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A CONCISE HISTORY OF:

XIII CORPS (WESTERN DESERT FORCE) (HISTORY & PERSONNEL)

A concise history of XIII Corps, a higher level formation of the British Army formed in 1940 as Western Desert Force, that existed until 1945. It saw service in the Western Desert (Egypt and Libya), Syria, Sicily and Italy. In addition, known details of the key appointments held during that period are included.

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A Concise History of XIII Corps (History & Personnel)

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Western Desert Force (XIII Corps)

On 3 November 1939, the Headquarters of the 7th Infantry Division moved from Palestine to Mersa Matruh in Egypt to take command of the Allied Forces facing the Italian Army in Libya. It was redesignated as the 6th Infantry Division on that same date. The divisional headquarters closed in the Western Desert on 13 March 1940, returning to Palestine.

On 8 June 1940, the Divisional H.Q. closed in Palestine and moved back to the Western Desert, where on 17 June 1940 it was redesignated as Western Desert Force taking command of the:

- 7th Armoured Division;
- Mersa Matruh Garrison.

With the 4th Indian Infantry Division now also under command, the Western Desert Force launched Operation 'Compass' on 12 December 1941 against the Italian Forces in Libya. On 1 January 1941, Headquarters Western Desert Force (W.D.F.) was redesignated as Headquarters XIII Corps. The 4th Indian Infantry Division was withdrawn from Egypt and sent to The Sudan. It was replaced by the 6th Australian Infantry Division. What started as a limited campaign soon captured the whole of Cyrenaica. With the end of the campaign, the Corps Commander returned ill to Egypt, and the Headquarters W.D.F. became Cyrenaica Command on 4 February 1941.

With the unexpected advance of the German and Italian Forces through Cyrenaica in early April 1941, the H.Q. Cyrenaica Command was dispersed and its Commander captured. Lieutenant General BERESFORD-PIERCE was brought from command of the 4th Indian Infantry Division in Abyssinia to reform Western Desert Force. Elements of the H.Q. of Cyrenaica Command escaped (including the B.G.S. and D.A.Q.M.G.) which joined the reformed H.Q. W.D.F. W.D.F. took under command the:

- 9th Australian Division (now trapped in Tobruk);
- 7th Armoured Division Support Group;
- 22nd Infantry Brigade (Guards)
- 7th Australian Division (at Mersa Matruh).

On 9 September 1941, the new Headquarters 8th Army came into being using some personnel from W.D.F., with others forming the resurrected Headquarters XIII Corps on the same date. On 18 November 1941, Operation 'Crusader' commenced. XIII Corps was tasked with taking the Halfaya Pass on the coastal side of 8th Army, and had under command the:

- 4th Indian Infantry Division;
- 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division.

In the first Battle of El Alamein in July 1942, the corps had under command the:

- 7th Armoured Division;
- 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division;
- 5th Indian Infantry Division.

By 31 August 1942 and the Battle of Alam Halfa, the 5th Indian Infantry Division had been withdrawn to be replaced by the newly arrived 44th Infantry Division. The 10th Armoured Division has also come under command of XIII Corps. For the second Battle of El Alamein, the 10th Armoured Division transferred to X Corps and the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division had transferred to XXX Corps. XIII Corps had taken under command the 50th Infantry Division and two Free French brigades.

Following the Battle of El Alamein in late October and early November 1942, the Corps was not involved in the advance through Cyrenaica towards Tripoli, but remained in the El Alamein area tasked with battlefield clearance. From there the Corps H.Q. moved to Palestine and came under command of 9th Army. It is shown on the Order of Battle for 9th Army on 14 February 1943, with under command the:

- 10th Armoured Division;
- 8th Division;
- Headquarters 5th Infantry Division.

Of these, only the 5th Infantry Division was an operational field force formation, the other two being administrative formations. The 5th Infantry Division had joined the Corps on 13 February 1943 on arrival from Persia. The Corps was designated for Operation 'Husky', the invasion of Sicily. It reverted to the command of 8th Army with the 5th Infantry Division being joined by the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division on 10 May 1943. From this date, the Corps had under command:

- 5th Infantry Division;
- 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division.

Both divisions landed on Sicily on 10 July 1943, and the corps fought throughout the Sicilian campaign. Still under the command of 8th Army, the corps crossed the Straits of Messina on 3 September 1943, with the:

- 5th Infantry Division;
- 1st Canadian Infantry Division;
- 231st Infantry Brigade.

It advanced up the toe of Italy, overcoming blockages and delaying tactics of the retreating German forces. The corps met up with X Corps and U.S. VI Corps which had landed at Salerno.

The 5th Infantry Division left XIII Corps on 5 January 1944 transferring to X Corps for the assault on the 'Gustav Line'. The 1st Canadian Infantry Division transferred to I Canadian Corps when it became active in Italy in December 1943. In January 1944, the corps comprised the:

- 6th Armoured Division;
- 4th Infantry Division;
- 78th Infantry Division;
- 8th Indian Infantry Division.

The 6th Armoured Division joined on 27 March 1944 from 8th Army reserves. It transferred to X Corps between 10 June and 2 July 1944, then returning to XIII Corps. The division left again between 4 and 12 August 1944 to come under command of X Corps, returning again to XIII Corps. The 6th Armoured Division left XIII Corps on 9 March 1945 in preparation for the final offensive, but returned again on 23 April 1945 until 3 May 1945.

In November 1946, Headquarters XIII Corps merged with Headquarters Central Mediterranean Force (C.M.F.) with the General Officer Commanding XIII Corps remaining as G.O.C. C.M.F..

Commander Western Desert Force

3 November 1940 – 31 December 1940

Lieutenant General (Acting) Richard Nugent O'CONNOR, C.B., D.S.O.*, M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

General Officer Commanding XIII Corps

1 January 1941 – 15 February 1941¹

Lieutenant General (Acting) Richard Nugent O'CONNOR, C.B., D.S.O.*, M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

General Officer Commanding Western Desert Force

14 April 1941² – 18 September 1941

Lieutenant General Sir Noel Monson de la Poer BERESFORD-PEIRSE, K.B.E., D.S.O.

General Officer Commanding, XIII Corps

9th September 1941 – 17th September 1941

Lieutenant General Sir Noel Monson de la Poer BERESFORD-PEIRSE, K.B.E., D.S.O.

18th September 1941 – 6th February 1942³

Lieutenant General Alfred Reade GODWIN-AUSTIN, C.B., D.S.O., M.C.

7th February 1942 – 7th August 1942

Lieutenant General William Henry Ewart GOTT, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

13th August 1942 – 8th December 1942

Lieutenant General (Acting) Brian Gywnne HORROCKS, M.C., *p.s.c.*

12th December 1942 – 19th January 1944

Lieutenant General Miles Christopher DEMPSEY, D.S.O., M.C.⁴

20th January 1944 – 5th March 1945

Lieutenant General Sidney Chevalier KIRKMAN, C.B.E., M.C.⁵

19th January 1945 – 27th February 1945 (Officiating)

Lieutenant General (Acting) Horatius MURRAY, D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

6th March 1945 – November 1946

Lieutenant General Sir John HARDING, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.** , M.C.

¹ Following the capture of Libya and the success of Operation Compass, Lt. Gen. O'CONNOR was taken ill with stomach problems, and returned to Egypt to take command of British Troops Egypt. The date of the formation of Cyrenaica Command is given as 4 February, and it is likely the H.Q. evolved over a period of time.

² This appears to be the official date Western Desert Force was reformed and the Commander assumed responsibility for the formation.

³ GODWIN-AUSTIN asked to be relieved due to conflict with Commander 8th Army.

⁴ Awarded the C.B. on 14 October 1943.

⁵ Awarded the C.B. in 1944. Relieved of command as declared sick with severe arthritis (but also suffering poor relationship with General Mark CLARK).

Brigadier General Staff – (B.G.S.)

June 1940 – 20th December 1940 (13th April 1941)

Brigadier Rupert HOBDAV,

20th December 1940 – 25th January 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Allan Francis HARDING, M.C., Somerset L.I., *p.s.c.*

7th February 1942 – 23rd January 1943

Brigadier (Acting) George Watkin Eben James ERSKINE, D.S.O., *p.s.c.*

16th September 1942 – 31st January 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Gwynne Brian SUGDEN, M.B.E., S.W.Bord, *s.c.*

1st February 1944 – 30th November 1944

Brigadier (Acting) William Harold LAMBERT, E. Lanc R., *p.s.c.*

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

June 1940 – 1941

Brigadier Eric Paytherus NARES, M.C.*

25th September 1942 – 10th May 1943

Brigadier (Temporary) Neil McMICKING, O.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*

11th May 1943 – 27th January 1944

Brigadier (Acting) Geoffrey Paul HARDY-ROBERTS,

28th January 1944 – 26th July 1945

Brigadier (Acting) William Gordon ROE, A.M.I.Mech.E., R.A.S.C., *p.s.c.*

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

15th April 1941 – 9th May 1941

Brigadier (Temporary) Gerald Knocker DIBB, M.C., *p.s.c.*

May 1941 – 9th September 1941 (To 88 Area, Tobruk)

Brigadier (Temporary) George Noel Chadwick MARTIN, D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*

15 May 1941 – 5 June 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) Henry Beveridge LATHAM, *g.*

10th June 1942 – 26th July 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Constantine Patrick Bartlett WILSON, R.A.

1942 – 1943

Brigadier (Temporary) Alan Hugh HORNBY,

5th March 1943 – 1945

Brigadier (Temporary) Howard GREENE, *G., y.*⁶

1945 – 1945

Brigadier Maurice N. DEWING,

Chief Engineer – (C.Eng.)

31st August 1940 – 26th February 1941

Brigadier (Acting) Henry Porter Wolseley HUTSON, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.

26th February 1941 – 9th September 1941

Brigadier (Temporary) Frederick Hermann KISCH, C.B.E., D.S.O., Reserve of Officers

13 March 1943 – 19 September 1943

Brigadier (Acting) Cyril Collier DUCHESNE, O.B.E., M.C., R.E.

20 September 1943 – ??

Brigadier H. H. C. SUGDEN,

1945 – 1947

Brigadier John Christopher WALKEY, C.B.E.

⁶ Awarded the C.B.E. on 24 August 1944 and D.S.O. on the 13 December 1945.

Chief Signal Officer – (C.R.Sigs)1941 – 1941

Colonel F. A. H. MATHEW

1941 – 1942

Colonel G. H. WALTON

14th July 1942 – 6th September 1942

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

7 September 1943 – 8 February 1944

Brigadier (Acting) John Buchanan ADAMS,

1943 – 1944

Colonel Mervyn Savile WHEATLEY,

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

13th August 1940 – 26th February 1941

Colonel Wilfred d’Auvergne COLLINGS,

5th February 1941 – 1st December 1941

Colonel (Temporary) Frederick Sherwood CLOVER, R.A.S.C.

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

25 September 1941 – 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Francis Gerald Augustus SMYTH,

14th May 1942 – 1943

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

1943 – 1944

Brigadier (Temporary) Stanley ARNOTT,

1944 – 1944

Brigadier Stanley ARNOTT, D.S.O.

3 May 1944 – 1945

Brigadier (Acting) Douglas Gordon CHEYNE,

25 January 1945 – 1946

Brigadier (Acting) James Craw BARNETSON

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

25th January 1941 – 4th February 1941

Colonel (Acting) Cecil Hubert COOPER, R.A.O.C.

14th April 1941 – 8th September 1941 (Western Desert Force)

Colonel (Acting) Cecil Hubert COOPER, R.A.O.C.

9th September 1941 – 1st May 1943

Colonel (Temporary) Cecil Hubert COOPER, R.A.O.C.⁷

1943 – 1945

Colonel W. GRIMSDALE,

⁷ Awarded the O.B.E. on 30 December 1941.

Bibliography and Sources

'G' Branch

1941	WO 169/1107
1942 – 1 Jan – 31 May	WO 169/4005
1942 – 1 Jun – 31 Aug	WO 169/4006
1942 – 1 Sept to 31 Dec	WO 169/4007
1943 – 1 Jan to 31 July	WO 169/8614
1943 August	WO 169/8615
1943 October	WO 169/8616
1943 November	WO 169/8617
1943 December	WO 169/8618

'A' Branch

1941 – 1 Jan to 28 Feb	WO 169/1108
1942 – 1 Jan 31 Aug	WO 169/4009

'Q' Branch (XIII Quartermaster)

1941 – 1 Jan to 28 Feb	WO 169/1109
1942	WO 169/4008

Royal Artillery

1941	WO 169/1110
1942	WO 169/4010
1943	WO 169/8620

Chief Engineer

1941	WO 169/1111
1941	WO 169/1112
1942	WO 169/4012
1943	WO 169/8622
1943	WO 169/8623

Signals

1941 – 1 Aug to 31 Dec	WO 169/1114
1942	WO 169.4014
1942	WO 169/4015
1943	WO 169/8625

Supply and Transport

1941	WO 169/1117
1943	WO 169/8627

Ordnance

1943	WO 169/8628
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R.E.M.E.

1942 – 1 Aug to 31 Dec	WO 169/4020
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Adjutant & Quarter-Master Branch

1943	WO 169/8619
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Counter Battery Staff

1943 – 1 May 31 Dec	WO 169/8621
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