



**THE CAPTURE OF  
GENERAL WILHELM JOSEF Ritter von THOMA**

**BY CAPTAIN GRANT ALLEN SINGER  
10<sup>TH</sup> ROYAL HUSSARS**

**4<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 1942**

Researched and Written by Wayne Price

By September 1942 the war had been raging in North Africa for nearly two years. In successive offensives, the Allies and the Axis forces had in turn advanced and withdrawn across the inhospitable terrain of sand and solid bedrock. It was a thankless place to wage war, but for a long time it was the only place that the allies were waging war on the ground against the German and Italian forces and one that it was vital the allies won.

It has been said that the war in the desert was a chivalrous affair with both sides respecting the other as well as the rules that govern civilised warfare. Whilst it may be true that in the main both sides fought 'cleanly' it cannot be said that war, any war is gentlemanly or ever clean. Due to the nature of the North African campaign and the vast area that it was fought over, it was a war of movement and therefore a war dominated by the tank. A tanks primary role in war is to destroy the opposition's tanks.

There are many ways to destroy a tank, mines or artillery will do the trick, a tank however has two main ways that it will attempt the same effect. The first is to fire a high explosive (HE) shell at the enemy tank; this will explode on the outside of the turret and send shockwaves through the metal causing a 'scab' to form on the inside of the turret. This scab can be anything from a few inches in diameter to a few foot, it will spin at an incredible speed around the fighting compartment within the turret and do incredible damage to anyone and anything inside the vehicle. In all likelihood it will also cause the tank to burn. The second way to destroy a tank was to fire an armour-piercing (AP) round at your adversary. An AP round travels at stupefying velocities (the modern day version being one and a half miles per second). The AP round will strike the outside of the tank and, using its energy, punch a hole through the armour and pass into the vehicle itself. Inside, still travelling incredibly fast it creates a huge overpressure that literally turns human flesh into a mush as well as anything else within the tank. The incredible energy also causes a flash fire which will gut the vehicle.

This then is the 'chivalrous and 'gentlemanly' war that the tanks of the 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars (10RH) and the rest of the belligerent forces were fighting in the desert of North Africa in 1942.



*(Above) This watercolour was painted a few days after the action that saw the capture of General von Thoma by the Belgian Liaison Officer for the 10RH, Major Henri Le Grand, DSO.*

By the early autumn of 1942 the North African campaign was in its final stages and was going in the favour of the Allies (mainly British, Canadian, ANZAC, South African and Polish forces). Early September had seen the British launch and win the battle of Alam Halfa which had secured the allied position at Alamein. As the official history of the 10RH at war explained:

*“It was the beginning of the end of the Axis forces not only in Egypt but also in the whole of the North African continent. The stage was now becoming set for the final act at Alamein. Act one had been the original halting of the enemy’s pursuit from Knightsbridge; Act two the battle which has just been described (Alam Halfa); and act three was to be the battle of Alamein”.*

At its rest area of Khataba the 10RH were re-equipped with two Squadrons (Sqn’s) of the new Sherman Tank, these were allocated to A and C Sqn’s with B Sqn retaining the Crusader. Also arriving was the twelve Dingo Scout Car’s that were to form the newly introduced Close Reconnaissance Troop of whom Captain Grant Singer was to be the Leader.

There followed a brief period of re-organisation and extensive re-training in gunnery to take into account the advantages in this field that the American 75mm mounted on the Sherman offered. There then began rehearsals for the next attack which was to become known as the Battle of El Alamein. At this time the Commanding Officer of the 10RH was Lt Colonel J. P. Archer-Shee MC with Major A. D. R Wingfield as his second in command. The Sabre Sqn’s were commanded by, Major D.R.B Kaye (A Sqn), Major R.M. Millbanke MC (B Sqn) and Major G.H. Errington (C Sqn). HQ Sqn was commanded by Major N.D. Charrington.

On the night of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> of October the 10RH tanks made their way to the assembly area at Alum Shalut to join the HQ element and B Echelon that had travelled there during the daylight hours. During two final days of fine-tuning the vehicles and equipment the regiment was joined by the other elements that made up the 10RH Battle Group, these consisted of:



B Battery 11th Royal Horse Artillery (HAC)



2<sup>nd</sup> Troop, 1<sup>st</sup> Field Squadron, the Royal Engineers



C Squadron, the Yorkshire Dragoons (infantry)



Two troops of D Squadron, the Yorkshire Dragoons (anti-tank guns)

On the eve of this momentous battle the men of the 10RH Battle group were given their orders for the task ahead, they were in brief;

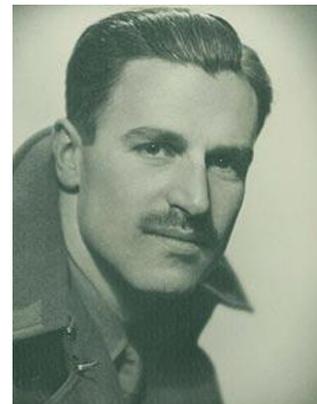
- (a) A deception plan to induce the enemy to believe that the main attack was falling on the southern sector.
- (b) A holding attack by XIII Corps in the South.
- (c) The main attack by the XXX Corps in the north and just to the south of the coast road.
- (d) A break-out by X Corps (1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armoured Divisions) through the XXX Corps area. This break-out was to have as its final objective the Kidney and Miteireya Ridges; and on these it was proposed to receive the counter-attack expected from the two German Panzer Divisions which at the moment were split between the northern and southern sectors. This first objective, which lay some eight thousand yards beyond the start line, was to be reached before first light on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October.
- (e) The battle was to open with a preliminary bombardment at 2200hrs on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October.

By the end of the first phase of the attack the 10RH had lost six Sherman's totally destroyed and a number of others damaged, mostly by mines, but repairable. In terms of men they had lost one officer killed and five other ranks, and also six officers and 19 other ranks wounded. In return the regiment had completely destroyed 27 German and Italian tanks and disabled a further 15. In addition they had destroyed two 88mm Guns, two 76mm guns, 10 anti-tank guns, three self-propelled guns and nine Lorries. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of October the regiment was stood down for a short rest, taking over some replacement Sherman's at the same time, in readiness for the next phase which was to be called Operation Supercharge.

Supercharge was launched, after a 24 hour delay, at 0200 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1942 and the 10RH led by Captain Singer and his Recce Troop moved to their position on the left of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigade and crossed the start line which was known as 'Two Bars Track' at 0600 on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. During the early stages of the battle the CO, Lt Col Archer-Shee, mistook a Sqn of enemy tanks for those of his B Sqn and he drove towards them to pass on some orders that he had been unable to pass on through his radio which was not working. Archer-Shee was only five hundred yards away when, realising his mistake he turned tail and ran. But it was too late, his tank was hit and set on fire, luckily he was able to escape with his crew with no casualties.

By 0900 of the 4<sup>th</sup> of November and after suffering further casualties, including a much loved Troop leader, Lt N Watson, the 10RH were still advancing in the vanguard of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division with the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers close behind to the right and the Bays rear and right. This formation dashed forward 4,000 yards destroying an 88mm gun and some Lorries before being held up by a number of German tanks and anti-tank guns which had to be dealt with. Six enemy tanks were knocked out by the 10RH and the advance continued until again being held up by even more anti-tank guns.

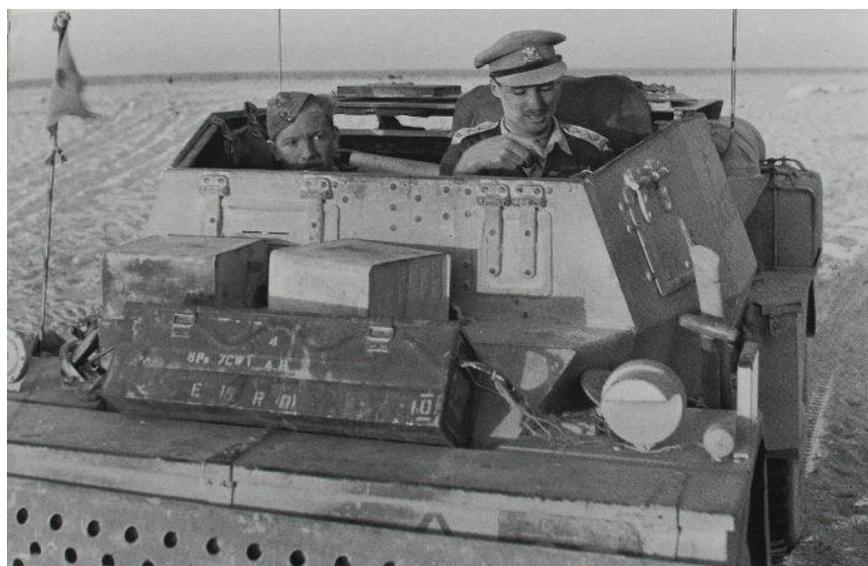
At the same time Grant Singer and his Recce Troop were moving in the forward areas collecting prisoners from the destroyed German tanks. During the sharp engagement with these tanks Captain Singer had spotted one of them moving to a flank, he approached one of the C Squadron tanks which was commanded by a friend and fellow 10<sup>th</sup> Hussar, Captain Richard Keane who was Second in Command of the Squadron, and pointed out the threat. Captain Keane instructed his gunner to engage the target which was hit by an AP round and caught fire. It was on seeing this that Captain Singer went forward to capture any crew that bailed out of the stricken German tank.



*(Above right), Captain Richard Keane who's gunner knocked out Von Thoma's Tank. Keane later served with Special Forces.*

As he approached the German tank its commander who had got out of the burning vehicle started walking towards Singer with his hands raised, grabbing a Thompson sub-machine gun, Singer dismounted from his Daimler and took the German prisoner. This was no ordinary prisoner though; this was the acting Commander of the German Afrika Korps, General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma. Von Thoma had decided to go forward to see for himself to what extent the allies had broken through so that he could convince Rommel that the German and Italian forces were in dire trouble. Instead he had met the 10RH, had his tank knocked out and been captured.

Captain Singer was ordered to take Von Thoma back to Brigade Headquarters, then to Montgomery's HQ where he remained for the night, rejoining his Troop and the regiment at 0700 the following day, the 5<sup>th</sup> of November. After some hasty orders the regiment moved off again with Singer and his Troop, as usual, leading the way to the first bound which was a raised piece of ground called the Bir Wagda.



*(Left), Captain Grant Singer (in peaked cap) and his driver, Trooper Hyatt, pictured at 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigades Headquarters just after they had arrived to drop off General von Thoma. Von Thoma was later sent back to General Montgomery's own HQ, see front cover.*

As Recce Troop reached this feature they came across an 88mm gun that was being limbered up by its crew for a hasty withdrawal, they were

too late and they quickly surrendered to Singer and were sent back down the line as prisoners of war. There was no time to stop now and the regimental second in command arrived on the bound and ordered the advance to continue to the next bound which was the feature at Daba. Major Wingfield was in temporary command of the 10RH at the time because Lt Colonel Archer-Shee was being treated for a wound to his hand that he had received during his encounter with the German tanks he had mistaken for B Squadron.

Recce Troop now advanced a further four hundred yards with B Sqn behind, just leaving the Bir Wagda feature. As Recce moved forward a second, and as yet unseen German 88mm gun opened fire hitting two armoured cars of Recce Troop and one of the B Sqn tanks. One of those Armoured Cars that was destroyed was that of Captain Grant Singer's, it ripped the vehicle apart and killed Singer and his driver, 25 year old Trooper George Hyatt instantly. On being told of Singer's death, Von Thoma was greatly upset and requested permission to write to his widow personally, this was granted by Montgomery and a letter was duly sent to Singer's widow Daphne. The official history of the 10RH at war recorded the death of Captain Singer:

*"The loss of Captain Singer, who had returned from being ADC to Lieutenant-General Willoughby Norrie to fight with the regiment at Alamein, was particularly tragic. He had commanded the newly formed Reconnaissance Troop with conspicuous gallantry and*

*cheerfulness throughout the hard dog-fight, and was just striking his true element in leading the advance in mobile warfare. This advance had started with his capture of a German Corps Commander”.*



*(Above), General von Thoma climbs out of Captain Grant Singer's Scout car at General Montgomery's Headquarters.*

### **Captain Grant Allen Singer**



Grant Allen Singer was born in on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1915, but for reasons that are unknown his birth mother gave him up for adoption and he was adopted by Eileen Singer, (nee Longsdon) and her husband and now Grant's father, Washington Merrit Grant Singer. The Singer family who were from America was very wealthy, in no small part from their (now) world famous sewing machine company. Grant's adoptive Grandfather, Isaac had been a colourful character, variously described as an actor, an inventor and an entrepreneur. It was Isaac that had originally set up the Singer Sewing Machine Company and set the family on its way to making a fortune. Isaac was also it seems a hit with the ladies and he married a number of times fathering over 20 children, some legitimate others not so. One of his legitimate sons was Grant's father Washington and, due to the families wealth, throughout his life Washington lived by his own means apparently never actually having employment, but being listed as a landowner on myriad passenger lists as he travelled extensively around the world. Washington had been married previously to Blanche but that marriage had ended in divorce. Eileen and Washington were married in 1915, less than a year before they adopted Grant.

During his early life Grant also travelled extensively, not least within the UK where his father owned properties in London, Devon, Suffolk and the main family home at Normans Court, West Tytherley near Salisbury which he purchased in 1906. As a young adult Grant travelled around the rest of the world including America, Indonesia, Europe and Africa. Grant's father had died on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1934 at his home, Steartfield House near Torquay and had left an estate worth £1,018,018. 11s 7d which meant that Grant had no need of seeking

fulltime employment and it is highly likely that he took over of looking after his father's estates and interests around the world, which were extensive. Washington was a generous benefactor to Exeter University which to this day has a building (Psychology Department) named after him.

Grant was married in August 1937 to Daphne Helen Travers, who was born in India. Her father Francis Travers was a successful businessman in Bombay as well as an accomplished cricketer, playing at first class level for the 'Europeans' in the Indian league between 1920 and 1929. Grant and Daphne moved into the Normans Court estate and used this as their marital home.

When war broke out Grant joined the army initially the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (he may already have been a member before the war) before transferring to the 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Hussars (10RH), joining them just after they arrived back from France following the Dunkirk evacuation in June 1940. The 10RH had only been in France for a mere three weeks or so but had suffered serious casualties, mostly at the battle of Huppy where the regiment lost the vast majority of their tanks to murderous anti-tank fire. In fact the 10RH had returned to England without any of their vehicles and in the latter stages of that campaign had been used as infantry.

Following a period of training and re-equipping the 10RH were sent out to North Africa to take part in that campaign. Grant Singer, now a Captain was detached from the regiment to take up the post of Aide-de-Camp to Lt General Willoughby Norrie (also a 10<sup>th</sup> Hussar) at XXX Corps Headquarters. Grant returned to the 10RH whilst they were resting at Khataba in early September 1942 to take up command as the Troop leader of the newly formed Recce Troop.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1942 (as detailed above) Grant captured General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, it was an incredible achievement and was celebrated across the Allied forces. The next day, Grant and his driver Trooper George Hyatt were once again probing forward trying to make contact with the enemy. Their Dingo armoured car was spotted by the Germans and was hit by an 88mm shell which tore their little vehicle apart and killed both Grant and Hyatt. Grant Singer is buried at the El Alamein war Cemetery, whilst George Hyatt, who was from Cliff Vale, Stoke-on-Trent is remembered on the Alamein Memorial. There is also a Memorial to Captain Singer in the church at West Tytherley, where the Normans Court Estate lies, just outside Salisbury

Daphne was to remarry twice in her lifetime, firstly to Lt Col Noel M. H. Wall and then later to Major Dermot Ralph Daly. She sold the Normans Court Estate in 1952 when it became a preparatory school. Daphne died on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1968 in Oxfordshire. After his father's death, Grant's mother did not remarry, Ellen died at Westminster in April 1955.

### **General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma**



Wilhelm Josef Ritter von Thoma was born in Dachau just outside the Bavarian city of Munich in 1891. He attended the Ludwigs-Gymnasium in Munich from 1903 until 1912 when he graduated and joined the Royal Bavarian Army on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1912 with the rank of 'Fahnenjunker, the equivalent in the British army of an Officer Cadet. His chosen regiment was called the Bavarian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infanterie-regiment 'Prinz Karl von Bayern'.

On the outbreak of WW1 von Thoma went with his regiment to the western Front where, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1914 he was wounded by a bullet graze to the head whilst serving on

the Somme front. The wound was not serious and he remained with his men receiving treatment on the front line. A few days after this wound he was ordered to assume command of the 11<sup>th</sup> Company of his regiment which he did so until he was wounded again, this time more seriously by shrapnel to his right elbow.

In January 1915 his regiment was moved to the eastern front and he became the adjutant, being based in Galicia. Von Thoma and his regiment saw much action on this front and were instrumental in the capture of Brest Litovsk. Von Thoma was also to see action in Serbia that year when he was seconded to the Austro-Hungarian army to assist them in their campaign against Serbian forces. It was during this campaign that von Thoma was again wounded, this time by a bullet to the chest.

Following treatment for his latest wound von Thoma was once again sent to the Western front and took part in the epic struggle against the French at Verdun before travelling east again and fighting in Romania and taking part in the German and Austro-Hungarian defence after the Russians launched their 'Brusilov' offensive. It was during this action that on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1916, the then Leutnant von Thoma performed an act of bravery that earned him the



Knights Cross of the Bavarian Military Max Joseph Order, the highest award for bravery that the Bavarian army could bestow. Von Thoma was now withdrawn from front line service to attend a series of courses.

He returned to the Western front on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1918 and was almost immediately wounded yet again, this time in the wrist by a grenade fragment whilst taking part in the battle of Kemmel. Once again he was treated for his wound and returned to active duty as the commander of the Machine Gun Company before on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1918 he was appointed the Commanding Officer of his regiments I Battalion. Von Thoma was captured on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1918 by elements of the US 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division whilst conducting a vicious defence during the Aisne-Marne counteroffensive. He remained a prisoner until the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 1919.

At the start of the Second World War von Thoma (who had seen action in the Spanish Civil War) was

one of the first into action with Rudolf Veiel's 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division serving with distinction throughout the Polish campaign and receiving the 1939 Bars to the two Iron crosses that he had won in the First World War. He was then appointed commander of the Panzer Regiment 3 with the rank of Colonel before further promotion to Brigadier saw him take over command of the 17<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division on the eastern front. Von Thoma was well known for being a cool and level headed commander, Generaloberst Heinz Guderian wrote of von Thoma in his memoirs, *Panzer Leader* that von Thoma was;

*".....one of our most senior and experienced panzer officers; he had been famous for his icy calm and exceptional bravery both in the First World War and in Spain and he was to prove his ability once again"*

Von Thoma was to remain on the eastern front until mid-1942 finishing off as the Commander of the 20<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. In August of 1942 he was transferred to North Africa and given command of the Deutches Afrika Korps (DAK) in place of General der

Panzertruppe Walter Nehring who had been wounded by a British aircraft that had bombed his vehicle during the battle of Alam el Halfa. Generalfeldtmarschall Erwin Rommel was also en-route back to North Africa to assume command of all Axis forces after being on convalescence leave in Germany. He arrived back on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 1942.

When the decisive battle of El Alamein started on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1942 von Thoma was now a Lieutenant General. The battle was going extremely well for the allied forces and Rommel was worried enough to start preparing to move his forces back into Libya. Hitler however had other ideas and he ordered that the DAK was to stand fast and fight in positions that they already held, he finished his order with the words *“As to your troops, you can show them no other way than that to victory or death”*. Von Thoma called this order “madness” and decided to go forward himself to see the battle at close quarters. It was whilst

he was conducting this forward movement that his tank was hit and he was captured by the 10RH, specifically Captain Grant Singer.

Rommel was to say that in his opinion von Thoma was attempting to seek his death in battle, whilst other officers of the DAK speculated that he had deliberately gone forward in an attempt to be taken prisoner. Von Thoma was to later have dinner with General Montgomery where they discussed the battle. He was recorded as saying that *“I was staggered at the exactness of his (Montgomery’s knowledge, he seemed to know as much about our position as I did”*.

Von Thoma was to remain a prisoner for the rest of the war and for a few years afterwards. He was held in a number of camps for high ranking Germans including, Trent Park, Grizedale Hall and Wilton Park. It was whilst he was at Wilton Park that he had a leg amputated at Cardiff and was fitted for an artificial limb. He was popular amongst the camp staff and had a good rapport with his captors including Winston Churchill who held him in high regard, once commenting:

*“I sympathize with General von Thoma; defeated, in captivity and..... (long pause for dramatic effect) dinner with Montgomery.”*

General Wilhelm von Thoma was released from captivity on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1947 and died just a few months later of a heart attack at his home in Söcking, Germany.



*Above and next page, detail from the painting by David Shepherd of the capture of von Thoma. This painting hangs in the office of the Commanding Officer of the King’s Royal Hussars.*

