

When sabotage did the enemy's work in New Guinea.

Sabotage of a U.S. Fifth Air Force Liberator bomber at Port Moresby on September 7, 1943 — just 19 years ago next Monday — wiped out an entire A.I.F. 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 Shaggy Ridge.

This is the true story of that pre-dawn tragedy at Port Moresby told by REG HARRIS,

"Brisbane Telegraph" feature writer, who served as an infantryman in the 2/33 Battalion before General Sir Thomas Blamey released him to become an accredited war correspondent with the Allied forces in Dutch New Guinea, the Philippines, Borneo, and China.

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stunt and were then placed on a flying formation from Kairuan, stripped off into a fighting patrol.

BACK at Port Moresby, doctors and nurses remained constantly at the bedside of those badly burned men who survived the crash of the Liberator.

Many were flown back 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 nearly-kept-turfed graves, a reminder of the 2/33 Battalion D Coy, members of whom the battalion regards as KILLED IN ACTION.

Army officials said they were accidentally killed.

To the soldier there is a vast difference!

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THE 25th Brigade (2/31, 2/25 and 2/33 Battalions) of the A.I.F. 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 13,000ft. high Owen Stanley Range.

American-manned Douglas DC Dakota transport planes—"biscuit bombers," as they were affectionately known—carried the Australians, without casualty, in flights over the mountains to Tsilli Tsilli.

After resting the night at Tsilli Tsilli, 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.

The strip had been burned off a few hours earlier by American paratroops, a battery of the A.I.F. 2/4 Field Regiment (who parachuted

down with the Americans) and a company of the A.I.F. 2/2 Pioneers, who joined them after crossing the Markham River.

But let us return to Jackson's aerodrome, a large airstrip seven miles from Port Moresby, at 4.30 a.m. 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 Tsilli Tsilli, were in army trucks assembled in the marshalling area at the western end of the airstrip.

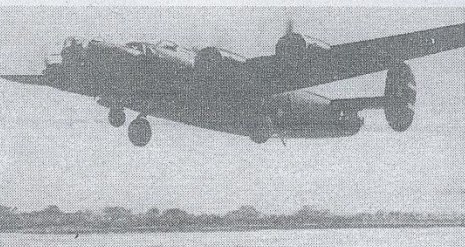
Air transport officers were calling the nominal roll, checking the names of the personnel in the trucks, before motor cycle provosts led each truck to its particular bomb-proof revetment, where the soldiers were to transfer into waiting "biscuit bombers."

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

Several trees between them and the end of the airstrip prevented the troops in the trucks 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 for a bombing mission, levelled out at 40 feet and

Crash that wiped out a company



A Liberator bomber, similar to the one involved in the New Guinea tragedy of 1943, leaves the ground.

the pilot could not lift it.

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

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 fire-crackers, their jungle green shirts, trousers, gaiters, and felt hats in flames.

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

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 basic pouches

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.

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 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.

MANY of the bodies recovered were unrecognisable. So, too, were some of the badly burned victims.

Every doctor within 20 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 to ambulances, trucks and jeeps were used to convey the victims on improvised stretchers to the 2/5, 2/1 and 2/9 Australian general hospitals and to the American hospital at Koki.

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 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 next day from shock.

The other ten members of the crew were killed instantly.

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

Total death-roll in the crash was, therefore, 91.

MEMBERS of A. B. C. and headquarters' companies of the 2/33 Battalion were just preparing to leave their camp at Pom Pom Park for Jackson's aerodrome when the tragedy occurred.

Although more than two miles away, they saw the bomb and petrol explosions 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 Nip b— knows we are on the move and is 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 re-mustered in the marshalling area, conducted to their aircraft revetments, and the Markham Valley show was "on."

"None of us spoke a word during the three hours' flight over the mountains to Tsilli Tsilli.

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, seven miles from 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 Coy. 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 Coy.

As Allied Command had prepared plans for all infantry units in the area, he had only non-infanterers 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 their unit was not likely to be committed to action, and they felt they were "loafing on their mates."

CAPTAIN POWER took the selected volunteers to Pom Pom Park and, with the aid of some of the Middle East veterans, who had been left at Port Moresby

for various reasons, gave them a week's intensive training.

The newly-formed D Company, containing about 75 percent brand new young Australians and about 25 percent Middle East veterans from whom the company's N.C.O.'s were drawn, flew across New Guinea to join their

stunt and were then placed on a flying formation from Kairuan, stripped off into a fighting patrol.

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