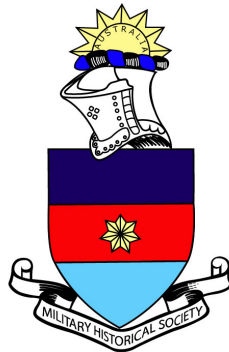


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Sabretache



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EDITORIAL

My wife is a qualified teacher of Ikebana, which is the Japanese art of flower arranging. From time to time international conferences are held, and this year the venue was the island of Okinawa. Anyone interested in military history, and particularly that of World War 2, knowing the significance of the place, would hardly pass up the opportunity to visit, and I was no exception. Coincidentally, the in-flight entertainment on the way over included the recent film *Hacksaw Ridge*, based on the true story of a draftee into the US Army who for religious reasons would not fight, but was prepared to serve as a medic. Landing on Okinawa with the 77th Division, he rescued many wounded soldiers under perilous conditions and so received the Congressional Medal of Honor. While having a good basis for a story, the film was marred by its tendency to revel in the special effects used to recreate death and injury, so that after a while it bordered on a comic-book representation of modern war. I've read the splendid official account of the campaign by Roy Appleman and was well aware of how brutal and drawn out the conflict was, but I felt that in the film too much of this was poured into too small an area to retain credibility. Maybe I gained the wrong impression, but I'm afraid that *Hacksaw Ridge* ended up teaching me nothing about the real campaign or the actual terrain on which it was fought.

In terms of preparation, I was less ready for how modern and built up the island actually is. I expected to see large military bases, and there certainly are a few of these, mainly belonging to the US Marines and Air Force. But the capital, Naha, a city of a third of a million, is much like any other Japanese provincial centre, and although the names change depending on where you are exactly, much of the west coast seems to be one long conurbation of concrete houses and shopping malls. Even when on one day we hired a car and drove north, it took some time to clear the built-up areas and strike open country. Nevertheless, you don't have to venture out into 'the sticks' to find sites associated with the bloody fighting of 70-plus years ago. Take a local bus a few stops into the southern suburbs of Naha and you'll discover the Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters, an underground complex of caves and tunnels purported to have held over 4,000 personnel and where many of them died. Some 300 metres of it is accessible to visitors, and it's a creepy and sobering experience descending the 30 metres and wandering around the cold, dark chambers.

Another local bus north from Naha takes you to Chatan, the southernmost point of the main American landings on 1 April 1945 and roughly where the 96th Division touched ground. Today it's made up of pleasant beaches and tourist resorts and attractions, including the appropriately named American Village – really a collection of retail outlets and restaurants in the Western mode. You can find quite a trade in military surplus clothing at this and other places around the island, mostly directed at young people as fashion items, but with some very collectible stuff if you know what you're looking for, and by no means exclusively American. Just outside of Naha is Shuri castle, the scene of much desperate fighting and which was largely destroyed along with most of Okinawa's unique cultural heritage. This has been completely restored to its former Ryukyuan kingdom glory, but with an eye on just how much was lost, including a civilian death-toll of at least 40,000.

While I had nowhere near the time or resources to explore all the military sites on Okinawa, I saw enough to make the trip worthwhile. My curiosity had been satisfied, and I came away glad that the ruins of war had largely been rebuilt. The only worrying aspect was the sabre-rattling going on in near-neighbour North Korea, reminding us that world peace is still nothing to be taken for granted.

Paul Skrebels

‘A LIFE OF TORTURE AND HELL’: AUSTRALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT AND THE GERMAN REPRISALS OF 1917

Aaron Pegram¹

Sergeant William Groves was captured during the costly and unsuccessful attack on the Hindenburg Line near Bullecourt on 11 April 1917. Many years after the war, Groves described how hundreds of German soldiers, ‘heads encased in barrel-like helmets’, overran his small portion of the Hindenburg Line and he was forced to surrender. He was stripped of his rifle and equipment at the point of an automatic pistol, and recalled a young German soldier ‘advancing menacingly towards me, swinging a stick-bomb by the handle shouting “Los! Los! Los!” by which I understood that I’d better watch my step and go quietly’.² Among the 4th Division’s 3,000 casualties were 1,170 taken prisoner in what was largest capture of AIF troops in a single engagement during the First World War.³

Captivity is a lesser-known aspect of Australia’s First World War story, largely owing to their relatively small numbers. Of the 213,000 battle casualties the AIF lost during the conflict, just 4,044 were lost as prisoners of war. The Ottoman Turks captured 196 on Gallipoli and in the Middle East, and the Germans took 3,848 Australians prisoner on the Western Front.⁴ The experiences of prisoners were never a widely known during the war or after, but the hardships of those who had endured captivity were overshadowed by the nation’s 60,000 war dead who became the focus of private and public mourning in the inter-war period. Just 397 Australians died in enemy hands (representing 0.6 per cent of Australian wartime deaths), which meant prisoners of war did not integrate easily into public narratives of the First World War or its emerging commemorative rituals.⁵ Captivity was also a story of surrender and defeat at odds with a triumphant national memory that gave prominence to the AIF’s victories over its defeats. The experiences of Australian prisoners in the First World War were further diminished by the capture of 30,000 Australians in the Second World War, many of whom suffered immense hardships in Japanese captivity.

Australians captured on the Western Front fared reasonably well in German hands, benefiting from pre-war agreements that respected the humane treatment of prisoners and protected them from violence and abuse of their captors. Vastly different conditions shaped the lives of captured officers and other ranks men, but there was a sense of continuity in that all prisoners in German captivity endured hardships, anguish and deprivation – particularly the 1,550 Australians who had the misfortune of being captured at Noreuil, Bullecourt and Lagnicourt throughout April 1917. Unlike most other Australians captured on the Western Front, the other ranks taken prisoner in these engagements were kept in France with other British and French prisoners so they could be worked as forced labourers behind the German front line for the following six months. Malnourished, abused and exposed to British shellfire, this

¹ Aaron Pegram is a senior historian in the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial. He is completing a PhD thesis on Australian Prisoners of War on the Western Front at the Australian National University.

² William Groves, ‘Things I Remember: A Prisoner of War Looks Back’, *Reveille*, 29.2.32.

³ C.E.W. Bean, *The AIF in France in 1917*, Vol. IV, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, 6th edition, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1938, pp.342-43.

⁴ A.G. Butler, *Problems and Services, Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, vol.3, 1943, p.896.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.896.

group of Australian prisoners experienced the worst of German captivity in World War 1.



Fig.1: An aerial photograph of the elaborate Hindenburg Line defences at Bullecourt before the attack on 11 April 1917. (AWM photo H11990)

The attack at Bullecourt occurred within the broader context of the Battle of Arras and attempts by British forces to achieve a breakthrough while drawing German reserves away from a French offensive on

the Chemin des Dames. British First and Third armies made significant gains in the days before the Bullecourt attack, which included the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge on 9 April. An attack by British Fifth Army in the Bullecourt area sought to achieve a breakthrough where the Germans least expected. Operating under the command of General Sir Hubert Gough, the plan was for the British 62nd Division and 4th Australian Division to attack either side of Bullecourt village and eject the Germans from their formidable Hindenburg Line defences. Gough hoped his troops would make a deep penetration on a narrow front into a re-entrant, but to retain an element of surprise, tanks would be used instead of the usual artillery bombardment.

Tanks were still a new and innovative weapon since their first use on the Western Front in September 1916. They were to advance ahead of the infantry, crush the Hindenburg Line's barbed-wire belts and neutralise nearby German strongpoints. But the tanks used at Bullecourt were poorly armed and armoured and prone to mechanical problems. They failed to reach the rendezvous on time, delaying the attack for 24 hours. News of the delay did not reach the British 62nd Division, whose troops carried out a futile attack on 10 April that resulted in 200 casualties.

This so-called 'dummy stunt' alerted the Germans to British plans in the Bullecourt sector, although Gough ignored protests from Australian commanders and went ahead with the 'dinkum stunt' the following morning. Australian troops of the 4th and 12th Brigades attacked the Hindenburg Line at dawn on 11 April, but of the twelve tanks to support them, just two made it to the German wire before they were destroyed. The rest were put out of action by German field guns, suffered mechanical failure or encountered obstacles from which they could not recover. The infantry were left completely unsupported in crossing No Man's Land, but still managed to fight their way into the Hindenburg Line where they engaged the Germans in bitter close-quarters fighting. They repelled counter-attacks throughout the morning, facing mounting casualties and ever-diminishing supplies of ammunition. With the

requests for artillery assistance unanswered, the 4th Division could not hold its gains and was ultimately forced to withdraw. Many who risked crossing No Man's Land in broad daylight fell victim to artillery and enfilading machine-gun fire from nearby positions.⁶

Hundreds of Australian soldiers were trapped in the Hindenburg Line, having been isolated by German troops who began rolling up their flanks with grenades. With the beleaguered remnants of the 4th and 12th Bdes having now exhausted their ammunition, German troops descended on their positions and took large numbers as prisoner of war. Private Lancelot Davies of the 13th Battalion was assisting two wounded men when German troops rushed his portion of the Hindenburg Line:

I was suddenly surprised to hear a gruff voice demand 'Come on Australia'. On looking up I beheld several Jerry bombers with bombs—of the 'potato masher' type—each pointing a revolver. I was compelled to submit to the worst humiliating experience of a lifetime, surrender! As the alternative meant death, and I was in a helpless situation, one must naturally excuse my choice.⁷



Fig.2: Australian prisoners of war following their capture at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917. (Photo courtesy of Peter Barton)

It was clear from the outset that German units involved in the Bullecourt fighting were not properly equipped to house and feed such a substantial body of prisoners. Able-bodied men were marched to the village of Écourt-Saint-Quentin, about six kilometres from the forward area, where officers and NCOs were separated from the other ranks and cross-examined by

⁶ There is now an extensive literature on the first battle of Bullecourt. See Bean, *The AIF in France in 1917*, pp.185-354; Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1998; Paul Kendall, *Bullecourt 1917: Breaching the Hindenburg Line*, The History Press, Stroud, 2010; David Coombes, *The Greater Sum of Sorrow: The Battles of Bullecourt*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2017; David Coombes, *The Battles of Bullecourt 1917*, Australian Army Campaign Series, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2017.

⁷ Australian War Memorial (AWM) PR00140, untitled manuscript, Pte Lancelot Davies, 13 Bn, p.2.

German intelligence officers.⁸ Around 800 other ranks men spent their first night in captivity locked inside the overcrowded church at Écourt-Saint-Quentin where they received a modest issue of black bread and ersatz coffee made from roasted barley and acorns – rations that reflected Germany's economic hardships that similarly affected its civilians and soldiers.

The following morning the prisoners were marched to a railhead at Le Quesnoy where they were kept for several days in an abandoned farmhouse that had been converted in to a transit camp for prisoners of war. The enclosure was already overcrowded, dirty and infested with lice, although conditions were made more miserable when 300 Australians captured at Lagnicourt entered the camp and stretched the modest food issue even further. At this point, hungry and anxious men became distressed.

In some cases, for the most miserable reward, [men] cringe to the Germans for the chance of being some service; others who despite the fact their bodies could ill-afford the sacrifice, trade their boots and other clothing in exchange for food and smokes, which gives them a measure of contentment.⁹

Australian troops captured at Fromelles, Pozières and Mouquet Farm had fared relatively well in enemy hands, with the wounded passing through the German casualty evacuation system and receiving treatment no different to wounded German soldiers. Officers were separated from their men and both groups transported to Germany within days of capture, entering a vast prison system that comprised 165 camps and 1.6 million allied prisoners by August 1916. Officers captured at Bullecourt were similarly sent to Germany after capture, and some of the wounded were treated in accord with the pre-war agreements. But the vast number of Australian casualties at Bullecourt placed an unexpected burden on the German medical system that was already struggling from bottlenecks and supply problems. German medical staff usually gave priority to their own wounded over the needs of prisoners of war, but there came a point in the afternoon of 11 April 1917 where German stretcher-bearers at Bullecourt stopped collecting wounded prisoners. A 15th Bn man reported burying Australian dead in shell holes 'twenty and thirty in each ... After this was done, we had to remove our wounded who had been left in the barbed wire. Those who had leg wounds and could not walk were shot with a revolver through the head'.¹⁰

More than a quarter of all Australians captured on the Western Front were taken prisoner in the fighting of April 1917, but it is important to establish that their treatment behind the lines was not representative of how all allied prisoners fared in German hands. This substantial body of captured Australians were treated in accord with a German reprisal order in response to the British and French armies' alleged misuse of German prisoners as labourers in forward areas. By deliberately mistreating the Bullecourt prisoners (and all other British troops captured at Arras), the German government hoped the British would respond by removing all German prisoners beyond 30km from forward areas. The German army was therefore applying a principle of reciprocity aimed at improving conditions for its men in allied captivity, but the reprisals must also be seen within the context of Germany's declining ability to continue fighting a war on multiple fronts without adequate resources to do so. The German reaction to the British misuse of prisoners in forward areas was extreme, but it was also a justification for the German army to use prisoners as labourers to meet its logistical

⁸ For further discussion on the intelligence value of Australian prisoners in the First World War, see Aaron Pegram, 'Informing the Enemy: Australian Prisoners and German Intelligence on the Western Front, 1916-1918', *Journal of First World War Studies*, vol.4, no.2, 2013, pp.167-84.

⁹ AWM PR00140, untitled manuscript, Pte Lancelot Davies, 13 Bn, p.5.

¹⁰ AWM30 B13.18, POW statements, report by LCpl Frederick Peachy, 15 Bn.

requirements while managing a manpower shortage following heavy losses at Verdun and on the Somme. Even after the reprisals formally ended, tens of thousands of British, French and Russian prisoners captured in 1918 remained working behind German lines until the Armistice.

Australian prisoners at the Les Quesnoy transit camp were eventually transported to Lille where they were paraded through the streets in front of thousands of French civilians living under German occupation. Excessive use of force was used to keep the prisoners and civilians separated. William Groves described a little girl who approached the column with a packet of cigarettes, whereupon 'one of file of guards rushed forward to meet her. With one jab of his rifle-butt he sent her spinning to the pavement – then bent down and confiscated the packet to the delight of his *Kameraden*'.¹¹

The prisoners were taken to dilapidated artillery barracks known as Fort MacDonald in one of Lille's outer suburbs (today known as Fort de Mons en Barœul) where they were broken down into a weak physical and mental condition before being returned to the forward area to work. On arrival, the column of prisoners was divided into groups of 120 and locked in casemates that were quickly overcrowded. There were no beds, blankets or straw on which the prisoners could sleep, and three small windows provided the only light and ventilation. Rations consisted of a modest daily issue of bread and ersatz coffee, but this did little to satisfy the prisoners' chronic hunger. Some coped by playing cards, singing hymns, reading pocket bibles and keeping warm by marching around their so-called 'dungeon'. Within time, men started arguing over the issue of food. William Groves described how 'chaps began to show signs of jealousy, when some more fortunate ones received a slice larger than the others'.¹² Hygiene also became a problem. Lice were already endemic, but in each of the casemates was a small wooden barrel that functioned as a latrine. German sentries opened the doors once a day to feed the prisoners but refused to empty the barrels which eventually overflowed, polluting the air and floor on which the men ate and slept.

Regularly, some of the frenzied fellows would approach the stone door, thump wildly against it with not result, and fall in a faint. Faintings became quite common – so common that we took no notice of them ... We possessed no medicines, not even a drop of water, so we were unable to offer the poor devils any help'.¹³

After a week in the so-called 'Black Hole of Lille', German commanders issued the following notice to the prisoners:

A DECLARATION TO THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

Upon the German request to the British Government to withdraw the German prisoners of war from the front line to a distance of not less than 30 kilometres, the British Government has not replied; it has been decided that all prisoners of war who will be taken in future will be kept as Prisoners of Respite¹⁴ and treated as under: Very short of food, bad lodgings, no bed, hard work, also to be worked beside the German guns under British shellfire. ... The British Prisoners will be allowed to write to their relatives or friends of influences in England stating how badly they are being treated and that no alteration in the ill treatment will occur until the

¹¹ William Groves, 'Captivity: A Prisoner of War Looks Back', *Reveille*, 1.9.32, p.28.

¹² William Groves, 'Captivity: A Prisoner of War Looks Back', *Reveille*, 1.12.32, p.26.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁴ Based on their mistreatment, one would assume the prisoners at Fort MacDonald were Prisoners *without* Respite. The confusion may be due to a mistranslation of the 'reprisal prisoner' (*Vergeltungsgefangenen*) from German to English.

English Government has consented to the German request ...¹⁵

By requesting Australian prisoners write to ‘friends of influences’, the German authorities were hoping to force change in the British use of prisoner labour behind the lines in France. This was largely unsuccessful among the Australians at Fort McDonald, since some men were mindful that any names, addresses and regimental details may benefit the Germans by disclosing information that could be used for intelligence; others were wary that news of their deliberate mistreatment would cause unnecessary distress among loved-ones at home. Most Australian prisoners who endured the reprisals therefore chose not to write of their deliberate mistreatment, but the High Commissioner in London received a letter from a man from the 14th Bn working at an engineering dump near Lens in May 1917. He was in a ‘state of exhaustion ... covered in lice and other vermin’ and described his deliberate mistreatment as ‘a life of torture and hell’. ‘For God’s sake’ he pleaded, ‘do what you can for us’.¹⁶

After ten days, the prisoners were removed from their casemates at Fort MacDonald and marched back to the forward area where they were assigned to labour camps in the Lille, Douai, Lens and Valenciennes areas. For next six months, they worked fifteen hours a day digging machine-gun pits, trenches and dugouts, clearing roads, unloading barges and supplies at engineering and ammunition dumps – all work associated with the German war effort and in violation of the 1907 Hague Convention. They were housed in derelict stables, farmhouses and ruined churches near where they worked. One party were housed in a shell-damaged church so close to the forward area that the concussion of falling British shells caused parts of the ceiling to collapse.¹⁷ Australians at a work detail at Marquion slept in the lice-infested barn of an abandoned farmhouse, next to two heavy field howitzers that frequently drew fire from long-range British guns.¹⁸

As with all prisoners captured on the Western Front, the names and details of the Bullecourt prisoners had been forwarded to the Red Cross. Confirmation that they were indeed prisoners of war reached the Australian Red Cross in London around June 1917, stating that the other ranks men were being held at Limburg in the Rhineland. Volunteers in the Australian Red Cross Prisoner of War Department dispatched thousands of food and clothing parcels to this address, so that the men did not have to rely on the meagre German provisions. But in all reality, the Bullecourt prisoners had to wait for a further five months before they would receive a decent meal.

While engaged in work behind German lines, the prisoners were kept on a so-called ‘starvation diet’ of vegetable soup, bread, ersatz coffee and whatever meat could be procured locally. They were worked hard on modest rations as the declaration had threatened, but it must be recognised that conditions were little better for the German sentries watching over them.¹⁹ One man captured at Noreuil was responsible for fixing meals for 200 British and prisoners engaged in digging machine-gun pits and had to make-do with mangle-wurzel, a few loaves of bread and small amount of meat every few days. The ration was either 150 herrings or a ‘good-sized lump of horseflesh, very often a whole leg with the shoe still on’

¹⁵ Groves, ‘Captivity’, *Reveille*, 1.12.32, p.56.

¹⁶ National Archives, United Kingdom (NA UK), WO32/5381, ‘Prisoners of War: Employment and Treatment of British Prisoners’, letter from Webb to Fisher, 24.5.17. See also NA UK, FO383/291, ‘Employment of Prisoners in France and Russia Near the Front Line’, letter from Bowen to Young, 24.5.17.

¹⁷ AWM30 B11.1, POW statements, report by Pte William Wheeler, 50 Bn.

¹⁸ AWM PR89/126, untitled manuscript, Pte Raymond Ayres 13 Bn, p.25.

¹⁹ NA UK FO383/291, 16th Battalion, Parsons & Stewart report.

evidently cut from an artillery dray. He used utensils found in ruined buildings and rubbish dumps and admitted ‘it was not nice food but we had to eat it to keep body and soul together’.²⁰



Fig.3: Some of the Bullecourt prisoners in camp at Soltau, Germany, several months after the reprisals ended. (AWM photo P01981.048)

Heavy labour and a poor diet forced many prisoners to scavenge to satisfy their chronic hunger. A group of Australians working at the engineering dump at Marquion made ‘scrounge bags’ from hessian sacks to collect stinging nettles, dandelions, frogs and snails. Once the sentries had turned in for the night, everything went into a communal pot and stewed. Boiled stinging nettles were said to have ‘tasted much like spinach’.²¹ Prisoners working near canals collected mussels, eels and small fish, while those working on engineering and ammunition dumps gathered shrubs and the carcasses of birds killed by the concussion of exploding artillery shells.²² Starving prisoners ransacked vegetable crops cultivated by German troops, consuming their spoils quickly while sentries were not watching. Eating raw potatoes and turnips would often cause stomach complaints and bouts of diarrhoea, which in one case resulted in

the death of an Australian prisoner.²³ Scrounging also had fatal consequences if German sentries discovered prisoners had strayed from their work party or were caught outside their compound at night. Another Australian prisoner of war was shot dead ransacking a potato crop by a sentry who thought he was escaping.²⁴

Prisoners usually respected the mounted Uhlans and infantrymen who had experienced combat, but detested the older *Landsturm* reservists whose age and fitness prevented from front-line service. It was these so-called *Etappenschwein* (‘rear area pigs’) who were more likely to drive productivity and maintain discipline using fists, rifle butts and verbal insults.²⁵ Beatings were constant, even when the physical condition of the prisoners deteriorated. On one occasion, an Australian prisoner who had collapsed through sheer exhaustion was struck

²⁰ AWM30 B11.1, report by Pte John Murphy, 50 Bn.

²¹ AWM PR89/126, untitled manuscript, Pte Raymond Ayres 13 Bn, p.10.

²² State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW) ML MSS885, untitled manuscript, LCpl Claude Benson, 13 Bn, p.7; William Groves, ‘Captivity: A Prisoner of War Looks Back’, *Reveille*, 1.1.32, p.19.

²³ AWM 1DRL/0428, ARCS WMB, Pte Harold Hall, 16 Bn, report by Pte Herbert Loechel, 50 Bn.

²⁴ AWM 1DRL/0428, ARCS WMB, Pte Joseph Miller, 16 Bn, report by Pte Joseph Measures, 16 Bn.

²⁵ AWM30 B5.44, 11 Bn, POW statements, report by Pte Thomas McCabe & Pte Thomas et al., 11 Bn.

in the head with a shovel.²⁶ Another was found with a crudely fashioned ‘shive’ and given several hours’ field punishment that the Germans referred to as *Anbinden*. With hands bound behind his back and feet barely touching the ground, he was hanged from a tree and choked for several hours.²⁷



Fig.4: The rail siding at Corbehem, where seven prisoners were killed by British artillery on 1 May 1917. (Photo by author)

The cumulative effects of a poor diet and unsanitary living conditions led to outbreaks of dysentery, enteritis, pneumonia and malaria. These affected the prisoners more than the physical abuse. Men deficient in nutrients suffered terribly from beriberi – a condition more commonly associated with Australian prisoners of the Japanese in the Second World War.²⁸ Men had the right to attend sick parades at roll call each morning, but sentries were just as likely to force them to work regardless of their condition and beat them when they collapsed.²⁹ One man already suffering from dysentery deteriorated into such a poor physical state he had to be carried to the latrines. Unable to work, the man was twice hit in the head with rifle butts and refused medical attention. He was eventually allowed to see a doctor but died five minutes before an ambulance arrived.³⁰ Sick men in other work parties were given medical attention, but many cases spent several days in hospital at Mons or Valenciennes before returning to work until their health broke down completely. Disease was endemic in most work camps. Within a two-month period, half of the 200 Australians working at the engineering dump at Marquion had been hospitalised with disease.³¹

Artillery posed a less of a threat to prisoners working behind German lines, mainly because the likelihood of British shells falling on work parties varied between their proximity to the fighting and the operational activity in that sector. Labour companies were situated anywhere

²⁶ AWM30 B5.44, POW statements, report by Pte Victor Perrie, 11 Bn.

²⁷ AWM30 B13.5, POW statement, LCpl Claude Benson, 13 Bn; AWM30 B11.1, POW statement, Pte Thomas Rampton, 50 Bn.

²⁸ AWM30 B11.1, POW statement, Pte John Murphy, 50 Bn.

²⁹ AWM30 B5.44, 11 Bn, POW statements, report by Pte Thomas McCabe & Pte Thomas et al., 11 Bn.

³⁰ AWM 1DRL/0428, ARCS WMB, Pte Herbert Freeman, 57 Bn, report by Pte Sydney Carter, 4 Bn.

³¹ AWM PR89/126, untitled manuscript, Pte Raymond Ayres 13 Bn, p.11.

up to ten kilometres behind the front line, putting them beyond the range of field artillery. But heavy siege guns would strike deep into German-occupied territory where the prisoners were working, carrying out counter-battery bombardments, harassing and interdiction, and striking at ammunition and supply dumps, stores, roads and railway depots. An area particularly vulnerable to British artillery during the reprisal period was the German-occupied villages along the Scarpe River, several kilometres from where British troops had gained ground during the Battle of Arras. This included the village of Corbehem, where a party of 150 Australians had spent the previous two weeks digging saps, burying German dead and carrying out general fatigue work.³² On 1 May 1917, gunners from the Royal Garrison Artillery fired on a German ammunition dump while Australian prisoners were unloading shells from a German supply train. A 15-inch shell caused the dump to explode, killing seven Australian prisoners and wounding five (see Fig.4). British guns also destroyed a nearby supply depot and a factory where machine-guns and small arms ammunition were stored.³³

The incident at Corbehem highlighted the vulnerability of prisoners working in the forward area, but tragic though it was, the artillery threat was significantly less than the health problems associated with a poor diet and months of debility.³⁴ The War Office sent reassurances to the German government in May 1917 that prisoner labour companies had been moved 30km beyond the British forwards area, and in June, most British and French prisoners behind German lines were moved to work parties further to the German rear. These new labour camps were no longer within range of British siege guns, but the paltry rations, physical abuse and squalid living conditions remained much the same. This move brought a formal end to the German reprisals against the Bullecourt prisoners, many of whom had gone months without a decent meal. Their debility eventually necessitated their transportation to Germany in October 1917, by which time, 87 of them had died of disease and seven killed by shellfire. One Australian prisoner already in Germany was appalled by the emaciated state of some of the Bullecourt prisoners who arrived in camp in November 1917. He shared his Red Cross food parcel with a man of the 4th Bde on the brink of starvation: ‘He made a rush [at a tin of Bully Beef] and grabbed it. After he finished, he simply sat down and cried like a kid’.³⁵

Prisoners generally fared well once they were transported to a prison camp in Germany. There, protecting powers from neutral countries could police the wartime agreements and guarantee humane treatment of allied prisoners through regular inspections of prison camps and work parties. Reprisals were not as frequent as they were behind the lines in France, nor were they as severe, but the treatment of prisoners continued to be shaped by Germany’s declining economic and military situation until their repatriation after the Armistice. After arriving in Germany, the Australian prisoners who had endured the reprisals were struck by the vast quantities of food and clothing the Red Cross had sent them. Having survived the German reprisals behind the lines, they were reassured that the rest of their captivity would be spent far away from the violence of the Western Front.

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³² AWM30 B13.18, POW statement, LCpl Frederick Peachy, 15 Bn.

³³ AWM 1DRL/0428, ARCS WMB, Pte George Fraser, 48 Bn, Holder report.

³⁴ AWM B13.18, 15 Bn, Gatley report; AWM30 B11.1, 50 Bn, Murphy report.

³⁵ AWM30 B16.1, POW statement, report by Pte Benjamin Ross, 29 Bn. For further reading on the plight of the Australian prisoners during the German reprisals of 1917, see David Coombes, *Crossing the Wire: The Untold Stories of Australian POWs in Battle and Captivity in WWI*, BigSky Publishing, Newport, 2010; David Chalk, ‘Talks with old Gefangeners’, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Iss. 14, 1989, pp.11-23.

FILIPINO WORLD WAR 2 VOLUNTEERS FROM THE NORTHERN TERRITORY: PART 2 ROLL OF HONOUR

Major Paul A Rosenzweig (ret'd)¹

Eight Filipino-Australians from the Northern Territory are now known to have volunteered for service with the AIF during the Great War. During WW2, this tradition of service continued. Ongoing research has identified 16 Filipino-Australians with a Top End connection who volunteered, in a total of 20 Australian military enlistments, plus one merchant seaman and one civilian guerrilla.² The origins and kinship of some of these families, and a full Roll of Honour, was given in Part 1 (*Sabretache* March 2017). This part considers the sacrifice of these WW2 Filipino-Australian volunteers.

The Conanan Family

The Conanan family of northern Australia is descended from Tolentino Garcia Conanan (1858-1921), originally from the village of Ybajay on Panay Island in the Philippines. Tolentino was a descendant of the *Gobernadorcillo* ('Provincial Governor') of Ybajay in the 1850s under the Spanish system of government called *encomienda*. In about 1881, aged 23, Tolentino relocated to Thursday Island to be a pearlshell diver, part of the first 'wave' of Filipino migration by individual seafarers and divers. He was naturalised as a British subject in 1892, and with his Portuguese wife Emelia Constantina Da Souza (1864-1902) had five children.³

Following Emelia's death in 1902, Tolentino was a diver in Palmerston (called Darwin after 1911). Tolentino's family was part of a small Filipino community at a time when the European population numbered just 300. When he could no longer dive he became a pearlshell processor; he later worked in the Darwin railway yards, and enjoyed fishing with hand-lines from the wharf. Tolentino died in Darwin Hospital on 10 April 1921 at the age of about 69, after having lived in Australia for forty years. His obituaries noted that he was well respected: 'He was a friendly and obliging man and was a scholar both in Spanish and English'.⁴

Tolentino and Emelia's first daughter Gertrude Maria Da Souza Conanan (born in 1891) married Catalino Puerte Spain (1887-1942) on 9 February 1909 and they had two children (see below). Their second daughter Emelia Da Souza Conanan (born 1893) married Mr Henry Lee of Darwin, but they had no children. From 1928, Gertrude and Emelia managed

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- AWM = Australian War Memorial
 CofA = Commonwealth of Australia
 NAA = National Archives of Australia
 NSD = *Northern Standard* (Darwin)
 NTG = *Northern Territory Gazette*
 NTTG = *Northern Territory Times & Gazette*

¹ Paul Rosenzweig is a non-professional military historian and biographer, recently honoured by the Philippine Ambassador to Australia at an award ceremony to mark the 70th Anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Philippines and Australia.

² In addition, five Filipino-Australian wharf labourers were among the civilians killed during the first Japanese air raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942: see Rosenzweig (2014c).

³ See Rivas (2003) and Rosenzweig (2014a).

⁴ NTTG 12 April 1921, p.3; see also NSD 12 April 1921, p.3.

the Canberra Café in Cavenagh Street.⁵ Both of Tolentino's sons who lived to adulthood volunteered for the AIF in 1915.⁶ Ricardo Warivin Da Souza Conanán (1894-1942) was discharged in Brisbane as permanently medically unfit, suffering from sciatica and diver's palsy as a result of being a pearlshell diver for many years. Elias Joseph Da Souza Conanán (1896-1945), born on Thursday Island on 8 August 1896, saw active service overseas with the 26th Battalion AIF in the north of France and on the Ypres Salient.

In Darwin on 27 April 1922, Elias married Lorenza Agnes Cesar (1905-1977), the daughter of Elias Cesar (1872-1938), a Filipino pearl diver who had come to Darwin in 1896 under the Indentured Labour Scheme, part of the second 'wave' of Filipino migration. Lorenza's three brothers Basil, Paul and William volunteered for service during WW2 (see Part 1). Lorenza and Elias lived in the 'Police Paddock', and had ten children, born between 1922 and 1938: Priscilla Isabel, Pauline Veronica, Joseph Louis, Matthew Elias, Vincent Tolentino, Agnes Helena, Cyril Francis, Margaret Mary, Lawrence Aloysius and Daniel David.

On 12 December 1941, the Northern Territory Administrator received a cipher message from the Prime Minister's Department informing him that Cabinet had approved the immediate evacuation of women and children from Darwin. The Conanans were among the 1,066 women and 900 children evacuated from Darwin between December and February 1942. Digitised copies of these evacuation records now available online show that Lorenza Conanán took her ten children by aircraft to Brisbane on 7 January 1942.⁷

Elias played tennis, billiards and snooker, and was employed by the Commonwealth Railways as a waterside worker, together with his brother Ricardo and other Filipinos such as Catalino and Hignio Spain, Antonio and Juan Cubillo, Eusebio Ponce and Francisco Chavez. On the morning of 19 February 1942, Elias had swapped his shift with a fellow worker and fortuitously escaped the first bombing raid unscathed. Ricardo however, was a hatchman unloading the cargo ship SS *Barossa*; his body was never found. Their sister Gertrude lost her husband (Catalino Spain) in the same raid. For the duration of the war and after, Lorenza lived with her family in an old elevated 'Queenslander' in the inner north-eastern suburb of Albion, close to the American Chemical Warfare Center and 62nd Chemical Depot Company warehouse site. Elias eventually joined his family, although he died on 5 April 1945 of a lung disorder, probably related to his Great War service. During WW2, two of Tolentino Conanán's grandchildren served in uniform, the children of Elias and Lorenza Conanán.

QX61563 Sapper Joseph Louis Conanán (1926-1946).⁸ Joey Conanán was born in the Police Paddock on 21 July 1926, Elias and Lorenza's third child and first son – christened 'Joseph Louis Cesar Conanán'. His extra middle name 'Cesar' was drawn from his grandfather Elias Cesar, who was noted as one of Darwin's oldest residents when he died at his home at the Police Paddock in 1938, aged 66. Joey and his sisters attended St Joseph's Convent School, and he and Priscilla were prize-winners during the King's Jubilee Celebrations held in June 1935. Joey Conanán was evacuated with the family in January 1942, and enlisted in the AIF in Brisbane on 1 September 1944 soon after he turned 18, assigned to the 8th Australian Division (Australian Army Service Corps). Sapper Conanán

⁵ *Northern Territory Times* (Darwin) 3 April 1928, p.2.

⁶ Their fifth child, Salvador Modeste Da Souza Conanán, died in infancy in 1901; see Rosenzweig (2014a) and (2014c).

⁷ CofA 1941-42, part 1 A-D, p.8.

⁸ NAA: B883, 'QX61563', item barcode 4467196; NAA: A8234, CAIRNS BA15, item barcode 4663450; AWM: record R1716763; *Northern Standard* (Darwin) 27 May 1938, p. 4; CofA 1941-42, part 1 A-D, p.8.

served with the 12th Water Transport Operating Company, RAE during and immediately after the war. The unit continued on operational taskings after the cessation of hostilities, with war graves duty and ammunition dumping. Joey Conanan suffered a ruptured appendix while at sea, and died of septicaemia on 1 March 1946, aged 19.

QF269602 Private Priscilla Silva (1922-).⁹ Priscilla Conanan is listed on the WW2 nominal roll under the name of ‘Silva’ because on 8 January 1944 she married First Lieutenant Tony Silva of the US Army, attached to the Allied Intelligence Bureau. She also had been born in the Police Paddock, on 31 August 1922 – christened ‘Priscilla Isabel Cesar Conanan’. She was a prize-winner for pianoforte in 1936 and 1938, and gained very good results in the commercial examination run by Stott’s Business College in 1940. Priscilla helped her mother Lorenza in managing the other nine children during the evacuation to Brisbane, while her father and uncle continued to work on Darwin wharf.

Priscilla enlisted in the Australian Women’s Army Service at Redbank, Queensland on 3 March 1943, aged 20, and worked in the Queensland District Accounts Office until 1 February 1944. It was in Brisbane that Priscilla met Saturnino (‘Tony’) Ramos Silva, a US Army officer of Filipino descent and a graduate of San Francisco State College. He was one of 7,000 Filipinos in the US who had immediately enlisted to help in the liberation of their homeland. By May 1943 he was undertaking commando and reconnaissance training with the Allied Intelligence Bureau (Philippine Section) at Camp ‘X’ in Beaudesert (Camp ‘Tabragalba’, the former Tabragalba Homestead), and at Canungra.

The Philippine Regional Section of the AIB had been established to train and send soldiers to the Philippines to collect intelligence, transmit Japanese troop movements and support the resistance. Despite the rigorous training regime, as an officer Silva was allowed weekend furloughs to Brisbane. His son later recalled:

It was in a Chinese restaurant that Lt. Tony Silva first met Private Priscilla Conanan of the Australian Women’s Auxiliary Service (A.W.A.S.) and fell in love. From photos of that period, Priscilla was a very beautiful Filipino-Australian.

This relationship caused concerns because their courtship was very brief, he was 15 years her senior, and fraternisation between a soldier and an officer (especially Australian-American) was not considered appropriate. Nevertheless, they were married on 8 January 1944 at Canungra camp. The family narrative recorded:

The marriage was brief. Three days into their honeymoon, Lt. Silva was called and ordered to proceed with his mission ... He left Priscilla in Australia pregnant with Isabel. She didn’t know where he was going and would not hear from him until three years later.¹⁰

Silva was despatched on a secret ‘guerrilla submarine’ mission to Mindanao in the southern Philippines. He departed Port Darwin on 14 February 1944 with four Filipino soldiers in the USS *Narwhal* (SS-167), on her tenth wartime patrol.¹¹ Tony Silva never returned to Australia. Within a year Silva had met a young nurse in Davao named Ester Peralta: they were married by a guerrilla priest, and lived together on Mindanao. Silva acquitted himself well by all accounts in training a local guerrilla force, earning the Bronze Star and Purple Heart, but he was wounded in the Battle of Ising in May 1945 and was evacuated – unwittingly leaving his second wife Ester pregnant, with Saturnino Silva Jr. Tony Silva raised

⁹ NAA: B884, ‘QF269602’, item barcode 4656365; NSD 10 December 1926, p.3.

¹⁰ Silva (2008a).

¹¹ Dissette & Adamson (1972) pp.96-100; Powell (1997); Glenn (2011).

a post-war family in America and died in Fresno, California in 1987. Meanwhile in Australia, Priscilla obtained a divorce and remarried; the letters Tony had sent her from the Philippines were delayed by Army censors and Priscilla did not receive them until well after the war's end.

From these relationships there came to be three separate families, in America, the Philippines and Australia, each completely oblivious of each other's existence – until a series of posts on a genealogy website triggered recognition of common threads of history. The early tentative contacts led to an emotional reunion in the Philippines in 2008, as John Silva recalled:

Isabel told us that for many years, two colored photo portraits hung side by side in their dining room: Priscilla in her AWAS uniform, Tony in his US Army uniform. It was love in a time of war and the portraits were Priscilla's proof while she waited.¹²

Meanwhile in the succeeding generations, new kinship bonds remained dormant and unknown for some five decades after the end of WW2. Priscilla raised her daughter Isabel in Brisbane, while at the same time in Davao Ester raised her son bearing his father's name. After the war Tony Silva did make contact with Priscilla, but his hospitalisation in America and separation by time and geography worked against them. Tony married a Filipina who had come to the US, and among their children were John and Marie. Chance discoveries of letters and photographs by Marie ultimately enabled her and another sister to meet with their half-brother in the Philippines in the 1990s.

By the late 1990s John Silva had moved to live in the Philippines, and he too met up with Saturnino. Considerably more effort was required to locate Priscilla's family because of name changes through marriage. But by 2006-07 internet genealogy sites had provided the platform for making a connection between John and his sister Marie (by then also living in the Philippines) with Saturnino Jr in Davao and Isabel and her daughters in Brisbane, which ultimately led to an emotional reunion – as John Silva later reported:

Six months later, there we were at a hotel entrance in Manila tearfully embracing each other, noting the undeniable proof that we all looked so alike. Our rounded dark eyes, the skin tone, the prominent front teeth and that smile were all Dad's. The resemblances were not faint and as we hugged each other in disbelief Isabel looked at us intently and declaimed softly, 'Now I have a sister and a brother!'.¹³

The Perez Family

Mr Rafael Ponce (1859-1928)¹⁴ was another Manilaman from the late 19th century, a diver and labourer. When the Commonwealth assumed responsibility for the Northern Territory on 1 January 1911, there were 31 pearling boats operating from Port Darwin employing 138 men.¹⁵ Rafael Ponce died in Darwin on 11 April 1928, aged 69, and was buried in Gardens Road Cemetery, Darwin's main cemetery from the time it opened in 1919 until 1970. He was recalled as, 'a very old resident of Darwin, having resided here for practically a lifetime'. He had been predeceased by his wife in 1922, and was survived by two children (Pantaleona Mary and Eusebio Joseph), two stepchildren (Francisco Augustus Chavez and Beatrice Maria Chavez) who had lived with the Ponce family since their father's death, and several

¹² Silva (2008b).

¹³ Silva (2008a); Silva (2008b).

¹⁴ NTTG 20 July 1919, p. 5; 24 June 1922, p.7; NSD 13 April 1928, p.4; 21 February 1947, p.12. Gardens Road Cemetery: grave ID 4871523, row 779.

¹⁵ Powell (1982) pp.113-17.

grandchildren.¹⁶ Eusebio was known as ‘Sibio’ or ‘Joe’, and Francisco was known as ‘Francis’, although in the Filipino community he was called ‘Chico’. Among the grandchildren, four sons of Rafael’s daughter Mary served during World War 2.

Pantaleona Mary Ponce (1898-1984) was born in Darwin on 27 July 1898, and worked as a secretary at Vestey’s Meatworks. In July 1919 she married Mr Rafael Perez from Spain in St Mary’s Star of the Sea Cathedral in Smith Street, with her step-brother Francisco Chavez officiating as best man. The ceremony was followed by a breakfast at the Catholic Club: after the toasts, it was noted that ‘The bridegroom briefly responded in English and also in Spanish’.¹⁷ During the 1920s Francisco Chavez was a motor car proprietor, operating his business from Railway Gully. He played in the Darwin Recreation Club band, while Eusebio played the mandolin with the 2½-Mile Jazz Band in the Dance Hall near the Railway Workshop (in the modern suburb of Parap). Rafael and Mary lived in Wood Street; Rafael worked as a boathand and was noted as a bird fancier. Their sons also attended St Joseph’s Convent School, and the elder boys Juan and Joseph were proficient on the violin, often playing duets.

By 1933 it was noted that there were 69 Filipinos living in Darwin.¹⁸ A newspaper report from this time refers to Catholic families by the names of Alfonso, Angeles, Cardona, Cesar, Cigobia, Conanan, Cubillo and Perez, as well as the orphans Beatrice and Francisco Chavez.¹⁹ During the evacuation at the end of 1941, Mary Perez took her children on the SS *Zealandia* on 20 December. Rafael left Darwin on 26 February 1942, after the bombing raids had commenced, taking their son Joe (aged 19) who had been working as a clerk.²⁰ Mary’s step-sister Beatrice Chavez lived in Moore Park, NSW with them; she did not marry, and passed away on 22 November 1944.

Eusebio and Francisco stayed in Darwin, where they worked on the wharf as employees of the Commonwealth Railways. Francisco was killed during the first bombing raid while working as a winchman: the second stick of bombs hit the right-angle of the wharf, completely obliterating a large section of the decking and destroying the turntable. A locomotive and six railway trucks were thrown into the water, and Chico Chavez was among several who were killed instantly, with no trace of their remains ever found.²¹ With the four older boys having left on war service, Mary had three young children to raise (Ray, Isabel and Margaret) and suffered badly from the climate change. The effects of the evacuation, losing their house and belongings in the bombing raids on Darwin, the death of Chico Chavez, and having four sons enlist were exacerbated when Miguel was posted as missing-in-action, and allotments were suspended.

The Perez family returned to Darwin in 1946. Terminally ill with cancer, Raphael left in 1962, and passed away in his birth town near Valencia in Spain and was buried there. The youngest of Mary’s sons, Raphael Imilo Perez (1929-1995), known to the family as ‘Uncle Rusty’, never married and spent his life in Darwin looking after his mother. Mrs Mary Perez

¹⁶ In the early years of the 20th century, Francisco’s father was housekeeper for the Apostolic Administrator Father Francis Xavier Gsell (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart) of the Star of the Sea Chapel.

¹⁷ NTTG 20 July 1919, p.5.

¹⁸ Powell (1982) p.175.

¹⁹ NSD 26 April 1935, p.8

²⁰ CofA 1941-42, part 1 L-Q, p.2; CofA 1941-42, part 2 P-S, p.2.

²¹ NTTG 4 February 1915, p.18; 20 July 1919, p.5; 24 June 1922, p.7; NSD 2 June 1936, p.2; 23 February 1951, p.11; 24 February 1950, p.12; Lockwood (1984) p.74.

died on 22 March 1984, aged 85. The Chief Minister of the Northern Territory paid tribute to her in Parliament: ‘At the date of her death, she enjoyed the distinction of having been a Darwin resident for 86 years. To the best of my belief, no other person can claim such a long connection’.²² Mary had survived the 1937 Cyclone and Cyclone Tracy, and as a Life Member of the Pensioners’ Association had been involved in many community activities. She was buried in the old Palmerston Cemetery on Goyder Road, Darwin’s ‘Pioneer Cemetery’, the first such burial there since 1966.²³

DX755 Corporal John Perez (1921-2017).²⁴ Rafael and Mary’s first child, christened ‘Juan’, was born in Darwin on 30 March 1921. John was Dux of St Joseph’s in 1935, and also took the Presentation Cup for Music Theory. He was the first from St Joseph’s to win a highly-coveted Queensland Scholarship, and in 1938 commenced at St Joseph’s Christian Brothers College in Nudgee. His 19th birthday was celebrated in Darwin in true Filipino fashion, with community singing, dancing, and instrumental music. John was present in Darwin during the first bombing raids in February 1942. He first enlisted in the AIF in Katherine on 15 December 1942 and served until 16 June 1944. His nephew recalls him telling stories of the bombing raids on Darwin and how he and his mates would shoot at the Zeros with their .303 rifles: ‘they were so low he could see the pilots’ faces’. John then enlisted in the RAAF on 17 June 1944 and served until 26 July 1945 (443093 Leading Aircraftman John Perez). He was a well-known Customs Officer in Darwin after the war, until he transferred to Brisbane in 1952. As he became more frail he was placed in a nursing home in Canberra, where he passed away early in 2017, aged 95.

NX134749 Sergeant Joseph Perez (1922-2002).²⁵ Rafael and Mary’s second child was born in Darwin on 17 June 1922. Among the awards won by Convent scholars in 1936, Priscilla Conanan won the Presentation Cup for Music and Joe Perez took the prize for Violin. In 1938 he received his bookkeeping certificate from Stott’s Business College, and he was employed as a Clerk with the Mines Department. He was evacuated to NSW with his father on 26 February 1942, and was living in Surry Hills when he enlisted in the AIF on 24 September 1942, aged 20. At the end of the war, Joe joined Headquarters 34th Australian Infantry Brigade when it was formed at Morotai on 27 October 1945 (Army number 245194). He then served in Hiroshima Prefecture with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan from February 1946 until 30 August 1948, initially at Kaitaichi and later at Hiro. Joe spent most of his life in Bendigo, Victoria and had 10 children. He passed away in Melbourne on 27 March 2002, aged 81.

432010 Acting Flying Officer Michael Louis Perez (1924-1945).²⁶ Rafael and Mary’s third child, christened ‘Miguel Louis’, was born in Darwin on 19 August 1924 (see fig.1). He enlisted in the RAAF in Sydney on 7 November 1942 and qualified as aircrew, was appointed an Airman Pilot (Sergeant) on 29 July 1943, and was promoted to Temporary

²² The Hon Paul Everingham MLA, *Hansard* (NT) 30 August 1984, pp.1170-1171.

²³ The Palmerston Cemetery closed in 1919 when the Gardens Rd Cemetery near the Botanic Gardens opened, and it was gazetted as closed on 24 Jan 1922; Grave 5349917: <http://austcemindex.com/inscription?id=5349917>

²⁴ NAA: B883, ‘DX755’, item barcode 6196065; NAA: A9301, ‘443093’, item barcode 5550849; *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 4 February 1936, p.10; NSD 28 November 1952, p.4; *Herald Sun* (Melbourne) 30 March 2002, 2 April 2002.

²⁵ NAA: B2458, 245194, item barcode 6396311; *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 16 December 1936, p.2.

²⁶ NAA: A9300, PEREZ M L, item barcode 5255104; NAA: A9845, 100, item barcode 7127553; NAA: A705, 166/32/604, item barcode 1077002; AWM: record R1716763; *The Sydney Morning Herald* 6 January 1950, p.14.

Flight-Sergeant on 29 January 1944. He was commissioned on 25 October 1944, and appointed Acting Flying Officer on 7 December while posted to No.207 Squadron RAF (Bomber Command) at the RAF Spilsby bomber station in Lincolnshire, England. He undertook his first operational mission on 7 December 1944, aged 20 – a Lancaster bombing mission over Munich. He captained two further operational missions on 1 January (over Dortmund) and 5 January 1945 (Royan).



Fig.1: Miguel ('Michael') Louis Perez, with his mother Mrs Mary Perez and sisters Isabel and Margaret (photo provided by Mr Mike Naylor)

Michael Perez died on 6 January 1945 during his fourth mission, as the Australian captain of a Avro Lancaster Mk III bomber, with six RAF crew members.²⁷ Lancaster 'NE168' with code-number 'EM-F' took off from Spilsby at 00:52 to conduct a night mission over Houffalize to attack German supply routes in the Belgian Ardennes. The aircraft was engaged by ground anti-aircraft fire and was destroyed immediately: it was subsequently considered that the bomb-load had exploded. Michael Perez and the crew were posted as missing, although it was later found that one of the RAF Air Gunners, Sgt Ottewel, survived the crash and was taken prisoner: he remained in hospital until after the liberation, and died on 23 March 2007. In 1948, the six bodies were recovered in the woods near Houffalize, near the border with Luxembourg, and were taken to a nearby farm to be buried. The remains were later re-interred in the Houffalize Municipal Cemetery, about 2km north of the village along the Rue du Liège. This cemetery contains the remains of ten WW2 airmen: the six from Lancaster 'NE168' and another four from Lancaster 'PA165' (No.61 Sqn RAF) which went

²⁷ SGT E Deller (Flight Engineer), SGT G E Patterson (Navigator), FSGT W L Cleary (Bomb Aimer), SGT A J Kennedy (Wireless Operator), SGT J G Shepherd (Air Gunner) and SGT K A W Ottewel (Air Gunner).

missing during the same raid.

Fifty years before the death of Miguel Perez, the nationalist José Rizal had come to prominence in the Philippines, then a Spanish colony. Rizal published two ‘social-commentary’ novels and formed a local ‘social reform’ organisation: as a result, he was declared an enemy of the state by the Spanish government and exiled. After a revolutionary movement declared their intention to overthrow Spanish rule, Rizal faced a court-martial for sedition and conspiracy and was executed by an army firing squad on 30 December 1896 – this became a defining moment for the archipelago which would ultimately become the Republic of the Philippines, propelling Rizal to martyr and later national hero status. Rizal’s martyrdom in a glorious cause can be seen as emulated by Miguel Perez in having his years cut unreasonably short, finding his own form of martyrdom as an aviator.

On the eve of his execution, Rizal had penned his final farewell, *Mi Último Adios*. Many of the sentiments contained within Rizal’s stanzas could equally apply to the life, and death, of Miguel Perez. To the pilgrims reverently passing the headstones and crosses in Houffalize Cemetery, Miguel might whisper up Rizal’s farewell to them:

Let the moon with soft, gentle light me descry,
Let the dawn send forth its fleeting, brilliant light,
In murmurs grave allow the wind to sigh,
And should a bird descend on my cross and alight,
Let the bird intone a song of peace o’er my site.

Each year following receipt of the news of Miguel’s fate, the Perez family placed a newspaper notice to pay tribute to the pilot and captain of Lancaster NE168 and ‘his gallant crew’.

NX181128 Private Frank Perez (1927-1999).²⁸ The fourth child of Rafael and Mary Perez, christened ‘Francisco Augustine Perez’, was born in Darwin on 15 February 1927. He was a footballer with the Buffalos, together with Dick Butler. Frank was living in Surry Hills when he enlisted in the AIF at Paddington, NSW on 20 February 1945 just after his 18th birthday. He joined the 31st/51st Australian Infantry Battalion, and served in the final stages of the 11th Brigade’s campaign on Bougainville. After Japan’s surrender, he transferred to Nauru and Ocean Islands as part of the occupation force to garrison the islands and facilitate the repatriation of Japanese troops. The battalion performed a similar role in Rabaul, New Britain from December until May 1946. Frank Perez was demobilised on 30 January 1947 (see fig.2). Known to the family as ‘Uncle Franky’, he died in Darwin on 11 March 1999 and his wife died soon after. They were both buried with their son Francis Joseph Perez (1949-1954) who had died at 5 years of age from complications of pneumonia.

The Spain Family

Dionisio Antonio Puerte (1863-1926) from Cebu was also a pearlshell diver on Thursday Island in the 1870s. His surname could not be understood or pronounced so he was instead called ‘Antonio from Spain’ (his homeland still being a Spanish colony at that time), and ‘Spain’ became his adopted surname.²⁹ After living a decade in the Colony of Queensland, Antonio was naturalised as a British subject on 4 April 1889. Antonio and his English wife

²⁸ NAA: B883, ‘NX181128’ item barcode 5584973; *Northern Territory News* 11 February 2012.

²⁹ See Rosenzweig (2014b). In most Filipino dialects, and modern Tagalog, the letter ‘f’ is pronounced as ‘p’, so it is possible that Antonio’s father’s name was actually ‘Fuerte’ (‘strong’ in Spanish) and pronounced ‘Puerte’.

Elizabeth Massey (1866-1951) had eleven sons and a daughter on Thursday Island and in Palmerston, although several of the sons died in infancy. Two of their boys served in the AIF – Felix was wounded on the Somme in 1918, and Prudencio (Percy) had a less illustrious war record and died in 1919. Antonio died of bowel cancer on 21 July 1926, aged 64, after having lived in Australia for about 50 years.



Fig.2: NX134749 Sergeant Joseph Perez (in uniform), with (left to right): Raphael Imilo ('Rusty'), Isabel, Mrs Mary Perez, Margaret and Francisco Augustine (former NX181128 Private Frank Perez) (photo provided by Mr Mike Naylor)

Elizabeth Spain, known as the 'Queen of Darwin' for her extensive work for charitable organisations, was in Brisbane at the onset of WW2. She saw three grandsons enlist for military service (see Part 1) – Felix Richard William Spain (1923-2001), Ernest Herbert Spain (1913-1996) and Daniel Cathalino Spain (1914-2010). Yet it was her second son Catalino Puerte Spain (1887-1942) who she lost, on Darwin wharf on 19 February 1942, aged 54.³⁰ Catalino Spain had married Gertrude Maria Da Souza Conanan on 9 February 1909, the first daughter of Tolentino and Emelia Conanan, and sister of Great War volunteers Ricardo and Elias Conanan. Catalino and Gertrude lived in McMinn Street and had just two children – Christina Liboria Spain and Daniel Cathalino Spain.

During the evacuation, Gertrude went to Brisbane on the SS *Zealandia* on 20 December 1941. When the fighters came in during the first air raid on 19 February 1942, Catalino Spain was machine-gunned on the wharf and then hurled into the water by a bomb blast. His body later washed up and was buried in a collective grave on the beach; these bodies were reinterred at East Point the following day, and on 1 July they were exhumed and taken to

³⁰ See Rosenzweig (2014b) and (2014c).

Adelaide River War Cemetery for burial. ‘Granny Spain’ moved to Brisbane in 1932, at the age of 66, after having lived in Darwin for 38 years. On her death on 3 April 1951 at the age of 85, Elizabeth was described as ‘a grand old lady’, survived by three sons and a daughter, and more than 20 grandchildren and about 35 great-grandchildren.³¹ In addition to losing a son and her daughter-in-law’s brother Ricardo on Darwin wharf, a great-grandson was killed in the Philippines while fighting as a guerrilla in defence of his homeland.

Florenco Francisco (1925-c1942/43).³² Florenco was born in the Philippines, the first child of Christina Liboria Francisco (1908-1973), the only daughter of Catalino and Gertrude Spain (see fig.3). On 4 December 1924, aged 16, Christina had married 22-year-old Doroteo Francisco from Manila, the wireless operator on the Norwegian cattle boat *Pronto* which had come to Darwin to collect cattle. When the *Pronto* left for Manila on 6 December she was



‘gaily decorated with flags’ for the bride and groom. Christina gave birth to six children in the Philippines, and when she returned to Darwin in 1937 she was pregnant with her youngest Filipino child. Tina remarried on 4 April 1939, to Raymond Brooks; after being evacuated from Darwin, Brooks served in the RAAF for 22 years from 3 March 1944 until 23 April 1966, retiring on his 55th birthday with the rank of Sergeant. Christina died on 21 October 1973 and was cremated (as later also was Raymond) and was memorialised at Botany Cemetery.

Fig.3: Christina Liboria Francisco (née Spain) with her first child, Florenco Francisco (photo provided by Mr Rod Brooks)

Her first husband Doroteo Francisco served with the US Navy during WW2, while her eldest child remained in the Philippines and fought as a guerrilla, but was captured by the Japanese and beheaded. It is an unusual circumstance that a grandfather and grandson would die in the same war – each killed in the land of their birth. While Catalino Spain was killed during the Japanese attack on Darwin, Christina’s eldest son Florenco Francisco fought and died as a guerrilla in the Philippines. Although he was Philippines-born, his mother and maternal grandparents were all Australian-born and two great uncles had been killed in the bombing of Darwin. Through his grandmother Gertrude, he was also a great-grandson of Tolentino and Emelia Conanan, from a family line stretching back to the *Gobernadorcillo* of Ybajay in the Philippines. Florenco was of mixed Filipino, English and Portuguese blood, the descendant of Filipino-Australian families although he never actually lived in Australia.

³¹ *The Brisbane Courier*, 22 October 1932, p.22; *The Queenslander* (Brisbane) 27 October 1932, p.34; *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Queensland) 4 February 1936, p.10; CofA 1941-42, part 1 R-W, p.3; *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane) 5 April 1951, p.12; NSD 6 April 1951, p.5.

³² *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 19 December 1924; *The Sydney Morning Herald* 4 March 1942, p.11.

Commemoration

Commemoration overseas. The headstone of Flying Officer Michael Perez stands in the Houffalize Municipal Cemetery. In the investigations conducted in early 1949, only three of Lancaster NE168's crew could be positively identified. The remains of Michael Perez and two others were buried in a collective grave in plot 1B-1C, but each with an individual headstone erected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.³³ Some 10,000 Australians served in Bomber Command – 3,486 of them were killed in action, 20% of Australia's combat deaths during the war (and a further 650 died in training accidents in the United Kingdom). Australians such as Michael Perez who served with Bomber Command were collectively recognised in June 2012 with the dedication of the Bomber Command memorial in London.

National commemoration. The names of two Filipino-Australians from the Great War can be found on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial. Joining them after WW2 were Joseph Conanan and Michael Perez, on panels 85 and 128 respectively. Even though Joey Conanan died after the cessation of hostilities, he was still engaged on operational taskings with the 12th 'Small Ships' Company and his death was considered to be 'as a result of war service' (the specified period for WW2 designated by the War Memorial was between 3 September 1939 and 30 June 1947).

Local commemoration. To honour the civilians killed in Darwin during the first raids on Australian soil, Darwin City Council erected a large plaque beside the doorway to the council offices. This plaque was unveiled on 19 February 1971 by Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck. On Stokes Hill Wharf on 19 February 2012, two special memorials were installed to mark the 70th anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin – a Mariners' Mural and a Wharf Memorial which commemorates the civilians killed on the wharf. These memorials include the names of five Filipino-Australians, including Francisco 'Chico' Chavez, Ricardo Conanan and his brother-in-law Catalino Spain.

To honour Darwin's military fallen from WW2, a bronze plaque was affixed to the base of the Darwin Cenotaph which includes the name of Flying Officer Michael Perez. Joseph Conanan's name was not included on this plaque however, presumably because he was living in Queensland when he had enlisted, his uncle had been killed in 1942 and his father had died in 1945, so after the war there was no-one left in Darwin to advocate on his behalf. In the 1960s, Darwin City Council registered a number of streets and parks in the suburbs of Moil and Jingili in memory of the fallen from the Great War. Following this tradition, on 7 April 1971 'Perez Street' in Wanguri was named in memory of the Filipino-Australian pilot Michael Perez.³⁴

Conanan. A marble headstone bearing an engraved Rising Sun badge marks the grave of Sapper Joseph Conanan in the Cairns War Cemetery.³⁵ Fellow Filipino-Australian veteran Guillermo ('Glamor') Garr MM (1892-1973) is also buried here. Although Joey Conanan died in 1946, his death was regarded as war-related and so his grave was registered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. His name is not listed on the Cairns Cenotaph

³³ Collective grave 1B-1C: FLGOFF M L Perez (Pilot), SGT G E Patterson (Navigator) and SGT A J Kennedy (Wireless Operator).

³⁴ NTG 14, dated 7 April 1971.

³⁵ Martyn Street Cemetery, Cairns – Division SR, Section WG, Row MES: Plot number 39712, Site 5067 (previously Plot R, Row A, Grave 15).

though, because he had enlisted in Brisbane.

Spain.³⁶ On 3 October 1962, Darwin City Council registered ‘Spain Place’ in memory of the Filipino diver and hairdresser Antonio Puerte Spain (1863-1926). The street also recalls Antonio’s son Catalino Spain, killed on the Darwin wharf due to enemy action.

Francisco. Florencio Francisco’s remains were interred as an ‘unknown soldier’ in the Republic Memorial Cemetery in Manila which was established in May 1947; this was renamed *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (‘Heroes’ Cemetery’) on 27 October 1954. Florencio is among the many honoured there by the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, to which Christina and Raymond Brooks paid an emotional visit in 1967. Since 2005, this memorial has been the site of the annual Anzac Day service conducted by the Australian and New Zealand Embassies in Manila.

Conclusion

Beyond their shared Filipino ancestry, these Top End families became inextricably linked through survival and loss. They endured the depression years and survived the 1937 cyclone, only to face a wartime experience which generally comprised the unique intermingling of three circumstances – the evacuation of families from their homes, the bombing raids on Darwin from 19 February 1942 onwards, and the service and sacrifice of daughters and sons. The original Manilamen did not live to see WW2, but between them they contributed a number of children and grandchildren to the war effort. The wartime contribution of these ‘Fil-Anzacs’ represents a significant contribution by the then very small Northern Territory Filipino community to the military history of Australia.

In commemorating and venerating the Filipino patriot and national hero José Rizal, whose contributions have lived on beyond his sacrifice, the Order of the Knights of Rizal has adopted and applied the motto *Non Omnis Moriar* (‘I shall not wholly die’). Equally, the Filipino-Australians who sacrificed their lives during WW2 are remembered today because their names appear on monuments and honour rolls – their mortal lives may have passed but, like Rizal, they have ‘not altogether died’.

Acknowledgments

This is a preliminary record of service and sacrifice of the Filipino-Australians WW2 veterans. Any feedback, amendments or additional information would be appreciated. I am very grateful for the ongoing assistance and encouragement of Mr Januario John Rivas AM, Philippine Consul-General *ad honorem* in Darwin. Thanks also to thank Isabel Conanan Silva Lagas, Michael Naylor and Leanne Wood for kindly providing photographs and information, as well as Pamela Newell, Janicean Spain Price and Roderick Spain Brooks, and also John Silva for permission to quote from his online blogs.

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³⁶ NTG 46, dated 3 October 1962.

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MILITARY HISTORY ON POSTAGE STAMPS: WW1 CENTENARY COMMEMORATIVES

Chris Yardley

In the run-up towards the centenary of the Great War the three post offices of countries whose stamps I collect announced that they would commemorate the event annually with sets of stamps over five years, 2014 to 2018. The stated motivations were similar and, of course, omitted to point out that this was an opportunity to cajole collectors and casual buyers of commemorative stamps into making a five-year commitment. After three of the expected five years of images, this article records my thoughts, chiefly on the Great War commemoratives but with passing comment on other sets of stamps issued during these years.

Country	Announced publication policy for each of the five years
Australia	A set of five stamps and a miniature sheet containing those images.
New Zealand	A set of 10 stamps, miniature sheets containing those images, and a diary containing the images and descriptions of every stamp and a comprehensive narrative of the events of the year in question.
Great Britain	<p>A set of six stamps with specific themes for each of the five years of issue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a portrait of a participant in the conflict • remembrance • a painting by a war artist • lines composed by a war poet • an artefact or object related to a participant • one additional story <p>A 'prestige stamp book' containing the stamp images and a Royal Mail narrative of the events of that year.</p>

[In the text that follows see also the illustrations in the colour section, pp.31-34.]

Australia

Fig.1: The year being featured is clearly shown in each issue, a poppy symbol denotes commemoration and a common title 1914/1918 Centenary of WWI ties the issues together. The 2014 issue has appropriate images and an explanation of the image. The miniature sheet also has a quotation of the then Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, 'If there is to be a war, you and I shall be in it. We must be in it. If the old country is at war, so are we.'

Fig.2: The images are entirely appropriate and seem not to have required a textual explanation.

Fig.3: The 2016 miniature sheet images are weaker than those of 2015 and some effort has been made to colour tint the photographs, which does not work too well. The 'conscription' controversy is correctly recorded. AusPost have used the fifth image, 'writing home', as a prompt to surprise us with a prestige stamp book of the same title. Richard Breckon uses the book to record AusPost activities in keeping the mail moving at time of war, but the stamp pages included in the book are lazy, with repetition of the same images as used on the stamps – but the booklet will be a 'must' for the serious collector as the blocks of four, (of the five stamps), on each stamp page shows the stamps in a different configuration (which some might call 'cheating' a captive market?).

In 2014 Australia also celebrated *A Century of Service: The Australian Defence Force* set of four stamps essentially highlighting the head-wear of the three elements of the Services and also showing a 'rising sun' badge.

2015 saw a bumper year for military history with three sets of stamps, an amazing 117 different images; too many to show here, but to precis: All 100 Australian Victoria Cross holders' images were sold as labels around 70 cent stamp images of a Victoria Cross in a single sheet. As post offices were prohibited from selling the stamps individually, one has to question the legitimacy of the issue, i.e. were any of these ever be used to send mail? I believe not. AusPost have cynically printed a fiscal device, money that will be collected from collectors and/or souvenir hunters. The folder notes that the stamps and labels and the list were Official Centenary Commemorative Merchandise.

Fig.4: Just three of the images including the 70 cent image of the VC itself. I have chosen two awardees at random. They are not named, which I believe is disgraceful and disrespectful. The numbers shown represent Blair Wark of the 32nd Battalion for bravery at Bellicourt, France in 1918 and William Joint of the 8th Battalion at Herleville Wood. The recipients are not named on the label but on the folder which enveloped the several sheets of stamps.

Australia also celebrated 2015 with a strange set titled *Animals in War: A century of service*, the title tying the set to the Great War.

Fig.5: The miniature sheet of the above set. The stamps were also available as gummed and self-adhesive issues. I cannot explain the blue poppy in the sheet's title block.

New Zealand

New Zealand Post has fulfilled its promise and created a substantial library of images and narrative with its first three issues. The diaries are probably a bit too small and are difficult to read easily because of the binding with string, but that is being particular. The diaries to date have featured: 1914 – 'For King and Empire'; 1915 – 'The spirit of Anzac'; and 1916 – 'Courage and commitment'. They tell the stories of soldier Melville Mirfin, nurse Evelyn Brook and Cook Islander, tunneller Solomon Isaacs (Fig.6 below).

Each diary is 64 pages, including ten stamp sheets with a narrative, and 44 pages of photographs, government posters, pictures of artefacts, maps and cartoons of the time and descriptions of the events portrayed. Unique material for the researcher!



Fig.6

The ten stamps from each year are informative and full of context (see Figs 7, 8 and 9).

Great Britain

The Great Britain stamps have lived up to their promise. I am not sure if that is a good thing, as I believe that in declaring the issues would follow a strict discipline, the opportunity to do something different may have been lost. I am not sure that three different poppies actually tell different stories, for example.

The three *participants* so far chosen and representative of 1914-1916 (see Fig.10) are Private William Tickle, Gurkha Rifleman Kulbir Thapa VC (25 September 1915 at the Battle of Loos) and Lotte Meade, a munitions worker. Lotte lived in London, and with her husband was away on the Western Front, she had four children to support. In 1916 she died of TNT poisoning, age 26. In Great Britain 600,000 women took on industrial work.

The three *memorials* (see Fig.11) are ‘the Response’ Great War memorial in Newcastle; to represent Cape Helles, Gallipoli, is an image by photographer Ernest Brooks (the 1924 Helles Memorial honours 20,878 British dead); the final picture is Thiepval Memorial, seen through the mist, on the Somme. 72,250 British and South African soldiers were killed in the Battle of the Somme with no known grave.

The paintings (see Fig.12) are: ‘A star shell’ by C.R.W. Nevinson; ‘The Kensingtons at Lavente’, showing the 13th Battalion, London Regiment, by painter and sculptor Eric Kennington, wounded in 1915; and Stanley Spencer’s work ‘Sepoys arriving with wounded’, about physical and spiritual care showing lines of wounded on stretchers, coming in from the physical darkness of battle into a redemptive light of the operating theatre. It is a painting that merits attention to my mind. I am much less impressed by the few words shown from Great War poets (see Fig.13). But that may just be me?

The artefacts chosen to date (see Fig.14) are: Princess Mary’s Gift Fund box given to serving soldiers at Christmas 1914 – and sometimes seen on ‘The Antiques Roadshow on television; a London Irish Rifles’ football from Loos representing a memory of 1915; and a Battle of Jutland medal commemorating the suffering that occurred on both sides of that 1916 naval battle. Poppies illustrate the ‘additional story’ for each of the three years (see Fig.15): one by F. Strickland; a second by Howard Hodgkin evokes the vivid blood-letting of the trenches as much as the poppy as a symbol of sacrifice; the third image is a ‘battlefield poppy by G Revell.

The six 2016 stamps from Royal Mail are also included in two pages of the 2016 Great War prestige stamp booklet (Fig.16). The background photograph shows a line of Austro-Hungarian troops marching through the snow in the Alps. The conditions on the Italian Front were extremely challenging for both sides. Fig.17 shows the gun-crew of the ‘P’ turret of the battlecruiser HMS *New Zealand* posing for a group photograph after the Battle of Jutland.

The Royal Mail prestige stamp booklets contain 16 pages of text, including the inside covers in addition to four sheets containing stamps. The pages are full of interesting stories. In 2016, however, the stamp booklet included a set of completely different stamps that focus upon the post-office workers’ direct contributions to the Great War, the same theme AusPost has followed with its own prestige stamp book.. The four images (Fig.18) show: ‘The Post Office Rifles’, ‘Home depot at Regent’s Park, London’, ‘Delivering mail on the Home Front’ and ‘Writing a letter from the Western front’.



Fig.16



Fig.17

An Unexpected Bonus

I had not anticipated that Royal Mail would produce a sheet of (ten) stamps to commemorate the ANZAC tradition (Fig.19). The stamps were sold within a folder containing a great deal of background, some quite technical, with a short description accompanying each of the pictorial labels attached to a definitive stamp. Unlike the British stamps I have already looked at, these were issued as ‘self-adhesive’ rather than gummed stamps. This makes the pseudo-perforations difficult to distinguish in the scan shown below. Each of the pictorial labels accompanies a Great Britain (1st class post service) stamp showing the Queen’s head (identifying the country of origin), and what has become an iconic symbol of the Great War,

poppies growing on stalks of barbed wire. The pictorial images are all new to me and are potential sources for future research. In the event that the descriptions in white do not scan well, the ten images show, left to right and then downwards:



Fig.19

The ANZACs landing on 25 April 1915, the beach, a sniping team, ANZAC nurses, stretcher-bearing, a General Birdwood inspection, the 10th Australian Light Horse, the Battle of the Somme, the Passchendaele offensive and finally the daily tot of rum. Are these, I wonder, the images that Australia Post would have chosen had they been limited to just ten images to tell the full story?

Royal Mail, during the period we are studying, has also issued three sets of stamps celebrating anniversaries that fell in 2015: the 200th anniversary of the Gurkhas' association with the British Army, the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, and the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. The artwork for these are excellent and I have used, or shall be using them, in formal presentation to MHSA ACT Branch.

Concluding Thoughts

A huge effort has gone into creating a five-year commitment to commemorate the Great War. It has surely been worthwhile and significant at a time when the postal authorities are suffering loss of revenue as online communications replace what we now call 'snail-mail'. To my mind NZ Post are doing the best job in stimulating and consolidating interest in the Great War. They have chosen to print more stamps in each issue and in making the 64-page 'diary' full of significant background to their stories they take the lead. All three major post offices have printed really cheap histories when you consider that the stamp booklets are sold at only 'pence' above the value of the unused stamps contained. Surely they represent some of the cheapest histories ever printed?

*

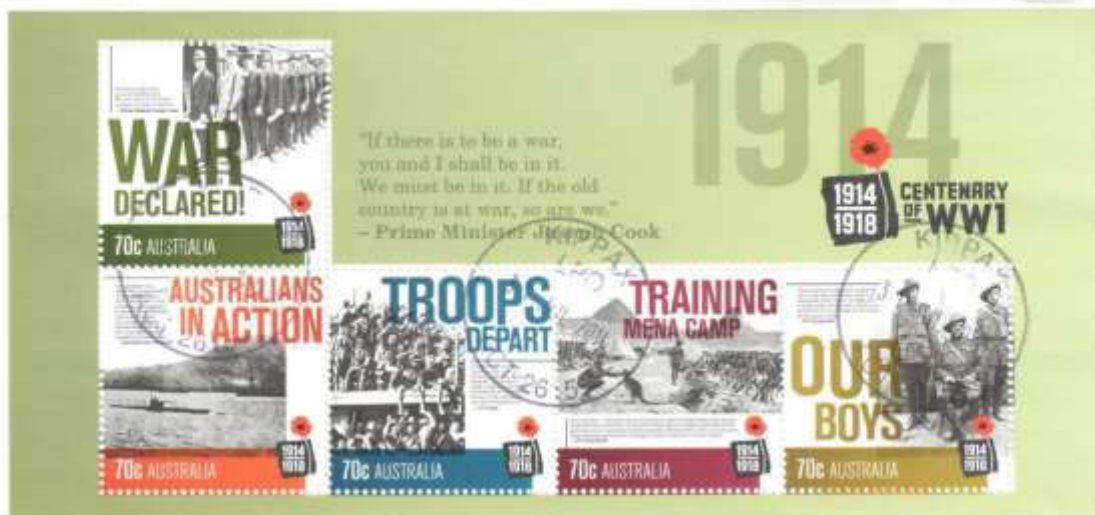


Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9



Figs.10 and 11



Figs 12 and 13



Figs 14 and 15



Fig.18

HOW WAR SHAPED AN AERO CLUB, PART 1

Michael Nelmes¹

*'Narromine, ... shown on a map as a suitable station and proved as such, and mentioned in cables to England as a selected place, has gained advertisement in the aviation world.'*²

Nowadays the town of Narromine, on the edge of outback western New South Wales, is more often associated with gliding and sports flying than with military aviation. But it has been an aviation town in one form or another since the 1920s. During the Second World War its aerodrome hosted the RAAF's first regional elementary flying training school (5 EFTS), as well as a top-secret British Mosquito bomber unit (618 Squadron RAF). The aerodrome's selection for development into a major RAAF station in 1939 followed nearly two decades of intermittent use by defence and Civil Aviation Branch aircraft, strategically located as it was as a refuelling stop on the government-approved air route between Queensland and the southern capitals.

Narromine came of age in 1928-29. Electricity, a newspaper printing office, reticulated water, public baths and golf links had all come into being. Amid these advancements, local aviation enthusiasts enlisted the help of a wealthy grazier and benefactor to provide land for an airfield, and then elected him as founding president of the aero club. With youthful enthusiasm and energy they set out to foster regional 'air mindedness', setting two main goals for their club: to establish a flying school to produce pilots for the next war, and to foster a small airline which would serve the region and link it with Sydney. As air force visits increased during the 1930s, a vocal lobby group, the committee of Narromine Aero Club supported by the municipal council, pushed for the Department of Defence to establish a RAAF flying training school there.

The aero club was born from the experiences of a handful of locals who had watched aircraft duelling over their trenches during the Great War. A few had joined the Australian Flying Corps (AFC). In Part One we examine firstly how the 1919 Great Air Race put Narromine on the aviation map, and then look at the First World War service of the founders of what is now the oldest aero club in regional Australia.

*

A century ago the AFC arrived in France, beginning a year-long contribution to the war on the western front. But in Australia itself, aviation was also emerging from its infancy. In the few years since the first tentative powered flights were made in this country during 1909-10, aviation fever had arrived from Europe. Its military applications were foremost in the minds of many. The great strides about to be made could scarcely have been foreseen even by its most far-sighted proponents, but aviation could no longer be seen as merely an expensive fad with little practical application.

It was the outback communities, separated from each other and from the cities by days or weeks of overland travel along dirt tracks, which stood to benefit most from the new

¹ Michael Nelmes has curated the award-winning Narromine Aviation Museum since 2003. His fourth book, to be published this year, is *Too damned far out west: Narromine's flying century*. Previously he worked in curatorial positions in military technology and exhibitions at the Australian War Memorial, and as senior historical officer for the Office of Air Force History in Canberra.

² Letter from Thomas Trumble (Department of Defence) to George Wheeler (Narromine), 1 December 1919.

technology. At Narromine, an early local experiment in aviation appeared at the agricultural show in 1917: an aeroplane built and exhibited by a local farmer and inventor. The only known photograph of it – the builder's son seated in its cockpit in army uniform – shows it to be a monoplane similar in layout to a Bleriot XI. Reports that it once flew are taken with a grain of salt. The engine, a pair of motorcycle engines combined, was inadequate; a farm horse called Ned was reportedly employed as substitute 'horsepower' to tow it briefly off the ground.



Fig.1: The small monoplane built on a property near Narromine in 1917. In the cockpit is its builder's son, Pte Jim Hayden, while on leave from the army the following year. (Keith Hayden via Narromine Aviation Museum)

When the Great War ended and soldiers made their way back home over the next year, most men simply wanted to forget and to build their peacetime lives. But the veterans of the flying corps, as well as many soldiers who had watched from the trenches as aircraft duelled overhead or droned along on their dangerous reconnaissance sorties, were well aware that such a future would feature ever-improving aircraft. A few of the veterans who returned home to Narromine were airmen. The town had owed its very existence to an earlier transport revolution, the railway, which during the late 19th century was extended into the vast plains of the interior west of the Blue Mountains. Now in the aftermath of the war which had driven aviation technology to remarkable new heights, Narromine found a new focus. Perhaps more than any other regional community in the state, the town became captivated with the promise of what aviation could bring to travel, commerce, communications, recreation, medicine and military power. What especially triggered this interest was an event that came soon after the diggers had returned home: that landmark in the development of long-distance air travel, the 1919 Great Air Race from England to Australia.

Narromine and the Great Air Race

Like many landmarks in history, the seeds of the idea for the race had been planted during a serendipitous encounter. Prime Minister Billy Hughes, prior to going to Paris to sign the Treaty of Versailles, spent Christmas Day 1918 visiting Cobham Hall in Kent, England, where wounded Australian soldiers were convalescing. Among them were airmen who told him they ‘wanted to fly their machines back home’.³ Hughes, a self-described ‘aviation fanatic’, thought that an air race would not only allow them that concession but, more importantly, generate some national prestige. In the longer term, it might stimulate interest in the development of a route for future travel, commerce and mail. He outlined the idea in a cablegram from London to his government in Melbourne on 8 February 1919:

In view of existing possibilities and advantages of aerial communication between Australia and Europe it would be great advertisement for Australia and concentrate eyes of world on us if flight were undertaken. An Atlantic flight will be made shortly, the prize for which is £10,000. I think that in all circumstances it would pay us to offer some prize for the first successful flight by Australians.

If the *Daily Mail* newspaper could pay such a sum to the winner of a ‘great air race’ across the North Atlantic Ocean, a shorter flight than across Australia, then the Australian government could surely afford the same sum for the first Australians who could fly halfway around the world. But such a flight had never been attempted. It would be a gruelling and, some thought, suicidal undertaking. Aids and facilities were sparse and primitive, and many regions had yet to see an aircraft. Most worryingly, engines were still far from reliable.

In Sydney on 11 November 1919, the night before the Smith crew left London in their Vickers Vimy bomber, the Australian Aero Club’s New South Wales Section had met to finalise preparations for the arrival of any of the contestants who might reach Darwin. Chairing the meeting was the club’s state president, Lt Col Oswald Watt OBE, a wartime flight commander of 1 Sqn AFC and commander of 2 Sqn. The chief of the general staff, Maj-Gen J.G. Legge CB CMG, was present and announced that after landing at Darwin the competitors would continue across Australia to Melbourne, where the winners would receive the prize money. This was another aerial journey never yet accomplished, one which even the long-range Vimy could only make in several stages and which many believed had as little chance of success as the trans-world flight. PM Hughes tasked the Department of Defence with doing everything possible to assist the airmen while in Australia. The route from Darwin suggested by AFC officers in England followed the Gulf coastline to Burketown, across to Townsville, and down the coast via Brisbane and Sydney to Melbourne. Hugging the coastline where possible, they reasoned, would aid in navigation.

This was not a good plan. Mindful of the need for at least occasional tracts of land suitable for landing in an emergency, the department ordered a ground survey by car of the proposed route. In a Model T Ford Lieutenants Hudson Fysh and Paul McGinness DFC DCM, wartime flying colleagues of Ross Smith’s in 1 Sqn, and their driver found that the gulf country to Burketown was too heavily wooded. Legge reported at the aero club meeting that ‘more unsuitable country could not have been chosen’. Instead an entirely inland route to Melbourne was plotted, which also avoided the generally less favourable weather along the east coast. Accordingly, the Department of Defence was preparing a number of landing grounds, starting with Katherine River and Newcastle Waters. At Cloncurry in Queensland, McGinness was to station himself with maps for the airmen’s next leg to Longreach and on to

³ Eustis, N., *Australia’s Greatest Air Race*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1969, p.11.

Charleville.⁴ The department also commissioned two more AFC officers, Maj Rolf Brown AFC and surveyor Lt Arthur Rowland (Roly) McComb⁵, to conduct ground surveys of the southern section of the transcontinental flight. The route they had recommended by 7 November 1919 was through Claverton, Cunnamulla, Barrington, across the New South Wales border to Bourke, Narromine, Tomingley, Peak Hill, Parkes, and Forbes to Cootamundra. The remainder of the route to Melbourne had already been traversed by air and did not require a ground survey.⁶ Cloncurry, Charleville and Narromine were designated as refuelling points, each to be stocked with 2,500 gallons (11,000 litres, more than fifty large drums) of fuel and 250 gallons of engine oil. At each would also be stationed an ‘aerial officer’ to issue supplies, maps, and local information. Those assigned this job were Lieutenants McGinness at Cloncurry, McComb at Charleville, and Dibbs at Narromine.⁷

Maj Brown had already visited Narromine in October and begun making local arrangements with George Wheeler, a 29-year old returned soldier and a stock and station agent. For a landing ground Wheeler suggested a lucerne paddock north-west of town on the property of Frank Mack, Narromine’s ‘grand old man’ and one of its pioneer settlers, and acted as a go-between for Mack and the Department of Defence in arranging its use. Reportedly the larger town of Dubbo, 40km to the east, had been the preferred stopover but had no suitable paddocks.⁸ ‘Dubbo squealed’, Wheeler later wrote, ‘and they used every source to have the landing at Dubbo in lieu of Narromine, but their effort failed.’⁹ Inter-town rivalry was moving into aviation, and was to permeate its development in the region for the next fifty years. Brown recommended Mack’s Narromine paddock as the sole refuelling point in New South Wales, and the last one before Melbourne. Sydney was to be excluded, not only because it was off the flight path to Melbourne, but because crossing the Blue Mountains was too risky.

Although the survey of the Darwin to Melbourne route by car was only the first step, one of its legacies lives on: Fysh and McGinness’ work on the northern section later inspired them to co-found Qantas. But what was now needed was a practical demonstration that airmen could locate and safely land at each potential landing ground, which included the three refuelling stops of Cloncurry, Charleville and Narromine and up to 14 emergency landing sites along the way. The resulting aerial survey was the first trans-Australia flight ever undertaken. Flying the reverse route from Point Cook near Melbourne, the survey aircraft was to meet up with the air race contestants at Darwin and pass on useful route information. They were also tasked with patrolling the sea off Darwin in search of any incoming contestants, and were to parachute-drop supplies to any who might come down in the water – a not unlikely prospect given the long final leg over the Timor Sea. ‘Any’ plane that got through from Singapore to Darwin’, the Australian Aero Club meeting in Sydney had concluded, ‘would be a very good one indeed’.¹⁰

The two men chosen for the survey flight across Australia had been schoolmates and wartime pilots in the AFC. Capt Henry Wrigley DFC (1892-1987, later AVM H.N. Wrigley CBE

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Nov 1919, p.11.

⁵ Brown was soon to command the Central Flying School at Point Cook, and a year later McComb became Superintendent of Aerodromes for the Civil Aviation Branch of the Department of Defence.

⁶ *The Argus* (Melbourne), 10 Nov 1919, p.7.

⁷ *The Argus* (Melbourne), 13 Dec 1919, p.21.

⁸ *Dubbo Liberal*, 2 Jan 1970.

⁹ *Narromine News*, 21 Feb 1930, p.1.

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Nov 1919, p.11.

DFC AFC) had flown with 3 Sqn as a reconnaissance pilot in France. The former officer and pilot who accompanied him as mechanic, Sgt Arthur ‘Spud’ Murphy DFC (1891-1963, later Air Cdre A.W. Murphy DFC AFC FRAeS), had flown with 1 Sqn in Palestine, serving in Ross Smith’s flight along with Smith’s mechanics, Bennett and Shiers. Wrigley and Murphy’s mount was a frail BE.2e, a biplane they considered obsolete even as a trainer. One concession at least was made for the forthcoming journey: the aircraft had been fitted with an extra oil tank and a pair of wing-mounted fuel tanks. ‘BE’ was the Royal Aircraft Factory’s abbreviation for Blériot Experimental (referring to the Blériot-style ‘tractor’, as opposed to pusher, engine and propeller configuration), but more often it was interpreted as ‘Bloody Emergency’ by the crews who had to fly it. The BE’s extra fuel tanks increased its capacity to 236 litres, extending the aircraft’s range to 650km in order to minimise the number of fuel stops needed.¹¹ After two attempted departures that were thwarted by engine trouble, on 16 November – a few days after the Australian Aero Club’s meeting in Sydney – Wrigley and Murphy left Point Cook for Darwin. Many believed that this journey over such vast tracts of rugged, unpopulated country had even less chance of success than the global flight. With their uncooperative engine, the airmen themselves may have believed it. In the confines of the cramped fuselage they could carry only minimal supplies: a few spare engine parts, a change of clothes each, a small camera, a gallon and a half (seven litres) of water, and army rations consisting of some biscuits, a tin each of bully beef, and sheep tongues.

At Narromine two days later, the whistle on the town flour mill heralded the arrival of the ‘Commonwealth aeroplane’ just before it landed on Mack’s paddock. This was only the second aerial visitor to town, following a visit the previous month of an Avro 504K which had taken joyrides promoting the government’s first peace loan.¹² Satisfied with the landing ground, Wrigley and Murphy continued north. Four weeks later, after a journey plagued by mechanical problems, they arrived at Darwin where the Vimy and crew, the only race contestants to actually arrive within the month prescribed, were already waiting. Wrigley described the route, and they were soon off for Melbourne. It was 13 February 1920 before the Vimy, now also carrying renowned explorer and cinematographer Capt Frank Hurley who had joined them in Queensland, touched down on Frank Mack’s Narromine lucerne field in the summer heat. Despite having been delayed several weeks in Queensland while an engine and propeller were being rebuilt, the crewmen were greeted by the largest crowd ever seen in the region – an estimated 3,000 spectators. Hundreds of cars, and even more horses, coaches, carts and sulkies, lined the fences. The crew stayed the night after a welcoming party, and local legend has it that in the morning the venerable Vimy was surrounded by an unbroken ring of beer bottles. They continued on for an unscheduled diversion to Sydney and its new airfields at Mascot and Richmond, before finally arriving in Melbourne to receive their prize.

Narromine could now proudly boast its inclusion on the London to Melbourne air route. In later decades, the legacy of its connection with the Great Air Race (or, at least, its aftermath) was to bear fruit with the town’s pivotal role in at least three more air races: the MacRobertson London to Melbourne International of 1934 (when Narromine’s air controller was responsible for the co-ordination of the final leg), the 1975 New South Wales event, and the 1988 GE Around Australia Bicentennial race.

¹¹ Coulthard-Clark, C., *The Third Brother: The Royal Australian Air Force 1921-39*, Allen & Unwin/RAAF, North Sydney 1991, p.15.

¹²Its pilot was Capt Gordon Wilson MC, a veteran of 2 Sqn AFC in France. A wartime flying comrade, Capt Les Holden, later became a regular visitor to Narromine on air charter business.

The town soon hosted more former AFC pilots: during the second peace loan tour, former fighter pilot and Great Air Race contender Lt Val Rendle took joyflights in an Avro, and ‘barnstormers’ such as Charles Kingsford Smith MC of the Wellington-based Diggers’ Aviation Co. generated some good business. In later years, the noted air ace ‘Jerry’ Pentland MC DFC AFC would operate a part-time flying school. A landing place closer to town was needed, but as these were almost unknown in country towns, Narromine made do with its showground and polo field. Through the 1920s a number of aircraft from England stopped over and were welcomed by locals, most notably Sir Alan Cobham while making the first England to Australia and return flight in 1926. But with arrivals infrequent, Narromine needed an aviation boost. It came in the form of a stock and station agent and former AFC air observer who, over the next decade, was to become known in western New South Wales as its ‘father of aviation’.



Fig.2: Some 3,000 spectators came to see the Vickers Vimy land at Narromine, 1 Feb 1920. (Neta Cale via Narromine Aviation Museum)

*

In September 1929, H. Bowden Fletcher DFC (1890-1967) called a public meeting in Narromine’s town hall to generate interest in forming an aero club. A number of the men who came forward to form a committee were Great War veterans. Harry Thrall MID had served with 1 Sqn AFC in the Sinai-Palestine theatre for two years as an air mechanic. Town retailer H.W. (Bert) Kierath had been a gunner with the 1st Field Artillery Brigade in France during the last month of the war. Fred Ballhausen MID had enlisted just a month after the outbreak of war, and during 1916/17 served as a warrant officer with the 14th Infantry Bde on the Western Front, mostly with its canteen section. Two had flying experience: Fletcher himself, who had served in 1 Sqn as an air observer, and Ballhausen’s business partner Bruce Irvine, who had flown with 2 Sqn in France at war’s end and was the only pilot among the founders of Narromine Aero Club.

S/Ldr Bowden Fletcher DFC

Howard Bowden Fletcher, raised in West Maitland and Mosman, NSW, first moved to Narromine some time before 1912 to take up a position with livestock auctioneer Arthur

Cleaver. Mid-year, however, he secured an auctioneering position with a large stock and station firm at Stanthorpe, just over the Queensland border, and moved there. He enlisted in the army a few months after the outbreak of war, and in May 1915 sailed for Egypt as squadron sergeant-major of B Sqn, 12th Light Horse Regiment.

When his squadron came ashore at Gallipoli in pre-dawn darkness on 29 August 1915, it reinforced the decimated and battle-weary soldiers in an unsuccessful bid to end four months of trench war stalemate on the peninsula. The light horse units there acted as infantry, having left their horses behind, and Fletcher's unit reinforced the 7th Lt Horse Regt. After the failure of the Gallipoli campaign and the evacuation in December, his squadron returned to Egypt where he was commissioned as a lieutenant for the regiment's next role as mounted troops in Sinai and Palestine. Fletcher, a Methodist, held traditional views in support of the British Empire which he strongly expressed in his letters home, as well as in one which he had published on 4 January 1917 in the *Brisbane Courier*. Recording his revulsion at the news of the defeat of the Hughes National Labor government's plebiscite on military conscription, he describes as 'traitors and craven cowards' those who had opposed compulsory overseas service (predominantly Catholics) in the present 'crusade against the human impersonation of the very devil himself'.

On 19 April during the second battle of Gaza, an action featuring tank and air support, he was hit in the face by a centimetre-long piece of shrapnel which pierced his left cheek and lodged itself below his right ear. Evacuated to hospital at Alexandria in Egypt, he recovered quickly after the piece surgically removed.¹³ By June he had returned to service as a Hotchkiss machine gun instructor for his regiment. During this time, he was encamped next to a Royal Flying Corps aerodrome. The sight of aircraft coming and going took his interest, and he managed to talk a pilot into taking him for a 20 minute 'flip'. He wrote about it to his parents:

I had nearly all the thrills except looping the loop, and I hope to have more one of these days. The pilot gave me an exhibition of fighting in the air against another machine. We dived and banked, side slipped, shot up and all manner of things to get the advantage in position so as our machine gun could do its work. The first time he nosedived I felt as if my abdominal regions were going right up through my head, but it was a surprise and next time I did not mind it and did not feel the slightest signs of any sickness at all.¹⁴

Fletcher was hooked. He applied for transfer to the AFC, and although initially rejected due to a lack of vacancies, he reasoned that if he could go up a few more times for experience, 'they won't be able to refuse me.' The strategy worked, and in September 1917 he was accepted. Although hoping for pilot training, his gunnery experience made him more valuable to the AFC as an air observer and Lewis machine gunner, and he began training in these disciplines at Cairo and Aboukir, Alexandria. He also began training in the use of airborne wireless sets, and brushed up on his Morse code. In a letter to his parents from Cairo on 12 September he was already setting out his post-war ambitions, both in the air and in politics:

The air is going to be a big affair after the war, and a thorough knowledge of aeroplanes and flying will be of immense value, and especially to me should my political ambitions come off. The AFC cannot be anything else but a big branch of our defence forces ... You know I am ambitious but the war has added fuel to the fire, and it is burning more fiercely than ever before.

¹³ He later used the shrapnel as the clapper in a trench-art bell, which is now displayed with his flying goggles, typewriter, aerial photographs and other effects in the Narromine Aviation Museum

¹⁴ Letters donated to Narromine Aviation Museum by Ewen Simpson.

In November Fletcher was posted as an air observer to 1 Sqn AFC, formerly 67 (Australian) Sqn, in Sinai-Palestine. In this theatre of war, British and Australian forces were bolstering the Arab revolt against Ottoman Turkish rule. After four months presumably in further training (and a month in hospital), in April 1918 he began operational flying as ‘back seat man’ in Bristol F.2B Fighters. He was thrown into the thick of the fighting against the Turkish army and the German air service, seeing his first combat on the 28th. He was in one of two Bristols escorting a reconnaissance aircraft over a Turkish aerodrome when his flight ran into four German fighting scouts. ‘We had a real ding-dong scrap for about 15 minutes’, he wrote to his parents, ‘and between us we accounted for three of the four in great style.’ Fletcher with his ring-mounted Lewis machine gun accounted for one of them, before his pilot’s gun jammed and they were forced to leave the scene. In May his squadron got to meet two of its foes when a German reconnaissance aircraft was forced down near the aerodrome, and his reaction to them was in marked contrast to his elation at downing them in battle: ‘The Huns seem very decent fellows’, his letter reads. ‘We had them to dinner here last night.’

By June Fletcher had logged 125 hours in the air, and aerial photography was added to his tasks when his flight within the squadron took on that role in Palestine. Wielding a heavy hand-held camera over the side of the aircraft, and aiming it in a gale-force slipstream and air turbulence, took skill and perseverance. In fearfully cold air at up to 16,000 feet he often had to expose 50 glass plates in a run, re-loading the camera between each. He later noted that if his photographs were delivered to intelligence staff at 3:00pm, maps based on them were at the front line at 9:00am the next day. In his spare time at his squadron’s station, he pored over maps and photographic prints to learn the lay of the land and the enemy positions. He wrote of his disapproval of the system of official recognition in which a pilot was awarded his ‘wings’ after 30 hours in the air, while an observer had to attain 100 hours. The observer, he felt, was the ‘main man’ doing ninety percent of the work. But it was not long before his own exploits in action came to the notice of his superiors.

On the night of 25 August he was roused from bed by the squadron’s commanding officer with the news that he and three others were to be awarded the newly-instituted Distinguished Flying Cross, following an intense air action the previous day. The award citation reads:

For conspicuous gallantry in air combats and in attacking ground objectives. On the 24th August, 1918 this officer, acting as observer to Lieutenant P.J. McGinness, DCM (and accompanied by Lieutenants Peters and Traill in a second machine) attacked seven hostile machines, of which he and his pilot succeeded in crashing two single-seaters, one of which burst into flames on hitting the ground. In addition, this officer has shewn much initiative in attacking ground objectives, notably on 2nd May, 1918, when he attacked the hangars and camps at Amman from a low height with effect, and also on the 31st July, 1918, when from a low height he attacked trains and transport parks at Beisan. Other attacks were carried out on the 11th June, 16th June, 8th July and 9th August. Further this officer has done much valuable and dangerous work recently in obtaining photographs and intelligence regarding roads etc. which was particularly required.

In Fletcher’s letter to his parents following the 24 August fight, his view of the ‘Huns’ had evidently soured over the months since his amicable dinner with a German crew. ‘It was the best fun in the world’, he now wrote. ‘The satisfaction of seeing them go down and crash and to know that in every instance the occupants were killed was great.’ As well as the two scouts sent down by McGinness and Fletcher, another two plus a reconnaissance aircraft (the latter apparently acting as a decoy) were shot down by Peters and Traill. The four Australians landed to wild congratulations from the squadron, and were dinner guests of the regiment as

well as being personally congratulated by General Allenby (General Officer Commanding the British Expeditionary Force in the Middle East) and General Salmond (GOC Royal Flying Corps in the Field). Fletcher's earlier action at the Amman aerodrome while escorting a British bombing raid was mentioned in the official history of the Australian Flying Corps: his pilot 'chased a German two-seater to earth ... they fired into this machine as it lay on the

ground, at others on Amman aerodrome, and into every party of infantry and cavalry around the town for as long as their ammunition lasted.'¹⁵



Fig.3: Howard Bowden Fletcher, after his enlistment in 1915, with his parents and uncle. (Ewen Simpson via Narromine Aviation Museum)

Cutlack's official history, in addition to the 28 April and 24 August battles, details several of Fletcher's notable actions including a particularly dangerous one on 31 July. After machine-gunning a train, Fletcher and his pilot attacked a 200-strong cavalry formation before creating havoc at a railway station and yard, where 'men

sprawled on the ground, fired rifles, threw themselves into ditches, and made for any available form of cover. A dump of flares exploded and started a local fire. Men jumped out of a train; horses bolted in all directions', writes Cutlack. Then on 19 September, at the start of the final Allied offensive of the Sinai-Palestine campaign, the Battle of Megiddo or Armageddon, Fletcher was the observer in the lead aircraft of a flight of three Bristols when he spotted the Turkish 8th Army retreating out of El Tireh. As Cutlack records, 'the three Australian machines dropped their twenty-odd small bombs upon masses which it was impossible to miss, and fired over 2,000 machine-gun rounds into disorganised mobs of men and animals.' A week later, he made a 12-hour drive to the abandoned Turkish aerodrome at Afuleh, between Jenin and Nazareth, to secure what he could for the squadron, and the booty included a case of champagne. He met and on several occasions chatted with Faisal, soon to

¹⁵ Cutlack, F.M., *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War: Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, vol.8, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1936, p.118.

be king of Iraq, whom he later described as ‘a magnificent specimen of a man with a bright intellect and calm serious manner, who knew his own mind.’¹⁶ He also met Col T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), ‘the wonderful harebrained Anglyshman who runs the show’. Lawrence was sometimes to be seen around Fletcher’s squadron, as Capt Ross Smith flew him around in its Handley Page bomber. After the war Lawrence, too, would join the ranks of airmen, though serving as an aircraftman on the ground in the RAF.

While in Palestine Fletcher wrote *Boundary Riders of Egypt*,¹⁷ a short book aimed at dispelling any notion that the ‘Billjims’ (soldiers) of the Australian Light Horse had enjoyed a ‘delightful picnic’ in the Sinai desert. Its only reference to the air war is the mental strain the troops endured when German aircraft came over the Australian positions on bombing raids. The book was published just after his return home to Stanthorpe in December 1918. He transferred to the army reserve the following April, and resumed stock and station work while also remaining active in the veterans’ community, organising the peace loan drive in Queensland’s Maranoa region and lecturing on the subject of the war which he referred to as the modern crusades. He served as vice-president of that state’s western districts branch of the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA, the present RSL).

Lt Bruce Irvine

A key figure in the early history of the aero club movement in Australia was the national club’s first NSW president, Lt Col Oswald Watt OBE DSO. During the war Watt had commanded 2 Sqn AFC, the unit with which Narromine Aero Club’s vice-president and the sole pilot on its founding committee in 1929, G. Bruce Irvine (1897-1974), had briefly flown in France just after the war. But although he narrowly missed seeing aerial combat, he had seen more than his fair share of ground fighting. The following summary of his service is taken largely from his diary, courtesy of his son Bruce.

Born in Wagga Wagga, NSW, he grew up in Melbourne and was already in military service when the First World War broke out. In February 1914, aged just 17, he had sailed for Europe with Capt Rushall’s Australian Mounted Cadets and was in England when war was declared on Germany. After serving as a cyclist ‘looking for spies and petrol dumps for Zeppelins’, Irvine and his fellow cadets were allowed to return home in February 1915. Arriving back in Australia he worked as a farrier before enlisting in the AIF in June and joining the field artillery. When the 4th Bde, 2nd Division Artillery was formed at Albert Park he was made a senior bombardier on horse-drawn 18-pounder field guns. He and his brother Norman arrived in France in March 1916 with the first of the Australian contingent to cross the Mediterranean; their brother Wallace, too, had embarked for overseas a year earlier. Within 24 hours of disembarking, their transport ship *Themistocles* was torpedoed and sunk on the return voyage. It was Irvine’s first of many close calls, and both of his brothers were later to die in service.

His unit fired its first shots in anger near Ploegsteert Wood on 1 April 1916. In the last week of June, it joined in the artillery bombardment prior to the Somme offensive. This failed to break the enemy lines, the defenders safely in dug-outs on the escarpment. As a result, the Allied casualties in the tragic start to the offensive of 1 July totalled a staggering 19,000 dead and 40,000 wounded, the worst ever suffered by the British and Commonwealth armies in a single day. Later at the Ypres and Fleurs salients, Irvine records the conditions as ‘terrible –

¹⁶ *Narromine News*, 13 April 1939, p.11 (‘On the wing’ column).

¹⁷ Available for download from the State Library of Victoria website.

rain, mush, slush’, a marked contrast to the sweltering heat of his recent training in Egypt. In the spring of 1917 the divisional artillery was close behind the infantry in the attacks on the Hindenburg Line, and then in the summer it was back to the Ypres salient for a big advance. On 12 August he was slightly wounded in the hand and lip near Hellfire Corner, and was evacuated to hospital in England.

Right from his first day in action, Irvine had watched the aerial duels over the Western Front. In his diary he often expressed frustration at Germany’s superiority in the air, such as this entry on 3 April 1917:

Fritz sailed over quite easily tonight and brought down two more balloons just behind us, and he got home safely. We can’t do any good until we get the air supremacy. We can’t get a look in, in that respect, and it is only murder for us to be here without it.

From the air, the Germans were observing the accuracy of their artillery fire and refining its aim (work which 3 Sqn AFC was to perform for the allied artillery later in the war); and being a gunner himself, Irvine could appreciate the advantage that control of the air brought. And so, on discharge from hospital, he transferred in January 1918 to the AFC to fly fighting scouts. At Oxford School of Aeronautics he was billeted in Queen’s College, and in June after passing bombing and gunnery school was posted to 5 (Training) Sqn AFC at Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire.



Fig.4: On 26 August 1920 Lt Val Rendle (a participant in the Great Air Race) with mechanic Sgt A.G. Hillman brought an Avro 504K to Narromine, and flew joyrides to promote the government's second peace loan. He flew it from the showground, where the town's highland games were in progress to mark Caledonian Day. (Neta Cale via Narromine Aviation Museum)

Military flying training in 1918 was not the refined science it later became. Just five hours’ dual flying time was considered adequate before ‘going solo’. Irvine was awarded his wings badge after fifty solo hours, and advanced to Aerial Fighting and Gunnery School where he

attained the school record for aerial gunnery in SE.5a aircraft. Just a week later, on 11 November, he was in London for the armistice parades. Although the war was over, flying duties were not, and nor were their inherent dangers. The Avro 504K, which he flew for the Royal Flying Corps Ferry Pool, was a simple and forgiving aircraft but the rotary engines of the day had their foibles, as Irvine recounts in his diary for 23 November:

Got an Avro today at lunchtime. Very misty flying at 300ft over Cheltenham and my engine cut out dead in a vertical turn. Only field available was about 120 yards wide with trees 50ft high all round. Sideslipped in vertically – pulled her out at about 20ft high, and then instead of crashing into trees and a ditch the far side, I put her straight down at about 50 or 60 mph. Broke her back – all longerons, undercarriage etc, planes [wings] all right, also engine – otherwise a ‘write off’ – my first real crash ... Got a guard from RAF until my own party came. Rang up the drome from a house nearby. Very pleased, I don’t think. Tender and crash party didn’t arrive till dark, so had to stay there overnight.

It was 18 December before he got the chance to fill a vacancy in the Australian SE.5a fighting scout unit in France, 2 Sqn AFC. The squadron was now making only routine flights such as courier services, Irvine ‘doing the rounds’ between stations, over the former front lines and up the French coast. He took the opportunity to follow the well-established Australian tradition of securing a number of souvenirs. A large piece of lozenge-camouflage printed fabric, complete with aircraft serial number, and a compass from his squadron’s nemesis, the Fokker D.VII, are among the rare items that are now preserved in the Narromine Aviation Museum. In March 1919 the squadron handed its aircraft in and returned to England. With the huge number of Australians waiting to leave, it was November before a transport ship was available to take him home to Australia. In postwar life he was property overseer of the Mack property ‘Weemabah’ near Trangie, and in 1926 bought his own property, ‘Reedyforde’, at Dandaloo.

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In Part Two, we will look briefly at the 1929 founding of Narromine Aero Club before examining how one of its two primary goals, the establishment of the first regional RAAF elementary flying training school on its aerodrome, came to fruition in 1940. Commanding 5 EFTS was W/Cdr Tom Baillieu DFC, a 1914-18 pilot with 3 Sqn in France, while its administrative officer was none other than S/Ldr Bowden Fletcher DFC.

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Acknowledgments: Biographical material was sourced from the archives of Narromine Aviation Museum. The S/Ldr H.B. Fletcher letters are courtesy of his great nephew Ewen Simpson. G.B. Irvine’s diary is courtesy of his son Bruce Irvine.

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‘WE MAKE EM AND WE BREAK EM’: UNDERSTANDING THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN ENGINEERS IN WW2

Graham McKenzie-Smith

Introduction

The role of Army Engineers is similar to that of civil engineers, i.e. water supply and essential services, surveys, road construction and maintenance, bridges and buildings, as well as specific army requirements of fortifications, mines and defensive positions. Their brief covers construction or repair all of these to support an advancing or static army or destroying them if the army is in retreat. More succinctly, they assist the army to live, move and fight and to deny these capacities to the enemy.

Field units of the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE) in the Second World War carried their own hand tools and light mobile equipment with heavier equipment, such as bridges, tractors and bulldozers being carried by Corps units who brought them forward as required. Field Park units had the role to manufacture engineering equipment and stores in their workshops and to distribute these stores as needed. Specialist engineers were grouped into units and detached where necessary for such roles as railway construction, sawmilling, bomb disposal, camouflage, drilling or oil tank construction, just to name a few. With the fighting in the undeveloped islands, RAE found themselves building and operating ports, landing craft and small ships, adding further operational skills to the engineers. By the end of the war engineers were over 9% of the Australian Army.

Engineer Headquarters

The senior formations of the Australian Army (Corps and Armies) had a Chief Engineer (CE) who was the advisor to the formation commander on all RAE matters and also exercised administrative and technical control over all RAE units assigned to the formation. The CE was usually a Colonel or Brigadier and his headquarters was usually referred to as CE (name of formation). The CE rarely commanded units directly as they were usually assigned to the lower level headquarters. The term CE was used both for the person fulfilling the role and for the headquarters group that he worked with.

Following the traditions of the Royal Engineers, the senior RAE officer within a division was the Commander Royal Engineers (CRE) and this title was usually used for both the position and the HQ which the CRE used to control the RAE units assigned to the division. At times this unit may have been referred to as HQ RAE. The CRE at each division was a Lt Col and the CRE title was also applied to other engineer headquarters commanded by a Lt Col (e.g. CRE (Works) or CRE Forestry Gp). As well as the CRE for each division or equivalent sised headquarters, a separate group of RAE units were directly available to a Corps or Army Commander, headed by CRE xxx Corps Troops.

Pre-war, engineer stores and the district's works program were managed by the Engineer Services Branch with a Works Section and Stores Section in the headquarters of each command or military district, under the District CRE. Most work was carried out for them by contractors, although they had access to some works troops. In the first phase of the war these sections increased rapidly and by September 1942 the changing workloads in each area led to the adoption of a more flexible arrangement. The CREs at the L of C Areas were reorganised

as a series of Works Headquarters that could be more easily moved around to follow the workflow.

The Chief Engineer (Works) units that were formed in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, WA and NT were designed to be relatively static, while the twelve Commander Royal Engineers (Works) which were formed in the L of C Sub Areas could be transferred as required. Most of the projects were done by a number of smaller works HQs, commanded by a Major which were named after the OC, the Deputy Commander Royal Engineers or (DCRE). Each of these HQs could be moved to match the workload in the different regions and had a design and supervision role with projects to be done by the units under command from time to time or by contractors. Specialist Headquarters were formed as required for groups such as Docks, Forestry, Water Transport, Chemical Warfare and Bomb Disposal units and are covered later with their units.

Field Engineers

The 'normal' allocation of field engineers to each division at the start of the war was three field companies to allow one to be closely aligned with each brigade, although they remained under command of the CRE who could centrally manage the companies to achieve optimal use of his resources.

The basic RAE unit was a Field Company, about 250 men commanded by a Major and containing a small CoyHQ and three sections (later called platoons), each of which had four sub sections of 12 men. Each company had its share of tradesmen and often the sub sections would specialise, although all could undertake the full range of engineer tasks, or fight as infantry if necessary. Each section was self contained with a cook and water cart and could be detached for lengthy periods from the CoyHQ which had the full range of admin and support personnel as well as some of the heavier equipment to assist the sections. Later in the war more mechanical and earthmoving equipment became available to the field companies

Pre-war field companies were formed for each of the fifteen militia brigades and they took the brigade numbers. An Army Field Company had a similar structure to a Fd Coy but these were formed after 1940 to work on projects in the base area and the distinction was removed later in the war when they were renamed as Fd Coys. When the Second AIF was formed the Fd Coys named with the prefix 2/ to distinguish them from the similarly numbered Fd Coys of the prewar militia. Army Fd Coys were also formed to come under control of CRE 1 Aust Corps Tps.

A single Field Squadron was formed for each of the pre-war cavalry divisions and was smaller but more mobile than the Fd Coy associated with the infantry division, also including a small stores section. One was also formed for each of the armoured brigades in 1 Armd Div, but without the stores role which was now undertaken by the new Fd Pk Sqn. With the formation of the light armoured divisions in late 1942, one Fd Sqn was attached to each brigade and a separate Fd Pk Sqn was formed for each new armoured division.

An Army Troops Company was formed in each Military District in 1940 to give them a capacity to undertake limited works programs and, as they were intended to concentrate on construction projects in rear areas, they had a higher proportion of tradesmen. Each company had three construction sections which could work independently, along with two electrical and mechanical sections who could operate water and power supply systems and man a

workshop. They later saw service developing and running the bases in forward areas of the Pacific.

Workshop and Stores Engineers

RAE was responsible for supplying its own and other units with a range of engineer stores, for the manufacture of some of these items and the repair of engineer equipment. These roles were carried out by various workshop and stores engineer units.

In the infantry divisions the Field Park Company had the role of providing engineering support. The workshop section had a capacity to manufacture a wide range of engineer items and the field stores section handled most RAE stores from a series of field dumps. The bridging section had a range of bridging types and the trucks of the section were also available for other transport tasks. Later these sections became platoons and a mechanical equipment platoon was added.

The Field Park Squadron was essentially similar to the Fd Pk Coy in the infantry division but smaller and more mobile for attachment to the armoured division. The workshop section had a capacity to manufacture a range of engineer items and the field stores section handled the RAE stores that were relevant to the division's mobile role. The bridging section had a range of relevant bridging types and the trucks of the section were also available for other transport tasks. Pre-war the cavalry divisions only had a single Fd Sqn which included a stores section, but the increased engineering tasks associated with motor and armoured divisions required a Fd Sqn for each brigade and the formation of a separate Fd Pk Sqn to manufacture and manage engineer stores.

A Corps Field Park Company was also similar to the Fd Pk Coy in each division but larger and less mobile. The workshop section had a capacity to manufacture a wider range of engineer items and the field stores section handled the full inventory of RAE stores from a series of field dumps. As each corps was to have an AASC Bridging Park attached, the bridging section was replaced by an electrical and mechanical section which could construct and operate the power and water supply system for the CorpsHQ. A Corps Fd Pk Coy was allocated to each CRE Corps Tps and CRE Army Tps.

The Workshop & Park Company filled a similar role to the Fd Pk Coy but was static to be attached to base formations. The large workshop section was relatively immobile and had a capacity to manufacture a wider range of engineer items. The expanded field stores section handled the full inventory of RAE stores for the base area and was usually the senior stores accounting unit in the region with a series of reserve field dumps.

In 1944, Beach Groups were formed to support landing operations and an Engineer Stores Platoon was attached to each to provide a range of stores until a Fd Pk Coy could be established. As the more mobile stores units left the rear areas in southern Australia they were replaced in the main centres by an Engineer Stores Depot and by an Engineer Stores Section (Base) in the smaller states.

Fortress Engineers

Pre-war the engineers required to operate the searchlights and engine rooms at the coast batteries defending the ports were part of a permanent Fortress Company which was backed up by militia companies. These were merged to form location based units (in various

combinations) until standardised into fortress companies in December 1942 with state-based fortress engineer headquarters in Qld, NSW, Vic, WA and NG. In May 1943, some RAE functions were transferred to RAA and absorbed into the coast batteries with the remaining RAE sections were collected into an Anti-Aircraft & Fortress Company with an emphasis on works. With the rundown of coast defences these units moved out of the fortresses and became general engineer works units.

Specialist sections in each fortress company included Coast Artillery Searchlight Sections controlling the fighting and observation lights to allow the guns to fight at night; Shore Defence Sections providing engine hands for the operation of coast artillery radars; 9.2" Gun Sections running the engine rooms of the 9.2inch counter bombardment batteries; Water Transport Sections servicing isolated batteries and towing targets; Depot Sections controlling stores; Works Sections undertaking construction projects as required; and Electrical & Mechanical Sections which operated workshops and ran the power and water supply systems. The Wks Secs later became Fortress Works Sections, while Anti-Aircraft Works Sections were formed in 1943 as part of the AA & Frt Coys.

Docks and Water Transport Engineers

In the Middle East the AIF was supported by docks and water transport units of the Royal Engineers, but for the Pacific campaigns these units were formed in the RAE. Docks Operating Companies were formed to work the wharves in forward areas, not only in New Guinea but also in northern Australia, and each was capable of fully working a port. The military interests in the civilian ports in southern Australia were supervised by Docks Control Detachments. These docks units were transferred to the new Corps of Transport in mid 1945. The military ports also needed to be maintained, so RAE formed Port Maintenance Companies and with the final campaigns moving to undeveloped areas, Port Construction Companies were also raised.

Much of the fighting in New Guinea relied upon water transport in small ships and landing craft, which became a RAE responsibility. After some previous ad hoc arrangements, Water Transport Groups were formed, each with a Water Transport Operating Company (Small Craft) and a Water Transport Maintenance Company (Small Craft). The Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers took over the latter, while the former became either Small Ships Companies, Landing Craft Companies or Port Craft Companies, while specialist Sea Ambulance Transport units and Refrigeration Lighter Sections were also formed. Landing Ship Detachments were formed to operate the cranes and other equipment on the RAN's landing ships, and Water Craft Holding Companies joined the mix late in the war. The water transport units also transferred to Corps of Transport in mid 1945.

Specialist Engineers

Initially the AIF in the Middle East were supported by the many specialist units of the Royal Engineers, so only front-line engineer units were formed. However, when the focus switched to the Pacific, the RAE formed many such specialist units to support the Australian Army and its allies. A Railway Maintenance Group was formed in 1940 to repair and maintain the lines of communications in France, but they changed to a construction role when they arrived in the Middle East. The three Railway Construction Companies had a HQ (include workshop) and four field sections and they were supported by the Railway Survey Company. When they returned from the Middle East in 1943, they were converted to mechanical equipment

companies but they retained their original titles to become Railway Construction Companies (Mechanical Equipment)

At the start of the war the Australian Army had little in the way of mechanical equipment and most heavy plant work was done by civilian contractors. The first Mechanical Equipment Company was formed in late 1941 and in mid-1942 mechanical equipment sections were added to some Fd Pk Coys. With the return from the Middle East of the Rlwy Const Coys they were converted to Mech Eqpt Coys and in 1944 several Fd Coys were also converted as mechanical equipment became more available. Initially a Mech Eqpt Coy had a HQ (including a workshop) and four field sections, and later the HQ was expanded to include a section for holding and issuing plant items. In 1944 this function (along with second line repairs) was devolved to a number of separate Mechanical Equipment Park Companies and the Mech Eqpt Coy now had a HQ (including a small workshop), three plant operating platoons and a tip truck platoon. Several independent Mechanical Equipment Platoons were also formed for the Beach Gps and for work in NT when the workload could not justify a full company. To overcome a chronic spare parts availability problem in 1944, a number of specialised Mechanical Equipment Spare Parts Sections were formed along with a Spare Parts Depot in 1945.

Early in the war the British requested Australia to supply companies of trained foresters to avoid the wastage of timber resources that had occurred in the First World War, and Australia raised two Forestry Companies in March 1940. This became a group of three companies under 1 CRE (Forestry) which operated sawmills in UK until they returned to Australia in late 1943. The companies operated independently in New Guinea and two Forest Survey Companies were also formed in 1944 to assess and allocate the forest resources of New Guinea. Along with CRE (NG Forests) this developed into the post war civilian PNG Forestry Department.

In the early part of the war, field engineer units were located in most areas and were able to carry out the maintenance of camps and facilities as required. As the field troops moved north, Camp Staffs in southern states incorporated Engineer Services Sections to undertake this role. By April 1943 these Camp Staffs were being reduced and it was decided to form a series of Maintenance Platoons. Each unit had one officer and 47 men, with a mix of construction and maintenance trades. Later specific Hospital Maintenance Platoons were formed to maintain the larger hospitals. Camouflage Training Units were small units (1 officer/5 ORs) whose role was to train operational units in the art of camouflage. Except for some formed in the Middle East they were generally formed in 1942 with one unit per corps, division or L of C Sub Area. They were renamed as Camouflage Units in July 1943 and disbanded as separate units in June 1944, when camouflage activities were either curtailed or undertaken by RAE headquarters.

By mid 1943 Milne Bay was being developed as the major transshipment port to support the advance along the north coast of New Guinea by Australian and American troops and the need arose for specialist engineers to build oil storage tanks and for associated works, especially large scale welding. Five Oil Tank Construction Platoons were formed and these later became Welding Platoons when they returned from New Guinea. Two specialist Boring Sections were formed in Palestine in late 1941 from experienced hard-rock miners, to be used to develop water supplies and for drilling to support the railway construction group with foundations for bridges. When they returned from the Middle East they converted to drilling for water supply in WA and NT, being renamed Boring Platoons.

Bomb Disposal Companies were proposed in the Mobilisation Plan for each state under local command but these were brought under command of a single bomb disposal group in July 1942, which then became a single bomb disposal company in February 1943. The sections of this company became Independent Bomb Disposal Platoons in October 1943 with the platoons rotated through the more active areas of operations. As well as bomb disposal the units handled unexploded ordnance and some demolitions. Although no chemical warfare weapons were used in the Second World War, a range of chemical warfare (CW) units were raised and maintained. Defence against CW is the responsibility of all units, with the Chemical Warfare Companies training for offensive use of gas. A company was initially raised in each state but these were amalgamated in 1942 and later the unit evolved into a heavy mortar company. CW units continued in the form of laboratory and experimental units that maintained a CW analysis capacity until the end of the war.

Engineer Training

RAE Training Depots were established in each of the Military Districts in 1940 and these were centralised at Kapooka (NSW) in 1942 as the RAE Training Centre, where all RAE recruits were trained and where RAE units were sent to be reorganised, retrained and reassigned. Higher engineer training was at the School of Military Engineering at Casula, although specialist training schools were retained at Meadowbank (Docks), Chowder Bay and Toorbul Point (Water Transport).

Follow the Sapper

From a small beginning in 1939, the RAE was built during the war to a corps of 28,000 sappers in the 660 engineer units that served in all theatres where Australia was involved. The Corps history is expertly covered by Maj Gen R.R. McNicoll in the three-volume set, with World War Two in the third volume, *The Royal Australian Engineers 1919 to 1945, Teeth & Tail*, published by the Corps Committee in 1982. No arm or service experienced such rapid development of appliances and equipment, or such an increase in the variety and complexity of their functions in such a short period. Without these dedicated professionals the rest of the Army would not be able to move, live or fight.

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AS YOU WERE ...

Feedback from Readers and Contributors

- **Russell Linwood** writes:

The OAM is not the Order of Australia Medal as appears in the heading on p.63 of *Sabretache* March 2017 edition. Many people are caught out by this (in my view) poorly designed hierarchy: Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM); Member of the Order of Australia (AM); Officer of the Order of Australia (AO); Commander of the Order of Australia (AC); Knight (shortlived) (AK).

- In the Reviews section of the March 2017 issue, p.52, and under the Contents, p.3, the author of *Allenby's Gunners* is incorrectly named; it should read Alan H. Smith. The Editor apologises for the oversight.

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TIRED OF THE SIGHT OF COCONUT PALMS: LIFE IN THE MILNE BAY SUB BASE AREA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

William Westerman

Histories of warfare, not unusually, tend to follow battles. There is an inherent kinetic energy to military narratives that sees the main actors moving from one place to the next – backward in retreat or forward in victory. The battles that take place are stepping-stones along the way; once one is finished we move to the next. Seldom do we dwell on the condition of Normandy once the allied advance had passed through in August 1944 or what the experience of living in Leningrad was like after the infamous 872-day siege had lifted in January 1944. These places do not hold our interest as much as where the action takes place. Yet it is worth sometimes lingering at the scene of a battle to see what happens afterwards, because for thousands of men and women their war was not at the face of battle, but behind the lines. This is particularly important in the Pacific War, where many sites of conflict were important precisely because the land being fought over was useful afterwards.

Milne Bay is on the southeastern tip of modern day Papua New Guinea. When it is discussed in narratives of the Second World War it is usually in the context of the battle that took place there between August and September 1942. Thereafter, any history of military operations in the South-East Pacific swiftly moves on to other areas. Yet both the Australian and American forces constructed bases in the Milne Bay area, requiring men to garrison and maintain them. For these men and for thousands more in other parts of the war, they were not at the forefront of the fighting, and their experience of the war was dull and monotonous, but no less important to the conflict's execution. This article examines life in the Milne Bay Sub Base Area.

The Battle of Milne Bay had taken place between 25 August and 7 September 1942. Now with the threat to Milne Bay diminished, it could now be built up as a forward supply base to support offensive operations in the area. Due to the enormous distances involved in the Pacific theatre of war, logistics and supply were vital factors in achieving operational victories. Base development provided the logistical foundations for future campaigns; bases allowed air and naval forces to advance over the vast distances of the Pacific Ocean.¹

On 14 June 1943, the Australian base in Milne Bay was designated the Milne Bay Base Sub Area. Airfields already existed there, yet the area was far from a serviceable military base, particularly with regards to its naval facilities. Once the threat of Japanese advances on Port Moresby had subsided, Milne Bay's usefulness as an airbase declined. As a naval base, however, it held many advantages. Its deep harbour was commodious enough to hold any number of ships, and shipping from the United States was able to sail directly to Milne Bay instead of via Australia, potentially saving two or three days' travel time.² This base was also used to support the Australian seaborne offensive to capture Lae, as well various US amphibious operations in the region, not least of which were those concentrated against Japanese merchant shipping.

Ross Mallett has done good work on how and why the sub bases were constructed and used, yet this article wants to shed some light on the actual living conditions in a sub base. The

¹ Ross A. Mallett, 'Australian Army Logistics 1943-1945', PhD thesis, School of Humanities and Social Science, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy, 2007, p.56.

² *ibid*, p.74.

Broadway musical by Rogers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific* (1949, based on James A. Michener's 1947 book *Tales of the South Pacific*) presents US Navy personnel in a tropical paradise, where their only complaint, seemingly, was that they 'ain't got dames'. The reality of serving at a naval base in the South Pacific, however, was far less glamorous.

Milne Bay itself was a semi-ellipse shape with heavily wooded mountains pressing in from three sides, leaving only a 'narrow coastal strip, soggy with sago and mangrove swamps; bush-covered except where a few coconut plantations stood in orderly rows'.³ It was 'notorious' for torrential rains during the wet season and was a 'malarial pest-hole'.⁴ The Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services (DADMS) stated that malaria was 'the main cause of hospitalisation' and rats were 'prevalent'.⁵ Amongst the lesser medical cases admitted to the Regimental Aid Post rather than hospital, skin diseases held 'pride of place'. In October 1943 the DADMS reported that an 'effort is being made to standardise a hot water shower and have one installed in each unit as an endeavour to lower the incidence of minor skin complaints'.⁶ He continued:

Hygiene of the area is definitely improving, but there is still a considerable amount of work to be done, particularly amongst the smaller units who experience difficulty in making sufficient personnel available for full time hygiene duties. The practice amongst many units of allocating 'misfits' and unsuitable personnel for unit hygiene duties is to be deprecated, as this only results in a poor standard of hygiene efficiency.⁷

A problem highlighted in February 1943 was the potential spread of dysentery via the influx of 'natives' as labourers. Their 'oversers' were to instruct them that the 'latrine will be used and that any native seen defecating in any place other than the latrine, will have his number taken and a report forwarded to Deputy Assistant Director, Native Labour for disciplinary action'.⁸

Although Milne Bay was a rear area base, it was not entirely a safe haven. For a while the 2/2 Australian Field Bakery was operating under 'difficulties', not only because their field ovens were struggling to cope during the wet season, but also because two old land mines exploded nearby injuring one soldier. The unit's monthly reported admitted that this at least had the benefit of relieving the monotony. Personnel were also subject to Japanese air attacks from time to time. The Japanese were stung both by successful allied efforts to disrupt their shipping to Lae and their failure of the battle of the Bismarck Sea, and they continued to launch air raids against allied bases in the surrounding areas, including Milne Bay, which was hit on 14 April for the twenty-fourth time, resulting in one ship, the *Van Heemskerck*, being sunk.⁹

Despite the work and the threat of Japanese attack, possibly the most difficult thing for men to endure was boredom. A report from the ADMS in September 1943 stated: 'Recreational

³ Dudley McCarthy, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series One: Army, Volume V: South-West Pacific Area – First Year*, AWM, Canberra, 1959, p.155.

⁴ *ibid* p.155

⁵ Monthly Report DADMS-MBBSA December 1943, January 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, December 1943 – January 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

⁶ Monthly Report – October 1943 DADMS Milne Bay Base Sub Area, 4 November 1943, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, December 1943 – January 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 8 February 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, February – March 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

⁹ Phillip Bradley, *To Salamaua*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Port Melbourne, Vic, 2010, p.94.

amenities are provided by a good picture circuit and a concert party, but boredom is a very real factor as it almost impossible for the troops to obtain any change of scene. Most people rapidly become tired of the sight of coconut palms.¹⁰ It did not help that gambling and intoxicating liquor were both prohibited, although how well these bans were enforced is questionable. It is difficult to believe that the regular Intelligence Reports informing soldiers what was happening in other parts of the war was an effectively entertaining substitute.

To stave off boredom, the RAAF established a radio station, broadcasting in selected blocks every day of the week. A notice on 16 February noted: 'Reports on reception and criticisms of a constructive nature would be appreciated by RAAF'.¹¹ Each day the radio ran from 1200 to 2100 hours, providing news, music, and a feature programme every day, sports results on the weekend and 'jungle cathedral' on Sundays.¹² In addition, two chains of film projectors were set up around the base area, to show films dispatched from Port Moresby. The army established 'Cinema 80', while the air force had 'RAAF Cinema'. Amongst the films shown were *Jitterbugs* (Laurel & Hardy), *City For Conquest* (Ann Sheridan & James Cagney), *Random Harvest* (Greer Garson & Ronald Colman), *Sky's the Limit* (Fred Astaire & Joan Leslie), *No No Nanette* (Anna Neagle) and *Hers To Hold* (Deanna Durbin). The rotation of films was very high, with two new features showing almost every week. Eventually, the different projector locations were given more appropriate names. The projector at 110 Australian Casualty Clearing Station for instance, was renamed the Plaza. Others included the Regent Theatre, The Astor, Tivoli, and His Majesty's.¹³

In December 1943 it was made known that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was running a writers' competition with prizes totalling £1,000 for 'original literary work dealing with Australian life, history or characters. The competition calls for novels, plays, documentary features, short stories, poems and discussions.' For Christmas Day 1943, Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. McConkey, the administrative commander of the Milne Bay Base Sub Area, approved for public funds not exceeding one shilling per man to be spent for the purpose of 'supplementing the standard ration scales for Xmas 1945'. The extra supplies were sourced from the Australian Defence Canteens Service. 'The general situation in Australia' it was remarked, 'in respect to food stuffs is such that the range of items is of necessity very limited'. It was expected that ham, poultry (chicken and turkey), Christmas pudding, muscatels, mixed dried fruits and cream would be available. In addition, the Australian Comforts Fund (ACF) intended to distribute hampers to the troops in New Guinea containing (per man): nuts and fruit, Nestlé's cream, Christmas cake, plum pudding, chocolate and chewing gum.¹⁴

A one-day cricket match was held between the army and the RAAF on 20 February 1944. The ACF provided 'cool drinks and light refreshments' for spectators, but personnel were

¹⁰ Monthly Report – September 1943, DDMS NGF, 4 October 1943, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, December 1943 – January 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

¹¹ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 16 February 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, February – March 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 23 February 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, February – March 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

¹⁴ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 16 December 1943, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, December 1943 – January 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

reminded to ‘bring their own drinking containers.’¹⁵ By that time the ACF had established as Club Room and the facilities were available for all personnel in the Area. It was equipped with ‘a good floor, piano, amplifier, furniture, crockery, urn and stove, is ideally suited for small unit social functions of all kinds’. It could also be converted into a large stage relatively easily for performances. The ACF also loaned units stores such as radios, furniture, sporting materials, gramophones (with records) and other ‘recreational accessories’, which they could borrow, but were required to return once their unit was placed on notice of movement to the mainland. In April 1944 the well-known pianist Isador Goodman, serving as a captain in the Australian Army Education Service, visited Milne Bay to give two music lecture recitals.¹⁶

The 9th Australian Division was able to launch *Operation Postern*, the ground assault against Lae from Milne Bay on 4 September 1943. This assault was part of the wider *Operation Cartwheel*, a two-pronged advance intended to isolate the major Japanese base at Rabaul. The operations were successful in their objectives, and by 1944 the Japanese in New Guinea had been effectively isolated, left to ‘wither on the vine’ in MacArthur’s words, as their supply lines were cut off. The Milne Bay Base Sub Area had done its work in supporting these operations, and when compared with the Japanese lines of communication in the same region, demonstrate the difference importance and value of having a successful logistics network. As the Japanese sphere of influence shrunk further and further back towards the Japanese home islands, the necessity for bases such as Milne Bay diminished. Although it may seem counter-intuitive to look at something as tedious as the goings-on of a base in the middle of nowhere, for thousands of servicemen, this was the reality of their war, and their service should neither be forgotten nor taken for granted.

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SOCIETY NOTICES

2017 MHSA Federal Council Elected Officials, Branch Delegates and Ex-Officio Appointments

Members please note the updated list of Society officials with email contact addresses.

POSITION	BRANCH	SURNAME	PREF NAME	PREFERRED EMAIL
Elected Federal Council				
President	ACT	GOYNE	Rohan	rgoyne@grapevine.com.au
Vice President	ACT	WEBSTER	Nigel	Nigel.Webster1@defence.gov.au
Secretary		Vacant		
Treasurer		Vacant		
Councillor		SIMPSON	Colin	simpsons@grapevine.com.au
Councillor		LOMASNEY	Ivan	maid106@hotmail.com
Councillor	QLD	LINWOOD	Russell	rlinwood@bigpond.net.au

¹⁵ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 16 February 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, February – March 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.

¹⁶ Milne Bay Base Sub Area Routine Order Part I, 9 April 1944, Milne Bay Sub Area unit diary, April – May 1944, AWM52, 1/8/4.