

THE EXCEPTIONAL WW2 1940 'WESTERN DESERT' M.C. GROUP TO A MAJOR, 7TH ROYAL TANK REGIMENT. M.I.D. FOR SERVICES ON THE NORTH WEST FRONTIER IN 1937, HE WAS RECOMMENDED FOR THE M.C. FOR HIS GALLANTRY IN MATILDA TANKS DURING THE BATTLE OF FRANCE IN MAY 1940 AND AWARDED THE M.C. FOR HIS GALLANTRY IN LEADING 'D' SQUADRON DURING OPERATION COMPASS IN DECEMBER 1940, DURING WHICH HE WAS ALSO WOUNDED IN THE FACE. AN ORIGINAL 'RAT OF TOBRUK', 'D' SQUADRON BEING ONE OF THE ONLY TANK UNITS BESIEGED WITH THE 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION, APRIL – OCTOBER 1941. IN 1942, HE TOOK PART THE BATTLE OF GAZALA, HIS UNIT AGAIN BEING BESIEGED AT TOBRUK WHERE HE WAS TAKEN PRISONER ON 20 JUNE. HOWEVER, ON HIS WAY INTO CAPTIVITY, HE JUMPED FROM AN AXIS LORRY AND ESCAPED WALKING SOME 500 MILES BEFORE FINALLY REACHING ALLIED LINES. POST WAR, THE WAR OFFICE SELECTED MAJOR HARRIS TO BE TECHNICAL ADVISOR ON THE 1958 FILM 'TANK FORCE', WHICH WAS BASED ON THE EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE LIBYAN DESERT 1941-2.



MILITARY CROSS, G.V.I.R. REVERSE OFFICIALLY DATED '1941'; INDIA GENERAL SERVICE 1936-39, 1 CLASP, NORTH WEST FRONTIER 1936-37 'LIEUT. K. P. HARRIS. R. TANK. C.'; 1939-45 STAR; AFRICA STAR; WAR MEDAL 1939-45, WITH M.I.D. OAK LEAF

M.C. London Gazette 24 April 1941:

*'Commanding 'D' Squadron. This officer led his squadron in the attack on Tummar West on the 9th [December 1940]. His tank was penetrated by a shell of high calibre which burst in the tool locker and set it on fire. Major Harris received facial injuries, which, though superficial, blinded him with blood. He destroyed the gun which had hit him, and continued to lead his squadron. Practically every fitting outside of his tank was blown off by enemy fire and the turret jammed. He rallied his squadron and was ordered to reorganize stragglers coming in to the rallying point throughout the night and the following day. He displayed calm and coolness throughout the action and until evacuated on the morning of 11th Dec. His gallantry and devotion to duty are well worthy of recognition. Major Harris was recommended on 15.6.40 for an award of the Military Cross for gallantry during the Battle of*

France. It is not known if this award had been made. If so the current recommendation is for a bar to M.C.'

M.I.D. *London Gazette* 18 February 1938. For distinguished services rendered in connection with the operations in Waziristan, North West Frontier of India, 25th November, 1936, to 16th January 1937

M.I.D. *London Gazette* 20 December 1940. This originally a recommendation for the M.C. The original recommendation states:

*'For courage and resource on several occasions between 23rd and 27th May, 1940, particularly at Souchez on 23rd May, 1940, when fighting his tank and engaging enemy A/T artillery at close range - and on the 26th May, 1940, in the Bois de Flines when he displayed great personal courage and coolness in moving his company of tanks out of a position of assembly which was being subjected to particularly heavy bombing from the air. By his cool action on this occasion, he undoubtedly saved many casualties.'*

### MAJOR KENNETH PASSMORE HARRIS

Kenneth Passmore Harris was born in Purley, Surrey on 4 June 1907 and enlisted into the Royal Tank Corps as a private on 20 October 1925. Having attained the rank of Lance Corporal, he was commissioned 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on 30 January 1930 and advanced to Lieutenant, 27 June 1933. He served in the Northwest Frontier 1936-7 with 9<sup>th</sup> Light Tank Company and was Mentioned in Despatches for his services. Advanced to Captain, 1 August 1938, during the Second World War, Captain Harris served in France with the 7th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment (7<sup>th</sup> Tanks), part of the 1st Army Tank Brigade.



*Harris — Swift*

*Capt. Kenneth Passmore Harris, Royal Tank Corps, son of the late A. W. Harris, and Mrs. Harris, of Barton, Abinger Hammer, Surrey, and Eileen Inez Swift, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. C. T. Swift, of Selsfield Place, East Grinstead, were married at Holy Trinity, Brompton*

Equipped with a mixture of Matilda I and II's, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks joined the British Expeditionary Force on 6 May 1940 and along with 4<sup>th</sup> Tanks, were (apart from some cavalry reconnaissance regiments), the only British armoured regiments available to face Germany's ten armoured divisions with 2,574 tanks, when on 10 May 1940 they struck Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg.



At Arras on 21 May 1940, the 7th smashed into the rear of Rommel's 7th Panzer Division to good effect, indeed in slowing Rommel, they did much to save the BEF from getting cut off from Dunkirk. Of this, Liddell Hart would write:

*"It may well be asked whether two battalions have ever had such a tremendous effect on history as 4 RTR and 7 RTR achieved by their action at Arras. Their effect in saving the British Army from being cut off from its escape port provides ample justification for the view that if two well equipped armoured divisions had been available the Battle of France might also have been saved."*

Both the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tanks suffered heavily losses, including the commanding officers of both Regiments, both being killed fighting their tanks. "On 22 May, the exhausted remnants of both regiments rested and refitted under cover of the Vimy Ridge woods overlooking Souchez. On 23 May in company with elements of the French Division Légère Mécanisée they beat off a strong column of German tanks and lorried infantry. Then under cover of darkness they withdrew to Carvin where a composite force was formed under Major George Parkes, DSO of 7 RTR, consisting of two Mk 2 Matildas, eighteen Mk 1 Matildas, seven Mk 6 Light Tanks and a small LAD"

<https://4and7royaltankregiment.com/1940-1941/>

It was during the latter period that Captain Harris particularly distinguished himself whilst fighting his Matilda, particularly for the rearguard action at Souchez. For his actions he would be recommended for the Military Cross, which was eventually downgraded to a MID. Days later what was left of the regiment was forced to evacuate, abandoning all of their vehicles in the process.

## OPERATION COMPASS

On its return to the UK, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks was immediately reconstituted as a Matilda II regiment and on 21 August 1940, Harris and his regiment embarked for Egypt. Having been advanced to Acting Major, in command of 'D' Squadron, the 7<sup>th</sup> formed part of the Western Desert Force which was then preparing to take on a much larger Italian army. On 9 December 1940 'Operation Compass' began, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks supporting the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 4th Indian Infantry Division, notably during the attack on Nibeiwa Camp. Here they attacked and destroyed the Italian armoured 'Maletti Group' - destroying about 20 tanks alone during the initial phase of the attack. After it refuelled, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks also supported the infantry attack on the Italian positions at the Tummar camps later in the day, as well as taking part in the attacks on Bardia later in the campaign. It was for his gallantry in leading 'D' Squadrons tanks during the actions of 9-10 December 1940, despite being wounded on the first day, that Major Harris would be recommended for a Bar to the Military Cross.

By 27 December 7 Tanks had 22 Matilda's left and on that day the Regiment closed up to Sollum, three miles East of Bardia and 90 miles West of Sidi Barrani. In support of the leading battalion of 6th Australian Division they broke into Bardia. The Bardia Garrison surrendered on 7 January, with no less than 40,000 prisoners being taken, along with 127 tanks, 462 guns, and nearly 700 trucks. Major General I G Mackay, the Australian Division Commander, said that each Matilda of the 7th was worth a whole battalion to him. (It was at this time, and allegedly at the suggestion of the Australians, that the song "Waltzing Matilda" was taken into use as the 7's Quick March.)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Compass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Compass)

Interestingly, the original recommendation for Harris's battle of France M.C. has only the passed date, 20 December 1940, this being the date it was Gazetted and being downgraded to an MID, no usual date of being received. However his recommendation for the Bar was initially received by Division on 17 December 1940, three days before the initial recommendation for the M.C. was Gazetted as an M.I.D.

## TOBRUK

On 21 January 1941 the assault on Italian held Tobruk was launched. Working with 16 and 19 Australian Infantry Brigades, 7th Tanks, now down to 18 Matilda's, made the decisive penetrations and the Tobruk garrison capitulated on 22 January. The bag amounted to 25,000 prisoners, 87 tanks and 208 guns. 7th Tanks had only 16 battle-worthy Matildas left. Of this, Liddell Hart, the military historian would write:

*"This crowned the most striking sequence of successes achieved by any regiment in the RTR, or in the RAC, or in the British Army – during the war. Indeed the history of warfare shows no case of a single fighting unit having such a great effect in deciding the issue of battles and of a campaign. The record of 7 RTR in this campaign is peerless – by any measure, and in the strictest sense of the term".*

A well known photograph taken just after the capture of Tobruk shows Major Harris in the turret of his Matilda tank (named 'Glenorchy') flying a captured Italian flag.



MAJOR HARRIS IN THE TURRET OF HIS MATILDA AFTER THE CAPTURE OF TOBRUK

Harris would go on to command 'D' Squadron during the defence of Fortress Tobruk, later stating when he arrived in the fortress on 19 April 1941, he had only 12 tanks with fighting crews. These tanks, along with 2 squadrons from 1st Tank Regiment, would be the only tank units present during the siege, therefore becoming original 'Rats of Tobruk', where they served with the famed 9th Australian Infantry Division during the siege.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Tobruk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Tobruk)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rats\\_of\\_Tobruk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rats_of_Tobruk)

Towards the end of August, the Australian withdrawal begun being and in September, elements of the 70<sup>th</sup> Division began to replace them and by mid October, the rest of the Division arrived with tank



reinforcements, including reinforcements from 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks. In mid October, Major Harris was also relieved, Major Holden taking over command of the reinforced 'D' Squadron.

### **CAPTURED DURING THE BATTLE OF GAZALA AND ESCAPE**

Major Harris's whereabouts are not clear after his relief at Tobruk towards the end October 1941. The siege of Tobruk was finally raised after operation Crusader, which ended in December 1941 with Axis forces being pushed back to Tripoli and 'D' Squadron rejoined the rest of 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks. Harris may have been given some leave, however he was certainly back with 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks in 1942 and took part in the battle of Gazala; Rommel's offensive, that started on 21 May 1942. During the latter stages of the battle, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks, as part of 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade, pulled back to defensive positions at Tobruk and on 20 June, with Rommel forward, leading, tanks and infantry of the Afrika Korps breached the defensive positions and 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tanks were ordered to counter attack. The battle raged for 8 hours, at the end of which, 7<sup>th</sup> tank ceased to exist as cohesive unit. The following day Tobruk surrendered and those of 7<sup>th</sup> Tank who as survived were taken prisoner.

Major Harris was one of those captured and with other prisoners, was packed on a lorry to begin his journey as a prisoner of War. However a newspaper article on Harris describes how just before reaching Derna, some 80 miles from Tobruk and well within Axis lines, he and another officer jumped from the lorry and got away. Eluding search parties, both officers began a huge trek to British lines, Harris telling how they walked some 500 miles before finally reaching Allied lines near El Alamein.



Daily casualty reports list Major Harris as taken POW on 20 June 1942 but was reported no longer missing on 13 July 1942. This suggesting Harris was captured during the tank battle and that after is escape from captivity, took approximately 23 days to get back to British lines.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Gazala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gazala)

Harris's service after 1942 is yet unknown. As noted, 7<sup>th</sup> Tanks were captured at Tobruk but were reconstituted in 1943 and later served in Normandy. Harris was confirmed Major, Royal Tank Regiment on 4 June 1945 and retired from the army on 16 August 1952

Due to his experiences in desert warfare as well as an escapee, the War Office selected Major Harris to be technical advisor on the 1958 film 'No Time to Die' (also known as 'Tank Force'), starring Victor Mature, which was based on the events that took place in the Libyan desert 1941-2. See the following article published in the Salisbury Times, 24 January 1958:

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**"NO TIME TO DIE"**

**WHEN** Tobruk fell in the last war, after one of the most heroic fights ever put up against overwhelming odds, Major Ken Harris, of the Royal Tank Regiment, was captured. With others, he was put on to a lorry, and a journey began which was to prove most eventful, and which was to lead to Major Harris, who now lives in Bourne Avenue, returning to the Western desert just recently for a nine-week stay. Just before the lorry reached Derna, Major Harris and another officer jumped for it and got away. They eluded search parties and began the long trek to the British lines. Altogether they walked some 500 miles, and eventually reached the allied forces at El Alamein. A film has now been made of the momentous events which took place in Libya; of the heartbreaks and the setbacks, and of the events which eventually led to the marvellous allied victories which were the turning point of the war. It is called, "No Time to Die," and Major Harris, with his knowledge of tank warfare and having been an escapee, was selected by the War Office to be a technical adviser. He is now back from Tripoli and from three weeks at Elstree where he has helped again in putting the finishing touches.

**An Actor Too**

I was chatting to Major Harris this week and he told me that, in addition to advising, he has a part in the film, but modestly he said it will depend on the boys on the cutting floor whether or not he appears. But certainly featuring large indeed will be the tanks and men of the Queen's Bays, who were in Libya at the time, and who, having taken part in the actual battles in the war, went into the picture with a great deal of first-hand knowledge. Major Harris pays great tribute to them, and told me that without them he could never have got along as he did do. The Bays are now back in this country, and are at Perham Down. The lead parts in the film are played by Victor Mature, Leo Genn and the Italian star, Luciana Paoluzzi. Mature is seen as an American who has been married to a German girl, who has died in a concentration camp. So eager is he to get his revenge that he joins the British Army before the Americans come in. First, there is a big tank battle which the Germans win, and Mature and five others are grabbed but escape, and what happens to them is detailed until El Alamein is reached where there is a second tank battle which the allies win. It was a great experience for Major Harris. It will be nice to see the film, which is made by Warwick, and will be released in the near future.

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Interestingly, the main character of the film escapes from a German lorry after being taken prisoner and it makes you wonder how many of Harris's own experiences were used in this production.



Condition NEF. Sold with recommendations, Gazettes etc (digital). An exceptional Tank commander's gallantry group with plenty of research potential.