



Issue 2/2004

**“THE MICE OF MORESBY’ MEMBERS BULLETIN
SNIPITS from GUINEA GOLD 15 December 1942**

WAR SUMMARY

NEW GUINEA: Americans capture Buna Village¹. Heavy Jap losses in attempts to reinforce troops at Buna.

NORTH AFRICA: Rommel unexpectedly retreating from El Agheila towards Tripolitania.

RUSSIA: Russians making slight advances in Starlin grad. Battles raging in four sectors.

Jap fuel and stores dumps and barges attacked by Australian Beaufighters. Boston Havocs (A20's) and Mitchell bombers scored several direct hits on barges in the mouth of the Mambare River.

Jew baiting in France as Nazis take control.

Australian pilot wins three awards in month. Pilot Officer Adrian Phillip Goldsmith wins DFC, DFM and Malta Cross.

German raider sunk in Indian Ocean.

Ministry of Information said 68% of adult males were in the services or war-time industries, more than 40% of the national income was being spent on the war effort.

Leading British and U.S. newspapers praise Australia's part in the New Guinea campaign viz –

LONDON TIMES: Australian stamina proved superior to all hindrances and hazards,

GLASGOW HERALD: Perhaps only in Russia were conditions as similar in their severity to those in New Guinea, have men been put to such exacting mental and physical test.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE: In New Guinea the Japanese fancied themselves as masters of jungle fighting; but today they know they have met their masters.

ON THE HOME FRONT

Ban on vests lifted on Monday cause losses to stores holding of “Victory” 2 piece suits.

\$200,000,000 Austerity loan filling rapidly, record applications.

Man received call-up for Women's Air Force.

Balmain cricket team dismissed for 31 runs in 39 minutes in second innings. Chilvers took 10 wickets for 24 runs in two innings. Paddington collapsed for 76 against Randwick, Cole taking 7 for 31 in 12 overs. Fitzroy football (Vic) has 45 of its senior players of the past few years in the services and finished sixth on the premiership ladder. Year profit being \$604.00, \$300.00 being invested in the Austerity Loan.

Gay Revelry wins Ascot at 50 to 1.

The previous items looked back to days long past, when the world was in peril of the destruction of a way of life, fought for by our forefathers and the pioneers of the free nations of the world. Today we

¹ This unfortunately is incorrect. Have a look at 'A Bastard of a place' by Peter Bruen and make up your one mind.

face an even greater danger to our nation and it is the responsibility of us to be ever vigilant and do whatever we can to preserve our country fit to be inherited by future generations.

M.V. TAROONA

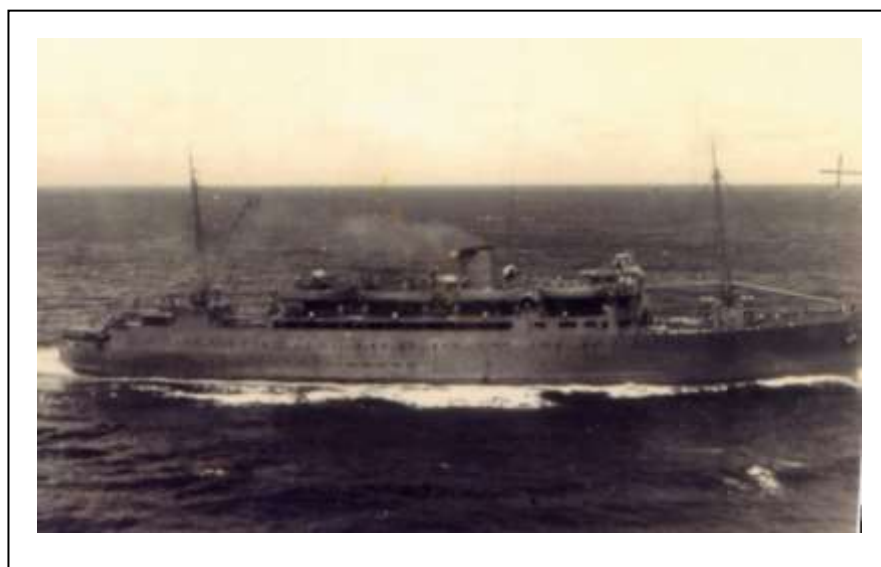
Peter WRIGHT'S query as to memories about the troop ship so many of us are familiar with brought quite a good response. Most recalled being shorn of all hair with the result that tin hats did not stay put and wobbling all over one's head and being hot as Hades when wearing them, having to get rid of all private gear on Major HILLEN'S orders, air raid defence being a Bren gun to assist our corvette escort, being seasick and rotten with colds because of the withdrawal of blankets and greatcoats before we left Greta and many other like tales. My memory includes the quite startling roll to port and starboard, every line and halyard rattling and making one wonder if it would ever right itself.

John BREEZE of "A" Coy sent the following details about the ship which was built for Tasmanian Steamers in 1935 for the Bass Strait trade, could accommodate 302 first, 105 second class passengers with a space for 50 cars on a lift on lift off (set up). She was 350 feet long and 50 feet wide, twin screw SR geared turbines of 6000 HP which gave her a speed of 18/25 knots. In 1942 the NZ naval board used the Taroona for one month local trooping, then shortly after the Australian government requisitioned and fitted her to carry 700 troops. In four years' service she made 900 trips (Voyages), carried 93,000 troops and travelled 200,000 miles. 1946 saw the ship refitted and the aft funnel removed, the forward one heightened.

Her last trip across Bass Strait was made in September 1959 and was sold to Typaldos lines of Greece as "Hellas" carrying 534 first class plus tourists class on the Venice and Istanbul run, calling at Brindisi and Piraeus. Laid up in 1968 at Perana for more than twenty years the 4326 (gross tonnage) made her last trip to the Turkish breakers at Aliaga. Aged approx. 50 years

Peter also enclosed a copy of a photo of the Taroona taken by a torpedo bomber off the coast of Port Moresby in 1942. The original was given to him by a Bernard STEPHENSON, who took over as her captain on her return from the trip that took us to Port Moresby in May 1942.

Thanks a lot, Peter, this made interesting reading.



Dave Swaney rights that the captain of the "Taroona" was not amused by the order to cut hair fowled up the vessels drainage system.

Alan MCQUEEN of Port Macquarie also responded with copies of a few pages of his life written for his grandchildren, great to read and regrettably it is not possible to report them in full to you. Alan was an A.I.F. reinforcement at Greta in January 1942. He does write about food problems, the discomfort of long train trips and trying to get some sleep, the lucky few who got up to the luggage racks slept better, the turn around of the train at Maitland that took the first part of the battalion to Brisbane and beyond.

My own memory is stirred to ponder. "Did we have to march to our camp site after disembarking at Port Moresby, because our C.O. refused the offer of truck transport which was available. Any comments? I do remember that as I left the wharf a voice said *"Good day, Trevor, I didn't expect to see you"*. The voice belonged to my cousin Eric Green, a member of the 53rd who transferred later to Air Supply.

Mrs Nancy Du Ross has sent to the committee a number of memorabilia items for safekeeping and it may be of interest to learn that a member of the battalion, her late husband Frank Mervyn Du Ross' brother was among those lost at sea when the Japanese POW ship taking them to Japan was torpedoed by an American submarine.

The following is an extract from a book entitled "My Battalion: by Bill MCLEOD; some recollections of his time with 'C' Company, 55/53.

Milne Bay 1942

By June 1942 the Australian Army realised the danger of a Japanese landing at Milne Bay on the eastern tip of the island of New Guinea. A force was formed to proceed there to prepare defensive positions plus a detachment of American engineers to build an air strip at Gilli Gilli for fighter planes. 'A' and 'C' Companies of the battalion were ordered to prepare for a move on this special secret mission. A section of 'E' Company (Machine Gun Company), was also to accompany us. 'C' Company commander Captain Hugh Griffin was in charge of the whole contingent. No troops, other than the two company commanders, had any idea of our final destination.

All of the troops involved had to attend a special dental parade and the dentist was given instructions to extract any suspect teeth and no fillings were to be carried out. Now we realised that we were destined for some isolated area. It might be appropriate to mention that the dentist surgery consisted of an eight-man tent with wooden plank flooring. The tent housed the dentist, who was always a commissioned officer, and his assistant, a soldier with one or two stripes. The rest was furnished with a dentist chair and cabinets and what always amused me in my army days was the dentist drill which operated by foot pedal by the dentist himself.

The whole of 'C' Company lined up in a circle outside the dentist tent and we went in one by one. The troops with sound teeth left in line for inspection whilst others, like me received a needle and instruction to remain in the circle. I waited so long the effects of the needle began to were off of I pulled out of the line. But I caught and so left the tent minus one tooth.

All of the troops involved in this secret mission were lined up in full battle dress ready to proceed to Port Moresby wharf. The battalion padre said a few words of comfort and his final prayer went something like this: "Please God, look over these young men wherever they were going. We know, Oh Lord, that some may never come back", etc. I had my head bowed in respect for the prayers and when he said those words I glanced up at my mates, met their eyes and many of them he said those words I glanced up at my mates, met their eyes and many of them frowned but did not say a word. The majority of us were only 18 years of age.

When I arrived at the wharf, I was confronted with this rusty ship called the 'Bontekoe'. We had a strong feeling of being expendable. The old ship and the young soldiers might not come back.

Once out at sea we worked out that we were sailing east by the position of the hot sun and we were soon informed that our destination was Milne Bay. If the Japanese landed here, we would be the only troops to defend the area. The movement was so secretive the area of Milne Bay was code-named "Fall River" and that is where our letter and parcels were sent care of the Australian Army Field Office, Fall River.

The crew of the ship were mainly Lascar seaman, dark skinned, who spoke very little English. Luckily the voyage was uneventful but I can still see in my mind that rusty old tub. The heat was oppressive reflecting off the steel hull.

Milne Bay was an isolated part of the island of New Guinea, sparsely settled with coconut plantations, native villages and mission establishments. Inland from the Bay itself was swampland and dense tropical jungle. My first impression of the was one of beauty of this tropical place. Coconut palms grew to the edge of the sea and the Bay was calm with clear blue/green water. High mountain in the near distance, dimmed with the after shower mist, rose sharply out of the jungle.

The natives were curious and friendly. They had never seen so many soldiers before. Their previous contact with white people had been mostly plantation owners and the missionaries. They smiled a lot and loved singing. The majority of the women moved around bare breasted as in Port Moresby. To me the area was my idea of a tropical paradise one would see on a holiday pamphlet. It was a pity that this place was a breeding ground for mosquitoes and it was not long before we became victims of malaria and dengue fever.

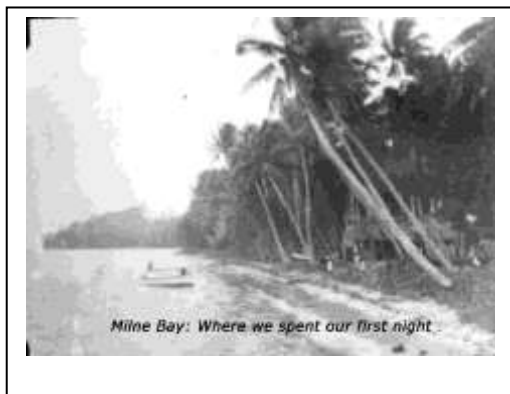
Once ashore we were designated our respective defensive positions, which were amongst the coconut plantations. The trees were very tall and had been planted in straight rows, Copra was mainly derived from these trees.

The Australian troops got along well with the American engineers who immediately began to construct the air strip. This was an area called Gilli Gilli. We had found out previously that the yanks did not muck around when there was a job to be done. No red tape stood in their way. We observed them darting from one palm tree to the next, placing explosives underneath each tree and then they were blown out of the ground. The plantations were kept clear of jungle vegetation as it was only a matter of bulldozing the fallen trees to either side of the proposed strip. After the ground was levelled by graders, metal strips were locked into each other to form a metal mat on the ground so

the planes would not bog in the soft earth and mud. The air strip became operational in record time and eventually the Royal Australian Air Force squadrons 75 and 76 used it flying Kittyhawk fighter planes. We often went to the nearby strip to watch the planes going out and returning on fighter patrols. Before we left Milne Bay, we watched aircraft dog fights over our area.

The happy natives mixed in well with our troops, particularly the children. You could not get rid of them. We always treated the natives well. Some were grouped into work parties and generally performed the jobs well for rations, mainly cigarettes and tobacco. The troops brought cartons of American cigarettes from the canteen and those commodities were exempt from tax so they were very cheap. The natives smoked thick plug tobacco, made into cigarettes by wrapping the tobacco in newspaper. They chewed beetle-nut which caused their mouths and teeth to become reddish/black in colour.

Both 'A' and 'C' Company officers mapped out vital slit trench positions in the vicinity of Gilli Gilli, Kobele (KB) Mission and Rabi Village. Nearly every day there would be a shower of rain to cool things down a bit and the mist would hang around the mountains. The defensive positions and maps made out by officers under the direction of Captain Griffin were to prove invaluable later when they were used by another Australian AIF and Militia troops when the Japanese made a sea landing at Milne Bay on 25 August 1942, By their heroic performances they fought the Japanese to a stand-still and caused them to have their first land defeat of the war, from which they never recovered. Milne Bay was the turning point of the war for the Australian troops in the South Western Pacific area. The situation was so bad just after we arrived at Milne Bay, I looked out into the Bay and wondered when they would come.





(these are photos added at time of transcription – photos taken by Reg Chard of C Company)

Tents were not erected as we were ordered not to show ourselves from the air. Natives helped to build shelter huts for us to blend into the environment.

Before the arrival of the Australian Air Force fighters, Japanese reconnaissance aircraft appeared overhead. They came in very low and not far above the coconut palms. I could see red circles on their planes and the pilots were clearly visible. They knew we were there by the construction of the air strip and the activities at the wharf. They made no attempt to fire on us nor we on them as we did not want to give our defensive positions away at this stage.

Information was received one day that a large Japanese convoy consisting of troop transports and naval warships were sighted in the Bismark Sea and heading south towards us. At this stage it was assumed that Milne Bay was its destination. So here we were, just the same as other Australian troops who met the Japanese on the Kokoda Track, with a couple of infantry companies ready to meet the invaders.

I was issued with a Boyes Anti-tank rifle to be used in conjunction with my .303 rifle. This anti-tank rifle was over five feet in length and weighed about 36 pounds. If fired a long bullet, similar to .303, when it was fired it kicked like a mule. I enquired as to my role when and if they landed and I was ordered by my officer to fire at the enemy barges and sink as many as possible and when we were overwhelmed, as we knew we would surely because of small numbers, we were to take to the jungle and hills and try and make our way back to Port Moresby. This would have been a daunting task because the way was through mainly untracked jungle for a distance of about 400 kilometres. Luckily for us the Japanese convoy headed towards Lae at the last moment and we were left alone for the time being.

Our two infantry companies were ordered back to Port Moresby to rejoin the battalion just prior to the landing of the Japanese at Milne Bay on 25 August 1942². Our job had been completed. Before we left, Milne Bay had been reinforced by the Queensland Militia 7th Brigade and the AIF 18th Brigade. Together with the RAAF, Anti-Aircraft Batteries, Artillery Regiments, Naval personnel and American engineers they fought the Japanese to a standstill. After a bitter struggle with no quarter they (the Japanese) were forced to evacuate Milne Bay. Few prisoners were taken.

When we returned to Port Moresby, we took up positions at Bootless Bay in the middle of an air raid; but that is another story ...

The following verse was written and composed by the late Lionel James Gordon at Goondiwindi, Qld in April 1943. It was written soon after Mr Gorton learned of the death of his only son, Geoffrey, who was killed in action on 7 December 1942.

Mr Gorton Snr. was a member of a very old and well-known local family. He was born at Stroud and died there on August 13 1970, at the age of 83. He spent the greater part of his life on the great cattle and sheep runs of inland Australia and his tales of a drover's life were many and varied and always entertaining. It is, as you will agree, a touching and moving piece if verse.

FIFTY-THIRD

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Across Owen Stanley Ranges
As most of you have heard
Past Buna's Shot and Shell Fire
They went – FIFTY THIRD. | Who will never more come back
He is buried with his comrades
On the Sanananda Track. |
| 2. And now they go to battle
As the word to us is said
They never failed or faltered
They are lying with the dead. | 7. Now you survivors of the battalion
May you end your life in ease,
And if anyone should question
We are the Fifty Third Battalion. |
| 3. If it is ever written
Or if the truth is ever found
Something tragic happened
On that recent battleground. | 8. For all these weeping mothers
We offer a fervent prayer
May the Great God in His mercy
Bless your offspring lying there. |
| 4. Was it Will of God in Heaven
Or surely the hand of fate?
The cry for reinforcements
Alas! They came too late. | 9. If there is any room in heaven
Of such places we have heard
they will surely find a corner
For the gallant Fifty Third. |
| 5. If ever you are searching
In the tropic jungle breeze,
You will find the Fifty Third Battalion
Neath a canopy of trees. | |
| 6. There is one I love amongst them | |

² According to Keith Campbell the section from E Company – Machine Gunners remained behind and faced the Japs at the unfinished Turnbull Strip.

Thanks go to Gus Forbes, our goof friend, of Newcastle Branch of the National Servicemen's Association for making this information available. Gus has been to several of the Newcastle luncheons and is known to those of us who have been to those great get-togethers.