

# THE FORMATION SIGN

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## I Had a Subaltern Under Command Who Was Something of An Artist...



One of the most famous of the British Army's formation signs worn in the Second World War is the "Desert Rat" Sign of the 7th Armoured Division. Introduced in the Middle East in 1942 it was worn in a variety of forms – see pages 27 & 28 – the first design attributed, according to the Divisional history published in 1954, to the Divisional Commander's wife, based on the sketch of a jerboa or desert rat found in Cairo Zoo.

When the 7th returned to England in January 1944 a new black-backed divisional sign - unusually for the time embroidered – made in facing pairs was adopted, produced by a still unidentified firm in England. Issued to the whole division this new version, initially worn throughout the campaign in North West Europe, continued in use by the Division until it merged with Hannover District before it was officially disbanded in 1948. When re-formed in March 1949 with three armoured regiments the sign worn in the European campaign reappeared and continued to be used as a divisional sign until 1961.

You can imagine the Editor's delight to receive out of the blue an email from Karina, granddaughter of the sign's designer with positive evidence that he actually drew this well-known sign; "While doing some research into my grandfather Oliver Herbert Hill, who was the protective troop commander for General Harding, at the opening of the second battle of El Alamein she wrote, I discovered information in **Badges on Battle Dress** regarding the emblem for the Desert Rats which needs to be corrected". [I quoted the account given in the Divisional history that the badge was based on a sketch made at Cairo Zoo – Ed].

"My grandfather designed the Desert Rat insignia, as commissioned by General Erskine on 23rd October 1943, to be used on the flash of the returning soldier's uniform. I attach scans of his letters to my grandmother, an aeronautical engineer in Reading, where he mentions the Desert Rat emblem commission and draws a copy of the design"; *"Yesterday I was asked by the Colonel of Div: H. Q. to design a new 'Desert Rat' which is to be worn on the right shoulder of members of the 7th, Armoured Div: (is this another indication that we are going home?) And so I spent yesterday evening, and early this afternoon painting several different types, so that the General could select the one he likes best."* Then later in the letter....*"I saw the Colonel this morning at breakfast, the mess being in an ancient Nunnery[1], he thanked me for the designs and said they were 'brilliant', Hm, well, he is taking them to the General at lunch time."*

