

The Man behind the Medal

108862 James Leslie Buchanan

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



Last month's 'Man behind the Medal' was a rather sad story of two brothers who paid the ultimate sacrifice in WW 2. This month's story is equally sad, but in a different way.

As mentioned before, I have an interest in Tobruk, during World War 2, and more especially the capture of Tobruk by Rommel, as my father was one of the 33 000 soldiers taken prisoner.

This month's story is of James Leslie Buchanan, who was captured at Tobruk. I have no record of where he was in Germany (which Stalag), but from what is recorded, he could very well have been with my father at Stalag IVB.

Buchanan was born on 1 October 1915 and did his schooling at Wynberg Junior School and Rondebosch Boy's High School. He then enrolled at the University of Cape Town for a Degree in Law. When he attested for service on 21 May 1940 he was an Articled Clerk at Buchanan and Burman, a law firm founded by his father. He was a tall individual, measuring 6 foot 2½ inches at the time he volunteered for service as a Gunner with the Cape Field Artillery, Prince Albert's Own, 2nd Anti-Aircraft Brigade. The brigade was mobilised on 17 June 1940 and moved to Potchefstroom two days later. On 8 September the same year they disembarked at Mombasa.

By mid-December 1940 the 1st South African Infantry Brigade and Buchanan's 6th Anti-Aircraft Brigade were involved in the raid on El Wak. Buchanan saw his first action when his unit came under heavy grenade and rifle fire.

On 17 December they experienced heavy bombing and machine gun fire from Italian Savoia and Caproni aircraft, which were eventually shot down by the S.A.A.F..



Buchanan remained in East Africa until September 1941 when he and the Brigade embarked for North Africa.

Buchanan was part of the force that captured the Fortress of Bardia from the Italians early in January 1942 before they moved on to Tobruk. He was therefore present when the Italian and German Luftwaffe air-force commenced their raid on the port of Tobruk on 20 June.

The Luftwaffe flew 588 sorties, the highest sortie rate achieved in the Mediterranean theatre, dropping more than 350 tons of bombs on the British position.



Buchanan was part of the 6th Anti-Aircraft Battery deployed against the German General Rommel, who was advancing on Tobruk with a considerable number of tanks and troops.

Picture: The Luftwaffe

Buchanan was to record that – *"they were 'sited' in an anti-tank role for which they were unsuited and had only about a dozen rounds of solid shot per gun".*

The guns used by Buchanan's unit were referred to as 'Bofors', and he went on to record – *"the Bofors, with a projectile about the same as a 2 pounder antitank gun, suffers from one insurmountable handicap in use against tanks – it is loaded from above, with clips of ammunition which can only be inserted by a member of the gun detachment, standing up on the gun platform, which is itself above ground level. Even well dug in, loading numbers and gun-layers are thus always completely unprotected against machine-gun fire from advancing tanks before they come within effective range of the Bofors' armour-piercing solid shot."*



Pictures: The Bofor



Buchanan was taken prisoner, together with over 30 000 Allied troops on 21 June 1942.

However, confirmation was only received on 2 November of him being a PoW.

I have the list of all those captured at Tobruk which was published in the Bloemfontein newspaper, 'The Friend' dated 29 July 1942, and his name does not appear in that list of names.

Picture: Tobruk at the time Buchanan was taken prisoner



He spent time in PoW camps in Italy and was then transferred to Germany when the Italians capitulated. At that stage, those in PoW camps in Italy were 'allowed' to leave camp and find their own way 'home'. However most believed that Allied forces were close and they would soon be in active service once more. That was not to be as the Germans arrived first and transferred all those men, who were still in camp, to PoW camps in Germany. Buchanan, together with all those transferred to Germany, spent the remainder of the war, as 'guests' of the Germans where he worked in coalmines, as well as in potato fields.

At the end of the war Buchanan was transferred to the U.K. before returning to South Africa in August 1945. He then re-joined the family business and on 12 February 1948 married Dawn Duncan. They were blessed with two daughters and a son. Buchanan was an active Rotarian.

On 28 January 1971, Buchanan sadly took his own life – a sad end to someone who had experienced so much.

On 15 June 1995, an article appeared in a Cape Town publication which referred to the 2nd South African Ack-Ack Regiment, of which Buchanan was part, as the 'Sportsmens' Regiment, as many men from the regiment, had either received sporting recognition before the war, or would receive recognition after the war. The article would fill another three pages, so, just to name a few – Benny Osler, John Apsey, Geoff Gray and Dendy Lawton (Springbok rugby); Frank Mellish, Septie Rademeyer, Bertie Louw, Geoff Rowlands and Tim Thornton (Provincial rugby); Roy Beamish, Les Manning, Ken Nattle, Geoff Reid and Cyril Whiteing (Provincial hockey) and the cricketers were – Boon Wallace, Bill Foley, Willie McDowell and Peter Jaffer. There are many more names, from other sporting codes, but the 'tribute' is to James Leslie Buchanan.

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Allan Gordon