

Preface

The Battle of Sidi Nsir, Tunisia. 26th February 1943.

This is John Gelly's story as a young Lieutenant and Gun Position Officer for "E" Troop, his capture at Sidi Nsir, escape from an Italian prison camp and his journey from Northern Italy to the village of Roccamorice, south of the Pescara River, some 430 miles away.

The story commences with the formation of a Territorial Regiment, 172nd Field Regiment RA, in January 1942 at Hastings and of the 155th Field Battery which made its first and last stand at Sidi Nsir, Tunisia.

It is a story, similar to that of the Spartans at Thermopylae, of courage, self-sacrifice and above all a devotion to duty, which can be compared with anything in the history of the Royal Regiment. The 155th Battery, like the other two Batteries (153rd and 154th) was armed with eight 25 pounder field guns.

The British Eighth Army, under Montgomery, was on the offensive against Rommel's Afrika Corps, who were retreating towards the Libyan/Tunisian boarder. This action convinced the German High Command that an all out offensive against the British First Army stationed in Tunisia, was necessary to break through to Beja and drive west to isolate the northern group of General Anderson's widely dispersed British, American and French forces and push on to Algiers. Credence for this course of action was the demise of the American forces at Kasserine and Von Armin's belief this would force the Allies to reinforce the south, weakening the northern Allied line. The German attack in the North consisted of three groups; one group to move west towards Medjez el Bab; a second, north of the first group, to advance southwest from Mateur to Beja; and the third to move west some 25 miles south of Medjez.

Under great secrecy the Germans moved the 10th Panzer Division to the west of Mateur together with a group of Messerschmitts, infantry and the 501st Heavy Tank Company consisting of Panzer Mk VI's, the Tiger tank. These tanks were reputed to weigh some 90 tons, have impenetrable armour and were equipped with an 88mm gun.


In February 1943, the Germans lunched Operation "Ochsenkopf" (Ox Head) under Kampfgruppel Lang; their objective to take Beja via Hunt's Gap and Sidi Nsir. The 5th Hampshire Battalion together with their artillery support, 155th Field Battery of 172nd Field Regiment RA, were sent to Sidi Nsir as an outpost or forward patrol base with orders to hold, and gain time, for the main force of the 128th Infantry Brigade together with the remainder of the 172nd Field Regiment, to prepare defensive positions some 12 miles to the rear, at Hunt's Gap. The action at Sidi Nsir had the desired effect, delaying the German advance by 24 hours, as the 155 Battery and 5th Hampshires

put up a defiant resistance against overwhelming odds. As a consequence, the Germans took heavy losses at Hunt's Gap which foiled their plan to take Beja.

Out of some 130 gunners at Sidi Nsir, 9 men managed to get back to their lines, the rest were either dead or captured. It is also reputed that each gun fired around 1800 rounds throughout the action; as a consequence the Germans believed there was a second Battery involved.

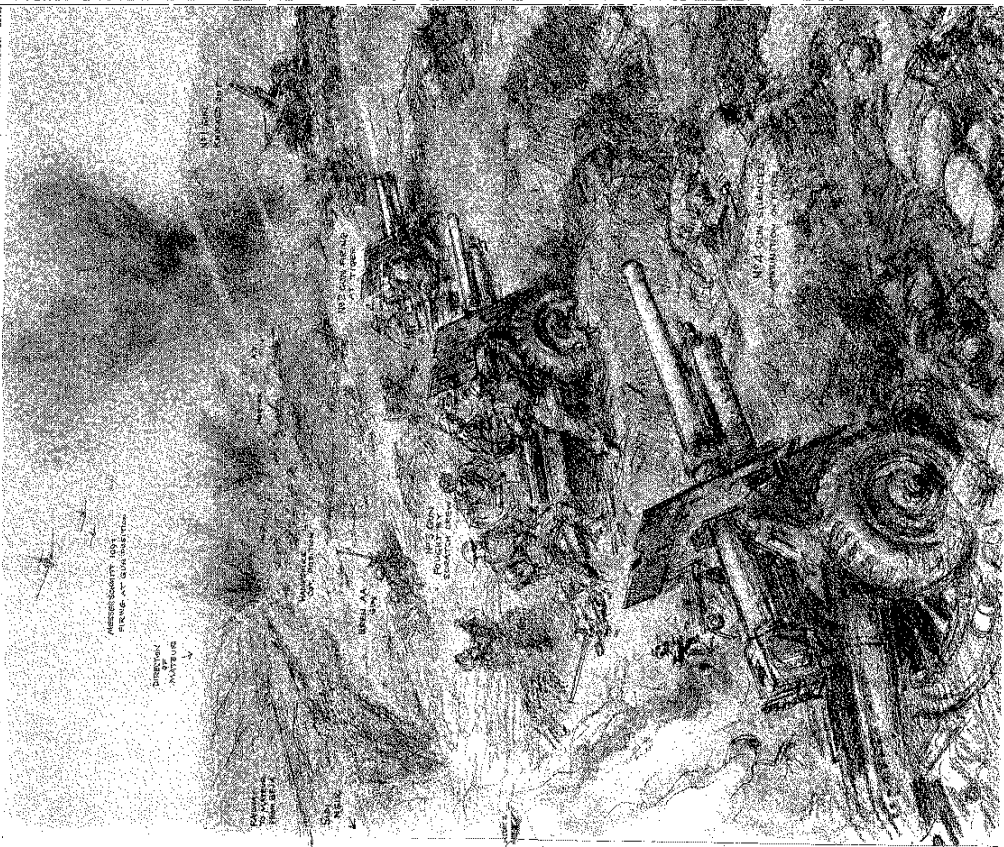
The action at Sidi Nsir was kept from the Public, only the next of kin knew from telegrams, (such as the one below), until in June 1943 when Field-Marshal Lord Milne's disclosure, in the House of Lords, in demanding more publicity for the Army and referred to the battery's action in Tunisia. Then it became headline news; The Daily Mirror, "130 GUNNERS DEFIED BIG HUN ONSLOUGHT – died under tanks"; The Daily Sketch, "EIGHT GUNS THAT SAVED TUNISIA"; News Chronicle, "Out of 130 Gunners Nine Were Left Alive"; and The Illustrated London News, "THE "V.C. BATTERY". THE EPIC STAND OF THE 155TH FIELD BATTERY", which included a sketch of the battle by Bryan De Grineau (page 7).

War Office Telegram notification of Lt. J P Gelly Missing in Action to Mother

Charges to pay s. d. RECEIVED	Delivery and Means	Sent out at.....m. By..... Returned at.....m. No.....	OFFICE STAMP
	Charges	Distance..... Paid out	
	Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.		
From	2.40 Important, land delusion 12th		
TO	Mrs J.P. Gelly 24 Kelvin Grove Corby, Northants		
Regret to inform you of notification dated 31st March 1943 received from N. Africa that Lieut. J.P. Gelly Royal Artillery has been reported missing stop letter follows shortly stop Under-Sec. of State for War C			

THE "V.C. BATTERY." THE EPIC STAND OF 155th FIELD BATTERY

DRAWN BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, CAPTAIN BRYAN DE GREY, FROM INFORMATION GIVEN BY

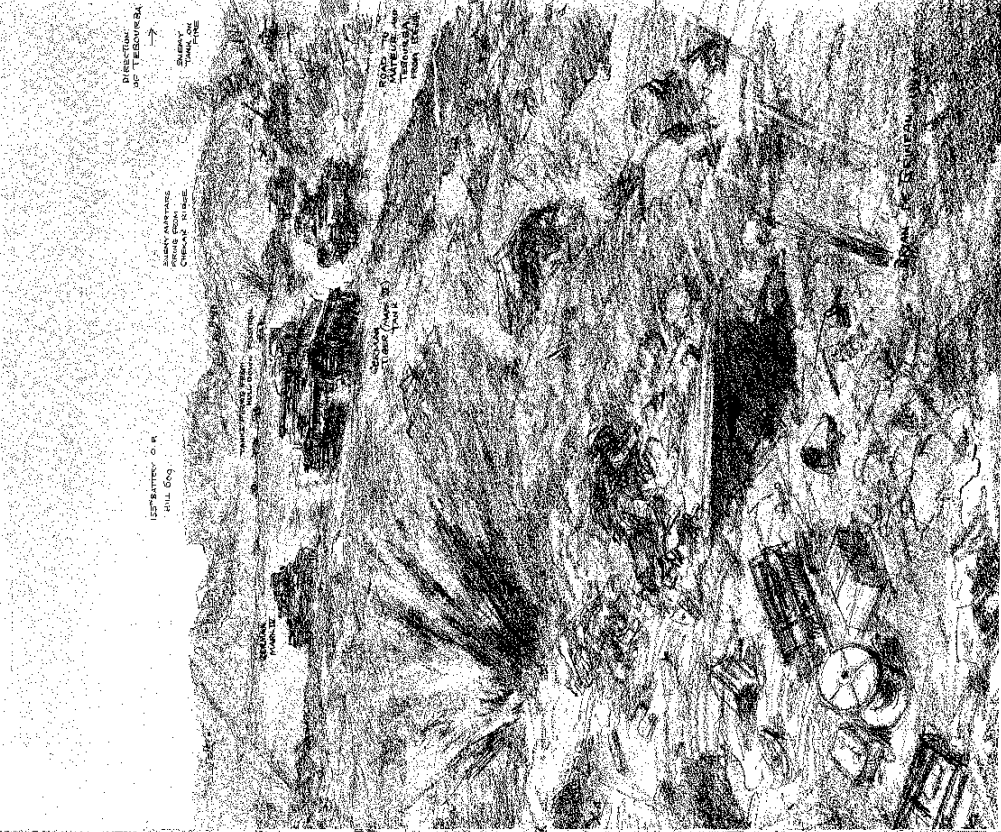


THE GLORIOUS HEROISM OF 155th BATTERY R.A., including Mark VI "Thors" of the 10th Heavy Division, the road from Metz, and as they came into range, the 155th Field Battery, R.A., at Sidi Nsir on February 26 last. It was for this action that the battery was awarded the Victoria Cross. By midday they had worked round both flanks and opened machine-guns at close range.

Following Field-Marshal Lord Milne's decision in the House of Lords, when in Tunis, was made for the Army, he returned to a battery of anti-aircraft guns, on June 8 the military authorities released details of the heroic action of the 155th Battery, R.A., at Sidi Nsir on February 26 last. It was for this action that the battery was awarded the Victoria Cross. By midday they had worked round both flanks and opened machine-guns at close range.

AT SIDI NSIR, WHO FOUGHT TO THE LAST GUN AND MAN.

BY SPECIAL SERGEANT MICHAEL BURNHAM, OF "F" BATTALION, WHO SERVED NO. 3 COY.



ATTACKS AT SIDI NSIR UNTIL EVERY GUN WAS DESTROYED AND THE CREWS LAY DEAD OR WOUNDED.

By 11 a.m. on the 26th the surviving tanks had been knocked out by us. The surviving tanks withdrew and killed the guns were knocked out by us. The surviving tanks withdrew and killed the guns were knocked out by us. The surviving tanks withdrew and killed the guns were knocked out by us.

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