

The Alamein Christmas Shops

From the Series "Pigeons at War"

by Dan Moroney

In the Australian sector of the Alamein battle-front amid all the paraphernalia of war, there stood late in 1942, a shop. It was unpretentious, surrounded by sand, and was in a water soaked dug-out, shored with scrap timber and adorned with a model assortment of tins and galvanised iron, still it was a shop. It was Father Christmas' most advanced supply depot in the Western Desert. On plank tables covered with blankets were silks, dress materials, silk stockings, linen table services, handbags, and all the hundred and one alluring articles which go to make up a gift shop. The familiar odour of a well-stocked emporium, that mingled scent of divers goods, triumphed over the stench of damp pigeon feathers, and piles of fermenting pigeon droppings. For us it did anyway. Men from the front line, a few hundred yards away, bumped and shouldered about the cramped space, scuffling on the mud floor. Hands which had been tending machine guns and mortars but half an hour before, fingered silk scarves and dress materials, exploring the secrets of texture.

The scene lacked the gaiety of Christmas shopping at home, with its crowds and children tired with wonderment, but it did have something, there were no parcels to carry; the postal orderlies saw to that. Once their purchases were made and wrapped ready for despatch, the Christmas shoppers shouldered their rifles and filed back to their weapon pits.

In the many Australian units which opened these gift shops trading went on for several days. A few men only could be released at a time from the front line. They would tramp into the Battalion Headquarters, visit the pay Sergeant on duty near the shop, and make their purchases. A wartime army can supply

experts in most things, and this time there appeared from the mass of khaki, men who had been buyers for Australian retail firms, warehousemen and shop assistants. Goods were brought from warehouses in Alexandria and hauled to the front where the shop assistants dropped their rifles and took charge.

The most marked effect war has had on Christmas has been to deepen its significance, particularly for men fighting far from their homes. This opportunity to buy gifts in token of the season gladdened more hearts than mouths will admit.

The enthusiasm of the men may be measured by their response. One shop took nearly 2000 pounds Egyptian, equal to 2,500 pounds Australian, and most of the others sold goods valued at more than 1000 pounds Egyptian. Not all of these shops were in the front line, for the idea quickly took hold in support areas. One field ambulance unit hoisted a tent to display its goods, resting Battalions used 3 ton trucks or anything else that could be spared.

This desert Christmas shopping became real news to the troops, and the unit news sheet of one battalion produced an 'extraordinary' edition. The editor did what few daily newspapers will do, give free advertising space. Obviously in league with the proprietor of the 'Battalion gift shop', he declaimed, "we have no expensive shop rent, no costly neon signs or heavy advertising expenses so that we are able to sell at cost price. Our shop is no plate glass front structure. It is just the usual dug-out, Western Desert model, Mark I, and is situated in shadier el mud patch. Enter the door of this humble dug-out and you are immediately transported to the basement of one of Cairo's leading Emporiums. Well, it's our story and we're sticking to it.

"These goods are available to you by special arrangement with Saida George and many other well known firms at home and abroad. 'Purchase your gift, with special advice from these trained shop walkers and assistants'," the editorial exhortation continues.

"The Quartermaster will come to light with paper and calico (that's more than you will get in Aussie) we'll supply greeting cards with every purchase; we'll even provide a censor ... with your purchase completed, back you go to the luxury of your front line homes, which in our case is a tent pitched beside a mobile pigeon loft, beside the Tel Aviv road. Jerry won't even know you've been away. That is what is known as simplicity shopping." And then the war obtrudes again, "a word of warning. Disperse; We don't want Jerry shells as souvenirs."

Many strange war stories have been bred at Christmas. Some of them are

apocryphal, but all serve to illustrate the season. They range from the icy slush of the first world war's Russian front. Where Germans and Russians sang "Silent night, holy night", over no-man's land, to the mud of Flanders, and the sands of the Middle East. The racing pigeons of the world were there, they fought, as surely as the troops, they were there among these gift shops, with or without Father Christmas' pine trees and candles. The Alamein Desert shops, and the great racing pigeons that died there along with the great war dead will surely keep a green spot in a lot of Australian's memories.

With thanks to 'SX 2663' for relating this story to me



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