

FIGHTING SPRINGBOKS

C COMPANY, ROYAL NATAL CARBINEERS: FROM PREMIER MINE TO PO VALLEY, 1939 – 1945



Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Military Science (Military History) in the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University.

Supervisor: Lt Col (Prof) I.J. van der Waag

Co-supervisor: Ian Liebenberg

December 2013

“Declaration”

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 20 November 2013

ABSTRACT

Germany's declaration of war on Poland on 1 September 1939 and the consequent war in Europe not only found the Union of South Africa politically divided but militarily unprepared to fight a modern war let alone make any worthwhile contribution toward its European allies' war effort. The task of getting South Africa into the fight fell to newly appointed Prime Minister J.C. Smuts who cleverly outmanoeuvred J.B.M. Hertzog as leader of the nation. Not only was the Union Defence Force (UDF) severely ravaged by several budget cuts during and after the depression but it seemed to have no inclination of embracing the kind of mechanisation that was the hallmark of most European armies. Within the space of a year Smuts managed to transform the UDF and on 17 July 1940 the 1st South African Infantry Brigade set sail for East Africa where Mussolini's Italians reigned supreme after brushing aside a couple of British border guards and laying claim to a few miles of British territory. One of the units dispatched by Smuts was the 1st Royal Natal Carbineers from Pietermaritzburg in Natal. Throughout the campaign the Regiment's C Company fought with distinction but had the dubious honour of being the South African unit that suffered the most casualties during the whole campaign. Several of C Company's men then become the vehicles through which the remainder of the war is experienced as the men were moved from one theatre of battle to another. Through their eyes the hunting trips into the East African bush and the death of their Commanding Officer, among other things, are relived. The victorious Springboks are then sent to Egypt where they were needed in an effort to break the deadlock that existed between the British 8th Army and the German Afrika Korps. Amidst the ebb and flow of the battle the men of C Company still found time to experience the sights and sounds of Africa's most populous cities, Cairo and Alexandria. Here many young soldiers were exposed to pleasures and pastimes not to be had back in the Union. In spite of the eventual defeat of the German forces North Africa C Company witnessed the destruction of the 5th South African Brigade at Sidi Rezegh and suffered the loss of a combined platoon when Tobruk capitulated on 21 June 1942. After a brief period on home leave in 1943 C Company was back in action, this time in Italy as part of the 6th South African Armoured Division. Here they faced mountains, heavy snow and an enemy desperately fighting for every hill, stream and building. In the months which followed C Company were often in the midst of the action and many men lost close friends on the slopes of the Italian mountains. As final victory became apparent during the first months of 1945, C Company's men began preparing for their post-war lives and when the first planes and ships left for the union at the end of April 1945 the men felt that they have served their country well and did their regiment proud.

OPSOMMING

Ten tyde van Duitsland se oorlogsverklaring Pole op 1 September 1939 wat die weg gebaan het vir die gevolglike oorlog in Europa was die Unie van Suid-Afrika nie net polities verdeel nie maar ook militêr onvoorbereid op 'n moderne oorlog. Die kans dat Suid Afrika 'n beduidende bydrae tot sy Europese bondgenote se oorlogspoging sou kon maak was ook skraal. Die taak om Suid-Afrika voor te berei vir die komende stryd het op die skouers van die nuutaangestelde premier J.C. Smuts gerus wat deur middel van politieke manouvering vir J.B.M. Hertzog uitoorlê het as leier van die volk. Nie net was die Unie Verdedigings Mag (UVM) erg uitgemergel deur verskeie besnoeiings in sy begroting tydens en ná die depressie nie, maar daar was klaarblyklik geen begrip vir die proses van meganisering gehad waarmee die meeste Europese weermagte doenig was nie. Binne die bestek van 'n jaar het Smuts daarin geslaag om die UVM te transformeer en op 17 Julie 1940 seil die 1ste Suid-Afrikaanse Infanterie Brigade Oos-Afrika toe waar Mussolini se magte die kruin van die golf ry nadat hulle 'n paar Britse grensposte eenkant toe gegee het en 'n paar myl Britse grondgebied beset het. Die 1st Royal Natal Carbineers van Pietermaritzburg was een van die eenhede wat in Oos Afrika teen die Italianers sou veg. Tydens die veldtog veg die Regiment met onderskeiding, maar verwerf ook die twyfelagtige eer om die Suid-Afrikaanse eenheid te wees wat die meeste ongevalle gely het gedurende die hele veldtog. Verskeie van C Kompanie se manne word gebruik as 'n lens waardeur die res van die oorlog ervaar word soos die troepe van een front na die ander verskuif word. Deur middel van hul wedervaringe word, onder andere, die jagtogte in die Oos-Afrikaanse bos en die dood van hul bevelvoerder herleef. Na Oos-Afrika word die seëvierende Springbokke na Egipte gestuur waar hulle benodig word om die Britse 8ste Leër by te staan in die stryd teen die Duitse Afrika Korps. Te midde van die stryd kom die manne van C Kompanie nog tyd vind om Afrika se mees digbevolkte stede, Kaïro en Alexandrië te besoek waar baie jong soldate blootgestel is aan genot en tydverdryf wat nie beskikbaar was in die Unie nie. Ten spyte van die uiteindelijke nederlaag van die Duitse magte in Noord-Afrika was C Kompanie teenwoordig tydens die vernietiging van die 5de Suid-Afrikaanse Brigade by Sidi Rezegh en ervaar ook die verlies van 'n gekombineerde peloton toe Tobruk oorgegee op 21 Junie 1942. Na 'n kort tydperk in Suid Afrika is C Kompanie terug in aksie, hierdie keer in Italië as deel van die 6de Suid-Afrikaanse Pantserdivisie. Hier word hulle gekonfronteer deur berge, swaar sneeu en 'n vyand wat desperaat veg vir elke heuwel, stroom en bouwal. In die daaropvolgende maande bevind C Kompanie hom dikwels te midde van die aksie sterf vele goeie vriende teen die hange van die Italiaanse bergreekse. Namate dit duidelik begin raak dat die Duitsers die oorlog gaan verloor begin C Kompanie se manne hulself voorberei vir hul na-oorlogse lewens. Met die vertrek van die eerste vliegtuie en skepe na die Unie teen die einde van April 1945 was die manne van Natal oortuig daarvan dat hulle hul land na die beste van hulle vermoë gedien het en dat hulle die goeie naam van hulle regiment gestand gedoen het.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	i
Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Opsomming	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of abbreviations	xi
Military Organisation of the Royal Natal Carbineers in 1939	xiii
Introduction	xiv
Acknowledgements	xxi
1. Chapter 1	
Prologue: The Union of South Africa, 1933 to 1940	1
1.1 Political Manoeuvring	1
1.2 The Union's Ability to Wage War	5
1.3 Pirow's Five Year Plans	7
1.4 Smuts Takes Control	14
2. Chapter 2	
Natal, 1939 to 1940	17
2.1 Natal Prepares for War	17
2.2 The Royal Natal Carbineers receives its Marching Orders	19
2.3 Training for War	24
3. Chapter 3	
Natal and East Africa, 1940 to 1941	29
3.1 The Adventure Begins	29
3.2 On Safari in East Africa	34

3.3	Preparation for Battle	37
3.4	Raiding the Wells of the God's	40
3.5	A Bloody Day at Gelib	44
3.6	Advance to Final Reckoning at Amba Alagi	48
4.	Chapter 4	
	North Africa, 1941 to 1943	56
4.1	In the Land of the Pharaohs	56
4.2	C Company's First Taste of Desert Warfare	58
4.3	Operations at Mersa Matruh	60
4.4	Operations in Cairo and Alexandria	64
4.5	Operation Crusader	68
4.6	Defence at the Gazala Line	75
4.7	The Gazala Gallop	80
4.8	Escape from Tobruk	83
4.9	Into the Bag	85
4.10	Drawing a Line in the Sand at El Alamein	86
5.	Chapter 5	
	Egypt, The Mediterranean and South Africa, 1943	93
5.1	The End in North Africa	93
5.2	Going Home?	95
5.3	A Changing Role for the Carbineers	98
5.4	Prisoners in Italy	102
6.	Chapter 6	
	South Africa, Egypt, Italy and Germany, 1943 to 1945	104
6.1	C Company returns to North Africa	104

6.2	On the Run in Italy	108
6.3	Training in the Desert for operations in the Italian Mountains	110
6.4	From Taranto to the River Arno	113
6.5	Failed Escapes	123
6.6	Crossing the River Arno	125
6.7	The Assault on Monte Stanco	128
6.8	Relative Inactivity at Monte Termine	131
6.9	Plenty of Prisoners South of the Po	135
7.	Chapter 7	
	Germany, Italy and South Africa, 1944-1946	138
7.1	The Beginning of the End	138
7.2	Prisoners in Germany	142
7.3	Patients in Allied Hospitals	143
7.4	Demobilising the Military Machine	144
7.5	The Death March to Freedom	149
7.6	Invalided Home	150
7.7	C Company Leaves Europe	151
8.	Chapter 8	
	Epilogue	157
9.	Conclusion	168
	Sources	170
	Illustrations	
1.1	Prototype of Pirow's proposed "Bush Carts"	10
1.2	Backbone of the SAAF in 1940: The Hawker Hartebeest	13
2.1	RNC assembled at Oripi Camp, Pietermaritzburg, on 12 March 1940	21

2.2	Proposed kit issue for enlisted men upon joining the UDF	25
2.3	One of C.D. Stainbank's many letters to his parents	28
3.1	HMT Devonshire as it is about to leave Durban on 17 July 1940	31
3.2	Some Carbineers in their quarters below decks on the journey north	33
3.3	Two Carbineers with their "trophies"	37
3.4	Graves of the C Company men killed at Gelib and buried nearby	47
3.5	Michael in action	49
3.6	Italian postcard depicting the Massif of Amba Alagi	53
4.1	The main UDF camp in Egypt at Helwan	58
4.2	C Company trench system at Mersa Matruh	62
4.3	Carbineers digging defensive positions somewhere in the desert	64
4.4	Four Carbineers doing a bit of sightseeing the local way	67
4.5	Private Doug Drummond	73
4.6	Cartoon strip detailing Sgt Quentin Smythe's actions for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross	79
4.7	A Carbineer section and their truck during the "Gazala Gallop"	83
4.8	Private Drummond's grave at El Alamein	88
4.9	South African graves at El Alamein	92
5.1	Capt E. McKenzie leads C Company through the streets of Pietermaritzburg upon the Regiment's return on 19 January 1943	98
6.1	Page from Ben Fainsinger wherein he expresses his desire to kill an enemy	118
6.2	C Company members on patrol in the snow in Italy	132
6.3	Photographs highlighting the mountainous terrain of Mount Sole in front of the Carbineer Positions	135
7.1	The "Olds and Bolds"	139

7.2	Captain J.P. Edmonds with the Silver Star	140
7.3	Ben Fainsinger’s opinion of the war during his stay in hospital	143
7.4	Posters and pamphlets used to inform UDF personnel about the Demobilisation Process.	143
7.5	HMT <i>Franconia</i> as it enters Durban harbour with the last of the Carbineers from Italy	154
8.1	Capt G Bentz and Mr H. W. “Bill” Buckley	158
8.2	C.D. Stainbank during the Italian campaign	160
8.3	Capt G. Bentz and Mr C.J. Portsmouth	161
8.4	W. J. Carpenter (Jack) Rossiter, standing on the right, with the two other Escapees	162
8.5	Michael the rooster	164
8.6	Carbineer veterans during the <i>Devonshire</i> Lunch on 18 July 2008	166
8.7	Carbineer veterans with the OC Natal Carbineers and WO2 I. Gerhardt during the <i>Devonshire</i> Lunch on 30 July 2011.	166
8.8	Carbineer veterans with former OC Natal Carbineers C. Simpson lunch organiser G. Dick during the <i>Devonshire</i> Lunch on 19 July 2013.	167

Maps

2.1	The route of C Company through East Africa, circa 1941	35
2.2	Hand drawn map by H.G. Symons of the El Wak operation on 16 December 1940	43
3.1	Rommel's flanking move becomes apparent on 12 June 1942	80
3.2	Map indicating Rommel's flanking attack on the Gazala Line and the Allied withdrawal, 26 May to 28 June	82
3.3	Dispositions of troops at the time of the El Alamein battles , circa October 1942	86
6.1	The 6 th South African Armoured Division's route through Italy, April 1944 to May 1945	107

Tables

2.1	Composition of C Company prior to deployment to East Africa	
7.1	UDF enlistment and total number of casualties during the War	155
7.2	Battle casualties per Campaign	155
7.3	Number of battle casualties sustained by the Natal Carbineers for the period 1940 to 1945	156

List of Abbreviations

AA	Anti-Aircraft
ACF	Active Citizen Force
Ack Ack	Anti-Aircraft Guns
AFV's	Armoured Fighting Vehicles
AP	Armour piercing or anti-personnel
AT	Anti-Tank
Brig	Brigadier
Brig-Gen	Brigadier General
Bty	Battery
Capt	Captain
CG	Campo di Prigioneri di Guerra
CO	Commanding Officer
Col	Colonel
Coy	Company
Cpl	Corporal
CSM	Company Sergeant Major
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DEOR	Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles
DHQ	Defence Head Quarters
Div	Division
DRA	Defence Rifle Association
FDL	Forward defence location
Gen	General
HMHS	His Majesty's Hospital Ship
HMT	His Majesty's Troopship
HQ	Headquarters

L/Cpl	Lance Corporal
LMG	Light machine gun
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-colonel
NAAFI	Navy Army and Air Force Institute
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
NMR	Natal Mounted Rifles
OB	Ossewa Brandwag
PF	Permanent Force
PIAT	Projectile infantry anti-tank
PI	Platoon
POW	Prisoner of War
Pte	Private
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
Rfn	Rifleman
RNC	Royal Natal Carbineers
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAMR	South African Mounted Rifles
SSB	Special Service Battalion
Tpr	Trooper
TS	Transvaal Scottish
UDF	Union Defence Force
VC	Victoria Cross
VMG	Vickers machine gun
WR/DLR	Wits Rifles/De La Rey Regiment
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Military Organisation of the Royal Natal Carbineers in 1939

On the eve of war the Regiment comprised the following elements:

- Headquarters Company
- Service Company (Store men, Cooks, Mechanics etc.)
- A Company
- B Company
- C Company
- Support Company (Mortars, Anti-Tank and Machinegun platoons)
- The Regimental Band

The HQ Company consisted of the Commanding Officer (Major), Second-in-Command (Captain), two Intelligence Corporals, a three-man signals crew, a company radio operator, the Commanding Officer's driver, Chaplain and medical orderly with his stretcher bearers. In South African units, stretcher bearers were drawn from the Coloured units and these men also served as batmen to the officers.

The rifle companies contained the men who did the fighting and consisted of three platoons and a headquarters unit. Each platoon was commanded by an officer who was assisted by a Sergeant and radio operator. The platoons were further divided into sections with a Corporal in charge and had a Bren machinegun for fire support. These were further subdivided into half-sections under Lance Corporals.

The Support Company consisted of a 3 inch mortar platoon for indirect fire support, an anti-tank platoon with which to counter any armoured threat, and a Vickers machinegun platoon. During the East African campaign and for the first part of the North African campaign the anti-tank platoon was armed with the Boyes anti-tank rifle which was later replaced by the more effective 2 pounder anti-tank guns.

In 1943 when the Regiment spent a confusing couple of months training for their new role as an armoured car unit there were actually six squadrons (companies) and a headquarters unit. This reorganisation did not materialise and the Regiment reverted back to its normal organisation during the Italian campaign. The most notable difference here was the addition of a Bren-gun carrier platoon for reconnaissance and light transport over difficult terrain.

Introduction

In his book **Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest** Stephen Ambrose focuses on one specific rifle company in the U.S. Army during the Second World War. Through hours of interviews with survivors, journals and letters, Ambrose sought to recreate the events as they unfolded from the company's first days of basic training through until the end of the war. The reader is taken on a journey through one of the previous century's great tragedies as experienced by the men who lived through it. The success of this novel is matched by the much acclaimed mini-series, where Hollywood special effects immerse the viewer deeper into the lives of the men of "Easy Company".

No such material exists on South Africans who fought alongside British, French and American troops in the Second World War. Jeremy Black indeed laments the fact that many military historians focus all their efforts on largely operational accounts of wars and battles.¹ Much of the literature available today are mere reproductions of previous renditions with too little scrutiny of archival sources while some published works offer little in the sense of new ideas and insight.² In line with the new approach to military history this battle-centred approach are being challenged and, with more recent assumptions and insights from the side of the combatants being immortalised in writing the future of military history seems bright indeed. Readers of military history are now exposed to warfare at almost grassroots level instead of how military commanders, through their own brilliance, achieved set military objectives by almost "playing" war by strategically moving units around on maps and charts.³ Black also argues that the experiences of common soldiers become more valuable when written by veterans themselves. In addition to Ambrose with his **Band of Brothers**, Eugene Sledge, Paul Fussel and John Holland, among others, all enriched their readers' understanding of the horrors of war as experienced by the men who occupied the trenches.⁴ These works are penned by American and European authors with South African writers dealing with military history focussing mostly on the much more recent South African Border War (1966 – 1989).

¹ J. Black, **Rethinking Military History** (New York, 2004), p x.

² This is in line with the traditional focus of military history that focus on celebratory tales and narratives. Some examples are: A. Beevor's **Stalingrad** (1998), J. Bierman and C. Smith's **Alamein: War without Hate** (2003), D.G. Chandler's **Campaigns of Napoleon** (1966) and B. **Alexander's How Great Generals Win** (1993).

³ Here Jeremy Black also points out that contrary to popular belief, British seamen during the first half of the twentieth century preferred to serve in smaller vessels with greater unit cohesion as opposed to the larger warships where the individual might become just another member of a very large crew.

⁴ E.B. Sledge, **With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa** (Novato, 1981); P.Fussel, **The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945** (New York, 1992) and J. Holland, **Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War:1944-1945** (New York,2008).

The most recent books by South African authors on personal experiences during the Second World War are **Come Back to Portofino** by James Bourhill,⁵ in which he details the 6 South African Armoured Division campaign through Italy, and Keith Ford's **From Addis to the Aosta Valley**⁶ where the author makes use of his own diaries and experience as artilleryman to paint a picture of what military life was like during the war. A few accounts of exploits by individuals are available and deal mostly with their part in a particular battle or their escape from a POW camp. In this regard Harry Rose-Innes's **The Po Valley Break** and Jack Rossiter's **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943** proved invaluable to this study. Both sources deal with their respective authors' capture, time as POW's and eventual escape. Another recent publication dealing with South African POW's are Cyril Crompton and Peter Johnson's book **Luck Favours** wherein the authors use their respective memoirs as a base to describe their experiences as POW in Germany and Poland (Crompton) and attempts at being recaptured (Johnson) by Germans and Italian patrols. In addition several very well written regimental histories exist but deal mostly with the history or operational aspects of the particular unit.⁷ A.F. Hattersley's **Carbineer** and M. Coghlan's **Pro Patria, Another 50 Natal Carbineer Years 1945 – 1995** speaks directly to the topic of regimental histories and both have done excellent work in documenting the history of the Natal Carbineers. The closest the South African reading public came to sharing the first-hand battle experiences, in the years following the war, was through a limited number of unofficial publications. One of those are J. A. Brown's published wartime diary, **Retreat to Victory: A Springbok Diary in North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein, 1942** wherein the author details his personal experience of desert warfare over the period 1941 to 1942 and it is one of the earliest attempts to move away from the "guns and trumpets" approach to military history. In **Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and social Justice** N. Roos introduces his readers to the plight of returning servicemen and how the politics of war influenced those who volunteered for service. The official South African account of the war pales in size when compared to the seventy eight volumes of the United States Army alone. The US Navy follows suit with fifteen volumes while the US Air Force completes the series with its own seven volumes. The records to Great Britain are equally impressive. South African authors managed to compile but a handful of official histories. The most salient ones dealing with Army operations, since the focus of this study is geared towards South Africa's preparation and operations on land, are the following: J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner's **The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941** which deals with Operation Crusader and the destruction of the 5th

⁵ J. Bourhill, **Come Back to Portofino: Through Italy with the 6th South African Armoured Division** (Johannesburg, 2011).

⁶ K. Ford, **From Addis to the Aosta Valley: A South African in the North African and Italian Campaigns 1940–1945** (Cape Town, 2012).

⁷ B.G. Simpkins, **Rand Light Infantry** (Cape Town, 1965), R. Griffiths, **First City** (Cape Town, 1970), H.H. Curson, **The History of the Kimberley Regiment** (Kimberley, 1963), A. J. Du Plessis, **The Umvoti Mounted Rifles**, (Pietermaritzburg, 1975).

South African Infantry Brigade and by the same authors **Crisis in the Desert, May-June 1942** which focus on the fall of Tobruk and the first battle of el Alamein. The writing of these official histories was eventually suspended and through donations from various sources a Semi-official set of histories comprising eight volumes were published. The most relevant are: Neil Orpen's **South African Forces World War II, volume 1: East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, which as the name suggest covers most of the ground operations in East Africa, **South African Forces World War II, volume 3: War in the Desert** dealing with Army operations in Egypt and Libya during the 1941-1942 period, **South African Forces World War II, volume 5: Victory in Italy** deals with the 6th South African Armoured Division in Italy. Volume 7 is collaboration between N. Orpen and H.J. Martin entitled **South Africa at War** and explains the military organisation, overall strategy, economic readiness to wage war as well as other aspects relating to South Africa as it prepared to enter the Second World War. Other volumes dealt with the Union's naval and air elements that saw active service as well as two volumes devoted to the South African Engineers (Sappers).

While books on the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) and the South African Border War abound with publications relating to the latter flooding the shelves of bookshops over the past 6 years, very few books dealing with South Africans during the Second World War saw the light of day. In the case of the Natal Carbineers where their Veteran's Organisation is fairly strong the Regiment managed to publish several memoirs and diaries of Second World War veterans. Such publications were mostly done for sentimental value and seldom more than 100 were printed and distributed only to members of the Regiment. These sources, in spite of their value to any researcher, are just modern reproductions of diaries and memoirs scribbled in fading ink on a collection of old and tattered pages. There are no interpretation and when read out of context are simply the reminiscences of very old men about a time when they were young and adventurous. In spite of the apparent increasing interest of South African writers on matters pertaining to the individual in war, the "face of battle" of the Second World War seems to have been largely neglected. In this regard John Keegan's work entitled **The Face of Battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme**⁸ in which he argues that a mere analyses of strategy and tactics as contained in many military histories does not do justice to the unpredictability of war as experienced by the troops in the trenches. He not only takes the experiences from the commanders, but also the soldier's themselves, thereby levelling the playing field allowing for a more knowledgeable and intellectual analysis of historical battles. This book is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to writing military history.

This Thesis aims to fill a gap that exists in South African literature dealing with the Second World War by using a South African infantry company as a lens through which the experiences of ordinary soldiers in the Union Defence Force (UDF) are thoroughly

⁸ J. Keegan, **The Face of Battle: A study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme** (London, 1976).

investigated. The experiences suffered and enjoyed by these men will then provide a bottom-up view of South Africa's military involvement in the Second World War. In order to accumulate these documented experiences the study will focus on a specific company of one of South Africa's many Citizen Force Regiments that saw action during the Second World War.

In terms of methodology the starting point of this study was to identify a unit which served as a complete entity from the outbreak of the war in 1939 until the end in 1945. The severe manpower shortage in the Union by 1943 necessitated a process of amalgamating regiments with one another in order to get them up to the required wartime strength. A quick internet search yielded positive results pointing in the direction of the Royal Natal Carbineers located in Pietermaritzburg. A welcome surprise was the discovery that South Africa's first Victoria Cross recipient, Quentin Smythe was a Sergeant in one of the Natal Carbineer Companies. This information steered the study in the direction of C Company of the Natal Carbineers which formed part of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade of the 1st South African Infantry Division during the East and North African campaign. During the Italian campaign the Carbineers formed part of the 12th South African Motorised Brigade of the 6th South African Armoured Division. At Natal Carbineers Headquarters a very helpful Sergeant Major confirmed that the Regiment indeed has a museum, archive and several Second World War veterans who were more than willing to share their collective stories. It was fortuitous that their annual veteran's lunch was a few weeks away upon commencement of this study, and was an opportunity not to be missed.

The Natal Carbineer Drill Hall in Pietermaritzburg is a military historian's dream with cannon captured during the First World War solemnly guarding the entrance to the Officer's Mess which also doubles as regimental museum. Historical artefacts representing the Regiment's history are on display throughout the museum and include hundreds of medals, maps, photographs, donated uniforms, swords, helmets, pieces of shrapnel and even a supposedly haunted life-size replica of a horse. The museum is run by the same Sergeant Major initial contact was made with and she prides herself in its existence. The next step in pursuit of Carbineer experiences was to meet the regimental historian. Being a dedicated ex-Carbineer himself he viewed his job more as calling than anything else. He provided a complete and unbridled access to his archive which contained material spanning a century. Here there were more artefacts, books, photographs, uniforms, personal correspondence and various other material of historical value. The first order of business was to locate a nominal roll of C Company during the War. Armed with the names of the Company members the process of locating diaries, letters, interviews and photographs began and spanned several days.

The next port of call was the SANDF Documentation Centre (SANDF DOC CEN) in Pretoria where South African military records dating back to the First World War are stored. At the personnel records section all personnel cards of members who served in C Company during

the war was copied for processing later. These records indicated age, pre-war occupation, next of kin and service record throughout the war, injuries sustained and medals awarded. Several research trips were made to the SANDF DOC CEN during the writing of this thesis. In addition to these trips, annual visits were also made to the Natal Carbineers Archive in Pietermaritzburg where through the good grace of the regimental historian, documents, diaries, letters and memoirs of C Company members were freely available for consultation. The availability of sources determined the target group for the study. The fact that several C Company veterans were still alive and willing to share their experiences was an additional bonus. A good deal of information was collected on each individual and ranged from interviews, diaries, memoirs, letters, newspaper clippings, an assortment of loose documents and photographs. This information was consolidated to create the narrative of several individuals as they navigated the years of war. Very often bits and pieces of information about the target group was found in interviews, letters and diaries of their comrades, necessitating a much wider search for the truth about these men. These stories were then woven together to create a chronological depiction of life as a South African soldier during the Second World War. This narrative was then fleshed out with official documentation and mostly South African literature obtained in large part from the SANDF DOC CEN and Natal Carbineers Archive.

It is unfortunate that this project was not undertaken a decade earlier since all of the original C Company men have since passed away while only a handful Carbineer Second World War veterans remains. Those veterans I did have the honour and privilege of interviewing had a wide range of stories to tell. Conducting these interviews was sometimes just as adventurous as the tales captured in the narrative. The best place where all the veterans could be found at once was the annual veterans lunch (Devonshire Lunch, so named after the troopship they all embarked on) but this was also the worst place for interviews. With several old warriors trying to remember who was who and who served where while sipping on their whiskey and water, opportunities for individual interviews were non-existent. The solution was to, very politely, get permission from their wives and children when the veterans were collected afterwards for a private visit a few days later.

In **A Guide to Historical Method**, Shafer provides guidelines for the conducting of interviews and warns that the interviewee should not be antagonised by aggressive questions⁹. Taking the advanced age of the target group into consideration the initial approach was to request the veterans to recount any and all stories about their wartime experiences. I soon discovered that much more guidance would be needed as they tended to jump between time periods drifting between the distant and recent past. Very often they would share stories totally irrelevant to the topic but their enthusiasm and eagerness to explain whatever they remembered at that point was simply too great to force them back on track.

⁹ R.J. Shafer, **A Guide to Historical Method 3rd edition**, (Chicago, 1980), pp 89 – 93.

The only persons who managed to bring some semblance of order to the whole affair was in most cases the wives who, being several years younger, very tactfully told their husbands to stop talking nonsense and to answer the young man's questions. Individual interviews tended to be much shorter as it appeared that the veterans ran out of stories to tell or became bored much too soon. The solution then was to organise a small get-together where a few veterans could be interviewed at once. This system yielded definite benefits as the interviews were much longer and the mornings were filled with "do you remember when we...", "weren't you at...", "what was the name of that place where we..." and "no that was not the true story, let me tell you what really happened". Recording this "immediate history"¹⁰ as Vansina puts it was immensely rewarding but the pitfalls of oral history quickly became glaringly apparent. Making sense of several stories at once proved to be the first challenge. The second problem was that of background chatter where wives and children went about their business resulting in family affairs also being recorded. Once again the joy that these men experienced at sharing their war-stories with old comrades was too great to force them back to the desired line of questioning. Since half a century have passed from the time when these men lived through the experiences they recounted, one had to bear in mind that their visions of the past might have become tainted by books and movies about the war. The one story of the Carbineer prisoner that was in the same German Prisoner of War camp where the "Great Escape"¹¹ was conducted from was recorded with a bit of scepticism. When memories are so vague there exists the danger to steer the interviewee in a direction that will suit the narrative and one is confronted with situations where you wonder "if this guy could just have been there when..." or "if only this man was part of the group that made a successful escape". With such temptations successfully averted the process of working through the recordings, video clips and photographs commenced.

The narrative follows a chronological sequence commencing from the years prior to the outbreak of war. The first chapter serves as a background to the political situation in the country and highlights the Union's unpreparedness for Total War. The following chapter deals with the mobilisation of the Natal Carbineers and it is also where the first of the selected troops of C Company are introduced. Chapters three and four focus on the campaigns in East and North Africa. Here the men's experience of their first war-time casualties, operational disasters and leisure time utilisation are discussed. In the next chapter the Regiment returns to South Africa and are informed that they are to become an armoured car regiment. It is also in this chapter that the plight of some of C Company's men who had been taken prisoner is discussed. The main focus of chapter six is on the Regiment's return to North Africa and the eventual deployment to Italy where the

¹⁰ J. Vansina, **Oral Tradition as History** (London, 1985), p13.

¹¹ The "Great Escape" was a 1963 film featuring Steve McQueen where a group of allied prisoners escape from a German POW camp.

Carbineers fought some of their fiercest battles. The exploits of some of C Company's POW's are interwoven with the main narrative as the South Africans fought across Italy. The events in chapter seven takes place against the backdrop of the final months of the war. It was during this period that preparations were made for the return to civilian life and the demobilisation process are briefly discussed. The epilogue then concludes the dissertation with an attempt to bring closure by briefly following the target group's post-war lives.

The focus was mostly on the enlisted men to ensure continuity and since the officers were transferred between companies and regiments they are mentioned in passing only. Whatever the men of C Company did, saw and experienced were not unique to their unit alone and was done, seen and experienced by others in the UDF as well. The difference is that C Company of the Royal Natal Carbineers was there from the very beginning until the very end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey would have been a brief one had it not been for the invaluable contribution and support of various individuals and institutions. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude for the assistance rendered by the SANDF DOC CEN. Here specific thanks go to the Deputy Director Ms L. Jooste for granting me permission to conduct my research at the military archives. A word of appreciation must also go to Mr S. De Agreila and Ms Z. Mushqwana who assisted me during my many hours in the reading room and were always willing to point me in the right direction. Mr G. Prinsloo for his assistance with the collection of relevant photographs, Ms M. Borain in the Library and Lt E. Kleynhans who were always willing to fax or e-mail crucial pieces of information at short notice deserves my heartfelt appreciation as well. Without the assistance of the members of the Natal Carbineers in Pietermaritzburg, this study would not have seen the light of day. Here the Officer Commanding Lt Col K. Louw, for allowing me to roam about the unit freely, Major E. Pascoe for providing me with lodging during my research trips and Mr G Dick for inviting me to the annual lunches and impressing upon me the value of being able to play snooker are thanked profoundly. I am also indebted to the families of veterans and the veterans themselves for allowing me to write this story. I must also express my appreciation to my co-supervisor, Prof I. Liebenberg for his words of encouragement and pearls of wisdom, specifically during the final stages of the study.

Three individuals need specific mention and acknowledgement. First is Sergeant Major Izabel Gerhardt of the Natal Carbineers. She was my liaison person from day one and we shared a passion for all things relating to Carbineer history. Together we travelled the countryside visiting veterans, taking photographs, recording interviews and handing out copies of the regimental history to ex-Carbineers.

I am tremendously appreciative of Dr M. Coghlan, the Natal Carbineer regimental historian, who allowed me free reign of his archive. His dedication to his job made mine so much easier. His interviews with long deceased Carbineers and collection of memoirs and diaries were critical elements of this study. The Natal Carbineers Archive became my "happy place" whenever I visited Pietermaritzburg.

Finally I want to thank my Supervisor and mentor, Prof Ian Van Der Waag. His guidance during the journey was invaluable and his professionalism and dedication to the field of history are traits I hope to emulate. He was at all times ready with an encouraging word when the going got tough and was always available for emergency advice at crucial times. Whenever criticism was due, he expressed it the most diplomatic of terms and eventually lead to the betterment of the study as a whole. Dankie Kolonel.

Gustav Bentz
Saldanha, South Africa
2013

Chapter 1**Prologue: The Union of South Africa, 1933 to 1940***'Anywhere in Africa'¹²**UDF Attestation forms, circa 1939*

It could be argued that South Africa was hopelessly unprepared to wage a modern war as the clouds of war began forming in Europe during the middle nineteen thirties. With Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog favouring non-involvement in the affairs of Europe, the Union Defence Force seemed content to continue a process of gradual of rearmament. According to military planners, the Union's military forces would only be required to conduct policing actions in southern Africa. This acceptance of their sphere of influence then also guided military doctrine. The UDF of the thirties prepared itself to wage war in the subtropical bush and savannah of the region and paid little heed to the technological developments elsewhere in the world. Under the Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, the country's military might was geared towards a defensive war in which the Royal Navy would deter any seaborne aggressor while the UDF prepared to repulse any foreign landward invaders. Had Hertzog not underestimated his deputy, J.C. Smuts' resolve to support Britain in a war against Germany, the Union might have been spared the fate which awaited its armed forces in the conflict which was to come.

Political Manoeuvring

Not only did the unexpected Currie Cup defeat of Transvaal at the hands of the largely English-speaking Natal¹³ on 2 September stun many Afrikaners¹⁴, but Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog was equally shocked when his deputy J.C. Smuts broke ranks the very same day during an emergency Cabinet meeting, wherein he declared his intention not to support the Prime Minister's motion of neutrality in the war which was about to erupt in Europe. A second meeting of cabinet was called for on Sunday, 3 September, at Grootte Schuur to discuss the Union's position regarding the impending war in Europe. A whole day of debating resulted only in a divided cabinet with seven members supporting Smuts' motion of war with Germany and six members in favour of Hertzog's neutrality motion.¹⁵ In his

¹² In accordance with the amended South Africa Defence Act (Act No 13 of 1912), UDF troops were only required to defend the Union from external landward attack in addition to service only in Southern Africa. This was later amended to enable UDF participation in the North African campaign and again in 1943 when the fighting moved to Italy.

¹³ Anon, 'Natal beat Transvaal', **Natal Witness**, 4 September 1939,

¹⁴ J. Nauright, Sports, **Culture and Identities in South Africa**, p77. Rugby was seen as the one way in which the Afrikaners could show they were good at something. It was viewed as an area where they could live and show superiority. The defeat of an Afrikaner team by one an English one from Natal shocked many Afrikaners. The defeat of his neutrality motion shocked the Afrikaner's champion, Hertzog, to an almost equal extent.

¹⁵ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p7.

neutrality plea to parliament on the morning of 4 September, the Prime Minister reaffirmed his policy regarding involvement in a European war, which he argued would create a situation of economic despair that would take 50 years to remedy.¹⁶

General J.C.G. Kemp,¹⁷ one of only six Boer leaders that voted against submission in 1902 as well as one of the leaders of the 1914 Rebellion and Minister of Lands in the Hertzog cabinet, seconded the Prime Minister's motion and declared that of the present government, seven cabinet ministers and a further 30 MP's participated in the Anglo Boer Wars of 1880-1881 and 1899-1902 and thus had intimate knowledge of the suffering inflicted on a country and its people during times of conflict.¹⁸ Since the government were the representatives of the population, it was argued that the people of South Africa, with visions of war still fresh in the collective memory, would be in favour of neutrality. Bolstered by the support from Kemp, Hertzog continued his argument by falling back on the old republican ideal of self-determination. He held that the real test for South Africans would lie in their willingness to relinquish ties with Britain by not being dragged into another European war. Hertzog also appealed to English-speaking South Africans to show their commitment to South Africa by not being emotionally blackmailed into supporting Smuts and, what he called, 'a lust for war'.¹⁹ The Union was also militarily totally unprepared for what was to come with its armed forces reeling from the depression and only preparing for limited policing actions in southern Africa.

Had Hertzog concluded his speech to the house at that moment, his motion might have carried. Instead, Hertzog went on to defend Hitler and his policies. It was understandable, he continued, that Hitler and the German people felt frustrated with their political and socio-economic situation brought about by the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. He compared this feeling of national despair to that experienced by the citizens of the former Boer republics after the Peace of Vereeniging in 1902 that was intended, by the enemies of the Afrikaner, to bring an end to the Republican ideal of self-rule.²⁰ He rebuked claims of German desire for world domination²¹ and with this line of argument Hertzog ran the risk of being labelled pro-Hitler and thus anti-British which enabled Smuts, who otherwise would have faced a difficult task in persuading parliament to accept his motion of war with Germany, to justify his counter motion easily. In opening his argument, Smuts suggested the severing of diplomatic ties with Germany. He further suggested that the Union continue to co-operate with her friends in the Commonwealth and commit all resources of the state to

¹⁶ G. D. Scholtz, **Hertzog en Smuts en die Britse Ryk**, p128.

¹⁷ I. Uys, **South African Military, Who's Who, 1452-1992**, p 119.

¹⁸ Anon, Kemp Speaks, **Natal Mercury**, 31 August 1939.

¹⁹ D. W. Kruger, **The Making of a Nation**, p196-197.

²⁰ J. Fisher, **The Afrikaners**, pp287 – 289.

²¹ G. D. Scholtz, **Hertzog en Smuts en die Britse Ryk**, p128.

defend South African territory and interests.²² The debate to decide the Union's part in the coming war raged on until 9 pm that Monday evening, when the house eventually divided. There would be no middle course; South Africa had to decide to either join Britain in a European war or to stay neutral.

Hertzog was certain that he would receive the support needed to secure neutrality. He was, he argued, struggling to keep the Afrikaner out of a British war against Germany, over issues that did not concern South Africa directly. Whereas the coalition between Hertzog's Nationalist Party and Smuts' South African Party in 1933 brought Afrikaans and English-speaking South Africans closer together, events in 1938 brought about a separation and rekindled old animosities. The centenary celebration of the Great Trek, which began on 8 August in Cape Town, led to a rise in Afrikaner nationalism and with it renewed patriotism and interest in an Afrikaner heroic past.²³ It was decided that nine tented ox wagons would take part in a re-enactment of this epic trek, through the interior, to the north. Several tiny processions wound their way slowly through the country and were met with thousands of singing emotional supporters in almost 500 towns and cities.²⁴ As the wagons rolled into Pretoria on 16 December, thousands of emotional Afrikaners eagerly anticipated the laying of the cornerstone of a great monument commemorating the Afrikaner and his triumphs. The underlying theme in many of the speeches given by high ranking officials during the many gatherings and indeed at the Voortrekker Monument itself was that the Afrikaner nation had to save itself from economic destruction.²⁵ It was then, at this momentous occasion that Kemp, to the dismay of the English faction within government as well as its supporters, announced that the military base of Roberts Heights would be renamed Voortrekkerhoogte (Voortrekker Heights).²⁶ This announcement was greatly appreciated by those in attendance as the old name reminded most Afrikaners of the Anglo-Boer War and the high price paid in the struggle for Afrikaner independence.²⁷

Two further events contributed during the preceding years to the slow erosion of unity within the United Party of Hertzog and Smuts. These were the questions of the flag and the national anthem. In spite of garnering support from the Afrikaners through his handling of these two issues, Hertzog did not see the rising tide of disaffection among the English-speaking members of his party. He declared that C.J. Langenhoven's 'Die Stem van Suid Afrika' was to be used as anthem on official occasions in spite of being warned by Smuts that the playing of 'God Save the King' only when the king is represented by the Governor

²² D. W. Kruger, *The Making of a Nation*, p197.

²³ D. W. Kruger, *The Making of a Nation*, p191.

²⁴ A. Grundlingh, *The Politics of the Past and of Popular Purists in the Construction of Everyday Afrikaner Nationalism, 1938-1948*, p193. In Dubow, S. and Jeeves, A. (eds), *South Africa's 1040s: Worlds of Possibilities*.

²⁵ H. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*, pp304-305.

²⁶ J. Fisher. *The Afrikaners*, p284.

²⁷ D. W. Kruger, *The Making of a Nation*, p192.

General would not be well received by English-speaking South Africans. It was also these English-speakers that were thoroughly disheartened when on Union Day, 31 May 1938, spectators and participants alike noticed that the Union Jack was absent from all parades and replaced with the new national flag. Hertzog appeased his critics by explaining that the Union Jack would be flown on all occasions marking the Union's association with the Commonwealth. The governing body of the United South African National Party, although disaffected with their leader, was not prepared to take any drastic steps on these issues, yet.²⁸

The debate to determine South Africa's involvement in the war came to a close on Monday, 4 September 1939. Parliament was just as divided as cabinet and a vote was called. Ten minutes later the votes were counted with 80 votes cast against 67.²⁹ In a desperate attempt to stave off certain defeat, Hertzog called on the Governor General that same evening requesting a general election. The 1936 census revealed that 56% of the white population spoke Afrikaans³⁰ and it was after all these people, freed from the Union Jack and 'God save the King', on whom Hertzog counted to pull him away from the political abyss. His request to Duncan to have Parliament dissolved and a general election held was, however, denied. The Governor General believed that the Hertzog made it quite clear on previous occasions that any decision on South Africa's participation in a potential war would be taken in parliament. He further argued that since parliament was supposed to be the voice of the people, that the people were indeed in favour of war with Germany. He pointed out that it was Hertzog's own policy that any decision on South African participation in the war, would be decided upon by the representatives of the people.³¹ With his last hopes dashed, Hertzog tendered his resignation on 5 September 1939, ending his tenure of almost 15 years in Tuynhuis. Duncan then invited Smuts to form a government.³² The new Prime Minister's Cabinet was formed on 6 September and later that same evening Duncan signed a proclamation stating that 'it is in the interest of the Union that the peaceful relations with the German Reich be severed and that it be at war with the German Reich.'³³ When, on the morning of 7 September, South Africans opened their newspapers for the latest update on the situation in Europe, they found that the Union was once again allied to Great Britain in a 'European' War.

²⁸ D. W. Kruger, **The Making of a Nation**, pp192-193.

²⁹ G. D. Scholtz, **Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner**, p676.

³⁰ D. W. Kruger, **The Making of a Nation**, p189.

³¹ UCT archives, Duncan Papers, BC294, P. Duncan to J. B. M. Hertzog, 5 September 1939.

³² J. Fisher, **The Afrikaners**, p284.

³³ J. S. M, Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p36.

The Union's Ability to Wage War

The Hertzog faction believed that South Africa was geographically too removed from Europe to ever be directly involved in a conflict on that continent. The distance between the Union and Europe as well as the presence of the Royal Navy at Simon's Town instilled in many South Africans a cautious attitude relating to matters of defence.³⁴ In relation to such matters, the Government's policy emphasised its non-commitment to a European conflict. The principles of its policy rested on several main pillars. Firstly, there was the deliberate commitment of the government to prevent and suppress internal unrest. Any military involvement in this regard, as it was understood, would be directed against 'native' uprisings and rebellions. It was much more likely that the Union Defence Force (UDF) would be called upon to react to large scale instances of 'native' violence in Southern Africa, as had happened, in May 1935, when African mineworkers in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, went on strike to protest against increased taxes imposed by the British Colonial Government. This strike was violently suppressed by the authorities and sensitised the South African Defence Council members to the more likely possibility of large scale 'native' unrest, as occurred in Lusaka. The second area of focus was to provide military training to a section of the white male population of South Africa. This would serve, in the event of mobilisation, to have partially trained personnel ready for military service.³⁵ The next focus area of the government's policy on defence was that of protection against an external threat. The possibility of an external invasion of the Union by a foreign power was deemed to be extremely unlikely. It was, however, decided to at least consider such an event and plan accordingly. In the light of the world situation, at that time, it was appreciated that Britain might possibly get involved in a conflict with Japan or France. In such an event, and considering Union involvement, it was expected that the Union Defence Force (UDF) might have to face an invading force of around 100 000 men. Whether this invasion was overland or seaborne made no real difference. What the Defence Council was concerned about the most was the strength of air support accompanying such a force. It was estimated that a potential foe could have at its disposal 100 aircraft to support a ground offensive. Although such an invasion was speculative, it provided the planners with a goal to work towards and also ensured that their allocated budget was not exceeded.³⁶

The South Africa Defence Act (Act No 13 of 1912) declared that the Union Defence Force should be organised for the defence of the Union in any part of southern Africa whether within or outside the Union. For the purpose of upholding government policy, this was sufficient. It was never considered that South African troops would be committed anywhere

³⁴ A. Wessels, **The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941**, Military History Journal, June 2000, Vol 11 No 5, p165.

³⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse Gp 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Defence Policy of the Union.

³⁶ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Minister's Outline of Defence Policy.

outside southern Africa.³⁷ It was reasoned that since the UDF could not be legally compelled to deploy externally, the question of an overseas expeditionary force could be left in the hands of the Union Government.³⁸

The restriction placed on the UDF, by the South Africa Defence Act, confined any military deployment to southern Africa. It was felt that any appeal for South African involvement, in a war overseas, would be met with mixed reaction and ought to be a consideration in defence policy. In so far as the involvement of the UDF in Africa was concerned, the approach was quite the opposite. To the Committee on Imperial Defence it was reiterated that, except in the case of Egypt and the Sudan, any request for assistance against attacks made by black troops, would result in an almost immediate military response from the Union.³⁹ In light of this sentiment, two directions would guide future preparations. Firstly, the main focus in any African venture would be to assist in police measures and, secondly, in the unlikely event of a war with France, the UDF would provide a white nucleus of trained machinegunners and trench mortar experts in support of allied African armies engaged in such a conflict.⁴⁰ In the event of such commitments being made, defence planners focussed on preparing the UDF for the execution of 'police actions'⁴¹ with heavy equipment, like tanks and planes, to be drawn from Britain or elsewhere within the Empire. At a Defence Council meeting⁴² in June 1935, more concrete guidelines in support of Governments' policy on defence were decided upon. The council felt strongly that the events of 1922⁴³ should not be repeated. It was agreed that the UDF should not be used as a strike breaking force; instead, a small armoured force would be established to support the police in the suppression of internal unrest. This force would consist of two armoured cars, three tanks, two armoured aircraft and its main role would be the deployment of teargas to disperse protesters.⁴⁴

Apart from a small Permanent Force (PF), employed in administrative and training roles, the backbone of the Union's defence was made up of the Active Citizen Force (ACF), which could be compared with the Territorial Army in Britain. There were 26 ACF units, spread all

³⁷ I. J. Van der Waag, 'The Union Defence Force between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939', *Scientia Militaria*, Vol 30(2), 2000, p210.

³⁸ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Defence Policy of the Union and Peace Time Policy.

³⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Defence Policy of the Union and Peace Time Policy.

⁴⁰ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Minister's Outline of Defence Policy

⁴¹ O. Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog*, p 218.

⁴² Present were: O. Pirow (Minister of Defence), Generals G. E. Brink, J. J. Collyer and P. Van Ryneveld.

⁴³ In 1922 thousands of coal and gold miners in the Witwatersrand area went on strike as a result of a reduction in wages. Smuts used the armed forces to violently suppress the uprising, leading to severe criticism, in Parliament, of his use of the military against its fellow South Africans. H. Giliomee. *Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie*, pp282-286.

⁴⁴ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Minister's Outline of Defence Policy.

over the country, and its members, were required to do between one and four hours non-continuous training per week and 15 days continuous training per year which would take place at the most convenient training centre.⁴⁵

The Hertzog government held firm regarding non-commitment relating to the future war. Not only did the prime minister shy away from clearly verbalising the country's stance in the event of war in Europe,⁴⁶ but the government was incapable of establishing a concrete policy for the purchase of equipment and vehicles. It was agreed that the status quo be maintained in regard to the physical purchasing of aeroplanes and weapons which would only be done in the unlikelyhood of war breaking out. This meant that the UDF would be armed with the latest and most advanced weapons available. As part of the Commonwealth it was also expected that Britain would sell such weapons to the Union at reduced prices. The dilemma of acquiring unnecessary weapons and vehicles for a war that might not break out in 1938 but at a later stage, were therefor solved by purchasing nothing. The government thus had the best intentions to prepare the UDF for war, but also guarded against any unnecessary expenditure, thereby safeguarding the still recovering economy.⁴⁷

Pirow's Five Year Plans

With South Africa's economy improving, the UDF began the process of recovering from the financial⁴⁸ and organisational⁴⁹ restrictions imposed on it during the previous years of depression. Leading this recovery, from 1933, was Oswald Pirow, Minister of Defence (1933-1939), with the first of his five year plans. Accordingly, the structure of the UDF would consist of a small Permanent Force (PF), an Active Citizen Force (ACF), whose members were recruited on a voluntary base, Defence Rifle Associations (DRAs) and several Reserve force organisations. The PF personnel, as a result of their previous military training, were employed in Headquarters and training institutions. The ACF members served in artillery units, infantry units, air force and to a lesser extent at British controlled naval installations. The organisation, training and mobilisation were conducted by PF personnel in the relevant units.⁵⁰ It was envisaged that at the end of the first five years, South Africa would possess a

⁴⁵ DOD Archives, Pamphlet Archive, Box SA Forces in the Second World War, SA Forces in the Second World War.

⁴⁶ G. D. Scholtz, **Hertzog en Smuts en die Britse Ryk**, p125.

⁴⁷ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p59-60.

⁴⁸ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns, Volume 1, East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p334. At the height of the Depression in 1932, the UDF budget totalled only £736,831 and all continuous training for Active Citizen Force units was cancelled.

⁴⁹ Of the Active Citizen Force Units, 49 were disbanded and all three the Navy's vessels were decommissioned. Wessels, A. **The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941**, Military History Journal, June 2000, Vol 11 No 5, p165.

⁵⁰ J. Ellis. Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939, *Scientia Militaria*, 2000, Vol 30 (2), p228.

world class defence force, comprising an air force of three squadrons, ten batteries of field artillery as well as 25 Active Citizen Force infantry battalions, trained in the use of machineguns and trench mortars. Pirow's army would be supported by a 25 000 strong Reserve which could be mobilised within 21 days.⁵¹

To solve the problem of a possible manpower shortage, renewed emphasis was placed on the cadet training programme as early as 1933, where it was agreed to confine cadet training to boys over the age of 14 with increased contributions and support to the Boy Scouts and the Afrikaans equivalent, the Voortrekkers.⁵² The aim was to have 50% to 66% of the boys in the Union pass into civil life with a standard of military training comparable with ACF standards. This system would then yield a potential 20 000 semi-trained men per year to be utilised as military reserve on possible mobilisation.⁵³ Upon leaving school, boys could then enlist in the Special Service Battalion for twelve months. Its aim, Pirow confessed, was not to train more soldiers, in spite of being trained by instructors from the London Guards regiments, but to make better citizens of those young men that completed their service.⁵⁴

Through his five-year plan Pirow committed himself to a yearly increase in the defence budget in order to enable the UDF to produce maximum military effectiveness and efficiency. It was also essential that South Africa be able to produce certain war materials internally. In this regard, emphasis was placed on the production of small arms ammunition.⁵⁵ The possibility of manufacturing locally in South Africa, mortars and mortar ammunition, aircraft engines, steel helmets, gas masks, rifle barrels, bullet-proof tyres and .303 ammunition was to be explored.⁵⁶ In 1936 it was reported that, in future, only those stores which could not be produced locally would be stockpiled. With regard to the protection of the sea lanes around the Cape, the Union would rely on Britain to maintain a protective presence.⁵⁷ With the Royal Navy patrolling the oceans, Pirow proposed to have harbour defences upgraded and modernised. Cape Town and its vital harbour installations would be protected by an assortment of gun emplacements as well as the Monitor *Erebus*, with its 15-inch guns, which was secured by Pirow from Britain. The intention was to have

⁵¹ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p335.

⁵² DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, The Defence Policy of the Union.

⁵³ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Minister's Outline of Defence Policy.

⁵⁴ O. Pirow, **James Barry Munnik Hertzog**, p219.

⁵⁵ J. Van Wyk, **Die Unie Verdedigingsmagte op die Vooraand van die Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1934-1939** (Militaria, 1976), 6/4.

⁵⁶ H. J. Martin. and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation: South Africa at War: Military and Industrial Organisation and Operations in connection with the conduct of the War, 1939-1945**, p17.

⁵⁷ J. Van Wyk, **Die Unie Verdedigingsmagte op die Vooraand van die Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1934-1939** **Militaria**, 1976 Vol 6, No 4.

the Erebus serve as floating artillery battery in the Cape Town docks to discourage any potential raider from venturing too close.⁵⁸

In fulfilment of government's policy of supporting Commonwealth operations in Southern Africa, Pirow drew on the experience of experts in the field of conducting such 'police actions', like General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who was acknowledged as the master of bush-fighting at that time.⁵⁹ The UDF, more specifically the army, would be trained along the lines of light raiding columns, capable of conducting operations in the Southern African bush.⁶⁰ Mobility for such columns would be based on Pirow's brainchild, the 'All Terrain' or 'Bush' Carts. These two-wheeled carts, to be drawn by oxen or mules, were deemed to be much more suitable and cost effective than motorised transport.⁶¹ The view regarding mechanisation, at the time, was that it should be undertaken with caution and only after careful estimation of its limitations as well as effectiveness had been considered.⁶² The ability of the country to supply a mechanised force with spares, oil and petrol seemed unlikely, especially when the area of potential operations is considered.⁶³ Early trials with the 'bush' carts proved quite promising and the idea was hailed as proving quite suitable for its intended purpose. It was reported that during exercises these carts were exposed to heavier type of work than they would ever be called upon to do.⁶⁴ It was considered that such means of transport would be of greater value to the forces in the field than that of mechanised transport. Two main reasons influenced the decision to proceed with the 'bush' cart experiment. The first was whether South Africa could supply sufficient numbers of mechanised transport to serve the needs of the defence force, both in time of peace and in war. For a country still recovering from economic hardships imposed by the depression, achieving this simply did not seem possible. Politicians suspected the military of clinging to an arsenal mentality where arms and ammunition are stockpiled in case of trouble while senior military officials believed that government officials were immobilised through civilian timidity, insufficient budgets and intelligence. Consequently, military modernisation was not to become policy under the Herzog government.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ G. E. Visser, Anglo-South African Relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939, **Scientia Militaria**, 2007, Vol 35, no1, p74.

⁵⁹ O. Pirow, **James Barry Munnik Hertzog**, p219.

⁶⁰ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**. p18

⁶¹ DOD Archives, Director Technical Service, Box 35, Experimental Work, Local Manufacture, Carts A. T, Report by Lt Col H. D. Klopper on an exercise with Bush Carts late in 1939,

⁶² J. J. Collye, **The South Africans With General Smuts in German East Africa**, p275.

⁶³ J. J. Collyer, **The Campaign in German South West Africa**, p170.

⁶⁴ DOD Archives, Director General Technical Services Group, Box 35, File D.T.S. 5/20, Experimental Work, Local Manufacture, Carts A. T, Report by Lt Col H. D. Klopper on an exercise with Bush Carts late in 1939

⁶⁵ W. Murray and A.R. Millet, **Military Innovation in the Interwar Period**, p367.



Figure 1.1: Prototype of Pirow's proposed 'Bush Carts'⁶⁶

The second motivation was that of reliability. It was questioned whether mechanised transport could negotiate the narrow tracks of subtropical Africa, much of which were either covered with mimosa thorns, fine dust that turned into almost impassable dust clouds when disturbed or in the rainy season sucked mechanised transport up to its axles into mud.⁶⁷ Pirow was convinced that mimicking European style of fighting in Southern Africa or composing forces along the lines of the great armies of Europe would be useless. Concerning any possible seaborne invasion or threat, South Africa would be protected by its extensive coastal defences, fortified harbours and the Royal Navy. It was further estimated that the UDF need only prepare to meet, on the field of battle, a force one third the size of the country's total forces.⁶⁸

Pirow, who personified Defence policy at this time, felt that by delaying the purchase of war machinery, they had found a middle ground on which to prepare South Africa for a possible conflict. Not only was it accepted as a certainty that Britain would support the Union, in terms of vehicles, aircraft and weapons, when so requested, but that the supply of such items would be done at pre-war prices.⁶⁹ The strength of the UDF, upon eventual

⁶⁶ DOD Archives, Director General Technical Services Group, Box 35, File D.T.S. 5/20 Vol 2, Experimental Work, Local Manufacture, Carts A. T, Submitted tender by the British Mining Supply Company in Johannesburg on their proposed "All Terrain Carts".

⁶⁷ J. J. Collyer, **The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa**, pp270-275.

⁶⁸ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p15.

⁶⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Letter to O. Pirow from W. H. Clark concerning the sale of Blenheim bombers to the Union at "obsolescent" prices.

mobilization, was deemed to comprise three ACF divisions (67 000 men), three special DRA brigades (10 000 men). In addition to this 137 000 men, conscription, if decided upon, could yield another 150 000 men with basic military skills.⁷⁰ In support of any operation, there would be a modern air force with 1 000 reserve pilots flying the very modern Spitfire fighter⁷¹ and almost twice as many technical support personnel.⁷²

South Africans reading their weekend newspapers at last had some concrete news on the war in Europe. The front page of every newspaper reported on an almost worldwide mobilisation of military resources and the bombing of Polish towns by the German air force.⁷³ The time to test the Union's military capability was close at hand. With the Union's participation in the war in Europe becoming ever more probable, Pirow, in July 1939, requested the assistance of Britain in equipping the UDF with modern arms and equipment. This was after all how the Hertzog government intended to prepare for war. The failure of government's policy on defence became much more apparent as South Africa braced herself for the coming war. In September 1939, the UDF had in fact very little to show in terms of preparation for a major conflict. Tensions in Europe forced many countries to begin a process of rearmament, including Britain. This resulted in very little modern weapons being available for use by the dominions. It was this point that was overlooked by the Hertzog government's policy makers during their discussions on how best to prepare for any future war.⁷⁴

South Africa's total unpreparedness, even for a defensive war, was a result of not only government's policy on defence, but certain views by military planners and the Union's political system. Defence planners appreciated that in the unlikely event of war breaking out, South Africa would have three to six months in which to mobilise its forces. As a result of this, mobilisation plans were neglected, since it was thought that there would be enough time to work out the details after an official declaration of war had been made. The second reason for the lack of military vision was the democratic nature of the political system. South Africans viewed the military a luxury that could be done without, especially during the years of depression. When times changed for the better, parliament hesitated in allocating increased funds to the military. Resources were instead spent on those institutions outside the field of militarism.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, pp15-16

⁷¹ Originally Hawker Hurricane Mk1's were ordered, but the order was cancelled as a result of the development and successful test flight of the Spitfire in 1936, which was favoured by the Minister.

⁷² J. A. Brown, **A Gathering of Eagles: The S.A.A.F in Italian East Africa 1940-1941**, p19-20.

⁷³ Anon, German Planes Attack Polish Cities, **The Natal Witness**, 2 September, 1939, p1.

⁷⁴ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p11.

⁷⁵ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p102.

It was remarked by Major General J.J. Collyer⁷⁶ that, notwithstanding an increased budget for defence over the past five years, the UDF was even less capable of dealing with military emergencies than it was 25 years ago. In spite of assurances to Parliament, by Pirow, on the large numbers of men available, on paper, the true strength of the UDF left much to be desired. Critics⁷⁷ of the Hertzog government bemoaned the South African Air Force's meagre strength of two high speed bombers, 26 obsolete general purpose planes and 40 training planes, while the Army's 39 000 of the intended 67 000 men with a virtually non-existent reserve was no ray of hope either. Official documentation list the UDF as comprising approximately 20 000 men under arms⁷⁸, two obsolete medium tanks and two obsolete armoured cars that had been imported from Britain in 1925⁷⁹, two armoured trains⁸⁰, a number of artillery pieces and eight anti-aircraft guns. The artillery had a mere 941 rounds of ammunition available,⁸¹ which was sufficient to support any offensive for one day only.⁸² Of the 400 Bren machineguns, ordered from Britain in 1935, only 15 were available in 1937.⁸³ To compensate for this shortcoming, obsolete Lewis machineguns were ordered instead. Almost all of the 500 that did eventually arrive in South Africa were unserviceable or incomplete.⁸⁴ The 122 000 strong commando reserve, that Pirow boasted about, could field only about 18 000 properly trained and armed men. In the Air, the UDF could only muster four Hurricane fighters⁸⁵, two bombers, 63 obsolete Hawker Hartbeest, several old support craft and about 230 training aircraft. Apart from coastal defences, South Africa had no navy. The *Erebus*, a First World War Monitor, intended to guard Cape Town, never set sail for South Africa and at the end of September was re-transferred to the Royal Navy at Churchill's request.⁸⁶

⁷⁶ Appointed by Smuts as military private secretary and regarded as 'the Liddell Hart of South Africa' in J.S.M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p91.

⁷⁷ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p56. Published in the year of the disastrous Sidi Resegh battles and apparent invincibility of the Africa Korps, this source is quite propagandist in nature and seeks to lay the blame for the UDF's unpreparedness in front of the Hertzog Government's policies on defence.

⁷⁸ A. Wessels, The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941, **Military History Journal**, June 2000 Vol 11 No 5, p165.

⁷⁹ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p32.

⁸⁰ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p19.

⁸¹ A. Wessels, The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941, **Military History Journal**, June 2000, Vol 11 No 5, p166.

⁸² H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p8.

⁸³ I. J. Van der Waag, The Union Defence Force between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939, **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 30(2), 2000, p208.

⁸⁴ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p337.

⁸⁵ A fifth one crashed on 5 September 1939, South African Press Association, SA Pilot Killed at Wynberg. The Natal Mercury, 6 September 1939, p11.

⁸⁶ G. E. Visser, Anglo-South African Relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939, **Scientia Militaria**, 2007, Vol 35, no1, p90.



Figure 1.2: Backbone of the SAAF in 1940: The Hawker Hartbeest.⁸⁷

Pirow envisioned an ultra-modern force armed with the latest weapons and aircraft. The defence force that Smuts inherited had at its disposal 91 of a required 2 574 machineguns,⁸⁸ 20 of the required 780 anti-tank rifles and 23 three-inch mortars out of a required 548 with which to confront an invader.⁸⁹ Pirow was also disappointed to learn that there would be no purchase of modern aircraft from Britain, at pre-war prices. The possibility of South Africa receiving three squadrons of Blenheim bombers on loan from Britain was also turned down.⁹⁰ Of the 200 training, and almost 700 service aircraft ordered from Britain after the outbreak of war, very few were received. No modern fighters or army co-operation aircraft were available. The Union did, however, order two modern Hudson bombers, 50 coastal reconnaissance aircraft and 33 Fury fighters of which 10 would be made available without engines, at reduced cost.⁹¹

⁸⁷ J.S. Bouwer and M.N. Louw, **The SAAF At War 1940-1984: A Pictorial Appraisal**, p2.

⁸⁸ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p19

⁸⁹ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p32.

⁹⁰ DOD Archives, Diverse Archive, Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Letter to O. Pirow from W. H. Clark concerning the sale of Blenheim bombers to the Union at "obsolescent" prices.

⁹¹ DOD Archives, Memo to the Minister of Defence from Maj Gen P. van Ryneveld regarding aircraft ordered from Britain.

Smuts Takes Control

With the battle for control of the Union Parliament won, Smuts focussed his attention on the creation of an effective and efficient war machine by providing Defence Headquarters with a structured programme for mobilisation.⁹² He assumed overall command of the Union Defence Force⁹³ and authorised the PF and ACF units to be brought up to strength⁹⁴ by accepting volunteers for the duration of the war.⁹⁵ Smuts' initial stance was that the Union would secure its own borders first and that no South African Citizen would be encouraged to participate in military activities overseas. After consultation with the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, Sir Godfrey Huggins, Smuts agreed that one South African Brigade and several air squadrons must be made available for duty in Kenya as a precautionary measure.⁹⁶ The intention was that this brigade group should consist of three infantry battalions, one artillery brigade, three air force squadrons as well as the relevant support services. In order to assist Britain in fighting the Axis forces on the African continent the deployment of such a force was set at June 1940.⁹⁷ The nucleus of this brigade group would consist of the Union's senior ACF units and would represent the whole country.⁹⁸ Smuts further proposed to the UK High Commissioner in Pretoria that in order to counter a possible threat by Italy from Abyssinia, a force of two divisions with its divisional troops supported by fourteen air force squadrons was required. Britain, in supporting such an endeavour would have to provide the aircraft for this force. The Union's ally was, however, not keen on giving away sorely needed aircraft especially since British opinion was that Kenya was in no way threatened and that nothing should be done to provoke the Italians in east Africa.⁹⁹

Smuts' ideal to have Union troops fight alongside their British allies, as far as Kenya and Tanganyika, conflicted with the South Africa Defence Act which restricted South African troops to service in Southern Africa. This meant that Smuts had to rely on an army of volunteers to fill the ranks and it was for this reason that, on 29 March 1940, all serving members had the opportunity to undertake a new oath, binding them to service anywhere in Africa.¹⁰⁰ This was a setback for the UDF whose initial mobilisation was just about completed. The new oath was not as eagerly accepted as was anticipated, and as several

⁹² DOD Archives, Diverse Archive, Group 1, Box 10, File 6RG/19/0/1, Defence Programme of the UDF.

⁹³ F. S. Crafford, **Jan Smuts: A Biography**, p330.

⁹⁴ D. W. Kruger. **The Making of a Nation**, p201.

⁹⁵ W. A. Dorning, A Consise History of the South African Defence Force (1912-1987), In **Militaria** 17(2), 1987, p9.

⁹⁶ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p23.

⁹⁷ I. J. Van der Waag. The Union Defence Force between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939, **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 30(2), 2000, p217.

⁹⁸ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p7.

⁹⁹ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p24

¹⁰⁰ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p7.

units lost as much as 50% of their personnel who declined to take the new oath. Many parents also refused to release their sons, as minors, for such an adventure. Many industrial and commercial bodies viewed their employees as 'key' personnel and were not eager to spare them for military service.¹⁰¹ The loss of personnel resulting from the institution of this new oath did delay the process of mobilisation, but was overcome with a new and even more energetic recruitment process.¹⁰²

To differentiate between the willing and the not so willing members of the UDF, an orange flash was worn on the shoulder straps,¹⁰³ commonly known as the 'Red Tab'.¹⁰⁴ Not only did the wearing of the Red Tabs differentiate between those willing to serve South Africa and those against active involvement,¹⁰⁵ but the wearer was also entitled, as one of the 'anywhere in Africa' men, to any field promotions and extra pay, as opposed to those who stayed behind.¹⁰⁶ In spite of this handicap, there were those members of the UDF that simply could not in good conscience support Britain. No other country has ever attacked or conquered South Africa except the British, who were seen as the international enemy of the Afrikaner.¹⁰⁷ Those that did not take the oath however, could, apart from no immediate career prospects, look forward to marginalisation, victimisation and often be branded as cowards¹⁰⁸ while those who volunteered their service were referred to as 'Rooi Luisies' (Red Lice) which was a derivative from 'Rooi Lussies' (Red Tabs).¹⁰⁹

The original scheme, as determined by the Defence Department, was to group units in the same command or province, together in brigades, upon mobilisation.¹¹⁰ As a result of the internal security situation within the Union, however, this was impossible. The surge in Afrikaner nationalism, in the years leading up to the outbreak of war, resulted in strong pro-German sentiments being fostered among a significant part of the population. Organisations established to restore Afrikaner culture, like the 'Broederbond' (established in 1918 already) intended to bring about the fulfilment of South Africa's God-given destiny,¹¹¹ an Afrikaner Republic. Such sentiments were further strengthened by anti-war propaganda broadcast by the Zeesen radio station where an ex-South African teacher discussed anti-Jewish and anti-

¹⁰¹ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p8.

¹⁰² E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p8.

¹⁰³ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p102.

¹⁰⁴ N. D. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p6.

¹⁰⁵ A. Wessels, The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941, **Military History Journal**, June 2000, Vol 11 No 5, p166.

¹⁰⁶ J. S. M Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p101.

¹⁰⁷ Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education Ossewa Brandwag Archive, Interview: B. J. Vorster, Tape 226, 7 November 1981, Interviewed by H. Tereblanche.

¹⁰⁸ R. Hiemstra, **Die Wilde Haf**, p199.

¹⁰⁹ D. Harrison, **The White Tribe of Africa, South Africa in Perspective**, p124.

¹¹⁰ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p7.

¹¹¹ UNISA, United Party Archives Central Head Office, File Broederbond, Report titled 'Die Afrikaner Broederbond', Circa 1943,

British matters in Afrikaans.¹¹² Another initially social organisation was 'Die Ossewa Brandwag' (OB), which soon saw some of its members becoming ever more militant¹¹³ and anti-British. It was not long before the OB sprouted a para-military wing, intent on causing mischief.¹¹⁴ Government informants infiltrated these organisations and reported that they were not intent on a military coup, but that a psychological revolution was visualised. This revolution would be brought about by the German invasion of Britain, sabotage by OB members in South Africa and widespread disloyalty in the public service.¹¹⁵ Government appreciated that Nazi supporters would attempt to destroy installations of essential services like gas-works and power-stations. The economy would be disrupted by sabotaging the gold mines where after these dissidents would march on Johannesburg creating chaos as they went.¹¹⁶ There was even talk of getting rid of Smuts, either through assassination or forcing him to flee the country.¹¹⁷ It was thus to counter this strong subversive element in the country, that it was decided to split the original province-bound brigades and that each coastal town and industrial centre be garrisoned by at least one battalion.¹¹⁸

To further prevent the perception of preferential treatment for certain provinces, it was decided to compose the brigades from different parts of the Union. Resulting from this decision, and Smuts' promise to deploy a brigade group to East Africa, the three senior regiments in the Union were brigaded in May 1940, under command of Colonel J. Daniel who later handed the Brigade over to Colonel D. Pienaar.¹¹⁹ The three infantry battalions that made up the 1st South African Infantry Brigade were the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles (DEOR) from Cape Town, the 1st Transvaal Scottish (TS) from Johannesburg and the 1st Royal Natal Carbineers (RNC) located in Pietermaritzburg, Natal.¹²⁰

Thus, with the neutral-minded Hertzog removed and Pirow's antiquated ideas a distant memory, Smuts set the country once more on a path to war as an ally of Britain and in spite initial dissent it appeared as if the nation supported their new Prime Minister. As recruiting, re-arming and training got underway, the various UDF regiments began organising themselves to heed Smuts' call.

¹¹² H. Strydom and I. Wilkens, **Super Afrikaners**, p76.

¹¹³ J. Crwys-Williams, **A Country at War, 1939-1945, The Mood of a Nation**, p2, and Interview: B. J. Vorster, 7 November 1981, Tape 226, Interviewed by H. Tereblanche.

¹¹⁴ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p32.

¹¹⁵ UNISA, United Party Archives Central Head Office, File Intelligence Reports, Political Disturbances and Meetings Report Titled 'A Republican Putsch', Circa 1940,

¹¹⁶ J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p58-63

¹¹⁷ Report by C.7 Regarding Threats to General Smuts, 18 August 1940, UNISA; United Party Archives Central Head Office File Intelligence Reports, Political Disturbances and Meetings.

¹¹⁸ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p7.

¹¹⁹ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p8.

¹²⁰ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p32.

Chapter 2:**Natal, 1939 to 1940**

*'What the Hell Am I Doing Here?'*¹²¹

Rifleman Bill Buckley, 1940

With the Union firmly set on a path to war, the UDF had to go to great lengths to ensure Smuts' promise of aid to Britain could be realised. As volunteers reported for duty at military installations all over the country it quickly became apparent how underprepared the country really was. Shortages of weapons, ammunition, clothing and combat vehicles were common during the first few months the Union was at war with Germany. In Natal, where ties with Britain was the strongest, mobilisation proceeded without serious delay. Not even the chaining of the Service Oath caused any major disruption in this, the most British of South Africa's provinces. Among the units mobilised for war was the Union's oldest established regiment, the Natal Carbineers. New recruits were allowed to choose which platoons they wished to join and under which officers they wanted to serve. This approach was indicative of the close ties the Natalians had with each other and they seemed to run their regiment like one big family. One particular extension of this family was C Company whose men were drawn from the rural farming areas and were different from the other recruits not only in size and marksmanship but in rowdy behaviour as well. In spite of their apparent differences, the Regiment took to preparing for war with gusto and were ready to embark for a destination somewhere in Africa by July 1940.

Natal Prepares for War

In the years preceding the outbreak of the Second World War the united front, as presented by Hertzog and Smuts after the formation of the coalition government in 1933, began losing its appeal among hardliners within government circles. Among the Afrikaners, the nationalists under the leadership of D.F. Malan broke from Hertzog to form the Purified National Party and became the official opposition since Malan and his followers was unable to reconcile themselves with the politics of Smuts and his pro-British sentiments.¹²² Smuts, on the other hand experienced opposition within his own party after forming a coalition with Hertzog. Under Colonel C. F. Stallard the mostly English-speaking voters of Natal made their distrust of Hertzog known and plans were made to form a new loyalist party that would maintain and strengthen all ties with Britain.¹²³

¹²¹ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz –G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg. Buckley, like many of his comrades enlisted in the heat of the moment and when the novelty wore off he questioned the wisdom of his impulsive decision.

¹²² B. J. Liebenberg, **Van die Statuut van Westminister tot die Republiek van Suid Afrika, 1931 – 1961**. In C. F. J. Muller, **500 Jaar Suid Afrikaanse Geskiedenis**, p375-376.

¹²³ D. W. Kruger, **The Making of a Nation**, p172.

Stallard addressed a crowd in Pietermaritzburg on 17 July 1934 where he stated that fusion would not be acceptable unless certain conditions were met. The first was that South Africa be recognised as an integral and indivisible part in law of the British Empire. The second demand was that any so-called right to advocate a severance must be summarily rejected.¹²⁴ The co-operation of Smuts with Hertzog was seen by many in Natal as the inevitable surrender of all English-speakers to the Afrikanerdom. This would ultimately lead to the destruction of Natal as a 'British' province with no provincial government, a centralised education system and the disappearance of all language rights.¹²⁵ In the years leading up to the fusion government of Smuts and Hertzog, there were even movements established that proposed, and worked towards secession from the Union. Never supported by the majority of voters in Natal, they nevertheless could count on the active support of a strong minority.¹²⁶ On 23 August 1934, the Dominion Party of South Africa came into existence with the aim of opposing Afrikaner encroachment on one of the last remaining British outposts. Two of its main tenets were the maintenance of the British Empire as a United whole with common aims and interests and the opposing of all movements to resolve the component parts of the Empire into sovereign independent states.¹²⁷

The showdown between Hertzog and Smuts in parliament during the closing months of 1939 presented Stallard's Dominion Party with an opportunity to tip the scales back in favour of closer ties with Britain. With Hertzog favouring a stance of neutrality and Smuts arguing for the support of Britain, in the event of war, Stallard's choice was simple. After voting on the issue in parliament on 4 September 1939, the result was 80 votes for support of Britain and 67 against. Smuts obtained a majority of thirteen votes over Hertzog, with the Dominion Party's sixteen candidates accounting for fifteen of Smuts' votes. The matter thus brought to a climatic conclusion, the men of Natal would in due time indicate their willingness to fight for King and country by flocking to the recruitment centres.¹²⁸

By June 1940, after months of training and equipping troops, the 1st South African Infantry Brigade was notified to prepare for a possible deployment of its battalions to East Africa. The excitement of the troops at the prospect of ending the hours spent each day on the parade ground drilling and training was dampened two days later when the deployment was postponed until further notice.¹²⁹ The frustration of the men on the ground grew, especially with more confusing orders when the RNC was ordered to deploy east to Komatipoort, on the Mozambique border, on 11 June, only to have the order countermanded and the

¹²⁴ A. J. Fick, **Die Onstaan van die Dominion Party van Suid Afrika**, p288.

¹²⁵ A. J. Fick, **Die Onstaan van die Dominion Party van Suid Afrika**, p23.

¹²⁶ E. H. Brookes and C. de B. Webb. **A History of Natal**, p275.

¹²⁷ A. J. Fick, **Die Onstaan van die Dominion Party van Suid Afrika**, p356.

¹²⁸ E. H. Brookes and C. de B. Webb. **A History of Natal**, p276.

¹²⁹ H. J. Martin, and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p15.

Regiment sent north instead to secure Beit Bridge on the border with Rhodesia.¹³⁰ This exercise, in response to the Union's declaration of war on Italy on the same day, provided valuable experience in terms of mechanised movement, in spite of several vehicles being damaged and personnel injured during the trip.¹³¹

Orders received on 13 July 1940 were not countermanded, as had happened before. The 1st Brigade moved out from their training area in the east of Pretoria, Premier Mine, and entrained for the concentration area at Pietermaritzburg.¹³² Before going on embarkation leave¹³³ the men assembled on the parade ground, to be addressed by their Commander-in-Chief. On that Sunday, Delville Wood Day¹³⁴, Smuts' 'boys'¹³⁵ were addressed thus:

'From personal experience I know what awaits you. I know what war means – seven years of my life have been spent in wars. They were among the hardest years of my life, but they were also full of the richest experience that life can give. I would not exchange my war experiences of the Anglo-Boer War and the last Great War for all the gold on the rand. You are going to face danger, hardship and sacrifice – perhaps death itself – in all its fierce forms. But through it all you will gather that experience of life and enrichment of character which are more valuable than gold or precious stones. You will become better and stronger men. You will not return the same as you went. You will bring back memories that you and yours will treasure for life. Above all, you will have that proud consciousness that you have done your duty by your country and rendered your contribution to its future security and happiness. We have fought for our freedom in the past. We now go forth as Crusaders, as children of the Cross, to fight for freedom itself, the freedom of the human spirit, the free choice of the human individual to shape his own life according to the light that God has given him. Farewell, my friends; and may God bless and prosper the Right'¹³⁶

The men of the UDF, and indeed the rest of South Africa, were finally going to war.

The Royal Natal Carbineers receives its Marching Orders

The sea of uniformed men that cheered Smuts at Premier Mine, on 14 July 1940, listened attentively as their commander-in-chief bid them farewell. Most were quite swept up in the

¹³⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, War Diary, 11 May – 30 June 1940.

¹³¹ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p107.

¹³² H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p15.

¹³³ E. Millin, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p109.

¹³⁴ The anniversary of the heroic defence Delville Wood, by Union forces, on the Western Front in 1916, where a South African brigade of 3 032 men suffered 2 815 casualties in six days of fighting.

¹³⁵ Smuts looked upon his troops as his own personal concern .J. S. M. Simpson, **South Africa Fights**, p173.

¹³⁶ H. J. Martin and N. D. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p15 – 16.

moment while others had mixed feelings about what is surely about to happen to them. C Company's men like Christopher Dering Stainbank from Eston, Natal, were not impressed with having to stand for five and a half hours, resulting in severe back pain.¹³⁷ A few ranks down Private Bill Buckley was even less enthusiastic about the prospect of returning home as a corpse.¹³⁸ Consequently, for some, Smuts' prophetic words lacked punch. The Royal Natal Carbineers, consisting of a regimental headquarters, a headquarter company, three infantry companies, heavy weapons or support company and the regimental band¹³⁹ was the senior infantry regiment on parade. The regiment was established in Pietermaritzburg on 15 January 1855 and aptly christened the 'Pietermaritzburg Irregular Horse'.¹⁴⁰ Volunteers were eager to join the unit and as a result of increased numbers a second troop was raised in Richmond which necessitated a name change to the Natal Carbineers on 7 February of that year.¹⁴¹ The mounted tradition remained strong in the regiment throughout its existence and their equestrian team were unmatched on the 'field of battle'. The period prior to the outbreak of war was a happy time for the Carbineers with trophies and awards accumulated on a grand scale. The Len Hay era, as this period was referred to saw the Regiment's officers reviving many forgotten traditions and implementing new ones as well as many young Natalians flocking to join arguably the best Regiment in the province.¹⁴²

The 40 officers and 980 other ranks of the Carbineers on parade, some 85 years after the regiment's formation, were as diverse as the brigade of which they were part. To ease the registration process, the infantry companies of the regiment were drawn from the same geographic areas of Natal and many close friendships existed between men that knew each other long before there was even talk of war. This explains the high levels of loyalty and comradeship among the men that were evident throughout the war and continued thereafter. The HQ, Support and A Companies were mostly made up of men from Pietermaritzburg while B and C Companies drew recruits from the rural towns and farms surrounding Pietermaritzburg.¹⁴³ To the men on the ground, another division seemed apparent. It appeared as if most of the 'city boys' were grouped together in A Company, the educated fellows were sent to B Company, while most of the aspiring farmers and men from the country filled the ranks of C Company.¹⁴⁴ Not only was C Company men better shots

¹³⁷ Natal Carbineers Archive (NCA), C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 14 July 1940.

¹³⁸ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg. Mr Buckley did not find those too comforting and questioned the wisdom of his decision to enlist.

¹³⁹ NCA, P. C. Francis Collection, History of the Natal Carbineers, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁴⁰ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p7.

¹⁴¹ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p2.

¹⁴² Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan, 26 June 1994, Hilton.

¹⁴³ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p2.

¹⁴⁴ Interview: H.W. Buckley - G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg. Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Estcourt. Interview: R. Pennington - G. Bentz, 22 July 2013, Pietermaritzburg.

than their comrades but they generally towered above the rest in terms of physical size. The negative side to this kind of grouping was that C Company, being headstrong and much more mature, were far more difficult to control by their officers than the rest of the Regiment.¹⁴⁵ This rudimentary grouping seemed to be in line with Defence Force policy which suggested that battalions organize their companies in trained men's companies and recruits' companies after mobilisation.¹⁴⁶



Figure 2.1: RNC assembled at Oribi Camp, Pietermaritzburg, on 12 March 1940¹⁴⁷

In the ranks of C Company there stood, listening to their Commander-in-Chief, a couple of clerks, several Railways and Harbours firemen, a dock inspector, employees of the local rubber factory and a good number of farmers and farm assistants. Then there was the 'Cedara Contingent', a group of former students and friends from the Cedara Agricultural College, who enlisted to a man when the Carbineers mobilised. A chemist, a butcher, a lorry driver and a surveyor completed the company make-up. For most of the men from Natal, loyalty to the crown and comrades were the most important factors in determining their willingness to volunteer for action anywhere in Africa.¹⁴⁸ Others like Victor Fly and Bill Buckley simply found themselves to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Fly became so mesmerised as a young boy by the mounted parades and equestrian sports which made the Carbineers famous during the pre-war years that he joined the Regiment in 1934 shortly after his sixteenth birthday simply out of a love for horses.¹⁴⁹ A few years later Fly found himself standing on a dusty parade ground with two corporal stripes on his arm¹⁵⁰ listening to how some of them might not return from this grand adventure and had Buckley not whispered the question 'What the hell am I doing here?'¹⁵¹ before him, Vic Fly might very

¹⁴⁵ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan, 26 June 1994, Hilton.

¹⁴⁶ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p24

¹⁴⁷ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁴⁸ Men enlisting in the UDF swore under oath that they were willing to serve anywhere in Africa.

¹⁴⁹ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan, 26 June 1994, Hilton.

¹⁵⁰ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, Fly, V.R. 4402V.

¹⁵¹ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

well have done so himself. In spite of their different backgrounds most of the Carbineers were unified in their motives for taking the 'red oath'

Age group	Occupation				Total
	Agricultural	Clerical	Governmental	Unconfirmed	
16-20	20	11	3	5	39
21-25	33	23	5	18	79
26-30	11	3	1	2	17
31-35	3	1	1	2	7
36-40	4	1	0	0	5
41 and over	0	1	2	27	3
	71	40	12	27	150

Table 1.1: Composition of C Company prior to deployment to East Africa.

Elsewhere in the Union the recruitment of sufficient numbers of willing white volunteers necessitated innovative means to fill the ranks. It was realized that neither the call to fight Nazism nor the preservation of the British Commonwealth would drum up much support, specifically from the Afrikaner segment of the population.¹⁵² Several, mostly Afrikaner men, whose parents spent time in British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War, abhorred all things British and unsurprisingly sympathized with the Germans.¹⁵³ To tap into the rising Afrikaner nationalism, brought about by, amongst other things, the 1938 centennial celebration of the Great Trek, recruitment officials put their faith in the 'Steel Commando' which consisted of various military vehicles, a recruitment van and a bugle band. The image of UDF men portrayed as national heroes, similar to the 'Voortrekkers' going northwards into the wild and untamed parts of savage Africa, contributed to the continuous flow of men to the recruitment centres during the first year of the war.¹⁵⁴ The 'Steel Commando', and its counterpart the 'Air Commando', reinforced the call to arms, as it travelled through the southern Transvaal, Eastern Province, Cape Midlands and Western Province.¹⁵⁵ The fact that it operated not as widely in Natal, indicated a general acceptance that service to a beleaguered Empire was not negotiable in this, the most 'British' of South Africa's provinces.

The 'Steel' and 'Air commandos' were not used in Natal where the government hoped that individual loyalty to the Commonwealth would be sufficient to motivate men to enlist. With

¹⁵² A. Grundlingh, **The King's Afrikaners Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force During the Second World War, 1939 – 1945**, p35.

¹⁵³ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p1.

¹⁵⁴ N. Roos, **Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961** p31.

¹⁵⁵ N. Roos, **Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961** , p33.

the effects of the depression years still being felt in parts of South Africa, loyalty was not enough of a motivation. Various government schemes attempted to relieve the plight of whites struggling to survive in a post-depression South Africa. In spite of securing employment in the mining sector and railways, many white South Africans, particularly Afrikaners, were destined to remain uneducated, poor and with limited opportunities for social advancement. The extent to which the economic hardships motivated men to enlist in the UDF became clear when, on 29 March 1940, with the institution of the 'Africa' oath, one third of the Mobile Field Force and almost all of the first and second mounted Brigades refused to agree to serve beyond the borders of South Africa. The prospect of becoming casualties in a European war, however, outweighed the luxury of the meagre army pay and rations. It was clear that self-sacrifice was not a priority of those first white volunteers. Unlike their English-speaking compatriots in Natal, most white Afrikaners found themselves at the nationwide recruitment centres out of economic necessity. Such was the extent of economic deprivation of many of the first volunteers that an incentive of issuing £3.10s to those volunteers not yet called up, with which they could purchase trousers, shirt and a blanket was instituted.¹⁵⁶ In Natal where individual links with Great Britain were still strong, the situation was different.

Jeremiah Joseph Hurley, brother of Bishop Dennis Hurley, followed the war in Europe attentively. As teacher in the government school at Weenen he was after all expected to remain abreast of the movements of the belligerents as well as offer enlightened opinions as to the progress of the war. His release from the Education Department was expedited by the headmaster, who viewed Hurley as the avenger of the suffering inflicted upon the Netherlands by the marauding Germans.¹⁵⁷ Eager to do his part for the empire, he endeavoured to join any unit about to mobilize for war. On the day that the Netherlands was integrated into the Reich, Hurley was ordered to report to the Natal Carbineer Drill Hall in Pietermaritzburg. The memory of tearful goodbyes and well wishes was replaced, as Hurley travelled to Pietermaritzburg on Sunday 19 May 1940, by a severe headache brought about by overindulgence in alcohol that usually accompanies such soldierly farewells. Dressed in slacks and a sports coat he stared in awe at the buzz of activity at the Drill Hall. He was in fact just in time to join C Company and fall in, at the back of the procession, as the Carbineers marched towards the station to board their respective trains bound for Premier Mine.¹⁵⁸

At three in the afternoon on 21 May 1940, 720 men of the RNC marched into Premier Mine, near Cullinan, to the loud cheers of the Transvaal Scottish (TS) who had arrived several hours earlier. Both regiments would in turn gather at the main entrance in the course of the

¹⁵⁶ H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **South Africa at War. Military and Industrial Organisation and Operations in Connection with the Conduct of the War, 1939 – 1945**, p59.

¹⁵⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p1.

¹⁵⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p2.

morning to welcome the third regiment of the Brigade, the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles (DEOR).¹⁵⁹ The Carbineers were under the command of Lt Col L. N. Hay, 'Biscuit Hay'¹⁶⁰, himself a veteran of the Great War of 1914-1918¹⁶¹ and a Carbineer in heart and soul.¹⁶² Before training commenced in all earnest, C Company's commander, Captain Morray Comrie, had the men fall in on the parade ground. The three platoon commanders stood to one side with their sergeants and corporals behind them. Comrie then told the men that since they had to live and fight together they could choose in which platoon they wanted to serve and under which commander. After a brief period of chaos the platoons were organised and training for war commenced.¹⁶³ It was assumed that all infantry battalions, called up for full-time service, would have mastered the basic skills of soldiery at their local training centres. This assumption formed the basis of all consequent training to be done at Premier Mine.¹⁶⁴

Training for War

Much of the training in that first month was aimed at hardening and preparing the troops physically for the rigours of combat that would follow. This was intended to include as much drill as possible during the first week, day and night marches, musketry revision, bayonet and grenade training, light machinegun firing, anti-gas drills and some elementary tactics. For some of the men there was a general acceptance that the harder they were pushed during training, the better it will be for them in the long run.¹⁶⁵ Not everyone however found the training they received useful and felt that they were merely equipped with a rifle and military kit and left to their own devices.¹⁶⁶

Then there was, of course, the one period per day allocated to physical training; if the men were lucky this was organized sport, more marching and exercises if they were not.¹⁶⁷ To his parents in Natal, Private Christopher Dering Stainbank wrote that 'Drill is going on slowly. They take the life out of us properly these days. I usually go to bed dead tired.'¹⁶⁸ Just to make the life of the ordinary soldier a bit more miserable, additional attention had to be given to concealment, anti-aircraft and anti-gas drills in the pursuit of realistic and efficient

¹⁵⁹ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p101.

¹⁶⁰ The Colonel earned this nickname on account of his family owning the biscuit factory in Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁶¹ Served in German South West Africa and German East Africa and was awarded the Military Cross in 1917.

¹⁶² A. C. Harvey-Williams (ed), *Travels in Darkest Africa*. **Carbineer**, p91.

¹⁶³ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan, 26 June 1994, Hilton.

¹⁶⁴ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p102.

¹⁶⁵ Interview: G. Clarke – M. Coghlan, 25 October 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁶⁶ Interview: A. Hackland - M. Coghlan, 2 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁶⁷ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p27.

¹⁶⁸ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 28 May 1940.

training. With the days of bayonet practice and route marches dragging by, Private Allan Dallas MacDonald, 'leader' of the 'Cedara Contingent', wrote to the principal of Cedara that:

'The spare time here too has proved to be particularly boring. The canteen, the local tea room and the YMCA, which incidentally is very far removed from the camp, are the only places where we can have a little pleasure and where we can remove our minds from the horrid subject of war for a while. Yet these soldier haunted rendezvous are themselves rapidly losing their attraction for many of us. The result is that the army has lost most of its former savour to most of us.'¹⁶⁹

The men as a group voiced their concern over two main issues; the first was the lack of equipment and the second the absence of any enemy.¹⁷⁰ MacDonald echoed these sentiments in a letter to his former principal; 'how we long for a smack at the sallow Italians and the boastful strutting Nazi's'.¹⁷¹

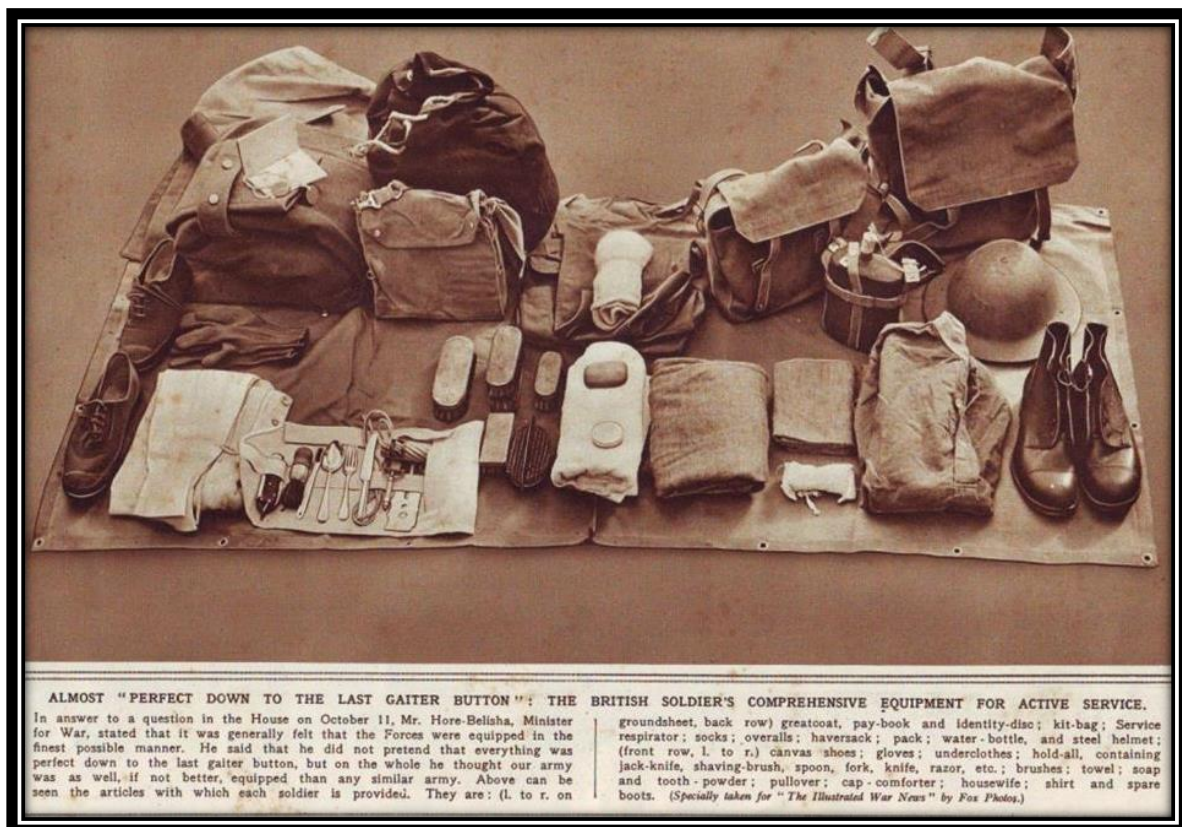


Figure 2.2: Proposed Kit issue for enlisted men upon joining the UDF.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ NCA, A.D. McDonald Collection, A.D. McDonald to Dr Fisher, 29 June 1940.

¹⁷⁰ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, 104.

¹⁷¹ NCA, A.D. McDonald Collection, McDonald to Dr Fisher, 29 June 1940.

¹⁷² NCA, V. Harte collection. This was the selection of personal kit soldiers were supposed to be issued with but wartime shortages meant that a soldiers' possessions were rarely as complete as indicated in the picture.

The camp consisted of line upon line of bungalows resembling sheds. Each bungalow was furnished with about two dozen iron bedsteads with lumpy mattresses and off-white sheets. At either end of the structure were two door frames, without the doors; it was jokingly speculated that this was done to prevent mutinous soldiers from locking themselves in during riotous times.¹⁷³ After settling down and getting themselves organized, there began, as is the case with military units, a feverish yet unspoken competition to be better than those not belonging to your native unit. This suited the brigade commander, Colonel J. Daniel, who was determined that the Brigade live up to its motto of 'First'. Within the first week at Premier Mine the Transvaal Scottish men executed two night marches. This accomplishment had to be bettered by the Carbineers and meant at least three nights of very little sleep while bungling through the bush in the dark in order to claim the accolade of being the 'first' to do so.¹⁷⁴

With the commencing of firing exercises on the ranges it was discovered that most rifles were extremely worn out and had to be completely stripped by armourers if they were to fire straight and true. The Carbineers received 500 reconditioned rifles, as replacements, but their quality was of the same standard as the first batch. The occupation of the ranges by the armourers, feverishly trying to repair the damaged rifles and then zero the sights, seriously retarded musketry practice. The lack of Vickers Machinegun (VMG) rounds as well as mortar bombs meant that no live firing could be done with such weapons.¹⁷⁵ In addition there was also an absence of grenades. This deficiency was easily rectified by having the men prime and throw rocks at each other.¹⁷⁶ Insufficient motorized transport haunted the brigade slightly more than the lack of motor cycles, compasses, binoculars and revolvers.¹⁷⁷ The shortage of boots and the resulting route march casualties did not dissuade the PF instructors from making the most use of the resources they had the most of, namely parade grounds and open tracts of land. Consequently, more drilling and marching was done and not much practical soldiering.¹⁷⁸ 'Please tell me there is no route march tonight but we have to listen to a lecture instead', Stainbank commented in one of his many letters to his parents.¹⁷⁹ C Company lived up to the brigade motto during one of the countless route marches, when they became the first company to have one of its members sent to the detention barracks.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ NCA, J. Holland papers, Training Camp at Cullinan, p3.

¹⁷⁴ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁷⁵ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p104.

¹⁷⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p3.

¹⁷⁷ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p104.

¹⁷⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p3.

¹⁷⁹ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 28 May 1940,

¹⁸⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 89, 11 May 1940 – 30 June 1940, Progress Report No 2, 08/06/1940,

Private Henry William 'Bill' Buckley, self-proclaimed troublemaker of C Company¹⁸¹, was slogging along one of the many slippery roads during just another route march. The men of C Company, dressed in their long khaki pants, tucked into canvas gaiters over black boots, wearing oversized bush jackets, mockingly referred to as a maternity jacket because of being too big around the waist, brought up the rear of the column. The men, struggling under the burden of their webbing with its myriad pouches, their World War One vintage rifles and bayonets and solid sun helmets, found it quite difficult to maintain good marching order on the slimy dirt roads. This spectacle caught the eye of a passing staff officer who immediately bellowed to the sergeant major to get the men in line. Private Buckley, not one to mince his words, expressed his views in proper soldierly terms about the commander's decision to have them marching in the rain along a slippery road where one might easily fall and break his neck. He concluded his monologue with the rhetorical question 'who does this fucking Colonel Hay think he is? I bet old biscuit Hay is not marching with us.' The uncomfortable, and sudden, answer came from the other side of the staff car. Private Buckley just slid past. 'Sergeant Major, Sergeant Major, arrest that man immediately.' Consequently Buckley spent a week of constant drilling in the detention barracks, courtesy of Lt Col Len Hay. The Company's first 'casualty', however received clemency for saving two drowning troops during a previous river crossing exercise and re-joined C Company after his short disciplinary visit to the detention barracks.¹⁸²

With June 1940 drawing to a close, there was definitely something different in the air. The days of monotonous bayoneting of sandbags on the ranges and drilling on the parade grounds were no more. Much more attention was placed on realism, with constant simulated gas attacks and authentic low-flying aircraft harassing the men in order to test their anti-aircraft and anti-gas skills. Some of the first real 'soldierly work' was done on 24 June by the officers and non-commissioned officers (NCO's) when they took part in a demonstration of simple tactics. The rest of the brigade displayed their skill the next day when they assisted in the production of propaganda films.¹⁸³ It was not only the change in training that surprised the men, but also the sudden change in climate. The cold Highveld nights spelt trouble for anyone used to the warm climate of Natal. The onset of influenza that hit the camp at the end of the month, hit the men of the coastal regiments the hardest. The Carbineers suffered severe 'battle casualties' when 198 men were admitted to hospital on 30 June with serious flu symptoms,¹⁸⁴ including Peter Pope-Ellis and Allan Mapham of the Cedara contingent.

¹⁸¹ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁸² Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁸³ E. Millen, **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour**, p108.

¹⁸⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 89, 11 May 1940 – 30 June 1940.

The dreary countryside of the Transvaal did not appeal to the men from Richmond and surrounding areas.¹⁸⁵ Stainbank was more liberal with his description of their temporary home when he wrote to his mother that she 'is right in saying that they must be sick of this camp, we are dead sick of it.'¹⁸⁶ On returning to camp, from leave, he commented that they arrived safely at that awful place with its same old 'stone sand (dust) and monotony.'¹⁸⁷ Few men in camp were sorry to read the mobilisation orders, finally ordering the brigade to Durban, and on to war.

Premise 21113
C. Coy
1st R.N.C.
13th July 1940

My very dearest Mum & Dad & the family

We have arrived safely back to this awful place safe & sound, it is just the same stone sand (dust) & monotony. It was just wonderful seeing you all, although it was only for such a short time, but it has done me the world of good, except for the little pain in my heart, which is home sickness. I have only been back half an hour, and the first bit of news I was greeted with is that we are going on Monday or Tuesday. I think it is just the usual story. I had quite a nice

Figure 2.3: One of C.D. Stainbank's many letters to his parents.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ NCA, A.D. McDonald Collection, A.D. McDonald to Dr Fisher, 29 June 1940.

¹⁸⁶ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 3 July 1940.

¹⁸⁷ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 13 July 1940.

¹⁸⁸ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 13 July 1940.

Chapter 3

Natal and East Africa, 1940 to 1941

'Wish me Luck as you Wave me Goodbye'

Perla Siedle Gibson 'Lady in White' 17 July 1940

During the opening stages of the campaign in East Africa, C Company's men might rightly have been mistaken for a group of South African businessmen on Safari. There were regular hunting trips, game drives and constant exploration of the countryside. With very little action coming from the Italians, who have by this time joined the Germans, the men were thoroughly enjoying their war. The first action at El Wak was such a mismatch between the two opposing sides that the South Africans even had the luxury of launching a bayonet charge while chanting Zulu war-cries. As C Company then battled on through the rest of the campaign, numerous hard-fought battles, in which comrades and even commanders were killed, turned the young farmers from Natal in to battle-hardened veterans. With very few exceptions the UDF's first campaign of the war was an almost textbook affair of advance, bombard, assault and mop up as the outclassed Italians fell back before the approaching Springboks. At Keren the last remaining Italians stood their ground and inflicted heavy casualties on the Allied attackers but no South Africans were present during the battle as they were on their way north to where the Germans were chasing the British 8th Army across the desert.

The Adventure Begins

With their training done the regiment marched to Cullinan station on 15 July and boarded their respective troop trains. From Cullinan the train rolled steadily past Johannesburg and then began to pick up speed to such an extent that those on board expected it to leave the rails at any moment. At the next stop, several anxious Carbineers were relieved to learn that the driver was removed and replaced. Relief was short-lived when rumours of fifth columnist attempts to wreck the train began doing the rounds.¹⁸⁹ After being deposited on Maydon Wharf on 16 July, the Carbineers prepared to board a troopship assigned to them and eagerly waited for the commencing of embarkation leave which would expire at midnight. Before making the most of their last precious hours in the Union, the men first had to be relieved of that which branded them the Union's Finest. Each company of the assembled battalions had to fall in on the wharf, with all their kit, for roll call. A chain of men was then formed from where the troops stood, to the ships armoury. Each man then handed his rifle to the end-man, who in turn placed the rifle in the armoury. The newly unarmed soldier then moved to the back of the chain where he awaited the rest of the company. This lengthy process was likewise repeated for the stowage of web equipment and then followed by the donning of one standard issue infantry steel helmet and regulation

¹⁸⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p4.

gas mask. Armed with his two blankets and kitbag the men filed on board and made their way to the mess decks. Here each man took his seat and awaited the conclusion of the final ships' inspection and for the liberation of East Africa to commence.¹⁹⁰

His Majesty's Troopship (HMT) '*Devonshire*' was scheduled to transport the young men from Natal northward into the unknown, where they were to confront the Italians waiting in East Africa. Only a limited number of men concerned themselves with such trivialities while on shore leave, and most sped off in search of life's other pleasures, which they were bound to be without for quite some time. Several men got engaged in order to enjoy, completely, that bounty which Durban had to offer and one Carbineer, 'Shippie' Schapero, actually received permission to get married on the morning that the *Devonshire* set sail for East Africa. His matrimonial duties, however, kept him from being on board as the *Devonshire* cast off her moorings. Living up to the brigade motto, this man did his brigade proud by being the 'first' to pursue, and catch up with, a warship in a small commandeered motorboat and scaled several flimsy rope ladders, to the cheers of his comrades, simply not to be left behind.¹⁹¹ He was indeed the first, but by no means the only one.

Cliff (Clifford John) Portsmouth, Dundee High School's head prefect and sportsman of note, was one of the many Carbineers that could not wait to get off the *Devonshire*. Not to get to grips with the Italians in East Africa, but in Durban, where his uncle waited to take him to the Playhouse for a farewell party. The presence of several of his high school girlfriends, now all nurses, and also eager to do their bit for the war effort, only served to increase his desire to make the most of his last few hours in the Union. His athletic prowess, for the first time since leaving school, provided him with an advantage over his comrades as he ran, jumped and shoved past, over and even through the likeminded men on board the berthed troopship in order to maximize his time ashore.¹⁹² This was a man that, after all, represented Natal in the South African athletics meet in the 400 yards, hurdles and long jump events. As captain of his school's first rugby team, member of the cricket eleven and the shooting squad, Cliff knew how to identify objectives and to make every effort in achieving them. None of these skills benefitted him, when, on returning to the dock, well past midnight, Portsmouth and several other Carbineers found the berth empty. The *Devonshire* had left. Fortunately for Portsmouth, and the dozens of other men who paid no heed to the midnight curfew, the ship was simply moved three berths down. Little did he know that, as a talented runner, he, and most of the ship's eager young men, would do much more running and shoving the moment the *Devonshire* entered the open ocean.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, Appendix 21: Procedure on Detraining at decks, 16/07/1940.

¹⁹¹ NCA, P.C.M. Francis Collection, Address given at Devonshire Luncheon on 17 July 1990.

¹⁹² Interview: C. J. Portsmouth – G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Estcourt.

¹⁹³ C.J. Portsmouth. Memoirs. Part of a private collection of papers and letters, in possession of Mr C.J. Portsmouth, Estcourt.

As the *Devonshire* moved cautiously out of its berth, to the melancholy tunes of the 'Lady in White', the contrast between the emotions of the troops on board and those they were saying farewell to, was almost tangible. Bolstered by the camaraderie of fellow warriors, about to embark on a great adventure, the Carbineers lined the railings, eager to come to grips with His Majesty's enemies. Waiving and singing, they bid farewell to their loved-ones on the quay, expecting to return heroes, all. There were no tears. That was reserved for those standing on the pier, watching and praying as the convoy disappeared slowly over the horizon and the last notes of Vera Lynn's classics echoed over the fast emptying wharf.¹⁹⁴

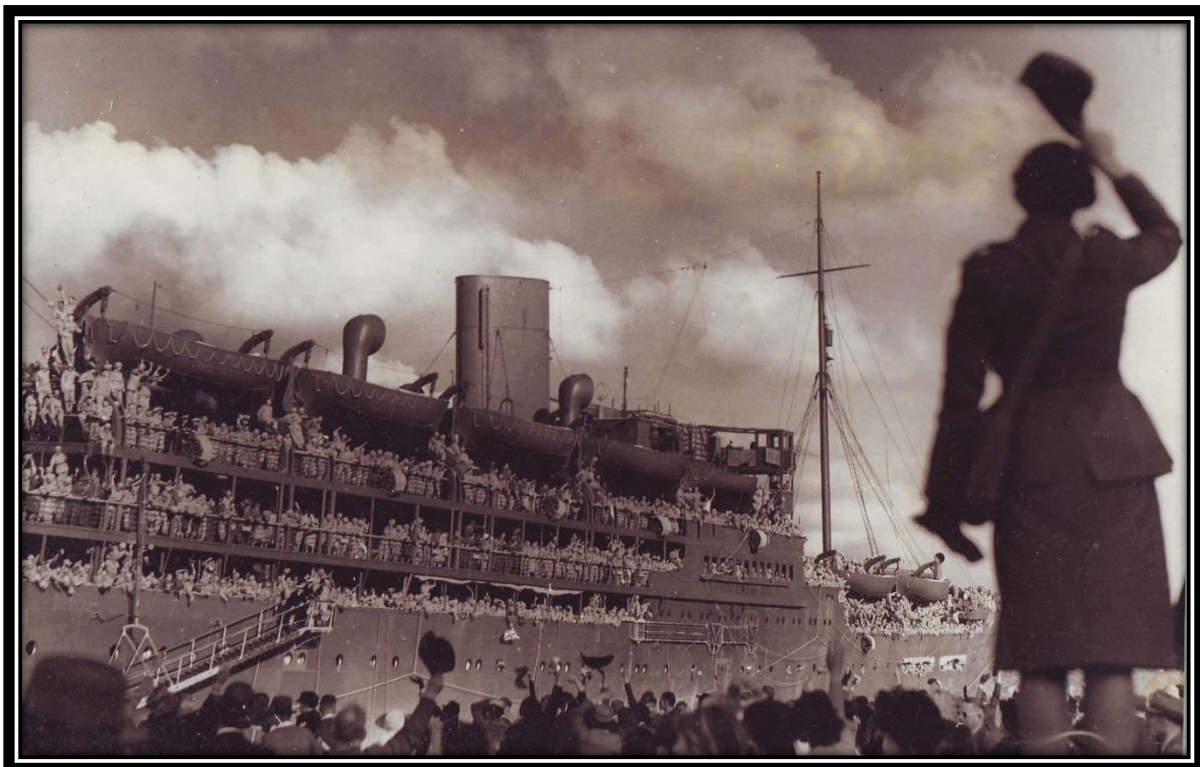


Figure 3.1: HMT *Devonshire* as it is about to leave Durban on 17 July 1940.¹⁹⁵

But a few nautical miles out of Durban, many Carbineers lined the ships railings once more staring blankly at the murky water, in spite of being prohibited from doing exactly that.¹⁹⁶ Strangely, when they finally tore themselves away from this position, they seemed to have turned a delicate shade of green, no doubt a reflection from the surging waves.¹⁹⁷ These unfortunate souls were struck by a very distressing malady indeed, which when contracted caused a man to prefer death rather than to have a king's feast of greasy pork chops and gravy.¹⁹⁸ The symptoms of this ailment were the tendency to regurgitate that which was

¹⁹⁴ NCA, P.C.M. Francis Collection, Address given at Devonshire Luncheon on 17 July 1990.

¹⁹⁵ NCA, Photograph collection, Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁹⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, July, Appendix 25: Ships Daily Orders, 20/07/1940,

¹⁹⁷ NCA, T. Kerby, *The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness*, **The Carbineer** 1989, p14.

¹⁹⁸ NCA, J. Holland Memoirs, Part of a collection of articles and recollections by the author, *Young Men from another Century*. p1.

consumed during the previous meal. No amount of glucose infused water¹⁹⁹ or dry army biscuits could prevent this calamity from taking hold of a man. Seasickness was also not rank specific. Once more C Company took the lead by being the first to have a senior officer, their company commander, Captain (Capt) Moray Comrie, lose his breakfast over the rails.²⁰⁰

From Durban the convoy sailed due east for two days and then swung north-west. Accompanying the *Devonshire* was the *Kilindi* and *Dilwara*, with the Scotties and the Dukes respectively. Two destroyers provided the necessary deterrent for Italian submarines that were said to be lurking off the coast of East Africa.²⁰¹ In the unlikely event of the convoy falling prey to an Italian submarine or mine, the men had to endure daily boat-drills of being herded like sheep along the life-boat deck. Wearing their lifebelts of grey canvass encased cork blocks, they could not help but wonder how many of them would suffer a broken neck or jaw upon entry into the water strapped into such crude life preserving devices.²⁰²

When not preparing to abandon ship or staring into the open ocean the men were kept busy with a series of lectures on military hygiene, presented by members of the South African Nursing Sisters.²⁰³ Labelled as Royal Game²⁰⁴, the men were not allowed to speak to or be in the company of these nurses, unless of course if you had been commissioned as an officer, were part of the deck crew or managed to evade the eagle eye of the fierce Nurse Matron.²⁰⁵ Self-confessed trouble maker, Bill Buckley was by no means officer material but managed by some stroke of good fortune to be drafted into the ranks of the deck hands. This entitled him to roam the decks of the ship, almost at will, as well as making small talk with the eager young nurses. This good fortune was shared by the ten men he was allowed to recruit as temporary crewmembers, and gained him a very definite measure of prestige in the company.²⁰⁶ Eager to share in the same fortune Paul Hathorn forgot the golden rule of any army, which is never to volunteer for anything, especially not for any 'special job'.²⁰⁷ This lesson was learned by several of C company's men back in the Union when all those who could speak Zulu were asked to take a step forward and then summarily transferred to the Native Training battalions in Johannesburg, many taking no further active part in the war.²⁰⁸ Hathorn and his fellow volunteers were utterly disappointed to be placed on heads

¹⁹⁹ Fellow C Company Carbineer Bert Evans swore that this would keep him seasick free. NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p24.

²⁰⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p25.

²⁰¹ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 24 July 1940.

²⁰² NCA, J. Holland Memoirs, Memories of the Middle East. p4.

²⁰³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, July, Appendix 25: Ships Daily Orders,20/07/1940.

²⁰⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p25.

²⁰⁵ P.C.M. Francis, **Carbineer**, Travels in Darkest Africa, 1990, p92

²⁰⁶ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

²⁰⁷ NCA, T. Kerby, The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness, **The Carbineer** 1989.

²⁰⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 204, File 10, Special Course, 3 July 1940.

(lavatories) duty for the duration of the journey. They would never volunteer for anything again.²⁰⁹

Physical training was also scheduled to take place daily from eleven to twelve. C Company was allocated the starboard aft part of B deck. This translates to the right hand side of the rear of the ship.²¹⁰ The importance of this part of the ship is not due to the fact that it was where C Company jogged on the spot but it was close to the area that the ship's company, when darkness fell, set up an illegal Crown and Anchor school, which was enthusiastically supported by the men from Natal. Whenever one of the ship's officers ventured too close, or as speculated by the Carbineers, when the game turned against the ship's crew, the sentries would shout 'peter' whereupon the candles would be snuffed out and the dice exchanged.²¹¹



Figure 3.2: Some Carbineers in their quarters below decks on the journey north.²¹²

After trying to sleep (and failing miserably) in the hammocks provided the men resorted to sleeping on, under and around the tables in the various mess decks. Falling asleep amidst scores of smoking, snoring and farting men was no easy matter and the opportunity to sleep on deck, under the stars, were eagerly grasped by many Carbineers.²¹³ Those sleeping on deck were often woken by the call of 'water coming' as shouted by the deck crew while hosing down the upper deck, as part of their chores, with icy sea water. The call, intended to

²⁰⁹ NCA, T. Kerby, *The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness*, **The Carbineer** 1989.

²¹⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, July, Appendix 27: Ships Daily Orders, 20/07/1940.

²¹¹ NCA, T. Kerby, *The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness*, **The Carbineer** 1989.

²¹² NCA, Photograph collection, Pietermaritzburg.

²¹³ NCA, T. Kerby, *The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness*, **The Carbineer** 1989.

be a warning of some vengeful sailor preparing to release a stream of stinging water over several sleeping infantrymen almost always followed a rude, cold and wet awakening.²¹⁴ Cover against enemy interdiction was provided by Hurricanes as the convoy sailed west towards the African coast and when the Mombasa lighthouse was sighted on 24 July 1940, the Carbineers knew a part of their journey has ended while another was about to begin.

Disembarkation orders were issued and rifles and webbing drawn in the same fashion as they were handed in a week earlier. The *Devonshire* docked at Kilindini harbour at a quarter to eight on the morning of 24 July 1940.²¹⁵ It was during the disembarkation process that the Italian enemy struck and inflicted 50% casualties on the Carbineers. This was the message that the German propagandist radio station, Zeesen, gleefully broadcasted to its listeners.²¹⁶ In reality the Carbineers were actually enjoying hot tea and sandwiches in a warehouse on shore, exchanging their money into East African shillings and preparing for the move by rail towards Gilgil, at the time of their supposed demise at the hands of the Regia Aeronautica.²¹⁷

On Safari in East Africa

The one feature about East Africa most of the Carbineers agreed on was that it was much hotter than what they were used to. Errol Ford recalled that they had to take a teaspoon of salt each day during the opening stages of the campaign to counter the loss of body fluid through excessive sweating.²¹⁸ And sweat they did. On enquiring from an Indian shopkeeper when they had winter and summer in Kenya, Lance Corporal Ian Arthur Gordon got the reply that 'Winter was in the morning and summer in the afternoon'. The lush green hills, resembling that of Natal, as well as the deserted streets failed to impress the troops as they disembarked, burdened by their recently reissued equipment. Their concerns were limited to how far they could make their iron rations last and whether there would really be a hot meal waiting at their inland destination.²¹⁹

Beyond the confines of town, a deadly enemy awaited the first contingent of South African troops. This threat was not affiliated to the Italian army, nor did it form part of the irregular Banda auxiliaries on Rome's payroll. It would however strike from the air and usually without warning with deadly consequences. It was made clear to all ranks that they were about to enter a malaria affected district at the worst season of what was said to be a particularly bad year. Commanding Officers were made aware that any relaxation of preventative measures, even for one night, might have disastrous consequences. To enforce

²¹⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p26.

²¹⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, 24 July.

²¹⁶ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 25 July, 1940.

²¹⁷ Italian Air Force.

²¹⁸ Interview: E. Ford – G. Bentz, 20 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

²¹⁹ NCA, I.A. Gordon Collection, Letter by I.A. Gordon to Peter, 29/08/40.

the taking of prophylactic quinine, ten grains would be taken by all ranks at sundown and consumed on parade with a large draught of water. Gargling parades henceforth became part of daily routine for the newcomers to East Africa.²²⁰



Map 2.1: The route of C Company through East Africa, circa 1941.²²¹

The movement by train to Gilgil was, by army standards, a typical one. The troops were forbidden to give free reign to their artistic expression by decorating their individual coaches with slogans and other morale boosting remarks as was the practice in the Union. Shortly after four in the afternoon the train departed from Mombasa and the troops were allowed to use the lavatories for the first time since their use was forbidden while the train

²²⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, July, Appendix C: Prevention of Malaria, 20/07/1940.

²²¹ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

was stationary.²²² The men were packed into the coaches to maximise the space available and as Private MacDonald remarked in a letter home 'The more we are together, the merrier we'll be'.²²³ The hot and sweaty Carbineers were not amused when their train derailed just after leaving Mombasa station. The fact that the engine crew were all Africans was a matter of great concern for some of the South Africans. Such jobs were after all reserved for whites in the Union. Their concern seemed justified as the engine jerked forward and steamed on its way without the rest of the coaches.²²⁴ This situation was, however, quickly resolved and the discomfort continued. Passing through the Kenyan Highlands, littered with game farms, the temptation to commence hostilities was simply too much for some Carbineers.²²⁵ Several shots rang out as some men tried their hands at game shooting.²²⁶ With one of the 'enemy' felled, the train came to a stop and an immediate rifle inspection was ordered by the Adjutant, Col Jack Vincent. This incident, being the first 'action' of the campaign also ensured that the Carbineers lived up to the brigade motto of 'First' by being the first regiment to have two sergeants demoted for engaging the 'enemy' without proper authorisation.²²⁷

On 26 July 1940, 35 officers and 874 other ranks officially marched into their camp at Gilgil and commenced with routine duties.²²⁸ This included the digging of trenches and air raid shelters, erection of tents and the completion of several unfinished bungalows. As in any other war, casualties are not only sustained on the battlefield but in the mess halls, bungalows and ablution facilities as well. Initial skirmishes resulted from diarrhoea which caused a whole lot of dashing to the cover of the latrines with many a gallant young carbineer not succeeding in reaching his objective. Several men were seriously ill during the first few days and put off duty. Jerry Hurley was one of the casualties and he felt 'as weak as a kitten'.²²⁹ A further non-combat related condition that would plague the men was 'Habaswein Itch', 'Wajir Clap' or 'Buna Balls'²³⁰ which was a condition brought about by the high mineral content of the drinking water to be found in East Africa. Sufferers of this condition had an excruciating experience when trying to urinate as a result of sharp crystals of undissolvable mica and gypsum that formed in the urinary system.²³¹

²²² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940, July, Appendix B: Disembarkation and Embarkation of troops at Mombasa, 20/07/1940.

²²³ NCA, A. D. M. MacDonald Collection, Letter to the principal and staff of Cedara Agricultural College by A.D. MacDonald, 25 August 1940.

²²⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p26.

²²⁵ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p29.

²²⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p26.

²²⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p27.

²²⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 219, July 1940, 26 July.

²²⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p27.

²³⁰ P.C.M. Francis, *Carbineer*, Travels in Darkest Africa, 1990, p95.

²³¹ G. Hanley, *Warriors and Strangers*, p218.



Figure 3.3: Two Carbineers with their 'trophies'.²³²

Training followed a 'civil service' pattern, with training from Monday to Friday and the weekends off²³³ as indicated by several notations in the war diary indicating a 'cleaning parade until midday when training ceases for weekend'.²³⁴ With the abundance of game in the vicinity, it was just a matter of time before ad-hoc hunting parties ventured out into the bush in search of prey. With the several hunting parties roaming the surroundings it was also only a matter of time before the Carbineers became the first unit to have one of their own almost killed by a stray bullet. One such a bullet went through the medical officer's tent, just missing his head which resulted in a much shaken up medical officer as well as ban on all hunting with rifles. Private MacDonald remarked that had they been allowed to carry on as they did, it would have been a wholesale slaughter of the game and of the men themselves.²³⁵ Future hunting expeditions saw the men armed with sticks and 'knob-kierries'.²³⁶ A welcome change in routine was the allowance made for the purchase of beer from the Quartermaster's store provided that all empty bottles were returned.²³⁷

Preparation for Battle

The Carbineers spent about two months at Gilgil, a motley collection of Indian traders' huts, conducting various company and battalion manoeuvres. It was here, in the Kenyan Highlands, that further intensive training was conducted in order to accustom the men to the conditions of the East African environment.²³⁸ Brigade exercises were conducted on a

²³² NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

²³³ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p30.

²³⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 220, July 1940, 30 July.

²³⁵ NCA, I.A. Gordon Collection, Letter by I.A. Gordon to Peter, 29/08/40.

²³⁶ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 1 August 1940.

²³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 220, July 1940, July, Appendix 33.

²³⁸ A.F. Hattersley. *Carbineer*, p65.

rotational basis. Commencing on 3 August, each regiment conducted offensive operations against another in defence.²³⁹ When on 9 August the Carbineers were the attacking regiment, it rained quite heavily, soaking the men through to the skin. Captain Comrie made use of this opportunity to order a forced march through the African mud in the direction of the 'enemy'. At dawn the Carbineers descended upon the unsuspecting Dukes and routed the whole battalion. According to Private H. G. Symons, the Duke's officers showed bad spirit by not accepting the beating.²⁴⁰

In spite of several schemes aimed at improving the combat effectiveness of the regiment, there seemed to be a lack of drive from the front.²⁴¹ This apparent inability of the Carbineers' Officer Commanding, Lt Col Hay, led to him being recalled to the Union on the grounds of ill health.²⁴² Few Carbineers were sad to see him go but the regiment did however go through the motions of hosting a farewell party by the officers and warrant officers as well as having the men line the road leaving the camp when Col Hay departed on 27 August.²⁴³ Carbineer traditionalists were utterly disgusted with their new Officer Commanding, who was not of Carbineer stock but a former member of the Transvaal Scottish as well as a staff officer from the East African Force.²⁴⁴ The fact that the Carbineer stalwart Major D.C. Flower, the regiment's second in command, was not considered for the position added fuel to the fire.²⁴⁵ Lt Col J.G. McMenamain soon made his presence felt and his insistence on efficiency on the part of his officers was much appreciated by the other ranks.²⁴⁶ His skill, drive and forceful personality quickly won the men over, in spite of him reorganising the regiment and intensifying all training.²⁴⁷ Standing on an anthill amidst his troops in the field, on 28 August, his remark of hoping to become as good a Carbineer as any man standing there, gained him further approval. Thus, as August drew to a close, the Carbineers exchanged 'biscuits Hay' for 'Mortar Mac' and continued their preparations for the eventual showdown with the Italians waiting to the north.²⁴⁸ McMenamain, though not a true-blood Carbineer, yet, was a native of Pietermaritzburg and thus a 'local man' after all.²⁴⁹

With several intensive field manoeuvres, route marches and evening lectures about a myriad of military aspects under the belt, the Carbineers crossed into the Northern Frontier

²³⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 220, August 1940, August. Appendix 3.

²⁴⁰ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 29 August 1940.

²⁴¹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p27.

²⁴² M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p30.

²⁴³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, August 1940, 27 August.

²⁴⁴ A.F. Hattersley. *Carbineer*, p65.

²⁴⁵ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p30.

²⁴⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p27.

²⁴⁷ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 31 August 1940.

²⁴⁸ Interview: K. Archiblad – G. Bentz, Natal Carbineers Officer's Mess, Pietermartizburg.

²⁴⁹ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p30.

District (NFD) on 16 September to reach Wajir two days later without any casualty or incident²⁵⁰ much to the utter disappointment of some of the men. Rumours of Italian reconnaissance planes to the north abounded. The use of 'native' tribes as an irregular force by the Italians was some cause for concern, as the Banda were thought to be infiltrating from the north and likely to ambush any unlucky convoy that dared to venture to far into unsecured areas.²⁵¹ At Wajir, a 'Beau Geste'²⁵² type fort built of white stone, the Carbineers busied themselves once more with that task too familiar to infantrymen of all armies – digging. Each company contributed a platoon to relieve the Nigerian Regiment's men that have been holding the line since the opening of hostilities.²⁵³ This meant that Union troops came under the command, for certain periods of time, of elements of the Gold Coast Brigades, which comprised of African troops, fighting under the British flag.

To enable the different platoons to gain operational experience, Lt Col McMenamin ordered a daily platoon rotation and a company rotation every three days. The men not on patrol spent their days digging defensive works, marching on compass bearings, firing exercises, debussing from vehicles when ambushed and some night driving without lights. Fully expecting to make contact with enemy Banda elements at any moment, several patrols were sent out with the aim of capturing or killing any enemy they encountered. All the patrols returned empty handed²⁵⁴ and the whole experience of getting to grips with the Banda proved to be an anti-climax.²⁵⁵ Stories of the elusive Banda sneaking up to a sleeping victim and dispatching him to the hereafter were rife and caused several uneasy nights after reaching Wajir. At about seven in the evening of the third night at the fort, two shots suddenly rang out. Bren and Vickers machineguns took up the challenge, followed by every other weapon in camp as the perimeter erupted in a sea of small-arms fire. The realisation that there was no return fire brought the staccato of rifle shots to an abrupt end. A sweep of the perimeter the next morning revealed the extent of the enemy attack. All the Carbineers had to show for unleashing their wrath on the African bush was a very unlucky and equally dead giraffe. This action was recorded as the battle of Wajir but jokingly referred to by the trigger happy men from Natal as the 'Battle of Bigger-All'.²⁵⁶ As the campaign dragged on both officers and enlisted men became used to the numerous sacrifices as demanded from an army in hostile terrain. It was during one of the less active nights at Wajir that the C Company officers discussed the campaign in a true soldierly fashion with a good supply of alcohol. Bren gunner Errol Ford was not amused that the men had nothing to assist them in achieving the same state of exuberance that his officers were

²⁵⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, September 1940, 16 September.

²⁵¹ A.F. Hattersley. **Carbineer**, p65.

²⁵² NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 19 September.

²⁵³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, September 1940, 20 September.

²⁵⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, September 1940, 20 to 30 September.

²⁵⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p16.

²⁵⁶ NCA, H.G. Symons. Diary, 16 September 1940,

fast approaching. Ford summarily marched over to the officer's canteen and expressed his view on the unfairness of the prevailing situation. From inside the darkness of the tent Ford was then instructed by the company commander Capt Comrie to sing a song as punishment for disturbing the council of war. Ford, without hesitation sang 'Somewhere over the rainbow' and so impressed his CO that Comrie sacrificed a bottle of whiskey from his own private stash to sooth the indignation just suffered by the gunner Ford who returned to the lines a hero.²⁵⁷

The next two months were spent patrolling the endless tracts of African bush, conducting several motorised transport manoeuvres, often at night, and taking part in regimental and divisional field exercises. When not busy with tactical matters, the men could look forward to route marches, improving their bayonet fighting skills on the ranges, countless recreational training exercises and the ever popular drill competitions.²⁵⁸ When, during one such a competition, Private Buckley's drill instructor forgot to give them the command to turn about as they neared the edge of the parade ground, Buckley, without hesitation, smartly kept right on marching off the parade ground and back to the bungalow. It was after all bad form to act without having received the command to do so.²⁵⁹ Soon rumours were doing the rounds that the brigade would be taking part in a 'big push somewhere'.²⁶⁰

November 1940 slipped by before the rumours of the 'big push' came to fruition. By December of that year, the Carbineers had seen their share of small skirmishes and ineffective Italian aerial bombardments. They were eager to test themselves in a real battle as Jerry Hurley remarked in his diary when he wrote that they 'we're all getting tired of doing nothing useful and even the most peaceable of us are longing for action'.²⁶¹ Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham was equally eager to test his light tanks and armoured cars in a region of very thick bush and deep sand. Consequently he planned a coordinated attack against five defended frontier posts controlled by the Italian enemy.²⁶² The first set piece battle by UDF troops in the Second World War was about to unfold.

Raiding the Wells of the Gods²⁶³

The focal point of Cunningham's attack was El Wak, another stone fort. The Carbineers were positioned on the right flank of the Gold Coast Brigade and had as its objective the Somali town of El Buro Hachi, lying south-east of El Wak.²⁶⁴ From 10 to 12 December the 1st South

²⁵⁷ Interview: E. Ford – G. Bentz, M. Coghlan, 23 September 1995. Pietermaritzburg.

²⁵⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, October 1940, 1 October to 30 October.

²⁵⁹ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

²⁶⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 21 October 1940

²⁶¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 10 November 1940

²⁶² A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p68.

²⁶³ Translation of El Wak.

²⁶⁴ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p69.

African Infantry Brigade executed what was called the rehearsal to battle. Everything about the coming confrontation was planned and rehearsed in minute detail. While still at Wajir the Regiment practiced debussing from vehicles, movement through the bush on a compass bearing, camouflaging vehicles and equipment as well as digging more trenches. McMenemy called his officers together on 12 December, laying out his plan and explaining each officer's role in battle. This was followed the next day by each platoon, in turn, receiving detailed instruction from their commanding officer on their particular role in the upcoming action. With each man now knowing what would be expected of him, the Carbineers set off toward their objective at eleven on the morning of 14 December.²⁶⁵

The village of El Buro Hachi was no more than a group of mud huts surrounded by a thorn stockade. This stockade was made from the abundant thorn trees covering the countryside. B and C Company of the Carbineers had to navigate through these thorn trees just before dusk on 16 December. Anxious moments were experienced when an enemy bomber passed overhead at a quarter past six but eventually the starting line was reached at ten that morning and an hour later the enemy was sighted.²⁶⁶ The biggest concern for Private Hurley and the rest of C Company was whether there would be any enemy worth fighting or if the UDF men would simply walk right onto the objective.²⁶⁷

Holding the town was a contingent of Abyssinian Regulars, supposedly crack Italian troops.²⁶⁸ They were believed to be trained in the use of machineguns and were to have the support of three artillery batteries in the vicinity of El Wak. The defenders of El Buro Hachi were in fact conscripts and formed part of the 191st Colonial Battalion that relieved the 73rd Colonial Battalion at the beginning of December. Intelligence reports revealed that several desertions from the 73rd Colonial Battalion had occurred as well as some cases of suicide. Discontent among the Banda were rife and morale in general was dangerously low.²⁶⁹

As the Carbineers emerged from the bushes, 700 meters away from their objective, an Italian field gun opened up on the advancing troops. The shots were high and landed to the rear of C Company, among the regimental HQ. Upon receiving the enemy's initial bursts of machinegun and random artillery fire, the Carbineers, chanting their Zulu war songs, charged and with fixed bayonets routed the defenders.²⁷⁰ Bill Buckley, always trying not to be too far forward when fired upon, on this occasion found himself uncomfortably too close to the wrong end of the battle.²⁷¹ As the initial shock of being in a real battle passed, he surged forward in the direction of the waiting Italian soldiers. Without warning the ground

²⁶⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, 1 to 14 December.

²⁶⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, 16 December.

²⁶⁷ NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 14 to 20 December 1940.

²⁶⁸ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p31.

²⁶⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 204, Intelligence Summary No 11 for December 1940,

²⁷⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, 16 December.

²⁷¹ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

underneath gave way and he felt himself falling. He did not hit the ground immediately as shot soldiers tend to do, for he fell headlong into one of the many disused wells in the area.²⁷² Fellow C Company member, Private A. MacDonald, did not need to see someone firing at him before instinctively falling flat and kissing mother earth while waiting for the Regiment's mortars to suppress the enemy.²⁷³ Relieved to be alive, Buckley was confronted with reality of being marked as KIA (killed in action) and contemplated staying in the well for the duration of the battle but to be branded a coward was more than he could bare and he considered raising his rifle over the top of the well and fire in a general direction. This was however sure to draw a very deliberate retaliation from the waiting enemy and the thought was put out of his mind. While still pondering his situation, the rest of C Company came charging past, shouting and with bayonets glistening. This was enough to move Private Buckley to action and he clambered out of his hole and promptly joined the battle-crazed men from Natal as they routed what remained of the enemy.²⁷⁴ Some Carbineers did however feel that the chanting of war-cries while charging defended positions with bayonets at the ready was simply just silly.²⁷⁵

It was during the opening stages of the battle that the Carbineers suffered not only their first, but also the first UDF battle casualty of the war. The small field gun that initiated the action drew first blood as it missed C Company, and one of its few shells landing among the mortar detachment, killing two and wounding two others.²⁷⁶ Leading C Company's advance were number eleven and twelve platoons. Jerry Hurley, in Number 13 Platoon, was in reserve. This enabled him to observe the action from the relative safety of the rear. As C Company reached the first mud huts, a Banda emerged and fired at the company commander, Capt Comrie. Fortunately the bullet only grazed his helmet.²⁷⁷ A hail of fire answered the Banda's challenge and left him dead with 46 bullet holes and a gash made by a bayonet in his body.²⁷⁸ With the rest of the defenders fleeing to the north, the Carbineers secured the objective and continued to 'liberate' the town and the dead of anything useful and interesting which included watches, tents, officers uniforms, and beautifully decorated revolvers.²⁷⁹

²⁷² Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

²⁷³ NCA, A.D. McDonald Collection, A.D. McDonald to Dr Fisher, 20 December 1940,

²⁷⁴ NCA, **The Carbineer**, Centenary Issue. How I Became a Soldier, Vol 4, p8.

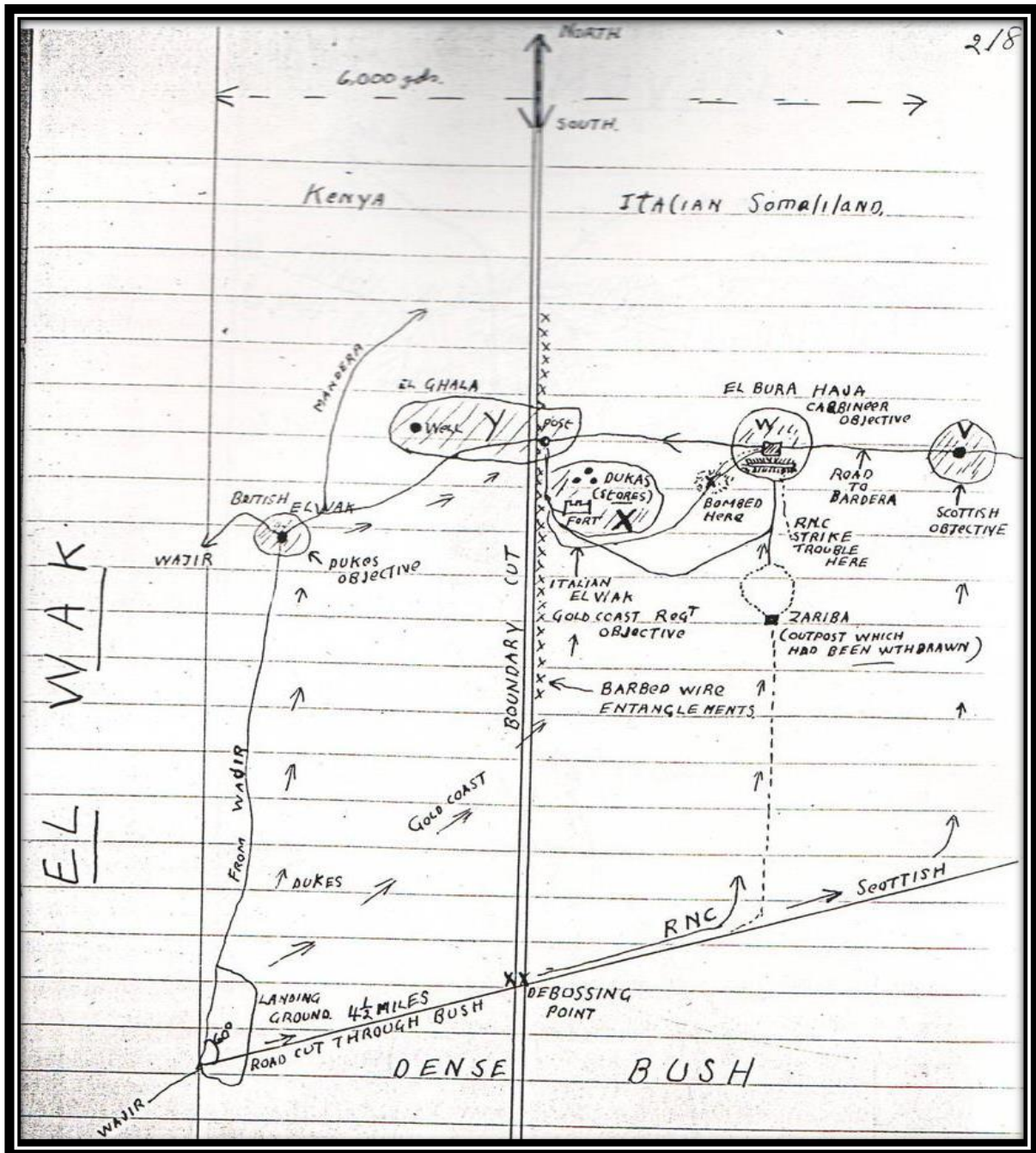
²⁷⁵ Interview: R. Pennington - G. Bentz, 22 July 2013.

²⁷⁶ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 16 December 1940.

²⁷⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 14 to 20 December 1940.

²⁷⁸ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 16 December 1940.

²⁷⁹ NCA, C.D. Stainbank Collection, C.D. Stainbank to his parents, 19 December 1940.



Map 2.2: Hand drawn map by H.G. Symons of the El Wak operation on 16 December 1940.²⁸⁰

As the battle raged, very few men had much cause for fear as they were swept up in the moment of the bayonet charge. This changed dramatically when the men in their slit trenches that night reflected on the day's action. Many recalled how Sergeant Athol Paton, during one of the pre-war training camps, painted black stripes on the commanding officer's white horse, resulting in the former having to partake in the morning parade dismounted.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, p218.

²⁸¹ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p31.

Private Hurley, tired, cold and hungry never felt so frightened before in his life. He kept thinking of the dead African soldier that fired on the company commander, and how scarlet his blood stood out against his dark skin.²⁸² Having survived their baptism of fire, the men of C Company were unified in the knowledge that 'now we are all soldiers'.²⁸³

The Carbineers spent their first wartime Christmas at Wajir in relative luxury feasting on captured Italian provisions which included hundreds of bottles of Chianti, ham, olives and beer.²⁸⁴ The New Year found C Company's platoons occupying various little towns and conducting daily patrols again. With their appetite for action wet, the men soon became frustrated with the idleness of camp life. This included route marches, church parades, soccer matches and the odd escort duty.²⁸⁵ Private Hurley remarked that they were becoming rather lazy and that they badly needed some exercise. He also feared that they might have been forgotten and that one day, in 1950, the Adjutant would realise that one company was missing and come looking for them, only to find them standing to and digging trenches.²⁸⁶

Through January and February 1941 the South Africans advanced east toward the coast, driving the Italian forces before them as they went. Their next objective was 'Somaliland's Maginot Line', the Juba River defences. The eastern bank of the river was lined with machineguns and it seemed evident that the enemy intended to make a stand. Through keen observation, Brigadier Dan Pienaar, the brigade commander and hero of El Wak, identified a lightly defended crossing point which was promptly assaulted by the Transvaal Scottish on 17 February. B Company followed suit with the rest of the regiment crossing the Juba on 19 February.²⁸⁷ With the enemy continuously giving ground, the Carbineers, having had a fairly easy war, became complacent and overconfident.

A Bloody Day at Gelib

On Saturday, 22 February 1941, the Carbineers, with C Company bringing up the rear, set out in a north-western direction towards Gelib. Lieutenant Colonel P. M. G. le Roux now commanded the Regiment since McMenamin was struck down with malaria.²⁸⁸ Le Roux, a huge block of a man was not liked by the men. A dip inspector before the war, he was responsible to inspect the farmers' cattle and ensure that the animals were dipped and free from disease. Apart from his pompous nature he was also not a Carbineer which counted

²⁸² NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 14 to 20 December 1940.

²⁸³ NCA, A.D. McDonald Collection, A.D. McDonald to Dr Fisher, 20 December 1940,

²⁸⁴ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p31.

²⁸⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, 1 to 15 January.

²⁸⁶ NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 4 to 12 January 1941,

²⁸⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, 19 February.

²⁸⁸ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p74.

heavily against him.²⁸⁹ The focus of operations during this period was to break through the enemy's positions along the River Juba. Several skirmishes occurred between A and B companies and an increasingly determined enemy. At seven minutes past ten the armoured cars, attached to the regiment, reported the whole area free of enemy.²⁹⁰ Both Companies then occupied the town of Gelib and proceeded with the taking of large numbers of prisoners and other war material.²⁹¹ They were joined in this by the armoured fighting vehicles (AFV's), whose crews were equally eager to lay their hands on some Italian souvenirs. C Company, still not committed to the battle, was ordered to secure the areas surrounding Gelib.²⁹² A few kilometres from the town, one section from number 13 platoon was struggling through the dense bush. The men were still joking about the pompous little Italian officer that tried to escape across the river earlier that morning while trying to remain as dignified as someone with wet pants could be. Private Willie Schwim thought he saw some activity ahead of the lead vehicle. Fully expecting to find but another harmless village the men dismounted and advanced.²⁹³

The next half hour would haunt the men of number 13 platoon as if it was a dream. To Jerry Hurley it felt more like a nightmare. From the dense bush came streams of machinegun and rifle bullets. The foliage was alive with Banda moving in for the kill.²⁹⁴ The section had walked straight into an ambush, in broad daylight.²⁹⁵ With pandemonium all around him, Hurley, recovering from initial paralysis, began working like a machine, his training taking over. The operator of the Bren gun was lying next to the road with his face buried in the sand and incapable of providing suppressing fire. The majority of the men managed to work their way back to their vehicle and were now frantically firing from behind it in an effort to keep the enemy's heads down. Lance Corporal (L/Cpl) Hallows Robinson was dragged back to the vehicle by Private Bert Evans and Corporal Maurice Osborne. He was however already dead, having been cut down by the first burst of machinegun fire. With a powerful desire to go on living the men managed to turn their vehicle around and under cover from the Bren, manned by Morris Hackland, beat a hasty retreat. With sufficient distance between them and the enemy, the section took stock of their situation. They were sitting in the back of their truck around the body of their dead comrade while the Bren gun operator sat in the front of the truck, his courage having left him during the ambush. Extremely glad to be alive

²⁸⁹ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan 26 June 1994, Hilton.

²⁹⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, 22 February.

²⁹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, February, List of War Material Taken at Gelib on 22 February 1940 and 23 February 1940.

²⁹² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, 22 February.

²⁹³ NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 22 February 1941.

²⁹⁴ NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 22 February 1941.

²⁹⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, January to May 1941, 22 February.

the section made their way back to camp only to be greeted by more bad news of the tragedy that befell number 11 platoon.²⁹⁶

As Jerry Hurley and his comrades in number 13 platoon were fighting for their lives, number 11 platoon under command of Lt D.G. Norton were struggling westwards towards the River Juba. Their goal was to cut off a large group of enemy troops believed to be retreating north along the river. Emerging from the thick bush into a disused cotton field, they saw a group of African soldiers coming towards them from the opposite side of the field. They were led by a European officer holding a white flag. With the enemy's intention to surrender apparent, the Carbineers felt disappointed that they would be deprived of a fight. The patrol commander, Capt R. R. Tomlinson ordered the platoon HQ forward to accept the surrender.²⁹⁷ The remaining Carbineers fixed bayonets and formed up in a hollow square formation, all eyes on the party receiving the enemy surrender. Without warning the enemy commander threw himself to the ground and a devastating volley of fire engulfed the left flank of the surprised Carbineers.²⁹⁸ Sergeant B. Blomeyer, platoon sergeant, and several other men fell with the first fusillade.²⁹⁹ Corporal E. R. Dinkleman saw to his disgust that since precious little cover existed which could shield the Carbineers from incoming fire the men had to get into a kneeling position to use their weapons effectively, thereby exposing themselves to the enemy³⁰⁰ With their casualties mounting, the men fell back to the edge of the clearing and prepared to defend themselves. Completely surrounded and with ammunition running low the only hope of rescue lay in whether the two runners, Pte Pope-Ellis and L/Cpl Gessner, would return with help before the platoon was wiped out.³⁰¹ Norton rushed through a hail of fire and managed to reach the mortar crew, from where he directed indirect fire in order to keep the enemy from totally engulfing his men, an action for which he would later receive the Military Cross.³⁰²

While on guard duty at no 12 platoon's holding area, Bill Buckley listened to the sound of fighting in the distance and wondered how he managed to get himself in this mess, when without warning someone charged straight at him through the bush. Instinctively Buckley raised his rifle and prepared to shoot. A moment's hesitation revealed that the person in his sight was Peter Pope-Ellis, the runner from the trapped platoon, coming to get help.³⁰³ With their mortar bombs expended and the Bren guns jamming due to sand and debris thrown up by bullets and grenades, number 11 platoon's struggle became increasingly desperate. Expecting to be engulfed at any moment, the remnants of the platoon prepared for a final

²⁹⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 22 February 1941.

²⁹⁷ NCA, T. B. Frost, Gelib incident report, p2.

²⁹⁸ NCA, E. R. Dinkleman, After-action report on the Gelib Incident, p1

²⁹⁹ NCA, T. B. Frost, Gelib incident report, p2.

³⁰⁰ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p75.

³⁰¹ NCA, T. B. Frost, Gelib incident report, p4.

³⁰² A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, pp65-76.

³⁰³ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

stand and formed a small square, firing in all directions.³⁰⁴ By now the grass surrounding the fighting men were aflame and many men suffered burn wounds as their scant cover burnt down around them.³⁰⁵ Suddenly the regiment's armoured cars, commanded by Capt Comrie, burst through the bush and broke the offensive spirit of the besieging enemy troops by spraying their positions with heavy machinegun fire. With the initiative now back on the side of the UDF men, the surviving Banda surrendered en masse.³⁰⁶ Twelve Carbineers were killed during the battle; a thirteenth died of his wounds later that day. The enemy's casualties numbered close to a hundred. After burying their dead, a shaken, saddened and depressed C Company prepared to resume the advance north, the knowledge that a platoon of forty men fought against an enemy battalion and survived provided scant conciliation.³⁰⁷ A Patrol was sent out the next day to search for any wounded and collect weapons and booty. A prize bigger than an Italian Brigadier, thousands of prisoners, stores and weapons, captured a few days later awaited C Company at the scene of battle the next day. Lying in the undergrowth with a severe stomach wound was the treacherous Italian officer that pretended to surrender to number 11 platoon the previous day. One of the Carbineers gave him some water but he died a few minutes later.³⁰⁸



Figure 3.4: Graves of the C Company men killed at Gelib and buried nearby.³⁰⁹

Advance to the Final Reckoning at Amba Alagi

³⁰⁴ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p75.

³⁰⁵ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan 26 June 1994, Hilton.

³⁰⁶ NCA, E. R. Dinkleman, After-action report on the Gelib Incident, p2

³⁰⁷ NCA, T. B. Frost, Gelib incident report, p4.

³⁰⁸ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 24 February 1940..

³⁰⁹ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

With the defensive line on the River Juba sufficiently penetrated, the Italians abandoned their coastal positions and retreated in the direction of Addis Ababa. In their wake they left demolished bridges and roads in an attempt to delay the advancing South Africans. It was only when the nature of the terrain gave the defenders a distinct tactical advantage that the Italians were prepared to make a stand.³¹⁰ Throughout March the Brigade continued its advance north. Days were spent patrolling the countryside and rounding up stray prisoners as the advance continued. C Company was usually tasked with piqueting the high ground in order to dominate the terrain the rest of the force was to move through.³¹¹

On 11 March the Company was astonished to hear that, in spite of having proven themselves in battle thus far; a period of retraining was scheduled for the whole battalion and would consist of squad and rifle drill. Fortunately, the men felt, the officers did not take this task too seriously and wasted much time talking to their men away from the parade ground. Sighs of relief followed the sudden announcement that the Company would be going back into action the next day when the advance would resume. About 30 kilometres outside Mogadishu a call was made for 100 of the fittest men to volunteer for a secret and dangerous mission behind enemy lines. Half of the Carbineers volunteered their services but only 40 were chosen, the other 60 would come from the rest of the Brigade. Among them was the twenty-one-year old Keith Boast, an aspirant farmer and number 13 platoon's very own philosopher and member of Jerry Hurley's platoon. According to Boast it was a given that the men were caught up in the SA Army with its entire works. What was required to be proven was that in the said institute it was a case of either feast or famine. This premise was successfully illustrated by the fact that when the Company had an abundance of water, there was no soap to wash with, while moving inland through the dry areas of Abyssinia the platoon was in possession of half a sack of soap.³¹²

It was during the advance north that another 'Carbineer' destined for fame and glory was drafted into the Company. Michael, or Miss Michael, was a scruffy looking cockerel that became C Company's mascot for the duration of the African campaign. Three versions of how Michael ended up in C Company exist. The first was that he was exchanged for a captured Italian pistol together with nine other fowls. The second version was that he was swopped from a local inhabitant for a pair of shorts while the third version has it that Michael was acquired after some serious bartering for a bag of Magaliesberg tobacco and cigarettes. With most platoons in possession of their own mascot it was not long before these individual cocks were pitted against each other for the glory of the platoon. The loser was destined for the pot and since this was where all acquired livestock ended up anyway; it was not much of a loss if the platoon's champion lost a fight. Michael, however, was selected for the evening meal together with another bird without being afforded the chance

³¹⁰ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p80.

³¹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, March 1941, 1 March to 30 March.

³¹² NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 7 to 14 March 1941.

to prove himself in battle. In spite of his bad luck he had no inclination of being served with rice or potatoes and when put next to the other chicken he became so enraged that he attacked and killed his feathery friend within minutes and a champion was born. Most companies and platoons had some kind of mascot which they acquired as they campaigned through Africa. It was then quite normal, to the troops, that these mascots should fight others in contests for supremacy. Since roosters were destined to be eaten eventually, the men had no issue in pitting these feathered warriors against one another. Whenever the men were out of combat for lengthy periods they had to find ways to combat boredom. Quickly an arena would be constructed and tins with spiders, scorpions and other creatures did the fighting on behalf of the cheering soldiers. In the fights that followed throughout the campaign Michael was unbeatable, earning the respect of his platoon and gaining glory for the Company.³¹³



Figure 3.5: Michael in action.³¹⁴

With the fighting moving into Abyssinia, C Company was detached from the Brigade to form an escort for General Cunningham who was en route to Addis Ababa to accept the Italian surrender of the city and, on 6 April 1941, Addis was liberated. Here the Carbineers found

³¹³ Interview: Ray Furniss – M. Coghlan, 1990, Colenso; Unknown Newspaper Clipping, Micheal the amazing rooster, Natal Carbineer Archive Centre, Pietermaritzburg; M. Alleyne to M. Coghlan, Notes on Michael the Rooster, NCA, Pietermaritzburg; K. Kabrita to M. Coghlan, 23 May 1992, History of Michael the Rooster, NCA, Pietermaritzburg.

³¹⁴ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

their roles reversed as they now had to police the city's streets and protect the Italian civilians and surrendering soldiers from the wrath of their former African subjects.³¹⁵ The South Africans were eager to mingle with the city's 20 000 European inhabitants and looked forward a period of respite.³¹⁶ In spite of having some very fine buildings, it was noticed that almost every building was fenced in with barbed wire entanglements and barricaded against possible attacks by the local inhabitants – all of whom possessed guns.³¹⁷ It was thus at Addis that the South Africans, while charged with maintaining peace between Italians and the local population, encountered scores of African prostitutes rumoured to be mistresses of the recently departed Italians.³¹⁸ South African policies of segregation risked being undermined by such interracial liaisons and the authorities were determined to maintain the South African status quo.³¹⁹ The Springboks could, however, not enjoy the bounty of the capital of Mussolini's African Empire as they were once more in pursuit on 13 April. To maintain law and order in Addis Ababa, A Company were entrusted to keep the European inhabitants safe in the absence of the retreating Italian soldiers, while the rest of the Brigade pursued the Duke of Aosta's forces North.³²⁰ For ten days the Carbineers chased the Italian forces as they rushed to reach the mountain fortress of Amba Alagi where the Duke of Aosta prepared to make his last stand.

By 15 April the Carbineers began their slow descent from escarpment into the sub-tropical bush below. Having just passed through the two Mussolini tunnels, where the regiment sheltered from menacing Italian bombers, they were informed by some members of the local population that the Italians intended to put up a serious fight at Combolcia. The geographic feature of importance here was the pass which had to be captured in order to proceed to Dessie some distance beyond the mountain. The Italians occupied and fortified the high ground and used the hazardous ground to their advantage in siting their defences.³²¹ From here the Italians intended to hold up any movement up the pass.³²² McMenemy's plan was to execute a night march across the plain and up one of the hills occupied by the enemy. At sunset, on 21 April, the Colonel briefed his company and platoon commanders on their objectives for the next two days and, at 0200 on 22 April, the regiment reached its objective between two enemy occupied hills. B Company was in the lead and commenced their attack.³²³ The surprise was total, and although C Company was in

³¹⁵ NCA, A.C. Harvey-Williams (ed), 1990. **The Carbineer**. Travels in Darkest Africa, p99.

³¹⁶ Orpen, N.1968.**East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**,pp. 245 – 252.

³¹⁷ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 6 April 1941.

³¹⁸ Interview: Peter Pope-Ellis - M. Coghlan, 7 February 1994. Pietermaritzburg.

³¹⁹ Roos, N. 2005, Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961, p57.

³²⁰ NCA, A.C. Harvey-Williams (ed), 1990, **The Carbineer**. Travels in Darkest Africa, p99.

³²¹ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p82.

³²² NCA, A.C. Harvey-Williams (ed), 1990. **The Carbineer**. Travels in Darkest Africa. p99

³²³ NCA, Unknown Private. Battle of Combolcia.

reserve, they could hear the sounds of battle coming towards them as day broke.³²⁴ The fighting was exceptionally fierce with B Company charging the Italian positions with fixed bayonets in their effort to dislodge the defenders. As the fog of war descended on the battlefield, McMenamain moved his HQ into the thick of the fighting to personally direct the regiment's mortars in neutralising the enemy positions. In an effort to secure the enemy occupied hills speed was essential, resulting in some pockets of resistance remaining on the flanks of the advancing troops. It was one such group of enemy soldiers that observed the regimental HQ moving up the line and summarily brought it under enfilading fire. While still directing mortar fire, 'Mortar Mac' collapsed at 0525 into the padre, Vic Shaw's, arms, mortally wounded.³²⁵ He died ten minutes later.³²⁶ McMenamain knew that the plan was sound and that his men would carry the day. And his final words to Captain Vincent, the Adjutant, were 'Well Jack, I believe we've done it'.³²⁷

With victory achieved, the normal process of rounding up of prisoners commenced and took up the remainder of the day. As dusk settled on the newly conquered terrain, C Company was detailed for sentry duty. Exploration (looting) parties wasted no time in scouring the battlefield and brought back some trophies but focussed mostly on supplementing their rations with captured supplies. This habit of scouring the battlefield after a fight might have had disastrous consequences if the enemy ever launched a counterattack.³²⁸ Fortunately for the Carbineers rummaging through the debris of battle the Italians and their native allies resigned themselves to offering a moderate degree of resistance before retiring to safety. The next few days were spent at Combolcia preparing to continue the pursuit. Several nights of heavy rain followed with the men now battling the elements by trying to stay dry, a battle which many of them lost.³²⁹ On 28 April, a requiem mass was held for the late commanding officer and other men that fell at Combolcia.³³⁰ Afterwards, to combat their boredom, those C Company men that acquired war trophies such as pistols, submachine guns and grenades got together to show off their spoils of war. A miniature battle then ensued as the men tried out the captured weapons and played at war among themselves.³³¹

The Duke of Aosta had by this time retreated to his mountain stronghold of Amba Alagi, where the Italians were surrounded following the British 52nd Division's advance from the north-west, the 5th Indian Division from the South and the South Africans from the South East.³³² With their avenue of retreat cut off, the Italians seemed determined to fight until

³²⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 20 to 22 April 1941.

³²⁵ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 22 April 1941.

³²⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, March 1941, 22 March.

³²⁷ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p87.

³²⁸ Interview: V.R. Fly - M. Coghlan, 26 June 1994, Hilton.

³²⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 23 to 30 April 1941.

³³⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, April 1941, 28 April 1941.

³³¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 28 April 1941.

³³² NCA, P. C. A.Francis Collection. History of the Carbineers, p5.

the last bullet.³³³ Marching onwards to the final confrontation the Carbineers not only had to contend with destroyed infrastructure and bands of African irregulars but also with the RAF. On 5 May, as the regiment were moving towards to Alomata, with some captured Italian trucks in the convoy, they were spotted by two passing fighter planes.³³⁴ Since the South African advance was so far ahead of schedule, the pilots accepted the convoy to be of enemy origin and descended upon the line of vehicles which made no effort to escape.³³⁵ Recognition strips were immediately deployed by the men of the convoy in an attempt to stave off the pending attack but was to no avail. The men of A Company received the first attack and were unaccustomed to not returning fire when they were being shot at and consequently retaliated with small arms fire. This confirmed to the pilots the hostile nature of the convoy and they continued to press home their attack by strafing C Company next and then moving on to Support Company, where Private W. F. Phillipott was killed and three other men wounded. The wounded were treated at the regimental aid post (RAP) and stabilised before transported to hospital.³³⁶

Also recuperating in hospital, at Mai Cev, from a severe case of dysentery and malaria was Private Robert Basil Dives, a twenty-one-year old rubber factory worker from Pietermaritzburg. He shared the ward with a large part of the 100 Carbineers and artillerymen that were admitted for the same affliction.³³⁷ On 12 May about 200 Italian wounded were brought into the hospital. They were in a terrible state as most of them were shot to pieces. The surgeons wasted no time in trying to put the broken men back together. Dives and some of his fellow Carbineers watched the operations with interest. Since the hospital had no more supplies of anaesthetic it was up to the orderlies to hold down on to the table the groaning patients as the surgeons' scalpels and probes found their mark. Some had shrapnel in their stomachs while others had bullets lodged in their chests. One Italian was captured by local African troops and had his tongue cut out. The orderlies had a difficult time using a teapot to pour liquid down the man's swollen throat.³³⁸ After spending the night in a hospital crammed with groaning and dying men Private Dives discharged himself the next day and made his way back to C Company.³³⁹

Amba Alagi was a mountain peak with a sheer granite face that was 4300m high and covered with defensive positions and various gun emplacements. It dominated the surrounding countryside and since observation was unrestricted in any direction, effective artillery fire could be rained down upon daylight movement in the direction of the

³³³ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p90.

³³⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 5 May 1941.

³³⁵ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p90.

³³⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May, 5 May 1941.

³³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May 1941, Casualty Return.

³³⁸ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, p193 – 1941.

³³⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May 1941, Casualty Return.

fortress.³⁴⁰ The Transvaal Scottish had the honour of leading the assault on the mountain stronghold with the Carbineers and Dukes bringing up rations and ammunition.³⁴¹ The Brigade Commander, Brigadier Dan Pienaar, in spite of successfully ousting the Italians from their mountain positions at Combolcia was not too keen to risk his men in senseless frontal attacks on strong defended positions, even if he could get them close enough under the cover of darkness, as was his way. His consequent plan for the final battle would rely mostly on bombarding the defenders into submission. By dawn on 14 May all of Pienaar's artillery and heavy weapons were in position. With the Triangle, a salient point needed for observation, firmly in allied hands, a tremendous bombardment was unleashed on the Italian defenders. Pienaar was adamant that if he could not blow the Italians off the Mountain then he would blow the Mountain from under the Italians.³⁴²

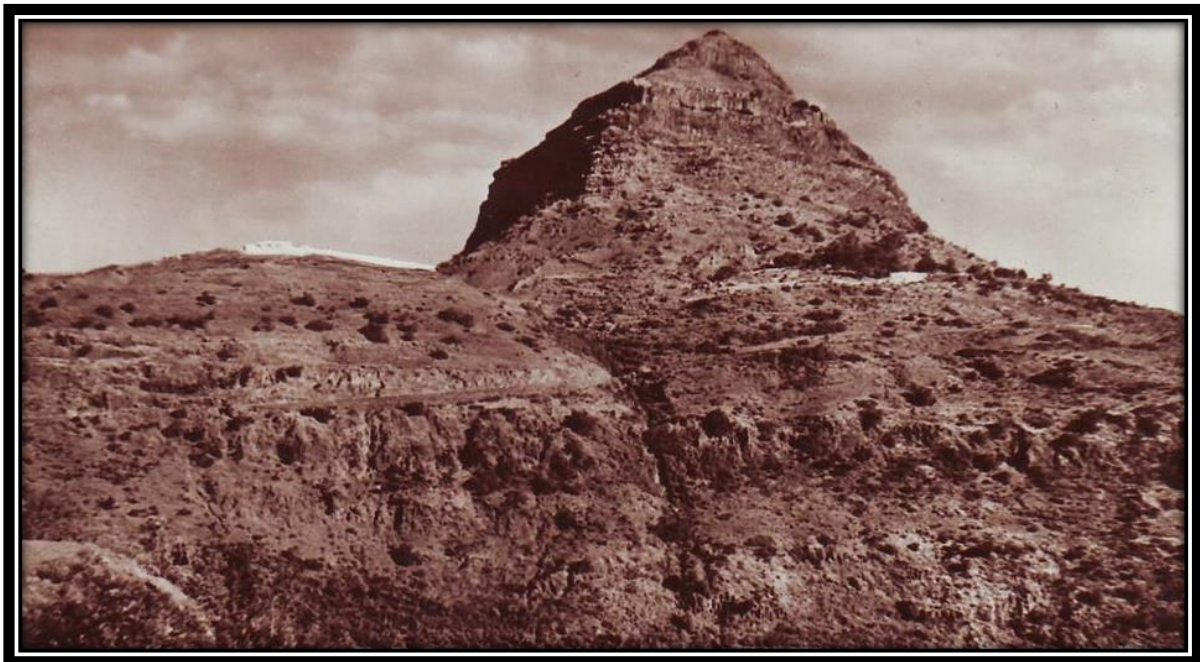


Figure 3.6: Italian postcard depicting the Massif of Amba Alagi.³⁴³

The now demoralised Italians, fighting amongst each other, sent a 100 man deputation with the request for a truce to locate the South Africans at daybreak on 17 May. Unfortunately this group was ambushed by Shifta irregulars and massacred. The Shifta were local Africans fighting on the side of the Allies and were in fact nothing more than mercenaries and opportunists.³⁴⁴ Private Hurley, on guard as dusk settled on the battlefield stared into the fading light at the Amba Alagi fortress wondering whether the Duke would indeed keep fighting or throw in the towel. Then the artillery phone rang and the message was relayed

³⁴⁰ NCA, A.C. Harvey-Williams (ed), 1990. **The Carbineer**. Travels in Darkest Africa, p101.

³⁴¹ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p92.

³⁴² A.M. Pollock, Pienaar of Alamein, p65-66.

³⁴³ NCA, V. Harte Collection.

³⁴⁴ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 16 April 1941.

that the terms of surrender had been accepted at 0530.³⁴⁵ Hurley felt as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders and the colossus of the Amba Alagi took on a friendly appearance as numerous fires erupted all over it. For a while some men forgot about killing each other as grenades and flares erupted in celebration all along the front.³⁴⁶ With the campaign in East Africa nearing a successful conclusion the South Africans, after fighting the Italians since December the previous year, were now tasked with protecting their erstwhile enemies from the vengeful Africans.³⁴⁷

The Brigade then moved on to Decamere about 160 kilometres north for a three-week period of rest, recuperation and a most welcome change of scenery. Passing through the town with its bioscope and several modern shops some men began expressing the hope that a return to the Union might be a just reward for recent services rendered. The situation began improving for the Carbineers as they were billeted in a disused Italian aerodrome with some very nice wooden barracks.³⁴⁸ Then the news was received of the sinking of the battleship HMS *Hood* and the German invasion of Crete. To make matters worse a ban was placed on visiting the town.³⁴⁹ A further blow to the morale of the men was the rumours of the Brigade going north to Egypt. Their misgivings were confirmed on parade when Lt Col P. M. G. le Roux, Officer in Charge since McMenemy's death, informed them that an advance guard from A and C Companies would leave for Cairo in a few days.³⁵⁰ On 25 May all money was changed into Egyptian currency and Jerry Hurley predicted a most depressing time ahead as his platoon was chased around doing fatigue duties and living off company cooking which meant less food prepared by even less enthusiastic kitchen personnel. News of the lack of progress from the rest of the war did nothing to change his mood.³⁵¹

Then at last some good news. It was reported that the German battleship *Bismarck* had been sunk, but better news was to follow with the announcement that the ban on leave to Decamere was to be lifted and that daily leave after lunch would be granted from 28 May.³⁵² In spite of efforts to keep the troops from becoming too familiar with the locals, a brothel was soon doing business at Decamere with specific hours reserved for officers and other times for the rest of the ranks.³⁵³ Michael the rooster's east African campaign could also not have gone any better. By this stage of the war Michael lived in a box that was fixed to his platoon's truck and even had several hens to keep him company. The imminent move to Egypt presented number twelve platoon with a dilemma since no livestock were allowed

³⁴⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May, 17 May 1941.

³⁴⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 17 May 1941.

³⁴⁷ NCA, P. C. A. Francis Collection, History of the Carbineers. p5.

³⁴⁸ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 27 May 1941.

³⁴⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May 1941, Routine Order No 28.

³⁵⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May 1941, 25 May.

³⁵¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 26 May 1941.

³⁵² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May 1941, Routine Order No 29.

³⁵³ Interview: Graham Clarke - M Coghlan, 25 October 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

on board the troopships. After some debate it was agreed that supper for the following few nights would consist of chicken in some form or another.³⁵⁴ C Company would, however, once more miss out on socialising with the populace as they left Decamere after sunset on 28 May, bound for Massawa from where they were to sail to Egypt.³⁵⁵ At Massawa they had to wait for their troopship to arrive and it was decided that leave would be granted to men wishing to visit Decamere again. Very few men took up the offer of traveling back along the route they have travelled but a few days before. Everyone wanted to 'get on with it' and teach "Adolf what's-his-bloody-face" a lesson in humility.³⁵⁶ Those men who braved the trip per taxi to Decamere were rewarded with having the town almost to themselves. A typical day was spent taking a bath and eating. During one sitting, two brave Carbineers finished 24 eggs, 20 cakes, two bottles of wine, fried steak and several cooldrinks each.³⁵⁷ With Springboks touring the countryside and local taverns the campaign ended almost in the same fashion as it had started eleven months earlier. Looking back at the scoreboard, the men from Natal had every reason to feel proud of their achievements. Their Brigade, as part of the Allied effort, managed to remove from the conflict 30 Italian generals, 42 tanks, 403 guns and 170 000 troops.³⁵⁸ In the process, however, twenty Carbineers were killed in action during campaign with fifteen of them belonging to C Company.³⁵⁹ Worse was still to come, but during the last few days of their African safari for C Company the reality of war was something to be concerned about another day.

³⁵⁴ NCA, M. Alleyne to M. Coghlan, Notes on Michael the Rooster.

³⁵⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 28 May 1941.

³⁵⁶ NCA, J. Holland, Memoirs, Young Men from another Century.

³⁵⁷ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary Part 1, 2 June 1941.

³⁵⁸ A.M. Pollock, Pienaar of Alamein, p68.

³⁵⁹ NCA, G.C.L. Du Toit, Roll of Honour: Royal Natal Carbineers, World War Two, 1939 – 1945.

Chapter 4**Egypt: 1941 to 1943***'Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas'*³⁶⁰

M. Coghlan, 1992

As the Springboks disembarked at port across Egypt they were assaulted, not by German or Italian troops but by Egyptian vendors selling anything from boiled eggs to tea coloured fluid which was promised to be the best whisky. Gone too were the days of living luxuriously in army issue tents. C Company had to learn to burrow underground to escape the constant German air bombardments which was a phenomenon never experienced in East Africa. When not required on at the front the South Africans once more seemed to be touring the ancient lands of the Pharaohs with trips to the beach, movie houses, various servicemen's clubs and off course the unsanctioned activities the men were warned against. From the Allied veterans of the desert war C Company learned that one had to savour every moment out of action. The disasters of Sidi Rezegh and the surrender of Tobruk affirmed the aforementioned notion and many young South Africans discarded their moral values to experience life to the fullest before the next tragedy might befall the army. The German triumphant entry into Cairo, however, did not materialise and as the rest of the 8th Army slowly pushed the enemy out of Africa, Springboks marched east to troopships waiting to take them home while others were force-marched west into captivity where transports waited to ship them to POW camps in Italy and Germany.

In the Land of the Pharaohs

*As the *Cap St Jacques*, a converted cattle-ship,³⁶¹ slowly entered the Red Sea the men, dressed only in shorts due to the intense heat, reflected on their exploits up to date and speculated on what the future held.³⁶² Cliff Portsmouth remembered how he almost missed the *Devonshire's* departure back in Durban. From an engineer on the little tug that pushed the *Cap St Jacques* away from the docks, he learned that the *Devonshire* had been sunk just after disembarking them the previous year. He also heard about a plane load full of German soldiers that arrived in Massawa prior to its capture by the South Africans. These Germans, he was told, were all big men and well equipped. They oversaw the scuttling of the ships in harbour and the blowing up of the docks. The men thought that the Germans did a much better job at destroying war material and infrastructure than the Italians.³⁶³ Very soon the*

³⁶⁰ Title of a compilation of articles by Carbineers relating to their experiences in the North African desert. M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**.

³⁶¹ M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, p3.

³⁶² NCA. J. Hurley Diary, 29 May 1941,

³⁶³ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 12 June 1941.

Carbineers would be facing a different and more determined enemy on terrain they have not yet encountered.

With several new names added to the battle honours of the regiments of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade it became clear that Mussolini's African Empire would not see the end of the war. Lieutenant-General G.E. Brink, 1st Division Commander left by air for South Africa to confer with Prime Minister J.C. Smuts on the future application of his brigades as Smuts had already committed to sending Union troops to the Middle East.³⁶⁴ At that stage 1st Division were concluding its campaign in East Africa, 2nd Division was preparing to deploy to North Africa and 3rd Division, 6000 strong, was to remain in the Union, ready to provide reinforcements and guard the home front against subversive elements. It was during one of the many meetings with the Chief of General Staff, Lt-Gen Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, that Brink expressed his doubt as to whether the planned three full divisions would receive sufficient support from the Union in terms of manpower and materiel. To add to his woe's Brink was instructed, at the conclusion of the campaign in East Africa to leave his heavy guns behind and that he would have to rely on the British in Egypt for indirect fire support. The most depressing news, however, was that 13 000 vehicles were to be shipped from East Africa and allocated to the 2nd Division. The 1st Division would thus be without its full complement of transport as it entered the North African theatre with any request for replacement vehicles handled by Middle East Command.³⁶⁵

Brigadier Pienaar had a dilemma of a different nature to as he arrived in Egypt in June 1941. His reputation as bush warrior had preceded him and caused sceptics to comment that fighting incompetent and demoralised Italians in the bush and Mountains of Abyssinia was quite easy and that it was the opinion of other Commonwealth troops that the South Africans knew nothing of the desert or of fighting Germans.³⁶⁶ The last time they fought in desert conditions was during the last war twenty years earlier.

The men of C Company did not share the worries of their superiors but were instead more concerned about whether there will be hot food and sufficient shelter wherever they might end up. Their days at sea were filled with cleaning duties, inspections and lifeboat drills after breakfast, then lunch with a few hours of lounging in the sun before supper. Jerry Hurley and his comrades lived in luxury and felt like first class travellers after the deprivation of East Africa.³⁶⁷ The task of A and C Companies were to prepare the base area for when the rest of the regiment arrived later in the month. The troop train that was to take the troops to Amariyah³⁶⁸ was not yet ready and after devouring some sausages and tea the men lay

³⁶⁴ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p69.

³⁶⁵ C. Birkby, **Uncle George: The Boer boyhood, letters and battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink**, p156-157.

³⁶⁶ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p69.

³⁶⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 29 May to 2 June 1941.

³⁶⁸ M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, p3

down next to their kit and fell asleep. Amariyah was a transit camp where new arrivals to Egypt would gather to receive numerous briefings on their new desert home. C Company learned that a place called Mersa Matruh was to be theirs and the rest of the Division's base area while in the desert. The 2nd South African Division began arriving on 9 June and was stationed at Mareopolis, much closer to Alexandria.³⁶⁹

The task of C Company, as part of the Regiment's advance group, was to make arrangements for the arrival of the rest of the Division by pitching tents and preparing other facilities. Apart from normal camp duties, daily training, which comprised the normal weapon and parade drills, also had to be conducted. Sweating under the desert sun could however not keep C Company from continuing their operational activities in Alexandria whenever an opportunity for leave arose and those days before the arrival of their fellow Carbineers were thoroughly enjoyed.³⁷⁰ Some days seemed to have passed unaccounted for except loafing around and drinking beer.³⁷¹ Others were filled with much more excitement.

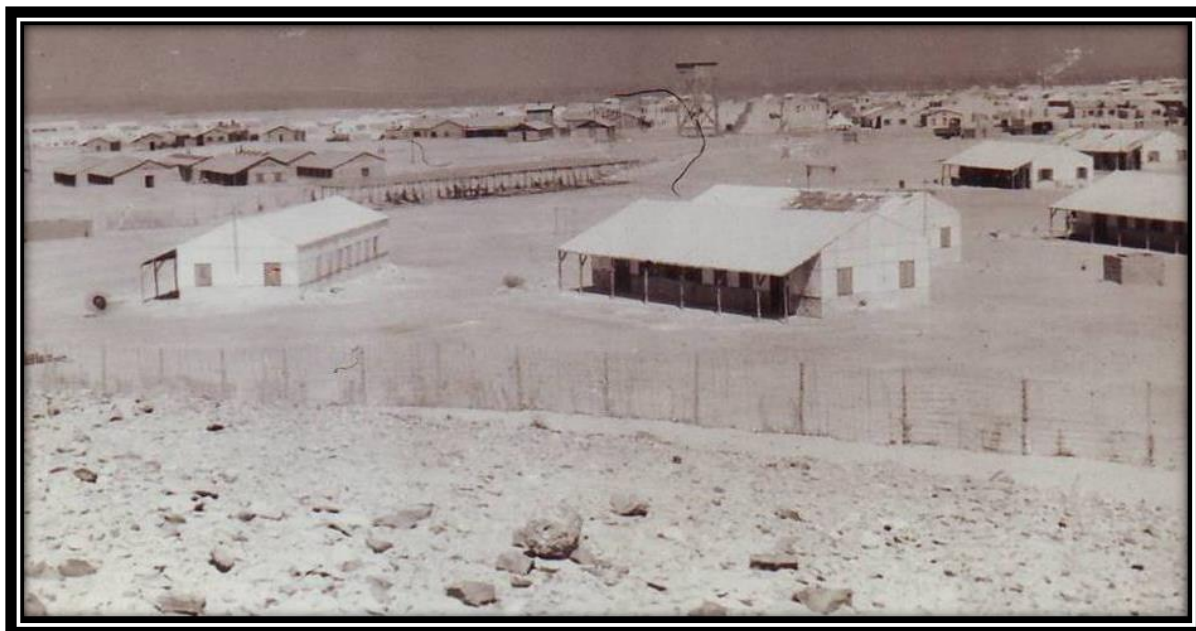


Figure 4.1: The main UDF camp in Egypt at Helwan.³⁷²

C Company's First Taste of Desert Warfare

On 5 June the Carbineers experienced, for the first time in their war, a serious air raid. Although not being the target of Alexandria's heaviest raid of the war, Cliff Portsmouth and the rest of the Company gathered outside their tents and marvelled at a spectacle not

³⁶⁹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, (Cape Town, 1957), p75.

³⁷⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1941, 17 June.

³⁷¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 6 June 1941.

³⁷² V. Harte collection. NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

experienced in East Africa,³⁷³ but one that was to be repeated throughout their stay in North Africa. As the German planes came over in waves the Ack-Ack³⁷⁴ commenced firing right after the night's darkness was penetrated by scores of searchlights.³⁷⁵ From all directions the anti-aircraft guns would then fire, causing bright red flashes as they engaged the enemy. The blasts from these guns would, however, be dwarfed by the explosions of bombs exploding near their targets.³⁷⁶ From the planes there came, apart from normal bombs, parachute flares which were kept up by the constant hot air. After a few minutes of brightening up the night sky, six balls of fire would drop out of each flare and ignite whatever they hit contact with on the ground.³⁷⁷ The enemy also mistook a salt pan next to the Carbineer tents as part of Alexandria harbour and dropped several large sea mines. The resulting explosion was of such magnitude that it blew over several tents.³⁷⁸ It is one of nature's inescapable laws that whatever goes up must also go down. The troops quickly learnt to appreciate their new steel helmets, as pieces of debris and spent shells began raining down on them, and inflicting some casualties in other units of the Brigade.³⁷⁹ There were not only shells and bombs falling from the sky. When one of the enemy planes were hit by ground fire, Private Buckley and the men from C Company witnessed two of the crew jumping from their burning craft. The first man was taken prisoner the moment he landed. His comrade was less fortunate, as his parachute did not open.³⁸⁰

Not all of C Company's men went for cover as bombs and shells fell from the sky. While on leave in Alexandria, during such a raid, one intoxicated Carbineer passed the Ibrahim Pasha statue and with bombs exploding declared boldly that if this guy on his horse does not take cover then neither will he. Malcolm Alleyne, a farmer from Richmond admitted to being so 'tight' he did not even realise there was a raid on.³⁸¹

On Tuesday, 17 June, the rest of the Carbineers reached Amariyah³⁸² and it seemed as if C Company's seaside vacation was at an end. Normal training commenced on Wednesday with rifle and squad drill in the morning and a route march before lunch. Cpl A.B.E. Domleo, a thirty two-year-old farmer were tasked to take some of C Company's men to a nearby water tower and fill drums with water for the arriving troops. Thereafter 200 benches had to be collected from the ordinance depot. The Carbineers, under the guidance of their corporal, promptly rounded up some Italian prisoners to finish the job and rushed off to the

³⁷³ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 5 June 1941.

³⁷⁴ Term used to describe anti-aircraft guns due to the sound they made.

³⁷⁵ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary Part 2, 6 May 1942.

³⁷⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 5-8 June 1941.

³⁷⁷ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary Part 2, 6 May 1942.

³⁷⁸ M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, p3

³⁷⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1941, 7 June.

³⁸⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 8 June 1941.

³⁸¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 9 June 1941.

³⁸² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box, 404, June 1941, 17 June.

beach for a well-deserved swim. As set out in the daily orders, C Company was to take their first route march since arriving in Egypt on 18 June.³⁸³ Their Company Sergeant Major (CSM) fortunately shared their view about Battalion HQ and let the Company only march as far as the showers where they would be out of sight of the officers.³⁸⁴ C Company did after all not come to North Africa to march around in the desert sun, but to chase the Germans from Africa just as they had done to the Italians.

Training continued until the end of June and comprised of the ever popular weapon and parade drill, lectures, demonstrations as well as some practice in judging distance.³⁸⁵ Bayonet drill was conducted in the mornings at sunrise and was seen to be 'useless and damn boring'. This was followed by more lectures on grenades and camouflage. Private Hurley complained that the Army provided no mental stimulant and that if it were not for books, he would go completely mad.³⁸⁶

Operations at Mersa Matruh

On 29 June the Regiment received a warning order to move on to its area of responsibility at Mersa Matruh.³⁸⁷ The Carbineers travelled 290 kilometres west toward their home for the next couple of months. For hours the convoy snaked along the dusty roads without a change in the white shingle sands of the desert. In its distant past Matruh was a holiday resort but now was severely battered and rundown. Defences stretched all around the town and were mostly situated underground.³⁸⁸ The men and their commanders looked forward to mobile warfare training and to finally test their mettle against the German enemy, but first the defences had to be prepared and new bodies obtained to replace those that fell in battle or through natural attrition.

Since the Union was now committed in North Africa it became clear that General Brink's doubts about the ability to support three divisions were not without merit. There were simply not enough white males who answered the call to arms.³⁸⁹ To solve the problem the UDF began a policy of dilution whereby Non-European personnel would be employed as drivers, stretcher bearers, cooks and batmen among others. Certain newly-raised units would also comprise solely of Non-Europeans except for officers and NCO's. On paper, at least, a South African division would thus consist of 13 073 Europeans and 11 035 Non-Europeans. The Women's Army Auxiliary Service would also be employed as clerks throughout not only the UDF but in Imperial establishments as well. It was UDF policy that

³⁸³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1941, Routine Order 39.

³⁸⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 19 June 1941.

³⁸⁵ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p94.

³⁸⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 25 June 1941.

³⁸⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1941, 29 June.

³⁸⁸ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary Part 2, 3 August 1941.

³⁸⁹ N. Orpen, **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, p329.

reinforcements for the divisions in Egypt would be held in a common pool, but that the men would be allowed to choose their own units to enter into.³⁹⁰

Sailing with the main body of 2nd Division that travelled from the Union on the SS *Dilwara*, there were several volunteers eager to fill the gaps in the brigades in Egypt. One of them was Private Jack Holland who joined the Pretoria Regiment in 1940 under the wrong impression that it would join the Carbineers and Jocks in the 1st South African Infantry Brigade instead of the Dukes. He consequently missed out on the East African campaign and spent a year training in the Union before being allowed to join his countrymen in the North. Not long after their arrival in the Middle East, Holland and about fifty others were taken on strength of an armoured car regiment which had recently arrived from the East African war zone. The 3 Reconnaissance Battalion saw its share of fighting and consequently the newcomers were considered to be outsiders and deemed unacceptable as such in the company of seasoned soldiers. They were labelled 'newies' and treated as pariahs and outcasts. Prior to their being parcelled out to various other regiments in the 1st Brigade and still with the armoured cars, they found themselves dumped in a portion of the Western Desert halfway between Sidi Barrani on the Egyptian border with Libya, and Mersa Matruh. They were completely isolated some distance from the rest of the battalion, meeting with them only during meal times, and then standing to one side while they ate their rations of bully beef and dog biscuits.³⁹¹ Learning that the Carbineers were in the vicinity and moving West, Holland and a few others volunteered themselves out of 3 Recce Battalion and joined number 12 Platoon of C Company, Royal Natal Carbineers, who were about to experience life underground as they took over the Matruh defences from the Poles.

At Mersa Matruh the Carbineers had to live underground for the very first time.³⁹² Here they also experienced the frequent sandstorms that plagued the desert, which drove men back into their holes and severely restricted any kind of movement. Its proximity to the ocean meant that any inland water sources were brackish and almost undrinkable.³⁹³ The sandstorms would die down in the evenings but would be succeeded by one of Egypt's ten plagues namely flies. Hundreds of flies would hover over the men's eyes and mouths and drive them insane.³⁹⁴ The presence of these pests at every event caused the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Pienaar, to one day suddenly interrupt his own order group and commence with reciting the ten plagues of Egypt, stopping at number nine. Posing the question of what the tenth plague was to his officers he was greeted with silence. His concern was growing over his men not reading their bibles when the Officer Commanding of

³⁹⁰ N. Orpen,, **War in the Desert**, p12.

³⁹¹ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East, June 1941 to April 1943*,

³⁹² NCA, P. C. A. Francis Collection, *History of the Carbineers*, p5.

³⁹³ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p36.

³⁹⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p94.

the Transvaal Scottish boldly proclaimed that the tenth plague of Egypt is undoubtedly the Carbineers.³⁹⁵



Figure 4.2: C Company trench system at Mersa Matruh.³⁹⁶

The first day at Matruh was spent inspecting and allocating company areas while deciding on the type and location of defensive works to be prepared.³⁹⁷ Just before midnight on their second day at the front the first of many air raids took place with one enemy plane shot down.³⁹⁸ This increased areal activity forced the Springboks to ground, or rather underground. The constant German air attacks necessitated the further digging and expanding of existing bunkers and underground passages,³⁹⁹ many of which became quite elaborate. These underground shelters were cool and dark and the tunnels extended deep into the limestone. Sleeping quarters were alcoves cut into the sides of the tunnels and there was always a larger room for various activities after dark when the electric lights were turned on.⁴⁰⁰ Describing his lodgings as a 'porcupine's warren', one soldier wrote to his parents that they had two large rooms, a storeroom, kitchen and pantry, all underground. In

³⁹⁵ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p73.

³⁹⁶ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

³⁹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1941, 1 July.

³⁹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1941, 3 July.

³⁹⁹ NCA, P.C.A.Francis Collection, History of the Carbineers, p6.

⁴⁰⁰ NCA, J. Holland, Memories of the Middle East, June 1941 to April 1943.

his following letter he informs his parents that they had improved their 'termites nest' and added a large underground dining room with a floor of sandbags and a table in the centre.⁴⁰¹ The presence of fleas and lice forced many a Springbok to sleep above ground and only share the underground safety with its unwelcome inhabitants when an air raid was imminent.⁴⁰² Sleeping under the stars in the cool night air was not without danger however as a member of the Dukes was killed in his sleep by falling shrapnel sent skywards by South African anti-aircraft guns on 10 July.⁴⁰³

The defensive offensive posture that was to be undertaken by Commonwealth troops in Egypt was disheartening to General Brink and on, 7 July, he forwarded some concerns and proposals to his superiors.⁴⁰⁴ He had three main issues that needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency. First was the fact that the front to be covered was simply too lengthy for just two brigades. His second concern and one that had definite merit was the lack of desert training done by 1st Brigade. Ever since their arrival in Egypt they have spent time preparing defences and, with insufficient numbers of motorised transport available, the only training that could be done was in the form of lectures on camouflage and judging distance. Brink's third request was that his men should be allowed time to rest after their recent campaign in Africa. Here the focus was on 1st South African Infantry Brigade specifically. The general felt that his troops had been working much too hard on the Matruh defences, some as much as twelve hours each day and that period of leave would be required to raise their morale.⁴⁰⁵

The men of number 13 platoon C Company could not agree more with the notion that leave was long overdue. Their divisional commander's perception about them slaving away in the desert sands, however, clearly overestimated their dedication to the most hated tasks in the army namely digging holes. The terrain at Matruh was not exactly perfect for spades and pickaxes. The whole area was rock. Whenever a pick, swung by a swearing soldier, struck the ground a metallic sound would resonate, giving a clear indication of what lay ahead.⁴⁰⁶ The Carbineers became experts at using pickaxes. They quickly discovered the exact spot where the handle must hit a boulder or side of a hole in order to facilitate the breaking off of the pick's head and thus bring work to a halt.⁴⁰⁷ One day the Company Commander ventured away from the relative luxury and safety of his HQ to inspect the work of his men. Having spotted him well in advance 13 platoon dug like maniacs to create the impression of a hard-working bunch, with sand flying everywhere. Since he stayed for over half an hour the men had to work for the whole time. The next day they were not so lucky when they

⁴⁰¹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Collection, Letters to his parents 2 and 4 July 1941.

⁴⁰² M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, p3.

⁴⁰³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1941, 10 July.

⁴⁰⁴ DOD Archives, Aanwinste Group 1 Box 52, Paper on Policy and Immediate Objects of Western Desert Force.

⁴⁰⁵ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, p74.

⁴⁰⁶ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, p75.

⁴⁰⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 8 August 1941.

suddenly discovered Col le Roux, the officer commanding, in their midst. A desperate scramble followed to appear busy instead of playing bridge, reading or sleeping.⁴⁰⁸ Since the strategic importance of the port at Matruh could not be denied, its defence had priority over training. Consequently the urgently needed desert navigation and mobile warfare which would be crucial in a few months to come was substituted with blasting and guarding.⁴⁰⁹



Figure 4.3: Carbineers digging defensive positions somewhere in the desert.⁴¹⁰

Operations in Cairo and Alexandria

Once more the rank and file were not concerned with navigating the desert dunes but instead with how to find their way around Alexandria or Cairo. Leave to these cities became part of daily life but, as opposed to the constant digging, depended on a certain measure of luck. Company commanders could grant twenty percent of their men on leave on Sundays⁴¹¹ but during the week lots had to be drawn to fill the few available spaces allocated to the Regiment for leave. The leave guidelines were strict and, in order to exit the unit lines, a signed pass was required and troops had to wear full battle dress. Transport, when available, would depart from the unit lines at 0900 in the morning and return from

⁴⁰⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 9 - 10 July 1941.

⁴⁰⁹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, p75.

⁴¹⁰ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁴¹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1941, 22 June.

Alexandria at 2200 in the evening⁴¹² whereas Non-European troops had to be back in unit lines by 1600 in the afternoon since they had were required for routine base tasks like maintenance or kitchen duties.⁴¹³ Those who were too exhausted from constant training or did not want to spend their off hours in uniform and helmet opted to accompany the sea bathing parties that departed daily after lunch instead.⁴¹⁴

For the lucky few, which included Privates Hurley, Gordon and Downs from C Company, leave began with a visit to Battalion HQ where they received their passes, money and a good measure of advice about their destination.⁴¹⁵ The train to Alex or Cairo would hardly have begun to move when the local vendors leapt on board through the many doors and offer for sale a variety of goods, chief among these being small round tins containing a dark smelly substance which, the troops were assured, was Spanish fly, guaranteed by the seller to arouse the passion of any and every woman of their choice. Where such commodities would be found on the frontlines was hotly debated afterwards.⁴¹⁶ Calls of 'eggs a' bread' also rang out throughout the crammed compartments.⁴¹⁷ There was also a concern from the side of higher command about 'doped drink' being sold to Allied soldiers by enemy agents in an attempt to obtain pay books and passes.⁴¹⁸ If one was lucky such a bottle of cheap whiskey would contain watered down tea, if not the unlucky soldier would take a giant swig of urine. The South Africans were not impressed with their first encounter with Egypt and its people. They complained about the flies, fleas, dust, heat and dirty Arabs who they thought were the most unhygienic and filthy crowd of people to be found anywhere.⁴¹⁹

After an arduous train ride to Alexandria or Cairo, troops on leave had to report to the Bir el Hadid barracks where they handed in their rifles and ammunition to British MP's who seemed to take an exceptionally long time in finalising the required paperwork.⁴²⁰ This served to keep track of who came into the cities and, more importantly, when they were destined to return to their respective units. Adherence to such time-consuming bureaucratic exercises ensured that one did not spend those few hours of freedom as guest of the hated redcaps in some isolated military holding area. One of the first places visiting troops were taken to was the city's hygiene museum. Here they were treated to a viewing of exhibitions of life-like wax models in full natural colour of rotting genitals of both sexes that hung from

⁴¹² NCA, P.C.A.Francis Collection, Routine Order no 39 for 18 June 1941.

⁴¹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 253, First field Provost Company Routine, Order 25/42.

⁴¹⁴ NCA, P.C.A.Francis Collection, Routine Order no 39 for 18 June 1941.

⁴¹⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 12 July 1941.

⁴¹⁶ NCA, J. Holland, Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943.

⁴¹⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary,, 12 July 1941.

⁴¹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1941, July, Routine Order 53.

⁴¹⁹ C. Birkby, **Uncle George: The boer boyhood, letters and battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink**, p171

⁴²⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 13 July 1941,

the walls.⁴²¹ This, the troops were informed, was what awaited them if they were to seek out the women of ill repute in the city's brothels. This macabre ploy was quite effective initially and many troops felt put off from sex for life.⁴²²

Avoiding the red light districts, as a matter of choice was not in itself too difficult and many Springboks enjoyed the officially sanctioned activities quite frequently. What proved to be a culture shock was how the young Egyptian boys offered up their sisters for sexual innuendos to the soldiers. Very often the troops would be confronted by a dirty youngster yelling 'Hey George, you want to fuck my sister? She is black on the outside but white on the inside, just like Queen Victoria?'⁴²³ Private Holland remembered how, while traveling by rail to Cairo, they witnessed a young Egyptian boy throwing what was probably his sister to the ground and pretending to have intercourse with her shouting at the soldiers 'hey George, gibbet money I fuck my sister'.⁴²⁴ For many South Africans this was unbearably distressing and it continued to bother them until long after the war.⁴²⁵

With some men seeking out places that were likely to have them end up with some sort of malady depicted in the hygiene museum, others were content with the officially sanctioned activities while on leave. A short bus ride from the station would take the men to one of several houseboats on the Nile. Here their first night would be spent consuming copious amounts of liquor and food they have last tasted in the Union. The cabins with hot and cold water, comfortable bunks with sheets and carpets almost made the troops forget about the war.⁴²⁶ A definite must-see while in Egypt were the pyramids of Giza. Long before the arrival of the Victors of East Africa, the local population were already exploiting the ancient pharaoh's contribution to the tourism industry and arguably most South African servicemen toured those ancient landmarks. Many a postcard featuring Springboks and pyramids reached the Union from 1941 onwards. Another thing to do while in the Middle East was to ride a camel. Soldiers would be photographed on its back, smiling nervously, and the folks back home would have some idea of the marvellous time their relatives or loved ones were having while they, unlucky people, were worrying themselves silly about him ever coming home again.⁴²⁷

During their first visit to those ancient cities the men would join organised tour groups only to avoid them and their greedy inadequate guides on following trips.⁴²⁸ For many of the

⁴²¹ NCA, J. Holland, Sharia el Bherka a.k.a. Berka Street.

⁴²² Interview: Watt McEwan. 2003. <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/sound/brothels-in-cairo>. Megan Hutching.

⁴²³ Interview: Various members of the Natal Carbineers – M. Coghlan, 1991, Pietermaritzburg.

⁴²⁴ NCA, J. Holland, Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943.

⁴²⁵ Interview: Danie de Waal – G. Bentz, 15 March 2011, Saldanha.

⁴²⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 13 July 1941, NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, 31 August 1941.

⁴²⁷ NCA, J. Holland, Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Riding a Camel.

⁴²⁸ H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2. 1 September 1941.

deeply religious Afrikaner Springboks it was a true pilgrimage to visit the Middle East. The places mentioned in the Bible including the River Jordan, where Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son and the spot where Elijah was fed by ravens impressed them at a deeply religious level.⁴²⁹ The men of 1st Brigade were not all equally religious and many gave in to temptation quite easily. Alcohol being the easiest and safer to indulge in causing the MP's literally having their hands full with intoxicated servicemen trying to forget the horrors of the battlefield or relieve the boredom of the frontline. Since the troops risked life and limb in the desert, many felt that they were in their rights to visit whatever establishment they wished and often left without paying, shouting as they ran away that the Eighth Army would pick up the tab. Restricting access to bars and clubs did not solve the problem as troops would either become intoxicated at their various units or requisition alcohol from the locals.⁴³⁰



Figure 4.4: Four Carbineers doing a bit of sightseeing the local way.⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ J. H. Harmse to his parents, 10 July 1943, Letter part of a private collection in the possession of Mrs A.C. Bentz, Vredenburg.

⁴³⁰ DOD Archives, Adjutant General Vol 1, Box 843, File128/35/1/188, Brothels and Contraceptives and Sex Education, Report on Venereal Disease and Pregnancies amongst WAAS and WAAF.

⁴³¹ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

Operation Crusader

Since arriving at Matruh in July the Carbineers did their fair share of digging, spent several days sightseeing in Egypt's ancient cities and conducted weapon drills on an almost daily basis⁴³² but very little training for mobile warfare. Then on 22 August, to their dismay, the SA division commanders were summoned by Lieutenant General C. Auckinleck, Commander in Chief Middle East, and informed that they were to be used in forthcoming operations.⁴³³ The concerns Brink had while his brigades were at Matruh were by then in some way remedied. His men were rested and sufficient numbers of motorised transport had arrived to facilitate the commencement of training for mobile operations at battalion level. His manpower woes were solved by the inclusion of Coloured and Non-European troops. Their quality, however, was of such a standard that they were almost undeployable without further intense training.⁴³⁴ Nevertheless, each platoon had Non-European and Coloured troops as drivers and four Non-European stretcher bearers.⁴³⁵ With further reinforcements arriving from the Union, the Carbineer's strength was brought up to 775 men of all ranks. Some reorganisation also took place with armoured cars replacing the Vickers platoon at regimental level.⁴³⁶ In spite of some organisational changes and an increase in lectures about desert navigation, the statistics of enemy activity was made known as August came to an end. The Carbineers survived forty six air raids in which 500 bombs were dropped and resulted in five men killed and twelve wounded. Private Hurley and others wondered whether it was worth it.⁴³⁷

On 17 September 1941, C Company conducted its first tactical exercise in which the infantry operated with armoured cars to ambush a fictional enemy supply convoy.⁴³⁸ A whole month then passed before all four companies conducted their first regimental exercise with attached artillery and anti-tank troops on 9 October.⁴³⁹ The period in-between was spent in the usual fashion of digging defences and providing guards to safeguard supplies on the docks. If selected for the latter activity one was expected to engage in a fair amount of pilfering and share the spoils with the rest of the platoon, provided you didn't get caught and ended up under close arrest.⁴⁴⁰ Rumours then began circulating again of either a

⁴³² As reflected in the Routine orders published during the period at Mersa Matruh. DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 220, May and June 1941 Routine Orders.

⁴³³ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, p85.

⁴³⁴ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941**, p85.

⁴³⁵ M.S. Coghlan, **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, p4.

⁴³⁶ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria: Another 50 Natal Carbineer Years 1945 to 1995**, p36.

⁴³⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 31 August 1941.

⁴³⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, September 1941, 17 September.

⁴³⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box, 404, October 1941, 9 October.

⁴⁴⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 17 August 1941.

gigantic British push into Libya or the return of the whole division to the Union.⁴⁴¹ Private Jerry Hurley was destined to miss both of those events, if either turned out to be materialise, as he was struck down with severe tonsillitis on 30 October and transferred to the UDF camp at Helwan for hospitalisation.⁴⁴²

As October passed very few UDF commanders had any illusions regarding the battle readiness of their brigades. When, on 8 November, the two Corps Commanders General A.R. Godwin-Austin (13th Corps) and Lieutenant General C.W.M. Norrie (30th Corps) issued their operational orders the 2nd SA Division was stuck at El-Alamein laying mines and preparing defences, 1st SA Division was still busy with its desert training with 1st Brigade having barely begun exercising in countering armoured attacks, while 5th Brigade did not even progress past the battalion scheme exercises⁴⁴³ and would not be ready when Cunningham's 'Operation Crusader' commenced on 15 November. In spite of securing three extra days, much to the dismay of his superiors, in which to train his men, Brink had to decide between sending his untrained men against the Germans or have his division replaced by the 4th Indian Division and become a national embarrassment. In true South African fashion, Brink chose to fight⁴⁴⁴ and, on 31 October, he issued orders to his brigade commanders to prepare to move out on a protracted divisional exercise the next day.⁴⁴⁵

Moving further and further westwards C Company was under the impression that they were merely busy with large scale training exercises and remained hopeful that home leave might still be forthcoming. For the next few days their routine was the same and consisted of tactical training and navigation while moving ever closer to the 'wire' which was a well-constructed and broad barbed wire barricade that indicated the border between Egypt and Libya.⁴⁴⁶ Private Holland and the rest of his Company crossed the wire into the Libyan Desert on 18 November and headed west in the direction of Bir el Gubi, which was no more than a stone cairn erected over a well of water deep water while at the same time being a point of reference on military maps.⁴⁴⁷ In the late afternoon of the first day's march the Carbineers reached an old landing strip eighty kilometres inside Libya and for the first time C Company took digging slit trenches and defensive positions seriously.⁴⁴⁸

Progress was very slow over the next few days. Enemy artillery restricted motorised movement and the Carbineers also attracted, for the very first time, the attention of the

⁴⁴¹ DOD Archives, Pamphlet Section, Box 41, Sidi Rezegh, Sidi Rezegh, p3.

⁴⁴² DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, J.J. Hurley, 4486V.

⁴⁴³ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p89.

⁴⁴⁴ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, pp119-120.

⁴⁴⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, October 1941, 30 October.

⁴⁴⁶ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 12 October 1941.

⁴⁴⁷ NCA, J. Holland, Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Bir El Gobi 1941,

⁴⁴⁸ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 13 October 1941.

much despised Stuka dive-bombers.⁴⁴⁹ The Stuka was described as a frightening apparition with bombs slung beneath the aircraft's wings and a siren attached to its landing gear which was actuated by a propeller whirring in the wind and making a horrible screeching sound. The bombs were designed to detonate on contact with the stony earth with a deafening crack, sending jagged steel splinters and sharp-edged broken rock flying horizontally through the air. The Stuka's seldom operated alone and would usually be accompanied by several yellow-nosed Messerschmitt 109 fighters which ranged around the perimeter shooting up anyone not in a horizontal position on the ground.⁴⁵⁰ Although no serious casualties were sustained during these first attacks, the Carbineers quickly learned to dive for the nearest slit trench during air attacks. It was during one attack, while the dust was still thick in the air and the enemy making another pass that one of the Coloured drivers, having had enough of being on the receiving end of enemy fire, grabbed a rifle and fired wildly at the plane overhead while shouting 'Ja jou bliksem ek kan ook skiet' (Yes you bugger, I can shoot as well).⁴⁵¹

On 20 November, 1st Brigade was ordered to attack Bir el Gubi while 5th Brigade had to occupy Sidi Rezegh. The Italian defenders were in no mood to surrender their position that easy and put up a stiff resistance.⁴⁵² With the armour that was supposed to protect the vulnerable infantry brigades scattered by the German panzers, 5th Brigade's defensive box came under severe attack from increasing German forces. The Carbineers were ordered to launch a dismounted attack against the Italians at Bir el Gubi in order to relieve the pressure on their comrades to the North.⁴⁵³ For infantry to attack over open ground against well entrenched defenders which may have tanks in support with only two companies was definitely not sound military tactics.⁴⁵⁴

Before setting off, the rum ration was sent around: except it was not rum but KWV export quality brandy straight from the vats of the Western Cape, more commonly known as Union Death Fluid, and each member of C Company received a mugful of the stuff before setting off on what may well have been their last walk on earth. It went down well and warmed them up in the cold desert air, providing a little more courage than was usually found in the men from Natal.⁴⁵⁵ Just before the number 12 platoon could break into a charge, their rifles and bayonets at high port, the attack was called off, much to their relief and they returned happily to their defensive positions.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁴⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 19 November.

⁴⁵⁰ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Bir El Gobi 1941*,

⁴⁵¹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p53. Translated into "Yes you bugger, I can shoot as well"

⁴⁵² J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p164.

⁴⁵³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 20 November 1941.

⁴⁵⁴ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 21 October 1941.

⁴⁵⁵ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Bir El Gobi 1941*.

⁴⁵⁶ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p56.

As the enemy's guns began finding their range to their targets, more shells exploded in and around the Carbineer's positions. Through the noise and dust the men regularly called out to each other to confirm their status as still alive. It was after one particular heavy bombardment on 22 November⁴⁵⁷ that Carbineer Doug Drummond did not answer to his name. In an instant the whole section leapt from their slit trenches and rushed to Doug's hole in the earth. He lay face down and as Cliff Portsmouth knelt down to get a closer look, Doug pointed to his left leg, just behind the knee. His trouser leg was faintly smoking with a small piece of recently red hot shell splinter resting on top of it. It was a great relief to both Doug and the rest of the section that blood had not been drawn and that all survived yet another attack.⁴⁵⁸

Unaware that the tanks, on which the success of the operation depended, had been dispersed, C Company dug in for an uneasy night, not looking forward to the prospect of a first light move in the direction of Sidi Rezegh. Their move was delayed until dawn since the division and brigade commanders both felt that the troops were insufficiently trained to operate at night.⁴⁵⁹ At daybreak on Sunday 1st Brigade continued its careful advance in the direction of 5th Brigade to their north. Throughout the day the men were aware of a tremendous battle being fought and that they were heading straight for it. A cautious Brigadier Pienaar ordered his men to dig in as the sun began to set. They hardly settled down when the heaviest artillery bombardment yet crashed down onto their positions.⁴⁶⁰ That night C Company, covering the northern perimeter of their brigade defensive box,⁴⁶¹ also began receiving something other than enemy shells. Out of the darkness the remnants of 5th Brigade fled through the Carbineer lines, away from the German tanks that surrounded and then overran the defending South Africans.⁴⁶² After the war General Crüwell, German commander of the Afrika Korps, describe the destruction of the South Africans as a battle of annihilation where in spite of the tenacity of the defenders and the skill with which they handled their weapons, they were no match for the concentrated firepower of the Germans.⁴⁶³ As news of the destruction of 5th Brigade reached Division HQ, the Carbineers were ordered to abandon their positions and move westward to Taieb El Esem where they were to set up a defensive box and prepare to meet the enemy.⁴⁶⁴

It soon became clear that Operation Crusader was not the grand success its planners envisioned. The breakout from Tobruk failed, the British tank elements were badly mauled and the South Africans lost one whole brigade. On the contrary the Germans maintained

⁴⁵⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 22 November.

⁴⁵⁸ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Bir El Gobi 1941*.

⁴⁵⁹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p227.

⁴⁶⁰ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p66.

⁴⁶¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 23 November.

⁴⁶² J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p276.

⁴⁶³ J. Strawson, **The Battle for North Africa**, p83.

⁴⁶⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 24 November.

their momentum and continued their relentless drive east destroying everything in their way. This in turn caused panic among the dispersed infantry and support vehicles and led to a headlong rush back in the direction of the Wire.⁴⁶⁵ Once more a horde of fleeing men and vehicles passed through C Company's lines with drivers shouting at the defenders to drive as hard as they could because there was untold horror behind them. When asked where they should go they received the answer that anywhere would be fine as long as they did so without delay.⁴⁶⁶ German and Italian forces pursued the fleeing Eighth Army while bypassing the South Africans at Taieb el Esem. This Westward rush to safety became known as the Matruh Stakes, and it soon transpired, that 1st Brigade was completely surrounded and cut off from the rest of the Eighth Army.⁴⁶⁷

Throughout the morning several attacks by tanks and motorised infantry were made and the Carbineers were locked in a life and death struggle with the same enemy that eliminated 5th Brigade a few days earlier.⁴⁶⁸ C Company's men hugged the ground and only chanced a very quick peek to see whether the enemy infantry have debussed from their vehicles and were moving in for the kill. They were extremely impressed with the anti-tank gunners who remained standing by their guns while the infantry lay flat on their stomachs.⁴⁶⁹ The attacks grew in ferocity, to such an extent that commanders were ordered to destroy all secret documents.⁴⁷⁰ Much later in the afternoon the enemy laid down a smoke screen and seemed to be forming up behind it in preparation for the final assault. All available artillery was urgently called upon to suppress the enemy concentration and the feared attack never materialised.⁴⁷¹ The Carbineer casualties for the day amounted to one man with shell shock and one Non-European driver that was hit by shrapnel.⁴⁷² By the end of the day the enemy withdrew and the men of C Company realised that in their brigade stood its ground against enemy armour and emerged victorious.⁴⁷³

The 1st Brigade then received orders to withdraw south towards Field Maintenance Centre 65 where they remained till the end of the month.⁴⁷⁴ From here strong patrols consisting of armoured cars and infantry were sent out in the direction of Sidi Rezegh to ascertain the enemy's intentions. It was during one such a patrol that the men of number 12 platoon discovered how much fight was still left in their enemy. While cautiously moving away from the relative safety of their defences the first warning of a pending attack was received from

⁴⁶⁵ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p292.

⁴⁶⁶ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p76.

⁴⁶⁷ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p84.

⁴⁶⁸ DOD Archives, Narrative and Reports, Middle East, volume 5, 1st Royal Natal Carbineers Narrative.

⁴⁶⁹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p71.

⁴⁷⁰ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p330.

⁴⁷¹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p333.

⁴⁷² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November 1941, 25 November.

⁴⁷³ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p84.

⁴⁷⁴ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p352.

the armoured cars. The patrol crossed the crest of one of the few terrain features and found itself confronted by several enemy vehicles less than a kilometre away. The German attackers immediately opened fire at the South Africans and a shell exploded right next to the truck Private Doug Drummond was traveling in. As a matter of instinct the men exited their vehicle at breakneck speed. More explosions straddled the now dispersed men over the desert. A sudden flash of light and tremendous noise next to Drummond betrayed the fact that his luck held as he suffered a very near miss. Feeling quite helpless as shells exploded around them, the platoon waited for instructions from their platoon sergeant Quintin Smythe as he tried to herd them to safer positions. Just as Private Holland changed positions at his sergeant's instruction a massive explosion occurred at the spot he occupied a few seconds earlier. With shell splinters in his face, Holland made his way to the RAP and only learned later that his friend Private Drummond had another brush with death as a bullet hit his helmet just above the rim, travelled along the inside curve of the helmet, making an exit at the rear.⁴⁷⁵

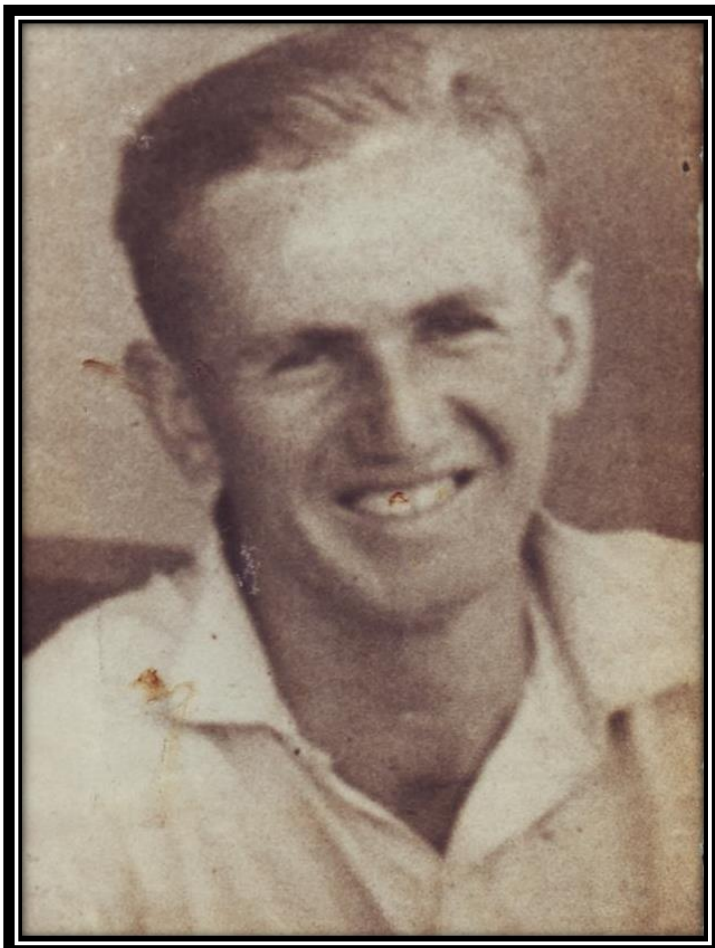


Figure 4.5: Private Doug Drummond

⁴⁷⁵ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Caught in the Crossfire*.

Days turned into weeks as the Carbineers were moved back and forth being bombed by the Luftwaffe as well as the RAF as the desert was turned into a giant dustbowl with vehicles milling around in all directions. With positive identification of troops on the ground very difficult under such conditions, many pilots preferred to shoot first and identify later.⁴⁷⁶ On 24 December, C Company's men received orders to continue their withdrawal further west; spending Christmas day camped in the desert with nothing but bully beef, dog biscuits and sugarless tea to lift their spirits.⁴⁷⁷ The Wire was crossed on 28 December and C Company headed to their new positions at Sidi Barrani where they were to be held in reserve while 2nd Brigade continued a reinvigorated campaign to push the supply-deprived Germans back into Libya.⁴⁷⁸ When they arrived at their destination things appeared to return to normal with number 11 platoon detailed to guard prisoners, number 12 platoon were tasked with guarding stores and supplies while number 13 platoon deployed around a small landing ground.⁴⁷⁹ A new period of preparing shelters awaited them and, with the cold and rain now an additional bother, the men could at least take comfort in their first beer ration since the offensive began in November.⁴⁸⁰

On 18 January, Jerry Hurley arrived back at number 13 platoon. He was discharged from hospital some days earlier and had a trying time traveling from the SA camp at Helwan to join his company at Sidi Barrani. He was surprised to find that his friend Keith Boast had been put in charge of their section but less so that their platoon commander remained unchanged and had been officially judged as a failure by the platoon.⁴⁸¹ While 2nd Division were rounding up prisoners and digging in at Sollum-Halfaya,⁴⁸² 1st Brigade was conducting training and the men from C Company even had time to enjoy a cricket match hosted by B Company. The match, played on the same day that Private Hurley returned to his platoon, saw the 'Barrani Beachcombers' beating the 'High Tide Hooligans' with four runs.⁴⁸³ The elation of the victory was short-lived as news once more began to spread of further setbacks suffered by the Commonwealth troops and that Rommel was once more on the move. Orders to move were received on 26 January 1942 and, in spite of joking about it to lessen the tension, the men of C Company were rather worried.⁴⁸⁴ Their concerns were reinforced when C Company found itself leading the Brigade's advance in the direction of the enemy.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁷⁶ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **The Sidi Rezeg Battles, 1941**, p352.

⁴⁷⁷ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, p107.

⁴⁷⁸ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p100.

⁴⁷⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, December 1941, 31 December.

⁴⁸⁰ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 31 December 1941.

⁴⁸¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 18 January 1942.

⁴⁸² N. Orpen, *War in the Desert*, South African Forces World War 2, Vol 3, p153.

⁴⁸³ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 18 January 1941.

⁴⁸⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 26 January 1942.

⁴⁸⁵ N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p176.

Defence at the Gazala Line

The advance continued up to Gazala where the Eighth Army prepared to meet the new German thrust from the West. The Carbineers once more found themselves digging defensive positions with the Transvaal Scottish on their right, the Dukes on their left and the rest of the Division deployed in a defensive line towards the north.⁴⁸⁶ This line stretched from the coast to Bir Hacheim in the south where the Free French had a defensive box and was protected by a maze of minefields and strongpoints.⁴⁸⁷ On the night of 3 February, the Indian Brigade, which had been fighting delaying actions against Rommel's troops, passed through 1st Brigade's lines, making the South Africans the commonwealth troops deployed furthest to the west.⁴⁸⁸ The men in C Company wondered how they managed to end up at the frontline again since 2nd Brigade has seen no action since their arrival and the 2nd Division had been involved in only limited offensive operations. The situation was cleared up a few days later when it was rumoured that the army commander had requested Brink to 'send one SA brigade to the front' and the message was interpreted as 'send 1st South African Infantry Brigade' to the front lines.⁴⁸⁹

At Gazala the men experienced their first spring in the desert with more moderate temperatures and sudden downpours through the day. In spite of the constant digging that had to be done, the inclusion of fresh meat and bread in their daily rations and a regular flow of beer continued to keep the men in high spirits. The news of the loss of Singapore and further Japanese successes in the Far East, however, caused some concern.⁴⁹⁰ Constant patrols once more became a part of everyday life but, instead of trying to locate the enemy, the main objective was to find building material for the various elaborate shelters and dugouts that were sunk into the ground back at C Company's positions.⁴⁹¹ In their positions at Gazala, life began to return to normality again. With their shelters prepared, sufficient supplies and enough water, and even some leave to Cairo, the men accepted the army's appreciation that the enemy has no other choice but to try and break through the South African lines in order to reach the port of Tobruk. Military planners did not believe that Rommel would execute a wide flanking move due to the fact that there were strong mobile British forces in the area which would sever the German lines of control.⁴⁹² The increase in air attacks and constant probing of their lines by enemy reconnaissance parties indicated to C Company that their commanders were probably right and that they should definitely

⁴⁸⁶ N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p177.

⁴⁸⁷ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p101.

⁴⁸⁸ P.C.A.Francis Collection, History of the Natal Carbineers, NCA , p10.

⁴⁸⁹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 4 February 1941.

⁴⁹⁰ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 7 February to 28 March 1942.

⁴⁹¹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 15 February 1941.

⁴⁹² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, March 1942, Operational Appreciation 1 March 1942.

expect an attack at any moment.⁴⁹³ To keep the enemy off balance and gather information, fighting patrols were sent out on a continuous basis. On 8 April one such a patrol captured an Italian dispatch rider who, under interrogation, revealed the location of several enemy positions. Cliff Portsmouth, as platoon runner, was summarily sent to his platoon commander with orders to prepare number 12 platoon for immediate action.⁴⁹⁴

At 1600 two platoons with VMG and mortar sections in support set off to neutralise the enemy. With artillery and mortar fire keeping the Italians' heads down the platoons launched their attack and soon scattered the bewildered defenders.⁴⁹⁵ Carrying messages between the forward attacking elements and the command group, Private Portsmouth suddenly came face to face with an enemy machinegun position. He realised that the enemy had to be neutralised before they could bring their weapon to bear on the advancing members of Portsmouth's platoon. Without hesitation he attacked them with his rifle and killed seven.⁴⁹⁶ His platoon continued their attack when they unexpectedly began drawing heavy fire from well-entrenched enemy troops hiding in broken ground. Portsmouth's officer instructed him to find a way around the enemy. He set off by himself and eventually found a number of Italian soldiers in a rock cistern which he quickly neutralised with grenades. In addition, he also put out of commission the enemy's gun that they were using to pin down the attacking South Africans.⁴⁹⁷ For his actions Private Portsmouth was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. After routing the enemy and rounding up as many prisoners as possible C Company's platoon returned safely with fifty Italian prisoners before the inevitable counterattack.⁴⁹⁸ On 13 March, number 9 platoon of B Company with attached elements left their holding area in an attempt to exploit the success of C Company. This patrol, however, was ambushed and surrounded by enemy tanks and dispersed. Very few men made it back to their friends.⁴⁹⁹

After preparing for several months, Rommel launched his long-awaited offensive on 26 May 1942. With Italian forces engaged in holding attacks against the main Gazala defences, his main force executed a wide turning movement around Bir Hacheim.⁵⁰⁰ This was the very same manoeuvre that was discounted by Allied commanders. On 1st Division's front, artillery shells exploded all along the line and there was a mad dash to get rations and ammunition into the slit trenches. Each of these trenches was a metre or more apart and faced in the direction from which the enemy might come. They were as long as a human body and wide enough to lay in them with comfort and deep enough so that the men could sit in them with

⁴⁹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, March 1942, 1-28 March 1942.

⁴⁹⁴ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*.

⁴⁹⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, April 1942, 8 April.

⁴⁹⁶ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Estcourt.

⁴⁹⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 8 April 1942.

⁴⁹⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, April 1942, 13 April.

⁵⁰⁰ N. Orpen, *War in the Desert, East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p226 – 227.

just their heads and shoulders showing above ground. The men would dive into these trenches whenever there was an alert and wait patiently for whatever was to happen.⁵⁰¹ The South African trenches differed from their British counterparts in the sense that the British trenches were much too wide with simply too many communication trenches that was easily visible from the air. The South Africans based their digging on experience while the British stuck to their text books.⁵⁰²

Jack Holland's slit trench was the closest to the gun pit that dominated his particular stretch of the line and during one of the air raids that signalled the opening of hostilities he decided to try his hand at shooting down an enemy aircraft. He jumped into the gun pit just as a flight of returning dive-bombers passed overhead. He slammed a cartridge into the breechblock of a mounted Boyes Anti-Tank rifle and was about to fire at the aircraft he had set his sights on when he felt the sudden urge to check the rifle's barrel. It was fortunate that he did as the barrel was filled with sand, blown into it by the ever-present desert winds, and had he squeezed the trigger would have caused both the rifle and Private Holland to explode. Still determined to eliminate his target Holland took hold of a Breda machinegun also mounted in the gun pit. It was a captured Italian gun and fired at a tremendous rate. The weapon had no recoil mechanism which meant that once it began to fire there was no stopping it. Holland was happily sending several rounds in the direction of the enemy when suddenly the makeshift wire holding the gun to the tripod began to unwind leaving the gun and the private leaping and bouncing around like a deranged desert rat. Praying for the magazine to empty Holland tried to maintain his aim in the general direction of the enemy plane. In spite of his direction being fine he was unable to keep the firing weapon elevated for the whole duration and soon bullets sprayed around the slit trenches of number 13 platoon like water from a hose. The enemy bombers disappeared over the horizon leaving a red-faced Jack Holland having to explain himself to the rest of his platoon.⁵⁰³ In spite of holding the line for the first two days of Rommel's offensive, the men of C Company did not know that German tanks and artillery had already outflanked the Gazala line and had taken up positions to the rear of 1st Brigade and were about to cut them off from the rest of the army again.⁵⁰⁴

After having repulsed the enemy's numerous attacks, the Carbineers once more conducted offensive operations in the form of fighting patrols and just after midnight on 5 June number 12 platoon passed through gaps in the minefield.⁵⁰⁵ Pausing for a last smoke, Lt K.H. Douglas waited for the platoons from A and B Companies to join them before setting off into the night. As they moved Private Portsmouth counted the paces in order to determine

⁵⁰¹ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Gazala under Fire.*

⁵⁰² NCA, H.G. Symmons *Diary, Part 2, 20 April 1941.*

⁵⁰³ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Gazala under Fire.*

⁵⁰⁴ N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p234.

⁵⁰⁵ DOD Archives, *War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 5 June 1942,*

the distance they had travelled and how much further they still needed to go. After reaching their destination the men went to ground and waited for the armoured cars to join them. Bad news was received when the armoured cars reported that they had run into a 'friendly' minefield and were unable to move. The decision was then made to fix bayonets and attack the enemy as soon as the artillery bombardment ceased.⁵⁰⁶ The moment the dust settled the platoon surged forward only to find to their surprise that there was an enemy outpost not in front but behind them.⁵⁰⁷ Lieutenant Douglas was hit by the first salvo and put out of commission.

Command then reverted to Sergeant Quentin Smythe a twenty-eight-year old Natal farmer. Charging at the enemy Smythe saw two Italians shooting in his direction. He promptly shot the one and stabbed the other through the chest with his bayonet. With the attack in full swing Smythe lunged forward when a grenade exploded between himself and Lance Corporal Leach, wounding them both.⁵⁰⁸ Dazed and with blood streaming from the head wound just sustained, Smythe pressed on his attack and neutralised another machinegun position a bit further on with a well-placed grenade, leaving the rest of the platoon in a defensive posture. The fire on number 12 platoon's flank were becoming intense and the men feared that if B Company's men were pushed back, they would be outflanked in turn and their route of withdrawal cut off. Privates Buckley and Biles captured an enemy anti-tank gun after killing the crew and were in the process of turning it on its former owners when Smythe returned. In their excitement to fire the weapon at the enemy, Private Buckley accidentally pressed the trigger of the cannon causing the recoil to knock out his friend Private Biles. Immediately hereafter the platoon drew severe machinegun fire from all sides. It became clear that the B Company men have been pushed back and that encirclement by the enemy was a very real possibility. Sergeant Smythe ordered a retreat and with men firing while dragging their wounded comrades number 12 platoon neared the gap in the minefield when an enemy shell exploded amidst them knocking Privates Buckley and Holmes off their feet.⁵⁰⁹ For his part in bringing his men safely back to friendly lines and eliminating several enemy personnel Sergeant Smythe was awarded the Union Defence Force's very first Victoria Cross.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁶ NCA, Q. G. M. Smythe, Report on Action in the Gazala Line.

⁵⁰⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 5 June 1942,

⁵⁰⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 5 June 1942,

⁵⁰⁹ NCA, Q. G. M. Smythe, Report on Action in the Gazala Line.

⁵¹⁰ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **Crisis in the Desert**, p50.

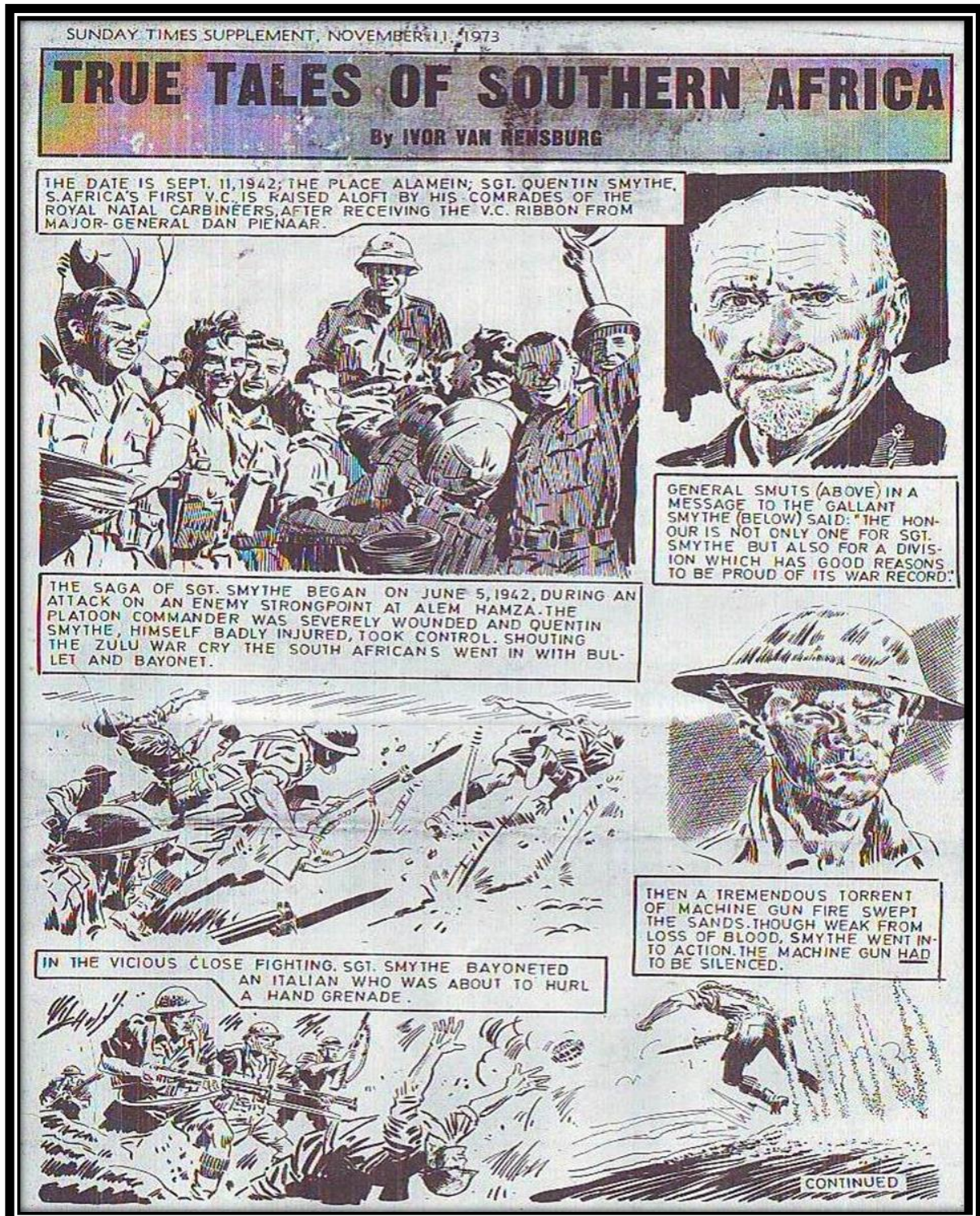


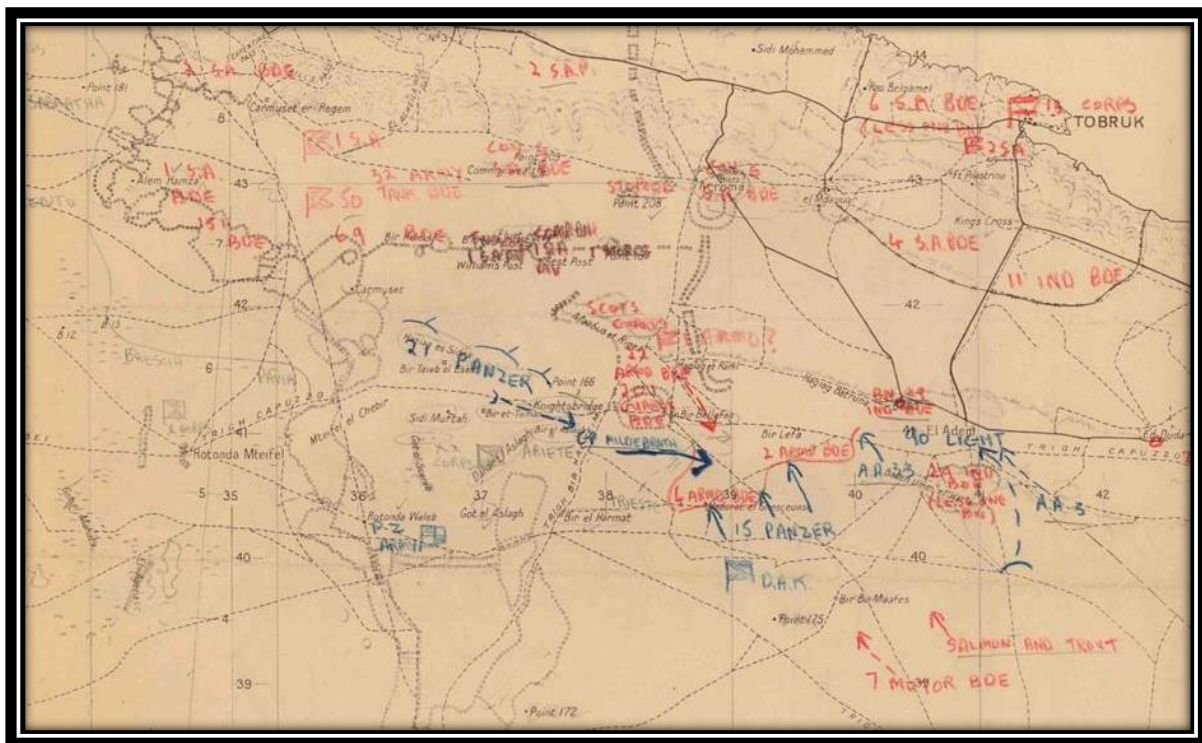
Figure 4.6: Cartoon strip detailing Sgt Quentin Smythe's actions for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.⁵¹¹

⁵¹¹

NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

The Gazala Gallop

Over the next few days the artillery duel continued but very few casualties were suffered. Then on, 10 June, the southern flank of the Gazala line at Bir Hacheim was subjected to intense German attacks and the defenders forced to withdraw. With their line now outflanked the allied commanders were undecided whether they should hold Tobruk harbour or withdraw all troops from the Gazala line.⁵¹² To strengthen the defences of Tobruk, each battalion in 1st Brigade supplied a composite company. For this task number 12 platoon from C Company was selected.⁵¹³ This platoon then made its way to the fortress with the rest of the group and was stationed in the southern most point of the defensive perimeter. It was to be called 'Beer Group' after the officer in command, Lt Col J. M. de Beer.⁵¹⁴ To be fair the section leaders drew cards to determine which sections would make up this platoon. Sergeant Smythe and Private Buckley were fortunate enough not to be selected while Private Portsmouth's section leader was out of luck and his section went off to the fortress. To fill the gaps made by the departing sections, about twenty men from the 3 Reconnaissance Battalion joined C Company when number 12 platoon departed for Tobruk on 12 June 1942.⁵¹⁵



Map 3.1: Rommel's flanking move becomes apparent on 12 June 1942.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹² J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert*, p60.

⁵¹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 12 June 1942,

⁵¹⁴ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert*, p131.

⁵¹⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 12 June 1942.

⁵¹⁶ DOD Archives, Map Room.

On 13 June, the Carbineers received orders to withdraw either to Tobruk or further East.⁵¹⁷ It was the inclusion of 'further East' in the orders that caused great deal of panic as it became clear that this would not be an orderly withdrawal but a headlong dash to safety. In spite of loading their vehicles at night to deceive the enemy as well as carrying out normal patrolling the men of C Company became increasingly concerned.⁵¹⁸ When Private Hurley received instructions to make holes in all the extra water drums and pour petrol over the rations that there were no space for on the trucks, he knew that things have gone seriously wrong somewhere.⁵¹⁹ All the excess supplies that were so carefully accumulated of the past few weeks had to be destroyed.⁵²⁰

Bill Buckley found himself in number 10 platoon after luckily missing the draw to join the Tobruk garrison. To his dismay his platoon acted as rear-guard and tasked with keeping the approaching enemy at bay for as long as possible. The Carbineers were following the rest of 1st Brigade north toward the Via Balbia, a road stretching parallel with the coast and their only route of escape. Before reaching it the men first had to descend the escarpment by negotiating the narrow El Agheila West Pass.⁵²¹ It was here that enemy dive-bombers wreaked havoc on the mass of vehicles and men trying to reach safety. Private Hurley's section was making their way down the pass when one of the anti-aircraft guns protecting the pass received a direct hit from a German dive-bomber. With dead men slumped over their gun and more bombs falling, all semblance of order collapsed and it was every truck for itself.⁵²² Half way down the pass at a sharp bend, another anti-aircraft gun was struck by a bomb at close range. The crew of three was still standing as they died and this sight increased the desire to move at even greater speeds in the direction of Tobruk.⁵²³

At daybreak on 15 June Buckley's platoon received permission to break with the enemy and join the regiment as it rushed east.⁵²⁴ Reaching the pass at El Agheila, Buckley and his platoon could see a confused mass of vehicles heading east along the flat dusty desert floor. There were trucks of all sizes, quads pulling 25-pounder field guns and one lone Valentine tank going as fast as its rattling tracks could take it, outstripping all the other vehicles in its haste to get as far from the enemy as possible.⁵²⁵ At nightfall the Carbineers were spread all over the desert and, after a day of hard traveling and near death experiences, Private Hurley and his section found themselves inside the Tobruk perimeter. Too tired to go any further the men collapsed around their vehicle only to be woken a short while later by someone

⁵¹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 13 June.

⁵¹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 13 June.

⁵¹⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 12 June 1942,

⁵²⁰ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **Crisis in the Desert**, p81.

⁵²¹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **Crisis in the Desert**, p82.

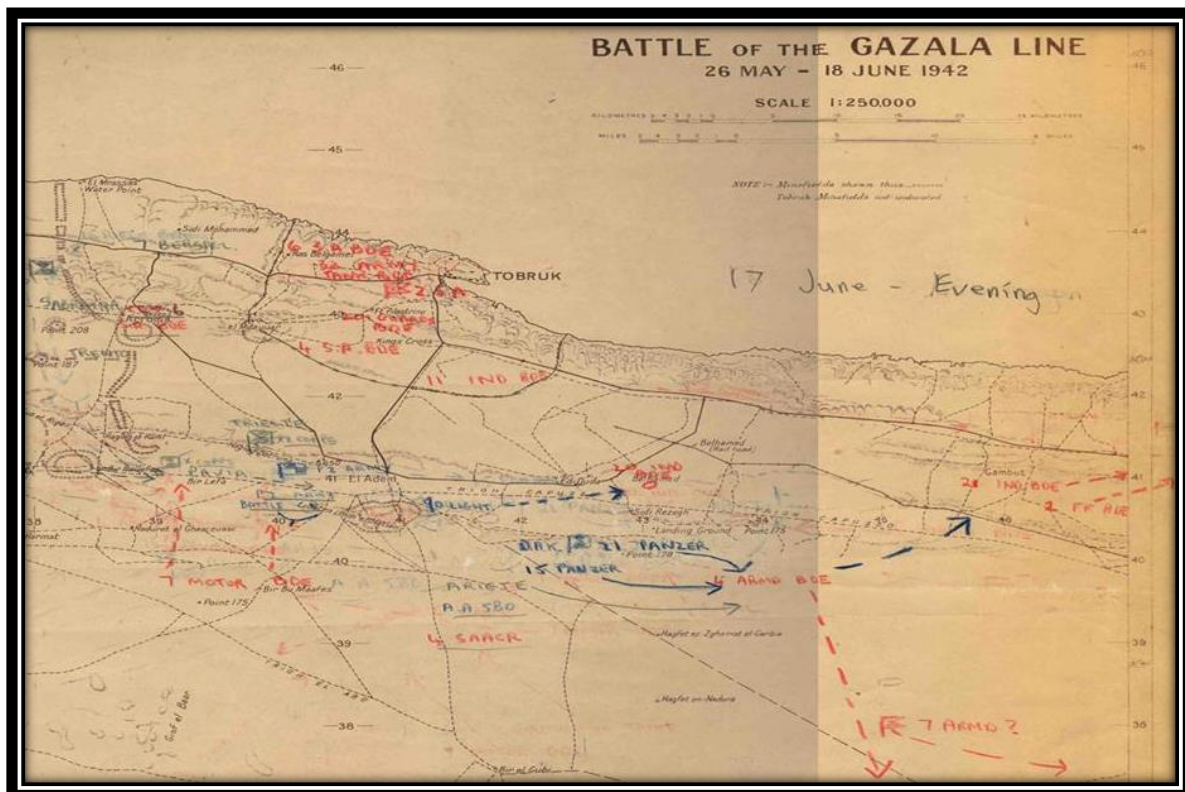
⁵²² NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 14 June 1942.

⁵²³ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Gazala under Fire*.

⁵²⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 15 June.

⁵²⁵ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Gazala under Fire*.

informing them that they were sleeping in the middle of a minefield.⁵²⁶



Map 3.2: Map indicating Rommel's flanking attack on the Gazala Line and the Allied withdrawal, 26 May to 28 June.⁵²⁷

Private Buckley's section also found itself close to Tobruk at the end of the first day. It was here that they were stopped by an officer who instructed them to rather proceed to the fortress itself instead of taking their chances by driving through the night. Having been in the army long enough to realise when the game was up, Buckley managed to persuade his section to keep going⁵²⁸ and both platoons eventually reached Gambut at the end of 15 June where they were to prepare defensive positions. With their fighting spirit temporarily dampened the men pushed on towards the Wire and safety. This barbed wire entanglement was crossed the next day where what remained of C Company set up camp on the Egyptian side of the border fence to recuperate and collect stragglers. That night large quantities of beer arrived and numbers 10 and 11 platoons celebrated their survival and toasted the bravery of the gallant number 12 platoon in Tobruk.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 14 June 1942.

⁵²⁷ DOD ARCHIVES, Map room.

⁵²⁸ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵²⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 14 June 1942.



Figure 4.7: A Carbineer section and their truck during the 'Gazala Gallop'⁵³⁰

Escape from Tobruk

Within the Tobruk perimeter Private Portsmouth and the rest of 12 platoon watched as the Eighth Army withdrew further east leaving them isolated in their fortress. They continued working on their positions until 20 June when they witnessed an incredible aerial bombardment of the Indian brigade to their east. During the course of the morning the sounds of a heavy tank battle were also heard coming from the Kings Cross area.⁵³¹ Late in the afternoon with German tanks approaching his headquarters, the fortress commander, Major-General H. B. Klopper, gave orders for all documents and signals to be destroyed. Attempts were made to get messages to the troops in the outer defences that the Germans had broken through the perimeter and were about to enter the town. A decision could not be reached whether or not to attempt a break-out and by nightfall it was every man for himself.⁵³² The Germans began rounding up prisoners on 21 June, most of whom had no idea that the fortress had surrendered. The men of number 12 platoon had no desire to become prisoners and decided to head south through the minefields and navigate their way back to friendly lines further east. Private Portsmouth and the rest of his platoon piled into their trucks and prompted their coloured drivers to drive as fast as they possibly could.⁵³³

Behind Portsmouth's vehicle was another truck with more C Company members, including

⁵³⁰ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵³¹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, **Crisis in the Desert**, p160 – 167

⁵³² N. Orpen, **War in the Desert, East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**, , Vol 3, p234.

⁵³³ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, Memoirs.

Private A. P. Smith and Corporal J. K. Cook, who were good friends of Private Jack Holland who at that stage was retreating east towards safety with number 11 platoon. Everything seemed to be going as planned when Cpl Cook's truck ran out of fuel. As they struggled to refill the tank, the rest of the little convoy continued south.⁵³⁴ With their truck moving again the men tried to catch up with the rest of the vehicles. Unfortunately Private Portsmouth's truck received a direct hit, putting it out of commission.⁵³⁵ Cook's truck then immediately came under machinegun fire and the occupants flung themselves on the ground next to their comrades of the now useless other vehicle. Lt Nissen immediately took charge and shouted at the men wishing to continue to get on the truck. Only thirteen men braved the bullets and clambered on board, setting off at high speed again. Nine of them were C Company men. At one stage during their escape the group even captured an Italian truck, which they used to sneak through enemy lines.⁵³⁶ For the men they left behind however, the war was over as they most of them were destined to spend the remainder of the war in Axis POW camps.

Plans to relieve the besieged garrison in Tobruk did not materialise due to the speed of the German advance and on 21 June unconfirmed reports filtered through to Regiment HQ that the fortress had fallen.⁵³⁷ The news stunned and depressed the men of C Company. Many refused to believe it. Throughout the day and late into the night stragglers from Tobruk reached C Company's lines and confirmed the loss of the fortress. There was no news of number 12 platoon who had gone with the composite company to Tobruk. Since nothing could be done about the situation in Tobruk, the Carbineers were ordered to prepare to withdraw to a new defensive line at El Alamein which they were to occupy on 25 June.⁵³⁸

At five in the afternoon the platoon commander of number 12 platoon, Lt Nissen, and seven members from the doomed platoon arrived at C Company's HQ after a successful breakout from Tobruk. They reported that the platoon encountered strong opposition in their breakout attempt and were forced to surrender.⁵³⁹ From them the men also heard how shortly before reaching the relative safety of friendly territory their vehicle was attacked by enemy aircraft and that Cpl Cook was killed and Private Hilvert wounded.⁵⁴⁰ The escapees in turn were told how the Germans bypassed Tobruk and then launched their attack from the east by overrunning the Indian brigades covering that sector which eventually led to the surrender of the fortress.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p108.

⁵³⁵ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*.

⁵³⁶ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p109.

⁵³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 21 June.

⁵³⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 22 June.

⁵³⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, June 1942, 22 June.

⁵⁴⁰ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p109.

⁵⁴¹ J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert*, p160 – 162.

It was ironic that the Carbineers now occupied defensive positions at El Alamein which were prepared by 2nd Division, which had gone into captivity when Tobruk surrendered. It was here that they prepared to meet the Germans once more. Unknown to them was that another withdrawal was considered, but this time to Cairo itself, where documents were being destroyed in anticipation of Rommel's arrival.⁵⁴² Private Hurley and his section were equally unaware of the true situation of the war and thus decided that they would not worry about it anymore.⁵⁴³

Into the Bag

For Private Portsmouth and the rest of the several thousand South African prisoners in Tobruk the shooting war may have been over, but another war was about to begin. While waiting in the POW cage in Tobruk the men had to brave hunger, thirst, exposure to the elements and dysentery, while the Germans and Italians brought in more men.⁵⁴⁴ With the Germans consolidating their gains around Tobruk the last of the South Africans still evading capture were rounded up and marched in the direction of the harbour. It was a long and thirsty march but the Germans allowed the wounded men to ride on tanks and other vehicles. The South Africans were surprised at the attitude of their German captors. They were offered cigarettes and water. Their German guards also deplored the fact that British and German soldiers had to fight each other and they were certain that the two nations would soon join forces against the Russians.⁵⁴⁵

After a couple of days in Tobruk, Portsmouth found himself squeezed into a truck with his fellow prisoners on the way to Derna. There was virtually no food to speak of except some Italian army biscuits and a few tins of bully beef. From Derna they were transported to Benghazi from where the prisoners were to continue on to Italy.⁵⁴⁶ Portsmouth remained in the Benghazi cage for about six weeks. The small six-man tent he shared with his fellow C Company comrades was situated close to the toilets which were in itself not the greatest problem. What did bother them was the high volume of traffic due to the prevalence of dysentery among the prisoners.⁵⁴⁷ Conditions in the cage deteriorated rapidly with flies and lice becoming a constant menace. Very soon the only topic of conversation was food and how to make it last as long as possible. Their daily ration was a small tin of bully beef and an equally small piece of Italian bread with some rice and lentils being added later on. On 31 July the prisoners were informed that they were to be shipped to Italy the next day.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴² A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p111.

⁵⁴³ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 28 June 1942,

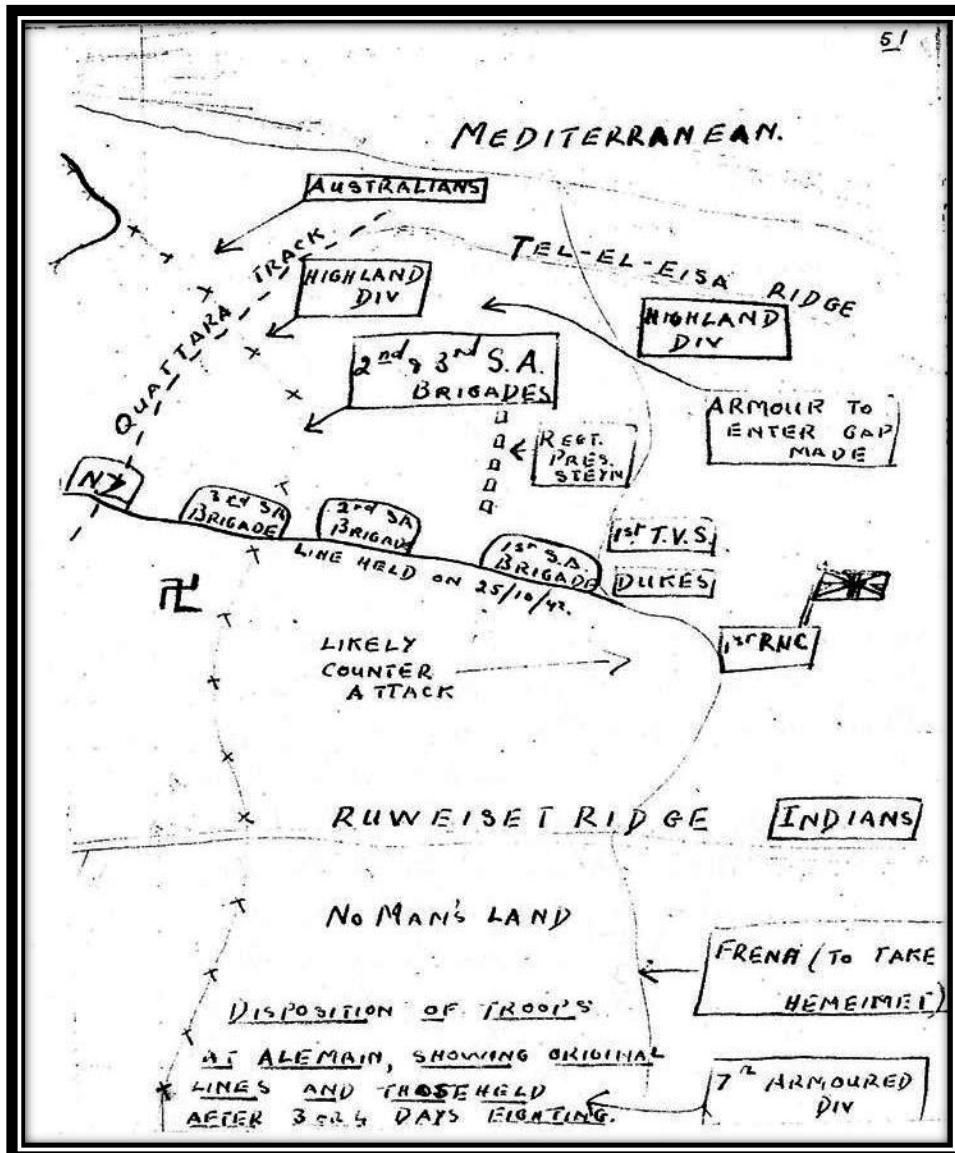
⁵⁴⁴ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Pte Jack Rossiter August – September 1943**, p17.

⁵⁴⁵ S. G. Wolhuter, **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War**, p31.

⁵⁴⁶ S. G. Wolhuter, **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War**, p35.

⁵⁴⁷ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*.

⁵⁴⁸ S. G. Wolhuter, **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War**, p31.



Map 3.3: Dispositions of troops at the time of the El Alamein battles, circa October 1942.⁵⁴⁹

Drawing a Line in the Sand at El Alamein

While Private Portsmouth busied himself squeezing lice between his thumbs and begging for water from the guards, the rest of C Company found themselves amidst another terrible sandstorm that was so customary of the desert. Peering from their slit trenches the men could see nothing but sand until the storm suddenly died down at two in the afternoon. Half an hour later, with visibility greatly improved, the men found an enemy column bearing down on them, cleverly concealed by the sandstorm.⁵⁵⁰ For the next two days the Carbineers held their sector of the line and with visions of being cut off by the enemy Private Hurley and his section realised that if a withdrawal was not ordered, it would be

⁵⁴⁹ NCA, H.G. Symons Diary, p 51.

⁵⁵⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1942, 1 – 3 July.

their end.⁵⁵¹ The order to pull back was received on 3 July and came just in time since the enemy managed to place machineguns very close to the Carbineer lines without being noticed. An intercepted radio message also betrayed the fact that enemy tanks were in the vicinity and preparing for an assault. After passing through friendly lines C Company was held in reserve for a couple of days, only sending out patrols at night and dodging artillery shells and bombs by day.⁵⁵²

In an attempt to ascertain the identity and positions of the enemy units facing them a night time patrol was proposed and volunteers requested. Captain E. C. Maunsell, a survivor from the Sidi Rezegh debacle attached to C Company from 1st South African Irish Brigade, was to lead the patrol. Three volunteers from each company were selected and after being briefed the patrol disappeared into the night. Their mission was to get as close as possible to a selected enemy outpost and grab a prisoner. Everything went according to plan up to the point where Capt Maunsell gave the order to charge. The attackers found that they were not assaulting an isolated outpost but part of the enemy's main line of defence. As artillery and anti-tank fire rained down on the patrol, a retreat was ordered and by the time the patrol reached their own lines, eight men lay dead on the desert sand and two more were seriously wounded. Among the casualties were Capt Maunsell and Privates Egner and Barlow, all three from C Company.⁵⁵³ It was seldom possible to take fallen comrades back to Allied lines, especially when retreating under fire. The bodies remained where they fell and could only be collected at night if the tactical situation allowed. For retrieval of casualties another patrol would be formed with the grisly task of bringing back what remained of erstwhile comrades. Under the cover of darkness the patrol then set out in an extended file. This was done to cover as much ground as possible. Whenever a body or parts thereof was found, a whistle was blown and the remains collected.⁵⁵⁴

Jack Holland's friend Doug Drummond was among those killed in the failed attack. He remembered the loss and burial process in detail. As the stiff lifeless bodies of former friends were brought back to the line, they were wrapped in grey army blankets which was secured by rope around the ankles and wound around the body in the direction of the head where it was tied around the neck. The bodies were then lowered into shallow graves while the Padre said a few words. Each man contemplated his own mortality as sand was then shovelled into the grave and a small white cross with black letters placed at the head of the grave. In silence the section then returned to the line in preparation for the next patrol.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵¹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 14 June 1942.

⁵⁵² DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1942, 1 – 3 July.

⁵⁵³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1942, 6 July.

⁵⁵⁴ Interview: R. Pennington - G. Bentz, 22 July 2013, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵⁵⁵ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943, Burial in the Desert: Alamein 1942.*

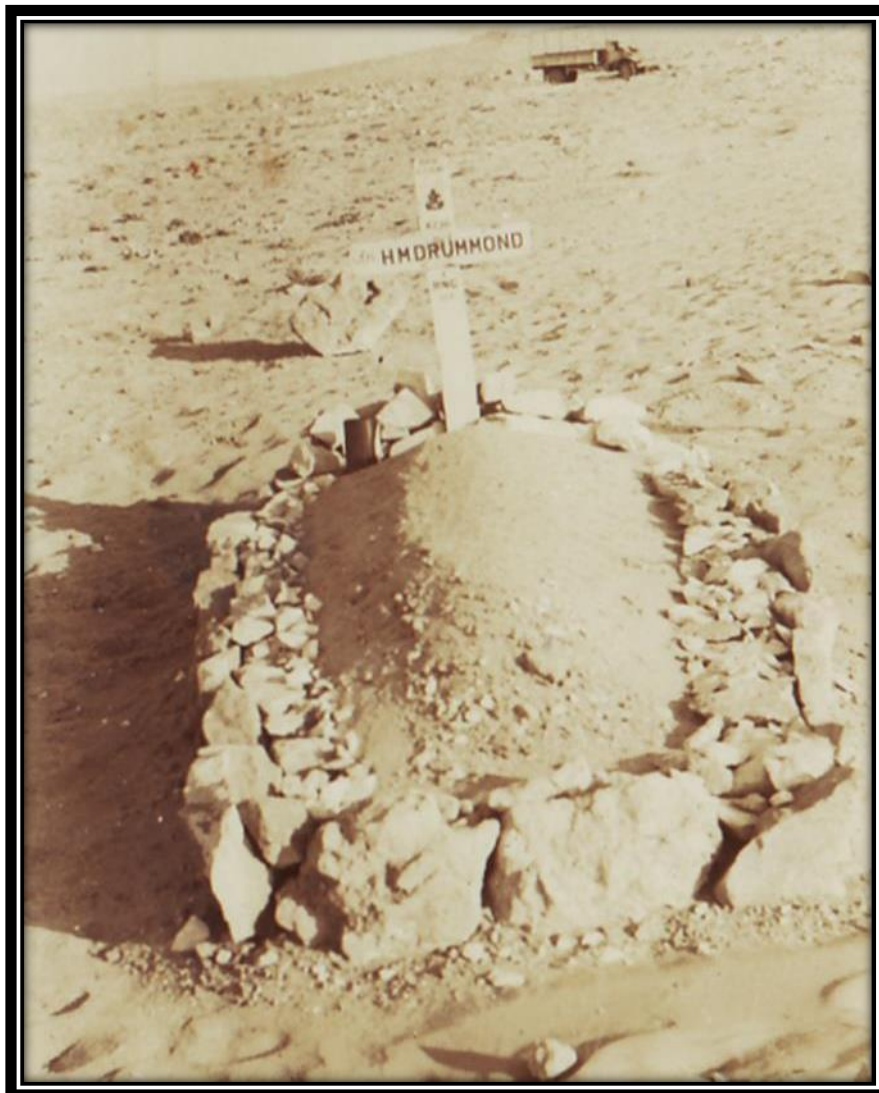


Figure 4.8: Private Drummond's grave at El Alamein.⁵⁵⁶

A strong patrol was sent out on the night of 26 July with the aim of clearing a path through the minefields to facilitate an attack on the enemy positions.⁵⁵⁷ Clearing mines was the most dangerous part of patrols as the infantry provided cover for the engineers doing the clearing presenting the enemy with an irresistible target to be plastered with high explosive shells. This indeed happened and nine Carbineers were killed and twenty others wounded. The casualty suffered by C Company during this attack was Private C. W. Kemp who was wounded and sent to the Regimental Aid Post.⁵⁵⁸ Not all casualties were caused by bullets or shrapnel. Constant bombardment and seeing friends dying were simply too much for some of the men in their slit trenches that bore much resemblance to a shallow grave. Men whose nerves could not handle the stresses of battle anymore were classified as suffering from 'battle stress' and evacuated to the Regimental Aid Post. The diagnosis on their charts

⁵⁵⁶ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵⁵⁷ N. Orpen, *War in the Desert*, p383.

⁵⁵⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, July 1942, 27 July.

would often bear the letters N.Y.D.N. which stood for 'Not Yet Diagnosed Nerves'.⁵⁵⁹ The best treatment for such cases was to remove them from the fighting and give them a few days leave in which to recuperate. At the end of July, after suffering the worst that Rommel had to offer, Private Holland had the letters N.Y.D.N. scribbled on his hospital record after being admitted to the 15 Field Ambulance for battle stress.⁵⁶⁰ His case was severe enough to allow him to be transferred to the 1st South African Field Provost Company in Cairo. His journey with C Company came to an end but his war was not yet over.⁵⁶¹

Michael the rooster also joined several of his platoon members in surviving one close call after another. He was spared the pot after beating a local opponent shortly after joining the Carbineers in East Africa. Then he was saved by Keith Boast who smuggled him aboard the *Cap St Jacques* when the Regiment sailed from Massawa. During the desert campaign Michael would, as was his nature, crow like a seasoned veteran at the break of dawn. This caused a serious security breach as the enemy might derive the South Africans' position from the incessant crowing. Often the morning quiet would then be shattered by incoming Italian or German artillery. At the insistence of the commanding officer, Michael was silenced. He did however not find his way to dinner table but was instead covered with a thick blanket every morning, thereby living to fight another day.⁵⁶² His skills improved daily and by the time of the Alamein battles it was speculated that Michael could identify enemy aircraft from friendly ones as well as navigate minefields. He even shared the platoon's beer ration one evening and was consequently unable to reach his roost, falling asleep on his owners' chest.⁵⁶³

Throughout August there was a lull in the fighting as both sides prepared their forces for continued actions. For the Germans it would be a last roll of the dice while the British brought in more troops and equipment to shore up their defences.⁵⁶⁴ The Carbineers were withdrawn from their positions on the front and moved into a reserve area behind the main line. A system of relief was implemented whereby reserve troops were exchanged with troops deployed on the front-line. This continued for the rest of the month with local leave being granted to Alexandria for the rest of the month as well.⁵⁶⁵ While out of the action, Private Hurley and the rest of C Company indulged in all the good things they have been deprived of over the last months. This included big breakfasts of eggs, tomatoes and bacon, swimming in the afternoons, generally loafing around and getting pretty merry at night.⁵⁶⁶ The Carbineers were freed from military activity for a while and even the official war diary

⁵⁵⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 2 August 1942.

⁵⁶⁰ DOD Archives, Personnel Card, J.G. Holland.

⁵⁶¹ NCA, J. Holland, *Memories of the Middle East: June 1941 to April 1943*.

⁵⁶² NCA, K. Kabrita to M. Coghlan, 23 May 1992, *History of Michael the Rooster*.

⁵⁶³ NCA, M. Alleyne to M. Coghlan, Notes on Michael the Rooster.

⁵⁶⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p112.

⁵⁶⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, August 1942, 5 August.

⁵⁶⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 5 August 1942.

had numerous entries of 'N.T.R.' (Nothing to report).⁵⁶⁷ The news of Ghandi's arrest in South Africa was very good news to Private Hurley since he seemed to be stirring up trouble among the Indian population of Natal. Unrest of that nature might easily spill over to their African neighbours thus affecting the flow of labour to the numerous farms across the province. Ghandi's incarceration had to be celebrated and Hurley shared this news with his friends Privates A. T. Hackland, P. Spies and L.L. Becke of C Company where they lay soaking up rays on the beach at the allocated rest area.⁵⁶⁸

The first two weeks of September was another blur of constant patrolling and loafing around. The most notable occurrence was the regimental parade on 11 September where Sgt Smythe received his Victoria Cross from a recently promoted Major General Pienaar.⁵⁶⁹ Without much time to celebrate their newest hero's achievement, C Company was ordered back into the line the next day.⁵⁷⁰ In spite of being extremely proud of their Sergeant, some C Company men argued that the VC actually belonged to the whole Regiment and its purpose was more to raise morale of the troops than to reward individual heroism – a characteristic in abundance in the Carbineers.⁵⁷¹ Intense training followed for a few weeks but it was not the parade ground and weapon drills that C Company had grown used to. There were new mine-clearing tanks, close support tanks and six-pounder anti-tank guns with plenty of ammunition that the men had to become familiar with.⁵⁷² It was clear to the men that the Germans failed to break through the Alamein defences and that the big push to send them back to Libya was not far off.⁵⁷³ In spite of everyone preparing for the next big offensive there was still time for some non-military activities like leave or spending time in rest areas when not in action. Men who were depressed and bored would soon break down physically and the war of nerves would claim another casualty.⁵⁷⁴ To keep those unfortunate fellows that were not sent on leave to one of Egypt's large cities entertained, the Union Entertainment Group was formed and by late 1942 there were numerous groups of performers touring the deployment areas. The Gypsies, Crazy Gang, Amuseliers and Ballyhoos hosted successful performances in almost all the UDF camps and even performed for other forces. The task of these units was judged as being as essential as that of the medical services, aiming to restore to normality nerves that were overstrained.⁵⁷⁵ It was also feared that men whose morale dropped beyond a certain point as a result of either

⁵⁶⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, August 1942, 5 August.

⁵⁶⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 5 August 1942.

⁵⁶⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, September 1942, 11 September.

⁵⁷⁰ N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p 407.

⁵⁷¹ Interview: H.W. Buckley - G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg. Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Estcourt. Interview: R. Pennington - G. Bentz, 22 July 2013, Pietermaritzburg.

⁵⁷² N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p 406.

⁵⁷³ A.M. Pollock, Pienaar of Alamein, p106.

⁵⁷⁴ H. P. H. Behrens, The stuff to give the troops. **The Nongqai**. September 1941,

⁵⁷⁵ H. P. H. Behrens, The stuff to give the troops. **The Nongqai**. September 1941,

enemy activity or total inactivity on the part of the troops themselves would lead to ill-disciplined, unorganised, hopeless and battle-shy soldiers. The danger herein lay that soldiers would enter battle already mentally defeated.⁵⁷⁶

Private Hurley and some of the C Company fellows visited one such a concert on 7 October as the lull in the fighting continued. They enjoyed the 'lovelies' and appreciated the talents of the female performers to no end. Some of the jokes and comments were however, too filthy and seemed to have embarrassed members of the audience and cast.⁵⁷⁷ This did not go unnoticed and led to a protest by the Army chaplains who expressed dissatisfaction with some of the films and shows presented to the troops. To them the whistling and shouting during performances by the UDF entertainment units was a source of great concern. To the chaplains it seemed that the higher the girls kick their legs the more approval was given.⁵⁷⁸

During the latter half of October the Carbineers were moved to the southern sector of the Alamein line and instructed to prepare defences. The final push commenced at two hours before midnight of 23 October with a tremendous artillery bombardment that seemed as if the sky exploded into a sheet of flame.⁵⁷⁹ The only Carbineers that really played a part during the opening stages was the regimental mortar detachment with the rest of the men holding the line in the event of a counterattack by the enemy.⁵⁸⁰ Over the next few days C Company was to occupy the newly-acquired territory and hold it against possible counterattacks.⁵⁸¹ These attacks comprised of artillery and machinegun fire with a good measure of dive-bombing for about a week. During this time the men were trapped in their trenches and many felt that they had reached the end of their tether.⁵⁸² The enemy lines were a mere eighty meters from where newly-promoted Lance Corporal Denis Larche had his dugout. For four days he endured constant enemy artillery attacks and could only venture out at night to tend to bodily functions and acquire food.⁵⁸³

Fortunately only Cpls K. G. Boast and A. G. Dunn from C Company received slight shrapnel wounds but remained on duty.⁵⁸⁴ At the edge of Cpl Boast's trench system were buried two New Zealanders who died in earlier battles. Since the nature of battlefield graves was to cover fallen comrades with only a few inches of sand until they could be reburied later, the

⁵⁷⁶ H. Bantjés, **Die Vermaaklikheidsgroep van die Unie Verdedigingsmag gedurende die Tweede Wêreld Oorlog: 'n Historiese Ontleding**, pp 12-13.

⁵⁷⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Diary, 2 August 1942.

⁵⁷⁸ DOD Archives, Adjutant General, Group 14, Box 843, File 128/35//1/187, Brothels and Contraceptives and Sex Education.

⁵⁷⁹ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p108.

⁵⁸⁰ NCA, P. C. A.Francis Collection, History of the Carbineers, p23.

⁵⁸¹ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p114.

⁵⁸² NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 3, 23 November.

⁵⁸³ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p36.

⁵⁸⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, October 1942, Casualty Return – Other Ranks, October 1942.

natural process of decomposing bodies did not go unnoticed by those in the trenches. As the smell of the dead men began to fill the nostrils of those still living, Cpl Boast would explain to newcomers that ‘the Kiwis are feeling cold and are complaining’. He would then shovel some more sand on the graves and on his way back to his dugout he would state that ‘they will be warmer now and stop complaining’.⁵⁸⁵ On 4 November the Germans began to withdraw after sustaining irreplaceable casualties in both men and materiel.⁵⁸⁶ In the early hours of 4 November C Company sent out its last patrol of the desert war in order to confirm reports that the enemy was indeed withdrawing. The patrol returned with news that the enemy’s positions in front of them were unoccupied.⁵⁸⁷ For the Carbineers the war in the desert against the Germans and Italians were indeed over but a new struggle to maintain their Regiment and return to active service as a homogenous unit was about to begin.



Figure 4.9: South African graves at El Alamein.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p36.

⁵⁸⁶ N. Orpen, **War in the Desert**, p452.

⁵⁸⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November, 4 November.

⁵⁸⁸ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

Chapter 5**Egypt, The Mediterranean, South Africa, 1943**

'Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning'⁵⁸⁹

Winston Churchill, London, 9 November 1942

Although the Carbineers no longer played any major part in the battles following El Alamein their fight for survival were by no means over. For the men going back to the Union there waited the 1943 elections and the personal decision whether to enlist for a second tour of duty. The regiment itself also faced either garrison duty in the Union or amalgamation with one of the units that had not yet seen combat. In addition to these uncertainties there was the proposed conversion to an armoured car unit as part of the 1st South African Armoured Division. In spite of all these uncertainties, at least C Company's men were at home with their families and loved ones. The fate of many of their comrades was unknown as they found themselves prisoners all over North Africa and Italy. Not impressed with their status as POW's some C Company men planned and executed elaborate escapes while others decided to try and survive as best they could. While some of C Company's escapees were making their way south through Italy, the rest of the Regiment prepared to set sail once more for North Africa.

The End in North Africa

With the rest of the army in pursuit of the Germans the Carbineers were tasked with salvage operations which entailed scouring the battlefield of Alamein looking for reusable war material.⁵⁹⁰ On 10 November, the unit moved to Quassasin, which was a concentration area for all South African forces in North Africa.⁵⁹¹ The Carbineer convoy reached its destination at midday on 14 November and every opportunity for rest and recreation was given after the men settled into their new home. Numerous sport events like rugby, football and boxing were organised against other forces, but the men enjoyed the presence of South African woman volunteer units the most. For the first time in many months the troops could partake in social gatherings in a South African atmosphere⁵⁹² while leave was granted to those men not doing guard duty or other military tasks.⁵⁹³ There was already talk among the men of the proposed conversion to an armoured division,⁵⁹⁴ but then Field Marshall Smuts stated at a divisional parade on 22 November that they would soon be back in the Union

⁵⁸⁹ W. S. Churchill, **The End of the Beginning**, p 265.

⁵⁹⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November, 5 November.

⁵⁹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November, 10 November.

⁵⁹² NCA, P. C. A. Francis Collection, History of the Carbineers, p23.

⁵⁹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, November, 13 November.

⁵⁹⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p115.

and an excited C Company began preparing for the journey back home⁵⁹⁵ commencing with some serious celebrating that same evening.⁵⁹⁶

For the rest of December, while the Germans were slowly forced out of Africa, the Carbineers enjoyed a restful period with liberal sports fixtures against the neighbouring units. Long periods of leave were, however, not possible since the unit was on short notice to embark for South Africa.⁵⁹⁷ On 19 December 1st Brigade's beloved General Pienaar's plane crashed shortly after take-off from Kisumu on the way back to the Union, and the general and the eleven other passengers were killed.⁵⁹⁸ A memorial service was held on 22 December and was well attended by men who served under him.⁵⁹⁹ Another tragedy hit C Company on 23 December when the Company's best rugby players were not good enough on the day of battle and were defeated by B Company with the final score at 16 – 6.⁶⁰⁰ Christmas day was spent in a jovial mood and was completely missed by Private Hurley and the rest of his platoon. For them Christmas, the defeat of Rommel and their upcoming repatriation back to South Africa could simply not be properly celebrated without some hard drinking.⁶⁰¹ Bill Buckley, recently promoted to Lance-Corporal, joined the rest of C Company in a very nice Christmas meal of turkey and ham, served to the enlisted men by the officers and NCO's who dressed up as Egyptian merchants for the occasion.⁶⁰²

On 28 December Lance Corporal Buckley joined his company at Tel el Kabir where they were to commence training with tanks. The men were under the impression that their days of route marches were at an end and that they would in future ride into battle on armoured steeds. They were amazed at all the different kinds of tanks in use the Middle East⁶⁰³ but before the afternoon lectures could commence they learned that the course had been cancelled as the time to head back home had arrived.⁶⁰⁴ It was 1 January 1943, and in the harbour at Suez, the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, a large Dutch Liner, waited to transport the Carbineers south.⁶⁰⁵ With 8000 souls on board the *Nieuw Amsterdam* set sail on midday 2 January and soon reached its maximum speed of thirty knots. Lance Corporal Bill Buckley, self-proclaimed trouble maker of C Company thought to himself that they were starting 1943 in the best way possible.⁶⁰⁶

⁵⁹⁵ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 24 November 1942.

⁵⁹⁶ NCA, J. Hurley, Memoirs, p37.

⁵⁹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, December, 1 - 27 December.

⁵⁹⁸ A.M. Pollock, **Pienaar of Alamein**, p121.

⁵⁹⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, December, 22 December.

⁶⁰⁰ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 12 December 1942.

⁶⁰¹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶⁰² NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 25 December 1942.

⁶⁰³ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 2, 26 December 1942.

⁶⁰⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries Box 404, December, 27 December.

⁶⁰⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶⁰⁶ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

Going Home?

Just like on their journey to war more than two years earlier, C Company was again berthed near the stern of the *Nieu Amsterdam* which was steadily sailing south towards the Union.⁶⁰⁷ From the crew they learned that the *Nieu Amsterdam* was in the process of being built during the time of the Dunkirk evacuation and narrowly missed falling into the hands of the invading Germans. It was also boasted that the ship was actually more luxurious than the *Queen Mary*. This the troops could believe as they marvelled at the beautifully decorated halls and passages as they tried to find their way through the maze of passages and staircases that had a way of leaving many unfortunate Carbineers back where they started from.⁶⁰⁸ Their proximity to the vibrating engines, intense heat and severe overcrowding did little to dampen the mood of men on their way home.⁶⁰⁹

On another equally-crowded ship several C Company men travelled in the opposite direction about six months prior to 1st Brigade's departure for the Union. Among them were C Company's Cliff Portsmouth, Jack Rossiter and Harry Rose-Innes. The little convoy they were part of, however, was taking them away from freedom to Italy where they were to be imprisoned for the remainder of the war. In the weeks following the fall of Tobruk Allied prisoners were transported in batches to Benghazi, where they awaited transport to Europe.⁶¹⁰ After being searched and basically robbed of their worldly possessions by the Italian guards, the men were bundled into a large encampment where they awaited their fate. It was not long before malnutrition, diarrhoea and lice became part of everyday life.⁶¹¹ They also learnt how to appreciate Benghazi Pie which was fried bully beef stuffed into an Italian mini loaf of bread. This was to become their staple diet throughout their imprisonment, but only when they were fortunate enough to be in possession of both of the ingredients at the same time.⁶¹²

From Benghazi the ships set sail for Brindisi on the east coast of southern Italy. An additional fear that gripped the men in the different cargo holds of the ships was that they ran the very real risk of being torpedoed by one of the many British submarines in the Mediterranean. With Italian shipping suffering a forty eight percent loss on journeys to and from the mainland⁶¹³ the men hoped that this fate would not befall them before they reach their destination. Cliff Portsmouth witnessed one of the ships in the convoy he was traveling in

⁶⁰⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶⁰⁸ NCA, H.G. Symmons, Diary, Part 3, 2 January 1943.

⁶⁰⁹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶¹⁰ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p17.

⁶¹¹ S. G. Wolhuter. **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War** pp33 – 35.

⁶¹² A. Pressly. The Aquired Taste of Benghazi Pie, Natal Mercury, 3 August 1992.

⁶¹³ P. Ogilvie and N. Robinson, **In the Bag**, p33.

being torpedoed and sunk. None of the other ships stopped to provide assistance as they tried to escape the enemy submarine.⁶¹⁴

Some convoys had destroyer escorts or even some air cover but this did not deter determined submarine captains and the men were quite relieved when they sighted land again.⁶¹⁵ Portsmouth and his fellow Carbineers found a way into the hold next to the one they were locked up in. In it they found large quantities of tinned peas and vegetables. After weeks of Benghazi Pie, sometimes with bully beef and other times without, the men wasted no time in dishing out the tins to their comrades before their captors realised what had happened. It was not long after their hearty meal of cold peas and beans that the three hundred men in the hold began to experience the effect of their actions. Within a short period a symphony of farting and burping progressed to the next stage, causing the six oil drums that served as latrines to be swamped by men in dire need of relief.⁶¹⁶

Upon arrival at Brindisi, the men were marched to a transit camp, two hours away, without food or water. This march took them through the town where scores of Italian civilians stared at the ragtag mob that was strangely singing as they went. A few men were even fortunate enough to be offered fruit by some of the onlookers.⁶¹⁷ The civilians lining the street as the prisoners trudged along did not swear at the men or make rude remarks. Instead there were sad faces with sympathetic looks and several teary eyed-old women, gazing quietly at the procession.⁶¹⁸ At the transit camp the prisoners were at last issued with a small piece of bread and one tin of bully beef for every two men. Several days later they were marched off to the station where they were herded into a goods train. The journey ended at a small Italian village called Gravina. Here the men detrained and were marched another few kilometres to their new home Campo di Prigioneri di Guerra (CG) 65.⁶¹⁹

At six thirty each morning the men on the *Nieu Amsterdam* were served breakfast where after they would spend their days sunbathing, reading and writing. Their uneventful journey was only interrupted when, a day after crossing the equator on 7 January 1943, a shot suddenly rang throughout the ship. One of the men committed suicide with his rifle. His motives were unknown and the burial at sea took place on 10 January, while several whales, blowing jets of water into the air, swam past the ship.⁶²⁰ Three days later the convoy

⁶¹⁴ NCA, C. Portsmouth, Memoirs, p13.

⁶¹⁵ S. G. Wolhuter. **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War**, p 33 – 35.

⁶¹⁶ NCA, C. Portsmouth Memoirs, p14.

⁶¹⁷ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p17.

⁶¹⁸ S. G. Wolhuter. **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War**, p 38.

⁶¹⁹ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p17.

⁶²⁰ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 3, 10 January 1943.

reached Durban harbour and Bill Buckley joined the rest of the Carbineers in collecting their shore passes before the disembarkation process could begin.⁶²¹

In their desire to be the first to spot a loved one or friend, the men rushed the starboard side of the ship and now fought each other for the best place to see and be seen. The mass of bodies on one side of the vessel caused it to list dangerously resulting in it being unable to dock. Orders then had to be issued compelling half the cheering troops to move to the other side of the ship. Nothing could dampen their mood as half the men happily moved across to the portside.⁶²² After the *Nieuw Amsterdam* righted itself the men could begin the slow process of assembling on the docks.⁶²³ With the entire contingent assembled on the docks, the regiments began marching to Albert Park in Durban where they were to be accorded a civic welcome by the Mayor.⁶²⁴ After the Mayor's speech, Mrs Pienaar, the widow of late General D. Pienaar, delivered a message to her husband's boys. With a bottle of mineral water and some small cakes for provisions,⁶²⁵ the men of C Company wasted no time in making the most of the hours until midnight when they had to be back on board to unload the rest of the equipment and personal kit.⁶²⁶ Private Jerry Hurley was fortunate enough to have his brother Denis, who was on the staff of the cathedral in town, take care of him for the rest of the day.

By daybreak the next morning the men were on board a train that took them in comfort to Pietermaritzburg where another short march, a parade and more cakes awaited them.⁶²⁷ Upon arrival at Oribi Station the men grouped into companies to begin their short march through town to Hay Paddock camp where yet another welcoming parade was to be held.⁶²⁸ The marchers were soon joined by friends and relatives and it did not take long for the procession to turn into a confined 'mess of humanity'⁶²⁹ That evening another civic reception was hosted by the Mayor in the City Hall where the Carbineers were officially welcomed home after two and a half years of war.⁶³⁰ For the troops going on leave the next day there awaited a period of indulgence in the things they have been deprived of for so long and for Jerry Hurley the taste of real butter was simply 'marvellous'.⁶³¹

⁶²¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1943, January, Appendix A, Disembarkation Procedures.

⁶²² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶²³ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 3, 2 January 1943.

⁶²⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1943, 13 January.

⁶²⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶²⁶ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 3, 3 January 1943.

⁶²⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

⁶²⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1943, 14 January.

⁶²⁹ NCA, H.G. Symmons Diary, Part 3, 3 January 1943.

⁶³⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1943, 14 January.

⁶³¹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.



Figure 5.1: Capt E. McKenzie leads C Company through the streets of Pietermaritzburg upon the Regiment's return on 19 January 1943.⁶³²

A Changing Role for the Carbineers

The successes of Rommel's panzers during the middle half of 1941 highlighted the rewards that were to be reaped from employing armoured forces on future battlefields. It was during this period that the idea to have South Africa's infantry divisions convert to armoured divisions gained ground.⁶³³ It was however not simply a matter of prestige to have South African tanks coming to grips with the enemy that motivated the desire to convert to armour but also to have vehicles capable of successfully fighting future wars.⁶³⁴ The manpower situation in the UDF was far from desirable as severe shortages were suffered by most parts of the military services and this was probably the most realistic reason. Conversion to armoured divisions would mean that one whole infantry brigade of a division's three would be absorbed into the new structure that would have one armoured brigade group and a motorised brigade group with armoured cars acting as reconnaissance elements.⁶³⁵ In spite of Field Marshall Smuts' insistence that two such divisions should be maintained, the progress of the war in North Africa at that stage meant that South African armour was not in high demand. These two divisions were to become the 1st and 6th South African Armoured Divisions.⁶³⁶

On 21 February 1943 most of C Company's men started reporting back from leave. After being medically inspected the men were subjected to the normal military routine they have

⁶³² NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁶³³ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p1 – 2.

⁶³⁴ E.P. Kleynhans, The First South African Armoured Battle in Italy During the Second World War: The Battle of Celleno -10 June 1944, **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 40 (3), 2012, pp 274-275.

⁶³⁵ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p1 – 2.

⁶³⁶ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p3.

become accustomed to. Liberal daily leave was granted and orders were issued to go on specific courses then cancelled just as the men were about to leave. This normal military confusion was of course laced with several dances and functions hosted by the grateful citizens of Pietermaritzburg.⁶³⁷ The decline of Axis power in North Africa also meant that South African troops would have to be employed in Europe. This posed a problem since the current oath of service stated that troops would only be utilised in Africa. A new oath was then instituted which stated that:

‘I will serve anywhere for the duration of the present war and for a period of six months thereafter unless otherwise legally discharged’.⁶³⁸

Those men that did not wish to take this new oath were transferred to garrison units elsewhere in the Union. It was also decided that Non-European personnel should not be deployed in any future campaigns in Europe or that their numbers should be restricted to the very minimum.⁶³⁹ The rest of the men of C Company enjoyed their daily leave and numerous sport fixtures that were arranged during the first half of March.⁶⁴⁰ They were oblivious to the decisions made at Defence Headquarters (DHQ) regarding their future. To solve the manpower problem many units in the UDF were amalgamated. For the Carbineers this meant that they would have to merge with the Royal Durban Light Infantry. This move was intensely opposed by both units and was consequently cancelled. Because of DHQ’s decision to give units that have not seen combat yet a chance to go north a concerted effort was made by unit commanders of 1st Division to find suitable partners to ‘marry’ their own units to in order not be left behind in the Union as garrison troops.⁶⁴¹ This was however not the case with the Royal Natal Carbineers.

On 25 March at the Chief of the General Staff’s (CGS) conference in Pretoria the future of the 6th South African Armoured Division was explained as well as the process through which it was to draw its reserves. It was envisioned that the units in the Union would continue with training and other duties and provide men to the 6th Division as required.⁶⁴² Not wanting to dilute their unit with men from outside the Carbineer family or send Carbineers to other units as well as the desire to return to action as soon as possible necessitated a passionate plea by the Officer Commanding, Lt Col M. P. Comrie, who started his war as C Company’s commander. With the men assembled on the parade ground he explained that he had not submitted their attestation papers as yet and this meant that some would miss out on promotion but, most importantly, that there was a strong possibility that some will

⁶³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1944, 14 January.

⁶³⁸ NCA, V. Harte Collection, Service Oath.

⁶³⁹ H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, pp 249 - 251.

⁶⁴⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, March 1943, 1-12 March.

⁶⁴¹ H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, pp 234 - 235.

⁶⁴² DOD Archives, CGS War Group, Box 176, 6 Armoured Division Organisation, File CGS 38/35, Proceedings of and Main Decisions arising out of CGS’s Armoured Conference, Pretoria on 25 March.

be sent to other units as reinforcements. He told his men that the Carbineers could either convert to an independent armoured car unit or stay in the Union and become a garrison unit. After discussing the matter with his officers, Comrie told the men that they had decided to opt for the conversion to an armoured car regiment.⁶⁴³ C Company was to be no more and they commenced tank training as C Squadron⁶⁴⁴ and on 21 April the Regiment left for further training at Piet Retief.⁶⁴⁵

By the end of April the Regiment went on embarkation leave in preparation for departure to the North. Upon their return to Hay Paddock camp in Pietermaritzburg on 31 May the Carbineers found that through a supreme effort of Lt Col Comrie the Regiment reached its required wartime strength without having to merge with another unit.⁶⁴⁶ There then followed more sports matches against other units as well as civilian teams.⁶⁴⁷ Light tanks and armoured cars for 1st South African Armoured Division, of which the Carbineers were part of, only started to arrive in the Union during the middle of March 1943.⁶⁴⁸ Consequently very little training could be done for the role that the Carbineers were to fulfil. Those first weeks of April were, however, not without pain for the C Squadron's men as they were vaccinated against Small Pox and inoculated against Typhoid and Tetanus. With the 1st division already in Egypt since early April, the Carbineers became increasingly frustrated with the constant transferring of men in and out of the unit as well as the lack of facilities and training equipment.⁶⁴⁹ This feeling of discontent surfaced as a nationwide competition to produce the best recruitment poster was also held in the Regiment with 'Join up and help fill Victoria Hospital' and 'Join up! Train hard for the next display at the Wanderers' being some of the entries received.⁶⁵⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Comrie, in his negotiations with Defence Headquarters managed to secure enough men for the Carbineers to fill six fighting squadrons and one headquarters squadron plus a forty percent reserve. The prevailing mood in the Regiment was that the prospects had never seemed brighter as they did during June 1943.⁶⁵¹ It eventually dawned that the Union would not be able to field two armoured divisions and with 6th Armoured Division already in Egypt it seemed as if the men of the second division would be used as replacements for the fighting units.⁶⁵² On 24 June Comrie again travelled to Pretoria to

⁶⁴³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, March 1943, Appendix A, Address by Lt Col Comrie M. C. to First Royal Natal Carbineers 29 March.

⁶⁴⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, March 1943, 16-18 March.

⁶⁴⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, April 1943, 21 April.

⁶⁴⁶ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p117.

⁶⁴⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, June 1943, 1-7 June.

⁶⁴⁸ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p7.

⁶⁴⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, June 1943, 1-7 June.

⁶⁵⁰ H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p302.

⁶⁵¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, June 1943, 1-7 June.

⁶⁵² H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p302.

advocate against the breaking up of his regiment. He returned a few days later, but was only allowed to inform his regiment of their fate after the men recorded their votes in the 1943 General Election at the end of that month.⁶⁵³

With their votes recorded the Carbineers speculated as to what their future role would be. Their concerns were soon put to rest when their Commanding Officer informed them that they were to revert back to infantry again.⁶⁵⁴ This was the only way for the Carbineers to get back into the action as the 6th Armoured Division already had an armoured car regiment.⁶⁵⁵ This proposed conversion caused a great deal of concern and dismay. After the disbanding of the tank and armoured car units⁶⁵⁶ in 1943 several of their men re-enlisted in the Carbineers. This was to the advantage of both the Regiment as well as the individual soldiers since the Carbineers managed to recruit enough men to avoid amalgamation with another unit and the armoured car men would serve in a unit where the skills they have learnt in the desert would be appreciated. Orders were received at the end of August that all armoured car personnel serving in the Carbineers had to be transferred to the Imperial Light Horse Regiment.⁶⁵⁷

In spite of facing the prospect of having to undergo infantry training, the armoured car men were very reluctant to leave a unit of which they have become an integral part.⁶⁵⁸ Consequently Lt Col Comrie rushed to Defence Headquarters once more to try and get the orders reversed. There were however also men with considerable political connections inside the Carbineer family and it was not long before letters were written to politicians and military staff lamenting the interference in unit affairs. The matter reached a climax when Major R. C. Tomlinson, who started his war as C Company's second in command, sent a telegraph to Col C. F. Stallard threatening to stop all recruitment for the Regiment and to take the matter to the local press.⁶⁵⁹ On 26 August the orders were cancelled and all officers and men that were transferred out of the unit were returned.⁶⁶⁰ It was however not only in the Union that men fought to stay in or get back to their beloved C Squadron. On Friday 20 August leave was once more granted for men wishing to go to Johannesburg. Nine officers and seventy other ranks made use of the opportunity to get out of camp, while those that remained visited with friends and families in town.⁶⁶¹ On that same day that C Squadron's

⁶⁵³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, June 1943, 24-29 June.

⁶⁵⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, June 1943, 29 June.

⁶⁵⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, March 1943, Appendix A, Address by Lt Col Comrie M. C. to First Royal Natal Carbineers 29 March 1943

⁶⁵⁶ H. J. Martin and N. Orpen, **Military and Industrial Organisation**, p226 – 228.

⁶⁵⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, August 1943, 23 August.

⁶⁵⁸ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p117.

⁶⁵⁹ DOD Archives, Chief of the General Staff Archive, War Group, Box 291, File CGS 291/3, Re-designation and Disbandment, Letter by R. C. Tomlinson to Col C. F. Stallard, 25 August 1943,

⁶⁶⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, August 1943, 26 August.

⁶⁶¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, August 1943, 6-32 August.

men were enjoying their last hours in South Africa, Jack Rossiter and two other Springboks, decided it was time for them to take their leave as well and re-join their respective Regiments at all costs.

Prisoners in Italy

Private Rossiter was one of the luckier POW's shipped to Italy quite soon after their capture. Many of his comrades were to spend months languishing in the Benghazi cage waiting for transport to be arranged across the Mediterranean. In Campo di Prigionieri di Guerra (CG) 65, Rossiter and other Carbineers who were teachers or graduates set up courses in various subjects in an attempt to offset the misery and hardship of camp life.⁶⁶² An essential skill quickly learnt by the men was that of bartering with the Italian sentries. Since most of their valuables had been 'lost' during their capture the only thing the men could barter with were the contents of their limited Red Cross parcels. Certain items in these parcels were unobtainable in Italy and were often exchanged for bread or vegetables that were likewise non-existent within camp confines. C Company's men were however not about to let the Italian sentries off the hook completely and often carefully opened the packets of whatever was to be traded. After extracting the valuable contents the packet would be refilled with either grass or dust and presented to their Italian guards. It quickly became known that Rossiter's section leader, Lance Corporal Vic Andrews, a fellow Carbineer, was the camp expert in passing rubbish filled parcels to hapless Italian sentries.⁶⁶³

It was not just the men's morale and health that deteriorated in the POW camps but their clothing as well. For five months Rossiter wore the same pair of shorts that he was taken prisoner in. By November of 1942 it was tattered and beyond repair. The only garment that the Quarter Master Sergeant could spare was a pair of white woollen long-johns. Before eventually receiving a British Army greatcoat, Rossiter had to go on parade in a shirt that was falling apart, a pair of long-johns and what was once a decent pair of army boots.⁶⁶⁴ After his arduous journey from Benghazi, Cliff Portsmouth and a large contingent of South African prisoners arrived at CG 65 in the middle of winter.⁶⁶⁵ With Rossiter sporting his new look of woollen underwear and British coat, the current occupants of the camp stared in disbelief at the new batch of prisoners coming through the gate. They were basically walking skeletons after having to endure horrible conditions in the North African camps. It was summarily decided that the whole batch of Red Cross parcels should be issued to the new arrivals as well as half of the current prisoners' daily bread ration.⁶⁶⁶ To prevent hoarding of food by prisoners contemplating escape, the Italians punctured the tins of perishable food.

⁶⁶² J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p19.

⁶⁶³ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p19.

⁶⁶⁴ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p19.

⁶⁶⁵ NCA C. Portsmouth Memoirs, p14.

⁶⁶⁶ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p19.

This was a time-consuming process and resulted in a few parcels being distributed but by the time Portsmouth and his group arrived CG 65 was fairly well organised with labour parties, for those below the rank of Sergeant, allowed to work on Italian farms and factories.⁶⁶⁷

The allure of double rations was enough motivation for Rossiter to apply to the NCO in charge of work permits for permission to join a farm working party. To his disbelief his request was not approved on the grounds that he did not shave often enough. With the help of Vic Andrews he eventually managed to secure some blades from the sentries and soon found himself on an Italian farm in Tresanti. Here the men were able to acquire eggs, milk and cheese as well as local newspapers. From the papers the men learned of the demise of the German armies in Africa and eventually of the invasion and occupation of Sicily during August 1943. Rossiter attempted to persuade his fellow captives that it was only a matter of time before Italy would surrender and the prisoners be moved to Germany. Sensing that the time was right, Rossiter and seven other men that also worked on the farm removed the bars from a window in the wooden barracks that served as their cell. Once through the window they scaled a wall and headed north towards the Gargano Mountains since the area to the south was teeming with German patrols.⁶⁶⁸ While these Springboks were on the run in Italy, the rest of their Regiment were about to set sail for a yet undisclosed location somewhere in the Mediterranean.

⁶⁶⁷ M. Leigh, *Captives Courageous, South African Prisoners of War World War 2*, pp64 – 65.

⁶⁶⁸ J. Rossiter, *The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943*, pp 22 - 30.

Chapter 6**South Africa, Egypt, Italy and Germany, 1943 to 1945**

'I just have to shoot a Jerry sometime'⁶⁶⁹

B. E. Fainsinger, 10 May 1940

A reorganised Natal Carbineer Regiment embraced its new role as mechanised unit and eagerly awaited the next confrontation with their old foes as they trained alongside South African armour at El Khataba. Even during those swirling attacks in the desert there were those who questioned the suitability of tanks in the mountainous terrain of Italy where the Carbineers were expected to be deployed to next. With the rumoured move to Italy nearing, the Carbineers reverted back to a motorised unit and in the months that followed C Company fought some of its toughest battles of the war. Everything seemed to be against them; from defenders fighting for every rock and crevasse to the elements exposing the south Africans to torrential rain and the mud which followed to very deep snow. In camps across the Third Reich several C Company members languished while awaiting the end of the war. Those few that made a break faced their own tribulations while on the run in enemy-controlled territory. For the remainder of the year the Springboks pushed the enemy further north until, on 27 April, C Company crossed the River Po in northern Italy. In spite of the war not yet officially over, the UDF began implementing its repatriation plans in an effort to get the men home as quickly as possible when peace are eventually declared. The struggle to reintegrate soldiers back into civilian life was about to begin.

C Company returns to North Africa

No one dared question Dering Stainbank's dedication to the imperial cause but, after three years of war, even he contemplated getting out of the infantry. A year before he applied for a transfer to the air force but, due to the bad state of his nerves, he was only suited for the position of rear gunner of a bomber which was the worst place to be when fighting Germans in the air. His dreams of flying then gone, Stainbank used his influence with the company commander to secure at least six months extra leave on account of being desperately needed on the family farm. This was a common practice with many South Africans excusing themselves from the war to tend to business back home, in spite of the fact that very few of those that returned were as desperately needed as they made it seem.⁶⁷⁰

Standing once more on parade listening to some dignitary going on about the war and how everyone should do their part, Jerry Hurley thought about his own time on leave. It was indeed a lazy time in which he rose late and was pampered by everyone at home. He felt quite like an important person himself.⁶⁷¹ It was at that moment when the spectators and

⁶⁶⁹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, , 10 May 1940,

⁶⁷⁰ Interview: C.D. Stainbank - M. Coghlan, 12 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁶⁷¹ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p38.

men on parade erupted in applause that Hurley was plucked from his daydream. At the edge of the parade ground two C Company members had just officially received awards. They were Quentin Smythe, promoted to Second Lieutenant⁶⁷², for his action in the desert and Peter Pope-Ellis for his gallantry at Gelib.⁶⁷³ All prospects for some more time at home disappeared when, during lunch, the men were informed that the H.M.T. *Stratheden* in Durban harbour, waited to take them back to the desert. At three in the afternoon on 14 September the convoy of four transport ships, a battleship and five destroyers put to sea.⁶⁷⁴ For the remainder of the voyage the men busied themselves with sports, concerts, debates and the constant practising of 'emergency attack stations'.⁶⁷⁵

Trooper B. E. Fainsinger likened their circumstances to that of galley slaves and was not impressed with the cramped conditions below deck. Some of his worst experiences were during meal times when, due to the heat, the men had to strip down to the waste. Under normal circumstances this would not have been a bad thing but, inside the hot mess halls crammed with a hundred or more men, the rate of perspiration was such that one could not bring spoon to mouth without sweat dripping into it. Fainsinger admitted that this did, however, provide some salt to the otherwise 'Pommey' food.⁶⁷⁶ Fainsinger was in his third year of studying dentistry when he decided to enlist in the UDF. In spite of certain medical faculties falling in the reserved occupation bracket and thus not allowed to go to war and against his father's wishes he signed up and eventually found his way to C Squadron.⁶⁷⁷ After disembarking at Port Tewfik, all seven Carbineer squadrons were bundled into cattle trucks and sent off to their new home in the desert El Khataba.⁶⁷⁸ The men were allowed one day to settle in and were officially welcomed on 4 October by the commanding officer of the 12th South African Motorised Brigade, Brigadier R. J. Palmer.⁶⁷⁹ It was on this parade that the men of C Squadron learned that they were indeed destined for infantry operations in Italy as part of 6th Armoured Division's infantry element.⁶⁸⁰

The change from armoured car unit back to an infantry unit once more necessitated a good measure of reorganisation. The Regiment reverted back to having three infantry companies and a Support Company which would also serve as the carrier platoon. Lt Col Comrie made it known that it was his intention to train four rifle companies from which he would pick his team when the time came for the Regiment to take the field.⁶⁸¹ After a few days were spent

⁶⁷² DOD Archives, Personnel Files, Quentin George Murray Smythe.

⁶⁷³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, September 1943, 10 September.

⁶⁷⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, September 1943, 14 September.

⁶⁷⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, September 1943, 15 September.

⁶⁷⁶ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p13.

⁶⁷⁷ Interview, B. E. Fainsinger - M. Coghlan, 10 Sept 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

⁶⁷⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, October 1943, 1-3 October.

⁶⁷⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, October 1943, 4 October.

⁶⁸⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p19.

⁶⁸¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, October 1943, 5 October.

reorganising the Carbineers began training for their new role. In addition to river crossings and mine-bridging drills that had to be learnt, the most important task of the Carbineers was to be that of close co-operation with tanks.⁶⁸² Ben Fainsinger was eager for action and could not wait for the training exercises to finish. Unfortunately for him he had a rare talent which might have kept him from joining his mates in C Company. Ben was a talented trumpet player and played with the Imperial Light Horse Regiment's band which was on the same ship from the Union. It was here that he caught the eye of the RSM who seized the opportunity in appointing Fainsinger as the official trumpeter of the Regiment.⁶⁸³ In the weeks that followed the men of C Company charged through swirling dust clouds made by 6th Armoured Division's tanks during their many training exercises. Choking on the desert dust the men of C Company saw their dreams of riding into battle on steel chariots of their own disappear along with the rapidly advancing armoured elements of the Division as training for mobile warfare continued until January 1944.⁶⁸⁴

Desert training did not prepare the men for what awaited them in Italy. Exercises at company level entailed moving out to a spot in the desert to test company cooking, resupply, administrative and communication systems.⁶⁸⁵ Divisional exercises in most cases took the form of a general advance of a beaten and retreating enemy with river crossings and mine-lifting operations being the most challenging activities. In their last divisional scheme of 1943 the Carbineers were ordered to pursue a fictional enemy force as they retreated to Suez where the Japanese Imperial Navy was waiting to stage a 'Dunkirk' for them.⁶⁸⁶ South African planners were urged by their British counterparts to reconsider the conversion from infantry to armour. Their argument was that the Eighth Army had enough armour units already and the need was for more specialised units as well as infantry.⁶⁸⁷ Misgivings about the value of armoured forces in Italy were expressed during the desert training phase in Egypt and it was pointed out that 6th Division were only suited for operations in the desert. With no further demand for armour in Italy there was speculation that the South Africans were destined to maintain law and order in Palestine and an urgent request was sent to Smuts for guidance on the Division's future utilisation.⁶⁸⁸

As more South Africans moved steadily north from the Union to Egypt, Jack Rossiter found himself in a RAF Dakota bound for Cairo. During the first week of September 1943 Rossiter managed to secure a new paybook and with it some back-pay. After learning of his

⁶⁸² A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p118.

⁶⁸³ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p14.

⁶⁸⁴ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p 40.

⁶⁸⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, November 1943, 22 November.

⁶⁸⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, November 1943, Appendix C, 1 RNC Battalion Group. Exercise 17 – 23 December 1943.

⁶⁸⁷ J. Kross, **War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto tot the Alps**, p6.

⁶⁸⁸ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp 23 -24.

Regiment's arrival in Egypt a few days earlier⁶⁸⁹, Rossiter wasted no time in tracking them down where they were training at El Khataba. Here he was welcomed warmly by Lt Col Comrie and several of his old comrades and stated in no uncertain terms that he wished to return to C Company after some home leave. This was granted on the spot but, in the time it took to process his paperwork, Jack had to recount the tale of his miraculous escape from captivity several times.⁶⁹⁰



Map 6.1: The 6th South African Armoured Division's route through Italy, April 1944 to May 1945.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, October 1943, 2 October.

⁶⁹⁰ J. Rossiter, *The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943*, p66.

⁶⁹¹ J. Kross, *War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps*, pviii.

On the Run in Italy

Of the eight men in Rossiter's party five were either shot and wounded or recaptured shortly after their escape. From 20 August until 28 September the three surviving men hid in caves and in forests during the day and only dared to move at night. During these nocturnal movements, apart from being devoid of any navigational aids, escapees ran the additional risk of stumbling into one of the many anti-aircraft batteries sites all over the countryside. Rossiter's escape nearly ended the same night it began when, while forcing his way through thick bush, he tripped over a field telephone wire that ran to one such anti-aircraft battery. To prevent all three men from falling into enemy hands the leading man would be just within sight. The other two only approached him when they received a predetermined signal. As their adventure continued and their association grew through shared trials and tribulations, they decided to abandon this system and that what happened to one of them must happen to the other two as well.⁶⁹²

The men lived on berries and fruit that they found in the vicinity of a cave which served as their home for the first week after their escape. It was here that they hid from Italian patrols and German observation aircraft, while battling boredom and frequent bouts of fever. On 5 September, while the Carbineers in South Africa joined the rest of the Union in a national day of prayer, proclaimed by His Majesty King George VI,⁶⁹³ Rossiter's escape came to an abrupt end after an Italian farmer spotted them and betrayed their location to local Italian troops. The prisoners were taken to Manfredonia which was a little town on the Adriatic. Here they received some bread and wine from the local villagers and were in a better situation as prisoners as opposed to when they were free men. The three escapees were amazed to learn that their Italian guards were equally anxious for the approaching British troops to arrive and evict the Germans from Italy.⁶⁹⁴

On 9 September the three men were brought before the Italian company commander and after exclaiming that 'Today we are friends' and shaking their hands he informed them that Italy had signed an armistice with the Allied forces. Two days later the prisoners and an escort of five troops and an officer, which was all that remained of the 93rd Blackshirt Battalion's company which deserted during the night, moved to another camp outside town. Helping their captors unloading ammunition the three South Africans were at first amused to see the Italian troops scattering in all directions when a truck with German soldiers approached at high speed. They soon realised that another opportunity for escape have presented itself and the three joined the fast disappearing Italians in a headlong flight.

⁶⁹² J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, pp32 -34.

⁶⁹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, September 1943, 5 September.

⁶⁹⁴ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, pp48 - 49.

In a nearby farmhouse the men met several Italian soldiers who were now also running from their erstwhile allies and agreed to take the South Africans with them.⁶⁹⁵

It was at this point that Rossiter cut his story short by explaining that the rest of the time they were assisted by an Italian farmer and his family who brought food and news to their shelter in a rocky gorge. On 26 September, Jack and his comrades witnessed the last German troops withdrawing from their area in a northern direction and on Tuesday 28 September they made contact with a British armoured car patrol that entered the little town. After fifteen months as POW's, the three men parted ways and Jack Rossiter headed for south to Africa where he hoped to be reunited with his company.⁶⁹⁶

Not all Carbineer prisoners were as fortunate to be reunited with C Company. Harry Rose-Innes, also captured at Tobruk, managed to befriend the German guard in the cattle truck in which he and other South Africans were being transported through Italy to Germany. When this sentry tended to one of the sick men in his care and with some distraction by his fellow prisoners, Rose-Innes squeezed through a window of the moving coach and disappeared into the night.⁶⁹⁷ Three men gambled with their lives by jumping into the darkness that night. Since the only food the trio managed to retain during their jump was two Red Cross parcels they knew that at some stage they would have to approach local villagers for help. In spite of losing their warm clothes and most of the food so carefully hoarded prior to the escape, the men began their trek north toward Milan and the Mountains where they hoped to hide out for the remainder of the war. Just like many other would-be escapees, Rose-Innes and the two men that also risked broken limbs by jumping from the moving train travelled by night and tried to avoid contact with the local population as much as possible.⁶⁹⁸ For about a month the men travelled further north, closer to freedom, reaching the River Po in late October. Out of necessity the fugitives joined a group of Italian women that appeared to be about to cross a bridge over the river. It was, however, unfortunate that the women had no intention of crossing the river, leaving the three men to cross the guarded bridge by themselves. The golden rule of not drawing attention to oneself while on the run was broken and Harry Rose-Innes's escape ended on a bridge over the Po.⁶⁹⁹ Sitting in the guardhouse waiting to be interrogated, the ex-POW's were amazed when an Italian girl was allowed to speak with them. The girl boldly explained to the men that it was she who betrayed their true identity to the soldiers on the bridge. She stated that the Germans were her friends and not the British. Flabbergasted Rose-Innes realised that not all Italians despised their German occupiers and that Fascism was very much still alive in Northern

⁶⁹⁵ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, pp50 - 51.

⁶⁹⁶ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, pp61 - 62.

⁶⁹⁷ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp20 – 25.

⁶⁹⁸ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp29 - 33.

⁶⁹⁹ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp179 - 181.

Italy.⁷⁰⁰ Carbineer Harry Rose-Innes did eventually cross the Po Valley, but it was to be as a POW. His destination was not freedom in the Mountains but a German POW camp near Munich.⁷⁰¹

Training in the Desert for operations in the Italian Mountains

In the same month that Rose-Innes reached the River Po, Dering Stainbank celebrated his twenty first birthday on his family's farm at Eston. One of the guests was Lt Col Comrie who now used his influence as family friend to insist on Stainbank's return to the Carbineers. The promise made by Comrie of sending Stainbank on an officer's course was enough to entice him to agree to return early in the next year.⁷⁰² The Carbineers celebrated their fourth wartime Christmas at El-Khataba in the usual fashion. This entailed early morning church services, well wishes from various high-ranking officers in the afternoon and then the main event which was the Christmas dinner during which the enlisted men were served, and waited upon, by their officers and senior NCO's.⁷⁰³ Lady luck then again smiled on C Company as they welcomed the New Year with a victory over the rest of the Regiment's soccer teams on 1 January 1944.⁷⁰⁴ The consequent victory celebrations were renewed as news of the defeat of a New Zealand rugby team at the hands of the Division's team reached the men. Two Carbineers, Frank Kingwill and Bawden Coombe were part of that winning team.⁷⁰⁵ It was not only in sports that the Carbineers excelled. The Regiment produced the play 'Journey's End' which drew two thousand spectators per show for four nights.⁷⁰⁶ Special effects included machinegun fire and detonators exploding in the desert outside the theatre. The highpoint of the show was when a young officer dies in the arms of his company commander. The men playing these parts were Private L. G. McNicholas, as the dying soldier, and Corporal V. Gardner, as the company commander, and had the audience on their feet at the end of each show⁷⁰⁷.

On 4 January, with the Christmas and New Year's merriment over, the Carbineers mobilised for exercises 'Grahamstown' and 'Standerton'. Both these schemes involved the motorised movement over vast tracts of desert waste. The objective in each case was to breach an imaginary minefield which one company had to secure. The rest of the force would then pour through the breach and set up a defensive bridgehead on the other side. In the

⁷⁰⁰ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, p182.

⁷⁰¹ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp204.

⁷⁰² Interview: C.D. Stainbank - M. Coghlan, 12 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁷⁰³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, December 1943, 25 December.

⁷⁰⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1944, 1 January.

⁷⁰⁵ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p40.

⁷⁰⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1944, 31 January.

⁷⁰⁷ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p40.

scenario an enemy armoured column would then launch a counterattack. A 'Gun Line',⁷⁰⁸ would then quickly be taken in and the enemy engaged. In every exercise the enemy were soundly beaten and the regiment returned to base for debrief, some rest and begun preparing for the next one.⁷⁰⁹ The most ambitious training exercise the Carbineers took part in was a two divisional scheme involving 6th Division as friendly forces and a British armoured division with attached local elements as the enemy. At 0600 on 16 January, Trooper Fainsinger sounded Reveille and exercise 'Tussle' commenced with C Company in reserve and Fainsinger even further from any action at the Regiment HQ. He thought he had a truly lousy job as trumpeter, having to wake up earlier than his friends and going to bed much later as well. His days were filled with sounding Reveille, reporting of guards, sounding parades, reporting of defaulters, calls for meals through to last light. To add to his plight he had to hoist the flag in the morning and lower it again in the evening. Instead of being in the line of enemy fire he received endless, although good natured, remarks about 'Fainsinger's Follies' from his fellow Carbineers.⁷¹⁰ The Carbineers advanced toward their assigned objective, and like so many times before, secured the enemy minefield, breached it, established a bridgehead and beat off an enemy armoured counterattack on the morning of 21 January.⁷¹¹ Under very tough desert conditions, which comprised swirling dust storms and extremely low temperatures, the divisional commander Major General W.H.E. Poole jokingly referred to 'Tussle' as the Division's first battle honour.⁷¹² For the men of C Company the real tussle took place when some of the 'enemy' Egyptian soldiers refused to be taken prisoner resulting in some close quarters hand to hand combat.⁷¹³

After 'Tussle', things returned to normal for the Carbineers with more liberal town leave and inter-unit sports.⁷¹⁴ Rumours about the need or lack thereof for armoured units never died down and then at last, on 7 March, the Regiment received its marching orders. The destination, however, was in a completely different direction. The men of 6th Division was ordered to Palestine for police duties. In spite of not going back into action immediately, the move out of the desert was welcomed by the South Africans.⁷¹⁵

Advance parties were sent out and preparations were made to probably sit out the remainder of the war in the Middle East. There was speculation that this move was an

⁷⁰⁸ This was a defensive position that was taken in whenever an armoured attack was imminent. In this formation the anti-tank guns were moved right up to the most forward troops and engage the enemy in concert with supporting infantry.

⁷⁰⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1944, 4-7 January.

⁷¹⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p21.

⁷¹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 89, January 1944, 16-21 January.

⁷¹² N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p21.

⁷¹³ J. Kross, **War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto tot the Alps**, p7.

⁷¹⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, March 1944, 20 March.

⁷¹⁵ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p 24.

elaborate hoax to fool enemy agents⁷¹⁶ as the mood around camp was very secretive.⁷¹⁷ Then on 12 March the Palestine order was cancelled and brand new rumours and speculations filled the air whenever the Carbineers enjoyed a break from their training.⁷¹⁸ The debates about the Regiment's future were further animated by an elaborate deception scheme devised to further mislead enemy agents regarding the movement of the South Africans. The men were required to remove all badges and insignia of identification. They were also required to pretend to be British troops and every effort was made to have the enemy think that a powerful new South African division, the 7th South African Armoured Division, was preparing for an invasion of the Balkans.⁷¹⁹

On 1 April, all clocks were advanced one hour and transport prepared for a journey by sea. With a host of security lectures, discussions on various tactical situations and several officers going for reconnaissance in Southern Italy it was hardly possible to keep the destination of the South Africans a secret in spite of all the countermeasures.⁷²⁰ News about stubborn German resistance at some famous monastery somewhere in Italy became the new topic of discussion as the South Africans boarded their trains and headed for the coast. While Carbineers prepared to conclude their part played in Egypt, the Battle of Monte Cassino was hotly contested resulting in both the New Zealand and Polish assaults failing to capture the Mountaintop objective.⁷²¹ As the troop train carrying C Company eventually reached Alexandria, Jerry Hurley realised, when he saw HMT *Circassia*, it was to be the fifth time he would board a troopship during the war.⁷²² Carbineer Fainsinger's first day at sea was spent disobeying all orders and simply lying on deck as he was violently struck down with that malady that afflict most landlubbers when they venture out to sea – seasickness. Not having seen any combat yet he thought this to be the worst day of his life and he prayed to God to end his misery and let him die.⁷²³ This was not what he signed up for at all. He refused to go on officer courses or be drafted into the medical corps to be utilised as a dentist since all he wanted to do was handle a gun and get into action.⁷²⁴ He was however not alone as the war diary reflects that '...the first day the sea was rough and a number succumbed to seasickness'.⁷²⁵

⁷¹⁶ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p 24.

⁷¹⁷ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p23.

⁷¹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, March 1944, 12 March.

⁷¹⁹ E. P. Hartshorn, **Avenge Tobruk**, pp 184 - 187.

⁷²⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 1 April.

⁷²¹ G. A. Shepperd, **The Italian Campaign 1943 - 45**, pp 237 -251.

⁷²² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p58.

⁷²³ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p26.

⁷²⁴ Interview: B. E. Fainsinger - M. Coghlan, 10 Sept 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

⁷²⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 16 April.

From Taranto to the River Arno

Fainsinger's wish for deliverance might have been granted on 18 April as their destroyer escorts suddenly ran up black flags, indicating enemy submarine activity, and dropped depth charges into the water. With the troop transports heading away from the danger⁷²⁶ the men were reminded by the crew that two ships of the previous convoy were sunk by the underwater menace but a few days before. With this knowledge the men were able to clip two minutes off their reaction time when executing the lifeboat drill.⁷²⁷ This pleased the captain and crew who, after having taken part in the Anzio landings, were just too happy to make the return journey in one piece.⁷²⁸ The coastline was reached on 20 April and the men marvelled at the beauty of the Italian mainland.⁷²⁹ Debarkation at Taranto was quickly completed and, after a short march to waiting transport, C Company found itself heading towards Gravina which was reached at 1400 in the afternoon. The Carbineers were billeted in a modern, yet empty, high school while they waited for the rest of the Regiment to arrive. Ben Fainsinger, while exploring the town struck up a conversation with an old Italian woman whose son, he discovered, was a prisoner of war in Cape Town. The irony of 'them being over there and us here' was not lost on him.⁷³⁰ For the South Africans gathering at Gravina there was little time for sightseeing and C Company found itself on the road to Bojano in the north scarcely a week after having landed in Italy.⁷³¹ The Carbineers were to take part in the Allied assault on the strongly-defended Gustav Line which was a series of defended positions straddling the Italian Peninsula from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic Sea.⁷³²

The Carbineers were instructed to relieve the hard-pressed Cape Breton Highlanders which formed part of the 11th Canadian Brigade.⁷³³ As they travelled past Foggia and its surrounding farmlands, Jack Rossiter pointed out the farm on which he worked as a POW a mere 6 months before.⁷³⁴ With the monastery at Monte Cassino still in enemy hands the Carbineers were transported to Aquafondata before they continued on foot. Two routes were available to reach their assigned positions. The first, 'North Passage' was a dirt road under constant observation from the enemy and were to be used only in dire emergencies while the other 'Inferno Track' was an improvised track along a stream with the same

⁷²⁶ E. Axelson, **A Year in Italy: An account of a year as military historian with the South African 6th Armoured Division in Italy 1944-1945**, p9.

⁷²⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 18 April.

⁷²⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p58.

⁷²⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 20 April.

⁷³⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p27.

⁷³¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 25 April.

⁷³² W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities of the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, pp44-46.

⁷³³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944, 25 April.

⁷³⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p119.

name.⁷³⁵ After the men debussed they filed down the Inferno Track taking care not to be run over by jeeps that raced up and down the track. Their first stop was 'Hove Dump' which was an ammunition and supplies depot hidden between steep cliff faces and out of sight of the enemy.⁷³⁶ At eight in the evening the Carbineers set off and arrived at Hove Dump at half past eleven and were treated to hot tea prepared by the Cape Bretton Highlander cooks.⁷³⁷

Traveling on foot up the line gave Ben Fainsinger further reason to complain. His one hundred rounds of rifle ammunition, three Bren machinegun magazines, greatcoat, blanket, gas cape and personal kit seemed to pull him into the earth and he wondered how he was to manage the twelve miles to his assigned position. Fainsinger described the first leg of their journey as 'hell' with guys falling out all over the show. In spite of the hot tea, no one looked forward to the rest of the climb that lay ahead. To add to their dismay, the last part of the trip had to be conducted wearing snow shoes and in utter silence in order not to provoke a response from the German gunners.⁷³⁸ Upon reaching their allocated positions the Carbineers began to prepare their individual holes and trenches with C Company occupying a position at the foot of Monte Cifalco.⁷³⁹ Allowing his companies one night to settle in, Lt Col Comrie ordered extensive patrolling of the front from 8 May onwards. This brought the deployed platoons under constant mortar and artillery fire.⁷⁴⁰ The trouble with these patrols, according to Trooper Fainsinger, was that all the positions were on top of hills and this necessitated one to go down one slope and up another.⁷⁴¹ It was during one of these patrols that the Carbineers suffered their first casualty of the Italian campaign when Lance Corporal B. Airey was killed and two others wounded while trying to disarm an enemy booby trap.⁷⁴² Of the 750 Carbineers that went into the front lines at the opening stages of the campaign, 127 were destined never to return home, while a further 369 would be wounded in what was to be Regiments' bloodiest campaign of the war.⁷⁴³

Peering from their dugouts many Springboks longed for the flat open country of the Western Desert over which they rehearsed countless fast moving mobile exercises. The veterans of the campaign in East Africa agreed that the terrain they faced then was indeed not as rugged as that which stretched out before them in May 1944.⁷⁴⁴ In the desert, places

⁷³⁵ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp 27-28.

⁷³⁶ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p120.

⁷³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 3 May.

⁷³⁸ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p30.

⁷³⁹ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p121.

⁷⁴⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 8 May.

⁷⁴¹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p31.

⁷⁴² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 9 May.

⁷⁴³ G. B. Hobbs, **From Sicily to the Alps: Personal accounts and recollections of World War II**, p88.

⁷⁴⁴ W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities if the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, pp47 - 48.

of importance were often mere map references with nothing identifiable to assist in navigation. To this was added the ever-present sandstorms and flies which added to the misery of the troops. In contrast the future battlefields of Italy were mostly hilly with the Apennines Mountain range stretching from north to south. C Company also quickly learned that the towns and villages located on top of the hills, which Trooper Fainsinger complained about, offered excellent observation posts to a determined enemy. With an abundance of natural vegetation and elevated positions the area was perfect for siting anti-tank guns, tanks, machinegun nests and the placing of mines and booby traps.⁷⁴⁵ To shield friendly forces from the eyes of the enemy the area in which the Carbineers found themselves was under a constant vile smelling smoke-screen during the day⁷⁴⁶ but at night both sides tried to infiltrate the other and there were constant night time ambushes and probing attacks. C Company repelled one such an attack on the night of 9 May and by noon the next day the forward positions were approached by some German soldiers waving a Red Cross flag. The Italian treachery at Gelib not yet forgotten, survivors of that battle cautioned those men who have not yet been in battle to remain alert. The enemy was however allowed to collect their dead and wounded unmolested.⁷⁴⁷ This was to the relief of the men in the forward trenches since the Carbineers were now introduced to a new element of static warfare they did not encounter during the fluid battles of the desert which was the smell given off by the unburied dead.⁷⁴⁸ With the slightest noise at night magnified several times over and every shadow a possible enemy trying to infiltrate the line, the sentries did not hesitate to open fire when they felt threatened. To prevent returning patrols from being fired upon by friendly forces, the system of passwords was extensively used. Hours after the battle on the night of 9 May one such patrol approached the Carbineer piquet line. The sentries challenged the approaching figures with the first half of the password and awaited a reply. After a second challenge without a satisfactory reply the sentries thought they heard someone speaking in German. They consequently fired into the bushes to their front and were rewarded with one enemy 'kill'. Upon closer investigation they discovered to their horror that they have just killed Second Lieutenant Willoughby Jackson of the First City Regiment.⁷⁴⁹ Some of the men recognised Jackson from when he joined the Carbineers as a Sergeant in 1940. They also revealed that the unfortunate Lieutenant was a prolific stutterer and it was concluded that in his attempt to reply to the challenge of the sentries his stuttering mistakenly exposed him as being a German infiltrator.⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴⁵ G. B. Hobbs, **From Sicily to the Alps: Personal accounts and recollections of World War II**, p91.

⁷⁴⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p59.

⁷⁴⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 10 May.

⁷⁴⁸ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p33.

⁷⁴⁹ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, W. Jackson, 330V.

⁷⁵⁰ Interview: P. Valentine – M. Coghlan, 21 October, Pietermaritzburg.

The South Africans were assigned a holding role to the east of the Cassino monastery in order to reinforce the Allied elements preparing to break through the Gustav line.⁷⁵¹ In the build-up to the fourth attack on Monte Cassino, the Germans continuously attacked the entrenched South Africans with artillery and aircraft⁷⁵² resulting in several men being killed, none from C Company however.⁷⁵³ Lying in his slit trench, listening to the sounds of battle coming from the west, Fainsinger's nerves were on edge. Every now and again the enemy would unleash a violent bombardment and then in the aftermath the men of C Company would strain their ears to listen for the slightest noise whilst imagining all forms of things coming towards them from the darkness.⁷⁵⁴ The slightest movement brought down a torrent of either machinegun or mortar fire on those foolish enough not to remain behind cover.

It was not only the men in the slit trenches that had to remain out of sight during daytime but those fortunate enough to occupy some of the few buildings as well. The sections which were allocated some sort of building did, however, have to get used to the 'potty' system when relieving themselves. Dering Stainbank, who was acting platoon sergeant during this period, was not amused when a fellow Carbineer, whose duty it was to ensure that the pot remained empty, allowed it to overflow right onto a sleeping Stainbank. As punishment the hapless fellow was made to dig a latrine the next morning in full view of the Germans.⁷⁵⁵ Fortunately he did not attract any action from the enemy and suffered his punishment unhindered. Fainsinger and Roy Petrie, who occupied an observation position further down the line, were not so lucky. With their shift just about to finish at dawn Roy got careless and stuck his head over the top of their position to have a look around. From nowhere several bursts of machinegun rounds hit the rocks around the two Carbineers and ricocheted in all directions. This was the first time that Fainsinger was directly fired upon by someone deliberately trying to kill him. Hugging the ground, now fully awake, he undertook to be more respectful of incoming bullets and shrapnel. Quite pleased that he survived the enemy onslaught Fainsinger noted in his diary that since he achieved one of his objectives which were to be shot at and survive he did his part for the war effort and looked forward to returning home in one piece.⁷⁵⁶

Shortly before midnight on 11 May, number eight platoon of C Company experienced the greatest bombardment since El Alamein a year and a half before. The fourth attempt at capturing Monte Cassino was underway.⁷⁵⁷ With sleep not an option, the men lay in their

⁷⁵¹ G. A. Shepperd, **The Italian Campaign 1943 - 45**, pp251 -252.

⁷⁵² N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy**, p 34.

⁷⁵³ **DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645**, May 1944, 11-12 May.

⁷⁵⁴ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, 36.

⁷⁵⁵ Interview: C.D. Stainbank - M. Coghlan, 12 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁷⁵⁶ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p36.

⁷⁵⁷ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p 35.

slit trenches and listened to the battle raging on through the night. Those brave enough to peer into the darkness saw red and orange flashes appearing all over the enemy held positions as artillery rounds rained down without end.⁷⁵⁸ C Company's position in the line was a most unpleasant one with a line of deserted farmhouses separating the thick woodland that was occupied by both sides. It was into these wooded areas that the various patrols ventured out at night to find someone to shoot at.⁷⁵⁹ Fainsinger's section had the honour of being the most forward position of the whole Allied line in Italy and they often heard the enemy talking only a few yards away. For the men of C Company it felt as if they were on constant patrol during this period in the line. The Germans did not leave the Carbineers unmolested and as the Poles were fighting it out with German paratroopers on Monastery Hill, number 8 platoon were on the receiving end of some very accurate enemy counter bombardment. Fainsinger was busy writing in his diary when enemy mortar bombs began falling around their positions. He was entertaining the thought of news reaching his family that he, Ben Fainsinger, has 'died for his country' when a nearby tree got uprooted and landed right on top of his hole. From under the leaves he hoped so desperately for the bombardment to stop that he did not even hear the hysterical laughter of his neighbour in the trench next to him.⁷⁶⁰

During this torrent of fire Fainsinger drew courage from their platoon sergeant, N.M. Clothier, who calmly directed the young Carbineers to better positions and to remain behind cover. Lying under the fallen tree Fainsinger added another ambition to his list of things to do during this war. He simply had to '...shoot a Jerry some time' and hoped that he did not get shot first in the process.⁷⁶¹ With his defensive lines penetrated at various places and the vital position of Cassino lost, Field Marshal Kesselring, the German commander in the Italian theatre thinned out his lines and prepared to fight further delaying actions from established positions north of Rome.⁷⁶² Trooper Ben Fainsinger therefore had to wait until then to realise his ambition of bagging a Hun. Had he known that the men they were to face north of Rome were the crack troops of the Herman Göring Division, kept in reserve to stem any breakout, he might not have looked forward to his next brush with the foe.

⁷⁵⁸ E. Axelson, **A Year in Italy: An account of a year as military historian with the South African 6th Armoured Division in Italy 1944-1945**, p14.

⁷⁵⁹ W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities of the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, p 56.

⁷⁶⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p40.

⁷⁶¹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p41.

⁷⁶² N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p 39.

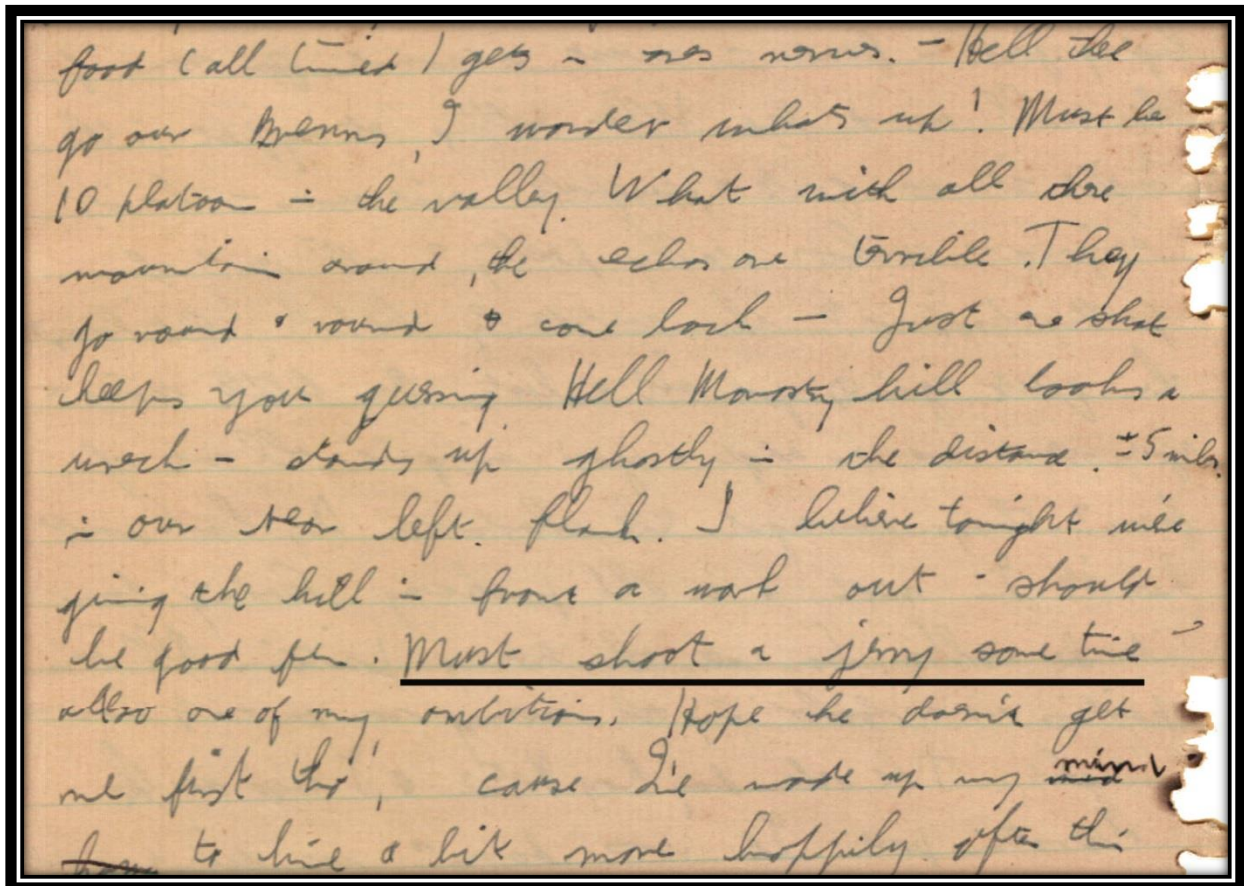


Figure 6.1: Page from Ben Fainsinger wherein he expresses his desire to kill an enemy.⁷⁶³

Fainsinger's plans received a further setback when, on 21 May, orders were received that the Carbineers were to be relieved by New Zealand troops and that the men were to move to Fornelli and then Caserta near Naples for some rest and recuperation.⁷⁶⁴ But first the men had to go down the Inferno track in full battle gear to where their transport awaited them at Hove Dump.⁷⁶⁵ Arriving at four in the morning the men were allowed to sleep for the rest of the day before loading their kit on vehicles and setting off on foot for Aquafondata.⁷⁶⁶ In spite of the Carbineers not having played a direct part in the assault on Cassino, they were constantly in contact with the enemy⁷⁶⁷ and suffered twenty casualties in as many days in the frontline. At Fornelli the men received a double ration of mail and a single bottle of beer per man and spent the day relaxing before moving to Limitola where they were to spend a week lying in the lush green grass and swimming in the River Volturno.⁷⁶⁸ It was also here that many of the young Springboks had a baptism of fire of

⁷⁶³ NCA, B.E. Fainsinger Diary, p43.

⁷⁶⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 21 May.

⁷⁶⁵ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p44.

⁷⁶⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, May 1944, 22 May.

⁷⁶⁷ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p124.

⁷⁶⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p60.

another kind. While many men enjoyed the flowing water of the Volturno, several waited in line, some distance away, for their turn with two prostitutes who had arrived from Naples to tend the needs of men. The feedback was quite favourable and the Carbineers were in agreement that Italian girls were much better than the girls in Egypt.⁷⁶⁹

For the first time since arriving in Italy the 6th Division had all its units together in one place at the same time. It was also here, south of Rome that the Division received an additional British unit, the 24th Guards Brigade, which was to remain under South African command for the remainder of the campaign. With reorganisation complete the Division was ordered to pursue the enemy in the direction of Rome and to pass to the east of the city which was liberated by American troops on 5 June 1944.⁷⁷⁰ C Company's objective during this northward advance was a little monastery near Paliano which was easily captured in spite of harassing mortar and machinegun fire. On the way to their objective C Company passed some knocked out tanks of the Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR) and spoke to some of their wounded comrades whose truck drove over a mine. The body of a dead Carbineer lay next to the truck. Fainsinger attended the driver's course with these men. They were his friends.⁷⁷¹

Jerry Hurley, listening to the artillery pounding some enemy positions after the capture of Paliano, appreciated the relative comfort provided by the interior of the wireless truck he was doing duty in at the time. Urgent calls for more artillery support from his comrades in C Company were cause for concern and, as Hurley followed the progress of the battle over the wireless set, he felt slightly relieved that he was temporarily not involved in the fighting.⁷⁷² After a brief engagement the enemy broke into a headlong retreat north while the Carbineers cautiously probed the recently vacated enemy positions, consolidating their gains.⁷⁷³ With the monastery in South African hands three men felt their way in the dark through the undergrowth toward suspected enemy held positions. Troopers Fainsinger, Fouche and number 8 platoon's officer, Lt Pittaway, lay listening to German voices barely metres away from them. There, in a clearing were several German soldiers carelessly walking around and chatting. They probably thought the South Africans were much further away. Pittaway quickly sent word for the rest of the platoon to join the men waiting in ambush. Reinforced by ten more men and a Bren machinegun the ambush was sprung. Several of the enemy were felled within the first few seconds. Recovering from their initial shock the Germans retaliated and suddenly, from out of nowhere, a tank appeared and began firing at the Carbineers. Supporting the tank was a twenty millimetre automatic gun which also opened up on the attackers and, with nothing heavy to retaliate with and no

⁷⁶⁹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p45.

⁷⁷⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 44 -52.

⁷⁷¹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p46.

⁷⁷² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p60.

⁷⁷³ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p127.

immediate avenue of escape, Fainsinger and his group had to endure the steams of fire directed at them. Fortunately the area in front of the tank was mined and it could not advance. After seeing that the attackers weren't going to go away, the Germans retreated. Having killed several enemy soldiers number 8 platoon felt extremely happy with themselves. The two prisoners and two motorcycles captured could however not compensate for the loss of another one of Fainsinger's friends, George Williams.⁷⁷⁴ The exploits of C Company was however quickly overshadowed by news of the long awaited invasion finally taking place in northern France on 6 June 1944.

For the men from Natal there was no time to visit the sites of Rome as they constantly pursued the Germans past the eternal city. In the days following the attack on Hitler's Atlantic Wall the Carbineers fought several engagements and were steadily gaining ground as their advance continued. At Civita the Germans unexpectedly fought back with greater determination and, by the time the men of C Company reached Bagnoregio on 13 June, four more Carbineers were killed in action⁷⁷⁵ while seven men were wounded⁷⁷⁶ including Bill Buckley who stubbornly remained on duty.⁷⁷⁶ If a wounded man had the good fortune of being wounded close to a road he would be spirited away by one of the many jeeps with Red Cross flags draped across their bonnets. At the nearest regimental aid post he would be patched up and evacuated to one of the many hospitals in the rear areas or returned to the line. If his luck held, the soon to be bandaged soldier received attention from the Carbineers' famed medical officer 'koffie' Rezneck.⁷⁷⁷ One of the wounded was Errol Ford who was hit by shrapnel from a German 88mm gun. In spite of his wounds he still managed to assist the stretcher bearers in helping the severely wounded men down the hill to the aid post. After handing the wounded over to the medical orderlies Ford lay down for a rest and passed out due to a loss of blood. After a while he came to and felt something tugging at his feet. He stared in disbelief at a fellow Carbineer trying to steal his boots probably thinking that since Ford was dead he won't need them anymore.⁷⁷⁸ As Ford could later attest to, fighting in the Mountains of Italy meant that the privilege of being rushed to a medical facility by vehicle was often just a theory and the mainstay of the evacuation process was by numerous stretcher bearers who accompanied the fighting forces. Since African troops were initially not included in the forces sent to Italy, most of the stretcher bearers were Coloured soldiers from the Cape Corps.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁴ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p47.

⁷⁷⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 13 June.

⁷⁷⁶ SANDF Archive, Personnel Cards, 4373 H. W. Buckley.

⁷⁷⁷ G. B. Hobbs, **From Sicily to the Alps: Personal accounts and recollections of World War II**, pp 122 - 124.

⁷⁷⁸ Interview: E. Ford - M. Coghlan, 23 September 1995, Pietermaritzburg.

⁷⁷⁹ J. Kross, **War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto tot the Alps**, pp. 152 - 153.

As the operations in the Bagnoregio region reached a conclusion, Fainsinger's section were ordered to escort one such a stretcher bearer party to evacuate a seriously wounded man somewhere in the dark. It was hell clambering over the rocks in the dark and Fainsinger wondered how they were going to get a fully loaded stretcher down the Mountain. In addition to the difficult terrain, the small group were also under constant fire. When they eventually reached their destination the casualty was identified as Cpl A. B. Maile who was shot in the stomach. The wounded man had waiting for three hours before help arrived and the men wasted no time in securing him to the stretcher. After a torturous journey down the Mountain, the group eventually reached a farm where they immediately sent for a doctor. In spite of studying dentistry Fainsinger's medical knowledge was respected and he was more or less in charge until a jeep arrived to take the dying man to a medical facility.⁷⁸⁰

In the absence of anyone shooting at them in the days after the action at Bagnoregio, the Carbineers found a different opponent in the torrential rain that now turned roads and countryside into quagmires and made movement, especially by tracked vehicles, virtually impossible.⁷⁸¹ As the month of June drew to a close the number of daily casualties rose steadily on account of the infantry having to face entrenched enemy positions. Such tasks now had to be done without the assistance of armour which the men have become so used to.⁷⁸² Centona was occupied on 19 June and for the next few days the men suffered constant shelling from enemy artillery and tanks.⁷⁸³ Having been in constant contact with the enemy for seven days the Carbineers were looking forward to some much needed rest.⁷⁸⁴ Before the relief could be effected however an urgent call was received for immediate assistance from the Cape Town Highlanders fighting in Chiusi. The Highlanders entered the town wrongly believing it to be unoccupied and were surrounded and subjected to intense enemy fire.⁷⁸⁵

After a desperate fight, the Cape Town Highlanders attempted to pull out of the town. Their A Company was however trapped in the town's cinema and systematically destroyed. The young men doing the killing belonged to C Company's nemesis the Herman Göring Panzer Division.⁷⁸⁶ In spite of the heavy casualties suffered by their countrymen, C Company launched an assault of their own on Chiusi and was met by the same torrent of fire that eliminated many of the Cape Town men.⁷⁸⁷ Lt Pittaway managed, after several days of fighting, to lead number 8 platoon to the centre of town where they found that the enemy

⁷⁸⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p49.

⁷⁸¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 15-20 June.

⁷⁸² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 17 June.

⁷⁸³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 21-22 June.

⁷⁸⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p131.

⁷⁸⁵ W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities of the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, p118.

⁷⁸⁶ J. Kross, **War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps**, p 99.

⁷⁸⁷ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p131

has fallen back leaving the field of battle to the South Africans.⁷⁸⁸ Patrolling the areas around their newly-acquired territory, Trooper Fainsinger came across an Italian farmer crying hysterically next to one of the many side tracks. On enquiring into the man's plight it was discovered that in their retreat the Germans killed the farmer's livestock simply for the sake of killing. The Italian's worldly possessions consisted of the clothes on his back and his only two remaining oxen. Fainsinger was enraged and vowed never to take a single German prisoner if he ever got the chance.⁷⁸⁹

As they gave up ground the enemy left the countryside and roads littered with anti-tank mines and booby traps. Whenever minefields were encountered the infantry would bunch up behind their accompanying tanks and walk on the tracks left by the armour. This then presented the enemy with a nice target to either bombard with artillery and mortars or fire at from their numerous machinegun nests that dotted the Italian hills. If this was not bad enough the presence of enemy tanks and anti-tank guns lurking among the trees slowed the advance to a crawl.⁷⁹⁰ With C Company nearing Montepulciano, Fainsinger's platoon came under fire while crouching behind an escorting tank. Within moments two men were dead and several others wounded, including Trooper Ben Fainsinger.⁷⁹¹ His wounds were however light enough to enable him to remain on duty.⁷⁹² Within minutes, the firefight was over and the advance continued as the enemy disappeared into the treeline. In spite of eliminating from the war scores of enemy soldiers and capturing many more⁷⁹³ the losses suffered by the Carbineers could not easily be replaced and by the end of June number 8 platoon comprised of only two sections instead of the usual three.⁷⁹⁴

A few days of rest followed at the end of June but were of shorter duration than expected and by late afternoon on 3 July C Company was on the move again.⁷⁹⁵ Fainsinger admitted to having forgotten about the war for a while as the first days of July were spent playing poker and speculating as to why the Division was making no real progress. An animated debate followed after news was received that the British Guards Brigade did not want to engage the enemy until 12th South African Motorised Brigade did so and since it was the turn of the WR/DLR (Wits Rifles/De La Rey Regiment) to do something the Carbineers were content with patrolling their respective sectors. This discussion was suddenly interrupted by six Spitfires strafing enemy positions not far off, sending the men back to their slit trenches.⁷⁹⁶ When not dodging shells and debating when the war would be over the men of

⁷⁸⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 26 June.

⁷⁸⁹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p49.

⁷⁹⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp113.

⁷⁹¹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p51.

⁷⁹² SANDF Archive, Personnel Cards, 589283V B. E. Fainsinger.

⁷⁹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, June 1944, 28 June.

⁷⁹⁴ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p52.

⁷⁹⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, July 1944, 3 July.

⁷⁹⁶ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p53.

C Company patrolled no-man's in search of signs of the enemy's presence.⁷⁹⁷ During this lull in the fighting such patrols provided some excitement to men whom have grown accustomed to being in almost constant contact with the enemy.

Failed Escapes

Dering Stainbank found himself selected by Sergeant Clothier to investigate possible enemy activity on the platoon's front. With him were Privates Fainsinger, Amos and Maunsell. Fortunately the little band encountered no trouble as it appeared as if the Germans had the good sense to get out of the pouring rain that seemingly was not going to let up any time soon. Cold and wet the Carbineers decided on the same course of action as their foes. Amidst the trees they came across a farmhouse occupied by a very friendly Italian family who dried their clothes and gave them some wine to provide additional warmth. The farmer also presented a note left by a Bombardier Hendrik Louw who some time ago escaped from a POW camp. In his note Louw attested as to how he and other escapees were helped by the Italian farmer and his family.⁷⁹⁸

Most South African POW's on the run found refuge with Italians who had little love to spare for their German occupiers. So too did Cliff Portsmouth who, after the Italian capitulation, joined some Free French troops in escaping from their POW camp by throwing blankets over the fence and disappearing into the Mountains. For three months he lived with a family that hid him whenever German patrols came by. The escapees thought that they would be able to sit out the remainder of the war in luxury since the area northwest of Florence where they were hiding was Mountainous enough to allow them never to be found by enemy patrols. While listening to broadcasts about the war the men were overjoyed to hear that the Allied armies had landed north of Florence and that the Italian war effort has collapsed immediately. The broadcast also implored all Allied POW's still on the run to return to the POW camps in order to facilitate their reintegration into their various services. Thanking the Italian farmer and his family for their hospitality Portsmouth and the rest of his group set off for the nearest POW camp in Florence. Liberation, they felt were mere days away. The German guards must have been amazed to find scores of Allied POW's willingly return to captivity over the next few days. Portsmouth and many other formerly free men discovered, to their dismay, that the radio broadcast was a clever hoax designed to recapture escaped men without expending limited manpower searching for them.⁷⁹⁹

Both C Company men, Portsmouth and Rose-Innes, ended up in Florence after their recapture. From here they heard that they were to be moved to camps in Germany. Portsmouth was among the first men to be bungled into cattle cars waiting at to take them north. Rose-Innes lingered at the back of the queue and when the guard asked whether

⁷⁹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, July 1944, 9-14 July.

⁷⁹⁸ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p53.

⁷⁹⁹ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

there were any officers or NCO's present he smartly jumped to attention. He was then lead to one of two coaches that were shunted to the rest of the trucks. Inside he shared a compartment with eleven other men. An unbarred window caught his eye and he immediately realised that another opportunity to escape just presented itself.⁸⁰⁰ In the cattle truck Portsmouth had the same idea to jump from the moving train. The argument was that concealed by the dark, the would-be escapees would be able to make good their escape. As the train rumbled on several men from Portsmouth's truck jumped through their window into the night. Unfortunately the darkness not only concealed escaped men but also the deep ravine the train travelled over at the time of the jumpers' exit. They were never seen again and no more attempts to escape from the cattle trucks were made. Portsmouth it seemed was destined to sit out the rest of his war in Germany.⁸⁰¹

Rose-Innes pried open the window of his compartment and once more leapt to freedom, not knowing about the fate that befell the men who jumped from the cattle trucks some time earlier. As he landed safely on a hard surface he was almost squashed by a convoy of troop-laden trucks that travelled parallel to the railway. Not knowing where he was on account of a thick mist that covered the countryside, Rose-Innes wanted to get away from the railroad as quickly as possible. Crossing a field he was almost seen by an Italian sentry guarding telephone wires, and in an attempt to avoid this threat, he did not notice the second sentry to his right. With his rifle raised the sentry called out to Rose-Innes who dashed back into the bush and ran for all he was worth finally jumping into a ditch. Thinking he was safe, Rose-Innes contemplated his next move when he was discovered by a little dog which barked without end. Armed with a rock to silence the animal Rose-Innes realised that he was not yet ready to kill a dog. Alerted by the dog's barking the Italian sentries found Rose-Innes and took him to a nearby German air force base from where he was sent to Mantua and eventually Munich.⁸⁰²

Portsmouth, after not jumping from a moving train at night, jumped at his next opportunity to escape when it presented itself. During their journey to Germany the train stopped at several small towns where more men were either loaded onto the trucks or the whole bunch offloaded and put onto another train. It was during one such change of trains on the Austrian border that Portsmouth and several others slipped away during some confusion caused in a nearby village. With the Swiss border only 150 kilometres away the group of about twenty men headed in that direction. At this time of the war the German guards were used to losing a couple of men every now and then but twenty at once demanded some action. The men were hunted up to the Swiss border where they were eventually recaptured by German patrols using dogs to track them down. They were but several

⁸⁰⁰ H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp196 - 197.

⁸⁰¹ NCA, C.J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*.

⁸⁰² H. Rose-Innes, **The Po Valley Break**, pp198 - 204.

hundred meters away from freedom and once back in German hands were sent in the opposite direction towards Czechoslovakia.⁸⁰³

Little did Rose-Innes or Portsmouth know, as they were taken deeper into the Third Reich, that within a few months their comrades in C Company would be passing through the very same areas around Florence in which they spent some time as free men.

Crossing the River Arno

As C Company edged closer to the Division's next objective, Florence, their days were filled by taking a few hills and relieving fellow South African units until they reached Radda.⁸⁰⁴ Here the Carbineers had to rely on tanks to neutralise enemy snipers that fired from the dense undergrowth. On 21 July one of C Company's platoons was on patrol and in the dark of night bumped into a German patrol. A brief firefight followed in which two enemy soldiers were killed and the rest dispersed. During the reorganisation it was discovered that two Carbineers were missing. A frantic search was conducted and only one of the two was found. The platoon returned the next night to search for their missing comrade and found his broken rifle not far from where the contact was made the previous evening. From prisoners taken during consequent patrols it was learned that the missing man, Van Loggenburg, wandered into the German lines and was himself taken prisoner.⁸⁰⁵

It was during this search that a platoon from A Company was ambushed and in danger of being eliminated. Number 8 platoon of C Company together with some tanks of the Prince Alfred's Guard was sent to extricate them.⁸⁰⁶ With the rescue complete, Fainsinger was on his way to occupy an outpost on a small hill overlooking the recently acquired territory when a sudden burst of fire from a machinegun forced him to bury his face in the ground. His section was pinned down by three Germans in a well-defended position. With bullets whizzing past and hitting the ground around them Fainsinger indicated to his friend Wes that it was time to act. Wes fired a burst of his machinegun in the direction of the enemy and in the split second it took the Germans to get behind cover themselves Fainsinger lobbed a grenade in between them. As Wes gave another burst the Germans disappeared in a cloud of fire and dust. The rest of the section rushed the enemy position and looted the dying enemy for anything of value. Paging through the pay book of the man he just helped to kill, Fainsinger learned that his enemy's name was Willie Sahm, a husband and father of a baby boy somewhere in Germany. With his personal wartime objectives having been achieved, all that remained was to return home in one piece.⁸⁰⁷

⁸⁰³ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁸⁰⁴ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p55.

⁸⁰⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, July 1944, 19-23 July.

⁸⁰⁶ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p. 113.

⁸⁰⁷ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p56.

Before claiming the city of Florence the South Africans had to cross the River Greve which was stubbornly defended by the enemy. Constant patrols were dispatched to find suitable crossings for the armour. One such a crossing was found near Le Sibille⁸⁰⁸ by A Company and, on 28 July, Private Ben Fainsinger went on his last nightly patrol.⁸⁰⁹ With his heart beating like a drum in his chest Fainsinger's nerves were on edge throughout the patrol and he was extremely relieved to return to the rest of his platoon. Exhausted from his nightly activities he decided to lie down in a shady recess close to his slit trench. Against his better judgement he decided to put off deepening his trench until later as he dozed off in a deep sleep. His nap was soon interrupted by enemy shelling that grew steadily in intensity. With the rest of his section already in their trenches, Fainsinger decided to take at least two more swings at his trench with his pick to make it a bit deeper and safer. Suddenly there was a loud 'swoosh', a big explosion and a lot of smoke as a shell landed seven meters away from where Fainsinger was digging. Hot pieces of shrapnel shot through the air cutting down anything in their way, which included the aspiring trumpet playing dentist from Natal.⁸¹⁰

The Germans withdrew from Florence during the last days of July leaving the city open to be occupied by South African troops who entered during the first week of August.⁸¹¹ In their harbour area at Galuzzo, the Carbineers received word that South African troops were in the suburbs of Florence on 5 August and that the Regiment was to be withdrawn to reform and re-equip. On 7 August C Company joined the rest of their Regiment as the convoy snaked its way south toward Castelnuovo. It did not take long after arriving at their destination for the normal out of line routine to set in. Church services were held, order groups attended and liberal leave granted to visit Rome and Sienna. In addition to these activities there was the more sombre task of visiting the graves of fallen Carbineers who died during the battles of the previous few months.⁸¹² In a regiment where many men knew each other quite intimately and the divide between officers and especially the longer-serving enlisted men was not as great as in other units, the accumulated casualties of constant battle were indeed felt as the unit enjoyed its first real break since arriving in Italy. From 17 April until 7 August, the Carbineers lost fifty eight men with another 213 wounded and out of action for certain periods of time, some permanently.⁸¹³

Once 6th Division settled into their respective rest areas the important activities of inoculations, sport and parades took precedence over locating the enemy. There were rumours of a move back into the line at the end of August but, with an officer's bar opening

⁸⁰⁸ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, p. 155.

⁸⁰⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, July 1944, 28 July.

⁸¹⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p58.

⁸¹¹ W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities of the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, p153.

⁸¹² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, August 1944, 2-19 August.

⁸¹³ A.F. Hattersley, Carbineer, p133.

its doors on 8 August and the enlisted men enjoying a cinema, the return to action was not openly discussed.⁸¹⁴ By the end of the month, however, C Company was back in the line just south of the River Arno. The 6th Division now fell under command of 4th United States Army Corps⁸¹⁵ which had eight infantry divisions south of the river. Normal patrolling continued in anticipation of crossing the river but it was not only the Springboks that ventured across the Arno in search of the enemy.

With platoons dispersed over a wide front, the task of getting supplies and hot meals to isolated areas of the line was indeed a perilous one. Not only was there the enemy to contend with but a severe tongue lashing from comrades if they received their supplies late or not at all. On 25 August it was the task of Sergeant C. J. Peycke, the Regimental Quarter Master Sergeant, to take C Company's rations to them. Unbeknownst to Peycke and the driver of the jeep, Private E. 'Pop' Castle, a group of four Germans crossed the river in an effort to capture a prisoner to interrogate. Pop was a good friend of Private Fainsinger, a veteran of the First World War and distributor of socks that he knitted himself.⁸¹⁶ Just before daybreak, with the jeep navigating the winding tracks, the Germans sprung their trap wounding both occupants. Leaving Pop for dead, the enemy grabbed Sergeant Peycke and headed back to the river.⁸¹⁷ Drawing on his last bit of strength Pop, fired at the enemy killing two and wounding another. The Germans abandoned their attempted kidnapping and beat a hasty retreat. In spite of being badly wounded Peycke managed to reach a nearby HQ from where help was sent to fetch the mortally wounded Pop who died three days later, not surviving his second war.⁸¹⁸

C Company crossed the Arno for the last time on 1 September⁸¹⁹ and, with sporadic shelling still harassing them, they reached Artimino after dark.⁸²⁰ As the Regiment edged further north an increasing number of enemy deserters were captured by the Carbineers. This was a clear testament to the low morale of the enemy and subsequent interrogations revealed that the Germans abandoned one defensive position after another.⁸²¹ By October, the German Gothic Line was reached. This was a formidable defensive system enhanced by the Rivers Reno and Setta as well as several dominant Mountain features.⁸²² The defenders comprised of the 16th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, which the War Diary of the Carbineers

⁸¹⁴ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, August 1944, 8-23 August.

⁸¹⁵ W. L. Fielding, **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities if the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II**, p 161.

⁸¹⁶ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p 42.

⁸¹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, August 1944, 25 August.

⁸¹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, August 1944, Appendix P.

⁸¹⁹ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp193.

⁸²⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, September 1944, 1 September.

⁸²¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, September 1944, 1 – 30 September.

⁸²² G. B. Hobbs, **From Sicily to the Alps: Personal accounts and recollections of World War II**, p 170.

lists as 'being the most fanatical of the Nazi species'.⁸²³ It was consequently expected that the enemy would have to be pried from feature to feature while being favoured by every natural advantage. Monte Vigese, the first in a series of high points, was captured by the Carbineers on 6 October and in spite of other units meeting considerable resistance C Company's men occupied Vigo on the northern side of Monte Vigese without much trouble.⁸²⁴ No casualties were suffered during this operation and was attributed to the surprise achieved by the direction and timing of the attack as the enemy defenders left a particularly hazardous section of the Mountain top undefended. It was over this supposedly inaccessible area through a very thick mist that C Company's men swarmed to completely surprise the enemy secure thirty six prisoners.⁸²⁵

The Assault on Monte Stanco

With Vigese occupied the Carbineers, in concert with other UDF units, prepared to take the imposing heights of Monte Stanco in what was to be their last big offensive action of the war. On 6 October the plan of attack was made known to C Company's officers and, if all went according to plan, the operation would be a 'cake-walk'.⁸²⁶ As the Frontier Field Rifles (FFR), who had the honour of leading the attack on Stanco, took to the field a generous helping of rum was issued to all C Company ranks and served to bolster morale in anticipation for the fight to come. But by mid-morning on 8 October the FFR were reeling under a deliberate German counterattack and were falling back. Without delay A and B Companies were ordered up through the FFR ranks in order to hold the line. C Company brought up the rear and through constant rain the men rushed forward and occupied any type of shelter from farmsteads, sheds and even outhouses to escape the cold and rain.⁸²⁷ By early morning on 10 October, three Carbineer companies were nearing the summit and had rounded up several enemy soldiers and eliminated a good number more. From the reverse slope of Stanco there suddenly came a surge of German attackers. In a desperate fight the Carbineers realised that the enemy's strength was grossly underestimated.⁸²⁸ The forward companies were put to flight and, with C Company in depth; it didn't take long for the fighting to reach them. It soon became evident that they too would have to fall back leaving number 9 platoon under Captain J.P. Edmonds to act as rear-guard. Courageously fighting several rear-guard actions, number 9 platoon eventually reached the rest of the

⁸²³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 2 October.

⁸²⁴ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 216 - 217.

⁸²⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 6 October.

⁸²⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 7 October.

⁸²⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 7 – 8 October.

⁸²⁸ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 222.

Regiment on the high ground south of Stanco where a defensive line was formed. The platoon sustained eleven casualties during their gallant defence.⁸²⁹

The incessant rain and consequent mud caused havoc with the few tracks available for supplying frontline troops. At one stage there was but a single jeep track over which four battalions had to be supplied. In addition the crews of two armoured squadrons had to leave their bogged-down vehicles and operate on foot in order to protect their own flanks. The misgivings about the unsuitability of armoured units fighting in built up and mountainous terrain resurfaced.⁸³⁰ Without tank support the Carbineers withdrew from the battle and the honour of finally occupying Monte Stanco was claimed by the First City/Cape Town Highlanders and the Wits Rifles/Regiment De La Rey (WR/DLR).⁸³¹ The Carbineers could however take comfort in the fact that their three Companies managed to hold back two of the enemy's better battalions.⁸³²

With the summit in friendly hands it was the task of the regiment in depth, which was the Carbineers, to occupy the next high ground in preparation for further attacks. Lieutenant Oettle, commander of number 8 platoon, lead his two sections in the direction of Grizzana and found no signs of the enemy's presence.⁸³³ During the lull in the fighting that followed attention could once more be given to trying to get supplies to some of the more isolated platoons and sections. With very few jeep tracks available much of the rations and ammunition had to be transported on mules. The never ending rain and omnipresent mud combined with the fear the pack animals had of gunfire and explosions made journeys to and from the front line almost as dangerous as being in a slit trench under fire. Getting a wounded man to the nearest RAP was no less of an arduous task as the recently promoted⁸³⁴ self-professed trouble maker of C Company, Sergeant Bill Buckley, was soon to find out. Since officers quite regularly moved between companies to temporarily replace those who went on leave or were promoted, the enlisted men frequently had to adjust to different styles of leadership. This, for Buckley, was simply just nonsense and after having words with one of his company's officers in which he, Buckley, was told that he was more trouble than he was worth, he requested to be transferred to B Company.⁸³⁵

On 20 October Sergeant Buckley was leading one of several Carbineer platoons that had to relieve the hard pressed men of WR/DLR on the summit of yet another elevated position

⁸²⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 10 October.

⁸³⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 223.

⁸³¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 11 – 14 October.

⁸³² N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 222.

⁸³³ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 229.

⁸³⁴ SANDF Archive, Personnel Cards, 4373 H. W. Buckley.

⁸³⁵ Interview: H.W. Buckley - G Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

named Monte Salvaro.⁸³⁶ They made their way through constant artillery and mortar fire to reach their positions just as the Germans, who once more used the rear slope of the high ground to build up strength, unleashed a series of violent counterattacks.⁸³⁷ Lying next to his platoon commander, Lt W. A. Robberts, Buckley had but a few seconds to be afraid when a German tank burst through the bushes about fifty meters from their position. It fired a shell which exploded beside the two men. Lieutenant Robberts was seriously wounded and knocked unconscious but Buckley, severely wounded, crawled down the slope under a hail of fire.⁸³⁸ He managed to reach one of his platoon members 'Smokey' Jones who helped him to the RAP from where he was transported to hospital.⁸³⁹ That day the Carbineers faced eleven German counterattacks but still managed to stand their ground in spite of mounting casualties.⁸⁴⁰

The Carbineer medical teams literally had their hands full during the closing days of October as they endeavoured to repair broken men and send them back into the line. With the companies fighting on the slopes of the Apennine's the doctor on duty, Captain Sammy Sacks, was roused by anxious members of his medical aid post. Fully expecting to find dying men on stretchers the doctor was surprised when he was presented with a very anxious Italian farmer whose wife have just gone into labour. Having grown accustomed to death the team was very proud when they delivered a baby boy a short while later. With the mother unable to breastfeed the child, the Carbineers collected their much valued army ration of condensed milk to be used to sustain the little one. The constant rain and mud that kept the fighting men in the front lines immobilised also ensured that the Carbineer medical team remained stationary long enough to ensure that Giuseppe⁸⁴¹ did not become just another wartime casualty.⁸⁴² This brief moment of joy was however overshadowed by events along the front line. In a matter of days C Company lost three of its most respected officers. Number 8 platoon's commander, Lt Oettle, was sufficiently wounded to cause him to be withdrawn from duty and Major R. C. Tomlinson C Company's second in command during the East African and North African campaigns died of wounds sustained while in command of B Company during the same attack in which Sergeant Buckley was wounded.⁸⁴³ The Tomlinson family was involved with the Carbineers since the Regiment's inception and he was much loved by the enlisted men and a very close friend of the Regiment's

⁸³⁶ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p141.

⁸³⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 20 October.

⁸³⁸ Interview: H.W. Buckley. G Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

⁸³⁹ SANDF Archive, Personnel Cards, 4373 H. W. Buckley.

⁸⁴⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 229.

⁸⁴¹ The passage of time has led to some information becoming distorted and the contributor of this information acknowledge the boy's name may have been Giovanni or Giuseppe.

⁸⁴² NCA, A. C. Harvey-Williams (ed), **Carbineer**: The annual newsletter of the Natal Carbineers 1991 edition, pp 15-16.

⁸⁴³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 21 – 24 October.

commanding officer, Lt Col M.P. Comrie.⁸⁴⁴ The third casualty was Comrie himself who after preparing C Company for war and leading them in East Africa was sent back to South Africa for some much needed rest.⁸⁴⁵

The strain of command took its toll on Comrie, and when another of his close friends was killed, he simply could not take it anymore. He did not like risking the lives of his men by sending them in to battle without sufficient support⁸⁴⁶ and, like many others he sought to dull the pain of losing so many of his countrymen with alcohol.⁸⁴⁷ Intoxication among the men was mostly limited to when they were out of the line and on leave but officers and in particular senior officers had easier access to liquor. The death of Tomlinson and the prospect of yet another mountain assault that lay ahead, as well as the concern over his Regiment being in constant contact with the enemy for the past twenty one days⁸⁴⁸ finally pushed Comrie over the edge and it was suggested to him by the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Palmer that he return home. He agreed on condition that command of the Regiment must remain in the hands of a Carbineers officer.⁸⁴⁹ Control of the Regiment then went to Major P.C.A. Francis who upon appointment was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.⁸⁵⁰

The Period of Relative Inactivity at Monte Termine

On 31 October the Carbineers were dispatched to the Monte Termine area where they were to spend the next few weeks aggressively patrolling their part of the front.⁸⁵¹ A static period in the line followed and it was a miserable time for all, particularly the men in the slit trenches where increased cases of trench-foot were being reported.⁸⁵² With snow now adding to the discomfort of the troops, C Company was tasked with trying to rebuild a certain stretch of road which ran the risk of becoming unusable due to the snow and consequent mud. Fortunately for them the enemy's shelling was much too accurate and the task abandoned forcing them to return to normal patrol duty instead.⁸⁵³ Up to eight patrols per night were sent out to determine the enemy's position on the ridges opposite and one of Lt Col Francis' first tasks as Officer in Command of the Regiment was to send a platoon to investigate strange, snow-covered mounds that he spotted through his binoculars. Upon closer investigation these mounds were found to be heaps of bodies covered by the falling

⁸⁴⁴ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p141.

⁸⁴⁵ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 246.

⁸⁴⁶ Interview: R. Freeman - M. Coghlan, 20 November 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

⁸⁴⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p64.

⁸⁴⁸ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 241.

⁸⁴⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, October 1944, 25 October.

⁸⁵⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp. 246.

⁸⁵¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, November 1944, 1 November.

⁸⁵² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p64.

⁸⁵³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, November 1944, 4 November.

snow.⁸⁵⁴ In their efforts to eradicate Italian partisans the Germans left a trail of destruction as their retreat north continued.⁸⁵⁵ A large-scale offensive to capture one of the last remaining enemy mountain strongholds, Monte Sole, was first postponed for three days and then put off until spring of the next year.⁸⁵⁶ For the Carbineers this meant another wartime Christmas away from home with this one celebrated in dugouts and bombed out farmhouses on Monte Termine. Both sides consolidated their positions throughout December and, when heavier snow began to fall before Christmas, many Carbineers who have never seen snow before were ecstatic. The increasing snow soon lost its allure as it accumulated and melted to leave men wet and freezing. Patrolling also became more hazardous as the deep snow covered the broken ground over which the men had to move.⁸⁵⁷



Figure 6.2: C Company members on patrol in the snow in Italy.⁸⁵⁸

In spite of the environmental difficulties, the men of C Company persevered and had their spirits lifted by jeeps loaded with parcels, letters and special Christmas cheer that visited each of the scattered dugouts.⁸⁵⁹ The day was however only properly celebrated after the bottles of beer which were transported on open trailers had to be broken to get to their

⁸⁵⁴ NCA, P.C.A.Francis DVD.

⁸⁵⁵ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p141.

⁸⁵⁶ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p150.

⁸⁵⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p64.

⁸⁵⁸ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁸⁵⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, December 1944, 25 December.

frozen contents.⁸⁶⁰ By year-end the situation of the fighting men improved considerably with mail from the Union arriving up to four times a week due to the establishment of a proper shuttle service between the Union and Egypt and it took a mere nine days for letters from home to reach the men. This morale boosting occurrence did have one snag however as the letters would sometimes reach the men out of chronological order with some letters arriving by sea and others by air.⁸⁶¹

While at Termine, C Company received a weekly newsletter from Regimental HQ in which the men were informed of recent activities on their front. In the December edition of this newsletter the ineffectiveness of constant patrolling was lamented and it was stated that the 430 patrols executed during December yielded very little information about the enemy. It was suggested that fewer patrols must be sent out which would also lessen the strain on the few remaining experienced patrol leaders.⁸⁶² At five minutes past midnight on 31 December 1944 several German guns opened up all along the front and were soon joined by numerous machinegun and anti-aircraft guns firing into the air. This was however not an assault and was similarly answered by South African guns as both sides heralded in the New Year.⁸⁶³ On 15 January, the Royal Natal Carbineers' 90th birthday, 6th Division became part of the 2nd United States Army Corps which was in itself not really noteworthy as brigades and divisions were often moved around like chess pieces. This change in command did however spell an increase in patrol activity for the Carbineers as the Corps Commander demanded a prisoner from each unit every three days for identification purposes.⁸⁶⁴ It was fortunate for the Carbineers that with the arrival of more reinforcements from the Union the Regiment was seventy two men over the authorised establishment. For the men in the trenches the swell in numbers allowed longer periods of rest between each patrol. To prevent troops from becoming too relaxed, the Regiment once more reorganised itself into five rifle companies instead of the normal four, enabling aggressive patrolling to resume as before, in spite of it becoming clear to everyone that the war would be over soon.⁸⁶⁵

C Company was however not yet out of the fight and the men continued their duties with the same aggressive spirit that had seen them through thus far. This fighting spirit meant that the men were seldom out of harm's way, even when not actively patrolling. Lieutenant Lowry could attest to this when, in an effort to demonstrate to other officers the effectiveness of the PIAT⁸⁶⁶ against buildings, he was seriously wounded when the projectile

⁸⁶⁰ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p152.

⁸⁶¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, December 1944, 31 December.

⁸⁶² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, December 1944, Appendix L: Patrolling report on 12 South African Motorised Brigade Front.

⁸⁶³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, January 1945, 1 January.

⁸⁶⁴ N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War 2, Volume 5, Victory in Italy*, pp. 246.

⁸⁶⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 645, December 1944, Appendix T: Field Returns 30 December.

⁸⁶⁶ Projector, Infantry Anti-Tank was a British hand held anti-tank weapon.

misfired and exploded prematurely.⁸⁶⁷ In keeping with the wishes of the Corps Commander to secure prisoners Sgt Clothier once more lead a patrol of three men into the dark on 29 January 1945. During the course of the patrol the three men were ambushed by nine Germans leading to an intense firefight resulting in Sgt Clothier being seriously wounded. The unlucky Carbineers promptly found themselves prisoners instead of captors. Clothier being too badly wounded to be carried requested to be left behind. The Germans, after doing what they could for him, disappeared into the night with Cpl Hennessey and Pte Smith. A patrol was dispatched the next day to find the missing men, but they only managed to return with Sgt Clothier who was promptly evacuated.⁸⁶⁸ During the night of 5 February, C Company reported excitedly that they had indeed captured a valuable prisoner. According to the patrol responsible for the capture they spotted a German soldier in white uniform walking down the road. Upon confronting him the patrol were fired upon by two more Germans hiding in the bushes. These two enemies were chased off and the first man taken prisoner. Upon closer inspection it was found that the man was an NCO and veteran from the Russian Front where he was awarded the Iron Cross first and second class for bravery. In his conversation with his captors he admitted that he liked the Italian campaign much better as there were not as much hand to hand fighting as in Russia. With the prisoner sent further down the line there was the hope that Higher Command's desire for prisoners were thus satisfied.⁸⁶⁹

The Carbineers stayed at Monte Termine until February of the next year when they were relieved by the 14th Infantry Battalion from the 1st United States Armoured Division on 19 February.⁸⁷⁰ They spent the next five weeks in the vicinity of Pisa where they attended operas, engaged in numerous sporting events like rugby, football, swimming, boxing and even basketball and made use of every opportunity to go on town leave to see the sights.⁸⁷¹ The UDF entertainment units now entertained troops regularly as the campaign drew to a close and on 27 February the Carbineers were treated to two shows by the 'Sundowners' in the local theatre. After the shows the performers were themselves entertained by the men. The Carbineers officers revealed their chivalrous nature by hosting a dinner for the female performers at the Officer's mess, leaving the male performers at the mercy of the enlisted men who hosted them in their respective mess.⁸⁷² The first day of March brought disturbing news as it was reported that B Company's commander, Major L.F. Gallimore, had not returned to the unit lines. A general search was conducted by the rest of the Regiment. The major's body was found the next morning a few hundred yards from his company

⁸⁶⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, February 1945, Regimental Newsletter No 15.

⁸⁶⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, January 1945, 29 January.

⁸⁶⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, February 1945, February 5, DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, February 1945, Regimental Newsletter No 16.

⁸⁷⁰ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, February 1945, 1 February.

⁸⁷¹ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer*, p154.

⁸⁷² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, February 1945, 27 February.

headquarters. He had apparently committed suicide.⁸⁷³ In their respective billets the Carbineers enjoyed not only the warmer weather but also the sight of Italian girls labouring in the olive groves, their baskets filled with olives. The girls would return home passing by appreciative troops and Springbok fantasy soon gave way as the girls began to sing loudly and discordantly in the hope of impressing the South Africans. Some Carbineers must have preferred the sound of battle as they experienced the lack of musical talent present in the locals.⁸⁷⁴ The remainder of the month was filled with more leave, attending numerous variety shows presented by entertainment units from various nations and of course several training exercises. For C Company the highlight of the month was an exercise with the Special Service Battalion's tanks.⁸⁷⁵

Plenty of Prisoners South of the Po

By 1 April the Carbineers were back in the line and preparing for an assault in cooperation with American troops on Monte Sole. In the wake of their continuous retreat, the enemy left the field of battle littered with mines and booby traps. In one small area on their front, C Company's patrols removed and neutralised seventy German Schü-mines.⁸⁷⁶ These mines were easy and handy obstacles to employ against infantry or light vehicles and available in abundance. They were cheaply constructed of wood or compressed cardboard housing an explosive charge.⁸⁷⁷ It was set off by applying pressure on the lid, usually stepping on it as one unfortunate member of C Company discovered on the night of 5 March.⁸⁷⁸



Figure 6.3: Photographs highlighting the mountainous terrain of Mount Sole in front of the Carbineer Positions.⁸⁷⁹

⁸⁷³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, March 1945, 1 March.

⁸⁷⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p65.

⁸⁷⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, March 1945, 23 March.

⁸⁷⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, March 1945, 5 March.

⁸⁷⁷ War Department Technical Manual, Handbook on German Military Forces, 15 March 1945 pp 41-42.

⁸⁷⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, March 1945, 5 March.

⁸⁷⁹ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

Fortunately for the men from Natal they were not part of any assault force and could, on 15 April, enjoy the aerial bombardment of the Sole sector from relative safety. As 570 heavy bombers pounded the German defences the Carbineers experienced a weapon not yet seen before by South Africans in war. This was the American napalm fire-bombs.⁸⁸⁰ Private C. H. Acutt described the spectacle as the most thrilling and spectacular they have witnessed so far. The inflammable bombs spread a brilliant sheet of flame over a wide area the moment they hit the ground.⁸⁸¹ Monte Sole erupted in fire and smoke and was captured the next day as the battle weary German troops continued their retreat north. The success of other South African units was so overwhelming that the Carbineers remained in reserve and were not needed in an offensive role. When sudden orders reached Carbineer headquarters to lead a mobile advance north on 19 April it became apparent that the past six months' static operations had a detrimental effect on the Regiment's operational ability. With deliberate infantry attacks having been the order of the day the Carbineers found it difficult to break the habits associated with such operations. It took a gigantic effort from officers and men alike to get the Regiment remobilised within twenty four hours and on 23 April with C Company in the lead, the Regiment reached the town of finale where 50 more prisoners were rounded up.⁸⁸²

At 0615 on 27 April, C Company crossed the River Po in northern Italy. Over their wireless sets the men heard the announcement that the Russian and American armies have linked up in Germany and that Mussolini had been captured by partisans.⁸⁸³ Unknown to the men crossing the river there were several high-level negotiations between Allied and German generals regarding cessation of hostilities in Italy.⁸⁸⁴ Orders were issued to C Company to mop up the right flank of the advancing Allied thrust and at Montegalda the Carbineers fought their last offensive action of the war. Here the retreating Germans blew up the bridge across the River Bacchiglione over which D Company was supposed to advance.⁸⁸⁵ With the lead elements of the assault force pinned down by determined enemy machinegun fire from across the river the operation seemed to be destined to fail. It was then that one of C Company's veterans, Corporal H. H. Cowan saved the day. A twenty two year old shop assistant from Pietermaritzburg, Cowan was a proud member of C Company and fought in all their major battles in East Africa, North Africa and now in Italy. He was leading a section in what was to be C Company's last battle of the war. With the war almost over it might have been safer for someone who has made it thus far to remain in cover and wait for other troops or even tanks to neutralise the enemy across the river. Cowan could not bear the thought of his comrades' lives being risked due to his inaction. Without thinking about his

⁸⁸⁰ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp246.

⁸⁸¹ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p157.

⁸⁸² DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, April 1945, 19 – 23 April.

⁸⁸³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, April 1945, 27 April.

⁸⁸⁴ G. A. Shepperd, **The Italian Campaign 1943 - 45**, pp367-369.

⁸⁸⁵ N. Orpen, **Victory in Italy, Victory in Italy**, pp305.

own safety he rallied his section and charged the right flank of the enemy position. The sight of their corporal running through a storm of fire inspired the rest of the men who subsequently overwhelmed the defenders and allowed the main force to continue with the advance. For this action Cpl Cowan was later awarded the Military Medal.⁸⁸⁶ C Company were kept in reserve for the remainder of the operation but managed to collect 445 prisoners who offered token resistance by firing a few shots and then surrendering.⁸⁸⁷ The next day General M. Clark, Commander of the American forces and their attached elements in Italy, announced that German military power in Italy has virtually ceased. On 2 May the Germans in North Italy surrendered unconditionally, bringing an end to the war for the South Africans.⁸⁸⁸ The news, although expected, stunned the South Africans and one C Company man was overheard remarking that he is so happy that he is actually thoroughly depressed.⁸⁸⁹

Thoughts began to turn to the journey home as it was confirmed that 6th Division would not be required for garrison duties in Germany.⁸⁹⁰ Instead they were ordered to Turin in North Western Italy where trouble was anticipated between pro-Fascist and pro-Allied factions, the latter seeking revenge and slaughtering the former by the hundreds.⁸⁹¹ During their stay in Turin C Company were housed in a wing of the King's palace where they awaited news of the end of the war in Europe⁸⁹² and at one minute past midnight on 8 May 1945 peace in Europe was officially announced.⁸⁹³

⁸⁸⁶ NCA, Letter to Officer Commanding Royal Natal Carbineers regarding Decorations: Royal Natal Carbineers, 18 September 1949.

⁸⁸⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 72, April 1945, 27 April.

⁸⁸⁸ A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p161.

⁸⁸⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 2 May.

⁸⁹⁰ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p47.

⁸⁹¹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 4 May.

⁸⁹² A.F. Hattersley, **Carbineer**, p161.

⁸⁹³ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 9 May.

Chapter 7:**Germany, Northern Italy and South Africa, 1944-1946**

*'For you the war is over'*⁸⁹⁴

Phrase used throughout the war after securing prisoners

In the dying days of the War, Allied prisoners in unoccupied Germany were marched away from the closing Russian and American forces. Many of these marches were nothing more than death-marches where prisoners were herded like cattle from one bombed-out town to the next. Those who survived to be liberated still faced a battle with military bureaucracy before they could be sent home. Other Carbineers, although on their way home, travelled on board hospital ships, not as crew but as patients after sustaining serious enough battle wounds resulting in them being withdrawn from the line. Their premature exit from the war came at a price and many wondered whether it was really worth it. The rest of the Regiment settled in the vicinity of Turin where they enjoyed copious amounts of sports, local leave and very little military activity. Those who enlisted first were sent home with the first transport aircraft and troopships heading south. These two modes of travel presented its own challenges and it was up to the men to decide which method they preferred. While in northern Italy the Carbineers had ample time to study the numerous demobilisation pamphlets and listen to lectures on a post-war South Africa. With the UDF's military presence in Europe steadily dwindling, the last Carbineers arrived in Durban aboard the HMT Franconia in September 1945.

The Beginning of the End

Getting the men home was to prove a lengthy process and depended on the availability of sea and air transport. A system of staggered repatriation was decided upon whereby the men who enlisted first would be sent home first. They were the category A's and the 'babies' who arrived in 1945 were the category M's. It was envisioned to have the A's home by 15 July and then the B's by end of August.⁸⁹⁵ This caused a delicate situation regarding the officers since most of them fell into category A. Lieutenant Colonel Francis informed them that some of them would not be able to go home straight away and that those who had pressing matters in the Union submit a request to be repatriated with the men in writing.⁸⁹⁶ With the repatriation process in place the Carbineers settled into a routine of sport, parades and town leave. This was to become part of their daily existence over the next few months. A photograph of the 'Olds and Bolds' was taken in Turin on 11 May and

⁸⁹⁴ Phrase used when taking prisoners or dealing with wounded. Translated from the German "Für sie die krieg ist vorbei"

⁸⁹⁵ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p46.

⁸⁹⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 9 May.

comprised all the men who were part of the Regiment when it left Durban in July 1940. There were 14 officers and 99 other ranks.⁸⁹⁷

More sport and parades followed with the Regiment taking part in 6th Division's parade at the Monza racing circuit on 13 May. During this parade an ex-C Company man, Capt J.P. Edmonds received the prestigious Silver Star from General Clark. Then on, 19 May 1945, at two in the morning the first eight Carbineers began their journey back to the Union.⁸⁹⁸ The cheery farewells and good wishes by comrades eagerly awaiting their turn to be repatriated were unexpectedly interrupted by an urgent phone call from Brigade HQ. There was still some space on board the ship waiting in harbour and eleven more Carbineers were selected to go home. The final campaign was now in full swing.

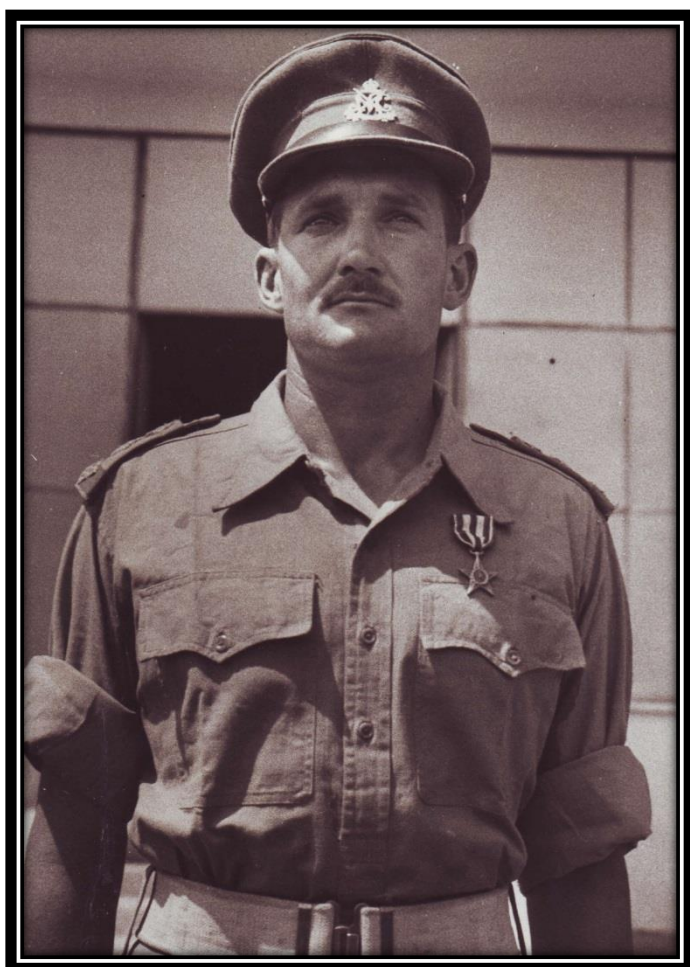


Figure 7.1: Captain J.P. Edmonds with the Silver Star.⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 11 May.

⁸⁹⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, 13 – 19 May.

⁸⁹⁹ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

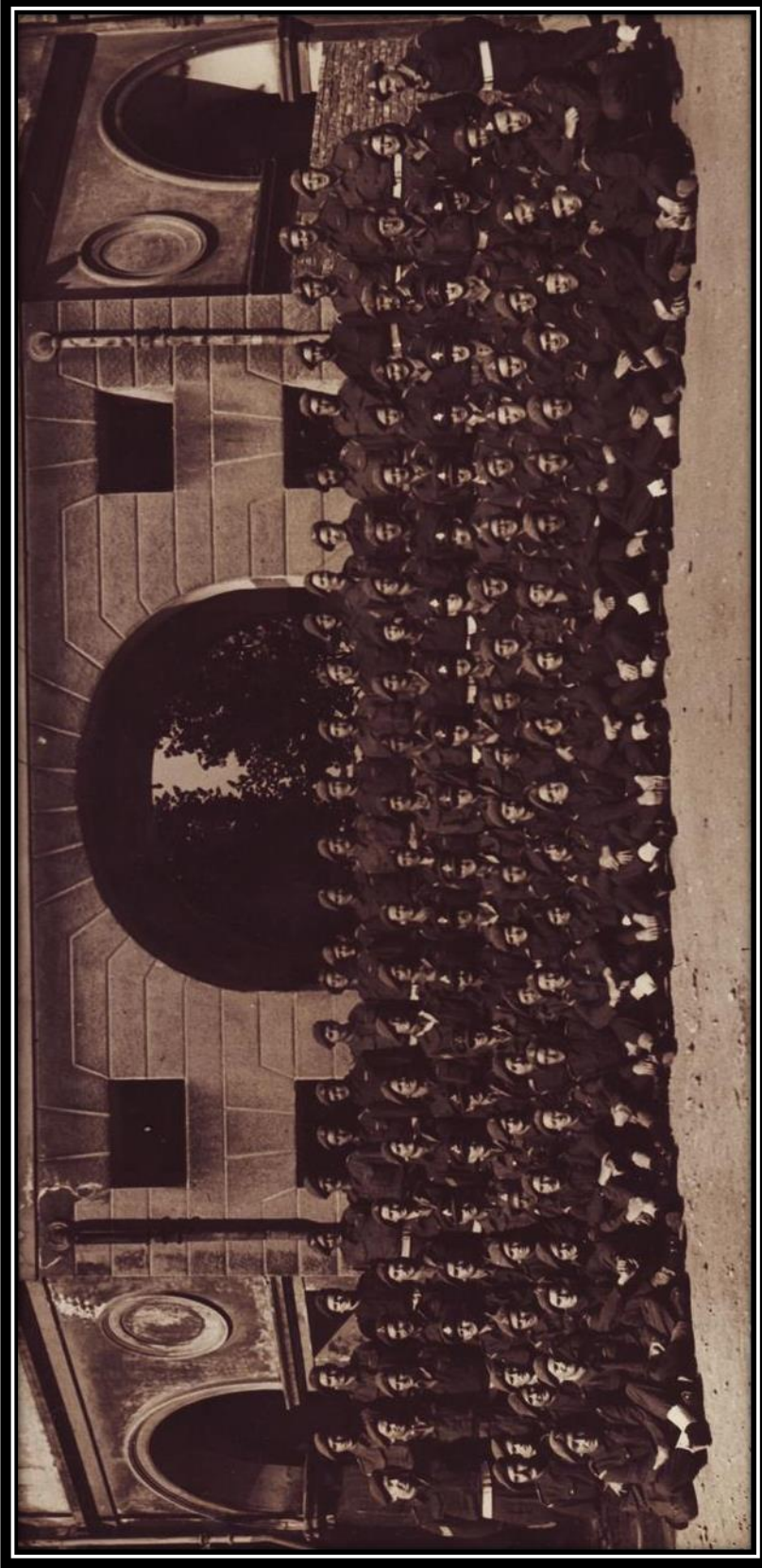


Figure 7.2: The 'Olds and Bolds'¹

Being spared garrison duty in Europe, the Royal Natal Carbineers expected to be reunited with their families shortly after hostilities ceased in Europe. The men accepted that there would be delays, but most of them trusted that their stay in peacetime Europe would be as brief as possible. The process of planning for the repatriation and demobilisation of the UDF began with the advent of the Italian campaign as it became clear that the war could not last for as long as initially feared. Although there were some difficulty in preparing the nation for war in 1940, getting the men to embrace military life was much easier. They were after all placed on an equal footing, with none of the daily constraints of class, wealth or religion preventing them from uniting in a common goal. While under arms the troops were clothed, fed, paid and employed without worrying too much about the future.⁹⁰⁰ Already in 1942, the Civil Re-employment Board began discussing plans for the future reintroduction of the armed forces back into civil society. By 1944 the UDF was awash with circulars on demobilisation with the most available being 'Back to Civilian Life: Information for the Volunteer'⁹⁰¹ The men from Natal were all eager to get back to their pre-war lives as they patiently awaited their turn to head south.

From all over Europe servicemen from various nations began their respective journeys home. The Royal Natal Carbineers were no different. While most of them left from Turin, there were others in hospitals in France and England that had to be repatriated as well as the many prisoners in recently-liberated POW camps. Escaping after a brief period as a prisoner of the Italians, Jack Rossiter eventually re-joined his unit and fought on as a Carbineer until the end of the war. Others like Cliff Portsmouth were not so fortunate and, after failing to reach Switzerland, arrived first at Stalag VIII C south of Gorkwitz in lower Silesia. For his part in the attempted escape Portsmouth received ten days solitary confinement. After a brief period spent working in a sugar factory the prisoners were sent to Stalag VIIC near the town of Sagan in the South Eastern part of Germany.⁹⁰² During the winter of 1943, their first in Germany, the Springboks experienced what life was to be as guests of the Third Reich. The treatment was much harsher, living conditions were bad and the food even worse.⁹⁰³ Gone were the days of relatively organised camps with various forms of entertainment to keep the men busy during the long Italian days.⁹⁰⁴

⁹⁰⁰ J. Lumsden, *Back to Ciwy Street. The Nonqai* July 1945, p797.

⁹⁰¹ DOD Archives, Union War Histories Civil, Box 45, File C25, Reinstatement of the volunteer. Other circulars included: The training of the Ex-volunteer at the Government Mines Training School, Farming for Ex-volunteers, Demobilisation and First Steps Towards a Better SA.

⁹⁰² NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*, p8.

⁹⁰³ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹⁰⁴ C. J. Portsmouth, Postcard to his parents, 17 February 1943, Private Collection, Mrs E. Portsmouth.

Prisoners in Germany

For the remainder of 1944, Cliff Portsmouth and the rest of the South Africans were set to work in a coal mine in Czechoslovakia. Being confined underground for up to twelve hours at a time was a severe shock for the Carbineer prisoners and, had it not been for the Red Cross parcels they received, very few of them would have survived. The meagre German ration of rye bread and tasteless meat stew became much more palatable when combined with some of the contents of these parcels.⁹⁰⁵ Letters from home could be written at any time, providing material was available for such a task. In contrast with outgoing mail, letters from home arrived rarely but, when they did find the recipient, it was like Christmas and New Year's Eve in one. On 30 April 1944 Portsmouth received forty-one letters on one day with the earliest having been written on 23 July 1943. The last letter from home was received on 29 July 1944 after which there was no more.⁹⁰⁶ Six months into his internment at Sagan Portsmouth and six other prisoners were working underground on a stope face when a sudden cave-in surprised them and sealed off the exit. Trapped underground with no confidence in rescue from above the men began digging their way out. By some miracle Portsmouth stumbled upon a civilian prisoner that worked in the very same mine before the war. This man revealed the existence of a secret side tunnel which had been blocked off. With a tremendous effort Portsmouth led some men in an attempt to unseal this passage to freedom. Eventually they reached the surface, and after digging through an additional six feet of snow, they were out. The injured were taken to the camp infirmary where they were treated for cuts and bruises while the rest went back into the mine.⁹⁰⁷ The Carbineers were about to spend their second winter in Germany.

Rumours now began spreading of the war not going the way the Germans had boasted and that the Russians were closing in from the East. Portsmouth befriended a German soldier that was boarded out of the army some years before. This man was a machinegunner during the Stalingrad battles and lamented the fact that the Germans were incapable of fighting the Russians. He told Cliff that they were animals and that they clambered over the bodies of their dead comrades to press home an attack. The rumour mill quickly cranked out a new rumour of the possibility that the whole camp was going to be force-marched to the west, away from the Russians.⁹⁰⁸ This unfortunately turned out to be no rumour but, through a twist of fate, Cliff Portsmouth would soon be trudging his way home.

⁹⁰⁵ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg; NCA, Portsmouth, Memoirs. p8.

⁹⁰⁶ C.J. Portsmouth, Notebook. NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹⁰⁷ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, Pietermaritzburg, 1 May 1992; NCA, Portsmouth, Memoirs. p8.

⁹⁰⁸ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

Patients in Allied Hospitals

The last thing Ben Fainsinger remembered as he raised the pick to take one more swing at improving his trench was how everything had gone quiet all of a sudden. The next three days were one long nightmare. The explosion should have killed him but riddled him with shrapnel instead and he barely hit the ground when Sgt Clothier was by his side shouting at the stretcher bearers to take him to the aid post. From there he was taken by jeep to number 65 British General Hospital. Here he faced three days of questions, x-rays, operations, telling and retelling his story as well as vomiting blood over and over. The moment he was judged to be out of danger all the wonderful attention disappeared as he was sent down the line to number 65 South African General Hospital in Naples. From here on Fainsinger felt like 'just a limb of something'.⁹⁰⁹

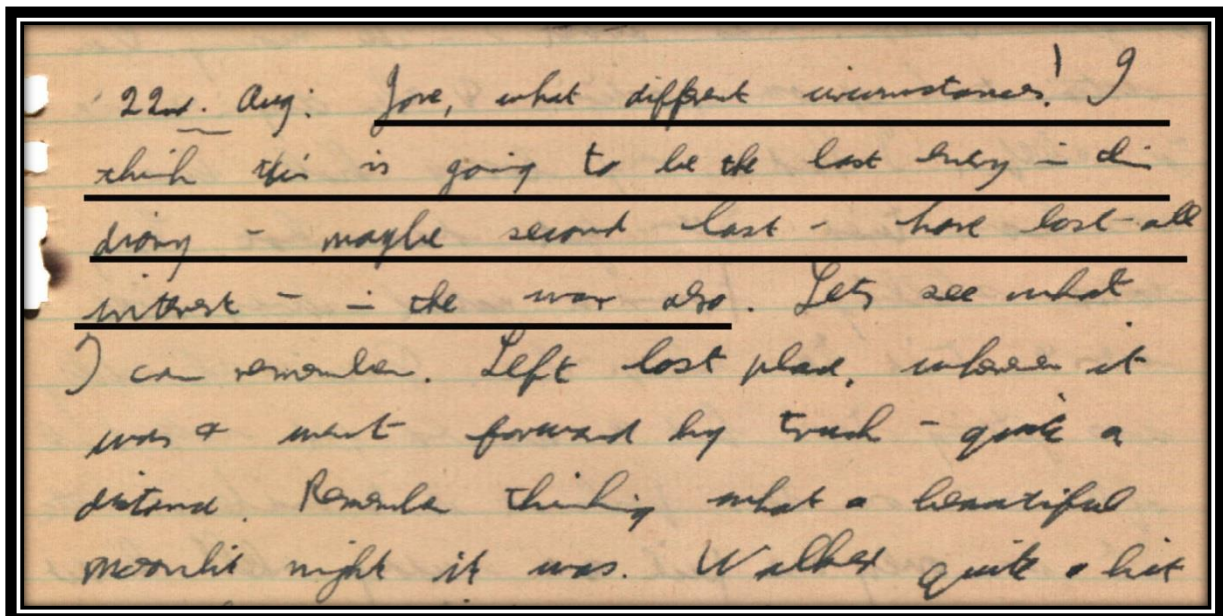


Figure 7.3: Ben Fainsinger's opinion of the war during his stay in hospital.⁹¹⁰

In Naples Fainsinger took stock of his situation. He had shrapnel in his neck, legs and right eye. The doctors at sixty five wanted to leave the shrapnel in his neck where it was, but Fainsinger lied about what pain he was in and managed to persuade the medical personnel to remove it. He was on regular doses of penicillin and his leg was in plaster. With his head still wrapped in bandages he hoped the wound to his eye was not that severe. Then, somewhere down the line, when a doctor removed the bandages to inspect the progress, Fainsinger asked him whether he had opened the eyelids since he was unable to see anything yet. The doctor hesitated and replied that he had not and dressed the wound with new bandages. Fainsinger expected the worst but still clung to some hope that his eye would be fine. He was the centre of attention again as it seemed that South Africans in

⁹⁰⁹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p60.

⁹¹⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p61.

hospital was a curious occurrence since they were the first to start walking after having been admitted. After a short stay at number sixty five he was transferred to Bari in Southern Italy where number 102 General South African Hospital was located.⁹¹¹

By now Fainsinger's thoughts went to his post-war plans. He pretty much gave up becoming a dentist and the mood in his diary becomes quite sombre and dark. He fully expected to get a 'job' somewhere and throughout the remainder of his diary he constantly reminds himself that things might turn out all right and that he should think himself into a positive mood. By September he accepted the loss of his right eye and strangely looked forward to having a permanent one made just for him when back in South Africa. With his leg still in plaster Fainsinger was confined to a wheelchair, but this did not bother him that much since there were more than enough erstwhile comrades to wheel him onto the veranda. Here they chatted the days away and, slowly, Fainsinger began feeling much better, both mentally and physically. Their favourite rumour was that the ship taking them back to the Union was about to dock at any moment. For about eighty of the walking wounded the rumour proved true on 16 September as they were marshalled to the docks and onto a waiting troopship bound not for the Union but for Egypt, where they were to relieve troops needed for frontline duties. Two weeks later Ben Fainsinger was on board the HMHS *Amra* and on his way back to Natal.⁹¹²

Sergeant Buckley spent four months in hospital after being wounded at Monte Salvaro and, after his discharge from hospital on 12 February,⁹¹³ was one of the men asked to remain behind with the Regiment as some of the earliest enlistees began returning home. With very few military tasks left, C Company's focus shifted to battles of a different nature. The months that followed the Axis surrender were filled with sport with clashes taking place on unit and inter-unit level. Bill Buckley thought that he would do no more marching since the fighting had stopped.⁹¹⁴ He was however gravely mistaken as he first had to form part of the C Company representatives that participated in another victory march through the streets of Turin on 24 March and then six days later he was on the march again, this time on a company route march across the River Po and back again.⁹¹⁵

Demobilising the Military Machine

By this time military planners were hard at work contemplating what to do with the returning servicemen and women when they reach the Union. On 24 March, Lt Col Francis provided feedback to his officers on a meeting he attended the previous day. It was intended to maintain two ACF divisions. These would be made up of the units that saw the

⁹¹¹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p63.

⁹¹² NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p64.

⁹¹³ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, 289283V H.W. Buckley, 4373V.

⁹¹⁴ Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹¹⁵ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, May 24, 30.

most action during the war, which included the 1st and 2nd RNC Regiments. This meant that the Carbineers could rest easy in the knowledge that they were to return to a life of normality as they have come to experience over the past few years. The CO also impressed upon the officers the desire that the men should remain on the UDF's payroll until they have made other suitable arrangements in terms of employment. The desire was also expressed that wherever possible the men should maintain contact with the Regiment either by remaining in the ACF or to remain on the Regiment's reserve list. A few days later an opportunity for some action presented itself when it was reported that Tito's partisans were causing some mischief in Trieste to the East. The South Africans, however, reported that they were completely inoperational due to advanced stages of the repatriation process and the task of dealing with the matter was given to another unit. Since they were virtually combat ineffective 6th Division received no further major tasking. This resulted in more visits to local towns, attending plays and shows, much more sports and the inevitable route marches.⁹¹⁶

With the surrender of Germany, the Regiment realised that an opportunity had presented itself to use the men's time, until they return home, profitably and an education scheme devised. The aim of the scheme was to enable the men to re-equip themselves mentally for their civilian life and occupations. A modest start was made by hosting two lectures a week to all companies relating to some aspect of South African society. From these humble beginnings the Carbineer Training Wing grew, which was situated in one of the barracks. The initial lack of furniture was eventually overcome and, on 28 May, the CO officially opened the wing which by then sported chairs, tables, blackboards and cupboards. Some of the first classes presented focussed on citizenship, agriculture and business methods.⁹¹⁷ Jerry Hurley was tasked with organising the classes for the Coloured batmen of the regiment on account of his one and a quarter years of teaching experience. Within ten days, one of Hurley's students was able to sign his name when drawing his pay instead of merely making a mark.⁹¹⁸ There was also a small library stocked with books and periodicals in limited quantity which in no small way contributed to the Regiment's educational plan being regarded as the best in the whole Division.⁹¹⁹

For Carbineers Buckley, Stainbank, Hurley and Rositter, among others, the long wait in Europe was filled with lectures about how the authorities were doing all they possibly could to speed up the process of repatriation. The men were bombarded with pamphlets on how the process would work and what were to happen to them once they reach the Union. News about the Home Front reached the men in the form of a special issue of the *Springbok Digest* that condensed the most important occurrences since Sidi Rezegh in one small

⁹¹⁶ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, May 24-30.

⁹¹⁷ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, Appendix J, Carbineer Training Schemes.

⁹¹⁸ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p68.

⁹¹⁹ DOD Archives, War Diaries, Box 646, May 1945, Endnotes

booklet. Herein the men read that battles not only raged in North Africa and Italy but back home as well where the Minister of Railways and Harbours planned to build a super railway station on the Wanderers cricket grounds. The 'battle of the Wanderers' was on. An explosion at the Grand Magazine in Pretoria, causing thirty-four deaths, and the good prices for beef were also interesting conversation topics.⁹²⁰ Most of the material relating to demobilisation attested to the fact that the object of the process was to demobilise and reinstate in civil life the greatest number of servicemen and women in the shortest time with the least fuss. By June all the men were aware of their respective categories for repatriation and their concerns were focussed on the actual demobilisation process.⁹²¹ Time seemed to drag on forever.⁹²²

UDF policy determined that demobilisation should take place according to a person's length of service in the UDF. To get the men back into society as soon as possible it was determined that those who had definite and genuine pre-enlistment jobs, students returning to studies and individuals who left school and would have entered a university were to be released from service at once. This caused great concern among the men that stayed behind in the operational theatre. They feared that men who returned home first would scoop up all the best jobs. The Directorate of Demobilisation had a trying time explaining to the men that to be released a soldier must have a pre-enlistment job. They firmly stated that intending to become a farmer, going on leave and finding employment with someone you know or being offered a job by someone in the Union did not entitle one to immediate release. Hereby the directorate sought to ease the emotions of men anxious about their future.⁹²³

But it was, however, not just their comrades being released from service early that threatened the job security of those staying behind in Europe. Several categories of men were prevented from enlisting at the outbreak of war. They were those men with health issues, held key positions in industry or those who had political objections to South Africa's participation in the war. Although many of the political objectors were interned during the war they were released during its course and could resume their positions in South African society.⁹²⁴ South Africans who did not participate in the military effort found their jobs targeted by returning troops at the end of the war. In several cases temporary workers were displaced as the men whose jobs they were doing returned from service. It was not all doom and gloom however, as many South Africans viewed it as doing their part for the war effort

⁹²⁰ DOD Archives, Union War Histories, Box 126, File 7576, Springbok Digest, p35-39.

⁹²¹ DOD Archives, Adjutant General group 3, Divisional Records, Box 47, File C24, Demobilisation, General and policy.

⁹²² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p68.

⁹²³ DOD Archives, Adjutant General group 3, Divisional Records, Box 47, File C24, Demobilisation, General and policy.

⁹²⁴ K.J. Gibbs, **Demobilisation after World War 2**, pp17-19

by assisting and training the ex-soldiers.⁹²⁵ The task of Government then was one of trying to satisfy the desires of returning troops regarding demobilisation benefits in concert with economic growth and stability.



Figure 7.4: Posters and pamphlets used to inform UDF personnel about the Demobilisation Process.⁹²⁶

In this endeavour various posts in government departments were reserved for returning servicemen as early as 1944. Ex-soldiers could choose from one of 300 vacancies in the Department of Agriculture and Forestry. The department was even willing to employ semi-fit and unfit ex-volunteers in an effort to ensure that everyone who did their part during the war had a job.⁹²⁷ The directorate also paid out more than £500,000 to the Post Office for investment in Union Loan Certificates which were to be used for the payment of war gratuities to South African ex-volunteers.⁹²⁸ These gratuities amounted to £1,10 per month for each month of service completed by European male volunteers and was paid in full and exempted from tax.⁹²⁹ The issue of civilian clothing and equipment at the demobilisation depots did however, not go as smooth as the ex-servicemen would have liked and many

⁹²⁵ F. Oosthuizen, **The Demobilisation of the white Union Defence Force Soldiers during the Second World War**. Unpublished Master's Thesis , p134.

⁹²⁶ DOD Archives, Archive Union War Histories, Box 45, File C24, Demobilisation Brochures and Posters.

⁹²⁷ Anon, **The Star**, Government Posts for Ex-Soldiers, 6 December 1944,

⁹²⁸ Anon, **Rand Daily Mail**, £541,299 Paid in War Gratuities, 3 December 1944,

⁹²⁹ DOD Archives, Union War Histories, Civil Section, Box46, File C25, Back to Civilian Life: Information for the Volunteer.

vented their anger in the newspapers where they complained about having to wait in line for hours to receive their benefits. As part of the government plan to employ returning soldiers, many of them were used as clerks at these very same demobilisation depots now having difficulty with the large number of men that needed to be demobilised. Apart from being too old, some in their sixties, they had no experience in the type of work required.⁹³⁰

In an effort to speed up the process of allocating jobs to returning troops the Directorate of Demobilisation embraced technology by using a machine to determine which jobs are most sought after by ex-servicemen. RODD (Records section of the Department of Demobilisation) the robot was a giant machine that used perforated cards and pegs to determine the age, type of pre-war employment, standard of education and post-war intentions of all volunteers. Information fed onto RODD was compiled from the answers to a list of questions distributed to troops during September 1944. With no margin for error allowed by RODD it was learned that a significant number of servicemen wanted to remain in the permanent force while others wanted to be trained as artisans. The ultimate task of RODD was to enable government to know in a few minutes how many ‘...jam-makers, interpreters, green keepers, *bywoners* (squatters), cemetery caretakers and sweet-makers...’ had jobs to return to or needed assistance to do so.⁹³¹

It was not just the physical problems of clothing and equipping repatriated soldiers that demanded government attention. During a social welfare conference held at Wits University on 25 September 1944 the speakers urged the Government to be ‘bold, original and imaginative’ when dealing with the demobilisation process. It was argued that since the Government spent vast sums on turning men into good soldiers, more should be spent on turning them back to good citizens. The question of prostitution, gambling and alcoholism needed to be addressed in addition to developing social services for non-Europeans. With gambling being a widespread pastime of soldiers it was acknowledged that the phenomenon was as wide-spread evil that needed to be stamped out. To this evil was added the misuse of alcohol and prostitution, both of which were serious problems as soldiers began returning home from the war. It was argued that the only way to relieve the plight of the many poor and starving European and Coloured families was through increased funding for social upliftment programmes.⁹³²

⁹³⁰ Anon, **Rand Daily Mail**, 4 December 1944, Soldiers Still Wait for Civil Kit. Anon, **Rand Daily Mail**, Ex-soldiers Resent Delays at Civil Equipment Depot, 24 November 1944,

⁹³¹ Anon, **The Star**, South Africa has its own WOCCI: RODD the Robot Classifies Service Men and Women for Post-War Jobs, 25 November 1944,

⁹³² Anon, **The Star**, The Soldier in Civilian Live: State Urged to be “Bold and Original” in Task of Demobilisation, 26 September 1944.

The Death March to Freedom

Cliff Portsmouth would have given anything to be poor and starving in South Africa but instead he was starving and freezing somewhere in Eastern Germany. On 23 January 1945 the prisoners were violently woken up and ordered to fall in outside with their belongings. Some speculated that it might be another routine search but soon the rumour that the camp was being abandoned began to spread and was proven to be true a short while later. Portsmouth's camp then joined a torrent of men being slowly marched to death across Germany.⁹³³ From Brieg they moved to Sagan, a distance of 270 kilometers, which they reached after two weeks. Portsmouth kept a secret diary of the march and noted all the towns they passed as well as the distances travelled each day. After a gruelling journey of sixty one days over 870 kilometers, the men reached Steinau where they were destined to wait out the rest of the war.⁹³⁴

During the march they slept in sheds, barns, chicken houses and stables. It was still incredibly cold and the few days they had to sleep in the open did much to worsen the prevalence of frostbite among the men. As if the cold and hunger was not enough, the column was subjected to allied air raids on two occasions where the pilots mistook the two and a half kilometre column for retreating German soldiers.⁹³⁵

Portsmouth, with his frostbite in an advanced stage, was moved to an adjacent camp with a large contingent of men suffering from infectious diseases. There were about 5000 men with no medical aid or food simply waiting to die.⁹³⁶ Although it was not clear to him at the time, Portsmouth's luck had begun to take a turn for the better. Scarcely a week after arriving at the death camp, Portsmouth awoke one morning to hear planes overhead and tanks firing over the camp. Suddenly the adjacent bungalow was hit by a stray shell and went up in smoke and flames. This was followed by a few more of the camp buildings being hit. Portsmouth and an Australian comrade were determined not to die at the hands of indiscriminate gunners. Portsmouth then, just like in Durban and North Africa, marshalled the last of his remaining strength, called upon his skills as athlete and sped off to safety.

Since POW camps were not built to withstand attacks from the outside there were precious little places of safety. The safest place around were the slit trenches that served as latrines since they were sunk a few feet into the ground. Without hesitating Portsmouth and his comrade dove into these places of refuge and remained there for an hour. Cliff Portsmouth then saw the most beautiful sight of the whole war. An American tank was driving straight

⁹³³ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*, p8.

⁹³⁴ NCA, C.J. Portsmouth *Notebook*. NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹³⁵ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*. p9.

⁹³⁶ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

towards them. It stopped at the camp gate and the 'Yank' shouted at the cheering men...'for you the war is over'.⁹³⁷

Invalided Home

Fainsinger's trip on the HMHS *Amra*, in spite of being hot, was mostly uneventful. He did not want it any other way. During this trip he became seasick only twice, as opposed to his previous naval excursions. His aggressive spirit seems to have been left behind on the mountain slopes of Italy as he began to find an interest in needlework. For the next twenty two days he hobbled around the ship on his crutches and was ecstatic when the ship docked at Durban harbour on 21 October 1944.⁹³⁸ From the ship he went straight to a very comfortable hospital train, which took a full load of wounded men to Johannesburg. From there Fainsinger was taken by ambulance to the Chamber of Mines Hospital. Having accepted his injuries, he was confronted with an event at the Milner Park siding which was to repeat itself in the weeks to come. Here he met some orderlies and acquaintances from times before he was wounded. Upon seeing him these men could not hide their surprise and fright as they gazed upon their deformed friend. They did not know how to react to the news that Fainsinger has lost his eye and used crutches to move about. He, on the other hand, has accepted his fate and did not want anyone to make a fuss about it. Over the following months Fainsinger was visited by family and friends and had quite a relaxing time in hospital. Daily entries in his diary became fewer as he stopped dwelling on the past and began looking forward to enrolling for studies at Wits University.⁹³⁹ On 21 March 1945, Fainsinger was discharged from hospital and, two weeks later, on 4 April, he received his discharge papers.⁹⁴⁰ Ben Fainsinger was a civilian again.

On the same day that Fainsinger received his discharge papers another Carbineer held a valuable piece of paper in his bony hands. Cliff Portsmouth gazed at the boarding pass in his hands in disbelief. He was one of many ex-POW's, recently liberated by the Americans, who were on their way to England for medical attention and repatriation. On the runway three Dakota transport planes filled with men eager to be reunited with their loved ones. Portsmouth just wanted to get away from the war and anxiously took his seat and after a while felt the engines roar as the Dakotas took off simultaneously. Suddenly and without any warning one of the Dakotas began losing height after take-off and exploded in a ball of fire as it hit the ground.⁹⁴¹ Air crashes were quite common during these months when thousands of men needed to be repatriated as quickly as possible. There was a shortage of all kinds of transport. Transport ships took too long to complete return journeys to and from

⁹³⁷ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*, p9.

⁹³⁸ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, Fainsinger B.E. 289283V.

⁹³⁹ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger *Diary*,

⁹⁴⁰ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, Record of Volunteer's Service, 289283V Fainsinger B.E.

⁹⁴¹ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, *Memoirs*, p9.

the Union and the Government was already using all its available transport aircraft to bring the men home. With the shuttle service of Dakotas and Lockheed Lodestars going day and night it was not long before aircrew exhaustion set in leading to several fatal crashes.⁹⁴² The Carbineers were not exempt from suffering such tragedies as they lost three of their most beloved Sergeants in one such a crash in Kenya.⁹⁴³ Captain J. P. Edmonds, C Company's Silver Star recipient, was destined to be on that same doomed flight. Troops received a list everyday with the names of the men going home and by which means they were to travel. Edmonds was listed on the air draft but through some bureaucratic mix-up a Major from the Natal Mounted Rifles got Edmonds' seat on the Dakota.⁹⁴⁴ In an effort to prevent further accidents, flights were restricted to daytime only and aircrew were given much more time between flights. The men were also given the option of waiting for a ship if the idea of flying did not appeal to them. After surviving several years of war the men of C Company definitely did not want to end up at the bottom of Lake Kisumu or spread over some deteriorating runway somewhere between Italy and Pretoria and most chose to wait for passage to Egypt where the UDF had its main staging point for soldiers returning home.⁹⁴⁵

C Company Leaves Europe

The monotony that accompanied the peaceful occupation of northern Italy, while waiting for transport home, was frequently interrupted by sports events which ranged from inter-unit events to semi-international affairs. The crowning moment of years of 'fighting' on improvised sports grounds and athletics tracks was on 16 June when the Regiment triumphed over the other units of 13th Brigade in the largest inter-unit athletics event to date. Captained by C Company's Lt E. Dinkleman, the Regiment literally left their opponents with dust in their eyes and added the winner's trophy to the already impressive collection of Regimental silver.⁹⁴⁶ The May and June issues of *The Springbok*, the official UDF newspaper, reported that starting from July at least 500 men would be repatriated by air per day. This scheme required the use of twenty-five transport aircraft daily, a logistical impossibility for the UDF.⁹⁴⁷ By this time a sufficient number of Carbineers have been sent home to necessitate yet another regimental shuffle. The four company regiment was reorganised to comprise of two companies only with A and B company and C and D company amalgamating respectively. This then was the end of the long road for C Company that started from Premier Mine in 1940 and ended in northern Italy five years later.⁹⁴⁸

⁹⁴² NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p69.

⁹⁴³ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p 46.

⁹⁴⁴ NCA, J. P. Edmonds, Interview, M. Coghlan, Pietermaritzburg, 2 Feb 1992.

⁹⁴⁵ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p69.

⁹⁴⁶ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p46-50.

⁹⁴⁷ The Helwan Riots: August 1945, Military History Journal, vol 12 no 3, June 2002. p2

⁹⁴⁸ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p49.

Many of C Company's men were, however, still waiting for their turn to go home. Bill Buckley realised that in spite of the Japanese still holding out in the Far East, his days as a combatant in Smut's army was numbered. A very clear indication of this was when the Carbineers returned all their first-line ammunition on 4 July and received numerous remnants from other partially demobilised units.⁹⁴⁹ Shortly hereafter Buckley and most of the remaining 'Olds and Bolds' departed for Egypt where they were to wait at the UDF base at Helwan for transport home.⁹⁵⁰ Within a relatively short period of time the base facilities which could accommodate 5000 men had to cope with twice the number as more and more men arrived from Italy. It was also murmured that the Egyptian run shops and theatre were making quite handsome profits at the expense of the South Africans. With insufficient entertainment for the troops, exploitation by the locals and constant delays in shipping and flights home led to discontent among many Springboks and it was not long before secret meetings were being called to decide on a course of action.⁹⁵¹ Dering Stainbank was fortunate enough to secure a berth of a transport bound for South Africa on 8 July just as the situation at Helwan deteriorated further.⁹⁵² Then, on 26 July, with the camp literally bursting at the seams, the camp commander requested 500 volunteers to be flown home. It became clear that the system of first in first out was seriously flawed and this led to further unhappiness among the Springboks.⁹⁵³ A month later tensions flared up leading to the 'Helwan Riot' where South African troops looted shops and burned down the Egyptian theatre. But by then, the men of C Company were back in the Union and preparing for their final discharge.

The risks involved with repatriation by air did not sway Jerry Hurley or Bill Buckley from volunteering. The army maxim of never volunteering for anything seemed to have been forgotten by both these men. For Hurley it would be his first time ever to fly in a plane, while Buckley did not care much how he got home.⁹⁵⁴ On 6 August Buckley boarded a Dakota for the Union and Hurley boarded on 8 August for the first leg of a very long flight home.⁹⁵⁵ The planes of both men followed the same route down the Nile to Wadi Halfa where they were refuelled and refreshments enjoyed. The next stop was at Khartoum where the men spent the night. Then it was on to Kisumu at Lake Victoria. The only way to take off from Kisumu was over Lake Victoria and several inexperienced pilots were surprised by sudden downdrafts forcing their planes into the lake. The sight of the pilot flying Hurley's Dakota smoking nervously before take-off did not inspire much confidence among the

⁹⁴⁹ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p50.

⁹⁵⁰ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, H.W. Buckley, 4373V.

⁹⁵¹ E. P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk*, p250-251.

⁹⁵² DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, C.D. Stainbank. 4495V.

⁹⁵³ The Helwan Riots: August 1945, *Military History Journal*, vol 12 no 3, June 2002. p2

⁹⁵⁴ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p69; Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, Pietermaritzburg, 18 September 2008.

⁹⁵⁵ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, H.W. Buckley, 4373V. DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, J.J. Hurley, 4486V.

passengers. Their plane touched down safely at Tabora and Ndola where the pilot missed the runway and had to come around for a second pass. The penultimate stop was at Bulawayo in Rhodesia, where the crew and passengers spent the night. While sampling the local nightlife, Hurley and a fellow Carbineer came upon the flight sergeant of their Dakota who stumbled down the street highly intoxicated. Not wishing to die so close to home the men took it upon themselves to assist the man in sobering up a little. After a serious talk and an even more serious slap across the face the flight sergeant wisely returned to his quarters, leaving the Carbineers to wonder whether they were about to experience their last night on earth.⁹⁵⁶

The next day's take-off was a textbook execution and as the plane crossed the Limpopo the pilot rang a bell indicating that they just entered South African Airspace. At Zwartkops airfield near Pretoria the men were welcomed back by a major, but they were more interested in the tea and buns offered by several helpful ladies. In addition there were also telegraph forms which the men could fill in to let their families know that they have arrived safe and sound. The men from Buckley's plane arrived on 9 August and were waiting for Hurley's crowd to arrive on 11 August. A train was scheduled to take them to Pietermaritzburg that evening which meant that they had the rest of the Saturday to walk around in Pretoria. It was here that C Company had a glimpse of the South Africa they have returned to. Wherever they went they were made to feel unwelcome by Afrikaner Nationalists who opposed the Union's entry into the war. Where these people were in the relative minority in 1940 there were now a number of close encounters between them and returning soldiers. The men boarded their train that evening and early the next morning, on 13 August 1945, they arrived at Pietermaritzburg station. With military matters set aside for a few days at least, the men quickly dispersed in all directions in pursuit of those many luxuries denied them over the past few years.⁹⁵⁷

Back in England, as the men stared in horror at the burning wreck of the Dakota that just crashed on the runway, that April morning, their own plane's engines gave a final great roar and they were airborne. Cliff Portsmouth felt a great sense of relief that his luck held and that he was at last going home. Throughout April he was moved from one hospital to the next until he finally ended up in number 179 General Hospital in Rouen where a Chinese doctor operated on his toes and did skin grafts in an effort to repair the damage done by frostbite he contracted during the death march across Europe. The moment he was out of danger Portsmouth went on leave for five days and spent them in Paris. Upon his return to hospital he was transferred to Stafford Emergency Hospital in England. From here he expected to be repatriated home at the earliest convenience but fate had one last card to play. Something happened to him for which his training had not prepared him at all. He fell in love with one of the British nurses attending the wounded men. A brief romance followed

⁹⁵⁶ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p69.

⁹⁵⁷ NCA, J. Hurley Memoirs, p70.

and, in May, he asked nurse Eileen Hipwell's father for her hand in marriage. They got married on 7 July 1945 and honeymooned at Brighton. It was not difficult to convince his new wife that life would be much better in South Africa than bombed-out Europe.⁹⁵⁸ Unfortunately the British authorities continuously changed the regulations regarding who could travel with whom resulting in Portsmouth's return to the Union being delayed until September.⁹⁵⁹

Not all C-Company men shared the fairy-tale ending of Cliff Portsmouth. Ben Fainsinger's girlfriend to whom he wrote many letters during the war and who he had a strong intention of marrying was one of the first visitors he had in hospital. His injuries must have been too much of a shock to her and her visits became less and further apart until they stopped altogether.⁹⁶⁰ From October the last few remaining Carbineers departed for Helwan from where they were to board troopships bound for the Union. Several delayed their repatriation back home as long as possible, even if they were scheduled for an early release as category A or B members. This was done to enjoy to the fullest the 'spoils of war' which was to be had in a Europe now free from oppression by Nazis and Fascists alike.



Figure 7.5: HMT *Franconia* as it enters Durban harbour with the last of the Carbineers from Italy.⁹⁶¹

⁹⁵⁸ NCA, C. J. Portsmouth, Memoirs. p9.

⁹⁵⁹ Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹⁶⁰ NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary, p66.

⁹⁶¹ NCA, Photograph Selection, Pietermaritzburg.

It was during the trip across the Mediterranean on the HMT *Franconia* that the roll call tally repeatedly amounted to 501 instead of the 500 that was on the books. Since space was limited on a ship crammed with men eager to go home, roll call was held at different times in different sections of the ship for different units. After several recounts it was discovered that the extra body at each roll call belonged to the girlfriend of an enterprising Carbineer who had every intention of taking his 'spoils of war' back home to South Africa⁹⁶² or maybe it was a genuine attempt to bring at least one extra person back in exchange for those left in the bush in East Africa, the desert sands of the North and the mountains of Italy.

With the war won it was time to count the cost incurred. Apart from the financial impact on South Africa, which amounted to £522 144 881 for the 5 war years⁹⁶³ but the greatest impression left by the war was on the families where loved ones did not return.

		Enlistments	Deaths	Wounded	POW/Missing
1	Europeans	222 795	7 957	11 411	12 271
2	Africans	77 239	1 521	888	1 655
3	Cape Corps and Indian and Malay Corps	45 015	1 097	470	615
Total		345 049	10 575	12 769	14 541

Table 7.1: UDF enlistment and total number of casualties during the War.⁹⁶⁴

		Killed in Action	Wounded in Action	POW/Missing
1	East Africa and Abyssinia	152	197	5
2	North Africa	2 104	2 928	14 247
3	Italy	711	2675	157

Table 7.2: Battle casualties per Campaign. The numbers for Italy reflects the casualties sustained by the 6 South African Armoured Division only.⁹⁶⁵

⁹⁶² M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p52.

⁹⁶³ The Union of South Africa and the War, *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa no 23 of 1946*, p27.

⁹⁶⁴ The Union of South Africa and the War, *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa no 23 of 1946*, pp20-23; DOD Archives, War Records, Box 125, Casualties and Statistics, Letter by the Officer in Charge of War Records J. W. James to the Adjutant General regarding statistics on UDF personnel, 29 April 1948.

⁹⁶⁵ N. Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p 309; N. Orpen, *War in the Desert*, p 476; N. Orpen, *East African and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p328.

		KIA/ Missing	POW	Total
1	Carbineer Casualties	212	93	305

Table 7.3: Number of battle casualties sustained by the Natal Carbineers for the period 1940 to 1945.⁹⁶⁶

⁹⁶⁶

DOD Archives, Library, Roll of Honour; DOD Archives, Library, UDF POW's in all theatres.

Chapter 8

Epilogue

*'You know, we were the Royal Natal Carbineers'*⁹⁶⁷

Carbineer E.G. Ford, October 2008

An effort to maintain close post-war ties between men who trained and fought together gave rise on 2 July 1944 to the idea of forming a Royal Natal Carbineers Association in Italy and the intention to form such an association was reconfirmed on 27 March 1946. Lt Col Hay, the Commanding Officer of the Carbineers during their preparation for war was elected as deputy and it was hoped that he would be able to rally sufficient numbers of ex-servicemen to the new cause just as he did prior to the Regiment leaving for war. In spite of a tremendous effort by committee members the Association struggled with low membership as many Carbineers chose to rather resume their pre-war lives.⁹⁶⁸ Several, however, did once more heed their Regiment's call and remained involved in Carbineer activities as the Regiment sought to re-affirm its value in a post-war South Africa.

Sergeant Henry William (Bill) Buckley was discharged from the UDF in September 1945 and was fortunate enough to have a job waiting for him. He was employed at the Dunlop rubber factory in Pietermaritzburg before the war and upon his return was able to go back to his workstation as if nothing had changed. Bill however, did notice that most of the men who stayed out of the war were promoted to better positions. In spite of several of his erstwhile colleagues now occupying positions of power, Buckley treated the whole situation with the same indifference that sustained him throughout the war. He did after all not enlist to further any ideological cause or because it was his duty to fight, but simply went along with his friends as they were all swept up in the excitement of pre-war mobilisation. In spite of having been wounded several times and doing his fair share of shooting at the enemy, Bill did not return a changed man. When he shipped out with the rest of C Company he knew that he might be called upon to kill. Whenever these thoughts plagued his mind he reassured himself with the knowledge that whenever he found himself in a situation where it was 'him or me' he would prefer that it was the other man who remained lifeless on the battlefield.⁹⁶⁹

⁹⁶⁷ Phrase repeated over and over by Mr E. Ford during the last visit made by the author to Mr Ford's residence in Pietermaritzburg in October 2008. By this time he was basically confined to bed and passed away a shortly afterwards.

⁹⁶⁸ M. Coghlan, **Pro Patria**, p48.

⁹⁶⁹ Interview: H. W. "Bill" Buckley – G. Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg; Interview: B. Buckley – G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.



Figure 8.1: Capt G Bentz and Mr H. W. 'Bill' Buckley.⁹⁷⁰

In contrast with Buckley, fellow C Company member Corporal John George (Jack) Holland was much more traumatised by his experience of war. He was quite eager to join the Carbineers in 1940 but through some bureaucratic mismanagement which only military planners could achieve he was sent to the Pretoria Regiment instead thereby missing out on the whole East African campaign. He was to spend a whole year training in South Africa before eventually being shipped to North Africa. There he joined the most decorated platoon in the Regiment. As rifleman in number 12 platoon he fought alongside men like Quentin Smythe and Cliff Portsmouth. He also formed a close friendship with fellow rifleman Dough Drummond. Holland joined the Carbineers during the disastrous Crusader campaign and constantly found himself on the receiving end of thousands of German shells, bombs and bullets. The sight of seeing his friend Dough cut in half by enemy machinegun fire and his consequent burial in the desert made Holland question his own mortality and during Rommel's El Alamein offensive in July 1942 Holland had one close call too many when an artillery shell exploded a few meters from his face. Although no medical term like Post Traumatic Stress⁹⁷¹ existed at that stage the medical officer judged Holland to be sufficiently combat inefficient to warrant removal from the line due to battle stress. He was

⁹⁷⁰ Photo taken at the Natal Carbineers Drill Hall in Pietermaritzburg on 13 June 2008.

⁹⁷¹ The term 'Shell shocked' were used to classify men whose nerves had given in and had to be removed from the frontline.

transferred to the SACMP in Cairo where he was to spend the remainder of the war. Unbeknownst to him his father used whatever influence he had and made several appeals to have his son discharged from the military. This discharge was effected in April 1943 and Holland was sent home only to be branded a coward by his father who, in a drunken rage, accused him of running away from the war. Not long after the end of the war Jack disposed of all his campaign medals and other war memorabilia. These things stirred memories of a painful time in his life when he was a trained killer. The memories never abated and haunted him until his death on 8 March 2009.⁹⁷²

Sergeant Quentin George Murray Smythe (VC), after receiving his Victoria Cross from Major General Dan Pienaar on 11 September 1942, was withdrawn from active service and returned to the Union for 'special duties'. He did a six month officer course and was promoted to Second Lieutenant. His fighting days were however over. The new frontlines were at recruitment drives, honorary dinners and military parades where he had to recount his exploits and motivate his countrymen to support the war effort by enlisting in the UDF. He became quite the celebrity in South Africa and was finally discharged from full time service on 5 August 1945 where-after he resumed his pre-war occupation as farmer. On 16 April 1946 he re-joined the UDF for two months in order to form part of the victory celebrations in London. In the years that followed Smythe married three times. He was not forgotten by his old regiment and was called to action several times during his career. In 1962 he opened the Clements Cup which was a revival of the South African Polo Challenge Cup. The driving force behind this tournament was another C Company member C.D. Stainbank. In 1969 he applied to for a position in the Permanent Force and after initially being refused entry was eventually accepted and posted to the Danie Theron Combat School in Kimberley and eventually attained the rank of Captain in 1973. Smythe's status as hero never abated and he even featured in a comic strip in a national newspaper. In 1982 Captain Smythe even organised and co-ordinated a shooting exercise for new Carbineers about to deploy to townships and national keypoints. He passed away on 22 October 1996 in Parklands Hospital.⁹⁷³

Corporal Christopher Dering Stainbank, the Carbineer who wrote the most letters home of the whole regiment, arrived in Durban on 25 July 1945 and received his discharge papers by mail a month later. As one of the 'Olds and Bolds' he shared C Company's actions throughout East and North Africa, missing the great El Alamein battle by accidently burning himself while cooking. He also volunteered for the Italian campaign after the personal

⁹⁷² NCA, J. Holland Memoirs; NCA, J. Holland, Letter to M. Coghlan 1 January 1993.

⁹⁷³ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, Q.G.M. Smythe. 4485V; Vere Harte Collection, Address by Major General Dan Pienaar on occasion of presenting the V.C. to Sergeant Quentin George Murray Smythe of the 1st Royal Natal Carbineers, at El Alamein on 11 September 1942; M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, pp 157, 165 and 189. Anon, *Sunday Times* supplement, True Tales of Southern Africa, 11 November 1973; I.S. Uys, *For Valour: The History of Southern Africa's Victoria Cross Heroes*, pp330-332.

intervention by Lt Col Comrie on his twenty-first birthday. Stainbank got married in 1947 and entered local politics where he aggressively opposed the Republican ideals of the Nationalists in Transvaal. He maintained his links with the Regiment and presented lectures on local Zulu culture and customs to new Carbineer officers during the violent protests of the 1980's. He was an active farmer and politician until his death in January 1997.⁹⁷⁴



Figure 8.2: C.D. Stainbank during the Italian campaign.⁹⁷⁵

Corporal Clifford John 'Cliff' Portsmouth (DCM) had no job to return to after the war and, to make matters worse, he had his young bride to provide for as well. He spent the last three years of the war as a POW and had to rely on himself to survive. Now, in post-war South Africa things seem almost as hopeless as during the war. Fortunately for him the UDF's reintegration process worked in his favour and he quickly got a government job as clerk in the Department of Customs. He managed to scrape together enough money to afford a flat in Durban which his wife and he occupied upon her arrival in South Africa in March 1946. He did not join the Carbineer Association and his first post-war reunion with his old comrades was during the Regiment's Centenary celebrations in 1955. The political interference in the post-war military by the Nationalist government was the main reason for him not getting involved in military matters. On 9 January 1985 Cliff and his wife attended the DCM muster at *Windsor Castle*. During this event the Duke of Kent inspected the 191 surviving DCM

⁹⁷⁴ Obituaries: Christopher Dering Stainbank. *Natalia* 26 (1997), Natal Society Foundation; DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, C.D. Stainbank. 4495V; **M. Coghlan, Pro Patria**, p165.

⁹⁷⁵ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

holders from all over the world. The couple retired to the family farm outside Howick where they stayed until Cliff passed away in August 2010.⁹⁷⁶

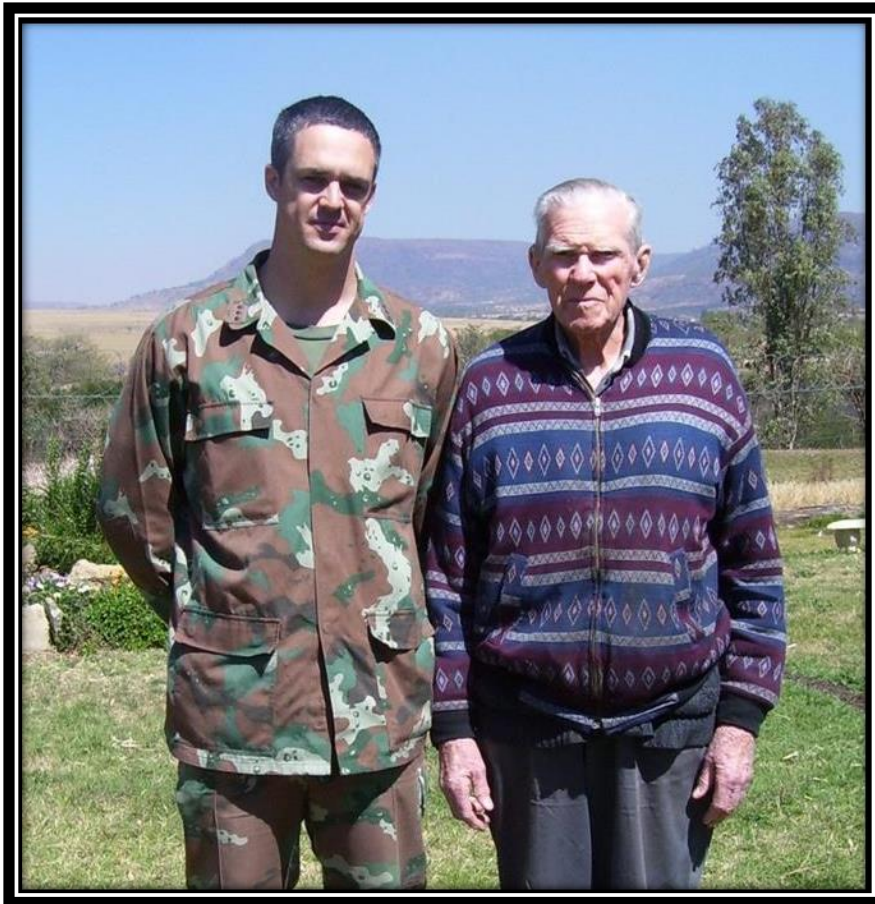


Figure 8.3: Capt G. Bentz and Mr C.J. Portsmouth.⁹⁷⁷

Benjamin Edgar (Ben) Fainsinger was studying to become a dentist when war came to South Africa. His yearning to handle a weapon drove him into the arms of eager UDF recruiters. He deliberately elected to join the Carbineers as he had no inclination to stay in SA and guard bridges and harbours. He joined the Regiment while it was in Egypt and fought in C Company during the Italian campaign. The diary he kept during this period betrays an eagerness to experience combat. His baptism of fire intensified his desire to fire his rifle at the enemy. The lack of emotion among soldiers in combat becomes apparent when he describes his section's attack on an enemy position and the killing of the German machinegun crew followed by the consequent looting of the bodies. The taking of war trophies was an acceptable practice by soldiers on both sides but Fainsinger opted to take the pictures that his dead enemy had in his possession. These photographs actually portrayed the enemy not as a faceless barbarian but a soldier just like Fainsinger. Two

⁹⁷⁶ NCA, Portsmouth Memoirs. p9; Interview: C. J. Portsmouth - M. Coghlan, 1 May 1992, Pietermaritzburg; Interview: C. J. Portsmouth – G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹⁷⁷ Photo taken on the Portsmouth Farm near Estcourt on 22 September 2008.

photos were of the German's wife and child while others were of his comrades posing with their weapons. Fainsinger's attitude changed dramatically after being wounded on 28 July 1944. He consequently lost the use of his eye and was boarded out of the UDF with a seventy five percent disability pension. He then completed the final two years of his studies at Wits University and became a qualified dentist in 1946. After further treatment to his eye he realised that he did not have a future in straight dentistry with just one eye. He then entered public service dentistry and specialised in orthodontics.⁹⁷⁸

Walter John Carpenter (Jack) Rossiter, C Company's escapee returned to South Africa in November 1943 and re-joined the Regiment again in March 1944 where he participated in the remainder of the Italian campaign. When the war ended Rossiter moved to England where he worked as an assistant secretary for four years. It was during this period that he met and married his first wife. He then qualified in hospital administration and spent the next twenty five years working in provincial hospitals. His wife passed away in 1974 where after he retired to Marlborough and remarried in 1981. Rossiter returned to Manfredonia in 1991 to seek out the various individuals who assisted them during their escape. The whole reunion was recorded and broadcast on local television that evening. Rossiter thanked his benefactors and armed with addresses and well wishes returned home feeling satisfied that indeed his mission was accomplished.⁹⁷⁹



Figure 8.4: Walter John Carpenter (Jack) Rossiter, standing on the right, with the two other escapees.⁹⁸⁰

⁹⁷⁸ DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, Fainsinger B. E. 589283V; Interview: B. E. Fainsinger - M. Coghlan, 10 Sept 1993, Pietermaritzburg; NCA, B. E. Fainsinger Diary.

⁹⁷⁹ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p68-70; DOD Archives, Personnel Cards, W.J.C. Rossiter W.J.C. 594V.

⁹⁸⁰ J. Rossiter, **The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943**, p5.

After the war Jerry Hurley immigrated to Australia where he lived out his remaining days while another Hurley rose to prominence in Natal. He was Father Denis Hurley, brother of Jerry, who eventually retired as Archbishop. Where Jerry fought Fascism during the war Denis opposed injustice in the years that followed. It was through the Archbishop that the regimental historian of the Natal Carbineers managed to track down Jerry and acquire his memoirs.⁹⁸¹

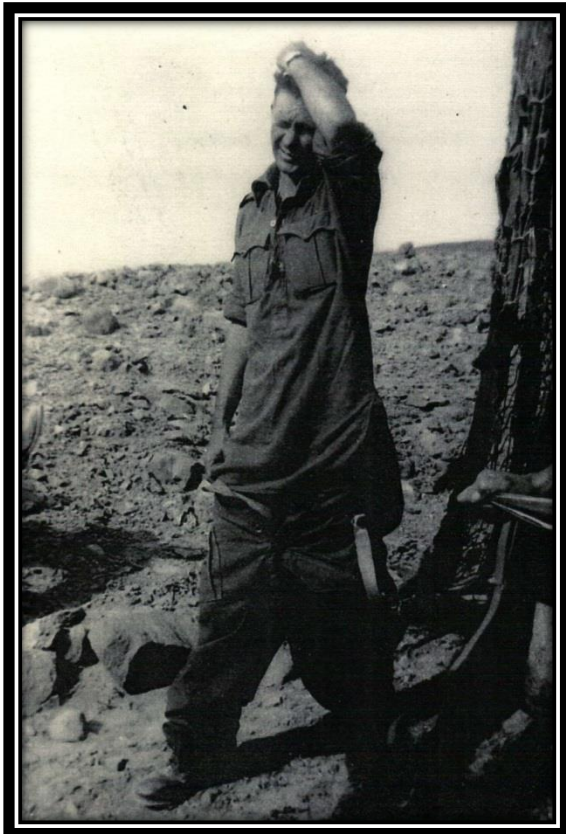


Figure 8.4: Jerry Hurley in the western desert *circa* 1942.⁹⁸²

⁹⁸¹ Interview: D. Hurley - M. Coghlan, 20 April 2013, Pretoria; Kearney P. Interviewing Archbishop Hurley. **Concord**, Vol 2/2 April, 2001, p3.

⁹⁸² NCA, J.J. Hurley Diary.

Michael the rooster was allegedly smuggled to South Africa by Keith Boast where he spent his remaining days in comfort on Boast's farm.⁹⁸³



Figure 8.5: Michael the rooster.⁹⁸⁴

On 17 July 1990 a luncheon was hosted by the Royal Natal Carbineers to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Regiment's departure to war. This differed from the 1987 reunion dinner hosted to celebrate the departure of the 1st South African Brigade⁹⁸⁵ in the sense that the attendants were with a few exceptions all Carbineers. During this event the last wartime Commanding Officer, Lt Col P.C.A. Francis, toasted the regiment and shared some of his memories with those in attendance. It was remarkable that 120 veterans managed to attend this occasion which became an annual event known as the '*Devonshire Lunch*'.⁹⁸⁶

In the years that followed the *Devonshire Lunch* was one of the highlights on the Natal Carbineer calendar and was well supported by those veterans who were still able to. It was always held on 17 July or the most convenient day closest to it. It was a prestige function and restricted to those who were physically present on the troopship as she left Durban.

⁹⁸³ NCA, M. Alleyne to M. Coghlan, Notes on Michael the Rooster.

⁹⁸⁴ NCA, Photograph Collection, Pietermaritzburg.

⁹⁸⁵ M. Coghlan, *Pro Patria*, p158.

⁹⁸⁶ NCA, P.C.A.Francis Collection, Devonshire Address, 17 July 1990.

Another tradition upheld until 2013 was that no ladies were ever allowed to attend the event. On the day of the lunch the members arrive at the venue, which for the last few years were the Natal Carbineers Officers Mess, are greeted by the current Officer Commanding (OC) of the Regiment or a delegated officer. Before being allowed access to the bar the members pay their respective fees at a very diligent Bill Buckley who acts as treasurer. As soon as all the veterans have arrived and ordered their beverage of choice at the bar, they and the invited guests find their seats which decreased in number year by year as the most frail and oldest of the veterans are either unable to attend or have passed away. The current OC, or his delegate, then briefs the members on the Regiments' activities and deployments, hereafter the chaplain or appointed person would say grace and the feast commence. There is then the briefest of opportunity to interact with the veterans and get first-hand accounts of their wartime experiences before they are spirited away by children or wives. The initial lunches were lengthy affairs and featured among other things the singing of the Brigade song and other jovial activities but the years progressed and age took its toll. The last couple of lunches were no more than two hours in duration but still featured a very active Jack Long whistling the tune to the Brigade song halfway through the main course. The 2013 lunch featured a musical number by Jack Long about a soldier cheating on his girlfriend and ending up getting shot. With fewer and fewer of the original members able to attend, an era will soon come to an end as only five veterans were able to attend the 2013 lunch.⁹⁸⁷ When, however, the last call sounds for the last remaining WW2 Carbineer, as it undoubtedly must, they will fondly be forever remembered as South Africa's fighting Springboks who lived up to their Regiment's motto 'Pro Patria'.

⁹⁸⁷

Carbineer Lunch, Pietermaritzburg, 18 July 2008 and 30 July 2011.



Figure 8.6: Carbineer veterans during the *Devonshire* Lunch on 18 July 2008.



Figure 8.7: Carbineer veterans with the OC Natal Carbineers and WO2 I. Gerhardt during the *Devonshire* Lunch on 30 July 2011.



Figure 8.8: Carbineer veterans with former OC Natal Carbineers C. Simpson and lunch organiser G. Dick during the *Devonshire* Lunch on 19 July 2013.

Conclusion

This aim of this study was to fill the gap that exist in South African military literature on South African soldiers during the Second World War by creating a reconstruction of the lives of a selection of ordinary soldiers and should have been undertaken twenty years ago when more veterans were still alive. At present it is not difficult to locate general histories of the Second World War that deals with South Africa's participation. Herein one would also find a plethora of accounts by famous generals, politicians or even one or two of civilians that did something extraordinary throughout the war years. The thousands of junior NCO's and Other Ranks have been left largely voiceless and it is then this injustice that the study seeks to remedy. In achieving the aim numerous interviews were conducted, hundreds of letters read, several diaries studied and personal memoirs consumed. Armed with all this information this study transformed from a mere academic work to a labour of love as Carbineers, living and dead, became part of everyday life with each page written and it quickly became apparent that there are much more material available but unfortunately it fell outside the scope of this study.

The reader, upon reaching the end of this dissertation will have a better understanding of what ordinary soldiers experienced upon enlistment until eventual demobilisation. Before the commencement of hostilities in Europe, the battle lines were already drawn in South Africa with supporters of Herzog and smuts voicing their opinions regarding the Union's involvement in a war thousands of miles away. While Herzog believed that Afrikaners would support his view of neutrality Smuts hoped that his countrymen would realise their duty to support the Empire in its hour of need. In voicing too much support for German motives in Europe, Herzog not only lost the support of a large part of the voting public but his job as well. Smuts, who then became Prime Minister, had to prepare the country for a modern war and transform the military from a defensive organ geared towards police actions along its borders to a coherent fighting force capable of fulfilling the promise of military aid made by its commander in chief. It was to be almost a year before the UDF could deploy its military might to East Africa where Mussolini's forces awaited. To most of the men who volunteered their services the politics Smuts was of no concern to them. Loyalty to friends and a desire for adventure fuelled the constant flow of men to the recruitment centres. For the Natal Carbineers this loyalty stretched beyond mere adventurous politics as they were fiercely proud of their regiment and if their regiment was destined to go to war, so were they.

The campaign in East Africa was, with a few exceptions, a textbook affair of manoeuvre warfare over difficult terrain. The Springboks swept the Italians from the field of battle and felt secure in their equipment, tactics and strategy. In reading the records of Carbineers long since gone, one gets the feeling that the time spent in East Africa resembled a very long hunting safari with visits to far-away places and the occasional skirmish with the locals. With their light tanks, armoured cars and antiquated aircraft the UDF managed to secure East

Africa for the Empire and then set its sights of North Africa where Rommel's men were chasing the British across the length and breadth of the desert. In spite of the two tragedies at Sidi Rezeg and Tobruk the Carbineers had a generally agreeably time in the "North". For many the exposure to the myriad of cultures was the highlight of their military service. With battles fought on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and the sands of the desert it was inevitable that casualties would be sustained. C Company had already been bloodied in East Africa and in North Africa the difference in casualties was the extent to which men were blown apart by tank rounds, artillery shells and machinegun fire. This might also have been the motivation why many Carbineers opted not to return to the field of battle in 1943. The regiment that took to the field in 1943 was a totally different animal than the one which engaged the Italians at El Wak three years earlier. There were different weapons and vehicles, experienced officers and NCO's and much more enlisted men whose idea of the romance of war was replaced by feelings of "Avange Tobruk".⁹⁸⁸

Whereas the Carbineers encountered mostly Africans during their recent campaigns they were now exposed to cities and towns with many of the comforts they have back in the Union. Some of the hardest battles were fought on the sports grounds across Italy and the South African teams were well represented by Carbineers. Unfortunately the conventional battles were equally hard-fought and the Regiment suffered the most of its battle-casualties during the campaign of 1943-1945. Being spared garrison duty in occupied Europe the Carbineers returned home at the conclusion of hostilities and by the end of 1945 almost all the Carbineers were back home where the process of rebuilding their pre-war lives began. In 1948 there was a change of government and men from Natal now found that those who opposed South Africa's entry into the Second World War was now in charge of the country and that the erstwhile supporters of Smuts and his ideals were slowly being marginalised. This gave rise to feelings of resentment and when South Africa became a republic in 1961 many Carbineer veterans were prepared to take up arms and secede from the Republic. But that is a story for another day. It is hoped that the experiences of the men in this study will serve as a lens through which future readers will be able to better understand how, citizens turned soldiers, coped with the everyday challenges they faced both on and off the field of battle as they answered their country's call to arms.

⁹⁸⁸E. P. Hartshorn, **Avange Tobruk**.

SOURCES

1. **BOOKS AND THESES**

- Agar-Hamilton J.A.I. and Turner, L.C.F., **The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941** (Cape Town, 1957).
- Agar-Hamilton, J.A.I. and Turner, L.C.F., **Crisis in the Desert** (Cape Town, 1952).
- Axelson, E., **A Year in Italy: An account of a year as military historian with the South African 6th Armoured Division in Italy 1944-1945** (Port Elizabeth, 2001).
- H. Bantjés, *Die Vermaaklikheidsgroep van die Unie Verdedigingsmag gedurende die Tweede Wêreld Oorlog: 'n Historiese Ontleding*, (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Pretoria, 1990).
- Birkby, C., **Uncle George: The Boer boyhood, letters and battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink** (Johannesburg, 1987).
- Bouwer, J.S. and Louw, M.N. **The SAAF At War 1940-1984: A Pictorial Appraisal** (Cape Town, 1989).
- Brookes, E.H. and C. de B. Webb, C. de B., **A History of Natal** (Cape Town, 1965).
- Brown, J.A., **A Gathering of Eagles: The S.A.A.F in Italian East Africa 1940-1941** (Cape Town, 1970).
- Coghlan, M., **Pro Patria, Another 50 Natal Carbineer Years 1945 – 1995** (Pietermaritzburg, 2000).
- Collyer. J.J. **The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa** (Pretoria, 1939).
- Collyer. J.J., **The Campaign in German South West Africa** (Pretoria, 1937).
- Crafford, F.S., **Jan Smuts: A Biography** (Cape Town, 1945).
- Crompton, C. and Johnson, P., **Luck Favours: Two South African Second World War Memoirs** (Fish Hoek, 2010).
- Crwys-Williams, J. **A Country at War, 1939-1945, The Mood of a Nation** (Rivonia, 1992).
- Dubow, S. and Jeeves, A. (eds), **South Africa's 1040s: Worlds of Possibilities** (Cape Town, 2005).

- Fick, A.J., **Die Onstaan van die Dominion Party van Suid Afrika** (Pretoria, 1973).
- Fielding, W.L., **With the 6th Division: An account of the activities if the 6th South African Armoured Division in World War II** (Pietermaritzburg, 1946).
- Fisher, J., **The Afrikaners** (London, 1969).
- Gibbs, K.J., **Demobilisation after World War 2** (DOD Archives Library, 1990).
- Giliomee, H., **Die Afrikaners: 'n Biografie** (Cape Town, 2004).
- Harrison, D., **The White Tribe of Africa, South Africa in Perspective** (University of California, 1981).
- Hanley, G., **Warriors and Strangers** (New York, 1998).
- Hartshorn, E.P., **Avenge Tobruk** (Cape Town, 1960).
- Hattersley, A.F., **Carbineer** (Aldershot, 1950).
- Hiemstra, R., **Die Wilde Haf** (Cape Town, 2001).
- Hobbs, G.B., **From Sicily to the Alps: Personal accounts and recollections of World War II** (Claremont, 1999).
- Kross, J., **War in Italy: With the South Africans from Taranto tot the Alps** (Cape Town, 1992).
- Kruger, D.W., **The Making of a Nation** (Johannesburg, 1969).
- Leigh, M., **Captives Courageous, South African Prisoners of War World War 2** (Cape Town, 1992).
- Liebenberg, B.J., **Van die Statuut van Westminister tot die Republiek van Suid Afrika, 1931 – 1961.**
- Martin, H.J. and Orpen, N.D., **South African Forces World War 2, Volume 7: South Africa at War. Military and Industrial Organization and Operations in Connection with the Conduct of the War, 1939-1945** (Cape town, 1979).
- Millen, E., **History of Organisation and Training of Infantry and Armour** (Unpublished Manuscript, DOD Archive Library, Undated)
- Muller, C.F.J., **500 Jaar Suid Afrikaanse Geskiedenis** (Pretoria, 1968).
- Murray, W and Millet, A.R., **Military Innovation in the Interwar Period** (Cambridge, 1998).
- Nauright, J., **Sports, Culture and Identities in South Africa** (London, 1997).
- Ogilve, P. and Robinson, N., **In the Bag** (Johannesburg, 1975).

- Oosthuizen, F., **The Demobilisation of the white Union Defence Force Soldiers during the Second World War** (Unpublished Master's Thesis, DOD Archives Library, 1993).
- Orpen, N., **South African Forces World War 2, Volume 5, Victory in Italy** (Cape Town, 1975).
- Orpen, N., **South African Forces World War 2: East African and Abyssinian Campaigns** (Cape Town, 1986).
- Orpen, N., **South African Forces World War 2: War in the Desert** (Cape Town, 1986).
- Pirow, O., **James Barry Munnik Hertzog** (Cape Town, No Date).
- Pollock, A.M., **Pienaar of Alamein** (Cape town, 1944).
- Roos, N., **Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939 – 1961** (Pretoria, 2005).
- Rose-Innes, H., **The Po Valley Break** (Johannesburg, 1976).
- Rossiter, J., **“You’ll never make it”: The Escape Diary of Jack Rossiter: August – September 1943** (Cirencester, 1992).
- Scholtz, G.D., **Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner** (Johannesburg, 1979).
- Shafer, R.J. **A Guide to Historical Method 3rd Edition** (Chicago, 1980).
- Shepperd, G.A. **The Italian Campaign 1943 - 45** (London, 1968).
- Simpson, J.S.M., **South Africa Fights** (London, 1941).
- Strawson, J., **The Battle for North Africa** (New York, 1969).
- Strijdom, H and Wilkens, I., **The Super Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond** (Johannesburg, 1978).
- Uys, I.S., **For Valour: The History of Southern Africa's Victoria Cross Heroes** (Heidelberg, 1973).
- Uys, I.S., **South African Military, Who's Who, 1452-1992** (Cape Town, 1992).
- Vansina, J., **Oral Tradition as History** (London, 1985), p13.
- Wolhuter, S.G., **The Melancholy State: The Story of a South African Prisoner of War** (Cape Town, No Date).

2. JOURNAL ARTICLES

- Anon., How I Became a Soldier, **The Carbineer: Centenary Issue**, vol. 4, 1954.
- Behrens, H. P. H., The stuff to give the troops. **The Nonqai**, vol 10, no.8, September 1941.
- Coghlan, M.S., **Shrapnel, Sand and Stukas: The Carbineers in the Western Desert, 1941-1942**, 1992.
- Dorning, W.A., A Concise History of the South African Defence Force (1912-1987), **Militaria**, vol.17, no. 2, 1987.
- Ellis. J., Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939. **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 30, no. 2, 2000.
- Francis, P.C.M., Travels in Darkest Africa, **The Carbineer**, 1990.
- Grundlingh, A. The King's Afrikaners Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force During the Second World War, 1939 – 1945, **Journal of African history**, vol. 40, 1999.
- Harvey-Williams, A.C. (ed)., Travels in Darkest Africa. **Carbineer**, 1990.
- Kerby. T., The Devonshire: Sun, Sea and Seasickness. **The Carbineer**, 1989.
- Kleynhans, E. P., The First South African Armoured Battle in Italy During the Second World War: The Battle of Celleno -10 June 1944, **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 40 (3), 2012, pp 274-275.
- Lumsden, J., Back to Ciwy Street. **The Nonqai**, vol 12, no 8, July 1945.
- Obituaries: Christopher Dering Stainbank. **Natalia**, vol.26, 1997
- Van der Waag, I.J., The Union Defence Force between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939. **Scientia Militaria**, Vol 30, no 2, 2000.
- Van Wyk, J., Die Unie Verdedigingsmagte op die Vooraand van die Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1934-1939, **Militaria**, vol. 6, no. 4, 1976.
- Visser. G.E., Anglo-South African Relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939. **Scientia Militaria**, vol. 35, no. 1, 2007.
- Webster, S., The Helwan Riots: August 1945. **Military History Journal**, vol. 12, no 3, June 2002.

Wessels, A., The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941. **Military History Journal**, vol. 11, no. 5, June 2000.

3. **INTERNET SOURCES**

Megan Hutching., Interview: Watt McEwan.
2003.<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/sound/brothels-in-cairo>.

4. **GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS**

Department of defence., **The Union of South Africa and the War: Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa no 23 of 1946**, 1948.

United States War Department Technical Manual., **Handbook on German Military Forces**, 15 March 1945.

5. **ARCHIVAL SOURCES**

5.1 **ARCHIVE REPOSITORY FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE**

5.1.1 **DIVERSE ARCHIVE GROUP**

Diverse Group 1, Box 10, Defence Policy of the Union.

Diverse Group 1, Box 10, Letter to O. Pirow from W. H. Clark concerning the sale of Blenheim bombers to the Union at “obsolescent” prices.

5.1.2 **DIRECTOR GENERAL TECHNICAL SERVICES ARCHIVE GROUP**

Archive Group Director General Technical Services, Box 35, Experimental Work, Local Manufacture, Carts A. T, Report by Lt Col H. D. Klopper on an exercise with Bush Carts late in 1939.

Archive Group Director General Technical Services, Box 35, Experimental Work, Local Manufacture, Carts A. T, Submitted tender by the British Mining Supply Company in Johannesburg on their proposed "All Terrain Carts".

5.1.3 PERSONNEL FILES

Record of Service, J.G. Holland,

Record of Service, C.D. Stainbank, 4495V.

Record of Service, B.E. Fainsinger, 589283V.

Record of Service, H.W. Buckley, 4373V.

Record of Service, J.J. Hurley, 4486V.

Record of Service, Q.G.M. Smythe, 4485V.

Record of Service, W.J.C. Rossiter, 594V.

Record of Service, V.C. Fly, 4402V.

Record of Service of 150 members of C Company.

5.1.4 WAR DIARIES ARCHIVE GROUP

War Diaries, Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, File 10, Special Course, 3 July 1940.

War Diaries, Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, Intelligence Summary No 11 for December 1940.

War Diaries, Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940.

War Diaries, Box 219, July 1940 – December 1940, Appendix B: Disembarkation and Embarkation of troops at Mombasa, 20 July 1940.

War Diaries, Box 220, January to May 1941, 1 to 15 January.

War Diaries, Box 220, January to May 1941, February, List of War Material Taken at Gelib on 22 February 1940 and 23 February 1940.

War Diaries, Box 220, July 1940 – December 1940, Appendix 21: Procedure on detraining at decks, 16 July 1940.

- War Diaries, Box 220, July 1940 – December 1940, Appendix 25: Ships Daily Orders, 20/07/1940.
- War Diaries, Box 220, March 1941, 1 March to 30 March 1941.
- War Diaries, Box 220, May 1941, Routine Order No 28.
- War Diaries, Box 220, May 1941, Routine Order No 29.
- War Diaries, Box 404, December 1941, 31 December 1941.
- War Diaries, Box 404, July 1941, Routine Order 53.
- War Diaries, Box 404, June 1941, Routine Order 39.
- War Diaries, Box 404, October 1942, Casualty Return – Other Ranks, October 1942
- War Diaries, Box 405, March 1942, Operational Appreciation 1 March 1942.
- War Diaries, Box 89, 11 May 1940 – 30 June 1940, Progress Report No 2, 8 June 1940.
- War Diaries, Box 405, November 1943, Appendix C, 1 RNC Bn. Gp. Exercise 17 – 23 Dec 43.
- War Diaries, Box 405, November 1943, November 22.
- War Diaries, Box 405, October 1943, October 1 - 3.
- War Diaries, Box 645, April 1944.
- War Diaries, Box 645, August 1944, Appendix P. Newspaper Report – Ambush of S/Sgt Peycke and Pte Caste.
- War Diaries, Box 646, December 1944, Appendix L: Patrolling report on 12 South African Motorised Brigade Front.
- War Diaries, Box 646, December 1944, Appendix T: Field Returns 30 December 1944.
- War Diaries, Box 646, February 1945, Regimental Newsletter No 16.
- War Diaries, Box 646, February 1945, Regimental Newsletter No 15.
- War Diaries, Box 646, January 1945, January 1.
- War Diaries, Box 89, April 1943, April 21.
- War Diaries, Box 89, January 1943, Appendix A.
- War Diaries, Box 89, March 1943, Appendix A, Address by Lt Col Comrie M. C. to First Royal Natal Carbineers 29 March 1943.
- War Diaries, Box 253, First Field Provost Company. Routine Order 25/42.

5.1.5 UNION WAR HISTORIES, CIVIL SECTION ARCHIVE GROUP

Union War Histories, Civil Section, Box46, Back to Civilian Life: Information for the Volunteer.

DOD Archives, Union War Histories Civil, Box 45. Other circulars included: The training of the Ex-volunteer at the Government Mines Training School, Farming for Ex-volunteers, Demobilisation and First Steps Towards a Better SA.

5.1.6 UNION WAR HISTORIES ARCHIVE GROUP

Union War Histories, Box 45, Demobilisation.

Union War Histories, Box 126, Springbok Digest.

5.1.7. AANWINSTE ARCHIVE GROUP

Aanwinste, Group 1, Box 52, Paper on Policy and Immediate Objects of Western Desert Force.

5.1.8. CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF ARCHIVE GROUP

5.1.8.1. CGS WAR

CGS War, Box 176, 6 Armoured Division Organisation, Proceedings of and Main Decisions arising out of CGS's Armoured Conference, Pretoria on 25 March 1943.

CGS WAR, Box 291, R. C. Tomlinson, Letter to Col C. F. Stallard, 25 August 1943.

5.1.9. ADJUTANT GENERAL ARCHIVE GROUP

AG 14, Box 843, Brothels and Contraceptives and Sex Education, Report on Venereal Disease and Pregnancies amongst WAAS and WAAF.

AG 3, Divisional Records, Box 47, Demobilisation: General and policy.

AG 1, Box 843, Brothels and Contraceptives and Sex Education.

5.1.9. NARRATIVES AND REPORTS ARCHIVE GROUP

NAREP, Middle East, volume 5, 1st Royal Natal Carbineers Narrative.

5.1.10 DOD ARCHIVES LIBRARY

Roll of Honour, UDF POW's in all theatres.

5.1.11 DOD ARCHIVES PAMPHLET SECTION

Pamphlet Section, Box 133, Sidi Rezegh.

Pamphlet Section, SA Forces in the Second World War.

6. UNISA UNITED PARTY REPOSITORY

UNISA, United Party Archives Central Head Office, File Intelligence Reports, Political Disturbances and Meetings Report Titled ' A Republican Putsch', Circa 1940.

UNISA, United Party Archives Central Head Office, File Broederbond, Report titled 'Die Afrikaner Broederbond', Circa 1943.

UNISA, United Party Archives Central Head Office File Intelligence Reports, Political Disturbances and Meetings Report by C.7 Regarding Threats to General Smuts, 18 August 1940.

**7. POTCHEFSTROOM UNIVERSITY FOR CHRISTIAN HIGER EDUCATION OSSEWA
BRANDWAG REPOSITORY**

Potchefstroom, Ossewa Brandwag Archive, Interview B. J. Vorster, Tape 226, 7
November 1981, Interviewed by H. Tereblanche.

8. NATAL CARBINEERS REPOSITORY

8.1. MEMOIRS, DIARIES AND PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE

N. Clothier Diary.

B.E. Fainsinger Diary.

P.C.A. Francis Collection.

V. Harte Collection.

J. Holland Memoirs.

J. Hurley Diary.

J. Hurley Memoirs.

A.D.M. MacDonald Letter Collection.

C.J. Portsmouth Memoirs.

C.J. Portsmouth Notebook.

C.D. Stainbank Letter Collection.

H. G. Symons Diary.

H.G. Symons Letter Collection.

8.2 ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS

Dinkleman, E.R., After-action report on the Gelib Incident.

Du Toit. G.C.L., Roll of Honour: Royal Natal Carbineers, World War Two, 1939 – 1945.

Frost, T.B., Gelib incident report.

Unknown Newspaper Clipping, Micheal the amazing rooster.

Alleyne, M., to Coghlan, M., Notes on Michael the Rooster.

Kabrita K., to Coghlan, M., History of Michael the Rooster.

Letter to the Officer Commanding Royal Natal Carbineers regarding Decorations:

Royal Natal. Carbineers, 18 September 1949.

Unknown Private. Battle of Combolcia.

Smythe, Q.G.M., Report on Action in the Gazala Line.

8.3 MULTIMEDIA

P.C.A. Francis DVD, Personnal Collection P. Francis.

Natal Carbineers DVD, Natal Carbineers Museum.

9. INTERVIEWS

Archibald, K., Interviewed by G Bentz 15 June 2008, Natal Carbineers Officer's Mess, Pietermaritzburg.

Buckley, H.W., Interviewed by G Bentz, 13 June 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

Buckley, B., Interviewed by G. Bentz, 18 September 2008, Pietermaritzburg.

Clarke, G., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 25 October 1992. Pietermaritzburg.

De Waal, D., Interviewed by G. Bentz, 15 March 2011, Saldanha.

Edmonds, J.P., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 2 March 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

Fainsinger, B. E., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 10 Sept 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

Ford, E., Interviewed by G. Bentz, 20 September 2008. Pietermaritzburg.

Freeman. R., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 20 November 1993, Pietermaritzburg.

Furniss, R., Interviewed by M. Coghlan 7 June 1990, Colenso.

Hackland, A., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 2 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

Long, J., Interviewed by G. Bentz, 21 July 2013, Howick.

Pennington, R., Interviewed by G Bentz, 23 July 2013, Pietermaritzburg.

Pope-Ellis, P., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 7 February 1994, Pietermaritzburg.

Portsmouth, C.J., Interviewed by G. Bentz, 22 September 2008, Dundee District.

Stainbank, C.D., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 12 February 1992, Pietermaritzburg.

Valentine, P., Interviewed by M. Coghlan, 21 October, Pietermaritzburg.

Various members of the Natal Carbineers., Interviewed by M Coghlan, 1991-1996.

10. **NEWSPAPERS**

Natal Mercury, The Acquired Taste of Benghazi Pie, 3 August 1992.

Natal Mercury, 31 August 1939.

The Natal Witness, 2 September, 1939.

Natal Witness. 4 September 1939, 'Natal beat Transvaal'.

The Star. 26 September 1944. The Soldier in Civilian Live: State Urged to be "Bold and Original" in Task of Demobilisation.

The Star 25 November 1944. South Africa has its own WOCCI: RODD the Robot Classifies Service Men and Women for Post-War Jobs.

Rand Daily Mail. 3 December 1944. £541,299 Paid in War Gratuities.

Rand Daily Mail. 4 December 1944. Soldiers Still Wait for Civil Kit, Rand Daily Mail. 24 November 1944. Ex-soldiers Resent Delays at Civil Equipment Depot.

The Star. 6 December 1944. Government Posts for Ex-Soldiers.

Sunday Times Supplement, 11 November 1973, True Tales of Southern Africa.