

CHAPTER 3

Atherton Tablelands

After the first leave in twenty months, battalion members reported back to Watsonia in the area which is now known as Simpson Barracks. It was nowhere near as well accommodated as it is now; tents had been erected throughout the area, and a few "thunder box" type latrines installed, with the usual ablution and laundry troughs scattered here and there.

Within a few days, an advance party of one officer (Lt Max Elliott) and twenty-nine other ranks (including the author), moved out by rail to north Queensland. A and C Companies followed. The move naturally was by troop train, and perhaps a small explanation is warranted here, to explain the difference between a troop train and an ordinary passenger train. On a troop train, every available space is occupied for the whole of the journey, and one slept where one sat. For the benefit of your mates, you kept your boots on at all times. Favoured spot for an uninterrupted sleep was the luggage rack in each compartment, but you had to be very quick to get this! Three times a day it would be necessary to join the mad rush for meals, usually consisting of the inevitable sausages and mashed potatoes. These were either served at tables erected on the platform of the station, or in the Refreshment Rooms en route. After the meal, sometimes instead of it if one was lucky, there might be a pub close handy, and it might have some beer, and one might get a drink!

Although usually "Out of Bounds," the pub, to many, was a challenge as well as a temptation. The scene at the time of departure, when the whistle blew, was not without a bit of humour as stragglers joined the train in a mad last minute dash, sometimes with arms and pockets laden.

To the men of the 7th Battalion, not knowing where they were bound, the journey was an exciting experience, even with all its discomforts. It brings to mind one little episode related by Sgt Reg Downey:

"We stopped at a place about 15 miles out of Brisbane, I think it was called Yeerongpilly, but there was no way of getting into Brisbane, so when we rolled out of camp like ants out of a nest, we climbed on board a truck before the poor fellow driving could say no, and asked him to take us to Brisbane. Naturally he objected strongly, but after a little "gentle persuasion" to make it worth his while, he decided to take us to the tram terminus at Moorooka. Getting back to camp was another story.

There were four of us who stayed together — Ted Benbow, John Freeman, "Monty" McMahon and myself. We had a very enjoyable afternoon, but had to be back at camp by 6pm because we were moving out again that night. We ran for the last bus going that way, but Ted and "Monty" missed out. John and I caught it on the move.

When we arrived back, feeling very contented with life, Lindsay McKinnon, who was the Platoon Commander, told me to fall in with the troops. Having

called for a marker, and having given the order "Fall in," I took one pace backwards, only to disappear down a ditch which just happened to be behind me. When I crawled out, there was nobody in sight. It took me a few seconds to realise that I had come out the wrong side and the boys were behind me.

Lindsay took a rather dim view of that, being about the only sober one amongst us, and decided there and then that my services were no longer required.

Just at that moment, a big black Rolls Royce pulled up about fifty yards away, with the driver wearing a long white coat and a peaked black cap. Lindsay must have thought the Governor-General had arrived, for he had the platoon presenting arms.

When the driver opened the door, Benbow got out and "Monty" fell over on top of him. They both yelled greetings to the boys, and really broke the whole show up. Not even Lindsay could handle them and gave it away in disgust! We did eventually get away that evening."

The journey to the Atherton Tablelands took six days, with the 7th occupying a site formerly utilised by 2/48 Aust Inf Bn of the 9th Division. The camp site is today covered by the Tinaroo Dam. The trip up was from Watsonia to Spencer Street, on to Seymour for a meal, with a further one at Albury and a change of trains from the wider Victorian gauge, to the standard 4' 8½" gauge in New South Wales. Breakfast was at Gosford, with other meals at Gloucester and Kempsey, arriving at Yeerongpilly for breakfast the following morning.

Bundaberg, Gladstone, Rockhampton and St Lawrence were stopping places on Day 4, with Bowen and Lampton being meal stops on Day 5. Cairns was the breakfast stop, with lunch at Mareeba, to arrive at camp by mid-afternoon. A six-mile hike from Kairi Railway Station was included, just to put everybody in the right frame of mind.

A and C Companies arrived at their new location on 12 November, and by the 25th the rear party, under Lt Dave Edwards, arrived to make the unit complete once more. The War Diary did record that the Officers' Mess was burned down on the 16th, but the beer was saved!

From the first instant, jungle training was the order of the day, and it soon became evident to all and sundry why the Tablelands had been selected for this purpose. Thick rain forest, with almost continual drizzle in the mountains and surrounding district made it ideal.

Routine wasn't without its lighter side though, as sports which included swimming in the Barron River was a favourite pastime.

Cpl A. McDonald entered, and won the tennis tournament conducted by the Methodist Church in Atherton, and cricket was again played against 8 Bn, with our battalion winning by 8 wickets and 139 runs.

On 7 December, 23 Brigade was inspected by Maj Gen S. Savige, who was GOC 3 Div at that time. He was also apparently impressed by the steadiness of the troops on parade.

Lt Gen E. Herring, Maj Gen Savige, and Brig A.W. Potts, paid a visit to the battalion area on the 22nd. They inspected the Guard of Honour, and General Herring stated that he was very pleased with the standard of training, keenness and bearing of the troops.

Christmas, 1943 was an elaborate affair compared with the previous one spent in the Northern Territory. For one thing, there was plenty of beer available, even though it was a brew of Cairns origin.

Breakfast on the big day consisted of porridge, bacon and eggs, with plenty of tea with fresh milk, and even sugar. Dinner was roast poultry, baked potatoes and green peas, topped off with an evening meal of cold meat, salad, fruit and jelly with custard. It was indeed a day enjoyed by all.

On New Year's Day, the 3rd Division sports meeting was held on the 23rd Brigade sports oval. Our battalion scored the most points to win the championship. Lt Peter Bush, being the Sports Officer, was presented with the pennant by Lt Gen Savige.

Interspersed with all this activity was the inevitable Australian Rules football, and cricket matches against other units in the area. All and sundry were encouraged to attend and spur on their respective unit teams. 7 Bn defeated HQ 1 Aust Corps at cricket by scoring 133 for 6 wickets, to 126 for 6 wickets.

Some of the football games were against such units as 27 Aust Inf Bn who had joined 23 Brigade in December, 17 Fd Amb, 2/2 Fd Regt, and our arch rivals, 2/7 Aust Inf Bn. There was also 2/6 Aust Inf Bn, 8th Battalion, and 2/11 Aust Inf Bn.

An extract from the Melbourne "Sporting Globe" newspaper of Wednesday 21 June, 1944 is repeated as a matter of interest. (It should be noted that Australian Rules football was actually played on 2 April at Wondecla, being a return match played and won by 7 Bn on 19 March. Scores in the first match were: 7 Bn — 18 goals 16 behinds 124 points to 2/11 Bn 12 goals 18 behinds 90 points. A final match between the two sides was arranged for Sunday 16 April, and was a great disappointment to all when it had to be cancelled due to 7 Bn's impending move).

AIF AND MILITIA TEAM CLASH IN HECTIC GAME

"This match must have been a real "hot hell" — tough hard game with a hairline finish, and the keenest rivalry between players and spectators.

Picture the set up. It would have been first down loses, and the last man up is a 'dingo.' Even the loss of a few weeks in transmission does not take the edge off the story — an all-in football clash in which an AIF unit beat a crack Militia team.

B. Cameron writes from 'up there' —

Yesterday in the damp, green jungles of the North, 5000 troops witnessed an unforgettable struggle. Winners were a well known West Australian battalion of the AIF.

High ranking officers and privates and others jostled for positions around the boundary of an improvised arena. The surrounding trees swayed with the load of more agile types of spectator, and roofs of trucks were heavy in demand as vantage points.

Unbeaten in two years, the Militia team were favourites. Time and time again their short passing, handball and flawless team work had demoralised the most formidable opposition.

From the first whistle, however, there were indications of something more than a close struggle.

Although they had no answer for their opponents' skilled positional play, the AIF by virtue of their marking and pace were within a few points of the Militia at the first change.

The second quarter had the huge crowd roaring with excitement. Spectacular high marking, long kicking and flashes of brilliant individual play were outstanding features of this thrilling battle.

Just before half time, the AIF produced a series of irresistible drives and, at the bell, had gained a grimly disputed lead of four goals.

In the third quarter, both sides rose to even greater heights. The physical clashes alone would have brought city spectators to their feet. Here, however, the assumption of a standing position had already been necessitated by the lack of seating facilities.

This term, however, the Militia team were on top. Exploiting the loose-man to perfection and giving dazzling exhibitions of team work and accurate short passing, they had the AIF badly rattled. Fighting back with real courage, the AIF could do little to stem the tide, and at the last change the Militia had converted a four goal deficit into a three goal lead.

The last quarter had the crowd in a frenzy as the virtually beaten AIF side struck back with a burst of inspiring football. The Militia hung tenaciously to their lead but, as time slipped by, the scores crept closer.

With time-off to play, the scores were level. All over the ground players hurled themselves into the game in an effort to gain the decision. Pandemonium broke loose as, driving forward in a do-or-die effort, the AIF snatched victory by a few points.

In a game well up to Victorian League standards, well known Les Hardiman and carnival representative, Herb Screaigh (both AIF) were very effective. Real star of the game, however, was a lad named Edwards, who played on the AIF back line. A product of the Army football system, he was never beaten. Throughout the afternoon he thrilled the crowd with his sensational high marking.

The Militia were always a powerful, polished combination and, even though defeated, were responsible for an outstanding exhibition.

Many of the men playing with Army teams today would, in normal times, be representing League and Association clubs. Consequently, it is not difficult to follow the reason why these Army football matches can provide such high entertainment"

The 5th of February saw the return to the unit of the ever-popular Padre Fry, who had been away for a period of four months. Many a Protestant had attended his services in preference to their own denomination. He was an inspiration to all with whom he came into contact.

On 9 February, C Coy was assigned to carry out a training exercise at 3 Division Jungle Training School. It was unfortunate during this exercise that VX67519 L/Cpl A. "Dixie" Dunbar was accidentally killed.

The first of a number of reinforcements were soon to arrive at the battalion. Forty-six marched in from Canungra on 1 March, with an additional one hundred and twelve arriving on the 9th. At a count of men on a battalion parade held on 22 March, it was revealed that there were now 32 officers and 635 other ranks on parade.

Reinforcements were still arriving, and the figure of those posted to the battalion showed on 13 April that there were now 36 officers and 737 other ranks.

Another member of the battalion was accidentally killed when a truck in which he was travelling to Cairns on a 3-day leave, overturned on the dangerous mountain road. He was VX66745 Pte J.E. Dyke, a member of B Coy whose members, led by Pte D.J. "Lofty" Howson, raised £100, which was later forwarded to the mother of the deceased.

Then the day most members had been waiting more than two years for, finally arrived. A muster parade was held in each company to advise the men they were going overseas.

The camp was a hive of industry, with everybody packing and getting prepared. The list, showing full marching order that each soldier was required to carry, is as follows:

On the Man

Knife and Lanyard

Identity Discs and paybook. Book 83., Wallet WP

Field Dressing — Mess tin QP type.

Dress

Socks pr

Badges chevron

Shirt JG

Titles Australia

Trousers JG

Cover Breech Rifle Muzzle

Boots AB

Gaiters

Web equipment

Singlets Cotton

Drawers Cotton

Hat KF with band and chin strap, colour patch.

Badges hat.

To be carried in Haversack

Mugs enamel

Tins mess in cover

Knife, fork and spoon

Rations emergency dehydrated

Unexpired portion of days ration

Towel

Pullover

Prs Socks 2

Holdall

Soap

Safety razor and blades

Brushes hair

Brushes shaving

Brushes tooth

Comb

Sterilizing outfit, anti mosquito lotions

To be carried in Pack

Helmet steel (attached)

1 blanket in ground sheet tied around pack

Tents mosquito

2 shirts JG

1 pr boots and 1 pr bootlaces

Housewife

2 Singlets cotton

2 Drawers cotton

Sheets ground with blanket tied around pack

Gas Cape

Towel

Surplus, such as greatcoat SD etc will be placed in kitbags, instructions for disposal of which will be issued later.

2 blankets to be withdrawn.

Finally on 23 April, 1944 between the hours of 2200 and 2300, troops departed camp by vehicle for the Tolga Railway Station. Three trains conveyed 7 Aust Inf Bn (AIF) to the port of Cairns for embarkation aboard the SS "Duntroon." A rear party of 3 officers and 32 other ranks, plus Mr R.H. McHugh, the YMCA Representative, were left to return stores and leave the area in inspection order.

By 0700 hrs the next day, all personnel of the 7th, 23rd Brigade Headquarters, and Corps Headquarters were on board. Two personnel who had been AWL, but returned just before the unit marched out of camp, were dealt with by the CO's orderly room. They were privileged to attend the Anzac Day ceremony conducted on 25 April.

The Duntroon sailed for New Guinea at 0930 on 24 April. At 1130 hrs on the 26th, the ship arrived at Milne Bay, moved inside the boom and berthed beside ships already in the harbour, there to remain until the 28th, when she moved outside the boom in preparation for departure to Oro Bay. At 1500 hrs she re-entered the boom to re-berth. At 0615 hrs on 30 April, she finally departed for Oro Bay, arriving there in the evening of the same day at 2300 hrs. Yet another day was spent at Oro Bay, before sailing at 0800 hrs on 2 May, to arrive at Lae the same night at 2345 hrs.