

## Workshops Section

The men of the Section were originally recruited at the Sydney Showgrounds in the months of June and July 1940.

About October of that year the unit, the 1st Australian Brigade Anti-Aircraft Workshops, was divided into two sections. One of the sections was transferred to 2/1st Heavy A.A. Regiment at Ingleburn, and the other section to 2/2nd Heavy A.A. Regiment at Puckapunyal.

In December 1940 six men each from the two Heavy Regiments were transferred to 2/3rd Aust. L.A.A. Regiment and, after assembling at Royal Park with men from Victoria and other States, were granted final leave.

The Section then proceeded to Werribee and became a part of the Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Roy Massina. The Regiment had not received any guns, and there were few motor vehicles on strength, so there was not a great deal of work for the Section.

On 29th December, 1940, the Regiment embarked for the Middle East, eventually arriving at Khassa Camp in Palestine at the end of January 1941. Six days later, the 8th Battery of the Regiment moved out for Cyrenaica, without guns or equipment. No members of the Workshops Section accompanied the Battery.

Lieutenant George Wiley was now in charge of the Section.

On Good Friday, 11th April, the Regiment, less 8th Battery, commenced the move from Khassa to Amariya Camp, about fifteen miles from Alexandria in Egypt. The Workshops Section was split, some travelling with the troops by train and some twelve men as maintenance crew with the trucks, tractors and guns, by road.

The 7th Battery moved out of Amariya on Tuesday, 22nd April, bound for Crete. Norm Anderson, Jack Marr, and Dick Plant of the Section were attached to the Battery. Temporarily attached were Viv Shinn and Jack Crowley, to assist in the unloading and installation of equipment. These two men, on completion of their work, returned to Alexandria on the corvette "Bathurst", and reinforced R.H.Q. and 9th Battery at Amariya. Subsequent to the German invasion of Crete, Anderson was killed when the destroyer "Dido" was bombed. Marr was evacuated and moved with other 7th Battery evacuees to Hill 95 in Palestine at the end of May.

On 23rd April R.H.Q., 9th Battery, Signals Section, Workshops Section and some R.A.S.C. personnel moved out of Amariya and into the Western Desert.

The guns of 9th Battery moved on to various airfields as air

defence, while R.H.Q. and ancillary troops were stationed near Abu Haggag.

The Workshops Section set up its camp with two trailers and several light-aid tents, and was attached to 9th Battery for rations and discipline. The area covered ranged between El Daba and Sidi Barrani, and included the maintenance of vehicles and guns of 9th Battery and British 3.7 Heavy A.A. Regiments.

The Section was reasonably well-equipped with transport, trade tools and some small power units, later augmented with captured German and Italian equipment. This allowed the Section to perform numerous tasks including convoy servicing, recovery and repair of captured Fiat, Lancia, S.P.A. and Volvo diesel trucks, recovery and repair of tanks, moving 3.7 A.A. guns into position to be used as field artillery, and in one instance fabricating plates for the repair of H.M.S. "Elizabeth" after the stern had been damaged by Italian limpet mines in Alexandria Harbor.

In one situation, a Ford V.8 staff car was found abandoned with its carburettor missing. A spare Chevrolet carburettor was connected to the Ford engine by an inlet fabricated from a piece of wood, the repair being sufficient to recover the vehicle.

The Section moved from Abu Haggag to Ras Hawala on 6th June.

When R.H.Q. and 9th Battery moved out of the Western Desert in July 1941, Chris Allen and Jack Crowley were attached to the 9th Battery convoy (which included a Lancia diesel truck and a B.M.W. motorcycle) until arrival in Beirut. They then returned to the Workshops Section at Hill 95, where R.H.Q. and the evacuees of 7th Battery were camped.

At Hill 95, the Section was engaged in routine maintenance and convoy servicing. The 2/4th Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment was formed in January 1942, and the Section lost many of its men to the new Regiment.

In early January 1942 R.H.Q., Signals and Workshops moved to the Canal Zone to await embarkation. Some men of the Section embarked on "Shillong", a fast, heavily-armed ship which was one of the first ships into Cochin, India. From Cochin, the vessel was ordered unescorted towards Singapore, but was recalled to Cochin until later directed to Australia.

The remainder of the Section, comprising about thirty men, embarked on the "Orcades".

Vic Kent recalls:

*"Arriving at Suez, we went aboard the "Orcades". The 1st Light A.A. Regiment had four Bofors mounted on the decks fore and aft and each side of the well decks. Some of the other units aboard were the 2/3rd Machine Gunners whose Colonel Blackburn gave his name to "Black" Force, 2/2nd Heavy A.A. Regiment and 2/5th*

"Field Company Engineers, 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion and 2/2 Aust. C.C.S.

"We called at Colombo and left with the cruiser "Devonshire" as escort. We made landfall at the Strait of Sunda, between Sumatra and Java, passing Krakatau Island on the right, and on to the bay called Oasthaven, at the head of which was the port of Telukbetung. The railway ran from here to Palembang where the oil wells were situated. Some of the troops were disembarked on to a Dutch oil tanker, leaving the 2/1st Light A.A. and 2/2nd Heavy A.A. men, and some nurses on board. When the troops arrived at the wharf, news came through that the Japs had got to the oil wells first. The pilot on the tanker "shot through" and the captain had to find his way back to the "Orcades" in the blackout, and the troops re-embarked on the "Orcades" in the early hours of the morning of 16th February.

"We arrived at the port of Tanjong Priok, near Batavia, and tied up at the wharf for several days. H.M.A.S. "Sydney" was in port. The port also had a lot of damaged ships from Singapore. It was at last decided that most of the troops would leave the ship (19.2.42) including the Bofors crews and guns, but the captain would not agree to that and offered the oerlikon guns on each end of the bridge. This may have saved us and the 2/1st Light A.A. men from getting off the boat. The 2/2nd Heavy A.A. did not have their guns on this ship. All available .303 rifles were stacked in the lounge, and the troops leaving the ship had their pick, but they were not aware that three years as prisoners of war lay ahead of them. In place of the troops, we took on board a lot of refugees, women and children, and R.A.F. personnel. We slept on deck. We started out again for Colombo with the cruiser (21.2.42).

"After several days in Colombo, we left at nightfall with the cruiser escort, but in the morning we were on our own. We thought we were going to Burma, but after two days the sun was in a position from which we deduced we were headed for home!"

The Official War History records the following contemporaneous events:

"Singapore had fallen on 15th February. A Japanese attack on Java was now imminent, and on 18th February Wavell regarded its successful defence as very doubtful, and recommended the diversion of the Australian corps to Burma.

"On the 19th the Australian troops disembarked from the "Orcades". . . . On the morning of the same day the Japanese attacked and seized the aerodrome on Bali, and bombed Darwin. A nucleus of defence was formed in Java to be known as "Black" Force under command of Lt.-Col. A. S. Blackburn. On 21st February

*the "Orcades" left Tanjong Priok. The remaining Corps troops and 7th Division were at sea. Wavell advised that this Australian force should be diverted to Burma. Mr. Churchill on 22nd February sanctioned a diversion of the leading ships in the 'Step-sister' convoy (7th Div. and Corps troops) towards Burma. However, Mr. Curtin, the Prime Minister of Australia at that time, would not agree to this move and insisted that the ships be turned back."*

The Workshops Section was eventually brought together in Adelaide, where the men were billeted in private homes, as were other members of the Regiment.

Here the Regiment was split up once again, with 9th Battery ordered to New Guinea, and 7th and 8th Batteries to Western Australia.

Chris Allen, Jim Allan, Vic Kent, Viv Shinn, F. Harrison, W. Parkinson, K. Parker, J. Gray, J. Houghton, J. Faulkner, F. Watson and some others were attached to 9th Battery. W.O.II Stockdale was in charge. At Milne Bay, these men serviced the Battery's equipment, unloaded ships in the first few weeks, and stood in as infantry when the Japanese landed, and when more Japanese troops were expected to be landed.

Some of the men were unloading the ship "Anshun" when it was sunk at the wharf by Japanese naval shelling.

In 1943, 9th Battery became part of the 2/3rd Composite A.A. Regiment and moved to Lae on 4th October, the Workshops Section moving with them.

At Lae the routine maintenance of guns and vehicles was carried out. A task of a more unusual nature was, with some 9th Battery gunners, assembling a 25mm triple barrel anti-aircraft, anti-tank gun captured from the Japanese. This entailed searching for parts to complete the gun. This was the first complete gun of its kind in the hands of the Allies at that time, and was test-fired before Headquarters staff. The gun was sent back to Monegeetta Ordnance Depot and is now with the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

The 9th Battery, as part of 2/3rd Composite A.A. Regiment, returned to Australia in 1944, and refitted. The Battery was sent to Borneo and was at the landing on Labuan Island on 10th June 1945. Some men of the Workshops Section were with the Battery at that time.

The men who had not left Adelaide with 9th Battery were attached to R.H.Q. and 7th and 8th Batteries on their being posted to Western Australia.

These men included Jack Crowley, V. T. Bowen, V. Smith, T. Board and J. Stoneham and some others. Captain W. Beaurt was in charge, having taken over from Lieutenant Wiley in the Middle East.

On arrival in Western Australia, the Section was stationed at Guildford in a private house, and, working from a garage serviced not only the 2/3rd Light A.A. Regiment, but many other units including some American formations.

Later, some guns moved north to Geraldton, Exmouth Gulf and Onslow, requiring the services of the Section on convoy maintenance and on the guns.

Some Western Australian personnel of other units were attached for training purposes.

In July 1943, the Regiment was disbanded, but 7th Battery and 8th Battery retained their identity. Some men of the Section went to the 8th Battery in the dual role of gunner and artificer.

This account of the Workshops Section has been mainly compiled from information offered from former members of the Section.

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