

MEMORIES

2/2 Australian Machine Gun Battalion

ANZAC DAY 2009

A collection of personal reminiscences

MEMORIES

Memory is a funny thing. Sometimes it is prompted by a song, or a smell, a question or the mention of a word.

Memory is imprecise. Two people who have witnessed exactly the same event will often have a different recollection of that event. The passage of time may also distort memories. Yet some memories are so strong that they appear vivid in the mind years afterwards, as if the events being described happened just yesterday.

The following document is composed from personal memories of a number of men who served with 2/2 Australian Machine Gun Battalion in World War 2. These are stories of 'ordinary' men (who of course were not ordinary in any sense). They are stories you will not read in history books but they are part of Australian history.

The purpose of this collection is to give the reader some insight into the unwritten side of their stories...the 'human' side.

The men interviewed for this collection were:

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|--------------------------|-----------|
| Neville BARGWANNA | NX 57085 |
| William Australia HARLEY | NX 168353 |
| Ronald MYERS | NX 65161 |
| Ross Gordon RILEY | NX 18186 |
| Adrian SIMPSON | NX 29757 |

I hope you learn something from their memories.

IAN SMALL

Author

WHO WERE THESE MEN?

Neville BARGWANNA (nickname 'Bargy') was born in Gilgandra NSW on 20/3/1921. He left school at age 15 after passing the Intermediate Certificate. When war broke out he was employed as Office Boy with Riverstone Meat Company in Sydney. He enlisted in the AIF at age 19.

William Australia HARLEY (nickname 'Bill') born in Sydney 22/1/1924. His parents had emigrated from Scotland two years previously, hence his middle name. Grew up around Penrith NSW, leaving school at age 14. Was working on a property at Mungindi NSW as a Station hand when he was called up at age 18.

Ronald MYERS (nickname 'Curly') was working as a Junior Accounts Clerk when he was called up at the outbreak of hostilities in 1939. Born at North Sydney 1/6/1919. He left high school in 2nd year at age 14. He 'hated school...except for French... for some reason I enjoyed that.'

Ross Gordon 'Mick' RILEY (nicknames 'The One-eyed Riley' (the title of a bawdy marching song), 'Two-miler Mick') born Goulburn NSW 16/5/21. Left school after completing Intermediate Certificate and was working as a Gutter-boy at the Lever Brothers copra-oil mill at Balmain when called up at the outbreak of war.

Adrian SIMPSON born 16/8/1919 at Armidale NSW. Educated at Armidale and North Sydney Boys' High. Was working for Bank of New South Wales on Relieving Staff (in the country) when he decided to enlist. Because of his youth he needed his mother's permission to join the AIF.

WHY DID THEY 'JOIN UP'?

Neville Bargwanna: At the time he joined the AIF Neville was a Sergeant in the Militia (20th Battn) and in a Machine Gun Company. Neville was in camp at Wallgrove and Basil Staniland came and addressed the group, informing them that a new Machine Gun Battalion (2/2) had been formed and was looking for recruits. Four NCOs present decided to join up together... Neville, Terry Geany, Bruce Griffiths and Tommy Lawrie. Neville clearly remembers they were conscious that the free world was in a desperate situation... the Germans had overrun the whole of Europe and Britain needed help.

Bill Harley: by the time Bill turned 18, the rules had changed. Because of Japan's entry into the war, you were called up at 18, entered the militia and could not be sent out of Australia until you had turned 19. You would be medically assessed etc and then called up in geographic 'areas' and had to present yourself when called up.

Ron Myers: Ron had been in the militia since age 16 and was in the 1st/19th Battalion when war was declared. He was called up at the outbreak of hostilities with the rank of Sergeant. After a number of postings, he was offered placement at an Officers' Training Course but decided the war may be over before that was finished and decided to join the AIF.

Mick Riley: another militia member, Mick was a Platoon Sergeant in charge of one of the machine-gun platoons in the 36th Battalion and was called up the day after war was declared. With his militia background in Vickers guns, when he found out that 2/2 M/G Battalion was being formed he decided to enlist. He joined the AIF on 28/6/1940. Mick says he was 'sick of playing soldiers' and 'dropped a hook', enlisting as a Corporal.

Adrian Simpson: Adrian and a friend (Bill Mackay) had discussed the situation and agreed they would join up together...their intention was to join the anti-aircraft section. They could see what was happening in Europe and everyone was joining up...Great Britain was threatened, Empire was still a great thing and Australia backed the Mother Country.

ENLISTMENT STORIES

Neville Bargwanna: Neville was 19 when he joined up. His father had said to him 'Don't have any ideas of joining the AIF. I will never sign the papers.' So when Neville enlisted he subtracted 2 years from his birthdate, making him 21. When he came home on his first leave he told his father he had joined up, and warned his father that if he 'took him out' he (Neville) would re-enlist under another name and his father would never know where he was. So he had no further trouble after that. Nobody checked on his age...the recruiting personnel were just happy to see a body walk in the door.

Mick Riley: had a similar story. He had enlisted in the militia a week before he turned 16, telling them he was 18. When he enlisted in the AIF, he had just turned 19, but told them he was 21!

Adrian Simpson: Adrian arrived in Sydney from the country and had agreed to meet his friend Bill in Martin Place. It was swarming with men and he couldn't locate his friend. Taxied out to Paddington, issued with an army number, had a medical check (very rudimentary, Adrian didn't see anyone rejected, urine samples were swapped or provided for men who couldn't produce, some of the recruits were intoxicated, in Adrian's words "if you had a pulse you were alright"). At Paddington, Army officers were getting recruits, building their platoons. Adrian was recruited for 2/2 M/gun Battalion.

TRAINING AT COWRA

Neville Bargwanna: remembers two things about Cowra. Firstly, the great kindness of the Cowra people. Secondly, the fact that the men were always broke...as a Private earned 5/- per day. The Cowra Show was on...Neville, Terry Geahy and Billy Keihne (from Emmaville) attended. One of the attractions was a 'Wild-horse Riding Competition' with a prize, Neville thinks, of 10/- to the successful riders. As Billy Keihne came from 'the bush' they said "Come on, Keihne, you're a country boy, get on and ride this bloody horse and get us some money," which Billy did! So they were in the money!

Bill Harley: has a particularly strong reason for remembering Cowra... during his training there he met his future wife, Phyllis, and now lives in the town! They were married on St Patrick's Day 1948. Bill remember Cowra as a modern camp...electricity, sewerage and town water plus a good transport system...rail and road. The huts were timber framed, timber floored, galvanised iron walls and corrugated fibro roofing. Bill was independent, having lived away from home, but 'Cowra was a totally different way of life'. Some of the other recruits suffered from homesickness, and Bill distinctly remembers his first Saturday in camp teaching three or four other recruits how to do their washing (most of the group were 18/19 years old).

Ron Myers: sees Cowra as a 'sorting out' exercise, teaching men discipline and to respect rank so if someone said 'Jump! you jumped. One funny incident (amongst many) which happened in Cowra was the 'riot' at the Lachlan Hotel. At Christmas time (1940) the proprietor refused to donate an 18 gallon keg to the camp and the troops 'rioted'. Someone threw a smoke bomb through the pub door and those troops inside or passing decided to help themselves.

Another memorable incident...Ron was in town one day with a couple of others when a girl of about 15 years of age approached them and asked if they would like to have dinner with her parents. They agreed and their host turned out to be the Mayor of Cowra. They "got on famously" and had quite a few meals at the house. The soldiers found the home-cooked food much more to their taste than the camp food.

Mick Riley: Mick has memories of long drives in the Battalion's trucks, basic training, stolen beer kegs and gun drill. Above all, Cowra means a

number of brushes with authority, in particular what he calls 'ack-willies' (Absent without leave) which saw him reduced to the ranks ('busted' to Private, losing all rank). The last of these occurred on Christmas Day 1940...the men were confined to Cowra camp, the Battalion awaiting embarkation orders, but Mick and some others from A3 Platoon decided to return to Sydney for Christmas.

He was arrested at 3am on Christmas morning in the morning at his fiancé's house in Sydney and taken to Bourke Street jail. He did not return to Cowra, being transferred direct to the jail on *Aquitania* when the Battalion sailed.

Adrian Simpson: Training began in earnest at Cowra. 20 mile route marches, gun training, gun drill...they were taught to strip/reassemble guns blindfolded and at night. Map reading/ compass training...many activities carried out at night. You had to be careful because of the fresh cow-pats in paddocks.

The men became physically very fit but they had very few shoots with the Vickers owing to lack of ammunition.

Had a lot of fun at Cowra...the camp was only a 'walk' from the town and pubs were well frequented.

EMBARKATION –off to war

Neville Bargwanna: Neville sailed on *Aquitania* and regards himself as very fortunate. Through a contact (Inspector of Police) of a friend in Cowra, Neville's mother, girlfriend and Cowra friend arranged a spot on board a police launch and followed *Aquitania* up the harbour. 'It was marvellous...I could see them very clearly.'

Neville sees himself at this time as being young and pragmatic and does not remember the farewell as emotional.

Wasn't seasick on the voyage which he describes as 'uneventful'.

After leave in Colombo they boarded a Dutch ship, *Christian Huygens*.

Neville's only specific memory of this ship is the food which he describes as 'dreadful'.

The bombing by aircraft near the Suez Canal he says was a good distance away and nothing to be scared of!

Ron Myers: Orders came to move overseas. We entrained at night...the townspeople at Cowra gave us a great farewell. To Sydney where we boarded 'Aquitania' (a four-funnel ship) Many families gave us a rousing farewell. From the ship we could see their faces.

Ron was not seasick and being a NCO had a cabin. Landed in Colombo where we had a couple of days leave before boarding a Dutch ship...

Christian Huygens. Thence to Suez and into the Canal, where "we had our first taste of war". A plane dropped a few bombs but missed both the ship and the Canal. We were unloaded and so to our first camp in Palestine.

Mick Reilly: Mick has an altogether different perspective on the departure of *Aquitania*. Having been arrested, he was held in *Aquitania's* jail with his fellow 'ack-willies'. Because of the presence of rats in the jail they were moved to a cabin at the stern of ship under armed guard...from where they walked up on deck and waved goodbye to Sydney!

Anchored off Rottneest Island in WA...a large tiger shark swimming around the ship deterred a couple of men who had decided to swim to shore.

In Colombo Mick bought an opal ring for 2 pounds...it is still in the family. The bombing near the ship in the Bitter Lakes area... 'frightened as hell'!

Adrian Simpson: Adrian remembers *Aquitania* as a beautiful old ship with four funnels and traces of past glory. The departure was extremely emotional with small boats following the ship up the harbour and people on the

headlands waving sheets. Many men became seasick, some before even leaving the harbour!!!

Trip took them down south of Tasmania...very cold and very rough seas. Also extremely rough across Great Australian Bight. Many sick.

Stopped at Fremantle...took on troops...then across Indian Ocean to Colombo (Ceylon). Pleasant trip....smooth seas. This was Adrian's first time out of Australia...he and some others went for a rickshaw ride in Colombo and he distinctly remembers the overwhelming poverty of the slum areas contrasted to the opulence of the well-to-do colonial areas.

Of *Christian Huygens*, Adrian reminiscences are of many ceiling fans and dreadful food.

THE MIDDLE EAST

This is such a huge part of the Battalion's history and the men's memories. It has been necessary to edit the stories to keep this document to a manageable size. Hopefully a more complete version will be posted on the Battalion website in the near future.

Neville Bargwanna: *Neville loved Palestine...he thought it 'marvellous' and a fascinating experience. The thing that struck him most was the age and antiquity of the things he saw compared to his previous life in Australia, a 'new' country. 'Everytime we moved over there the thing that hit us between the eyes was the antiquity'.

*on food... 'I reckon we were fed donkey the meat was so tough.'

*on EWO beer... 'There's an old saying...there's no such thing as a bad beer but EWO is the exception...it's bloody terrible.'

*regards El Alamein as 'first action' and 'a real awakening for us'. During this time Terry Geany was wounded, Tommy Lawrie was killed. Neville himself was seriously wounded when the truck in which he was a passenger was blown up after hitting an anti-tank mine. Neville 'thought I'd lost my leg...I thought my leg had been blown off'. So of the four men who had joined on the same day in 1940, one was killed, two were wounded. The fourth, Bruce Griffiths, had been returned to Australia.

Ron Myers: *Alamein was the main action in the Middle East for us.

*at Bulimba a shell dropped on our position while Johnny Parkhill was moving between guns. The shell was 'dud' and did not explode but started chasing Johnny much to our great amusement. We got a great laugh out of it despite the close call.

*something you would never forget was the sound of bagpipes as the 51st Highlanders closed the gap on our left flank. It was still dark, lit up by burning tanks. They were led in by a piper.

*also never forget the artillery barrage at Alamein. Sitting in the trucks waiting to go in, all of a sudden everything opened up. Knew it was going to happen of course but the noise was terrific...once the barrage stopped the whole front moved into the attack.

*Diarrhoea was a constant problem in the desert. Millions and millions of flies, unsanitary conditions. The 'remedy' was Epsom salts!!!

* If you went into a bar in Tel Aviv after Alamein local members of the Jewish population would buy you drinks to thank you for stopping the Germans. What would have happened to them had the Germans won??

Mick Reilly: *Mick has a raft of stories from the Middle East, many of which he has personally recorded. They are well worth reading.

*Mick has a great anecdote from the big parade at Gaza aerodrome, where General Alexander made his famous speech...John Cockram came back from Cairo, he had just got his commission. When everyone lined up for the parade John had no rank insignia on his uniform...he was a lieutenant but had not yet been presented with his 'pips' to denote his rank. One of the senior officers told him to 'go and get rank' ie get some display of his rank. John came back with sergeant stripes on. Next thing someone else arrives with his actual pips, so John disappears again and returns with his pips...now he is correctly identified as a lieutenant and lines up again. A voice comes from the ranks behind: "Jesus, next time he goes away he'll come back as a Major-General!"

*of the famous speech given by Alexander, Mick says it was '...one of praise and you just basked in the glory of the praise, you know? You swelled with pride.'

Adrian Simpson: *the orange orchards in Palestine...the Arabs would sell us oranges.

*the need for constant sentry duty to stop Arab thieving. Their main objective was to secure weapons and ammunition

*arriving at Mersa Matruh in a terrible duststorm...the dust so thick that the men were guided to their positions by holding on to the bayonet scabbard of the man in front

*the beauty of Syria...the amazing ruins at Baalbeck

*the rushed move back to Egypt after the fall of Tobruk. Adrian and some others were on leave in Beirut., sitting in a café when MPs came in and ordered all 9th Divn men outside, into trucks, back to camp where they had to pack and go.

*Adrian missed the early part of Alamein as he had been evacuated with hepatitis. As he was being evacuated he saw South African Negro troops digging a large number of graves in preparation for the coming battle.

*general memories of Alamein are the noise, seeing Stuka attacks but particularly "of the blokes that died there". Another thing: "the main concern at Alamein was to survive". A very active sniper at Thompson's Post. Burning tanks. After the battle it was eerily quiet.

BACK TO AUSTRALIA

Neville Bargwanna: After evacuation, treatment and by the time he left convalescence camp, the 2/2 Machine Gun Battalion had returned to Australia. Neville came back on a Sea Ambulance Transport, SS *Cornwall*, which returned to Australia unescorted.

Ron, Mick and Adrian returned on ~~all~~ returned on the Queen Mary:

Ron Myers: Returned from the Middle East on Queen Mary (11,000 troops on board). Got friendly with a couple of nurses and played bridge...being officers, the nurses supplied the grog.

The greatest sight of all was coming in through Sydney Heads and seeing the Harbour opening up before you. Quite an emotional feeling.

Mick Reilly: Three things spring to mind...a competition was held to guess the time 'The Mary' would pass through Sydney Heads. Secondly, the men were banned from playing two-up, which led to a fracas, thirdly an organised boxing competition that turned ugly and almost led to a senior officer being thrown overboard.

There was great excitement coming back into Sydney. Mick remembers a Manly ferry coming past, the ferry at a precarious angle as passengers ran to one side to greet 'The Mary'...everyone yahoing and calling out.

Adrian Simpson: Adrian remembers 'The Mary' as huge. Through the Red Sea alone at 32 knots to outrun submarines...the ship was going so fast the bow wave was coming up past the portholes (the library was quite high up). Adrian spent the time playing bridge "for 3 weeks solid".

*arrived back in Sydney on a beautiful sunny morning. An incredible feeling coming through the Heads...word had got out and there were people everywhere.

Upon return to Australia, Adrian and Mick both married their sweethearts. Neville Bargwanna was sent to OCTU (Officer Training) and left the Battalion.

NEW GUINEA

Again, this is a huge topic. This is a brief summary.

Unlike the Middle East, everyone's basic memories of New Guinea are remarkably similar and can be summed up as follows:

- *rain, rain and more rain.
- *always being wet from either rain or perspiration
- *extreme heat
- *mud
- *mosquitoes
- *slogging along muddy jungle tracks carrying heavy loads.
- *the complete contrast to the desert...the closeness of the jungle, thick bamboo and kunai grass. You were always wary.
- *dead Japanese beside tracks
- *Atebrin to suppress malaria...it turned your skin yellow
- *sickness and diseases...the threat of malaria, dengue fever, typhus
- *skin diseases...ringworm, tinea and myriad others all over your body
- *poor food

Bill Harley:

*joined Battalion in New Guinea upon completion of training. As a new member of the unit, Bill saw it as 'the sort of place everyone wanted to go so long as they came home. It had that bit of an aura about it.'

*in the forward areas you never got enough sleep because of sentry duty at night.

*you never got enough food and what you did get was not appetising...no variety and not nutritious. You lost weight because of it.

* 'There's nothing worse than going to bed wet-or lying down, you don't go to bed! Nothing worse than being wet because before long you're cold. It's pretty hard to be cold in the tropics but you're cold.'

*Bill suffered from dengue fever in New Guinea and malaria after he returned to Australia.

Ron Myers:

*chlorinated water tasted foul...chlorine tablets

*had a tin of bully beef per day so would split it 3 ways with two others...everyone would have a third for breakfast, dinner and tea. Became a staple diet, just got used to it. Tried taro root once but didn't know how to

cook it and ended up a 'gluggy mess'. We lost a bit of weight in New Guinea.

*on board LST which was hit by aerial torpedo on way to landing in Lae...many commandos in stern section killed

*Ron souvenired an American officers' coat when the Seabees disappeared into the jungle during an air raid....unfortunately it was much to big for him and he had to give it away.

Mick Riley:

Mick's thoughts are entirely consistent with the summary above...the heat, rain every night, slogging through the jungle up to your hocks in mud, constantly wet, mosquitoes, carrying heavy loads. Upon return from New Guinea suffered malaria attacks after he stopped taking the Atebrin suppressant, his first attack coming at the very end of his 44 days leave. He had a total of 7 attacks.

Adrian Simpson:

*gentian violet and raw alcohol used to treat skin diseases

*torpedo attack on their barge on way to Lae...torpedo hit stern, many commandos killed. Adrian sees this as another lucky escape...it had been their intention to camp in the stern (air-conditioned, ice-cream machine) but commandos beat them to it. After attack someone yelled out 'get ready to abandon ship' which caused great consternation...at sea, sharks etc But apart from that there was no panic, discipline was perfect

*Americans were very 'green' and inexperienced. At Lae there were a lot of Americans on the beach, unloading equipment, stores etc. We told them to get off but they ignored us...shortly after the beach was strafed by aircraft and they suffered many casualties.

*Lae...dead Japanese everywhere...stench terrible

*after Sattelburg, Adrian has a distinct memory of coming down the mountain and seeing a beautifully attired officer standing there asking troops 'where is your mosquito net, soldier?' (the nets had been tossed away...too heavy!)

*Eventually the entire Division became 'Z Class'...unfit for further duty through malaria, dengue, skin complaints, typhus etc. Repatriated to Australia on board a liberty ship....a terrifying journey in which it was feared the boat would break in half.

Mick Reilly left the Battalion in December 1944, medically boarded.

MATESHIP

One of the great Australian 'traditions' is mateship. Every one of these men mentioned it yet it probably something that those who were not there can ever really understand or appreciate.

Neville Bargwanna: The story of Neville and his three mates enlisting together, training together, fighting together, says it all. Upon reflection, Neville says 'It was 5 ½ years of my life that I wouldn't want to exchange...the army matured me very quickly. It's a totally new experience. Everyone was exposed to men who had led different lifestyles. The language was shattering.'

Bill Harley: 'You eat together, live together, you have the same aspirations-mainly to get leave and survive. The camaraderie that existed... young people could get along together'.

Ron Myers: At war's end there was a feeling of relief. Following demobilisation, Ron was 'at a complete loss. I didn't know what to do. You hit Marrickville barracks for discharge and you walk out the door. You're on your own and you've lost a family.'

Mick Reilly: 'It comes back to the camaraderie, to the blokes I was with. I'll never forget them, never forget them...they were the salt of the earth, whatever they had you had half.'

Adrian Simpson: Adrian feels morale within his unit was always extremely high and puts this down to the quality of both leadership and men... "We never thought it was possible we would lose. No one was going to beat us...we had first class people..." Mateship was all important. "Had we not been able to get on it would have been hopeless..."

A good example: after return to Australia from the Middle East, although the men had been away for two and a half years, had been constantly in each others company over that time and had only limited leave, they wanted to get together at the Long Bar in the Australia Hotel for a drink! Which they did! This still amazes Adrian.