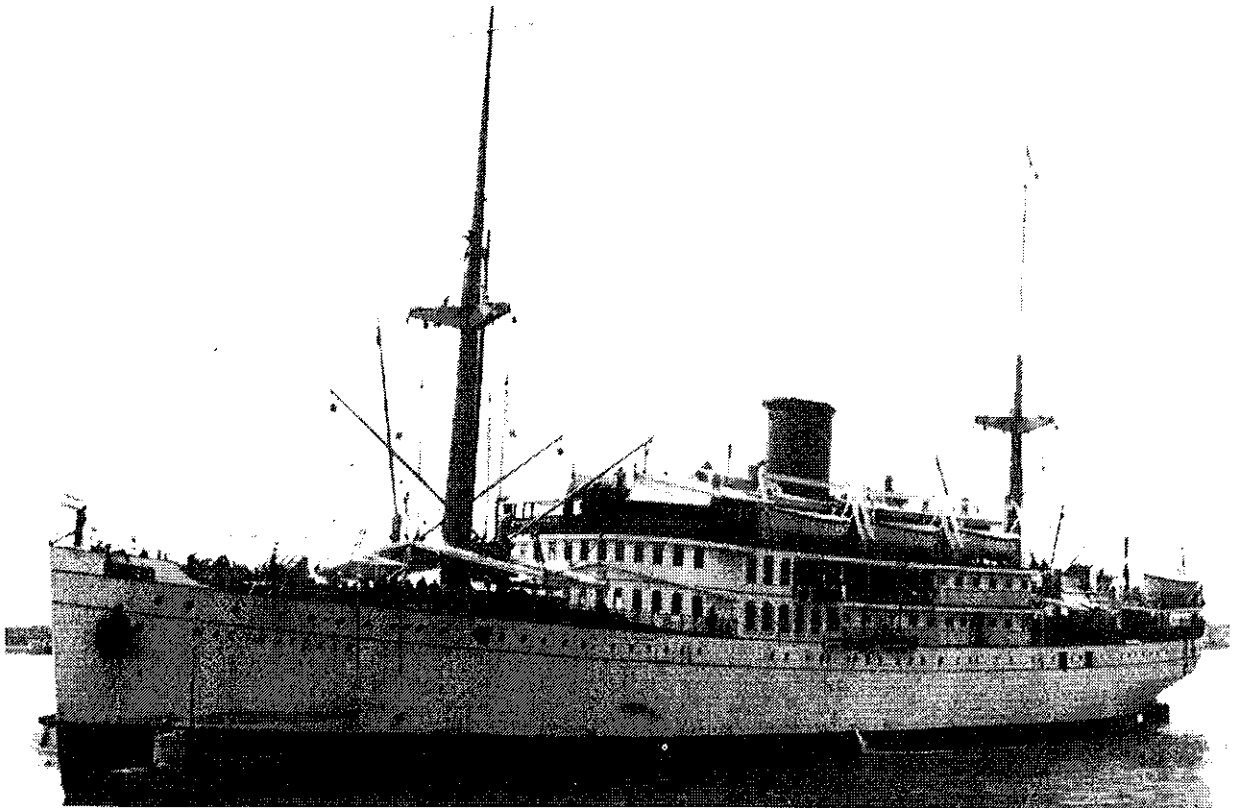


CHAPTER 3

**NEW GUINEA
TROOPSHIPS**

The *Maetsuycker* was built in 1937 and was 4,131 tons, of advanced design for its day with mechanical ventilation, smoke detectors and echo sounder. The *Both* was older and smaller having been built in 1931 of 2,608 tons and certainly not of advanced design. Both ships were owned by a Dutch company called in English the Royal Packet Navigation Co. They were used around the islands of the former Dutch East Indies. The unit was divided fairly evenly between the two vessels and there were other brigade troops aboard, in all comprising "Lilliput Force".



M.V. Maetsuycker.

The original intention was to be landed on the north coast of New Guinea and assist with driving the Japanese from the Buna area where they had been driven back after their unsuccessful foray across the Owen Stanley range to menace Port Moresby. We proceeded north up the Queensland coast but as the situation in New Guinea and at Milne Bay and around Buna was still fluid we were ordered into Townsville Harbour to await a naval escort.

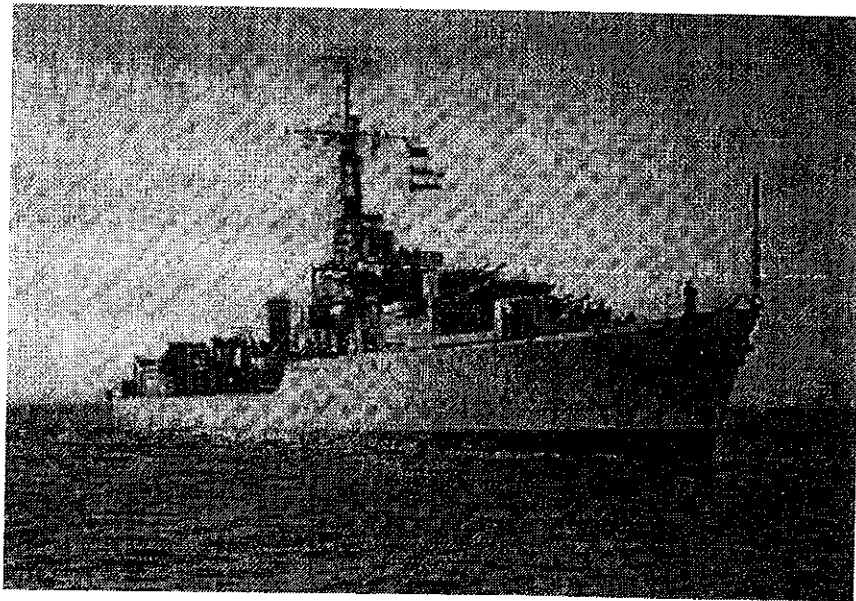
The Japanese were strenuously resisting the allied landings on Guadalcanal at this time. A Japanese naval force supporting the landing of reinforcements was met by U.S. warships and on November 14th and 15th the Japanese force was decisively beaten.

We remained at Townsville for two weeks. On two occasions we were taken ashore by barge for a march around the town. Those on the *Both* were taken ashore for five days and staged at Oonoomba whilst the ship was fumigated because of an outbreak of dysentery. Townsville harbour was notorious for its number of sharks and seeing them proved too much for the chaps with rifles on board the *Maetsuycker*. With a careful aim and full concentration the marksmen were oblivious to the fact that the *Both* was in a direct line with the rifles and the shark! Further, bullets can ricochet off water and the result was that a message was soon flashed from ship to ship to stop the firing immediately!

The crew attending the bofors gun on the deck of the *Maetsuycker* were madly practising their anti-aircraft drill and using planes flying over the Townsville 'drome as targets when the crew literally interpreted the order to "fire". Fortunately the shell missed the "target" plane. When a very upset pilot and the Air Force and Navy chiefs came to interview the Captain the pilot was heard to remark that it was bad enough having the Japs shooting at him but he thought the "Army was on our side"!

With the arrival of our naval escort comprising the R.A.N. destroyer *Arunta* and two corvettes, the convoy set off on the 15th of November. The *Arunta* was capable of a speed of thirty knots and was a fine sight as it circled the slow moving convoy. We were in a convoy of about seven ships and the speed of the convoy had to be set at the speed of the slowest of the vessels. The *Both* was one of the slower ones, with a speed of about seven knots. We proceeded on a

zig zag course changing direction every seven minutes as this is the time taken for a submarine to get a vessel in its sights and fire a torpedo. The familiar Bass Strait passenger ship the *Taroona* was passed travelling in the opposite direction all painted grey.



H.M.A.S. Arunta. (Latrobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

The conditions on board were far from ideal - cold salt water showers and salt water for everything except drinking. A special kind of soap, which was supposed to lather in salt water was issued, which did everything except lather. On the *Both* we slept in hammocks swung from hooks screwed into the deck above. Turning over inevitably meant bumping the men on either side. The air below decks was hot and smelly and many preferred to sleep on deck. The troops on the *Maetsuycker* had tiers of wooden slatted bunks and a kapok mattress. Notwithstanding this "luxury" the stifling conditions in the hold forced most to take their mattresses up and claim a space 3 ft x 6ft on deck which became their sleeping spot for the voyage.

Both vessels had been engaged in island trading around Java and the other islands of what is now known as Indonesia. No doubt sometimes their cargo would have been live stock. As a result the smell below decks was quite off. The only ventilation in the holds was a single canvas chute which was suspended above the hatch which was intended to catch the breeze and direct the air down below. It was partially effective whilst the ship was in motion but of little value when anchored. There were the usual number of men who suffered sea sickness. Some troops were engaged in cooking, submarine watch, orderly runner etc. First aid lectures were given to the infantry men and we were taught how to identify enemy and allied aircraft and to distinguish between Japanese and Chinese. The usual boat drill and the correct fitting of life jackets was also gone through thoroughly.

On the *Both* there was trouble with the crew who objected to emptying the ash from the boilers. To overcome the problem and to ensure the vessel was not held up the Army agreed to supply labour to do this task. Jack Bacon was in charge of the 10th Field Ambulance squad which went down into the bowels of the ship at certain times and carried the buckets of ash up the steep gangways and tipped it overboard. The environmentalists may have something to say if this method was still followed today. Jack remembers Jack "Whacker" Thompson was in his squad. The only compensation for this disagreeable task was a hot shower at the end of their shift. Looking back on this incident it was a case almost of "getting ourselves to the war".

Despite the foregoing, the voyage was for most a time of idleness filled in mainly by conversation, playing cards or "spine bashing". Andy McHattie recalls passing the time with Allen Fox, "Pop" Cook and Laurie Malkin by creating a serial story of the "Cruise of the *Maetsuycker* or *Insanity Unfair*", each one in turn adding a chapter. A pity this and many other happenings were never committed to paper at the time. Games of Housey Housey or Bingo always drew a crowd and some who organized the games did very well out of it. The unit barbers also did a good trade and crew cuts became popular. There were of course the usual tricks played with some receiving a "half" crew cut

until the barber took pity on them. With the delay in Townsville the men were becoming bored and soft and were losing the state of physical fitness they had attained in Queensland.



Group on Board - ??, Allen Fox, Phil Aylwin, John Garlepp, Jack Caldwell, Wally Claringbold.

Don Hiddleston was a bit of a comedian and could perform sleight of hand tricks. He had

Captain George Marks, our Dental Officer and Wally Page his assistant make him a denture with just one solitary tooth plumb in the middle. He would commence his trick by holding up a handkerchief and the usual spiel of, "Now you see this handkerchief folks, well it's the same size this side as (turning it around fast) it is on this side" - accompanied by a wide grin showing his full denture with all his teeth. With a quick turn and fast sleight of hand he replaced the full denture for the "one tooth" one, and again faced the audience with a big smile. To say the least they were astonished, especially the Indonesian sailors. They could hardly believe their eyes.



Port Moresby.
Native climbing coconut tree.

The ship's officers were Dutch and the crew natives of the Dutch East Indies, now known as Indonesians. The officers would appear each morning immaculately dressed in newly laundered white uniforms. Obviously their lackey's laundry and washing facilities were a lot better than ours ! The Captain of the *Maetsuycker* would address the troops each evening thus, " A-tten-tion all twoops. All lights will be extinguished. There will be no smoking on deck. Blackout conditions will be observed. Nothing is to be thwown overboard."

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

The battle for Guadalcanal was being fought at this time. In addition the Japanese were still resisting strongly in the Buna-Gona-Sanananda regions. It was therefore considered premature to land our force on the north coast of New Guinea. Eventually we were directed to Port Moresby on the south coast. The convoy split somewhere in the Coral Sea and the *Both* and *Maetsuycker* and one corvette and another vessel proceeded to Port Moresby arriving there on the 28th of November.

PORT MORESBY

On arrival at Port Moresby we were again anchored in the harbour and remained on board, still in readiness to proceed to the north coast. However, although Kokoda and Wairopi had been recaptured the Japanese still held Buna, Gona and Sanananda. New experiences awaited us in New Guinea. Firstly we were subjected to almost nightly air raids and we had our first introduction to the stifling heat and humidity of the tropics. We commenced taking quinine as a precaution against malaria. Every second day we were taken on land for a march around Port Moresby and soon realized how soft we had become on the voyage. The heat and humidity were exhausting. Cordial was available in Port Moresby which made the drinking water on board a little more palatable.

Our new Commanding Officer, Lieut. Col. E.C. Palmer joined us at Port Moresby. We were first introduced to him on board our boats waiting in Moresby harbour. Lieut.Col. Palmer was originally with the 2/10th Field Ambulance which was attached to the 8th Division A.I.F. A detachment of this unit consisting of two officers and twenty O/R's as well as six nurses was sent to New Britain as part of *Lark Force* defending Rabaul. Major Palmer was in charge of this detachment. When the Japanese landed at Rabaul on the 23rd of January 1942 the Australian defending force was hopelessly outnumbered by the Japanese and Major Palmer and a number of troops were able to elude the invaders and trek across a mountain range up to 3,500 feet high and reach a plantation on the south coast of New Britain from which they were able to contact Port Moresby. They had been in the jungle for three and a half months and had covered 350 miles in their trek. A 90 ton naval auxiliary ketch, the H.M.A.S. *Laurabada*, with a medical officer on board was sent to pick up the party and they were successfully rescued and taken to Port Moresby. The story of this epic escape and march to freedom is well documented in a number of books including the History of the 2/10th Field Ambulance entitled "Medical Soldiers".

Eventually, it was decided that we should disembark at Port Moresby and be sent to assist the 2/9th A.G.H. (Australian General Hospital), which was being swamped with casualties, sick and wounded from the various fighting zones. They were holding 1,200 patients at this stage with admissions increasing daily.

Major Bernard McColl, who had joined the unit with the 4th Field Ambulance reinforcements was transferred out to New Guinea Force as D.D.M.S.

On 28th November we disembarked and marched to Pari Village. The next day we were taken to the 2/9th A.G.H. and issued with 2 man tents and allotted a hillside site for quarters. The two man tents were totally inadequate for the tropical storms and downpours which occurred with such regularity every afternoon. These would be followed by hot sunshine and high humidity. Nursing staff and others not engaged in establishing camp were sent to assist 2/9th A.G.H. staff in the wards and with other duties. The 2/9th A.G.H. was situated in a pleasant hilly area about 9 miles from Moresby and as well as male orderlies there were sisters and nurses. All this time we were on 24 hours notice to re-embark. However the *Both* had returned to Townsville with some of our stores and personal gear and pickets guarding the stores. The pickets were Cpl. Laurie Malkin and Ptes. John Stretton, Albert De Lantye and Ted Monot.

Further reinforcements from the 22nd Field Ambulance joined us at Moresby on the 4th of January 1943. They were :

S/Sgt Bob James	Pte. E.J. Atkins
Sgt. Bob Mitchell	Pte. Jack Best
Sgt Jack Pigram	Pte. Bill Sheffield
Cpl. Ken Clinch	Pte. George Johnston
Cpl. M.J. Roughan	Pte. Geoff Flower
L/Cpl. Les Best	Pte. Bill Chapman
Pte. Harry Tozer	Pte. Sam Chaffey
Pte. Ross Hayter	Pte. A.G. Hilditch

The Japanese were resisting strongly in the Gona, Sanananda and Buna areas and medical units on that side of the range were scarce. To service the casualties from this area it was decided to send by air to Dobodura what was to be the 1st Australian Portable Hospital, including a surgeon from New Guinea Force and two medical officers and twenty eight O/R's from the 10th Field Ambulance. Other detachments followed as detailed below and their story will be told in the succeeding chapters.

17th December 1942	2 Officers and 28 O/R's by air to Dobodura and thence to the front line at Buna.
24th December 1942	C.O. and twelve stretcher bearers by air to Dobodura and from there to Buna to service the forward R.A.P.'s of the 18th Brigade.

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

- 25th December 1942 Lieut. Jack McGill and twenty four stretcher bearers by air to Dobodura and thence to Buna to relieve the 2/5th Field Ambulance stretcher bearers.
- 27th December 1942 Capt. Harry Francis and Lieut. Les Wilton and 47 O/R's embarked on the *Both* for Oro Bay and thence by barge and foot to Buna.
- 4th January 1943 Balance of unit including the new reinforcements from the 22nd Field Ambulance embarked on the S.S. *Van Heutz* for Oro Bay and from there marched to Soputa via Dobodura.

The transport personnel on the *Jessie Applegate* disembarked at Milne Bay on the 26th of November, 1942 where they and their vehicles were held in a large transport park used for assembling vehicles for the push up the coast from Buna. The personnel were finally shipped to Oro Bay, minus their vehicles, on the 10th of January, 1943 and from there marched to Soputa where they joined the main body of the unit.

On the 2nd of December, 1942 U.S. and European scientists working on the atom bomb achieved the first nuclear chain reaction. The U.S. industrial machine was swinging into action and the first L.S.T. was also launched in that month. Thousands more were to follow as well as L.C.M's, L.C.V.'s etc. and Liberty ships. The first B29 Super Fortress aircraft had been built and an experimental jet aircraft had been built and test flights made. At the same time Germany was testing V2 rockets.