

ALEX TOMLINSON 1895 to 1984

Perhaps remembered in Levens just as the local coal merchant in the 1950s & 60s, there is a completely different side to the life of Alex Tomlinson that is now little known, but the clue to which lies in the title by which many in the village referred to him - "the Colonel".

Thomas William Alexander Tomlinson was born to Thomas and Margaret Tomlinson at Brathay, Ambleside. By 1901 the family, including Alex's younger brother, Wilfred, was living at Scotforth, Lancaster, where Thomas was Farm Bailiff. In the 1911 census, Thomas, Margaret, Wilfred, a third child, Elizabeth, and nephew Donald Addison were at Low Butter Bent, New Hutton, but Alex, aged 15 was recorded as a labourer on Thompson Edmondson's farm at Borrans (New Hutton).

At present we have no other information about Alex's early years other than that he joined a volunteer cavalry regiment, the Westmorland and Cumberland Yeomanry, and was mobilised in 1914. He first served in France from 23rd July 1915, and was commissioned into the Border Regiment as a temporary 2nd Lieutenant on 29th May 1918, a rank he relinquished on completion of his war service on 10th September 1919. After returning to civilian life Alex was soon married, in 1920, to Jane Newby Braithwaite, daughter of the widowed owner of the Scawfell Hotel, Seascale, and was working as a commercial traveller for an animal feeding stuffs company when their son Guy was born in 1921. Around that time Alex acquired a Kendal coal business from Mr. J. A. Thompson (the first appearance of Alex Tomlinson, Coal Merchant in the phone book was in 1922).

In all this he maintained his military connections, joining the Territorial Army's 4th Battalion, the Border Regiment in 1920, when his rank was re-instated and he duly progressed, to Lieutenant (1921), Captain (1926), Major (LG 1/1/1935 p63), and to Lieutenant Colonel (LG 12/1/1937 p267) at which point he took over command of the Battalion.

4 Border was mobilised on 1st September 1939 and went to Low Lynn, Northumberland for training. They were soon in France and on 17 November 1939 they arrived in Brittany (HQ at Morlaix). Undertook training and guard duties on lines of communication.

When the Germans attacked Belgium and Holland on 10th March 1940, the situation quickly became grave and 4 Border soon became a front-line unit, moving first to Rouen (18 May) to guard bridges and where they were joined by 5th Reserve Motor Transport Company and became a "motorised" battalion, and from where, on 23/24 May, they were moved up to the Somme to attempt to re-capture three bridges and allow their use by British units (mainly the 1st Armoured & the 51st Highland divisions) retreating from the Saar front (not the troops positioned on the Franco/Belgian border who were falling back onto Dunkirk). The German forces proved to be too strong for 4 Border, and after fierce fighting Tomlinson had to withdraw his men. They were soon moved again in order to support the retreating troops and, as part of an improvised formation known as "A" Brigade, were ordered to clear out the advance elements of the German forces from the Forest of Eu.

By this time the Dunkirk evacuation was finished, but there were still considerable British forces in France (c 200,000 men), attempting to retreat towards ports further to the west. "A" Brigade was unable to dislodge the Germans but their advance was held up, gaining valuable time. After two days of heavy fighting involving every company in the Battalion, 4 Border were ordered to withdraw to a line near Dieppe, but by 9th June D Company could not be extricated from its position in the village of Incheville, and by the following day was surrounded. It fought on until 14th June when the Germans sent forward a captured British officer who explained that the Highlanders whose retreat they were there to assist had either got away or were POWs.

Very soon the defensive line near Dieppe became untenable and 4 Border withdrew to the coast near Fecamp but the Germans were already there and after some sharp fighting Tomlinson was forced to move on again, by night, to Le Havre. Half of the Battalion made it by truck without too much trouble, but Tomlinson and the other part found their route blocked by the enemy and were forced to abandon their vehicles and fight their way through, at 1.30 a.m. On 12th June Tomlinson managed to extricate his men and they marched the 20 odd miles to Le Havre where they were ordered to form part of the perimeter defences of the town. They were then evacuated by ship to Cherbourg, whence they eventually made it back to England, one group, under Tomlinson, to Poole harbour on 17th June, and the other under Captain J. L. Burgess, to Brest by a train via Rennes. From Brest they were evacuated on the steamer Yorktown, reaching Portsmouth on 19th June.

Tomlinson was later awarded the D.S.O. for his gallantry and leadership during the ill-fated campaign.

4 Border was rapidly made up to strength with newly trained men and was deployed as part of the 25th Brigade as a mobile anti-invasion force for South Wales and the Midlands. When the invasion threat deflated 4 Border was ordered to the Middle East, departing from Avonmouth on 19th March 1941 and arriving at Suez on 6th May. Within a few days it joined the 23rd Brigade and took part as a reserve unit in the unsuccessful operations attempting the relief of Tobruk. Very soon, the brigade was moved to take part in operations to forestall Axis threats to Syria (French mandate). This campaign was successful, the Vichy French surrendering on 14th July. From Syria 4 Border was sent back to the Western Desert, and in October, by ship to join the garrison at Tobruk, but by then, Tomlinson had been given a new role, as commander of the Massawa sub-area on the Red Sea. Massawa was an Italian naval base which had surrendered to Free French and British forces in April 1941.

NO FURTHER DETAILED KNOWLEDGE OF TOMLINSON'S MILITARY SERVICE.

1941 Telephone Directory – First appearance of West View, Levens as residential number for Lt. Col. T.W.A. Tomlinson – Sedgwick 268

11 October 1945 – Award of Distinguished Service Order (London Gazette supplement 11 October 1937 p5006) *Note that the award related to “gallantry in the British Expeditionary Force in 1940” and that no citation accompanied the recommendation for the award “which was submitted from Germany” by Major-General Victor Fortune (former GOC 51st Highland Division) who was at that time a POW.*

7 January 1947 – appointed as a Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Westmorland. (London Gazette 7 January 1947 p174)

24 February 1947 – granted the honorary rank of Colonel (War Office Letter of that date)

15 August 1950 – Retired from the TA as having exceeded the age-limit (London Gazette 15 August 1950 p4145)

6 June 1951 – Alexander Tomlinson & Son incorporated as a Limited Company at Customs and Excise Buildings, Beeson Road, Kendal, Westmorland - (Companies House records)

Was also a member of Westmorland C. C. for 27 years, and of the Westmorland & Cumberland T.A. association for 35 years.

Border Regiment 4th (Westmoreland & Cumberland) Btn

After the Dunkirk evacuation, two divisions remained in France in battle with the Germans in Picardy, Artois and Normandy. The 4th Battalion The Border Regiment was part of the new 23rd Brigade attached to the 1st Armoured Division. The 4th Border captured three bridges on the River Somme, a reprise of the actions of their regiment in the Great War. Under the 10th French Army the 4th Border cleared German-held Basse Forêt d'Eu and relieved the Black Watch at Incheville. Supporting the 5th Sherwood Foresters, both were driven back by heavy shelling, and eventually many were killed or captured. After withdrawal the 4th moved north towards Fécampe where it met the 7th German Panzers and then withdrew to Le Havre where the 4th Battalion went by ship to Cherbourg. It then moved to Rennes and on to Brest, boarding ship for Southampton on 18th June 1940.

In March 1941 the 4th Battalion left for Suez and on to Sidi Barrani, supporting Wavell's offensive in Syria. The battalion, based in Kiam, patrolled the central sector generally under continuous shelling. As part of the 6th British Division, the 4th returned to the Western Desert, going by destroyer in October 1941 to Tobruk and relieving Australians besieged there since April. During the siege, the Western Desert Force became the 70th British Division, the only British Division of infantry in the Middle East at the time. The eventual taking of Tobruk signalled the second defeat of the German land forces.

The 70th Division, including the 4th Battalion, was sent to India and Burma, becoming part of Wingate's Long Range Penetration groups and remaining there until the end of the war.