

ALAMEIN

By **COLONEL L.A. CROOK***

Take Post!

The crisp order from the Gun Position Officer, given to the four gun detachments of Able Troop, 1st Field Battery, 1st Field Regiment, South African Artillery (C.F.A.) was repeated by other GPO's in the Regiment at about 21h30 on the night of 23 October 1942. For the gunners it signalled the opening move in a battle that provided the first great victory for the Allies in World War II.

The faint shadows of the six-man detachment of No 1 Sub-section sprang to their places on their 25-pounder gun, No 2 ready to operate the breech mechanism, the layer on the left at his dial sight with the elevating and traversing wheels at his hand, the other numbers, 4, 5 and 6 next to the stacked, and previously carefully camouflaged ammunition. The No 1 ordered :

HE, 117, Charge 3, load!

The layer set his drift scale plate and range reader to the Charge 3 settings, and ensured that the MV corrector scale reader was set correctly. No 4 stepped forward with the 25-lb high-explosive shell, armed with its instantaneous 117 fuse, and slipped it into the open breech of the gun. No 2 with a short, truncheon-like rammer, rammed the shell home and as the copper driving-band engaged with the rifling of the barrel there was a deep, bell-like ring. No 4 half-turned, took the long, brass cartridge case from No 5, showed it to No 1 to prove that it contained the full three charges of propellant, and after No 1 reported, "Correct," No 4 pushed it into the breech with his closed right fist. No 2 slammed home the breech-block with a metallic clang.

The sergeant ordered : **Zero One Two Degrees. Five Zero Minutes.**

By the light of a hand torch the layer set the scale on his dial sight to the fig-

ure which would bring his gun pointing towards its target and, by means of hand signals, directed the trail to be swung over until he found, in the prisms of his sight, the light of the night-aiming-point.

Angle of Sight 5 minutes Elevation.

The enemy battery was a little higher above sea level than his gun and the layer made the correct setting on his sight clinometer.

Nine Seven Seventy Five.

The layer, repeating "9775", quickly set the range to the enemy battery on his range-scale plate. The muzzle of the gun lifted up and up as he turned the elevating handwheel for approximate elevation first. He cross-levelled his sight till it was vertical, then, with his eye glued to the rubber eyepiece, laid accurately on the night aiming-point and finally levelled his sight clinometer bubble for exact elevation. Then he signalled "Ready" by placing the palm of his right-hand on the breech. No 1 reported "No One ready" to the GPO.

The gun was ready to be fired, the detachment alert and tensed, but there were still some minutes to go. When all four guns had reported "ready", the GPO ordered :

Troop, rest!

The detachment relaxed at their posts and the last minutes dragged by with subdued small talk amongst the men, the Sergeant looking at his watch every now and then. "A minute to go," he said. The last few moments passed 'till once again the crisp command came from the GPO :

Take post!

At their action stations and alert once more, with No 2 having ensured that the safety catch was set to "Fire", the

detachment waited for the final order of the sequence of fire orders.¹

“Able Troop, Fire!”

Pulling the firing lever on the left of the breech, No 3 sent the first of eight rounds, which followed each other at 15 second intervals, onto the first of four counter-battery DF tasks, upon the last of which the final round fell at 21h55 hours.²

These were the opening rounds of the Battle of Alamein.

For approximately 50 000 German and 62 000 Italian soldiers at Alamein,³ October 23 was exactly the same as every other day of the month had been and like the Allied troops a few thousand yards away to the East, those in the front lines watched with relief as the sun went down, a sunset made unusually beautiful by the dust which delayed the darkness a little that night, its orange light slanting across the sands.⁴

They climbed out of their trenches, stretched themselves, consumed their evening meals and went about their night time duties. They too, occasionally glanced at their watches but only to see how much of their guard duty was left.⁵

Just after 8 o'clock those towards the southern end of the 38 mile forward defence line between the sea and the Quattara Depression heard the sounds of gunfire from the north - probably those accursed Australians about to launch one of their large-scale raids - and blessed their good fortune, the night for them promised to be a quiet one.⁶

Away to the east the waiting infantry of the 8th Army climbed out of the cramped trenches in which they had

remained hidden all day. The armour cast off the canvas skins of the dummy lorries under which they had been hidden, anti-tank guns, bren-carriers and other operational vehicles of the infantry moved up and parked, and divisional and brigade commanders drove forward to their camouflaged tactical headquarters in the vicinity of the front line.

Clouds of dust were created which soon neutralised the moonlight.

Hot meals were taken forward, final checks of ammunition and equipment were made, water bottles were inspected and dry rations issued.⁷ An army girded itself for battle.

The gunners of the South African, Australian, New Zealand and Royal Artillery regiments who would support the attack soon to be launched by 30 Corps, saw that the lamp of the night picket in the rear of each gun position, was lit. It was this pin-point light on which the layer would centre the vertical cross-wires of his dial sight and upon which the accuracy of fire would depend. They began to break open ammunition boxes and prepare ammunition. They would count the minutes, and then the seconds, perhaps more precisely than anyone.

That evening, General Stumme, in temporary command of the Afrika Korps whilst Rommel was in Europe recovering from an illness, radioed his routine evening report to Hitler's headquarters in Germany :

Enemy situation unchanged⁸

One of the biggest problems at Alamein had been that of CB fire.

As well as preserving secrecy it was necessary that nothing be done which

¹ *Gun Drill for Q.F.* 25-PR, 1944 and “Alamein” (Lucas Phillips), pp 121, 122.

² *Gun Programme*, “A” Sub-Section, “Able” Troop 1st Field Regiment, SAA (PAOCFA).

³ *The Crucible of War* (Pitt), pp 295, 296.

⁴ *The Desert War* (Moorhead), p 183.

⁵ *The Crucible of War* pp 295, 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Alamein*, p 116.

⁸ *Ibid*, p 119.

might cause the enemy guns in known positions to move at the last moment. Consequently in the northern part of the front, for over two weeks before the attack, a silent CB policy was followed, except for certain destructive shoots against particularly active batteries. The enemy was believed to have 200 field guns, 40 medium guns and 14 heavy guns in action, and 8th Army resources were quite inadequate to neutralise these and at the same time support the initial attack. In theory, shell fire should only neutralise determined gun detachments up to within a few minutes from when the fire ceases. Nonetheless it was decided to employ all artillery within range of enemy guns for 20 minutes immediately prior to zero hour to put down really heavy concentrations never less than ten guns to one, on 25 known hostile batteries. There seemed to be no satisfactory alternative. Some doubts were expressed as to whether surprise would be compromised, but when the attack started, the enemy artillery was silent. It is now known, during the battle that followed many enemy guns were destroyed by gun fire or bombing, but there is no definite evidence that the CB policy, itself, was a complete success.

The counter bombardment programme in dealing with the known enemy gun positions, however, successfully served the dual purpose of concealing the infantry's final move to their start lines.⁹

Montgomery's plan was to strike the main blow with 30 Corps in the north, whilst leading the enemy to believe that he would make his main attack with 13 Corps in the South, who with fewer artillery resources had to carry out a limited attack to keep up the deception plan but in their case activity rather than silence and camouflage was required.¹⁰

For the most massive artillery onslaught seen in Africa and the biggest since the great barrages of 1918 the gunners of 8th Army had been preparing for

many days and the artillery staff officers for much longer. The fire plan envisaged by Brig Sydney Kirkman, BRA to General Bernard Montgomery, for the whole thirty-eight miles of front from the sea to Himeimat had been allotted and sub-allotted from Army to Corps, Corps to division, division to regiment and regiment to battery. The gunners' maps were covered with transparent traces on which were marked with precise care the parallel lines by which a curtain of shells would move forward by leaps of 100 yards for the whole depth of the infantry's advance.¹¹

But it was not to be a "barrage" in the true sense; there were not enough guns for that. On the New Zealand front, as an example, there would be only one shell every forty-five yards. It was to be mainly a series of moving concentrations of shell fire on known or suspected points of enemy resistance. The first fifteen minutes, however, were to be devoted to concentrations on the enemy's own gun positions, plotted from air photographs and by other means, in order to reduce the volume of fire that would break on our infantry

At the little headquarters of each battery - usually a hole dug out of the sand and rock - the Command Post Officer and his Technical Assistants, working with artillery board, range table and slide rule, had patiently calculated the line and range for each of the eight guns of their battery for every step in the long ladder of fire. The arithmetical corrections had been applied for the barometric pressure, the temperatures of the air and the cartridge, the direction and force of the wind, the difference in height above sea level between each gun and its target. Still further corrections had to be made for each gun individually, as also for each batch of shells and cartridges if they differed in weight from the normal.

The Command Post of each battery was quite close to the two Troops, each of four guns, and before long the

⁹ *Gunpit News*, August 1976, pp 29 - 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Alamein*, pp 119, 120.

completed gun programmes, which were foolscap forms covered with a mass of figures, went out to the Gun Position Officer of each Troop, who was a subaltern.¹² At Able Troop the GPO summoned his four Nos 1, who commanded each gun and who were all Sergeants, and explained his task to each. There was a start of astonishment when he told them that they would have to fire over 650 rounds per gun that night, 36 rounds on CB fire and 620 rounds on a timed programme lasting 5 hours and 40 minutes, an average of one round every 30 seconds.¹³

Back in each gun pit, under its dun camouflage net, the No 1 went through the barrage programme with his gun-layer, explained the task to his detachment and prepared his ammunition, which for days had been gradually accumulating and had laid buried in the sand. He saw that water was at hand for sponging out the gun when it became over-hot, ensured that all moving parts were working smoothly and tested his sights. An artificer came round to test the gun's recoil apparatus.

Every man in the detachment now knew the nature of the tremendous call that was to be made on him. Except for ten minutes' rest each hour to cool the gun, they would be required to maintain a high rate of fire for more than five and a half hours continuously, and if they came under fire themselves from the enemy they were not to pause or take cover.¹⁴

The deception plan for Alamein was vast and on a grand scale. Gun positions had been prepared in advance, surveyed in and ammunition gradually stockpiled. All had been carefully camouflaged.¹⁵

The artillery regiments of 1st S.A. Division, 1st Field Regiment SAA (P.A.O.C.F.A.), 4th Field Regiment, SAA, and 7th Field Regiment, SAA, together

with attached Royal Artillery units who were to supplement the fire power of the division - three troops of 98th Field Regiment and one battery of 69 Medium Regiment, with 4.5-inch guns - cast aside the flimsy shape of sham lorries and moved into their deployment areas during the night of 21/22 October and were in position before 23h00,¹⁶ fully camouflaged.

The three troops of 98 Field Regiment under command of 1st Field Regiment from 18 October, - one troop allotted to each battery - were to support the attack, consolidation and exploitation phases of the battle whilst the battery of 69 Medium Regiment would provide support from Zero hour to Z plus 7 and from Z plus 175 to Z plus 185. A troop of New Zealand artillery in support was tasked to fire on a known enemy strong point at grid 87142915 from Z to Z plus 23 and in addition one battery of 5.5-inch guns was available via the CRA "to help subdue any locality very strongly resisting the advance".

It was the **intention**, as expressed in paragraph 13 of 1st S A Division Operation Order No 46 issued on 18 October 1942, that the Division would attack and capture Sanyet et Miteiriya Ridge from grid reference 87352896 to 87762868, before first light on day D + 1 and thereafter exploit southwards at first light on that day to the general area 872283.

A large trace attached to the Op Order at Appendix "D" indicated a maze of DF targets and paragraph 16(e) of the order clearly stated that the following regiments :

"Three Fd Regts 1 SA Div Arty
Two Fd Regts 2 NZ Div Arty
One Fd Regt 4 Ind Div Arty
Three Med Regts RA"

must be prepared to fire onto the areas indicated, on call, with calls for fire to be made to the CRA, who would arrange for "the maximum number of guns to be brought down", on the DF

¹² *Ibid*, p 120.

¹³ **Gun Programme.** A Sub-section. CFA.

¹⁴ **Alamein**, p 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 104.

¹⁶ **Gunners of the Cape** (Orpen), p 208.

concerned, provided that the guns were not required for more urgent tasks!¹⁷

The South African infantry were thus assured of ample artillery support.

Five percent smoke was to be included in all concentrations in the event of rain, and the Op Order also instructed that smoke would be used from Z plus 100 to Z plus 160 to help mask enemy fire from the infantry, hopefully at that time reorganising on the first objective; again from Z plus 255 to Z plus 263 to indicate the line of final objective and finally, also whilst harassing fire was put down after capture of the final objective.

4th Field Regiment was allocated to come under command of the Division's mobile Reserve Group of 8th Royal Tanks and 2nd Regiment Botha for exploitation tasks, on orders from the CRA.

The batteries of the anti-tank regiment were allocated to the three brigade groups, with a battery of eight 6-pdrs under command of the Division's Reserve Group, whilst 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment was instructed to provide protection to 1st SA Division Artillery units and to 69 Medium Regiment, RA plus a troop under command of the Reserve Group. A second troop was to be ready to move out at first light on D plus One to give added protection to the Group and a third troop was "at call CCRA to protect any area that has become congested".¹⁸

The FOO's had already "married-up" with the infantry and were crouched in the shallow slit trenches that had previously been dug, camouflaged and provisioned, on the home edge of the Division's own minefield, steel helmeted, equipped and ready to move out. From 1st Field Battery Capt. Joe Geber had reported to the Natal Mounted Rifles and Capt. Charles Cock to the Cape Town Highlanders

whilst 3rd Field Battery FOO's were Lt Anton Murray (Rand Light Infantry), Capt Pat Power (Royal Durban Light Infantry) and Capt Dudley Flynn who was with the Imperial Light Horse. Of the FOO's from 14th Field Battery, which had replaced 2nd Field Battery - lost at Tobruk - there is unfortunately no record.¹⁹

The 15 minutes of counter-battery fire died down, the last rounds falling five minutes before Zero Hour. A sudden dead silence lay over the whole desert.

Quickly, the gun detachments of the 544 25-pounders and 48 4.5-inch and 5.5-inch guns involved in the pre-Z hour neutralization programme made their final preparations for the long programme of mixed concentration and barrage that was to support the infantry assault. They knew that the infantry were already walking forward, bayonets fixed.

More of the green metal ammunition boxes were opened, the gunners working quickly and quietly, stripped to the waist, and although the night air was chilly, they were already hot and would soon be dripping with sweat.

The GPO gave the order necessary to lay the guns on the first serial of the fire plan and one by one the gun Sergeants reported ready and were acknowledged by the GPO with, "Down No 2, down No 4," and so on. The last seconds ticked by till at last, sixteen seconds before Zero, when the first shell was due to burst on its target, there was a terse command, from the GPO :

Serial 1, Fire!

To those of the enemy at that moment looking towards the east, the horizon turned pink and for a brief few seconds an astonished silence reigned - and then the noise of the guns was heard.

¹⁷ 1st S A Division Operation Order. No 46. 18.10.1942.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ *Gunners of the Cape*, p 208.

The Battle of Alamein had begun.

The storm of fire from 882 field and medium guns that burst on an unsuspecting enemy was an experience never to be forgotten. The trumpeting of the "Alamein barrage" echoes still within the memories of those who heard it.²⁰

As Capt Grant Murray of the 5th Seaforth Highlanders, who was out with a patrol covering the Start line, later wrote,

"... As zero drew near I twisted round and looked back towards our own lines. Suddenly the whole horizon went pink and for a second or two there was still perfect silence, and then the noise of 8th Army's guns hit us in a solid wall of sound that made the whole earth shake ..."²¹

Everywhere men who were not engaged stood and watched entranced at the long line of leaping gun flashes ripping open the night sky and listened to the urgent and compelling roar. The "maddening incessant clamour of the guns became deafening", and Commanders of divisions and brigades found it difficult to go back to their headquarters and wait for news from the attacking battalions.²²

Close behind the artillery barrage, which soon obscured everything in its area with dust and smoke, the leading infantry companies advanced in line, two or three yards between each man, at a steady pace of 100 yards in two minutes until they reached the edge of the first minefield.

If the opening barrage shook even the men who were expecting it, its immediate effect on Panzer Armee Afrika was shattering. Dazed by the suddenness and violence of the bombardment in depth their counteraction was slow and for a long time few of their guns spoke, so that the attacking infantry got away to a clean start.

It was a long time before Stumme's headquarters knew what was happening and, so little did he appreciate the impact of the occasion that his uppermost thought was to conserve his limited stocks of ammunition. The ravaged communications gave only the scantiest and uncertain information on what was happening and against advice, General Georg Stumme went forward to the front lines to see for himself the state of affairs. He appeared to have died of a heart attack when he fell off his vehicle²³ after it ran into a storm of fire, leaving Panzer Armee Afrika for several hours without a commander.

For the fifteen minutes of the CB fire the guns of XXX Corps supported by the Desert Air Force, pounded the known enemy gun positions and ammunition dumps, without reply and not until after the first hour did the enemy fire become serious.²⁴

As far as the gunners were concerned the battle lasted for 12 days, during which time the 8th Army gunners fired, often for hours on end, an immense quantity of ammunition, the 25 pdrs alone firing over one million rounds. In the first twenty four hours the 25 pdrs supporting 30 Corps fired on an average 577 rounds per gun,²⁵ the guns of 1st Field Regiment SAA (PAOCFA) expending 656 rounds per gun in the first six hours whilst the total expenditure by the 3 South African units during the night of 23 October was 62500 rounds. The guns gave full support to the South African infantry units in the grim battle of position which raged along the Miteiriya Ridge.

During the whole battle the 834 25 pdrs in 8th Army fired on an average 102 r.p.g. per day. The expenditure for medium artillery was higher, 133 r.p.g. per day for 4.5-inch guns and 157 r.p.g. per day, for the 5.5-inch guns.

²⁰ *Alamein*, p 122.

²¹ *El Alamein* (Carver), p 109.

²² *Alamein*, p 123.

²³ *Ibid*, p 164.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 129.

²⁵ *Gunpit News*, August 1976, p 32.

Tributes to the gunners have been paid by Montgomery and others, but perhaps the most telling comes from the German commander, General Erwin Rommel. He wrote, "The British bombarded our known positions with extraordinary accuracy, and enormous casualties resulted."²⁶

For the gun detachments much of the battle was a most exhausting time but the most striking feature - never used on such a scale before - was the ability of one observer to direct regimental and divisional concentrations in a matter of minutes on to new targets, a logical development of a system of centralised control of artillery with which to bring the concentrated fire of two or more regiments of artillery onto a target, first used in the Second World War by the three regiments of the South African Divisional artillery, and 7th Medium Regiment, RA, on 1 July 1942 when their converging fire caused the German 90th Light Division to panic and break off their first attack on the Alamein Box.²⁷ It was an action during which 1st Field Regiment SAA (PAOCFA) fired over 8 000 rounds in one day.

Of the three field regiments of the South African Artillery in 1st South African Division at Alamein, only two remain.

7th Field Regiment was merged with 23rd Field Regiment on 1 October 1943 to form 7/23rd Medium Regiment SAA and with effect 1 May 1946 7th Medium Regiment (3TS) SAA emerged from the combined unit, 23 Medium Regiment having been disestablished. 7th Medium (3TS) SAA was disbanded and disestablished on 1 March 1960.

1st Field Regiment SAA (P.A.O.C.F.A.) amalgamated with 6th Field Regiment SAA on 1 October 1943 to become 1/6th Field Regiment SAA (P.A.O.C.F.A.) under which designation it fought during the Italian campaign of 1944/45 but it reverted to 1st Field Regiment in 1946 and is today known as Cape Field Artillery. It is the oldest volunteer or non-regular army artillery unit in the world still available for operational service having been formed on 1 August 1857 and is the senior unit of the Citizen Force.

Not only was CFA involved in the famous Alamein "barrage" but is also the only South African artillery unit to have taken part in the even more impressive demonstration of artillery fire power at Cassino, Italy, on 11 May 1943. In seven days 1554 guns in a ground role fired 1 590 700 rounds of ammunition and one innovation worth mentioning is the use of a "William" (Army) target for the first time. 600 guns of 8th and 5th Armies fired on this target at 20 minutes notice.²⁸

4th Field Regiment, also served as a combined unit during the Italian Campaign in an SP role as 4/22nd Field Regiment.

Reformed as 4th Field Regiment at the end of the Italian Campaign as a unit of the Active Citizen Force it became a Permanent Force unit in 1946 and is today known as 4 Artillery Regiment, with headquarters at Potchefstroom.

This unit can trace its line of descent from the Artillery Troop of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police formed in 1874, making it the second oldest artillery regiment in the Country.

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²⁶ *Ibid*, p 31.

²⁷ *The Crucible of War*, pp 139, 140 and *Gunners at War* (Bidwell), p 185.

²⁸ *The Gunner*, April 1969.

LIST OF SOURCES OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS ETC

(i) Gun Drill for QF. 25-PR, Mark II. Gun on Carriage 25-PR., Mark 1. 1944. The War Office, 9th October, 1944.

(ii) 1st S.A. Division Operation Order No. 46, 18 October 1942.

(iii) Gun Programme of "A" Sub-Section Able Troop, 1st Field Battery, 1st Field Regiment, South African Artillery (P.A.O.C.F.A.), from Regimental records.

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(i) "The Gunner" - *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, April 1969.

(ii) "Gunpit News" - *Journal of the Cape Field Artillery*, Vol 20, No 1, August 1976, containing an article extracted from the Royal Artillery Journal

(iii) Notes gathered by the Author over many years