

Rat of Tobruk

Extracts

I caught the train from Mandurama to Sydney on 4 July 1940, my official enlistment date, with two friends, William 'Bubbles' Smith and his brother Ron. We arrived at Central Railway Station to scenes of chaos. There were recruits everywhere. We were ushered onto a fleet of buses and taken to the Sydney Showground at Paddington. Although it was only 6.00am, thousands of soldiers and would-be soldiers were there. We were sent to the mess hall for breakfast and then returned to the enlistment centre to complete a medical examination. It lasted a quarter of an hour and was a new experience for me. Apart from the time I was knocked out tackling the massive Bathurst rugby second rower when I was 11, I had never been to a doctor.

Recruits who passed their medical were sent to a large hall and were given inoculations for diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, tetanus and cholera. Many of the men fainted. The same needle was used to inoculate scores of men. The needle was extremely blunt by the time it was my turn. I didn't faint, but I suspect I might have let out a little murmur as the doctor tried to hammer the blunt needle into my arm.

After receiving our injections ...



We followed the tank out on its left flank and its early demise was startling and terrifying. We drove straight at the German machine guns and big guns, firing our machine guns as we went. It was just like a scene from Rambo, magnified greatly. Thousands of rounds were fired at us. We could see the tracer bullets and hear the bullets zoom past. Somehow, we managed to break through the German lines. My truck was hit by machine gun fire a number of times, but miraculously no one was hurt. Headquarters, Gambier-Parry and Munro, saw that we had broken through and immediately attempted to follow us out. Apparently, they very quickly decided it was suicidal to continue and turned around and went back into Mechili. They were taken prisoner along with 102 Australians and 3000 Indians.

Having broken through the German lines, we had advanced a mile when we noticed three German armoured scout cars on our right. They were chasing us. It was real Hollywood stuff, only this was actually happening. We raced up a deep waddi (gully) and our second gun-truck tipped over. We stopped, as did the Germans. The blokes from the tipped truck scurried to ours. Just as we were about to continue, Doc Dempsey ordered me to get the breech from the gun of the truck that had tipped over. I scampered through the sand with my heart pounding like a base drum ...



We ate all our meals in our trenches out of our dixies. Even for a boy brought up on bread and dripping, the meals weren't too flash! They consisted of tins of bully beef and dry hard biscuits, and a tin of meat and vegetables once a month. The once-a-month was a bit of a treat, as Dinny Barratt would try to use his culinary skills to enhance the ordinary. We were rationed to one water bottle a day. Most of the blokes shaved as infrequently as possible to save their water ration; just often enough to comply with a 'no beard' regulation. We were issued with safety razors and '7 o'clock' blades. I needed my full compliment. Notoriously to my crew, I used part of my water rations to shave every day. From the day I grew my first stubble, my mother insisted I shaved every day before breakfast. I believed she would still expect me to do so in the trenches. In hindsight, I'm sure that she would have preferred I drank the precious liquid.

We were under constant attack ...



As strong as the bond of mateship was in those trenches, we were all lonely, homesick and longing for those we had left behind in Australia. Mail was our one form of contact, and we lived each day hoping that this day would bring us news. Mail delivery was irregular at best, and sometimes brought relief to only a few members of the crew, which heightened the disappointment of the rest of us. I wrote to members of my family at every opportunity and in nearly every letter from Tobruk to my sister Billie, I asked about the beautiful young woman I'd seen on the tennis court. Fate offered a helping hand. Billie's husband Clarrie had fought in the First World War and was not in contention for a spot in our generation's Hell. He continued to work in the city throughout the War ...