

1942–1943: DANDENONG TO DARWIN

By Keith Alexander, Signaller 7th Battalion

World War II broke out in September 1939. It seemed a long way away from us (in Australia) but recruiting started almost immediately. A home defence unit was formed in Merbein (near Mildura) - the V.D.C — and I joined with Dad. He had been in the signals during World War I in the 8th Light Horse stationed in the Middle East, so he was placed in charge of the Signals Section.

I hoped to join the RAAF as a ground wireless operator but Dad wouldn't sign the consent form. However, I learnt Morse code and was getting up to the 18 words a minute needed when all 19 year olds were called up for army training.

On November 5th 1941 I, along with a lot of other lads from Mildura, were taken by train to Balcombe and enlisted in the 7th Battalion. I was drafted to D company but I wasn't happy with this and applied to join the signal platoon. I was changed over a week or so later and I never regretted the move.

We were paraded for our uniforms, rifles and other equipment and then had our medical 'shots' for everything. We were sent home a few days later to recover before we commenced training. When we got back, training started within a bull ring in a paddock of *The Briars*, a historic homestead over the road from the camp. We learnt all the basic army skills including using weapons, marching drills,

and hygiene. One test was to put on gas masks, run up the hill and back to camp.

We had leave passes to Mornington and Frankston and used them as a break from camp life.

In December 1942, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and came into the war. They moved south very quickly and the war soon got much closer to home and fair dinkum. The 7th Battalion was ordered out of camp to build and man a defensive line based around Dandenong to protect Melbourne. We set up positions on all the hill tops which had fields of fire and defensible positions.

The Sigs (Signals Corps) had to run lines of communication to all these positions as well as man a switchboard. I was sent to D company with 'Dasher' Dean and an older, trained Sig. We set up a tent and Sig office on Mrs Aird's front lawn because the



1942. Hampton Park. Sig Office on Mrs Aird's front lawn. Mrs Aird standing on left.

Captain Hughes, the Commanding Officer, had taken over her front room.

After three weeks, we got orders to move again and we were on our way to Darwin. We went by train to Adelaide, then Terowie where we changed trains for Alice Springs. We were fed on the train or at stations by the Country Women's Association who did a wonderful job of supplying us meals.

The trip from Terowie to Birdum was an experience in itself. The Ghan train was quite long with carriages for the troops (300 soldiers) and flat top cars for the trucks and Bren carriers all loaded with the Battalion's gear. The driver told us there was 36 feet of slack in the couplings along the length of the train. This meant that when the train started, you counted the bangs until your carriage was next, then we hung on as it jerked into motion.

When the train was rolling along at a top speed, this slack rippled along the train; the carriages would pause, and then jerk off into motion again. To shave, wash or walk along the aisle was very scary. The carriages were the old Indian Frontier style with the seat running down each side and a landing out at each end. Our favourite pastime was to load stones onto the landing when the train stopped, then bombard the empty bottles along the track as we rolled along.

When we stopped at Finke River we were greeted with the news that Darwin had been bombed very heavily that morning by the Japanese. It was February 19th, 1942. The authorities were expecting a landing to follow so it was panic stations from then

on to get troops to Darwin as quickly as possible. Next morning, we were loaded on to three ton trucks and set off for Birdum. Because of the fear of an air raid, the trucks couldn't come into town to collect us. They waited by the roadside three miles out of town while we marched out carrying all our gear. One wonders what made the better target - trucks running in to pick us up or 300 odd men marching the three miles out to them.

We travelled at 50-60 MPH (miles per hour which is about 80 to 100 kph) along the rough gravel road, sleeping out in the bush and supplied by mobile kitchens and water tankers full of bore water. The result of drinking the bore water was the same as a good dose of salts. With the trucks on convoy instructions (a 10 minute stop every hour) and 300 odd men with bowel problems made for fun and games. The method was simple; you got two mates to hold your arms, dropped your daks and hung your bottom over the tail board and let go.

When we got to Birdum we were loaded on to cattle trucks for the last leg to Darwin. By this time, we started meeting all the people who had fled Darwin and were heading south by any means possible. We



left the train at Noonamah, 12 miles (about 20km) from Darwin, where our advance party had set up a camp. It was February and the middle of the wet season. We had ordinary army tents which were no match for the thunderstorms that lashed the area every day.

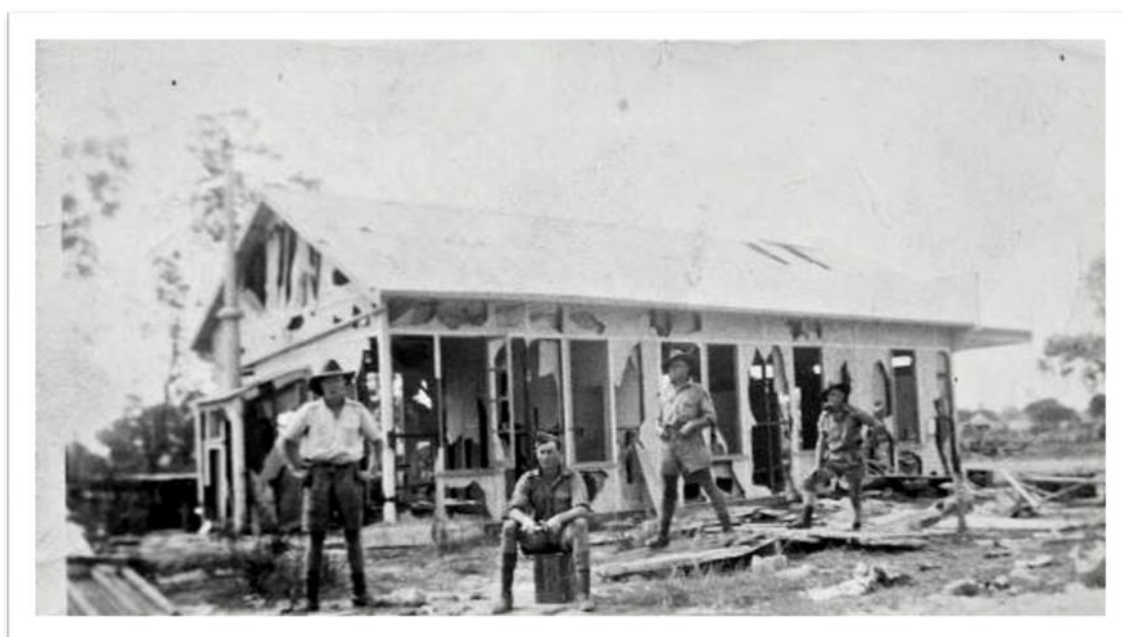
Supplies were terrible, tobacco non-existent; the smokers were smoking bark, tea leaves, anything else they could get. At one stage we had 27 meals of rice which Stores got some from somewhere. Another time an American ship came in with supplies for the Yanks in the area but they made a big mistake when they asked the Australian troops to unload it. Our meals made a dramatic improvement almost immediately.

While the Battle of the Coral Sea was on we were rushed into defensive trenches protecting Darwin. We lived and slept in the trenches for about a week. The

Japanese were bombing Darwin, mainly the aerodromes and oil tanks, and we were able to see a lot of it although the fighters were too high to see who was who.

The first fighters were American Air Force Kittyhawk P40's which were a good plane but no match for the Japanese Zero's in a dogfight. These were replaced with Australian RAAF P40's then later with Spitfires. In all there were over 60 raids on the Darwin area while we were there. The nearest I got to the bombs was about 300-400 yards (about 275-365 metres) away.

We had 20 months in Darwin area mostly in camps 34-39 miles (about 55-62kms) to the south, however we manned the Darwin Fortress on two occasions, living right in Darwin. We had very large training exercises all over the area and became very capable signallers with the wireless. At each camp we set up a Sig office with a switchboard that had lines running out to



1942 Darwin. 7th Bn members inspecting a house hit by “daisy cutter” bombs during initial bombing raids

all Companies and other places that needed a phone. This office was manned 24 hours a day with teams of three to four signallers at any time. We had a special line to Brigade HQ on which all messages were transmitted in Morse code.

All exercises were marches where wireless was used to communicate. Our wireless was a 108 pack set weighing 48lbs (22kg) and had a range of 3 miles (5km) on wire and 12 miles (20km) on Morse. It had an output of 0.5 of a watt. On one exercise we were taken out 60 miles (almost 100km) from camp and had to march back over 3 days but when we got there none of our wireless sets would work. After a high level conference, it was decided to cancel the exercise and we were trucked back to camp. The area we had been in was lush jungle and was later found to be a huge uranium deposit.

Our second wet season was much better than the first as we were better prepared. Working parties went out and cut bark from trees to lay around the tents. The tents were lifted up about 3 feet (1 metre) on poles and a bark wall was then built around them. This made them much more comfortable to live in and let in more air while keeping them waterproof.

Our main entertainments were the picture shows that visited the area and the concert parties. We had our own screen in the Battalion HQ area and seats were BYO logs. Sometimes we hitched a ride to see a show that wasn't coming to us. All the camps were along the main road because that was where the main water pipe to Darwin went and the camps could tap into it. Being on top of the ground, the water would be hot during the day and get quite cool by morning in the dry season.



Keith in front of tent he shared with 3 others in Darwin



Keith on guard duty, Darwin

All our exercises were in the dry season because the country was impassable in the Wet (i.e. summer). The Brigade tried one wet season exercise using donkeys for transport and troops carrying all the food and gear. It was a total disaster. I carried the wireless so my pack, rations and dry clothes was put on a donkey. Over the three days of the exercise I never saw it again until we got back to camp. I had to rely on mates for food and other equipment and had nothing dry to wear for 3 days.

When my pack finally arrived back to me at camp after 3 days on a donkey, it was covered in sweat, hair and god knows what else. I never really got it clean again.

I had some scary moments over the time we were there. On one exercise the units were split and marching along two roads getting further apart all the time until they were becoming out of range of our wireless sets. Our officer, Ken Dellar, grabbed me and a wireless and rushed me out into no man's land in the middle to act as a relay station. Parked under a tree for a long time

on my own with dingoes howling around me was not my idea of a good time. I had my rifle loaded and nearby the entire time. Eventually I was picked up by the Battalion C.O. and his driver in his blitz wagon. As I hadn't any rations with me, my first question was "do you have anything to eat"? I was directed to a box in the wagon with a loaf of bread and a jar of honey and I proceeded to eat 22 slices of bread and honey.

The real scare was on a day when an exercise was pending and our officer was not sure if our wireless sets would have the range to cover it so he got 3 or 4 of us with wireless sets to go out and check out the area towards the middle of Darwin harbour. After we did our reconnaissance of the area we drove over to the harbour where a new wharf complex was being built to get the ships away from Darwin.

After having a good look over the construction, we became aware of a humming noise and immediately knew what it was. We looked up and sighted a



Signal Platoon, Darwin. Keith in front row, 2nd from left

formation of Japanese bombers heading straight for us!

We raced off the wharf, threw ourselves down into the mangroves and held our breath. We really thought we were in for it properly. However, the seconds ticked by and nothing happened. Then we heard the 'whomp', 'whomp', 'whomp' of bombs falling on Hughes airfield some miles inland from where we were. We were very relieved about that!

During the second Wet season, we had some very severe storms. One afternoon lightning struck the tree outside our Signals hut where all the phone line came in to before going down to the switchboard. It burnt all the wires for yards around, slammed through the switchboard, knocking the operator flat on his back and leaving burn marks on his chest where the mike rested. It took us two hours to replace the wiring and get all the lines working again.

Eventually we were told we would be replaced by the 5th Battalion so we were withdrawn to a spot near the Adelaide River and built a Wet season camp to handover to them. Then we were sent south by rail to Birdum, then truck to Alice Springs, but this time it was a bitumen road all the way. At Alice Springs we were given new uniforms, hopped on trains to Adelaide and then home for 24 whole days of leave. It was October 1943.

1942.
Coconut Grove
Darwin. It
looks very
different now!



Keith (right) with fellow sigs on exercise



Tropical downpour, in camp near Darwin



Above and Below: 1942. Darwin.
Sig office

