

Liberty

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I HELPED CHASE THE GERMANS IN LIBYA

**Hell in an armored car—
A 1942-style reporter
goes into battle . . .
and lives to tell the tale**




By Liberty's special war correspondent

ROBERT LOW

By Radio:

With British Armored Forces in Libya—

 **IT** was no use. Five layers of sweaters and coats, four blankets, and a tarpaulin just weren't enough. This was the cold of a dead planet. Sleep was another luxury the desert did not afford. I lit a cigarette under the cover of my bedroll. You don't show light here—not even the brief flicker of a match. The sea of sand was a frozen waste in the light of a full moon. And the tanks around us were monsters from Mars.

Throughout the day our armored cavalcade had rumbled across the desert toward an enemy column holding the airdrome at Sidi Rezegh. As dusk fell the loose formation of tanks, armored cars, trucks, and transports closed up into a tight group called a "leaguer," not for warmth but for safety. Officers, tank crews, drivers lay beside their tanks ready for action. Rolled up in their blankets, they slept, oblivious to the cold.

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British Forces in Libya

Only one man was awake in the camp. I could see the glow of a concealed cigarette reflecting on his face some yards away, I got up to share with him our unwilling vigil. His name was Paddy. He was a sergeant major in the Engineers with twenty-eight years' service. It wasn't the cold that was keeping him up, he said. In a few hours, before our attack started in the morning, he was to go in to blow up a mine field which lay between us and the enemy.

Handling explosives was child's play—if you knew how. And he knew how all right. Back in Belgium last year he'd planted several hundred pounds of dynamite in the Albert Bridge. While the rest of the army withdrew to Dunkirk he had remained behind until the arrival of the advancing German forces. When fifteen or more of their tanks, some trucks filled with infantry, and motorcycle troops were on the bridge, he had pushed the plunger and blown them and the main span sky-high. Then he had hopped into his truck and headed down the road for the coast with the dive bombers after him. On the way he crossed a few more bridges, so up they went too. The delay enabled Paddy and about 50,000 other British soldiers to get away from Dunkirk on that last day. His reward was a military medal and bar. His seventeen-year-old son had last been seen at Dunkirk firing a machine gun at a low-flying German bomber. The bombs it dropped had landed too close.

We crawled back into our bedrolls. Sleep came easily now. But not for long. Three bursts of machine-gun fire scrambled us to our feet—a startling but effective reveille. In the dark hour before dawn, hundreds of heavy motors coughed into life. We ate our breakfast on the move.

A young South African commanding a reconnaissance squadron had offered me a ride the day before. There were five of us in his armored car. I sat beside the driver, the officer and gunner stood in the turret, and the wireless operator nestled in the back. Slowly we moved off to our position on the flank of the tanks to wait for dawn. It came up like thunder that day—but the thunder was Paddy's, not Kipling's.

As the first gray light spread over the desert a terrific explosion split the air. Others followed as the enemy's land mines went up one after another. This was the signal for the armored cars to move up and form the screen for the tanks. A shout from the turret brought us to an abrupt halt. The officer seized the radio telephone:

“Hello, Tommy—Johnny calling. Fifty enemy tanks moving eastward five miles ahead.”

For a quarter of an hour we continued to report the enemy's position as our own tanks cut across to attack them on the flank. Spread out in formation, ours looked like a huge battle

British Forces in Libya

fleet. Clouds of sand rose behind them. Suddenly the German column turned in the direction of our attack. We could see the tiny flashes of enemy guns. Behind the German tanks were field and antitank guns.

The distance between the two forces was only 1,500 yards now. The artillery of both sides had opened up. The dust of exploding shells enveloped the leading British tanks. But through the yellow haze the flashes of their guns showed they were still advancing.

At 1,000 yards all hell broke loose. The German tanks were remaining almost stationary, relying on heavy armament and fire power. The faster British tanks were maneuvering in to almost point-blank range.

It seemed incredible that in the melee either side could know whom or what they were firing at. The best I could do was identify the burning tanks: white smoke from the petrol-driven British—thick black smoke from the Diesel oil of the Germans. There was plenty of both.



WE were moving again, this time toward the center of the battle. I wondered about that armor of ours. It was all right against machine-gun fire, but not for those German antitank shells that were ricocheting along just in front of us.

We were going in to pick up the crew of a British tank that had been knocked out. The driver put the car into third gear and pushed the accelerator down to the floor board. We shot ahead. Suddenly there was a terrific crackle overhead. The machine gun in our turret was firing in the direction of the tank. For a moment I thought it must be German, after all. Then I saw that the bursts were landing ahead and to windward of it.

We drove up to within ten yards of it with the gun still firing. Its turret opened and two men jumped out. Then two more heads appeared. The men on the outside helped lift one man out. We drove up alongside and helped this wounded man into our car. He was the gunner of the tank. He'd stopped a nasty piece of shrapnel in his abdomen.

Less than eight miles from the scene of the battle we drove up to a casualty clearing station. There were several Red Cross tents and two large trucks backed together end to end. Those trucks formed a miniature operating theater. The surgeon had the gunner on his operating table exactly forty minutes after he'd been wounded. It saved his life.

Throughout the day we were in and out of the fighting. The shelling and firing became meaningless; there was too much of it. You saw things that only seemed fantastic later, when the battle was over. The brigade commander driving through the thick of the battle sitting atop a tank turret shouting encouragement to the crews,

British Forces in Libya

beating with a long stick on the sides of any tanks that seemed to be lagging behind and urging them on with a few well-chosen words. Late in the afternoon the German tanks began falling back. Ours had worked their way round to the west and were making a final attack out of the sun.

The battlefield was ours for the night, and that gave us a chance to repair our own damaged tanks and destroy the enemy's. Our objective, Sidi Rezegh airdrome, was only of secondary importance compared to the blow inflicted on the German forces. Their General Rommel had lost twenty-six tanks he could not replace.

Just before dusk we climbed out of the car for the first time in ten hours. The tanks and trucks were forming a leaguer once more. The five of us sat round our fire and watched the mulligan of bully beef, beans, and onions bubble up. We'd be able to have two cups of tea. The ration is three cups of water a day. But we'd missed ours earlier. We felt pretty good.

The officer who commanded the squadron as well as our car reported to the headquarters truck and came with orders that we were moving off at once. A convoy of 250 ammunition trucks was on its way up from the base depot. This ammunition was badly needed by the New Zealanders who were fighting in the coastal sector to the north of us. We were going to escort it by night through forty miles of enemy-infested desert.

At the rendezvous point we found the trucks formed up into columns, three abreast, with some tanks to guard their flanks and rear. In the event of an attack the trucks were to disperse and get away while the armored vehicles fought a rear-guard action. Two expert desert navigators led the convoy; our armored car and two others formed a screen in front.



I STOOD in the turret with the commander, watching the leading trucks following in our wake. And I paid a silent tribute to the Royal Army Service Corps drivers. A tough, thankless job, with all the risks and no glory. Yet they never fail to appear when needed most.


It was strange, moving across the desert at night, never knowing whether we were being stalked by the enemy or driving straight into one of his camps. Occasionally a white flare would climb lazily to the sky in the distance and hang there. German sentries shoot those up whenever they think they've seen or heard something. At other times green or red Very lights rose. Italian sentries shot those off to keep up their spirits or something. There were plenty of the boys around, all right, but so far none directly on our course.

Every two hours we stopped. We were making about eight miles an hour. On the second halt we swung back the length of the convoy. "That's funny—I don't remember seeing a

British Forces in Libya

truck like that here before," the officer said, pointing to a big ten-wheeler. He was right. The truck was German. It had joined up behind us in the darkness and followed along for miles. When we stopped, the driver asked in German where we were bound for. In a moment he was nicely tied up in the back of his truck.

For three more hours we crawled through the night, and then it happened. The officer spotted the tiny light first. It was almost dead ahead.

 **WITH** another armored car we drove on cautiously for about two miles. The light was still burning steadily. Another mile, and then we spotted some German and British trucks, but all seemed to be derelict. A quarter of a mile beyond we saw a group of about sixty or seventy tents. "I don't like the look of this—but we'd better find out whose camp that is," the C. O. said. We drove on. The light we had seen was coming from two or three tents at the far side of the camp. Yet there was no movement. No challenge. Only a silence best described as sinister.

When we reached the center of the camp the C. O. whistled softly and the other car drew up. "Go over to that big tent and see who is inside. We'll cover you from here," he said.

The car drove up to the entrance and the car commander climbed out, carrying his tommy gun. Slowly he poked his head inside the tent. Then he withdrew it and climbed back into his car. He drove back to us.

"There were a few men in there sitting around a table. I couldn't tell what sort of uniforms they were wearing. They saw me but paid no attention. It didn't look right to me," he reported.

We drove up to another tent. The C. O. shouted, "Anybody in there? What camp is this, anyway?"

More silence, but we could see moving figures silhouetted against the canvas. He shouted again. This time two men crawled out from under the flap. At the same moment the light went out inside the tent. So we couldn't see their uniforms.

"Who the hell are you?" the C. O. demanded angrily.

"Shhh—don't make any noise," came the whispered reply in English. "This is a German prisoner-of-war camp. We're British prisoners. Watch out for the sentries."

At that the officer gave Cyril a kick. "Jump on, jump on!" he shouted as the car shot off. But they made no effort to move. As we roared straight through the camp I shouted the few good curses I knew in German. But just whom that was supposed to fool I can't think now.

They didn't open fire on us until we were almost clear of the camp, and then it was too late. A four-mile detour took the convoy safely past the enemy and eventually into the New Zealanders' lines.