

## CHAPTER 11

### "TOBRUK"

Trucks arrived early the following morning to convey us to a coastal battery, - which had been left by the Italian forces during General Wavell's advance. The guns and site had been partially destroyed before their retreat. Huge boulders of rock, littered the site, which was constructed on a hilltop overlooking the harbour, with a perfect view landwards.

The 6 inch guns the battery boasted, were very soon repaired by our skillful engineers and made ready for action. The remainder of the site was quickly worked on, until it became to resemble a workable station, ready for action.

What remained of the town, could be plainly seen, from our lofty position. Ruins of the 62nd General Hospital, although covered with huge red crosses, lay to the left of the town. A church with tower still intact was plainly visible, - most of the remainder of the buildings were a complete shambles.

Back on the site we discovered a huge tunnel, - constructed by the "Ities" when they were in residence, almost a quarter of a mile long. The far end having been converted into some sort of sleeping quarters, - being quite capable of accomadation for a battalion of men. Two engines supplied lighting, but only at night-time, - during the day parrafin hurricane lamps had to be used. After a very short time the engines gave out, - no spares being available, so the lamps became the only means of illumination.

The tunnel was absolutely bombproof, and was to prove it's worth time and time again. Even on the very first day, we were attacked several times by "Stukas", - the tunnel proved it's worth. At least we did have something to thank the Italians for.

Allied planes were unable to visit, - their bases being too far away from which to operate, - consequently Tobruk possessed one of the finest anti-aircraft defenses I had ever seen. Hundreds of heavy guns, plus 'Bofor' guns encircled the

harbour, putting into the sky a huge box barrage which the dive-bombers had to fly through. They did just that!

Our staple diet was, "guess what!", - bully beef and biscuits for breakfast, dinner and tea, plus a daily dose of vitamin tablets. Bread was baked in Tobruk, but was so full of weavels to make it uneatable.

It was not long before we made our acquaintance with enemy shell fire, - a German battery firing from the direction of Bardia, which earned the nickname "Bardia Bill". Another battery nicknamed "Perimeter Percy" firing from the opposite direction. When they decided to join together, the proceedings got more than a little hot under the collar. These attacks usually took place between the frequent air attacks, leaving little time for meditation. Each time they fired, our guns would go into action returning the compliment. I can only hope that they were made to feel as uncomfortable as they made us feel.

The 6 inch shells were continually wiped clean of sand, which accumulated very quickly, - this obviously to delay wear and tear of the gun barrels. Harry remarked "that they didn't want any "Jerries" to die of blood poisoning, if they became unlucky enough to be hit by shrapnel".

The harbour was full of shipwrecked vessels, of all descriptions, - some completely submerged, others above the water line. The pride of the Italian Navy was one of these, - the battle cruiser "Sans Georgia" smashed to pieces, with upper decks well clear of the water.

One of the most important tasks the battery performed was to light a green lamp, which was placed on the highest point of the site. This happened whenever our destroyers were expected at night, - giving them a direct marking point into the harbour.

Two or three days later, we received our back mail. All else was forgotten as letters were quickly delved into, bringing news from our loved ones back home. What joy, contentment and pleasure these letters meant, to each and every one. Even our Sergeants appeared human, - it was evident they were really loved by someone, - although Harry was never convinced.

Each night, enemy planes would drop by means of parachute,

mines, in and around the harbour. This made a hazardous task for the Navy minesweepers, having very little idea of where the mines had been dropped. In order to combat this ordeal, a series of mine spotting posts had to be organised at various points around the harbour.

Each of these posts was situated in one of many caves around the harbour, - all being equipped with charts, to observe the approximate place a mine might have been seen to fall. The charts being collected each morning and handed over to the Naval boys, who could then locate them far more easily, so making them harmless.

Night and day these posts had to be manned, - two gunners and a bombardier being detailed for each. I was one of the men detailed for such a duty, along with many others. We were to be transported by truck to the various posts.

The journey took about an hour. On two occasions we dived beneath the truck during dive bombing attacks. However, we were so accustomed to these attacks that very little notice was taken. Surprising what one can get used to! Eventually we were dropped off, at our little cave, which was to become our new home.

We quickly moved in, - the cave being just large enough to accommodate three men, - but not standing. The distance between the cave and the water's edge was about fifteen yards. Far from being bombproof, we were showered with rock and dust each time a bomb fell within a hundred yards, nevertheless it was home for the three of us.

Bully beef, biscuits plus tea and sugar was brought every day, - water we distilled ourselves from the sea. Two empty oil barrels comprised our distillery. Fuel for the heating of same was salvaged from the wrecks in the harbour, using the hot sun to dry out the timber. We were entirely successful in our enterprise, but unfortunately we never managed to rid the water of its oily taste.

Although in communication by telephone with headquarters, the lines were more often useless. The wires were laid along the ground, so consequently during the frequent air attacks they became cut by either the bombs or flying shrapnel. Whenever this

occured, a runner would be used to convey the very necessary information to headquarters. This proved to be quite a dangerous mission. More often than not, one would get caught up in an air raid with no cover whatsoever. All one could possibly do, was to stand perfectly still, hoping for the best. If you ran, then there was every chance the pilot would spot you, so deciding to spray you with machine gun fire. There was another alternative, like burying your head in the sand, pretending you were not there.

The Australian signal boys did everything humanly possible to keep all the lines in repair. During heavy air attacks or shelling, they would do their utmost to keep communications flowing. No mere words of mine could express the courage and guts shown by these men. It was a priviledge to have served with them.

Air attacks became so numerous, one became immune to them. Shelling was far different, - the artillery men being much more accurate than their comrades in the sky. Henceforth, we moved around far more quickly and cautiously when shelling was in progress.

When darkness descended, we sat quietly in the cave, to await the coming of the mine-laying aircraft. Our suspense was not very long. Intense ack-ack fire split the silence of the night. Shrapnel rained down on the roof of the cave, covering all with showers of dust and small rocks. Coloured tracer bullets sped into the sky from all directions, - the din was terrific. Although there was no moon, the sky was ablaze with coloured tracers and flashes of light. Jerry had arrived!

The planes flew very low over the harbour, dropping their mines, which were attached to black parachutes. They made rather a loud swishing noise when falling from the plane. In spite of this they proved very difficult to see exactly where they fell in the water. However, come morning, we had successfully plotted fifteen mines, passing on the information to headquarters for further action by the minesweepers.

Sleep next day was out of the question, - the heat was far too intense. I really should stress at this point, that although days became increasingly hot, - the nights could be extremely

cold, so that one used all blankets, and even greatcoats, in an endeavour to keep warm.

A working roster had to be planned to cover the many tasks that had to be done. Simply, it worked something like the following one man in turn would do a complete night's watching, the other two would do the daily tasks and sleep during the night. This way, ensured two nights' sleep out of three. The cooking of meals hardly needed much expertise, - bully and biscuits provided very little scope for perfection in the cullinary art. The distilling of water continued, - so did the oily taste.

We managed quite a bit of swimming, the water only a few yards away from our doorstep. Very soon we took on a very rich brown tan that would have done credit to those swimmers we had met in Cape Town. One had to be extremely careful of blisters which in turn, could lead to sand sores, - a really dreadful condition when they became infected. Furthermore, it was an offence not to wear a shirt, - this order being given to avoid sand sores. However, I can't remember anyone taking much notice, there being more bare bodies, than ones with shirts attached.

When on our daily collection of wood, from the many creeks, we often came across decomposed bodies, that had been washed away from the many wrecks in the harbour. Whenever possible we pulled them out and buried them, often not knowing whether they were friend or foe. Actually when I refer to burial, it was simply a foot or two of sand, scrapped over the body. Contrary to people's belief, the sand is not very deep, only where there are dunes, - solid rock was mostly only a few inches under the surface of sand, - hence the tunnel back at H.Q., plus the many caves that abounded.

An anti-aircraft battery nearby, boasted of a radio which was most enjoyed by one and all. I can still hear "We'll meet again", with Vera Lynn singing across the desert sands. I must confess that many a tear I shed at these times, but I was far away from being alone in this matter. It brought back so many happy memories. The battery also boasted a good cook, who although having only bully and biscuits, would concoct the two together making a kind of bully stew. From then onwards we

discontinued the raw bully and biscuits, to follow his exotic recipe. A more than welcome change.

Flies and fleas were constantly on the attack in our cave, - one during daylight, the other at night. Fleas being more agile than flies were far more difficult to capture. However many we killed, plenty more took their place. Nevertheless, we did have some measure of success, - their numbers eventually diminished.

Destroyers continued to arrive frequently by night, bringing up provisions, ammunition etc. Unloading was accomplished by tender, often during severe air attacks when a great deal of material had to be hurriedly thrown overboard, to be recovered later. This system proved very fortunate for our family of three. We discovered in the creeks a case of tinned milk, with other tinned foods, plus a sack of flour. The outside of the sack, having become wet, formed a sort of crust so that quite a fair amount of dry flour remained in the centre. From this stroke of luck, it was goodbye to bully stew for a while.

Now I could put my cooking skills to some use, - even so I never did think my mates appreciated my art. Perhaps they were right. Thinking back I'm sure they must have been.

We continued to live our almost hermit like existence, content to watch the endless artillery duels between friend and enemy, and dodge the never ending air attacks. Letters from home were now almost non-existent, - we being allowed one letter home each week.

Strong friendships were forged between ourselves and the "Aussie" signalmen, who came regularly to repair the broken lines of communication. They brought along news copies of their paper called "The Dinkum Oil", which when translated meant, "The Whole Truth". Although always a few days late, the news was eagerly read. Time was of no importance in this particular environment.

Oftentimes, enemy loudspeakers would implore the Aussies to pack it in. "England were fighting a losing battle". "Let them go it alone". Even aircraft dropped leaflets telling them

the same thing. The only impression they made, were to make the Aussies double up with laughter. They obviously miscalculated the spirit of the Australian fighting forces.

Each week one of our officers paid a visit to all spotting posts to check log books, - also to bring our pay. Money being quite useless here, our finances began to accumulate. Actually, the Salvation Army had managed to keep some semblance of a club going in the town. How they managed to do this, God only knows. There was nothing there one could spend any money on, but at least you could meet people from all parts of the area.

It was on such an officers visit, that I was to receive a severe shock, - my dear friend Bill Barlow was dead. I simply felt sick, - it seemed the bottom had fallen from my life. When I heard the full story from the officer, I was absolutely stunned.

For several weeks he had been very ill with dysentery, but recovered sufficiently to take up duties again. Early one morning he left his dugout, walked a short distance away, then shot himself through the stomach. It just appeared unbelievable that a happy-go-lucky chap like Bill, would ever contemplate such an action, - it was all so unreal, - so unlike his character. I felt there had to be a strong reason for his action, and I was determined to discover the truth. Something now had gone out of my life. Now gone forever, was one of the finest fellows it has ever been my privilege to meet.

Some considerable time was to elapse before eventually I discovered the true story. After his illness he became very nervous, - spending time brooding over the least little thing. It happened after an air attack, - with the "Stukas" diving down, his machine gun jammed. This being a moment for a cool head, Bill panicked, - leapt from the gun pit and ran for the nearest cover, dodging a hail of machine gun fire as he ran, reaching safety unhurt. Ever afterwards he was continually telling everyone he was finished. With his poor state of health, incidents however trivial began to play on his mind. The M.O. refused to send him to hospital, saying he would be himself again. However that was not to be, so my friend age twenty two years had gone forever. So departed a life that had brought so much joy and laughter, to so

many people.

Soon after I became friendly with Bill, we had made a pact together. Should something happen to him, I would write to his fiancée, simply to tell her just how much he loved her, - should anything likewise happen to me, then he would do the same. I complied with his request never dreaming it would happen in such distressing circumstances. However I did not tell the truth, - my version of his death being exactly the same as the official war office statement, - "Killed in action".

Weeks changed into months, - same routine day in, day out. Air raids, shelling, minespotting, with the never ending flea chasing. Eventually a welcome change took place, - we were relieved from minespotting to return to our battery. Shortly afterwards a welcome reunion awaited us, back with the lads.

A drastic change had taken place, - all the rubble and rocks had been converted into dug-outs for sleeping quarters. This being a very considerable achievement, having been accomplished between numerous air raids and continual shelling. Only a few of the regiment was allowed to use the tunnel, - mostly clerks and cooks. These people had the nickname "Bomb happy", - each time an air raid took place, they would run for the shelter of the tunnel, whilst the remainder manned machine guns, situated around the guns. It seemed ironical that these men could seek safety, whilst the remainder faced death daily. I am not stating they were all alike, - knowing some who would have gladly taken any risks, but unfortunately, or fortunately, they were not allowed the privilege.

After being allocated a position in the gun team, I was then invited to share a dug out with three others, George Tallwin, George Dawson and who else, but my old pal, Harry Bradley. From demolished houses in the town, they had managed to salvage some "Itie" beds, which was far more comfortable than the rocky ground. The dug out even boasted an old wash basin, - but sadly no water. Almost Savoy Hotel comfort!

Our water allowance was one bottle per day, - to wash clean your teeth, shave or bath in, if there was enough left over. A little different from the minespotting post, where we