

OBITUARIES

Lieutenant-Colonel Tom 'Boomer' Bigland

Officer who defended a desert strongpoint under two days of intense shellfire and refused to risk his men unreasonably at Tobruk

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL TOM "BOOMER" BIGLAND, who has died aged 87, was awarded an immediate DSO — having been originally recommended for the VC — after showing outstanding bravery and devotion to duty during the capture and defence of the Libyan strongpoint of El Duda, south east of Tobruk.

During the engagement in November 1941, Bigland, an anti-tank artillery officer, took command of one of his troops himself (his subordinate troop commander having been killed), and led them through intense shellfire, up the escarpment and into action.

During 48 hours' intensive shelling and attack by tanks, he was an inspiration both to his own gunners, and to the supporting infantry as well.

After all his guns had been destroyed by direct hits, he reported for duty with the infantry, staying with them until the end of the action. Before being knocked out, his troop had accounted for five German tanks.

Bigland later became a staff officer, wrote standing operational instructions for the invasion of Normandy, and, from June 6 1944, was Montgomery's personal Liaison Officer with the American General Omar Bradley.

Thomas Scott Bigland, the son of the distinguished oars-

man RT Bigland, was born on June 9 1910 and sent to Shrewsbury. After school, he entered a shipping firm in Liverpool, later transferring to his father's firm, McLarrens, as a stockbroker.

In 1938 he joined the local Territorial Anti-Aircraft Unit in Liverpool, and was commissioned in 149 Regiment when 432 Battery was formed.

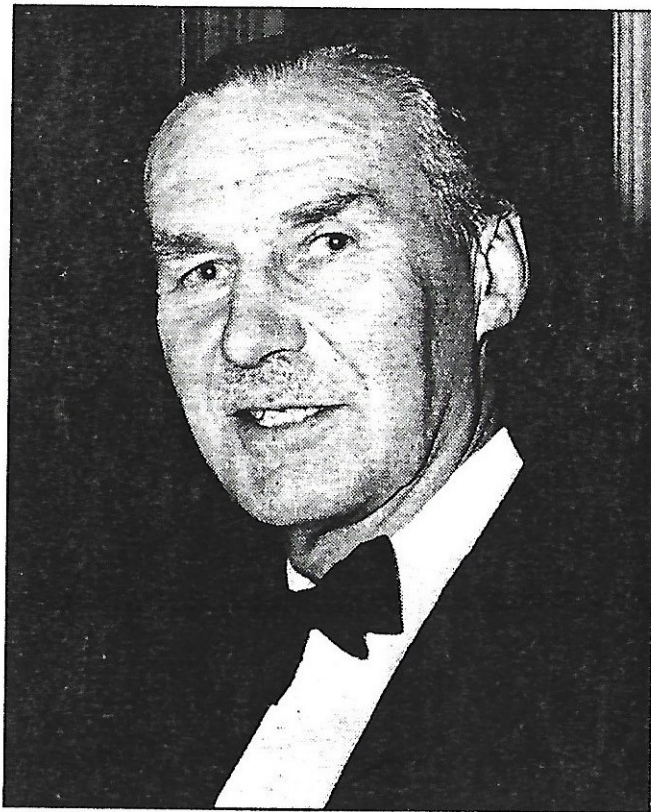
In November 1941, his regiment moved to the Middle East. At Mena, they were converted to an anti-tank role, making all their previous instruction on 25 pounders useless. They trained in temperatures up to 107°F.

"We were much troubled by Egyptian flies," Bigland recalled, "which are much worse than British ones and are more difficult to kill: one alone can drive you mad." Fleas ran a close second: one morning he killed 15 of them.

Since April 1941, Tobruk had been besieged by Rommel's Afrika Korps on the landward side; in September, 149 Regiment travelled by sea to reinforce the garrison before its planned breakout.

On November 24, Bigland was ordered to move his battery out with the tanks, but refused to do so, as they were not equipped to fight a dug-in enemy.

He argued that they would lose men and guns for no purpose and was put under open arrest; this was cancelled a



Bigland: accounted for five of the enemy's tanks

day later when he accepted a more reasonable plan. In the ensuing action he was awarded his immediate DSO.

Bigland recalled that at Tobruk the water was so brackish and scarce that they flavoured it with salt. After

advancing some 300 miles across the desert he became ill and was evacuated to Cairo, but returned to be stationed on the Gazala line.

Later he fought at Alamein, before being posted to attend the Staff College at

Haifa. He then became an instructor at the Junior Staff School at Sarafand.

Subsequently, Bigland was selected to join the British Military Mission in America. In 1944 he returned to Britain and worked at 21st Army Group HQ (in St Paul's School) writing and rewriting operational instructions, among them the procedure for the disposal of dead carrier pigeons. He was then appointed by Montgomery as his Liaison Officer with General Bradley.

This enabled Bigland to be one of the first Britons to enter Paris. He served throughout the North West Europe campaign and was at the Ardennes battle, the Rhine crossing and the German surrender at Lüneburg Heath.

In May 1945 he was awarded an MBE. In June he was appointed GS01 in charge of information control at 21st Army Group HQ, making sure that infamous Nazis neither escaped nor were employed by the Allies, and also that false rumours did not gain credence. In October 1945 he was awarded the American Legion of Merit.

After demobilisation, Bigland returned to stockbroking, but in 1951 resigned in order to become an executive director of Edward Young, the wine shippers, and later of Hedges and But-

ler. He also became chairman of A B Dalzell (Construction) and the Hilbre Wine Company. He retired in 1974.

In 1990 he published *Bigland's War*, based on the letters he had written to his wife during the war. By the time of writing he had lost the use of his right hand, and had to learn to use his left.

Like his father, Bigland was a distinguished oarsman, competing at Henley.

He was champion of the Dee in 1933, and was in the final of the Silver Goblet and Nickalls Cup at Henley in 1933, 1934 and 1938. In 1934 and 1938 he also rowed for the Royal Chester IV and VIII, contesting two finals on the same day.

He was captain of the Royal Chester Rowing Club from 1934 to 1938 and introduced a Head of the River Race on the Dee in 1935.

Bigland also helped to coach aspiring oarsmen, notably at King's School, Chester, and designed and sponsored boats. He was awarded the Scouts' Bronze Cross for rescuing two men from drowning in the River Severn in 1931.

In 1947 he became County Commissioner of Boy Scouts for Cheshire, retiring after 15 years. He was also a governor of Shrewsbury School.

He married, in 1939, Rosalind Castle, who predeceased him. They had two sons.