

"B" Troop at Port Moresby

Major A. G. Margetts had decided on 21st June, after a reconnaissance of the Milne Bay area, that one troop of the Battery be left at Port Moresby in favor of taking some heavy A.A. guns, as it was thought the coconut palms in the area would restrict the traverse of the Bofors guns.

On 23rd June 1942, "A" and "C" Troops sailed from Port Moresby. "B" Troop guns took up positions around the Seven Mile aerodrome at Port Moresby. Lieutenant Dale Crooke and Lieutenant Kel Archer were the officers in charge.

When 9th Battery had arrived at Port Moresby on 15th June, the area had experienced Raid No.59, to be followed by Raid Nos.60 on 16th June, 61 on 17th June, and 62 on 18th June. High level raids continued during and after "B" Troop's stay on the Seven Mile Drome. Raid No.85 was experienced on the day "B" Troop left Port Moresby for Milne Bay on 25th October 1942; that is, 26 raids over a period of approximately four months.

Some information on a few of the raids is taken from "War Diary 1942", by George Johnston, published by Collins:

"5th July. Seven Mile bombed by 18 bombers at extreme altitude. 1 soldier killed, 3 wounded. 7 bombers attacked half hour later.

"10th July Raid by 21 bombers with 8 Zeros as cover. "A.A. claimed 2 definite hits and 1 probable hit on bombers, which were forced to break formation because of the accuracy of the fire." Note: The A.A. referred to would be 3.7" Heavy A.A.

"20th July. 26 bombers and 15 Zeros inflicted slight damage on Seven Mile Drome.

"29th July. 1 Kawanisi flying boat dropped 16 bombs wide of any target. The same day heavy land-based bombers at dusk made a raid with bombs and kerosene-filled incendiaries, without damage.

"17th August. The 78th raid. 24 bombers in three formations of 8 raided Seven Mile Drome from 23,000 feet.

Damage: 3 bombers and 1 transport plane destroyed. 6 planes badly damaged. 2 bombers were damaged taking off during the raid and another in a forced landing. Petrol drums hit and grass fires threatened other planes. Control tower destroyed and Operations hut gutted. 1 R.A.A.F. man killed. 13 U.S.A.A.C personnel wounded.

Our fighters were too late getting off the ground to intercept "A.A. went into action without result

"8th September. 26 heavy bombers with at least 6 Zeros raided Seven Mile Drome dropping over 100 bombs. No casualties. Some of our aircraft damaged by bomb splinters.

"22nd October. 3 bombers bombed aerodrome by light of the full moon. No damage.

"25th October. 2 bombers dropped 5 bombs near the Seven Mile Drome after sunset."

During August it was reported on the 3rd that the Australian troops had been forced out of Kokoda by over-whelming numbers, on the 7th that U.S. Marines had landed in the Solomon Islands, and on the 10th that H.M.A.S. "Canberra" had been sunk off those Islands. Also on 28th August it was reported that the planes on No.1 Strip at Milne Bay had been withdrawn to Port Moresby for the night.

Harry Corneliusen recalls some happenings whilst at Port Moresby:

"During our tour of duty, offering low-flying protection, we underwent numerous raids, usually delivered from around 30,000 feet plus. (No wonder we all finished up in varying degrees of bomb-happiness). The elaborate warning system developed here of yellow alert (20 minutes to go) and red alert (5 minutes to go) for the most part worked very well. The majority of American troops in the area were newcomers to the unsporting practice of the Japs and didn't altogether trust the warning system. At the first hint of a warning they leapt on to trucks already in motion and in general fled for the hills, and the sanctuary of the many slit trenches dotted around. Despite the heat, they would sweat it out in the trenches from Yellow Alert to the All Clear at least an hour later. I liked the comment of one man who, after enduring the trauma of a raid on the drome and the consequent long period in the slit trench, was heard to mutter a fervent 'God was sure on our side this day'.

"In the confusion of another impending raid, another member of the Allied Forces came racing through our gun site, including a barbed wire strung around the area. When we called out to assure him it was one of ours, a P.38 having been observed through our binoculars, he didn't slacken stride but turning his head he called back 'One of these days you're gonner make a god-damn mistake.'"

Harry continues:

"The films shown in the Moresby area drew an entrepreneur's dream of a house – often as many as 10,000 Allied troops sat on their ground sheets on a hill-side, watching 'Going My Way' and such like. During interval you could always bet on a first class 'blue' to enliven proceedings, as some Aussie humorist did the rounds calling out 'Peanuts, lollies, Purple Hearts'. Should the

Nips turn on a raid, it was not uncommon for a member of the audience to bolt right through the screen in the haste to find a safe place.

"The hillsides around the Seven Mile Drome were honey-combed with slit trenches, usually fully occupied during alerts and the actual bombing runs. I remember one fatalist, refusing the example of his fellow unit members heading for the slit trenches saying 'If your name is on the bomb, you'll cop it, no matter what you do'. He remained in his tent, lying on his bed reading. A Japanese 'daisy cutter' bomb landed over 100 yards away and cut him to pieces.

"In the same raid a piece of bomb fragment demolished the billy we had on the fire brewing-up for morning tea.

"We were always amazed at the inflexibility of the Japanese Command's orders for their bombing missions. There were a number of recorded instances where the Japs harmlessly dropped their bomb load on the unoccupied 7 Mile Strip (the planes alerted of their approach, having already taken off while the nearby harbor was full of vulnerable shipping."

Dale Crooke says that the only damage to "B" Troop he can remember was to the Troop Headquarters tent, caused by a 'daisy cutter' bomb. He does not mention Harry Corneliusen's billy. Dale Crooke also reports that conditions were good — living conditions outside the bombing, that is. This could be explained by another of Harry's stories: *"Our unit 3-ton trucks, identical with our friendly Allies' G.M.C. trucks, arrived at an American Supply Depot with a requisition in the name of some American unit in the area, and drove off with a load of interesting American foodstuffs that made quite a change from bully beef, baked beans and herrings in tomato sauce."*

Probably if the Americans had been asked straight out they would have provided the fare, as they were, mainly, of a very generous nature. However, that would have spoilt the game.

It should be remembered that, although the light anti-aircraft guns did not get the opportunity to fire at the enemy, it was by their very presence that enemy fighter aircraft were discouraged from strafing, and the bombers' task made more difficult.

It is understood that Ralph Lancaster was the only one killed in "B" Troop during the stay at Port Moresby.

"B" Troop rejoined the Battery at Milne Bay on 29th October 1942.