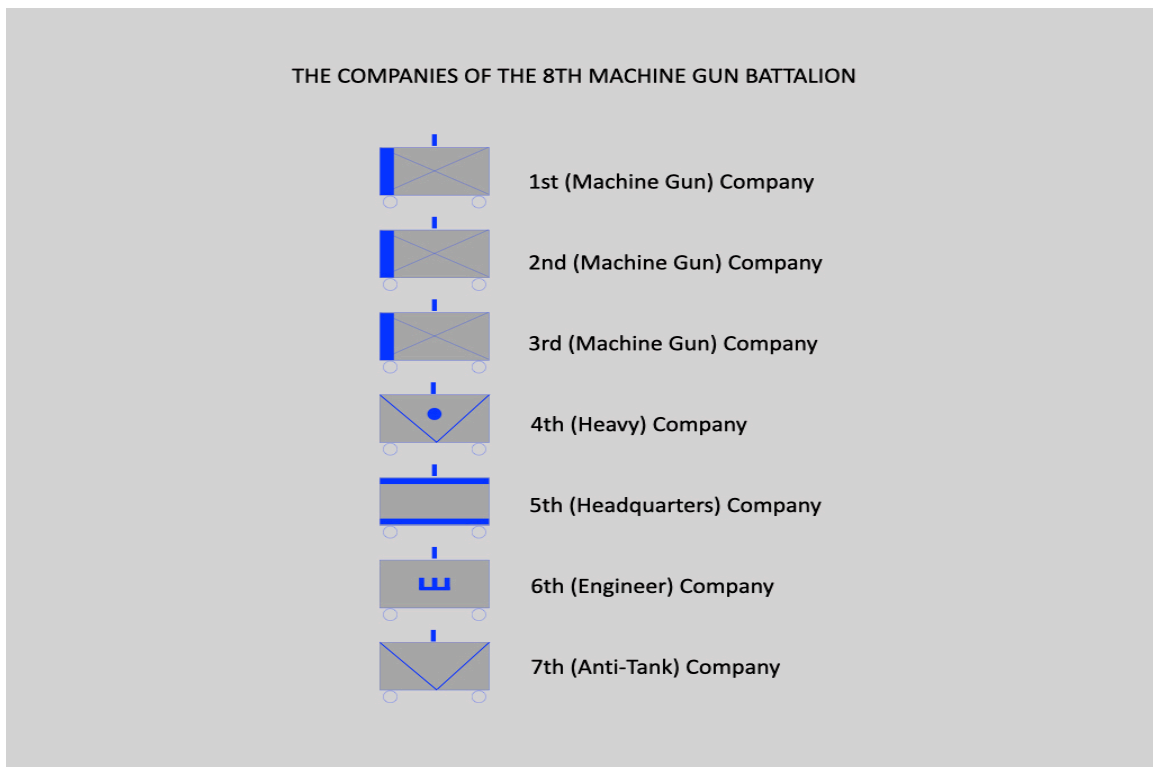


Reading for "Tobruk"

The 8th Machine Gun Battalion was a curious unit. Not only was it larger than most battalions that saw active service in the Second World War, it was also organized in a peculiar way. Of the 1,367 officers, non-commissioned officers, and men who belonged to the unit, 720 were charged with the care, feeding, and operation of the 40 heavy machine guns that gave the unit its name. (These machine gunners were organized into three truck-borne machine gun companies and two motorcycle machine gun platoons.) Of the rest, 315 employed the battalion's other heavy weapons (15 light anti-tank guns and 6 heavy mortars), 210 practiced the art of the military engineer, and 122 provided a variety of services, ranging from the operation of headquarters and the maintenance of a communications network to medical care and equipment maintenance.

The unusual structure of the 8th Machine Gun Battalion was the product of an unusual purpose: the creation, in a matter of hours, of a fortified position that was sufficiently powerful to block a large-scale enemy attack. So that it might reach the location for such a position as rapidly as possible, the unit was fully motorized, with every single man having a seat in a car, truck, motorcycle, or armored personnel carrier. So that it might dig its trenches, build its bunkers, and lay out its obstacles in a short period of time, it was provided with three times as many engineers as were normally allocated to a unit of its size.



Early in 1941, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion received a new, and very different, assignment. It joined another machine gun battalion, three anti-tank battalions, a reconnaissance battalion, and an anti-aircraft battalion to form Obstacle Formation Libya (*Sperrverband Libyen*), a unique organization that had been custom tailored to the task of providing much-needed defensive firepower to the hard-pressed Italian forces fighting in North Africa. A few weeks later, Obstacle Formation Libya traded one of its anti-tank battalions for two battalions of tanks and a field artillery battalion, thereby becoming a unique organization of another sort. The purpose of this new organization, with the somewhat misleading title of 5th Light Division, was to conduct defensive operations of a more active sort.

On 27 February 1941, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion arrived in Tripoli. Within hours of coming ashore, it drove five hundred kilometers to the front, where they joined the three battalions of the 5th Light Division that were already in action. Thus began six weeks of long road marches along the coastal highway, shorter (but much more difficult) treks through the desert, and hastily improvised attacks. This campaign began as a reconnaissance in force, an effort to locate the forward edge of Western Desert Force. Within a few days, however, the discovery of the relative weakness of the British forces in Libya, and the arrival of the rest of the 5th Light Division, led to operations of a more enterprising sort, actions in which the capture of each desert outpost was inevitably followed by aggressive pursuit. For the 8th Machine Gun Battalion, the highpoint of this campaign was the capture, in the wee hours of 7 April, of Lieutenant General Richard O’Conner, the architect of the recent British victory.

