



BERNARD LAW MONTGOMERY

Legendary commander
and Czechoslovak unit
of the British Eighth Army



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In October 1914 Monty was shot in the right lung and knee on the French front. Pictured seven months later.

17 November 1887: Born in London

Bernard was born in the London borough of Kennington, the fourth of nine descendants of Church of Ireland minister Henry Montgomery and his wife Maud, eighteen years his junior. The Montgomery family's roots were in Ulster, Ireland. Bernard's grandfather, Sir Robert Montgomery, was colonial governor of the Indian province of Punjab.

1889–1901: A difficult childhood in Tasmania

Bernard's father's appointment as Bishop of Tasmania marked the end of the family's financial difficulties, but also uprooted them. The clergyman spent long months away from home there, and the children received little love from their mother. The future military commander was subjected to beatings, but he did not treat those around him any better himself.

THE PHENOMENON CALLED MONTY

The remarkable life of 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein

„Leadership is based on truth and character. A leader must himself be the servant of truth, and he must make that truth the focus of a common purpose.“

B. L. Montgomery

Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (1887–1976)

was one of the most important and successful British commanders of the Second World War. “Monty”, as he was nicknamed, commanded the Allied forces in North Africa and in the subsequent invasions of Italy and Normandy. He capped his long career with the second-highest post in the NATO military structure.

1901–1914: London - Sandhurst - India

After returning to London, the unruly boy attended St Paul's School, founded in 1509, and then the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. As a lieutenant, he was transferred to India, then the “pearl of the British Empire”.



28 October 1918, parade in Lille. Lieutenant-Colonel Montgomery on the left, Churchill, Minister of Ordnance, in the centre with his cane.

1914–1918: Catharsis of a war hero

During the First World War he fought at Méteren, near the Franco-Belgian border, where a German sniper shot him through his right lung and knee. Despite bleeding heavily, the 26-year-old captain miraculously survived. After a year's convalescence in England, he returned to the front and was eventually promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and general staff officer of the 47th Division of the British army.

1921–1923: Dark mission in Ireland

As part of the British Army of Occupation, Montgomery oversaw the demilitarisation of Germany. He longed for a high command rank but only got into Staff College at Camberley through the intercession of Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, whom he impressed at tennis. At that time, the Irish War of Independence from Great Britain was at its height. Monty went to command the infantry in County Cork, where he vigorously confronted the separatists' guerrilla operations.

1927–1937: Happy marriage with a tragic ending

Forty-year-old Monty married Elizabeth Carver, the war widow of an Olympic rower. Together they raised her two sons and their only child together, David (1928-2020). After ten happy years, Betty died in Monty's arms, succumbing to a mysterious insect bite infection.

1938–1939: Arab revolt in Palestine

Hardened by the family tragedy, Monty devoted all his energy to the army. He returned to India with the rank of colonel, and later served in Palestine under the British Mandate. He impressed his superiors by conducting a sophisticated landing operation training exercise, but also by successfully putting down an Arab revolt against growing Jewish immigration.

„The British Soldier is second to none in the communities of fighting men. Some may possess more élan, others may be better disciplined; but none excels him in all-round character.“

B. L. Montgomery



Monty also occasionally wore an Australian broad-brimmed hat.



1939–1940: Phoney War and Dunkirk

Monty returned home in July 1939. Shortly afterwards, on the 3rd of September, two days after Hitler's invasion of Poland, London and Paris declared war on Berlin. Montgomery, at the head of the 3rd Division of the British Expeditionary Force, began conducting tactical night exercises in France, honing his forces into an agile formation. But when the Nazis attacked the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 and cut through France like a knife through butter, the Allied retreat in the face of overwhelming odds culminated in the evacuation of 330,000 men from Dunkirk to Britain. Montgomery's well-trained unit suffered relatively few casualties, and he was one of the last officers to leave French soil.



Emblematic photo of Montgomery in a British version of the American M3 Grant medium tank (November 1942).

1940–1942: Tenacious defender of Albion

In order to secure strong bases ahead of the expected German invasion of the British Isles, Major General Montgomery drew up plans for - ultimately unrealised - Allied invasions of the Portuguese Azores and Cape Verde. In July 1940 he was placed in charge of preparing the defence of the vulnerable counties of Hampshire and Dorset, and in April 1941 he was given responsibility for Kent, and later Sussex and Surrey. His efforts culminated in May 1942 with Exercise Tiger, involving some 100,000 men. He spared no one, not even his officers.

October 1942: Command of the Eighth Army

Meanwhile, the war had spread to Africa. Since the summer of 1940, British troops had been fighting the Italians in Libya, who were substantially reinforced by Erwin Rommel's Afrikakorps in February 1941. The extremely capable German general known as the "Desert Fox" pushed the British out of Libya and threatened Egypt. There was an imminent risk of being caught in a gigantic pincer movement, as the fascist Axis alliance was simultaneously advancing in the Caucasus. In October 1942, at a critical moment, Prime Minister Winston Churchill appointed Lieutenant General Montgomery to lead the Eighth Army.

November 1942: El Alamein & Supercharge

The first battle of El Alamein had been fought before Monty left England. Ground troops and the RAF were growing stronger with each delivery of American tanks and other weapons and ammunition.

The Second Battle of El Alamein began on 19 October 1942 with a British counteroffensive, and ended five days later with Monty gaining the upper hand over his opponent, despite significant equipment losses. Erwin Rommel himself was in hospital in Germany at the time, suffering from low blood pressure and a liver infection in addition to physical exhaustion. He hastily returned to the desert on the 25th of October, his deputy Georg Stumme having died of a heart attack. In early November, Monty followed up with the devastating Operation Supercharge, after which Rommel was left with just 36 tanks. But the victory at El Alamein came at the cost of some 13,500 British and Allied lives.



Returning to England from Africa, wearing his characteristic beret (1943).

November 1942: Operation Torch

Montgomery's counteroffensive from Egypt into Libya was supported by the Americans' invasion of colonies in what is now Morocco and Algeria, which were controlled by the puppet Vichy regime in France. The victory of General Dwight D. Eisenhower's forces was followed by a rapid advance into Tunisia, where the British, along with soldiers of other nationalities, including Czechs, fought their way across from the east.



Somewhat strained smiles for photographers: the famous British commander had difficult relationships with American generals such as the later liberator of western Bohemia, George S. Patton (left).

May 1943: End of the Axis in Africa

The fighting virtually ceased during the winter, with both sides using the time to shore up their positions. In early March 1943 the British Eighth Army, advancing along the Libyan Mediterranean coast, reached the Tunisian border. Rommel was fighting the Americans in western Tunisia, so Monty's opponent was Italian General Giovanni Messe. Buckling under pressure from the British Eighth and First Armies, the Italians and Germans surrendered on 13 May 1943. This brought an end to the war in Africa.

3 September 1943: Toe of the Italian boot

Napoleon recommended that the way to conquer Italy was from above, like a foot entering the boot it resembles on the map. But this time there was no choice but to attack the southern island of Sicily. Overcoming destroyed bridges, minefields and booby-traps, Monty's Eighth Army then "hopped" from Messina in Sicily to Calabria on the Italian mainland, and pushed north alongside other British and American troops.

1943–1944: Preparations for Operation Overlord

Both Bernard Law Montgomery and the British Army reached their zenith in 1943. Churchill's cabinet was already struggling to replenish troops thinned out on battlefields from Benghazi to Burma. By contrast, the American role was growing considerably, and with it the Americans' justified demands for command roles. From January 1944 Monty helped prepare for the Normandy landings. He was in charge of the ground forces, but the commander-in-chief of the expeditionary force in Europe was the future US President Eisenhower, known as Ike. The relationship between the two strong-willed commanders was far from idyllic. To make things worse, Montgomery, suffering the after-effects of the old wound to his lung, hated the cigarette smoke that constantly enshrouded the heavy smoker Ike.



The French press lauded the heroes of the Normandy landings before Christmas 1944. Commander-in-Chief Eisenhower on the left, Monty on the right.



Normandy, August 1944: Churchill stroking Rommel, his cocker spaniel. Monty also had Hitler, his bad-tempered fox terrier, on a leash.

6 June 1944: Normandy landings

The brunt of the fighting was borne by the Americans, but they were vigorously supported by the British, Canadians and other allies. The latter, following Monty's strategy, attacked Caen, where the Germans had deployed elite troops. The Germans at Caen held out for a long time, but their resistance tied down twelve German divisions and prevented them from joining the fight against the Americans. To this day, though, debate rages over whether the difficulties at Caen were a failure by Monty or rather a sophisticated plan. Under the original agreement, Ike took command of the ground forces on the 1st of September. Montgomery received a deserved promotion to Field Marshal from Churchill, and advanced to the Rhine via Calais. The daring Operation Market Garden was an attempt to strike a blow at Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr. But it was unsuccessful.



King George VI, father of Elizabeth II, is briefed on the strategy for the next steps during a visit to his troops in the Netherlands (October 1944).



With Churchill in his open Humber Super Snipe staff car (1944).

„The United States has broken the second rule of war. That is: don't go fighting with your land army on the mainland in Asia. Rule One is, don't march on Moscow. I developed those two rules myself.“

**B. L. Montgomery's
opinion
(not only)
on War
in Vietnam**



A meeting of commanders on 7 December 1944 in Maastricht, before the Battle of the Bulge.



17 July 1945 at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The Soviet marshals were soon to become adversaries. Monty, however, warned strongly against a direct clash with the Soviets.

4 May 1945

From February 1945, British-Canadian troops advanced northwards through France, and by early September they had begun to liberate the Netherlands and then Denmark and occupy parts of Germany, including the ports of Hamburg and Rostock. It was in northern Germany, on Lüneburg Heath, that Monty accepted the surrender of German forces operating in the territories he occupied. The Second World War in Europe officially ended on 8 May 1945.

21 September 1945: Monty in Prague

In late September 1945, a plane carrying Field Marshal Montgomery landed in Prague. A car was put at his disposal: an open-top Mercedes-Benz 770, the same type of car that the Nazi leaders, including Hitler, had used just six months earlier. There was no more luxurious car to be had in Czechoslovakia at the time. Driving through the streets of Prague lined with cheering crowds, Monty was received at Hradčany by President Edvard Beneš and awarded the highest state decoration, the Military Order of the White Lion First Class.



Montgomery acknowledging the crowds in Prague from the most luxurious car available. It was a 230-horsepower, supercharged, eight-cylinder Mercedes-Benz 770.



He left Prague the following day. You can watch a contemporary news report here:



The triumphant Churchill flew to Berlin, where he inspected Hitler's bunker.

1946–1949: Chief of the Imperial General Staff

In 1946, the field marshal was elevated to the peerage as 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, and was subsequently awarded the Order of the Garter, Britain's most senior order of knighthood. He also presided over the General Staff of the Army of the British Empire. During his inspection tours around the world, he sought to consolidate an empire seriously weakened by war and decolonisation. One of his proposals was to amalgamate Britain's colonies in Africa and make even more intensive use of their rich raw material resources after Albion lost control of India and some other Asian countries.

1946

1951

„NATO is the only answer to the political and military problems of the free world. But we must not be complacent and think that the organisation cannot be improved...“

B. L. Montgomery



Montgomery had been Eisenhower's deputy at SHAPE since 1951. Right, the letter from Ike welcoming him to the post.

1951–1958: Number 2 in NATO

NATO was formed as a defensive military alliance in 1949 in response to the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union. Two years later, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) was established under Dwight D. Eisenhower. The latter appointed Monty as his deputy, a position he held for seven years, even after Ike's election as US President, until he retired at the age of 71. Published soon afterwards, his memoirs, in which he spared almost no one, provoked storms on both sides of the Atlantic. A "war of the memoirs" erupted, as the great men of World War II sought to tell their side of the story.

1958



The field marshal was received at the White House by US President Harry S. Truman (1946).

1968: Ill-judged Vietnam and Monty Python

The retired field marshal did not lose interest in world politics and military strategy. During a visit to the North African battlefields in 1967, Monty is said to have warned the Egyptians, shortly before they launched their attack on Israel, that they had no chance of success. He repeatedly opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War, where - in his view - the US had no clear objective. We do not know whether or how the eighty-two-year-old Monty reacted to the formation of the satirical comedy group Monty Python. It is a paradox that his unmistakable nickname infiltrated pop culture in this way and has remained in the public consciousness to this day, when few of the younger generation associate him with victory at El Alamein...

1968

24 March 1976: Monty according to Hemingway

Field Marshal Montgomery died at his home, Insington Mill in Hampshire, at the age of 88. In Whitehall, London's government quarter, he is commemorated by an accomplished statue by Oscar Nemon; another stands in Montgomery Square in Brussels, not to mention countless plaques and other memorials in other countries. But you can also remember Monty in the comfort of your own home. Although the field marshal was a vegetarian and a strict teetotaler, he inspired the creation of the Montgomery cocktail. A favourite drink of Ernest Hemingway, it was immortalised in his novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950). The base is 15 parts gin to 1 part vermouth, referencing Monty's alleged – and patently false – principle of not going into battle unless he outnumbered his opponent by at least 15 to 1. The field marshal, one of the most respected heroes of the Second World War, certainly didn't deserve that!

„In defeat, unbeatable; in victory, unbearable.“

Winston Churchill on Monty



Not just statues: Monty's motorcycle, a traditional English Sunbeam (1950), can be seen at the Louwman Museum in The Hague.

1976

Friends for life



Karel Klapálek and Leopold Firt were the commander and chief doctor respectively of the Czechoslovak unit in the Middle East, which was under General Montgomery's command as part of the British Eighth Army from 1942. Klapálek and Firt met in 1940. They both underwent training in Palestine and experienced combat "from the Euphrates to Benghazi". Their respect for each other's professional and human qualities and their shared experiences of the arduous campaign created a firm bond between them, a friendship that even persecution at the hands of the communists in the 1950s could not break. They remained friends until Firt's death in February 1968.



General Karel Klapálek

(26. 5. 1893–18. 11. 1984)

Born in Nové Město nad Metují, Karel Klapálek had a difficult childhood. Having lost his father, a railwayman, when he was eight, he lived in poverty with his mother and four siblings. He started working as an accountant, but in 1915 he enlisted to fight in Galicia on the Russian front. In March 1916 he joined the Czechoslovak Legions, distinguishing himself at Zborov and in other battles, despite being hampered by tuberculosis. He did not return to his homeland until 1920. After the founding of the independent Czechoslovakia, he climbed the ranks to command an infantry regiment. At the beginning of the Nazi occupation he was active in the resistance in České Budějovice, before escaping to Belgrade and joining the Czechoslovak foreign army.

Medical Corps General Leopold Firt, MD

(25. 6. 1894–9. 2. 1968)

Born into the family of a tenant farmer in the village of Sestroun near Sedlčany, Leopold Firt attended the Pilsen grammar school, but his subsequent studies at the Prague Medical Faculty were cut short by the First World War: in March 1917 he enlisted to fight on the Serbian and then the Italian front. After graduating as a doctor of medicine (1921), he started working as a general practitioner in Kobylišy, which was then on the outskirts of Prague. His patients included employees of the Troja Zoo and prominent artists such as Adina Mandlová and Karel Čapek. The latter, together with Ferdinand Peroutka, regarded Leopold as a "fine lad of great sensitivity". During the Nazi Protectorate, Firt ended up in Pankrác prison after being arrested by the Gestapo. He was only released thanks to a lucky coincidence – the judge was his former classmate.

From 1940 to 1942 Lieutenant Colonel Klapálek was in command of the 11th Czechoslovak Battalion - East, later reorganised into the 200th Czechoslovak Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment - East. His unit achieved a number of successes, including defending the strategic fortress of Tobruk. After his transfer to England (1943), Klapálek joined the Czechoslovak Separate Infantry Brigade, later the Armoured Brigade, and volunteered to fight in the Soviet Union. He fought in the Carpathia-Dukla operation, commanded the 3rd Brigade, and from April 1945, the entire 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps. Riding a white horse, he led the victorious army's parade through Prague. In February 1947 he attained the highest rank of army general. After the communist seizure of power in February 1948 he joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He tried to help his former comrades-in-arms, but in 1952 he was imprisoned in Valdice, demoted and deprived of his property. He was released after four years. General Klapálek was rehabilitated in 1968. He died at the age of 91 and is buried in the Olšany Cemetery in Prague.



From left: Commander K. Klapálek and Chief Doctor L. Firt (Great Britain, 1943)

Via Belgrade he reached Palestine, where he soon became the chief doctor of the Czechoslovak unit. The demanding mission confirmed his professional qualities as an experienced diagnostician and a dedicated military doctor of great courage.

In July 1943, when the fighting in Africa ended, Czechoslovak soldiers sailed for Great Britain. From September 1943 Firt served in the Czechoslovak section of the military hospital in Hammersmith, west London. From January to April 1945 he was deputy chief medical officer of our mission, and then chief medical officer until August.

Back in liberated Prague, Leopold Firt became deputy commander of Military Hospital I, now the Central Military Hospital in Prague-Strešovice, and from June 1946 its commander: first as a colonel, but in February 1947 he was promoted to the rank of medical corps general.

His brother Julius, a former parliamentary deputy, emigrated in 10 March 1948, a month after the communist takeover, and soon established himself in the leadership of the resistance in the USA and then at Radio Free Europe. It was for that reason that Leopold had to move to a less public position at the ministry of defence, later escaping imprisonment mainly thanks to the intercession of the now influential "working class cadres" he had once treated on the outskirts of Prague, including delivering their children. General Firt was only allowed to work as a district doctor. He died in February 1968 and is buried in the family tomb in Jičín. His son, Professor Pavel Firt, MD, DrSc. (1927-2016) was a leading European cardiac surgeon. In January 1984 he and his team performed the first successful heart transplant in the Eastern Bloc.



Souvenir of the defence of Tobruk: a defused mortar shell with part of this strategic Libyan fortress's wall.



Leopold Firt's general's cap, made while he was still in England.

Chief Doctor Firt's brave deed

The Libyan desert, November 1941. The fortress of Tobruk, once the pride of Italy's colony, lay in ruins. In the third year of the war, the battle for this strategic port on the Mediterranean coast rages on. The British command reinforces the Australian defenders with Poles and, later, the 11th Czechoslovak Battalion – East. Klapálek's unit is entrusted with an important five-kilometre section of the perimeter, i.e. an arc of the defensive semicircle around Tobruk.

Before they were driven out from their positions, the Italians had carved austere redoubts out of the rocky terrain, about 800 metres apart and partially connected by trenches. Elsewhere, two modified natural caves reinforced with metal beams serve as a field hospital. The chief doctor, Captain Leopold Firt, took it over from the

Firt inside the infirmary he took over from the British forces.



A family heirloom: an English-made stethoscope from the North African battlefield.



Leopold Firt in front of the field hospital, protected from shelling by sandbags.

British without any support staff, unless you count the cat, that is, an indispensable ally in the never-ending battle with the ubiquitous rodents.

Forty-seven-year-old Firt has his work cut out for him. The Czechoslovak soldiers have to contend with searing heat by day and freezing cold by night, coughing up black phlegm in damp dungeons lit by kerosene lamps. Many of the men are plagued by dysentery, anaemia, malnutrition, vitamin deficiencies and rotting teeth, not to mention mental problems. Insects are everywhere. The supply of foul water depends on old pumps, and the enemy's shelling of all exposed areas, including latrines, compounds the already poor hygiene conditions.

In snipers' sights

Firt's field hospital shudders with every shot fired by a nearby artillery battery, dislodging sand from the ceiling and walls, making everyone cough. It is barely two hundred paces to the shelter of Klapálek's command post, but the route is exposed to German fire. The chief doctor is an easy target for the German snipers and machine gunners. Every trip to a meeting, a chat or lunch could be his last. So Firt often throws himself to the ground, jogging rather than walking, all to the cheers of his comrades peeking out from behind sandbags. Over lunch they then joke about the proper way to fall and get up, so as to follow military regulations.

Right now, Klapálek is sitting with Firt and other friends at headquarters over a modest lunch. They force themselves to devour the undeniably high-quality contents of the Bully Beef canned meat, but eating it on its own or with just unappetising dried vegetables is a chore. The sound of the fighting beyond the walls protected by sandbags and sand-filled barrels suddenly grows louder. A nearby fortress has taken a direct hit – the lads there must be suffering.

Leopold Firt knows what he has to do. Just as he did a quarter of a century ago, when he fought on both the Serbian and Italian fronts as a young medic during the First World War, he reaches for his medical bag. With his other hand, he grabs a dusty flag with a red cross on a white field. Klapálek puts his hand on his shoulder: "Doctor, you're going to your death!" "It's my duty," Firt replies. With a parting glance, and waving the flag, he strides out of the headquarters onto the hot sand.

Many fine words have been said about the chivalry of combat, officers' honour, the sanctity of the mission of medics on both sides of the front. But does it still mean anything? Did it ever? Who's he facing now; whose sights is he in?

It sounds like a sentimental story from the colourful soldiers' calendars printed by propagandists on all sides of the war, but silence does indeed descend over a few hundred metres of the scorching Libyan desert. The forces under British command, like the Germans, cease firing.

They squint, hold up their baking-hot binoculars to their eyes, and watch the tall, slender figure of Leopold Firt waving his flag. He crosses the critical section and disappears into the ruins of the fortress. After what seems an interminable time to all around, and certainly to himself, having done what he could for his comrades, he sets off back to the command post. His red cross flag flutters one last time, and the cooling barrels of the machine guns roar into life once again.



Czechoslovak War Cross 1939, awarded for a heroic deed – risking his own life to treat wounded comrades in a fortress under shelling.

War Cross

It will remain a memory that both the humble chief doctor and his commander will pass on in their memoirs – although Leo will later receive the 1939 Czechoslovak War Cross for this very act. When he returns home, he will tell the story to his son and later to his grandson. Both his descendants have preserved to this day his set of authentic surgical instruments, his stethoscope and a mortar shell with a piece of the masonry of the Tobruk fortress, carefully compiled photo albums and Leopold's film footage from that time...



Read more in the book
**FIRT – A family caught up in the
whirlwind of Czechoslovak history**



Under Monty and other commanders

During the Second World War, Czechoslovak troops fought successfully on the Western, Eastern and North African fronts. The 11th Czechoslovak Infantry Battalion - East and, after its disbandment on 21 May 1942, the successor 200th Czechoslovak Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment - East operated as part of the British armed forces. Many of the men who came back from Africa then joined the newly formed Czechoslovak Separate Armoured Brigade. Czechoslovak soldiers were thus under Montgomery's command 13 August 1942, when he was put in charge of the Eighth Army, until the end of the war in May 1945.



On guard in the scorching desert.



Military tents during training in Palestine.

The basis of the first Czechoslovak military unit formed in Great Britain from 1940 onwards, the 1st Czechoslovak Mixed Brigade, consisted of members of the 1st Czechoslovak Infantry Division in France, which had been evacuated after the crushing defeat of the Allied forces on French soil. These soldiers were mainly tasked with the defence of certain sections of the coastline in case of a German invasion. Fortunately, no invasion materialised.



One of Leopold Firt's photo albums.

From Palestine twice to Tobruk

Around the same time, in July 1940, the 11th Czechoslovak Infantry Battalion - East was established in faraway Palestine under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Karel Klapálek. After training in the harsh Judean Desert at the turn of 1940/1941, the battalion mainly performed guard duty, guarding Italian prisoners of war near Alexandria and air bases. The British command had not yet deployed the handful of Czechoslovaks in battle.



The desert rats had their own medal, introduced by the Australians.

The situation changed in February 1941, when the retreating Italians were reinforced by Rommel's Afrikakorps. Rommel drove the Allies back to the Egyptian border, although the Australians put up fierce resistance to hold the strategic port of Tobruk. Czechoslovak troops began to build defensive positions at Marsa Matruh and conduct deep reconnaissance, but in June 1941 they were again transferred to Syria - to fight the Vichy units collaborating with the Axis. After neutralising this threat, the battalion returned to Alexandria and from there again by sea to Tobruk. Together with the other Allied forces, they successfully guarded a 5 km stretch of 13 concrete or rock redoubts, despite facing mainly mortar shelling by the Italian besiegers.



Paying respects to the Czechoslovak fallen at Tobruk.



Plánuje se, pŕi prŕipravě 11. - Vŕstehadba na ŕed. Vŕstehad.



Podobnŕ kŕyadnŕ.

As part of the British offensive in November 1941, the garrison of Tobruk was also involved in the attack, and Tobruk was liberated after 244 days under siege - at the cost of 14 dead, 26 seriously and 55 lightly wounded members of the Czechoslovak Battalion.

Rommel responded with a counter-offensive. Tobruk, which the Czechoslovak troops had been withdrawn from in April, fell in June 1942, and a new line of defence was hastily built at El Alamein, where the Allies achieved a turning point in October. By then the Czechoslovak battalion had been incorporated into the legendary Monty's Eighth British Army.

In April 1942 the Czechoslovaks found themselves back in Palestine. In a camp near Haifa they were retrained from infantrymen to Bofors autocannons. They returned to the re-liberated Tobruk as the 200th Czechoslovak Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment – East. They also defended the El Adem and Bu Amud airfields, until the fascists on the African front capitulated on 12 May 1943.



A minaret in the besieged fortress.

Czechoslovak troops' movements in the North African theatre of war.

We should add that a total of 2,489 soldiers passed through the Czechoslovak units in the Middle East in 1940–1943; 36 of them were killed. Only about 30% of the men had the best medical “A” rating, and the unit had a relatively high average age of 32: the youngest were seventeen and the oldest was sixty-three years old.



For safety, the ship sailed around practically the whole of Africa.

All the way round Africa to England

In the middle of June 1943, the Czechoslovaks set off for England. The luxury ocean liner *Mauretania*, almost a quarter of a mile long, sailed from Tewfik, Egypt, on 5 July 1943, with over 1,300 Czechoslovak soldiers out of more than 6,000 people on board. The shortest route through the Strait of Gibraltar was out of the question due to German U-boats and other warships in the Mediterranean, so the *Mauretania* faced a laborious six-week voyage around the whole of Africa. The regiment landed at Liverpool on the evening of Wednesday 11 August 1943. 12 days later they went to Camp Wivenhoe near Colchester, where the 200th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment - East was disbanded on 26 August 1943.



Churchill watching Czechoslovaks in training (April 1941).

Firt's memoirs were published in 1947 and 1948.

Heading to Dunkirk with armoured vehicles

Most of the men joined the 1st Czechoslovak Separate Infantry Brigade, soon transformed into an armoured brigade commanded by General Alois Liška. A combination of British and American weaponry was used. During the invasion of Normandy, the Czechoslovaks sailed to France on 30 August 1944. By the beginning of September they had relieved the British besieging the heavily fortified port of Dunkirk. Dozens of Czechoslovaks died there before the German army finally surrendered on 8 May 1945. Before that, on 23 April 1945, a symbolic detachment of 140 soldiers set out for western Bohemia, crossing the border at Cheb on the 1st of May with the Americans. However, Field Marshal Montgomery ruled out any major deployment or advance beyond the Karlovy Vary – Rokycany – České Budějovice demarcation line, something many never forgave him for...

