

Palestine Again

Returning troops stopped briefly at Amariya camp where re-grouping of units reunited late arrivals. On 30th May, Major Hipworth greeted the survivors from "A" Troop like long-lost sons of whom he had known nothing, because of lack of communications between Maleme and Battery H.Q. at Heraklion during the previous ten days.

The fate of many members of 7th Battery was to remain unknown for many months to come.

That the Crete campaign had failed for Britain when it might have succeeded, was apparent to all. But Hitler's decision, to divert from his original time schedule for the Russian campaign to conquer Crete, had cost him dearly. Although victorious German armies swept across Russia to Leningrad and the gates of Moscow, the onset of winter during the battle for Stalingrad began the stalemate and final retreat which so many of 2/3rd L.A.A. Regiment men were to witness as P.O.W.s.

The Airborne Division in Crete suffered such heavy casualties, in which 7th Battery played a significant part, that it marked the "*paratroopers' swansong*".⁽⁶⁷⁾

When Hitler was awarding medals to paratroops who served in Crete he is reported as saying, to General Student, "*Crete has shown that the day of the paratrooper is over. Paratroops are a weapon of surprise and the surprise factor has been over-played.*"

The audacity of the airborne invasion, by an army relying solely upon air power, introduced an important change in tactics; it succeeded because of the German's remarkable organisational ability and their complete mastery of the air.

7th Battery returned to Khassa in Palestine by train. There the 2/2nd Australian Heavy A.A. Regiment welcomed them.

During the next few days, late arrivals from Crete marched in, among them, Gunners Harold Dickinson, Jack Tuck, Jack James, Ian Whitney and Eddie Birch who had come out with the last N.Z. troops to be evacuated; others arrived later still after a period in hospital. There were happy reunions as men checked on the survivors amongst their mates, but there were many unanswered queries about the fate of those who had not returned, especially those from the "Hereward" of whom nothing was known.

The final figures for the Crete campaign told the sad story of loss for 7th Australian L.A.A. Battery: Maleme Sector ("*A*" Troop) 20

returned; 12 killed and 2 died of wounds; 1 of illness later in hospital, 41 prisoners. Heraklion Sector ("B" and "C" Troops and B.H.Q.): 70 returned; 40 killed, 66 prisoners. The total figures 55 killed, 107 P.O.W., 90 returned, are in striking contrast to those quoted in the Official History where the cost to 7th L.A.A. Battery is shown as "2 killed, 2 wounded and 144 prisoners."⁽⁶⁸⁾

Questions exercising the minds of those who had returned concerned the future of the Battery and the chance of getting leave. Mail had piled up, and parcels provided luxuries the men's stomachs could not at first tolerate, after the long period of simple and often very meagre fare; but visiting the tents of those with the best food parcels for supper became a popular pastime.

The postal services did a remarkable job in safely delivering so many letters and parcels. There was much letter writing to home folks to give what reassurance could be given within the limits of censorship.

Leave became freely available to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, but some who had lost their pay books during the evacuation had to depend on loans from mates until new pay books could be issued.

On leave in Tel Aviv, the luxury of a haircut and shave in a barber's shop and a hot bath became the highpoint of indulgence for most.

Some enterprising shopkeepers arranged for messages on gramophone records to be forwarded home.

New issues of clothing and kit replaced the dilapidated or lost items and soon everyone returned to normal camp routine, although most experienced some difficulty in adjusting.

On Sunday, 8th June, a group on leave in Jerusalem was waiting in the Russian Church compound to hire a taxi to return to Khassa camp. A diary entry for that day continues: "*Saw a number of Palestine Police Officers who have been conscripted into the army and are about to leave for Syria for 'diplomatic purposes'. We learned that Britain marched into Syria at 0200 hours that morning.*"

This news did not ring any bells for 7th Battery at the time, because Major Hipworth was in Egypt, presumably learning what the Unit's future was to be; and the Unit's returned men numbered no more than one Troop. It was only much later, when 9th L.A.A. Battery arrived to spend one night at Khassa, that it was learned that they were on their way to represent the 2/3rd L.A.A. Regiment in Syria.

A bombing raid on Tel Aviv on the night of 12th June resulted in new interest in checking slit trenches in the camp. That same day, Gunner T. D. Simpson, who died from typhoid fever contracted in Crete, was buried in Gaza War Cemetery.

(68) Long Gavin p315

Life for the local community around the camp sites went on normally; harvesting of grain followed the same pattern and practices as those of centuries past. Camels and donkeys trampled the heaps of hay before the straw was tossed in the air to separate the grain.

The camps provided a good market for straw used to fill palliasses, which the troops found too often developed their own colonies of the local fleas, ever-ready to migrate into blankets to feast at night.

Each camp site also had its fringe-dwellers ready to pick-up and whisk away any unguarded item, whether food, valuable equipment, or even weapons. Security measures were tightened and sentries were instructed to assert their authority to the full.

Erection of tents heralded the arrival of a group of 60 reinforcements on 17th June, bringing 7th Battery to about half-strength.

The formation of new gun crews meant that many mates were separated as promotion opportunities required them to move to new groups. Route marches and P.T. sessions occurred daily with diversions, in the form of cricket matches and donkey race meetings, helping to break the monotony.

The news, on 22nd June, that Russia and Germany were at war, cheered everyone with the hope that this change in the balance of power might hasten the end of the conflict.

The grapevine provided the information that 7th Battery was to be attached to 6th Division A.I.F. Up to that time, the Regiment had seemed destined to be fragmented, always under different commands so the prospect of serving with Australian units was welcomed.

The anticipated arrival of new guns provided some incentive to be enthusiastic even about digging gun pits.

Evening news sessions brought together groups of eager listeners wherever there was a radio. The effect of the Crete campaign in delaying the Germans became apparent as the importance of Russian pressure from the East increased.

Flights of British aircraft, in groups of twelve or fifteen, on their way northwards over the camp, further raised the men's spirits; planes in such numbers in the past had meant only enemy aircraft.

About this time, a warning issued to troops anticipated the distribution of communist propaganda, and required the arrest of anyone caught. This seemed strange considering the general rejoicing that Russia had joined the fight against Germany.

German and Vichy planes operating from Syria raided the Tel Aviv area, but expected raids on camp sites didn't eventuate. News reports from the Russian front, Syria and Abyssinia, on 5th July, gave cause for some optimism.

Gun crews, including reinforcements, went to Aqir aerodrome for

experience with Bofors guns belonging to the 52nd British L.A.A. Regiment, whose 156 Battery served with the 7th Battery in Crete. The airfield's impressive array of Hurricane and Blenheim planes was a sight anti-aircraft gunners could appreciate.

On 9th July, sixteen more gunners marched in – some of them from 8th and 9th Batteries, and some returning casualties.

On 14th July, men listened on the radio to an account of the meeting of British and Vichy officers to decide on the terms of an armistice to end the Syrian fighting.

On 21st July, 7th Battery packed up and moved to Hill 95, some fifteen miles south of Khassa, where the men proceeded to make themselves comfortable.

The three 6' x 8" bed-boards supplied, proved popular for making beds above ground level. Life for several days following was fully occupied with erecting tents for the 2/1st L.A.A. Regiment which was due to arrive, and for the promised arrival of more of the 2/3rd L.A.A. Regiment.

On 26th July, Colonel Rhoden arrived with R.H.Q. and was obviously especially pleased to shake hands with the survivors from Crete.

Late, as was expected, the 2/1st L.A.A. Regiment duly arrived after dark. The coppers of stew had been ready for hours and the men were hungry, so a feed came first and the men were then guided to their quarters by 7th Battery personnel.

The anticipated reunion that night with 9th Battery was very short-lived; the unit moved out, after a brief over-night stay, on the way to Beirut.

On 1st August, 1941, the first anniversary of the formation of the 2/3rd L.A.A. Regiment, Colonel Rhoden, in a letter, marked the occasion by complimenting all concerned on their efforts and record, summarising as follows:

7th Battery – Achievements: *Action in Crete as static Battery. Bofors guns. Credited with 62 planes in six weeks. Loss in personnel, approximately 200. Present strength, with reinforcements, 230.* **8th Battery – Achievements:** *Action in Tobruk for 6 months. All types of captured guns. Credited with 30 planes. Loss in personnel, approximately 50.* **9th Battery – Achievements:** *Action in Western Desert for 3 months as mobile Bofors unit. Credited with 9 planes. Loss in personnel, 1 killed.*

Troops continued to receive regular practice in gun drill at Aqir and rifle shooting at Jaffa rifle range.

Visits to the beach, where the Comforts Fund ran a hut supplying free tea, biscuits and cigarettes, provided welcome interludes to dreary route marches – always along dusty tracks through dirty villages in the heat of the day.

On the 11th August, while the 7th Battery was on parade, the

C.O. escorted two Arabs along the ranks apparently inspecting the men.

The sergeant of one section in "B" Troop recalls that he was standing at the end of the front rank, hoping that the whole charade would hurry to a conclusion. The men just weren't accustomed to being inspected by local villagers. Suddenly, one of the Arabs stopped in his track and, pointing an accusing finger at a gunner in the front rank, jabbered away in Arabic, which being translated indicated that this was the man he sought. A glowering C.O., annoyed that one of his men should be so identified, strode off with the inspecting party.

The inevitable parade before Major Hipworth followed. The evidence was produced — one button on a piece of cloth, torn from a soldier's shirt in the scuffle when the Arabs wrestled with the intruders in the orchard at night. Gunner A — had made the mistake of wearing that shirt on parade, and of standing in the front rank.

Major Hipworth, realising that punishment of all who visited vineyards or orange groves illegally was impractical, sought a basis for a charge on more serious grounds.

"Gunner A — did you strike this man?" he asked.

"No sir," replied the gunner solemnly, "*if I had hit him he would not be here complaining.*" After a sharp talk and a minor sentence of several days C.B. the case was settled. As the sergeant marched the culprit out he caught the twinkle in the Major's eye. It was well known that Major Hipworth had been there in W.W.I. with the Australian Light Horse, and doubtlessly had memories of similar minor escapades in which he had been involved. The humanity, sense of humor, and rapport with his men had already endeared him as "Hippy" to 7th Battery.

On 16th August, events began to move quickly; 9th Battery trucks arrived from Syria to transport "C" Troop of 7th Battery northward to relieve on 9th Battery guns; "B" Troop moved to the aerodrome at Lydda leaving "A" Troop and B.H.Q. at Hill 95. About that time, radio news questioning Japan's actions caused disquiet amongst the troops, one prophetic entry in Sergeant Harold Dickinson's diary being, "*Things look uneasy re Japan. If anything happens there I'm afraid the A.I.F. would take some holding here.*"

On 5th September, bombs were dropped on Deir Suneid about three miles from Hill 95 encouraging troops to take more interest in their training.

On 19th September, word was received that Sergeant Max Whiteside, wounded at Maleme, had died in a Greek hospital.

In the following week, troops were busy erecting tents at Kilo 89. On 25th September troops from Tobruk and the Western Desert

poured into the new sites. The word spread that all Aussies were mustering in Palestine. Then came the news that 8th Battery were at Beit Jirja camp about a mile from Hill 95 and would arrive on the morrow.

Great rejoicing, as the 8th came in at 0845 hours on 29th September, tired, dusty, and showing the strain of their eight months in the desert! 7th Battery was on parade, waiting, and gave them a mighty cheer; but the Hill 95 men had been so busy erecting tents on new camp sites for others that sufficient tents were not immediately ready for their returning 8th Battery mates, to everyone's annoyance.

At 2100 hours 9th Battery arrived from Syria and once again the 2/3rd L.A.A. Regiment was together as a unit after eight long months separation; but not for long, because 9th Battery were off at 0500 hours next morning for Ismailia (on the Canal) — a mobile anti-aircraft battery indeed!

Many 8th Battery men who had been granted four days leave did not have slouch hats as they had been living continuously in the tin variety, so there was much borrowing from their 7th Battery mates. None of them wanted to go on leave wearing a brand new hat!

7th Battery were told by the 8th Battery men that Blamey, at a review, had said that the men who had been in the Desert, Greece and Crete, "*had seen nothing yet compared with what they would see!*"

As he had been made a full General, it seemed a full Army Corps under his command was forming in Palestine ready for action.

News that Mr. Curtin had taken over as Prime Minister led to speculation as to how he would handle the strikes, stop-work meetings, the lag in recruiting, and 5th columnists; the feeling amongst the troops was that many of the people back home were not pulling their weight.

Early in October, news from the Russian front was ominous with the German army at the gates of Moscow.

On the home front, Caulfield Cup fever was occupying public interest. The camps buzzed with sweeps and bookies' odds.

During the last week of October, a call was made for men with any experience in skiing. The fact that snow had fallen in Syria seemed to provide the only logical destination for such men.

Talk of a three day bivouac became the next topic of interest, especially as it was planned to tow dummy guns, constructed by the Workshops, in an exercise also involving 2/1st Field Artillery.

Travelling towards the Hebron Hills, camping in olive groves and deploying guns into strategic positions in moonlight, was particularly good experience for the reinforcements who were made to feel an integral part of the Battery.

The wild country had many huge caves which could shelter large

numbers of men or sheep; the local Arabs were much bolder and more independent than those met in the villages. Shots were often fired to discourage marauders who came too close. After the comic opera of playing with dummy guns, rifle shots in the dark added some reality to the exercise.

The deadly inactivity in following weeks made the men restless, with the inevitable incidents of breaches of discipline landing men up on charges – an experience common to all units bored with inactivity.

On 12th November, Captain Young, the Regiment's Adjutant transferred to the 2/2nd Heavy A.A. Regiment, and several sergeants were posted to the reinforcement training centre at Nieu Serat.

Further exercises in the Hebron Hills, between Jerusalem and Hebron, involved co-operation with 2/1st Field Regiment and an Anti-Tank Regiment in the wild stony area which was considered to be a possible future battle ground.

A sergeant, returned from a camouflage course, told of the activity seen in the Arab Legion country north of Amman near Irbid, and the Arab Legion post at El Salt in Trans Jordan. There, Indian forces and Arab workmen were employed in constructing "dragon's teeth" tank traps, and anti-tank pill-boxes camouflaged as rocky outcrops in the open areas, and as mud huts, on the edges of villages or hidden in prickly pear hedges. The possibility of a German thrust through that area towards the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee was obviously taken seriously.

Knowledge of such possibilities would have made many exercises much more meaningful for the troops.

News of the loss of H.M.A.S. "Sydney" and H.M.A.S. "Parramatta" received on 2nd December and messages from the Western Desert gave further cause for concern. Then, on 8th December, with news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the American and Australian declaration of war the men became anxious for the welfare of their families, and felt frustrated that they were so far away doing virtually nothing.

News of the loss of H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and H.M.S. "Repulse" came as a further blow.

Lord Haw Haw struck a responsive note for the troops with his comment on 15th December, that "The Australian Army is like Wirth's Circus – only the Army has more tents." Viewed from the position of the listener, there appeared to be some truth in the claim.

The troops were cheered on Christmas Day to learn that they were to have a day of rest, while sergeants and officers were to do the fatigues and work. For Christmas meals: roast beef, roast vegetables and pudding with a bottle of beer per man for dinner;

pork, salad of lettuce, radishes and onions, fruit salad, cakes and cream, and a bottle of beer for tea.

Hail added to the discomfort during the day, but in Jerusalem during the week it snowed – the first time since General Allenby and the Light Horse entered the city after defeating the Turks in W.W.I. The Arabs thought that a good omen for the prospect of an early peace! The Hebron hills were certainly quite a sight, blanketed in snow.

A memorable event to mark the anniversary of the 2/3rd Regiment's departure from Melbourne was the arrival of three Kerrison predictors and three generators, but no guns, leading one soldier to record: *"After six months now, when we have just mucked around and feel pretty fed up with the whole game, we shall doubtless be driven mad with training on this most incomplete equipment. Units such as ours must be needed somewhere. The troops want equipment, action, and home."*

Early in January, the formation of a 2/4th L.A.A. Regiment was announced. Members of 7th Battery had mixed feelings at the thought of the transfers involved: Captain Baglin was transferred on promotion to Major, Lieutenant Dyer of 9th Battery was promoted to Captain in 7th Battery and a number of N.C.O.s were selected for the new unit.

Training continued on antiquated French Bofors, but the men waited impatiently to learn who else was to transfer; for as one soldier commented, *"after all the 7th is the 7th"*.

Major Hipworth announced that twelve Bofors for the Battery were *"handy"* with necessary transport, and that the 7th Battery was under fourteen days operation orders. The question was *"where?"*

By the 14th January, preparations to move began in earnest. The men were keyed up with curiosity and expectation. A sea voyage was rumored. Cyprus?, Syria?. Malta?, Western Desert?, Suez?, Burma?. Then the possibilities conjured up included a two thousand mile trip, or Australia!

The 16 N.C.O.s departed for the 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment on 16th January, among them Sergeants Stan Watkins, and Frank Parkinson who were "originals", and Bob Frankling who had been left behind in Melbourne because of sickness, but had caught up with survivors from Crete while waiting at Amariya for transport to Tobruk.

He had volunteered as a reinforcement, believing his "A" Troop mates to be there. When Major Hipworth learned the facts he had arranged for his transfer to "A" Troop. The Battery paraded to wish them luck but many were saddened by the parting.

Major Hipworth announced that as from 23rd January 7th Battery would be on twenty-four hours notice to move, with no leave

thereafter. The 23rd came and went; troop movement proceeded in all directions, but it was not until 26th January that the news broke – 2/3rd Australian L.A.A. Regiment's thirty-six guns were to be mounted as A.A. defence on transports; but going where?

The 29th January, 1942 saw the advance parties from 7th and 8th Batteries leaving Hill 95. The 29th December, 1940 had marked the Regiment's embarkation from Melbourne to arrive at Haifa on 29th January, 1941; survivors from Crete had reached Alexandria on 29th May, 1941.

News on the war fronts told of Rommel's advance on Benghazi, the Russian's battle around Smolensk and of Singapore still in British hands.

Those who travelled by road to Egypt, saw the lines of trenches from W.W.I. near Beer Sheba. The ribbon of tarred road across the desert, seen by moonlight, seemed much less monotonous and forbidding than by day. Near the Canal, endless prison camps, airfields crowded with hundreds of unpacked crates of aircraft, and barrage balloons came into view. Everywhere there was evidence of great activity.

The transit camp about five miles from Suez already accommodated 9th Battery.

It was a dusty, dirty place with conditions even worse than those at Amariya, but the arrival of new guns and tractors spurred the men to work with a will in cleaning and servicing them.

"Itie" prisoners, wearing large blue diamond distinguishing patches on the seats of their trousers, moved happily about their fatigue duties, obviously satisfied that the life they led was preferable to the alternatives in Mussolini's army or working with the Germans.

With the arrival of B.H.Q., the troops learned that movement to Port Said was imminent. One diarist wrote: *"All straining at the bit. Zero hour 2400 and glad we shall be able to get out of this stinking hole. There are many ships in port. Troops come and go with great convoys of equipment. Everyone hopes for home."*

The trip to Port Said was a pleasant experience for the boisterous gun crews packed on their overloaded gun tractors. Port Said was another generally filthy spot with many tumble-down mud and lath two-storey houses, and inhabitants as unpromising in appearance as the dwellings and their surroundings.

The Canal and harbors were cluttered with shipping. While Indian troops disembarked from transports, Australian troops embarked on others nearby. Overhead, barrage balloons provided some protection against low-flying aircraft attack.

Gun crews stayed with their equipment on the wharves amongst the mountains of supplies and equipment being unloaded for the desert campaign.

Not surprisingly, "scrounging" became a popular activity during the days and, in some instances, weeks of waiting for departure. One sergeant recorded that his gun crew supplemented their rations with 25000 cigarettes, cases of tinned fruit, cordial and aspros – the last-named seemingly appropriate later, when they saw a sling slip and their loaded gun tractor met the deck nose first.

Another sergeant recalls that a gunner was found admiring a Sperry gyro-compass taken from a tank. As some-one's life would depend on that, it was duly returned and the need for restraint in "acquiring" supplementary rations or souvenirs was stressed. Later, the sergeant received his mild rebuke, when he awoke during the night to find himself surrounded by a wall of cases of tinned food-stuffs, neatly stacked by some members of the gun crew.

Siting of the guns to gain maximum field of fire, and their secure lashing to the deck, became matters of prime concern to the gunners once guns were loaded.

Few of the ships carried adequate life-boat facilities, so additions were provided in the form of rafts made from four gallon drums within wooden frames. The Dutch skipper of the S.S. "Ittersum" was asked whether these rafts would last long in the water. After glancing at the deck cargo of three-tonner trucks loaded with ammunition he replied, "*If they are hit we will all need wings not rafts.*"

Between the 2nd February, and the 1st March, 1942 the transports departed in small groups or individually, usually with barrage balloons floating above them. These measured thirty-six feet in length, nine feet in diameter and could be raised to a height of 2000 feet.

Many of the ships were only slow tramps and had to make their way as best they could. Some made landfall in India at Bombay, Cochin or Colombo, where they remained for as long as a fortnight, while decisions were made as to their ultimate destination because of the changing fortunes of war. Others steamed on continually changing course in accordance with instructions received daily.

Radio silence was observed during daylight hours, but each evening, at a specified time, ships tuned in to London for instructions. At the sight of smoke on the horizon, skippers usually changed course or slowed down to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Those who travelled on the "Ittersum" realised one morning, soon after "*stand-to*", that the officers on the bridge were watching the horizon intently. This was a period when a submarine stalking its prey might be expected to strike, but the cause for concern soon materialised in the form of two destroyers. They circled at a safe distance with signal lamps blinking before disappearing as quickly as they had come. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and eagerly

awaited the Captain's explanation: "Escorts from the aircraft-carrier "Hermes" were searching for Japanese raiders known to be in the area." Later it was learned that the "Hermes" had been sunk by enemy action on 5th April 1942.

Gunners who travelled on the "City of Hankow" were among those who called at Cochin, south of Bombay on the west coast of India. They had heard of the fall of Singapore on 16th February as one diary entry stated: "Bloody awful show which needs investigation: 55,000 British, Australian and Indian prisoners. The usual muddling we guess. Wonder at our destination now." Then three days later, on 19th February, came the news of the bombing of Darwin – the first bombs on Australian soil.

With the fate of the East Indies in the balance, several ships were held at Cochin. The men had received no mail for two months and no mail was going out, so restlessness soon became apparent. Shore leave was allowed with organised groups attending the Rajah's garden party to help relieve the tension.

Some of the troops bought monkeys and took them aboard as pets, but as the time to depart arrived it was "all monkeys ashore". As the "City of Hankow" resumed its journey, the Adjutant announced that the original destination had been Java, but following its loss the destination was – Australia!



"ITTERSUM". Loaded trucks as deck cargo leaving Suez.



"ITTERSUM". Life rafts with emergency supplies.