

= 20th Battalion (New Zealand) =

The 20th Battalion was an infantry battalion of the New Zealand Military Forces , which served during the Second World War as part of the 2nd New Zealand Division . During the war it was converted to an armoured regiment .

The 20th Battalion was formed in New Zealand in 1939 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Howard Kippenberger . After a period of training it embarked for the Middle East and then onto Greece in 1941 as part of the 2nd New Zealand Division . It participated in the Battles of Greece and later in Crete . Evacuated from Crete , it then fought in the North African Campaign . It suffered heavy losses during Operation Crusader , when it was effectively destroyed by the 15th Panzer Division . Brought back up to strength , the battalion played a key role in the breakout of the 2nd New Zealand Division from Minqar Qaim in June 1942 , where it had been encircled by the 21st Panzer Division . The following month , the battalion suffered heavy casualties during the First Battle of El Alamein .

In October 1943 , the battalion was converted to an armoured unit and designated 20th Armoured Regiment . To replace men lost at El Alamein , personnel were drawn from a tank brigade being formed in New Zealand . The regiment spent a year in Egypt training with Sherman tanks , before embarking for Italy in October 1943 to join the Eighth Army . It participated in the Italian Campaign , fighting in actions at Orsogna and later at Cassino . The regiment finished the war in Trieste and remained there for several weeks until the large numbers of Yugoslav partisans also present in the city withdrew . Not required for service in the Pacific theatre of operations , the regiment was disestablished in late 1945 .

= = History = =

= = = Formation = = =

Following the outbreak of the Second World War , the New Zealand government authorised the formation of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) , for service at home and abroad . Following consultation with the British Government , it was decided that the main New Zealand contribution to the war effort would be in the form of an infantry division , the 2nd New Zealand Division , which would require nine battalions of infantry . Consequently , several infantry battalions were formed from 1939 to 1940 with New Zealand volunteers .

The 20th Battalion was formed in Christchurch at Burnham Military Camp in early October under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Howard Kippenberger . After a period of training , it departed for the Middle East on 5 January 1940 as part of the 4th Infantry Brigade , 2nd New Zealand Division . The battalion arrived at its base in Maadi , Egypt on 14 February , and was involved in training and garrison duty at Baggush for most of the next 12 months .

= = = Greece and Crete = = =

The British Government anticipated an invasion of Greece by the Germans in 1941 and decided to send troops to support the Greeks , who were already engaged against the Italians in Albania . The 2nd New Zealand Division was one of a number of Allied units dispatched to Greece in early March . The 4th Infantry Brigade was tasked with the defence of the Aliakmon Line in northern Greece , with the 20th Battalion preparing and manning the defences along the western end of the line . On 6 April , the Germans invaded Greece and their advance was so rapid that it quickly threatened the Florina Gap . The 4th Infantry Brigade was withdrawn to the Servia Pass where it manned defences that were superior to its previous positions . On 14 April German forces reached the Servia Pass and the brigade defended its positions for three days before being withdrawn . The battalion was the rearguard of the brigade for most of its withdrawal until it was evacuated to Crete on 28 April .

On Crete , the 20th Battalion was detached from the 4th Infantry Brigade to form part of a new ad

hoc 10th Infantry Brigade , under the command of Kippenberger . The battalion 's second @-@ in @-@ command , Lieutenant Colonel James Thomas Burrows , was in command for most of the Battle of Crete . On the opening day of the invasion of Crete , the battalion was positioned to the east of the town of Galatas . On 22 May , it was used in a counterattack on Maleme airfield , which had been allowed to be occupied by the Germans the previous day . The delayed arrival of its relief meant the battalion was late to its starting position . The attack was unsuccessful and resulted in heavy casualties , although not as high as the Germans ' own losses .

When Galatas fell to the Germans on 25 May , the 20th Battalion was in danger of being cut off . It successfully regrouped and assisted in the recapture of the town . The battalion withdrew on 26 May , which marked the beginning a retreat to Hora Sfakion , on the southwest coast of Crete . Kippenberger rejoined the battalion after his previous command , the 10th Brigade , was disestablished after the capture of Galatas . On arrival at the evacuation beaches , it was found that there was insufficient room on the Australian destroyers that were the designated transport for all of the battalion 's personnel . The bulk of the battalion was evacuated on 30 May although Kippenberger was forced to select 40 men to stay behind and form a rearguard under the command of Burrows . After manning defensive positions to prevent Germans infiltrating the cordon around the evacuation beaches , the rearguard was evacuated the following day .

= = = North Africa = = =

The 20th Battalion was evacuated to Egypt , having lost over half its original complement of personnel during the Greece and Crete campaigns . After a short period of rest , Kippenberger set about bringing the battalion back up to strength . Nearly 400 replacements joined the battalion and stragglers , separated from the battalion for various reasons during the previous two months while in Greece and Crete , continued to arrive for several weeks as they made their way across the Mediterranean by various means , including small sailboats . By mid @-@ June , the battalion was at full strength and several weeks were spent at the battalion 's previous positions at Baggush , engaged in intensive desert training .

= = = Operation Crusader = = =

In November 1941 , the battalion participated in Operation Crusader as part of the British Eighth Army and was engaged in offensive operations towards the Sidi Azeiz area . On the night of 25 November , along with the 18th Battalion , it was tasked with the night @-@ time capture of Belhamed , a hill adjacent to Sidi Rezegh . As the units moved to their positions , Kippenberger made a navigational error which resulted in his headquarters company becoming separated from the other companies of the battalion . It took him until daylight for him to reestablish contact with the remainder of the battalion which , when he located it , was in its expected position having taken the hill with few losses . Shortly after his arrival Kippenberger was wounded by machine gun fire and evacuated . The battalion held the hill for three days before it was destroyed by elements of the 15th Panzer Division in a counterattack . Only one man managed to escape capture .

= = = Rebuilding = = =

A number of the 20th Battalion 's personnel had not been involved in the battle , most of whom were unfit , recovering from injuries , on leave or attending training courses . These men , numbering about 137 , formed the nucleus of the reformed battalion at Baggush in early December . Other personnel who had been temporarily deployed elsewhere also returned to the battalion during December . By the end of the month , the battalion , now under the command of Burrows (Kippenberger had been promoted to brigadier and given command of the 5th Infantry Brigade) , was brought back up to strength with 600 reinforcements . For the next two months , Burrows oversaw training of his new command while it was based at Baggush and then later at Maadi . In February 1942 , the battalion was on the move , with the rest of the 2nd New Zealand Division , to

Syria to defend against a possible attack through Turkey on the Middle East oilfields by the Germans .

In Syria , the battalion prepared defences in its assigned sector around Djedeide Fortress , digging weapons pits as well as undergoing further training . Following the attack on the Eighth Army 's Gazala Line by Panzer Army Africa , the 2nd New Zealand Division was recalled to Libya . On 17 June , the battalion left for Mersa Matruh , a 320 kilometres (200 mi) journey that took four days to complete . After a period of indecision as to where the division was to be best used , it moved to Minqar Qaim with the 20th Battalion remaining behind at Matruh for two days to act as security for engineers laying minefields before joining up with the division .

At Minqar Qaim , the division was to hold and delay the advance of the Panzer Army Africa for as long as it could while remaining intact . By the middle of the afternoon of 27 June , the division had been encircled by the 21st Panzer Division . Panzer units approached a number of the 2nd New Zealand Division 's positions , including the 20th Battalion 's sector on the northern side of the Minqar Qaim escarpment , and were successfully beaten off . The New Zealanders broke out that evening with the 4th Brigade breaching the German lines and the 20th Battalion on the northern flank of the chosen withdrawal route . During the action at Minqar Qaim and the subsequent breakout , the battalion 's casualties were light , with thirteen men killed and it reached the El Alamein line by 28 June .

= = = El Alamein = = =

On 14 and 15 July 1942 , during the First Battle of El Alamein , the battalion was engaged in what would be known as the Battle of Ruweisat Ridge . Ruweisat Ridge was held by the enemy and was in the centre of the El Alamein line , dominating the surrounding area . The 4th Brigade was to take the western end of the ridge , with Kippenberger 's 5th Brigade tasked with the capture of the centre of the ridge . The 5th Indian Brigade was allocated to deal with the eastern end . British tanks , in the form of two armoured brigades , were to protect the flanks and be in support to deal with the expected counterattack . However , little thought was given to communication and liaison between the infantry and armoured brigades , nor was a clear chain of command established . This would have implications for the outcome of the battle .

After a night @-@ time advance , the 20th Battalion was positioned on the ridge in reserve behind the 18th and 19th Battalions . On daybreak , it was discovered that the advance had bypassed numerous strong points , leaving the German line in front of the ridge largely intact . The supporting British armour was nowhere to be seen and the supporting artillery and anti @-@ tank units were unable to break through , leaving the two New Zealand brigades in position on the exposed ridge . Kippenberger had difficulty with his radio communications and made a dash through enemy lines to make contact with the British armour . On reaching one of the British brigades , its commanding officer resisted Kippenberger 's entreaties to advance and it was not until a passing British general authorised the move that the British mounted up . By the time the armoured support arrived , the flanking battalion of the 5th Brigade had been overrun , leaving the battalions of the 4th Brigade even more exposed and receiving fire from the enemy .

A counterattack by elements of the 15th Panzer Division was launched in the afternoon of 15 July . The limited number of anti @-@ tank guns present were exposed and quickly immobilised or forced to withdraw . This left the infantry to be surrounded and large numbers were forced to surrender . Some soldiers made it to the positions of 19th Battalion , but it too became surrounded . By nightfall , the brigade had been overrun . Only the 18th Battalion managed to escape largely intact . Of the 20th Battalion , nearly 200 men were taken prisoner .

= = = Conversion to armour = = =

About half of the 20th Battalion had been wounded , killed or captured during the Battle of Ruweisat Ridge and it was withdrawn to Maadi to be brought back up to strength . It had previously been decided to form an armoured brigade to provide tank support to the 2nd New Zealand Division and

as a result , the 1st New Zealand Army Tank Brigade was formed . This brigade was still undergoing training in New Zealand in September when it was decided to convert the 4th Brigade to armour instead . Personnel were transferred from the tank brigade in New Zealand to bring the 4th Brigade back up to strength . As one of the constituent units of the brigade , the 20th Battalion was officially re-designated the 20th Armoured Regiment on 5 October 1942 .

The regiment , with three squadrons of tanks , would spend the next year in training , learning to use the signalling equipment and guns of the tanks it was expected to use . One squadron was to be equipped with Crusaders with the other two squadrons operating Shermans . However , the mechanically unreliable Crusaders were later replaced with Shermans . Burrows initially oversaw the transition to armour until he returned to New Zealand on furlough in May 1943 and was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel J. W. McKergow .

With the close of the North African campaign in May 1943 , attention then turned to the European theater of operations . Despite a preference amongst some sections of the New Zealand government for the 2nd New Zealand Division to be redeployed in the Pacific theater , it was decided that the division , having served with the Eighth Army throughout the desert campaign , would remain in Europe . Accordingly , in October , the division moved to join the Eighth Army in Italy .

= = = Italy = = =

The 20th Armoured Regiment disembarked at Taranto on 22 October 1943 and gradually travelled up Italy towards the Sangro River , which it duly crossed on 3 December . In the following weeks , the regiment was involved in a supporting role in the 5th and 6th Brigades ' attack on Orsogna , as part of the Moro River Campaign . Although the infantry made some gains , the German defences were too strong and the attack soon faded into a stalemate , with a number of back and forth actions . The regiment lost a number of tanks during the fighting but generally acquitted itself well and was withdrawn from the line the following month . McKergow had been wounded at Orsogna , and Lieutenant Colonel H. A. Purcell took over command of the regiment .

Following its withdrawal from the area around Orsogna , the 2nd New Zealand Division was one of a number of divisions that was transferred from the Eighth Army to the Fifth Army , then engaged on the western side of the Apennines . This was part of an overall strategy to breach the Gustav Line and break an otherwise deadlocked Italian front . Together with the 4th Indian Division and supporting British and American artillery , the division formed the New Zealand Corps , under the command of the New Zealand divisional commander , Major General Bernard Freyberg . The corps moved to Cassino , the defenders of which had resisted American forces for several weeks .

As at Orsogna , the 20th Armoured Regiment was to play a supporting role in the forthcoming Cassino attack , with the infantry of the 5th and 6th Brigades bearing the brunt of the battle . When the attack began on 15 March , the regiment was initially held as a reserve , ready to exploit any breakthrough by the infantry but this did not eventuate . The infantry struggled to make progress in the face of determined resistance . Over the next week , some of the squadrons of the regiment became involved in small scale raid actions . On 24 March , the regiment moved into the area of Cassino controlled by the New Zealand infantry , and essentially became mobile pillboxes . The tanks were vulnerable to artillery and German patrols and the troops of the various squadrons of the regiment were rotated in and out of the town in two day shifts . While the New Zealand infantry had been relieved by the Guards Brigade in the early April , the 20th Armoured Regiment stayed in the line until the end of the month .

After the New Zealand Corps was disbanded , a period of rest and training in the Volturno Valley followed for the 20th Armoured Regiment before it returned to action in May . It was temporarily split from the 4th Brigade and its various squadrons detached in support of separate operations being conducted by 5th and 6th Brigades in advances to Avezzano . Following the Normandy landings , the Italian campaign was reduced to a sideshow , although one which still had considerable value in tying down German forces that could otherwise be used elsewhere . The regiment , now rejoined with 4th Brigade , supported the infantry brigades as they advanced to Florence , and entered the

city in August . The 2nd New Zealand Division was transferred to the I Canadian Corps , then on the Adriatic Coast , and advanced up to Rimini . Here the B Squadron of the regiment supported an attack by a Greek mountain brigade towards Rimini on 14 September .

On 19 and 20 October , the 4th Armoured Brigade was involved in its first action as a brigade in an attack towards the Savio River , with the 20th Armoured Regiment on the left flank . This was primarily a tank action , in contrast to previous battles in which the armour supported the infantry . Having advanced seven miles to complete its objectives , the regiment supported the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade in making its own attack across the river on the evening of 21 October . The regiment 's Shermans fired an hour @-@ long barrage of high explosive shells along their front to create a diversion , under the cover of which the Canadians made their own landings on the far bank of the Savio .

In late 1944 , the 20th Armoured Regiment crossed the Lamone River and its squadrons supported the infantry battalions of the 6th Brigade in attacks in and around the town of Faenza in December . The regiment then wintered along the Senio River . It would be involved in supporting infantry on the front lines until early February 1945 . The regimental chaplain was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) after his efforts in organising and evacuating wounded infantry during this phase of the war .

= = = Trieste and disbandment = = =

After a period of rest , the 20th Armoured Regiment returned to the front lines in early April . It made a series of advances against the retreating German rearguard . On 2 May , the regiment 's A Company was the leading element of the 2nd New Zealand Division and entered Trieste . While most of the German garrison quickly surrendered , it was necessary to deal with some diehard elements who refused to surrender to either the New Zealanders or the Yugoslav partisans also present in the city . In fact , the partisans were reluctant to allow Germans to surrender to the New Zealanders at all .

The regiment , along with the rest of the 2nd New Zealand Division , remained in and around Trieste for several weeks to counter the presence of the partisans , who had laid claim to the city . It was not until mid @-@ June that the partisans withdrew from the city . It would be several more weeks before it was determined by the New Zealand government that the division would not be required for service in the Pacific theatre of operations . However , the longest serving men of the regiment had been steadily returning to New Zealand on furlough since early 1944 , and most were not required to come back to active service . By the end of August , the last elements of the regiment had withdrawn from Trieste to wintering positions near Florence . In mid @-@ September , it was decided to send the latest reinforcement drafts , then assembling in New Zealand , to Japan to serve as an occupation force (Jayforce) and that the men of 20th Armoured Regiment would not be required . This accelerated the demobilisation process and accordingly the regiment was officially disbanded on 2 December 1945 .

During the war , the 20th Battalion and its successor , the 20th Armoured Regiment , lost 366 officers and men either killed in action or who later died of their wounds , including 30 men who died as prisoners of war . Nearly 750 personnel were made prisoners of war .

= = Honours = =

Some of the personnel of the 20th Battalion were highly decorated , including two members , both of C Company , that were awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) . Sergeant Jack Hinton was awarded a VC for his actions during the Battle of Greece . Captain Charles Upham was awarded a VC for his actions during the Battle of Crete , and later won a bar to his VC for his actions during the Battle of Ruweisat Ridge on 15 July 1942 . Six members of the battalion , including some of its commanders , were awarded the Distinguished Service Order while four members were appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire . Several other awards for gallantry were also made .

The 20th Battalion and its successor , the 20th Armoured Regiment , was awarded the following

battle honours :

Mount Olympus , Servia Pass , Olympus Pass , Molos , Greece 1941 , Crete , Maleme , Galatas , 42nd Street , Withdrawal to Sphakia , Middle East 1941 ? 44 , Tobruk 1941 , Sidi Rezegh 1941 , Sidi Azeiz , Belhamed , Zemla , Alam Hamza , Mersa Matruh , Minqar Qaim , Defence of Alamein Line , Ruweisat Ridge , El Mreir , Alam el Halfa , North Africa 1940 ? 42 , Orsogna , Cassino I , Advance to Florence , San Michele , Paula Line , Faenza Pocket , Rio Fontanaccia , St. Angelo in Salute , Pisciatello , The Senio , Santerno Crossing , Bologna , Sillaro Crossing , Idice Bridgehead , Italy 1943 ? 45 .

= = Commanding officers = =

The following officers served as commanding officer of the 20th Battalion :

Lieutenant Colonel H. K. Kippenberger (September 1939 ? April 1941) ;

Lieutenant Colonel J. T. Burrows (April ? May 1941 ; December 1941 ? July 1942 ; August 1942 ? June 1943) ;

Major I. O. Manson (July 1942) ;

Lieutenant Colonel D. J. Fountaine (July ? August 1942) ;

Lieutenant Colonel J. W. McKergow (September 1942 ; November 1942 ; June ? December 1943) ;

Lieutenant Colonel H. A. Purcell (December 1943 ? January 1944 ; May ? December 1944 ; January ? March 1945) ;

Lieutenant Colonel J. B. Ferguson (January ? May 1944) ;

Major P. A. Barton (December 1944 ? January 1945) ;

Lieutenant Colonel H. A. Robinson (March ? October 1945) ;

Major W. H. Ryan (October ? December 1945) .