

# Brief History Of The British 7th Armoured Division



## "The Desert Rats"

The British 7th Armoured Division is one of the most famous formations that ever served in the British Army. It was formed in the desert of North Africa just before the Second World War and fought in most of the major campaigns of the war, ending up in the heart of the Third Reich itself - Berlin. Much detail can be found throughout this website and within the reference material highlighted on the [Other Sites and Books page](#). What follows here is a brief outline of the Divisions history, but much can be found elsewhere by careful reading.

The British Army had deployed small armoured car forces in the Western Desert of Egypt and Cyrenaica for many years, with the first ones operating in the Western Desert towards the end of the Great War. They were used to fend off attacks on the Egyptian frontier by Senussi tribesmen from Cyrenaica. Between the wars Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and eventually Ethiopia became under the control of Mussolini's expanding African Empire. So after the 'Munich Crisis' in 1938, the British decided to strengthen their forces in Egypt to protect the vital link of the Suez Canal in the event of hostilities.

To this end a 'Mobile Force' was established on the coast at Mersa Matruh in 1938, 120 miles west of Alexandria. This force consisted of the Cairo Cavalry Brigade, made up of three armoured regiments, the 7th, 8th and 11th Hussars and the 1st Royal Tank Regiment (RTR). They were supported by 3rd Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) and as Divisional troops, a company of Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) and a Field Ambulance unit. It was this force that was to form the nucleus of the Division that was to follow.

The equipment that this force had was recent vintage, with 11th Hussars operating in [Rolls Royce Armoured Cars](#), from the Great War. 1st RTR brought with them [Light Tanks MKVI](#) which were already worn out, while 7th Hussars had tanks of an earlier vintage, with 8th Hussars only having 15cwt trucks, with machine guns and 3rd RHA was equipped with First World War vintage [3.7 inch Howitzers](#). In October 1938, this force was joined by an infantry unit, 1st Battalion (Bn) The King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC). This 'Mobile Force' was often referred to as the 'Immobile Force' in Cairo, but fortunately, soon after its creation [Major General Percy Hobart](#) (latter to command the

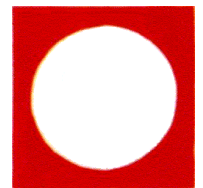
"Funnies" of the 79th Armoured Division) arrived to take command of what was now called the Mobile Division, on 27th September 1938. He started an intensive and effective training programme to ensure all the different elements could work effectively together.

The Division was reorganised into three brigades, with the arrival of 6th RTR, as the Light Armoured Brigade, the Heavy Armoured Brigade (although it was only equipped with Light Tanks and a few [A9](#) Cruiser Tanks) and the Pivot Group. [Click here to see the Order of Battle as this time](#). The Pivot Group existed to supply the tanks with their essential artillery and infantry support and was later to be renamed the Support Group.

During the winter of 1938-39, the Mobile Division pulled itself together in Cairo and then in May 1939 it went to the Western Desert to put General Hobart's ideas into practice. He intended that all his men would be desert-wise and be able to live, fight and win battles in the wastes of the Western Desert. The 1st RTR had already served in the desert before, in 1936, so they had already built up considerable desert experience, but undoubtedly the most experienced unit in either the British or Italian armies was the 11th (Prince Albert's Own) Hussars - "The Cherry Pickers". It took time to make the men and equipment ready for fighting a desert war, so the Division set about learning desert lore, improving navigation skills and fitting sand filters to the vehicles.

With the outbreak of war with Germany on 3rd September 1939, the Mobile Division moved up to the Egyptian-Libyan frontier, where they took up positions. With Italy apparently not being keen to join Germany in all out war, field training began again, but the first blow to the Division fell when the war office relieve General Hobart of his command, having fallen out with the new G.O.C General Sir Henry Wilson. As he drove away his men cheered him all the way. He was then left to serve his country as best he could as Corporal in the Home Guard until Winston Churchill recognised his talents. General Hobart then went onto form the 11th Armoured Division and the 79th Armoured Division.

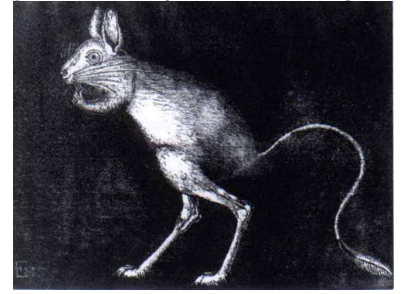
In December 1939, [Major General Michael Creagh](#) took command, with it continuing its exercises and receiving better equipment, through out the winter. During this time the three brigades changed their names. The Light Armoured became the 7th Armoured Brigade, the Heavy Armoured, the 4th Armoured Brigade and the Pivot Group became the Support Group, with the latter now also containing 2nd Bn, The Rifle Brigade. At this time the Division Sign was as shown to the right.



On 16th February 1940, the Mobile Division became the 7th Armoured Division and at about the same time the famous Jerboa Divisional Sign appeared. The story of the Jerboa badge is told by Len Burritt on this video clip ([Birth of the Desert Rats \(ITV Anglia News\)](#)), which explains how of General Creagh (the Divisional commander) saw a young local boy with Jerboa in his pocket. He then traced the shape of a Jerboa in the sand using stones. Later a picture was produced for a design of desert rat (pictured below) which was approved by the officers and men of the Division and this

was then drawn up by Trooper Ken Hill of RTR. The first six badges were produced by Nurses and distributed among the men of Divisional HQ.

The men took to the Jerboa and adopted the nick-name of "The Desert Rats". It is worth pointing out that the term 'Desert Rats' is often used to describe any soldier of the Desert Army or men that fought in Tobruk. Indeed the Australians have a Rats of Tobruk Association, but the only true "Desert Rats" are the men who served in the 7th Armoured Division, whose shoulders or vehicles wore the Jerboa emblem. This new sign is shown above Left. A picture of the shoulder flashes can be found on the [Memorabilia](#) page.



NB. The name 'Rats of Tobruk' was well earned by Australians and the other commonwealth forces defending Tobruk and in fact breaking out to help in Operation Crusader, as they were a thorn in Rommel's side for a long time diverting troops and equipment from the main front line. It was Lord Haw-Haw's "poor desert rats of Tobruk" Radio Berlin broadcast was in 1941. We should all be grateful for what they all did over seventy years ago and without them the outcome of the desert war may have been greatly different.

In simple terms some of the Desert Rats (men from 7th Armoured Division) were also [Rats of Tobruk](#) and the and likewise some were also Australians that were not Rats of Tobruk, but not all of the Desert Rats were Rats of Tobruk and not all of the Rats of Tobruk were Desert Rats!

It is also fair to say the many a desert veteran has said, "I was a desert rat" as this became a general name for those who fought in the Western Desert. It was in fact Churchill who said ..... "It will be enough for any man to say that he marched and fought with the Desert Army". That is the true epitaph of all who fought in the dust and heat of North Africa, whatever their nationality, the units they served in or the battles they fought!

In April 1940, it became clear that the Italians were moving troops upto the frontier wire near Sollum and so at the end of that month the Division began to deploy. The 11th Hussars and Support Group took up positions near Mersa Matruh, from where the Hussars could move out and reconnoitre the wastes of the Western Desert. During this period 3rd RHA had been re-equipped with both [2-pdr](#) and [37mm Bofors Anti-Tank guns](#) so its four batteries could perform and anti-tank role within the Division. On 10th June 1940, Italy entered the war, the 11th Hussars, who had been patrolling the border wire for months crossed it, to begin their war.

What followed is chronicled as part of series of engagement pages, but during June 1940 the Division took part in a series of [border raids](#) ([Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#)) along the frontier and the counter attack at [Sidi Barrani](#), in November that year, where large numbers of Italian prisoners were taken. Then in January 1941, it took part in the successful capture of [Tobruk and Bardia](#) and culminating with the action at [Beda Fomm](#), in February 1941, when the retreating Italians were held by a small force while the rest of the Division caught up causing the surrender of over 25,000 Italians. This campaign effectively destroyed the Italian Army in North Africa. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#)

When the Deutsche Afrika Korps and Italians attacked in April 1941 the Division was refitting in the Nile Delta, but was soon back in the Western Desert. In May 1941, the

Division took part in [Operation Brevity](#) and later in [Operation Battleaxe](#), in an attempt to lift the siege of Tobruk, but suffered heavy losses in tanks and men. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#). In November 1941, the Division now strengthened by the addition of the 22nd Armoured Brigade took part in [Operation Crusader](#) and particularly the bloody battles around [Sidi Rezegh](#), [Rommel's Raid](#), [The Axis Withdrawal](#) and [Clearing Cyrenaica](#), where it was nearly wiped out. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#).

In January/February 1942, the Axis forces attacked again, but the 7th Armoured Division was refitting after the Crusader battles and did not return to the Western Desert until April that year. In May and June 1942, it was involved in the battles for the [Gazala Line and the 'Cauldron'](#), before having to withdraw to the El Alamein line with the rest of the British Army, where it was involved in the battle of [First Alamein](#). [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#). After the British forces withdrew behind the El Alamein line the Division went through major refitting and training and played a part in the defeat of the German Panzer forces during the [Battle of Alam Halfa](#), in late August and early September 1942.

Having completed its retraining and been refitted the Division was ready for the British offensive of [El Alamein](#) in October 1942, where its main role was to participate in the armoured breakout, called 'Operation Supercharge'. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#). After breaking through the Axis lines, the 7th Armoured Division and other British formations pursued the retreating Germans and Italians, along the [North African coast](#), back over the old battle grounds of 1940 and 1941, taking Tripoli on the way. By early 1943, the Division was ready to take part in the final push to expel the Axis forces from North Africa. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#). In April the [final attacks](#) started and on 7th May, the 11th Hussars entered Tunis to capture the city. By 12th May the war in North Africa was over and the Division enjoyed a well earned rest.

The 7th Armoured Division, did not take place in the invasion of Sicily, but did land in [Italy](#) a few days after the main invasion at Salerno. Once ashore it started to work its way up the west coast of Italy, taking part in the assault across the River Volturno, before being withdrawn from the line and returning to England in November 1943. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#).

Once back in [England](#) the Division set about re-equipping and training on its new equipment and preparing for the Invasion of Northern Europe, in Normandy, while based in Norfolk. The 7th Armoured Division started to land in [Normandy](#) late on D-Day, 6th June itself, and quickly started to form ready for battle. On 12th June, it fought elements of the 2nd Panzer and the Panzer Lehr Divisions at [Villers-Bocage](#) and thereafter in the action known as the [Battle of the Brigade Box](#), before withdrawing to the British lines, having effectively caused both German formations to cease to be battle worthy. After this it took part in the various British and Canadian assaults to break out and take Caen, such as [Operation Goodwood](#), [Operation Spring](#) and [Operation Bluecoat](#), before finally breaking out and racing to the [River Seine](#). [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#).



Now out of the killing fields that were Normandy, the Division now pushed on through Northern France into [Belgium](#). Here the Division liberated Ghent and then continued to clear German forces from the rest of Belgium and Holland, up to the [River Maas](#). Here they remained for November and December 1944, into January 1945, continuing to keep the pressure on the German forces on the [Maas](#). In January 1945, the Division took part in [Operation Blackcock](#), to clear the Germans from the Rivers Roer, Wurm and Maas.



By late 1944 and into early 1945 the Division adopted the final of its three Divisional signs as shown here, which it was to use until the end of the war.

Having successfully completed the clearance, the 7th Armoured Division now prepared to cross the Rhine into the heart of Germany, as part of [Operation Plunder](#), which took place in March 1945, with the eventual goal of capturing Hamburg. In the weeks that followed it fought its way across Germany, via the [Teutoburger Wald](#) to the River Weser, where fierce battles took place with fanatical SS and Hitler Jugend forces. [Click here to see the Divisional Order Of Battle at this time](#). By mid April 1945, the Division was poised to move on [Hamburg](#), but it had to fight its way all the way to the suburbs of the city. On the way it did release several men that had served in the Division, from a POW camp at Fallingbommel. Elsewhere some elements of the Division became involved with the efforts to clear up the Concentration Camp at Belsen, which had been liberated by 11th Armoured Division, fighting on the 7th Armoured right flank. Finally, after fierce battles in the suburbs of Hamburg, the Division accepted the surrender of the city on 3rd May 1945, moving into it the same afternoon.

Over the next few weeks some units moved onto Kiel (which many were glad to do because of the stench of the dead in the rubble), but the final accolade for this famous fighting force was to come. In July 1945 it was ordered to [Berlin](#), to join the British Garrison there and to also take place in the Victory Parade. This they did on 21st July 1945, parading past Winston Churchill himself. The parade was led by 3rd RHA, the Armoured Regiments, 5th RHA, 8th Hussars and the incomparable 11th Hussars, who drew a special cheer from the ranks of the Division as they went past. Then came the Engineers, the Queens, the DLI and Devonshire's and representatives of all the other elements of this great Division, which had fought for so long and so far, through victory and defeat, right to the capital of its enemy. Later on Winston Churchill addressed the men of the Division as the 'Winston' Club and his words can be found [here](#).

By now the 7th Armoured Division had been fighting for five years. Many good men had died in the process and many more wounded, but it had fought through adversity and success, from the heat of the Western Desert, through the mud of Italy, the killing fields of Normandy, through Belgium and Holland. It then had to fight its way right across Germany in the final bloody battles of the war, to Hamburg. Its men had proved themselves worthy of the hardy desert animal on their shoulders and vehicles and had been rewarded by parading through the enemy's capital in triumph!

At its HQ in Berlin the Division erected a signpost showing its route to Berlin, which serves as a fitting statement of its achievements. This is shown below;



Later a Memorial Stone (below) was erected when the Division entered Berlin in July 1945, at the end of the autobahn. Later, when roadworks in this area made it necessary to move the monument, so it was removed and taken to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where it stands today.



After the war the Division continued to serve in Germany, but in January 1948 it was disbanded, being perpetuated by 7th Armoured Brigade. It was reformed in March 1949 and served with the British Army On the Rhine (BAOR) until it was finally disbanded in January 1957. In its entire history it had only been in the United Kingdom for about six months. Some of the regiments that served have been disbanded or merged over the years, but the Jerboa emblem is still worn proudly by the men of the 7th Armoured Brigade. It is good to know that one of the first Brigades that served with the Division, but left it, now continues its heritage. Likewise the other original Armoured Brigade (the 4th) is also still serving in the British Army, wearing their "Black Rat" badge, but now as the 4th Mechanized Brigade, since 2007.

In 2014 an end of an era was announced by the MoD that as part of the reorganisation of the British Army that the 7th Armoured Brigade, would cease to exist and become the 7th Infantry Brigade. The new Brigade will continue to wear the Jerboa and carry on the traditions of the Desert Rats. Effectively, after over 74 years of existence there will no longer be a 7th Armoured Brigade in the British Army.

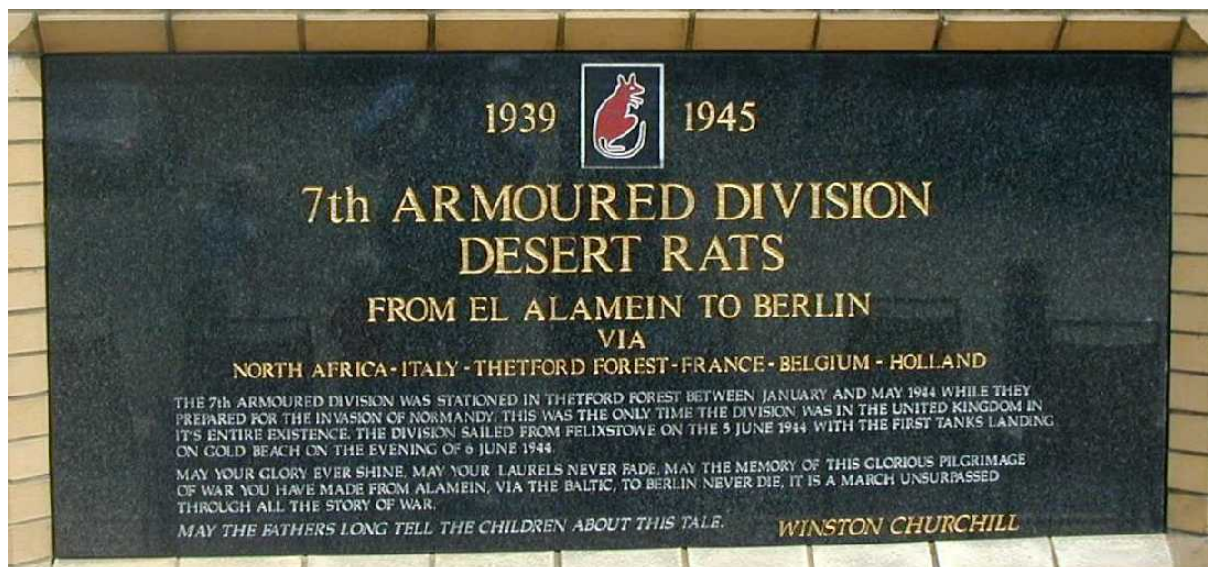
Over the years the men that served with 7th Armoured Division have become fewer in number, but on 23rd October 1998, a permanent [memorial](#) to this famous formation



(shown below) was dedicated at Mundford, in Thetford Forest, Norfolk, by Field Marshall Lord Carver, who served with 1st Royal Tank Regiment with the Division in 1944 and later Commanded 4th Armoured Brigade.



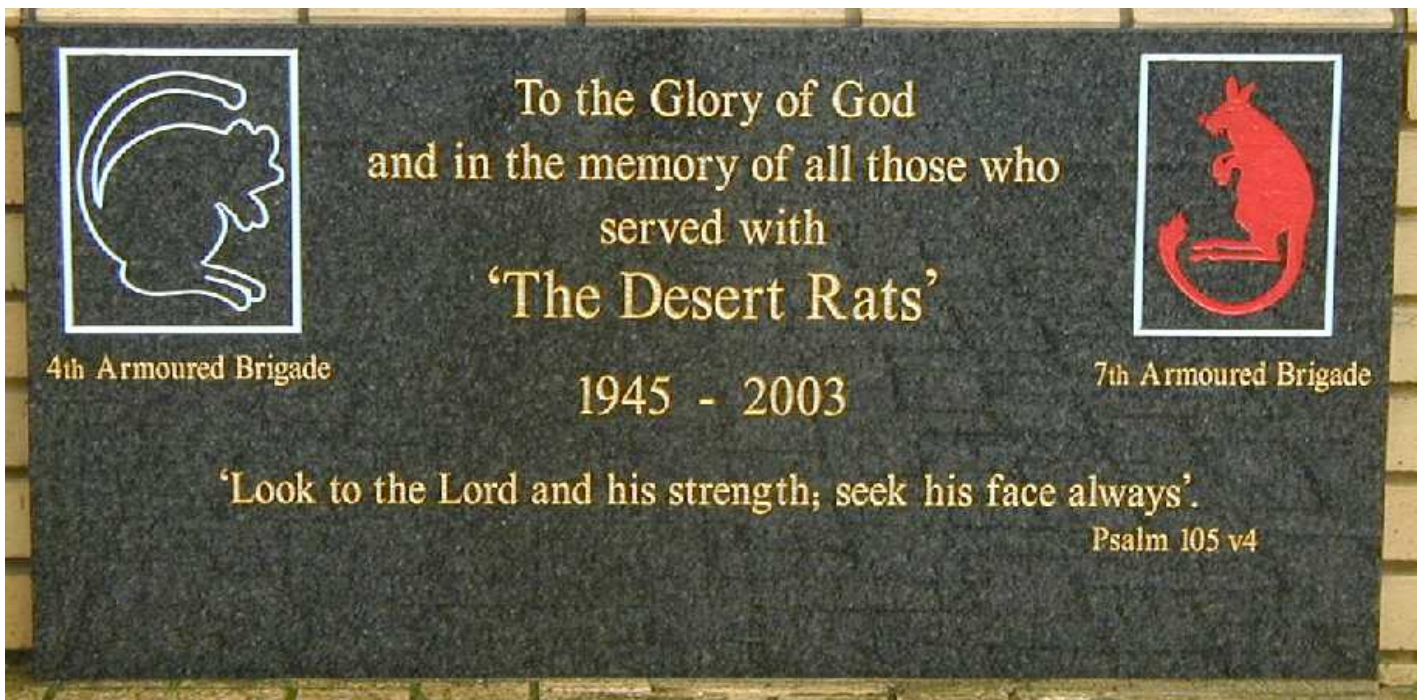
On 10th November 2002, the memorial was Dedicated by the Bishop of Lynn, the Rt. Rev. Anthony Footit (assisted by Rev. David Hanwell), during the Remembrance Day service that year, to the memory of the Division and those who served in it, giving the 'Desert Rats' a permanent War Memorial here in the UK.



During the Open Day on the 27th June 2004 the present day successors to the Division, namely 4th and 7th Armoured Brigades, installed an additional plaque on the Memorial plinth, commemorating the Desert Rats from 1945 to date. The Dedication of the



plaque was conducted by Rev. David Hanwell in the presence of Brigadier Adrian Bradshaw Commanding 7th Armoured Brigade and other senior officers from both the 4th and 7th Armoured Brigades.



Please click here to find out more about the location of [7th Armoured Division \(The Desert Rats\) Memorial](#).

## *Floreat Gerboa*

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