

Jump TO Article



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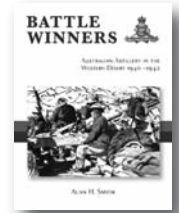
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW:

Battle winners: Australian artillery in the Western Desert 1940-1942

by Alan H. Smith

Barrallier Books Pty Ltd: Griffith, ACT; 2014; 412 pp.; ISBN-9780987586438; RRP \$34.95 (paperback)



Alan Smith has produced a comprehensive record of the contribution of field artillery to the success of battles involving the 2nd Australian Imperial Force in the Western Desert. It provides most useful information about the extraordinary battles of the Australian 6th and 9th Divisions' six field artillery regiments against the Italian Army and Africa Corps in the bleak and unforgiving Western Desert from 1940 to 1942.

The author is exceptionally well qualified to create this study. He served in the Royal Australian Artillery from 1951 to 1969 including postings to the British and Canadian artilleries. He is one of Australia's foremost artillery historians with four major works¹ to his credit.

This book has a foreword by one of Australia's most respected gunners – Major General Steve Gower AO AO (Mil). A second foreword is by Brigadier David Baines MBE, who was the senior surviving officer of 7th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, which fought alongside the Australians. There are excellent photos well placed, comprehensive endnotes, seven helpful appendices, a glossary and an index. There are many informative maps, diagrams and tabular summaries of data.

The early chapters offer a compelling summary of the development and role of Australian artillery in the Great War, activity between the wars, Australia's response to the long shadows cast by Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and the British Expeditionary Force artillery's 1940 travails in France – from which much was learnt.

The author covers the offensive involvement of the 6th Australian Division in the fight towards Benghazi. The 9th Division was affected by the sudden withdrawal of the 6th from Cyrenaica for the defence of Greece and Crete, and by Japan's ferocious march through Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. Alan Smith covers artillery command issues, counter bombardment and the contrasting enemy command, tactics and resources.

I have two comments. The first is that sub-headings would make chapter components easier to identify and digest. Even an experienced gunner needs to focus

hard on the text. But all readers can be well rewarded. The second is that it does not do full justice to the contribution of, and losses by, the Allied anti-tank or light anti-aircraft regiments.

I had extensive contact for several decades with members of the 2nd/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment RAA 2nd AIF Association of which sadly, only a handful remain. The regiment was formed in 1940 so surviving originals are in their mid-90s. A recurring theme in every contact with these men was that they felt under-recognised in the literature and awards. The unit history² establishes that its deeds against German armour – the most formidable in the world – were extraordinary, and the unit's losses (killed, wounded and captured) significant. The unit history (and then David Horner³) notes that after Alamein: *“there was a long list of Officer and other-rank decorations to RAA HQ, the three field regiments [of 9th Division] and the anti-aircraft regiment but, to the amazement of every unit, there was not one to the (2nd/3rd) Anti-Tank Regiment. Dozens were earned ... and citations submitted by RHQ for five Officers and seven other ranks, but no awards were received.”*

Anti-tank gunners on both sides needed stout hearts and steel nerves to eyeball and engage enemy armour with direct fire. The Africa Corps itself had made great efforts to develop its anti-tank capacity to neutralise Allied armour. One of the major post-war studies of Alamein states: *“[before Alamein] the tank had dominated the previous battlefields of the desert, what were to dominate the fierce struggles at Alamein were not the tank, nor the bayonet, nor the air, nor even the field artillery, but the mine and the anti-tank gun”*.⁴

The author reminds us in this expansive guide and reference work, that Australian forces were part of a big picture that manifested one of the most shining victories of combined British and Commonwealth arms. Overall, this is a most worthy addition to the record of Australian artillery, its command and control, and its key players, at a critical time in world history.

Ken Broadhead

¹The other books are: *The life and times of Major General Timothy Frederick Cape, CB, CBE, DSO, Royal Australian Artillery: a biography* (A H Smith: St Ives, NSW) 2001; *Gunners in Borneo: artillery during Indonesian Confrontation, 1962-1966* (Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company: Manly, NSW) 2008; and *Do unto others: counter bombardment artillery in Australia's military campaigns* (Big Sky Publishing: Sydney) 2011.

²J. N. L. Argent (1957). *Target tank: the history of the 2/3rd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, 9th Division, A.I.F.* (privately published: Parramatta).

³David Horner (1995). *The gunners: a history of Australian artillery* (Allen & Unwin: Sydney), p. 336.

⁴C. E. Lucas Philips (1962). *Alamein* (William Heinemann Ltd: Surrey), p. 57.