

CHAPTER 10: Success



Self and Bill Calvert, July 42.

IN JULY WE WERE IN THE MESS ONE LUNCH TIME, and the BBC news stated that the whole position in Egypt was very serious, there was talk of Headquarters in Cairo burning their papers and preparing for evacuation. I remember saying out loud “Absolute balls.” We had been through a lot but there was no feeling of depression or defeatism. To emphasise our optimism, 82nd Battery decided to throw a drinks party for the rest of the regimental officers that evening. The party went with a real swing. Someone poured a bucket of iced water over my head as I was standing by the door saying goodnight to the CO. Two hours later I had an urgent telephone call from the adjutant telling me that I was ordered to take a composite battery up to the front line at first light. I thought that the adjutant was pulling my leg but he emphasised that it was in compliance with a definite order from higher authority. Notwithstanding our situation at the time with our vehicles unloaded, having to make arrangements for detailed gun detachments, stores, ammunition, equipment, and all the other requisites by feverish activity we succeeded in getting everything ready and moved forward towards our required destination at first light. To begin with we were attached to different divisions until a composite group moved up under 69th Brigade whom we then joined.

On July 21st, 69th Brigade Group and a composite battalion from 201st Guards Brigade moved south with the intention of attacking the high ground at El Himeimat and El Taqa at the southernmost part of the line near the Quattara depression. The move by night was

difficult because of soft sand. The attack went in daylight but the enemy held the high ground and could observe every move and there were many casualties. Following the abortive attack the Brigade moved north through the night near Alamein. The following night the Brigade was again in action to secure a gap in the minefields for an armoured attack. The infantry reached their objectives but the armour did not go through. The Brigadier confided in me that he had had a row with the Corps Commander and expected that he would get the sack, but it was the Corps Commander who went. In the morning I accompanied "Red Ted" on a recce of the battlefield – he was looking through his binoculars and commented that he could see some Germans who were studying us. The battlefield seemed to be rather lonely but there were a lot of solid shells bouncing around.

At the end of July 1942, 69th Brigade rejoined Fifty Div, which was given the task of defending the Northern Delta area whilst re-organising, re-equipping and being reinforced. 82nd Battery moved to support an Indian Brigade on the western end of Ruweisat Ridge, a grim flyblown position.

One afternoon the Second in Command of the 25th Regiment, Major Bob Orme, visited 82nd Battery and informed me that the battery was to move back the following day to an area next to Regiment headquarters, that was situated between Ruweisat Ridge and the sea. I said that I hadn't received any orders to that effect from Regiment headquarters but he confirmed that those were the orders. The next day the Battery moved as instructed and the prospect of a rest was welcome. The following morning I reported to the CO. His brother, the Second in Command, was also present. The CO then slated me for moving the Battery without authority and ordered me to take the Battery back to the position it had left. I was very surprised, and naturally expected the Second in Command to tell his brother that I had complied with the orders he had given me. I was amazed but said nothing thinking perhaps that the two brothers would sort out the situation between themselves. Both the brothers must have known that I would never have withdrawn from a position without orders. How the Second in Command had the nerve to stand there listening to my being so heavily criticised without saying a word is something I have often thought about but could never understand: As far as I know the CO never held it against me, but I never received an explanation. Perhaps they were too embarrassed, or perhaps there had been some misunderstanding between them. However I was shocked by the Second in Command's behaviour and thought that any future orders from him should be in writing. Later that day we moved back to the positions we had so recently left. Not long afterwards orders were received to move back to the area near Regiment headquarters. The battery was getting weary: there had been no let-up since breaking out from Gazala and the prospect of rest was welcome.



Alan Hemingway, Geoff and Bob Orme, August 1942.

In August General Alexander succeeded General Auchinleck and Lieut-General B. L. Montgomery took over command of the 8th Army.

Towards the end of August, 82nd Battery took up positions on Ruweisat Ridge ready for the battle of Alam Halfa. The battle was short-lived and Rommel withdrew. There was a breathing space, which enabled the 8th Army to be heavily reinforced with men, up-to-date equipment, and aircraft.

After Alam Halfa, 25th Regiment was withdrawn into 13th Corps area to assist in the training and protection of the newly arrived 51st Highland Division. I attended its first Divisional briefing in the desert.

25th Regiment embarked on its first real rest in October, and came under the command of 18th Anti-Aircraft Brigade, Cairo. 82nd Battery was encamped at Amirya, when it was inspected by the Brigadier, who seemed completely out of touch. He had expected a band and remarked that troop commanders should carry dusters to polish their men's boots before an inspection. Fortunately I knew the Brigade Major, Major John Brocklebank, whom I originally met whilst at Brigade headquarters in Liverpool. The Battery was shortly due to move to an RAF maintenance unit near Cairo and there was going to be a further visit from the Brigadier whilst there. I told the Brigadier that the battery had been in the desert for over a year and had been involved in many battles since January but if he would arrange for me to be given a list of things he would like to see on his next visit we would do our best to comply.

82nd Battery moved to an RAF Maintenance Unit that was situated in the desert to the west of Cairo. The RAF Medical Officer was Squadron Leader Alan Sibbald whom I had known in Liverpool, and he went out of his way to deal with all the Battery's medical problems. Nearly everyone had desert sores, trench foot and trench mouth. Alan Sibbald's recommended treatment for foot rot was to soak the feet in a solution of formaldehyde, issued for fly killing, twice a day. When the battery left the Medical Unit the health of all had been considerably improved. Whilst at the Medical Unit I arranged for a flight in a Beaufighter so that I could look at our gun positions from the air. When the time came to land there was a problem with the undercarriage and we belly-flopped. It seemed to take an awful long time to get out of the plane and I could see the rescue vehicles rushing to our aid but all was well in the end. Shortly before the Brigadier's inspection was due I was sorting out the contents of my secret file and had the papers spread over a table in my tent when a sudden "dust devil" hit the middle of the tent, lifted the far side, and like a vacuum swept all the papers off the table and scattered them far and wide into the air towards Cairo. Of course I had to report my loss. When the Brigadier came round for his inspection he liked what he saw. In order to please him plenty of bull was laid on and all our training for desert warfare was reversed. All that could be polished was; guns and vehicles shone so that they could be more easily observed from the ground or air. When he wished to see a particular gun site, it was arranged that his vehicle became stuck in soft sand. He was pleased with his visit. When I was asked when such and such a thing had been done I would reply, "Yesterday, Sir." After that inspection we were left in peace.

Regiment headquarters was situated half way along the road between Cairo and the Pyramids. One night, thieves broke in through the barbed wire and stole all the regimental cutlery they could find. The CO was furious. The following night thieves again broke in and took away the sides of the marquee! When in the Delta area every care had to be taken against very clever thieving gippos. An unattended vehicle might lose all its wheels, small arms would have to be chained up or be placed in a hole beneath bedding. When traveling in a vehicle it was advisable to have a man in the back armed with a pick-helve. Sometimes gangs might fake an accident and then an accomplice would jump in the back and throw out all the contents that would quickly disappear in the crowd.

Whilst the regiment was in the Cairo area John Cowen, Brigade Commander of 274th Battery and I were sent on a gunnery course for senior officers at Haifa. We went there by plane, and, as we were coming into land three Blenheims took off in formation and failing to get airborne disappeared down a wadi at the end of the runway. Later I heard that the planes had just been modified for additional protection and presumably the extra weight proved

fatal. We were put through our paces by the IGs but had some leisure, that included a visit to Nazareth. I also visited Major Oscar Roberts (a Rugger International who played for Birkenhead Park) who was commanding a Light Anti-Aircraft Battery in Haifa. Some of those on the course had been out for a few drinks one evening and I warned John Cowen that there was a possibility that his tent might be let down. Sure enough his tent was collapsed. An infuriated John Cowen emerged. Seizing a bucket of water he rushed into a tent and threw it over the person he thought responsible, only to find that he had mistakenly drenched the Camp Commandant!

Major John Cowen became Battery Commander of 274th Battery in April when Major T. Eustace Smith was transferred to command 15th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Before the war he was a barrister and after the war became joint-general manager of Barclays bank.

When the Second Battle of Alamein began on October 23rd, 25th Regiment was still resting and it was disappointing for us that we were not there with Fifty Div, but we were not permitted to return until our allotted rest period was complete.

138th Battery joined 25th Regiment on November 10th. 138th Battery had been formed in Margate and served in Cyprus before coming back to Egypt. The Battery Commander was Rae Benney and his predecessor was Major Pat Grosvenor, heir to the Duke of Westminster.

The regiment moved back to Amaryia for a short time and then rejoined Fifty Div at El Adem on December 16th. Whilst at El Adem I obtained permission to revisit our old position in the Gazala line. Knowing I was going back, one of the cooks asked me to look for his teeth, which he had left behind in the hurried evacuation. Strangely enough I found them in the deserted cookhouse. Presumably few had entered the box since we left for fear of mines and booby traps. On the way back I came across a number of our dead, lying unburied, in the sun. I took a careful note of the location, thinking that a padre would ensure them a proper burial, and recover their identity discs and personal belongings. The





My home and Bill Calvert. March 1942.



Jimmy Doyle, Edwards and Blomky, March 1942.

matter was reported to the Padres' unit and the message came back, "You found you bury them." This callous attitude put me off padres and the church for some time. A burial party was arranged and the personal papers handed over.

Christmas was spent at our camp at El Adem and we enjoyed what few "comforts" we had. We set off on December 31st for the Ajedabia-Benghazi area. Weather conditions were appalling and unbelievably the desert had turned into a morass of mud. Everywhere vehicles were bogged down and in the flat surroundings one had to try and spot some slightly higher ground and slowly make for it.

We reached our area and cleaned up, but our stay was short and on January 9th, 1943, 82nd and 138th Batteries moved to join 30th Corps at Sirte. On the way I had pulled up for a halt near "Marble Arch" and found a lot of mines around; however, all our vehicles carried sandbags beneath the legs to give some protection for those in the front seats. The night before we entered Tripoli I spoke to the men and pointed out that Tripoli would be the first civilian town to be entered and that they should treat the people as we would have wished our own people to be treated had the position been reversed. We entered Tripoli early on the morning of January 21st, 1943, and the guns were deployed near the sea front, where ships were tied up. The town looked very attractive in the sunshine and we had no problems with the population.



Tripoli, January 23, 1943.



After a few days, 82nd Battery joined an armoured brigade further to the west, which was actively engaged with enemy forces and there was a lot of movement. Fifty Div had moved up to the area and on February 24th, 30th Corps advanced to Medenine near the Mareth Line to draw the Axis forces southwards to assist 1st Army. 82nd Battery rejoined 69th Brigade. At this time I developed violent toothache and managed to find a dentist who was busily engaged in digging a slit trench. He didn't want to stop digging but kindly extracted the troublesome tooth whilst I was sitting on a rickety camp chair. I had noticed someone hovering in the background and enquired who he was and the dentist said, "Oh he's the head holder." – I supposed he was used to put a neck-lock on troublesome patients. Rommel attacked "Edinburgh Castle," a defensive position, in force and was beaten off with severe losses. There were comparatively few casualties on our side.

After Medenine, Fifty Div moved to its new area opposite the Mareth Line. The Mareth Line was a miniature Maginot Line built by the French when Mussolini's ambitions were considered to be a threat. On March 14th a formation of United States Mitchell planes bombed the area in error and repeated their mistake the following day, but despite the



With captured German anti-tank gun, Gabes Gap, 1943

claims broadcast on the BBC they inflicted little damage on their friends, who by then had become wary of them.

The preliminaries for the battle began on March 16th. 50 Div to launch a frontal attack on the Mareth Line and draw in the Axis defences whilst the New Zealand Corps made a left hook encircling movement round the Matmahta Mountains to Le Hamma. The frontal attack met with much resistance, but by March 29th, 69th Brigade with 82nd Battery was in Mareth.

Rommel took up a defensive position at “Gabes Gap” a level pass between mountains on either side and protected by an anti-tank ditch. At dawn on April 6th, 69th Brigade supported by 82nd Battery attacked the central sector, with 4th Indian Division on the left flank and 51st Division on the right. The Ghurkas were going to put in a night attack and I remember hearing at the time that they enjoyed using their traditional kukris and made a point of collecting the ears of their victims to prove how many they had killed. During the afternoon six Italian bombers flew in formation to attack the concentrated gun area and were shot down simultaneously. 69th Brigade achieved its objectives and burst through the gap at 11.00 hours. The anti tank ditch was filled in and passages made through the minefields and in the afternoon the armour of the Xth Corps formed up for the pursuit.



The seargants were a tough lot. They were in charge of each gun.

Following the battle, Fifty Div concentrated in the immediate area in front of the “Gap” and there was a farewell parade for Major-General J. S. Nichols, DSO, MC, a popular general with a reputation for leading from the front armed with a swagger stick, who was going to be replaced.

During the lull the CO informed me that it had been reported to him that some gunners from 82nd Battery had been observed robbing the bodies of the enemy dead during the battle and that these men were to be charged and the cases be referred for his attention. I said that I would of course comply with his orders but I would require evidence of the accusations to satisfy myself that there was a prima face case to answer. I asked for evidence from the reporting officers but none was forthcoming so that was the end of that!

After a few days Fifty Div moved forward via Susa and past its ancient amphitheatre famous for its statue of “Winged Victory,” to Enfidaville which was taken on April 20th, 1943. 69th Brigade was relieved on April 23rd and on the 24th, Fifty Div started its long journey of two thousand miles back to Alexandria.

On 13th May 1943 the Tunisian campaign was over and all enemy resistance had ceased. It had been a great victory and being able to advance instead of retreating was uplifting to say the least of it.



*Top: Alan Aitken, Alan Pennington, "Johnny" Johnson, Clem White, Dickie Hindle, Basil W. Town.
Lower: Alan Hemingway, Don Curtis, self, Bill Calvert, Neville Wharton.*

Fifty Div moved back to the Delta by road a slow journey, which went smoothly. The Division had a brief stay at Tripoli to unload ammunition and certain other stores. Several gun detachments, apart from having their own dogs, also carried tame chickens, which may have been earmarked for the pot. When on the move the chickens would quickly jump on board. When the ammunition was being off loaded and taken to the dump at Tripoli, the chickens belonging to one detachment thought they were being left behind and perched on the back axle where they remained despite all the dust and discomfort until the vehicle returned. The journey was long and slow and probably the first vehicle in the convoy would reach its destination before the last vehicle had started. During the journey back I used to go off in my jeep for a little sightseeing in Cyrenaica, rejoining the column later in the day. Some of the Italian settlements looked very attractive and colourful and we had previously by-passed the coastal part by cutting across the desert via Mechili. One particularly interesting place was the ancient city of Cyrene with some of its dwellings cut into the rocks, and I bathed in an ancient bath cut into the rocks by the sea.

The object of bringing Fifty Div back to the Delta was to re-equip and prepare for the invasion of Sicily though we were not aware of our destination at that time. 25th Regiment

with the Divisional Artillery were assembled at Amiriya, near Alexandria, and the infantry had training in amphibious warfare on the Bitter Lakes. Our establishment changed and 82nd Battery was to have twenty motorcycles for Don Rs. We seemed to encounter some difficulty with the motorbikes and I remember Don Curtis, the Battery Captain, saying he couldn't understand the difficulty and would show them how. He then succeeded in hitting an oil drum, which was the only obstruction in a wide open area. Being near the fleshpots of Alexandria created some problems with the MPs and some of our men and had to be dealt with. Some of our guns and equipment were due to be loaded on ships at Alexandria and everything had to be detailed and marked. On June 11th, 25th Regiment travelled through the night in cattle trucks to Suez and went into camp near the sea. As usual the battery was kept busy with training and physical activities. One afternoon I took the battery for a bathe in the Red Sea. To my surprise on the return march, which was at ease, several men experienced problems. The following day I saw a medical officer who criticised me for being irresponsible in marching the men after a swim – I certainly was not aware that swimming could have such an effect. Whilst we were encamped we had a visit from Josephine Baker and I went one evening to watch her show, which was being given in a large smoky hut. She was topless and I remember her singing the "Balalaika". The men greatly appreciated her and didn't want her to stop. Some entertainment was provided in the officers' mess and we had the occasional dance with a few Queen Alexandra's Royal Army nurses who were heavily outnumbered, so most of the dances were of the "Excuse Me" variety.

Whilst we were in Suez there was a visit from Monty the 8th Army Commander. He spoke to an assembled group of officers about the forthcoming campaign. It was also arranged that Monty would meet the men. It was all very contrived and stage-managed. It was arranged that when Monty's car was seen approaching the men would stop their training and surround the car as though it was spontaneous and start cheering him. We actually practised doing this!

Whilst in Suez we heard that our CO, Lt-Col E. L. Orme, was being posted back to the UK for compassionate reasons. He was a first class CO, a very good soldier and an exceedingly able man. Everyone was sorry that he was leaving. He was replaced by Lt-Col G. ("Gerry") G. O. Lyons MBE, a regular soldier who had been a general staff officer at Major-General, Royal Artillery, Cairo.