

Beirut

Sunday, 27th July, the Battery crossed the border, through El Auja with its ruined fortress and Palestine Police barracks, Asluf where a good wash was enjoyed after crossing the Sinai Desert, through Beersheba to Hill 95. R.H.Q., which had moved out of the Western Desert just ahead of 9th Battery, was stationed here and had gathered under its wing the remnants of 7th Battery which had not yet been re-equipped. There were many happy greetings between the 9th Battery and 7th Battery men.

However 9th Battery was not to stop here, as it was informed by Lieutenant-Colonel Rhoden that it was to proceed to Beirut, which caused much interest amongst the troops. So, after a quick lunch, the Battery moved on past the old camp at Khassa, through Ramille along a most pleasant road through green country, arriving at Beit Lid Camp about 50 miles south of Haifa, in time to enjoy the evening meal provided by the Tommies. 173 miles recorded for the day.

A description of the next day's travel comes from a gunner's diary:

"Moved out at 0645 and moved up along the railway and coast to Haifa. Passed through Haifa at 0915 and Acre at 0930. Just near here we saw a Roman aqueduct. 0950 passed over the border into Syria over a high hill which comes down to the sea. We are travelling on a small coastal plain with mountains on the right. Passed Tyr. Near Damour the bridge has been knocked by shell fire and the corner of practically every house has been hit with a shell. At 1245 stopped for lunch near Beirut. About an hour later we moved about 5 miles and then turned into an olive grove and camped for the night. The Lebanese are quite a pleasant race. We are trading bully beef for eggs and tomatoes."

A brief note on the invasion of Syria: About May 1941 it was decided that Allied troops should enter Syria "in order to prevent the occupation by the Germans". It was also decided that 7th Australian Division, supported by British components, would have this task.

On 8th June the move was made from Palestine and frontier posts were captured. However the French (Vichy) strongly defended their territory (held under mandate after World War 1), until a cease fire was arranged on 12th July. A convention was signed on that evening and the Allies formally entered Beirut on 16th July and received a warm welcome from the civilians. The Allied losses were 382 killed and 1129 wounded.

So on 29th July 1941 the Battery Commander issued Operation Order No.10 which, in summary, meant that 1 Aust. A.A. Brigade would assume responsibility for anti-aircraft defence from 1700 hours on 29th July 1941. 9th Battery were to take over from 155 Light A.A. Battery R.A., whose guns were primarily deployed in anticipation of attack from enemy bomber aircraft. Attacks by fighter aircraft were considered unlikely while Rhodes remained the nearest enemy base. 9th Battery to come under command of 2/2nd Aust. Heavy A.A. Regiment. Goodbye to 2/3rd Light A.A. Regiment once again!

The distribution of guns was to be – Airport – “I” Troop plus one gun, “H” Troop under command. Harbor – “G”, “J” and “H” Troops (less one gun).

The take-over to commence beginning at 1000 hours on 30th July; completion of the take-over to be signalled to B.H.Q. with the code words – “G” Troop - YOUNG; “H” Troop - JACKSONS; “I” Troop - CONNELL; “J” Troop - PHAIRS.

The code words were the names of some of Melbourne's hotels at that time. Young and Jacksons is still going, Johnny Connell's was on the south-west corner of Elizabeth Street and Flinders Lane, and Phairs in Collins Street near Embank House. Stores to be taken over were guns, predictors and connected items and tentage.

B.H.Q. and “G”, “H” and “J” Troop H.Q. to be stationed at Lazaret Quarantine. “I” Troop H.Q. to be stationed at the Airport.

The take-over duly took place; the troops were issued with mosquito nets, and quinine tablets were to be taken twice each day to combat malaria. The brothels had been closed for medical inspection and blue light clinics set up.

BH.Q. and the Troop H.Q.'s settled in at the Quarantine Station, to find that something had got into bed before them – bed bugs!

The guns of “G”, “J” and “H” Troops settled in at the harbor which was protected by moles (stone jetties).

The guns of “I” Troop had a pleasant area to protect, as a gunner's diary describes:

“We moved into the Beirut aerodrome and saw our first French plane. The 'drome has asphalt runways (in contrast to the desert sand) and was previously the civil airport. The buildings and hangers are quite modern. At the end of the runway there is a 100 foot drop to the sea and with the hills at the back makes a pleasant picture. We have a sea breeze here, but the climate is very humid. We had an excellent shower in the 'drome buildings.”

The twelve guns taken over were of the Nuffield type, built in England, and lacked the finish of the Swedish gun which had been used in the desert. They were built primarily for static positions, but could be equipped with wheels for transport.

Gunner Hepburn reports: *"The gun carriage was twice as heavy as the Swedish Bofors, much longer, and steered like a billy-cart, had large tyres, but no springs, and a stay, holding the barrel when travelling, made of sub-standard angle iron. We broke every one between Beirut and Suez and arrived with all sorts of "fencing wire" repairs in the best Aussie bush mechanic's tradition. The breakages occurred though not all guns employed the Percy Quinton cornering system. The method involved the hard application of the gun's brakes as the gun entered a curve. The gun then went round the curve with the front wheels following the tractor, and the back wheels going sideways."*

The guns were equipped with predictors. These were a device to lay the gun on to the target without layers operating the gun manually. Electricity was supplied by a generator. So new gun drills had to be learnt. The range was 10,000 feet.

Leave was given to Beirut, to Damascus and to Cairo. The city of Beirut was available to the troops for day leave. Beirut had not been touched by the war, as the cease-fire was agreed before the 7th Division reached there. It was a very pleasant city, made so by the influence of the French who delight in planting trees.

Leave was also granted to Aley, where the rear H.Q. of the Battery was situated. This was a very pleasant area in the mountains which overlook Beirut. The mountains were extensively terraced to retain the little good soil available. The air was fresh and crisp after the humidity of the coast. An Australian canteen, good hotels and a night club with a swimming pool kept the men amused.

The commercial buildings and hotels were of modern design. A university had been built under the sponsorship of the United States of America, and was known as the American University.

The city had been commercially prosperous before the war under the French, who had taken over from the Turks after World War 1. Government had been stable, with the Christian and Moslem populations electing their members to the Lebanese/Syrian parliament, which met in Damascus.

The residents of the city were friendly towards the troops, and a trade of Aussie rations for local fruit and vegetables was agreeable to both sides.

A gunner recalls his time in Beirut:

"I joined Herb Hardie's gun detachment which occupied a former Vichy French position complete with large concrete floored barracks jammed between the coast road and the railway from the wharf area to the main station. The gradient from the wharf was very steep, but flattened out behind our barracks. The engine drivers of the trains could not resist letting go a shriek of triumph on the whistle when they had conquered the steep bit. We found the continuous noise a bit much. When we were check-

ing gun stores, we discovered a large tin of grease G.S. that was badly contaminated with desert sand. Gunner Ripper suggested that we could punish an engine driver or two by spreading the grease on the steep section of the railway line. The idea was accepted without hesitation (and without much thought). The next train came up the hill, hit the grease and the driving wheels revolved with incredible speed. The swarthy face of the driver, peering out of the cab window, turned a nasty shade of pale grey. He shut off the steam and the loco just made it over the crest and struggled on its way.

"Our failure to think the exercise through now became apparent. The grease was spread down the hill by passing trains. Now the trains, instead of making a steady if noisy progress up the hill, came to the steep part, spun their wheels, shut off steam, almost stopped, then started up with full steam pressure until the wheels slipped again and the performance was repeated. The noise, formerly a bit of a nuisance was now unbearable night and day."

Consequent on the depletion of manpower of the Battery, due to sand-fly fever, and the non-arrival of reinforcements, an Operation Instruction was issued on 10th August which resulted in several guns being taken out of action and the personnel transferred to other gun crews to make up the numbers, leaving out of the Battery's twelve guns a minimum of three guns at the airport and four guns around the harbor. Predictors were to be used at the airport, but not in the harbor area.

At this time there were 90 personnel on the X LIST and 80 personnel on the strength of the Battery.

On 16th August "C" Troop of 7th Battery took over the gun positions at the airport, and on 19th August some 2/1st Aust. Heavy A.A. Regiment gunners arrived to receive instruction, as this Regiment was in the process of being re-organised into a light anti-aircraft regiment using Bofors 40mm guns. On 31st August the Battery received reinforcements from 2/1st Aust. Heavy A.A. Regiment, making some crews up to a total of 16 men.

There were several air raid alerts during August and September, but no aircraft came into the range of the Bofors guns.

On 25th August Iran was invaded by Russian troops in the North and by British troops in the South.

Three French ships arrived in the harbor on 20th August, the "Providence", the "Florida" and the "Mareshal Lyantry", to take the Vichy French troops, civilians and families back to France. So, with a band playing, and all the personal gear imaginable, the ships left Beirut harbor.

Relevant to the French ships coming into the harbor was an incident which could have become serious. The incident became

known on No.3 gun, (Sergeant Jim Grice,) as "Gordon McIlveen's greatest moment".

The gun was stationed at an unoccupied quarantine station overlooking the harbor. Gordon, a newly arrived NX reinforcement, was very keen to become a regular No.4 on the gun crew, and at every opportunity he would urge an N.C.O. to show him the finer points of loading and firing the gun.

One morning, directly after breakfast, he succeeded in getting Jim Grice to put him through the actions of loading and unloading. Accidentally he managed to "put one up the spout" and fired the gun. The projectile cut across the bow of one of the Vichy passenger ships as it was entering the harbor. The ship came to a halt. Signals were exchanged between ship and shore and the ship eventually proceeded on its course.

Despite months and years of endeavor, Gordon was never elevated to the position of No.4.

Most gun detachments had their servant for washing clothes, washing dishes, cooking and general tidying of the camp area. The servants would usually know before the troops of any move to be made. Some were Christian and some were Moslem. If a Moslem, then some of the time was lost to religious duties, as the Feast of Ramadan fell during this period.



Beirut. (Courtesy Australian War Memorial)