

Nominal Roll – Certificate for LESLIE EMANUEL ANDERSEN

# World War Two Service

CAPTAIN  
LESLIE EMANUEL ANDERSEN  
VX48255



SERVICE	AUSTRALIAN ARMY
DATE OF BIRTH	4 NOVEMBER 1903
PLACE OF BIRTH	ADELAIDE, SA
DATE OF ENLISTMENT	25 JULY 1940
LOCALITY ON ENLISTMENT	GLEN IRIS, VIC
PLACE OF ENLISTMENT	CAULFIELD, VIC
NEXT OF KIN	ANDERSEN, FRANCES
DATE OF DISCHARGE	10 SEPTEMBER 1941
POSTING AT DISCHARGE	2/24 BATTALION
ADDITIONAL SERVICE NUMBERS	V30006



Australian Government  
Department of Veterans' Affairs

“THE RATS of TOBRUK”

By

CAPT. L. E. ANDERSEN

Late Coy. Commander B.Coy.

2/24th Btn., AIF

With

Allan DAWES

.....

**DEDICATED  
To  
A REAL RAT  
“LORD HAW HAW”**

**In token of  
His unwitting aid  
To the morale of a Beleaguered Army  
And in hope of  
An early Meeting**



# TOBRUK

## Chapter 1

LOUSY, caked with s mud compounded of sweat and sand, flea-bitten, fly-bitten, deaf from the crash and roar of unremitting bomb and shell, dropping for lack of sleep and perishing for the good square meal that mother used to make . . . These are the Rats of Tobruk.

For weeks they haven't had their shirts or shorts off, for the matter of that their boots or their stockings; they've spent their nights on single blankets on the sand, tin hat at elbow. For months they've been bombed half hourly all night by Stukas and Capronis, shelled by Axis artillery from beyond the perimeter of Tobruk, picked at by Breda-gun snipers and, most deadly of all, menaced by mortar fire.

Everything venomous and verminous in the desert - from sand flies to scorpions - has made common cause with the Axis. Still the Rats hold on.

Their food comes in cans (alas, not in bottles - a realistic commissariat rightly does not regard beer as essentially one of the sinews of War), the cans bring their attendant ills: dysentery mans a new Fifth Column against them, the only enemy that ever caught an Australian soldier with his pants down.

**FOOTNOTE:** : *We have it on the authority of the late Francis T. Buckland, celebrated author of "Curiosities of Natural History" (London: Macmillan, 1905), that a mere two or three Australian breed of rat will extirpate any number of rats of another breed. "We were further told "quotes the learned Buckland, "that they realised a high price, in consequence, from those who had faith in their frightening propensities."*

*"It has been said, and with much truth, that it is an easier task to learn a proposition of Euclid than to catch a rat.*

*The love of self preservation is particularly developed in this beast, and being surrounded by enemies, he becomes very suspicious and even on his guard against treachery..... find that the grey matter (the thinking portion of the brain)*

*is highly developed. The clever tricks therefore that we hear of rats avoiding poison and traps are accounted for; their natural cunning arising from their mental faculties (if I may use the expression) being of a high order, amounting more to reasoning than to instinct."*

The chlorinated water of the wells, judiciously diluted with distilled sea-water, salts the tongue and stiffens the bristles - but there is issue soap of sorts . . and shaving stiffens the morale, so your Rats, whatever else they are, are shaven. Even (if there has been a recent raid on a Pansy dugout) nicely talced as to the chin – and the chin is well up. . - '

Not only food comes in cans. Canned sudden death is rained down day and night - the raids intensifying daily with the dawn. Sometimes 50 'planes - dive bombers escorted by fighters, come over, six or seven times a day.

The Rats take cover, but you can't bomb them out.

The Rat-holes are caves in the walls of the escarpment in the inner perimeter of Tobruk, varying from 8 to 11 miles from what is left of the town. There are about 20,000 men - British, Indian and Australian - scattered along a semi-circle of 52 miles from Mediterranean to Mediterranean. As an Australian, I write for the most part of the Australians though at Tobruk, if never before, I learned to appreciate all that is best in the character of the British fighting soldier and the rare, almost reckless tenacity and courage of the Indians.

From my own rat-hole in the side of a wadi or dry gully beside the Derna Road, against the blood-red of a sunrise I can descry the ugly ruin of Tobruk, a stark, serrated, nondescript skyline of - smashed concrete and stone . . . the mud walls of the Arab village have been completely razed and the empty city reduced by our own fire - in the initial capture to a jumble dump, shapeless, hopeless, horrible . . . a square mile of rubble.

Between us stretches the dead off-white waste of Libyan sand, so fine it sieves through the cloth of your shirt, the canvas of the hospital tents (the only tents in Tobruk). There is no life, no sign of life save the solitary fig tree, a thirty foot mound of olive-green a few yards away on the other side of the Road, and a half-dozen spluttering sparrows dive bombing on the unsatisfying, sparsely strewn tufts of saltbush no higher than their own hocks.

Beyond the city and the dark oily jetsam-dotted littoral the Harbour lies, a graveyard of some forty-seven wrecks . . . black, funnels, hulks and spars, fuselage of crashed enemy bombers, defacing the unclouded disc of the now risen sun.

The wooden wharves on the left of the Harbour, not entirely smashed are yet useless because of the broken ships and 'planes that snag the shallows.

Nearly opposite, all that is left of the Italian destroyer "San Giorgio" stretches

well up on the beach, like an abandoned cadaver, not even a roost for shags and seabirds, for all that is living of Tobruk is underground. Here it is the living they bury, not the dead. '

It is a picture of utter desolation. The one green thing, the Fig Tree by the Derna Road, fascinates you. It shines like a good deed in a naughty world . . . the seal of Nature signing off to make way for the Wrath of God. Fig Tree stands imperishable in the memory of every man who came out of Tobruk..

To us in the Western wadis it was the centre of our being - we met or marched east, west, south, north of Fig Tree. We took a bearing by Fig Tree — coming or going. It was our Nelson's Column, our Statue of Liberty, our G.P.O.Melbourne, our Sydney Central Station and our Taj Mahal, The Fig Tree was also the head and front of the affection of our friends the enemy who had the idea, not entirely inaccurate, that an important H.Q. was situated not far from its everlasting arms.

They rained bombs and shells around it day and night, poured out the concentrated fury of their H.E. to the tune of thousands upon tens of thousands of marks and lire, with the single object of its destruction and the destruction of everything about it.

Fortunately the enemy's fire was less accurate than his ideas and Fig Tree stood throughout the siege like Ajax defying the lightning . . stands today as a memorial to the bombs that missed and to the stupendous waste of War.

It was just an ordinary fig tree, I suppose, but for me it had something of the heroic. Its trunk, a dozen inches through at the base, was about thirty feet high and supported branches which arched out, heavy with foliage and fruit, for fifteen feet in all directions. The Fig Tree appears often in parable and prophecy: I see why now - here was s parable beside the Derna Road.

There were other such trees within the perimeter, though not within this stricken area which lay in my line of vision from the cave in the wadi by the Derna Road... an orchard of thirty or so Fig Trees in a wadi we called Happy Valley which ran down to the open sea behind the Hospital which stood away to the north-east extremity of the Harbour front.

But only the solitary Fig Tree by the Derna Road, I think, has what it takes - the stuff to make history;

The field telephone splutters . . .

"That you, Andy? Heard about Haw Haw?"

The notorious traitor-broadcaster was the breath of life to us in Tobruk. His obiter dicta went the rounds regularly - by 'phone or by word of mouth from

those, in ambulance units for instance, fortunate enough to be sitting in on a radio, to those who had only the flies for company.

Sometimes his cracks were immortalised in the columns of "Dinkum Oil", Tobruk's original news-sheet. At any rate we used to dwell upon his familiar opening gambit . . . "Rats of Tobruk, I have some information for you . . ." as an overture to our daily belly-laugh. It was a great help to morale . . .

"What's his latest?"

"What's the difference between the A.I.F. and Wirth's Circus?"

"Didn't notice any, but I'll be the mug . . ."

"Answer: A.I.F's got more tents!"

"Not so hot - now, if he's said we'd gob more performing fleas ..

"I'll say. Heard last night's score? The Archie's got four  
more Stukas, three Capronis - two of them are in the drink. And  
Dingo's mob cleaned up three Iti dugouts on the outer perimeter  
. . . didn't fire a burst, brought in 95 prisoners, 20 Bredas  
and ammunition, three honourable surrenders and two dozen of  
talc . . ."

"Honourable surrenders" were the white flags which were a regular issue to Italian formations and took their name from the instructions we found in Italian Army Text Books that they were to be availed of for the purposes of "honourable surrender". Certainly the ice cream boys were ready enough to use them. These raids were a regular feature of life in Tobruk and often as not ended just that way - not a shot fired in anger and the prisoners marching arm in arm, laughing and singing in their bedraggled uniforms and shoddy, worn out boots, with a casual Digger or two at their heels, for all the world like sheep dogs at a Show trial . . . the Diggers with their rifles slung and their hands stuck in their pants. For these Italians the War was over. They were "going on their annual leave". Some of them were only four or five days in from Tripoli. They had had no intention of fighting and were just biding their time for an opportunity to surrender to the first British troops they met. For one thing this was their first chance to get decent grub. Even landing them under fire in the death trap conditions of Tobruk Harbour we were more nearly certain of decent supplies than the Italians who had to bring their stuff 600 miles overland from Tripoli. Besides the Italians were not content . . . their relations with their German partners were far from happy. The humourless, inhumane, inhuman Hun was a shockingly bad workmate, and no playmate at all. Among the troops we

brought in were a number of German officers and N.C.O's, and there was every indication the Italians hated them worse than poison. On one occasion that came under my personal notice, we observed that there were extensive casualties in a combined German and Italian attacking party before they came within our machine gun range. After they had withdrawn, from the evidence of our own eyes we could see that the Italians had turned on the Germans and shot them down.

These raids and fighting patrols of ours were pretty effective. The Axis forces were reduced to such a state of nerves that after a while they had search-lights playing constantly over the sands by night and Alsatian watchdogs to give warning of the approach of patrols. The patrols continued nevertheless and brought in hundreds of prisoners Breda Guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, as well as a continuous stream of information and the most laughable proof of the effectiveness of our own defences — and particularly of the havoc our little games were wreaking on enemy supplies by provoking waste of valuable munitions of War. How many thousands of tons of high explosive we caused the Italians and Germans to throw away in needless bombing and shelling of fake fortifications, stove pipe guns and hessian tanks will never be known. Certainly none of our bait was thrown away - they rose to it every time !!!

The Italians had no stomach for the fray at all. The standard Australian practice was to follow the dust - advance under cover of the darkness of a sand storm (and a sand storm will blow, blinding and completely black, for weeks on end) - right into the enemy stronghold, grenades in their pockets, Bren Guns swung over their shoulders - sometimes Tommy Guns - without even bothering to unslip the guns, the troops would fire a burst, from the hip, into the air and yell the familiar Australian challenge . . . "Come on out, you B ---- --s!" And out the B ---- --s would come, their arms reaching for heaven as if they were doing physical jerks at the word "one". Some weren't even game to emerge, but lay whimpering on their faces, crying for mother.

I remember one raid where a bunch of Diggers who had lost most of their personal effects in the withdrawal from Benghasi decided to retrieve their fortunes according to the material to hand. They stripped the Italian and German trucks they had captured of everything that appealed to them and came back through our own wire gloriously arrayed in green shirts and red handkerchiefs and plastering themselves

with the inevitable talc powder - the "Pansies" penchant for talc was an unfailing source of amusement to the Diggers, especially to the hardy bush-whackers, among whom it was a standing joke that with a little chlorinated water and some red coals they'd never run short of damper, so long as the Itis brought in a few tins of baby-face. A few more items of news from the budget garnered by the Wireless station in Tobruk proper, a staccato recital of the days

orders, an inquiry or two after the health of Bill and Dave and Alec and the field phone sputters into silence. The sun is well up, so is the entire ship's company of the dugout - a couple of Officers, a couple of telephonists, a brace of runners and a batman who can conjure more out of a can of canned food than ever the manufacturer put into it. Breakfast is on. —

No use asking what's for breakfast. Can is constant - except for asparagus and tomato soup, as any can-addict (and there are hundreds of thousands of them in outback Australia) will tell you, there's no difference between any two canned products after the first five years — or is it five weeks? Our vitamins come in tabloids - the cans are just propaganda. To get the best out of your vitamins, take a lesson from the Oracle, full private, A.I.F. (he hasn't been full since One Night at Cairo, the subject of many a vividly recollected anecdote which may begin with "There was a Sheila, no, I . . ." or "Of course, the only decent beer is Vic. but, as I always say, any port in a storm, so one night at Shepherd's . . ." or more plainly 'Well supposing I was shickered, but still . . .').

The Oracle is a gourmet, an epicure. He savours his viands, he appreciates their subtleties, he gets the most out of life. "That", he says, as one white capsule slips down the hatch, "will be cabbage . . . I'm very fond of cabbage . . ." A second . . . "Ah, pineapple - genuine Murwillumbah . . That, anyone would tell you is lettuce . . you can taste the snails. (I prefer the superphosphate flavour myself, being brought up in the South) . . Pity nobody ever thought of tabloid beer - though perhaps, after all, it's just as well they didn't. What would you do for suds?" Then, contemplatively sucking his teeth . . "Steak an' eggs? Steak an' eggs? When did I have steak an' eggs?"

Once in fact, one eventful day, the troops did manage fresh meat. From somewhere out along the Derna Road, a flock of sheep

strayed in from what mysterious quarter nobody ever managed to divine. It was an occasion of the highest military significance. There was "mounting in hot haste and hurrying to and fro", a fighting raid was carried out - the enemy surrounded and every one of them taken prisoner. This was the only occasion in the history at any rate of the present War when, in defiance of the Hague Convention, the League of Nations, the Ten Commandments and the Constitution of the Vegetarian Society, Australian soldiers Killed and ate their prisoners. There was never any lack of food in Tobruk.

A Destroyer brought in supplies under cover of night; It could not use the broken wharf, because of the wreckage, but slipping in between the ruins of tankers, cargo ships, here and there, an odd survival of the lesser vessels of Mussolini's navy or a bomber brought down by our fighters in the first onslaught on Tobruk, she would anchor at a point where she could be approached by pontoons and unload her cargo of supplies - food, ammunition, medical stores and mails from one on the portside, while she shipped the more seriously wounded from another to starboard. Thirty minutes constituted the limit of her stay because the bombers were always with us.

Even moonlight nights with their added discomfort could not daunt that gallant destroyer. The sky might be raining bombs; aircraft splinters and merry Hell, but the Navy was always there. Her business done, the destroyer darts out like a dragon fly - but it's always with an Au Revoir - never with goodbye. Incidentally for the men of the Navy — R.N. and R.A.N, alike - the Rats of Tobruk will throw in three cheers and first pip any day. Their deeds of heroism, individual or collective, in keeping the Tobruk Garrison alive and kicking through those terrible months are an epic of unforgettable fortitude and incredible feats and will inspire as they have inspired the men of the P.B.I. to surpassing endurance and endeavour. We played the Waiting Game in Tobruk, with murder and hell slammed down on us unceasingly month in, month out, and we will never boast that it could have been done without the Navy.

The bombers didn't get it all their own way by any means. Our Anti-aircraft defences at Tobruk were among the fiercest in the War. But we had no fighters stationed at Tobruk - the area was too small inside the perimeter and our 'planes had to come from Egypt. So every Stuka, every Caproni, brought down was a tribute to the skill and efficiency of the Ack Ack gunners (and plenty were brought down). Coming over of the bombers was the signal for a deafening burst of

fire from the Ack-Ack emplacements all round the Harbour. At night the Italians and the Germans developed nerves. They flew at 50,000 feet and lost all hope of accurate bombing or even, half the time, reconnaissance. Often as not, they got nowhere near their objective at all and the checking officers at the German fliers' stations must have rivalled the Recording Angel in the number of lies they chronicled as the pilot bombers returned, for they never took their bomb loads home but released stick after stick into sea or sand without hope of a target, once disappointed of their original objective. Old Fig Tree was about the only aiming point about which they showed any consistency - and he lived to laugh them off.

The technique of the daylight bombing raids - six or seven a day and sometimes by as many as 60 bombers - never varied. The raiders would approach in waves. The first wave would attack the A.A. guns, others would dive on the Harbour, the water point or store dumps or seek out Divisional or Brigade H.Q. The 'planes dropped like lead, one after another from 20,000 to 50,000 feet, through clouds of A.A. fire. Many would be hit or shattered to pieces or would burst into flame. Others did not come out of their dive, and blew up in their own bombs.

Tobruk's piecrust perimeter embraces a system of about twelve strong posts. The area within the perimeter is about 140 square miles; the greatest depth of this area is about eleven miles from Tobruk to a point just West of the El Adem-Tobruk Road. The perimeter defences themselves consist of some 140 strong points spaced fairly regularly around in two lines, the second line of strong points about 400 yards in the rear of the first. The strong points of the second line do not lie immediately behind the strong points of the first line, but in the gaps between them, except at the wadi Zeitun on the East, and the Wadi Es Sehel on the West, an Anti-tank ditch about ten feet deep and 15 feet wide has been dug in front of the forward line of strong posts and, in addition, there is a continuous double apron fence between the tank trench and the strong points. Many strong points have wire on their flanks and a concealed anti-tank ditch, covering their rear. The strong point gives excellent shelter to the garrison and is provided with concrete Machine Gun and Anti-tank gun emplacements.

When we arrived in Tobruk after the withdrawal from Benghasi we improved these defences by digging, or rather blasting, a second line about 20 miles long, from sea to sea inside the outer perimeter, erected wire fences, dug Anti-tank ditches and laid mine fields.

Carried out in the heat of the desert while we were constantly on the alert for counter attacks or to deal with parachute troops should they attempt to land . . (they never did, the blasting of the weapon pits from the solid rock lingers in our memory as the cream of the jest out there . . it was done in our "rest" periods away from the front line. Noise of the A.A's, reinforced by the big bang-bangs of our own 25-pounders, 4.5 howitzers, and 60-pounders camouflaged in the wadis and in a semi-circle half a mile within the perimeter and supported by the enemy bombs, shells and mortar fire, raising Hades in all directions and all the time, makes sleep, except in desultory half waking snatches, impossible at night, even to the tiredest troops returning from a raid or worn out from a fatigue or special duty within the defences. Nor is it much better by day, with the mercury anywhere between 127 and 150 and the fleas and flies attacking with truly Fascist-inspired ferocity. Daylight bombing caused much damage to shipping in the Harbour. Even on moonlight nights some hits were scored but it was remarkable that from the great number of raids carried out over Tobruk the casualties were very light..

The field telephone again . . .

"Hullo Andy, get an eyeful of the weather. There's a blackout on your port bow . . . looks like you might take the boys over and pick up one of those Iti strong posts, eh?"

"Blackout" is right. West and south the dust is mounting up the sky - in half an hour we'll be singing "When the Lights of London Shine Again" in inky blackness. Sandstorms in Tobruk are like the overwhelming all-enveloping pall of death itself. You daren't move without a compass. I've been lost within a few hundred yards of home, found my way back by running the telephone wire through my hand. The whole desert rises against you, strikes you, slaps you down, hour on hour, sometimes day after day, sometimes week on end.

But sand stops no Wars. This will be the night for a raid!

.....

## CHAPTER 2 “GAZA to BENGHASI”

The War hadn't been exactly a picnic for us up to the time, that day in Gaza, we got the orders which eventually took us to Tocra; it hadn't been a picnic but it hadn't been a War.

Here we were . . . months out from Australia (and six months trained there first) and not a shot had we heard fired in anger. We were fit as fighting cocks, trained, taut as fencing wire and fair spoiling for a fight . . . and when an Australian is spoiling for a fight it is best to go round by Spadger's Lane, or, if you must use the high-road, keep your head down and be respectful.

All the time we had been at what someone was pleased to designate our "elementary" training in Palestine, we of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division had been hungrily following the fortunes of the 6th in Libya who, along with Tommy troops, were making a magnificent job of the desert campaign. We followed them from Sidi Barrani to Tobruk, Tobruk to Benghasi - with mixed feelings; pride in them, admiration for their achievements, pity for ourselves, contempt for our own inaction.

I remember we were sitting at mess, evening meal polished off, the last dregs drained, when the news came like thunder out of the blue that Sidi Barrani had fallen to the 6th Australian Division.

Did I say the "last dregs drained" . . . the last dregs?

Fill them up again and yet again! This was news! Their first stoush and how they had pulled it off!

Next morning the blanks in the news are filled in. Sidi Barrani had fallen with a great haul of supplies, thousands of prisoners . . . three Italian Generals to lend dignity to the proceedings. Foot by foot we followed them. Word by word as the news came in. Four days later we heard how the Italians were retreating and how the tally of prisoners had passed the 20,000 mark. British forces had penetrated Libya. Next day comes the capture of Sollum and Fort Capuzzo, whose Imperial Roman Eagle, before the main gateway now bore obvious scars of battle. The pressure is increasing against Bardia.

Between Christmas and New Year the grip upon Bardia tightens. The Navy begins hammering the fortress.

Then at dawn on January 3rd the 6th Australian Division launches its terrific assault on Bardia. ,By sunset next day the last pockets of resistance have been mopped up. Eighteen hours later the Italian gunfire has faded into silence. The total of prisoners is about 50,000, bringing grand total since Sidi Barrani to about 70,000.

It was the best Christmas present the 6th Division could have given us, the news of the fall of Bardia. And oh! boy, did we celebrate? The Itis were on the

run! (The fall of Tobruk nearly sent the troops in Palestine frantic, but damn it, we said, why couldn't we be in the flaming show?)

About 20,000 more prisoners, more generals, enormous quantities of equipment and, don't forget, one Admiral.

When the troops arrived in the town of Tobruk, there on the steps of the Naval Barracks, stood the Italian Admiral, complete to white gloves, his bags already packed for departure and the engine of his small private Fiat car ticking over. Smoking his cigar he watched unmoved, hundreds of his men being marched up the main street towards the cages.

From the tall flag-staff in front of the Naval Barracks the Italian flag had been hauled down; the mast head was crowned instead with a Digger hat.

These stories are twice told tales, no longer news today except for the breaks they gave us in Palestine. Haw Haw never got anywhere near their standard.

There was the Australian Brigadier who received a message from an Iti General that he wanted to surrender with his troops. The Brigadier replied accepting the offer but he added "please leave it till tomorrow . . the number of prisoners becomes embarrassing."

One enclosure was being covered by several Diggers with Bren machine guns. The prisoners came so thick and fast the gunners were swamped. One Digger was seen with a ring round him giving a demonstration.

It was not of the national game of Two-up but how to strip and assemble the gun. The Itis were most interested.

An Italian truck driven by an Iti arrived at the cage full of prisoners but with no escort. The driver was quite upset because he was not allowed to go back for more.

Next, only a week later, comes news of the fall of Derna.

Cirene - 2,500 years ago a city of a million souls but now an empty shell - followed six days later. February 8th brought news that Benghasi was finished. One month and the lads had rolled up Libya like a scroll, with a loss of about 800. How's that?

How's that? How was that: We were still watching from, the stand.

That was what always rankled — inaction. It wasn't that we were old war horses eager for the fray, or even that we were unblooded youngsters with some perverse desire for human bloodshed- We just had that natural healthy wish to be in anything that was going. The worst thing you can say to a Digger is "Nothing doing!" It wasn't even that those days in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were not happy days. Many of the boys will tell you still they were the happiest days of their lives, although the ladies of the Holy City

did not play Ludo and the wog beer tasted like boiled liquorice. We knew we had ample precedent for enjoying ourselves here. Was it not under these sunny skies that: "King Solomon and King David led merry, merry lives, with too much beer and whisky and other people's wives . . . And when old age came creeping on, and conscience felt its qualms, King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms."

Well, we lacked the Royal amenities and maybe the elasticity of the Royal Conscience, but we had our fun. Who will ever forget the wild hilarity of his first donkey-race at Gaza for instance, conducted Geebung fashion, Rafferty's rules.

One such was the Dimra Stakes, as a Racing Classic second only to the Melbourne Cup. It was run on New Year's Day at Dimra, about seven miles from Gaza. Thirty donks were hired from the Arabs at 20 mils apiece. A tote was set up, long tables joined together from behind which the tote clerks issued tickets for the successive races. Lieutenant Jack Shelton, the Clerk of the Course, looked the part mounted on a camel draped with a rug of brilliant red and gold. The donks, when brought out for inspection, exhibited no Cup form. Underfed, scraggy-looking, none of them more than two kero tins high, they deserved no write-up in the "Palestine Post" and they didn't get any. To the owner they were just donks, the trainer didn't exist, the Jockey picked out the one which showed the most white in its eyes and if Stinky No. 9 in the book was not showing the necessary dash during the race the backers would either run behind kicking his tail or run in front with a bunch of carrots.

There was no dirty work with batteries or dope but just the same it was not entirely according to Hoyle and the Clerk of the Course was kept busy.

The troops kept themselves amused easily enough.

The only fly in the ointment was this cursed "Nothing doing" feeling. (There were plenty of flies outside the ointment, by the way - in the Middle East they come big as boxers, limber as jockeys and with the vicious cunning of a dress-circle flea.) I remember the caption on a Sydney "Bulletin" cartoon of a bunch of Diggers crowding the Army Minister of the day, at Darwin: 'We don't want glamour, we want stoush.' That was about our size.

That was also the situation when one evening, sitting in the mess tent at Gaza, looking out over the slit trenches as they fell into shadow with the sinking of the desert sun, we heard the furphy that had broken loose . . . the furphy that threw back every beer in one toss and set the whole mess in a fever of speculation. We were

being snatched from the Promised Land.

Prophecy, they say, is written in letters of fire; furphy is written on galvanized iron. Furphy usually turns out right.

In the dark of the next morning before the break of day, we were up and packed, camp had been struck and the train that had shunted into the little Gaza Station overnight was bulging with soldiers. Same old station, by the way, not a grain of sand different, that the Australian Light Horsemen who took Gaza from the Turk in 1917, so vividly remember, squat square single storey of not-so-white concrete.

Those masters of psychology, the boys of the Postal Corps, did their stuff before we entrained I remember — mails only fourteen days out from home. Bless their hearts, those boys had Mandrake, Mercury and the Magic Carpet - in fact all the mail order merchants from Moses to Sydney Myer - in the kindergarten. That goes for the whole campaign. Mails, fresh as pie, just came out of the hat. That last mail at Gaza was an iron ration for the journey. But since an army, traditionally at any rate, marches not on its mails but on its stomach, we were issued with bully and water, three days rations apiece, before leaving Gaza.

Six hours to El Kantara, across the Arabian sands - most of the time in darkness, for we travelled black-out, ferried across the Suez Canal, 200 men to a punt. Re-entrained after breakfast - I wonder if anybody ever stops to think what organisation is necessary to produce snags and spuds for so many thousands at short notice, at a hole in the ground like El Kantara, a trumpery job in a War?

At El Kantara too we tasted our last sweet-water tea . . . the fact that it was to be our last was mercifully veiled from us. The Australian likes his tea sweet and often, he doesn't care whether he drinks it from a pannikin or the Presentation Silver Service, from a billy, a boot or a bottle and . . . but tea he wants and will have.

"While the Billy Boils" is the title of a volume of Henry Lawson, one of Australia's most loved writers and Australia's only folk song is about a jolly swagman who "sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled".

But that, in the Australian phrase, is "another cup of tea" Tea we had in the desert, but it was tea made with chlorinated water, which is to say the least of it, a horse of a different colour.

One day's rail Journey more took us to Mersa Martruh rail-head and set us down on our long ride over the rough desert roads in the 5-ton trucks of an English Motor Transport Company, whose personnel were to be our guides,

philosophers and good companions in the next few days.

Day after day of stifling heat, we bumped through the desolate waste to Derna . . . in the wake of the Air Force and the victorious 6th Australian Division.

Not a tree, not a blade of grass brightened the grisly aspect of the barren sand. The terrible toll exacted of the Italians by our Air Force, and the havoc wrought by our Infantry and Artillery was everywhere in view. In the three or four days journey to Derna we counted, to right and left of the road, 185 Caproni bombers burned on the ground - Heaven knows how many were out of sight - and hundreds of derelict trucks and tractors. The salvage corps had been busy and had collected Breda guns, howitzers, and 50-pounders which, along with aeroplanes and other equipment; we saw in concentration at intervals, awaiting, as we afterwards found, shipment to Greece to be used against the Germans. All this was heartening testimony to the utter rout of the Italians as indeed was the fact that during the whole journey right up to Benghasi we were never once attacked by enemy aircraft. Sidi Barrani, Sollum and Bardia, once typical Mediterranean towns of gleaming blue and gold, were mere amorphous mounds of broken concrete and rubble, with here and there a derelict truck or two. The only signs of life were the odd ownerless donkeys and camels at the trackside and now and then a handful of Arabs passing leisurely over the horizon.

So we rumbled on, twenty or so men to the truck, sweltering under our canvas cover, our packs piled in beside us and the canvas rear blinds drawn down as a screen against the persistently penetrating sand as successive sandstorms wrestled with us for the right-of-way.

(If Australian soldiers ever had grit at all, they had it now. There's one thing about desert warfare - it gives you sand).

Tobruk furnished scores of abandoned Italian trucks - 5 and 5 ton trucks, with Diesel engines, which when reconditioned by our troops, proved ideal for desert traffic. They were terrific in power and would plough through sand and rocks alike with enormous loads.

Acquisition of these treasures so freely laid out for us by the retreating enemy greatly relieved our own troubles as to mechanised transport during our sojourn in Tobruk. In addition to the vehicles we found abandoned still more guns and ammunition and more wrecked Italian bombers - as well as another precious piece of treasure trove . . . hundreds of drums of petrol and oil which the Italians in their desperation had so obligingly ditched but even more obligingly had strangely, not destroyed..

Thirty miles west of Tobruk at Gazala, the road offered further evidence of the havoc wrought by our Air Force and Navy . . . mile on mile of bomb holes and

shell holes. No time was being wasted in repairing the road. The labour units were hard at work - once again utilising materials left behind by the enemy. Gazala gave us a chance to stretch our legs and rid ourselves of that numbness due to long sitting . . . very brief experience of mechanised warfare is necessary to demonstrate that corns don't grow only on toes.

The Mediterranean blushed brown that day when hundreds of Aussies, naked and dirty, soaked for hours, removing the outer crust which represented the fruits of their African experience. It was like peeling pineapples.

The shaving process was more difficult - a single razor blade was utterly inadequate to the operation (a lawn mower would have been more appropriate) - but eventually this feat was achieved and we emerged satisfied we were a good-looking mob after all. A little laundry, also carried out with the assistance of Mare Nostrum, and Richard is himself again.

The Mediterranean promptly signified its disapproval by delivering up a mine, heaving it on the rocks. With the aid of a Bren gun we blew up the monster. The explosion was terrific.

On the two aerodromes at Gazala (one on each side of the main road) we found more bombers scattered over the drome, burnt to ashes, and thousands of bombs of all sizes, enough to topple the sky scrapers of New York, let alone to level Melbourne or Sydney. Stacked and camouflaged they were the answer to an engineer's prayer. These were used later for our own demolition work and made a sticky mess of many a gold medal stretch of Mussolini's road. It was at one of the dramas at Gazala I met the Tommy who thought War was fun.

"Heard the news, sir?" Answer - "No" Said the Tommy brightly.

"They have just captured 60 Itis and 60 camels . . . the camels put up a stubborn resistance."

On to Derna passing the dromes and a road house used as a petrol filling station, the usual square clean cut building painted white. On one of the outer walls a dilettante geographer in the A.I.F. had scored in black letters and figures about six feet high, "9,685 miles to Griffiths Brothers". On the other he had painted a hand holding a pot unmistakeably of Victoria Bitter Beer.

The midday halt for lunch provided a diversion typically Australian. In my company I had a leaven of lads who came from the country and who had all the Australian country boy's characteristics, including that love of a "few bob on", inherent in every man who knows horses. But don't run away with the idea that you need horses for a race meeting. The Italians had abandoned a

lot of tractors, all sizes - and three road rollers. It was the rollers that caught the eye of the troops. They were in good order and within a few minutes of bolting their bully and biscuit, the Aussies had all three ticking over.

The tractors were in it too. They all went to the starting line - followed by all the troops.

Don't run away with the idea that you need money for a race meeting, either. I.O.U's for anything from 5 mils to a sheep station changed hands - rupees, plasters, mils, any sort of souvenir disc was used for money.

**FOOTNOTE:** *The mileage of Griffiths Brothers Tea Warehouse near the Central Railway Station in Flinders Street, Melbourne, is the subject matter of an advertising poster long familiar throughout the Railway system of Victoria. Among Australians a wag is always sure of a "bite" if he questions the merit of Melbourne beer.*

"They're off!" Clouds of smoke and dust rise from the course. The "pip-pip-peeps" of the tractors leave the "whoof-whoof-whoofe" of the rollers at the start line. They hurtle past the first furlong post, the beetles still leading . . . one conks out (the Itis had not left enough petrol in its tank ... a punter who has done his last zack will take it out of their hides later).

More clouds of dust . . . they are turning into the straight. Three only are battling it out to the finish. The whoofs are just passing the first furlong post but the pips are steeds of mettle. It is all over.

"Pongo" (By "Dago" out of "Pong") wins from "Doo—Da" (by "Accident" out of "Derna") by three wheels and "Scratch-it" (by "Iti" out of "Petrol") is still back at the first furlong, in imminent danger of summary execution.

The first transport moves off. We follow in quick succession. The convoy is miles long. We travel 500 yards between trucks, every truck with a spotter standing on the running board. We are giving Jerry no chances. Dashing up and down the convoy, fast trucks, with machine guns mounted, protect us against air attack.

In a few miles the scene changes, the desert sands merging into a landscape of trees and bush, of golden wattles in bloom, of green gum trees and darker pines.

Perfume, I have read somewhere, is the most potent influence in rousing nostalgia, that longing for the hills of home which is perhaps the most softening influence in the soldier's admittedly hard life. But of all perfumes, the incense of the trees stirs the blood and sends the thoughts a-roving most

effectively .... You remember Kipling's "Scent of the Wattles at Lichtenberg, riding in the rain" in the South African war?

Those trees took us back, the Victorians to the Dandenongs and the forests of the Otways and Gippsland; the New South Wales men to their beloved Blue Mountains, but it wasn't the Dandenongs - it was Derna. We weren't a moment "off the track", even in memory.

At the edge of the escarpment we reach the Pass and Derna is now clear on the coast, and beautiful to see - her white houses framed in the trees.

We drop down hundreds of feet on a winding road, some of the hairpin bends so sharp that we had to back and fill round them.

Here we fill our tanks . . . the Australian Army Service Corps had its men on the job . . . as ever.

The A.A.S.C's contribution to these campaigns was beyond praise. It is to the "dogged-does-it-and-damn-the--danger" spirit of these men that an "inestimable proportion of the Australian achievement is due.

An army moves on its stomach . . . A gun's no good without shells. 'Plane, tank, transport unfuelled are useless.

The Army Service Corps is the answer. Its task is more than trebled both in difficulty and in danger in the war of movement and mechanisation. Speed and supply are at the back of everything, the two sure wings of victory. You may think you have been forgotten chaps, because your job is not so showy as that of the combatant units, but forget it. Every soldier knows you are worth your weight in gold and thanks you for a brilliant job bravely done.

One night's rest by the road, and our next objective is Barce, pretty as its pleasant sounding name. The road leading into the town takes us past the cage, with its hundreds of Italian prisoners . . . an interesting preview of the shape of things to come.

The country undergoes yet once more of a change. The soil is a deep chocolate, the trees richly green, the orchards fresh ploughed. Flowering trees are in bloom athwart green fields, in which are set the simple houses of the Libyan settlers. It was a sight for sore eyes.

A few miles along the road we breast the Tocra Pass.

.....

## Chapter 3

### Defence of TOCRA, TOLMETA

The 2/24th Battalion were proud of their first active service operation order. We were now at the end of our 950 miles journey by rail and road from Gaza to Tocra.

The C.O., Lieutenant Colonel Allan Spowers, D.S.O., M.C.Q was at Cairo on a Senior Officers Course.

B. Company therefore received its first operation order at the hands of Major Harry Tasker. The task was the defence of three passes - Tocra, Tolmeta, and a third five miles west of Tolmeta.

It was big and it was urgent.

It meant, in fact, working desperately day and night, for we had to deny the enemy those passes, should he counter-attack.

The passes, diverse in character, required defence works of different types. Take Tolmeta first. Having left the desolate waste of sand and rock, with the Fig Tree its one green thing, we are again in the land of trees, green fields and orchards, much like the kind of Australian country most familiar to us. This is the Libyan Settlement upon which the Italians have lavished hundreds of thousands of lire.

Tolmeta is on the Mediterranean coast, nothing more than a village with one or two solid buildings and a few ancient ruins. From the town, the escarpment lies about three miles inland. This country is quite flat save for a few dry creek beds running away from the escarpment to the sea. Completely under cultivation the landscape was good to look at — one great green field divided down the middle by a line of about thirty white houses, the homes of the Libyan settlers, all built alike and apparently out of the same mould.

The escarpment rises sheer out of the plain making it impossible in some places to scale on foot. After a series of deep wadis hundreds of feet deep, the escarpment settles down to a flat plateau, again a vista of green fields and orchards.

The passes became important because only by their aid could vehicles make the escarpment. The Tolmeta Pass is entered by an excellent road and the Italians knew how to build roads - with straight walls on either side rising hundreds of feet.

It was these walls that made the Pass comparatively easy to defend. From the walls of solid rock Lieut. Ken Payne and his men blasted out weapon pits and posts, cunningly concealing them in the bushes so that their existence could not be suspected from the road.

In several places the engineers prepared the road for demolition.

Moreover in large holes which they'd dug in the walls they planted bombs, kindly left for us by the Italians. Elsewhere in the wall orifices had been prepared for the "droppies". Molotov grenades were to be dropped on such

tanks and armoured cars as attempted the passage.

Finally a minefield had been laid at the entrance (More Iti mines . . . thanks, Mussol)

Altogether an engaging little death trap.

But the works of the pass five miles west of Tolmeta were perhaps more interesting. To begin with they entailed more physical labour than the defence of the other two put together. The faces of Lieut. Allan Macfarlane and his boys when I introduced the job to them were worthy of a Hollywood screen test. Nevertheless they hoed in like niggers and the finished job was a credit to them.

The mouth of the pass was about 500 yards wide and the walls were not so precipitous, so we had to build nine walls about 90 feet long, 8 feet high and some 6 feet thick, set jazz-fashion across the mouth to form tank obstacles. All the tons of stone put into that Job were carried by hand. Filling the gaps between these obstacles we planted a gorgeous mine field and between the trees and bushes we hung booby traps (materials all Iti brand). The weapon pits and posts were so sighted as to criss-cross the entire mouth of the pass with the fire of machine-gun and rifle, not forgetting our famous Anti-tank Rifle, the little spit-fire which the Iti detested, so deadly was its penetration of their light armoured stuff.

In this pass also the engineers prepared to blow the road if necessary.

The engineers, in fact, throughout spent enjoyable hours digging holes in the best part of the road, causing landslides, blowing up bridges, corking wells, and getting up to so much mischief.

You realised they had a Kink for putting a bend in everything that looked straight.

These tigers were worth their weight in gold.

When this job was finished I don't think there was a more dangerous place than that pass on the face of the earth. We didn't try it on the dog but a few donkeys strayed in one morning and did not stray out again.

The Tocra Pass was by far the prettiest of the three. On either side of the road, in Wadis and on the hills, the Italians had planted thousands of gums, wattles, pines and other trees, the varying green and gold of their foliage and the profuseness of their growth making a magnificent spectacle, which somehow, even in the desperate circumstances of war stirred the conscience that military necessity demanded its destruction . . . not that soldiers have much time on these occasions for philosophy. Certainly Lieutenant Dick Webster and his troops hadn't . . . Perhaps the world being what it is, it's just as well the latent savage in us all encourages a certain

satisfaction in smashing up our toys.

As in the other passes, the road was a pretty piece of engineering.

At the top of the pass stood a fort with the facade of a mediaeval castle which fitted appropriately, especially at first light and at sundown, into the dream setting of the forest. The fort, which the Italians used as an ammunition dump, was the highest point in the neighbourhood and presented a splendid vista across the three miles to Tocra town.

Tocra itself was just another Tolmeta - a few ancient ruins connected by a good road west with Benghasi. Tocra by the sea preserved throughout its atmosphere of the past. An old Turkish castle looked down on a rock bestrewn coast and its imposing gateway led to the Italian Headquarters in the town.

Dick Webster's team excelled themselves in the defence work of the Tocra pass. Again all the posts and pits were blasted out of the rock. All the blasted out stone was dropped into the wadis. Pure white, they would have been detected with ease from the air. The pits were covered with timber and tin lifted from the old Turkish castle in Tocra town and with two layers of sand bags; the lads then planted some of Musso's young trees, selecting those about three feet in height, on the "roof gardens" of the pits, leaving only a slit, out of which poked nasty looking guns and rifles. Altogether there were 8,000 sand bags used in the defence works in this single pass.

The Tommy Artillery worked with us here demonstrating a notable flair for concealing guns. These 25-pounders planted at Tocra Pass have a range of 13,000 yards; here they were set to hit their target at 800 yards. A tank struck at this range would have been tipped bodily into the Wadi off the road.

Mine fields were laid at the entrance and that lovely road, in seven places, was set for demolition. The main demolition was a hole dug in under the highway from a wadi in which 1 ¾ tons of Italian bombs and other explosives were set. About 50 bombs were placed on the road itself to make it a little more interesting. It was this demolition job that nearly put my lights out later in the story.

Day and night we worked on these defences and, when they were completed, day and night we patrolled them to keep the strays away.

Three questions you may be asking here . . . Why did we not chase the Italian right across to Tripoli while we had him on the run? Why these defences of the passes, seeing that the British troops had routed the Italian Army and sent what was left of it hurtling across to Tripoli? Why were the British troops forced to withdraw after General Wavell's brilliant push across the desert?

The original intention, according to an official statement later from British G.H.Q. Cairo had been not to advance further than Tobruk. For this reason it was pointed out the forward posts in Cyrenaica were very lightly held, and having fought across the desert some 600 miles through dust and sand our troops were not considered fit to continue another stretch of 300 miles to Tripoli. The men were tired, our tanks and motor transport were well overdue for overhaul and refit (we have to thank the Italians perhaps more than is realised for their failure to destroy their motor transport before abandoning it in early battles . . . this omission assisted us greatly in our transport problems on the run to Benghasi). Our communications moreover were being drawn out, supplies had to be brought forward, not across the desert but around the coast road. This in itself was a tremendous and a perilous task.

If we had had lots of tanks and guns and fresh troops to carry on from the day we took Benghasi, perhaps . . . but that is the same old story familiar to the sportsman. If you only knew the winning horse before the race was run. We did not have lots of tanks and guns and fresh troops, so that was that. The finishing post had to be Benghasi.

As far as the second question - Why these elaborate defences of the passes? It was only to be expected that sooner or later the Italians would counter attack and if and when they did it was not thought possible after the mauling they had had at the hands of the British troops that they would attack across the desert, but rather that they would use the coast road. Had they come this way, they could have been caught between the escarpment and the sea and cut to pieces by our artillery which was in position along the top of the escarpment. It was imperative therefore that the passes from Benghasi to Tolmeta be held to prevent the enemy from getting out of the trap.

Finally, why the withdrawal?

It was quite within reason not to expect a counter-attack for at least a month, seeing that the Italian army had suffered such heavy losses in men and material. Up to the capture of Benghasi the British had taken some 120,000 prisoners, including several generals, many tanks, hundreds of guns of all calibres, motor transport by the score and much other valuable equipment, and the Italian Air Force had been utterly destroyed.

The Italian army on the other side of the Mediterranean had broken down completely. They had at this time been driven back before the onslaught of the gallant Greeks. The pincer movement towards the Suez Canal which had been entrusted to Mussolini was being reversed on both sides of the Mediterranean simultaneously.

While obviously neither of two operations was proceeding according to plan news was flashed to Italy that the Fascist forces were being hurled back before the British troops in Abyssinia.

Still one more danger was staring the Italian High Command in the face. Would the Free French in Tunis seize this opportunity to move east towards Tripoli, cut off the retreating Italian army and so close up the North African campaign? In this eventuality the Axis plan for the control of the Mediterranean would have been sunk without a trace.

Meanwhile, back in Cyrenaica the 6th Australian Division had been withdrawn, the object of the move being to send it to Greece and replace it in Cyrenaica with the 9th Australian Division and English troops. This force was thought to be strong enough to hold the depleted Italian army at bay, while the British built up their armoured division, (which was holding our left flank) to enable us to punch on to Tripoli.

Here a new factor enters. Hitler, realising how abjectly Mussolini had failed in his contribution to the Axis plan, saw fit to come to the aid of his partner. He sent an army into North Africa - A mechanised army with scores of new tanks and armoured cars, with highly trained troops and with Air Force. It was that army which sent us on our way back to Tobruk and to the Egyptian border.

For the first time in this war the A.I.F. came up against German troops. The infantry had to face a highly armoured mechanised force with its own weapons.

For both sides time and material constituted the essence of the contract. General Rommel, the new German Commander, had the material and he made time so as to beat us to it. To speed up the supply of his men and material Rommel apparently used two routes . . . the Tripoli-Benghazi Road in the first place, and in the second through Italy and across Sicily, taking advantage of the short stretch of water between Sicily and Tunis, than hugging the African coast (avoiding the British Navy) and landing west of El Agheila in the Gulf of Sidra.

When Rommel did attack, with his combined army of Germans and Italians, under German Officers and N.C.O's, he copied General Wavell's tactics and advanced across the desert by both the southern route and the coastal road.

The game was up. Our disappointment after all our time and sweat on the defences of the passes may well be imagined. Not very patiently we had waited for the box-on to begin, all the time itching for the first tank to show up when a very chagrined Major Tasker came to me with the instruction to blow the passes and withdraw, not a shot had been fired. We had to stir the

stumps, however, because Jerry's southern column was moving much too fast for us and there was a chance of his cutting us off as we were moving along the northern road.

About midday the engineer, Jack Harrison, and I drove like Hell to Tolmeta, about 55 miles from Tocra, to order the withdrawal and blow up the pass. (What a mess we left that road in . . . a line of grisly, gaping holes) We turned our attention to the bomb filled fissures in the walls, and the side of a hill hundreds of feet high came hurtling down, blocking the road with hundreds of tons of rock and rubble. We wasted no time viewing the wreck, however, but sped to the next pass five miles away with our box of matches. We were well on our way from here to Tocra when seven violent explosions rocked the escarpment behind us. "There she goes again, Andy", said Jack, who was responsible for the fireworks. "Just as well there were seven, and not six . . . we would have had to go back and fire the seventh!"

We arrived at Tocra late in the afternoon to finish our work of destruction. I called the officers together and detailed the plan of our get-away . . . which was not so easy, for Jerry was right on our heels.

---

## **Chapter 4 “Benghasi Handicap”**

The first order I gave was that all troops were to leave their posts, and get clear of the main demolition because it was such a beauty we could take no risks. They were then to return and cover the withdrawal of the artillery. My troops were then to withdraw, one platoon at a time, in trucks, and join in the "Benghasi Handicap".

Jack Harrison and I decided to leave on the last truck to ensure that nobody was left behind and, on our way out, light all the remaining fireworks.

Captain Peter Gebhardt, my second in command, was busy behind the scenes arranging transport for the troops and stores.

Heaven only knows where he got the buses from . . . you don't ask questions in the army, especially at such a time. At any rate his miracle worked.

Everything went off like clockwork save for one little accident which nearly prevented me from joining in the Handicap at all.

In spite of my instruction to all troops to leave their pits and posts clear of the demolition, one platoon was not withdrawing quickly enough . . . it happened to be the platoon on the top of the hill of which part was to be blown up. I ran

down to the side of the road and called and signalled to them to get going. They were apparently not keen on leaving their well built home. Time waits for no man nor did the engineer. The next moment the gates of Hell opened. Barely 90 yards away, up went the ton-and-three-quarters of H.E., together with the fifty bombs, strewing the road in smithereens along the sky.

I was rocketed, I don't know how far, into the heavens and came to flat out in a depression, which apparently saved the day for me. The next moment, however, I might have been in a chaff-cutter. Splinters of steel from the bombs, rocks, road metal and fragments of trees were flying and falling everywhere. A rush of air filled with dust and sand followed, imposing for some time an eerie, uncanny blackout on the whole pass. All the stuff that went up had to come down again, and these moments were the most dangerous of all, for the depression which had saved me in the first place afforded no shelter from the earth's crust coming down in pieces. Fortunately, none of the heavy stuff had my name written on it. I picked myself up, a bit dazed, and my nose bleeding. When the dust had cleared away and I had to some extent regained my senses, I noticed about 20 yards to the left, on the other side of the road, to my surprise, that the side of the hill had slipped down on to the road. This was not by design but was satisfactory, as it made it a little more awkward for Jerry.

I am not quite clear how I finally emerged; it had been a close shave and maybe I was a trifle shaken.

As arranged, Jack and I left last, but we were a little more cautious in keeping away from each of the remaining demolitions. We had cleared the top of the Pass when the Castle, about 800 yards behind us, blew to pieces.

Night had fallen and the glow was like that of the setting sun.

Jack looked at me in amazement . . . "I did not prepare that for demolition", he said, "as there was so little explosive in the castle". Apparently the Italians had left a lot hidden in the ground the existence of which we knew nothing. "But how did it blow up?" we asked ourselves? An Artillery Officer told me a few days later that Jerry had shelled the pass from Tocra just after we had left it . . . he had detected the gun flash further round the escarpment. This solved the mystery. That was the second close shave that day!

Half way along the Tocra-Barce road we met the rest of the Battalion and all went on together.

Among the orders given for the withdrawal was one to "scorch the earth" . . . to make everything on the way back a military desert. We did it: Before or since I have never seen such destruction. That day all the wells from Benghasi to Tolmeta were destroyed and Benghasi, queen city of

Cyrenaica, with its stately buildings and lovely harbour, last resting place of a scuttled Italian destroyer, was left a smoking inferno whose glow that night could be seen from Tocra.

Bridges, culverts and dumps were blown up. Not a drum or tin was left unpunctured. Petrol and oil just ran into the ground. . . hundreds of gallons were poured away.

An engineer officer told me when we got to Tobruk that he had the job of destroying everything on the Benina Aerodrome outside Benghasi.

He sent up nearly 500 tons of bombs in one hit . . . Wouldn't that . . (to coin a phrase) . . wouldn't it rock you?

He told me too of the scores of Italian bombers which had already been destroyed on the ground by our Air Force.

We pass by Barce . . . the pretty little town is now a pretty little ruin. The water tank, which used to be a landmark, dominating its layout, is prone across the main street, blown remnants of the buildings scattered all over the main thoroughfare; the railway station and yards have been razed to the ground; the aerodrome has been made useless. The prisoner's cage has been thrown open and the Italians have been left to fend for themselves . . . a few more mouths for Jerry to feed.

The prisoners want to come with us but we are well aware that we will collect them again later and so are prepared to leave it to Jerry to find transport for them as far as Tobruk. They will be a burden to him, for we have their rifles and machine guns.

All round Barce and along the road, dumps are burning furiously . . . the engineers are carrying out their instructions to the letter.

So we went on with our withdrawal along the North Road, with Jerry on our tail all the time. The following afternoon we came to Wadi Cuf - like the Tocra pass, a poet's dream of delight . . . if there hadn't been a war on. The bridges along the highway had all been blown up by the Italians on initial retreat and could not be rebuilt. We had to make the best of our way along the dry wadi bed. Here we intended to make a stand, but Jerry was making too much headway on the South Road and we changed our plans. It was at Wadi Cuf that I met Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor, who had come to inspect the hurried defences, and for whom Destiny was planning a little surprise soon after.

Late the same night we received orders to be on our way again. If Wadi Cuf was a poet's dream, it was a soldier's nightmare.

I think the memory of that at least will remain for many a nightmare for years to come. Up till this the withdrawal had been orderly but now . . . It was about nine o'clock when we withdrew from the Wadi Cuf and embussed, our

destination being Derna and points east, and about this time the moon had set, and a flaming dust storm blew up, making it impossible to see a band's space ahead. Hundreds of motor transport, guns, hospital vans and everything else that went on wheels, all on the same road in a blackout, with fine sand viciously lashing in everyone's face . . . it was the Seven Plagues of Egypt magnified, speeded up and striking in the dark. It was to get worse before it got any better. Twice in succession we ran off the road, but nobody had a word out of place for the Tommy driver. Well enough we knew his difficulties. The moment we realised the situation, out leaped all those who had not already been thrown out, and with one heave-all-together got their "taxi" back on the road. Off we went again with only a few moments lost. We followed the tail of the bus in front for a few miles - then off goes the flaming chariot again! This time the problem was not easy of solution.- Tommy had been playing "follow my leader" with his mate in front too successfully. His leader ran off the road and Tommy, thinking his mate was making a corner, went in after him. Pandemonium reigned and the language in which Private Anybody, was now giving orders like General Somebody, was mixed and meaty. Two buses this time had to be extricated and everybody knew how and said how. "Go forward Tommy!" . . . "You silly b-----d" . . . "Put it in reverse!" . . . "Get the other one out first!" . . ."Keep your foot on the brake!" . . . the orders rang. Then suddenly - crash! The team in front had made other arrangements and had backed too far. So the picnic went on. It was so funny by now that we stopped the war, took time out for a good laugh and then decided to get the trucks out one by one.

A little more swearing and sweating, a little more heaving and hauling, and it was a case of "Off again, on again, gone again, Lonergan . . ." We were in the race once more.

When we came to Derna it was found impossible for the huge volume of traffic to go through the town. The road on the pass was perilously narrow and perilously steep. It needed only one bus to break down and the pass would have been irretrievably blocked. As it was, progress became wretchedly slow.

To make things a bit more exciting, some of Jerry's advance troops had already arrived at Derna, by way of the South Road.

It was here that all our troops who were on the North Road barely escaped being trapped. To avoid Derna we had to turn south for the desert, actually going through the advanced German troops.

Jerry showed us a point here which is amusing in retrospect but which

caused us some loss. In the height of the dust storm, our procession reached a crossroads. Dimly in the gloom we despaired a figure in a British uniform directing the traffic. All the material that Jerry wanted was directed up one road into the jaws of the lion and was captured with all its escort. This did not go on for long.

An artillery officer shot the "Tommy". He was a German soldier. It was during this confusion that General O'Connor, along with Lieutenant General Philip Neame, V.C., and Major General M. D. Gambier-Parry, fell into the hands of the enemy.

Their capture was described in the official statement from British G.H.Q., Cairo, as "sheer bad luck". General O'Connor and General Neame, according to the communiqué, after leaving Derna, found the road blocked at the adjacent village of Marwa and since progress was slow, made a detour in the desert, where they ran into a German motor cycle patrol. Major General Gambier-Parry was captured at Mekili.

Whether the bogus Tommy at the cross roads had anything to do with it I don't know . . . but imagine that the Corporal in charge of the patrol rolling home with two Generals . . . Drinks on Hitler for the Jerries on the motor bikes!

Nevertheless as the fog covered the withdrawal from Dunkirk, so the dust storm covered our withdrawal through the desert. Both were miracles. The drivers of those buses and of the other vehicles in that mad chariot race were wizards for guts. Many had not slept for days and had just not bothered about meals . . not that the Aussies let their drivers go hungry. They opened tins of bully beef and packets of biscuits . . went 50-50 with the contents of their water bottles and generally saw to it that the inner man wasn't left on the outer.

The run through the desert and the dark was just a shemozzle. At best we could not see ten feet in front for driving dust. We smashed our windscreens and took it in turns to ride on the radiator, calling to the driver when he was about to crash into the bus in front.

At this time we were about ten vehicles deep - guns, limbers, trucks, hospital vans, motor cycles, Bren carriers and anything else that could kick up a dust, just ploughing through French chalk. If any transport broke down with engine trouble there was no time for repairs.

The bus was pushed aside and burnt, the troops jumping on anything that could take them.

A Tommy driver told me at Gazala that that night at Derna he was in a convoy and closed on the transport in front of him to find to his amazement that it was loaded with Germans. He Just tooted his horn and flew past,

muttering under his breath the rudest he could muster, for want of more appropriate military action. Good War this . . . British, German and Italian troops all in the same convoy and all, apparently, headed the same way. You will understand why I called it a shemozzle.

"Hold everything, Tommy!" came a voice from the rear. "Your left rear tyre's flat!" - Slap goes the brake and the lad sitting on the radiator takes a dive into the French chalk. All out again and fifty put their heads and hands together to change the wheel . . not a very safe job, for vehicles are racing up behind, sighting us in the nick of time, swerving off, and missing us by inches. We couldn't jack her up so we all lifted the back of the bus and on went the spare. We scrambled back aboard, the engine raced, but-too late} another crash - the driver of a 25—pounder and limber veering off at too acute an angle, and we got the whole of his 25-pounder chucked at us.

'Where the devil do you think you're headin' you flamin'---- --" bellows Private Voice from the rear of the bus. The 25 pounder driver's attempt to reply is drowned in the chorus of endorsement evoked by Private Voice.

Then another voice is heard crying in the wilderness . . .

"I say theah - would you be good enough to remove that cannon from beneath our Rolls Royce?"

However a little patience, more grunts and all vehicles are on wheels again. Goodbye Tommy, see you in Cairo! "

Eventually we made the main road again and linked up with the troops who had gone through Derna. Dawn broke and we pushed on to Gazala where we pulled off the road and took up a defensive position between the road and the sea. We did not dig in but took cover within rough stone enclosures.

It was here that we saw the German air force for the first time.

This was our first experience of a Jerry strafing (a "ground strafe" - with machine guns). As it happened to be actually my own baptism of fire, I suppose it is the more vivid in my memory. The Australian is a cheerful cuss with an ardent desire to stay living, but at any rate on, rather than under, the surface. I don't know however we got that nickname "Diggers". Though Australians are descendants of a race of gold winners and miners generally – witnesses the gold rushes of the last century in New South Wales, Victoria and West Australia, and more recently the opening up of the New Guinea field, witness the families who, generation after generation, toil in the coalfields of Newcastle and South Coast of New South Wales (spurring better wages and conditions elsewhere in industry); and the whole community that lives underground on the opal fields of Goober Pedy — as soldiers, even those who took to the rifle and bayonet like

a baby to a rattle, they one and all had a singular distaste for the pick and shovel . . . for a while.

Within half an hour of the first pop of an airborne machine Gun in that strafe by the Derna road, every man-jack was underground.

When it began I was in the open, but I went to ground like a windfall in autumn, but not in any direction could I see signs of a depression which would afford any sort of cover. A stone just ahead looked promising . . . I got my head down and dodging, north, south, east and west, as the bullets flew, made what use of it I could.. Cover has a good psychological effect, even though in these strafes you always get the idea the enemy is gunning for you personally, just making a target of you . . . when the strafe was over, I rose and gave myself a good laugh. My Rock of Gibraltar was a pimple a few inches above the ground and wouldn't have sheltered a gecko.

Eager to emulate their comrades of the 6th Division, the 9th Division knew bitterness in their hearts that their first contact with the enemy had developed into a series of hasty retreats, with little opportunity of inflicting losses on the enemy or delaying his advance. But the truth was that the 9th Division had performed a remarkable feat in extricating itself from a precarious position and withdrawing a distance of 270 miles.

It was the first time Australian troops had ever fought a withdrawing action over extended territory.

.....

## **Chapter 5 “THE BATTALIONS FIRST CASUALTIES”**

It was late the same evening we pushed on to Tobruk and found ourselves inside the perimeter defences. (On the upward trip when we came to Tobruk I had said to my batman, Arthur Barnes, "I wish I could get a snapshot of this place, we may never see it again". . . Never see it again!)

That was two days before Easter (and what an Easter). Hitler was telling the world that his troops would be in Tobruk within three days; about midday on Easter Thursday I was ordered to move "B" Company up the Derna Road and to take up a position as near as possible to the tank ditch. It was thought the Germans might attempt to break through at this point.

It was a pretty sight to see B. Company go out extended on either side of the

Derna Road, in perfect trim and in perfect line. Only one thing was missing the band.

Jerry supplied a substitute; when we were within about 800 yards of our mark. Jerry opened up with the music of a six gun battery. We carried on for another 100 yards through a hail of shells. By that time it was too hot. I waved the troops to the ground. That, by the way, was as flat as a board offering absolutely no cover.

Hour after hour Jerry shelled us. The shells were coming over with the rapidity and regularity of a typist's rat-tat-tat in a speed test. Only two hundred yards in front of us, I could see machine gun bullets churning up the earth. There must have been by now at least ten guns on the job . . . their roar was like that of an organ with all the bass notes full out.

Occasionally Jerry would send over some of his 5-inch mortars, the most deadly weapon he had. Away to our right a Tommy 25-pounder battery was in action . . . I was presented with a ghastly sight. A Jerry 5-inch mortar battery had found its mark and I saw two of the four guns blown out of the ground with their crews and their ammunition.

Why, one asks, couldn't the artillery have engaged the mortar battery? The 25—pounders have a long range and the trajectory is very flat, whereas the mortar is fired at a short range but has an extremely high trajectory which enables the battery to come into action from a wadi or a depression out of sight of the artillery and it was my experience that they could be located only with the greatest difficulty.

For seven hours we lay nose down, helpless, with Jerry's shells and mortar bombs dropping all about us. I expected the casualties to be many, but by the mercy of Providence, they numbered only one killed, four wounded and one poor lad who went out of his mind.

These were the first casualties for the Battalion.

The wings of God were certainly spread over us during those seven hours of Hell.

Later that evening we went forward and occupied the perimeter posts astride the Derna Road. At the same time the remaining three companies of the battalion occupied the posts from the Derna Road to the sea - B. Company commanded by Captain Arthur Bird, C. Company by Captain Frank Budge and A. Company by Major Len Fell.

About now, by the way, I had just met Captain Jack Kelly, a Tommy Artillery Officer (RHA), whose battery was to work in my sector. He was a quiet spoken fellow, a sound sport, full of good humour and knew his job backwards (as most of the Tommy regulars did.) He came to my Headquarters, introduced himself and shared bully and biscuits with me. We

went forward to his O.P. and from then on we spent most of our time together there, sharing many and various adventures.

On Good Friday we experienced our first attack on the perimeter defences. B. Company copped it again. This first attack of Jerry's was daring to the limit. He came up the Derna Road in nine trucks. When these trucks had approached within a few yards of the tank ditch, they all turned about exposing the backs of the trucks and a heavy machine gun mounted on every truck to cover the troops while they got into the tank ditch. Up till this moment my chaps had refrained from opening fire — with justification, because Jerry was craftily using trucks which he had captured from us two days before and we naturally thought that the trucks might have been carrying some of our own troops who were running a little late in the withdrawal. But when the first shots were fired from the trucks and the enemy attempted to unload, we let him have the lot . . . we chucked everything but the Harbour at him.

Jack Kelly was not going to be out of this. He called back to his battery on the field telephone and a few seconds later we heard the welcome whine of the 25-pounder shells. Within a few minutes we had thoroughly broken up the attacking force and sent what was left hurtling back to the place it had come from. The trucks which were off the road were being pulled back in a hail of machine gun, rifle and shell fire. Nearly all their tyres were flat, nearly all the canvas tops ripped off! Jack got a direct hit on one truck and I will leave you to picture for yourselves what happened.

Some days later, from a diary we took off a German Officer, we learnt that the Germans had firstly underestimated our strength.

Moreover, it appeared they thought that we were utterly disorganised from the withdrawal and would not be prepared to withstand an attack.

The German diary also set upon record that their reception at our hands was "Hell let loose". From what I saw I can believe it.

The casualties on the German side were very heavy.

For days after that, the Axis troops tried to dislodge us with artillery and mortar fire. He chucked what must have been thousands of shells at us without causing a single casualty. These posts, so generously left to us unimpaired by the Italians, were mostly solid concrete.

Post 19 in the perimeter defences . . . the Rock of Gibraltar to the boys of B. Company . . . was one of the most interesting.

Situated on the Derna Road on an outstanding corner of the escarpment, overlooking the Wadi Es Sahel, were three posts having one common entrance. Atop of the escarpment a circular concrete weapon pit had, been sunk five feet; in its centre was a column upon which a machine gun had been mounted. From the wall of the pit a doorway gave into the post. Fifty

feet down a concrete tube three feet wide, by way of an iron ladder, brought you to a point where at three passage ways lead out about 100 feet to the crust of the rock where the three-posts were situated. These passages were concrete lined and wide enough to allow men to sleep to one side without impeding the progress of others to and fro. A small room was situated half way down each passage.

These were elegant rat holes indeed. Set in the ceiling at vantage points were electric lights. These were not in order when we took over the post, but the Aussies soon proved they knew more than their geography. They raided by night derelict Italian trucks, the batteries of which were pressed into the service of an emergency electricity supply department . . . and as the Bible puts it – there was Light: Alcoves let in the walls were excellent for "boiling the billy". The lads improvised cooking stoves for this essential service by three-parts filling a jam tin with sand and tipping a cupful of petrol in the sand. This would burn for about half an hour – long enough anyhow to boil a billy. This was not, of course, the only hot tea provided. Every night hot tea and enough "stew" was brought up in hot boxes for two meals . . . the evening meal and breakfast. It sounds easy "bringing up the stew", but it was no mean feat. The truck drivers often had to plough through French chalk and rocks in a blackout with shells dropping in their path, but the Digger must have his stew and the Digger always got his stew . . . thanks to the truck drivers.

The posts at the terminals of the passage had been shrewdly constructed. Every post was about eight feet square and seven feet high. The rock face at the end of every passage had apparently been cut out and, after the post had been built, set back again in the concrete, leaving only a slit six feet long and nine inches high and providing most effective camouflage. These three posts were well placed so that every post covered two others and jointly, the three covered a wide frontage with machine gun fire.

It was in these posts that I found small niches let into the walls, each housing three white flags on wooden rollers, for "honourable surrender".

Post 19 was typical of many such posts of the perimeter system, the whole comprising an engineering feat involving an enormous expenditure in time and treasure, as well as in patience and endurance. . . an expenditure entirely lost to the Italian people, as indeed has the expenditure of blood and sweat upon its defence been lost in vein.

The day after the attack Jack Kelly came to my Headquarters. . . a diminutive concrete room with walls about 18 inches thick; and a roof of thin asbestos. His greeting, which came to be a habit, was "Good day, Andy".

"On for some big gene hunting today?" And up we went to our Observation Post to search Jerry's lines with our field glasses. Jack, like many others of us, enjoyed seeing an ammo dump or a supply wagon go flying-up to Jupiter. Henceforth we made it a practice to compare the panorama every morning with our sketch.

This sketch was about 2 feet long and 12 inches wide and comprised everything we could see before us, with the range marked in every case. In other words it was just a big range card but it proved later to be invaluable.

One morning I noticed that one of the derelict trucks in a group away to our right, had undergone a change overnight. Jack smelt a rat.

He called back to his battery for one gun only. The third shot hit it fair in the centre and up it went. Jerry's little trick did not come off. It was a supply truck full of ammo.

We had a good fireworks display for the next two hours . . . it finished up a heap of ashes.

The same day Jack scored another hit . . . it was that flaming 5-inch mortar which had given us so much trouble. He used two guns to get it and lifted mortar, ammo and crew, clean out of their hide-out. A shell landed amongst the mortar shells and up went the whole box and dice.

One morning when we had searched our panorama and found all in order I rang Frank Budge and asked him if he could see anything that we couldn't. He dug up a target in a Wadi - about six trucks which had come up overnight together with about 50 troops. He remained on the phone and did the spotting. "Up 600" came over from Frank, as the first shell landed. "Down 50" for the second.... "Got it" for the third - Jack Kelly didn't waste time. Three rounds of gun fire and trucks and personnel were no more.

On another occasion Arthur Bird found a target and phoned through. He gave us a description, for, situated as he was, he could descry detail in what to us was just a faint line . . . the sand looked alike everywhere. Sure enough there were 6 machine guns which had been brought up under cover of darkness. Arthur did the spotting and I passed it on to Jack. He used four guns. We thought the first shots, which landed about 200 yards behind the target, had found the mark first pop, but Arthur made a correction before Hitler lost six perfectly good guns and their gun crews.

The Royal Horse Artillery, you may gather from this, has my admiration. At sundown on about the fourth night we had a nasty shock.

Captain Jack Brock, our Adjutant (and a damned able Adjutant too), rang to say that Jerry had broken through on our left flank with tanks and all opposite our sister Battalion, the 2/48th from South Australia; and that the 2/23rd Battalion (another sister, which formed the 26th Brigade) was coming up to

counter attack if necessary.

I didn't let any grass grow under my feet (not that it would in Tobruk, anyhow), but sent a section away to the left, equipped with anti-tank rifles, Bren guns and rifles, to make doubly sure. It was just as well for, sure enough, about 20 Italians and Germans had got through the wire, crept along the wadi and crawling up to the escarpment, were mounting machine guns when my chaps spotted them. The Australians made short work of them. . .

The attack was eventually broken up by the Artillery and the 2/48th Battalion. The enemy withdrew leaving dead all over the escarpment.

Early next morning, Roy McKenzie, dashing Company Sergeant Major of B. Company, took a small party up the wadi and brought in 19 prisoners - the first captured by the battalion. Mac made a picture arriving home with his catch - smiling from ear to ear in spite of the shells dropping everywhere. (Jerry always shelled his own troops when they were captured . . . the dirty dog!)

Later on in the morning I took a stroll over the escarpment to see if possible where Jerry had broken through the wire, and to my amazement I came across eight Italians hidden in a bit of a depression. Here was I with only a pistol and six rounds in the chamber, against eight Itis with two Breda machine guns. I had the advantage that they could not see me so I took a risk . . . one shot over the top and up went their hands to Heaven.

I could not speak any Iti but with a certain amount of gesticulation and a few words of abjuration which seem to sound the same in any language, I persuaded them to stand away from their guns while I cleared them. The Itis were quite willing to come with me - even offered to carry their guns - so off we went.

Jack Kelly rocked laughing when I arrived back with my bit of the Italian Army, but when I took him up and showed him where I got them he was rocked in a different way. It was only about 20 yards from his O.P. - A matter of a few boulders divided them.

A couple of days later Major Len Fell was on the phone ... "I say, Andy, I can see troop movement in all five wadis in front of you . . so watch your step!" I at once consulted my big game hunter. He volunteered to clear the wadis for me. Up we went to the O.P. and I called all three on the phone - Frank Budge, Arthur Bird and Len Fell and asked them to do a bit more spotting. Jack called another battery into this strafe and away he went, Frank, Arthur and Len all calling up or down, left or right.

Jack was cunning. He took the farthest target first and worked towards us so that there was no chance of any getting away.

The box-on lasted all the morning and about midday a dust storm blew up ...

right into our hands . . now was the time for a raid to finish the job. We raided the first wadi and the lads brought back 15 Itis; the second wadi, strangely enough, also yielded 13, the third 21 and the fourth a good bag of 11 officers and 75 other ranks. Six of these officers were German. I think we must have disturbed a little conference, catching all the officers together. During these raids the lads brought back many Breda guns which were put into use straight away, for we had tens of thousands of rounds of ammo which the Italians left behind on their last trip.

The captured Italian machine guns added considerably to our fire power. The men of the raiding parties always returned looking like Ned Kelly and his gang, every man jack of them brandishing a "borrowed" pistol. The German officers showed signs of being most annoyed at being captured, but the Italians came through the wire arm in arm.

Farewell to arms and hearty greetings to a good feed.

In searching the officers I found maps perfectly marked with coloured pencils showing the disposition of the Axis troops outside the perimeter . . . these were a treasure trove indeed and back they went at once to Division Headquarters. All letters and other papers were bagged and sent back to be given the once over. Much information was picked up by us in this way. Often, in fact, an impending attack was broken up before the enemy had a chance to launch it.

When we had searched our prisoners and taken all from them that was dangerous, we packed them into trucks bound for the cage, and it was here that we saw how the Iti and German hated each other.

The Germans went so far as to refuse to travel with the Itis, but the Australian stands no nonsense. The recalcitrant Germans were ushered into the trucks with a little "pressure".

We had much evidence from time to time of friction between the German and Italian troops. It was understandable. Italians, impelled into the war by compulsion and placed under German officers and N.C.O's can scarcely be blamed for bitterness towards their arrogant masters. On the other hand the Germans' contempt for the Italians was not unreasonable in the light of their military, naval and air failures, and the knowledge that at the first opportunity they would surrender.

On one occasion the British troops in the perimeter defences saw a strange thing happen. Two bodies of troops were approaching as if to attack, but before they had come within the range of our machine guns, a scrap took place between them. They retired in disorder leaving many dead. The Italians had, in fact, turned on the Germans who were coming on behind them. As a matter of fact I think Musso himself would cut Hitler's throat, if he had the

chance.

Many diaries collected from time to time from German officers recorded their dislike of their Axis friends. One officer, in a ball-to-ball description of his trip from Tripoli, wrote "Today we open stores and rations. In a number of cases opened, the first layer is tinned meat, the second, third and fourth, either tinned stones, sand or shavings . . . Does this not spell-Italian corruption?"

---

## **Chapter 6 “PATROLS and RAIDS”**

On our part, day and night patrols and raids on the enemy were intensified. In the raids our troops inflicted many casualties and reconnoitring patrols gained much valuable information.

One night I took a party out on a raid, everyman of which had tied sand bags round his feet to deaden the rattle against stones. We carried Bren guns strapped so that they could be fired from the hip if necessary, rifles, and an ample supply of our old stand-by the hand grenades; Jack Kelly standing by with his 25-pounders, lest we got into trouble.

The object was to carry out the raid without firing a shot. .. We went out about a mile and a half up the Derna Road into a wadi where we knew there were some anti-tank guns. If we could not bring the guns back I was to remove the breach blocks and sights. I practised during the day and became quite expert at this job.

At the appointed time we came up the Derna Road from a rear position. Our friend the dust was blowing and three of our trucks ran off the road into the ditch. We had great fun getting them back again. In spite of the time lost in this diversion we passed through the wire on time. We brought our trucks up as close as we dared to the wire and away we went on mischief bent.

Arriving in the wadi which was about 400 yards long, I cut all the telephone wires connecting the German O.P's with their rear positions . . . in some cases twisted them together. (I'll bet his communications were a trifle upset that night). We got so close to the Jerries and Itis that we could hear them talking. We reached the spot we sought only to find that the guns had already been removed . . . War's like that! We were flaming mad at that but war, like everything in life, has its compensations. We turned our attention to 22 trucks upon which we found a complete set of Italian military text-books, many maps and other valuable books. We noted the position of the trucks and the

following morning, again with Frank Budge and Arthur Bird observing, Jack Kelly proceeded to blow them to pieces. A few thousand pounds went up in smoke . . . military trucks which Jerry could ill afford to lose, together with the ammo they were carrying.

One incident was funny. We had eleven minutes left before the covering troops were to withdraw without further orders. The lads discovered on the trucks a great deal of Italian clothing, brand new. I told them to go to it, seeing that they had lost everything but what they were standing in, during the withdrawal . . . Go to it they did: When they emerged they were carrying shirts, underclothing, pyjamas, belts, shorts and the inevitable outsize tins of Iti talc powder. The raiding party returned through the wire with enough stuff to start a jumble sale. The big laugh was on the boys however when they got into the light of their dugouts, to find that their pyjamas were red, their shirts green. - One lad had souvenired a black dressing gown embroidered in as many colours as Joseph's celebrated coat.

"Wacko, Digger, think you're going straight to Cairo on leave?" and "Lend us your shirt for the seventeenth of Ireland, mate!" and "Oh, Grandmama, is my face red, or is it your pyjamas?"...were among the bright cracks . . . but the troops took them . . . and the loot. Talc as flavouring for drinking water however proved a thundering frost.

It always amazed me how Jerry was prepared to use his artillery on one man targets, knowing how hard it was to replace his ammo. On one occasion I was walking between two posts when he opened up, dropping them mighty close. He must have lost ten or twelve shells trying to get me.

One day things were rather quiet and the lads became a bit restless. One of them decided to get a small car going which was abandoned near his post. It was only about three kero tins long, had perhaps been used by an Iti General to do "grand rounds". The Digger eventually got the baby moving, blowing out great clouds of smoke and crackling like a bush fire . . . and off he went round and round the posts. Jerry, however, chose to upset the little game. He opened up with his artillery, perhaps in the mistaken conviction that his target was an armoured fighting vehicle.

The lad leaped from his fiery chariot, leaving it still on the move, to make its own arrangements about Jerry's shells and its own ultimate destination. He made the home base un-hit ... it was a typical Aussie prank . . . all gun and no fun makes Jack a dull boy.

Hardly a day passed without our being shelled by Jerry's artillery. The shelling became more intense as time went on. One morning he picked out two targets . . . the first was my Company Headquarters near the Derna Road, the second the \_O.P. in which Jack. and I spent so much time.

My Headquarters was a small pumping station, a concrete room about twelve feet square with the flimsiest possible roof. The shells were coming over the top, missing the roof by about six feet.

Fortunately the escarpment in front of us prevented Jerry from lowering his range any further. There was a few minutes break . . . from experience we all knew what that meant . . alteration of range or change of target. Over they came again. This time around the two sides. The shells passed so close to us that we could have put our hands out and touched them as they passed, every one of them causing a rush of air. The shells hit the ground and burst only 20 to 50 yards away. We all thought this was the finish but although he shelled for nearly an hour he didn't get us.

Jack happened to be with me at my Headquarters while this was going on. His language, for an English officer and a gentleman, was far from choice. Nor did it improve as the shells dropped closer.

It needed only one to hit that inadequate roof and you know the rest. . . Dust to dust, ashes to ashes .. plenty of dust there already, we supplied the ashes. Jerry next turned his attention to the O.P. The two lads attending to the phone in the O.P. who had had a dress circle view of the shelling of my Headquarters came rocketing in, their faces as white as sheets. They certainly had had some near misses.

A few minutes told the story. One perfectly good O.P. went to blazes. This made Jack ramping mad . . he had lost his phone, his field glasses and his tucker for the day; when I reminded him that he was lucky that he had not been in it when the shell hit it that did the trick, he cooled down. We found him some tucker, lent him my glasses and another phone was sent up to him, and everything in the garden was bonzer once again.

From these two efforts it became obvious that Jerry had shifted his own O.P. well forward. Besides, we were being machine gunned all day from a well concealed machine gun post. Next morning before dawn we took a small party up a pipeline which gave us just enough cover. Jack had his phone with him connected to his battery and the fun started. We discovered both the O.P. and the machine gun post. Jack got the machine gun on about the fifth shot with his 25 pounders and we got the O.P. It was in an enclosure built up with stones. The anti-tank rifle did the trick . . it looked funny! As each stone was removed from the enclosure, a hand would issue from within and replace it, but the anti-tank rifle could be reloaded more quickly than the stones could be replaced, so it wasn't long before the game was up. Nine Germans made a dash for it but our Bren gun was the deciding factor. None got away.

About ten o'clock the same morning we again had a rude awakening. The same two targets were picked again but this time with the dreaded five inch mortar, the most filthy of all Jerry's weapons. He gave us blazes for an hour, but Jack, from the same position in the pipeline, scored a direct hit on the mortar. There was a terrific explosion when one of his 25-pcunder shells blew up the mortar bombs. Once again you understand why I say the Royal Horse Artillery were brilliant, and why Jerry said they were deadly.

Artillery duels went on for days, each side trying to get the other's O.P's. But Jerry came off the worse each time. Our our chaps were too good for him.

Up till now the prisoners we had taken were the results of a little stoush, but now Musso turned on a show, free tickets and all.

I was attracted by calls "Come on, you beauties" and others in similar terms from the forward posts and went up to behold coming down the centre of the Derna Road an Iti carrying a white flag. It looked like half a sheet and following him were 24 of his cobbers.

They had had enough of it. Their clothes were torn and shabby and their boots, if laced at all, laced with string or wire.

Their frames were emaciated, their faces drawn and their first cry was for water. They were the enemy, true enough, but to see those poor devils getting into the water when we filled their water bottles fairly turned our stomachs over. It was a pitiful sight.

When the trucks left for the cage Jerry gave them the usual send off by shelling them, but our drivers knew their job. They got the Itis away.

It appears that these 25 were all that were left of a Battalion; two days before their unit had attacked the perimeter posts on our left flank and had been caught by our machine guns and artillery and cut to pieces.

Jack and I had seen this scrap take place from air O.P. Several batteries engaged the enemy, they put a box barrage around them and few indeed got away. There was also a German Battalion in this show and, judging from the dead left on the battle field, their casualties were just as heavy.

One thing I have never been able to understand. Jerry was well trained, his equipment excellent, he was full of cunning, but he attacked in mobs, like sheep . . . the same reports came from our lads who fought in Greece . . so different from the Australians who go forward in deployed formations. The practice cost Jerry many hundreds of needless casualties.

.....

## "JERRY TAKES IT SERIOUSLY"

One day in particular Jerry gave us a hammering with his Artillery . . . working up and down the whole Battalion from the Derna Road to the sea.

Jack was furious this day. He couldn't locate the Battery until about midday; then suddenly came the comforting whine of our 25 pounder shells overhead ... with love and H.E. to Jerry. They must have dropped pretty close to him for Jerry closed, down for a few hours, and gave us a turn. Late in the afternoon he started up again all round B. Company Headquarters. He was determined sooner or later to get our little roost. Major Harry Tasker and Major Bill Turner had chosen this moment to pay a call on us. They got within 500 yards of my Headquarters and decided to play rabbits instead and took cover in holes in the escarpment. How they got out of it I don't know. The shells were dropping thick and fast all round them. Eventually they made a sprint for it, during one of those little pauses well known to us, when Jerry changes his range.

They almost fell in the door looking like a pair of chewed bootlaces.

I'll bet Harry and Bill hold the world record for 500 yards. They stayed to dinner ... bully and biscuits . . and left when Jerry had finished his fireworks. Late the same afternoon one of our fighters got his mark and down came a bomber, fully loaded, a few hundred yards behind us. It dropped like a piece of lead and blew up in its own bombs.

The pilot bailed out but his parachute failed to open ... the rest of the crew were incinerated.

About this time we were relieved and went back for a rest.

I said Cheerio to Kelly . . and I never saw him again. Did I say rest? It was just dig . . dig . . dig . . You remember the man who couldn't call a spade a spade because he knew after all it was just a bloody shovel? He was an Aussie.

Glorious weather too. Hot as hell and the French chalk was blowing . Our sector had been taken over by another Battalion, along with the Indian troops. Only two days passed before Jerry remembered the old Company Headquarters . . this time he visited it with his dive bombers and made a decent mess of it - persistent brute.

A section of about eight men - was going forward to the attack when a thousand pound bomb landed not ten yards ahead and buried its nose in the sand, its tail pointing heavenwards. It did not explode.

Six of the section carried on but two took the knock.. No flying stones or debris had struck them; they were stunned by nothing but shock . They were up and going again in a few minutes.

A shell landed only a few yards in front of two lads in a small trench, spun along the ground like a catherine wheel and finished up in the trench between them. One lad shot out tout-de-suite leaving his mate to welcome the guest ... they lay in beauty side by side, each dead to the world, a perfect picture of still life. The lad recovered to thank his lucky star.

I was censoring the boy's letters for home a few days after.

The whole lot of them had written the story to Dear Mum and My Darling Clara . . they had all been in the same trench, they had been the lucky one who got out tout-de-suite . . . Sleeping Beauty didn't write home at all. As for the bomb, it was just as well it did not explode. . . I'm sure it would have wiped out a Battalion and a half.

Some got the bomb story mixed up with the shell story, but all the versions made interesting reading. Of course when there's anything doing the boys all want to be in it . . Bless their hearts .

The censoring of many letters on the same subject furnishes an interesting study in human psychology - and in human powers of observation and description, not to say sheer mendacity.

I can remember on the way over from Australia to the Middle East, for instance, a super fish story by the boys. You can imagine how difficult it is to write a letter after reading down the list of - "Thou shalt nots" of the Chief Censor . . on this occasion everybody decided to tell Mum and Clara about the flying fish they saw in the Indian Ocean. This at least would pass the Censor without interference. The flying fish were indeed fascinating . . nine inches, of gleaming silver, they leapt twenty or thirty at a time out of the water, flew some fifty yards and then dived in again, a silver shower into the blue.

But the lads had different ideas about the fish. Their length varied from nine inches to five feet and they flew all over the ocean in schools of anything up to a thousand. They were all the colours of the rainbow. Their speed was terrific . . and you should see the ones that got away.

Gulliver, Baron Manchausen, and de Rougemont were suckers to the Aussies.

Bless their hearts again!

Censoring letters at Gaza I noticed another curious incidence of resourcefulness on the part of the Digger. Quite a number of the letters describing the sights of Tel Aviv and the Holy Land in general, appeared even at first reading to bear a curious family resemblance. Checking up I discovered that the source of the information was a well known Guide Book whose passages and pearls of wit and wisdom were poured out profusely in the letters of Australian soldiers, who alas had probably never seen the

splendours they described with such literary flourish but, having carried out a little rough copying, had spent their leave, I fear, soaking in something other than the glories of nature and of Middle Eastern architecture.

What the result of the exchange of quotations on the part of the Mums and Dear Claras of many Diggers from neighbouring homes brought forth I hesitate to conjecture... . but there, there. . . great minds think alike and even Shakespeare owed a lot to "available sources of information"

I wonder if Mum and Clara stopped to reckon the mileage covered in a tour involving Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Galilee, the Dead Sea and the Mount of Olives - particularly a tour resulting in the inclusion of so much detailed and picturesque information ; a fair step for one day even for a Digger brought up on route marching and iron rations . . phenomenal mileage to the gallon, in fact. It is fortunate the seal of the censorship is as sacred as the seal of the confessional, or perhaps even this story of mine, would not pass the censor.

I met Indian troops from time to time . . some from labour units, some from fighting units. The labour units were by far the hardest working troops I had seen, brown from their native sun, solid from the necessities of their daily life. Hard work was their way of living. Tank ditches, tank obstacles, field works that made the defences of Tobruk impregnable - all these were due to the indefatigable labours of the Indians.

Camouflage was a long suit of the Indians. I watched them at work. They rigged up two platforms and a truck was driven between.

Several were ready with paint and brush, each with a set design, and the truck was painted all over front to rear. The finished job the driver took away might be something like a pine tree or a close resemblance of good old mother earth.

The Indians were responsible for most of the camouflage nets which were used pretty extensively to cover gun positions, machine gun nests and divers other things which we did not want the Jerry pilot to see. Even our tin hats had a splash of paint and a dash of sand, without camouflage on a moonlight night they were as easy to pick as a mushroom on a lawn.

I remember one excellent piece of camouflage Jerry had just been over, had bombed his target, missed it . . these chaps were called to make the target appear to have been destroyed. What a job they made of it . . piling stones around the walls, painting portions black, they encouraged the Jerry pilot to report with the joyful story that the target had been demolished. It was intact and it remained so for weeks. Things, as W. S. Gilbert remarked, aren't always what they seem . . skim milk masquerades as cream . . The Indian fighting troops ranked with the best in the world. At night patrolling and

raiding they are past masters . . the Indian is a born hunter. Both the Germans and the Italians feared the Indian troops and their fighting qualities. Most of their raids and patrols were carried out with as few as two or three men and they caused terrific havoc among Axis troops, to return under a hail of shells laughing over a job well done. They made it so hot forward of their lines that the enemy was compelled to patrol every sector with armoured fighting vehicles.

The Indians carried on, armoured fighting vehicles notwithstanding.

The Indian fighting patrols certainly looked very dangerous.

The leader usually carried as many Mills grenades as he could in a haversack round his neck. Others in the patrol also sported the little pineapple bombs. But it was the little dicky-knife the enemy most feared. Three, four, five or six Indians would attack as many as thirty or forty, causing terrific havoc and returning with few casualties. Once they had drawn the knife they were prepared to chase their opponent hundreds of yards rather than return without a kill.

Their officers were mostly British soldiers who had lived many years in India. Full of good humour, they knew their job and they had lion hearts.

The Indians gave Jerry a lot to think about during their stay in this part of the perimeter . . They were as game as Ned Kelly.

One young officer told me how one night he took a truck load of troops through the wire. They were armed with rifles, Bren guns, grenades . . and knives . . they made straight for a wadi in which they had observed about 50 troops late that afternoon...it was say 1,500 yards away. The driver however, took his bus not only into the wadi, but right into the bunched-up troops. Thinking the truck was one of their own the enemy made no attempt at defence . . the next moment told the whole story. Grenades were flying everywhere, thrown by the Indians before they scrambled off the bus. There was a mighty scatter. The troops proved to be Italians and Italians don't like the Mills grenade. The Brens took up the tale then, and after that the knife. The getting back was not so easy. Jerry loves his fireworks and he certainly puts on a good show when he likes. Parachute flares lit up the sector. Verey lights shot up from a dozen places and the artillery did its most desperate best to prevent the return of the raiding party.

They got away . . all returned home safely.

"How many prisoners did you bring back?" I asked the young officer.

"No room on the bus", he replied. The rest he left to my imagination.

The same officer told me that one night there was room on the truck and they brought back some Italian prisoners . . . a complete patrol, in fact. Interrogated the Italians said their Commanding Officer was a German who,

when they went out on patrol, ordered them to build heaps of stones at intervals in order that the following day the officers could make certain they had really approached our defences as closely as they had been ordered. A post was pointed out to me some 400 yards in front of the wire. This was an observation post. Every day a small party went out to it, taking turns, and took up the role of observers for a little gun team concealed in a wadi. A telephone had been connected. An Italian two pounder gun which had been captured early in the piece, had been mounted on the back of a lorry . . . a little shooting followed whenever things seemed a little quiet. They must have caused a lot of trouble. Often Jerry in his fury would open up with a battery to try to silence this Italian gun. The team was quite prepared to give Jerry a hearing in this argument, and when he had finished they would always put over a few more to show that his efforts had been in vain. Once, as I was passing through their posts one of these Indians flashed a broad grin, pointed to his knife, then to his throat, and looking in the direction of the enemy rubbed his hands together.

Apparently he had been selected as one of the team for a raid that night. Meeting these men and their officers took me back to one evening at Colombo when we were on our way to the Middle East from Australia . . . late that night at the Galle Face, a girl's dance number - and could she dance! - was wildly cheered by the visitors, one of whom asked her for a song. She was diffident - she was only a kid in her teens, a Cingalese and very beautiful - but eventually beckoned us to come closer around the orchestra. We all left our tables at her bidding and crowded round..... she sang "There'll always be an England"

"There'll always be an England" - in a Colombo Hotel and there'll always be an England in the hearts of Indian troops as in the hearts of their Australian comrades in arms.

Colonel Spowers, our C.O., turned up now, returned from Cairo fit and well; tall, slim and with the energy of three men - his D.S.O. and M.C. from the last War, a fair introduction to this.

The 24th Battalion won't forget the Spowers Handicap – a route march we did every Saturday of our Palestine training. It began at ten miles but week by week grew longer, until one very hot day we reckoned we had covered 25 miles. Allan Spowers idea was to make his Battalion tough . . . he set an example . . . every route march saw the C.O. with his long stride always well in front.

There was also ever present in our recollection the Wangaratta to Bonegilla sixty miles or so, a trek in which the C.O. led the way.

We liked Allan Spowers. He liked his jug, he enjoyed his joke, knew when to play and knew like Hell when a job had to be done. The job was done all right.

Major Taskers previously named, handed over his charge, himself conscious of, and I think later commended for the excellent job he made of the Battalion in a worrying hour. The team were "together again but not for long; disaster was on its way.

Disaster in War may be described as that which is always on its way. I have always felt that victory is to be defined as that which by chance or choice has overtaken disaster; disaster comes often, victory need come but once.

You know the old adjuration to "wire in". I don't know who told us to do so but from our trial by spades we proceeded to a job of wiring in. We wired, wired, wired and dug our second line.

We proceeded to keep it up until the next job should come our way, as come it did. The job was to support one of our sister Battalions in the attack on Carrier Hill.

The attack was launched at dawn . . but about nine o'clock, a long green worm was seen winding its way through the wire . . a line of 400 prisoners - German and Italian.

Jerry was most annoyed at this attack and promptly introduced both his bombers and fighters into the show . . too late.

Again; he shelled his own troops and bombed them as they came through our forward defences . . It was hot while it lasted but Jerry took a lot of risks flying up and down the wadis, machine guns roaring,

During one of these sorties three fighter 'planes flew very low over the escarpment. We thought at first that two of our fighters were chasing an M.E.109, but as they came a little closer, we saw the wings of the two rear planes bore black crosses. Within split seconds we had dived back into our burrows.

The pilot of our Hurricane had apparently run out of ammunition . . by a bit of clever tactics his two opponents were destroyed.

He led them down into a Wadi some 500 feet deep, drew them out upon the flat, exposing them to the anti-aircraft guns. The anti aircraft gunners soon made short work of the black crosses . . blew them to pieces.

Our pilot made a steep bank and came back wobbling his wings in a "Thank you!" He landed on the drome, fixed his guns and returned to the war.

Later in the afternoon a Hurricane flew low over our lines along the Derna Road towards Tobruk. Our fighters seldom come so low over our lines unless on business bent. We doubted his behaviour and a few minutes later, to our amazement, saw him shoot up one of our staff cars moving along the Derna

Road. He was shot down and we found the pilot was a German officer flying one of our planes.

Hurricane fighters played a great part in the war of the Western Desert.

Digging and wiring in our second line was hard going. We struck hundreds of yards of rock, drills had to be used for every peg and post. Progress was slow. Music was supplied in plenty for all. Only 50 yards behind the artillery had decided to come into action. Two batteries, one Australian using 4.5 howitzers and a Tommy with captured howitzers, eleven guns in all.

A few hundred yards behind them there were two more batteries of 25 pounders adding a little tenor to the choir.

I shall have occasion later to refer to the reconnaissance plane "Dirty Bertha", which paid us a daily visit seeking out these gunners. The Aussie Battery, in fact, was discovered and at sundown that day Jerry paid his kind regards. He shelled us for four hours continuously. Fortunately he didn't get any of the guns, but he put one in the command post, making a horrible mess.

Fortunately nobody was at home.

Jerry did this three-nights running, but the Aussie battery survived. The third night Jerry varied the programme. Searching for the gunners he hit two very large Italian ammo dumps which nearly caused an earthquake . . when a shell dump is hit all the shells explode together.

The sky turned orange, then there was a terrific roar; the blast filled every dugout and crack in the escarpment, only to disturb the confounded flies who were trying to get a sleep in for "tomorrow is a lovely day".

Flies, by the way, were by far the worst of our 5th Column.

Every soldier in Tobruk had to fight the fly not only as a pest which tackled him personally but as a friend and forerunner of disease.

The cookhouse naturally came in for plentiful grooming. Tins were burned and buried immediately after they had been emptied. Every care was taken to see that water was not thrown on the ground . . all sorts of contrivances were invented to destroy the fly. The big fellows were the only flies that were ever of any use to us . . the green backs three quarters of an inch long. At night in the second line by the light of the candle, troops were accustomed to spread a ground sheet on the dugout floor . . . on the ground sheet, over a piece of paper, a souvenir Iti ashtray with five indentations would be placed upside down . . . Anything serves the Aussie for a gamble.

The five openings were numbered 1 to 5 and the odds would be laid in the usual manner - home made paper money or any kind of coinage being used for this purpose. Greenback, who had practically succumbed to the influence of fly spray, would be imprisoned under the ashtray. He

must eventually stumble out of one or another of the exits if he is to remain breathing.

He emerges, say, at No. 4. . . . Backers of No 4 collect the hoot.

It was from our position in the second line that we had a grandstand view of the bombing attacks on the harbour and supply dumps. We had to duck when the 'planes were returning westward. Jerry liked his little ground strafe, and we, naturally enough, didn't.

The Air Force turned on a dog fight right over us one morning....it was easily the best I have seen.

Watching an air fight is a dangerous game . . there are thousands of bullets flying in all directions. This, however, was too good to miss. Jerry's planes were on their way to bomb the harbour, fully loaded with bombs, when our fighters came in from over the sea and most of the bombers dropped all their eggs. It was fortunately between the first and second line defences where there were no troops . . then, of course, the fun began. There was some clever flying on both sides . . bombers against fighters.

No siree .... three black crosses came down, black smoke pouring out of their tails . . a fourth tries to come out of a spin and finds himself well out . . he crashes into the drink. The rest twist and turn, dive and climb, everyone trying to get on the tail of another. At times the planes flew so close to one another that a collision seemed inevitable. "There goes another", somebody calls, and one more cross glides to earth in the direction of Jerry's lines . . our chap is on his tail but the bomber crashes just the same.

By this time those who were not engaged in the box-on had cleared out, the others trying desperately to join their cobbers.

The bombers draw our chap over the German ack ack fire so they decide to call it off. The three planes which have landed on our side of the line are burning furiously. As our chaps fly back over us, the troops looking on, quite unselfconsciously, put their hands together for their excellent performance. Witnessing an air battle such as this, one becomes more convinced that there is only one answer to dive bombers and that is the fighter craft.

These bombers were prevented from getting to their target, all their bombs were wasted and five 'planes destroyed, all at the hand of the fighter plane. The following day the raid was carried out again, the planes arrived over their target, dropped their bombs and got away without loss through a hail of ack-ack fire . .and our barrages were very fierce.

Nearly every day to the South and well outside the perimeter we hear the moan of the enemy bombers flying to and from the Egyptian frontier. We trust to Heaven that the British troops can hold the enemy on this front . . if Jerry

should break through into Egypt and cut off our supplies, it will be just too bad...eyen bully beef won't come our way.

The early attacks which we beat off were more in the nature of probes. The enemy was trying to find weak spots in our defences.

On Easter Monday he launched his first serious attack against Tobruk.

This attack was led by 22 ton medium tanks, followed by infantry.

The tanks passed through our forward defences in the dark and by dawn they had progressed three miles almost up to the El-Adem – Bardia Road Junction. It was at this junction that the tanks ran into the trap.

Our artillery raised Cain . . . seventeen tanks were knocked out; the rest of them returned in double quick time badly damaged. Once again the fire of our 25 pounder guns had proved accurate and effective.

In some instances the heavy turret and 75 mm gun and mounting were stripped off the German tanks by gun fire.

Our infantry had held firm while the tanks passed through and then inflicted heavy casualties on the oncoming enemy infantry, the German losses being 120 dead and about 250 captured.

Later a document fell into our hands which paid a tribute to the defenders of Tobruk. It was written by a German tank Commander - The (German) Intelligence," he wrote, "gave out before the attack that the enemy was exhausted, that his artillery was extremely weak, and that his morale had become very low. Before the attack, he went on, "we had no idea of the well designed defences of the enemy nor of a single battery position or of the enormous number of anti-tank guns". Also "it was not known that he had so many tanks".

The Regiment went into battle determined to break through to Tobruk; it was the vastly superior enemy, the frightful loss and lack of supporting weapons which caused the Regiment to fail in its attack. About 40 tanks went into action, 17 were destroyed."

The same day out of 42 enemy planes which co-operated with the tanks in their attack, 13 were shot down by the RAF, and 4 by anti-aircraft fire.

The second violent and determined attack took place on May 1st let against the Hedauuur sector. This attack was led by 62 tanks which were followed by everything else the enemy had. By sundown the enemy held about 4,000 yards of the perimeter defence frontage. But he failed to penetrate the secondary line in this battle. His losses once again were enormous. It was in this attack that Jerry showed us a point on how to remove wire. Shell and mortar fire was brought down on the posts and the strafe was pretty thick. While this was going on; two tanks approached the wire fence and from the leading: tank two Germans jumped

out and blew a passage in the wire, broad enough to let the tank through. As the second tank approached, two Germans issued from it carrying a heavy chain by which they linked the two tanks together. The linked tanks proceeded to pull the fence out of the ground leaving a gap of about 20 yards. Two more tanks followed and carried out the same procedure, leaving a wide gap as an entrance for the other tanks. Nor did Jerry pass through the posts as he had done in the former battle and so permit the infantry following to be cut to pieces. He had, in fact, learnt n lesson from the first battle. He either "sat on" the posts and pinned down the garrisons or went round and round, firing his guns into the pits, thus giving the infantry a chance to close on the posts.

It was in this battle that the flame throwers were used for the first time. The enemy had indeed thrown everything into this attack . . He gained a hillock which was useful to him for observation ~ but again he failed to take Tohruk.

It was in this battle also that the 2/24th Battalion lost a number of officers and men, including Major Len Fell and Captain Arthur Bird. It was learned later that all the officers and most of the men who were lost, were prisoners of war. It was a black day for D. Company for we lost our three Macs, Company Sergeant Major Roy McKenzie, Sergeants Mackie and McBroom. All three were Killed, together with a number of others.

They were a sad loss to B. Company . .men of a good team, members of a happy family. We had lived and trained and fought together and together we knew as fighting troops we were second to none.

Only a few days before, Frank Budge was wounded and had to be evacuated.

In the same action Jack Kelly was killed. I learned that Jack and Frank were in the same dugout when a German plane flew down and machine gunned them four times. You can guess how downcast all this left me.

Towards the end of .May the enemy was settling down and digging in. The Axis losses had been great and their replacements both in material and men were not forthcoming... the British Navy were doing a job well in the Mediterranean and preventing every ton of Axis shipping it could from arriving in Libya.

The Axis running short of equipment, attacks with tanks were discontinued. The Germans apparently wanted to reserve all their armoured formations to hold off the British forces on the Sollum front and Halfya Pass area.

From now on, however, air raids increased in number and intensity. Although German losses in the air were great the German was able to replace these

losses and so the scale of air attack was maintained. Some idea of the extent of the air raids can be gauged from the fact that between April 9 and May 31 no fewer than 1,450 enemy planes were over Tobruk; 49 were shot down by ask-ack fire and about as many again probably did not return to their bases. So, back to the "Fig Tree" to support another Unit which is under orders to attack and capture posts gained by Jerry in his last strafe. This attack was carried out with support by tanks and artillery . . . several posts were in fact recaptured.

Later in one post 30 Germans were captured, nearly all N Cos with 37 automatic weapons . . . they certainly had meant to hold the post. Three days we waited in a Wadi standing by in case the enemy counter-attacked. He gave us little peace . . . his Artillery knew the range on the "Fig Tree". The counter-attack did not come and we returned to our former position.

It was at this stage that my old nerves petered out. I was packed off to hospital. I had lost more than two stone in weight.

They gave me the once over, decided to evacuate me. A few days later I moved to "Happy Valley" to wait my turn on the first available ship to Mersa Matruh. I cannot attempt to set on paper my disappointment at leaving my unit and Tobruk. I would have given everything to see it out, but . . . modern war, as far as the front line is concerned, is definitely a young man's job . . . about 21 to 23 is about the limit, as every theatre of war has proved. more men than I, and better, have cracked up, and packed up, about the forties . . . Can't take it?

The hospital lay scattered over about a square mile. One section was in fact the former Italian barracks. The building surrounded a large barrack square, each roof clearly marked with a large Red Cross. . . In the centre of the square was one such Red Cross about 40 feet broad. Half of these buildings, incidentally, have been set aside for enemy wounded. One section of the hospital was completely underground in concrete rooms. The rest under canvas, dispersed and surrounded with sandbags built up about eight feet high, the usual Red Cross painted on the top of every tent, was just such hospital layout as might be expected

The Dental Units were in two wadis near the hospital, sandbagged on four sides to a height of eight feet. German disregard for law, decency, feeling, mercy, was such that all consideration for barriers went west. The Germans deliberately bombed all Red Cross sections, even those set aside for their own wounded, killing many patients, wounding others. On one such ruthless raid sixty were killed, including two Australian Medical Officers. The German will never be forgiven his merciless bombing of hospital ships at Tobruk, killing many wounded men who were lying helpless on the ship. The patients

were being transferred from the wharf to the ship on punts towed by launches, when sixty planes flew over on their filthy mission... the ship was dive-bombed, the large Red Cross was the central target . .this done, the pilot's then machine gunned the Stretcher Cases on punt . . while they were being removed from the ambulances. The launch drivers showed great presence of mind and towed the punts between some old wrecks saving most of the patients from being killed.

Many were further wounded.

What e target . . men tied to stretchers . . helpless. All the wounded, including many more of the staff who would not leave their patients, were taken back to the hospital, badly shaken and were later evacuated on a destroyer overnight.

The whole hospital staff, doctor to orderly, showed superhuman devotion. Defenceless, they were bombed and machine gunned, all day suffering no less inconvenience than the fighting men from sand-storm and heat. The wounded, many of them heart breaking to see, were brought to them and the silent service never faltered. Their job was to save the life others had set out to destroy . . many have to thank the medical staff for their survival of the Siege of T0bruk.

---

## Chapter 8

### **“TRICKERY”**

The great length of the Axis communications and supply line was a potent factor in keeping the Rats of Tobruk alive and kicking.

All arms and equipment, bombs, heavy-calibre shells, and everything down to small arms ammunition had to brought many hundreds of miles from Germany and other occupied countries in Europe to Southern Italy and shipped from Naples at the enormous risk of a great percentage of loss, for the British Navy, constantly patrolling these waters, set out to destroy all supplies sent from the Axis countries to Libya. The toll which the British Navy has taken of merchant ships and war ships in these waters was extensive then and is enormous now.

All these supplies, if they made a landing at Tripoli, were taken by road to Tobruk about six hundred miles, and to the Egyptian frontier - 800 miles, with constant interruption by our Air Force and on bomb swept roads. The cost of bringing shot and shell these enormous distances is incalculable! Having all this in mind the Divisional Commander commanding the Garrison of Tobruk,

with all his officers and men, set out by every cunning device that could be evolved to force the enemy to spend his ammunition on fruitless targets. Much was added thereby to our enjoyment of life.

At Tobruk one evening an English Officer invited me to move round with him on an inspection of the results of some of his own carefully planned work in this direction. He was a short, stubby chap, full of good humour, liked a joke and knew how to tell one.

His eyes had the very devil in them and his actions were much like a Jack-in-the-box.

At meal times he would have everybody rocking with laughter when telling of his school day pranks and his jokes on the local Vicar.

He certainly had the right job as Camouflage Officer.

Before leaving on our tour of inspection he told me the story.

For some days his camouflage Section had been busy constructing tanks out of wooden frames covered with hessian and camouflaged with various

coloured paints. The dummies were attractively set in such a Wadi as that which normally would be used as a hiding place for tanks.

They were covered with camouflage nets, the camouflage purposely overdone to attract the eye of the pilot. Everybody in Tobruk knew that about 4.50 every afternoon a reconnaissance plane would fly over Tobruk. "Dirty Bertha" we called her, and she was incredibly punctual day by day. So much so that a lot of the tricks which were played to deceive the enemy were actually planned to be complete by this time. "Bertha" never failed us! This is just another of those cases where Jerry's devotion to method proved his undoing. The object of this visitation was to take photographs for a mosaic of the perimeter defences. Having purposely over camouflaged our "tanks" we knew they would show up in the day's photograph by comparison with the previous photographs taken.

The evening that I viewed the results of the cunning of the camouflage merchants there was ample evidence that their efforts had been well rewarded. We sat on the escarpment with a number of the men whose handiwork this was and counted 1,020 shells fired at this useless target. Every downpour of shells brought a hearty laugh from the English Officer who was responsible for the fireworks.

After the barrage, the fragments of the tanks which remained were collected and taken back to Tobruk, some were reconstructed, others repaired and taken to another sector in the perimeter to tempt "Dirty Bertha" on her next visit to take another photograph. This little game was repeated

until thousands of shells had found their way into useless targets. The cost of this wastage to the Axis unfortunately remains incalculable.

The Anti Aircraft Gunners were not to be left out of this trickery and I saw some very amusing efforts on the part of these lads.

Captured Italian 60-pounder guns were brought up within the anti aircraft circle near the Harbour and with the wheels taken off, rigged up in pits surrounded by sandbags to look like Anti Aircraft guns. Gelignite and gun cotton would first be pushed up the barrel along with anything else that would form a cloud of smoke. The charge was then placed in the breech and the breech closed. The lads then connected to the firing lever a long piece of telephone wire or cord and in a slit trench 50 to 100 yards from the gun pit awaited the raiders. Often 60 of these German dive bombers would appear over Tobruk together, causing the air to throb, a terrifying spectacle as they approached their target, wave after wave.

On a signal from the leader, those formations would break up to do their deadly work. The leading squadrons dived from 50,000 to 20,000 feet from the sky like plummets to attack first the anti-aircraft guns and put them out of action in order to free the following squadrons to dive on their appointed targets, quite often the Harbour or water points. And how often too these squadrons fell for the trick. The A.A. boys, cord in hand, were feverish with excitement, everyone eager to be the first to fire the guns. An enormous flash would be thrown out of the barrel, followed by a cloud of smoke. The Stukas, sighting the "gun" fire, would dive, as many as eight to ten on to one dummy gun, and deliver from 250 to 500 pounds in bombs.

Then the real Anti Aircraft guns came into action and their shells would find their mark, bringing the Stukas down in flames.

Once again a little trick cost the Axis many thousands of bombs dropped on dummy targets.

Together with these working models, a number of other dummy guns were set up but not quite so elaborate. An iron pipe would be used as a gun, well enclosed with sand bags and close handy a wooden contraption built looking much like a range finder. These instruments of deception often had to be replaced or rebuilt after a raid, the pipe having such a nasty bend in it and the range finder looking like Dad's contribution to the after dinner fire at home.

When the surviving 'planes returned to their Base the lads emerged from their slit trenches to build up their dummy again and await the next raid, to cost the enemy probably a few hundred more bombs.

The Artillery were not without their sense of humour.

Adding insult to injury they would bring up some of the Italian Howitzer guns,

set them up in good action positions with their camouflage again either overdone or thoroughly neglected to ensure "Dirty Bertha" picking up the battery. This had a similar result, either by attracting heavy shell fire from without the perimeter or bombs from the air. The Axis did not like our deadly artillery and went to extreme measures to try to put them out of action.

Another trick of the Royal Horse Artillery was to trail round at night inside the perimeter one of their 25 pounder guns and fire off perhaps ten or twelve shells at a planned target. They would then move some hundreds of yards to a distant part of the perimeter, leaving Jerry to send over a hail of shells into sandy and rocky ground.

Many of the Italian guns, particularly howitzers, were turned against the enemy. We had ready to our hands thousands of shells, left by the Italian in perfectly built dumps and undisturbed when we arrived in the perimeter. It was a costly mistake the Italian engineers made, leaving all these valuable shells for us to hurl back at them.

I saw the Tommies in action with these guns, putting them in as fast as they could and as each shell was pushed into the breech, making some such remark as "There you are Musso, you can have them back, or if Haw Haw is with you, wack them up between you!"

It was during these operations that we noticed how many of his bombs and shells were duds, particularly when he was using concrete cased bombs. Many of these were dropped on their target, broke in several pieces and failed to explode. It was considered in the early artillery attacks on Tobruk that one enemy shell in every five did not explode.

Once, sitting in my Company Headquarters, I counted eleven shells in succession land within a few yards, only to cause a dust. I must admit I was just as well pleased they didn't burst.

Let us not forget the bomb which Haw Haw advised us would be dropped on Tobruk on the occasion of Hitler's birthday. This bomb turned up, 9 feet long and of concrete. The Engineers had an opportunity of taking its dimensions when eventually it fell, for it did not explode. I am told that there was a little note written in English discovered by an Engineer, reading: "This is the best we can do for you! ...." Evidence not merely of faulty workmanship, but rather of sabotage by Axis munitions workers, whose war effort was merely simulated under the compulsion to which they had been subjected. We had other evidence of such sabotage from time to time.

While we are on the subject of the somewhat irregular activities of the Rats, a word for the "Bush Artillery". The Bush Artillery was formed from Infantry Units and was equipped with Italian Howitzer guns, equivalent to our 4.5's, with thousands of rounds of ammunition at its disposal from dumps left

intact on the Italian race to Benghasi. By contrast with the Royal Horse Artillery in action, with all its British precision, at first the Australian Infantry was comic in an artillery role, and doubtless the Tommy Artillery Officer blushed when he heard the improvised fire orders and saw the hit or miss method of ranging the guns. For the most part the guns were set by compass and a few degrees right or left did not matter so long as the shells fell outside the perimeter.

At first we treated the Bush Artillery as a bit of a joke, but their fire became so accurate that it was found to be worthwhile properly organising them under experienced Officers. Early in the piece, however, the amateur gunners actually ranged their gun on to the target by looking through the barrel, then loading and firing the gun and correcting the range by trial and error. Some of their fire orders were those of an Infantry Section Commander, others of their own invention, something like this: 'half right or left!' . . . "three telegraph posts to the right" or "cock them up a bit more" for instance when they found that their shells were dropping short. "Charge three, four or five" meant the same to them at first, but in the long run they became very efficient and accurate. On one occasion they picked out an excellent target . . . an Italian Cookhouse. The Italians, having probably come straight from a camp of elementary training, lined up with their tin pannikins and mugs to "Come and get it", but they got more than they expected. The Bush Artillery made a horrible mess of both the Italians and the Cookhouse . . . breakfast for that day was off!

One day a Tommy Officer was sent to the Battery to do the observing . . . a short, dapper gentleman, with a very Tommy accent of the kind which the Australian loved to mimic but grew to like. "I have been instructed to do the observing for you today", he explained. "You're telling us" was the whisper of one Aussie to another.

Having given the guns the once over and the amorphous heap of shells, he must have wondered what sort of a turn out he had struck. However, he went to his O.P., selected his first target, called back over the telephone for his battery to take post, proceeded to give his fire order.

The Battery, having received these instructions with a wink, embarked on a little mischief to see how he would "take it". One gun was turned 15 degrees right, another about 10 degrees left, another elevated to look much like an anti aircraft gun, filling the gaps so that when the order came down "One round gun fire", the result nothing so much as a fan . . . shots flying everywhere. The O.P. Officer, seeing the astonishing results of his first ranging, wondered if there hadn't been a dive bombing attack.

When the Command Post called to the gunners that the O.P. Officer's

command apparently had not been understood, their remark this time "You're telling us" was far from being a whisper. However a good time was had by the gunners, for after all it was Italian Ammo they were using and they could afford to have a little practice - Bless 'em!

When later on these nondescript batteries were well organised they added tremendously to the fire power of the artillery inside the perimeter. The Axis appreciated getting their own shells tossed back at them from their own guns??

But we never heard a word about it from Haw Haw and we Rats were, to say the least, disappointed with him.

.....

## Chapter 9 “HAPPY VALLEY”

Happy Valley was a wadi which ran down to the open sea behind the Hospital north of the Harbour. This Wadi sheltered the 'Transit camp" for troops on their way to and from Tobruk. At the sea end, the wadi ran out into a bay, whose waters, small of compass, mirrored, as in jewelled crystal, the incredible colour harmonies of the rock formations on either side, their varied hues lighting the imaged blue and purple of the Mediterranean skies. Its other end provided a more prosaic, but highly utilitarian, water point and pumping station which nevertheless was responsible later for taking the "Happy" out of Happy Valley when Jerry decided to give it his attention.

Half way down its length Happy Valley boasted an orchard of about thirty fig trees, a few date palms, and two wells. Maybe the wells were the attraction, for is not truth, by tradition, found at the bottom of a well, but this wadi also, on the north side housed the war correspondents. A flimsy little building which had been used as an Italian Headquarters had been converted into an Officers Mess and from this "nerve centre" the international correspondents of the world sent out news of Tobruk - news which, as we subsequently learned, in spite of Haw Haw's sneers, did much to stiffen the morale of the British and the respect of nations.

Dispersed between the palms had been erected a few tents which were used in conjunction with the Hospital . . . this was the "Rest Home" . . ideally situated with every mod con, for the repair and restoration of cracked nerves . . Are you telling me?

In the walls of the wadi, which are hundreds of feet high, scores of caves and dug outs had been excavated mostly by the Italians when they were in Tobruk and many of them used by our own troops.

It was in this wadi that I was bombed more fiercely and frequently than at any other place in Cyrenaica. When we didn't get the bombs we got the splinters from the Ack Ack shells during the raids. Sometimes indeed the shells returned to old mother earth all in one piece to explode on the ground.

The Ack Ack guns were mounted on the escarpment all round us. These anti aircraft gunners are world renowned, as the ack ack of the defence of Tobruk became the laboratory for the world. The pluck and courage of these lads was incomparable. I have seen them stand at their guns, fire like fury at a dive bomber or fighter who was using them as a target . . . bullets flying all round them and bombs churning up the dust until they were blacked out with it. In every gun emplacement the crew had a board on which they would keep their scores. One, justly proud, had eight to its credit. The whole of their team had been together throughout the siege and had suffered one casualty . . . but one tragedy . . . they had their Cookhouse blown to pieces by a bomb. To all eternity Jerry will stand unforgiven for that body blow.

It was awe inspiring to see the entire battery of anti aircraft guns in action. Hundreds of small black and white clouds like a snow storm filled out the sky; at night the aspect changed to suggest some visitation of comets tearing through the air. A direct hit is impressive, if not pleasant; the planes come hurtling to earth belching black smoke and burning from end to end. Sometimes these dive bombers would pull out of their dive and drop to earth like lumps of lead, to blow up with their own bombs . . even in German pilots we found it in us to admire skill and daring. ("To honour, while you strike him down the foe that comes with fearless eyes").

Our fighter planes in the early stages were absent doing a job in other theatres. . . it was the ack ack gunners we had to thank . . and for a great deal of magnificent work.

Soon after I arrived in Happy Valley, Jerry began to concentrate on the important water point and pumping station situated in this wadi. Until now he had left this target alone, for his intention, or at any rate, his fond hope had been to capture Tobruk together with the water supply and to have destroyed the water point and station in the early stages would have been cutting off his own nose to spite his face. His determined attack now on the water supply was significant - it was evident that he was beginning to realise that his intention to capture Tobruk was after all not even a fond hope.

Drinking water in the desert was as precious as gold (Beer next to pearls) and the enemy knew this only too well.

On our part water had to be carefully rationed, each man receiving one water bottle per day, half of which went to the cook to make that stew and that chlorinated tea.

Oh for a couple of hours at Shepherds Hotel, Cairo, or one or our crayfish suppers at the Trawool Hotel, Seymour, Victoria, on these days when the sun was beating down giving us a temperature of 127 to 150 degrees! With the other half of our allowance one would clean one's teeth, then shave and what did not evaporate would be turned carefully into a face washer and one would then proceed to wash the North East corner of the body. The following day the North West corner would have its turn and, given time, the face washer would work down South.

As often as possible sea water would be brought up in drums so that a little washing could be done. You can imagine how acceptable this was, for we lived all day and slept all night in the same shorts and shirt, sometimes for a fortnight. If this was not convenient we just remained dirty.

Occasionally when occupying a Sector near the Coast we would take every opportunity that offered us to have a dip in the Mediterranean. I will never forget my first hot water bath in Alexandria after leaving Hospital. I just sat in the bath and soaked, and soaked, and soaked: Even today I am still removing the Libyan sand and dust.

One bright morning about eight o'clock, Jerry paid us a visit with his Air Force, and bombed his target with thousand pound bombs.

For a moment the clear Mediterranean day was transformed into a Hell of sound and fury. One after another the planes dived on their mark ... stones as big as your hand came flying through the air, along with the steel fragments of the bombs. The wadi was blacked out with dust and smoke and the explosions roared in your ears like a tempestuous ocean in the ears of a drowning man. It was pretty.

When Jerry had gone, and the dust had cleared and we had given the Ack Ack shells fragments time to find their way down, we went over to inspect the damage. The pump engine was still going strong. It was surrounded by 42 bomb craters; some were very close - but nearly is as good as a mile after all. The little station had not been hit.

The sound and the fury had signified nothing after all.

An hour later the station was unrecognisable by foe or friend. The camouflage experts had been on the job . . . The place looked like a heap of rubble. Stones had been scattered around the sides, some painted black making it appear to have been hit. Jerry left this target alone for a long time . . . satisfied, doubtless, that he had shattered it. I suppose the squadron leader got the Iron Cross, or the "Order of the Floating Kidney" . . . if he got home.

Later the same day, Jerry came over again, this time to bomb the Harbour. On his way out he did a bit of ground strafing. Three planes went up and down the wadi with their machine guns roaring. With two other Officers, I was taking a dip in the drink at the time and the gunner of one plane took a peal at us in the water. We dropped to the bottom the moment we saw him coming, and came up like whales afterwards, blowing bad language and salt water. As if this hadn't been enough, the second plane took up the tale. We dropped to the bottom again . . . it wasn't only the machine gun fire that was worrying us; the lads on our Ack Ack guns were trying to get them and all their stuff was dropping round us too. Finally one of the planes was hit and crashed into the sea and the others made off. Day after day, without fail, Jerry came over in formations. . . and at night at half-hourly intervals he would send one plane over at about 30,000 feet. From that height his bombs might drop anywhere since it was impossible to see a target. The only effect was to keep us awake; if the bombs didn't, the ack ack guns did.

One thing we did learn in our bombing experience, and that was that the most effective protection against bombing was the "slit trench". It is not only a defence against flying splinters, but also against blast. We dug our slit trenches in an "L" shape about two feet wide, each arm of the "L" 15 feet long, and about 5 feet deep. A bomb may drop within a few yards of such a trench without endangering you in it. Long, wide, straight trenches have proved to be dangerous; a bomb dropping at one end can shower the occupants with splinters and perhaps kill half of them. Narrow and "L" shaped, the slit trench does not offer such a big target. The mere fact of taking up a position below ground level saves the occupants the effect of the blast.

In the same wadi, on the occasion of one raid, I was standing in a concrete room about 10 feet square, with walls two feet thick in one of which was set a door, and opposite it a small window. A bomb fell about 20 yards away, immediately in front of the door. The door and frame were blown straight across to the window and the window and frame were blown out through the wall. The building had not been hit. . . this was simply the effect of the blast. Fortunately my mate and I were standing in the corner and only got the effect of the blast, which was considerable. I thought my ear drum had been shattered. If we had been in our slit trench we would not have felt any effects at all.

It is astonishing how rapidly you can dig a slit trench after your first raid. You had to walk with care now in Happy Valley area . . . for that matter anywhere in Tobruk, for Jerry had now acquired a habit of dropping "Thermos

Bombs", with characteristic lack of humanity, making the Hospital grounds his mark for these. The bomb was about the shape and size of a thermos flask; it was dropped from a low flying plane at night and its particular menace was due to the fact that you had merely to walk within a few feet of it for the vibration to explode it.

Another dirty trick Jerry used to play was to drop, as he did all over Tobruk, hundreds of "shaving stick bombs" - small aluminium cases about three inches long in the shape of a shaving stick. Finding one casually you were tempted to pick it up and remove the top . . . whereupon it would explode. The engineers had methods of their own to deal with these trick bombs.

A trick the Italians played, before they were captured, was to leave large areas planted with hand grenades from which the safety pins had been removed. These bombs were not powerful enough to kill but would blow off a foot or a hand. The clearance of these fields was effected by the engineers also.

I am left with an abiding conviction that some of these engineers had no nerves at all. To strip a deadly bomb or a mine was no more than dismantling an alarm clock to them. They played with death without turning a hair.

It was in Happy Valley that I met the Commandos for the first time and their Officers, among them Major Sudley, Captain Dunn and Lieutenant Randolph Churchill.

The Commandos have been described as Britain's "secret and most deadly fighters". They are a force of picked men, highly trained because of the superlatively dangerous nature of the job. All are volunteers, and the standard required is so high that 80 per cent of volunteers were rejected after preliminary training. They are selected from and require the knowledge of every branch of the service.

For sea-going raids, special shallow-bottomed armoured craft with a ramp bow to enable a speedy landing, have been built for them and are manned by their own personnel. Each boat carries about 30 troops. As engineers they know everything from cracking nuts to blowing up bridges; as Infantry armed with Machine and Tommy guns they are experts even to throwing knives. They have eyes like cats for they do most of their raiding at night. The enemy doesn't like them even a little bit . . from his point of view they always turn up at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Many daring raids have been carried out by the Commandos... . in desert warfare, water is naturally one of the biggest problems. Since for the most part water is drawn from wells; wealth cannot buy water in the desert once the wells are destroyed. More than one battle has been fought and lost . . lost simply because of the lack

of water. So the Commandos then are often given the job of raiding many miles behind enemy lines, blowing up wells or rendering the water undrinkable, by dropping saltpetre into the wells. This may sound comparatively easy but where these troops go, the odds are invariably against them and often they know nothing about the country which they have to raid (practically their only information is gained from maps); they may even have to go through the enemy lines disguised to attain their objective, or travel by their flat bottomed boats many miles up the coast, fight their way in and fight their way out again.

---

**End of my Memoirs of Tobruk.**