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## BHARAT RAKSHAK - 5TH INDIAN INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE "CAULDRON" JUNE 1942

*continued from the November - December 2003 Tac News*

**I**NTO THE CAULDRON: PHASE I  
 5th Indian Division was supposed to be in general reserve. In fact, every part of it had been attached to other units throughout the battle. General Briggs wrote, "It was not (until) Rommel had established himself in our minefields, had overrun 150 Brigade, and was threatening Bir Hakeim that I was called in". Briggs had to collect his division together and attack Tmimi through the South African position along the coast. "I never thought harder in my life". Briggs decided on a sweep south of Bir Hakeim to avoid the mines. But armored units (From 13 Corps), tasked with protecting his right flank weren't ready. They needed a day to refit. The plan changed to a frontal attack against prepared German positions, with only part of the division. The plan was ill conceived and the preparations rushed. The troops had not trained together and two separate headquarters controlled the attack. Several of the units involved had arrived only a few hours before and were new to desert warfare. The operation was called "Aberdeen".

Aberdeen started in the early hours of 5 June, with Boucher's 10 Brigade going in first. Just before 0300 Hrs, artillery began to drop shells on the objectives (Bir Et Tamar and Dahar El Aslagh) and continued this for twenty minutes. Then, riding in trucks, 4/10th Baluch and 2nd Highland Light Infantry crossed the start line behind a screen of armor. Moonlight made visibility good. The first objective was reached under light enemy fire. They pressed on. The firing

became heavy. Things started to go wrong. The direction taken was too far north. The tanks got split up. The Highlanders were unable to find Bir Et Tamar. Their commander, Colonel Thorburn formed a 'cowpat' before daybreak to await better visibility.



At dawn, enemy shells began to fall in great numbers. 'C' and 'D' Companies went forward, preceded by five Valentines, to the southern edge of Bir Et Tamar, to capture this second objective. The men were shelled and machine-gunned all the way. They dug in on its northern edge, while Battalion Headquarters established itself a short way to the west. Meanwhile, 'A' Company had formed an independent 'cowpat,' dismounted their guns, and dug in. The enemy was not far away. Tanks from 22nd Armored Brigade came into position west of the Scots. They could clearly see enemy guns only a thousand yards away and hoped the tanks would attack them. They didn't.

The main attack on Bir Et Tamar was launched at 0630 Hrs. The objective was a

series of bumps atop a long ridge. The companies had to cross 250 yards to the first bump on foot. There was no cover and they were shelled the whole way. Casualties mounted. A number of German tanks appeared on a ridge west of the Bir. At this

moment, Thorburn arrived and ordered his companies to consolidate their gains, with 'D' Company on the forward end of the ridge. 'C' Company settled in just behind, with headquarters in the rear and 'A' Company on its left. By 0415 Hrs, 4/10th Baluch had captured Dahar El Aslagh and 2/4th Gurkhas, were covering the minefield gaps at Bir El Harmat, to the southeast. By 0630, Boucher's forces had taken both objectives. The first phase of Aberdeen was over. Casualties had been comparatively light. Four artillery regiments were moved up to support 22nd Armored Brigade and Fletcher's 9 Brigade, to pass through and secure Sidi Muftah.

### PHASE II

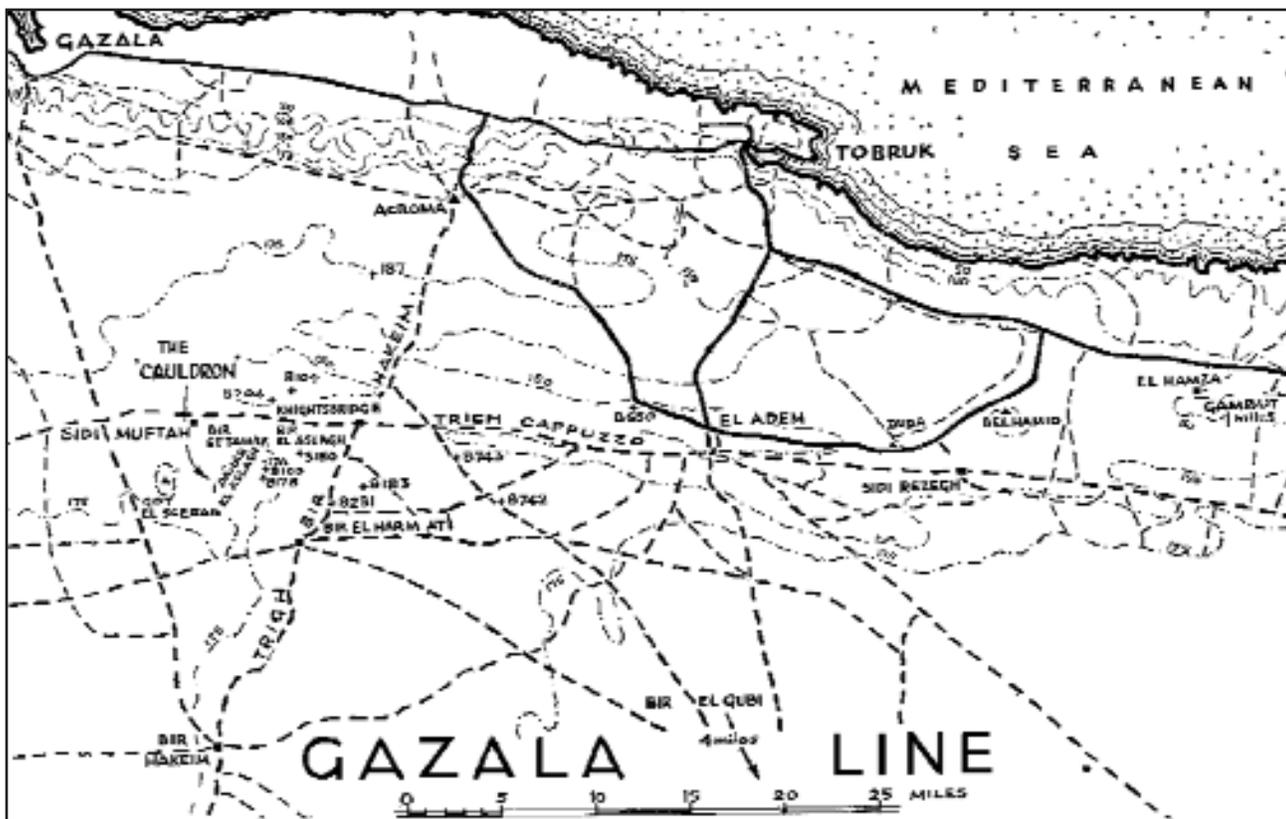
Fletcher's attack began at 0645. The Brigadier wrote, "If we examine this plan from the point of view of 9 Brigade, we find that battalions were expected to advance in the dark, over ground they did not know, to an assembly area, the center of which was marked by a barrel; to do a further advance to a point east of (objective) B.100, where they were to be joined by a battery of a regiment which they did not know (it had arrived from Iraq two days previously), and by a squadron of the 4th RTR which had already been in action in the dark. The axis of advance was marked out by the Brigade Intelligence Officer (Captain Livingstone) with lamps,

some of which went out during the night. The leading battalion, however, reached the assembly area by 0545, and the Brigade's first group, consisting of the 2nd West Yorks and supporting troops, crossed the Trigh Bir Hakeim at 0635 behind the 22nd Armored Brigade."

At about 0700, 22nd Armored Brigade informed Fletcher that they had completed their attack and were rallying at B.204,

northeast of 10 Brigade. They had met no enemy tanks, but had suffered casualties from German anti-tank guns near Bir El Scerab, covering 21st Panzer Division at Sidi Muftah. German resistance here was more intense than expected. 32nd Army Tank Brigade, having run into a minefield, was unable to attack Sidi Muftah from the north and failed to influence the battle at all. The withdrawal of the 22nd Armored Brigade left 9 Brigade's West Yorkshire Regiment vulnerable to attack by German tanks.

At 0730, the West Yorkshires reported being engaged by forty tanks and seventeen armored cars (15th Panzer Division). The Armored Brigade then announced the presence of German armor (21st Panzer Division) near B.204. Some time after 0900, 10 Brigade reported that the Highlanders were under fierce tank attack and forced off B.204 with heavy casualties. They were now concentrating at Bir Et Tamar, and enduring heavy shelling from enemy guns and tanks. The infantry were complaining that British tanks were sitting behind them and not attempting to assist. This was true, but understandable in many ways. The very nature of the British attack had challenged the enemy Panzer divisions to a decisive battle, but



Eighth Army had failed to concentrate its tank forces for this challenge. Individual British tank units had been tearing around the desert without rest for days. Crews were exhausted and equipment was breaking down. Cohesion was failing everywhere. For two hours, from 1030 Hrs, the H.L.I. were shelled and machine-gunned steadily. Brigadier Boucher appealed for tank support backed up by requests from his Division Commander, to no avail. Some two-pounders were supposedly on the way, but still hadn't arrived an hour later. About noon, an enemy tank attack began from three sides, supported by intense shelling, machine-gun, and mortar fire. Thorburn was forced to order his Highlanders to retire through a "murderous hail of fire from every type of weapon". Many were lost.

Thorburn realized that unless support arrived very soon, the ridge of Bir Et Tamar could not be held. While standing on a squadron commander's tank, screaming at him to move, he was struck in the head by a piece of shrapnel. Wounded, he carried on. Captain Bromley Gardner, replacing Captain Rolls, who had also been shot through the head, arrived at Brigade Headquarters a few minutes later to report the situation. Brigadier Boucher immediately ordered the Gurkhas

and a machinegun company up to help Thorburn, adding that the 28th Field Artillery Regiment had already been sent forward. Gardner was about to leave when a radio message from Thorburn announced that both his forward companies were overrun. He would make a "last stand" at his battalion headquarters. Boucher cancelled the Gurkhas. Spending more lives to hold Bir Et Tamar would be fruitless. Somehow Thorburn avoided annihilation, escaped the Germans, and re-formed the surviving Highlanders behind the Gurkhas. Towards evening the battalion was taken out of the line and Thorburn was evacuated to a hospital in Egypt.

#### **MORE DISASTERS**

Next afternoon, the 1st Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, after a forced march from Baghdad, arrived at Bir El Harmat to relieve the 2/4th Gurkhas. This new battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel H. W. Dean, had expected a day's rest, but patrols were sent out and found the enemy a few miles to the southwest. The D.C.L.I. formed the sole barrier between Eighth Army Headquarters and lines of communication on one hand and enemy attack from the south-west on the other. The battalion also had to block lanes through friendly

minefields, which came out near Bir El Harmat.

The companies had arrived piecemeal, armed with the normal issue anti-tank guns. Their position was critical. Behind them the remnants of the H.L.I. were unfit to assist. Beyond the Scotsmen stretched the "rear echelons" of various forward units. By 1700, guns and tanks supposed to support the D.C.L.I. had been ordered to various hotspots. At this moment Rommel chose to send tanks round this vital flank. The D.C.L.I.'s position, after being shelled and mortared, was attacked from the rear by a strong armored force. The infantry without tanks or guns of their own couldn't hold them. German tanks moved forward. The battalion ceased to exist.

Having smashed the "Cornwalls", German tanks next overran the joint tactical headquarters of both Messervy and Briggs. General Briggs returned from seeing Boucher at 10 Brigade to find his tactical headquarters in enemy hands. Chased by German tanks, he headed full speed for Main Headquarters and ordered a hasty move. Enemy "tracer" rounds began slamming into signals and maintenance vehicles. It was time to "get the hell out!" A few seconds later the command vehicle moved off, followed by whatever other trucks were ready.

### **BOUCHER'S ODYSSEY**

At 1830 Hrs on 5 June, the enemy delivered a severe bombing attack northeast of 10 Brigade Headquarters. Then he shelled the area from the south. Finally, a few enemy tanks came into view about 1,500 yards out. Forbes, the Brigade Major, ordered the remnants of the H.L.I. to withdraw in a northeasterly direction. The Headquarters remained. At 1900 it was overrun by tanks and forced to withdraw. Many escaped in trucks before the enemy could mop them up. During the flight, however, communications between 10 Brigade and its component battalions was lost, and was never re-established. Brigade Headquarters itself

broke into small groups in the darkness, wandering between Tobruk and El Adem.

Brigadier Boucher was missing, but this was not yet known to most of his troops. He was driving back from visiting forward units when shells began to fall on him from directions where no enemy should have been! Signals and escort trucks lost contact. Boucher could not follow his earlier bearing. Groups of Germans and Italians were everywhere. When night fell further movement was impossible. Boucher and two enlisted Baluchis were forced to abandon the Bren Carrier and took refuge in a derelict three-ton lorry. During the night, long columns of tanks passed and there was no way to tell whether they were friend or foe. At daybreak there were tanks to the east and more tanks to the west. One group was British, one German. Both groups knew that they had no forward outposts where this lorry was standing. When both saw moving figures there, they opened fire. A battle ensued. The British tanks were forced to withdraw. Boucher sheltered in a handy trench with the Indians until the firing died down, then set off on foot across the sand. Soon a further group of vehicles appeared from the southwest. This time it was part of the German 90th Light Division, who unsuccessfully machine-gunned Boucher and his companions.

By now the three men were dog-tired. They could see the 4/10th Baluch Infantry on the horizon, and the sounds of battle reached them across the desert. A German artillery battery came into action right next to where Boucher was. He just had time to find a slit trench and cover himself and the two Indians with sand. All round them enemy guns were firing. In the lulls he could hear shouts and orders. Soon, British artillery ranged on this battery and shelled it heavily. The RAF bombed it. A German gunner saw the slit trench and jumped in, right on top of Boucher. It happened that one of the Brigadier's boots was showing. The German soldier saw this and was

tempted to steal it and its mate from the supposed corpse. He then proceeded to yank the general out of the ground along with it, capturing him and the two Indians with him.

### **COLLAPSE**

The rest of 10 Brigade with the motor battalion of 22nd Armored Brigade and Truscott's 4th Field Regiment, stayed in their positions on Dahar El Aslagh, to hold the ridge. Here they waited for the German's next move, with orders to "hold until relieved". Digging the guns in was impossible due to rock hard ground. 1st and 7th Armored Divisions realized the gravity of 10 Brigade's position, and planned a counter-attack to rescue them from the encircling enemy. General Messervy found that his 22nd Armored Brigade was in no condition to participate, however. Sixty tanks had been lost due to shellfire or mechanical failure during the day's fighting. 4th Armored Brigade, which had been reinforced, made slow progress from the north and 2nd Armored Brigade attacked too far north finding its advance blocked by an impassable escarpment. The armored counter-attack simply failed. The enemy overwhelmed the exposed infantry and artillery.

On 6 June, the Highland Light Infantry, saved from annihilation by Briggs' order to withdraw, re-formed in the El Adem "box." Stragglers and small detachments came in all day. Of 25 officers and 678 men who entered the battle, 15 officers and 467 other ranks remained. In the early morning rain fell heavily. Richard Gardner noted in his diary: "A good thing; it washed the blood off our vehicles." And so it ended. The Fifth Indian Division would recover from the beating it took in the "Cauldron" going on to achieve great things at places like Ruweisat Ridge, Arakan, Kohima, Imphal, Rangoon, and Singapore (the last time it served under British officers). Its combat record stands as a proud example of the courage and devotion to duty of the men of "Bharat Rakshak" (The Army of India).

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[Special thanks must go to Gopal Dutia and Rama Masud for their kind assistance in translation of Indian Army documents.]

### "Thorburn's Last Stand" - 5 June, 1942

Historical Note: Colonel Thorburn's Highlanders had been holding on to the ridge of Bir Et Tamar throughout a long day of shelling, small-arms fire, and tank attacks. As evening wore on to night, approximately forty enemy armored vehicles appeared on his front and both flanks. The Highlanders' positions were dug-in as well as the rock-hard ground allowed and skillfully camouflaged. Thorburn gave strict orders that all units, especially his two-pounders, were to hold fire as long as possible to avoid betraying their locations prematurely. After a desperate defense, the seriously wounded Thorburn led the remnants of his command to safety under cover of darkness.



scenario length: 9 turns

allied forces

cohesion

14

2nd Battalion / Highland Light Infantry (-):

Headquarters	1 x Infantry (HQ)
A Company (+)	3 x Infantry, 1 x 3" Mortar (2)
C Company (+)	3 x Infantry, 1 x Engineer
D Company (+)	3 x Infantry, 1 x 2lbr ATG

#### ALLIED SPECIAL RULES

1. The Allied player deploys his forces on the map in "Light" improved positions.
2. "A", "C", and "D" Companies must deploy within four inches of the positions marked for them on the map.
3. The Infantry GHQ stand may be deployed wherever you like.
4. No Allied stand may be fired upon until after it "fires" at an Axis stand. They may be overrun.
5. The Allied player may designate any 2 stands as forward observers for his mortars.

#### VICTORY CONDITIONS:

There must be at least 7 Allied stands on the map at the end of turn 9.

#### SPECIAL RULES (GENERAL)

1. The game length is 9 turns.
2. Maximum sighting distance is 37 inches on turn one. This distance drops by four inches per turn (i.e. 33 on turn 2 etc.)
3. "Ridges" are considered "Hilltop" or "Ridge Crest" terrains.

#### PLAYER NOTES

The maximum sighting distance drops off dramatically as the game progresses to simulate the rapid onset of darkness. In the desert, the transition from daylight to darkness is surprisingly swift.

The Germans advanced in three groups. At first they were "probing", trying to ascertain if the position was even occupied. The Germans were also unsure if Bir Et Tamar had been reinforced with tanks or anti-tank guns (there were quite a few of both in the area). The whole area was also full of unmarked minefields!

This scenario is small and easy to play in a short time. German tanks must overrun their opponents to guarantee destruction. The Allied player must make maximum use of his mortars to suppress German tanks, slowing them down. He must also hold fire as long as possible to avoid drawing enemy fire on himself. Given equally experienced players, it is not easy for either the Germans or Allies to win. The German player must maneuver aggressively. The Allied player must not panic. Victory is often determined on the last turn.

axis forces

cohesion

16

Armored Kampfgruppe / 15th Panzer Division (+):

5 x PzKfwIIIIG, 3 x PzKfwIIIJ,  
1 x PzKfwIIF, 1 x SdKfz222

#### AXIS SPECIAL RULES

1. The German player enters the board on turn one dividing his forces between the three German deployment areas as he sees fit.
2. The German player has no Headquarters or GHQ stand in his order of battle.

#### VICTORY CONDITIONS:

The Germans must eliminate seven or more allied stands before the end of turn 9.

### BIR ET TAMAR

