

2/6th Bn. The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) War Diary April 1944

April 1944.

- 1st April. Area GRAVINA.
0900 hrs. C.O. addressed the Bn. We shall be moving to one of the Dalmatian Islands – Partisans are friendly but death penalty for theft and interference with women. Warning order for move.
- 2nd April. 1000 hrs. Bn. move to BARI, leaving at GRAVINA a B. Echelon party consisting of the majority of the M.T. Pln. u/c of Maj. A.G. DALLAS M.C.
Rifle Coys still only 80 strong organised in three Coys – A, B & D.
1600 hrs. Bn. embarks for VIS on 3 L.C.T.'s and H.M.S. LAURANA. QM Stores, cooking equipment and canteen taken to the island together with a minimum scale of M.T. consisting of 7 x 3 tonners, 8 Jeeps, 3 15 cwts, 1 water truck and 24 M/cycles.
- 4th April. Area VIS.
0100 hrs. Bn. arrives – half at VIS and half at KOMIŽA. Tea and beds down in local billets for the night then move to Coy areas by transport (see attached map) houses spotlessly clean and the whole atmosphere refreshing after the dirt, squalor and whining population of civilian Italy. As the last troops embus a Partisan bard puts to sea in a wooden schooner to welcome a boatload of refugees rescued in the last raid on German occupied HVAR. Gallant and a little pathetic as they chug slowly out of the harbour with banners flying and the noise of the Bard fading gradually over the water.
1400 hrs. 'O' Gp. All bivouacs to be sangared and camouflaged by evening of 7th.
T.E.W.T. for 'O' Gp. 1400 hrs. 8th instant to discuss operational role of the Bn. which is primarily anti-parachutist in 'Gunner' and 'Aerodrome' plains. (see sketch trace attached). First impressions of this island very favourable. Partisan spirit is magnificent, they march everywhere singing and obvious meaning it and are keenest soldiers we have seen. Women march with the men carrying a pack bigger than our webbing valise and full of equipment. Hand grenades at their belts and a rifle or M.G. over their shoulder. Some wear Officers badges of rank but they are all either doctors or employed in some administrative capacity.
- 5/6th April. Rest room in each Coy area with wireless, darts and local wines (free and very good) Partisans friendly and very helpful, problems are put up to local committee who usually agree to whatever is required.
- 7th April. Coy areas inspected by C.O. T.E.W.T. on hill side 1 for 'O' Gp. Bn. dispositions. on alarm decided (see sketch trace attached) Estimated that Germans may attack either by air or sea but that the most probable time is on a moonlit night. Gunner and Aerodrome plains are favourable for parachutists (although the vines might trip up one or two) but Bn. posns. are sited to cope with attack from any direction. Sangers to be built and reserve rations and ammunition dumped by 11th instant.
Lieut. R. PURDON & Lt. J. LEM WILSON rejoined.
I Sect. recess for bathing beaches. Bn. HQ have a cove twenty minutes walk away, deep and narrow with a house and a few fishing boats set back in the inlet. Access by a narrow footpath through shrapnel minefields. Water is deep but so clear that the bottom at 6 fathoms looks a few yds. away.

- 8th April. Recce of battle posns. Performance by partisan band for our men in Bn. HQ area. Duration unlimited and band more delighted than most of the audience. Maestro comes to dinner and talks volubly in a mixture of French, Italian and Yugoslav.
- 9th April. Reorganisation of old HQ Coy into Support Coy. under Maj. KING consisting of Mortars, Carriers, A/Tks and Assault Pioneer Pln. and HQ Coy under Capt. HALES consisting of admin. Pln., Signal Pln. and Bn. HQ.
2/Lt. HARDING & 2/Lt. FAWCETT M.M. rejoined the unit on being granted immediate commissions.
Partisans have an exercise. Fire & movement through Bn. HQ bivouac area with live ammunition pointed skywards. Some trepidation until the village of MARINA ZAMBE falls in case one of the weapons – mostly Italian Breda's – slips off a rock while a burst is being fired to the detriment of Bn. HQ.
- 11th April. "Stand to" posns. completed. Practise "Stand to" at 1400 hrs. and Brig. CHURCHILL MC. 2 S.S. Bde., inspects Bn. posns. C.O. sees Comdr. CERNI - Supreme Yugoslav Comdr. of VIZ, to arrange for Scrub Ridge (See sketch attached) to be manned by a Bn. of partisans.
The Ridge dominates our posns. but is at present unoccupied.
Capt. PURDON assumes Comd. of "C" Coy. Capt. CURTIS 2i/c "D" Coy.
Local women on washing for the troops. Food from B.H.Q cook house is their pay for the day.
- 12th April. Training starts. Two weeks cadre under Capt. MILLS for all junior NCO's Cpls and below. Specialist courses absorb nearly all rifle Coy personnel.
Major FP. St M. SHEIL rejoined the Bn. from M.E.F.
Lt. A. BOURNE rejoined from hospital.
Lightning aircraft returning from a sweep over Vienna made a perfect landing on emergency landing strip. Attempted to take off about 1700 hrs. One engine cut out at 200 feet and the plane crashed by reservoir 789862 killing nine partisans and wounding others. Pilot officer later died of wounds. Plane was out of fuel due to pilot forgetting to switch over to main tank on jettison supplementaries carried under wings. Reports received of 2 partisan boys aged 14 taking prisoner a German NCO and one soldier on enemy occupied KORCULA.
Certainly no lack of courage among the Yugoslavs even the youngest are tough.
Commandos in one of their periodic raids on the islands and enemy shipping captured 3 Yugoslav schooners manned by Germans. One of them contains German rations and British troops on the island have fresh Danish butter at every meal for a week.
- 13th April. All Courses suspended for a day so as to allow a working party 100 strong to be found for clearing runway of new landing ground on opposite side of Rd from the old emergency strip. Engineers estimate that the field will be completed in 10 days and they expect 2½ squadrons of spitfires. Anticipate some bitter air fighting over the island as presumably the Germans will do their best to put the aerodrome out of action as soon as they get wind of it.
All exchange on the island is by barter and surprisingly prices have remained fairly level since we arrived at 1 egg for five cigarettes. Eggs are about the only commodity one can buy apart from anchovies which are caught and tinned locally. The population feed on army rations and the island itself supports only a few goats and chickens.
In the evening a cinema show by courtesy of the American special operations group at VIS. Performance greeted with deep appreciation including newsreel showing entry of 8th Army into TRIPOLI which raised a big laugh.

- 14th April. Training resumed. First organised parties go swimming, water cold but delightful and minefields quite easy to negotiate. Partisans greeting is "Stravoh" and salute delivered with clenched fist. Everyone salutes everyone else and we begin to find it quite easy to say "Stravoh" ourselves in reply although we always give the British salute not the clenched fist.
- 15th April. Another Spitfire made crash landing on emergency strip. Pilot unhurt. Coy Sgts Mess opened. I.O. visited partisans and Bde. HQ and exchanged information about defences. Scrub Ridge is already manned by elements of 3rd (Y.S). Overseas Bde. and defences will be thickened if necessary.
- 16th April. A watch and a compass was stolen yesterday from support company by an Italian bred partisan. Thief arrested by the partisans who are going to shoot him.
The owner of the watch is strongly against it and the commanding officer is trying to get the punishment altered to something less drastic. One interview with the local Soviet committee this morning and another with the Kommisar this afternoon. In the evening two political Kommisars, one man and one woman to dinner in the mess with Slavenka woman interpreter the local Bn. commander, and a partisan woman doctor. They are not afraid to drink and we spend a pleasant evening swapping songs, "Heimo Partisani" tunelessly sang by a three in harmony followed by "Roll out the barrel" from our officers and so on.
They all enthusiastically pro Soviet and pro Marshall TITO but towards the end of the evening the political Kommisars confesses he is not really as much in favour of Russia itself as he has to appear. The battalion commander recounts how under King Alexander he spent 10 years learning to become an architect and then was not allowed to work because practises were given to the richest bidder.
General Mihailovich fighting with the Germans because his party is strongly anti Soviet is regarded as the lowest of the low.
We spend some time picking up courage to sing "Lily Marlene" knowing how fiercely the party hates the Germans and thinking they may be offended but they only laugh and join in.
Church parade at 1100 hrs but the Padre is marooned on RAVNIK ISLAND after holding a Service there and cannot get a boat to take him back to the mainland until 1200 hrs.
Enemy recce plane over just before dusk. A lot of A.A. fire all miles off the target.
Warning from Bde, bombing expected 9th - 21st on docking of L.S.T. carrying bulldozers for completion of aerodrome and eight 3.7 A.A. guns.
- 17th April. 0440 hrs. By 10 enemy planes on KOMIZA. HD and incendiaries dropped, the majority falling on the slopes of HUM HILL above the town. Only one house hit and one partisan killed. A bomb very close to the D.I.D. but no damage done. Windows dropped by the planes as they came in, some of our bombers were also on their way home. These combined with the silver paper dropped by the enemy, deceived the R.D.F. into anticipating a much larger number of enemy planes than in fact were on their way but no warning was relayed to the Infantry. Navy and the A.A. are always warned first.
Battalion goes into K.D. shorts and weather takes a corresponding turn for the worse.
A particularly vicious sentry on duty opposite the recreation room. He shouts "stoy" (Halt) like an explosion out of a gun barrel and wakes me up three times in an hour from a distance of some 100 yards away.
- 18th April. Another recce plane over. Presumably observing results which apart from a few burnt Bushes on HUM HILL must have been hard to locate. Bulldozers and A.A. not now expected for a few days.

A Partisan trips a mine in the field round B.H.Q bathing beach. 3 taken to hospital badly wounded and partisans are very nervous of anyone going through the field but the path is still quite safe.

- 19th April. Battalion football team meets the Partisans, they have several first grade players and we are beaten 3-2.
Two battalions of the Partisans 3rd Dalmatian Bde. holding sector of coast opposite our Bn. HQ leave for VIZ. O.C. of a unit near us says they are joining Marshall Tito's armies in Bosnia. Houses in the district have TITO in large letters covered with greenery hung from poles outside the doors or nailed into the brickwork. 3rd Overseas Bde. are taking over Dalmatian Bde's defences but positions will not be held as strongly as before.
- 20th April. Cinema apparatus loaned by Americans, operators are not available, so we supply our own and after a few false starts the show goes well.
- 21st April. No news of the Support Company thief so we presume the sentence has been carried out. A party of particularly amazing women making up the road to the aerodrome, lifting boulders twice the size of any most of us would care to move.
- 22nd April. A.A. guns arrive 268/64 Bty together with bulldozers. Road closed to all but essential traffic while heavy equipment navigates the hairpin bends of the islands one Rd.
TITO'S 2i/c takes over military command of partisans on the island.
News received of a big partisan raid on MILJET. No details yet but the battle said to be going well. Presumably carried out by the men from our area who were not going to BOSNIA after all.
Notice with amusement that the partisan Red Star is still now above our Orderly Room.
More RAF arrive and go into a camp beyond Support Company lines operation room for the station is at MARINE ZEMJLE.
- 23rd April. Battalion race meeting organised by Lt. LAWRENCE. Horses are empty water cans wound into the finishing line on signal roles. Realistic side shows along the track, coconut shies with tins and wooden balls, dart boards, roulette and a shooting booth. Picture completed by course narcs in borrowed civies shouting the odds. Tea and cakes at 4:00 followed by VIZ Derby - won by CSM ELLIOTT MM for B Coy. At 1600 hrs. a Liberator crashes on the North End of the island. Crew baled out and landed safely, two picked up out of the sea by RAF launch one suffering from slight concussion. The plane had one engine hit by flak over VIENNA and two more gave out as they were over the island.
- 24th April. The partisans have attacked KORCULA as well as MILJET. Fierce fighting is going on round BLATO – biggest town on KORCULA – which was known to be well defended. The garrison of MILJET has been liquidated except for a party of about 50 Germans who have gone off into the hills – some partisans have been left behind to deal with them but the main force came back last night. Both the main force on KORCULA and those remaining on MILJET are to be brought back tonight.
Another Spitfire made a crash landing on the emergency strip. Shall we have a complete Sqn. ready barring repairs by the time the landing ground is finished.
Our office direct a 25 pdr. Shoot on GREEN ISLAND. As the practice finished local fishing boats race for the target area from behind RAVNEK to pick up any under-sea casualties we may have caused.

- 25th April. Partisans marching back along the rds. from VIS after their raids. A few bandages in the coln. but they are singing as usual. In between two Coys a band of refugees – grandfathers, black shawled old women and little boys, mothers with babies in their arms, a few crying but most looking merely bewildered; hollow cheeked and ragged with shoes a matter of a sole held in place by the odd strips of leather that remain of the uppers. A party of them washing by the reservoir wave as our Jeep goes by and then get back to their scrubbing. In the afternoon a long conversation in bastard French with one of the Coy Comdrs. back off MILJET. While we talk the men lie on the ground outside the house getting more than a little merry on wine provided by the old lady who owns the place. Evidently the usual regulation about drunkenness has been relaxed for the occasion. Gelmen – the Coy Comdr. – says his men were magnificent. They swept the plain and then fought their way up into the hills, killing every German they met, except those who showed no fight at all. They captured a lot of equipment and rations but left most of the food behind for those civilians who could not be taken off. They did bring plenty of cigarettes however and the most acute shortage among the Partisans seems to have been liquidated for the moment. Coy Comdr. puts his own casualties at only about ten and the German losses at 164. The last is probably correct – we knew there was one Coy on the island. Lt. G.E. SMITH (Wounded at ANZIO) rejoins the Bn. with a draft of 50 x O.R.'s, a few of whom were wounded as long ago as SALERNO.
- 26th April. The first official news of the partisans raids. Our allies accounted for 898 Germans, in killed and prisoners only, against 313 of their own of whom only 61 were killed. They took the whole of MILJET and about 2/3rds of KORCULA before withdrawing. Booty included four howitzers, 600 rifles, 5 lorries an ambulance a workshop and large quantities of food stores and ammunition. Letter from the partisans signed by political and military KOMISAR'S thanks us for cooperation of British Naval and air forces. The British C.C.S. has dealt with a hundred partisan casualties. German prisoners left for Italy this morning. Two Bty's. 111 Field Regiment arrived and moved into sites at present occupied by 228 Bty at SHELL VILLAGE and below JAIL RIDGE. Waggon lines of the battery at JAIL RIDGE move in between Bn. HQ and Support Coy. We now have the landing ground B.H.Q, Support R.A., & RAF ground personnel complete with wireless mast all in a long straight line. 228 Bty go tomorrow and some gloom settles over the Bn. We imagine we shall be next and most people are more than a little reluctant to leave the island, which is the cleanest and most pleasant place we have seen since leaving England, even if there are no amusements.
- 27th April. 1st edition published of WEF, Bn. weekly newspaper. Pouring with rain and courses are cancelled for the day. Abrupt rocketing of prices, eggs now 20 cigarettes for one but we anticipated return to normal when captured supplies of cigarettes begin to run out.
- 28th April. 279 liberators flying north in waves of 40. Raiding forces have instructions to fly over VIS on the outward journey to show that the partisans can see destruction on its way to the Germans. Recce format exercise around VIS and return with four partisans, 2 sheep's carcasses, 4 sacks of bread and a bale of flower, latter being supplies for a local hospital. Constantly thumbed for a lift on the way back and nearly mobbed at hairpin corners out of VIS in spite of heavy load, think of Blomeleys cartoon showing motorcycle loaded with four being thumbed by two more as it passes. Sheep are the first fresh meat we have seen since leaving mainland, strongly tempted to barter for a joint but desist as it is intended for wounded back off KORCULA.

- 29th April. 2 ME'S at 15,000 feet on a recce. Heavy A.A. keeps quiet, still hoping to surprise the next batch of raiders when they come.
228 Bty were to have embarked tonight but storms prevented the ships from leaving Italy and the move is postponed until tomorrow.
N.C.O's Cardre go for a pleasure trip round the island in a wooden Yugoslav schooner.
On a clear day HVAR looks startlingly near but today weather is grey and inclined to rain.
Skipper speaks English and when we went round talked casually about his friends putting into coves on HVAR and the other occupied islands only a mile from the nearest German garrisons.
This happens every night and is regarded as a routine job they land ammunition and food supplies for the partisans "Garrisons" and sometimes a British or American Recce party with a wireless as well.
- 30th April. Fairchild Army Co-operation plane lands on the flying field bringing smallpox serum for vaccination. Only one case so far, a British Army man attached RAF from outside KOMIZA.
Elimination rounds for football final tomorrow. Commandos beat the rest Americans play the partisans to provide an international flavour and are beaten 10-1. Firework display with small arms in the evening to inaugurate May Day. The big Political festival of the year for Marshall Tito's men. C.O. broke his wrist in a fall last night but his plastered up by the C.C.S. and returns the same day.

Lieut. Col. AJ Renshaw, DSO, MC.

Comdg.

2/6th Battalion The Queen's Royal Regiment.