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A FRENCH FARCE

Hundreds of British soldiers lay exhausted on the cobblestones of Brest's quayside that afternoon, 16 June 1940. They had marched into the harbour, having left scores of vehicles in fields on the outskirts of town. Many had for weeks endured little sleep, they had been under German air attack repeatedly and what was, for most of them, a first taste of war was ending bitterly. One felt that 'our emotions had been torn to bits'.

An old steamer lay in the harbour, a sitting duck for any Stuka that came over. Everyone just wanted to get on board and quickly away home. Many scanned the skies, anxiously expecting the reappearance of the Luftwaffe. The tide was too low for their ship, the *Manx Lass*, to dock, so men were being taken out on a lighter, a few dozen at a time. As if this process was not already taking an agonising amount of time, the French harbour

master was insisting the vessel could not sail until all the paperwork had been done. In the attitude of the Cherbourg authorities, or indeed of the War Office that had sent them over, the gulf between peacetime procedure and the total war practised by their German enemy could hardly have been more absurd.

The soldiers who sat waiting their turn noticed little boxes being passed around. As each man received his, he saw it was a punnet of fresh strawberries. Some French dockers had taken pity on the Tommies, purloining the fruit from a cargo that was about to be shipped. Many of the British were ravenous as well as tired, so the strawberries tasted delicious.

Two weeks earlier, Britain had removed more than three hundred thousand troops from the beaches at Dunkirk. The soldiers in Brest were members of an armoured division that had been sent over after the initial dispatch of the British Expeditionary Force. However, Germany's blitzkrieg against Belgium and France had moved so swiftly that the British reinforcements had never been able to link up with the main force.

Many of those awaiting the lighter out to the *Manx Lass* were soldiers of the 5th Royal Tank Regiment. They had not brought any tanks to Brest, though: their fighting vehicles were scattered all over northern France. During a week of headlong retreat the battalion, in common with the rest of the British armoured division, had literally gone to pieces.

On the quayside were lorry drivers, spare tank crews and fitters from the battalion. The 5th's Commanding Officer was also there. Inland, a small party of volunteers was moving among the vehicles abandoned at the gates of the town, sabotaging them. Some, armed with hammers, attacked the distributors in the lorries' engines; others put sand in petrol tanks. There were orders against torching the vehicles, but columns of black smoke

arced up into the sky. Fuel dumps were being lit, and other stores too.

The dozen or so tankies disabling the vehicles enjoyed their work. There was something thrilling in so much wanton destruction. In some of the wagons they found abandoned bottles of booze or trinkets, and helped themselves. Eventually, though, word came that Jerry was getting too close. They jumped on a truck and drove as fast as they could for the harbour.

Aboard the *Manx Lass* at last, Frank Cheeseman, a fitter from 5th Tanks, opened fire with his Bren gun as a German plane lined up to attack them. There was a brief cacophony of shooting but no harm done by either side, and as the lone attacker flew off the stress and exhaustion washed over the young soldier; he broke down crying.

The steamer had already gone when the truck carrying the sabotage team roared into the docks in the darkness of early evening. The tank soldiers jumped clear of the wagon, set its accelerator running and watched in delight as the vehicle sped off the dock, sailing through the air before landing in the harbour with an almighty splash. They ran up the gangway of a Royal Navy destroyer that had come into Brest to pick up the last remaining stragglers. Soon they too were underway, disappearing into the darkness.

Just as the rescue vessels sailed from Brest, another column of the 5th Tanks roared into the Channel port of Cherbourg, 150 miles to the north-east. Seven tanks made their way through the streets, and down to the docks. At this point the Commanding Officer and others evacuated at Brest had no idea what had become of the regiment's last working tanks and their exhausted crews.

The mixture of light tanks and cruisers that arrived at Cherbourg were the last runners from three different armoured

squadrons, armed with more than fifty tanks, which had landed in France. Their crews had driven for more than fifty hours without halt in order to make it there. They too had feared air attacks as they rushed up the Cherbourg peninsula, the snapping Germans at their heels. Although the battalion's brief French campaign had been plagued with breakdowns among its British-made tanks, these seven had all completed the last road march of more than two hundred miles. They had nursed the machines, tending to their mechanical peculiarities, stopping every hour to tighten the tracks or find water for leaky radiators.

It hadn't been easy; indeed, at times their march north had assumed a desperate air. On one occasion, with the tanks' fuel supply close to exhaustion, they had pulled in at a petrol station where a forbidding *madame* guarded the pumps. She had initially insisted that there was nothing left to give them, and anyway she didn't have the keys to the locks on the pumps. One of the 5th Tanks soldiers drew his pistol and put it to the woman's head, telling her that 'if she did not find the keys by the time he counted five he would blow her brains out'. The keys were produced by the time he reached 'two' and the soldiers pumped hundreds of gallons into their vehicles. They left her with a receipt signed 'Winston Churchill'.

The army had absorbed hundreds of thousands of conscripts since the war started, but most of this squadron arriving in Cherbourg were regulars, seasoned tank soldiers highly trained in the operation of their war machines. One RTR officer noted: 'My soldiers were of a high standard in every respect, in intelligence, in behaviour, and in their willingness to tackle anything. The soldier of the Royal Tank Corps was in those days the cream of the army.'

Sergeant Emmin Hall had joined eight years earlier. A barrel of a man, tall too, Hall had served on the North West Frontier – what are now the tribal areas of Pakistan – and radiated the quiet

authority of a veteran. A miner's son from Nuneaton in Warwickshire, Hall was the product of unhappy family circumstances, both his brothers and his mother having died when he was young. Escaping his stepmother and hard-drinking father as soon as he could, Hall had joined the army in 1931. Having served in the regular army on a 'six and six' (a contract for six years' full-time service followed by six in the reserves), Hall had been recalled to the colours in 1939 as war became inevitable. Wearing three stripes, and aged twenty-seven by the time of the Cherbourg evacuation, Hall had begun to see the 5th Tanks as his real family and, looking out for the younger men, made sure his tank was the last of the seven to be loaded.

As the war machines were lifted by crane from the quayside to a waiting ship, the drivers watched anxiously. Some took a smoke, others wondered if there was still time for a drink before they embarked. Among the latter was Jake Wardrop, who had joined the 5th in 1937, training as a driver. Wardrop, who had celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday during the late campaign, had rescued his guitar from the tank and was intent on a sing-song before they left. A hard man in the best Glasgow tradition, ready to respond to an insult with his fists, Wardrop was also well read and a perceptive observer of the human condition. Members of his squadron remember 'cat-like eyes', an intense stare, someone who quickly sized up officers and rankers alike.

The drinkers among the regiment had found the campaign convivial enough: the crews had been able to buy wine, beer, calvados or brandy in many of the villages they passed through. They had also bought or taken their food as well, since the army system of supply never kept up with them. One member of the 5th Tanks insisted, 'I never ever had a meal cooked by the army whilst I was in France – we lived off the land.'

Charlie Bull was also on the quayside. He had joined the army not long after Sergeant Hall, also on a 'six and six'. He

had finished his six years of regular service in1938, returning to his native Tutbury in Staffordshire, but the coming of war saw him called up and returning to his old battalion. If Wardrop had an air of danger about him, Bull was harder to read. On the surface he was a stolid, stout Englishman who went through most things uncomplainingly. There was something John Bull about Charlie, an Englishman who craved roast beef and ale, and who could be relied upon to maintain bluff good humour in the face of adversity. Beneath this exterior, though, was a man of more elemental passions, a Jack the Lad in the dance hall who had a taste for fancy cars, women and fine clothes. His life had already been marked by confrontations with authority: while Emmin Hall, from the same start, had gained promotion to sergeant, Bull's problems with peacetime discipline left him a private soldier. For him, the war would offer the chance of redemption.

Bull had found the brief campaign bewildering. Like many, he had been unnerved by the sporadic air attacks when screaming Stuka dive-bombers had dropped on their columns, often without warning. Having come through this ordeal, Charlie wanted to let his mother, the great pole of stability in his life, know all about it.Writing to her back in Staffordshire, the tank driver tried to sum up his feelings about what they had just come through: 'We had a pretty rough time while we were there, as we had to be on the move all the time, we didn't get much sleep either, but I think I liked it, and wouldn't mind going again. I got the wind up once or twice, especially when I could hear bombs whistling down all over the place.'

With the evacuation of this squadron and several hundred soldiers from Cherbourg on 17 June, the regiment's departure was largely complete. But it was not quite as simple as withdrawing from Brest and Cherbourg. Other men had fetched up in other ports. Lieutenant Brian Stone, a 5th Tanks reservist called up at the start

of the war, had been evacuated from Saint-Malo, with the remnants of a group from A Squadron. The lieutenant, who was twenty-one years old, had gone from a private school to work at the head office of Shell in London a couple of years before. An avid reader and lover of classical music, plays and poetry, with blond wavy hair, he was as far from the Blimpish military archetype as it was possible to be. Yet he hungered for adventure, and with war approaching Stone knew where he might find it, so he joined the Territorial Army. Once evacuated and back in Britain, Lieutenant Stone was keen to get back to his unit in order to convince the regular army men who ran the show that he was worthy of the command of tanks.

Few of the battalion's five hundred plus souls remained in France. Just six men had been killed during the brief campaign. They had died during the one formal engagement that they had fought, on 28 May, advancing on the little town of Saint-Valéry-sur-Somme. There the tanks had been thrown forward in an attack that was supposed to be supported by French infantry. The allies failed to materialise, so the armour was soon hit by the Germans defending the place. A few tanks were knocked out before the operation was called off, with just one of the British commanders claiming a kill.

Parties of the 5th, in common with the other remnants taken away in that evacuation from France, landed in ports all along the southern coast of England and Wales. Other members of the battalion were scattered even further afield, but whose fate would be closely tied to the men returning from France.

Gerry Solomon had volunteered for the tanks soon after the outbreak of war. He had endured three months of square-bashing – parade-ground drill under bawling instructors from the cavalry – before being sent for further training as a driver/mechanic. Tall, earnest and motivated, Solomon represented the wartime volunteer, that great tide of humanity being pressed

into khaki. Such was the shortage of weapons and scale of Britain's mobilisation during those early months of war that their training had focused largely on military basics such as map-reading and physical fitness. When his future colleagues were reassembling themselves as a battalion in Warminster, Trooper Solomon was sitting in a classroom being taught at a civilian garage. It had been pressed into the war effort in order to teach the new recruits about ignition systems, crankshafts, and clutch plates. He was nervous about how the returning veterans – most of them regular soldiers – would react to a civilian like him, turning up as a tank driver/mechanic, without ever having taken a spanner to a real tank, let alone driven one.

The state of flux in which regiment, army, nation and industry found itself that summer of 1940 extended even to where the war should be prosecuted. With the fall of France, attention had moved from helping allies on the Continent to self-preservation. Precautions against invasion were under way everywhere, from sowing mines on possible landing beaches to hoisting barrage balloons over London. But even at this moment of supreme national peril, Britain could not forget that it was a global empire whose colonial possessions might become targets for Germany's allies, Italy and Japan.

In Egypt, on 10 June, a British garrison that had been idling away the days joined the war. Italy had entered the fray and everyone at Headquarters in Cairo knew that this would soon mean war on the desert border with Libya, where a substantial Italian colonial garrison was based. Egypt was, at this time, the one place outside England where the British army had significant numbers of tanks. British commanders were busily trying to put as much of their garrison on tracks or wheels – mechanising and motorising regiments – as they could, recognising that a war in North Africa would involve large distances and rapid movement.

Lieutenant Arthur Crickmay, having joined the 5th Royal Tank Regiment at the outbreak of war, had been posted to the 6th RTR in Egypt late in 1939. Crickmay, aged twenty-four in the summer of 1940, was something of a dandy, whose careful attention to his clothes and the trim of his moustache masked an underlying diffidence or shyness. Like Trooper Solomon he hailed from Suffolk, and like Lieutenant Stone his family was far from wealthy. As the months of phoney war had ticked by, Crickmay was cheered to find his pay went far in Cairo, where he brushed up his squash game at the Gezira Sporting Club, acquired a Chrysler for touring about and ate well at numerous watering holes.

Crickmay may have embraced the social or sporting preferences of an English gentleman but he was no dilettante in the business of war. During several desert exercises with the 6th he had become proficient in the tricky business of navigation across often featureless sands, returning from one two-hundred-mile round trip to rescue a stranded tank crew with a sense of exultation at his achievement. An architecture student when the war broke out, he was intelligent, well read and technically proficient – a man ideally suited to the command of a troop of tanks. Returning from a desert exercise in May 1940, Crickmay wrote home, 'actually I enjoyed myself a great deal . . . I seem to have been a soldier all my life'.

While Brian Stone had yet to prove himself to the point at which he would be given command of a troop of tanks (usually three or four vehicles) Crickmay had already made his mark with the regular officers who ran his battalion. The two men represented a new generation, drawn into this branch of the army because it embodied technology and modernity. There was also a definite class aspect to choosing the Royal Tank Regiment. While Britain's cavalry had begun to mechanise in the 1930s, its officers generally had the money to ride to hounds and shun

those they regarded as social climbers. One officer who joined the RTR at that time comments of its commissioned element on the eve of war:

> The officers of the Royal Tank Corps were an odd mixture in those days. Some had been the pioneers of tanks during the First World War. They were of all kinds and tended to be men of character. Some were officers who had joined since the war, because they saw the corps as the arm of the future . . . The younger officers tended to be more homogeneous in origin, mostly promising games players who had an interest in motor cars or motor cycles and little or no private income – very much the same material as those who joined the RAF.

Lieutenants Stone and Crickmay fit neatly into that category. Indeed, as a teenager Crickmay had amazed his family by converting an old motorbike into a four-wheeled motorised buggy. But whereas a dashing young man who joined the Royal Air Force might find himself at the controls of a Hurricane or Spitfire, those who became tank soldiers were equipped with decidedly less exciting machines. The returnees from France knew that many of their tanks had broken down and been left by the wayside.

Solomon, Stone or Crickmay had volunteered for tanks because they knew that Britain had invented this form of warfare. What they could not have appreciated was the degree to which that early lead had been squandered during the inter-war years. That was just starting to become apparent on the battlefield. Tank production and design had been run down to the point that, in 1930, the entire country had manufactured just sixteen. When rearmament started in earnest, from 1936 onwards, the threat of air attack led ministers to give priority to the RAF. In

the meantime, other countries – including Germany and the Soviet Union – had made great strides in the development of their armoured forces.

The balance of power, as it applied to the tank forces that many generals in 1940 considered to be the essential element of modern land warfare, had therefore tilted decidedly against Britain. Yet the British General Staff remained convinced that it understood this vital branch of war as well or better than any other, and the Royal Tank Regiment had staked its name on excellence in this very field.

By the late summer of 1940, the 5th Royal Tank Regiment was being equipped with replacement tanks. Daily its men, based in southern England, watched the German aircraft flying up to bomb London. The Battle of Britain had been joined in earnest, but even before its outcome was clear, and the threat of invasion passed, rumours of foreign service were sweeping the battalion. The fates of Arthur Crickmay, Brian Stone, Emmin Hall, Jake Wardrop, Charlie Bull and Gerry Solomon were becoming linked by the destiny that awaited their unit. Some became as close as brothers, others were on little better than nodding or saluting terms, but they would all play significant parts in the 5th Battalion's odyssey. Two of these six would not survive the road to victory, and two more would be taken out of the war by serious injury. Along the way they would all be promoted, two would be decorated for bravery and one banished from the regiment for fomenting a revolt. The path that awaited the men of the 5th Tanks was one of unequal contests, disappointment and intense personal danger. But it was also one that would be crowned with triumph.

2

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

The flotsam of the 5th Tanks washed up in Thursley Camp in Surrey. While some places the army called 'Camp' were in fact settled towns with a long history of being garrisoned, Thursley was one in the real sense of the word, with lines of tents, soldiers standing guard and the constant throb of vehicles arriving or leaving. The settlement had been placed in a dip below the Thursley village common, a few miles from the leafy vistas of the Devil's Punch Bowl, a popular spot with picnickers on the old London to Portsmouth road. It was to this picturesque setting that Trooper Gerry Solomon reported in September 1940, in his own words 'relieved' at not being sent to a cavalry regiment, 'anxious' about how the veterans of France would regard him, and 'hungry' for action.

Having presented himself at Regimental Headquarters, itself

tented, the new recruit awaited his fate. At twenty-four, Solomon was more mature than many of the recruits the pre-war regular army was used to receiving. By the time war broke out, he had been working for several years as a grocer's clerk, pedalling his bike around the more genteel parts of Ipswich, taking orders for produce. He was also a more sober character than the old sweats who had drunk their way through the brief campaign in France, being the grandson of a Methodist minister and one of five boys raised by a devout mother.

The advent of national service produced a huge expansion of the army, drawing in a wider spectrum of society than those who ran it were used to dealing with. Many recruits realised that war was coming, and by volunteering hoped to have some control over their fate. 'I didn't want to get into the infantry,' said Solomon, who had heard enough from his father about their suffering in the trenches during the Great War. 'That definitely weren't me. If I want to go into action, I want to ride into action.' His reaction was typical of many soldiers who volunteered for this branch even before the war; they had heard about the slaughter of the Somme or Ypres, and knew that a British invention, the tank, had broken the stalemate. They wanted to be part of that.

A year into the war, the arrival of wartime volunteers such as Solomon was still a novelty for a battalion like 5th RTR. So far, its manpower had been based on pre-war professional soldiers (like Trooper Wardrop from the Cherbourg column), and reservists who were either recalled regulars like Sergeant Hall and Charlie Bull or greenhorns with a modicum of training such as Lieutenant Brian Stone. In time, the war volunteers and conscripts would form a majority within the battalion, but in late 1940 many saw them as alien creatures, basically civvies who hadn't a clue what they were doing. As Stone had discovered in France, there was a sense in both the officers' mess and the

barrack room of regular army men not wanting to let the newcomers play in their war, something that they had waited years for.

For the battalion, then, the first question with a new arrival was where to put him. The 5th Tanks, in common with other armoured regiments at the time, had five major components: the fighting squadrons labelled A, B, and C; the headquarters squadron; and the 'echelon'. HQ Squadron included the colonel's immediate staff, people like the medical officer, the fitters (who repaired stricken vehicles), the padre and the regimental sergeant major, as well as some troops of vehicles. The echelon was its wheeled transport, equipped with trucks to move shells, petrol, rations and people up to the tanks. In practice, this transport was broken down into a main group that dealt with bringing supplies to the battalion, and forward groups (one for each fighting squadron) that took them onwards to the tanks.

Trooper Solomon was not a properly trained armoured vehicle driver. Indeed, until he arrived at Thursley he had not even been in a working tank. There simply weren't enough to equip the newly mobilised units and training bases. The non-commissioned officers would also want to get some sense of the man before they assigned him to one. Solomon was therefore sent to A Squadron but entered in the books as 'L.O.B.' – Left Out of Battle. He entered that pool of soldiers, which included Lieutenant Brian Stone, who would get their chance to crew a tank when some unfortunate man became a casualty. Both Stone and Solomon found themselves assigned in September 1940 to A Squadron's transport packet, manning the trucks that brought up supplies. Solomon looked at Stone, with his blond wavy hair, blue eyes and passion for high culture, and wasn't quite sure about him: 'We found him a little effeminate.'

After France, with the threat of German invasion high, the 5th

Tanks were placed in a home defence role. They sent guards out to various points, and Trooper Solomon was detailed to drive out in a lorry to change over the men on duty or to bring supplies. By late September, however, the armoured battalion had begun to regain its purpose. New tanks arrived throughout July and August, and it was now time for the squadrons to begin exercising with them on the local heathland. Crews melded together once more, and the unit regained its pride as a group of professional tank soldiers.

On Saturday nights some of the officers would walk up the hill from the camp to Admiral Robert Hamilton's house, not far from the common. He was a Great War sailor whose nieces had told the 5th's commanding officer that they would happily entertain some young subalterns each week.

The boys and girls would meet, eat sandwiches, drink beer and play records in the admiral's sitting room. There was dancing and good-natured flirting. One of the women remembers the tank officers first arriving just a few weeks after the evacuation of France: 'They were all very stressed, but we obviously didn't realise what they had been through.' With time the mood became more relaxed. Lieutenant Stone was a regular at these parties, as was his firm friend in A Squadron, Lieutenant Deryck MacDonald, who soon became enamoured of one of the admiral's nieces. While their soldiers enjoyed big bands on the radio or in nearby Guildford, the young officers' Saturday night assemblies in Thursley resounded to light-hearted French ballads.

Sport provided another release from daily training and the expectation of further action. Within the Royal Tank Regiment the various battalions tended to specialise in different sports. Among the men of the 5th, the boxing team held particular status. Jake Wardrop was a boxer – constantly out running and sparring with his teammates. In matters of organised violence, as

in music, the officers' tastes were generally for something a little more subtle, with rugby being a particular favourite. The rugby team contained all ranks, and its fixtures against other regiments were, as for the boxing team's matches, occasions for fierce rivalry and unit pride. Charlie Bull's idea of sporting recreation, however, was less aggressive. He and quite a few others spent free Sunday afternoons at the Guildford Lido, swimming, enjoying the summer weather and eyeing up women.

The waifs and strays evacuated from Cherbourg returned to their original squadrons. So Wardrop went back to C, as did Sergeant Emmin Hall. Charlie Bull, meanwhile, was in B Squadron. All three men served on tank crews.

In joining the RTR Gerry Solomon donned its distinctive black beret, and also the black overalls (called denims by the soldiers) which were used when working on the vehicles. The officers carried long sticks – ash plants – instead of the swagger sticks of other regiments, a tradition that went back to the Western Front, when tank commanders walked ahead of their lumbering vehicles, prodding the mud with the ash plants to make sure it was firm enough to take the tanks' weight.

The inter-war years of cuts to the army and economic depression followed by rearmament had left scars on those of its armoured branch. These emerged in the constant arguments among officers about the best tactical use of tanks, and in the other ranks a jeering contempt for the newly mechanised cavalry. Until the mid-1930s, the Royal Tank Corps had maintained a near monopoly on the crewing of armoured fighting vehicles, reserving unto itself the right to regulate their employment on the battlefield in much the same way as the Royal Engineers might opine over where to build a bridge or the Royal Artillery advise a divisional commander on the best type of barrage to neutralise his enemy.

Starting in 1936, the army decided that it must do something urgently to boost the strength of its tank force. War clouds were gathering and Germany, France and Russia had all surged ahead of Britain in the creation of armoured divisions, which, bound by tradition, retained dozens of regiments of horsed cavalry across the empire. The Tank Corps had started to expand – but only slowly. It had fielded six battalions, each with forty to fifty tanks, when the decision to accelerate mechanisation was reached. Another two regular units (the 7th and 8th RTR) were raised before the outbreak of war. By the time the 5th were at Thursley Camp a further twelve units of RTR, created on a Territorial or reserve basis, had formed or were in the process of gathering. Many experienced officers and NCOs were drawn out of the 5th and other regular battalions to help with this mobilisation. Nonetheless, even as early as 1936 those running the army had decided that the expansion required could not be handled by the Tank Corps alone. Their decision testified to the political clout of cavalry generals within the British set-up, since other countries such as the US and Canada managed to form their armoured divisions from scratch, without mechanising cavalry or indeed even having a professional cadre such as the Royal Tank Corps to fall back on.

The Imperial General Staff, however, had decided that catching up demanded the mechanisation of the cavalry. The British army's equestrian tradition was such that, even as the machine age powered forwards, many in the mounted arm were loath to lose their horses. The 1936 manual prepared by the army for the substitution of hay-fed chargers with petrol-driven ones tried to minimise the shock, noting that 'the principles of training in field operations given in Cavalry Training (horsed) are, in general, applicable to Armoured Car Regiments'. What would the relationship be between them and the Tank Corps? The top brass knew they might make poor bedfellows, since they had spent

years competing for resources, bad-mouthing one another time and again.

The answer, in 1939, was the formation of the Royal Armoured Corps, in which the erstwhile horse soldiers and the Royal Tank Corps were pushed together with much ill feeling. The wearers of the black beret were to be styled the Royal Tank Regiment, it being one element of the Royal Armoured Corps. At the same time that the new corps was formed, twelve cavalry regiments were earmarked for the first wave of mechanisation.

Among the old sweats in Thursley Camp there was still much use of Tank-Corps terminology: calling men like Solomon 'private' instead of 'trooper', referring to 'companies' rather than 'squadrons', or 'sections' rather than 'troops'. The rejected language was that of the cavalry. Although members of the unit slowly changed their lexicon, the use of the word 'battalion' to describe the 5th RTR persisted until the end of the war. It did so stubbornly, despite the Royal Armoured Corps edict that such bodies of the old Tank Corps would simply become 'regiments' of the RAC, a cavalry term used by the likes of the 11th Hussars or King's Dragoon Guards.

The question of which word to use was one of those awkward issues of British military identity. In most armies, a regiment is a group of battalions, but the cavalry had retained the term even when the body of men and machines in question (say six hundred and fifty, respectively) was closer in size and command terms to a foreign battalion. In keeping with the professional armoured soldiers' desire to differentiate themselves from the equestrian fraternity, this account will refer to the 5th Tanks as 'the battalion'. One of its members, who had experienced the formation of the Royal Armoured Corps, said that the tankies felt demoted, 'from a high and mighty corps to a regiment', adding, 'We didn't like the cavalry. "Donkey bashers", we called them.' Stories abounded of RTR men sent to help newly mechanised cavalry regiments,

only to discover that most of their vehicles weren't working. The general view was that they might know how to groom a horse, but were clueless as to the maintenance of such a complex piece of machinery.

Gerry Solomon had experienced none of the unpleasantness of 1938, but through his training in Tidworth, where there was a mixed staff of cavalry and tankie instructors, he soon acquired the sense that the RTR was the place to be. Like many recruits, he noticed that those from the cavalry were more preoccupied with 'bull' such as the minutiae of dress, parade-ground drill and deference towards those in command. He also had the feeling that, although many regiments were at last forsaking their beloved horses, their cavalry spirit was more likely to get them killed: 'I got the impression, somehow or other, that the cavalry . . . couldn't forget that they didn't have horses and would go charging in.' Arriving in the 5th Tanks, recruits were told it operated on the principle of 'shit and efficiency' – it didn't matter what things looked like; what was vital was that they worked properly.

The sense that they were better than erstwhile horse soldiers – smarter, more technically proficient and well led – was all very fine but did not sit easily with the late events in France. Some other battalions of the RTR had distinguished themselves just before Dunkirk with an effective counter-attack against the advancing Germans at Arras. But as far as the 5th Tanks was concerned, it had been a dismal campaign in which the battalion had been scattered with just a single claimed kill of an enemy tank. At Thursley the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dinham Drew, therefore drove his men hard to put the regiment back on its feet and restore its confidence. Infractions of discipline were swiftly punished, earning him the nickname 'Detention' Drew. He drove his young officers too, drilling them in the manoeuvres needed to bring a squadron into battle.

In addition to moulding his men, the colonel also had to oversee the re-equipment of the regiment, and the tanks that arrived in Thursley had plenty of peculiarities. Just as the army struggled to create new regiments, so industry strived to step up production massively, while embracing the technological changes needed to meet the Germans.

The 5th RTR had been built to a strength of fifty-two tanks. Four of these were being kept by the commanding officer and others in battalion headquarters, and sixteen went to each of the three squadrons. A Squadron, which had a reconnaissance role in the field, had been given tanks called A9s. B and C Squadrons were equipped with A13s. There were similarities between these two types, which both represented the evolution of what the army termed 'cruiser' tanks: they shared a main gun, the two-pounder, and were lightly armoured. However, the steel plate on the front of the A9 was just 14mm thick, which was only enough to stop a rifle shot or shell splinters. The A13 had started with similar armour but been upgraded to 30mm. The A13 weighed in at thirteen tons and the A9 at twelve. They were designed for quick, decisive strokes rather than slugging it out.

Getting to grips with the tanks for the first time, those who had come through the wartime training system would have been struck by the cramped interiors of the A9 and A13. The War Office had decreed that the tanks should fit on standard railway flatcars, and this made them narrower than some continental designs. When squeezed from the top down, because a lower profile meant a smaller target, this compressed the available space within the armoured shell. For this reason the V12 Nuffield engine in the back of the hull was very hard to work on, and the turret, for example of the A13, particularly small. Three men had to fit inside it: commander, gunner and wireless operator or gun loader. The gunner had no hatch of his own in the turret roof and could only observe the world through the narrow aperture of

his gun-aiming telescope as he was bounced about. The wireless operator and commander had their own hatches, but these were a tight squeeze for some of the battalion's boxers or other big men who had to push one shoulder down through the hatch before the other. As those who had just been in France could testify, the design of these tanks added to the difficulty of maintaining them, and created a sense of claustrophobia, particularly if you worried about being able to get out quickly.

During the tactical debates of the inter-war years the army had ruled that there should be two types of tanks, cruisers like those given to the 5th RTR and 'infantry' tanks. The latter, as the name implied, were designed to support foot soldiers in battle. Consequently they were heavily armoured and slow-moving. The cruisers, by contrast, were to form armoured divisions that would be used for the more exciting stuff – racing forward to block a gap in friendly lines, or to exploit one in the enemy defences. The British theorists also expected the cruisers to do most of the tank-to-tank fighting, but the enemy could not be expected to adhere to these tactical distinctions decreed by the British General Staff. So when the Arras battle took place, in May 1940, it pitted British infantry tanks against German armour with results that were cheering but a little inconvenient for those who believed in having two different types of vehicle. The Matilda – the infantry tank – was much better armoured than the cruisers, with frontal protection almost three times as thick as that of the A13, and the Germans encountered considerable difficulties knocking out Matildas. The tank had proven a success even if the campaign as a whole had not.

All three tanks – Matilda, A9 and A13 – shared the same gun, the two-pounder or 37mm tank gun. This weapon had been designed to drive a small metal projectile, weighing two pounds and roughly the size of a small pear, through the armour of an enemy tank. The whole round, comprising the projectile and a

brass case containing an explosive charge that sent it down the barrel, was about eighteen inches long; it could easily be picked up with one hand. Knocking out an enemy tank with a slug this small required a gun that could shoot it at high speed, and in this respect the two-pounder, which sent its shell down range at 2700 feet per second, was good for its time (the mid-1930s). The combination of a two-pound shot and this speed of travel was sufficient to pierce 50mm of armour angled at 30 degrees at a thousand yards. If it penetrated the enemy vehicle the shot might pass through a man, disable a vital piece of equipment or, since it was often red hot, cause the explosion of ammunition or fuel inside. Gunnery instructors appreciated that this might not happen on the first shot; it might take many hits to knock out the enemy tank.

The crews preparing their tanks for deployment from Thursley Camp had been taught that the two-pounder was their weapon of choice for dealing with enemy armour. If they came up against infantry, anti-tank guns or other resistance they were instructed to use the machine guns mounted on their tanks. There was no high-explosive shell for the two-pounder gun, a consequence of Tank Corps dogma that deemed a gun firing armour-piercing rounds only was sufficient to do battle with enemy ones, and of the practical difficulty of packing much power into so small a shell. The crews in any case were confident that their two-pounders could sort out the Italian tanks in Libya – and in this particular matter their optimism was not misplaced.

As for the build of these tanks, it had something in common with Bristols, Morgans and Rileys, the great British sports cars of the day: there was a good deal of engineering ingenuity in them. The A9 had a power traversing system to help the gunner lay his weapon more quickly onto the target – one of the first tanks so equipped. The A13 had a new kind of suspension that allowed it to travel more quickly and comfortably across country. British

tanks also embodied, like their sports-car counterparts, craftsmanship. They were built by British engineers – often in the same plants that built railway locomotives or ships – and each vehicle arrived in Thursley from the factory with a highly polished brass plate giving its serial number and manufacturers' details.

The War Office contracted big industrial concerns as part of the mobilisation of British industry. A9 tanks were made by Harland & Wolff and Vickers-Armstrong; the A13 by Nuffield Aero, as well as the London, Midland & Scottish railway works. Tank production was also underway at several other factories that had previously made rolling stock or civilian vehicles. Many of the engineers were unused to working on tanks, and so production brought myriad challenges of fitting together components from suppliers they had not previously dealt with. 'Concessions', the permitted variations in the shape of parts, were generous, a fault that 'cost millions of lost man hours', according to Major George MacLeod Ross, one of Britain's leading tank designers. Contrasting British methods with what he saw a couple of years later in America, MacLeod Ross wrote:

> We still pursued our love affair with 'craftsmanship', which may be defined as, 'the ability to fit two things together which do not fit'. There was no place for craftsmanship in an American production plant, even the presence of a vice or a bench in such factories was regarded as a sign of incompetence. Accuracy was invariably the enemy of craftsmanship.

The fitters in 5th Tanks knew all too well what he was talking about. A complex machine like a tank was only as strong as its weakest component. Within weeks of getting their vehicles, soldiers were reporting frequent breaks in the tracks on the A9 as well as all sorts of problems with the fan belts and engine cooling on the A13. These issues of reliability might have been

overcome by deploying large numbers, but shifting production beyond the scale of a cottage industry proved problematic. During the first year of the war, by pressing so many new plants into service, Britain managed to produce about 1300 tanks – a respectable total, and one comparable to Germany's. But the British made a dozen different types, half of which were already obsolete, whereas the Germans concentrated production on a smaller number of more effective models. Crucially, they also insisted upon building to exacting engineering tolerances, reaping their reward in superior reliability.

While training in Surrey the 5th had put on a number of demonstrations, one of them for some American visitors. The US army had gone even further than the British in its disarmament years, disbanding entirely its nascent tank corps. Even though the United States was officially neutral at this time, the country was rapidly re-establishing both armoured regiments and mass-production facilities, while the British government was negotiating to buy weapons from American factories. The US army saw the RTR as natural partners in the business of tank soldiering.

By October 1940 the feeling in southern England was that the country had weathered the worst that the Luftwaffe could do. Hitler had postponed the invasion of Britain, while the war was spreading worldwide. Italian forces were operating in East Africa, as well as launching bombing raids on Egypt, Palestine and Malta. Japan, meanwhile, aligned itself with Germany and Italy. The 5th Tanks had reformed itself and rediscovered a well-practised confidence in its tactical exercises.

On 5 October the regiment was assembled in Thursley Camp for a short, sharp address. Colonel Drew told them the battalion had been ordered on overseas service. The men would be entitled to 'embarkation leave' of a few days each. Charlie Bull reported to his mother, 'We are under orders to move again any

time now, don't know where we are going of course, but we are being issued with tropical kit', but was simply observing the security instructions imposed on soldiers heading overseas. Where they were heading was in fact common knowledge within the battalion.

The men were issued with such items as the sola topi or pith helmet, and khaki drill shorts. The removal of several dozen NCOs and officers in order to form a new RTR battalion meant some last-minute promotions. Bull got his first tape, becoming a lance corporal, but Stone and Solomon remained Left Out of Battle in A Squadron.

As departure time drew near, the young subalterns made their way up to Admiral Hamilton's house on Saturday nights for one last time. Fond farewells were taken and the girls tried to lighten the mood with their choice of records. Charles Trenet's '*J'Attendrai*'– 'I Will Wait' – played. Brian Stone had not found love at these parties even if he had enjoyed them enormously, but his friend Deryck MacDonald had fallen in a few weeks for Brenda Pitt, the admiral's niece, and they promised to write to one another.

By the end of October the young officers and most of the rest of the battalion were awaiting embarkation in two northern ports. Most of the men were leaving from Liverpool, while the tanks, trucks and most of the drivers were to go from Glasgow on the *Clan Chattan*. After waiting briefly on the Clyde, the *Clan Chattan*'s convoy formed up and sailed out to sea. For Glaswegian Jake Wardrop the departure was particularly evocative. 'I pointed out Dumbarton Rocks, the Gairloch, and Loch Long to the Englishmen,' he wrote in his diary. 'I was off to the war and far away too.' Trooper Solomon stood on deck, watching Britain disappear on the murky horizon. There were no regrets. 'I was full of the spirit of adventure,' he said, 'I wanted to get in the action.'