them win battles.

Perhaps the greatest testament to this training was a plaintive note from the 5th Battalion that: '*A full training programme has put football somewhat in the background.*²⁹' Finally war was beginning to be taken more seriously.

²⁸ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.566, pp.26-30

²⁹ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.566, pp.28

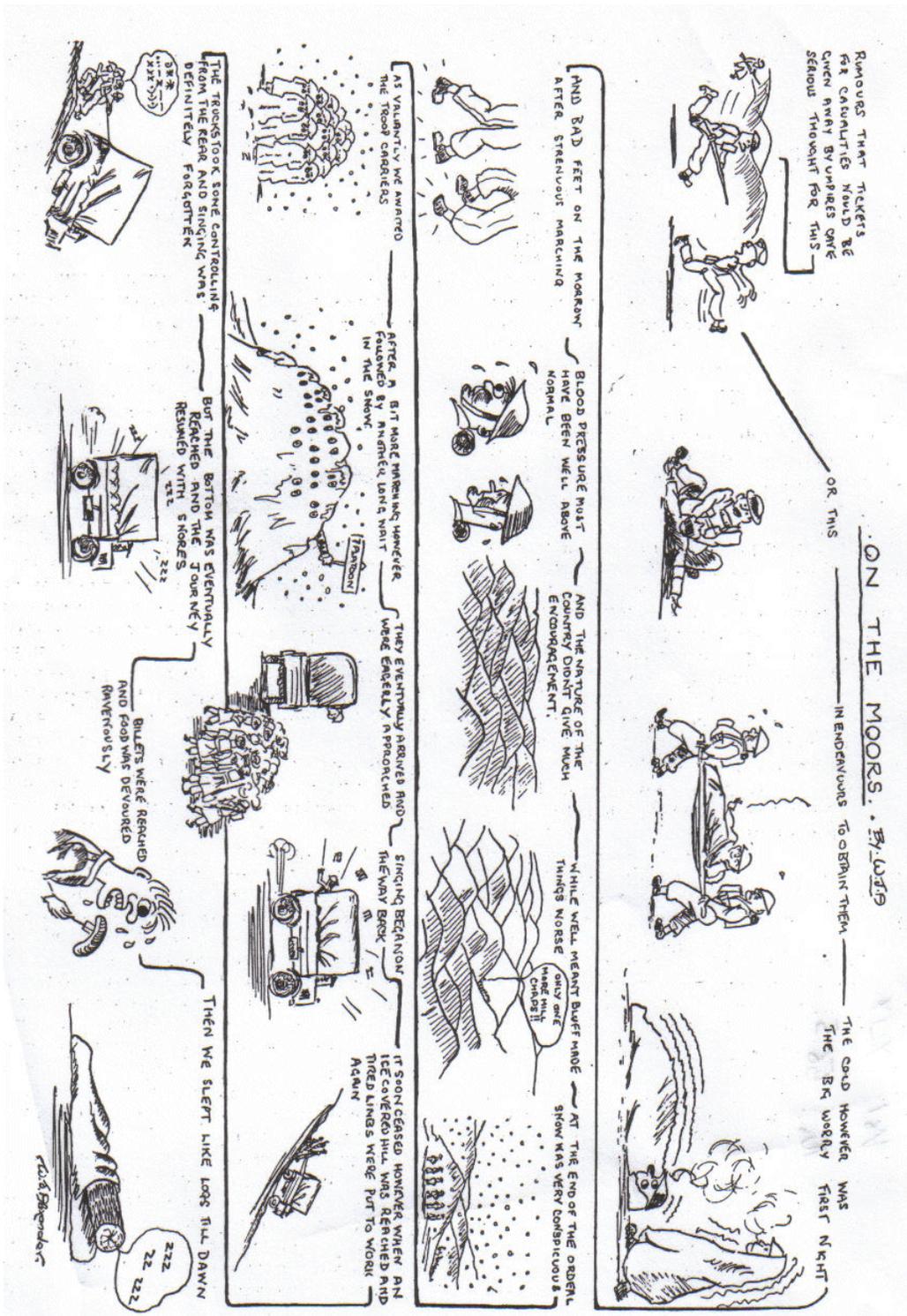


Fig.2 Cartoon drawn by Cpl Alexander, 4th Green Howards, showing a training exercise undertaken across Dartmoor in February 1941. (From *The Green Howards' Gazette*, Volume XLIX, Number 565, pp.7)

Chapter Seven

Training from May 1941-June 1942

The move to the Middle East via the Cape was undertaken in some style. The 4th Green Howards, together with Divisional and Brigade HQs, the 4th East Yorkshires and a regiment of artillery were embarked on the liner *Empress of Russia*. The 5th Green Howards and another regiment of artillery were embarked on the *Empress of Asia*¹. They had an eventful journey, being on the high seas at the same time as the *Bismarck*'s final voyage. At one point the Lascar stokers of the *Empress of Asia* jumped ship, they were replaced by Lt Black's platoon of the 5th Green Howards who were rewarded by the ship's captain with extra money and beer².

Naturally the pace of training was somewhat curtailed during the six week passage. A typical daily training programme for the 4th Battalion started with Physical Training at 0700 hours and was followed by a battalion parade at 0900 and mess deck inspection at 1000. In the main part of the day Between 1330 and 1700 hours cadres and TEWTs were conducted. By 1930 the days work was done and the troops could look forward to bands, interest lectures and films³.

A month later the battalion was still managing to keep itself interested even after the various line crossing ceremonies. '*...Our life afloat is far from empty; cadres, courses on sun compasses, explosives, tactics, fieldcraft, model exercises, lectures, cinema shows and concerts keep our minds fairly fully occupied.*' In terms of boxing, bouts were commonplace and popular both as physical training and entertainment.⁴

¹ Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.46-47

² Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.41

³ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.568, pp.69

⁴ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.569, pp.98

Over on the *Empress of Asia* the 5th Battalion was somewhat less military than the 4th, engaging in: ‘*spelling bees and intelligence tests. Obstacle races, tug-of-wars, war games and TEWTs for the officers with opposing syndicates in the smoking room aft and the staircase landing for’ard, and telephone control in the lounge between. Slippery pole contests in swimming tank, concerts, cinema shows, PT*⁵.’ Early morning PT for officers was on the programme for the morning but it usually fell on the CO and Adjutant to round up the unwilling before it could commence⁶.

On arrival in the Middle East the division began to concentrate at Tel el Kabir and began the acclimatisation process. The 4th Battalion’s correspondents noted the process of drilling in the dust, ‘*pink and perspiring*’ and attempting to come to terms with the conditions. There were marches into the desert by day and by night to master new tactics and to learn water discipline. A process that they record was completed in a very short time⁷.

Unfortunately the training process was hindered by personality clashes at higher levels. Major-General Ramsden and Brigadier Haydon, respectively commanders of 50th Division and 150th Brigade, had little love for each other. During this work up training each commander stationed himself at opposite ends of the training area to take a series of platoon and company rotations. After having learned a tactic from one commander the element would proceed to the other who would countermand what had been learned⁸. This added a needless element of confusion for the troops.

The battalions were soon dispersed into rear areas of the Western Desert to provide defence parties for vulnerable locations, limiting unit training. During this period good use was made of the opportunity to get commanders up to the front to see

⁵ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.569, pp.99

⁶ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.569, pp.99

⁷ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.571, pp.136

⁸ Metcalfe, *No Time For Dreams*, pp.56

conditions on the frontline for themselves. The CO, 2 i/c and company commanders of the 4th Battalion at the very least took advantage of this being hosted by the 4th Indian Division⁹. In the mean time desert navigation was a topic that was being made much of back with the units¹⁰.

It is at this time that the correspondence of the battalions, already intermittent in the case of the 5th Battalion, with the Green Howards' Gazette breaks down almost entirely due to a combination of time lag, censorship and lost mail. Consequently we are forced to rely on what has been written in regimental and divisional histories for details of subsequent events.

50th Northumbrian Division was dispatched from Egypt to form the defence force for the island of Cyprus which was still threatened from possible German attacks launched from Greece. The 4th and 5th Battalions were dispatched in the middle of August and the first task was, once again, the preparation of defensive positions. According to the divisional history it was in Cyprus that the concepts of the defensive 'box' and the Brigade Group were introduced to the division¹¹. Once again the division's digging ability was noted.

With defences mostly dug training could begin again. This mostly took the form of independent platoon marches across the mountains or the island which would lead to a night of digging fighting positions, and then the return march in the morning. Other evolutions included exercise moves in Motor Transport to simulate countering enemy airborne landings such as those that resulted in the fall of Crete earlier in the year¹².

The division spent three months on Cyprus before being replaced by the 5th Indian Division who they exchanged MT with. The British unit came off worst as the

⁹ Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.68

¹⁰ *GHG*, Vol.XVLIX, No.571, pp.137

¹¹ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.42

¹² Synge, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.70

Indian equipment was worn out by years of campaigning in Africa. This limitation would have serious consequences in the war when two of the division's brigades were effectively immobilised in the Gazala Line for lack of transport¹³. It also significantly increased the maintenance burden on the units. Indeed while most of the 50th Division was dispatched to Persia, the 150th Brigade had to remain behind in Palestine as its working MT had been cannibalised to get the other two brigades mobile. The brigade was still in Palestine at the start of Auchinleck's CRUSADER offensive in November 1941 and was deployed to the Western Desert as an independent Brigade in GHQ Reserve at the end of the month¹⁴.

They were in position at Bagguish by the 3rd of December and then began a period of three weeks of training and re-equipment for desert war. Special attention was paid to operations requiring the passage through minefields¹⁵. The brigade established links with its neighbours from the 19th New Zealand Battalion and the 7th Indian Brigade both of whom were resting after operations at Sidi Rezegh and Bel Hamed¹⁶. Both of these units sent officers and NCOs to live with the 150th Brigade and pass on valuable battlefield knowledge to the British newcomers.

The brigade moved again towards the end of the month to Bir Thalata. The training it conducted there is described in the regimental history as 'intensive'¹⁷, and by the divisional history in slightly more depth as involving daylight and night time operations¹⁸ but details are distinctly lacking. However it was to be the last period of formal training undertaken by the battalions as they crossed the Libyan frontier on 27

¹³ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.71

¹⁴ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.72

¹⁵ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.73

¹⁶ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.49

¹⁷ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.74

¹⁸ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.49

January 1942 and were engaged on operations until their destruction at Got el Ualeb on 1 June.

It was only when they were inside Libya that the brigade received its first anti-tank guns, having previously relied upon the dubious stopping power of the Boys Rifle. Accounts differ as to whether they were equipped with captured German 50mm PaK¹⁹ or Italian 47mms²⁰. Regardless of their provenance these weapons were reserved for the brigade anti-tank battery and the battalions would still have to soldier on with the Boys. All rather dubious protection against the might of the Afrika Korps, indeed at the time only the 25 Pounder field guns could provide reliable defence against the *panzers*.

The battalions were swiftly introduced to the realities of desert warfare; digging in, the difficulties of navigation and the mobile, ad-hoc 'Jock Column' For example the 4th Battalion had dug itself in at a position they believed to be Bir Tengeder, only for the Intelligence Officer to find a sign marked 'Bir Tengeder' some five miles away. Honour was satisfied by the expedient of removing the sign and erecting in the middle of the defensive position²¹.

Subsequently the battalions were involved in the provision of infantry for a number of mobile columns usually comprising infantry, armoured cars and artillery tasked with harassing the enemy and dominating the ground around the defensive 'boxes'. This tactic which had some success against the Italians was regarded almost with contempt by the Germans. This was acknowledged by certain officers within the division however it was allowed to continue as it encouraged an offensive outlook and it was regarded as good 'on the job' training for newly arrived troops²². The cost came in the casualties inflicted when a number of columns were mauled. 150th Brigade, with

¹⁹ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.75

²⁰ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.51

²¹ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.76

²² Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, pp.51

an edge in experience over the rest of the 50th Division, were called upon to mount many of these columns.

The two battalions were involved in digging positions at Bir Hacheim and were then moved to replace the motorised 201st Guards Brigade at Got el Ualeb, covering the ground between the Trigh Capuzzo and the Trigh el Abd. However as the bulk of the 150th Brigade's MT had been withdrawn the Guards' positions were too widely spaced to be defended effectively by the now dismounted infantry, indeed some gaps in the defences were over a mile wide²³. The cost of exchanging the division's vehicles was well and truly making itself felt.

The ultimately futile stand made by 150th Brigade and elements of the 1st Army Tank Brigade at Got el Ualeb during the Gazala battle has been well described in any number of works. However the verdict of Rommel, who personally commanded the final assault on this key position, is a testimony to how far these territorial soldiers had come since 1938.

'Yard by yard the German-Italian units fought their way forward against the toughest British resistance imaginable. The defence was conducted with considerable skill and, as usual, the British fought to the last round of ammunition'²⁴.

²³ Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.83

²⁴ Quoted in Syngé, *The Story of the Green Howards*, pp.106, from Brigadier D. Young, *Rommel* (London, 1950)

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

The 4th and 5th Battalions of the Green Howards began the build up to war initially somewhat under strength but were able to quickly recruit up to and beyond their nominal strength. They were subsequently able to provide the manpower to form their duplicate 6th and 7th Battalions. This process of recruitment had picked up speed in 1938 and then accelerated dramatically in the early months of 1939. It was the quality of this wave of volunteers that would be largely responsible for the fine reputations these four battalions would gain during their existence.

However the sheer volume of volunteers and the need to provide twice the number of leaders and trainers than expected caused no little difficulty. Existing training programmes were overridden with the need to provide basic training for the recruits as the routine recruit training program was designed for much smaller numbers. This effect was exacerbated by the need to cater for the training of other forces such as the ATS and national defence platoons using the already overstretched resources of the territorials.

While the stretched and finite resource of trained leaders was one problem. The general lack of realistic and useful training was lamentable, especially in the last half of 1939 after the battalions had been mobilised. The training led by 50th Division was, in spite of their opinion otherwise, unrealistic, lackadaisical and lacking in the required intensity. However in their defence it is unlikely that any other training being carried out elsewhere in the British Army was any better. It is perhaps quite fortunate that these units did not have to face a full blown German assault in France. During this period the battalions can only be described as amateurs.

Only when the battalions returned to the UK after Dunkirk did they begin to receive training of the required intensity to turn them into professionals. Long route marches combined with battalion level and above manoeuvres were complemented by the introduction of live firing field exercises. It is perhaps notable that while Montgomery has an excellent reputation as a trainer of troops the 50th Division received its toughest training when under the command of the unsung Lt-Gen Franklyn.

Trained to a high pitch before leaving the UK the battalions had to adjust to the unique conditions in the Middle East on their arrival. It seems that this was accomplished without too many problems. However their operational performance was then hampered mainly by equipment deficiencies. The exchange of 50th Division's MT with that of the 5th Indian Division resulted in the formation losing most of its capacity for manoeuvre, a vital force multiplier in desert warfare. The final problem was the lack of effective anti-tank weaponry forcing the battalions to rely on the Boys rifle and captured enemy anti-tank guns.

However there is little that training or better equipment could have done to save these battalions during their final battle at Got el Ualeb. Astride the Axis supply line, surrounded, without support and without ammunition re-supply their only hope was a swift and violent response from the 8th Army. Something that at the time that force was incapable of providing.

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