



British Army Captain John Cloudsley-Thompson

Born in May 1921, at Murree in India, John Cloudsley-Thompson was educated at Marlborough and Pembroke College, Cambridge. His war experiences began at the outbreak of hostilities by assisting his father, who was Medical Officer of Health for Lambeth, in organising the casualty clearing stations in the borough.

John had been a member of the Officer Training Corps at school. Along with school friends, he volunteered for the army at a Reception Unit in Reading in September 1939. Cloudsley-Thompson indicated his preference for the Royal Tank Regiment as 'I would rather drive than march in the infantry and also I would like to see what I was shooting at and therefore not serve in the R.A.!' After a spell in the Local Defence Volunteers and Home Guard, which he joined while waiting to be called-up, John remembers the great fire raid on London, 29 December 1940, in which he was caught, while attempting to return from leave to his training regiment at Tidworth. After further training at Sandhurst, John was commissioned into 4th Queens Own Hussars. After a call for volunteers he transferred to the 4th County of London Yeomanry (Sharpshooters) who were due to leave for overseas service with 7th Armoured Division (the Desert Rats) within a week. He went with his friend, David Gotch, and was pleased to receive a warm welcome.

Whilst in a camp in the desert outside Alexandria, John suffered a bout of bacillary dysentery and recovered in hospital. Fearing that he would be sent to a convalescent camp and miss the coming battle, he wrote an SOS letter to his Colonel requesting him to facilitate a return to the Regiment. This was organised in time for him to take part in Operation Crusader in November 1941. By this time, John was B Squadron Transport Officer, in charge of delivering supplies of food, ammunition and petrol for the tanks. He experienced the confusion of desert battle conditions while trying to supply the Squadron and ended up running into the South African Division, warning them that German tanks (21st Panzer Division) were in close proximity.

After Christmas 1941, while the Regiment was stationed at Beni Yusef, John was promoted to Tank Commander and spent his 21st birthday in the desert celebrating with a party complete with cake made by the mess staff. Shortly after, John's tank, a Crusader A15 Mark VI, was knocked out during the Knightsbridge battle and the crew were



John Cloudsley-Thompson as an Orderly Officer with the 4th County of London Yeomanry in El Amiriya, October 1941



Italian M13, El Gubi, November 1941.



all injured or killed. John himself suffered a severe leg injury and was evacuated to Tobruk Hospital. After recuperating in South Africa, John's next posting was as Gunnery Instructor at Sandhurst. Despite paralysis in his leg, with which he suffers to this day, John 'wangled' a medical upgrade in order to take part in the Normandy landings on board an LCT with nine tanks. Heading through Villers-Bocage the Reconnaissance tanks ahead of RHQ, which was then under John's command, were hit. RHQ also came under attack. John's tank, a Cromwell, was hit by fire from the Super-Tiger of SS-Hauptsturmführer M. Wittman and the crew forced to bale out. They took shelter in a cellar and went through a dramatic game of hide-and-seek for four days, before managing to rejoin the Squadron, bringing with them important intelligence information on the positions of German tanks and troops in the vicinity. After taking part in the Caen offensive of July 1944, John returned home to his new wife, Anne and they subsequently had three sons.

Post-war, John Cloudsley-Thompson completed his education at Cambridge and was appointed to a lectureship at King's College London. He later became Professor of Zoology at the University of Khartoum and is now Professor Emeritus at Birkbeck College, University of London. He has written over fifty books and is a specialist on desert reptile and arthropods.

We are honoured to preserve the Second World War material and memories of both [Anne](#) and John Cloudsley-Thompson in the Centre's archives and both now feature on our Website.



ME 109, November 1941.

The November Handicap, 1941 Dawn.

The Stukas screamed towards us out of the rising sun, their bombs hurtling earthwards like vicious black eggs. A crash, clouds of yellow and black smoke swirling slowly upwards and they had gone. I changed the empty Bren magazine while machine-gun and rifle fire crackled all round. Then another winged silhouette came towards me. The black crosses on its wings were quite visible. Aiming off to allow for its speed, I pressed the trigger again. More bombs and a lorry burst into flames: black smoke reflected their ruddy glow. There was a distant drone of engines and then silence. The attack was over.

(Extract from the Royal Armoured Corps Journal Vol 10 (4) 1956)



Cloudsley-Thompson's first tank crew.
Trooper Webb (P.O.W.), Trooper J. Sagar
(K.I.A.), Trooper P J Baldwin (K.I.A.) and
Trooper Taylor (K.I.A.)



'Brew up' on the 'F' Route, January 1942.

Inventory of the Donation

- 2 uniform belts
- 2 Royal Armoured Corps cloth badges
- 5 metal uniform badges
- Home Guard sleeve band
- Identity tag
- Photocopied articles written by Cloudsley-Thompson from the Royal Armoured Corps journal
- 50 photographs
- 2 original wartime letters
- Tape-recorded



Cairo, January 1942.



Tank in Battle

My crew used to amuse themselves training the baby fox that I had bartered with an Arab for half a piastre and two over-ripe bananas. My codename at that time was 'Highball' and they called her 'Noball'. She was soon completely tame and never tried to escape. Indeed, she became quite a Regimental figure and used to visit other tank crews to scrounge extra bully beef. Noball made a lair for herself behind the wireless set, but when the midday heat became unbearable she lay panting in a pool of oil at the bottom of the turret. One day we lost her inside the engine and the whole Squadron was held up until she had been extricated!

(Extract from the Royal Armoured Tank Corps Journal Vol 10 July 1956)



April 1942. No. 1 Troop B Squadron John Cloudsley-Thompson's second tank crew) before 'Knightsbridge'.

Left: Trooper Joe Hocking (driver, K.I.A.).
Right: Trooper Alf Carr (gunner, severely wounded) holding 'Noball' their pet fox cub. Corporal Norman Mew (wireless operator and loader, severely wounded) stayed inside the 'Bivvy' because it was too hot to come out just for a photograph!



B Squadron Officers' Mess near Tobruk, January 1942.

From left to right: Captain E G S Smallwood (K.I.A.), Lieutenant Sir A Tichborne Bart, Major D J Hill-Wood MC, Second-Lieutenant J A C Pearce, Captain F A Jarvis MC, Lieutenant The Honourable Robin Maughan.



Transcript of Audio Clip

Well, we charged in and the whole of this, which actually was the 15th Panzer Division, I gather afterwards, started firing at us and we got fairly close. There was a block of 20 Mark 3's and then 6 Mark 3's to the right of them and I was a bit right of that and I came along, I was almost level with the Mark 3's when I saw a wadi in front, so I stopped - "Driver left halt" and started firing at those German tanks. I could see - we had a power-traverse - so we could get on to them quicker than they could on to us and I was watching their guns coming round and I was going to put down the smoke and get out as quickly as possible when the tank was hit once again, I mean we were hit many times before, in the charge in, but this time the shot came in through the front and all I knew was that the tannoy, loudspeaker, so I could talk to the crew with had broken down and air was escaping from the pressure system and so on and so I shouted "Bail out!" and my wireless operator and driver (the driver couldn't get out - he was killed). Wireless operator and gunner got out and I got out. Well, they ran ahead. The wireless operator went off in another tank and my Squadron Leader came up and stopped and I was started to run and I found my feet were wobbling and the shells kept exploding in front of me - I think that they were firing S88's from the back of the column and were firing by that time either at me or at my Squadron Leader's tank but they missed.

During this incident John suffered a severe leg injury and was evacuated to Tobruk hospital.