

THE SUPERB SECOND WORLD WAR IMMEDIATE 'SALERNO' 1943 D.C.M. GROUP TO A SHERMAN TANK GUNLAYER OF 40TH (THE KING'S) BATTALION, ROYAL TANK REGIMENT, WHO DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF IN TAKING CONTROL OF HIS TANK AFTER HIS TANK COMMANDER WAS KILLED, KEEPING HIS TANK IN ACTION FOR A FURTHER THREE HOURS DURING WHICH TIME HIS TANK WAS SUBJECTED TO INTENSE MORTAR FIRE AND SNIPING UNTIL IT WAS FINALLY HIT BY AN ENEMY ANTI-TANK GUN. 'BREWING UP' THE TANK, FROM WHICH, THOUGH WOUNDED, HE ESCAPED WITH TWO OTHER CREW MEMBERS, ANOTHER BEING KILLED. HE LATER SERVED WITH ARKFORCE DURING THE GREEK CIVIL WAR



DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '7915294 L. CPL. J. L. COOMBES. R. TANK R.', 1939-45 STAR; AFRICA STAR; ITALY STAR; DEFENCE AND WAR MEDALS 1939-45, MOUNTED FOR WEAR.

D.C.M. *London Gazette* 13 January 1944:

'In recognition of gallant and distinguished services in Italy.'

The original Recommendation, for an Immediate award, dated 1 October 1943, states:

'On 25th September, 1943, Lance-Corporal John Lathom Coombes was the Gunlayer in the leading tank commanded by a Sergeant supporting the 2/4th Battalion, Hampshire Regiment in an attack at Cava de Tirreni [6 miles north-west of Salerno]. The tank was advancing down the main road which it was unable to leave due to the close precipitous nature of the country. As the tank advanced, it was held up by mines laid on the surface of the road. The Tank Commander got out of the tank to examine the mines when he was immediately shot by two enemy machine guns and fell in front of the tank in the road. Lance-Corporal Coombes immediately assumed command of the tank and engaged both enemy machine gun posts, though they were difficult to locate in the close country.

He then put down smoke from the tank and with great courage got out and ascertained that the tank Commander, who was lying in the road, was dead. He got back into his tank and informed his Troop Leader that he had taken command of the tank and again re-engaged the machine gun posts which then remained silent. With a depleted crew, he kept his tank in action for a further three hours during

which time the tank was subjected to intense mortar fire and sniping. After three hours his tank was hit by an Anti-Tank gun which set it on fire and killed another member of the crew. Lance-Corporal Coombes again displaying sterling courage and devotion to duty ordered evacuation of the tank and still under machine gun fire and sniping, he evacuated successfully the remaining two members of the crew.

His sustained courage, great coolness and fighting spirit was a magnificent example and worthy of the finest traditions of the Royal Tank Regiment. I have the honour to recommend he be awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.'

John Latham Coombes, from Fulham, a 24 year old clerk-salesman at Smithfield Meat Market Allocation Board, joined the Royal Tank Regiment in 1940. Serving as a gunlayer (the crewman who aimed the tanks gun) with the 40th (The King's) Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment as part of the 23rd Armoured Brigade, his regiment, which was equipped with Valentine tanks, serving with the 8th Army in North Africa and was virtually annihilated by German anti-tank fire while crossing the minefield during the first battle of El Alamein in July 1942.



Re equipped and reformed after the battle, the 40th Tanks (and 23 Brigade) went on to fight at Alam El Halfa and Second Alamein, the 40th being attached to the 9th Australian Division. Taking part in the long pursuit of the Afrika Korps and Italian Army across Egypt and Libya, into Tunisia, 40th Tanks acquired the nickname "*Monty's Foxhounds*"

ITALIAN CAMPAIGN AND GALLANTRY AT SALERNO

In July 1943, 23rd Armoured Brigade took part in '*Operation Huskey*', the invasion of Sicily, though 40th Tanks did not take part in the initial landings as they were in the process of converting to Sherman tanks. However they saw their fair share of action after arrival. During the campaign, the brigade did not fight as a unit, its units being detached to support other formations. The brigade historian commented that "*Sicily was the hardest, the bloodiest, and above all, the most disillusioning campaign in which the brigade had served during the war*".

On 9 September 40th Tanks were the only unit from 23 Brigade to take part in the initial landings at Salerno (Operation Avalanche), part of the Invasion of mainland Italy. Assigned to 46th Infantry Division, 40th Tanks, were the first British tank regiment to land in Italy.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Avalanche

Corporal Coombes distinguished himself during the breakout from Salerno, in the difficult surrounding mountainous terrain. The fighting was tricky and costly; with isolated German outposts with snipers having to be dealt with systematically. As noted in his recommendation, Coombes's acts of gallantry were performed on 25 September 1943, his tank supporting a battalion of the Hampshire Regiment during attack on Cava. The War diary for 40th Tanks adds that at the time, Coombes's tank was part of 8 Troop, B Squadron, consisting of just two tanks, which had been ordered to link up with 2nd Hampshire's and advance, followed by a section of Engineers. Having been held up by mines and the tank commander (Sergeant Clark) being killed, as per D.C.M., recommendation, Corporal Coombe's continued to keep his gun in action for three hours, despite being under constant fire, until his tank was finally hit by an anti tank shell which 'brewed up' his Sherman and killed another member of the tanks 5 man crew. Coombes and 2 other members of the tanks crew managed to escape.

Hour, Date, Place.			Summary of events and information.
1943.			"B" Sqn.
SEPT. 24	LA MOLINA.	0600 hrs.	Nos. 6 & 8 Troops moved forward just short of LA MOLINA bridge.
		0725 hrs.	4 Germans surrendered to No. 6 Troop.
		0730 hrs.	17 German parachutists surrendered and were handed over to the infantry.
	CAVA	0930 hrs.	Nos. 6 & 8 Troops entered LA MOLINA to assist in mopping up operations.
		1515 hrs.	The R.E.s. had repaired CAVA bridge and the Sqn. together with Nos. 6 & 8 Troops entered the town where they were joined by the rest of the Sqn. at 1600 hrs.
600328			Lieut. G. Barton who was commanding the leading tank ran on to a mine, was fired on and hit by a Mark VI Special. This was engaged and forced to withdraw.
			Orders were received from 131 Inf. Bde. that the Sqn. and the Recce Troop were to guard the approaches to CAVA, and the road from ARCANGELO. While orders were being given a Nebelwerfer shell dropped on the road, and although no personnel were injured one tank was rendered immobile. No. 6 Troop took up a position at road junction 597332 and No. 7 Troop at road junction 598332. The remainder of the Sqn. moved to 600328 where they leaguered for the night.
			The Bn. after standing by for a possible move stood down at 1800 hrs.
	25 CAVA		RHQ. Tac HQ moved to CAVA, Main HQ being at VIETRI. "C" Sqn. at VIETRI took over from "B" Sqn. at 1500 hrs., and "B" Sqn. proceeded to rest at SALERNO.
			"A" Sqn. The Sqn. remained in leaguer area 685285.
685285			"B" Sqn. No. 8 Troop comprising two tanks were ordered to link up with 2 Hamps and advance up the road followed by a section of R.E.s.
			0615 hrs. The Troop was held up by mines, and No. 7917067 Sgt. Clark, E.J., asked if he could move them. On getting out of the tank he was killed by machine-gun fire. No. 7915294 L/Cpl. Coombes, J.L., took over command of the tank and brought fire to bear, but could not locate the M.C. posts. He then laid smoke and got out to ascertain whether he could render assistance to Sgt. Clark. L/Cpl. Coombes then exploded the mines by firing on them. He remained in this position until 1050 hrs. when his tank was hit by an A.P. shell and 'brewed up'. No. 789447 Tpr. Brady, M.H. being killed.
			0730 hrs. Capt. G.S. Willcocks with one other tank and a recce troop endeavoured to get round the left flank and cut the main road in the region of EPITAFIO DI CAVA. On reaching PASSIANO, after great difficulty owing to the narrow roads, they met half a company of 1/4 Hamps. Together with one platoon they crossed the stream at 588339, afterwards encountering opposition. Further advance was then held up owing to lack

Though it is not mentioned in either the D.C.M. recommendation or the war diary, Corporal Coombes was wounded during the action for which his award was made. This confirmed on casualty List 1278, dated 30 October 1943 which lists him wounded on 25 September 1943. It also notes that Coombes "Remaining at Duty", which is also confirmed in the newspaper article, which said he was "slightly wounded the deed for which the award was made"

CONTINUATION OF THE ITALIAN AND 'ARKFORCE'

The other units of 23 Brigade having arrived, it went on to serve throughout the campaign in Italy, serving under a new commander, Brigadier Robert Arkwright. Taking part in advance through the Gothic and Gustav lines, in late May 1944, 23 Brigade were withdrawn from Italy and returned to Egypt. There is nothing to suggest that Corporal Coombes was not still with his unit during this or any further campaigns during the war, indeed an article relating to his award, published in the West London Observer, 26 November 1943, suggests he was still with his unit.

In August 1944, the brigade was renamed Force 140, later Arkforce after its commander, Brigadier Arkwright and was dismounted from its tanks. The 40th and 50th Tank Regiments were retrained as infantry while 46th Tanks was reorganised with one squadron of armoured cars and one squadron of infantry, this being attached to the 50th Tanks but kept one squadron of Shermans. Arkforce arrived at

Piraeus on 12 October 1944 as part of the British occupying force in Greece when the Germans withdrew. It participated in the repression of the Greek Peoples Liberation Army (ELAS) during the Greek Civil War. Arkforce was disbanded on 8 January 1945 and the 23rd Armoured Brigade regained its name and had its tanks restored by the end of January. It remained in Greece beyond VE Day until the end of the Second World War.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23rd_Armoured_Brigade_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23rd_Armoured_Brigade_(United_Kingdom))



Combes's medals entitlement is confirmed on his WW2 campaign medals application card, noting additionally entitlement to 8th Army emblem. This also notes that Coombes was discharged in 1946 and that his last unit was 40th R.T.R., which confirms he will have served in Greece



FULHAM BOY WINS D.C.M.

The D.C.M. has been awarded to Pte. John Latham Coombes, son of Mr. and Mrs. Frank V. Coombes, for 28 years residents in Rannock Road, Fulham Palace Road.

An ex-pupil of the Lower Latymer Foundation School, he was employed at the outbreak of war as a clerk-salesman in Smithfield Meat Market and finally with the Meat Allocation Board, Shoreditch. He joined the Royal Tank Regiment in July, 1940, and, previous to embarking overseas, married Miss Marjorie Stubbs, youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Stubbs, of Leybourne Avenue, West Ealing. His battalion was with General Montgomery and the Eighth Army during the whole of the North African campaign. Later, in Italy, he was slightly wounded whilst performing the deed (details of which are not yet known) for which the award was made. He is the first man in the battalion to win this coveted decoration.



Condition, some small scratches to obverse of DCM, otherwise EF. Sold with copy recommendation and some digital research, including War diary entries for September 1943

An extremely fine and scarce Sherman tank crews D.C.M. with a superb fighting citation