

The Man behind the Medal

211530 Solomon Siritzky

Group of Four – 1939-45 Star; Africa Star; War Medal; Africa Service Medal



I have an interest in Tobruk, during World War 2, and more especially the capture of Tobruk by Rommel, as my father was part of the 33 000 soldiers taken prisoner. I never really understood why my father never became a MOTH – he did go to a couple of meetings, and he was a 'club' man, but the MOTHs never grabbed him. I remember asking him about it once and his reply was that one day I would understand.

Well, I don't completely understand, but I suppose, when you attend a monthly meeting/get together, followed by a few drinks, and most present are talking about their Military Cross, or Military Medal, or various victories, and your contribution revolves around three years in a prisoner of war camp, it must be a little soul destroying.

In 2008 I successfully bid on the above medal group because of the recipients association with Tobruk. I have, as part of my collection a number of groups to those who were taken prisoner – I suppose I am trying to find someone who spent time with my father. I still have to do research on this group.

Before I introduce my 'Man Behind the Medal', just some background info on Tobruk.

Tobruk was a small, but strategic port for supplies, in North Africa, which had been fortified by the Italians from 1935. Two old outlying forts had been supplemented by a double line of concrete-lined trenches which connected a number of weapons pits protected by concealed anti-tank ditches.



Tobruk was captured by Australian forces in January 1941 as part of the first large Allied military operation of the Western Desert Campaign. Erwin Rommel was assigned to operations in North Africa, and without going into too much detail, Tobruk was cut off and besieged between April and December 1941. The Australians, and then the British and Allied forces who replaced them in September 1941, repulsed a number of attacks by the Italians and Germans, an army which was twice the size of the garrison at Tobruk. Surviving these attacks, the defence of Tobruk became a symbol of the British war effort.

After a lull in hostilities, during which time Rommel was building up his 'tank corp' with a view to taking Tobruk and then the strategic Suez Canal, British commanders made a decision not to defend Tobruk for a second time, and stripped its minefields for use in the Gazala Line to the west. Rommel's offensive began on 26 May 1942 and poorly armed troops, inferior armoured tanks and poor co-ordination allowed Rommel to defeat the Eighth Army and by 13 June the British had begun to retreat eastwards from Gazala, leaving Tobruk vulnerable. By mid-1942, the garrison included many inexperienced troops and on 15 June 1942, the new Major-General Klopper of the 2nd South African Division took command. Rommel commenced his advance on Tobruk on 18 June 1942 with massed air support he penetrated the eastern defensive perimeter. On 21 June he captured the port and 33 000 prisoners.

The surrender was the second largest capitulation by the British Army in the war, after Singapore in February of the same year. The loss of Tobruk came as a severe blow to the British leadership. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in New York meeting with U.S. President Roosevelt when he heard the news.



In his Memoirs, Churchill writes –

"It was a bitter moment. Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another. "What can we do to help?" said Roosevelt. I replied at once, "Give us as many Sherman tanks as you can spare and ship them to the Middle East as quickly as possible.""

But back to my group and to Solomon Siritzky. He was born in Istanbul in June 1924. His father arrived in South Africa in 1927 and settled in Krugersdorp where he had relatives. He worked on the mines as a mechanic and was saving up to be able to send for his wife and three children who were still in Turkey – Solomon being one of the children.



Kemel Ataturk had just come into power in Turkey and he had set about modernising the country. He had also ordered the expulsion of all Jews at the government's expense. This is the reason why Solomon's father had left Turkey to travel to family in South Africa. Prior to Ataturk gaining power, Jews had been afforded refuge in Turkey from Russian persecution. Solomon's mother and two brothers, who were waiting for Solomon's father to send money for them to join him in South Africa, were supposed to travel by ship to Montevideo, Uruguay, with other Turkish Jews, but his mother was having nothing of this. She spent over a year, waiting every day at Ataturk's office, to explain to him that her husband was already in South Africa, and could she and her three children rather be given tickets to travel to join him. Eventually one of the guards got tired of seeing her and arranged for her to see Ataturk. Having explained her position she and the boys were given tickets to Cape Town.

Solomon Siritzky attended Monument High School in Krugersdorp and at the outbreak of World War 2, as a 16 year old, forged his father's signature, giving his age as 18, and volunteered for service.

After basic training he went up north and saw action in the desert in Egypt. His unit got out of Tobruk the night before it fell to the Germans.

He was attached to the 40th Army Co-op, which served as ground crew for the South African Air Force, arming aircraft.

After seeing out his service in North Africa he chose not to go on to Italy and he returned to South Africa. His nickname in the army was 'Turk' and that name stuck with him for years.



On leaving the army he followed a career as a commercial traveller.

He married in December 1945.

Solomon Siritzky died in July 1995 aged 71.

Picture: Solomon Siritzky and his wife

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Allan Gordon