

**Abner Rupert James Paine O.ST.J.**

**Was I the first Australian to enter the desert war?**

For years I have thought about it, could I really and honestly claim that I was the first Australian to enter the 'Desert War' in North Africa in World War II? Perhaps even the last Australian to leave that war front. How did it come about? A third generation Australian in a "Pommy Regiment".

I was born in Melbourne in 1920. My stepfather took me to the UK in 1935. I hated it. Restless away from my own country and seeking adventure, I put my age up a couple of years to 18 and joined the British Army three years before World War II broke out.

Foot-slogging was not for me so I looked for something more glamorous and chose the cavalry of the line – the 15<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup>, the Kings Royal Hussars, a fully horse-mounted Regiment stationed at York. They had returned from India and the North West Frontier with their horses.

The next three months were hell or so we thought. Eighteen of us, the 'lowest of the low', we were 'knocked' into shape. Forever polishing, square bashing, dismounted drill with sword and lance. All we saw of the horses were mountains of hot steaming manure every morning at six. Next, three weeks of learning how to groom every part of the horse, making whisks and of course how to make 'much of the horse'.

Then the first time in riding breeches, no spurs yet, we were marched down to the stables to meet the Rough Riding Sgt Major. Sitting erect on his jet black stallion, looking down on us in silence, he suddenly announced: "My name is Funnell, with two 'n's and two 'l's and 'L' is what it will be for you if you don't shape up. My rank is Rough Riding Sgt Major so at all times you will address me as 'Sir'.

He had studied our files. "You would be the most sorriest, most useless and most 'orrible' bunch I have ever seen and I am expected to turn you into cavalry men. Not only that but somewhere hidden amongst you is an 'orsetralian' who no doubt thinks he can ride a horse. We shall see." He allotted each a horse.

For the next nine months, we entered purgatory. How we hated Sgt-Major and his team. Saddle sores, knocked out of our saddles with those 'blob sticks' (a long lance with a big blob of hard leather at the end) riding without reins, stirrups, swimming our horses over the River Ouse in winter, riding over the ditches of the Yorkshire moors, charging at full gallop. But, at the end of it, we could handle our swords, lances and rifles and horses with the rest of them.

At our passing out parade, the RR Sgt-Major told us we were not bad, and that was praise indeed. We felt we could eat 'hoof nails' for breakfast. We had found out that two 'n's and two 'l's and his team were damn fine blokes.

We were sent off for leave, returned, and found out that the Regiment was being 'dehorsed' and was being mechanised. We were the last troop of the Regiment to be trained as 'pukka' cavalrymen. Now it was last in and first out and we were being transferred to Egypt to a fully equipped armoured car regiment. From horses to armoured cars in our first year.

After arriving in Cairo, we assembled on the Regimental Square to be welcomed by the Commanding Officer who then handed us over to his RSM. The Regimental Sergeant Major, as are all cavalry RSMs, was an imposing figure, impeccably dressed, casting an eagle eye over us standing strictly to attention. His first words, in a deceiving quiet voice dripping with anticipation, were “and who is (he looked at his board) Abner Rupert James Paine”?

I swallowed, and yelled, “Sir, here Sir”.

He glanced at me, then for the next 15 minutes informed us in no uncertain words what he expected, nay demanded of each and every one of us. His message was clear, “shape up or get out”.

Again, he informed us that we were not in a Regiment but “The Regiment. The Eleventh Hussars. Prince Albert’s Own”.

Having finished, he marched up and faced me. Looking me over from toe to head, he said, “Australian in the Regiment, what next? God help us”.

We soon learnt what he said about the Regiment was very true. This was not only one of the best but an efficient ‘War Machine’, trained to perfection and kept to the highest peak by continual training, as later years would prove. The training was ruthless for officers and men. We quickly adjusted and became a drop of oil in the machine.

1938: trouble in Palestine. In 24 hours, we were on the road to that country. Our squadron was stationed at the ‘hot spot’, (still is) Nabulus. Those of us who had never seen action were soon ‘blooded’.

1939: war clouds in Europe. Back to Cairo. Training on desert, day and night, intensified training.

1940: move up to the border between Egypt and Libya, which was a tangle of barbed wire separating the two countries. Waiting, war had started in Europe, not much news. Italy declared war on 10 June 1940. That night the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars were ready and waiting on the frontier.

We packed up and after being briefed, just sat around. Tomorrow we would be in enemy territory. No one said much. What was in our minds? Somebody, I don’t know who, thought as I, and I expect others did, and wrote this simple prayer:

Stay with me God, the night is dark  
The night is cold: my little spark  
of courage dies, the night is long.  
Be with me God, make me strong.

That night, who of us young men, most to see our 21st birthdays, would have thought that those who would get through the forthcoming fight that started the next morning would, as a few old men, be sitting together 50 years later in the Winchester Cathedral on the 24<sup>th</sup> October, in that faraway year 1992? Hear the words of the Chaplain General, The Rt Rev James Harkness, in his sermon to us and I quote:

“The Eleventh, who spent more time continuously than any other Regiment in the Western Desert and won more Battle Honours, and in addition were mentioned nine times in the official history of the Africa Corps – the only Regiment who can make this unique claim.”

But who on this night of 10 June 1940, could foresee that we were facing three years of searing heat in the day and bitterly cold nights, sand that seemed to permeate our bodies, food and equipment, the incessant flies who came from nowhere in droves crawling up our noses for a drop of moisture and then the main ingredient, the enemy? As far as I was concerned, the only good that came out of it was the special humour, the spirit of brotherhood and true comradeship, together with the will and determination to succeed.

I think the ‘Desert Rats’ were born the morning after war was declared when we cut the wire and entered enemy territory. Later we were officially given the title and allowed to wear the ‘Rat’ on our uniforms. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division (British) still wear the ‘Rat’.

Towards the end of the desert campaign, nearly three years later the Regiment was withdrawn from action to Homs in Tripolitania for a well-earned rest before Italy.

I am sure those 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars who survived the early days of war will treasure most, out of all their memories, the comradeship they enjoyed in the Regiment. Of all the things a soldier needs to help him conquer the fears of battle, perhaps good company is the most important. Even if the worst should come, it is easier to die in good company. This is what the 11<sup>th</sup> never failed to provide under any circumstances.

For five years, almost continuously across 3,000 miles, they had been in contact with the enemy, longer than any other British Regiment and they suffered casualties greater than the total of their ranks, which first set out to war.

I am truly proud that as an Australian, I was able to represent my country and serve in the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars PAO. Now in the twilight of my years, I realize that I served with the finest the British Army produced.

The Regiment, of which I am a life member, and perhaps the only ‘Aussie’ to achieve this honour has, after nearly 300 years of service, been amalgamated with other Hussar Regiments into the present Kings Royal Hussars of which Association I have been made a Life Member.

Was I the first Australian to enter the Desert War and perhaps the last Australian to leave that war front alive?