

"They also Serve."

GUERRILLA

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IN A DESERT PRISON CAMP

This is an eye-witness account of life in a desert prison camp by a New Zealand soldier who was captured by the Germans in 1941 at Sidi Azeiz. After spending a long period in a prison compound at Bardia, he was released with the others when Bardia was recaptured by the Allied forces. This interesting narrative, by courtesy of the Official Archivist, is published here for the first time.

I was a member of the First Contingent, and I had been in the first Libyan campaign (at Sidi Barrani), and in the evacuations from Greece and Crete. During the second desert campaign I was in a machine-gun section attached to H.Q. 5 Infantry Brigade. This, under the command of Brigadier J. Hargest, together with supporting troops, was situated at Sidi Azeiz, about 15 miles due south-east of Bardia, for several days up to 27th November, 1941.

Near at hand was a fairly large aerodrome, but the last three planes had left it the previous day. Due north was a route used by the Germans for carrying supplies, and north-west of that the 22nd Battalion was sitting some distance from the Bardia perimeter defences. Several attempts by the Germans to push their normal convoys through had been persistently checked by the N.Z. headquarters force and the convoys turned back eastwards. One ammunition truck which attempted to get through by itself was blown up by a N.Z. 25-pounder.

Evidence that the Germans were more than curious about the reason for these mishaps was the fact that a reconnaissance plane came over to check on the situation. At shortly after 0700 hours, 27th November, 1941, and while the New Zealanders were preparing to have breakfast, a German envoy came in from the north, demanding that the force move out within five minutes or else a strong armoured force would attack it. He added that the position would be taken within an hour and a-half.

Five minutes later the German heavy artillery opened fire,

dug-outs, also scoffing most of our breakfast which had been interrupted by the battle. Although very well armed, they were both hungry and thirsty and deficient in clothing, so thus made up these deficiencies in quick time.

The German general in charge drove up in a distinctive tank to Brigadier Hargest, and in the ensuing conversation complimented the Brigadier on the tough opposition his force had made. He said he was surprised that the force was so small. He had thought it to be at least two thousand strong, which was the reason (and he is said to have apologised for it) why he had used such a heavy barrage.

On the Road to Bardia.

He then gave permission for us to finish our breakfast, but when we went to get it we found that the Germans had finished it for us. We were



An artist's impression of British paratroops in action in the later stages of the North African campaign.

The German Attack.

Our force had only six 25-pounders, three anti-aircraft guns, twelve anti-tank guns, one dozen Bren carriers, one company of machine-guns, and no 60-pounders. Our guns were quickly put out of action. The Germans changed to light artillery and mortars and then followed up with tanks, behind them coming truck loads of infantry. The New Zealanders fought doggedly, firing at the tanks with machine-guns and rifles. It was all over in an hour and a-half. As the German infantry came in they systematically looted trucks and

not allowed to gather up our gear, only a few of us being able to pick up a greatcoat or blanket, and about 1100 hours we set off on our march to Bardia. Meantime the main German force had continued westward. A Bren-gun carrier patrol which had left the main force to reconnoitre before the battle commenced, approached Sidi Azeiz from the south just as the battle was finishing, saw the position was hopeless and made off: it is thought that they escaped.

On the march to Bardia there were about 700 New Zealanders, several English ground personnel from the