

The Desert Rats Association New sletter 2015-16



Where have we come from?

In 1938, Maj Gen Percy Hobart flew to Egypt to “Create an Armoured Division” from the Cairo Cavalry Brigade. The Brigade deployed to Western Egypt to conduct training and became known as the “Mobile Division.” Its order of battle was a Light Armoured Brigade, a Heavy Armoured Brigade and a Pivot Group (Artillery and Motorised Infantry).

In Feb 1940 the Mobile Division was officially re-designated the 7th Armoured Division with the Heavy Armoured Brigade re-designated as 4th Armoured and the Light as 7th Armoured Brigades. Its emblem was the famous ‘Red Rat,’ designed by the then GOC, Maj Gen Creigh, and sewn by his wife who was a nurse in Cairo. The first ‘Rat’ was worn by the General’s Command Vehicle Commander, Len Burrit, who remains a member of the Association to this day.

When war came to the desert theatre of operations in Jun 1940, the Division

was involved initially with border raids against the Italian Army, then mobile battles against the Deutsches Afrika Korps and the Italians. In Nov 1941, it took part in Operation CRUSADER, culminating in the bloody battles around Sidi Rezegh where the Division was virtually destroyed defending the airfield.

In Jan 1942, 7th Armoured Brigade deployed to the Far East to fight the Japanese Imperial Army in Burma. With great skill the Brigade covered the general retreat from Rangoon, the defence of the oil fields at Mandalay and then conducted operations on the Indian border. In 1943 it returned to the Middle East, serving in Iraq, Syria and then Egypt before deploying to Italy in May 1944, as an Independent Armoured Brigade. There it took part in helping break the GOTHIC and the HITLER Lines, before pushing up the Adriatic coast, crossing the Senio River and advancing on towards Venice and Trieste. At the end of the Second World War the brigade remained based in Northern Italy until early 1946 when it was disbanded.

Meanwhile 4th Armoured Brigade remained with the Division and fought in all the major desert battles, including El Alamein. It was during the final

push on Tripoli that it too became an Independent Armoured Brigade and adopted the ‘Black Rat’ emblem. After the completion of the North African campaign, the Brigade landed in Scilly, then mainland Italy before returning to England in Jan 1944 to prepare for Operation OVERLORD. From Normandy, 4 Brigade, as part of 21st Army Group, fought its way in to Germany, over the Rhine and up into Hamburg. In Mar 1948 it was disbanded, but was reformed in 1981 in Munster, West Germany.



The 7th Armoured Division's long and illustrious history finally came to an end in April 1958, when it was converted into 5th Division. 22nd Armoured Brigade was re-designated 7th Armoured Brigade in 1948 where it remained stationed in Soltau, throughout the Cold War, and then moved to Bergen-Hohne on 1st April 1993.

Since the end of the Cold War both Brigades deployed on Operation GRANBY in 1991 to liberate Kuwait. 7

Brigade returned to Iraq in 2003 to help destroy Saddam Hussein's regime. Both Brigades have deployed on a number of peace-keeping operations in the Balkans, and operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Desert Rat Association was founded in 1998 to provide a fitting memorial to the Desert Rats. The association is now run by Rod and Tina Scott who have organised annual reunions since 2000. The current membership stands at about 100, of whom 30 are original Desert Rats.

Where are we now?



The past few years have been extremely busy for the 4th Mechanized Brigade, "The Black Rats." The Brigade moved to its new home in Catterick in 2009. Since then the Brigade has deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan on a number of occasions. Most recently the Black Rats deployed to Afghanistan in 2010 under command of Brigadier Richard Felton on Operation HERRICK 12, returning

in 2013 during Brigadier Bob Bruce's command tenure on Operation HERRICK 17. During both tours the Brigade was the lead formation of British troops in Helmand, which saw it working in support of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. In 2014 the Black Rats were re-designated 4 Infantry Brigade and Headquarters North-East under the command of Brigadier Charlie Herbert. The Brigade now has responsibility for the North East region of the England and comprises a mixture of regular and Reserve elements as part of the Adaptable Force structure of the Army under the Army 2020 programme. Operations remain at the forefront of what they do. Recently elements have deployed once more to Bosnia under Operation ELGIN and to Mali to train the Malian Armed Forces under Operation NEWCOMBE. The Brigade has a mixture of light infantry units and light cavalry, the latter equipped with the JACKAL vehicle that proved so effective in Afghanistan. In an intriguing link to our past the Brigade also has responsibility for the Army's overseas engagement activity in North Africa. This means that once again members of the Black Rats can be found in the deserts of the Maghreb upholding the very finest traditions of a historic formation.



7th Armoured Brigade's recent history has been dominated by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011 the Brigade deployed on Op HERRICK 14 in support of 3 Commando Brigade. It then deployed on Op HERRICK 19 for an extended tour resulting in the merger of Task Force Helmand with Regional Command (South West) under command of Brigadier James Woodham. This was the final UK Brigade deployment to Afghanistan and saw the end of combat operations in September 2014. The Brigade then returned to Germany for the final time hosting a celebrations parade in Hohne and Bergen commemorating their unsurpassed history and long standing relationship between with the German communities that that supported them for 76 years. The Red Rats moved to Chilwell in January 2015 and were re-designated 7 Infantry Brigade and Headquarters East under Brigadier Jonny Bourne. Like the Black Rats, 7 Brigade is a mix of Regular and Reserve units and forms part of the Adaptable Force with a combination of Light Infantry, Protected Mobility and

Light Cavalry units. Continuing their operational pedigree 7 Brigade was the first formation to deploy troops on Op TORAL, the latest UK contribution to operations in Afghanistan. The Brigade is also supporting operations throughout the world including Op NEWCOMBE in Mali and FIRIC in the Falkland Islands. As part of the Army's commitment to overseas engagement the Red Rats are aligned to West Africa and have already deployed multiple Short Term Training Teams to Nigeria in support of the Nigerian Army's fight against Boko Haram.

Where are we going?

The aim of this first Newsletter is to raise awareness of the Association and to encourage the current generation of Desert Rats to join. Membership is £10 and you can join by signing up on the website: desertrats.org.uk

The Association's Annual Reunion takes place on Sunday 21 June on the original D-Day training site. The day includes a service, parade and a host of displays and stands – including WWII military equipment. Timings and location can be obtained from the website. Please come and show your support.