

CHAPTER 13

"THE FALL OF TOBRUK"

A considerable time elapsed before I settled down completely, but eventually all were forgotten, - at least I had my memories of all I had learned and seen. Not even "Jerry" could take that away from me.

For some weeks now, I had been experiencing some sort of eye trouble, which I had blamed the continued sunshine for. However, after a visit to the M.O. he decided my eyesight needed attention which was impossible to receive in Tobruk, - in other words I needed to see an eye specialist. He therefore decided I should leave the gun team, to take up some other situation which demanded less strain on my eyesight.

On receipt of this information, my Commanding Officer decided I should be transferred to the battery observation post. This entailed working with a duty officer, reading range finders, which I was quite able to do, - but other duties incurred, appeared to be above my educational abilities. Trigonometry, square roots etc., never entered the school I had set foot in, - it was bewildering.

Captain Scott-Atkinson was my duty officer, - who helped me tremendously, doing everything possible to enable the routine to go along as smoothly as possible. He turned out to be a real pal and we got along famously, - almost like two gunners, or should I say in a bigheaded way, like two officers. Seldom did he show any rank towards me, ever.

My work, because of this friendship, became increasingly more interesting, - I enjoyed more and more my sessions of duty in the post.

Air attacks again became more frequent, although we did have our own fighters to combat them. Rommel's German troops had now ceased to run, having now taken the initiative once again. Benghazi had now fallen to his troops and "Derna" now under attack, - very shortly it looked more than likely, we should again be in the thick of things once again.

Beyond the outer defences of Tobruk, the area became boxes, that were given code names. Tank battles took place daily in these so called boxes. Tank crews would tell us, they had no chance at all against the new "German Tiger Panzers", which with their much improved gun fire could out-gun our tanks before they could get in range.

Action stations, alarms, were sounding continuously both day and night, giving precious little rest to all concerned. Nevertheless, we were not unduly worried, had we not experienced it all before? Tobruk had previously defended itself against all odds. What could be done once, could be done again, - at least that thought appeared to be in everyone's mind.

The outer defences were being manned by South African forces, British, and I believe Free French and Polish troops. The Aussies having long since departed, owing to the Japanese threat in the Far East.

"Derna" falls, the enemy now being near enough to bring their artillery to bear. Orders now being given "Fight to the last man". Even then we had no idea of the impending catastrophe.

The evening prior to the attack on "Tobruk" the Captain and myself whilst on duty in the observation post, listened to a radio talk from London. The theme of the report went something like the following. "Everyone in the world will be wondering what will, or has, happened to gallant little Tobruk". We looked at each other in amazement. What the hell was he talking about? He also went on to say, that the German Air Force was almost depleted, - being only able to put out very little in the way of dive bombers. Where the hell he got that information from, God only knows. Anyhow, we felt confident enough at that time, having little idea of things to come.

Six a.m., June 20th, on duty in the observation post with my Captain, - several other officers also being present, when wave after wave of enemy divebombers began their attack on the outer defences. The air strip having been evacuated of allied planes a few days previously, - the "Stukas" really enjoyed themselves. The barrage of ack-ack fire filled the skies.

around them with bursting shells, - but sorry to say, I never saw one plane brought down. How on earth anything could fly through such fire power will forever amaze me, - it just seemed impossible to do so.

Twelve a.m., still they were coming in, with no respite whatsoever. If this was what the gentleman on the radio had termed a few planes, - I should have hated to have been there when more happened to be around. The entire outer defences were now enveloped in thick black smoke. Infantry men began pouring back into the town, stating that German panzers were attacking all positions, the defences being virtually impossible to stop them. Telephone communications were almost impossible, most of the lines being cut by bombs and shelling, - so there being no means at all of finding out the true position being enacted on the perimeter.

The position looked desperate as more and more men poured into the town not knowing what to do, or where to go to escape the horrific bombardment that was taking place.

Events turned rapidly, - soon it became our turn for the "Stukas" to turn their attention to, - our role of spectators now over. All hell was let loose as wave after wave attacked our positions. Soon they departed, - we breathed freely once again, - but not for very long. More and more repeat performances took place. During the afternoon they suddenly let up, continuing their attacks out on the perimeter.

Artillery fire became increasingly heavier. Coloured smoke used as markers for their spotting planes, was in evidence all around. Had the position not been so serious, one could have sat back admiring the sight of the multi-coloured smokes. However, no one felt in the admiring mood in the present time.

Slowly, but very surely the artillery barrage crept closer and closer to our positions, but still we were unable to sight the enemy. Many times during the seige of Tobruk, we had endured similar heavy air-attacks, - but never artillery so close at hand. Were things ever so bad as this? we asked ourselves. The answer had to be no. These and many other:

questions continually passed through the mind.

At last, our first glimpse of the enemy, - seven enemy tanks making their way towards us. The six inch guns smartly went into action, - result, - seven enemy tanks shattered shortly afterwards. First blood to us, the cheers could be heard all over the town.

More tanks followed, so that now our battle had really commenced, - also their artillery had moved in close enough to commence shelling us. So close in fact it was possible to see the enemy loading their guns. Even the dive bombers decided to join in. Life indeed was now getting uncomfortable. If ever a man prayed, then no man could have prayed harder than myself at that time.

Calmly and efficiently each man did what he had been trained to do. No heroics, but a real sense of duty, - but alas, to no avail. One by one our guns were put out of action. The observation post was badly hit, but continued to carry out instructions, the remaining guns continuing to fire, - even though it was very plain the battle was lost.

Enemy troops now occupied the town. Minesweepers and torpedo boats with our men aboard, were attempting to leave the harbour, whilst enemy tanks continued to shell them from the shore positions. It was decided to concentrate our remaining fire at these tanks to try and help their escape.

It seemed hardly conceivable they would escape, but whether or not some succeeded I have no means of knowing. I sincerely hope so!

It became increasingly obvious we were now fighting a losing battle, - all means of communication having disappeared long ago. Under the circumstances, orders were issued to blow up the remaining guns, also the ammunition magazine, - this to prevent same falling into enemy hands. Range finders and anything else that could be of possible use to the enemy, went the same way. We were now isolated, - the enemy troops all around us, with the open sea behind. Escape now became impossible.

Tobruk was ablaze from end to end, with thick black smoke pouring into the skies, - even to the extent of obscuring the

sunlight. Never had I witnessed such a picture of utter desolation, - it was a terrible sight, with still petrol dumps exploding at intervals beyond the town.

What was now left of the battery made for the safety of the tunnel, where talk continually came back, as to what would happen next. Obviously it was inevitable that we would be captured, having no earthly means of escape, with the enemy surrounding us. All that remained now, to sit and contemplate when the Germans would enter the tunnel to take us prisoners. Not the most amusing thought.

It being now past midnight, Captain Scott Atkinson asked for volunteers to crawl with him to the officers mess, - about a hundred yards distance, to capture some bottles of gin that were still lying there. There being no shortage of volunteers, the gin arrived quite safely, approximately a dozen or so bottles being consumed during the night.

"There'll always be an England" was murdered several times during this time, - minus the piano. All appeared quiet outside, except for occasional snatches of "Deutschland uber Alles", sung by German voices, but no enemy ventured into the tunnel, so our gin drinking survived into the night. At this particular time no one cared, - that time became, not very much later.

CHAPTER 14

"I BECAME A PRISONER OF WAR"

As soon as daylight broke, German soldiers entered the tunnel to claim their prisoners, - marching us out, or should I say prodding us out with their rifles, officers and men alike, to march us up into columns of three. Fires raged fiercely in the town, with still the black pall of smoke overhanging almost everything.

A very efficient German officer took charge immediately, addressing us all in German. When no one took any notice, he then addressed us in English, - his very first words being "Good morning". Hardly any man thought there was much good about it, - especially as most seemed to be suffering a hang-over from our night in the tunnel. All our possessions, - at least what we had left were then thoroughly searched. What they expected to find I do not know, - unless they suspected the odd bottle of gin.

Officers then being separated from the men, we were marched into the town. Looking back I felt a pang of anguish, leaving what had become home to us for so long, - never dreaming I should leave in this manner. Germans now occupying everything that had become so much a part of us, - it was indeed, a bitter pill to swallow.

Enemy planes flew low overhead, taking photographs of prisoners for propaganda purposes. Their fighters planes flew low overhead. Oh how I wished a few spitfires could have got amongst them, - but I guess that was a little more than wishful thinking.

The town resembles a shambles, - bodies lay everywhere, - a truly horrific sight. Something that will remain forever in my memory, - one that I hope I may never witness again.

Arriving at what was once the town square, we found already there, thousands of other prisoners, English, South African, and Italian forces, sat, lying, or standing aimlessly around. My God, the humiliation of it all.

We actually remained here for at least a couple of hours, during which time "General Rommel" drove through the town. So this was the gentleman responsible for our present predicament, - obviously I did not feel very kindly disposed towards him. However one must give him credit for his masterly handling of this vast military operation, even though that person represents the enemy. The German troops cheered and shouted as he made his way through the packed crowds in his staff car. At this moment they were on top of the world, - we at rock bottom. Never mind, cheer up, worse was to come!

At this time I had no idea where my friends were. Whether dead or alive I'd no means of knowing, being thrust among men who I had never seen before, nevertheless there being plenty to talk about, even though most of the talk was far from encouraging. Lets say depressing!

Eventually, after being lined up in columns of four, we began marching, - where to, we were yet to discover. The columns of prisoners seemed endless, - German trucks mounted with "Spandau" machine guns moved continuously up and down what seemed like miles of prisoners, presumably to prevent escape. The planes still continued to fly low over the long procession, - obviously with plenty of film left for their photographs.

Clouds of sands were kicked up by the marching men, - that along with the blazing sunshine, made my throat parched and dry, also I felt, along with all the others, terribly weary. No water could be had, - that had been drunk long before, but the march continued, on and on.

After what seemed an eternity we eventually halted on a huge strip of flat sand previously used by both the R.A.F. and the "Luftwaffe" as an air strip. Whether the Germans had deliberately planted us there to prevent the R.A.F. from bombing same, or whether there was insufficient room in the P.O.W. cages for so many prisoners I do not know. Either theory could be correct.

Although no one had eaten that day, or the previous one for that matter, we were not hungry. Thirst being well

nigh unbearable. Everyone clamoured for water to appease their thirst, - dozens of men going down with sunstroke. One simply had to sit or lie in the hot sun, - no shade of any description being available, - nightfall with the cold evening air, brought a considerable measure of relief.

The following morning, the hot sun rising rapidly, conditions by mid-day were fast deteriorating. Mouths began to puff up and lips cracking, - the torment became hellish. Some of the men began acting very strange, shouting continually for water. I do really believe that murder would have been committed for just a spoonful of the stuff.

Continually my mind wandered back to Malvern, where the water from the springs gushed into the many fountains. Day and night the flow continued, week after week, year after year, for ever and ever the process continued. It seemed impossible to think of anything else, - but I knew I must, or I should go mad.

German interpreters explained that they were doing their best to get water to the prisoners, but all water points had been destroyed by the Allies before falling into enemy hands. Obviously this made things difficult for them, as water was needed for their own forces, who were now well on the way to "El Alamain".

So the day continued, with more and more men becoming hysterical, - some even drinking their own urine, which was the most stupid thing they could have done. But who am I to blame them, when I almost felt like doing likewise.

Until one experiences thirst at this level, it's almost impossible to describe it's consequences. It was absolutely unbearable!

About an hour before dusk, a convoy of trucks, loaded with oil drums was spotted on the distant horizon. Could this be the precious water the interpreters had promised? The convoy wended its way towards us, - what followed is well nigh indescribable.

Thousands of men suddenly stampeded towards the unloading point. One was forced to take part in this mad rush, or be

trampled to death beneath the flying feet. German sentries fired into the air, - but all to no avail. Dozens of drums were overturned by the thirst maddened crowd, - the precious water being soaked up by the sand. Men lay on their stomachs, mouths pressed to the wet sand, whilst men still continued to trample over their bodies in a desperate bid for water. All humanity had now disappeared, - only the animal instinct remained.

It became perfectly obvious that this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue, - the Germans swiftly organised a system of distribution. Troops being quickly posted all around the convoy, armed with machine guns, with orders to shoot anyone disobeying their orders.

At last the situation became more sane, - each man eventually, receiving one mug of water, - not much, but more precious than gold, - being guarded with the same respect.

Next day, food was issued from our own food dumps, with again one mug of water. The food was left almost untouched, - throats so inflamed by thirst, being almost impossible to swallow.

Four days later we were packed into trucks and on our way to "Derna". The guards and drivers now being Italian. From this time onwards, we were now entirely under Italian administration. If thinking this was a good omen, it just goes to prove how wrong one can be.