

PIONEER NEWS

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SHORT STORY OF 2/1st and 2/2nd PIONEER BATTALIONS

2/1st PIONEER BATTALION

On May 1, 1940, Lieut-Colonel P. E. Macgillcuddy, Australian Staff Corps, was appointed Commanding Officer of the 2/1st Pioneer Battalion and by May 24 most of the senior appointments had been made, with a mixture of both infantry and engineer officers.

An Advance Party established Battalion Headquarters in Ingleburn (NSW) on May 24. However, four days later they were ordered to move the unit to the new section of Greta Camp — known as "Silver City".

From that day men began to arrive in "droves" and the build up of unit strength was fairly rapid. Colonel Macgillcuddy addressed the first battalion parade on June 11. The battalion had been launched and training proceeded with greater efficiency each day.

During early September, 1940, the battalion moved to a new camp in Dubbo and were the first troops to occupy the camp — the site today of the Western Plains Zoo.

However, the stay in Dubbo was short. The unit proceeded on pre-embarkation leave on September 20 for seven days and was back in camp and ready to move out to embarkation port on the 29th.

The battalion embarked on the *Johan-de-Witt* at Pymont on September 30, along with the First Reinforcement, and sailed late that evening. D Company had proceeded to Melbourne and embarked on *Nieuw Zeeland*, which joined the convoy off Port Phillip on October 2.

Disembarkation took place at El-Kantara and from here the unit moved to Julis Camp in Palestine. Training commenced in earnest and by the end of December, 1940, it appeared likely that the unit would move to Egypt early in the new year. It was at this time that Colonel Macgillcuddy was admitted to hospital and Major Arnold Brown was appointed to administer command, which was later confirmed.

Early January saw the battalion on the move, firstly to Amiriya in Egypt and by January 22, 1941, they were in Salum. The capture of Tobruk by 6th Division was now complete and Italian resistance virtually ceased, so the battalion was under orders to move to Tobruk.

Our initial tasks in the Tobruk area were aimed at getting the port into working order, fixing roads, repairing wharves and it was here that they suffered their first desert casualties from booby trap explosions. From here on, the tasks took the various companies of the battalion to Derna and beyond to Barce, Tocra and Benghazi.

This was the period in Libya when events were beginning to take place which would drastically effect the future of the battalion. Rommel was on the move from Tripoli with his highly-trained Afrika Corps and soon had the British and Australian forces withdrawing back towards Tobruk.

In order to slow down Rommel's advance, the battalion was ordered to prepare demolitions and anti-tank obstacles through the Wadi Cuff area, the Tocra Escarpment and at Derna, thus destroying all the restoration work the battalion had done earlier.

On April 8, 1941, the unit was back in Tobruk (under command of 9th Division who had relieved the 6th Division in Libya in March) and remained there during the long months of the Siege. During this period, until they were relieved in late September, they shared front-line duties equally with the infantry battalions and casualties were high — 52 officers and men were killed, 72 were wounded and nine taken prisoner.

With their departure from Tobruk in September, the battalion moved to Palestine for a well-deserved

rest and further training, before returning to Australia in March, 1942.

After leave, the unit moved to Queensland to once again resume the role of an engineer, but in September was moved to New Guinea for top priority engineering jobs. However, the Japanese break through and the advance towards Moresby saw the unit once more swung into the role of infantry when they defended Imita Ridge. D Company had in the meantime landed at Milne Bay and after defending the perimeter for four weeks they resumed engineering and road tasks.

In November, 1942, after two months of patrolling and working in the forward areas on the approaches to Ioribaiwa, the battalion moved to a new site at 9-mile Quarry — working three shifts of eight hours each. This was back-breaking work and the morale and physical condition of the men began to deteriorate. Work continued here until June, 1943, when the battalion moved to Donadabu.

It was at this time that advice was received that Colonel Brown was to be transferred and that Major G. Graham had been promoted to Lieut-Colonel and was to command the battalion.

October, 1943, saw the battalion once more back in Australia and in camp on the Atherton Tableland.

Over the next 18 months the battalion regrouped themselves and carried out all phases of jungle exercises and amphibious training at Trinity Beach, north of Cairns. It was here on the Tableland that Lieut-Colonel Adrian Buckley assumed command of the unit and was able to train the battalion for its next and last tour of operations at Balikpapan.

On May 18-19, 1945, the unit began to move out of Kairi for embarkation points, and by early June was in Morotai preparing for their final campaign in Borneo.

The landing took place at Balikpapan on July 1 and by July 4 all companies were ashore and working in the beach area, with many interruptions due to Jap shells landing in and around beach and transport areas. The battalion was also busy unloading stores from ships in the harbour.

Later companies were moved across Balikpapan Bay to Penadjan and Djinabora to prevent raiding parties moving down river to the Bay. Further movement took place to the beach area at Tempadeong, occupied by the Japanese, and daily clashes with the enemy took place, resulting in casualties on both sides. Intensive patrolling was carried out in this area for several weeks.

News of the capitulation was received on August 10 and the surrender of the Japanese in our lines at Tempadeong on September 10 was a momentous occasion for the battalion.

2/2nd PIONEER BATTALION

Authority for the formation of the battalion was given on May 1, 1940, and Lieut-Colonel N. F. Wellington, M.C., V.D., was appointed to command. By May 16, the majority of officers and first draft of NCOs were taken on strength, and two days later assembled at 58th Btn. Drill Hall at Moonee Ponds (Vic.) to proceed to Puckapunyal where the troops arrived in large drafts during the first week in June.

A move to Balcombe was carried out on February 21, 1941, and it was from here on April 6 that the main body of the battalion entrained at Mornington en route to Pymont. The troops were moved by ferry to the *Queen Mary*, anchored in Sydney Harbour, and sailed shortly before dawn on April 9.

The unit arrived at Port Tewfik on May 3, then on to El-Kantara, before entraining for their first camp in Palestine at Hill 95.

Within a few short weeks the battalion was committed to action with the 7th Division in Syria and

moved out to an assembly area at Er Rama. Five weeks of intensive action against the Vichy French followed and the battalion took part in grim fighting around Fort Merdjayoun, Damour and surrounding areas. In that brief conflict, 73 officers and men had laid down their lives and a further 102 had been wounded.

Several changes in posting were necessary after the Syrian campaign and in November, 1941, Lieut-Colonel J. M. Williams, O.B.E., E.D., arrived in Qatana to take command of the battalion.

On February 1, 1942, the *Orcades* steamed out of Port Tewfik with the Pioneers, minus the baggage party and most of the transport party, bound for an unknown destination. The unit finally arrived in Java on February 18 and moved to the aerodrome at Tjilitan.

Confusing action and movement ensued over the next few weeks. Short of equipment, Bren guns, anti-tank rifles, no vehicles, no ammunition other than that carried by the troops, and no rations — the unit, along with other troops on Java, capitulated on March 9. A total of 865 members of the battalion became prisoners of the Japanese — those who did not come home numbered 258.

The battalion reformed in June, 1942, under the command of Lieut-Colonel J. T. Lang, O.B.E., M.C., at Wagga Wagga (NSW) and then moved to a new training area at Kapooka. The nucleus of the reformed battalion were, in the greater part, the original unit's baggage party, and troops mostly from NSW and Victoria.

On September 30, 1942, the battalion marched out to Strawberry, WA, and later moved to Camp Bellevue at Midland Junction. They were in camp here until January, 1943, when another move was made to Mangalore in Victoria, before entraining once again for the Atherton Tableland for intensive jungle training. In its first year the re-formed unit had moved six times and was about to embark upon its seventh — "we had to be better than Grace Bros" was the cry.

Embarkation for New Guinea took place on July 25, 1943, and on August 25 the unit was air lifted from Moresby to Tsili Tsili. It was planned the main body of the battalion would march from here to Kirklands Dump, a distance of some 50 miles, and a second party including engineers were to sail 12 large folding boats carrying heavy equipment down the Watut River to the Markham. On September 1 the main body, consisting of 780 men and 760 native carriers moved out on the long trip to the laying-up area at Kirklands, arriving on the evening of the 4th. The surviving river parties also arrived during the night and final preparations for the hazardous crossing and the assault on the airstrip at Nadzab were made.

Once the bombing and staving of the suspected Japanese positions around the area of the strip had taken place, the unit quickly advanced to meet the American 503rd Parachute Regiment who had been dropped on the strip. Detailed personnel in command of native labour quickly commenced to clear the strip, while the remainder of the unit, along with the Parachute Regiment and some gunners from 2/4th Field Regiment, put a defensive perimeter around the strip and partly down the Lae Road.

The first elements of 7th Division commenced landing a few hours later, amid burning grass and smoke, and went into action in the area.

Defensive action continued through to Lae, entering the town on September 16, where resistance had ceased. From Lae the battalion moved back to Nadzab and were flown to Kaiapit in the Ramu Valley, before moving on to Dumpu. The battalion carried out extensive patrolling in the lower

(Continued on page 4)

2/2nd PIONEER BATTALION — from page 1 ranges and on December 11 the battalion was ordered to occupy the high ridges overlooking Mene River valley and Shaggy Ridge. Patrolling was difficult and carried out into Japanese-held areas. It was during this time that command of the battalion passed to Major E. F. Aitken.

Operations in this area continued until January 23, 1944, when with the capture of Mt Protheroe and Kankiryo Saddle the battalion had completed their task.

The unit had cause for satisfaction — the first unit committed to action in the Nadzab-Lae campaign, it remained in the field to the end. It had served under each of the three Infantry Brigades of the 7th Division and earned the confidence of all Senior Commands.

On February 8 the unit was on its way home on leave before returning to North Queensland for amphibious training. Command of the battalion had been given to Lieut-Colonel C. E. Davis, D.S.O., M.C., and on arriving at Trinity Beach the unit was formed into 2nd Beach Group, and carried out exercises with troops of all three Divisions.

Embarking on the *Sea Barb* on March 16, 1945, destination Moratai, the battalion then saw service with 26th Brigade of 9th Division on Tarakan, as a Beach Group Battalion, before returning to Moratai in May.

In July, 1945, the unit once again acted as Beach Group Battalion for 7th Division landing at Balikpapan in Borneo and remained with 7th Division until hostilities ceased and battalion was declared redundant.

There are many memories in the minds of those who passed through both battalions during the five and a half years of their existence, but at the top of the list are the names of those who did not return or who have since passed on. Let those who are left pay tribute to their battalion — now celebrating its 50th Anniversary.

SICK PARADE

CLIVE (CASEY) BROWN 2/1 of Bondi contacted the Secretary to say he had recently had a hip replacement operation carried out at St Vincent's Hospital. While at the hospital he met Clem Moroney, who was having throat problems.

KEVIN (FROSTY) McLEAN 2/1 of Fairfield had a stay in Concord Hospital in February and was visited by Bill Jollie. Kevin sent regards to all Pioneers.

JOY PREEDY 2/2 of Shenton Park, WA, had a three day stay in hospital with gall bladder trouble but according to Len she is now starting to get around. Do hope by this time you are fully recovered. Joy and special regards from Peg and Max Herron.

ESME GRIFFITHS 2/1 of Mayfield had a spell in hospital and Jack is pleased to report she is improving steadily. With a busy person like Jack to look after, you can't afford to be on a sick pass Esme, but we do all wish you a speedy recovery.

BOB McCLOSKEY 2/1 who resides at a Parramatta nursing home, was visited by Bill Jollie in February. Bob sends regards to all Pioneers.

HUMPHREY JACKSON 2/1 of Norfolk Island was operated on at Concord Hospital in February, resulting in having the lower part of his leg amputated. He is now recuperating at Lady Davidson and has been visited by Bill Jollie, Steve Clarke, Ken Stuart and Bill Tasker.

FRANK HEPBURN 2/2 of Condell Park was recently in Bankstown Hospital and was visited by Bill Tasker. Thank you Irene for letting us know that Frank was in hospital and we hope by now he is much better.

RON CALLAGHAN 2/1 of Hunters Hill had a short stay in hospital and was visited by Bill Tasker and found Ron to be his usual cheery self. Hope you are now at home Ron, and fully recovered.

PETER CRAIG 2/1 of Leura came down in March for a further operation at Concord Hospital and was visited by Bill Jollie and Bill Tasker. Peter was in for a hernia operation, so we do hope that your health will improve.

WELFARE ENQUIRIES

All notification of hospital visiting and funeral attendance to be given to Mr Bill Tasker, 3 Killara Avenue, Kingsgrove, phone 78 6658.

TOUR TO GALLIPOLI

Hearty congratulations to Jack Griffiths on being nominated by the Gallipoli Legion Club of Newcastle to be their representative at the Anzac Day Service at Gallipoli.

Jack is President of the Gallipoli Legion Club, Newcastle, in addition to being President of the Rats of Tobruk Association, Newcastle Branch.

There are still four veterans of Gallipoli with the Club, but they were not able to make the trip on medical grounds.

The tour undertaken by Jack is being organised by a Newcastle travel agency and comprises a party of 30. It has no connection with the Government sponsored trip.

They leave on April 18 by Qantas and the first stop is Athens for two nights, Istanbul for two nights and Gallipoli for three nights, with a special Turkish guide to cover all those areas. Then on to Paris for one night and Belgium for three nights and a comprehensive tour of the French battlefields.

After this tour Jack will go on his own private tour with seven days in London, a six day tour of Britain, Wales and Ireland and a 13 day tour of Europe, comprising Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France.

Jack will arrive back home about May 30, just in time to attend the Gosford Reunion. Hope you have a good trip Jack and look forward to a report from you.

MAX LAW IN HOSPITAL

Our popular Welfare Chairman suffered a severe stroke in October and has been confined to bed and a wheel-chair ever since. After a long stay in Sutherland Hospital, he has been transferred to John Paul Nursing Home at Heathcote.

The stroke has left Max paralysed in his left arm and leg and his memory affected.

Joyce Law and her family spend a part of each day at the hospital, in an endeavour to help Max to recover, and extend their thanks to all those who regularly visit Max. Their visits are much appreciated.

LAST POST

BOB GALES 2/1 of Toukley passed away on November 30, 1989, and the service was conducted at the Church of England Chapel at Rookwood Cemetery.

Bob had been in a nursing home for the past two years and he had been ill for some time.

In attendance were members from Lidcombe RSL, Bruce Perry of ROTA and Peg and Max Herron representing 2/1st Pioneers.

Bob had worked at Rookwood Cemetery for many years, firstly in the gardening section then later as Assistant Manager.

In his address the RSL President spoke highly of Bob as he had always been a regular attender, and had been on numerous trips to New Zealand with the RSL and was highly thought of by many friends over there.

Sincere sympathy from the Association was extended to Bob's wife Lil, and daughters Marie, Janet, Doreen and Heather.

ARTHUR VINCENT HALE 2/1 of Anvil Creek via Greta passed away in February and the funeral took place at Beresfield Crematorium.

The RSL service was conducted by our Jack Griffiths who expressed to Mrs Hale and family the sincere condolences of the Association.

In attendance were eight members of the Maitland RSL.

BERT COOPER 2/1 of Chester Hill passed away in February whilst in Auburn Hospital. The funeral was attended by Bill Tasker who extended to the family the sincere sympathy of the Association.

The Secretary received a thank you card from Mrs Cooper.

SID VAUGHAN 2/1 of Revesby passed away on March 10 and the funeral at Rookwood Crematorium was attended by Bill Tasker.

The Revesby RSL conducted the Poppy Service and the Eulogy was read by Bill Tasker. On behalf of the Association Bill extended sympathy to Mrs Vaughan and her three children.

ANZAC FUNCTIONS — 1990

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

TUESDAY, APRIL 24 — REDFERN RSL

The Annual General Meeting will be held at the Redfern RSL Club, on corner of Redfern and Gibbons Streets, Redfern, just east of Redfern Railway Station.

The meeting will commence at 3.30 pm and finish at 5 pm and members are invited by the President to partake of a few drinks at the conclusion of the meeting.

Then a snack at the club and proceed by train to Martin Plaza for the Wreath Laying Service.

WREATH LAYING SERVICE

Assembly will be on the corner of Martin Plaza and Pitt Street on the G.P.O. corner, as last year. Form up at 7.25 pm, march off at 7.27 pm and lay wreath at 7.30 pm.

ANZAC DAY MARCH

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25 — PHILLIP STREET

Forming up points for both units are the same as last year — 2/1st in Phillip Street, head on to King Street, and rear of 6th Division, 2/2nds in Phillip Street near Martin Plaza and rear of 7th Division. Both unit banners will be displayed at their respective assembly points. Please check notice in city newspapers for any changes in assembly points.

ANZAC DAY REUNION

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25 — REDFERN HALL

Upon completion of the march and service at Hyde Park, members of both units will make their way to Museum Station to catch the train to Redfern for the Anzac Day lunch and reunion.

Members not able to march are still welcome at the Reunion and your mates will be pleased to see you.

The doors of the Redfern Town Hall, corner Pitt and Wells Streets, Redfern, will be open at 11.30 am and draught beer, served in jugs, will cost \$3.

A new caterer will be on the job, as John Winters has retired up the coast. Brothers Catering Service of San Souci have assured us they will make it an enjoyable meal.

THANKS TO OLIVE FINLAY

At the March Committee Meeting it was proposed that a letter of appreciation be sent to Olive Finlay in recognition of her dedication to the wrapping of the *Pioneer News*.

Apart from Peg Herron, Olive is the longest serving lady on the Wrapping Committee and this year Olive will have notched up 27 years as a member of the team.

The Secretary in particular wishes to place on record his grateful thanks to Olive for her regular attendance at the wrapping meetings.

2/1-2/2 PIONEERS, WA

A meeting of the WA Pioneers was held on November 17, 1989, at Anzac House, Perth, and those in attendance were: Joy Butcher, Joan and Jack Monger, Norm Le Cornu, Jean Lyford, Jack Murray, Arthur Dearden, Ethel and John McDougall, Fred (Pee Wee) Craig, Norma and Bob Sefton, Beth Lee, Syd Abercrombie, Freda Due, Jack Stewart and Len and Joy Preedy.

Barrie Hunt and his wife sent apologies from Coober Pedy which they were visiting while on their tour of NT.

Bob and Norma Sefton left to catch a bus and being in a hurry Bob fell over and had to return for first aid treatment.

Joan Monger reported that Jack broke a record of getting off his chair to get a jug of beer — not just once — but twice. Jack is back into growing a moustache.

Fred Craig brought along some old maps and newspaper cuttings about New Guinea, which everyone was keen to see. Also noticed Fred and Freda Due with their heads together, no doubt catching up on old goldfield times.

George Murphy, Secretary 2/2 in Melbourne, sent a letter to meeting with regards to all members.

— LEN PREEDY