

## The "Rats" Bite Back

It became clear that the 8th Battery's gunners were contributing to a successful anti-aircraft defence. In 2½ months, 2000 enemy planes had been over Tobruk. The anti-aircraft batteries had shot down 61 planes and hit 73 others which had got back to their own lines. The Stukas had received a major jolt. Although they had been a terrible weapon in Europe, here in Tobruk, where guns could be concentrated around targets, it was demonstrated that the Stukas were not necessarily a battle winner. It was proved that concentrated light anti-aircraft fire could not only act as a deterrent to dive bombers, but could defeat them.

The myth created by the German Air Staff after spectacular successes in the opening campaigns of the war, that the Stukas were the ultimate aerial weapon, was dispelled.

The Battery's Diary recorded an example of enemy deception on 21st May. *Eleven bombers came in along the coast on a high level attack. A wave of five were identified as being four British Bristol Blenheims (three with British markings, one with German) and a smaller plane with British markings. There were also escorting CR 42 fighters.*

Perhaps at this stage, the enemy was beginning to "scrape the barrel", for the War Diary also noted that aircraft used in one day included 30 Ju 87s, 5 Dorniers, 4 Savoias, 5 Me 109s, 1 Ju 88 and 2 Heinkels.

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Towards the end of May, Sergeant McGillivray and Sergeant-Major Light had the honor of being promoted "in the field" to the rank of Lieutenant. Subsequently, the Battery received a signal from Regimental H.Q. in Palestine ordering one officer to return to Gaza to attend an Anti-aircraft gunnery school. There was slightly arrogant conjecture as to whether by this time anyone in Palestine could teach an 8th Battery gunner anything about anti-aircraft work. However, "ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die", so Lieutenant McGillivray, being the junior officer, soon found himself on the Tobruk wharf waiting in the darkness for the destroyer which would take him back to Alexandria.

The destroyers which were so bravely supplying the fortress tried to operate when there would be little or no moonlight towards the end of their run up to Tobruk. With this strategy, they hoped they would be just about out of range from attack by land-based Luftwaffe by dawn on their return trip.

Mac. tells of his journey:— "When dawn broke next morning, we were not clear of 'bomb alley' as it was called. About six Ju 88s appeared and bombed the little convoy of two destroyers and a specially-equipped Anti-aircraft ship H.M.S. 'Carlisle'. This 'Carlisle' was very fast. It bristled with high-angle guns and multiple-barrelled pom-poms. The little ships were going flat out, weaving like mad things with all guns blazing upwards. Our skipper lay in a deck chair on the bridge. When he saw the bombs leave an attacking plane he would order the helm hard over. The ship would swerve like a speeding dolphin. With one side of the ship dipping into the sea, water would pour over the deck. Huge water fountains were springing up where the bombs hit the sea, but all missed the ship.

"A near miss on the other destroyer stopped its engines. As it slowed down and stopped, the other two ships circled around it at full speed at about a half-mile radius. The cone-shaped canopy of fire that the ships put up over the 'sitting duck' was a wonderful sight. Any pilot would be crazy to fly into it.

"The Ju 88s went away. 'My' destroyer quickly took the damaged one in tow in what seemed an incredibly simple operation; but soon had to cast it off again when more Ju 88s turned up — I suppose with the buzzard-like idea of finishing off the cripple. Again the little ships carried out their spectacular circling manoeuvre putting up their protective umbrella of shellfire.

"During most of this time I was sheltering on deck under the protruding gun platform of a high-angle gun. The only trouble was that when the ship leaned over one way the big hot empty shell cases tumbled off the platform and frightened hell out of me as they hit the deck.

"Again the planes departed leaving no more damage to the convoy. After being towed again for a few miles, the crew of the damaged destroyer fixed the engines. We eventually limped into the harbor at Alexandria at slow speed.

"With the excitement and entertainment over, I realised that I was feeling pretty ill with what I thought was sand-fly fever which had been common in Tobruk.

"In the one day I had in Alexandria I had a uniform tailored and visited the Deceased Officers' Kit Store (thinking what a ghoulish name) to get a valise. I chose a beauty, but the Warrant Officer in charge said — 'Please yourself sir, but that one has been back twice already!' I found out later that he said that to all the young officers. I had a night at the famous old Shepherds Hotel at Cairo then went on to Regimental H.Q. with an immediate visit to Medical Officer John L. Sullivan.

"The M.O. was sure that I was suffering from the early stage of typhoid fever — so I got to Ghaza alright; but to the 1st Australian

*General Hospital and not to the gunnery school."*

Lieutenant McGillivray, who later became Battery Captain, was still hale and hearty forty-five years later so the fellow at the kit store at Alexandria was a pessimist. Perhaps it was as well that Mac. left Tobruk when he did. He might have spread his typhoid around the garrison.

Throughout June, the few personal diaries written by gunners continued to record terrible heat, meagre water rations, dysentery, sleeplessness and nervous tension as a result of the constant artillery fire and air activity throughout the days and nights.

The Battery was engaging enemy aircraft almost every day. The War Diary recorded many of the events in detail such as on 8th June.—

*"Sergeant Richard's gun repeatedly hit a Ju 88, Bombardier Milligan claimed hits on one Ju 87B, Bombardier Middleton claimed hits on two Ju 87Bs. Three guns of Lieutenant McKinnell's troop fired 220 rounds. Bombardier Massey-Greene claimed hits on a Ju 87B which departed to the west smoking and belched down.*

*"Three guns of Lieutenant Reed's Troop fired 114 rounds and Sergeant Hepworth claimed to have brought down the plane which banked sharply to the south and was reported on fire. Claims by Bombardiers Massey-Greene and Roberts and Sergeant Williams apparently all refer to the same plane, their gun positions being in close proximity. The Battery was officially credited with two planes. The two airmen of the plane brought down in our lines bailed out at about 200 feet but their parachutes failed to open. Both were Italian and were killed."*

Despite grave reservations by General Sir Archibald Wavell that with the equipment and forces available, an attempt to relieve Tobruk from the east and a breakout from Tobruk would incur heavy casualties, Operation Battleaxe was planned for 15th June, under some pressure from Mr. Winston Churchill.

With some 200 tanks, half of which were heavy infantry tanks, it was hoped to achieve temporary superiority at the outset of a drive to break through the enemy's front in Egypt at Halfaya.

The proposed task for the Tobruk garrison was to hold its besiegers and to execute a strong sortie to ultimately join forces with the formations operating from the frontier. The sortie was to be made by Australian infantry brigades, British artillery and a British armored brigade, to bar the way against retreating enemy forces.

Several detachments of 8th Battery prepared to provide anti-aircraft protection for the sortie and optimistically, to assist in an anti-tank role.

If the Allied attack developed successfully, English commandos

were to make a landing on the coast east of the Tobruk perimeter.

The German African Command through its Intelligence services became aware of the preparations for the attack. Guns and tanks were placed in great depth for all-round defence astride the likely lines of the Allied advance in the Halfaya area.

The signal to Tobruk forces to commence their sortie never came. Notwithstanding desperate attempts by the Allied forces at the Egyptian front, the offensive was eventually abandoned. Casualties were severe and included the loss of 87 British tanks.

Although there was disappointment in Tobruk that their prospects of relief had disappeared, the 8th Battery gunners were not too upset when the plan for the proposed sortie from Tobruk was called off. Many of the gunners had been compiling their last letters to home when they considered their fighting chances of impeding retreating German tanks with their 20-mm Breda "peashooters".

Some of the 8th Battery gunners were taking a terrible pounding from the Italian and German artillery. A couple of the crews were providing air protection to a troop of 2/12th Australian Field Regiment which was using captured Italian 75-mm guns and old 4.5-inch howitzers designed more for mountain rather than desert warfare. The howitzers were firing at 3,000 yards, while the opposing heavier guns were sitting back firing at 10,000 yards. It was the practice of these 2/12th Field gunners to rush out from their dugouts in a wadi to fire perhaps a hundred rounds or so, then to drop back into their dugouts. The enemy would take up the challenge and blast back with their big guns.

The luckless anti-aircraft gunners on each flank of the troop of field guns would take a pounding, having to stay on their guns to deter the enemy's Storch spotting aircraft which was observing for the enemy artillery.

In one period of a couple of days, Bombardier Roberts' crew was depleted. Roberts had to go to hospital with a throat infection. Gunner Dick Ince and Scottish Driver Jock Rodgers had been injured when the large shell crashed into the edge of their dugout, partly burying them and Gunner Frank Mawdsley, who was a bit slow in dropping on the sound of the enemy gun firing, was wounded in the leg by shrapnel. Another gunner packed up with nerves. The last two members of the crew with their re-inforcements moved back a mile or so after weeks of hammering by shellfire.

During June, as many as 2,500 shells a day were raining down on the garrison. As time went on, the minimum was about 200 shells, with an average of about 600 shells a day.

On the 4th July, the Germans dropped pamphlets from the air, with the following message:—

*"AUSSIES, AFTER CRETE DISASTER, ANZAC TROOPS ARE NOW BEING RUTHLESSLY SACRIFICED BY ENGLAND IN TOBRUCH AND SYRIA. Turkey has concluded a pact of friendship with Germany. England will shortly be driven out of the Mediterranean. Offensive from Egypt to relieve you totally smashed. YOU CANNOT ESCAPE. Our divebombers are waiting to sink your transports. Think of your future and your people at home. Come forward – show white flags and you will be out of danger!*

**SURRENDER!"**

The pamphlets hardly had the effect that the Germans intended. The Australians were most disappointed that not enough were dropped for all to get one as a good souvenir!

Late in July, the gun crews were heartened by a visit to each gun site by the greatly-respected General Leslie Morshead, Commanding Officer of the Tobruk garrison. Until then, the gun crews in the forward areas although well tended by their troop commanders, had not been visited by any senior officer. General Morshead congratulated Gunner Jim Cowie on driving Dick Ince and Scottish driver Jock through heavy shellfire to get the wounded men to the Regimental Aid Post a week or two earlier. Gunner Jack Buntz who usually carried his false teeth in his haversack, honored the General by wearing his teeth for the occasion. The General was very low key and unassuming, but he had an air of quiet confidence about the situation of the Siege which was reassuring to the men.

The Germans were using searchlights at night along the front lines to surprise patrols by Commandos who with Australian and Indian infantrymen had been inflicting casualties on the enemy.

The story of the infantry has been told in other histories. But it would be remiss if it were not acknowledged here that in Tobruk it was the infantry who had to withstand the initial onslaughts of tanks, artillery barrages and enemy infantry attacks. It was the infantry who had to counter attack and to carry out night patrols walking through minefields and barbed wire. It was the infantry who had to fight person to person to hold ground or to regain it. As time went on, it was obvious from the youth of their junior officers and non-commissioned officers that promotion could be rapid due to the high casualty rate.

Several of the light anti-aircraft crews who had been under almost constant shellfire while protecting advanced artillery batteries were brought back to the artillery batteries which were in positions further back. The health of these gunners improved. They had been suffering a certain amount of nerve strain from the bombardments as well as from dysentery carried by the ever-present flies.

Some of the 8th Battery's gunners to break the monotony, would join their neighboring artillery batteries to take part in their firing. The Allied field artillery had been severely rationed with ammunition – generally to 10 rounds per gun per day except for meeting specific attacks. By early August, thanks to the remarkable efforts of the Navy in running the gauntlet from Alexandria to Tobruk, additional ammunition became available. Most of the artillery fire was indirect; that is, the field gunners could not see their targets because of the distance involved or because of slightly higher ground between the guns and the target. Occasionally now, the gunners of the British Royal Horse Artillery, a first class fighting regiment of permanent soldiers using 25 pounders, would be allowed to relieve the monotony by direct fire at Fort Medauuar which was used as an observation post by the enemy. This direct fire introduced a sporting element into what otherwise was labor of a deadly serious nature. The exploding shells ranging on the fort could be watched by the gunners, instead of only by their men in a forward observation post.

The Royal Horse Artillery no longer used horses to pull their guns except for ceremonial parades and events back home in the United Kingdom. Their guns were moved by trucks or gun tractors of various types. Like most of the British permanent soldiers, they were true professionals, rather poorly paid, but imbued with tradition, highly trained, skilled and ready to fight to the end. The Australians were fortunate indeed to have such fine artillerymen at their side to hold back a determined enemy.

John Goschen, one of those dashing types of British officers who was in charge of Rocket Troop of the R.H.A., and also his gunners, became very friendly with many men of the 8th Battery. Goschen was regarded as someone special because of his leadership, his gallantry at the forward observation posts and for his Troop's skilled artillery fire in the heat of battle. Later, he was sent to a school in Cairo but on the way back his ship was sunk and he was drowned, to the great sorrow of his 8th Battery friends.

Our men noticed that in another nearby British artillery regiment, one officer in quiet times between shoots regularly played cards with some of his gunners by the gunpits. It was said by the British gunners that he had been promoted from the ranks, earning his commission "in the field" and that in the circumstances, he didn't feel as one with his fellow officers who had been commissioned because of their education or earlier position in life.

The initiative of Australian soldiers has been recognized. It could also be said that they have always been opportunists. "Lord Haw Haw" of Berlin Radio, the British defector by the name of Joyce, portrayed the Tobruk Australians collectively as "*Ali Baba Morshead and his 20,000 thieves!*" It was noted in the Battery

Diary of July that the Battery Commander had exchanged his desert van for a Humber Snipe sedan, which was duly camouflaged with appropriate desert colors. It was not recorded that a gunner had observed another Humber Snipe with no apparent owner, so removed the genuine leather covered back seat which made a luxurious bed in the gunner's tiny dugout. So, all ranks did look after themselves as well as possible.

"Lord Haw Haw" continued to make nightly broadcasts of propaganda from Radio Berlin for the Germans. He spoke contemptuously of the "*rats of Tobruk who were all thirty feet underground and still digging*", and threatened extermination for them. The sobriquet was happily accepted by the troops who were certainly living in holes in the ground and who became proud to be known as "*The Rats of Tobruk*".

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Being besieged meant being cut off from the rest of the world. Gunsites were often very lonely places. The only regular visitors were the troop commanders who brought ammunition, food and mail for the crews, and Gunner Doug Simson who delivered the water ration by tanker. Doug's visit was welcome not only for the meagre, daily ration for all purposes of 4 pints of water per man, (later increased to 6 pints), but for his news and gossip, in the tradition of water-carriers of all wars.

To counter the feeling of isolation, a newspaper, "Tobruk Truth – The Dinkum Oil" was printed daily by one Sergeant W. H. Williams, firstly on an old Italian duplicator, and later with a new typewriter and duplicator sent up from Cairo. The Tobruk Truth was a limited edition – 600 copies a day printed on both sides of one sheet of foolscap – due to the shortage of paper. The news gleaned from BBC broadcasts and from local events, was avidly read by the troops and passed around.

Despite life for month after month being dangerous, monotonous, with little variety in rations or routine, with no opportunity for sporting activities, with scant reading matter, and notwithstanding the constant heat and frequent duststorms, good comradeship prevailed and the men were remarkably cheerful for the most part.

It was conceded that if one had to be involved in a war, the desert had a few advantages. Once away from the derelict town of Tobruk and the Harbor, there were no buildings to come crashing down as a result of bombing and shellfire. For men who could take cover in small dugouts or in slit trenches from bombs and shells, although the noise, smoke and dust were frightening enough, the odds were against any particular individual suffering a direct hit. There were no women, children or any civilians to suffer as occurred when

cities or towns were bombed and shelled. There was intense heat and stifling fine dust; but this was not as bad for an army as fighting in mud and snow. Humor always existed, even if it was grim. A gunner from a British artillery regiment occasionally made a show of standing up in not-too-close shellfire, pretending to "catch" flying shrapnel. He joked once too often, being killed by an unexpectedly close bursting shell. Another soldier, shaking dust from his blankets, disappeared in a cloud of dust and smoke from bursting shells and was still shaking his blankets when the air cleared!

The 8th Battery "Rats" soldiered on from their little holes in the ground, watching the parades of enemy planes, firing hundreds of their 20mm shells day after day, observing the colorful fireworks of night bombing and anti-aircraft barrages, listening to the night and dawn infantry battles and artillery duels, and patiently suffering the intense heat and dust. Many of the planes shot down by anti-aircraft fire were not observed to crash by the gunners responsible for the hits, as often the planes flew on for miles before making a forced landing or crashing. When the British-manned Bofors guns made direct hits on a plane, the two-pound Bofors shells exploded on contact and the plane would generally crash there and then. As an example, early in August, Sergeant Hill's gun obtained several hits with a 20mm Breda on an Italian G-50 which was on a reconnaissance. It was then engaged by a Bofors of the 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, R.A., which with direct hits caused the plane to crash in flames a few hundred yards south of Advanced Headquarters. Bombardier John Campbell, who went to the crashed plane found it burnt out, with the pilot's body badly smashed and still smouldering. The body was buried near the plane and a cross with "Unknown Pilot" written on it, was erected over the grave.

Except for officers and drivers servicing the troops with ammunition, water, food and mail, men rarely left their allotted positions as there was nowhere to go, and one's dugout, slit trench or gunpit provided a sense of security. Driver Bob Little, who was dark of complexion, unshaven, dressed in his usual manner with Italian sun helmet, khaki shorts and Italian boots, did set off to look for his brother who was a member of the 2/48th Battalion which was manning a section of the perimeter. Indian infantry grabbed Bob, assuming he was an Italian soldier, and roughed him up attempting to make him admit to Italian identity. Eventually an Indian officer sent for Bob's brother, allowed them to talk for a while, then after dressing Bob down, sent him back to his gunsite, just a little wiser.

An 8th Battery Bombardier, whose guncrew was defending a flank of a troop of the Royal Horse Artillery, was stung by a scorpion one night. Thinking he might die and barracked by his cobbers with such comments as "*You'll be right Bomber*". "*the scorpion*



*will die anyway*”, “*any messages for your loved ones?*”, the two-striper sadly wandered off into the utter darkness of the desert to look for the Regimental Aid Post which he knew was somewhere around and miraculously located it by the sound of its flag flapping. Descending into the wadi to the R.A.P., he found a Captain and a Corporal intently playing poker; so he watched, feeling miserable and wondering how much time he had left. The Captain at last inquired what was the matter and when told that it was a scorpion bite said, “*Well anyway, you won't die*”, which was such good news that the Bombardier felt faint with relief. For the rest of the Siege, he was often referred to as “Scorpy”. Returning to his dugout, he did indeed find the scorpion dead in his blankets.

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On the 27th August, for the first time in four and a half months, there was no air activity. For the first time the gunners did not have to take post at their guns. Unbeknown to the “other ranks”, there had been much discussion and argument between British Prime Minister Churchill, Australian Prime Minister Menzies, General Auchinlech - Commander in Chief Middle East, General Blamey - Deputy Commander in Chief Middle East and General Morshead, as to the relief of the troops in Tobruk. The main reasons for considering relief were the deteriorating health of the men after many months of continuous action, and the desire to re-organise the A.I.F. into a force which could fight together instead of being scattered under various commands as it was.

The arrival of the Polish Carpathian Brigade late in August triggered off rumors that relief was contemplated. The Poles were patriotic soldiers who were largely escapees from internment and prisoner-of-war camps. They were mature, fine-looking men, experienced, and eager to tackle the Germans and Italians. Their artillery, anti-tank and cavalry regiments and infantry were soon in action. The Germans obviously knew that the Poles had arrived.

The short lull in air activity had been to conserve their resources for the 1st September, which was the anniversary of the German invasion of Poland. On that day, presumably to impress the Polish troops, 140 enemy aircraft attacked the harbor installations, the food dump and field artillery positions. The Germans had raked up many old planes for the occasion. There were pencil-shaped Dorniers, the usual Junkers and Messerschmitts, and even old bi-planes making up the attacking force. The 8th Battery gunners had many wonderful opportunities to hit planes which were often low enough for the pilots to be clearly seen in their cockpits and cabins.

Regrettably, the old Breda guns were showing signs of wear. In the first place they were not a high quality gun like the Swedish designed Bofors. Most of the crews had stoppages. Some of the

gunners were clearing stoppages up to half-a-dozen times while planes were coming at them. Had the Battery been equipped with Bofors guns, the Luftwaffe would have paid dearly that day.

The Australian War Memorial's history of Tobruk commented on the events:

*"Thirty Stukas attacked two heavy anti-aircraft guns and a formation of high-level bombers managed to drop more than 50 bombs on and around the site of a third, 15 Stukas dive-bombed the field-gun sites, other high-level bombers attacked targets in the base area, while others again distributed their largesse with a certain impartiality over the forward defended localities, some bombs falling in the enemy lines. With the enthusiasm and in-accuracy of amateur duckshooters, the ground forces fired thousands of rounds into the path of the lower-flying aircraft, while the ammunition expenditure of the anti-aircraft regiments in the raid was –*

3.7 inch	1006 rounds
102 mm	111 rounds
40 mm	1200 rounds
20 mm	3000 rounds

*One anti-aircraft gunner was killed and six wounded; five heavy guns were put out of action for four hours. Numerous planes were hit and at least four were believed to have been destroyed, though only one was seen to crash. But evidence, if not proof, of good shooting was perceived in the fact that only one other Stuka was seen over Tobruk in the rest of September."*

Many of the attacking planes that day were flying over to El Adem aerodrome some 15 miles away, reloading with bombs and returning to Tobruk to bomb again.

In early September, the Battery was attached to a British Regiment for administration. The Australian gunners, some of whom were under direct enemy observation were astounded to receive orders from the British command to form "Detachment Rear" for inspections, to shave daily, to wear long socks, and for N.C.O.s to wear shirts at all times. As there was no fresh water for washing, many of the Australians had their hair clipped back to the scalp for the sake of cleanliness, and as mentioned earlier, wore little in the way of clothing. Whilst appreciating the need to maintain standards in an environment where morale could slip, they were not at all impressed by the discipline inflicted on the British gunners having to dress each morning according to these orders, with polished boots, and also having to polish the brasswork on their guns. Whilst this looked good, the men in the hot sun were unavoidably sweating in clothes they could not wash and the glinting brass on their guns was apt to attract the observant eyes of the enemy. Gunner Arthur Wright, (English born himself) was seconded to a British

Bofors gun crew whose gunsite was fifty yards from the sparkling water of Tobruk Harbor. Wright suggested that they might all freshen up a bit by having a swim in the clear salt water. "Oh no", they said. "*We're inland men from Central England and we're not used to water!*" The Australians were appalled to be shown by a small group of conscripted English soldiers their infected feet, the result of cultivated tinea, in an attempt to get a "blighty", that being their term for being sent home. Lest any of these comments be regarded as knocking the British, let it be clearly stated that the Australians regarded most of their men, particularly those of the British artillery and machine gun units, to be efficient professional soldiers of the highest standing. Many of these men had been fighting more or less continuously in desert wars for well over a year, far longer than any Australian. Many Australians owed their safety to the fighting skills of these Britishers.

Because of the heavy losses of dive bombers, the Ju 88s (German twin-engined bomber/fighters) commenced a new technique of sneaking in at a great height, from the direction of the sun with engines throttled down, dropping their bombs and zooming out quickly. This was effective, often catching troops by surprise, as was to happen tragically with the Battery later.

The Battery was honored by the award of the Military Medal to Gunner Jim Courtney. On several occasions during heavy actions, his crew's Breda gun jammed, as they were wont to do, at the most inopportune moments. Gunner Courtney, ignoring bombs and machine-gun bullets raining down in clouds of battle dust, coolly and methodically cleared the stoppages and got the gun and crew into action again. He received the well-deserved award and was later promoted to the rank of Sergeant. Without detracting from Gunner Courtney's award, it is fair to say that there was not one gun crew of the Battery which did not have the same experience. Apart from one recorded exception early in the Siege, at no time did 8th Battery gunners ever take cover and leave their guns if in an air raid, even if they were being specifically attacked by bombing or machine gunning planes. The British anti-aircraft had learned a bitter lesson in April. Some 50 dive-bombers attacked their guns at four sites. At two sites, the guns maintained their fire. The damage was not great. One man was killed and one wounded. At the other two sites the personnel took cover. Here there were 46 casualties including 5 killed with four guns put out of action. So the lesson was that the safety of gun crews and the people who were being protected obviously lay in never giving up firing their guns.

Members of the 8th Battery recognised that the infantry had the terrible responsibility of keeping the enemy at bay at the perimeters. The artillery supported the infantry with counter barrages against enemy artillery and laid down fire against tanks or

any other target when requested. Every member of the 8th Battery accepted without question the responsibility of giving the artillery and any other troops protection against enemy aircraft. They never missed an opportunity of firing at an enemy plane regardless of whether they were being bombed, machine-gunned or shelled.

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Despite the opposition by the British Government and by their Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the relief of the Australian troops in Tobruk commenced. With the end of the Battery's sojourn in the Siege in sight, the men reflected on their first period of active service. For almost six months, the gunners had monotonous rations and little water; they suffered heat, frequent sandstorms and loneliness, with 24 hours a day and 7 days a week responsibility at their gun sites. They had been poorly equipped. There had been no recreational activities. But they felt proud of their part in a historical Siege, particularly of their record in fighting back at the notorious and previously feared Ju 87 dive-bombers – the Stukas.

The Official History, (Series 1, Vol. 3, Maughan) sums up the activities of the British and Australian anti-aircraft during the Siege:

*"3525 aircraft were engaged by anti-aircraft fire over Tobruk. Forty anti-aircraft gunners were killed and 128 wounded and more than 49,000 rounds of 3.7-inch, 3700 rounds of 40-mm and 75,000 rounds of 20-mm ammunition fired. Headquarters of the anti-aircraft brigade reported 74 aircraft definitely destroyed, 59 probably destroyed and 145 damaged. No aircraft was reported destroyed unless seen to crash. On two occasions when captured documents enabled the brigade's reports to be compared with enemy records, its claims of damage were found to be substantial under-statements. It is probable that some 150 enemy aircraft were destroyed."*

Lieutenant Roy Macartney of the Military History and Information Section in the Middle East reported that during the Siege, the 8th Battery shot down 23 enemy machines, 14 more were probably destroyed, 60 were badly damaged and 100 others were hit.

The Tobruk garrison had numbered from 22,000 to 23,000 troops in the fighting units, some 14,000 of whom were Australian. 776 Australians were killed in action or died of wounds, 2112 were wounded, 1019 were captured or were missing, making a total of 3,907 casualties.

Tobruk marked the turn of the tide. Until April 1941, the German blitzkrieg tactics with fast armor and dive-bombers had never been countered. No force or fortress had previously



*Remains of an Italian plane and pilot shot down by a British Bofors crew.*



*Tobruk Harbor. (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)*



*Tobruk War Cemetery. (Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)*



*H.M.S. "JACKAL" which evacuated the main party of 8th Battery from Tobruk*

withstood the Nazi assault. The Tobruk garrison gave the German land-forces their first defeat of the Second World War.

The British, Australian, Indian and Polish soldiers had forged strong bonds with shared suffering and mutual effort. Barton Maughan put it that:

*"If the greatest single factor in repelling the German assaults and holding the besiegers off was the steadfast, efficient and brave work of the field artillery which for some of the time was solely and for the whole time preponderantly from the British Army; if the greatest call on deep resources of courage was laid most often upon the anti-aircraft gunners who stood to their guns day and night even when they themselves were the direct target of the strike, if the most dreadful burden borne by the defenders was the constant manning of shallow and sun-scorched diggings and weapon-pits in the regularly-bombed, bullet-raked Salient, in which to stand in daylight was to stand for the last time; these judgements only illustrate that each man had his own job in the conduct of the defence. The spontaneous respect of all arms and services for the performance of the others and the loyalty with which they combined were the things that made Tobruk strong in defence and dangerous to its besiegers."*

Late in September, an Irish Light Anti-aircraft Regiment arrived from Egypt to take over the 8th Battery's guns. For two years, the Irishmen of this Regiment had been experiencing a good degree of comfort while manning guns at Alexandria. They were shocked to see their new living conditions in the desert around Tobruk, in six feet by four feet dugouts in stony ground adjoining the gunpits – the dugouts which had been home and security for the gunners for more than five months.

The main party of the 8th Battery, relieved from their guns, moved to an assembly point near the coast to be near the Tobruk Harbor for embarkation at night on to destroyers of the Royal Navy.

The morning of 25th September was cloudy. Early in the morning, a German plane reconnoitred along the coast, not an unusual event. Later, many of the 8th Battery men were congregated and queued up at a large tent for an issue of cigarettes. Many of those relieving Irishmen who had not yet gone out to the gunsites were camped further up the slope of a large rise. At 0830 hours, Gunner 'Runner' Williams hearing the ominous 'throb - throb' of a plane noticed the group at the tent and shouted – *"Disperse, for God's sake!"* It was too late. Following the earlier reconnaissance, a German twin engined Ju 88 bomber, a deadly efficient plane, swooped in from the direction of the coast. Gunner Nap Croft said later – *"I saw the bombs leave the aircraft. The first one or two dropped*

*into the sea. I hit the deck, but was knocked unconscious for a few moments by the explosions of the bombs."*

The bombs straddled the camps of both the 8th Battery and the newly-arrived Irishmen. Men who had survived so much for so long were blasted and cut to pieces. Gunners Jim Cowie, Don Evans, Sam Hardingham and Val Morrow were killed. Six of the relieving Irishmen also lay dead. Eight other men of the 8th Battery were wounded. (They were Bombardiers Jack Milligan and Jim Moyes, Gunners Ken Kilpatrick, Jack Matthews, Bert Evans, A. L. Cameron, Jim Dennis and J. T. Bell). Thirteen gunners of the Irish Regiment were also wounded; some very badly so. It was a terrible introduction for the Irishmen. It was a sad finale at Tobruk for the 8th Battery.

In preceding weeks, Gunners Croft and Bryant had saved up a full waterbottle of rum from their meagre weekly ration for a morale booster on the evacuating destroyer in the event of its being bombed. Their rum was passed around to the surviving shocked troops as they collected their wits. Men from a nearby Regimental Aid Post gave great assistance in attending to the dead and wounded. The bodies of both Batteries' men killed were buried in the desert sands of Tobruk War Cemetery that afternoon, the Service being attended by several officers and men from each Battery. The wounded were admitted to 4th Australian General Hospital at Tobruk, with the exception of Bombardier J. S. Milligan and Gunner K. D. Kilpatrick who after treatment returned to duty.

On the next night, 26th September, in very sombre mood, the main party from 8th Battery moved in motor trucks quietly down to the harbor. Some of the gunners were in a revengeful mood at the loss of their mates on the previous day and felt like staying on. However, they were all embarked efficiently in the darkness at about midnight by friendly and helpful sailors of the Royal Navy on to the destroyer H.M.S. "Jackal". At 0030 hours, without a light showing that might attract submarines or night bombers, the "Jackal" quietly and carefully manoeuvred through the wrecks in the Harbor to head into the Mediterranean and back to Alexandria. At 2330 hours on the 27th September, the rear party of 8th Battery moved down to the wharf to board H.M.S. "Griffin". The soldiers were given beautiful-looking white bread with jam, and cups of hot coffee, before settling down on the decks to sleep for a few hours.

As dawn broke with each group, the excitement of being on these wonderful little destroyers weaving from side to side to upset the aim of any lurking submarine's torpedoes, speeding towards Alexandria at 30 knots on the calm Mediterranean, lightened the hearts of the gunners. Several gunners were taken unawares by the extreme list of the ship when weaving, being pitched across the

deck but were saved from the sea by the deck rails.

Escorts of Brewster Buffaloes and Hurricanes located the little groups of destroyers and an accompanying minelayer. During the "Griffin's" voyage, an enemy bomber approached from aft, but on sighting the aerial escort, dropped its bombs harmlessly in the sea and flew off with a couple of fighter planes in pursuit. The gunners, reclining on the decks of the destroyers, were happy to be alive after their never-to-be-forgotten months in a siege which would be remembered in history. Thin and drawn as they were, beset by desert sores through poor diet, heat and dust, flea-ridden and poorly clad, their morale was high as they saw the Egyptian port of Alexandria appear.

They thanked the British sailors for the speedy and enjoyable journey, then disembarked. Motor trucks took them to Amariya where they were marched, carrying rifles, bayonets, packs, haversacks and tin hats some miles to a British staging camp. Many of the men were very weak and had to be assisted with their gear by their mates. To their disgust, they were served at the British Army camp with an evening meal of a small pigeon sized boiled egg, a small onion and a slice of bread.

Nevertheless, there was always that light relief. On his first night at this camp, Gunner Dick Ince had occasion to visit the camp's long-drop toilets. To inspect the seat, he lit a match, and accidentally dropped it down the hole, setting fire to the mass of paper below. Frantically, he rushed back to his tent waking up his mates with the cry — "*Quick, give me your water bottles, the shithouse is on fire!*" With an armful of water bottles and followed by sleepy imprecations, he won his fight with the fire.