

Strathpine – Queensland

On 1st August 1944, the bulk of the Victorian enlisted men assembled at Royal Park, Melbourne to proceed north by train. It was difficult to return to the realities of army life after a very enjoyable period of leave.

The destination was Strathpine Camp, a few miles north of Brisbane. The camp, situated in natural bushland with plenty of mosquitoes, had been established by the American forces. There were good permanent ablution blocks and kitchen areas. The men were accommodated in tents.

An advance party, made up of members of the Regiment who had come down on leave from Lae and who had not been posted back to the unit, had established a camp in the area and in fact (so it is alleged) were drawing a beer ration for a much greater number of men than actually existed.

Training programs commenced, leave to Brisbane was available, and the Regiment settled down to the usual army routine.

The sergeants of 9th Battery, for the first time since Werribee days, enjoyed a sergeants' mess, shared with the sergeants from 6th Battery.

Formal parades, which were not possible when the men were on the guns, were re-introduced. After four years of informality, it came hard to some of the original members of the unit.

Some of the leave parties did not get to Brisbane. They commenced their drinking at the Strathpine Hotel – known to the men as the "Blood House".

One of the favourite leave bases was the Lady Bowen Hostel. The building had at one time been a maternity hospital, incongruous perhaps but none the less enjoyable. Here the troops could get a good clean bed in pleasant surroundings, with meals almost like home. Credit should be given to the girls who waited on the tables. With orders coming right, left and centre, they remembered and returned with the correct order to the right man.

The hotels in Brisbane had limited supplies of beer, but a greater than normal patronage. When it came towards closing time, each member of the party would order for himself and all his mates. This resulted in glasses and glasses of beer placed on the shelves around the drinking men.

The picture shows were a great palliative for the troops and one way of having a comfortable sleep and forgetting the world.

At the beginning of September, some of the guns went to Wasp Creek, near Southport, for training. On return to Strathpine, it was

learned that the Battery was to engage in an infantry course at the Canungra Jungle Training School. The school was situated in rain forest in the mountains behind Southport and Surfers Paradise, giving plenty of scope for hard training.

The course included route marches day and night over difficult terrain, unarmed combat, climbing ropes, jumping hurdles, bayonet practice, sniper courses, using pack horses, river crossings, shooting with mortars, rifle, Bren, Owen and Vickers guns, lectures on map reading, booby traps, and tropical diseases.

Many of the troops found the going rather too much after months of easy living, but many others acknowledged the benefit of the training.

One of the trainees recalls:

"I remember that on the last day of the stunt we wanted to be 'home' in time for the broadcast of the Caulfield Cup (about 3 p.m.); so we set off about 7 a.m. and marched the twenty odd miles up hill and down dale and achieved our objective. For me it was all worthwhile having backed the winner with the Unit S.P. Bookie at 8 to 1."

On 14th October the Battery moved back to Strathpine, to a more routine existence, except for the first two weeks of November, when the Battery moved to Burleigh, seven miles south of Southport. Here there was training for the gun crews in laying and shooting on targets towed by aircraft.

Censorship of letters was imposed in that period, so the troops felt that "it was on" once again.

A gunner, in his diary under the date of 20th November, records:

"Stinking hot day. Working on the guns all day, everyone is fed up with the whole damn show, and the officers are making things worse by hounding us all the time."

Probably the officers had a hounding also, as there had been an inspection of the Regiment a few days before by Brigadier Wrigley.

At the beginning of December the troops knew that there was no chance of getting home for Christmas. About sixty men of the Regiment took the matter into their own hands and returned home for Christmas, some to Sydney, some to Melbourne.

There was no trouble getting home, but when some Melbourne men reported to the military police after their "leave", they were placed in the "gaol" at Camp Pell, Royal Park. Finally they were returned under escort to the Regiment. Courts-martial were held, those with stripes were reduced to the ranks, and some had to spend further time in gaol near Ipswich.

The majority of those men who had gone A.W.L. were good, solid, conscientious gunners, but they had been in the war for 4½ years

and they were weary.

Christmas Day was no big event; some went on official leave, others stayed in camp.

In January some of the guns were sent to Burleigh Heads again for shooting, and to Toolbar Point to practice loading trucks and guns on to landing barges. Later the Regiment moved to Deception Bay for exercises and manoeuvres.

In March a number of men were transferred out for discharge. The Army Educational Service was giving lectures on rehabilitation, so in this atmosphere the troops were not pleased to be told that a move out of Australia would take place in the very near future.

It was during this month that Major Staughton left the Battery to return to civilian life. Tom, or "Tuggin" as known to the men, had been with the Battery since its formation in 1940. Major Keith Willis took over the Battery.

Early in April the stores were moved out, and on the 9th pre-embarkation instructions were given. The guns and trucks were driven to Enoggera, to be weighed ready for embarkation.