

VALE: "Pride of the Cornhuskers" & 62 2/33ers

This review was written by Matt Sloan, grandson of Capt. Jack Balfour-Ogilvy who became OC of the restored Don Company following the disaster

The following is a recount of true events that occurred on the morning of September 7th 1943 involving the men of "D" (Don) Company, 2/33 Battalion. Due to strict military censorships in New Guinea at the time war correspondents were not allowed to report on this incident. Military personnel were not allowed to write home and tell their relatives of the incident that occurred, and military authorities simply notified the next of kin of those who died that their loved ones had been "accidentally killed in New Guinea" or "killed in an air accident in New Guinea".

The accident was the single most horrific tragedy to befall the AIF during World War 2, and to this day almost 70 years later is believed to be the worst airline accident in history involving Australians.

The 25th Brigade comprising of 2/31Bn, 2/25Bn & 2/33Bn was the first airborne infantry of the British Empire to be flown in to attack the Japanese. 7th September 1943 at 7-Mile Airstrip, which became Port Moresby's Jackson's International Airport, 3 companies of the 2/33 waited in a convoy of Army trucks to emplane in USAAF DC3 "Biscuit Bombers". The marshalling area had been set up at the eastern end of the airstrip and motorcycle provosts would lead each truck to its bomb proof revetment. Don company in their 6 trucks, almost bumper to bumper, were stationary across the end of the strip in the face of bombers taking off.

The men were weary from the lack of sleep they had received due to the excitement of preparation, and at 0420hrs the roar of a B-24D Liberator bomber hurtling down the runway drew the attention of those who were awake. Trees separated the men's view of the strip, but the lights of the Liberator lit up the sky as it climbed to approximately 100 feet above the convoy to head off on bombing mission. They watched in amazement at the low altitude of such a huge aircraft above the convoy.

Five minutes later at 0425 the men heard another roar of bomber engine. Again many of the men looked to the right to see the lights of the aircraft through the trees. This time the lights kept coming. The Liberator bomber took to the skies but then appeared to hang. "It's going to hit us. LOOK OUT! LOOK OUT!" yelled one of the young Sergeants. The Liberator hit the trees separating the Battalion from the airstrip. The sky lit up with a bright yellow flash as the left wing was sheared off completely and the fuselage of the plane continued on, crashing directly into the truck-line of "D" Company.

The bomber had crashed directly into five of "D" Company's trucks, four of which were reduced completely to a pile of metal. Of the four bombs onboard the aircraft, two had exploded on impact with a third exploding minutes later. Men were disappearing amongst the wreckage as the grenades or mortarbombs they were carrying on their chest exploded. Other men on fire would drop to the ground and roll in an attempt to extinguish the flames, unfortunately often resulting in a jerk of their body as their bandolier of ammunition around their waist or shoulder exploded.

Men from "A" Company and "C" Company were also injured when debris and petrol hit their trucks.

Members of the Headquarters & "B" Companies still at the battalion camp could hear the mortar and ammunition explosions and their first reaction was thinking that the Japanese had realised the AIF were on the move and had come under attack. Within minutes, US Army trucks arrived at the scene and two men in asbestos suits got out of their trucks and walked calmly directly into the fire to help rescue the injured and recover the dead.

Every Doctor within twenty miles of Port Moresby from Australian and American hospitals, Army, Air Force and Navy units in the area, rushed to Jackson's aerodrome to treat the injured and wounded. Ambulances, trucks and jeeps were used to transport the victims on improvised stretchers to the 2/1, 2/5 and 2/9 Australian General Hospitals and to the US hospital in Koki. Some of the nurses broke down and cried, some fainted at the sight of the burned soldiers.

The total number of Australian personnel killed in this tragedy is 62 and a further 90 soldiers were injured. All 11 members of the aircrew were also killed. Although rumours of sabotage circulated at the time, the official US inquiry ruled that due to the lack of visibility at 0425hrs and the pilot flying by instrument, it was a miscalculation of the lift required to clear the trees at the end of the runway. The crash was ruled as pilot error.

This is something that I have spent a lot of time researching as I know that it impacted my grandfather very deeply. As a young Lieutenant at the time he had the grim self-appointed task of recovering his men for identification. Realising there was no time to grieve, he, along with the other survivors flew out to take part in the Markham Valley to Lae battle.

Recently I have also been in contact with two men living in the United States whose Uncles were onboard the "Pride of the Cornhuskers" that day.

To commemorate the 70th Anniversary of this tragedy I would like to plan a commemoration ceremony in Port Moresby in September 2013. I have the support of the 2/33 Bn Association and I will be working with Gary Traynor, Site Administrator for Medals Gone Missing.

If you would like to show your support for such an event, please post a comment below, contact Gary Traynor at customerservice@medalsgonemissing.com or Matt Sloan at 2_33BnAssoc@mail.com

This event changed the lives of so many Australian families, and the families of the USAAF crew.....They will not be forgotten.

Lest we forget.