

**THE BATTLE OF MEDICINA**  
**14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> KING'S HUSSARS**  
**ITALY, 16<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 1945**

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*“Every man thinks meanly of himself for never having been a  
soldier; or not having been at sea”*

Dr Samuel Johnson 1709-1784



## Introduction

The question of whether the Italian Campaign was necessary in the first place is still a subject that is debated amongst historians. In 1943 the war in the desert of North Africa had been brought to a successful conclusion by the allies, the axis forces had been destroyed and the last great city on the Mediterranean coast, Tunisia, had surrendered on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1943. As soon as the last vehicles and troops had marched through this great city in the Victory parade, the politicians and planners started scrabbling around to continue the ground war.

That Europe needed to be tackled next was obvious, the Americans were keen to get on with it and Stalin was constantly pressing for the western allies to do more, pointing out at every given opportunity how hard his armies were fighting (and dying) in the cause to free the world of Fascism. It wasn't that the Americans and British didn't want to invade France it was more that they couldn't. To launch an invasion of France would require a great deal of Landing Craft and even at this stage of the war there were not enough to carry the required amount of troops needed to launch an assault on France, let alone enough trained divisions available.

With Stalin insisting on action, and claiming (quite rightly) that it was the USSR that was prosecuting the war on the ground in any substance, the allies needed to come up with a plan quickly to get back into the ground war. Churchill had always been an exponent of striking in southern Europe, Italy specifically, in what he called the "soft underbelly" of Europe; the Americans were more reticent and it needed all the diplomatic persuasion and cajoling that Churchill could muster to bring them around to his way of thinking. It was with reluctance that the Americans acquiesced and agreed to launch an invasion of Italy.

The idea to launch an invasion of Italy did have some merits; if it was successful and the Italians were knocked out of the war this may make an all-out invasion on Europe unnecessary. It would also create a second front which would draw troops away from fighting the Russians having the dual effect of relieving some of the pressure on Soviet troops and placating Marshall Stalin (to a degree) at the same time. As it was, although Italy was knocked out of the war, the invasion of Italy did not mean that Operation Overlord was rendered unnecessary. D-Day still took place and the war in Italy rumbled on until the conclusion of hostilities in May 1945. What it did do, which was hugely useful was that it tied down 18 German Divisions that could have been used on the Eastern Front, but on the flip side of that coin, it took 18 Allied Divisions to do the tying down. Nevertheless, to do nothing and allow the Soviets to carry the burden of the fight was intolerable so it was decided that Italy would be the next target for the British and American armies.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1943 the allies invaded Sicily, by early September they were ready to move into the Italian mainland, the first troops landed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September and by the 8<sup>th</sup> the Italians had surrendered. With their usual expedience the Germans quickly filled the void left by the Italian troops and continued the fight against the allies. What lay ahead was a long and bloody campaign that would be as bad as any other fought in World War Two (WW2).

## The 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars

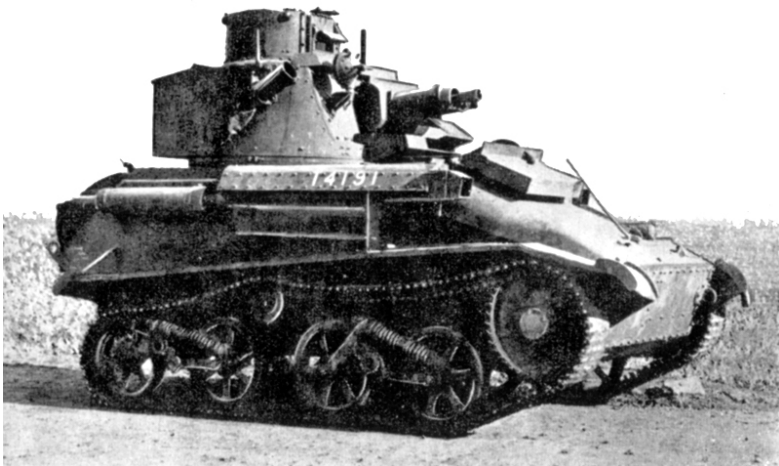


When WW2 broke out in September 1939 the 14<sup>th</sup> /20<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars (14/20H) were stationed, as they had been at the onset of WW1, in India. They had given up their horses in August 1938 being one of the last regular British Cavalry Regiments to do so. The regiment was now equipped with the Mk VI light tank and Bren Gun Carriers. It was hoped that the regiment would join an active Brigade (Bde) and get into the war as soon as possible; sadly for the regiment, this was not to be the case and would not be for a good few years. Many a senior officer of the 14/20H thought they knew why, they blamed a certain man called

Montgomery who had had dealings with the regiment when they were based in Abbasia Barracks near Cairo in the early 1930's. In his book *The Ramnuggur Boys*, a previous Commanding Officer of the 14/20H, John Pharo-Tomlin quotes Nigel Hamilton from his book, *Monty – The making of a General*, saying:

“.....The 14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> was again in the same Brigade as the 17<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Lancers. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Warwickshire Regiment, under a certain Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Law Montgomery, were based at Alexandria. Although only a Lieutenant-Colonel, ‘Monty’ was already making an impression locally both with his superiors and with the other regiments, not always a favourable one. While he approved of the 12<sup>th</sup> Lancers, who had mechanised with the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, being the two most junior non-amalgamated regiments, he thought the cavalry were a nonsense, not serious soldiers, just there for hunting, Polo and fishing, he told them so.....”

Rightly or wrongly the regiment were of the opinion that it was this encounter with Montgomery that was to keep them out of the fighting in the Western Desert and mainland Europe until the war and Germany was in its death throes.



(Left) the Mk VI Light tank that the 14/20H were equipped with at the start of the war.

The only move that the 14/20H made in the early stages of the war was to move locations in India when the regiment moved to Meerut.

In 1941 it was decided to re-instate some of the old cavalry regiments that had been disbanded after previous wars, selected regular cavalry regiment in the British army would be responsible for providing the backbone to these new regiments, and for their training. The

14/20H were ordered to send 9 Officers and 102 other ranks to England to staff the reformed 26<sup>th</sup> Hussars, this regiment was to be commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel John Norton.

The 14/20H were finally mobilised in May 1941, following the March 1941 coup in Iraq when the Prime Minister of the country who was pro-German removed the sitting Regent from the throne and moved to cut the oil-line from Kirkuk to Haifa. The British responded aggressively and managed to stabilise the situation but more troops were needed to maintain the fragile situation and so in June the regiment, along with others of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Armoured Bde (2IA Bde) sailed from Bombay en-route to Basra. In 1941 the 2IA Bde Consisted of:



4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Cambridge's own Lancers



13<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught's own Lancers



14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars



1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Bombay Grenadiers



15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment Royal Artillery



32<sup>nd</sup> Field Squadron Indian Engineers

The 14/20H and the remainder of the 2<sup>nd</sup> IA Bde arrived in Iraq on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1941 and quickly worked on their vehicles in order to bring them into a condition where they could be used for war fighting. Even after leaving an India in summer the heat of Iraq was incredible, there were many casualties from the heat in these early days and the adjutant, Captain Richard McAllen died of heatstroke on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July.

Although Iraq and Persia was not a 'main' area of operation within the great scheme of things, there were still some sharp actions fought there that the regiment took part in and men were killed and wounded. The 14/20H saw action at Qasr-i-Shirin which saw the award of an immediate MC for Captain 'Bodge' Browne who displayed immense bravery whilst assisting another crew who had been bogged. Browne went to their assistance and managed to free the vehicle whilst being fired upon the whole time. It was during this campaign that the regiment claims to be the first Allied troops to make official contact with troops from Russia when Major Bob Stephen and a Company of Gurkhas' made contact with them at Kazvin.



When the campaign in Iraq and Persia concluded, the regiment, which was now commanded by Lt Col 'Freckles' Tilney left Iraq bound for Egypt, where they dis-embarked in November 1943. After they arrived they went through an intense period of training, particularly in infantry and tank co-operation as well as receiving new equipment, perhaps now they would see some serious action. The, (at least perceived), curse of Monty however, seemed to still be in place and the regiment was still to see no action in a major theatre of war throughout 1944; the only excitement being a 700 mile forced march to Alexandria to quell some rioters.

*(Left) Lt Col 'Freckles' Tilney, Commanding Officer of the 14/20KH at Medicina.*

At last, at the end of 1944 the regiment was warned off to take part in the Italian Campaign. The fighting there was eating up troops and vehicles at an alarming rate and more were required if the campaign was to be prosecuted to a successful conclusion. The regiment sailed just after Christmas with the main body arriving at Taranto on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 1945. The regiment was now to split up and C Sqn very quickly drew their tanks and moved forward to the much destroyed village of Fontanelice which sat on the main road between Florence and Imola. B Sqn meanwhile had already left the main body of the regiment and moved to a position 60 miles north of Florence to take over from a Sqn of the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Regiment becoming part of the 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Div. The remainder of the Regiment, RHQ and A Sqn, moved out of their barracks at San Donato seven miles east of Florence to Castel del Rio where they established a regimental tactical HQ. The 1947 edition of the 'The Hawk', the regimental journal of the 14/20H says of this period:

*"B Squadrons role was almost that of an artillery battery, and they carried out a great number of successful indirect shoots. C Squadrons job was not so nearly as interesting. They were not allowed to fire, having to lie doggo and act as an unpleasant surprise should the Germans advance".*



In February/March 1945 the 14/20H were withdrawn to Cesena, a small town west of Rimini where 'A' Sqn, along with a troop each from B and C Sqn's donated to make up the required strength, converted to 'Kangaroo' tanks which were turret-less Sherman's or Priest self-propelled guns (without the gun) which had been converted to carry Infantry. At the same time the regiment was transferred to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Lorried Infantry Bde (43GLI) which had been in Italy since August 1943. This move to the 43GLI was met with delight by all ranks of the 14/20H because they had already seen service with the 31<sup>st</sup> Indian Armoured Division and had made many friends amongst them. At the time the 14/20H was attached to it, the 43GLI consisted of:



2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles



2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles



2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles



2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Tank Regiment



14<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> King's Hussars



25<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment RA



R Battery 15 Med Regiment RA



78th (Duke of Lancaster's Yeomanry) Med Regiment RA

The 43GLI Bde also had a Battery of Polish Self-Propelled (SP) guns and a Royal Engineer Assault Sqn consisting of a troop of Sherman Dozers, a troop of Bridge Layers and a troop of AVRE's. The 31GLI formed part of the II Polish Corps which in turn was part of the Eighth Army.



During this period of re-organisation the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles (2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR) were converted to ride in the Kangaroos that would be crewed by 'A' Sqn of the 14/20H. These kangaroos were the Sherman variety and had a crew of two (a driver and a commander/machine gunner) they could carry up to 10 fully equipped infantrymen in the back. The 14/20H was also to provide the tanks that supported the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR and a friendship grew between the two regiments that lasts to the present day.

*(Left), a Kangaroo shown carrying Infantry. In combat the men would be covered from fire within the hull.*



The final offensive that was to be launched by the Allies in Italy began on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1945. The war was already won and the Germans knew it but the German soldier of WW2 was a tenacious, aggressive and resourceful fighter. The ground that the 43GLI Bde was to advance over was perfect for defence, and in this art, the Germans were past masters. As the map above shows, the terrain was littered with Vineyards, rivers and canals which of course are natural obstacles for armoured warfare and can be held with small forces. Even a single machine gun could hold up an advance and force the advancing troops to deploy, to deal with it, each time causing more delay. As well as the natural features there was also the small towns and villages interspersed around the area, which brought with them all the horrors of fighting in a built up area.

The Bde's immediate role in the advance was to establish crossings over the various rivers and canals in order to allow the II Polish Corps to pass through them and maintain the advance. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April after five days of heavy fighting and stubborn opposition, the Bde crossed the River *Santerno*, by the next day the advance had reached the approaches to the River *Sillaro* but the Corps commander was worried that in attempting to cross, his forces would be vulnerable to a counter-attack from the town of Medicina on the right flank of the crossing. He ordered the commander of the 43GLI Bde, Brigadier 'Tochi' Barker, himself a Gurkha Officer, to make a push up the road that would take in the built up areas of Speranza, Marochia and the vital communications hub of Medicina, this would either cause the German defenders to flee or surrender or at worst, force them to give battle.

The Germans troops defending the area were from the 4<sup>th</sup> Parachute Division and although battered and bruised from the relentless fighting that they had endured, they were no pushovers. They were well trained well equipped and importantly well led. The option to flee or surrender was highly unlikely to appeal to them, it was expected that they would fight, and fight hard, the first allies to find out just how hard the enemy would fight was the 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> GR who made an attempt to cross on the morning of April the 15<sup>th</sup>. Although they succeeded in crossing the *Sillaro* under intense German fire they were unable to hold the small bridgehead on the northern bank that they had formed and were forced to withdraw. The 2<sup>nd</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>GR made a second attempt in the early hours of the 16<sup>th</sup> and this time they managed to hold on to a small bridgehead for long enough to allow the Engineers to lay a bridge which they completed at 0700 that morning. As soon as the bridge was down the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>GR crossed on the backs of the 2RTR tanks and advanced hell for leather to the town of Formasaccia.

Lt Col Tilney, commanding the 14/20H Battle group, which, as well as RHQ and C Sqn 14/20H, also consisted of 'A' Sqn 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Tank Regiment (2RTR) and two Companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR mounted on the Kangaroos of 'A' Sqn 14/20H, was now ordered by the Bde Commander to cross the *Sillaro* and continue the advance to Medicina. The RTR Sqn was to cross the River first and form a protective shoulder on the left flank that would protect C Sqn 14/20H who would act as the punch of the advance guard along with a single troop of 'A' Sqn Kangaroo's, carrying a platoon of Gurkhas of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR. The remaining Kangaroos would be escorted by 'B' Sqn 14/20H and together they would form the main body of the advance. The crossing began, after a delay, at 0945 on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of April.

It wasn't long before the advance encountered problems, the vineyards which were irrigated by small canals and ditches were extremely difficult to negotiate and the slowness of the advance provided the defending Germans ideal opportunities to inflict losses on the 14/20H battle group.

The first casualties for the 14/20H occurred at 1300 just



outside the village of Madonna del Silvaro. The Troop Leader of C Sqn's 1<sup>st</sup> Troop, Lieutenant George Camburn was wounded when his Sherman was hit by a 105/25 Self Propelled, (SP), Gun crewed by the Falschirmjaeger Sturmgeschutze Brigade XI, who were equipped with the Italian built Semovente 105/25 (*above*) and provided the armoured element of the defence of Medicina.

With 1<sup>st</sup> Troop held up the advance was taken over by C Sqn's 2<sup>nd</sup> Troop, led by Lieutenant Russell Burgham, it took a further two hours for the Gurkhas and tanks to deal with the two SP guns that had engaged the lead elements before the advance could continue, but not before there had been more casualties. Lance Sergeant Higginbottom's Sherman was also hit as it dashed through the vineyard, it immediately burst into flames and killing the co-driver, Trooper John Murray from Glasgow, who was burned alive in the inferno. There were enemy infantry everywhere, dug in, in well prepared defensive positions. As Burgham pulled up in a fire position adjacent to a Farmhouse he was hit in the rear of his tank by a German armed with an anti-tank rocket, either a Panzerschreck or Panzerfaust, it didn't matter, the German anti-tank man was killed by another vehicles machine gun which seemed to take the sting out of the German defence which now lessened, and finally stopped when the German defenders emerged from their trenches and were taken prisoner. The advance could at last get back under way and was now led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Troop's Sgt, Henry Hall. His tank was hit no less than 5 times during the dash to Medicina but he continued to fight his tank until it finally gave up the ghost. Undaunted this brave Sgt continued to fight from another vehicle. For this act of devotion to duty and aggression Sgt Hall was awarded an immediate Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). The vanguard of the 14/20H battle group hit the outskirts of the town of Medicina at around 1815.

With A Coy of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR having arrived a hour or so earlier and already making probing attacks into the town itself the Bde Commander, Brigadier Barker raced up to the RHQ tank of 'Freckles' Tilney and told him that as enemy resistance was faltering, the time was ripe to launch an attack on the town immediately. C Sqn 14/20H were ordered, by the CO, to attack at once, with A Sqn 2RTR providing the protection from counter-attack on the left flank.



*(Above) Terrence Cuneo's depiction of the Battle of Medicina, on the right can be seen Subedar Raghu Gurung killing a German anti-tank team with his Kukri.*



Because of the losses that C Sqn had already suffered in the approaches to Medicina, Tilney decided to add the two RHQ tanks to the attack and promptly ordered them to attach themselves to C Sqn. Major 'Bodge' Browne (*left*), commanding C Sqn now spoke to his tanks over the radio saying, *"let's show them a good old cavalry charge, fingers out and follow me"*. With that he led his Sqn down the Via Saffi into the town.

Medicina is a medieval market town and as such it is littered with narrow streets surrounded by old buildings with cellars and attics. The Germans were defending every building and street with all weapon systems at their disposal, this included 88mm Guns, a small amount of SP guns, Panzerschreck, Panzer Faust and all the other various weapons that the German infantryman was armed with. The fighting was as intense as it was fierce. As the tanks and Kangaroos of the 14/20H battle group poured into the town the defenders, seasoned though they were could not believe the ferocity of the attack, prisoners later agreed that the scene of so much armour appearing in the fading light was extremely unnerving, (in the

fading light the Germans took the Kangaroo's to be Sherman's too, adding to the amount of tanks they were facing).

The Gurkha's now moved from room to room, cellar to cellar and house to house fighting every inch of the way. The tanks of C Sqn were right there with them, hard on the heels of the men from Nepal, using the 75mm guns on the Sherman's to great effect blasting holes in the walls of the buildings to allow the Gurkhas alternative entry points, destroying 88mm guns being used in the anti-tank role and killing German Infantrymen. The bayonet and kukri were well used on that evening of April the 16<sup>th</sup>. Major Browne himself destroyed another assault gun whose subsequent explosion brought down a house behind it. Behind Browne, Squadron Sergeant Major Albert Long from Birmingham was killed by a single shot from a German marksman as he stood in his turret. The fighting continued unabated.

As the tanks reached the town square, Major Browne's luck ran out. His Sherman was hit by an anti-tank rocket and set on fire. His gunner, Trooper James Burt, another Glaswegian was wounded by the impact of the rocket, dying the next day, and his operator Sgt Evans received serious burns, Browne himself was badly wounded in the leg and out of the fight. His Driver, Trooper Armstrong, and Co-Driver, Lance Corporal McGregor however, both unwounded, were still very much in the fight. They dismounted their stricken tank and killed the German soldiers wielding the anti-tank weapons with their revolvers before Armstrong returned to the tank to tend to the wounded and LCpl McGregor returned to RHQ to report what had occurred and what the current situation was.

Out of a crew of 5 on Maj Browne's tank, two received the Military Medal (MM) (Armstrong and McGregor), and Browne himself was awarded an immediate Distinguished Service Order (DSO) to go with the MC he had won in Persia. Could this have been the most decorated tank in the British army?

RHQ followed C Sqn to Medicina and halted outside the town which was now covered in smoke and burning in parts from the fighting and the shelling. Due to the narrowness of the streets it was not practical to commit the entire 14/20H battle-group to the fight so B Sqn were ordered to escort the remaining Kangaroos' of A Sqn to specific points around Medicina so that their Gurkha's could dismount and enter the town. With the battle now quieting down and B Sqn covering most of the exits the infantry could begin mopping up.

There were more medals to be won for the 14/20H in the battle for Medicina. Captain Douglas Heath was to be awarded an MC after he assumed command of C Sqn and eventually secured the town. Lieutenant Ken Brailey, one of the Troop Leaders in A Sqn's Kangaroos was also to receive the MC for his bravery in engaging Snipers with his .50 machine gun and evacuating casualties under enemy fire. The fighting had been savage and in many cases hand to hand, much use had

been made by the Gurkha's bayonets and kukris. At the end of the battle Medicina was littered with the dead and wounded of both sides but many more Germans had fallen before the town was declared secure at around 2100.



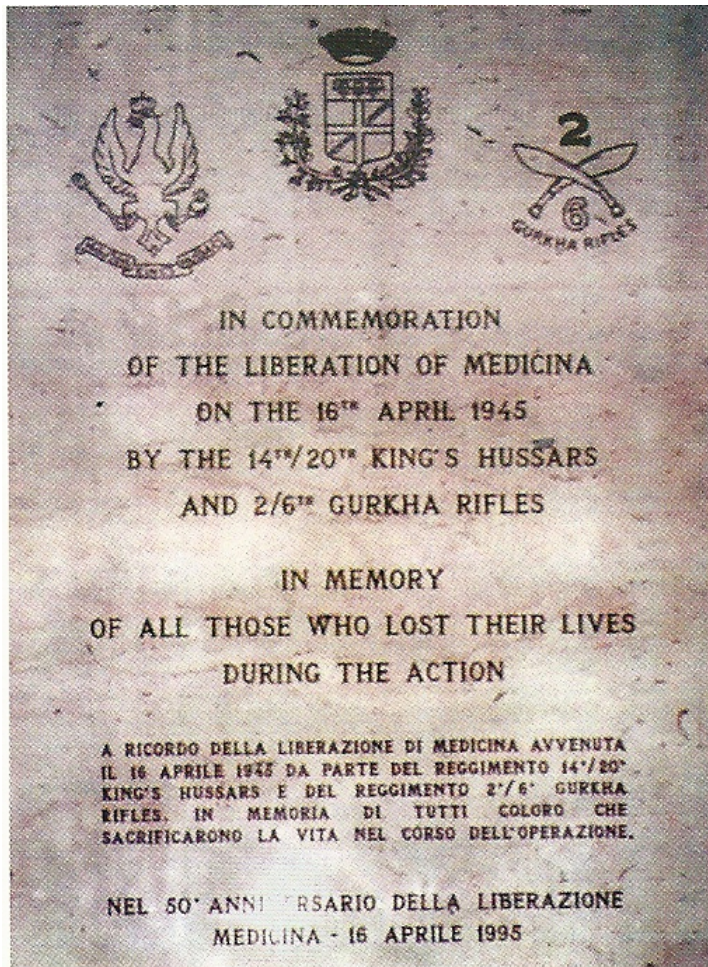
*(Above), The Semovente 105/25 in the Town Square of Medicina. This is the one that Major Browne destroyed; note the collapsed building behind it.*

Today the campaign in Italy is viewed almost as a side show to the main events taking place at the time, which were the assault on Nazi Germany and the defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific. It is true that the battle of Medicina did not make any strategic difference to the war, which was all but over anyway, nor is Medicina a major city. It was not vital to take Medicina, but taken it was with great bravery, dash and courage by the two regiments which were awarded the battle honour 'Medicina', the 14/20H and the 2<sup>nd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>GR. If asked, hardly anybody will know the name of Medicina or the action that took place there in the closing days of WW2, but those that do know, know that it was a hard fought and vicious battle, fought at close quarters, against a well-trained and excellent foe that still put up the fiercest resistance even though he knew the war and the Nazi cause was lost.

#### **The men of the 14/20H who lost their lives in the Battle of Medicina**

<b>Surname</b>	<b>Forenames</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>KIA/DOW</b>	<b>Date</b>
Banks	Victor	Tpr	30	Monmouthshire	DOW	17/04/45
Burt	James	Tpr	22	Glasgow	DOW	17/04/45
Long	Albert	WO2	33	Birmingham	KIA	16/04/45

Murray	John	Tpr	22	Glasgow	KIA	16/04/45
Nixon	Charles William	Tpr	34	London	KIA	16/04/45
Shepstone	William John	Cpl	33	Derbyshire	KIA	16/04/45
Smith	Horace Edward	Tpr	22	Yorkshire	DOW	17/04/45



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[www.6thgurkhas.org](http://www.6thgurkhas.org)

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