

Townsville

On 12th April 1942, 9th Battery said farewell to the good folk around Paradise and Hectorville, who had looked after them so well. The tractors and guns left the area near the reservoir about 0600, to be loaded on flat-tops with the trucks and utilities, and the troops were later entrained in carriages behind the flat-tops and left Adelaide at 2145 for Melbourne.

The next day was breakfast at Ballarat and lunch at Sunshine, where there was a delay of two hours, giving the men an opportunity to telephone their families. Between Shepparton and Tocumwal Jack McMahon accidentally fell from the train and was killed.

It was all out at Tocumwal at 0100 to change to the New South Wales Railway's different gauge. So all the trucks, guns, tractors and stores had to be unloaded, driven or carried to the new train and lashed down once again by the men. The whole operation took one hour. However, the accommodation for the troops was not as comfortable, it being difficult to stretch out to get some sleep. Some slept in the luggage racks, on the floor, or in the toilets.

The train passed through Narrandera, Junee, Harden, Newcastle, Gloucester and Casino. While the train took on water at a siding called The Risk, the troops took a risk and went down to a nearby creek for a swim in the nude and a good wash, the first in five days. In the late afternoon the train pulled into Brisbane, where the troops detrained and moved out to Doomben Racecourse by truck, and were accommodated in tents. The next day the men had leave to Brisbane where civil amenities were much enjoyed.

On Saturday 18th April, the Battery was again on the move. However with the change to a smaller rail gauge, the train provided even less space than the N.S.W. train. The motor vehicles and guns had once again been taken off one group of rail trucks and lashed down on the Queensland Railway's trucks. Tea at Gympie.

Into the routine once again, breakfast at Rockhampton, dinner at St. Lawrence, tea at Mackay. It rained steadily all day.

The train arrived in Townsville early the next morning. The arrival of the Battery was unexpected, so there was a great deal of waiting around until the troops were dumped in a timbered paddock about three miles out of Townsville. No tents, no water, no amenities, but plenty of mosquitoes.

At 4 a.m. the next morning, an American B26 bomber crashed on take-off within 250 yards of the sleeping men. A 500 lb. bomb exploded and fragments of the plane and the bomb fell around the

troops. One piece hit a man on the foot, but there were no other casualties.

The War Diary records: "*April 21, B.C. reported to H.Q. of Col Donaldson C.O. 208 Regt C.A. (A.A.) U.S. Army A.A.D.C. Townsville.*"

The following day the Battery moved into Garbutt Airfield to provide light A.A. defence. The administrative buildings provided showers and washing facilities for the Battery.

The troops began to settle in, but the erection of tents was forbidden, so half the crew of 12 was to alternatively sleep at Troop H.Q., while the remainder stayed on the gun. The gun pits had to be blasted out of hard clay ground.

A warning was received that the Japanese might try to make a landing near Townsville, which meant that the troops had to carry their "tin hats", respirators and waterbottles around with them at all times. In fact on Friday 1st May, three Japanese reconnaissance planes flew over out of the range of the Bofors. The heavy A.A. fired about 20 rounds. There was no warning until the planes were overhead, and questions were asked in Parliament why this was so.

Later in the day four more planes identified as hostile flew over, but no action was taken as they were again too high.

The guns were connected by telephone to B.H.Q. and the local Volunteer Defence Corps (V.D.C.) patrolled the lines against sabotage.

The Coral Sea Battle was in progress from 5th May to 8th May, and after the Battle the newspapers were full of it, as the Japanese had lost many warships.

On Friday 15th May another alert was received; first one unidentified plane, then 20 planes, then 29 planes, but the all clear came shortly afterwards.

While stationed in Townsville, the rations were very poor, which was unexplainable when so much was available locally. To make matters worse, the Battery was taken on a visit to the Ross River Meatworks just south of Townsville. There the troops were shown the process from the cow on the hoof to the carcass all neatly packaged. This was too much for one gunner, who persuaded one of the cutters-up to lop off a couple of pounds of prime fillet steak which, wrapped in a handkerchief, was concealed inside his shirt. Back at the gun site, a fire was lit and the meat barbecued. A meal to be remembered! The troops ate out in Townsville at every opportunity.

Another concession was that troops could ring home if they were prepared to wait for five hours, filling in the time reading a book outside the post office.