



# African Armed Forces

Journal

Covering the African Military Renaissance

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# BOOKS

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Books on defence subjects are welcome and will be reviewed by a panel of selected specialists in these fields.

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As the youngest of the generation which fought the Second World War reaches their mid-eighties and the conflict's history nears the point where it is about to pass from living memory, more and more memoirs of this nature can be expected. Indeed, for many surviving veterans the coming decade represents a final opportunity to commit their experiences to paper, both for their families and for history. Cyril Crompton and Peter Johnson's military autobiographies, published by Echoing Green Press, fall into this category. Echoing Green Press, deriving its rather unusual name from a poem by William Blake, is a small independent publisher based in Fish Hoek. Specialising in poetry and literature, *Luck's Favours* appears to be the niche publisher's first title dealing with a military subject, spurred no doubt by the publisher's close connection with one of the two authors.

Unusual in that the book consists of two separate wartime memoirs bound under the same cover, it is nevertheless an intriguing personal look at the experiences of two South African soldiers who separately experienced two of the darkest moments in South Africa's Second World War history. In Crompton's case, the battles of Sidi Rezeg and in Johnson's case, the fall of Tobruk.

The battles at Sidi Rezeg are a seminal event in South African military history. German and Italian forces combined to, among other things, virtually annihilate a South African Infantry Brigade (5 Brigade) resulting in some of South Africa's heaviest losses of the war. Indeed, as a consequence, some South African regiments such as the South African Irish ceased to exist in all but name.

In Crompton's personal account of the battle he explains how, converted from an anti-aircraft to an anti-tank role, he lost three personal friends on his gun alone with the situation being such, that when forced to retreat, they had to leave the bodies of their comrades where they had fallen. Captured after the battle in an abortive attempt to drive back to their lines in a damaged truck, he then had the misfortune of being torpedoed near Greece while being transported by ship to Italy. Luckily being within 8km of the coast they were able to bring the damaged ship in closer and Crompton swam ashore with a safety line that allowed further lines to be set up and men to come ashore. After being imprisoned in Italy and Germany for the remainder of the conflict, he took part in a series of deadly forced marches as the Germans retreated - taking their prisoners with them - from the advancing Russians, before finally being liberated by the Americans at the small German town of Winklarn.

In Johnson's case, he "went into the bag" at Tobruk with some 35,000 Commonwealth troops. This defeat rankled deeply with its defenders, given Tobruk's stout defence the previous year

# BOOKS

by a largely Australian force albeit under very different circumstances. The ignominy of roughly one third of South Africa's ground forces in Libya being captured in one fell swoop was hard to bear. Transported to a prison camp in Italy, Johnson subsequently took advantage of the confusion surrounding the Italian armistice to walk out of the prison camp along with two fellow escapees. Here his many adventures include a front row seat to the German rescue of Mussolini at Gran Sasso while crossing the mountain on his own.

In a vivid account Johnson describes witnessing the gliders cutting loose from their tugs and descending on Albergo Refugio (also called the Campo Imperatore by the Germans), the hotel where Mussolini was being held. There are serious problems with his eyewitness account however, that could perhaps best be ascribed to the passage of time since he witnessed the event. By far the most problematic of these is his mention of "parachutists". His description that "parachutists dropped from some of the circling planes ... [and] landed almost on top of the buildings" (pg 238) is quite implausible since only glider-borne troops were used in the operation. While the rescue was conducted by German paratroopers under overall command of Major Mors with a handful of SS men under Skorzeny, everybody on the mountain was flown in by glider.

*Luck's Favours* is an intriguing book which, in some ways, succeeds in putting a personal face on the experiences of so many South African servicemen in the Second World War.

## ***Luck's Favours: Two South African Second World War Memoirs.***

**by Cyril Compton and Peter Johnson.**

**Echoing Green Press; (2010)**