

9th Battery

Western Desert

When 9th Battery moved out of Amariya Camp on 23rd April 1941, it virtually severed all connection with R.H.Q., except for supplying a copy of the War Diary and other army paper work.

In the afternoon of 24th April, "I" Troop (Ink) moved out from B.H.Q. to an aerodrome designated Baqqush Satellite on which was stationed 55 Squadron R.A.F. This squadron was equipped with Blenheim and Glen Martin bombers, but it was very difficult to assemble sufficient serviceable aircraft to fly each day. The aerodrome was situated in a bleak sandy stretch of desert subject to sandstorms every other day, when visibility was reduced to about three feet. Those sandstorms originating in the Sahara were known as the Khamsin. The thermometer registered 117° on one day.

During the early hours of the morning of 3rd May, one plane crashed on another and burst into flames, exploding bombs on the plane on the ground.

While the Troop was stationed at Baqqush Satellite, there were several air raid warnings, but no attack on the aerodrome. However, the Troop was permitted to fire four practice rounds, this being the first time the gunners had fired a Bofors, as ammunition was in short supply. Anti-tank ammunition was limited to four rounds of armour-piercing shells. Monotony was relieved by swimming in the Mediterranean, a reasonable issue of Australian beer, and mail from home. The ground defence was a unit of the Argyll and Sutherlands.

Two songs were added to the troops' repertoire, "Ilkley Moor" and the song of 55 Squadron.

Ink Troop moved out of Baqqush Satellite on the evening of 13th May, and in the darkness went past the turn off point by about 3 miles, turned back and turned away from the sea, camped for the night and in the morning moved into the defence area of Gerawla aerodrome and commenced settling in.

At 1800 hours the Troop received orders to drop everything and to get ready to move, and at 2000 hours moved out passing through Mersa Matruh. Some of the trucks lost the convoy and went on to Sidi Barrani before the mistake was realised. Turning back two miles they were met by the Troop utility and led back to the bivouac area near the sea. The problem with travelling too far forward dur-

ing the night was the danger of running into German forward positions.

"G" and "H" Troops (George and Harry) had been deployed on R.A.F. aerodromes at Haneish North and Fuka Satellite, where the ground defences were manned by the Leicesters and the Queens. Lieutenant Fitzhardinge with two guns of Harry Troop had before that been ordered to Sidi Barrani.

Ted Lewis, who was in charge of supplying meals to "I" Troop, remembered Fuka Satellite:- *"It was blowing a terrible sandstorm, there was no hope in the world of doing any cooking in the open, so I took the fire inside the tent and closed the flaps. . . . imagine the heat! The sand was still getting into the tent so I had to do all the preparation under a mosquito net. When the meal was ready it had to be delivered to the four guns out in the desert. It was either George Reid or Jerry Sampson who drove me. You could not see beyond the bonnet of the truck for the sand blowing, but eventually we did find the guns and deliver the goods. Finding our way back was not so easy. We drove round and round for an hour or so without any luck so decided to stay put until the storm abated. When it did we found ourselves slap bang in the middle of B.H.Q., a long way from Troop H.Q. We just got back in time, after being away all night, to start preparing for breakfast."*

The cooks did a splendid job in difficult circumstances and with very little in the way of rations.

Whilst at the bivouac area the troops saw numerous Itie (Italian) dugouts and a lone grave. Also in the area was a peculiar desert animal about the size of a rat. It had a head like a rabbit, especially the ears, a long tail ending in white hair, long hind legs and short front legs, and burrowed in the sand.

From a gunner's diary of 17th May 1941: *"Up at 0430, packed, had a cup of tea and away by 0530. Passed through Sidi Barrani which has been blown to hell and from here on passed wrecked cars, trucks, tanks, tractors and guns. Road in very bad condition, very cobblestone. 0830 halted for breakfast. Averaged about 10 m.p.h. for the 29 miles. Have turned off for the 'drome (near Buqbuq). Heard a few explosions during the morning and got the guns into action, but no enemy craft sighted. Had lunch. Lieutenant Keith Willis and Sergeant Brin Boothby went on recce., but could not find 'drome we were to protect. Much traffic passing us all the time. Just finished the evening meal when we were ordered to move. Left area at 1830, passed some Bofors and tanks on their way back. We were within 15 to 20 miles of Jerry, but you would not have known. Arrived back at Sidi at 2230, had a hot meal of Italian soup, steak and tea and in bed by 2300."*

A newspaper of the day reported:

"Nazis Admit British Gain in N. Africa

"London, Friday A.A.P. –

"Today's Berlin communique says strong British forces thrust towards Fort Capuzzo and Sollum. Some contingents penetrated into Sollum."

No wonder the aerodrome could not be found; they had probably moved back towards Mersa Matruh or had never arrived.

The mention of Italian soup brings forward a gunner's reminiscences:

"In the Sidi Barrani area we met up with vast food dumps left behind by the Ities when they were overrun by the 6th Divn. Middle East Command had issued stern warnings about these dumps – they were supposed to be poisoned. Weary of our own unimaginative rations (the bully beef, the gold fish - herrings in tomato sauce, the dog biscuits, the Jewish marmalade and fig jam, the dehydrated eggs, onions etc.), we eyed the succulent looking tins of tomatoes, minestrone soup etc., with envy. Eventually one brave soul threw caution to the winds, opened a tin of tomatoes and scoffed them down. The rest of us waited for some time to see if he collapsed writhing on the ground, frothing at the mouth etc. When none of these symptoms of poisoning came to pass, we lived very well; the ration situation improved dramatically."

Sunday 18th May at 1900 hours, Ink Troop moved out, back through Mersa Matruh, which was now the first line of defence, and arrived at Haneish at about 0600 after travelling in the dark all night. Fortunately, the Troop moved into gun pits, ammunition pits and dugouts vacated by George Troop. The Troop was to protect 73 Squadron R.A.F., Hurricane fighters commanded by "Cobber" Kain.

At this stage, there did not appear to be any prospect of leave, nor did the men look for it, as it was very much "family" between members of the gun crews. Once on leave, a return to the unit was problematical, and the troops were still looking for action. Therefore those who were showing signs of loss of hair and hoping for an improvement, and those finding that it was difficult to keep their scalps clean with the limited supply of water, decided to have their hair shaved off. It can now be told that those who had a receding hair-line became bald, so there was no remedy there. It also can be told that the hair had not grown to a respectable length before the Battery was given leave in Cairo.

Harry Corneliusen recalls:

"Among the string of orders issued by Middle East Command was one that lent itself to a variety of interpretations, being an order to halt the incidence of dysentery. Latrine trenches were to be sited at least 150 yards from the gun site. A sergeant, always

conscientious, interpreted the instruction literally, amid growing protests from his not so conscientious gun crew. When they had paced out 100 yards, the digging crew said, 'This is near enough Sarge'. 'No', said the sergeant and he carefully stepped out the required distance before allowing them to dig. A few days later, suffering an attack of the dreaded 'Jimmy Brits', the sergeant leapt up from the mess table and headed for the newly-dug 'kangaroo' trench. A few minutes later, a thoroughly crestfallen N.C.O. crept back to the gun site 'Bombay bloomers' in hand (but held at arm's length) and announced, 'I'm sorry fellas - I didn't quite make it! "

The troops suffered from the Khamsins, duststorms that obliterated all objects within a few feet, diarrhoea and dysentery, "wog" sores and camel ticks. Camel ticks always burrowed into the soft parts of the body, and could only be removed by placing a lighted cigarette near the insect's tail.

This account of a duststorm comes from a gunner's diary:

"May 6. Woke up this morning to the roar of wind. Conditions were not too bad at breakfast, but after breakfast we had to change the entrance of our tent around as the wind was blowing the sand into the tent. In next to no time we had a sand storm blowing in from the Desert. It was a hot wind and conditions were very unpleasant. The heat was stifling and the storm grew gradually worse throughout the day. Dust was in everything and we looked at each other in the tent through a haze of sand. Sand was in the stew we received for dinner and on the potatoes given us for tea. In the afternoon it was impossible to see 2 yards in front of you. The wind changed after tea and the storm abated somewhat".

In the desert, the "fresh" water was strictly rationed. In fact the men who had to report to the water points became quite nervous at times, for the reason that the Germans took great joy in strafing these areas. Sometimes, water was drawn from cisterns deep underground, but as the opposing forces took their turn to retreat, they fouled them with salt and/or mines. At one stage, the water ration was one quart per man per day for drinking, shaving and washing. In fact, some of the water was pooled, poured into a half petrol tin and used by six men to wash six bodies. First in was definitely best served. At one situation, there were dark mutterings from the troops who observed, just before nightfall each evening, the batman preparing the portable canvas bath for the lieutenant. The troops more often than not had to resort to a plunge in the Mediterranean when transport was available, using the "salt water" soap which was supposed to lather in salt water, but did not do so. There was more petrol available than fresh water, so clothing was sometimes washed in petrol, which got rid of the grease stains.

Some members of "G" Troop sought out wells marked on the map as being mined. By pushing a 44-gallon drum down the well, it was soon discovered whether it was mined or not. A good supply was then enjoyed by the men.

The battle to hold Crete was now in progress. These notes from a personal diary reveal a part of it:

"Saturday 24th May, 1941. Seven planes (Hurricanes) left here for Crete yesterday to do some strafing. Two planes are missing and one was shot-up when on the ground on Crete whilst refuelling. The pilot of the shot up plane came back sitting on the knees of another Hurricane pilot (and there is not too much room either). Sand storm all day.

"Sunday 25th May. Sand storm. Heard that H.M.S. "Hood" had been sunk.

"Monday 26th May. Bob Laing the pilot who lost his plane on Crete came over and had a chat with us. He originally came from Tasmania, but joined up from New Zealand. He told us quite a bit about Crete - he seemed to think we were holding Jerry."

B.H.Q. issued Operation Order No. 4 on 26th May for a change in defence areas. On 28th May, B.H.Q. moved forward to Sidi Barrani, and on 30th May, Ink Troop moved out of Haneish North. The Operation Order was to give rise to the moves which would commence Operation Battle-axe in an attempt to relieve Tobruk.

Another entry from a personal diary states:

"Friday 30th May. Moved out from Haneish North at 1100. A beautiful day. Rather sorry that we are leaving as we had made ourselves very comfortable. Passed through Mersa Matruh at 1230. There is enough barbed wire here to re-fence the whole of Victoria. Although we had passed through M. M. twice before it had been at night and we had no idea until today that this town was so large. We had a beautiful view from a hill just before entering the town. There was a small amount of shipping in the harbor. Most of the buildings have been wrecked by bombs, but some are still left. Arrived at B.H.Q. at 1800 having done 111 miles. Went for a swim and had tea at 1900. Sleeping under the sky - the nights very damp. At 2045 our ground sheets quite wet.

"Saturday 31st May. Up at 0430 and left B.H.Q. at 0515. Went up the road a short way then turned into the desert about 1 mile. We are defending Food Supply Depot No. 30 which is quite vast. The R.A.S.C. chaps are good to us giving us a few extra rations. Many Itie trucks about here."

There was an Italian dump here, water-tanks, helmets, respirators, grenades, ground sheets, water bottles and food stuffs.

Operation Order No. 5 of 28th May amended Operation Order No. 4 to some degree. "G" Troop were now not to wait until being

relieved. No. 8 Gun Detachment to be released back to "H" Troop. "G" Troop to report to C.O. Scots Guards. "H" Troop were also not to await relief but to proceed, less two guns, to Maaten Mahomet near Kilo 105, the other two guns of "H" Troop to proceed to Sup G.P. Rear H.Q. near Kilo 93. After bivouacking at B.H.Q. "I" Troop with 2 guns to proceed to Food Supply Depot No.30 by 0600 on 30th May. The remaining two guns to arrive at FSD 30 by 0600 on 31st May.

On 2nd June the Battery received news that on Crete there were 195 men posted missing from 7th Battery.

A movement order was received on 5th June for 9th and 12th Detachments of Ink Troop under command of Lieutenant Dale Crooke to move inland to Advance Head Quarters 7th Armoured Division.

The Battery was now under command of 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment R.A., to make the fourth battery in a Force consisting of the 7th Armoured Division and the 4th Indian Division, with the task of an attack to relieve Tobruk. 9th Battery was placed under command 22nd Guards Brigade and George, Harry and Ink Troops were allotted to 1st Buffs, 2nd Scots Guards, and 3rd Coldstreams.

Diary entries from a personal diary draw the picture of an Ink Troop detachment.

"Friday 6th June. Up at 0530 and left FSD 30 at 0930. Only 2 guns 9 and 12 Detachments. A very small shower of rain before we left. Sergeant Boothby missing, but later turned up in a 3-tonner. We went straight south into the "blue" (desert). All we saw were some Itie fortifications until we came to Piccadilly (what a humorist) where there were a few trucks. Lunch here. After this place we went off into the desert making our own tracks. After travelling a short way we got more or less lost, but we sighted a small convoy on our right so we all turned right and chased them. They must have thought we were a Jerry patrol because we could not catch them to find out where we were. Shortly after this we arrived at our destination, Bir El Malla - 7th Armoured Division. The British were surprised to see us arrive from the direction we had come as the area was heavily mined. Our average progress was 10 m.p.h. for the 50 miles travelled.

"The next day the British were clearing mines and making a lot of noise. There was a great assembly of vehicles, tanks, armoured cars, signallers' vans, trucks and 'dingoes'. The last-named were small armoured cars with Daimler fluid flywheel drive. The tanks were camouflaged as trucks."

The two Ink Troop guns left Bir El Malla in the afternoon of 9th June for a FSD. The diary continues the story:

"Road very rough. At about 1600 came into country cut about

EXAMPLE OF A TYPICAL OPERATION ORDER

9th Aust. Lt.A.A. Battery

SECRET Operation Order No 4. Copy No 2 26 May 41

Ref Maps SALUM and SIDI BARRANI Sheets 1/100,000

1 - INFORMATION. Own Tps. Tps in frontier sec. Western Desert Force, are under command 7 Sup Gp

2 - INTENTION. 9th Aust L A A Battery is to be relieved of the A A D of L G's 05,010 and 012 and will move forward to participate in

(i) A A D of areas vital to 7 Sup Gp, probably for a limited period only; and thereafter.

(ii) Support of mob cols operating in interior of desert

3 - METHOD.

(a) **Comd.** 9th Battery comes under comd 1 L A A Regt at 1200 hrs 27 May 41

(b) **Vacation of existing A.A. Layouts.**

(i) **G Tp** is to be relieved by 37th L A A Battery on 28 May After handing over on L G 010, G Tp (plus one gun det) will move to R V at Kilo 93 MATRUH - SIDI BARRANI Rd. vicinity rear HQ Sup Gp On arrival at Kilo 93 will despatch orderly to Battery Report Centre at Kilo 134 for further orders 8 Gun Det under orders of Det Comd will proceed after an interval to be decided by GTP Comd, to L G 05 and will revert to Comd H Tp Road trace attached

(ii) **H Tp** to be relieved by 38th L A A Battery on 29 May After handing over on L G 05, will move to R V near 30 F S D located at ZAWYET - SIDI BARRANI 965744 Suitable R V will be reced and reported forwarded to Battery Report Centre at 1200 hrs 28 May

(iii) **I Tp** is to be relieved by 38th L A A Battery on 30 May After handing over on L G Q15,012 will move to R V at Kilo 134 MATRUH - SIDI BARRANI Rd and report to Battery Report Centre for further orders

(iv) **Time of departure, speed and density.** Tp Comds will decide speed according to state of roads A Tp which is NOT relieved before 1500 hrs on scheduled day will NOT commence move forward until one hour before first light following day Density 10 vt m

(v) **BQMS** and veh will be attached I Tp at L G 012 from 1800 hrs 28/5

5 - ADMIN. (a) Rations. There will be no interruption to supply of rations to G, I Tps by Battery HQ whether at existing layout or future R V H Tp will continue on existing arrangements till further orders issued

(b) **Water.** Tps will carry filled water tins NOT less than 1½ gals per man

(c) **Petrol refilling** for G, I Tps by Battery HQ veh at future R Vs

(d) **Recovery.** 3rd Aust L A A Workshop Sec is to detail a recovery van to (a) accompany each of G, I Tp convoys This van will report to G Tp by 0900 hrs 28/5 and to I Tp by 0900 hrs 30/5, thereupon coming under Comd Tp as far as Kilo 93 (b) Recovery for G, I Tps from starting point to MERSA MATRUH will be ABU HAGGAG, from MERSA MATRUH as far as Kilo 93 by 3rd Aust L A A Wshop Sec to 1 L A A Regt Wshop Sec in SIDI BARRANI area Recovery forward of Kilo 93 for G, H, I Tps by 1 L A A Reg Wshop SEC

(e) **Medical.** On the move, first aid kits where possible Medical posts are established at MERSA MATRUH, Kilo 83 After arrival at R Vs by 1 L A A Regt, details with orders

(f) **Supply of Maps.** Maps will be issued if possible on following scale before 1800 hrs 27/5 (H Tp before 1800 hrs 28/5)

	Battery HQ	G Tp (plus 1 gun)	H Tp	I Tp
SALUM sheet	5	4	4	5
SIDI BARRANI sheet	5	4	4	5

6 - INTER COMM. (a) Battery HQ Report Centre will be opened at Kilo 134 by 1200 hrs 28/5

(b) Battery Rear HQ (less BQMS and veh) will close GERAWLA Ry Stn at 1200 hrs 28/5

(c) Motor cycles are allotted from 1200 hrs 27/5 on following scale Battery HQ 4, G, H, I Tps - 1 each H Tp will detail M C O to report with surplus machine for duty at report centre at Kilo 134 at 1200 hrs 28/5

(d) One W/T van will accompany B C forward on 27/5, second W/T van will remain and move with Battery 2 i/c

7 - ACK. By bearer

8 - DISTRIBUTION. G Tp - 1, H Tp - 2, I Tp - 3, 3rd Aust L A A Regt (for Sig Sec and Workshop Sec) - 4, War Diary - 5, 6, File - 7

C L Hughes-Hallett, Major R A A

B C 9th Aust Lt A A Battery

1100 hrs 27/5

by wadis. It is great going down the wadis and through the sand at the bottom. The tractor can certainly pull. The leading 3-tonner was bogged in one wadi, also an English mob, both pulled out by our tractor. Although the desert is the desert, the wadis make the terrain more interesting. Arrived at Bir Imba (35 miles S.W. of Sidi Barrani) at 1730 and took up our gun position on a food dump, FSD 29, but am afraid scrounging is out of the question as they are very strict here. Our other two guns had some fun when two Jerries came over yesterday. They claim a hit, but there was no trace of the aircraft."

At this FSD the gun crews were issued with British tropical kit, helmets pith (topee), shirt, shorts, stockings, puttees and boots.

Personal diary entries record Ink Troop's part in the push forward to relieve Tobruk.

"Saturday 14th June. Awakened at 0500 as usual to hear hundreds of trucks, tanks etc., passing on their way to the front. Vehicles have been passing since 0300 until we left at 1000. We are sharing a 3-tonner with Coggo's Mob, the rest of us are in the tractor. We all feel a little excited and exhilarated to know that WE are taking the offensive. After some time saw a fort with very low stone walls. Continued on the escarpment to Sofafi fort about 6 miles, arrived 1100. 1730 moved forward providing anti-aircraft defence for a column consisting of the Buffs and Scots infantry, etc. We are scheduled to be in Fort Capuzzo tomorrow. We are in a huge convoy of miscellaneous vehicles and the two guns (like destroyers in a sea convoy) on either side. At 1945 saw three flashes in the sky, a plane crashing and bursting into flames. The convoy halted at 2130.

"Sunday 15th June. 0500 vehicles are coming into line for the big race. 0530 moved off. 0600 passed burnt out Wimpy (Vickers Wellington). The graves of the crew were nearby. 0800 stopped and had breakfast, could hear artillery doing their stuff, probably at Hell Fire Pass (Halfaya). 1200 heard that positions had been taken forward. We are about 12 miles from the front. 1830 we have lost some tanks, but Camerons and Indians have taken their objectives. Fighting on Hell Fire Pass.

"Monday 16th June. Heavy fog this morning. Artillery still hammering away – fire more intense. 0830 a few German prisoners came in a truck – some tank chaps with them. 1045 moved forward with convoy taking supplies to front – convoy very fast. 1400 seven Junkers 87 flew over us at about 150 feet. Although we had been ordered to keep up with the convoy we halted when they were 500 yards away and went into action, but we were too late. We were strafed all the time and the planes offered perfect targets. No damage done. We were all very excited but did not feel fear. After having a bottle of beer and some cheese

and biscuits we moved on about 2 miles. The Germans were in this area this morning. As we had only four rifles for the gun crew of eleven we armed ourselves with discarded German rifles and ammo. 1500 stopped in sight of 'the line' – we can see the artillery flashes and bursts. Libya (the Wire) is about 2 miles away. Our other guns have shot down some planes. Whilst here quite a few Jerries flew over, but too high. 1630 left to go back to our base, but had to stop, once for petrol and once to await the convoy. At 1730 we saw 15 Stuka dive-bombers release bombs where we had just been. We could see the bombs being released. Planes just out of our range. We picked up some prisoners all badly wounded – one Nazi airman and several Ities. A captured BMW motor cycle and side-car passed us. 1900 moved off. 1930 went into action – planes out of range. Moved on. Artillery firing on our right. 2230 arrived at our base after being nearly lost with the desert and the darkness. Mr. Crooke did a great job.

"Tuesday 17th June. After lying about in what shade we could find and after our two other guns had rejoined us we moved at 1400 with Royal Artillery "B" Echelon for Halfaya Pass. We went east along the Escarpment of Sofafi Pass. Here we had a great view of the Escarpment and surrounding country being on the 150 metre contour line. The road from here down the Escarpment to the coast road was terrible. Coggins' gun wheel had a puncture, but came in later. When we arrived at the coast road we put the gun into action and awaited orders. At this time there were many trucks going back almost bumper to bumper. Soon after Brin Boothby came back and told us to clear out as we were retreating. Whilst we were there 3 planes flew very low over the retreating vehicles – they were ours! We joined the general exodus and went back about 11 miles. Our feelings were of hopelessness and helplessness. It almost broke our hearts to see the huge stream of M. T. retreating after we had hoped for so much. We are about 15 miles East of Buq Buq."

The story is told again by Dale Crooke:

"I can remember experiencing an interesting day during the advance and retreat when attached to 7th Armoured Division. I was in charge of a convoy taking supplies from our Troop or Battery H.Q. up to Brigade H.Q. I was travelling in a 3-ton truck at the rear of the convoy when a yell from those in the back caused me to stop the vehicle and get out. On looking back I saw a Stuka, at ground level, coming straight for the truck. I had time to step in front of the vehicle as it opened fire – tracer coming from the port wing only. Fortunately for us the starboard gun didn't fire. The aircraft was so low that it had to swing to the port side to avoid hitting the truck – if it had swung to the opposite side we would have been riddled. One of our guns managed to go into action

very hurriedly, but failed to register a hit.

"On reaching Brigade H.Q. we delivered the supplies and the O.C. Hughes-Hallett was giving Dyer and myself orders concerning our next move. We were standing on a clay pan beside Dyer's utility. Above could be heard the drone of planes. A Stuka could be heard going into a dive above our heads. H.H. didn't take any notice and we two concentrated on what he was saying – none of us looked up and it wasn't until bullets began to flick up the sand beside us and the plane was pulling out of its dive that we hit the dust. Fortunately our vehicle was not the target – it was the Brigade Communication van nearby. If I remember rightly H.H. just stood up and continued to give us our orders as if nothing had happened.

"My job was to take back to a Field Hospital, via our H.Q., a load of wounded Italians and a German airman with a broken leg. It was getting dark when we left the defined track en route to our H.Q. This meant going across country using a map, compass, speedo and a friendly star. I wasn't sure how the compass would work inside the truck so was relieved, when about halfway to pass a cairn marked on the map. Eventually when the mileage indicated we should be near our H.Q. I stopped and got out in total darkness to be challenged by one of my own men. After a short break Driver McKenzie and myself continued. On leaving our camp I took a wrong turn, but fortunately we were stopped by a British sentry, who said if I wanted to end up in the 'can' (be captured) to keep going. We reversed smartly. When McKenzie's eyes gave out I took over as driver and shortly after daylight we located the hospital and delivered the wounded who must have had a hell of a trip. I also required medical attention as my eyes felt as if they were full of gravel. After a rest we headed back, but had only gone a short distance when I was amazed to see what looked like a dust storm approaching at speed. I soon discovered there was a full scale retreat. We joined the race down the Escarpment and couldn't believe our luck in that the enemy failed to take advantage of attacking a perfect target from the air. Ink Troop took up a position near the coast giving A.A. protection to an R.A. Battery."

The story of the activities of Harry Troop during the period of 15th, 16th and 17th June is taken from official reports, supplemented by the recollections of "those who were there".

The first official report was that of air activity in the area Bir Wa'ir on 15th and 16th June.

The initial action was at 0815 on 15th June, when three Ju-88 bombers flew into the Fort Capuzzo-Bir Wa'ir area at 1200 feet and dropped several bombs. No damage was done.

The next action was at 0515 the following day, when an enemy

aircraft, possibly a Me-110, flew over the camp area dropping flares while the German counter attack was in progress. After dropping the flares, the aircraft dive-bombed and machine-gunned the area, hitting an anti-tank gun.

In the early afternoon of the same day, approximately fourteen Ju-87 dive-bombed and machine-gunned Halfaya Pass. Harry Troop guns engaged as they flew away from the target area at about 1000 feet. The aircraft *"immediately broke formation and took highly evasive action, diving and twisting in an extraordinary manner. One aircraft was hit in the tail and crashed after the pilot bailed out"*.

At 1900 on the same day, nine Me-110 and an estimated four Me-109 aircraft bombed the area from 1200 feet, with heavy and anti-personnel bombs. Two British officers were killed, two trucks destroyed by fire and two trucks damaged beyond repair.

The report on the loss of equipment by Harry Troop during the operations on 15th, 16th and 17th June at Bir Maisaid records the damage to a 3-ton truck and a utility by bombing and machine gunning. Tyres, spare tyres and engines had been rendered unserviceable. As the withdrawal of forces had commenced, these vehicles could not be recovered, so were destroyed by burning.

Griff Weatherly gives his account after forty-four years:

"I remember our amazement at the Tommies rushing to dig slit trenches whenever we stopped in the push up to Capuzzo. We were strafed after about the third stop and then we were just as quick at digging slit trenches. We had our first action out from Capuzzo and shot the tail off the Stuka that wounded Charles Luckock. The pilot parachuted down and was taken prisoner by the Coldstream Guards. The Coldstream's Brigadier presented the pilot's Luger to Wellstead who was in charge of the gun. We were plastered by a high-level bombing raid. Dick Todd was badly wounded and died shortly afterwards. One of our 3-tonners was disabled and had to be burnt. We were chased out to Halfway House Pass by Rommel's tanks and I mean chased! Dale Crooke did a wonderful job map reading and plotting a compass course. George Simpson did a great job driving our Morris tractor with gun, as we had smashed one side of the rear-drive bogey on the way and had a broken winch-cable. We tied the cable, what was left of it, to the gun draught so we could winch quickly when stuck in sand drifts. Believe me, we worked fast! The tank battle was the biggest in the war till that time I believe."

Harry Corneliusen gives his account.

"Our first acquaintance with formidable Ju-87 dive bombers shattered our complacency about it being a comfortable although boring war. In the first raid our driver, Dick Todd, was killed when he was struck by a bomb fragment. In the same raid a unit

of the Coldstream Guards was bombed near our gun position. Two second-lieutenants were exhorting their men to get down and don their tin hats when they suffered a direct hit from a Stuka bomb. After the raid it was a traumatic experience to see a detail searching with trenching tool and sandbag for sufficient charred remains of the two lieutenants for burial."

There is more detail of Harry Troop's movements from the diary of Lieutenant Fitzhardinge.

"12th June. Receive movement order to move to Sidi Barani at 0600/13.

"13th June. Leave Buq Buq and 4 Indian Division at 0600, arrive Battery for breakfast. Prepare for desert 'show', sleep until 0130 then push off South arrive at Sofafi at 0900 (3 m.p.h.). DBF Coldstreams Sergeant Paul and Sergeant Brett. Lieutenant Jack Harris – Buffs, Sergeants Max Canning and Luckcock. Move at 1900 for forming up 4 miles.

"15th June. Eat, go to bed. 0400 breakfast, 0600 move. 2 Divisions moving at one time at 12 m.p.h. Cut through wire at 40 Post. (Note: the wire was on the border of Egypt and Libya). We carried the Bangalore torpedoes for the Coldstream's engineers. Guards take Bir Wair. Shelled. 3 Ju-88 bombed with Anti-Personnel bombs. Tank battle at Capuzzo where Jack Harris has ½ "H" Troop.

"16th June. Counter attack by ITIES and a/c at 0430. Guards capture 60 prisoners. A/c with flares all night finishes off by bombing and M.G. Me-110 or 88 presumed. Flew off in semi dark. Not seen. Another tank battle at Capuzzo (Buffs), Scots go through (Tom Staughton) to take Fort Musaid. Ju-87 dive bomb Halfaya Pass and we bag a Ju-87. We get bombed by 9 Me-110s at 12000'. Lose my utility and a 3-ton truck. Todd R.E. was fixing a puncture from an earlier attack and was hit in the stomach. Patched up and got into ambulance. Later died. Have a shot at 3 Me-109s flying past but they didn't come back.

"17th June. We do quick withdrawal (actually I saw the Guards packing up and had to go and ask what was happening). German tanks have cut us off from withdrawal to south. Destroy trucks damaged and head for Half Way House Pass. Fortunately not air attack only tanks.

"18th June. Get guns into action (after shoving off all the other Bofors who followed me) at Buq Buq. Max Canning's gun was lost in Capuzzo. B.C. arrives and gives orders to go to Sidi Barrani tomorrow."

Whilst in Capuzzo, "Slim" Storer was preparing a stew for the men when there was a sudden attack by Stuka dive bombers, resulting in the stew and the feathers from the cook's sleeping bag being hopelessly mixed together.

The activities of "G" Troop in Operation Battle-Axe are recalled by John Wilkinson, Bill Hopkins and the diaries of the "Dirty Thirteen". (A group of former Lighthorsemen from Central Victoria.)

"G" Troop had only two guns to the Troop under Sergeants Jim Grice and Bill Hopkins. The crews making up the remainder of the Troop had been dispersed between the other two Troops and B.H.Q. Lieutenants Staughton and Wright were the "G" Troop officers.

"G" and "H" Troops moved into B.H.Q. on the morning of 13th June and moved out in the late afternoon of the same day and proceeded inland to a point where the Escarpment flattened out into the Desert. "G" Troop provided A.A.D. for the Scots Guards and moved towards the Libyan border with them. Some of the Italian troops had been surprised by the move and had left the area in haste. One of the prizes was an Italian general's office box, well fitted up and containing amongst the official papers some "feelthy" pictures. The box was to become the "G" Troop headquarters office box.

John Wilkinson recalls: "*G' Troop went on with the Guards Brigade towards Fort Capuzzo. The Brigade took the Fort and that part of Sollum on top of the Escarpment, under cover of an artillery barrage.*"

On 16th June the two guns moved through the Fort Capuzzo area and gave air defence cover to the Scots Guards attack on Fort Musaid. Arriving within striking distance of the Fort, the Guards were mounted in trucks, the drivers drove at maximum speed towards the entrance, stopped, the troops were out of the trucks and within minutes the defenders surrendered. There were very few casualties on either side.

The Fort covered an area of about 2½ acres, with walls 10 feet high. The defenders numbered around 200, mainly Italians with a small number of Germans.

One Stuka was claimed by Sergeant Hopkins' gun and this was later confirmed by a British officer.

Meanwhile at Fort Capuzzo, Sergeant Wilkinson, with E. Robertson and E. Cassidy, had been given permission to attempt to recover some enemy trucks. While keeping watch on the enemy from the tower of the Fort, Wilkinson tried unsuccessfully to remove the warning bell suspended there. Robertson managed to start two Italian trucks and these were taken on strength. A 20mm Breda A.A. gun was also retrieved, and that evening its mechanism was being examined when Lieutenant Staughton asked, "*What's that?*" and depressed a pedal sending off a volley of tracer shells. The British forces nearby stood to with fixed bayonets and were not very pleased. Sergeant Wilkinson also recalls an action whilst in the Capuzzo area:

"A flight of Stuka (Ju-87), apparently returning from a strike

down the coast, flew over our area. The Bofors did not engage, but Len Shugg gave them a good pasting with the Lewis gun. He must have done some damage."

A further truck recovery exercise was attempted in the area near Sollum, but shortly after arrival some British in a Bren gun carrier informed the party that there were some sixty enemy tanks fast approaching. The trucks that had been recovered were requisitioned by the British to assist in the transportation of prisoners.

On 17th June, "G" Troop moved back in the general withdrawal. Sergeant Wilkinson remembers: *"Not long after the enemy artillery lobbed some around us and we had to vacate the area, on the way to Halfway House Pass we got some more artillery attention during which Clem Bramwich in the back of the truck said with a grin, 'This is a bit dangerous', and got under an Itie ground sheet, stretched back from the cabin roof. Reaching the bottom of the Pass we observed the Itie trucks we had recovered, and lost, coming down the Pass with the prisoners waving cheerfully. We had not been able to refuel these trucks, so when they ran out of fuel, the Tommie drivers and guards abandoned them. However the Ities knew the trucks had a reserve tank, turned them on and followed us down the Pass.*

"Instead of following the Guards, "G" Troop took a wrong turn, despite protests from some, and ended up on the coast where we were visited by a none too pleased Brigadier "Sandbag" Sewell. Tom Staughton had spent a restless night with the Guards wondering where the hell the Troop was.

"G" Troop then joined a mixed Brigade group with Indian infantry from the P.A.V.O's (Prince Albert and Victoria's Own). The O.R.'s were a fine lot, but the officers left a lot to be desired. These chaps used to go up the Escarpment at night to get prisoners for interrogation.

"This crowd had an Indian medico, who had quite a lot of success in treating the desert sores of our chaps. He was duly thanked."

Gunner Hepburn remembers some "G" Troop incidents: *"G" Troop was on Sidi Haneish North 'drome. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. had moved out of Sidi Haneish South on the previous day and had succeeded, with simulated strafing attacks, in blowing down every tent on our aerodrome. 3 Squadron left piles of .303 ammunition behind, so we were able to organise some rifle practice. This was the first time since I joined the A.I.F. that I had fired a rifle. There were also many drums of 100 octane fuel left on the drome. These were seized by our despatch riders. Any change in the performance of our 500c.c. side-value Nortons was purely imaginary.*



Sidi Barrani, Western Desert. (Courtesy Australian War Memorial)



Fort Capuzzo, Libya. (Courtesy Australian War Memorial)

"Then there was the Vickers biplane which used to travel up and down the Desert at low altitudes. It was built as a bomber, but converted to a transport. It had two pilots in an open cockpit side by side, and carried twelve passengers in a closed cabin. Stalling speed was 35 m.p.h., and maximum speed 70 m.p.h."

After five days without a wash and five days without drawing rations, the guns settled into positions along the coast road. The losses were: one man died of wounds, one Bofors gun, one utility truck and three 3-ton trucks destroyed. So ended Operation Battle-Axe.

The Official War History of the R.A.N. gives this statement on "Battle-Axe": *"Operation Battle-Axe was designed to drive the enemy west of Tobruk and re-establish land communication with that fortress, and was launched by General Wavell on 15th June.*

"Unexpected enemy mechanised strength was met, and the operation failed, the British falling back to near their original positions after a three days' battle."

From a gunner's diary: *"Friday 20th June. Morale low. 1125 some planes about but we cannot see them to identify them. 1126 a sudden roar, a dive, a bomb exploding and we are in action. 1130 action over. We got away 18 rounds. About five Me-110's bombed and strafed us although nothing came very close to our gun. Ink Troop "A" 3-tonner was destroyed by a bullet entering the petrol tank. The fire could have been put out if the fire extinguisher had been O.K. Ten boxes of Bofors rounds, some small arms ammunition, and some kits were destroyed. The B.S.M. of an anti-tank outfit was killed. Morale after the action has improved greatly."*

Operation Order No.7 was distributed to the members of 9th Battery on 21st June 1941. The guns were allotted to three columns FAITH, HOPE and CHARITY and to B Echelon of Columns. The acknowledging code words were for Lieutenants' Dyer - ABRAHAM, Fitzhardinge - ISAAC, Crooke - ESAU, and for Staughton - JACOB.

There was considerable air activity over the period 20th - 26th June, strafing and bombing by Me-109s and Me-110s. The number of rounds "fired in anger" by the Battery for the month of June was 668 rounds (War Diary).

The following letter is taken from the War Diary:

"PERSONAL: Headquarters 22nd Gds Bde.

D.O. / L. 27th June 41

Dear Hughes-Hallett,

I'd like to write you a line to thank you and the battery for all the help and co-operation, you have given us in the last weeks.

I'm sorry our association for the present has ended, but no doubt we shall meet again before long.

Will you please let your officers and other ranks know how much we have appreciated having your battery working with us, and thank them for the excellent protection they have provided us.

Yours ever, I. ERSKINE.

*Major Hughes-Hallett
9 Aust. Lt.A.A. Bty.*

(AWM 52 4/11/2)

The European war was now becoming more widespread. Germany had invaded Russian territory and committed "a hostile act". Finland and Rumania had joined hostilities. Italy also considered herself at war with Russia.

About this time, two men from each gun were released to spend two days leave at "Bavo on Beach" (B.H.Q.), just relaxing. A reminder that the war was still on was given by the appearance of parts of human bodies coming ashore with the waves.

The Battery experienced a quiet period, except for the guns at Bir Said and Fiat Coln on 14th July until Movement Order No.2 of 16th July was received. The Order informed the troops that:

"9th Aust. L.A.A. Battery is to be relieved on the ground by 122nd L.A.A. Battery R.A. After concentration at Bavo-Super-Mare, the Battery will move by road to an unknown destination in the Delta for the purpose of being re-equipped."

The relief was to commence on 18th July with guns, tractors and all equipment to be handed over, except for motor transport. On completion of the handover, the troops were to concentrate at Rear B.H.Q., each Troop to construct "one deep latrine of approved pattern and sufficient roses". "Roses", commonly known as "desert roses" were a half petrol tin with holes punched in the bottom and sunk into the sand as a urinal.

The Battery was to be ready to move by road out of the Barrani area NOT before 21st July. Acknowledgement of the Order was to be made by code words: "G" Troop - WINE, "H" Troop - WOMEN, "I" Troop - SONG, "J" Troop - LEAVE.

On 17th July there was some confusion as to whether to fire or not on an aircraft colored white, with rudder markings red, white and blue and no wing markings. The side of the aircraft was painted with a large red cross, so the guns did not fire. The aircraft was later identified as a Caproni ca.11 of Italian manufacture - possibly a hospital aircraft from near Tobruk.

The guns and tractors were handed over to the Tommies on 18th July and the Troops moved into the area Bavo-Super-Mare, or more commonly know as Bavo on the Beach. Whilst here, there was a story that two Poms and two Aussies had arrived from Crete in a fishing boat. On 20th July a formal Battery parade was held, with

every one dressed in the best possible gear. All went well until enemy aircraft were heard strafing, and then the parade ground was deserted except for the O.C.

On the following day, it was reveille at 0430 and the move out commenced at 0600. There was plenty of air cover in the area, the road quite fair and the convoy bivouacked at an oasis a few miles on the Sidi Barrani side of Mersa Matruh. Date palms, olive and fig trees, and green grass were a marked relief to the sand of the last few months.

Tuesday 22nd July was recorded in a journal as follows:

"0615 Left 'The Palms' and went through a hell of a lot of barbed-wire, tank traps etc. It would be almost impossible for Jerry to penetrate these defences. We passed many barracks and then proceeded along the promenade. There is hardly a sound building. There is a great deal of M.T. from here on to Fuka where we stopped for breakfast at 0930. There appear to be more planes around than when we were last here. Stopped at El Daba for lunch at 1300. We made straight for the N.A.A.F.I. and bought some beer. We had 1½ bottles each and felt pretty good. Moved off about 1400. Many South Africans about. Arrived at Amariya about 1830 and had tea at a wog cafe with walls and roof of a carpet-like material. Then on to an Aussie canteen for beer, off the ice."

23rd July continues:

"Left Amariya 0630, road very monotonous, just desert. At noon sighted the Pyramids and to the left a 'sea' of blue which is the irrigated Nile delta. We camped at Beni Yousef Camp which is in the desert right beside the Nile delta with its farms and plantations. After lunch we were paid 50 akers and given leave until 1100 tomorrow morning. We arrived in Cairo and booked in at the Kings Hotel (near Shepherds). Not a good room, 20 akers. We went to Jackys Bar where we had tea and got mixed up with a crowd of Royal Artillery chaps. Then went on to Sweet Melody cabaret and had one dance, then on to the Majestic where we met quite a few of the boys. We were all quite merry by this time. After riding in a gharry for some time looking for a place to have supper and finding everything closed, we finally had supper at our own hotel."

24th July continues: *"Arrived back at camp about 1030, were paid and given more leave. Went out to Mena, had lunch were entertained by a magician, hired some donkeys and went round the Pyramids. Saw the Sphinx, the Tombs of the Priests with their giant granite blocks, and the interior of one of the Pyramids – the King's Chamber. Took a tram back to the City for which we were charged 1 piastre. Met up with some more of the chaps at the Kings Hotel and we all proceeded to the Empire Club, a ser-*

vicemen's club for all nationalities, where we had quite a few beers. On to the American Badir and saw a floor show, then to the Egyptian Badir on the other bank of the Nile. Back to the city and had dinner at the Parisian Cafe. On to the Atlantic Hotel to sleep – better than the Kings.”

25th July continues: “Had breakfast at the Parisian and went out to the Gezira Sporting Club. Met the rest of the boys at the Empire Club and then went out to Mena House Hotel, near the Pyramids, and had lunch there. Mena House is of Victorian architecture and has very pleasant grounds surrounding it. Went to the swimming pool and enjoyed the water all afternoon. Then drinks, gin and tonic, on the lawns with a Greek couple and a Yugoslav couple. Pre-dinner drinks in the bar with some English officers who had not been in the Desert. Dinner at tables around the swimming pool – very enjoyable after our army rations. Booked a room for the night – much more like home.”

The next morning the Battery moved out proceeding through Cairo, crossing the Canal at Ismailia and camped just short of the Egyptian/Palestinian border – 197 miles for the day, with the chaps drying out after their Cairo leave.

