

The Siege of Tobruk

Enemy air activity was being stepped up. On the 9th April, nine German planes bombed Tobruk around the Harbor and town and later, ten twin-engined Messerschmitts came in low, firing machine guns and cannon. Five of the 8th Battery's Bredas opened fire on the leading Messerschmitt which was only about 500 feet above the ground. Many tracers could be seen hitting it. With parts of the tail shot off, the plane crashed, bursting into flames, killing the crew instantly. Three more Messerschmitts roared in firing their machine-guns and cannon. Then two more planes came in actually flying around inside the contours of a wadi. The gunners opened fire on the front plane. Observing that it was a British Hurricane being chased by a Messerschmitt-109 at no more than 100 feet above the ground, the guns switched to the German and beat it off. The Hurricane pilot later sent a note of thanks to the Battery despite his Hurricane having 8th Battery's shots in the wing. That evening, the R.A.F. reported that they had shot down four of the Messerschmitts and confirmed two more of them for the Battery's gunners, so the Germans had lost seven of these raiders. The gunners' morale was boosted.

Each day now, there was great activity throughout the area of Tobruk. Following an extensive reconnaissance of the fortress area by General Morshead, three Brigades took over the defence of the perimeters on the 10th April. Thousands of mines were laid by engineers, British artillery were putting down barrages on the enemy, morning and evening, while a destroyer in the harbor was firing into the enemy's lines. Italian planes carried out several raids and shot down a Hurricane. Australian infantry were patrolling no-man's land night and day.

Tobruk was cut off and isolated on the 11th April by the German armored columns. The Siege of Tobruk had commenced. Few of the troops then besieged would ever have anticipated such an event and none at that time would have known that they were to take part in one of the great sieges of history.

The garrison dug in. The perimeter to be defended ran in an arc for about 30 miles with an average distance from Tobruk Harbor of about 9 miles. There were four Australian infantry brigades, four British field regiments and some anti-tank units, with about 120 guns in all. In addition, there were several heavy and light anti-aircraft batteries, some engineers and two British armored regiments with 29 Cruiser tanks and 10 Matilda tanks.

On the morning of 12th April, several of the 8th Battery's gun

crews were up at 0100 hours to move into position to give anti-aircraft protection to the 18th Brigade which was assembling to meet an anticipated attack by the Germans. Nearly two thousand infantrymen assembled near the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads. They were escorted by light and heavy tanks, and took up defensive positions.

At dawn, a German Henschel observation plane came in low, at no more than 100 feet up. The gunners, not having seen a Henschel before, mistook it for a British Lysander, both planes being high wing monoplanes. The gunners argued afterwards whether they had seen R.A.F. roundels or Luftwaffe crosses on the plane. It seems that their powers of observation may have been affected by what was already in the minds of the observers, either by what they expected to see or by what they hoped to see. Be that as it may, the gunners were too slow, only getting a few shots away as the Henschel receded over the desert.

The expected attack by the enemy did not eventuate so the troops were re-deployed. The gunners, as with most of the troops, were tired and dirty. They had not had a wash or taken their clothes off for over a week. Lifting the guns and ammunition on and off trucks for each move was heavy work. There were dust storms day and night. Mornings would find the gunners sleeping in the open, covered with a layer of dust, with oozing eyelids stuck together. Water was strictly rationed for drinking only. Food, although only canned, had been adequate, but was now running low.

Early morning on 14th April, tanks skirmished over a rise near some of the Breda gun positions. Shells were ricocheting around the crews. Gunner Dick Ince had been told by an infantryman that one method of stopping a tank was to run up to the side and to lever off the track with a crow bar, so he usually made a point of having a crow bar handy. As three huge tanks lumbered up in front of his gun position, Gunner Ince rushed out and halted the leading tank to make the crew identify themselves! Fortunately a British Captain poked his head out of the turret and said "*It's all right old chap; we're British!*"

Forty Stukas, the notorious Junkers 87s, bombed the battery's area. As the Stuka pilots pulled out of their screaming dives at a low level, the gunners had exciting shooting, with many tracer shells scoring hits. Meanwhile the German escorting Messerschmitt 109s were engaged in dogfights with Hurricanes, shooting down two. The anti-aircraft gunners shot down two Stukas. A twin-engined Ju 88 made a spectacular sight toppling down from the clouds, rolling over and over in flames, apparently shot down by a Hurricane which had been lurking high above. A Hurricane crashed 150 yards from Bombardier Roberts' crew. The Australian pilot had been shot in the head by the guns of a German Me 109. That sadly was the last



TOBRUK BESIEGED, 1941. (Cartography by James Emery - With acknowledgement to Chester Wilmot)

of the Garrison's few Hurricanes. The British and Australian pilots, some still in their teens, had gone up bravely time and again without hesitation against odds of up to ten fighters to one. The German Messerschmitts had proved faster than the desert-equipped Hurricanes, although the Hurricanes were reputed to be more manoeuvrable. The 8th Battery's gunners would never forget the gallant attempts of these fine lads, the pilots of the Hurricanes, to stop the enemy's bombers.

The troops in Tobruk took a lot of punishment that day from aircraft and artillery. But the enemy lost 15 planes to Hurricanes and the anti-aircraft batteries. The infantry had taken 400 German and Italian prisoners while the efficient British artillery had knocked out ten tanks with their 25 pounders.

Apart from the thirty members of 8th Battery under the command of Lieutenant Chester Guest who had been captured during the retreat, another thirty men of the Battery were casualties or sick. The guns were being moved so often that the crews generally didn't have time to dig proper gunpits or to construct parapets. They felt quite exposed with Stukas screaming down at them, bombing and machine gunning. The Battery was being used mainly to give protection to field artillery, with a Breda gun placed at each flank of a troop of field guns.

Life tended to settle down to a routine. The Germans bombed the Harbor regularly at night and often at about 0400 hours. The 8th Battery gunners who were out with the field artillery could lie back and watch with great interest the brilliant displays of red, white and green tracers, shell and bomb bursts, flares and searchlight beams around the Harbor, as they were usually some three to four miles away. On the other hand, they were now subjected to the heavy shellfire of the artillery duels.

Generally speaking, the anti-aircraft men became fairly inured to bombing. They could hit back at the Stukas or fighter planes with their Bredas. With so much to be done to keep a gun firing, there was little time to worry. To be caught in a barrage of artillery shells was far more frightening. It was then a case of lying low in a small two-man dugout or in the gunpit while the shells, often in their hundreds, whined and crashed around them. During artillery duels, men would lie flat on their faces in their shallow dugouts, tin hat pulled down over the back of the head, with swirling dust and smoke from high explosive, sand spilling down from the dugout walls, appearing calm enough, even passing a joke, but tense inside, wondering whether the next screaming shell would mean the end.

Gunner Dick Ince was a man of great religious belief. His calm demeanour in the worst of shellfire was inspiring to see. There is an old maxim that says there are no atheists under intense

shellfire.

Shellfire was much more frightening when caught out alone, sheltering in a depression, without the prop of close mateship.

There never was a time during the Siege that the gunners were out of range of enemy artillery. One of the enemy's long range guns called by the allied troops "Bardia Bill" would fire intermittent shells, perhaps every quarter hour or so, willy nilly, into the fortress area, day after day. These shells could be heard whining far overhead of the men in the forward areas, but never seemed to cause a great deal of concern, at least to those up front.

There were lucky escapes. The gunners at one of Sergeant-Major Light's positions were blown off their gun by the explosion of a bomb landing on a dump of gelignite some 75 yards from the gunsite.

Two bombs landed near Lieutenant Harry Stephens and his driver, causing their Austin truck to be written off. Staff-Sergeant Scott was firing a mounted Lewis machine-gun at three Me 110s when a fourth Messerschmitt machine gunned him, the bullets striking the gunsight and flashguard. Sergeant Frank Le Sueur's detachment, whilst moving to an alternative position, came under heavy shellfire which exploded a nearby ammunition dump. Le Sueur and Gunner "Tiny" Brazenor received wounds from shell splinters – the former in the head, neck and arm and the latter through the right side. Their gun and truck were damaged. (Sergeant Le Sueur was evacuated back to Palestine, but died of illness and was buried at Gaza War Cemetery). Gunners Gordon Fellows and W. Marshall were wounded by shrapnel from odd unexpected shells.

Soldiers say that when one is shelled by artillery, one doesn't hear the one that gets you. They say the speeding shell arrives just before the sounds of the gun firing and the whine of the shell. Gunner Hawting swore that was true. While on Sergeant Hugh Robertson's guncrew protecting a troop of 2/12th Field Artillery Regiment from air attack, Gunners Hawting and Maxwell shared part of an old roofed infantry trench during the enemy's persistent artillery barrages. Two shells exploded just six feet away from them, but luckily around a bend in the trench. They heard the explosions first, immediately followed by the whine of the shells proving, they said, the point that *"you don't hear the one that gets you"*.

Technically of course, it depends on range, height of trajectory and velocity of the projectiles. Experienced troops taking shellfire from howitzers which fired high into the air to lob shells into wadis would hear the distant 'boomp' of the guns as that sound travelled in a straight line from guns to target. The troops became very adept at dropping smartly into gunpits or dugouts at the first 'boomp', beating the arrival of the shell.

On the last day of April, a curious incident occurred along the escarpment. Two Messerschmitts and a Hurricane came in low, apparently engaged in a dog fight; but in fact they were staging it and strafing with machine guns troops who were watching the act. A very experienced British Bofors gun crew appreciated the real situation and with a few expertly aimed shots brought the Hurricane down. When doubt was expressed by a senior officer as to whether the Hurricane had been strafing, an Australian soldier who had been wounded in the backside said, "*He was shooting; show him my bloody arse!*" It was confirmed later that the Hurricane, probably captured in Greece, had a German pilot.

Early in May, as the wadi occupied by 8th Battery Headquarters was being shelled persistently, B.H.Q. moved to a new position. The next day, the vacated position was heavily bombed and several men of the remaining Casualty Clearing Station and Divisional H.Q. were killed.

Under General Leslie Morshead, the Garrison settled down to stubborn defence. The besieged troops could not have had a better leader. The General had commenced his career as a school teacher, but had made soldiering his hobby. He was a captain at the Gallipoli landing in 1915, and later was wounded there. He commanded the 33rd Battalion with distinction in France. In 1939, having commanded an Infantry Brigade in the Militia in the intervening years, he was appointed as a Brigade Commander in the A.I.F.'s 6th Division. So, at the time of the Siege there would have been few generals with his experience of front line warfare.

The infantry, mostly Australian, dug in in-depth around the perimeter. They actively patrolled no-man's land at night in the traditional Australian manner. The artillery, with about 100 oddly assorted guns were able to cover most vital areas outside the perimeter. The mainstay of the artillery were the British regiments with their magnificent 25-pounder guns.

The 2/12th Australian Field Regiment which had arrived from Egypt in early May, took over a motley collection of guns which included old 60-pounders, 18-pounders 4.5-inch howitzers and old captured guns, all of which their gunners soon used to good effect. Back at the Harbor, heavy and light anti-aircraft guns gave some cover for the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy ships which so bravely ran the gauntlet night and day to supply food, ammunition and mail, and to evacuate sick and wounded men. Each part of the Garrison relied heavily on the other sections. As the troops overcame their initial tiredness following the retreat, they gained confidence from the mutual support of the other parts of the defence. A new spirit began to prevail. There was pride in that, for the first time in this war, the German blitzkrieg method of breaking through with dive bombers and tanks had been resisted.

Life for the gunners, although never easy, became more bearable. They generally lived in small two-man dugouts. These were about six feet by four feet, dug into sand and rock, a couple of feet below ground level. They had a parapet a foot high around the edge and were roofed with a sheet of canvas or iron. Although countless thousands of rounds of enemy shellfire landed around these dugouts, miraculously no shell landed directly into them, but several shells did hit the parapets. A 155mm shell hit the edge of the dugout in which Gunner Ince and Scottish driver Jock Rodgers were lying and partly buried them. They were pulled out, covered in dust and blood, but not too badly injured. Gunner Jim Cowie who drove them through heavy shellfire to the Casualty Clearing Station was mentioned in despatches for his effort.

Food was delivered daily by each Troop Headquarters to the gun-sites. Rations were rather basic. There was rice with much red dust in it which had to be sifted out by pouring it from one tin to another, allowing the wind to blow out the dust. There was good Australian bully beef. Bread, tinted through with red dust, baked in a Field Bakery was fairly regularly supplied and welcomed. The British tinned herrings and tomato sauce smelt far too fishy to be appreciated.

The British tinned meat and vegetables, an uninviting-looking mess, was no more welcomed than their tinned fish. An occasional tin of South African canned fruit with Carnation tinned milk was considered a real luxury. Army biscuits were in good supply, but several gunners cracked their teeth on these. Nevertheless, crushed up and with some tinned milk, the biscuits made a satisfying sort of cereal for breakfast.

A bright spot in the British supply of rations was a weekly issue of about 50 cigarettes per man, and a minute quantity of rum which could be saved up for emergencies or celebration.

Each member of a gun crew took his turn at being cook. This wasn't onerous as typically breakfast would be the biscuit porridge, with bread and jam, lunch would be bully beef and biscuits and the evening meal would be a bully beef stew with rice, supplemented on occasion with tinned fruit – sustaining enough, but monotonous and lacking vegetables. Cups of tea were a great pleasure. When water was most scarce, the troops generally agreed that black tea gave the most satisfaction as a thirst quencher.

During May, when German paratroopers and airborne troops successfully invaded Crete, albeit at great cost, all ranks at Tobruk were eventually armed with rifles, bayonets and hand grenades. Up until this time there had been only one Lee-Enfield rifle for each gun crew apart from old Italian rifles and pistols which had been picked up. Tobruk was little more than 200 miles south of Crete. The Tobruk troops were standing to at dawn each morning, expect-

The Domestic Scene at a Tobruk Gun-site



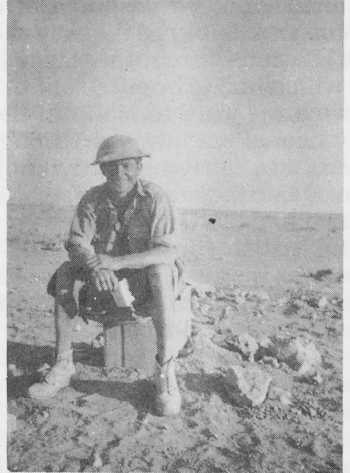
The Dining Room



The Laundry



The Bathroom



The "En Suite"



Entrance to the Bedroom

ing that Tobruk would be next on the list for an airborne attack as Tobruk was proving to be an irritating thorn in the side for Rommel's Africa Korps which had by this time advanced into Egypt.

Had the paratroopers attacked Tobruk, it would have been a costly operation. The Tobruk troops were well dispersed, dug in and now well-equipped with small arms. There was a reasonable layout of light anti-aircraft guns which would inflict terrible damage on slow, low flying planes or gliders carrying troops. The expected airborne attack never eventuated. By late June, Germany declared war on Russia and then could not afford another costly airborne raid on closely-defended Tobruk after the heavy losses of so many elite troops in capturing Crete.

Day after day, the Germans and their Italian allies tried to wear down the Tobruk defences. There were daily bombing raids by the Stukas escorted by Messerschmitts. As there were no British fighter planes left at Tobruk, the Germans had control of the air but they still had to contend with the anti-aircraft guns which damaged many aircraft, and shot down an increasing number.

With the hot season, life became grimmer for the men of both sides. The water ration was meagre. Four pints per man only were allowed for drinking and cooking, which in the hot desert was not enough to allow for washing utensils or bodies. For a while, drums of sea water were delivered to the gunsites for washing. Eventually, petrol became so scarce that it was no longer possible to deliver sea water. So then there was no washing. Somehow, the men although not clean, did not smell in the dry desert air. They wore little — usually khaki shorts, boots with no socks and tin hat.

Flies became a great problem. At one stage, casualties from dysentery were three times heavier than battle casualties. Strict regulations were enforced regarding burial of excreta. Efficient "thunder boxes" with good lids were issued to each gun site. The troops learned to take more care of their food by keeping it in fly-proof ammunition boxes. The precautions were effective, reducing the incidence of dysentery to manageable proportions.

The gunners tried to finish their work on gun and ammunition maintenance early in the morning, to as to be able to get to the shade of their dugouts or to lie under trucks, to avoid becoming too thirsty. Some tried sucking some miserable little raw potatoes, which they had received in rations, to ease their thirst; but learned that they had a terrible taste. Fleas were a constant irritation to some of the men who would de-flea their blankets each morning. Others seemed to be able to ignore them. Some of the troops were suffering badly from sores on their faces caused by the hot dry winds and sun. Most had desert sores, usually referred to as "wog" sores. Any slight scratch would develop into a weeping sore due to the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, despite the issue of Vitamin C

tablets. Lassitude and nery headaches were common from the combination of heat, poor diet and the constant bombardments from enemy shelling and aerial bombing.

Greece and Crete had been lost by the Allies. The Allied Front in Egypt had become entrenched. Grim and isolated as life was in the garrison, there was still the ability to smile. Army cooks were always a target for banter, such as, "*who called the cook a bastard?*" The stock reply was, "*who called the bastard a cook?*" Gunner Dick Hawting made Cook Stan Waugh a more serious target as a result of some gun crews being brought back to Battery Headquarters to have a day or so away from the guns and the bombardments by enemy artillery to have a swim in the Mediterranean. Dick Hawting, during such a break, was having a well earned sleep-in. He was rudely awakened with the order to – "*Parade for rifle inspection!*" He grabbed his .303 Lee-Enfield, which was loaded in case parachute troops dropped in, and lined up beside Cook Stan Waugh. Sergeant Cavanagh, inspecting the rifles, came to Gunner Hawting who rattled the bolt back and forth to remove live rounds. In his half asleep stupor, he accidentally pulled the trigger, parting Stan's hair with the breeze of the bullet. The embarrassed Gunner Hawting, apologising to Stan Waugh, added that the shot had nothing to do with the standard of his cooking. Nevertheless, Gunner Hawting said that the cooking did seem to improve after that episode!

Those who got to the beach for a swim on their two day break still didn't get away from the war. As bombers and fighters flew in or departed along the coast, troops basking in the sun at the sandy cove would race for the protection of overhanging rocks. They looked rather odd, being as naked as when they were born except for steel helmets clutched to their heads.

What was it like in the gunpit? One Gunner wrote of a typical action: – "*We get a sinking feeling in the stomach as we watch the dive-bombers circle around the area, then turn towards us. Although it is supposed to be a crime to smoke at the gun, most of us are smoking by this time to help us to keep calm. Down screams a Stuka in a spectacular, almost vertical dive. Cigarettes thrown away now we wait until it's well within range, perhaps 3,000 feet. Looks as if he's on to us. Fire! Smoke, flame, pounding guns, dust, exploding bombs, anti-aircraft shell-bursts, gun stoppages, cursing, ejecting jammed shells, firing again, hits, then it's generally all over in a few lively minutes. All hands get on to checking the gun, reloading trays of shells and tossing hot empty shellcases from the gunpit. Luck has been with us, but sometimes we wonder if it's being stretched a bit far. As the planes come at us, we don't feel too happy, but once our little gun is firing away, all's well and it's exciting enough. After the excitement subsides,*

we return to our digging, eating, reading, writing or just yarning."

After one shoot, Gunner George Roberts commented on how the duty of the No. 3 gunner was to stand on the left side of the gun to feed in trays of ammunition while the gun was firing with the No. 4 gunner passing trays to him from behind. As this required concentration to follow the gun around they would generally not have time to watch the proceedings above. As the sounds of aircraft motors, machine-guns and of falling bombs intensified, No. 3 would crouch lower and lower and No. 4 would be trying to outdo him by sinking even lower! But when the gun began firing the tension would ease. In any case, after a few raids, the gunners gained confidence within the low walls of their gunpits.

In these early days of the Siege, the gunners had respect for the bravery of the Stuka pilots, many of whom dived almost vertically through a canopy of bursting heavy anti-aircraft shells, Bofors and Breda tracer shells, and a hail of bullets from mounted Bren and Lewis guns and from a great variety of odd firearms. It seemed remarkable that so many got through the screen of flying metal. However, sufficient planes crashed or absorbed hits to eventually dissuade the pilots from diving so low as the months went by.

On 10th May, the troops of the garrison, who could be forgiven for wondering whether any but their own folk at home were much concerned about them, were pleased to learn of the messages which had been received by the G.O.C. Tobruk Fortress:—

1. From the Prime Minister of England (Mr. Winston Churchill):

"The whole Empire is watching your steadfast and spirited defence of this important outpost of Egypt with gratitude and admiration."

2. From General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief:—

Your magnificent defence is upsetting the enemy's plans for attack on Egypt and giving us time to build up our force for a counter-offensive. You could not be doing better service. Well done."

The following translation from an article in the German newspaper "Nationblatt" of 12th May 1941 by a German war correspondent, R. W. Billhar, who flew over Tobruk, seemed to be designed more for home consumption rather than recording reality:—

"The Desert stretches out endlessly beneath us. The wadis, the dried-up river valleys are deep; here and there are small hills, in some places the coast falls away steeply, but huge expanses are there.

"No village, scarcely a tree breaks up the endless void. Far away on a deep and unmistakable bay stand the white buildings of Tobruk. Desolate and flat as the country seems to us

as we look down on it from above, to our comrades below it will seem still more desolate, still more comfortless. They will suffer from the heat and the dust. Lack of cover against artillery and air attacks will make their lives a misery.

"Here, hills and heights can be commanding positions. The English have taken advantage of this. Everywhere they have built up their earthworks and defences. Their batteries are dug in at all important points. Tobruk is not only a town to be defended, but a huge defensive system, well built up and cleverly suited to the ground.

"In this system, ships played a great part. We have sunk or seriously damaged them. The harbor was important – it was, because our Stukas have smashed the quays. English fighters played a decisive part. They have had to give up this role which our Messerschmitts and Italian fighters have now taken over. The anti-aircraft artillery of Tobruk enjoyed our highest respect – once upon a time. Then, the Stukas dropped their bombs! The anti-aircraft fire of Tobruk has become very much weaker. Artillery positions made the lives of our tanks and infantry a misery. We have beaten down battery after battery with bombs.

"Over Tobruk, the sky is seldom silent. The sound of engines continually terrifies the Tommies, chases them to the guns, forces them to hang the sky with steel curtains and black anti-aircraft clouds, until dive attacks by fighters and Stukas with bombs and machine gun fire destroys them or forces them to take cover.

"No day passes without bringing our squadron a task, no day passes without a flight, no day without an attack on Tobruk. 'It's just like it was on the Western Front' say the old hands among us. Then they tell us of the clean perfect work of the Stukas at Liege, at the break through on the Maginot Line, at the crossing of the Meuse. The young ones among us are twice as eager next day, fly still more madly into the anti-aircraft barrage, and get on to their objectives even more exactly.

"To batter Tobruk until it is ready for storming shall be a clean piece of work. That much at least, the old and young Stuka airmen of our squadron owe to their fair name."

A captured German soldier wasn't so impressed with their Stukas. This quote is from his diary: "Plenty of sunshine, little food. . . . Dive bombers begin their work again. Let us hope they will accomplish something this time. Up to the present, they have done nothing to speak of. It is only over the harbor that there are strong defences. In the fortified areas they could circle around quietly and then pop in. So what! The commander dives, chucks his eggs haphazardly and of course the other 30 follow his example. Blockheads!"

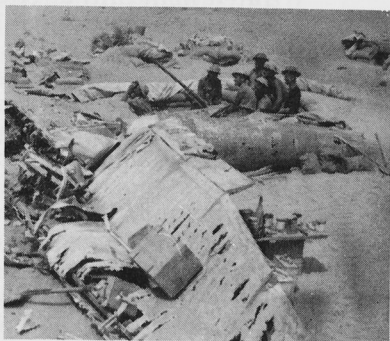
This soldier wasn't very happy anyway. He went on: "What is

there for a soldier to do when there is no fighting, and nothing to eat. This morning the bit of cheese was not even enough to go round for breakfast. The men want to attack, to get into Tobruk. There, there's loot to be had. Our opponents are Englishmen and Australians. Not trained attacking troops but fellows with nerve and toughness, tireless, taking punishment with obstinacy, wonderful on the defence. Ah well, the Greeks spent 10 years before Troy.

"We are feeling hungry. The theorists in Germany said, 'Make sure the soldiers eat enough. The heat takes away the appetite with disastrous results.' A pretty theory, but we have an appetite, a bigger one than we can satisfy, and we can't forget it."



The 20-mm Breda A. A. gun in action.



Gun position concealed in remains of a crashed Stuka.
(Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Stuka shot down by A.A.
(Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Mobile 20-mm Breda A.A. gun.
(Photo courtesy Australian War Memorial)