ALAMEIN - Their Song Shall Live!

A tribute to <u>all</u> who fought at El Alamein.

Michael Johnson

November 2016

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Contents

Acknowledgements

This narrative would not have been undertaken without the generous encouragement and most helpful guidance of our friend Professor Robert O'Neill.

It was inspired by reading Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley's 'Alamein – The Australian Story'. Their vivid account of the desert war from the perspective of Australian soldiers describes how the 9th Australian Division contributed significantly to victory, albeit at an extraordinary and tragic cost.

Critically important to this account of Bill's experiences coming alive was Mark's invaluable introduction to the intrepid stretch bearer Chris Johnstone, who now 96, kindly agreed, earlier this year, to record his oral history. As a fellow member with Bill of the 2/8th Field Ambulance, Chris well recalled the immensely daunting frontline action to which they were exposed.

Mark and Peter's chronology of the July-November 1942 battles was used to place events described by Bill and, in turn, by Chris.

The name 'El Alamein' is often shortened simply to 'Alamein', the version used here.

Introduction

Acknowledgements

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It was inspired by reading Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley's 'Alamein – The Australian Story', their vivid account of the desert war from the perspective of Australian soldiers. It was time to open a pandora's box comprising Bill's numerous letters, poems and hymns composed whilst serving in the Middle East.

There is a significant debt owed to Mark and Peter for allowing extensive quotations from their book.

Critically important to this story coming alive was Mark's invaluable introduction to Chris Johnstone, who had been an intrepid stretch bearer, and now 96, kindly agreed earlier this year to recording of his oral history. As a fellow member of the 2/8th Field Ambulance with Bill, Chris well recalled the frontline action and atmosphere to which they were exposed.

The following chronology from Mark and Peter's story of the July-November 1942 battles was used to place events described by Bill and in turn Chris. 'Alamein – The Australian Story' details how the 9th Australian Division contributed significantly to victory, albeit at an extraordinary and tragic cost.

The Desert War and Australia

- A little War: North Africa. 1942
- Things don't look good': Crisis in the Desert
- 'Nine Div': The 9th Australian Division

The July Battle

- To defeat the enemy: Early July
- Come on. 'Australianos': 10th July
- A hot spot: 11-16 July
- Vigorous Local Action: 17-22 July
- The big push: Late July

Between Battles – August

- A good month: August
- To reach the Suez Canal: Alam Halfa and Bulimba
- Born for this battle: September-October

The October Battle - The final battle of El Alamein, which the Eighth Army and the Desert Air Force fought between 23 October and 5 November 1942

- 'Terrible Night': 23-25 October
- Trig 29: 25-28 October
- 'Death and Blood': 30-31 October
- The Saucer: 31 October-1 November
- Victory in Egypt: November

Finally, my special thanks go to kind friends for their backing and my wife, Anne, for reviewing the text and for her support and patience during this time-consuming project.

Introduction

This narrative seeks to capture the essence of Bill Johnson's wartime experience in the Middle East, 1941-43, as expressed in his letters, poems and hymns. It is a testimony to his unwavering faith and his affection for his fellow soldiers. 'The men, who caused me to write the hymns, were very dear to me'.

Bill did not want those same men to fall into the possible error of regarding war as a Holy Crusade. He saw 'there were evils on both sides of the conflict. So that while our men might justly regard our own as the lesser of evils, they should keep in mind the broader picture – the picture of a world where nations who were now fighting, would then be at peace. That they would fight with passionate zeal to quell the evil of dictatorship and at the same time preserve a mental balance. That they would not, in the end, sell Australia to a Dictator, because they were too weary to make the mental efforts that a democracy requires'.

This is a tribute not only to the extraordinarily courageous but modest men of the celebrated 9th Australian Division, but also to the bravery and commitment of the German and Italian 'drivers and fitters who for months had been putting in long hours to keep the army moving, and gunners, tank crews and, above all, infantry shouldering increasingly severe burdens as their numbers dwindled'. Bill's thoughts were movingly captured in his poem 'Dedicated to a German Tank Commander incinerated at El Alamein'.

In Chapter 4, Bill's recollections and poems are augmented by extracts from Stretcher Bearer Chris Johnstone's oral history. Now 96 and still living at the family farm on the Mornington Peninsula,

Chris was interviewed by the writer in March 2016. His humble recall radiated the undaunted sense of duty and bravery which inspired those troops at El Alamein.

Neither conveyed any sense of triumphalism!

Each served with the 2/8th Field Ambulance; in which Chris, as a stretcher bearer, unarmed, accompanied the infantry into battle. Bill served initially as an orderly based at a Regimental Aid Post (RAP). This was the front line military medical establishment incorporated into an infantry battalion or armored regiment and designed for the immediate treatment and triage of battlefield casualties. In October 1942, Bill was finally commissioned as a chaplain.

They disembarked in Egypt as reinforcements in September, 1941, sharing a tent at Gaza for the first few weeks. They and all survivors of the 9th Division returned to Australia following a divisional parade held at Gaza Airport on 2nd December 1942, the salute being taken by Lieutenant General (later Field Marshal) Harold Alexander, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, who on 8th August had taken over from General (later Field Marshall) Claude Auchinleck. Concurrently Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshall) Bernard Montgomery on 11th August replaced Auchinleck as General Officer Commanding the British Eighth Army.

In October, 1942 on the eve of the final battle of El Alamein, Bill was formally licensed as Chaplain.

The 9th 's sacrifice and achievement have been deservedly well described in Mark Johnston and Peter Stanley's exceptional 'Alamein – The Australian Story' and validated in the 'Special Message' from 'the Cmd 30 Corps to the Cmd 9th Aust Div' in which Lieutenant-General Leese commends 'the immense part, the critical role the 9th Division played in the battle', see Chapter 4.

For those who seek a detailed history of Australia's role in the crucial battles around El Alamein in 1942, Mark and Peter provide a vivid account of the desert war from the Australian soldiers' perspective. They illustrate how Australia provided the hinge on which success swung. How Australians fulfilled that purpose admirably and contributed significantly to victory, albeit at a heavy cost with casualties comparable to those suffered in major battles on the Western Front in World War 1.

With their agreement, quotations from Mark and Peter's account have been used to shape Chapter 4.

Barton Maughan's official history of the 9th Australian Division's contribution in 1941-42 to the defeat in North Africa of the German and Italian Army, commanded by Field Marshall Rommel is the other foundation reference. Rommel was promoted to Field Marshall 22nd June 1942 for his capture of Tobruk but during the 1941-early 1942 period, he was a General.

Maughan details the history of the division from March 1941, when soon after its formation, it was sent untrained and without its artillery to Cyrenaica as part of a garrison force which, within a few weeks, took the brunt of the surprise advance by Rommel's newly arrived armoured force. Retreating to Tobruk, the division withstood, with the support of British armoured, artillery and machine-gun units, several assaults and a long siege, and maintained a threat on the flank of Rommel's long line of communications to the Egyptian frontier. By the time the siege of Tobruk had been raised, at a cost in men and material so much in excess of every prediction, the Eight Army's resources not only of armour and motor transport but also of infantry had become severely strained.

Before the siege ended, the 9th Division was withdrawn by sea in September, disembarked at Alexandria and entrained to the A.I.F. Base Area in Palestine. Progressively reinforcements from Australia were absorbed including the intrepid replacements for the 2/8th Field Ambulance.

It is worth quoting Maughan at this point for he well conveys the rapidly changing events in the Pacific and how they played out in the Middle East. That Australian troops were anxious about events

at home would be an understatement. Bill captures this anxiety in his correspondence and poetry, see Chapter 3.

> "On 10th December, the Ninth Army was directed to have a division ready to move to the Nile Delta for reinforcement of the General Headquarters reserve. Ninth Army headquarters nominated the 7th Australian Division but requested it should be replaced in Syria by the 9th Division as soon as the move took place. General Blamey demurred to the latter proposal, pointing out that the 9th Division had been an untrained formation when it was committed to operations (in 1941) and that it was essential that its training should be undertaken before it was given other duties (and presumably the replacement troops integrated). General Headquarters did not press the issue, presumably because General Freyberg had already made a proposal to transfer the New Zealand Division to Syria, which had been agreed to.
>
> The future deployment of the 7th Division, however, was to be determined by events if greater consequence then occurring far from Cairo. The day on which Japanese armed forces landed in Thailand and Malaya and struck from the air at Pearl Harbour, Wake Island, Guam, Hong Kong and Ocean Island, had dawned three days before Middle East Headquarters had asked the Ninth Army to nominate a division for the reserve. A fortnight later the Japanese forces were at the Perak River, having captured the northern end of the Malayan Peninsula; a landing had been made in North Borneo; Hong Kong was soon to fall; the Philippines had been invaded. The reinforcement of the Far Eastern theatre had become the allies most pressing problem. It was patent a call might be made to dispatch from the Middle East and forces that could be momentarily spared (including some of the Australian battalions). On 21st December, Middle East Headquarters cancelled the plan to move the 7th Division to
>
> Egypt. About a week later new warning orders were issued: to the 7th Division to move to the Gaza area 'for training', and to the 9th Division to relieve the 7th in Syria. General Blamey no longer raised objections."

In all armies of World War II, the division was the main tactical formation. Within the Eighth Army, the 9th was an infantry division comprising a balanced force of infantry supported by artillery, engineers and other 'arms' and 'service' units. The division comprised about 17,000 men based on three infantry brigades, each of three battalions. Each brigade could call on the support of a 'field regiment' of artillery, a 'field company' of engineers, a 'Field Ambulance', and several smaller units.

The 9th Division comprised variously the 18th, 20th, 24th and 26th Brigades. In turn, the 24th Brigade, 'born under fire' at the siege of Tobruk, comprised initially the 2/28th and 2/43rd Battalions with the 2/32nd joining in May 1941. Originating from South Australia, the 2/43rd suffered the largest number of casualties and was the most decorated of the 24th Brigade battalions in Tobruk but Mark and Peter suggest it perhaps stood in the shadow of the 2/48th, the only other 9th Division battalion formed in South Australia.

The 24th Brigade was supported by the 2/8th Field Ambulance which according to Chris in 1942 numbered 260 men in three companies, comprising stretcher bearers who accompanied the soldiers into battle, the RAP behind the battle line triaging battlefield casualties and providing immediate treatment, and a field hospital to the rear.

Whilst all the Axis attacks in 1941 had been halted at Tobruk so too had most of the Australian counter-attacks. These failures had generally been at a high human cost, casualties that impacted communities and families throughout Australia. The 9th Division's casualties from 8th April to 25th October 1941 according to Maughan amounted to 749 killed, 1,996 wounded and 604 prisoners.

Murray Bridge in South Australia was typical of the rural communities impacted by this carnage. As the district's youth continued to volunteer, the likes of Bill Johnson, then the local Church of England priest, enlisted to support 'their boys'.

Early in 1942, with the 6th and 7th divisions despatched to the Far East to meet the Japanese threat, the 9th Division, resting and training after its withdrawal from Tobruk, was transferred to northern Syria and reinforcements from Australia were absorbed.

The 9th Division 'had been confronting German troops that were aggressive and resilient, conditioned to counter attack without hesitation. Sharing a common doctrine, German formations readily formed a number of 'battle groups' of all arms, using weapons of proven quality, and able to launch attacks or retrieve setbacks with great flexibility.' Rommel's 'Africans' comprised the original *Afrika Korps*, the 15th and 21st Panzer divisions and the 90th Light Division, later joined by the 164th Light Division and the Ramcke parachute brigade. They had developed assurance in the back-and-forth battles of 1941 and the exhausting victories of early 1942, driving the Eighth Army back into Egypt, thereby once again reversing the allies logistical advantage. 'Allied defeat (in the Western Desert) seemed as likely as victory'.

The Australians in Syria were aghast to learn of the Axis retaking of Tobruk in two days in June, 1942. Rommel's success was all the more extraordinary and impressive considering the small number of fighting troops and tanks with which it was achieved. Only fifty German tanks and fourteen Italian continued to run.

At the Middle East Joint Planning Staff, there was real concern at the prospect of 'simultaneous threats to our Western and Northern Fronts if the Russians gave way under the German offensive a thousand miles to the north' for they did not have the forces to save Egypt and the Suez Canal *and* save Persia's oil!

Such news filtered through to the Australian soldiers in Syria via the BBC and the grapevine.

By mid-1942, as Mark and Peter observed, 'Axis morale rode high; that of their British Commonwealth adversaries was correspondingly low. Hitler allowed Rommel to try to reach Cairo rather than allow Kesselring to take Malta.' The capture of Tobruk gave the Axis huge strategic and logistic advantage, they impounded thousands of vehicles and 2.5million gallons of fuel enough to keep the vehicles running for several more weeks.

Well aware that whatever the tactical realities of the war in the desert, the strategic imperatives of supply were the more critical and were running against him, in June, 1942, Rommel pressed on, seeking to force the El Alamein position, the Eighth Army's last defense west of the Nile Delta – the partly-prepared El Alamein position obstructed the 30-mile neck of desert between the sea, near El Alamein, and the Qattara Depression.

On 26th June the foremost German units bypassed the frontier fortress of Mersa Matruh. Several large formations of Ritchie's Eighth Army were in danger of being cut off. 'When Mersa Matruh fell on 29th June, 6,000 more British and Indian troops were marshaled ready to be marched westwards into captivity. Again, hundreds of vehicles, tons of stores, and gallons of fuel fell into Axis hands.'

Major (later Lieutenant) General Sir Leslie Morshead, who had commanded Tobruk's defence, presumably looking ahead to the division's likely requirements when the Eighth Army launched its next offensive, was suggesting an additional 6,000 plus men be dispatched to the Middle East. At the time his request arrived in Australia, the operations being fought to resist the Japanese attempt to take the whole of Papua had reached their most critical stage. On the Owen Stanley Range's jungle trails the outcome of the desperate fighting to halt and turn back the Japanese force advancing on Port Moresby hung in the balance. The need to employ more battle-hardened formations against the Japanese in Papua and New Guinea was plain and pressing. Moreover, the high sickness rate in tropical warfare at that time, before the problem of malaria control had been solved, was aggravating

the problem. On the same day Prime Minister Curtin approved the dispatch of the 6,000 reinforcements Moreshead had requested, Curtin informed General Blamey that the future of the 9th Division was at present under discussion with President Roosevelt and Mt Churchill. Before these reinforcements embarked other developments were to cause Curtin to reverse his decision.'

As Mark and Peter pointedly observe, in the Middle East:

> 'The northern summer of 1942, then, was the crucial period of the war. British strategists contemplated the real possibility of German forces breaking through the Caucasus and into Persia and advancing into Egypt and the Levant. If the two drives were to link up, Allied Middle Eastern oil reserves would be in jeopardy.
>
> The significance of the war in North Africa needs to be appreciated in perspective. Rommel's army in July 1942 included four German divisions; in the Eastern Front the German army fielded 195 divisions. World War II was not going to be won in the desert of Egypt, but it could be lost there, at least by the western Allies.'

As Ritchie's troops streamed back to Egypt towards Alexandria, 'indiscrete and defeatist talk was rife'. He had lost the confidence of his army and his superior. On 25 June, Auchinleck assumed command of the Eighth Army personally and decided immediately to withdraw to the position between the Mediterranean Sea and the sand sea of the Qattara Depression that as noted had been prepared against just such an eventuality, there to stand and fight.

Auchinleck immediately recalled the 9th Division from Syria to bolster this new front.

Within days, the complete division had been trucked to 'somewhere west of Egypt'.

By the end of the 'July Battle' 1942, after four weeks' operation, the 9th Division had suffered 2,552 battle casualties, including 127 officers.

Further heavy losses were to be suffered by Australian 9th Division in the final battle of El Alamein, which the Eighth Army and the Desert Air Force fought between 23 October and 5 November 1942. 620 Australians were killed, 1,944 wounded and 130 became POWs, a total of 2,694; about one fifth of the total Eighth Army battle casualties of 13,560 killed wounded or missing.

Bill's writings, prose and poetry illustrate how his faith sustained him as he witnessed the carnage and experienced the trauma of those critical battles July through to November, 1942 and how he was able to support those men. Given he applied self-censorship in his writing as to specific locations and dates, we have relied on Mark and Peter's narrative and Chris 's oral history to link poems to specific events. Bill's composition, spelling and punctuation have been retained were possible. Similarly, the extracts from Chris's oral history are verbatim.

Bill Johnson SX 13215
Date of Enlistment 16th June 1941
Adelaide SA
Date of Discharge 13th November
Hampstead SA 1945
Born 6th January 1907 Died 20th April 1987

Chris Johnstone VX53194
Date of Enlistment 29th April 1941
Date of Discharge 25th October 1944
Born 17th February 1920

Extracts from Chris Johnstone 2016 interview

For the first time recounting his experiences, aged 96!

Chris Johnstone was one of the extraordinarily courageous but modest men of the celebrated 9th Australian Division.

Chris Johnstone, in 1942, was a member of the 2/8th Field Ambulance numbering 260 men in three companies. They supported the 24th Brigade. These included stretcher bearers, who accompanied the soldiers into battle, the RAP behind the battle line, triaging battlefield casualties and providing immediate treatment, and a field hospital to the rear.

On the 26th June, the 9th Division was 'On the move!'

Chris Johnstone recalled this period thus:

'When we were at the 89 kilometre camp in Palestine, the 7th Division who some months before played a major part in the Battle of Syria and the 9th Division that had just come out of Tobruk and were pretty weary and … they sent the 9th over to replace the 7th as the occupation force in Syria and at that stage, HQ ran the hospital and we were out in the field so I did not see much of Bill… then one morning they pulled us out of the desert, gave us 20 minutes to be on the trucks … we had trained to move fast and we made it in a quarter of an hour and then we travelled eleven hundred miles in four days to Alamein.'

Chapter 4 – The Desert War: July-November 1942

The Western Desert

Part 1: 'On the move' to Alamein under General Auchinleck - 26th – 30th June 1942

The entire 9th Australian Division was moved from Syria to the Western Desert in a series of immense convoys.

> ‘On 1st July in near panic-stricken Cairo and Alexandria, Commonwealth civilians were evacuated while staff officers and clerks burned files in what became known as ‘Ash Wednesday’.
> On 1st July which has been described as ‘the crucial day in the whole desert campaign’, Rommel’s exhausted and weary formations finally stopped, at Dier el Shein.
> Even as British, Indian and South African units held the Alamein position much of the Eighth Army retreated towards the Suez Canal.
> The 9th Australian Division was returning to the desert, the country in which it had learnt to fight. They were to fight the coming battles on a relatively narrow strip of country, a dozen or so miles long and nowhere more than eight miles from the coast.
> And it was mid-summer with daytime temperatures 30ºcentrigade’.(Mark J and Peter S)

Bill’s poem, ‘On the Move’, captured well the sense of urgency while Chris described the efficiency of the transfer and mixed emotions as the 9th Division headed to battle, west through Alexandria to the ‘Alamein Box’. And as they headed west, they passed men of the Eighth Army heading east!

On the Move

Quick! Pile up the rifles; hand up the gear;
Check the water and the rations,
The convoys Southward steer!
Each man with his water bottle, small kit and haversack,
Respirator, tin hat, all slung across his back,
Clambers up and finds a place,66
Cursing at the lack of space …
As off they go to Egypt; to make the spurt,
To meet the foe;
To beat the foe
In the sand dunes of the desert,
Somewhere west of Egypt.
The sun beats down like fire; the wind is parching hot:
But the spirit’s high for action,
As the convoy’s Southward shot:
Aleppo – Hama - Homs … down to lofty Lebanon,
On to Baalbek and Hermon … Galilee and far Hebron
Speed the endless line of trucks,
Over good roads, tracks or ruts …
As off they go to Egypt: to make the spurt,
To meet the foe;
To beat the foe
In the sand dunes of the desert,
Somewhere west of Egypt.
Late into the evening, early in the day …
Short time for sleeping …
The convoy daren’t delay:
On thro’ lone Sinai’s majestic barrenness,
On to where the Suez divides the wilderness ….
Passed dhows on the Nile Delta:
Sweating freely in the swelter,

As off they go to Egypt: to make the spurt,
To meet the foe;
To beat the foe
In the sand dunes of the desert,
Somewhere west of Egypt
The tired men are lolling restless on each truck;
Their spirit's high, but weary,
In those cramp conditions stuck.
A good intentioned Private's spilt marmite o'er the load;
The corporal's getting shirty ….
Each man's liver's slightly dirty,
As off they go to Egypt: to make the spurt,
To meet the foe;

The 26th Brigade, first away, left at 6 a.m. on 26th June and travelled by way of Homs, Baalbek, Rayak, Tiberias, Tulkarm, Gaza, across the Sinai Desert to the Canal and Cairo; the whole journey was completed in motor transport. Instructions were received en route that the division would be responsible for the defence of Cairo, a clear sign of the concern that Rommel would achieve the breakthrough, but, before the main bodies reached Cairo, orders had been changed.

Main divisional headquarters and divisional troops left Tripoli on the 27th and, travelling by the coast road and the Sinai Desert, reached Amiriya about the same time as the 26th Brigade. The 24th Brigade Group left on the night of the 27th–28th by the same route as the 26th Brigade until Tiberias was reached, when the main body was diverted to Haifa to entrain, a road party continuing on by the 26th Brigade's route. The rail party detrained at sidings to the west of Alexandria in the afternoon of 1st July, while the road party arrived some hours later.

The remaining brigade, the 20th, now in the frontier area, was not to move immediately but to await relief by the 17th Indian Brigade. The 2/15th Battalion was dispatched hurriedly by road and rail to Tripoli for the defence of that town, with the commanding officer, Lieutenant -Colonel Ogle taking command of Tripoli fortress. Late on 29th June, however, the 20th Brigade received orders from the Ninth Army not to await relief but to move to Egypt early next morning. The 9th Divisional Cavalry Regiment also left Latakia for Egypt that day.

All units were mobilised at extremely short notice while their onward movement was most efficiently organised by the staffs and units of Ninth Army and the British line-of-communications organisations. *Whatever the future might hold for them, the men welcomed the end of garrison duties in Syria.*

It is important to remember as the 9th Division was transported south from Syria, the soldiers were not to know what the historian now does, that Rommel's losses were mounting, placing pressure on forward and rear German troops. 'German drivers and fitters for months had been putting in long hours to keep the army moving, and gunners, tank crews and, above all, infantry shouldering increasingly severe burdens as their numbers dwindled.'
Rather, for the Tobruk veterans, Rommel had developed a mystique as a genius with the aptitude for rapid and sure decision in mobile war. As they fast tracked once again to the Western Desert, the sight of the retreating Eighth Army and the disarray in Alexandria would have heightened their concern that Rommel might execute the breakthrough for which he was pressing. The Tobruk veterans knew what to expect, the reinforcements quickly learnt!

Chris graphically recalled the transfer:

"… then one morning they pulled us out of the desert, gave us 20 minutes to be on the trucks … we had trained to move fast and we made it in a quarter of an hour and then we travelled eleven hundred miles in four days to Alamein. You can imagine sitting on the back of a truck for four days. It was quite hot and dusty.
If Rommel had taken Alexandria, that was our main naval base, and Cairo was being evacuated, we would have lost our naval base, our oil … we could have lost the war … it was a very vital battle.
When we reached Alexandria, they were evacuating the town, they were sure the Germans were going to
Break through … they were only 70 miles from Alexandria … they had pushed our army (the Eighth)
back 100s of miles.
Anyway when they saw the Australian army, many who were evacuating turned back … they had a lot
of faith in the Australians. We camped at a POW camp that night … the Germans in there said we were
Tommys dressed up in Aussie uniforms. They had been told all the Aussies had gone home, they didn't
want to fight the Aussies anymore & anyway … on the way to Alamein, we stopped for lunch … war or
no war you still had to eat …the moment we stopped two German Stukas came over and bombed the
artillery and four of us rookies… of course we had never seen anything before … we were standing
there mesmerised, watching these planes. When they dropped their bombs, they flew about at tree top
level so the ack ack could not get them … except there were no trees, you could see the rear gunner
turning his gun around, the next thing the sand is bursting all around us, suddenly submachine gunning
us … so we dived under a truck … of course all the Tobruk veterans were down slit trenches. Anyway
if you survive your first mistake your learnt fast up there. Next time the planes came over, we beat
the veterans into the slit trenches! The trenches were 'L' shaped in design to allow one to be at a
tangent to the strafing plane. And no more than two feet deep to prevent the sand sides collapsing and
burying you if an artillery shell fell too close.
And then we went up to Alamein … and they pushed us into the Front Line and, as I said, you learnt
fast and when the planes came over, you quickly looked to see who they were & if they were German,
you dived into the slit tranches … and then you learnt first to dive into the slit tranches and then check
whose planes they were.
Because the extra troops were now up there, we managed to stop Rommel's troops and that was as
close as they got to Alexandria. For the next five months, we attacked them and they attacked us

whilst they built up for the terrible battle. It takes millions of tonnes of equipment to fight a big battle
and it takes a long time to get it all together.

Finally, Monty took over as General and my understanding is he changed a defeated army into one full of confidence almost overnight.

Before the Colonels and Brigadier general fought the war from Cairo … well he brought them up to El Alamein you see. Having them chaps up there made a difference … lily white, they were. We were quite amused in a couple of ways, they were soon bright pink, looking a picture of misery, sunburnt … but, anyway, they soon settled in. they did a marvellous job … sadly some of them never came back, they are still there.

Chris that humble stretcher-bearer, almost seventy-five years later, summed up the situation thus:

'When we arrived at Alamein, they were a defeated army, they had been driven back a 1,000 miles, their spirit was so low, that is the 8th Army … Monty changed them from a defeated army to one full of confidence. Monty took over as General and in my opinion changed a defeated army into one full of confidence almost overnight. He sent a full plan of the October Battle around to every unit. Before, we never knew what was going on but thanks to Monty we then knew exactly what we had to do and what was going to happen. Monty said the battle would take 11 or 12 days and it took 12 days.

Everything was well thought out for, at night, if you turned around a couple of times, you wouldn't know where the enemy was, for there were no land marks … and they said navigate by the stars but when they fired the shell shots, you could not see the sky, it was clouded over with dust and smoke.

So anti-aircraft guns fired different coloured tracer. The 15th Battalion had a green tracer. Every few minutes they would fire the tracer and troops would follow the tracer.

When the big battle started, the bombers would come up … we called them the football team because there were 18 aircraft in a flight. They would drop their bombs and then turn around and the next flight would come in and that went on continuously day and night.

Monty even got stuck into the cooks and that made them produce better meals! And that went down pretty well, I can tell you. And he wouldn't sacrifice a man's life if he could help it. The other generals, they did not care.'

And then there was a glint of mischief in Chris 's eye as he recalled how looking after mates mattered:

'Even though we had Red Cross tarpaulins over the trucks, we still got bombed. Sandy Walsh and I, when we were behind the lines, we had a two-man tent for which we dug a trench. When you were down at the 'Cook House' on duty … well, if you didn't swipe something for your mates, you felt you were letting them down. So we soon had a few things on the shelf in our tent … and this plane came over and dropped a bomb pretty close and, of course, we were lying down flat in our trench and Sandy yells "I'm hit'! So I said 'well stay down, there are still a few to come'. When they cleared out, I get up to inspect the damage and discovered the 'blast' had sent a tin of cheese flying through the

air and it had hit Sandy in the back … everybody was amused about that except the cook, he took umbrage that we had been swiping his stuff.'

Resistance dependent upon the many.

As Mark and Peter note, it is important to remember that resistance was in fact dependent upon the many.

> "It has been said that the arrival of the 9th Australian Division stopped Rommel's advance. This is plainly not so. It was the resistance of the tired and disorganized British, Indian, South African and New Zealand troops in the first week of July that contained the Panzerarmee on the Alamein Line. Even so, Rommel continued to plan and mount further attacks as he refitted. What the availability of the Australians meant was that Auchinleck was able to regain something of the initiative, which the British Commonwealth forces for so long had foregone.'

For some days, Eighth Army troops allotted to establishing the defensive 'box' at Alamein had been digging, wiring and laying mines while past them poured the transport of a retreating army. The successes of Auchinleck's July 1942 counter-offensive were to be limited and costly but critical. The 9th Division captured the Tel el Eisa ridges and other important positions near the coast and later, under Montgomery, took a leading part in Rommel's defeat in the battle of Alamein.

Chris recalled the build up to the October battle

Mark and Peter graphically captured the October Battle, the defeat and retreat in all its complexity, culminating in the 'Supercharge Breakthrough' on 3rd November, which detail is picked up shortly.

The deadly impact of that intense fighting was movingly recalled many decades later by stretcher bearer Chris, embedded with the infantry:

> 'And eh, the night before went into battle … the big battle in late October … A and B Companies of the 2/8th Field Ambulance were up at the Front and HQ Company, the main dressing station, they were ten miles behind the line, that's where Bill was.
> We serviced the 20th Brigade, comprising 13th (NSW), 15th (Queensland) and 17th (NSW) Battalions and the 24th Brigade, comprising 28th (WA) and 43rd (SA) Battalions.
> There were 280 in our 2/8th and the Colonel, Hanson, who got an OBE for Tobruk for administration and a DSO for the work we did at Alamein … as he said 'it was a reflection on what the unit had done'.
> 'We moved into no man's land where the engineers had dug secret trenches the night before as the area was under German observation. We had to crawl into slit trenches where we 106 lay for 12 hours under the blazing sun, there was no shade up there. We were burnt almost black so much so that later, when we went down to the town, which was seldom, they would say we were out of the desert.
> On 23rd October'42, at 21.40 hours, a lone search light flashed across the battlefield and our artillery opened up, the guns were critically placed, you can imagine how many we had on a 40-mile front … and they all opened up together … Well, the ground shook like a huge earthquake and you could feel the blast and your shirt front blew out like this … and the noise … even though they were our guns, we were absolutely terrified. So you can imagine how the Germans felt.
> Just to give you an idea of the noise, think of the loudest thunderclap you ever heard and multiply it by 100 … they heard the sustained barrage in Alexandria 70 miles away where it rattled the windows of the houses.'

‘They fired for 20 minutes and then they ceased firing and flash spotted the German guns to zero in on them and they continued firing all night. You can imagine the noise.
We then moved up to the minefields and there, in the moonlight, were the engineers, magnificent men, probing the sand with a bayonet, clearing a track through the minefield.
Another chap and I picked up the first casualty in our area. I was standing beside the ambulance with another chap and there was an explosion in the minefield and they called for stretcher bearers so we grabbed a stretcher and raced across and they said ‘don’t come this side of the rope. We’ll bring him across’. That warning was unnecessary for there was no way we were going to step into the minefield.
Anyway, we took him and put him in the ambulance and raced him to the RAP where there was a doctor and a few ambulance blokes to look after him … and just as we got there, word came back that the Doc’s best mate, a Captain Cobb, had been killed. He was very upset about this. When they cleared the tracks through the minefield, we moved through behind the attacking infantry because we were with the RAP, which was with the infantry at that stage. They picked up the casualties. After a while, we came across a large gun pit so the Doc decided to set up an RAP there and as we were setting it up, a couple of infantry blokes came across and said there was an Italian, terribly wounded, and so another chap and I went out there and picked him up and brought him back. The Doc took a look at him and said give him a grain and a half to knock him out … and anyway we did that … the normal dose was a grain. Then we discovered a body lying on the edge of the gun pit and it turned out to be this Captain Cobb and the Doc said ‘I can’t bear to see him lying there, send him back.’ (1)

We usually never touched the dead, that was a special job for the War Graves people, but in this instance, we sent him back and we had an advanced registration about a mile behind the front line where they could keep a bloke alive until he got back to the main dressing station, ten miles back, and just after daylight, we were all sitting in the gun pit when the Doc stood up to get an instrument out of his tent, he was standing up head and shoulders above the ground, and a shell landed nearby, some shrapnel hit him in the throat and killed him … about two metres away from where his best mate had been killed the night before. So about 10.00am, they sent me back to the Advanced Dressing Station. Our ambulance was overflowing with wounded so that when we got back there we learnt that one of the majors, a doctor and a sergeant had been killed there … so we had lost two doctors in a couple of hours. That was a big loss.

And later in the day, word came back of four of our stretcher bearers with another RAP. Three had been killed and the fourth badly wounded. And one of my squad, Bill Halfpenny, he told me the bad news. Bill H always looked on the gloomy side of things, he said ‘that is not the worst of it’. I said ‘what could be worse than that?’ He said ‘they want another squad to take their place and it is sure to be us and we won’t come back!’ I laughed …and it was a long time before I laughed again, for sure enough we were picked to take their place. We moved up after dark to the front and we ran into very heavy shell fire and the three of us crawled under a truck.

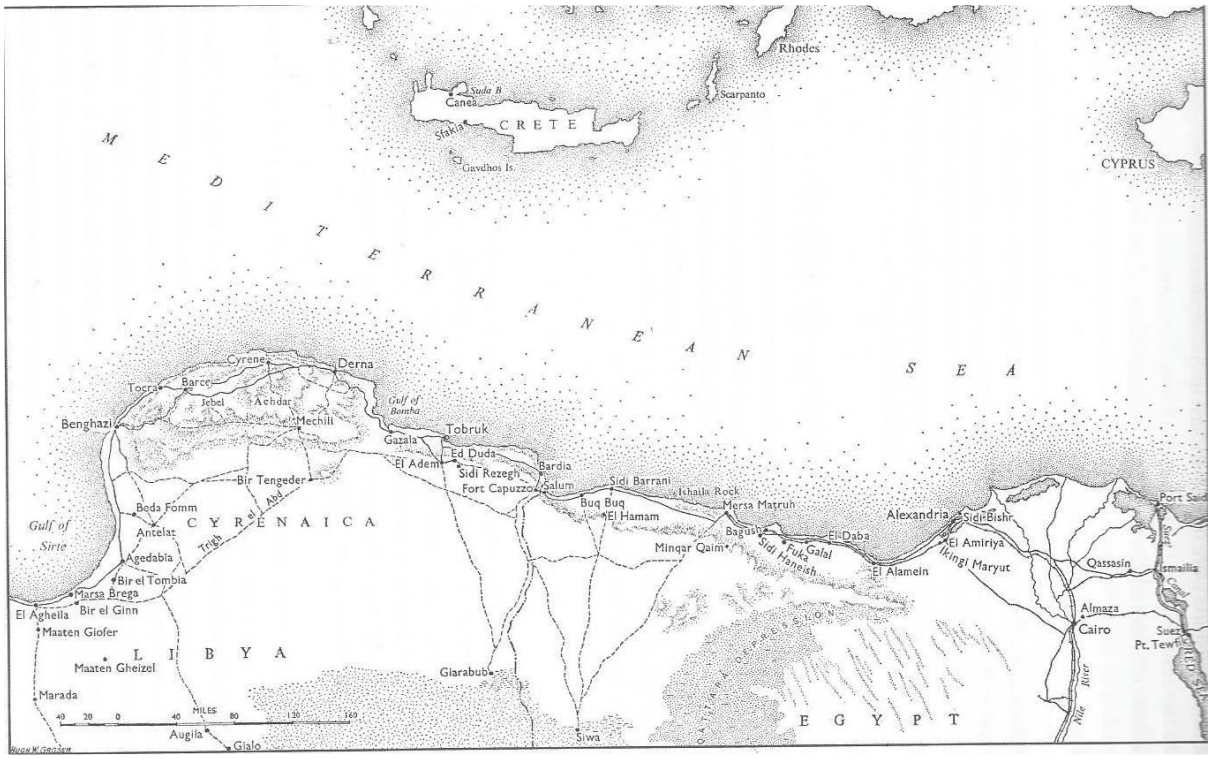
The sand was very loose so I started digging in with my hands, its surprising how quickly you can dig in when your life depends on it! And Bill H said ‘for Christ’s sake keep still, you are putting sand all over me’. I ignored him and in no time, I was below the ground and one shell landed rather close. Next thing Bill H was digging as hard as he could go, he didn’t care where the sand went. Anyway, after a while the shelling eased and we moved forward … and you are not supposed to be able to walk through a fixed line or machine

gun fire, but we did … you could see the tracer flicking past … somehow or other we got through and a bit further along, a Doctor decides to set up an RAP … so as we are setting

(1) Mark Johnston in his commemoration address on Wednesday, 23 October 2002 saw fit to single out Cobb. ‘Another adored Captain, Bill Cobb of the 2/15th Battalion, died early in the battle. At Tobruk, a year earlier, he had won the Military Cross and then won a second one in the disastrous Bulimba operation of September 1942. No wonder the official history calls him "audacious". There's a record of him, too, encouraging his men, with a nip of Scotch, the night before the October push. That night he told a fellow officer the items he wanted sent home: for Cobb had a premonition that he would die, and when it eventuated during the first advance, men in his company cried.

Later in the battle, Cobb's commanding officer, was killed. In September he had left the 2/17th Battalion to take over the 2/15th. His battalion was forming up for an attack on 28 October when they came under fierce shelling. An officer from the 2/17th invited Magno to take shelter with him, but Magno insisted on staying with his men. The advance began, but soon news came back that Magno had been severely wounded. His carrier driver went forward and found that Magno had lost an arm and received severe head and stomach wounds. He was conscious, calm and still concerned about his men. He died of his wounds two days later.

Bill movingly recalls the Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Keith Magno, in ‘An El Alamein Runner, Remembered’, December 31st 1973, see Chapter 5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Bardia
Sidi Rezegh
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Salum
Sidi Barrani
Ishaila Rock
Mersa Matruh
Buq Buq
El Hamam
Baguish
Minqar Qaim
Fuka
Galal
Sidi Haneish
El Daba
El Alamein
Alexandria
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El Amiriya
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Port Said
Suez Canal
Qassasin
Ismailia
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Bir el Abd
Boda Fomm
Antelat
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Gulf of Sirte
Trig
Agedabia
Bir el Tombia
Marsa Brega
El Agheila
Bir el Ginn
Maaten Giofer
LIBYA
Maaten Gheizel
Marada
Augila
Gialo
Giarabub
Siwa
MILES
EGYPT

Epilogue – Bill Johnson

Service Record SX13215

Date of Enlistment 16 June, 1941 Adelaide SA

Record of Service AIF 9th Australian Division, June, 1941 enlisted as Private in 2/8 Field Ambulance.

Embarked 2nd September, 1941 on Queen Mary. Disembarked Port Said, late September.

Commissioned as Chaplain 4th Class with rank of Captain 4th October, 1942.

February, 1943 Division shipped back to Australia, disembarked Fremantle.

1943: Training Darling Downs.

1943-1945: 2nd/27th Battalion in Bougainville.

Date of Discharge 13th November 1945 Australian Imperial Forces at Hampstead, SA

Rank Chaplain Class 4

Re-enlisted Citizens Army, Melbourne based, 1949-1951, following National call-up. The Korean War commenced 25 June 1950.

Post-war, Bill's life was one of continuous service.

Archbishop Booth offered him the post of Assistant Chaplain at Grimwade House, Melbourne Grammar Preparatory School (22nd March 1946-48) and then Vicar, St Luke's, North Brighton, Victoria (7th May 1948-1956).

In 1956, Bill returned to the Diocese of Adelaide, South Australia as Rector St Paul's, Port Adelaide, which parish comprised, Saint Nicholas, Glanville, and Saint Barnabas, Rosewater, 2 November 1956-1968 and Rural Dean, Western Suburbs 1967-68.

The appalling range of social problems which confronted him at the Port stirred Bill to lobby the Social Welfare Department, corporations and his parish for funds to set up accommodation for the many down-and-outs, often victims of alcoholic abuse. Unceasing labour and enthusiasm led to the establishment of 'Archway Port' which Bill described in the acronym SPACE, a 'Supplementary Programme Applied Christian Evangelism'. This was the 'Alcoholic Centre and home welcoming all yeast victims – Prepared of their own accord to receive treatment'. Their board adopted 'SPACE' as part of their rebuilding fund-raising program with recipients of the promotional publication being invited to donate 'such equivalent value as you are able to do so'. Again, Bill prepared the text, interspersing it with his hymns new and old.

In his approach to the treatment of alcoholics, Bill was ahead of his time in arousing social consciousness. Such was the community's response, the Archway Board was able to go ahead with the construction of what became the 'Johnson Building' catering for 22 male alcoholics in a

live-in centre and the Boundy-Bryant Building next door, making a total of 39 beds, 34 male and 5 female.

Ongoing funding was ultimately provided by the South Australian Government and the centre became a model for rehabilitation programs Australia-wide.

Mr Roy Bryant, an ex- Superintendent of Doctor Barnado's Homes, directed the Archway Rehabilitation Centre Inc. from 1960, by which time Bill had acquired 13 cottages in the Port for accommodation. At the outset, Bill said 'We will not preach Christ, but show Christ in ourselves to others.' Over the next three decades, 6,000 men and women were to receive treatment at Archway.

Bill's final appointment was as Rector, St Augustine's, Victor Harbor, 12 January 1968 and from where he retired on 10 January, 1973.

This parish, encompassing Saint Thomas, Inman Valley, and Saint Christopher, Mount Compass, was then part of the Diocese of Adelaide, but on 23 February, 1971 was incorporated as part of the new Diocese of the Murray.

There, in Victor Harbor in 1973, Bill founded the Senior Citizens Club. Then, with generous support of several families including the Hay and Rymill and the community, in 1975 Bill established Victor Harbor Encounter Crafts and Social Centre to provide support for handicapped and isolated people. The following year, the association was incorporated and registered as a charitable body. In 1983, the South Australian Health Commission assumed responsibility for part of the association's funding and a year later funded renovations to the Centre, located in the old ETSA building on Flinders Parade. Grant funding in 2001 helped establish new, expanded facilities at the current site on Armstrong Road. This improvement included modern machinery in the carpentry workshop, a garden centre and larger meeting rooms.

Today Encounter Centre Incorporated is a community-based charity reliant on dedicated volunteers who provide help to run a range of activities, in particular, programs for those with special needs.

By extraordinary coincidence, Bill died on 20April,1987, the fiftieth anniversary of his wedding to Ursula who remained at Victor Harbor until 2003..

The community's recognition of Bill's diverse and significant service have included:

- 1960 Port Adelaide's Man of the Year, having commenced Archway Port.

- 1977 South Australia's Senior Citizen of the Year.

- 23rd November 1977 Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia (A.M.) for 'service to religion and the community'. After Bill was awarded this Australian honour, Jim Robbins, the columnist, observed 'no matter where he is, Bill Johnson sees something to do and he does it. According to people who served with him, Chaplain Johnson saw ways in which the conditions of the 'other ranks'

could be improved, and said so. It didn't endear him to authority, but the troops thought the world of him.'

- 1981 Victor Harbor's Citizen of the Year for 'outstanding humanitarian service to the community'. He was described a 'a man who organised everything and did the hard work, then let others take the credit'.

- 19th June 1984: Encounter Craft and Social Centre Inc. formally acknowledged his nine years of service which contributed to the successful establishment of this Centre.

- 1988 One of Bill's hymns was included in the service held in the presence of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, on 21 August 1988 in the Great Hall to mark the opening of the new Parliament House in Canberra. Members described the words and thoughts expressed as inspiring and its inclusion as a fitting tribute.

A Victor Harbor neighbour, Angus Thompson, reflecting on Bill's life observed in 1992, "I feel there still remains one matter which, as yet, has not been covered. This is the unique quality of the late Father Bill's smile. When he smiled, which was often, his face lit up as his love for his God and fellow man shone through. Perhaps his smile which lingers long in the memory still, can best be explained in the words of the smiler himself, via a verse from Bill's hymn's called 'Discovery':

I know that when I'm at your place,

Dear neighbour there I'm tracing.

God's image in a human face.

His love your cares replacing."

Angus saw Bill as "one of nature's gentlemen, a pioneer who strove mightily always, and selflessly, to serve the less fortunate in his community".