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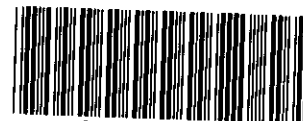
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## AUSTRALIANS IN THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN JULY 1942

Craig Tibbitts  
Australian War Memorial<sup>1</sup>

Dear Mother and Dad,

We have been in action in the desert again, and it has been action of a kind the like of which we have never seen before – Tobruk was a picnic compared to this, it is real war, with the spurs on...<sup>2</sup>

Private Harry Frazer (2/24<sup>th</sup> Bn, AIF) 23 July 1942

### Introduction

Three major battles occurred around El Alamein in the Egyptian desert between July and November 1942.<sup>3</sup> Of the three, it is the final decisive battle in October/November that is most celebrated and best remembered. It is known simply as 'The Battle of El Alamein' from which its architect Lieutenant General Montgomery drew much of his fame. For Australians the fame of our 9<sup>th</sup> Division is also partly drawn from this battle which is often described as the turning point of the North African campaign. However a closer look at the whole period at Alamein reveals that the first battle in July is a rival to that claim. While not as decisive as the final battle, the July battle was a desperate struggle of high stakes and high drama, where victory could have gone either way.

### The lead up

The struggle for North Africa saw both sides' fortunes rise and fall in the first two years of the campaign, 1940 and 1941. A series of sweeping offensives had driven first one side back, then the other. At each turn the campaign became larger as more men and materiel were sent in. The Axis forces in North Africa comprised German and Italian troops and were known by 1942 as *Panzerarmee Afrika*, led by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, 'The Desert Fox.' Opposing him was the British Eighth Army commanded by General Claude Auchinleck. This army comprised British, Australian, New Zealand, South African and Indian troops as well as small contingents of Free French and Greeks.

In early 1942 the pendulum swung sharply in favour of the Axis. After being driven back across the Cyrenaican 'bulge' to El Agheila in December 1941, Rommel received reinforcements including much needed tanks. On 5 January 1942 he counterattacked, driving the Allies all the way back to Gazala, 100 kms west of Tobruk. From this thrust, the Allies lost half their armour and vast quantities of stores and equipment.

Both sides then paused near Gazala and there was a lull in fighting. On 26 May Rommel launched the next stage of his offensive, employing a sweep to the south with strong armoured forces to outflank the Allied line. Fierce fighting ensued for the next three weeks at places known

<sup>1</sup> This article was the result of research undertaken for a talk the author presented at Tel el Eisa, as part of a joint Australian War Memorial/Imperial War Museum battlefield tour of Crete and Egypt in September 2002

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Private David Henry Frazer (2/24 Bn) dated 23 July 1942, Australian War Memorial, Private Record PR01943.

<sup>3</sup> First Alamein (1-27 July), Alam Halfa (30-31 August) & Second Alamein (23 Oct-6 Nov).

as Knightsbridge, Bir Hakeim and 'the Cauldron.' Despite gallant resistance the Allied commanders badly mismanaged this battle, resulting in their line breaking, then falling back to the east in some disorder. A week later on 21 June, Rommel finally captured the vital port of Tobruk. After holding out so stubbornly the previous year, Tobruk fell easily and about 35,000 Allied prisoners were taken. The following day Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal.

### **Retreat into Egypt: 22 June – 30 June**

Eighth Army fell back to Mersa Matruh, about 200 miles inside Egypt. On 25 June Auchinleck assumed command of the Eighth Army after relieving Lieutenant General Ritchie. But Rommel was wasting no time. On the 26th he struck again and forced another disorderly retreat. By contrast, the New Zealand Division managed an orderly fighting withdrawal to Allied lines after being completely cut off. Thus nearing the end of June, Rommel had forced the Allies back deep into Egypt, and the capture of Cairo and the Suez Canal seemed a very real possibility. Rommel's confidence was high. On 27 June he wrote to his wife,

We're still on the move and hope to keep it up until the final goal. It takes a lot out of one, of course, but it's the chance of a lifetime. The enemy is fighting back desperately with his air force. PS: Italy in July might still be possible. Get passports! <sup>4</sup>

In July however, Rommel was to become rather too busy to take that holiday.

Coinciding with the Allied defeat at Mersa Matruh, The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division still in Syria, suddenly received orders to pull out. Their destination, then known only to the officers, was the object of much speculation. Were they going back to the North African desert or home to fight the Japanese? Intrigue heightened when orders were given to remove all vehicle markings and to conceal colour patches and their distinctive slouch hats, while some signallers were to stay behind to generate fake transmissions indicating the entire division was still there. When the convoys rushed down through Palestine to the Suez Canal, word came through that Mersa Matruh had fallen and the Eighth Army was in serious trouble. It now became obvious that the division would be facing their old enemy again, and soon...

### **The Alamein line**

The Allies now pinned all their hopes on their new defensive position hinged on the little railway stop of El Alamein. Here, the battlefield narrowed between the coast and the impassable Qattara Depression, just forty miles south. Defensive positions were hastily improved to make several strong points along the line. For Auchinleck, things were going from bad to worse. Attempting to rally his army from headlong retreat, he needed a firm display of leadership. He had to demonstrate that a determined stand was to be made at Alamein, while also preparing for the very real possibility that his army may again be defeated and have to withdraw rapidly to avoid total destruction. This uncertainty played on the minds and morale of the troops.<sup>5</sup>

As well as the uncertainty at the front, Allied rear areas were also showing signs of collapse, bordering on panic. The 'Cairo flap' as it was called, resulted from the sudden departure of the Royal Navy Fleet from Alexandria and warning orders for GHQ to prepare to move out. Some foreign diplomats left, and at GHQ in Cairo they started burning documents.

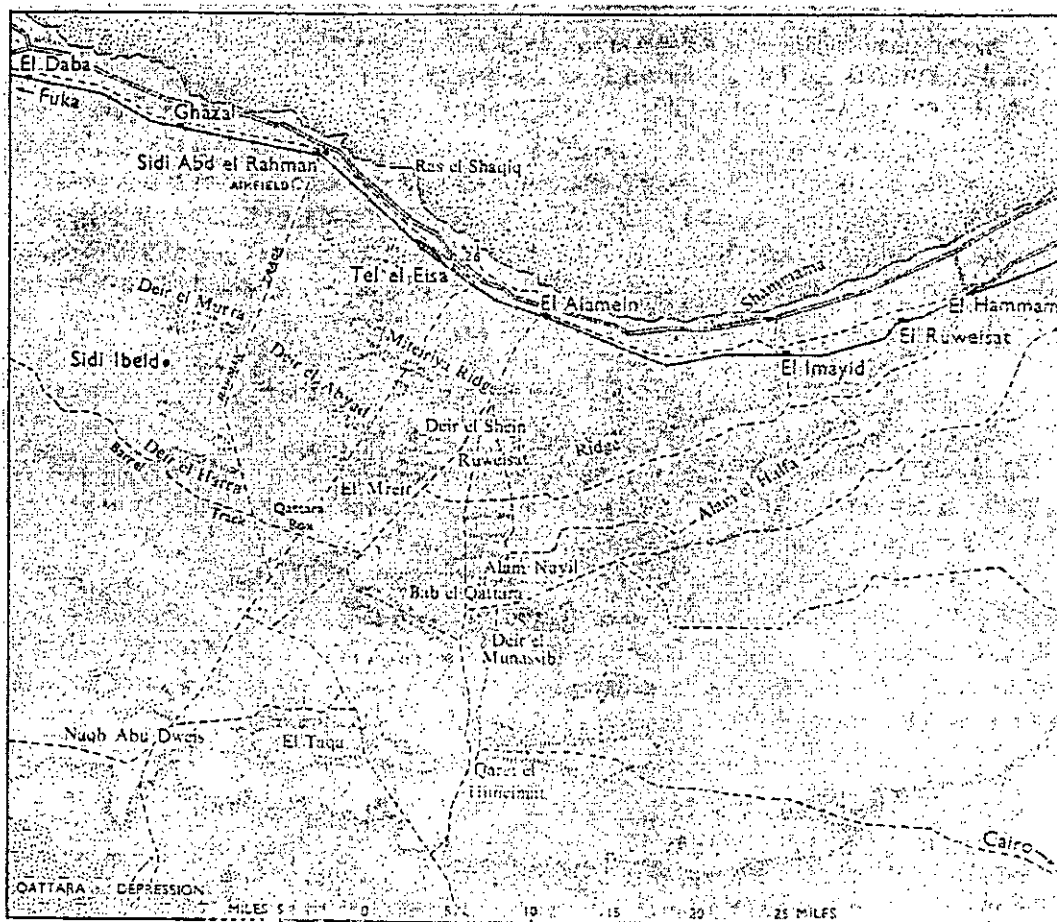
One Australian soldier on his way to the front at this time wrote in his diary,

<sup>4</sup> Rommel, Erwin 1953, *The Rommel Papers: edited by B H Liddell Hart*, Collins, London, p. 237

<sup>5</sup> Playfair, I S O 1960, British Official History, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol III*, HMSO, London, p. 333

Our guns passed through the city of Cairo. It was no triumphal procession. Indifferent to our travel-stained blackened convoy of guns and vehicles, the citizens scarcely glanced at us, let alone gave us a cheer or a wave. They were preparing to welcome Rommel... the shopkeepers had plenty of Nazi flags in stock.<sup>6</sup>

There was now much hasty repositioning of Allied forces to handle the emerging crisis. The Eighth Army's XXX Corps was positioned to hold the northern sector of the front including El Alamein and the all important coast road. Further south XIII Corps held the southern sector. As auxiliary troops and equipment streamed back from the front, 9<sup>th</sup> Division was briefly tasked with the defence of Cairo, then the Nile Delta near Alexandria. A few days later however, they were ordered to the front at El Alamein to join XXX Corps.



Map of the El Alamein area from the Official History volume III, Tobruk and El Alamein, p. 543.

### The opening moves: 1-4 July

Rommel attacked the Alamein line early on 1 July hoping to dislodge Eighth Army and open the way to Cairo and Suez. Delays in bringing up his forces hampered the attack and it soon bogged down. The Allies had by then regrouped enough to repulse the attack and make some small counterattacks of their own. They owed much to the tenacity of 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade and to the

<sup>6</sup> Private papers of Gunner J P Stokes (2/7 Field Regt), Australian War Memorial, MSS1120. This attitude among the Egyptian population was not however universal.

Desert Air Force (DAF) who bombed them incessantly. Over the next two days Axis attacks again faltered as more organised British armour came into play. The New Zealanders also delivered a severe blow by demolishing the Italian *Ariete* Armoured Division, capturing their artillery and taking many prisoners.

Signs were now showing that Rommel's army was overstrained. They had been through five weeks of battle from Gazala to Mersa Matruh, and were now deep into Egypt, severely stretching their supply lines. Rommel did seem acutely aware of the problem, writing at the time, '*...in modern warfare supplies decide the battle.*'<sup>7</sup> Due to battle casualties, the Axis forces had also become dangerously weak in manpower, the German 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division having only 1500 effectives skewed the meaning of a light division to the extreme! Of more concern was the fact that his German tank force had dwindled to just twenty six effectives. They were now partly relying on captured British vehicles and equipment to continue the drive east. On the other hand, the Allies were assembling all they could muster in troops, artillery and tanks, and by now their growing strength in the air was telling. As 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalion's war diary recorded on 2 July,

There is much air activity over our area but it is all ours to date. After the time this unit spent in Tobruk when the sight of one of our planes was a miracle, this is indeed a very welcome change.

At this point Rommel accepted that he must now regroup and consolidate his position. His Chief of Staff, Friedrich von Mellenthin later wrote,

Everyone realised that the offensive which had opened on 26 May, and which had achieved such spectacular victories, had at last come to an end...we had failed.<sup>8</sup>

Rommel pulled his tanks out of the front line for a quick reorganisation and refit, their place being taken by Italian infantry divisions. Auchinleck, sensing the enemy was weakening and vulnerable, ordered attacks but these were poorly conducted and soon fizzled out. His orders at this time suffered from being sometimes too ambiguous and even contradictory, coupled with his failure to stress their urgency. It was an opportunity wasted as von Mellenthin later agreed,

On the morning of 4 July 1942 the position of Panzerarmee Africa was perilous ... we could not have resisted a determined attack by Eighth Army ... We survived 4 July with no real damage except to our nerves ... the great opportunity of the British had passed ...<sup>9</sup>

During those first days of July, the fate of the whole campaign had hung in the balance. Both sides were critically weakened and disorganised, and had missed opportunities for decisive victories. They now took time to reorganise and rebuild their strength.

#### **The next round**

The vanguard of the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division arrived at the front on 5 July. They were a welcome boost for the battered Eighth Army. While not having its full establishment of guns and vehicles, it was the only division that was both fully rested and full strength in men. Moreover, despite having many unblooded reinforcements, the division had a strong cadre of veterans experienced in desert warfare, including its commander, Lieutenant General Leslie Morshead. Now, after being persuaded by Morshead to let the division fight together rather than disperse into brigade groups, Auchinleck planned to put them straight on the attack in the vital northern sector along the coast.

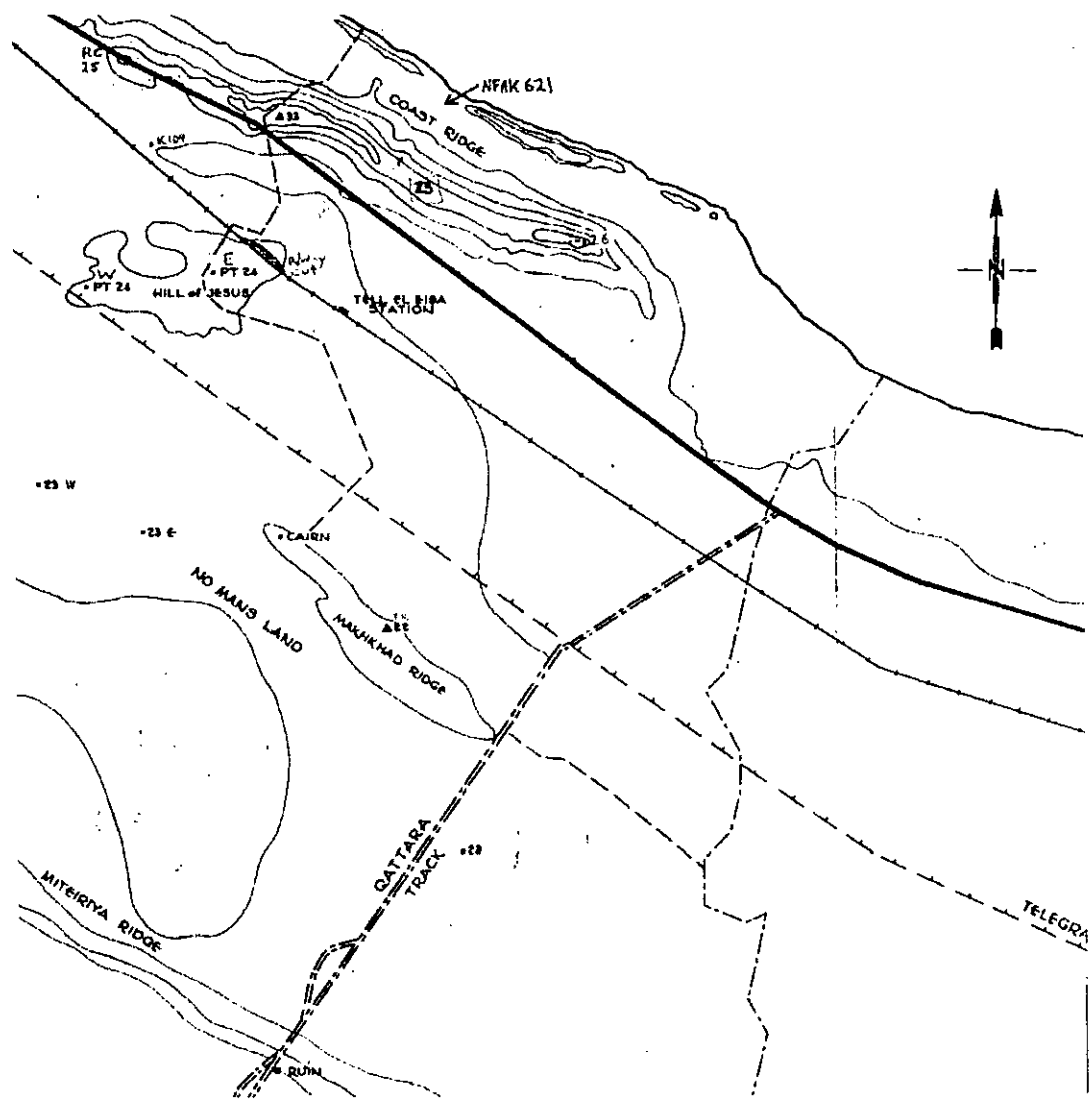
For his attack, Morshead chose the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade (2/23<sup>rd</sup>, 2/24<sup>th</sup>, 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalions), reinforced with anti-tank and machine guns. The whole of XXX Corps artillery would be in support, as would

<sup>7</sup> *The Rommel papers*, p. 242-244

<sup>8</sup> Mellenthin, F W von 1955, *Panzer battles*, p. 128

<sup>9</sup> *Panzer battles*, pp 163-164.

the DAF, plus some tanks. The plan was to capture Points 26, 23 and Trig 33 along the three mile coastal ridge, then turn and take the Tel el Eisa feature just over a mile further southwest. Tel el Eisa was also known by a loose translation as the 'Hill of Jesus'. To coincide with the Australian attack, the South Africans were to advance and take two points on the Makh Khad Ridge (about five miles to the south), while an armoured raiding party was to race up the coast road to El Daba attacking enemy supply lines. Over the next few days, the troops rehearsed the attack. Patrols ventured out during the night, right up to the enemy defences at Point 26. They confirmed intelligence reports that the Italian *Sabratha* Division opposite them was low in morale, poorly dug in and not alert.<sup>10</sup>



Map adapted from original 9<sup>th</sup> Division map, AWM54, 526/6/8, *Trace of El Alamein fronts showing advance of Australian 9 Division in the early part of July 1942*

<sup>10</sup> Australian War Memorial, AWM54, 526/4/22, *XXX Corps Operation Order #61 (7 July)*

Auchinleck also knew on 8 July from Ultra and Y (wireless) intercepts that Rommel was massing his strongest units in the south for an attack. This is evident in *Panzerarmee* instructions of 9 July that ordered preparations to resume the offensive, in the belief that Eighth Army was about to withdraw. On 9 July Rommel attacked the southernmost sector of the Alamein line at Naqb Abu Dweis. But the New Zealanders who were holding this position, had been ordered to pull back shortly before this attack went in. Consequently, Rommel's attack succeeded, meeting no opposition. Encouraged by this and believing the Allies *were* going to make a general withdrawal, Rommel decided to quickly follow up the next morning to catch the Allies on the hop. He spent the night near Bab el Qattara with the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division but had not long been asleep when he was awakened by the distant thudding of artillery coming from the north. He 'at once had an inkling that it boded no good.'<sup>11</sup>

#### The perfect attack: 10 July

At 0330, 2/48th Battalion (Bn) moved out for its first objective, Point 26. The plan was to seize it by surprise, approaching on foot and with no artillery support. The artillery would then come to life and support the further objectives. Suspense filled the air as the Australians stalked quietly closer. Then, just as they had almost reached it, an enemy plane dropped a parachute flare directly over Pt 26 that lit the whole place up like daytime.

The Battalion "froze" to a man and the sigh of relief when the flare hit the ground was almost audible. Everyone expected a terrific outburst of fire, but all remained quiet and the advance continued.<sup>12</sup>

The Italians obviously had *not a single man* keeping watch...

The battalion swept up onto Pt 26 and quickly overwhelmed its defenders many of whom were asleep. About 400 prisoners were taken. The time was now 0455, and the battalion went for its second objective, Pt 23. Following on the heels of their supporting artillery barrage, they took it just as dawn was breaking, and secured many more prisoners.

Meanwhile, 2/24<sup>th</sup> Bn had moved out at 0430 and advanced along the coast. Delayed by vehicles bogging and increasing enemy resistance, they pressed on. Artillery fire pounded their objective, Trig 33. By first light they had taken it and were digging in. Shortly after, planes of the Desert Air Force swept the battlefield in support, among them, fellow Australians from 3 Squadron RAAF. Meanwhile the South Africans had all but captured their objectives when they saw the pre-arranged Very light signal to withdraw. Flabbergasted, they complied. As for the planned exploitation by armoured columns, enemy tank and artillery fire prevented their breakout and for the time being these plans were cancelled.

Further east, 2/48<sup>th</sup> Bn now turned its attention to the third of its objectives, the area around Tel el Eisa railway station (a solitary hut). Under heavy fire from a now fully alert enemy, C and D Companies pushed forward. As they neared their final objective they encountered a four-gun battery of enemy artillery blocking them. One of C Company's platoons launched a fierce bayonet charge, the troops leaping into the gun pits and taking all the enemy prisoner. 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade Group now had all their objectives in hand, bar one, Tel el Eisa to the south across the railway line. This was due to the earlier delays in bringing forward the vehicles and heavy equipment. So far their casualties so far had been amazingly light.

<sup>11</sup> *The Rommel papers*, p 252.

<sup>12</sup> 2/48 Bn War Diary, Australian War Memorial, AWM 52, 8/3/36

### Holding the coastal salient: 10-16 July

The area they had captured offered little or no cover. In such a generally flat expanse, ridges a mere twenty or thirty metres above sea level give commanding vantage points to their occupants. The height advantage is so slight that one can scarcely appreciate it until actually upon the feature. 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade Group began the difficult task of digging in while reinforcements of artillery, anti-tank guns and machine guns were quickly brought in. Now would come the inevitable response - an all out counterattack for this vital ground.

For the Germans and Italians, the situation had rapidly become critical. Rommel, still miles to the south realised that something big was up.

Presently came the alarming news that the enemy had attacked from the Alamein position and overrun the Sabratha Division ... there was a serious danger that they would break through and destroy our supplies ... the attack from Qaret el Abd [Bab el Qattara] had to be cancelled ... I was compelled to order every last German soldier out of his tent or rest camp up to the front ... the situation was beginning to take on crisis proportions.<sup>13</sup>

After the *Sabratha Division* was put to flight, von Mellenthin had hastily organised the headquarters staff and some members of the 328<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and prevented a complete breakthrough. They got there in the nick of time. Rommel was very concerned over the lost territory and resolved that it must be retaken at once. A penetration in this sector could threaten his entire front.

He rushed some panzer battle groups up from the south to cut the Australians off from the Alamein box and destroy them. His first attempt to do so was spoiled by the overwhelming power of XXX Corps artillery. Apparently well ensconced and supported, the Australians would take some shifting, and Rommel had to deliver a well-coordinated and powerful counterattack.

At 1100, five German tanks attacked 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalion, dug in along the railway. The tanks stopped in front of the battalion's positions and raked them with fire. Heavy artillery and Stuka dive-bombers joined in but they stayed put and withstood the onslaught. While the Stuka attacks were not very effective, the artillery was bursting over the men's heads, showering them with fragments. Casualties occurred, as they didn't yet have overhead cover for their slit trenches. One machine gunner, 'Skinny' Anderson was seen holding a shovel over his head as he crouched to answer the call of nature, no doubt hoping for some measure of protection!

At 1430 that afternoon, the Germans again attempted to drive them out. This time there were ten tanks, which managed to get in amongst their positions. The tanks rumbled around the area caving in the slit trenches with their tracks to intimidate the Australians into abandoning their positions. Aptly named machine gunner Morrie Trigger remembered a German tank commander yelling down to him 'Hände Hoch! - Hands Up!' Trigger ignored the command and narrowly escaped death by lying flat at the bottom of his slit trench.<sup>14</sup>

And from another account,

The tank stood over us, looking a tremendous size in the fading light. A German poked his head out of the turret and yelled: "Come out and lift your hands up."... Mick Riley, who was a really good soldier, yelled back "Shut up you squarehead, I'll get you." Ted whispered to Mick, "Don't tease him, let him go home." We held our fire and the tank moved off.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp 252-253

<sup>14</sup> Oakes, Bill 1980, *Muzzle blast: six years of war with the 2/2 Australian Machine Gun Battalion, AIF, 2/2 Bn Assn.*, Sydney, p 97.

<sup>15</sup> Glenn, John 1960, *Tobruk to Tarakan*, Rigby, Adelaide, p 110.



Sergeant 'Tex' Weston and Corporal 'Spud' Hinson led other men of 2/48<sup>th</sup> Bn against the tanks. Both were awarded DCMs for knocking out tanks with grenades and capturing their crews. Fortunately, anti-tank guns arrived on the scene and knocked out one particularly troublesome tank. The crew baled out and made a run for it. Sergeant Gus Longhurst, a big rugby forward, picked up a Vickers heavy machine gun and chased after them. A burst of fire convinced them to surrender.

2/48<sup>th</sup> Bn was attacked six times by tanks that afternoon. Morshead had taught his men in Tobruk the previous year, how to handle this sort of situation. They learned that if enemy tanks broke through their positions, they should not be overly concerned, stay put and concentrate on preventing enemy infantry coming through in support. The artillery and anti-tank guns further back would deal with the tanks. On this occasion, the Australian infantry *overdid* their job, getting out of their holes not to run, but to have a crack at the tanks themselves.

At 1700 Rommel's counterattack shifted its focus to Trig 33 where 2/24<sup>th</sup> Bn was dug in. Approaching from the west were eighteen Italian tanks. These soon ran into difficulties however, hampered by soft ground and good shooting from the anti-tank gunners. Fourteen tanks were knocked out. Later, nine more approached from the south but were also repulsed. During this action, Bombardier J T McMahon bravely placed his gun in the open to engage them. He and his crew were all wounded, but they still knocked out two tanks. The 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Machine Gun Battalion also played their part here, spraying the tanks with bullets, forcing them to close down their vision slits and preventing the commanders from standing in their turrets to obtain a better view.

Soon after dark, a German battle group under Hauptmann Kirsten made the day's final attempt on 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalion's positions near the railway station, and again broke through the forward defences. Anticipating the likelihood of a German breakthrough, the battalion was ready to respond. The reserve companies immediately launched a counterattack from north of the railway.

From the diary of Corporal Tom Derrick,

We were to move forward in one long extended line, cross the railway line without a sound and on a shot from the OC we were to open up with everything and continue to advance firing as we went and calling out "Come on Australianoes." ... from the din of the Light Machine Guns, Tommy guns, rifles and grenades, also the blood curdling cries of advancing men, the enemy must have thought there were thousands and I think the Australianoes business helped a lot.<sup>16</sup>

This counterattack routed the Germans and restored the battalion's positions. It was the final act of a long, but very successful day for the Australians.

#### **An intelligence coup: the capture of NFAK 621**

On top of the Australian's capture of the coastal ridge came another unexpected, yet exceptionally important bonus. As 2/24<sup>th</sup> Bn advanced along the coastal strip they collided with a German unit they were not expecting to meet. Thankfully it was not a heavily armed combat unit, but one that was jokingly referred to as 'the Circus' on account of their strange assortment of tents, trucks and equipment.<sup>17</sup> They were in fact Rommel's most valuable intelligence asset, the signals intercept unit *Nachrichten Fern Aufklärung Kompanie 621* (NFAK 621). The unit

<sup>16</sup> Corporal Tom Derrick had already earned a Distinguished Conduct Medal earlier in the day during the attack on Pt 26. He went on to earn the Victoria Cross for his actions at Sattelberg, New Guinea in 1943 and promotion to Lieutenant. Sadly, he died in the 2/48<sup>th</sup> Battalion's last battle on Tarakan Island, Borneo in May 1945. Copies of his diaries are held at the Australian War Memorial, Private Record PR82/190.

<sup>17</sup> Behrendt, Hans-Otto 1985, *Rommel's intelligence in the desert campaign, 1941-1943*, Kimber, London p 170

included a team of highly skilled wireless operators and English language specialists who, unknown to the Allies at the time, had been very successful intercepting Allied signals.

Unfortunately for them, their commander Hauptmann Alfred Seeböhm had recently been criticised for hanging back too far from the fighting. Seeböhm's response was to move his unit well forward, right in behind the front line. They had set up camp behind the *Sabratha* Division's forward defences in the sand dunes by the sea.

The speed and surprise of the Australian attack caught the unit completely by surprise. NFAK 621 put up fierce resistance for over an hour while frantically trying to destroy documents, but was soon overrun. Most of the unit were either killed or captured, along with much equipment and documents. Very few escaped, and Seeböhm died of his wounds some days later.

Interrogation of the prisoners and examination of their documents revealed the extent of NFAK 621's eavesdropping. Rommel was being fed all manner of detailed intelligence on the Eighth Army. This of course led to a thorough tightening up of Allied signals security as well as counterintelligence measures that put an end to the German 'Kondor Mission' spy ring in Egypt, and possibly the unwitting security leak coming from the US Military Attaché in Cairo.<sup>18</sup>

The capture of NFAK 621 has on at least one occasion been portrayed as a planned, top secret assignment and the real purpose behind the Australian attack.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere however, is there evidence that this was the case. The main objective of the attack was to seize and hold the key high ground. NFAK 621 had simply been unwise to position themselves behind such an unreliable unit as *Sabratha*, and unlucky that they had been in the path of 2/24th's advance. Rommel when told of the unit's loss was furious – he had suddenly lost his best source of intelligence. As one author put it, this was 'quite the most important intelligence coup of the entire North African campaign.'<sup>20</sup>

### 11-12 July

Next morning, 2/24<sup>th</sup> Battalion supported by part of the 44<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment seized the eastern end of Tel el Eisa and by midday had taken the whole feature and 500 more prisoners. This caused Rommel to commit almost every piece of artillery he had to this sector. So began the pounding of Tel el Eisa. All next day, the whole salient was shelled relentlessly. Then around 1800 while it was still light, there were signs that a big counterattack was coming. Out to the west of Trig 33, men of the German 104<sup>th</sup> Motorised Infantry Regiment were seen coming on in waves, over 2000 strong.

Corporal Vic Knight quickly moved his section of Vickers machine guns into position. Here, they poured fire into the advancing ranks and with the artillery gradually cut the attack to ribbons. Knight stood in full view of the enemy directing his section's fire, while Lance Corporal Ron Allenden yelled to his infantry mates, '*Stay in your holes! Keep your bloody heads down!*' Knight was awarded the DCM for his work that day.

The machine guns fired 80,000 rounds that evening, the men having to urinate on the barrels to cool them off. The Field Regiments had also been working overtime, one having fired 9000 rounds, the muzzles of their 25 pounders glowing red hot as darkness descended. The carnage wrought upon the Germans was awful.

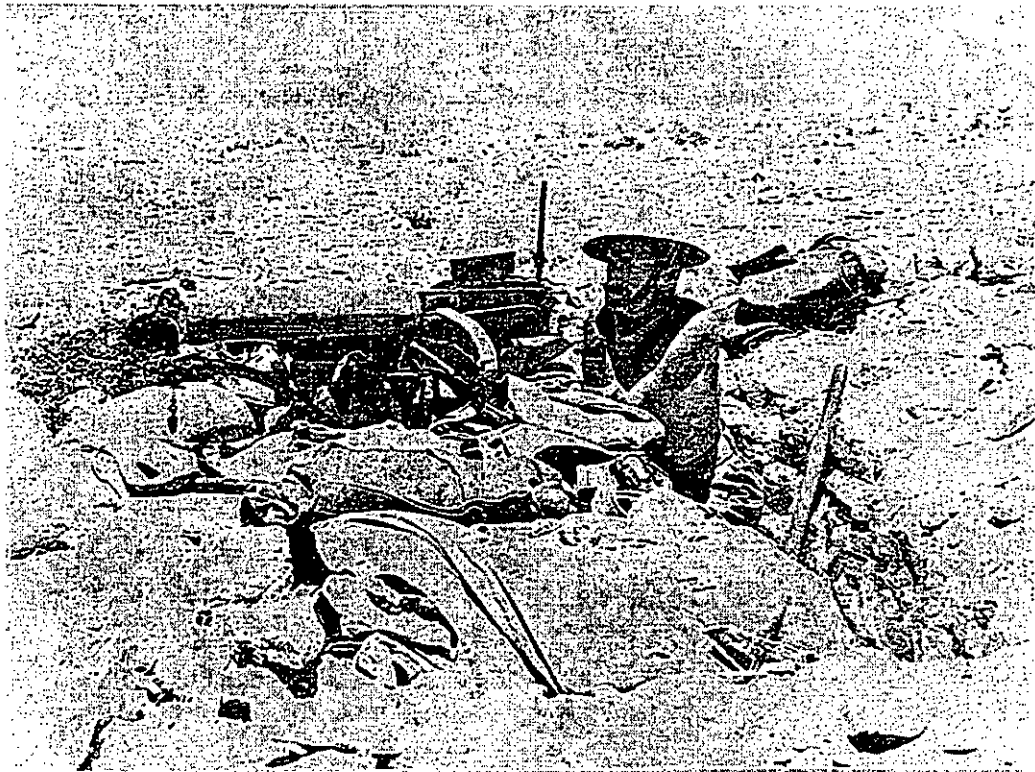
<sup>18</sup> It is not clear whether or not the capture of NFAK 621 led to stopping the US leak. Some say 'The Good Source' as it was called by the Germans was stopped in late June, others say August.

<sup>19</sup> Bungay, Stephen 2002, *Alamein*, p 100.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, Anthony Cave 1975, *Bodyguard of lies*, Harper & Row, New York, p. 104. For further reading see Baillieu, Everard 1985, *Both sides of the hill* and Behrendt, Hans-Otto 1985, *Rommel's intelligence in the Desert Campaign 1941-1943*

Up and down the line of advance the guns played, tossing bodies and bits of bodies in all directions. Even to the hardened defenders it was a sickening sight, and at the height of the battle men found time to feel sympathy for a courageous enemy.<sup>21</sup>

The German infantry were certainly courageous in their attack, however for their commanders to launch such an attack while it was still light over such open ground, knowing the fire they would be subjected to, was surely stupid and wasteful. An Australian patrol early next morning counted around 600 Germans dead on the field.



An Australian machine gun post near El Alamein in July 1942. The forward troops had to endure cramped conditions in slit trenches during the heat of the day, as movement above ground was impossible due to enemy fire. (AWM 041952)

### 13-14 July

On the 13<sup>th</sup> Rommel again shifted his point of attack, this time angled straight in at the Alamein box, to bypass the Australian salient. Tanks of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division were seen forming up for the attack and again every piece of Allied artillery in the area came down upon them. The attack broke up before they even got close. Next day, Rommel sent the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer in again, this time directed at Tel el Eisa. In the afternoon, an air attack went in, then infantry supported by tanks. The attack was poorly coordinated though, coming too long after the air attack had finished. Fighting was intense, but the defenders managed to hold them off for some hours until panzers broke into the Australian positions and once more began caving in the slit trenches. One

<sup>21</sup> Share, Pat (ed) 1978, *Mud and blood: Albury's own, 2/23rd Australian Infantry Battalion*, Heritage, Frankston, Vic., pp 175-176.

memorable sight was that of Private Allan Dwyer standing fully exposed, digging out his mates who had been buried in their hole. Despite their resistance, the Australians were overwhelmed and forced to abandon the position.

Another dangerous situation developed that night when more German tanks supported by infantry managed to break through, the tanks crossing the railway and pushing on towards Pt 26.

The artillery engaged them, the range dropping as the tanks came closer and closer. The artillery inside the salient was actually ordered to prepare to withdraw, but fortunately the tanks were soon forced back. As they retreated, concealed anti-tank guns ambushed them. Gunner Spittle destroyed three with as many rounds before he was killed. Sergeant Muffett and Warrant Officer Digby were also busy, destroying eight more tanks.

From a German account of this action,

To the railway embankment, all went well, then all hell broke loose. Anti-tank fire from front, right and left. Up we get then, our one hundred men storm the enemy whose positions are recognisable only by the flash of their firing. They are damned close! In the fine, brown sand it is difficult to press forward. The panzers veer left and right. Again we lay alone, in a hedgehog formation – heavy infantry and artillery fire comes down. Our nerves are worn out...<sup>22</sup>

Rommel wrote later that evening,

... our units fought their way forward ... as far as the area between the road and the railway, where the attack came to a halt. Fierce fighting followed with the Australians, whom we knew only too well from the time of the Tobruk siege, and lasted well into the night.<sup>23</sup>

### 15-16 July

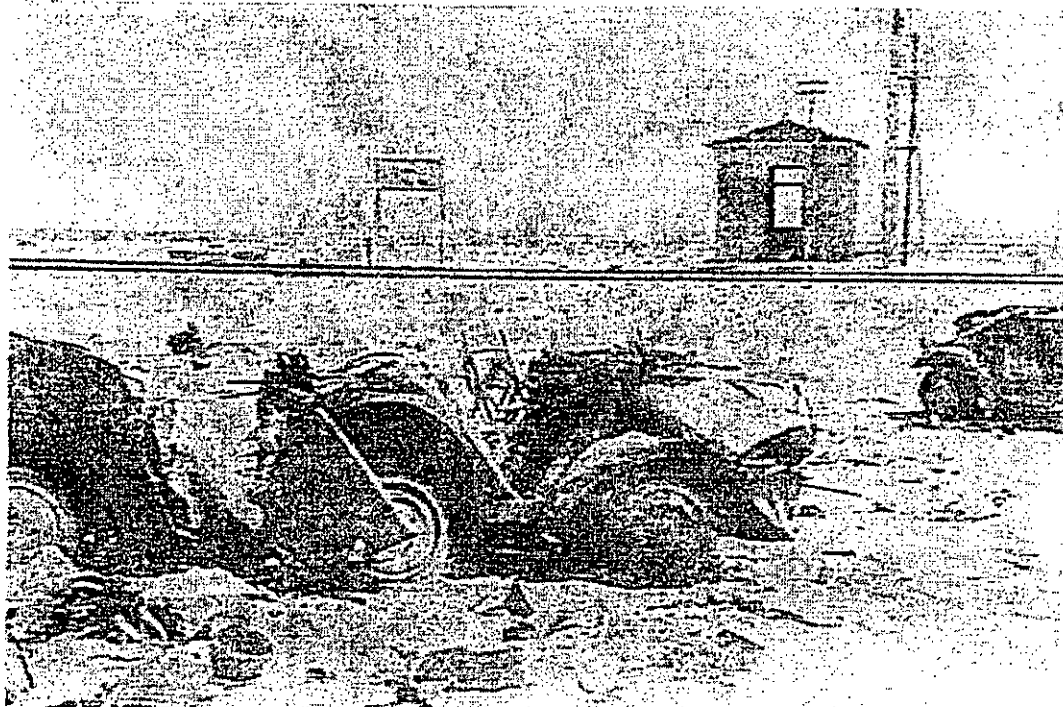
Rommel intended to continue the attack on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>, but that night Auchinleck launched an attack on Ruweisat Ridge, several miles to the south and penetrated the Italian XX Corps. This relieved a lot of pressure on the Australian sector as part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division was shifted to meet this threat. The New Zealanders had a tough day's fighting on Ruweisat Ridge. They took their objectives on the ridge but lacking tank support, became cut off. They sent the codeword for the capture of their objective - 'Faith'. But events that followed would see their faith shaken. Help did not come for the Kiwis, and their day ended in catastrophe, suffering 1405 casualties. As testament to their stubborn resistance, Victoria Crosses were awarded to Sergeant Keith Elliot and Captain Charles Upham (his *second* VC). Wounded, Upham was captured, and was later imprisoned in Colditz Castle, Germany.

Despite his concerns further south, Rommel was still determined to destroy the Australian salient. Four separate attacks by tanks and infantry were directed at Trig 33. Again the defenders repulsed them destroying 10 tanks and causing heavy casualties upon the German infantry. Early next day, 2/23<sup>rd</sup> Bn retook Tel el Eisa in a well carried out operation that yielded another six hundred prisoners, mostly Italian. Yet again, they were shelled there so heavily that it had to be abandoned soon after. Once, when another soldier asked Corporal Vic Knight which was the 'Hill of Jesus', he replied 'See that one they're blowing Christ out of? That's the Hill of Jesus ...'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Aberger, Heinz-Dietrich et al 1972, *Nur ein Bataillon*, (German 8<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Bn, 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division), p 192.

<sup>23</sup> *The Rommel papers*, pp 255-256.

<sup>24</sup> From a 1989 interview with Cpl Vic Knight (2/2<sup>nd</sup> MG Bn), Keith Murdoch Sound Archive, AWM, S00555



Tel el Eisa railway station after the battle. It was the scene of fierce fighting on the evenings of 10 and 14 July when the Germans penetrated the positions of 2/48 Bn. Wrecked German vehicles are seen scattered on the otherwise barren landscape. (AWM 013347)

The 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade Group had shown great skill and determination in capturing and holding this important salient over those first seven days. While the DAF, British tanks and Corps artillery were of invaluable support, the tenacity of the men in the front lines ensured the position would not fall. Rommel threw all he possibly could at them for a week. They were constantly pounded by artillery and attacked, even having the heart of the salient penetrated, but they held on. Only first class troops could have stood that sort of ordeal.

### Keeping the pressure on

In the early hours of 17 July, 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade attacked in order to expand the salient. 2/32<sup>nd</sup> Bn drove west for Trig 22 on Makh Khad Ridge and took it by 0845 after heavy fighting. Meanwhile, 2/43<sup>rd</sup> Bn pushed south for Miteiriya (Ruin) Ridge. They reached it by 0700, however were driven off by strong counterattacks. The Brigade then brought up 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn to consolidate about Makh Khad, with 2/7<sup>th</sup> Field Company engineers sowing a defensive minefield in front of them. Despite their mixed success, 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade had inflicted serious casualties on the enemy, taking hundreds more prisoners mostly from the *Trieste* and *Trento* Divisions. Significantly, they had also forced Rommel to send much of his strength to meet them, which spoiled his plans to exploit the victory at Ruweisat two days before. Delivering another telling blow the DAF compounded Rommel's problems by destroying 2200 tons of ammunition and 50,000 gallons of fuel back at Mersa Matruh. He recalled the 'round the clock bombing' by Allied aircraft as a constant drain on his strength. During July the RAF/DAF flew close to 15,400 sorties in the Middle East Theatre. Auchinleck later praised their efforts stating 'I am certain

that, had it not been for their devoted and exceptional efforts, we should not have been able to stop the enemy on the El Alamein position ...'<sup>25</sup>

Rommel was now becoming exasperated and perhaps showed signs of losing heart. He wrote to his wife later that day,

Dearest Lu,

Things are going downright badly for me at the moment, at any rate, in the military sense. The enemy is using his superiority, especially in infantry, to destroy the Italian formations one by one, and the German formations are much too weak to stand alone. It's enough to make one weep.<sup>26</sup>

Auchinleck considered regrouping before resuming his attacks at the end of the month, but now sensing the enemy were close to cracking, decided to launch another big push straight away. This time he would attack simultaneously along Ruweisat Ridge and from the Australian salient. But another four days would pass before the attack was launched and even then it suffered from hasty preparation.

On the night of the 21<sup>st</sup>, XIII Corps attacked along Ruweisat Ridge with two newly arrived units, the Indian 161<sup>st</sup> Brigade supported by 23<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade, while the New Zealanders were to thrust up from the south. Sadly this second battle for Ruweisat was a repeat run of the disaster on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Strong enemy resistance and confusion in the dark did not prevent the infantry reaching their objective, however by first light they were in bad shape, lacking support and being heavily counterattacked. A headlong charge by 23<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade did manage to push through but lost many tanks straying into the dense minefields and soon found itself trapped in a killing ground. Anti-tank guns and panzers shot them to pieces and this new brigade was practically wiped out. A more experienced unit would not have attempted such a bold and reckless drive. It proved at an unacceptable cost, that Allied tanks could not hope to succeed in that fashion against the more powerful German tanks and anti-tank guns. In total, XIII Corps lost 132 tanks. For the New Zealand infantry it was a terrible case of déjà vu as they were again left badly exposed, suffering another 900 casualties. As the British Official History states, 'The plan of the attack conducted had some merit, however some critical faults. Firstly, two key tasks were given to inexperienced units, and secondly, insufficient time was taken to study the details of the plan ... they saw the wood ahead, but lost sight of the many nearby trees.'<sup>27</sup>

The XXX Corps part of the attack was to be carried out by the Australian 26<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Brigades, and was ambitious in its scope. 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade was to again thrust south onto Miteiriya Ridge, while 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade was to push well out to the west and capture Ring Contour 25, K109 and all of Tel el Eisa. Morshead told his Corps Commander that he thought the task given his division was not only too great, but would also leave them dangerously vulnerable. 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade had to seize these objectives while still holding the ground they now occupied. It not only meant that this weakened the force available for the attack, but also they would be stretched very thin in holding their new gains. Nevertheless, the attack was ordered to proceed.

Before dawn on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, elements of 2/24<sup>th</sup> Bn pushed out towards Ring Contour 25, but were met by withering artillery and machine gun fire from the outset. They reached their objective but had taken heavy casualties and were too weak to hold it. Shortly afterwards, 2/23<sup>rd</sup> made for Kilo 109 and East Pt 24 of Tel el Eisa and took them despite heavy fire. Again, despite strong artillery support, this battalion also found itself pinned down on its objectives and taking casualties. The next battalion to come into play was 2/48<sup>th</sup>, which had to sweep around the left flank of 2/23<sup>rd</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol III*, HMSO, London, p. 335

<sup>26</sup> *The Rommel papers*, p 257.

<sup>27</sup> *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol III*, p. 354

and capture West Pt 24 of Tel el Eisa. Once more heavy fire met this battalion, forcing them to ground short of their objective. They were pinned down and badly exposed. At this point, Private Stan Gurney sprang to his feet and charged the enemy. He attacked two machine gun posts using grenades and bayonet, killing all occupants save one, whom he sent back as a prisoner. Another Australian soldier had lent support in silencing the second post. Charging a third post, Gurney was blown off his feet by grenades, but leapt up again and into the enemy post where he was seen bayoneting the occupants. For his bravery in this action he would be awarded the Victoria Cross. His body was found later among the German positions.

Despite their tenacity withstanding hours under heavy fire, 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade could not hold any of its objectives. Attempts to assist them with Bren carriers and tanks failed, and the survivors made their way back throughout the day and started digging in. The only positive was that the Germans had been forced to abandon both points of Tel el Eisa and would never again occupy it. 2/23<sup>rd</sup> Bn went back onto East 24 the next morning while West 24, being too 'hot' for either side, remained empty.

Further south, 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade's attack had also failed. Pushing forward to seize Trig 22 on Makh Khad Ridge, infantry of 2/32<sup>nd</sup> and 2/43<sup>rd</sup> Bns had been met by withering fire and stopped cold. Later in the evening 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn and supporting British tanks tried to force the objective, but poor coordination between infantry and armour and a bad mistake in map reading saw this attempt also fail. As one soldier of the 2/28<sup>th</sup> later said, it was 'a balls-up altogether.'<sup>28</sup>

Auchinleck's attacks had again been frustrated and both Corps had suffered heavy casualties. He had attacked Rommel not where he was weakest, but where he was strongest, and again coordination of armour and infantry had been lacking. Writing of the battle, Auchinleck pondered that his armour 'though gallant enough, lost control and direction', while the infantry 'made some avoidable mistakes.' 'Perhaps I asked too much of them ...'<sup>29</sup> But he was soon to ask for more.

### **Ruin Ridge: 26-28 July**

Auchinleck's final attempt to break the enemy began on 26 July. His Special Order of the Day read:

To all ranks EIGHTH ARMY from C-in-C.

You have done well. You have turned a retreat into a firm stand and stopped the enemy on the threshold of EGYPT. You have done more. You have wrenched the initiative from him by sheer guts and hard fighting and put HIM on the defensive in these last weeks. He has lost heavily and is short of men, ammunition, petrol and other things. He is trying desperately to bring these over to AFRICA but the Navy and the Air Force are after his ships. You have done well but I ask you for more. We must not slacken. If we can stick it we will break him. STICK TO IT.<sup>30</sup>

The objective of the next attack was to break through between Miteiriya and Deir el Dhib. The South Africans were to make a gap through the minefields for the British 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade to come through driving west. The Australian 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade was to attack south onto Miteiriya (Ruin) Ridge, then drive northwest along it. They would also rely on making gaps in the dense minefields. The spearhead of their attack would be made by 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn. Tanks of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division were to then exploit further westwards.

<sup>28</sup> Johnston, Mark & Stanley, Peter 2002, *Alamein: the Australian story*, Oxford, Melbourne, p 94. From an interview with Jack Hawkes, 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn, (1989), Keith Murdoch Sound Archive, AWM, SOO527.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p 97.

<sup>30</sup> Maughan, Barton 1966, *Australia in the war of 1939-1945, Vol III, Tobruk and El Alamein*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, p 590.

Beginning at midnight on 26 July, 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn advanced and after making a small gap in the minefield were on Ruin Ridge an hour later. Casualties had been moderate, but several supporting Bren carriers had been destroyed and were burning brightly, blocking the gap in the minefield. 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn commander Lt Colonel McCarter sent the message, '*We are here*'. The battalion dug in as best it could and waited ...

69<sup>th</sup> Brigade, advancing at 0200 met heavy resistance and soon their attack broke down in confusion. German counterattacks caught them in this state and the best part of the brigade was completely overrun. Once more armoured support did not materialise in time, the tank commander deeming the gaps in the minefield insufficient. Hours ticked by.

2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn had beaten elements of the German 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division off the ridge and inflicted serious casualties. Rommel again organised his trademark rapid counterstroke. Strong battle groups supported by tanks now closed in on the 2/28<sup>th</sup> as the early morning wore on. Repeated calls were sent for more ammunition before their radio went dead. The sounds of heavy fighting from the ridge intensified. At 0905 they finally got their damaged radio going and called Brigade Headquarters. The first words heard there were '*We are in trouble.*' Over the next hour the signallers at brigade recorded the battalion's desperate plight,

0914 from 2/28<sup>th</sup>: We need help now. We need armour ... Rock it in!

[The artillery stepped up supporting fire, pausing once thinking they were firing on British tanks before resuming. Minor corrections were made as requested]

0943 from 2/28<sup>th</sup>: There are tanks all around us ...

From Brigade: Who's are they?

From 2/28<sup>th</sup>: They are Jerries ... You'd better hurry, Rock artillery in!

0949 from Brigade: Our Witchcraft [code for tanks] with you soon. Stick it Mac!

From 2/28<sup>th</sup>: We are one third strength

[British armour tried to get through to them but were beaten back, losing 22 tanks.]

0952 from Brigade: Enclosing you in an artillery box

and finally,

1003 from 2/28<sup>th</sup>: We have got to give in.<sup>31</sup>

With their lines of communication and retreat completely cut, 2/28<sup>th</sup> Bn were then squeezed on three sides by strong German panzer and infantry groups until they were overrun. The battalion was virtually wiped out, losing 65 killed and 489 missing, most of whom were wounded and taken prisoner. The British 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade losses had been slightly heavier, totalling about 600. It was a tragic end to a month that had such encouraging successes in its first half, yet demoralising failures with heavy loss in its second.

### The aftermath of July

'So ended the great campaign of the summer...' wrote Rommel,<sup>32</sup> for now both sides were exhausted, as they had been at the end of June. Eighth Army was spent and needed time to recover and replenish. Rommel's army was so weakened by the past two months' fighting that they could not possibly launch a renewal of their offensive. They had barely held on. Eighth

<sup>31</sup> Australian War Memorial Official Record, AWM54, 526/6/5, HQ 9th Division - Report on operations - 24th Brigade - 3 to 29 July and to 6 November 1942

<sup>32</sup> The Rommel papers, p 260.



Army held the upper hand slightly, but by now they had lost many tanks and most infantry formations were seriously depleted. Conceding defender's advantage to Rommel, Auchinleck was right to now call a halt to proceedings. Now the race to reinforce and resupply would begin in earnest, a battle fought at sea and in the skies.

As stated, the importance of the July battles is often overshadowed by the second battle that began in October. But a few authors have recognised a greater importance in the July battles, as pointed out by Charles Messenger in his book *The unknown Alamein*.<sup>33</sup> While he admits that these include biographers and 'defenders' of Auchinleck, which is hardly surprising, there are others. Australian Official Historian Barton Maughan described the successful attack on 10 July as 'the turning point of the war in North Africa'<sup>34</sup>, while more recent authors Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley suggest that the July fighting 'laid the foundations of the October victory' and that its subsequent 'obscurity is undeserved.'<sup>35</sup> In addition, British Official Historian I.S.O. Playfair wrote: 'In retrospect the vital importance of the July fighting stands out clearly, and to General Auchinleck belongs the credit for turning retreat into counterattack.'<sup>36</sup> To further stress the importance of the *timing* of the battle, we can look to none other than Winston Churchill who reflected that in July 1942

I was politically at my weakest and without a gleam of military success...<sup>37</sup>

From the achievements of the Eighth Army during this period, despite the reverses of the latter half of the month, perhaps Churchill should have noticed there *was* in fact a gleam of military success, and signs of a more shining victory on the near horizon. In other theatres there would be hope as well. In the next few months the Allies would follow up their important victory at Midway with success in Papua and Guadalcanal, while in Russia, the Germans descended into disaster at Stalingrad.

In early August, Auchinleck was reassigned to command in Persia and Iraq, and Lt General Bernard Montgomery took command of the Eighth Army. Churchill had finally lost patience when Auchinleck told him that he could not resume the offensive until mid September. Ironically Montgomery would get away with waiting until the end of October to launch his offensive. By that time, the balance of power had swung so much in favour of the Allies that victory was virtually assured.

The Australians of 9<sup>th</sup> Division had suffered 2700 casualties (600 dead) in July, a cost that would be matched and slightly exceeded in October/November. By the end of it, close to 6000 would be casualties (about 1200 dead or missing). That represented a full third of the division's strength, a casualty and death rate akin to the Western Front of twenty five years before.

9<sup>th</sup> Division continued to hold the coastal sector around Tel el Eisa. It would be from this key position that they would launch their part of the attack in October. As in July, they would play a prominent and decisive role. Rommel's last attempt to break through the Alamein line at Alam Halfa on 30/31 August was defeated easily. On 23 October, the Second Battle of El Alamein opened, in which ultimately the Allies would deliver a crushing defeat to Rommel's *Panzerarmee* that would soon see it ejected from Africa altogether. The pendulum had now swung irreversibly in favour of the Allies.

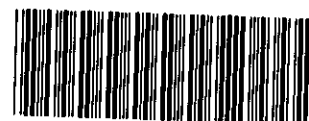
<sup>33</sup> Messenger, Charles 1982, *The unknown Alamein*, Ian Allen Ltd, Shepperton, Surrey, p 3. Messenger himself considers the battles in July to be 'undoubtedly the turning point of the desert war' (p 58)

<sup>34</sup> Baillieu, Everard 1985, *Both sides of the hill*, 2/24<sup>th</sup> Battalion Assn, Burwood, Vic., p ix (introduction by Barton Maughan)

<sup>35</sup> Johnston, Mark & Stanley, Peter 2002, *Alamein: the Australian story*, pp 115-116.

<sup>36</sup> *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol III*, P 377

<sup>37</sup> Churchill, Sir Winston S. 1951, *The Second World War, vol. IV*, Cassell, London, p. 390



## *La Guerra Marina 1936-39* The Spanish Civil War at Sea

Graham Wilson

The Spanish Civil War was, one of the pivotal conflicts of the 20th century. It is also one of the most studied. Literal mountains of paper and oceans of ink have been expended in examining almost every aspect of the war, in all of the world's major languages. Books in Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, German, Italian, even Chinese, are available to both scholars and laypersons interested in almost every facet of the war - the land war; the war in the air; the economics of the conflict; the politics of every colour and shade. But among this flood of material, next to nothing has been written about the naval side of the war, certainly in English at any rate.

Many otherwise excellent general accounts of the war never mention naval activity at all. One of the best accounts of the war, certainly one of the most comprehensive and well balanced accounts, Gabriel Jackson's *History of the Spanish Civil War*, dismisses the naval side of the war in few dozen paragraphs scattered throughout the book. This is inexcusable as the naval war, little known and largely unsung, even at the time, was crucial to the outcome of the conflict in general.

It is probable that most readers will have at least some knowledge of the Spanish Civil War. For instance, it is almost certain that most, if not all, readers have heard of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in 1937 with its attendant loss of life. How many readers, however, have heard of the loss of the Nationalist battlecruiser *España* in the same year and the sinking of its sister ship, the Republican battlecruiser *Jaime I*, several weeks later with a combined loss of over 300 Spanish sailors?

Most people will be aware of the activities of the German Condor Legion in testing German military equipment, tactics and aircraft and providing battle experience for German army and air force personnel. How many, however, are aware of Operation URSULA, the German Navy's top secret submarine campaign in support of the Nationalist Navy?

Finally, any one with a reasonable knowledge of the war will be aware of the Republican Army's last throw of the dice in attempting to force the River Ebro in 1938. Who, however, has heard of the gallant, quixotic and ultimately doomed attempt by the Republican destroyer *Jose Luis Diez* to rejoin the rest of the Republican fleet in the Mediterranean in 1938 by trying to force the Straits of Gibraltar disguised as a Royal Navy destroyer? Not too many one would suspect.

As can be gathered by the introduction, the Spanish Civil War definitely had a naval aspect and it is this aspect which will be addressed in the following article. The article will in fact demonstrate that the naval aspect of the war was crucial to the final outcome of the conflict. Before proceeding, however, I wish to stress that I have no personal axe to grind and in fact came to the conclusion many years ago that there were no "goodies" or "baddies" in this war. Both sides saw themselves as patriots and the saviours of Spain. This, of course, was the greatest tragedy of the war.

In 1931, at the end of a long series of political crises, a Socialist dominated government took power in Madrid and declared a republic. Generally well meaning and possessed of an undisputed raw idealism, the Republican government unfortunately was beset with bitter religious, class and ideological divisions. These divisions soon led Spain to the brink of anarchy and social chaos. As the government began to lose control of the political and security situation and the Republic floundered towards disaster, a military led revolt was mounted in July 1936. The aim of the conspirators was to depose the government, reinstate the monarchy and stabilise the security

situation. Unfortunately, the rebels' hopes for a quick victory were dashed and rather than saving Spain the revolt triggered an explosion of violence and counter violence in the Spanish people.

After a confused, chaotic and bloody first few days, Spain found itself divided into two fairly evenly matched armed camps. Left leaning and regionalistic "Republicans" versus right leaning and centralist "Nationalists." There were no shades of in-between in the war, you were either a "Red" or a "Fascist" and that was that. When the dust of those first few days had settled, physically speaking Spain was divided roughly in two with the Republicans holding the south, apart from a few embattled Nationalist enclaves, while the Nationalists basically held the north, apart from a strip of territory running from the French border about three quarters of the way across to the Atlantic coast line. More importantly, the Nationalists held all but one of the strategically important Balearic Islands and controlled all of Spanish Morocco with its large professional and battle hardened colonial army.

As well as the nation, the armed forces were roughly divided between the two sides with both the army and the air force being split almost equally between the two protagonists. The air force, however, a more technical organisation with an educated personnel base, tended to side with the Republic. The two paramilitary forces, the Guardia Civil and the Guardia d'Asalto in general sided completely with one side or the other. The Civil Guards tended to support the Nationalist while the Assault Guards favoured the Republic. It should be noted, however, that personal survival probably played a great part in one's choice of side in the conflict. Doubtless there were many Republican sympathisers caught on the wrong side of the line who threw in their lot with the rebels out of sheer self preservation. Just as certainly there were many Nationalist sympathisers who were forced to throw in with the Republicans for the same reason.

As with the Air Force and the Civil and Assault Guards, so the army and navy split along ideological lines. Although the all-important Army of Africa, made up of long service, battle hardened regulars, went over to the Nationalists almost to a man, on the mainland it was not so one sided. The confusion of the first few days was made worse by bloody battles between various factions fighting to gain control of Army units and the all-important arsenals. By the time the situation had "stabilised," for want of a better word, it transpired that, apart from the Army of Africa, about 33,000 men of the Army stood by the government while about 24,000 declared for Franco and the Nationalists. Of the Army officer corps of about 8,500, some 3,500 were killed or imprisoned by the Republicans in the first days and of the remainder, 2,000 sided with the government and 3,000 with the rebels.

What about the Navy? At the outbreak of the war the Spanish Navy was, from the point of view of most of its ships at least, a reasonably modern and up to date force. It was ranked 7th or 8th in the world. Of particular pride for the Spanish Navy was the fact that almost all of its ships were Spanish built (although largely from foreign, mostly British, designs). On the other hand, the navy had not fought a major engagement since the Spanish-American War of 1898 and that conflict had been a humiliating disaster for Spain and its navy. The navy *had* been actively involved in operations in the conquest of Morocco during the 1920's. While the navy had performed with reasonable credit in the Moroccan and Riff Campaigns, it should be remembered that there was no naval opposition and any glory won had been tarnished by the loss of the flagship of the fleet. The battlecruiser *España*, pride of the fleet, ran aground off the Moroccan coast in 1923 and was totally wrecked in an ensuing storm.

Beside the lack of recent combat experience, of particular importance was the fact that despite a number of wide ranging reforms dating from as far back as 1907, training for both officers and ratings was old fashioned, rigid and unimaginative.

On that fateful day in 1936 when the generals rebelled, the Spanish Navy had a strength of approximately 20,000 men. Its major bases were at Cadiz and Cartagena in the south and El Ferrol in the north. There was also a large secondary at Mahon in the Balearic Islands. Digressing slightly, El Ferrol on the Atlantic coast was not only the major ship building and repair base for the navy, it was also the birth place and home town of General Francisco Franco. Franco in fact came from a naval family, his ne'er do well father being a senior officer in the Corps of Naval Administrators, his maternal grandfather had been a flag officer in the Corps of Naval Engineers and his brother was a naval line officer who eventually rose to be an admiral. Franco himself had been destined for a naval career and it was only by a stroke of fate that he ended up at the Infantry Academy at Toledo rather than at the Naval Cadet School at El Ferrol. It is fascinating to conjecture what the outcome of the Spanish Civil War would have been had Franco donned navy blue instead of army green!

The navy boasted a fleet of 66 combatant ships representing a fairly balanced mix of cruisers, destroyers, submarines and smaller surface combatants. The order of battle of the Spanish Navy at the outbreak of the war is shown in Table 1.

TYPE	No.	REMARKS
Battlecruisers	2	Both obsolete; <i>España</i> laid up out of service at El Ferrol
Heavy Cruisers	2	Both still under construction
Light Cruisers	5	<i>Almirante Cervera</i> under construction; <i>Méndez Núñez</i> on detached service in Spanish West Africa; <i>Navarra</i> moored out of service at Cadiz
Destroyers	15	<i>Gravina</i> , <i>Ulloa</i> and <i>Jorge Juan</i> under construction; <i>Velasco</i> in dry dock
Torpedo Boats	12	British Thornycroft type
Sloops	6	Rated as gunboats; all obsolete
Minelayers	3	
Coast Guard Ships	9	
Submarines	12	6 x "B" Class commissioned between 1921 - 1926; 6 x "C" Class commissioned between 1928 - 1930

**Table 1 - Spanish Navy Strength June 1936**

The two battlecruisers *España* and *Jaime I* were both old ships, dating back to the First World War. *España* in fact was so decrepit that she was laid up out of commission at El Ferrol. Just to clear up any confusion, the *España* laid up at El Ferrol in 1936 was not the *España* mentioned above as having been wrecked off Morocco in 1923. When the original *España* was lost in 1923, her sister ship *Alfonso XIII* took over as flag. The newly installed and implacably anti-monarchist Republican government renamed *Alfonso XIII* to *España* in 1932.

The cruisers were the backbone of the navy. The two heavy cruisers *Canarias* and *Baleares* were both brand new and were in fact not even in commission at the outbreak of the war. Construction on the two ships had been delayed by a series of economic crises and at the outbreak of the war, they were still fitting out at El Ferrol. *Libertad*, *Miguel de Cervantes* and *Almirante Cervera* had been commissioned between 1926 and 1930 and mounted eight 6 inch guns each as well as a useful mix of smaller guns and torpedoes. All three ships were at El Ferrol when the war broke out, *Almirante Cervera* being in dry dock. *Méndez Núñez* was somewhat older than the three just mentioned, having been commissioned in 1924. She was in fact a close relative to the contemporary HMAS *Adelaide*. *Méndez Núñez* had a somewhat odd mix of combustion machinery, six oil fired boilers and six coal fired boilers, which hampered her performance throughout her career. She was on detached duty at the Spanish West African colony of Guinea at the outbreak of the war. The oldest of the navy's cruisers was *Navarra*, commissioned in 1922. Originally named *Reina Victoria Eugenia* in honour of the wife of King Alfonso XIII, her name was changed to *Republica* in 1932. The Nationalists would change her name yet again to *Navarra*. Although relatively well armed,

*Navarra* was very slow and this made her unsuitable for any duty other than blockading. She was in fact moored out of service at Cadiz at the outbreak of the war.

To complement the cruisers, the Spanish Navy operated 17 modern destroyers, 14 of the "Churruca" class and three of the "Alsedo" class. The "Churuccas" were all completed between 1928 and 1937. Note the last date - *Gravina*, *Escano*, *Ulloa*, *Jorge Juan* and *Ciscar* were all still under construction at the outbreak of the war and were not completed until hostilities were well and truly under way. The "Alsedo" class ships were slightly older, having entered service in 1924 and 1925. Of the destroyers, all but one, *Velasco*, would become part of the Republican fleet. The other major combatant portion of the Spanish Navy was its submarine arm. This consisted of 12 relatively modern submarines. Six of these were of the older "B" class, called somewhat unimaginatively *B1 - B6*. These boats were commissioned between 1921 and 1924. The other six boats were of the more modern "C" class. These boats, named *C1 - C6*, had been commissioned between 1927 and 1930. The fleet was rounded out by an assortment of gunboats, sloops, minelayers and various auxiliaries.

As with the Army, the rising of the generals in July 1936 was a signal for fratricidal fighting to erupt in the fleet as factions attempted to gain control of the ships and bases. When the fighting of the first few days had subsided, the Nationalists controlled the bases at El Ferrol and Cadiz while the Republic retained control of Cartagena and Mahon. Fighting had been particularly savage at El Ferrol as the highly politicised enlisted ranks of the Navy were largely on the side of the Republic. Caught ashore in the centre of a conservative and staunchly monarchist area, Republican sailors put up a stiff fight to keep control of their ships but were overwhelmed by the local Army garrison backed up by monarchist Galician militia.

When they captured the base at El Ferrol, the Nationalists gained control of the old battlecruiser *España*, the two new heavy cruisers under construction *Canarias* and *Baleares* and the older cruiser *Almirante Cervera* which was in dry dock. They also gained their one and only destroyer *Velasco*. The old cruiser *Republica* was captured at Cadiz and towed to El Ferrol. There she was refitted and renamed *Navarra* and pressed into service. *Navarra* was so old and decrepit, however, that she did not complete her refit and join the Nationalist fleet until June 1938.

At the very outbreak of the uprising, the cruisers *Libertad* and *Miguel de Cervantes*, then at El Ferrol, had been ordered by the (Republican) Ministry of Marine to sail for Cadiz. En route the officers tried to declare the ships for the Nationalist but the crews mutinied, killed some of the officers, imprisoned the rest and sailed the ships to Cartagena where they joined the Republican fleet. The illustration below shows *Miguel de Cervantes* at anchor in Cartagena a few days after the uprising. She flies the Republican flag and members of her crew are seen on the stern giving the clenched fist Republican salute.

The old cruiser *Méndez Núñez* was on detached service in Spanish West Africa when the war broke out. After some indecision the bulk of the officers, probably out of sheer self-preservation, decided to remain loyal to the Republic and the old ship made her way back to Cartagena where she also joined the Republican fleet. This voyage was a major epic worthy of an article in its own right. Unfortunately, space precludes recounting the tale here.

Apart from *Velasco*, the Republic retained all of the destroyers, including the five under construction. This lack was to hamper Nationalist operations throughout the war. As with the destroyers, so with the submarines. All of the "C" class boats plus *B-5* and *B-6* were in port at Cartagena at the outbreak of the war; *B-2*, *B-3* and *B-4* were at Pollensa and *B-1* was at Mahon. All of the submarines and their officers and crews declared for the Republic. The relative strengths of the two fleets at the beginning of the war following the first days of the conflict are shown in Table 2 below.

TYPE	REPUBLICAN	NATIONALIST
Battlecruisers	<i>Jaime I</i>	<i>España</i>
Heavy Cruisers	NIL	<i>Canarias, Baleares</i>
Light Cruisers	<i>Libertad, Miguel de Cervantes, Méndez Núñez</i>	<i>Almirante Cervera, Navarra</i>
Destroyers	<i>Sanchez Barcaiztegui, Jose Luis Diez, Almirante Ferrandiz, Lepanto, Churruca Alcala Galiano, Almirante Valdez, Almirante Antequera, Almirante Miranda Gravina, Escaño, Ulloa, Jorge Juan, Ciscar, Alsedo, Lazaga</i>	<i>Velasco</i>
Submarines	<i>B-1, B-2, B-3, B-4, B-5, B-6, C-1, C-2, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6</i>	NIL
Sloops	<i>Laya</i>	<i>Antonio Canovas del Castillo, Jose Canalejas, Eduardo Dato, Calvo Sotelo</i>
Torpedo Boats	<i>TB3, TB4, TB13, TB14, TB17, TB18, TB20, TB21, TB22</i>	<i>TB2, TB7, TB9, TB16, TB19</i>
Seaplane Tender	<i>Dedalo</i>	NIL

**Table 2 - Relative Strengths of Republican and Nationalist Fleets 1936**

At first glance this table indicates that the Republic had an overwhelming advantage in numbers. This is, however, somewhat misleading. Undeniably the Republic had the ships but the Nationalists had the trained men in the persons of the officers, the majority of whom had declared for the rebels. Even those officers aboard Republican ships who had declared for the Republic were not entirely safe. As an example, when the submarine commanders and their crews declared for the Republic, those boats ready for sea were all ordered to Malaga. From there they were to commence war patrols to interdict ships bringing the Army of Africa to the mainland. On arrival at Malaga, however, the Republican authorities dismissed the Submarine Squadron commander, *Capitan de Navio* Guimera and all of his captains. This was a taste of things to come. The action was repeated with the officers of *Méndez Núñez* who, despite declaring for the Republic, were dismissed when the old cruiser eventually managed to make her way back to Cartagena from Spanish Guinea. Thus, the Nationalists were able to flesh out the skeleton crews of their ships with enthusiastic volunteers who could largely be trained on the job by the officers and warrant officers who had declared for the rebels. For the Republicans, however, the lack of trained officers was to hamper naval efficiency and operations for the entire war.

The Nationalists were quick to seize the naval initiative. The ageing battlecruiser *España* was quickly refitted and, manned by a scratch crew, she put to sea in company with the destroyer *Velasco* on 12 August 1936 to carry out blockade duty on the northern Republican coast. This was not without its risks as the old lady was torpedoed by a Republican submarine on 31 August. Luckily the torpedo was a dud.

Her sister ship *Jamie I*, meanwhile, had joined with the cruisers *Libertad* and *Miguel de Cervantes* and seven destroyers of the Republican Navy and sailed for the international port of Tangier where the squadron dropped anchor on 20 July 1936. They commenced operations two days later with a bombardment at La Linea on the Spanish coast just north of Gibraltar, followed by a similar operation at Ceuta on the North African coast on 25 July. These operations outraged the International Committee which governed Tangier and the squadron was eventually forced out of the city at the end of July and moved its base of operations to Malaga on the southern coast of Spain. At the end of July the Republican submarine *C-4* was caught on the surface in the Straits of Gibraltar by Nationalist aircraft and bombed. Limping into Tangier, she was immediately interned by the exasperated International Committee (she was later released).

The Nationalists meanwhile had been active in trying to move troops from Africa to the mainland. Much has been made over the years of the use by Franco of German and Italian transport aircraft to fly his African army to Spain. This is in fact not quite the whole truth and in point of fact, certainly in my opinion, it is something of a myth. A myth because, although the air bridge did occur and it did have an enormous moral impact in the early days of the war, it was really nothing more than a spectacular stunt. The aircraft provided were old and small in the main. The German Junkers transports for instance were only able to carry eight troops at a time. The numbers of troops moved by air were in fact quite small. Had Franco relied on aircraft only, he would probably be still ferrying men across the Straits today. In fact, the bulk of the Army of Africa moved to the mainland by sea.

It was for this reason that the Republican fleet had deployed its main surface and subsurface strength to the south. The first successful Nationalist convoy forced its way through the Republican blockade on 5 August. As most of the Nationalist fleet, such as it was, was in the north, the convoy was escorted by one of the small ships that had been serving in Moroccan waters, the ancient gunboat *Dato*. Although a large portion of the Republican fleet was deployed to interdict the convoy, the Republican ships were so poorly handled and commanded that only the destroyer *Alcala Galiano* managed to even get near the convoy. Even then the Republican destroyer, lacking experienced officers and senior ratings, was driven off by the far smaller and vastly inferior *Dato* and the convoy got safely through to Algeciras to land several thousand well armed and well equipped combat troops to support the Nationalist drive on Madrid.

The saga of the first Nationalist convoy had an interesting postscript. As *Dato* was about to enter the harbour after seeing her charges safely docked, she sighted a destroyer rounding Gibraltar's Europa Point. Immediately assuming that the enemy had returned *Dato* turned furiously to the attack again. Even as the newcomer was straddled by *Dato's* first salvo, however, she hoisted a huge White Ensign at the foremast and was subsequently identified as HMS *Basilisk*. Profuse apologies followed. This was the first of a number of mistaken identity incidents that would occur throughout the war. These came about because the Spanish destroyers were built to British designs and thus at first glance would have been difficult to distinguish. Hazy visual conditions and the close proximity of the pre-war Spanish naval hull colour to the Royal Navy's "Mediterranean Grey" only added to the problem. Sadly, the gallant little *Dato* was lost two days later when the Republican cruisers *Jaime I* and *Libertad* bombarded Algeciras.

Towards the end of August the Republicans mounted an abortive operation designed to capture the Nationalist held Balearic Island of Mallorca. Although the Republican cruiser *Libertad* conducted a reasonably efficient and effective naval bombardment in support of the army, the operation ultimately failed and *Libertad* returned to Malaga to rejoin the Gibraltar blockade.

Several of the Republic's submarines had been deployed to the north into the Spanish end of the Bay of Biscay, locally referred to as the Mar Cantabrico. On 18 September the Republican Navy suffered its first combat loss when the submarine *B-6* was caught on the surface off Santander by the Nationalist armed tugs *Galicia* and *Ciriza*. A surface gun action quickly drew the attention of both Republican shore batteries and the Nationalist destroyer *Velasco*. Despite support from the shore batteries *B-6* was totally outnumbered and outgunned. She was eventually so seriously damaged that her crew scuttled her and abandoned ship to be taken prisoner.

A dramatic little episode, one of many which typified the bitter nature of the war, occurred at the northern town of Gijon on 4 October. This town and the nearby of Oviedo had been captured from the Republicans in surprise attacks on 4 September. Unfortunately for the Nationalists, while Oviedo was fairly easily held against heavy odds, holding Gijon proved not as easy as taking it. Hard pressed to find men in the north the Nationalists had only been able to spare 180 men to garrison Gijon. This tiny force held out for eight weeks against determined attacks by Republican Asturian militia but finally

succumbed on 4 October. In a desperate attempt to hold the town the Nationalist cruiser *Almirante Cervera* had been providing naval gunfire support. At the end, as the Asturian militiamen were overrunning the last Nationalist position in the old fort in the town the Nationalist commander, *Coronel Pinilla*, broadcast a message to the captain of *Almirante Cervera* which read: "Fire on us. We have the enemy inside. Fire on us, I repeat." In response to this message the cruiser laid down a barrage which obliterated a large number of Republican troops, along with the last of the Nationalist defenders. Gijon was to remain in Republican hands until 1938.

The blockade of the Straits of Gibraltar meanwhile had continued. While fairly ineffectual, the blockade did at least hinder Nationalist operations in the region. For this reason, it has always been hard for me to understand why on 26 September the Republican naval command ordered *Jaime I*, *Libertad*, *Miguel de Cervantes* and five destroyers to cross the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic and steam north to support Republican operations on the northern coast. While it is undeniably true that the Republican held territories in the north were quite isolated and were being actively harassed by *España* and *Velasco*, the decision to send the ships north was a grave strategic error, as will be seen.

After securing the naval dockyard at El Ferrol, the Nationalist had worked furiously to bring the two heavy cruisers into commission. By a supreme effort they managed to add *Canarias* to their fleet in early September. In order to get *Canarias* to sea and into the fight as soon as possible she had been commissioned with only three 8-inch turrets instead of the planned four. She also was armed with smaller AA guns than originally designed. The fourth 8-inch turret would, however, be added later in the war. Besides decreased armament, *Canarias* also had a brand new crew made up mostly of untrained volunteers. Despite this, when the Nationalist naval command learned that the bulk of the Republican fleet had cleared the Straits of Gibraltar and headed north, they immediately despatched *Canarias* and *Almirante Cervera* to the Straits to sweep them clean of the remaining Republican ships. On 29 September the two cruisers spotted the Republican destroyers *Almirante Ferrandiz* and *Gravina* and immediately engaged them. In a short fight *Almirante Ferrandiz* was sunk with almost all hands and *Gravina* was badly damaged and forced to flee. Thus, in only a few short minutes the Nationalists were able to wrest control of the all-important Straits of Gibraltar from the Republicans. The Nationalists were now free to carry out unimpeded convoy action across the strait. This ability to move the 24,000 man Army of Africa across from Morocco to Spain unhindered was (in my personal view) one of the ultimate winning factors of the war. This, I believe, proves the premise that the sadly neglected naval aspect of the war was in fact a *decisive* element of the war.

As noted above, I am at a loss to explain why the Republican Navy made this basic and glaring strategic blunder. Possibly some of the senior Republican officers may not have been as committed to the Republican cause as they seemed and issued the orders as a form of sabotage. That is, of course, pure conjecture on my part. The fact remains, however, that the mistake *was* made and the Republic was to suffer its consequences.

Meanwhile, when the powerful Republican fleet had appeared in the Atlantic the tiny Nationalist Navy very wisely stayed out of its way. The Republicans spent a few unproductive and frustrating weeks trying to run the Nationalist ships to bay while conducting a number of fairly useless bombardments. Eventually they were ordered to return to the Mediterranean in mid October. The Nationalists were aware of the redeployment of the Republican squadron and deployed *Canarias* and *Almirante Cervera* across the Republican's intended path but the two forces failed to find each other. In fact they actually crossed each other's paths during the night of 16 October but neither was aware of the other. As a result the Republican squadron was able to rejoin the remainder of the fleet at Cartagena. But, the Nationalist Navy remained in control of the Straits of Gibraltar and this control was never to be seriously challenged again by the Republic.



Republican naval morale would not have been helped by the loss of the *B-5* on 12 October. The submarine was lost under mysterious circumstances. It has long been theorised among Spanish naval historians, however, that *B-5* was sunk by her captain, *Capitan de Corbeta* Carlos Barreda Terry, who was believed to be a Nationalist sympathiser. Certainly Terry's largely Nationalist sympathetic family revered him as a hero who sacrificed his own life in the Nationalist cause.

Despite the loss of two submarines, however, the Republican Navy still held a total advantage in this area and the Nationalists desperately caste around for some submarines of their own. A meeting had been held in September between senior Nationalist, Italian and German officers where the question of the provision of submarines had been discussed in detail. At this meeting Admiral Canaris of the *Kriegsmarine* had given tacit agreement to the provision of a small German submarine to the Nationalists but had made no promises. The following month, however, Hitler and Ciano had signed the Rome-Berlin Axis Agreement and here it was secretly agreed to provide submarine support to Franco's navy. As a result of this agreement, and over the strenuous objections of *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine* led by C-in-C *Grossadmiral* Raeder, the *Kriegsmarine* was ordered to launch Operation URSULA. This was a top-secret operation designed to test Germany's submarines under combat conditions, to test and develop U-boat tactics and to give selected U-boat personnel combat experience. URSULA was officially launched on 20 November 1936 when two Type VIIA U-boats, *U-33* and *U-34*, slipped out of Kiel, after dark and under the most stringent security, bound for the Mediterranean. The submarines cleared the Straits of Gibraltar on the night of 27-28 November and on 29 November officially relieved the Italian submarines *Topazio* and *Torricelli*, which had been supporting Nationalist operations. The Italian boats withdrew to their base at La Maddalena and the U-boats commenced war patrols.

The U-boats had very little luck. *U-34* attacked a Republican destroyer on 1 December but her torpedo went wild, struck the shore and exploded. The explosion was not linked to a torpedo and the operation remained secret. A second attack was mounted the following night but was hurriedly abandoned when the target was identified at the last moment as a patrolling British destroyer! Attacks on 5 and 8 December also failed. *U-33* had no better luck. Attacks planned or mounted on 2, 3, 5 and 6 December all resulted in no hits. URSULA finally achieved a result in the afternoon of 12 December. *U-34*, on course for Malaga, spotted the Republican submarine *C-3* on the surface and attacked. A torpedo launched by the U-boat struck the Republican submarine forward of the conning tower and she broke up and sank in seconds. The only survivors were two sailors who had been on deck disposing of food scraps from the midday meal and the sub's navigating officer, a merchant navy officer who had been pressed into naval service, who had been chatting with the sub's captain on the conning tower at the time of the explosion. The three men were thrown clear and picked up by a fishing boat that was nearby at the time. Interestingly, Republican authorities at first attributed the loss of *C-3* to an enemy submarine. This theory was quickly discarded, however, in the absence of evidence. The Republican Navy of course did not know of the presence of hostile submarines and therefore decided that the loss of their submarine could not have been the result of a submarine attack. In the end it was decided that *C-3* had been lost as the result of an explosion in the battery compartment. It was not until the end of the Second World War in fact that the *U-34's* role in the loss of *C-3* was revealed.

The two U-boats departed the Mediterranean on 15 December. At that time, due to coordination problems, it was agreed that only Italian submarines would operate in the Mediterranean. From that time onward German submarines deployed on Operation URSULA would confine their activities to the Atlantic arena. At least eight U-boats, possibly more, served in Spanish waters from 1936-39. Boats known to have taken part in Operation URSULA were *U-14*, *U-25*, *U-26*, *U-27*, *U-31*, *U-33*, *U-34* and *U-35*. These boats represented the three major operational classes in the *Kriegsmarine's* inventory at the time, the Type IA, Type IIB and Type VIIA. Although the U-boats made very few kills, Operation URSULA was certainly a useful testing and training ground for the U-boat arm.

The Italians were far more active and generous in their provision of submarine support to the Nationalist Navy. At least 58 Italian submarines served in Spain between 1936-39. Two of these submarines, *Archimede* and *Torricelli*, would be transferred to the Nationalist Navy in 1937. They would serve as the *General Mola* and *General Sanjurjo* respectively. As with the German effort, Italian submarine operations reaped very few kills. On the other hand, like the Germans the Italians learned valuable lessons and developed useful techniques from the experience.

One grey area is the matter of Soviet submarines. Persistent rumours abound to the effect that Soviet submarines operated in support of the Republicans but nothing to date has been proved. It should be noted that these days it is relatively easy to obtain historical information from Russia. As an example, I have obtained from official Russian sources copies of declassified files dealing with Soviet military involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Bearing this in mind, it stands to reason that any records of Soviet submarine operations in Spain would also be available but absolutely nothing has been turned up by interested researchers. That is not to say that records don't exist and they may turn up one day. In the meantime, however, rumours of Soviet submarine involvement in the Spanish Civil War remain just that, rumours.

A partial success by an Italian submarine ended the year on a low note for the Republicans. On 22 November, the Italian submarine *Torricelli* torpedoed *Miguel de Cervantes* off Cartagena. The cruiser had just returned from the north and was so badly damaged that it would not rejoin the Republican fleet until 1938. Republican naval woes were added to when the submarine *C-5* departed Bilbao on 30 December, never to be seen again. As with the disappearance of the *B-5*, the loss of *C-5* has been credited to her commander, *Capitan de Corbeta* Jose Lara y Dorda.

Another blow to the Republican cause was the sinking of the Soviet merchant ship *Komsomol* by the Nationalist cruiser *Canarias* on 12 December. Although this sinking led to a bitter international incident and resulted in savage Soviet denunciations of the Nationalists, it also resulted in a marked drop in the number of Soviet merchant ships attempting to reach Republican Spain. Thus ended 1936, the first year of the war. During the six months from July to December of the year the outnumbered Nationalist Navy had established both moral and technical ascendancy over the Republicans. Although outnumbered for the entire war the Nationalists were never to lose the initiative at sea. Nationalist naval strength was boosted when the second heavy cruiser, *Baleares*, joined the fleet at the end of December. Like her sister ship *Canarias*, *Baleares* went into service with only three turrets instead of the designed four. Her fourth turret would be fitted in the summer of 1937.

The fairly frantic naval activity of 1936 began to settle down at the start of 1937. Naval activity at the beginning of the year consisted of convoy escort, shore bombardment and blockade duty. As it turned out, these were to be the bulk of the lot of both navies for the rest of the war.

One of the more significant events of the year was the capture of the Republican port of Malaga by Spanish and Italian troops on 8 February. This was a bitter blow for the Republicans as it deprived them of a safe harbour close to the Straits of Gibraltar and the North African coast. Nationalist warships began operating from Malaga within hours of its capture.

The Nationalist Navy displayed its aggressiveness and initiative in late April 1937. On 25 April the heavy cruisers *Canarias* and *Baleares* which were now home ported at Mallorca in the Balearic Islands, sailed into the harbour at Cartagena to harass the Republican fleet. Although little damage was done to the Republican ships, total chaos reigned in the harbour and we can only imagine the chagrin of the Republicans as the two impudent Nationalist cruisers steamed serenely out of the harbour before the shore batteries could be brought into action.

Shortly after this little action, both sides received a shock when the two old battlecruisers *España* and *Jaime I* were lost within weeks of each other. The first to go was the Nationalist *España*. On 30 April

the hard worked Nationalist destroyer *Velasco* spotted a freighter attempting to force the blockade off Santander. *Velasco* radioed *España* for assistance and the bigger ship headed for the scene while closing the shore in an attempt to cut off the blockade-runner. Unfortunately, *España* struck a mine that blew a huge hole in her starboard bow and she went down quickly. *Velasco* immediately abandoned the chase and went to the rescue. She was able to save all but five of *España's* crew.

Earlier that month *España's* Republican sister ship *Jaime I* had run aground off Malaga and was eventually towed to Almeira for repairs. While in dock she had been further damaged in a Nationalist air raid on 21 May and it was decided to tow her to Cartagena for a complete refit. While under tow on 17 June the old ship suffered an internal explosion of unknown cause and quickly went down, taking 300 of her crew with her.

A little bit earlier international tensions had been increased when two foreign warships had been damaged off Spain. In the first incident HMS *Hunter*, a Royal Navy destroyer based at Gibraltar, struck a mine. It is presumed that the Nationalists had laid the mine. Badly damaged, *Hunter* limped back to Gibraltar for repairs. Of more significance was the Republican attack on the German battlecruiser *Deutschland* on 29 May. The German ship was part of the International Non-Intervention Patrol. She was on patrol off Iviza on 29 May when she was bombed by Republican aircraft. As *Deutschland* had huge swastikas painted on the foredeck, quarterdeck and main armament turrets, there was no chance of the attack being a case of mistaken identity. The attack resulted in the deaths of 31 German sailors and the wounding of over 80 more. In retaliation, Hitler withdrew his ships from the Non-Intervention Patrol. Hitler being Hitler, however, he had to go one step further and ordered the battlecruiser *Admiral Scheer* to carry out a bombardment of the Republican port of Almeira. The bombardment severely damaged the docks and port area and resulted in the deaths of 19 Spaniards.

The loss of *España*, old and decrepit as she was, was a critical blow to the ship starved Nationalist Navy. Her loss was somewhat compensated for by the acquisition of two old Italian submarines mentioned above. Later in the year, the Nationalists finally convinced the Italians to sell them some old destroyers. Unfortunately, these ships were to be of little use due to their age and slow speed. On the Republican side, at the end of June the navy lost the use of one of its destroyers when *Alcala Galiano* was damaged in a collision with a merchant ship. Towed to Cartagena for repairs, she was further damaged in an air raid and was out of action for the rest of the war.

From May to September of 1937 a series of small, inconclusive skirmishes were fought between Nationalist and Republican ships as they stumbled on each other, usually during convoys. On 20 May for instance, *Baleares* encountered the bulk of the Republican fleet while she was carrying out a lone escort of an oil tanker. The Nationalist cruiser exchanged fire with the Republicans until the two sides lost each in the fog. No hits were scored. On 12 July *Baleares* again encountered the Republicans in the form of six destroyers escorting two merchant ships. *Baleares* was able to drive off the destroyers but in the confusion the merchant ships were able to make good their escape. In August, the Republican destroyer *Churruca* was torpedoed by an Italian submarine but managed to make its way back to Cartagena. *Churruca* was eventually repaired and recommissioned.

Finally on 7 September, *Baleares* precipitated one of the only two major naval engagements of the war, the Battle of Cape Cherchell. On the morning of that day *Baleares*, operating alone, intercepted a Republican convoy of four freighters escorted by the cruisers *Libertad* and *Méndez Núñez* and seven destroyers off Cape Cherchell in Algeria. Although she was in an unfavourable position, caught between the Republican ships and the coast, *Baleares* attacked, engaging the two Republican cruisers while the destroyers remained with the convoy. *Baleares* managed to score a hit on *Libertad* but in turn received two hits herself. One of the hits started a dangerous fire in the forward 8-inch magazine. The old and slow *Méndez Núñez* had quickly fallen behind *Libertad* and was well out of range of the

Nationalist cruiser's guns so *Libertad* broke off the engagement and the two Republican cruisers turned back towards the convoy.

Despite her damage, *Baleares* gave chase and eventually caught up with the convoy in the late afternoon. Once again she engaged the Republican cruisers and managed to score a few hits while absorbing some more damage of her own. She was eventually forced to break off the engagement and wait for *Canarias*, which was steaming to her support from Ceuta in Morocco. During the fight the convoy had turned back and put into the Algerian port of Cherchell where they stayed. When *Canarias* arrived the two cruisers carried out a sweep to try to locate the convoy (which they were unaware was in Cherchell) and the escorts. The sweep was unfruitful, as the escorts had headed back to Malaga.

Not a grand fight in the tradition of Trafalgar or Jutland, Cape Cherchell was still significant as it once again demonstrated the technical superiority of the outnumbered Nationalist Navy over the Republicans. It had also prevented an important convoy from reaching Republican Spain.

Blockade and counter blockade patrols continued. On the night of 23 September *Canarias* intercepted two merchant ships escorted by three destroyers off the Balearic Island of Mallorca. The destroyers were driven off by the cruiser after a short fight and the two merchant ships were seized.

In October 1937, after months of negotiation, the Nationalists finally obtained agreement from the Italian government for the sale of some destroyers. Unfortunately for Franco's navy, as Mussolini had other fish to fry, he had no intention of selling modern ships to Spain. The four ships provided by Italy were obsolescent and almost worn out. Two were "Aquila" Class destroyers, the *Falco* and the *Aquila*. *Falco*, renamed by the Nationalists *Ceuta*, had been commissioned in 1920. *Aquila*, which became *Melilla*, was even older, having been commissioned in 1917. Based on a British design, both ships bore a superficial resemblance to the Nationalist's sole, hard worked destroyer, *Velasco*. As a piece of deception, the two ships were originally called *Velasco-Ceuta* and *Velasco-Melilla* and had *Velasco's* recognition letter "V" painted on their bows. This was done in an attempt to confuse the Republicans as to the location and movements of the Nationalist's only modern destroyer. To add to the deception, each of the former Italian ships had a false fourth funnel fitted. Thus disguised the two ships, which were in fact too old and slow to be of much real use, were employed on blockade and escort duties to release the real *Velasco* for more aggressive and active tasks.

The other ships acquired, the two "Poerio" Class destroyers *Gugliermo Pepe* and *Alessandro Poerio*, were older still. Both had been commissioned in 1915 and, like the two "Aquilas", had been obsolescent as far back as the 1920's. *Gugliermo Pepe* was commissioned as *Huesca* and *Alessandro Poerio* became the *Teruel*. Far too slow and limited in endurance to keep up with the more modern ships of the Nationalist fleet, *Huesca* and *Teruel* still did excellent work on blockade and patrol duty and even managed to intercept and capture a number of blockade runners.

October 1937 was a bad month for the Republic. A concerted Nationalist campaign was slowly grinding away at the Republican territories in the north. When the Republican fleet had withdrawn from the north in October 1936, the destroyers *Ciscar* and *Jose Luis Diez* had been left behind as the major element of the Republican Navy in the north. In concert with the somewhat bizarre "Basque Navy" they had struggled hard to keep the sea-lanes open and to support the Republican land forces attempting to hold the Basque country and the Asturias for the Republic. This was to no avail. On 21 October *Ciscar* was sunk in harbour in Gijon. The submarine *C-6* had been damaged in an air raid the previous day. The port itself fell soon after. *Ciscar* was abandoned, *C-6* was scuttled and *Jose Luis Diez* made good her escape ahead of the victorious Nationalists. With her homeport gone and with little hope of breaking through into the Mediterranean to rejoin the rest of the fleet, *Jose Luis Diez* became a ship on the run. Dodging Nationalist ships hunting for her, she eventually made it to England and put into port at Falmouth. Despite some sympathy for the orphan ship, intense Nationalist diplomatic pressure forced her to leave England soon after her arrival. Crossing the channel she found

sanctuary in the French port of Le Havre and settled down to await events. Nothing more will be heard of *Jose Luis Diez* until 1938. *Ciscar* in the meantime was refloated in March 1938 and repaired by the Nationalists. She joined the Nationalist fleet in the last dying days of the war. *C-6* was also raised and refloated but she was never to sail or fight again and was eventually scrapped in the 1940's.

October 1937 was a bad month in the south as well. As Nationalist columns closed in on Teruel, the Republican government began to feel physically threatened and decided to quit Valencia and relocate to Barcelona further up the coast. On 1 November the Republican Navy conveyed the government and treasury of the Republic to the new capital.

After this last flurry of activity, 1937 wound down for both navies with the now routine rounds of convoy escort, shore bombardment and blockade duty. With the north now firmly in their hands and the Republican naval threat in that theatre reduced to the fugitive *Jose Luis Diez* and the occasional submarine, the Nationalists redeployed all of their fleet to the Mediterranean. Operations in the north were left to a motley collection of armed merchant cruisers, trawlers and drifters.

In January and February 1938 the Nationalist cruisers, led by *Canarias*, carried out a series of bombardments. This included operations against the new Republican capital of Barcelona. Then, on the night of 5-6 March, the second major naval engagement of the war, the Battle of Cape Palos, occurred. On 5 March the three Nationalist cruisers were escorting two freighters en route to the Balearic Islands. Unknown to the Nationalists commander, Admiral Vierna, the Republican Admiral Ubieta had planned a raid by MTB's on the Nationalist anchorage at Palma del Mallorca in the Balearics. The aim of the operation, which appears to have been based on faulty intelligence, was to sink the Nationalist cruisers at anchor. As part of the plan, the cruisers *Libertad* and *Méndez Núñez* were to sally from Cartagena supported by the destroyers *Sanchez-Barcaiztegui*, *Almirante Antequera*, *Lepanto*, *Gravina* and *Lazaga*. The plan apparently was for the cruisers and destroyers to provide cover for the MTB's on their run in and then to provide back up in the event that one or more of the Nationalist cruisers survived the attack and sortied into the Mediterranean. This somewhat ludicrous plan was doomed from the start. Firstly, bad weather forced the MTB's to turn back almost immediately, although Admiral Ubieta decided to remain at sea with the cruisers and destroyers. Secondly, the Nationalist cruisers weren't even at Palma del Mallorca. They were in fact on a collision course with the Republican squadron at a point off Cape Palos near Cartagena.

The two forces sighted each other at a range of 2,000 meters at about 0030 on 6 March. It is interesting to conjecture which side was more surprised. The Nationalist cruisers turned to cover the convoy and quickly broke contact, although not before one of the Republican destroyers launched torpedoes at them (which missed). The Republicans gave chase and the two forces again made contact at about 0200. Although still covering the convoy, the Nationalist ships were determined to attain the initiative and *Baleares* immediately opened fire, again at a range of about 2,000 meters. Unfortunately, Admiral Vierna made the mistake of ordering *Baleares* to fire star shell and this allowed the Republicans to pinpoint his ship.

For once the Republican ships were handled aggressively and reasonably competently and Admiral Ubieta was able to launch a relatively well coordinated attack by his cruisers and destroyers, concentrating on *Baleares*. The Nationalist cruiser suffered some hits from *Libertad* while the destroyers drove in under the cover of the cruisers' guns to launch a torpedo attack. Shortly after sustaining at least three hits from *Libertad*, *Baleares* was struck by two torpedoes, probably fired by *Lepanto*. One of the detonations blew up the forward magazine and the bridge. *Baleares* immediately went dead in the water afire from bow to stern. *Canarias* and *Almirante Cervera* were in line behind the stricken cruiser and were forced to take violent evasive action to avoid hitting the blazing hulk.

Outnumbered and with one of his three cruisers destroyed plus with the responsibility of the convoy still on his hands, Admiral Vierna made the agonizing decision to leave *Baleares* and her crew to their

fate in order to extricate the convoy and bring it to safety. For his part, the Republican Admiral Ubieta appears to have been overwhelmed by his success. Although he outnumbered his enemy and his destroyers still had torpedoes in their tubes he broke off the engagement and withdrew to Cartagena. This was an unforgivable error. Had he acted aggressively and pressed home a second attack it is possible he may have sunk one or even both of the other two Nationalist cruisers. This would have been a crippling blow to the Nationalist Navy and could very well have swung the naval balance in the Republic's favour and possibly even effected the eventual outcome of the war.

Meanwhile *Canarias* and *Almirante Cervera* had escorted their convoy into harbour and raced back to the scene of the battle to render assistance to *Baleares*. They were too late, however, as the cruiser had gone down within minutes and all they could do was search for survivors. Assisted by Royal Navy destroyers from Gibraltar, they were only able to rescue about 60 men. Over 700 of *Baleares'* crew went down with her.

While the loss of *Baleares* was a blow to the Nationalist Navy, it was not decisive. As just outlined, the Republican Navy threw away a golden opportunity to cripple the Nationalist Navy when Admiral Ubieta failed to follow up his initial success at Cape Palos. In addition *Baleares* was replaced soon after when the old cruiser *Republica*, now named *Navarra*, joined the Nationalist fleet. Although she was still too slow to keep up with *Canarias* and *Almirante Cervera* at speed, *Navarra's* refit had seen her emerge from the yard totally modernised and almost unrecognisable from her former appearance. She was an extremely useful ship and would serve on in the post-war Spanish Navy until the late 1940's.

By the middle of 1938 time had all but run out for the beleaguered Spanish Republic. The north was now firmly in Nationalist hands. The Republic in the south had been split in two by the huge Nationalist offensive that had reached the coast in April. In total the Republic now controlled only about a quarter of Spain's territory. All of Spanish Morocco, the Canary Islands and the two major Balearic Islands were also firmly controlled by Franco. The Republic's one and only hope was to hang on and hope for assistance from France, England or Russia. These hopes were to be in vain but the Republic battled on anyway.

At the end of July the Republican Army cast its last throw of the dice with the offensive at the River Ebro. Originally a success, the offensive soon run out of momentum and the Nationalists rallied and went over to the offensive themselves. It was at this point in the war that the Republican Navy decided to recall *José Luis Díez* from France. This ship had managed to escape from Gijon in the north in October 1937 as the city was falling and had made its way to England and then to France, where she had been ever since. With the Republic battling for its very survival and the Nationalist Navy becoming ever more aggressive and active, *José Luis Díez* was desperately needed back in the Mediterranean.

Of course, she couldn't just steam through the Straits of Gibraltar. Something a bit subtler was required. In the end the Republicans decided on the subterfuge of disguising *José Luis Díez* as a Royal Navy destroyer. The plan was for a Republican squadron to wait on the far side of the Straits and for *José Luis Díez* to bluff her way through the Straits and then make a run for the squadron on the other side. The Republicans hoped that the disguise would cause any Nationalist ships she encountered to either let her pass unhindered or at least to hesitate long enough to enable her to make good her escape.

It was ultimately decided to disguise *José Luis Díez* as the Royal Navy Destroyer Leader HMS *Grenville*, for the following reasons: firstly, while she had been built in Spain, *José Luis Díez* had been built to a British design and thus closely resembled contemporary Royal Navy destroyers; secondly, in 1937 the Republican Navy had changed the colour schemes of its ships from the pre-war colour to a darker grey which even more closely resembled the Royal Navy's "Mediterranean Grey," and thirdly, the Republicans knew that *Grenville*, which flew the pennant of Captain (D) of the 1st Destroyer Flotilla of the Mediterranean Fleet, was frequently in and

about the Straits of Gibraltar and would be well known to the Nationalists - it was hoped that this would cause the Nationalists to hesitate long enough for *José Luis Díez* to make her way through the Straits. It wasn't a bad plan, as such plans go, but it was doomed to failure from the start. Nationalist agents had kept a close eye on *José Luis Díez* and became aware of the plan before the ship had even sailed. The Republicans made the cardinal error of carrying out alterations to the ship in port under the eyes of Nationalist agents, rather than at sea after leaving port. After she had sailed she was shadowed by Nationalist merchant cruisers and it is believed that Portuguese naval units and shore stations passed details of the ship's passage to the Nationalist authorities. Thus when *José Luis Díez* sailed into the Straits of Gibraltar on 27 August wearing *Grenville's* pennant number (D19) and funnel markings and flying the White Ensign, the Nationalists were waiting for her.

Waiting off Gibraltar to greet the lone Republican destroyer were the cruisers *Canarias*, *Almirante Cervera* and *Navarra* and the destroyers *Velasco*, *Ceuta*, *Melilla* and *Huesca*. Or, in other words, just about the entire Nationalist Navy! Despite being outnumbered, *José Luis Díez* first tried to bluff her way through and then, when that didn't work, to fight her way through. Her deception was not accepted for a moment and *Canarias* brusquely ordered her to heave to and surrender. When the Republican ship refused the Nationalists opened fire and hits from *Canarias* quickly crippled the destroyer, killing 20 of her crew and wounding 14. Outnumbered, outgunned, cut off and severely damaged, *José Luis Díez* had no option but to make for Gibraltar which she reached in the afternoon. Limping into the Naval Basin, the Republican ship transferred her wounded to the Royal Navy hospital, buried her dead in the Naval Cemetery above the Rock and commenced repairs. In the mean time intense diplomatic efforts by the Nationalist government to have the destroyer interned were met and countered by just as intense efforts by the Republic to keep her free.

The burial party for the dead Spanish sailors included members of the crew of HMAS *Albatross*, the RAN's seaplane tender, which was in Gibraltar en route to the UK to be transferred to the RN as part payment for HMAS *Hobart*.

With *José Luis Díez* cornered in Gibraltar and the remainder of the Republican fleet contained in the Mediterranean, Nationalist naval activity went on apace. The Republican submarine *C-1* was sunk by Nationalist aircraft in the harbour at Barcelona on 9 October. The following month, on 3 November, a Nationalist armed auxiliary shelled and sank a Soviet freighter bound for Spain off the English coast, east of The Wash just outside British territorial waters. The next day another Nationalist auxiliary captured a Republican steamer, which had just left Grimsby. In late December the bombing of several British ships in Barcelona and one at sea off the Balearics by Nationalist aircraft drew protests from the British government. By this time, however, the British could read the writing on the wall and their complaints to Franco were weak and muted.

On 30 December *José Luis Díez* made her final bid for freedom. She sailed out from Gibraltar in a last desperate bid to break through the Nationalist fleet and rejoin the Republican fleet at Cartagena. As soon as she cleared Europa Point, however, she was engaged by the same Nationalist squadron that had intercepted her at the end of August. Unable to break through and once again damaged by Nationalist gunfire, the gallant Republican ship made a run for it back to Gibraltar. The Nationalists had cut off access to the harbour, however, and the Republican captain had no alternative but to run his ship aground in Gibraltar's Catalan Bay on the eastern side of The Rock. This time the British authorities interned her. This was the last surface action of any size and the last warship loss of the war. With the end of 1938, with the Republican fleet impotent and Republican armies falling back before Franco's victorious columns, the Republic only had a bare few months to live. Table 3 below lists the major warship losses for the conflict.

SHIP	TYPE	FLAG	DATE	CAUSE
<i>Dato</i>	Gunboat	Nationalist	7 Aug 36	Gunfire from <i>Jaime I</i>
<i>B-6</i>	Submarine	Republican	18 Sep 36	Surface action with Nationalist armed tugs
<i>Almirante Ferrandiz</i>	Destroyer	Republican	29 Sep 36	Sunk in action with <i>Canarias</i>
<i>B-5</i>	Submarine	Republican	12 Oct 36	Unknown (possible sabotage by captain)
<i>C-3</i>	Submarine	Republican	12 Dec 36	Torpedo (German submarine <i>U-34</i> )
<i>C-5</i>	Submarine	Republican	30 Dec 36	Unknown (possible sabotage by captain)
<i>España</i>	Battlecruiser	Nationalist	30 Apr 37	Mine
<i>Jaime I</i>	Battlecruiser	Republican	17 Jun 37	Internal explosion
<i>C-6</i>	Submarine	Republican	20 Oct 37	Scuttled at Gijon
<i>Ciscar</i>	Destroyer	Republican	21 Oct 37	Aerial attack at Gijon - later refloated by Nationalists
<i>Baleares</i>	Cruiser	Nationalist	6 Mar 38	Torpedoes from Republican destroyers (prob <i>Lepanto</i> )
<i>C-1</i>	Submarine	Republican	9 Oct 38	Surface action with Nationalist squadron
<i>Jose Luis Díez</i>	Destroyer	Republican	30 Dec 38	Forced aground at Gibraltar and interned

**Table 3 - Major Naval Ship Losses in the War**

As Franco's divisions ground down crumbling Republican military resistance, the Republic itself began to collapse. On 5 March 1939 the Republican government was ousted and replaced by a "Committee of National Defence" headed by General Jose Miaja and Colonel Sigismundo Casado, two of the Republic's most prominent soldiers. Although the new committee had the support of most of the armed forces, it could not realistically hope to avert the death of the Republic.

On the same day as the creation of the new government, Nationalist sympathisers in Cartagena staged a desperate uprising that was violently and bloodily put down by the Republican forces. This was followed two days later by a violent Communist uprising intent on wresting power from the new government. This second uprising was as bloodily suppressed as the first. The dying Republic was tearing at its own entrails. The disintegration of the Republic, however, was by this stage of no more than academic interest to the Republican Navy. On 5 March the Republican fleet had abandoned its base at Cartagena and sailed for North Africa. It was in fact the departure of the fleet that had triggered the abortive Nationalist uprising at Cartagena.

Two days later on 7 March 1939 the Republican fleet carried out the last melancholy act of a defeated navy when it steamed into the French North African port of Bizerta and surrendered to the French Navy to be interned. As the Republican colours were sadly hauled down most of the crews were discharged and dispersed. A small complement of Spanish personnel remained to oversee the takeover of the ships by French caretaker crews. Interned at Bizerta were the cruisers *Libertad*, *Miguel de Cervantes* and *Méndez Núñez* and the destroyers *Lepanto*, *Churruca*, *Almirante Valdes*, *Almirante Antequera*, *Almirante Miranda*, *Gravina*, *Ulloa* and *Jorge Juan*. Of the remainder of the fleet, the destroyers *Alsedo*, *Lazaga*, *Sanchez Barcaiztegui*, *Alcala Galiano* and *Escano* were all left at Cartagena in various stages of disrepair or dereliction. The submarines, *B-1*, *B-2*, *B-3* and *B-4* were scuttled, while *C-2* and *C-4* were interned in France where they had been undergoing refit. The Republican Navy had ceased to exist.

With the Republican Navy gone and his own navy now free to roam the Mediterranean at will, Franco declared a total blockade of the Republican coast on 8 March. In his statement Franco advised that his navy had orders to sink any vessel, regardless of the flag it was flying, which approached the Republican coast within a three mile limit. A muted statement of protest issued by the British Foreign Secretary was contemptuously ignored.

It hardly mattered anyway. On 18 March Franco rejected a Republican request for a negotiated peace and eight days later launched his "Victory Offensive." Foreign recognition of Franco's now de jure



leadership of Spain poured in. On 25 March, the day before the final offensive was launched, France handed over to the Nationalists the former Republican ships interned at Bizerta and Le Havre. The British handed the battered *José Luis Díez* over to the Nationalists in Gibraltar the same day. Madrid surrendered to Franco's columns on 28 March and the Nationalist armies had secured all of Spain by 31 March. Fittingly enough in the context of this paper, the very last Republican centre to surrender, on 31 March, was the naval base at Cartagena. Even more fittingly, the surrender was taken by Nationalist Navy landing parties from the cruisers *Canarias*, *Almirante Cervera* and *Navarra*. The Spanish Navy was therefore involved in the war right up to the very last day. Franco issued a communique from Madrid on 1 April 1939, officially declaring the war over.

Some lessons can be drawn from the naval side of the Spanish Civil War.

The first of these is that in the long run competence and professionalism, especially when coupled with aggressiveness, as demonstrated by the outnumbered and outgunned Nationalist Navy, will always win out. Perhaps another way to put it is, "It's not the dog in the fight that counts, it's the fight in the dog!"

The second lesson is that the subordination of military necessity to political or ideological requirements is a recipe for disaster. The Republican Navy demonstrated this when it dismissed a number of officers willing to serve and withheld its trust in others. The early policy of running ships by committee, so-called "ships' soviets," was even more disastrous. By the time the Republican Navy woke up to this fact it was too late.

The third lesson is one of tactics. As the loss of *Baleares* at Cape Palos demonstrated, to operate capital ships without a destroyer escort is to court disaster. Admittedly the Nationalist Navy only had one modern destroyer and was stretched to the limit both providing convoy escorts and maintaining the blockade of the Straits of Gibraltar. Even so it would have made more sense to send only one cruiser on the fateful convoy, supported by, say, *Velasco* and one of the older ex-Italian destroyers. The Nationalist Navy had amply demonstrated its superior technical and tactical skill and more aggressive fighting style. The mix just suggested would likely have negated the Republican destroyer attack.

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## THE ORGANISATION OF THE IMPERIAL CAMEL BRIGADE, 1916-1918 Part 2

Colonel Jim Underwood (Retd)

As described in Part 1<sup>1</sup>, by the end of 1917 the Imperial Camel Brigade's order of battle had settled down into the structure that it was to retain until its disbandment in June 1918. The second part of this paper examines the establishments of the Imperial Camel Brigade units as they existed during this period.

**Table 1 – Brigade Organisation – December 1917**

- Brigade Headquarters
- 1<sup>st</sup> (Anzac) Camel Battalion
- 2<sup>nd</sup> (Imperial) Camel Battalion
- 3<sup>rd</sup> (Anzac) Camel Battalion
- 4<sup>th</sup> (Anzac) Camel Battalion
- No 1 Mountain Battery, Hong Kong & Singapore, Royal Artillery
- 265<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company, Machine Gun Corps
- 10<sup>th</sup> (Camel) Field Troop, Royal Engineers
- Brigade Signal Section, Royal Engineers
- Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Train
- Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ammunition Column
- Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ordnance Section
- Australian Camel Field Ambulance
- 97<sup>th</sup> Australian Dental Unit
- Imperial Camel Corps Mobile Veterinary Section

### **Imperial Camel Brigade Headquarters**

By present day standards, the Imperial Camel Brigade Headquarters was a lean organisation. Its establishment is summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Imperial Camel Brigade Headquarters**

Commander - Brigadier General

Staff	Administrative Services and Departments		
Brigade Major	1 Major	Army Veterinary Corps	1 Captain
Staff Captain	1 Captain	Chaplains	3
		Army Postal Service	3 Other ranks
		Military Mounted Police	10 Other ranks
		Clerk	1 Other rank
		Army Ordnance Corps	3 Other ranks
		Cook	1 Other rank
		Batmen	11 Other ranks
		Egyptian Camel Drivers	6 attached from Camel Transport Corps

<sup>1</sup> See *Sabretache* December 2003 pp.5-14.

In summary there were 7 Officers, 29 Other Ranks, Egyptian Camel Drivers with 4 Riding Horses, 36 Riding Camels and 6 Baggage Camels

*Source* War Establishment No 699/20 – Headquarters Imperial Camel Brigade. 30 August 1917.

### Camel Battalion Organisation

The Camel Battalion used a combination of Infantry and Mounted Infantry terminology. The basic sub-unit was a “Group” of four men. In the first Camel Company establishment seven Groups plus a Headquarters formed a “Section” commanded by a Subaltern. Four Sections plus a Headquarters formed a “Company”. In its original form, the Camel Company consisted of five officers and 125 other ranks as shown in Table 3. There were no machine guns in the Company. Officers were armed with a revolver and other ranks with a rifle.

**Table 3 – Camel Company Establishment – January 1916**

	Officers	Other Ranks	Riding Camels	Baggage Camels
Officer Commanding (Major or Captain)	1	1*	2	1
Section Commander (Subaltern)	4	4*	8	2
Section Sergeant		4	4	
Sergeant		4	4	
Rank and File		112	112	
Ammunition #				6
10% Spare Camels			13	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>10</b>

\* Batman

# Ammunition - 300 rounds on the man/camel  
200 rounds per man on baggage camels

*Source.* AWM25 Item 157/3 – Headquarters NZ and Aust Division Memorandum “Camel Corps” dated 8 January 1916

In late August 1916, as a result of operational experience by the provisional Camel Battalion that formed part of Lieutenant Colonel Smith’s Mobile Column during the advance eastwards after the Battle of Romani, the number of Groups in a Section was increased from seven to eight. At the same time, a Lewis Gun Section with three guns – one officer and 14 other ranks – was added to the Camel Company establishment. It was originally intended to add only two Lewis guns per Company. However, during operations stoppages caused by sand were very frequent. The third Lewis gun was added to ensure that two guns would always be in action.

A number of other specialist positions were added to enhance the combat power of the Camel Company. A Company Sergeant Major, a Quartermaster Sergeant, a Veterinary Sergeant, eight signallers and a medical orderly were added to Company Headquarters. The Company establishment was now six officers and 179 other ranks. The revised Company establishment is shown in Table 4.

Table 4 – Camel Company Establishment – November 1916

	Offrs	WOs	S Sgts/ Sgts	R&F	Riding Camels	Baggage Camels
Company Commander (Captain)	1	-	-	-	1	1
Section Commanders	4	-	-	-	4	2(a)
CSM	-	1	-	-	1	-
CQMS	-	-	1	-	1	-
Sergeants	-	-	6	-	6	-
Corporals	-	-	-	4	4	-
Signallers	-	-	-	8	8	-
Batmen	-	-	-	6(b)	6	-
Medical Orderly	-	-	-	1	1	4(c)
Privates	-	-	-	136(d)	136	7(e)
<i>Lewis Gun Section</i>						
Commander	1	-	-	-	1	-
Sergeant	-	-	1	-	1	-
Corporal	-	-	-	1	1	-
Privates	-	-	-	12	12	2(f)
				Spare Camels 10%	17	2
<i>Attached</i>						
Veterinary Sergeant			1	-	1	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>18</b>

- (a) One of these camels also serves for the Lewis Gun Officer.  
 (b) Includes Batman for Lewis Gun Officer.  
 (c) To carry eight lying-down cacolets.  
 (d) Four men to be trained as Stretcher Bearers.  
 (e) To carry reserve ammunition.  
 (f) To carry Lewis gun ammunition.

*Source.* AWM25 Item 157/5 – War Establishment No 381 (Amended) included as attachment to Imperial Camel Corps Minute 1386/16 dated 4 November 1916.

Four Camel Companies plus a Headquarters formed a “Battalion”. In summary, the Camel Battalion consisted of 30 officers and 740 other ranks as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 – Summary Camel Battalion

Officers	30	Riding Camels	842
Warrant Officers	6	Baggage Camels	80
S-Sgts/Sgts	39		
Artificers	2		
Rank and File	693		
<b>Total Personnel</b>	<b>770</b>	<b>Total Camels</b>	<b>922</b>

In contrast to the Light Horse-Mounted Rifles-Yeomanry regiments of the Desert Mounted Corps, the Camel Battalions possessed endurance and combat power that the horsed units lacked. The camelier deployed with 300 rounds of ammunition with another 200 rounds per man in the

Company reserve. He carried five days rations and water for himself and five days forage for his camel. The camel could go for five days without a drink; and in an emergency this period could be extended provided it had access to some rough herbage.

When mounted, horsed units could move rapidly over long distances when the going was good and ample water was available. The troopers arrived relatively fresh and, if suitable cover was available, the horses could be ridden close to the enemy before going into dismounted action. The fact that they always had their horses handy also enabled mounted units to break off an engagement and withdraw with much greater ease than Infantry. But in action, the horsed units lacked the weight and staying power of the Infantry. Approximately, one quarter of the mounted unit was required to "hold horses".

The Camel Battalion provided a valuable compromise between the mobility and flexibility of the mounted regiments and the endurance of the Infantry. The camels could not be galloped up as close to the enemy as horses but required fewer men to look after them after they had been "barraked" – made to kneel down. One camelier for every 12-16 camels became the norm for "camel holders". Camels also proved to be more placid than horses under artillery fire or air attack and more stoical when wounded. Camels, however, suffered heavy casualties in the rugged terrain and the cold, wet conditions they experienced in southern Palestine in the winter of 1917-1918. These conditions caused severe injuries to the soft pads of the camel's feet and many camels broke a leg when they slipped on the sodden slopes of the Judean hills.

#### **No 1 Mountain Battery, Hong Kong & Singapore**

No 1 Mountain Battery was manned by both British and Indian personnel. A summary of personnel and animals is shown in Table 6. The Battery was equipped with six 2.75 inch BL mountain guns organised into three sections of two guns each. Two to the older pattern 10-pounder mountain guns that the Battery had originally been equipped with were retained as anti-aircraft guns. The establishment also included an ammunition column to transport the Battery's first line ammunition.

**Table 6 – No 1 Mountain Battery, Hong Kong & Singapore**

<b>British Personnel</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Animals</b>	<b>457</b>
Officers	5	Riding Horses	21
S Sgts/Sgts	4	Riding Camels	251
Artificers	6	Pack Camels	185
<b>Indian Personnel</b>	<b>240</b>		
Officers	3		
NCOs	30		
Gunners	200		
Followers	7		

*Source.* War Establishment 699/47 – No 1 Mountain Battery, Hong Kong & Singapore dated 30 August 1917

While the majority of the Imperial Camel Brigade used camels sourced in the Sudan; the Mountain Battery's camels were of Indian origin – from the state of Bikanir. These Indian camels were larger and more powerful than the Sudanese camels and were more suited to the heavy loads of the Battery. Each two-gun section was equipped with three riding horses, 73 riding and 47 pack camels. The normal first line holding of rounds per gun was: 120 rounds of shrapnel, seven rounds of high explosive and four star shells.

**265<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company**

The 265<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company consisted of a headquarters and two sections each of four Vickers Mark I medium machine guns. For a summary of personnel and animals see Table 7.

**Table 7 – 265<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company**

Personnel	115	Animals	156
Officers	5	Riding Horses	6
Warrant Officer	1	Riding Camels	115
S-Sgts/Sgts	5	Baggage Camels	35
Artificers	1		
Rank & File	99		
Egyptian Camel Drivers	4		

*Source.* War Establishment 699/100 – Machine Gun Company, Imperial Camel Brigade 30 Aug 17.

**10<sup>th</sup> (Camel) Field Troop, Royal Engineers**

The 10<sup>th</sup> Field Troop, Royal Engineers was specially raised to support the Imperial Camel Brigade. While it was capable of minor field engineering tasks including demolitions; its main task was winning water for the Brigade. One of the officers was an attached Army Medical Corps officer responsible for testing and sterilising water won by the Troop. Table 8 is a summary of the personnel and animals in the unit.

**Table 8 – 10<sup>th</sup> (Camel) Field Troop**

Personnel	71	Animals	91
Officers	4	Riding Camels	57
Warrant Officer	1	Baggage Camels	34
Sergeants	2		
Artificers	1		
Rank & File	49		
Egyptian Camel Drivers	14		

*Source.* War Establishment 699/66 – Field Troop, Imperial Camel Brigade dated 30 August 1917.

The 34 baggage camels were allocated loads as follows: Water Plant - 23, Tools and Explosives - 4, Baggage - 1, Ammunition - 1, Water - 2 (Each camel two 10 gallon fanatis), Spare - 3.

**Signal Section, Imperial Camel Brigade**

In addition to the Field Troop, the Royal Engineers provided the Brigade Signal Section. This Section consisted of a Headquarters, and Telephone and Visual detachments. Table 9 is a summary of the personnel, animals and vehicles in the Section.

**Table 9 – Signal Section, Imperial Camel Brigade**

Personnel	30	Animals	36
Officers	1	Riding Horses	3
Sergeants	2	Riding Camels	27
Rank and File	24	Baggage Camels	-6
Egyptian Camel Drivers	3		
		<b>Vehicles</b>	<b>3</b>
		Motor Cycles	3

*Source.* War Establishment 699/82 – Signal Section, Imperial Camel Brigade dated 30 August 1917 (Amended 26 March 1918).

Some of the specialist equipment carried by the Signal Section was:

4 Heliographs	16 sets Flags Signalling	1 Switchboard
4 Electric Signalling Lamps	4 Telescopes	15 Field Telephones
4 Stands Lamp or Heliograph		

### Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Train

The Brigade Train provided second line transport for the Imperial Camel Brigade. A summary of the personnel, animals and vehicles in the Train is shown at Table 10. No approved War Establishment for the Brigade Train has been located. The information in Table 10 has been extracted from the proposed establishment for the Train. While there may have been minor changes to the approved War Establishment, the information in Table 10 is indicative of the unit's establishment.

**Table 10 – Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Train**

Personnel	245	Animals	153
Officers	6	Riding Horses	9
Warrant Officers	2	Draught Horses	144
S-Sgts/Sgts	10		
Artificers	8		
Rank and File	99		
Egyptian Labour Corps	120	<b>Vehicles</b>	<b>33</b>
		Water Cart	1
		Wagons GS Limbered	3
		Wagons GS	29

*Source.* Australian War Memorial – AWM25 Item 327/5 Part 2 – Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Train.

There were no camels in the Brigade Train. It relied on wheeled vehicles. Functionally, the Train was divided into a Transport Section and a Supply Section. The Train carried some reserve rations and forage plus equipment and stores not required by Brigade units when they were operating in a mobile role. The Train also drew rations and forage from advanced supply depots and carried these forward for issue to Brigade units. The European element of the Brigade Train appears to have been all British Army Service Corps personnel. Note the large number of Egyptian Labour Corps personnel in the Train. Approximately 40 of these personnel were employed in the Transport Section as drivers; the remainder worked in the Supply Section.

### Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ammunition Column

The Brigade Ammunition Column carried second-line artillery rounds for No 1 Mountain Battery and reserve small arms ammunition for all units of the Brigade. Personnel and animals are summarised in Table 11. The officer was a British subaltern. The other ranks were all Indian soldiers except for one British veterinary sergeant. The 59 Egyptian camel drivers were Camel Transport Corps personnel.

**Table 11 - Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ammunition Column**

Personnel	75	Animals	126
Officers	1	Riding Camels	16
Other Ranks	15	Baggage Camels	110
Egyptian Camel Drivers	59		

*Source.* War Establishment 699/47 – Brigade Ammunition Column dated 30 August 1917.

### Imperial Camel Corps Brigade Ordnance Section

No approved war establishment for the Brigade Ordnance Section has been located. One document suggests that its establishment was two officers, 10 other ranks and four Egyptian camel drivers. These numbers seem about right for an independent brigade sized formation.

### Australian Camel Field Ambulance

The Australian Camel Field Ambulance establishment is summarised in Table 12. Functionally, the Ambulance was organised as follows:

- **Tent Division** with accommodation for 50 patients
- **Bearer Division** for battlefield first aid and collection.
- **Camel Transport Section** with 18 pairs of lying down cacholets and 30 pairs of sitting down cacholets.
- **Wheeled Transport Echelon** with eight sandcarts and six cycle ambulance stretchers.

**Table 12 - Australian Camel Field Ambulance**

Personnel	185	Animals	222
Officers	6	Riding Camels	82
Warrant Officers	1	Baggage Camels	93
S-Sgts/Sgts	9	Riding Horses	7
Artificers	3	Draught Horses/Mules	40
Rank and File	94		
Egyptian Camel Drivers	72		

*Source.* Australian War Memorial AWM25 Item 327/11 Part 2 – Establishment Camel Brigade Field Ambulance (2 Sections) dated 14 December 1917.

Cacholets were canvas supports stiffened with either bamboo, wooden or metal struts. There were two forms lying and sitting. The cacholet was a most distressing form of medical evacuation; dreaded by a wounded soldier. To the pain and shock of the soldiers wounds were added the discomforts of heat, flies and the smell, grunts and lurching gait of the camel. Camels carrying loaded cacholets were at the limit of their carrying capacity and marched at a rate of only two miles per hour – about 3.2 kilometres per hour – when the going was good. A wounded soldier could spend many hours in a cacholet from the time he was picked up on the battlefield, patched up in the Field Ambulance and then moved from the Field Ambulance to a Casualty Clearing Station 15-20 kilometres behind the front line. The sandcart was a lightweight two-wheeled ambulance with wide tyres on the wheels to facilitate movement through soft sand. It was fitted with an open spring mattress bottom. It was capable of carrying two lying or four sitting patients.

As noted earlier, camel casualties were heavy during the cold, wet winter of 1917-1918. Subsequently, there was less emphasis on evacuation by camel and more use was made of wheeled vehicles. In January 1918, the eight sandcarts and six cycle ambulance stretchers on the establishment of the Field Ambulance were replaced by six horse-drawn light ambulances, two sandcarts and four motor ambulances. The motor ambulances were attached to the Camel Field Ambulance and were driven by British Army Service Corps drivers.

### Imperial Camel Corps Mobile Veterinary Section

The Mobile Veterinary Section joined the Imperial Camel Brigade in February 1917. Prior to the raising of this Section, veterinary support in the Brigade had been limited to the Veterinary



Sergeant in each of the Camel Companies. Table 13 summarises the establishment of the Veterinary Section as it existed in 1917.

**Table 13 – Imperial Camel Corps Mobile Veterinary Section**

Personnel	42	Animals	53
Officers	1	Riding Horses	1
Sergeants	2	Riding Camels	42
Corporals	2	Baggage Camels	10
Egyptian Labour Corps	37		

Source War Establishment 699/159 – Mobile Veterinary Section (Camel) dated 30 August 1917.

In December 1917, the Imperial Camel Brigade had to be withdrawn from operations for several weeks due to an outbreak of camel mange which affected both the men and camels. At this time, the establishment of the camel Mobile Veterinary Section was increased by one British veterinary sergeant and 16 Egyptian labourers in order to treat this disease.

The Imperial Camel Brigade was an ephemeral but hard fighting formation. It was a truly Imperial force drawing its personnel from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, India, Egypt and, for a period, the Sudan.<sup>2</sup> During the eighteen months of its existence, it suffered 345 fatalities from killed in action, died of wounds, accidentally killed or died of disease.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the spirit of the Imperial Camel Brigade is best expressed in Major Oliver Hogue's poem *To My Camel*:

In the days when I was younger, when I never knew your worth,  
 When I thought a prancing palfrey was the finest thing on earth,  
 When a ride upon a camel seemed a punishment for sin,  
 And made a man feel fed up with the land we're living in,  
 It was then my errant fancy lightly turned to thoughts of verse,  
 And I libelled you, old Hoosta, in a wild iambic curse,  
 I know you now for better, but for you I might be dead,  
 So I recant, old Hoosta, I take back all I said.  
 When the winter nights were freezing on the hills of old Judea,  
 You humped my load of blankets and a ton of surplus gear,  
 When summer's sun was scorching and my head seemed like to burst,  
 You bore a full fantassi,<sup>4</sup> and quenched my raging thirst.  
 I have never yet gone hungry, I have never yet gone dry;  
 That's something to your credit in a place like Sinai.  
 You have been my board and lodging, you even humped my bed –  
 Honest Injun! Oont, I'm grateful; I take back all I said.

Trooper Bluegum  
 (Major Oliver Hogue 1880-1919)<sup>5</sup>

---oOo---

<sup>2</sup> The original ad hoc Signal and Wireless Sections included regular Sudanese soldiers.

<sup>3</sup> The figure of 345 fatalities does not include fatalities to Egyptian camel drivers and Egyptian Labour Corps personnel.

<sup>4</sup> Fantassi – a five gallon cylindrical water tank carried by the Imperial Camel Corps.

<sup>5</sup> Major Oliver Hogue served in the 1<sup>st</sup> (Anzac) Camel Battalion. He accompanied other Gallipoli veterans to England after the Armistice, and died there from pneumonia in March 1919.



## The British Garrison in Australia 1788-1841 Military supervision of Convict Work Gangs - Part V

Clem Sargent

### Introduction

This is the final Part in the series of articles on convict work gangs which have appeared in *Sabretache* since March 2003. Included in this Part are:

- A map showing the locations of known stockades with a legend identifying these. Where stockades shown have not been mentioned in the texts of previous Parts some brief notes confirming their existence are shown.
- An illustration of the stockade at Cox's River.
- The 1834 and the 1832 plans of stockade lay-outs.
- Graves associated with the stockades.

### Section Stockade Sites on the Great Roads

The legend to the map shows three stockades conforming to the 1832 plan and 12 stockades conforming to the 1834 plan. Other stockades, which have not been mentioned in previous Parts and are not all shown on the map, with a confirming source of existence and some notes:

Razorback Range (Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Vol 25, 1940, p. 429)  
Myrtle Creek "  
Gibraltar (Mittagong) . "

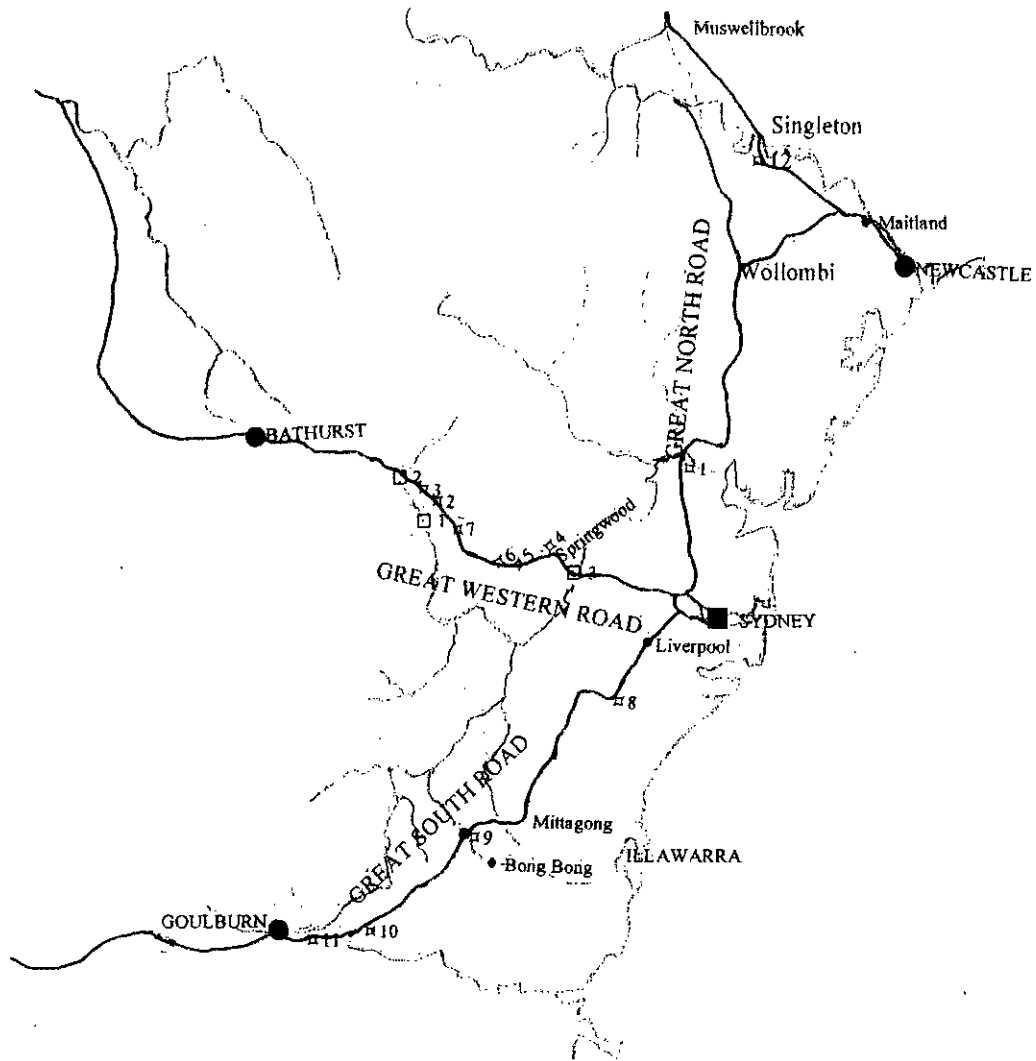
Newcastle – convicts in the ironed gang at this stockade were employed in the construction of the harbour breakwater. Detachments of garrison troops had been stationed there since the initial establishment of settlement at Newcastle. See also – James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a visit to the Australian Colonies*, New York, Johnson Reprint 1967, p. 404.

Maitland (also shown as Green Hills). *The Australian* of 28 January 1841 reported the committal of John Marsh, a runaway from the Maitland Stockade. See also Walter Allan Wood, *Dawn in the Valley*, Sydney, Wentworth Books, 1972, p. 303.

Harper's Hill (Greta), *The Sydney Herald* of 9 October 1837 reported that at the 'Road and Bridge Gang Stockade at Harper's Hill a sly grog shop had operated in the gang itself' the grog was brought up by the driver of the ration cart but no blame was attached to the commanding Officer as he was 'considered very active'. Lieutenant Smith of the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment was the 'active' commandant (WO 17/2321. See also Backhouse, p. 391.

Illawarra, a small military detachment was stationed in the Illawarra from 1826 to 1831, originally located at Red Point (Pt Kembla) and later at Wollongong, it was not until 1835, with the commencement of work on local roads and the construction of the harbour, that stockades were established at Dapto and on Flagstaff Hill. The Monthly Return (WO17) for June 1835 shows Lieutenant Otway, two sergeants and 20 R&F of the 50<sup>th</sup> Regiment at this station. The 50<sup>th</sup> was replaced by the 80<sup>th</sup> in 1838. The 80<sup>th</sup> remained there until 1842, with the 28<sup>th</sup> present for one year only in 1840. The 99<sup>th</sup> served from 1842 to 1844 and was not replaced. See Michael Organ, *The Story of the Illawarra Stockade*, Lecture Text, 1999, Wollongong City Local Studies Library; Backhouse, pp. 422-423.

**Section Stockade Sites on the Great Roads**



**LEGEND**

□ Traditional stockades with 12 ft (3.6m) timber palisades to the 1832 plan:

- |               |               |              |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1 Mt Victoria | 2 Cox's River | 3 Emu Plains |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|

▣ Stockades without palisades, conforming to the plan of 1834, consisting of 'moveable houses' or similar huts:

- |                             |                  |                   |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1 Wiseman's                 | 2 Hassan's Walls | 3 Bowen's Hollow  |
| 4 17 Mile Pinch (or Hollow) | 5 Weatherboard   | 6 20 Mile Hollow  |
| 7 Blackheath                | 8 Campbelltown   | 9 Berrima         |
| 10 Wingello                 | 11 Towrang       | 12 Harper's Hills |

Honeysuckle Hill, Stony Ridge Backhouse mentions (p. 308) visiting small Road Gangs at these locations approximately 8km and 20km west of Cox's River on the Great West Road and 'another twixt that place and Bathurst.

Black Bob's Creek mention is made also of a Road Gang at this location on the Great South Road 11 km south of Berrima.

Road Gangs worked out of irons, under the supervision of free or ticket-of-leave overseers. They were not usually guarded and none of the above three stations appear in Monthly Returns. Consequently they are not covered in this series of articles which consider the role of the garrison regiments in the road building program.

Stockades in the Sydney metropolitan area, not shown on map:

Bradley's Head *The Australian* of 28 January 1841 reported 'Four convicts attached to the Stockade at Bradley's Head made their escape on Tuesday evening'.

Cockatoo Island WO 17/2323, May 1839, gives details of a detachment of one Sergeant, 21 R&F, 50<sup>th</sup> Regiment, replaced by the 80<sup>th</sup> in 1840.

Georges River and Lansdowne Bridge *The Sydney Herald* of 14 May 1835 reported 'the government has at last determined upon stationing a Military Detachment on the Liverpool-road for which purposes the spot occupied by the Lansdowne Bridge party will be formed into a stockade. The military will be under the command of Captain Montgomery, 50<sup>th</sup> Regiment. James Backhouse visited the ironed gang at Georges River in 1836 where the gang was 'employed raising stone, which is conveyed up the George's River to Lansdowne Bridge'. Backhouse p. 417

Goat Island *The Australian* of 28 January 1841 reported the appointment of an Assistant Superintendent to the ironed gang at Goat Island. See also Backhouse p. 457.

Longbottom (Concord) *The Sydney Herald* of 2 May 1842 reported the escape of three prisoners from the Longbottom Stockade.

Pennant Hills A metal quarry was opened here in 1832 to supply blue metal for the streets of Sydney and suburbs. It was sited in the Sir Thos Mitchell Reserve, Yates Avenue, Dundas, and operated for 70 years. The metal was carted down to the Parramatta River to the then 'Pennant Hills Wharf' located at the river end of Wharf Street. The stockade was located adjacent to the quarry. A guard detachment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment was posted there from 1837 to 1840. Refs: Council sign in Yates Avenue; Sir Thoms Mitchell, *Report upon the progress made in Roads and in the construction of Public works in New South Wales from the year 1827 to June 1835*, Wm Hansen, Sydney, 1856, p.68; WO 17/2321-2324.

Victoria Barracks *The Sydney Herald* of 24 August 1840 reported that two runaways from the Barracks Stockade were committed for trial for robbery.

Woolloomooloo *The Sydney Herald* of 15 February 1836 reported 'a large gang of convicts under a military guard, are at present quarrying the rock at the base of Woolloomooloo Hill, near the intended new gaol. The stone is to be used in the erection of a new gaol, courthouse and barracks'. It is believed that with a military detachment deployed, the convicts would have been housed in a stockade. The mention of stone for barracks is of interest as the Commanding Royal Engineer, Captain Barney, had only arrived in Sydney in December 1835, and although he recognised, at an early stage the need for new barracks, work did not begin until 1840.

The Monthly Returns give the deployments of troops to most country and metropolitan Sydney stockade sites from 1831, but not all sites are covered. Woolloomooloo and Victoria Barracks are notable omissions, probably because the detachments there were drawn from the Sydney garrison. The Monthly Returns from 1831 are in the War Office Series WO 17/ 2315 onwards. These are available in most State Libraries in the Australian Joint Copying Project microfilms, indexed in the Project Handbook Part 4.

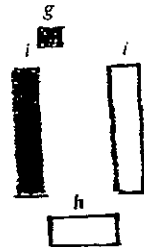
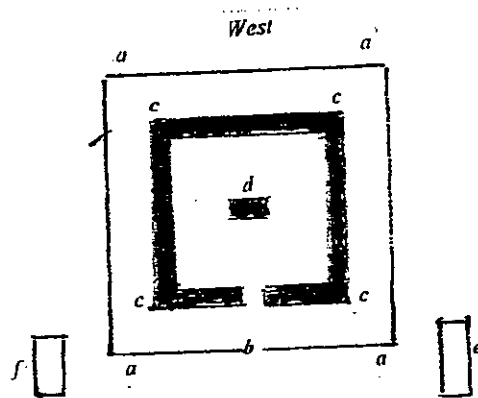
## 2: The Stockade at Cox's River



*'The Fort On Cox's River near Bathurst NSW'* in the collection of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, is a water colour painting attributed to Major General James Pattison Cockburn. Of course there was never a 'Fort' on Cox's River and the painting is obviously of the convict stockade established there from 1832. The painting conforms to the topography of the known site of the stockade.

The attribution to Major General Cockburn is open to challenge. Cockburn (1779?-1847) was a Royal Artillery officer with a well documented record as a watercolourist, having gained some experience in his term at the Royal Military Academy, under the eminent topographic artist, Paul

THE 1832 STOCKADE PLAN



- aaaa* Stockade 12 feet high
- B* Gate way
- cccc* Huts for ironed men
- d* Lock up house
- e* Overseers huts
- f* Assistant Overseers huts
- g* Guard house
- ii* Barracks
- h* Sergeants quarters and Store
- l* Military officers quarters
- m* D' . . . . . D'

*There is yet to add*  
*Kitchens to the Military Officers*  
*quarters*  
*A. hospital. 30 by 12 feet Stockaded*  
*A. Store and quarter for the*  
*Commissariat Officer*

*The buildings tinted dark are finished*  
*And those tinted light are in progress*



*Stockade at Cox's River*

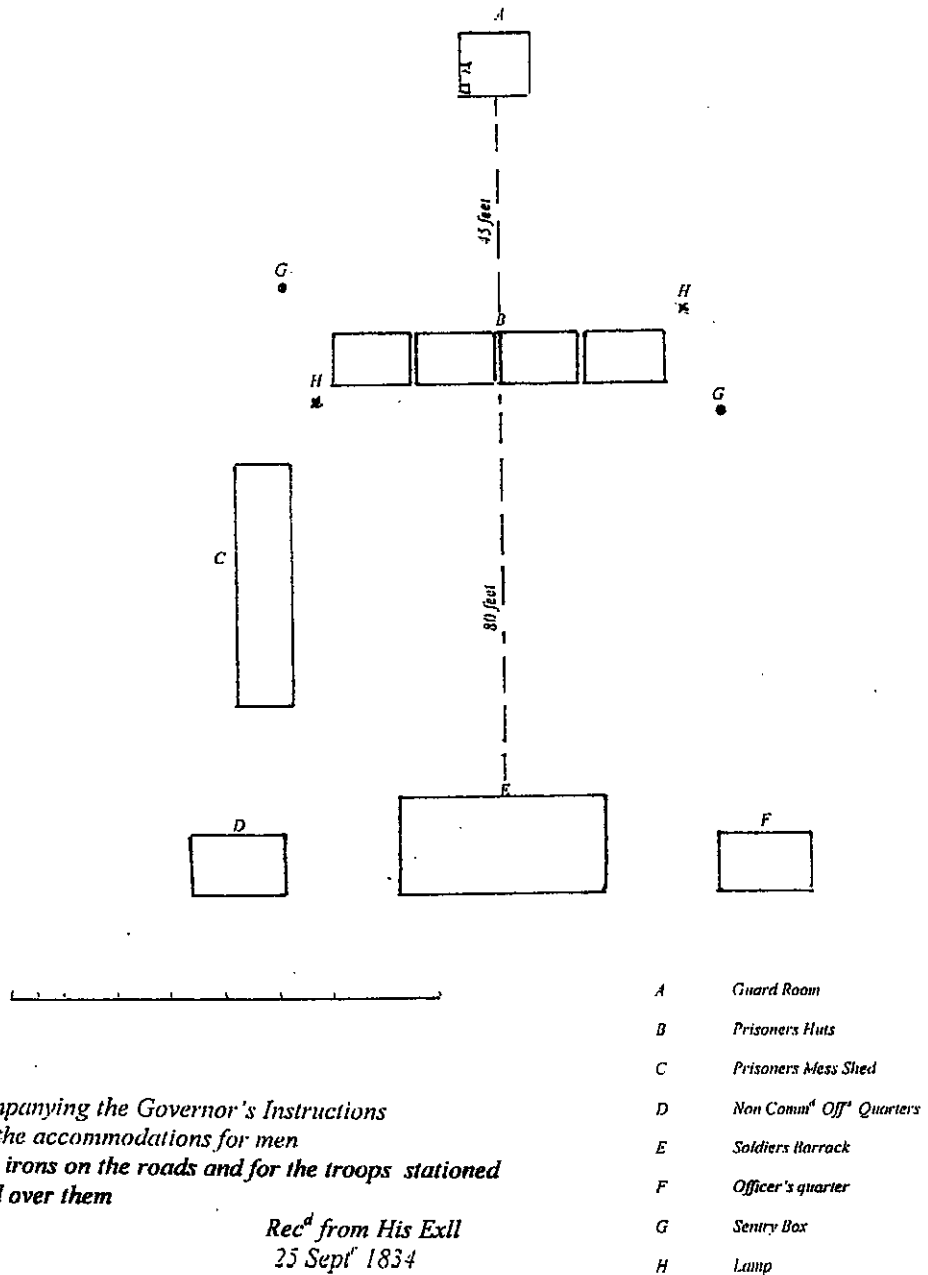
*Copy transmitted to private Sec<sup>y</sup>*

*1<sup>st</sup> Sept' 1832*

*Nicholson*

1832 Plan of the stockade at Cox's River based on Assistant Surveyor Nicholson's plan. Reference State Records NSW/ Surveyor-General Sketch Book/ Vol 2, Folio 17/45. The plan has been retouched to improve clarity

**THE 1834 STOCKADE PLANS**



*Plan accompanying the Governor's Instructions  
relative to the accommodations for men  
Working in irons on the roads and for the troops stationed  
As a Guard over them*

*Rec<sup>d</sup> from His Exll  
25 Sept 1834*

- A Guard Room
- B Prisoners Huts
- C Prisoners Mess Shed
- D Non Comm<sup>d</sup> Off<sup>r</sup> Quarters
- E Soldiers Barrack
- F Officer's quarter
- G Sentry Box
- H Lamp

1834 plan for so-called 'stockades' issued to Deputy Surveyor-General Perry. These stockades had no perimeter fence or palisades. This plan, also, has been retouched.

Sandby. Cockburn was commissioned on 2 March 1795, served at Malta, The Cape of Good Hope, and in the East Indies. He served in Canada from 1826 to 1832 and is well represented in Canadian collections. Cockburn was Director of the Royal Laboratory, Woolwich, from October 1838 to December 1846. Joan Kerr, in the *'Dictionary Of Australian Artists'* has suggested that Cockburn may have painted the Cox's River scene while en route from Canada to England. There appears to be no record of a visit to New South Wales of as distinguished as Cockburn and the suggestion that he returned to England via New South Wales is a shaky proposition with no supporting evidence.

It has also been suggested that Cockburn may have executed the painting from sketches sent to him from New South Wales. The painting has been used in by the Miegunyah Press as an illustration of von Hugel's *'New Holland journal'*. There it is identified as " 'Convict Stockade at Cox's River Crossing, c1835' water colour by an unknown artist". This seems a more realistic assumption.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever the artist may be, the painting visually confirms the existence of palisaded stockades in the New South Wales convict system.

### The Graves

A handful of gravestones are the lasting reminders of the commitment of the garrison regiments to the construction of the Great Rods. Fortunately New South Wales was a healthy station; here the troops were not exposed to the tropical diseases which ravaged the regiments in the West Indies and in India, the latter their usual station after service in Australia. Nevertheless there were almost certainly more deaths along the roads than those which are marked by monuments, erected usually by the comrades of the dead. Eight, only, have come to notice during research for this series of articles. Of these one, adjacent to Springwood on the Great Western Road, has been disturbed by a re-alignment of the road and lost. The inscription has fortunately been recorded in the history of the soldier's regiment.. It reads:

Sacred to the Memory of Francis Smith Who Died May 5<sup>th</sup> 1836 aged 43 years having served for 25 years A Soldier in HM 4<sup>th</sup> the King's Own Regiment.

Private Smith had been at the 17 Mile Pinch in the first Muster for April-June 1836 in the detachment commanded by Lieutenant Campbell, with two sergeants and 22 R&F, with one sergeant and 20 R&F at Springwood. Smith had been transferred to the detachment at Springwood in the second quarter and died there. There was no Assistant Surgeon at Springwood, the nearest was at Emu Plains. (WO 12/2218, WO 17/2320)

Further along the Great Western Road. at the Forty Bends Cemetery, at the base of Hassan's Walls, is a grave of William Travis - see right.

Three members of the Berrima detachment were not buried near the stockade site but in the church yard of All Saints' Anglican Church which had been established at Sutton Forest in 1830. The first two soldiers died in 1835 during the service of the first detachment of the 50<sup>th</sup> the Queen's Own Regiment at Berrima; the inscriptions on their headstones have weathered badly and brass plates now show the detail which was originally inscribed:

Sacred to the Memory  
of  
William Travis  
Late Corporal  
In Capt'n Kane's Company  
80<sup>TH</sup> Regiment  
Who Departed this Life  
12 June 1837  
Aged 20 Years

*Billeted By Deat  
I Quartered Here Remain  
When the Trumpet Sounds  
I'll Rise and March Again.*

<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of National Biography entry for Cockburn; Joan Kerr (ed) *The Dictionary Of Australian Artists*, Melbourne, OUP, p. 169; Carl Freiherr von Hugel, *New Holland journal*, Melbourne, MUP, p. 341; Conversation Elizabeth Ellis, Mitchell Library.



Pte Michael McGee Late 50<sup>th</sup> Or Queen's Own Regiment Who Departed This Life On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1835 Aged 32 Years, and

Pte Patrick Connelly Late 50<sup>th</sup> Or Queen's Own Regiment Who Departed This Life on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1835 Aged 34 Years.

From an examination of the Muster Roll for the period it seems that McGee died of natural causes but Connelly was recorded to have drowned. (WO 12/6128)

The incidence of the two burials so close in time may have been the reason which prompted Ensign Waddy to write to Headquarters concerning the fee charged by the local parson for the burial of soldiers. Waddy wrote:

Sir,

The Chaplain of the District having charged Ten Shillings for the internment of a soldier who died here some time ago, I have the honor [sic] that you will let me know if he is entitled to make such a charge'

Although no formal reply has been found, attached to Waddy's letter in the State Archives NSW file is what appears to be a draft reply:

Memo - 'The following fees to be received for the Burial of free persons was established by the Govt Order 22 December 1810, and confirmed by the Colonial Act 6 Geo IV, 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1825, viz -

	S
The Chaplain	5.0
Clerk	2.6
Bellringer	6
Grave Digger	<u>2.6</u>
	10.6

The third grave is of particular interest and, fortunately, the inscription is still legible, it reads:

O'Brien, a labourer from Donohill, County Tipperary, had enlisted in the 80<sup>th</sup> on 17 June 1831 and served in Ireland until May 1833 when the Regiment moved to Chatham prior to embarking as guard detachments on convict transports. O'Brien embarked on the *Waterloo* on 29 October 1834 and reached Hobart on 3 March 1835. There, the convicts and the guard detachment disembarked, O'Brien going on to join the regiment in Sydney in May. In July he was posted to the garrison at Norfolk Island until February 1836 when he returned to Sydney and joined the detachment commanded by Lieutenant Briggs at Berrima.

SACRED  
TO  
THE MEMORY  
of  
THOMAS O'BRIEN PRIVATE  
In H. M. 50<sup>TH</sup> Or Queen's  
Own Regt, Who Was Barbarously  
Murdered. On the 10<sup>TH</sup> Feb<sup>y</sup> Near  
Berrima, 1837.  
AGED 24 YEARS

*This stone was erected by his Comrades to His Memory as a testimonial to the high Character which he bore both by his Officers and Comrades*

On 19 February 1837 O'Brien, accompanied by Private James Hayes and two women, went to an inn, three miles (4.8 km) south of Berrima on the Great South Road, where they were drinking with two assigned convicts, Jones and McCafferty, and a freeman, John Moore. O'Brien became involved in an altercation with Jones who accused him of being responsible for a flogging inflicted on Jones while a member of the ironed gang at Berrima. O'Brien, by then the worse for drink, was ordered from the inn by the proprietor, on his way back to Berrima he was set upon by Jones, McCafferty and Moore and beaten to death. O'Brien's body was found by Hayes and the culprits were quickly apprehended. They appeared before the Supreme Court in Sydney on 5

May 1837; Jones was found guilty of murder and executed on 8 May. McCaffery and Moore were freed.<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances of O'Brien's murder throw light on an aspect of garrison service in the Colony which was of continual concern to senior officers – the association of soldiers with convicts. In evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Transportation on 12 May 1837, Lieutenant Henry Breton, 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, stated that the system in New South Wales tended to lead to demoralisation of the men. Among the causes were drunkenness and '.... intercourse between the military and the prison population, which we cannot prevent ...'<sup>3</sup>

At the site of the Towrang stockade, at the bottom of the slope from the powder magazine, and beside the Towrang Creek, are the last three known graves on the Great Roads. The headstones are those of Private John Moxey, 80<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Elizabeth Whiticker [sic], and Mary Brown. John Moxey's grave was the subject of an article – 'The Soldier at Towrang' by Lt Col Don Goldsmith, which appeared in *Sabretache* in April 1967, shortly after a visit to the stockade site by members of the ACT Branch of the Society that year. Moxey died on 16 November 1838 after 22 years service. The headstone is engraved with the verse:

Remember me as you pass by,  
As you are now, so once was I,  
As I am now so you must be  
Prepare for Death to follow me.

Beneath, this has been inscribed:

This Stone was Erected by his Comrades as a Token of Respect Towards a Good and Deserving Soldier

Next to Moxey's headstone is Elizabeth Whiticker's (Whittaker?), 'Who departed this life, June 9, 1841, aged 33 years'. A search of the Muster Rolls (WO 12) failed to find any Whiticker, or similar name, in the detachment of the 80<sup>th</sup> at Towrang at that time. Elizabeth may have been the wife of a civilian overseer or Commissariat clerk.

With the graves of Private Moxey and Elizabeth Whiticker is the most poignant of all those on the Great Roads. It is of 'Mary Brown, Who departed this Life, the 25<sup>th</sup> Day of June, AD 1841'. Mary Brown was four years old. There was a Sergeant John Brown in the Towrang detachment at that time. Previously at Port Macquarie he had moved to Towrang in December 1840. It is believed that Mary was his daughter as Senior NCOs would be the most likely to have their families with them. Mary's grave is an eloquent reminder of the hardships borne by the families who faithfully followed their husbands and fathers to the remotest parts of Australia where there were no medical facilities to support. At the time of Mary's death there was no assistant surgeon at Towrang.

How had the toddler, Mary Brown, reached Towrang? By ship from Port Macquarie to Sydney, where her father remained for six months with the Headquarters, then the 200 kilometre journey to Towrang. The soldiers marched, had the toddler trotted alongside, being carried by her mother or father when tired and, if lucky, enjoying a ride on the baggage wagon? Were there any other children in the detachment? It was a typical experience for those families 'following the drum', one which is only too frequently overlooked when appraising the role of the garrison regiments in New South Wales.

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<sup>2</sup> WO 12/6127-9; Colonel Fyler, *The History Of The 50<sup>th</sup> Or (The Queen's Own Regiment)*, London, 1895, Chapman and Hall Ltd, p. 369. LINDA EMERY.

<sup>3</sup> British Parliamentary Papers 1837-1838, Vol 22, p. 136.



## Obituary

### **Major General Timothy Frederick Cape, CB, CBE, DSO** **5 August 1915 - 20 December 2003**

Timothy Frederick Cape, the son of Charles Scarvell Cape, Solicitor, of Sydney, and Maude Want Cape, was born at Vacluse. He was the youngest of three children and in a line of colonists who first came to NSW from the United Kingdom in 1821. He became a well known figure during his long service in the Australian Army, in his subsequent role as a business consultant and through his association with many organisations and clubs. He was a very pleasant, gregarious and agreeable character who easily made friends and readily contributed to discussion whether it be one relating to some problem of the moment or merely social.

His interest in the Army stemmed from his father, a member of the volunteer movement in NSW, who had service in South Africa 1901-02 and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. At Cranbrook School, he was an enthusiastic member of the cadet corps, becoming a cadet lieutenant. Possibly this interest in matters military was reinforced by the then headmaster, Iven Mackay (later Lieutenant General Sir Iven, a highly respected AIF leader in WWII) a keen citizen soldier who had recognised Cape's potential and appointed him head prefect. This caused more than a little stir at the time as Cape was a Roman Catholic and the School was of the Anglican persuasion. The circumstances of his appointment would have assisted in the further development of Cape's already strong character. Mackay encouraged him to apply for entry to the Royal Military College. It was accepted.

Together with ten other Australians and four New Zealand cadets, Cape marched in to RMC on 1 March 1934. Of this small class, twelve graduated on 14 December 1937. Cape was commissioned in the Australian Staff Corps and allotted to Artillery. Despite only a short period of service with the guns he retained a real interest in the Regiment until his death.

His first gunner posting was regimental duty with the 1st Heavy Brigade at Georges Heights, Sydney where he gained experience with 6 inch Marks 7 and 11 coast defence guns and the newly installed 9.2 inch battery on North Head, Sydney. Ahead lay some practical and staff challenges as the junior of two officers of Port Moresby Defences, specifically 13th Heavy Battery, from March 1939. They faced the task of installing two 6 inch Mark 11 guns on Paga Hill for the defence of the port and then to man them on a limited basis. The isolation of this coast defence "outpost" was somewhat ameliorated when international tensions led to a finer focus on the defence of Papua New Guinea and the formation of HQ 8th Military District in Port Moresby to organise defence preparations in the region. Cape for a short while was much involved in this endeavour as the administrative staff officer of the district before his return to Australia in March 1941.

Cape was hoping to be allotted to an AIF unit for active service in the Middle East like so many of his Staff Corps contemporaries. But this was not to be. He was given the challenge of establishing the Anti-Tank Wing of the School of Artillery at Puckapunyal, Victoria. This he tackled with enthusiasm and drive in the face of extremely limited resources of expertise, doctrine, guns, ammunition and every type of equipment. Quite some time later this outstanding and meritorious service, coupled with his earlier activities in New Guinea, were recognised when he became a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In the meantime, the demands of the moment kept him very busy until his desire for an AIF appointment was granted in a rush.

He was posted as Brigade Major 23rd Infantry Brigade on 5 February 1942, told to pack his bag and get to Darwin without delay. As it turned out, his appointment was to HQ Sparrow Force, charged with the defence of Koepang and the nearby Penfui airfield in Dutch Timor. He arrived on the island with his commander, Brigadier WCD Veale, on 12 February, a few days before the Japanese landed and in fierce fighting overwhelmed the major part of the sole infantry element, the 2/40th Infantry Battalion. Cape and his commander evaded capture and linked with the 2/2nd Independent Company which was operating in Portuguese Timor. Then ensued the hardships and adventures of guerrilla warfare including being adrift in a canoe for a day while evading capture. He was recalled to Australia in August and mentioned in despatches for exceptional services on the field.

By October, Cape was back in Port Moresby at HQ New Guinea Force as a Lieutenant Colonel where he gained a signal reputation, in the face of enormous difficulties, for putting the arrangements for offensive air support and air supply in that theatre in a sound basis. There is no doubt that Cape's charm and gift for getting on with people,

coupled with his determination and drive was a major factor in overcoming communication problems, the paucity of resources, lack of common doctrine and understanding of the basics of inter service and allied co-operation. He made a major contribution to overcoming the chaotic army/air situation which pertained in the early days of the New Guinea campaign.

Attendance at the Staff School and a posting to Land HQ was followed by a further stint in the air support business for the final campaigns involving Australian Forces in Borneo. In recognition of his contributions in the field of air support he was made a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order and awarded the US Bronze Star in recognition of his sterling wartime contributions.

The cessation of hostilities saw Cape posted to the Occupation Force in Japan as the senior operations staff officer. Two years at Army HQ followed until his talents in joint operations was put to good use as an instructor at the UK School of Combined Operations from November 1949 and then at the Staff College, Camberley. Before returning to Australia at the end of 1953 he attended the UK Joint Services Staff College. These four years were the start of a love affair with the UK which could fairly classify Cape as an anglophile.

Back in Australia he was headed for higher things, being promoted to Colonel as Commandant of the Officer Cadet School, an appointment which he averred as the most rewarding of his career. Then for a short while he was Commandant of the Australian Staff College and was promoted to Brigadier followed by duty as Deputy Master General of the Ordnance in April 1957.

Cape wrapped up his already extensive military education by attending the Imperial Defence College, London, 1960 course. He was Chief of Staff Northern Command during 1961, during this time he picked up the soubriquet "Marco Polo" in recognition of his penchant for frequent travel to the far reaches of the Command, which besides Queensland included Papua and New Guinea, reaching to the equator.

He married Elizabeth Rabett, the daughter of Colonel RLR Rabett of Sydney, on 31 August 1961. They had been friends since schooldays and on occasions he remarked with regret that he had not asked much earlier!

Short stints in Melbourne at Army HQ and as Commander Central Command preceded promotion to Major General in February 1965 as General Officer Commanding Northern Command for three years before his final Army duty as Master General of the Ordnance. He retired in August 1972 as a Companion of the Order of the Bath, awarded in 1972, and Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1966. He often remarked on what a satisfying career he had enjoyed but with regret that the resonant title of Master General of the Ordnance had been changed to the prosaic Chief of Materiel Army.

Retirement brought activity in new fields, with connections to his experience in the materiel area. As a consultant he advised a number of enterprises in relation to their contacts with governments in the provision of defence equipment. Much to his satisfaction, this involved frequent overseas visits. Notable were those to the biennial air shows at Farnborough, UK and Le Bourget France, conveniently arranged on alternate years. For the most part visits were extended to allow contact with relatives and many friends in the UK, Canada and USA. His desire to keep up contacts and travel seemed unquenchable.

His circle of friendship was wide. He was a member of many clubs, societies, and associations, often in an official position. Some were the Royal United Service Institution where he was both ACT and National President, the National Council of the Red Cross where he was both a Councilor and Chairman of the National Disaster Relief Committee, the Australian-Britain Society, trustee of the RAA Historical Society, the RAA Association ACT and others. He was particularly proud of his Gunner connections. He actively pursued such activities until he died on 20 December 2003. He is survived by his only child Lizette, her husband Stephen Amorsen and grandchildren Ingrid, Greta and Elsa. Our sympathy goes out to them.

Vale General Tim/Marco Polo,  
Ubique.  
John Whitelaw  
January 2004