

The Story of Tom Anderson at Shrine Pilgrimage 23 October 2014

Tom Anderson VX34767

The Battalion history was written before many of the POWs told their stories, and the chapter is rather sparse reading. We are currently running the story of Donald Radnell in the Furphy Flyer, and I have received the diaries or stories of several others. To fill the gap I want to tell you part of the story of Tom Anderson, VX34767 of the 2/24 Battalion. He was Keith Anderson's uncle. Tom starts his story with, 'I was on a tram going into Geelong when I heard the news that war had been declared on Germany. I worked at the Ford plant and I recall there was no great rush to join up among the Ford Workers.' But nine months later he did go to enlist, along with his brother, Arthur, and step-brother Freddie. A week later Tom was medically checked at Royal Park and then on the train to Wangaratta. That was July 1940, with Tom explaining 'We were two men to a sheep pen in the showgrounds, moving later to the cattle pens, sleeping on palliases.'

In September they marched to Bonegilla with embarkation on the Strathmore in November. They disembarked at Kantara on the Suez Canal and boarded a train to Dimra, where Col Spowers had them on a 20 mile route march the next day! That left an indelible impression on many of the soldiers! On leave they visited Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the Dead Sea. Then in February 1941 it was off to war going to Egypt and then by train to Mersa Matru. Trucks then took them to Barca near Benghazi to replace the 6th Division that had been sent to Greece. Rommel had arrived and no sooner had they reached Tocra than they headed back to Tobruk. Of this experience Tom relates that 'At night we dug slit trenches to sleep in and one morning I found I had been sharing it with a rusty-brown scorpion!' Equipment, fuel and supplies were abandoned, and rather than leaving it for the Germans they were blown up. As they headed east Tom relates that, at a fork in the road, an English officer was directing traffic to the south. Major Fell had studied the maps and felt it could be a trap. Fell's companion went around the truck and shot the German, who had time to fire a very pistol as warning. In another record of this event it stated that the give-away was the BMW motorbike.

After a couple of days inside the Tobruk perimeter they were sent to the NW sector where Tom went with Capt Cauty to guard a spring that supplied water to Tobruk. They captured a couple of Italian prisoners and took them to HQ. He is not the only person to record seeing a mine in the sea. But they decided to blow it up with the Bren gun. It left a hole in the rock the size of a house. Then they were posted to the Salient, alternating between the Blue line and the front Red line. But Tom writes that it was just as hairy on the Blue line as they were in the open and subject to strafing. As a side note of humour Tom tells of dummy wooden planes being built and scattered around the aerodromes. The Germans woke up to the ploy and dropped wooden bombs! Then on their second stint at the front the food got progressively worse – bully beef and biscuits and, with the cookhouse 3 miles to the rear, the food was always cold. There was also tinned fish and vitamin pills.

On the night of 30 April–1 May Tom, in an understatement, says that the Germans decided to capture Tobruk. He records ‘there was a fierce big battle and some 200 of A Company became POWs’ – but adds proudly that Rommel didn’t get Tobruk. Prior to and during the battle they were strafed, bombed; ammunition and grenades were blown up, weapon pits destroyed, and communications were out. Tom had saved a bottle of beer for later and reports regretfully that it was lost too. The incredible survivor was a camel. Tom writes: ‘It had been wandering around the previous afternoon and ‘bless my soul, there it was in the morning still wandering, apparently unscathed’. Tom was with a group that surrendered and, as they were being marched to Acroma, the artillery (that they had needed the night before) arrived and started shelling the Germans – and the captured Australians. After a couple of days they were taken by truck to Derna – some 120 miles west.

Tom continues, ‘Within a fortnight we were getting pretty bored with prison life so I suggested to my mate Freddie Tabram that we try to escape and head back to Tobruk.’ They hooked a cable over a tap and Tom, then Freddie climbed down. They lay doggo as a guard passed by some six feet away, then they followed the town wall until they found a gap and headed for the coast, travelling a little inland to avoid the wadis. On the third day they met some Arabs who offered them a meal which they accepted – Tom described it as a sort of bean casserole with goat meat – with tea to follow. They stayed the night and were given a camel rung on which to sleep as the ground was stony. Next day they took off as soon as they could and stripped to clean themselves of the fleas. They met Arabs four times. One followed them and when they turned towards him he had a rifle aimed at them. Signalling that they wanted water he pressed them forward and took them to water – at gunpoint. At another wadi with water they found a German swimming; they grunted a reply and kept going. Later they found a rowing-boat and decided this was a good way to get to Tobruk. But after about 30m it took on water rather rapidly, and since neither could swim very well, they headed to shore – ending their careers as sailors. In the distance they saw a line of men working and on closer scrutiny found they were Germans digging a tank trench. The road crossing through the tank trench was where the Germans were camped, so they waited until dark and walked through the camp and along the road with some Germans following them. Tom writes, ‘They were chatting away, thinking we were their mates’. Some distance past the bridge Tom and Freddie moved away from the road and into the night. On the eighth day they found a deserted campsite with some tins of food. Some half empty, probably from the Germans nearby. There was a full tin of English meat and veg., probably from stores abandoned as the allies retreated to Tobruk. Then they met an Arab who offered to escort them into Tobruk, but they declined; knowing that he could get a price for turning them in.

On the tenth day they played cat and mouse with two Germans on a motorcycle and sidecar. Tom and Freddie tried to evade them but eventually they were confronted by a command and raised gun. They were escorted to HQ. A good meal

of stew and then coffee went down well. They were sent back to Derna and put into solitary confinement for a fortnight. It was a new definition of solitary confinement – they were put together in the same tent in the middle of the compound with a guard. But to relieve the monotony they demanded toilet breaks every couple of hours and there they would signal to meet the other chaps at the loo and have a good natter. Their solitary ended after 10 days when they were moved on to Benghazi. And that's another story.