

8th Battery

"Stokes' Travelling Circus" in Libya



Just five days after arrival in Palestine, the 8th Battery was paraded by Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel John Rhoden and Battery Commander Major Phillip Stokes. The gunners were told, "*You have drawn the plum! You are to move to a forward area in Libya*". Their short briefings ended with an exhortation to "*fire those bloody guns!*" This brought excited cheers. Ignorance is bliss. The troops may well have asked, "*What bloody guns?*", because they didn't have any.

On 6th February, 1941, 8th Battery under the command of Major Stokes left Majdal by train for the Suez Canal, eventually crossing it by ferry at El Kantara. The inexperienced troops were burdened with far too heavy personal kits. Included in their loads were numerous tins of bully beef and packets of hard biscuits to feed themselves en route. They enjoyed their rail trip, even though the carriages were overcrowded. Several camps of British, Indian and African troops were passed as well as those of Italian prisoners-of-war captured by General Wavell's Army at the beginning of the year.

The Battery crossed the Nile, passing through mysterious looking Cairo in darkness to stage overnight at Amariya Camp. The men were roused at 0300 hours next morning to travel by train to the port of Alexandria. In the railway yards, awaiting their train, they learned of the usual Egyptian toilet arrangements of the time — on the ground, anywhere.

Alexandria was a wartime port. Many of the buildings had been badly knocked about by bombs. There were many destroyers, cruisers and aircraft carriers in the harbor. The veteran battleship "Warspite" had part of its bows blown off.

While the men were waiting on the wharf for their ship, an Arab barber, complete with chair, apron and scissors, came along looking for business. Gunner K. O. Bell, his head covered with a woollen cap, wandered out and asked to have his hair cut. The happy barber seated him, carefully tucked the apron around him, then to the amusement of the troops pulled off the woollen cap to disclose the already completely shaven head of his "customer".

After waiting six hours on the wharf, the Battery embarked on to a small, decrepit Polish merchant ship, the "Warszwar". The ship

THE TARGETS
(Not to relative scale)

Ju 88 Bomber



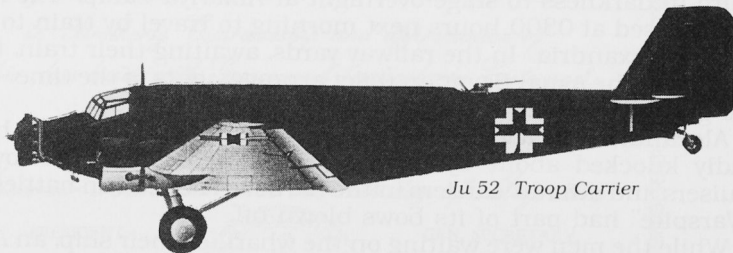
Me 110 Fighter-bomber



*Ju 87
Dive Bomber
(Stuka)*



Me 109 Fighter



Ju 52 Troop Carrier

THE JAPANESE MITSUBISHI ZERO
Fighter



was loaded with ammunition in the lower holds. The gunners were in the middle holds and small cabins. Rather grubby and morose Libyan soldiers were carried on deck amongst piles of scattered stores. Cabins and holds were filthy. Mattresses in the cabins were coated with dried blood from earlier wounded occupants. The latrines were flooded, with six inches of water and filth slopping around. Several of the troops were prepared to rebel rather than, as ordered, have to wade into the filth to clear the drains. Fortunately trouble was avoided by the ship's crew taking on the unpleasant task and clearing the blockages.

The ship headed westward through the Mediterranean. After two days pitching and rolling on choppy seas with many of the troops seasick, the "Warszwar" anchored about a mile off Tobruk Harbor. No one ashore expected or wanted the ship, or its then rather miserable troops.

On the next night, 11th February, the "Warszwar" was permitted to enter Tobruk Harbor. Tobruk had been captured by the Australian 6th Division on 22nd January. In the harbor were ten destroyers at anchor as well as a Monitor gunship with 15 inch guns and a beached 1500 ton Italian ship. A further 17 ships were sunk or aground. The Italian cruiser "San Giorgio" had been blown apart. An aeroplane was in the water. One ship was still afire.

History was still being made in a port that had been used by the mariners of Carthage, ancient Greece and Rome.

The gunners disembarked from the "Warszwar" by barge during the cold night. They marched out some four miles from the eerie deserted town, across the sandy stony desert to a valley, Wadi Auda.

The area around Tobruk was generally arid and devoid of trees. Running down to the coast were deep gullies, or as they were known there, wadis. In earlier ages, these had been carved out as water courses, then as time went on, by wind and water erosion. The only vegetation was some stunted scrub with a few palms and prickly pear bushes in some of the wadis. Above the wadis was mostly harsh, waterless, stony, sandy plain or plateau.

Wadi Auda, the Battery's first bivouac in Libya, was a valley about 200 yards across, with a few palm trees and a well, which had brackish water. What might have been an attractive little oasis was somewhat the worse for wear from the occupations by nomads and armies over the years.

The next couple of weeks were spent agreeably by the troops exploring their new domain. There seemed to be a touch of the Foreign Legion about it all. They felt that at last they were on active service. The recently defeated Italians had left in the desert vast quantities of clothing, rifles, machine-guns and ammunition. The gunners, having no tents or accommodation, built lean-to shanties

from timber and Italian blankets, or dugouts for shelter.

Gunner Gordon Fellows enthusiastically commenced to make his home in a small cave which had been lined with straw. He soon found that it was alive with fleas and littered with human excreta. One of the gunners to his delight found a hogshead of Italian wine. Sadly, it was only of mediocre quality.

The men collected and tried out Italian rifles and grenades. The rifles were old; but with limitless ammunition much target practice was carried out. The little red grenades were not very effective, but were dangerous enough if handled without care. A couple of the men suffered badly gashed legs from dropped live grenades.

As the war had passed on, it seemed at that stage that there was no allotted task. Nevertheless, the gunners found much to interest them. Although they had no Bofors 40mm guns which were intended to be their equipment, they were given captured Italian 20mm Breda light anti-aircraft guns. These fired four ounce projectiles at the rate of 220 per minute, fed by trays of 12 High Explosive or Armour Piercing rounds. The guns were fitted with elementary sights. In practice, these were soon discarded in favour of the simple "hose-pipe" method using the bright tracers in the base of each projectile literally to "hose" up shells at enemy aircraft.

Some twenty gunners from the Battery were attached to the 38th Battery of the British 13th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment to gain experience in air raids.

A few Italian and German aircraft were bombing the Harbor at night. Surprisingly, many of the British crews had no gunpits, or any sort of protection around their guns. It was a spectacular sight for the new troops to be amongst the light and heavy anti-aircraft guns sending up a deafening barrage. Searchlights would try and locate the planes, sometimes with success. Thousands of red, green and white tracers were put up by the light guns making a colorful display. Shrapnel and debris whined down around the unprotected troops. Ships were hit by the enemy's bombers and set on fire. The Australians acted as ammunition numbers for the British gunners who were using 40mm Bofors guns, Isotta Franchini 20mm guns and captured Bredas.

The raw beginners of 8th Battery were becoming seasoned soldiers rather gently, coping with sandstorms, fleas, scorpions and sleeping out in the open, sometimes in rain. They were also learning to beg, borrow or steal equipment, food and vehicles, to set themselves up as an operating battery. The army term "scrounging" was probably an apt description of their activities at the time; but the gunners liked to think of it as using enterprise. For a few nights, some of the men were given the task of guarding the food dump. At dusk, large numbers of troops from the Battery converged on the dump and the friendly guards. As a result, the Battery dined

exceptionally well for several days on quality tinned foods accompanied by rum and brandy.

Orders were received late in February that the Battery was to move forward. The period of indecision and acclimatisation was over. On 28th February the Battery equipped with its Bredas moved out of Wadi Auda to follow the 6th Division's tracks further westward. Canvas covered motor trucks were provided by the Royal Army Service Corps for the journey along the good bitumen road which had been constructed by the Italians through the desert.

Thirty men of "F" Troop, under Lieutenant McKinnell, were detached at Derna, a small coastal port. The remainder of the men camped for the night in the desert beyond the town.

Next day, after leaving the other part of "F" Troop and part of "E" Troop at Barce, the remainder of the Battery, comprising Headquarters, "D" Troop and part of "E" Troop reached Benghazi late in the afternoon. The highlights of the journey were the spectacular steep passes leading down to, and out of, Derna and Barce. The country around Barce was more fertile, having been developed as one of the Italian colonisation schemes.

At Benghazi, Battery Headquarters was established in an abandoned oil depot whilst the guns of "E" and "D" Troops were set up around the harbor. Later, some guns were stationed around Benina aerodrome on the outskirts of the town and at Magrum where a food dump often came under enemy air attack.

The gun crew on which Gunner Bob Campbell served had a site on the end of a mole extending out into Benghazi Harbor. By some means they had obtained an electric stove which, when duly installed, provided rather luxurious cooking facilities. A visit by the Battery Commander was followed by an order that the stove would be picked up for use at Battery Headquarters. The stove was collected and delivered; but not before an experienced electrician had removed a vital component and flung it into the sea.

An ownerless piano found its way to John Campbell's gunsite, so Gunner George Roberts, an excellent pianist, had his own piano for the only time during his army career. For men on active service, George's musical sessions were an unexpected but welcome pleasure.

Sergeant "Mac" McGillivray recalls some of the events of the time: *"Our main duty was to provide anti-aircraft protection for the excellent harbor and port facilities in case the Allies needed them to use as a jumping off place for future attacks, either westward by land or northwards across the Mediterranean. Be that as it may, the well known outcome was that the Australian 6th Division was suddenly withdrawn to go to Greece. It was replaced by the (at that time) inexperienced 9th Division.*

"Incidentally, I remember the 'we was robbed' feeling of

extreme disappointment felt by all personnel at Benghazi when we learned that lucky 7th Battery, and not the 8th had really 'drawn the plum', and were going to beautiful Greece or Crete while we rotted in Libya! Not that Benghazi itself was bad. It was quite a handsome town. There were actually some trees, mostly palms. Strangely enough it did not seem to have been much damaged by either the retreating Axis troops before they left, or by the occupying Allied troops.

"There was evidence that some of the officials of the Italian administration had cleared off in a hurry, as shown for instance by clothes left in wardrobes and part-eaten meals left on dining tables in the luxurious staff living quarters of the Customs House. There were also hundreds of bottles of a sort of Vichy water which we not only habitually drank, but which we used for cleaning teeth and shaving. The local town water was described by Sergeant Len Morgan as, 'Ess aitch i tee house'.

"Benghazi must have been an important Italian administrative centre going by the fine large white concrete buildings. In the middle of one smallish but attractive Town Square was a high stone or concrete column with Romulus and Remus on top, together with the she-wolf which was supposed to have suckled them. There was another more elaborate Piazza near what was probably the Benghazi Town Hall.

"The harbor with its huge stone breakwaters was really beautiful, with no visible wrecks as in Tobruk Harbor, although one sunken Italian freighter yielded hundreds of tins of salty anchovies and some more cases of Vichy water to anyone game enough to dive for them. A few of the shops were still operating as many of the inhabitants did not leave the town when it came under the control of our people. Proprietors of eating places in particular vigorously professed undying affection for the Aussies, and of course, hatred for the Germans."

A Breda gun was mounted on the flat roof of the Battery Headquarter's storeroom. Access to this gun was by means of a ladder leaning against an outside wall. It was manned by the first five "odds and sods" of Battery Headquarters to scale the ladder whenever there was an alert. There were many "stand to" alarms. The gun went into action on several occasions. The crews claimed possible hits a couple of times. Gunner Maurie Prideaux was in the seat on the first occasion on which this gun was "fired in anger" in one of the first air raids on Benghazi.

"D" and "E" Troops were also set up on what seemed to be suitable sites. "Mac" McGillivray selected one such position. He said later: *"One of the huge white buildings, the Customs House, by the harbor seemed to be an ideal spot for a gun position on top of the tennis court sized flat concrete roof, surrounded by a parapet*

about a metre high. One little problem was that the gun just wouldn't fit up the stairway to the roof, so we borrowed ropes from the Royal Navy and hauled the Breda up bit by bit on the outside of the building.

After re-assembling and sandbagging it neatly into a corner of the roof, we were wiping the dirt from our hands when a large plane appeared flying sedately in our direction. Somebody yelled 'that's a bloody Dornier, look at the markings!' Sure enough it had the German crosses on it. In a flash, Gunner Frank Nicholson was in the gun seat laying for elevation, firing pedal down, while someone was shoving trays of 20mm shells into the appropriate slot at the side of the gun. I was hosepiping the pretty tracer projectiles at the target with duck shooting expertise. To our astonished gratification, smoke began to pour from the Dornier. It plummeted into the Mediterranean. The poor German pilot probably didn't know that Benghazi had changed hands lately, otherwise I don't suppose he would have been poking along at about 1000 feet height at 100 m.p.h. — a target that even we could hardly miss. Anyway, we had fired our first angry shots with great success. Battery Commander Major Phil Stokes was overjoyed. He insisted that we had 'downed' the first plane by an Australian Anti-aircraft Battery."

As well as being the first plane "downed" as described, it was probably the first plane to fall victim of the rough and ready hosepiping method referred to by Mac.

This method mentioned earlier was achieved by disconnecting sufficient of the gun laying mechanism (the sighting apparatus) to allow the gun to swivel 360 degrees on its mounting. This enabled the Number 1 (the man in charge of the gun) to direct the attack by following the flight of the tracer shells (each of which had a burning colored glow in the base of the climbing projectile), and getting well ahead of the target by swinging the gun around by the elevation layer's seat. It was another instance of Australian initiative. Mac's reference to duck shooting expertise was apt, as the Number 1 had to be skilful in controlling his "hosing" and allowing for lead and the slightly curved trajectory of the hi-velocity projectiles.

As history reveals, 8th Battery must have had quite a few potential duck shooters in its ranks.

At about this time, the Battery was unofficially named. Its unusual arrival in Tobruk, its move forward in a variety of trucks, its weird equipment of scrounged Italian Breda and Isotta Franchini guns, and the fact that some of the men were by that time wearing quite a few items of Italian clothing made them a little odd and prompted some humorist in the Battery to inscribe on an appropriate wall: — "We picked the plum — Bulsh! Stokes' Travelling Circus. Opening Tonight. Prizes for All"

Unexpectedly this piece of ridicule seemed to please Major Stokes who thought it good publicity and was heard to remark, "Well, every circus needs a clown".

The Battery started to gain its spurs with some convincing action in Benghazi, Barce and Derna followed by a useful role in protecting traffic on the road back to Tobruk in the famous "Handicap" and, from then on, by its magnificent performance during the historic Siege of Tobruk. Thus the name, "Stokes' Travelling Circus" bestowed on the Battery in ridicule became an honorable title. The Unit marking - STC (in a triangle) often with a silhouette of a dancing girl on horseback was painted on the Battery's vehicles. Every member who took part in the Siege eventually looked back with some pride on the fact that he was a performer in the "Circus".

Sergeant Geoff Watson adds to Mac's description of Benghazi: "There was also a large cathedral with a twin-domed roof. Its main feature was a marble-lined interior in which the various colored pieces of marble were arranged to form a diamond pattern. It was undamaged except for one relatively small bomb hole in the roof.

"A surprising number of shops were still operating. Many of them were conducted by a range of nationalities, such as Chinese, Jews, Arabs and some by Italians who had chosen to stay when the 6th Division went through.

"As well as eating places, there were quite a few retail food shops operating. I still shudder to think about the choice cuts of meat (camel probably) hanging outside the butchers' shops and absolutely black with flies. No wonder dysentery was so rife in the area.

"At least one barber shop was in business. Although there were two chairs, there was only one set of equipment. This was no problem as one barber trimmed the bottom half of his victim's hair while the other expert dealt with the top half of his customer. They then swapped tools and finished the job by doing the reverse half. This shop also offered shampoos and showers, both of which were welcomed by men who had no such facilities on site. The service was rough; but the price was very cheap.

"It is interesting to speculate on the shopkeepers' welfare when the Germans recaptured the town and later again when General Montgomery's push forward re-took it. They were smooth operators; but would have had a busy time keeping track of whose friends they really were.

"Many of our men had large amounts of Italian lira which they picked up in an abandoned Italian pay office. Several shops were accepting some of it from those who hadn't thrown it away or lit their pipes with it. Perhaps those locals knew before the Allied troops did that we would be retreating from the town

before long."

Battery Headquarters quickly made themselves comfortable in the large store room. Rations were reasonable and they even had fresh fish. Gunner Bill Tom had noticed fish swimming between some buildings along the sea front. He and Bob Campbell dropped a grenade among the fish, the explosion bringing many stunned fish to the surface. Bill, with his usual enthusiasm whipped off his clothes and plunged into the water. With a wail of despair he realised that his valuable, but not waterproof watch was still on his wrist. The fish made good eating; but sadly the watch never worked again.

Early in March, there came into existence the "Bush Anti-aircraft". The Battery was given the job of setting up and getting into action an improvised heavy gun site adjacent to Benghazi.

The available equipment consisted of two captured 75mm Italian heavy anti-aircraft guns, plus the relevant predictor equipment which, at first, lacked the necessary generator. A detachment of men from Battery Headquarters and any available Troop member was formed to man the site, under the command of Lieutenant Lin. Davis.

There was hard work at first, manhandling the four-ton guns into position, collecting oil drums, cutting the tops out of them, filling them with sand and forming a parapet to protect the crews.

The site was made operative fairly smartly. A generator was scrounged. Crews consisted of 9 or 10 men per gun, 9 on the predictor, 4 on the range finder and 2 on the direction finder (which in Italian parlance was called a "Goniometro"). Readings from the various instruments were passed on to the predictor crew by telephone. These readings were processed by manually turning little handles on the predictor at a constant speed, which had to be judged by keeping an eye on an inbuilt stopwatch. When all the operators called "On" the predicted figures were telephoned to the gun layers. When they were "on target" the Sergeant called "Fire"!

All this was confusing enough, but the roar of the guns firing just about deafened everyone engaged in the action. From then on difficulty was experienced in hearing the chatter, let alone deciphering it. Still, the guns went into action a few times. Goodness knows where the shells went; but at least the activity was a warning to any roving German pilot that there were heavy anti-aircraft guns in the area. Later a third gun was added, which increased the noise and the confusion. The scrounged ammunition all had to be checked to make sure it fitted the breeches of the guns. Many of the rounds proved to be faulty. This was said to be due to sabotage in the Italian munition works.

The detachment suffered from onslaughts by mosquitoes, sand flies, fleas and mice. Scorpions and centipedes also caused concern.

Several men from Battery Headquarters including Geoff Watson and Bluey Palmer were detailed to join a group which had been ordered to proceed further forward along the road through Gemines and Magrum to Ajedabya to pick up anti-aircraft and field guns, and to strip parts from other guns to provide a supply of spare parts. The field guns were intended for use in setting up a harbor defence. This plan was abandoned a few days later. It seemed wilful waste then that so many good guns had been wrecked to obtain the necessary spares. (As it turned out, the group had done a good job putting them out of action before General Rommel's push described later).

The road to Ajedabya was lined with abandoned Italian equipment, with a huge dump where the salvage was carried out. It seemed that the further the fleeing Italians went, the more equipment they abandoned. There were several wrecked planes beside the road with nearby graves. The road was regularly machine gunned by Italian planes so the salvage party scattered several times to get away from the trucks.

As the work party eventually returned to Benghazi from the furthestmost western point to which the Battery had travelled, they felt a little homesick as they passed Australian eucalypts and wattles lining the roads.

Towards the end of March, life had settled down to a fairly easy routine. There was little air activity. The main enemies were dysentery and sandfly fever.

Everybody, cooks, batmen and drivers included, became part of a gun crew somewhere in the area.

Sergeant Cavanagh and his crew were swamped one night in a fierce storm. Their gun, sited right out on a mole in the harbor was hit by the worst of the storm. The gun emplacement was wrecked. Their "kitchen" was washed away, together with part of their equipment. The casualty report recorded that Gunner Frank Maudsley suffered a "bash on the nose".

One of the British drivers, Sam Brown, who was attached from the Royal Army Service Corps, sported a large Italian diesel truck. He "unofficially" managed to get his truck into a convoy of similar trucks which were moving the luxury items of a food dump and drove happily out with his load of the spoils. Much of this haul had to be left behind when the retreat started; but what could be taken proved to be invaluable during the hectic days of the later "Benghazi Handicap".

Gunner Frank Washbourne recalls how a couple of locals were spotted trying to remove the explosive out of a couple of large shells.

They were twisting and bashing the shells which had percussion caps in them. In spite of frantic warning yells from the watching gunners, they persisted with their efforts. The shells exploded. The scroungers were blown to pieces.

The various activities led Major Stokes to claim at one stage that his relatively few personnel were manning 27 guns, namely several Coastal Defence guns, three or four 75mm heavy anti-aircraft guns as well as many 20mm light anti-aircraft guns, including some supplied with the scarce armor-piercing ammunition and sited for possible anti-tank and even anti-submarine defence. This all added up to good thinking, because at that time of the change over from the 6th Division to the 9th Division, Benghazi's defence may well have needed all the help it could get. However, despite all these initiatives, not many angry shots were fired there.

For the men of "F" Troop who had been dropped off at Derna, an attractive little oasis and port, life had been comfortable enough for a few weeks. The gunners there took over 20mm Breda guns from British detachments. Most of the gun crews found good shelter or accommodation in nearby deserted houses or port buildings. The crews settled down to operating as small units of 5 or 6 men under the command of sergeants or bombardiers. Whilst their task was to give air defence to the port, they were incidentally building up esprit-de-corps within their crews, and generally learning to cook for and to look after themselves. Some of the crews had good types of Italian prisoners-of-war attending to their domestic chores. The gunners looked after the prisoners well, often giving them rations to take back to their camp to supplement their own rations.

Working parties of Italian prisoners at the port, obviously glad to be out of the war, could be seen at their "smoke-ohs" in groups, singing in chorus from their Italian operas.

The gunners still had little battle experience with anti-aircraft guns or with aircraft identification. They were instructed to fire at any plane crossing the harbor, it being a forbidden area for Allied aircraft. A few planes passed at various times, one desultorily dropping bombs. The gunners had a little practice at long range without much effect.

Early in March, a bomber passed by the harbor. Bombardier Phil Roberts' crew rushed up to the Breda gun on their roof-top site and fired 156 20mm rounds at it. The nearby British Heavy Anti-aircraft had identified it as a friendly British Vickers Wellington (a twin engined bomber), so had not fired. The Navy's port commander said it was a captured plane which had been laying mines outside the harbor, abused the British gunners on their "masterly inactivity" and praised Roberts' crew for driving the enemy off! The 8th Battery gunners soon improved with their aircraft identification of enemy from allied aircraft, but still fired warning shots at

British Wellingtons or Lysanders (single engine observation plane and light bombers) which approached the harbor.

The Navy's Commander Duff at Derna was a colorful character of some 17 stone in weight with a long fair beard. On the last day of March, the air sentry reported a sail at sea. It was in fact a submarine with a sail attached to the periscope gear. The submarine had surfaced to get fresh air. Duff put to sea in his 40 foot boat, the "Eskimo Nell", armed with a six pound anti-tank gun to attack the submarine. It discreetly submerged before the Commander got within range. Returning from this frustrated encounter he found 3 Greeks and 3 British Sergeants fishing in his rowing boat. He fired warning shots across the bow, pulled alongside, threw the Greeks overboard to swim ashore and arrested the Sergeants for taking his boat.

The same Commander on the next night thought he saw the lights of shipping at sea. He instructed the British Heavy Anti-aircraft guns to fire at them and prepared to go to sea again. After many high explosive shells whined past Roberts' gun position on the mole, it was found that the lights were merely two shorting electrical wires along the wharf.

Duff, a great adventurer, later commanded a flotilla which ran supplies to besieged Tobruk in two-masted wooden schooners of about 200 tons and in sundry small ships manned by Greeks, Jews, survivors of sunken ships and spare British and Australian sailors.

The troops at Derna spent their occasional few hours of leave wandering around the small bazaar, bargaining for tapestries and tinned foods which had been looted by the Libyans from dispossessed Italians. No great troubles were encountered by the occupying troops with the local population, although telephone lines to the guns were frequently cut at night and warnings had been received that enemy agents would be operating.

After a week or so, the gunners would not bother keeping sentries awake all night on the guns, but posted a guard who at about 2200 hours each night would fire a few rifle shots up into the sky, shouting threats at anyone who might be around. After this noisy act, the guard would settle down cosily into a blanket to sleep beside the anti-aircraft gun for the remainder of the night.

At this time, the Germans were preparing for the invasion of Greece. Several Greek fishermen and their families with foresight and who were afraid of the Germans, had sailed across the Mediterranean to Derna. Roberts' gun crew on the mole gave them what food could be spared to enable them to sail along the coast to Egypt. The grateful Greeks gave the Australians large sea sponges which were all they had for gifts.

A few gun crews had been left at Barce to protect the aerodrome

and the few allied planes which landed there. The surrounding country was attractive with trees, grazing animals and white concrete farmhouses. The gunners' only action there was to fire warning shots at British Vickers Wellington bombers which failed to identify themselves with correct signals.

Some of these gun crews under Lieutenant Wilbur Reed and Sergeant John Hepworth moved back to El Adem aerodrome, about 25 kilometres inland and south from Tobruk. The Royal Air Force which was operating Wellingtons from the 'drome welcomed the gunners as they had been suffering from occasional enemy air raids.

Indian troops took over ground defence duties of the area. Jack Whitley had been telling the gunners what good soldiers these men were, how they carried a knife as sharp as a razor, how they could creep up behind a man unseen and with one slice of the knife could cut the neck so cleanly that the victim's head stayed in place until he coughed, when it would fall off! It so happened shortly after that a beam of light was showing from an improperly blacked-out building and "Whit" told Jim Dennis to go across to warn the occupants. Some time later, Jim returned looking shaken and told how as he was on his way to the building, he didn't see or hear anything, but hands came over each shoulder feeling for his collar badges. Jim was hauled off to the Indians' guard room where, because he was carrying a British .303 rifle and the Officers of the 18th Indian Cavalry Regiment could speak English, he was able to establish his identity and was freed. "Whit" asked Jim to shake his head. When Jim obliged, his head didn't fall off! Thereafter, the Indian soldiers were held in great respect.



Bombing Wadi Auda.

ULLSTEIN