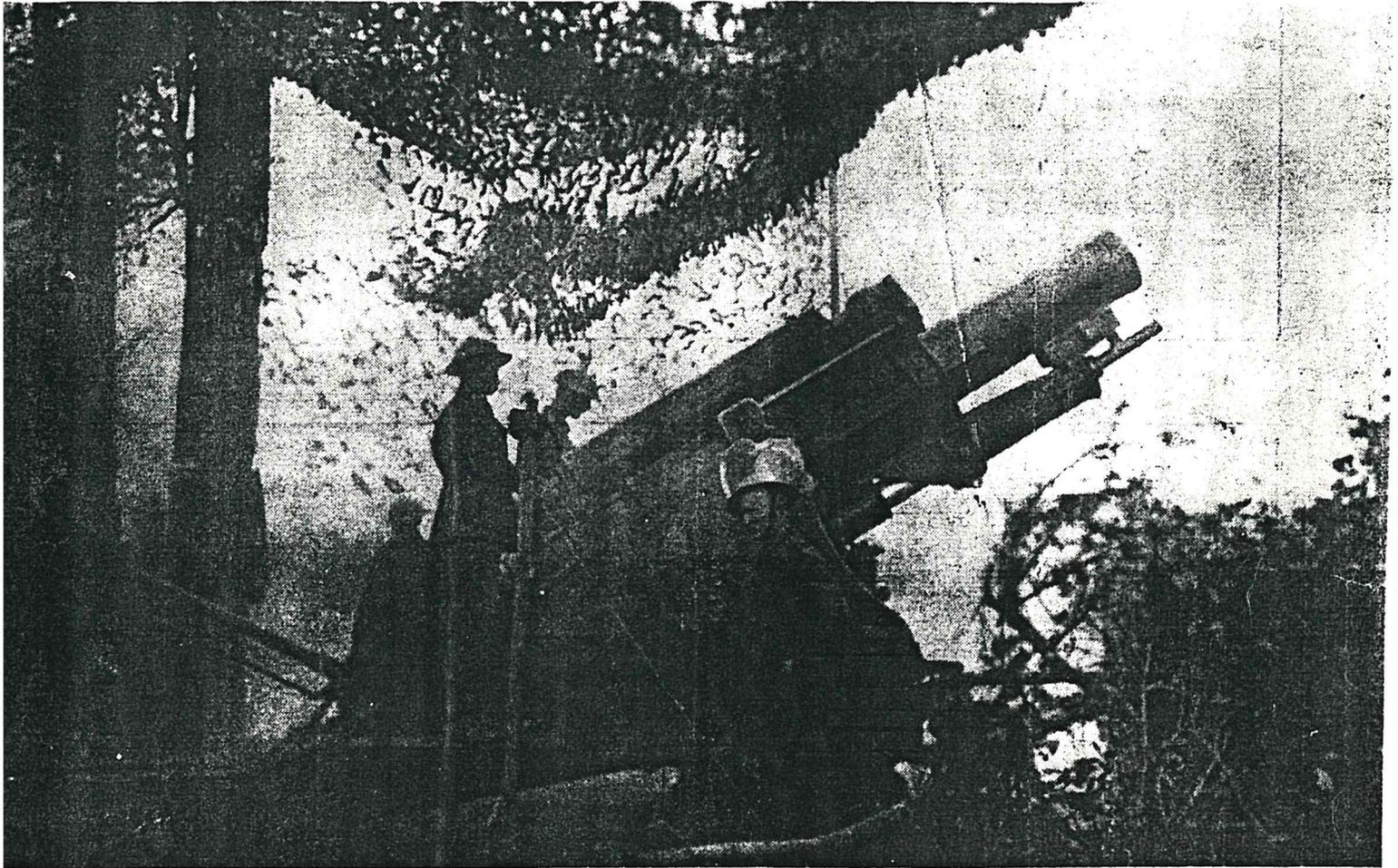


STAND-TO

Vol. 6. No. 5.



Sept., 1957-Oct., 1958



A 9.2-inch howitzer of the 55th (Australian) Siege Battery in action at Voormezele, near Ypres, 13th September, 1917.

(Australian War Memorial Official Photograph)

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Sept., 1957-Oct., 1958

THE CAPTURE OF GIARABUB

By James Calvert

FRIDAY the fourteenth of March, 1941. Reveille 0400 hours, battalion parade 0800 hours.

It was at this parade that our C.O., Lieutenant-Colonel J. E. G. ("Sparrow") Martin, personally inspected every man of the unit, after which he explained to us his reason for doing so. He told us that some time within the next week or so we would take action against the enemy for the first time in our short but not uneventful history. He thanked us for our co-operation and hard work during the training period, and forecast that we would make for ourselves a splendid record and gain distinction in the field. Events proved him right. He then expressed regret that some of us might be absent from our next battalion parade.

Colonel Martin, who came from Rockhampton, on Queensland's central north-coast, was a civil engineer. A slightly built man of medium height, 36 years old at that time, with dark brown, almost black, hair and a small moustache, he was stern but just, a strict disciplinarian who demanded the best of himself as he did of those who worked for him. The 2/9th's successes in the field were due in no small measure to his hard work and his insistence on a full and carefully planned training programme at all times. How we cursed him at times for his ruthless insistence that manoeuvres be carried out to the last detail, and the least instruction complied with.

At the end of the parade we moved off in full marching order, carrying all platoon weapons, and an hour or so later arrived in Ikingi Maryut, hot and dusty. It was little jaunts such as this which really brought home to us the (?) joys of infanteering. From Ikingi Maryut we entrained for Mersa Matruh, which was to be our first stop on the way to Giarabub. The powers-that-be had decided that this desert fortress must no longer be retained by the enemy, and we were the instrument chosen to take it from him. There was great jubilation throughout all ranks of the battalion that we were soon to get "stuck into it." This, we said, was what we wanted: we'd show them all what *we* could do now, after hearing so much about what the other chaps had been doing farther north. We were filled with an arrogant confidence which augured well for the success of our undertaking.

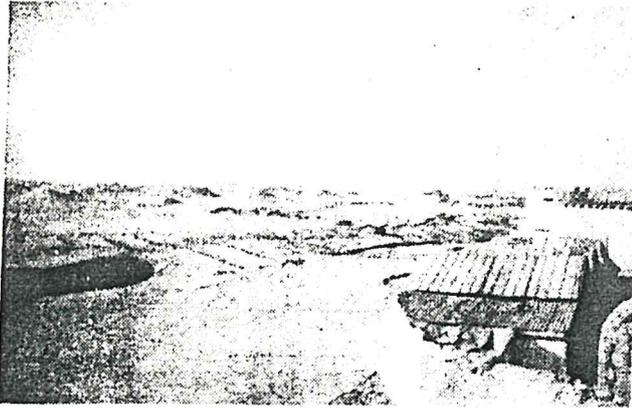
So we slowly rolled along in those Gyppo trains, and, following a hold-up of some two hours at Oneida, in a sizzling sandstorm, finally arrived at Mersa at 3 a.m. After some delay and messing round we had a slight snack and went for a stroll through the town, which showed all the signs of a military occupation, but at this time was apparently uninhabited by civilians. Some time later the whole battalion travelled a few kilos in trucks to what appeared to have been an Italian barracks, which bore signs and many scars of war. Dossing on concrete floors, we were beset by an army of fleas, for which we made choice feeding. Quite a restless night resulted from this combination, as did a few frayed tempers of the morrow.



The Author

Here it was that I renewed acquaintance with another ex-Northern Territorian, Ted Martin by name, whose father had managed Victoria River Downs Station for many years. This station, depending on seasonal conditions, branded between thirty and forty thousand calves each year. Ted was a member of "B" Company of the 2/10th Battalion. This company, plus the Vickers platoon of the 2/10th, was with us as a reserve. After some talk of horses and cattle, Ted and I and a number of others went for a swim, only to discover that the waters of the Mediterranean are much colder than we had anticipated.

Leaving Mersa about 10 a.m. on Sunday in R.A.S.C. trucks, we got the greatest shaking-up ever. All will remember the troop carriers, three-tonners I think they were, sprung like a railway loco, and built to carry maximum load with minimum give.



Corner of Giarabub fort. Brown's Knob in the distance.

Anyway, after a few miles of good road we ploughed straight off into the desert, and quite a time was had by all. Spending most of the trip "airborne," it seemed to us that the only times we really came to earth were on the occasions when our truck got stuck in loose sand and everybody had to get out and, after a great deal of spitting, shoving and swearing, persuade it to part company reluctantly with the bog in favour of firmer ground. All of us would then climb aboard again and the driver would set off after the main convoy, ignoring other bogged trucks on the way; we did our best to help their crews and passengers by shouting advice and ribald comments as we sailed by. Of course they had their revenge, as our truck was bogged a number of times that day.

Our course this day lay over true desert, arid and mostly flat. Here and there, however, some scattered features jutted straight up out of the ground like monoliths. After going about ninety miles, the convoy halted in the late evening and, following a meal of biscuits and "bully," we rolled into our blankets to spend a bitterly cold night under the stars, the brilliance of which had to be seen to be believed.

Next day we broke camp at 9 a.m. and an hour later crossed the Egypt-Libya border. Shortly afterwards there occurred an incident which left me with a lifelong antipathy to "goldfish" (herrings in tomato). According to our orders the convoy was not to halt for the mid-day meal, so we decided to have a snack in the truck as it rolled and bounced and bumped along. Goldfish being decided on, young Bernie Roser opened a tin and was handing it to me when the truck gave a huge bump. Up we went, goldfish and all, then down we came. The reactions of the fish and the humans were not quite the same: the humans went up and down individually, whereas the goldfish stuck together until they landed on my head, tin upside down, after which each fish went its separate way, trailed by a copious flow of juice and essence of tomato. I had received more than my allotted portion.

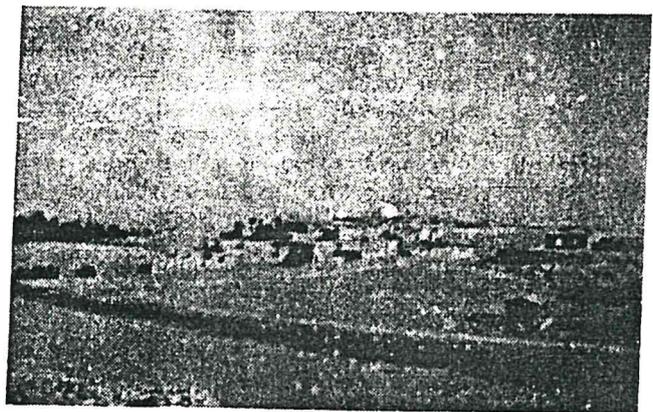
This night we camped within thirty miles of Giarabub. As before, it was bitterly cold. Hereabouts

the country was very arid, apparently no vegetation of any kind, although we could see what appeared to be a lake in the distance. It was a country of many colours, mainly reddish, with black and orange based on grey dominating the many features which on all sides rose abruptly out of the desert in almost sheer cliffs. Shells of long deceased crustaceans were everywhere, also coral-like substances embedded in the cliff walls — everything had the appearance of being worn by wind and water, and we thought it strange to discover here these evidences of some form of marine life. I have seen similar country in Australia.

After being at this spot for some hours, we were issued with extra Bren magazines and S.A.A. Gunfire could now be heard in the direction of Giarabub, indicating a softening-up process on some outposts, which had to be reduced before the assault on the fortress proper could be attempted. It was here that we discovered that all trace of oil must be removed from the Bren mags, because the oil collected dust and sand which clogged them to such an extent that the rounds would not feed down. Dry magazines fed reasonably well.

Embussing once more, we progressed for an hour or so until another breakdown occurred, when it was decided to camp where we were for the rest of the night. At 0700 hours we started out to rejoin the main body, catching up with it about three hours later. We were in a friendlier country now, small lakes could be seen, vegetation was plentiful, and there were signs of wild life, small groups of gazelle-like creatures being seen in the distance. After lunch, as there was nothing to do but wait, "A" Company organised a game of cricket. I can visualise the scene quite clearly to-day. I was number-one on a Bren gun mounted for anti-aircraft work on a small eminence, and, as danger from aircraft was slight, I relaxed in the warm afternoon sun as if I was in the stand at the 'Gabba in Brisbane. The players were more energetic than skilful, but the barrackers were both, their good-natured criticism pungent and blasphemous. As things turned out, it proved to be the last game ever for some of these boys.

"A" Company did a recon this night, feeling



The Mosque at Giarabub, surrounded by dwellings of the Senussi.

out the enemy wire for weakness. They ran into a little trouble and lost a platoon truck. "Brown's Knob" was captured after a good deal of opposition, opening the way for our main assault which would take place on the morrow. Or so we believed then.

On Thursday, March 20th, we left this camp at 1035 hours and, after a few more trials and tribulations, including a further breakdown, arrived within striking distance of our objective. A meal of sorts was provided here, followed (unless my memory plays me false) by a conference of the company officers and senior N.C.O's.

Moving out at 1930, on foot this time, we shortly came under fire for the first time from ground weapons, fortunately without suffering a casualty. After an hour-or-so's marching, the various rifle companies went their different ways. "A" Company spent another hour in false starts and fossicking round, and finally reached a rather deep hollow protected on all sides from enemy fire. Here we stayed until we moved on to the start-line next morning. The rest we enjoyed was good, for the going had been through heavy sand, up, down, and round hills. It was now 2330 hours, quite cool, and our K.D. shirts and shorts, sweat soaked, were cold and clammy; so we settled down with our one ground-sheet per man to wait it out.

The decision that we were to wear shorts was, to me, just another instance that the basic idea behind infantry training and practice was to make the soldier so bloody miserable and fed-up that he would conclude that it was just as easy to go out and get shot anyway. That night the enemy must have been aware of our position, from the rattling of our bones in concert as we shivered and the numerous comments we made on the so-and-so's who had decided that shirts and shorts were the appropriate dress for this stunt at this time and season. The genealogical trees of quite a number of persons were referred to in no uncertain terms. Then, huddling in pairs for warmth under our ground-sheets, we talked of those things which come unbidden into men's minds and hearts on occasions such as this. Sleep was out of the question. Half-an-hour after midnight a gale arose, filling the air with flying sand to such an extent that even the most garrulous gave up the unequal struggle and subsided into an uneasy quiet which seemed intensified by the eerie noise of the wind and the pattering of wind-blown sand like little feet running over our capes.

Desultory M.M.G.s and mortar fire persisted throughout the early hours of the morning. At 4.30 a.m. we filed past our company commander, Captain R. F. ("Bull") Reidy, getting a handshake and good wishes from him. Reidy, a cane farmer from Mackay, was a fine man, and capable, who would, in my opinion, have made a name for himself had he been spared. Standing over six feet in height, broad of shoulder, dark visaged, with a small moustache, and keen eyed, he was forceful and direct. Just on 29, with the confident bearing of healthy youth, he was an easy man to approach, and of good sense, and a keen, conscientious, hard-working soldier. He was killed later this day in our own barrage without having fired a shot at the enemy; a tragic waste of

superb material. "A" Company never had a commander of his calibre again during my time with the unit.

Giarabub's central piece was a white mosque with a large dome and a smaller one, and a large tower and a minaret, all reaching to a height of about fifty feet and sitting on top of and athwart the usual courtyards. The priests' quarters and the tomb of Ben Ali el Senussi — founder of the Senussi sect, and grandfather to the then spiritual leader of the Senussi — are under the large dome. Surrounding the mosque are the dwellings (mud huts) of the faithful, which on the west are flanked by the oasis proper, an area, perhaps half-a-mile square, of date and other palms, irrigation channels and wells.

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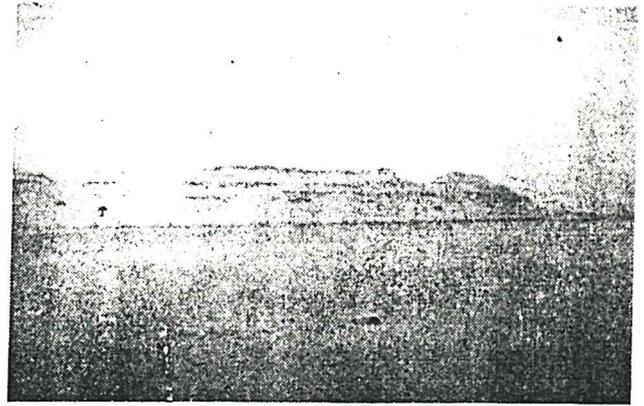
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Farther out is open, flat country half-way to the horizon, then broken country with small round features dotted about, building up in the south-east, east, and north-east into a rugged natural battlement to a height of some two hundred feet. The whole area was surrounded by barbed-wire defences. Within this again and dominating the area was a large "Foreign Legion" type of fortress set atop a natural feature about fifty feet high, and surrounded by a strong inner defence work of barbed wire. All the land between the various features was flat sand; and the whole was bathed in brilliant sunshine with a good deal of reflected glare. The various features "crawled" with weapon pits, gun emplacements and breastworks, and comprised a very strong defensive position, one that I should not have cared to tackle had it been manned by a determined force of Germans. However, it fell to our arms like a ripe plum.

On the evening of the 20th the guns of our supporting artillery (25-pounders of the Royal Horse Artillery) had ranged on their targets with their usual precision, and about 5 o'clock next morning they opened their barrage just as No. 9 Platoon was filing on to its start line. The first salvos fell among us, creating dismay and confusion, at the same time killing and wounding a number of men. In all, No. 9 Platoon lost about half its strength in this barrage, seven being killed and two dying of their wounds. The artillery F.O.O. was shelled out of his position and his signal wire cut, and it was some minutes before the breaks could be located and repaired and contact re-established with the guns. We had three men named McDonald in "A" Company — and it is a strange fact that the three of them were killed within a few minutes of each other.

This was our first experience of shell-fire. The noise and the flashes of bursting shells, with which were intermingled the cries of suddenly startled men, and the groans of the wounded, were shockingly frightening. We were so unprepared, it was so unexpected. This was the enemy's portion, not ours. Again the baroom-boom of our guns, the thin whine of the approaching shells, a screaming crash and flashes of light, redly orange, blinding in their strange brilliance. Then silence. We were smothered in choking sand, fumes and smoke. These were our own shells falling among us.

Suddenly I shouted loudly, "Get back, get back, it's our own guns falling short." I was standing upright, as if frozen with the shock of it all. Some had gone to ground. Again I called, "Get back! Get back!" and threw myself down as another salvo whined towards us. Once more the crashes, and the flashes of brilliant light. Followed by others I moved to the left rear as the next salvo boomed from the guns, and so to earth again. I felt a furious impotence of anger at the horror of it all, at our own shells, killing and maiming our mates. Making a number of such moves, I again went to ground, when "crash" — it was as if my body bounced in a crazy blasting flash of hot gases and sand. A shell had burst a few feet dead ahead of me. The throat strap of my tin hat tore at my neck, my eyes were forced back into my head, my mouth gaped open. Dazed



Defensive position at Giarabub captured by "A" Company, 2/4th Battalion, 21st March, 1941.

and a little shocked I lay there, not knowing whether I was injured or not. Strangely unafraid, I think now that the sensation of fear had exhausted itself.

Roy Held, a lad of 16, told me afterwards that he was just in front of Captain Reidy, who was with No. 9 Platoon when the barrage came down. "We all stopped dead," he said, "and I heard someone sing out to get back, that it was our shells. Reidy grabbed me, threw me down and fell on top of me. Shells kept falling all round us, but he told me not to worry, that it would be all right. I was seared. After the shelling stopped I still lay there, for Reidy hadn't got up, but when it started to get light I said to him that I thought we could get up now. He didn't move or say anything, so I wriggled out and had a look at him. He didn't move when I spoke to him, and as a lot of other chaps were lying about I cleared out." It seems fairly clear that "Bull" Reidy deliberately protected Held with his own body. It was the sort of thing he would do; and the youngster was quite sure that Reidy had saved his life. Incidentally, when Held "cleared out" (as he termed it), he travelled in the right direction, through the wire to our first objective.

After some minutes the gunners lifted their range — the shells sang a different tune, and could now be heard passing overhead. A welcome sound. For a minute or so I did not move, then, rather shaken, I regained my feet. It was now about 0520 hours, and still dark. Starting forward, I almost stumbled across a body. A few feet to the right was another lifeless figure, and beyond it was a man whose head moved. I called out, "Who is it, who's that?" A voice, groaning in pain, said, "Don't touch me, for Christ's sake don't touch me, I've got it in the back." Recognising the voice, I called him by name, adding, "It's Calvert here." He replied, "It's me, Jim, don't touch me mate, my hips are gone."

Feeling indescribably saddened, I stood erect. This was a little chap who had joined us as a reinforcement about two months before. He was a real wag, fond of a rough and tumble, and a likeable player of harmless jokes.

Other bodies were lying around; dead, wounded, or not, I went to no more. Walking on, I called out, "9 Section, where are you?" There was no response.

Feeling queerly lonesome, and worried, I walked about loudly calling, "9 Section, 9 Platoon." There was movement now. Men started to get up, moving towards each other. I heard Mo. Coates calling for his brother, whom I knew to be dead behind me; others called for their mates, and I called for Jim Mitchell — all without result. There were now about a dozen of us. As no one appeared to be taking charge, I said — "We'll have to go on, we can't let this stop us." No one seemed to care much one way or the other, so I repeated, "Come on, we'll have to go," at the same time moving towards where I knew the wire to be. The others followed, bunched up.

Coming to the wire, we missed the gap blown for us by the Royal Engineers, so two or three moved to the right, the others and myself to the left. We found the gap within a few yards. Moving at a jog trot and calling loudly to the others who now ran back along the wire, we quickly covered the seventy or eighty yards up a 35-degree slope of sand to the base of the main feature. 20-mm. and M.M.G. fire was now passing overhead, the tracers being plainly seen, and all of it crackling. Luckily for us, the I-ties had not dropped their range.

Here we found a few men of No. 7 Platoon who were surprised to see us. Moving on again, we saw some I-ties coming out from what, in the half-light, appeared to be a small cave or dugout in the face of the cliff. I shot the first one who slumped to the ground. The others dropped their weapons, putting up their hands and huddling together. Realising there was no further danger from them, I made a kick at one fellow, pointing down the slope the way we had come. With their hands still high in the air, they moved hopefully away. Poor devils, I think they had expected short shrift. Perhaps they would have got it, too, had we not suffered ourselves. What we had been through already certainly helped me to a better understanding of their feelings.

On we went, round the end of a stone wall built out a few feet from the face of the cliff and rising slightly as it followed the curve of the face. With Bernie Roser and "Dinny" Sheehan following, I ran along inside this wall, passing an abandoned 20-mm. Breda automatic, then round an angle on to an M.M.G. post, manned, but not firing our way. I

shot one of its crew, and before I could reload the remainder fled up a path to the left leading to the top of the feature. Roser and I chased after them, but by the time we reached the top they had disappeared. Quickly ranging over the summit, about three hundred feet long by a hundred feet wide, we heard excited Italian voices below us at the south-eastern corner. Just as we started down I lost my footing, and half-sliding, half-scrambling the remaining few feet, created quite a commotion, which evidently proved too much for the nerves of these I-ties. However, as they fled, one of them pitched a "pillar-box" grenade which exploded to my left front, fragments hitting me about the face, the left hand, and arm. One piece penetrated my top lip, lacerating the gum, and another went in under the left eyebrow, both sticking where they hit.

Roser and I fired together, causing one of the Italians to fall. On setting off in pursuit of the others we heard shots and cries, so slackened up. Some men of No. 8 Platoon had intercepted them. At this stage Roser drew attention to my face, and I plucked out the offending pieces of metal. No real harm had been done. These I-tie grenades got their name "pillar-box" (or "post-box") from their shape and the fact that they were painted red. They were a percussion job, being detonated by a steel ball, about three-quarters of an inch in diameter, which dropped on to the primer when the grenade was thrown. Depending mainly on blast for effect, the most lethal part was the metal ball. The casing itself was very thin and possessed no real powers of penetration.

By now the sun was just about up, so we moved to our left into a shallow gully and made in the direction of the enemy. Suddenly we came under fire from a mountain gun sited on top of a feature to the right (west) of the one we were now on. After a number of shells had been fired, some of the attackers apparently got on to it or else the gunners deserted, for the shelling ceased. Roser and I now discovered a number of Italians and two Australians, one of them Commano of the headquarters signal platoon. Both Australians were rather shocked, and Commano was badly wounded in the left leg. Using

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his own field dressing and another, we dressed his wound, and then had a look at the I-ties who were lying back against a sloping bank. One was dead; another was nearly so. A third had been hit in the stomach, and two of the others were shocked and quite harmless. I felt sorry for them, caught in their own fire as we had been in ours; after searching them, we started them off, those who could walk, towards the gap in the wire.

The whole situation was very confused, or so it seemed to me. Small parties of our men had roamed about the area neutralising opposition as they got on to it. No. 8 Platoon of "A" Company, like our platoon, had been caught in the initial barrage with the loss of some of its men and because of this the survivors of both platoons were to some extent disorganised.

Bernie and I now returned to the front of the feature we had first assaulted, and found a group of "A" Company talking and smoking outside a sunken dugout. He and I rolled our first smoke for about fourteen hours. After a few minutes, he said he could hear someone moving about down below. One man accordingly pelted a Mills grenade down the dugout opening, but it was lobbed back outside again a minute or so later, quite intact. Our thrower had forgotten to remove the pin. Soon we coaxed a brave soul to come out, and he then persuaded the others, about eight all told. The incident amused us: the Italians lying doggo for so long, the throwing of the grenade, and the shamefaced look of the I-ties when they came up. We searched them, a bit of souveniring taking place at the same time. I endeavoured to remove a watch from the wrist of one young chap, but he became so upset that tears ran down his face as he made me understand that his mother had given it to him — so I hadn't the heart to persist. Probably someone else relieved him of it later. We gave them some smokes, and as all opposition had ceased in our section, some of us escorted the Italians to where a number of other prisoners were moving towards the gap in the wire.

On returning to our mates, we found a number of officers in conference, including Captain Fleming, now commanding "A" Company, Captain Berry, Lieutenant Beal (9 Pln.), and Lieutenant Joyce (7 Pln.). The survivors of No. 9 Platoon were called together, and we were led away to rest. We took no further part in the action, which was in any case drawing to an end. We were few, 14 all told out of 37 who had moved to the start-line.

At this point I must say something about Bernie Roser, who had stood by me throughout the morning's action. In the days to come we were to fight side by side on many occasions. Although a boy in years, he was a quiet and resourceful soldier, with a steadfast courage that never deserted him. Born somewhere outside of Clermont in Queensland's central north, he was at this time about 5ft. 8in. in height, with good shoulders and strongly built in a slim way. He had, I think, been a station hand. Black haired, clean shaven, brown eyed, he possessed the longest vision and the most acute hearing of any person I ever knew. He received few letters,

and never a parcel to my knowledge. He talked very little about himself, but I gathered that his background had not been a happy one. We were firm friends.

All this time of course the attack was being pressed home by our other companies, assisted by the 6th Division Cavalry. By mid-day, Giabarub was almost completely in our hands, only an odd pocket or two of resistance still remaining to be cleaned up. Some of the defenders fought stubbornly and with courage; others resisted hardly at all, or at best made but a token resistance. They seemed without the will to fight, and once we got close to them they gave up. Reports we received at the time gave the enemy casualties at 350 killed and wounded, and 1,200 captured.* This does not take into account any Senussi who may unfortunately have suffered injury.

After we of No. 9 Platoon had rested for a couple of hours we had some "bully" and biscuits. We then walked half-a-mile or so to take a look at the position where we had been caught by our barrage. By then the dead had been picked up and placed in a row covered by their capes, awaiting burial.

The question as to why we were trapped in our barrage has been asked many times to my knowledge and no satisfactory answer has ever been given. My theory is that the heavy wind which blew throughout the night may have caused some fractional displacement of the guns, or perhaps the heavier, more humid air (showers of rain fell overnight), dust-laden as it was, may have affected the flight of the shells. Moreover, the bitterly cold weather may have affected the charges. Some there were who said we were too far forward, that "Bull" Reidy had made a fatal error. This I could not believe then, nor do I believe it to-day. Reidy knew his job and made no error. No. 8 Platoon was also caught in this barrage, losing a number of men. But they, like us, were well outside the designated target area. Another thing — would the artillery F.O.O., who was shelled out of his observation post, have been too far forward? Certainly not. On exploring the ground that afternoon we discovered that shells had

*The Australian Official History says that it was estimated that 250 Italians were killed and 1,300 taken prisoner of whom 100 had been wounded.

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Jim Mitchell (of Stanthorpe, Q'land) beside a 20-mm. Breda gun captured at Giarabub.

fallen as far as a hundred yards behind the position No. 9 Platoon had taken up. It was, to me at least, just one of those tragic but unaccountable incidents which happen occasionally, even where conditions are far better than they were at Giarabub that morning.*

The 25-pounder shell was a deadly missile against troops in the open — our enemies feared it intensely. About $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, perhaps 15 inches long, it was milled along its length with closely set lines, probably to assist fragmentation, and it had an instantaneous percussion fuse, a very low bursting height, and complete fragmentation. All the splinters I ever saw ranged in length from about an inch up to possibly six to eight inches, but they were never more than an inch wide. Every edge was serrated, giving great cutting effect. The holes blasted by the explosion of these shells, even on the desert, were never more than twelve inches deep — usually they were much less — but the lips of the craters were wider.

In spite of this initial disaster, great credit is due to the R.H.A. battery for the way in which it supported us during the operation. In the space of a few hours its guns ranged on many targets over the entire area. Although warned not to harm the mosque, they were inevitably given targets in close proximity to it, but they did not so much as land a shell splinter on any portion of it. These Senussi were friendly to us, even though in Giarabub they were under the domination of the Italians. The ones I spoke to later during a visit to their mosque were civil and friendly without being obsequious.

A fine job was also done for us by a detachment of the Royal Engineers, six in number, who blew the wire-entanglement in a number of places with Bangalore torpedoes. They were under heavy fire the whole time — one of them was shot through the body and died later. He and another wounded

*The Official History records that the artillerymen had found the range when a very strong tail wind was blowing and they opened fire on the 21st in a still fiercer head wind. The adjustments made were evidently not sufficient, and after the first phase the guns were not used because the sandstorm prevented accurate observation.

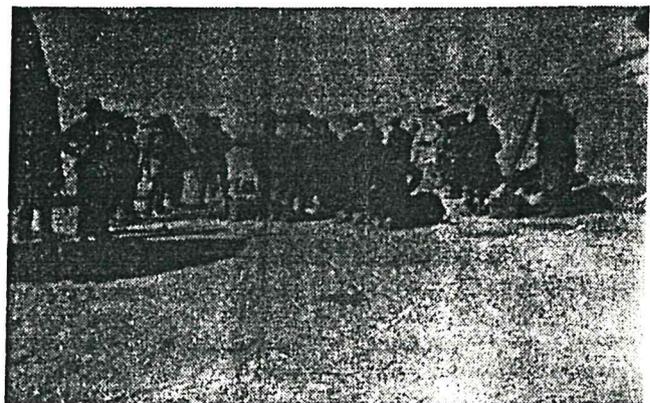
sapper were carried out by one of their own detachment.

Later in the afternoon of the 21st we marched along a track to the oasis proper, where we had a good clean-up and a hot meal. Sentries were posted from 1800 hours, my shift falling from 2200 to 2400 hours. The remainder of the night I spent in very uneasy sleep. Next morning there were "no parades or duties," so off we went souvenir-hunting.

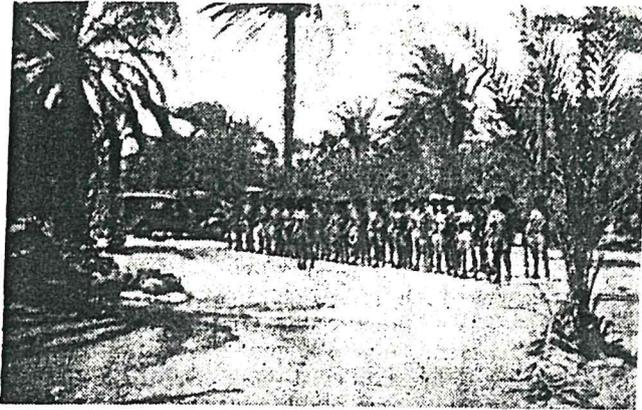
I got two revolvers, one of which I gave to young Held, together with a few rounds I had found to suit them. A few other trifles were picked up, Jack Avery just beating me to a good camera. Jim Mitchell and I then wandered over the whole battle area, taking snaps and picking up anything else to be found. Like many others, we visited the mosque. On taking off our boots at the request of the dignitaries in charge, we were made most welcome and were shown through the buildings, items of interest being pointed out to us by our guides, who made it clear how proud they were not only of their mosque, but also of their important positions in the scheme of things.

On returning to camp we heard that our dead were to be buried at mid-day, and that a guard-of-honour had been formed. The service, however, had to be postponed for an hour, as five Italian bombers came over and bombed and machine-gunned the area about that time, fortunately without loss to us. After lunch I was again ordered to report to the R.A.P., and, having done so, settled down for a couple of hours sleep, as I was very stiff and sore, no doubt due to the shell blast the previous day.

Shortly after 11 a.m. on March 23rd an Italian bomber came over and departed without leaving any gift. An hour later we moved out of Giarabub by truck and after going about sixty miles, made camp at 1715 hours. Next morning we started at half-past six, but an hour or so later our driver pulled up to inform us that his generator was not charging. In the manner of Australians the world over, we all tumbled out, more than willing to diagnose the trouble. The bonnet was lifted and those of us who were able peered knowingly into the works, but our



Italian prisoners-of-war at Australian R.A.P. tents, Giarabub.



Ceremonial party of 2/9th Battalion fallen in at Giarabub oasis, 22nd March, 1941, for the burial service of members of the battalion killed in the fighting.

eager fingers were denied the opportunity to take things apart. It turned out that we had no fan belt! Broken, it had parted company with us and was now lying some miles back along the road. Having no substitute, and discarding various suggestions, all without merit, there was nothing for it but to walk back and find the belt. One or two trucks of the convoy now passed us, but having had their own troubles, our attempts to wave them down were treated with scant respect and ribald comment. Naturally, our driver said he could not leave his truck; we said we were not going to leave it either. However, a compromise was effected, and the driver and one of our chaps set out along the road. As they faded into the distance they presented a rather forlorn appearance. We settled down to smoke and talk, and noted that we were not taking the route we had followed on the outward journey — we were now on an all-weather bitumen road, and the return trip was therefore quite comfortable.

An hour or so later our two stalwarts were seen to be making their way wearily towards us, and in

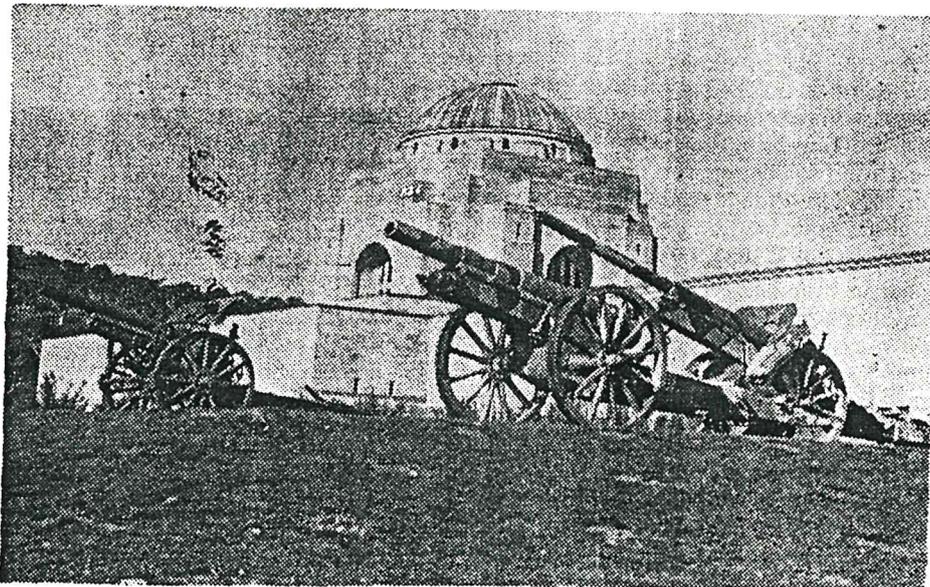
another twenty minutes they arrived with the damaged fan belt, which was soon joined together with some soft wire found in the tool-box. Before long, however, the engine became overheated, due to lack of proper tension on the belt; afterwards we had to stop on a number of occasions, as the engine boiled and the radiator had to be topped up. Finally, we caught up with the convoy after dark, without water, thirsty, and a bit "fed up" with things generally. However, after finding our company "Q" truck and having a drink and a wash and some hot food and tea, we were quickly restored to our normal humour.

On March 25th, after a good sleep and a hearty breakfast, we got away in the lead of the convoy — and with a new fan belt — to cover the ninety miles to Mersa Matruh, which was reached at 11 a.m.

As soon as we had lunch we visited the hospital and talked with those of our wounded mates who were then out of danger and doing well. The next two days we spent resting or swimming and visiting various caretaker and guard detachments. On the second day a number of us made a thorough inspection of the whole area, including the mosque. The civilian population had been evacuated during the latter part of the previous year, so there were no Wogs to worry us. The defensive works around the place were extensive and were well protected by barbed wire and minefields, tank traps, tank blocks and road blocks, while judging by the gun sites the A.A. defences had been good.

We had a stroke of good luck when, mooching round, we came across some Poles doing security guard who introduced us to their canteen. Quite an enjoyable time we had, returning to camp late in the evening with half-a-dozen bottles of beer. At 1930 hours the battalion was paraded and by 2230 we were on our way back to Ikingi Maryut.

So ended our fourteen days' excursion to Giarabub.



German guns, captured in France in 1916-18, in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

(Block by courtesy of
The Canberra Times)

OUR AUTHORS

James Calvert

JAMES CALVERT, whose story of "The Capture of Giarabub" appears in this issue, was born at Manchester on 22nd April, 1910, and educated at the Varna Elementary School in that city, and at night school. After leaving the elementary school he was employed for a time by Crossley Motors, Gorton, and for twelve months as an apprentice moulder at the Gorton L.N.E.R. railway workshops.

His interest in the Antipodes was no doubt stimulated by an older brother, Reuben, who had migrated to Australia at any early age, and later served as a private at Anzac with the 16th Battalion, A.I.F., and in France, with the 4th Divisional Artillery. At any rate, December, 1925, found the fifteen-years-old Jim Calvert arriving in Australia in the old "Hobson's Bay," one of five passenger ships then owned by the Commonwealth Shipping Line. The voyage to a new life half-a-world away was a rugged experience for a youngster —one wonders ruefully how some of the present-day victims of misapplied psychology (including the writer's own son) would have survived it. After arrival he worked for nine months on a mixed farm in the Tumburumba district of southern N.S.W., a wholesome experience after factory work, then for three months wheat-harvesting, followed by a year of sheep-farming near Walwa, Victoria. At the end of that time he left the southern regions for Queensland and the sun, by way of Bourke, Barrington on the New South Wales border and Cunnamulla, where, he declares, his travels really began. He worked on the Eulo bridge, after which he managed a small sheep property for eight weeks during its owner's absence. Thence he went to Blackhall kangaroo shooting on Inniskillen station, followed by sheep droving round Tambo, station hand and shearing shed hand at Winton, and cattle work. On the large, open cattle runs of Clonagh station at Cloncurry, Calvert showed a particular aptitude for working cattle, learned to like handling young horses, and put to use knowledge gained in this field from Australia's one-time champion bareback roughrider, Harry Hawkins, a half-caste aborigine known as "Yellow Harry," whom he first met in 1928, on Minnie Downs station, between Blackall and Tambo. Jim became a better than average roughrider, and enjoyed bullock riding, which he describes as "a wonderful sport."

In December, 1929, Calvert left Clonagh with a mob of cattle, and after delivering them to Yelvertoft station in the Northern Territory, visited Mount Isa and Camooweal.

Thence he went to Victoria River Downs station, by way of Wave Hill, where he worked for some time as a stockman. He remained in the Territory until 1938, doing all kinds of bushwork, meeting and working with Tom Ronan, the author of the prize-winning novels, "Vision Splendid" and "Moleskin Midas." Ronan was also a stockman, and now runs a small property on the Katherine River, near the township of that name. During this period Calvert came close to perishing of thirst on two occasions while scratching for gold in the desert towards the Granites. In January, 1938, having accumulated a healthy roll that was burning in his pockets like hot coals, Jim hopped a plane at Victoria River Downs and ended up in Adelaide. After six weeks or so in that eminently respectable city, he returned to Queensland by way of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, leaving his mark in each capital city as he went. He was employed on Dalgonally station in September, 1939, when war broke out, and, if he remembers rightly, heard the declaration over a battery-operated wireless in the small hours of a Monday morning. Next Saturday, eight young men, including Calvert, drove in to Julia Creek to volunteer, only to learn that no facilities for enlistment existed. For some weeks Jim stayed on the job; then, his martial ardour again getting the better of him, he went to Cloncurry, where he left his horses and gear with a friend and took a train to Townsville. There on 6th December, 1939, he enlisted, but was not formally attested until March, 1940, when he and a large number of others were drafted to Redbank, the large holding centre between Ipswich and Brisbane.

In the last days of April he left Queensland with the 2/9th Battalion for Ingleburn, N.S.W., and on 5th May embarked in the "Mauretania," sailing the same day. If one excludes

a period of seven days pre-embarkation leave, Calvert, when he sailed, had had less than two months elementary and recruit training, but the best basic qualities of the Australian infantryman — initiative, courage, hardihood (plus the fact that he was a first-class marksman) — were all his in rich measure. The "Mauretania" was of the third convoy — containing "Queen Mary," "Empress of Britain," "Empress of Canada," "Empress of Japan," "Aquitania" and "Andes" — and was diverted to England, disembarking at Gourrock on the Clyde on 17th June, 1940. After it had left Capetown, "Lord Haw Haw" had broadcast details of the convoy, its approximate position, and a message from Hitler to the effect that the convoy would never reach England. It was not the least of Hitler's miscalculations. From Freetown the convoy was escorted by the aircraft carrier "Argus," the battle-cruiser "Hood," two cruisers, and a flock of destroyers.

For most of the Australians in the 18th and 25th Brigades the sojourn in embattled England and during the critical months of 1940 was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. It was doubly so for an Englishman serving in the A.I.F. They met the King, were treated to a rousing impromptu speech by the visiting Winston Churchill, and the English people took them into their hearts and homes.

By the end of 1940 the threat to England had subsided. In December the 2/9th left Glasgow in the "Strathaird" for the Middle East, via Durban, arriving at Alexandria on the 31st of the month, and reaching Ikingi Maryut in the morning of New Year's Day, 1941. There it remained in hard training until 4th February, when it embarked in the "Ulster Prince" and set sail (as Calvert to this point in time believed) for Greece at 1600 hours. At 1800 hours the troopship met units of the Mediterranean Fleet, signals were exchanged, and the "Ulster Prince" altered course and returned to Alexandria, where the troops disembarked and returned to camp at Ikingi Maryut. Security must have been exceptionally sound in the 2/9th. In fact, when the "Ulster Prince" sailed on 4th February the battalion was bound for Tobruk, where an advance party of the 18th Brigade was already established. The ship was turned back because of enemy mines sown in Tobruk Harbour and along the coast. The battalion remained for a time on 12 hours notice to move, then 24 hours notice, then 36; finally it was discovered that the 2/9th was last in the order of priority to move. Later in February the 18th Brigade's advance party also returned to Ikingi, after a long period of being "mucked about by experts." This journey, afterwards referred to by members of the 2/9th Battalion as their "week-end excursion," was followed in March by Giarabub, and then in early April by transfer by sea to Tobruk, and the long siege. As they marched out to their perimeter positions in soon-to-be beleaguered Tobruk, they passed the 2/4th A.G.H., where the sisters and nurses, packed ready to move out of Tobruk, gave the infantrymen a cheer as they went by. Calvert recalls that a few minutes later they received orders to "charge magazines."

The siege began on the 11th of April. Calvert survived the routine patrol work of the infantryman, the German attacks on the salient in May, was there when the first British attempt to relieve the fortress was frustrated in June.

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and then on the night of 20th July fouled a mine, receiving wounds to the head, left arm, and "various bits and pieces elsewhere" — they were still being picked out months later. He was evacuated from Tobruk in H.M.S. "Hero" to Matruh, and then by train to the 2/2nd A.G.H. at Kantara. After a period in hospital and convalescent camp at Kfar Vitkin in Palestine, he rejoined his unit at Kilo 89 on 20th September, and two days later left for Syria.

The unit reached Latakia, a pleasant little seaside town, and in November, after a Baedekker tour of northern Palestine and Syria, which took in Nazareth, Damascus, Chtaura, Djeide, Idlib and Aleppo. There followed a period in the bush on the Turko-Syrian border half-way between Latakia and Aleppo. Then war broke out in the Pacific and in short time the 7th Division was brought back to Palestine and prepared for departure from the Middle East. The 2/9th embarked at Tewfik in the "Nieuw Amsterdam," carrying the entire 18th Brigade Group, on 12th February, reached Bombay unescorted on the 19th, and there transhipped with the 2/5th Field Ambulance into the "Takliwa."

She reached Colombo on 1st March to find the harbour crowded with troop and refugee transports and other shipping "all loaded to the gunnels." They were grim days. Singapore had fallen; Sumatra had been overrun; soon Java would fall and the long retreat from Rangoon which was to take the British out of Burma was about to begin. The Japanese were riding the crest of a wave of victory; Allied fortunes were at their lowest ebb. On 6th March the convoy carrying the 18th Brigade (including "Nevassa," "Takliwa," and "Dilwarra") sailed for what seemed to most Australians an appropriate destination. Fremantle was reached on the 20th, and the brigade began to disembark at Port Adelaide on the 27th. Then, after a period at Sandy Creek Camp, the brigade moved in April to Tenterfield in northern N.S.W., and in May to Kilcoy in south Queensland. The Queenslanders were home again. Those were good days to be an Australian soldier; the Yanks had not yet taken over the girls, the taxis and the theatres; cafes were clean, the food good and the helpings always generous; beer flowed in the hotels; but above all the A.I.F. was welcome, and made to feel so. There was solid training during the week, and long marches through the warm countryside, but leave was freely given at the week-ends.

An interlude ended once again; the Japanese had landed on the north Papuan coast and were advancing across the Owen Stanleys. A threat was developing to Milne Bay on the eastern tip of Papua, and the 18th Brigade was used with the 7th Militia Brigade to thwart it. Calvert served throughout the Milne Bay operations in August-September as a lance-corporal — he had been an acting corporal before going to New Guinea, and immediately after the show was again promoted. Buna followed, and on 18th December, during the 2/9th Battalion attack on Cape Endiaderere — a superb feat of arms — Calvert, then an acting platoon commander, stopped a bullet in the chest. The 2/9th lost over 150 men that day. Calvert was picked up and, due to the efforts of the R.A.P. sergeant, Noel Connors, was sent back by native bearers to the 22nd

American Portable Hospital, a couple of miles behind the lines. At this time he was not expected to live; he had almost "had it" when the Yanks, to whom he is eternally grateful, pumped adrenalin and plasma into him and saved the day. Thence he travelled by bearer to Dobodura and plane to Moresby, and before the end of the year was in the hospital ship "Manunda" bound for the 2/4th A.G.H. at Redbank. In February he was transferred to the 117th A.G.H. at Toowoomba, and later to the 112th A.G.H. at Greenslopes. On 11th December, 1943, almost a year after receiving his wound, he was discharged medically unfit to the Rosemount Repatriation Hospital.

After discharge Jim worked for a time as a tow-motor driver for the Americans at Eagle Farm aerodrome, and then transferring to Sydney, joined the Waterside Workers' Federation. A long and painful period of illness continued until November, 1945, when he was admitted to the 113th A.G.H. at Concord for a major chest operation. He spent eight months as an inmate with a tube in his chest until June, 1946, when the tube having been removed he was allowed to leave as an out-patient. In 1947 he purchased a post-office store on the Hawkesbury River. He remained there for two years and then joined the Department of Health. In November, 1952, he arrived in Canberra, and here, due to improvement in the condition of an asthmatic son, he decided to remain. He began work with the Department of the Interior as a nightwatchman, and is still so employed.

Calvert joined the R.S.L. at Greenslopes in November, 1943, and has had an unbroken financial membership since that date. He has been secretary of the North Canberra R.S.L. Club since February, 1956, has been two years vice-president of the Turner-O'Connor Sub-branch and a delegate of A.C.T. branch for the past three years.

In the matter of material wealth, providence may not have been particularly generous to Jim Calvert. But he is rich in the field of human experience, and a philosopher would ask no more.

Basil Moorhouse Morris

MAJOR-GENERAL B. M. MORRIS, whose narrative of "The Australian Siege Brigade, 1916-18," is published in this issue, was born at East Melbourne on 19th December, 1888. He was educated at the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, on leaving which he was persuaded to take up a course at Melbourne University, but his heart not being in it, he was (as might have been expected) unsuccessful at the examinations at the end of the first year. Soldiering, in fact, had always been his chief interest, inherited perhaps from his maternal grandfather, Major John French of the 14th Bengal Infantry. Coming to Australia on his retirement from the Army prior to the Indian Mutiny, Major French died shortly after arrival, and was one of the earliest settlers to be buried in the cemetery at Kameruka in southern New South Wales.

Young Basil Morris had risen to the rank of sergeant in the school cadets, and he joined the first unit of mounted

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