



AUSTRALIAN ARMOUR ON CYPRUS

May to August 1941



By Paul D. Handel

The activities of the Second Australian Imperial Force on Cyprus during the Second World War receives a one line mention in the Official History of Australia At War, and virtually no one outside those who served there know about the deployment of an Australian Cavalry regiment to the island. This article will attempt to redress those omissions, as well as add a little to the story of armour in the Middle East.

Background

The fall of Greece during early 1941 focussed the British Government's attention on the eastern Mediterranean. In particular, the Vichy French – held country of Syria was thought to pose a particular

danger for a German invasion through Turkey, threatening not only Egypt but the oil pipeline from Persia and Iraq into Palestine and Jordan. The German advance was also believed to include the capture of the islands of Crete and Cyprus. Whilst a relatively large, although under-equipped force of British, Australian and New Zealand troops had assembled in Crete after their withdrawal from Greece, there was little in the way of troops garrisoning Cyprus.

Following the German invasion of Greece, Prime Minister Winston Churchill believed that a force of about 1500 men was all that was required to deter the Germans from an invasion of Cyprus. Arguments to the contrary by the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies did not seem to sway Churchill, who stated that "if the enemy comes in force.... then the 1500 men on Cyprus can take to the mountains, which are rugged and high, and maintain a guerrilla war as long as possible". Fortunately this ridiculous idea of Churchill's was ultimately not put to the test.

So who did provide the defence of Cyprus? The British 7th Division provided a brigade headquarters along with a battalion of infantry (the Sherwood Foresters), and the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm based some torpedo bomber aircraft (Albacores) there from HMS Illustrious. HMS Illustrious had been badly damaged and was taken to Malta for repairs, its aircraft becoming land-based for a period. Further air support came from a detachment of No.3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force flying Hurricanes. The mechanised component, and the subject of this article, was the 7th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment, detached from the 7th Australian Division. Each of the Australian Infantry Divisions raised for war service contained a Divisional Cavalry Regiment for reconnaissance, based on the British model, and theoretically equipped with 28 Light Tanks and 44 Machine Gun Carriers.

The Governor of Cyprus, Sir William Battershill, was advised by General Wavell in April 1941 of the despatch of a force to Cyprus, and was told "Sorry, we are going to send you an Australian Regiment". Fortunately, the Governor did not share Wavell's dislike of "colonials" and replied "I've been married to an Australian for 25 years. What is a Regiment?"

Arrival in Cyprus

The 7th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment disembarked at 1100 hours on 5 May 1941, from the SS Warzawa, and made camp about a mile from the port of Farmagusta.

The Regimental Bulletin provides insight into the activities of the first night in Cyprus. "On the evening of their arrival those members of the Regiment not detailed for duty were granted town leave and, without a moment's hesitation, headed straight for the night-spots of Farmagusta. This sortie was to have grave short-term consequences for the physical well-being of the diggers. Over-indulgence in the local brews had a devastating effect on even the most hardened and impervious drinker. It was not more than two hours before the first survivors returned staggering to the encampment, much the worse for wear, and the rest of the night was spent by those on duty retrieving sodden wrecks from all over the town. Every man on the Regimental pay-sheet was accounted for - in fact, next day on parade, we were 13 over-strength! At a subsequent Court of Enquiry, it was proved beyond reasonable doubt that no blame was attachable to any member of the Regiment for the events which occurred on the night of 5 May 1941 in the port of Famagusta, Cyprus. Evidence proved conclusively that the real culprit - the real fifth columnist - the true snake in the grass as: The rough red wine of the country - KAMANDERIA!"

On 10 May 1941 the Regiment moved to its main camp at Athalassa, outside Nicosia. This involved a body of marching troops, as well as convoys of tanks, machine gun carriers and trucks. The reception of the soldiers by the locals exceeded all expectations, as the Regimental Journal noted:

"As the Column of Route got further into the labyrinth of Main Street Famagusta, it became more obvious that our arrival had not been without impact. The street was veritably packed with the good citizens and yeomen cheering and shouting. "Australie ver good! Dinkum Aussie! Hitler bloodie bastar!" and other expressions of cordiality and welcome. From balconies protruding above the narrow street, the young virgins of the district (who, though few in number, had with prudence been locked upstairs) waved gaily coloured tablecloths at us while downstairs their less prudent sisters showered us with flowers. Old men

handed us bottles of wine and ouzo. Young men climbed trees the better to view the Anzacs. Everyone was shouting and singing. Taxi klaxons honked, and mule and donkey trains gave us the right of way. Church bells rang - all six or seven warring religious factions on the Island declared an ecclesiastical amnesty for the occasion. Finally, when we were well and truly into the centre of the town, the whole ruddy caboodle came to a grinding halt and we were entirely hemmed in by the mob.

"All we had up the spouts of our rifles were flowers, and in our hands instead of grenades were bottles of vino and Cyprus dinner ale. Over the heads of the packed crowd glasses of beer and more bottles of wine were handed to the troops in their stationary vehicles. Crews of AFVs did a superlative PR job by swivelling their gun turrets and elevating and depressing their guns. Showers of fruit and more vino. It transpired that the stoppage had been occasioned by the Archimandrite of the local Greek Cathedral who wished to give us his benediction and bless a couple of AFVs with Holy Water. The CO graciously consented and the Don R's (Despatch riders on motorcycles) rode up and down the stranded convoy. As they passed each vehicle they called out: "Hats off! Pay attention to divine service". The great crowd did a shuush! The prayers rose in syllables unknown to the heathen colonials. The smell of incense assaulted their heathen colonial nostrils. Holy Water was liberally sprinkled upon the leading tank which, aptly, was named "CASCADE" in honour of a popular Tasmanian brew. The saintly Old Father Xmas Bishop with the long white beard kissed The Goon (Lieutenant-Colonel Logan, the Regiment's Commanding Officer) on both cheeks and said that was the best he could do for us at such short notice. The crowd went berserk. Greek, Turkish, Cypriot, Lebanese, Egyptian, Spanish, Syrian, Palestinian, Maltese and even Italian flags were waved furiously amidst innumerable Union Jacks and the flag of the Farmagusta Rovers Soccer Club. Eventually the column arrived at Athaslassa and set up their encampment."

Equipment

On 6th May, the Regiment's heavy equipment and transport were unloaded from the SS Trajanus at the port. Difficulties with the lack of stevedores to operate the ship's cranes were quickly overcome by the Regiment's fitters and Light Aid Detachment personnel taking charge, and the unloading proceeded smoothly. The Regiment now had vehicles and equipment, and preparations to defeat the German invader began. Although the Light Tanks were all brought by the Regiment from Egypt, only two Universal Carriers were available. A further 10 were issued early in June, and another two a little later.

The main equipment of the Regiment in Cyprus at this time comprised the following:

- 15 Vickers Light Tanks Mark VIA and B
- 14 Universal Carriers
- 40 15 cwt trucks (mostly Fordson)
- 10 30 cwt trucks (Ford or Morris)
- 15 3 ton trucks (Australian-built Ford or Chevrolet)
- 26 Motorcycles (all Nortons)
- 4 2 Pounder Towed Anti Tank Guns

With the exception of the Australian-built trucks, all the vehicles came from British Ordnance Depots in the Middle East. In fact, the Vickers Light Tanks had been previously issued to the Regiment in Egypt, and these had been returned to workshops for repair, only to turn up in the same poor condition for the defence of Cyprus. All the vehicles had been well used prior to their issue. The British built Universal Carriers were fitted with a Boys Anti-Tank Rifle in the gunner's compartment and a Bren Light Machine Gun for anti-aircraft

defence during the defence of Cyprus.

The following is a detailed listing of the armoured vehicles with which the Regiment was equipped in Cyprus.

| Universal Carriers Mark 1 | Vickers Light Tanks Mark VI | |
|--|--|----------|
| T 12047 | T 1666 | Mark VIB |
| T 12976 | T 1708 | Mark VIB |
| T 13066 | T 2057 | Mark VIB |
| T 13109 | T 2073 | Mark VIB |
| T 14221 | T 2125 | Mark VIB |
| T 14328 | T 2159 | Mark VIB |
| T 20611 | T 2206 | Mark VIB |
| T 20771 | T 2211 | Mark VIB |
| T 20813 | T 2243 | Mark VIB |
| T 20918 | T 2356 | Mark VIB |
| T 20922 | T 2424 | Mark VIA |
| T 20924 | T 4205 | Mark VIB |
| T 20928 | T 4255 | Mark VIB |
| UNKNOWN | T 4677 | Mark VIA |
| | T 5767 | Mark VIB |



A troop of Vickers Light Tanks on patrol in Cyprus, consulting with an officer on a motorcycle. The Censor has deleted the Regimental Colour Patch on the pugaree of the Slouch hat.

One useful piece of ordnance was the towed version of the 2 Pounder Anti-tank gun, of which four were issued to the Regiment. Originally the guns were towed by 15cwt Fordson WOT2C trucks. Problems were encountered by the specially formed Anti-Tank Troop using the existing towing pintles of the Fordsons, and spring type tow bars were removed from one Chevrolet 3 ton and three Ford 30cwt trucks and modified to suit the Fordsons. Later the guns were mounted "portee" style on the back of Morris 30 cwt CS11 trucks. The rear cargo body was removed and the two pounders were mounted on bolted wooden frames, which were in turn fitted to the truck chassis. The cabins of the vehicles were open topped. Evidence regarding who mounted the guns is sparse, and although some veterans believe the vehicles were received in "portee" configuration, it appears more likely, given the timing of equipment issues, the fact that tow bars were modified in Cyprus by 50 LAD, and the nature of the conversion, that they were built by the Regiment in Cyprus.



A towed 2 Pounder Anti-tank Gun with wheels removed and mounted on the back of a Morris CS 11 30 Cwt 4x2 truck. The truck body has been removed and a wooden frame built to carry the legs of the gun's ground mount. Note the variety of headdress.

Organisation

The Regiment was organised into the standard headquarters squadron and three "sabre" squadrons. The deployment of the armoured vehicles within the unit was:

Headquarters Squadron with three Vickers Light Tanks and two Universal Carriers;

A and B Squadron headquarters had four Vickers Light Tanks and four Universal Carriers each; and C Squadron Headquarters had four Vickers Light Tanks and three Universal Carriers.

All vehicles had a dug-in defensive position for when they were not patrolling the island. This was also to protect the vehicles from the effects of dive-bombing.

Defence and Patrols



A Fordson 15 cwt 4x2 truck carrying a patrol of the Regiment. Of interest is the unit sign, 41 on black, is mounted on the left mudguard and repeated on the bridge classification plate on the right mudguard.

The main job of the force was to show the flag, and make believe that there was at least a brigade on the island, which it was hoped would deter the German invader. Following the fall of Crete, air raids by the Luftwaffe and the Regina Aeronautica increased. The Vichy French Air Force, flying Glen Martin bombers out of Syria also joined the battle, at one stage executing a raid on the airfield just as the British ground crews were lining up for their mess. This raid caused many serious casualties amongst the ground staff. A number of Australians were injured in these attacks, with the more seriously injured being evacuated by plane to Egypt. In order to simulate the brigade size group, patrols of light tanks, machine gun carriers and trucks of the Regiment roamed far and wide over the island. The normal head dress of black beret with the small collar-badge size "Rising Sun" was often substituted for the Australian slouch hat or steel helmet, to make it appear as though there was a large force on the Island. This ruse would, of course, have not fooled anyone, let alone the locals, who were a canny as their neighbours in Egypt and Palestine, and could identify the Australian soldiers immediately from their tan boots. (The British Army and other Commonwealth armies wore black boots.)

The Sherwood Foresters, it is understood, used commandeered local buses for transport around the island, complete with holes cut in the roof for use of the air sentries.



Universal Carriers of the Regiment with crews. Note the gunner's armoured shield has been moved to allow removal of the Vickers Machine Guns. Perhaps this photo was taken during a range practice with dismounted guns.

An important aspect of the defence plan was wireless (radio) communications. Being a mechanised unit with a good supply of wireless sets, a communications plan was established to ensure all sub-units were linked in times of an emergency. The Regimental 2IC had wireless links with each sub-unit and the Brigade Headquarters, and these were duplicated with an alternate command vehicle. Three operators maintained communications at hourly intervals, with all nets opening immediately if an alarm were raised.

With road links being important to a force moving around the island, seven bridges were identified as being tactically important. Twenty members of the Regiment were trained in the demolition role, their main tasks being the destruction of those bridges.



A troop of Vickers Light tanks, with a Mark VIA on the right ("Carlton"), amongst the palm trees on the Cyprus plain.

As the deployment to Cyprus was basically a "come as you are" operation, and the Regiment being issued with worn out vehicles only days before sailing, lots of repair work was performed by the attached Australian Army Ordnance Corps (AAOC) Light Aid Detachment (LAD) – No. 50 LAD. In addition, they manufactured or arranged for the manufacture of various items for the Regiment. The Regiment required a mounting for a Vickers Medium Machine Gun, capable of being used in the anti-aircraft role. Two types were made by 50 LAD – a straight pipe arrangement which was described as being "reasonably accurate" and an offset arm type which allowed too much vibration. Following the tests, versions of the straight type were manufactured by the Cyprus Public Works Depot Workshop, as the LAD had not the material nor resources.

The LAD had their Breakdown Lorry on almost continuous detachment to the aerodrome, where it was used to lift aerial torpedoes onto the loading frames for the Fleet Air Arm, as no other suitable equipment was available for these normally sea-based aircraft. On one occasion, the LAD recovered a Fleet Air Arm aircraft from a ditch on the aerodrome, where it had come to grief. The corporal responsible for the support of the Fleet Air Arm was awarded a Mention-in-Despatches for his outstanding work.

Withdrawal

The German Airborne invasion of Crete was so costly in terms of casualties that no further use of parachute and airborne troops was made in that role. The expected invasion of Cyprus did not eventuate, and so the 7th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment was warned to move on 30 July 1941. The controlled stores were handed over - the British 3rd Hussars received the 15 Vickers Light Tanks, the Breakdown Lorry (an Australian Built LP2 Ford Breakdown) and part of the transport fleet, with the British 69th Infantry Brigade receiving 14 Universal Carriers and most of the 15cwt trucks and all the motorcycles. The four two Pounder guns were handed over to the CRA 50th British Division.

Departing Cyprus on 10 August 1941, the Regiment rejoined their parent organisation in garrison duties in Syria, where they relieved their sister unit, the 6th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment.

The 7th Australian Division Cavalry Regiment was the only Australian Army unit to be detached from its parent formation and serve under direct British command during the war. Its role on Cyprus, whilst by no means glamorous, was undertaken with professionalism, and made the most with the limited and poor equipment with which it was issued. Fortunately, their defence plan was not to be put to the test – this would come later in New Guinea during December 1942, where, operating in the dismounted role they took part in the bloody battles around Sanananda. Only 47 men were able to walk from that battlefield – the remainder were wounded, suffering from tropical disease or were laying in the jungle where they fell.

Acknowledgements and References

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This article is dedicated to the memory of the author's uncle, the late Lt Col Roland Wiltshire, MBE, ED, a former TQMS of the Regiment, whose stories over the years provided the inspiration to write up the deeds of the "Cav" on Cyprus.

It has been brought to the Author's attention that a portion of the information used in this article regarding the Governor of Cyprus was initially researched and published by Mr R.S. Merrillees. Further information on Mr Merrillees researches may be found in the following articles:

R.S. Merrillees, " Australia and Cyprus in the Second World War " in *Defence Force Journal. Journal of the Australian Profession of Arms No. 43*, November/December 1983, pp. 47 - 50.

R.S. Merrillees, " Australian ' Diggers ' in Cyprus in 1941 " in G.C. Ioannides (ed.), *Studies in Honour of Vassos Karageorghis* (Nicosia 1992), pp. 369 - 374.



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