

ECHOES OF WAR (PART 3)

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Third Ypres Menin Road Battle 20 September 1917

Our troop train crawled at snail's pace along the SW line leading to Ypres on a bright September morning in 1917. The enemy balloons were floating over their line all along the ill-famed Salient and we could only bank on the sketchy camouflage nets strung up between us to conceal what would be a prize target to the enemy observers perched on high and in close touch with their heavy batteries of guns below.

We had entrained a few hours earlier from our training grounds well back from the line. Having completed our two weeks of intensive training for the big attack, well fed and rested from the boredom, discomfort and danger of many weeks of trench warfare, we keenly practised the job we were to do at our zero hour. Enemy positions had been photographed and replicas of the ground we had to take was exactly laid out. Each man knew what he had to do. If the platoon commander fell, the sergeant, or senior corporal, would take over and so on all the way down the line of command.

Now we were really on our way for the big thing and strangely all the troops were cock-a-hoop and the dangers were forgotten. In our compartment eight young subalterns relaxed with their webbing kit and revolvers stowed away on the floor beside each one. There was absolute silence. All ranks had been warned, no smoking, no singing, no noise. As I looked around at the set faces about me, I could not help thinking and wondering who were to be the lucky ones to survive and who would be missing from this group after the show.

We had been told to expect heavy casualties and that the objectives we were to take and hold had twice been taken and lost again to enemy counter attacks, and a third attack had been completely repulsed. We of the 9th Scottish Division were given explicit orders to take, at all costs, the ridge held by the enemy and above all to hold it.

Crawling along we reached our destination just

outside the old and battered city and were able without any casualties to reach our quarters in dugouts all along the canal bank to the West of the town. These dugouts stretched for some distance along the Western bank and so were reasonably safe from artillery fire; they were dug deep into the banks sometimes a hundred feet, or more, with great depth of cover overhead. It was here from one of these dugouts in sight of the long rows of soldiers' graves nearby that Colonel MacCrae of the Canadian Medical Corps wrote his famous lines of which this is the first verse:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing fly
Scarce heard amidst the guns below.

Here we spent the remaining part of the 18th day of September and the 19th preparing and organising for the great attack. I went along to the adjoining company (B) to look for my younger brother who had recently joined our regiment. He had been a student at Cape Town University and having done two years towards his BA degree, left with a friend and came to join us in the field where we were urgently in need of men to fill the gaps caused by our heavy losses. I eventually found the two friends, both privates, busily discussing and declaiming the classics and thinking apparently of anything but the great ordeal ahead and which I must confess weighed heavily with me, this being my first command in battle. We said goodbye and wished each other luck. Roscoe, his friend, kept saying how Reg must concentrate on literature when the war was over as that was his bent. He said he was going to help him. Poor chap, he was killed at Reg's side the next morning.

The order of battle for the 9th Division was that there were to be two attacking brigades, the South African Brigade and the 27th Lowland Brigade with the 28th Highland Brigade in support. In our Brigade the 3rd Regiment on the right with the 1st Regiment in support. On the left the 4th Regiment with the 2nd in support. In each



The 'ghostly town of Ypres' which was 'usually under constant fire'.

company there would be three fighting platoons under command of a 2nd Lieutenant and one carrying platoon in support under command of a senior sergeant.

Incidentally these company dispositions had caused a little dust-up between myself and my company commander, Captain A.W.H. McDonald when in training a few weeks previously. Being the junior and youngest 2nd Lieutenant he allocated the carrying platoon to me and the fighting platoon to the senior Sergeant. Naturally, I objected strongly to a junior in rank taking my place. My company commander being adamant in his decision I demanded to see the Colonel, the right of every officer in a dispute. On this he climbed down and gave me No 1 Fighting platoon.

On the night of the 18/19th I was ordered to take a corporal and lay the tapes for my company (A Coy). Accordingly at about 9 p.m. we made our way up the duck boards when it was comparatively quiet. I reported to Captain Vivian* of A Coy of the 3rd Regiment who was kindness itself and he pointed out the right and left flanks of my company just behind his own.

The corporal and myself spent the night putting down the tapes for each platoon and also company

headquarters. I then returned to say goodbye to Captain Vivian and to thank him. I was grieved to hear after the battle that he had been killed early in the attack next morning when helping to take a heavily defended pill box.

By the time we had completed our job of laying the company tapes, dawn was breaking and just then the enemy barrage came down with a crash. There seemed to be a quite impenetrable line of bursting shells between us and our way back. It was most imperative that we should report back that the company area was properly marked for our company to line up on that night. If we stayed until a little lighter we would easily be picked off by enemy snipers only a hundred yards distant. Corporal A and I looked at each other; this seemed the end. We decided to chance running through the barrage rather than the certainty of a bullet from the alerted Jerry. We ran, and I made for each shell burst with the theory another would not fall in the same place; somehow running madly from side to side we broke through and on to what was left on the duck boards in

* Captain E.V. Vivian, MC. He had previously served in the Rand Light Infantry and Railways Regiment during the Rebellion and German South West Africa campaign. He was wounded at Delville Wood and was eventually killed at Ypres later in 1917.



A German pill box.

the barrage area. We reached Company Headquarters shocked and very tired but able to report all's well and the company could proceed as planned that night. Corporal A and I prayed for a short rest and that was the last I saw of my little plucky corporal. He too was killed next morning.

At about 10 p.m. rain started to fall and continued until almost dawn just as the whole brigade was getting into position for attack. The blackness of the night and the slippery ground added to our problems. At about 9 o'clock A Company moved off on its approach march to our attacking positions. This meant first of all getting through the ghostly town of Ypres usually under constant fire. It was pitch dark and fortunately a comparatively quiet time except for the occasional crash of a heavy shell.

We crept through the eerie streets with the aid of specially trained guides in charge. There were wide gaps between sections and platoons to minimise casualties. It was a slow and devious route with many halts before we were through the town and delivered by our guides to the start of the duck boards leading to the front line.

With the company commander bringing up the rear I led the company along the slippery duck boards to our assembly position. Poor Captain A.W.H. McDonald had slipped into a shell hole on the

way up. Shelling by the enemy had been light fortunately. I showed Captain McDonald where I had arranged for his company headquarters. He was wet and shivering with cold and nerves.

He said 'Lawrence, will you put the company in position for me?'. I was only too pleased to take over his job and keep occupied until zero hour. I put each platoon on their starting tapes and gave as best I could their right and left flanks and general bearings. With muddy shell holes and few salient points to be seen in the pitch blackness of the night this was no easy matter. At about 3 a.m. I reported to Captain McDonald that the whole company was in position on their attacking line. I was then asked to supervise the issuing of the rum to each man. So with the Sergeant Major carrying a jar of rum and myself with an empty shaving stick container, we went all along the line and gave each man half a tin of rum, just enough to steady his nerves. We finished this job at 5 o'clock and I returned to company headquarters a few yards behind the centre platoon and said a few words of parting to Captain McDonald. He thanked me profusely and said goodbye.

Poor Captain McDonald, he was in a terrible state of nerves and fear which he seemed unable to fight down. He appeared to dread the coming of the dawn and was apparently convinced that he would fall. He was one of the first to be

killed by a burst of machine gun fire after advancing a short distance from our jumping-off line.

I could do nothing to comfort him as one so much younger and junior in rank and having the same fears, I expect, as all of us. What deep thoughts there were in those tense waiting moments of life that were ticking away so fast towards zero hour! Fortunately the rain stopped at 4 o'clock and the stars peeped out. From now on no more rain fell until we were relieved on the 22nd.

And then for a short rest, and 'the dreary doubtful waiting hours before the brazen frenzy starts'.

With a thundering deafening crash our barrage came down at 5.40 a.m. and we all moved off into the dark hell of rattling machine guns, sparks and whining splinters. I found myself followed by a section of Lewis Gunners and we charged on until we came to a blast of concentrated machine guns. Several men fell. I took cover in a shell hole and signalled to those behind me to follow. I decided to work round the pill box and so we jumped from shell hole to shell hole to the right. I was the first one up and down again and each time the man behind, who was a bit slower, was hit. However, we kept on and the fire slackened. I came across and almost walked over a man in our company lying as peacefully as if asleep. Always the tidiest and smartest turned out and there he was immaculate in death — a very fine man named Herold. We now reached my guide to my right flank, the rail line leading to Rouers.

Here I found a group of our men who had had a shooting match with the enemy and had won. Nearly a dozen were lying dead mostly shot through the head. Whom should I find amongst our chaps but my brother, Reg, who later claimed he had shot five of the Jerries. But not without loss — his friend, Roscoe, was killed beside him.

I went on with added numbers now and came to a dugout on the railway embankment. Here 20 Germans put up their hands frantically in surrender, whilst about ten or more others ran up the line in escape. I was firing with my revolver at these whilst at the same time motioning to the others to get back. With the prisoners we took 3 machine guns and I had these marked with chalk '1st SAI'.

Our tempers were up with our losses and I had to restrain my men from shooting the enemy as they came out. We had heard of cases where some would surrender in front whilst those behind would take advantage and open fire. I felt sorry for the poor devils and had them sent back. From here I went forward again on the right of the embankment which was also the extreme flank of the 27th Brigade. I had a number of my own men and a few of the Royal Scots. Carrying on in this sector working up the embankment and firing with my pistol at the running Germans, but getting down quickly when they replied with machine gun fire. I crossed over the bank to the 1st Regiment sector and carried on until our objective was reached. This was difficult going on account of very swampy ground that had been churned up by our heavy artillery fire and three times I sank up to my waist and higher and would have stayed there if it had not been for the hand my men gave me.

Whilst working up the left bank I was amazed to see a very senior officer of the Royal Scots keeping pace with me on the right side of the embankment. He was wearing a cap with a red staff band instead of the usual tin hat. I heard afterwards that it was General Maxwell, VC, the commander of the 27th Brigade. We were sorry to hear later that he had been killed next day by a sniper's bullet.

On reaching our objective the first thing was to dig in and reorganize our men for the inevitable counter attack by the enemy. Here I met Second Lieutenant Mackie and hearing of our company commander's death we set out plans for running the company. We settled on a shell hole for our headquarters and then ran in different directions to see that all was in order. We were the right flank of the whole Brigade and it was important that we should keep touch with the Royal Scots. Actually they had failed to reach their objective at this point and there was a 100 yard gap between our right flank and their left. A heavy enemy barrage opened on us and when Mackie got back to our shell hole Headquarters it had disappeared with all our kit, the result of a direct hit. Mackie thought I had gone up too and we were both surprised to meet in the middle of what can only be described as a downpour of shells. We both thought the other dead. The shelling was extremely heavy but we were saved to a great extent by the soft ploughed up soil. A little later three men were buried only a yard from me but were dug out quickly and soon recovered.

awhile. An officer whom I did not know came up and said 'What's your name?'. He wrote it down and went off. I said come on, chaps, we're for it and we carried all that night and in the morning another officer also took my name, so off we went again, but the shelling got so awful my mates said, No, it is certain death to go into that wood. So I went in alone and carried men out on my back until I could carry no more! Soon after we were relieved I was told to report to the Colonel and he said I had won the Distinguished Conduct Medal.'

On about the third day in this area the rain very fortunately stopped and for the rest of our time a weak sun shone making our conditions a little less miserable. Each of our platoons in charge of a Second Lieutenant was divorced from the company and was working up and down the communications track on its own. This was quite a new and interesting experience. Shell fire was often very intense and always concentrated on the duck boards track we dared not leave. Fortunately Fritz's artillery was very methodical and opened fire at regular times on certain track junctions or likely concentration points. We became wise to this and took care to wait until his fury was over. Nonetheless we had quite a number of casualties whilst doing our carrying work.

It was about this time that my friend, Douglas Mackie, was fortunate enough to get a blighty wound, one that would be severe enough to take him to hospital in England. After six months he was rested and fit once more and returned to the regiment only to be killed shortly afterwards in the terrific fighting to hold the threatened breakthrough at Meteren (July 1918).

On our fourth day all platoons reported back to their company commanders and we moved up to relieve the front line troops. The front line, so called, was a series of water-logged shell holes connected above the water level by shallow trenches. The Germans were fifty to one-hundred yards distant in the same indescribably miserable conditions. Indeed so miserable that quite a number came over cold and dejected to surrender several days running. The others stuck it out. We all watched each other with the greatest caution and any exposure was fatal.

Three or four of us officers formed a company headquarters in the largest shell hole about the centre of our frontal area and made the best of the impossible conditions. We sorted out our

few stores, reserve ammunition, grenades etc., and tried to dry ourselves in the sun. The first morning we were basking in the sun having breakfast on bully beef and biscuits and some hot tea sent up from the rear. I was sitting comfortably on a kind of bench watching the steam rising from our sodden clothing, when, glancing down I noticed a red stripe running down the length of my bench. On looking carefully I found I was sitting on a German corpse. He was still fresh so we used him regularly as part of our amenities and furnishings. During the second day an enemy plane flew low over us all the way up our approximate front line. On his return trip we were ready for him and blazed away with Lewis guns and rifles and down he came just outside the sector. We were certain we had brought him down but as the whole front line had been firing several other units claimed him as well.

On about our second night the early morning ration of hot soup failed to reach us as usual between one and two a.m. Under those bitter conditions of existence in that sea of mud and water-logged shell holes, a steaming supply of soup was almost a necessity of life and undoubtedly a great morale booster. The next morning we were naturally all agog to know what had gone amiss.

Our soup carrier had safely made his way up the duck boards from a sheltered kitchen in the rear, but on reaching the shell hole area had lost his way in the dark, probably found everything changed by the previous day's heavy shelling and stumbled through a morass of mud into Jerrie's line. He must have passed through one of the gaps between our line of shell hole strong points.

What happened to the unfortunate soup carrier then, remained a mystery. Either the trigger happy Fritz's shot first at the figure looming out of the darkness or, as we hoped were only too pleased to welcome him and his hot soup with open arms. If the latter, he would have been taken prisoner and returned home after the war.

We never heard what his fate had been.

In the five days that we held the front line there was periodic heavy shelling. The greatest activity was at night. Very light flares went up continuously, fired by both sides to ensure against being surprised. We would see flares for some distance pinpointing the snaking lines of the opposing fronts. There was little sleep at night so we tried to get snatches in turn during the day.

At last our relief came on the fifth night. We assembled the company and moved off down the duck boards. Captain Ward, who replaced Captain McDonald as company commander, led A Company and I, as second-in-command, brought up the rear. Trouble soon started. As we expected, Jerry had been alerted to the relief going on and opened up with high explosives and gas shells on the duck boards. Our company was most fortunate and only one man was badly wounded. A 5,9 shell fell a short distance away and splinters went whining by. We could hear one chunk tumbling along seemingly slowly, nearer and nearer, until it struck with a sickening smack into the back of a man near the tail end of the company. At once shouts went up to halt in front and for stretcher bearers. The man was attended to and the company went on eager to get away from the very unhealthy junction of duck boards we were at. I decided to stay with the bearers and see the man to my friend the Canadian doctor whose dressing station was nearby. We soon had him there. I had a quick word with the doctor and then ran out to catch up with the company.

At the junction they had moved faster than I expected. I ran down one track but could not see them, so doubled back and took the other track hoping to contact them. But no luck; I had missed them. All I could do was to go on. I was soon completely lost. The night was pitch dark and the track barely discernible. At one stage I was unknowingly passing through a huge heavy artillery park when with a most terrific crash they opened fire, belching noise and flames that seemed to almost lift me off the ground.

The suddenness of this unexpected eruption was most shattering. I got through somehow and eventually in the early morning found our new billets on the canal bank. At last I was able to get down and sleep in warmth and safety. The next morning I reported to headquarters but in trying to speak to the Major found I had lost my voice and was almost deaf. Apparently the gas shells had affected my throat, luckily no more than that. I was packed off to Dunkirk for a five days' rest in a kind of officers' nursing home.

Although taking part in only a static type of action for ten days in this ploughed-up wilderness of mud, our Brigade losses were heavy. According to John Buchan's history, casualties were 261 in killed and wounded.

After recovering from my touch of gas at the

officers' nursing home in Dunkirk, I returned to my regiment which I found had moved to billets on the coast at a place called Coxyde Bains. These quarters were well behind the lines amongst sandhills so like our own at home that they themselves added a restful almost holiday touch to our existence. Here we recuperated, built up our strength with fresh drafts of men and reorganised for our next engagement. It was a lovely peaceful life only troubled at night by a long-range enemy naval gun that regularly spoilt our sleep. The heavy shells would come over with a rush like a passenger train, falling short or over mostly and doing little damage except to our sleep. Each shell seemed to be making directly for our exposed Nissen hut!

On the 30th November news came of the big Cambrai Battle and we were warned to be ready to move off at short notice. Early the next morning we started on our long march in full kit down South to the troubled area.

The first day the weather was fair though very cold and we did our fifteen miles of steady marching. At the day's end each company was billeted in barns for the men and officers in rooms nearby. Each subaltern saw his platoon settled in on the floor of the well-strawed barn and immediately had a foot inspection. Men's feet had become very tender from the continuous soggy conditions of the previous month at Ypres and Passchendaele and now with the first long march blistered more easily. Each man's feet were seen to be washed and any blisters treated with iodine. Beware the subaltern who neglected to first see to his men's comfort before looking for his own billet. Our Colonel, 'Pa' Heal, was a martinet who brooked no slackness on the part of junior officers concerning the welfare of their men.

The next two or three days on the road were very trying for we were marching in a bitter wind and heavy rain. I was billeting officer for my company on the second day, so with a corporal and a bicycle each we would ride ahead to the town or village that was to be our destination for the night and make all the necessary arrangements for each platoon and the company headquarters. The French people were quite accustomed to this, having had to provide accommodation for troops for generations past. They were always very polite and helpful and our men responded in the same way. A good supply of our army rations was always left to the householder or farm owner.

The South Africans were well-known and like for orderly discipline and generosity. I remember on one occasion when we had to move off at 4 a.m., a dear old French woman getting up hours earlier to make us cups of steaming unbeatable coffee made in the French manner of roasting the beans, grinding and making the coffee all in one operation, and finally speeding us on our way with a sincere 'Bon chance, Messieurs!'

On the third day of the march the rain stopped and snow came falling down. We had now reached the scorched earth area left in the German retreat and that night there was no shelter to be had. Men lay down in the snow and slept if they could. Some of us found broken-down walls or cellars.

On the following day we relieved the 2nd Brigade of Guards at Gauzeaucourt. The 9th Division were now taking over this part of the line at the end of the battle which had opened so brilliantly with the surprise break-through of our tanks. We had driven deep into the German defences and taken tens of thousands of prisoners and hundreds of heavy and light artillery guns. The enemy counter-attacked and owing to a lack of reinforcements in time our troops were driven back and forced to yield most of the ground we had won. We now took over a hastily dug trench line on the position where the enemy's counter-attack had been halted. The whole battlefield in front of us was littered with the dead of both sides, broken-down tanks, guns and all the signs of the back and forth struggle of the past fortnight.

We were accustomed by now to the sights of many battlefields that had been fought over, but here were many strange sights new to us of what had been almost open warfare. I saw a Prussian guardsman, a huge fellow, who had been run over by a tank and rolled out flat as if he had been pressed like a flower in a book.

The trenches we took over were more primitive — no communication trenches, no fire steps, or revettment in trenches, and no dugouts or shelters. There was very little wire in front and, worst of all, our sector was in a hollow between two ridges and therefore no drainage. This meant hard work day and night under constant shell fire to get our defences in order and at the same time be ready to repel any attack.

The Guards handed over the sector to us and in doing so had to get a receipt for trench stores. I was tickled by the formal way a Guards

sergeant would address me — 'Twenty shovels, sir, thirty picks, sir' — etc, etc, and then as he went off a very snappy salute. The Brigade of Guards had fought very well in the battle and finally checked the enemy's advance. They were certainly very fine and well-trained soldiers and we were proud to take over from such a famous Corps as the Coldstream Guards.

A few days after taking over this sector I was fortunate in being selected to attend a two-weeks' Lewis Gun course at Le Touquet on the coast. This was a wonderful break — a return to civilization and a most interesting course. All the members attending were junior officers. We were well housed and fed and worked hard to a pretty strenuous schedule. Although the weather was intensely cold we were very comfortable — sat around fires at night and made merry after work.

In the little town near by we in our section had our photographs taken and these I still have.

Part of our training was in revolver shooting at the butts. I found I could more than hold my own with the other fellows for I had done a lot of shooting soon after getting my commission. I always fancied a revolver in preference to a rifle for trench fighting. I did not want to be caught unhandy if the Hun came over as he sometimes did though usually we were the aggressive ones and staged quite a number of trench raids — always a tricky affair with usually several casualties both sides. He who shot first and best stayed alive. The course being finished, I returned to the regiment the day before Christmas.

In working my way back to devious ways and stages I found myself landed at nightfall by an ammunition truck at an Irish Divisional headquarters, the nearest I could get to our lines for the moment. They were all most hospitable, but being so close to Christmas, they had made an early start to their celebrations and there was a terrific uproar going on. I thought they were coming to blows at one stage, but discovered they were only talking politics and that this was quite the usual trend.

I was pleased to get back to my company the next morning. I found them in the support line and preparing for a Christmas dinner that day. It turned out to be a horrid and tragic Christmas. Those Huns across the way could not even respect this hallowed day. Great preparations had been made for the company to have its Christmas

dinner before going into the front line the next day for our spell of duty. The cooks had saved up rations and special puddings, dainties and decorations had been provided for the occasion. Two missen huts, end to end, with a 15 foot space between each were to be our dining rooms. The Nissen huts were well behind the front line and, as we thought, out of observation by the enemy sausage balloons. We had barely settled down to the feast when Jerry opened up on us with his artillery. Shells exploded all around us. The hut next to us had a direct hit and we were getting near misses all the time. Everyone started to run out as fast as possible. I saw little (Tony) Harris* with one leg dangling badly shattered and being carried out by two friends. On the ground between the huts our poor cook lay with both legs blown off high up and obviously past all help. He pleaded with such imploring eyes of terror not to be left to die alone in that deadly shell fire. As senior officer I stayed to see everyone out and poor cook carried to a shelter where he could die in peace. It was a great shock to all of us, the more so as cook was going off the next day on leave to England, his first well-deserved leave.

The next evening we relieved the front line troops who now came back into the reserve area. All December there was heavy shelling and casualties mounted up.

Amongst the 2nd Regiment on our left I lost a friend from my old school in Grahamstown who had been a prefect in my dormitory, at Espin House. In a dugout in the front line trench a batman cook was preparing breakfast for the company headquarters' officers. Unknowingly and in spite of every care, a tiny wisp of smoke was rising. An alert observer in Jerry's sausage balloon spotted this and his guns got a direct hit on the dugout. My friend, Captain Bryant, and two other officers were killed whilst Lieutenant Arnold and Pope Hennessy were wounded. Arnold, besides a losing a leg, had many other severe wounds. I later got to know him well when I joined him in the same ward at the South African Military Hospital at Richmond.

At the beginning of January the temperature dropped to the lowest we had even known it. Everything iced up and the cold was intense. Work shifts started at once reorganising the trench system, making fire steps and traverses and at night wiring in front. At night it was much too cold to sleep and when not with a working party

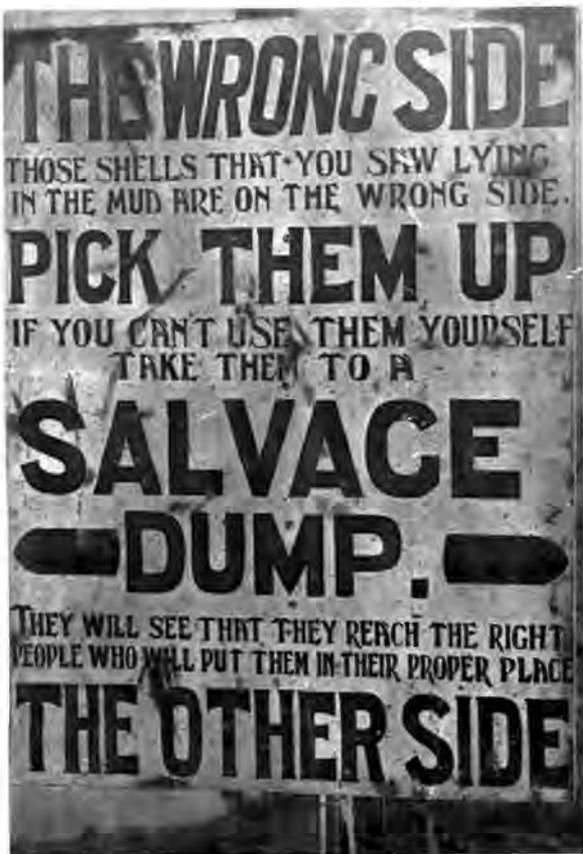
one could only stamp up and down. We were at this time an unknown distance from the enemy and so a patrol was sent out each night to establish what they were doing and where. I went out several times dressed in a white hooded snow suit with one or two men in support all in white and armed with grenades, rifles and bayonets, I led with my revolver at the ready. We would go as far as a derelict tank 200 yards in front and take cover there. We got quite close to Jerry working parties but not looking for trouble, left them alone. Coming back and getting into our trench at the right spot, and where we were known, was usually the most tricky part of the job. It was very easy to veer one way or the other when returning for everything looked the same in the vast expanse of snow. The troops too, all along the trench system were alert and trigger happy; one had to be quick with the pass-word.

Most of January the ground was frosted hard and the cold was terrible at night. The only way we could keep our feet from freezing was to tie sandbags around our legs and boots and even then many had toes frost bitten.

In die middle of January the thaw set in and our sector was flooded from the rising ground on either side. Thigh-length gum boots were issued to all ranks and life was really miserable. Work continued day and night. Half-an-hour before dawn all troops would stand to arms in readiness for any attack. After stand down there was a break for breakfast and a foot inspection by platoon commanders. At this stage men's feet began giving trouble. From the one extreme of frost-bite to the humidity of gum boots worn continuously, what was known as trench foot, broke out and there was a high casualty rate. Not only this, but many of our new drafts who joined us after Ypres had been fighting in East Africa and had contracted malaria. Now with the hard conditions of slush and cold they went down again with fever and had to be hospitalised.

According to John Buchan's history of the Brigade, our strength when we took over this line on the 4th December was 148 officers and 3 769 other ranks. By the end of January our Brigade strength had shrunk to 79 officers and 1 661 other ranks. We were thus doing intensive work as well as holding the line with a company strength of less than 50%.

* Private T.W.J. Harris. Despite his grave wounds he returned to serve later in 1918 with the South African Railway and Trades Company. He was severely injured in an accident later in 1918, however.



A Notice on the Western Front.

One shell, a heavy 6 inch, fell beside me and jammed the back of the trench up against me; I could feel the trembling of the earth as it went down. Most fortunately it was a dud and though I waited for it to go off nothing happened, or else!

After an hour of this the barrage stopped to some extent and we knew a counter-attack was coming. I ran down the line and gave the order for every other man to take out and clean and oil his rifle bolt and when finished man the fire step whilst his half-section did the same. All rifles were clogged with the flying dust and mud.

The enemy came on but our rifle fire was so accurate although we were firing at 400 to 600 yards, their attack broke down and about fifty of them, seeing it was useless, came in and surrendered on our left. In our company it was fortunate that I had ordered the cleaning of rifle bolts. I recalled our experience in Egypt and mine in German South West Africa where, after a few rounds, one had to grab a stone to hit up the bolt and close it again. Sand and dust made rifle bolts impossible to move by hand.

There was a good deal of shelling all day and we had a number of casualties. That night was a restless one and no one was allowed to sleep. Mackie and I patrolled the line all night to see to this. We were expecting Fritz to counter-attack at night as he had been so quiet after his setback in the day. At dawn on the 21st our artillery put down a heavy barrage in front of our line and of course Fritz replied with all he had and gave us a very hot time. Fortunately his shooting was not too good. Later in the morning and early part of the afternoon we had the usual shelling. At 5 p.m. our artillery opened up again and due to some error their shells were falling on our own line especially so on the extreme right where our trench was getting blown in wholesale. Mackie and I decided to withdraw the men and form a defensive flank to cover the very dangerous gap between us and the 27th Regiment. We managed to get them all out before the heaviest part of the bombardment. Our own shells came down thick and heavy being all 6 inch and heavier. I thought it was all up with most of us then for there was no retiring and we had to stick it at all costs. A very heavy shell fell two yards on my left and buried five men. We managed to dig them out very shocked but able to carry on.

The terrific bombardment seemed the last straw and kept up until 6.30 p.m. by which time the batteries had been informed of their error. Fritz now started up and with greater accuracy than in the morning, and we made sure of being counter-attacked. All the men were specially warned. Almost all our Lewis guns had been blown to pieces or buried and numbers of rifles had gone the same way. The rifles left had jammed bolts and again had to be quickly cleaned. This was done and we were ready for the Bosch. The shelling increased again and a hail of shells seemed to be falling, completely blowing our trenches to pieces and killing and burying many. This really seemed to be the end. Most fortunately the Hun did not follow up his barrage and attack. Even so our men were wonderful and could, I think, have repelled any attack.

I could not help worrying about my brother much further to the left in B Company as they, too, had had a terrific pasting. Just before midnight two officers at regimental headquarters came up to give Mackie and myself a break. I was quite indignant and I thought it was a reflection on us. However, it was the Colonel's kindly assistance for very tired men. We were finally relieved by the Cameron Highlanders in the early hours of the 22nd

September. We had to leave our wounded who were crying piteously for water and stretcher bearers. I asked our relief most earnestly to see to our wounded in the morning and get them out. I was assured this would be done by the kindly Jocks.

Making our way wearily back in the dark it was terrible hearing the moaning and cries of the wounded and dying, and not being able to help. It was a relief to trudge back to our support line and out of range of shelling.

Each one of us officers, after we had put our men in their quarters, was welcomed back by our Colonel. The handshake and 'Well done, Lawrence', was, I think, the most inspiring experience of my life. Colonel Heal had himself had a very rough time — had been struck by shrapnel and buried by a shell.* Everyone was served with a hot meal and plenty of tea, the first hot meal we had had for five days. At first light we at last got down to sleep and slept the clock round.

After a two days rest we were driven back by lorries to far behind the lines to a quiet village. This was the first time that transport has been provided for us and we feared it was an ill omen for further attacks soon. We were not mistaken. With fresh drafts to replace our gaps we were ready in three weeks' time to once again play our part in the terrible continuing Third Battle of Ypres.

Our casualties for the Brigade had been 263 officers and men killed and 995 wounded. What a wonderful contrast to be billeted in tents and farm barns in quiet unspoilt rural countryside where all was fresh and green with streams nearby for bathing. It was strange and too wonderful to be living in clean civilised conditions well beyond hearing even of the sounds of warfare.

On the second day I was surprised to be given the order to meet our Brigade Commander, General Dawson, at a certain quiet corner of a lane. Here he very kindly put me at ease and went over the report of my doings in the battle. Each officer renders a report and apparently having been responsible for keeping touch with the left flank of the Lowland Brigade, mine was of more importance.

General Dawson stressed the importance of the Brigade keeping in touch with the neighbouring Brigade and complimented me on having done this.

He also said that Mackie and I had done good work in forming a defensive flank to protect the serious gap between our company and the Lowland Brigade. Probably as a result of this interview the officers' regimental 'grape vine' was active with rumours that Mackie and I were up for decoration. In the event Mackie got the MC. I was, of course, very disappointed but felt that he undoubtedly deserved it more than anyone. Mackie and I were very great friends with bonds almost closer than brothers.

He, poor, chap, was killed in the terrific fighting at Meteren. It was here that the 9th Division was so heavily involved in stopping the German attempted break through to the Channel ports in July 1918, and as they succeeded in doing in 1940.

I was in the South African Military Hospital at the time and was very saddened to hear of the loss of Captain Scheepers, MC, ** Second Lieutenant Mackie, MC, four Second Lieutenants and 30 other ranks killed and 100 wounded in the action to recapture the town of Meteren. Quoting from John Buchan, 'The capture of Meteren by the composite South African Battalion and a battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers was a good example of a perfectly planned and perfectly executed minor action!'

In the lull after our success in the Menin Road battle, a number of officers from each regiment were sent off to a five-day course. I was one of the lucky ones selected and made my way to an old Chateau some distance further back. Here I found myself among a gathering of some junior but mostly senior officers. Lectures were the order of the day. Usually they broke down into discussions of the past successful engagement and of the lessons and future tactics to be learnt from it. It was all most interesting and inspiring to hear of how others overcame difficulties and then, too, what had actually been happening in other sectors, sometimes near by, but quite unknown in the stress and excitement of one's own immediate front.

A Captain of the 3rd Regiment related how they had succeeded in gaining their objective. He in-

* Lieutenant Colonel F.H. Heal, DSO. He began his war service as a Lieutenant in the Cape Peninsula Rifles. He remained at duty after this particular wound but was killed later in March 1918.

** Captain J.C. Scheepers, MC. He had served in German South West with the Dukes, and had risen from the ranks.

structed his men to keep well up to our own creeping barrage and to be prepared to take 20% casualties from our own shells so as to be on the enemy before they could recover.

The South African Brigade was to be in support this time to two attacking brigades, the 28th Highland and the 27th Lowland. The night of the 12/13 October was a terrible one. A gale of wind



SA Genl Hospital France

Many friends were made and contacts with officers of our other three regiments made. I made friends with one outstanding man, Captain Garnet Green of the 2nd Regiment. He was looked up to by all in our Brigade as the beau ideal of a company commander; he had then the ribbon of the MC up and later won a bar to it. It was a great loss when he fell fighting to the last in our fighting retreat from Gauche Wood on the 22nd March 1918. Back again to the regiment from this very stimulating course, I found all hands busily reorganising and preparing for our next engagement.

3rd Ypres Passchendaele Battle — 13th to 23rd October 1917

About the 12th October 1917 we moved from our happy restful quarters and were taken for the second time by motor transport to just East of Ypres where the regiments were distributed into what shelter there was, mostly dugouts for the men and marquee tents for the officers.

followed by steady rain. Our marquee went down in the early hours soon after midnight and very soon we were wet through. One comforting thought was, surely the attack would be put off, but no such fortune. It seemed the war machine was geared up and just could not stop.

At dawn in a howling wind and drenching rain we moved forward by platoons towards the duck boards communications leading to the front lines. We had to trudge through an artillery park of heavy howitzer guns with their guns in series of lanes, one behind the other, the guns 20 yards apart in the lane.

All these huge pieces of artillery were firing flat out and the noise was quite undescrivable. The smallest were 9 inch and the heaviest 12 inch with a few batteries of 60 pounder long-range guns that had a most terrific bark. A poor unfortunate Alsatian dog, a beautiful animal, had strayed into this hell of noise. He went howling,

madly running from one belching gun to another that was even worse and back again howling with fright. No one except his master could help him and he was not to be seen.

We passed through the noisesome park and were guided to the start of the duck board system. Here the field artillery was drawn up wheel to wheel it seemed, fortunately silent for the moment. As each platoon in turn mounted the track I hoped against hope that the guns would give us a chance, but no, we were hardly started when their crescendo burst forth and of course Jerry immediately replied concentrating on the duck boards. We had several casualties moving up which to us seemed so unnecessary, but we were only part of the picture of what was going on up front and but pawns in the game of bloody war. No one dare step off the duck board track to avoid the shell fire for this meant sinking deep into the ploughed-up quagmire of mud. Many poor fellows further up lost their lives trying to attack and drowning in the muddy shell holes. Fortunately the heavy rain stopped and only light misty rains continued for the next few days.

Being in support to the front line troops for the time being, we occupied positions in the St Julian area, and my platoon job for the first few days was to carry out the wounded. I took shelter several times in a large concrete 'pill box' that we had taken from the enemy and which was being used as a first aid post. I became quite friendly with the doctor there whose name I remember was Warburton from Alberta in Canada. One morning a badly wounded artillery man was brought in with both legs shattered above the knee and just about completely severed. I was surprised to see the doctor cut off both legs without chloroform and without apparent pain or noise from the poor chap who was badly shocked and only cared about his new lace-up knee boots which he wanted kept safely for him. As the doctor was cutting he said, 'Can you feel anything?' The answer was, 'No, no, nothing', but just as the last outside skin was reached he gave a yell. I asked the doctor later what chance he had. He said, 'I'm afraid, none, the shock will kill him', and so it did, for in a few hours he was gone.

Part of our work was escorting back prisoners. They were mostly very shocked and dejected looking but I particularly noticed and admired a tall sergeant who bore himself very well. He wore a ribbon of the iron cross and his general dignified

manner indicated he was not going to kowtow to anyone.

I had to see to wounded taken to a dressing station run by our South African field ambulance and there I found my cousin Captain Hal Lawrence working with another doctor and orderlies in the most appalling conditions. There was the lightest of shelter overhead and shell fire was searching for them all the time I was there. I was very pleased to get out of what seemed a death trap. By good luck they had no direct hit and the staff all pulled through.

On about the third day of fatigue work, as we were passing another dressing station, an officer called to me and asked if I was a South African for he said, 'We have a dying man whom we can hardly understand. Will you come and do what you can for him?' I went in and there was poor Loubser, one of our staunchest company stretcher bearers with a terrible wound in his left shoulder and going fast from loss of blood and shock. I stayed with him awhile and comforted him, speaking in Afrikaans until he lost consciousness and died a short while later.

The doctor in charge told me that this man told him how he was hit when caught in very heavy shell fire in the front line and had dragged himself to a first aid post where a doctor took one look at his wound, gave him a morphia injection and told him to sit down outside in the shelter of a wall. Loubser knew when no more was done for him what this meant, so he got going again to the next dressing station down the line. Here he got the same treatment of a hopeless case and he finally made his way to where I found him. The doctor said he did not know how it was humanly possible for anyone to do what he did with such a grievous wound. Poor old Loubser, the finest and most reliable stretcher bearer in our company. A great strapping Afrikaans-speaking lad from the Western Province who had been with us from the very start and who when he signed on in early 1915 could barely speak a word of English.

He had won his Distinguished Conduct Medal in Delville Wood the previous year (Private A.J. Loubser) DCM. Afterwards he was telling some new drafts who had come to fill the gaps how he had won the coveted decoration. He said, 'Man, you know we were carrying with our stretchers backwards and forwards through that heavy shell fire in Delville Wood, and in the late afternoon we just had to sit down and rest

Tamatave aan die ooskus was blootgestel aan aanhoudende passaatwinde en die strand meesal te rof vir gebruik deur stormlandingsvaartuie. Naglandings was buite die kwessie. Die enigste veilige landingsplek was agter die beskermende koraalrif, in die hawe self. So 'n landing kon nie op verrassende wyse uitgevoer word nie en sou waarskynlik bestry word. Daarom is oorspronklik beplan om die aanslag deur 'n skeepsbombardelement te laat voorafgaan.²

Die swak teenstand wat by Majunga ondervind is, het Platt en skout-admiraal Tennant (wat in bevel van die vlootkontingent by Madagaskar was) laat besluit om 'n oorgawe sonder die noodsaak van 'n bombardement te probeer afdwing. So kon lewensverlies en verwoesting vermy word.³ 'n Groot skaalse magsvertoon, en dan 'n ultimatum, sou aan die Franse voorgehou word. Indien hulle nie sou toegee nie, moes 'n stormlanding na 'n skeepsbombardelement volg.⁴

Operation Jane se imposante vlootafdeling, bestaande uit drie kruisers, talle torpedojaers en mynveërs, 'n vliegdekskip en die slagskip *HMS Warspite*, was vroeg die oggend van 18 September voor Tamatave. Radioboodsappe is uitgestuur waarin om oorgawe van die dorp gevra is. Die Franse het uitstel gevra. Later is 'n vlootoffisier met 'n wit vlag op 'n landingsvaartuig na die kaai om voorwaardes voor te lê. Hy is met masjiengeweevuur begroet. 'n Skeepsbombardelement met ligte kaliber kanonne het onmiddellik gevolg. Na drie minute het die Franse 'n wit vlag gehys, waarop die bombardement gestaak is. Troepe is aan wal gestuur. Die hawedorp is sonder teenstand beset. Die bombardement, so is spoedig vasgestel, het nie veel skade veroorsaak nie. Die hawefasiliteite was beter as dié by Majunga en ontskeping kon vinnig plaasvind.⁵

Die Britse *29 Brigade* het onmiddellik per pad en treinspoor van Tamatave na Brickaville, 'n dorpie suid daarvan, beweeg. Oor die eerste honderd kilometer was die spoorlyn in werkende orde en 'n buitgemaakte trein is gebruik om 'n gedeelte van die troepe en hul vrag te vervoer. Die vyand is ook nooit opgemerk nie. Sowat drie kilometer van Brickaville af moes die spoorlyn twee diep klowe oorsteek. Beide brûe was vernietig. Die trein is dus daar gehalt en die troepe is te voet verder om die dorpie net na middernag te beset.⁶

Die troepe wat Brickaville beset het, het spoedig vasgestel dat daar geen treine was om op die trein-

spoor te gebruik nie en dat die pad na Tananarive, meer as tweehonderd kilometer weswaarts, vol hindernisse was. Daar is onmiddellik met opruiming begin. Patrollies is op die pad en ook langs die spoorlyn na Tananarive uitgestuur. Talle hindernisse en beskadigde brûe is padlangs gevind, maar die spoorlyn was bruikbaar. Op 22 September is die pad van Tamatave na Brickaville oopgestel. Dieselfde dag is vier spoorwegwaens by Fanasa op die spoorlyn na Tananarive buitgemaak. Die opmars na die hoofstad is steeds voortgesit, en op 24 September is Moramanga bereik.

Terwyl die hoofkomponente van die Britse *29 Brigade* weswaarts na die hoofstad opgeruk het, het 'n junior offisier van daardie brigade met vyf man langs die ooskus af beweeg. Hulle taak was om die Geallieerde teenwoordigheid in daardie gebied bekend te stel. Die toestande by sommige dorpiee daar was wanordelik, maar die plaaslike outoriteite het die besetting as 'n *fait accompli* aanvaar. Die klein afdeling het tot by Masomeloka gevorder voor dit na Brickaville teruggekeer het.⁷

Met die besetting van Tananarive op 23 September is 'n pantsermotortroep en 'n infanteriekompanie op die hoofpad in die rigting van Tamatave uitgestuur. Hulle moes skakeling met die *29 Brigade* bewerkstellig. Die pad was vol hindernisse wat met behulp van Malgassers verwyder is, maar wat nogtans die aantog erg in die wiele gery het. Teen 25 September was ook hulle naby die dorpie Moramanga. Gedurende die nag wat gevolg het, is kontak met die voorste patrollies wat van Tamatave af aan die kom was, bewerkstellig. Die ontmoeting het byna op 'n skietery uitgeloopt, want die voorste patrollies weerskante was nie seker van mekaar se identiteit nie. Die pantsermotors het spoedig na die hoofstad teruggekeer.

2. K.C. Gandar Dower: *Into Madagascar* (London, 1943), p 54.

3. Supplement to the *London Gazette*, Number 37655, 17 July 1946 (Despatch dd 31 march 1943 by Lt Gen Sir William Platt on operations of East Africa Command, 12 July 1941 — 8 January 1943), p 3718. Na hierdie publikasie sal vervolgens bloot verwys word as *London Gazette*, 17 July 1946, en die toepasslike bladsynommer.

4. K.C. Gandar Dower: *op. cit.*, p 55.

5. *London Gazette*, 17 July 1946, p 3718; C. Buckley: *Five Ventures Iraq — Syria — Persia — Madagascar — Dodecanese* (London, 1954), p 202.

6. K.C. Gandar Dower: *op. cit.*, pp 65 — 66; C. Buckley: *op. cit.*, p 203.

7. C. Buckley: *op. cit.*, p 204.

Met die verbinding tussen Tamatave en Tananarive in Britse hande, was *Operation Stream-Line-Jane* in geheel afgehandel. Goewerneur-generaal Annet het egter nie, soos die Geallieerde beplanners gehoop het hy sou, as gevolg daarvan oorgegee nie. Die veldtog moes dus voortgaan.

'n Verposing in die hoofstad

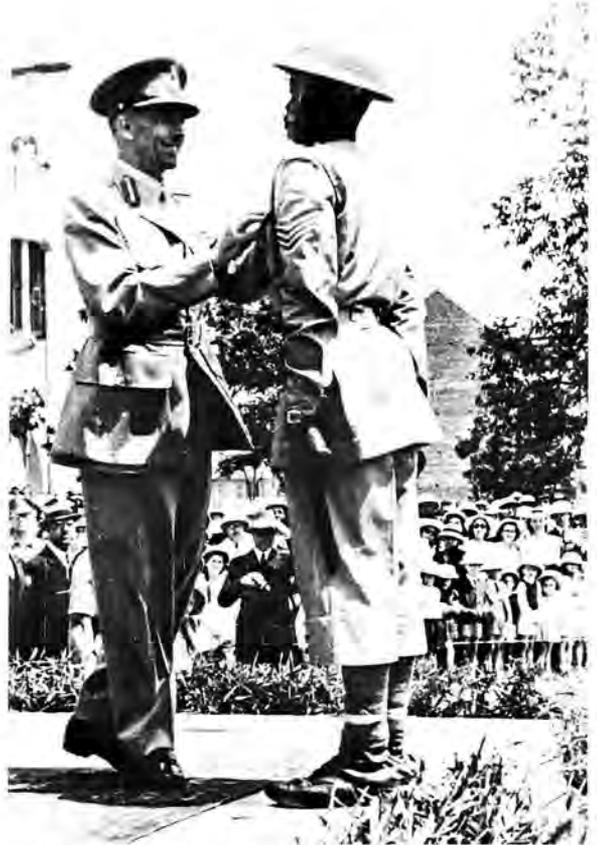
Die 22 (*East Africa*) Brigade, waarby die Suid-Afrikaanse A Eskadron 1 Pantsermotorkommando toegevoeg was, het sedert die besetting van Tananarive patrollies uitgestuur wat vasgestel het dat die Franse op die roete suidwaarts na Fianarantsoa voorbereide verdedigingsposisies ingeneem het. 'n Volskaalse aantog in daardie rigting kon nie onmiddellik hervat word nie, want die logistiese posisie van die Geallieerdes in Tananarive het dit nie toegelaat nie. Wat petrol betref was daar skaars genoeg om al die voertuie 'n gemiddeld van tagtig kilometer te laat vorder. Administratiewe reëlins moes dus eers in orde gebring word. Daardie taak is vergemaklik deur die feit dat daar 'n spoorlyn tussen Tamatave en Tananarive was. Dit was wel weens brugvernietiging by Brickaville nie in geheel bruikbaar nie, maar die aanvoer van voorrade daarlangs was tog oneindig makliker as oor die lang padroete vanaf Majunga, waarlangs die stukkende Betsibokabrug boonop 'n risiko was. Die burgerlike administrasie in Tananarive is gelukkig, ten spyte van die feit dat die sekretaris-generaal vervang moes word, spoedig in orde gekry. Op 26 September het Platt sy persoonlike hoofkwartier na Tananarive verskuif. Dit was sy hoofsetel tot hy op 11 Oktober sy bevel aan generaal-majoor Smallwood, die Opperbevelvoerder Eilandgebied, oorgedra het.

Die Geallieerde opmars suid van Tananarive was teen daardie tyd weer in volle swang. Voordat dit bespreek word, word daar egter eers aan 'n ander operasie, die eerste en enigste tot op datum waarby Suid-Afrikaners as stormtroepe in 'n amfibiese aanval gebruik is, naamlik *Operation Rose*, aandag gegee.

Operation Rose

In die vorige artikel van hierdie reeks is kortliks gemeld dat die beplanning vir die besetting van die hele Madagaskar onder andere voorsiening gemaak het vir die besetting van die hawedorp Tulear op die suidwestelike kus. Dit moes na die besetting van Tananarive geskied.⁸ Die Suid-Afrikaanse landmagte is op 24 September vir die eerste keer direk daarby betrek toe die bevelvoerder van die Pretoria Regiment, luitenant-kolonel C.L. Engelbrecht, na die Britse kruiser *HMS*

Birmingham in Diego Suarez ontbied is. Hy en sy adjudant, kaptein W.J. McKenzie het aan boord 'n ordegroep bygewoon waarby brigadier Senescall, luitenant-generaal Platt en skout-admiraal Tennant teenwoordig was.



Luitenant-generaal sir William Platt, the Geallieerde Opperbevelvoerder, besig om 'n medalje aan 'n askari-sersant te oorhandig. (Foto: SAW-Argief.)

Platt het verduidelik dat Tulear beset moes word omdat dit aan die Geallieerdes 'n vastrapplek in die suide van Madagaskar sou bied. Die Britse Vloot moes die Pretoria Regiment na Tulear neem en help om dit te beset. Indien nodig, kon die Franse suid van Tananarive dan van daar af ook aangeval word. Die besettingstroepes moes as ENCOL bekend staan, 'n naam saamgestel uit 'Engelbrecht se kolonie'. Hulle sou aan boord van die troepeskipe *Empire Pride*, vergesel deur die *Birmingham* en twee torpedojaers na Tulear vervoer word. Engelbrecht self moes aan boord van die kruiser reis sodat hy die stormlanding in oorleg met admiraal Tennant kon beplan. Platt het laastens verduidelik dat dit wenslik was om die hawetjie vreedsaam te beset, en geen krygsgevangenes aan te hou

8. Kyk in deel 3 van hierdie artikelreeks, gepubliseer in *Militaria* 8/2 (1978), p 21.

nie. Indien weerstand ondervind sou word, moes geweld egter gebruik word.⁹

Die operasionele bevel vir die besetting van Tulear, aanvanklik bekend as *Operation Pam* maar spoedig herdoop na *Operation Rose*, is die volgende dag uitgereik. Daarvolgens sou ENCOL uit vier en twintig offisiere en 297 ander range, wat elf swart soldate ingesluit het, bestaan. Elemente van die Tweede Echelon, die Brigadeseinkompanie, die 88 Veldkompanie Suid-Afrikaanse Genie, die 19 Veldambulans en die Brigadewerkplaas was daarby ingereken.¹⁰ Veertien voertuie — drie pantsermotors met masjiengewere bewapen; vyf een-ton troepedraers en ses motorfietse — is vir die operasie geoormerk. Van Britse kant is 'n afdeling van vier en tagtig *Royal Marines* tot ENCOL toegevoeg en onder bevel van luitenant-kolonel Engelbrecht geplaas.

Dit was nie 'n omvangryke mag nie, maar daar is nie veel weerstand teen die besetting verwag nie. Tog kon die Geallieerdes slegs raai oor wat hulle van Franse kant op Tulear te wagte kon wees. Inligtingsverslae het aangedui dat daar drie blanke offisiere en tien onder-offisiere, sowat tweehonderd Malgassiese soldate en enkele reserviste was. Versterkings uit ander dele van Madagaskar sou onwaarskynlik binne minder as ses en dertig uur na Tulear vervoer kon word. Daar was, sover bekend, geen artillerie of vliegtuie nie, maar wel 'n vliegveld en 'n strandmeer wat as seevliegveld gedien het. Voorts was daar geen grootskaalse verdedigingswerke nie. Die hawewerke was moeilik verdedigbaar, want die kusvlakte was sowat agt kilometer breed. 'n Landing direk in die hawe sou dus 'n betreklik veilige onderneming wees. Die probleme wat voorsien is, het bloot met die terrein te doen gehad. Die Geallieerdes het geweet dat die strande so vlak was dat geen vaartuig tot naby die strand kon beweeg nie. Die meeste goedere sou dus op die pier afgelaai moes word, en daar is gehoop dat die hyskrane nie beskadig sou wees nie.

Die drieledige hoofdoel met die besetting van Tulear was om die hawe, die hawe-installasies en die radiosendstasie sover moontlik onbeskadig te beset; om die hawe te beset om so te voorkom dat vyandelike duikbote of ander skepe dit gebruik; en om 'n pro-Geallieerde administrasie van die Tuleargebied daar te stel. Laasgenoemde het impliseer dat die welwillendheid van die plaaslike inwoners gewen moes word. Om dit te doen is die soldate uitdruklik beveel dat: 'the correct attitude to adopt is that of a London Policeman. It is our duty to create good feeling.' Plunderaars moes op die plek

doodgeskiet word.

ENCOL is gedurende die middag van 25 September in Diego Suarez aan boord van die *Empire Pride* verskeep. Vyf ander skepe, die kruiser *Birmingham*, *HMS Inconstant*, *HMAS Napier*, *HMNS Vangalen* en die *Gascony*, het die volgende aand saam met die *Empire Pride* na Tulear vertrek. Die Suid-Afrikaners is tydens die seereis onder toesig van luitenant-kommandeur Ward van die *Royal Navy* op 'n stormlanding voorberei. Verskeie inoefeninge vir blitssnelle bemanning van stormlandingsvaartuie is gehou. Teen die middag van 28 September kon die Suid-Afrikaners binne vier minute hul posisies inneem. Dit was volgens Ward net so vinnig as wat die Britse *Commandos* landingsvaartuie kon beman.¹¹

Aan boord van die *Birmingham* is die operasie intussen in besonderhede beplan. Daar is besluit om wanneer Tulear bereik is 'n proklamasie na die plaaslike owerhede te stuur, hetsy per radiosender, per boot onder 'n wit vlag of per pamflette wat uit die lug afgegooi sou word, waarin die oorgawe van die dorp opgeëis sou word. As daar enigsins op die Geallieerdes geskiet sou word of dade van sabotasie sou plaasvind, sou 'n skeepsbombardement onmiddellik volg. Dan sou die helé kolonne aan wal gaan en die dorp beset. Indien die owerhede sou oorgee, voor of na die bombardement, sou slegs beperkte troepe-afdelings, vergesel van 'n politieke offisier, as permanente garnisoen aan wal gaan. In beide gevalle sou slegs die onmiddellike omgewing van Tulear beset word voor die skepe weer na 36 uur sou vertrek.

Vir die landing self is drie stadiums beplan: eerstens sou een peleton van A-kompanie van die Pretoria Regiment 'n taktiese landing uitvoer, 'n brughoof vorm, en die radiosendstasie beset, óf die brughoof hou totdat die tweede stadium afgehandel is. Dit was die besetting van die brughoof deur die res van A-kompanie, die adjudant en hoofkwartier-staflede, B-kompanie en 'n afdeling *Royal Marines*. Die derde fase was opruiming van alle moontlike weerstand in die dorp, die ontwapening van krygsgevangenes en, indien nodig, van die polisie, en die besetting van die radiosendstasie by Sakaraha, honderd kilometer van Tulear af.

9. *Military History Journal* (Johannesburg), Vol 2, No 1 (Engelbrecht, C.L. and W.J. McKenzie, edited by D.F.S. Fourie: Operation Rose. The only amphibious landing by South African Forces at War. Madagascar 1942), p 16.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p 17; *London Gazette*, 17 July 1946, p 3718.

Na suksesvolle besetting van Tulear sou 'n garnisoen onder kaptein O.G. Sheard daar gelaat word. Dit sou uit sewe offisiere, 131 ander range en agt nie-blankes bestaan. Hulle moes 'n kamp daar inrig, patrollies in die omgewing uitvoer en gereeld verslae na Diego Suarez stuur. Die voertuie wat tydens die besetting gebruik is, sou vir die gebruik van die garnisoen in Tulear gelaat word.

Die landing by Tulear

Die skepe waarop die Encol-kolonne vervoer is, het om 0630 uur die oggend van 29 September die hawe van Tulear binnegevaar. Admiraal Tennant het onmiddellik per radio die volgende boodskap aan die *Chef de Region* laat stuur: 'Do not fire. Order troops to remain in barracks. If you fire or if troops attempt to leave the town I shall be compelled to bombard.' Die Franse owerhede het toegegee.

Die landing moes om 0710 uur begin. Die infanteriekompanies was ligdag al daarvoor gereed. Na die Franse oorgawe is een seksie van A-kompanie in 'n stromlandingsvaartuig uitgestuur, op 'n afstand van agthonderd meter gevolg deur nog twee vaartuie met twee peletonne. Die res van die vaartuie het daarna gevolg. Die eerste vaartuig se mikpunt was die strand tweehonderd meter noord van die pier. Die soldate moes tweehonderd meter van die strand af afspring en deur die water verder loop. 'n Brughoof is onmiddellik daargestel. Terwyl A-kompanie daardie brughoof vergroot het, het een peleton oor 'n oop stuk grond na die radiosendstasie beweeg. Die Franse het skaars hul laaste boodskap, 'Die Engelse het in Tulear geland' (in Frans natuurlik) uitgestuur gehad, toe die sendstasie om ongeveer 0900 uur onbeskadig beset is.¹²

Onmiddellik na die besetting van die radiostasie het 'n tweede peleton onder die kompaniebevelvoerder die brughoof verlaat. Hulle het links van die radiostasie verby oor 'n oop stuk veld reguit na die militêre barakke opgeruk. Twee seksies van die peleton by die radiostasie het agter die tweede peleton verby beweeg en die polisiestasie, 'n bank en regeringsgeboue begin beset. Die tweede peleton het by die militêre barakke 33 soldate onder 'n Franse offisier, luitenant Voisin, krygsgevangene geneem, en by die *Tirailleurs*-kamp sowat vyftig Malgassiese inboorlingsoldate onder 'n blanke kommandant. Al die polisiemanne is tydelik krygsgevangene geneem. Die Britse seesoldate onder kaptein Forrest het die dorpsgebied wes van die pad wat van die pier by die mark verby geloop het, beset.

Majoor Louw het persoonlik na die Regeringskantore van die *Chef de Region* gegaan en dié in geselskap met die *Administrateur* en die Polisiekommandant aangetref. Hy het hulle na luitenantkolonel Engelbrecht geneem. Dié het die moeilike taak gehad om die Franse amptenare oor te haal om hulle take voort te sit, want ENCOL was te klein om die burgerlike administrasie waar te neem. 'n Britse politieke offisier het normaalweg met die Franse amptenare onderhandel. Dan is daar gewoonlik bloot vir die amptenare gevra of hulle pro-De Gaulle of pro-Pétain was, en laasgenoemde is ontslaan. Engelbrecht, wat van generaal Platt volmag gehad het om persoonlik met die Franse te onderhandel, het gevoel dat dit onredelik was om van amptenare wat jare gedien het te verwag om dadelik te antwoord dat hulle pro-De Gaulle was. Die politieke offisier moes dus, wat hom betref, bloot as tolk dien.

Engelbrecht het begin deur aan die Franse te verduidelik dat Tulear om militêre redes beset is, en nie geannekseer is nie. 'n Suid-Afrikaanse vlag (nie die Britse vlag nie) is in die plek van die Franse vlag gehys, maar die Franse vlag kon weer langs die Suid-Afrikaanse vlag gehys word. Die belangrikste was dat die daaglikse administrasie moes voortgaan, en of die amptenare nou pro-Pétain of pro-De Gaulle was, solank die amptenare hul werk gedoen het en nie die Suid-Afrikaanse besettings-troepe benadeel het nie, sou hul salarisse betaal word en sou die besettingstroepe nie met die administrasie inmeng nie. Die proklamasie van krygswet is daarop afgelees en 'n bespreking van Engelbrecht se voorwaardes het gevolg. Die Franse het spoedig onderneem om saam te werk, en op versoek van die *Commandant de Police* is ooreengekom dat die polisiemanne nie ontwapen sou word nie, maar beveel sou word om hul pligte voort te sit.¹³

Dit was van die begin af duidelik dat die Franse nie beoog het om Tulear te verdedig nie. Daarom het hulle geen skade aan die hawefasiliteite of aan die radiosendstasie, die meteorologiese stasie of enige gebou in die dorp gedoen nie. Teen die middag is daar reeds oor die radiostel kontak met Majunga gemaak.

Informasie wat kort na die besetting ingewin is, het daarop gedui dat 'n Franse offisier, kaptein Rene Thomas, op 19 September met sowat twee-

12. *Military History Journal* (Johannesburg), Vol 2, No 1, *loc. cit.*, p 18.

13. *Ibid.*

The prevalence of trench foot caused a little tiff between Captain Ward and myself which I later regretted, for we stuck together through many difficult times.

We received an urgent order from Brigade Headquarters deploring the many cases of trench foot and platoon commanders were given strict orders to have two foot inspections daily and to see that their men's feet were rubbed with whale oil. We were all overstrained, chiefly from lack of sleep and having to be constantly on the alert from shell fire and attack. Added to this we were working under miserable conditions, half under strength in manpower. Captain Ward had to decide between finishing the repair of our trench line and giving time off for the prevention of trench foot. In spite of my strong opposition he cancelled the evening and some other foot inspections and gave priority to the work. Unfortunately a man in my platoon had to be sent back with trench foot. Then the fireworks started. Captain Ward was ordered by Headquarters to get a statement from me as to why this had happened. Not being prepared to have the buck passed to me, I reported that my evening inspection was cancelled by order from my company commander in spite of my protest. Captain Ward refused to accept my report. I refused to alter it and he was obliged to send it back to Headquarters and, of course, got the rap. We soon got over our little troubles when we had really big ones to cope with and were on the best of terms thereafter.

I had a narrow escape when moving down the front line one morning. I was just about a step from one bay into the next bay separated by the traverse, when I sensed a heavy shell was almost on us. On which side of the traverse would it fall was the burning question. I rightly stepped back just as two heavy 5,9 shells crashed into the bay I was making for.

Water and slush was knee-deep in the front line and higher in the communication trenches. Special pumps able to deal with slush and mud were supplied, but could not keep pace with the melting snow. Work had to go on continually to shore up the collapsing parapets and to revett as much as possible with any timber that could be found. Eventually we were able to get our trench line reasonably dry and water kept below the duck board level. A great comfort to us was a ration of hot soup brought up at two o'clock every morning without fail from our cookhouse in the reserve line. This was carried in a 10 gallon thermos container strapped to a man's back.

I was walking down towards a corner of our trench on a dark night when I heard the approach of our soup man wading through a very bad and slushy spot. As he neared me his one leg stuck in the mud and in pulling his leg out he left his gum boot behind. He struggled to get his foot back into his boot again but missed and down his leg came in the cold slush to the accompaniment of much lurid language. I was able to help him get his foot unstuck and to keep his balance until he was back in his boot. Hot water for shaving was brought up in the same way in the early morning after 'stand down'. In early January before the thaw the soap froze on one's face before one could start shaving. With so many skinned and sore faces shaving had to be abandoned for a while.

Lack of sleep was telling on us all so the news that another Brigade was relieving us soon was very cheering. I remember thinking I would not mind being killed if only I could sleep first, not realizing that after a good sleep one would think otherwise. At last at the beginning of February our relief came and the whole Brigade moved to a back area for a rest and training for the great battle that was believed to be due in March. We knew that with the collapse of the Russian armies the enemy was transferring vast quantities of troops and equipment to the Western Front for an all-out attack to end the war in their favour before we could benefit from American reinforcements. We also knew that we held a new and very extended line with divisions under strength. We had to make the best of it and strengthen our line with redoubts and strong points in depth and were confident that we could hold any attack thrown against us. Our relief on this occasion was not without loss. The enemy was alerted to our movement and A and B Companies of our regiment were caught by heavy artillery fire just before reaching shelter on the far side of a slight ridge.

The officers of both companies had a particularly sticky time walking up and down getting their men to move to what little cover there was. The shelling was intense and there were a number of casualties. Amongst them was poor old Zaap (P.R.) Stapleton, MC, one of our most popular officers who 'got a shell to himself' whilst ensuring that his men were safe. At this time it was my turn for leave and I left for ten days in London and the Isle of Wight. England was beginning to feel the shortage of food at this period of the war. Sugar in particular was severely rationed.



It became the custom for men going on leave to take parcels of sugar from our plentiful rations and on arrival in London post the packages to the families of their friends. So in turn I was asked by one of our officers, Lieutenant Paul Farmer, to post a parcel of sugar to his wife and children and this I was only too pleased to do.

He, poor fellow, did not survive the great enemy onslaught against our line the following month.

Going on leave I left carrying only a valise on my back and in high spirits looking forward not only to enjoying the gaiety and civilisation of London, but with a feeling of a new lease of life, away from the ever overhanging threat of death. It was simple to thumb down an empty ammunition lorry returning to our port of departure, and in this way I met a very interesting Royal Flying Corps pilot by the name of Green, on the same leave jaunt as myself.

He had a quite extraordinary tale to tell of a miraculous escape he had just had whilst flying his old R.F.8 plane spotting for our artillery. Inadvertently he rose to the same 'traffic lane' of our heavy howitzer and long range shells going over to Fritz's back areas.

There was a crash and he found his engine had been taken clean out by a huge shell that unaccountably did not explode. He was left with only his wings and tail piece, yet somehow managed to glide down into our lines with nothing worse than a few bruises. There were no parachutes in those days so he had to stay with what was left of his machine and rely on luck and skill to get down.

We of the infantry often listened to the steady traffic of shells overhead from the huge 12 inch and 15 inch guns well to our rear passing with almost the noise of passenger trains on their way and wondered how our planes patrolling up and down the line were able to judge and avoid their flight.

The mood in England was far gloomier than at the front. There was foreboding on account of news of the big enemy moves from the Eastern Front. Accounts of well-rested troops retrained for the Spring offensive was the talk at the time.

I was back in time for intensive training in the type of defensive fighting that was new to us. I was sorry to hear that whilst on leave I had missed a memorial service held at Delville Wood on the 17th February. All four regiments were present at the drumhead service.

About the 10th March all officers were told to report to regimental headquarters for a briefing and also to decide which officers would go into the front line and which would be left behind as a nucleus to reform in the event of heavy casualties. When my name was given for No 1 platoon in the line, Colonel Heal objected and said 'this officer has had a long spell of combat duty and must be left out and posted to A Coy nucleus'.

The regiment took over the front line on the 12th March, relieving its counterpart of a regiment in the 29th Division. The Brigade had recently been reinforced by a draft of officers and other ranks which considerably built up our depleted strength. Amongst them were a number of Rhodesian officers and men who would now have their first experience of warfare in France.