

## In the Biblical Lands

The Battery crossed the Suez Canal again by ferry, then travelled by train back to Palestine. As usual they slept on seats, floors, luggage racks and in the corridors. The men were heartily welcomed back to their Headquarters of the 2/3rd Light Anti-aircraft Regiment at Hill 95, a few miles north of Gaza where Australian Light Horsemen had fought in World War 1.

Palestine was a "land of milk and honey" indeed after the desert in Libya. Here were enjoyed good Australian rations, ample water, tents to live in and canteens where little luxuries could be purchased. Oranges were available from Arab urchins at 50 for six-pence. Grapefruit cost little more. With good food, including abundant fruit and vegetables, the men quickly put on weight and the desert sores disappeared.

The gunners kept a wary eye on aircraft flying over; but these were friendly in contrast to the preceding months when all aircraft were hostile.

Four days leave was granted to enable the men to visit Tel Aviv. This clean city was appreciated after life in the desert, it being the first urban foreign life that the soldiers had experienced, apart from their day in Colombo. As few had travelled abroad before, they were intrigued by everything, historical and contemporary. The men also visited old and new Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Dead Sea, and were reminded of their biblical history.

During the Battery's sojourn at Hill 95, several of the N.C.O.'s and Officers were transferred to the newly formed 2/4th Light Anti-aircraft Regiment. To make up these and the Libyan losses, the 8th Battery was re-inforced with an excellent group of men who quickly settled in and assimilated with the original members.

Several men from the Regiment accepted an invitation to visit the communal Jewish settlement, Gevat Brenner, near Rehovot. This settlement had commenced some 13 years before. As some of these kibbutzes have survived harsh conditions for sixty years or more at the time of writing, a gunner's observations of Gevat Brenner in 1941 are noteworthy:

*"Nine hundred Jews, mostly refugees from Germany live on and from 450 acres of intensely cultivated land. Gevat Brenner was commenced in 1928, in desert. Irrigated by bore water, the main crop is citrus fruit. One third of the land grows feed for cattle which are not allowed to graze as it is more economical to hand-feed them. The farming is mixed to offset bad seasons in any particular branch.*

"What it cannot supply, such as clothing, is purchased from trading profits. The jam factory is a valuable source of income. No field or property belongs to any one person. No worker receives wages or gains individual profit for the work performed. Every one works according to his or her ability, and draws necessities according to need. Surplus produce is sold for the benefit of the community.

"When a new settlement is pioneered, the people suffer hardships, and often have to repel attacks by Arabs. After 13 years of hard work, this kibbutz has a communal dining hall which is used for orchestral concerts, dances and meetings. They have a library, sanatorium, school, dormitories for single men and women and two-room bungalows for the married couples. There are a bakery, butchery and workshops. All skilled workers are in permanent positions. The unskilled people take their turn at agricultural work, cooking, waiting, laundering, dairying and other laboring tasks.

"Some settlements grant the workers a paid holiday annually for one or two weeks. The life has its advantages. Their job is secure; their sick are well cared for. The children are well educated; there is full time schooling until 16 years of age, then half-time schooling until aged 18 years with half-time work. If the scholar shows exceptional ability, expenses are paid for University training. Young people can marry without financial worry.

"There are disadvantages. The unskilled workers' lot is hard and monotonous. Individual ambition is stifled as no one can possess personal wealth; but they say this prevents avarice and greed. Communal feeding, orders for the days work, requests for leave suggested too much regimentation for Australians. Yet these people seemed better off than many Australians at home. The Jews look fit, healthy and content. The children are a fine lot. The settlements are prospering and new settlements are being formed.

"After being shown around the settlement, we were served a three course meal. According to our customs, the meal seemed to be the wrong way round – oranges first, then schnitzel and rice, and to end the meal, soup. After dinner, the settlers turned up for a concert and dance when a symphony orchestra played excellent music. This was followed by community singing with Australian songs alternated by the Jews singing in their languages. Finally there was an all-in folk dance, with coats off, round and round to a chant. As one falls out tired, another takes his or her place. It was good fun and hard work, relieved with glasses of orange juice."

On the 8th December 1941, it was learned that Japan had entered the war on the side of Germany and Italy by bombing the American base, Pearl Harbor. The thought of gaining the United States of America as a strong ally was welcomed.

The men settled down to Regimental camp life. There was training with Bofors guns at Aqir aerodrome, marching to get fit, small arms practice, routine camp fatigues and guard duties. Most of the troops were granted a week's leave to visit Cairo in Egypt. There they did all the things that their fathers or uncles of the first A.I.F. had done about 25 years before. They visited the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the mosques, the Nile Delta, the bazaars, the horse races and they rode camels. It seemed odd to visit the Gezira Sporting Club where numerous British officers were playing polo with horses which were being cared for by many Indian soldiers – odd to see such extravagant pastime while battles were being waged just a few hundred miles across the desert; but perhaps the officers too were just on leave.

Groppis was an interesting cabaret with giant negroid waiters dressed in flowing red robes, looking like eunuchs of early Egyptian days. At the other end of the scale were dives where drinks and entertainment were cheaper in price and in quality. Girls would sit with a soldier as long as he was prepared to buy a drink of *'lolly water'* at 4/6d a time, out of which the girl would get her cut from the waiter. With a drink being the major part of a day's pay, the diggers soon pushed the girls away. The most tawdry area of all was the red light area of Wasir El Burka which had got many soldiers of earlier times in trouble. Many of the troops looked in on the dingy smelly street which had ladies of many shades, of color and of varied age. Most of the troops, being well forewarned by the army medical officers of dire perils, treated their visit as a sightseeing jaunt only. The King Fouad Museum of Hygiene was also a warning to all to keep away from the local loose women. Amongst other things, it contained horrifying exhibits of diseases of the human body, particularly of the venereal diseases so common in Egypt.

The army issued "Blue Light outfits" to troops going on leave. The outfit consisted of a condom and ointments for prevention of disease for men who were prepared to risk a visit to the painted ladies. In Cairo, very few men would have been tempted, but many took the outfits out of curiosity. One gunner had the bright idea of putting his watch into the condom to keep out desert dust. When he was asked the time of day, he would dutifully dangle the condom to inspect the watch!

At El Kantara, by the Suez Canal, the gunners met Free French troops who looked smart in their Foreign Legion type of peaked caps. What a tragedy it seemed. The youth of nations fighting for

one side or both sides. If German servicemen had been born British, or British servicemen born German, each one of them would still believe he was fighting for a just cause.

Back at Palestine around Christmas time, winter had set in. There was rain, wind, hail, sleet and snow. Guard duty at night, dressed in great-coats and groundsheets to patrol the camp, was not pleasant in teeming cold rain. Tents were frequently blown down at night. The troops usually slept on under the damp collapsed tents until daylight rather than having to get out in the dark dismal conditions.

The Regiment's Welfare Fund, financed by the efforts of the gunners' wives and mothers back home, provided a fine Christmas Dinner in large marquees. Officers waited on the other ranks.

The 29th December 1941 marked a year's operations since sailing from Port Melbourne. It had been the most eventful year in the lives of most of the gunners. Many of their mates were dead, wounded, or had been captured by the enemy, to remain in Prisoner-of-War camps for the duration of the war. The survivors, together with their reinforcements who were already indistinguishable from the originals, would not have realised that they still had nearly 4 years to go as soldiers. Early in the new year of 1942, men of the Battery were again well treated for leave. They took the opportunity of being tourists in the Holy Land visiting Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Haifa, the Dead Sea and Jericho. In mid January, rumors were about that British and American troops had arrived in Australia. General Thomas Blamey and General Leslie Morshead inspected a large parade of the men who had been at Tobruk. The Generals congratulated the men on their past work, but warned them of the stiff tasks ahead. In any case, after having experienced the life of being on gunsites, where the crews to a large extent managed their own affairs to cope with whatever conditions they encountered, the troops were becoming rather bored with regimental camp life with its round of guard duties and various fatigues such as assisting the cooks, washing dishes and cleaning out latrines. In February 1942, the 8th Battery was pleased to be equipped with 40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns and new trucks for the first time since its formation about one and a half years before. A gunner said at the time that history has a habit of repeating itself and that no doubt Australians will again be called at some future time to fight for their country and their lives — ill-equipped and ill-trained.

On the 11th February the Battery pulled down its camp and said farewell to Palestine. As part of the Regiment, it was moved by train to Geneifa Camp, Egypt, near the Suez Canal Lakes. Again for a few days the Battery, to its disgust, found itself on British Army rations with a typical evening meal being a slice of bread and an onion. It was no wonder, the men thought, that the British Tommies were

often physically small men.

The Regiment's destination was unknown to the troops who were astounded and disappointed to hear of the loss of Singapore to the Japanese and of the sad loss of the A.I.F.'s 8th Division in Malaya and Singapore. After travelling by train to Suez the men of the Regiment embarked on to many ships which were to travel in convoy with the object of the Bofors guns being used on the ships as part of the anti-aircraft defence. However, many of the 8th Battery personnel embarked on a modern 20,000 ton ship, the "Andes". The servicemen were generally very crowded beneath decks, but the gunners who were manning anti-aircraft guns lived and slept by their guns on the decks with some degree of comfort.

Troopship life became boring, with card games being the main pastime. The tropical heat affected the troops making them lethargic; but they had no complaint as the food was good and the ship was clean.

The "Andes" made good time, arriving in a week at Colombo, which had been the Regiment's first foreign port of call on its journey to the Middle East.

The account of the return to Australia is recorded in the section on the Regiment. A gunner adds brief memories of the 8th Battery's return:

*"The "Andes", being a fast ship, left the convoy, and sped along at 21 knots. To our great joy we learned that we were heading back to Australia.*

*"On the 10th March we arrived at Fremantle, Western Australia. Only a small number of people were there to welcome us in good style with an Army band playing with gusto - 'Roll Out The Barrel'.*

*"What a thrill it was to see Australian shores again, with a large batch of mail awaiting us.*

*"Twenty-six days out from Suez, after a rough trip across the Great Australian Bight where many of the boys were seasick, we sailed into Port Adelaide.*

*"We were paid in Australian currency for the first time since leaving home, in the meantime having used Ceylonese, Indian, Palestinian, Egyptian, Italian and English currency.*

*"On disembarkation, we had the unusual experience of being billeted in private homes around Adelaide, mostly at Campbelltown and Paradise. This was an area of small farms, many of which produced celery. The householders were paid a modest allowance to provide for the men. Six of us were billeted with an older lady, Mrs. Ridley, who looked after her soldiers as if they were her sons. The kind local people entertained the men with tennis and dances and provided wonderful home-cooked meals.*

*"The guns and equipment had been distributed over many ships for the journey home from the Middle East so we had to wait a while to collect them. Meantime we were granted four days leave at our homes where we received joyous welcomes from families and friends. The families of course were delighted to see their husbands, sons, fathers or brothers in good shape, generally a little more knowledgeable, tougher, and in most cases a little more serious and mature after their first year or so of real soldiering".*