

CHAPTER 1

The North West Murray Borderers

The 7th Australian Infantry Battalion (AIF) really first came into being with the reconstruction of the Australian Army Militia Forces after World War I.

Prior to 1918 and stemming from the reorganisation of the Australian Army in 1912, there did exist on the Order of Battle of the Australian Army, a unit designated the 66th Infantry, which in 1913 became known as the 66th (Mount Alexander Regiment) Infantry. In 1918 this unit was redesignated the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment (Mount Alexander Regiment), a title it carried until 1921 when, by Divisional reorganization of that year, the units known as the 2/7th and 2/21st Infantry, became the 7th Battalion.

After 31 July, 1929 though, the 7th Battalion ceased to be maintained as a separate identity and was linked with the 38th Battalion, to become the 38th/7th Battalion. However, on 9 November, 1936, in accordance with Australian Army Order (AAO) 83 of 1937, the 7th Battalion was once again unlinked from the 38th, to be the 7th Battalion. By the same AAO, the territorial title of "North West Murray Borderers" and the Regimental Motto "Cede Nullis" (Yield To None) was adopted.

It is worthy of note that at the official raising ceremony in Mildura, approximately fifty members of the 7th Battalion AIF, 1914-18 were in attendance. Among them were Sir George "Gunner" Holland and Sir Gilbert Wyatt, both former Presidents of the Victorian Returned Servicemen's League. Others included Jim "Doc" Guthridge, who at the time was the Manager of London Stores, George "Snowy" Deacon (Max Deacon's father) ex-RSM, "Darky" Charville, Sir Albert Coates, later famous for his work with POWs at Changi Prison, Bob Hillard, a local Mildura solicitor, and "Stretch" Sullivan, who was a B Coy stretcher-bearer.

On the raising of the battalion in 1936, individual hat and collar badges were adopted and took the shape of the sultana vine (grape growing being principal industry of the Sunraysia area at the time). The badge contained the Arabic numeral "7" in the centre, between in chief, an Imperial crown, and in base, a scroll with the motto resting upon it, bore the title of the Regiment.

It was customary at the time, for a colour patch to be worn on the upper sleeve of the tunic. That worn by this unit was the same that had been worn by the 7th Battalion AIF, 1914-18, which consisted of two bars, rectangular in shape, with one on top of the other. The top was brown and the bottom red, and was commonly known as "Mud over Blood."

The new unit also perpetuated the War Service of the original 7th, and the Battle Honours they steadfastly and proudly carried on the

Regimental Colours for their exploits in the Great War of 1914-18. These Honours are Somme 1916-18, "Pozieres," "Bullecourt," "Ypres 1917," "Menin Road," "Polygon Wood," Broodseinti, Passchendaele, "Lys," Epehy, France and Flanders 1916-18, Helles, "Kriethia" Anzac, "Landing at Anzac," Defence of Anzac, Suvia, Sari Bair-Lone Pine, Gallipoli 1915, Suez Canal 1915-16. Only those Battle Honours shown in parenthesis are emblazoned on the Regimental Colours.

The 7th Battalion formed part of the 6th Brigade, which in turn was part of the 4th Division. Companies of the original unit were established at Mildura, Merbein, Wentworth, and Red Cliffs with their own individual parade grounds until approximately 1938, when the Drill Hall, at present used by 8/7th Royal Victorian Regiment, was built.

Initially the new CO, Lt Col Fred Goucher, a WWI veteran who operated a fruit block at Birdwoodton, set up his HQ in a grain and chaff store opposite the Mildura Railway Station in 7th Street. Capt Skirratt of the AIC, was his Adjutant, with Capt Findley as CMF counterpart.

Other AIC men appointed to the battalion were: Capt Bill Greer, Capt Theo Redhead, WOs Norm Rowell, Tom Eltham, Steve Brett, and "Snowy" Graham. Early CMF members, some of whom joined the AIF during the war years were: Maj W. Osmond, Capt W. Bowring, Capt J. Hughes MM, Capt H. Robinson, Capt V. Ellis, Capt N. Eddy, Capt F. Oldham, Capt Blair (AAMC), Capt J. Weir (KIA ME), Capt G. Badger, Capt A. B. Gray, Capt R. Gray, Lt M. Jolly, Lt W. Gibson, Lt C. Ellis (KIA with 2/7 Bn in PNG), Lt Don Healy, Sgt H. Iredale, Sgt M. McGlynn (Snr), Sgt Les Jolly, Sgt "Nugget" Lawton, Sgt J. Barnes, Sgt W. Brown (POW Malaya), Cpl Les Hanlon, Cpl A. Draper, Cpl J. Loughead (KIA AIF), Cpl A. Roberts and Cpl "Snowy" Roberts. There are other names that come to mind, but putting a rank to the name is impossible after such a long time: Pender, Morier, Warren, Maj McLeod, Archer, Hillman, Cater, Wagstaff and Whitaker, are in this category, to name a few.

Lt Col Hugh Conran was the second CO to be appointed. He, with Capt Findley, later took the 39th Infantry Battalion to New Guinea. After Conran came Lt Col R.M. Sadler DSO, MC, VD, who was then 48 years old, and had served with 25 Bn AIF as a Lieutenant during WWI. He was still CO when 7 Bn moved to the Northern Territory in 1942.

In pre-war, as in the post-war CMF period, training consisted of one night parade per week, which was conducted on sites such as Appleby's Paddock and the No. 1 Oval in Mildura; courses for NCOs and those wishing to become NCOs, with TEWTS for officers. It was usually culminated by an annual camp of fourteen days. A few weekend bivouacs were also conducted over the river from Mildura

at a place called Gol Gol. It was here, also, that the first exercise in live firing was carried out.

In the first instance, Merbein members paraded with D Support Company in Mildura, but later became B Coy and then paraded at Merbein. A Coy was established at Red Cliffs, and C Coy formed at Wentworth, with weekly parades held in the old jail. Mildura also housed the band.

Equipment of the period consisted of that which was left over from the Great War, and by this time was rather obsolete and inadequate, preventing training to be very effective. This did not, however, prevent the men from utilising that which was available with great enthusiasm. In spite of these setbacks, exercises at battalion level still took place.

One little anecdote, which demonstrates the situation at the time, occurred during a training exercise. There was to be a dawn attack, and an enthusiastic NCO was briefing his troops. "For the purpose of the exercise," he said, "those trees over there are to be considered the enemy. For the purpose of the exercise, those sapplings you have in your hands are rifles. For the purpose of the exercise, those logs over yonder are the artillery."

It was then that he noticed the Padre listening in to his briefing. "Padre," he said, "this is a danger area and you are not supposed to be here. What are you doing here anyway?"

"Sergeant," replied the Padre, "for the purpose of the exercise, I am here to bury the dead."

Rations were also a bone of contention to the troops. Rations were of inferior quality, and lacked variety. When prepared by the cooks, who were still learning their trade and who were hard pressed to produce anything but stew, the result left much to be desired.

There was an old saying, probably dated from WWI, which went something like this:

"What's on for breakfast?"

"Stew."

"What's on for lunch?"

"More stew."

"What's on for tea?"

"More flamin' stew!"

The first fourteen-day camp the battalion underwent was in 1937 at Seymour, in Central Victoria. A special train was organised to depart from Merbein at 8pm, and as was the custom, a large crowd of locals were in attendance to farewell the troops.

The establishment at the time consisted of BHQ, the Band, three rifle companies and a Support Company of Vickers machine-guns. B Coy, located at Merbein, and C Coy from Wentworth, both entrained at Merbein and then proceeded to Mildura to pick up the contingent from that city, before moving on to Red Cliffs where A Coy was located.

Many stops on the journey to Seymour were made, and soldiers being what they are, made many visits to hotels which usually are located adjacent to the railway stations. The train eventually arrived at Spencer Street station for lunch, but again many of the men missed the midday meal in preference to the "amber" type, after which it was just a leisurely run up to Seymour, finally arriving at about 4pm.

After unloading all stores, etc, a march to their final destination some five miles distant was accomplished. Following a long and mostly sleepless night and much imbibing of the amber fluid on the way, some found the march to camp rather heavy going.

It is now very difficult, after fifty years, to find anything recorded that relates to the efficiency or the effectiveness of training during this first camp. Some of the members who attended recall that at times it was cold and wet, especially during the night exercises. One other thing that is remembered is the fact that Seymour was not a very friendly town, which most likely was because another Regiment had been camped in the same area some weeks before, and had run riot in the town. Unfortunately this was a common occurrence during the years that followed, and did not endear the local population to the military.

7th Battalion continued in this fashion, up to the beginning of hostilities in 1939, and camps were held at other locations such as Broadmeadows and Mornington.

It has already been written that in 1939, Australia was better prepared for a military role than at any stage in her peacetime history. There was a fairly well-trained Militia force of some 80,000 men, with a hard core of combatant officers who had served in World War I and who, still under the age of forty-five, were young enough to instruct and lead.

Admittedly, the force was ill-equipped, but it contained strength and depth, having been recruited for the prime purpose of self-defence of the mainland and adjoining mandated territories. On the outbreak of war in 1939, it appeared that the main theatre of operations would be on the continent of Europe and the Middle East. Britain, at the time, did not know what was required, and perhaps mindful of the memories of the force Australia sent her during WWI, stated that she did not want Australia to send a large contingent.

Together with this unenthusiastic attitude, and the needs for the home defence of Australia in the event of Japanese aggression, the Commonwealth Government decided on 15 September, 1939 to start recruiting for a force of 20,000 men for service at home or abroad, as circumstances arose.

The 7th Battalion, as was the case with other Militia units, tried to volunteer en masse for overseas service, but was rejected on the grounds that it was needed for the defence of Australia.

From early October, the Militia was called up in two drafts, each of 40,000 men, for a period of thirty days continuous training. Early in 1940 the pattern was repeated, but this time for ninety days duration. Militia units were then brought up to strength by the introduction of compulsory training, when the government called up fit young men in their twenties. These new recruits were officially known as "Universal Trainees."

Most of those called up and allocated to the 7th Battalion came from the districts of Sunraysia, but others from the districts around Nhill, Hopetoun, Warracknabeal, Rainbow, Jeparit, Donald, Murtoa, Minyip, Rapinyup and Horsham, were allocated to the battalion. There were also some from Maryborough and Kyneton. The first thirty-day camp in which the battalion participated was at Mt Martha on the Mornington Peninsula, but the first ninety-day camp, where the universal trainees were to participate, was at Balcombe.

Militiamen wore their own distinctive-type uniform, and this consisted of a slouch hat with the regimental badge on the turned-up side, the cavalry unit still wore the plume as well; a tunic without a collar and fastened at the neck also bore the regimental badge, and was trimmed with red or green piping. This tunic was worn with breeches, with long puttees or leggings, and brown boots.

On the entry of the universal trainees to the system, all troops were issued with the AIF-type tunic and long slacks. At the same time, all regimental badges were withdrawn and replaced by the "Rising Sun" hat and collar badges issued to the AIF. This made the only noticeable difference between an AIF volunteer and a CMF conscript, being that the AIF personnel wore the metal "Australia" insignia on their tunic epaulets. The introduction of the same pay system also reduced the daily pay of a CMF pre-war volunteer private soldier from eight shillings a day to five.

As might be expected, the outbreak of hostilities saw quite a transformation within most Militia units, and the 7th was no exception. With the opening of recruiting for the AIF and other Services, an immediate flood of transfers of officers and men took place. This was to continue throughout the proceeding months until there were very few of the pre-war personnel remaining.

During 1940 and through 1941, many personnel changes occurred with a continuous stream of trainees joining and departing the unit. On 13 April, 1941 the battalion again entered camp for a further training period of ninety days. This time the site was at Nagambie Road, a few miles out of Seymour. By this time, the establishment of an infantry battalion had been altered to consist of BHQ, HQ Coy, four rifle companies — A, B, C and D, and a support company known as E Coy. When this camp came to a conclusion, most of the officers and NCOs, together with a few ORs, were placed on a full-time basis. Those not in this category were returned to civilian life

to continue their normal occupations until called up again in December, 1941. The full-time duty members were transported to Balcombe to be utilised in the training of further recruits. It is of interest to note that by August, 1941 the total strength of Militia stood at 173,000 men, quite a considerable force for a nation the size of Australia. Approximately 45,000 of this force was serving at this time on full-time duty.

Throughout the whole period of Australian military history, 1941-42 marks the time during which the greatest stress was placed on the Australian High Command. The news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii was a great shock to most Australians, but initially there was little dismay. It took about two months for most of the adult population to realise the seriousness of the situation. This was brought home to them by the fall of Rabaul on 23 January, 1942, and things certainly turned grimmer when the Japanese launched their attack on Singapore on the night of 8 February, and decidedly more grimmer when the defenders surrendered a week later.

The islands of N.E.I., now known as Indonesia, were only a few weeks away from being over-run, leaving Australia next in line for possible invasion. On the fall of Ambon and the Celebes, Darwin was within range of land-based bombers, not to mention the carrier-based planes which had attacked Pearl Harbour.

Towards the latter part of 1941, the Naval and Air Forces available in Australia were, for the most part, non-existent. The only force available was the Army, mostly Militia, who in the main were not fully trained nor fully equipped, but nevertheless had to be deployed for the defence of mainland Australia. It was therefore not surprising that the 7th Battalion was due for a move.