

EL ALAMEIN SIDESHOW

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The day had been pretty much as usual so far. It was now well advanced with sun blazing from a cloudless sky the heat seeming to be not only held by the sand and rock but reflected upwards. The Battery was dug in with the gun Troops on the usual inexact formation with the Command Point in the centre, but we had been joined by a steadily increasing number of other neighbours, odd tanks were parked in the open space and with the appearance of sunny marks in the desert near us, it was apparent that our section of sand was soon to become far more animated and indeed it was the evening before El Alamein.

Our position had been taken over from the New Zealanders and on it with its four gun pits part dug and partly built up to breast height, ammunition and battle rations were dug in. The water housed in tins of British make had to be strained before use to separate the pitch lining which had become detached from the inside of the tins, and our cooks operating in the rear of the position treated it with suspicion and bad language. Except for two troop vehicles parked well away and the odd tank the desert stretched in its gentle slopes away on all sides, with in front a gradual rise up to the sky line and the rim of the horizon broken only in the far distance to our left front, south west, by the twin peaks of Mt Hammamet.

We had not fired a round from the position for eight days but for the previous three days we had carried out our firing from a harassing position to a flank and forward, returning to our battle position by first light with ammunition parties busy shipping in ammo which came up each night.

On these outings we had become aware that our section was livening up. Swarms of strange vehicles were arriving and surprise meetings in the half light at night with some inspiring armoured formations into which we made our way only to find them a canvass and lath army. But now we knew what had been half surmise; the battle was near at hand. On October 21 we were inspected by the Colonel, who passed on to us F M Montgomery's message and told us of the evening action. In later days, we had become so used to expecting things to go as outlined in these famous messages that it is interesting to look back at the manner in which, this, the first was received. We felt inspired and encouraged, but the confidence of victory did not come on the first occasion, rather it was a "That's fine but I'll wait and see" attitude!

Well, it was nearer the day now, one more night to go and this afternoon everyone got what rest they could in the doubtful shelter of the camouflage nets and the position appeared deserted, with only a drifting cloud of sand on a mountain where a vehicle ploughed a long a desert track and a few rounds of distant gunfire and the monotony unbroken even by the unreal aerial dog fights which were pretty common in the neighbourhood.

Having sorted out the usual returns, any rumours of a quiet spell for me were dispelled by the message from the GPO "B Co confirm in half an hour" and the conference finished any ideas of a restful night. We were to pull out after last light, go back some miles and harbour for the night, obviously some special job was to take the Battery away from the battle. We were used to doing this sort of work and were rather intrigued at the prospect of we knew not what and so with darkness up came the vehicles the guns came out of action first line ammunition and essential stores only were taken and we were off, bumping over miles of unfamiliar track with the cool night air blowing the fine sand through the windows of the Quads from which the glass had been removed months before.

At last the order to halt and leaguer and we settled down. Morning and the usual scanty breakfast (plus the reappearance of those never failing companions – the flies) brought us the sun.

We were to go down south out into the blue and support the Free French who were to stage an attack on our old friends the twin peaks on Mt Hammamet, our allies apparently either hadn't the necessary artillery or the smoke shell, for it was a smoke barrage they requested. We felt quite a propriety interest in the plan for Jerry had a particularly nasty 88 which came out from hiding at last light behind the Hammamet features and fired at us and the results of these H E shells with their high velocity was unpleasant and so we were all for having a go to eliminate him.

During the morning and early afternoon we lay with the vehicles widely dispersed after a mornings trip southwards and seemed to "fry" in the heat but with early evening we moved once more, out through the last wire, across the minefields, humping now over ground which became steadily worse going. Night had come and soon the moon shed its brilliant light, which on this night seemed more pronounced than ever. At a rendezvous we were joined by an armoured car escort from the Household Cavalry and were glad to see them as the situation was pretty fluid on the southern flank, for after the battle of Main El Halfe in September Rommel's forces had returned badly mauled but remained in possession of Hammamet which was used by them as an OP with an excellent range of vision and from the rear of which his light patrol forces sallied out at intervals on patrol and his artillery harassed us, so there was quite a possibility of a private brush with the enemy en route back to our position.

Movement by armoured formation in the desert always reminded me of the movement of a fleet at sea with the vehicles keeping their station in line ahead, with the armoured cars like a destroyer screen out on the flanks staff cars in front, a gentle cloud of drifting sand thrown up by the guns and quads with the heads and shoulders of the No 1s showing up through the canvass roofs, the whole moving across the deserted desert bathed in the brilliant moonlight.

Quite suddenly we came upon the Troop Ring parties and the familiar routine of dropping into action once more. Guns came in at "Action Rear" the vehicles left us for a wagon line in the open about 500 yards in rear and detachments busied themselves in carrying the special loads of smoke shells to their guns and were glad of the exercise for the night was cold, and all wore overcoats.

Once the initial occupation was over it was possible to look around us and very intriguing it was. The guns were in position right on the edge of the Quattara Depression, on the edge of the cliffs formed by the dropping away of the desert floor into a valley littered with rocks and soft sand stretching away into the distance on either side and on the far side of which, our target showed up sharply silhouetted by the moonlight against the night sky. The depression was a plain to be avoided at any time, with its heat by day, and at night looked somehow awesome and gave one the unreal impression of a film set.

Our preparations were complete and all eyes were turned to the North West while watches were consulted for the time which was 2140h and right on time the canyon was lit up by the dozens of gun flashes and pin points of light as the guns of the 8th Army opened up on what has now become one of the actions of history and a serious impression it was to stand there as spectators in an event which we all agreed was to make such a change on our fortunes. The scene claimed our attention for some time for our show was not yet and we had time for a meal and a hot drink. The men huddled down in the lee of the guns until roused by the urgent shout of a sentry "Tank Alert". That roused everybody and running forward far out in the valley below we could see the vehicles of a large formation moving up parallel to our front. Fortunately it was the Free French whom we had come to support

and we watched them for a while until ordered to “take post”, and it was with a very real sense of doing something that we opened fire and a little while afterwards we would see the smoke shell bursting on the slopes of Hammamet in the distance and the screen itself begin to form, maddeningly slowly it seemed.

While engaged in watching this we had another shock. Previous information had been forgotten in the interest of the scene when very low indeed over our heads screamed a large bomber of the South African Air Force to disappear towards the smoke screen before we had overcome our initial reaction and joined in by thickening up the smoke. Enemy artillery reaction there was none and it was with a sense of anti climax that we eventually ceased fire, salvaged the cartridges, reformed and pulled out, only guessing at the bitter fight we were leaving to our allies on the slopes of the target area, and we were not to know until the following day that the attack was repulsed and the Germans left in possession of.

Off northwards we jolted once more. The artillery battle had died down by now. The detachments were silent in the vehicles and overcome by tiredness slept, until in the early hours of the morning we rambled into our old battle position which we hardly recognised from the great and partially deserted area of desert we had known and indeed had some difficulty finding access to our gun pits, for we were completely surrounded by other batteries which had come in during our absence and now with first light were hard at it with the intervening spaces between them and ourselves filled with a motley collection of tanks and every kind of vehicle.

Concealment was now no longer possible or necessary, and every kind of gun seemed to be hard at it and we ourselves joined in. Even in front on the west of the long slope our tanks were busily engaged and we were soon aware that we were in the unfortunate position of acting as “long stop”, for the rounds of anti tank shell being fired by enemy guns on tanks out of sight from us, the solid shot skipping and bouncing across the sand directly towards us in a somewhat disconcerting fashion, while from Hammamet our old enemy the 88 joined in and very soon after our arrival the very high pitched scream of the shell and the simultaneous sharp crack of the explosion told us of the fashion of our previous nights work, and in the next round casualties were caused in the detachment of the no 2 gun of an RHA troop in action to our left area, and so we rejoined the battle of El Alamein.

There is a postscript to this story. The scene is Blankenburg in August 1945, a Spa in the Hartz Mountains in Germany. My troop were responsible for the military government of the town and surrounding countryside. It became impossible to fulfil all our commitments especially our patrols and a squadron of armoured cars was sent to us from the Household Cavalry. When the Corporal of Horse reported we recognised each other. We had last met when his armoured cars had been with us on the night of El Alamein!

In a glass case in the Regiment's HQ stands an 88 case, chromium plated on a plinth, which bears a suitable inscription. The case must have been one of the most travelled in the world as I brought it from Hammamet and the enemy gun position which had preoccupied us and was abandoned by the enemy in our attack.