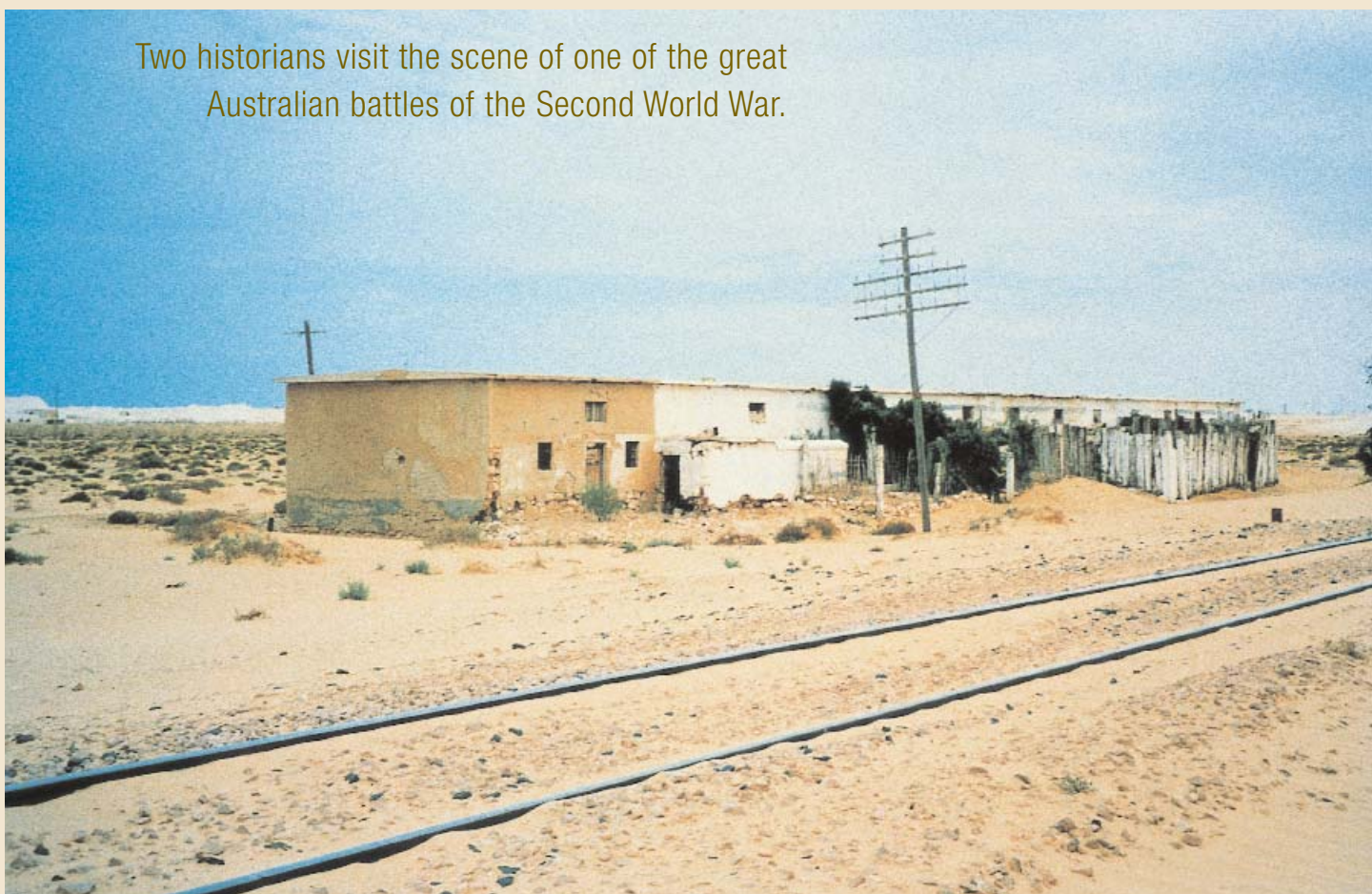


Getting our knees brown

exploring the El Alamein battlefield

Peter Stanley

Two historians visit the scene of one of the great Australian battles of the Second World War.



One of the trivialities of the Second World War is that the Eighth Army, the main British Commonwealth force serving in North Africa, was the only major Allied formation to fight in short trousers. The Eighth Army referred to serving in the desert as “getting your knees brown”.

In November 1997 Mark Johnston and I travelled to Egypt to explore the El Alamein battlefield as part of our research on the Australians at Alamein. The battles that took place there have been the subject of many books over the past half century – perhaps because of the intriguing personality of the Eighth Army’s most notable commander, Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery – but no recent works have dealt in detail with the Australian part in the operations. Unlike the previous generation of authors, we are too young to have served at Alamein, so we needed to begin by getting a grasp of the ground – we needed to get our own knees brown.

The battles of Alamein, between July and November 1942, were among the most decisive battles of the Second World War. The final battle, beginning on 23 October 1942, broke Rommel’s Panzerarmee Afrika and drove it westwards, ultimately to surrender in Tunisia in May 1943. Australian troops of the 9th Division played a major part and suffered over 5,000 casualties (dead,





wounded or captured). Today over 1,200 Australians lie in the impressive El Alamein War Cemetery, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The division's losses were high

because it held the vital northern sector of the Eighth Army's line, near the coast, drawing the German armour for ten days during the "Dogfight" until Montgomery's armour was able to break through Axis lines further south.

The Australian part at Alamein involved bitter struggles for patches of desert, the names of which were once well known among veterans and their families. We wanted to seek out these places. We looked for the Cutting near Tel el Eisa, Barrel Hill, the Blockhouse and Saucer, Makh Khad Ridge and a series of "trig" points – 22, 26, 29, 33, and Ring Contour 25 – seemingly just numbers but in 1942 the scenes of desperate and bloody fights. Each of these places has stories to tell.

Successful field research requires careful preparation. As the battlefield is located in an area controlled by the Egyptian army, there were difficult negotiations with Egyptian authorities to obtain a permit to visit it. We also needed maps. Fortunately, the Memorial's collection – which includes war diaries, official records and the map collection itself – provided large-scale maps made or annotated in 1942. These allowed us to plan our program and became the mainstay of our navigation about the battlefield.

We began with the ridge running between Trig 26 and Trig 33, which still dominates the northern sector of the battlefield. Today the two hills on either end of the ridge are the sites of the German and Italian memorials. The 26th Brigade captured and held the ridge at the height of the July battle, and Australians held it throughout the rest of the campaign. The imposing memorials, visible all over the battlefield, provide useful reference points, helping to locate other sites, especially in the desert south of the main coastal road.

Opposite page (main): The Blockhouse

Opposite page (left): The author surveys the battlesite.

Top right: El Alamein War Cemetery

Right: The interior of the Italian memorial.

(Photographs courtesy of the author.)

Unlike Allied dead, the Axis dead were interred in ossuaries beneath the memorials. Each reflects a distinctive character. The castle-like German memorial, built of honey-coloured stone, bears the names of the German dead on panels around its courtyard. The Italian memorial, a white sand-



stone tower, looks out homeward across the Mediterranean, the brilliant blue of the sea visible through a large window. The names of Italy's dead appear on marble tablets reaching from floor to ceiling in room after room of its adjoining wings.

From Trig 33 the Australians turned south towards Tel el Eisa. Here, on a low rise bisected by the main railway line, the Australians fought off a series of strong German tank and infantry attacks, holding vital ground for the Allies. At the Cutting, the scene of the most serious fighting, we were aware of present dangers too. Land mines still lie hidden all over the Alamein battlefield, though numbers are disputed. Every year several dozen people, mostly local Bedouin, are killed or injured by these deadly relics. We tried to





keep to well-used tracks, and departed from them rarely and gingerly.

Tel el Eisa bears few signs of the dramatic events of five decades before. Occasionally we saw broken bottles and pieces of rusted tins, but the desert wind and drifting sand has obliterated the craters and covered up any debris left by Bedouin scavengers. And yet there is a sense of place: that here Australians faced repeated attacks by German tanks and infantry, that here men fought and died. We left a poppy, stood for a moment and moved on.

Between the worry of the mines and the apprehension of our security-conscious hosts, we did not press our attempts to reach sites in the desert far to the south. Constrained by the presence of an Egyptian military intelligence



soldier in the back seat of our car, we made a detailed exploration of the coastal sector, fixing its topography in our minds and capturing it on film. On our third day we walked south from Barrel Hill towards the Blockhouse, the focus of some of the heaviest fighting the 9th Division encountered in October 1942.

The Blockhouse still stands, though now derelict, stinking when approached from a hundred metres downwind. On the scrubby, sandy ground we saw shards of shrapnel, a few fragments of barbed wire and Italian and British bullets. From the floor of the shallow Saucer it is much easier than from the map to appreciate how the surrounding Germans dominated the position. Here, standing by the railway line, even on a mild, sunny autumn day, hearing nothing louder than the sound of the wind, it is still possible to glimpse something of the ordeal of the Blockhouse that occurred on that spot 55 years before our visit.

The author

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Peter Stanley and Mark Johnston acknowledge the assistance of the Australian Army's Military History Research Grants Scheme; the Australian War Memorial; Scotch College, Melbourne; the Australian Embassy in Egypt; and veterans and colleagues in making their research at El Alamein possible.

Top (left): Dr Mark Johnston and the author on either side of an Australian commemorative plaque.

Left: The desert

Below: The railway station



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