

Milne Bay Continued

Two of "B" Troop guns were attached to "C" Troop. One of the guns with Harry Long in charge took up a position on the East end of Lau Lau Island.

There was good news on the wireless on 5th November. The report was that German forces in the Western Desert were retreating, 9,000 prisoners taken, including a general. A general, who took over from Rommel whilst he was in Germany, had been killed; 260 tanks and 250 guns captured or destroyed.

A load of 500 sheep was brought in by ship and two days later there were mutton chops on the menu, there were mutton chops for breakfast, mutton cutlets for the midday meal and mutton chops for the evening meal. The meat was greatly enjoyed by everyone, being the first fresh meat available since coming to Milne Bay, except for some Zebu cattle, which were killed in the first few weeks of occupation.

More men of the Battery, who had been stricken with malaria, left on the hospital ship "Manunda" during the month.

Ian Coggins, one of the most popular men in the Battery, was accidentally killed on 23rd November. His death was a sad blow to the Battery.

To finish off the month, the Japanese sent over 30 bombers on 29th November at 0220. The Heavy A.A. engaged the enemy for almost an hour. There was little damage done, although about twenty bombs were dropped.

The month of December saw a major build up of shipping, with troops staging prior to movement to the fighting areas. The news that Buna had fallen to the Allies was received with rejoicing on 11th December.

This is how one gunner saw Christmas Day 1942:

"Breakfast consisted of one egg and some bacon. Coffee. Light shower early in the morning, but fine and hot for the rest of the day.

"Christmas dinner consisted of ham, turkey, chicken, roast potatoes and peas. Christmas pudding a la A.C.F. Fruit and cream. Rum and wine.

"Enjoyed a good rest all the afternoon. Reinforcements arrived.

"The evening meal consisted of fruit and the remains of the dinner. Rum and wine."

During the month more men went down with malaria, although atebirin tablets had taken the place of quinine. It was probable that the tablets were not always taken as prescribed, as there were rumors of possible loss of fertility. Atebrin tablets resulted in a yellow coloring of the skin. It was also probable that the infection was received before safeguards had been enforced, including the draining of swamps and the wearing of shirts with sleeves rolled down and long trousers after dusk. Gun crews were reduced to 6 or 7 men.

The War Diary of 31st December 1942 has this entry:

"General the percentage of sickness this month in the Battery has been very high, malaria being almost entirely responsible. Since arriving here until present date over 60 Battery personnel have been evacuated to the mainland, including several Sergeants and junior N.C.O.s. This, together with the lowered standard of health of the Battery as a whole, has somewhat impaired its fighting efficiency."

This day saw the accidental death of Jack Cockram, caused by the explosion of a Bofors shell.

* * * *

"There is no wild rejoicing for the New Year, but naturally we are hoping for great things. The war news is good." That is how most of the troops looked at the situation.

The NX men who had not received leave when the Battery returned to Australia were granted home leave.

Searchlights, now included in the A.A. defence of the area, were being used to direct incoming aircraft. Allied aircraft, that is!

The next major air raid came on 17th January, and is described by a gunner on No.3 Strip:

"A beautiful clear day. At 1245 when in the middle of lunch heard siren and took post. At 1250 sighted formation down Bay - Japanese formation of 23 bombers escorted by several fighters. Heavy A.A. opened up. Too high for us as they were up about 25,000 feet. They kept perfect formation as they passed overhead, and then the bombs came down. The bombs seemed to be creeping up to our gun pit and then passed on. It was soon over except for an odd delayed action bomb here and there.

When we looked around there were fires everywhere. A few of our bombs (awaiting loading on to aircraft) exploded and some petrol dumps and planes went up.

An anti-personnel bomb landed about 75 yards away - a piece of the bomb took a slice out of the vertical sight on the gun and made a gash on the breech casing. Several pieces of metal landed in the gun pit. No injuries."

Enemy aircraft were over the area on 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd and 25th January and were engaged by the Heavy A.A., with the excep-

tion of the night of 23rd when Lightnings were directed by G.O.R. No great damage was done in these raids except for the loss of a Lockheed Hudson on the ground.

The War Diary records on 1st February:

"Captain Crooke left for KANA KOPA with tractor, 2 spare Bofors barrels, 40 coils barbed wire for ground defence, 20 boxes 40mm ammo.

"Sergeant Jenkins position at DOWA DOWA."

Dowa Dowa was an idyllic situation for a gun position. Situated on the southern shore of Milne Bay, beside a small river it was remote from the war. Nearby at Labi Labi was a sawmill owned by a Mr. Colinson.

At the end of January, the "Katoomba" and the "Duntroon" had arrived in the Bay with troops of the 5th Division.

The month of February passed with an occasional air raid, wet weather and the usual work around the guns. An enemy submarine was reported in the Bay on 5th February, but nothing came out of the report.

A detachment of 6th Australian A.A. Searchlight Company with six searchlights arrived at Milne Bay during the month.

On 21st February there was a red warning at 2030. The Heavies opened up ten minutes later, assisted by five searchlights. The 'All Clear' came at 2115. Some bombs were dropped.

There was another red warning the following day at about mid-day, but there was no action.

However, on 23rd February there was a red warning soon after midnight. A Kittyhawk was sent up as a night fighter, but the operation was not successful. The searchlights caught a plane in their lights for a few seconds. The enemy aircraft made several runs, dropping bombs on No.1 Strip and on No.3 Strip. The Heavies fired at intervals, the raid lasting about 2½ hours.

There was a yellow warning at 0500, but nothing came of it.

There was another raid in the early hours of 28th February, and the Heavies engaged the aircraft.

* * * *

In early March, Japanese reconnaissance planes were sighted over the area on several occasions. Two of their number were shot down by Kittyhawks.

The War Diary of 9th Battery gives the following entries:

"15th March. "A" Troop to take over positions on Turnbull Strip (No.1) from 235th Aust. L.A.A. Battery.

"18th March. Battery reverted from composite detachments of 10 guns to original 4 three gun troop organisation with T.C. (Troop Commanders) as follows: "A" - Lieutenant Hall, "B" - Lieutenant Corneliusen, "C" - Lieutenant Purves, "D" - Lieutenant Archer."

On 17th March two guns of "A" Troop under Sergeant Neil Anderson and Bombardier "Unc" Melville moved to Kana Kopa.

Early in the morning of 24th March, there was a raid by two flights of medium bombers. They were picked up by the searchlights and the Heavies went into action. Bombs were dropped without damage or casualties.

On 29th March two guns of 2/6th Aust. Heavy A.A. moved to Rabi on the coast about two miles east of No.3 Strip.

Ted Guinness remembers being transferred to Neil Anderson's gun at that time:

"The gun was being sent down the Bay to cover a position of a Heavy A.A. gun at Kana Kopa. The barge carrying our gun was moored to the jetty, to be unloaded the next day. In the morning the tide having dropped 8 feet during the night, the barge had sunk with the gun and ammunition under water. On retrieval the gun had to be hauled to its selected site, necessitating the felling of several palm trees. One over-enthusiastic recruit managed to drop one on top of the gun."

April commenced with more rumors of a move, but nothing came of them. The men who had been in Milne Bay from the first landing were becoming restless, either wanting to get on with the war, or to get some leave and so to be away from the tedium of inaction.

There were more amenities now with films showing every week, some concert parties, Army Education Services and the famous Australian game of "Two-up" attracting huge crowds for huge stakes. There was also the manufacture of alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol was first brewed in Milne Bay from the milk from coconuts, as there was a plentiful supply of these. This was the original "jungle juice" and was quite potent.

Later the manufacture of alcohol became more sophisticated as, with the arrival of American troops in force, there was a better availability of rations damaged in transit, such as tinned fruit and sugar. These ingredients were fermented in 44-gallon drums. The liquid from the fermentation was then passed through a still, to obtain a pure colorless spirit. The spirit could then be colored with brown sugar to give it the appearance of whisky. When a sale was being arranged, the test of setting a match to the spirit was made. If the spirit ignited, it was accepted by the purchaser.

Another occupation of the troops was the manufacture of articles from the brass casings of shells and small arms cartridges, for sale to the U.S. forces.

There were several general warnings of an expected large air raid on the Milne Bay area early in the month, and on the 14th April it occurred.

The first warning came at 1100 that there would be a raid on Port Moresby or on Milne Bay. Then the warning came that it was to be

Milne Bay. About 1230 the enemy was sighted coming up the Bay and then they were over the Gili Gili area – bombers and dive bombers.

The Heavies engaged the bombers and the L.A.A. engaged the dive bombers. The Allied aircraft were also in the engagement. There were 105 Japanese planes in the raid, three ships were hit, one of which later sank. A number of personnel were killed. Seventeen Japanese planes were shot down, six attributed to anti-aircraft fire and eleven to the R.A.A.F.

There were no casualties amongst the anti-aircraft gun crews.

At this time, one of the Battery's guns was mounted on the "George Peat". This vessel was formerly a ferry on the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales. Having a shallow draught, it could come close inshore where no port facilities were available.

Harry Long was the first detachment commander, to be succeeded by Dick Rowan on 2nd May.

The vessel supplied isolated units along the coast north of Milne Bay and the islands in that area. The scenery was interesting, and so was the food. The menu was supplemented by scrounging American rations, and by fishing with grenades with good native divers.

On 6th May, during a strong wind and rain storm, the "Taroona" was driven ashore near the Pontoon wharf. The ship was eventually got off with the assistance of a sloop and a corvette, with little damage done.

On the night of 19th May enemy planes dropped several bombs on No.3 Strip, setting a small petrol dump on fire.

A tragic accident occurred on Sunday 13th June. Bunny Mitchell, Roy Hobbs and Tom Flanagan were out on the Bay in a dinghy, with the intention of collecting a meal of fish by using a charge of gelignite, which at that time was in plentiful supply. Something went wrong, the charge burst in the boat, resulting in injuries to all three men.

Orders then came that all stocks of gelignite on gunsites were to be destroyed by burning.

Training programs continued with lectures, anti-tank shoots and A.E.S. lectures. Permanent structures were built around gun sites, now that supplies of material were more available either legally or illegally.

Rumors persisted that the Battery would soon be relieved. The general opinion was that twelve months' service in Milne Bay was enough.

During June there was a large build-up of U.S. Navy shipping in the Bay, all flying the Stars and Stripes, even down to the smallest dinghy – a very re-assuring sight and an indication of an offensive

to come.

On 28th June General MacArthur made an inspection of the Milne Bay area. His B19 aircraft was escorted by 18 P.38's and 19 P.39's.

Early in July the story around the guns was that 9th Battery was to form a composite anti-aircraft regiment with 2/6th Australian Heavy A.A. Battery, with Lieutenant-Colonel A. G. Margetts in command.

The following events were recorded in the War Diary:

"On 20th July "B" Troop was relieved from its duties at Kana Kopa and Dowa Dowa by guns from 235 Australian L.A.A. Battery.

On 21st July the Battery was organised into two Troops of 6 guns each – "A" Troop being made up of the former "A" and "B" Troops, and "B" Troop from the former "C" and "D" Troops."

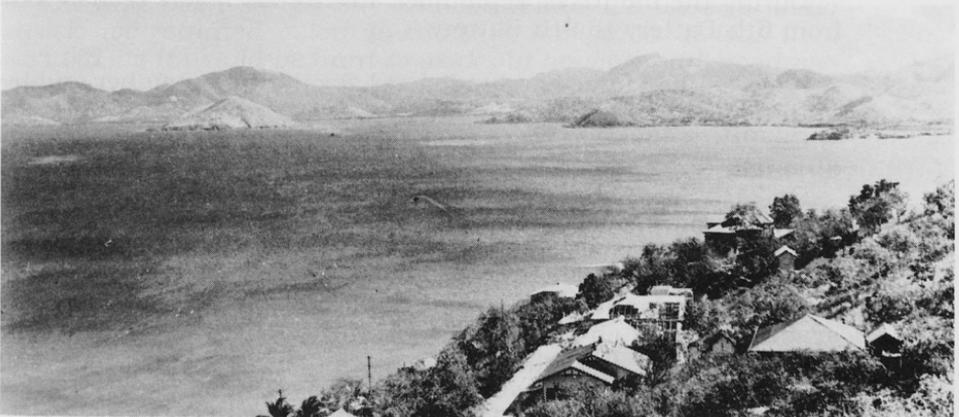
On 26th July Major Staughton returned on the "George Peat", after visiting Oro Bay, Buna and Morobe.

The Nominal Roll of Officers of 17th July 1943 listed Staughton, Archer, Hall, Corneliusen and Long.

Units of the 9th Division A.I.F. began arriving early in August, including 2/12th Aust. L.A.A. Battery which had amongst its members many men from the original 2/3rd Regiment.

Training commenced on stripping down the guns for travel by air, but there was no indication of what the object might be.

Also during this month the guns were issued with ammunition fitted with a 12-second fuse, giving an improved range of 18,000 feet."



Port Moresby Harbor, New Guinea. (Courtesy Australian War Memorial)