

The next afternoon all ranks gathered around their Company Headquarters while General Montgomery's pre-battle message was read to them; the pending operation was explained in general and the part they were to play was described in very great detail. From the start line to the infantry objective on the far side of Miteriya Ridge was about three and a half miles; there would be 104 guns supporting the Divisional attack, some on known, likely or supposed defensive posts and some by way of a creeping barrage. This would be the first time a barrage, a number of guns covering the front and lifting their range at predetermined times, had been used on such a scale in North Africa. Barrages large or small did not concern the sappers, but what was of interest was the information that a troop of Scorpions had been placed under the command of each brigade to be used only if the engineers could not get the enemy belts gapped in time.

That night the sappers moved, with their brigades, from the Onsol area to lying-up areas just in rear of the infantry start line. In 5 Brigade two lanes were to be cleared 500 yards apart for the unit supporting arms and the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade. Tenth Armoured Division, which was to break out after the infantry had captured the ridge, was responsible for its own lanes. No. 3 Section, 6 Field Company (Lieutenant St. George), right lane, and 2 Section, 7 Field Company (Lieutenant Page), left lane, were to clear as far as the west side of the first enemy field, whereupon 3 Section (Lieutenant Standish) right and 1 Section (Lieutenant Foster) left were to pass through and carry on to the infantry objective. A small party of sappers would accompany 23 Battalion as far as the minefield and place there at an agreed spot a shaded light for the guidance of the clearing parties. In order to get the vehicles off to a flying start, gaps were made through our own minefield and the greatest care taken to leave no traces for prying enemy patrols.

After lying up throughout the hours of daylight on 23 October, the crucial test was at hand. At about 9 p.m. 23 Battalion, which was to take the first objective some two miles forward, passed the waiting sappers; soon afterwards there followed the two companies of Maoris who were to mop up on each brigade sector. Bright moonlight bathed the silent desert, while out to the west the silhouette of Miteriya barely broke the flatness of the skyline. 'Yet still war seems on either side to sleep.'

At 9.40 p.m. from the sea to Ruweisat Ridge and from Ruweisat to the Qattara Depression belching gun barrels turned

the moonlight red; an avalanche of missiles screamed westwards; magically, lights appeared in the cleared gaps when the need for concealment had passed.

The Maoris left the start line at 10.23 p.m., following 23 Battalion with the sappers close behind. Missed strongposts were to be eliminated as quickly as possible to give the working engineers a clear field; there were no interruptions from this cause for Maoris are very proficient at such jobs.

Lieutenant St. George, on the right-flank lane, writes:

'At 1800 hours on 23 October we moved up to the start line which was taped and waited for zero hour. I went up and inspected the gaps on our own minefield and also checked slit trenches, which could put our trucks out of action if not marked. While on this check, I met Major Skinner and we were discussing how much time was left, when the first 25 pounder shot practically parted our hair, or so it seemed. With the sky lit up from horizon to horizon with flickering gun flashes as the great barrage really got cracking, it was a sight Major Skinner or I will never forget.

'As we were third off the mark after the attacking infantry and the mopping up Maoris, I walked back and gave the order to start up. We sent out small recon party, of I think 3 sappers and Sgt Hill,⁴ with the mopping up Maoris and they had a blue light to plant at any minefield they could find to keep the section on line.

'"Battle Order" was 1 officer and 37 O.R.s spread out in two ranks in extended order with myself in centre of front rank and Sgt. Johnny Brown⁵ in centre of rear rank. Then a three ton truck with our explosives and gear. If our recon party missed a minefield which of course did not show in the desert, we hoped to find it by someone in the extended ranks stumbling on a mine and thus giving us a clue.

'The whole scene was rather unreal to me and I kept getting an impression of a cinema scene with the large moon shining, the flat plain, the terrific noise of the barrage and the red coloured blobs, which were German shells landing but which of course were noiseless in the general din.'

A salvo of these unheard shells landed among the section, wounding St. George and his batman, and Sergeant Brown took charge. His truck became mixed with carriers and unit transport

⁴ Sgt L. W. Hill, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 8 Jan 1918; carpenter; twice wounded.

⁵ Lt J. Brown, DCM, m.i.d.; Waitakere; born England, 13 Jun 1905; engineer; wounded 2 Nov 1942.