RETURN
to
TUNISIA

56 Years on, February 1999

Retracing the route of 1KRRC
Medenine to Gromballia
10 March to 12 May 1943

"You have to come," wrote Robin Raphel from her Embassy in Tunis to us in the hills of Connecticut in the autumn of 1998. "My military are eager to take you over your wartime route, and I have a lovely house, overlooking the Bay of Tunis from Sidi Bou Said, which you will enjoy." Robin is the brilliant, tough-minded and attractive Ambassador of the United States, in her first post as Ambassador, after distinguished service in political affairs in London, South Africa and India, among others, and most recently as Secretary in the State Department for South Asian Affairs. She is now well established in Tunis.

Of course, I replied positively to this exciting invitation and suggested, after inquiring about flights in our local travel agency at Langport, which had all the details, to my surprise, that we might come in February, flying from Alicante via Barcelona, during our third winter stay in El Portet de Moraira, Costa Blanca. And so, after further email and telephone exchanges, we found ourselves flying into Tunis on Iberia Airlines on **Tuesday, 9 February.**

The Embassy's "fixer", Farouk, met us as fixers do, on our side of Customs, and ushered us rapidly past all formalities, no questions asked, to an Embassy car, chauffeur driven. It took about twenty minutes to reach the hill-top town of Sidi Bou Said, and up the side road to the Residence, which indeed proved beautiful, with smiling and efficient French speaking servants, a sensational view, as Robin had promised, and five acres of gardens. Also permanent police guards at the gates and circulating the grounds. Our own guest quarters were immensely comfortable. On the drive in I found the flat landscape, olive groves, grassy scrub, men on the backs of donkeys and others herding flocks of sheep and goats all very familiar. What was not familiar was the heavy traffic, the rows of tall buildings, some half-finished, and two-way highways.

After the victory in 1943 I know I visited Carthage, near Sidi Bou Said, feeling rather it was my duty, but I have no clear picture of doing so. I also know that on one occasion only I drove into Tunis from Gromballia, a few miles out, and had lunch, French style, in a restaurant, which thrilled me. But I cannot remember with whom I went, or what impression the town made on me, other than its strangeness after the desert. We had not been to or seen any restaurants since our last visits to Cairo, for nearly all of us well before Alamein in the summer of 1942 or earlier. Nor do I recollect how I paid for lunch, but I suppose we had the chance to draw Dinars (I assume the same name for Tunisian currency as now) from a paymaster against our pay.

Indeed, our time in Gromballia, after the first few days of immense elation, was uneventfully spent, first trying to sort out the huge numbers of prisoners (as described vividly on page 369 of the Annals by John Hogg) and then sorting ourselves out. There were no special celebrations nor did we go looking for women. By May we were off, back all the way to Tmimi in Libya, before a later return to Boufarik near Algiers and eventual landing at Naples, and so on into Austria in the spring of 1945.

One story, however, which was prevalent in Gromballia, might add colour to John Hogg's light hearted account. I remember clearly watching the Battalion playing the German prisoners at football, Colour Sgt "Kipper" Knieff from the 9th Battalion (Rangers), later in Italy an autocratic R.Q.M.S., being a dominant centre half. None the less we lost, and a German officer was heard to observe to a small Rifleman: "Well,

we have beaten you at your national game." Quickly the Rifleman came back: "Don't worry, mate, we beat you at yours."

Perhaps my most vivid memory of that time was the pleasure of a thorough wash all over by my camp bed in the open air and a change of clothes provided by my long serving and loyal servant Rifleman Harry Deane, with the feel of warm sun on my back and, for the time being, freedom from tension. The relaxation was tangible and everyone was smiling.

10th February

Now, this time round, we spent the first day being taken into the narrow passages of the Medina, crowded with merchants, including a leading carpet dealer's premises, and also a mosque. After lunch the Bardo Museum of Mosaics and classical statuary. Our driver and guide was an elderly but vivacious American lady, with red dyed hair and a very strong Belgian accent, (though her English was better than her French) who has a special relationship with the American Embassy, as help with visitors. Without her we would not have seen what we did, all of interest, though she never stopped talking and her driving terrified me. Tunisians, on foot or bicycle or motorized, do not pay any attention to anyone else on the road.

Robin came home to dinner very late, after we had finished both our first two nights. American relations with Tunisia are good, and the country is free from the Islamic terrorism of one neighbour, Algeria, and fanatic anti-Western and de-stabilizing tactics of Quadaffi in Libya, her neighbour to the East. But Tunisia had irritated the Americans by highly critical comments over the recent air action against Iraq, with consequent hard hitting diplomatic exchanges, and this further complicated various plans for V.I.P. visits both ways, still unresolved during our visit. So Robin was involved in intensive communication with Washington and delicate negotiations with the Tunisians, all combining to keep her at work exhaustingly late. But that is the stuff of Embassy life, and Robin is a top class performer.

On our second night Robin's Defense Attaché Colonel Mike Ferguson, and his French wife came to dinner. Mike Ferguson was what Robin meant by the use of her "Military" in her first invitation to us. And a very fine and rewarding person he proved to be. Denise, his wife, was also delightful, and my wife Tilla and she had an instant rapport from then on, talking rapid French about everything other than military history. In fact, throughout our expedition we all got on splendidly at the various points when we met.

I had sent Robin, in case she and Mike might be interested and able to find time to read them, copies of pages 340-374 of the Annals, comprising a narrative of our First and Second Battalions' parts in the Tunisian campaign. Indeed, Mike had read and thoroughly taken in the whole story, and had studied and reconnoitred most of the locations on a U.S. Army map of considerable detail, dating from the late seventies. He had also prepared and orientated the Ambassador and ourselves with copies of a thorough and elaborate "Operation Order," covering all our various movements over the next two and a half days, what we would see, and what and where we would eat and sleep, together with copies of maps from our own Chronicle and The History of the Second World War Vol. IV, Playfair and Molonv, H.M.S.O. 1966. This last is a massive and detailed history which I had never before seen. Mike was kind enough, at the end of our visit, to inscribe and present this volume to me.

I immediately found Col. Mike a most attractive figure. He started in the ranks at age sixteen, served in Viet Nam for twenty months and then later as a Military Attaché in a large number of tough posts, including Ethiopia, and, most recently, South Africa. He seems to have been all over the world. He is widely read, especially in military history, and can quote at length from Kipling. His professional attitude to Robin, his Ambassador, warm without familiarity, protective and helpful, was a model for this rôle. His stature is now being recognized by his appointment, from April, as Director of the Defence Attachés School in Washington, D.C.

11th February

Mike's Operation Order specified our departure from the Residence at 0700 hrs, early for us, but they all normally start work at 0800 hrs, and are used to it. Our suitcases had been driven down to Jerba by the three four by four vehicles the previous day. So we went to the airport in Robin's distinctive white Cadillac, with police waving us on through the traffic. This was our first meeting with one of Robin's two Tunisian body guards, one of whom is always with her.

The other, Ramzi, a huge man, very helpful and engaging, apparently Tunisia's former champion kick boxer, had gone down to Jerba the day before. It was interesting to see what a lot of really big men there were in Tunisia. Are they of Nubian stock? Ramzi's father, as he told me with pride, had served in the French Army at Dien Bin Phu in Vietnam.

We were ushered onto the plane very grandly on our own. The other passengers, a full load, followed after we were settled. It took an hour to fly to Jerba, a large flat island, very much a tourist resort, in the south of Tunisia, joined by a road in the south and by a ferry in the north. We learned that Jerba, being the nearest airport to the frontier, is used by Libyan smugglers in order to avoid the blockade on international flights to Tripoli. We went first to the Hotel Abu Nawas where we left Tilla and Denise, with a guide, for a separate programme of sight-seeing, and with Denise's driver, retired from many years' service in the Embassy. Robin, Mike and I crossed on an open ferry, causing the police, now following us, to remove a donkey and cart and their aged owner to make room for our vehicles. Robin said wryly, "I just don't intervene when this sort of thing happens, and look the other way."

The Battalion did not go near Jerba in 1943. As Mike's Operation Order for the Ambassador stared: "As focus of the trip for Mr. Waterfield (you and I accompanying) will be on the 1st Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps' activities during the campaign." So the first target of the "military group" or "war party" as Tilla has called it in her separate account, was Medenine on this sharp, windy but occasionally sunny morning. Lt. Colonel Lyon Corbett Winder went forward here with his company commanders (of whom Toby Wake is the only survivor today) on 10 March 1943. I do not remember the exact location of our reserve position (in 7th Motor Brigade) between 10 and 18 March, but we, luckily, missed the repulse of 21st Panzers' strong attack as we reached the area. "Monty's" visit to the Battalion on 19 March I definitely remember. It is pointedly illustrated by John Hogg's account on page 341 of the Annals and by the (incongruously placed) but vivid photograph opposite page 295. This shows Monty, in beret, talking to NCO's and Riflemen of B Company, in which I was, at twenty-one years old, a Platoon Commander. In front, with his back to the photographer (I think Peter Wake, then Signals Officer) and in what look suspiciously like corduroy trousers,

fashionable if irregular wear for the desert, is, I think John Hogg second in command, thankfully in robust command of his faculties to this day[*]. The only other possibility is the Brigadier of 7 Motor Brigade, T.J.B. Bosville, late R.B., whom for some obscure reason, probably thought up by David Karmel, 2nd in command of B Company, we called "Sapper Jim" behind his back. The green side hat, which those who still possessed them usually wore, is not conclusive either way. Next comes John Hope, D.S.O., M.C. and Bar, B Company Commander, loved and admired by all, who was killed, to our dismay, when commanding the Battalion in almost the last action in North Italy in 1945. He seems to be wearing his scruffy khaki knitted scarf, which I remember well, and which further illustrates our relaxed attitude, despite Monty's presence, to dress.

I cannot, alas, now remember the names of the NCOS and Riflemen in the photo, but I rather think we stuffed the ranks of those selected for Monty to meet personally with individuals who had especially long service overseas. I do remember Monty expressing shocked surprise when he asked Sgt Lathwell, from my 6 platoon, how long he had been abroad with the Battalion. "Eight years, Sir," was the reply. And soon after the capture of Tunis, with clearance of the Mediterranean sea lanes, leave in UK was organized for those with longest service abroad, this being gradually reduced until the standard qualification up to the end of the war, under the "Python" scheme, became four years' service abroad. I remember distinctly that there were many others in my first platoon (Sgt Tyson) in B Company before Alamein with six, seven and eight years' service in the Battalion, which had come to Egypt at the end of 1938 after many years' unbroken service in India and Burma.

In our 1999 expedition, we climbed a steep road to the top of the brown rocky whale-backed ridge, uncultivated and uninhabited then and now except for an enclosed Tunisian military building, which was not there in 1943. From the top we looked down on the plain beyond with the ridges at some distance, where in 1943 we could see Germans moving on foot and in vehicles, and beyond these in the distance the Matmata Hills. I think we were very close to, if not exactly on, our B Company position. I remember taking over from little dark Gurkhas and then digging hard to protect us from sporadic German shelling. I was rather pleased with my successful use of plastic explosive, on which I had done a course, for getting down through the almost solid rock. The results were worthwhile as enemy shelling did us little harm.

I remember John Hope discussing with me the sighting, on the reverse slope and with fields of fire, of my Vickers machine guns. But we were not attacked, and our action was limited to fighting patrols. It was a special relief from this time on not to be attacked by the hated Stukas. From now on the Desert Air Force was dominant. And, for the first time, we also had the benefit of American strategic attacks.

I now see from Toby Wake's fuller account, from the Chronicle, that later, even as late as ten days or so before the surrender, when we were around Kournine, "the Luftwaffe seemed to grow stronger every day as they concentrated everything on us" and that "we had vehicles knocked out and damaged" by dive bombing. It just shows the fallibility of memory as, unlike my experience in the desert, I personally have no recollection of enemy air action hereabouts.

Perhaps I should insert here that I never kept a personal diary. We were not supposed

[*] Sadly, Sir John Nicholson Hogg died on 12 April 1999, after this account, which he read, was written. He was born on 4 October 1912.

to do so, though as the Annals show, a few did. When I became Adjutant, at Tmimi in Libya, a short time after we got back there, I kept the official War Diary, writing it up late every night in duplicate, and had no time for personal accounts. My letters to my parents were severely self-censored and record little except that I was O.K., so what I write here is a selection of what, at seventy-seven, still stays in my mind's eye. There are great gaps which even our return over some of the ground did not bring back. And of course, this return journey served to confirm that in war, especially a war of mobility, the lower formations, despite genuine efforts to pass down information and orders, only see and remember a very small surrounding zone of activity, and the wider picture is scarcely glimpsed. Colonel Mike's helpful analysis, aided by the Histories and the maps, helped enormously to enlighten us all beyond the Battalion's special concerns.

On 23 March 1943 we were with 1st Armoured Division on the famous "left hook" to El Hamma, when direct attack on the Mareth line was not successful. I cannot remember the town of Medenine then, but the movement by night of ourselves and the 4th Indian Division at the start of our march was described by John Hogg as a "mechanical nonsense," due to poor traffic control by the staffs whose experience of this kind of thing had been largely limited to the desert minefields. I do remember appalling delays and confusion.

I will not try to gloss the detailed description of the "hook" by Giles Mills in the Annals, and General Playfair's in the Official History. My memories are of really awful grass and hillocks, soft sand in between, considerable fatigue as we did a hundred fifty miles to gain thirty, a full blown sand storm and considerable ignorance and uncertainty, at least at platoon level. At one point in the dark we were all mixed up with German armour and at dawn, in Hogg's words "one's immediate impression was a mass of tanks, armoured cars, trucks and heaven knows what else crossing, recrossing and driving aimlessly around." Action for us petered out on 27 March as the final break through to El Hamma was frustrated by the Germans who produced a strong armoured screen to cover their withdrawal from the Mareth Line.

In fact, though I hope this brief account of our 1943 route to El Hamma will help to illustrate what it was like, the 1999 party decided, on Mike Ferguson's sensible advice, that to try to follow it exactly was likely to be too arduous and uncertain in the time available. So we headed off towards Mareth, with a picnic lunch of beer and American Army rations, which we had in our vehicle, due to the bitter wind. Mike prepared the rations by heating them somehow through water and chemical reaction. I had corned beef hash and Tabasco sauce which were good. Everything was wrapped individually in strong plastic, including chewing gum, which I passed by. Robin accepted.

We drove through Mareth town to the Tunisian Army's Mareth Museum, where we were greeted warmly by a Colonel, who had come down from Tunis for the purpose, the resident officer in charge, a photographer, and sundry police and hangers on. The Museum contains photographs, maps and charts. We were given a brief analysis of the battle in English, and shown a film. I found, quite unjustifiably, the strictly non-partisan presentations slightly disconcerting. Before we left we walked down from the Museum building to inspect the dry and rocky Wadi itself; a severe defensive obstacle, and concrete emplacements built by the French against a possible Italian incursion from Libya in the thirties. The Tunisians have taken a lot of trouble with the Museum and are, rightly, proud of it. We left with mutual protestations of the highest esteem and much shaking of hands.

Soon afterwards the ladies joined us, with the help of persistent telephone calls from Colonel Mike, and we all climbed up the steep brown Matmata Hills. where the cold wind whistled round our ears, to a modem hotel called "Les Troglodytes," slotted into the mountain and built of white painted concrete cubes and stone steps. Inside the rooms there was little heat, and it was very dark, due to the absence of windows. Soon we decided it was better out than in until supper time, and we were taken to an underground "hotel," unappealing to me, and then an underground family dwelling. No water, light, heat or floor covering. Only a young woman and her brother were there, with various animals, whose quarters were no different from the family's. When we asked where the older family members were, Ramzi translated the Arabic opinion of our ever present police escort, "probably in the cafe, playing cards." It seemed a grim life, but the cave dwellers, we were told, had been there for three hundred years. As dusk fell we saw the young woman scrambling on the mountain to herd a flock of shrilly bleating goats. In 1943 we saw none of this.

It was too cold to dress for dinner but Colonel Mike had brought some fine malt which warmed up the war party; the other two ladies refrained. We had a convivial evening with some reasonable Tunisian wine, the only type on offer, and we were all tired enough, with all the blankets in the cupboards piled on top of us, to sleep pretty well.

12 February.

We were up early to be greeted by a cold, but sunny day and left at 0800 hours, the ladies heading directly for El Djem, while we went to El Hamma itself. The Battalion in 7th Brigade had moved through El Hamma before dawn on 30 March 1943, but the whole Brigade were forced to withdraw and to try another route through the Akarit position and the rocky peaks of Fatnassa, 800 feet high. The first part of this I do not remember at all, but I do remember that B Company were ordered to reconnoitre forward in force. I can see John Hope giving orders in the afternoon, I think, and then we all set forth in our vehicles, spaced out, towards the grim looking mountains. But the track, as it was then, through the pass was covered by the Pistoia Division with heavy mortar and artillery fire and, as we were totally exposed in daylight, with no cover, John Hope withdrew the company, having achieved the objective of establishing that the pass was strongly held.

The next day we were still totally exposed, but the enemy, to preserve ammunition and conceal their positions, only engaged our artillery or O.P.S. Certainly I do not remember being shelled when we were dispersed, nor seeing any of our own forces to right or left. It was necessary, before a mountainous night assault by 4th Indians Gurkhas, for which only they were trained, to establish how far the pass was wired, mined and blown, for the subsequent passage of anti-tank guns and ammunition. The Annals generously describe my own patrol on the night of 31 March/ 1 April with fifteen NCOS and men from 6 platoon of B Company, which I felt at the time was not wholly successful, although it was received by the staffs at the time with unexpected praise. I told Sgt Lathwell, I remember, that I would not take him, as he, after eight years abroad, could expect to be among the first to go home on leave. He looked relieved.

And now, after all those years, we stood on the exact spot in the road where poor Rifleman MacKinnon was killed on that patrol, blown up in the dark by a mine about a yard to my right. He was a converted "Jock", having come up as a reinforcement,

probably through a muddle in the infantry pool in the rear. The ground, steep up into the pass after the about three-quarters of a mile's walk on the flat from our company position, seems entirely unchanged. Sand in the plain, harsh rock in the hills, and only the tarmac of the road an innovation. I was glad to get a MM for L/Cpl Van Gelder; Sgt Boenke (both pure Cockneys but with those curious European surnames) had already got one. I have a photo of Rifleman Mackinnon's grave, with a wooden cross. I expect it was later gathered up to a cemetery by the War Graves Commission. His death was particularly unpleasant, which I had to gloss in writing to his family, and has always left a strong impression on me. Moving though it was to be there again, on exactly the point where we were in 1943, it seemed, on this brisk, sunny day in 1999, curiously anti-climactic and hard to imagine as the scene of mine explosions, crackling small arms, thumping mortars, and coloured illuminating lights. All credit to Col. Mike to bring us precisely there.

Truth requires me to add that a Rifleman ran away in the dark. He was court-martialled and suitably punished later, it being my duty as Adjutant to prosecute.

We played no part in the very gallant subsequent assaults by 51st Highland, 50th North Country and 4th Indian Divisions, which, now I read about them and the heavy casualties involved, put our comparatively simple Motor Battalion role into the shade. But despite the crushing of the Wadi Akarit Line, our Armour, with ourselves in support, somehow missed the chance to break out of the opened pass; the Italians under Field Marshal Messe, though very badly mauled, managed to slip away north. The Annals describe this period as "profitless," and it has left little or no impression on me today.

The Annals say that with 7 Motor Brigade in the 1st Armoured Division, and behind the tanks of 2nd Armoured Brigade "advancing from the south, ready to form an anti-tank screen," 8th Army was deployed on a wide front. Our tanks were in contact with 10th Panzer. But it was pretty easy going. Colonel Lyon Corbett Winder, say the Annals, went across on 12 April to meet Major Humphrey Woods, DSO, MC who had left us to be 2nd in command to the 2nd Battalion. Humphrey Woods was sadly killed when in command of a Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry in Normandy a year later. This was the last time the two 60th battalions had contact in action during the war.

Other than the relish of the open, greener country, with fresh eggs and olive trees, these few days, 7-13 April 1943 hold only two memories for me. The first is of seeing and engaging with our Vickers machine guns a group of German motor vehicles between us and the coast, driving north, as they were about eight hundred yards from my platoon. It is only worth mentioning because I read later in Algiers, when I was Adjutant, an Intelligence Report which included a German account that, as far as I could discern, Major Graf von Stauffenberg had been wounded and evacuated, subsequently losing one arm, on the same day and in the same area as my platoon's comparatively puny action. Anyway, it is an interesting thought that we may have been responsible for getting von Stauffenberg back Germany so that he was able to be the protagonist in seeking to blow Hitler up in the historical but unsuccessful "July Plot." He was wounded early enough to be evacuated Germany, a mixed blessing for him. Otherwise he would have been "in the bag" in Egypt. The Official History makes it clear that it was German policy not to evacuate any personnel, high or low in rank, as they were hemmed in, thus providing us with 200,000 prisoners.

My second memory is a visit to the Great Mosque at Kairouan, which I made on my

own, taking off my shoes at the entrance. I do not remember how I managed to get away for this from the Battalion. Perhaps we were halted for the night. Nor do I remember how I knew about Kairouan as the "City of the Daybreak" and one of the greatest centres of Islamic learning. Certainly we had no guidebooks, but I know I had read about the place somehow.

For our 1999 expedition, our two groups were due to drive to the hotel at El Djem to meet for lunch, but we in the "Ambassador Group" had been so enthralled by our return to the Fatnassa Pass that we were late, and the ladies, though we saw them briefly, looking happy, had finished lunch and took off to return home to Tunis. We, for our part, after lunch walked round the amazingly well preserved and huge stone Roman Amphitheatre, where symphony concerts, instead of gladiators, have recently entertained large audiences. We then headed north for a two and a half hour drive to Kairouan.. Tilla records that her group met a lost, white baby camel on the road, yelping for its mother, who came back to fetch it. A symbol of desert life and complete contrast to the bustling industrialisation of Tunisia's larger cities, such as Sfax, through which we passed.

As the Annals record, on 13 April 1943, 1st Armoured Division was warned that we were being transferred, under General Alexander's plan for the final assault on Tunis, to the 1st Army, thus leaving the 8th Army, which for the Battalion had long been its parent body, all the way from the Egyptian desert. We thus drove off north west to Le Kef, our dispersal area. Our carriers went, with the tanks, on transporters. I do not remember much of this period except that we met, for the first time, American troops, which led to a number of hilarious exchanges between G.I.s and Riflemen. We got, for the first time for years, real Scotch whisky, and plenty of cigarettes, also different and nicer rations, all of which led us to feel we were doing rather well in the 1st Army. We had been officially warned not to look down our noses at 1st Army, or give ourselves 8th Army airs. We thought this very funny. General Alexander came to visit us (commander of 18th Army Group). I remember how astonishingly well turned out he was, though I was not one of those selected to meet him; mostly Burma veterans were. We all thought him impressive and charming, a different style entirely to that of Montgomery.

Our 1999 war party arrived at Kairouan just before sunset, and found Le Grand Mosque closed for Friday prayers, so we walked about the enchanting narrow alleys inside the walls, entered an upstairs coffee shop where a camel, in a confined space, works the well, and inspected a fine carpet shop in an old house, where carpets were hung to the ceilings. Then to the hotel, rather grander than Les Troglodytes, and certainly warmer. Ramzi told us there had been hail in Tunis and some snow on the hills. Tilla called from the Residence with news of the Senate vote on Clinton. We had a good and very convivial dinner, with a different bottle of malt. The Manager, who gave us, because of Robin, special attention, said he had worked for Grand Met in London for a number of years. The present season for the hotel, he told us, was largely for shooting parties of Italians who start with wild boar in the hills, and now pursue clouds of small birds (whose name I did not catch, some kind of small pigeon, I think) who strip the ripening olives.

13 February

After early breakfast on a dry sunny but cold morning, we went to the Grand Mosque.

which was open. I am bound to say that although it impressed me again with the fine proportions of its courtyard, walk-up sundial and towers, and the architectural elegance of its interior, I got no jog of memory of it from my visit in 1943. So off we went in 1999 north west to recapture the more vivid experiences of the last phases of our 1943 campaign. (p 359 *et seq* of the Annals). We had some fine views of sun shining on the snow-covered hills to our left. It had also rained on the plain and the tracks through the cultivation were obviously going to be muddy and impassable, so we had to stick to the hard topped, often pot-holed and narrow roads. We decided not to go to Le Kef first, due to Robin's need to get to her Embassy while she could reach Washington, six hours behind, on a Saturday morning.

So we made for the general area of the Battalion's take over from Guardsmen on 23 April 1943, and then on to just west of the Bou Arada-Goubellat road, where we stayed until 26 April. I have no significant memories of this period. This time we all pored carefully over our maps, trusting somewhat to luck to find on the ground what the map indicated. Milestones and sign posts were eagerly scrutinized. We eventually came to Djebel Bon Kournine, "the bare menacing feature with its twin peaks," easily visible from far away, less easily approached on a drivable road. It also seemed less menacing than all the histories describe, and rather more wood-covered than bare. We then spent some time trying to identify the famous Argoub el Megas ridge. The distances were hard to calculate; a number of ridges, steeper than they seemed from afar when we approached them, stretched towards the north. Nor did we ever find a native who recognized the name, or indeed who could give us any practical directions. We finally found it for certain, but had to drive up steeply on a stony track from the German side. This is where A and C companies attacked at night on 29 April as Toby Wake vividly describes in the Annals on page 363. Before that B Company were positioned at the bottom of the ridge, in plain view from enemy-held Kournine and another sharp-pointed feature to our right front which I remembered rather more clearly than Kounine. We stayed there, in fact in the "inevitable outpost of the southern edge of Argoub" until the night attack, from the night of 26/27 April. Although we dug in as far as we could, it was highly uncomfortable, especially made so by the Germans' "Nebelwerfer" mortars, which had the novelty, to us, of a silent approach. Our company lost Pev Sanford, a very young subaltern, whose heavy moustache and old-fashioned manners belied his age, killed on a night patrol, also Jack Brister, the Battalion's remaining American officer, when a shell landed on our company H.Q., merely a trench, in fact, and also wounded, yet again, John Hope and David Karmel, 2nd in command. I distinctly remember that Jack Brister, just graduated from Dartmouth College, New England, had said to me the night before his death, "I think I must go to the American forces now. I want to pass on what I have learned in the Regiment, which has been so much." Apart from shelling and mortars we were threatened by several huge Tiger tanks with "88" guns, which, fortunately, did not extend threats to direct attack, against which we would have had little chance even with our six pounder anti-tank guns. Of our own tanks there was no sign, though after a few days one tank of the Bays put itself in view behind us but then quickly retired behind cover.

I am quite clear that our 1999 group stood on the ridge at its eastern end and looked back down on B company's position. Where we stood there was a sort of farm hovel, with the family coming out and smiling at us. I do not believe that this existed in 1943, though Toby Wake's account, covering the western edge of Argoub, speaks of "a cottage." I remember that in foolhardy fashion I stole round the eastern edge at dawn

on what must have been our last morning and fired, probably ineffectively, with my captured Luger at two Germans who seemed to be carrying some sort of load. In 1999 the ground looked as it did to me that morning in 1943. Colonel Mike took some fine photographs and got them developed for us incredibly fast, before we left on 14 February. They provide a vivid record, as it were of the past and the present. We were all three thrilled to have found Argoub and roundly shook hands like explorers! It certainly felt eerie and almost unbelievable to me.

The Annals say that on the night 30 April A Company was given permission to pull back and refers to A and C Companies' "desperate exposure" to Kournine. They do not refer to B Company here but I have to confess that up to the moment of our own withdrawal, I do not remember any other company to our front. I may be quite wrong (as I wrote above, as a platoon commander one only sees one's own little space) but I think we were the last to leave the area. In any case, I remember we were all very dirty and tired, after little or no sleep. I can see us in our trucks and remember those in mine making our way back to Battalion H.Q., from where, after a day or two, I accompanied Toby Wake's younger brother Peter, a close friend of mine, who was Signals Officer, in a jeep to a hospital, probably in the Corps H.Q. area, to see his brother. I also managed to get new Army issue glasses as my old ones had been knocked off and broken by an alarmingly close explosion on Argoub.

Our 1999 party, at this point, felt we had attained our principal objective. Our Battalion's continued advance in 1943 proved a very nasty experience of being heavily shelled early one morning when unable to disperse in an olive grove in a defile under the Creteville hills, with a number of casualties. Though I remember that morning well, no particular geographical feature made it essential for us to return to it. Moreover, if we were to get to Tunis in time for Robin to do some necessary work, we could not deviate to the Gromballia plain to the east of Tunis. John Hogg describes in the Annals here "the most splendid scenes" of our attempts to organize a prison camp on 11 and 12 May, and simultaneous "looting" of German staff cars.

I do remember one special incident. I happened to be standing with our Colonel, Lyon Corbett Winder, with swarms of prisoners milling around us, when an open jeep drove up. Lt. General Horrocks, Corps Commander, stood up in it and said to Colonel Lyon, who saluted, as did I, "Well, Lyon, this is a good sight and does the Riflemen good, doesn't it?" I could not help thinking at the time that Gen. Horrocks, who had spent most of the First World War as a prisoner of war, felt the sight was doing him good too. He was a fine commander, but did not endear himself to us.

So our party made its way directly to the Embassy in Tunis and I was pleased to be shown Robin's and Mike's fine offices. The building is heavily protected, but as it is entirely vulnerable to any bomb attack from a main road, plans are in hand to build a new Embassy further out, on a green field site, opposite the American School. Dinner that evening, for twenty four, was a splendid occasion. Though we were warned in Col. Mike's briefing notes, it was rather daunting to find it was in our honour, when Robin took my arm and Col Mike took Tilla's down the stairs to the beautifully arranged table. Robin sat opposite me with the French Ambassador (his wife was unable to come), an Admiral who had been Chief of Staff of the French forces in the Gulf War, on her right and the very agreeable newly arrived young British Ambassador on her left. Then came Tilla with the German Ambassador on her left. On my right was the wife of the British Ambassador, who was French, and on my left the wife of the German. Italy was represented by the president of the Italian Veterans'

Organization, who had fought under Marshal Messe and been taken prisoner at the surrender. He told me he had been born in Tunis where his father had been an evidently wealthy merchant before the war. The Tunisian forces were represented by a senior Air Force Officer, and by a splendid retired Major General, looking like a caricature of a French Army officer and extremely genial, who fought for the French outside Dien Bin Phu. We three "*anciens combattants*," all in our late seventies, reminisced convivially in French, but we happily circulated among all as the evening continued.

Notably among the other guests was a well-known Tunisan writer and historian, in national dress, who showed me his gold watch, worn around his neck, which he said his ancestor had been given by the Bey of Tunis.

Without warning Robin tapped her spoon on her glass for silence and then made an eloquent and charming short speech, welcoming us and briefly describing our journey, with thanks to all who had made it possible. I replied impromptu, at first in French and then, as Tilla wrote, more eloquently in English. My theme was that after fighting each other, it was good to be able to share such hospitality, in warm and friendly fashion, and long may such new relationships persist in peace. This seemed to strike the right note and I was surprised to find it met with applause.

14 February

On Sunday morning I went to the Catholic church by the port of La Goulette with Robin, Maggie Law, a charming South African lady, who runs the Residence and takes care of Robin's two daughters, and the girls. The Protestant church has been ruined, in atmosphere, I was told, by a "happy clappy" clergyman and his adherents. There were about fifty at the Catholic church,, singing led by a group of tiny Mother Theresa nuns, all colours in the congregation, and communion with wafer only, as usual. It all gave a good feeling. Then, on return, I was urged by Robin to do a painting. Although there was only an hour before lunch and the bright light, unsuitable for a picture, shone directly into my eyes, I made an effort and am glad to have the result as a reminder of the superb view.

We left after lunch, but were held up before taking off by congestion, as I found out with difficulty, over Barcelona, so we missed our connection. After at first fruitless efforts to get help from Iberia, we were sent by the airline's public relations, taxi and all costs paid, to a first class hotel in the centre of Barcelona. Though exhausted, we had an excellent dinner from an enormous buffet, attentively served. I had a whole bottle of Rosado to restore my morale. We slept well, had a smooth flight down to Alicante, where our driver, whom we had alerted the night before on his mobile, met us, and were home up the autopista in time for lunch. We were amazed to see our mountains covered with snow, like icing sugar, a rare event.

So ended this excellent and nostalgic adventure, which we would never have attempted or had the facilities to attempt without the generous help of the Ambassador and Colonel Ferguson. We felt we owed them more thanks than we could easily express. It was indeed a happy Anglo-American enterprise, entirely appropriate for the "Royal Americans" and renewed links during our war.

I cannot help commenting, in conclusion, on something which our trip made me realize forcefully. As the Annals (p.373) record, just as the Motor Battalion was

reorganized with adequate numbers of six pounder anti-tank guns which, backed up by the long-range Vickers machine gun, enabled it to form a proper pivot of manoeuvre for our armoured regiments with new Shermans, the war was moving away from the theatre in which they could have been so decisive a year earlier. And again, the motor brigade was too heavy in vehicles and too light in assaulting swords (bayonets) for action on the beach heads. So indeed in the Tunisian campaign, although we were usually in the forefront of the action, or thereabouts, we were thankfully spared, except at Argoub El Megas, the hard slogging set piece attacks which took such heavy toll of 51st and 50th Divisions, 4th Indian Division and the Guards Brigade. We were always at it, which was tiring, but never like that, and our actions were much less severe than they had been, overall, in the Desert, and were to be in Italy. Playfair's History does not even mention the 60th or the Rifle Brigade except in the notes, listing how formations were made up. All the same we, our 2nd Battalion and the Rifle Brigade had a steady drain of casualties, among all ranks, all sad, throughout the campaign and perhaps this narrative can, in a small way, revive tributes to the memory of them all, and confirm that they did not die in vain.

J. P. Waterfield
El Portet de Moraira
Costa Blanca
5 March 1998