

CHAPTER 9

HOME LEAVE - TABLELANDS

(4th June 1944 to 21st May 1945)

HOME LEAVE

Our leave passes were from the 4th of June until the 25th of July, 1944. This was mid-winter in Melbourne but I don't think anyone worried about that. From memory the weather was generally good but we felt the cold initially. Sleeping in a bed with sheets and pyjamas was a novelty. Families with a car had been saving up petrol coupons to be spent during our leave. Blackout conditions applied at night and my father had dug an air raid shelter in our back yard and stocked it with provisions. Many things available pre-war were no longer seen in shops. Clothing coupons were required for all clothing purchases. A black market existed for most scarce things.

Some took the opportunity to get married and others met girl friends and began



On Leave. Jack Bacon, Andy McHattie, Ken Phillips and Bob Crawford.

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a correspondence with them after returning to camp. Friends and relatives were visited and the only trouble was the time went far too quickly. A number of our unit had recurrences of malaria and had to have a spell in hospital and some were still in hospital when our normal leave expired. Those who had been hospitalised had their leave passes extended for the days spent in hospital. A few took extra leave without authority and paid the penalty of being AWL. Some "shot through" and it took some time for the M.P.'s to catch up with them.

Ted Young and Kel White were in Melbourne one day wearing tan shoes instead of army boots. The M.P.'s picked them up and charged them and if the Melbourne military gaol had not been full would have taken them there. Instead the charge was sent to the unit for the C.O. to deal with. The C.O on receiving the charges tore them up and despatched them to the waste paper bin. He would not tolerate pettiness or red tape or anything that impeded the real war effort.



Kel White and Ted Young on leave in Melbourne.

A number left the unit at this stage among whom were Sgt. Neil Gerrand, transferred to the Pay Corps in Melbourne, Charlie Chitts, boarded out on medical grounds, W.O. Harry Gaudion marched out for reallocation. Some had their medical classifications altered and were reposted either for discharge or transfer to other units. Among them were Norm Hart, Bruce Rimington, Jock Drysdale, R.A. West and D. Watkins.

Shortly after our leave began, a momentous event occurred on the other side of the world with the allied landings at Normandy, France. Before our leave expired both the Russian and the allied armies had begun their all out offensives against the Germans and Italians in Europe. Germany responded by launching their first V 1 buzz bombs against England. In the Pacific theatre the Americans made a landing on Guam in the Marianas and a naval battle in the same vicinity shattered the remaining Japanese aircraft carrier force. A far more optimistic mood now prevailed in both the civilian population and the military.

All too soon we found ourselves assembled at Spencer Street station for what seemed an interminable journey by rail to Atherton on the Tablelands in North Queensland. There were the two breaks in the rail gauge where we had to change trains, one at Albury and the next at Brisbane. At Brisbane we de-trained and were camped there for two days waiting for the train north. Also at

Cairns we detrained and staged overnight at Red Lynch before catching the scenic train from Cairns to Atherton passing the spectacular Barron Falls and the colourful Kuranda railway station. The whole journey took from the 25th of July until the 3rd of August. The biggest fellows booked the seats or luggage racks for sleeping with the rest of us sprawled on the floor or in passageways or wherever a space could be found. Meals were taken in railway refreshment rooms with Red Cross and other volunteer ladies serving. From Atherton we were taken to our camp site at Wongabel.

WONGABEL

A detachment of those who had been given leave from New Guinea were detailed to be an escort, under Captain Cliff Barrett, for the unit's stores returned from New Guinea. They were initially stationed at Mapee on the Tablelands. On the 29th of June this party was joined by Captain Bill Brand and twenty three O/R's from the Lae detachment who had completed their leave and a camp site was allotted to the unit in area D7 at Wongabel. The stores and their escort were moved from Mapee to Wongabel and the escort party and the Lae detachment began to set up camp. Arrangements were made for this party to mess with the 2/13th Field Ambulance until the main body of our unit returned from leave.



The "Snake Pit"

The Wongabel camp site was on gently sloping ground with a road running along the north side and a small creek forming the southern boundary. There were two permanent huts already erected on the site. Work commenced on building cook houses, one for each company, showers and deep pit latrines. The lines for the personnel tents were laid out in companies.

From the 9th of July parties of men began arriving on the expiration of their leave and all joined in camp construction so that by the 3rd of August when the main body of Victorians arrived ex leave the camp had been established with our own cook houses in operation. Arrangements were made with a nearby pig farm for the disposal of all of the unit's food scraps.

Several promotions were notified on the 4th of August with both Captains Mick Dunn and Cliff Barrett being promoted to Major. S/Sgt. Len Martin was appointed R.S.M. and promoted to Warrant Officer Class 2. Major J.P. Lyttle was transferred to H.Q. 9th Division as D.A.D.M.S. At this time also Lieut.

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Merv Featonby and Cpl. Jack Bacon were transferred to 2nd A.A.M.C. Training Battalion at Darley as instructors. Lieut. "Lefty" Foord marched in to replace Lieut. Featonby. Later Lieut. Jack McGill replaced Lieut. Featonby at the Training Battalion and Merv was able to rejoin the unit and participate in the Borneo campaign. Jack Bacon, on the other hand tried to rejoin the 10th when their move overseas was imminent but was not able to do so. At the end of the war Jack joined the Hospital Train ferrying patients mainly from Sydney to Melbourne and sometimes across the Nullabor to Perth. Other staff moves were the transfer of S/Sgt. Jack Chenhalls, our dispenser to 79th Aust. Camp Hospital. He was replaced by S/Sgt. Chris Milone.

SPORT AND RECREATION

The unit spent a long time on the Tablelands, from the end of June 1944 until



Tuesday 23rd, January 1945.
Won by 10 AUST FIELD AMBULANCE.

R. E. James.
R. L. Crawford.
G. S. Arnott.
J. W. Cox.
J. B. Best.
R. L. Woff.

President *Secretary*

Table Tennis Tournament Certificate.

the 21st of May 1945, the longest period in one camp since leaving Seymour. The time was spent in intensive training together with two compulsory sports afternoons per week intended to improve the physical fitness of the troops. Inter unit sports contests were arranged and a lot of talent emerged. Sgt Bob Crawford tells of the time when he defeated John Bromwich at table tennis.



Football Team.

The unit Table Tennis team comprising Bob James, Bob Crawford, Mick Arnott, Jack Cox, Jack Best and Ron Woff won the Tablelands Table Tennis Tournament against all other units on the 23rd of January 1945. The official certificate received on the occasion is shown, also

a photograph of the unit's football team.

Badminton was another favorite pastime with many courts being laid out. The story of this sport is best told by Alan Patrick. He states -

" It all began at Lae, New Guinea, when many of us were waiting to return to Australia for much needed leave late in 1943. "We would all be home for Christmas", according to those 'in the know' ! But no such luck ! Home for Easter instead - so again, disappointment. However, during our long months of waiting, a Badminton Set 'appeared'. Many of us enjoyed swatting the only shuttlecock until it disintegrated. I was asked to find further supplies.

Subsequent searching proved to be fruitless. However, we discovered a few groups of Chinese market gardeners on the outskirts of Lae who had chooks. There, we grabbed some discarded feathers. With the aid of some suitable corks and spools of sticking plaster, I devised a method of improvising a suitable shuttlecock which flew fairly true in outside conditions. Also, our feather supply was supplemented by some bird loving infantry blokes who shot a few white 'cockies' for the cause.

We then went home on leave after Easter 1944. After our well earned leave, we were sent up to the Tablelands for 'Jungle Training' at Wongabel. Here we hopped into the Badminton business once more and many courts were laid out.

I was made 'Unit Shuttlecock Maker', and visited surrounding farms in the quest for feathers. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed once, surrounded by feathers, corks and sticking plaster - making my daily production. Without warning, the 'inspection party' manifested itself, headed by Col. Palmer. 'Good morning Corporal Patrick, how's it going ?'

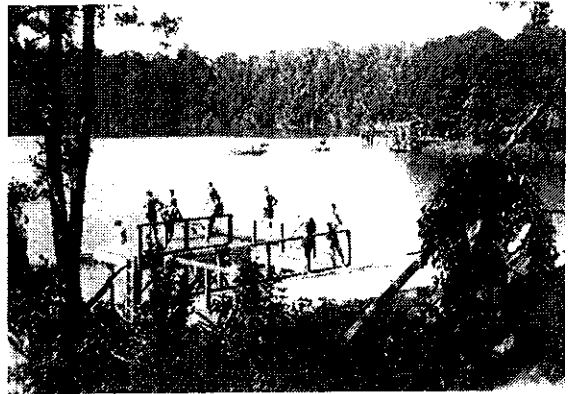
'Oh, very well, thank you sir !' (Springing off my bed to attention, amidst a flurry of white feathers) ! 'Keep on with your good work' !

After Wongabel we were shipped to Morotai. There we made temporary camp until further orders. During our stay, some 'bright spark' announced that he had seen three large crates marked 'SHUTTLECOCKS - U.S. ARMY', at the wharf. Naturally I arranged with a more co-operative member of our Transport Section (probably Keith Davey) to grab a three tonner and drive us to the wharf. After surreptitious surveillance, we noticed that the 'bright spark's' observation was correct. However our thieving had to be delayed until the waterside workers, (U.S. Army Negro Unit), went off for 'chow'. There was also a large negro sitting on one of those precious crates which made things a little awkward ! I found out that his mates called him 'The Judge' - he was always sitting on a 'case'.

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As soon as the coast was clear, we moved in and grabbed the three cases. Total shuttlecock count was now in excess of 2,000! They were then taken back to be absorbed into the 10th Field Ambulance store holdings. From that day until our departure from Ambon we never ran short of shuttlecocks!"

Ron Woff says he was a tent-mate of Alan's for some months at Oro Bay and he could vouch for his "acquiring ability". He said "We lived rather well"!



Swimming at Lake Barrine.

Practically every member from medical officers down attended a school or course designed to make them more efficient in their duties. There were Nursing Orderly courses, courses for clerks, loading officers, Gas schools, chiropody schools, first aid, operating theatre and resuscitation courses and for medical officers courses in tropical medicine. Amphibious landing exercises were also carried out in conjunction with other units.

With all the official courses and schools going on, army drill was not neglected and athletic training and route marches were undertaken. The unit was involved in many field exercises, some at unit level or in conjunction with other units, also at brigade level and sometimes involving the whole of 1 Aust. Corps.

On the lighter side a member has supplied the following interesting anecdote :-

" The 18 gallon keg of Cairns beer (the unit weekly ration) arrived and was tapped after evening mess, the boys lined up with their tin pannikins and Lady Blamey's. As the barrel emptied the voices became louder and everyone was having a good time. The drip tray under the barrel tap consisted of a two gallon bucket and was the prize of the night for a certain few when the barrel was empty. One digger used to get this bucket more than anyone else, so someone had a bright idea. A French field toad (very large frog) was procured from a farm and put in the bottom of the drip tray. The time arrived when the barrel was empty and everyone stood back to watch. Sure enough the drip tray was picked up and put to thirsty lips, the toad swam down to meet them and staring eyes met staring eyes, one face turned white, bucket and beer was forgotten. We had a very sick and sorry soldier with us. For weeks he was going to commit murder if he found the culprit who had done it!"

No names! No pack drill!.....

While the physical condition of the troops was improving there were still a lot of casualties from recurrent B.T. malaria. Fifty personnel were evacuated to hospital during August 1944 and forty five in September, mostly with malaria. Lieut. Alf Swales marched in as Transport Officer, replacing Lieut. Forbes. A new medical officer, Captain Marshall Gratton was taken on strength.

SCRUB TYPHUS RESEARCH

While at Wongabel the unit once again became involved with Scrub Typhus. This time in the research side trying to find the vector which carries the infection. It is best told in Capt. Alec Reith's own words :

"Bob Beck, who was in charge of the Malaria Control Unit that was then living with us, was given the job of trapping native animals in the Bellenden Ker Ranges using large wooden traps, box like shape, which didn't in any way harm the animals, mainly things like bandicoots, native cats, native rats, possums etc. These traps were laid out late afternoon, inspected next morning and any animals trapped brought back to 10th Field Ambulance where I had the job of anaesthetising them. This done, the animal was laid out on a white sheet while one entomologist combed through their fur while the other caught fleas and parasites with a soft brush dipped in methylated spirit and so transferred them to small separate bottles - blood was then drawn from the big vein running down the inside of the hind leg. I'm not quite sure what happened then but I think both blood and parasite were sent up to one of the A.G.H.'s then at Rocky Creek and from there to the Walter and Eliza Institute at the Royal Melbourne Hospital for anti body determinations etc. What the final results were I don't know, the vector is today believed to be a mite of some kind.

My own particular interest in this is that (although I've never been able to check up on dates), I developed a fever which was later diagnosed as primary atypical pneumonia and also that Miss Dora Lush, an M.Sc. graduate working at the Walter and Eliza Institute on Scrub Typhus died from it while working there."

UNIT BECOMES AN A.I.F. UNIT

When the Australian Government extended the area in which the C.M.F. could be deployed to anywhere in the South West Pacific it also stipulated that any unit having at least 75% of A.I.F. personnel could apply to be accepted as an A.I.F. unit. The 10th Field Ambulance, having had more than the required percentage for some time and application having been made as required, the unit officially became an A.I.F. unit on the 18th of August 1944. As preparations were being made to utilise Australian forces in Borneo it was arranged with the 15th Field Ambulance, who were to be given a role in the action in the Solomon Islands to "swap" thirty five C.M.F. personnel remaining in the 10th

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for thirty six A.I.F. personnel from the 15th. This transfer took place on the 25th of November, 1944. Several C.M.F. N.C.O.'s who were not required by the 15th were sent to the Staging Camp at Red Lynch for reallotment to other C.M.F. units.

We have reason to believe that our unit was unique in having so many sets of brothers. After the reinforcements from the 15th Field Ambulance were received, when the Eccles brothers were marched in, nineteen sets of brothers had been or were serving with the unit. In two instances, the Drysdale and Matthews families, they each had three brothers serving in the 10th.

Jack and Les Best
Ken and Bill Clinch
Bill and Roy Dickson
Jock, Jim and George Drysdale
Darcy and Bill Eccles
Ivey, Roy and C.T
Bill and Dick Jones
Vern and Geoff Laidlaw
John and Harold Lawrence
Earl, Clive and Cecil Matthews

Jack and Jeff McGill
Jack and Len Pigram
Des and Mick Rea
Les and Clarrie Sanders
Jack and Eddie Sullivan
Jack and Allan Urquhart
Ron and Gerald Vernon
Aub and Horrie Vimpani
Allan and Les Williams

1944 REFERENDUM

A referendum was held in Australia in August 1944 in which all Australian troops were entitled to vote. The referendum was referred to as the "Fourteen powers referendum" and its intention was to alter the Constitution on a number of points including national health, rehabilitation of ex-servicemen, family allowances, aborigines, safeguards against delegated powers and guaranteeing freedom of speech and religion. Needless to say that with such a mixture of issues all put to the vote at the one time the referendum was not successful. Captain Alec Reith was in charge of voting arrangements in our unit.



Group at Wongabel.

*Arthur Bachelor, Ray Frith, Stan Lucas,
Ted Lee, George Brown, Alec Murphy,
Horrie Hamer, Cyril Evans.*

TACTICAL SITUATION

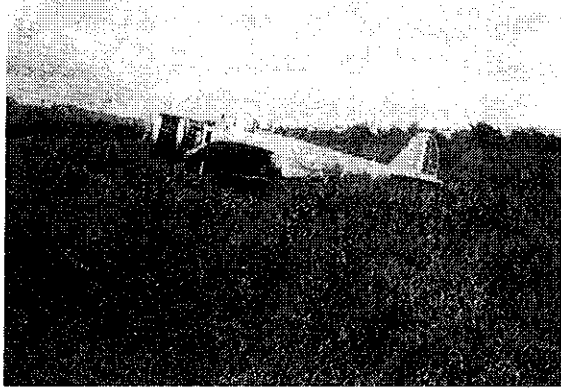
In August 1944 General MacArthur moved his headquarters from Brisbane to Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea. Hollandia and Aitape had been captured the

previous April by the Americans in a leap frogging operation which left Japanese troops still in the Wewak area further south. General MacArthur now had his sights set on the recapture of the Philippines but needed more troops. Six American divisions were being used in purely defensive roles in Australia and the areas recaptured from the Japanese in New Guinea and the Solomons. The 1st Australian Army took over these tasks and freed the six U.S. divisions. The plan for the Australian units was for the 7th and 9th Divisions which had returned to Australia from New Guinea, under command of 1 Aust. Corps, to be used in the recapture of Borneo so as to secure the American advance on the Philippines. The 6th Division was to continue in the Aitape - Wewak area of New Guinea and the 2nd Aust Corps comprising the 5th Division and 3rd Division to be used against the Japanese in New Britain and Bougainville respectively, with the 11th Division held in reserve.

A forward section of Australian Advanced Land Headquarters was established in Hollandia in September 1944 so as to maintain close liaison with the American headquarters. By the end of the year the whole of the Australian army headquarters had moved there. As a prelude to the Philippines offensive American troops on the 15th of September 1944 landed on Morotai Island in the Molucca Group and meeting little resistance set about establishing a forward base there.

By the end of 1944 the American industrial might was beginning to show and although the battles in Europe were at their peak the U.S. troops were able to continue their advances towards the mainland of Japan. We had already seen the volume of equipment which the Americans had poured into building the Dreger Harbour airfield and the surrounding base. They repeated this performance in Hollandia and then at Morotai and Guam in their relentless push towards the Philippines and the Japanese homeland. The British troops in the area were also doing their bit in Burma and by March 1945 Mandalay, the capital had been liberated. In the shipping line especially, the Americans were doing an enormous job in turning out, not only warships, but landing craft of every description and Liberty ships rolling off the slips just like articles coming off an assembly line.

Lieut. Alf Swales our Transport Officer, was promoted Captain and appointed as Officer in Charge of 2/22nd Transport Platoon. Lieut. A.L. Robbins was appointed in his place. The usual monsoonal rainy season was experienced during December, January and February but training continued as normal. It had been decided that the 10th Field Ambulance would be a Corps Ambulance attached to the 7th Division. The task allotted to the 7th Division was to be the capture of Balikpapan with its important oil refineries and storage tanks. The 9th Division were to embark first and capture Tarakan which is on a small island off the east coast of Borneo and then to take Labuan and Brunei in Sarawak



Downed Jap Zero at Balikpapan

on the western side of Borneo. General Sir Leslie Morshead, commanding 1 Aust. Corps was relying on the use of the airfield on Tarakan Island to give air cover and support for the attack on Balikpapan.

During February 1945 all troops in the Wongabel area were inspected by H.R.H. The Duke of Gloucester. During March the unit was issued with stores and equip-

ment in accordance with the War Establishment for a Field Ambulance. Owing to some 7th Division medical units being readied for embarkation the 10th Field Ambulance was requested to supply one Company to go to Wondecla and arrange medical services and evacuation where necessary for all troops in the Wondecla area. "B" Company was selected for this task and left for Wondecla on the 16th of March. The remainder of the unit continued with intensive training exercises. On the 6th of April "A" Company was sent to Ravenshoe to take over from the 2/1st C.C.S. to provide medical services and evacuation for troops in that area.

It was only a short time later on the 16th of April that the unit was given orders to prepare for overseas tropical service and the two Companies from Wondecla and Ravenshoe returned to Headquarters at Wongabel. Preparations for embarkation were immediately commenced such as removing sulphuric acid from batteries, packing and baling stores etc. Cholera injections were given to all troops.

On the 7th of May 1945, almost twelve months after the landings on Normandy, the good news was received that Germany had unconditionally surrendered. Allied leaders immediately began planning an invasion of Japan. Although many troops would still be required in Europe to ensure the terms of the armistice were complied with, it meant that there could be a substantial diversion of trained personnel, ships and aircraft from Europe to the Pacific.

On the 9th of May, 1945 the order was given to entrain the following day at Wongabel commencing at 0600 hours. The unit's motor vehicles were to move in convoy to Cairns. Lieut. "Lefty" Foord and three O/R's escorted the unit's stores. The unit detrained at Red Lynch staging camp and spent the night there. We were put on the train again the next morning at Cairns and travelled south to Townsville where we arrived at Oonoomba staging camp at 2100 hours.