



Machines of war

Magnificent menace

88 mm guns at El Alamein

The German 88 mm Flak gun was one of the most famous and feared weapons of the Second World War. Known by its various types as the 8.8 cm Flak 18, 36 or 37, it was designed as an anti-aircraft gun (“Flak” is a contraction of *Flugabwehrkanone*, meaning “anti-aircraft gun”); but it also performed effectively against ground targets – as one Australian infantryman said, it was “anti-everything”. It was so effective that Allied soldiers tended to attribute any German artillery fire to 88 guns, even when other guns were actually responsible. To those who fought in North Africa, the “88” was justifiably and inextricably linked with the success and mystique of Rommel and the Afrika Korps.

The 88 had been designed as a heavy anti-aircraft gun, and was first used in the Spanish Civil War. The Germans then employed them in flak battalions, both for the defence of Germany and in other theatres. The gun’s design and German tactical doctrine were flexible enough to allow the use of the 88 not only against air attack, but also on the ground, against tanks and other vehicles, gun emplacements, troops, and even ships. It could fire both armour-piercing and high-explosive projectiles, and was so powerful that it could knock out any tank in North Africa at a range of two kilometres. The British had a similar weapon, the 3.7 inch anti-aircraft gun, which possibly could also have been adapted for use against ground targets but, its design and less flexible British doctrine prevented the conversion being made.

Mark Johnston Melbourne
David Pearson Australian War Memorial

In North Africa the Australians, who did not have many tanks or armoured vehicles, generally encountered 88s firing high-explosive ammunition. The guns would fire an “airburst” of time-fused high-explosive projectiles that would explode 15 to 30 metres in the air over the heads of the infantry, showering them with metal fragments. The 88s made their greatest impact on the Australians at Alamein, in October and November 1942. The Germans had at most 86 of the guns along their entire, 50-kilometre front, but the guns’ effect was out of all proportion to their numbers. During the fighting on the northern flank, the Australians faced at least a dozen 88s, and succeeded in destroying or capturing at least seven of them.

Yet the 88s also took their toll on the Australians. “Storms of 88 mm air-burst swept across the battlefield,” noted one account. A machine-gunner recalled the ordeal of lying in a weapon pit and having to “take it” from an 88 mm gun firing from close range. The Australians often used corrugated iron head-covers for protection against airbursts; the terrain also did not help, most of it flat, open, and too rocky to dig into. One estimate suggested that 88 mm guns may have caused 40 per cent of all Australian casualties in the Alamein campaign.

Above (inset): The Australian War Memorial’s 88 mm gun. This gun, is a Flak 36 with a Flak 18 barrel. (Courtesy D. Pearson)

Below: A German 88 mm gun abandoned in its emplacement at El Alamein. The body of a gunner lies in the foreground. Crewing the 88 mm was extremely dangerous, as the gun was a key target on the battlefield. (Used by permission.)





At the end of the battle, a German prisoner wounded by a .45 calibre (11.5 mm) Thompson sub-machine gun bullet told an Australian stretcher-bearer that the Thompson was a brutal weapon. The Australian replied, "Not so brutal as your eighty-eights." Even the German could see the humour in this. Yet the crews of the 88 mm shared its danger: their gun, with its high silhouette and efficiency, was a primary target, and its destruction often meant their own deaths.

As many as three 88 mm guns were brought back to Australia from North Africa. One of these is now held at the Australian War Memorial.

Left: An 88 mm gun destroyed on the Alamein battlefield. This is probably a gun which was audaciously towed, in full view of some Rhodesian gunners, to a position close to the main road near Barrel Hill. The plan seems to have been to fire at point-blank range at the Australians in the Saucer. Instead, the Rhodesians hit it and set it on fire after it had fired just two rounds. Australians reportedly stood up in their pits and applauded. According to one report, the German crew were all killed, but others claimed that some escaped down the road. (AWM 050011)

