

**EXCLUSIVE! CRUSADER TANKS ARRIVE FROM SOUTH AFRICA**

# CLASSIC MILITARY VEHICLE

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*The two Crusader IIs shortly after arriving in the UK. Lynn is in the foreground, with Vera sitting behind*



Two Crusader II tanks have landed back on British soil after more than 80 years in South Africa. **Tim Gosling** was given rare behind-the-scenes access to witness their return

*Vera being collected from storage at Hogsville in South Africa*



*Externally, Lynn was in far better condition, but unfortunately, most of the interior fittings had been removed some years previously*

# The Crusaders RETURN

*'The Crusader II was a marginally improved version of the Crusader I'*

By their very nature, armoured vehicles are dispatched to serve all over the world. Most of those which survive combat do not survive the peace that follows. Serving little practical civilian use and too costly to return home, most tanks are usually scrapped shortly after being cast from military service. However, occasionally, they are saved by being exported. This is exactly what happened to most of the Crusader II tanks sent to South Africa during the war.

In the years running up to the start of World War Two, British tank designers

were asked to develop what were termed 'cruiser tanks', whereby armour thickness was sacrificed in exchange for improved speed so that they could swarm the enemy. Established engineering companies like English Electric, Leyland, London Midland Scottish Railway and Nuffield Mechanizations and Aero Ltd all contributed to the design and build of Cruiser tanks, but although they met the requirement for speed, they suffered from poor reliability and armour. Nuffield Mechanizations' Cruiser Mk VI 'Crusader' would ultimately be the most successful, with over 5,000 examples being built between 1940 and 1945.

The Crusader I entered service in North Africa in May 1941, and despite its fast speed from the Nuffield Liberty 27 litre V12 petrol engine, it gained a reputation for being poorly armoured, unreliable and hopelessly outgunned against the German tanks then in service. The engine was just not able to cope with the dusty conditions and had a habit of overheating. To help overcome these deficiencies, production of an improved version (the Crusader II) had commenced by July 1941.

The Crusader II was a marginally improved version of the Crusader I with additional armour on the front of the



*A Crusader on a transporter, a sight not seen in Kent for at least 80 years*



Externally, Vera is in poorer condition than Lynn. Just visible, a small section of turret armour has blown out, and the wings and toolboxes will require some remedial work



Looking down inside the turret of Vera shows how cramped it is for the crew



Although covered in 77 years of accumulated dirt, the driver's controls of Vera are in remarkably good condition

hull and the turret. It did, however, still have the same woefully inadequate 2pdr gun and a 7.92mm Besa machine gun alongside it in the turret. The 2pdr gun would be replaced with a 6pdr gun in the next version of the tank, the Crusader III.

The Crusader III received some additional armour and, to mount this larger 6pdr gun, also gained a new shape of turret. On the downside, in order to accommodate the larger gun and ammunition, there was less internal space. As such, the crew was reduced from five to four, which meant everyone had additional roles to perform.

All three versions of the Crusader would serve in North Africa, but from March 1942, they began to be replaced by the more reliable and powerful American-built Grant tank, and from October 1942,

the Sherman M4 tank. This was not the end of the Crusader, though. In October 1942, at the start of the second battle of El Alamein, the British were desperate for tanks of all types so employed 170 M3 Grants, 252 M4 Shermans, 216 Crusader IIs, 78 Crusader IIIs, 119 M3 Stuarts and 194 Valentines.

In January 1943, the 1st South African Infantry Division was withdrawn from the Western Desert and shipped back to South Africa to form the basis of a new Armoured Division. In February 1943, the 6th South African Armoured Division was formed, which remained in South Africa until April to complete their training. The South African armour museum at Bloemfontein has confirmed that South Africa received 25 Crusader IIs during the war for training purposes.

Unfortunately, the exact date is unknown, but it does seem most likely that these Crusaders were sent to South Africa in early 1943 (by which time they were already considered to be outdated) to help train the new 6th Armoured Division. With training completed, the Crusaders were left in South Africa when the 6th Armoured Division travelled to Egypt. On arrival, they received other redundant Crusader II tanks to continue their training with, before those were in turn replaced with the superior M4 Sherman prior to the 6th Armoured Division landing at Taranto, Italy, in April 1944.

At the end of the war, the Crusader IIs left in South Africa were held in storage at the 81st Technical Stores Depot at Lyttleton, Pretoria and were ultimately repurposed for use as gate guardians



The 27-litre Nuffield 'Liberty' V12 engine was present in both Vera and Lynn, but the former's engine was far more complete

at military establishments, donated to military museums or given to the MOTH clubs. Unless you are from South Africa or have a South African connection, you will probably not be familiar with what a MOTH club is. MOTH stands for the Memorable Order of Tin Hats, a benevolent Old Comrades-type

organisation formed in 1927 to take care of military veterans and remember those with whom they once served. As a meeting place, clubhouses or "shell holes" as they are known, were established where members could meet for social gatherings.

The South African military donated at

***'The return of both of these Crusader IIs to the United Kingdom is an incredible achievement and will, I am sure, generate much interest'***

least seven Crusader IIs to the MOTH shell holes to display outside as gate guardians, with at least a further 13 being displayed either in military museums or on military establishments across South Africa. Another one of those 25 was donated to the Jordanian tank museum, which leaves just four others, whose locations are unknown. With the passage of time, the membership of the MOTH has declined, and some of the shell holes have been forced to close. This left some of their gate guardians vulnerable to vandalism or theft for scrap, but the Sandstone Heritage Trust stepped in and saved two which were under threat.

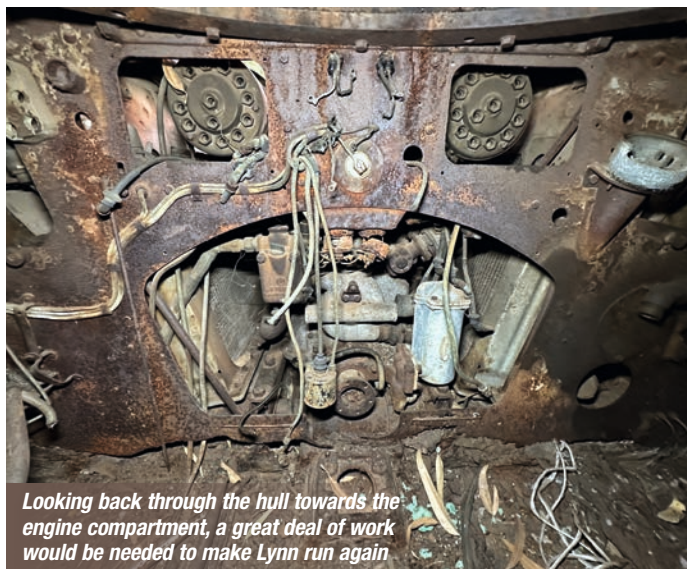
Established in 1995 and based on a commercial farm in the eastern Free State of South Africa, the Sandstone Heritage Trust is an incredible private collection of heritage items, railways, tractors, commercial vehicles, agricultural equipment and of course, military vehicles. In 2008, the MOTH club at Olifantsfontein approached the Sandstone Heritage Trust and asked if Sandstone could take ownership of their Crusader as they no longer had the means to look after it. Located in a garden outside the clubhouse, a quick inspection of the tank found it to be in a very good and unmolested condition. The hatches and engine covers had fortunately been welded shut many years previously,



Inside the turret and beside the commander's position is a box for the binoculars, clearly labelled on Vera



The works data plate inside Vera shows the date of manufacture as September 1, 1942 and the census number as T44661



*Looking back through the hull towards the engine compartment, a great deal of work would be needed to make Lynn run again*



*The driver's compartment of Lynn appears to have been robbed of its internal fittings and has suffered water ingress damage*

which meant that the internal fittings were all still in place and although not in pristine condition, everything was still present. The company of Rieks Towing came and collected the Crusader, and after many years outside at Olifantsfontein, it was relocated to the Sandstone storage facility at Hogsville.

A second Crusader was subsequently acquired, which had been located outside the Boksburg Gap shell hole. When this shell hole ceased operation, the Crusader had been removed and stored in a private yard. As its custodian aged, he passed the Crusader over to Sandstone for safekeeping.

Having two Mark II Crusaders now presented a dilemma for Sandstone. The objective was to return one to a fully restored running condition and the second to a restored static condition. Although Sandstone has its own team of restorers, returning an 85-year-old tank to running condition presented a special challenge. After much thought and discussion, the ownership of the Crusaders passed to the Bannister Historic Armour Collection within the UK, which has contracted them to be professionally restored by the Kent-based business of Armoured Engineering. Armoured Engineering was set up by Gavin Barlow, who, after working eight years restoring military vehicles for RR Motor Services, set up this military vehicle restoration business in 2016. Since then, a series of high-quality restorations have passed through their Old Romney workshops.

By selling the Crusaders to the Bannister Historic Armour Collection, Sandstone received a remuneration which would be used to help fund the restoration of the many other projects which they have in hand. But perhaps most important

## ***‘The South African military donated at least seven Crusader IIs to the MOTH shell holes’***

of all, they knew that by joining the Bannister Historic Armour Collection, the Crusaders would be restored with the intention of being displayed as part of the running collection of the Tank Museum at Bovington, allowing the public to see and appreciate these important survivors of British Tank development.

In July 2025, the two Crusaders were loaded onto flat rack containers (designed for transporting unusually sized or heavy loads) and dispatched by containership to Britain. Arriving on August 8, the Crusaders were taken to a temporary storage facility where they were unloaded and manoeuvred into position by an ex-military Foden 6X6 Heavy Recovery. The first task would be to closely examine the Crusaders to assess their condition and identify what work would need to be undertaken to restore them. For the journey, several of the delicate external fittings, such as the auxiliary fuel tank and air filters, had been removed and carefully placed either inside the turret for safe storage or, as is the case with the auxiliary fuel tank, strapped to the turret roof to reduce the risk of it being crushed.

When I examined the Crusaders, the one from Olifantsfontein (now named Vera) was at the rear of the shed while the one from Boksburg (now named Lynn) was parked in front of it. Externally, Lynn appeared to be in slightly better condition than Vera, but looking inside, I could see

that the fighting compartment of Vera was remarkably complete, with all of the internal fittings still in place. Climbing inside the turret reminded me that the tank crew must have been much smaller and more athletic than I.

I marvelled at how the inside of Vera had survived so well, even to the extent that all of the paper labels on the storage areas (maps, binoculars, ammunition, etc) were still quite legible. Another big find was the brass maker's plate, which showed the date of manufacture as September 1, 1942. I found this to be quite surprising as in May 1942, production of its successor, the Crusader III, commenced. Vera may be a veteran of the second battle of El Alamein, which took place in October through to November of that year and before the Crusaders were shipped out to South Africa.

Unfortunately, although the external appearance of Lynn was much better than Vera's, the inside was in a poor state, with most of the original fittings, like the brass maker plate, having been removed some years prior, so I was unable to ascertain its date of manufacture.

The return of both of these Crusader IIs to the UK is an incredible achievement and will, I am sure, generate much interest. Since my visit, the tanks have been moved to a new secure location and are not available to be visited. With the overall lack of spare parts available for British-built tanks from the war, their restoration is going to be challenging, but I have every confidence in Gavin's ability to undertake this task. Perhaps, maybe in the not too distant future, I will be able to visit Vera and Lynn once again and report on how their restoration is progressing.