

TRANSVAAL HORSE ARTILLERY



(Source: THA Regimental Council)

The long and hard fought war in South Africa, which culminated in the Treaty of Vereeniging, signed on 31 May 1902, and the withdrawal of the bulk of the British forces from the country led eventually to the establishment of volunteer corps in the new Crown Colony of the Transvaal. One of these units was the battery of artillery known as the Lys Volunteer Corps, named after its founder, Maj G. Lys. Established on 17 March 1904, the first volunteers were enrolled on 30 March. Six months later the title of the battery was changed and became The Transvaal Horse Artillery Volunteers. In January 1907 it was renamed: The Transvaal Horse Artillery (THA).

A second battery was raised in 1905 and a section was later formed in Pretoria but only one battery was accepted into the Active Citizen Force when the latter was established with effect from 1 July 1913.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914, the THA volunteered to serve as the THA Battery (S.A.M.R.) and it was in this guise that one section of the battery fought its first war-time action at Sandfontein, in German South West Africa (GSWA), in September 1914. Unfortunately the small force which included the two guns had been led into a trap and was forced to surrender.

Reformed as a four-gun battery, the THA returned to GSWA by way of Walvis Bay in late February 1915 and joined Col Coen Brits' mobile column. The Gunners distinguished themselves at Riet, completely outshooting the six German guns in the foothills of the Langer Heinrich. With 1st Mounted Brigade THA took part in the remarkable desert march of 376 miles in 21 days from Usakos to Namutoni which outflanked the German defences. The last 200 miles had been covered in ten days and from Lemputz the battery had moved 52 miles in 52 hours, without water.

There was little training in the years after the war due to the economic situation but the battery was mobilised when martial law was declared in March 1922 as a result of an armed strike by miners. The 1930s saw an increase in the establishment of THA to a brigade of three batteries. Mobilised for war in 1939 the THA Brigade moved to Potchefstroom at the end of October where, on 1 February 1940, it became 3rd Field Brigade (T.H.A.).

The brigade left Potchefstroom for East Africa in September 1940 with 18-pdr MK II and MK IV guns but in January 1941 9th Field Battery were ordered to exchange their guns for the 4.5 inch howitzers of 11th Field Battery. The brigade fought through the rigours of the campaign in support with other South African Artillery units, of the 1st SA Division and the 12th African Division together with 4th and 7th Field Brigades and 1st Field Battery (CFA).

Once the campaign was nearing its end, the South African artillery units moved to Egypt in August 1941. THA handed in its old guns and was issued with 25-pdrs, at the same time undergoing conversion, to become 3 Field Regiment (V) South African Artillery (T.H.A.).

The regiment moved to Mersa Matruh and with the commencement of the Crusader offensive it went forward with 1st SA Division to become involved in what a brigadier later described as "...the bloodiest and most heroic encounter of the war", the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. It took place on 23 November, Tottensondag to the Germans; the Sunday of the Dead was to live up to its name.

Attacked by the Afrika Korps, the gunners fought over open sights in rising smoke and dust. Casualties were heavy on both sides. The war diary of 22nd Armoured Brigade recorded that the South African gunners "had been magnificent", and a simple soldier said "... they gave it stick, they never faltered."

Remnants escaped the irresistible tide of German armour but by 1 December 375 officers and men answered roll call at Mersa Matruh. A few more trickled in over the coming days. The regiment had managed to extract five of its 24 guns from the scene of battle and later recovered ten guns from the battlefield, seven of which were those of THA.

Reinforced and re-equipped but lacking adequate transport, 8th Field Battery moved to Gazala at the end of January 1942, followed by 7th Field Battery a month later. RHQ and 9th Field Battery remained at Matruh to calibrate guns and provide live shell shoots for courses, before moving to Tobruk at the end of April. They were joined by 8th Field Battery and most personnel were taken prisoner when Tobruk fell to the Afrika Korps on 21 June 1942. A party of 8th Field Battery managed to escape with the Reserve Company of the Coldstream Guards.

7th Field Battery attached to the 7th Field Regiment, was badly hurt in the withdrawal from Gazala, the entire regiment reaching Alamein in a parlous state. Reinforced by officers and men from 5 Field Regiment, 7th Field Regiment (with the THA battery) fought at Alamein from July to the final battle in October.

The Transvaal Horse Artillery (V) was depleted at Tobruk, and was removed from the Order of Battle, together with 2 Field Regiment (NFA).

Transvaal Horse Artillery was represented during the Italian Campaign of 1944/45 by 7/64 Field Artillery (V), South African Artillery (T.H.A.) one of the three batteries combined with those of 22 Field Regiment to form 4/22 Field Regiment, equipped first with 105mm Priests and later 25-pdr Sextons.

The pre-war brigade was resuscitated on 1 January 1946 as 3rd Field Regiment (T.H.A.) and commenced annual peace-time training camps. Its next call to action was in January 1976 in support of 72 Motorised Brigade in Operation Budgie, following Operation Savannah. Recalling its war-time activities the batteries of the regiment were, as in 1946, numbered 7, 8 and 9 and 8th battery was the first, during the Operation to be equipped with the 140mm gun (GV2) whilst the other three batteries were equipped with 25pdrs (GV1s). The fourth battery was (incorrectly) numbered 10th Battery.

Several tours of duty on the SWA/Namibian border were subsequently undertaken including Operation Protea where the THA was equipped with the GV4 155mm gun. On two occasions the THA was employed as infantrymen in Northern South West Africa and Angola. The regiment also served in COIN roles during the periods of unrest which preceded the change of government in 1994.

The Freedom of Johannesburg was awarded to the regiment in 1964 and in 1986 THA took part in a mechanized parade to celebrate the Centenary of the City of Johannesburg. Four years later Johannesburg Artillery Regiment (previously 2 Locating Regiment) and 7 Medium Regiment were amalgamated with THA, the latter retaining its traditional name.

The regiment celebrated its centenary in March 2004 with a well attended dinner at the Rand Club and by exercising its freedom of entry into the City of Johannesburg with both a mechanized and a marching column. In 2006 the THA was tasked with providing ceremonial gun salutes within the Gauteng province.

The regiment was affiliated with the Honourable Artillery Company on 13 August 1937 and on 11 June 2007 was given the privilege of sharing with the HAC an official 62-gun salute at the traditional saluting base, Tower of London, in honour of the official Birthday of the Duke of Edinburgh, husband of Queen Elizabeth II. It was the first time that any foreign country had participated in such an event.

The regiment is located at Mount Collins, Kelvin Sandton.

The THA is currently equipped with GV6 155mm Self Propelled Gun/Howitzers.