

MAJOR GEORGE WHITAKER MC MBE (R28-32)

The following is taken from the spring 1994 OF Magazine:-

He was born on 6 October 1913 in Argentina, where his father worked for the Vestey Meat Co. After Framlingham he went out to Kenya, where he learnt about crop cultivation and the use of pyrethrum for insecticides and served in the Kenya Defence Force. In 1936 he returned to Britain, crossing the Sahara Desert in an ancient lorry with three companions and a school atlas.

The next year he sailed to India, where he became a tea planter in Doorars, Assam and East Bengal. He served successively in the Assam Light Horse, the Northern Bengal Mounted Rifles, the Surma Valley Light Horse and the Calcutta Scottish and was commissioned into the Baluch Regiment in 1940.

He was awarded the Military Cross when commanding a company of the 4th Baluch Regiment in the Battle of the Cauldron in North Africa on 6 June 1942. Rommel had launched an offensive on 26th May and established a bridgehead (known as "The Cauldron") between Tobruk and Bir Hakin. Determined British attacks inflicted heavy casualties on the German defenders but were beaten off by their anti tank guns.



Rommel then launched a counter attack and the Baluch position was approached by some 60 German tanks, whose armour the British guns were unable to penetrate. Whitaker decided to knock out at least one tank. Accompanied by his havildar (sergeant), he left his trench carrying a sticky bomb and made for the nearest tank. It turned their machine gun on them, killing the havildar but missing Whitaker. He hurled his bomb at the tank but it failed to explode.

The battle was a disaster: much of the 8th Army was over-run and Whitaker was captured and sent to prisoner-of-war camp in Italy. In the general confusion reigning in Italy in September 1943, when Badoglio had seized power from Mussolini and signed an armistice, Whitaker and a companion escaped from their prison in German occupied territory on the lower slopes of the Apennines. After 2 months of trekking through German held territory – often in snow and with their feet wrapped in rags after their boots disintegrated – they encountered American troops. Whitaker and his friend were at first mistaken as deserters, but when that misunderstanding had been cleared up they were taken to hospital and then sent back to England to convalesce.

Once he had recovered, Whitaker was posted to India in June 1944 and spent the rest of the war as an instructor in the jungle training division at Chindhwaras in the Central Provinces (Madhya Pradesh).

On his release from the Army in 1946, he returned to the tea business, managing estates in Assam and Darjeeling and administering in Calcutta. He was appointed MBE in 1969 "for services to the British community in Calcutta", on whose behalf he had displayed great effort and organisational skill in times of change and unrest.

Later that year he moved back to London, where eventually he became chairman of the Indian Companies.

After his retirement on 1983 Whitaker and his wife made frequent treks in India, Nepal and Africa.

He died at the age of 79.