

THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK 1941 — ONE GUNNERS EXPERIENCE

~~A TOBRUK RAT'S EXPERIENCE AS A GUNNER~~

~~IN TOBRUK.~~

My name is Eric Eacott Watts and I was born in Leonora, W.A., on 27th August, 1916.

In answer to an advertisement in the Press, I joined the Coastal Artillery at Fort Queenscliff, Victoria, in August 1939.

In April 1940 the Commanding Officer there called a parade to advise all ranks that he was to command a Medium Artillery Regiment for A.I.F. service. He called for volunteers to join him and become part of the 2/2th Medium Regiment. We trained on World War One Sixty Pounder guns at Puckapunyal, Victoria. In October 1940 the Regiment was re-organised as a Field Regiment, and became the 2/12th Field Regiment, part of 9th Australian Division, A.I.F. The unit sailed aboard the HMT Stratheden to the Middle East on 17th November, and arrived safely at Port Suez on 15 December 1940.

1. Training in Palestine.

The unit travelled by train to our camp at Qastina, a tented camp with some hutted accommodation, reasonably appointed. On the re-organisation, I had been promoted to Sergeant.

After Christmas the gunners were hardened up with route marches, football matches and drill. We had not been issued with any guns. Leave to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was on a rostered basis.

2. Move to Egypt.

On the 11th April 1941 the 2/12 Field Regiment moved by road to Egypt, went into camp at Ikingi Maryut. There we waited and waited for orders to move to Tobruk, and into action. Because of enemy penetration, moves by road and rail were cancelled. At last on 7th May my troop, Don Troop went on board the Australian destroyer, Waterhen, and sailed west to enter the Tobruk harbour in darkness, on 7 May 1941.

3. Tobruk.

Due to the enemy having air superiority, arrival of ships was timed generally for a moonless period and on reaching Tobruk the ship weaved its way through the minefields in the harbour and tied up alongside a sunken vessel, converted into a makeshift jetty.

My sub unit, D Troop, was issued with five 60 pounders (WW1 vintage).

(a) The Terrain:-

Looking inland from the sea the coastal terrain is not flat and sandy, the land rises in escarpments divided by deep wadis (valleys) running down to the sea. Nothing grew there except a thorny camel shrub. There was one notable landmark, a solitary fig tree. Dust storms (Khamsans) could last for days and whipped up the sand, burying equipment and reducing visibility to a few feet.

There was no rain during the period the Regiment was part of the defence.

(b) The Defensive System:-

The outer perimeter was 30 miles long and consisted of strong defensive posts outside which was a barbed wire fence. Outside this the Italians had partly completed an anti-tank ditch. Minefields had been laid interspersed throughout the layout by the Italians.

A second line of defence within the fortress (the Blue line) was established by Major-General Morshead, who commanded the Tobruk Siege. He called his Commanders together and explained that he had been ordered by Higher Command to hold Tobruk for two months. Morshead issued a definite order:- "There will be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out we will fight our way out. There will be no surrender and no retreat." He adopted an aggressive defence from the word "go". Patrols were ordered into no-mans-land every night. The enemy became jittery.

At the end of April about 12,000 non-essential troops were evacuated by sea plus 7,000 prisoners. Australian troops comprised two-thirds of the garrison. We were fortunate to be supported by some excellent British gunners who manned three 25 Pounders regiments. Other British units were anti aircraft regiments and the 3rd Armoured Tank Brigade.

(c) The Enemy:-

Tobruk was obviously a "thorn in the side" as the German High Command needed a good port and airfield. Hitler sent his top General, Erwin Rommel to North Africa to re-capture Cyrenaica. He also expected Rommel to stiffen the Italians' resolve. His aim to reach Egypt and the Suez canal could not be achieved while Tobruk remained in the Allies hands.

4. The Conditions in Tobruk.

The troops found the greatest hardship was lack of water. We each received a water bottle of water each day. The ration was 1.25 litres which had to suffice for drinking, personal cleanliness, cleaning our teeth and shaving. Our Commanding Officer ordered all ranks to shave every second day. His theory was "keeping clean raised morale". We found it amazing as to how far a mugfull

of water would go. Lice and fleas were always a worry, finding solace in the hairy parts of one's body.

At the end of June our Regimental Medical Officer reported:- There has been a moderate amount of sickness from stomach trouble and desert fever. With the rotten weather the flies were becoming worse. Eating was with one hand as the other was needed to swipe the flies away, as food was inserted into one's mouth.

During any lull in activities some men were sent by vehicle to a Rest Camp (Happy Valley) which was a secluded beach, out of range of the enemy's artillery, but still subject to Stuka bombing, occasionally.

We managed to get by on pretty terrible rations. The main meals comprised tinned bully beef, or tinned M and V (meat and vegetable stew). The chief staple was Tobruk bread, baked in a cave near the town. The weevils somehow survived the cooking. The dog biscuits split quite easily so the weevils, grubs etc. could easily be brushed away. As for tea, we all had only black tea, no doubt it is a drug for it gave us a "lift" when we were somewhat exhausted.

We slept in our slit trenches to reduce the risk when there was night shelling by the enemy.

5. The Role of Artillery.

The 2/12th Field Regiment was the only Australian Field Regiment in Tobruk during the Siege. The officers and gunners, through their past training, were sufficiently skilled to use against Rommel, a mixed bag of antiquated British and captured guns. I think I was lucky to be appointed a Sergeant in charge of a 60 pounder, World War One vintage. The Italian guns were dangerous, in that often shells burst at the muzzle or the barrel recoiled violently causing death or injury to many guncrew members.

The 60 pounder had a range up to 9 miles therefore their large shells had a devastating effect on rear areas, concentrations of vehicles, and dug in troops. The Germans however had a large, long range heavier gun, known as "Bardia Bill". It was well concealed. In an effort to pinpoint this gun, infantry patrols were sent out, flash spotting and technical calculations used, and we considered we had a fair idea re "Bardia Bill's" exact location. It created a serious nuisance firing on the harbour, especially when a ship had arrived offloading stores, ammunition and re-inforcements. The task of the 60 pounder troop was to engage him, and we usually managed to stop the firing, so we must have been close to his position. Our officer was awarded the MBE in recognition of the success D Troop had, in at least silencing "Bardia Bill".

Other missions allocated to us involved one gun being used away from the main troop position, in a roving role. This gun fired rounds at varying times to harass the enemy positions at night. When our gun was pinpointed we "up sticks" and got out quickly. Due to lack of sleep we felt somewhat harassed ourselves.

On the last day of July a heavy concentration of shells fell on D Troop and a large group of men sheltered in a cave. An 88 mm shell burst in the mouth of the cave, curiously, those killed and injured were in the rear of the cave. A sergeant and one gunner were killed and many wounded. It bore out the belief among men in action "if your name's on it, you'll cop it".

One black day for the regiment occurred when enemy guns, directed by their air observer on to one of our vehicles loaded with men, got a direct hit, 10 gunners were killed including the Warrant Officer in charge. "Herman" the spotter plane responsible, cruised around unopposed, and was often able to bring fire to bear by watching our gun flashes. I can't remember seeing any of our planes over Tobruk during my time there.

Our Commanding Officer realising that we must adopt a gunner role in Tobruk, ordered that the captured Italian World War One guns must be put into service against their original owners. He was sufficiently skilled to convert the range tables and other metric instruments over to Imperial measurement.

One ironical fact concerning the Italian shells which I should mention, was notable, because in the Czechoslovakian factories many anti-Hitler workers sabotaged the ammunition in the manufacturing stage so that on impact they failed to explode. We felt that, although we fired many defective shells at the enemy, we were comforted to find many fired at us were quite useless, hitting the sand with a thud.

6. Our Honourable Enemy.

We had a high respect for the German soldiers which is underlined by an incident during the attack by 2/28th Battalion and 2/43rd Battalion on post S6 and S7 plus K7 in the salient. We provided vital artillery support. The 2/28th had 83 casualties and the 2/43rd four officers and 97 men. It was a disappointing and costly business. A Padre, Father Gard, stood up in a truck and during a lull approached K7, holding a big Red Cross flag. When about 250 yards away a German stood up in full view also holding a similar flag. Not a shot was fired. The German shouted "Halten Minen" indicating that our party was on the edge of the minefield. The bodies of about 13 of our fellows lay on the ground. The Germans then produced a mine detector and a German doctor and officer appeared through the gap made in the minefield. Both sides then removed their dead and wounded. They exchanged good wishes, cigarettes and drinks. The battle began again when each party returned to their weapon pits.

This temporary truce and others which occurred in Tobruk produced a warm feeling and our infantry experienced a feeling that his opposition were just ordinary fellows like themselves. The Germans respected us and we admired them also. Our regimental medical officer at this stage reported to the Commanding Officer that the health of the gunners was only fair, desert sores and stomach troubles were rife. But luckily 50 re-inforcements arrived on July 16th and 5 more the next day. They soon became indoctrinated into the routine, continual dust storms, artillery duels and the stuka dive-bombers. The flies, especially in the infantry posts, were worse than ever.

On the 17th July our regiment fired 1200 rounds in support of a large scale raid by the 2/28th Battalion. It completed its task at 3 am. next morning. Lack of ammunition plagued the guns of the British artillery regiments, and as we had ample Italian shells left behind in caves etc. we were required to make up the deficiency.

7. Hazards Experienced By Defenders.

(a) The Infantry Role:-

During Easter in 1941 Rommel began probing to find weak spots in the perimeter defenses. On Easter Sunday he made his first real attack but the defenders drove him back with bayonets and grenades. By dawn the enemy had penetrated 3 miles, but Rommel's tanks had passed over. Our infantry ^{got out of their} slit trenches and the following Germans broke ranks. The 38 tanks continued on but ran into our concealed anti-tank guns and 25 pounders. Seventeen German tanks were knocked out. Their infantry, without any support and pounded by our artillery and machine guns, turned retreat into rout.

However it had cost Rommel 110 dead and 254 wounded. He made another attempt with his storm troopers. At dusk on 30 April he succeeded in capturing Hill 209 and establishing a bridgehead one mile wide. Thus the Salient was in German hands and remained so for the extent of the Siege.

The aggressive defence ordered by Morshead began to tell on the infantry battalions, which were required every night to send out patrols into "No Man's Land". To see them passing our gun position wearing sand shoes, sneaking out on a fighting patrol with a look in their eyes that was hard to fathom, it was a look almost of resignation.

Each day was like yesterday, hot and dry and the occasional sandstorm. Visibility became difficult due to dust, sand and heat haze. Sometimes these storms lasted two or three days. Driving vehicles was a danger when movement caused the German guns to open up. Despite the conditions dive bombing stukas were relentless in their attacks on the harbour.

(b) The Fear Aspect:-

After the troops baptism of fire enemy shelling was never quite so hard to take. Generally the men displayed little outward sign of fear, for they were unwilling to appear less a man than their peers. A few found the fear unbearable and suffered personal torture, but many, through determination, stuck it out. Others had to be sent to a rear area or out of the fortress altogether. I realised that, as a sergeant, I was required to encourage a "don't care" attitude and adopt it myself. It was imperative that all members of the guncrew understood that the job in hand had to take precedence.

(c) Protection:-

When deploying guns in the Regiment the first task at the selected gun position was the digging of slit trenches for our personal protection. Next came the safety of the guns. No sleep was permitted until gunpits had been dug. Because of rock formations under the sand we built walls of rocks above the ground. These were called sangars. Mostly we got below ground level with our slit trenches and made them comfortable to sleep in. This meant if an enemy shelling concentration was put down on us it took a direct hit to destroy us.

For the gunner officers and men manning the observation posts where our infantry was located, it was essential that they kept their heads in the slit trench to avoid sniper and machine gun fire. Urinating was done using a supply of empty tins. A latrine area was used mainly at night so that men could squat comfortably.

8. Propaganda.

A diversion occurred a week after the British attack (Operation Battleaxe) was repulsed. German planes scattered leaflets over Tobruk. A sample is hereunder.

AUSSIES

AFTER CRETE DISASTER ANZAC TROOPS ARE NOW BEING RUTHLESSLY SACRIFICED BY ENGLAND IN TOBRUCH AND SYRIA. TURKEY HAS CONCLUDED PACT OF FRIENDSHIP WITH GERMANY. ENGLAND WILL SHORTLY BE DRIVEN OUT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN. OFFENSIVE FROM EGYPT TO RELIEVE YOU TOTALLY SMASHED.

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE. OUR DIVE BOMBERS ARE WAITING TO SINK YOUR TRANSPORTS. THINK OF YOUR FUTURE AND YOUR PEOPLE AT HOME. COME FORWARD. SHOW WHITE FLAGS AND YOU WILL BE OUT OF DANGER!

SURRENDER!

This endeavour by the Germans to weaken the resolve of their enemy failed miserably and was not quite what the enemy psychological department intended.

9. Bombing Raids.

While the bombing of the fortress occurred relentlessly, development of Allied strength in Egypt was almost uninterrupted by enemy air attack. There were 800 enemy bombing raids on Tobruk between April 10th and November 18th, 1941, and less than 100 on British bases and airfields in Egypt.

The siege developed into a pattern, fierce skirmishes constant stuka dive bombing, especially over the harbour and artillery bombardment from both sides. The absence of the RAF and RAAF caused almost total dependence on the anti-aircraft gunners who were absolutely superb. I remember on May 29th 50 Stukas, 6 ME109s and 4 CRU42s attacked the harbour. Four were shot down by the A/A and 4 more hit.

10. The Navies.

There is no doubt that without the Navy there would have been no Tobruk Siege. The supply line was kept open by the gallant efforts of RAN and RN ships (known as the Scrap Iron Flotilla). Both navies succeeded in bringing into Tobruk 29,000 troops and evacuating 23,000, plus 34,000 tons of supplies. This was only possible due to the timing of their run so that the ships were protected by darkness from a point within Stuka range. The destroyer in which I went into Tobruk, the Waterhen, was however sunk on its next foray to the fortress. Australian destroyers used were Vendetta (28 trips) Stuart Vampire Voyager Napier Nestor and Nizam. I came out on the Jackal on 27th September. It was a British destroyer. Of the little ships, the auxiliary lighters which ferried in tanks and guns were militarily the most important.

11. The Name "Rats Of Tobruk".

A British traitor who broadcast over German radio each night, was known as Lord Haw Haw. He used the scornful tag "Tobruk Rats" and called the defenders "self supporting prisoners of war". Post war the British made sure he was executed.

The title "Rats" intended as a slur, has been carried ^{over since} with pride by those who took part in the 242 day siege.

12. Departure.

In July the harsh conditions were beginning to tell. In particular the infantry and Ack Ack gunners were quite war weary. The strength of our regiment was now down to 40 officers and 452 other ranks.

Wastage from those killed, wounded and evacuated because of sickness was 130 all ranks. We gunners at the "blunt end" mainly had to contend only with shelling and bombing whereas the infantry in their weapon pits did the hard hand fighting, and in daylight had to keep their heads down to avoid machine gun fire.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the strain of continuous night patrolling carried out by the infantry - they were superb.

The Higher Command decided that 9th Australian Division and 51st British Regiment RA would be relieved and replaced by the Polish Carpathian Brigade Group and the 70th British Division. One Australian Battalion, the 2/13th, remained in Tobruk until 10 December because destroyers were not available to evacuate it.

In Don Troop we had to stay as long as was necessary to familiarise the British gunners with observation posts, and the 60 pounders generally. Since its arrival in the fortress, the regiment had fired over 56,000 rounds while the Italian guns had expended 27,500, up to 18 September 41

13. Casualties.
Australian.

	<u>Killed in Action</u> <u>or died of</u> <u>wounds.</u>	<u>Wounded in</u> <u>Action.</u>	<u>Missing.</u>	<u>Prisoners</u> <u>of War.</u>	<u>Total</u>
Siege inc. withdrawal from Benghazi.	776	2,112	* 65	954	3,907
All Middle East Campaigns.	3,147	8,317	443	6,806	18,713

* Most were presumed to have been killed.

The relative strengths of the garrison is shown in the following table:-

<u>21st April 1941.</u>	A.I.F. 14817 British 18292 (inc. about 550 Indians).
<u>30th June 1941.</u>	A.I.F. 14326 British 7979 (inc. 500 Indians).

14. Conclusion.

During the siege Prime Minister Churchill sent the following tribute to Major General Morshead. "The whole Empire is watching your steadfast and spirited defence of this important outpost with gratitude and admiration."

It was at Tobruk that the Germans suffered their first defeat on land. The defence proved that the Blitzkrieg break-through tactics used in Europe in 1939 and 1940 could be defeated by resolute infantry, supported by minefields and artillery.

The Regiment moved back to Qastina camp. In view of the possibility of Turkey's entry into the war in support of Germany, the complete 9th Australian Division was ordered to move to Lebanon in January 1942. In June it was ordered back to Egypt to be part of the defence line at El Alamein to stop Rommels advance to Egypt and the Suez Canal. After the massive attack on 23rd October and the breakout by the Allies in November, the division moved to Palestine and sailed back to Australia in February 1943.

As for myself, after the El Alamein battle I was sent to a school to become an officer. I returned home in the Ile De France. After taking leave, and getting married, I was posted to 2/11th Aust. Field Regiment, and finished the war on Bougainville Island.

I served on after the war in the Regular Army, was promoted to Captain and transferred to the C.M.F. where I finally became a Major. I resigned from the Army in 1963 after 24 years service.

Eric E. Watts

10 March 2005.

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