

New Guinea

The Battery embarked on the troop transport "Katoomba" on 4th December, 1943, for an unknown northern destination. The gunners were delighted to find they had scored cabins with bunks. Men from other units were sent to lower decks, some away down, where there were folding steel stretchers in badly ventilated holds. As was usual, some of the soldiers were very seasick for the first couple of days of the journey, but most soon found their sea legs and enjoyed the voyage. Many of the gunners were used again to man the ship's guns.

All troops commenced taking the yellow atebrine tablets to prevent or reduce the effects of malaria. As a result, they all developed the yellow-tinted skin which was the temporary mark of men who served in the Pacific areas. The "Katoomba", a comfortable 12,000 ton ship, sailed around the east end of New Guinea, through the China Straits and past the island of Samarai. On the mainland, razorback ridges rose to over 6,000 feet high, while the coastal scenery was beautiful with a few white beaches and a backdrop of palms and jungle.

On the morning of 7th December, the second anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, it was exciting and heartening to see a United States naval force of eighteen destroyers and three cruisers heading north.

The Battery disembarked in warm tropical rain at Buna, on the north east coast of New Guinea, near Popondetta. Their first night's camp was near a plot with the graves of 260 Australian soldiers who were killed a year before in the terrible struggle to take the area from the Japanese.

The guncrews took over the gun sites and equipment of the 17th Anti-aircraft Battery. Most of the sites were in good condition; some were on the coast, while others were placed around heavy anti-aircraft positions and airstrips.

With dense jungle, lawyer vines and up to eight feet high kunai grass around the gun areas, conditions were so different from the Battery's earlier days. Shirts and long trousers had to be worn at all times to reduce the incidence of malaria and scrub typhus. Clothing was all dark green cotton drill as against the old khaki drill. An encouraging difference from earlier days was to see hundreds of American Mitchell and Liberator bombers flying overhead each morning to bomb the Japanese in New Britain and on the Huon Peninsula.

Life settled down to a routine of gun drill and maintenance, improvements on the gunsites, aircraft watches and exploration of the area. Gunner Frank Hands recalls: *"A few of us hiked about five miles up the Kokoda Trail which ended near Buna. This was the easy end of the Trail, being fairly flat, but it was still hard walking often in knee deep mud. We paid tribute to the boys who fought along it in the previous year to force the Japanese back to the north coast from across the Owen Stanley Ranges."*

With a routine life, in the way of Australian troops, the gunners found and created diversions. Rowing boats were scrounged for trips along the coast and up the rivers. Wild pigs were shot and trapped. Gunner Les Stephens built a splendid pig trap from the steel mesh "cage" of a three ton truck. It was staked to the ground and had a trap door entrance. When a basket of food inside the cage was touched by the pigs, the heavy door fell down and locked them in. The first night when the trapdoor clanged shut, Gunner Stephens ran to the cage whereupon a large boar of about 180 pounds weight charged him. The cage shook, but held, so Les shot the black tusker which to their great pleasure was presented to the local natives next morning. This same trap caught many small pigs which were killed, scalded and butchered by Gunners Arthur Wright and George Young, both farmers. Their efforts provided welcome fresh meat for the troops. Trapping the pigs was soon given up as it was felt that the natives were being deprived of their game.

A few illicit "jungle juice" stills were built. Although originally set up to attempt to provide liquor for Christmas celebrations, it was soon found that American soldiers and sailors provided a ready market. Gunners Jim Bourke and Les Stephens were probably the most successful distillers. Some 50 yards back from their gunsite, in a small clearing in the jungle, they set up a 44 gallon steel drum into which they placed potatoes, any available vegetables, dried fruits, golden syrup, sugar, lemon cordial and water. After allowing this concoction to ferment for a week, they strained off the liquor through an old singlet and boiled it, using a four gallon drum, from which the steam was taken by a copper tube to a bottle being cooled in a bucket of water. The resulting clear liquid was obviously alcoholic and would ignite if a match was put to a spoonful on the ground. So this was bottled, corked and sold for £3 a bottle to the Americans. Seeing that £3 represented nearly a week's pay for a gunner, the trade was lucrative.

Life at this stage wasn't very serious and the men were always ready for a joke. Gunner Les, better known as "Plonk", was sitting by the illicit still, in deep contemplation of such a wonderful money making outfit. A friend of his visited the gunsite. Being a tall impressive fellow, attired in well-pressed jungle greens, with a well



"Jungle Juice" Still



Very Hygenic toilets. (The jetty crashed a few minutes later!)



Digging a well for fresh water.



Native friends

scrubbed canvas belt and gaiters, other members of the guncrew made up an M.P. (Military Policeman) arm band, and led him down the narrow track to the still, with the M.P. badge well displayed. "Look who's here Plonk", they said. It was the first time Plonk had ever been known to go pale with shock. On realising eventually it was an old mate, he expressed himself in his own inimitable style!

Appropos of trade, several gunners formed a syndicate which they named "Nipponese Novelties", the products of which also found a ready market with the comparatively highly paid American sailors and airmen. Sergeants Tom Dawson and Geoff Davies were Accountant and Sales Manager respectively. Ashtrays and scimitar shaped paper knives were made from bullet cases and brass shellcases and engraved - "New Guinea, 1943", with crude tools. Japanese rifles, bayonets, and hats, deloused grenades and mortar bombs and magnificent blue and green butterflies mounted on pads of cottonwool were prepared, sold, and the proceeds were distributed to the industrious gunners.

Fresh fish were obtained with hand grenades. It was best to wait for a shoal to be observed. A grenade thrown in to the water would stun the fish which could then be collected. The water was not very clear and natives, if they were about, would swim underwater and find more fish than the soldiers. The bombing fishermen would take the precaution of holding a hand over their male characteristics while the grenade exploded in the water perhaps only 10 yards in front of them. Sergeant Courtney's guncrew took a record number of 132 fish with one grenade.

Christmas 1943 was celebrated quietly. The Australian Comforts Fund and the United States forces provided good fare including turkey, ham and plum pudding.

The natives in the nearby villages were friendly. Their health was not good. If the native child's constitution was strong enough to survive the first two years of life, then their life span was thirty to forty years. They married soon after puberty, with the boys firstly going through a ceremony of initiation involving circumcision.

The social position of a man was determined by the number of wives and pigs that he owned. The land and crops were owned by the whole tribe. Most of the natives had a large spleen as a result of malaria. If the spleen was hit, they could die. Few were actually dying of malaria, but many died of bronchitis, pneumonia and consumption.

The natives were clean and so were their villages. The practice of women suckling small pigs had one explanation in that they were women who had lost their child and were still "in milk", so using the pig to dry them up. This was not always the case and it was often simply a method of feeding piglets, valuable to the village

economy.

The children were a happy lot and could swim like fish in the rivers or off the coast.

Between the first and second world wars, the natives had looked up to white men as the "big bosses". Those so called "big bosses" tended to avoid manual labor in the tropical heat and delegated work to the natives. Consequently, the natives were amazed when white soldiers came and engaged in "pick and shovel" work building gunsites, airstrips and campsites. To attempt to protect post war civilians' privileged position, it was explained by white residents that the soldiers were "white kanaka belong Sydney"!

An interesting trial shoot was carried out from a gun on the beach. An old Japanese barge had been towed out 1,000 yards to sea. Gunners Arthur Wright and Frank Hands, both experienced gunlayers, after two short ranging shots raked the barge from bow to stern with two-pound shells, setting fire to it and sinking it. As with earlier practice anti-tank shoots it was demonstrated that with its high velocity, low trajectory shells, the Bofors gun was extremely accurate for ground or sea targets.

The jungle was interesting, but difficult. Bombardier Arthur Duke, and Gunners "Shorty" Allen and Jack Evitt lost their way in it. After two days of searching by men of the Battery, natives, infantrymen and native policemen, they were found, tired but safe. Gunner Evitt subsequently went down with scrub typhus but fortunately recovered. He was lucky as the typhus was deadly, often causing deafness, brain damage and death. It was said that little had been heard of it in peace time, but it seemed that with so many bodies lying around in the jungle, rats had been transmitting the disease carried by a little red mite.

Deadly as the jungle could be with its perils of malaria, typhus, dengue fever and dysentery and difficult as it was with its sago-palm swamps, mud, and dense vegetation making penetration so troublesome even for those not engaged in deadly combat, it still had interest and beauty. There were brilliantly-colored blooms, magnificent green and blue butterflies with wings over seven inches across, fireflies which glowed at night and a host of varieties of grasshoppers, brightly-colored insects, crickets and frogs.

At nearby Soputa Cemetery, there were 400 graves of Australians and native boys who had been killed in that area giving another sad and mute reminder of the desperate fight with the Japanese in the previous year.

By 1944, the war had moved on, so it was unnecessary to continue to have anti-aircraft defence at Buna. At the beginning of June, the Battery picked up its guns, loaded them on to the "Duntroon", and sailed back to Australia. Apart from one of the shafts to the twin screws of the "Duntroon" breaking, so reducing the speed

to a wallowing 6 knots, the trip was uneventful but slow, taking three days to reach Townsville.

Only sixteen days after leaving Buna, the men of the Battery had home leave again. They felt the cold of the southern winter, but enjoyed seeing their families. Most of the men had been in the Army for four years by this time, but because the war was not yet won, had become professional enough in soldiering to accept the necessity for continued service. However, with time marching on, several of the men took the opportunity of marrying. Looking back on the times, it must have been difficult for the married men to leave home and even more so for those with children, for what was at best an uncertain future.

In typical Army fashion, those who went home on leave to Sydney and Melbourne returned, as ordered, back to Brisbane to find that the Battery was to go to Greta Camp in New South Wales, so they had an unnecessary one thousand miles of train travel.

The period at Greta Camp was initially a recuperative time after the service in New Guinea. On ceasing to take atebirin tablets, some 30% of the men went down with malaria. Most soon recovered after good hospital treatment. The gunners were allowed a good deal of time for sport – softball, baseball, cricket, football and tennis. With fresh food and exercise the weight losses in New Guinea were soon restored.

On the 8th September, 1944, the 2/8th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery held its last parade before it was disbanded. The men were sad to see the end of the Battery. Their thoughts were expressed by one of the gunners: *"We will always consider ourselves as 8th Battery men, with happy memories of a worthy unit which had represented a sort of home and family, and mateship for us in Palestine, Libya, Egypt, Australia and New Guinea and which had seen our transition from raw ill-equipped beginners to seasoned soldiers."*

Approximately ninety men were transferred to form a complete troop in the 7th Battery of the 2/2nd Composite Anti-aircraft Regiment. This Regiment was a group of one Light Battery of 18 Bofors guns, a Battery of Heavy 3.7 inch guns, with searchlights, signals and workshops comprising in all about one thousand men.

The remaining men of the old 8th Battery were sent to General Details Depot to be re-allocated to other units. Many of the men served a total of six years or more before being discharged after war's end.

Copy of an 8th Battery Monthly Report.

Report for month of April, 1941. (16 guns)

Enemy Planes Destroyed	14
Enemy Planes probably destroyed	2
Enemy Planes damaged	13
No of Rounds fired	7555

- Apr. 6 4 guns engaged 9 Me-110s in vicinity of Derna Aerodrome 1 shot down near Aerodrome. 2 other reported down by R A F. personnel
- Apr 9 3 guns under command 26 Inf Bde engaged 18 Me 110s near Gazala bringing 1 down in area.
8 guns near Derna-Tobruk road (near detour around broken bridge) engaged firstly 3 Ju 88Ks. 1 of which fell into the sea.
Later engaged 3 Me 110s. 1 of which was shot down within a few hundred yards of the gun position and another engaged whilst attacking a Hurricane and was later reported by 9th Div H Q personnel to have fallen into the sea.
- Apr. 11 3 Ju (Reed's Troop) claimed down (through Major Younger 40 L A A Battery)
2 guns opened fire on 3 G50s which were pursuing a Hurricane and drove them off
- Apr 13 3 Ju 87s (Reed's Troop) claimed down (through Major Younger)
- Apr 17 3 guns claimed hits (1 gun two trays) into 3 Ju 87s which were not observed to come down.
- Apr 19 1 gun claimed two trays into a Ju 88 which was observed to crash about a mile further on and about 1 mile W of 9th Div H.Q This Ju 88 at the time it crashed was being pursued by a Hurricane which however did not get close enough to open fire
- Apr 21 3 guns of different detachments reported having each hit Ju 87s several times
- Apr 23 1 gun claimed hits on Ju 87 during raid at 1150
- Apr 23 5 guns claimed hits on different planes (Ju 87s). 4 observed to be smoking badly and probably came down in own lines to South. (1 wobbled badly, banked and continued flight in uncertain manner, losing altitude)
- Apr 24 Henschel hit several times without any apparent effect except sudden change of course
Ju 87B hit (2 trays) and continued flight to S W losing altitude and smoking from tail
- Apr 28 1 gun claimed hits on Ju 87 which lost height rapidly and smoke issued from tail. Disappeared below horizon approx. 10-12 miles N.W. of 9th Div H Q
- Apr 28 2 guns claim many hits on Ju 87 seen to smoke and appear to fall approx 10 miles S W of 9th Div H Q.
- Apr 29 1 Ju 87 approached flying N at 5000' and with smoke issuing from tail. evidently as a result of H A A fire 1 gun opened fire and hit plane several times. It continued on way belching smoke and evidently unable to gain altitude
1 gun engaged 5 or 6 planes at approx 4500' 1 Ju 87 was hit several times and smoke observed to issue from it. Fire on two other planes was observed by Tank Corps personnel to be effective but could not see any apparent result.
- Apr 30 1 Ju 87 believed hit but no apparent results discernable
- (Signed) P W Stokes
8th Aust. L.A.A Battery

Copy of Letter from General L. Morshead to Commander 4th A.A. Brigade, to which 8th Battery was attached.

*Headquarters,
TOBRUCH FORTRESS.
20th Oct. '41.*

My dear Muirhead,

Would you please convey to all ranks of the 4th Anti-Aircraft Brigade the appreciation and esteem of the 9th Australian Division.

We shall always associate TOBRUCH with their magnificent and sustained defence and ever remember their courageous and victorious fight against great odds.

The fire discipline and steadiness in action of the anti-aircraft batteries have been an inspiration to all and we are sad to have to sever an association which has meant so much to us in the execution of our task here.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) L. J. Morshead.

*Brigadier J. S. Muirhead, DSO, MC, TD,
Commander, 4th A.A. Brigade.*