

Signal Section

The Signal Section of the 2/3rd Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment was formed from the 1st Australian Corps of Signals at Seymour, Victoria, on 19th June 1940. The Section consisted of approximately fifty men, mainly from New South Wales, who had been brought down from the Sydney Showgrounds, and joined with the Victorian members of the Section.

There were four Light Anti-Aircraft Signal Sections formed. Members of the Section, other than officers and N.C.O.'s, were designated as Signalmen. A part of the uniform was a leather cart-ridge bandolier, as worn by Light Horsemen in World War 1. The colour patch, white over blue in a triangle, was that of the 1st Australian Corps of Signals.

At Seymour the Section was trained in basic soldiering and signalling, which included telephone and wireless communication.

On 29th December, 1940, the Section was driven by truck to Dysart Siding, and there entrained for the journey to Princes Pier, Port Melbourne, for embarkation on H.M.T. "Mauretania". Lieutenant N. Traynor was in charge of the Section, which at this point became physically a part of the Regiment.

The "Mauretania" joined the other ships of the convoy in Bass Strait, and continued on to Fremantle, and thence to Colombo. There the Regiment trans-shipped to H.M.T. "Devonshire" which, after passing through the Suez Canal, arrived at the port of Haifa in Palestine, on 30th January 1941. The Regiment disembarked the following day and proceeded by train to El Majdal, and then by truck to Khassa Camp.

On 6th February, 8th Battery moved out of Khassa for Libya, but no members of the Signal Section were attached to the Battery.

In April the Regiment moved out of Palestine for Amariya, in Egypt. 7th Battery was ordered to embark for Crete, and one instrument-maker and five signalmen from the Section boarded a transport at Alexandria, but were withdrawn before the ship sailed.

Regimental Headquarters, 9th Battery, Workshops Section and Signal Section moved out of Amariya on 23rd April and proceeded by road into the Western Desert.

The Section was stationed at Abu Haggag from 24th April until 12th June, at Sidi Barrani from 12th June until 30th June, and at Sidi Haneesh from 30th June until 22nd July.

During this time, the Signal Section consisted of headquarters

staff, cooks, linesmen, despatch riders, a workshop and two mobile wireless units.

Attached to each Battery was a Line Section consisting of six men and a lance-corporal. The function of the Line Section was to connect each gun position by telephone to Battery Headquarters. Despatch riders were attached to each Line Section, in case of damage to telephone lines, which frequently occurred. Information was relayed to Signal H.Q., where wireless operators functioned in co-operation with Battery H.Q.

Tom Welsh recalls the duties of the Section in the Western Desert:

"The duties carried out by the Signal Unit included installation of switchboards for headquarters, connection of field telephones to gun positions, provision of mobile wireless linkage for Advanced H.Q., and for field operations against the enemy."

A gunner at B.H.Q. complains in his diary: "Sigs. test line at 7 a.m. each morning, waking us up."

The same gunner records on 19th June: "The Sigs. have a wireless station and a sig. office here, so there will be no work to do here as regards to the telephone." The diary note was written at B.H.Q., which was then near Sidi Barrani, after the retreat from the "Battleaxe" operation.

The Signal Section in the Western Desert did not operate as originally planned, but worked mainly with the R.A.F. Desert Air Force. The Section also worked with the 4th Indian Division, the Polish Brigade, and the Durham Light Infantry Battalion.

Tom Welsh recalls: "I personally operated, twice daily, a Don R Letter Service each of 90 miles, linking all forward airstrips and the headquarters of various units, both Army and Air Force. I used a Ford One Ton truck on this duty."

The Regiment moved out of the Desert on 21st July, 9th Battery moving independently to Beirut; while R.H.Q., Workshops Section and Signal Section moved to Hill 95 Camp, arriving there on 27th July 1941.

The Section remained at Hill 95 until 6th February 1942, when it moved to Suez with the Regiment, less 9th Battery, for embarkation. The Section was then under the command of Lieutenant L. R. Williams.

Before leaving the Middle East, a number of men from the Section were transferred to the newly formed 2/4th Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment.

Some members of the Section embarked on the "Andes" for eventual return to Australia, but Regimental records name Corporal Wallis, Lance Corporal Sandow, Signalmen Burrows, Hall, Mercer, Peters, Sims, Waddell and Welsh, as passengers on the ship "Anna

Odland". The ship left Port Tewfik on 15th February 1942, and arrived in Port Adelaide on 26th March 1942, after being delayed in Aden from 20th February to 1st March.

The Section was billeted in private homes in Adelaide until orders were received for the Regiment, less 9th Battery, to proceed to Western Australia. At this stage a number of men were promoted and transferred to other units.

On arrival in Perth, communication channels were set up linking gun sites at Guildford airstrip and around the Swan River, where American Catalina flying boats were stationed. Lines were also set up to gun positions at Pearce R.A.A.F. Station and No.4 F.S.T.'s at Geraldton. In Perth the Section had its own headquarters close to Regimental H.Q.

Some members of the Section were attached to 7th and 8th Batteries. The story of these batteries is told in other chapters.

Members served at Noonkanbah on the Fitzroy River, between Fitzroy Crossing and Derby; Cape Leveque, north-west of Derby where there was a Radar station; "Pot Shot" submarine base on Exmouth Gulf "Pot Shot" airstrip at Onslow, north-east of Exmouth Gulf and at Corunna Downs near Marble Bar.

R.H.Q. War Diary records that Admin. Instruction No.10, dated 3rd July 1943 from H.Q., R.A.A. 3 Aust. Corps contained the order that the Signals Section was to be transferred to 109 Aust. L.A.A. Battery. The transfer was to be completed by 14th July 1943.

The 2/3rd Aust. L.A.A. Regiment was disbanded at this time.

When 9th Battery left the Regiment in Adelaide, it proceeded first to Townsville, then to Port Moresby, where one Troop remained for some months while the other two Troops were stationed at Milne Bay.

There is no record yet found linking any of the members of the Signal Section with 9th Battery, except that Tom Welsh recalls: *"One member, Ken Scott from Victoria, was urgently flown to Milne Bay from Perth. He was a former telegraph operator with the Postmaster-General's Department, and as such was needed badly."*

When the Regiment was disbanded, 9th Battery joined with 2/6th Heavy A.A. Battery to form the 2/3rd Composite A.A. Regiment, and after service in New Guinea was refitted in Australia and sent to Labuan Island off Borneo. Tom Welsh recalls: *"Whilst at Morotai and Labuan, I met quite a few original members who enlisted in Sydney when I did. We were all in different Units, one former member Reg Farrant was serving as a navigator with a Beaufighter squadron."*

"At Labuan, because the American Forces provided most of the landing craft and the amphibious craft, most of the communica-

tions were done by the Americans. The 25th L.C. (Signals) provided field links by ground cable to various areas of the Island. When the Japanese surrendered the 25th L.C. worked long and hard restoring permanent line communications throughout Labuan."

So, at the end of the war, there were still some original members of the Section working closely beside some original members of the Regiment.

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