

TROOPING

JULY 26th 1942

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No, it doesn't commemorate any great battle, but it does for many an ex gunner in South East England recall that day in 1942 when he first set foot in Egypt.

The 58th (Sussex) Field Regiment RA (Lieutenant Colonel Colbourn OBE) with the 57th and 65th Field Regiments formed the Divisional Artillery of the 44 (Home Counties) Division which had been ordered to the Middle East as reinforcements for the 8th Army, and on that day ten years ago arrived to join it just before the army's great trek forward from Egypt to North Africa.

After service with the BEF in France and Belgium in 1940, the Regiment had carried out duties in the defences of the Kent area against the threatened invasion, continuously traversing the SE corner of England with a move at least once a fortnight and with equipment which gradually improved from the "Arquebus Stage" after Dunkirk, to a full compliment of 25pdrs in the April of 1942, which found us in Sutton Valence. Here, quite suddenly it seemed we received orders one morning to mobilise for service overseas and to move to Beckenham to carry it out. At the same time all drivers and all the Sergeants were sent on leave, so that on return they would be available for all the thousand details attendant upon a Regiment mobilising. This leave did not of course exactly assist in the matter of moving to Beckenham, and some lurid details of incidents on that move engendered by spare drivers attempting what was sometimes the impossible with unfamiliar equipment still remain fresh in my mind, however by a miracle we all arrived and settled down to the business, and what a business it was.

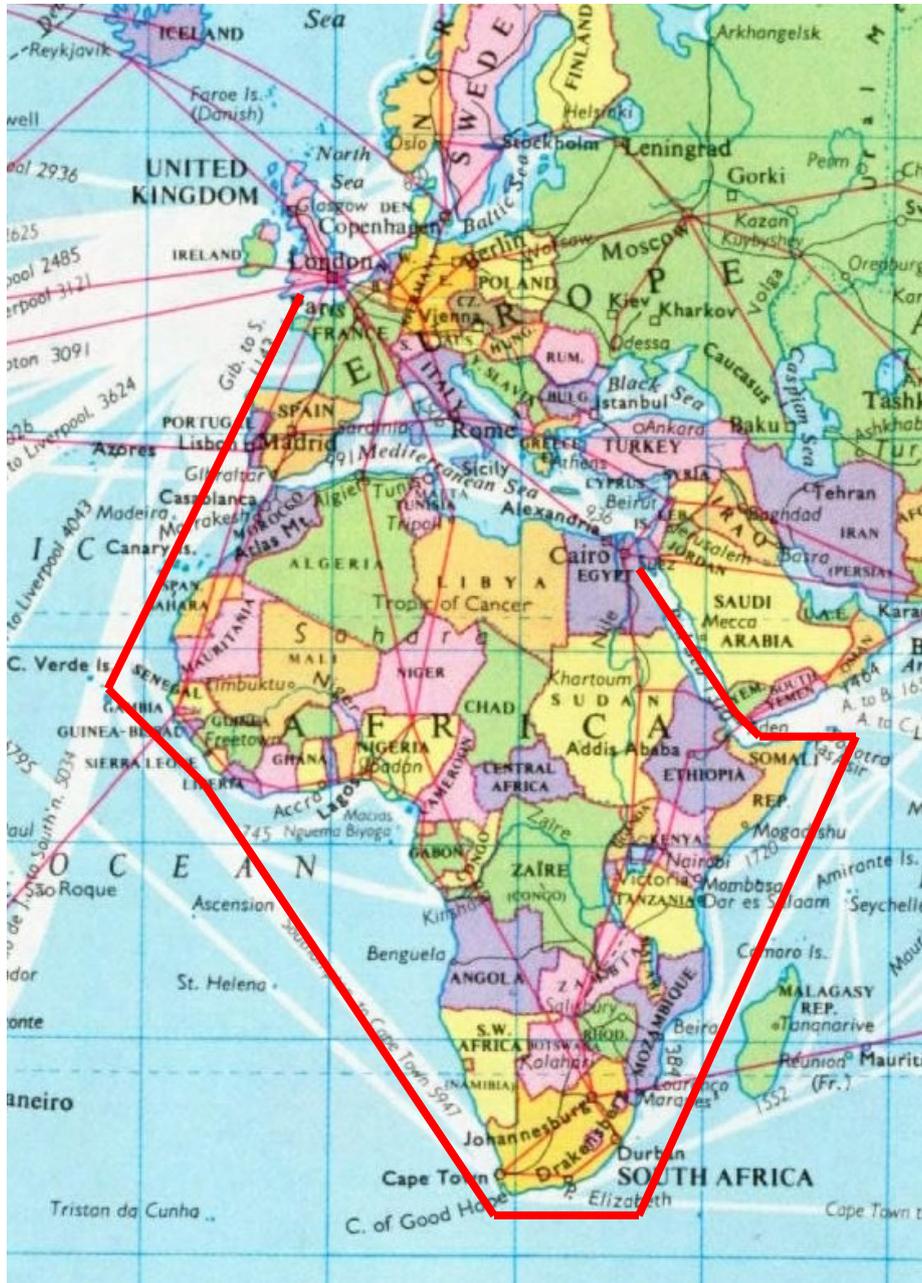
Drafts arrived to bring us up to strength. Equipment poured in. Medical inspections, inoculations etc. The incongruous site of men in battledress in quiet deserted suburban streets emptying from a large disused house with armfuls of tropical kit with Wolseley Helmets perched on their heads. The arguments on the phones long into the night by tired Orderly Room staffs trying to balance Battery strengths with War Establishments and not losing anybody in the process! The complications of showers of Smiths, Jones etc which Records with a misguided sense of humour had sent our way, and the solace we found in the excellent bar of the "Three Tuns".

Somehow as embarkation day drew near it was sorted out as these things always are, and the tempo slackened, with equipment being crated and dispatched, and the last details away to their leave. The departure of the guns and vehicles for their own ships left us with that sense of loss suffered by all Gunners when separated from their guns. Then the last impressive Regimental Church Parade in Holy Trinity and the regimental Battery and Troop photographs, with one morning shortly afterwards a very early parade in the quiet street, a final roll call of the men heavily laden with full kit and the march in somewhat subdued spirits through streets free from traffic to the railway station, and then – away across England by unfamiliar railway tracks to Liverpool.

Here we were met by a fleet of Lorries and transported across the bombed city right to the quayside, where in the late afternoon we fell in under the shadow of the roofs of the dark sheds faced by the towering grey side of the ship which was to become our home for two months, the "SS Laconia". The men stood quietly in their ranks and talked as I did with the Senior NCOs and wondered what the future might hold for us all, but such was the good organisation that we had not long to ruminate before the guides returned and led the files away to the Mess Decks the men stumbling up the steep brows and disappearing into the ships side, followed by the NCOs and myself.

Most of us had been on board ships quite a few times before, but this business of a liner preparing for sea with about 4,500 troops on board for a lengthy voyage, is something special. After dumping our kit in the cabins allocated to us we fought our way down to the mess decks and found the space -

Route taken
by SS Laconia
from Liverpool
to Egypt 1942



- allocated to the Battery. My first impression has always remained, that here, although there was certainly more head room, the scene must have been very like the gun deck of the "Victory" being cleared for action. The deck was not very far above the water line, and the "dead lights" secured over the ports at night were to remain there for long periods when we were at sea in bad weather. Overhead above the Mess tables swung the hammocks, while for those whom there were no hammocks or no room to swing them, small mattresses were placed on the steel decks. This was complicated enough while the ship was not at sea, but when the motion of the sea-way began to take effect – the atmosphere can be easily imagined.

Having satisfied myself that all the men really were on board and reasonably sorted out we extracted ourselves and found our way to our cabins again (six bunks to a cabin instead of the normal two). Care had to be taken when waking up if one was an occupant of the top bunk, as sitting up sharply resulted in a smart crack with the steel deck directly above! Word somehow passed round that our evening meal was ready, and with visions of "bully beef and hard tack" we went along to the Dining Saloon, where to my amazement we were served with a dinner, the like of which I hadn't seen in England for many a day. It transpired that the ships were re-victualled in South America and in consequence served something like a normal peace-time menu, this agreeable state of affairs lasting throughout the voyage.

Next morning we found that we had been moved down river, the convoy assembled and on May 28th we pushed our way out towards the water of the Atlantic on a cool grey day matched by the sombre colour of the vast array of ships, and settled down to the routine which was to become so familiar, and by the end of which we were all to be as much at home on board ship, as on land.

After "Reveille" each morning came "Lash and Stow" when hammocks were taken down and rolled with their regulation lashing and stowed neatly against the bulkhead, ready for inspection on "Ships Rounds" during the morning. Meals were fetched by the men from their galley, and after meals there were the morning Roll Call and parades on deck. Somehow in the confined space everybody managed to wash and shave. Rifles were handed in to the Armoury and some men volunteered to act as relief detachments to the ship's 6" guns mounted at the stern, while the light AA Regiment on board did a similar duty on the anti aircraft armament. Parades on deck were a problem as with so many men on board (there were some of the Divisional Infantry Battalions), space was strictly limited and had to be used in a sequence, everyman seeming to take up twice his space by reason of carrying his life jacket.

Having settled down everyone gradually became accustomed to their surroundings and indeed we followed a training programme in the mornings consisting of lectures with the classes squatting on deck with the scene of ever changing interest of sea and sky and the pattern of the escort with its lines constantly changing course for by now the convoy had been joined by the battleships Nelson and Rodney, the aircraft carrier Argus and some destroyers and cruisers. To vary the lectures on gun drill and military matters, I used to pick on a different type of ship from the escort each day and talk about it and its duties and the history of the name which I was able to do by reason of a pre-war hobby and a keen interest in the Royal Navy. In the afternoons everyone was more or less free and the cry of "Housey-Housey" disturbed the slumbers of those who preferred to stretch out or try to on the packed upper deck. At first we wore PT shoes all day, but later as we neared journey's end, boots were worn for half a day to prevent the feet from becoming too soft.

Of fatigues there were many, and indeed the men welcomed them, the most popular being that which involved the bringing up from the various holds, the rations to the galleys, including meat from the ice rooms. I know my chaps seldom had any complaints about food, and frequently found ice in their drinking water, so I didn't ask too many questions.

Voluntary church services were always crowded and impromptu sing-songs were very popular. At night, before the Officers evening meal, I used to take the senior NCOs down to my cabin and be joined by the Battery Officers. Prior to leaving England we had bought a complete set of model miniature guns and lorries sufficient to show the deployment of a Battery at War Establishment, and there on the cabin floor the NCOs, many of whom had never heard of the driving drill of the old horsed days, were made to give the correct signals and move the Battery accordingly, and the models were useful for demonstrations, the policy paying good dividends later in the open spaces of the Western Desert, while evening meetings were an opportunity to thrash out daily problems.

Constant operation alarms seemed to keep everyone alert and to find their way to their appointed places quickly and quietly for Boat Stations everyone had to somehow get on deck, while for "Attack by Surface Raider" all had to gather on the main Mess Deck. These operations until one got used to it, were complicated by day, and even more difficult by night.

In the first weeks of June, we changed from Battledress into Khaki Drill and rather strange it seemed, though the though the weather was warm and we were well out in the Atlantic, but in a few days orders were given to wear sun helmets. As previously mentioned these were Wolseley helmets, very smart, but not when worn with the covers on which made them look like miniature bee hives, but at least it caused plenty of amusement, even though it was really a precaution against dirt and damage. At last on June 13th, after watching wonderful displays by flying fish and porpoises we put into Freetown. Despite the humid atmosphere, the sight of green slopes and trees and the hustle of a - - - - busy tropical port with all its sights, sounds and smells provided much to interest us. But five days

later no one was sorry when we put to sea once more away from that sweltering place out to sea and the cooling wind, arriving at Cape Town on the beautiful morning of July 1st. Here everyone had a chance to go ashore, and indeed were compelled to, at least in the mornings when route marches were the order of the day. Men poured down the ships gangways on to the quays and formed up in threes, and then the long columns marched away out of the docks and into the suburbs, columns so long that as we returned to our ship, men were still leaving others of the convoy. In the afternoons the citizens of Cape Town gave of their best hospitality and the few days were thoroughly enjoyed, while the scene at night with the shops brilliantly lit and work going on under floodlight in the docks, backed by the dark mass of Table Mountain against the wonderful blue of the night sky, seemed most unreal after "blacked-out" England. July 5th found us at sea again and we made our first acquaintance with the "Cape rollers".

For anyone who had not previously experienced such seas the action was to say the least of it – disturbing! Great slow moving waves widely spread, with our 19,000 ton ships ploughing slowly up the slope from trough to crest where the bow seemed to hang for a moment while the stern rails dropped steadily nearer the sea and then that slow, ponderous, disturbing plunge into the next trough seeming to leave ones stomach suspended. Down below decks the temporary partitions creaked and complained and tried to accustom themselves to the unexpected strains of the ship. Parades were not well attended for a few days, and then calmer seas and warmer days, with additions to the convoy from Durban, until on the morning of July 11th we woke to find our ship alone with the engines broken down. People who had complained of the effect of the steady rhythm from the engine room, became most anxious that the pulse should start to beat once more and fortunately repairs were soon carried out and we proceeded "all out" at a speed (which was libellously termed by some as "nine knots and an onion") and even then every rivet seemed determined to fall out.

The weather on the whole gradually became hot with some days of heavy sea and wind with decks and all metal work too hot to touch. On these nights, when Duty Warrant Officer, accompanying the Field Officer on his rounds, the sight of the thousands of men sleeping on their swaying hammocks and on the steel deck itself, all bathed in perspiration was an unforgettable sight, especially on E Deck with a temperature of 123o.

Washing day for clothing brings recollections of all open spaces threaded with clothes lines festooned with clothes, supposedly washed with that peculiar substance called "Sea Soap" (somewhat erroneously alleged we thought to be usable with salt water). Unofficial sentries on the washing were necessary otherwise kit deficiencies would be remedied at other peoples' expense. The hot weather brought reinforcements to those hardier sports who were prepared to queue for long periods for the Wet Canteen to open and seemed to think the result was worth it. One worry was to prevent smoking below decks which was forbidden as there was always the chance of a lighted cigarette dropping down the hatch gratings with results that need not be dwelt upon.

As we up the Red Sea with its barren cliffs and its shore giving an air of desolation, signs of normal activity began to appear and the familiar sight of the towed barrage balloon, until on July 26th came journeys end and at Port Teurfite, the anchor rumbled away and the engines stopped and we had our first glimpse of the land which held our destiny for the next eighteen months, another Field Regiment had arrived. I said that many would remember the date I certainly shall not forget it for it was my birthday.

Now as the date comes round each year, especially with the hot weather we are now enjoying, the memories become vivid especially when I hear on the radio that famous tune the Trumpet Voluntary, which the Purser whose cabin was near ours never tired of playing when off duty, and hearing it I always seem to see a picture of sky and sea framed in the porthole which used to be on the other side of the cabin from my bunk.

In the September of each year there is an obituary note in the Daily Telegraph for the SS Laconia. She was torpedoed on the homeward one. There were four survivors.