

**THE HISTORY OF THE  
54<sup>TH</sup> HEAVY REGIMENT ROYAL ARTILLERY  
AND THE  
54<sup>TH</sup> SUPER HEAVY REGIMENT ROYAL ARTILLERY**

This document is a detailed description of the formation and operation of both the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment & 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment of the Royal Artillery during the Second World War.

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## NOTES

To avoid repetition of the word battery and/or batteries, this document *may* refer to these as shown: B Battery of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment *may* be written as B/54 – this abbreviation could also represent the B Battery of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment. These abbreviations will only be used in lines of text where the parent regiment is referenced, which make sense to their use as to avoid confusion further within this document. The same rule applies for repetition of the words Heavy Regiment or Super Heavy Regiment. Unless otherwise stated, the term ‘54<sup>th</sup>’ can be used to represent either the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy or Super Heavy Regiment. Similarly, ‘Heavy’ may be shortened to ‘Hvy’, where ‘Super Heavy’ may be shown as ‘SHvy’.

No 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy / Super Heavy Regiment or associated individual battery war diaries will be specifically referenced to as a selected source within the document. The applicable war diaries that have been used along with their date ranges are located in the bibliography. However, war diary appendices will be referenced with an endnote, as I consider these a separate entity from the war diary entries. Where possible, I will reference them as they are written on the appendices e.g. Appendix A or Appendix IV and with their document title e.g. Operation Order No.5, along with providing the dates of their publication or release. Some of the appendix references are not directly quoted within the applicable war diaries (I feel like the regimental COs had more important things to worry about during wartime than ensuring full traceability) and this is another reason I have given end notes for information taken from appendices.

Within this document, references to military formations will follow the standard nomenclature:

- Military corps formations will always be written in roman numerals e.g. V Corps for 5<sup>th</sup> Corps (where required this will be prefixed with the nationality e.g. British V Corps).
- Military army formations will be written in alpha form e.g. Eighth Army (where required this will be prefixed with the nationality e.g. British Eighth Army). This document *may* refer to these formations with numerical format as well e.g. British 8<sup>th</sup> Army.
  - o On certain maps within this document, these may also be shown as roman numerals.

For added context on military formations for the reader, I have created the table below which should explain better the formations used within the armies during WW2:

Army Formation	Symbol	Information	Officer Commanding
Brigade*	X	Made up of a number of regiments, approx. 3000 men	Brigadier
Division	XX	Made up of 3 or more brigades, approx. 10000 men	Major / Lieutenant General
Corps	XXX	Made up of 3 or more divisions, approx. 35000 men	Lieutenant General
Army	XXXX	Made up of 2 or more divisions, approx. 100,000 men	General
Army Group	XXXXX	Consists of two or more armies	Field Marshal

*\*The Royal Artillery had regiments, not brigades, which then supported divisions. These were normally commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel.*

During the war, soldiers and officers were sometimes given temporary ranks in lieu of a full field promotion, which were as follows: Acting (A), Temporary (T), Substantive (S) and Wartime (W). These temporary wartime promotions prefixed the soldier or officers rank e.g. A/Lt. Col. (Acting Lieutenant Colonel) or T/Sgt (Temporary Sergeant) and not much information on the creation of these ranks or their application is available online. If an officer or soldier is referenced within war diaries or applicable documents using this structure then they will also be labelled as such within this document when they are first referenced within the text. From then on, the prefix rank will be removed as I feel it adds nothing to the report and the soldiers/officers deserve their higher rank; the temporary ranks seemed to be a way to get a position filled without actually administering a

full field promotion. There also seems to be discrepancy between various forms of military documentation as to the use of these ranks; for instance, one of the officers within this document is listed as both a A/Lt. Col. and T/Lt. Col. in two different British Army records.

To follow on from this and to give some clarity to the rank structure used within the British Army, more specifically the Royal Artillery during WW2, the following information will highlight the lowest to the highest rank – this will hopefully assist with understanding the seniority of the ranks used within this document.

Royal Artillery Ranks (Lowest First)	Acronym	Equivalent British Army Rank
Gunner	Gnr.	Private
Lance Bombardier	L/Bdr.	Lance Corporal
Bombardier	Bdr.	Corporal
Lance Sergeant*	L/Sgt	
Sergeant*	Sgt	
Staff Sergeant*	S/Sgt	
Warrant Officer Class III	WOIII	
Warrant Officer Class II	WOII	
Warrant Officer Class I	WOI	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant	2/Lt	
Lieutenant	Lt.	
Captain	Cpt / Capt	
Major	Maj	
Lieutenant Colonel	Lt. Col.	
Brigadier	Brig.	

*\*Sergeant may also be seen written as Serjeant in other document or online but throughout this text, only the former will be used.*

Between the Second World War and the creation of this document, some place names referenced within the war diaries have changed and so wouldn't appear on more modern mapping software when searched. Where this is applicable, the name referenced within the war diary will be suffixed with the modern place name in brackets e.g. Burma (Myanmar).

Some of the source materials referenced used imperial measurements for various values within the source text (e.g. yards (yds) and pounds (lbs)) and I have converted these to metric (e.g. metres (m) and kilograms (kgs)) when I have referenced from these sources within this text, as these are the measurements I am familiar with.

Within this text, the terms howitzer and gun will be greatly used. For those not familiar with the difference between the two types of weapons, a howitzer was normally a short barrelled weapon, mainly used to fire shells over a medium distance at relatively low & medium trajectories, while a gun tended to have a greater barrel length and significantly increased range, yet with lower elevation.

Another term to be used often will be AOP, which is an Air Observation Post. Without going into great detail, an AOP was an aircraft that flew at relatively low height along the battlefield, often at great risk, to observe and re-direct the fire of any artillery regiments that it was working alongside.

## HEAVY & SUPER HEAVY REGIMENTS

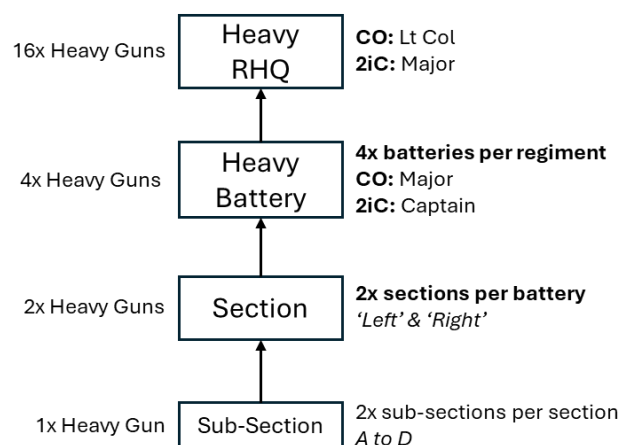
The main body of this document's text doesn't go into any great detail as to how a Heavy or Super Heavy Regiment was setup during the Second World War. To ensure the related terminology used throughout the document is understood, the following information should give some clarity to those not familiar with Royal Artillery Heavy or Super Heavy organisation during WW2.

### Heavy Regiment

A Royal Artillery Heavy Regiment was administered and controlled via a Regimental Headquarters (RHQ). The RHQ oversaw the daily management of four heavy batteries, which were the units in the regiment that operated the heavy guns. The regiment's commanding officer (CO) was normally a Lieutenant Colonel, supported by a Major as second-in-command (2iC), while a Captain normally held the position of regimental adjutant, whose daily role was generally administrative.

Battery Commanders (BC) were the senior officers of each of the four batteries and were normally the rank of Major. Unlike Field and Medium Regiments, which were split into 'troops' and then split further into sections, heavy batteries were divided by sections, which were then separated again into sub-sections, or 'subs'. Each battery operated four heavy guns – so a Heavy Regiment operated a total of 16 heavy guns – with each section then operating two guns each within a battery and the sub-sections operating a single weapon. The guns, when in firing positions, were known as gun pits and the men operating them labelled as gun detachments. The two sections in the regiment were normally labelled as 'Left' and 'Right' and the sub-sections were normally A through to D, although this may have been different between the various Heavy Regiments; this breakdown is shown in Figure 1.

Heavy Regiments were unique in that they tended to operate a mixture of weapon types, say 8x 7.2in howitzers alongside 8x 155mm guns, unlike Field and Medium Regiments who tended to operate a single weapon type between the whole regiment. The batteries were named either using numbers or letters e.g. A, B, C & D or 1, 2, 3 & 4 and these could change throughout the war, although it is never too clear as to why.



*Figure 1 – Typical structure of a Royal Artillery Heavy Regiment during the Second World War*

As a fictitious example to demonstrate the aforementioned system in use, a gunner within a Heavy Regiment could be part of the Right Section (C Sub-Section) of B Battery of the 1<sup>st</sup> Heavy Regiment.

Each heavy battery had its own command post (CP) which was separate from the RHQ and was occupied by the BC and associated staff. All of the batteries vehicles, ammunition and stores were kept in an area known as the 'wagon lines', which was normally just behind the battery gun

pits. Each battery also had its own observation post (OP), a small group of specialised officers, which moved ahead of the battery into an elevated position to assist with selecting targets, directing fire and adjusting the rounds as they were fired onto targets. Each battery having their own OP provided some autonomy, as controlling the fire of 16 guns would have been a large effort for a single observation group to manage.

### **Super Heavy Regiment**

The term 'Super Heavy' was adopted by the Royal Artillery and was used to describe weapons with a barrel size of 200mm or more. The Americans, who designed and manufactured all of the Super Heavy equipment used by the Royal Artillery during WW2, used the same 'Super Heavy' weapons in their 'Heavy Field' Artillery Regiments, which was 'perhaps a better description than the rather cumbersome name' that the British knew them by.<sup>1</sup>

Initially there were only three independent Super Heavy batteries at the start of the war, who all went to France and whose guns were all either lost or destroyed during the retreat to Dunkirk. In 1940, the first three Super Heavy Regiments were formed, which were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>, who operated large howitzers and railway guns.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the war, only two more of these regiments would be formed: the 61<sup>st</sup> Super Heavy (converted from the 61<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment in December 1944)<sup>3</sup> and the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, at around the same time.

Like their Heavy Regiment counterparts, Super Heavy Regiments were overseen via the RHQ, which oversaw the daily management of the Super Heavy batteries. Unlike Heavy Regiments, which always had four batteries, Super Heavy Regiments didn't seem to follow such a defined structure. For example, the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment had a consistent total of four batteries, while the 61<sup>st</sup> Super Heavy had only three batteries and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Heavy varied from 3 to 5 batteries during the war. The Super Heavy ranking officers were the same as the Heavy Regiments; the CO a Lieutenant Colonel, supported by a Major as 2iC, with Majors again holding the position of BCs.

There currently seems to be limited evidence to support that there were either sections or sub-sections within the Super Heavy batteries, as due to the reduced number of weapons (Heavy Regiments had 16 while Super Heavy Regiments nominally had 12) this structure would not have worked as effectively. However, the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy had 'subs', with 3x weapons in a single battery, with each gun acting as a 'sub'. Despite this, I believe Figure 2 to show the most accurate representation of a *standard* Super Heavy Regiment within the Royal Artillery – the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy, as shown later, was not a standard Super Heavy unit.

Each Super Heavy battery also had its own command post (CP) near the gun areas but unlike Heavy batteries, which had their own dedicated OP, Super Heavy Regiments seemed to be allocated to the control of a specific corps and normally worked with either AOP units or FOO, which directed their fire onto targets – targets which were selected by higher command or attached units such as infantry or armoured divisions.

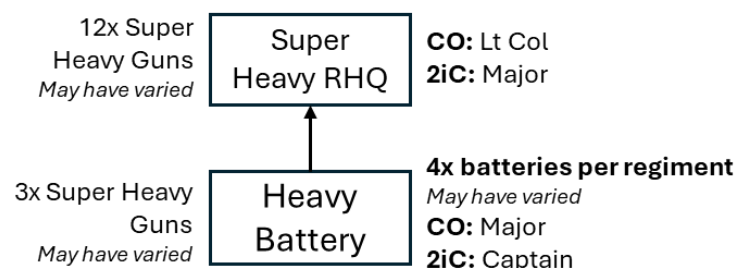


Figure 2 – Typical structure of a Royal Artillery Super Heavy Regiment

## INTRODUCTION

My grandfather was born on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1923 in Liverpool, to parents Robina and William John Cavadino; his father William John previously served in both the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force in WW1. He was born a twin, alongside his sister Florence Ruth, who would sadly spend her infancy battling against pneumonia, until her death of the disease on 18th March 1924. Edward would go on to finish school at 14-years-old in March 1937, finishing top of his class with aptitudes in Maths, English and Woodwork & Art. His head teacher stated that

*“Edward is a very splendid character indeed. Regular and punctual in his attendance he is hardworking and painstaking. He is very capable and should satisfy even the most exacting employer. He has been a credit to his school and I feel certain that the employer who obtains his services will have no cause to regret it.”<sup>4</sup>*

After school, Edward would go on to work as a plumber until just after his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, when he joined the British Army (as part of the Territorial Army) on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1942. A short man at 5ft & 3½in, Edward would be enrolled into the Royal Artillery, holding the rank of Gunner with a military service number of 1138832. He was given the best medical grading available in the TA and was declared fully fit for military service.<sup>5</sup>

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The origins of this report date back to 2019, when I first received pictures that my grandfather had taken during the Second World War, along with his military medals and other miscellaneous items. These came as a surprise to me, as it had been almost 50 years since his death and I had never been told anything about him; this was also the first time that I had actually seen a picture of my grandfather.

I wanted to know the answer to the questions that came to my mind when I was handed my grandfather’s personal belongings:

*With which regiment did he serve in during the war? Where did he fight? What did he do?*

My grandfather’s wartime service records (acquired from the Ministry of Defence) showed that he served in only three regiments during the war: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Training Regiment (FTR), the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment and the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment. My initial research into these three regiments pulled up little to no information.

I initially used *Regiments of the British Army 1939-1945 (Artillery)* by Malcom A. Bellis to gain what information I could on any of the aforementioned regiments. For example, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Medium & Heavy Training Regiment was formed in July 1941, before being redesignated in August 1941 as the 23<sup>rd</sup> FTR. It would also go on to become a Field, Medium & Heavy training Regiment in March 1944 before transitioning back to a Medium & Heavy orientated training unit in May 1945, just as the war in Europe was drawing to a close.<sup>6</sup>

Without trying to spoil the content of the main report text, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, a Territorial Army unit, was formed in December 1939 and would go on to serve in both North Africa and Italy.<sup>7</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment was formed in February 1945, when the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy was converted into the use of Super Heavy weaponry, serving in Italy until war’s end.<sup>8</sup> These very brief overviews are the limit of what is available in published sources for the Heavy Regiments in question.

Then I took my research online, hoping to find an extensive source to assist with my project. The brilliant website *The Royal Artillery 1939-45* aims to provide information on all Second World War RA units and it does so very well. Unfortunately for me, this website provided very little information on both the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy and Super Heavy Regiments, only giving a very basic rundown of the formation & operation of both regiments, with a limited overview of the batteries and

weapons used. Even this statement only really applies to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy as there is barely any information related to the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy, apart from its basic battery structure. In hindsight and with my own in-depth research behind me, I can say that this lack of information is not down to the choice of the website or its curator. It is just a fact that there is simply very little information available online related to either regiment. This issue also extends to other Heavy/Super Heavy units but that is a larger gripe of mine for another time.



*Figure 3 – My grandfather, Gunner Cavadino on parade. The exact date of this photo is unknown but it is likely to be early 1942, during his initial days in the 23<sup>rd</sup> FTR. Note the white lanyard on his right shoulder, a traditional part of battle dress in the RA, linking back to when the lanyards were used to act as the firing mechanisms for the guns.*

Research into my grandfather's wartime service seemed to be at a standstill before it had even started. I eventually found the website WW2Talk, an online forum dedicated to conversations about the Second World War. I used it to enquire about researching the regiments my grandfather served in, with the same results as before. Once again, information on this website was very limited, with a few conversations linked to either regiment hitting dead ends or repeating the small amount of information that was online. Thankfully, there are members on these forums who assist in retrieving unit war diaries, which are a key item in researching any regiment, as they act as a day-by-day record of a regiment's activities; these members will be directly thanked later.

Upon retrieving the unit war diaries, I began to uncover what I had been looking for – an extensive source of information linked to both regiments and an entry into finding out about my grandfather's service during the war.

This report details what I have uncovered.

**Tom Cavadino**

**27<sup>th</sup> July 2025**



# 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment

## Part I: Formation and Early Years

### Initial Weapons

On 27th December 1939, the 54th Heavy Regiment was officially formed, when various ranks and support staff of both the 78th Field Regiment and the 52nd Heavy Regiment amalgamated into this new Heavy Artillery Regiment, which was initially based at Sheffield. Like most other war formed Heavy Regiments, the 54<sup>th</sup> had four batteries named A, B, C & D. The regiments initial armament consisted of both the 9.2in MkII howitzers and 6in MkXIX guns.

#### *The 9.2in MkII Howitzer*

The A, B & C Heavy batteries operated four 9.2in MkII howitzers each (which the regiment received 12x of on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1940), which were a weapon system previously used by the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) in World War 1. The RGA originally labelled these howitzers as 'siege' weapons before the term 'Heavy' was commonly used after the war. The MkII siege howitzer was developed in December 1916 and was a variant of the original 9.2in Mkl howitzer, which was first used in combat in France in 1914. The MkII never fully replaced the Mkl in the RGA arsenal but altogether 512 howitzers of both variants were manufactured by the war's end.<sup>9</sup>

The main change between the two 9.2in variants was the extension of the barrel, which went from 309cm on the Mkl to just over 405cm on the MkII and in turn saw the weapons range increase from nearly 9.2km to approximately 12.74km. The earth box, which was secured to the front of the weapon and filled with up to 9tons of earth (on the Mkl platform) to reduce the weapons vertical recoil, increased in size to 11tons on the MkII, which was to account for the larger barrels increased recoil.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the stagnation of Heavy weapon development by the Royal Artillery in the inter-war period, some MkII variants survived to the outbreak of the Second World War,. The MkII weapon system weighed a total of nearly 16.5tons (exclusive of the earth box) and took nearly 12 hours to fully set up after transport.<sup>11</sup> This lack of mobility was the weapons downfall in France 1940, when the BEF was overrun by the rapid advances of the German *blitzkrieg* and a total of 27x 9.2in MkII howitzers serving in Heavy Regiments of the BEF were lost during the retreat to England.<sup>12</sup> The remainder of the 9.2in MkII howitzers used by Heavy Regiments stationed in England then went on to serve in anti-invasion defences and would never see service in any other theatre during the war.



*Figure 4 – 9.2in Mk2 howitzer of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment deployed in Hastings on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1940, in a highly elevated firing position. Note the large earth box in the bottom right of the picture.*

### ***The 6in MkXIX Gun***

D Battery of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment operated four of the 6in MkXIX gun, which was another weapon system that had previously served in the First World War. It was a conversion of the 6in MkVII gun, which was done by reducing the guns weight by 3tons through several modifications. The modified piece was placed onto the Carriage MkVIII (the carriage which was used to support an 8in howitzer). The MkXIX weapon had an impressive range of 17.1km and by the end of WW1, 108 MkXIX guns had been built,<sup>13</sup> although some sources claim that this number is higher. The length of the 6in MkXIX gun barrel was over 5.5m and the weapon system (inclusive of its carriage) weighed approximately 10.3tons,<sup>14</sup> although being on a wheeled carriage, it was much more mobile than the 9.2in MkII platform.



*Figure 5 – 6in MkXIX gun on a Mk VIII carriage with large traction engine wheels.*

This meant that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy started the war with weapons that had previously served the British Army only 25 years or so prior. While tried and tested, these weapons were certainly not cutting edge by the time of the *Wehrmacht* advances of 1939; in fact, it could be argued that both the 9.2in Mk II and 6in MkXIX weapons were past obsolescence and that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy (and all Heavy Regiments in England) could potentially be outgunned if a German attack ever came to England.

### **Commanding Officers**

The regiment's first commanding officer, Major D.G Brodie, assumed command of the 54th Heavy Regiment on 15th January 1940 when he transferred from the Officers Wing of the Depot RA. Before this, he was previously a member of the 14th Heavy Battery in the Auxiliary Force (India), which was one of two coastal batteries defending the port of Bombay (Mumbai); these batteries operated 3x 6in & 2x 7.5in coastal guns each.<sup>15</sup> It may have been Major Brodie's experience with heavier weapons which landed him the position of a Heavy Regiment CO.

Major Brodie would only command this regiment for just over 3 months until he was replaced on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1940 by A/Lt.Col John Henry Edward de Robeck MBE. A/Lt. Col. de Robeck, 45 years old at the time of his appointment, was a career soldier and had previously fought in the First World War, reaching the rank of Major as part of the Royal Field Artillery. He had served in France, entering this theatre on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1915 and also ended the war with an MBE.<sup>16</sup> During his time as the CO of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, his only real major contribution, aside from the administration of growing the regiment to full strength, would be to oversee two very important visits to the regiment. The first was in July 1940 when the new British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, visited on the 18<sup>th</sup> and toured the Right Section of B/54. In the same month he hosted then Lieutenant General Montgomery (who was Commander of V Corps at the time) on the 26<sup>th</sup>, who also visited the Right Section of B/54 for an inspection.

On 10th March 1941, after a year of commanding the 54th Heavy, de Robeck would be posted to the command of the 129<sup>th</sup> (Lowland) Field Regiment, who were located in the Northumberland area and were employed on mobile coastal defence duties. Both this regiment and de Robeck would eventually be sent to the Burmese front, to assist in the fight against the Japanese as part of the British Fourteenth Army. Serving in the jungle warfare that this theatre was notorious for, de Robeck would eventually go on to become the CRA (Commander, Royal Artillery) for the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Light Division\*, as part of British IV Corps, for which he received a promotion to T/Brigadier. As a CRA within IV Corps, de Robeck would serve during the Battle of Kohima, an important battle based around the town of the same name, which found itself the centre of attention during the Japanese operation of U-Go (their attempted invasion into Northern India, which started in March 1944), where de Robeck would go on to receive an OBE on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1944 for

*‘...artillery support...of a very high order...[which] was in no small measure due to the skill with which [de Robeck] commanded the artillery of the division. It was a vital factor in the defeat of the enemy. There were many difficulties to be overcome to ensure the greatest possible [artillery] support. As a result of the skilful handling of the artillery by [Brigadier] de Robeck, at no time was full support lacking for the infantry. He proved himself resourceful and imperturbable throughout the operations...’<sup>17</sup>*

In de Robeck’s place came 44-year-old Lt. Col. Geoffrey Heming Gilkes from the 75<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank (A/Tk) Regiment. Another career soldier, Gilkes had previously passed through the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich in 1915 and as a ‘regular’ soldier, he had served in the First World War as part of the Aden Field Force from July 1916 to March 1919, as part of 62 Coy RGA<sup>†</sup>, earning the rank of Lieutenant by July 1917. After WW1 he joined the Intelligence Corps, where he would serve in operations in Turkey and would also serve within the No.2 Wireless Company (Royal Signals), as a cryptographer in both Egypt and Palestine. Reaching the rank of Major in 1937, Gilkes would earn an Acting (A) promotion to Lt. Col. in November 1940, 3 months after obtaining the role of Instructor of Gunnery (IG) for Scottish Command (itself part of the Home Forces) in August 1940.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 6 – Portrait of Major Gilkes, date unknown*

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\* This is more commonly known as the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division.

† 62 Coy RGA – 62 Company, Royal Garrison Artillery. They served in Aden, a city in Yemen, during WW1.

Gilkes left the 75<sup>th</sup> A/Tk Regiment (which he had only joined in November 1940) for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1941, where his personal diary simply stated that he was ‘Told to go to 54 Regt in Bournemouth’,<sup>19</sup> which is where the regiment was located at this time. Within his first year in command, Gilkes would take part in Exercise BUMPER as the Senior Artillery Umpire for British 3<sup>rd</sup> Division on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1941. BUMPER was a large anti-invasion exercise which would become critical in developing the future of the Royal Artillery during WW2, mainly bringing about the formation of Army Groups, Royal Artillery (AGRA) and an improvement in the creation & use of fire plans by the many varied regiments of the RA during the war.

## Home Defence

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would only reach operational strength in December 1940, when intakes of other ranks, officers and support staff towards the end of 1940 meant the regiment was ‘completely up to establishment’. There was also a brief period in May 1940 when the regiment was overstrength, when between 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> May, 24 officers and 990 other ranks from the BEF, evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk, temporarily joined the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy ranks. These officers and other ranks were attached to the regiment for no longer than 10 days before being despatched to re-organization centres to join other regiments and divisions in England.

After some months based within Sheffield after their formation, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy first moved to Tytherington, near Macclesfield in April 1940, where they would remain for two months until they moved again on 1st June 1940, when the RHQ was moved to Kimbridge House near Romsey, approximately 10 miles from the town of Salisbury. Here the regiment would experience bombing for the first time during the war, when six bombs fell near the regimental wagon lines. While no casualties were reported, a single unexploded bomb was removed from the nearby area by Royal Engineers. It is not made clear in the war diary as to whether these were bombs dropped by the *Luftwaffe* or accidentally by the RAF!

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would remain in Romsey until 19th October 1940, when they moved to Bournemouth, where the RHQ would remain until the regiments war mobilisation two years later. Situated in Bournemouth, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would fall under the structure of Southern Command,<sup>20</sup> who had the responsibility of defending the coastline from Cornwall to Hampshire.

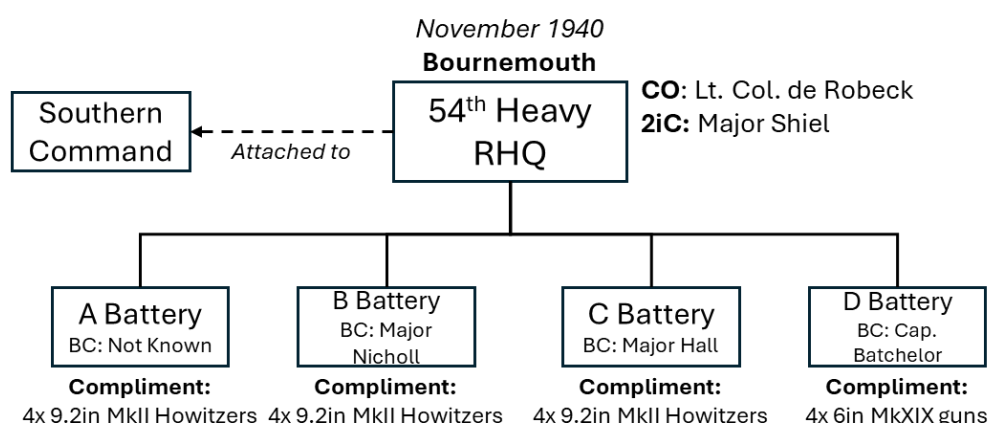


Figure 7 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment formation as of November 1940

Within two days of moving to the South Coast, the regiment would again come under aerial attack, when on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1940, two bombs, this time dropped by enemy aircraft, hit the regimental area. One bomb ‘bounced’ in the garden of the officer’s mess, while the second bomb directly struck the officer’s mess building. Fortunately, there were no casualties but there was ‘considerable’ damage to property and kit – the officer’s mess was consequently moved to a new venue.

In the year of 1940, when the threat of a German invasion still seemed inevitable, the role of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy was one of local area defence, primarily tasked with the defence of beaches on the Southern Coast, to repulse the expected German assault and amphibious invasion. The heavy guns were arranged around FDLs (Forward Defended Localities) and were placed 'in support of infantry beach defences...to fire on...boats and ships as they approach...' These FDLs were to be defended in conjunction with the local infantry commanders (the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy was supporting both the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and 50<sup>th</sup> (Northumbrian) Infantry Division as part of V Corps), although battery commanders were told to 'consider...ammunition supply and...not risk using all...ammunition whilst there is a likelihood of fresh targets.' All gunners within the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy were reminded to not send in false reports of an invasion to higher command, when it was reiterated that 'the lesson of May 1940 was false information and rumour'.<sup>21</sup> However, if the Germans managed to land and were somehow successful in a 'temporary penetration of our FDLs', then a typical response by the guns near the beaches would be the 'heaviest possible concentration of fire to bear upon [the enemy] wherever he is located'.<sup>22</sup>

If there were favourable conditions for invasion, referring '...not only to meteorological conditions but also to the enemy's state of preparation and his known or suspected intentions...' then a code word 'STAND-TO' would be sent out to the defenders on the coast. Upon receipt of this code word, the gunners of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would have to man their beach defences 'and the degree of alertness will be as in battle when in contact with the enemy'.<sup>23</sup>

A particular example of the use of a code word to rally the formations in home defence was CROMWELL, which was first issued on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1940 to the men of both Eastern and Southern Commands. This was issued in response to information provided by the Joint Intelligence Committee, when the 'tides, weather and moon were perfect' for invasion and 'much activity was seen in enemy harbours', leading the intelligence teams to suspect an imminent enemy invasion.<sup>24</sup> The CROMWELL plan was created in June 1940 by General Ironside (then Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces), as a defensive strategy which was to be launched when an invasion appeared to be close. The plan was for three infantry divisions and two armoured divisions to be positioned along the Northampton-North London-Aldershot line, where they could attempt to strike back against any invaders to the North-East, East or South-East of this defensive line.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Casualties in Home Defence***

Although thankfully no German land invasion ever came to fruition, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would still suffer wartime casualties while serving in the role of home defence, even if none were the direct result of enemy action.

### ***Ill Health***

The first casualty of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would be 21-year-old Gunner Stanley Douglas Peters, who was born to parents Stephen Albert and Alice Emma on New Years Day 1919, in the town of Kew. His father was a bank messenger at the time of Stanley's birth and had also completed military service, as he was taking a pension from the Army alongside his other profession.<sup>26</sup> Gunner Peters was a driver within the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment but unfortunately was struck with pulmonary tuberculosis and died of this disease on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1940, in a military hospital stationed in the city of Bath.<sup>27</sup>

Another member of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy whose death would come as the result of a tuberculosis related illness was Gunner Joseph Mackey, originally born in Newcastle in April 1918. At the time of his birth, his father Thomas was a Private in the Northumberland Fusiliers, an infantry regiment established in the area of Newcastle.<sup>28</sup> Joseph followed in his father's footsteps and enrolled into the Army but passed before seeing combat. His death, registered on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1941 at the

Queen Alexandra Hospital in Cosham, was the consequence of tuberculosis peritonitis; he collapsed during the operation attempting to remove an intestinal obstruction.<sup>29</sup>

The only other rank of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy to die of an illness on home soil would be 24 year old Lance Bombardier Frank Leah, who passed on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1943 in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Netley, due to a 'cerebral abscess' and 'bronchiectasis'.<sup>30</sup>

### **Accidental Deaths**

There were many deaths in the British Army during WW2 which were the result of accidents but all of the accidental deaths in the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy were directly linked to road traffic incidents involving motorcycles.

There was Gunner Peter Alec Bruton, who was born in the small Gloucestershire town of Mailsworth on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1918, to his father Randolph Frederic – a blacksmith and master wheelwright – and mother, Ada Marion.<sup>31</sup> Peter, 22 years old at the time, would die as 'the result of an operation for multiple injuries', which were sustained when he collided with 'a bollard on a traffic island', as he was riding a motor cycle – he passed on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1940.<sup>32</sup>

Lieutenant David Gustavus James Leith-Buchanan, 24 years old at his death, was also sadly killed in a motorcycle accident on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1941.<sup>33</sup>

A/L/Sgt Andrew Christie Morrison was born on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1918 in Birmingham, to munition worker John Morrison and his wife Mary.<sup>34</sup> On 4<sup>th</sup> April 1942, at the young age of 23 years old, Andrew would be involved in an 'accidental collision between the motorcycle he was riding and a 3ton Bedford lorry', resulting in 'injuries to the mid brain and fracture of the skull.' Andrew would not recover from these injuries and passed the day after on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1942.<sup>35</sup>

WOII Thomas Bruce Chantry, 45 years old at the time of his death, was involved in 'an accidental collision' between his motorcycle and an 'Army motorcar' on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1942. The injuries he sustained from this incident would be fatal. He would pass 4 days later on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1942, in an emergency hospital in Salisbury.<sup>36</sup>

### **Friendly Fire**

One of the more unfortunate moments in the regiment's history involved 8 officers from the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, including 27-year-old Lieutenant William Laurence Hodge. These 8 officers attended an RAF ground strafing demonstration at Imber, approximately 15miles from Salisbury, on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1942. Six Spitfires of 234 RAF Squadron and nine Hurricanes from 175 RAF Squadron were to demonstrate a live strafing of dummy targets for a gathered audience of both military and civilian spectators, which was to be a practice for a similar event to be ran 3 days later, of which Winston Churchill would be attending. Owing to hazy weather & poor visibility, the pilot of the sixth Hurricane from 175 Sqn mistook spectators for the dummy targets and opened fire. 25 spectators were killed, along with 71 others being taken as wounded.<sup>37</sup> One of the 25 killed was Lt. Hodge, while 2/Lt Hall (also of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy) suffered non-fatal gunshot wounds in the upper right arm. Gilkes diary for the date of Hodges unfortunate death simply adds 'Hodge killed by bullet from RAF plane.'<sup>38</sup> The main event set 3 days later for Churchill did go ahead despite this incident and this time, it ran as planned with fortunately no more injury.

### **Training**

Given the fact that Germany never invaded England, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment never needed to fire their weapons in anger. However, the four heavy batteries would conduct weapons training at various ranges around the Salisbury Plains area. The regiment actually started their firing practice on non-heavy weapons, namely on both 18pdrs and 4.5in guns, on 28<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> June 1940 at the West Down Ranges. The dates February 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> 1941 saw C/54 fire 50 rounds at Hamilton Battery at Larkhill. The first recorded time that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would fire 9.2in MkII howitzers



together would be on 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup> January 1942, when A, B & C batteries fired four guns situated at the firing range of Silver Barrow. Similarly, D/54 fired four 6in MkXIX guns as a complete battery at Lonely Copse on 30<sup>th</sup> January, another firing range in the greater Salisbury area.

The 54th Heavy would also work with various Allied air force squadrons, including both 651 RAF and 400 RCAF squadrons on some of these shoots, to improve both artillery reconnaissance and AOP cooperation. These skills would be necessary in the upcoming campaigns.



*Figure 8 – A/54 firing a 9.2in MkII howitzer at Larkhill on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1941*

The regiment were also given various lectures during their training, possibly as a means to inform the ranks and officers about the war and its many factors. On 26th November 1941, Mr Birch Jones from the Board of Education, lectured the regiment on the Russian Army and two days later on 28th November, Captain Spearman lectured to all of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy officers about 'Germany – Its characteristics and component states'. These two lectures should have been very poignant, as at this point in the war the Germany armed forces were currently battling close to the gates of Moscow.

My grandfather joined the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1942, when the CCRA V Corps was giving a regimental lecture on the 'Employment of Medium and Heavy Regiments.' At 2pm on the same day, the regiment was also briefed about the 'Underground Movement in France'. The next day on 10<sup>th</sup> June, there was perhaps a more appropriate lecture to the gunners and officers about Artillery Air Reconnaissance.

There were also various corps and command exercises, of which both officers and ranks of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would be involved. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1941, only 12 days after his appointment as CO, Lt. Col. Gilkes would offer 'fifteen umpires and a considerable quantity of transport' for V Corps Exercise No.5; the regiment had previously supported Exercise No.3 with 11 officers 3 months earlier on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1941. On 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> May 1941, Gilkes would be employed as an umpire on Exercise REPULSE for Southern Command. While the details of this exercise are not given, it is clear that this would have been a large anti-invasion exercise along the whole Southern front

## **Mobilisation**

In March 1942, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy battery structure changed, when the four batteries, A to D, swapped their names to P, Q, R & S. In the same year between 30<sup>th</sup> July and 8<sup>th</sup> August 1942, all batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would replace their older 6in MkXIX & 9.2in MkII weapons with the 7.2in MkI

howitzers, meaning for the first time the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment batteries now all operated the same weapon.

While this weapon system was not necessarily new – the barrel liners and breech mechanisms were modified from the 8in howitzer, which itself was also used in WW1 – it was an upgrade on both the 6in MkXIX & 9.2in MkII and it would have definitely seemed so to the gunners as well. The weight of the weapon system, inclusive of howitzer and carriage, was nearly identical to that of the 6in MkXIX at 10.3tons.<sup>39</sup> Its range was better than the 9.2in MkII howitzers, as it could launch a 90kg high explosive (HE) shell up to an approximate distance of just under 15.5km.<sup>40</sup> It was also more mobile than the 9.2in MkII howitzers, as with its more modern carriage and pneumatic rubber tyres, it could be towed and moved around the battlefield quicker. One of the only downsides of the weapon was that the recoil system was not able to fully absorb its own force. Upon firing, the weapon rolled backwards (especially on wet ground) and gunners had to stand back during firing. While this would be eradicated with the introduction of a new carriage (these were the 7.2in Mk V & VI, which became a standard of the RA Heavy Regiments by wars end) the current solution was the addition of firing ‘scotches’ behind the wheels, angled platforms that the wheels could roll up onto, so that the gun would roll itself forwards again after firing.



*Figure 9 – Three 7.2-inch howitzers of 3rd Battery, 1st Heavy Regiment in France, 12 February 1940. Note the two scotches to the right of the middle gun.*

### **Joining an AGRA**

After its reorganisation and re-equipment with new weapons, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was to be amalgamated into the newly formed 1<sup>st</sup> Army Group, Royal Artillery (AGRA), which was created on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1942.<sup>41</sup> Then Colonel Edward Maxwell Tyler, the units first CAGRA\*, only joined the group on 1<sup>st</sup> September, when the AGRA was seen to be officially activated.<sup>42</sup> The AGRAs headquarters were situated at Burnbank near Glasgow and the unit was initially allotted to the British First Army artillery, as part of V Corps.<sup>43</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy was to be the only Heavy Regiment in 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA and during the war, Heavy Regiments would only ever make up a small portion of the regiments allocated to each AGRA, of which there would be 10 total during the war.

AGRAs were formations of various artillery regiments, usually consisting of Field, Medium, Heavy and eventually Super Heavy regiments – Anti-Tank Regiments were not normally assigned to AGRAs. Despite their name, AGRAs were normally attached to military Corps formations.

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\* Commander AGRA



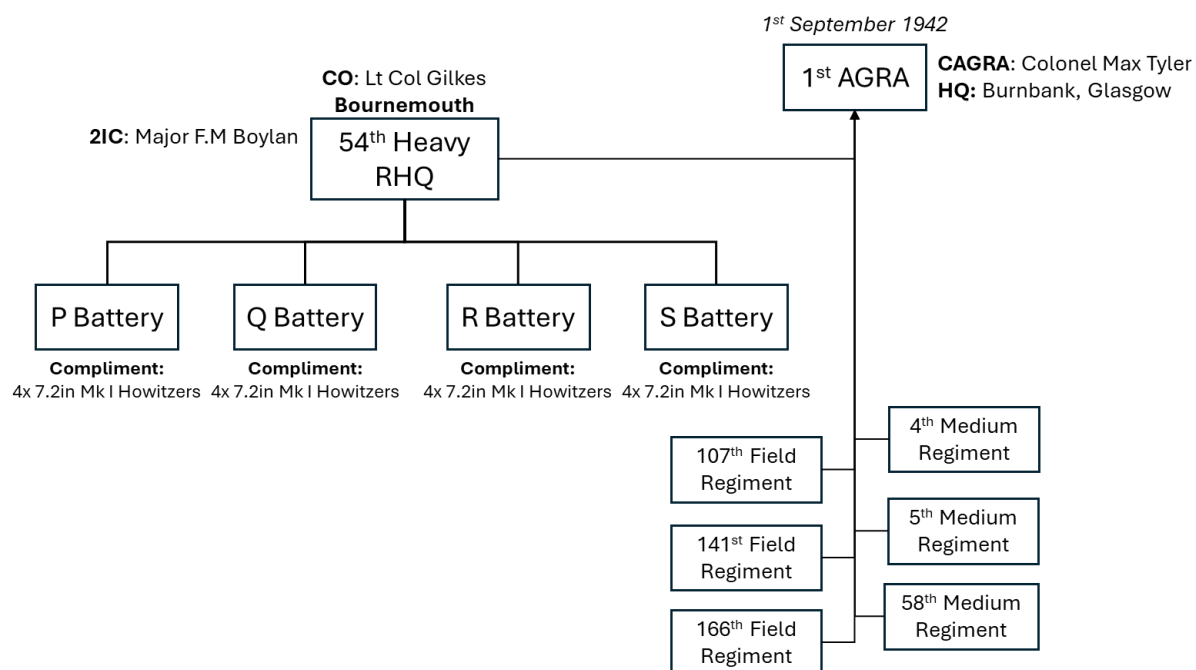


Figure 10 – 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA formation at its creation on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1942, along with the battery information for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment at the time



Figure 11 – 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA CAGRA, Edward Maxwell Tyler in a picture taken on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1944 in Italy, with Tyler then holding the rank of Brigadier.

On 23rd September 1942, the regiment was officially ordered to mobilise for overseas deployment. Two days later, on 25th September, the Secretary of State for War, James Grigg, was given a gun drill demonstration by R/54 when he visited.

For a reason unknown to the author, there are no war diary entries for the regiment after the month of October 1942 and it can only be presumed that these entries didn't survive the war. The last war diary entry for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy in the year of 1942 was on 31<sup>st</sup> October, which stated that '20 officers and NCOs visited the camouflage school in Old Sarum'. Knowing how to apply camouflage could prove invaluable in the regiments future war efforts.

## Part II: Africa

### Algeria

As previously mentioned, there are no official war diary entries for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment between the dates of 31st October 1942 and 1st February 1943. However, within this time the regiment changed their battery structure again, most likely at the beginning of the new year. The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, currently with four batteries named with letters, P, Q, R & S, changed over to numbers: 11, 12, 13 & 14. All batteries at this time still operated four of the 7.2in Mk I howitzers.

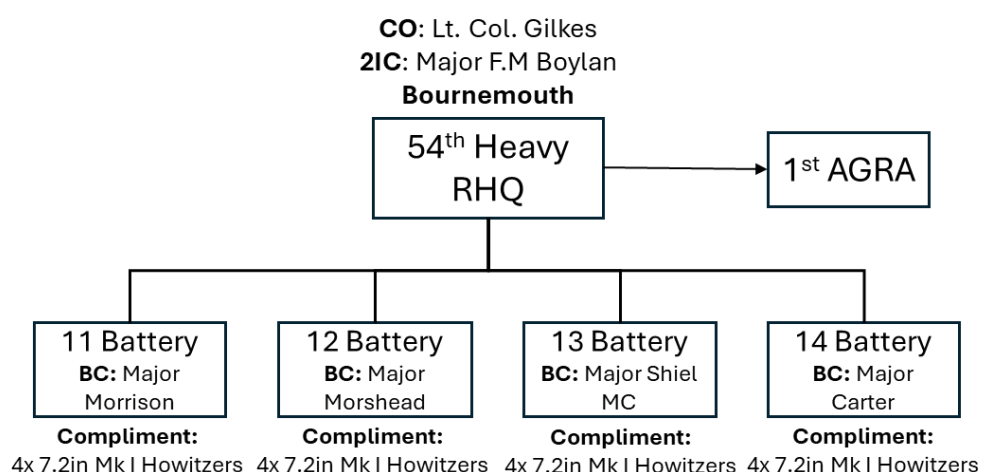


Figure 12 – 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment formation for the African campaign

After their initial mobilisation orders in September 1942, further orders were received, this time from the Movement Centre for Southern Command in February 1943, to move the regimental vehicles and personnel to ports across the country. On 15<sup>th</sup> February 1943, 18 tractors, 8 guns & 116 vehicles from the regiment were loaded onto various ships across ports in Wales such as Cardiff and Swansea. By the afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup> February, all regimental personnel would arrive at the King George V Dock in Glasgow, having made the train journey from Bournemouth the previous evening. By 4pm the same day, all regimental personnel would embark onto *HMT Boissevain*\*. She would leave her moorings in Glasgow at 11am on the 20<sup>th</sup> and sail to lay off Gourock, approximately 20 miles up the River Clyde, where she would remain while waiting for the assembly of an escort convoy to travel with. She would eventually set sail on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1943, with Algiers as her final destination and as part of Convoy KMF.10A, which contained five other merchant/troopships and 10 escorting warships.<sup>44</sup>

Also sailing in this convoy was 39 year old Major Harry Geoffrey Pickard. While Pickard would go on to eventually serve as CO for the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, at this time he was the CBO Staff Officer for 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA as part of British V Corps. He had served in the Royal Artillery since January 1922, first being commissioned as an officer in 1927 and already in this war he had served with the BEF in France, as the 2iC of the 70<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment.<sup>45</sup>

Major Pickard sailed as part of this convoy in the troopship *Circassia*. This was known as a ‘dry’ ship and was established as such because on a previous convoy the ‘...Americans had got so drunk that the powers that be said no more drink on the North African route!’ On board this ship, the men were accommodated below in ‘mess decks’, which Pickard grimly commented on, stating that their ‘atmosphere in the evening had to be smelt to be believed’.<sup>46</sup> *Circassia* had

\* Originally *MS Boissevain*, a Dutch built passenger-cargo liner, she was converted into a troopship in Sydney before sailing across the Pacific and Panama Canal, arriving in Glasgow in June 1942 to be used by the Admiralty. (<http://ssmaritime.com/KPM-Boissevain-Tegelberg-Ruys-2.htm>)

previously carried the vehicles and personnel of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA to Africa, with the AGRA HQ and staff departing Glasgow on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1943.<sup>47</sup>

Sailing past Northern Ireland on 25<sup>th</sup> February, the day of the convoy's departure, the ships encountered 'rough & cold weather' with Pickard describing how the 'sea certainly got choppy' and how 'one couldn't go down the iron ladders without meeting someone being sick or having been sick.' The convoy entered the Mediterranean a week later on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, when they passed through the Straits of Gibraltar, when 'apparently hostile aircraft had been sighted.' This led to gun crews within the convoy undertaking a 'certain amount of firing', although Pickard claims no one ever saw a plane.<sup>48</sup>

On 5<sup>th</sup> March at 2pm, the convoy would finally arrive at the dock of Algiers, having had a voyage from the British Isles fairly 'unmarked by any visible signs of hostile activity.' Unfortunately for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment and other troops in the convoy, a small foot march was needed to get from the Algiers docks to Transit Camp No.2, which was the result of a lack of available transport at the docks. Pickard remembers that 'there had been rumours of having to march seventeen miles when we landed so we were mildly pleased when we were told we only had to march five miles!' This 5-mile march would take approximately 3 hours, with the troops involved having 'halts every half hour or so to wipe the sweat off our brows and change hands and loads.'<sup>49</sup>

After they had completed their march through the desert heat, they arrived at the transit camp. The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would only rest here for two days before they received new orders from the Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General (DAQMG) of the Algiers sub-area, which asked for the regiments men to be loaded onto two different troopships. They would then be moved onto Bône (Annaba) to No.4 Transit Camp.

This they did on 9<sup>th</sup> March, when 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy personnel embarked onto *HMS Royal Ulsterman* and *HMS Royal Scotsman*, both former passenger ships requisitioned by the Admiralty after the start of the war\*. At 8pm of that night, three hours before the troopships were set to depart, the Algiers docks came under air attack, although there were no reported casualties within the regiment. At 8am the following morning and while underway, six 'Italian torpedo-bombers' attacked the two troopships, luckily inflicting no damage or casualties. Unscathed after two separate air attacks, the regiment would finally arrive at Bône docks at 2pm on 10<sup>th</sup> March.

Holding in the Bône sub area, the regiment awaited delivery of their vehicles and weapons, which started to arrive on 20<sup>th</sup> March; 18 tractors and 8 guns were unloaded off a single ship at Bône docks. On 24<sup>th</sup> March, the remaining guns, along with 62 other vehicles, were unloaded at Algiers. These were to be driven to the Bône sub area as part of large convoys, with hundreds of other vehicles. Pickard, who drove in one of these convoys, only started to appreciate 'how long it really took to get a big convoy off the road...and how long [it took] to get them all started again'; any 'Drivers who halted unofficially...deserved the ticking off they got when they were caught!'<sup>50</sup>

By 26<sup>th</sup> March, 18 tractors, 114 vehicles and all 7.2in Mk I howitzers would arrive, meaning that the regiment was now back up to its full strength of armament and vehicles. Even before all batteries had their weapons, some took to practice firing, taking opportunity of their reunion with their guns. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 12/54 & 13/54 fired into the Mediterranean, using the Charge IV fuse for the first time. The Charge IV fuse was an 8.6kg increment charge with approximately 340g of cordite, which when combined with Charges I to III, allowed the 7.2in Mk I howitzer to fire shells at 518m/sec over 15km.<sup>51</sup> Despite this being the first time the regiment had used this charge, all of the firings were reported as a 'complete success'.

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\* The Royal Ulsterman and Royal Scotsman were launched a day apart in Belfast, on 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> March 1936 respectively before being requisitioned by the Admiralty between 1940 and 1941. (<https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/13471.html>)(<https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/13469.html>)

## Tunisia

On April Fool's Day 1943, Lt.Col Gilkes received final orders from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA to move the regiment to a concentration area at Le Kef (El Kef), a city approximately 70 miles to the South-East of Bône. However, 12/54, at the request of HQRA V Corps, were ordered to move to Souk El Khemis. On the same day, 11/54 was also on the move, meaning that by day end 2<sup>nd</sup> April, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy RHQ would now only command two batteries, 13/54 & 14/54.

### 11/54

At the request of 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA, 11/54 moved independently on 2<sup>nd</sup> April to El Aroussa, a small town in the Bou Arada region. The 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA was formed in Darlington, Yorkshire, on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1942, under the command of Brigadier F.H.C Rogers. It moved with British IX Corps HQ to Algiers in February 1943.<sup>52</sup> In March 1943, the AGRA HQ moved to the Bou Arada valley, where it was to act in support of the French De Monsaubert Division. At this time, 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA consisted of the 23<sup>rd</sup> & 102<sup>nd</sup> Field Regiments, 11/54, the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment (less two batteries – reference 12/54 in Tunisia) who were also operating 7.2in howitzers, albeit the Mk IV version, the 140<sup>th</sup> Field and the 74<sup>th</sup> Medium regiments, who were units attached to the French divisions; 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA packed quite a punch. 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA supported the British V & IX Corps push into the Tunis area, whose main attack on the capital started on 6<sup>th</sup> May.<sup>53</sup>

There are no regimental or battery war diary entries for 11/54 during the Tunisian campaign, so no specific details of this unit can be given. 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA also does not have a HQ war diary during this time period but it can be presumed that 11/54 gave the usual heavy weapon support, in the form of counter battery fire to both V & IX Corps, helping infantry attacks move forward with the suppression of hostile batteries, as well as being involved with AGRA fire plans.

My grandfather, Edward Cavadino, joined the regiment as part of P Battery and served in 11/54 during the Tunisian campaign. On 29<sup>th</sup> April 1943, just under a month after his deployment to the North African front and just before the end of the African campaign, he was found to have committed an offence in accordance with Army Military Law, Section 40. Gunner Cavadino was 'Ordered by C.O. to forfeit 14 days [ordinary] pay for showing wilful defiance of censorship regulations'.<sup>54</sup> Fighting in the desert was brutal, with the heat, sand and various illnesses taking their mental and physical toll on all soldiers who fought there. My guess is that he tried to write home to complain about the conditions but was probably told to get on with it, as everyone else was told the same thing!

On 9<sup>th</sup> May, orders from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA were received for 11/54 to move to Pont Du Fahs, to come under the command of French XIX Corps, as this unit was still engaged in heavy fighting.<sup>55</sup> By 11<sup>th</sup> May, 11/54 were back in action<sup>56</sup>, although their contribution was to be limited at this stage of the campaign (reference 13/54 & 14/54).

### 12/54

On 1<sup>st</sup> April, 12/54 left the command of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy RHQ and proceeded onto Ghardimaou, a town on the Algeria-Tunisia border, arriving here at 3pm and coming under the command of the 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, with 12/54 now coming under the command of 71<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment, a recce party for the battery went forward along with 71<sup>st</sup> Field (less two batteries) and 19/56 Heavy Regiment (less two batteries – reference 11/54).

The battery was moved approximately 6 miles Southwest of the Beja area on 2<sup>nd</sup> April and were in action at 11pm, 'in hide at *Hindenburg Corner*.' There is no official description of where *Hindenburg Corner* was, so it is presumed this was a name given to a certain crossroads or specific rest position for the battery and its men; perhaps the name was in jest to German forces who may have recently evacuated the area, or who were only a few miles away at the front. The batteries guns were moved in to these positions by night on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and by midday on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the

gun positions were formed, but a policy of silence was to be enforced on the battery at this time – no guns were to be fired.

This policy of silence would be ended on 6<sup>th</sup> April, when 12/54 received their first orders for artillery support. These orders were to support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hampshire's (2<sup>nd</sup> Hamps) Battalion, part of the 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which was also known as the Battleaxe Division, was to conduct an operation aimed at liberating key high points in the areas near the main road linking Oued Zarga to Medjez El Bab, allowing full control of the plains in this area, which would then open up the advance to Tunis. This was to be known as Operation SWEEP, whose D-Day was set for 7<sup>th</sup> April. 12/54 would directly support the 78<sup>th</sup> Division on D-Day, alongside both 18/56 & 19/56 as the heavy support, with C Flight of 651 AOP Squadron providing Arty/R. The 5<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, 19<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, 102<sup>nd</sup> & the 71<sup>st</sup> Field Regiments were also in support, meaning there was approximately 12 heavy guns, 16 medium and up to 32 field guns in support of the infantry.<sup>57</sup>

At midnight of 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> April, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hamps attack near the Djebel\* Mahdi and Mt Kachbia was supported by 12/54, who fired DF tasks until 4.50am. Bombardier Andrews of 12/54 was supporting 19/56 in their OP during this attack. He was seen by the gunners of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy as a fresh soldier, as this regiment had been in action in Tunisia since February. One member of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy even joked that Andrews was only 'coming along for the experience.'<sup>58</sup> After digging a trench and laying cable for their wireless sets later in the night, they came under fire from German 88mm guns. Being new to artillery fire, Bdr Andrews was understandably frightened:

*Bdr Andrews: "How long does this go on for?"*

*Bdr Milligan: "Until the war is finished."*

*Gnr Tume: "Don't take any notice of him. Sometimes a few minutes, sometimes an hour, it depends on which German's on duty."<sup>59</sup>*

Bombardier Andrews stayed on in support of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hamps attack, where 12/54 fired 184 rounds, which assisted in the eventual enemy pull back and allowed Mt Kachbia to be captured at 5.40am on the morning of 7<sup>th</sup> April. The day after on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 12/54 engaged targets in support of the continuing 78<sup>th</sup> Division advance, even firing onto a 'M' (Mike<sup>†</sup>) target at 6pm. From 8.30pm until 6am the next morning, 12/54 would fire a further 120 rounds in harassing fire programmes, continuing throughout 9<sup>th</sup> April. 12/54 would eventually be pulled away from support of the 78<sup>th</sup> Division but Operation SWEEP, lasting up to 3 weeks, would be successful and the road to Tunis lay open, with further operations to be planned on the back of this success.

On 13<sup>th</sup> April 12/54, at this time attached to 5<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, were now supporting 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and fired onto Mike targets in the morning, as part of the ongoing battles around the area of Oued Zarga; C Sub of 12/54 'got off 24 [rounds] in 36 minutes' at targets in the afternoon. Perhaps having made themselves a target, 12/54 were attacked the next day by dive bombers at midday, who dropped 3x 500lb bombs, one of which landed approximately 20 or so metres in front of 'D Sub' but with no casualties taken. By 8pm, enemy aircraft would come back and target the battery again, dropping three more bombs. Again, no casualties were taken.

On 21<sup>st</sup> April, 12/54 took part in what is now known as the Battle of Longstop Hill, moving from their current positions, in the Bou Salem area, to the Medjez el Bab front on 18<sup>th</sup> April. This hill was previously the focus of a brutal battle in December 1942, when the Coldstream Guards, involved with British First Army, lost nearly 200 men killed and wounded after a German counterattack took the hill, while the supporting American 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment also lost 350 men in the same

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\* Djebel (jebel) = A mountain, hill or range of hills in Middle Eastern or North African countries

† A 'Mike' target was normally one to be engaged by all available guns within a regiment

action.<sup>60</sup> The hill was of importance as it bore down on the road to Tunis, which the Germans knew was a major target for the Allied forces. Once the battery had moved to the area to support, they immediately came under the attention of the German forces and were straight into action, as they faced 'strong enemy patrolling during the night' of the 18<sup>th</sup> with their 'gun area nearly [being] surrounded.' The 'battle during the day lasted until 1200hrs...5 [battalions] being involved of the Hermann Goering (sic) Corps\*'. At the end of this battle, the 12/54 BC Major Morshead recorded that the Germans had eventually lost 500 men as PoW, with around 30 of their panzers and vehicles being knocked out.

After surviving an aggressive German attack at Longstop Hill, the battery would be pulled out. It was reported by 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA on 24<sup>th</sup> April that 'Longstop [was] reported clear of enemy',<sup>61</sup> which shows the brutality of even these small but important battles in this larger campaign. Longstop Hill was *finally* re-captured and held on 26<sup>th</sup> April, by elements of British First Army.<sup>62</sup> The capturing of this prominent feature in the Tunisian plains now opened up the road to Tunis for the Allies.

12/54 would be involved in a 'fresh battle' on 24<sup>th</sup> April, when at midnight they would start firing concentrations supporting V Corps advances until 3.50am. At 4.50pm of the same day, 'enemy aircraft activity' culminated in an air raid, where Gunner Arthur Richard Briggs suffered a 'bullet wound in the shoulder', most likely during a low level strafing attack. Despite this, the V Corps attack being supported was making 'good progress' and the second phase of this battle was completed at 10pm on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

The next few days were quiet for the battery until 28<sup>th</sup> April, when the battery gun positions were once attacked again by aircraft, this time by 'FWs'†, with no reported damage or casualties. The next day on 29<sup>th</sup> April, 12/54 had a 'day with many group targets and observed shoots'.

On 9<sup>th</sup> May, orders from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA were received for 12/54 to move to Pont Du Fahs,<sup>63</sup> along with 11/54, to come under the command of French XIX Corps, who 'further south were still held up by mountainous country. The French called up for their old friends';<sup>64</sup> these old friends were the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA.

### **13/54 & 14/54**

By 4<sup>th</sup> April, the two batteries still under RHQ jurisdiction, 13/54 & 14/54 would move from the Siliana area to Djebel Bargou. Here they fell under the command of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA and would be called on to provide indirect support to the French XIX Army Corps, who were led by General Koeltz. The corps contained two divisions, the Division Mathanet commanded by Maj. Gen. Maurice Mathanet and the Division Welvert, led by a General of the same name. These two divisions consisted of other smaller units, including Free French units from Morocco and Tunisia.

At 10.50am on the same day, in a somewhat unfortunate introduction to the frontlines, 13/54 had a premature at one of their guns which injured 5 gunners of the battery, along with a single gunner from RHQ. Despite this setback the battery still managed to engage a hostile battery (HB) later on in the day, using 24 rounds of high explosive (HE). The next day, 14/54 had their own baptism of fire when their battery area was slightly shelled; luckily the enemy shelling was not effective and 14/54 suffered no casualties during this barrage.

Over the next few days, the two batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would work hard performing counter battery programmes and between 9<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> April, they would report firing approximately 333 rounds of HE onto known HB locations – 14/54 also observed firing onto a new HB on the 14<sup>th</sup> and

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\* The Hermann Goering Corps listed in the 12/54 war diary was actually the *Hermann Göring* division of the *Fallschirmjäger*, which were the German airborne forces during the Second World War.

† FW, or *Focke-Wulf*, presumably the *Fw 190*, was a single engine aircraft of the *Luftwaffe* during WW2. It was known for its speed, agility and versatility as fighter, fighter bomber and ground attack platform.

after many rounds, '11 heavy explosions [were] observed suggesting hitting of [ammunition].' This shelling was in support of an attack by 2/6 RTA\* and 1/29 RTA, which was also supported by the guns of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment. This particular attack 'was not heavily opposed apart from fairly heavy mortar and small arms fired from Pt746.', which would have been a high point in the nearby area.<sup>65</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> April 14/54 fired 46 rounds in support of an attack led by 1/RTA. The 17<sup>th</sup> saw the 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment and 14/54 support an attack of the 1/6 RTA, which saw about 100 Italian PoWs being taken.<sup>66</sup> On the 18<sup>th</sup>, another attack by 1/RTA in the Djebibina area was supported with 240 rounds HE being fired, with the attacks 'objective reached'.

During this time, Gilkes would be called upon to act as temporary commander of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, after CAGRA Brigadier Tyler, who received a promotion from Colonel on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1943,<sup>67</sup> had to leave 'to assume appointment BRA 18 Army Group.'<sup>68</sup> However, he would only act as CAGRA for 3 days, when on 15<sup>th</sup> April, Brigadier Denham, the CAGRA successor, arrived and assumed command.<sup>69</sup>

On 19<sup>th</sup> April, the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA HQ left to the Medjez el Bab front (the 23<sup>rd</sup> & 166<sup>th</sup> Field Regiments also left the area with 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA), leaving only the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, 63<sup>rd</sup> LAA and 132 Battery of the 87<sup>th</sup> A/Tk Regiment to remain in support of the Free French forces: the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy fired 41 rounds on HF tasks on the same day. Two days later, 13/54 & 14/54 fired 125 rounds in preparation for an attack by RTA forces in the area, which was to commence on 22<sup>nd</sup> April. This attack ultimately fizzled out, with the infantry getting within 500yds of their objectives before the fire plan ended (138 rounds were fired during the attack) and the French soldiers were told to consolidate their gains.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> April, Gilkes attended a conference at French XIX Corps HQ to discuss a 'big attack on whole front to conform with 1<sup>st</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Armies attack'. This led to Admin Order No.4 being issued on 24<sup>th</sup> April, which was an order for the two batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment to support an attack on the whole of the French XIX Corps front. The 15<sup>th</sup> RTS† and 6<sup>th</sup> RTA were to attack the peaks of the Djebel Mansour and Djebel Alliliga features, where the enemy had entrenched themselves along these two peaks down to the plains, heading South and then in a further defensive line heading South-East. The two djebels stood rather high, at 648m & 678m respectively, and both overlooked the French XIX Corps units, who faced the German & Italian forces only a few kilometres away to the West.

There were to be three 'phases' of attack: the first was an infantry attack, supported by artillery, against the Southern end of the mountainous defences in the Ech Chouchi area; if the first was successful then the second, a direct push against Djebel Alliliga, was to be started with artillery support and finally, Phase 3 would commence from the North against the Djebel Mansour range itself.<sup>70</sup> The 13/54 OP would be situated 732m above the Mansour plains, on aptly named Pt.732, approximately 8km away from the frontlines, while 14/54 would have two OPs: one at Pt.581 5km away from 13/54 and the other on the Djebel Bargou, a peak to the South.

During the night of 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> April, the eve of D-Day, 13/54 & 14/54 fired a total of 116 rounds as part of their fire plans supporting the attack, mainly targeting hostile batteries with HE, even firing at an 'intense' rate of fire onto one target as the attack was ending. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, the 'enemy [was] reported to be withdrawing along whole front', with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment 'ordered to rest until situation clarified'. Between 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April and as the enemy withdrew, the regiment moved from the Djebel Bargou area to Djebel Fkirine, an area Northwest of their previous positions,

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\* The Regt Tirailleurs Algeriens (RTA), or the Algerian Tirailleurs Regiment, was a regiment, serving within the Free French divisions of the French XIX Corps.

† The Regt Tirailleurs Senegalais (RTS), or the Senegalais Tirailleurs Regiment, was another Free French regiment serving in XIX Corps.

chasing the now withdrawing Axis forces. The RHQ and both batteries found themselves situated below the Djebel el Assa.

On 28<sup>th</sup> April, the new 13/54 positions were hit by enemy medium guns at 11am and shell fragments put out a gun by bursting its tyre. The same shell fragments also injured Gunners Evans, Ward & Wilson, Sgt Timms and L/Sgt Savage, who would all be evacuated to MDS (Main Dressing Station) Robaa. Unfortunately, these same shell fragments also killed two of the batteries gunners: Gunners Davies and Reynolds. Gunner Harold Davies, originally from the small town of Bryncoch in Wales, came from a coal mining family and was only 28 years old at the time of his death.<sup>71</sup>

Gunner Raymond Spencer Reynolds was born on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1909, in Sheffield, in the village of Hathersage.<sup>72</sup> A general labourer before the war, he stood tall at 5ft 10in and had black hair. After he was enlisted into the Territorial Army on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1940, he initially trained with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Medium and Heavy Training Regiment before being posted to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1940.<sup>73</sup> When 13/54 moved to the Djebel Fkirine area, Raymond was 33 years old. He left behind his mother, Mabel Arline.

At 2pm on 28<sup>th</sup> April, 13/54 were ordered to a new position, which was away from their now exposed gun areas and somewhat closer to RHQ, at least for the meantime. On 30<sup>th</sup> April, the two batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy supporting the French advances were preparing for what would be a final assault, as the Germans and Italian forces had pulled back into new defensive positions in the Zaghouan area, which was approximately 50km South from the centre of Tunis. This day saw 'considerable enemy activity in Zaghouan and hostile shelling of Pont Du Fahs plain', an area of land between the Djebel Mansour and Zaghouan, which was connected by roads; these roads would be critical to the capture of not only Zaghouan but Tunis itself.

Going into May, 13/54 & 14/54 were only to use wireless transmissions (W/T) in order to locate & observe hostile batteries as on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, a 'policy of silence' was 'dictated by MATHANET [Division] in order to effect surprise.' Enemy shelling was 'fairly active' on this day and hostile batteries were even located using sound bearing, although the guns of the two batteries remained silent for now.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, a new hostile battery concentration table was issued, with the regiment lined up to support an attack by 7<sup>th</sup> RTM\* against the defences around Zaghouan at 0430hrs on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The attack started on schedule and an hour and a half later, the 7<sup>th</sup> RTM had reached their objectives, with 120 prisoners taken as a result. At the same time, enemy shells landed on the attackers and finally the guns of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment could open up. Using the concentration tables issued two days earlier, the two 7.2in Mk I howitzer equipped batteries would fire 493 rounds of HE against hostile gun positions. The enemy would counter attack on the 5<sup>th</sup>, regaining the ground captured by the French a day earlier but the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would still engage hostile batteries to 'quieten enemy supporting fire', with 57 rounds of HE fired during the day. Either due to the intense artillery fire or the tenacity of the French forces, the Axis troops began to withdraw on the 6<sup>th</sup>. The Axis artillery supported this withdrawal and rounds that landed on positions of the 140<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment were responded to in force by in the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, as all known HBs in the area were engaged in retaliation.

This withdrawal continued into the next day and 'all lines of enemy withdrawal [were] heavily engaged'. The two batteries expended 414 rounds HE in harassing fire plans and to possibly confuse and disrupt the enemy further, these plans were fired at 'irregular intervals'; the shooting on the 7<sup>th</sup> led to 'Fires and explosions [being] seen and heard indicating enemy's departure'. The

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\* The Regt Tirailleurs Marocains (RTM), or the Moroccan Tirailleurs Regiment, was a regiment, serving within the Free French divisions of the French XIX Corps.



enemy falling back may also have coincided with orders they received from their Higher Commands, as on this day, the city of Tunis fell to the Allied Armies.

On 8<sup>th</sup> May, the RHQ and two heavy batteries moved to an area approximately 4km West of Djebel Kohol (Jabal al Kuhl). The regiment received reports on the 9<sup>th</sup> that enemy presence was still noted in the towns of Bir Halima and Zaghouan; these potential targets were now only 10km away. On May 10<sup>th</sup> the 7/RTM were to put in an assault on Djebel El Lerg, a peak to the South of Zaghouan, which was still in enemy hands. With direct support from the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, the attack was to go in at 6pm, with a single OP officer from 13/54 registering both batteries onto their tasks at 5pm. There was to be 30 rounds per gun available before the attack went in and the targets would be ridges on and around the Djebel itself.<sup>74</sup> During this attack, 'Very little enemy resistance [was] encountered', 115 rounds were fired and the attack was deemed a success.

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, the harassing fire onto the area of Zaghouan was continued. At 9am on this day, heavy fire was to be put down on all known enemy positions by both batteries, as well as other regiments as part of the XIX Corps and 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA units. This was an effort to force the enemy's hand and get them to surrender. 253 rounds were fired by the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy batteries in the area – this would have consisted of 13/54 & 14/54, although it is not certain as to whether 11/54 or 12/54 fired any rounds during this final assault – before the armistice of the enemy forces was commenced at 10.30am. In the Zaghouan area itself, 22,000 enemy prisoners surrendered unconditionally and both the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment and '[1<sup>st</sup>] AGRA finished their North African campaign with a series of quick actions and a gay expenditure of ammunition.'<sup>75</sup>

### ***Casualties in North Africa***

As well as the casualties that have already been mentioned within this section, there were other wartime losses for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment during the fighting for Africa.

Gunners Albert Silk and James Gordon Dean, 23 and 24 years old respectively, both died on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1943 as the direct result of enemy action. Bombardier Geoffrey Largent Collins died a day later on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1943 and I believe this to be the result of wounds sustained on 21<sup>st</sup> with the other two gunners.

What is strange with these three deaths is that they don't appear in either the main regimental war diary entries or the battery diary for 12/54 for April 1943, so my presumption is that they must be linked to 11/54. Gilkes, covering the activities of both 13/54 & 14/54 during April & May, was fastidious in his detail and I am sure he would have covered these deaths if they were involved in his RHQ area.

My best guess is that the battery was involved in fighting near Longstop Hill or another battle near Medjez el Bab, in support of either British V & IX Corps and received an enemy shell on their positions, which directly killed the two gunners on impact and severely wounded Bombardier Collins, who died a day later of his injuries.

I will keep researching other unit war diaries to see if anything comes up linked to these deaths.

## Victory in Africa

The day after the German surrender in the area of Zaghuan, May 12<sup>th</sup>, was a day of rest for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment. Gilkes wrote in his diary that he ‘saw thousands of prisoners coming in.’<sup>76</sup> Although there was ‘no organised resistance encountered’ on this day, with both German and Italian forces surrendering, there was still ‘some hostile shelling.’<sup>77</sup>

The day after, May 13<sup>th</sup>, would see the total surrender of approximately 250,000 German and Italian troops in the country of Tunisia, including those that had been pushed back from the Western African front by the British Eighth Army. The battle for North Africa was finally over and the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment had played their part in bringing it to a close. They were one of only two Royal Artillery Heavy Regiments supporting the Allied troops in Tunisia and alongside the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, they were the only Heavy Regiments of the British Army currently in action against the Axis forces anywhere in Europe.

Despite their short involvement in the fighting, the two batteries under direct jurisdiction of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy RHQ (13/54 & 14/54) fired approximately 3196 rounds, including 1736 in May alone. Supporting the French XIX Corps, the two heavy batteries fired an average of 77 rounds a day (coming up to an average of nearly 157 rounds per day during May) and fired more than 400 rounds on two days. The regiment worked primarily on counter battery work and performed well under pressure to suppress the Axis artillery, which as shown, continued to fire up until and including the day of their overall surrender.

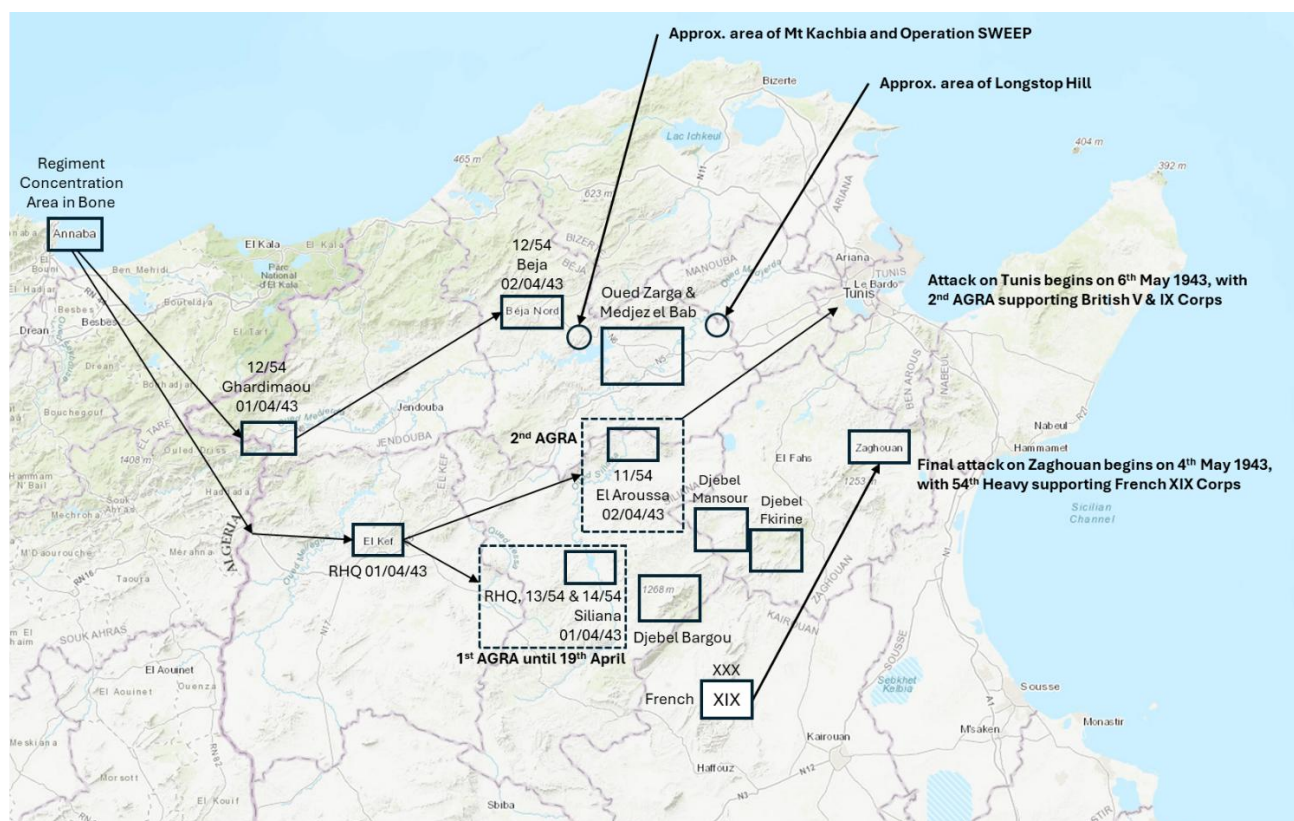


Figure 13 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment's movements during the North African campaign, during April and May 1943.

The support of the regiment (along with other RA regiments as part of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA) would lead General Koeltz, who commanded the French XIX Corps, to later comment that the ideal combination of military force in the desert campaign was ‘French divisions with British gunners’.

In a remark to the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA CAGRA, Brigadier Maxwell Tyler, on 4<sup>th</sup> August in Algiers, Koeltz would remark:

*“Le vous donnerai un mot d'argot pour votre artillerie – ils sont chics et durs.”*

This roughly translates to

“I'll give you a slang word for your artillery - they're classy and tough”.<sup>78</sup>

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would eventually receive more praise later on in the year, for their participation in the desert campaign, in a letter written by Brigadier Pratt\* on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1943. Brigadier Pratt wrote to the commands of both 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRAs, saying how he would like to ‘congratulate all ranks in 54 and 56 Hvy Regts’ for ‘how splendidly 7.2” How detachments performed in the March-April and May battles.’ – Pratt would finish his complimentary letter, also commenting on the upkeep of the aforementioned regiments guns, by stating that the ‘tribute is well earned’.<sup>79</sup>

On May 13<sup>th</sup>, the regiment would finally be back at full strength of guns and personnel, as with the cessation of hostilities in North Africa, both 11/54 & 12/54 reverted back under regimental command, which itself remained under the full authority of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment left along with 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA to concentrate in an area near Medjez-el-Bab, which was called Grenadier Hill,<sup>80</sup> and two days later on the 17<sup>th</sup>, moved again into a new rest area to the West of the city of Tunis.

Here they would rest until May 20<sup>th</sup> when they were called up to be part of the Allied victory parade in Tunis. Two guns from each battery were taken to be presented during the parade and these would eventually line the parade route under a beautifully blue and clear sky, along with other Allied units including armoured cars, tanks and masses of Allied aircraft flying overhead. As the men and guns of the regiment marched along, their salutes were ‘taken by General Dwight Eisenhower’, who at the time was the commander of the Allied forces in North Africa. Gilkes and his officers attended, sitting close to the parade route, having ‘a very good view close to the saluting base’.<sup>81</sup> The day after on 21<sup>st</sup> May, Gilkes and his friend ‘Frankie’ (who to me is unknown) would venture into the town of Tunis, first having a ‘hot shower’ then going on to explore ‘Carthage afterwards’.<sup>82</sup>

After their participation in the Allied parade, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy enjoyed some more earned rest until 26<sup>th</sup> May, when 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA and its components started a movement towards Setif in Algeria. They arrived 3 days later on May 29<sup>th</sup> after a journey of approximately 300miles, covering nearly 100miles per day. Major Pickard, part of associated 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA staff, said this journey was completed ‘in one of the biggest convoys we had ever travelled in’. The lead vehicle of the column approached camp ‘at about 4pm but the tail never arrived until about 10 or 11pm!’<sup>83</sup> Here the regiment were to be encamped in a concentration area west of Setif, with a period of refit and individual training (of at least 3 weeks) ordered. This training included courses on Mine Warfare, Anti Malaria awareness and the important skill of Counter Battery. The gunners also spent some training on the 6pdr, an Anti-Tank weapon, after an idea proposed by AFHQ called for Medium and Heavy Regiments to be allotted 6pdr guns on a scale of 8 & 10 guns per regiment.<sup>84</sup> Training commenced for two weeks on 12<sup>th</sup> July with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy being trained by 87<sup>th</sup> A/Tk regiment.<sup>85</sup> Although training was completed, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would never use or own 6pdrs for the remainder of the war.

The gunners and officers of the regiment, now resting and training, would have to deal with the harsh weather of the North African landscape. Even if there was now no worry of German or Italian

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\* Fendall William Harvey Pratt was the CCRA for V Corps during the Tunisian campaign and at the time of writing this letter, was the BRA for 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group during the conflict in Sicily.

shells, there was always the infamous sirocco winds to interrupt sleep or daily activity. On July 6<sup>th</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA diary details of the 'sirocco blowing at its height' and how the 'dust is most unpleasant' which tended to 'cover everything'.<sup>86</sup> On 3<sup>rd</sup> August, there was also heavy rain, which had the ability to make 'a road impassable in less than ten minutes'.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the poor weather, morale within the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment seemed to be at a high. As well as extensive training, the gunners and officers also managed to enjoy themselves and forget that there was a war on. They attended concerts, such as on the evening of 13<sup>th</sup> July, when the 'Stars in Battle Dress' gave 'an excellent show'.<sup>88</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA band gave an open-air concert to 166<sup>th</sup> Field, 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy & 11<sup>th</sup> LAA Regiments on 20<sup>th</sup> August; the attendance at this concert was 'the largest open air one the band had played at this point'.<sup>89</sup>

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy also played some great football over the months in Africa, starting off a good run when they beat the 5<sup>th</sup> Survey Regiment 5-1 on 11<sup>th</sup> August, despite a draw at half time.<sup>90</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> August, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would represent 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA in the AGRAs Football Final, when they played against 74<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment of 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA. What resulted was a great final of football which resulted 'in an exciting win for 54 Hvy Rgt, who led 1-0 until 10 minutes before time. 74 Med drew level and less than one minute later 54 Hvy scored winning goal'.<sup>91</sup> The gunners and officers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment could now claim to be both the champions of the African Campaign as well as the AGRAs!

Even though the regiments of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA were rested and prepared in Algeria, they were never called up into the order of battle for Operation HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily. In hindsight, the Sicilian campaign didn't particularly suit heavy weaponry – Sicily was conquered in a month and the terrain didn't suit large, towed and immobile weapon platforms – but the men of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA weren't to know that at the time. On 6<sup>th</sup> August, orders were received at 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy RHQ from AFHQ for 're-equipment of unit for Operation AVALANCHE', which was the codename for the upcoming invasion of Southern Italy by British Eighth Army. The gunners of the regiment may have got their hopes up again, as after missing out on Sicily, perhaps their time would come. However, this wasn't to be, as on 21<sup>st</sup> August the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was officially stood down from the Operation AVALANCHE order of battle; the only other operational Heavy Regiment, the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy, was to be involved and be part of this invasion.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was not to be deterred by the constant rejections. They continued to train at individual and regimental level, ensuring their readiness for the day when they were finally called up to another theatre. On 25<sup>th</sup> August, the regiment completed some course shooting and in attendance spectating was the CAGRA. Brigadier Tyler was very impressed by what he saw on the day and openly stated that some of the course shoots from the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy 'ranked among the best he had seen'.<sup>92</sup>

One of the largest training exercises the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy performed while in Africa was WINKLE II. The WINKLE exercises were created by 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA to get regiments to 'perform at full scale with Group HQ...Survey and [LAA]'. These exercises would be held on the School of Artillery ranges near Setif and they would give a 'limited amount of daylight for small recce parties to prepare for night occupation', where fire plans would be created. In the morning, there would be a small amount of time to check registration before 'various battery, regimental and group [targets] are to be engaged.' The WINKLE exercises were designed to 'be difficult' but were seen as vitally important, by ensuring all regiments responded to the exercise with a 'full sense of...urgency which is so vital in giving artillery support'.<sup>93</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment finished Exercise WINKLE II on 20<sup>th</sup> September showing 'good form as expected' but made 'several blunders, such as orders for moves going wrong.' The official AGRA reports stated that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy 'were not on their day'.<sup>94</sup> Gilkes also echoed the thoughts of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA as he bluntly commented in his diary that the regiment 'did badly'.<sup>95</sup>

### **Casualties in Peacetime**

Unfortunately, the period of calm after the end of the campaign did not apply to every member of the regiment, as on 19<sup>th</sup> August, 20-year-old Gunner Walter Arnold Hancock died as a result of road accident, suffering a lethal ‘head injury’.<sup>96</sup>

Sadly, Lieutenant Stephen Charles Bonnett, who was posted back home also died, when on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1943 ‘a mine he was destroying exploded’; he suffered a ‘fracture of both legs and multiple injuries’, a grim way to die when the war was meant to be so far away.<sup>97</sup> It is not clear to what detachment Lt. Bonnett served or why he was back in England, as his name doesn’t appear in any Army field return forms. Although there is no specific war diary entry related to Bonnett, perhaps he was sent on a mine disarming training course which was only available in England.

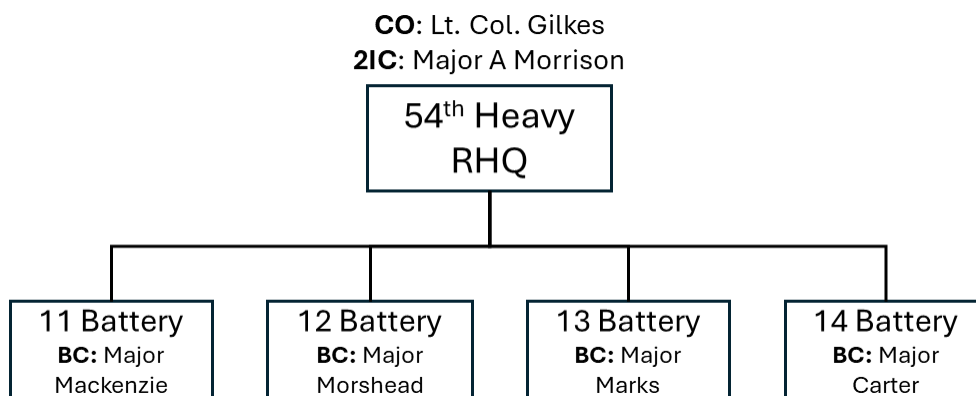
Maybe he thought that he had escaped the war for a few days.

### **Changes to the Regiment**

In this period of downtime, the regiment would also undergo a change to higher commands, as well as the individual commands of some batteries changing hands. The current 2iC, Major F.M Boylan, was to be replaced by Major A Morrison, who at this time was the BC for 11/54. Morrison had been with the regiment since 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1940 and took his place as Gilkes’ second on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1943. To replace Morrison as BC for 11/54 would come Major Mackenzie, who had joined the regiment the same day as Morrison back in 1940 – he assumed command on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1943.

12/54 and 14/54 would remain with their commanders, Major Morshead and Major Carter respectively. 13/54 would eventually replace Major Shiel MC with Major Marks, who joined the regiment on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1943, which was the same day he assumed command of the battery

This structure, shown in Figure 14, would remain the same for the rest of the war, at least while the regiment remained as a heavy unit.



*Figure 14 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment’s new command structure going into the Italy campaign.*

## Part III: Italy

1943

### ***Battle for Ortona***

In the months following the victory in Tunisia, there were signs that the regiment was being considered for action again. Between September and October 1943, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would start to move away from their current weapon systems, giving some of their 7.2in Mkl guns to both the 75<sup>th</sup> Heavy, who received a total of 3x 7.2in Mkl howitzers, and the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy, who took two of the 7.2in Mkl howitzers before their involvement in Operation AVALANCHE, the invasion of Italy. The Royal Artillery Training Depot (RATD) also took one of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiments 7.2in Mkl howitzers, meaning that by the end of October, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy was down six weapons, or a battery and a half worth of firepower.

The replacement process of these weapon systems began in November 1943, when the regiment would start to receive new 155mm guns from the 32<sup>nd</sup> BOD (Base Ordnance Depot). The American made 155mm gun, which would eventually earn the nickname 'Long Toms' by both British and American gunners, was a weapon platform based on the 155mm GPF, which was used by American forces in WW1 and later upgraded in the inter-war period. Various development pieces, both for the gun and carriage, were tested before the weapon system was standardised in 1938, as the Gun M1 and Carriage M1, which is more than likely the version of the 155mm that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy started to receive in late 1943. It was still a relatively new platform, as only 65 M1 guns and carriages were completed at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>98</sup>

The 155mm M1 gun carriage was hailed as one of the best carriage designs of the war; it was versatile with four dual wheels and the carriage was a split trail, meaning when the two legs of the carriage were separated, they were used to dig into the ground. This was done with the use of spades on either ends of the split trail. Upon firing, these spades limited the recoil of the system, especially compared to the 7.2in Mkl. The performance specifications of this gun were very impressive, as it could fire 43kg HE shells over 23km, at nearly 853m/sec, which was an increase in range of up to 8km versus the 7.2in Mkl howitzer. In action the gun weighed almost 14tons and the system as a whole was nearly 7m long, inclusive of the carriage it was carried on.<sup>99</sup>



*Figure 15 – A single 155mm gun on an M1 carriage of the 61<sup>st</sup> Heavy Regiment, dug in and in action somewhere in Italy, October 1944.*



It is a shame that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy only received enough weapons to fully convert two batteries, which were selected to be 12/54 & 14/54, while the other two batteries, 11/54 & 13/54, were still operating the 7.2in Mk I platform; these batteries received orders from Movement Control on 7<sup>th</sup> November to proceed to Italy. Two days later, the associated vehicles and support sections (including Signals and the LAD) of the two batteries and RHQ, moved to Bougie (Béjaïa), where they would stay until the 19<sup>th</sup>, until they reached a transit camp in Philippeville (Skikda).

Here they would rest until 1<sup>st</sup> December, when the officers and ranks of RHQ, 11/54 & 13/54, embarked onto *HMT Cap Padaran*, a troopship destined for Italy. Setting sail on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, they passed Malta on the 4<sup>th</sup> and eventually anchored off the Italian port of Taranto on the 7<sup>th</sup>. On the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>, they finally disembarked from *HMT Cap Padaran*<sup>\*</sup>, moving to a vehicle assembly area, where they would regroup and rest again. Orders eventually came on the 20<sup>th</sup>, with request for RHQ and 11/54 (13/54 were only ordered to move two days later) to move to the operational area of British V Corps, which they began to do on the 21<sup>st</sup>, finally leaving Taranto at 7am. The regimental group would stage outside of Foggia on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> and reach Vasto at midnight of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. The morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> would see both RHQ and 11/54 cross the Sangro River, which was part of the seemingly impenetrable Gustav Line (this would only be broken fully in May 1944), with both groups getting into action by 6pm the same day, near the coastal town of Ortona.

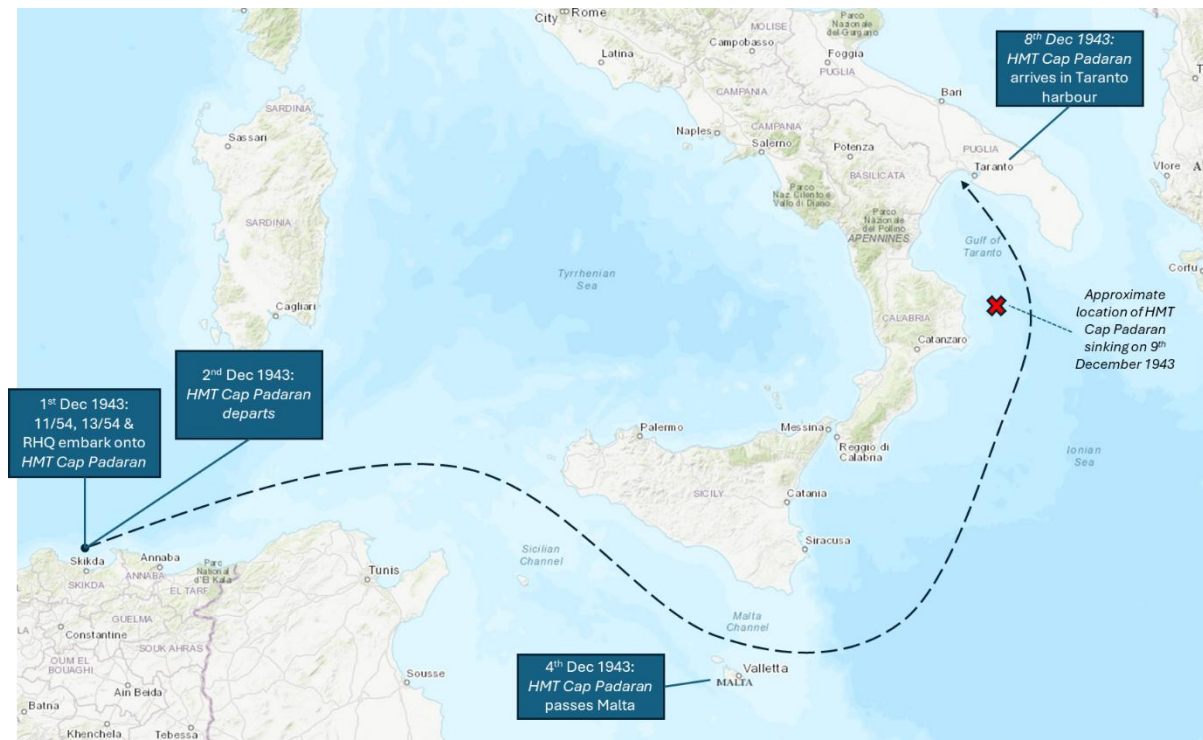


Figure 16 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment's (11/54, 13/54 & RHQ) route from Philippeville to Taranto during December 1943

They were in action near the town of San Donato, close to the banks of the River Moro and only 3km or so away to the South-East of Ortona. Ortona itself was deemed to be an important target, as the town hosted a deep sea port which could, in theory, support Allied logistical issues on the Eastern Coast of Italy, which elements of the British Eighth Army would be keen to take advantage of. The Allied forces chosen to attempt the liberation of Ortona were the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, with the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades selected to enter the town.

<sup>\*</sup>*HMT Cap Padaran* was sunk the day after the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment disembarked on 9<sup>th</sup> December, by the German submarine U-596 (<https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/3147.html>)

My grandfather's battery, 11/54, began their support for the Canadians on the same day, 23<sup>rd</sup> December, when they completed 'a most successful shoot on to the Citadel' in Ortona.' Brigadier Tyler, CAGRA for 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA commented in his report that there was now 'no possible doubt in [German] minds as to the accuracy of our guns.' The close proximity of 11/54 to Ortona and the proximity of this shoot to their own infantry, who were only 180m from the Citadel, led to a gunner in 11/54 saying

*'Three thousand five hundred God dang yards. They'll be fixing bayonets on those bloody guns next.'*<sup>100</sup>

Lt. Col. Gilkes would also be directly involved in this shoot, as from an OP in Ortona, he ranged 'a proximity shoot on the old fort' and the Canadian infantry attacking the Citadel ensured to keep 'well behind the walls until the fourth round, when Col Gilkes began his 50 rounds of fire for effect.'<sup>101</sup> Flight Commander Captain Darling, who oversaw the action as part of A Flight of 651 AOP Squadron, supported the shoot onto the 'Citadel' and his after action report on 24<sup>th</sup> December stated that the 'Shoot [was] successful, [with] direct hits observed.'<sup>102</sup>

The Battle of Ortona was a brutal urban battle, featuring constant close quarter fighting between the attacking Canadian infantry and resolute German defenders, most of whom were the crack German paratrooper infantry, or *Fallschirmjäger*. Between the 25<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup>, 11/54 fired 47 rounds onto positions in Ortona, in direct support of the Canadian infantry.

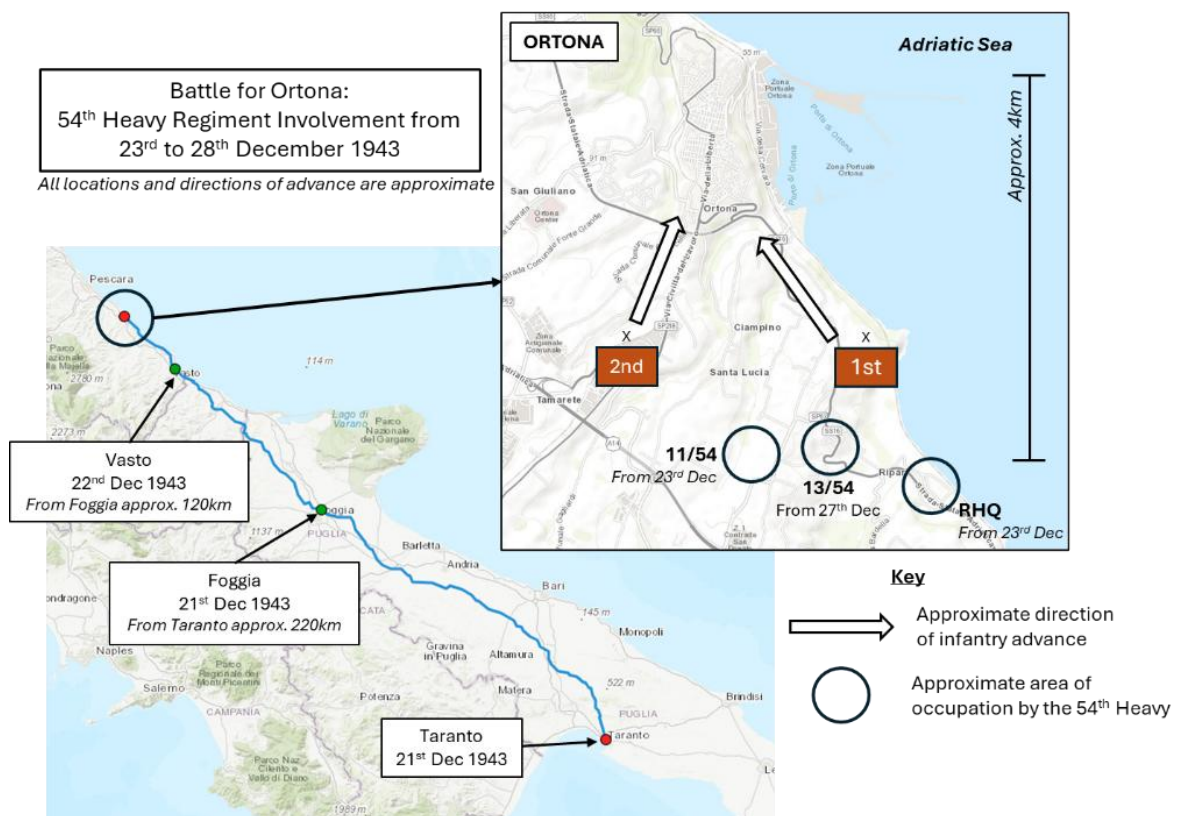


Figure 17 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment's journey from Taranto to the front lines near Ortona, along with their involvement during the battle.

By 1pm on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 13/54 (less one gun) were also in action near 11/54, on roads leading from the town of San Donato and upon their arrival, Gilkes visited their OP. At the same time, enemy aircraft attacked, leaving one soldier (Gilkes names them as Selby) injured. The next day, Brigadier Tyler was visiting the 11/54 CP when a 1kg bomb was dropped by a 'passing dive

\* The 'Citadel' was a German strong point in the old fort of Ortona.



bomber', which landed only '20yds from CP and 20yds between two guns.' Fortunately dropped on soft ground, the bomb did little damage and Brigadier Tyler considered those near the CP lucky, as if the bomb was dropped onto a harder surface, it would have 'caused very large casualties to personnel and equipment.'<sup>103</sup> Gilkes, also visiting the 11/54 positions along with the CAGRA, commented that these were 'bad air raids',<sup>104</sup> with the total number of wounded on this day reaching 5 soldiers.

The Battle for Ortona ended on 28<sup>th</sup> December, when German forces retreated from the town, with the Canadians and Germans suffering almost 1,000 casualties each. Despite the fighting lasting just over a week, the battle for this small coastal town was very hard fought. Brigadier Tyler commented that 'Ortona is, *finally*, captured and clear of enemy.'<sup>105</sup> The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment fired approximately 230 rounds into Ortona during the battle, with 11/54 firing approximately 100 rounds before 13/54 were involved. In the days that followed up to the end of the year, 11/54 & 13/54 fired approximately 147 rounds onto the retreating enemy forces, who did not retreat quietly, as their gunners were 'fairly active' covering their withdrawal, with 'spasmodic shelling'.



Figure 18 – A 7.2in MkI howitzer of 11/54, in action near Ortona, on Christmas Day 1943. Note the scotches, this time placed in front of the howitzer at the time of this image.



Figure 19 – A gun detachment of 11/54 on Christmas Day, with a present to the Germans in Ortona: a shell 'To Jerry'. My grandfather is second from right in this image and both he and the gun detachment seem very high in spirits.

## 1944

### ***A Wet New Year***

While in modern military history texts the Italian campaign is now infamously known for its ever changing weather cycles, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment had so far not experienced any heavy rainfall or muddy conditions that result from such downpours. Even toward the end of the year, on December 30<sup>th</sup> 1943, Gilkes commented in the war diary that the weather was ‘fine’.

However, this would soon drastically change *and* only a day later. On New Years Eve 1943, the ‘weather [was] wet’ which resulted in the ‘ground [becoming] boggy’. The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment ended this year under a downpour – this was to be a common occurrence in the months to follow.

This bad weather continued into the new year. On New Year's Day 1944, both 11/54 & 13/54 were ‘out of action owing to heavy rains.’ The River Moro, which 11/54 had found themselves situated adjacent to, was taking on more water with the increasing rain fall and its banks had broken as a result. The water of this river kept rising, eventually getting to a height where it seemed to reach the ‘barrels of some of 11 [Battery’s] guns.’



*Figure 20 – Two 7.2in Mkl howitzer positions of 11/54 flooded on the banks of the River Moro.*



*Figure 21 – Gun detachments of 11/54 recovering their 7.2in Mkl howitzers from their wet & boggy gun positions on New Years Day 1944. Note the camouflage pattern used on the 7.2in Mkl howitzer in the image on the right. You can also imagine the enormous task of trying to push a 10ton howitzer through mud and deep water.*

It was not only the drenched gunners of 11/54 that were suffering in this weather, as the members of 13/54 had awoken to receive some terrible news; two of the batteries gunners had been found dead, having been buried in a landslide which occurred during the night.

The first of these two was Gunner Charles Edward Feaver, who was born in London on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1919, to his father Charles Andrew and mother Edith Annie. This meant he passed at the young age of 24, barely a few weeks away from his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>106</sup>

The second gunner, George Wilfred Hull, was born in Hastings on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1920. He was the son of steel labourer George Hull, who had previously served with the British Army.<sup>107</sup> George had taken after his father in serving his country but unfortunately, unlike his father, George had paid the ultimate sacrifice for it. He was only 23 years old at the time of his death.

While casualties in Heavy Regiments were not as common when compared to frontline artillery units, such as Field or Anti-Tank Regiments, they still occurred and their effects would still be as brutal on the gunners and officers who served alongside the men who were lost. Gilkes, as the commanding officer responsible for such young men, was surely feeling a range of emotions on this day. In his diary for 1<sup>st</sup> January 1944, he wrote:

*'...Hull and...Feaver killed - buried by landfall when asleep in dugout – buried at [Ortona] with many Canadians – [very] wet day with 11 Battery flooded out – miserable time was had by all.'*<sup>108</sup>

By the 3<sup>rd</sup>, both the guns and gunners of 11/54 had moved to new drier positions, near the RHQ in the area of Ripardi Bardella. The German gunners must have done the same and both 'sides have dried out a bit', which 'consequently [meant] more firing'.

The next few days were quiet. More heavy rains came, followed by a fast wind which started to dry up the mud. Despite this, both batteries were 'still having great difficulty keeping guns on platforms owing to wet ground.' The overall weather at the front was still cold, which was 'threatening snow.' As well as the weather, which appeared to now be consistently dreadful, the regiment still had to deal with the enemy, who continued sporadic shelling all throughout January. On 11<sup>th</sup> January, it was also reported that the 'enemy [was] cutting telephone wires and 'tying the ends to S\* mines', a brutal reminder of not only how bitter the fighting in this war had got, but also a stark display of the desperation of the German forces facing the Allied troops.

On January 7<sup>th</sup>, Lt. Col. Gilkes left for Bari, a port city on the Adriatic Coast in Southern Italy, approximately 100km from Taranto, to hopefully find the status and whereabouts of his two remaining heavy batteries, 12/54 & 14/54. He returned 3 days later having had found both batteries, who were resting in a camp just outside of Bari. Gilkes found that after 'numerous interviews' with 'Brigadiers, Army, Corps, Div, AGRA', it was clear that both 12/54 & 14/54 were wanted 'in action at once.' However, Gilkes also stated that these various parties were all 'treading on each other's toes', as 'none are prepared to do anything about getting the countless necessary stores that these batteries lack.'

Eventually these stores were located as both batteries, now equipped with the new American 155mm guns, would undergo calibration before travelling North to regroup with the regiment. The BC of 14/54, Major Carter, would eventually arrive at RHQ on January 24<sup>th</sup>. The final battery, 12/54, would not reach the RHQ area of command until 5<sup>th</sup> February.

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\* S-Mines, more commonly known as the 'Bouncing Betty' by Western troops, were German anti-personnel mines, which, when activated, sprung out of the ground to knee height before sending shrapnel in all directions. They aimed to maim infantry and stall local advances.

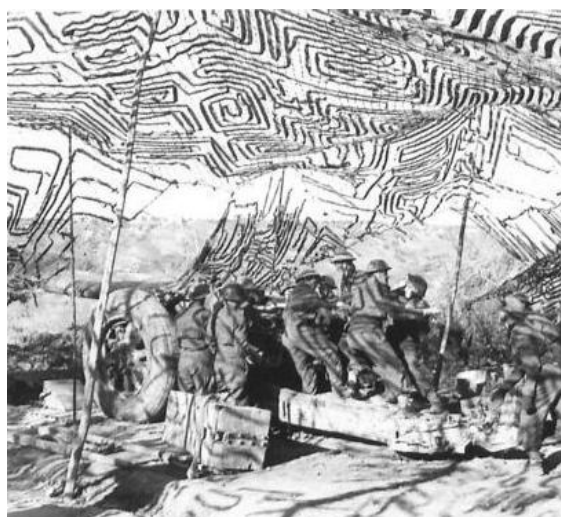


Figure 22 – A 7.2in Mkl howitzer of 11/54 firing on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1944. Note the camouflage net to conceal the position.

Throughout the month of January, the active batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would support the Allied advance, with various shoots and fire plans. Between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> January, the regiment would fire approximately 442 rounds as part of harassing fire programmes. On 17<sup>th</sup> January, 524 rounds were expended in support of the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Brigade, who were part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian (Armoured) Division, which was attacking a feature known as ‘2818’, a high point that overlooked the area of Arielli, a village 10km or so South West of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy positions. A similar action on 30<sup>th</sup> January saw 362 rounds fired in support of the Hastings & Prince Edward Regiment\*, who were aiming to take high ground ‘2715’, another high point which was once again overlooking the town of Arielli. During the month of January 1944, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would fire approximately 2885 rounds, in support of mainly Canadian forces, attacking the German forces North of the River Moro. The importance of this support may have been missed by most but it was not missed by General Leese, the new Army Commander of the British Eighth Army†, who visited the regiment gun positions on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1944, escorted by Brigadier Tyler.



Figure 23 – Leese (first from left on left image) talking to (from left to right) Gnr Miles, Gnr Rickets & Bdr Vale, possibly of 11/54. In the right image, Leese (2<sup>nd</sup> from right) talks to Sgt Swain, again possibly of 11/54, on his 7.2in Mkl howitzer gun position.

\* Also known as the ‘Hasty P’s’, this was an infantry regiment within the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and had previously seen action in the Battle of Ortona, alongside the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment.

† General Leese replaced Montgomery as Commander of Eighth Army on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1943



## ***Holding the Adriatic Front – Operation DIADEM***

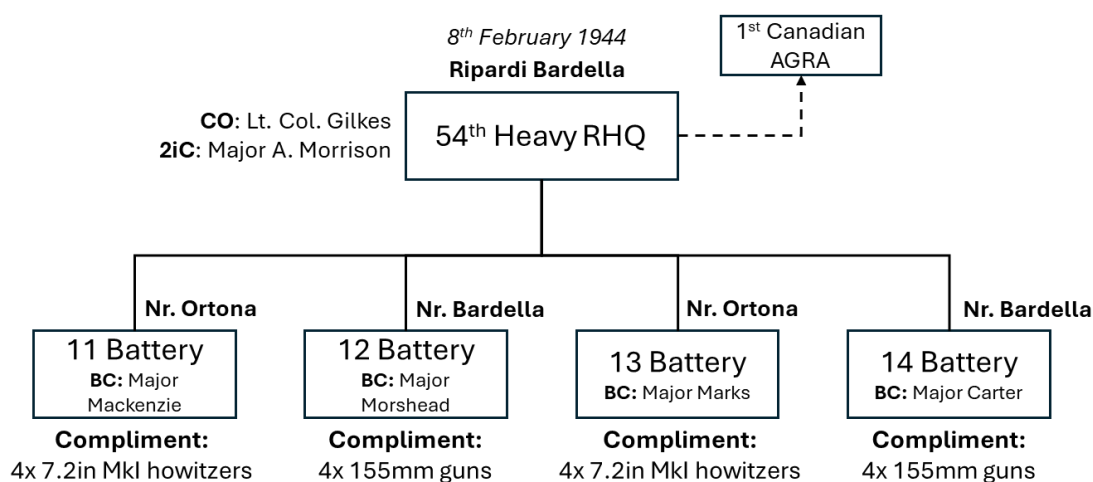
In February 1944 a conference was held by General Alexander, commander of the Allied Armies in Italy (also known as Fifteenth Army Group), which decided on the best way to support the American forces on the Tyrrhenian Coast. The result was the creation of Operation DIADEM.

Operation DIADEM was the Allied offensive which was aimed at breaking the defensive lines on the Eastern Coast of Italy, namely centred around the Gothic Line and the German forces held up at Monte Cassino; breaking these lines would open the road to Rome, place pressure on the German Tenth and Fourteenth Armies and tie up important German forces which would be needed in France to try and repel the upcoming Allied invasion of Europe, Operation OVERLORD.

To assist the US Fifth Army, elements of the British Eighth Army (XIII Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> POLCORPS (Polish Corps and 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps) were moved from the Adriatic Front to the North East of Monte Cassino, just off the Gustav Line, to act as a blocking force and stop the Germans attacking from this front. This left other elements of the Eighth Army – British V & X Corps, now still in the Adriatic sector but holding a thin line between the East Coast and Monte Cassino – to sit on the Adriatic Coast and continue applying pressure to the German forces on this side of the country. This included the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, who were now part of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian AGRA\*, as 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA had moved with the Eighth Army to the West.

Arriving the day before – finally getting into action in Italy – were 12/54, who experienced their first troubles in this theatre, as recent heavy rain had ‘made it impossible for gun positions to be occupied.’ Even when the battery began to prepare their positions the day after, they were halted once again, when Lt. A Edsger, who had been with the regiment since December 1941, noticed mines on the 12/54 positions; he was known to have a ‘keen nose for such things.’ These mines would only be removed two days later and on 8<sup>th</sup> February, 12/54 would finally be in action, just shy of 1km West of Bardella, nearly 9 months after their last action in Tunisia.

On the 7<sup>th</sup>, 14/54 also got into action, firing into the area of Chieti, a hilltop commune 20km roughly West-Northwest of their positions, which although never detailed within the diary can be presumed to be close to 12/54 in Bardella, as both were now operating the 155mm guns. This also meant that by 8<sup>th</sup> February, all batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment were in action, together, for the first time as part of RHQ since the regiments formation. On 13<sup>th</sup> February, all batteries would also fire together for the first time, as they engaged in harassing fire programmes during the night; in return the Germans lightly shelled the 12/54 positions with no casualties suffered.



*Figure 24 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment formation as of 8<sup>th</sup> February 1944.*

\* This was not abbreviated to CAGRA and was always prefixed with 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian.

The regiment would mainly fire into the areas of Chieti and Pescara over the next few days. All batteries would engage in harassing fire, either directly onto the areas held by the enemy, or targets selected by AOP. As an example, both 11/54 & 13/54 engaged a road junction on the coast, South of Pescara, with HF on 17<sup>th</sup> February. The CBO report later on in the day indicated that the HF had 'caused [a] large fire.'

This was despite the weather now turning bad once again. Shooting on certain days was cancelled when the visibility became 'so bad that firing [was] abandoned.' Gilkes also commented on there being issues of 'rain, snow [and] hail' which halted the firing. Maybe more importantly, Gilkes declared a 'rum issue', which may have affected some morale in this dismal weather. This weather was so poor that when the sun finally appeared on 22<sup>nd</sup> February, Gilkes (perhaps sarcastically) commented in the war diary that it was the 'first day this month we've noticed the sun shining.' The sun wouldn't be out for long; overall visibility on this day was still bad, which led to the cancellation of planned 'Apple Pies'.\*

The firing into the Chieti area carried on until 29<sup>th</sup> February and this routine would eventually become known to the regiment as 'the usual nightly hate on Chieti', as described by Gilkes in the war diary on the 25<sup>th</sup>. In the 3 weeks supporting attacks in the Chieti area, the regiment would fire approximately 4000 rounds of both 7.2in Mkl and 155mm gun ammunition, including rounds expended as part of exercise DUNG II, 'a small concentration designed to cut enemy wire and make him open wireless', as to get the Germans to 'disclose [their] locations.' This was performed by 13/54 on 29<sup>th</sup> February but there is no report of whether this was successful.

The only casualty during this period would be 22 year old Lt Philip John Dicker of 13/54, who was born in Cragford, near Dartmoor, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1921 to father Bertrand William Lethbridge Dicker, a farmer, and his mother Getrude.<sup>109</sup> On the night of 21<sup>st</sup> February 1944 at about 10.30pm, 'the enemy started a burst of HF' of which 'a good proportion...fell on 11 & 13 Bty areas.' During this period of 'heavy shelling' which 'continued for half an hour', 11/54 only took materiel damage – charges in their area were hit and a gun tyre was punctured by shrapnel – while 13/54 lost Lt. Dicker, who sadly 'was killed by a direct hit by a shell.' The regiment responded in anger, with 223 rounds fired against hostile batteries.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1944, as the Sun shone across the battlefields for the first time in a while, Lieutenant Philip John Dicker would be buried at San Vito cemetery. Today he resides at the Sangro River War Cemetery, along with 2546 other soldiers who all gave their lives for their countries.

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On 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 13/54 carried out a shoot onto an enemy minefield in the area of Ripa Teatina, a small commune approximately 8km North-East of Chieti, alongside Captain Wood, who flew in A Flight of 651 AOP Squadron. This shoot was based on reports from the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, who drew attention to the area as it 'was thickly sown with mines.' The usual way through or around a minefield would be to involve a regiment of Royal Engineers, who would spend time clearing a path through the minefields before allowing Allied troops or vehicles to pass through safely. However, this time, the Allied commanders tried something different. It was 'thought that if the heavies' fired a few rounds into the general area of the minefield, then it 'might be exploded sympathetically.' The AOP report stated that while 'one or two explosions in excess of the guns firing were observed', there was 'no grand explosion as hoped for.'<sup>110</sup> This particular minefield would have to be cleared the normal way.

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\* Apple Pies were Counter-AA targets, part of fire plans when air support was to be in attendance, with the aim of suppressing hostile AA fire.

On the same day 13/54, after completing their somewhat unsuccessful minefield shoot, would be hit by enemy artillery just before midnight. The enemy guns in question, which were medium 155mm French guns\*, fired various shells onto the 13/54 command post wagon lines when

*'One shell hit a truck which burst into flames and set alight the truck next to it. A Scammell was parked near the burning truck. As the shelling was heavy personnel were sheltering in their slit trenches...W/Bdr Chandler...and...Gnr Clifford...got out of their trench, started up the Scammell, and drove it away from the burning trucks while shells were bursting all round, and S.A.A.<sup>†</sup> was exploding in the burning trucks. Only a few moments after the Scammell had been driven off a shell fell on the spot where the Scammell had been. W/Bdr Chandler and Gnr Clifford showed great coolness and disregard for their own safety, and their prompt action undoubtedly saved the Scammell which is irreplaceable.'*<sup>111, 112</sup>

For these outstanding acts of bravery in the face of almost certain death, Bombardier Geoffrey Graham Chandler and Gunner James Clifford would both be recommended the Military Medal by Lt. Col. Gilkes. The Military Medal was an award given during WW2 for non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and other ranks, who had shown bravery on the battlefield. In this scenario, both men had rightly received their medals.

### ***Some Earned Rest***

On 6<sup>th</sup> March, after an active start to the month with more than 783 rounds fired, the regiment (less the 155mm batteries of 12/54 & 14/54) were ordered to move to a rest area near Potenza, approximately 80km East from Salerno as the crow flies. The 7.2in Mkl howitzer batteries of 11/54 & 13/54 had now been in action in Italy for nearly 4 months at this point without rest. With changing weather and enemy action affecting the men, it can't be said that this rest wasn't needed. Coming out of action two days later on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 11/54, 13/54, RHQ and other support staff such as the LAD & Signals Section were on the move to Potenza on 9<sup>th</sup> March.

Travelling South along the Adriatic coast, mirroring their route in December 1943 (Ortona-Vasto-Termini-Imerina-Foggia), they reached the area of Canosa in the afternoon of the 10<sup>th</sup>. Upon arrival, the regiment were told that the bridges to Potenza 'will NOT take the guns' due to the weight of the weapon platforms and associated vehicles. Instead, the regiment were diverted to the town of Melfi, which sat 40km or so North of Potenza and was a midpoint between Naples and Bari. The town itself was a quiet Italian commune yet was layered in history, as the town was surrounded by Norman walls and contained a beautiful cathedral. More importantly, the Castle of Melfi, built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Normans, stood proud overlooking the town on the hilltop.

The regiment arrived at Melfi on the 11<sup>th</sup>, leaving behind their guns and vehicles at the station in the town, while they decided where to rest. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the soldiers & officers chose the Castle of Melfi as their new billets, which was described by Gilkes as a 'huge [and] very dirty medieval castle.'<sup>113</sup> It was still 'partly inhabited by refugees' and had no 'light, heat or sanitation' but the men did start 'settling in at [the] castle', despite the few days following their arrival being ones filled with heavy snow; on the 16<sup>th</sup>, Gilkes remembered a particularly 'Heavy fall of snow in night.'<sup>114</sup> The cold weather didn't stop the regiment starting a period of maintenance, in the specific order of 'guns, vehicles and men.'

The weather reached a climax on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, when Vesuvius, the legendary volcano that sat over the Bay of Naples, erupted, although thankfully it was not as deadly an eruption as it was in AD 79. The regiment, still billeted within the walls of the castle, noticed 'dust from eruption of Vesuvius', which was 'joined with a snow storm to help things along.' Amazingly, Gilkes had only

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\* The German Army, especially towards the end of the war, used a lot of captured equipment including artillery pieces such as this French 155mm.

† SAA - Small Arms Ammunition

recently been in the area of Vesuvius, when after visiting Eighth Army in Avellino on 19<sup>th</sup> March – ‘on behalf of AGRA’<sup>115</sup> – he had ‘tea in Naples’ on 20<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>116</sup> On the day of the eruption, Gilkes had ‘motored 380 miles’ to visit V Corps HQ, when he noticed the ‘soot [that] fell from Vesuvius’.<sup>117</sup>

Although there are no regimental war diary entries for the whole of April, Gilkes’ limited diary entries for the month do help to paint a picture of the regiments activities within this period. The regiment would stay in the castle at Melfi until 4<sup>th</sup> April, when the troops, vehicles and guns, which were now rested and repaired, started to move back towards the frontlines. On the same day Gilkes, who must have left Melfi in advance, was ‘staged with 14 Bty’, North of Lanciano.<sup>118</sup> The day after, he recced positions for both 11/54 & 13/54 and the latter arrived the day after on the 6<sup>th</sup>, with ‘11 Bty in action again’ on 7<sup>th</sup> April. The same day, Gilkes was visited by ‘new Brigadier Maconochie’, who ‘came to tea with [Brigadier] Huckvale’.<sup>119</sup>

Brigadier Huckvale was the CAGRA of the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. According to Major Pickard, who was serving as the CBO for British V Corps at the time, the atmosphere within the Canadian officers mess ‘...wasn’t a very happy one. The CAGRA – [Brigadier] Huckvale was not at all popular with his officers and there was always a ‘strained’ atmosphere when he was about’, but Pickard ‘got on with him quite well.’<sup>120</sup> This would not be the same for him and Maconochie.

Brigadier Maconochie was, at the time of this meeting, the new CAGRA for 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. He had replaced Brigadier Tyler upon the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA return to the Adriatic Coast when it replaced the Canadians. In March, Tyler had been taken away for an operation, after losing a ‘private war against an inflamed appendix’.<sup>121</sup> To be fair, Pickard didn’t rate Tyler as an effective CAGRA, stating that Tyler was ‘bad enough’, although he was adamant that Maconochie ‘didn’t start!’

*‘I shall never forget our first meeting in the CB office. The [Brigade Major] brought him in and introduced him – he looked so clean and new just as if he had been walking down Piccadilly. He asked me to explain the maps and charts which I did at great length and afterwards turned to me with a silly smile on his face and said ‘Do you really believe this Counter Battery stuff works’ or words to that effect. I could have killed him stone dead with a look.’<sup>122</sup>*

Pickard, who knew firsthand the overwhelming importance of counter battery in this war, eventually went on to prove to Maconochie that it did work and would continue to do so with the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment later on in the war.

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April was a quiet month for the regiment but their commanding officer, Lt. Col. Gilkes, had a fairly busy month. On 10<sup>th</sup> April, he was ‘flooded out’<sup>123</sup> and had to move his bivvy to a drier location. He would not fare any better at his new billets near Lanciano and on 20<sup>th</sup> April, the ‘Huns bombed Lanciano’.<sup>124</sup>

22<sup>nd</sup> April was also a busy day for Gilkes, as he ‘had to move to AGRA while acting for Brig’<sup>125</sup> – only a year earlier had he done a similar job, covering for Brigadier Tyler while in Africa. Clearly, Gilkes was a respected officer who was seen as more than competent to be covering for such an important role in the absence of higher officers; this was again shown to be the case on 22<sup>nd</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> October 1944, when he temporarily took command of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA two more times.

For the regiment as a whole, April was quiet. With the vast majority of Allied and German forces fighting on the West Coast in a prolonged series of battles, the Adriatic front remained relatively quiet. On 10<sup>th</sup> April, Captain Dallas of 651 AOP Squadron, who only the night before had broken his planes’ landing gear in a practice night beach landing, visited the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment at their positions. Upon his arrival, he found the gunners ‘very restricted with ammunition’, with all the battery OPs ‘having observation only for a defensive role’<sup>126</sup> and perhaps this was linked to the



now known *tyranny of OVERLORD*. Given their lack of ammunition, it isn't surprising to not see any war diary entries; even if there was a war diary for April, would it have contained much information? There was only really one day of note in April for the gunners of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy.

### ***The Cellulose Factory Shoot***

At 9am on 29<sup>th</sup> April, two sections of 155mm guns, one each from 12/54 & 14/54, carried out a 'special shoot on the cellulose factory', in the western areas of Chieti, observed by an unnamed Spitfire pilot. Captain Bicknell of A Flight, 651 AOP Squadron, was also in attendance to give his observations and would observe the battle ground from a height of 600ft.<sup>127</sup>

The 155mm guns first few rounds made 'a large hole in the [warehouse] roof' out of which 'smoke was seen to be pouring for a short time.' Houses and cottages near the factory, unfortunately in the cross fire, were set on fire and continued to burn even after the shoot had finished. After the first 5 rounds of gun fire, there was a pause 'before the good work continued.' The subsequent rounds were fired to try to engage parts of the factory which had 'escaped so far' but due to rising smoke and dust, these 'were not easy to observe.' It also didn't help that everytime the Spitfire pilot approached the factory (who was flying between 10000-15000ft), 'he was met with intense AA fire' and couldn't see whether there was any movement in the area – this more than likely would have been HAA, capable of reaching high altitudes, as Captain Bicknell didn't report receiving any ground fire on this day.

The 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA Intelligence Summary of this shoot stated that 'there is no doubt the shoot was a successful one' and even despite firing up to 185 rounds of 155mm, it was 'extremely accurate as a predicted shoot.' While this shoot was a success and the target deemed put out of action, the ramifications of hitting a cellulose factory dawned on the AGRA officer writing the report:

*'What on earth our wives would say, however, if they discovered we had been shooting at a possible silk stocking factory does not bear contemplation'.<sup>128</sup>*

The 155mm sections of 12/54 & 14/54 would re-engage this target on 10<sup>th</sup> May, again with Captain Bicknell flying as the AOP observer. However, flying slightly higher this time at 9000ft, he was unfortunately 'unable to see target for most of the time due to low cloud.'<sup>129</sup> Despite the interference of the Italian weather, all of the opening rounds of the shoot were in the area of the factory and no corrections were needed during the entire shoot, with 229 rounds of 155mm expended onto this target.

### ***All Quiet on the Adriatic Front***

During April, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would suffer another casualty, yet this would be another who would not pass as a direct result of enemy action. Cyril Rogers, who was born in Todmorden near Manchester on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1922,<sup>130</sup> was only 21 years old when the regiment were in action near Lanciano in April 1944. Holding the rank of Gunner, he sadly passed on 24<sup>th</sup> April, when he was the victim of a 'traffic battle accident.'<sup>131</sup>

Going into the month of May, all of the regimental batteries were in action near Ortona again, in the area of Lanciano. In the month of May, the regiment would perform their usual counter battery work almost every day. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, 12/54 & 14/54 engaged HBs with a Polish AOP squadron, with the 'opening predicted [rounds] always very near the mark.' The 14<sup>th</sup> saw the enemy overrun a forward company area under the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA boundary and 11/54 & 14/54 would fire a CB programme in retaliation, codenamed MAGPIE, as part of the planned counterattack. The MAGPIE fire plan commenced at 8.45pm the same day, with the positions being re-captured half an hour later at 9.15pm.

On 16<sup>th</sup> May, the CO of the 61<sup>st</sup> Heavy Regiment, Lt. Spedding and his 2iC Major Pillsditch, arrived on the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy's positions. Part of 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA at this time, they came to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment

to discuss the possibility of the transferring of gun positions. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, 11/54 would give up their current position to a battery of the 61<sup>st</sup> Heavy, moving to some of their older positions, of which they had previously occupied 'when they were rescued from the River Moro.' From these new positions, they would co-operate with 651 AOP Squadron once again, who the regiment now had a close working relationship with. Like the month prior, low ammunition stockpiles were still a pressing issue for the heavy batteries. Even Captain Carmichael of 651 AOP A Flight recognised this, when after visiting 11/54 on 20<sup>th</sup> May, he wrote that he would have to wait until 11/54 got an 'allotment of ammunition from 1 A.G.R.A' before doing a shoot together.<sup>132</sup>

While the regiment sustained no further casualties during May, they would still come under constant attention of the enemy. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, two enemy aircraft flew low along the valley of the Moro, coming from the Adriatic Sea, until they arrived over the area of the regiment where they proceeded to strafe the gun positions. The machine gun rounds did little to no damage and only a single gunner from 13/54 suffered a graze to the head. On 24<sup>th</sup> May, three rounds of HE fell into the 11/54 gun areas, which injured W/Sgt Harrison, who impressively 'remained at duty' with a 'cut head and abrasion to hand.' On the 27<sup>th</sup>, both the 12/54 & 13/54 areas were shelled during the day but 12/54 seemed 'to get more than their fair share.' On the same day, Captain Carmichael of A Flight would fly over the gun positions of 11/54 to 'observe camouflage.'<sup>133</sup> As previously shown on this day and throughout the campaign, if the regiments guns could be seen, then they could be targeted by hostile gunners.

This would prove to be the case on 4<sup>th</sup> June, when 20 rounds of enemy HE landed in both the RHQ & 12/54 areas. While there were no fatalities, a single OR in the RHQ suffered 'slight wounds', as a result of 'falling bricks' from when the regimental cookhouse was hit, while the quartermasters truck was damaged by shrapnel. The enemy were persistent in hitting the 12/54 area, as the next day they fired 25 rounds of HE onto their gun positions (this included delayed action shells), while 11/54 also got hit with more than 30 rounds, some of which were airbursts\*.

On a lighter note, the regiment once again proved their prowess at football, like they had previously in Africa. The regimental football team played in the semi-final of the V Corps competition on 5<sup>th</sup> June and beat the 131<sup>st</sup> Composite Company of the RASC in an exciting game at grounds in Fossacesia, 20km South of Ortona – the final score was 6-2. The regiment met their match in the final of the competition, when on 12<sup>th</sup> June, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment lost 6-3 to the Northumberland Fusiliers.

During their time holding the Adriatic front, the regiment fired approximately 11,000 rounds of both 7.2in & 155mm calibre. The American & British forces would go on to breakout from the beachhead at Anzio, eventually capturing Rome on 5<sup>th</sup> June, with DIADEM deemed a success. The German armies would pull back to new defensive lines. On the Adriatic Coast, the Germans manning the so called 'Caesar Line', which the Eighth Army had been slowly chipping away at, also retreated to new lines further North. As an example, on 8<sup>th</sup> June, the enemy on the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade front were believed to be withdrawing, with Crecchio, a small town to the South West of Ortona, also believed to be clear of enemy soldiers by this point.

In response, the batteries all moved: 11/54 positioned themselves in the area of Bavi on 9<sup>th</sup> June, on 10<sup>th</sup> June 12/54 were on the Alboreto-Villa Caldari road, 13/54 positions were 4km North West of Ripardi Bardella in the area of Villa Grande on 9<sup>th</sup> June and 14/54 were approximately 1km South West of Villa Caldari by the afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup>. The RHQ was placed near 12/54 by midday of 10<sup>th</sup> June.

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\* Airburst rounds were rounds that detonated slightly above the ground, with the desired effect being a wider spread of shrapnel – they were particularly potent against dug-in infantry positions.

## Battle for Florence

The regiment completed recce on new positions near Chieti and Pescara but before they could move, there was an order for the whole regiment to move to the area of Vinchiatturo, near Campobasso for rest and refit. This order was received on 12<sup>th</sup> June and resultantly the battery moves were cancelled. The regiment would begin their move on 14<sup>th</sup> June, with the men and vehicles of RHQ leading the column initially heading South.

On route, some of the sharp bends leading onto newly built Bailey bridges were 'quite unsuitable' for the regiments 155mm weapons, of which the gun and breech alone weighed nearly 5tons. A verge of a particular bridge collapsed when the last gun of 14/54 crossed it, which gives an idea to the weight of these pieces. All regimental vehicles and guns should have arrived at the rest area in Vinchiatturo at 8pm on the 14<sup>th</sup> but due to these unforeseen delays – including a 2 hour halt 'caused by the passage of another convoy' – the final vehicles didn't arrive at the rest area until 4am on 15<sup>th</sup> June.

The remainder of the month of June saw no action, with no firing undertaken. Various wireless transmissions exercises were carried out between the regiment. From 19<sup>th</sup> June, a period of individual training was begun within each battery and the signallers within the regiment were also sent on weekly courses at 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. This period of inactivity extended to the first few weeks of July, with the only noticeable event being that the 7.2in Mkl howitzers and 155mm guns of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy were sent away for total calibration, at the School of Artillery in Eboli, South of Salerno.

After a period of good rest and re-equipment, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment received orders to move back North, this time into areas on the outskirts of Florence, to assist in not only the capture of this magnificent and historic city, but also to take on the newly constructed and heavily defended Gothic Line, whose defenders consisted of both the German Tenth and Fourteenth Armies.

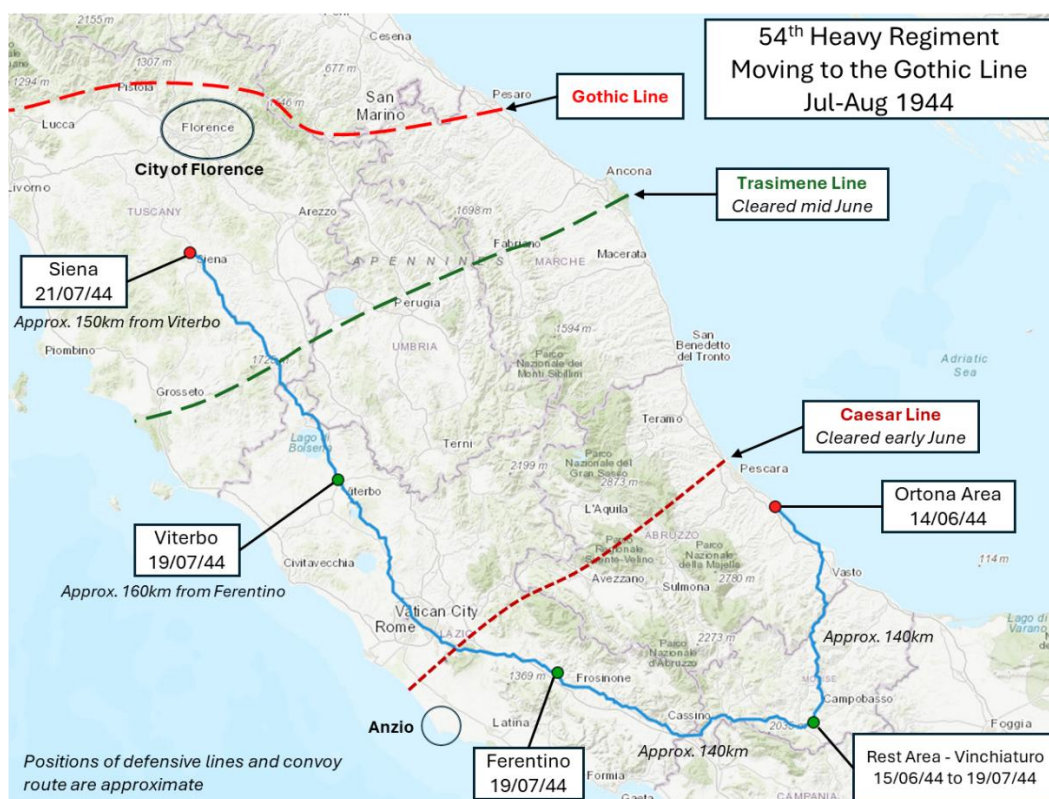


Figure 25 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiments move from the area of Ortona to Siena, facing the Gothic Line and Florence

On 19<sup>th</sup> July at 6am, a day after receiving their orders to move Northwards, the regiment began their journey and on the same day, they staged at Ferentino, moving again on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> to arrive in the area of Viterbo. They would leave here the next day and finally reached a concentration area near Siena on 21<sup>st</sup> July. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the four heavy batteries and RHQ would finally get into action within the area of Colle di Val d'Elsa (Northwest of Monteriggioni by 8km), which was approximately 40km South from the centre of the city of Florence.

Unfortunately, while the regiment was getting into action on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, two soldiers, both of 14/54, stepped onto a hostile land mine and both received multiple injuries. First there was Bombardier Harold John Smith who, born in Greenwich in 1919, was only 25 years old when he trod on the mine.<sup>134</sup> Gunner David Gould was the other unfortunate soldier but was a lot older than Harold. David was also from London, having been born in Croydon in 1906, meaning he was 38 at this time.<sup>135</sup> They both would be immediately sent to the nearest CCS\* but would not live through their injuries; it was reported on 24<sup>th</sup> July from the CCS that they both had unfortunately passed.

The batteries would move slightly North to the town of Poggibonsi on the 26<sup>th</sup>. When they arrived here, the town of Poppiano (approximately 19km North) was the first subject of the batteries attention. First, 13/54 engaged enemy vehicles on a road leading into the town, while Gilkes and 14/54 conducted a 'successful shoot' into the town, done alongside an AOP flight.

On 27<sup>th</sup> July, all batteries were on the move again, in what would be the final move for the regiment during their involvement during the battle. The 155mm guns of 12/54 moved to new positions near Petrognano (approximately 8km to the North of Poggibonsi), while 14/54 moved into an area on the road Zambra-Sant'Appiano, North 4km of their old gun pits. 13/54 moved to positions near the small village of Poggo ai Grilli and by the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, 11/54 were finally stationed in the village of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, itself 10km approximately North of Poggibonsi. From these new positions, the batteries would support the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand (NZ) Division, who were attempting the advance into the historic city and its suburbs. On 28<sup>th</sup> July, both 11/54 & 13/54 fired Stonks† for the New Zealand infantry at around midday.

The enemy forces facing the New Zealanders included approximately five German divisions, holding a defensive line South of Florence, on and around the River Arno, the city's main artery. These forces included 6 battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Panzergrenadier Division, the 29<sup>th</sup> Panzergrenadier Division and the 4<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division.

To try and break this defensive line, the plan SANDHURST was developed, which aimed to capture the high ground around the Pian de Cerri, South of Florence. A smaller plan, RIPON, was created, which consisted of two phases. Phase I aimed to capture the ridges and high ground leading up to the defensive line and then Phase II would see the New Zealanders try to take the town of La Romola (Romola), a small town 11km Southwest of Florence city centre. Both phases of RIPON would be carried out on the night 30/31<sup>st</sup> July, with 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA being supported by A Flight of 655 AOP Squadron, as well as the attached divisional artillery of both the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand and 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions.<sup>136</sup>

In preparation, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy batteries would attempt to soften the known hostile batteries, to limit the effect of enemy artillery onto the advancing New Zealand troops and armour. A hostile battery known as 'NM' was engaged by both 155mm batteries and the 7.2in Mkl howitzers of 13/54 at 10.10am – it can't be imagined how this would have felt on the receiving end. At 9.45pm on the same night, the counter battery programme for SANDHURST and RIPON began, along with Kittyhawk, Mustang and Spitfire aircraft providing fighter bomber support during this time.<sup>137</sup>

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\* CCS – Casualty Clearing Station

† Stonk – Divisional concentration of fire across a linear area approximately 500yards in length. The New Zealand Division actually created this fire method in Syria during 1942, although it changed over the war.

During the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup>, all the heavy batteries were in constant action, firing not only onto hostile batteries, but other targets such as road junctions and even enemy self-propelled guns, of which one was successfully destroyed by both 13/54 & 14/54 just before midday. Into August, the regiment kept up pressure on the German defences. On the 1<sup>st</sup>, with observation from 52<sup>nd</sup> Field Regiment, a single 7.2in Mkl howitzer from 13/54 engaged enemy tanks and infantry, in an area North of Montespertoli, while both 12/54 & 14/54 fired onto enemy guns near San Michele a Torri, aided again by the aircraft of 655 AOP Squadron.

The New Zealand troops were advancing but some of the high ground near Montespertoli was still in German control. On the night of 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> August, a renewed offensive from the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division would try to capture this high ground, with support from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was to provide one FOO from a 155mm battery as well as a 7.2in Mkl howitzer battery, who would both report to the CAGRA representative of the New Zealand Division. As part of a new counter battery and harassing fire plan, 2<sup>nd</sup> August was a busy day for all the heavy batteries. The 155mm guns of 12/54 & 14/54 starting HF onto crossings and bridges directly leading into the eastern suburbs of Florence, while 11/54 & 13/54 fired onto enemy guns and positions; 11/54 engaged a group of houses seen to be sheltering both enemy infantry and tanks, which was 'badly damaged' by accurate fire. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 14/54 engaged a heavy gun near Empoli, whose position was previously reported by 53<sup>rd</sup> Field Regiment and the resulting shoot was reported as 'very effective.'

On 4<sup>th</sup> August, Allied troops were reported to be entering Florence's suburbs from the South, with blown bridges greeting them into the city – most likely to be the result of German demolitions in an attempt to slow the Allied advance.

During the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiments involvement in the battle for Florence, Lieutenant Alistair Neil Stewart performed outstanding work as a forward observer for the New Zealand troops during their advances. It is not clear as to which battery Lt. Stewart belonged to but he ended up supporting the 28<sup>th</sup> New Zealand *Maori* Battalion – an infantry unit within the 2<sup>nd</sup> NZ Division – during their fighting on the aforementioned high ground overlooking the River Arno. Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> August, Lt. Stewart

*'...accompanied the leading troops with his wireless set and gave the [Battalion] invaluable support. Owing to his initiative in getting forward, often under heavy fire, he was able to knock out two [Tiger] tanks with his guns and engage many other useful targets'.*<sup>138</sup>

As a reward for his exemplary work and disregard for his own safety, Lt. Stewart was recommended and accepted for a Military Cross by Lt. Col. Gilkes. The Military Cross was similar to the Military Medal, being an award given to those who had shown gallantry during operations at the frontlines, although this award was given only to those holding an officers rank.

Major Pickard was also present during the Battle for Florence, as he was the CBO for XIII Corps, who he joined in July 1944. Funnily enough, he was also sent to rest in an area near Campobasso, close to Vinciatiuro and the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy. Stationed there for a few days, with not much to do bar 'overhaul vehicles and clothes', he and the corps staff were 'beginning to be fed up with being so far back and out of all the excitement'; when they finally arrived back in action, in a position South of the River Arno, they would also be supporting the New Zealanders, along with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy.<sup>139</sup> Pickard claimed that the XIII Corps guns never directly fired onto the historic city of Florence, despite the heavy German presence. Orders to *not* fire on the city were never received from higher command but it was 'just taken for granted that one wouldn't lob shells into that beautiful city.'<sup>140</sup>

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment – plus the guns of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA – continued to carry out counter battery fire, until it was reported on 11<sup>th</sup> August from 'civilian reports' that the 'enemy may be pulling out of

Florence.' As the Germans retreated, the city was declared open, meaning no more shelling or bombing was to take place onto the city. Despite this, the German forces did lay demolition charges around the city, namely on bridges in an effort to slow down the Allied advance. The OP for 11/54 was warned 'to watch out for signs of demolitions' in the city's train station, which their position overlooked.

During their support of the Allied advance into Florence, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy suffered against the Italian weather *and* their own guns. The poor weather, which seemed to change from good to awful in no time at all, brought about the usual problems: flooded positions, delayed moves and grounding of AOP flights – one pilot was unable to fly on 7<sup>th</sup> August as his landing strip was flooded! While weather was a regimental wide issue, the guns seemed only to trouble the gunners of 12/54, who dealt with malfunctioning equipment, such as 4<sup>th</sup> August, when one of their 155mm guns was taken out of action owing to stripped driving bands. The same would happen to two other guns, this time on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> August, leaving the battery with *only* one gun in action by the 11<sup>th</sup>. Quite angrily, Gilkes reported this issue to HQ 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA and requested the issue to receive 'urgent attention.' 12/54 would only get back up to a full complement of weapons on 16<sup>th</sup> August. Luckily, the support of the regiment was not as critical as it had been a week or so earlier, so this temporary lack of firepower was not too big a loss to 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA and the Allied forces.

### ***Assault on the Gothic Line***

After victory in Florence, the regiment was visited by officers from the 75<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment on 14<sup>th</sup> August, who would go on to examine the regiments current gun positions, eventually taking over their positions by 7pm of the same day, when the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy received orders to move out. The regiment would go on to move as part of a convoy, with their final destination eventually being the area of Camerino, 60km South East of Ancona, once again to support the elements of British Eighth Army, who were pushing up the Adriatic Coast and back into the Gothic Line, which at this time was still proving a tough obstacle to overcome. To try and penetrate this line, the Eighth Army was to regroup all of its units for one big push against the entrenched Germans, of which the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was to be involved.

Moving the regiment across the country would be no easy task, as there were 147 vehicles just within the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment motor pool, all which needed both fuel and access to a road. They would begin their initial journey to the Italian East Coast at 7.30am on 15<sup>th</sup> August, as part of a convoy including 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, the CBO staff, RASC elements and the 5<sup>th</sup> Survey Regiment.<sup>141</sup> On the first day of travel, the route they followed would be Poggibonsi-Siena-Arezzo, where they arrived at 3.30pm the same day.

At 3.15am on the 17<sup>th</sup>, the regiment headed for a concentration area South of Camerino. The journey should have been relatively free of anything other than military traffic as according to V Corps orders, 'all civilian traffic is being cleared from routes required by...Eighth Army.'<sup>142</sup> The clearing of the roads was critical as within this convoy, which would eventually include 3 Field regiments, 4 Medium regiments, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, 5<sup>th</sup> Survey regiment, V Corps CBO, HQ 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, RASC staff *and* the vehicles of 651 AOP Squadron, the total number of vehicles & guns came to a staggering 1,595.<sup>143</sup> To try and counter the roads becoming too overcrowded, a limit of just 150 vehicles onto the roads per hour was introduced, to try and spread out this massive force.<sup>144</sup>

The regiment would finally arrive at the rest area at 8.15am on the 17<sup>th</sup>, having completed a journey of approximately 250km. Gilkes immediately enforced a policy of 'complete camouflage and security'. The regiment would rest for a few days, before moving to a forward area near Fabriano on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Gilkes and his 2iC, Major Morrison, would leave to perform recce for new gun positions on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, finding suitable positions the day after on the 24<sup>th</sup> in the area of Pergola. The four heavy batteries would all be in action by 6.15pm on 25<sup>th</sup> August.



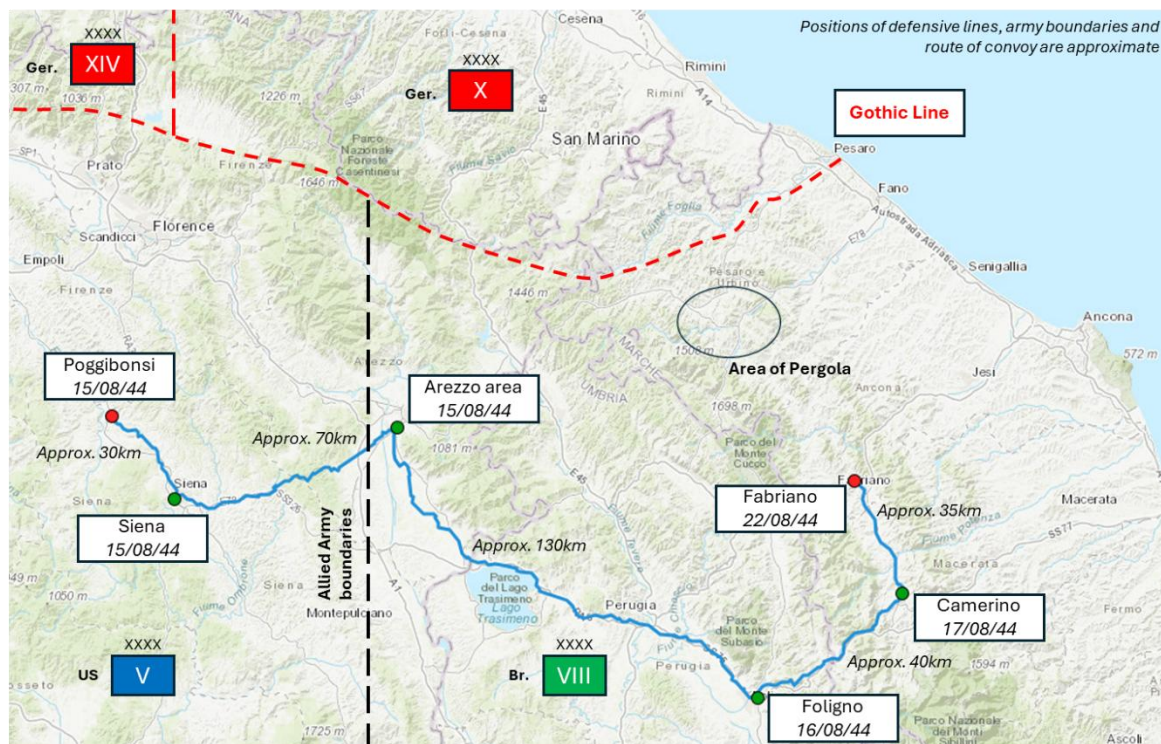


Figure 26 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment move from the US Fifth Army area of operations, back to the Adriatic Coast

From these positions, the regiments first action would be to fire as part of a neutralisation programme, brought to them from the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps CBO staff, who they would be supporting once again; they would also indirectly support both British V and Polish II Corps while back on the Adriatic Coast. The firing was to be done on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> alongside the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian AGRA and the AGPA (Army Group, Polish Artillery) and the fire programme was written by none other than Major Pickard.

Major Pickard was previously the CBO for both British V & XIII Corps but during the move from the area of Florence, he was promoted and given the job of co-ordinating the CB for the entire of Eighth Army. This was the first time a CBO had ‘worked on an Army basis’ – normally they were only allotted to corps commands – and Pickard ‘felt very honoured to have been given the job.’ As previously mentioned, the British Eighth Army at this time consisted of three major corps formations: the British V Corps, Canadian I Corps and the Polish II Corps. New to modern warfare, Pickard found the Polish to be difficult to work with at first, as ‘their CB information was of a pretty poor order compared with ours’ but eventually he established good working order. At the time of writing this neutralisation programme, he was acting as the CBO for Canadian I Corps, who he was covering for as they were sick at the time.<sup>145</sup>

The heavy firepower available for this programme came from the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment (although both 11/54 & 13/54 would eventually not be called upon) and two superimposed heavy batteries: a single 7.2in battery of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Heavy as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian AGRA, as well as a single 7.2in battery of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy, who were working with the AGPA.<sup>146</sup> The firing, or at least Phase I of the programme, commenced at 11pm, with Phase II following at 6.30am on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>. The plan contained 36 total serials (targets), which the gunners would fire onto.

There were other small actions on the 26<sup>th</sup>, with the 155mm guns of 12/54 & 14/54 engaging enemy held buildings near San Gervasio, while 11/54 began harassing a particular target at 11pm. The firing onto this target, which lasted until 3am on the 27<sup>th</sup>, was done with one gun, which fired off 24 rounds.

During the month of August, Pickard remembers how the 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA CAGRA, Brigadier Maconochie, was like ‘a cat on hot bricks’, in his apparent insistence to constantly move positions, which took up unnecessary time and effort. On one particular night, which Pickard doesn’t give the exact date for\*, the Brigadier chose a position for his HQ very close to the 155mm guns of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, who were supporting a particular shoot and

*‘...every time the guns fired next to the Brig’s caravan it nearly shook him out of bed! So down went the order for the gun to stop firing! Although I don’t suppose it made much difference to the battle, the principle of stopping a gun in action because it was making too much noise appalled me.’<sup>147</sup>*

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By 10am on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 11/54, 12/54 & 13/54 would move from their gun positions and be in action just North of Calmazzo, having engaged several targets the past few days; on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the whole regiment had fired onto a single target labelled ‘Y81’, which was in the area of Calmazzo, where they now resided. 14/54 would soon follow and be in position at midnight on the 31<sup>st</sup>, despite most of their guns being ‘held up on [road] by traffic blocks.’ From these new positions the regiment would perform the usual heavy artillery work, engaging enemy batteries and harassing important road junctions to hamper enemy movement. Between the hours of 5am and 8.25am on 31<sup>st</sup> August, the regiment harassed ‘essential enemy reinforcements’, who were arriving on the road of Trasanni-Gallo.

By 11pm of 5<sup>th</sup> September, the regiment had moved into the area of Mondaino, approximately 20km North-North West of Calmazzo. Despite only just arriving on their new positions, a counter battery programme for the same night was received by telephone. This CB programme would be fired on reception of the codeword ‘CHAFFINCH’, with 11/54 & 13/54 (both operating 7.2in Mkl howitzers) limited to 1 round per gun CB per task, while 12/54 & 14/54 (operating the 155mm guns) would have slightly more firepower for each task, with 2 rounds per gun per task permitted.

On 6<sup>th</sup> September at 8.40am, the regiment is told to be prepared to fire on Gemmano, a hilltop commune which sits above the River Conca but *only* if the regiment was required to do so. Both 11/54 & 13/54 quickly acknowledged that they could bring all ‘guns to bear if given notice.’ However, the firing onto Gemmano doesn’t happen this day, allowing 13/54 to instead engage both a battery of 88s at 9.30am and a Nebelwerfer† near Maite at midday, approximately 2km South West of Gemmano. The firing onto the Nebelwerfer was done in liaison with the AOP of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division, who requested that their AOP supported the 54<sup>th</sup> on this day. This AOP support was to be known as ‘B1’ and 11/54 would also perform a shoot with B1, engaging three targets in the afternoon, some of which when hit produced ‘large explosion and fires.’

Over the next week the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would perform the usual heavy work: harassing fire, counter battery work and work with AOP on selected targets. 11/54 fired into an enemy occupied churchyard and house on 9<sup>th</sup> September, with ‘direct hits obtained’ on both. Perhaps as a result of this shoot, 11 Italian refugees found their way to the 11/54 gun positions – these refugees were collected by AMGOT the following morning.

On 12<sup>th</sup> September, orders to support an attack by Eighth Army were received from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, which was to be put in by both the Canadian I Corps and British V Corps. The intention of this attack was to break through the German lines in the areas of Coriano, while also capturing the towns of Montescudo, Gesso, Croce, Gemmano and San Savino. British V Corps consisted of 46<sup>th</sup>

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\* I like to think this could be the night of 26<sup>th</sup> August, when 12/54 & 14/54 were both in action.

†Nebelwerfers (literally German for fog launchers or throwers) were a series of rocket launched mortar weapon systems fielded by the German Army during WW2. Allied soldiers in Europe would refer to them as ‘Moaning Minnies’.



Division, who were to take Montescudo, 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division who aimed for Gesso and 56<sup>th</sup> Division, who were tasked with holding a 'firm base' on the line San Savino-Croce-Gemmano. Canadian I Corps was built up from the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division, tasked with capturing high ground North of Coriano and the 4<sup>th</sup> British Infantry Division, who were to capture two high points near the advance of the 5<sup>th</sup> Armoured.<sup>148</sup>

Supporting this attack onto the area of the Coriano Ridge would be the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, less the two 155mm batteries, who on 11<sup>th</sup> September had been reserved for Arty/R only and would be reserved for CB by the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian AGRA. In their place would be two 7.2in batteries of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy, along with 5<sup>th</sup>, 70<sup>th</sup> & 80<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiments. These regiments would provide support in three different phases, which were predicted to last until the afternoon of 13<sup>th</sup> September.<sup>149</sup> During this action, the regiment were targeted by enemy artillery and on 13<sup>th</sup> September, the 12/54 area was hit by enemy shells; the final damage assessment of this barrage was that a total of 33 charges had been destroyed by enemy action and some vehicles were slightly damaged.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, there was more CB and AOP shoots throughout the day. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the regiment supported the Allied attack with counter mortar & CB programmes, along with small fire plans. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that 'many [enemy] guns and vehicles [are] withdrawing' near the San Marino border. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, 11/54 & 13/54 commit to a HF programme from 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA onto targets within San Marino including road junctions. The next day, both batteries were in action again, this time supporting the 56<sup>th</sup> Division in an attack on the commune of Coriano. This support carried on into the early hours of the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, with other fire plans and actions done in support of the 46<sup>th</sup> Division as well.

Some of the regiments last actions as a Heavy unit were more of the usual. On 5<sup>th</sup> October, the enemy counter attacked units of the 1<sup>st</sup> King's Own Royal Regiment (near a road junction at Secchiano) but with fire support put down by the regiment, this counter attack failed. In response, the enemy increased their own shelling and on the 7<sup>th</sup>, a heavy enemy concentration landed in the area of 14/54, with rounds falling 'in gunpit but [with] no damage.' Other enemy rounds would also fall into the regiments lines over the next few days. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, an enemy barrage landed on the area of 12/54, with a tractor and some motor transport being damaged as a result. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, shells landed in the 14/54 area, with 'no damage beyond personal kit in CP'

The 54th Heavy Regiment's last casualty as a result of enemy action was on 17<sup>th</sup> October, when an enemy concentration landed into the regimental area. While this barrage did damage to surveying trucks, it also caused grave injuries to two soldiers. The first was Corporal Harold William Burgess of the Royal Corps of Signals, who died of his wounds on 18<sup>th</sup> October. The other was 26-year-old Bombardier Gilbert Alexander MacPherson of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, who died as the result of the enemy shelling on 17<sup>th</sup> October.

## 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment

1944

The last months of 1944 saw the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment slowly begin their transformation into a Super Heavy Regiment. As defined earlier within this document (page v), Super Heavy Regiments within the Royal Artillery were sparsely used, with their main involvement coming towards the end of the war. While heavy weapons were proving their worth so far in the fighting, it may have been seen by the higher commands – there is currently no document or source which states this – that weapons with better & bigger firepower were needed to break the ongoing deadlocks and to get the war in Italy over with quicker. So, in came the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy, who were selected to re-equip with ‘Super Heavy’ weapons. They would officially remain as the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy until February 1945, when the first war diary for the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment was penned.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, after converting to super heavy guns, would also be the *only* Super Heavy Regiment in Italy, even up to the wars end in May 1945.

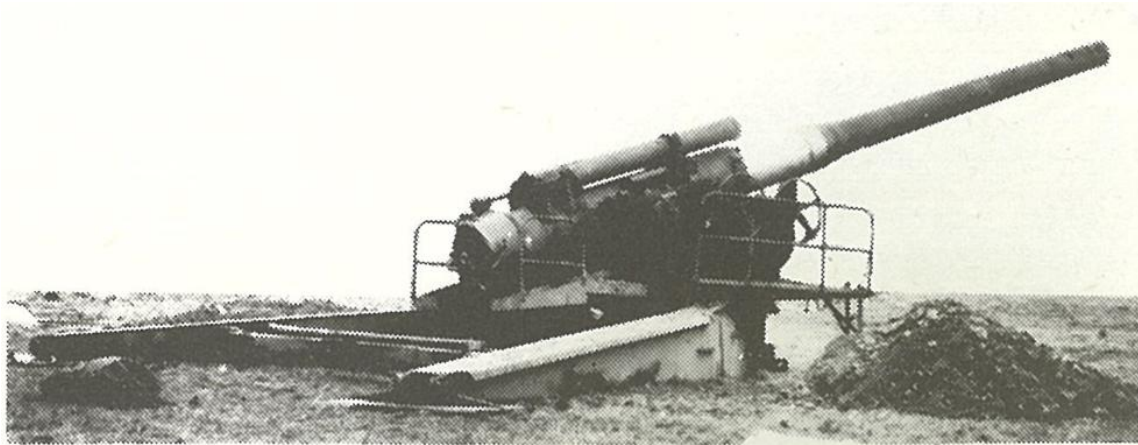
### ***The new 8in Super Heavy Gun***

On 20<sup>th</sup> September, with the regiment still situated near the San Marino border, Lt. Col. Gilkes would depart on recce for new gun positions, not for his own regiment but rather for two 7.2in howitzer batteries of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, 18/56 & 19/56. These two batteries would eventually fall under command of RHQ and get into action by midday of the 24<sup>th</sup>, despite heavy rain which made ‘movement impossible and firing by 7.2 difficult.’

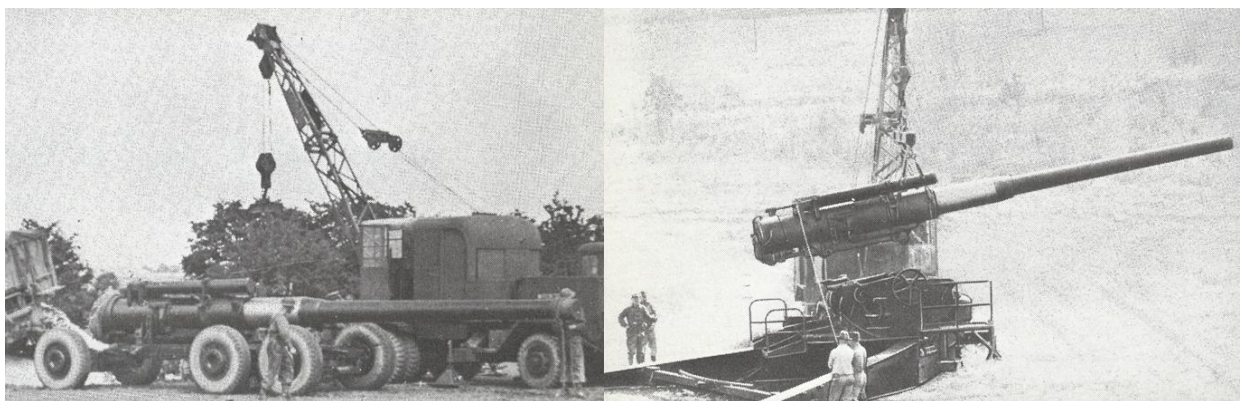
These two batteries were called upon to replace the 7.2in batteries 11/54 & 13/54, who were beginning their transition into Super Heavy batteries. Previously on 16<sup>th</sup> September, the Staff Captain Royal Artillery (SCRA) of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA reported that new 8in guns for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would be delivered to the country and arrive near Rome on 19<sup>th</sup> September.

The 8in (~203mm) gun was an American made heavy weapon which sat on the carriage of an American 240mm M1 (page 47), which after modification to suit the 8in gun was rebranded the M2. The 8in gun M1 carriage M2 was first introduced into American service in 1942 and was both a very large and expensive weapons platform, with only 139 total being produced by 1945.<sup>150</sup> The high cost of the weapon was more than likely due to the initial problems that the weapon faced in its early service, namely the excessive bore wear, which led to poor accuracy and resulted in many solutions being created to try and rectify the issue: these variants of the gun, ranging from the T2E1 to the T2E5, had varying success. The weapon that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy received would more than likely have been the standard M1 with M2 carriage, which when fully assembled, weighed just over 31tons; the gun and breech together weighed just under 14tons. The length of the weapon platform was approximately 10.5m and required large vehicles to both transport and assemble the gun into position. Cranes were needed at the gun positions to lift and lower the gun & breech into the carriage.<sup>151</sup>

The main changes of the 240mm howitzer to the 8in M1, apart from the increased barrel length, was the change to the nitrogen pressures of both the equilibrator and recoil system, to account for both the greater length and weight of the barrel.<sup>152</sup> Once in action, the 8in gun had a rate of fire of one round a minute, although this dropped to a round every two minutes after approximately 10 rounds.<sup>153</sup> The 8in gun, as standard, fired the M103 HE shell, which weighed approximately 108kg and contained just under 10kg of TNT. When combined with super charges, the 8in gun had an approximate range of 32km<sup>154</sup> and a muzzle velocity of 865m/s.<sup>155</sup>



*Figure 27 – A fully setup 8in M1 gun*



*Figure 28 – Lifting the gun into position using heavy cranes*

The 8in guns promised for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy did arrive on time and so 11/54 left the RHQ on 23<sup>rd</sup> September to collect them. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, a party of '1 [officer] and 91 ORs' from 11/54 travelled in 'old vehicles' to Fiuggi, along the way handing in their 7.2in howitzers to V Corps workshops in Morciano di Romagna. They also got rid of their Scammels and 3tonner trucks, handing these over to the 17<sup>th</sup> Vehicle Park in Mondolfo, as 11/54 would eventually require much more powerful transportation to handle the new heavier guns; these old vehicles would now not fill this role.

By 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1944, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment (now stationed North of San Marino in the area of Cantelli) consisted of the RHQ, 12/54 & 14/54 (both equipped with 155mm M1 guns) and the two attached batteries of the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment – 18/56 & 19/56, who still operated the 7.2in howitzers. The previous week had seen a 'Rainstorm so violent' that no guns could be fired. The 19/56 CP was 'washed away', with '[ammunition] pits flooded' seeing 'many charges floating down [the] hillside.' The 18/56 positions were 'under water' and a 'Storm water dam burst above 12 Bty, flooding out gun pits, CP and living accommodation.' Perhaps 11/54 were lucky that they had now vacated these positions.

On 4<sup>th</sup> November, a single battery of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Heavy Regiment (which also operated 155mm guns) came into the action area of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy RHQ and would be in action by 7<sup>th</sup> November. The next day, 18/56 & 19/56, who had been attached to this regiment for almost 2 months, vacated their current positions by 7am, to leave and rejoin their parent regiment, along with their RASC platoon. On the same day, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 13/54, who had only come out of action the previous day, also handed in their 7.2in howitzers – which they had owned for nearly 4 years – and associated stores to V Corps workshops.

### **Major Changes to the Regiment**

On 6<sup>th</sup> November, 13/54 begin their move to Fiuggi for re-equipment, while both 155mm batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy stayed in location, firing onto Forlì along with the single 155mm battery of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Heavy Regiment. Two days later, enemy shells landed in the regiments lines, damaging a gun of 14/54 and also injuring a gunner in 12/54. This was to be the last action the 155mm batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy would see, as by 4.30pm the same day, both batteries were to cease their firing and come out of action. By 6am on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 12/54, 14/54 and the remainder of the regiment begin their own move to Fiuggi, for conversion and re-equipping to use super heavy weaponry. Gilkes stated in his diary that the night previous was very wet and the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> was no better: 'Snow storm. Very uncomfortable.'<sup>156</sup> On their way to Fiuggi, the 8x 155mm guns of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy were handed over to the 56<sup>th</sup> Heavy, leaving the gunners of these batteries now without any guns!

The rest of the regiment, having passed through the centre of Rome on their journey, arrived in Fiuggi in the evening of 11<sup>th</sup> November, where 11/54 reverted back under command of the regimental HQ, after a month apart and while under the umbrella of 7<sup>th</sup> AGRA. Here the regiment would re-arm, re-equip and rest. They did so with 'Marvellous billets in hotels.'<sup>157</sup> The main body of 11/54 moved to the command area of the US Fifth Army on 30<sup>th</sup> November, having previously been 'unable to move on account of state of road'. Here they would select and dig their new gun positions to suit their single 8in gun. This would come with its own challenges, as if they found this process difficult, they could not request assistance from any other super heavy batteries or regiments, as there were none.

For the remainder of December, a single 8in gun was left with the regiment (along with an associated training team, both of which were from 11/54), with regimental training on the weapon to be undertaken within the month; this was due to no more super heavy weapons arriving before the end of 1944. This was also the same issue for the tracked towing vehicles, as a lack of new vehicles meant that any driving and maintenance training was to be completed on 3x M10s, a US manufactured tank destroyer, which were previously delivered to the regiment on 27<sup>th</sup> November.

Within the month of November, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would also lose their last casualty of the war, before their transition to a Super Heavy unit. This was another death not as the result of enemy action when on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, Gunner Overall died very unexpectedly – he passed as the result of coronary artery thrombosis while he was stationed in 'unit lines.'<sup>158</sup>

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Before the end of the year, a major change would be made to the regiment. After just over 3 years in command, Lt. Col. Gilkes would finally be relieved of the role as commanding officer of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, when he officially left the unit on 11<sup>th</sup> December. Gilkes, in his last diary entry relating to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, stated that he

*'Left 54 (H) Regt which I joined on March 12 1941. Great send off from the chaps. Spent night in transit hotel.'*<sup>159</sup>

In his place came Major Pickard on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, who we have come to be fairly familiar with throughout this document. Pickard had come from the role of Battery Commander (BC) of the 229<sup>th</sup> Battery within the 58<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, who he credited with being a 'a really practical regiment with first class personnel and an excellent TA spirit.' Lt. Col. Auld, commander of the 58<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment, said that he envied Pickard moving to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, as 'nothing would have pleased him more than to have been able to 'play about' with some super heavies.' Pickard also looked on his time as BC, approximately three months, as incredibly worthwhile, as he had 'learnt a lot...which I had forgotten whilst 'on the staff.'<sup>160</sup>

Pickard was also joining the regiment having only recently been awarded the Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, or MBE, for his work in the last year in Italy – this was

announced in the London Gazette on 21<sup>st</sup> December, the day before he joined the regiment. He was nominated for this award by Brigadier Edward Barrington de Fonblanque, CCRA for V Corps, who initially recommended him for an OBE, although this was downgraded before its receipt. Pickard had been

*‘...CBO 5 Corps during the Sangro-Moro battles and the subsequent fighting up to the R.Arielli. Throughout this period he carried out his duties with marked technical efficiency and...energy, and thereby contributed in a very large measure to the control in which the hostile gains were held. For a period of 3 weeks in Feb-Mar ’44, Major Pickard was attached to the staff of the artillery commander 6 U.S Corps. General Baehr subsequently wrote to [Command] 5 Corps, saying that the constructive work which Major Pickard had accomplished had been of...value and that he has made a very real contribution to the more efficient operation of the U.S CB office.’<sup>161</sup>*

Major Pickard MBE joined the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment when it was stationed in Fiuggi, which he thought was a ‘marvellous spot right up in the mountains.’ The area of Fiuggi was filled with hotels, some of which the regiment ‘were comfortably ensconced in’ – the roads in this region were ‘steep and very twisting’, which sounded an area very unsuitable for moving Super Heavy artillery. Arriving in the area and joining the regiment, Pickard felt a weight on his shoulders, as he later admitted in his post war memoirs that he initially found it difficult to replace Gilkes, who was a ‘regular soldier and a very popular one too.’ Gilkes had been in the Royal Artillery at this point for over 27 years and was only let go from active service due to his age – he was now 48 years old – but was incredibly ‘loathe to do so’, with all the gunners and officers in the regiment also ‘very loathe to lose him’ as well. Pickard now was feeling uncomfortable and felt like the officer who ‘nobody really wanted.’ Why was the commanding officer, a favourite among the men and a veteran of the regiment, having been with them for nearly 4 years, being let go and replaced by an officer who the men didn’t know? It turns out that Gilkes had thought of this and to allay his fears, he had left Pickard a ‘particularly nice letter’, stating his delight that he had been appointed as his successor. It transpired that Pickard also knew some of the battery commanders within the regiment, namely Majors Stuart Mackenzie of 11/54 (though ‘just slightly’) and John Carter of 14/54, who he knew best. The regimental 2iC, Major Andrew Morrison, who had been with the regiment since 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1940, also made him feel ‘very welcome’, and Pickard thought of him as the ‘most [loyal] person and a grand help’, always doing ‘his best to help and advise me.’<sup>162</sup>

In Pickard’s first month in command, 11/54 would be the first within the regiment to officially become a Super Heavy battery when on 5<sup>th</sup> December, 11/54 (now officially the 11<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Battery RA) was placed under the command of US II Corps (itself part of US Fifth Army) for operational purposes. Here the battery would come under the watch of 10<sup>th</sup> AGRA for administration purposes and by the 7<sup>th</sup>, the regiments only operational 8in gun – the other being stuck with the main body of the regiment – was in action before midnight in the area of Loiano, in the hills approximately 25km South of Bologna.

There was no reported action for either the battery or the gun until 26<sup>th</sup> December, when the battery (and the regiment) shot their first super heavy rounds of the war in anger. Their first round, fired at 11am onto a set of crossroads, was observed by a Spitfire. Three more rounds were fired onto target ‘5R277’ which were also observed by the same Spitfire. The next two days saw the battery fire a total of 10 rounds onto target ‘5R279’, which was another set of crossroads, which would have been an effort to hamper the movement of the enemy. To end the year of 1944, 11/54 fired 14 rounds in observation shoots, alongside another Spitfire and flash spotters\* from two nearby OPs; the flash spot shoots had a ‘fairly good group reported.’

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\* Flash spotting was the practice of directing fire onto the flash of enemy guns after they fired, as their muzzle flashes were visible for a very short period after firing.



*Figure 29 – The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy' only operational 8in Super Heavy gun, in action near Loiano, on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1945. The weapon appears to have been painted white to blend in with the snow covered landscape. The gunners are currently loading in a shell, using the two-man lifting cradle, which is then pushed into the breech using a long pole.*



*Figure 30 – The same 8in gun now ready to fire. A gunner (second left) stands ready to fire with the firing lanyard in his right hand. The gun has also been elevated after the loading of the shell, so that the round fired can clear the hill which the gun pit is situated nearby. This picture also shows the size of the gun pit required for the 8in gun.*



## 1945

The regiments only Super Heavy battery, 11/54, would continue their firing into the new year, when on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1945, 12 rounds of 8in HE were fired onto target '5R283', which was another set of crossroads, with 7 of these rounds being observed by a Spitfire pilot. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the 8in gun of 11/54 fired its first rounds against hostile forces, when HB '1B265' was engaged with 10 rounds. During the remainder of January, this battery would only fire a further 40 rounds of 8in calibre onto various targets, including a hostile ammunition dump on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and an enemy occupied house on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The battery would also fire a HF task on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, which was codenamed '*Michegan Boulevard*', a small programme consisting of only 4 rounds directed onto Highway 9, a major road connecting the Northern areas of Italy, which also ran into and through Bologna.

The rest of the regiment, as in December 1944, continued their training throughout January. They also finally received 'release orders for further guns and tractors', which would eventually include two Lorain cranes and a single 3-ton lorry, although these extra vehicles would only arrive in February. These heavier cranes and vehicles would be critical for towing, lifting and setting up the significantly larger super heavy weapons, one of which was the new 240mm howitzer.

### ***The 240mm Howitzer***

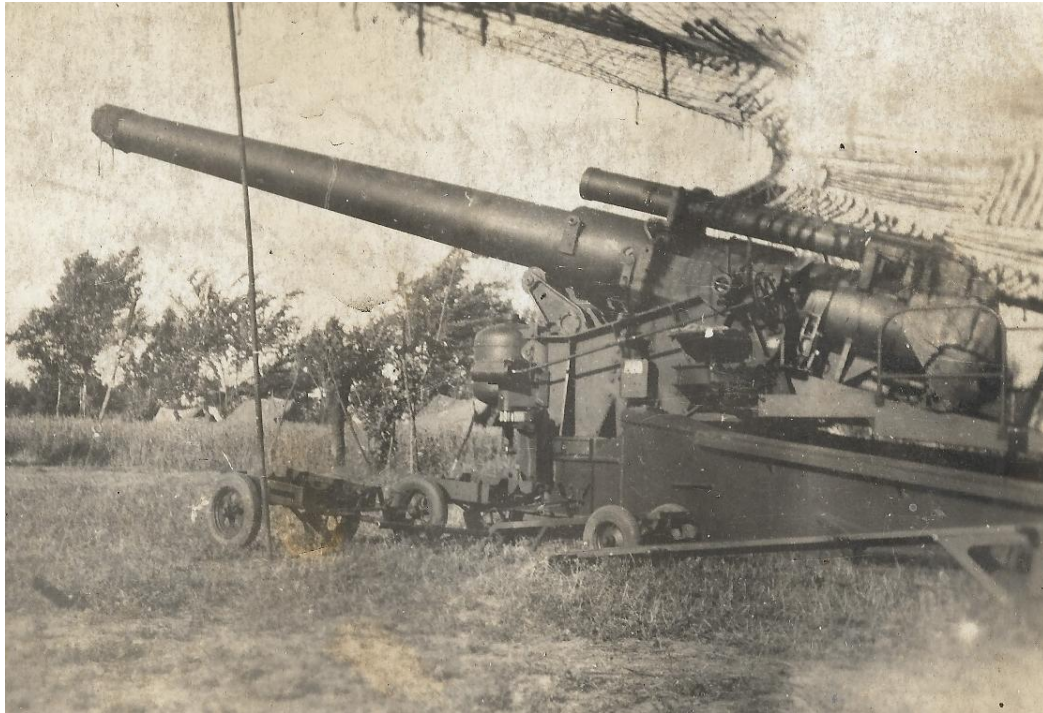
At the time of Pickard's arrival, the regiment only had one operational Super Heavy weapon, which was the 8in gun of 11/54 at Loiano supporting the Americans. The only other 8in gun available on the Italian mainland was now in the regiments hands, although it was currently only supporting training and not being put to proper use. At the military stores in Fiuggi there was also only a single 240mm howitzer available for use, another Super Heavy weapon that the gunners of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would have to become quickly accustomed.

The 240mm howitzer M1, of which the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment were to receive, was another American designed and manufactured weapon. It was based on the M1918 240mm howitzer, which was a weapon system designed for use in the First World War, of which it didn't see any proper front line service, due to the war ending before any significant number of the weapons could be manufactured.

After initial issues with the original carriage were sorted out and the development phase for alternate transportation ideas was completed, the 240mm howitzer was finally placed onto the M1 carriage, which the 8in gun (page 42) was also fixed onto. The 240mm M1 It was a vast improvement on the previous weapon system, as the overall range of the 240mm M1 – while firing a 163kg HE shell and using a four unit propellant charge – was approximately 23km,<sup>163</sup> where the 240mm M1918 could just reach a range of under 15km.<sup>164</sup>

Like the 8in M1 gun, the 240mm howitzer was a very large weapon system, which took a great amount of effort to move around the battlefield. It was towed in two separate loads: the gun & breech (which weighed approximately 11.5tons) and the howitzers carriage. When set up, the weapon system weighed in at nearly 30tons and had an overall length of 8.5m.<sup>165</sup> It was often accompanied by a crane which assisted the gunners in digging the gun pit, using a clamshell bucket style attachment to move the earth of where the gun was to be positioned; the crane could also be used to lift the carriage and the howitzers barrel into position. Heavy tractors could also assist by lifting the gun into place using winches, placing the barrel onto the carriage which would otherwise have been dragged into place by the poor gunners. This method was obviously a lot more work; using a heavy crane and other vehicles meant the 240mm gun could be in action in just under 2hours with a proficient crew, whereas manual emplacement would take up to 8hours to bring the gun into action, including digging of the gun pit by hand!<sup>166</sup>





*Figure 31 – A 240mm howitzer M1 of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment. This image was taken after the end of the war.*

It would be up to Pickard to ensure that his new regiment was properly kitted out, as to avoid any unnecessary manual labour in setting up their new weapons! Since Pickard's arrival he had 'began a fight with the various Ordnance Depots, chiefly at Naples', in order to try and get the rest of the regiment equipped and ready for action once again. He felt that these various depots were 'quite happy to sit down and wait for the equipment to arrive', meaning when he started pushing for the depots to get what the regiment needed, he was not a popular figure! It probably didn't help the situation in that the stores and equipment required for the regiments new guns were mostly American and the difficulties he faced 'in getting equipped were enormous.' Not many quartermasters even knew what the applicable stores & sundries related to the 8in gun and 240mm howitzer were, as these guns were new, even to the Americans.<sup>167</sup>

As well as troubles with stores, Pickard found some of the men within the regiment to also briefly give him some bother. The grand and historic city of Rome, the capital of Italy, was only 40miles or so from Fiuggi as the crow flew, and it was a fairly common place for the gunners to visit at this stage of the war. The current custom was for each battery to send a party of troops in a single 3-ton lorry about three times a week to see the sights. Pickard thought this was a 'glorious waste of time' and that 'troubles...always occur when troops haven't enough to do.' Once again, Pickard made himself quite an unpopular figure when he made drastic cuts to these 'joy rides' and replaced them with 'intensive training.' Gilkes, to his credit, was not a harsh disciplinarian and would more than likely have allowed these excursions, seeing it as a way to relieve the stress on the men. However, in Pickard's opinion, this way of rule wouldn't 'really pay off in the long run' and he felt that he had to gradually begin 'tightening the reins' to try and reinforce some kind of discipline, which he thought was necessary, even at this stage of the war.<sup>168</sup>

### ***A Wartime Holiday***

As the regiment was beginning the slow process of conversion into a Super Heavy regiment, Pickard understood that neither he, the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment or any other British regiment in Italy had any experience operating super heavy guns or vehicles. He was in the unfortunate situation of being the only commanding officer in the Italian theatre to operate a Super Heavy regiment and so had no one to turn to or ask for advice. As a result, he requested a transfer to the European

theatre to study the current use of Super Heavy weaponry by both British & American forces who, as part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, were making good use of these weapons against the Germans and their defences. While Pickard knew this trip would be worthwhile, not only for him but the regiment as well, he also knew his trip would seem 'like a month's holiday', especially given his relatively short time in command; apparently the announcement of this trip was met with 'great envy from all sides.'<sup>169</sup>

He left the regiment on 14<sup>th</sup> January, travelling first to Naples to catch a flight on a C-47 Dakota, from where he flew onwards to Marseille and to Paris, although bad weather restricted this route for a while. Eventually he reached an American gun position near Alsace-Lorraine, who were part of US VI Corps. Here he would meet General Baehr, who had previously recommended him for his MBE. After reminiscing together on their battles at Anzio, Pickard would learn what he could from the Americans regarding the operation of their super heavy weapons. While he picked up some good information on the guns and methods from the American soldiers, he felt he could absorb more from a British Super Heavy group, so he moved through a battered Bastogne and onto Brussels, where he reported to 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group. He then met with 9<sup>th</sup> AGRA HQ, where after speaking with the CAGRA, he agreed to visit the 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, who were currently in action just over the Germany-Holland border.

On his way to visiting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, he was struck by 'the enormous number of troops...and the amount of equipment they had'. He now knew why his regiment were 'short in Italy', as this front was 'where it was all going.' He eventually reached the regiment and was welcomed by the regiments CO and its 2iC, who Pickard found to both be 'most helpful and co-operative.' The composition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Heavy Regiment at this time was of 2 batteries, one with 3x 240mm howitzers and the other with 3x 8in guns. Pickard didn't like this setup, as he thought that the batteries were in danger of being 'constantly split up and not working as a complete unit.' This thinking would feed into the way he would operate his own Super Heavy regiment in the coming weeks. Before leaving, having learned a lot about super heavy weaponry operation, he taught the 3<sup>rd</sup> Super Heavy Regiment gun detachments about camouflage, 'of which they seemed to know very little.'<sup>170</sup>

After brief leave in England, Pickard returned to Italy. Upon his return and after his learnings from the past few weeks, he immediately set about changing the way his own Super Heavy regiment operated; after all, there was no other regiment in the Italian front from who he had to copy. He didn't like the rigid formation of the other Super Heavy units in the Royal Artillery and so suggested his regiment would be more flexible. Other Super Heavy units, like Heavy Regiments before them, operated batteries of single weapon types and so this meant if a corps or division requested use of a 240mm howitzer and 8in gun, then the batteries would be split.

His thinking also applied to another concern, in that 'Corps were unlikely to get more than three 'pieces' together'. Administratively, it would be easier and 'far preferable to send a complete battery containing the [howitzers] and guns' than combining a 'part of two batteries' to support any action. Pickard managed to convince his superiors of this idea and therefore the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment was to be eventually composed of four batteries, each containing three pieces (2x 240mm and 1x 8in guns) with a regimental total of 12 guns. Resultantly, the regiment was also to hold the honour of being the 'biggest [Super Heavy Regiment]...in the British Army and in fact any army'. Pickard also decided that the batteries would be re-equipped in numerical order. Since 11/54 had already begun their re-equipment, this meant that 12/54 would be next to convert from a Heavy battery, while 14/54 would be the last to be re-equipped. However, Pickard changed his mind as 14/54 'were the keenest to get on', so this battery was to be fully re-equipped before 12/54, who were the 'least knowledgeable'.<sup>171</sup>

### ***Finally Becoming a Super Heavy Regiment***

The month of February 1945 saw the regiment officially become the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment. The associated stores and equipment finally arrived, even after 'many tussles with Naples'. In February alone, 3x Lorain cranes, 9x M6 tractors, 4x 240mm howitzers and 3x 8in guns were delivered to the regiment.

The Lorain cranes were critical to the regiments operation, as they could greatly assist in the setup time of both weapon types, meaning any training on these was of the upmost importance. However, training crane drivers was a 'difficult and slow process' and the regiment had 'several near accidents.' Pickard eventually got three Americans flown out from Europe to train both the crane operators and M6 tractor drivers, who were both 'first class and most helpful', with an attached American officer leaving a 'glowing report on the regiment.'<sup>172</sup>

Despite progression in both re-equipment and training, Pickard unfortunately remembers the month of February as one which brought up many personnel problems.

One of the biggest clashes he had was with Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) Barber, a regular soldier who had been with the regiment for years, who he believed to be 'undoubtedly useless' and 'a bad example as a senior warrant officer.' He 'used to drink too much, knew very little, cared little and altogether was a complete nuisance.' Once again, and once again in Pickard's opinion, Gilkes had been too easy on Barber, who would have known of these faults and had chosen to not act on them. Pickard thought the regiment would be better off without him but had no reason to remove him – this was until Barber gave him one. A 'fracas' between a gunner and another officer – which RSM Barber pretended not to see, apparently hiding a blanket over his head to miss the fight – led to Pickard reporting the RSM for demotion, leading him to become a Sergeant. Pickard had no 'regrets at having implemented' the demotion and was keen to set some standards within the regiment. Officers in the regiment were also not safe from punishment, as they may have been in the past. A particular example of this arose when an officer of the regiment, driving a jeep with a nurse as a passenger in an effort to impress her, crashed on a snowy road. This joyride landed the officer a £20 fine (~£1100 today) for damaging regimental equipment. This unexpected fine 'shook him and his fellow officers quite a bit' but Pickard wanted to show that no one was exempt from rules. This particular officer was eventually moved on to another regiment but his replacement 'was far worse', leading to Pickard sarcastically claiming that the 'repercussions did a lot of good'.<sup>173</sup>

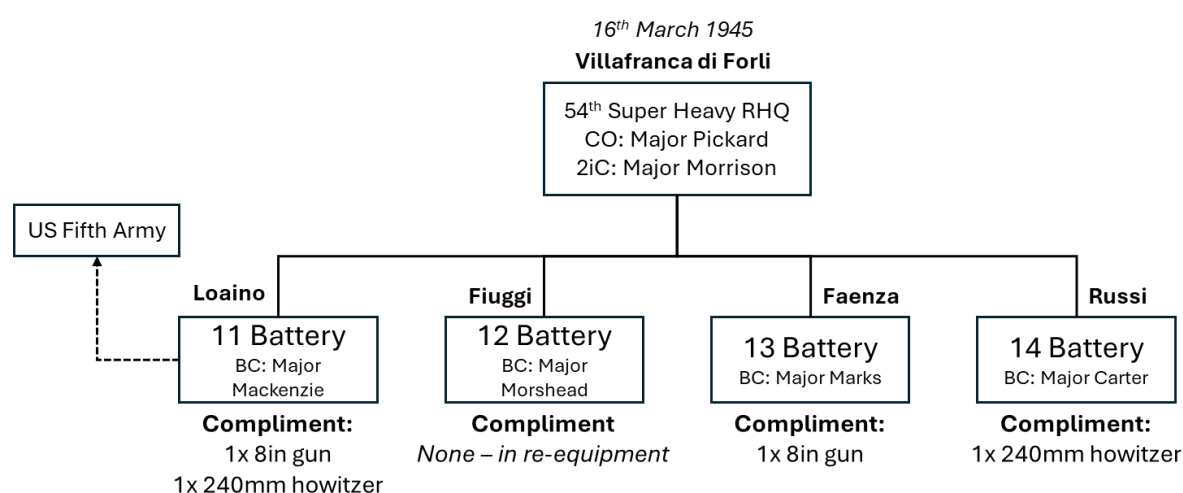
On 26<sup>th</sup> February, Pickard visited both the US Fifth and British Eighth Army fronts and the conclusion of these visits was that the regiment would split, going off to support each army. 11/54 & 12/54 – realistically only 11/54 would be providing fire for the time being – would stay on the Western Coast, supporting the American Fifth Army while 13/54 & 14/54 would stay near the Adriatic, to provide fire support for the British Army. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, the battery commanders for 13/54 & 14/54, Majors Marks and Carter, went to the Eighth Army area to recce potential battery areas and gun pits, with Pickard joining them on 1<sup>st</sup> March. Pickard, while in the area, visited the HQRA for V Corps where he spoke with the CCRA Brigadier de Foublanque, who wanted to keep both 13/54 and 14/54, who at this time both had only one weapon ready for action. He wanted them under his direct control (as part of V Corps), as opposed to being under the control of an AGRA, which they probably 'should have done' according to Pickard.<sup>174</sup> The next day, Pickard and de Foublanque would discuss the proposed use for the 240mm howitzer and 8in guns, something which needed to be figured out before the batteries would be moved to support any Allied units.

The conversations between the two artillery officers must have proved fruitful, as eventually the regiment began to receive orders to move. On 11<sup>th</sup> March, 13/54, with a single 8in gun, left Fiuggi and were in action on the 15<sup>th</sup> near Faenza, with their support being allotted to the Polish II Corps. 14/54, with only a single 240mm howitzer, were in action on 16<sup>th</sup> March near the train station in

Russi, where Pickard had previously gone with Major Carter to select during their previous recce. The position was selected as it ‘had a very firm platform’ and there was so much ‘stuff lying about the yard’ that ‘it was pretty good from the camouflage point of view.’ Pickard thought that camouflage at this stage in the war ‘was a complete waste of time’, probably owing to the dominance of Allied aircraft and total lack of any *Luftwaffe* activity, although he admitted no one was brave enough to criticise the camouflage policy and so the camouflage went on!<sup>175</sup> During this move, RHQ found themselves positioned near Villafranca di Forlì, a small town approximately 9km away from both new battery positions.

While 12/54 were still re-arming and awaiting any guns (they would only receive orders to move on 26<sup>th</sup> March, finally recceing gun positions on the 31<sup>st</sup>), the only active Super Heavy battery, 11/54, were now receiving new equipment. On 10<sup>th</sup> March a new 240mm howitzer, which was previously inspected by the CO on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, was sent to Loaino. The battery began work on the gun pit required for this new piece on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, with the weapon being in action by 8.15pm on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The battery received the gun at 3am in the morning meaning it took the gunners over 15hours to set the gun up; this can be excused, as at this point they were the only Super Heavy battery in Italy to have attempted this with the new 240mm system. Despite the gun being set up, it would not be used for a few weeks. On 25<sup>th</sup> March, Pickard went to visit 11/54 and their new 240mm weapon, which was actually positioned near Sabbioni, just 3km South from their 8in gun, and he noted the lack of firing activity within the gun pit. Apparently, there was a ‘silent policy...being pursued with this [howitzer].’ This was (to the best of my research) my grandfather’s gun pit and I would love to have known his and his battery gun mates thoughts at this time. Would they have been happy with these quiet moments amidst the grand backdrop of the war or would they have wanted to get going with their new and big toy?

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March, Pickard would once again visit 11/54 near Loaino, this time along with Brigadier Siggers, the Brigadier RA (BRA) of Eighth Army. The gunners would finally get their chance to use their new guns and put on a show for the Brigadier, when they fired onto a train with 8 rounds, including 2 airburst rounds. However, the shooting was not up to par for the event, as there was only ‘1 probable hit on [the] rail track.’ Four days later on the 7<sup>th</sup>, the battery made up for this poor show with some impressive shooting, when they fired 36 rounds onto a known enemy heavy gun position: 19 of these rounds were observed falling in the target area and a fire was started in a nearby house.



*Figure 32 – 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy formation as of 16<sup>th</sup> March 1945*

On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the newly located Super Heavy batteries were directed onto targets, firing their first rounds in anger from their new positions. The 240mm of 14/54 fired onto a battery of

Nebelwerfers, while the 8in of 13/54 fired onto targets 'A & B' near Mezzano. It was observed that 'the guns behaved satisfactorily' during both of these shoots. The next day, 13/54 sustained shellfire from an enemy heavy gun, with 10 rounds total landing in the battery position, amazingly with no reported casualties.

On 19<sup>th</sup> March, 14/54 completed counter battery work, engaging both enemy HAA and medium guns, firing an impressive 22 rounds in one hour, with all these rounds landing in the target areas, demolishing a nearby house in the process. They would keep up this rapid fire rate two days later, when firing onto another set of both HAA and medium batteries, the gunners let off 20 rounds in 35 minutes, nearly a round every 2 minutes, which for a 240mm howitzer is an almost unbelievable rate of fire! On 24<sup>th</sup> March, 13/54 and its single 8in gun engaged enemy supply dumps, having had a previous Arty/R shoot on the 20<sup>th</sup> cancelled after only firing 9 rounds. The battery did also assist in completing a Radar OP shoot with the 11<sup>th</sup> Special Radar Unit, firing onto an enemy emplacement on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

By the end of March, the regiment would start to finally fill their compliment of weapons. By the 28<sup>th</sup>, one 8in gun and 240mm howitzer, along with associated transport, arrived on the 14/54 gun positions, meaning they were now the first battery to be fully equipped, despite Pickard suggesting they would be third in the list of re-armament priority; they were ordered to have both new guns in action by the end of the month. 13/54 received a new 240mm howitzer on the 26<sup>th</sup> and were in action with this on the 27<sup>th</sup>, firing on the 28<sup>th</sup> alongside Captain Nijinski of 318 Polish Squadron, who conducted AOP onto 4 enemy medium guns. Sticking with the Polish AOP, 13/54 fired their 8in guns onto crossroads in the area of Sabbioso on 2<sup>nd</sup> April; the Polish pilot regarded the shoot as 'first class', reporting that 'all rounds [landed] on or near the road.' 14/54 also worked with AOP, this time with 40 SAAF Squadron, when they engaged enemy HAA batteries on 31<sup>st</sup> March, with the results being were labelled as 'highly satisfactory.'



*Figure 33 – '240mm in action' – this image was taken directly after firing of the weapon, as the breech of the gun can be seen close to the recoil pit, indicating the gun has just fired a shell. The location and date of this image is unknown but it is a great picture, as it highlights the number of gunners required to work this weapon. Note the large camouflage netting above and the large number of sandbags surrounding the gun pit.*



### **Operation BUCKLAND**

On 4<sup>th</sup> April, the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment CO, Major Pickard, attended an Army Commander's conference at Forlì, where it was announced that there were no new targets for 13/54 available at the current time. Only three days later on the 7<sup>th</sup>, their final weapon arrived – a brand new 240mm howitzer. This meant that 13/54 were now also fully equipped as a Super Heavy battery and they were fully in action by 10pm the following day.

Potential targets for 14/54, now a fully equipped Super Heavy unit, were highlighted in the Argenta area, just 30km or so to the North of their current positions. It was also highlighted by pilots of the 40 SAAF Squadron, that the area contained many 88mm positions used as AA, which rightly drew up reservations from the same pilots, who all questioned the importance of these targets when measured up against the 'danger from flack'. However, the next day, and despite these reservations, 14/54 did engage one of these targets, an enemy stores dump, which was near Argenta. Unfortunately, they received shell fire in return from a very heavy enemy weapon, a 21cm gun. Perhaps they should have left Argenta alone.

The battery at the bottom of Pickard's re-arming order, 12/54, were finally being brought up to the front, when on 5<sup>th</sup> March, after receiving positions on 31<sup>st</sup> March, they arrived in the Florence area. They were initially allocated to the US II Corps (US Fifth Army) as part of the 178<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Group USA, with their first gun positions near 11/54 in the Loiano area.

Pickard commented that the 'front had been very quiet' for weeks before their arrival, although he knew this was due to 'great preparations...now taking place for the great battle.'<sup>176</sup> This great battle was to become known as the Spring 1945 Offensive in Italy, or also as Operation GRAPESHOT, which was to be a two pronged offensive involving both the British Eighth Army and the US Fifth Army (together collectively known as 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group) to push the German forces in Italy back across the River Po, forcing retreats and defeats where possible, in the final hope of capturing Verona and ending the war in Italy

The 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment's first inclination of the operational orders for this attack were provided on 6<sup>th</sup> April. They were told that the British Eighth Army's involvement in the attack would comprise of V Corps on the right and the Polish II Corps on the left, who were to 'break through the enemy's SENIO [defences]'. The River Senio ran from Castel Bolognese to Alfonsine, with the Germans defences built in areas across the banks of the rivers.<sup>177</sup>

Supporting the two corps formations would be both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRAs, who would be packing a punch. The 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, with the 4<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 58<sup>th</sup>, 70<sup>th</sup> & 80<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiments, both sporting either 4.5in or 5.5in guns and the 75<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment (who operated both 7.2in howitzers and 155mm guns), along with Light & Heavy AA batteries *and* a single searchlight battery, would directly be supporting the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Division advances, who also had their own complement of RHA regiments and divisional artillery. The 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA, supporting the advances of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division (who also had Field regiments of the 78<sup>th</sup> Division attached) had the 5<sup>th</sup>, 74<sup>th</sup> & 102<sup>nd</sup> Medium Regiments with 5.5in guns, while the 73<sup>rd</sup> & 76<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiments had 4.5in guns. Both AGRAs were supported by a single flight from both 651 & 654 AOP squadrons, while 13/54 & 14/54 of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment would be superimposed under the CCRA administration.<sup>178</sup> The total number of guns, just from the elements of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRAs, would be around 180.

On 8<sup>th</sup> April, Pickard attended a briefing conference at the HQ 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA for final details of Operation BUCKLAND, attended by 9 other officers from various artillery regiments. He returned with the general CB arrangements for D-Day, which had been given as 9<sup>th</sup> April, along with the general plan for the operation, which was to see both the 8<sup>th</sup> Indian and 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Divisions cross the River Senio and establish a bridgehead before other allied forces would advance into the Argenta Gap. This was hoped to crush the German defenders and force major retreats.

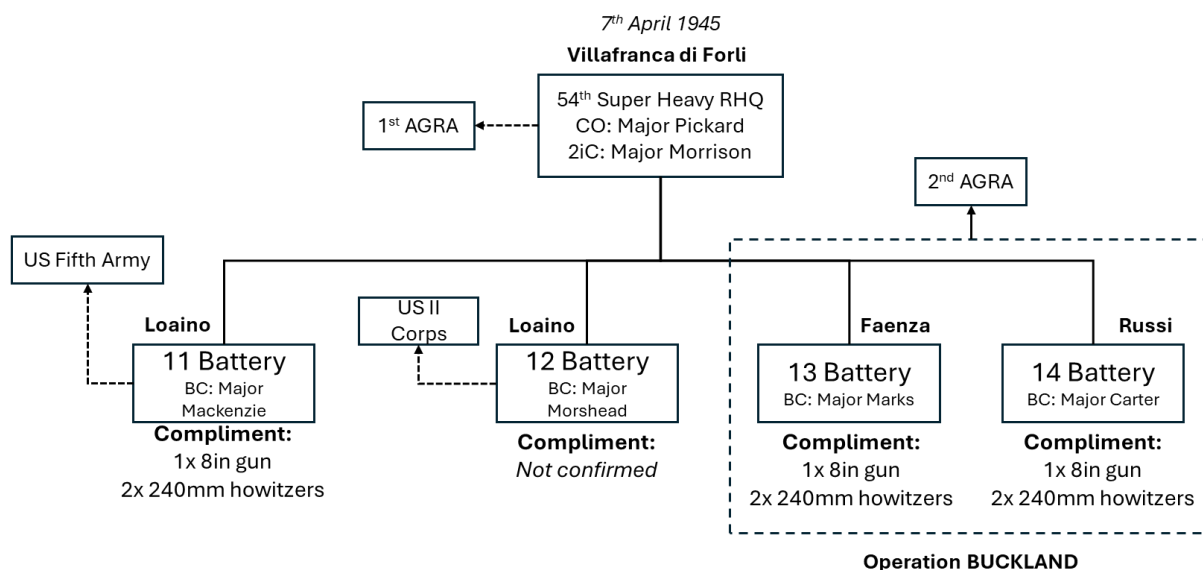


Figure 34 – The formation of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment just before the start of Operation BUCKLAND, as of 7<sup>th</sup> April 1945.

Supporting the advance of these two divisions would be the aforementioned artillery regiments under the command of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA, who on D-Day would engage up to a total of 240 hostile batteries, in an aim to suppress the German artillery, allowing an uninterrupted thrust North. An estimated 50 enemy guns directly faced the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment positions while they were in support of V Corps. Some of these 240 HB would be engaged as part of a CB programme named 'FESTA', which was to be carried out between 10.30am and 12.15pm on D-Day, where '59 HBs are due to be engaged plus 6 by 54 Super Hy.' After this initial firing, a '[heavy] bomber carpet' was to be put down between the hours of 1.55pm and 3.20pm, where it was estimated that another 44 HBs would be eliminated. Medium bombers would then attack a further 24 HBs and if this wasn't enough, a further wave of fighter bombers would then deal with up to 48 more enemy gun positions; it was looking like a bad day to be a German gunner.<sup>179</sup>

The ammunition available to the two 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy batteries supporting BUCKLAND would be 60rpg for the 240mm howitzers, while the 8in guns would be allowed half of this amount, with only 30rpg. This meant for support during BUCKLAND, 240 rounds would be available for the 240mm howitzers of the two batteries, while the two 8in guns of 13/54 & 14/54 would share 60 rounds between them.<sup>180</sup>

9<sup>th</sup> April 1945, D-Day for Operation BUCKLAND, a 'warm sunny day'. Given that there had been significant preparation in selecting targets, Pickard found himself not 'having very much to do', as all the targets had been 'laid down some days before', so he went to the hills in Faenza to observe the 'colossal bombing force' which was allocated for D-Day. On top of these hills, he had a 'first class grand stand view' of the bombing force, which approached wave after wave, with 'several hundreds' coming over during his time spectating. To ensure there was not even the slightest chance of friendly fire – after all, the selected targets were very close to the front line forces – a number of AA guns lit up the targets with coloured shells,<sup>181</sup> which were fired by the 55<sup>th</sup> HAA Regiment.<sup>182</sup> Unfortunately, some bombs did fall on the waiting Polish infantry formations but despite this, the Polish troops started their attack, which showed their eagerness to fight.

In support of the initial attacks 14/54 fired 58 rounds onto various enemy targets, including field guns, light infantry guns & medium emplacements, with 17 direct hits confirmed. 13/54 would engage two other sites and over the course of the whole day, would fire a total of 99 240mm shells. 'A Sub' of 13/54 fired the most during the day, with 72 rounds fired during 12hours between 8am



& 8pm, while 'B Sub' fired only 27 rounds, starting much later at 4pm but firing the batteries last round at 8.18pm.<sup>183</sup> Continuing the attacks as part of BUCKLAND, 13/54 engaged new targets on the 10<sup>th</sup> including a bridge in Imola, while both 13/54 & 14/54 performed harassing fire programmes into the Argenta area. On 13<sup>th</sup> April, having previously moved to the Alfonsine area the day before, 14/54 engaged the railway bridge which ran North over the River Reno between Lavezzola and San Biagio, scoring three direct hits on the target. Pickard knew the significance of this bridge to the Germans, as it 'was a bottleneck on Route 16 over which the bulk of the German transport had to pass.' The rounds which landed directly onto and even those near the bridge 'would certainly have shaken up anyone who was within a short distance of them when they burst.'<sup>184</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, 14/54 were ordered to move to the Voltana area, a small town 30km or so North of the Russi train yard and only 11km South East of the town of Argenta – all the batteries guns were moved and in action no later than 2pm on 15<sup>th</sup> April. On the same day, 13/54 also came out of action, moving to Imola, North West of their current positions by approximately 15km. After their move, the battery came under the indirect command of the AGPA, although Eighth Army give no orders to this effect. They would be 'looked after' by Major Andrew Morrison, both the regiment 2iC and the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment representative at HQRA POLCORPS.<sup>185</sup> From their new positions, 13/54 fired 20 rounds of 8in ammunition onto Route 9, the highway which led to Bologna, during the late hours of 15<sup>th</sup> April until the early hours of the 16<sup>th</sup>. The battery also received a single German deserter, who was brought to their positions by two Italian civilians. This German, whose war was now officially over, was despatched to X Corps POW Cage in the town of Faenza.



*Figure 35 – The original caption on this image states that this 8in gun 'shelled Bologna from 20miles range', which indicates that this is the 8in gun belonging to 13 Battery, freshly located in Imola as of 15<sup>th</sup> March 1945. As mentioned previously, this 8in gun fired 20rds onto the roads leading into Bologna on the same day.*

On 17<sup>th</sup> April and after a busy week supporting BUCKLAND, Major Pickard took some time to visit knocked out German gun positions. The gun positions, which were fired on by 14/54 when they were in their Russi gun pits, contained 3x of the infamous 88mm German guns and a captured, or repurposed, Italian 75/27, a 75mm field gun used by Italian forces in both WW1 and WW2. Pickard always found it 'intensely interesting' to assess positions which he had only ever seen on maps

and photographs; he found it just as appealing to visit the regiments targets and see 'what havoc we had caused and how near shells had fallen.' He remembered a specific visit (it is not clear if it is the one on the 17<sup>th</sup>) where he witnessed a German gun position in the front room of a house. Upon assessment, it appeared that the Germans rolled the gun out of the front room of the house, fired their rounds and then retreated back into the safety of the house. While Pickard was scathing of German counter battery fire, in that 'it could not be compared with ours for organisation, accuracy, or anything else', he did have some appreciation for the German ingenuity and how they were 'always full of original ideas.'<sup>186</sup>

The single 8in gun of 13/54 opened up again when on the 18<sup>th</sup>, the battery fired 40 rounds of 8in ammunition onto the roads leading out of Bologna, as well as a bridge over the River Idice and one near Castenaso. This was in advance of the battery moving the same day, although this was cancelled due to 'bridge and road difficulties.' On the 19<sup>th</sup>, 13/54 finally managed to move, this time 11km North West to Castel San Pietro Terme. Their 240mm howitzers were taken across bridges both at Toscanella and Castel San Pietro Terme, over two rivers most likely spanned by Bailey bridges, or local bridges sufficiently supported to take the weight of a mechanical armies advance. It is more than likely that most bridges in Northern Italy at this time of the war were destroyed and replaced by Bailey bridges; it is also quite likely that the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment were trying to cross bridges that they themselves had targeted not too long ago! The two 240mm pieces were moved, with the battery 'greatly assisted by cooperation on the part of [Royal Engineers] who accelerated the [constraints] of bridges.' This would have been to the delight of Pickard, who as the CO of a Super Heavy Regiment, knew the issue of moving large and heavy guns all too well.

Given the 240mm M1 howitzers and 8in M1 guns weighed nearly 50tons each, the number of bridges in Italy which could take the guns was very limited. Even a Class 40 bridge, a Bailey style bridge which was used extensively in the Allied armies to take the weight of tanks, self-propelled artillery, trucks and Jeeps, was not even suitable for the American designed Super Heavy artillery. Even though these bridges were not suitable for the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment's guns, there weren't sufficient quantities of them this close to the frontlines anyway, so Pickard and his men had to 'improvise otherwise we should have never been able to keep up with the advance.' Their method was

*'...to send the M.6 over the bridge first paying off its long tow rope, When it got to the other side it [started] winding in the rope towing the piece over with it. In this way only 30 tons went over the bridge at a time. There was very little room to spare and to 'fiddle' a 30 ton load into the right position was no easy feat.'*<sup>187</sup>

While this method worked wonders for the regiment, the bridge they decided to transport their guns over would have been out of action until they had finished, meaning they were probably the reason for a lot of traffic jams! To prevent major buildups of vehicles, the regiment tended to move their guns across bridges at night, which although let up congestion of other Allied units, didn't make this difficult process any easier.

On 21<sup>st</sup> April, 13/54 were alerted by Major Morrison, the regimental representative at the AGPA, that Allied troops had entered Bologna – the enemy had retreated North East of the city the day before. Operation BUCKLAND is reported to have finished on 19<sup>th</sup> April, although it could be debated that BUCKLAND ran until the end of the war in Italy.

The two batteries of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment had provided constant and impressive fire support over the 10 days of the operation, which helped the Allied advance and both hampered and harassed the numerous German withdrawals in the area. With every shell that the regiment fired, the end of the war surely drew closer.

## **Supporting US 5<sup>th</sup> Army**

### **11/54**

While the two other regimental batteries, 13/54 & 14/54, were directly supporting the British Eighth Army advances in the Argenta Gap, pushing the German Tenth & Fourteenth Armies back, 11/54 were in support of the US Fifth Army, who at the same time were making their own advances in the joint Allied Spring Offensive. Four days after D-Day for BUCKLAND and after a relatively quiet start to the month, the Super Heavy battery did some shoots in conjunction with a Spitfire observer. Between 2.30pm and 3.15pm, 28 rounds (it is not stated as to what gun was used in this action) were fired onto two separate enemy gun pits with 3 direct hits registered on the two pits and a nearby house was also hit. Between 9pm and 9.45pm, the battery repeated HF task *Michigan Boulevard*, which they had previously completed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1944 (they would also repeat this on 14<sup>th</sup> April). The next day, maybe having heard of the impressive firing done by the large guns or just out of curiosity to see American designed heavy firepower in action, the commander of the US Fifth Army, General Mark Clark, visited the battery and its gunners near Loaino.

Over the next two weeks, the battery and its guns would fire a total of approximately 467 rounds in support of the American Army and its associated units. Up to 278 rounds would be fired by the two 240mm howitzers (labelled How 1 & 2 in the battery diary), 142 rounds would be fired by the 8in gun detachment (named Gun No3) and a further 47 were listed in the war diary but not attributed to either weapon – Major Mackenzie, the BC for 11/54, was nothing but precise in his diary entries. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, the battery fired a total of 108 rounds, their busiest day since becoming a Super Heavy battery and on 15<sup>th</sup> April, the 8in gun fired 13 rounds in support of a heavy bomber programme, firing onto enemy AA positions.



*Figure 36 – A picture of my grandfather's (third from left) 240mm howitzer in action located near Sabbioni. My grandfather, part of 11 Battery, had written on the rear of the photo 'Taken April 15<sup>th</sup> 1945, in action on 5<sup>th</sup> Army front. Jerry 3000 yards off.' On this day, the 240mm howitzers of 11/54 would fire a total of 54 rounds alongside 423 AOP Squadron onto various German targets.*



### **12/54**

The regiments last battery to transition into a Super Heavy unit, 12/54, was finally being moved to the frontlines, after nearly two months out in their re-equipment phase. Leaving Fiuggi on 4<sup>th</sup> April, they staged in the Florence area on the 5<sup>th</sup> and the next day they would be allotted to support the US Fifth Army, as part of US II Corps and the 178<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Group USA; they were under the administrative command of the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armoured Division. It is never directly established in any war diary entries as to what weapons 12/54 used or when they received them. At this stage in the war, it can be presumed they now operated both the 240mm howitzers and 8in guns and they would only fire their first rounds on the 15<sup>th</sup>, when they fired an undisclosed number of rounds in support of an attack by the US II Corps, mainly focusing on CB. The next day they would fire more rounds in support of the same attack; these would be the batteries last rounds fired during the war – they had barely even got started before they finished.

### ***Chasing the Germans Across the River Po***

On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, days after the end of Operation BUCKLAND, the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy RHQ was moved just North of San Nicolo, approximately 20km South of the mighty River Po, the last major defensive line of the battered German Armies in Northern Italy. At this point in the war, with the batteries so spread out, the RHQ purely served in an administrative role, controlling the maintenance and ammunition of the two attached batteries, 13/54 & 14/54.

### **11/54**

The battery moved to the area of Medolla, some 70km North-North West from their gun positions at Loaino and were in a hide area by 5am 24<sup>th</sup> April. From here, they moved to an area slightly North of Parolare, only 5km or so off the banks of the mighty Po and once the guns were in action, the gunners let off what would be their final rounds of the war. The 8in gun detachment fired 25 rounds into the area of Bovolone, a town approximately 30km North of their positions; this really shows the extreme range of these guns. The 240mm gun detachments didn't miss out either, as they fired 20 rounds from their new positions onto various targets across the river.

By 4pm of the 26<sup>th</sup>, the battery had come out of action and remained in their positions. While the war was over for them, it was still progressing to the North. BC Major Mackenzie commented on the 29<sup>th</sup> that 'Mussolini executed by partisans on Swiss frontier' and that Milan, Turin & Genoa were 'liberated by partisans', while Venice was 'captured by 8<sup>th</sup> Army' on 30<sup>th</sup> April.

### **12/54**

By 17<sup>th</sup> April, this battery, after previously firing what would be their only rounds as a Super Heavy battery, were in the area of San Benedetto Val di Sambro, 32km South of Bologna – they had nothing to report. By the 22<sup>nd</sup>, they were concentrated North in Sasso Marconi and by the 23<sup>rd</sup> the battery was in the Medolla area, meaning they had travelled an approximate distance of 100km to rejoin the RHQ command. 'B Sub' had advanced ahead of the battery and were in action near the River Po in the area near to Santa Croce. It is not clear as to what gun 'B Sub' operated but the gun and its detachments were in action by 9.30pm of the 24<sup>th</sup>. The same night, W/Sgt Miles of 'B Sub' took 7 German soldiers prisoner.

Neither the battery nor 'B Sub' moved again before the end of April. On 26<sup>th</sup> April, the battery came under command of US II Corps Artillery USA Army. Between the 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> April, the battery reported little apart from that the gunners were 'employed with maintenance and training'. It must have been clear to all that the war was coming to an end.

### **13/54**

On 21<sup>st</sup> April, 13/54 came out of action and all guns were 'on wheels' and awaiting their move. Once they had completed their move, they were to come under the command of British XIII Corps, ending their coordination with the Polish II Corps. After a few days of new positions being reced,

the battery moved in the early hours of 25<sup>th</sup> April from their positions in Castel San Pietro Terme, moving approximately 40km to the area of Casoni, just slightly North of Bologna. 13/54 BC Major Marks indicated this was not the easiest move, as there was 'only one winching bridge crossing'; moving three 50ton guns across a single bridge at night must have been hard work. They then moved to new positions 1km from the banks of the River Po, in the area of Porporana, becoming fully in action by 6pm of the 26<sup>th</sup>. Another bridge, this time on their journey North crossing over to Malalbergo, was an issue, as the 170ft span had a difficult track from the canal bank to the road and the heavy group took 1.5hrs to cross. The CCRA of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, who visited the battery at 5.30pm of the 26<sup>th</sup>, was 'very pleased' with the batteries night moves and 'specially complimented officers i/c guns and all drivers.' From their new positions and under the command of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA once again, the 8in gun of 13/54 engaged enemy targets on the River Adige, North by 20km, with 21 rounds, which would be the batteries last rounds fired in anger.

The next day, Major Marks was informed by the CAGRA that arrangements had been made to ferry this battery across the river on the 28<sup>th</sup> – this was proposed by 6<sup>th</sup> AGRA. Major Marks 'persuaded him that ferry was unsuitable' but advised that the regiment had experience in crossing Class 40 pontoon bridges. When he proposed this the preparations to ferry the guns had already been made but the plans were scrapped. All guns were out of action by 4pm of the 28<sup>th</sup> but this was then met with a message from CAGRA, who advised that the battery would 'possibly...not cross River PO.' The battery didn't cross the river and on 29<sup>th</sup> April, the battery finally reverted back to RHQ, where they concentrated their gun positions. This was the end of the war for 13/54.

#### **14/54**

This battery made some major moves during April, moving from Russi to the Copparo area, travelling some 85km, where they came into action by the end of 26<sup>th</sup> April. Here, only 6km South East of the Po, they were under the control of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA. By the end of the 27<sup>th</sup>, they occupied new positions in the area of Guarda Ferrarese, sitting on the banks of the river which they were trying to cross. The next day, a single 240mm howitzer of the battery was moved across the river, perhaps in an effort to close the gap between the guns and the Germans, who at this point 'were literally running and were soon out of range.'<sup>188</sup>



*Figure 37 – The original caption on this image is as follows: '8in Super Heavy field gun, 'D' Battery'. This is actually a 240mm howitzer, possibly of 14 Battery. The location and date are unknown but it looks like the gun is still in action, so my guess is that this was taken in April 1945 in the Voltana area, near what looks like an orchard.*

## Victors

Despite chasing the Germans to the River Po, Pickard and the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment never officially crossed the river; although a single 240mm howitzer of 14/54 was transferred to the other side of the river, it was not used. The Allied Armies at this time were fully mechanised and so there would have been an unbelievable amount of transport trying to cross the river at the same time. With the German Armies all but defeated and with Allied air superiority now unchallenged, the need for Super Heavy weapons at the front was now reduced. The divisions and corps of both the US Fifth and British Eighth Armies which pushed on to Venice, Trieste, Milan and other major Italian cities didn't require the firepower that the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy offered – self-propelled artillery and tanks, now numbering in the thousands, could be called upon to support infantry where required. For the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, their war was now over.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1945, the regiment was ordered to concentrate in areas just South of the River Po, not far from their previous positions. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the single 240mm howitzer of 14/54 that had crossed the River Po came back under command of RHQ, along with both 11/54 & 12/54, who still came under the full administration of US Fifth Army. Pickard said that getting these two batteries back 'was much more difficult, as the Americans did not want to part with them' – 12/54 had 'been an independent [battery] so long' that BC Major Morshead 'didn't at all like the idea of coming back into the fold as he had so much freedom with the Americans!'<sup>189</sup>

The German Armies in Italy surrendered on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1945 in the early hours of the morning. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 1945, the rest of the German Armed forces in Europe officially declared their unconditional surrender. A time of rest – a well-deserved rest – was upon the millions of soldiers now on the continent. The regiment, now back up to full strength, eventually moved to a concentration area between the towns of Ferrara and Bordenò, which Pickard recollects was on 12<sup>th</sup> May. He also remembers that getting to this concentration area was difficult as HQRA 'would not allow' the guns and vehicles of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment to 'clutter up the roads which were already cluttered up to their full extent.'<sup>190</sup> A Thanksgiving Service was held at RHQ on 13<sup>th</sup> May. No other major activities were undertaken during the month, apart from inspections by Pickard of the batteries weapons and vehicles.

The regiment also 'captured' between 30 and 40 horses, left behind by the retreating German Army, which the regiment kept for 'some long time.' Pickard had great fun 'running inter-battery Gymkhanas' (equestrian events consisting of speed pattern racing and timed games) and this surely helped with morale, which did seem to remain at high levels; the troops of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment were 'thoroughly enjoying themselves with no one to worry us.'<sup>191</sup>

At the end of the month, on 27<sup>th</sup> May, Pickard visited the HQ of 1<sup>st</sup> District in the Forlì area (the regiment came 'under command' of 1<sup>st</sup> District on 22<sup>nd</sup> May) to 'ascertain ultimate destination of regiment and policy with regard to it. Little or no information was available.' Sadly, despite the cessation of hostilities, the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment would still suffer their first (and only) death when on 1<sup>st</sup> June, Gunner Edward Marsden of 11/54 died in a traffic accident.

Moving on from this bad news, the regiment carried on with rest and maintenance. After a while, Pickard thought that the regiment 'had been forgotten' and perhaps they would get to relax in the Italian sun for a few weeks more. However, there was to be 'no such luck', when the regiment received orders to move to Riccione and come under the command of 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA.<sup>192</sup> This they started to do on 8<sup>th</sup> June, when an advance party went ahead to recce billets for the regiment, where they had 'difficulty in getting the necessary accommodation' – the advance parties didn't seem to appreciate the amount of room that they both wanted and needed. They ended up requisitioning buildings, with arguments 'going on about the state of the buildings' between the gunners and officers. Eventually the whole regiment, inclusive of all guns, vehicles, staff and other ranks, were stationed in Riccione by 25<sup>th</sup> June.

Whilst at Riccione, Major Pickard was told by Brigadier F.H.C Rogers, CAGRA of 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA, that the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment had to help run one of the PoW camps in the nearby area of Rimini. The regiment had already assisted with this work previously, when on 8<sup>th</sup> June the regiment provided a train guard for 8 German officers and 152 ORs. The PoW camp they were sent to 'held all the officers who had been segregated from the other ranks' and amazingly, there 'were about 4,000 of them altogether.' Pickard joked that his overall command now extended to over 5,000 soldiers! On 18<sup>th</sup> June, the regiment moved a guard party to PoW Cage 5D. Between 20<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> June, the members of 12/54 looked after the PoW Transit Cage 18, which closed on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The most difficult task of PoW duty was 'taking the daily count of prisoners', which the total number of changed per day – 'it was really most difficult to get the same number every day!'<sup>193</sup> Despite this challenge, the gunners lived a 'life of leisure' while not on PoW guard and Pickard kept himself busy with administrative work.<sup>194</sup> After their PoW camp duties were completed, the regiment moved to Pesaro on the 30<sup>th</sup> and in the month of July, there was nothing to report. The first entry was on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, when Major Pickard relinquished his command and left the regiment, being replaced by his 2iC, Major Andrew Morrison. Pickard had been involved in the forces from August 1939 and so after nearly 6 years of fighting, he was finally out. His journey home 'was uneventful', although the thought of returning home did excite him. Despite having had a long war, Pickard's only regret was that he left his horse behind in Italy!<sup>195</sup>

Major Morrison, who had been with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy/Super Heavy Regiment since 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1940, resumed some PoW guard duties during his short command; the regiment was still responsible for Cage 5D (Officers). On 25<sup>th</sup> July, there were still no details available of the 'pending disbandment' for the regiment, although there were by now rumours spreading through the ranks.

On 11<sup>th</sup> August, the regiment, still located in Pesaro, received a signal announcing the 'imminent disbanding of Signal Section', which was followed with disbandment orders on 23<sup>rd</sup> August for the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, which was received directly from AFHQ. Three days later, Posting Order G-1 (Br)/51706/A10 was received, which was to dispose the remaining officers less Major Morrison as commanding officer. The order allowed one officer from each battery, Adjutant and Technical Adjutant to 'wind up the affairs of the still intact regiment.' All other officers who now were not needed were shipped to RATD or XIII Corps.

On 5<sup>th</sup> September, the HQ 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA issued 'posting and/or attachment orders for some 500 ORs', as well as 'disposal orders for the remaining howitzers and tanked vehicles'. Major Morrison stated that these vehicles 'must await the pleasure of [Tank Transporter Company]', which eventually arrived on 2<sup>nd</sup> October.

By 21<sup>st</sup> September, all that remained of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment was 'the CO, the Technical Adjutant (Lieut. A.N. Stewart MC\*) the Medical Officer and some 70 ORs.' On 25<sup>th</sup> September, a notification was received that stated the 'effective date of disbandment [was] now to be 20 Sep, [with] completion by 27 Sep'.

This action was delayed by a week and on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1945, the final war diary entry for the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery stated

***'Last convoy of howitzers left for Naples, tanks for Forli. The regiment can now fairly be said to have disbanded.'***

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\* The regiments hero during the Battle for Florence, where he earned his Military Cross.



## Postscript

The 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment was formed at the start of the Second World War in December 1939 and served until the very end of the war, finally being disbanded as a unit after its conversion to a Super Heavy Regiment at the end of 1944. It served valiantly in every theatre it served. During the defence of the home islands it didn't have much to do against the German invasion that never came but the gunners and officers of the regiment honed their skills and ensured they were ready for their call up. They had the honour of being the first Heavy Regiment in the Royal Artillery to be selected for the new and first AGRA formation. Despite no enemy attack on the homeland, the regiment still lost a lot of young lives, all due to accidents or ill health. Despite never seeing combat, these soldiers still made their sacrifice.

The regiment's first call up came in 1942 and the regiment proceeded onwards to North Africa in early 1943, being one of only two Heavy Regiments serving in this theatre *and* anywhere in the world outside of the UK at this time. It excelled at counter battery for the French forces of which it was attached to and helped bring about the destruction of the German and Italian forces opposing them. The fire support provided was always of high quality and it is a shame that the Heavy Regiments do not get more credit for the work that they did during the war. They suffered their greatest losses of the war in the African campaign but made a good account of themselves, earning the plaudits of higher commanding officers and the Free French Army. They performed so well that they were initially considered to be part of the invading force in Operation AVALANCHE, the invasion of Southern Italy.

For all their efforts in the African campaign, the British Army – both the First and Eighth Armies, which eventually formed together as part of 18<sup>th</sup> Army Group for the closing stages of the campaign in early 1943 – honoured the major victory with a campaign medal, the Africa Star, which was awarded to soldiers in the middle of 1943. The soldiers and gunners of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment would wear this ribbon on their battle dress, sporting a golden metal clasp in the shape of the number one, pinned to the middle of the ribbon, indicating their attachment to the First Army and its success in the desert.



*Figure 38 – My grandfather wearing the Africa Star ribbon, with the First Army clasp (a small metal '1') just visible.*

While the regiment didn't go with the vanguard into Salerno, they eventually arrived in Italy and went straight into action in the brutal Battle of Ortona in December 1943. Here they faced the brutal reality of the new campaign; resolute German defenders holding back the Allied advance for as long as they possibly could, aided somewhat by the ever changing weather. From their gun pits, the gun detachments faced rain, snow and mud for the majority of the campaign, although the Germans did too.

Despite these challenges, the regiment continued to provide the same outstanding fire support as they had previously done in Africa. Over the course of the campaign, they served both the American Fifth and British Eighth Army and performed admirably, even against the strong presence of German artillery. As a result, the regiment did lose more gunners to enemy action but a significant amount of their casualties came to accidental causes. The regiment served in the Battle for Florence, helped to punch through the Gothic Line and as a Super Heavy Regiment, they helped crush the remainder of the German Armed forces in major operations, focusing once again on counter battery and AOP shoots, of which they had become so adept at this stage of the war.

The gunners started the war with older weapons – in hindsight they were obsolescent relics of WW1 not suited to mobile warfare – and over the course of the war, they upgraded to newer weapons. The prime armaments of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment were the 7.2in Mkl howitzers and 155mm guns, which served them excellently; the last batteries operating the 7.2in howitzers within the regiment had done so for almost 3 years. The 155mm guns brought lethality to the regiment in Italy that it did not have previously in Africa and this was even more so when the gunners moved to Super Heavy weaponry. They were the only Royal Artillery Regiment in Italy to operate either the 8in gun and 240mm M1 howitzer and the gunners did so with great affect, once again providing crucial fire support to Allied infantry who could be 20-30km away in front of them.

Some gunners and officers within the two regiments had served for the length of the whole war. Some were older and had experience from the past war, while most were young adults and were thrown into a conflict of such a scale that we hopefully never experience again.

### ***Edward Cavadino***

One of these young adults was my grandfather. Edward Cavadino finished the war in Italy holding the rank of Gunner at the young age of 25 years old. He had joined the Royal Artillery when he was only 19 and had briefly served in home defence, before joining the British First Army in the Tunisian campaign and then fighting in Italy for nearly two years, alongside the British Eighth & American Fifth Army. He served in both the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment, as part of P and 11 Battery, operating the 7.2in Mkl howitzer and the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment, as part of 11 Battery, when he was part of the gun detachment of a 240mm howitzer.

Enjoying some time in Italy after the war had ended, visiting Venice with his friends from the regiment, he finally left the control of the regiment HQ on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1945. Given he was a Territorial Army enlist, my grandfather would actually be called back to serve for the Royal Artillery with the 57<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1945. He would be a part of this regiment until August 1946, when he was placed back on the wartime reserve list. He would again be pulled back from this list to train with a new regiment, this time the 287<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment in July 1952, whose HQ would be in Liverpool near to where Edward lived at the time.

He would finally be let go from the wartime reserve list on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1959 and leave the Royal Artillery at the age of 36.



*Figure 39 – My grandfather (3<sup>rd</sup> from right) with who can be presumed to be 11 Battery, 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment. This picture was taken near Lake Garda, although it is unclear as to when this was taken. Given he visited Venice on the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup>, I would guess this visit was done on either the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> May 1945.*

Edward would continue his trade as a plumber after the war, working for the gas board and would marry my grandmother, Anne Veronica Brady on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1951. Living at Griffin Close in Eccleston near St Helens, he would go on to have three children: my father and his twin sister both born in 1961 along with another daughter who was born 4 years earlier.

Edward would go on to live peacefully until his death on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1970 at the age of 47. He did so with my grandmother at his side. While my grandmother was still alive, I was too young to even entertain the thought of asking her about her husband's service during the war. Did *she* even know anything or had my grandfather kept his war stories to himself?

If I could speak to him now there would be so many things I would want to ask.



*Figure 40 – My grandfather's post war portrait. Here in this image, he is wearing the following ribbons, from left to right: The 1939-45 Star, the Africa Star (without the First Army clasp), the Italy Star and the Defence Medal (I do not have either his ribbon or the medal in my collection). In his collection of medals, he also has the War Medal 1939-45.*

### **Geoffrey Hemming Gilkes**

Ending the war as a Lieutenant Colonel – a title which he held only temporarily for the majority of the war but finally received the full promotion to on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1944 – Gilkes had served with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment from March 1941 up until December 1944, meaning he held command of this unit for nearly 4 years. As previously detailed in this report, he had only left the regiment due to his age and all members of the regiment were shocked to lose him; if this doesn't speak to the man and his character then nothing will.

Looking back at the decision to remove Gilkes from office, I think it is a really strange one. The Allies knew the war in Europe was ending soon and to me, removing an officer who had built a bond with a regiment and its men & officers so close to the end of the conflict seems counterproductive. In hindsight and with knowledge not available then, I know that in December 1944 the war only had 5 months left to run. Luckily, removing Gilkes didn't have too great an impact on the outcome of the war or the regiment's operation but it would have been rewarding to see Gilkes end the war with his unit. However, this didn't ruin Gilkes' war or his career.

From only reading his personal diary extracts, my opinion of Gilkes is that he was a man of few words and he chose his words sparingly, yet as a career soldier he knew how to look after those supporting him. He may not have been a 'harsh disciplinarian' but he knew that he didn't need to be. After my research, it is clear that he was also well respected by many higher ranking officers during the war. He was friends with Brigadiers and even took the role of some when he covered as the CO for 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA on multiple occasions. He had managed the regiment with great efficiency during their involvement in the war and took them from a war formed unit to a key part of the AGRA formation with which it served with for the duration of the war.

Rightfully so, Gilkes received a Distinguished Service Order on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1945. Recommended by Brigadier Maconochie, then CAGRA of 1<sup>st</sup> AGRA, Gilkes' citation covers his actions starting from the year prior in Italy. The Brigadier's words respectfully paint a great picture of Gilkes:

*'Col Gilkes was in command of 54 Heavy Regiment during the forcing of the Gothic line...The extremely mountainous country made the finding of suitable gun positions for heavy artillery very difficult. Col. Gilkes, by constant and detailed reconnaissances, which he carried out personally, amongst the leading elements of the infantry, always ensured that the few suitable areas were occupied by his guns. Very frequently these reconnaissances and the reconnaissances of the O.P.s were carried out under persistent enemy shell fire. On 6 Sep, Col. Gilkes, although his O.P. at [San Clemente] was subjected to heavy shell fire, personally directed the fire of his two [7.2in batteries] against a German counter attack which was beaten off. This is only one instance of his courage and devotion to duty. Previously during the advance to the ARNO in July 44, Col. Gilkes displayed the same dash and enthusiasm. His heavy guns were always deployed far forward and the response from his regiment was always both immediate and accurate. The efficiency of this regiment was entirely due to the high standard set by its commanding officer. His great courage and devotion to duty was an inspiration to all ranks...'*<sup>196</sup>

The 'high standard' of the regiment shines through in the war diaries and I have no doubt Gilkes' many experiences from WW1, the interwar years and the years of WW2 helped him become the professional he was. Gilkes was also a great fan of 'recces' and before any regimental moves, he would always be off with his 2iC or a party of officers to scout out new positions – he always forgot to admit that he did most under fire! His more famous reconnaissance was at Ortona, from where he personally directed fire on German forces entrenched in an old fort, which is cemented in *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book, 1939-45*. Gilkes' description of the day? *'Did recon.'*<sup>197</sup>

In similar fashion, Gilkes also responded to the awarding of his DSO, which was a major personal achievement and reflection of his military service, succinctly in his personal diary:

*'Heard today in a letter from Major General Hornby that I had been awarded the DSO.'*<sup>198</sup>

Gilkes only arrived permanently back in the UK on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1947 and was posted to the Depot RA. Nearly straight away he was placed in command of the 281<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment RA (TA) which he assumed command of on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1947. Two years later in January 1949, Gilkes surpassed the age limit for retirement and was placed onto retirement pay. Three years later in February 1952 he 'exceeded age limit to liability for recall' and was formally retired. At this point he was 55 years old and had served in the Royal Artillery for 37 years.

Gilkes had previously married his wife Mary Stella in 1936, with who he had three children: sons Robin & Jeremy and lone daughter Victoria Gilkes. Gilkes was a church warden in his residence of Chilbolton, known to the community for walking his dogs and for being a very a keen gardener; his garden became his 'office'. Sadly, Geoffrey Hemming Gilkes would pass in 1991 after fighting a long battle with both dementia and Parkinson's disease.

His daughter, now Victoria Coombes, has recently helped me to retrieve her father's diary entries. Upon reading back through the small & slightly worn pages her father had neatly written on in pencil over 80 years ago, she commented on how little she actually knew of her father's wartime exploits because *'He never spoke about them...'*<sup>199</sup> To Gilkes and those that served, the war was something that they just had to partake in, to fight against the evil of Nazi Germany to ensure freedom prevailed in the world. Just like attending his flowers in the garden at his home, the war was probably just another day in the office.

I hope reading this report now gives Victoria an insight into her father's wartime exploits and that it brings her some peace to see what kind of an impact he made to not only this regiment but the Royal Artillery and outcome of the war as a whole. I have certainly enjoyed reading and writing about him and have enjoyed the correspondence between myself and Victoria over the last few months.

### **Geoffrey Harry Pickard**

I will start this section by saying I was really cautious about how I approached using Pickard's manuscript. In his memoirs, he was very outspoken about other officers and soldiers. I thought the addition of these was critical, not only in the sense that they brought a personal aspect to the regiment but also provided some background into events or other characters that otherwise would have been left in the archives. However, I meant no offence to anyone who seemed to be singled out in his own words. If anyone reading this report can provide any other insight, specific to the officers or memories mentioned within this text to counter Pickard's words, then please contact me and I will be happy to discuss.

When I initially discovered Pickard's manuscript in the RAM archives, I was very happy to read it, as it would provide the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment section in this report with so much more information than I would have been able to provide by just using the war diaries. The only issue with it is that it is Pickard's word versus anyone else's, so I have taken his memoirs with a pinch of salt. As an example, he didn't paint a good impression of either Brigadier Tyler or Maconochie and as I don't have currently any opposing sources or references, I have to side with Pickard's story.

Despite this, Pickard (in my opinion) seemed to be an officer who respected himself because he thought highly of his work as a CBO officer. Since he took his first course in CBO back in 1940, he perfected his craft over the course of the war. Through the African campaign he worked alongside various corps as part of the British First Army (he even criticised the American for knowing little about CB) and in Italy, he carried on his work with both Allied armies. This work was so impressive

that he eventually rose to the position of CBO for the entire British Eighth Army, an accomplishment not yet achieved at that point of the war and one that clearly highlights his proficiency in CB. He believed in it so much so that he could have knocked Brigadier Maconochie out when he asked as to the purpose of it – I believe him when he says this as well!

He followed in the trail of the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy and Super Heavy Regiments through the course of the Italian campaign as part of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRAs, XIII & Corps and finally the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps. He planned CB for many battles, including those near Ortona, Florence and the area in and around Cassino. Those above in command must have respected Pickard's work rate and the pride he took in his work, as eventually he moved from the CBO to a command post, first with the 229/58 Medium Regiment as BC and then onto commanding the entire 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment.

I personally think he did a good job leading this regiment, especially since he was restricted so much in that he was the only commanding officer of a Super Heavy Regiment in Italy! He had to leave the theatre to assess the current use of Super Heavy guns by the Royal Artillery in Europe and when he returned, he put his findings into practice. He dramatically altered the 'standard' setup of a Super Heavy Regiment to give it more flexibility when called upon by both corps and divisions and he also fought to get the regiment and the gunners their guns, so that they could do the job that they had been trained to do.

In terms of the lifespan of the two regiments, Pickard played a very small role, only being in charge of the 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy for 6-7 months but in this time he brought about changes to the regiment, both in personal terms and operation, but also imposed leadership when it was needed; to train a whole regiment to operate weapons of significantly higher calibre within a few months is impressive and this showed in the excellent work the 54<sup>th</sup> performed in the latter stages of the conflict. While he contrasted Gilkes a lot in terms of discipline, Pickard was clearly an officer who had very high standards (not to say Gilkes didn't) and wanted the regiment to all believe in the same mindset and operate like professionals. After all, this was a regiment still in war and there would be much time for relaxing once the hard work had been done.

I couldn't find much information on Pickard after the war, which is a shame. I have an image in my mind of what he looked like: moustached and lean, with a smart officers hat on at all times, constantly attending to a pipe or cigar – basically the stereotypical British officer. One day I would like to see a picture of him to compare. All I could find of him post WW2 was that in December 1956, his co-owned estate agents business in Barnet, 'HARLAND & SON', was dissolved but the business carried on in 1957 without him.<sup>200</sup> Geoffrey Harry Pickard died in 1982 in Wycombe, aged 77.<sup>201</sup>

### ***The Gunners and Officers of the Regiment***

My main aim with this report was for me to get an understanding of what my grandfather did during the war and I have been lucky enough to be able to do that. I now know what weapons he served with, what regiments he was part of and his involvement in the war and the theatres where he fought. What I also hope is that other people, whether they have an interest in the war or the Royal Artillery *or not*, read this report and also get a better understanding of the operation of both Heavy & Super Heavy Regiments. This report hopefully now shows the work involved by the somewhat 'forgotten' regiments of the Royal Artillery during WW2 – the 'heavies'.

My other aim was to ensure that the memories of those that served within this regiment weren't forgotten. When I came to start my research, I felt that the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy & Super Heavy Regiments were forgotten; no information was available anywhere I seemed to look. I now feel like they will at least both be appreciated for their part in the war.

Those in the regiment that died during the war should also never be forgotten, especially those who perished on home soil, far away from a German shell or an Italian bullet. Despite never



meeting the enemy, they all made the sacrifice to enlist, to fight for their country and defeat the evil of Nazism and fascism. I thought it was very important, where possible, to give background on these young men so that if anyone reads this who has a connection to them, they are provided with some knowledge of what their long lost family member did during the war. Hopefully they would be proud after reading. If anyone reads this report and can provide more information to any of the soldiers or officers within, please contact me and I would be more than happy to share your stories. At the time of writing this report I am still waiting to hear back from the MoD regarding many service requests for soldiers and officers within.

The 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment finished the war with a command structure that featured many officers who had been with the regiments for a large period of time. While previously established that Pickard was a 'newcomer', his 2iC, Major Andrew Morrison had been with the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy since 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1940, basically as the regiment was formed. He took his post of 2iC on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1943, relinquishing his role as BC of 11/54 after an impressive campaign in Africa. He served well under both Gilkes and Pickard and proved to be a great help to both, especially helping Pickard bed into his new post. Major J.K.H Morshead started with the regiment on its first day, coming from the 78<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment and served as BC of 12/54 for the remainder of the war after taking this post in August 1941. Major J.C Carter joined 3 months after Morshead in March 1940, also taking his BC role of 14/54 nearly a year later in May 1942 but also holding this position until he was relieved at the end of the war. Major G.N Marks of the 4<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment replaced Major G.L Shiel MC, himself a long serving member of the regiment, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1943 and held his title as 13/54 BC until wars end. On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1944, Lt. Col. Gilkes labelled Major Marks 'a great exponent of the game'. The last BC, Major G.S Mackenzie of 11/54, took his role in October 1943, nearly 3 years after he first joined the regiment, receiving his promotion from Captain in the same month.

Even other minor roles were held by officers for a long time. Capt E.E Chapple had been the regimental adjutant since 26<sup>th</sup> October 1942 but had been with the regiment since March 1940. Lt. W. Webb joined in October 1942 as the regimental Quartermaster (QM), a role he held until the end of the war. Even the regimental padre Reverend W.G Drake, attached from the Royal Army Chaplains Department, served alongside the soldiers and officers of the regiments for two years from August 1943. Sadly, he would be needed many times in Italy.

This text doesn't even touch on to the support elements of the regiment, such as the LAD, the Royal Signals and the attached Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), who all performed their roles to help keep the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy and 54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiments operating throughout the war.

**To Dad.**

## GLOSSARY

AFHQ	Allied Forces Headquarters
AGPA	Army Group, Polish Artillery
AGRA	Army Group, Royal Artillery
AMGOT	Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories
AOP	Air Observation Post
Arty/R	Artillery Reconnaissance
BC	Battery Commander
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BOD	Base Ordnance Depot
BRA	Brigadier, Royal Artillery
CAGRA	Commander, Army Group, Royal Artillery
CB	Counter Battery
CBO	Counter Battery Office
CCRA	Commander Corps, Royal Artillery
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station
CO	Commanding Officer
CP	Command Post
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery
DF	Defensive Fire
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
FTR	Field Training Regiment
HAA	Heavy Anti-Aircraft
HB	Hostile Battery
HE	High Explosive
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
HMT	His Majesty's Transport
HQ	Headquarters
HQRA	Headquarters, Royal Artillery
IG	Instructor of Gunnery
LAA	Light Anti-Aircraft
LAD	Light Aid Detachment
MBE	Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross
MDS	Main Dressing Station
MM	Military Medal
NZ	New Zealand
OBE	Order of the British Empire
OC	Officer Commanding
OP	Observation Post
POLCORPS	Polish Corps
POW	Prisoner of War
RA	Royal Artillery
RAF	Royal Air Force
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
RATD	Royal Artillery Training Depot
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
RGA	Royal Garrison Artillery
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major

RTA	Regt Tirailleurs Algeriens (Algerian Tirailleurs Regiment)
RTM	Regt Tirailleurs Marocains (Moroccan Tirailleurs Regiment)
RTS	Regt Tirailleurs Senegalais (Senegalais Tirailleurs Regiment)
SAAF	South African Air Force
SCRA	Staff Captain, Royal Artillery
TA	Territorial Army
TNT	Trinitrotoluene (explosive)
US	United States
USA	United States of America
WO	Warrant Officer

## APPENDIX I: IN MEMORY

### *54<sup>th</sup> Heavy Regiment*

Rank	Surname/s	Forename/s	Age	Date of Death	Cause of Death	Location
Gunner	Peters	Stanley Douglas	21	28/06/40	Ill Health	England
Gunner	Bruton	Peter Alec	22	08/11/40	Accident	England
Lieutenant	Leith-Buchanan	David G. James	24	24/02/41	Accident	England
Gunner	Mackey	Joseph	23	11/11/41	Ill Health	England
Lance Sgt	Morrison	Andrew Christie	24	05/04/42	Accident	England
Lieutenant	Hodge	William Laurence	27	13/04/42	Accident	England
WO Class III	Chantry	Thomas Bruce	45	17/05/42	Ill Health	England
Lance Bdr	Leah	Frank	24	18/02/43	Ill Health	England
Gunner	Silk	Albert	23	21/04/43	Enemy Action	N. Africa
Gunner	Dean	James Gordon	24	21/04/43	Enemy Action	N. Africa
Bombardier	Collins	Geoffrey Largent		22/04/43	Enemy Action	N. Africa
Gunner	Reynolds	Raymond Spencer	33	28/04/43	Enemy Action	N. Africa
Gunner	Davies	Harold	28	28/04/43	Enemy Action	N. Africa
Lieutenant	Bonnett	Stephen Charles	26	04/08/43	Accident	England
Gunner	Hancock	Walter Arnold	20	19/08/43	Accident	N. Africa
Gunner	Hull	George Wilfred	23	01/01/44	Accident	Italy
Gunner	Feaver	Charles Edward	25	01/01/44	Accident	Italy
Lieutenant	Dicker	Philip John	22	21/02/44	Enemy Action	Italy
Gunner	Rogers	Cyril	21	24/04/44	Accident	Italy
Bombardier	Smith	Harold John	25	22/07/44	Enemy Action	Italy
Gunner	Gould	David	38	22/07/44	Enemy Action	Italy
Bombardier	MacPherson	Gilbert Alexander	26	17/10/44	Enemy Action	Italy
Gunner	Overall	Harold R. Charles	26	22/11/44	Ill Health	Italy

### *54<sup>th</sup> Super Heavy Regiment*

Rank	Surname/s	Forename/s	Age	DoD	Cause of Death	Location
Gunner	Marsden	Edward Francis	27	01/06/45	Accident	Italy

### *Totals (including both regiments)*

Rank	Totals
Other Ranks	18
NCOs	2
Officers	4
	24

Cause of Death	Totals
Ill Health	5
Accidents	10
Enemy Action	9

Location of Death	Totals
England	9
North Africa	6
Italy	9

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report, from its origins back in mid-2024, has taken me many months to both research and compile & get ready for a publishable state. While I admit that a lot of the content within this report is down to my own work, research and financing, it certainly wouldn't have been possible to complete without the following people.

From the invaluable website & forum that is WW2Talk, the following members were crucial in helping me make the first steps in writing this report, by obtaining for me the regimental war diaries for both the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy & Super Heavy Regiments, along with other miscellaneous regiments, batteries and divisions when required; I hope that they don't mind me thanking them in this format. Many thanks to Graham (username – hutt) and Gary Tankard, who without this report wouldn't be possible. Thanks to Frank de Planta, who for this version corrected me on some dates and points in relation to Op DIADEM. I would also like to extend my thanks to all the other members on WW2Talk who have assisted me in some way during my research, whether this be combing through soldier service records, deciphering old handwriting in war diary excerpts, or even helping me understand more about the Royal Artillery and British Army. All help received has been much appreciated and I can't recommend this website enough for anyone who wants to start their own WW2 research project.

To Derek Barton, the curator of Royal Artillery 1939-45, an invaluable tool for anyone looking into researching the RA during WW2, who has allowed me to update his website pages for the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy & Super Heavy Regiments, so that the information displayed on the pages is correct as per this report. I hope that anyone in the future now who wants to research these two regiments can use these pages as a starting point for their own project. Thanks to Derek for also proof reading this report and I appreciate him taking his time out to do this. I am also very happy to say that I will be working alongside Derek in the future, in assisting in keeping his website updated with information on the Heavy/Super Heavy regiments and general upkeep and I look forward to having contributions to this incredible platform.

At the Royal Artillery (RA) Museum, located in the grand and historic School of Artillery, Larkhill, I would like to thank Siân Mogridge, the archivist who helped me to obtain the museum's records linked to the 54<sup>th</sup> Heavy & Super Heavy Regiments. She made me feel very welcome on the day of my visit. One of the records that Siân retrieved for me and I scanned for use in this report was invaluable and it is a record that I have referenced multiple times throughout; I personally don't think that this report would have been as complete without it. For those doing their own research project on the Royal Artillery, I would highly recommend a visit to these archives as they hold so many valuable and hidden records, if you can find time to go.

My biggest thanks for this project have to go to Victoria Coombes, who I have been in contact since the start of my report. While her father wrote very sparingly and some of his entries were no more than locations or weather reports, his entries add an incredible personal touch to events. I consider myself very lucky for having been able to contact Victoria and have spoken to her multiple times in requesting specific dates and entries, where she has been very quick to respond everytime. I feel very honoured to tell her father's story and I hope she enjoys reading this report. I also have to thank Andrew Flanagan of Wherwell History who first put me into contact with Victoria.

## IMAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IWM Imperial War Museum

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- <sup>47</sup> WO 169/9405A – Army Groups Royal Artillery: 1 AGRA – 1943 Jan-Jun, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1943
- <sup>48</sup> MD/3066, p.3
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.4
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.6
- <sup>51</sup> Hogg, Ian V, *Artillery of World War Two*, p.140
- <sup>52</sup> *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, p.612
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.613
- <sup>54</sup> Service and Casualty Form, Army Form B103 – Edward Cavadino (Obtained from MoD)
- <sup>55</sup> WO 169/9405A, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 11<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>57</sup> WO175/178, 56 Recce. Regt., 1942 Oct.- 1943 June, 78 Div Operation Order No.7, Sheet 1, dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>58</sup> Milligan, Spike, *Milligan's War*, p.94
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.98
- <sup>60</sup> Strawson, John, *The Battle for North Africa*, p.203
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 24<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>62</sup> Strawson, p.245
- <sup>63</sup> WO 169/9405A, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>64</sup> *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, p.610
- <sup>65</sup> WO 169/9405A, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 17<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1943
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 12<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 15<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>70</sup> WO175/350, Appendix M, 54 Hy Regt R.A., Operation Order No.4, dated 24<sup>th</sup> April 1943
- <sup>71</sup> Harold Davies Birth Certificate – (GRO – 9<sup>th</sup> February 2025)
- <sup>72</sup> Raymond Spencer Reynolds Birth Certificate – (GRO – 9<sup>th</sup> February 2025)
- <sup>73</sup> Territorial Army, Record of Service Paper – Raymond Spencer Reynolds
- <sup>74</sup> WO175/350, Appendix H, Operation Order No. 5., 54 Hy Regt. R.A., Sheet 1, dated 10<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>75</sup> *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, p.610
- <sup>76</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (May 12<sup>th</sup> 1943)
- <sup>77</sup> WO 169/9405A, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>78</sup> WO 169/9405B – Army Groups Royal Artillery: 1 AGRA – 1943 Jul-Dec, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1943
- <sup>79</sup> Milligan, p.119
- <sup>80</sup> WO 169/9405A, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1943
- <sup>81</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (20<sup>th</sup> May 1943)
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid., (21<sup>st</sup> May 1943)
- <sup>83</sup> MD/3066, p.14
- <sup>84</sup> WO 169/9405B, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1943
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., 12<sup>th</sup> July 1943
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., 6<sup>th</sup> July 1943
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1943
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., 13<sup>th</sup> July 1943
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid., 20<sup>th</sup> August 1943
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11<sup>th</sup> August 1943
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid., 24<sup>th</sup> August 1943
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid., 25<sup>th</sup> August 1943
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid., 13<sup>th</sup> September 1943
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid., 20<sup>th</sup> September 1943

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- <sup>95</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (20<sup>th</sup> September 1943)
- <sup>96</sup> Gunner Walter Hancock Casualty Card (FP)
- <sup>97</sup> Stephen Charles Bonnett Death Certificate (GRO – 30<sup>th</sup> May 2025)
- <sup>98</sup> Hogg, *Artillery of World War Two*, p.147
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149
- <sup>100</sup> WO 169/9405B, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1943
- <sup>101</sup> *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, p.612
- <sup>102</sup> AIR27/2167/1 – 24<sup>th</sup> December 1943
- <sup>103</sup> WO 169/9405B, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1943
- <sup>104</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (28<sup>th</sup> December 1943)
- <sup>105</sup> WO 169/9405B, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1943
- <sup>106</sup> Charles Edward Feaver Birth Certificate – (GRO – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2025)
- <sup>107</sup> George Wilfrid Hull Birth Certificate – (GRO – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2025)
- <sup>108</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (1<sup>st</sup> January 1944)
- <sup>109</sup> Philip John Dicker Birth Certificate – (GRO – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2025)
- <sup>110</sup> AIR27/2167/1 – 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1944
- <sup>111</sup> WO373/6/545, Recommendation for Award for Chandler, Geoffrey Graham
- <sup>112</sup> WO373/6/554, Recommendation for Award for Clifford, James
- <sup>113</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (11<sup>th</sup> March 1944)
- <sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, (16<sup>th</sup> March 1944)
- <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, (19<sup>th</sup> March 1944)
- <sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, (20<sup>th</sup> March 1944)
- <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, (23<sup>rd</sup> March 1944)
- <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, (4<sup>th</sup> April 1944)
- <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, (7<sup>th</sup> April 1944)
- <sup>120</sup> MD/3066, p.36
- <sup>121</sup> *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book 1939-45*, p.612
- <sup>122</sup> MD/3066, p.36
- <sup>123</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (10<sup>th</sup> April 1944)
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, (20<sup>th</sup> April 1944)
- <sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, (22<sup>nd</sup> April 1944)
- <sup>126</sup> AIR27/2167/1 – 10<sup>th</sup> April 1944
- <sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1944
- <sup>128</sup> WO170/902, No. 1 Army Group R.A., Intelligence Summary No. 146, dated 29<sup>th</sup> April 1944
- <sup>129</sup> AIR27/2167/1 – 10<sup>th</sup> May 1944
- <sup>130</sup> Cyril Rogers Birth Certificate – (GRO – 16<sup>th</sup> April 2025)
- <sup>131</sup> Gunner Cyril Rogers Casualty Card (FP)
- <sup>132</sup> AIR27/2167/1 – 20<sup>th</sup> May 1944
- <sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1944
- <sup>134</sup> Harold John Smith Birth Certificate – (GRO – 19<sup>th</sup> April 2025)
- <sup>135</sup> David Gould Birth Certificate – (GRO – 19<sup>th</sup> April 2025)
- <sup>136</sup> WO170/902, Appendix Z, 1 AGRA OO No.2, Sheet 1, dated 30<sup>th</sup> July 1944
- <sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, Sheet 2
- <sup>138</sup> WO373/9/287, Recommendation for Award for Stewart, Alistair Neil
- <sup>139</sup> MD/3066, p.39
- <sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40
- <sup>141</sup> WO170/902, Appendix N, 1 AGRA Move Order No 2, Appendix A, dated 14<sup>th</sup> August 1944
- <sup>142</sup> WO170/902, Appendix O, 5 Corps Movement Order No.2, Sheet 1, dated 16<sup>th</sup> August 1944
- <sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, (Appendix A)
- <sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, Sheet 1
- <sup>145</sup> MD/3066, p.40
- <sup>146</sup> WO170/902, Appendix X, 1 [Canadian] Corps CBO Staff – Neutralization Programme No.1, Sheet 1, dated 25<sup>th</sup> August 1944
- <sup>147</sup> MD/3066, p.41

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- <sup>148</sup> WO170/902, Appendix O, 1 AGRA O.O No.3, Sheet 1, dated 12<sup>th</sup> September 1944
- <sup>149</sup> Ibid., Sheet 2
- <sup>150</sup> Chamberlain, Peter and Gander, Terry, *Heavy Artillery*, p.54
- <sup>151</sup> Hogg, *Artillery of World War Two*, p.155
- <sup>152</sup> Ibid., p.154
- <sup>153</sup> Chamberlain and Gander, p.54
- <sup>154</sup> Hogg, *Artillery of World War Two*, p.156
- <sup>155</sup> Ibid., p.155
- <sup>156</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (9<sup>th</sup> November 1944)
- <sup>157</sup> Ibid., (11<sup>th</sup> November 1944)
- <sup>158</sup> Gunner Overall, Royal Artillery Attestations 1883-1942, 1939 (FP)
- <sup>159</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (11<sup>th</sup> December 1944)
- <sup>160</sup> MD/3066, p.47
- <sup>161</sup> WO373/72/304, Recommendation for Award for Pickard, Geoffrey Harry
- <sup>162</sup> MD/3066, p.48
- <sup>163</sup> Hogg, *Artillery of World War Two*, p.162
- <sup>164</sup> Ibid., p.158
- <sup>165</sup> Ibid., p.161
- <sup>166</sup> Ibid., p.160
- <sup>167</sup> MD/3066, p.48
- <sup>168</sup> Ibid., p.49
- <sup>169</sup> Ibid., p.49
- <sup>170</sup> Ibid., p.51
- <sup>171</sup> Ibid., p.53
- <sup>172</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>173</sup> Ibid., p.54
- <sup>174</sup> Ibid., p.55
- <sup>175</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>176</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>177</sup> WO170/4787, Appendix A, RA 5 CORPS OP [INSTRUCTION] No.9, Sheet 1, dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1945
- <sup>178</sup> Ibid., Sheet 3
- <sup>179</sup> WO170/4787, Appendix M, Minutes of Conference held at HQ 2 AGRA 1130hrs 8 April 45
- <sup>180</sup> Letter sent to 54 Super Hy Regt regarding ammunition policy for Op BUCKLAND, sent by 2<sup>nd</sup> AGRA, dated 7<sup>th</sup> April 1945
- <sup>181</sup> MD/3066, p.55
- <sup>182</sup> WO170/4787, Appendix N, 2 AGRA OO No.14, Sheets 6 & 7, dated 8<sup>th</sup> April 1945
- <sup>183</sup> 13/54 Estimated [Ammunition] for 240mm [Howitzers], dated 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945
- <sup>184</sup> MD/3066, p.56
- <sup>185</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>186</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>187</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>188</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.57
- <sup>190</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>191</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>192</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>193</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>194</sup> Ibid., p.58
- <sup>195</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>196</sup> WO373/12/25, Recommendation for Award for Gilkes, Geoffrey Heming
- <sup>197</sup> Gilkes Personal Diary (23<sup>rd</sup> December 1943)
- <sup>198</sup> Ibid., (10<sup>th</sup> May 1945)
- <sup>199</sup> Email correspondence between author and Victoria Coombes
- <sup>200</sup> London Gazette 1665-2018, Issue No. 40981, dated 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1957 (FP)
- <sup>201</sup> England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007, Wycombe, Volume 19, Page 1270 (FP)