

## Gunners Out West

On arrival back at Adelaide after the few happy days at home, as there was considered to be great danger of the Japanese attempting to land in Western Australia, the Battery was sent by train west across the Nullabor. The Plains were green after heavy rains, so the troops enjoyed the five day journey. The disadvantage in wartime of the change of gauge of railway line at Kalgoorlie was illustrated by the many hours of delay caused with changing over the heavy equipment and gear.

The Battery's arrival at Perth was the commencement of the most pleasant period of the gunners' army service. Some of the gunners had up to six months around the American Navy's Catalina flying-boat base on the Swan River at Crawley Bay and Pelican Point. The Catalinas were graceful amphibious flying-boats. With their twin engines and long range, they were useful for sea and coastal patrols. The American Navy used them for intelligence and rescue work as far up as Java. Other airbases where the Battery sited its guns for aircraft protection were at Pearce, Geraldton, Onslow and Exmouth Gulf, from which the Royal Australian Air Force was operating.

Perth families were open-hearted to the gunners. As the West Australian population was feeling very isolated, and concerned with prospects of a Japanese invasion, they were glad to welcome troops who had had battle experience in the Middle East. Several of the men "met their fate" by falling in love with and marrying West Australian girls. Many of these men, over forty years later, still live in the West with their grown up families. Life on the guns around the aerodromes at Pearce and Geraldton was still comfortable despite at times heat, flies and fighting bushfires. It was an odd quirk that some of the gunners at Geraldton, to occupy spare time, were happily assisting Italian tomato growers to pick and pack tomatoes in return for a few shillings and supplies of wine and beer — odd, in that not long before, they had been fighting the Italian farmers' compatriots.

As is the case with most travellers, many of the troops met with great kindness from hospitable people who welcomed them to their homes. Exceedingly good were Mrs. Smiley and her daughter Nora who had a little cafe near Pearce Aerodrome. They adopted whichever crew was fortunate enough to man the Bofors gun nearest their shop. Using the crew's rations and supplementing them, the war effort of these good people was to provide beautifully cooked meals for the successive crews of eight to ten men over a period of a

year or so.

The troop which was sent to Onslow under the command of Captain Fitzhardinge and Lieutenants Les Harris and Roy Richards found life in that remote area of the west coast interesting enough. Les Harris recalls:

*"We travelled on the coastal steamer 'Koolinda'. The radio operator had a yellow life jacket hanging on the side of his cabin. It came from the Kormoran, the German raider that sank H.M.A.S. 'Sydney'. The crew of the 'Koolinda' rescued a boatload of German survivors and took them to Carnarvon. Hearing that survivors were due, the townspeople turned out to welcome them; but were stunned to find they were Germans.*

*"Our arrival at Onslow gave us experience of the high tides in that area. Before the ship finished unloading it was sitting on the seabed about ten feet below the level of the wharf. Our guns were sited to cover the airfield – a coral strip – in readiness for the arrival of the well known footballer and fighter ace, Squadron Leader "Bluey" Truscott and his 76 Squadron of Kittyhawks of the R.A.A.F.*

*"On trying to get our first gun into what seemed the most desirable position we ran into trouble with our ignorance of the salt flat. At high tide it flooded; but at low tide a hard crust gave a false impression of the real strength of the surface. The Bofors gun was too heavy for the crust and only after much winching and cursing did the gun reach the high spot where it was needed."*

Onslow was deserted apart from the postmaster, a medico by the name of Mannix, the sister at the Bush Nursing Hospital and half a dozen locals. The arrival of 76 Squadron livened things up. As the planes touched down they immediately pulled to the side of the strip and the emerging pilots all turned their eyes skywards to watch the last plane to land – Bluey Truscott's. The pilots explained he always landed last to avoid messing up the airfield for the rest of the Squadron! He was credited with making great landings – forty feet up!

Daily patrols out to sea kept the squadron busy and the fitting of auxiliary tanks increased their range. It was customary for the squadron to send two aircraft from time to time to Carnarvon to pick up official correspondence and personal mail for members of the Squadron and for troops in the area. It was on such a trip that Squadron Leader Truscott met his death on the 28th March. It was extremely hot at the time. The water in Exmouth Gulf was very flat. The combination of the heat and smooth water made it extremely difficult for a pilot to judge the height of the plane above the water. It was fairly common practice whenever any of the aircraft were returning from either a patrol or simply a trip to Carnarvon to pick

up mail, to make one or two passes at a United States submarine tender which was anchored at the secret Submarine Base code-named Potshot. This enabled the tender's anti-aircraft gunners to practise sighting their guns and permitted the pilots to take evasive action after making the pass at the tender, to simulate a normal attack. Following one of these passes, Truscott's plane hit the smooth water and sank. Divers from the submarine tender got to the crash scene, dropped marker buoys and descended. It was then late in the afternoon, a breeze came up which moved the markers and as it got dark the divers were unable to continue the search. The aircraft was located the following morning and the body brought to the surface. It was a sad end for a great sportsman and a dashing pilot.

Another tragedy occurred here. The R.A.A.F. agreed to stage a mock attack on the guns for the benefit of a high ranking army visitor. By arrangement, two planes came in low from the direction of the mangrove swamp, one behind and slightly lower than the leader. Nearing a telescopic aerial used for communication with the airmen, the second plane came up from under the leader and cut the aileron out of one wing, turning the plane over to crash, killing the pilot. The second plane, with a damaged propellor, landed in the mangroves, the pilot fortunately surviving.

76 Squadron left, so 8th Battery was ordered to the U.S. submarine base at Exmouth. There was need for a new generator which was expected to be delivered by air. In due course, a plane was heard, but it was not approaching on the agreed flight path for friendly aircraft. As it came nearer the gunners realised it was not a Kittyhawk and thought it bore some resemblance to a Japanese Zero fighter. The pilot started to lower the plane's wheels, obviously intending to land, but one wheel did not come down. A siren could be heard blaring from the plane as it landed on one wheel. The auxiliary petrol tank on the wingtip scraped on the ground, the plane tipped forward slightly with its protruding machine guns ploughing into the coral of the airstrip and then came to rest still in one piece. As a jeep pulled up to the side of the plane, the canopy was slid back and the pilot raised his goggles to reveal Oriental features! It was Squadron Leader Roy Goon of 83 Squadron Boomerangs, newly-arrived in the West. The gunners had never heard of these aircraft, nor had they even seen silhouettes of them. Roy Goon's comment was "*Well, I've now pranged every type of plane I've flown, but I've brought your generator.*" Roy was a great pilot and after the war instructed in aerobatics and became a test pilot.

"Tokio Rose", broadcasting from Tokyo, used to give running commentaries on what was happening at Exmouth Gulf and even knew when the mother ship was due in to service the submarines. However, the little Japanese air activity was at night and was too

high for action from Bofors guns.

Christmas 1942 was a happy occasion with many of the gunners being entertained at the R.A.A.F. establishments. Looking back over the year, the Allied forces had suffered many terrible reverses. It was obvious that there were many battles to come; but it was felt that the tide was beginning to turn. The troops were being better equipped. They now had some air support in contrast to the Libyan days when the Battery had little or no air support and was equipped with scrounged Italian trucks, ammunition and guns. 1942 had seen the majority of the A.I.F. back in Australia with the object of fighting together and to defend Australia.

The period in the West was used to advantage by the Battery, not only for improving its equipment and the fitness of the men, but also for improving the troops' technical ability. Several officers and non-commissioned officers were sent to the Light Anti-aircraft School at Randwick at Sydney. The School conducted training in aircraft identification, gun drill, mechanism of guns and in tactical anti-aircraft work.

Although army travel to and from the West was rough enough, often being in cattle trucks, travel was nevertheless improving with transit camps now having facilities such as hot showers and good meals. The cattle trucks, although giving a hard and noisy ride, had advantages. They were equipped with hessian palliases (six feet by two feet six inch hessian bags) filled with straw, which were laid out on the floor of the trucks. The troops were able to lie down and rest with some degree of comfort, instead of being very crowded into conventional railway carriages. This was good, as the journey from the West to the East, or vice versa, would take six or seven days.

By mid-1943, the nation seemed to be getting properly geared up to support its armed forces.

In July 1943, the 8th Battery was relieved by 109 Regiment and left Western Australia after a very happy sojourn in a good climate with most hospitable people.

As a result of a re-organisation of the Australian Army's anti-aircraft units, 8th Battery became an independent airborne battery, with the novel idea of transporting dismantled Bofors guns with their crews in DC-3 aircraft to newly-captured airstrips. So after the gunners had home leave again, on 24th August, 1943, the Battery travelled by train to Brisbane, then 60 miles west to Helidon, a tented camp in the Australian bush. Here the troops hardened up with plenty of long marches, swimming and sport. New Canadian-built Bofors anti-aircraft guns were delivered. Although strongly built, they needed much work with files on the

roughly-finished parts.

On the 3rd September, the Battery was pleased to learn that Italy had surrendered. The first of the Axis powers had been knocked out. It was hoped at the time that comrades captured in the Western Desert, Libya, might be freed, but unfortunately this did not eventuate until war's end.

By the 30th September, the Battery was well equipped with small arms and stores and was ready for action. In mid-October, the Battery's contemplated embarkation for a job in the Pacific area seemed to have lost its priority. The Battery moved to Chermiside Camp, quite close to Brisbane.

The men found Brisbane to be a lively city, crowded with American soldiers, sailors and airmen. Many civilians were chasing the Americans' dollars, supplying drink, entertainment and girls. Others, particularly those who had relatives in the forces, extended warm hospitality to the Australian servicemen. Still others seemed to ignore the urgencies of war. An N.C.O. was instructed to take thirty men of the Battery to the Howard Smith wharf on the Brisbane River to unload 44 gallon drums of petrol from trucks for urgent shipment to the troops in New Guinea. The Sergeant relates:

*"Our men handled 3,700 drums of petrol. I was accused of being a slave-driver for pushing the job along. I guess that was a natural re-action in view of the civilian wharf laborers' efforts. Like us, they started their day by putting six drums at a time in a net to be slung over the Liberty ship's side. After numerous tea breaks and much discussion, they reduced their load to four drums a time, then after lunch slowed down to two drums at a time. The wharfies were earning ten times the rate of pay of our soldiers. One wondered whether they had any loyalty to our cause and to our troops who were fighting in the Pacific areas."*

With large numbers of men in training for active service, inevitably there were accidents from time to time. At this camp, an American fighter plane, a Thunderbolt, coming in to land nearby on one landing wheel only, lost speed, stalled, side-slipped from side to side, crashed and burst into flames. The pilot was killed instantly. On the same night there was over six inches of rain and two soldiers were drowned when attempting to cross a flooded gully.

In November, ten Sergeants were sent to a pre-selection Board for Officers. Most of the Sergeants were classified "A", which meant that if they were around long enough, they could be candidates for Officers' Training School. It was a compliment to the type of men in the Battery; but in the event the Battery moved on, so the N.C.O's did not get their opportunity for further promotion.