

### Chapter No.3.

#### North Africa.

As we approached Port Tewfic at the head of the Red Sea, we could see the forbidding country in the distance. Red, hot and without any sign of life. I thought to myself, this is what the desert really looks like. We disembarked and the sea was so clear that it was possible to see the side of the ship many feet down.

On a train through desert country to a station which I think must have been in vicinity of Cairo. Then by lorry to Almaza which I gather was the Base camp for Army personnel. We were allocated a tent shared by fourteen of us. These tents had a base about four or five feet below ground level, and a mud-brick wall up to ground level. Presumably for safety reasons. This was all very well but while we were there, we had a downpour of rain, extremely unusual, and some of the mud-brick walls collapsed and I gathered that a couple of lads were killed.

When we were sorted out the day after arriving, I was attached to the P.T. Instructors team and for a week or two carried out duties with them. We each took a squad of about thirty lads out on to a cleared area and put them through the P.T. drill we had been taught on the Instructors course.

It was necessary for two Instructors to take each squad as some of the lads were liable to drop off the rear of the party as they rounded a bend, and could not be observed by the leader of the group and by the time the exercise ground was reached, he might well be half a dozen short.

Each morning we were awakened by the cry of "Ot Shai" "Ot Shai". One of the local Arabs came round with a bucket full of hot tea which you could buy for one acker per mug. There were one hundred Ackers (Piastres) to the pound, and the tea was very good, particularly at that time of the morning~.

-I had made friends with another three lads and we went around for most of our off duty time together. We had trips into Cairo where we were invited into private homes for tea and cakes or visited one of the many bars or clubs. One club was the "Sweet Melody" and it was used by some of the Aussies out there (*No* Americans). The band was up on a balcony behind wire netting as it was not unusual for someone to throw an empty bottle in that direction. The lads, in particular those who had been "Up the Bluey" were not given to restrictive behaviour .

When we first went into Cairo, we were picked upon by the "Shoe shine boys" who chased us to have our boots cleaned. We found that they knew the new boys as they had white knees against the brown knees of the old soldiers, but we soon learned the words such as Yala and Igri which translated meant shove off and quick about it.. Said with conviction it worked.

We had made arrangements, the four of us, to go and see the pyramids and the Sphinx one day, but as luck would have it, we were all posted up the desert, and we were never to meet again. I am not quite right here, as many years later I did meet one of the four, in Manchester, when I was working in that part of the country, but I have not been in contact with any of the others.

I was given to understand that J was going to the 5th regt R.HA. but somehow found that I had been posted to the 3rd R.HA. and within a few minutes of joining "D" Battery, I joined the "A" Troop Command Post, and the Germans greeted my arrival by sending over several 88mm shells, which landed uncomfortably close but no one was injured

Within a short time, I found my feet and it was not long before I was feeling quite at home with the situation. The unit I had joined had been in action since the start of the war and many of the men had seen action from the start of the war and many were survivors of "Wavells 30.000" and had seen action over a long period.

From then onwards I learned many of the desert ways, which had been developed over a long period. We filled up the vehicle radiators with good water when it was available, and used it to brew and cook when the water was salty or oily, replenishing the radiator with the bad water. We used a Benghazi stove to prepare a cooked meal or to make tea. We could have an all over wash in a pint of water. Our bedroll was made so that it could be unrolled in a matter of seconds and rolled up again in little longer.

On one occasion When we had received an issue of good water and after we had carried out our usual replenishments of radiators and water containers, Driver Acaster, the man in charge of the water wagon informed us that there had been a dead camel in the water hole where he had just filled up, but he had tested it and found that it was perfectly alright so he just went ahead and filled up the tanker.. Fortunately none of us suffered any ill effects.

We could prepare several different meals from Bully and Biscuits. We swapped tea for eggs from the natives. I must admit some of it had been used once and then dried. Sardines fried in batter made a change. When possible we travelled in open order, spread out across the rough ground, and not in convoy. I have seen the whole unit stop when we were attacked by Stukas. Clouds of smoke and sand everywhere and everyone keeping their heads down. When the Smoke had cleared, no one hurt and no vehicle hit.. Sometimes we were lucky. Not always though.

One time an ammunition wagon had been hit and it was blazing away merrily. The driver who had been a short way from the vehicle at the time dashed back to the blazing lorry which we knew was about to blow at anytime, dived into the cab and emerged with his paperback which he said he had only a few pages to read and he didn't want to miss the ending. It was nearly his ending as the ammo went up within a few seconds.

When it was necessary to answer a call of nature, the procedure was to take a shovel and walk a fair distance from your position before relieving oneself. A new lad had just joined us and when he went for a walk with a shovel he only went a distance of about twenty yards before he started to perform. Charlie Keenan took exception to the close proximity of the new lad and picking up his rifle, put a shot just under his backside. The lad shot up into the air when a blast of sand hit him where he must have been quite tender. "Shove off a bit further than that you dirty B "called out. Charlie. We had come to within striking distance of the remnants of the German army in N. Africa and had contacted the first army. They were in a position along the foot of a hill with a lot of open ground in front of them. Our Battery Commander, Major Stewart, said to the Officer in charge of the infantry, "Why don't you take up a position on the ridge at the top of that hill" to which the Infantry Officer said "Because there are mines in that area in front of you. Major Stewart", then, after a recce into the field said that the mines had just been thrown around and could easily be picked up. So he instructed each gun No.1. to proceed carefully into the area and to pick up any mines that appeared in the way and to place them in a pile on the edge on the field. This was done with care and we took up our gun positions in front of the infantry unit. The Infantry Officer then ordered his men up to the ridge. I think he must have had had a red face.

Many targets were engaged many incidents took place, too many to go into details even if I could remember them.

Finally the barrage which was to open up the way into Tunis. I believe we fired about 350 rounds per gun to help open the way for the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars to go through the gap.

Within hours we heard that the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars had surprised Germans sitting at a cafe table in the centre of Tunis. The situation was followed up and within a few days the remnant of the German army was being cleared from the peninsular.

We then began a trek back along the road which we had previously fought our way, Kairouan, Slax, Medenine, Mareth, Tripoli and finally to Horns which was between Misurata and Tripoli. In actual fact, our camp was situated Dear Wadi Cam and Zliten. We set up camp fairly near the sea and a mile or so from the coast road which ran a little inland. Whenever a vehicle went up or down the road to the camp a cloud of dust invariably followed. Hence the limit of 5 mph was put on the connecting road.

I'm not sure if it was in this area or if I had seen it before but there was one area I found fascinating. Almost as far as one could see, there appeared large tree stumps as much as two feet across and only a few yards between them. On closer examination they were hard stone. In fact it was the remains of a petrified forest..

Several units including our other batteries and A.A. batteries were spread along the coast for quite a distance. The weather was now very warm and we would often sleep outside the tents and leave our kit inside, although it was better to get out of the sun during the day. We had a little chameleon that shared out two man bivvy and it made itself at home for several months and it kept the flies down.

We had several things to keep us occupied. First there was the sea. Swimming was a must several times a day and we chased lizards over the sand hills. They were faster than us. We organised a concert party in Horns. One play was a skit on "Little Nell" words not to be repeated in civvy life. I played Little Nell and cut my hair in a fringe and found a frock from somewhere. A couple of rolled

up puttees did for boobs and there was great hilarity when one of them dropped out and rolled across the stage, and I had to retrieve it and stuff it back again. There was a time when the Divisional sports day was cancelled owing to the temperature being about 100degrees F. so a dozen of us spent the afternoon playing rugby down on the beach " Mad dogs and Englishmen" you know the rest.

It was here that I decided that I would find out if anything could be done about my painful wrist. I had fallen and according to the MO. at the time when in England, was just a sprain. But it had been playing me up for over a year.

I hitched a lift for about fifty miles up the desert to a field hospital and reported to the sister in charge. She said "Get your clothes off and get into bed" I replied that I had only come for an X-ray on my wrist. To which she replied "Do what you're told" and added with a smile "When was the last time you slept between sheets" I did what I was told the day after I had my wrist X-rayed and spent another night between clean sheets. The following day I was told the result which showed that there was an un-united fracture of a small bone and nothing could be done at that late stage. .It was a pleasant break and a couple of nights in a comfortable bed and good food was worth the trip.

The ruins of Leptis Magna were quite remarkable. An ancient Roman amphitheatre where a microphone was not necessary for an audience of several thousand. We had a Divisional concert there, and one member of the Division, was quite an entertainer. He gave a lecture on eating irons mark one ,two and three. (knife, fork and spoon). I can only say that a man who can have several thousand troops in fits of laughter for half an hour talking about nothing but a knife fork and spoon has talent. There were also several other entertainers all who were very good in their field.

Monty gave us our marching orders there prior to our invasion of Italy and I think the army was very much inspired by the way he spoke

One sad incident happened when the R.A.F. were giving the A.A. Gunners low level attack practice. One Hurricane flew so low that it hit the gun barrel and crashed a little further along the beach. The pilot of course was killed.

I was on Fire Picket one evening and when I came to check on the bodies present, one, Ted Draper, was missing. Anyone seen Ted Draper." Yes! He's over the mess tent p...ed as a newt as usual", someone volunteered I went over to the tent and there was Ted, out to the wild. I carried him over to the picket post and rolled him in his blanket. When the Orderly Officer and Sgt. came round, he said "I can see that you are all here, don't bother turning them out"

Another evening, I was Orderly Sgt. and having mounted the Guard, returned to the Mess Tent. The spirit ration had been issued that day and most of the Sergeants were well away. I had a bottle of Gordons for my issue so a pint mug filled to within an inch of the top and a half an inch of lime juice was my first for the evening. The bottle was empty in less than half an hour and we proceeded to top up with Legby and Zibib, the local home brewed spirits in addition to a jar of army rum the Q.M. had obtained.

By midnight, only three of us were conscious so we went along to "1" battery Mess to see how they were. They were much about the same as us. After a session with them we left them stark out and went down to the sea for a swim in the clothes we wore.

The following morning I had a gun-laying test. .I managed to focus the (two?)aiming lines of the gunsite on the (two?) aiming points. There should have only been one of each. .I passed the test O.K. But I couldn't think of gin again for a couple of years without my stomach turning over.

During our stay at Horns we were paraded one day and told that we were going to receive a visit from a very important person. An inspection took place and notes taken of all worn and untidy clothing and kit. All this was replaced and we then were told to parade in full dress order. The Major inspected everyone and we were then told that we would not be given any more inspections before the main parade but were expected to turn out in perfect order. It was up to us. The big day came. We were lined up each side of the road just outside Tripoli. Right dressed and a fellow was detailed to go along the paraded ranks and to put a chalk mark just where each persons boots were. We were then allowed to relax by the side of the road until we given the order to fall in. This, of course eliminated the necessity of standing on parade for an unknown time in the desert heat. I must say the the Colonel had some feeling for his men. Time went by, and after a long wait we called on parade, one of the lads ran along and dusted off everyone's boots, and very shortly after we were called to attention and lo and behold who should drive slowly by but King George the Vth accompanied by Monty (Sorry General Montgomery) and another General. The King's car stopped and the King shook hands with

the Colonel and had a few words with him and then drove slowly off. The colonel told us afterwards that the King had congratulated him on the Regiment's turnout and thanked us all for appearing so smart on parade. We have had parades before that have been much more of trial, but this was an easy one. We then prepared for the invasion of Italy. We went up to Tripoli and were loaded on to an L.S.I. (Landing Ship Infantry). We were then given the order to disembark. To do this we had a ramp each side of the craft down which we had to make our way. The craft was run into shallow water for this exercise. All went well except for the fact than when Tich Russell, the signals Sgt. who was a real shorty, went down the ramp, and he must have stepped off the side as he disappeared and his tin helmet floated away. The man following him must have given him a helping hand as he appeared a little further inshore quite unruffled and just said "Where's my tin hat gone?"