

Near home,

4/12/90

I too, have taken the privilege of addressing you by your first name - why not?

Thank you for your letter of 9/10/90 and I apologise for the delay in answering.

I am the sort of bloke that likes to find the right time and place to do a job like this what better place than sitting in the rear seat of my s/wagon at Merewether Beach ocean baths with the sun blazing outside.

"Write down anything you remember" you ask. It would take an effort like Tolstoy's War and Peace to do that. However, I will have a go at your four questions first.

"where deployed" I will have to start at the point when we (militia) were ordered to report for duty one week after Pearl Harbour.

It turned out to be "for the duration" but we were not told that. Train from Chatoewood Station to Rooty Hill, then bus to Wallgrove camp. It was not long before the 8th Brigade occupied the whole camp. I do not remember what battalions comprised the brigade then but I do know that in W.A. it was 4th, 18th & 35 Battalion. Brigadier Cameron was Bgde Commander throughout, a very fine soldier, and I have an idea that he may still be alive. You can check this by contacting R.S.L. Hq and/or Anzac Day march organisers.

Back to the 7th - the 18 pdr guns were replaced about late January 42 with 25 pdr guns all new. The regiment was brought up to full strength by the addition of about 200 A.I.F. volunteer personnel from Bathurst, to form 27th Battery (E & F troops) commanded by Capt Geoffrey Stuckey. The troop commanders were Lt Dave Bartley (E troop) and Lt Kewling (F)

The A.I.F. bloke, grizzled about being

posted to a militia unit. They all had volunteered to go and fight the Germans in the Western Desert (Africa)

We did not know it, at that time, the Austr Gov't was negotiating to bring back the A.I.F Divisions to Australia, so no re-inforcement were required. And things were pretty desperate in Singapore.

At least, the new A.I.F recruits were altogether in the same battery and it turned out they were unintentionally kept separate from the rest of the Regiment. I transferred from D (Dow) troop 26 Bty to E (Eddy) troop 27 Bty what militia men, which included all the N.C.O's, that were posted to the new battery were quickly accepted by the A.I.F volunteers as mates. The militia men trained the A.I.F blokes in their various categories - gunners, sigs and drivers etc. Incidentally, some of the A.I.F men taught us how to drive. No militia man could transfer to A.I.F as everything was frozen. You stayed "put".

"Battle Stations" Towards the end of February the regiment was deployed as I have already told you between French's Forest & Mt Keira 26th Bty (8 guns) in French's Forest. I went there once but don't know the exact spot, but it was near Beacon Hill, and their field of fire covered from Palm Beach to North Head. 25 Bty went to Wallongong area (Mt Keira) plus "F" (Freddy) troop of 27th Bty (i.e. 12 guns) and (you wouldn't read about it) the remainder of 27 Bty i.e. B.H.Q and E (Eddy) Troop took up a gun position on the East Lakes Golf Links at the end of Florence Ave. We took over 4 brand new houses that had just been built

in Florence Ave and Vernon St. Our field of fire covered from South Head to Cape Solander Botany Bay, I'll never forget the shoot we had. There was no accurate maps. The military maps did not agree with Parish maps and road maps in the range from our position and Bondi Beach. We did not know if the first shot would land $\frac{1}{2}$ mile out to sea, or blow up the surf shed. Well, it missed the surf shed and brightened the bush.

The gunners lived in dugouts near their guns. The command post was a big dugout in a central spot on higher ground. The rest of us lived in the houses 8 to 10 to a room. All the cooking was done in the houses on the gas stoves. Leave was fairly liberal on a scattered, rotated basis but always with enough in camp to man the guns. Being based at East Lakes we were handy to transport (trams) in Gardners Road.

The move to Greta The regiment pulled out of these "battle stations" on Friday 29th May 1942 and assembled at St Ives showground.

27 Bty grouped at Hassel Park St Ives not far from the showground. We got weekend leave to report back on the Sunday night (Pyrmble Stn). Well, you know what happened on the Sunday night. The Jap subs raided Sydney Harbour and sank the "Cuttabel". If we had still been at East Lakes that night we might have fired at least one shot in anger. But we did not know anything about it until the next morning (Monday). We pulled out that morning in convoy and proceeded on our trek to Greta via the Paddy Road (just completed, all dirt). The Pacific Highway was a problem

with Peal's ferry quite unable to cope with a convoy of 200 trucks and guns, 9 miles long. We bivouaced at Wilberforce that night and made Greta the next day. The whole 8th Brigade was there. We had no idea why we were there. The top brass knew but not lower ranks including officers. It was at Greta we were given the opportunity of transferring to A.I.F. but still had to remain in our own unit. I was detailed to go up to R.H.Q office and help complete attestation forms. About 10 of us worked all day on this job and at the end of the day we filled in our own attestation forms. I received my two stripes at Greta (MT Bar) and the unit received the official title, 7th Aust Fld Regt.

The move to W.A.

One afternoon in July, the drivers were told that the trucks and guns were to be taken to Sydney the next morning, but not told why. Take all our personal gear too, even blankets and palliasses. So we travelled all day down the Putty road and ended up at Centennial Park (near Langdel gates) There, we were met and told to park our trucks here and there and to proceed back to Greta.

Organised chaos reigned free - how?

200 drivers and NCO's had to be fed - some food arrived probably from the show ground. By then it was getting dark. Somebody said some trams would come soon and take us to Central Rly. where a troop train would take us back myself, and 2 or 3 mates hailed a taxi and bent the mob back to Central by about 2 hours. We got back to Greta about 2am. What a day! Even then we did not know our trucks & guns

were to be shipped to W.A. Some of the regiment personnel (20 or 30) accompanied the gear. It was all top secret and well kept.

A few days later about the middle of July '42 we were told that "a move" was imminent.

Get ready in a hurry, early meal then it was "pick up kits" and march to Greta Rly Stn. It was a Monday about 3pm. Entaining (on train) 600-700 of us and we headed towards Sydney. We had tea at Gosford (I think) when the train headed toward Liverpool, we deducted "South?" Next morning (TUES) we breakfast at Albury. Change trains to Victoria wide gauge train. Lunch at Spencer St. By now it was "out" we were going to W.A. Tea at Ballarat. Travel all night and next morning (Wed) we had breakfast at Tailers Bend. On again to Wayville (near Adelaide) Here we detrained at Goodwood Rly Stn and marched to Wayville Showground for a shower and lunch. Then we entrained again (same train) arriving at Port Pirie about 4pm. After a meal we changed trains once more to the standard gauge Transcontinental Railway. It was a normal passenger train with 1st and 2nd class carriages - a top class train by the standards of 1942. It had 2 open trucks hooked on the front, behind the engine (steam). The first truck had a Wyles mobile steam cooker in it to prepare meals. The second truck contained wood fuel and a couple of axes. The poor cooks and detailees were out in the wind and soot from the engine doing their best to cook and chop wood. They would have had a miserable trip.

Next day (THURS) we travelled across the Nullabor plain stopping at various places for

breakfast, lunch and tea, the abos appearing from nowhere to clean up the left overs.

Next day (FRI) we had breakfast along the track somewhere (could have been Zanthus) and made Kalgoorlie by lunch time. Here we changed trains again to 3'6" narrow gauge W.A. railway, the worst trains in the world then, small dog box carriages, no buffers, very cramped. Our journey was via the old track via Coolgardie (now demolished) and Northam to Chidlow (also demolished) The track these days is standard gauge and a different route.

And so, next morning (Sat) we arrived at Chidlow about 40 kms east of Perth. The trip took from Monday 4pm until Saturday about 8am. (4 1/2 days) Accommodation - sleep on the train wherever you could find a place to lay down.

Rations - the usual army fair - stew, stew & more stew
Time in W.A. From mid July 1942 to Sept 1943 about 14 months I have told you where the camp were in my previous letter. Yes, we were constantly in training under war time conditions and deployed in defensive positions but we often wondered what we were suppose to defend. For instance, the countryside 20 miles out of Geraldton was nothing but low scrub, salt bush and sand. Just nothing North and East to the horizon & more. There was some habitation to the south but very sparse and to the west - the Indian Ocean. However, the W.A. experience is a separate subject on its own and I will deal with it at a later time

The voyage home

The last camp was at Mingenera (55 kms east of the coastal town of Dargara) The town was a railway station, a couple of shops & a pub.

but our camp was about 15 kms east of the town. After certain events took place, which I will write about at a later date, we took all our gear, guns, MT, signal gear and any stores to a receiving depot in Mingenew. This was Sept 1943. We were taken by train from there to Fremantle arriving next morning. There, at the dock (Victoria Quay) was this enormous ship, emblazoned on its bows. "NIEW AMSTERDAM" after detrainning we were given boarding slips to stick in our hat bands. On board, Officers and NCO's were allotted to cabins and the O.R.'s were given hammocks to sling from specially fitted bars above across the decks. The boat deck above was an open deck. This deck, the rubber deck was closed in, as was the promenade deck below that. Then came 10 more decks all port holed. & cabins. The cabins had been luxury suites with private showers and toilets, sounds good, doesn't it?

But wait on — 16 bunks to a cabin. Well we settled in, officers NCO's & ~~men~~^{O.R.'s} and were given leave for the rest of the day in Fremantle. The three battalions were there too spread around the ship which now had 8000 souls on board, including 800 German panzer P.O.W's and their pommie guards, as well as the ship's crew.

On returning from leave I/we settled down in our cabin bunks. but it wasn't long before I/we found out the ship was absolutely lousy with bugs, and was on its way to the U.S. to be de-loused.

I cleared out of the cabin and joined the boys on deck in a hammock. Next morning Capt Bartley asked me what I was doing

sleeping up on decks. I showed him my
bug bites and then he showed me his and
no more was said. The ship, 45000 tons
had 13 decks. There were 5 or 6 sittings for
meals. They never stopped feeding us in
rotation. A whole battalion of men took
turns to act as mess orderlies 4th 18th 35 Btms
At evening meal one of the battalion bands
played appropriate music from the bandstand
of the huge converted dining room (mess hall)

After that it was just walk around the
ship looking at the waves, the albatross
which followed the ship, the German P.O.W.^s
exercising on the stern promenade deck
or the Dutch escort destroyer ^{"VAN TROMPE"}, ¹ shooting round
the ship like a watch-dog and firing a
few practise shots with its Bofors guns.

A very pleasant cruise on a mild sea. We were at
sea for about 3 days. On arriving at Port Phillip
one morning we sailed up to the dock (Princes
Pier) and disembarked. First the 3 battalions
and then us. It took all day. The trains
were waiting for us on the docks. I remember
the train pulled us through Flinders St Stn
and we whistled and waved to all the girls
going home from work. Then the train
reversed back through Flinders St to Spencer's
St. Stn and we did it all over again. We
got a very late tea that night at Wodonga
Rly Stn. Then on to Albury to change trains
again for the overnight trip back to Sydney
in a real troop train (with bunks). We detrained
at Rooty Hill and pushed up where we started
- Wallgrove. We were given 28 days leave, then
returned to camp, only, to our dismay to be
broken up.

The final act (of bastardry)

I went to the 18th Brigade Re-inforcement Infantry Training Battalion (at London Bridge, Jenterfeld) as did all the N.C.O's for conversion to infantry NCO's. The 6th Division (or whatever) did not want any N.C.O's especially R.A.A. NCO's. They had plenty of their own experienced and battle seasoned men to promote. So the idea was to crime us for the slightest trivial misdemeanour, such as a few spots of dust on your rifle. Since all of our ranks were confirmed, those unfortunate enough to fall into the trap, were court-martialed, stripped of rank and reduced to privates, then shunted over to the 16th or 17th Bgde Rec. battalions. Some chaps did extraordinary things to escape this humiliation. They volunteered to go to commando squads, to work on military water-side docks, and landing craft, even joined the Provost corps. but they were treated well in these places and retained their rank. If you could find another unit to "claim" you, they let you go. With a bit of outside help. I organised to be claimed by R.A.E.M.E. I was sent back to Newcastle Area Workshops and later to Port Moresby Base workshops. I returned my ^{new} corporal rank. Didn't sound as good as bombardier.

That's about all I can tell you in this letter. It's a very long letter and if I have bored you, I apologise. But you did say "Anything I remember". I have not finished yet. What do you know about. —

The Ingleburn Camp.

The change from a Field Brigade to a Fld. Regt.
The Narellan Camp. — don't ask me, I wasn't at it.

Events at Wallgrove (Jan 1942)

Life at East Lakes "battle stations"

Life in W.A. — all the camps and shoots

~~# (10)~~ (10)

The final divisional shoot at Mullaawa (guns)⁷²
These are matters I will deal with in
my next letter.

Please let me know what you & others
think of this letter.

I can be contacted most afternoons
and nights by phone if you wish (049) 57.5566

With the festive season just around
the corner may I wish you and yours
a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year.

Regards from

Neil Jefferson.