

STEEL AND SAND

Fighting the British in the Western Desert: 1942



OVERLEAF:
Field Marshal
Erwin Rommel
awards the
Knight's Cross
to Günter Halm.
(left)

Ruweisat Ridge is a rocky and austere geographical feature in the Western Egyptian desert, set between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression about 12 miles south of El Alamein. The series of engagements fought across it as part of the Battle of El Alamein rightfully rank among the most crucial of the African campaign in the Second World War.

Following the German victories at Gazala, and the capture of Tobruk, the British 8th Army had been forced to withdraw. Establishing new positions at Mersa Matruh, a small coastal port halfway between Cyrenaica and El Alamein which was then the last coastal fortress in Allied possession, the port having been fortified in 1940 when Italy first invaded Egypt.

Rommel's *Panzerarmee Afrika*, in close pursuit of the British, and trying hard to destroy them before they had a chance to regroup, attacked Mersa Matruh on 26 June 1942.

Only three days later four British divisions had been routed and forced to withdraw another 120 miles further east, into the vicinity of El Alamein itself. At that point both sides were worn out and depleted, yet General Claude Auchinleck decided to make a stand and organised a defensive line stretching from the coastal settlement of El Alamein to the Qattara depression in the south.

Rommel's forces finally attacked these new positions on 1 July 1942. His aims were to bypass Alamein aiming his main thrust with 15. and 21. *Panzer-Division* at the centre of the Allied lines, while a secondary blow

was struck further north near the coast. Here the 90. *Leichte Infanterie-Division* was pinned down and halted by heavy artillery fire and a counter-attack by the Allied 4th Armoured Brigade. The fighting continued to rage over 2nd, 3rd and 4th July with both 15. and 21. *Panzer-Division*, supported by the Italian *Ariete* Division, trying to force a breakthrough on both sides of the Ruweisat Ridge. Yet again, these attacks were repelled by British and Commonwealth troops. On 10 July, the Italian 60th Infantry Division, routed after an attack by the Australian 26th Brigade, aimed towards the direction of Tell el Eisa; a near catastrophe which forced Rommel to commit the few reserves he had left at his disposal. >>

STEEL A

The fighting in the Western Desert between Allied and Axis forces was as bitter and suffered catastrophic losses at the hands of the Afrika Korps. On the German side, the winning the Knight's Cross in the process. **Robin Schäfer** presents his remarkable

ND SAND

merciless as any war could be, and at Ruweisat Ridge a British armoured brigade actions of just one man, Günter Halm, stood out as he battled to stem the Allied advance story which is told exclusively for Britain at War by **Günter Halm** himself.

STEEL AND SAND

Fighting the British in the Western Desert: 1942



TOP RIGHT:

Afrika Korps uniform cuff titles.

RIGHT:

Halm and his crew. His FK36(r) was a modified Soviet 76.2mm gun retaining Russian ammunition. A later version used German shells. Heavier than the Pak 38 or 40 and with less penetration, they still proved effective and worth the tiny cost to convert them.

BELOW:

Knocked-out Valentine tanks and, in the distance, a Matilda, after the battle.



After suffering heavy casualties, German forces finally managed to gain a foothold on the western side of Ruweisat Ridge (Point 63) on 15 July 1942. During the night of 21/22 July 1942 the Allies (XIII Corps) launched an attack to retake the lost ground.

THUNDERING THROUGH CLOUDS OF DUST

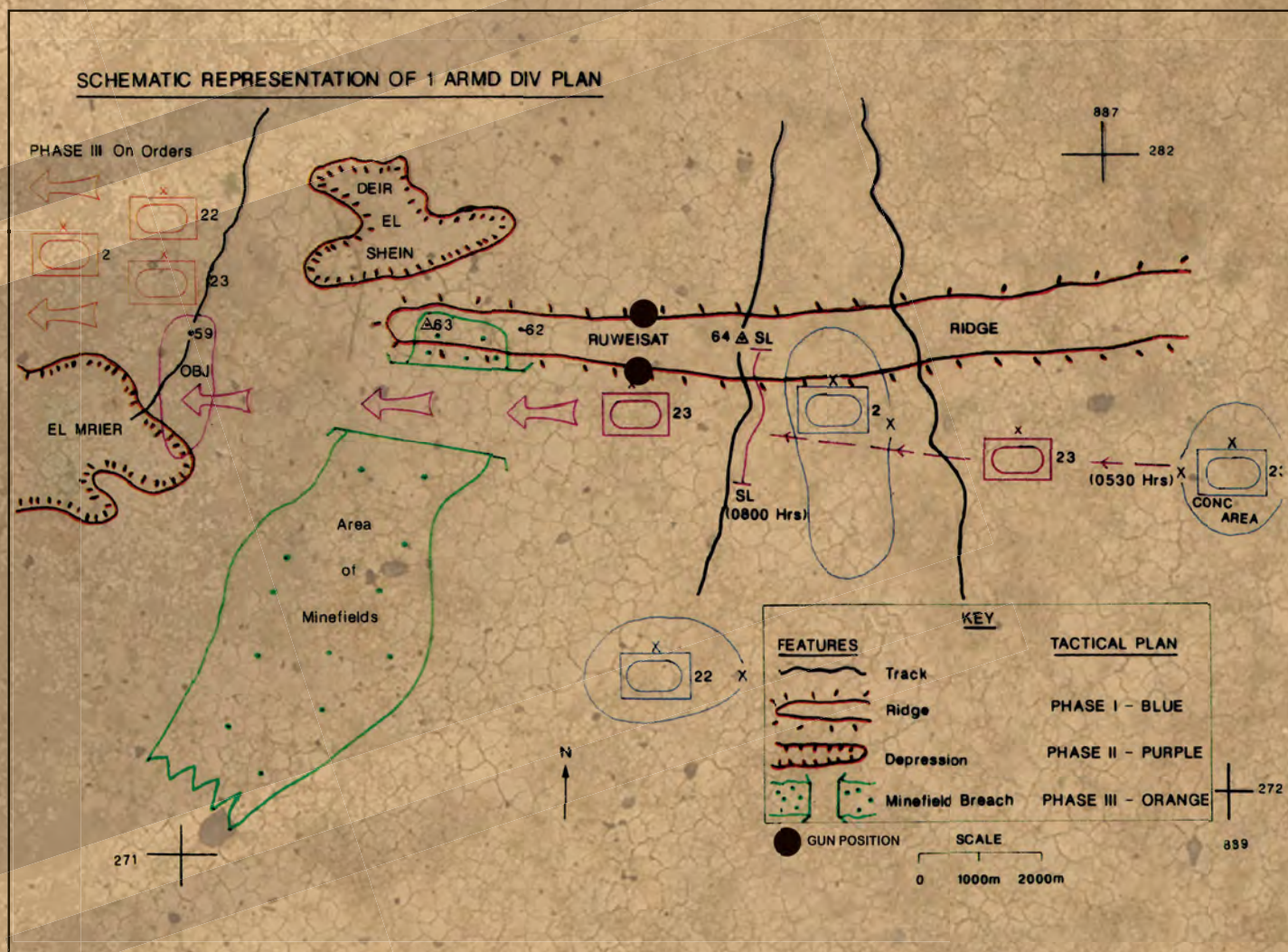
Infantry of the 2nd New Zealand and 5th Indian Division were ordered to launch attacks on Point 63 and to clear gaps through a German minefield which would allow an

armoured attack along the southern slopes of Ruweisat Ridge to pierce the German screen of anti-tank guns with the objective to take El Mreir, a terrain feature lying to the southwest of the ridge. Unknown to the Allies, German defences had been much improved and strengthened within the previous week; the density of the minefields had been increased, as had been the number of anti-tank gun positions. Nevertheless, initial progress was good with both the Indians and New Zealanders managing to take their objectives,

taking prisoners and pushing screens of German infantry out of their positions. Yet, at daybreak, a German counterattack retook the lost ground and overran the 6th New Zealand Brigade.

Undaunted by these setbacks, and the fact that the infantry had failed to clear a path through the minefields, the CO of XIII Corps insisted that the planned armoured attack must be launched by 23rd Armoured Brigade, consisting of two battalions (40th and 46th Royal Tank Regiment), and mustering 122 Valentine and 18 heavy Matilda II tanks. To avoid the worst of the German minefields, the brigade's route of attack was slightly altered, yet these new orders were not received and by 8:00 am on the morning of the 22nd of July 23rd Armoured Brigade rolled forward to engage the enemy in what was to become one of the most catastrophic Allied operations of the Second World War. Thundering through clouds of dust in two columns (40th RTR on the right and 46th RTR on





the left), and with engines roaring, the historian of the 5th New Zealand Brigade, evidently impressed by the spectacle, later commented that the tanks 'thundered past at a great pace - a real Balaclava charge!' Yet the glorious moment was soon to be over when the tanks raced into the minefield, losing the first 20 in the process. What followed can only be described as a massacre.

THE BURNING HOT DESERT

The line west of Ruweisat Ridge was being held by *Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 104* of the *21. Panzer-Division*. The regiment had entrenched itself well and had secured its regimental front with a cleverly laid minefield. Adding to these defences were single anti-tank guns of the regiment's 14th company which had been positioned far in front and out of sight of the German infantry lines. Two guns of the staff

company's anti-tank platoon lay on the northern and southern slope of the ridge, close to Point 63, with their barrels pointing eastwards. Standing their ground in the middle of the burning hot desert, out of sight even of each other, the closest German lines, defended by the regiment's 3rd battalion under command of *Hauptmann* Werner Reißmann, lay about 3 kilometres behind them. Further in the rear

ABOVE:
Map of Ruweisat Ridge.

BELOW:
Afrika Corps steel helmet and goggles. In the chaos of the sudden action described in this feature, Günter Halm had no time to don his helmet!



was *Panzer-Regiment 5*, whose 23 operational tanks formed a mobile armoured reserve. Among the crew of the southernmost AT gun of *Panzer Grenadier Regiment's* staff company on the southern slope of Ruweisat Ridge was 19-year-old German: *Panzer Grenadier* Günter Halm. A machine tool fitter by trade, he was one of thousands of German boys who volunteered to fight for the *Vaterland* and, having joined the German Army as a recruit in 1941, he would soon become the youngest soldier of the German *Afrika Korps* and the second youngest soldier of the German Army to be decorated with the 3rd Reich's highest award for bravery in combat, the coveted Knight's Cross. Today, Günter Halm is 94 years old - a slightly fragile, unpretentious man with his mind still as sharp as a knife. He clearly remembers that fateful day; a day of catastrophe for the Allies and a day which would entwine his name forever with the now legendary name of El Alamein. Günter takes up his own story: >>

STEEL AND SAND

Fighting the British in the Western Desert: 1942



ABOVE:
Halm's gun crew with their FK36(r) marked with eight victory rings on the barrel.



LEFT:
Günter Halm was commissioned later in the war and, after his service in the Western Desert, he went on to serve in Normandy where he was eventually taken POW.

platoon, we could not even move our guns to support each other in any way. Our pulling lorry had been taken to the rear and without it, it was hardly possible to move the gun due to the rocky ground and the steepness of the slope. It had taken many a day of hard work in temperatures up to 45 degrees Celsius to dig our gun in, to anchor the trail legs in the ground and to camouflage it properly. After that, we covered it with camouflage netting, stacked the ammunition crates behind it and then had the pleasure of cleaning the whole thing and its mechanics from the fine sand and dust that had settled on it. A painstaking task which had taken hours and which had to be repeated at regular intervals.

EVERY SECOND COUNTED

Regular loading, aiming and drill was very important, as in combat a gun

crew must function like clockwork. In the thick of battle there is no time to manage and supervise every movement and decision – here, every man needed to know his job, what shells to bring, which lever to push and when. In battle the enemy armour would attack in spread out formation. With the limited field of vision the aiming scope offered, it was necessary to correct the elevation and horizontal angle before every shot, an adjustment based on the speed and distance of the target. This had to be practiced as often as possible because in action every second counted. The blast of each shot triggered a huge cloud of fine dust and sand which made it impossible to acquire a new target or to observe the effect of a fired round through the gunsight. This in turn meant that there were a few seconds after each shot where we were more-or-less blind. Luckily, this was problem

GÜNTER'S STORY

It was on 16 July 1942 and we were holding a position about 3 kilometres in front of one of our battalions on a slope of Ruweisat Ridge, a Jebel 20 to 30 metres high, which stretched from west to east towards the enemy lines. The other gun of the platoon stood, out of sight for us, on the other side of the ridge. Our gun was a Soviet made F-22 M36 divisional gun, one of hundreds which had been captured during the campaign in Russia. It had been modified to serve in an anti-tank role as by then we were short on large calibre weapons like that. Our German designation was 7.62 cm PAK 36 (r). It had a terrific muzzle velocity and range which was very much comparable to that of our 8.8 cm Flak guns. Not only could we not see the other gun of the

RIGHT:
Halm chats with Rommel after his investiture of the Knight's Cross 'in the field'.





light. We all knew that there would be troubles ahead although none of us had any idea what they would be. After sunset, only a couple of hours later, we could hear the crunch of feet in the sand, muffled murmuring in English and the clink of equipment and weapons. A large body of men was marching past us at a distance of only 50 metres! The plan to fire at them with our new machine gun was quickly discarded as we were under clear orders not to betray our position to the enemy. A few days later I learned that these enemy soldiers had not been part of an enemy patrol, but elements of a large force of New Zealanders which later engaged our third battalion in battle.

LEFT:

Dug in! Hidden in its camouflaged emplacement, Halm's gun is all but invisible.

BELOW:

Afrika Korps issue sun helmet.

BOTTOM:

A disabled Matilda II tank with Valentines littering the background. Featuring armour which was thick even by late war standards, the Matilda II was a tough target. While the lighter Valentine, the most produced British tank of the war, was only slightly less thickly armoured.

we shared with the enemy tank crews whose field of vision had the same limitations. Yet once we were spotted the enemy would pass our position on via radio which made surviving more than difficult. Yet the firepower of our gun enabled us to take out any kind of enemy armour at ranges of up

to 1500 metres, or even more when firing at light tanks. Using indirect fire our shells could hit targets up to 13 kilometres away. In front of us was no man's land and minefields, while behind us were the remains of our Panzergrenadier Regiment which had taken heavy losses during the previous night's fighting, a fact about which we knew nothing on the morning of the 22nd.

Even through our binoculars it was impossible to see anything remotely English, so we were quite relaxed and felt relatively secure. During the night, the crew slept gathered around the gun, while one man took watch on a rotating basis. On 19 July a dispatch rider brought us an MG34 machine gun which we were to use to defend against infantry, something that surprised and worried us to the same extent. Something was brewing and I remember that on the evening of 21 July none of us could sleep. The sun was setting, dipping the ridge and the surroundings into a dark red

A BURBLING, UNSETTLING SOUND

When dawn broke on the following morning, all Hell broke loose when the English began plastering the surroundings and the regimental areas behind us with artillery. >>



STEEL AND SAND

Fighting the British in the Western Desert: 1942

RIGHT:

Gunners and their ammo. Halm's gun crew pose with rounds for their converted anti-tank gun.



We were sure that we had been discovered. Pressing ourselves into the ground we could only pray not to be hit. Splinters of shell and rock fragments were not a great threat as our position offered protection against them. A direct hit, though, would have turned us into mince-meat. Later there suddenly was another, different sound that mixed itself into the thunder generated by the shell fire. A burbling, unsettling sound we had all heard before. Tanks!

Now we had no other choice than to leave the relative safety our position had offered us. We had to rise and stand up to be able to see what was coming towards us. Amidst a shower of seething hot pieces of metal and razor sharp splinters of rock, Leutnant Skubovius rose first, using his binoculars to see through the clouds of dust and sand raised by the blast of the detonating shells. Only our Unteroffizier Jabek, as so often before, remained prone and did not move. Even though the engine sounds got louder and louder we

could not see a thing. Only when the barrage suddenly lifted and moved further to the rear could we suddenly see them. A huge formation of enemy armour spread out in front of us. The closest tank, quite clearly one of the command vehicles, was only 50 metres away to our right. By that time, a group of five tanks, the advance guard, had already passed by, a fact that I only learned about later. We had spotted the enemy just in time, yet to score a hit we had to turn the whole gun by 45 degrees. This in turn meant that we had to release the trail legs, which we had anchored firmly into the ground.

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

Our first shot was a direct hit which tore the closest tank apart. As the trail legs were now not anchored in the ground anymore the recoil of the first shot sent the gun flying backwards a distance of around three or four metres, with me still sitting on the

gun layer's seat and catching my leg between the wheel and the barrel and bruising it severely. The pain was immense, yet there was no time to feel pain. The second round had already been loaded; I took aim and my comrade pulled the firing lanyard. Again, the recoil was terrible, although this time I reacted as trained, jumping backwards from my seat to avoid being hit in the face by the gunsight while putting my full weight on the trail leg to reduce the force of the recoil. Another direct hit. This way it continued, aim, fire, reposition the gun, aim, fire, reposition...and so on. Here, we turned into what we had

BELOW:

Halm's gun is moved into position.





trained to become; machines feeling neither fear nor pain. It did not matter if we got killed or wounded just so long as we kept on firing, firing, firing. Two men, the Unteroffizier and a comrade, lay on the trail legs to soften the recoil and a third man brought up the shells, which the loader rammed into the breech. So far, the English 'tankers' had not spotted us, but now all Hell broke loose.

I heard a comrade shouting "Gute Nacht Marie" (goodnight Mary) when the first armour piercing round smashed through the steel plate of our gun shield, followed only seconds later by a second one. Loader number three suddenly screamed in pain when a shell tore a fist sized hole into his lower leg, spurting blood

everywhere. I could not help him. Another comrade dragged him up the slope towards our second gun. Now, there were only five of us left. The Leutnant kept observing the situation through his binoculars while I chose the targets and took aim. Time stood still. Everything around me turned into slow motion and time began to freeze. A third and a fourth AP shell punched through the gun shield. No one took notice. Aiming and firing was all that mattered. Even today I can still hear the eerie sound of armour piercing shells which grazed the ground in front of us before they whizzed past and over our heads. After firing another round, and in a careless moment, I failed to lean backwards quickly enough and the gunshot smashed against my forehead throwing me into the sand. The sight was smashed, my head rang like a bell and we were not able to aim properly anymore. Lying in the sand, a high explosive shell detonated near one of the trail legs showering me with hot splinters. Blood ran down my face and I realised that none of us was wearing a steel helmet. We had been caught by surprise and no one had thought about putting one on.

'A MARK ON YOUR SOUL'

There was no way we could hope to carry on the fight so we decided to withdraw towards the position of our second gun. Under constant enemy shell and machine gun fire we worked our way up the slope before throwing ourselves into cover behind

it. Covering my head with my hands, shock and awe overcame me. I started shivering, pressing my face into the hot sand. My head was bleeding profusely and I noticed a number of shell splinters had buried themselves into the bone of my skull. Only a few years ago I had an X-ray taken and much to my surprise there are still two splinters the size of a fingernail lodged in it.

Our second gun had destroyed tank which had tried to flank us to fall into our rear, not knowing that there was another anti-tank gun positioned behind us. Then we heard what in our situation was the most wonderful sound imaginable. The howl of our dive bombers! A wave of Stukas was screaming down to finish what ➤



TOP LEFT: Günter Halm proudly displays his hard-earned Knight's Cross.

ABOVE: Halm with his comrades after the award of the Knight's Cross in the desert.

LEFT: Refreshment after the battle. Note the dressed injuries on his arm.

LEFT: Halm with his gun before the heat of battle.

STEEL AND SAND

Fighting the British in the Western Desert: 1942



ABOVE:
In 1962 Günter Halm was invited to a reunion in Liverpool of 40 RTR. Here, he was given the honorary 'appointment' as 'Number 1 Anti-Tank Specialist of the British Army.' His caption to the photo reads: '2am. Whisky and soda and Lili Marlene.'

RIGHT:
Memories. Günter Halm pays a visit to the Tank Museum, Bovington, during the summer of 2016.

we had started. Of the carnage they inflicted, we saw nothing. Minutes later, a severely wounded Englishman dragged himself out of the remains of the tank that had fallen victim to our second gun. He had somehow survived and now lay in the shadow of his tank. There was nothing we could do to help him. He asked our Leutnant for his pistol. The wish was granted, and the Englishman shot a

bullet through his own head. Even after the carnage of the previous hour the fate of this brother in arms hurt me deeply. War is cruel and it is merciless. When it became quiet we walked back to our gun to have a closer look at it and at the field of battle. Nine shots had pierced our gun shield. The gunsight was lying metres away, while the scorched sand around it was littered with debris, crates and empty shell cases. It had been Hell, but we were alive. Our loader with the shell wound in his leg did not survive the journey to the dressing station and my friend Prokorni could not speak anymore and was brought into hospital. He died of diphtheria

a few days later. If death comes and takes those away who are dear to you, if you are close to such an amount of carnage, death and destruction, it touches you somehow. It leaves a mark on your soul which is difficult to overcome.

'What I witnessed in the endless waste of the African desert will never leave me.'

THE ATTACK HAD BEEN BROKEN

Günter Halm and the brave gun crew of Leutnant Skubovius had destroyed nine enemy tanks and disabled a further six in less than 14 minutes. His first four victims (destroyed within two minutes) were of 'C' Sqn and RHQ 40 RTR. The CO's tank (40 RTR) was hit first and the driver killed. Ten minutes later, now in a tank of 'A' Sqn, the regimental CO, Lt Col Howard C F V Dunbar, was hit again and mortally wounded. By the end of the day, 23rd Armoured Brigade had, staggeringly, lost 116 of its tanks while nearly half of the tank crews had been killed or wounded. The unit had virtually ceased to exist. What had taken two years of training to build had been destroyed in 30 minutes. The attack had been broken and thrown into chaos and German dive bombers and an armoured counter-thrust finished what Günter Halm's gun had started. ☉



NO MORE WAR!

'Both friend and foe are gone. Today only the memory remains, because comradeship and friendship are stronger than death. As young men, we were forced to fight against each other to the bitter end in the most brutal of all wars. We all did our duty for our Fatherlands. The difference to other theatres of conflict was that the fighting in Africa was fair. After the battle and the killing was over, both sides turned into humans. Friend and foe helped one another and treated the other side with respect and honour. We wore different uniforms, but we all knew that the foe was just like us. Men with families, fathers, brothers and sons fighting for their loved ones and their country. I found proof of that on the ship that took me into captivity in America and on which, by the strangest coincidence, I met an English Captain whose tank had been hit by my fire at Ruweisat Ridge. It had been my fire that had taken away one of his feet. After a long conversation, he embraced me. We shook hands and he said "Kamerad, it is a shame that we were born in different Fatherlands". He gave me his address in England and asked me to visit him after the war. Sadly, this address was taken from me when I arrived in the POW camp, yet I have never been able to forget this man.

I am moved and impressed by English fairness and respect. Whereas, in my country, the old German soldiers are still being criminalised by politics, it is the invaluable friendships with my former enemy, new friendships and old ones, which define who I am today.

Nie wieder Krieg!
(No more war!)



Günter Halm, July 2016.