

42nd (East Lancashire) Infantry Division

The 42nd (East Lancashire) Infantry Division was an infantry division of the British Army. The division was raised in 1908 as part of the Territorial Force (TF), originally as the East Lancashire Division, and was redesignated as the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division on 25 May 1915. It was the first TF division to be sent overseas during the First World War. The division fought at Gallipoli, in the Sinai desert and on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Disbanded after the war, it was reformed in the Territorial Army (TA), in the Second World War it served as the 42nd (East Lancashire) Infantry Division with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and fought in Belgium and France before being evacuated at Dunkirk. The division was later reformed in the United Kingdom and, in November 1941, was converted into the 42nd Armoured Division, which was disbanded in October 1943 without serving overseas. A 2nd Line duplicate formation, the 66th (2nd East Lancashire) Division, was created when the Territorials were doubled in both world wars. The division was disbanded during the war

Second World War

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War on 3 September 1939, the 42nd Division, commanded by Major General William Holmes, was serving under Western Command with its headquarters stationed in Manchester, and was mobilised for war service. The division, still comprising the 125th, 126th, and 127th Infantry Brigades, was understrength, having sent many of its best officers and men to help create a duplicate formation, the 66th Infantry Division, when the possibility of another conflict became obvious.

Although war was declared, many of the division's units, widely scattered, were engaged in static defensive duties and guarding vulnerable positions, and so were initially unable to concentrate on training. In late September, the division moved to Northumberland where it came under Northern Command and was able to begin training, which continued into the winter.

In January 1940, the division moved to Wiltshire, coming under Southern Command and continued training in order to join the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. By late March, training had progressed sufficiently and, in mid-April, the division crossed over to France, coming under the control of General Headquarters (GHQ) BEF, before being assigned to Lieutenant General Ronald Adam's III Corps on 29 April. While there, the division exchanged some of its units for Regular Army units, as part of official BEF policy, which was, in theory, intended to strengthen the inexperienced TA formations with experienced Regular units but this also had the simultaneous effect of weakening the Regular formations with relatively untrained troops.

The 42nd Division transferred from Adam's III Corps to Lieutenant General Michael Barker's I Corps on 19 May 1940, nine days after the German Army invaded France, as the division moved into the front line on the River Escaut. On 17 May, Brigadier John Smyth's 127th Brigade was detached to join "Mac Force", under Major General Noel Mason-MacFarlane, temporarily leaving the division with two brigades, returning on 20 May. After the speed of the German advance, the division, along with the rest of the BEF, was forced to retreat to Dunkirk, and was evacuated from Dunkirk on 31 May/1 June, having suffered significant casualties.

Around this time the 42nd Division gained its first and only Victoria Cross (VC) of the Second World War, belonging to Captain Marcus Ervine-Andrews of the 1st Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment, of the 126th Brigade. In addition to being one of the first VCs won by the British Army during the Second World War, he was also the first Irishman to be awarded the medal during the war.

The next few months for the division were spent in England, being re-equipped and reformed, along with anti-invasion duties in the event of a German invasion. Due to the heavy casualties sustained in France, the division absorbed thousands of conscripts as replacements. The division was stationed initially near Middlesbrough, Yorkshire under Northern Command, and in mid-June Major General Holmes, who had been General Officer Commanding (GOC) for over two years, was given command of X Corps and succeeded as GOC 42nd Division by Major General Henry Willcox. On 4 July, the division came under the command of X

Corps and then, on 9 September, moving to East Anglia, IV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Francis Nosworthy, under Eastern Command.

The corps was intended by General Sir Alan Brooke, the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, to be used in a counterattack role if the Germans invaded. On 5 November 1940, the division moved to Gloucestershire upon transferring again, this time to Lieutenant General Hugh Massy's XI Corps, and continued its routine of alternating between beach defence and training for potential future operations overseas. In late April 1941, Major General Eric Miles, who had commanded the 126th Brigade with distinction in France and Belgium the year before, assumed command from Major General Willcox, upon the latter's promotion to command I Corps, and, after further training, which included numerous large-scale exercises, on 23 October, the 42nd Division transferred again to Northern Command and, five days later, Major General Miles Dempsey assumed command from Major General Miles, who was posted to the 56th (London) Infantry Division as its GOC.

Soon afterwards the division was, due to a shortage of armoured troops in the British Army to face a German invasion of the country, selected by General Brooke (soon to become Chief of the Imperial General Staff), as the most senior TA division, and, in his opinion, "a good division" (as he wrote in his diary after having spent the day with the division on 1 July),^[80] for conversion into an armoured formation. Consequently, on 1 November, the division was redesignated as the 42nd Armoured Division, the 125th and 126th Brigades becoming the 10th and 11th Armoured Brigades and the 127th Brigade becoming the 42nd Support Group, respectively.

Thus, the division ceased to be an infantry formation. However, after undergoing numerous changes in organisation and personnel, the 42nd Armoured Division, after an existence of just less than two years, was broken up, many of its units reconverting to infantry or disbanding.