

# GUNNERS AT TOBRUK:

# 1941

For the men of the South Nottinghamshire Hussars life in a besieged Tobruk was Hell on Earth as Imperial War Museum historian **Peter Hart** explains.



**I**N THE second of this three-part series, Imperial War Museum historian Peter Hart takes a look at life in besieged Tobruk during 1941, as seen through the eyes of men who were there.

The 107 Regiment, (South Notts Hussars), Royal Horse Artillery had been rushed to bolster the artillery of the Tobruk garrison – just before it was cut off by Rommel's onrushing Afrika Corps. Once they arrived on the night of the 9/10 April 1941, they were immediately thrust into action to fend off a series of German tank and infantry attacks, culminating in a big effort on 14 April. In the days that followed there was a bit of a lull, giving the SNH gunners time to try and get proper gun pits carved out of the rock-hard ground to shelter their

25-pounders. Supervising them was Sergeant George Pearson (425 Bty).

'You dug yourself a gun pit, digging down maybe a foot and a half, couple of feet if you could. Then you put a sandbag wall, two or three sandbags high round the front so that you had a certain amount of protection for the gun crew and the ammunition which you piled in the gun pit. They were set out not four guns in a line, but two forward and the wing guns back a little bit, so that if you were attacked by tanks you could always bring two guns to bear even if it was attacking from the flank.'

During the opening battles, the German Stukas had made their first attacks, but had barely been noticed amongst the general mayhem. Soon, the Nottinghamshire gunners had a grandstand view of tremendous Stuka attacks on the vital port facilities of Tobruk. Then, as RAF fighter cover was eroded, the Stukas began

to concentrate on the artillery that had caused so many casualties during recent ground attacks.

There is no doubt that there was an extra dimension to the Stuka raids that rattled almost all of the men - the screaming noise was almost unbearable. Gunner Ted Holmes (425 Bty) shared the grudging admiration for the skill of the Stuka pilots.

'They were really good. They came so low they nearly scraped the floor by the time they pulled out of the dive. They aimed the Stuka at the target, just let the bomb go at the last minute and machine gunned you as well. With this fixed undercarriage there used to be a saying that you don't know you've been 'Stukad' till you've got tread marks on your back!'

### **STUKA ATTACKS**

As the raids proliferated it was essential to hide the regiment's position. As Lance Bombardier

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**MAIN IMAGE:** An advanced Italian gun position outside of Tobruk. The gun in the foreground is a licence built version of the Skoda vz 14/19. The 100mm peice was considered obsolete by 1941 but was still in widespread use. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



# GUNNERS AT TOBRUK: 1941

Desert Life with the South Notts Hussars



**ABOVE:**  
A Marmon  
Herrington  
Mk II, with a  
captured 20mm  
Breda cannon,  
80 of these  
cars served  
at Tobruk or  
in its relief,  
with the 1st  
Kings Dragoon  
Guards. (IWM)

**BELOW:**  
A British soldier  
hides from  
falling bombs.  
(IWM)

Ted Whittaker (425 Bty) wondered – the question was how? ‘They brought us these reconnaissance photos taken by a high flying Hurricane. There were our positions - beautifully visible. Four little black dots, white lines leading to the command post which wasn’t quite as visible, lines leading up to the latrines. It stood out like a sore thumb. We went to work with bits of scrub thorn and tried to obliterate the tracks and the pattern.’

Gradually men like Sergeant Bob Foulds, (425 Bty) got almost accustomed to the Stukas.

‘You saw the bombs leave the plane, you could see them coming at you through the air. We began to learn that if the bombs appeared to be coming straight at you, then they were going to go overhead, and hit something behind you. But if they appeared to be coming down in front of you, then they were going to drop on you or very, very close to you

which wasn’t a very nice sensation. It’s the most naked feeling in the world and really all we did was to get as far into the ground as we possibly could.’

Yet familiarity was no defence as Sergeant George Pearson (425 Bty) found on one raid.

‘I dived into a slit trench and another young chappie called Phil Collihole dived on top of me. When the bombs had finished exploding and the aircraft were going away I said, ‘Come on, get up, Phil!’ He



didn't move and I got up and he sort of flopped over on his back. I said, "What's the matter, are you hit?" I couldn't see a mark on him, but he was obviously out and he was in fact dead. A small piece of shrapnel had gone into the back of his neck and must have severed the spinal column - killed him just like that.'

## A WILD LOT

These Stuka raids marked the beginning of a second attempt by Rommel to remove the Tobruk



garrison from the flank of his Afrika Korps to concentrate on his real objective - the Nile Delta. On 30 April a massed German infantry attack supported by artillery was launched and managed to make some progress forming a salient protruding into the perimeter area. But they still could not break through. Once more the lines stabilised - leaving stalemate. As the focus of Rommel's attention moved away, German units were largely replaced with Italian formations.

The SNH Observation Post (OP) teams would liaise closely with the Australian units in the front line to ensure that the guns responded quickly to any developing threat. The Australians seemed a wild lot from the British perspective, Half-naked most of the time they had a refreshing irreverence towards figures of authority which endeared them men like Bombardier Ray Ellis.

'I liked being with the Australians in the front line position, they were friendly and they had a certain casual way about them. For instance, the Battery Commander, Major Peter Birkin, had red sandy hair. When he

got into the trench a private soldier would refer to him, "Hi-yah, Red! How yah doing?" Which I thought was fantastic - whereas we would say, "Good morning, Sir!"

The observation officer and his specialist OP assistant would send situation reports of anything they sighted - opening fire if necessary. Ammunition was limited outside of big battles, but when a worthy target had been identified the OP would get into contact with the gun positions. Ray Ellis describes the process.

'You first of all identified the target, you would just say, "Troop target!" Then you gave the type of ammunition that was to be fired, the gun which was going to range, your line left - or right - of the zero line, if there was any angle of sight you would give that! Then the estimated range! All that would be passed to the guns. They would say, "Ready, Fire!" The shell would come over your head, land and you'd make the necessary corrections.'

## ORDER TO FIRE

Back at the guns, specialist assistants surveyed in the guns, placing the >>

**ABOVE:**  
The iconic  
Stuka dive  
bomber. (1940  
MEDIA LTD)

**MIDDLE:**  
Men of the  
SNH relax  
in the lull  
between  
bombing raids.  
(ALL IMAGES BY  
AUTHOR UNLESS  
OTHERWISE  
STATED.)



**ABOVE:**  
A preserved  
Cannone da  
149/35A, the  
aging gun  
identified by  
Capt Laborde.  
(JOHANN JARITZ)

**BELOW:**  
A gunner  
washes, being  
sure to use as  
little water as  
possible.

guns, OPs and target on the 'map', working out any corrections before orders were passed to the gun sergeants - such as Lance Sergeant John Walker (425 Bty). They had a key role.

'He was in charge of everything to do with the gun and to see it was effective in every respect: supervise the work of the layer, see that the ammunition was there, organize the gun tower and the driver, all the



gun numbers. He was responsible - if anything went wrong he was to blame! Physically on the gun he had to put his shoulder to everything else that was happening. If the gun wanted moving round from one line to another he helped as much as he could. Basically he was there to see that everybody else did their job. And he gave the order to fire.'

The next most important member of the gun team was the gun layer, who made required adjustments to lateral and vertical angles, laying the gun on target. Then, the rest of the gun team swung into action as Ray Ellis describes.

'You put in the shell which is rammed, then you put in the cartridge which is really bags of cordite. You close the breech and pull the firing lever. A pin strikes the percussion cap which explodes the cordite. The cordite burns with great rapidity causing gases to project the shell. If you're putting bags of cordite into a gun that is red hot you don't need to pull the firing lever it explodes itself. If you're not quick and you don't get the breech closed in time, then it will blow the breech back and the gun blows up. So you mustn't jam the breech by getting the cartridge in at a wrong angle. You have to have people who work as a team very well. In goes the shell,

rammed in, the man loading the cartridge has got to be very adept and the man closing the breech has got to follow his hand so that it closes quickly. Very often before the layer had time to pull the firing lever it would fire itself!'

## HUGE SHELL BURST

There was a desperate need for artillery at Tobruk, so the SNH formed an extra troop with spare 4.5" howitzers. Another means of enhancing available firepower was through the use of captured Italian guns close to the 426 Bty gun positions. Captain Charles Laborde soon pressed them into use.

'They must have been 150 millimetres, real first war veterans. They had huge slatted wheels, wooden flaps round the outside of the wheel. They had no dial sights of course, but we used to point them roughly in the right direction of the El Adem aerodrome. When you'd lined the gun a lanyard was tied on to it and you retired. You pulled the trigger with this very long lanyard made of signal wire. There was a colossal bang: off goes the shell! Marvellous sight - you could see the shell going away - then there would be this lovely 'WHHUUMPHH!' in the distance, a great cloud, a huge shell burst.'



**ABOVE:**  
Lt. J. Blair-Yuill (centre) poses with his ingenious water purifier constructed for the defenders of Tobruk.  
(WW2 IMAGES)

**BELOW:**  
Indian soldiers unload supplies on one of Tobruk's quayside in Tobruk.  
(WW2 IMAGES)

it's a nasty sensation.'

The fauna of the desert was varied, too, but almost uniformly unfriendly. Scorpions and poisonous centipedes made it imperative to check the bed roll before sleeping. More prosaically, troops suffered from plagues of lice and fleas. Sergeant George Pearson remembered a spectacularly dangerous method of delousing.

'Your clothes do get lice in them and we used to get a half petrol tin, put petrol in it and soak your overalls or shirt in petrol. You'd then put that over a low petrol fire so that the petrol heated up and that seemed to get rid of these lice. Then you let your shirt dry out and washed it in such water as you could get! It sounds so ridiculous now!'

The desert was, above all, the domain of the fly, although Sergeant Bob Foulds (425 Bty) could not understand how they came to be there.

'You could drive into totally empty desert, miles from civilization, and stop. While the truck was moving there was no sign of life, but the moment you stopped, flies would settle on you. Where they came from, what they lived on and how they existed, I've no idea. But they were an absolute menace.' >>>

The Australian infantry soon became keen amateur gunners, crewing these abandoned guns - the ad hoc gun teams collectively known as the 'bush artillery'.

As the siege wore on and the days became weeks, and then months, the men of the SNH endured a miserable existence dogged by a nasty combination of danger and boredom. Although Tobruk itself was a sizeable town, most of the defensive perimeter was out in the Western

Desert, with all the discomforts that this entailed. Signal Sergeant Fred Langford (425 By) remembered the filth.

'You couldn't get away from the dust - the grime round your eyes, your mouth, your nose. The khamsin, the hot blast of wind, means you're sweating like fury. The dust, the filth in the atmosphere sticking to your sweat. You can't move your eyelids, you try to breathe, you can't blow your nose -



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Desert Life with the South Notts Hussars

**RIGHT:**  
A South Notts  
gun crewman  
poses at his  
25Pdr gun.

**MIDDLE:**  
Of course,  
the general  
monotony of  
the siege could  
be broken  
suddenly with  
a lethal burst  
of violence,  
possibly  
catching troops  
unawares.

**BELOW:**  
The ever  
reliable Vickers  
Machine Gun,  
dug in and well  
camouflaged,  
could be a potent  
adversary.  
(IWM)



the chaps wouldn't like it. Then you would mix some of your meat and vegetable ration with your bully beef to get a certain amount of vegetables inside a stew. We did meat pies on tin plates. You put your bully beef and vegetables on the plate, put a bit of pastry on the top and push it in the oven. The cave was reasonably cool and we were able, to a degree, to cut the bully beef so therefore we were able to make bully beef fritters, which were very popular. Make a flour and water batter, cut a slice of bully beef, drop it in the batter, fry it in a pan for 2 or 3 minutes.'

Although other types of food were occasionally available, the basic diet was unrelenting and dietary diseases

## PRIMITIVE CONDITIONS

Tobruk was besieged, and the SNH found their food supplies extremely limited. Cook Sergeant Ted Hayward (425 Bty) had set up his cooking equipment up in a cave and tried his best.

'We were on very simple rations: six days a week corn beef and one day a week tinned M & V - meat and vegetable - ration. No such a thing as menu planning - you went off the cuff - what was there! If we had curry powder, we used to make a curry stew of bully beef with a bowl of rice - not too hot because most of



were a real threat in the absence of fruit so the men were given ascorbic acid tablets to prevent scurvy, a further trial for the garrison being a constant shortage of water. Gunner Ted Holmes found it a torment.

'We had half a gallon of water a day and a good portion of that went to the cookhouse. We used to have our water bottle, which holds about a pint and a half, filled every other day. It was very bad, our lips were all swollen up, split and bleeding. Like you see with these pictures of anyone what's got lost in the desert. We used to dream about putting your head under the tap at home.'

The same water would be used many times over as Fred Langford ruefully recalled.

'It was a matter of real economy of priorities really and truly. Drink first of all. Any water that was left over that would be a matter of washing your shirt. Maybe, before it got too thick, you'd have a shave and when it was really no good at all - that was the time to wash your socks!'

At one point in the siege the men were promised the blessed relief of a beer ration! Lance Bombardier Ted Whittaker remembered their excitement.

'They announced, rather rashly, that somebody had paid for a whole consignment of beer. There would



**ABOVE:** As morale hung in the balance, field newspapers could provide a little escapism. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

**BELOW:** The ships in Tobruk's vital harbour were often easy targets for the Luftwaffe.

be one bottle of beer per man for the whole garrison. And they said when it was coming. The day the ship arrived, in daylight, the Stukas came over as it got into the harbour. All we ever saw was this big plume of smoke. I drew this cartoon with two chaps talking and a big column of smoke in the background just saying, "Oooh! I see the beer ship's come!"

Illness aside, boredom was almost as much an enemy to the men as the Germans, the desert and the flies. Ordinary conversation centred on their lives back home and that chewed away some of the empty hours. The men also played cards

and read books from an improvised library. The grinding boredom even prompted activities reminiscent of a second childhood. For Ray Ellis it was all about amusement and releasing stress.

'We actually sometimes played 'Cowboys and Indians' around the gun pits! Once we were doing this and I was an Indian with a stick which was supposed to be a tomahawk charging across. This is ridiculous - this is men in action! Jim Hardy, the Sergeant Major, was a cowboy he came charging up and, in the excitement of the thing, he forgot, drew his revolver and fired >>





# GUNNERS AT TOBRUK: 1941

## Desert Life with the South Notts Hussars

**RIGHT:**  
Men of the  
SNH rest  
around one of  
their command  
vehicles.

**BELOW:**  
Australian  
infantrymen  
shelter from  
the Luftwaffe  
in a cave.  
(IWM)

and nearly put a bullet through me!  
That sobered us down a bit!

### SURELY HEROES

The SNH endured the whole siege of Tobruk until it was relieved in late-November 1941. Throughout there was no real escape from danger, a every part of the Tobruk area was continually under threat of fire. Ray Ellis was typical in his response to the stress.

‘A man could walk up, one shot could be fired and he would be killed. We thought about this a lot actually. You looked for all sorts of omens – I can remember looking for omens in the sky – shapes of clouds which would suggest good things. Your mind was involved in this sort of thing. What were the omens or the chances? But I never thought of being killed – it was always the other man who was going to die. You had this feeling that – yes – you would survive! At the back of your mind you realized you were kidding yourself.’

A few men broke, and tried to get away by means of trickery – as Ray Ellis and his gun team noticed with one NCO.

‘His act was that he was becoming mentally unsound and he was doing all sorts of peculiar things; but we noticed that he always did it when



there was an officer present. He would put his head in front of the barrel of the gun and say, ‘Fire!’ We were very tempted to do so! He referred to himself as ‘Bubbles’. All sort of silly nonsense. It could be that he was becoming mentally unstable under pressure, but we honestly thought that he was working his ticket.’

Such conduct was the exception, with most officers and NCOs holding up well under pressure. The only respectable way of leaving the unit in action was with a ‘Blighty’ wound.

Everyone dreamed of the marvellous painless wound that didn’t inflict permanent injury, but got them safely home. Until that miracle, they just endured it as best they could. Fred Langford summed it up:

‘Generally speaking, it was a matter of doing your duty. I don’t believe in the slightest that there’s any such thing as a hero. I think the average bloke just did his duty.’

From our perspective, some 75-years later we may perhaps beg to differ. These men were surely heroes. ☺



# THE GATES OF TOBRUK

## Battle in the North African Desert

**BELOW:** A formation of A12 Infantry Tank Mark II, known simply as the Matilda II (or just Matilda after 1940) operate in the vicinity of Tobruk. (WW2 IMAGES)

**I**N DECEMBER 1940, General Archibald Wavell launched Operation Compass to push the Italians out of Egypt, across Libyan Cyrenaica, the campaign culminating in the Battle of Beda Fomm on 6-7 February 1941, completing the destruction of the Italian Tenth Army. The Germans could not allow their Italian allies to collapse in North Africa and so deployed the Afrika Corps (the German 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division and 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division) under the command of Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel who arrived at Tripoli on 12 February 1941. The gradual arrival of these reinforcements unfortunately coincided with a leaching of strength from Wavell's Middle East Command, caused by the decision to give priority to the proposed campaign in Greece and

a log jam of further operational commitments in Eritrea and Italian East Africa. This dissipation of the limited British resources meant that the forces remaining in Libya were given a purely defensive role with the priority on maintaining the integrity of fighting units, rather than the pointless exercise of defending miles of empty desert.

At the end of March, Rommel cautiously began to move forward and the British – as planned – fell back avoiding contact. However, as the Afrika Korps accelerated the pace of their advance, Wavell realized that, unless something was done quickly, then Rommel might not wait courteously at the borders of Egypt, as the diffident Italians had done, but would probably burst through to the Nile Delta and Suez Canal – the strategic jugular of the British Empire. It was decided to hold the crucial

port of Tobruk with the intention of diverting Rommel from an attack on Egypt and give time for British reinforcements to arrive.

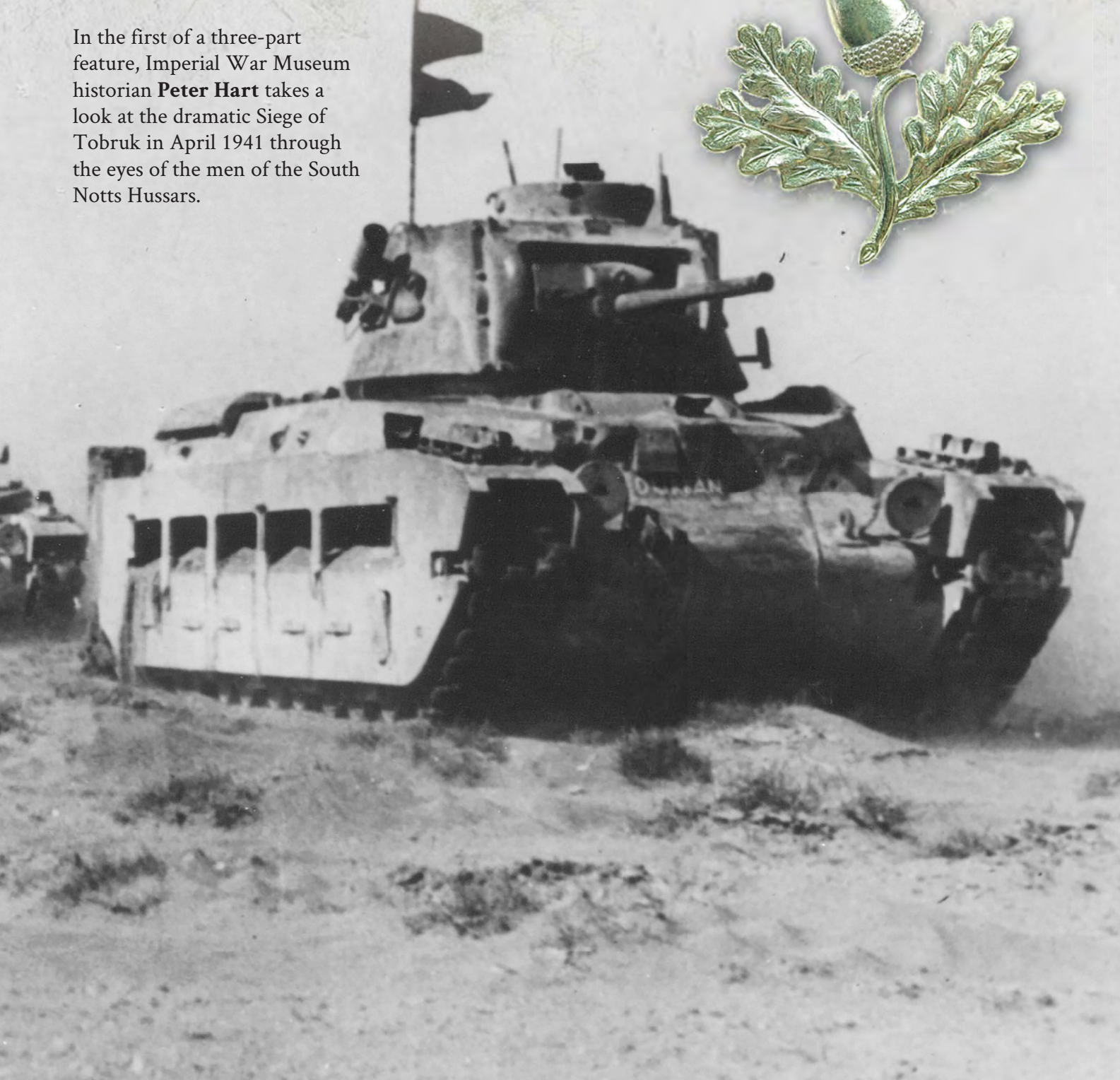
### A FEARFUL AMOUNT OF CHAOS

The only troops available to defend Tobruk were the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, the newly re-formed 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade and four regiments of artillery. (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Royal Horse Artillery and 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regt, Royal Artillery) The positions they were to occupy were a double ring of concrete posts and dugouts on a perimeter frontage of some 30-miles, which surrounded Tobruk in a half circle about nine miles from the harbour. The core strength of these defences lay in a series of minefields. The final addition to the deployments was a further regiment of 25 pounders, sent post-haste from Egypt. >>



# THE GATES OF TOBRUK

In the first of a three-part feature, Imperial War Museum historian **Peter Hart** takes a look at the dramatic Siege of Tobruk in April 1941 through the eyes of the men of the South Notts Hussars.



# THE GATES OF TOBRUK

Battle in the North African Desert



**ABOVE:** Rommel stands alongside Italian officers outside Tobruk, September 1941. (WW2 IMAGES)

**BELOW:** British soldiers stand near their bunker, Tobruk. (LOC)

So it was that the 107<sup>th</sup> Regiment, (South Notts Hussars), Royal Horse Artillery, who had only recently been equipped with 25-pounders, were whistled up from training exercises at Kabrit in the Suez Canal Sector. They were destined to join the defenders of Tobruk. The unexpected orders triggered a fearful amount of chaos before the SNH managed to set off on their 700-mile road convoy journey to Tobruk at 07.30 on 5 April. Once they

had passed Mersa Matruh, Bombardier Ray Ellis (425 Bty) became aware that all was not well:

There were signs of panic: troops coming back at great speed; more and more troops; everything was going east; then we passed rear aerodromes of the RAF where we could see crates being set on fire which we knew contained aircraft engines; then we met convoys of ambulances coming back. It all grew a bit sombre. This trickle developed

into a mass exodus of troops - it seemed that everyone in the Army of the Nile was doing their level best to put the greatest distance they could between themselves and the enemy - everyone was rushing headlong back into Egypt. The only troops moving west were the South Notts Hussars!

They just kept going, changing drivers without stopping the lorries, while petrol cans were just thrown into the back of the trucks as they passed the refuelling station at Fort Capuzzo. It soon became apparent that it would be touch and go whether the SNH would get into Tobruk before the rampaging Germans swirled round the perimeter to slam shut the 'gate'. Sergeant George Pearson (425 Bty) found himself allotted a terrifying task:

My gun tower was 'tail end Charlie' of the regiment and my battery commander, Peter Birkin, who stuttered a little, came up to me and said, "N-n-n-now, w-w-when we get on the top, if we get ata-ta-tacked by tanks, your truck, ammunition trailer and gun tower will go on and you will hold them off as long as you can!" So we went on to the top of the escarpment - I praying that there would be no German tanks anywhere! By the middle of the afternoon a few tanks appeared on the escarpment side. I was watching them, they were



German tanks, and they kept pace with us, following along and I was shaking in my shoes thinking, "Oh my God, please, please, don't make me have to drop off!" Luckily they didn't attack but I had a distinct looseness of the bowels when I thought of what might have happened.

**'WHO'S ROMMEL, AND WHAT'S A PANZER?'**

The SNH entered Tobruk at midnight on 9 April and as the last trucks entered the defence perimeter the Royal Engineers laid the final rows of mines and pulled the barbed wire across the road. To Ray Ellis the situation looked grim:

The siege of Tobruk had begun - and it began in almost total chaos. We got to a junction in the road in the dark, Eagle crossroads. There three artillery regiments got mixed up in the dark, there was confusion everywhere, there



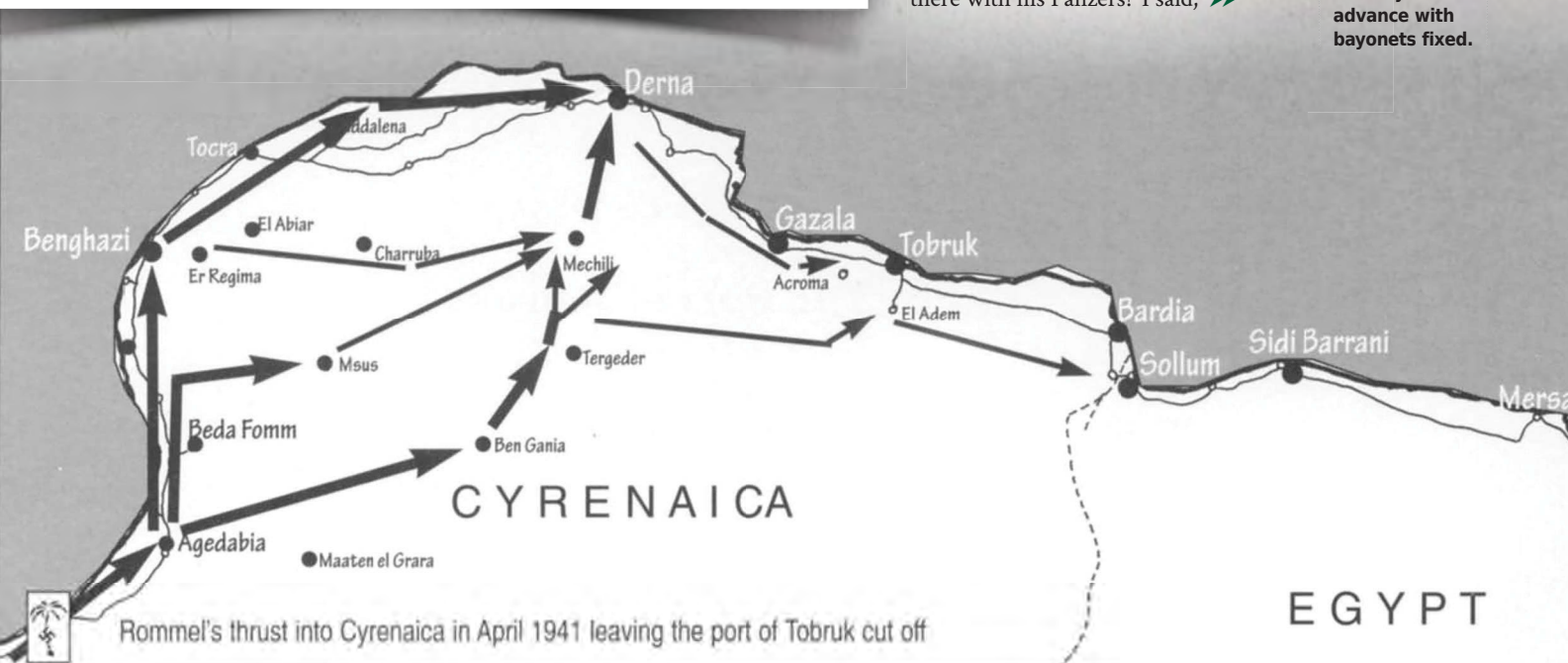
were guns that were not ours, there were cap badges that were not ours - everyone was milling about. Had the Luftwaffe come and dropped a few flares they could have wiped out the whole of the artillery power which was to defeat them in a few days' time.

Driver Bill Hutton (425 Bty) was soon disabused of the common perception that the desert was just miles and miles of soft shifting sands:

They said, 'Dig in!' Well I got out and got a pick and a shovel and it was just like rock. I hit the ground and sparks flew up from the pick. I thought, 'To hell with it!' and I made my bed and went to bed. I woke up next morning and some cocky chap came along and said: 'We're the last in, Rommel's out there with his Panzers!' I said, >>

**ABOVE:** Commonwealth troops, from 2/3 Light AA Reg (Aus), 4th AA Brig, or 106th (Lancashire Hussars) RHA, crew a captured Italian Breda Model 35 20mm cannon, which was effective against light armour and aircraft. (LOC)

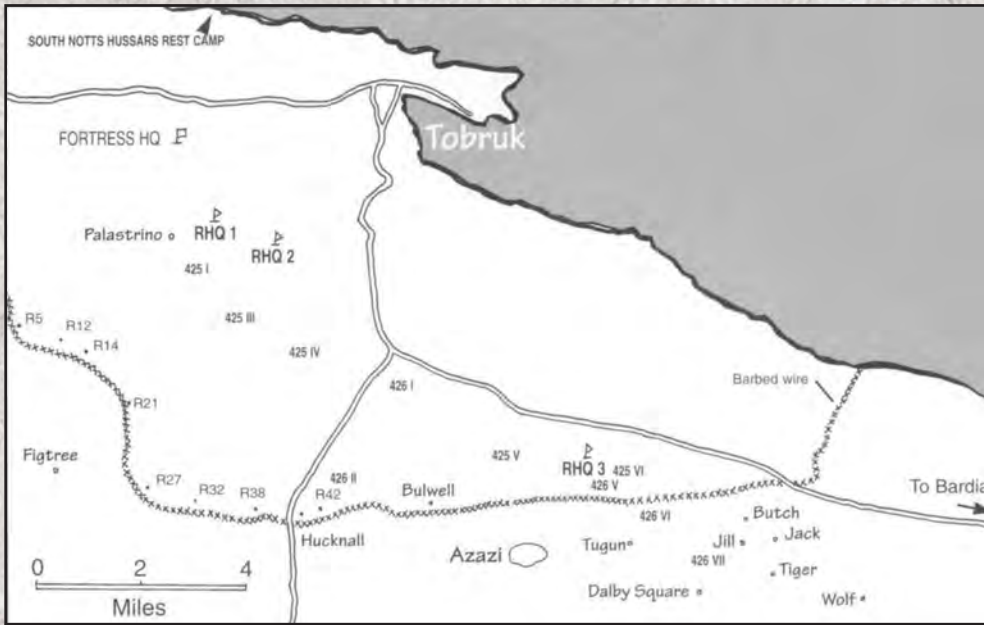
**LEFT:** Australian infantry advance with bayonets fixed.



Rommel's thrust into Cyrenaica in April 1941 leaving the port of Tobruk cut off

# THE GATES OF TOBRUK

## Battle in the North African Desert



**ABOVE:**  
A map of the defensive perimeter at Tobruk.

**RIGHT:**  
A caricature of Major Birkin, 425 Battery, SNH.

**BELOW:**  
Panzer III and Panzer IV tanks, with Sdkfz 222 armoured cars, advance toward Tobruk.

‘Who’s Rommel and what’s a Panzer?’

On the 10 April, the SNH moved a couple of miles south into gun positions along the top of the second escarpment about 5,000 yards from the wire. The 425 Bty was just south of Palastrino covering the 2/17<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion; while the 426 Bty were in the angle of the fork formed where the main road from Tobruk bears left and a track leads straight on for the El Adem airfield. They were covering the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion. The Australians were holding the outer perimeter defences thoughtfully provided by the former Italian garrison of Tobruk. While the gun pits were carved out of the ground, Observation Posts (OP) were established near the front line. Captain Bob Hingston, (commanding D Troop, 426 Bty) picked a promising spot, just to the west of the El Adem track as it

passed out through the perimeter:

Everybody was a bit tense. I was sleeping just by the telephone on the surface and I told the sentries: ‘Wake me up if anything happens’. There was no hesitation. During the day whoever it was on sentry go said: ‘Captain Hingston, Sir, there’s something there,

I don’t see what it is!’ He drew my attention, quite correctly in the way he’d been trained, to this lump, a very small lump, right out in the desert. I got my glasses on it and I said: ‘No, I don’t think it’s anything to worry about!’ Then suddenly it put its head up - it was a camel!

### THE THICK OF THE ACTION

They did not have long undisturbed for on Good Friday, 11 April, the German tanks marked the Easter

festivities by launching a full-scale attack on Tobruk. The 426 Bty D Troop Gun Position Officer was Lieutenant Ivor Birkin accompanied by his assistant, Lance Sergeant Harold Harper:

There was an escarpment and these tanks came over the ridge. We were firing at between 5 and 6,000 yards. They didn’t attack in great strength, probably about fourteen tanks altogether. I was relaying the instructions to the guns, shouting out all the different angles using the megaphone. The firing was almost incessant. It was rather like going to a cup tie - when you knocked a tank out everybody cheered. I think we managed to knock out three or four tanks before they retired.

In places the situation was far more serious and in all some fifty German tanks were believed to be involved.





With the help of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Tank Regiment the first German assault was parried and the situation seemed to calm down. During this lull Ray Ellis was sent up as a relief OP assistant to Captain Charlie Bennett at the 425 Bty OP. They were installed in the front line trenches alongside the Australian troops.

At around 02.00 on Easter Monday, 14 April, a strong German attack was launched - and Ray Ellis found himself right in the thick of the action:

First there was a lot of shell fire landing upon us. Then looking through the binoculars I could see these men creeping towards us, running from cover to cover, diving into holes in the ground as they approached. I realized I was watching German troops advancing. It was quite a sensation - a game I had played as a boy - it was actually happening!

The OP team had to direct their troop or battery fire onto targets that were invisible from the gun positions. The infantry attack was repelled by a combination of artillery fire and the vigorous small arms fire of the Australians. Then a more dangerous combined tanks and infantry attacking force began to rumble across No Man's Land straight towards Ellis in his OP:

There was mortar fire, shell fire and machine-gun fire. You had to stick your head over and look over to observe and it wasn't a very pleasant sensation. Bennett gave the orders; I was just helping him really. We were two men together in a very tight situation: 'Have you seen this? There's one over there!' As the tanks advanced so we were reducing the range of the guns, so that our own shells were beginning to fall nearer and nearer!

Bennett with considerable courage continued to direct fire on to the German tanks even as they passed over their trench. Gunner David Tickle was back at the 425 Bty gun positions:

Captain Bennett was at the OP and he'd been over-run. The call came down the telephone line: 'Target me!' We thought: 'Crikey what's happening?' He kept shouting, "Target me!" Then it dawned on us.

### **HORROR AND ADMIRATION**

The whole essence of British gunnery tactics was to separate the German infantry from their tanks. Together they were a potent force, but once separated they would be vulnerable. At Regimental Headquarters the second in command, Major Robert Daniell, was a regular officer with considerable experience: >>

**ABOVE:**  
Men of the South Notts Hussars rest by their lorries.

**BELOW:**  
The lorries and gun tractors of the South Notts Hussars sit idle as the men gather for a briefing.



# THE GATES OF TOBRUK

Battle in the North African Desert

**RIGHT:**  
Watching for the enemy: An observer searches the desert from his tower.

**CENTRE:**  
Dug in with rifles, bayonets, and a Boys anti-tank rifle, men of the 9th Australian Infantry Division await the coming tank storm.



My role was to try and concentrate the fire of all the guns I possibly could on the gap in the wire that the Germans had cut and through which their tanks were coming. The effect of that was that when they tried to bring their infantry through they were wiped out. The lorries were blown up and set on fire. At all costs we were to keep out every single infantryman we could.

In the front line it was the task of the infantry to deal with their German counterparts who had escaped the artillery fire. Ray Ellis watched with a mixture of horror and admiration:

was only like a bullet it fired but it had got a lot of velocity, it's supposed to penetrate tanks. He left me a tin of bully beef, packet of biscuits and a bottle of water. I was in this here hole for about twelve hours. His instructions were: 'If you see any tanks not flying a blue pennant on the aerial, mow them down!'

They may have still posed a threat, but unsupported by infantry there was little that the German tanks could achieve. Engaged directly by the guns of the SNH and 1st RHA, the panzers were also harassed by British tanks firing from hull-down positions.



Then the Australian infantry went into action against them - bayonet fighting in fact. Men paired off and fought individual battles. I was absolutely petrified - I hadn't even got a bayonet and if I had it wouldn't have done the slightest bit of good to me because I wasn't trained and to take on a German infantryman would have been suicide. All I could do was pray! No German came towards me and fortunately the Australians overcame the German infantry who started to retire and took cover in the anti-tank ditch. We switched our fire to the ditch and we did great carnage there.

The German tanks that had broken through were left unsupported by infantry, but they still posed a considerable threat to the SNH position. Amongst the precautions taken were some which were less than effective. Gunner Ted Holmes was mortified when he received his orders:

Sergeant Major Hardy says: 'There's some tanks broke through, they're wandering round anywhere'. He took me out somewhere into the desert in this truck. I'd got a Boyes rifle, it

The German could manoeuvre in the dead ground behind the OPs, but they could not 'hold' captured ground. Eventually, the tanks were forced to turn tail and retreat back across No Man's Land. They would never penetrate so far again.

## GRIM AFTERMATH OF BATTLE

Throughout the whole of the Easter period the SNH guns had roared out in response to the fire orders of their forward OPs. But the Nottingham gunners found the demand for near continuous fire on constantly changing targets to be physically gruelling. At the culmination of the German attacks the pace became frenetic - it was exhausting - yet it was also exhilarating. This was what they had trained for, this was what men like Sergeant Ian Sinclair (425 Bty) had waited for:

We had to keep ramming them up the spout on the line we were on without any movement, told to keep on firing. One of the troop guns seized up because it got so



hot. Eventually we stopped firing in turn to let the guns cool down. I reckon that my gun alone fired something like 1,200 rounds. We loved it, that's why we'd come, that's what we had hoped to do from when we were called up in 1939. Everybody was exhilarated.

There was the elation of the moment, but the aftermath of battle was grim. Major Robert Daniell took forward the Padre, Captain H. A. Perry, the Doctor, Captain J. Finnegan and a couple of gunners to carry water forward to the wounded Germans left between the lines where their infantry attack had broken down:

We found that the anti-tank ditch, which was about 9-feet deep, was absolutely crammed with German wounded who had crawled in there from the vehicles that our shells had set on fire. We started giving them water but, while the Doctor was attending one of the soldiers who was badly wounded, I saw a German rise up on his feet and have a shot at him with a revolver. I shouted to the Doctor and the Reverend Parry to withdraw. I left the water with the wounded and said - a lot could speak English - to them: 'If you shoot at my efforts to alleviate your wounded then you can fend for yourselves!'

### IN A SHEET OF FLAME

Once the Germans had given up, most of the SNH gunners were swamped by fatigue. By this time Ray Ellis had



returned from detachment to the OP to his gun team:

Between Friday and Monday, we never slept at all, never closed our eyes. We were sitting on the gun and everyone's face was one mass of sand. The sand adhered to the sweat on the face. The eyes were little red slits, everyone looked grotesque. The guns had been so hot that all the yellow paint had gone. They were bringing round bully sandwiches and handing them to us as we went on firing. Then it got to the point where at the end of that battle I remember whisky bottles being passed and we were drinking it from the bottle, gulping and passing it on. Things gradually quietened down and it was obvious that the battle was over. We were absolutely exhausted. Everyone fell on the desert where they were, anywhere, rolled themselves in their blankets and just went into a dead sleep.

Yet one question had been answered. Often, men could not help wondering how they would perform in battle. Now the SNH knew: indeed, an incident diligently recorded in the SNH regimental history summed up their new found status. Two German staff cars were spotted by Captain Colin Barber from his OP, he opened fire and shells pursued the cars down the road before they were hit and exploded in a sheet of flame. All this was watched by the Australians who were delighted to the extent that one hefty 'Digger' ran up to Captain Hingston, smote him heartily on the back and exclaimed: 'You're the best b----- battery in the British Army!' One hesitates to imagine what foulness the dashes conceal from our delicate sensibilities. Men were different in those days.

The SNH had certainly proved themselves in the opening battle for Tobruk - but the siege of Tobruk had only just begun. It would be a long hard battle. ☉

**ABOVE:**  
Exhausted after the struggle, a tired gunner rests.

**BELOW:**  
A gun crew furiously man their 25Pdr gun, helping to keep Rommel at bay.  
(WW2 IMAGES)

