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ESCAPE FROM RABAUL

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INTRODUCTION. In January 1942 I had just taken up a position as platoon Sergeant of A/A platoon in H.Q. Company of 2/22nd Battalion. The Platoon Officer was Lieutenant Henry and the remaining N.C.O's were Sgt Johnny May, Cpl. Harry Job and Cpl. Norm Furness. Platoon strength was roughly 30.

Just prior to the Japanese invasion personnel other than the rifle companies were formed into two additional rifle companies "X" and "Y". Our platoon was augmented by the addition of the Provost Section (Sgt. Jack Butt and the prisoners in the guardhouse at that time and a Vickers machine gun crew L/Cpl Ted Saligari. We became one of the Platoons of "Y" Company commanded by Capt. Shier.

PRE INVASION. On the evening of 21st January 1942 we received instructions to move from our camp to defence positions and took it to be just another practice run as we already had a series of trial runs and expected to return to camp later that evening. In consequence we moved out with only the minimum gear – shirt, shorts and tin hat plus also – in my case a Thompson sub machine gun and haversack full of spare magazines and ammunition. I had fired a sub machine gun only once – 10 rounds. The platoon truck carried our ammunition grenades and iron rations consisting of bully beef and army biscuits.

As we only had one impressed Ford utility as transport we alternately marched and rode as we were ferried inland in the general direction of Four Ways road junction.

During the next 24 hours we changed position five times in the general beach area of Raluana point to Gazelle Point and on the evening of 22nd January 1942 took up our final position above the beach, around a small church just below Vunapope Mission, with our Vickers crew actually located on the beach. It was only during that day that we became aware that a Japanese invasion fleet had been stationed just off new Britain for at least 24 hours, but it was too late to return to camp to retrieve any personal possessions or additional equipment.

During the day we could observe what appeared to be the conning tower of a submarine cruising up and down St. George's Channel for some hours, and a launch out from shore for a closer look, without success

It rained most of the day and roads for transport were very wet and slippery – we had punched the windscreen out of the utility to see more clearly. At some time during the day Sgt. Butt and a section of men were sent out on patrol down the road to Kokopo but failed to return and I did not see them again.

Our role at this stage was to move round our defence positions and see that everyone was awake and on the job, particularly after darkness. It must have been about midnight that we first heard the sound of engines out on the water and realised that Japanese barges were cruising up and down just off the beach occasionally showing lights, presumably to draw fire. At this time also a utility truck drove up. Just up the beach from us and stopped with its headlights full on, pointing out to sea. I held them up with a sub machine gun, turned off the lights and found a very frightened Eurasian family in their utility – husband, wife and two children, obviously signaling to the barge. I sent them off to Vunapope Mission without lights.

Sometime after midnight a plane dropped a very powerful parachute flare which burned for quite a long time and we heard machine gun fire on our left in the "A" Company area at Vulcan Beach. Not long afterwards we could hear trucks moving back along the road behind us and it was quite apparent that a withdrawal was in progress. Shortly after we in turn received orders to withdraw and I moved around to marshal the troops for transport. I could not find the Vickers crew on the beach so walked down the beach for several hundred yards calling for Cpl. Peplow. There was no reply at any stage so I finally left the beach and climbed on the utility – there were 13 of us.

After several hundred yards we slid off the side of the road into a ditch, and in the wet conditions were unable to move it. We tried man handling several times but could not make any impression on it and the Japs now on land decided that we would have to leave it. A passing utility picked us up and with fifteen on board we started to move to Four Ways where "A" Company was located and took up a defensive position. It was daylight by now with quite a lot of air activity and all roads were covered by planes both bombing and machine gunning vehicles.

It was at this stage that Lt. Henry, Sgt. May and a section moved out on patrol and failed to return. I had charge therefore of what was left of the platoon and some others we had picked up - about 17 all told. We were instructed to move back again but before we could do so came under air attack again. A truck towing an anti-tank gun which we were hoping to use as transport received a direct hit, so we prepared to walk.

As we were about to move off the battalion 2I/C, Major J.Mollard arrived and advised us that the action was all over and that any further resistance would cease. He informed us further that there were no plans for withdrawal as a unit or for evacuation and that it was in fact "every man for himself". These were his exact words and it was fortunate that he issued this order as on return to Australia this campaign was the subject of an enquiry and we were required to make Statutory Declarations regarding the cessation of hostilities.

The time was approximately 11.00am on 23rd January 1942. We were about 10 miles from Rabaul and we had the clothes we stood in plus weapons. No food, water, medical supplies, blankets, mosquito nets or spare clothing. Our tin hats were hot and unnecessary and were finally discarded. We had no maps but I had a small pocket compass which had been given to me before we left Australia.

This then was the start of the escape.

THE ESCAPE. The concept for the defence of New Britain was apparently to concentrate lark Force of approximately 1500 troops on the Gazelle Peninsular at the northern tip of the island to defend two coastal artillery guns covering the entrance to the Rabaul Harbor and two aerodromes within about a 10 mile radius. Had the Japanese landed at the neck of the peninsular our entire force would have been bottled up and taken prisoner.

Morale within the unit was first class at all times both before and after the landing but within the ranks it was always understood that lark Force could not provide any meaningful resistance with no naval vessels, no fighter planes, no artillery and only 1914-1918 World War weapons – Lewis and Vickers guns, 3" mortars, telephones and dispatch riders. We did have sub machine guns (one per platoon) radios which were not effective and were not used and anti tank guns with 12 rounds per gun.

Within the ranks every man was sure that ultimately evacuation would be necessary and although it was mentioned usually in jocular fashion, each man had a good idea of the geography of the island, and the routes open to him if he had to get out. It is obvious that in planning the defence of an area – and it should be understood that this was a defensive operation – if any movement is to take place from the beaches it can only be backwards.

The responsible authorities would be aware then that they could discard any planning for offensive operation and that the options open to them in planning a defensive operation were reasonably numerous and could include:-

1. Fighting it out and dying on the beaches
2. Following planned routes of withdrawal to defensive positions inland
3. Complete cessation of contact and withdrawal to supply dumps inland for regrouping and counter offensive
4. Withdrawal to supply dumps inland and fragmentation into smaller units for commando type activity
5. Evacuation to fight again.

With the advantage of thirty six years hindsight it is easy to say and to know what should have been done but in fact what did happen :-

1. The RAAF evacuated all its personnel before the landing
2. Some of the shore based RAN came out with the Army
3. The ARTY – I had not thought about this because in 1942 you did not I suppose think – but in 1978, what did the Army do in 1942, what did they do in relation to Lark Force – Gull Force or Sparrow Force? Are there records – are they available – what do we know?

At the time we had reasonable expectations that evacuation would be arranged either by sea or air, but in fact nothing happened. With the departure of the Battalion 2 i/c, who had risked his life to come forward and give us a clearance, it was in fact “every man for himself”.

During the nine months we had been in New Britain the unit had confined its activities to an area within about 15 miles of Rabaul – there had been no reconnaissance outside that radius – we had no maps of the area outside that radius – and there were no supplies of any sort outside of Rabaul. There had never been any discussion instruction concerning the course of action open, or resources available in the event that we moved outside of Rabaul.

We did know that the island was 300 miles long and up to 50 miles wide with the Baining Mountains running lengthwise down the middle up to 7000 feet high and we believed prohibiting movement from north to south coast. At the western end of the island it was only about 70 miles across Dampier Strait to New Guinea with Umboi Island about halfway across. It seemed possible to walk down either the north or the south coast of New Britain and then cross the water to New Guinea by boat, canoe or raft. We elected to take the north coast, first of all getting off Gazelle Peninsular as soon as possible to avoid being cut off there and to pick up the north coast at Kerevat where the Road from Rabaul terminated.

There were still 13 of us at this point including Cpls. Job and Furness, Ptes. Bill Maher, Snowy Gleeson, Ernie Sinclair, Ray Yench, Bill Apsy as we headed off through the jungle until we picked up a native path leading in the general direction of Kerevat.

First night out was spent in a small grass hut which we realised after some time had housed pigs and fleas but we were too tired to worry. There was no food or water and a few berries that we tried did not appeal.

We started walking again early next morning and met other groups moving in the same direction until we had some 40 or 50 soldiers strung out in single file. At one stage we heard a burst of machine gun fire some distance away and thought our time had come when a single shot rang out alongside us. Everyone hit the ground at once but no further shots were heard. Eventually we re-grouped and ascertained that the shot came from one of our own men who accidentally discharged his rifle.

There were no officers in our party and as senior NCO I was automatically in charge for the time being.

Our course took us close to a Mission Station and as one of the NGVR men required medical attention for blistered feet we stopped and sent him in alone. He never got his medical attention - the Mission was occupied by Japanese troops. We made a wide circuit and followed a compass course into the Kerevat River area crossing the bridge with some relief as it took us off the peninsular.

The scene across the bridge at the end of the road was just utter devastation. We were the last troops through there as we had walked but some 300 ahead of us had ridden there in trucks and carriers which they immobilised and left as the track followed the beach and would not carry transport. The ground was covered with clothing, parts of weapons, grenades, ammunition punctured tins of food and biscuits all rendered useless. We were lucky enough to find a tin of biscuits in a carrier which we found subsequently had been booby trapped with grenades and had our first food for two days. Within a couple of hours we caught up with another large party of troops and camped for the night on the beach.

Our third day on the track took us through to Mandres Saw Mill where Lieut. Gordon Braden was established to receive troops, feed them and pass them on. We spent the night there and the following day I was ordered down to the beach about a mile away with a section of troops to watch for enemy activity. Since the landing we had been followed by slow moving seaplanes which kept us under observation but were of no concern except when we crossed wide stretches of kunai grass plains where concealment was difficult. These were still about and in addition we had Japanese destroyers several miles away shelling the beach area and then sending in boat loads of troops who seemed to make a brief inspection of the beach then return to their ship. The patrol passed without incident and that afternoon we moved on to the next stop - a mission station up in the hills and some distant island.

This had been established as a temporary base by Capt. Appel and with our arrival - again the last troops in, there appeared to be a strength of about 300. The camp was organised with cookhouse, latrines, sleeping areas for each group and a roster of standing patrols - 2 hours each - was arranged about a mile down the track from our camp. Our patrol was 2.00a.m to 4.00am. and we were glad when it was over.

We all remained at the mission the following day but were disturbed by a Japanese seaplane which dive bombed us from a height of only several hundred feet, but missed by a long way. It was obvious then that we could not stay there so we moved out in several large parties - ours containing a hundred or more troops.

Late in the afternoon the senior officer in the party – Major Mathieson from the Anti Tank Company – halted us all and explained that he wished to outline the situation to us – the continuing Japanese threat, shortage of food and medical supplies, dysentery and the difficulty of getting off the island. He proposed that the party break up and that those who wished to do so continue as a small group under their own steam, and those that did not would walk down to the beach and surrender to the Japanese. We were given about ten minutes to reach a decision and ultimately the bulk of the party decided to surrender.

My own group elected to continue down the coast and we joined forces with another – some M.G. Company including Sgt. Sandy Kirkland and Harry Yench from somewhere unknown Jack “Lugger” Smyth who for the remainder of the journey was our chief cook and a tremendous morale booster. Our party now numbered 26 of whom 24 escaped.

At this point we discarded all weapons except several rifles for shooting game and headed off to the coast again.

In discussing the next stage we still planned to try to get to New Guinea but had no hope unless we could get food. The jungle offered coconuts, some bananas, occasionally taro, tapiok and kow-kow (sweetpotatoes) but not very often and not in large quantity. Our best hope lay in heading down the coast and checking the house on each plantation for supplies.

We set off – our first stop being Lassul Bay – where we understood the native village had been visited by Japanese and was possibly occupied. We approached cautiously but it was completely deserted so spent the night there. En route we called at St.Pauls Mission where the priest and staff were in residence still and medical facilities were available but we did not stop there.

On succeeding days we moved down the coast calling at each plantation – all abandoned by their white owners but usually natives still in their villages. From them I collected a map of the northern part of the island, a toothbrush, a ladies pink straw hat, a large jar of powdered malted milk, a similar jar of dried salted prawns and a beautiful pair of English leather golf shoes.

Within a week we had reached the village of Taxes, just inland from Cape Lambert but although my map showed a track through the Pondo Plantation we found our way barred by impenetrable mangrove swamp. The natives were sullen and unhelpful so we decided to retrace our steps to the last plantation (Rangarare) to consider our next move.

Our return journey was interrupted by the appearance in front of us of a near naked man, Grey haired, past middle age, incoherent and irrational to a point bordering on mental instability. Our enquiries finally elicited his story. He owned the plantation we planned to use as our base, his name was I think Jock McLean and together with three neighboring plantation owners they had evacuated their properties and set up camp in the jungle as a safety precaution. It seemed that friction had developed and in the course of an argument Mclean was evicted and had been wandering in the jungle since the previous day. We offered to escort him back to his camp and found there three rather apprehensive white men – one was Mason from nearby Usevit plantation – the other two I do not remember. They were well set up in a tent with a good supply of tinned food, radio receiver and battery charge. We had a meal with them, saw Mclean reestablished and left them.

We decided to hole up on the plantation for a while and were in fact there for about six weeks. We were aware that the Japanese Navy sent a reconnaissance seaplane along the coast every morning and vessels to check plantations for prisoners from time to time so we set up camp in a deserted hut about two miles into the jungle from the plantation house. About twenty of us occupied the hut and six stayed in the house to serve as base sick bay for malaria victims and point of contact for anyone passing through.

It is worth pausing at this point to survey our situation as after two weeks of reasonable privation we were in much better shape than newspaper correspondents might have suggested.

We had shelter, ample water from a creek next to the hut, a supply of rice and tinned food collected from plantations, and herd of goats, tins of American coffee with lemons on the trees, some bananas, taro paw-paws etc. Jack Smyth was installed as cook with a large three legged black iron cooking pot and served two meals a day at 9.00am and 4.00pm. We posted sentries until it became apparent that this was not necessary and at all times kept an air watch.

There was a small supply of quinine, which we kept for actual malaria, attacks only, a few books and some of us had blankets. Food was rationed and we were always hungry but health generally was good apart from the odd day off with a malaria attack.

All wore beards quite often a native lap-lap instead of shorts and boots without socks as they were worn out. It was the rainy season so we were continually wet but warm. Some of us constructed mosquito proof beds from a roll of fly wire we found and so delayed the onset of malaria.

Each day a party went out with hessian copra bags foraging for food and we kept in touch with our fellows on adjoining plantations – our nearest party headed up by Sgt. Frank Dawson and Capt. Fred Field. Others in the vicinity included Capt. Col McInnes, Sgt. Derek Pitts and a few other “B” Coy. Personnel. But we all maintained separate identity and acted independently.

There were natives in the area but they remained neutral and unhelpful until the closing stages of our stay when they became belligerent and we resorted to carrying arms when moving out of camp.

Several of us tried again to find a track through axes to Pando without success and reconciled ourselves to a long circuitous journey through the mountains and down to the beach again at Pondo. A feature of our stay was the saga of Lugger Smyth’s Uncle Jack who may or may not have existed in real life. Each evening Lugger regaled us with stories of the old rip’s doings around the back streets of Brunswick which would fill a book themselves and this I am sure was a big factor in maintaining morale at a very high level.

Malaria was becoming more prevalent. Lack of food a significant factor – weight loss was at last a stone per man – and we were starting to get sores which looked like a sign of vitamin deficiency. Nevertheless all were in good shape and capable of taking to the track at a moments notice. Our only concern at the time was when the hut caught fire – on february 13th – and threatened to destroy our meagre supplies but we doused it with water from the creek and re-thatched the hut with split palm fronds.

It must have been early March when the Assistant District Officer from Talasea, Keith McCarthy came through under instructions from New Guinea to contact all groups and initiate their movement to the bottom of the island where they were to re-group for evacuation.

We left at six next morning – the whole 26 of us – and walked until nine that evening back towards Rabaul almost to xxxxxx and then up into the mountains to spend the night at the village of Moen. It was cold there and I remember we huddled over a fire.

It rained all next day but we kept moving after midday and then camped in the rain. This was the spot where we tried for five hours to light a fire with wet wood and finally gave up.

It was also the spot where Cpl. Harry Job announced that he felt too ill to go on and proposed to return to the Mission Hospital of St. Paul. We tried to encourage him to continue but he stuck firmly to his decision and then Bill Apsy said that he would go back with him. Bill did not appear to have been ill and I am not sure even now whether he went back in his own interests or to assist Harry. As they were going back to an assured safe place our ways parted there and we lost the only two lives from our party. We did not know then that another half day's relatively easy walk took us into Pondo and virtually assured evacuation.

Pondo was a well established plantation with numerous buildings included amongst other things a dessicated coconut factory. We tried eating it in handfuls but all suffered acute indigestion and left it.

All troops were assembled here and brought under discipline once more with Capt. Appel in charge supported by Capt. Field, Lt. Tolmer and others. Capt. McInnes incidentally had left New Britain some weeks before with a party of about 10 in a commandeered pinnacle and eventually reached civilisation after us.

The final count at Pondo was probably about 150 and included a civilian Rod Marsland who held a Sea going master's certificate. With his assistance it was proposed to ferry us in groups for the remainder of the distance to the foot of the island and evacuate from there. Our vessel was to be a pinnacle – the "Malahuka" – about 25 to 30 feet overall which at that time was 50 yards above water level with its bottom stove in and motor inoperative. With Rod Marsland, Alec Tolmer, Sgt. Jack Beaumont, who was a mechanic, and others it was soon fixed and with all of us on ropes was duly launched.

We travelled at night only, in stages, when troops were on board and the pinnacle returned in daylight to ferry down another group the following night. I seem to remember that we stayed at Lolabau Island, Powell Harbour and finally farewelled the Mallabooka at Talasea.

The trip was not without its moments as the pinnacle regularly lost its flywheel and we drifted until repairs were effected. It was necessary to land before daylight to avoid observation by the regular early morning Japanese reconnaissance plane, but on two occasions repairs delayed us and we paddled in with floorboards in broad daylight – the latest at 11.30am.

An advance party at Talasea headed by Sgt. Bert Smith had food ready for us and we walked across the peninsula to pick up our next vessel. At about this time I had my first bout of malaria and was carried on to the "Totol" for the run down to Rein bay. We did

no more walking after this so I was lucky that in all the miles we covered on foot I was never ill.

At Rein Bay our base was, I think, Iboki plantation with Mrs Baker still in residence and we spent some days there until all troops were assembled. We ate fresh meat, flour with weavils in it and anything else we could get. We all had dysentery and Mrs Baker spent a good deal of her time administering liquid quinine.

Finally re-embarked on a very well found ketch for Witu Island about eighty miles off shore where we were advised we would find a 120 ton motor vessel the "Lakatoi" which was to be our final means of transport. It had a captain but no crew, but this was easily remedied.

By now my own group numbered 53 and we were allotted the open fore deck of the vessel which we were told was heading for Cairns. Again we traveled by night and pulled in close to shore by day, sometimes we camouflaged the vessel with palm fronds.

Our route took us to Umboi Island, Ferguson Island, through the China Straits to Samarai and then direct to Cairns. En route we had rendezvoused with the vessel "Larabada" which was heading for the south coast of New Britain to pick up more survivors.

Before landing at Cairns we were all directed to remove our beards and I dropped overboard my copra sack containing then all my worldly possessions – a half blanket, a bowl made out of a half coconut shell, a bush knife, toothbrush and a book.

On landing we were marched up the street for breakfast of sausages and eggs and then to the local convent where we bathed and were outfitted by the local Red Cross with a shirt and a pair of sand shoes – there was no military establishment at all in the area at that time – end March 1942.

Telegrams were dispatched to our homes from Cairns – the first intimation they had that we were alive – and boarded a special train for the trip to Brisbane. In the course of that journey strangely enough I met the owner of the English golf shoes that I was still wearing. He recognised them immediately but obligingly made no claim on them.

We were re-outfitted with Army uniform in Brisbane and on arrival in Melbourne were for some reason driven out to Watsonia Army Camp by Red Cross convoy and from there sent on leave – about 5th April 1942.

The Army later on paid us a sustenance allowance of two shillings and five pence per day for the period we spent in the jungle when we were not receiving Army rations.

I spent six months in and out of Heidelberg Hospital with recurrent bouts of malaria and effects of exposure - my weight had dropped from 11st,8lbs to 8st,5lbs – but in between times was fit. A further six months was spent at Ballarat Convalescent Depot and then I was medically boarded with Restriction to Victoria only for a further three months.

I was never in bed with a bout of malaria after that but acquired 500 quinine capsules and took them all over the course of the next three years as any symptoms appeared.

The Battalion was never reformed and we all went our own separate ways mostly as individuals getting postings as and when we were able to do so.