

GENERAL SIR RICHARD NUGENT O'CONNOR

PART I: THE BRITISH DESERT FOX: PALESTINE BRILLIANCE, COMPASS GLORY

Among many well decorated British Generals stands the highly praised Richard O'Connor, famous for a masterful desert campaign, and quite possibly the soldier most Mentioned in Despatches. In part one of this feature, **John Ash** outlines the General's early career and his brilliance in the Western Desert.



ABOVE: Sir Richard Nugent O'Connor.

Born in Srinagar, India, on 21 August 1889, Richard O'Connor was the son of, Maurice O'Connor, a Royal Irish Fusilier Major, and Lilian (née Morris), the daughter of a former governor of India's central provinces. He began his military career in 1908 at Sandhurst.

In October 1909 he joined 2nd Battalion, the Cameronians, and later served as Regimental Signal Officer. His unit was put into the new 7th Infantry Division, a Regular Army formation formed from serving soldiers returning from overseas service. The 'Immortal Seventh', which contained no reservists, arrived in Belgium on 6 October 1914, helping to stabilise the front around Ypres. They were involved in most major actions on the Western Front until 1917, including Neuve Chapelle and the Somme.

O'Connor held various positions within 7th Division. At the rank of Captain, he commanded 7th Division's Signal Company, and later

became 91st Brigade's new Brigade Major. His efforts earned him the Military Cross in February 1915, and a month later he fought at Arras and Bullecourt. O'Connor was awarded his DSO after being appointed as temporary Lieutenant-Colonel of 2nd Infantry Battalion, HAC, in mid-1917.

The Division moved to Italy in November 1917, and after the dismissal of Luigi Cadorna, newly appointed Italian Chief of Staff Armando Diaz launched a decisive attack along the River Piave in June 1918, supported by 7th Division.

O'Connor seized the island of Grave di Papadopoli in October, and this successful action earned him a Bar to his DSO and the Italian Silver Medal of Honour. In addition to other awards, he was Mentioned in Despatches on nine occasions during the Great War.

INTERWAR STUDIES

Rapid progression followed, and the young Major spent a year at Staff College. It is while at Camberley



GENERAL SIR RICHARD NUGENT O'CONNOR

Nickname(s): Dick (Informal)

Born: 21 August 1889

Died: 17 June 1981 (aged 91)

Allegiance: United Kingdom

Service/branch: British Army (1909-1948)

Battles/wars: First World War: Battle of the Piave River, Palestine, Second World War: Operation Compass, Operation Epsom, Operation Jupiter, Operation Goodwood, Operation Bluecoat, Operation Market Garden

Awards: Knight of the Order of the Thistle, Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, Distinguished Service Order & Bar, Military Cross, Mentioned in Despatches (13 times), Legion of Honour, Croix de Guerre, Silver Medal of Military Valour.



ABOVE: General O'Connor receives an ovation from locals as he tours a recently captured Derna.

REPUTATIONS

RIGHT:
A British machine gunner on Bab-el-Silselah Street, in Jerusalem's Old City, with his Lewis Gun pointed toward the entrance of the Mosque grounds, 22 October 1938. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



BELOW RIGHT:
O'Connor (left) discusses the assault on Bardia with Archibald Wavell, C-in-C Middle East. O'Connor also met with General Iven Mackay on 24 December to discuss his preparations, and suggested building the attack on 7RTR's last 23 Matildas. Although concerned with supply shortages, the cold, and enemy strength, Mackay's brilliant attack demolished the Italians despite not entirely sharing O'Connor's confidence. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

O'Connor met Lieutenant-Colonel Neame. The Kentish officer and nephew of the Shepherd Neame founder was barely older than O'Connor, but already the youngest member of directing staff, and one of the best. The VC awardee Engineer would win a Gold medal in the 1924 Paris Olympics and is the only person to hold an Olympic Gold and Victoria Cross. Most of the officers in attendance, including a Major Montgomery, held higher ranks during the war, therefore the course was more an evaluation and dissemination exercise rather than training.

Following Camberley, O'Connor was appointed to 5th Brigade (Experimental Brigade) in January 1921. The formation, which combined elements of infantry, artillery, and tanks, had three main aims. The first, to test and integrate these core elements, the second, to take these developments and impress observers, and the third, to train battalions rotated through the force in the new techniques.

Promotion to the Seaforth Highlanders followed, however O'Connor instead opted to return to his original regiment. The Cameronians were in need of a shake

up after a tour in Ireland, and the Regiment's CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Ferrers, asked specifically for his old friend. The stint proved worthwhile, forging numerous contacts with officers who rose later to prominence. Two years as a company commander at Sandhurst followed, where he met a Captain Miles Dempsey, and Frederick Browning - then a camp instructor. Both officers would have a valuable role to play in the future. The 1927 and 1928 intakes saw the arrival of Harold Alexander, Oliver Leese, Richard McCreery, Gerald Templer, Gerard Bucknall, Bernard Montgomery and Bernard Paget. Field Marshal Lord Harding later stated his success was down to the lessons and influence of O'Connor and Montgomery. Clearly, the 'class' of the interwar period shaped British military history for decades.



BELOW: General Haining (obscured by soldiers in centre) visits the scene of an attacked locomotive on the Jerusalem to Lydda railway, 20 December 1938. The site, on a bend and between high embankments, was well-chosen, an indicator to the abilities of the opposition. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)





LEFT:
An Italian Army photograph showing Italian soldiers in position along the River Piave, ahead of the decisive battle in which O'Connor took part.

BOTTOM:
One of 76 Rolls Royce armoured cars in British service in the Middle East. Although obsolete, there was little else to replace them. This 1924 Pattern car operating near Bardia has heavily modified with an open turret, a Boys anti-tank rifle and a Bren.
(HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

LIVELY SERVICE

O'Connor attended a course at the new Imperial Defence College in 1935. During one foretelling exercise, he led a 'Japanese' force in an invasion of Singapore. Chillingly, he easily took the island, defended by fellow student, then Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Percival. He was then appointed to the Secunderabad Brigade in Hyderabad, India, but this was changed to the Peshawar Brigade, in the lively North West Frontier. The tenure came with promotion to Colonel and then acting Brigadier.

By the summer of 1938 the worsening situation in Palestine necessitated a response, and O'Connor was sent there, commanding 7th Division, very much as a rising star. However, attitudes toward the deteriorating situation in Palestine was of disinterest, and the only briefing he received was from his own sources. Since the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the tensions between Jews and Arabic peoples caused consistent unrest that rarely occurred on such levels under Ottoman rule. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, naming Palestine as a home for the Jewish faith, drastically changed matters and conflicted with a previous assertion promising Palestine to the Arabs.

REBELLION AND INSURRECTION

Unrest exploded into rioting and resistance against British rule, a situation not helped by numerous changes in statute which made law enforcement tricky. Previous

commanders had done what they could but were unable to solve the problems. As Major-General Haining took over in April 1938, the rebellion grew in ferocity.

Resistance grew in strength and the British soon lost large swathes of Palestine. Power supply and communications to Jerusalem were often severed and civil unrest escalated to sniping attacks and bombings. Heavy-handed British reprisals such as the destruction of property were common - many detainees died 'trying to escape', some hostages taken to ensure safe transit of British forces never returned. But, these were not necessarily acts of policy nor the will of senior commanders, they were increasingly not tolerated and in this war of counterinsurgency, the overall conduct of British troops was more positive. On 17 October, the rebels in Jerusalem felt strong enough to bring the uprising to its climax. Their headquarters was in the Mosque of Omar in Harem esh Sharif and, seemingly untouchable by British troops, proclaimed their control of the Old City.

O'Connor arrived on 16 October, and immediately set about learning about a situation, a country, a people, he knew little about - embracing the advice of civil authorities. British troops had offered a good defence, but were unable to stem the insurgency, Jaffa and Gaza were effectively rebel towns, roads were being mined and trains derailed. O'Connor planned to retake Jerusalem's Old City

and reopen transport routes. On 18 October, the newly promoted Major-General was informed he had been appointed Military Governor of Jerusalem, which simplified management of the civil/military situation.

A PERSONAL RECONNAISSANCE

O'Connor's first move was a masterful operation to retake the Old City and he personally observed the tight web of interconnecting narrow streets

BELOW:
Ahead of Op. Compass, the British had a number of older Cruiser tanks, but also the modern Mk III, seen here. Like the Matilda II, the Mk III Cruiser was superior to its opposition at the time.
(THE TANK MUSEUM)





ABOVE:

While the perfect imperial policeman and scout, light armour and a machine gun only armament made the Vickers Light Tanks, like these Mk VIBs, or even the up-gunned Mk IVC (with 15mm BESA), ill-suited for battle. (THE TANK MUSEUM)

BELOW RIGHT:

Mk VI Light Tanks suffered on the softest ground and thirteen 3rd Hussars tanks were lost in ten minutes on the salt pans at Buq Buq after they bogged down and were targeted by Italian guns. However, when employed cleverly, they were useful. Around 110 Mk VIs were available through January, and proved effective in flanking and rear attacks on Italian positions. They also served, less successfully, in Greece and Crete. (THE TANK MUSEUM)

and alleys, each flanked by buildings and all centred on the Mosque of Omar, which dominated the district. The Old City was ringed by high wall, complete with turrets. Noting the vulnerabilities to his men without adequate cover, O'Connor opted to put troops on the roofs of the sprawling mass of structures, and protected them from the wall or Mosque by occupying the turrets and positioning machine guns in them. Soldiers would then progress at street level, protecting police while they searched people and premises, all covered from the rooftops.

The plan met criticism, as it required men at street level where snipers and hidden bombers could wreak havoc. Upwards of 300 casualties were feared, but O'Connor persisted, and the *sang froid* officer was proven. In

this extensive manoeuvre, no fire was received from or, importantly, poured into, the Mosque, and one casualty was sustained while 19 rebels were killed. The operation and tactics were radical, and provided valuable street fighting experience to an army which had little familiarity with it.

The issue of clearing the main roads outside of Jerusalem was also resolved by O'Connor, who applied a method used in the North West Frontier, establishing several outposts along main routes, ordering 24 hour armoured patrols, and making local dignitaries responsible for the safety of the roads in their areas – again controversial. However, the plan was implemented and order swiftly restored along main routes.

Railways required a different solution, which, as always, began

with a Richard O'Connor personal reconnaissance. His two day scouting mission pressed on despite encountering a platoon-strength patrol exhausted by rebel actions, and who reported other units had encountered similar resistance. O'Connor himself came under fire as his group progressed and the man next to him was shot dead. After gathering civilians as a protective shield the fire waned, and the patrol found safety under an umbrella of aircraft.

FUTILE CAUSE

His recce made, O'Connor noted it was not possible to establish forts along the tracks, so opted to make use of patrols and made the protection of the routes a tasking for local dignitaries. This worked, temporarily, so O'Connor ordered prominent Arabs ride ahead of the trains. The rebels simply switched to delayed action charges. O'Connor's response, which put an end to the attacks, was to put an Arab leader in every car of every train.

The British spent much of November 1938 retaking areas like Rammallah and Jericho. Morale shattered and facing such an effective military and police response, the rebels gave way and support for what was becoming a futile cause dwindled. In the north of Palestine, a newly appointed Major-General Montgomery was also doing well, in constant contact with his long-time friend, adapting and emanating O'Connor's methods.

With the exception of sporadic attacks the rebellion had been defeated,



and O'Connor became a popular figure to both Arab and Jew. Striking was the new weapon for the disaffected, but O'Connor was even able to stop this disruption, ordering participating businesses to close for the same length following a strike as they closed as participants. O'Connor was Mentioned in Despatches for a tenth time for his actions in Palestine.

SIDE-LINED?

When war broke in September 1939, O'Connor, unlike his counterpart Montgomery, was not given divisional command in France. The mission in Palestine was about complete and the campaign wound down with much of the force sent to other theatres. There has been suspicion O'Connor was side-lined, and one event that summer could be pointed to as reason.

An operation to root out the last vestiges of the uprising went awry and resulted in unnecessary deaths.

The target village was known for harbouring rebels, and an off-the-record action was launched to clear it. Those suspected or caught harbouring weapons were separated and left in a sun-bathed enclosure. Their water-supply was limited, and troops and the captain in charge complained about the poor treatment offered - they were ignored. The inhumane treatment continued for four days after the search, and five men died of thirst before any intervention was allowed.

The fiasco was world news, only topped by the looming war which distracted British politicians. At the later inquiry, the unfortunate Captain was the receiver of much blame. O'Connor, despite knowing nothing of the operation, stormed into the court and put a stop to the hearing by taking responsibility. When the Brigadier overseeing the operation declared O'Connor knew nothing about it, the cool General responded stating that



meant deaths were as much his fault, as they were the Brigadier's.

However, there were strong reasons to keep O'Connor in the desert. One being his popularity and familiarity with the theatre and he proved loyal and fair to troops and population. War had long been due, and the Chamberlain administration had been preparing. Their review of Anglo-Arabian relations decided the continued allegiance of the mid-eastern states was favourable - even at the expense of minorities. The beginnings of a Jewish-led uprising also needed attention, but O'Connor handled the situation until the threat of war overshadowed all and calmed local tensions.

WAR

O'Connor moved to Cairo in late 1939 to prepare Egypt for Italian invasion. He used the time well, familiarising himself with the desert, and identifying the importance tanks would have. He worked with the

• **ABOVE:**
 • Some of the
 • thousands of
 • prisoners captured
 • in the Bardia
 • action. By the
 • time Bardia fell,
 • Mackay's 16,000
 • Australians had
 • captured 36,000
 • Italians and killed
 • or wounded more
 • than 5,000.
 • He lost 130 killed.

• **BELOW:**
 • Vickers Light
 • Tanks, formed a
 • good proportion
 • of tanks available.
 • 200 Vickers
 • Light tanks were
 • available prior to
 • Compass, along
 • with 75 various
 • Cruiser tanks and
 • just 45 Matilda II.
 • (THE TANK
 • MUSEUM)



ABOVE: O'Connor made good use of the limited numbers of A12 Matilda II tanks at his disposal. Here, a Matilda enters Tobruk on 24 January 1941, proudly displaying a captured Italian flag.





ABOVE:
Italians surrender as the assault on Bardia progresses.

ABOVE RIGHT:
An Australian rider stops near Bardia to look at captured Italian tankettes. The first, an L3CC, is armed with a 20mm Solothurn anti-tank rifle, the second, a standard L3/35, has twin 8mm machine guns. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

BELOW:
British soldiers cross one of the few bridges left intact by the Italians at Derna. (WW2IMAGES)



excellent Major-General Percy Hobart to study how armour performed in arid conditions – all completed in relative secrecy, to not antagonise the Italians across the border.

Hobart commanded the Mobile Force which later became the legendary 7th Armoured Division. His formation achieved what was perhaps an unrivalled standard, globally, let alone within the British Army. Hobart fought to forge a division of such quality, and his creation would be described by O'Connor as 'the best trained division' he had ever known. The pair quickly picked up the harsh realities of the Western Desert, which proved difficult to navigate and had an endless corrosive toll on vehicles. Hobart would not remain in theatre for long, but long enough for O'Connor to benefit and transform his force.

O'Connor's re-designated 6th Division visited Palestine briefly

before returning to Egypt on 10 June, two days before Italy entered the war. On the 17th, he was temporarily promoted to Lieutenant-General and as commander, Western Desert Force. His superiors were General Maitland 'Jumbo' Wilson, and ultimately Wavell, C-in-C Middle East. This complicated command structure strained under the pressures of war, but held. O'Connor also sought good relations with the RAF and Royal Navy, in particular with Air Commodore Collishaw of 202 Group RAF, the Desert Air Force.

Wavell planned to attack Italian Africa alongside French troops and crawl up the Mediterranean, controlling as much of it as early as possible. However, the fall of France meant this ally and her territories were knocked out the war, with many French colonies becoming opposition. Vichy-mandated territories such as

Syria and Lebanon now posed a threat to the British rear rather than a secure buffer.

Nevertheless, the offensive took place. The day after Italy declared war, armoured cars of the 11th Hussars breached the border and overran the defenders. News Italy had entered the war reached the British before reaching the Italians, and total surprise was achieved. Fort Capuzzo fell on 14 June, the same day Fort Maddalena also surrendered. On 16 June, in a masterstroke, combined elements of the 7th and 11th Hussars brought their armour to bear on the Italians without loss, surrounding and destroying 40 tanks.

Outside of the Italian main positions, the Libyan Frontier was effectively British, and that remained undisputed for around three months despite the costly desert attrition to armoured units and a scarcity of spares. Patrols were reduced to lorried infantry and armoured cars. In the face of a much larger Italian Air Force, 202 Group RAF also had to commit to operations sparingly.

O'Connor, as he had in Palestine, toured frontline positions. He used the lengthy journeys to scout ground, and ultimately gauged the quality of those he commanded and instilled confidence. The qualities of his personal reconnaissance came from private reflections on the Great War, but they were risky. He would advance further forward than his own front, and on one occasion his staff car was reported joining a forward patrol from further behind the enemy lines! The visits, and according to one company commander the extra ration of beer which followed, made O'Connor a popular leader.

Anticipating Italian invasion,



O'Connor prepared his plans. He opted to allow them to advance and over-extend before slamming their flank with his armour. Sure enough, on 13 September the Italians attacked and the thin defending screen withdrew in the face of the advance. The Italians gained 60 miles, capturing Sidi Barrani but losing several hundred men. The retreating British sustained light losses, 160 casualties.

The Italian force played to its strengths and instead of continuing their advance exploited their engineering and administration, building a ring of forts, each occupied by a reinforced brigade with all-arms support. The planned counter was no longer viable, but Wavell, Wilson, and O'Connor were simultaneously developing a solution: Compass, the great 'five day' raid - Wavell's answer, executed by O'Connor.

COMPASS

The disparity between British and Italian forces was huge. At its height, O'Connor's force contained some 34,000 men, while Marshal Graziani's 5th and 10th Armies contained 250,000 men and 450 tanks. The realisation was surprise was essential, stressed heavily by Wavell in secret instructions.

Wavell's planned two-pronged pincer was not well received by O'Connor as it relied on wholly mobile units, pressuring already precious resources. The southern elements had too far to move, and would be far from the main battle - impossible to adequately direct. Lastly, air cover could not extend to two operations in separate locations. His proposal was simpler, to breach the Italian line

and move his infantry to the coast, attacking the forts from behind. The armour would engage the western flank, cutting off Italian forces in the south. Wavell commented this unorthodox plan would have been laughed out of Staff College, but backed it, it was the only means to keep surprise, the Italians separated, and British forces together.

On 8 December 1940, 30,000 men and 275 tanks smashed through the Italian line at Nibeiwa, near Sidi Barrani, capturing 38,000 Italians (including four generals) in addition to tonnes of equipment and 72 tanks. 7th Armoured's Matilda tanks, nigh impervious to fire, proved their worth. Brigadier Selby's force of 1,800 infantry secured the coast road and Maktila while a motorised group kept the Italians to the south, in Sofafis, isolated. Having cleared the Italians from Egypt, O'Connor advanced into Libya, snapping at Graziani's heels.

The new 6th Australian Division captured Bardia and Sollum as the 4th Indian Division was pulled to fight in Sudan. The Australians took another 40,000 prisoners, 500 artillery pieces, 120 tanks and 700 other vehicles.

The Western Desert Force, now XIII Corps, renewed the offensive on 9 January 1941. Three weeks later, »

LEFT:

O'Connor (left) talks with Wavell (centre) and Major-General Iven Mackay, a capable Australian officer commanding 6th Division, key to victory at Bardia and knighted for his success during Compass. Certainly deserving of his own 'Reputations' feature.

BELOW:

British or Australian troops run through the war torn streets of Bardia during the capture of the town. (WW2 IMAGES)



RIGHT: Italian gunners killed by their gun during Operation Compass. Judging by the quantities of spent shells, they resisted furiously. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

BELOW: The Libyan Desert is arid and rocky. While tanks could easily traverse this, the damage done to running gear, transmission, and tracks when at speed could be as immobilising as soft sand. (THE TANK MUSEUM)

Tobruk fell, capturing another 25,000 Italians and 87 tanks. Derna fell after a stiff fight, then Mechili. There were hiccups in the British battle, but the Italians began a general retreat. An emboldened O'Connor moved a flying column through the desert in a bid to cut them off.

On 4 February, the detached force from a reinforced 4th Armoured Brigade, named 'Comforce', after its commander John Combe, reached Beda Fomm after an impressive 30 hour 150 mile dash across unmapped ground - a day before the retreating Italians. Within two days, sandwiched between the screen provided by the 4th and the bulk of XIII Corps advancing from Benghazi, the exhausted Italians surrendered.

O'Connor's five day raid turned into an 800 mile, two month advance. He



BELOW: British troops halt outside Tobruk. Clearly visible, smoke rises from Royal Navy shelling or RAF bombing. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

captured more than 130,000 prisoners, seven generals and 15 high ranking officers, 400 tanks, and 1,300 artillery pieces and had he simply fought his five days and fell back, it still would have been a victory of brilliant proportions.

Instead, he pressed on, battling heat, sand, rain and mud, destroying ten divisions for the loss of 500 killed and 1,400 wounded - Italian casualties were almost ten times larger. He dealt with losing a division, the attrition on his armour (and that they struggled to adapt to night operations) and with the sheer number of prisoners (three or four times the size of his largest

force) which put strain on an already meagre supply chain. The General fought some of the best Italy had and prevailed, barely 30,000 Italians escaped encirclement. The Italian Air Force had also been smashed, and the Royal Navy rapidly reopened captured ports. For this great victory, O'Connor was knighted.

Although decisive, O'Connor's victory was not complete. A large Italian force remained in Libya, and XIII Corps, urged by O'Connor, were ready to press the attack. However, upon reaching El Agheila O'Connor was halted, on the orders of Churchill himself. 🇬🇧

To read about O'Connor's subsequent career, please see next month's issue of Britain at War.



GENERAL SIR RICHARD NUGENT O'CONNOR

PART II: A PERSONAL D-DAY: FIT FOR DUTY?

Cunning and brilliant, the popular and proven O'Connor faced his greatest challenge not in the desert, but in Normandy - and in his own mind. In the second of this two-part feature, **John Ash** asks: Did incarceration affect the later commands of Britain's Desert Fox?



ABOVE: Sir Richard Nugent O'Connor, postwar.

Responsible for arguably the first great British ground victory of the war, Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor forced massive Italian surrenders during Operation Compass, culminating at the Battle of Beda Fomm, ending 7 February 1941. From his letters: *"I have seldom seen such a scene of wreckage and confusion as existed on the main Benghazi Road... I think this may be termed a complete victory, as none of the enemy escaped."* Adding: *"The Italian [10th] Army had completely ceased to exist... The army was not only defeated, but liquidated, nothing remained to fall back on Tripoli."*

Yet, O'Connor refused to accept this stunning outcome as a total success - there was still work to do. Elements of 11th Hussars reached El Agheila and patrols moved 50 miles beyond the lines, meeting little opposition. He stood ready to press on to Sirte, even Tripoli.

O'Connor did not want to halt the pursuit, hoping to press his advantage. In later times, he spoke of his regret that he did not ignore orders: *"A brigade of the 6th Australian Division, lorryborne, with supplies of petrol, was drawn up on the Benghazi*

and Sirte road, facing south, all ready to advance... I have never really forgiven myself for not using them."

The halt order came from Churchill himself. A new front opened in Greece while O'Connor waged his war and Wavell, C-in-C Middle East, had to divert forces. The critical weakening of XIII Corps and lacklustre commitment to Greece, led to a stunning reversal in North Africa and costly failure in the Aegean.

THE FOX LEAVES THE DEN

In March 1941, General Erwin Rommel arrived and O'Connor now faced an equally cunning and resourceful foe. The pair would no doubt have fought an interesting campaign; both had the potential to be every bit each other's nemesis.

Rommel's first attacks came on 31 March with the defeat of 2nd Armoured Division. O'Connor rushed to meet with Lieutenant-General Neame and Wavell as Rommel's initially limited action expanded and the situation deteriorated. The 9th Australian Division withdrew, but 2nd Armoured was, with its commander, Major-General Michael Gambier-Parry, captured. »

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BELOW: British Shermans and infantry wait ahead of Operation Goodwood. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS (HEREAFTER HMP))



RIGHT:

O'Connor's senior officers; 2nd Army commander, Miles Dempsey, and 21st Army Group commander, Bernard Montgomery. (HMP)



RIGHT: Major-General Sir Richard O'Connor (centre, middle distance) and Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Neame VC (centre), with Major-General Gambier Parry (right) and Brigadier John Combe (left) following their capture. (HMP)

BELOW:

Cromwell and Firefly tanks before Goodwood. Cromwell was low profile, fast, and well-protected, but although the OQF 75mm gun (a bored out 6Pdr firing American shells) had an excellent HE shell, it lacked a good AP round. The Firefly or the faster Challenger, was allocated to troops at a ratio of 1:3 to resolve this. (HMP)

In the retreat, XIII Corps headquarters was moved to Tmimi on 6 April and at 8pm O'Connor, Neame, and Combe left for the new HQ. A second car followed with Neame's staff, including Lord Ranfurly. The generals drove overnight, negotiating tracks and weaving through army traffic. They caught up with a slow moving line of vehicles and began overtaking, halting in the middle of the column as it rolled to a stop. Lord Ranfurly commented on the 'Cypriot' drivers (often hired by the army) shouting as they overtook. He strolled over to Neame when a German soldier interrupted. O'Connor and Combe woke and hid weapons on their person. No one expected German patrols so far east, and Brigadier John Harding (who assumed temporary command of the corps) left later yet arrived safely. Attempts were made to

exchange or buy O'Connor's freedom, however the Chiefs of Staff would not agree.

While a devastated O'Connor arrived in Italy, the question of whether he could have continued his advance raged. Wavell felt it was not feasible due to poor availability of support and serviceable vehicles, robbing any advance of haste. Harding suggested Italian strength 500 miles inside their own lines would prove superior.

However, Rommel recorded: "Graziani's army had virtually ceased to exist... No resistance worth of the name could be mounted..." Continuing: "Troops who on one day are flying in a wild panic to the rear, may, unless they are continually harried... very soon stand in battle again, freshly organised as fully effective fighting men." O'Connor's friend, Brigadier Barclay, suggested:

"It has been said XIII Corps was not in a position to continue strenuous operations... It would have been difficult to find anyone in a responsible position serving with the Corps at the time who would have subscribed to this view." Adding: "Officers and men were 'itching' to go on and were all agreed... There may have been good reasons for abandoning the North African offensive... but the condition of units of the XIII Corps was not one".

ESCAPE

The generals were incarcerated in Campo 12 and were in good company. Major-General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart VC joined them and the men committed to escape. Gambier-Parry was also present, and according to de Wiart was "a first class 'forger - which could no doubt earn him a steady income in the underworld".





LEFT:
 British Shermans, and a Sherman ARV (carrying two BSA motorbikes), all with wading gear, wait in their LCT (Landing Craft, Tank) ahead of their landing on Normandy's beaches. (HMP)

O'Connor secured support by having a letter smuggled into British channels. Fellow inmate, New Zealand Brigadier James Hargest, said of O'Connor: *"[He] never for one moment of his captivity gave up trying to escape... In his zeal he became completely one-track minded."*

O'Connor reflected how escaping kept him going. However his first attempt, to slip out over the wall, failed.

Then there was the tunnel, starting from the sealed chapel where work could proceed uninterrupted. The tunnel took months to complete but strengthened defences and good weather prevented immediate escape. It was not until 30 March 1943 that six officers scrambled out and vanished into the night. O'Connor and de Wiat covered 150 miles before their recapture.

On 7 September 1943 the prisoners were assembled and informed of Italy's surrender. General Chiappe took the men to Florence station, explained German troops were coming, and that the men were to move to Arezzo. Hidden around Arezzo, most of the British slipped away. O'Connor and Neame lodged in Segetheina, where Neame received a message coordinating a submarine pick-up for O'Connor, Neame and Air Marshal Owen Boyd. The officers made the rendezvous but the submarine failed to arrive. An Italian, Signore Arpesella, later bought them passage to British lines on a trawler. The most harm the men came to during their escape was O'Connor tripping at dinner with Generals Alexander and Eisenhower after crossing the lines.

VIII CORPS

Home for Christmas Day, barely two weeks passed before O'Connor would find another command. However, his fitness for command was questioned, even though the Italians generally treated prisoners well. O'Connor rarely spoke of his time as prisoner, but despite immense mental toughness and that he became fitter - his physical prowess proven by the audacious winter escape, there seemed a lasting effect.

For O'Connor, the worst thing was that he was tested, proven, and undefeated in battle - yet still captured. He became subject to scandal, centred

on how a man of great reputation and ability was unable to reverse the situation faced by Neame. The collapse in the desert was a shock, and O'Connor was scapegoated. The success of Montgomery after successive leaders' 'failings' fuelled ill-founded criticisms of Britain's Desert Fox, even though 'Monty' never blamed him.

Historians argue this criticism often stemmed from professional jealousy or ignorance, but many leading figures recognised his achievements yet considered O'Connor ill-suited for command after such a lengthy capture. Still, other generals, ➤

BELOW:
 Major General George 'Pip' Roberts DSO, MC (right), commanding 11th Armoured Division, with Brigadier Roscoe Harvey DSO, of 29th Armoured Brigade talk in front of Roscoe's Sherman command tank (note extra aerial on the front hull for the additional No.19 wireless, but retained main armament), in a Normandy staging area, 15 August 1944. (HMP)





ABOVE:
Cromwells and Achilles tank destroyers assemble for Goodwood.
(BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)

BELOW:
Bombs fall on Cagny.
(BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)



including Wavell, fought furiously to protect his reputation and felt his escape restored his standing. Eisenhower, Churchill, and Alexander were impressed, and Montgomery suggested O'Connor lead 8th Army in Italy. Alanbrooke deferred his decision until he had met the escapee general, but shortly after O'Connor was given VIII Corps, part of Montgomery's 21st Army Group.

MISSING OUT?

However, if O'Connor was not at fault for the collapse in North Africa, if he was fit to command, if his capture had little or no lasting effect, and if criticism against him was misplaced, why did he fail to shine?

In August 1944 O'Connor turned 55 – old for a corps commander, perhaps, but workable with his level of fitness. Yet, it is claimed O'Connor aged terribly in captivity, that capture was hard on his mental health. Despite confidence in him, some close to O'Connor noted some 'spark' was missing. However, O'Connor won the battle for his own mind, whatever effect there was appears to not have affected his generalship.

Therefore, the strategic situation was the most critical factor. O'Connor had many advantages; for one, he was trusted by Churchill. He also inherited a corps filled with rising stars. Among them stood 'Pip' Roberts, 11th Armoured Division's well-regarded commander, who at 37 was possibly the youngest Major-General in the army. The 11th itself was arguably the best British armoured division in Europe. Another standout officer could be found in 2nd Household Cavalry Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Abel Smith, who generated remarkable successes in future operations. Other commanders, such as Miles Dempsey and Montgomery had been elevated to positions above O'Connor, but, knowing these men well, he worked with them effectively despite their

restrictive seniority and their tendency, rightly or wrongly, to smother bold operations with caution.

Some issues, however, could not be resolved by any corps commander. Although familiar with the intricacies of supply in the desert, North-West Europe presented its own challenges for O'Connor. Vulnerable supply ships sailing long distances were less an issue, but replaced by the lack of suitable ports. The great size of the desert facilitated independent operations which suited O'Connor well, a key element of his daring brilliance which translated poorly to Normandy's restrictive terrain. His units would not have physical space to manoeuvre. Normandy also required rigid cooperation between generals, more than O'Connor was used to. He was unlikely to get free reign. Weather played a role too, with heat replaced by rain, mud and dust.

The most damning effect of capture was how lengthy incarceration prevented O'Connor practicing years of development in tactics and strategy. He missed out on key experiences and had not witnessed the strategic situation unfold. A crisis in manpower gripped British and Canadian formations during Normandy which was not an issue during O'Connor's previous command. Plus, O'Connor had rarely fought Germans, had little experience of their tactics, and certainly had not faced a defensive, resource-starved, German Army relying increasingly on anti-tank guns and infantry.

NORMANDY

On 12 June 1944 the first of VIII Corps landed in Normandy and O'Connor immediately planned for VIII Corps' first operations. The weather and the small beachhead made it difficult to spring VIII Corps, but with Operation Epsom, 26 June, into action they went.

The aim was to cross the Odon and Orne rivers and cut off Caen from the south, but their opposition was strong - a pair of SS Panzer divisions with a contingent of Tiger and Panther tanks. The more 'open' terrain outside of the Bocage was still restrictive and the network of fields, hedges, and woods perfectly suited the defender. Additionally, many VIII Corps units were unable to land due to the weather, at least one armoured division could not participate and O'Connor had to rely on two attached independent brigades, 4th Armoured and 31st Tank.

Although heavy artillery support was allocated, from the assets from three corps, strategic air support was rained off. Additionally, XXX Corps failed to achieve all their objectives in a preliminary operation, leaving VIII Corps exposed. The assault left O'Connor on a salient, vulnerable. However, as Montgomery wanted to focus German armour away from the Americans, such tempting target was perhaps promising. British



LEFT:

Soldiers of 1st Welsh Guards pour fire into Cagny, 19 July. (BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)

troops made quick progress, but the Germans responded. The four mile gain concerned them. They rushed in armour, but were decisively repulsed.

After bitter fighting across tough terrain, the results were somewhat inconclusive. The British gained six miles, broke German defences and forced them to commit precious reserves, but the advance was contained and Caen not cut off, albeit

at the cost of 120 valuable German tanks. However, O'Connor endured the stiffest resistance yet offered by German forces and still gained. Such results in perhaps the hardest battle of O'Connor's career so far were impressive and morale was high. Montgomery was pleased, stating: "Your contribution to the general plan of battle has been immense", despite unbearably heavy losses. ➤

BELOW:

British and Canadian tanks on the move during the breakout from Normandy. (CONSEIL RÉGIONAL DE BASSE-NORMANDIE/CANADIAN NATIONAL ARCHIVES)





ABOVE: Ram Kangaroo personnel carriers of 4th Armoured Brigade in Rethem, 16 April 1945. The Kangaroo was one suggestion made by O'Connor and others, such as the Canadian Guy Simmonds, to give infantry protected mobility when supporting armoured operations. They would not be used during Goodwood, but were a common feature of subsequent operations. (HMP)

The 15th Scottish alone lost 300 killed, 1,640 wounded, 800 missing/captured – 25% of the division's casualties from Normandy to VE Day. Such losses were simply unsustainable.

By 12 July two subsequent operations, Windsor and Jupiter, met further success but again at cost. VIII Corps' 43rd Wessex Division had been mauled, but with the arrival of Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchies' XII Corps, VIII Corps could be rested. Respite would do them good, as O'Connor's greatest struggle was to come.

GOODWOOD

Commander British 2nd Army, Miles Dempsey, was issued the following directive by Montgomery on 10 July: "Second Army will retain the ability to operate with a strong armoured force

east of the River Orne in the general area between Caen and Falaise. For this purpose a corps of three armoured divisions will be held in reserve, ready to be employed when ordered by me."

Three days later, O'Connor was handed the reins. VIII Corps had been given 7th Armoured Division and 8th AGRA (Army Group Royal Artillery, a counter to manpower shortages) but lost much of its infantry. By making VIII Corps armour-heavy, three armoured divisions and five independent brigades, the British united a core strength of armour under a single command. O'Connor, with more than 2,600 tanks, stood ready for the push.

Goodwood ranks among the more controversial operations of the period. Depending on differing interpretations of the intentions, the operation was a

failed breakout, or, a limited operation where breakout was a possibility which never occurred. The original plan was to breakout, but more restricted prior to its launch – yet none senior to Montgomery were informed. O'Connor, while other units battled to secure Caen, was to assault as far forward as Bourguebus Ridge and only reconnaissance units were to progress to Falaise, 15 miles south, in which they succeeded. A general advance would take place only if the situation allowed.

OPERATIONAL DIFFICULTIES

In planning Goodwood, O'Connor faced major problems. First, against his command style, he could not use surprise and led a frontal assault which, as a skilled flanker, he hated. Surprise was a key element in his operational art which was unachievable as German troops held the Colombelles Steelworks towers and watched the bridgehead. Although Allied intelligence expected heavy resistance, they were unaware the attack was anticipated, with 1st SS Panzer Corps and LXXXVI Corps prepared. Rings of bolstered defences, 10 miles deep, took advantage of the open ground from good cover. The area was also densely populated, and mutually supporting occupied villages (typically 1500m apart – perfect tank-hunting range) surrounded by hedges, and orchards proved every bit the fortress.

Secondly, the small size of the staging area created problems moving three armoured divisions into position. They had to cross a river, a canal, and a hastily deployed and unmapped British minefield before even beginning the attack. Dust kicked up by movement further betrayed them and despite the best efforts of engineer units, who could only work at night, the assault stymied and only a handful of lanes were cleared. The front allotted to VIII Corps was narrow, almost too small for a single brigade, preventing more than one division from forming up.

Finally, O'Connor realised the vital necessity for air support, as the narrow front and busy staging area meant his artillery had to be held back, unable to support him fully. The exceptionally heavy strategic bombardment was welcomed, but only had limited impact. As the ridge was outside the envelope of artillery, any failures of the strategic air would be magnified – 2,077 bombers were allocated and 83 (Tactical) Group RAF, flying air-



RIGHT: O'Connor, with Prime Minister Churchill, Montgomery, and other prominent officers, observe Allied aircraft overhead. (BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)



ground sorties, was also available. Eighth Air Force alone would drop 89,000 100lb and 20lb bombs on the ridge.

PRESERVE THE INFANTRY

These immediate pressures were worsened by ongoing issues in manpower. The 51st (Highland) Infantry Division was to remain in reserve and with multiple simultaneous operations running, there was little infantry to assist O'Connor. 'Pip' Roberts, leading the advance, commented that with only the single infantry brigade in his division, he'd struggle to clear settlements. O'Connor sympathised, but did little but advise bypassing resistance. The 51st, just two miles away, had to remain in reserve.

O'Connor's inability to quickly take Cagny, because of a similar lack of infantry, would cost him 16 tanks and hold up the entire advance bar 29th Brigade, which passed unmolested. The village was held only by four 88mm AA guns and a small ad-hoc medley of men commanded by Hans Von Luck, until 4pm the first day.

O'Connor had called for the limited resources of infantry to be mobile and under armour, requesting, prior to Goodwood, modified self-propelled guns functioning as armoured transports – enough for two battalions. The move was blocked, but II Canadian Corps commander Guy Simonds debuted 'Kangaroo' armoured personnel carriers during August's Operation Totalize – undoubtedly inspired out of the shortcomings of Goodwood.

On launch day, 18 July, progress was swift. Two miles were quickly covered, with Germans dazed by heavy bombing. Tiger tanks, weighing around 60 tonnes, had been flipped as if they were coins, some defenders were driven insane. Men captured from 16th Luftwaffe Field division were so shaken they were unable to walk, and could not be interrogated for a day. There were suicides associated with the heavy bombardment. Half of 503rd Heavy Tank Battalion's vehicles were knocked out, and 200th Assault Gun Battalion, directly opposing the advance, was destroyed. For five miles, a scarred and cratered landmass was encountered during the armour's push through unharvested fields and villages (some, like Cagny, oddly untouched despite 650 tonnes) ➤

• **ABOVE:** Tiger Killer. The Firefly, excepting the M10 Achillies, was the only tank in numbers during the early stages of Normandy that was capable of defeating Tigers or Panthers at 1000 yards. However, such German vehicles, and extended ranges to fight them, were rare. (HMP)

• **MIDDLE LEFT:** Prisoners taken during Goodwood, under guard. (BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)

• **LEFT:** Fearsome, but not invincible. Tiger I was vulnerable to 17Pdr guns at long range, and the 6Pdr could also be effective, especially with new ammunition issued in March 1944. However, at 300 yards most tank guns could defeat Tiger's frontal armour, especially the 75mm M3 fitted to Shermans, and, to lesser extents, the QF 75mm fitted to the Cromwell. Here, men of the Durham Light Infantry, 49th (West Riding) Division inspect a knocked-out Tiger during Operation 'Epsom', 28 June 1944. (HMP)





ABOVE: Tiger 313 of Schwere Panzer-Abteilung 503. Nearly 60 tonnes impressively but brutally flipped by bombing prior to Goodwood. Tiger 313's servcability however, is in question, as earlier photos show 313 took a powerful, but non-penetrating, hit to the side, leaving a deep fist-sized dent.

BELOW: A Cromwell tank and Ram Kangaroo personnel carriers in Weseke, March 1945. (HMP)

of bombs). Resistance grew – but the fiercest lay beyond the bombed zone, as the guns on or behind the ridge were mostly intact.

TWO BLOODY MILES

Seven miles from the start point and just two miles from their objective, 11th Armoured Division's 29th Armoured Brigade suffered as fire rained in from Bourguebus Ridge. Units reaching the foot of the rise required urgent support, yet, because of traffic congestion in rear areas, fire from bypassed villages, and the raised railway which cut the battlefield in half and dangerously exposed tanks crossing it, the advance units were forced to cling on with little assistance. Fortunately, the 29th were spared when 83 Group RAF's Typhoons halted a counterattack by a battalion of Panthers and 15 Tigers, elements of 1st SS Panzer Corps led by Sepp Dietrich. Elements of 7th Armoured

(Desert Rats) were sent to the 29th, which had lost half its tanks, but 22nd Brigade's progress was slow, and the glorious reputation of the long-weary Desert Rats, so proficient in Italy and North Africa, was threatened.

The attack on 18 July gained ground, but left VIII Corps exposed. Gains were consolidated over the next two days, with further attacks on both flanks launched. The Bourguebus was contested, with parts falling, before weather put a stop to proceedings. Breakout never occurred, but the size of the cramped bridgehead grew, German armour was worn down, and casualties amongst British infantry, actively being preserved, were light. Heavy tank losses, 36% of all British tanks in Normandy - 126 lost in 29th Armoured Brigade alone - were easily replaced or repaired. Not so easily replaced, were at least 110 German tanks, though Dietrich personally awarded every man in the tank workshop at Foret de Cinglais with an Iron Cross 2nd Class.

WASTED OPPORTUNITY

By keeping the 51st back the entire operation, already hamstrung by varying factors, was put in jeopardy. As Pip Roberts suggested, German forces could not launch a counterattack so strong it would defeat three corps - one of which was armoured. Had they, a single division would not stop them. To O'Connor, the reserve hampered his operation. The decision was not his, but, well

aware of the issue, there was a case for reversal. O'Connor escaped the anger associated to Goodwood's 'failure' to breakout, but he knew what was needed for the operation to progress more smoothly yet did little to challenge it. Roberts subsequently noted there were 72 88mm guns, 12 heavier flak guns, 194 field guns, and 272 Nebelwerfers on or behind Bourguebus ridge. Critically, these were out of range of artillery and largely untouched. By having more infantry accompanying the advance, holdouts such as Cagny could have been swiftly dealt with, freeing up armour. Infantry could then escort the tanks uphill.

O'Connor worked on the next attack, Bluecoat, as the furore over Goodwood raged above him. Left unaware of the change in aims, Eisenhower, Arthur Harris and Arthur Tedder (who welcomed the fact O'Connor was commanding and expected another Compass), were furious at the absence of a breakout - and arguably only contributed their support expecting spectacular results. Dempsey and Montgomery were scolded, but spared dismissal.

BLUECOAT

O'Connor worked quickly to disseminate the lessons, namely the need for cooperation between infantry and armour – critical, as the next operation, Bluecoat, would take the British into Bocage country. Infantry battalions were to work with armoured





regiments at a small unit level, with command shifting between the tanks and the infantry depending on circumstance. The tactic was described as "highly satisfactory" and remained in use until the end of the war. Strategic air support would again be vital, but this time a valuable second strike was allocated. The Americans had just launched their breakout, Cobra, which was successful in part because all but one German armoured division was watching the British sector. The lone Panzer Lehr division facing the Americans was bombed into submission.

VIII Corps reverted back to a balanced force and a five mile advance against Point 309 was O'Connor's objective, to be followed by exploitation if possible. Yet, there were still difficulties. Some of his units were miles away from the start point the day before launch, 30 July. His artillery, 8th AGRA, was 30 miles to the rear, 11th Armoured some 25 miles behind the lines, Guards Armoured, 45 miles. Additionally, the terrain was appalling. There was only one south-running road and only infantry and Churchill tanks could move effectively through the thick countryside. Nevertheless British troops advanced to within a mile of Point 309 and waited for the second strike. When complete, two Guards Armoured battalions, one carrying infantry on the tanks, rushed the hill. Mines were the main problem for 11th Armoured, stuck attacking down the road after their long night march, but they too met their objectives. The 2nd Household Cavalry discovered an

undefended bridge five miles past Point 309, at Souleuvre. This was captured by 29th Armoured Brigade and the reconnaissance troops moved forward another seven miles.

Bluecoat turned into a bitter struggle, but is considered to be VIII Corp's best action – likely because O'Connor attacked with some surprise, he finally had some space to manoeuvre, and there was little reason for 'Monty' to be cautious at this stage and he could unleash his generals. So effective was O'Connor's advance, he inadvertently created a dangerous salient for VIII Corps as he outran XXX Corps, bogged down on the left flank. The Americans broke out, with Patton leading the way to the Seine, but O'Connor, moving as swift as he could to trap the Germans, was slowed by XXX Corps poor advance.



CHANGES

Montgomery ordered a general advance on 8 August, yet O'Connor was not going to be part of it. Perhaps allowing commanders operational freedom meant any failings were accentuated. Commander XXX Corps, General Bucknall, was soon replaced by Brian Horrocks and a number of O'Connor's best divisional commanders had been wounded or transferred into Horrock's command. A further, personal blow for O'Connor, was that Brigadier Hargest, fellow Campo 12 escapee, was killed in Normandy.

With XXX Corps gaining on and surpassing VIII Corps, and the Americans moving as swiftly, O'Connor's command was reduced and he out of the pursuit. XXX Corps began the race to Brussels under the leadership of Brian Horrocks, another brilliant and charismatic desert general, fresh from convalescing. He reversed the fortunes of the corps, and was in a better position to advance eastwards. As a result, O'Connor, who had waged a tough and challenging campaign, was halted.

General Sir Richard O'Connor was once again prevented from pursuing a retreating enemy in a battle which he decisively forced. Nevertheless, it was his breakthrough, casting aside, once and for all, any effect captivity may have had on him. Whatever spark O'Connor lost, he found at Bluecoat. With room to act, O'Connor's style of command finally seeped through and began to fit the Normandy battle. He was perhaps not the best man for the job, but clearly, the inclusion of Britain's Desert Fox was beneficial to the pursuit of the campaign. ■

LEFT:

Although this shows bombing to the Calais area, heavy bombers such as this Halifax were used by O'Connor and his seniors to prepare the way for British operations in Normandy. (BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)

BELOW:

British troops advance behind a Churchill Infantry Tank during Operation Bluecoat, where lessons regarding infantry mobility and infantry/armour cooperation were put into action. (THE TANK MUSEUM)