

Obituaries

Lieutenant-Colonel Tony Hunter, who has died aged 97, was awarded a DSO and Bar, the latter in Italy in 1943 in the first major opposed river crossing of the campaign.

On September 9 1943, the 5th Army landed at Salerno Bay. The Germans counter-attacked strongly and for several days the situation at the bridgehead remained critical. By September 15, however, the approach of the 8th Army led to some relaxation and, a week later, the 5th Army broke out.

In the subsequent advance to the River Volturno, Hunter, as Commander Royal Engineers 7th Armoured Division, was faced with engineering problems of the greatest difficulty. At Grazzanise, the crossing point, seven miles west of Capua, only the central span of an old wooden bridge remained, with both ends demolished. The banks were 15 ft high and the river, 80 yards wide and swollen by recent rain, was flowing swiftly.

Hunter made several personal reconnaissances under fire and, on two occasions, an RE officer swam the river to the enemy-occupied bank and brought back valuable information. In the attack launched on the night of October 12, many assault boats were holed by shrapnel and machine gun fire or swept downstream by

the force of the current. 7th Armoured Division, however, managed to get part of two battalions across the river and the Royal Engineers established a ferry which carried over anti-tank guns, Jeeps and ammunition.

The foothold won was narrow and only 300 yards deep, but work started immediately on constructing a Bailey bridge. Having come straight from the desert, Hunter's engineers had little experience of bridging rivers but, under Hunter's supervision and despite continual harassment from enemy fire, the bridge - the first across the river - was open to traffic four days after the assault. Major-General Erskine proclaimed it a "Hunter Bridge", and Hunter's skill and leadership were recognised by the award of a Bar to his DSO.

Anthony Duncan Hunter was born near Swallowfield, Hampshire, on September 9 1906 and educated at Wellington. When he left school, his whole future was decided in a couple of sentences over the tea table. He told his father that he wanted to go to Cambridge. His father replied that it was too expensive and that the way to get there was through a commission in the Royal Engineers, who would send him for nothing. He agreed.

Hunter's family called him Nino; at the RMA Woolwich, where he did his induction training, he was plain Tony. He was taught Science, Mathematics, Infantry Tactics and Drill before going to the School of Military Engineering where he was instructed in a formidable range of skills including road building and demolition, laying and clearing mines, running railways and making maps. This was combined with two years at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he read Mechanical Engineering.

Hunter's first posting was to the Rail Training Centre, where he offended the powers-that-be by keeping a smart grey horse and riding it to hounds, and also by expecting his men to be clean and smart on parade when they were not driving their engines.

Hunter was next posted to Fort George in Scotland where his talents were better appreciated. His brother officers shared his enthusiasm for sport and he and a local enthusiast constructed an 18 ft clinker-built boat, launched it and formed a small sailing club which eventually became the Royal Findhorn Yacht Club.

After a number of postings, Hunter took command of 9th Field Squadron in the 8th Armoured Division and accompanied it to North Africa in time for the battle of

Alamein. He was awarded his first DSO during the campaign in the Western Desert as CRE 7th Armoured Division.

"Every step of an advance of 2,000 miles produced a problem for the Royal Engineers," the citation stated. "Mines, craters, booby traps and demolitions have been overcome by the excellent work of the Engineers supervised, directed and led by Lt-Col Hunter in person." General Montgomery, in adding his personal support to the recommendation, confirmed that much of Hunter's work was carried out under fire.

Hunter remained as CRE 7th Armoured Division for the campaign in north-west Europe. After the end of the war, he was posted to Singapore and then to Palestine as CRE 6th Airborne Division. He was recalled to England to command the Army Air Transport Development Centre at Brize Norton before retiring from the Army.

Hunter remarried in 1948, purchased a small farm in Herefordshire and planted it with apple trees. He and his wife started a series of musical evenings. They had a fine collection of classical music on record, which they shared with friends; every chiming clock in the house was stopped before they put the first record on. In 1966, he began to find the handling of 40 lb crates of apples increasingly tiring and sold

the farm. He bought a caravan and he and his wife set out for Portugal and settled at Sintra.

The musical soirees continued and many guests enjoyed their hospitality and Hunter's limitless repertoire of cautionary verses and questionable limericks. After his wife died in 1999, he returned to England and lived with his daughter in Wiltshire.

Tony Hunter died on October 19. He married first, in 1932, Mary Grant. The marriage was dissolved and he married, secondly, in 1948, Priscilla Gurney. She died in 1999 and he is survived by a daughter of his first marriage.