
A WAR HISTORY

OF

B.H.AVERY

WX349 2/11th Battalion



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15th March 2005

A BRIEF HISTORY OF 2/11th BATTALION

By WX349 Sgt 2/11th BN

On the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 the 2/11th Battalion was the first infantry unit to be raised in WA as a component part of the 18th Brigade Sixth Australian Division. Lt.Col T.S. Louch MC was appointed Commanding Officer. The advance party entered Northam camp on the 4th November, 1939. The first action by the unit took place on 5.1.41 at Bardia, followed by Tobruk and Derna all of which are in Libya. The Battalion embarked from Alexandria, Egypt on 10.4.41 for Greece and on 24.4.41 went to the island of Crete where they, and other Allied troops met and almost repulsed what was then the world's largest German airborne invasion. The majority of the Unit were captured on Crete and became POW's. Those who escaped capture, namely 52 ranks, together with reinforcements already in Palestine became the nucleus of a reformed Battalion and after training undertook garrison duties in Syria. The Battalion later, on 5.11.44 went to New Guinea and continued in action until the cessation of hostilities. The disbandment of the 2/11th took place on 7.12.1945.

HISTORY OF WX349 SGT BASIL HURLSTONE AVERY

Prior to the war I was educated at East Perth State School then Maylands State School and then Guildford Grammar School. It was at that time very difficult to get a job as the depression had influenced the job market. I commenced my employment in 1938 as a jackaroo on "Minderoo" station, Onslow. It was a sheep and cattle station and was owned by Mervyn Forrest a relative of the late pioneer Lord John Forrest. I was taught to ride horses by Tommy Farr who was known throughout W.A. as the greatest breaker-in of wild horses. I remained at "Minderoo" until October, 1939 when the news came through that war was highly imminent. I decided then that I would volunteer so I came to Perth to enlist at Subiaco Drill Hall in November, 1939. I was then nineteen years of age. My reason for joining up was that I was seeking adventure Also that I wanted to serve my country. I went to Northam Camp to commence training. After a short period of Training we embarked on 7.12.39 and sailed from Fremantle for the eastern states to continue training in the following camps: Rutherford, Greta and Ingleburn. Returning to Perth on 16.3.40 we embarked for the Middle East on the "SS.Nevasa" on 22.4.40. On 18.5.40 the Battalion disembarked at "El Kantara" on the Suez Canal and entrained for "Gaza" in Palestine.

After a period of training the Battalion departed for "Burg El Arab" on 5.1.41 engaging in the battle for Bardia, followed by the battle for Tobruk. Then, on 25.1.41 the Battalion secured "Derna" and its defenses. On 3.2.41 the Battalion departed for "Benghazi". Then shortly after this the Battalion pursued the Italian army to the south. On 7.2.41 the Italian army surrendered to the British Army Division. This effectively ended the participation of the 6th Australian Division and the 2/11th Bn. in the "Libyan" and "Cyrenaican" campaigns.

On the 16.3.41 the Battalion arrived at "Mersa Matruh". On 10.4.41 we embarked on "HMT Pennland" for Greece disembarking at Piraeus on 12.4.41. On 15.4.41 we arrived at "Kalabaka" and took up defensive position to cover the withdrawal of the British Armoured Division. After this the Battalion continued to withdraw through defensive positions to "Megara". On the 19th-24th April Colonel Louch was wounded in action and was replaced in command by Major Ray Sandover. On the 25.4.41 the Battalion embarked on the "Thurland Castle". We were escorted by the destroyers "Havock" and "Hasty". Before boarding we destroyed our equipment and vehicles.

On 26.4.41 I disembarked at Crete Souda Bay and marched to Georgiopolis and later to "Retimo". On 26.5.41 the assault on Crete took place by the German Airborne Division. On 30.5.41 the surrender of Crete was made although the Battalion was still occupying its prepared positions. The option was given to all ranks to surrender outright to the German forces or to break contact and escape, "if they could, as best they could". The decision resulted in some soldiers making extraordinary escapes.

This effectively ended the existence of the first of the two 2/11th Battalions which were raised and fought in World War II. On 12.9.41 the Battalion went to "Syria" to take up garrison duties. On 16.2.42 the Battalion embarked on "SS Durban Castle" and departed for the Pacific area. On 16.3.42 the Battalion arrived at Adelaide, South Australia and moved into billets in the Mount Lofty area. On 17.4.42 the Battalion moved back to W.A and commenced jungle training. After a period of 18 months training the Battalion, on 5.4.1944 embarked "SS Katoomba" for New Guinea under the command of Lt.Col.Binks who was later replaced by Major A Jackson. On 14.3.44 LtCol Green was appointed to command the 2/11th Battalion after the "Wewak" operation. On 23.11.45, Colonel Green relinquished command and marched out for discharge. The Battalion was formally disbanded on 7th December 1945

The 2/11th BREN CARRIER SECTION, HEADQUARTER Coy.

In November, 1939, at Northam Camp when the Battalion was being formed, Lieutenants Jackson and Egan, two Vickers gun experts called together a number of men and asked them "What do you want to be in this man's army"? If you replied "Gunner" you were dobbed-in. Prior to the Libyan campaign the Platoon consisted of the following Officers and Men: Lieut. Tom Bedells, Sergeants Merrick, Mews, Holiday and Denny. Corporals Liddel, Spencer and Paull. Privates Anderson, Ashfold, Banks, Carey, Crombie, Duffy, Edwards, Foggon, Corrie, Holford, McCarrey, Oakley, Pederson, Morley, Sim, Whitman, Walsh, Sinclair, Avery, Dare, Bradfield and Martin.

Following the Libyan campaign the battalion returned to "Amiriya", Egypt and we were issued with new Bren Carriers. The Transport and Carrier platoons received orders to embark for Greece and did so on the "Hindustan". After several days of near misses the ship landed at Port Pireaus in Greece. The carrier group was separated from the Battalion for some time and took part in many incidents with the German tanks and troops. The group shortly afterwards returned to join the Battalion. The carrier deeds brought no disgrace. In fact they are most likely to be remembered with affection by all members of the Battalion.

During this period we lost two of our corporals: Liddell and Spencer. They jumped out of their carriers into a wadi to try and avoid the German bombers. Before leaving Greece my carrier turned over during the evacuation. Lt.Tom Bedells fired his pistol at the carrier and it exploded. I lost all my personal gear including my Bren gun and .303 rifle.

WX349 PRIVATE BASIL H.AVERY (GUNNER)

ESCAPE FROM CRETE IN A LANDING CRAFT.

On 26.4.1941 the 2/11th Battalion disembarked at Suda Bay, Crete. We were marched to Georgiopolus and later to Retimo where we prepared slit trenches under the cover of olive trees. Our position was directly opposite the sea and in front of the trenches barbed wire was put up along the entire front occupied by our troops. Some weeks prior to the ensuing battle at Retimo I was standing along the side of the trench with Sgt Norm Mews and Gunner Stan Hancock when a German fighter plane, a Messerschmitt 109, appeared from nowhere and raced along the row of olive trees. Both Mews and Hancock jumped into the trench and injured their legs. I got behind a tree. As the pilot opened up you could see the bullets splattering everywhere. Fortunately no one was killed. Sgt Mews was evacuated to the RAP. Almost every day we were spoken to on the wireless broadcast by "Lord Haw Haw" German propagandist minister saying that we were all doomed men, and he referred to Crete as the "Island of Doom". It was my personal opinion that he made us more determined. The Airborne invasion commenced on 20 May, 1941. It was about 2 o'clock in the afternoon when we could hear a loud noise in the sky. It was not long before you could see large numbers of German Airborne Junker planes almost upon us. They almost immediately began to drop a large numbers of paratroops. These paratroops landed all around us to the front and rear of our trench. It became a slaughter. There were heavy casualties of German soldiers. Many wounded Germans landed in the trees, others in the barbed wire. Several Junker planes were brought down by small arms fire and the occupants died in their planes. The fighting went on until about the twenty ninth of May, 1941. Then began the taking of POWs and the burying of the dead. This was one of the worst jobs I have ever experienced. The bodies had been exposed to the elements for some time. Also it was said at the time, that the drugs they had taken prior to jumping out had contributed to their deteriorating condition.

On the morning of 30.5.1941 the 2/11th Battalion was ordered to surrender. I remember the adjutant, Lt. Dowding telling us that it was "every man for himself" as the German tanks were almost upon us. The majority of troops marched towards them. They became prisoners of war "for the duration" in Europe.

I made a quick decision to run towards the mountains and endeavour to escape. Some others didn't make it. I kept running for some time. I was completely exhausted; however I managed to keep going. It was several days before I met up with a few other soldiers one of which was WO Charlie Mitchell from Headquarters Company. It was very dangerous climbing in the mountains and on the last mountain I was bringing up the rear of a small group when I slipped trying to retrieve my boots. I slid to the bottom of the mountain. The party left me as they were too exhausted to go back for me. The next day I was helped to go on by two South Africans. My hands were damaged. I was able to join a small group of our battalion, two of which were Allied soldiers near a small fishing village called "Ala Galini". Our commanding officer Col. Ray Sandover was in charge and he had been told that there were two abandoned British landing craft at "Ala Galini". They were quickly located, but one was found to be severely damaged. There was a chance that the other could be floated however its battery had been damaged. At this point we were informed by several Sutherland Highlanders that there were two army trucks about 2 to 3 miles up the coast at a small village named "Tim Bakion" and that their batteries would probably be all right. Lt Tom Bedells asked for two volunteers, and Cpl Bill Mortimer and myself agreed to go. We set off; our mission was to bring back the batteries if they were OK. The beach had sharp stones and it took some time to get there. Bill took out the two batteries and whilst he was removing them I found two cases of rations in an olive oil factory. We were not able to carry any of the food, 12 volt batteries were too heavy so we decided to return for them later. The walk back with the added weight of the batteries was very difficult but we made it. Capt. Fitzharding and Lt. Tom Bedells returned with a small party to obtain the rations but they encountered an enemy patrol while getting the rations and had to run for their lives. Tom Bedells was wounded while helping to put the boat out to sea but that they managed to get back to the main party. In the meantime we had managed to float the good barge. With the batteries installed we were able to prepare for the voyage as the engine was OK and running smoothly. Colonel Sandover had a difficult time in deciding who the crew and passengers would be. Some of those selected from the 2/11th Battalion included Capt Ryan our medical officer, Lt. T Bedells, W/O C Mitchell, Bert Skinner, Doug Quinlan, Bill Mortimer, Eric Smith and myself. From the 2/3rd Field Regiment: Capt. Fitzharding and Peter Monger. Our course was set for Mersa Matruh. It had been decided by naval and air force

personnel that the barge would do about four knots and we had fuel for about three days running. An army compass was used to steer our course. About 5pm we set off with the best wishes of those left behind.

During the night the lookout yelled out that there was a dark shape approaching us. It turned out to be a submarine on the port bow. It went past us and then turned and came back again firing a shot over the top of the barge. Capt Fitzharding stood up and sang out that we had wounded and sick men on board. We were then ordered to stop. The Italian submarine then came along the side of us and ordered all the officers to board the submarine. Lt. Tom Bedells was wounded and remained on the barge. We were then told to return to Crete which we did but not for long. Several hours passed before the submarine submerged. We then turned the barge about and resumed our voyage towards the western desert at "Mersa Matruh". The following days were uneventful. On the third day we sighted land. It was the desert coast occupied by South African troops. Bill Mortimer swam ashore and told them who we were. After all of us went ashore they could not do enough for us. It turned out that the South Africans had several days previously counter attacked and pushed the Germans back. We were told we were very fortunate. The next few days were spent re-equipping us and transporting us back to Palestine to rejoin the Battalion which was now reforming and awaiting the arrival of reinforcements.

On returning to the Battalion I was promoted to corporal. Shortly after that the Battalion moved to Syria. I was then promoted to sergeant and sent back to Palestine to assist training reinforcements.

When the Battalion returned to Perth, W A, I was sent to two Officer Training Schools: 21.9.1942," PASS", and on 7.243:"GOOD PASS". On the last day of the second Training school I developed rheumatic fever and was sent to Hollywood hospital. After several months of rehabilitation I was medically downgraded to class B. After this I was discharged from the Army.

POSTWAR

After discharge I was employed by the Repatriation Department for a period of 39 years.

Pay book No: 43086; continuation Pay book No: 111278.

Discharge Certificate: 72415

Served in Australia: 743 days

Served outside Australia: 697days

WX 349 Sergeant 2/11th Infantry Battalion

Basil Hurlstone AVERY

Discharge date: 28th April 1944

It was a privilege to have worn the chocolate and blue colour patch of the 2/11th Battalion throughout my service.

POSTSCRIPT

In 1999 my wife and I returned to Greece, and Crete, and were welcomed by a well known Greek author George Efth Harokopos who wrote the ***"The Forgotten Debt"***.

On our departure from Athens I was presented with a copy of his book in which he had written the following:

To Mr. BASIL AVERY

---One of the brave Australian fighters in the famous battle of Crete against the Nazis Parachutists, in Rethymno area from 20th to 30th May 1941--- as a token of Honour and Gratitude to Him as well as to his Australians Comrades-In-Arms who fought so gallantry several battles in Greece and elsewhere during WWII for the Freedom of the World.

Athens, August 1st, 1999.

George Harokopos

I have included the authors' remarks to allow present and future generations to be aware of the great bond, and friendship existing between the Greeks, Australians, and Allied Forces who fought in WWII, many of whom suffered deeply, while many more made the supreme sacrifice.

GEORGE EFTH. HAROKOPOS

THE FORGOTTEN DEBT

To Mr BASIL AVERY

— One of the brave Australians
fighters in the famous battle
of Crete, against the Nazis
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from 20th to 30th May, 1941, —
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several battles, in Greece
and elsewhere, during W.W.II
for the Freedom of the World.

Athens, August 1st, 1999.

George Harokopos