

## Suez Canal Zone

The stay in Beirut came to an end on 29th September 1941, when the Battery moved out to proceed to the Canal Zone, camping the first night at Hill 95 in Palestine with Regimental H.Q., 7th Battery, and 8th Battery which had been shipped out of Tobruk three days previously.

This was the first time the Regiment had been together since 6th February 1941, but it was not to be for long, as 9th Battery moved out in the morning, passing down through Palestine, across the Sinai Desert to the Canal and camping there. The following day the Battery moved through Ismailia and down the Canal towards Suez, where the guns took up anti-aircraft positions along the Canal.

From a gunner's diary of 13th October: *"A ship mined in the Canal and sinking but quickly got out of the main channel and other ships were soon passing along. A cruiser proceeded with the convoy and luckily passed over the mine without striking it."*

There was an interesting parade of ships along the Canal. Ships flying flags of nations in the Allied cause, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, little ships, big ships all came and went.

Near the guns and close to the east bank of the Canal was a huge crater resulting from a mine which had been dropped a little off course by enemy aircraft.

The R.A.F. patrolled the Canal with a Vickers Wellington equipped with a huge metal circle extending under both wings and under the body. This mechanism was to explode any magnetic mines in the Canal. Some ships were equipped with devices against magnetic mines.

It was during this time there was born the idea of, not a Head of the River, but Head of the Canal sponsored by Charlie Saleh. Charlie had been a successful coxswain with the Sydney Rowing Club before transferring to Melbourne in 1935. He coached Geelong College until he enlisted in 1940. Quoting Charlie from a newspaper cutting, *"I have been doing some rowing coaching over here. Last week I selected two pair-oar crews from the 'A.A.' to race against the R.A.F. We had only a few days of training before racing a distance of half a mile. Jim Grice, who stroked Melbourne Grammar in 1939, was stroke of one crew. In an exciting race, Grice's crew was beaten by one from the R.A.F., stroked by an Oxford University oarsman, with a Thames man rowing bow. In the other race the 'A.A.' crew won by eight lengths. Jim Coghlan, who stroked Xavier in 1931, was stroke, and R. Rowan, who*

rowed for Geelong Grammar in 1938, was bow. The races were rowed against a strong tide. This was the first time any 2nd A.I.F. oarsmen had rowed against the R.A.F."

Keith Wilson tells another side to the Head of the Canal episode.

*"Along the Suez Canal when the Unit was trying out rowers for a contest with the Poms, we had two to a rowing boat and as Huck Finlay and myself were gearing up we were asked by a 'rower' from one of the ex 'school tie' boys 'Who did you row for?'. I think I made the mistake of saying 'I rowed for my Old Man who was a fisherman on Lake Macquarie'. We didn't get picked."*

At 1.30 a.m. on 2nd November, there was an air raid. The searchlights picked up one plane, there was Heavy A.A. fire and some Bofors opened up. Bombs were dropped near Tewfik (Taufiq), but without causing any damage.

On 4th November there was another raid, the Heavy A.A. put up barrages at 15000 feet and at 17000 feet. Bombs were dropped, but little damage caused.

Air defences in the area also included a balloon barrage, mainly to protect the oil refinery and oil storages.

On 5th November, some guns moved to H.M.S. "Phoenix", a Fleet Air Arm station. Here the main occupation of the Navy appeared to be the testing of aircraft engines. The station was very much in the desert, with the Ataq mountains to the west, but not a great distance from Suez. Whilst here, a Liberator aircraft arrived bearing U.S.A.F. markings and flown by an American crew. However it was not long before the red, white and blue roundels of the R.A.F. replaced the American markings. The aircraft was probably flown in under the Lend Lease arrangement between Britain and the United States.

Whilst at the station, the Battery came under Royal Navy administration for rations, which included a daily rum ration, and afternoon tea on Sundays consisting of cake, bread, butter and jam and tea. Almost civilised! The beer was brewed in New Zealand.

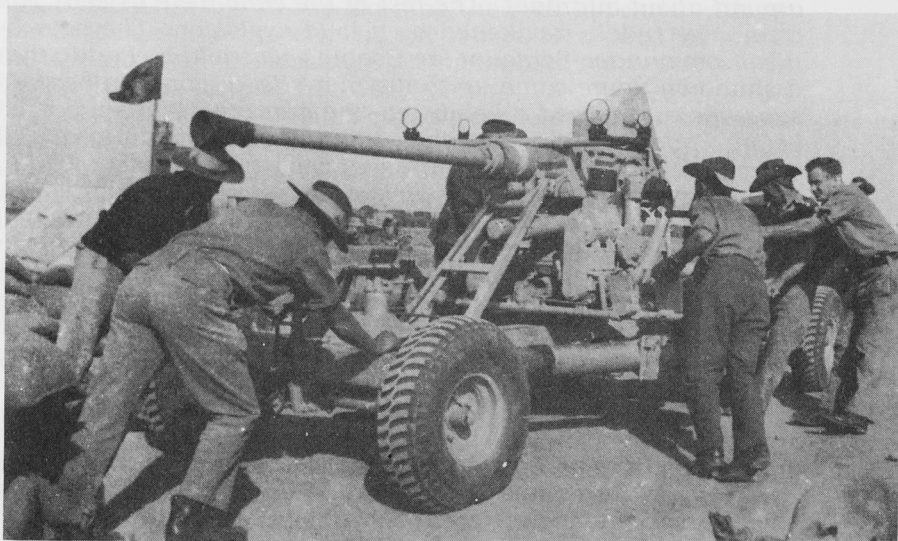
On 30th November, there was a rumor that Japan had declared war on America, but the 10.00 o'clock news did not confirm it.

Bits and pieces from a gunner's diary of date 3rd December: *"Pulled the gun out of the pit and did 'in and out of action' drill. A Bristol Beaufort (similar to those being produced in Australia) landed here today. They can be used for recon, bomber or torpedo work. Pay Day. Heard that the "Sydney" and the "Parramatta" had been sunk."*

On 7th December, the Battery paraded with the Royal Navy and moved out, Battery H.Q. to Ataq, George and Harry Troops to Suez and Tewfik, and Ink Troop to El Shatt, which was well named. El



*Morris tractor and gun on way from Beirut to Suez Canal Zone.  
(Photo courtesy M. Bird)*



*Moving gun into position - Suez Canal area.*

Shatt was on the eastern entrance to the Canal and was a sandy desert. The guns had to be winched into position as they, the 3-tonners and the gun tractors became bogged in the sand.

The next day the newspapers reported "*150 JAPANESE PLANES BOMB HAWAII*", and on the news at night it was announced that the Japanese had inflicted 3000 casualties on Hawaii, that they had attempted to land in Malaya and that Thailand had capitulated to the Japanese. It was bad news for Australian troops, who now felt that their homeland was threatened. The troops were more distressed when on 10th December they heard that H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and H.M.S. "Repulse" had been sunk by Japanese aircraft off the coast of Malaya.

However, there was a little light relief. The latrine for one of the guns was a box over a deep hole in the sand. There was absolutely no privacy; at least it was easily seen as to whether it was occupied or not. The gun sergeant thought it was time for cleaning out the latrine, so petrol was poured in and a match thrown in, a pause, no result. More petrol was added, a match thrown in, a pause, then a mighty explosion that projected the latrine into the air, the sergeant staggered a few yards, fell down, then joined in the laughter from the crew.

Another story from El Shatt.

*"My old mate, one J. C. Malone, known as Paddy, was on guard around about midnight. The rest of the crew were asleep. The crew were rudely awakened by a loud explosion. The detachment commander, Sergeant Ian Coggins, was told by Paddy that a shadowy figure came up to the gun site, apparently bent on sabotage and tossed a bomb into the gun pit. He disappeared before Paddy could get a shot at him. An immediate armed search was organised. While the search party was absent, Paddy told the true story to me. After an hour had passed on guard duty, Paddy had felt hungry. Among our provisions was a stock of Italian minestrone soup. Paddy placed one of these large cans in the brazier which was there to keep the person on guard warm, and went looking for something to go with the soup. While he was away the can, not having a hole punched in it, exploded, shattering the brazier and creating quite a mess. Paddy was very fortunate that he was not in the gun pit.*

*"An enquiry the next day did nothing to expose the truth."*

Orders were received to polish the brasswork on the gun and on webbing belts, as a General was to inspect the gun sites. When all was ready with the brasswork revealing the gun positions to the enemy, instructions were received that the inspection was not to take place after all.

On 18th December Major Hughes-Hallett left the Battery for Singapore, and Captain Margetts took command and was pro-

moted Major on 26th January.

Comforts Fund Christmas hampers and a Christmas beer ration were received just before Christmas. The hampers contained 50 cigarettes, preserved fruit, cream, Minties, dried fruit, Christmas pudding, shaving cream, tooth paste and tooth brush.

It is an Army tradition that the officers wait on the other ranks at Christmas. Dinner was well celebrated, as there was no shortage of beer.

A typical Christmas day: *"Breakfast, porridge, eggs and fish. 1030 Rain. 1100 B.S.M. Paul and Lieutenant Perry called and had a few beers. 1300 a light lunch of salmon and plum pudding. 1700 moved over to the Heavy A.A. canteen leaving the gun in charge of Robin Paul.*

*"Had a really excellent Christmas dinner and more than we wanted, finishing with a sing song in the canteen with the Poms. Boxing Day – bully beef for lunch."*

Some of the troops visited Moses' Well about 10 miles east. The well was an oasis of palm trees and bubbling ponds containing small fish. A remarkable place set in the sands of the desert.

And so the year moved on to its end with a beer or two, or a dram of Scotch.

Reg Goldfinch remembers New Year's Eve on the Suez Canal when a group from Ink Troop attended a party at the Scottish Heavy A.A. Battery nearby. In the morning the cook appeared with two beer bottles, one of kerosene and one of beer. He poured the beer on the fire and drank the kerosene. He was subsequently pumped out by the first aid people.

The troops found this time of year very cold with, on occasions, ice forming on the water and frost on the ground.

Several large troopships came into the harbor including the "Mauretania" during this period, the authorities apparently believing it was now safe to bring large vessels past Ceylon.

A red warning was received at midnight on 6th January but nothing came of it. The days progressed without incident, the time being occupied by digging-in the tents and altering gun pits.

On 10th January there were whispers of a move. The Battery was told of the formation of a light anti-aircraft regiment, to be known as the 4th Aust. L.A.A. Regiment, and on 15th January the Battery lost many good men and good friends to the new Regiment.

On 16th January there were rumors of a move for 1st, 2nd and 3rd Regiments, which gave rise to much speculation as to where the move would be.

The War Diary for this period reads:

*"Jan 20. Telephone message from A.A.D.C. Suez ordering "B" Troop to move to KASFAREET and report to A.A.D.C. Kasfareet at 1430 hrs. 21 Jan 1942. Present sites to be abandoned and to take*

*all ammunition.*

*"Jan 20. 1900 move cancelled. Jan 21. Preliminary orders for STEPSISTER move.*

*"Jan 22. 9th Aust. L.A.A. Battery less "C" Tp left ATAKA and TEWFIK for ABU ZENIMA.*

*"Jan 24. Signal received from A.A.D.C. Suez 'Prepare to Move' (Stepsister).*

*"Jan 25. Signal received 'Concentrate Suez Transit Camp at earliest.'"*

With reference to Abu Zenima, Major Margetts, O.C. 9th Battery gave this memorandum to "A" Troop and "B" Troop: *"Abu Zenima used as anchorage for ships waiting for port facilities Suez to be available. Over the moon there are usually 8 to 10 ships, sometimes with escort. Enemy bombers have been known to carry out low-flying attacks on ships at anchor. The large works belong to the Sinai Mining Co. which mines manganese ore in the interior."*

Abu Zenima is situated on the east coast of the Red Sea about 80 miles south of Suez over a very rough road. The story was that, as "A" and "B" Troops had pilfered so much American canned beer from the lighters bringing it into Port Tewfik, they were punished by this extraordinary move to Abu Zenima. "C" Troop lacked the opportunity, so they were "clean" except for all the cans that came their way from their friends in "A" and "B" Troops!

"C" Troop moved into the Suez Transit Camp with guns and equipment on 26th January, and were joined by Battery H.Q., "A" Troop and "B" Troop on 27th January, and as someone noted, *"thousands of Australians here now"*. It was a desolate spot, with Italian P.O.W.'s assisting in the menial duties around the camp. However, the troops were provided with a good N.A.A.F.I.

7th and 8th Battery advance parties arrived on 30th January. The men were told that the guns would be mounted on freighters, the crews to go with the guns, and the remainder of the troops would embark on a troopship. Some to embark at Port Said and some at Suez.

On Sunday 1st February, some "C" Troops guns moved to Port Said to embark. The guns were now being towed by "Spiders", a Chevrolet four wheel drive with a special body for light anti-aircraft work. They were a disappointment after the Morris Commercial tractors.

The story of the Regiment's embarkation and movement to Australia has been recounted in the story of the Regiment.