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The Cross of Sacrifice
Imphal War Cemetery
With the poppy wreaths laid in memory of
Major Hugh WALKER and Major 'Sandy' LAMBERT

A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM PLATT

A concise biography of General Sir William PLATT, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., an officer in the British Army between 1905 and 1945. He is best recognized for commanding British Troops in the Sudan during the East African Campaign of early 1941.

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A Concise Biography of General Sir William PLATT

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General Sir William PLATT, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*



General Sir William PLATT, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., *p.s.c.* did not come from a military family, but ended up serving from 1905 until 1945 as an officer in the British Army, rising to the rank of General.

He served throughout the First World War in France and Belgium. His inter-war career was one of steady progress up through the ranks, so that by the outbreak of the Second World War, he was a substantive Major General serving in the Sudan.

The entry of Italy into the Second World War made this theatre important, due to the large territory of Italian East Africa posing a major threat to British interests in the Middle East and East Africa. In early 1941, a joint campaign conducted from the Sudan (under the command of PLATT) and Kenya successfully defeated the Italian forces and conquered the territory. This allowed Ethiopia to regain independence, and opened up the Red Sea to Allied shipping.

Following that military success, PLATT was sent to East Africa rather than being brought to the Middle East or back to the United Kingdom. As such, he commanded a relative backwater, in terms of the conduct of the rest of the war, until his retirement from the British Army in early 1945.

Family Background

William PLATT was born on the 14th June 1885, at Brooklands, in Cheshire, England. He was the eldest child and only son of John PLATT, an engineer from Carnforth in Lancashire; and his wife Margaret Oudney GRAHAM.

As with many boys of his generation, his parents sent William to a boarding school, to be educated at Marlborough College in Wiltshire. Most public schools and some state, grammar schools had detachments of the Officer Training Corps (O.T.C.), very similar in concept and operation to the modern Army Cadets.¹ The Senior Division of the O.T.C. had detachments at most universities, with the Junior Division having detachments at most public schools, and some state grammar schools.

Marlborough College had one of the larger contingents, with no less than six companies administered by a Lieutenant Colonel. The O.T.C. provided boys with a good grounding for an army career, and groomed them for either of the two establishments in the British Army that educated 'Gentleman Cadets'.

Early Career

From Marlborough College, PLATT successfully applied for admission to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, Surrey. This establishment trained potential officers for the British Army, with the exception of the Royal Regiment of Artillery and Corps of Royal Engineers who were educated at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich.

¹ Personally, I have always considered the term 'Public School' a misnomer. The term is used however for the independent, fee paying educational establishments that are so much a part of the English educational system. These establishments include: Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Wellington, Marlborough, Ampleforth, and many others.

Entry to the Royal Military College was by means of a competitive examination. Most of the key public schools provided an 'Army Class', which prepared boys specifically for the entrance examination to Sandhurst and Woolwich. For most boys and their parents, there was the requirement to pay fees, which in 1914 amounted to £150.²

The boys who gained entry to Sandhurst found a regime not dissimilar to that they had left in their boarding schools. The course lasted two years, with the cadets taught the organization of the Army, military history, minor tactics, welfare and administration of soldiers, drill and musketry. Discipline was strict, with high standards demanded of the cadets. At the end of the course was an examination. The top twenty or so cadets in terms of results in the final examination were offered commissions in the Indian Army. These were in demand, as the pay rates were better and allowed a young officer to live by his own means, whereas many young officers with regiments in the British Army still relied on parental financial support to make ends meet.

PLATT did not shine at Sandhurst, but passed out all the same. He commissioned in the Northumberland Fusiliers on the 16th August 1905.³ He left the United Kingdom to travel to the North West Frontier of India where his battalion, the 1st Battalion of the regiment was then stationed. In 1908, as a young subaltern, he participated in the operations against the Mohmands in that province. He was Mentioned in Dispatches on the 14th August 1908, and received the campaign medal and clasp.

In addition, PLATT was awarded the Companion of the Distinguished Service Order on the 28th November 1908, a rare gallantry award to a young subaltern. The citation published in the London Gazette does not give a full explanation of the circumstances that led to his award, but it states:

The KING has been graciously pleased to give orders for the following appointments to the Distinguished Service Order in recognition of the gallant conduct of the undermentioned Officers during the recent operations on the North West Frontier of India, against the Mohmands:—

² This equates to about £3,600 at today's value of £ Sterling.

³ The regiment was not granted the prefix 'Royal' until the 3rd June 1935.

*To be Companions of the Distinguished Service Order, viz:—
Lieutenant Gerald Francis Waterworth, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment.
Second Lieutenant William Platt, The Northumberland Fusiliers.*

In May 1908, the battalion was stationed at Peshawar, in the North West Province of India. By 1912, the battalion had moved to Bombay. On the 19th June 1909, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. In 1913, the battalion returned to the United Kingdom to be stationed at Portsmouth as part of the 9th Brigade.

First World War

The 9th Brigade was itself part of the 3rd Division, so mobilised when war was declared in August 1914. The battalion moved to France, arriving on the 27th August 1914. The 3rd Division formed part of II Corps, and was immediately involved in the Battle of Mons as the German Army swept through Belgium.

The British Expeditionary Force at this time comprised only two corps, I Corps with the 1st and 2nd Divisions, and the II Corps with the 3rd and 5th Divisions. There was also the 4th Division and Cavalry Division forming in the area.

The next battle for PLATT and his men from the Northumberland Fusiliers was that at Le Cateau, between the 26th August and 1st September 1914. This is where General SMITH-DORRIEN, the General Officer Commanding II Corps decided to make a stand. He arranged his corps in defensive positions along the open downs to the west of the small town of Le Cateau. The units from II Corps engaged the advancing Germans with accurate and rapid rifle fire, supported by artillery fire.

The Germans suffered heavy casualties, and it checked their advance. Despite this action, II Corps had to fall back further, but managed to disengage and retreat just in time to avoid destruction. The 3rd Division was engaged again in the Battle of the Marne between the 7th and 10th September 1914, and the Battle for the Aisne and the First Battle of Ypres.

On the 21st September 1914, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Temporary Captain. He remained a Temporary Captain until the 1st November 1914, when he received the substantive promotion to the rank of Captain.

PLATT was wounded and evacuated from France on the 27th October 1914. Once recuperated from his injuries, PLATT was appointed the Brigade Major 103rd Infantry Brigade with effect from the 8th January 1915.

The 103rd Brigade (Tyneside Irish) was one of the 'Pals' brigades comprising battalions raised in specific localities in the United Kingdom. It comprised:

- 24th Bn. The Northumberland Fusiliers (1st Tyneside Irish);
- 25th Bn. The Northumberland Fusiliers (2nd Tyneside Irish);
- 26th Bn. The Northumberland Fusiliers (3rd Tyneside Irish);
- 27th Bn. The Northumberland Fusiliers (4th Tyneside Irish).

The 103rd Brigade was part of the 34th Division, part of the Fourth New Army. After initial training in the North East, the brigade moved to Ripon where the division concentrated. In late August 1915, the division moved to Salisbury Plain for final training and firing practice before deployment to France.

The brigade received its order to embark for France on the 3rd January 1916, and concentrated at La Crosse near St. Omer. PLATT himself arrived back in France on the 11th January 1916.

The brigade took part in an attack during the Battle for La Boisselle on the 1st July 1916, sustaining very heavy casualties. This left the brigade decimated and unable to continue fighting, so it was placed under command of the 37th Division between the 6th July and the 22nd August 1916 to rebuild and recuperate.

On the 22nd November 1916, PLATT left the 103rd Infantry Brigade on being posted to the Headquarters, 21st Division as the General Staff Officer 2nd Grade (G.S.O. 2), being granted the rank of Temporary Major. On the 1st January 1917, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Brevet Major.

In 1917, PLATT was posted to the Headquarters of the II Australian and New Zealand Corps as a G.S.O. 2. This corps was redesignated as the XXII Corps in December 1917. On the 22nd December 1917, PLATT left France to return to the United Kingdom. He came back to France on the 25th March 1918.

PLATT was promoted further on the 10th July 1918 on being made the General Staff Officer 1st Grade (G.S.O. 1) of the 37th Division, with the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. He was now aged thirty-three years' of age, with thirteen years' service in the Army. The division took part in the Battles of the Hindenburg Line and the final advance through Picardy.

He was still in this post as G.S.O. 1 when hostilities ceased in November 1918. The division was then located in the area of Le Quesnoy. Initially, after the armistice, the division moved back into reserve, but was then moved forward to Charleroi. Demobilisation started on Boxing Day (26th December) 1918, and on the 25th March 1919, the division disbanded officially.

In spite of his active service during the First World War, PLATT was not granted any further medals or awards by the United Kingdom. He was Mentioned in Despatches on four occasions, the: 4th January 1917, 20th May 1918, 20th December 1918 and 5th July 1919. He received the 1914-15 Star with Clasp, the British War Medal and Victory Medal. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the government of Belgium.

Between the Wars

The end of the war found PLATT a Temporary Lieutenant Colonel and G.S.O. 1 of a division. He attended the first full Staff Course held at Camberley after the First World War, which was held in 1919. He passed this course successfully, and was able to add the letters *p.s.c.* after his entry in the Army List.

On the 16th January 1920, PLATT was appointed a Brigade Major; he served in the 12th Infantry Brigade, Eastern Command, and the Galway Brigade in Irish Command. On the 12th February 1922, he relinquished the role as Brigade Major, and returned to regimental duties. He left this role on the 12th February 1922, and returned to regimental duties with the 2nd Bn. The Northumberland Fusiliers, which were then based in India, at Dinapur and then Meerut.

On the 29th January 1924, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Major; and the following day he was promoted to the rank of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel. On the 8th March 1924, he was appointed a Brigade Major in Egypt.

He held this post until the 11th April 1926. He returned to the United Kingdom, where he was appointed an Assistant Adjutant-General in the Directorate of Recruiting and Organization at the War Office in London. He remained in post until the 30th October 1930, that is over the usual four years for a staff appointment.

PLATT was now forty-five years' of age, and had twenty-five years' service. Within his regiment, The Northumberland Fusiliers, both commanding officers of the two Regular Army battalions had been appointed only recently. They were appointed in September and November 1929, and both were expected to serve the then usual four year term as commanding officers. This left PLATT with no vacancy for him to fill within his regiment. In the Wiltshire Regiment, the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel C. A. BARKER, O.B.E.) was due to complete his four years' in command on the 31st August 1930. The Colonel of the Regiment agreed to PLATT transferring to The Wiltshire Regiment (Duke of Edinburgh's) to assume command of the 2nd Battalion with effect from the 31st August 1930. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on the same day.

The 2nd Bn. The Wiltshire Regiment was then stationed in Plymouth, which apart from being a major base for the Royal Navy also had a large Army garrison. The units in Plymouth formed part of the 3rd Division, in Southern Command.

On the 22nd January 1933, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Colonel (his seniority dating from the 30th January 1928), and he relinquished command of the 2nd Bn. The Wiltshire Regiment. On the same day as his promotion, he assumed his new role as General Staff Officer 1st Grade (G.S.O. 1) at the Headquarters, 3rd Division based in Bulford on Salisbury Plain. This role was that of the senior operational staff officer within the division, who worked closely with the General Officer Commanding.

PLATT obviously impressed his superiors, as after less than two years' in that role, he was further promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier on the 18th October 1934, and given command of the 7th Infantry Brigade. This formation was stationed at Tidworth on Salisbury Plain as part of the 3rd Division.

On the 29th June 1937, PLATT was made an Aide-de-Camp (A.D.C.) to His Majesty The King, an honorary appointment given to selected Brigadiers.

Kaid in the Sudan

On the 11th November 1938, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Major General on being appointed the General Officer Commanding British Troops in the Sudan and Commanding Officer of the Sudan Defence Force. He relinquished the appointment as A.D.C. to The King on the same date.

British Troops in the Sudan was a pre-war command in the British Army. In 1898, the country was made a protectorate of the United Kingdom. This was a response to the increasing power of the Mahdi in the Sudan, and the perceived threat to the Suez Canal. The Mahdists had seized Khartoum in 1885 resulting in the death of General GORDON, and the British had responded militarily leading the Mahdist war between 1881 and 1899.

The United Kingdom took control of the Sudan in 1899 following the Battle of Omdurman on the 2nd September 1898; establishing Anglo-Egyptian Sudan as a condominium whereby both Egypt and United Kingdom shared political administration. In effect, as the United Kingdom dominated Egyptian politics, the United Kingdom ruled the Sudan as a British colony.

After the Great War (First World War), British Troops in The Sudan was a subsidiary command from British Troops in Egypt for the purposes of administration. The period immediately after the First World War was characterized by a significant rise in Egyptian and Sudanese independence movements, with rioting in both countries. On the 19th November 1924, the Governor-General of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Sir Lee Oliver Fitzmaurice STACK was assassinated in Cairo.

The assassination of STACK led to increased tension between the British government and the Egyptian government. One of the demands of the British government was the withdrawal of all Egyptian officers and Egyptian Army units from the Sudan. This withdraw of Egyptian personnel from the Sudan took place in 1924 and 1925. In January 1925, Geoffrey Francis ARCHER, a civilian governor, was appointed as the Governor-General of the Sudan.

The Sudan contained two main ethnic groups, the Muslim Arab population in the north of the country and the Christian south. The British effectively administered the country as two separate states from 1924 onwards.

To replace the Egyptian officers and armed forces in the Sudan, a locally recruited armed police or militia, the Sudan Defence Force was formed in 1925. The officers and senior non-commissioned officers were British personnel seconded from their regiments or corps to the Sudan Defence Force (S.D.F.). To form the S.D.F., about one-hundred and forty British personnel transferred from the Egyptian Army to the S.D.F.. In addition, usually two or three British infantry battalions were posted to the Sudan at any one time.

The General Officer Commanding The Sudan also held the post as Commandant of The Sudan Defence Force, known locally as 'The Kaid' from the Arabic term '*al-qa'id al-'amm*'. In the 1930's, the commandant of the Sudan Defence Force was a Temporary Brigadier, who held the rank of Local Major General, but by the time of PLATT's appointment, the post was held by a substantive Major General.

The Headquarters British Troops in The Sudan had a staff of only one Brigade Major and a Staff Captain. Two infantry battalions were stationed in Khartoum, the capital of The Sudan, with small detachments from the supporting arms and services.

As Commandant of the Sudan Defence Force, Major General PLATT had a Colonel as General Staff Officer 1st Grade and nine other staff officers. The staff of the Sudan Defence Force comprised the following officers:

- General Staff Officer 2nd Grade;
- General Staff Officer 3rd Grade for Weapons Training;
- General Staff Officer 3rd Grade (Intelligence);
- Staff Captain;
- Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General;
- Deputy Assistant Adjutant General;
- Deputy Assistant Quarter-Master-General;
- Deputy Assistant Director of Supplies and Transport;
- Director of Pay and Records

When PLATT assumed his new role, the area was already tense following the Italian invasion and annexation of the independent country of Ethiopia. The invasion started in October 1935, and ended in May 1936 with the victory of the Italians. A large standing Army of about three-hundred thousand troops was maintained in Italian East Africa, against which the British had meagre resources. The border itself was about one-thousand, two-hundred miles in length, and extremely porous in terms of ability to cross.

On the 8th June 1939, as was usual with Army officers holding the substantive rank of Major General, PLATT was made a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (C.B.) in the King's Birthday Honours List.

The Eritrean Campaign

The beginning of the Second World War on the 3rd September 1939 did not bring about any significant developments in the Sudan; however, the entry of Italy into the war on the 10th June 1940 did change matters.

Major General PLATT decided to adopt an assertive attitude with the intention of making the Italian forces that the British forces were stronger than they actually were. On the 4th July 1940, the Italian Army mounted an attack on Kassala in the Sudan. The town was defended by about three-hundred and twenty men of the Sudan Defence Force, who retreated after inflicting casualties on the advancing Italian troops. Further to the south, the Italian Army also captured the village of Gallabat, just inside the Sudan.

Having secured these two border settlements, the Italian Army did not continue their advance and a period of stalemate ensued. At the end of June 1940, the exiled emperor of Ethiopia, Haile SELASSIE, arrived in the Sudan. This presented PLATT and the Governor of the Sudan, Sir Stewart SYMES with a potential security problem; one which could have encouraged the Italians to resume their advance.

Thankfully, the Italians did not resume offensive action. The presence of Haile SELASSIE was then turned to the advantage of the British, who raised Mission 101 under Colonel SANDFORD to undertake a guerrilla war in Ethiopia, and to encourage Ethiopians to join the British forces against the Italians.

The first reinforcements for PLATT's command arrived in September 1940 with the arrival of the Headquarters 5th Indian Division under Major General Lewis Macclesfield HEATH. The division comprised only two brigades, so a third was formed by incorporating the three British battalions into the division and by forming a third brigade.

To promote an offensive stance, PLATT and HEATH formed a mobile force called 'Gazelle Force', under the command of Colonel MESSERVY. Gazelle Force comprised units from the 5th Indian Division and the Sudan Defence Force.

Then PLATT and HEATH decided to make an attack to retake Gallabat, using the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade under command of Brigadier SLIM. The attack did not go well, and although Gallabat was taken eventually, bombing by the Italian Air Force made the village untenable, and the British forces withdrew. During this action, Brigadier SLIM was injured and forced to hand over command of the brigade.

General WAVELL, the Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Command was facing significant political pressure from London for some early success in the war. In early December 1940, with planning for Operation Compass well underway, WAVELL held a conference with Major General PLATT and Lieutenant General Alan CUNNINGHAM, who was the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief, East Africa Force. It was agreed to undertake a joint operation to capture Italian East Africa, with British forces advancing from the Sudan in the north and from Kenya in the south in a pincer style movement.

Controversially, the 4th Indian Division (Major General Noel Monson de la Poer BERESFORD-PEIRSE) was withdrawn from Libya just as Operation Compass gathered pace, and sent to the Sudan to reinforce PLATT's command. At this time, this division comprised two Indian and one British brigades. The British brigade remained in Libya, with the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade, then en-route to the Middle East, landing at Port Sudan to come under command of this division.

General WAVELL travelled to Khartoum on the 6th January, and told PLATT that the offensive should start within the next two weeks. This was much earlier than PLATT had first intended; his view being that the offensive would commence in March.

As British Troops in the Sudan now had two divisional formations under command, both led by experienced Major Generals, PLATT was promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant General on the 7th January 1941 to preserve the command structure.

With planning brought forward significantly, the advance commenced on the 19th January 1941. The northern offensive consisted of two distinct lines of attack; the 4th Indian Division took the northern route through Agordat, with the 5th Indian Division taking the southern route through Barentu. Gazelle Force led the advance along the northern route, and the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier BRIGGS) advanced independently from Port Sudan southwards into Eritrea.

The initial advances found little opposition, but then at both Agordat and Barentu, more stiff resistance was encountered. On the 2nd February, Gazelle Force reached the Keren mountains, a feature comprising a high and barren range of mountains. These barred the route to Keren itself, the capture of which was essential if the campaign was to be successful. The main route for the road and railway through the Dongolaas Gorge was blocked, with Italian forces occupying the high ground that dominated the surrounding locality.

The first assault on the Italian positions took place on the 3rd February, and although features later to be called Cameron Ridge and Brig's Peak were taken, Italian troops counter-attacked with Brig's Peak being lost.

It became clear that a concerted, planned attack was necessary to force the Italians from the Keren heights. The 4th Indian Division was to assault the features on the left of the gorge, with the 5th Indian Division assaulting those on the right. This battle started on the 15th March, and although progress was made, the Italian defenders fought with tenacity. The attack ground to a halt, with heavy casualties on both sides.

After ten day's fighting, it was found that the actual gorge itself was not as strongly held as expected, so the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade under command of Brigadier REES pushed through along the railway line, allowing the engineers to open up the road and the route to Keren. On the morning of the 27th March, resistance collapsed and British forces advanced on Keren.

The advance of East Africa Force from the south was making good progress, with Addis Ababa being captured on the 6th April. In Eritrea, the port of Massawa was captured, thereby opening up the Red Sea to Allied shipping. This brought to a conclusion the first stage of the campaign, with Eritrea and most of Ethiopia liberated. Thousands of Italian and colonial troops entered captivity on the 19th May, with the Duke of Aosta agreeing the terms of surrender.

Even though the final area of Ethiopia around Gondar was not captured until November, the campaign was over. It was deemed to be a great success, and coming after the victory in Libya, had dismantled the Italian empire in Africa.

On the 1st April 1941, PLATT was Mentioned in Dispatches for his gallant and distinguished services in the Sudan. On the 30th May 1941, he was knighted on being created a Knight Commander of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (K.C.B.) in recognition of his leadership during the East African campaign. He was promoted to the substantive rank of Lieutenant General the following day.

With the end of the campaign against Italian forces in East Africa, the region returned to that of a relative backwater. Lieutenant General CUNNINGHAM was chosen to command the newly formed 8th Army in the Western Desert, so Lieutenant General PLATT was transferred to his role. He relinquished command of British Troops in the Sudan on the 4th October 1941, passing command to Lieutenant General (Acting) Sir Noel Monson De La Poer BERESFORD-PEIRSE, K.B.E., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

East Africa Command

On the 5th December 1941, PLATT assumed the appointment as Commander-in-Chief, East Africa Command from Lieutenant General WETHERALL, who had been officiating since the departure of Lieutenant General CUNNINGHAM.

East Africa Command covered the United Kingdom colonies in the region, namely:

- Kenya;
- Uganda;
- British Somaliland;
- Nyasaland (now Malawi);
- Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia);

- Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

The new Command was divided into four Areas:

- Eritrea;
- Ethiopia and British Somaliland (the 12th (African) Division);
- Central Area (Italian Somaliland, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar and Tanganyika);
- Southern Area (Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia).

Ethiopia regained sovereignty on 31st January 1941, which was recognised by an agreement in December 1944. The 12th (African) Division disbanded on the 18th April 1943 as the government regained control of the country.

The main focus of East Africa Command was to raise and equip formations for deployment to South East Asia. One divisional headquarters and five brigades were raised and saw active service in Burma. Other brigades were raised for deployment in East Africa Command. Not only was there the requirement to recruit and train infantry; artillery, engineers, signals, medical, supplies and transport, and other supporting services all had to be raised for service overseas.

Madagascar is a large island off the south-eastern coast of Africa. It is about one-thousand in length from north to south, and at its widest point is about three-hundred and sixty miles across. It was a French colony and after the fall of France in 1940, it aligned itself with the new Vichy government. With the entry of Japan into the Second World War in December 1941, concern grew in the British government that the Japanese Navy may use Madagascar as a base, in particular for submarines. There was a large anchorage and naval base at Diego Suarez on the northern tip of the island. With the closure of the Mediterranean Sea to British shipping, the route around the South Africa and up the east coast of Africa was vital in order to reinforce the Middle East and for oil supplies to the U.K.

An expeditionary force had been formed in the U.K. comprising the Royal Marine Division and the 29th Independent Infantry Brigade. This force had trained in combined operations in preparation for an amphibious landing. When the order was given for the force to sail from the U.K., the 29th Brigade was loaded on the landing ships, so it sailed to South Africa instead of the Royal Marine Division.

The operation was given the codename 'Operation Ironclad', and was ordered to be undertaken on 14th March 1942. The Royal Navy element was under the command of Rear Admiral E. N. SYFRET, C.B., R.N. with a Royal Marine Major General, R. G. STURGES in command of the Army element. Brigadier F. W. FESTING was appointed the Assault Commander, and Captain G. A. GARNON-WILLIAMS, R.N. as the Senior Naval Officer for the landings.

The 29th Brigade commenced landing at Deigo Suarez together with 5 (Army) Commando on the 5th May 1942. The 17th Infantry Brigade landed later the same day, and the 13th Infantry Brigade on the next day. The French forces (comprising French, Foreign Legion and Senegalese troops) put up some fierce resistance, but surrendered on the 7th May 1942. The 13th and 17th Infantry Brigades continued their journey onto India to rejoin the 5th Infantry Division, with the 22nd (East Africa) Infantry Brigade being sent to Madagascar to replace them.

Efforts were made to encourage the French Governor to surrender the rest of the island, but he refused to do so. As a result, the 7th South African Motorised Brigade was offered by the South African government to garrison Diego Suarez. This allowed the 29th Brigade to land at Majunga on the 10th September 1942, and the 22nd (East Africa) Brigade passed through and advanced into the centre of the island. The 29th Brigade re-embarked and landed at Tamatave on 18th September, and then advanced towards the capital.

The capital Tananarive (now called Antananarivo) was occupied on the 29th September, but the final surrender did not take place until the 5th November 1942. British forces garrisoned Madagascar until late 1944 when Free French forces assumed responsibility for the island.

A new Islands Area was formed on the 1st September 1942 to take control of Madagascar, Seychelles and Mauritius. Southern Rhodesia transferred to the responsibility of South Africa, and the General Officer Commanding Southern Area became the General Officer Commanding Islands Area. The Islands Area disbanded on the 24th July 1944, with the Headquarters becoming H.Q. Northern Area. The Central Area became the Southern Area on the 1st August 1944 to give two Areas, as existed pre-war.

On the 1st January 1943, PLATT was created a Knight Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in the New Year's Honours List, and four days later, he was promoted to the rank of General.

He received three awards from Allied governments. The first, published in the London Gazette on the 9th October 1942, was the award of the Order of the Nile 1st Class by the Egyptian Government. The second was the Grand Cross, Star of Ethiopia awarded on the 1st March 1945; and finally (also in 1945) the award of Commandeur, Legion d'Honneur from the French Government.⁴

As he approached his sixtieth birthday, General Sir William PLATT relinquished the post as Commander-in-Chief on the 11th December 1944, handing over to Lieutenant General Sir Kenneth ANDERSON. PLATT retired from the British Army on the 17th April 1945, after just short of forty years' service to the Crown.

His adopted regiment honoured PLATT by appointing him the Colonel of The Wiltshire Regiment (Duke of Edinburgh's) on the 28th June 1942. This is a symbolic position as the titular head of the Regiment.

PLATT represented the Wiltshire Regiment at formal parades and oversaw the welfare of the Regiment and its members. He was to hold this appointment for twelve years, retiring as Colonel of the Regiment on the 1st November 1954.

Retirement and Family Life

On retiring from the British Army, Sir William PLATT went to live in the Lake District of north-west England. He joined the board of the family engineering firm called Mather and Platt, which was based in Newton Heath in Manchester.

PLATT also joined the management committee of the outward bound mountain school in Eskdale in Cumberland, and served for over eight years on the drama panel of the Arts Council fulfilling a long held interest in the theatre. In addition, he was a freeman of the Fruiterers' Company.

⁴ Some sources state that he was awarded the Order of Leopold I and Order of the Crown by the Belgian Government, but I cannot find any corroboration of this.

William PLATT had married Mollie Dendy WATNEY in 1921. She was the daughter of Dendy WATNEY, an architect and surveyor from Addlestone in Surrey. They had two sons together. General Sir William PLATT, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., *p.s.c.*, died aged ninety years in London on the 28th September 1975, , leaving an estate of £95,908.

Epilogue

Rightly, PLATT is recognised for his leadership of one element of the East African Campaign of 1941. This campaign was one improvised by the British Army early in the Second World War to appease political demands, but it also had a clear military aim and objectives.

The credit for the strategic decision to launch the campaign, and to transfer the 4th Indian Division from the Western Desert to the Sudan at a crucial time, must be given to General WAVELL. The tactical success of the campaign in Eritrea lies with the leadership of PLATT, who was supported by two very competent divisional commanders in the presence of Major General BERESFORD-PEIRSE (4th Indian Division) and Major General HEATH (5th Indian Division). In his Dispatch on the Middle East, General WAVELL stated:

Major General W. Platt, C.B., D.S.O., has commanded the troops in the Sudan throughout the period with marked efficiency. He kept his head during the dangerous period when the Sudan was exposed to the attack of the greatly superior Italian forces and used his slender resources to the best effect to meet the danger. With the arrival of reinforcements he had initiated offensive action against the enemy whenever possible, though still inferior in numbers.

He was relatively old at fifty-five years' of age to be an operational commander, but this was early in the war and he was clearly seen as the right man, in the right place at the right time to command the invasion of Eritrea.

PLATT is described as resolute, resilient and resourceful and this borne out in the conduct of the campaign.⁵ Planning was curtailed by the political imperative to launch the campaign as soon as possible, and the nature of the Battle for Keren showed his resilience under difficult conditions.

⁵ Source: Oxford National Biography by Rev Gawain BELL.

PLATT instilled in the Sudan Defence Force an offensive culture against a numerically superior force, for example, he must have sanctioned the creation of Gazelle Force; whoever had originally thought of its formation and deployment.

Photographs confirm the description of PLATT as having a lean and athletic build. He possessed drive and determination, and could be explosive in nature. One officer who worked under him described him as, “*a stick of dynamite in a hot fire when there was a job to be done*”.⁶ Although he sometimes had differences with civil administrations within his command, he was seen as having a warm nature and a quick sense of humour. This engendered with most of his peers a good deal of respect and affection.

⁶ Quote taken from the Oxford National Biography, itself taken from The Times 29th September 1975.

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