

The Benghazi Handicap

The pleasant times at the Libyan ports were drawing to a dramatic close. To understand the imminent withdrawal to Tobruk, a full scale retreat, better known as the "Benghazi Handicap", it becomes necessary to briefly recapitulate some of the events leading to it.

Early in 1941, the whole of Cyrenaica was apparently firmly in British hands. The Italians had been defeated, losing many thousands of troops who had become prisoners-of-war, and practically all their arms and equipment. The study of intelligence reports led to the reasoned and reasonable assessment that the Italians in Cyrenaica could be disregarded and that the Germans were not likely to accept the risk of sending large bodies of armored troops to Africa, because of the unreliability of the Italian Navy. It seemed therefore, that a holding operation in Cyrenaica was all that would be necessary.

Following this assessment, the well-trained and battle-hardened troops of the Australian 6th Division together with the best of the available equipment were, in the main, sent to the war theatre in Greece.

The relatively raw troops of the 9th Australian Division were sent to various parts of Cyrenaica, in many instances for further training, together with a proportion of more experienced units. No unit at that time had received its full complement of arms and equipment. The Australian part of this "holding" army was placed under the command of General Leslie Morshead.

There were great shortages in tanks, armored cars, armored personnel carriers, anti-tank weapons and transport; all vital items at the front beyond Benghazi where patrolling the inland desert would be most important.

Many units had Italian tanks as a large proportion of their equipment. Their engines were notoriously inefficient and hopelessly unreliable. The 20mm Breda light anti-aircraft guns which the 8th Battery had collected, although useful enough as anti-aircraft weapons, could not be compared with the 40mm Bofors guns with which the gunners had expected to be equipped.

Powerful bodies of heavily-armed enemy troops began to appear "out of the blue" and there were persistent reports of elusive armored patrols probing along the old inland desert tracks; obviously a warning that there could be outflanking operations in the near future.

News arrived that the German Africa Korps had been shipped

across to Tripoli. The armored units of the Korps were advancing at speed. They were led by General Erwin Rommel, who had 300 tanks at his disposal. The British had only a few. General Rommel also had 88mm high velocity anti-aircraft guns and the new 50mm anti-tank guns. He had more aircraft than the Allies could muster in the whole of the Middle East. The morale of the Africa Korps was high, for at the time German armored forces had been unchecked on land at any place where they had attacked.

It has been argued that, had the expeditionary force not been sent to Greece, Cyrenaica might have been held and that General Wavell might have gone to Tripoli and swept the Italians and Germans right out of Africa two years before the Allies eventually did. This theory was open to question as the British were undoubtedly over-extended for the men and equipment that were available. However, the hard fact was that after numerous skirmishes and small scale battles, the British were retreating.

Geoff Watson recalls events at Benghazi: *"At 2100 hours on 1st April we received orders at the Heavy Anti-aircraft site to be ready to move in an hour. We packed by candlelight and waited.*

"Next morning we were still waiting and, like condemned men, ate a hearty breakfast, cleaning up some of the good food that we would be unable to take with us. Our tents were down and we sat around wondering what the day would bring. Even then we could hardly believe that we would really pull out, as I don't suppose that we had given any thought to such a possibility.

"During the day there was one air raid in our vicinity. We fired a few shots, the last by our Benghazi 'Bush Ack Ack'."

Then, at 0830 hours on 3rd April the order finally came to evacuate the site. The heavy anti-aircraft guns were destroyed. Mac McGillivray tells that story: *"I was given the responsibility for spiking the guns and destroying the predictors, range finders and generators, to prevent them all falling back into the hands of the enemy. It was all Italian equipment of course and probably worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. The predictors and other equipment were smashed with sledge hammers. The guns were destroyed by banging a projectile into the muzzle of the long barrel and then firing a live shell in the breech by means of a long - very long - wire attached to the firing lever. With a true sense of theatre, it was decided not to blow up each gun separately, but all together. One gunner remarked when ruefully surveying the wreckage, 'Jesus Mac, I'm glad we got all the stuff for nothing.'* Maurie Prideaux and Bill Tom were among the wreckers. The guns were equipped with beautiful magnifying sights. Maurie Prideaux toted one of the sights, which was quite heavy, right through the Siege of Tobruk and back to Australia. The monstrous kit bag which Bill Tom somehow struggled with back to Australia

could well have held one of the other sights."

Geoff Watson continues the story: "The gun crews loaded their Breda guns on to trucks and assembled at Battery Headquarters. By this time all other units in Benghazi were destroying everything which might have been of use to the advancing Germans. There were fires and explosions all around us. The final word to leave the town and move back towards Barce came at 1900 hours. So we joined the retreat which became known as 'The Benghazi Handicap'.

"Doubtless, many people will have read of the retreat with details of the turmoil that prevailed along the road. Troops caught up in the events were heard to use descriptions such as 'a scramble', 'chaos' or a 'rout'. In retrospect, perhaps it could go down in history as a fairly successful manoeuvre. Moving a division plus ancillary units is a mighty job in ordinary conditions, in reasonable terrain and with adequate transport.

"9th Division was faced with an urgent retreat over difficult desert roads and tracks. Transport was inadequate and many of the vehicles were in poor condition after long spells in the frequent desert dust storms. Shortage of vehicles meant that the trucks had to move men, drop them along the route and return for another load. Thus the roads were cluttered by convoys moving both ways. Frequent breakdowns of trucks added to the confusion.

"Intelligence reports available to Divisional Headquarters were scanty. Our men were faced with a well organized and better equipped force led by General Rommel, one of the enemy's best Generals. The counter-attack was well planned. When it came, it was rapid and savage. As it turned out, to get so many men back to the Tobruk perimeter was no mean achievement.

"To describe the 8th Battery's experiences in the retreat is difficult. Our trucks were often separated and detachments from Magrum, Barce and Derna had to join us en route. Each truckload of men met with its own particular problems. As we moved out of Benghazi the sky was lit with flames from burning petrol and ammunition dumps. Much of the Italian equipment which the Army had inherited was going up in smoke. The road out of town was cluttered with fleeing local residents. A few shots were fired from roof tops – by residents who had quickly forgotten that they had professed to be our 'friends'.

"We stopped for the night about 40 miles out of Benghazi, set up our Breda gun and bedded down beside it. At 0100 hours next morning we were roused from our sandy beds and told to be ready to move out towards Barce. We moved off at about 0630 hours not knowing quite where we were heading. The neat little white houses we had admired on the way up were now daubed

with mud to camouflage them. At one spot we noticed several British Lysander planes warming up on a small 'drome to go out on reconnaissance. I was detailed during a waiting period along the road to guard a small petrol dump. After knocking back a number of worried truck drivers whose fuel was running short, I was ordered to climb back on our truck and to leave the petrol for anyone who wanted it.

"We had started from Benghazi in a large Italian diesel truck. Somewhere near Barce this truck broke down and as was common practice in the retreat, it was pushed over an embankment and abandoned. Our group then transferred to another truck driven by Steve Newton of the Royal Army Service Corps. This increased his load to 15 men and all their gear, making it crowded to say the least. Several moves were made during the next two days, one of them being to the campsite of the previous night.

"The names of d'Anunzio and Tecnis come to mind as overnight stopping places. Our stop at the former site was outside an Italian convent or monastery. It was strange to hear the bell calling the inmates to prayer in a house of peace while military personnel were preparing for, or trying to dodge combat right outside.

"At one of these stops we received mail from home. We wondered at the efficiency of the Postal Section finding us when we didn't know quite where we were ourselves. This mail was distributed to other detachments of the Battery as we joined them over the next few days.

"During these days our Troops were at different times given the job of setting up the guns on the Tocra and Barce Passes to protect the motor convoys passing up and down the road.

"Any chance we had to rest during the retreat involved having a nap on the ground. By the time we struggled out of our blankets (sometimes in the middle of the night), we were usually partly buried in sand blown over us by the desert winds. Some of us soon got to be fed up with having blankets full of sand. I had an Italian groundsheet complete with buttons around the edges. By folding the blankets suitably it was possible to button the groundsheet around them, making a rough and ready sleeping bag. On rising, it was only necessary to shake off the sand, roll it up and to secure the roll with a couple of straps (also Italian). We seemed to have far more Italian gear than Australian at the time. Packing up only took a few minutes as we slept fully clothed. Desert nights were cold but the 'bag' was cosy.

"By this time the 'Handicap' was really on. We took off during the night of 6th April travelling back past the Derna turnoff. Later, when we were half stunned from the continual bumping about, we heard Sergeant-Major Ted Light arguing with someone outside the truck. The someone was supposedly a British Military

Policeman trying to direct Ted into Derna. Ted was adamant that he was going to stick to his original instructions to keep going flat out to Tobruk, so we kept going. Later it was said that the Military Policeman was a German dressed in captured British uniform. As it turned out, anyone who followed his directions finished up being captured in Derna. In the confusion of that night, two British Generals, Lieutenant-General Sir Phillip Neame and Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor ran into a German ambush near the Derna-Mechili crossroads and were captured. Anyway, it was Ted Light who kept us from going 'into the bag'.

"We bumped across the desert in the darkness for hours. Driver Steve Newton, either by intuition or under orders, frequently left the road and pioneered a new track through any obstacles such as ditches and wadis. Steve drove continuously right through the night. In the morning, we were still ahead of the German flanking attack which had cut across inland from Benghazi, heading towards Tobruk. We halted in the El Gazala-Acroma area to draw breath. German scout cars were seen prowling the area. British artillery was engaging the enemy.

"While we were waiting to join up with our other detachments, the Allied forces were having trouble with transport due to so many breakdowns with trucks in the harsh conditions. Gunner Dave Bell worked tirelessly shuttling back and forth along the road ferrying stranded troops back to safety. Quite a few troops who reached Tobruk owed their safety to Dave Bell. By then the road was under spasmodic attack. Dave's efforts brought a special commendation from 9th Division Headquarters.

"We were by this time near enough to Tobruk to watch numerous air raids on the Harbor. Dog fights between Messerschmitts and Hurricanes were occurring above us. One Me 110 with its machine guns and cannon blazing headed straight for us. Just as we reckoned the hardships we had suffered in the 'Handicap' were to be of no avail the plane veered off slightly and crashed right beside our truck. After our nerves had steadied we realised that Sergeant Frank Le Sueur's gun crew had shot it down. The German pilot and gunner were killed instantly. The sight of the two young fair-headed Germans, mere boys, dead, brought sober realisation of the stupidity and reality of war.

"Duststorms raged intermittently during our stay in this area. Visibility was sometimes reduced to only a few feet. From then on, we often endured such duststorms, along with shade temperatures up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

"The 9th Division had decided to make a stand inside the Tobruk perimeter. 8th Battery had by this time been brought

together again with the exception of Lieutenant Chester Guest's Troop which it transpired had been captured during the retreat. (That story follows later.)

"On the 11th April I had my first wash since leaving Benghazi on the 3rd April. A couple of weeks later, Steve Newton's truck, the faithful chariot which had hung together over the worst of the desert tracks could offer to get us back to Tobruk, was hit during an air raid, set alight and badly damaged."

* * * *

On the morning of 7th April, Lieutenant Chester Guest's "E" Troop was in dire trouble during the "Handicap". Sergeant Keith Butler pieced together the events from recollections by Gunners Alex. Barnett, Darce and Mick Edwards and Jack Confait:—

"For the purpose of providing anti-aircraft protection for the convoys the 20-mm Breda of each gun crew was mounted on a tripod bolted on to the tray body of an Italian Fiat diesel, quite open and with no protection at all for the gunners. What with ammunition, rations, water, their own gear and crew, there was little room for comfort. The drivers were Scots, seconded to the Battery from the Royal Army Service Corps. Their convoy camped the first night (5th April), overlooking the Barce-Tocra Pass. Gunner Jack Confait remembers the occasion by remarking that he cannot recall any soldier previously jockeying for guard duty, but many volunteered that night as the sentries were issued with binoculars. The Germans manning their positions were quite discernible as they in turn studied our positions.

"At this point our Battery split, the majority under Lieutenant Dick Harry continuing on towards Tobruk, while 'E' Troop under Lieutenant Guest was attached to Headquarters Company of the 2/15th Infantry Battalion to be part of the rearguard after giving protection to the demolition crews. This prospect was not received with unalloyed joy by the gunners who were of the opinion that 'hiking full bore' towards Tobruk without delay would have been preferable, but nevertheless they cheerfully accepted the situation.

"'Barbara is Reborn' was the code name of the operation that was to keep "E" Troop at Barce for another day. Engineers and some Workshop men destroyed culverts and bridges — quite a task as they had been well constructed by the 6th Australian Division Engineers during the first forward thrust into Cyrenaica.

"That evening a Khamsin blew up adding choking sand and dust to the discomfort of the troops. The convoy was re-formed and set off in darkness, by the inland route towards Giovanni Berta. As the night was cold, the exposed gunners spent an

uncomfortable journey.

"Around midnight, reflectors were noticed and some movement on the track 100 yards or so ahead, and as the convoy closed the gap, red-capped military policemen materialized, directing traffic up a side road. Aleck, our Scots driver, who had been running supplies from Tobruk to Benghazi for three months, exclaimed 'That's nae the f..... road choom' and swung the truck around them, keeping on the road he knew to Martuba.

"We later heard that this was how Generals Neame, O'Connor and Gambier-Parry were captured, when Germans disguised as provosts gave false directions into a German trap, a ruse previously employed in France. This rumour was very strong, and was never really disproved. About daybreak, the convoy came to a halt because of an overheating engine. The troops, having been told to keep close to the guns, took the opportunity to 'brew up'.

"So commenced the saga of 'The Breakfast Battalion' – really only a Company, with a few 'odds and sods' including our few Bredas."

"A sentry sounded the alarm! Movement was noticed to the south-west; quite an unexpected direction, as that terrain was supposed to be impassable owing to salt marshes and deep sand. The gunners mounted the trucks which had been deployed on slightly higher ground around the infantry positions and manned the Bredas. After a brief period of surveying the approaching vehicles through his binoculars, the nearest infantry officer remarked – 'It's all right chaps. They're ours.'

"Everybody relaxed – but not for long! Our supposed friends had moved closer, and their vehicles began an encircling movement. Gunner Alex Barnett likened the manoeuvre to 'Red Indians encircling a wagon train in the American Wild West'.

"Our Bredas opened up, as did the infantry with their rifles and a few light automatics. Chester Guest was moving around, revolver in hand, encouraging his gunners. At this juncture, the Germans having sized us up, turned their tracked vehicles inwards presenting their cannon at us, and within seconds, we had been hit amidships. The Breda was unserviceable and the truck burned furiously. Amazingly, the only casualty was our Scots driver who was wounded in the side and also had a broken ankle.

"A second gun and truck, that of Bombardier Syme's crew, joined that of Sergeant Hawke, on fire and out of action. All the gunners had escaped becoming casualties and scrambled off the burning vehicles to take cover behind some low rocks, having no small arms or rifles.

"Several of the infantry transport vehicles received hits and

became part of the conflagration. Gunner Jack Confait was busy assisting the wounded infantrymen to a sheltered depression where they were being collected behind a small escarpment. Here his knowledge of bandaging race horses stood him in good stead as he got busy with bandages and field dressings. He was good, and the men were grateful. Later on, in prisoner-of-war camps, his help on that day proved a good investment. The cooks in these camps would, to use Jack's own words, 'turn the ladle into the thicker part of the soup or stew'.

"The other two Bredas, that of Sergeant Adams and that commanded by Bombardier Neil Sloane were still in action, with Gunners Charlie Little, Ken Clements, Mick and Darcy Edwards, Lew Potter, Russ Morres and Norm Colson helping to keep the action going, until their ammunition was exhausted.

"At this juncture, the Commanding Officer of 2/15th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel 'Spike' Marlan approached the gunners to observe that their Bredas, with their relatively small 20mm calibre HE (High Explosive) rounds were not even marking the enemy armor. He decided that owing to the vastly superior enemy fire power, and because no way of escape appeared apparent, he would surrender the force which by that time had over forty wounded.

"Gunner Darcy Edwards recalls that after the capitulation, a German tank rolled up beside their truck, the commander emerged with a 'tommy gun', and in fluent English said, 'All off the truck or I'll blow you off!' The tank crew herded the gunners together, grabbed what water and rations they had, and burnt the truck. Gunner Les Wilkins, a despatch rider, decided to make a dash for it on his motor-cycle, but only got a short distance before he was cut down, being hit three times. Unfortunately, he died from his wounds some hours later.

"Immediately after the surrender, as Gunner Barnett remembers, the German soldiers were upset, expressing their anger at the explosive H.E. rounds from the Bredas which had 'opened up' several of their men when they were shot. They accused us of using 'dum dum' bullets. The situation could have become really nasty, but fortunately an Africa Korps high ranking officer arrived and resolved the argument by explaining that this was just normal Italian anti-aircraft ammunition. It was noticed that the troops of the Africa Korps were well-dressed with shirts, shorts and high quality soft leather boots which rolled down. Many carried automatic pistols or sub-machine guns, and a large percentage spoke very good English. While guarding the Australian prisoners they were quite friendly. There were no Australian complaints about the treatment by German front-line soldiers.

"The engagement had resulted in our casualties being one killed and forty wounded, out of about one hundred and fifty men. The German column had been held up for about 2½ hours, for which purpose we had been left"

(In retrospect, these makeshift outfits of a 20mm Breda mounted on an open truck were most vulnerable to enemy fire, being far too high off the ground, and with no protection at all for the crews. Their ammunition was of too small calibre, the high, explosive rounds having no penetration against any armor, however light. As recorded, it was also liable to provoke a very nasty reaction from enemy troops. The gunners were 'sitting ducks' on trucks. Use against low flying aircraft was their only logical role. Even with every third round being 'armor piercing', they still lacked penetration and certainly did not inspire confidence against tanks, armored cars or anti-tank guns.)

It was not until 1948 that Sergeant Arthur Adams was awarded the Military Medal following a recommendation by Lieutenant-Colonel Marlan. The citation read:

"Sergeant Arthur Adams was No.1 of a gun team operating Breda 20mm guns in an anti-tank role. He engaged the enemy after his Portee had been hit several times and was on fire and continued to fire at close range until all his ammunition was expended. Throughout, he gave a fine example of calm courage under extremely trying conditions."

The group of prisoners was kept together in a wadi for the whole of that day and was augmented from time to time by troops rounded up from other intercepted units.

Gunner Barnett was allowed to be present at the burial of Les Wilkins in the desert at El Piet on 8th April.

Finally, after two days in the wadi enclosure, the prisoners, now numbering perhaps 300 to 400 thirsty and hungry men, were assembled for the march into Derna. The Germans appeared apprehensive as desert warfare was quite new to them also and they felt isolated. They appeared not to have realised how close to Derna and plenty of water they actually were. In these circumstances it appeared to them just military necessity that German troops received the water and rations.

The column of prisoners was encompassed for an overnight stop, when Gunner Confait recalls that a small armored car drove up and a Senussi alighted. He was dressed in a tailored German officer's tunic, with polished bright Sam Browne belt and pistol holster, then down to his nether regions which were clothed in Arab-type pantaloons gathered in at the ankles, but made from a fine black gauze material, with two silver stripes down the outside of each leg — a very pretty picture!

The story that circulated later was that he was a Sheik's son who

in his opinion had not received the deference due to his rank from the British, but rather the treatment meted out to the usual "Wily Oriental Gent"! To restore his dignity he had led the Germans by an old caravan trading route from Tripoli to Mechili through the desert and then on towards Derna. Fact or fiction, our convoy was unfortunately in the enemy's line of march at exactly the wrong time.

The prisoners, under guard, arrived at Derna after dark, and were herded into the hospital grounds, which were enclosed by high brick and stone walls.

Darcy Edwards remembers vividly the excited call from a Digger who found a fountain or trough with water in it, and the thirsty troops had the best drink they could remember. In the morning when they awoke the 'fountain' was empty but with a residue of rubbish — old ration tins, old bandages and bottles!

To add insult to injury, they found they had been handed over to the Italians.

Then commenced a period of just four years as Prisoners-of-War for most of them. The subsequent experiences of these gunners, their attempted and sometimes successful escapes, their hardships, the occasional brutalities by Italian or German guards, their forced marches in Germany and Poland and eventually their release from P.O.W. camps, is a story in itself, beyond the scope of this history to relate in full.

After a few days "in the cage" at Derna the prisoners were trucked to Benghazi. All kits and spare clothing had been lost. This was no worry in the warmth of Africa, but later in Europe the lost gear would have been most welcome.

Three or four days later, a convoy of trucks took several hundreds of prisoners to Tripoli, a journey of about 700 miles, taking several days. The troops were located at Sobratha P.O.W. camp a little distance from Tripoli where they were kept in poor conditions for about six weeks with not much food. While at Tripoli, many Allied prisoners were used for unloading Axis ships at the wharves; but there was so much sabotage, that about 200 Australians were handed over to the Italians as dangerous prisoners.

At the conclusion of the unloading work period, most of the prisoners were shipped on the S.S. "Vittoria" to Italy, landing at Naples. Although this was a luxurious peacetime liner, the prisoners didn't experience any of the benefits of past trips. The move to Naples from Tripoli was completed at night as this was an occasion when British submarines were regarded by all as the enemy.

From Naples, the prisoners moved to a P.O.W. camp at Capua, then to Salmona in central Italy, and ending up at Bolzano, in the Brenner Pass. At this last named Camp the 8th Battery prisoners were joined by a number of 7th Battery personnel captured in

Crete.

In September, the boys were moved to Campo Concentramento 57 at Gruppignano, near Udine. This was to be the group's Camp for the duration.

The Italians capitulated in September 1943. Those prisoners who had been sent out to work in the Po Valley were lucky, because those still in the P.O.W. camps were taken by the Germans to Austria, Germany, Poland or Czechoslovakia, and did not see each other until the end of the war.

The story of the capture of Chester Guest's Troop concludes with an extract from a letter sent by Major Stokes, Commanding Officer of the 8th Battery to the President of the 2/3rd Light Anti-aircraft Regiment's Welfare Club, acquainting him with the latest news of the encounter east of Giovanni Berta and the extent of the casualties. It reveals a story of initiative, courage and skill of two men, coupled with endurance and a slice of luck, considering the terrain, the harshness of the climate, gathering of food and water and the safe passage through two lines of troops, both on full alert, for over five weeks of travelling undetected:

"The Good Tidings are as follows – I today interrogated a signaller who was a member of the Battalion, portion of which was captured with Mr. Guest and his detachment, and who succeeded in escaping from the Prisoner-of-War Cage at Derna, and made his way with a 'Tommy', arriving here this morning after a five weeks' trip. He was in good health and most intelligent, and quickly identified some of our fellows. Others I identified from his descriptions of them. I intend to see him again in two days' time when he has rested, so as to obtain fuller information, but can now with a fair degree of certainty state that they were all captured alive and unwounded, with the exception of Sergeant Hawke's gun crew, the members of whom at present are not defined. In the enclosed list of the missing men and the names and addresses of their relatives, I have marked those in each gun crew for you, which narrows down the number from which the one was wounded, but whoever it was apparently received only a slight wound in the arm. You will agree with me that this is wonderful news, and I am overjoyed that it is so."

The signaller's account of the engagement now follows: – *"They were moving in convoy between Giovanni Berta and Martuba and halted for breakfast at 6.45 a.m. A force was seen approaching in the distance and the trucks on which the guns were mounted were cleared for action, and the infantry occupied defensive positions. However, due to some mis-understanding it was thought the force was friendly and the vehicles were loaded up again ready to move, when it was discovered that the party was hostile. Sergeant Hawke's and Bombardier Syme's guns opened*

fire, but their guns were knocked out – amazingly enough with only one casualty.”

Major Stokes continues: *“My informant states that in Derna he saw our bunch, the size of which he gave at 35, which would be correct, including the English drivers. He knew this because, at the Prison Camp, they were split up into their various units for cataloguing. He described Chester Guest, Tom Hawke, young Syme, Bombardier Simpson who, he volunteered to me, was a publican at South Melbourne, also Brown S.E. whom he described as a thick-set dark chap, smoking a heavy bent pipe, (such bent pipe, the only one in the Battery, is a characteristic of this chap). There appears no doubt whatever in my mind of the authenticity of the information which concluded with the fact that on the morning of the 12th April, the whole detachment with other prisoners, was despatched by Motor Transport to the Prison Camp at Benghazi.”*

*In the Field,
31 May, 1941.*

*Sincerely,
Philip W. Stokes (Major)”*

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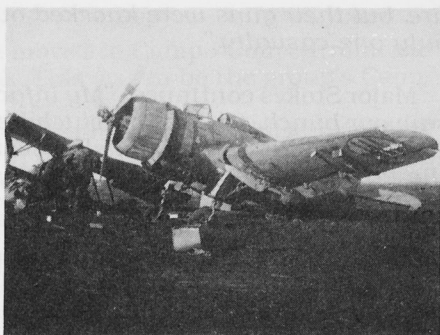
Bombardier Jack Milligan's crew which included Gunners Roy Farr, Ian Bell, Horrie Beck and Ralph Hawkey were lucky to make it back to Tobruk. With a couple of other gun crews they had been ordered to Magrum to protect a food dump which was frequently being machined gunned by German planes. The guns were deployed around the dump and concealed by stacking cases of bully beef and biscuits, and bags of sugar and flour around them.

The guns fired at three German planes one morning, but Milligan's gun jammed. One plane trailed smoke as it left the area and may have been hit.

Orders were given to leave Magrum at midnight on 1st April as the Germans were advancing inland. The stores being left had petrol poured over them and were burnt. Passing through Benghazi and Barce, the guns were placed to protect convoys motoring through a pass near Benina. Gunner Ralph Hawkey had occasion to remember the events well: *“A lone Jerry in a Heinkel came in to machine gun the trucks. Our Breda was mounted on a truck where there was only room for three of us. Horrie was gun layer, Ian was feeding the gun with trays of shells and I was keeping shells up to Ian. Our gun barrel was almost horizontal as Jerry was flying so low. We were on the fixed gear traverse and although Horrie was traversing by hand as fast as he could, the tracer shells were always just behind the tail of the plane. I was desperately trying to release the traverse to enable the gun to*



Roadside camp during retreat, in cold winds.



Wrecked Italian planes at Derna Airstrip.



Bristol Blenheim taking off from Derna Airstrip to harass advancing enemy.



Tired, dirty, but safe, back at Tobruk.



Digging in at Tobruk.

"swing ahead but couldn't get it free. How frustrating, as it was an easy target.

"Following an order to move, a British despatch rider on his motorcycle arrived to tell us to stay until we received further orders. Soon afterwards we were told that this chap had been a disguised German, and to get out fast as a rearguard action was taking place a little inland from us. Soon after passing Derna Aerodrome, a group of German armored cars and tanks cutting in from the desert opened fire on our convoy. Horrie, who was driving got a bullet in the arm, so pulled up. I got this searing pain in the back and was last to get off the truck. There was no good cover so we laid down on the far side of the truck. Arthur Wright who got down from another truck got into a shallow ditch. The low crown of the road gave him slight protection as bullets whined overhead and ricocheted off the bitumen.

"To our great relief, a couple of British 25-pounder field gun-crews swung into action and drove the Germans off. The convoy got going again. Further along the road, someone stopped an ambulance. Horrie and I were put aboard. A Medical Officer in the ambulance said I was a lucky boy as a bullet has just missed my spine. The bullet had entered my left leg above the knee, snicked the button off the tail of my greatcoat, smashed a pelvic bone near the base of the spine and came out of my back.

"I was taken to the Hospital at Tobruk. This was far from being a restful place. There was always plenty of action; but I couldn't see what was going on. The day a dive bomber came out of the sun and bombed the hospital, I was in the ward next to the one that was hit. The noise and the blast I shall never forget. During the fortnight I was there, there were air raids every day and night except for one day. Medical care was not too good because of the difficult conditions the hospital was under. I was lucky to get a dressing to my back before late afternoon despite the wound being badly septic.

"While I was in this hospital, a young pleasant-looking fair-haired German soldier was in the bed opposite me. He had three bullet wounds in the chest. Lieutenant Bluey Davis had been in and had left a tin of Ardmona pears for me. I shared the pears with the German who smiled his thanks. An English sergeant who could speak German came in to interview him. The German related how he had been on an armored vehicle when he was wounded. When this happened, the Germans with him pushed him off. He was picked up by Australians who got him to hospital. As well as being amazed and grateful, he could not understand why the enemy, particularly Australians, would bother to rescue and care for him. He said he hadn't wanted to join the Army but had he objected he would have been taken away and

shot. He had a wife and baby daughter back in Germany.

"I was evacuated on the hospital ship "Dorsetshire" to Haifa in Palestine and later was taken to the Australian General Hospital in Gaza. When I was fit enough, I was sent home and discharged and eventually took up farming on a soldier settlement block. Forty-five years later I can't sit still or stand in the one place for too long; but I can still manage a barrow-load of wood. I'm grateful to God that I managed to come out of it so well."

The Tobruk Hospital was never troubled with malingerers staying on for a rest. No area in Tobruk was immune from aerial bombs or artillery shells. So the Hospital suffered as much as any other area. Intentionally or not, the Hospital had been bombed many times and several of the staff and patients had been killed or wounded.

Gunner Tom Dawson recollects his sojourns there with a bad lot of desert sores on his legs: *"During bombing raids, all who could, took cover under their beds for what that was worth. A Tommy next to me had been badly wounded and was encased in plaster from the arms down, so he could hardly move. After a heavy raid, we found him under his bed, so two of us dragged him out and put him back. I asked 'How did you get under there?' 'F..... knows' came the answer in cockney dialect.*

"After being discharged, I was soon back again, but this time the ward was full of German prisoners. Again the Hospital was bombed and I dropped to the floor. The bomb blasts burst the window and my bed was covered in broken glass. After cleaning up, I chatted to a German prisoner who spoke excellent English, his mother being a Scot. He told me his imprisoned friends weren't happy about the bombing. He also told me what a wonderful man Hitler was. I said the bastard's mad and that his followers were suffering from mass hysteria. I concluded by patting him on the shoulder and telling him that he was lucky to be captured by the Australians because he would still be alive when the war ended as we were going to win and they were not."

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Gunner Ron Bryant relates the story of the Derna detachment's entry into the "Benghazi Handicap":

"Thousands of British, Australian and Indian troops in trucks, cars and motorcycles were streaming back along the coastal road. Three guns of 'F' Troop were moved from their comfortable abodes at Derna to the top of the Derna Pass to give protection to the vehicles crawling up the steep winding Pass with its numerous hairpin bends. Had the Pass been heavily bombed by the enemy, chaos would have resulted. Hundreds of vehicles and thousands of troops would have been jammed. The retreat had,

as in the nature of many retreats in history, become a rather panicky rout.

"When any truck stopped on the narrow winding road up the Pass with engine or tyre trouble, it was pushed over the edge of the road to tumble spectacularly into the deep ravines below rather than delay the procession of retreating vehicles. The dispossessed passengers would then hastily clamber on to other retreating vehicles.

"Next morning, thousands of vehicles were still approaching and climbing the Pass. Twin-engined Royal Air Force Blenheim bombers had been operating from the Derna aerodrome near the top of the Pass, so the "F" Troop gunners took little notice as about 12 low-flying aircraft approached. Suddenly German black crosses on the fuselages and wings became obvious. The men jumped to their three guns, put up a hail of tracer shells and split the formation. The planes were Me 110s twin-engined fighter bombers, usually armed with four machine guns and two 20mm cannon, and capable of a top speed of 340 m.p.h.

"Many tracers could be seen hitting aircraft. The 110s, banking low and fast, were machine-gunning vehicles on the Pass after having shot up a Hurricane, a Blenheim and three Lysanders on the aerodrome. One of the Messerschmitts crashed near the town. The Royal Air Force intercepted some of the planes, shooting down two. The British airmen reported that the "F" Troop gunners had been credited with two more Messerschmitts which had crashed as a result of anti-aircraft fire. The gunners were excited about their first-known successes. That evening, we celebrated with a few tots of rum which had been saved for emergencies.

"By the 6th April, the German advance was continuing apace with tanks and armored cars travelling east inland through the desert. The Germans were out-flanking and passing the Allied retreating troops to attempt to cut them off. A light dust storm was blowing. The men from both sides having had little water for days and sleeping in the open were very dirty. At 6 a.m. on that morning, the "F" Troop gunners, who had no transport of their own, were told to protect the R.A.F. aircraft on the aerodrome until the last airworthy plane took off, then to head east in British Royal Army Service trucks to be lent to them. The airmen set fire to their own five aircraft which had been damaged in the recent air raid and took off in clouds of dust from the dirt airstrips in their remaining planes. As the last British Lysander got into the air, German guns from across the road fired at it. To put it mildly, our forlorn gunners felt at a disadvantage as they watched the R.A.F. planes disappear into the East. We hastily dismantled our Bredas, loaded them and the ammunition on to the trucks and

"sped off along the now very lonely road to Tobruk

"Some 15 miles out of Derna. Australian infantry with rifles, fixed bayonets and Bren guns were advancing across stony and scrubby ground towards German armored columns which could be seen about a mile further inland. Being so lightly armed, their lot seemed an unenviable one. On the topic of arms, each crew of 5 or 6 men of "F" Troop only had a Breda anti-aircraft gun in pieces on the truck, one .303 rifle, and an odd Italian rifle or pistol or two.

"It was obvious that while we were on the trucks with our Bredas in pieces we would not be effective in a fight. The Royal Army Service Corps' drivers had been in the retreat to, and the evacuation from Dunkirk, in France. They knew all about retreats. When you retreat, they said, you go for your life; so they wasted no time, driving their 3 ton vehicles at 55 miles per hour all the way back to Tobruk. We put our guns into action on the aerodrome amongst a motley crowd of Libyan soldiers."

The same evening, what could be found of the scattered Battery was ordered back about 40 miles west to Gazala to be used in an anti-tank role in a line of resistance which the Australian Commander, General Leslie Morshead had decided to organize. In view of the inadequacy of the guns for anti-tank work, it was probably fortunate that the Battery ran into British anti-aircraft and field artillery units retreating from a colorful battle along the road, with brilliant tracers flying through the night air in all directions. So, 8th Battery turned about and headed back again to Tobruk. The gunners passed two trucks which, driving without lights had collided and capsized, injuring several British soldiers.

The Battery arrived back at Tobruk at 0200 hours on the 7th April. The truly remarkable Army Postal Service delivered mail from home to the gunners at that strange hour. Air letters, written at home about two weeks or so before, were avidly read in bright moonlight by the weary, dishevelled and dirty troops.

Morning found the gunners with morale rather low, in a sandstorm. They felt that they had been wandering around for days like lost sheep. The proposal to use the guns in an anti-tank role had seemed unrealistic, for when travelling, due to the shortage of trucks, there were now generally two Breda guns partially stripped down to fit them in to each truck. Getting them into action took about 20 minutes. Little armor-piercing ammunition was carried at that time.

The guns were eventually dispersed to give anti-aircraft protection to artillery units and to 9th Division Headquarters.