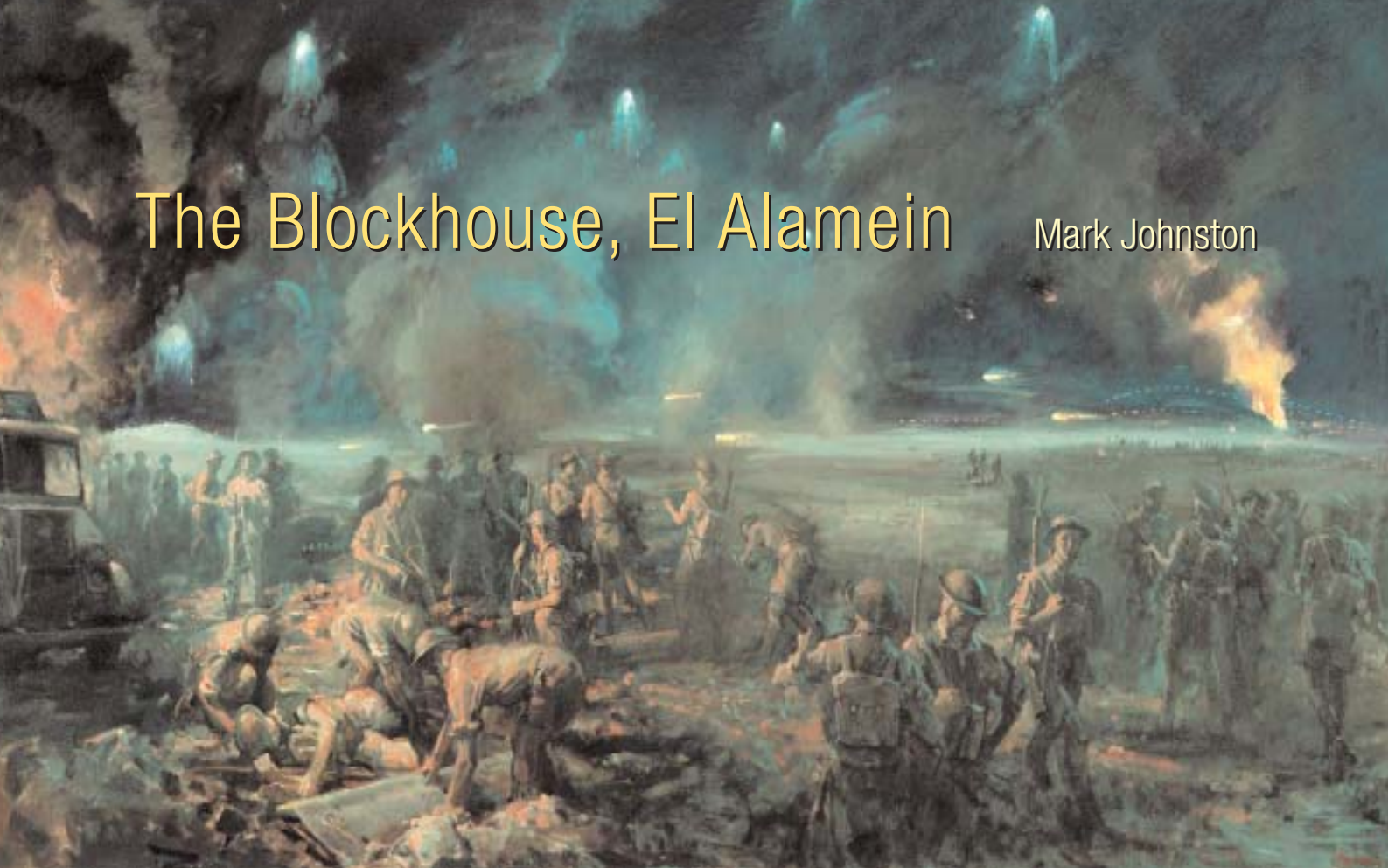


The Blockhouse, El Alamein

Mark Johnston



To the Australians it was the “Blockhouse”; to the Germans “the Hut”. For several days an Egyptian railway workers’ building was at the centre of a tiny area in which the outcome of the great battle of El Alamein hung in the balance. It was not a fortification, but a hospital, and to men of both sides it became an oasis of humanity in the midst of carnage.

On 23 October 1942, the British 8th Army launched a great offensive against Field Marshal Rommel’s Panzerarmee Afrika. The British commander, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery, planned to destroy the enemy forces in their heavily mined and fortified positions and “hit the enemy for ‘six’ right out of Africa”. There would be three phases: a Break-In, by infantry and then by tanks; a Dogfight, when the enemy’s forces would be destroyed; leading finally to a decisive Breakthrough. The Australian 9th Division would play a crucial role, in its position on the right of the line near the coast. Penetration here by either side would allow one side to outflank the other, and turn the entire line. Crossing this area was the only major road on the battlefield. The main thrust of the attack was in the north.

By 29 October, six days later, the original plan had not succeeded. Only in the north had there been a break-in, and nowhere had the tanks been able to pass through and beyond the enemy defences as intended. The Dogfight continued.

Despite this grim scenario, victory was still attainable. Rommel now clearly believed that the northern flank was the point of greatest danger to his army. When the battle began, German units had been interspersed with Italian units right across the 65 kilometres of the Axis front line. Now, in response to this northern threat, Rommel had concentrated his German forces on the coastal flank, opposite the Australians. Montgomery realised that if he could pin down Rommel’s German divisions in the north, he could probably achieve a breakthrough further south. He developed a plan for this breakthrough, Operation Supercharge, for the night of 1–2 November.

For the breakthrough to work, it was essential that the Australians maintain the pressure on the Germans in the north. In accordance with Montgomery’s requirements, 9th Division

Above: Australian troops prepare for a night attack in late October 1942. William Dargie, *Attack by 2/24th Battalion, El Alamein at night, 25–26 October 1942* (1973, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 274.6 cm, AWM ART 27821)



commander Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead developed a plan for new offensive operations to occur on the night of 30-31 October. The division would attack north from its westernmost point of advance, towards the enemy’s defences around the coast. The 2/32nd Battalion, which had so far taken no part in the battle, was to establish a firm base on ground near the railway and main road. From this base, the 2/24th and 2/48th Battalions would loop back eastwards down the main road, to attack the rear of the considerable German defences that still existed further east. These two battalions had already been fighting for nearly a week, and were each down to little over 200 men. Afterwards, the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion – an infantry unit trained and equipped to dig and build as operations required – was to drive north from the 2/32nd Battalion base to the coast, in order to cut off the retreat of the Germans trapped to the east.

These ambitious operations were launched on the night of 30 October. Despite enemy opposition, the 2/32nd reached its objectives. One of the first positions captured by the battalion after crossing the railway was a long, low, grey concrete building, which lay just a few metres north of the rail line. In peacetime it housed railway gangers; now it was a German medical post, and three German doctors, nine orderlies and some wounded were captured. This building came to be known as the Blockhouse, and was now to have a short but remarkable career, in the official historian’s words, as “a kind of international medical post”.

The Regimental Medical Officer of the 2/32nd, Captain Bill Campbell, set up his Regimental Aid Post inside the building. In its six rooms he found much medical equipment. Not all the Germans were keen to stay, and some had to be

prevented from escaping, but from the outset the German medical personnel helped with Australian casualties. Campbell was in charge, and was soon busy with a flood of wounded: the remaining attacks of the night had not gone well. The 2/24th and 2/48th Battalions had attacked eastwards towards the strong German defences at Ring Contour 25 and Thompson’s Post, but had suffered appalling losses. It became clear that they must retreat or be annihilated. The 2/48th had only 41 men left standing, while the 2/24th had about 85. These were outnumbered by the

264 wounded of both battalions, many of them

Above centre: German propaganda leaflets designed for Australians serving in the El Alamein sector. The figures at the top are copies of the 9th Division’s sign, a platypus over a boomerang. (AWM 025015)

Below: Beginning their march into captivity, these Germans were taken prisoner during the battle of El Alamein. (AWM 044985)



1942
 67
 1942
 67



Left: The Blockhouse was not the only place in the El Alamein area where Allied medical personnel treated German casualties. Here treatment is taking place at the entrance to an underground operating theatre, 1 December 1942. (AWM 014077)

stretcher cases. It was reported that the stretcher-bearers did not miss a single wounded man out in the field on that terrible night.

Most of the wounded walked or were carried to the Blockhouse, where the battalion war diary noted that Captain Campbell personally attended to every case. The casualty list was made still longer when the retreating remnants of the 2/24th tripped wires detonating two 1,000-pound aerial bombs. Twelve men were killed, and sixteen wounded, among the latter being the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Weir. After carrying Weir to the Blockhouse in a groundsheet, Sergeant French and several other members of the battalion sat outside the building and shared their rations with some Germans there. Dawn was breaking. "Though we did not converse," he recalled, "all had a happy time and I remember considering how damned silly it all was to be fighting coves just like ourselves."

The Blockhouse area itself had not been safe that night. German machine-guns moved east down the railway line from Sidi Abd el Rahman, opening fire on anyone who tried to cross the railway line. They even brought up an artillery piece, which prevented some of the vital supply vehicles from getting through to the Pioneers. The Pioneers had advanced north as planned, but at dawn they were still 500 to 1,100 metres short of the coast. In the morning, they were forced to retreat in the face of German tanks.

The men of three battalions were now huddled round three points in an area roughly one kilometre wide and one kilometre deep: the Blockhouse; a crossing, which engineers had blown in the railway embankment; and Barrel Hill, a 150-metre long ridge some 500 metres north of the railway. The area became known as the Saucer, because that was how it appeared to the Australians in it. German observers in the minaret of the mosque at Sidi Abd el Rahman, the site of Rommel's headquarters 8 km to the north-west, could see right into the Saucer. As the Australians expected, it was also an area that the Germans were determined to recapture.

During the day, the Pioneers were forced to withdraw from the forward slopes of Barrel Hill, as a furious tank battle erupted between German



tanks driving towards the Saucer and the British Valentines which had come forward to support the Australians. The Germans eventually withdrew. In the early afternoon, German tanks captured most of an Australian company which was holding the northwestern edge of the Saucer. These losses left the Blockhouse perilously exposed.

All day the Saucer was heavily shelled. One shell penetrated the roof of the Blockhouse: the ceiling collapsed, and some of the patients had to be dug out. A dive-bombing raid hit an Australian ambulance, killing the driver and wounding two other men. Still the Blockhouse retained its international character. At one point, it was claimed, a German ambulance brought in five wounded Germans and one Australian. The medical men in the building, who had now been joined by Captain Grice of the 2/11th Field Ambulance and Captain Yeatman of the 2/48th, were fully occupied. Luckily, they were assisted by the German doctors, whom Campbell found “quite cooperative and efficient”. The Germans primarily worked on German casualties, but numerous accounts also testify to their skilled work on Australians.

Jack Ralla of the 2/48th, for example, had been wounded in the leg and groin on the night the attack began. When he arrived at the Blockhouse, it was a “Jerry Doctor” who gave him an injection and “slapped a couple of splints on my leg.” As Ralla entered the Blockhouse, he noticed wounded lying everywhere outside as well as inside the building. Another patient was Corporal Gerry O’Connell, of the 2/32nd Battalion. O’Connell was being carried towards the Blockhouse on a stretcher when a shell landed nearby, wounding most of the stretcher party and

hitting O’Connell again. When he eventually reached the Blockhouse, his wounds were so bad that the staff contemplated amputating both his arms. Eventually, a German surgeon amputated his right arm at the shoulder, but was able to save his left.

At least one surgical operation in the Saucer was carried out under even worse circumstances. The 2/3rd Pioneer Regimental Aid Post was functioning in a hole in the railway embankment. The battalion chaplain, Eric Seatree, saw an ambulance man, named McDonald, hit by enemy fire as he left his truck to help wounded men. Ignoring enemy machine-guns, Seatree rushed to the man, applied a dressing and carried him on his back to the RAP. It was too dangerous to move him from there to the Blockhouse, so the Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Day, operated on him on the spot. On a groundsheet spread over ammunition boxes, and amidst dust, grit and enemy fire, Day and his two assistants saved McDonald’s seriously damaged leg, and probably his life.

Another Australian soldier who braved all to carry men to treatment was Gunner Schwebel of the 2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment. When a German tank knocked out his 6-pounder near Barrel Hill, his crew were all killed or wounded. Schwebel was hit in the arms and legs, but carried his two wounded crewmates through enemy fire and into the Blockhouse. He then returned to his damaged gun and, by salvaging parts from other unserviceable 6-pounders, was able to bring it into

Below: Soldiers of the 2/3rd Australian Pioneer Battalion seek shelter on the railway embankment close to the Blockhouse, 31 October 1942. For most of the day they had been exposed to enemy fire from three sides and were unable to dig in until late in the afternoon. (AWM P02743.001)



Capt. Eric Seatree in 1942



Left: Lightly armed Australians wait as German tanks emerge from the dust in front of their positions. William Dargie, *2/32th Battalion holding a German counter-attack, El Alamein, 31 October 1942* (1943, oil on hardboard, 39 x 45.4 cm, AWM ART 22251)

Below: An Australian soldier gives food and drink to a German survivor of an Australian attack on his position, 3 November 1942. (AWM 042073)

action again. Once more enemy fire hit the gun, and he received another wound, to the head.

Undeterred, he took a Bren gun and joined the infantry defence. The following day he carried a wounded soldier 500 metres to the Blockhouse, and was stopped from returning to the battle when it was found that his wounds included a bullet through the head.

At the end of 31 October, the Saucer was still in Australian hands, but the 2/24th and 2/48th Battalions were exhausted. Morshead decided to replace them with his last two fresh battalions, the 2/43rd and 2/28th, though this risked a German attack while the changeover was in progress. All went well, however, though the new arrivals were shocked by the chaos when they tried to fit two nearly full-strength battalions into an area previously occupied by company-sized ones. The 2/43rd had several sections on the forward slopes of Barrel Hill: one of the landmarks used to position them was a severed arm attached to a haversack but not a body. This was grimly symbolic of what lay ahead.

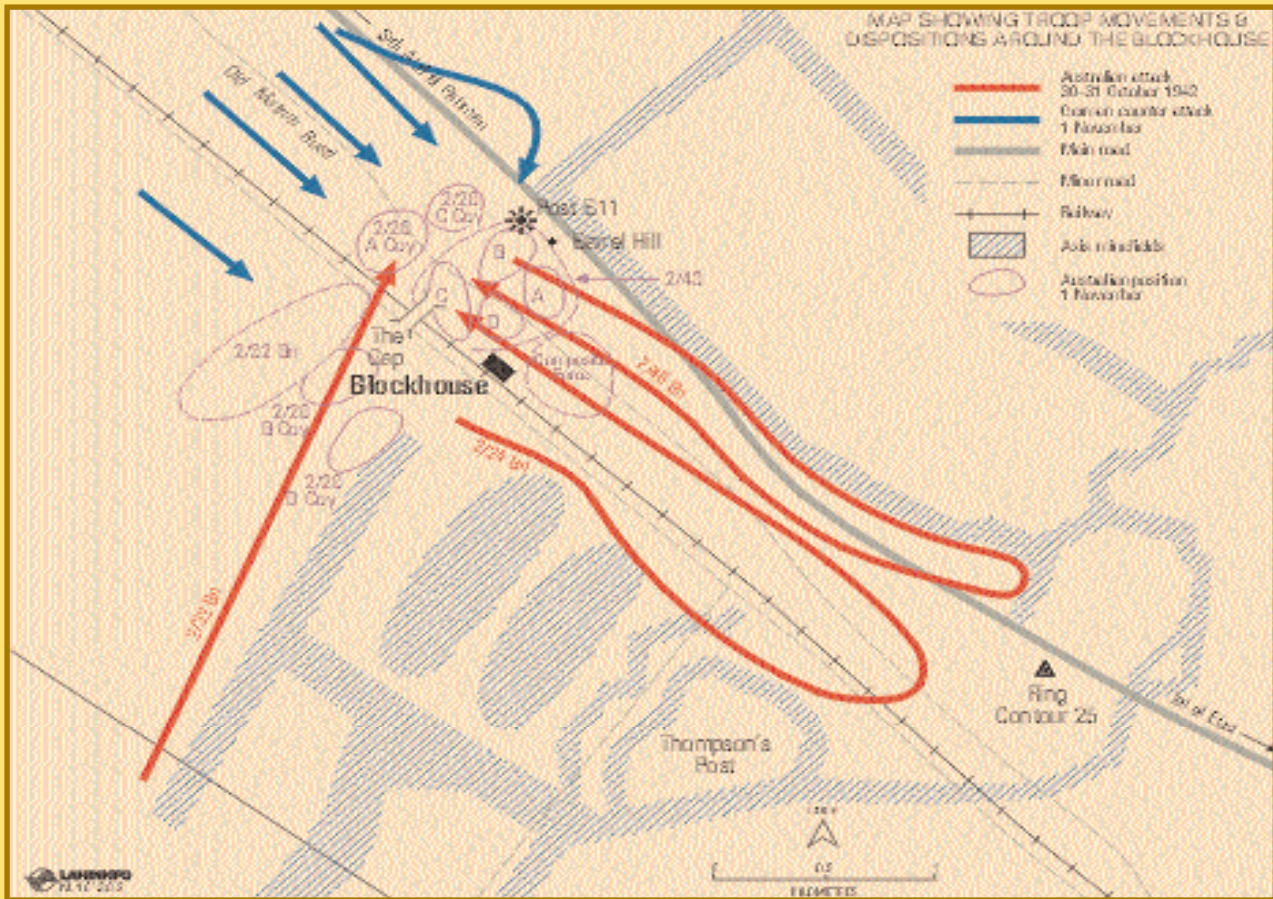
At 9.00 am on 1 November a message was intercepted from Rommel's headquarters, ordering an immediate attack on the "Hut": the map reference was for the Blockhouse. Rommel was aware that the force holding the area was "depleted", and did not know that fresh troops had taken over during the night. Six times during the day the Germans attacked with tanks and infantry. The fighting continued through the night until 2.30 am, but the Germans could not achieve a decisive breakthrough. The Australians had done the job required, and that night Operation Supercharge began. Breakthrough, and British victory, ensued.

During the day Rommel climbed a hill to gain a better view of the battlefield. He could see the Blockhouse, and around it some forty or more wrecked British tanks. Later he described the scene:

A Red Cross flag was flying from the railway station, "The Hut". ... The British were obviously getting their wounded out, and our artillery had accordingly ceased fire.

Months earlier, the Australian artillery had shown the same respect for the Red Cross flag when they first saw it flying above the then German Blockhouse.





Nevertheless, shells rained on the Saucer from east and west throughout 1 November. Typical of those wounded in the shelling was Lieutenant Coen of the 2/43rd, who received a shrapnel wound in the leg while stationed on Barrel Hill. When circumstances allowed, he set out for the Blockhouse, stopping every few metres because of the pain. Two stretcher-bearers from the Blockhouse came to help him and carried him to the building, though nearby shelling caused them to drop him on one occasion. At the western end he was greeted solicitously by the battalion chaplain. Inside the “cool and dim” building, he received a quick but sympathetic examination from his Regimental Medical Officer, Captain Colyer. Despite the soporific effects of a cup of tea, which he suspected was laced with something, heavy shelling woke him an hour later, and eventually he had to be removed by ambulance. Twenty-four other men from Coen’s platoon were taken to the Blockhouse that day. Some of the stretcher-bearers were killed and wounded trying to aid their comrades.

Right: A Royal Air Force bomber flies over the mosque at Sidi Abd el Rahman that Rommel had used as his headquarters during the battle. (AWM 050009)

With Operation Supercharge and the breakthrough, the battle moved away from the Blockhouse. On 2 November, the German medical personnel were transferred to the Australian 2/11th Main Dressing Station to help treat their own casualties. However, they soon lost this special status and were placed with the other prisoners.

For his extraordinary medical work at the Blockhouse, Captain Bill Campbell received the



Col. Bill Campbell in 1942



Left: Max Ohmayer, *Maschinengewehr und Stand an der Küste vor Alamein* (Anti-aircraft machine-gun and stand on the coast at El Alamein) (1942, watercolour and pencil, 35.6 x 41.6 cm, AWM ART 31525)

Below: After the battle, 22 December 1942: members of the 20th Australian Infantry Brigade, on parade in Gaza, await inspection by General Harold Alexander, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces. On this occasion, Alexander inspected a parade of the entire 9th Division – now made up of battle survivors and reinforcements – to thank them for the division's part in the victory at El Alamein. (AWM 050109)

Military Cross. His Regimental Aid Post had not stopped working throughout the fight at the Saucer. The Military Cross citation noted that his

coolness and courage saved the lives of scores of wounded men. His cheerfulness, daring and splendid leadership in working right in the forward area was an inspiration to all the troops in that area.

For a brief moment, the chivalry so often touted as a feature of the desert war really existed at the Blockhouse. Occasionally compassion could even be shown on the field of battle. On 1 November, eight men of the 2/43rd were overrun and captured by German tanks and infantry. A German NCO gestured to one of the Australians, a young and wounded machine-gunner, to return to the Blockhouse and treatment rather than go into captivity. But such actions are not common

on the battlefield, and were few outside the sanctuary of the Blockhouse. As the 2/43rd Battalion historian notes, there was a terrible irony in the fact that outside the building Australians and Germans generally sought to destroy each other, while inside men of both sides did all they could to save life.

The author

Dr Mark Johnston is Head of History at Scotch College, Melbourne. He is the author of *At the front line: experiences of Australian soldiers in World War II* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996); he is currently working on a book about Australians' attitudes to their enemies. An Army Research Grant made it possible for Dr Johnston and Dr Peter Stanley of the Australian War Memorial to visit El Alamein in November 1997.



Frank Petras : German photographs captured at El Alamein



AWMM P03091.001

This collection of photographs provides an interesting glimpse into the lives of ordinary German soldiers who had become used to the hostile environment of the North African desert. The images are from a roll of film dropped by a German officer while taking cover from his own artillery. Each photograph bears a caption, written by an Australian soldier sometime after the battle. Just as the images reveal something of the conditions under which the Germans lived and fought, the captions reveal a little of how an anonymous Australian soldier viewed his enemy and regarded the war.

The photographs came into the possession of a member of the 2/7th Australian Field Regiment, Frank Petras, after the battle of El Alamein, and have been donated to the Memorial by his son.

AWMM P03091.010



Yes - its the Great Field Marshall Rommel!

AWMM P03091.004



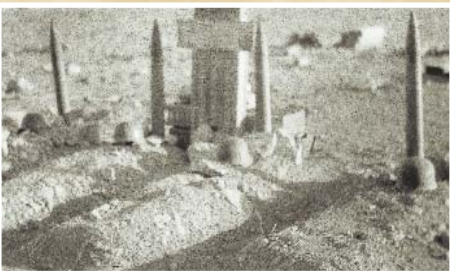
German convoy vehicles always travel at intervals of 100 yds or so in case of sudden air attack.

AWMM P03091.007



Is he saying those famous "last words" of many an optimist - "They're ours".

AWMM P03091.006



The last resting place of four German dead. 3.7 AA shells & steel helmets do duty as headstones.

AWMM P03091.005



Probably arguing if they will be home by Xmas.

AWMM P03091.001



At a guess its Knightsbridge where our tanks walked into a trap and we lost 230 in a day. At any rate here's 4 of the Matilda and Grants. Well might jerry wear the grin, but he's not in Alex or Cairo.

AWMM P03091.003



A Tomahawk comes off second best and is able to pancake successfully. Smashed aircraft are a common sight in the desert, however our Spitfire is the only real match for the German ME109F.

AWMM P03091.002



Again the German war effort is aided by a V8 Ford captured from British or Sth. African troops in recent rotten show by our armies. This emphasises the importance of destroying equipment at any cost when the position becomes hopeless.

AWMM P03091.009



Two German soldiers in a slit trench. Who knows, the 57 Battery may have them taped?

AWMM P03091.008



At a guess - taking a potshot at one of our low flying planes.