CAPTURE IN THE DESERT: 3 ANTI-TANK REGIMENT AT MECHILI 1941 AND ALAMEIN 1942

Katrina Kittel

This is no story of heroes, but of plain common ordinary men,
Who came from the farms - cities and towns
To fight for the so-called freedom of men
Remember the war in the desert
Back and forth - in and out - to and fro
Both sides took thousands of prisoners
Your luck was out an' behind wire you'd go

Frank Sanderson, NZ 18th Bn

Frank Sharp would have felt the frustration swirling in his head. There he was, in the North African desert, at the old fort of Mechili, about fifty miles south of Derna, Libya. It was 8 April 1941. Not long before, he had narrowly escaped bullets fired at a truck that he was in. This WW1 decorated veteran was confronting the German officer before him, in yet another world war and at another faraway place. 'I am sorry to be taking prisoner a man of your age,' Frank was surprised to hear. Quick with his retort, and with just enough dollop of optimism, Frank quipped, ‘When we win this bloody war, you come to Australia and I’ll buy you a beer.’ The German officer was never to forget the words of this Aussie prisoner.

Frank, together with his son Keith, were now prisoners of war, ‘in the bag’. Their troop, together with Indian soldiers, had stayed on to battle the attacking German Army. The story of the part played by this Australian troop of 3 Anti-Tank Regiment at Mechili in its rearguard action is just one of many gallant stories in our desert warfare history. April 1941 at Mechili, and July 1942 were periods of strong memory to those gunners and officers who were taken prisoners of war, handed over to the Italians by their German captors, in what was considered to be an Italian theatre of war in the North African desert.

Fighting alongside father and son Sharp were five from Moree – Ron Fitzgerald, Ron McIntosh, Lloyd Ledingham, and brothers Carl and Paul Carrigan. The five had enlisted together on 26 June 1940 at Moore Park in Sydney. Like most of the young men who enlisted, they felt long on enthusiasm, but short on knowledge of the future that they were going to meet. Two Humphries men from Wee Waa had lined up to enlist the day after the five from Moree, on 27 June 1940, at a recruitment centre closer to home at Tamworth. In the queue behind George Humphries was Lloyd Moule, from Deepwater. George Humphries became a gunner, as would his brother, Hilton, who would strike up mateship with fellow layer on their gun, Alan ‘Snow’ Garbutt, from Wingello. Alan was not to forget that his mate

1 Katrina Kittel’s interest in this area of research developed from the experience of her father, a 2/3rd Anti-Tank Gunner who was captured at Ruin Ridge, El Alamein in 1942. The experience of escaped Australian POWs in Italy is now her research interest, with the view to writing a book on this area. She completed a double History Major in her undergraduate studies, has a Master’s degree, and works on a casual basis as a librarian at the University of Newcastle.
2 Harold Sanderson, extract from War, 1968 poem, courtesy of the Sanderson family. Harold served with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and was one of the Kiwi POW evaders in Italy.
3 Don Sharp, personal communication with the author, 2011. Don is son to Frank Sharp, and brother to Keith Sharp. The German officer came to Australia post-war and successfully located Frank Sharp for ‘that beer’.
4 Cate Carrigan, Italy to the Alps: A wartime odyssey, unpublished manuscript. Cate is daughter to Carl Carrigan and niece to Paul Carrigan.
Hilton was killed during their rearguard action at Mechili. Alan honoured his mate by naming his son Rex Hilton.  

Gunner Colin ‘Ted’ Coppock, another Moree man, was clearly not happy about their plight at Mechili. Despite big German tanks closing in, and ammunition nearly spent, Ted defiantly gave a typical Australian exclamation in reply to his wounded mate who pleaded that it was time they gave up. Ted should have listened to his mate; within hours, he was caught in fire, killed in action. Another fallen gunner, Edward Howe, was being taken away to a makeshift hospital in the fort, and he called to his mates for a drink. Bombardier from Mudgee, Vince Rayner, was also wounded in the same barrage but he made sure Edward was to get his drink. Despite best efforts, Edward succumbed to battle that day.

Meanwhile, Lt Cant took over the Boyes anti-tank rifle, alongside Gnr ‘Bluey’ Baptist. Antiquated weaponry was not helping their efforts, and ‘the elephant gun out of Clive of India’s time’ was no exception. The barrel had become so hot from the firing that they could not hold the bolt to close it. Bluey homed in on the problem by picking up a stone from underfoot, and banged it shut. The Mechili anti-tank soldiers were feeling the sting of battle. Yet, with a bit of luck, badly wounded Gnr Joe Potter tried to uphold his reputation as the wildest driver in the desert. Joe, in his battle-worn truck, got a group of seven men out of the line. As he lurched the wounded truck through enemy lines, every tyre was riddled with bullets. With one badly injured arm, Joe relied on Lt Charlie Johnson to change the truck gears, until the motor gave out altogether. The truck was spent, and Joe was not faring so well either. In the middle of nowhere, raising a white towel to approaching armoured vehicles seemed the only way out.

It was not going to be an easy few days of fighting. Fire was heavy and sandstorms brewed. The function of an anti-tank regiment was to protect the infantry from tank attack. But at Mechili, the 3 Anti-Tank regiment was only half strength, with only Headquarters, 10th and 11th Batteries available. The regiment’s 9th and 12th Batteries were scheduled to join them later. Later was going to be too late, however. Gnr Dick Gill was aware of latest intelligence that German panzer divisions were now in Libya under the personal command of General Rommel. The Germans were not running the risk that North Africa could come under control of the Allies. In fact, requests had been sent in by the Germans, and from Rommel, for the Allies to give up. Rommel’s messenger was bluntly told by the recipients what he could do with his message. Why should they be worried? After all, Australian intelligence believed that it would take two to three months for the ‘unprepared’ German troops to acclimatise to the desert heat! Leaflets dropped by Germans to suggest surrender to the Allies were used by the men as toilet paper, and typically, complaints were made as to lack of softness.

5 Rex Garbutt, personal communication 2012. Rex is son to Alan Garbutt.
6 Col J.N.L. Argent, Target Tank: The history of the 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, 9th Division, A.I.F., Parramatta, 1957, p. 64. The 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment is the official designation of the unit; however; the author here uses 3 Anti-Tank Regiment, which is the version preferred by its veterans (Barry Willoughby, pers. comm., 13 Jan 2013).
7 Phil Loffinan, interviewed by Brian Wall for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, S00557, transcript of oral recording, AWM, p.6.
8 Dick Gill, unpublished manuscript, pp. 21-22. Courtesy of family of veteran Nicol Lawrie, as provided by Dick Gill.
9 Ibid.
10 Argent, op cit, p.48.
This first action of 3 Anti-Tank regiment on 8 April 1941 had brought 100 of its men together in a new but unwelcome bond as battle casualties. Five of their men had been killed, and others were cared for at field hospitals. This new batch of POWs, many of whom were suffering with wounds, were handed over to the Italians, to go behind the wire of Italian camps before the end of 1941. Other 3 Anti-Tank gunners and officers, who had not yet met this fate, remained to serve in the desert for a longer haul. The desert environment was to become increasingly familiar over coming months. It was not considered too bad by some. It could even remind them of home, a bit like Longreach in a bad year.11 Col Jack Argent, ‘Silver John’ to his 3 Anti-Tank men, was chuffed that his officers had become experts at desert navigation, and that never once was a troop or section lost on their way across the desert at night.12 Like their own adaptations and knowledge of the desert, the Aussies should have realised that the professional German army was not going to do things by halves. The German Afrika Korps planned ahead for the North African desert by training in hot houses. For all, water was a real problem. No matter how long the Aussies spent in the desert, a dixieful of water to last all day, to wash, shave, clean the feet, and to drink, was still a bit grim.13

Before Mechili 1941, Australian men going ‘in the bag’ had been low in number, but the tide was to turn. The desert battles of 1942 would swell the number. In the late days of June 1942, a long convoy of 9th Division returned to the Western Desert, the country in which it had learned to fight.14 The war in North Africa was becoming more critical for the British Eighth Army. On 26 June 1942 the Australians began moving south, through Syria and Palestine to Egypt. With the rushed transfer to the Alamein ‘box’ commencing in secrecy, the men had initially hoped that the movement meant that they were now heading out of the desert, and home. As they approached the Suez Canal ports, the convoy’s destination became clearer. They were heading back to the desert.

*Old Rommel had us on the run, the news was far from hot,*  
... *So we came back to the desert, well known in days of yore,*  
*We met the Hun at Alamein close by the Meddy shore,*  
... *While history repeats itself, now we’re once more in the game,*  
*Will the form displayed in ’41, this year be just the same?*  
*If so, then Rommel’s stonkered, what’er the plan he weaves.*15

Aiming to confuse enemy spies, the Aussie troops replaced their slouch hats with tin helmets. Even their boots had been disguised. It must have worked as the German spies thought they were South Africans disguised as Australians! In this high summer, the troops wearing only shorts, boots and tin helmets would endure temperatures akin to Longreach or Kalgoorlie in a bad year. It was best not to wear underwear, as the seams would harbour fleas and lice. Navigation from tent to toilet could disorient a man in that terrain and dust.16 By the end of June, the battered Eighth Army was holding a new line running south of El Alamein, a forlorn railway station near the coast, barely 90 kilometres drive from Alexandria. It was the ‘last ditch’ before Cairo. Insignificant on the map, Tel el Eisa, ‘Hill of Jesus’, and El  

11 Peter Bosgard, AWM PR82/174.  
12 Argent, op cit, p. 137.  
13 Jack Wauhop, interviewed by Brian Wall for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939-45, S00512, transcript of oral recording, AWM, p.11. A dixie was a utensil used for food and water.  
16 Johnston and Stanley, op cit, p.47.
Alamein, humble railway sidings, were to become place names of significance.

On 25 July 1942, General Auchinleck issued an order. ‘You have done much’, he commended the men for halting Rommel’s army, ‘... but I ask you for more ... If we can stick to it, we will break him’. An attack on ‘Ruin Ridge’ (Sanyet el Miteiriya) was part of this extra demand, and it involved a night attack through minefields. The demand came at short notice, sounding fairly straightforward. On Sunday 26 July 1942, the wind in the west blew the fine sand over the battlefield, but the heat of the day gave way to a chilly night under clear skies. The night attack started as a brigade attack by crossing the start line at midnight, in bright moonlight. Ruin Ridge was successfully seized by 2/28th Bn and support troops, including the 12th Battery of 3 Anti-Tank. The West Australian 2/28th Bn had ‘gone up the guts’ to make the main attack, with support by the anti-tank guns carried on the trucks of 3 Anti-Tank regiment. Once the objective was reached, they began to dig in. The whole battalion area was under heavy fire, and to site the anti-tank guns in the dark was difficult, despite the shining moon. In addition to the captured Italian Breda light machine guns, the Australian artillery included Brens, Bofors, bayonets, and Boyes anti-tank guns.

In that now familiar but dreadful rocky desert, the digging in to obtain some measure of shelter was tough. Only shallow trenches could be made. Sparks would fly off their picks as they dug in. It was too bloody rocky in this patch. The men who had sandbags found they could not fill them. In their trench, sand would not move as quickly as 3 Anti-Tank gunner Doug Frame and Sg t Bruce Templeman would have liked. To give his trench mate a breather, Doug offered to swap places with Bruce. Bruce was the one who copped a shell, and in the random draw of battle survival, battle in the desert took the life of this well-respected 23-year-old sergeant from Sydney. The luck was beginning to run out for this troop of the so-called ‘Lucky 12th’ Battery. For battle veterans, memories cannot numb the horror of war. Such memories are enough to rationalise the many years for those veterans who chose to remain silent. Memories from Alamein, Tobruk or Mechili held their grip. It was driving a gun carrier over the head of a young enemy soldier at Alamein that was to haunt farmhand from Bundanoon, driver and gunner Col Booth – one battlefield memory shared with his family. Sometimes, it is only later in life that the full horror hits home to the men who were there.

At Ruin Ridge, the best laid plans of the 9th Division had gone horribly wrong. Vehicles that should have brought forward ammunition were blown to pieces. Three company commanders were wounded. British support was stalled. Bright moonlight contrasted with barrages of artillery fire. Burning vehicles lit the night horizon like bushfire. It seemed as if every vehicle involved was blown and burning. The gunners would have shared the fear that the morning was not going to be easier than was this dreadful night.

18 Ian Templeman, pers. Comm., 2011. Ian is brother to Bruce Templeman. Ian had opportunity to meet with Doug Frame, post-war
19 Dubbed the ‘Lucky 12th’ due to its fortunate run leading up to the July battles at Alamein, on 26/27 July 1942 fourteen of so-called ‘Lucky 12th’ were killed in action, or died of wounds, as did Bruce Templeman. Four more men, falling into the hands of their captors, were to be killed during transport to Italy or to die soon after.
20 Col Booth is the father of the author. Col, like many veterans, shared selective memories with family, and suffered long-term anxiety and health problems due to battle, captivity, and as an evader.
In the early light on the 27 July, Col’s mate Sgt Ian Hocking called out to fellow sergeant, Don Walter, to swing his six-pounder gun around to cover the front. A semi-circle of tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, and all sorts of vehicles were facing them. It looked like ‘cockroaches coming in across the hills’. Ian Hocking and Capt Jimmy Allen were keen to determine whether it was Pommies or Jerries driving the tanks that were now seen milling around in the distance. Could this be the support that they hoped for, or something else?

It had been a long night but Don Walter did cover the front, knocking out five tanks. To Ian Hocking’s horror, after they were about 100 yards out, a shell ricocheted up underneath the Morris convertible carrying Ian and Jimmy, penetrating Jimmy Allen’s back and out through his stomach. Jimmy rolled out the side of the door-less Morris. Ian hit the brakes, and hearing someone yell, ‘Keep going, we will look after him’, he sped off again to the right flank to follow those mysterious tanks. About 1000 yards out, Ian fell right into the hands of Italian soldiers. Probably the only one in his regimental battery to be captured by the ‘Ities’, and not the ‘Jerries’, Ian would often cop this jibe on Anzac Day reunions.

In this early light, the counter-attack was back on, as Jerry woke up. The ridge hotted up quickly with continuous shelling and mortar bombing. At 0900hrs radio contact was regained, just in time for the battalion to report that it was in trouble. The Australians were battling enemy tanks from three directions. Those approaching tanks carried big black German crosses, and they fanned out on entering the wadi, picking off infantry units one by one. To make it worse, the British support was nowhere in sight. As the men waited for the expected tank and artillery support, they were left with one portable wireless in operation. Most signal trucks had been knocked out on the minefield. Ammunition was running out.

Ian Hocking, now a prisoner of war, saw from a distance the soul-destroying sight of his fellow Battery troops laying down their weapons, as they too surrendered to German forces. By 10am, 12th Battery knew that their days as combatants were over, whether they liked it or not. Their commander accepted the inevitable, and surrendered to prevent the wounding of more of his men. When the dust had settled, casualties were counted and stragglers were collected. For the ‘Lucky 12th Battery, 44 men were missing, mostly wounded, including several officers, and 14 had been killed or died of wounds.

The heroic defence by 2/28th Bn, the 12th Battery gunners and other support troops on Ruin Ridge was over. Hundreds of men were marched out in sixes amid a heavy barrage coming from their own side, unaware that they were sending down fire on their own men. According to Colin Weekes, ‘We had to trot right through the whirling shrap. It was here that poor old Peter Norton-Knight got a bit in his back and old Pop Ryan a piece in his heel’. Colin had his own close call with a piece of 25-pounder shell, about 8 inches long, that spun close to him at stomach level: ‘I’ve never pulled my tummy in so quickly as I did then’.

For the POWs, to be taken prisoner was more than a low point; it was an unshakeable sense of shame. They hung their heads in shame, humiliation and frustration. The rationale of the men to serve their county in battle, and to keep serving, seemed lost. Amidst the gut-wrenching frustration was the shock and grief that some of their fellow soldiers, mates, had

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22 Phil Loffman, interviewed by Brian Wall, op cit, p.9.
23 Ian Hocking, cited in Phil Loffman, POW, 1995, p.146. Jimmy Allen was a Captain in the 2/28th Bn.
24 Ibid.
25 Argent, op cit, p.188-89.
26 Colin Weekes, unpublished manuscript, Part B. Courtesy of Colin’s son, Martin Weekes.
lost their lives on the desert battlefield, or were carted off as casualties, in moments that could not be forgotten. For the exhausted and shattered troops, this early phase of captivity was another test of strength: ‘You can quite imagine how we felt as we were herded into 3 tonners, packed like cattle ... We almost died that night, because we were so overcome’.27

Indeed, during the years of captivity ahead, the manifestations of their war would wax and wane, and evolve into circumstances for which they may not have been trained at Ingleburn or Northam. In their early weeks in transit camps, including the euphemistically named ‘The Palms’ at Benghazi, and during subsequent transport to Italy, the conditions were more than enough to worry the men: ‘I got out and put my hands up and the old expression is, “For you, the war is finished”. What a lot of crap. The war only started. This was just the beginning.’28 The Germans took advantage of this being regarded as an Italian theatre of war: ‘Send them over to Italy and they will feed them and guard them’.29 The rest of their war awaited them.

The 3 Anti-Tank men captured at Mechili 1941 had been ‘settled’ into their Italian POW camps for over a year before their mates arrived from the July 1942 battles at Alamein. The new arrivals swelled the numbers in Italian camps, in particular the large Anzac camp PG57 Gruppignano, notorious for its vicious and vindictive Colonel Calcaterra. In the following April, fortune would see a number of the 3 Anti-Tank men drafted from Gruppignano to working POW farms (PG106) in the rice growing Vercelli region, near Milan. Escape and evasion was frequently contemplated. After five months in the Vercelli working camps, such opportunity arose with the promulgation of an Armistice between Italy and the Allies, 8 September 1943. With the Armistice came turmoil, and the long-awaited opportunity to get outside the wire. Murmurings of the Armistice had filtered through the camps, and decisions were tossed about – whether to stay put and await Allied help, to head south to reach Allied Lines, or to head for the hills – the Swiss Alps. For many, the hills beckoned: ‘That false armistice was just a matter of deciding to go and we went, so that was our escape, nothing dramatic. Then that’s when our war started ... We left the camp with their blessing ... and headed towards the hills’.30

The prisoners still at Gruppignano were without options. Following the promulgation of the Armistice, the Germans rounded up the internees of large camps such as PG57, the officers’ camp at PG78 Sulmona, and more isolated working camps, to transfer POWs to Germany. Most of the 3 Anti-Tank men captured at Mechili and Ruin Ridge were transferred from to German-occupied territories. Illustrating that escape and evasion could happen at any stage, there were those such as father and son Frank and Keith Sharp who managed to escape en route to Germany, and head for Switzerland.31

Heading to the hills was for many, a fortunate choice. A small number made it safely to Allied lines. Of the Mechili group, sixteen made it to Switzerland.32 The names of a handful of 3 Anti-Tank POWs in Italy do not appear on German camp lists, or as arrivals in Switzerland. Perhaps they remained in safe shelter with peasants or partisans, or found other

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27 Ibid.
28 Phil Loffman, interviewed by Brian Wall, op cit, p.9.
30 Ibid.
31 Keith Sharp, ‘Escape to Switzerland’, Stand To, January 1952.
32 Veteran Bill Rudd’s extensive research is published as a web publication at www.aifpow.com and includes incomplete ANZAC Nominal Rolls of escaped POWs, including the recorded AIF POW arrivals in Switzerland.
means of survival, until war’s end. There were similarly varied outcomes for the Ruin Ridge captives. Several men were killed during transport to Italy on the torpedoed Italian freighter, *Nino Bixio*, or died soon after arrival. A few successfully reached Allied lines. Four ‘Lucky 12th’ gunners captured at Ruin Ridge – Col Booth, Peter Erickson, Claude ‘Gus’ Gibson, and Colin Weekes – would indeed find luck, to carry them safely into Switzerland in late 1943. Col Booth and Peter Erickson crossed the Alps with Ross Wycherley of the 2/24th Bn and two POWs of South African and British nationality.

Whereas some escaped POWs headed swiftly for the hills, a number took their time. Fortune and opportunity intervened on the journey. Italy 1943 was a turbulent battlefield. The men left the routine of the POW camps to enter a hotbed of civil hostility, German and Fascist patrols, and the Italian Resistance. A ‘strange alliance’ developed between Allied evades and the Resistance, as the partisans brought disciplined and desperate soldiers to their cause, for the shorter or longer duration. The award of Italy Star was an honour for a small number of POWs who spent considerable time fighting with the Resistance. 3 Anti-Tank Gunner Alan ‘Snow’ Garbutt was one recipient.

The Alpine frontier was at once a pathway to freedom, but it was also a passport to hell. It was as if those mountains were the final hurdle, the final test, to the gruelling years of service that led them to those foothills. Years of desert, captivity and evasion led to this choice. The sheer beauty of the frontier was not lost on the men, but it was not the time to savour it. If they stopped, they could freeze, or be recaptured. If they moved too quickly and carelessly, their evasion could end in an Alpine crevasse. Luck saw them over the mountains, even the most inhospitable. Weather could be kind to their plight, including the fog that offered invisibility from the ever-watchful patrols. Would they have headed for the hills if they could have foreseen the hazardous nature of that terrain, or if they had previously experienced thigh-deep snowdrifts in their Australian upbringing in Sydney, Moree and Kalgoorlie?

The stories of the 3 Anti-Tank men taken POW at Mechili and Alamein, to become prisoners in Italy, have much to tell us. There was more to Alamein than the oft-quoted ‘battle of Alamein’, as the October Alamein battle has often been depicted. Similarly, the dominant discourse speaks often of the significance of a place called Tobruk. ‘Ruin Ridge’ and ‘Mechili’ are spoken of much less. The 3 Anti-Tank men involved in action at Mechili in 1941 and El Alamein in July 1942 are representative of outcomes of Australian service in North African campaigns of WW2. Gallant soldiers were killed in action or seriously wounded. Brothers fought side by side. Men were of youthful age, or older like Frank Sharp, Herbert ‘Pop’ Ryan and Ernest Winter. The men of 3 Anti-Tank witnessed the randomness of fortune in war. Strong bonds were formed with regimental mates, and those from other units, alongside them in battle or in POW camps. Every man needed a trusted mate, among whom were those fortunate to survive battle, albeit wounded, but others who were to die during transport to Italy or in POW camps.

For 3 Anti-Tank POWs in the Vercelli region, their varied outcomes were to parallel those of the thousands of other Allied escaped prisoners: shelter by brave peasant families, living on low rations, involvement with partisans, lying ‘doggo’, heading for the neutral sanctuary of Switzerland, or to Allied lines. Our men would cross paths, or join paths, with their POW counterparts of other nationalities, including British, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians, Cypriots, Palestinians and Poles. Stories of escaped POWs inform us that evasion

was equally taxing, if not more so, on physical and psychological resilience, than experiences behind camp wire. Although it is the POW experience _behind_ barbed wire that dominates the discourse of wartime captivity, it is being _outside_ the wire as escaped prisoners, that the men found themselves beyond the rules of the Geneva Conventions, and into new battle territory.

Fraternity with Italian ‘foes’ was a key strategy to successful evasion. Italian civilians risked serious repercussions for sheltering POWs, yet stories abound of hospitality granted by the poorest of peasant families. A number of 3 Anti-Tank men returned to Italy post-war, to renew contact with those who had sustained and assisted them through times of mutual battle in a war-ravaged country. The experience of our veterans in the hands of the Germans and Japanese has been a dominant part of the discourse surrounding Australian POWs during WW2. We need to acknowledge also that more than 2000 of the AIF were prisoners in Italy. To bring the stories forward of those who were prisoners and evaders in Italy, and to glean a wider understanding of the historical and human context of their plight, is to give these men the honour to which they are due.

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