

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Lieutenant Albert Edward PEARSE

(1912?-1996)

[when and where born, parents, education?? Also see Court Martial NAA]

Every regiment has its 'character' – an individual who, regardless of rank, colour, creed, race or even of ability, everyone knows or remembers. One such was Sergeant 'Skeeter' Pearse of the 2/1st Field Regiment. He had enlisted in the Permanent Forces in 1937 and learned his skills, gunnery and army ways with 1st Heavy Brigade in Sydney. He named his previous civilian occupation as 'gold prospector'. His military career was to prove no less venturesome or rewarding than he might have experienced as a prospector.

On the outbreak of WWII he transferred to 2/1st Field Regiment along with another famous gunner, Roy Harvey, although their paths would never cross again. His first CO, Lieutenant Colonel Leo Kelly, promoted him to sergeant and gun detachment commander and, in this role, over the next four years, he won renown – not for bravery, although he was a brave man, but for being on the losing end of expensive Commonwealth property – four 25 pounder guns and two gun tractors!

Skeeter's unit sailed for the Middle East on 10 January 1940 and, now under Lieutenant Colonel L.E.S. Barker, trained and exercised with Major General Iven Mackay's 6th Division. His first noteworthy act was, when as In Charge of Picket, to order one of his gunners at Ikingi Maryut, Frank Donovan, to shoot a recalcitrant, inebriated cookhouse hand in the leg who was intent on disposing of two 1st Battery cooks with malice.

Ordered into action, the regiment headed west and their first operational experience was at Derna. Pearse's gun crew, with others, were in an anti-tank role with 2/11th Infantry Battalion on one side of the aerodrome. The Italians who opposed them bided their time, then engaged the Australian position. Later, Italian bombers attacked their positions and the intensity of engagement quickened with fighters strafing, followed by an 'artillery duel'. 1st Battery came under observation from an Italian 75mm mountain gun and as one regimental historian recorded: "*The first round from the 'Itie' landed behind and the next one in front. The classical bracketing technique had commenced and, of course, this continued until one shell hit 'Skeeter's' gun (killing three of his detachment) and wounding him in the forehead which required his evacuation to hospital.*" That was Gun No.1!

Pearse was discharged from hospital and rejoined his regiment near Mersa Matruh. His battery moved into a bivouac area and to hasten things along 'Skeeter' jumped into the driving seat of his tractor after unlimbering the gun, drove forward a few yards and detonated a British mine. It blew the left front off the tractor that never made the refuelling point – Tractor No.1! Pearse's's score for Libya: 1 gun, 1 tractor.

The campaign in Greece followed and after the regiment had moved north to meet the advancing Germans, their first gun position was in a culvert, well forward and covering a narrow pass with the dual role of anti-tank and ranging guns. At dawn next day a line of 72 enemy aircraft turned out of the sun and blasted the strip of road and regimental area, attracted by the concentration of vehicles. A 500 kg bomb disabled the troop temporarily, inflicting several casualties. On this occasion, Pearse's gun crew were spectators from their slit trenches. A few short days later, in an olive grove called the 'Petrified Forest', the Luftwaffe pattern-bombed and a bomb fell beside Pearse's truck and hooked-in gun setting the truck alight and causing the ammunition to explode destroying both. That was his second lost gun and truck!

In Palestine at Bin Asluj before the regiment returned to Australia, a live firing exercise produced a statistical aberration – only this time it was in the realms of improbability, the ammunition. A premature detonation of the shell on firing destroyed his third gun.

Sergeant Pearse and most of his veteran colleagues rejoined their unit in 1942 and the 2/1st supported the 6th Division assault during the Buna-Gona phase of the campaign in New Guinea. A Japanese raiding party – primitive counter bombardment, as it were – set out to 'neutralise the guns'. In a determined assault one of them slipped a bundle of HE down the barrel and set a short fuse. Guess whose gun? Gun No.4! A colleague (Ken Kell) wrote that it was no wonder his application was given favourable consideration when he requested a transfer to an airborne infantry (paratroop) regiment.

Pearse was commissioned before the war ended and was discharged. When recruiting for the Korean War began in 1950 he enlisted again. He did not disclose his commission and joined 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, as a private soldier. 'Skeeter' was soon promoted to corporal and then the long arm of CARO reached out and he was paraded before his CO, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hassett, and arrangements for his commission were quickly completed and he found himself OC Mortar Platoon.

Being a warrior takes its toll – not only four guns and two trucks. 'Skeeter' succumbed to stomach ulcers and was discharged on medical grounds on the completion of his Short Service Commission. Back on Civvy Street he became a motel operator on the North Coast of NSW, and died in 1996.

Sources: E.J. Hewit, MC, *'It Was Fun Sometimes'* (monograph), 2002, pp. 20, 22 and 48; Ken Kell (ex RAA WO2), 'Skeeter' in DRA Liaison Letter September, 1976; 'Kibbles Post' (Newsletter of 2/1 Field Regiment Association), October, 1997. R.J. O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War, 1950 - 53*; and Alan H. Smith.