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A CONCISE HISTORY OF:

XXX CORPS (HISTORY & PERSONNEL)

A concise history of the XXX Corps, an operation formation of the British Army between 1941 and 1945. It saw active service in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Sicily, and North West Europe. In addition, known details of the key appointments held between 1941 and 1945 are included.
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A Concise History of XXX Corps (History & Personnel)

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XXX Corps

XXX Corps was formed in the Western Desert to be one of the two Corps under command of the newly formed 8th Army. It was intended that XXX Corps was to be the predominantly armoured corps, with XIII Corps as the predominantly infantry corps of 8th Army. Lieutenant General Vyvyan Vavasour POPE was designated as the first Corps Commander, and he was appointed to the role on 20 September 1941. He flew out from the U.K. to Egypt to assume command of the Corps, but on 5 October 1941, the aircraft carrying the Corps Commander and his staff crashed in Egypt, killing all on board.

The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of 8th Army (Lieutenant General Neil RITCHIE) decided to use XXX Corps in reserve to prevent any attempt by the German and Italian forces to outflank the 8th Army positions. The Africa Corps did indeed try to outflank the 8th Army, but determined resistance by the Free French Brigade at Bir Hachiem allowed 8th Army time to withdraw. XXX Corps retreated back to the El Alamein position.

The 51st (Highland) Infantry Division came under command of XXX Corps on 9 October 1942, after a period of acclimatization in Egypt. It joined the 1st South African Infantry Division and 9th Australian Infantry Division in XXX Corps. The corps has the 23rd Armoured Brigade under command as well.

XXX Corps played a major part in the first Battle of El Alamein, where the advance of the Axis forces was halted. This was followed by the indecisive Battle of Alam Halfa. The arrival of a new Commander-in-Chief of 8th Army led to the plans for a major offensive at El Alamein. For this major action, XXX Corps was given the major role, and given command of the following formations:

- 51st (Highland) Infantry Division;
- 4th Indian Infantry Division;
- 1st South African Infantry Division;
- 9th Australian Infantry Division;
- 2nd New Zealand Division.

After the defeat of the German and Italian forces at the second Battle of El Alamein in early November 1942, XXX Corps became the main force following up the Axis troops as they retreated through Libya. As the Axis forces reached Tunisia, they started to use a series of defensive features to fight the 8th Army. The first battle in Tunisia for XXX Corps occurred on the 6th March 1943, with the action at Medenine. Then followed a more serious and costly engagement at Mareth, which took place between 16 and 23 March 1943.

The attack on the Mareth Line was called 'Operation Pugilist' and opened on 19 March with XXX Corps launching a frontal assault on the defence line. Both the 50th Infantry Division and 51st Infantry Division sustained heavy losses, and although they managed to create a gap, German forces quickly sealed the gap. It was left to X Corps to conduct a wide outflanking move to force the Axis forces to give up the Mareth Line overnight the 26th/27 March 1943.

XXX Corps was designated as one of the two corps to form part of 8th Army in the operation to invade and capture Sicily, the other being XIII Corps. For the landings, XXX Corps had under command the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Infantry Division. The former had seen active service in the Western Desert through to the surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia, the latter sailed directly to Sicily from the United Kingdom having seen little active service apart from a few weeks in France in June 1940. The corps also had under command the 231st Infantry Brigade, which had come from Malta.

The Allied forces landed on Sicily on 10 July 1943, with the XIII Corps on the right flank of 8th Army and XXX Corps on the left. The American forces landed to the west of XXX Corps. The intention was for 8th Army to drive up the eastern side of Sicily to take Messina, with the Americans clearing the western side of the island including Palermo. The initial resistance was patchy, but as the 8th Army advanced towards Mount Etna, the introduction of German troops provided stronger opposition and the advanced slowed down. The direct route to Messina was well defended, so XXX Corps was tasked with taking the eastern slopes of Mount Etna. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division had been slowly working its way forward towards Adrano, whilst the 51st Division had been aiming for the airfields at Gerbini, but were halted by counter-attacks on 21 July. In view of the fact that the 8th Army now lacked the strength to force the defensive line around Mount Etna, the reserve division of the 8th Army, the 78th Infantry Division, landed on Sicily on 26 July and came under command of XXX Corps. The division moved forward immediately, and on 29 July, commenced its assault on Adrano, supported by the Canadians.

They soon made a bridgehead across the River Dittaino, and pushed on into mountainous terrain to attack Centuripe. Fierce fighting took place throughout the 2nd August, however, on the following day the German defenders withdrew. Adrano itself held out until the 6th August, meanwhile, the 51st Division captured the nearby town of Biancavilla. After the capture of Adrano, the 1st Canadian Division was placed in Army Reserve, and the main focus moved to XIII Corps' drive to Catania and onwards to Messina. General MONTGOMERY was directed to return to the United Kingdom to take command of the 21st Army Group for the forthcoming Allied invasion of Normandy and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General BROOKE, decided to transfer some experienced formations from the Middle East to the United Kingdom in order to form part of the invasion force.

The decision was taken to transfer XXX Corps, together with the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division and 51st (Highland) Infantry Division as soon as the Sicily campaign was over. The reason this corps was chosen was probably down to General MONTGOMERY, who had some affection for the corps and the two divisions from his time in Egypt and Libya. All three formations all left the Middle East in November 1943 to return to the U.K.. On arrival in the U.K., XXX Corps came under command of 2nd Army, retaining command of the 50th Infantry Division (which had come under command on 13 August 1943), and gaining the 7th Armoured Division on 7 January 1944 on its return from Italy. The 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division joined the corps on 1 February 1944, having been stationed in the U.K. having returned from Iceland in April 1942. Two armoured brigades came under command of the corps, the 8th Armoured Brigade on 12 December 1943 and the 33rd Armoured Brigade (the latter being under command of the 49th Infantry Division). The 50th Infantry Division also gained the 56th Infantry Brigade on 4 April 1944 as an additional infantry brigade for the forthcoming invasion.

Therefore, for the invasion of Normandy, the corps had under command three divisions:

- 7th Armoured Division;
- 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division;
- 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division;

XXX Corps was chosen to be one of the assault formations on D-Day. It was designated to land on Gold Beach, the westernmost of the three beaches allocated to the 2nd Army. The invasion of Normandy took place on 6 June 1944, with XXX Corps using the 50th Infantry Division as the assault formation. The corps was tasked with securing the beach and then moving rapidly inland to secure Bayeux and the road to Tilly-sur-Seulles. The post-landing operation, codenamed 'Perch', then intended for the 7th Armoured Division to deploy through the 50th Infantry Division and seize Mont Pincon, a significant hill feature. This movement was intended to outflank Caen allowing I Corps to take the town late on D-Day.

On D-Day, the 50th Infantry Division was able to clear seven exits from the beach and advance five miles inland by the end of the day, linking up with the Canadians from Juno Beach. Heavy fighting at a German defensive position at Le Hamel had delayed the advance out towards the American troops at Omaha beach, and caused many casualties in the 1st Bn. The Hampshire Regiment who landed opposite that position.

On D + 1, the 7th Armoured Division had landed and Bayeux had been captured. Several localised counter-attacks by German forces had taken place, but all had been successfully beaten back. German reinforcements from I S.S. Panzer Corps started to arrive opposite XXX Corps, which was seen as a major threat. The advance of the 50th Infantry Division was now being opposed by the

Panzer Lehr Division and had slowed down. The Americans had reached Caumont posing a threat on the flank of the I S.S. Panzer Corps.

The 7th Armoured Division came into the front line on the right of the 50th Division and made a thrust for Villers-Bocage and the road to Caen called Operation 'Perch'. The 7th Armoured Division was slow to redeploy, but late on 12 June, elements from the division reached Villers-Bocage, thereby outflanking the Panzer Lehr Division, but then a counter-attack by a few German Tiger tanks caused havoc, resulting in the British troops being withdrawn back to Caumont and the penetration being blunted.

With the failure of Operation Perch, the next operation devised by 2nd Army was Operation 'Epsom'. The main striking force for this operation was VIII Corps, with XXX Corps on its right flank. The 49th Infantry Division had now landed and come into the line to the left of the 50th Infantry Division. On the left of the 49th Division was the 15th (Scottish) Infantry Division of VIII Corps. At about 04.15 hours on 25 June, the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division attacked towards Fontenay-le-Pesnel. It was supported by tanks from the 8th Armoured Brigade and additional artillery. By the end of a bitter day's fighting, the 49th Division occupied the village eventually. For the next month, few gains were made, with XXX Corps involved in holding the line. Then the U.S. forces launched an offensive on the Contentin peninsula, with VIII Corps (on the right) and XXX Corps given objectives to support the American attack in Operation Bluecoat. VIII Corps made progress, but XXX Corps did not. The performance of XXX Corps and its formations was subject to criticism, which led to Lieutenant General BUCKNALL being relieved of his command. Lieutenant General HORROCKS, who was well known to MONTGOMERY, returned from convalescent leave to take command of XXX Corps.

Following the collapse of the Falaise pocket, XXX Corps advanced through France and into Belgium. Units from the corps liberated Brussels and Antwerp, although with the latter the approaches to the port were not cleared, leading to many months of bitter fighting before the port could be opened. In early September, as the lack of supplies halted the Allies advance, resistance stiffened as XXX Corps reached the border with the Netherlands. On 17 September 1944, at the commencement of Operation Market Garden, the Corps had under command the:

- Guards Armoured Division;
- 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division.

The 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division had transferred from XXX Corps to VIII Corps on 18 September 1944.

The task allocated to XXX Corps was to advance rapidly up the one main road leading from their current positions through Eindhoven, Nijmegen and onwards to Arnhem. XXX Corps commenced the advance at about 14.00 hours on Sunday 17 September 1944. XXX Corps' advance was led by the Guards Armoured Division, which soon encountered difficulties and caused delays. They reached the bridge at Nijmegen on the 20th September, only to find that the 82nd U.S. Airborne Division was facing significant resistance and had not captured all its objectives.

Meanwhile, German forces had cut the main road behind the advance. This meant that forces had to be diverted to deal with these new threats, and in consequence, massive disruption occurred to road transport. By 21 September, the advance had slowed as the troops became exhausted. The 43rd Infantry Division was brought up to move across country to the southern banks of the Neder Rijn at Arnhem. By this time, the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem had fought itself to the point of extinction, so all that could be achieved was the withdrawal of the survivors back across the river.

When the German forces launched their Winter offensive through the Ardennes, XXX Corps was moved to secure bridges over the Meuse River in case the Germans reached them, which they did not. XXX Corps was involved in the final major offensive in the crossing River Rhine in March 1945. Initial resistance was fierce, but the German Army quickly crumbled allowing the Allies to advance deep into Germany. With the end of hostilities in May 1945, XXX Corps assumed responsibility for the Hannover Province of Germany. At this time, the corps had under command:

- 5th Infantry Division;
- 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division;
- 51st (Highland) Infantry Division;
- 3rd Canadian Infantry Division;
- 8th Armoured Brigade.

As with the rest of the British Army in Germany, the formations started to run down during 1946. The 43rd and 51st Infantry Divisions both disbanded by August 1946, by which time the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division had already left Germany to return to Canada to disband there. XXX Corps survived to eventually disband with I Corps District in June 1947.

Corps Commander

20th September 1941 – 5th October 1941 (Died on Active Service)

Lieutenant General (Acting) Vyvyan Vavasour POPE, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

5th October 1941 (or 6th November 1941) – 8th July 1942 (Relieved of Command)

Lieutenant General Charles Willoughby Moke NORRIE, D.S.O., M.C.*

8th July 1942 – 10th September 1942

Lieutenant General (Acting) William Havelock Chaplin RAMSDEN, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

10th September 1942 – January 1944

Lieutenant General Oliver LEESE,

January 1944 – 3th August 1944 (Relieved of Command)

[Lieutenant General \(Acting\) Gerard Corfield BUCKNALL, C.B., M.C.*, *p.s.c.*](#)

5th August 1944 – 31st January 1946

Lieutenant General (Temporary) Brian Gwynne HORROCKS, C.B., M.C., *p.s.c.*

Brigadier General Staff – (B.G.S.)

27th July 1941 – 5th October 1941 (Died on Active Service)

Brigadier (Temporary) Hugh Edward RUSSELL, *p.s.c.*¹

5 October 1941 – 7 December 1941

[Brigadier \(Acting\) John Lennox Clavering NAPIER, R.T.R., *p.s.c.*](#)

7 December 1941 – 24 March 1942

Not Currently Known.

25th March 1942 – October 1942

Brigadier George Seton HATTON, O.B.E.

October 1942 – January 1944

Brigadier George Peregrine WALSH, D.S.O.

January 1944 – 23rd January 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Harold English PYMAN, D.S.O.*, R.T.R., *p.s.c.*

23rd January 1945 – 23rd April 1946 (Unconfirmed)

Brigadier (Acting) Charles Phipps JONES, M.C., *p.s.c.*

¹He was awarded the D.S.O. after his death.

Deputy Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General – (D.A. & Q.M.G.)

17th July 1941 – 5th October 1941 (Died on Active Service)

Colonel Eric Sudeley UNWIN, M.C., R.A.S.C., *p.s.c.*²

9th October 1941 – 1st December 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) Edward Henry Lysaght LYSAGHT-GRIFFIN, O.B.E., *p.s.c.*
1942 – 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Edgar Patrick SEWELL, S. Wales Bord.

1944 – 14th April 1945 (Killed in Action)

Brigadier (Temporary) George Clifford WEBB, C.B.E., D.S.O., R.T.R.

Corps Commander, Royal Artillery – (C.C.R.A.)

22nd October 1941 – 6th June 1942

Brigadier (Acting) David Francis AIKENHEAD, D.S.O., M.C., R.A.
1942 – 1944

Brigadier Meade Edward DENNIS, M.C.

August 1944 – 27th March 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Stuart Blundell RAWLINS,

Chief Engineer – (C.Eng)

October 1941 – 23rd April 1942

Brigadier (Acting) George Herbert CLIFTON, M.C., Royal New Zealand Engineers

24th April 1942 – 7th April 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Kenneth RAY, D.S.O., South African Engineer Corps

12th May 1943 – 9th September 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Basil Charles DAVEY, R.E.³

1945 – 1945

Brigadier G. L. WILKINSON

² It is not confirmed when UNWIN was appointed to his new role, nor whether he held the rank of Colonel on an Acting, Temporary or Substantive basis.

³ Promoted Temporary Brigadier on 15 October 1943 and awarded the C.B.E. on 23 March 1944.

Chief Signal Officer – (C.S.O.)

12th February 1943 – 30th January 1944

Colonel (Temporary) Reginald Herbert Ryrie STEWARD, O.B.E., M.C., R.Sigs⁴

1944 – 1944

Brigadier H. N. CRAWFORD,

1944 – 1945

Brigadier H. BARTLETT,

Deputy Director of Supplies and Transport – (D.D.S.T.)

3rd May 1942 – 1943

Colonel (Acting) William James Fitzpatrick EASSIE, R.A.S.C.

Deputy Director of Medical Services – (D.D.M.S.)

10th June 1942 – 13th January 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Richard Andrew AUSTIN, M.C., R.A.M.C.

1943 – 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Edward PHILLIPS, D.S.O., M.C., M.B.

4 December 1944 – 8 January 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Robert Fowler WALKER, C.B.E., M.C., M.B.

Consultant Surgeon**Consultant Physician**

⁴ Promoted Colonel on 26 July 1943 and Acting Brigadier on 7 September 1943. Awarded the D.S.O. on 21 October 1943 and a Bar to the D.S.O. on 25 November 1943.

Deputy Director of Ordnance Services – (D.D.O.S.)

13th July 1941 – 12th March 1942

Colonel (Acting) Leonard Hamilton HOWARD-JONES, R.A.O.C., B.Sc. (Eng), A.M.I.Mech.E., R.A.O.C.

13th March 1942 – 23rd October 1943

Colonel (Acting) George Oswald CRAWFORD, R.A.O.C.⁵

Chief Ordnance Mechanical Engineer – (C.O.M.E.)

13th March 1942 – 30th September 1942

Colonel (Acting) Leonard Hamilton HOWARD-JONES, R.A.O.C., B.Sc. (Eng), A.M.I.Mech.E., R.A.O.C.

Deputy Director of Mechanical Engineering – (D.D.M.E.)

9th September 1942 – 25th May 1943

Colonel (Acting) Gerald Richard TAYLOR, M.I.Mech.E., R.E.M.E.⁶

Colonel WEIR

Corps Paymaster**Assistant Director of Dental Services**

⁵ Promoted Acting Brigadier (in post) on 6 June 1942, and awarded the O.B.E. on 14 October 1943

⁶ R.E.M.E. came into existence on 1 October 1942, with TAYLOR transferring to the new corps from the R.A.O.C. on that date in the substantive rank of Captain. He was awarded the O.B.E. on 14th October 1943.

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