



Desert Rats at War: North Africa. Italy. Northwest Europe

George Forty

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70 years ago, on 7 June 1944, the British 7th Armored Division landed in Normandy, halfway through a wartime journey that had started in north Africa. Formed on 16 February 1940, it adopted the Jerboa as its divisional sign—and while many units that fought in the desert call themselves by the name, 7th Armoured Division are the original ‘Desert Rats’. The division helped destroy the Italian Tenth Army at Beda Fomm on 7 February 1941, defeat the Desert Fox—Rommel—at El Alamein in October 1942, and drive Axis forces out of North Africa. After the desert, 7th Armored Division landed at Salerno on 15 September 1943, in time to help repulse concerted German counterattacks, before—as part of U.S. Fifth Army’s British X Corps—it took Naples and crossed the Volturno.

Pulled out of Italy, it reached England in January 1944 where it prepared to enter the Northwestern European theater at Gold Beach from 7 June, equipped with the new Cromwell and the Sherman Firefly. The division had difficulties in Normandy, particularly at Villers-Bocage, and suffered the ignominy of having its GOC—George Erskine—and a number of officers sacked and moved to other positions. Erskine was replaced by Gerald Lloyd Verney on 4 August 1944. He helped reestablish confidence and discipline to the division which took part in the Allied liberation of France and Belgium, entering Ghent in September. Verney was, in turn, replaced by Lewis Lyne in November 1944 and Lyne led the division on their final advance through Holland and into Germany.

The Desert Rats ended the war with the liberation of Hamburg on 3 May 1945 after one of the most remarkable military journeys in history and was chosen to take part in the Allied victory parade held in Berlin on 21 July 1945. Winston Churchill recognized the achievements of the division when he spoke at the opening of a soldiers’ club in Berlin: ‘Dear Desert Rats! May your glory ever shine! May your laurels never fade! May the memory of this glorious pilgrimage of war which you have made from Alamein, via the Baltic to Berlin never die!’

Desert Rats at War is an evocation of what it was like to serve with the division, in the African desert and Europe, from the first encounters by the Mobile Force in 1940 to Berlin in 1945. Full of eyewitness accounts and private photos, Desert Rats at War has been completely revised and updated, with additional text, maps and photographs.

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