

A vintage biplane is flying in the sky above a tank in a desert. The tank is a large, heavy-duty vehicle with a prominent turret and a long barrel. The scene is set in a sandy, arid environment under a clear blue sky.

BREAKING ROMMEL'S SIEGE

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

FOR EIGHT LONG MONTHS, COMMONWEALTH AND ALLIED FORCES ORGANISED THE DEFENCE OF TOBRUK, DENYING AN ADVANCE PORT TO FACILITATE AN AXIS INVASION OF EGYPT. THIS ARGUABLY SAVED BRITISH FORCES FROM AN HUMILIATING EARLY DEFEAT IN THE NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN

Erwin Rommel led the Axis forces at Tobruk

Throughout the ebb and flow of the North African Campaign during World War II, Tobruk, a major port city on the Mediterranean coast of Libya, was a glittering prize.

Possession of Tobruk facilitated operations east and west, and it became the scene of desperate fighting several times.

However, the heroic defence of the city during more than 240 days of siege, from April to December 1941, is remembered as a defining chapter in the history of the armed forces of Britain and the Commonwealth. The epic siege itself came about somewhat by accident. Operation Compass, a British counter-offensive intended for only a limited duration, became a sustained action that produced a resounding triumph in the desert against the Italian Tenth Army. However, its bitter unintended consequence was the deployment of German forces – the vaunted Deutsches Afrika Korps – to the continent. The Afrika Korps commander, General Erwin Rommel, was later to become the 'Desert Fox', the stuff of legend.

In response to the Italian invasion of Egypt in the autumn of 1940, the British Western Desert Force, numbering only 36,000, struck back at the 250,000-man Italian Tenth Army, repelling the invaders and carrying the fight across the Libyan frontier. General Richard O'Connor swept across the desert, occupying the whole of the province of Cyrenaica in eastern Libya and bagging 130,000 prisoners during operations from December 1940 to February 1941. The crowning achievement was the capture of Tobruk, which fell to Commonwealth forces in late January.

The entire dynamic of the desert war had been altered in favour of the Allies. But two significant developments rapidly removed the lustre of their accomplishments.

Early exit and bold entrance

By May, Winston Churchill was asserting that Allied forces in Greece needed support, and Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, head of

"THE AFRIKA KORPS COMMANDER, GENERAL ERWIN ROMMEL, WAS LATER TO BECOME THE 'DESERT FOX', THE STUFF OF LEGEND"

Middle East Command, transferred much of his available troops and equipment there. At the same time, Germany committed forces to bolster its flagging Italian ally in North Africa.

The first German formations to arrive had reached the Libyan capital and port of Tripoli in February 1941, and Rommel was there to meet them. The Afrika Korps comprised the 5th Light Division, 15th Panzer Division and later the 90th Light Division. Together with six Italian armoured and infantry divisions – Ariete, Savona, Trieste, Brescia, Bologna and Pavia – these Axis formations constituted Panzergruppe Afrika, which formed in August 1941. Though nominally under Italian command for most of his North African sojourn, it was understood that Rommel ran the show.

Although he had been told to delay an offensive until his strength was further augmented, Rommel demurred, intent on taking advantage of an opportunity that he rightly recognised as fleeting. "We must attack Tobruk with everything we have before Tommy has time to dig in!" he told his lieutenants. On 24 March 1941 Rommel unleashed a lightning offensive that took the British by surprise. On the first day, his spearheads gobbled up El Agheila. Within two weeks, they had retaken Barce and Derna. Commonwealth forces fled. German columns rolled onto the coastal plain near Gazala and executed flanking movements to trap enemy troops as they retired. To compound the misery, both O'Connor and General Philip Neame were captured before dawn on 7 April, depriving the British of two highly capable commanders.

"TOBRUK MUST BE HELD. THERE IS NOTHING BETWEEN YOU AND CAIRO"

– Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell

Allied soldiers observe Axis artillery fire



Image: Piotr Forkasiewicz

Mounting a defence

Located 120 kilometres (75 miles) west of the Egyptian border, Tobruk offered the Germans a deep water port roughly 430 kilometres (265 miles) east of Benghazi – a forward base of supply that might facilitate a masterstroke into the heart of Egypt, perhaps all the way to Cairo and the strategically vital Suez Canal. If Tobruk remained in Commonwealth possession, it would constitute a thorn in Rommel's side, a conduit for potential resupply of troops and equipment that would threaten his rear, while the German supply lines would be appreciably lengthened across the desert.

Although initially on their heels, the British, Australian and Indian soldiers of the renamed XIII Corps, and later the New Zealanders, Poles and Czechs brought into the fray, realised to a man the importance of Tobruk. Wavell gathered his subordinate officers at a hotel on the city's waterfront on 8 April and told them frankly, "Tobruk must be held. There is nothing between you and Cairo."

Commanded by Australian General Leslie Morshead, nicknamed 'Ming the Merciless' by his men after the villain of the *Flash Gordon* radio and comic strip series, the 23,000 defenders of Tobruk consisted of elements of several Australian infantry brigades, including the 26th, the 18th and 24th, which had escaped encirclement by the Germans at Derna during their retreat, and the 20th Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, along with the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division. These troops were bolstered by the 25-pounder (11.5-kilogram)

artillery of the 1st/104th Essex Yeomanry and 107th South Nottingham Hussars of the Royal Horse Artillery, the 51st Field Regiment Royal Artillery, along with the 18th Indian Cavalry, the 1st Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, the antitank guns of the 2/3rd Australian Antitank Regiment and the 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, as well as assorted anti-aircraft units. To counter Rommel's PzKpfw. III and IV tanks, the battered remnants of the British 2nd Armoured Division mustered 22 tanks – a mixed bag of Matilda IIs and Cruiser Mk. I, Mk. II and Mk. IIIs.

Morshead made the most of the defences at Tobruk, positioning more than 40 of his big guns so that they could fire over the defensive perimeter at any point without moving. He repurposed Italian coastal guns, turning them inland. The defensive perimeter extended roughly 48 kilometres (30 miles), and the outer band, designated the Red Line, stretched 13-16 kilometres (eight to ten miles) from the inner port. It was constructed with an antitank

"THERE'LL BE NO DUNKIRK HERE. IF WE SHOULD HAVE TO GET OUT, WE SHALL FIGHT OUR WAY OUT. THERE IS TO BE NO SURRENDER AND NO RETREAT"

German soldiers, two carrying machine guns over their shoulders, move to a new position during the eight-month siege of Tobruk



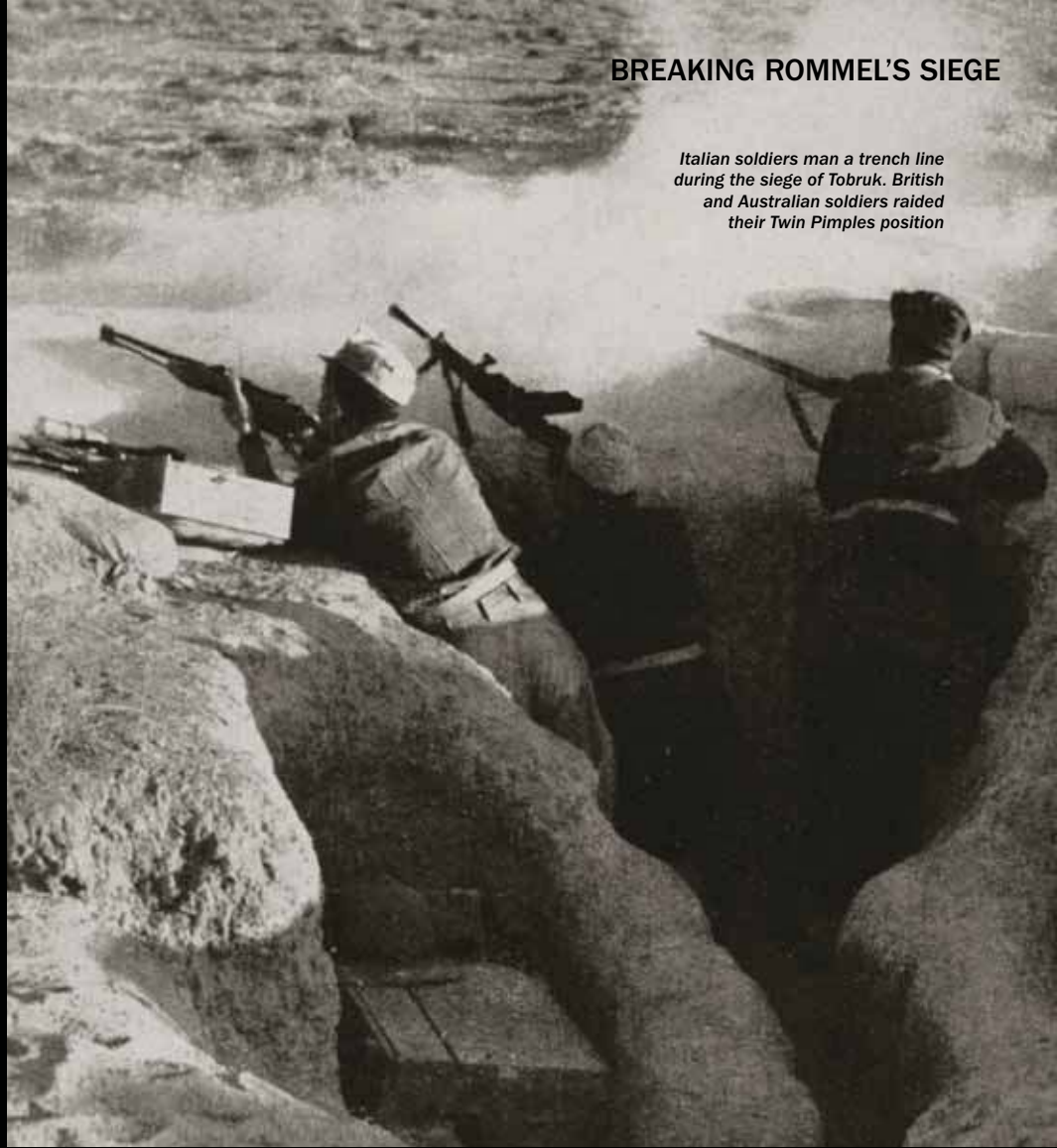
ditch and an extensive minefield that was laced with barbed wire entanglements. At least 150 strongpoints dotted the defences, including those originally constructed by the Italians and improved by the new occupants. Many of these were concrete reinforced bunkers bristling with Vickers machine guns and Bren guns. Morshead also utilised a network of fortified caves. Early in the siege, he had air support from Hawker Hurricane fighters of No. 72 Squadron and intelligence from the observation planes of No. 6 Squadron, RAF.

“There’ll be no Dunkirk here”

As the Germans approached, Morshead was resolute. Referring to the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from continental Europe a year earlier, he bluntly stated, “There’ll be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat.”

The Afrika Korps vanguard roared into the vicinity of Tobruk on 10 April 1941. Intending

Italian soldiers man a trench line during the siege of Tobruk. British and Australian soldiers raided their Twin Pimples position



THE TWIN PIMPLES RAID

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK IN THE SUMMER OF 1941, THE DEFENDING COMMONWEALTH COMMAND MAINTAINED HIGH MORALE & STRUCK SMALL-SCALE BLOWS AGAINST THE INVESTING AXIS FORCES UNDER GENERAL ERWIN ROMMEL

One of the most successful raids occurred on the night of 17-18 July, when elements of No. 8 Guards Commando and the Royal Australian Engineers executed an assault against an Italian strongpoint outside the Tobruk perimeter, identified as the Twin Pimples.

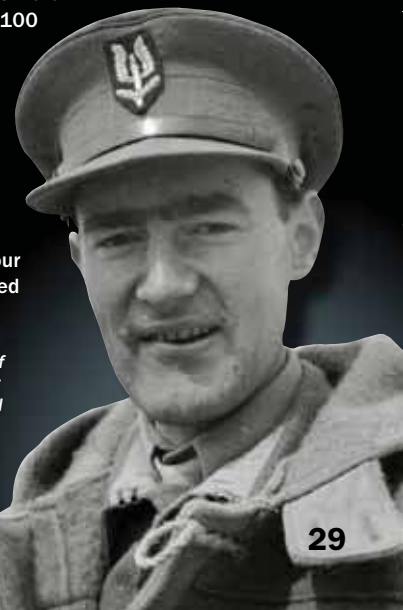
The Twin Pimples raid serves as an excellent example of timing, execution and cooperation. The terrain feature derived its name from a pair of hills located close together and occupied by the Italians. The 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry held the Tobruk line directly opposite, and a raid involving three officers and 40 soldiers of No. 8 Commando was organised to cross a supply road in front of the Italian positions and attack the high ground from behind.

The commandos set off at 11pm and crossed in front of the enemy post undetected. Under cover, they waited for two hours before the 18th Cavalry Regiment executed a diversionary attack. When the Italians were alerted to the diversion, their positions erupted in small-arms fire, and flares lit the night sky. The subsequent commando advance was undetected until the attackers were within 27 metres (30 yards)

of the Twin Pimples. Swiftly, the commandos took the Italian positions, and the engineers moved in to plant explosives at several mortar emplacements while also destroying an ammunition dump. Planners had estimated that supporting Italian positions would require 15 minutes before their artillery came into action, and the commandos were roughly 91 metres (100 yards) away when the enemy guns began firing.

Although some operational issues had emerged, the mission was deemed a success, with just four commandos wounded and one dead.

Lt. Col. David Stirling of No. 8 Commando went on to found the Special Air Service in the summer of 1941



to maintain his momentum, Rommel made a tactical error, failing to appreciate the strength of the port city's defences. Originally, he had intended to sweep eastwards and surround Tobruk before initiating a direct assault. Upon arrival, he determined that such a preparatory movement was unnecessary and immediately ordered the 15th Panzer Division, under General Heinrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron, to attack directly from the west. This assault was roughly handled and Prittwitz was killed.

Reconsidering his initial plan, Rommel executed the flanking movement early on 11 April, investing Tobruk with an array of firepower. In the east, south and west, he positioned the 5th Light Division, 15th Panzer Division and the Brescia Division respectively. The remaining Italian infantry divisions and the sole Italian armoured division, Ariete, were held in reserve.

Shortly after noon that day, the storm opened up again on Tobruk as the 5th Panzer Regiment hit the Australian 20th Brigade west of the El Adem road and lost five tanks before grinding to a halt. In the late afternoon, separate infantry attacks involving 1,100 soldiers failed to make gains. A second attack was supported by both German and Italian tanks, with several falling victim to antitank defences and four counterattacking British tanks. As daylight waned, the Axis forces pulled back after sustaining significant casualties. Rommel had once again been frustrated, having written to his wife Lucie at home in Germany that he was confident of victory: "Dear Lu, today may well see the end of the Battle of Tobruk."

Instead, it was merely the bloody beginning. Rommel licked his wounds and two days later sent the 5th Light Division forward at dusk against the 8th Machine Gun Battalion. The Australians fought desperately and threw the enemy back with heavy casualties.

A 26-year-old corporal of the 2/17th Infantry Battalion, John Hurst 'Jack' Edmondson, earned a posthumous Victoria Cross on the night of 13-14 April. As German infantry breached the barbed wire obstacle near his position and set up half a dozen machine guns, along with mortars and artillery pieces, Edmondson and six others mounted a bayonet charge against

Below: Australian General Leslie Morshead bullishly fought to defend Tobruk during the siege

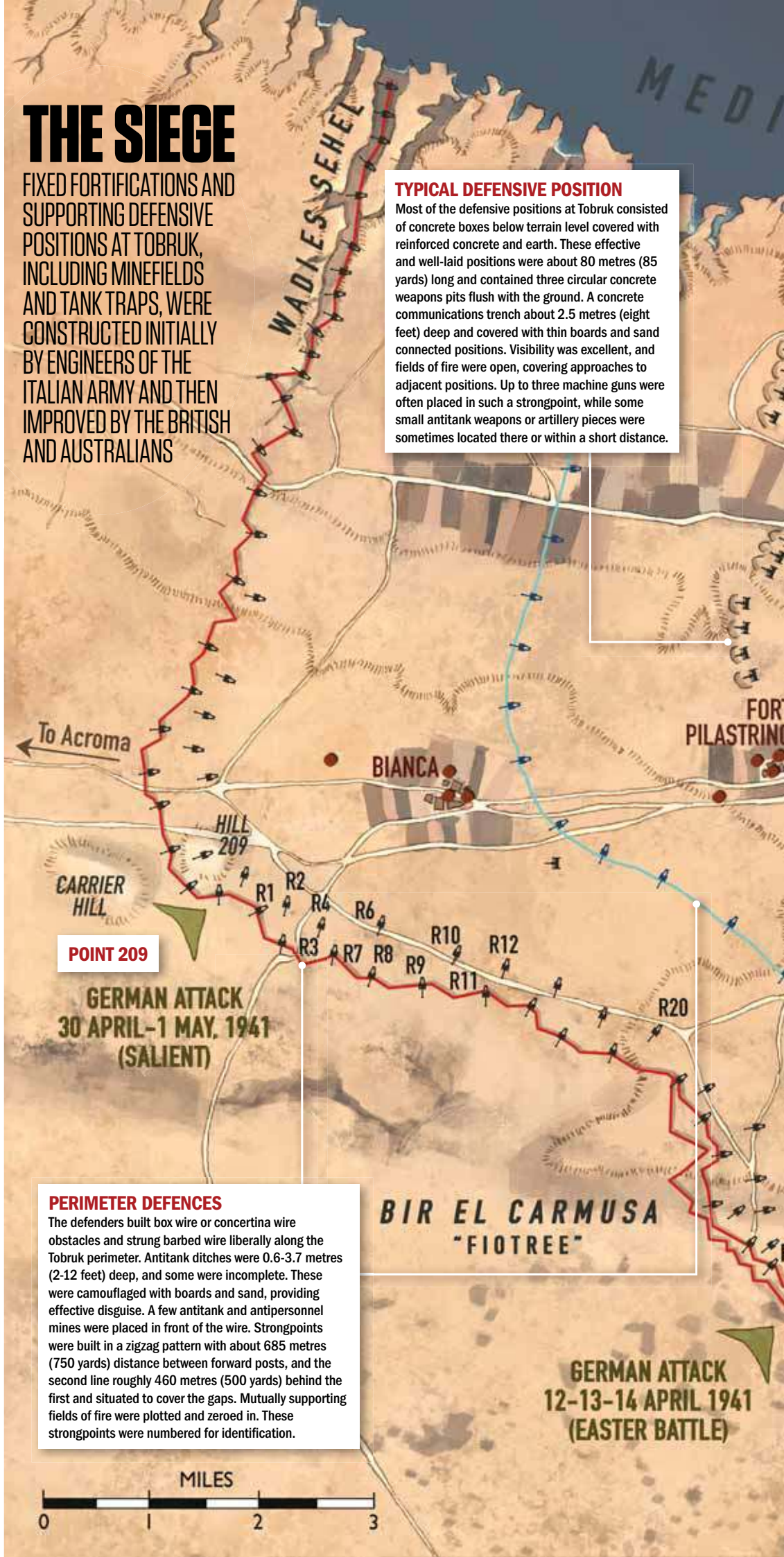


THE SIEGE

FIXED FORTIFICATIONS AND SUPPORTING DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AT TOBRUK, INCLUDING MINEFIELDS AND TANK TRAPS, WERE CONSTRUCTED INITIALLY BY ENGINEERS OF THE ITALIAN ARMY AND THEN IMPROVED BY THE BRITISH AND AUSTRALIANS

TYPICAL DEFENSIVE POSITION

Most of the defensive positions at Tobruk consisted of concrete boxes below terrain level covered with reinforced concrete and earth. These effective and well-laid positions were about 80 metres (85 yards) long and contained three circular concrete weapons pits flush with the ground. A concrete communications trench about 2.5 metres (eight feet) deep and covered with thin boards and sand connected positions. Visibility was excellent, and fields of fire were open, covering approaches to adjacent positions. Up to three machine guns were often placed in such a strongpoint, while some small antitank weapons or artillery pieces were sometimes located there or within a short distance.



POINT 209


**GERMAN ATTACK
30 APRIL-1 MAY, 1941
(SALIENT)**


PERIMETER DEFENCES


The defenders built box wire or concertina wire obstacles and strung barbed wire liberally along the Tobruk perimeter. Antitank ditches were 0.6-3.7 metres (2-12 feet) deep, and some were incomplete. These were camouflaged with boards and sand, providing effective disguise. A few antitank and antipersonnel mines were placed in front of the wire. Strongpoints were built in a zigzag pattern with about 685 metres (750 yards) distance between forward posts, and the second line roughly 460 metres (500 yards) behind the first and situated to cover the gaps. Mutually supporting fields of fire were plotted and zeroed in. These strongpoints were numbered for identification.


**GERMAN ATTACK
12-13-14 APRIL 1941
(EASTER BATTLE)**





Perimeter defenses (RED LINE) 


Perimeter defenses (BLUE LINE) 

Strongpoints 

Artillery R.H.A. 

Artillery Bush 

Outposts 

Tanks 

Maps: Rocio Espin

DEFENCE IN DEPTH

The defences of Tobruk, much of them originally constructed by Italian engineers, were arranged in three lines. The first, the Red Line, 13-16 kilometres (eight to ten miles) from the inner harbour, consisted of mutually supporting fortifications, artillery emplacements and antitank minefields designed to disrupt any penetration. The second, the Blue Line, was three kilometres (two miles) behind the Red Line and manned by three reserve battalions. General Morshead instructed forward positions to hold while the Blue Line absorbed any breakthrough. If the enemy breached the Blue Line and mobile reserves could not hold, available forces were to concentrate at the innermost Green Line for the last stand.

ARTILLERY POSITIONS

The devastating use of artillery had a telling effect on the Axis effort to capture Tobruk. Morshead skillfully placed as many as 40 artillery pieces so that they could fire in virtually any threatened direction without being relocated. One of the most effective uses of artillery occurred between 30 April-1 May when the 25-pounder guns of the 51st Field Regiment blasted the German effort to capture Point 209. Although they were temporarily successful, the Germans could not hold their deepest penetrations, largely due to the galling British artillery fire. Morshead also employed captured Italian guns, known as Bush Artillery, turning them from coastal positions to face inland.

To El Adem

To Bardia

BIR EL AZAZI

White Cairn

Cooma

Plonk

Bondi

Bash

Jim

Jack

WADI ES ZEITUM

EL ADEM CROSSROADS

EL GUBI

CEMETERY

FORT SOLARO

FORT AIKENTE

TOBRUK

NORTH POINT

TOBRUK HARBOUR

WADI AUDA

BEACH HOSPITAL

TERRANEAN SEA

R33, R32

R34

R35

R45

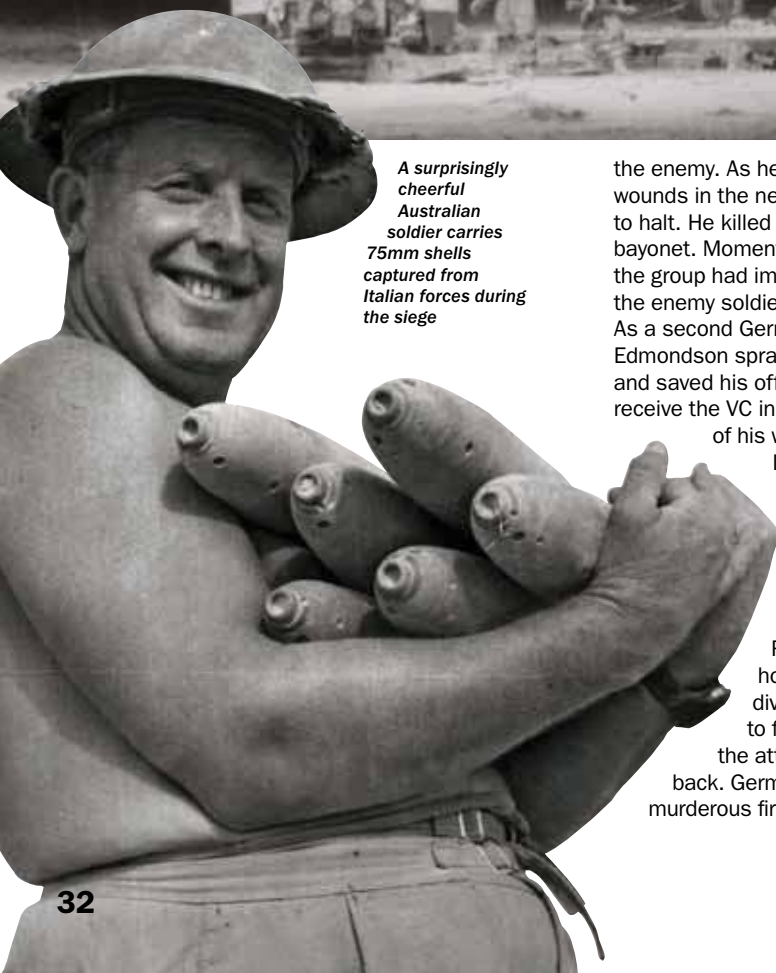
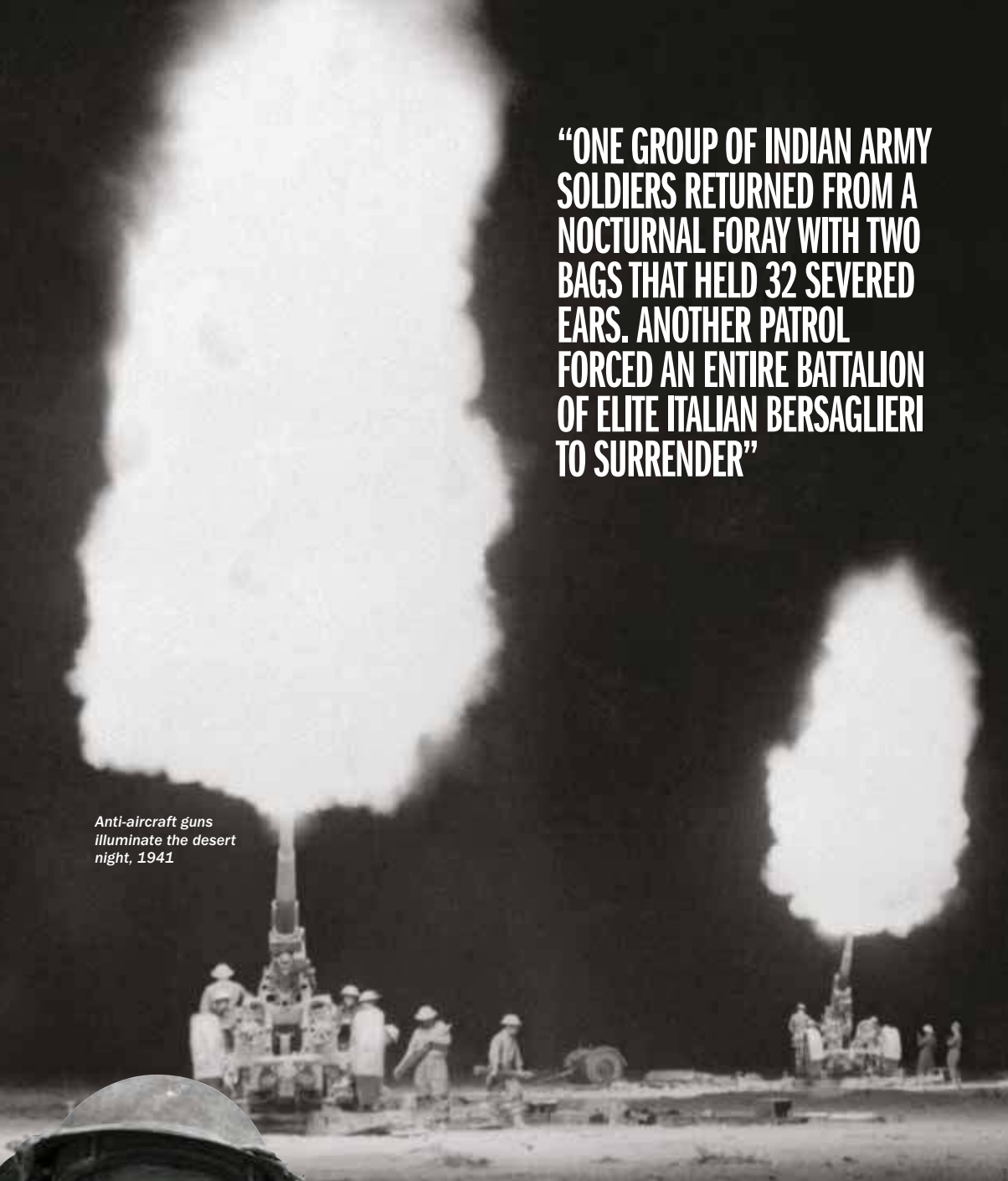
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R70

“ONE GROUP OF INDIAN ARMY SOLDIERS RETURNED FROM A NOCTURNAL FORAY WITH TWO BAGS THAT HELD 32 SEVERED EARS. ANOTHER PATROL FORCED AN ENTIRE BATTALION OF ELITE ITALIAN BERSAGLIERI TO SURRENDER”

Anti-aircraft guns illuminate the desert night, 1941



A surprisingly cheerful Australian soldier carries 75mm shells captured from Italian forces during the siege

the enemy. As he ran forward, Edmondson took wounds in the neck and stomach but refused to halt. He killed a German soldier with his bayonet. Moments later, the officer who led the group had impaled another German, but the enemy soldier continued to grip his legs. As a second German attacked the officer, Edmondson sprang forward, killed both Germans and saved his officer's life. The first Australian to receive the VC in World War II, Edmondson died of his wounds within hours.

Despite the young soldier's heroics, the Australians were compelled to fall back an hour later under the weight of an attack by 200 German soldiers, who managed to penetrate the Red Line temporarily. Rommel, however, had been forced to divert troops from another sector to fight Edmondson's unit, and the attacking troops were pulled back. German tanks were subjected to murderous fire during the withdrawal, and

several were destroyed by antitank guns that had been camouflaged.

The defenders of Tobruk took heavy losses as well. Every inch of their position was within range of German and Italian artillery. The Luftwaffe was a continuing threat as Junkers Ju-87 'Stuka' dive bombers screamed down in near-vertical dives to deliver their lethal payloads. "They timed their run to coincide with the position of the sun so that they were on us before we could really see them," remembered one veteran of the siege. "What with the banshee blood-curdling scream of diving aircraft, the anti-aircraft barrage and exploding bombs, it was a nerve-racking experience."

The resurgent Rats

After Nazi propagandists referred to Tobruk's beleaguered defenders as rats caught in a trap, the defenders began calling themselves the 'Rats of Tobruk'. They endured tremendous privations. Food and water were always in short supply. Clouds of black flies and mosquitoes plagued them. Lice and fleas tormented them during fitful attempts to sleep. The men were



Above: A brigadier gives instructions to tank commanders, November 1941



Above: Allied soldiers using a captured Breda anti-aircraft gun during the siege of Tobruk, May 1941

German forces fighting outside Tobruk. The siege slowly sapped Axis strength, finally compelling them to halt offensive operations and later to withdraw



tired and ragged but full of fight, so decided to mete out some terror of their own. In addition to a robust defence, they regularly slipped past the German lines at night, sometimes in patrols of up to 20, slitting throats, setting booby traps, blowing up ammunition dumps and generally creating chaos. One group of Indian Army soldiers returned from a nocturnal foray with two bags that held 32 severed ears. Another patrol forced an entire battalion of elite Italian Bersaglieri to surrender.

Meanwhile, Rommel pounded away at the Red Line, and General Friedrich Paulus arrived at the behest of high command to observe operations and hopefully quell Rommel's penchant for ignoring orders. In the predawn hours of 14 April, the Germans tried to crack the nut that was Tobruk yet again, but the result was a harsh rebuff. Following artillery and Stuka strikes, tanks rumbled forward as the 5th Panzer Regiment managed to stake out a small lodgement at the El Adem road three kilometres (two miles) inside the Red Line.

Unaware that they had been coaxed into a trap, the German tankers pressed forward, past

“WHAT WITH THE BANSHEE BLOOD-CURDLING SCREAM OF DIVING AIRCRAFT, THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT BARRAGE AND EXPLODING BOMBS, IT WAS A NERVE-RACKING EXPERIENCE”

the quiet Australian defences. The German infantry followed, but as they passed the defenders erupted with every weapon at hand. Assailed from both flanks, the advance turned quickly into a rout. Antitank fire was pressed home from short range, in some instances from only 550 metres (600 yards). British artillery barked and machine guns clattered. Crusader tanks, dug in for protection, blasted away. By the time the Germans backed out of the meat grinder, 16 of 36 tanks were destroyed and dozens of infantrymen were dead or wounded.

Rommel's frustration boiled over as one tank commander referred to the fight as a “witch's cauldron” and muttered that he had been fortunate to escape alive. The Desert Fox refocused, swinging his attacks to the west. At 5.30pm on 15 April, he sent 1,000 Italian

troops forward against the Australian 2nd Battalion, 24th Brigade. The attack made good initial progress, compelling the defenders to retreat from forward positions, but reinforcing infantry and the steady fire of the 51st Field Regiment caused the attack to peter out. The following night, Italian infantry of the 1st Battalion, 62nd Trento Regiment attacked near Acroma. When the tank commanders of the Ariete Division refused to advance and remained hull-down in a wadi, Rommel was incensed. But the armour stayed put. 800 Italian infantrymen were cut off and captured.

Still pricking the enemy's thumb, Morshead ordered a pair of raids on the night of 22 April. They bagged nearly 450 German and Italian prisoners near the Ras El Maduar area in the southwest perimeter.



Allied tankers and their vehicles lined up in the desert, Tobruk, 1941



Crewmen aboard a British tank watch a long line of Axis prisoners march into captivity during the 241-day siege of Tobruk

An all-out assault

Rommel regrouped for more than a week. Then, on 30 April, he unleashed a powerful attack against the western perimeter near Ras el Madaur. His first objective was Point 209, an observation post for the guns of the 51st Field Regiment. German troops of the fresh 104th Rifle Regiment joined Italians of the Brescia Division at dusk, breaching the perimeter and taking Point 209 about five hours later. Several strongpoints fell to the onslaught, and by daylight on 1 May the Desert Fox had ordered tanks into the gap in the British line. The armour split into two columns, right to support the Brescia Division and left to attack the 51st Field Regiment's gun emplacements at Wadi Giaida.

Bucking up against the major threat, the reserve company of the 2/24th Battalion stepped up with an antitank gun company in support. As the Australians fired briskly, the German tanks ran into a minefield. For more than two hours they were trapped under heavy artillery fire. Although several strongpoints were overrun, others stood firm. Morshead ordered an afternoon counterattack, but several tanks were disabled and the 2/48th Battalion took heavy casualties. Rommel conceded his deepest penetration but maintained control of a five-kilometre (three-mile) salient into the Red Line, at a cost of 46 of the 81 tanks employed, either to mechanical breakdowns or enemy fire.

While a sandstorm limited operations on 2 May, Morshead reinforced his defences around the German penetration. Subsequent counterattacks by the 18th Brigade failed to dislodge them, and the salient remained intact as Rommel came to grips with the failure to take Tobruk by direct attack, settling further into siege mode. Rommel began to plan offensive operations further east as Paulus advised him against another attempt to take Tobruk. A flurry of messages from Berlin warned Rommel not to attack Tobruk again or undertake any other offensive operations

“HEAVY FIGHTING ERUPTED AS EACH SIDE VIED FOR CONTROL OF HALFAYA PASS NEAR THE PORT TOWN OF SOLLUM. THE BRITISH TOOK CONTROL OF THE AREA, NICKNAMED ‘HELLFIRE PASS’, BUT WERE DRIVEN BACK”

for the foreseeable future. The failure of the attack of 30 April-1 May, among the first major setbacks for the German army in WWII, ended the immediate threat to Tobruk. The succeeding months were largely consumed with artillery bombardment, raids and periods of inactivity.

Brevity and Battleaxe

Winston Churchill and General Wavell were both encouraged by the defence of Tobruk, and the prime minister urged him to attempt a relief effort. Operation Brevity was launched on 15 May as British troops advanced from defensive positions along the Egyptian frontier. Heavy fighting erupted as each side vied for control of Halfaya Pass near the port town of Sollum. The British took control of the area, nicknamed ‘Hellfire Pass’, but were driven back, and the offensive was called off.

A month later Wavell launched a second relief attempt, Operation Battleaxe, which was a dismal failure. British armoured tactics were woefully inadequate, and accurate fire from the highly effective German 88mm guns – originally anti-aircraft weapons innovatively employed in an antitank role – took a heavy toll. During three days of fighting, the British lost 45 Crusader tanks, 27 Cruiser tanks and 64 Matilda IIs. On the heels of the debacle,

Wavell was informed that he was being replaced by General Claude Auchinleck.

At the same time, a political crisis occurred in Australia as the government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies was toppled and the new leadership clamoured for the withdrawal of Australian troops from Tobruk to rejoin their comrades in other areas. The Australians were replaced by the British 70th Division, the Polish Carpathian Brigade and the Czech 11th Battalion between August and October.

Final relief

Since the fighting had begun in April, the defenders of Tobruk had suffered heavily. Incessant Luftwaffe air attacks were hazardous to shipping that brought much-needed supplies and reinforcements into the harbour. Artillery pounded their positions relentlessly. Still, they had clung to their posts and parried each of Rommel's thrusts.

By late November, with the siege in its seventh month, the recently constituted British Eighth Army initiated Operation Crusader, an offensive intended to relieve Tobruk and destroy Axis armour in the process. On 18 November, British and German tanks clashed in a driving rain at Sidi Rezegh about 16 kilometres (ten miles) southeast of the Red Line. Repeated engagements sapped Rommel's strength, and a battle on 7 December, in which the 4th Armoured Brigade knocked out 11 tanks of the 15th Panzer Division, was indicative of the losses the Afrika Korps was regularly absorbing.

Resupply was becoming problematic for the Germans and Italians, and Rommel reluctantly withdrew to Gazala. On 10 December, elements of Eighth Army marched into Tobruk in triumph. The great siege had been costly, the Allies losing nearly 4,000 killed, wounded and captured, and the Axis forces approximately twice that number. For the Desert Fox, the setback was only temporary. Within months he returned to Tobruk with a vengeance.

SURVIVING THE SIEGE

In 1941 Dennis Middleton was on the frontline, defending Tobruk against fierce Axis assaults. He recorded his incredible experiences in a memoir, which reveals what day-to-day life in the siege was like

WORDS JEREMY & DENNIS MIDDLETON

My father, Dennis, joined the Territorial Army before the start of World War II because he knew war was coming. He told me he had never believed Chamberlain's claims of "peace in our time". He chose to join the artillery. Memories of World War I were fresh enough to dampen enthusiasm for the infantry. He went to war a few months later, telling his mother he would be back in a couple of years. In fact he was to be away for five years.

Dennis was posted to North Africa and the Middle East and saw action in the last six major battles of the desert campaign. He was among the few to serve under Wavell in the early days and under Bernard Montgomery after that. He was at the siege of Tobruk from

beginning to end. His best friend was killed and he himself was captured, only to be freed by the British Army six days later. There was plenty of action.

However, this is not just a military story. It's the story of an ordinary young man of 21 who experienced extraordinary times. It tells of jokes and japes, horror and comradeship. It's a straightforward and unsentimental tale, intelligent and gently humorous, just like my father. My father rarely mentioned the war. However, in the mid 1990s he hand-wrote his memoir as a record for himself and our family. I publish the memoir now to share his story. His experiences were shared by many of his generation – experiences my generation has been spared and I hope and pray my children will be spared, too.

Men rest after the end of the Siege of Tobruk, 1942



"I entered 1941 at the Middle East Signal School. Course No. 14 was for both officers and NCOs and ran for six weeks, so at the end of it I felt I really knew my job. Maadi was at the end of 12 miles [19 kilometres] of electric railway running into Cairo city centre, so I was easily able to get into town in the evening or at weekends. The station was a mile or so from camp so, if possible, one got a taxi. Since taxis were scarce the drill was to jump on the running-board of one going in the right direction. On one occasion I even rode the whole way on the luggage grid. A bit tricky going round corners! The course contained Australians and New Zealanders, which added to the social side. By the time it had ended, the South Notts had left Matruh and handed in their guns.

"It must have been at this time the Army apparently thought my regiment was up the desert because I was put on a very small ship in Alexandria which slowly chugged its way up the 800 miles [1,285 kilometres] of coast to Tobruk. There I tasted, for the first time, the terribly salty Tobruk water and thought the cooks had made a mistake and used sea water for the tea. After a day or two in a transit camp, my proper destination was discovered and I joined the same ship to chug all the way back again, this time with the holds full of hundreds of Italian prisoners. I finally found my way to the regiment...

"On 3rd April orders suddenly came to return to the Western Desert. We had already been equipped with 25-pounders but now stores poured in. Other units were ordered to give the South Notts anything they wanted. News of Rommel's attack 1,500 miles [2,415 kilometres] away had become common knowledge and on 5th April we set off westwards. We bivouacked the first night at Mena Camp, a few miles north of Cairo. Pete Birkin the battery commander came round and let it be known that the military police in Cairo had been requested to be kind, on this our last night before going up to meet Rommel, and trucks were laid on to take us into town...

"On Sunday morning we set off westwards up the potholed coast road, and on Tuesday reached Sidi Barrani. It had almost 50 mud huts, and here was where Mussolini had earlier reported the trains were running again. As the convoy was passing Buq Buq, despatch riders rode down the column showing boards on which were chalked the words, 'close right up' and 'drive as fast as possible'. It appeared orders had just been received to get to Tobruk as quickly as possible, and we were told, 'There have been German tanks between here and Tobruk this morning.' We were the only vehicles going west, streams of traffic were travelling in the other direction. We wound up the escarpment to Fort Capuzzo and the wire...

"It was a terribly difficult journey being towed in pitch darkness, and I had to keep on glancing to the side to relieve the strain on my eyes. As we approached Tobruk we could hear bombing and shelling from 20 miles [32 kilometres] away, and at last we crossed the perimeter fence long after midnight. Soon after, barbed wire was drawn across the road and the last belt of mines was laid. We still did not pull up until the column met a crowd of vehicles and guns coming from the opposite direction. Three regiments met at a crossroads and stayed there until morning.

"Morning dawned with a blinding sandstorm and there was immediately an alarm that we were about to be attacked by tanks. The wagon line officer, Lieutenant Newman, obviously inspired by exploits in the Spanish Civil War, passed down the line of vehicles saying in his rather squeaky country voice, 'When the tanks come, stick the crowbars in their tracks...' The prospect of approaching a tank in the open desert at close quarters armed only with a crowbar seemed to appeal to nobody, and I did not notice anyone getting crowbars out. Fortunately at midday the flap was over and our guns went into position two or three miles [3.2-4.8 kilometres] south of the crossroads.

"The defended area at Tobruk was larger than people imagine. The perimeter wire ran in a half-circle for about 30 miles [48

"THE PROSPECT OF APPROACHING A TANK IN THE OPEN DESERT AT CLOSE QUARTERS ARMED ONLY WITH A CROWBAR SEEMED TO APPEAL TO NOBODY, AND I DID NOT NOTICE ANYONE GETTING CROWBARS OUT"



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From left to right, Peter Surfleet, George Pearson, Bob Foulds, DGM, Dennis Middleton and Bill Williams pictured after being promoted in Cairo, July 1942

kilometres] from coast to coast, with the town and harbour in the centre, on the shore, of course. Outside the wire was an old anti-tank ditch, and inside was a concrete defensive post with underground shelters every half-mile or so. These posts were numbered from the west. Because there was virtually no variation in height near the wire there were several steel observation posts and towers. The posts comprised a small crow's nest at a height of about 15 feet [4.5 metres]: the towers were much larger and higher, perhaps 50 feet [15 metres], with the ladder concealed behind a roll of scrim (open fabric). Some observing officers used them, some found somewhere on the ground, but they looked, and were, terribly vulnerable. Glad to say, I never sat on top of one, like a coconut on a shy.

"We were one of four Royal Horse Artillery regiments – two regular, two yeomanry, and a field regiment. The infantry were the 9th Australian Division, and there were a few odds and ends.

"It was now Good Friday, 10th April, and shelling had been exchanged for 24 hours. At 3pm an attack came in on our left from enemy tanks which broke through the wire, but at dusk they withdrew after eight had been knocked out by fire from the whole regiment. It must have been about then I was manning an observation post in a shallow slit trench near point 29 with Lieutenant Timms. It was an exciting exercise trying to direct fire on to enemy vehicles and guns, but terribly difficult through the mirage seen through binoculars, and blowing sand. It was Timms's first time at an observation post (mine too, but he didn't know that) so most of the orders were given by Bombardier Middleton.

"Next day some enemy infantry had obviously got into the anti-tank ditch, and if I popped my head up for air a rifle shot would be fired with the bullet zinging close by. If I had to get out of the trench and go back to our vehicle down by the hill it was a matter of running the gauntlet. The Northumberland Fusiliers, machine gunners, were also behind the hill and we got them to silence the enemy riflemen. They were firing over our heads (like artillery) but the trajectory was terribly close to us and some shots hit the ground very near us and

ricocheted on, so we had to stop them. We spent 48 hours at this observation point, which meant I went for three nights without sleep, and when we were relieved I was so tired while waiting for the truck that I lay down on the ground and went straight to sleep...

"It was now Easter Sunday. On the gun position, the information coming down from Lieutenant Bennet at his observation point was relayed to us. Our telephone lines had been cut but the infantry line was still working and orders came to our troop through the two headquarters. He was with the Aussie infantry in point 32 when the German infantry broke through the wire and German tanks were all around him in his Bren carrier. He described the Jerries using flame throwers, and they were so close that he gave the order 'Target ME – fire!' The gun position officer's assistants feverishly worked out his exact position and the guns fired.

"The Aussies stayed in their trenches, the observation post party kept their heads down in the corner, and the German infantry were cut up and chased from the gap in the wire. The enemy tanks went on. While all this was happening, a terrific air battle was in progress with 15 Germans brought down for the loss of three of our Hurricanes. The sight of a plane diving vertically to earth became commonplace Easter Sunday! Artillery duels continued.

"I accompanied an officer to an observation post in front of a small mound near the wire where we were completely overlooked by the enemy. We did a bit of shooting and then enemy shells bracketed our observation post. We were in a slit trench about three feet [0.9 metres] deep, two of us, with our driver and

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the truck in a mere scrape behind the mound. The enemy quickly got the exact range, then plastered us continually for 20 minutes. I suppose between one and two hundred rounds were fired, then they stopped, obviously thinking we were knocked out.

"In front, at one point, a spent splinter had hit me on the cheek, but barely drew blood, and one or two shells had landed on the very edge of the trench. I must admit I felt our survival was miraculous. When we were certain the shelling had stopped we nipped round the back of the mound, expecting to find our driver dead. But no, despite his only being in a scrape he was right as rain. However, our observation post was obviously untenable, so we got in our truck and moved.

"As April went on Stukas were active daily over the town and harbour, which we were able to watch with equanimity from a few miles away. Then one day they suddenly turned their attention to the gun line of 425 Battery. I was up at the observation post, saw the raid from a distance, and returned to hear with foreboding that three senior NCOs had been killed. One was BSM Smedley, a sergeant major of only 21, and yes, one was Phil Collihole. I collected his steel helmet, which had a jagged splinter hole in the back.

"We had been very close since the war started, and up to a fortnight before when the battle began we had been able to exchange a few flippant remarks every day. His death left a big gap, and I wrote to his wife as soon as I could. However, there was no time for this now: I was promptly promoted to lance-sergeant and put in his place in charge of battery signals. After this raid Lord Haw Haw [William Joyce] announced over German radio, 'All guns in the Palestine area of Tobruk have been knocked out,' but in fact Battery 425 was very much in action. My 23rd birthday passed unnoticed.

"When the battle had started 11 Hurricane fighters had been left for the defence of Tobruk fortress. Every day we saw one or more shot down, and every day fewer and fewer were able to scramble. Towards the end of April just one was left, and I saw him plummet from 10,000 feet [3,050 metres] to crash into the ground a few hundred yards away. He was

Flying Officer Lamb, a Canadian. Earlier I saw a German plane hit and the pilot descending by parachute. We watched him land and said, 'Let's go and do him in.' We grabbed rifles and actually jumped into a truck. But after a few minutes sanity prevailed, and we left him for someone else to pick up.

"On 30th April the Germans made another attack, broke through the wire and captured several posts, thereby establishing a salient within the perimeter, which they retained throughout the siege. Our counterattack was unsuccessful. So ended three weeks of battle, a very wearing experience. The Germans retained their salient but got no further, and things quietened for some weeks, except for nightly bombing...

"In June there was a relief attempt from the frontier. It failed. This was disappointing. About this time a third troop was formed with old 1914 howitzers taken from the 51st Field. It was christened Glamour Troop, after Ian Sinclair commanding it. I laid a phone line to it which was always thereafter called the Glamour Line. Since I extended it to A&B troop observation posts, it duplicated the posts' ordinary lines, forming a belt and braces job. It was thus very useful when the cry came from a battery telephone exchange, 'a troop's line's gone!'. If I felt it was a difficult assignment I would go myself, taking another man with me.

"Usually it involved walking up the line, plugging in with a field telephone at intervals to make sure we hadn't missed the break. Often it had broken because of shellfire: sometimes because a tank had crossed it. Sometimes it ran across a minefield but, fortunately, this didn't matter very much because many were old enemy anti-tank mines and, in any case, the sand usually looked slightly different where the mines had been sunk (though not visible at night)...

"The water ration was half a gallon [2.3 litres] per man per day. This provided a pint [0.6-litre] mug of tea at breakfast, dinner and tea which used three pints: the cookhouse kept half a pint per man for cooking and washing utensils: and each man had one pint for his water bottle every other day. There was thus nothing for washing either oneself or one's clothes. The water too was salty, nearly as salty as seawater, so the tea was nothing like you have ever tasted...

"Food was monotonous to a degree. Sometimes there was no bread, and we had biscuits. Usually there was bread, but because the flour was thick with weevils the bread had lots of little black bits in – dried weevils. Not that it mattered – one couldn't taste them. The other staple was bully beef, sometimes MV (meat and vegetable in theory but actually pretty disgusting). So the menu every day was like this, for over eight months:

- Breakfast: Biscuit porridge and tinned bacon boiled in the tin, making it soggy and greasy.
- Dinner: Bully stew or MV.
- Tea: Pilchards or jam.
- A pint of tea with each meal.

"Just occasionally there was a tin of fruit. I remember to this day that a tin of pineapple was the ration for eight men, and contained 44 pieces. I carefully dished it out at five and a half per man. And I have never eaten a pilchard since! Nevertheless, to get a meal under one's

"I RAN, SEEING THE LINE OF BULLETS KICKING UP THE SAND AND APPROACHING AT A TREMENDOUS RATE. I MADE IT WITH A SECOND TO SPARE"

belt was a great thing: one was then ready for whatever might befall, and I retained this feeling for many years.

"I used to control the cigarette ration of 50 a week. To help make them last, two or three men would give me their ration to keep, and would ask for cigarettes as they wanted them. They knew I only smoked 30 to 40 a week and they ran no risk of me being tempted by theirs.

"By August we were rationed to 10 rounds per gun per day, which only provided for a few minutes' firing at dawn and dusk, and although during the period of the siege the Germans would think up some attack every few weeks, there were long periods of quietness. During one such period, since leave was impossible, a rest camp was established where I spent three days. We would take a truck and go for a swim in the afternoon, but apart from that there was nothing to do, and I lay all day on my bed (i.e. my blankets on the ground). The inactivity made me feel ill, and I was glad to get back to work.

"However, we did entertain ourselves. Battery HQ was in a large cave, where we had periodical concerts. We had what would later be called a skiffle group, who included Driver Walker slapping a homemade double bass made out of a packing case and wire (when I next saw him 25 years after the war it was as chairman of a public company!) Many people used to sing, but particularly enthusiastic were the cries for a particular gunner to sing *Mexicali Rose*, which he did in a falsetto voice...

"Some time in autumn, surprisingly, we began to receive a daily rum ration. Geoff Douglas, a battery clerk, decided very sensibly that while one tot of rum was not much good to anyone, if we saved it up for one week we could have a party. We rewardingly formed the Saturday Club, whereby each Saturday evening four or five of us played auction bridge, which we had just learned, and drank rum. This went very satisfactorily for two or three weeks, and a Saturday then came when we had saved a lot of rum. At the end of this evening we came out of the sandbagged dugout half cut to find Major Peter Birkin outside, absolutely furious. As I told him, I had made proper provision for the manning of the telephone exchange, there was no barrage planned, and so on, but he was unappeased. Next morning we lined up before him, and he said fiercely that unfortunately we were his senior NCOs and he could not possibly do without us in action, otherwise we should have been up before the colonel. So I was unexpectedly saved...

"At the end of August most of the Australians were relieved, and replaced by Poles and some British infantry: we were supporting the Polish Brigade. They were charming and brave people – as effective in their frequent night patrols outside the wire as the Aussies had been.

"They were much taken aback by the water situation: in the first place they used a week's supply in three days and had to be given extra, which annoyed me intensely. Secondly, they could hardly credit the taste: some tried to improve it with jam, but without success.

"Actually, although we did not know it at the time, only five units saw the siege through from end to end. The South Notts was one. An Aussie infantry battalion was another: they were due for relief in October but could not get out before the full moon came round again.

"There was always bombing of course, chiefly of the port but also on the gun positions and elsewhere. It was usually at night, during the fortnight of the moon, but also by daylight, since we had no fighters whatever, and anti-aircraft fire did not achieve much. I was once caught out in a daytime raid when I realised that a squadron of enemy bombers was heading direct for me with all machine guns blazing. They were terribly near and low and I had to decide in an instant whether to lie down or run 50 yards [45 metres] to the nearest dugout. I ran, seeing the line of bullets kicking up the sand and approaching at a tremendous rate. I made it with a second to spare.

"One night the old Italian ammunition dump was hit. It was little loss to us though we did use a few old Italian guns as what we called Bush Troop, and the ammo went on burning and exploding for hour after hour, providing the most spectacular firework I have seen, for 24 hours.

"By this time we had picked up a great deal of old Indian Army language, chiefly Urdu, to which we had added many Arabic words, so the 8th Army's conversation was quite distinctive.

"November was bitterly cold and we had changed back into battle dress. We knew the breakout would soon come and all NCOs had the plan of attack explained. We were to break out and join up with the rest of the 8th Army coming up from the Egyptian frontier. My job was to ensure the communications from Ops to guns, this time chiefly by wireless. On the 20th the code word was given, and at 6am next morning the Black Watch were lined up on the start line in the anti-tank ditch. My information came from Bombardier Keeton, who was in charge of the line-laying 15 cwt truck. It was completely unarmoured, although heavily sandbagged, but travelled with the first wave of tanks, immediately behind the infantry, laying out the line as it went."

Memoirs Of A Not Too Serious Hussar by Dennis Middleton is available on Amazon kindle for £9.95 and in hard copy from remembermedia.co.uk for £19.95

