

When former artillery gunner Lance Rigney received recognition for his military service, he could hardly have expected that it would be from his one-time adversaries at the 1942 Battle of El Alamein. Representing the Australian Returned Servemen's League during a visit to Germany, Lance was made an honorary member of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's Deutsches Afrikakorps (DAK), known popularly as the Afrika Korps.

The defeat of the Axis forces led by the renowned DAK at the Battle of El Alamein in North Africa was arguably a turning point in World War II. It also has a special place in the history of Tasmania at war, marking a major milestone in the state's long artillery tradition. This battle shaped the lives of several young Tasmanian gunners who were later to make significant contributions to their community.



The Battle of

EL ALAMEIN

earns a place in Tasmanian history

WRITER
**Mike
Vanderkelen**

PHOTOGRAPHS
Courtesy of
**Lance and
Betty Rigney**



The story of how Lance, now aged 92, and some 650 other members of his artillery regiment came to confront Rommel, the 'Desert Fox', began in 1940, soon after the declaration of war. In May of that year the 2/8th Field Artillery Regiment was created, a unit raised in Tasmania and Victoria as part of the Australian 9th Division. Very few members of the regiment are still alive. The regiment, now represented by a few surviving members, their families and friends, has been 'outlived' by the unit to which it in part owes its heritage. That unit, the Launceston Volunteer Artillery Corps, which was formed in June 1860, is now the oldest continuously serving corps in Australia.

BELOW
16th Field Battery,
Brighton, 1940
BACKGROUND
Egyptian
seaport
Mersa Matruh

In November 1940 about 300 members of the 16th Battery of the newly formed regiment left the Brighton camp near Hobart and boarded the SS *Taroona* in Launceston for Melbourne and the Puckapunyal army base in central Victoria. As strange as it may seem now, the isolation of the state at that time meant that Tasmanians met their Victorian counterparts with some trepidation. Former 2/8th member and Launceston resident, 95-year-old Max Gofton, is happy to confirm, however, 'that the Victorians were not too bad because when we arrived in Puckapunyal, in the absence of a tap on a keg of beer they broke it open and poured it into a bath for us all to enjoy'.

Barely two weeks later the regiment embarked for the Middle East. For the next two years it was deployed in Palestine, Egypt and Syria. In October 1942 it took part in the battle at El Alamein, some 200 kilometres west of Cairo.

Tasmanian-born author and former 2/8th gunner Ron Ware summed up what confronted them in his memoirs, entitled *Flies, Fleas and Sand*. The author says he was in somewhat better shape than John Steer when they encountered each other in hospital in Gaza as two of the more than 80 casualties suffered by the regiment between July and November 1942 in the preliminary battles prior to El Alamein.

Lieutenant Steer had been blown up by a heavy mortar bomb that severely injured one leg and nearly severed the other. In the post-war years, having lost one leg, the popular young man learnt to dance again and became a member of the Tasmanian parliament, introducing a Bill that would make Tasmania the first state in the country to introduce daylight saving.

In the federal sphere, politics also became the post-war calling for teacher and former 2/8th gunner Lance Barnard who, as deputy prime minister to Gough Whitlam, maintained a connection with El Alamein well beyond 1942, not least through his role as Minister of Defence.





WESTERN DESERT

Whitlam said in his 1997 eulogy to Barnard 'as a gunner at El Alamein, in the glorious 9th Division, he [Barnard] could speak with authority on veterans' affairs and defence matters'. Barnard was consulted about the design of the 9th Division Memorial that is just beyond the Alamein War Cemetery.

Another former member of the regiment, John Gunn, whose Launceston-based hardware and building supplies business later became timber giant Gunns Limited, continued to show his love of the artillery and support for later generations of gunners, including this writer. Gunners visiting the Stony Head artillery range east of Low Head have John Gunn to thank for the officers mess – an old house he moved from Launceston – and for the materials from which an other ranks mess was built.

Despite having long been discharged from the Australian Defence Force, John Gunn regularly accompanied the Tasmanian-based 6th Field Regiment to its annual camp with the approval of various commanding officers, including Peter Patmore, a former CO of the regiment.

During one of his several post-war visits to Germany Lance Rigney presented a plaque from the RSL to the DAK. His brief speech to his former adversaries was enthusiastically received. Having warmed to Lance's words that 'I am an Australian but today my heart is here in old Germany with other soldiers', former DAK members were waiting for him as he stepped down from the podium. They hoisted him up on their shoulders and marched around the hall, followed by someone brandishing a huge jug of fine German beer. Also at the function was Manfred Rommel, then lord mayor of Stuttgart and son of the famous and much-respected field marshal. Lance presented him with several keepsakes made from Tasmanian timber.

The lord mayor asked in which division he had served. Lance told him and Rommel replied, 'My father had much respect for the 9th Australian Division'. Lance responded, 'I can assure you, sir, the 9th Division had much respect for your father.' 



LEFT: Lance Rigney held aloft in Stuttgart

BELLOW: Plaque presented to Rigney by DAK veterans



Further information

Ron Ware, 2007

Flies, Fleas and Sand

KRAM Publishing, Nunawading

2/8th Australian Field Regiment Association

www.2nd8thaustralfielregtassoc.org.au

Royal Australian Artillery Association of Tasmania Inc.

www.tasartillery.com



WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

On 23 October 2007, the 65th anniversary of the Battle of El Alamein, 34 veterans of the battle and/or their family members were presented with a commemorative medallion by the then Tasmanian governor, Sir William Cox, himself a former gunner. A memorial service is held annually on 23 October at the Hobart Cenotaph to mark the success of the Australian 9th Division in the Western Desert.

Between 23 October and 5 November 1942, Australian casualties at El Alamein totalled 463 dead among the nearly 2,700 presumed dead, wounded or taken prisoner. Eighteen citations and decorations were awarded to members of the 2/8th Field Regiment and seven went to Tasmanians.