

Military Historical Society of Australia
Sabretache



Copyright © 1957-2019 Military Historical Society of Australia on behalf of the Society and its authors who retain copyright of all their published material and articles. All Rights Reserved.

Sabretache policy is that the submission of material gives the Society permission to print your material, to allow the material to be included in digital databases such as the MHSa website, Australian Public Affairs-Full Text, INFORMIT and EBSCO. Reprints to non-profit historical and other societies will be approved provided suitable attribution is included and a copy of the reprint is sent to the author. Copyright remains with the author who may reprint his or her article or material from the article without seeking permission from the Society.

The Society encourages the download and distribution of *Sabretache* for personal use only and *Sabretache* can not be reproduced without the written consent of the Society.

www.mhsa.org.au

Military Historical Society of Australia
PO Box 5030, Garran, ACT 2605.
email: webmaster@mhsa.org.au

EDITORIAL

In June I had the opportunity to visit Canberra and meet with the Federal President of the MHSA, Rohan Goyne, and Vice-President Nigel Webster. It was good to be able to put some faces to names I had been familiar with up to that time only as signatures on emails, and to catch up on Society news first-hand. In the absence of both a Federal Secretary and Treasurer, Rohan and Nigel effectively are running things at that level as a two-man show, and a sterling job they are doing of juggling the various tasks. Nevertheless, one hopes that this is a temporary situation, and that volunteers will eventually step in to take over the crucial roles of secretary and treasurer at some stage soon. I also at last met and had very pleasant chats with Kristen Alexander and a couple of other contributors to the journal. My sincere thanks are due to Rohan and the Society for providing support for my visit.

While there I was able to attend most of the two-day Prisoners of War Conference held jointly by the Australian National University and the Australian War Memorial. This was in general an interesting occasion, and included a dinner at which the new director of the AWM, Dr Brendan Nelson, gave a short address. Politics aside (mine, anyway), he presented as an informed and amenable person, seemingly well-suited to the task, and I look forward to some of his ideas for the future of the AWM being realised in the near future.

Typically of this sort of event, the presentations at the conference varied considerably in quality, although the information and findings were sufficiently varied to have something of value for most of those attending. Even so, I couldn't help but make comparisons between the sorts of things usually dealt with in academic history and the articles submitted for *Sabretache*. In all honesty I have to say that the latter very often beat the former into a cocked hat for the ways they continue to unearth a plethora of fascinating situations and extraordinary individuals, and for their ability to evoke powerful emotions along the way. As editor I can be accused of obvious bias, but I'm also an academic (albeit not in the field of history), so I have a foot in both camps and therefore grounds for judging both sides of the case. But don't take my word for it – find out for yourself! In this issue alone there are two articles on the POW/evader theme which I defy anyone to read without being very moved by one and completely swept along by the course of events in the other.

In this issue I've also initiated a new column, Page and Screen, which I encourage you to contribute to. It's intended as a set of resources which may prove of value for researchers and collectors in the field of military history, whether in print or digitally in whatever form. The only criteria for inclusion are that you have found something of particular interest or value – a book, journal, DVD, website, and so on – and wish to share that discovery with other readers. All I would ask is that the contributions be based on genuine regard for the resources, and not as an excuse for self-promotion or covert advertising.

Two last things: details of the 2014 MHSA conference in Queensland appear under Society Notices; and membership renewals are now due. A reminder and some information are included on page 12 of this issue, so please send in your renewal if you haven't already done so in order to continue receiving the journal. Better yet, get a friend to join as well.

Paul Skrebels

‘A LETTER NOW WOULD BE BETTER THAN PICKING THE LOTTERY’

Glenn Matthews¹

The study of Australian prisoners of war (POWs) has assumed a substantial role in the development of Australia’s national consciousness. In particular, the experiences of a large number of POWs during the Second World War have become an integral part of the Anzac story. Survival in a prisoner of war camp may have depended as much on the mental and psychological health of the captive as it did on his physical well-being. Perhaps the greatest boost to a prisoner’s morale, and to his ultimate survival, was a letter from home. Without this contact, the prisoner felt isolated, alone, and may have lost hope of ever being released from captivity. In an attempt to understand the importance of these letters, this article will examine the correspondence relating to the experience of the author’s uncle, Bill Williams, who was held a prisoner of war in Europe during the Second World War. There are one hundred and eight surviving letters and they reveal a remarkable story of survival.

William Johnson Williams was the eldest son of William and Elizabeth Williams (nee Johnson) of New Lambton, NSW. He was born 24 January 1907, and was already fifteen years old when his youngest sister Norma was born. As the eldest, Bill was the ‘big brother’ his eight younger siblings looked up to. This gave Bill a strong sense of family and responsibility, as evidenced in his letters home during the war. The Williams men were coalminers. The family had its origins in the mining villages of Durham County, England. Being a carpenter in the mines, Bill’s skills were put to good use in the 2/3rd Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers. When the Second World War broke out, Bill was in his early thirties but had never married. He stated that if he enlisted to fight, being a single man, it might save a married man from having to join the armed forces.² This is a fitting example of Bill’s character – he had a generally optimistic nature and was mostly positive even in the darkest times of captivity. This positivity would be greatly tested as the first year of incarceration led on to the second, and then the third year in a prison camp. Bill often wrote that he was ‘in the pink,’ and ended most of his letters with the salutation to ‘keep the chins up.’³

The first few letters Bill wrote home after enlisting were short and matter-of-fact. They were written from the Greta Army Camp in Australia where he was undertaking basic training. In one letter, Bill commented, ‘They made us make a will yesterday and gave us our overseas gear.’⁴ By September 1940, Bill was at sea when he wrote home describing a day he had spent in Bombay the week before. He thought the city was quite unattractive and overcrowded when he said, ‘You have heard about the millions of people in India, well I think they were all in Bombay that day.’⁵ He was impressed with a visit to a temple, writing home, ‘Well I’ve heard about palaces but never thought I’d ever see one. We went up to the minaret in the Temple and what a sight it was from there.’⁶

¹ Glenn Matthews was born in Newcastle NSW and has been a teacher with the NSW Dept of Education since 1975, teaching in small rural schools as well as larger schools in urban areas. He is particularly interested in military history, especially Australian POWs in Europe in World War 2.

² Interview by the author with one of Bill’s surviving sisters, c.1984.

³ Williams, POW Letters, 1940-1944; for example, 18 April 1942, 17 November 1942, 21 December 1942, 22 March 1943, 18 August 1943.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Thursday 1940 [sic – there is no other date on this letter written during his training at Greta camp].

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22 September 1940.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Starting in October and for the next few months, Bill sent letters home from Palestine during training with the engineers. These letters are long and detailed. On 20 October Bill wrote to his mother,

I haven't had any mail from home yet, for that matter very few has, you should see the boys on mail day, you see getting a letter here is like getting a prize in the lottery.⁷

In November, Bill wrote to his mother, 'I received Norma and your letters yesterday and I was pleased to hear from home. They were the first I'd had since I left Greta.'⁸ The first letters received from home were cause for celebration for any military personnel serving overseas.

Even at this early stage of serving overseas, for Bill, mail from home was arriving too irregularly. His sister Bess had sent him a photo and he complained that it had taken three months to come from Greta. Bill wrote to his mother, 'So far I have only had one air mail and two other letters but everyone here is in the same boat there must be a hold up somewhere.'⁹ In early December, he again wrote to his mother,

Well mum I am still waiting for a letter from home I haven't had one since the first air mail you wrote this must be about twelve I've written, but there are a lot of men here who are in the same boat as me, Bill Heaney is the opposite, he has written about 4 has received about 40. I hope you are putting the right address on them.¹⁰

In the same letter he added,

I forgot to tell you about the trip into Jerusalem in the bus we had to go thru the Judean hills, and what a road it is one part of it they call the 7 sisters, they are 7 real sharp bends going around them the driver can shake hands with the passenger in the back seat.¹¹

About a year into his service with the military, Bill showed that he had not lost his sense of humour.

Having, and retaining a sense of humour, was important to men like Bill. His humorous side was evident in his early letters home. When describing some photos recently taken of himself that he was about to send home, Bill stated, 'the one with the long ears is the donkey.'¹² After attending a travelling show, Bill noted that 'the hall was packed with Scotch men, you see it was a free show.'¹³ In the same letter when commenting on the risks to nurses serving in forward areas, he stated that he believed they were quite safe as the Italian forces 'couldn't hit the Red Sea.'¹⁴ Some of the men had visited Jerusalem and had seen the Dead Sea, which the guide had informed them that a human body would not sink into. Bill commented, 'I bet Ted Sharpe would touch bottom.'¹⁵ These types of comments are notably absent from Bill's letters home as the years of imprisonment wore on.

Despite retaining his generally positive attitude to life, Bill grew more despondent about being away from his loved ones, and mail from home increasingly became an issue for him.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20 October 1940.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 September 1940.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1940.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 December 1940.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 2 November 1940.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1940.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 December 1940.

On New Year's Eve he wrote to his sister Norma,

I received a letter today along with the one you sent by boat mail in October and one from George posted in September so you see it pays to write by Air Mail. I have received no parcel or Christmas card yet from home but I suppose they will turn up. I have only had four letters from home all told and have posted one every week since we landed.¹⁶

In early February he wrote to his mother,

Well mum I have had no news for about three weeks but that is only to be expected, the speed of our moving around makes it awkward for us to get mail. I've written to about a dozen different people but never get any answers so I won't write anywhere else but home until I get an answer.¹⁷

By late February, the two cables his mother had sent still had not arrived and Bill sounded quite disheartened when he wrote, 'Mail is still a bit scarce though, but seeing that we are moving about so fast it is only to be expected, your cables haven't turned up yet.'¹⁸ On 18 March, Bill wrote, 'I have had no news from home for a while, but had a letter from Tucker Riley about a fortnight ago.'¹⁹ Bill closed this letter the same as he had closed virtually every letter written home so far, 'wishing all at home all the best.'²⁰ This was to be the last letter he wrote before he was captured and he became a prisoner of war.

On 24 April 1941, a telegram arrived at the Williams' household in New Lambton, Newcastle, informing the family that Bill had been 'reported missing believed prisoner of war.'²¹ In an attempt to find out more about his situation, the family contacted the Australian Red Cross Society. They were told that a report had arrived that confirmed that he was not a prisoner, but in fact he was dead. The family was given this Red Cross searcher's report, supposedly reliable, evidence being given by another sapper from the 2/3rd Field Company who had attended Bill's funeral.²² The family was distraught.

To obtain the details of Bill's death, the family again contacted the Red Cross Society. Then, on 18 July, another letter was received stating that a mistake had been made and that Bill had been mixed up with another W.J. Williams in the 2/3rd Field Company who had died from wounds in April 1941.²³ It is probable that one W.J. Williams replaced another W.J. Williams in the same company of engineers, and that is where the mix-up occurred. It was every mother's dream. Her dead son was not dead after all. Bill did not learn of the mistake until November and wrote to his mother, 'I cannot make it out Mum, it must have been a shock to you. I hope everything is all right now.'²⁴ In late January 1942, after receiving only a few letters compared to some other POWs who had received several dozen, Bill wrote, 'The mob here reckon that seeing I was dead I didn't need any mail, they are calling me ghost.'²⁵

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31 December 1940.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6 February 1941.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26 February 1941.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 March 1941.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Australian Minister for the Army, Telegram 24 April 1941.

²² T. Sutterby, Searcher's Report – Australian Red Cross Society 18 May 1941, private collection G. Matthews.

²³ B.R. Riley, Letter July 18, 1941, Australian Red Cross Society – Bureau for Wounded, Missing and Prisoners of War, Sydney.

²⁴ Williams, November 1941.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1942.

In April 1941, during the Middle East campaign, twenty-seven sappers of the 2/3rd Field Company, including Bill, were captured.²⁶ Bill and the other sappers eventually ended up at Campo 57, Gruppignano near Udine in north-east Italy, along with about twelve hundred other Australians. Conditions in this camp were extremely harsh, mainly due to the camp commandant who victimised the men to the point where they were described as ‘a mass of neurosis’ because the men never knew when it might be their turn to be singled out for severe treatment.²⁷ The prisoners lived in this climate of constant fear. Unfortunately, they could not write about this aspect of their incarceration in their letters home, due to all correspondence being heavily censored.

Not knowing anything of his reported death, Bill had been writing letters as a POW since 18 May 1941, when he simply stated, ‘I suppose you know by now that I am a prisoner of war in Italy.’²⁸ He was full of confidence when he wrote in the same letter, ‘All I can say is don’t worry, I will come thru alright I have so far. Hoping that all at home are in the best of health and that this war ends pretty quick, tons of love to all.’²⁹ Bill’s biggest worries were, that time dragged too much, and that ‘we never hear any news from outside our camp.’³⁰ At this stage Bill could not have known that he would be incarcerated for almost four years and we can only speculate as to what effect this uncertainty would have had on his mind.

The uncertainty surrounding his situation meant that Bill was always eager to receive word from home. This was, at best, a tenuous link with the world outside the camp. He was already worried that his mail was not being received at home when he wrote home in late June, ‘I wish, Mum, you could receive these letters as often as I write them, but I suppose you will receive them all in a heap. Just as long as you get them I’ll be quite satisfied.’³¹ In the same letter, he implored his mother to, ‘write two, three, write four because the Red Cross codger said we can receive as many parcels and as big a parcel as we please, so it should go the same with letters.’³² News from home was a lifeline to sanity for the imprisoned servicemen.

Bill attempted to keep a positive tone in his correspondence home by reassuring his family that he was alright. For example, he often wrote ‘don’t worry about me,’ and he would comment that he was ‘in the pink.’³³ By October 1941, Bill still had not received a letter from home, and he almost pleaded with his mother when he wrote, ‘Will you ask some of the mob to write, the more the better,’ and, ‘well mum still no news from home, but there is more and more coming in every day, so, I expect a letter any day now.’³⁴ Bill’s naturally optimistic nature was being severely tested by the lack of correspondence from home. Every prisoner probably harboured a fear of being forgotten in a war involving the lives of so many people. Evidence of this fear, as Peter Monteath observes, could be seen ‘in the meticulous care with which the POWs pored over every word in letters from home.’³⁵ Prisoners would sometimes lend letters to men who had not received any mail in the hope that it would lift their spirits.³⁶

²⁶ Field, p.755.

²⁷ Australian War Memorial, ‘Campo 57’.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1941.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26 May 1941.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1941.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, October 1941; *Ibid.*, 4 October 1941.

³⁵ Monteath, p.206.

³⁶ Hall, p.28.

Bill had become quite dejected about not receiving any mail, when his first letter from home arrived. It was from his sister Bess. He wrote to her, 'I got quite disgusted last week and wouldn't write, and now almost half an hour ago, I get one from you. It was just in time because today is mail day.'³⁷ Finally, in January 1942, Bill received his first letter from his mother. He wrote, 'I have about the average 5, but a fellow has had 90, something wrong somewhere.'³⁸ He signed off this letter with the usual, 'Tons of love to all,' and then added in an imploring tone, 'Tell them all to write.'³⁹

Lack of adequate clothing was a problem for all prisoners. Private parcels from home would often contain articles of clothing that family members had sent to their men. However, as Monteath notes, a parcel had to make a 'long and perilous voyage' and then be forwarded to the addressee whose location may have changed since the parcel was posted.⁴⁰ As well, parcels could be stolen by prison guards and thus the chances of a prisoner receiving any parcels from home was actually quite small.⁴¹ In June, Bill wrote to his mother,

there has been a sudden rush of private parcels here mostly posted late in last year, so I still have a chance. We hear that there will be another 300 in a few days so say a little prayer for me. But I suppose the luck will still hold. Be like the man who fell out of the boat. I have only had the two letters since January one from you and one from George. I wrote to Uncle Hardy again last week but there was not much to tell him there never is. I only keep writing to let you know I'm still kicking.⁴²

In late July, he wrote to his mother,

This is the first letter I've written to you for quite a while. I'm still okay had no mail for months. Hoping you are all in the pink and not worrying about anything, will have to close hoping to see you all soon.⁴³

Bill was still hopeful that the war would end soon and he would be returned to Australia. Some degree of hope was important to the prisoner of war. Receiving mail from home could, as Monteath points out,

help to haul a POW from the gloom engendered by capture and confinement. Much joy was to be gleaned from knowing that all was well at home, and that their return was eagerly awaited by loved ones.⁴⁴

Bill was writing to relatives in England in the hope that mail would arrive more frequently from there. Possibly because of this, between July and November, there were only two letters received at home, both in September. One, in part, read,

Haven't heard from you since that bunch I had a few months ago, quite a few parcels came in this week but I wasn't in the running. Some men here get all the mail. Jimmy Hyland from Wickham has had 200 odd letters. There are two neighbours here from Sydney, one fellow has had quite a heap of mail the other has had none, both of their people write the same amount of letters.⁴⁵

³⁷ Williams, 13 December 1941.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1942.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Monteath, pp.198-199.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.418; Hall, p.27.

⁴² Williams, 5 June 1942.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31 July 1942.

⁴⁴ Monteath, p.213.

⁴⁵ Williams, 9 September 1942.

In late December, Bill wrote to his sister Norma,

I don't know who I wrote to last, but what's it matter. Mail is scarce just now, but that's not strange it generally comes in spasms. Anyhow here's hoping you all have a good time this Christmas, pull the wishbone for me will you.⁴⁶

By the end of 1942 Bill had been incarcerated for over twenty months and the 'what's it matter' comment in his letter to Norma seems to point to the fact that he was becoming increasingly disheartened by the seemingly endless days of prison life, exacerbated by the inconsistency of mail from home.

It was not until March 1943 that Bill finally received further mail from home. Bill wrote to his sister Norma, 'Nearly 3 months now since I had any mail, I suppose one of these days I'll get a pile greensea [sic] couldn't jump over.'⁴⁷ He sounded enthusiastic, but also quite despairing, when he again wrote to Norma, 'I had five letters in the last batch that came in so now I will have to wait for about three months for the next lot.'⁴⁸ Bill was bothered by the irregularity of the arrival of mail.

By mid 1943, Bill had been incarcerated for almost two years, and his usual optimism was being slowly eroded by the hardship of prison camp life. Maintaining a positive attitude was becoming increasingly difficult because of the knowledge that he could wait months for news from home. In June 1943, Bill wrote, 'It looks like a few more leaving here for home on repat shortly.'⁴⁹ Unfortunately, he was not one of them. In July, Bill wrote to his mother, 'Received and answered a letter from Frank Williams today the first for 12 months. Like myself he is okay and full of confidence.'⁵⁰ Bill's optimism is directly related to the reception of mail. A week later Bill wrote, 'Doing fine. Received another parcel from Joe Quinn this week, also six letters four slim one Norma and Unk Hardy.'⁵¹ Bill was 'doing fine' when he received mail from home.

To relieve the boredom and drudgery of camp life, many POWs made plans for what they would do when they returned home. Being a carpenter, Bill's dream was to build his own weekend retreat. He wrote to Bess,

I have been drawing plans of weekenders until I'm giddy. Get one that suits before I'm finished. It's just three years today since I was at home on my final. It seems more like ten but they reckon that the first 5 are the worst.⁵²

The men needed to have something to look forward to in the future. Bill Kelly, another prisoner, had loaned a book titled *Mathematics Made Easy* to fellow prisoner Noel Ross. Ross 'spent hours poring over it' as he wanted to know how to build better bridges.⁵³ The more Ross learned, the more he wanted to become an engineer when the war ended. It was important for the men to believe they would return home eventually, and that would one day they would have some semblance of a normal life.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1942.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 January 1943. *Greensea* was a champion hurdler of the 1930s, winning several hurdle races in Sydney, often carrying a heavy weight handicap. See 'Champion Hurdler: Greensea's Record'.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, March 1943.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 June 1943. 1329 prisoners were returned to Australia in prisoner exchanges; see Reid, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 July 1943.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1943.

⁵² Williams, 18 August 1943.

⁵³ Kelly, p.137.

Many Australians found gambling a successful antidote to the relentless boredom and drudgery of camp life.⁵⁴ They would use coins, dice, or cards and play for potatoes, cigarettes or *Lagergeld*.⁵⁵ The Italian authorities tried to suppress gambling, but this met with little success.⁵⁶ Cards proved to be extremely popular and started as simple games such as poker and the like.⁵⁷ These soon developed into more complicated games, and Contract Bridge became the favourite amongst the men.⁵⁸ Playing card games was a useful way to break the monotonous routine of camp life.⁵⁹ Bill described in a letter early in 1942 how cards were banned for a time because ‘someone at some time or other sent a message in a pack.’⁶⁰ As well as card games, educational groups were also formed and some of the men presented lectures in their field of expertise. One clergyman even delivered a discussion of philosophy, which was often attended by as many as two hundred men!⁶¹

After the Italian surrender in 1943, Bill found himself incarcerated by the Germans and along with thousands of other prisoners was taken to Germany. By November, Bill’s first letter from Germany was received at home. In this letter, he commented on the weather, which he did quite often from then on, probably because of the different climate he was experiencing in Germany. He wrote,

We have had quite a lot of snow here but we are in better and warmer barracks half the time, the other half we are working. Getting cold, but I think I’m getting hardened up to it now, I reckon if I see Tasmania I’ve seen the world.⁶²

In the middle of the German winter, Bill wrote home that it was, ‘Cold as one thing here, different to home, Spring can’t be far off tho,’⁶³ and ‘we have had one glimpse of the sun in six weeks, snowing all the time.’⁶⁴ As spring arrived, Bill received his first letters from home since being held prisoner in Germany, and he was quite elated by this. He wrote, ‘Everything okay. Received 11 letters recently, old, but good, 6 from Slim 3 George Norma and Bess 1 each.’⁶⁵ These were the first letters he had received for about seven months.⁶⁶ This appears to have had a positive effect on his morale.

By May 1944, the mail was starting to come through more regularly. Bill wrote, ‘Received two letters from home this week, posted this year, quite good going.’⁶⁷ This ‘good going’ was to continue with mail arriving more frequently. On 4 June he wrote, ‘This is the first for five weeks that I have missed getting a letter, so am doing all right for mail, air mail takes about 2½ months to get here.’⁶⁸ Bill was even optimistic that he might receive a parcel when he wrote, ‘I am expecting a parcel any day now.’⁶⁹ The reason for this optimism is probably due to the increase in correspondence from home helping to elevate Bill’s spirits.

⁵⁴ Monteath, p.214.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* *Lagergeld* was camp money issued to prisoners.

⁵⁶ Field, p.757.

⁵⁷ Kelly, p.137.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Monteath, p.214.

⁶⁰ Williams, 8 February 1942.

⁶¹ Field, p.761.

⁶² Williams, 7 November 1943.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11 January 1944.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1944 to Mother.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1944 to Flo.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1944.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 June 1944.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1944.

This optimism paid off. Bill wrote home,

I have a parcel at the Post Office here it has been there a week hung up over a bit of trouble in the mail. I believe it is from Aussie, expect to get it Tuesday.⁷⁰

This parcel had taken exactly one year to arrive as Bill described in a letter written home, ‘Received a parcel yesterday from Joe Quinn, posted on 2 July 1943. It was addressed to Italy but reached here all right. Will write next week, more room on letter paper.’⁷¹ Bill had written to his sister Bess,

Received your letter along with Uncle Hardy’s yours dated 8th April his 3rd May but I think there is something wrong with the date of his, it seems too good to be true that I should get a letter in so short a time, but let us hope it keeps going.⁷²

Bill’s morale was boosted by the improved reception of mail and he was also optimistic the war would end soon when he wrote, ‘It’s sure going to be a wild night when we get together again.’⁷³

In spite of the hardships of prison life, Bill was still feeling positive. This positivism was most likely due to the improved reception of mail in the early months of 1944, both from home and from England. In early September Bill wrote to his sister Bess, ‘Received three letters today yours, George and Slim, the first for a while latest being Slims, 1st June.’⁷⁴ The mail then ceased as Bill noted in letters during September and October.⁷⁵

In December 1944, Bill wrote his last letter home to his mother, ‘We have had no Red Cross parcels for quite a while, and prospects of any more are very small.’⁷⁶ He signed off this letter in the usual way, ‘Tons of love and luck to all.’⁷⁷ This was the last word the family heard from Bill.

For prisoners of war, the reception of mail was possibly the most important factor in lifting and maintaining their morale. It seems likely that this also impacted on their physical condition. In almost every letter written to family members, Bill commented on the reception of mail from home. It is the one thing that he returned to constantly. Unfortunately, for Bill, mail arrived all too infrequently. This lack of correspondence from home probably had a detrimental effect on Bill’s health, both mental and physical.

Of the Australian servicemen taken prisoner by the Germans and Italians, two hundred and sixty-five died in captivity. Unfortunately, Bill Williams was one of them. He died 21 March 1945 during the ‘long march’ and was buried near Eger, Germany. In 1949, Bill was re-buried in the Prague War Cemetery. In reading his letters, we are given a vivid insight into the life of a prisoner of war, and the things that were important to him. Bill’s letters home encapsulate the human spirit in times of hardship – a spirit that lives in this correspondence.

*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1944.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1944.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 25 June 1944.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 10 September 1944.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24 September 1944; 8 October 1944; 30 October 1944.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 December 1944.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

References

- Australian War Memorial, 'Campo 57,' *Stolen Years: Australian prisoners of war*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/italy/story2.asp>, accessed 20 December 2012.
- 'Champion Hurdler: Greensea's Record,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1935, p.12, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/17192159?searchTerm=greensea&searchLimits>, accessed 28 Dec 2012.
- Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Stolen Years: Australian prisoners of war*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2002.
- Field, A.E., 'Prisoners of the Germans and Italians,' B. Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, Australia in the War of 1939–1945, series 1, vol.3, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1966, pp. 755-822.
- Hall, D.O.W., *Prisoners of Italy*, Dept. of Internal Affairs War History Branch, Wellington, 1949.
- Kelly, Bill, *Journeys of a Restless Spirit*, William Kelly, Adelaide, 2001.
- Monteath, Peter, *P.O.W.: Australian prisoners of war in Hitler's Reich*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2011.
- Reid, Richard, *In Captivity: Australian prisoners of war in the 20th century*, Commonwealth Department of Veteran Affairs, Canberra, 1999.
- Various, letters telegrams and newspaper clippings relating to W.J. Williams, private collection G. Matthews.
- Williams, William Johnson, POW Letters 1940-1944, private collection G. Matthews.

-o0o-

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Renewals for the 2013/14 membership year are now due.

Branch membership:

Branch members please contact your treasurer for the necessary forms and payment details.

Corresponding and Institutional membership:

Corresponding membership (individuals and families) \$A35, overseas \$A45

Institutional membership \$A40, overseas \$A50

Cheque (drawn on Australian Bank in \$Aus) made out to: Military Historical Society of Australia

Please send cheque and details to: Federal Council, Military Historical Society of Australia, PO Box 5030, Garran ACT 2605, Australia

Or direct deposit to: MHSA Federal Account: BSB Number 803205 and Federal account number 20538555. Reference details should include organisation name and INSTCOR to denote corresponding member.

If you direct deposit, please forward membership form and copy of deposit receipt to the Federal President at the above address.

JACK KENNEDY: THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN FIGHTER PILOT TO DIE IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Kristen Alexander¹

John Connolly Kennedy was born in Dulwich Hill, Sydney, New South Wales, on 29 May 1917. He was called 'John' within the family but at school and in the air force he was always known as 'Jack'. Jack was enrolled in St Charles' School, Waverley, Sydney in 1925 and then Waverley College in 1930. He was a champion gymnast and a good swimmer. He excelled on the football field and in 1934 was a forward in the First XV. He was a solid student and after receiving his intermediate certificate in 1932 and completed his leaving certificate in 1934. When he left school, he studied accountancy at night but soon realised he did not want to spend the rest of his life at a desk. Jack was accepted by the air force and commenced a cadetship at 1 Flying Training School, Point Cook, with 20 Course, in July 1936. He successfully completed his cadetship and received his wings on 29 June 1937, one month after his 20th birthday.

At the conclusion of his cadetship Jack surprised his family by choosing to go to England and was sworn in as a member of the Royal Air Force on 26 August 1937, with the rank of Pilot Officer and service number 40052. After three months at an advanced training course, he was posted to 65 (Fighter) Squadron on 19 December, flying the Gloster Gladiator I. 65 Squadron received its first delivery of the Spitfire Mk Ia in March 1939. Jack was promoted to flying officer on 26 May, three days before his 22nd birthday. On 1 September, Germany invaded Poland. Great Britain and France demanded withdrawal and gave a deadline for compliance. The German forces did not withdraw, so, on 3 September, in accordance with the March 1939 agreement to defend Poland against enemy aggression, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. Jack and his friends gathered in the mess to listen to Prime Minister Chamberlain's announcement that they were at war. There were no shouts of excitement or enthusiasm; no sentimentality. They were all subdued as the impact of Chamberlain's words sunk in.

Jack and his fellow pilots expected to be called to action at any moment and on 5 September 65 Squadron received a report of unidentified aircraft approaching London from the east. Led by Jack in K9907, three Spitfires from A Flight were ordered to investigate. They took off at 8.00 that evening; it was their first operational sortie of the Second World War. Before interception occurred, however, it was discovered the 'raid' consisted of friendly aircraft. During the next few weeks, it was ordered to investigate a number of incursions of unidentified aircraft, known as X raids, but during the Phoney War period, they encountered only friendly aircraft. In March 1940, 65 Squadron was tasked with convoy patrols which offered little excitement. On 15 May 1940, Jack arrived at the just-forming 238 Squadron, based at Tangmere in West Sussex, an important airfield that had been enlarged in 1939 to defend the south coast against enemy attack.

Flight Lieutenant Stuart Walch, Jack's Point Cook classmate, also arrived at Tangmere on the 15th. He had come via 151 Squadron, where he had been A Flight's sub-flight leader, and

¹ This is an edited extract from Kristen Alexander's recently published book *Australian Eagles: Australians in the Battle of Britain* (Barrallier Books, Griffith ACT, 2013, <http://www.barrallierbooks.com>, ISBN 9780987414229). The extract is published by permission of the author. See also the review in the Book Reviews section of this issue.

had flown Hurricanes. Acting Flight Lieutenant Jack Kennedy was to be A Flight's flight commander and Walch was in charge of B Flight.

Three Hurricanes also arrived on 15 May but before Jack had time to reacquaint himself with them the squadron was advised it was changing from Hurricanes to Spitfires. Jack was the only pilot to have flown Spitfires. He quickly set about training his A Flight charges, most of whom had only recently come from training schools. He hoped they would not encounter the enemy as he found some of his pilots could hardly fly let alone fight. He had his work cut out for him. Firstly, he made them examine the Spitfire's pilot's notes, and then quizzed them as to where everything was located. Only then were they allowed control of the Spitfire. They familiarised themselves with Tangmere and environs; practised air gunnery which involved firing into the sea; carried out formation flying and performed aerobatics.

It was not all smooth flying. There were a number of crashes during those first weeks and, despite his experience, Jack also crashed a Spitfire. He had held off too high and the undercarriage collapsed. Just as the squadron felt it was really getting the hang of the Spitfire, ten Hurricanes arrived on 11 and 12 June. After 439 hours flying time on Spitfires, 238 was again a Hurricane squadron.

Flight Lieutenant Walch in B Flight had had considerable experience on the Hurricane but Jack's had been limited to the dogfight trials at Northolt. Everything now had to be relearned and time was running out as 238 Squadron felt the pressure to become operational. Jack's acquaintance with the Hurricane proved less than auspicious – he ran out of petrol and force-landed. He damaged the undercarriage, airscrew, and starboard mainplane.

On 15 June Jack flew to Middle Wallop, an 11 Group airfield located in Hampshire. The squadron had been transferred and Jack was in the advance party. Middle Wallop had become operational just three days before Jack arrived but it was still under construction. Only one hangar had been completed and there were a number of open trenches. Accommodation facilities had not been completed and Jack slept in a tent, wrapped in blankets. Within weeks, Middle Wallop would transfer to the newly formed 10 Group, responsible for the defence of south-west England and Wales.

238 Squadron officially became operational on 2 July when fifteen uneventful sorties were flown. Jack's first with his new squadron were on 3 July. He carried out his first at 1.25pm in Hurricane P2947, when he led Red section on a base patrol at 8000 feet. On the second, at 2.22pm, again in P2947, he led Red section on a patrol over Winchester. They were vectored to Bournemouth and ordered to intercept a raid with caution, but did not encounter enemy aircraft.

At 4.26pm, Sqn Ldr Baines was Red leader and Jack, this time in P3700, was Red Two. They were ordered to patrol the base at 10,000 feet. They detected Junkers Ju 88A fast bombers. Baines led Red section in a chase out over the sea. The enemy aircraft opened fire at about 1000 yards range. Jack's Hurricane was hit. Bullets penetrated near his seat and struck the radiator system below the centre section. He was unhurt and landed safely at Middle Wallop. Jack thought he had hit the Junkers and wrote to a friend that 'I was over your way ... and shot one of the buggers.' It was not officially acknowledged as an enemy casualty but post-war research has ascertained that Jack damaged one of the Ju 88As.

Jack carried out two sorties on 4 July but made no interception. It was a busy time:

I've hardly had time to wash and eat and when I'm not flying, I'm sleeping. I find I need just about all the sleep I can get and we are on duty from dawn to dusk – quite a long day. Thank heavens anyway the war has woken up a bit now and we are getting a bit of action at last ...

Jack was fully aware of how important his work was, and how much depended on it – ‘we are waiting for the Blitzkrieg on England’.

Convoy and local patrols continued in earnest over the next few days and Jack carried out one on 7 July. He was flying P2950 on ops for the first time and, apart from one sortie in P2946 on 10 July, was to fly this Hurricane until his death. Red Section took off at 11.00am with Pilot Officer Charles Davis leading and Jack as his number two. This proved an uneventful patrol and Red section landed at Middle Wallop at 1.28pm without sighting the enemy.

On 8 July Jack led Red and Yellow sections on an early afternoon patrol of Wimborne Minster, and Red section on a late afternoon base patrol. He again led Red section when it was vectored to intercept a raid on 9 July, but nothing was seen. On 10 July, he led A Flight on a patrol over Portland Bill to intercept two raids but again, did not encounter the enemy. It must have been a frustrating time – plenty of sorties but only once in action, and no acknowledged enemy claims. The honour of 238 Squadron's ‘first confirmed scalp’ went to Flight Lieutenant Stuart Walch who claimed enemy blood on 11 July when he shot down a Messerschmitt Me 110 which had also taken hits from the other pilots in his section. In addition, three other 238 pilots jointly attacked a Ju 88.

After a day off operations, Jack was in the air again on 12 July leading Red section on a patrol over Poole. They left at 5.48am and returned at 6.42am. At 12.36pm he led Red section on a base patrol. No enemy aircraft were sighted on either operation. With the fall of France, the RAF had to extend its fighter coverage to the south-west of England. Warmwell, a grass airfield eight miles north-east of Weymouth in Dorset, was considered ideal because of its proximity to the Portland Naval Base and was selected as a forward operating base for Middle Wallop. The pilots would fly there in the early morning and return at dusk.

Jack was up bright and early on 13 July to fly to Warmwell. The weather was cold for this time of year and it was overcast, with gusty rain showers. The weather improved as the day advanced. Convoys plied the southern waters and by early afternoon, one of the westward convoys was nearing Lyme Bay. This area west of Portland was considered especially dangerous, with vessels vulnerable to enemy attack. Accordingly, Warmwell despatched three Spitfires from 609 Squadron and twelve Hurricanes from 238 to Portland to mount guard when the ships arrived and then escort them westwards. Jack was leading A Flight which took off between 2.45 and 2.55pm.

The convoy had had to do a fair amount of zig-zagging so was behind schedule. When 238 Squadron arrived there were no ships, but they encountered a large formation of enemy aircraft, who also expected the convoy to be there. A Flight was about 12,000 feet over Portland Harbour when it spotted one of two Dornier Do 17s heading out to sea in a shallow dive. These Dorniers were the reconnaissance eyes of the main formation of Me 110Cs.

B Flight and 609 Squadron attempted to deal with the Me 110s, and B Flight successfully despatched one of them. Yellow section damaged one of the Dorniers and also despatched another of the Me 110s. Meanwhile, Jack ordered Red section into line astern to follow the diving Dornier in a westerly direction. When they were over Chesil Beach, Jack attacked. He killed the gunner and damaged the Dornier. The Dornier turned towards the shore. Pilot

Officer Davis and Sgt Parkinson fired at the retreating Dornier. As it turned across Portland Bill, they continued to fire at it. They saw it crash into the sea off Chesil Beach at 3.04pm.

After firing at Red section's Dornier, Jack also turned towards the shore. He was losing height as he approached Weymouth, and beyond that, Warmwell. He had either been wounded, or his Spitfire hit by return fire from the Dornier, or both. He struggled to maintain course.

Jack continued to lose height and P2950's wings clipped high tension cables. It crashed into a hillside at Southdown Farm, north of Lodmoor, just outside Weymouth. Jack was only about two miles from Warmwell. His Hurricane was engulfed in flames on impact. Twenty-three-year-old John Connolly Kennedy, known as Jack, was dead. He was the first Australian fighter pilot to die in the Battle of Britain. He was 238 Squadron's first death in combat; it lost 'an officer of high calibre' and great promise. Jack was officially credited with a third share in the Dornier. This was his only acknowledged combat victory.

With a Catholic padre officiating, Jack was buried with full honours at Holy Trinity, a small Anglican church close to Warmwell airfield. The quiet graveyard is shaded by trees. Flowers, shrubs and roses are planted between the graves. Service to country and empire link the dead of different faiths.

Back in Australia, Jack's family were overwhelmed by grief. They had not expected him to die as he was such a good pilot. They placed a small notice in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and received many letters of condolence and phone calls. Their disbelief was shared by extended family and friends. Jack had been well-known in swimming and football circles; he had been popular and much loved. Masses were said for him at the family church at Holy Cross, Woollahra and Waverley College.

Jack's sister, Beryl, visited her brother's grave in 1975. Standing in front of her brother's memorial stone was a moving experience. Memories of her older brother, gone too soon, came back to her as she read the inscription chosen by her father: 'In memory of our dear son and brother of Beryl who gave his life in the Battle of Britain'.

-o0o-

6TH DIVISION MEMORIAL OLIVE TREE

John Hardy¹

The efforts of the soldiers of the 6th Australian Division, 2nd AIF, are recognised with the planting of an olive tree at the Rocky Creek War Memorial Park near Tolga. The idea of planting the tree is that of Dawn Henderson of Mareeba, whose husband Mick served in Crete and the Tablelands during WW2 with units of the 6th Division.

Dawn planted the heritage variety, Helena, at the conclusion of the memorial service to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the disbandment of the 49th and 39th Australian Infantry Battalions on 3 June 1943. Both units were respectively absorbed into the 6th Division, 16 Brigade, 2/1 and 2/2 Australian Infantry Battalions AIF.

¹ John Hardy is Secretary of the Rocky Creek Memorial Park Advisory Committee.

Dawn said, ‘This tree will be a living memorial to those soldiers of the 6th Division and in particular to those that served and trained in the Wondecla area during World War 2. My husband served in the 2/2 Battalion and 2/2 Field Regiment and was also a Malaria Research Volunteer here at Rocky Creek in the 5 Australian Camp Hospital.’



Dawn Henderson planting the 6th Division AIF memorial olive tree at the Rocky Creek War Memorial Park, June 2013

Mick and his wife Dawn served for many years with the Rocky Creek Advisory Committee and Mick in his capacity as plaque providore encouraged many military associations and individuals to place unit memorial plaques in the park. The olive tree will compliment other memorial trees planted in the park, including two WW1 Aleppo pines from Gallipoli and from WW2, a 9th Division Tobruk fig tree and 8th Division Borneo rain trees.

The 6th Division, on return to Australia in early 1943 from Libya, Greece and Palestine, occupied the Wondecla area on the Atherton Tableland. After jungle training, parts of the Division went to New Guinea to fight on the Kokoda Track and also at Wau, culminating in the capture of Salamaua late in 1943. The Division regrouped at Herberton/Wondecla, and near the end of 1944 again returned to New Guinea to see action at Wewak until the surrender of the Japanese in 1945.

THE CRASH OF CATALINA A24-34 IN JAPANESE-OCCUPIED NEW BRITAIN

Peter Hill¹

The conflict in the Southwest Pacific Theatre was characterised by vast stretches of ocean, hostile jungle environments and an enemy that generally treated prisoners of war with contempt and which could take an especially vindictive attitude towards downed airmen. Being forced down in enemy-held territory was an option that air crew could only have viewed with serious apprehension. It is a sobering figure that of the RAAF airmen shot down and captured in New Guinea and the Netherlands East Indies, 66 were executed and only 15 survived the war.²

The reason for the Japanese vindictiveness towards captured Allied airmen is not entirely clear but the first indication that downed airmen would be treated in a category of their own came in the aftermath of the Doolittle Raid in April 1942. The insult to national honour from this first ever bombing of the Japanese homeland caused the Tojo Government to pass special regulations which prescribed death or imprisonment for ten years or more for ‘enemy fliers’ guilty of air attacks ‘upon ordinary people’, ‘upon private property of a non-military nature’ and ‘against other than military objectives’. Despite the fact that the Japanese airforce had practised a calculated policy of indiscriminate bombing in China and Southeast Asia, the new regulations were retrospectively used to sentence the eight captured Doolittle airmen to death, with the sentence carried out on three of the airmen with the other five to serve life in prison.³ Thus began a policy of treating airmen captured in Japan or its occupied territories as ‘criminal prisoners’ with many routinely executed with or without the pretence of a trial.

This article attempts to retell the story of Catalina A24-34 and its crew which crashed in New Britain on 8 February 1944. While the story has been recounted in part in the reminiscences of two of the survivors,⁴ this article is largely based on a very interesting trail of material in the collection of the National Archives of Australia. The story of Catalina A24-34 is a good example of how a seemingly routine long-distance operation in the Southwest Pacific Theatre could quite suddenly turn into a life and death nightmare from which, in this instance, only half the crew would survive.⁵

On the morning of 7 February 1944 Catalina A24-34 left Cairns for a single-plane harassment raid on the major Japanese base of Kavieng in New Ireland. Catalinas operated as self-contained units on their long flights and the crew consisted of Squadron Leader (Sq/L) John Todd as Captain and 1st Pilot, Flying Officer (F/O) Ian Ralfe as 2nd Pilot, Flight Lieutenant (F/Lt) Brian Stacy as an extra 2nd Pilot, F/O Frank Pocknee as Navigator, F/O Allan Liedl as

¹ Peter Hill is a Tasmanian member of the MHSA with a particular interest in the history of the RAAF. He studied history at the University of Queensland.

² D.C.S. Sissons, *The Australian War Crimes Trials and Investigations*, p.50, at <http://socrates.berkeley.edu>. These figures do not include airmen captured in New Britain.

³ *International Military Tribunal for the Far East*, chap.VIII, pp.1023-1031, <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar>.

⁴ See Flt Lt Brian Stacy, ‘Favoured by Fate,’ in C. Gaunt & R. Cleworth (eds.), *Cats at War: The Story of RAAF Catalinas in the Asia-Pacific Theatre of War*, Cleworth, Roseville, 2000, pp.156-174; and Richard Murray Howard, ‘The Sequel to “Favoured by Fate”’, in R. Cleworth (ed.), *The Fabulous Catalina*, Cleworth, Sydney, 2006, pp.203-214.

⁵ The crew members who managed to escape recorded their experience in a most interesting report to be found in the National Archives Australia (NAA): A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

1st Wireless Air Gunner, Flight Sergeant (F/Sgt) Henry Murphy as 2nd Wireless Air Gunner, Sergeant (Sgt) Frederick Woolley as 1st Engineer, Sgt Earnest Kraehe as 2nd Engineer, Sgt Murray Howard as Fitter and Sgt Harry Jones as Armourer.

The Catalina refuelled at Milne Bay and departed at six in the evening for what was described as ‘a nuisance raid just to keep the Japs awake, and to do as much damage as we could to airdromes and shore installations.’⁶ This, though, understates the importance of the operation. The ports of Rabaul in New Britain and Kavieng in New Ireland were major Japanese bases for managing and supplying the conflicts in the Solomons and New Guinea. By early 1944 both were firmly in the sights of MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific forces leap frogging from one strategic target to the next along the northern coast of New Guinea and Admiral Halsey’s South Pacific forces doing the same up the Solomon’s chain.

From October 1943 Rabaul was under relentless attack from Allied bombers and strafing aircraft and the airstrips at Kavieng became a major target in early 1944 as Halsey’s South Pacific forces prepared to seize Green Island about 200km to the east of New Britain.⁷ While RAAF Catalinas were far too slow and vulnerable to be used for daylight attack, their low speed combined with their ability to carry a comparatively heavy bomb load over ultra-long distances made them a very suitable night-time raider. In preparation for the seizure of Green Island, the daytime attacks on Kavieng were supplemented by a series of single Catalina harassing raids on each night from 2-8 February 1944.⁸

From Milne Bay, A24-34 flew northwards along the coast of New Guinea and arrived over the target area on the northern coast of New Ireland at about 11 at night in bright moonlight. A24-34 initially turned its attention to the 4,000-foot Japanese-built runway at Panapai about two miles to the east of Kavieng. Two 250lb bombs were dropped and numerous incendiaries were thrown out the Catalina’s side blisters on its second pass over the airstrip. By this stage Japanese defences were well alerted and anti-aircraft (AA) fire, especially from shipping in the harbour, was heavy but not accurate. A24-34 then turned its attention to the 5,000-foot runway at Kavieng which had been initially built by Australian forces just prior to the war and greatly developed by the Japanese. Two passes were made over the airstrip in the course of which the remaining six 250lb bombs and the remaining incendiaries were dumped on the airstrip and facilities. By this stage AA fire was intense and accurate and violent evasive action needed to be taken. A fifth run was attempted to take photos for assessing damage but was abandoned in the face of a ‘very intense’ AA barrage. Due to some difficulty in trimming the aircraft, it was likely that the tailplane and fin had been hit by AA, although the crew did at least have the satisfaction of observing large fires at one end of the Panapai airstrip.

After an eventful operation, A24-34 left the target area about midnight and headed southwards to make landfall on the western side of Japanese-occupied New Britain with the intention of landing at Milne Bay by early dawn. Given the tension of the operation itself, the crew could perhaps have been entitled to ease off a little even though they still had a long flight over enemy held territory. Unfortunately it was at this point that disaster struck.

On their long flights, Catalinas commonly combined reconnaissance activities with their

⁶ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

⁷ George C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports: A Personal History of the Pacific War*, Air Force History & Museums Program, 1997, pp.350-1.

⁸ Office of Air Force History, 1943_MISC_11SQN, Record of Operations of 11 and 20 Squadrons (Catalinas) from the beginning of 1941 to the end of June 1944 as compiled by F/Lt. Tom Graham (Intelligence Officer).

return trips. As they neared New Britain Captain Todd instructed the Armourer to change the height setting on one of the aircraft's three reconnaissance flares.⁹ F/Lt Stacy later recorded that the intention was to drop a reconnaissance flare over Rabaul Harbour to see if there was any enemy activity to report. The Catalina, however, ran into heavy flak from a vessel in the harbour and abandoned the attempt at reconnaissance.¹⁰ As A24-34 resumed its southward track across New Britain the Armourer was instructed to return the flare to its normal setting. Caution advised that this was a procedure that should normally be carried out in the Catalina's blister area because the flares had a reputation for being fickle.

In this instance, though, the Armourer carried out the operation in the bunk compartment and, as he turned the height setting ring, 'a stream of sparks flowed out of the flare in the manner of a Roman candle',¹¹ and this was followed by a thin trickle of smoke. One of the Air Gunners, F/O Liedl, had the presence of mind and courage to make a grab for the flare with the intention of throwing it out of the Catalina's side blister which had already been opened by the aircraft's Fitter, Sgt Howard.

Unfortunately the magnesium filled flare exploded as F/O Liedl picked it up and his eyes, face and hands were all burned by the terrific heat generated by a 175,000 candle-power flare. Everything in the bunk compartment immediately caught fire and the other two flares also went up. The four crew members in the vicinity were forced back into the blister area by the terrific force of the exploding flares where, after a futile attempt to quell the fire with an extinguisher, they closed the bulkhead between the blister area and the bunk compartment for protection. Fortunately someone had the presence of mind to pull F/Lt Stacy, who had been asleep on one of the bunks, into the blister area and certainly saved his life.¹²

The crew forward of the fire made every effort to control the situation with fire extinguishers, but these made no impression. To add to the general predicament, the crew forward of the fire were in danger of being suffocated by black smoke from the burning rubber of a dinghy which had been stowed in the bunk compartment. Even with the cockpit windows open, the two pilots were struggling to continue flying.

The situation of the five crew members in the blister area, though, was becoming dire. The fire was so intense that it began to burn holes through the bulkhead and the crew were faced by the fire being forced out like the flames of an acetylene torch. The wireless operator did manage to get out two SOS messages at 01.36 and 01.50, giving their position and indicating the aircraft was on fire,¹³ but was then forced to evacuate his station due to the suffocating fumes.¹⁴

Once it became apparent that the fire could not be extinguished, Sq/L Todd lost altitude as quickly as possible from their previous cruising height of 8,500 feet and turned the plane near Jacquinot Bay to follow the New Britain coast line south in an effort to reach the recently established US bridgehead of Arawe on the southern tip of New Britain.¹⁵

⁹ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

¹⁰ Brian Stacy, 'Favoured by Fate,' pp.168-9.

¹¹ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

¹² Brian Stacey, 'Favoured by Fate,' p.169.

¹³ NAA: A705, 166/28/241, Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section.

¹⁴ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

¹⁵ Arawe was attacked by US and Australian forces on the 15 December 1943 and after a month of bitter fighting a secure base had been established as part of the overall strategy of isolating and bypassing the Japanese base at Rabaul. See, for instance, *Reports of General MacArthur in the Pacific* (prepared by his General Staff),

A24-34's situation, though, was now not so much critical as disastrous. With the plane in danger of breaking in half in the air, Todd immediately 'crash landed' the aircraft in Jacquot Bay about 50 yards from the shore. As a portion of the hull had been burned through and the wing tip floats could not be lowered, 'crash landed' was an accurate description as the Catalina bounced 50 feet into the air and swung violently to the right before nearly diving into the water.

Despite the violent landing, the raging fire and exploding ammunition, all crew members survived and were able to evacuate the aircraft 'with nothing more serious than a few burns and scratches.'¹⁶ The crew were able to wade ashore but were immediately forced to seek shelter behind rocks as the .50 calibre ammunition began to explode in all directions. By now it was about 2.15 in the morning and the crew could do little but watch their aircraft burn until it broke in two. It was also expected that at any moment the petrol tanks would go up.

In the meantime a more sheltered spot about a quarter of a mile along the beach and 50 yards inland had been located. The crew retreated to the spot to spend an uneasy night. Burns were treated with the cold tea from a thermos that had been retrieved and guards were set. At first sign of dawn the crew were able to recover some further equipment from the ruined plane. This included five knives, four revolvers, a medical kit, four emergency jungle kits and a parachute. Two crew members also surveyed the scene with binoculars from a nearby high point to see if there were any signs of Japanese in the area.

While no Japanese were seen, the first signs of trouble soon appeared in the form of three natives approaching along the beach. Two of the natives turned and ran as soon as they saw the sentries but the third approached and warned that there were Japanese a few miles away. The Japanese had seen the aircraft crash in flames and had sent the natives to look for the crash site. The native, who spoke quite good English and seemed very frightened of the Japanese, advised them to get away from the beach back to an abandoned plantation and added, 'Why the hell didn't you get out of here last night?'¹⁷

Sq/L Todd immediately set Sgts Woolley and Murphy as guards and began dividing the crew into three parties with the intention of heading separately to the abandoned plantation. At this point disaster again struck and in the next minute or so life and death decisions were made for more than half the crew. As they were dividing the equipment among the three parties, the sound of Japanese commands was suddenly heard from the beach. Realising that the two guards had been jumped by the Japanese, the remaining crew grabbed the equipment and dashed into the bush. Unfortunately F/Lt Stacy became separated from the others in the hasty retreat.

The seven remaining crew came together about 100 yards into the bush for a short council of war. Sq/L Todd quickly divided them into two groups to head in different directions on the basis that if the Japanese picked up the trail of one party, it might be possible for the other party to evade capture. Sq/L Todd headed off in a westerly direction with the navigator, F/O Pocknee, and the second Engineer, Sgt Kraehe. At this point they largely disappear from the story until after the end of the war.

Washington, 1966, vol 1, pp. 128-131; G Hermon Gill, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 2 (Navy), Volume II, Royal Australian Navy, 1942-1945*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1968, p.335.

¹⁶ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

¹⁷ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

The Second Pilot, F/O Ralfe, led the other party in a north-westerly direction. The party included the first Wireless Air Gunner, F/O Liedl, the Fitter, Sgt Howard and the Armourer, Sgt Jones. The four crewmen were equipped with two .38 calibre revolvers, three knives, a parachute, a first-aid kit and two RAAF-type emergency jungle kits. While the emergency kits included a compass and cloth map, one kit was missing the map. This was soon to prove a very unfortunate omission.

Taking out the compass, the four crewmen headed off into the interior. After about a quarter of an hour, though, two small calibre shots were heard from the direction of the beach. Concerned that the shots were connected with the fate of some of their colleagues, the four crewmen greatly accelerated their pace. After a reasonable distance had been covered they stopped to check their bearings but found that somewhere in their haste the all-important cloth map had disappeared. Faced with an unforgiving enemy, heavy bush, mountainous terrain and no means of communication or map to guide them and no European food, the crewmen decided that their only option was to head as far as possible into the mountainous interior and see if they could survive off the land – and hope that something would turn up in their favour.

They headed off in a northwest direction and spent the remainder of the day struggling through swamps before eventually emerging into low mountainous terrain. Fortuitously, the day before their mission a member of the local Volunteer Defence Corps near their Cairns base had taken the crew into the bush surrounding Cairns and showed them how to recognise tropical jungle and bush food. The lesson now proved essential in allowing them to recognise sufficient edible palms and vines to sustain themselves.¹⁸ The only other food available was a solitary paw-paw from an abandoned native garden.

On the second day they were soon confronted by a wide crocodile-infested river. With only knives and a parachute available, the river crossing was affected by lashing together several logs with strands cut from the parachute. They soon came to a clearing at the head of a small inlet where a fresh water stream ran into the brackish water of the river. A native trail led invitingly away from the clearing but after finding a discarded Japanese rice tin, it was considered preferable to avoid the native trail and to head further inland through the bush.

The crew passed a second uneasy night on a ridge with only the parachute available to provide something in the way of a ground sheet, shelter and protection from mosquitoes. A major reason for the uneasy night was the sound of two shots and a burst of machine-gun fire. There was no way of knowing whether this related to the unknown fate of the second group of crewmen, but it certainly indicated that there were Japanese in the vicinity. The crew continued to head inland for another half a day but very quickly came to extremely rocky country, full of dry gullies and lacking both food and water. As there was no chance of living off terrain that was this barren and difficult, they opted to head back towards the coast with the idea of heading in a south-westerly direction in the hope that they could reach the newly established US base at Arawe on the southern tip of New Britain.

On this occasion the crew took the risk of following a native trail and found themselves back at the clearing on the side of the crocodile-infested river. The return trip had taken just three

¹⁸ The palm tips had a taste like raw cauliflower. See Richard Murray Howard, 'The Sequel to 'Favoured by Fate'', in R. Cleworth (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.206.

hours compared to the day and a half of moving through the bush. The crew decided to make camp at this location which was favourable in every way – with the exception of the discarded Japanese rice tin. As a precaution, the crew decided to set up their fire in the clearing at the top of the lagoon while locating their camp on the opposite side of the inlet. The camp also gave them the opportunity to forage and they were able to shoot a pig and a scrub fowl with their .38 calibre revolver. This gave them their first proper food since the crash. However, all attempts to catch fish with baited safety pins or to spear them proved fruitless. Attempting to shoot fish from near point blank range merely attracted the attentions of a crocodile which came down to examine the cause of the noise.

To improve their food supply, they planned to construct a raft with the intention of using it to go further upstream. All plans, though, came to an abrupt end when on the third day at the lagoon they were surprised by a Japanese river patrol as they sat around their cooking fire. Perhaps it was a random patrol or, more likely, the fire had given their location away. Whatever the case, the surprise was complete. Their first sight of the river patrol was when a small canoe with two natives and two Japanese came around the bend of the river and directly into the inlet as they sat around their fire. This first canoe was followed five or six minutes later by a large canoe with two natives and eight Japanese soldiers.

The surprise was so complete that the crew only just had time to dive into the swamp at the back of the clearing and to head away through the sac-sac swamps and to again ford the river in an effort to throw the Japanese off their trail. The crew had no time to recover their already meagre equipment (a parachute, medical kit and one knife) or much of their clothing which was back at their main camp. Once they were clear of the Japanese, they headed off in a south-westerly direction towards the coast for the next four days, avoiding all native trails. The country proved to be ‘unbelievably rough’ as they were faced with mountains, swamps, swollen rivers and creeks.¹⁹ The only food available was from the ubiquitous palm tree and a malted milk tablet every second day. Fortunately, too, they had been able to save their atebirin and took one tablet every second day as protection against malaria.

Eventually they came out on a Japanese-constructed road near the deserted lowland village of Lau. Despite the risk they spent the night at Lau where there was at least a plentiful supply of coconuts and fresh water. On the next day they followed the Japanese-constructed road in a south-westerly direction until reaching the Torlu River, which they managed to cross after fortuitously finding a native canoe complete with paddles along the bank. They then followed the crocodile-infested Torlu down to its delta on the coast and spent the night there. Frustratingly they sighted two Beaufighters along the way but were unable to attract their attention.

The following day they tracked along the coast until at dusk they came to the deserted village of Kangilona. There they spent the night despite the presence of two recently-opened Japanese rice tins and a fire still burning. In the morning they found a large but dilapidated native canoe on the beach and came up with the plan of repairing the canoe and sneaking down the coast by night in the hope that they might somehow reach the allied base at Arawe. Some such option seemed their best hope at that stage. While Kangilona was a decent distance to the south of their crash site, it was still only a fraction of the distance they needed to cover to reach safety at the southern allied base. And, with no equipment to speak of, the

¹⁹ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

difficulty of crossing a succession of crocodile-infested rivers could only have seemed insurmountable.

Unfortunately the canoe option proved to be short-lived. Sgts Jones and Howard worked all day to plug up the borer holes in the canoe but when it was tried out it proved much too heavy for the four of them to paddle. Nor could the vessel really be made safe on the water without proper equipment that they did not possess. They therefore decided to stay another night in the village and then to continue southwards along the coast. This was despite the fact that F/O Liedl's and Sgt Jones's boots had almost worn through and, to make matters worse, F/O's Liedl and Ralfe were beginning to suffer from large infected sores due to the continuous bites from mosquitoes and sandflies and scratches from the swampy underbrush. Both had lost their main clothing when surprised by the Japanese and now only had shorts, short sleeve shirts and short socks.

The crew could have been forgiven for thinking that fortune had totally deserted them during the previous week. By any measure their situation could only have looked thoroughly desperate and their options bleak. Continuing to follow the coastline seemed the only possible route to safety, but it equally seemed only a matter of time before they walked around a bend and straight into the Japanese.

In the afternoon, however, four natives came down to the village from the mountains. The natives were amongst the original residents of Kangilona who periodically came down from a newly established village up in the mountains with the purpose of collecting food from their abandoned gardens. While the four natives did not say much they did at least offer taru, kau kau and sugar cane before they departed and this was gratefully accepted with a return offer of safety pins. This chance meeting with natives, who would also appear to have shared a mutual interest in avoiding the Japanese, was to be their first piece of good fortune since Sgt Jones had turned the height setting ring some two weeks before with such disastrous consequences.

At about eight o'clock that same evening two other natives from the same village appeared to warn them that the Japanese were at the village of Atu only four miles away and were returning to Kangilona the next day. The Luluai or chief of their village had sent them to guide the airmen to their village in the mountains. They set off early the next morning in a northeast direction and, after four hours of trekking along native trails and going some distance in a native canoe, they came to the new native village.

The friendly natives informed them about a white party located on the northern side of the island who received their food and supplies by aircraft. The natives agreed to take them to what the crew realised was part of the extensive Coastwatch Organisation which had been established in 1939 as part of Australian Naval Intelligence in remote Pacific locations to observe enemy movements and rescue stranded Allied personnel. The natives, though, warned that the trek across the island would take seven days and that they should rest in their village for three days and eat their food until they had the strength to make the journey. By this stage, the crew were generally not in a good way. The main problem was not so much the lack of nourishment as the tropical sores on their bodies which were becoming progressively worse. The worst affected was F/O Liedl. The sores on his right leg had progressed to 'extremely ugly' tropical ulcers and the leg was now inflamed up to the thigh.²⁰

²⁰ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

Despite F/O Liedl's condition, they set off after three days respite with 18 natives to guide and carry supplies. It soon became apparent, though, that their progress would be greatly slowed by F/O Liedl's state and the natives very sensibly suggested that the airmen write a note which could be taken ahead by a messenger to the Coastwatchers. They rested for the second day of their trek and then slowly made their way northwards through 'extremely difficult' mountain range country.²¹ The native messenger, much more at home in these conditions, hurried on and reached the Coastwatchers in two days.

At this stage there were five Coastwatcher groups active in New Britain.²² The group based near Viraulalu in the Nakanai Mountains on the northern coast was led by Lt Malcolm Wright and included Lt Les Williams, Capt Lou Searle and Sgt Jack Marsh. They had all been on station in New Britain since March 1943. They were a well armed and provisioned group and, as the importance of their purely coastwatching role had declined with the increasing isolation of Rabaul, they had organised their native supporters into what proved to be a risky but highly successful guerrilla campaign with the aim of denying the highland areas to the Japanese and disrupting their movement along the lowland routes.²³ The Coastwatcher groups relied very much for their survival on the active support of natives in their immediate operational area. This was brought home to all concerned on 24 October 1943 when a new group under Capt John Murphy was betrayed to the Japanese by hostile natives with all members either killed or captured.²⁴

Malcolm Wright and his colleagues despatched a party of their native supporters who reached the four airmen within another two days and brought with them European food, clothing, medical supplies as well as a 'cook boy' and a 'doctor boy'.²⁵ They also brought a note telling the airmen to go to the village of Ti – more or less in the centre of New Britain – where they would be met by Lou Searle. The note also warned that there was a Japanese patrol in the area.

As they again proceeded northwards the party grew conspicuously as the number of natives keen to help them reach the Coastwatchers grew from 18 to some 85. After six days of slow travel, Lou Searle met them at Ti but unfortunately they were again forced to stop and rest due to F/O Liedl's poor condition and to the fact that Lt Searle had also contracted either a fever or jaundice.²⁶ Indeed their situation was such that the Coastwatchers organised an emergency drop of food and boots and these were duly dropped for them by an RAAF Boston bomber.²⁷ Eventually F/O Ralfe and Sgts Howard and Jones went on ahead and finally reached the northern based Coastwatcher party on 4 or 5 March – almost a month after the disaster. F/O Liedl and Lt Searle arrived a week later. For the first time in almost a month the four airmen could consider themselves to be basically safe, if not exactly in a place of safety.

As Malcolm Wright and his colleagues were due to be relieved in early April owing to the

²¹ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

²² Patrick Lindsay, *The Coastwatchers*, William Heinemann, Sydney, 2010, p.321.

²³ M. Wright, *If I Die: Coastwatching and Guerilla Warfare Behind Japanese Lines*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1965, pp.132 ff. The map at the end of the article is taken from this very interesting book. It has not been possible to trace copyright ownership in this map but copyright is acknowledged.

²⁴ Lindsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-6; Wright, *op. cit.*, p.116.

²⁵ NAA: A1196, 37/501/402, Report submitted by Crew of Catalina A/C - No.11 Squadron.

²⁶ Wright, *op. cit.*, pp.167-8.

²⁷ The soft leather flying boots may have been suitable for flying but were totally inadequate for trekking through jungle and had become a major problem for the airmen.

length of time they had been in the field, the four airmen stayed with the Coastwatcher group for about five weeks. On the evening of 7 April the entire group was sent off in style as their native supporters put on their war paint, took up their drums and performed a huge sing-sing and ceremonial dance to celebrate their victories over the Japanese. In the early evening of 8 April the group made their way down to a rendezvous point on the coast. Signal lights were exchanged and two US PT boats towing a small landing craft brought a replacement party for the Coastwatchers and also evacuated the four Catalina airmen.²⁸ An overnight trip took a relieved and very fortunate group of airmen to Finschhafen on the northern coast of New Guinea before being evacuated by air to Townsville.²⁹ Their two-month nightmare was over.

The fate of the remaining six crew members, however, was unclear and only gradually became known over the next two years. Their misfortune, though, does highlight how precarious the situation had been for their colleagues who had evaded capture and how incredibly fortunate they were to survive and escape from the jungles of New Britain. The first indication of the fate of the remaining crewmen came in May 1942 from a 'field intelligence party' (presumably a Coastwatcher party) operating in New Britain which reported that the other six airmen had been captured by the Japanese with the assistance of local Tatongpal natives who had also assaulted them.³⁰

The next indication came in late November 1944 with the receipt of a cable via the Prisoner of War Information Bureau from the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva. The cable listed F/Lt Brian Stacy from 11 Squadron as a POW in Japan and as having been transferred to the Zentsuji Camp. A very brief prisoner letter card from F/Lt Stacy was received at much the same time although dated September 1944. It included the key words, 'Please advise Squadron last saw Todd and crew at Rabaul last February.'³¹ The information was conveyed up the RAAF chain and next of kin were advised in February 1945 of what on the face of it was promising information.³²

Further information became available via the Australian Military Forces in May 1945. Following the landing of the Australian 11th Division at Jacquinot Bay in November 1944 and the confining of the Japanese to the Gazelle Peninsula around Rabaul, Australian personnel were able to take statements from Tatongpal natives involved in the capture of the six airmen. These statements largely confirmed the 'field intelligence party' report from the previous May: the six mission airmen had all been captured with the assistance of the Tatongpal natives and, at the behest of the Japanese, they had slapped the airmen across the face. The natives thought the airmen had then been taken to Rabaul.³³

The end of the Pacific was a time of relief and celebration for most people but for families with members who were 'missing in action' it was a time of high anxiety and strain as they slowly learnt the fate of their loved ones. In the case of Catalina A24-34 the only missing crew member to return to Australia was F/Lt Stacy, who arrived home from Zentsuji Camp on the British Escort Carrier HMS *Ruler* on 24 September 1945.³⁴ F/Lt Stacy did not record

²⁸ Wright, *op.cit.*, pp.185-89.

²⁹ Australian War Memorial, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war of 1939-45, S00959, Transcription of Oral History Recording with Captain Henry Leslie 'Les' Williams.

³⁰ NAA: A705, 166/28/241, Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section.

³¹ NAA: A705, 166/38/834, Flight Lieutenant Stacy, B.P. – Casualty Section.

³² NAA: A705, 166/28/241, Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section.

³³ NAA: A705, 166/28/241, Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section.

³⁴ NAA: A705, 166/38/834, Flight Lieutenant Stacy, B.P. – Casualty Section.

his story until the late 1990s but, as he readily conceded, his survival owed itself to fate alone. After fleeing into the bush clad in only shorts and a bush shirt and no boots, he realised by the next day that he would need the assistance of friendly natives if he was to survive. Tired and exhausted, he therefore chanced the next village he came to but unfortunately this proved to be the Tatongpal village from which the Japanese were organising the search for the downed airmen. He soon woke to the sight of an angry Japanese soldier pointing a rifle and bayonet at him.³⁵

About an hour or so later a Japanese patrol brought in Sq/L Todd and his colleagues, Sgts Woolley, Kraehe and Murphy. After a two-day forced march and a trip by barge, they found themselves confined for interrogation in the first-floor jail cells of the 6th Kempei Tai Headquarters in Rabaul. Shortly thereafter Stacy was told by the Japanese that they wanted a ‘captain’ from the flight and that he would be leaving immediately for Japan. The apparent reason was that the Japanese had captured a high-profile US airforce ace in the Guadalcanal conflict, Major Greg Boyington, and were making up numbers to send a flight of captured enemy air officers to Japan for propaganda purposes. The obvious officer to choose from A24-34 was Sq/L Todd but the Kempei Tai had yet to finish their interrogation. Stacy felt ‘desolated’ by this turn of fate on the basis that Rabaul would soon fall to Allied forces and their captivity would not be long.³⁶

Stacy soon found himself tied in a group of six prisoners (four US airmen and two RAAF officers) and bundled into the back of a ‘Betty’ bomber on the way to the major Japanese base at Truk. The journey almost finished at Truk because as soon as the ‘Betty’ landed they were all bundled into slit trenches as carrier aircraft from Admiral Halsey’s Third Fleet devastated the base with repeated raids on 16 and 17 February.³⁷ Two weeks later, after obtaining a new aircraft, the flight continued via Saipan to Japan where he ultimately was transferred to Zentsuji POW Camp. Despite strict discipline, a severe winter and little food, Zentsuji was close to a model camp by Japanese standards and was even open to Red Cross inspection.

When Australian forces reoccupied Rabaul on 10 September they found a mere seven allied POWs alive at what was called Tunnel Hill POW Camp near Rabaul instead of the 70 or so who were believed to have been captured by the Japanese. One of the surviving prisoners was the captured Australian Coastwatcher Capt Murphy who, as noted above, had been betrayed by hostile natives. He was able to inform Australian authorities that by February 1944 some 69 prisoners of war (mostly US flyers) had been held for interrogation in crowded and unsanitary cells at the Kempei Tai Headquarters in Rabaul. Food consisted of about a coffee cup of poor grade white rice three times a day with the occasional addition of wormy dried fish. There was no water for washing or shaving.³⁸

At this stage Rabaul was being heavily bombed twice a day. The POWs were left in their cells while the Kempei Tai took to their air raid shelters. On 2 March 1944 the Kempei Tai moved their headquarters out of Rabaul to a series of prepared caves at a mountain pass called Tunnel Hill which was about two miles from Rabaul on the road to Tanoura Beach.³⁹

³⁵ Brian Stacy, ‘Favoured by Fate,’ in C. Gaunt & R. Cleworth (eds.), *op.cit.*, p.172.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.172.

³⁷ Office of Air Force History, 1943_MISC_11SQN, Record of Operations of 11 and 20 Squadrons (Catalinas) from the beginning of 1941 to the end of June 1944 as compiled by F/Lt. Tom Graham (Intelligence Officer).

³⁸ NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6, War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

³⁹ The Kempei Tai Headquarters in Rabaul was destroyed by Allied bombing within days of the move.

They also moved their prisoners with the intention of establishing a POW Camp at the site.

In his affidavit, Murphy stated that all POWs were moved to Tunnel Hill on 2 March and initially they were jammed into a small cave approximately 30ft x 7ft x 5ft, and the entrance to this cave was largely closed with heavy boards. The POWs were kept under these inhumane conditions for approximately two days without food or water. In the early hours of the second day at about 0300 the Kempei Tai took some 21 POWs out of the cave, blindfolded them and tied them together and took them away. At about the same time the following morning, a further 19 POWs were taken away in the same manner. Among the POWs removed were four members of A24-34's crew: F/O Pocknee and Sgts Murphy, Woolley and Kraehe. Only Sq/L Todd remained at Tunnel Hill and he, along with the other remaining POWs, was soon put to work building what became known as the Tunnel Hill POW Camp.⁴⁰

In time a further six US airmen and two New Zealand airmen were added to the remaining POWs at Tunnel Hill POW Camp. However, sixteen POWs died at the camp before war's end from beri beri, dysentery and malaria but the real reason, according to Murphy, was 'chiefly neglect'.⁴¹ Unfortunately Sq/L Todd was one of the casualties and Murphy records that he died of what appeared to be 'catarrh of the kidneys' on 12 August 1944.⁴² Sq/L Todd was buried adjacent to the Tunnel Hill POW Camp and his grave site, and those of other POWs who died at the camp, was found by Australian forces when they reoccupied the Rabaul area from 10 September 1945.⁴³ Bizarrely, given the circumstances, the Japanese had made an effort to restore the graves before the arrival of Australian forces by the placement of a wooden cross and flowers at each grave. Todd's remains were exhumed and are now interred at the Rabaul War Cemetery.

The POWs who remained at Tunnel Hill were of course very concerned to learn the fate of the 40 POWs who had been removed in the early morning from their packed cave. Eventually the permanent guards at the camp informed them that the missing POWs had been killed on 5 March 1944 in a US bombing raid as they waited in the morning at Tanoura Beach for a transfer to nearby Waton Island for their own protection. Their remains, the Japanese explained, had been cremated and stored in a wooden box. Most of the dead POWs were captured US airmen but Murphy informed authorities that this number also included the remaining crewmen from A24-34.

Australian military authorities directed the Japanese to hand over the ashes of the cremated airmen and during December 1945 the Japanese handed over three small wooden boxes for the three POWs who the Japanese said could be identified, and a large wooden box for the remainder.⁴⁴ The ashes were divided between US and Australian War Grave officials and the remains of F/O Pocknee and Sgts Kraehe, Murphy and Woolley now reside in Rabaul Cemetery as part of a joint burial.

In March 1946 the formal process of Presumption of Death was made for the missing airmen:

⁴⁰ NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6, War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

⁴¹ NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6, War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

⁴² NAA: A705, 166/40/141, Squadron Leader Todd, J.E – Casualty Section. The RAAF Searcher Party that operated in the New Britain area under Sq/L Rundle gave the date of death as 22 July and the cause of death as dyspepsia. The information was based on Japanese records maintained by the Japanese Provost Corp at Toma.

⁴³ A photo of John Todd's grave at the Tunnel Hill POW Camp is at <http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/096512>.

⁴⁴ NAA: A705, 166/28/241, Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section.

Frank Pocknee, Henry Murphy, Fred Woolley and Ernest Kraehe were all ‘officially presumed to have lost their lives on 5th March, 1944’ as the result ‘of an Allied bombing raid on Talili’, and John Todd was recorded as having died while a POW.⁴⁵ Next of kin were also advised to this effect.⁴⁶ In the Official History published in 1957, it is recorded that Todd ‘died of illness while a prisoner, and the Japanese said that the four remaining members of the crew were killed in an Allied bombing attack while imprisoned at Talili.’⁴⁷ In the immediate post-war period, though, Australian and US military authorities strongly suspected that the Japanese account of death by bombing was an elaborate and convenient fabrication to cover up the fact that the missing airmen had been deliberately murdered.⁴⁸

In the months that followed, the commanding Japanese officers at Rabaul and members of the Kempei Tai were exhaustively interrogated by Australian war crime personnel but all stuck to basically the same story. The core Japanese story was that the decision was made to remove some of the prisoners to nearby Waton Island where they would be safer from the relentless Allied bombing. On the morning of 5 March, as the prisoners waited at Tanoura Beach for transfer by boat, another bombing raid commenced over Rabaul and the POWs were rushed to an air raid shelter prepared at the beach (a pit covered by coconut logs and earth) while the Japanese guards entered an adjacent air raid shelter about 25 metres away. According to the Japanese, the POW shelter received direct hits at both ends from bombs and, by their count, 26 of the 31 POWs in the shelter were killed outright and the five survivors died over the next 24 hours. The remains of the 31 POWs were then cremated at Tanoura Beach by the Kempei Tai. According to the Japanese, only three POWs could be individually recognised and their ashes were placed in separate small boxes and the ashes of the remainder were placed in a large box. The remains were kept at Toma and ultimately handed over to Australian authorities.⁴⁹ From the beginning Australian interrogators strongly doubted the Japanese version of events. Besides the fact that only seven POWs survived out of the approximately 77 who fell into the hands of the 6th Field Kempei Tai at Rabaul, there were evident problems with the story.

Australian war crime investigators did not believe the Japanese casualty count and believed that their version was intended to conceal the fact that probably nine of the POWs who were removed from the cave were already on the verge of death and probably died before reaching Tanoura Beach. It also seemed improbable that all the POWs died in the bombing, or shortly thereafter, while all the guards ‘miraculously escaped unharmed’.⁵⁰ The commanding Japanese officers on Waton Island were also thoroughly interrogated and none had any knowledge of an impending transfer of POWs to their area of responsibility. Investigators were also suspicious of the method of removing the POWs. Why were they blindfolded as well as bound together? They were also deeply suspicious that the remains of the POWs had been cremated rather than buried as was normal Japanese practice for dead POWs. Cremation would, of course, destroy the evidence of an atrocity.

The war crime investigators believed that it was highly likely that the commanding Japanese

⁴⁵ NAA: A705, 166/1/319/Part 2, Presumption of Death Casualties in RAAF Units.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, NAA: A705, 166/28/241 Flight Sergeant Murphy, H.L. – Casualty Section; and NAA: A705, 166/40/141, Squadron Leader Todd, J.E – Casualty Section.

⁴⁷ G. Odgers, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Series Three, Air War Against Japan 1943-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, pp.131-32.

⁴⁸ The documents relating to the investigation are at NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6 – War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

⁴⁹ NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6 – War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

⁵⁰ NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6 – War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

officers at Rabaul had conspired to murder the captured US, Australian and NZ airmen, either to relieve a problem with overcrowding at the Kempei Tai headquarters or as an act of revenge for the recent bombing of a Japanese military hospital at Rabaul. Australian war criminal investigators interrogated and re-interrogated the principal Kempei Tai suspects in the immediate years following the end of the war. It proved difficult, however, to pick this version of events apart and the lack of any other witnesses to what happened (local natives were interviewed without success) did not assist. Australian interrogators continued the trail well into 1948 and 1949 and any Japanese who could be in any way connected with what happened were interviewed at least once even after they had been repatriated back to Japan. During 1948 and 1949 some of the principal suspects were even put through polygraph tests with results that supported the suspicions of the investigators.

In the end, however, investigators seemed unable to break the Japanese version in the way that they had been able to do with the Japanese massacre of civilian internees at Kavieng in nearby New Ireland.⁵¹ With a discernible note of frustration, one of the principal Australian investigating officers, Capt J.G. Godwin, wrote in Tokyo in June 1949, after yet another re-interview, that he had reached the following two conclusions: 'that the story as given is the truth to the best of their respective memories; or, that the story in question is the most perfectly rehearsed fabrication yet encountered in the investigation of war crimes by this Section.'⁵² Ultimately, then, the fate of F/O Pocknee and Sgts Kraehe, Murphy and Wooley must remain uncertain – but it does seem most likely that the Official History has passed over an end that is more awful and tragic than has been realised.

Eventually time worked against the war crimes investigators. As the 1940s drew to a close there was a general move from the supreme Allied council, the Far Eastern Commission, to bring the war crime trials arising from the Pacific conflict to a close. At its first meeting on 20 December 1949, the newly elected Menzies Government approved a final round of war crime trials at Manus Island involving 21 cases and 91 suspects.⁵³ The remaining war crime investigations were brought to a close.⁵⁴

While the fate of A24-34's crew was both traumatic and sad, the surprising aspect is that five of the crew of ten did manage to survive – although only just. The four crewmen who managed to evade capture primarily owed their salvation to a mix of chance and planning. Chance played an important part because after a succession of near disasters, and when their position was beginning to look increasingly hopeless, they had the good fortune to meet natives who were prepared to risk Japanese vengeance to actively assist them. Pre-war planning, though, also played an important part because one of the key roles of the Coastwatcher network was to assist downed airmen in a very hostile environment – and ultimately the Coastwatcher network in New Britain was responsible for rescuing some 30 allied airmen.⁵⁵ Their survival, though, may also have owed something to a sergeant in the Volunteer Defence Corps in Cairns who, the day before their ill-fated mission, gave them a quick lesson in recognising jungle foods. It imparted sufficient knowledge to keep them alive for the many days they were without European food. F/Lt Stacy's survival owed itself to the fact that there was a spare spot on a flight of 'trophy' prisoners being flown to Japan for

⁵¹ Lindsay, *op.cit.*, pp.371-9; Raden Dunbar, *The Kavieng Massacre: A War Crime Revealed*, Sally Milner Publishing, Binda NSW, 2007.

⁵² NAA: MP742/1, 336/1/1955 Part 6 – War Crimes – Tunnel Hill Road POW Camp.

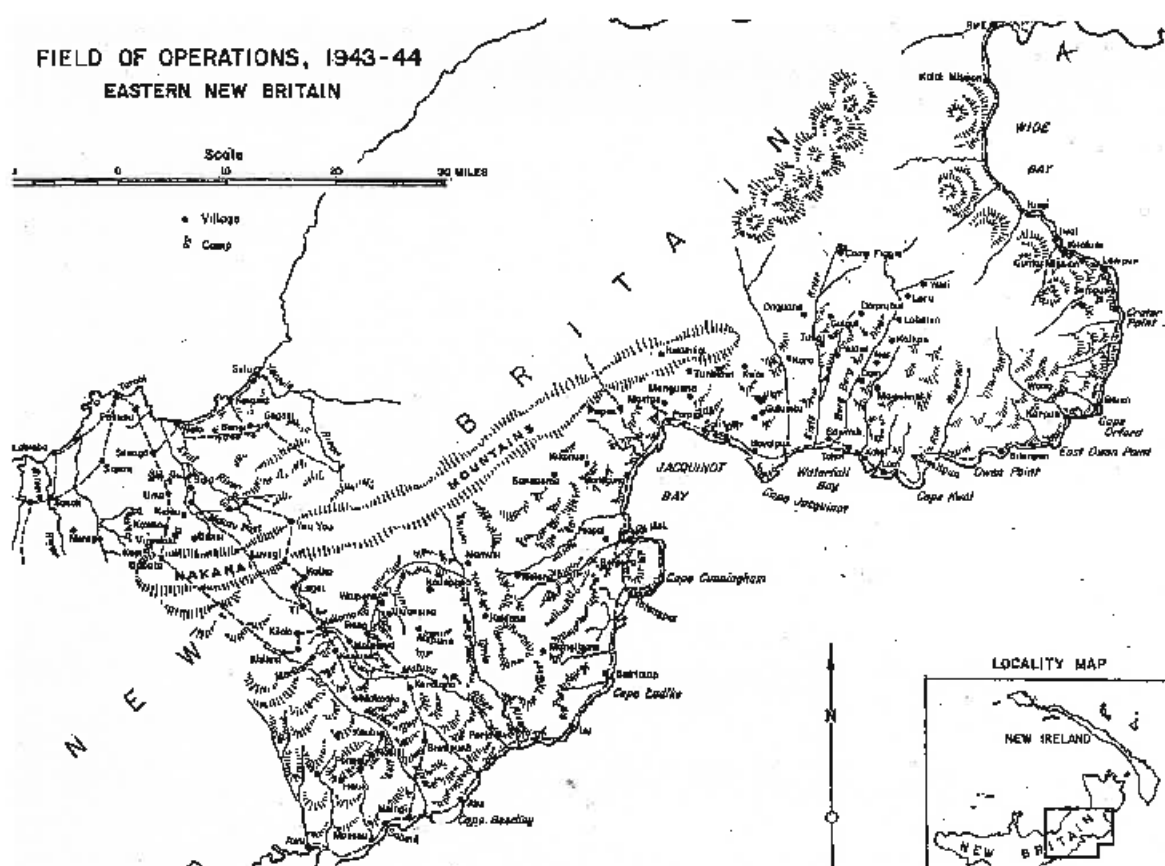
⁵³ D.C.S. Sissons, *The Australian War Crimes Trials and Investigations*, p.21.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, pp.18-21.

⁵⁵ Lindsay, *op.cit.*, p.350.

propaganda purposes and, as Stacy himself put it, it was pure fate that saw him on the flight rather than his skipper Jack Todd.

The fate of the five crewmen from A24-34 who did not return is depressingly consistent with the Japanese treatment of downed airmen and, given that only some 10 per cent of captured airmen survived internment at Tunnel Hill POW Camp, this may be one of the worst but least-known instances of Japanese mistreatment of prisoners of war in the Southwest Pacific Theatre. The captured crewmen from A24-34 may also have had the misfortune to be captured at a time when the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul had been effectively knocked out of the war by relentless Allied air attack. The Japanese command at Rabaul, it would seem, had little compunction in taking out their failure in the air on any downed airmen who fell into their hands.



Map taken from
M. Wright, *If I Die: Coastwatching and Guerilla Warfare Behind Japanese Lines*,
Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1965

REMEMBERING FORGOTTEN ‘SPECIAL DUTIES’ SQUADRONS

RAAF and RAF Airmen and Airwomen of No 138 (SD) Sqn & No 161 (SD) Sqn RAF

John Williamson AM (Wing Cdr RAAF [Ret.])

Such was the secrecy surrounding the Operations of these ‘Special Duties’ (SD) RAF Squadrons, based at the secret airfield, RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire during WWII, that not even the remainder of Bomber Command knew of their existence. Their role was to deliver trained Agents (known as ‘Joes’) and supplies, usually by parachute, to the waiting Resistance Forces in enemy occupied Europe, and beyond.

To do this these élite crews, flying frequently in four-engined heavy bombers, only on moonlight nights and at terrifyingly low altitude to avoid German radar, had to navigate to tiny awaiting ‘Drop Zones’ (DZ), lit only by hand-held torches or small lanterns. The success of these clandestine operations was dependent entirely upon iron-clad secrecy – which sadly was penetrated by German intelligence on many occasions. Many of these crews and Joes paid the supreme sacrifice, including some 36 RAAF airmen. The price post-war of this secrecy (never broken by the airmen or airwomen themselves) was complete neglect of the service, sacrifices and the contribution to the war effort of these multinational air crews and personnel by Commonwealth military history records, until relatively recently.

ATVARA: The Inaugural Australian SD Tempsford Squadrons Commemoration

On ‘Bastille Day’, 14 July 2012, at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance, the first Australian steps to correct this military historical injustice towards especially the RAAF and Australian RAF SD Airmen and Airwomen of RAF Tempsford were begun. Following prior establishment of contact with some 35 families Australia-wide (one in the USA) over the preceding 2 years – many of whom were still grieving – this wonderful and deeply moving Ceremony was held in the Shrine Sanctuary. Some 60 persons from almost all States attended, including two actual surviving RAAF veterans of No 138 (SD) Sqn.; both these wonderful airmen (Figure 1) addressed the Gathering.

Official wreaths were laid by a serving RAAF Wing Commander, then by representatives of the RAAFA Victorian Branch, the RAFA Melbourne Group and finally, respectively by six families of lost RAAF Airmen relatives of either No 138 (SD) Sqn or No 161 (SD) Sqn (Figure 2). During the planning months for this occasion strong support was received from the well established UK equivalent organisation, Tempsford Veterans and Relatives Association (TVARA). Our Australian Branch is now known as ATVARA.

Following the Ceremony a splendid informal gathering happened in a nearby cafe, where great new and renewed friendships were made. Arrangements are now firm for an annual ATVARA Ceremony each 14 July henceforth, at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. Meantime arrangements are proceeding for the creation of a special large SD Squadrons flag for official use at the Shrine, and hopefully for the laying of a small memorial plaque within the Shrine Air Force Reserve.



Figure 1: W/O Fred Bowman RAAF (third left) and FltLt Lloyd Trotter RAAF (fourth right) each formerly of No 138 (SD) Squadron, with RAAF, RAAFA (Victoria) & and RAFA (Melbourne) Executive Members



Figure 2: The Shrine Honour Guard in full Australian Light Horse uniforms, presenting arms during the Wreath Laying Ceremonies within the Shrine Sanctuary

FINDING GRANDFATHER

Michael Firth¹

Growing up in a small country town, my earliest memories of Anzac Day services are about being there with my family, wreaths being laid and the activities afterwards, and running around with other children, involved in games and other activities. We played at soldiers, trying to relive the battles we had been told about, being the heroes and winning medals. At this very young age I and the other children tended to believe that heroes were brave, the more medals the braver the person. As the adults marched up the main street, we saw the rows of medals on their chests, including the medals on my father's chest. It was later I learnt that the medals belonged to my grandfather who had served in the army during World War 1 while my father served in World War 2 with the RAAF. Later I learnt about the many types of medals including the existence of campaign medals.

My grandfather's medal group included

- Queens South Africa medal with bars South Africa 1901, Transvaal, Orange Free State, Cape Colony, inscribed '43, Cpl J W Firth, New South Wales Lcrs'
- Kings South Africa medal with bars South Africa 1901, South Africa 1902, inscribed '43, Cpl J W Firth, New South Wales Lcrs'
- 1914-15 Star, inscribed '985, Pte J W Firth, 11/Bn AIF'
- Victory Medal, inscribed '985, Dvr J W Firth, 11/Bn AIF'
- War Medal, inscribed '985, Dvr J W Firth, 11/Bn AIF'

Over the course of many years and from a range of resources including the family bible, unpublished letters/manuscripts, his service record and the Dept of Veteran Affairs file, I have found information on my grandfather with the search still continuing. His name was John William Firth, born on 5 August 1879 in Leeds, United Kingdom, to John and Charlotte Firth. His father was born in North Inverness, Scotland and Charlotte's maiden was Rushworth.² There had been an older brother who had died within five months being born. While still in Yorkshire, two more children were born but both died before they reached 12 month old. It was about this time John's family decided to immigrate to Australia.

Right: JW Firth standing in front of the war memorial, Balingup WA, taken in 1957

The small family left the United Kingdom late in 1883 on the liner 'Abergeldie', arriving in Sydney on 3 February 1884.³ At the time of arrival, John (24 yrs), Charlotte (29 yrs) and John William (5yrs), were listed



¹ Michael Firth is a member of the WA branch of the MHSA with a strong interest in military vehicles and Australian military history. He works as a volunteer at the Army Museum of WA and is currently working on a manuscript about the history of the Australian 8th Division.

² Firth Family Bible containing a list of birth, deaths and marriages from 1808 to 1890.

³ NSW Immigration list, microfilm # 2142.

as being able read and write, with John's father classed as a labourer. They settled in the Grandville area of Sydney where the following children Herbert, Walter and Lottie were born. John wrote, later in his life, that he attended Kings College.⁴ On contacting the historian at Kings College, no record of attendance could be found for John between the years of 1884 and 1892, the years when he would have been of age to attend school. It was pointed out the lists used were compiled from the Annual Prize lists for the period so it was possible John had attended the school but had been awarded no prizes.

While living in Sydney, John joined the newly formed Parramatta half-squadron, New South Wales Lancers in October 1893, service number 43, and during his service he was selected to attend the six-month cavalry training held in England in 1899. The contingent left in March 1899 and on its way back from England, it arrived in Cape Town, on 14 October 1899. According to John, he served with the Lancers and other units in the Boer War until being discharged in September 1902 with the rank of Roughrider Corporal.⁵ After writing to the NSW Lancers Memorial Museum, I was advised that there is no record of John serving with the Lancers or appearing on the Boer War roll.

The NSW Lancers had formed a squadron at Parramatta by 1893 which became 'K' Troop with a Parramatta cadet half-squadron formed during the same year.⁶ As John William was 14 years old in 1893, he could have been a member of the cadet unit and become a senior cadet member at the time of the contingent leaving for England in 1899. The contingent sailed from Sydney on the SS *Nineveh* at the start of March 1899, arriving in England late April. After the training had been completed, the contingent boarded the *Nineveh* on 10 October 1899, arriving in Cape Town on 2 November 1899. The contingent comprised 100 members of the Lancers and returned to Sydney in December 1900. Some members returned with other units or stayed in South Africa to fight with other units which had formed there.

When John's Boer War medals were remounted a few years ago, comments were made about the engraving on his medals. The engraving appears to have been done privately after the medals were issued. One possibility for this could be John may have served with British or other Imperial units and the medals issued were not engraved at the time. The time period gives John approximately nine years' service with the Lancers, with the last three years fighting in South Africa, all of which cannot be confirmed.

After his return from South Africa, John settled in the south west of Western Australia and had joined the Bridgetown Rifle Club during 1903.⁷ He continued his military service by joining the local troop of the 18th Light Horse (18 LH) within five years of his arrival in the state. The 18 LH was formed from the Western Australian Mounted Infantry (WAMI), being gazetted in 1903. The 18 LH remained until it was re-gazetted as the 25th Light Horse (25 LH) in 1912, which in turn was re-gazetted the 10th Light Horse (10 LH) in 1914.⁸

While working in the local Balingup-Greenbushes area, he would ride with others to attend

⁴ Unpublished document written by John William Firth.

⁵ Unpublished document written by John William Firth and unpublished application letter, 4 Jan 1936, requesting a Returned Soldiers Pension.

⁶ P.V. Vernon (1986), *The Royal New South Wales Lancers 1885-1895*, Royal New South Lancers Centenary Committee, Parramatta.

⁷ Unpublished application letter, 4 Jan 1936, requesting a Returned Soldiers Pension.

⁸ R.J.G. Hall (1968), *The Australian Light Horse*, W.D. Joynt, Blackburn.

parade in Bridgetown; the unit was eventually under the command of Col Noel Brazier.⁹ During his service with the light horse, John rose to the rank of sergeant while the unit was still called the 18 LH and maintained this rank until he was called up for service in World War One. As a sergeant with the light horse, he underwent field engineering courses and attended light horse camps. Towards the end of this period he had attended light horse camps at Karrakatta (1911), Northam (1911), Rockingham (1912), Guildford (1912) and Guildford (Field Engineering Camp 1913) as well as troop camps in the local Balingup-Greenbushes area.¹⁰ At the end of this period John was listed as a sergeant with the 25 LH. After World War One and his return to the citizen forces, Sergeant John William Firth, 10 LH, service number 285, was finally discharged at his own request on 31 July 1920 after 11 years and four months of service.¹¹



Left: Sgt JW Firth, 18th Light Horse in dress uniform taken between 1910 and 1912

During August and September 1914, John received a series of telegrams and letters regarding his volunteering for the ‘overseas expeditionary forces’. The first was sent on 11 August 1914 requesting him to report to the drill hall in Bunbury for a medical examination on the 15 August. The next was a telegram, 20 August 1914, requesting him to take the next goods or passenger train to be in camp the next day. The final letter was dated 17 September 1914 from the adjutant of the 25 LH requesting the confirmation of the return of his arms, saddlery and equipment issued while on service. On the 22 August 1914, at 35 yrs old, John William Firth, service number 985, enlisted in 11th Battalion, 3rd Infantry Brigade, AIF.¹²

After enlisting, John eventually reached Blackboy Hill for his initial training which lasted until 31 October 1914, when the camp was roused at 4.00am for the movement of the 11th Battalion to Fremantle Port to embark on the SS *Ascanius*.¹³ The battalion travelled with full kit and Pte Firth was part of the Machine Gun Section. The first exciting news came on Monday 8 November with the sound of firing south of the convoy which was the battle between the *Emden* and the HMAS *Sydney* off Cocos Island. After several reports, the news of the naval battle was finally confirmed at 11.45am. The next change in the ship’s routine occurred after the convoy had left Colombo, when the transport received a couple of bumps at about 4.00am on the morning 20 November, causing all troops to be parade on deck. John noted that several officers had drawn their revolvers, holding them in trembling hands. He thought it was

⁹ A.C. Frost (1979), *Baylya-Balinga: A history of Balingup WA*, Donnybrook-Balingup Shire Council, Donnybrook.

¹⁰ Unpublished documents of John William Firth including camp syllabus, examination questions and training reports.

¹¹ Citizen Forces, Certificate of Discharge number 255, stamped 12-3-1921.

¹² John William Firth, 985, AIF service record

¹³ Unpublished Diary of John William Firth from 31 October 1914 to 28 November 1915.

disgraceful as it appeared that some of the officers were not fit to carry arms. It was later found the transport had been hit by another transport, the *Shropshire*, causing some damage and removing one of the life boats. The transport docked in Alexandria at 4.00pm on Sunday 6 December after a church parade had been held on its decks that morning.

The next day he arrived at the camp at the base of the pyramids but had to wait till the end of the week before the troops received their tents. Meanwhile they slept under the stars, getting occasionally wet at night and spending a lot of time carrying stones to form boundary lines in the camp. John's life in the camp was mainly centred on looking after the section's horses, different types of mounted drills, occasionally going into Cairo and visiting the local sights. An important entry in the diary occurs during January 1915 and relates to the well-known picture of the 11th Battalion on the Cheops Pyramid. The entry is as follows:

Sund 10th Stables 15-7 (6.45) till 8, breakfast, stables 9am, church parade 9.30 till 10.30. Battalion marched to Cheops Pyramid where we were distributed on the north side and the photos taken of Batt. Marched back 12 noon. Dinner, Stew and Plum Pudding presented by London Daily News. Visited by Egyptian Boy Scouts with band.

It was about this time he was involved in an accident with the horses pulling the wagons for the machine gun sections. His diary relates an incident where he is knocked down by the bolting horses but other sources give a different picture. Others report the incident occurring on a battalion route march and when the march passed a string of camels, the horses on his wagon were spooked and only being stopped by running the team into a mound of rubbish. Both of John's legs had been crushed or heavily bruised during the incident, leaving him very shaken.¹⁴

On 28 February 1915, striking their tents, the battalion moved to Alexandria and the next day boarded the SS *Suffolk*, arriving in Mudros harbour, Lemnos, on 4 March 1915. Regrettably John spent the whole trip in the hospital on the *Suffolk* with a case of suspected pneumonia, on top of the bout of influenza which he had suffered a few weeks earlier. From his position on the ship he could see the transports and warship arriving in the harbour. By 12 March he had been discharged from hospital, had landed on Lemnos and was carrying out light duties. There was obviously something in the air as John noted 70 to 80 ships loaded with troops in Mudros harbour on 7 April and that several officers left to view the Dardanelles a week later.

There had been several trial embarkation/disembarkation drills in full kit and on the 23 April the troops are given three days' rations. He mentions his section boarded the destroyer HMS *Usk* about 2.00am on the morning of the 25 April and was anchored off Imbros at 3.00pm on the same day. From his diary it seems John remained on Imbros viewing the bombardments and picking up news on what was happening on the Gallipoli peninsula, but in his DVA file there is a statement indicating he landed but contracted dysentery.¹⁵ He reported several aerial attacks on the ships at anchor off the peninsula. On 13 May he left Imbros, returning to Lemnos and finally arriving back in Alexandria on 18 May. From here he was transferred to Mex Camp and carried out his duties in the stable lines with the occasional visit to Alexandria and the hospitals to visit wounded friends.

Part of his duties was to swim the horses on a beach next to the camp but on 6 July he noted several bodies of men washed up on the shore line. More bodies washed up the next day as

¹⁴ Unpublished letter from J.J. White (late 506, S.Sgt. 11th Bn) dated 25-4-38.

¹⁵ Department of Veteran Affairs file on John William Firth.

well as bodies of horses and some wreckage. It all appears to have come from a transport carrying wounded from the Dardanelles which was torpedoed near the harbour the week before. During the first week of November, John's unit was relocated from Mex camp to a camp near Cairo. During his time in Mex Camp, John was given the rank of Driver with the Transport Details 11th Bn. By 18 March 1916 John had been transferred to the 3rd Machine Gun Company at Serapeum Camp and a short time later he boarded the *Maryland* at Alexandria bound for France and arriving in Marseilles on 2 April. Regrettably he now suffered another bout of influenza which hospitalised him for the next month, and it was not until the start of May before he was able to rejoin his unit; because of his sickness he had reverted to the rank of private.

During the next 15 months John served with his unit but during the remainder of 1916 he suffered a reaction to his TB shot, was gassed at Fleurbaix and suffered trench feet during the winter of 1916/17. During 1917 he suffered a loss of hearing during the bombardment prior to the attack on Polygon Wood and a broken knee on Menin Road near Ypres. During July 1917 at Bullecourt he was placed on 14 days' light duty for breaking down under the strain of active service. The only time away from the front during this period was from 19 to 31 August when he was on leave in England. On John's service record, his next of kin was listed as Miss Ann Rushworth, Long Marston near York. Ann was John's aunt and sister of his mother Charlotte, so he may have visited her while on leave.



At the start of April 1918 his unit was made part of the 1st Machine Gun Battalion and three months later John was reinstated to the rank of Driver. He was granted another period of leave in England from 17 September to 2 October 1918. After returning from leave he was listed as part of the Special 1914 Leave group on 13 October 1918 and embarked for Australia on 23 October 1918 aboard *Port Lyttleton*, arriving back in Western Australia on 13 December 1918. A medical examination was carried out by the 8th Australian General Hospital, Fremantle, where he was passed fit for discharge. He was discharged on 17 February 1919 after 4 years and 161 days service in the AIF of which 4 years and 43 days were served abroad.¹⁶

Left: Driver JW Firth, 11th Battalion AIF, taken while on leave in either 1917 or 1918

John moved back to Balingup and began working in the district while still corresponding with his Aunt Ann in England. During this period John had either met in England or had been put into correspondence with Ellen Holmes. Due to her letters constantly urging him, John asked Ellen to marry him in 1920. This was just twelve months after Ellen's previous husband had died. Ellen Holmes (nee Fowler) was born on 12 September 1883, Hutton Wandsley, York and married Frank William Holmes, registered in York by June 1905. The marriage produced two children before Frank died on 18 February 1919: Helen Doreen Holmes born 14 December 1905 and Marion Goldman Holmes born 29 November 1909, both births registered in the York district.¹⁷

¹⁶ Certificate of Discharge for 985 Dvr John William Firth.

¹⁷ Unpublished handwritten page by Ellen Holmes.

On asking Ellen to marry him, John advised her it would take at least two years for him to build a home for them and to have enough money to keep the family.¹⁸ Ellen kept writing to John asking him to send for them, stating that she would be a good wife to him, help him on the farm and promised to bear him at least two sons. After finally agreeing to her demands, he let her arrange her own transport to Australia on the *Osterley*. Ellen and her daughters left England on 15 October 1921, arriving in Fremantle on 17 November.¹⁹ Ellen and her daughters stayed with a local family, the Daniels, while John and few friends worked on the house to make it habitable for new arrivals.

John and Ellen married in the Daniels home on 1 December 1921 and then they all moved into the house John was still in the process of completing. From the description of his married life Ellen was referred to as Nell, Helen was referred to as Bessie and Marion was referred to as Marie. The marriage started off well enough but over the next few years it degenerated to a point where they ended up living in separate residences and John suspected Helen of adultery had but could not prove it. A judicial separation was issued on the 21 July 1925. During this period two children had been born: John William Firth (called Jacky) on 4 September 1922 and Barbara Helen Firth on 26 January 1925. John accepted the parentage of his son but questioned the parentage of the daughter, but ended up paying maintenance for both children and was given access to his son once a week on Saturdays. During the following year there were several suspicious fires on John's property as if it was an attempt to burn him out. He had to appear in court later in the mid-1930s regarding late maintenance payments but these were deferred as he was unemployed for a lengthy during the period 1932-33. At the time of the separation in 1925, John was 46 years old.

In 1926 John William made an application for a war pension to the Repatriation Office which was not granted. He appealed on the grounds the illnesses which he suffered in later life were due to his military service during WW1. After a lengthy process of several appeals which lasted until 1938 his application was turned down and the pension was not issued. John continued to work in the Balingup-Greenbushes area as a casual farm labourer and slowly managed to clear all his debts; he also continued to be a member of the local Balingup Rifle Club. Life was made a little harder with the commencement of World War 2, when John once again signed up for military service but only the home front. On 28 August 1941 he submitted an application form to join the RSL Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC) at the age of 62 years, but he listed his age on the form as 66 years.²⁰ The VDC was set up in June 1940 by the RSL with permission from the federal government, and it was made up of 'B' class volunteers up to the age of 60 years, but by the middle 1941 it was also open to men in reserved or protected occupations. It was placed under Army control from May 1941.²¹ The area around Balingup and Greenbushes came under control of the 5th VDC (Busselton) Battalion. John's application to join the VDC would most likely have been rejected due to his age and poor health but this would have not stopped him from being involved in the Volunteer Air Observation Corps which was formed at the same time. On a letter written in 1962 to the Repatriation Department, John was requesting a new set of glasses and in the notes at the bottom he listed his WW2 service as VDC, VOC 1939-1946.²²

¹⁸ Unpublished manuscript by John William Firth called 'Diary of J W Firth of my married life'.

¹⁹ Passenger lists and National Australia Archive record searches.

²⁰ VDC Application form dated 28 August 1941.

²¹ J. Gregory (1996), *On The Homefront: Western Australia and World War II*, Uni WA Press, Nedlands.

²² Unpublished letter dated 16 April 1962 from John Firth to the Deputy Commissioner, Repatriation.

On 4 October 1944 Ellen Firth died in Kirup and was buried the following Tuesday afternoon in Donnybrook Cemetery.²³ John was advised by telegram the same day and his first written comments were ‘Thank God free at last, she has turned up her toes’.²⁴ It is after Ellen’s death that John finally accepted Barbara as his daughter as she showed a strong similarity to his son. He also requested the return of his picture in his light horse uniform and asked the rest of Ellen’s estate be shared between his two legitimate children and not his step-daughters.

By 1960 John had cleared all his debts, purchased a rundown block on Jayes Road in Balingup, had cleared the block and built a comfortable house with two out buildings. His son was working at the timber mill in Quininup, south of Manjimup, and had married Marjorie Helen Gregory on 10 December 1955. His daughter Barbara had married in 1952 to Thomas G Duggan and was living in the Margaret River area. He had been awarded life membership in the Local Agricultural Society and with the RSL. John finally died on 31 December 1963 in Bridgetown Hospital at the age of 84 years 4.5 months. During the last part of his life he lived alone on his property in Balingup but he lived long enough to see his son married and to see his first two grandchildren.

I have been a long time researching my grandfather and the most frustrating part has been not being able to confirm parts of his service and trying to read the documents he left behind. After WW1 he had a very hard difficult life with a failed loveless marriage with many people turning against him, but he managed to come through it all with the respect of his local community. Although later in life he lived alone, I feel he had a happy life in which he managed to accomplish many things which some people had tried to stop him from doing. Learning about our ancestors is not all the glamour people make it out to be; you have to accept your findings or lack of them with all the rewards and warts that come with the knowledge.

-o0o-

SOCIETY NOTICES

Special ‘Gallipoli’ Edition of *Sabretache* 2015

Federal President Rohan Goyne is proposing the production of a special edition of *Sabretache* to coincide with the 100th Anniversary of Anzac. It will have a print-run of 1000 copies, and will appear in addition to that year’s usual four volumes. Rohan will be seeking funding from the Anzac Centenary Committee, which is calling for proposals for suitable projects, to produce the edition. This notice is by way of an early call to interested members to start research and planning for articles for possible inclusion in the edition. More news will follow in due course.

MHSA Conference 2014

Dr Bob Doneley, the conference convenor, provides this information and call for papers:

Date: 18-21 April 2014 (Easter Long Weekend)
Venue: Maryborough, Queensland
Theme: 1914-1915: Australia and the first years of the Great War
Sub-themes: Recruiting the AIF; German New Guinea; Egypt 1914-1915; the *Sydney-*

²³ Telegram dated 4 October 1944 sent to John William Firth, Balingup.

²⁴ Unpublished document written by John William Firth in 1944 with additions in 1954 and 1960.

Emden battle; the AE1 and AE2; Gallipoli

We are now calling for papers to be presented at the Conference. While the above theme and sub-themes are the main topics for which we are seeking papers and presentations, other topics will, of course, be considered.

Abstracts (of no more than 50 words) should be sent to:

Bob Doneley
3 Oelkers Crt
Hodgsonvale QLD 4352
r.doneley@uq.edu.au

- Abstracts should be submitted no later than 30 November 2013
- Full papers (written using author's guidelines for *Sabretache*) to be submitted no later than 28 February 2014

Venue and conference attractions:

- The Maryborough Military and Colonial Museum, housing two Victoria Crosses (including one for Gallipoli), a Cross of Valour, the Gallipoli Gallery, and an extensive collection of Australian military history
- The conference will be opened by Lt Col Harry Smith SG MC, former Officer Commanding D Company 6 RAR, Long Tan 1966
- The historic town of Maryborough, formerly Queensland's premier port
- Hervey Bay, 20 minutes' drive away, with beautiful ocean views

Getting there:

Maryborough is approximately 3 hours' drive north of Brisbane. Regular bus and train services run between the two cities. Interstate members can fly direct from Sydney to Hervey Bay where they will be met by a local member who will transport them to Maryborough and return after the conference.

Details of accommodation venues will be published at a later date. However, John Meyer, Queensland Branch President, adds the following for those considering attending:

As it will be the first conference ever held in Queensland and it coincides with the centenary of WWI, we will ensure that it is worthy of the standards set by other branches in the past. We look forward to having a good attendance and of course a formal dinner on the Saturday night. Bob Doneley is the author of the books on the 25th Battalion in WWI and WWII; those who attended the conference in Melbourne in 2010 will remember him delivering a paper on the 25th. A local motel has been contacted regarding accommodation. We have used them on many occasions in the past and their prices are quite competitive in today's market. We have booked 25 rooms at this stage and this can be increased or decreased. They have a large dining room and will put on buffet breakfasts or you can have your meals delivered to the room. Also, we will organise a local bus to transport members and wives/partners to the conference venue and return each day. Early advice on attendances will be appreciated so that we can keep the motel informed.

John Meyer OAM

The Society congratulates Mr John Meyer, Queensland Branch President, on his recent award of the Order of Australia Medal.

PAGE AND SCREEN

Resources for the Researcher and Collector

Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany 1944-1945*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington / Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1981, ISBN 0283988010. Although now over 30 years old, this would still have to rate as one of the best single-volume accounts of the fighting in northwest Europe in WW2. Told from the American point of view, it displays a remarkable ability to touch on every level of unit from the Army Group down to the individual battalion and sometimes even company. At the same time, Weigley describes the events and participants with a particularly wry brand of humour uncommon in professional historians, making this a highly readable as well as authoritative account. Well worth chasing up from second-hand book sources.

Paul Skrebels

In Victoria at the Croydon Public Library, part of the Eastern Regional Libraries system, there's a Military History group that meets bi-monthly. Alan Bennett, one of the library staff, runs the group and puts out a newsletter viewable on www.erl.vic.gov.au (click on 'Library newsletters'). Each newsletter includes a set of websites of military history interest. You will also see that you can subscribe on-line to receive future newsletters by email.

Leigh Ryan

World War Helmets: Référence de casques de 1915 à nos jours <http://world-war-helmets.com/home.php>. This is a website devoted solely to military helmets of the 20th and 21st centuries, and not only deals with a wide range of items, but covers each one in considerable depth and detail. Countries include the usual major powers, but also a number of harder to track down ones, such as Brazil, Iraq, Mexico and Thailand, and there are new entries being added to the site at regular intervals. So if you're wondering who wore that strange helmet you saw in a disposal store, or which strap should be on a particular model, this is the site for you. The disadvantage for Anglophones is that it's all in French, but even if your skills in that language aren't up to scratch, the pictures and diagrams alone will show you a great deal you won't find elsewhere. Bravo to the team who have constructed and run *World War Helmets*.

Paul Skrebels

Over to you ...

Have you come across a book, magazine, DVD or website which you think may be of interest to readers of *Sabretache*? Why don't you write a brief description of it along the lines of the items you see above? Email your contribution (editor@mhsa.org.au) with the subject line 'Page and Screen', or contact the editor with your idea.