

7th Battery

Isle of Sunshine and Shadow

When Regimental Headquarters, 7th, and 9th Batteries moved to Amariya staging camp during the Easter week-end in 1941, it was generally understood that their destination was Greece with "Lustre Force". In fact, official documents record that "*2/7th Aust. L.A.A. Battery embarked for Greece on 22nd April, 1941*".

Subsequent developments in that campaign brought amended instructions, from Headquarters Middle East, for 7th Battery to proceed to Crete to assist in the defence of Navy Air Bases on the island. The Royal Marine Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.), then 'at sea', was intended to eventually take over those responsibilities.

There were no regrets at the prospect of departing from the Amariya camp with its spartan accommodation for the steady flow of units moving to and from war zones, and its sandstorms which complicated the daily routines, especially at meal times.

Loading of stores, equipment, and ammunition proceeded apace with native laborers earning recognition, as they cheerfully carried heavy loads of ammunition on their backs, while soldiers worked two to a box. When an over-enthusiastic Egyptian workman missed his footing on the gang-plank and fell with his load into the water, onlookers cheered.

Movement from the staging camp commenced on 22nd April and boarding on the troop transport "Ulster Prince" was completed on the 23rd April.

That evening, with an escort of two cruisers and two destroyers, "Ulster Prince" carrying troops, the "Delaney" with stores and equipment, and one other ship slipped out of Alexandria harbor.

The decks were crowded with eager, cheerful troops, most of whom had recently received mail from home. They realised that they were about to move in waters where similar convoys of Australians had sailed in April 1915 on their way to Gallipoli.

Seas were calm, the voyage uneventful, and morning brought a magnificent view of approaching land, with rugged mountains capped with snow forming the backbone of the island of Crete.

As the "Ulster Prince" turned into Suda Bay on the morning of 24th April, a Sunderland flying boat was sighted at rest on the water.

Although unknown at the time, this was a portent of events to affect 7th Battery in the immediate future. That morning, the evacuation of Greece had commenced. General Blamey and his senior staff had taken off before dawn to give the slow Sunderland a chance to stay ahead of the German fighter planes that were sure to start ranging the skies at first light. One of his senior staff wrote, "We put down in Suda Bay, Crete for re-fuelling at 0630. There was then considerable and potentially dangerous delay".⁽¹⁾

The cruiser H.M.S "York", with only her superstructure visible above water, bore testimony to the effectiveness of Italian motor torpedo boats.

On the night of 26th March, eight of these secret weapons of the Italian Navy, each controlled by one man, had edged their way over the boom protecting the harbor and had succeeded in sinking three transports and damaging the "York" so seriously, that she had been beached about a quarter of a mile offshore. There she was to remain as a gun platform throughout the battle for Crete.

Two of her Vickers two-pounder anti-aircraft guns, later removed and mounted as A.A. defence on Heraklion harbor, were manned there by 7th Battery gun crews.

Troops were hurriedly disembarked and working parties were given two hours to unload as much equipment and stores as they could. The "Ulster Prince" had been ordered to sail for Greece to assist in the evacuation of troops who were already moving to embarkation ports. Unfortunately, that was to be her last voyage as she ran aground at Navplion beach.⁽²⁾

The single jetty lacked a crane but unloading proceeded apace, though admittedly with more enthusiasm than skill.

The arrival of high-flying Italian aircraft brought the heavy anti-aircraft guns into action. The new arrivals watched the puffs of smoke from the exploding shells with interest, but it was the sound of bursting bombs that brought a hurried response, as those who had decided on a quick dip in the sea scattered to safer spots.

All then realised that they had caught up with the war at last as the first Australian unit to land in Crete.

7th Aust. L.A.A. Battery was allocated an area in an olive grove on the slopes overlooking Canea. Further strafing and bombing during the day enlivened proceedings but without casualties or damage, and the troops learned to scatter and take cover.

Fatigue parties continued unloading equipment from the "Delaney". One member guarding stores recalls the arrival of British Consular staff from Greece in a small vessel. The men wore suits and ties and the ladies light summer dresses; with their suitcases and tennis racquets, all seemed strangely incongruous.

Among the first of the evacuees to arrive on 24th April, was a

(1) Carlson ND p.49

(2) Spencer p.67

group of war correspondents who camped in the olive grove near 7th Battery while waiting transport to Egypt a few days later. They included amongst their number such well-known personalities as Hetherington, Aldridge, Morrison, Fitchett and Slessor. The troops listened with keen interest to their accounts of what had happened in Greece, although there were some questions as to how the information was obtained.

But Anzac Day 1941 will be remembered vividly by those who saw the thousands of others, who landed at Suda Bay on the night of 24th and throughout the 25th April and following days.

The steady stream of Australian, British, New Zealand, and Greek soldiers, airmen and sailors of all ranks, intermingled with civilians clutching a few belongings, flowed day and night.

Five thousand arrived on the 25th and another twenty thousand in the following days until the Navy could do no more. Thereafter, arrivals came in small groups, often after days and weeks of dodging the enemy, using escape routes and improvising means of transport to cross land and sea.

Many of these weary, dejected men supported wounded mates; some carried their rifles, Bren guns, Boyes anti-tank rifles, and ammunition, but many had nothing other than what they wore.

Occasionally, a group that had obviously moved as an organised unit marching in orderly formation, some even singing, provided a contrast to the general air of hopelessness and disillusionment of an army in retreat.

7th Battery troops were reminded of the first Dunkirk that had influenced many of them to enlist almost a year earlier. But these men, thanks to the British Navy, had successfully crossed 200 miles of sea from Greece without the protection of friendly fighters to oppose the swarms of enemy aircraft seeking to destroy them, and without the prospect at journey's end of arriving in their own homeland.

7th Aust. L.A.A. Battery was made responsible for rationing the new arrivals so cooks and all members of the unit not allotted other duties worked around the clock, carting water to the field kitchens, handing out tins of bully beef, packets of biscuits, oranges and cigarettes and pouring countless cups of tea. And how that tea was enjoyed even if it was drunk from a condensed-milk tin or some other improvised receptacle!

The wounded were made as comfortable as possible under cover of the olive trees. The more seriously wounded were moved on to the R.A.P. set up in a church along the road to Canea. There, the doctors were assisted by local womenfolk.

While some 7th Battery men worked on the wharf, others assisted in erecting tents for the 4th British General Hospital at a pleasant spot on the coast past Canea and about seven miles from

Suda.

A group of forty nurses from the 2/5th Australian General Hospital was temporarily accommodated at the new site whilst awaiting transport back to Egypt. They told of their experiences when ordered to evacuate ahead of the advancing Germans. Their main concern was for the welfare of the patients they had left and the safety of the few of their colleagues who remained behind to tend the wounded with whom they were to be later evacuated.

As transport became available, nurses, wounded, and many of the troops who had been landed in Crete without arms and equipment were evacuated to Egypt. Of the 25,000 who had arrived from Greece on the 25th May and the following days, approximately 20,000 eventually remained in Crete.

Among a group of Greek soldiers who camped in the olive grove near 7th Battery was one who claimed to be the boxing champion of the Greek Army. Lance-Bombardier Twyman who fancied himself in that field issued a challenge. Soon a ring was formed there under the olive trees at the side of 42nd Street (so-named because a detachment of the 42nd Field Company Royal Engineers had been stationed there sometime before the arrival of the Australians, whom they met later in Heraklion). After sparring for a few minutes the opponents parted and shook hands and Greek-Australian friendship had been cemented.

Of those who remained in Crete, many were Australian and New Zealand infantry, or artillery units acting as infantry, because their equipment had been lost in Greece. Large numbers of Greek troops were untrained and the majority were unarmed.

Before the embarkation, troops had been instructed to put all artillery and armored vehicles out of action, to wreck transport left behind, and to destroy supplies to deny their use to the enemy. Unfortunately, the literal interpretation of this order resulted in the destruction of invaluable communications equipment which was so seriously lacking during the ensuing battle for Crete.

On 26th April, 7th Battery H.Q., "B" and "C" Troops began to move to Heraklion to take up positions in defence of the town and airfield. One of those travelling in the advance party with the Battery Commander, Major J. A. Hipworth, recorded in his diary some of the sights and events that interested him during the journey. These included:— *"the magnificent scenery of hilly country inland with white villages and isolated villas of white stone; winding roads which followed the coast and which later frustrated strafing and bombing aircraft aiming at road targets; the absence of fences, terraced slopes where infantry later found slit trenches close to the terrace walls provided maximum protection from bombs; deep wells with buckets on an endless chain pouring water into troughs or an irrigation channel; the local habit of walking in the*

middle of the road, moving to the side to allow vehicles to pass and then returning to the centre again; tall moustached Cretans with baggy Turkish trousers and leather top-boots, proud men the tassels on the knotted head bands a legacy of past wars and feuds (the bands signified blood, the tassels tears); fair-haired, blue-eyed children among the predominantly dark-haired, brown-eyed girls; the friendliness of the people towards these strangers cluttering their roads, the welcome sight of a Battalion of Yorks and Lancasters with two Bren carriers moving past."

Major Hipworth called a halt to allow the remainder of the convoy to catch up. Seeing a man working in a nearby field he indicated that he was thirsty. Immediately, the Cretan sent a young boy racing off towards the white-washed stone house to return a few minutes later with a cool bottle of wine. All had a taste of the refreshing drink which was greatly appreciated as a token of the friendship and hospitality which continued wherever our troops came in contact with the local population.

The journey proceeded through Retimo (Rethymnon), with its narrow airstrip parallel to the coast road, the convoy arriving at Heraklion (formerly Candia) at 2200 hours to be greeted by cheering residents.

Battery Headquarters was established in a two-storeyed building formerly used as H.Q. by the 2nd Black Watch Regiment. This position commanded a good view of the port area which was almost enclosed by the two concrete and stone piers set at right angles to one another.

Small boats had safe anchorage in an area protected by a long stone causeway or mole, later to become the scene of vital activity for 7th Battery at the end of the campaign.

A solid rectangular stone building and a circular fort built towards the landward end of the mole were constructed during the Venetian occupation (13th-17th centuries) to protect the harbor. A two-pounder Vickers from the "York" was mounted at the fort, and another on the east of the harbor.

"B" and "C" Troops' guns were deployed at Heraklion aerodrome which was defended to the east by the 2nd Black Watch, to the south by the 2/4th Battalion and to the west, by 7 Medium Regiment armed as infantry, 2nd Leicesters and 2nd Yorks and Lancs. Greek regiments defended the town area. A British A.A. Composite Battery came under command of the O.C. 7th Battery.

Major J. A. Hipworth was seconded to Creforce H.Q. as A.A. adviser to the commander, Major General Freyberg, and Captain B. A. Baglin became acting O.C. of both 7th Battery and the British Composite Battery at Heraklion.

"A" Troop and two "C" Troop guns remained in the Suda Bay area for a week after B.H.Q., "B" and "C" Troops moved to Heraklion.

During that period, gun-site responsibilities provided little opportunity to explore the interesting surroundings; but visits by a British medical officer acquainted the troops with the risks associated with drinking, unboiled, the beautifully cool water drawn from wells and the need to protect wounds against infection.

An intelligence officer told of the suspected subversive element fostered in the community by the Germans, and the importance of security. Point was added to his comments by the behaviour of one fellow who came daily to the unfurnished stone house in a ploughed field near one gun site. For much of his time he seemed to be aimlessly hoeing already ploughed ground, while keeping an eye on the stream of people passing along the road from the Suda Bay area towards Canea, as though expecting someone; then he would leave hurriedly and move down the road out of view. He frequently visited the gun site and was interested in the equipment there. His behaviour was reported, but the crew did not hear if any action was taken.

One day, when a paratroop landing was expected, spare crew members were detailed to take the few rifles available and establish positions, two men to a pit, away from the gun-site. One crew member vowed to deal with the friendly "gardener" if he chanced to be around when the show started.

In lighter vein were the discussions about the history of Crete — the island of Greek legends, of Jason and the Golden Fleece, of Theseus and the Minotaur and the traces of past civilisations to be seen by those with the leisure to indulge in such a pastime.

Those stationed at Heraklion were within sight of the ruins of Knossos and its relics of an ancient civilisation. The splendor of the landscape moved Gunner MacGeorge to record his impression that:

"Those unexpected Mediterranean colors, the purples of distant cliffs and the shimmering blueness of the sea were an unreal setting.

Strange people in foreign garb came around us selling devilled almonds and hard-boiled eggs when we were digging the trenches. The sun was heady and strong in the afternoons, making us want to go to sleep."

It was spring, the grape-vines were in leaf, oleanders grew wild on the hillsides, and a profusion of wildflowers bloomed and scented the roadsides and the olive groves, while the mountains in the background provided a constantly changing backdrop.

Press correspondents and evacuated troops had given their accounts of the grim events in Greece, but just for that brief time the world seemed fair again, in spite of the concern at the obvious lack of essential arms and equipment, and the grumblings about

inefficient administration back where the planning should have occurred.

On the 4th May "A" Troop moved to Maleme airfield – it scarcely warranted that title, but "aerodrome" would have been just too flattering. The landing ground at Retimo was only a strip, Heraklion with more space could take large aircraft, but Maleme was unsuitable for anything larger than fighters. The Germans were later to use it with reckless abandon to land Junkers 52s, but at a heavy price.

The journey from Canea to Maleme provided an opportunity to study the terrain of the area where "A" Troop was to be stationed. It is said that God miscalculated the amount of stone needed to create Crete, but much of the country's character stems from that source.

Between Suda and Maleme, a narrow fertile plain extends from the coast to merge with the foothills, rising through terraces cut by steep wadis into the rugged mountains forming the backbone of the island; these fall away steeply to the south coast ending in sheer cliffs with very few places where even small fishing boats can shelter.

These natural features all contributed to the problems of defending and supplying the island. The only airfields were within short-range attack from the enemy; all the harbors were on the north side bringing shipping into the danger area. The only substantial road was parallel to the north coast, north-south travel was best made by mule or on foot. The situation from the defender's point of view was that *"Crete faced the wrong way with its three airfields, two harbors and roads all situated on the north coast"*.⁽³⁾

(3) Long p203