

Sabotage of a U.S. Fifth Air Force Liberator Bomber at Port Moresby on September 7th, 1943, wiped out an entire Company of an A.I.F. 7th Division Infantry Battalion, killing seventy two and maiming sixty two others.

Strict American and Australian military censorship in New Guinea prevented the story from being told at the time by War Correspondents. Soldiers were not allowed to refer to it in their letters home. Military Authorities advised next of kin that their sons, husbands and brothers had been "accidentally killed in New Guinea" or "killed in an air accident in New Guinea".

It was only when wondering relatives learned that "many others had received the same curt notification of the death of their boys that they began to realise the magnitude of the accident". Their pleas for more information went unanswered until 2/33 Battalion comrades of the dead soldiers returned to Australia on home leave after later victories in New Guinea. This is the true story of that pre-dawn tragedy at Port Moresby.

The 25th Brigade, (2/31, 2/25 and the 2/33 Battalions) of the A.I.F. 7th Division, which already had won fame in Syria, at Milne Bay, and on the Owen Stanley Range Kokoda Track, was selected as the first air-borne infantry of the British Empire, to be flown in to attack the Japanese. Their task was to drive the Japanese from the Markham Valley airstrip at Nadzab and capture Lae, so that Allied aircraft could have bases on the northern side of the 13,000ft high Owen Stanley Range.

American-manned Douglas 3 Dakota transport planes - "biscuit bombers", as they were affectionately called - carried the Australians without casualty over the mountains to Tsili Tsili. After resting the night at Tsili Tsili, the "biscuit bombers" again carried the Australians along the river valley, never flying higher than 60 feet to Nadzab, where they landed amid smoke and charcoal dust on a flat kunai strip. This had been burnt off a few hours earlier by American paratroops, a battery of the A.I.F. Field regiment, who had parachuted down with the Americans, and a company of the A.I.F. 2/2 Pioneers, who had joined them after crossing the Markham River.

But let us return to Jackson's Aerodrome, a large airstrip seven miles from Port Moresby, at 0430 hrs on September 7, 1943. Members of "D" (Don) Company of the 2/33 Battalion, which had been selected as the advance Company to fly to Tsili Tsili, were in Army trucks assembled in the marshalling area at the western end of the airstrip.

Air transport officers were calling the nominal roll, checking the names of the personnel in the trucks, before motor-cycle provosts led each truck to its particular bomb-proof revetment, where the soldiers were to transfer into waiting "biscuit bombers". Everyone at the end of the airstrip heard the approaching roar of a "four-engined bomber", but no-one took any notice because the ashfelt runway ended three hundred yards from the trucks and aircraft always were airborne before reaching the strip's end.

Several trees between them and the end of the airstrip prevented the troops in the trucks from seeing, in the darkness, the exhaust flames of the Liberator as, with throttles wide open, it lifted off the runway. The Liberator, fully loaded with high explosives, taking off on a bombing mission, levelled out at forty feet, but the pilot

could not lift it. The giant bomber crashed, with a roar, into the tree-tops twenty yards from the troop-filled trucks. Petrol tanks in the wings exploded, hurling high octane fuel all over the trucks and their occupants. Two 500lb and two 250lb bombs flew from the wrecked bomber and landed among the trucks. A 500 pounder and two 250 pounders exploded. Some of the trucks were blown to pieces, others were blown onto their sides and caught fire. Some of the soldiers were blown into eternity.

Nearly all the others were human fire-crackers, their jungle-green shirts and trousers, gaiters and felt hats in flames. Every man in trucks had front-line ammunition strapped about his body, because they were expected to begin fighting the Japs the moment they stepped from the "biscuit bombers". Some had one hundred rounds of .303 rifle or Bren gun ammunition slung in bandoliers around their waists or across their shoulders and chests. They also were carrying two hand-grenades inside their pouches (part of the web equipment). Others carried four two-inch mortar bombs in their pouches. Some were charged with .303 rounds for the Bren guns, nine millimetre bullets for Owen sub-machine guns and bullets for service pistols and revolvers.

Each lorry contained boxes of three-inch mortar bombs. The flaming sheets of petrol set the men on fire and the fire set off the ammunition each was carrying as well as that which lay in the burning and over-turned trucks. The screams of the blinded, dying and frightfully-burned soldiers were drowned by the crescendo of exploding ammunition which shot from their bodies into the darkness like sky-rockets.

Many rescuers were seriously burned and wounded by ammunition which exploded on the soldiers they were trying to drag to safety.

A padre found the body of the Officer Commanding "D" Company two days after the crash. Many of the bodies recovered were unrecognisable. So too were some of the badly burned victims. 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 airstrip to treat the injured and wounded. In addition, ambulances, trucks and jeeps were used to convey the victims on improvised stretchers to the 2/1, 2/5 and 2/9 Australian General Hospitals and to the American Hospitals at Koki. Some nurses broke down and cried, some fainted at the sight of the burned soldiers.

The tail of the Liberator broke off and dropped to the ground when it hit the trees. Two of the crew, who had been in the tail section walked from the wreckage, dazed, but unscathed. They were taken to hospital for observation, but died next day from shock. The other crew members were killed instantly.

Four A.I.F. Army Service Corps drivers, two marshalling staff and an American Provost also were killed. Total death-roll in the crash therefore was ninety one.

Members of A, B, C and Headquarters Companies of the 2/33 Battalion were just preparing to leave their camp at Pom Pom for Jackson's Aerodrome when the tragedy occurred. Although more than two miles away, they saw the bomb and petrol explosion light up the sky like a vivid sunrise and heard the continual roar of aircraft and mortar bombs, as well as the exploding small-arms ammunition. Their first reaction was "The Nib b...s know that we are on the move and are bombing the airstrip".

When they reached the marshalling area in trucks and saw the carnage, they joined in the rescue work mechanically, too overcome to speak. Within a few minutes the companies were remustered in the marshalling area, conducted to their aircraft revetments, and the Markham Valley show was "on".

None of them spoke a word on the three hours flight over the mountains to Tsili Tsili. They couldn't speak, they were too busy suppressing tears and thinking. The Battalion could not reform before being committed against the Japanese at Heath's Plantation, seven miles from Nadzab. A company of the 2/3 Pioneers led by Captain Norm Garrard became

attached to the 2/33 Battalion and took the role of the unfortunate "D" Company in the successful attack on Lae. Meanwhile, Captain Kevin Power, M.C., of the 2/33 Battalion, who had remained at Port Moresby to train reinforcements for the Battalion, sought volunteers for a new "D" Company. As Allied Command had prepared plans for all infantry units in the area, he had only non-infanterers to call upon. Although he believed his task of obtaining volunteers would fail, Captain Power visited the 7th Division carrier Group. He did not need to explain the urgent need for volunteers. These men knew that the 2/33 was a company short, facing a long period in action.

So many volunteered that Power was able to hand-pick the best men in the group. When he had all the men he wanted, the others tried to bribe him into taking them. They said that their unit was not likely to be committed to action, and they felt that they were "loafing on their mates". Captain Power took the selected volunteers to Pom Pom Park, and with the aid of some of the Battalion's Middle East veterans who had been left at Port Moresby l.o.b. (left out of battle) for various reasons, gave them a week's intensive training

The newly-formed "D" Company, containing about 75% new young Australians and about 25% Middle East veterans from whom the Company's N.C.O.s. were drawn, flew across New Guinea to join their battalion. Members of the new company alighted from their "biscuit bombers" at Kaiaput in the Ramu Valley, and set off on a forced march, in full battle equipment, to catch up with the 2/33 Battalion, which was chasing the Japs up the centre of the Ramu.

After the capture of Lae, on the north coast, the 2/33 Battalion marched back to Nadzab, in the Markham Valley, and had a few days rest there while other Battalions drove the Japanese forces back along the adjoining Ramu Valley. The 2/33 then flew to Kaiapit, in the Ramu and again was committed. They pushed the Japanese back into the high Finisterre Range, flanking the Ramu.

The new "D" Company marched 62½ miles in 2½ days to overtake the Battalion, passed straight through it, and carried out a forward patrol. When the Battalion "caught up" with the new "D" Company it found these new infanteers bare-footed. They had worn out their boots in their first stunt and were then patrolling from the Kaiguian, stripped off into a fighting patrol.

Back at Port Moresby, doctors and nurses remained constantly at the bedsides of those badly burnt men who had survived the crash of the Liberator. Many were flown to Australia for plastic surgery. Four Army Padres, of various denominations, presided at the graves when the victims were buried in a combined ceremony attended by Allied soldiers, sailors and airmen of all ranks.

The Australian War Cemetery at Bomana, near Port Moresby, has row upon row of white crosses over neatly-kept turfed graves, a reminder of the 2/33 Battalion "D" Company members who the Battalion regard as KILLED IN ACTION. Army officialdom says that they were accidentally killed. To the soldier there is a vast difference.

American airmen later told our troops that the Liberator had been sabotaged by their maintenance staff, which serviced the aircraft overnight. They said that two Mexican members of the ground staff had been shot as saboteurs. For sometime after the crash, American Bomber Captains made the ground staff who serviced the planes overnight, draw lots to see which one had to fly on the mission with the aircrew. This, they said, stopped any subsequent sabotage.

=====