

Charlie Scales - Service of remembrance 9 December 2014

I am Alastair Davison of the 2/24 Battalion Association and the son of a Rat of Tobruk. I am representing the 2/24 Battalion Association and the Rats of Tobruk Association. Charlie was a wonderful and dear friend; and a very proud member of both our Associations, as well as a staunch member of the Longbeach RSL. We were saddened to hear of his passing and until recently he seemed invincible. On behalf of both Associations I express our condolences to Loris and members of the extended families. Present today are Doug Dobson, President of the 2/24 Association and past-President Alan Macfarlane; Reg Lawrence, secretary of the Rats of Tobruk Association as well as Committee members and members of both Associations.

Richard Charles (Charlie) Peter Scales VX29311 born on Armistice Day - 11 Nov 1922. He was the son of the original 24th Battalion that fought in Gallipoli and the Western Front in WW1. Charlie was a digger of WW2, part of the Magnificent 9th Division. He served in Tobruk, Syria and Alamein. These men were a breed apart and so many of their memories are of men buried beneath the sands at Tobruk, Knightsbridge, Alamein and places as far away as the Suez.

Charlie was 17 when he first went to enlist. He told me that, unfortunately, his uncle was on duty at the recruiting office and sent him home. That did not deter him and he did enlist at Corryong when he was 17 years and 7 months on 20 June 1940. So Charlie was an original member of the 2/24 Battalion, 13th Platoon, in appropriate 'Charlie' Company, camping at the Wangaratta showgrounds until the Bonegilla camp was completed. With minimal training and equipment they sailed for the Middle East on board the HMT Strathmore, leaving Melbourne on 17 November 1940.

He liked to start his story at Tocra, just north of Benghazi in Libya where the 9th Division was replacing the 6th that had been sent to Greece, and as Charlie said in his typical way of understating things, 'We were enjoying the sunshine and admiring the greenery when a series of large explosions behind us followed by large billowing columns of smoke, alerted us to the fact that we were in a spot of trouble'. Rommel had arrived.

And so started the Benghazi Handicap, travelling night and day back across that desert to Gazalla, about 30 miles west of Tobruk. Here they dug defensive positions but were soon attacked by Stuka Dive Bombers. Then Charlie relates how, soon afterwards, a number of tanks (the first they had ever seen) lined up on the skyline about 600 yards away and started shelling them. It was April 1941 when they arrived at Tobruk. Later that month the 2/24 was positioned on the Red Line when Rommel attempted, for a second time, to break through the defences and reach the harbour. Capturing the harbour at Tobruk would shorten his supply line by days and be advantageous for his attack on Egypt and beyond.

Charlie was in a patrol that brought back their first prisoners. Then on the night of 30 April-1 May the 2/24 were shelled and strafed. During this Charlie was ordered to take ammunition to the HQ post. He spent most of the journey on his belly, being attacked by gunfire from friend and foe. They left Tobruk after 7½ months of (in Charlie's words) "near starvation - a pint of water a day, and a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits between four men per day with the temperature averaging over 40°C by day and plagues of flies, fleas and other crawly creepy things that thrived on us and prospered'. Not really Charlie's holiday environment, but it ended during October 1941. Back in Palestine, Charlie and Teddy Turner were sent to Northern Syria as Advance Guards as an attack was feared through nearby Turkey. They had to dig an anti-tank trap. Those two enjoyed a week or so of freedom from strict discipline, dining on fresh poached eggs and freshly baked white bread.

With permission they hired men to continue the digging, but the local paymaster paid youngsters less and pocketed the difference. Charlie reported the misdemeanour - and was rewarded by the locals with a big bag of lush purple plums and 6 bottles of warm beer - and I got the impression that he knocked most of it off. There was an incident around that time when Charlie took a 24-hour holiday and it may have been when he consumed this reward. He was docked three days' pay and received three days of CB (Confined to Barracks).

After the tour of duty in Syria the Battalion, in June 1942, headed south and they thought they were heading home - but on reaching Egypt they turned right instead of left and were up for the Battles of Alamein; where they geared up to confront Rommel again.

Their first encounter on 22 July 1942 is described by Charlie:

"My Platoon Commander, Ted Bell from South Australia, said to me 'Charlie, I have lost a section. Would you go over that rise and see if you can locate them'. I did as he asked but could not find them so I went over another rise to the west and I got the shock of my life. There were three of the biggest guns I had ever seen pointing straight back the way we had come. I ran back and told Ted who waved his arm in traditional fashion, singing out 'Follow

me men'. We captured the guns and their crews. The guns were so large that the whole platoon could sit along the barrel of *one*."

Then the battalion headed towards the high ground at Point 33 and were given 20 minutes to dig in. Charlie wrote that he was sick of digging-in so he found a depression where a truck had been garaged and threw his gear down. A few minutes later the heaviest mortar barrage that they had experienced hit them. Suddenly Charlie was digging furiously, throwing out boulders the size of footballs.

They were given orders to create a diversion by attacking along the coast. His mate Ted Turner fell and was hospitalised; and in one of those quirks of history was nursed by both of Charlie's sisters - Molly and Yvonne. Amid the carnage Charlie was amazed at the calmness of the stretcher bearers who behaved as though they were immune to enemy fire.

But the savage carnage continued as Rommel threw the full force of the Afrika Korps at them, and many of his mates in the company were killed or wounded. Charlie said he had a machine gun bullet through his haversack, and another through a rolled up sleeve while another creased his right side. On return to base a shell landed near him and he *come-to* in a dugout, with his rescuer telling him he was lucky because the shell was a dud. He was evacuated to hospital suffering he said in his understated way, from concussion and superficial wounds - and that he was not away from the Battalion for long. However, Battalion records show that he was wounded on 22 July with GSW to right arm. He was in hospital for 22 days before being transferred to a convalescent depot and was back in the unit on 7 September - in time for the second Battle of Alamein, October 1942. After a fortnight of fighting, Charlie felt he was like a punch-drunk soldier - out to it but determined to keep going. The Battalion was mauled in this offensive where they were Right of Line with an exposed flank. They were down to 84 men. In the counter attacks by the enemy more losses occurred. They were eventually relieved by the 2/28 with only some 54 men to be transported out from the battlefield.

A constant memory for Charlie was that of digging trenches. He had dug defensive positions whenever they stopped on the way to Tobruk and again during the months in Tobruk, then in Syria and again in Alamein. He was so sick of digging trenches, fox holes, trenches and tank traps that on return to Australia he applied for and became a member of the 1st Australian Paratroop Battalion. But in so doing he sat out the war, as Macarthur decided not to use Australians for the recapture of the Philippines. This did not appeal to Charlie and he asked to return to the 2/24 - but his request was denied.

Along with many other diggers Charlie prepaid for a memorial plaque that will be mounted on the 2/24 Memorial Wall at the Wangaratta Cemetery. Some years ago when he sent the money for the plaque Charlie wrote, in an attached note: "This application is a not a statement of imminent departure".

Richard Charles Scales, Charlie to everyone. He was one of us. He was a Rat. He was proud 2/24 member. My friend - Stand easy, stand down - your service is complete.