

# A Practical Guide to Irish Brigade battlefields in the Bou Arada Area

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Irish Brigade Website

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*Photograph taken on Stuka Farm ridge at grid reference 638055 looking north-west to the northern part of Grandstand Hill across the Goubellat-Bou Arada road which can be seen running left to right about half-way up the photograph. The wooded escarpment to the right was held by H Company on 26 February and was not subject to German attack. 6 Skins occupied Grandstand Hill but had a standing patrol on the west side of the road at the base of the escarpment.*

THE battles of Bou Arada spanned two periods: 11-22 January and 26-27 February 1943. The key locations for both can be covered in a single day, though it is probably advisable to take at least two to allow additional time to study and explore the landscape. The most temperate times to visit the area are during the spring and autumn: day-time temperatures being about 20-25 degrees centigrade and it is generally dry, though rain can occur. Night-time temperatures can still dip quite sharply at those times of the year.

## **Getting started**

The starting point for the journey to the Bou Arada battlefields is Tunis, capital of Tunisia. There are regular scheduled flights from the UK using Tunis Air and British Airways, as well as a variety of package tour companies, though the latter would probably include a full board hotel at a less convenient beach resort. Carthage Airport in Tunis is reasonably modern, though queues through passport control can involve waits of up to one hour. No visas are required for visitors from the UK. There are buses from the airport to the centre of Tunis and a taxi in the spring of 2012 cost less than (US) \$15, although it is recommended that careful attention be given to meter prices as there could be some manipulation of normal tariffs by the driver.

Taxi drivers speak enough English to understand simple directions; most speak reasonable French, though few Tunisians outside the capital speak English with any fluency. French is widely understood though many rural people only speak Arabic. The Tunisian people are friendly and helpful and continue to be welcoming despite the challenges created by political events since the start of 2011. The overwhelming majority of Tunisians are Muslims with a moderate outlook. Many women wear veils or hijabs but the majority in the capital in the spring of 2012 had their hair uncovered. Wine is sold in hotels and in some restaurants, but public consumption of alcohol is unacceptable.

There is a wide range of choice of hotels in Tunis. They include luxury five-star hotels in the centre of the city that cost more than \$300 a night. But affordable and reasonably appointed accommodation is also available nearby and a room including breakfast can be found for less than \$75. Dining out in Tunis is very good value, and a three-course meal can be enjoyed for no more than \$15 a head.

There are three possible ways of traveling to Bou Arada. Cars can be hired at reasonable rates, although maintenance standards sometimes leave something to be desired. Roads in the north of Tunisia are good and well-maintained, traffic is comparatively light and driving is generally not unsafe. Roads are well signposted and there are petrol stations in the larger towns.

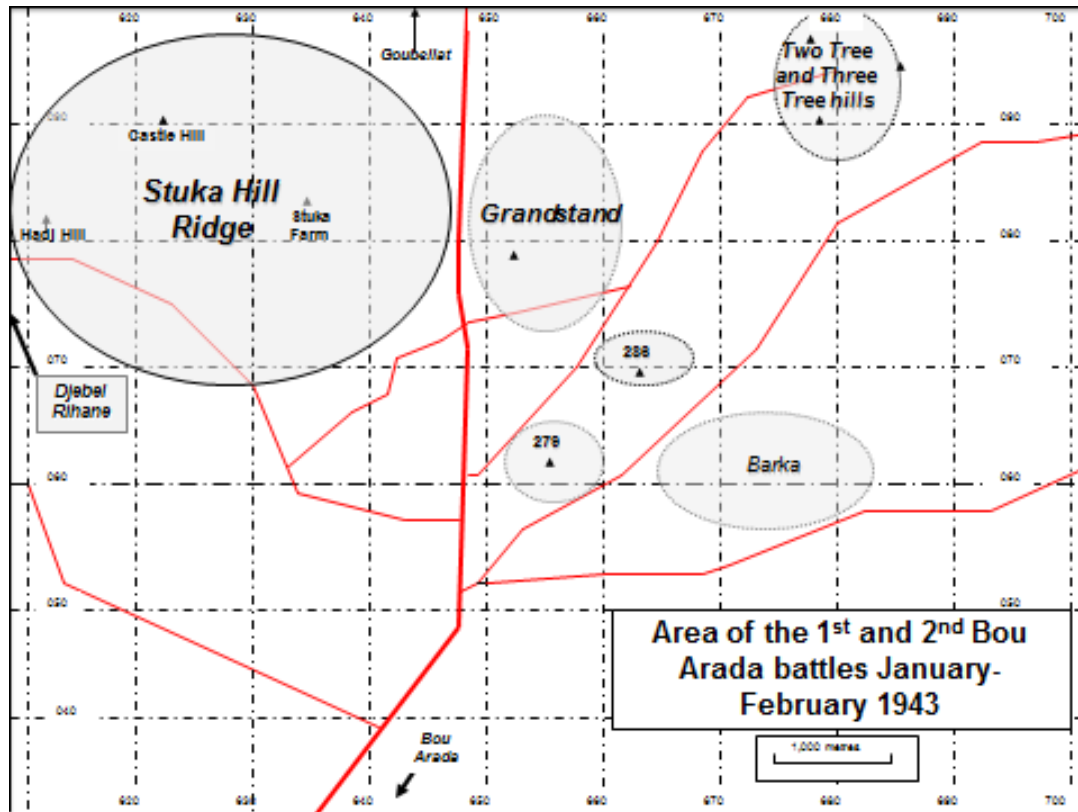
A better alternative would be to hire a driver for the day (s). The advantage of an appropriate driver is travelling with someone with local knowledge of the areas to be covered who can speak the vernacular of the region visited. This alternative will cost less than \$100 a day, and cars can take four passengers at a slight squeeze.

The third option is to use public transport. The Irish Brigade website visit in the spring of 2012 involved using on separate occasions a hired driver and public transport. The latter is extremely inexpensive and involves taking a seat in a louage (minibus) to Medjez-el-Bab for less than \$10 return, and from where a taxi can easily be hired to visit the areas nearby. This approach is probably only suitable for people traveling with companions comfortable with French and/or Arabic.

## **Getting to Bou Arada**

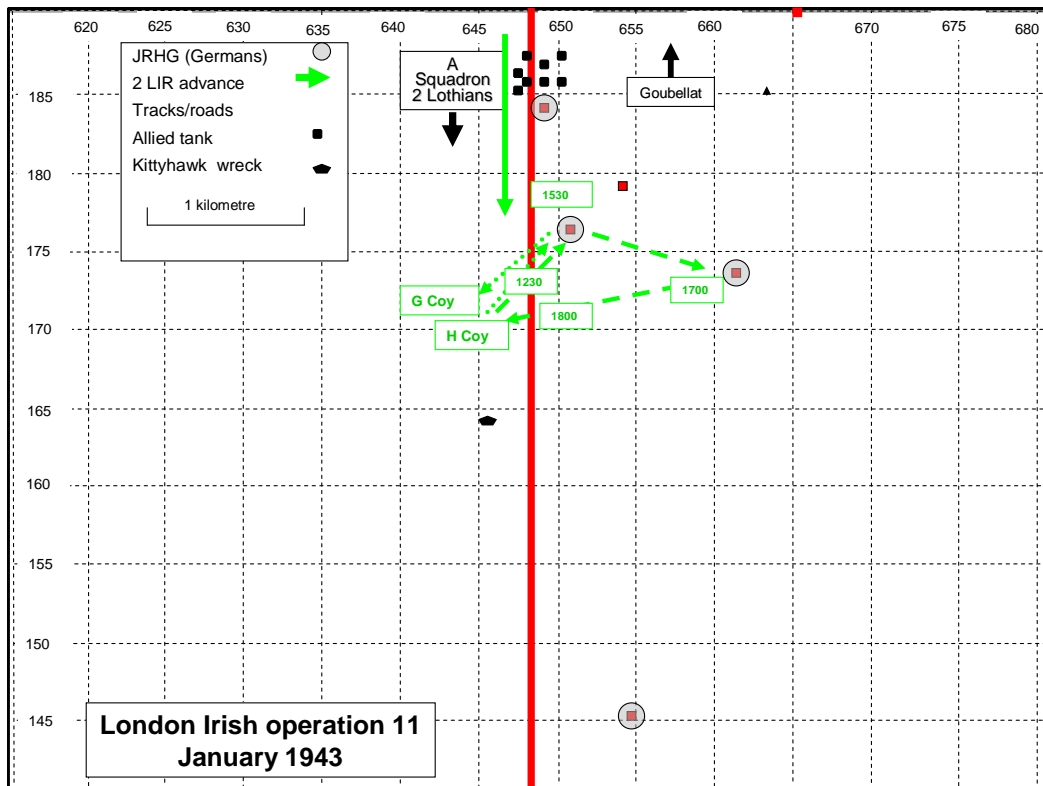
The fast route to the battlefields involves taking the main A3 out of Tunis. This heads south-west into the countryside towards Medjez el-Bab. Travellers may opt for Avenue 5, which is the older main road via Massicault which affords a more leisurely way of enjoying the countryside. After

about 60 kilometres, visitors should take the north-south 28/29 road towards Bou Arada. After about 10 kilometres you will arrive at Goubellat, where elements of the Irish Brigade were based in early January 1943, although the town, itself, is of little interest. The visit through the Bou Arada battlefields begins south of Goubellat. Following the line of a straight Roman road, the route to Bou Arada passes across the Goubellat Plain, a large, flat area that was contested territory in the first two months of 1943. The main features of this area are shown in Map 1.



*Map 1. The features of the Bou Arada battlefields in January-March 1943.*

The area just south of Goubellat was also the location of the first serious engagements for the Irish Brigade. On 28 December, 1 Royal Irish Fusiliers (1 Faughs) spotted German troops south of the town and drove them off in what was jokingly named “The Battle of the Mosques” a reference to the two mosques in that area. The brigade spent the next three weeks trying to deny the area east of the Bou Arada-Goubellat road to German patrols, which regularly took over farms in the area. This process of trying to clear the plain to allow free movement of Allied troops to Bou Arada reached a climax on 11 January, the day when 10 Rifle Brigade advanced to Grandstand Hill and tried to take Two Tree Hill further east. A squadron of Lothian & Border tanks was sent from Goubellat to clear the enemy from the area. Advancing on each side of the road, several of them got bogged down in thick mud created by torrential winter rain. 2 LIR was ordered to protect the tanks while they were to be dug out of the mud. Two companies were involved and they headed south and then east to attack farms held by German units. They found the task impossible and were withdrawn after suffering five fatalities (see Map 2 for details).



*Map 2. A squadron of 2 Lothian & Border tanks was ordered south from Goubellat to drive Germans from farms on both sides of the road. Several got bogged down and 2 LIR was ordered to help them withdraw. The operation was a failure and H Company lost five in the attack.*

The drive south from Goubellat takes you past the scene of these minor battles. You will also immediately see in the distance the low ridges extending east and west of the road which were held by the Irish Brigade from 11 January until the start of March. With limited forces, the 1<sup>st</sup> Army found it impossible to deny the plain to the Germans and the decision was taken to move the Irish Brigade to high points where they could monitor developments. The result was a highly porous front-line which allowed night patrols from both sides a high degree of latitude.

About 10 kilometres from Goubellat, the road rises gradually to a pass through the ridges and then descends on the other side onto the Bou Arada plain. The ridges were the centre of the principal actions of the Irish Brigade. The plain to the south was defended by Free French forces.

The town of Bou Arada is a possible starting-point for a battlefield tour though, like Goubellat, there is little to see. The main feature is the railway line coming from Tunis that heads to the Algerian border via El-Aroussa to the west. The creation of the railway in the 19th century stimulated the growth of Bou Arada as a logistics centre for local farmers, who were mainly French immigrants, now all long gone. The railway runs from east to west through Bou Arada and it marked the limit of a panzer attack on 18 May which was only contained by the guns of the 17<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment firing over open sights at 28 German tanks.

Starting with a cup of coffee in Bou Arada, your journey of discovery can commence. The Irish Brigade recommends a chronological schedule which begins by going to the top of Grandstand Hill, on the eastern side of the road, and part of the ridge lines, which were seen as you travelled south from Goubellat.

About 10 kilometres north of Bou Arada on the road to Goubellat, you will return to the line of ridges that you passed through on the journey south. As you re-enter the pass, there is an olive oil factory on the left side of the road, made of concrete and painted white. Opposite to this on the right hand side of the main road you will find an unmetalled road heading east that you can drive along with some caution or walk at leisure. The road rises gently around the southern base of Grandstand hill. This was the route of the first section of the advance of 6 Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (6 Skins) on the morning of 13 January in the first Irish Brigade battalion-level attack on German positions. Smaller paths from the north side of this track lead past modern houses to the top of Grandstand Hill, which appears to be common land and unfenced. Visitors should nevertheless proceed with discretion and ensure that they greet local farmers and residents.

The high points of Grandstand, which is a ridge running north in a sausage shape for about 1,000 metres, are easily reached after walking about 600 metres north from the track and you will be able to move along its top with little difficulty. In the spring, there is a pleasing coverage of short grass and wildflowers. There is practically no top soil and the hard sedimentary rock is easy to walk on.

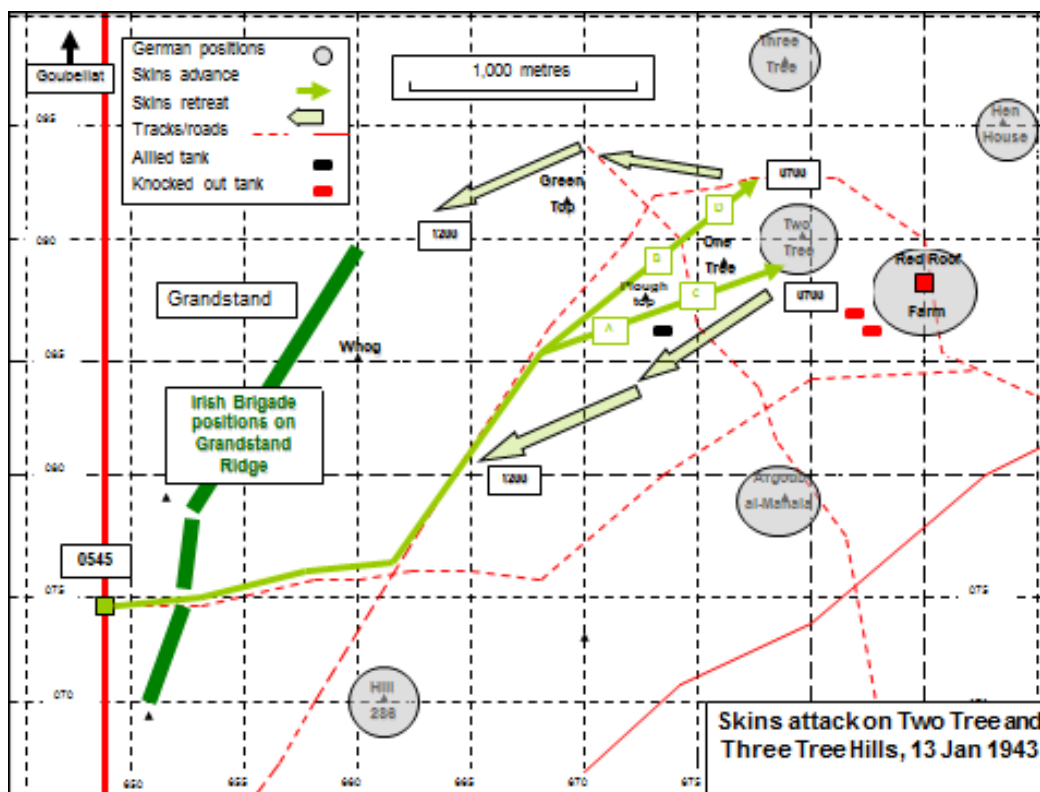
The views, as can be expected from a feature called Grandstand, are comprehensive and you can take in all key points of the Bou Arada battlefields. The hill itself was occupied by the Irish Brigade on 12 January after an attack against German positions by the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Rifle Brigade the previous day. This had followed orders for the 1<sup>st</sup> Army to head south-east to block the advance of German forces which were fanning out from Tunis. Grandstand was occupied, principally by the 1 Faughs and Skins, until the brigade was moved north of Medjez in late March. Evidence of occupation can be found including pieces of scrap metal and the remains of entrenching works. An attempt has been made to excavate the main trench line on the hill's summit; and this might have been done by souvenir hunters.

### **The 6 Skins attack on Two Tree Hill on 13 January 1943**

Deployed on and around Grandstand on 12 January to join 10 Rifle Brigade, the 6 Skins were ordered to repeat the riflemen's attack on Two Tree Hill the next day. This was an improvisation that was almost disastrous.

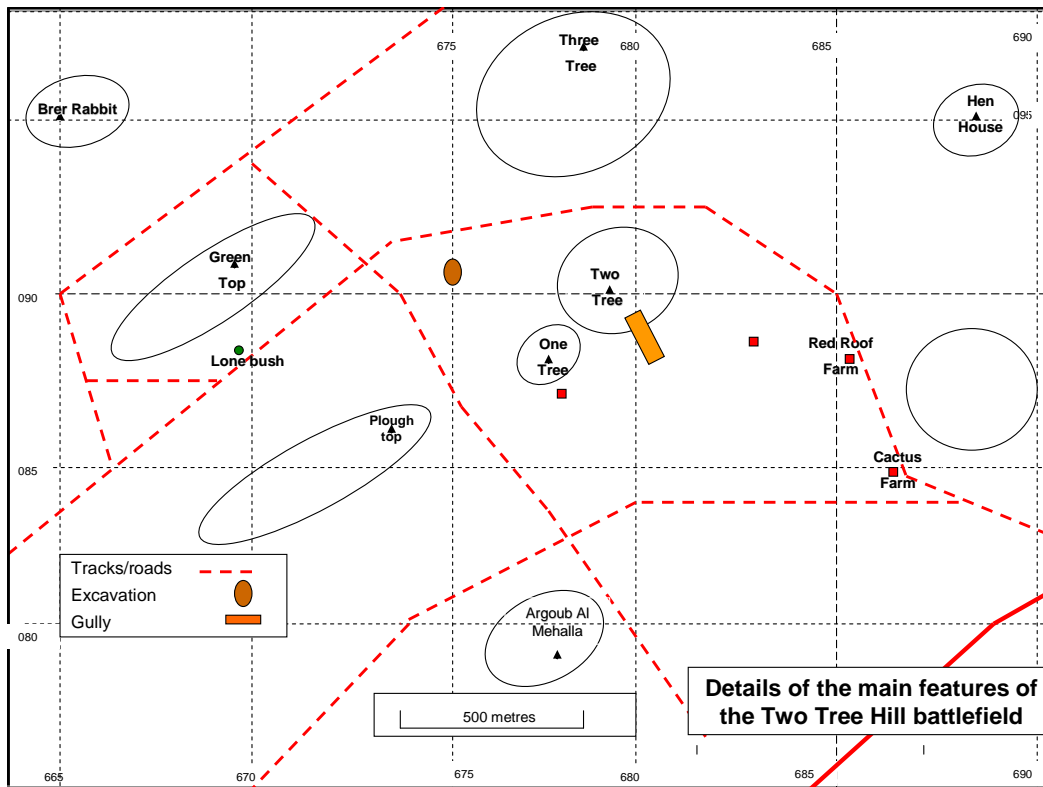
The direction of the 6 Skins' attack on Two Tree and Three Tree hills is shown in Map 3 (below). It involved all four of its fighting companies with carriers supported by three Grant tanks, which were all knocked out, and required an advance of almost 2,000 kilometres through low land generally overlooked by German machine gun posts and strongpoints. The Skins advanced across this valley into a cul-de-sac shaped formation to the north-east. At its eastern extremity are two of the attack's principal objectives: Three Tree Hill to the north and Two Tree Hill about 1,000 metres to the south.

For the contemporary visitor, probably the best route is to drive to the track off the Bou Arada-Goubellat road used by the Skins in the first part of the advance. The landscape hasn't changed since this period and it is clear how the Skins' advance was so exposed when their attack went in.



**Map 3.** The first major Irish Brigade offensive involved the whole of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (6 Skins). Advancing at just before dawn, they climbed the southern end of Grandstand Hill and advanced along the line of a track that ran in low ground to the north-east. The battalion divided into two parts: B and D companies advanced through the central valley to the north-west of Two Tree Hill. A and C companies followed a route south of this -- and more directly -- to Two Tree. The advance was supported by three tanks; two were knocked out. The companies, slowed by mud, got to the base of Two Tree Hill at about 7am. They then spent almost four hours unsuccessfully trying to take the hill. After sustaining heavy casualties, the battalion was withdrawn. The attack was subsequently regarded as a mistake; the difficulty of the landscape and the strength of German position were underestimated.

There were two lines of advance: B and D companies proceeded up the main valley to the foot of Three Tree Hill, where, in January 1943, there was a patch of waterlogged ploughed land that became known as Becher's Brook. A and C companies advanced on the southern side of the valley's right-hand ridges to try and take Two Tree Hill from the west. Subsequent analysis of the ground showed that taking Two Tree from the south was probably impossible. A and C companies also came under fire from German positions around Red Roof farm.

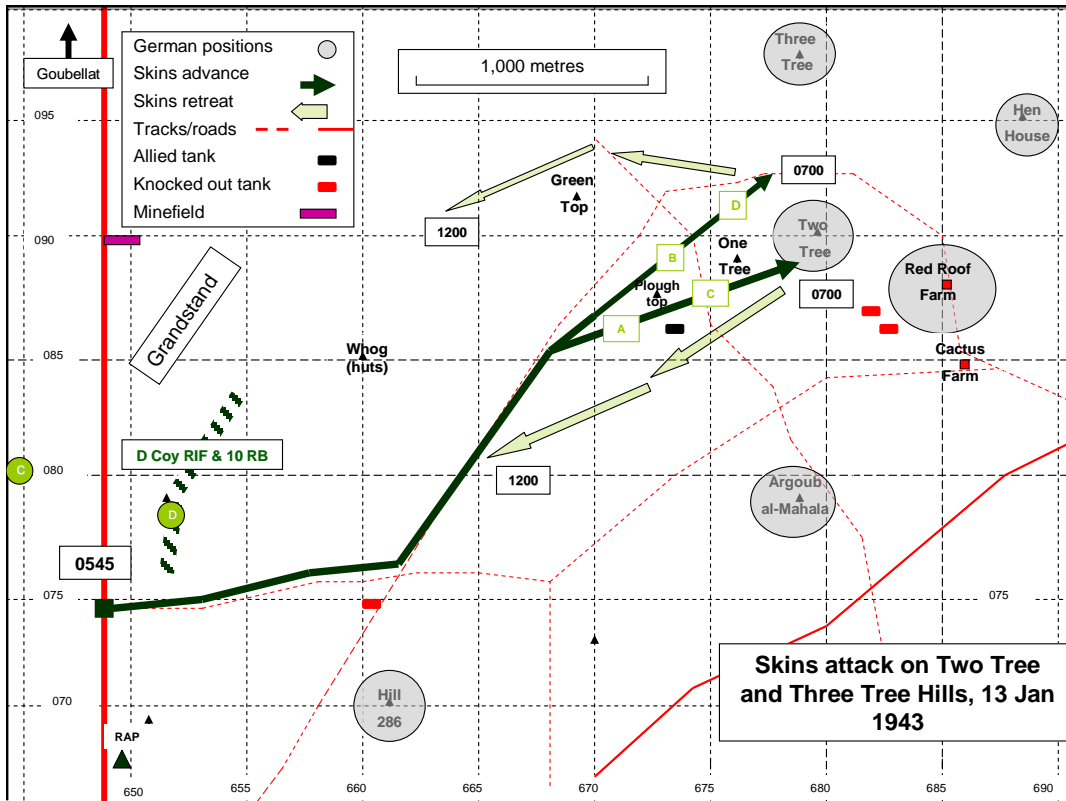


**Map3.** The details of the Two Tree hill battlefield are shown.

After studying the landscape, you can return south to the track and follow its route across the valley towards Three and Two Tree Hills. There is further evidence of the war including rusting barbed wire at the eastern base of Grandstand. The track extends across the valley to Two Tree and Three Tree hills, but is badly potholed and probably not recommended for visitors without four-wheeled vehicles. An alternative is to walk to these landmarks, or use a road farther south. A full tour of the Two Tree area would take about another one to two hours, so visitors would probably need to devote a full-morning to Grandstand and the area to the east, and later return along the track to the Goubellat road.

### **The German attack on Grandstand and Bou Arada on 18 January 1943**

The allied high command decided to continue to try and take Two Tree and Three Tree Hills. Despite the experiences of the Rifle Brigade on 11 January and the 6 Skins on 13 January, the decision was taken to involve the whole of the Irish Brigade in an attack to begin before dawn on 19 January. The lead role in the attack was allocated to 1 Faughs and Major John Horsfall led a night reconnaissance patrol to check out the areas main features. Their recommendation was that the Faughs should advance to the excavation bowl shown in Map 3 and attack Two Tree and subsequently take One Tree and other high points. 2 LIR and 6 Skins were to be kept in support. In the event, the plan was invalidated by the attack by 10 and 7 Panzers with 5 Parachute Regiment support at dawn on 18 January. A total of five German battalions and up to 30 tanks were involved.



***Map 4.** The main features of the German attack on 18 January are shown. Panzers headed directly south-west to the main road and then drove south to Bou Arada where they were repulsed over open sights by Royal Artillery batteries. Infantry were sent to take Whog (sic) Hill and then Grandstand. The latter was held by the Skins and the attack was contained as a result of heavy artillery fire. One of the dramas of the day was the arrival of the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers who at just before 5am attacked from the Skins' right flank and caught the German attackers in their flank. This, with further artillery bombardments, broke German resolution. The Faughs' A Company commander Peter Murphy, leading the counterattack, was killed in open ground.*

The view to the east from the top of Grandstand covers the setting for the German attack on the brigade's positions on that morning January (see Map 4). Almost 30 tanks headed south-west along the valley to the Goubellat road and from there headed south to try and occupy Bou Arada. They were blocked in the Bou Arada plains by the guns of 17th Field Artillery, Royal Artillery which engaged the tanks over open sights. German infantry turned to the west to take Whog (sic) Hill and launch attacks on the Skins' positions on Grandstand. These were beaten off, at least in part by the heavy and accurate shelling from batteries located a couple miles south on both sides of the road to Bou Arada. More than 70 allied guns were ranged on the German attackers and this was critical in the battle.

D Company of 1 Faughs was moved to Grandstand Hill to join 6 Skins. The rest of the battalion was based on Stuka Ridge west of the Goubellat Road and they were spotted, and fired on, German attackers that had got behind the Skins' positions on Grandstand. A Company was moved across the road and, during that afternoon, launched a counterattack along the forward slope of the ridge and the Germans were expelled.



The southern end of the ridge affords an excellent view towards the relatively low and almost imperceptible hills, which in 1943 were designated as 286 and 279, and was the site of a calamitous attack by 2 LIR on 19-21 January. And to the west the land rises quite sharply across the main road to the Stuka Farm ridge, scene of heavy fighting on 26-27 February. Beyond the ridge, the dominant feature of the landscape is Djebel Rihane, which the brigade policed at a respectful distance in 1943.

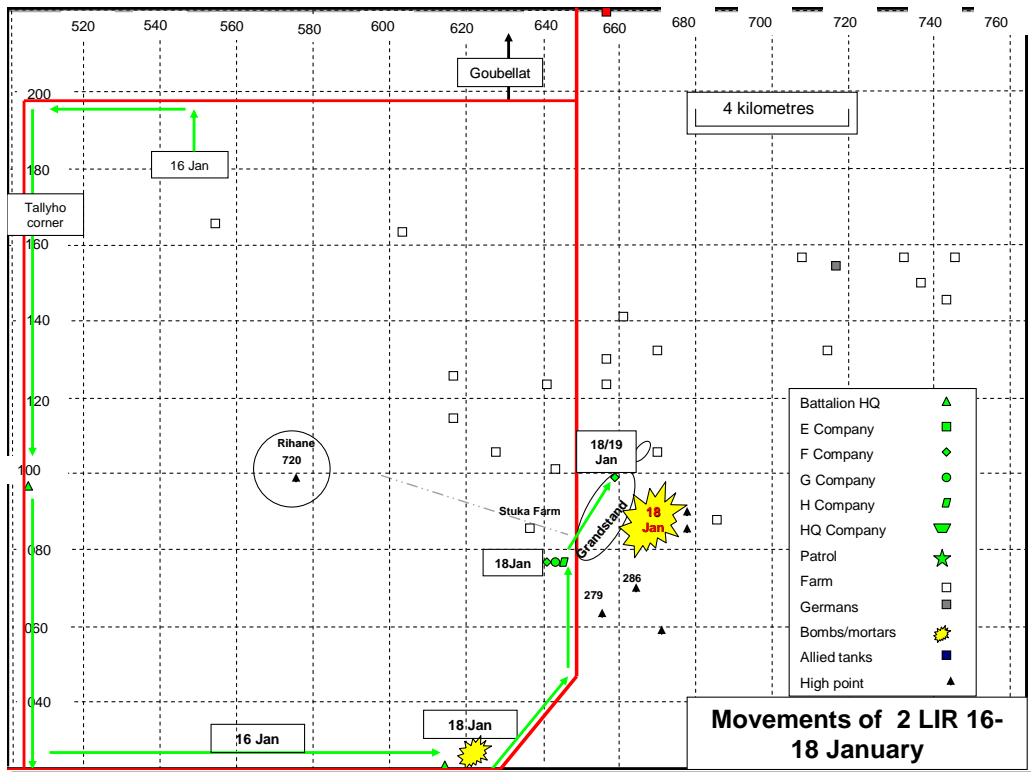
### **Hills 279 and 286**



*Photograph taken at the southern end of Grandstand around point 351 (grid reference 652080) looking south-south west. The Bou Arada-Goubellat road crosses the right of the photograph and then bends south to Bou Arada. Hill 279 is in the middle distance to the right of the yellow gorse bush. Hill 286 is to the right of the bush. This point was attacked in error by two platoons of F Company at the start of the 2 LIR attack before dawn on 20 January.*

Seeking to counter growing German forces in the area, the Allied high command moved the battalions of the Irish Brigade over the Bou Arada area on a daily basis. 2 LIR was based south of Goubellat until 16 January when it was ordered south to support the Faughs and Skins around Grandstand. It arrived on 18 January after the German attack on Grandstand and Bou Arada had been repulsed. On 19 January, it moved to Bou Arada and then back to positions west of the

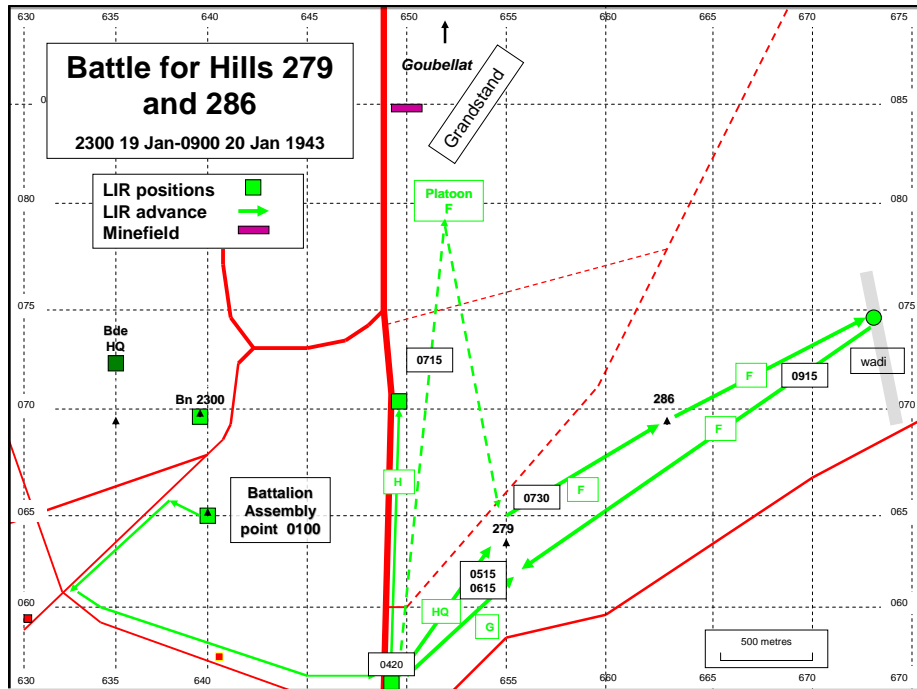
Goubellat road south of Stuka Farm Ridge. The two movements of the LIR on 16-19 January are shown in Map 5 below.



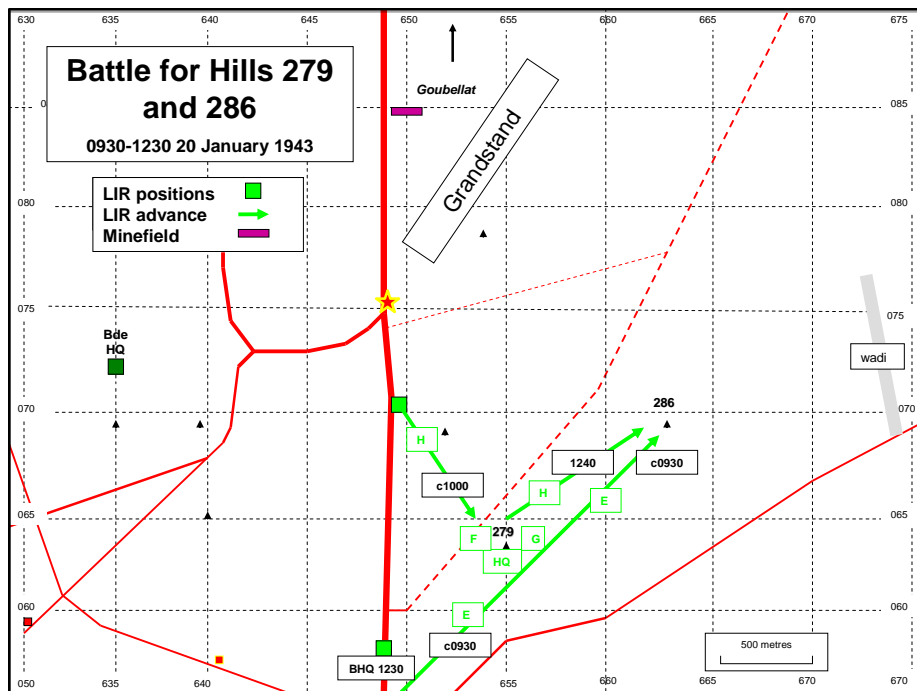
*Map 5. 2 LIR was based to the north-west of the map until 16 January when it was moved four times until taking up positions south of Stuka Farm around grid reference 640065 on the evening of 19 January. Tiredness caused by the constant movement was compounded when orders were received just after midnight on the morning of 20 January that the battalion was to attack Hills 270 and 286.*

This is the site of what was probably the greatest defeat suffered during the war by a unit of the brigade (see Maps 6-8). To get to the start point, return down Grandstand to the unmetalled road and travel back to the main road. Follow it towards Bou Arada for about 1,500 metres and you will see junctions that lead both east and west. Take the left hand, easterly one and this will take you along the southern base of Hills 279 and 286. This marks the assembly point for 2 LIR before dawn on 20 January 1943.

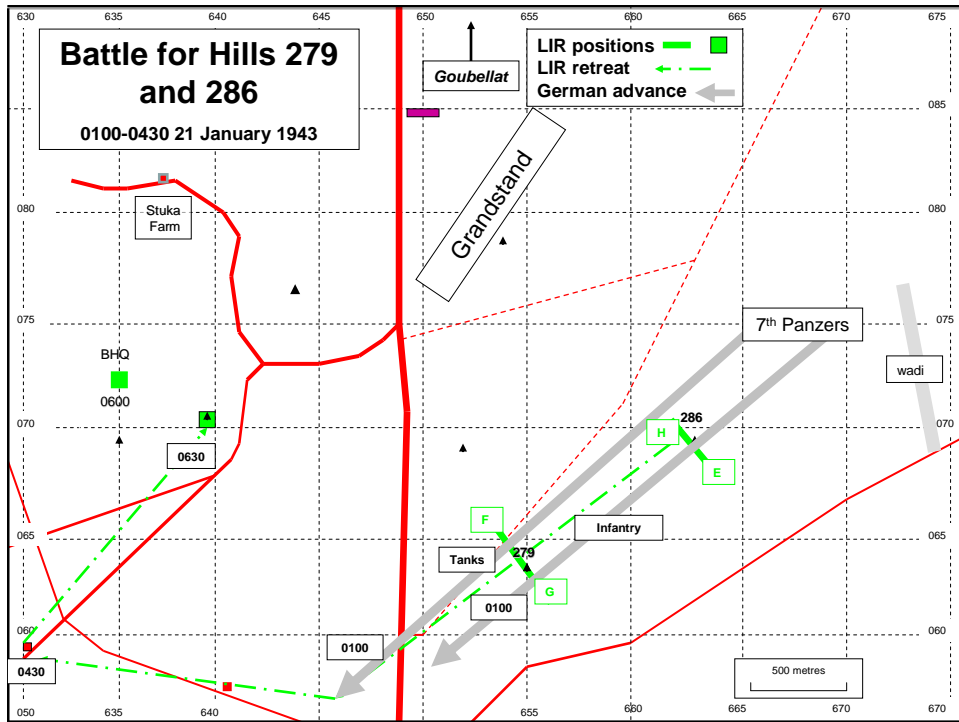
The operation began at just after midnight when 2 LIR was ordered to assemble south of Stuka Farm ridge. From there, it moved south-west and then east towards the Goubellat road. The battalion formed up around a junction on the road at about 430am. The attack began at about 5am and its course can be seen in the maps. For those wishing to retrace the battle of hills 279 and 286, the best approach is to follow the track south of 279 until you come to the base of 286 where you can climb a path to its top. From there, you can move south west to 279. There is not much to see on either hill, but the impression is lasting. Both are dominated by Grandstand and hills to the east that were held by the Germans in January 1943. The lack of cover and the hard rock of which both hills are made were key factors in the disaster that enveloped the London Irish.



**Map 6.** The movement of 2 LIR in the period until 9am on 20 January. Two platoons of F Company went the wrong way and attacked Point 351 on Grandstand. The rest of F advanced through 279 to 286 and beyond



**Map 7:** By 0900, 2 LIR were facing a major challenge. F Company had retired to 279. E Company was ordered to 279 and on to 286. It arrived about 1000. At 1240, H Company was ordered to 286. By this time, Stukas were attacking and H Company's OC was wounded. H Company then joined E Company on 286. By the afternoon, it was obvious that 286 couldn't be held and that it would be abandoned that night. The LIR were told to expect a diversionary attack by a battalion of the Grenadier Guards on Barka about 1,000 metres to the south that night.



**Map 8:** Exposed and lacking senior officers and NCOs, 2 LIR nevertheless dug in for the night with H and E on and round 286, while F and G with HQ Company were on 279. The storm broke at about 0100 on 21 February when two German thrusts were launched: panzers stormed through the low ground to the north-west of 286 and 279. They crossed the road and took up positions where they could fire on LIR battalion HQ and other positions to its west. Infantry meanwhile broke LIR lines on 286 and 279. Survivors reported that many of the riflemen ran to the west to escape. The Germans were eventually repulsed at about 0400, partly because the Faughs' CO had moved carriers south along the road to provide covering fire. The London Irish CO retreated west along the track to take up a position shown in the extreme left of the chart. The remnants of the London Irish were told to gather back on the highpoint they had left not much more than 24 hours earlier. Their losses were severe: more than 200 were killed, wounded, taken prisoner or missing. Following an inquiry, Jefferys was removed from command of the battalion.

## Stuka Farm ridge



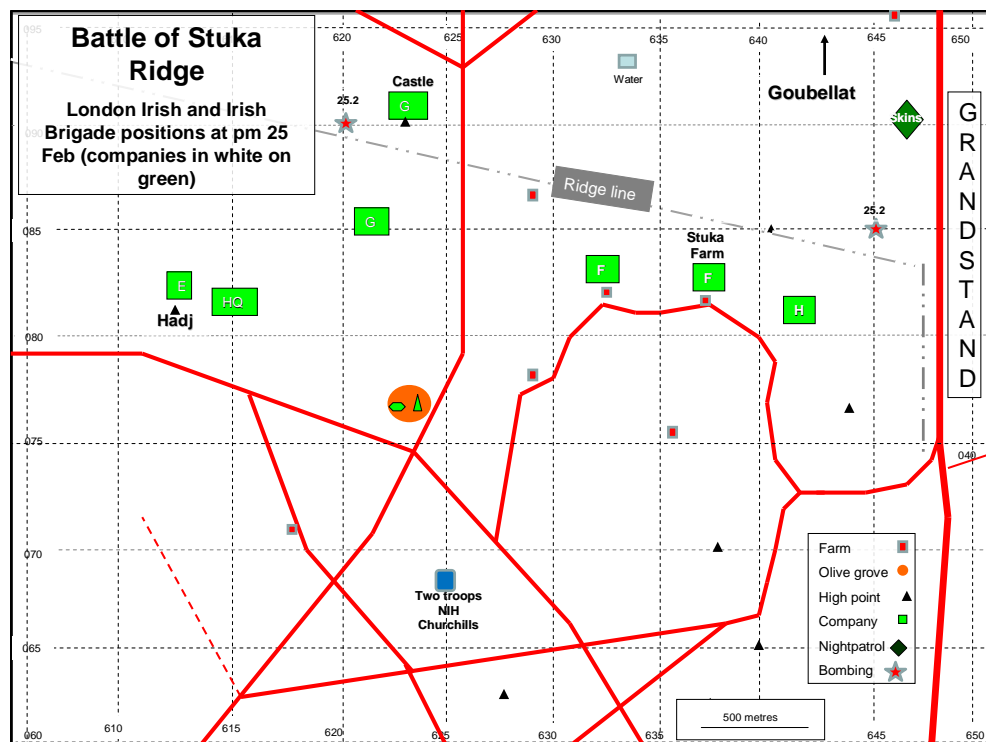
*Photograph taken on Stuka Farm ridge around 638055 (see map below) looking north-west along the ridge. The high point in the centre is Hadj Hill, which was held by E Company of 2 LIR on the morning of 26 February. A carrier returning from delivering rations to platoons on high points further west was attacked as it tried to get within the defensive wire on the hill. E Company was driven off and the hill was only recovered the next morning. This point on the ridge sits about 400 metres north of Stuka Farm which was held by F Company throughout 26 February. It was relieved around midday by Churchills from the North Irish Horse and B Company of the Faughs. This photograph was taken in April 2012.*

The next step involves returning to the main road and following the road west towards Djebel Rihane in the opposite direction to take taken by 2 LIR before dawn on 20 January. This will take you into an area that was heavily defended in that period. A right turning leads up to the high land upon which Stuka Farm sits. This can be approached by car although the road is unpaved and can be muddy when it is wet.

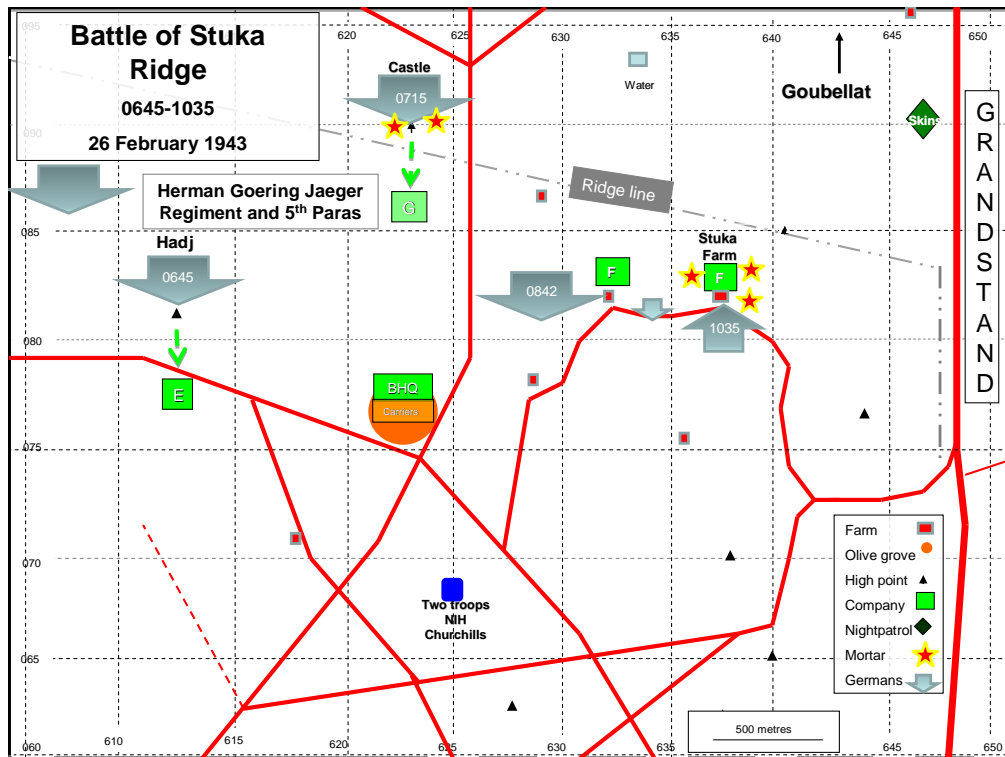
The journey towards Stuka Farm crosses countryside that has been farmed for more than 2,000 years. The farm itself has been modernised since 1943 but some of the original outbuildings exist

as does remnants of Roman ruins that have been incorporated into the contemporary farm's boundary fence. There are tracks north through the farm to the ridge and, once again, attention should be paid to the sensitivity of the residents to foreigners. Our visit found that a quick explanation (in French and Arabic) was very reassuring and freedom was granted to walk freely along the ridge. This is another excellent viewing point. The details of the events of 26-27 February are shown in the following five maps.

Walk north from Stuka Farm for about 400 metres and you will come across the steep escarpment that falls from the ridge to the Goubellat plain. The defensive advantage of this position is obvious. Look to the right and you will see the Bou Arada-Goubellat road about 1,500 metres to the east and Grandstand Hill beyond. This area was held by F Company on the morning of 26 February. To the left and isolated from the ridge is what was called Castle Hill. This was held by 2 LIR's G Company and almost overrun by German troops on 26 February. A separate high point to the left (east) was held by E Company and largely untouched during the attack.



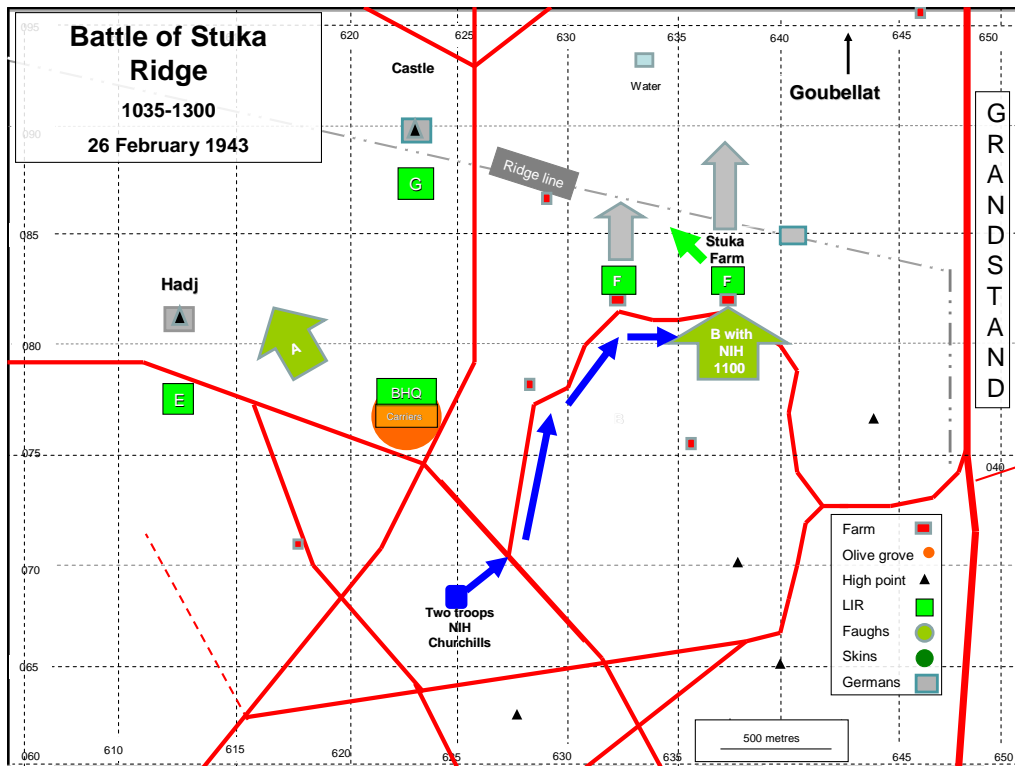
**Map 9:** On 25 February, 2 LIR was west of the Bou Arada road along an indented ridge line extending more than 3 kilometres towards Djebel Rihane. F Company was around Stuka Farm; H to the right and G on the ridge and on Castle Hill, a high point. E was on Hadj Hill close to Company HQ. Three of its platoons were on high points to the east. The Skins were entrenched on Grandstand, but had a standing patrol west of the Bou Arada road. The Faughs were held in reserve. Three of their companies were based on the south edge of the ridge close to Djelida Station. LIR Battalion HQ was in an olive grove. A key factor was two troops of Churchill tanks (in blue) were hidden about 2 kilometres south of the ridge. The Irish Brigade was on alert following German attacks along the allied line, including the offensive against the US Corps at Kasserine Pass. Bombing attacks (shown on map) were reported in the days before the main German



**Map 10.** An LIR carrier returning from 9 Platoon on the west was fired upon at about 0645 on 26 February by German infantry. The Germans broke through E Company HQ defences and eventually forced the LIR to abandon the hill. Soon after, the Germans were on Castle Hill. Meanwhile, German units climbed Stuka Ridge to surround Stuka Farm. By about 0900 E Company was dispersed, G Company was out of touch and F Company was surrounded. Fighting for its life, F Company resisted a strong German attack from the

Stuka Farm ridge, held by F Company on 26 February, runs roughly north-west for more than 3 kilometres to Djebel Rihane. This was the area of intense fighting on 26 and 27 February during a German attack on London Irish positions that ran from east of Stuka Farm along the ridge towards Djebel Rihane

About 800 yards along the ridge is Hadj Hill, held by E Company which was driven from the hill in the morning of 26 February. This is also a distinct high point. There is further plentiful evidence of the wreckage of war including barbed wire and parts of what look like destroyed troop and bren carriers. If you have time you can walk the entire length of the ridge and, if you have decent shoes, there is an opportunity to clamber down the ridge and then scale Castle and Hadj Hills. These are pleasant and peaceful spots covered with trees.

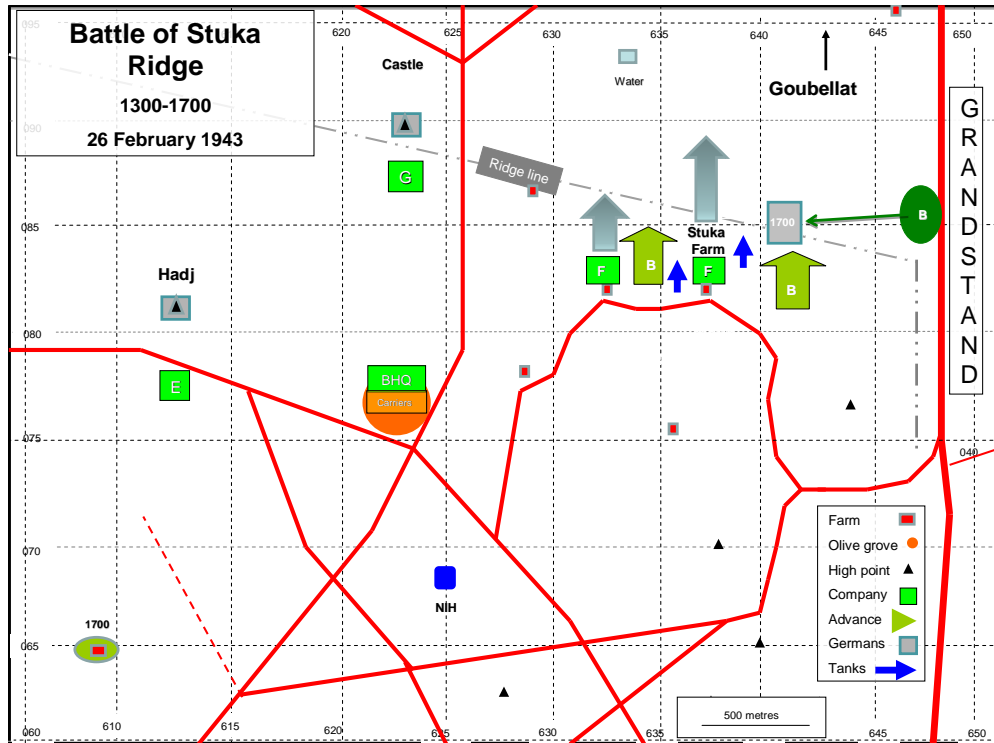


*Map 11. A brigade counterattack by a mobile reserve and tanks on Stuka Farm came around the time the German assault climaxed. By early afternoon, the Germans were withdrawing, though they continued to hold Hadj and Castle hills overnight.*

The Irish Brigade at the end of February was widely dispersed along Stuka Farm ridge. A and D companies of the Faughs were initially based south of the Grandstand-Stuka Farm ridge and were subject to aggressive attacks on the night of 26 February. The Skins meanwhile were occupying Grandstand Hill, though some members of the battalion were crossed the road to assist in counterattacks on Stuka Farm Ridge. B Company of the Faughs with the support of the Churchill tanks of the North Irish Horse played a notable role in driving Germans from Stuka Farm itself. A platoon of 6 Skins crossed from Grandstand to joint counterattacks on the ridge. The ridge is also the site of the action that earned Terence “Spike” Milligan a mentioned in dispatches honour. He was operating an observation post in this area for the Royal Artillery’s heavy guns behind the line.

The Faughs mounted aggressive night patrols north from the ridge later in the month, but the main fighting in this area was now over. At the end of March, the whole of the Irish Brigade moved north to join the final Allied attack on German and Italian defensive lines around Tunis.





*Maps 12 and 13. The battle ended around 5pm on 27 February. A company of the Skins crossed the road to attack Germans on the ridge (see above). A Company of the Faughs took over Castle Hill. The Faughs were deployed across the ridge (see below)*

