

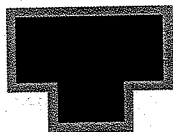
# **THE 2/8 AUSTRALIAN FIELD REGIMENT AIF**



## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

**BY**

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The 2/8 field Regiment was formed in May 1940 at a time when recruiting and volunteering for service in the second AIF was at its maximum. The urgency of the war situation was greater than expectations as the withdrawal from Dunkirk had taken place and implications of the bombing of London and the Battle of Britain were of frightening proportions and German U-Boats were sinking a large proportion of Allied shipping.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Battery, who were Victorians and the 16<sup>th</sup> Battery who were Tasmanians, came together as a regiment at Puckapunyal Camp, Victoria, in November 1940. Later, the regiment was reinforced from all over Australia. Late in October 1941, the 58<sup>th</sup> Battery was raised while the regiment was in the Middle East.

In a very short time, the 2/8<sup>th</sup> embarked on the ex P & O liner, "Strathmore" at Port Melbourne and became part of a convoy proceeding to the Middle East, arriving in Palestine on 19 December 1940.

After leaving Fremantle, the convoy travelled in a north – westerly direction across the Indian Ocean. Approaching the tropics, the overcrowded, below decks sleeping quarters became unbearable, so the troops moved and slept on every available space on the open decks. Sleeping there was rather wonderful – hearing the wind rattling in the rigging and being able to see the other blacked out ships in the convoy and further out, the escorting cruisers and destroyers in the moonlight.

Each night the Southern Cross sank further under the southern horizon until, eventually, the North Polar Star came into view. Sadly, many of those aboard never saw the Southern Cross again, except on the Australian flag. This applied particularly to the 2/23<sup>rd</sup> and 2/24<sup>th</sup> Battalions who shared the ship with the 2/8<sup>th</sup>. Their wonderful record in Tobruk and El Alamein came at a heavy price.

The regiment camped at Kilo 89 and Quastina, Palestine, and became part of the newly formed 9<sup>th</sup> Division. Further training and acclimatisation took place which included getting used to the split cane beds provided in all tents. Strength was not the highest priority in the manufacture of these beds, with the result that 99.5% of them collapsed under the weight of a normal man, usually in the middle of the night. Also, there were Spinney's sausages manufactured in Gaza. It was difficult to acquire a taste for these, as the troops decided they had to be made of camels and/or donkeys at the end of their lives as beasts of burden.

On 24 May 1941, the regiment moved to Mersa Matruh which was an Egyptian railhead and port on the Mediterranean coast nearly mid-way between Alexandria and Tobruk. Before the war, it had been a fashionable seaside resort, but by the time regiment arrived there, very few buildings were still standing after continual Axis bombing, the Axis having almost complete control of the air at the time. Keeping the port of Mersa Matruh open was essential for the convoys supplying the forces which were gallantly defending Tobruk and which included many of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. The troops found Matruh notorious for plagues of fleas, but the swimming in the Mediterranean was wonderful and kept them healthy.

The regiment patrolled from Mersa Matruh through Sidi Barrani to the Libyan border near Halfaya Pass, the guns being spread right out to give the Germans the impression we were a much stronger force than we really were. Water was short and conditions uncomfortable including intermittent bombing and strafing. The German commander, General Erwin Rommel "the Desert Fox", knowing his supply lines were over-stretched, did not make another significant advance towards the Suez Canal while Tobruk held. The Australians were withdrawn after holding Tobruk in excess of four and a half months, and the 2/8<sup>th</sup> was also withdrawn to Palestine on 9 October 1941 for patch-up and reinforcement.

The desert we left is so well described by Tahu Hole in his book, "ANZACs into Battle":

A blue and yellow and brown grey land. The sun pours out of the cloudless blue sky. It blazes powerfully, month after month

sucking out all colour in the land, bleaching, withering, drying, and burning everything.

In spite of that torrid description, if young men have to fight in sad and bloody wars at all, what better place to do so in the desert, where there are no civilians, including women and children to hurt and leave homeless, and the many hundreds of nomadic Bedouins have moved on, in their customary way, before coming to any harm.

### THE LEBANON AND SYRIA.

During the early months of 1942, Staff in Cairo were anticipating the possibility of a German advance south through the Caucasus, Persia (for its oil) and then through Turkey. Consequently, the 2/8<sup>th</sup> moved from Palestine to a camp know as Jdaidet Ghazir in the foothills near the boundary of the Lebanon and Syria, in the middle of January 1942. A camp surrounded by olive groves and small villages inhabited by people who could not have been more friendly and hospitable to us, although their favourite drink, Arrack had to be treated with discretion.

Here the 2/8<sup>th</sup> built a fortress with gun pits on a cliff face on the border of Lebanon and Syria, and patrolled and trained further north in the Homs and Aleppo areas, some 9<sup>th</sup> Division units being spread right up to the Turkish border.

However, Hitler made the same mistake as Napoleon by invading Russia, making it impossible for him to advance south, thus making Syria relatively safe.

### EL ALAMEIN.

While the 2/8<sup>th</sup> were in Syria, Tobruk fell to the Axis forces on 21 June 1942, Sidi Barrani four days later and by the end of the month reached the El Alamein area, threatening Alexandria, Cairo and the Suez Canal. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army's performance during the period was described by some historians as lacking strong leadership and co-operation between forces.

The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division was recalled from Syria to the Desert. The 2/8<sup>th</sup> left Jdaidet on 26 June in a slow and congested convoy, taking a week to reach Amiriya, a short distance from Alexandria where

equipment was upgraded, and final preparations made to support our infantry.

Unlike the regiment's first visit to the desert, the Allied air forces had become so much better equipped and able to give effective support. Long range heavy bombers hit ports and supply routes further west; medium bombers (mostly Bostons and Baltimores) battered the Axis forces, and Hurricanes and Spitfires could mix it with the best Axis fighters and shot down many dive bombers.

The 2/8<sup>th</sup> supported the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade on 10 July in their first action of the campaign – the beginning of a long campaign that finally concluded with the defeat and retreat of Rommel's Army on 4 November 1942.

General Auchinleck commanded the 8<sup>th</sup> Army during that early period of the battle, but Winston Churchill replaced him with General Bernard Montgomery on 15 August. Montgomery immediately used his considerable administrative and tactical ability to re-arrange and strengthen the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

The intensity of the 2/8<sup>th</sup>'s participation in the battle is illustrated by the regiment's ammunition returns for the period – 163,321 25 pounder shells were used against the enemy, 61,000 of those in the final battle. Protective smoke screens were also provided when requested by the infantry. The 2/7<sup>th</sup>, our sister regiment, had very similar ammunition returns; a quote from history of the 2/7<sup>th</sup> makes the following comment on the 2/8 Field Regiment:

The 2/8<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Regiment had been in action since July 9-10 and during the coastal battle, their guns over towards the beach, and within half a mile of ours had been an even more favoured dive-bomber target than we were on rising ground. Successive waves of clumsy Stukas had come down out of the sun, bombing and enveloping their gun lines in dust and smoke. From where we were, guns appeared several times to have been obliterated. There was something awe-inspiring in the way those little 25 pounders of the Victorian-cum-Tasmanian Regiment would open up again out of the dust and smoke. They spat out their flames followed by sharp defiant barks seemingly out of the very holes made by the bursting bombs in the swamps.

During the final battle from the full moon of 23 October to 2 November, the 2/8<sup>th</sup> played its part in supporting our infantry in their magnificent contribution to the first major allied victory of the Second World War.

The regiment's casualties remained marginal but sadly, overall Australian casualties were considerable, mostly infantry who had to cover so much open ground.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Division withdrew to Palestine in early November and the whole Division of 20,000 men marched past the Commander in Chief, Middle East, General Alexander to remember "Fallen Comrades". A quotation from General Alexander's address reads:

I do not believe you have ever fought with greater bravery or distinction than you did during that battle when you broke the German and Italian Armies in the Western Desert. You have added fresh lustre to your already illustrious name.

Montgomery later wrote:

The more I think back, the more I realise that winning was only made possible by the bravery of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division.

The division was prepared for returning home to Australia late in January 1943. A convoy was assembled in the Red Sea with 30,000 troops aboard. The 2/8<sup>th</sup> were aboard the Dutch / American liner "*Nieu Amsterdam*" carrying 6,000 troops, it was not particularly comfortable but as it was travelling in the right direction, it didn't seem to matter. Troops leaning over the deck rail were certain they could smell gum trees when they were only half way across the Indian Ocean.

On arriving home at the end of February 1943, the troops had three weeks of unforgettable leave before reassembling on the Atherton Tablelands, west of Cairns which led to long and most monotonous period in the history of the 2/8<sup>th</sup>. Many of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division units saw action in New Guinea during that period, but due to unsuitable terrain for the use of artillery, the number of artillery regiments to a division was

reduced from three to one and the 2/8<sup>th</sup> and its sister regiment, the 2/7<sup>th</sup> were left in Queensland, until moving to Moratai and the invasion of North Borneo in the Brunei Bay area in June 1945. Morale fell considerably during that time with so called training, manoeuvres and route marches into the bush. I remember a well known Tasmanian Bombardier sitting on a log during a lunch break and tipping a tin of bully beef into his old dixie making the profound statement – “If I get home from this war, I’m not going on another b----- picnic in my life”.

## BORNEO

The regiment left Townsville on board an American liberty ship “*David C Shanks*” and landed at Moratai Island in the Maluccas for final preparation for the landings in the Brunei Bay area of Borneo. A great congregation of shipping was in the harbour and Liberator bombers were leaving from there on raids in preparation for an invasion, the reason for which was to remove the pockets of Japanese remaining in the area to enable the Americans to re-open and use the oil wells in the region.

After a five day trip from Moratai, the landings were reasonably successful and, once again, the 2/8<sup>th</sup> was able to assist the infantry whenever they were in difficulties.

Borneo was an unpleasant place under those conditions – troops wet through the whole time either from sweat or rain, crocodiles plentiful in the rivers, malaria always a possibility and enemy movements difficult to detect in the wet conditions, but medium bomber support was usually available when needed.

Needless to say, the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945 was an unbelievable relief, once again the 2/8<sup>th</sup> had done a good job under difficult conditions, and their casualties were light.

Members of the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment returned to Australia wiser men, more appreciative of the freedoms and opportunities available to them in their own country. They had both pride in the job they had done, but grief for those who didn’t return.

I wish to conclude with a small poem about one of our Service Medals called "The Africa Star", written by Eddie Plunkett:

How speedily the years have flown, and we,

who came back safely home

From arid deserts, far and wide,

Still wear with modest pride, the

Africa Star, now dimmed with age,

Its meaning, a merest page in history,

Long forgotten by those who didn't

See them die, those gallant youngsters

of Alamein, and many other campaigns.

And, as we stand in silent prayer,

Within our hearts will be aware,

That these are comrades of long ago,

And still with us, Row on Row,

Flanked by friends who died in peace.

So grant us, Lord that wars will cease.

Geoffrey Ashton-Jones

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