

Pte J. Heather – The Queen’s Royal Regiment (West Surrey)

Archibald John Heather was the son of Walter and Edith Heather of Gomshall. In early 1940 he married Kathleen Edith Best of 18 Milton Street, Westcott.

We do not know when John Heather’s Army service began, as service records for Other Ranks are not yet available to the public. By 1942 he was serving in the 1st/5th Bn Queen’s Royal Regiment (West Surrey), a Territorial Army battalion which had been part of the 44th Division which served in the British Expeditionary Force in France before being evacuated from Dunkirk on 30th May 1940.

After undergoing training in the United Kingdom the Division was sent to Egypt, disembarking at Port Suez on 21st July after an eight weeks’ voyage in convoy via the Cape of Good Hope. After a period of training in desert warfare, the Division joined the Eighth Army on 14th August, two days after General Sir Bernard Montgomery had taken command.

The North African campaigns had started in June 1940 when Italy declared war on Britain and invaded Egypt. A series of battles followed. By March 1941 the British were on the verge of victory but their position was weakened when troops and supplies had to be sent from Egypt in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the German invasion of Greece. Their difficulties increased further with the arrival in Libya of the German Afrika Corps under General Rommel. By August 1942 the situation was grave; the British had been forced back to a line 100 miles west of Alexandria and the Suez Canal and Middle East oil fields were under threat.

After assessing the situation General Montgomery decided to stop the enemy advance on the Alam el Halfa ridge which was turned into a fortress, using tanks hull down in fixed positions as additional artillery. Although still under training the 44th Division had to be brought into the line to provide extra infantry support. The battle lasted from 30th August to 5th September and achieved its aim. The enemy attacks were broken; Rommel was forced to withdraw and dig in on the El Alamein line between the coast and the impassable Qattara Depression in the south.

After taking time to build up their resources, the British launched a massive offensive with the aim of making a decisive breakthrough. The

plan was that the infantry would advance behind an artillery barrage through the enemy's minefields and give cover for engineer units to clear mines and create 'lanes' for the tanks to pass through. The plan also relied on deception - the enemy would be led to believe that the main attack would take place in the south, when it would actually be in the north. The southern thrust would hold the German armour until it was too late to re-deploy them against the main attack – responsibility for this was placed with XIII Corps which included the 44th Infantry Division, part of which was 131 Brigade comprising the 1st/5th, 1st/6th and 1st/7th Queen's.

The battle started on 23rd October 1942. The task of the Queen's battalions was to form a bridgehead for the tanks beyond the minefields between Deir al Munassib and Himeimat. The 1st/7th suffered heavy casualties on the night of 23rd October but achieved their objectives to enable the 5th Royal Tank Regiment to get through. The 1st/5th and 1st/6th made a good start but took casualties as they advanced; they overran an enemy position, advanced a further 800 yards and then dug in. The Royal Engineers cleared the gaps for the armour, but this met heavy fire as it came through. The 4th City of London Yeomanry lost 26 tanks and, to conserve armour, the Divisional Commander stopped further attempts to get through.

This left the two Queen's battalions stranded 2000 yards in front of their nearest support and pinned down by enemy fire. During the day General Montgomery authorised XIII Corps to break off the attack. The Queen's were too exposed to be of value and withdrew back through the minefield. 1st/5th Queen's lost 11 officers and men killed, 50 wounded and 56 missing; most of the missing were later found to have been killed or wounded.

John Heather lost his life on 25th October 1942, which suggests he may have died of wounds sustained in the action of the previous day, or was killed during the withdrawal. He is buried in the El Alamein War Cemetery which holds the graves of 7,240 Commonwealth servicemen and 102 men of other nationalities who died in the North African Campaign. He died in the same action as George Dixon who served in the same battalion and is also remembered on our village memorial.

The Battle of El Alamein lasted from 23rd October to 11th November 1942. The breakthrough was achieved; it brought a decisive victory and was a turning point in the war. Today 'El Alamein' is one of the battle honours emblazoned on the colours of the Queen's Royal Regiment.

