

**THE SUPERB AND SCARCE 'NICKFORCE' 'BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS' 1943 M.M. GROUP AWARDED TO A SERGEANT, 'F' BATTERY, ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY WHO DURING THE BITTER AND CONFUSED FIGHTING AT THALA, TUNISIA ON 21-22 FEBRUARY 1943, KNOCKED OUT TWO TANKS OF THE 10TH PANZER DIVISION WHICH UNDER THE DIRECT CONTROL OF GENERALFELDMARSHALL ROMMEL, WERE ATTACKING THE DEFENSIVE LINE**



MILITARY MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '3061845 SGT. T. B. AINSIE. R.A.', 1939-45 STAR, AFRICA STAR, CLASP 1ST ARMY, ITALY STAR, DEFENCE AND WAR MEDALS 1939-45 WITH AN ORIGINAL CITATION ON WAR OFFICE EMBOSSED WAR OFFICE PAPER, BASE OF CARD BOX OF ISSUE WITH NAMED BUCKINGHAM PALACE FORWARDING LETTER, HONOURABLE ARTILLERY COMPANY BERET BADGE AND TIE SLIP BADGE, TWO ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY COLLAR BADGES

M.M. *London Gazette* 23 September 1943.

For the action during the bitter and confused fighting at Thala, during the battle of Kasserine Pass, Tunisia, 21-22 February 1943, where elements of 'Nickforce', including, 'F' Battery held of a Kampfgruppe of the 10th Panzer Division under the direct control of Generalfeldmarshall Rommel, Sergeant Ainsie being responsible for knocking out the leading German tank, believed to be a captured British tank pressed into service by Rommel and sharing in the destruction of a second tank.

The Recommendation states:

*"Sgt Ainslie was one of the very first people in the battery to realise the presence of five tanks halted on the road about 100-yds away from the battery position on the night of 21 Feb. He did not know whether they were our own tanks, or German tanks, neither did he know the disposition of our own troops. Having ordered his subsection to take cover from machine gun and cannon fire which was sweeping the valley, behind some nearby rocks, he himself crept forward to within approx. 20 yds of the tanks to try and identify them. When he was there, the leading tank put up a flare and he saw someone moving towards him. At this he withdrew to his subsection, followed by this other man, who turned out to be an R.E. The R.E. then told Sgt Ainslie he was almost certain that they were German tanks. Whereupon Sgt Ainslie reported the matter to Command Post and again crept forward to satisfy himself that they were enemy tanks. Having got to within 20 yds of the tanks again, he distinctly heard German voices and saw them collecting prisoners, so he withdrew to his subsection and when the machine gun and cannon fire had abated a little after a few minutes, he laid his gun into the leading tank as best he could in the dark; then when Captain Pirie had fired a very-light over the tank he laid his gun into it accurately and fired, scoring a direct hit and knocking out the tanks. He then laid on the next tank and scored another hit at the same time as his other subsection.*

*Sgt Ainslie and his subsection are credited with one and a half tanks out of three knocked out by the Battery that night, and it is considered that by his initiative and offensive spirit, he turned back the remaining tanks and made the Germans alter their plan."*

A sub-note to the typed recommendation in ink by his commanding officer notes:

*"This NCO was the deadline section in the gallant action of 'F' Battery (HAC) RHA and set a magnificent example to all ranks throughout the operation"*



The 'Trojan Horse' of the 10. Panzer-Division. This was a captured Valentine that joined the tail of the column of British tanks of the 26th Armoured Brigade withdrawing on the evening of February 21 and so infiltrated the infantry positions

of the 2nd/5th Leicesters. The markings on the tank included the 10. Panzer-Division formation sign (a 'Y' with three ticks) on the rear; the bison insignia of Panzer-Regiment 7 on the turret, and several German crosses.





3061845 W/Sgt Thomas Balfour Ainslie, served with 'F' Battery, 12th Honourable Artillery Company Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery during the battle of Kasserine Pass. His battery forming part of 'Nickforce', which was a small, improvised formation of the British First Army in the Tunisian campaign, which supported American forces during the battle. 'Nickforce' was hastily formed from elements of the British 6th Armoured Division on 14 February 1943, for the defence of Thala, during the latter stages of the battle of Kasserine Pass. It took its name from the commanding officer, Brigadier Cameron Nicholson. In desperate fighting, the force successfully blocked a Kampfgruppe of the 10th Panzer Division under the direct control of Generalfeldmarshall Erwin Rommel on 21 and 22 February 1943.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nickforce>





The battle of Kassarine Pass was predominantly fought between Axis and American forces, elements of British and Free French units supporting: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Kasserine\\_Pass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Kasserine_Pass)

The Desert War: Then And Now, by Jean Paul Pallud, includes a narrative of the events leading to Sergeant Ainslie's award:

*At first light on February 21 the 26th Armoured Brigade, with 17th/21st Lancers on the right and 2nd Lothians with F Battery in support on the left, were in position astride the road about 20 miles east of Thala. The Leicesters were moving on to their position. It was a bright, sunny day and during the morning a certain amount of activity was observed. German infantry could be seen getting out of vehicles, but they were well outside the range of our guns. At about one o'clock a German tank attack developed, with SP guns in support. They were engaged and the armoured regiments, already much reduced in strength and armed with 2-pdr Valentines only and a few Crusaders with 6-pdrs, were leap-frogged back during the afternoon. Observed shooting was extremely difficult at this stage owing to the dust and the almost continuous smoke screen put down by the armoured regiments. The battery was at the same time leap-frogged back troop by troop, and about 30 minutes before dusk it passed back through the Leicesters' position and went into action about 1,500 yards in the rear. The position was extremely cramped, for guns were sometimes only 20 yards apart and no more than 150 yards separated the two troops, T Troop being in the front with V Troop behind them. At dusk the armoured regiments passed back through the Leicesters' position and went into laager.*

*Less than an hour later, while subsection meals were being got ready and the digging of slit trenches and preparations for the night were going on in the dark, some tanks came up the road and stopped, the leading one no more than 100 yards from the battery position. The situation was confused, some of our vehicles were lost and looking for their units, and the night was dark; but the identity of these tanks was suspect. Sergeant Ainslie, No. 1 of the nearest gun, went forward to reconnoitre and heard German voices. In the dark he got close up and found that the leading tank had*

*apparently broken down with mechanical trouble. As he got back, a Bren carrier drove unsuspectingly up the road towards the leading tank, which opened at point-blank range and brewed it up.*

*A small plan was made to deal with the immediate situation. Captain John Pirie was to fire a Very light over the German tanks while Sergeant Ainslie laid his gun on the leader. Lieutenant John Bagnall was to discourage any German from showing his head out of the turret by opening on him with a Bren. The first Very light misfired, but the second one was successful, and Sergeant Ainslie knocked out the leading tank with his first shot. It burst into flames. This stirred the remainder of the tanks into activity and they attempted to withdraw, firing as they went. Another tank was knocked out almost immediately by Sergeant Ainslie's gun and a third, which came off the road and moved round in front of T Troop's position, was dealt with by Sergeant Laurie.*

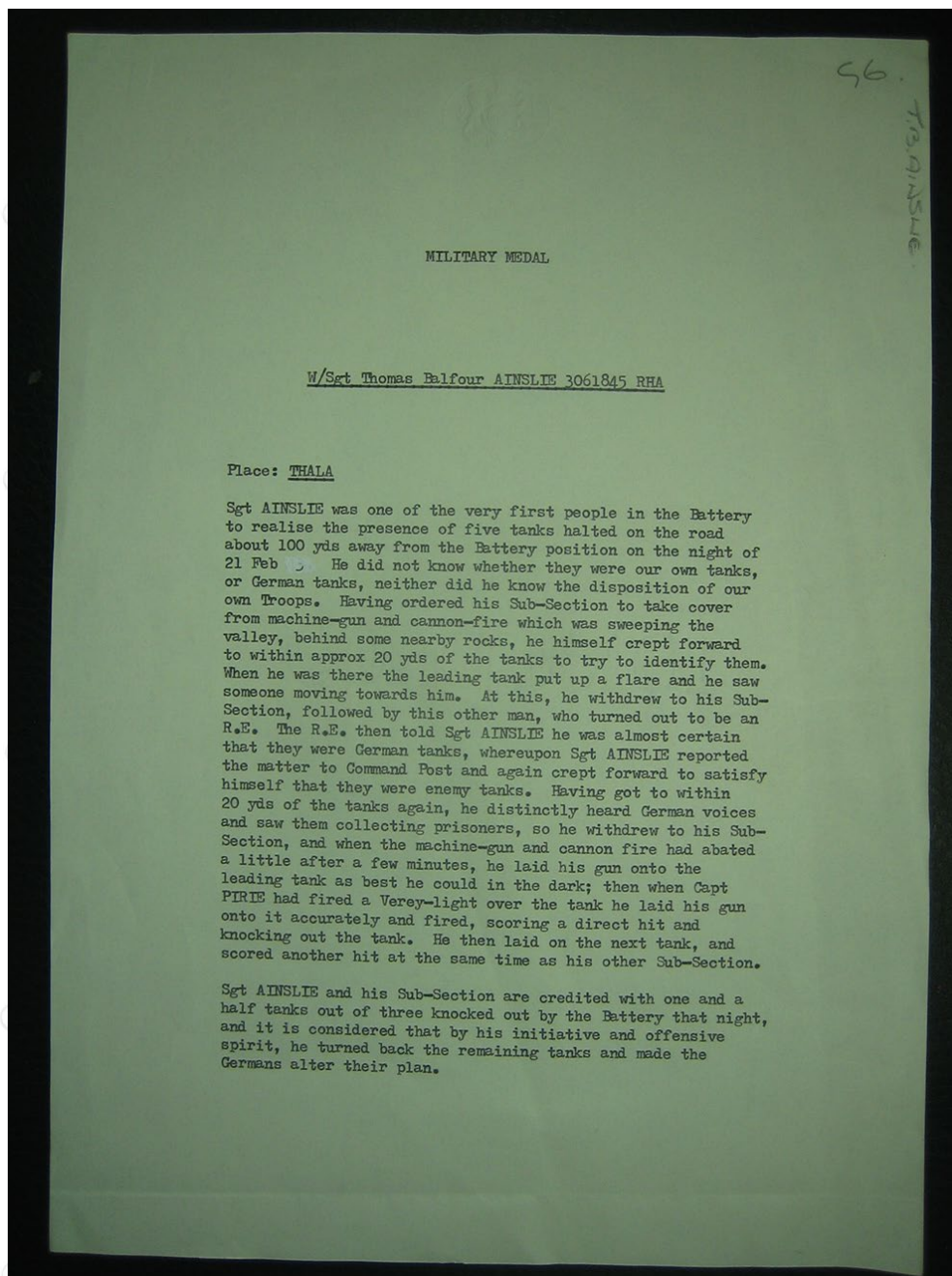
*He and his detachment were taking cover from the small-arms fire in their shallow slit trenches when the silhouette of this tank was seen passing across the front of the gun position about 50 yards away. Sergeant Laurie immediately jumped up, laid, loaded and fired his gun himself and knocked out the tank. The remainder of the tanks withdrew back down the road and sat on the high ground firing their machine guns, with tracer, indiscriminately down the road. At the same time a fierce exchange of firing broke out away on the right, where German tanks had penetrated into the laager of the 17th/21st Lancers, and a number of tanks on both sides were knocked out in a confused engagement in the dark.*

MAJOR C. MIDDLETON, F BATTERY, ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY, FEBRUARY 1943

A further web page gives a very good account of the battle of Kassarine Pass, including the actions of Nickforce: <https://mikesresearch.com/2021/08/29/kasserine-pass-1943/>







Sergeant Ainslie's medal card confirms all WW2 campaign medals and clasp. It also shows him with the rank of Warrant Officer II by wars end and his address at Comley Bank Road, Edinburgh. Medals being issued on 8 March 1949.

#### NEW INFO

'Regimental Fire' by Brigadier Johnson notes that Ainslie was one of 150 Scottish infantrymen that joined 12th Honourable Artillery Company Regiment, in late 1940. Ainslie is singled out from this 150, along with Sergeant Lawrie as they were both later awarded decorations; both for the same action; Ainslie the MM, Lawrie the DCM. The Regiment were awarded 12 MM's during the war and 1 DCM. Further details of the action at Thala from 'Regimental Fire' can be found here:



action on the left, were kept in touch with the Regiment by Major Adam Block until a shortening of the line was ordered, involving a withdrawal to Rohia. As far as their northward push was concerned—the threat to Sbiba—the Germans had definitely been held. They had shot their bolt.

Not so with the southern arm of their pincer movement, which threatened Thala.

While C and D Batteries were busy at Sbiba, F Battery had, four days earlier, been detached to join 26 Armoured Brigade. Twenty-five miles to the west, an American engineer battalion, holding the Kasserine Pass, had given way, sweeping back with them the small subsidiary force—a company of Rifle Brigade, a troop of tanks and a field battery—which had been rushed to their support. 26 Armoured Brigade less 16/5 Lancers were ordered to fight a delaying action 15 or 20 miles from Thala while, thus protected, a battalion of the Leicesters dug a defensive position on a ridge five miles south of the town.

At first light on the sunny morning of 20 February the action began. German infantry, well out of range, were seen getting out of their vehicles. Shortly after midday 20 or 30 tanks, with a few self-propelled guns, led the enemy infantry towards the Allied position. First to meet the shock were C Squadron Lothians and Border Horse. Their Valentines, outranged and outgunned, fought until all but one had been knocked out, the squadron leader, Major Beilby, walking from tank to tank until he was killed. Then the last Valentine, in death grips with a tank of thrice its gun power, joined its enemy in mutual destruction.

Throughout the day, with Brigadier Dunphie calmly erect in his scout car, directing the fight by wireless, the Lothians and Border Horse and 17/21 Lancers rivalled each other in gallantry of this sort until, having held up the enemy advance for the whole 24 hours allotted to them, they withdrew through the Leicesters' lines with barely enough tanks between them to make a squadron.

As the armour fell back so, troop by troop, F Battery conformed; firing steadily at what they could see—which, in the dust raised by the tracks and the smoke screens put up by successive squadrons as they withdrew, was precious little—or what they could guess.

While the exhausted cavalymen, in leaguer, refuelled and licked their wounds, F Battery came into action 1500 yards in rear of the position the Leicesters had dug. Level with them, C



Company 10 Rifle Brigade, rejoicing at a momentary respite, were digging slit trenches. A tank trundled up in the darkness (there was no moon), demolishing the side of a trench a rifleman had almost completed. He stood to curse the driver. The reply was a revolver shot. Fifty yards on, the tank halted within 100 yards of the Battery position with four others behind it.

"Come out and surrender to the Panzers", said a voice in perfect English. "You are all finished."

A Bren carrier came up the road; stopped, all unsuspecting, beside the tank. It was immediately shot up, and in a moment the tanks were loosing off in all directions with their 75-mm. guns and machine-guns. Sounds of firing, flashes of Verey lights, small-arms fire in ragged streams came from the darkness beyond.

"It is impossible to estimate how long the stalemate lasted", wrote Major R. Fyffe, the Rifle Brigade company commander. "It seemed a century. It was perhaps 15 minutes. Suddenly it was broken by F Battery. Someone fired a Verey light. There was a flash from a 25-pounder . . ."

Sergeant T. B. Ainslie, No. 1 of T Troop's nearest gun, had spotted the tank as it halted, seemingly with some minor mechanical trouble. Tanks were still groping their way home from the battle; but Ainslie suspected this particular one. As he crept forward to reconnoitre, he heard German voices. Back in the gun position a quick plan was made: Captain John Pirie would fire a Verey light, Sergeant Ainslie would lay his gun on the tank, Lieut. John Bagnall, with a Bren, would prevent any German from shewing his head.

The first Verey light misfired. The second lit the tank in its flickering glow and a moment later Ainslie had scored a direct hit with his first shot, following it with another to knock out the second tank which had crept up behind. A third tank broke off from the road. Machine-gun fire was now sweeping the position. Sergeant J. C. Lawrie, taking cover with his detachment in half-dug slit trenches, saw the silhouette of a tank passing across the front of his gun position. He jumped up, laid, loaded and fired his gun himself and knocked the tank out.<sup>2</sup>

Three rounds can seldom have exercised such influence on a battle. Had the first tank, its breakdown adjusted, passed through the Battery line unscathed, with two tanks following up, Le Kef might have fallen; the whole North African campaign might have had to be fought over again.

As it was, the brief night encounter stirred Major Middleton to gigantic efforts. Infantry were coming back from the forward positions saying that they had been over-run. Each gun had to be resited; each provided with slit trenches for defences; vehicles and quads sent back out of harm's way; for it was obvious that T Troop's line of guns was now the British front line. An attack at first light was inevitable; probably an infantry attack; and F Battery would abide the first shock of it.

It came with the dawn: but not an infantry attack. Instead, from the ridge in front came a torrent of shelling. Throughout the morning tanks appeared over the crest 1000 yards or so away; were engaged furiously over open sights, turned and were gone. Armour piercing shot ran out. H.E. was fired with the fuze-cap on. From time to time the battery guns were hidden from sight in rings of shell-bursts. Gunner R. R. Wilson, while laying, was killed by a direct hit on his gun.

"It was almost unbelievable", says Major Fyffe, "that their crews could remain alive. No sooner, however, did the enemy shelling slacken than the gunners leaped from their slit trenches and carried on with their interrupted programme, firing like mad until they were again dowsed by the enemy . . . The way in which the gunners served their guns is a sight which will always remain in our memories."

"Their Battery Commander also was outstanding; sometimes moving about his guns unflurried by the enemy 'stunks', sometimes scrambling up a hill behind them whence he yelled fire orders and shouted encouragement to his magnificent teams. From time to time an ambulance came up to the battery position to take away the wounded, but F Battery never failed to respond to their commander's calls. At dusk the enemy fire died down, and during the night the Germans withdrew; but it had been a near thing."

The Germans withdrew. They reported—as was later discovered—that they had come up against determined opposition from greatly superior forces. In fact, to the 70 German tanks still available for battle, there were just 10 tanks left in the two cavalry regiments—plus F Battery.

It was a fine piece of leadership, for which Major Middleton received a Military Cross; and honours fell thick on his team. Captain Pirie—he had been an inspiration throughout the action until he was wounded—also received the M.C.



Condition NEF, mounted as worn. These, along with the miniatures, ribbon bar and insignia mounted on card board for display. Can be removed if wished. Sold with four copy photographs of the recipient in uniform, two with fellow soldiers.

An extremely fine Royal Horse Artillery M.M. group with a superb citation for knocking out German tanks. A scarce award for Kasserine Pass









BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

I greatly regret that I am  
unable to give you personally the  
award which you have so well earned.

I now send it to you with  
my congratulations and my best  
wishes for your future happiness.

*George R.I.*

3061845 Sjt. T.B. Ainslie, M.M.

Royal Regiment of Artillery.