

SERGEANT CYRIL HENRY JENNINGS

Cyril was born in the second quarter of 1917 in Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire, the youngest of 3 sons of William John Jennings (a groom from Little Shelford and later a gamekeeper) and Frances Ellen (nee Chapman) from Croxton, Norfolk. His parents were married in Little Shelford on the 26 October 1913. By the time of the 1939 register, his mother was living in Great Chesterford at 2, Delles Cottage, Carmen Street and his father was in Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge before his death in the first quarter of 1940.

Essex Regiment records show that Cyril enlisted in the 5th Battalion on 26 April 1939 with service number 6016191.

This Territorial Army battalion was spread across the county, but it is likely he was initially assigned to X Company based in Saffron Walden. On 1 June 1939 the Battalion was doubled in size as part of the country's preparation for war and re-designated 1/5th Essex based in east Essex and 2/5th in the west. After the outbreak of war on 3 September 1/5th Essex was initially stationed at Chelmsford, with home defence and training duties. In the first 8 months of the war there was very limited



military action involving the British Army in Europe (called the Phoney War in Britain and the Sitzkrieg in Germany) and few casualties. Most modern equipment would have been prioritised for the Regular Army in France and so life in the home defence units would have been dull routine. After the German Blitzkrieg, defeat of France and Dunkirk in June 1940 all types of military equipment, especially transport and radios, were critically short and it was not until June 1941 that 1/5th Essex was fully equipped and posted overseas to the Middle East to join the 8th Indian Division which was deployed to Iraq to stabilise the region.

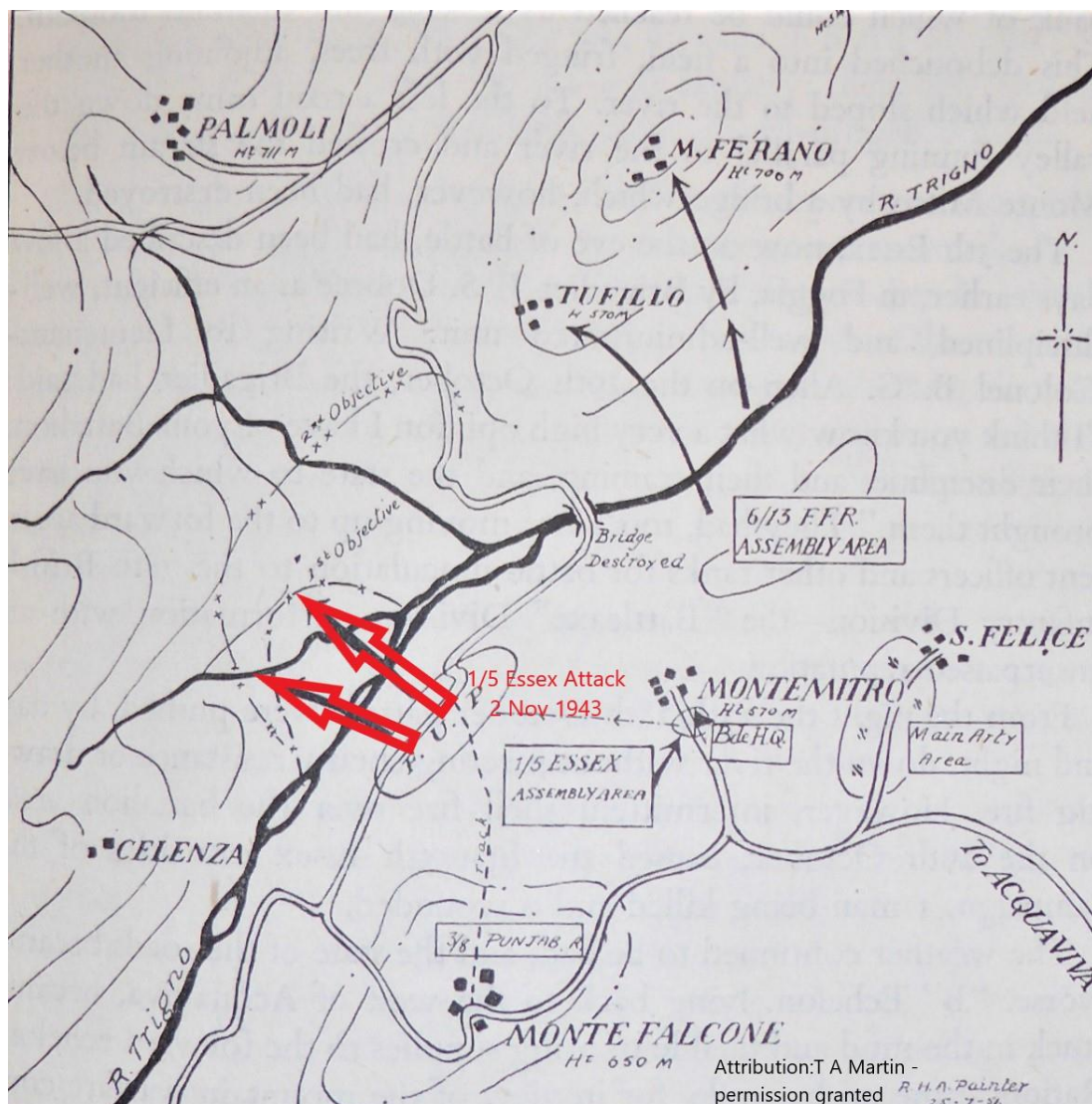
Anglo-Iraq War 1941

In a little known episode of WW2, in May 1941 a pro-Axis faction overthrew the Royalist rulers of the Kingdom of Iraq and hoped with German and Italian help to eject the limited British forces (stationed there under a 1930 Treaty), thereby gaining control of the oilfields owned by Britain. The British forces concentrated around two RAF bases at Habbaniya (near Baghdad) and at Shaibah (near Basra) initially comprised around 2,000 Assyrian soldiers, 18 elderly RAF armoured cars and about 100 obsolescent aircraft. The Royal Navy controlled the Persian Gulf. Despite conflicting priorities in the Middle East, limited Army reinforcements were quickly sent by air.

The Iraqi Army attempted a show of force and surrounded Habbaniya with 9,000 troops supported by artillery, but the RAF responded with major air strikes against the besieging Iraqi troops and their supporting air force bases. In less than a week the Iraqis had retreated from Habbaniya. The promised support from Italy and Germany was limited and ineffectual and with the arrival of significant reinforcements from the UK and India the Iraqi forces were defeated by June and the Royalist Government re-established. 1/5th Essex remained in Iraq until April 1943.

On 8 May 1943 1/5th Essex was redesignated 5th Essex, the 2/5th having almost been wiped out in July 1942 stopping the Axis advance on Egypt at the battle of Deir-el-Shein (also known as the 1st battle of El Alamein). 5th Essex then spent time in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt before landing in Taranto, Italy on 24 September 1943. From there the Battalion moved up the Adriatic Coast with the 8th Indian Division now part of General Montgomery's 8th Army.

The Allied advance up the Italian peninsular was a gruelling and costly campaign where the rugged terrain favoured the German defences. Their first proper battle of the war for 5th Essex was a forced crossing of the River Trigno in the early hours of 2 November conducted in torrential rain against the elite German 1st Parachute Division.



While the Battalion largely took its objectives, albeit with heavy (139) casualties, the crossing could not be sustained and a withdrawal back south of the river was ordered in the afternoon. It was during this battle that Cyril was killed and he was buried in the locality. Three days later the Germans began pulling back, and the Battalion was able to cross the river successfully and advance to the next obstacle, the River Sangro.

Cyril was reburied on the 4th May 1944 in the Sangro River War Cemetery, south of Pescara, along with at least another nine from the Essex killed on the same day. His headstone has the words "In loving memory of my dear son Cyril safe in God's keeping". There are over 2500 Commonwealth soldiers buried there.

