

The day D Company was wiped out

April 25 2003

The commander of a platoon during WWII tells of a tragedy in Port Moresby. Roger de Lisle reports.

Sixty years on, David MacDougal still finds it difficult to talk about a day in September 1943, when D Company of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion was virtually wiped out - behind their own lines. Members of a platoon under his command were also among those killed when a US bomber crashed into troops assembled at an airport before heading into battle.

The retired lieutenant-colonel, who lives in Frankston, still carries with him the memory of the US Liberator, fully laden with bombs, crashing into the Australian troops at Jackson's Field in Port Moresby.

On Tuesday, September 7, the battalion was assembling on the airstrip, preparing to fly out to join a campaign aimed at flushing out the Japanese army from the port of Lae and the Ramu Valley.

In the pre-dawn darkness, the young men, many of them teenagers, were in a convoy of trucks brought in to carry transport them to the end of the airstrip. The six vehicles of D Company were among the first group to move.

By this time US airborne operations were under way, the roar of four bombers' resonating as they struggled to take off with their payload of four 500-pound bombs.

The troops became acutely aware of how low the US planes were as they flew over the dispersal area. One of the bombers began spurting flames from its exhausts as it struggled to gain height. Someone yelled, "Christ, it's going to hit us!"

Seconds later the bomber crashed through the treetops into the convoy. A huge fireball erupted as three of the bombs exploded. Burning fuel from the aircraft's ruptured petrol tanks gushed out. The fuselage of the aircraft had cartwheeled into the leading trucks, igniting the ammunition they were carrying.

Colonel MacDougal says that when he arrived at the crash site the carnage shocked him. "The cries of the badly burned and the sight of the battalion's trucks reduced to a blazing mass of molten metal made the situation even more distressing," he says.

As well as their normal issue of ammunition, the troops carried extra hand grenades, mortar bombs and up to 300 rounds of bullets in bandoliers.

The colonel remembers the sickening sight of men whose clothes had caught fire and the exploding ammunition. "The sounds of small arms, grenades and mortar bombs detonating, and the stench of burning flesh will never be forgotten," he says.

Nine members of Colonel MacDougal's platoon were among the dead; the rest were injured.

Sergeant William Crooks had a grandstand view of the tragedy. He was sitting on the tailboard of the last truck in D Company's convoy - which probably saved his life.

In his history of the 2/33rd battalion, *The Footsoldiers' Crooks*, he recalls how a figure appeared out of the flames, covered in burns and naked except for his smouldering boots. In quiet American drawl (he was one of the plane's crew), he asked: "Sir, where shall I go?" He died as he was being placed on a stretcher not five minutes later.

None of the Liberator's crew of 11 survived. Despite the carnage, the airlift went ahead as planned. The troops were flown to Tsili Tsili, where a rollcall revealed: 59 Australians dead, 92 injured, some of whom were to die from their wounds.

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Picture: MICHAEL CLAYTON-JONES
David MacDougal as a young soldier (l) and in the present day, remembering 1943(r).