

A SECOND WAR 'FORTRESS TOBRUK' DEFENDERS M.M. GROUP AWARDED TO NCO, 1ST ROYAL NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS, FOR HIS GALLANTRY DURING THE DEFENCE OF TOBRUK AND THE BREAKOUT IN NOVEMBER 1941. AN ORIGINAL 'RAT OF TOBRUK', HIS BATTALION BEING THE ONLY BRITISH INFANTRY BATTALION THAT FORMED PART OF THE FAMED 9TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION DEFENDING FORTRESS TOBRUK, APRIL – OCTOBER 1941, HE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY CAPTURED AND TAKEN PRISONER OF WAR DURING THE BATTLE OF GAZALA, JUNE 1942, WHEN HIS ENTIRE COMPANY WAS OVERRUN BY GERMAN TANKS



MILITARY MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '4269670 SGT W SHAFTO R NORTH'D FUS R.'; GENERAL SERVICE 1918-62, 1 CLASP, PALESTINE '4269670 SGT W SHAFTO R NORTH'D FUS R.'; 1939-45 STAR; AFRICA STAR, 1 CLASP, 8TH ARMY; WAR MEDAL 1939-45, mounted court-style for display, the MM and GSM both official Replacements marked 'R'

M.M. *London Gazette* 9 September 1942. The original Recommendation states:

'This N.C.O. has consistently shown initiative and encourage under fire throughout the Defence of Tobruk and in the operations of the break out. During the affair at Butch he handled his Machine Gun Section with great boldness when his Platoon Commander was wounded and pinned to the ground, and got his guns into action under heavy enemy fire. He has throughout this long period such a fine example which has been reflected in those under him.'

Sergeant William Shaftoe, a pre war regular, served with the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, Machine Gun Battalion (Vickers machine guns) during the Second World War. At the outbreak of the war, the battalion was sent to the Middle East and was posted to various locations and under various commands until December 1940.

Between December 1940 and January 1941, the battalion served as part of the 6th Australian Infantry Division in taking part in the battles of Bardia, Tobruk and Derna. Serving with 2nd Support Group during February and March 1941 but during the retreat to Tobruk it came under the 9th Australian Infantry Division. It moved to Barce under the 20th Australian Infantry Brigade and eventually entered Tobruk with the division on the night of 9th/10th of April 1941, Shaftoe therefore becoming one of the original 'Rats of Tobruk'. Serving with the famed 9th Australian Infantry Division during

the siege at Tobruk Fortress until mid October 1941, it then became attached to the 70th Infantry Division on the Australian Divisions relief. The battalion remained at Tobruk, taking part in the breakout in November 1941, during which battle, Captain Jackman of the Fusiliers won a posthumous V.C.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Tobruk

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rats_of_Tobruk

The Affair at Butch in Shaftoe's recommendation, referees to a German strongpoint called 'Butch' by the allies and was overrun by elements of 70 Division on 21 November 1941.



Shaftoe is mentioned a couple of times in 'Fusilier: Recollections and Reflections, 1939-45':

"..On the last day of the fighting in the Tobruk area, I was going forward at night, accompanied by Corporal Shaftoe, a solid, imperturbable regular whose rock-like presence more than once had kept me from faltering. We passed a small group of enemy dead and one wounded man, a dark handsome officer who had been shot in the foot. I paused to reassure him, telling him we could not stop but the medics were following us – he seemed grateful. Later, Corporal Shaftoe showed me a wicked - looking automatic. 'I took this from him,' he said darkly. I did not ask if the German had appeared about to use it, though it sounded as if he had. Shaftoe must have thought me a fool, but he gave no sign of it..."

<https://robertlyman.substack.com/p/professor-john-mcmanners-fusilier>

Between December 1941 and June 1942, the Fusiliers rested and refitted until June 1942 at the Citadel in Cairo. Moving to the front with the 8th Army in June 1942. Shaftoe, who was a member of 'Y' company, was later taken Prisoner of War in North Africa on 6 June 1942 during the battle of Gazala

'Y' Company, 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, had been detached to serve with 10 Indian Infantry Brigade on 5 June 1942. On 6 June 1942, along with some Indian Infantry, 'Y' company took up positions covering 25 pounds of 107 RHA during an expected attack by German tanks and infantry of 15th Panzer Division. In the event, the Germans initially attacked with tanks only, knocking out most of the artillery pieces and as 'Y' companies machine guns ran short of ammunition, what was left of the company was forced to withdraw and re group. Having redistributed all available ammunition, the machine guns of 'Y' company attempted to hold back the Germans until they were nearly on top of them. Captain Ferguson then gave orders for the company to make a break for it but bar one truck, the entire of 'Y' company were killed or captured. One of the survivors later gave a statement of what happened (this in the War Diary) and he lists 47 Officers and men he saw being collected by the Germans. In this number was Sergeant Shaftoe who was slightly wounded.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gazala

Shaftoe was held at Camp PG85 near Taranto but presumably escaped at some stage as he does not appear on P.O.W. rolls in July 1944.



Condition NEF. Sold with a small amount of copy research. A most interesting gallantry group