

Brigadier A Prain CBE BSc

15 August 1894 - 5 June 1987



Alexander (Sandy) Prain was born on 15 August 1894 in Montrose, the son of a master saddler and attended the engineering course at the Royal Technical College, Glasgow¹. On 18 December 1914 he was initially commissioned into the 8th Bn, The Border Regiment². He transferred to the Royal Engineers and having completed training at the 'Shop' in 1915 and Chatham, he saw service in France during World War 1 arriving in Jul 1916.

He served with 62 and then 61 Field Companies. The latter unit was in F (Brigade) Sector south of Arras. [His papers mention trialling Russian saps (trenches)]. He recalled once how he made contact with a distant Prain relation while home on leave. This Prain was acting manager of a Scottish distillery. He promised to send Sandy a bottle of whisky. Soon after returning to France, attached to 145 Army Troops Company, Prain was wounded at Passchendaele on 29 Nov 1917 and evacuated. His brother officers feared the worse and so when a crate of whisky arrived, drank to his memory. When Prain made contact with his old unit he was rather disappointed!

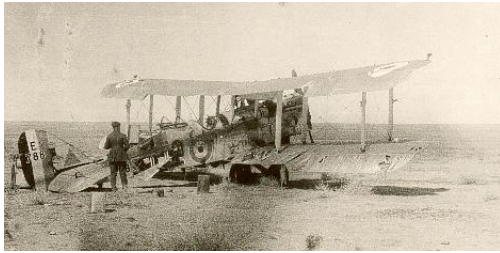
In Jun 1918 Prain was sent to India for service with the 3rd (Bombay) Sappers and Miners. He arrived at the Depot in Kirkee in Sep 1918. In Feb 1919 he was sent to East Persia (Seistan Section) as Officer Commanding and Section Engineer.

In 1921, Prain undertook took a university short course at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. He was then posted to Lancashire.

In Feb 1927, having reached the rank of Captain he was attached to MI4 at the War Office prior to going to Iraq in support of the Air Ministry. He subsequently deployed and was involved in the delineation of the Iraq-Saudi Arabia border. He was one of one two soldiers to be awarded the 'Southern Desert, Iraq' clasp to the GSM¹. By now he became fluent in Hindustani and Persian as well as French.

¹ Later to become part of University of Strathclyde

² <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29017/supplement/11027/data.pdf>



[RAF Rolls Royce Armoured Cars: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKcUjEyHkJU>]

After 2 years in Iraq, Prain returned to Chatham. In 1933 he was promoted Major and served as Garrison Engineer in Eastern Command.

During 1934 he returned to duties with MI4 working in the Trans-jordan on what was to become the Jordan – Saudi Arabia border. He was working on the section running east from Aqaba. He arrived in Jerusalem on 6 Feb 1934 as the officer-in-charge the Transjordan Air Survey. On 27 Aug 1934 he issued his final report from Chatham³. He returned to the area on 19 Oct 1934 to undertake more survey work. On completion he sailed home. By 23 Nov 1934 he was off Marseilles on board SS Mooltan. His next report, written at OS Southampton, was issued on 19 Dec 1934.

Between 1934 and 1939 he served again with the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners as Officer Commanding 17th Field Company. In mid-1935 the Company was sent to Quetta to help with the clearing up and reconstruction after the earthquake which had struck the year before⁴. The unit remained there until November.

Having spent Christmas 1939 at home he became DAD Svy at GHQ in Egypt in Mar 1940. Coincidentally, his posting coincided with his brother, Major William Prain RASC, being invalided back home from Egypt suffering from TB.

In Sep 1940 he became AD Svy at HQ British Troops, Egypt in rank of Lt Col. Then he moved to the Cyrenaicia Command (North Africa).

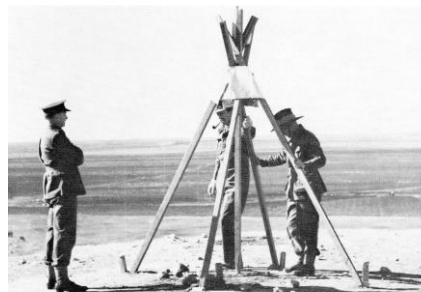


³ Transjordan-Hedjaz Frontier – Survey and Proposed Delimitation 18 Dec 1933 PRO Air 2/861 Reg No 30366/Pt II

⁴ From “The Indian Sappers & Miners” by Lt Col ECW Sandes

By Apr 1941, Prain had risen to the rank of colonel and in Oct became Deputy Director Survey, HQ Ninth Army. Major E. H. Thompson RE⁵ (see photo above: in foreground, with unidentified instrument very likely of his own design) is seen with Prain, probably between September 1941 and October 1942 and (judging from the maps on the wall behind) at GHQ Middle East in Cairo where Thompson himself was based.

Under his control was the 2/1 Australian Survey Company RAE. It had worked in Palestine and Syria before being recalled to Australia in January 1942. The Australians remember Prain with fondness referring to him as a tall and lean Englishman (Scotsman actually) with a handlebar moustache, more suited to the Junior Service, together with an accent and a monocle⁶.



A triangulation station near the Turkish border.
L to R: Major FitzGerald, Colonel Prain (D.D. Survey HQ Ninth Army), Captain Kurrie. AWM 2251

In Sep 1942 Prain was appointed AD Svy, Northern Command before become AD Svy 2nd Army in May 1943. He then became DD Svy 21 Army Group. In Dec 1943, he was promoted Brigadier and became Director Survey, HQ 21 Army Group⁷. He was based at St Paul's School and was deeply involved in the 'Operation Overlord' planning. At this time, he was still a confirmed bachelor living in the Naval and Military Club, London.



21 Army Group Officers



Picture Shows: Right to Left: Colonel J.R.C Gannon, Deputy Military Secretary: Brigadier A.W Beament, Canadian Section, G.H.Q.: **Brigadier A. Prain, Director of Survey**: Colonel Harvey W. Wilkinson, Personnel Officer attached to, 21 Army Group: Brigadier C. Lloyd, Deputy Adjutant General: Major General J.D Inglis, Chief Engineer: Major General M.E. Dennis, Major General, Royal Artillery: Major General G.W. Richards, Major General, Royal Armoured Corps. Southwick House, Hampshire - June 1944. (IWM Catalogue Number - H 39165)

⁵ <https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/wiley/e-h-thompson-somewhere-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-during-the-second-96N8OjX8vT>

⁶ Lebanon to Labuan by Lawrence FitzGerald OBE.

⁷ <https://www.britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/124/2020/06/21-Army-Group-History-Personnel.pdf> (see page 44)

<https://film.iwmcollections.org.uk/record/2178> (see Prain enters frame at 0:46) and <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060019404>

One of Prain's instructions (22 May 44) is shown at Annex A. Although 21 Army Group Tac HQ moved to Normandy on 7 Jun 44, HQ Main to not open at Bayeux until 4 Aug 44. During this period, he was having to deal as executor of the estate of his uncle, Sir David Prain, who had been the Director of Kew Gardens in the 1920s. (See letter dated 2 Jul 44 at Annex A).

Subsequently when in France with the allied forces Prain was informed that a group of ATS girls were to join 14 Field Survey Company. He told the 2ic (W H (Freddie) Hore) that he wanted nothing to do with them!

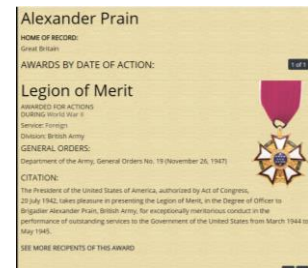
Brigadier (temporary) Harold Douglas Kyrle Money, D.S.O. (20639), late The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment).
 Colonel Terence Desmond Murray, D.S.O., M.C. (6529), late Royal Tank Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps.
 Brigadier (temporary) Arthur Espie Porritt, O.B.E. (125494), Royal Army Medical Corps.
 Brigadier (temporary) Alexander Prain (1956), late Corps of Royal Engineers.
 Brigadier (temporary) The Marquis of Reading (194426), Pioneer Corps.
 Brigadier (temporary) Thomas Robbins, M.C. (108766), The Lancashire Fusiliers (Res. of Off.).
 Brigadier (temporary) Reginald Herbert Rylie Steward, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C. (15428), late Royal Corps of Signals.

CITATION FOR THE LEGION OF MERIT
 DEGREE OF OFFICER

Alexander?
 Brigadier Archibald Prain, British Army, rendered exceptionally meritorious service as Director of Survey, 21st Army Group, from March 1944 to May 1945. He was responsible for map and survey service to the First and Ninth United States Armies during the periods they were with the Group. Brigadier Prain achieved outstanding success in the supply and distribution of required maps and survey data, and carefully integrated British and American practices so as to achieve maximum efficiency.



Gazette – CBE - 01/02/1945



From web⁸

After the war, Prain was appointed Principal Cartographic Officer, Internal Affairs and Communications Division of the Control Commission / HQ BAOR. He eventually retired from the Army in Apr 1948.

He later became a founder member of the Rhodesia Air Survey Company. In 1950 he offered a job as General Manager of the Air Survey Company of Rhodesia Ltd in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe) by his former subordinate Walter Smith⁹. He had been involved with the RICS but resigned as a Fellow in 1955.



In 1955 he married Joan Burton. They set up home in remote cottage in Somerset. Prain set to applying his sapper know-how to improving his property. In 1965, Prain, together with his nephew Major (Ret'd) Tony Prain, undertook a site survey of the Stanton Drew stone circle for Alexander Thom who was renowned for his theory about 'megalithic yard'.

⁸ <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/95694>

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/phor.12271>



In 1968 Prain and Joan moved to Malta for health reasons. Unfortunately, the Mintoff regime forced them back in 1974. They moved to Eype near Bridport.

Despite his advancing years, Prain retained a sharp mind ever questioning the events around him and was always a practical man. He was a regular contributor to the 'Pickaxe' (aka The RE Journal) including an article on sun-dials.

He died after a short illness on 5 June 1987, aged 92.



ⁱ This clasp was awarded to the RAF for its services against the Akhwan in the Southern Desert, under the command Air-Commodore T.C.R. Higgins between 8 and 22 January 1928, or under the command of Wing-Commander E.R.C. Nanson between 22 January and 3 June 1928.

Papers relating to RAF operations in Iraq and Kuwait, mainly concerning operations against the Mutair and Ajman tribes following their rebellion against Ibn Saud, King of Najd and the Hedjaz, in an attempt to prevent them seeking sanctuary in Iraq and Kuwait, notably telegrams and reports relating to harassment of the tribes through aerial bombing and the use of armoured cars; the surrender of Naif Ibn Hithlain and the Ajman, and Faisal al Dawish and the Mutair to the RAF commander, AC Charles Stuart Burnett, Chief Staff Officer, British Forces in Iraq, 8 Jan 1930

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29441383>

Group (Main) ✓

21 May 44

Reference 2182/G (Trg) dated 30 Apr 44 para 5.

It is important that this Branch should know if the new system of distribution is working correctly. Liaison officers with formations should be asked to report:-

- (i) Are the Corps and Divisional map lorries capable of supplying the maps required.
- (ii) Is the control of stock in these lorries by Corps and Div staff adequate to enable the lorry personnel to function.
- (iii) Do any group and army troops get their maps.
- (iv) Do troops actually use all the maps at different scales issued to them. If not which scales are used and by which type of troops.
- (v) Are scales of issue of maps correct for all types of operation by all types of troops.

2. Para 6. Theatre Lessons

- 1 (i) All available trig data Diagrams and Technical Pamphlets should be ready at a very early stage in the planning operation.
- 2 (ii) For the most efficient organisation for producing large scale maps or defence overprints or maps for a special purpose these principles are essential.

(1) The programme must be decided early and worked out in detail as a result of conferences between the originator of the material, and the survey service who will draw and print the maps, and all interested parties. This programme must be adhered to without radical alteration.

(2) The best and latest material must be provided, particularly as regards air photographs.

(3) Once reproduction is started by survey there must be one controlling authority only.

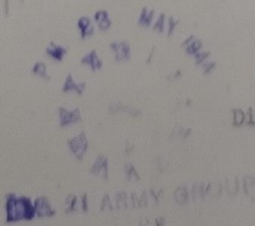
(iii) It has been found impracticable for Branches other than Survey to compete successfully with distribution of large quantities of maps or photos since no adequate distribution facilities are provided. The successful distribution of a map series is just as important as its production in quantities.

There are now many additional distribution commitments which have not in the past been looked on as a Survey Task. Since Survey are required for detailed map distribution, it should be clearly laid down as part of a mapping task where distribution responsibility lies. Survey facilities for distribution may have accordingly to be augmented.

(iv) A Survey Directorate at army or army group is designed as a team and personnel have been reduced to the minimum to perform the various branch functions.

Director of Survey must be at Main Headquarters. Hence the whole directorate should work at Main Headquarters.

2182/K



A. Prain
 (A. PRAIN)
 Brigadier
 Director of Survey

HQ, 21 Army Group (Main)
 No 1 A P D C, London W.1.
 /JAH

Survey Directorate,
HQ 21 Army Group (Main)
No 1 A P D C,
London, W.1.

2 Jul 44

Dear *M. Burdill*,

I am quite unable to express to you my gratitude for what you have done over my uncle's library.

I agree with your action about the books you have removed. There is, of course, no question of payment but will you please let Mr Bond know their value for probate and estate duty. Your own valuation will suffice.

I will ask my father to write to the Arnold Arboretum if you can forward the address to him direct.

I note also your remarks about the engravings which will be disposed of as you suggest.

I will have the Francis Hamilton papers packed up and held against the time you can use them.

By all means keep my uncle's account of his life. I wonder if you got his last attempt to put this down on paper.

Could you get in touch with Dr Salesbury, at Kew, and ask for his help in disposing of the reprints and other things in which he might have an interest.

Please excuse this hurried note.

Yours *Surrey*

Alan

Alan

I. H. Burdill Esq.,
Clova,
The Mount,
Leatherhead,
Surrey.

*replied 5.11.44
that I had written to his brother Prain
had communicated with Salesbury
would receive anything he likes to
send by (Anti-Pollum) rather
means
*Alan**

Compiled by:

James Prain
(Great Nephew)
9 March 2025