

THE AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE AT BIR HACHEIM

by
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Ever since we had arrived with the French at the end of March, our whole unit had been looking forward eagerly to the long-rumored Spring campaign in Libya. For, except for the lucky one or two who happened to be out on patrol, the work at Bir Hacheim, while interesting, was generally routine during the lull in the Desert.

About May 15th, however, there were obvious signs that the action was really about to commence: we were given orders to dig ourselves deep slit trenches, the camp minefields were deepened and improved, each day saw convoys of reserve supplies being loaded into camp, and all the rear hospital units (to which we evacuated) were put on orders to move at an hour's notice.

On the evening of May 26th, Stratton returned from a patrol to say that every indication was that the offensive was due to start the next morning. The small group he'd accompanied on patrol had retired in front of a large concentration of Axis forces moving generally towards us.

Naturally the excitement amongst us was tremendous: we all felt that at last we were to have a real chance to justify ourselves in action.

On the morning of May 27th we were walking back to our tent from getting our early-morning cup of tea, when, suddenly, our own artillery started firing. The show was on! For a couple of hours the Hacheim 75's kept up desultory fire. As yet we couldn't see any targets. Occasionally, however, we could see shrapnel bursts at about three miles range, to the southwest.

All our ambulances were attached to the GSD (Groupe Sanitaire Divisionnaire); so our work actually came after the various battalion ambulances, very light Fords, had picked up the casualties at the place where they were wounded, and brought them perhaps five hundred yards to the central GSD tents. But for the duration of the emergency we were supposed, at times, to go around and help out the aid-posts. Accordingly, Alan (Stuyvesant) called a meeting at about nine this morning; he told us exactly where the aid-posts were situated, and arranged for us to drive around the camp with some Legionnaires as guides.

Meanwhile Stratton and Tichenor were scheduled to make a routine evacuation to Bir Bu Maafes, twenty-one miles to the northeast. The track, according to the GSD officers, was believed still open at the time. About three miles out on it, however, Stratton and Tichenor met a column of trucks rushing back towards Bir Hacheim, and they were told to turn back, - that a group of Italian tanks was just over the ridge ahead. They returned to camp with their patients, were assured that the route was quite clear, and were sent out once more. But this time, just as they were passing through our minefields, a salvo of light shells landed about eighty yards ahead. Another salvo followed. It was very much closer. Before our men could turn around, a great number of shells rained down on all sides. They managed, nevertheless, to get away and to return to camp without damage.

When the shelling began, Kulak and I were caught over in the other side of camp. We were forced to take cover in a trench for about ten minutes before we dared make a frantic dash back to our own area. On the way back, we saw a line of enemy tanks approaching our edge of the perimeter.

The battle that followed, though short, was very severe while it lasted. It was particularly severe for us: our tent and holes-in-the-ground were way down on the edge of camp, with the result that not only the incoming but also the outgoing shells all whistled over our heads. As we had not yet got used to the tumult of a battle, we all were quite convinced that every whistle was going to be our last!

And this battle, though short, was decisive. At the end of a half-hour, 40 out of the 70 attacking tanks had been destroyed by our artillery and anti-tank guns; and the remainder had very wisely turned and fled. At one point, however, a group of six tanks had got within the camp itself before they were destroyed.

Then our work really began. We all rushed down to the trenches and the GSD tent. Trucks were bringing the wounded tank-crews in to us. The wounds that men get in tanks are not very pleasant to look at! Remarkably enough, there was only one French casualty, and that one very slight. The Italian casualties were numerous. For about two hours we ferried them from where they were unloaded up to the operating theatre. Our three doctors worked furiously to keep up with the influx. By lunch time (we could hardly believe it), things were finished, and quiet....except that we were still surrounded.

On June 1st, the French sent out an offensive column from Hacheim to Rotunda Segnali, a point about 30 miles behind the Axis lines and directly athwart their communications. After a great deal of persuasion, Alan got the French consent to our sending two ambulances out with the expedition. We cut cards, and Kulak and I won the assignment. We started off at about noon, heading northwest over the trackless desert, with a force of men and a number of batteries of artillery.

From the start, the expedition was ill-fated. We were strafed three times in succession on the way out. Several of the armored cars escorting us were hit and there were some casualties. Kulak turned around to bring the wounded back to Hacheim, while I went on ahead. We camped for the night, dispersed over a wide area lest the Luftwaffe should find us and give us a pounding. Our AA protection was light. Suddenly we heard a roar and a group of three ME 110's appeared flying very low. As they approached they opened fire with cannon and machine guns. The first attack resulted in several minor casualties, and the doctor and I set out to pick up the wounded. We were just bandaging one fellow when the planes returned . . . in much greater force. They used the same tactics as before. While we were throwing ourselves on the ground, one plane opened fire directly on the ambulance which we'd hurriedly left. A stream of glowing cannon shells hit on both sides of the lone ambulance, missing it, and the shells ricocheted on down the depression, where they accidentally blew up a petrol supply truck. From then on, we were attacked again and again until dark, with light bombs as well as guns. Finally we rounded up all the casualties, a few of them severe, and improvised a hospital in a sheltered depression between two hills. A stray bullet had smashed the light inside my ambulance; so I operated a hand generator flashlight while the doctor and I worked.

Since the column was planning to move on the next morning, it was necessary somehow to evacuate the wounded. A radio message was sent back to Bir Hacheim, calling for a relief column of ambulances. Alan and all the rest of our drivers started off at once that night. After a gruelling drive across the desert, they arrived at our rendezvous at 7 in the morning. Fortunately, heavy dust storms protected us from the air. We delivered the wounded to them and then moved ahead to rejoin our column, which had left at dawn; they immediately started back to Bir Hacheim. On the way, about fifteen miles from their destination, Alan had a flat tire. He insisted that the others go on, as they had wounded aboard. One of the Foreign Legion drivers they had borrowed, a Persian, remained behind to help him. Meanwhile, entirely unknown to any of them, the Germans were moving heavy forces up to Hacheim for a real full-scale attempt to take the stronghold, which was interfering with their communications problem. The other eight ambulances slipped into camp just as the Germans started to shell them. Alan was not so fortunate. It seems that he was actually within sight of the camp when a German armored car rushed up and captured him.

At any rate, at that time, we knew nothing more than that he had disappeared and that he did not return. We hoped he had been picked up by one of our armored cars, operating in that region. Eventually, that hope proved false. His loss was a severe blow to us.

The next afternoon, we were sitting around with the column, which we'd rejoined, when suddenly the astounding news was radioed to us that Bir Hacheim was being surrounded. In force. Instantly, we all set off to fight our way back. There was a terrible sandstorm raging, so that the confusion was tremendous, but we managed to get off, though in the wierdest formation (or lack of it) that the Libyan Desert has ever seen! After driving all night, we approached the camp at dawn and saw the German artillery upon the ridge to our right . . . a great deal too close for comfort. Apparently they were too surprised to fire quickly, for we managed to negotiate the single-file passage through the minefields with but one casualty. Most of the shells went far over us.

When Kulak and I arrived back at our tent, we saw that the others had transformed it in our absence into a very safe little dugout. The tent itself had been dismantled, as it offered far too tempting a target to the enemy; and the doorway, reinforced with sandbags and sand-filled petrol tins, and with a hastily improvised anti-shrapnel door, formed an adequate, if rather cramped, shelter against fragments.

And in the days to come we were certainly to need such a shelter. The force of the assault began to make itself felt. The shells that were poured into the camp far outnumbered those that went out. The most serious factor was in the greatly superior weight of enemy artillery. They brought up guns which threw against us shells twice as heavy as our own and with twice the range. Then, too, time after time, huge flights of Stukas would come over, circle until they picked out their precise targets, and dive down through the barrage which our light AA threw up.

Our daily routine during the siege was simplicity itself. We'd get up just before dawn, while there was still a heavy mist over everything, and draw our daily water rations. . . and possibly get a cup of coffee if we were lucky. As soon as the fog had burnt off, we'd go to our dugouts. And then, as regular as clockwork, the

guns on both sides would open up. From then until dark, well over twelve hours, it was absolutely impossible to step out of our dugouts. The shelling and machine-gunning were continuous. During the greater part of the attack, the enemy were throwing in at least twelve to fifteen thousand shells a day. Furthermore, a tremendous weight of bombs rained down in the daily raids. We had the misfortune to be situated pretty close to the artillery, so the major part of the Axis bombardment fell all around us. It wasn't long before we got into the habit of always keeping our mouths open against the concussion of nearby shells. I couldn't begin to count the number that landed within 40 yards of where we lay.

Apparently the Hospital tents attracted the enemy bombers very strongly. The tents were not marked with Red Crosses, and were surely among the most prominent features of the camp. At any rate, the GSD probably received the worst bombardment of anybody. On one day alone a total of two HUNDRED Stukas dove on the hospital area. They razed the tents, killed all the wounded, and dazed everybody in the vicinity — including ourselves. In the worst single raid we experienced, 117 Stukas dove on our area at one time, with loads of one-thousand pound bombs . . .

But it's impossible to describe the effect of such a blast. You have to experience it. Even above the terrific roar of the diving planes one can hear the rising shriek of the bombs . . . then there's an infinitesimal pause, a moment of rumbling, and then there's an ear-splitting crack which sounds as if the air itself is not merely being pushed aside, but literally ripped into shreds. From what I'm told by people who went through the war in France, we at Bir Hacheim experienced one of the heaviest shellings ever dished out — certainly for such a prolonged period as two solid weeks. But even so, every one of us agreed that the bombings were a thousand times worse than all the rest put together. During that 117-plane raid, we were all completely convinced we were dead. It was lucky that it took place the evening we finally evacuated Bir Hacheim, for it completely ruined our dugout. Along with a large piece of the bomb's tail, which came through the door, petrol tins and sandbags and roof — all came down on our heads.

We were unfortunate, too, in a number of little details. On the first day, for example, a bomb struck our cook-dugout and not only killed the cooks and destroyed the cooking equipment, but also blew up most of our stores. The same thing was repeated on a much more serious scale a few days later, when a shell landed in our water dump, destroying almost all of our stock. So, for the last three days we didn't get a bite to eat . . . not, to tell you the truth, that there was an AFS man in Bir Hacheim who would have wanted to eat a bite. That was just one of the minor effects which the bombing and shelling had on our nerves. To further harass us, there was a sniper who was gunning for us during the entire last week. That made it very foolish to go out even during those rare lulls in which we'd try to get a breath of fresh air.

Although we were astonishingly lucky in not having one of us so much as scratched in the actual bombardment, our cars didn't have such good luck. Kulak's went in the most spectacular fashion. It was struck directly by a 105mm shell, and there was hardly anything left but the four wheels and a bit of the chassis. The ground for a distance of fifty yards on every side was strewn with pieces of wood, canvas, and steel. For protection, cars were nosed down into shallow holes, which was fairly adequate as far as the motor was concerned; but often the whole

would be blown to splinters. Between the bombs and the shells, eight out of our twelve ambulances at Hacheim were rendered totally unusable; and all of the remaining four were hit. Tichenor's, for example, was hit on at least five occasions: the dash ripped out, the windshield demolished, and most of the back was more like a sieve than a car. Yet, somehow, the motor ran, and there was still room for four stretchers.

Through an odd error, during the first part of the attack, a number of German ambulances drove into the camp and were promptly captured. But though they helped out greatly around the camp, they were not in good enough condition to be driven out during our evacuation.

An interesting incident, in which we took part, occurred one afternoon when the fighting was at its hottest. The enemy sappers had been working in our minefields, under heavy machine gun fire, trying to cut a passage for their tanks, and they sustained a number of wounded. For some reason, they asked for us to send an ambulance to get some of these. In response to their appeal, the GSD detailed Kulak and Jim Worden to go. They flew a huge white flag out one side of the ambulance and a Red Cross flag out the other, and started down towards the mines. Except for one lone burst of machine gun fire, doubtless accidental, all firing on both sides stopped. Reaching the edge of the minefield, the men in our car called to the German Red Cross orderly who was lying down with two or three wounded. He came over, handed in a pistol he'd been wearing, and helped Kulak and Worden carry the wounded to the ambulance. Then the orderly climbed in. He was surrendering himself as well as the casualties. Not until Worden had driven to a safe distance did everything open up again. Hardly the sort of incident that one associates with modern warfare.

But all this while, day by day, the situation for all of us had been becoming more critical. The terrible strain of two weeks of constant fighting was telling on even the strongest; relief columns were unable to get through to us; rations were critically low, and our ammunition shortage was desperate. In actual gains, as well, the enemy, at the cost of heavy sacrifice, had admittedly made progress. His infantry was entrenched almost in one corner of the camp itself, and for the last few days there had been continuous small-arms fighting. It was inevitable, then, that the decision was made on the afternoon of June 10th to evacuate as much as possible of the camp's garrison and equipment.

All through that afternoon and evening we took great pains to continue as usual: it was essential that the evacuation be a complete surprise. The evacuation was further complicated by the fact that over two thousand of the men had to leave the camp on foot. At about 11 P.M., we went down to the GSD with our four remaining ambulances and started to load as many of the wounded as we could. Most of them, of course, had to be placed in trucks, which were to follow us. With Jim Worden leading, Tichenor next, myself after him, MacElwain and Kulak next (in the same car), and Stratton bringing up the rear, - we slowly moved over to the southwest corner of the camp, where our engineers had just finished cutting a passage out through our own mines.

The delay as we waited to start out seemed interminable, for, obviously, it was only a matter of time before an enemy patrol spotted our silent concentration. Still, time dragged on and on. Finally, just as we began to move, a star shell burst directly overhead. From then on it was simply a matter of speed against

accuracy. Almost instantly the enemy opened fire with machine guns and Breda cannons (a rapid-firer used against light tanks). If ever the enemy had a chance for slaughter it was then: through some slip-up, flares to mark our passage had not been lit, and we had to pick our way blindly through a dangerous minefield. As an added hazard, the gap was lined on both sides with loose coils of barbed wire: one slight brush against that and a car can become hopelessly entangled.

The enemy fire, by some miracle, was universally high for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Burst after burst, Breda shell after Breda shell, whistled overhead as we moved forward a few feet. We'd stop for a couple of minutes, crouch down behind the wheels, then move again -- and so on. But they got the range and began slamming machine gun fire into the men on foot as well as into the vehicles. By this time, the scene was beginning to be luridly illuminated by burning vehicles.

I was continuing in that halting progress when suddenly I felt my car drag. I realized I'd run into a coil of barbed wire. My frantic efforts to pull loose only got us in deeper. About ten yards from me, across the passage, I saw that the head of the GSD had had the same misfortune. While I was helping him momentarily, he decided there was no chance of freeing his car. He abandoned it, got in with Worden, and our private little convoy moved on again -- leaving me behind. Tichenore disappeared, following Worden, while a moment later Kulak and MacElwain went ahead and also disappeared. Stratton (we afterwards learned) had had his car riddled by machine gun fire. No one in it was hit, but bullets had stopped the motor and ruined the steering. He had quickly hailed another truck, which threw him a cable, and he went on under tow.

By a stroke of luck, there was an armored Bren carrier abandoned very near to me. I got some help from an English RASC fellow in unloading the four wounded from my car. Their position in it was very dangerous. During this operation we all got quite a scare: a burst passed through the back wheels as we were standing at the back, unloading stretchers. We dragged the stretchers across to the Bren carrier and placed them against it. It provided a certain amount of rather effective cover. Finally, about a half-hour later, a truck stopped which had room for the wounded, lying on the ground. But all was not to be so easily settled: while I was standing on the running board, talking to the driver, a Breda shell struck the hood of the car and knocked us all to the ground. Fortunately I was only struck slightly in the leg, which at that time was not of any consequence. But the car was destroyed. Finally, however, a French truck and a battalion ambulance halted. They had room, and we loaded the wounded.

Stratton, meanwhile, had run into disaster slightly farther on. A shell had struck his ambulance in the front, setting it and its reserve petrol instantly ablaze. It wounded him in at least eleven places with small fragments which came through the engine wall. He fell to the ground, clear of the flames. By fast action, the tow cable was cast off, but it was impossible to save the wounded, who were burned in the back of the ambulance. Stratton was picked up by a passing truck, and it managed to carry him safely through the terrible

barrage which now had been set up. By this time, the enemy were veritabily hosing the passage with fire. Almost every truck, including those who got through, was hit at least once.

Tichenor met disaster when he entered the barrage. Although the story is far from certain, it appears that he was struck by machine gun bullets and killed instantly. His car burned, probably with the wounded still in it. Tichenor's body was transferred to an English ambulance workers shortly before dawn, about 14 kilos southwest of Bir Hacheim.

There is no way of knowing what happened to Kulak and MacElwain. I believe I was the last to see them, as they pulled past me while I was stuck in the wire. At any rate, they vanished and haven't been heard of since. We hope that they are safe somewhere, in some prison camp with Alan.

After disposing of the wounded, I walked a short distance before getting a ride on a truck. It was a truck of the Foreign Legion and it carried me through the barrage. We got through with but one slight casualty,- a fellow hit in the shoulder by a piece of a Breda shell that apparently blew up against the truck right behind us. When we got through the fire, there was such a pall of smoke from burning cars and trucks that we were unable to see the stars to set a course back for our territory. Luckily, we almost literally ran into an English truck, driven by an English officer I knew from Hacheim, and we followed him all night. By the time the mist burnt off in the morning, we had left Hacheim far behind and were safely in our own territory.

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There is little more, from the AFS point of view, at least, to tell of the seige of Bir Hacheim. Our losses bore out all that has been written and said of the severity of the attack and evacuation. Of twelve cars, we lost twelve cars. Of the six Americans we had there, one is definitely captured; one is known dead; two are missing; and the remaining two were wounded. You can't ask much more than 100% casualties to men and material . . . at least not for our first engagement.