

AIR CRASH

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■ Sabotage of a US Fifth Air Force Liberator bomber at Port Moresby on September 7, 1943 — 40 years ago last Wednesday — wiped out an entire AIF 7th Division infantry company, killing 72 and maiming 62 others.

Strict American and Australian military censorship in New Guinea prevented the story 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 deaths 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 their victories against the Japanese at Nadzab, Markham Valley, Lae, Ramu Valley and Shabby Ridge.

This story of that pre-dawn tragedy at Port Moresby was told by REG HARRIS who served with 2/33 Battalion until he became a war correspondent:



THE LIBERATOR ... a bombing mission that tragically backfired.

The 25th brigade (2/31, 2/25 and 2/33 Battalions) of the AIF 7th Division — which had already won fame in Syria, at Milne Bay, and on the Owen Stanley Range-Kokoda Trail — was selected as the first airborne infantry of the British Empire to be flown in to the attack against 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 Owen Stanley Range.

At Jackson's aerodrome, a large strip 12 km from Port Moresby, at 4.30 a.m. on September 7, 1942, members of "D" (Don) Company of the 2/33 Battalion, which had been selected as the advance company, were in army trucks assembled in the marshalling area at the western end of the airstrip.

Everyone at the end of the airstrip heard the approaching roar of a four-engined bomber, but no one took any notice because the asphalt runway ended 200 metres from the trucks, and aircraft were always airborne before reaching the strip's end.

The Liberator, fully loaded with high explosives taking off for a bombing mission, levelled out at 12 metres and the pilot could not lift it.

The giant bomber crashed with a roar into the treetops 20 metres from the troop-filled trucks.

Death before dawn

Petrol tanks in the wings exploded, hurling flaming high-octane liquid fuel all over the trucks and their occupants.

Two 500 lb bombs and two 250 lb bombs flew from the wrecked bomber and landed among the trucks.

A 500-pounder and the two 250-pounders exploded.

Some of the trucks were blown to pieces; others were blown on their sides and caught fire. Some of the soldiers were blown to eternity.

Nearly all the others were human firecrackers, their jungle green shirts, trousers, gaiters, and felt hats in flames.

Covered in ammunition

Every man in the trucks had first-line ammunition strapped about his body, because they were expected to begin fighting the moment they stepped from the transport aircraft.

Some had 100 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 in their web equipment pouches.

Others carried four two-inch mortar bombs in their pouches.

Some were carrying magazines charged with .303 rounds for 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 sheet 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 overturned trucks.

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

A padre found the body of the officer commanding "D" Company two days after the crash.

The tail of the Liberator broke off and dropped to the ground when the bomber 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 the next day from shock.

The other 10 members of the crew were killed instantly.

Four AIF Army Service Corps truck drivers, two AIF marshalling staff, and an American provost were also killed.

The total death toll was 91.

Within a few minutes, the companies were re-mustered in the marshalling area, conducted to their aircraft and the Markham Valley "show" was on again.

None of us spoke a word during the flight over the mountains. We couldn't speak — we were too busy suppressing tears and thinking.

The battalion could not re-form before being committed against the Japanese at Heath's Plantation, near Nadzab.

A company of the 2/2 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-infantryers to call on.

Although he believed his task of obtaining volunteers would fail, Captain Power visited the 7th Division Carrier Group.

He did not have to explain the urgent need for volunteers. These men knew 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 Captain Power had all the men he wanted, the others tried to bribe them into taking them.

They said they would be committed to action, and when they left they were "loafing on their mates".

(This article was drawn to the attention of *The Sunday Mail* by John Kelso, of Dorrington, ex-Lance Corporal, AGT Company, 2/33 Battalion.