

# Commemorating the Battle of El Alamein (1942) 75 Years On

*Article and photographs by: Mrs R. Lord*



*Staff Sergeant Marius Pfeiffer of the SA Army Band Western Cape, plays the Last Post and the Reveille, with the Drums and Pipes of the Cape Town Highlanders in the background.*

**O**n Sunday, 29 October 2017, the Castle of Good Hope hosted the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Commemoration Service of the Second Battle of El Alamein. The service was organised by the Cape Town Highlanders, the Cape Western Provincial Dugout of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (M.O.T.H.) and the Department of Defence and Military Veterans (DOD&MV). The parade began with Pipe Major WO2 Charles Canning leading the Drums and Pipes of the Cape Town Highlanders onto the parade ground through the imposing entrance of the Castle, closely followed by the M.O.T.Hs. banners and a column of M.O.T.H. from various shell-holes around Cape Town. The sentries of the Cape Town Highlanders took post around the GV1 gun, as the SA national flag was unfurled, under the watchful eye of Parade Warrant Officer Alfie Wort, RSM of the Cape Town Highlanders.

Master of Ceremonies, Philip McLachlan, Provincial Adjutant of the Cape Western Provincial Dugout of the M.O.T.H., welcomed everyone to the commem-

oration service. Seating for the dignitaries, veterans, and representatives of various regiments and associations had been set up in the colonnade, which provided welcome shelter from the sun.

Lieutenant Colonel Tienie Lott, Officer Commanding of the Cape Town Highlanders, took to the podium to address the parade. He spoke about the significance of the Battle of El Alamein, the reason why it is still remembered today, 75 years later, and its special significance for the CTH. The regiment fought in all of the major battles in the Western Desert Campaign of 1941-43 of the Second World War.



*Lieutenant Colonel Tienie Lott, Officer Commanding the Cape Town Highlanders, addresses the parade.*

The First Battle of El Alamein was fought around the small railway siding of that name in Egypt, on the North African coast, during the month of July 1942. The conflict involved, on the side of the Axis forces (Germany and Italy), the Panzer Army Africa under the command of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, and, on the side of the Commonwealth forces, the Eighth Army (consisting of troops from Britain, British India, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand),





*From L to R: Dave Revell (Provincial Old Bill of the Cape Western Provincial Dugout of the M.O.T.H.), Lieutenant Colonel Tienie Lott (Officer Commanding the Cape Town Highlanders), Alderman Ian Neilson (Deputy Executive Mayor of the City of Cape Town), Brigadier General Debbie Molefe (Director Defence Reserves), Lieutenant Colonel Johan Conradie (Defence Reserves Western Cape) and Mrs Deirdre Conradie in front of the ceremonial gun.*

under the command of General Claude Auchinleck. Taking advantage of the terrain, the British Eighth Army constructed three 'boxes' (dugouts surrounded by minefields and barbed wire); one of these was at El Alamein.

Here, the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division played a pivotal role in halting Rommel's advance from their front-line in Libya towards Cairo in Egypt and the strategic Suez Canal and the oilfields of the Persian Gulf further east. Total South African losses, from 26 June to 30 July 1942, were 433 officers and other ranks of whom 164 were killed, 253 wounded, and 8 taken prisoner of war, while eight received treatment for shell shock (Roll of Honour, World War II, 1939-1945; Div Docs 105, File1 SAD/A2/2: Battle Casualties, 1-30 July 1942).

The Second Battle of El Alamein, which was fought from 23 October to 11 November 1942, marked a turning point in the North African Campaign. The new commander of the British Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, launched a multi-pronged offensive focusing on the north, involving a massive artillery barrage on the German tanks, infantry actions, the advance of Allied armour tanks through vast minefields, and bombing raids by airplanes, coupled with diversionary attacks from the south.

The Eighth Army succeeded in breaking through the defences of Rommel's Panzer Army Africa, leading to the eventual defeat of the German and Italian forces in North Africa.

Among the Commonwealth forces, and part of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division, were troops from various regiments, including, among others, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cape Town Highlanders, 1<sup>st</sup> Dukes of Edin-

burgh's Own Rifles (known today as the Cape Town Rifles [Dukes]), 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Natal Carbineers (Natal Carbineers), 1<sup>st</sup> Transvaal Scottish, 1st Natal Mounted Rifles, 1<sup>st</sup> Imperial Light Horse (Light Horse Regiment), 1<sup>st</sup> Rand Light Infantry, and 1st Royal Durban Light Infantry (Durban Light Infantry) and various artillery regiments.

The Second Battle of El Alamein represented the first major offensive against the Axis powers since the start of World War II; the victory revived the morale of the Allies when it was sorely needed. The South African casualties during this battle alone amounted to 734, killed, wounded or taken prisoner of war.

In acknowledgement of their participation in these historic battles, the CTH earned three battle honours. Interestingly, it is only one of three regiments in the world to have not only the usual two Alamein battle honours, "Alamein Defence" (relating to the First Battle) and "El Alamein" (relating to the Second Battle), but also a third, "Alamein Box". Two other Reserve Force regiments, the Durban Light Infantry and the Light Horse Regiment have also received this battle honour. This is why the commemorations of El Alamein hold special significance for the Cape Town Highlanders.

The scripture reading and prayer were given by Chaplain Ben Smit, and the singing of the beautiful



hymns “Abide with me” and “Amazing Grace” was accompanied by the Drums and Pipes of the Cape Town Highlanders. During the traditional two minutes’ silence, the moving Last Post and the Reveille were played by Staff Sergeant Marius Pheiffer of the SA Army Band Western Cape. The M.O.T.H. standards were lowered, as everyone stood in reflective silence.

One of the 25-pounder GV1 guns of the Cape Field Artillery Saluting Troop stood on the front parade ground of the Castle, serving as a fitting focal point of the parade, since guns just like it had contributed their fire to the Allied effort at El Alamein. Like the Cape Town Highlanders and the Cape Town Rifles (Dukes) regiment, Cape Field Artillery too had seen active service in the North African Campaign, under the name of 1 Field Regiment; 1 and 3 Field Batteries, joined by 14 Field Battery, participated in both Battles of El Alamein.

Wreaths were laid all around the base of the gun by Mr Mike Masala on behalf of the DODMV, Brigadier General Molefe, Director Defence Reserves, and the Executive Deputy Mayor of the City of Cape Town, Alderman Ian Neilson. Alderman Neilson is a frequent speaker and long-time supporter of these military parades and commemoration services. Once all the wreaths had been laid, Pipe Major Charles Canning played the hauntingly beautiful Lament, giving us time to reflect on the lives

lost and ultimate sacrifices made in these battles, which changed the course of history.

Many of the people attending the parade were veterans who had seen active service, in World War II, during the Bush War in Namibia and Angola, and further afield. Although there are thousands of World War II veterans still alive today, around the world, they are all in their 80s and 90s by now, and their numbers are dwindling. In Cape Town, we are fortunate to have two veterans of El Alamein still alive today: Major Charles Holloway (age 99) and Sgt Sydney Ireland (age 97). Both of them were present at Sunday’s service.

Major Charles Holloway, a signaller, was attached to the Duke of Edinburgh’s Own Rifles, as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade in North Africa, and served at both the First and Second Battles of El Alamein. Sergeant Sydney Ireland served as a wireless operator in East Africa as well as in North Africa, where he too witnessed the Battles of El Alamein.

It was a particularly emotional moment when they laid their wreath at the base of the gun, with the assistance of Sergeant Ireland’s grandson, Craig Portman, as well as Sergeant Peter Longbottom and Staff Sergeant Pierre Fourie of the Signals Association. As they returned to their seats, all the spectators applauded, in heartfelt acknowledgement of their years of service to the country.

**To conclude the parade, Dave Revell, the Provincial Old Bill of the Cape Western Provincial Dugout, delivered the M.O.T.H. Credo and Prayer:**

*“I shall pass through this world but once;  
any good thing that I can do  
or kindness I can show any human being,  
let me do it now and not defer it,  
for I shall not pass this way again.”*

*“They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,  
We will remember them.”*

**Note:** With grateful acknowledgement to Lieutenant Colonel Johan Conradie, SO1 of the Defence Provincial Office of the Western Cape, and to Captain Jacques de Vries, National Communications Chairpersons of the Junior Officers’ Association of the Reserve Force Council, for their input. 

