

9th Battery (as part of 2/3rd Australian Composite Anti-Aircraft Regiment)

Lae Garrison

The War Diary for the period 1st September 1943 to 30th September 1943 records the birth of the new Regiment:

"Milne Bay 1st September. Authority has been received (vide L.H.Q. SM20106) 13th Aug. '43 to form 2/3 Aust. Comp. A.A. Regt. R.A.A. (L.E.) (WE 111/25A/3)

To comprise:

R.H.Q. formerly H.Q. A.A. Group Milne Bay as from 13 Aug. 1943.

2/6 Aust. H.A.A. Bty. – Mobile 3.7 in. (formerly of 2/2 Aust. H.A.A. Regt.)

2/9 Aust. L.A.A. Bty. – 40mm Bofors (formerly of 2/3 Aust. L.A.A. Regt.)

2/3 Aust. Comp. A.A. Regt. A.E.M.E. (L.E.) (formerly 2/6 Workshops Sec. and 2/9 Workshops Sec.)

2/3 Aust. Comp. A.A. Regt. Signal Section (formerly 10 Aust. H.A.A. Regt. Signal Sec.)

Lt-Col. A. G. Margetts to command.

Maj. J. H. Linden 2i/c."

The 2/3rd Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment had been disbanded on 14th July 1943, as has previously been recorded.

During the month of September, twenty men were transferred from 6th Battery to 9th Battery.

A large Allied force had landed at Lae on 6th September and by 17th September, Lae had fallen.

On 9th September word was received that Italy had unconditionally surrendered.

On 24th September the guns of the Regiment were ordered to be ready to move out to an unknown (to the men) destination. However, the next morning, when the tractors were packed with ammunition and personal gear, the men were told that the move was postponed indefinitely. On the following days the move was on again, off again, on again, off again until on 3rd October, it was definitely on for the following day.

So, on Monday 4th October, the vehicles of 9th and 6th Batteries did rendezvous at 0730 at No.3 Strip, together with the personnel of

those Batteries.

Loading, commenced in the morning on to three L.S.T.s, was completed by nightfall, when the vessels moved out and anchored for the night off K.B. Mission.

9th Battery had landed at Milne Bay on 25th June 1942, making fifteen months of living in this rain-soaked, malaria-ridden area, with not a white woman in sight. The only relief for some was to be granted leave, or be sent back to Australia with malaria.

However, relief was still not forthcoming as the Battery was not destined to return to Australia just yet, but was headed for Lae.

The vessels kept close to the coast, passing Goodenough Island on 5th October, waited off Buna on 6th October, and picked up an escort of three destroyers and two submarine chasers, arriving at Lae at 2300 in pitch darkness, but lights were permitted for disembarkation. The men slept on the beach close by the tractors and guns.

Gunner Perkins remembers the voyage:

"Late 1943, 9th Battery was moving from Milne Bay to Lae. We slowly steamed up the coast, port holes blackened out and noise cut to a minimum. A couple of hours previously we had seen gun flashes and heard explosions as an air raid was carried out on Japanese occupied islands. A few of us were playing poker to pass away the time; matches were the stakes, each match representing threepence. I had quite a fair pile in front of me, when there was a loud clanging of a bell from above the messroom where we were all gathered. There was immediate panic, everyone struggling to get up on deck. I tried to grab my winnings, and in doing so blocked the only exit. 'What the hell is the holdup?' someone yelled. I replied 'I'm collecting my matches'. The cry came 'Bxxxxxx your matches, we could all drown!' After the confusion had been sorted out and we found we weren't under attack, we returned below to continue our game. It was then decided, as it would be hard to work out how we had stood previously, we would start again from scratch. So ended my winning run!"

The sight next morning was one of utter destruction; two ships and several barges sunk around the coast, and the 'drome littered with smashed Japanese aircraft. Bomb craters were everywhere. The township of Lae did not exist, except for the strongroom of the Bank of New South Wales.

Guns moved to positions around the area, some to protect 6th Battery guns from low level attack. The guns in these positions were fortunate, as they received electric lighting from the Heavy A.A. generators used for the predictors.

The troops were still eating field operations rations up to 9th October.

On 10th October Japanese bombers were over the area most of the night, dropping three lots of bombs in four runs.

There were still a number of stray Japanese in the area, so everyone had to be alert for an attack. Some sightings were made. One afternoon two gunners went off looking for souvenirs. As darkness fell, concern was felt for their safety, so their absence was reported. However they eventually returned at a late hour, safe and sound and with a goodly supply of Japanese equipment; the souvenirs later became acceptable currency with any newly-arrived American.

The first days were spent settling in, making the gun sites comfortable and camouflaging the guns. As there was a great deal of rain, one gun crew erected an old tent fly over the gun to keep it dry. It could be quickly removed on receipt of an air raid warning. No thought of camouflage had been in the minds of the gun crew, but when a Camouflage Unit discovered it, they were full of praise as to its conception, took numerous photographs, wrote in their little books and went away very happy.

In order to make living conditions more comfortable, a great deal of scrounging went on around wrecked buildings and (at night) around the U.S. Forces' depots where timber was stored. It became quite a game to get past the American guard (fully armed and ready to shoot at any sound).

The U.S. Air Force was flying 44-gallon drums of fuel from Lae to Nadzab. As soon as a loaded D.C.3 transport plane took off, another one landed. They did a tremendous job.

Now and again there were Japanese raids on Nadzab, and dog-fights over the area could be seen from Lae.

Kunai grass flourished in the Markham Valley and was the hiding place for Japs and scrub typhus, a very deadly disease which fortunately did not cause many casualties amongst the troops in the area.

Some leave to Australia was granted in November. The experiences of some members of the Battery are of interest:

Members of the leave party left their various gun sites on 10th November and, after receiving pay and subsistence, entered the Transit Camp. No one in authority knew when the party was to leave Lae. One of the party, Jim Nolen, was planning to be married on his leave in Melbourne. Jim had won his place in the leave party by cutting cards – he had the ten of clubs while the unlucky one, Norm Bridges, cut the seven of diamonds. Jim was suffering from malaria, but if he had reported sick, he would have missed the leave draft, so his mates cared for him, giving him their atebtrin tablets. On 13th November, Jim was in the party which boarded a Dutch vessel heading south. Breakfast, dinner and tea were no problem for the cooks, it was bully beef and biscuits each time. The ship duly

arrived in Buna harbor that night. The troops disembarked the next morning and were quartered in the Buna Transit Camp. There was a long wait here with Jim Nolen getting noticeably worse, but on 28th November the party embarked on the "Duntroon". A roll call was made, so Jim was left lying on his bunk while someone answered his name. When the troops were dismissed, Jim was not on his bunk and could not be found for some time. He was duly located wandering around the ship in a daze, probably as a result of too many atebirin tablets given by well-meaning mates.

A gunner's diary records the events of the morning of Monday 29th November:

"At 2 a.m. woke with a start, it felt as though the ship had run aground. Went off to sleep again. Woke up again to hear American voices – they are the survivors from an American destroyer we rammed and sank in the blackout.

"Went on deck about 3.30 a.m. and saw the lifeboats returning from their last look around. About 4.30 the ship was again under way. Bow is damaged and some water coming in. The ship anchored in Milne Bay and the survivors disembarked.

"Spent the night in the Bay, still hoping that the damage is such that we don't have to disembark. Left the Bay about 3.30 p.m."

On 1st December it was found that one of the party had disappeared from the ship. It was never discovered what happened to him.

The ship arrived off Townsville on 2nd December, and all on board were lined up with their gear ready to disembark, but orders came to return to quarters, as the ship had been ordered on to Sydney. A naval escort was picked up off Gladstone, and shortly afterwards "Emergency Stations" was sounded and the destroyer circled behind dropping depth charges. The ship duly arrived in Sydney, the leave party was given a priority on the next troop train to Melbourne and Jim Nolen was wed on 14th December.

Meanwhile back at Lae, two men from "A" Troop had been caught selling jungle juice and had been detained in the "Boob".

Red warnings were received, but these turned out to be the enemy over Nadzab. The red warnings received at night were an inconvenience, as the picture shows were interrupted but, as one gunner remarked, *"I have seen the show twice before"*. However, in the early morning of 19th November, it was "fair dinkum", the Heavy A.A. engaging six enemy bombers.

The gun drill, work on the roads, "spine bashing", gun drill, work on the roads, "spine bashing" went on and on, with the weather getting hotter and hotter.

Rations had improved with the scrounging from the Americans, and with the growing of some vegetables on the gun sites.

Reinforcements were brought into the Battery in November and December, making the strength on some guns up to 18 men.

Christmas Day came as usual on 25th December.

Some men in the Battery were fortunate. When the Americans saw the poor rations on issue to the Australians for Christmas, they gave them turkey with all the trimmings, plum pudding and many extras, which made the day more like Christmas.

Towards the end of the year, large formations of U.S. bombers were daily heading North to harass the Japanese. The tide had definitely turned.

The New Year of 1944 opened, as 1943 had closed, with very hot weather. The men suffered severely from skin rashes caused by the heat and humidity. Rumors were around that the Regiment was to move.

This entry was noticed in one person's diary: "*Have to supply bitch for Troop*", which translated means that he had to detail a man from the gun crew to do duty as kitchen fatigue (known as kitchen bitch) at Troop Headquarters. Not as interesting as it might sound from the first reading of the entry!

One way of passing the time beside "spine bashing", playing cricket, performing gun drill, writing letters and going to the pictures, was the making of models of Allied aircraft from spent shells and materials from crashed aircraft, Bostons and Beaufighters.

On 24th January the Regiment was put on warning for a move back to Australia.

A gunner's diary for 26th January records:

"Saw 4 nurses!" It should be remembered that the last time some of the men had seen a white woman was in June 1942. The nursing staff for the Australian General Hospital had arrived a few days previously.

On 24th February a large convoy of ships with troops on board arrived in the harbor, so raising the hopes of the men for a return to Australia, but it was not to be. Two days later there was an enemy paratroop warning, but that was not to be either.

Lieutenant-Colonel A. C. Perry was appointed to the command of the Regiment on 16th March. Lieutenant-Colonel Margetts had returned to Australia on 9th March to take up a senior appointment.

On 22nd March, the news came to the guns that they were to move back to Australia. Some of the guns moved into the Battery Headquarters area.

A few of the relieving troops arrived at the gun sites on 3rd April; others were to be flown in, giving the troops some hope of leaving that month.

Finally on 8th April several guns of the relieving Battery arrived, and the 9th Battery guns were taken out of action. But it was not to be a rest: the gunners were occupied with mobile gun drill, rifle drill, cricket, tennis, swimming, football and card games.

The month of May was one of frustration, with the move always being put off to another date.

On 23rd May Gunner R. H. King died of illness, and his funeral was held the day before embarkation.

A check of the men revealed that there were only twelve of the original members left in "C" Troop. A check of the other Troops would have revealed a similar result.

The embarkation is recorded on 25th May 1944:

"Up at 0100 hours, got ready for the move, moved from Battery at 0245, embarked on "Gorgon" at 0330. Sailed from Lae at 0615 hours. . . . Passed Buna at 1730."

The "Gorgon" arrived in Townsville on 28th May and the troops disembarked there, then on to Melbourne by train, arriving on Thursday 8th June. From Royal Park the troops returned to their homes by train, tram or car. As one gunner records the home coming ". . . . then trams home, arrived at 1940, a wonderful welcome home it was great to be home by the fire . . . gee, what a great life."

That was the bulk of the men safely home, but there was a rear party with the equipment still to come. These men left by the "Sea Snipe" on 30th May, arriving in Brisbane on 4th June; or by the "Karsik" on 6th June, arriving in Brisbane on 12 July.



Harbor at Lae - from the terrace.