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THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE THAT SAVED AUSTRALIA

The evening breeze is warm as I gaze from my upstairs veranda through the swaying Cocos palms towards Perth, the City of Lights. The Swan River is bathed in moonlight as it twinkles like a silver sea. A solitary ferry, like a lit up lantern, glides silently over the water.

Perhaps it's the warm evening breeze or maybe the swaying palms that takes my mind back to the darkest year 1942, to a far off place few had heard of called Milne Bay.

Milne Bay is situated on the south eastern tip of New Guinea. The dense jungle grows right down to the sea with a backdrop of steep, thick jungle covered mountains.

Constant heavy tropical rain makes the jungle dank, humid and fever-ridden. I first set my eyes on this scene in the early evening of a day in late July 1942. I was on a troop ship, an old coal burning Dutch dirty cargo boat, which was escorted by a small Royal Australian naval corvette, HMAS Swan.

My first impression of the place, which I viewed from some miles out where we had to anchor till daylight the next day, was that of the French penal colony, Devil's Island which I had seen in a movie some years earlier.

My reason for being on the troop ship was that as a member of the Royal Australian Air Force, I was posted to No. 75 Fighter Squadron that at the time had American-made P40 Kitty Hawk fighter aircraft.

Also with 75 Squadron was number 76 Squadron and they had similar aircraft. We had not long dropped anchor in the fading light at the mouth of the bay when several low flying aircraft dived on HMAS Swan, which replied with all of her anti-aircraft armament. After some anxious moments, the aircraft flew off to the north.

Next day we tied up to the coconut palms on a makeshift wharf built by the Australian troops. While waiting on the ship waiting for be picked up, a solitary B17 Fortress bomber with American markings on the wing flew very low over the ship and wharf area. Something looked odd about this aircraft, don't ask me what it was but it looked wrong. We did hear later that the Japanese captured B17s when the Philippines fell.

I went to stretch my legs and ran into George Mills who hailed from Gnowangerup in Western Australia who was a wheat farmer.

I had done my training with George at Pearce in Western Australia. He had come up a week earlier with the main body of No. 75 Fighter Squadron. I asked him how far the Japanese were to here and he replied about 50 miles north that would have been round about Buna.

I said, “Do you ever get any air raids” and he said, “No, they don’t even know we’re here.” (Unfortunately, George died of cancer in 1993.)

About three quarters of an hour later, eight or more Japanese fighter Zeroes flying at tree top height attacked the ship with machine guns blazing. At the time they were about to lower a wooden tray with four wires on each corner loaded with Australian troops going down the hatch to work the cargo.

When the zeroes hit, the crewmember on the winch shot through and the soldiers were calling “For god’s sake get us down, get us down”. Someone went over and worked the winch and swung them around and put them down on the deck.

I was on the foredeck of the ship near the foremast and when the cannons and shells and bullets were flying around, I jumped into a steel locker at the base of the mast. It was possibly a lamp trimmer’s locker or paint locker and I closed the door.

A few seconds later, the door opened and the black face of an American negro appeared. Apparently, these guys were working with the Americans who were hewing the second airstrip out of the virgin jungle and he’d come to pick up cargo.

He said to me, “Hey Buddy, have you been in an air raid before?” His eyes were wide like saucers.

I said, “Yes mate, this is my first air raid on a ship.” With that he slammed the door and he was off. Eventually someone came down from the Squadron with a truck to pick me and a few other chaps up off the ship to take us back to the strip campsite.

We’d only been there about 15 minutes at the most when seven or eight Japanese Zero fighters, flying at palm height strafed the area with cannons and machinegun fire.

The Zeroes were silver in colour, not like our planes that were painted with camouflage colours and they flew very fast and very manoeuvrable and they burnt and destroyed a Kitty Hawk fighter on the side of the airstrip. Fortunately no-one was killed in the action.

That night in the clearing in the jungle, which was our campsite, in pouring tropical rain our commanding officer Squadron Leader Les Jackson gathered us all together and said, “Well chaps, we’re here for one purpose only and that is to kill Japanese. They killed my brother at Port Moresby” and he said there will be no distinction in rank.”

“Today they caught us with our pants down but as of tomorrow morning we will have 8 Kitty’s at the ceiling and when they are low on fuel, we’ll have 8 more take off to relieve them” and this included fighters from Squadron 76.

He said the kites then coming in for fuel would have air cover protection to land.

This went on as normal everyday routine and paid off handsomely when the Japanese Zeroes came back.

In those days we did not have radar and relied on coast watchers up the coast to warn us by radio of Japanese aircraft and ship movements. Three shots from the operations tent down the airstrip with a revolver became the air raid alert.

The Japanese made no effort to bomb the airstrip. It was always low flying attacks because they did not want to damage the airstrip as they fully intended to take it and use it for themselves.

That food was not good. In fact, it was downright terrible. No bread, everything was out of a tin. No fresh fruit or vegetables and the drinking water was laced with chlor of lime – that's the stuff we used to put down our toilets back home.

And everybody had to take Atebrin tablets against malaria. It made our skins very yellow and in fact, we were similar colour to the Japanese but it didn't stop us from getting malaria. I got malaria along with most of the squadron.

Dysentery was bad together with skin complaints, dermatitis, tinea, eczema and scrub typhus. I must not forget to mention the damn dog biscuits. They were that hard, if you didn't soak them in water or tea you would break your teeth.

American engineers were well into the making of a second strip, which was being hewn out of the virgin jungle. The pilots in 75 Squadron had very good fighting experience against that Japanese at Prot Moresby about two months before where for the loss of about 24 Kitty Hawk fighters they destroyed about 70 Japanese aircraft. In fact they used to get a lot of Japanese aircraft on the ground at Lae.

They would take off from Moresby, fly off over the mountains and come in from the seaward side of the Japanese airstrip at Lae. The Japanese had a very peculiar way of parking their aircraft. They used to put the fighters down one side of the airstrip and the bombers down the other.

Our chaps used to say, "You take the bombers and I'll take the fighters" and we destroyed numerous Japanese aircraft in this manner.

No 76 Squadron pilots had considerable experience fighting against the Germans in the Western Desert and in Syria and they were no fools when it came to flying fighter aircraft.

Because of the heavy rain falling day after day, the airstrip was often under water. But this did not deter the Australian pilots. Watching them take off and land was like watching a high-powered speedboat taking off on a lake.

No time was lost saluting, or red tape or all the bull that went on in the mainland stations back in Australia. Pilots and ground crews alike had one goal and one goal only and that was to keep the aircraft flying no matter what.

On the 4th August 1942, four Japanese Zeroes and a dive-bomber on an armed reconnaissance of the Milne Bay area ran into eight Kitty Hawks from 76 Squadron who were up at the ceiling.

The Zeroes attacked the airstrip and destroyed one of the Kitty Hawks on the ground but the Kitty Hawks of 76 Squadron engaged the Japanese fighters and Flight Lieutenant Ash of 76 Squadron shot down the dive-bomber, which crashed in flames not far from where we were in the jungle.

On the 11th August 1942, both of our squadrons 75 and 76 had between them 22 aircraft in the air on a red alert and they met a force of 12 Japanese Zero fighters.

Although we had the numbers that day we paid dearly with some of the young inexperienced pilots. Four of them were shot down and killed and the Japanese also lost four Zeroes. On that particular day the CO was “blooding” some new pilots.

On August 12th 1942, advance parties of the 18th brigade of the 7th division arrived to boost up the Milne Bay defence. Major General Clows was appointed the commander of all the Milne Bay forces. The intelligence reports coming in indicated that the Japanese were about to make another big push in the area and all our orders were to prepare for this.

We did not know at this stage that the Japanese attack was to be directed against the American forces about 400 miles to the east of us at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands or Port Moresby or us at Milne Bay.

Because of this impending threat, an RAAF Hudson Bomber squadron number 6 (Hudson bombers had a much longer flying range than the Kitty Hawks). The Hudson’s were moved into place into Horn Island, which was to the south west of us in the Torres Strait.

In addition to this, more coast watchers, (these were very brave men indeed, who were virtually living on the Japanese doorstep, and if captured faced immediate execution by beheading by the Japanese) the addition of these coast watchers they were to boost the gaps that we had in our visual warning system.

The allied base or general headquarters was set up in Gilli Gilli near the wharf area. That was not far really from the airstrip we were operating from.

Milne Bay itself is like the letter U. At the entrance to the top of the U, it is seven miles wide so you can see it's a massive bay. In fact, ships never entered the bay at night-time. They would anchor at the mouth of the bay and come in in daylight.

The coastal strip at either side of the headquarters at Gilli Gilli was not a proper road and with all the rain that had been falling day after day and night after night, the coastal strip became a mud track that was knee-deep in some places and sometimes even deeper.

This presented a big problem to the army when it came to moving troops and supplies to wherever the Japanese may land. At this stage we didn't know the enemy's intentions.

It was apparent after the battle that General Douglas Macarthur, the American Commander in Chief, in his safe air-conditioned quarters in Brisbane, had no idea of the very big problem that the Australian Commander Glowes was up against.

Then on the 24th August 1942 a coast watcher on Cape Nelson at the northern entrance to Ward Hunt Strait gave us warning of a Japanese sea-borne operation. He sighted seven 50-ft Japanese landing barges full of Japanese troops moving down the coast towards Milne Bay.

On the next day, 25th August 1942 in response to the barges being sighted and put ashore on GoodEnough Island (and island only about 30 minutes flying time from Milne Bay).

On that day nine Kitty Hawks from Number 75 Squadron in two flights (one lead by Flying Officer Johnny Piper and the other led by Flying Officer Atherton) moved in for the kill.

One flight flew at top level to provide cover and the other flight flew at low level and attacked the barges with gunfire. After about six passes, all seven barges were on fire. The craft were about 50 ft long and about 10 feet wide and quite a few Japanese were killed in the action.

Unbeknown to number 75 Squadron pilots, they had not only destroyed the enemy barges, but they had also taken out all of their radio equipment and the Japanese were not able to advise the main invasion fleet of their mishap.

The destruction of the barges by 75 Squadron Kitty Hawks played a vital role in the defeat of the Japanese and the battle for Milne Bay. After the war when Japanese records were captured and translated, it was apparent what they intended to do.

The barges were to have moved on just after the main fleet landed and land around the bay at another part away from the initial place and if this had happened, the Australians would have been fighting two fronts.

We now knew that the enemy's main force was two cruisers, three destroyers, two submarine chasers and two transports full of troops heading towards Milne Bay and at 3pm on 25th August 1942, the Japanese fleet now came into range of our Kitty Hawk fighters.

Six Kitty Hawks from 75 Squadron, led by Flying Officer Brereton, attacked the convoy, each plane dropping a 250lb bomb but without success. I must point out here that Kitty Hawks are fighter aircraft, not bombers and they have no bombsights. The bomb was dropped from where the belly tanks would be. It really was a hit and miss operation.

And at 4.30pm, fighters from both squadrons with Hudson bombers from number 6 Squadron attacked the convoy, scoring a near miss on a transport and a direct hit on the submarine chaser, which stopped and did not follow the rest of the convoy into Milne Bay.

When the rest of the aircraft returned, it was dark and we had to light a flare path for them to find the airstrip in the jungle. From the time this Japanese invasion fleet left Rabaul in New Brittain the weather was such that they were under heavy cloud and they made good use of the cloud cover to come down the coast.

When our reconnaissance aircraft that was shadowing the convoy attempted to come below the clouds to pick the convoy up they were subject to heavy anti aircraft fire from the cruisers and all the other ships in the convoy.

At Milne Bay we had no navy whatsoever in the area. The Arunta left the day before for the safety of Port Moresby and the Americans had no ships in the area because they were all in the Solomon Islands and at Guadalcanal. We had no shore batteries or searchlights.

After heavy rain had been drenching the whole area for four days, in the early hours of the morning on 26th August 1942, the Japanese invasion troops landed on the shores of Milne Bay.

The fighting was very fierce when they met Australian AMF infantry battalion troops who fought very well. The Japanese trooped were handpicked crack marines, well trained in jungle warfare. No prisoners were taken on both sides and the heavy four days of rain made the ground a quagmire but this did not deter the Japanese from landing tanks to assist their infantry.

The tanks had a searchlight on them that vas virtually impossible to shoot out because it was reflected off a reflector plate and they were shining this light onto the Australian troops at the base of the trees and they were machine-gunning them with the machine-gun on the tanks.

In addition to this, the Australian troops were risking their lives to run out to these tanks to attach limpet or sticky bombs but unfortunately because of all the heavy rain and damp conditions that we'd had for weeks on end, all the fuses were damp and these bombs didn't explode.

At first light we found that the Japanese convoy had disembarked their troops and equipment and had used 15 powerful steel barges that lay moored inshore, together with a large number of drums of petrol that were floating in the water. They had been offloaded in a hurry and the Japanese ships had then gone back out to sea.

Our main target was these 15 barges that were moored inshore. With the aid of Hudson bombers, the Kitty Hawks, with bombs, cannons and machine gun fire they attacked the barges and destroyed them.

Bombs from the Hudson hit the petrol drums and started a huge fire. In the same action, Flight Lieutenant Piper dived his Kitty Hawk at the truck that the Japanese had landed. It was full of ammunition and it blew up. The loss of these barges stopped the tactics the Japanese used against the Australians in Malaya by going by water in loops. It also severed their ship to shore connection.

On 27th August 1942, eight dive bombers and 12 Zeroes attacked the airstrip. The bombs did some damage but the Zeroes destroyed the liberator bomber on the strip.

Flying Officer Watson and Flying Officer Jones shared in shooting down three of the dive-bombers. Next day, two Zeroes attacked Flying Officer Munroe's Kitty Hawk and they shot it down and he did not survive the action. At 5pm the same day, Squadron Leader Peter Turnbull, the commanding officer of 76 squadron took off to try and find the Japanese tanks but because of the dense jungle, he couldn't find them. He did however, in a clearing, find a detachment of Japanese troops, which he attacked.

Unfortunately, his aircraft was hit and Peter Turnbull flew on and crashed in the jungle. His plane and body were found about eight days later by forward troops. We knew that the Japanese main target was the airstrip where we were and when the Japanese landed we demolished the campsite for fear of it falling into their hands. We didn't want to make it too easy for them.

About 25 RAAF personnel and I went over and fought with the Australian army in the 18th Infantry Battalion attached to the 7th Division. We were told only to take the clothes that we were wearing which was a long sleeved khaki shirt and pants, a ground sheet, a water bottle, the Owen sub-machine guns that we already had and all the ammunition that we could carry and they stressed that on no account were we to take any prisoners.

The first position that we took up was not all that far from the campsite on the side of a hill. We dug in and we used the same tactics that the New Zealanders used in Crete where they dug a trench and instead of putting all the dirt in front of the trench (because people would then know that there was a trench behind the dirt) they put the dirt in a line at the bottom of the hill so that they would think there was a trench down there.

After about two hours or more one of the army brass said they were not taking positions up here, we're going to take up positions on the high ground at the back of the airstrip on the jungle side, not the sea side because the Japanese may attempt to attack the airstrip from that side.

The positions we took up were on quite high ground and in front of us was 6ft high kunai grass and the army fellas, they worked in pairs and were placed at intervals all long the top of the high ground. There were also two men on listening posts down the hill and at the foot of the hill.

It was here that I nearly made my first mistake since I joined the air force. I was on the listening post at the very end and it was the second day of battle. It was just starting to get light when I heard voices in front of me in the tall kunai grass. The voices were not in English and my mate and I pulled the cocking handles on our Owen guns and were just about to fire the whole magazine into the first people that came out of the kunai grass when thank god I froze because the black faces of Fuzzy Wuzzy men, women and children appeared.

I beckoned them over the where we were on the side of the hill and they came over and we took them up to the command post. When they were interrogated, it was found that they were fleeing from the advancing Japanese. And here again, my guarding angel stopped me from pulling the trigger and I would never have forgiven myself if I had wiped out that whole family of Fuzzy Wuzzies.

Things went along alright on the high ground until the night of the 6th September 1942 when the whole jungle around us lit up with a very bright purple coloured light. It was so bright that it reflected off the low clouds and you could have had no trouble reading a newspaper in the jungle because it was so light.

The first thing that we thought was that the Japanese had landed more tanks. There were numerous land explosions in the distance in front of us and the light went off and all was dark and quiet again and then about 30 minutes later the light came back on again and after five minutes, shells came over the top of us and all around us and to the side of our position.

We were not dug in, we were just lying in the flat ground of the jungle so it was a wonder that none of us were killed. When it got light, we had a look at the shell craters around us and they were deep enough to have stood a car in on end and the coconut trees were cut clean as a whistle at the bottom of their trunks by the shrapnel.

What caused all the trouble were two Japanese cruisers with 6-inch guns that did the damage. They were four to five miles away and they put their light on the cargo boat, the Anshun, at the wharf and sunk her with gunfire.

The second time they came back, put the lights on the Anshun and saw that she was lying on her side with her funnel out to sea and they shone the light

on the hospital ship Munuada and didn't touch her even though she was anchored in the bay and they started shelling the airstrip.

They were firing in the right direction but virtually overshooting the strip and because we were at the back of the strip, we were copping all the shells.

My hearing was affected because for a week after the shelling, I had bells ringing in my ears and if someone spoke to me, I could see their mouth moving by I couldn't hear what they were talking about.

After the war, I was checked out by an air force specialist and he told me that my hearing was like a Hi Fi set and they had just blown all the Hi out of it.

From that day on my hearing has never been right. During the battle and leading up to it, the comradeship amongst all the troops, that was the two armies and air force was tremendous. You could always rely on those guarding your rear or flank. Also, so close to the front line, it was amazing because we would strike the Salvation Army guy with his comforts.

For me, these troops were a very special breed of Australians and I doubt if we'll ever again see such men.

The Kitty Hawks flew all day long attacking the Japanese and they made 26 sorties in a day, firing 1,500 rounds of ammunition on each sortie and they were hardly pulled up their wheels from takeoff before they were diving on the Japanese positions.

They were more like airborne artillery than fighter aircraft. In fact, one observer at the front said that under the Kitty Hawk gunfire, palm fronds, bullets and dead Japanese snipers were pouring down like rain.

The Japanese came equipped with these climbing irons to get up these trees and it was from these positions that the snipers killed quite a few Australians. Milne Bay was the first time in history where a fighter squadron had operated so close to the front line.

After Pearl Harbour, the Japanese had taken every place that they invaded, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines, and numerous other Pacific Islands and at Milne Bay, it was the first time in World War II that a Japanese amphibious operation was repulsed and this was solely at the hands of the Australians.

Then on the 29th August 1942 a Japanese cruiser and nine destroyers escorted a convoy that brought in the first major Japanese reinforcements. Then on the morning of the 31st August, the Japanese made an all-out attack on number three airstrip.

This was their third attempt to cross open ground and they were chopped to pieces with very heavy fire and took very high casualties. They were fired on by heavy and light machine guns and mortars.

I saw a grave that was dug at the side of the airstrip in which 85 of them were buried. Also, around them, there were other piles of Japanese dead and because it was so hot up there, the smell was terrible.

Then on 5th September 1942, the 7th Division, regular troops, stormed the K.B. mission at bayonet point and killed some 60 Japanese but there were quite a few that were bayoneted and they ran off into the jungle and died.

The fighting went on for quite some time and I was only one section of a battle. I had no idea of what was happening in some of the other areas but later on, I did find out what was happening on the dawn of the first day.

George Milne told me that the CO told him to stand by in the operations tent on the phone all night and in the early hours of the morning one of the army brass rang up and asked him if he would alert the commanding officer of 75 Squadron and all the pilots and tell them that there had been a breakthrough.

He said they could not guarantee that they would not get on to the airstrip and he suggested that if they had any spare pilots at first light to get them on to a Hudson bomber to get them to the safety of Port Moresby.

Then the Japanese started to weaken and they started to take off what was left of their invasion force and as a sort of parting gift, nine enemy bombers attacked the airstrip on 8th September 1942.

They did little damage but killed two of our mates, Lofty Rose and Bluey Downton who were manning machine guns with the AIF gunners at the time. Quite a few of the AIF gunners were also lost that day. We lost some very brave good pilots including the commanding officer of number 76 Squadron.

Looking back now at photographs, we were not really aware as to how young we were and the bravery of the Army and Air Force alike was magnificent. For a man aged 18 – 21 years old, many did not live long enough to see the victory for which they gave their lives and Australia's fate hinged heavily on the outcome of this battle.

General Douglas Macarthur the supreme commander in his safe quarters in Brisbane, he never had a kind word to say about the Australians.

If it was an American victory, he would say the American's did this but if it was an Australian victory, he would never mention the word Australian, he would always say it was an Allied Victory.

He had no idea of the conditions that the battle was fought in but he patted himself on the back when he said that it was his foresight that put troops in Milne Bay.

After the battle had lasted several weeks, mopping up operations began and the clearing out of pockets of enemy troops went on for some time. What aircraft we had left, were battered and torn and only a few were serviceable.

The Kitty Hawks, they wore out about 300 gun barrels in the course of the battle. The top army brass said that it seemed remarkable that men and machines had endured and accomplished what they had and I, like our pilots, sat down to catch our breath after the battle.

It was at this stage that I sat down and wrote my poem, the Heroes of Milne Bay, which was dedicated to the officers, NCOs and men who fought at Milne Bay in 1942.

The Heroes of Milne Bay

We shall remember them
Battle stained and torn
Into that jungle of death
On that raining dawn

Gallantly they fought through hell and swamp
Their progress sure and slow
In mud and filth they battled on
Against the coming foe

Low in the stagnant mangroves
Throughout the night they lay
Waiting for these yellow swines
Their one and only prey

Looking down from every palm
These green-clad fiends did lie
But still our boys went forward
In spite that some would die

Courage and valour was only theirs
And life so dear to pay
Those gallant lads who fought so well
In the battle of Milne Bay

On board, Major General Glowes wrote and I quote:

“I wish to place on record my appreciation of the magnificent effort on the part of our RAAF comrades. The success of the operation was in great measure due to the untiring and courageous work, which has earned the admiration of us all who have been associated with them here.”

As a footnote, captured Japanese documents, when translated, read as follows and I quote (the Japanese had issued a general order for the Milne

Bay operation), “At the dead of night, quickly complete the landing and strike the white soldiers without reserve. Unitedly smash to pieces the enemy lines and take the Aerodrome by storm.”, end of order.

There was always so many of them and so few of us and people back in Australia even today do not know how very, very close it all came. The plan the Japanese had for Australia was to ship back to Japan all the cattle in the north of the country and to execute all the inhabitants there.

They also intended to breed a better type of Japanese from Australian women. I still hate that generation of Japanese, I’m sorry, but I can’t forget.

One more poem I wrote up there in 1942.

An Airforce Guard

It’s dark like inky blackness
Your eyes just pierce the gloom
The palms like ghostly figures
From out of the jungle loom

Like weird and dancing phantoms
They stand out in the night
The jungle all around you
A dank and dismal sight

The raindrop pitter patter
A tattoo on the kite
Like some prehistoric monster
It stands there in the night

The muzzle of your rifle
Is shining in the storm
Beneath that dripping rain cape
You feel your body warm

The wind gives light protection
From the beating jungle rain
Like a million phantom drummers
It plays a haunting strain

Your mind is just attracted
It seems to catch the eye
The twinkling hovering spectral
A drifting firefly

That tiny little creature
With it’s body all alight
Gives a fractions comfort
In the long and dreary night

The breeze like devil's voices
Whispering out of space
Whistles round the main plane
And fans your shining face

A light shine in the distance
Like some orbit evil eye
It stabs the dark around you
Casting shadows through the sky

Then, as the light approaches
It fades towards the hill
The darkness round you gathers
The night once more is still

The rains had stopped its beating
Just a drizzle trickles down
You think of home and people
In some far distant town

Then as the night grows older
Comes a silver creeping dawn
The scene that stands around you
Seems strange and much forlorn

Birds around awaken
Their song is swift and sweet
To the ears of a standing figure
A sentry on his feet.

After the battle of Milne Bay we found 35 of our young soldiers with their hands tied together with long lengths of telephone wire and they had been used for live bayonet practice.

Also the Papuans never went untouched. Numerous women and girls were raped and staked out spreadeagle on the ground and slit with their damn swords from the groin up to their necks. The Papuan men suffered similar fates.

We ourselves never intended to ever get captured. When I used to go back to the old campsite to dig for food in the mud I found a compass and I have still got that compass today.

I and three other chaps if we'd lost the battle and they had said every man for himself with the aid of this compass and a map we found we intended to try our luck and go over the mountains through the thick jungle and try to get to the other side of New Guinea. It would have been an amazing thing if we had done it.

We felt it was far better to do that, even if you died out there in the jungle, than to say die on the end of one of the Japanese bayonets.

I have spoken about New Guinea and Milne Bay as I was there but this was only one of the many battles against the Japanese, which saved this country from the Japanese.

And bloody Buna, there were 40,000 men, Australians and American troops that were committed and of those 3,100 were killed and 5,500 were wounded. There were many, many more died of malaria and other diseases, which are not included in these figures.

The fighting there was very bloody and the losses at Kokoda in the Owen Stanley Ranges were heavy too. At the start there were only about 300-400 Australian troops holding back a Japanese army of about 6,000 men.

Other places the heaving fighting that saved this country were places like Sanananda, Gona, Lae, Salamaua, Wewak and Finschhafen. No one knows these names but in all these areas, the Australian soldiers fought well.

Most people know of course about the Battle for the Coral Sea. Few know of the battle of the Bismarck Sea. Here the Japanese were sending troops by sea from Rabaul in New Brittain to boost up their concentrations of troops at Lae in New Guinea.

There were some three cruisers, four destroyers and 12 transports full of troops that were sought out and attacked for days on end by Australian and American aircraft – Flying Fortresses, Liberators, Boston, Beaufighters, Mitchells, Catalinas with Lockheed Lightning fighters protecting them from the Zero Japanese fighters.

It was virtually like a naval battle but there were none of our ships used, it was all aircraft. All these ships were eventually sunk and the Japanese lost around about 5,000 men and for days after Australian Beaufighters and Mitchells shot everything that was in the sea from the sunken ships because the did not want the Japanese soldiers to get ashore.

I saw the camera gun footage of this action and believe me, it was horrific. Of course when the Japanese attacked and invaded Milne Bay they also landed at Buna just 50 miles north of us with their assault on the Owen Stanley Ranges at Kokoda because they fully intended to capture not only Milne Bay but Port Moresby.

Kokoda was the back door into Moresby and had they achieved this they would have controlled all of the seas around New Guinea and Australia would have been in diabolical trouble.

At Lae, the Australian Boston bombers, 22 Squadron, (I used to be with them before I went to 75 Squadron) they had been hammering the hell out of the

Japanese installations at Lae, the buildings, the airstrip and the anti-aircraft guns.

One of the Bostons, flown by Flight Lieutenant Bill Newton was hit when he was attacking one of the anti-aircraft positions and the other pilots saw Bill ditch his Boston in the sea off Lae. They say him get out of the aircraft and he was swimming towards the beach.

They were hoping to God that he would be picked up by some of our forward troops but unfortunately, Bill Newton was captured by the Japanese at Lae. In March 1943, he was beheaded by the Japanese and this of course was how they treated our downed aircrews.

Back at Milne Bay, one of the things we really noticed up there was the comradeship amongst all the troops from the army and air force. If you were digging a trench, some guy would come along and say 'righto mate, have a sit down and have a blow, I'll give it a go'.

If you fell down in the mud there was always a helping hand held out to you to pick you up and get you back on your feet.

In spite of all the terrible conditions, the rain and mud and mosquitoes and other insects and the bombing and strafing by the Japanese and not to mention the poor food, when anything happened, we invariably always saw the funny side of it.

I will never forget it. Before the invasion, one night two Japanese bombers on a reconnaissance and the anti-aircraft guns had been firing at them for some time and we were in the trenches and one of the fellas said, "you know, its amazing really that the Japanese don't put commandoes in here to take this marvellous strip that we've got and another fella said 'these Japanese commandoes, you don't even hear them of a night'.

They've got this great big long bamboo pole with a spike on the end of it and on the end is a loop of a very thin piano wire and they come behind you and they slip the wire over your head and pull it back and if you go back to get away from the wire you get the spike in your neck or the wire cuts your throat.

Eventually the Japanese gave it away and we all turned in for the night and in those days we were sleeping in beds in the marquis tent but nobody would sleep in the beds at each end of the tent. (They weren't beds, they were two coconut logs with a piece of Hessian nailed across them).

In the early hours of the morning we heard this hell of a commotion in the middle of the tent. Fellas had lit hurricane lamps and someone found a torch. Bill Sinclair was yelling out "help, help they've got me" and when they put the lights on, his mosquito net had fallen down and the ring from the mosquito net (that keeps it open at the top) had fallen over his head and he must have been dreaming about the Japanese commandoes.

On another night, the first guards would go out on the truck and be driven out into the dispersals (which were well and truly off the main airstrip in pretty thick jungle and the aircraft were hidden night and day in the dispersals) and each aircraft, they put a three-sided wall of coconut logs to protect the aircraft from bomb splinters that might fall.

The first guards used to be driven out there into the jungle just on dark and the second shift would go out about 2-3 hours later.

I was on the second shift and I was dropped off and they picked the guy up that I relieved and he said to me everything is alright, you've got two Kitty Hawks, one Kitty Hawks here and one alongside of it and over there there's a Lockheed Lightning an American came in today for fuel but everything is alright.

He got back on the truck and it was dark (as black as the ace of spades) and when you are out there in the jungle on your own, especially on a moonlight night, you look at the tree-line you start to go mad with your imagination you can see things moving out there but you never stayed in the same position for any length of time, you kept moving position.

I was under the wings of the Kitty Hawk and the moon came up and I thought I saw a big thick piece of rope on the ground but as the moon got on it there was a shine to it and then I realised it was one of the great big pythons that are up in that region.

I pulled the cocking handle back on the Owen gun and I must have put a quarter of a magazine into it but as soon as I hit it I knew it was already dead because it didn't move. Unbeknown to me, the blighters had killed it in the daylight and had put it there to frighten the hell out of me.

You would never move from the allocated position you had from those three aircraft of a night because if you did you would walk right into it because every thing that moved or even looked like moving we would open up on it and then have a look the next day to see what we had hit.

We used to take a lot of ammunition with us and the CO used to say that I love to hear you people out there firing off all this stuff at night because I know you are looking after the kites and we fellas back at the campsite are quite safe.

I always maintain that I definitely had from the time I joined the Airforce I definitely had a guardian angel looking after me.

There's no two ways about that because on one occasion I was detailed for a stunt when I reported in for the night's duty and a mate of mine, Jim Munroe, 18 years of age, he was married with a young six month old daughter Carole and he said "Bill, I would love to do that job: and I said its alright with me mate, you go and check with the powers that be and if they OK it then that's alright.

He came back about a quarter of an hour later and said “they said I can take your place”. That was the last time I saw him alive because the next day when I was down the strip and some of the fitters said to me “you should go and buy a ticket in the golden casket” and I said “why’s that” and they said young Munroe’s been killed.

So I still maintain there’s a guardian angel looking after me and then on another occasion, it was one of these days up there where we had a good clear sunny day and we were in a clearing with all these native huts.

There must have been about 20 of us down there and nine bombers were flying in formation at about 15,000 feet in three lots of three and the fellows said they are American Marauders going over to give the Nips a bit of a going over at Gasmarta.

I didn’t want to cause any panic but I thought to myself the formation was too good to be Americans and secondly there was a stop-start noise with their airplane motors. I didn’t want to cause any panic but there was a hole up the side of the hill so I worked my way up there and I got about halfway up when the aircraft turned and let their bombs go and I felt the hot breeze over my back (I didn’t have a shirt on).

I looked back to where all these huts were and there was just dust and splinters going up in the air. Quite a few of the fellows got killed that day. The reason that there wasn’t any air raid alert was because a truck had run over the telephone cable that sends the warning signal in from the spotters to say that there is enemy aircraft approaching. This is another example of someone looking after me.

When we pulled out from the Bay to go south to get new aircraft we went by ship from Milne Bay to Horn Island in the Torres Strait and we landed at Thursday Island and went across to Horn Island in a great big army barge.

The army barge had four big trucks in each corner of the barge with a small space between the outside of the barge and the side of the trucks and all the gear was in the middle. There was quite a current in the Torres Strait and as we approached the jetty at Horn Island the tow-rope broke on the tug that was pulling the barge.

Having been at sea before the war I knew that we needed to get a light rope to the guy on the jetty and tie it to a heavier rope so that they could tie it to the bollard on the jetty.

I was down there tying the light rope onto the heavier rope when I looked up and beside the stanchions on the jetty were racing at the barge at a rate of knots and I had to make up my mind in a fraction of a second to go up or down.

If I had gone up I would have been chopped in half because they hit really hard on the sides of the trucks and mudguards and I was only about 9 and a half stone in those days and I managed to go down and squeeze behind the wheel near the engine.

Again someone was looking after me!

At Milne Bay and after the Japanese lost the battle, prior to that they didn't attempt to bomb us because the wanted to take the airstrip intact and as I said before, they used to strafe us but they never bombed us.

But after they lost the battle, they started to bomb us and one day there was 170 aircraft in a raid. There were normal bombers and dive-bombers and fighter escorts and the dive-bombers they went for the ships in the harbour and we got the bombs from the bombers.

They didn't do all that much damage really. We used to disperse all the petrol drums for the aircraft and we would have staggered heaps in the jungle so that if one heap got destroyed we would still have the others.

The Japanese hit two of these petrol dumps and there was black smoke and you would have thought the whole island was on fire. That was the day that the ship the Gorgon was in the harbour and one of the dive-bombers dropped a bomb and the bomb went through the cattle deck doors and didn't explode.

The mate and the chief engineer – it was a silly thing to do – they dragged this bomb to the side of the cattle deck door and they dropped it over the side. The ship did get other damage from the bombs and it limped back to Australia for repairs.

That night on the Japanese radio, Tokyo Rose told the Japanese nation that we had been wiped out. She called us the "Butchers of Milne Bay" because we butchered that many of them when they invaded the place and she said that the debt had been repaid to the Butchers of Milne Bay and that we had been annihilated from the big air raid.

The New Guinea rain – you had never seen anything like it. It used to rain for days and nights on end, heavy downpours of tropical rain and with all the rain, you could smell this dank damp smell in the jungle and if you had a leather belt hanging up in your tent, it would go absolutely green overnight with the mould.

It was amazing all the creepy crawlies that used to get into the trenches with the rain. When you had to get into the trenches you had all this water and the creepy crawlies to contend with.

Will all the rain the humidity was also very high and you were never cold but the humidity used to sap the strength out of your body. When the Japanese invaded we completely demolished the whole campsite before we went with the army and the only clothes we had was what we were wearing and we had

been wearing those for weeks on end. We didn't have a change of clothes to change into.

When the battle was over and we left the army and went back and rejoined the squadron we made a temporary campsite – it didn't have much in it – and the American fighter squadron came in to relieve us. They don't call theirs fighter squadrons, they call them pursuit squadrons and it was Number 35 Pursuit Squadron.

They had an Airocobra aircraft, which was a notch up on the Kitty Hawk but still no match for the Zero. In fact, it was the same pursuit squadron that came to relieve at Milne Bay that relieved 75 Squadron at Port Moresby.

I was in the campsite standing by two of these American pilots and what few aircraft – we only had about three or four left – and our guys came in flying very low over the tops of the coconut palms and doing a victory roll and one of the American pilots said to the other pilot "Hell, these bastards sure can fly these God-damned things".

The food that we had up there was pathetic. For politicians to send Australian's up there to do what we had to do on the food they gave us, it was criminal. But the Americans, they came in from the wharf and came up to the campsite with these great big mobile army kitchens.

They looked like a great big steel caravan and in these they had all sorts of things, stoves, ovens etc and they were all fuelled by 100-octane aviation fuel. That was always readily available.

Lunchtime came around (they didn't call it lunch they called it chow) and they put these great big wooden trestles down. They filled the trestles with great big round aluminium bowls and they had steaming hot sausages in one of the bowls and in another one, they had Frankfurt sausages. There were hot mashed potatoes made from dehydrated potatoes, tinned butter and powdered milk.

In another bowl, they had steaming hot fried onions and all these condiments on the table like tomato ketchup as they called tomato sauce and American mustard and pickles and the thing that really made our eyes bulge out was when they put on the table these stacks and stacks of freshly cooked bread rolls.

You could smell this freshly cooked bread and we never had any bread the whole time we were in New Guinea to be quite honest. It was always these blasted dog biscuits and then on top of all of that they put these other bowls down with tinned peaches in them and pears and apricots and another great big bowl with custard in it.

What the Americans had done to make this custard was they used powdered milk and custard powder and it was really top quality custard and this American lieutenant he could see that our eyes were wide open and that our

mouths were watering and he said “Righto you guys, get in there on the end of the chow line.”

Well, we went through with the miserable gear that we had left after the battle and they put it on our plates and it was that much food we really couldn’t eat it all. In fact, we hadn’t seen food like that since we left home.

But I always maintain that we virtually had four enemies up there – the Japanese, the weather, the politicians and back in Australia the waterside workers who had no idea what was happening up there and they couldn’t have cared less.

They were living off the fat of the land and sleeping in dry beds and no chance of waking up the next morning with the guy alongside you with his throat cut and this was what happened at Kokoda.

They believed what was being put out that the Australian’s were retreating from inferior forces whereas it was 300 Australians against about 8,000 Japanese.

The fourth enemy was the waterside workers in Australia up in Cairns, Townsville, Brisbane and Sydney.

These guys were getting top wages and having good food and able to be home with their families and getting paid extra money for handling explosives and we were out with the damn explosives all the time and all we were getting was sixty pence a day.

These guys had all the shore derricks loading the ships and they would take eight days to load a ship and those ships used to come to New Guinea, tie up against the coconut trees, no shore derricks, just the ship’s gear.

Then the army boys would board the ship the moment it docked, rain, hail or even at night and they would have all that cargo out of the ship and then would reload the ship with empty petrol drums and empty shell cases and ammunition boxes etc. to go back to Australia in two days.

Yet back in Australia these guys were taking eight days to load a ship. In fact, during the battle, one of the things that we had problems with was the we were running low on ammunition and we had run out of fuses for the sticky bombs and this was caused because of the slow nature of supplies coming to us from Australia.

But the battle for Milne Bay was really a very crucial battle and it was the furthest south that the Japanese came on land in World War II. In fact, it was the nearest that they ever got to Australia.

I’ve always had a very good memory and I can remember things that happened right back to my very early childhood but for some unknown reason

I cannot remember anything about the latter time I was fighting with the infantry battalion during the battle.

I can remember going back to the campsite to get food in the mud and I can remember nearly wiping out the Fuzzy Wuzzies, I can remember the shelling by the two cruisers but apart from that, my mind is a complete blank.

Some years ago, I met a chap in Perth who was with the 18th Infantry Battalion and he told me that he remembers US air force chaps going with them and he said in fact you fellows came with us on patrols and mopping up operations but I have got no memory of this. While I was up there I became a bit of a poet.

Dream Girl

Jungle, jungle, jungle
Humid wet and green
Entangled vines and creepers like some horrid awful dream

The order it is given
The advance stops for a spell
You fall fatigued and tired in this jaded jungle hell

As you sit there in the jungle
Your mind drifts into space
In the mud hole filled with water you see a charming face

Of a pretty dark haired lady
Her smile is soft and sweet
Her eyes are gay alluring, her face is small and neat

Her face it seems to sparkle
Like an elegant morning dew
It lingers in your memory like the strain of a haunting tune

You bend down to her closer
To kiss those ruby lips
Instead of scented lipstick, just muddy water sips

Your dream girl she has vanished
The pool is stirred and black
You wish that pretty lady to that mud pool would come back

Of course, when we eventually caught up with the Americans we were able to trade with them. I don't know how I came to get them in my possession but I had quite a few trinkets and photographs and articles that had been taken off dead Japanese soldiers and I was able to trade all of these with the Americans and I was able to get some of their gear.

Their khaki shirts and pants were made of beautiful material – not like the sackcloth of the material that we had that was Air Force issue. I took some of this gear down to Perth when I went on leave and I wore it and it felt really nice to wear.

When we pulled out of Milne Bay, we went by ship to Horn Island and the Torres Strait and it was a peculiar island. It was only small and you could have walked around it in half a day and it was just the reverse to New Guinea where it was wet and heavy jungle. Horn Island was sparsely treed and no water there.

I'll never forget it – we were only there for about two months and our main purpose for going there was to try to get all the malaria out of the fellows in the squadron and we decided we would dig for water.

We started with pick axes and shovels but the ground was like hard dry gravel. We started an eight foot square hole and we got down to about six or eight feet and then we got a crowbar and we punched holes in the four corners and they had some gelignite and one of the fellows said that he knew all about gelignite because he'd worked at the mines before the war.

So we put these sticks of gelignite down each of the holes in the corners and what he should have done was to cut his fuses all different lengths so he could light the longest fuse first and the shortest fuse last but he cut them all the same length.

He struck a match and the first fuse lit up and then when he went to strike the second fuse, the head kept coming off the matches and he was only able to light three of the fuses.

We told him to get out of the hole because he would have been blown up. There was a hell of an explosion and we had to wait for ages for the three sticks of gelignite to go off so we knocked off another smoko and we didn't see it but one of the smart alecks there went back to the hole and urinated into the hole in one of the corners. When we came back and looked in the hole we thought great, we've struck water!

Eventually we left Horn Island and went back to Cairns to get new aircraft and the squadron camped on the banks of the Barron River at Cairns. We weren't in tents, we were in plywood huts and each hut had accommodation for two men.

I went down with the second dose of malaria (I got my first dose of Malaria in Milne Bay) and it was really bad. They put me in the ambulance and took me to the public hospital in Cairns.

I honestly saw the light in the tunnel and at the last minute I came out. They put me in bed in the hospital and there were other fellows in the ward saying "Look at that poor devil, he's just come back from New Guinea."

The bed was shaking like a leaf and they had an army corporal with me all night and next morning the air force doctor came in and he had been up the coast the day I went into hospital and they didn't think I could hear them but I heard the matron say to the doctor that she thought they were going to lose me last night.

At the Cairns hospital, I wrote another of my poems call My Angel and it was dedicated to a pretty nurse at the hospital in 1942.

My Angel

Bathed in the sweat of fever, a head with a maddening beat
He lies so still, perhaps you're dead in that bed with the sheets so neat

Then my eyes began to open just like rosebuds do in May
Through a distant window there came a golden ray

I thought I was in Heaven as I looked down to my feet
For there she stood, an angel, in white and smiling sweet

Her halo it was shining in white upon her pretty head
And turning to my angel but not a word she said

He smile was like the dawning, her hair of auburn hue
Her eyes were clear as crystal just like the morning dew

I wanted to caress her and take her in my arms
But she stood there defiant in spite of all her charms

Then my mind awakened to war and all it's curse
My darling beloved angel turned out to be my nurse

Another poem I wrote up there was the Road to Kokoda and it was dedicated to the gallant Australians who battled through the Owen Stanley Ranges in 1942.

The Road to Kokoda

Through the pages of history we'll look back
At the hardships and the suffering on that jungle beaten track
Their goal was always onwards up high and perilous slopes
In spite of all the setbacks their hearts were full of hopes

The weary, worn and wounded who had stopped a knife and shell
Were carried back to safety from this unforgotten hell
Their bearers they were gallant, their skin was shiny black
Through unseen work and glory, they brought the wounded back

These Fuzzy Wuzzy angels, their child-like actions odd
Had surely come from heaven and were sent to us from God
Every inch a hardship, every mile a woe
Carried our boys nearer towards a cunning foe

So on this road of glory with many a turn and bend
Towards a well earned victory when they reached their journey's end

With my name starting at the letter D, if there was a stunt to take place, you could bet your bottom dollar I'd be on that list and one of the lists that they drew up one time was they intended to send an advance party up to Dutch New Guinea on the Fly River.

This was real headhunter country up there. We were to go up there in addition to the normal Owen Guns that we had, we carried a revolver on the hip at all times. We even slept with it because of the headhunters.

The idea of us going up there was to protect the guys that were going up there to work the equipment to put in another airstrip but thank goodness at the last minute, my guardian angel came to my rescue and they aborted the whole thing.

When we were in New Guinea and in a fighter squadron down the strip, you would hear when the Kitty Hawks were taking off on a red alert against the incoming Japanese aircraft and often between the two squadrons there could be as many as 15-20 planes taking off.

We would always count them off and then count them again coming back to see if there were any missing.

Another poem I wrote up there.

75 Squadron's Port Moresby

Bathed in the golden glory of a nation's fight
Strong and unbeaten, a token of their might
It's gallant heroes had lived to fight and die
Undaunted and brave in a New Guinea sky

A handful of men from away down under
To a land of hell midst war's loud thunder
Poor food and mud was their daily curse
Fever ridden sick they had to nurse

Few were their grieves and seldom a moan
Distinction in rank was never shown
From bloody fights our battered kits came
Some were lost, the others lame

Our planes and pilots were getting few
From dawn to dust the remainder flew
Of three kites left one could fly
But still we downed them from the sky

After six long weeks relief it came
We'd done our job with worthy fame
As we left this unforgotten hell
We thought of those who died and fell

Some were boys just only men
But we shall always remember them

Another poem I wrote

The Men in Green

These jaded sons of Anzacs, valiant in every deed
Their daring and their courage an example we might lead
From Milne Bay and Buna of Lae and Kokoda fame
Their blood on the beaten jungle has written their glorious name

Through rivers, creeks and jungle and land that no-one knew
They overcame the setbacks, these men in nature's hue
A cross stands in the jungle, a tin hat on it's frame
It bears the scribbled letters of a fallen hero's name

Perhaps a kiddy's daddy, perhaps a mother's son
Lies down beneath the heap of earth, his life and duty done
Nippon scattered remnants retreat before their might
Broken in disorder, they leave the bloody fight

Onwards, ever onwards their work and fight unseen
There gallant sons of Anzacs who wear the jungle green

Even now, 50 odd years later, I think of the men that I was with in New Guinea. Looking back, we were all one big, happy family. We all certainly had the same goals to aim for up there.

I was one of the lucky ones who came out virtually unscathed. I never got my original hearing back and the jungle often catches up with me with the skin trouble that I got up there but I guess in all the weather on the floor of the jungle for weeks on end, I got off pretty lightly.

After the war, I went back to Sydney and I met the wife and mother of Jimmy Munroe who took my place and got killed. But I never told them what really happened. There were only two West Australians in the Squadron, George

Mills and I. George died a few years ago, which makes me the sole surviving West Australian of Number 75 Squadron.

Recently the commanding officer of Number 75 Squadron, which now has F18 fighter aircraft and are at Tindall in the Northern Territory, sent me a 75 Squadron embroidered cloth badge to wear on Anzac Days when I march. That was very kind of him indeed to do so.

When we came out of New Guinea we left behind a lot of very young brave Australians. We must never forget the sacrifice that they all made. They did so that the likes of you and I could enjoy the democratic way of life our forefathers had carved out for us.

The men I have spoken about were a very special breed of Australians the like of which we may never see again. With time, their ranks are now getting thin and before long they will just be a memory.

They shall not grow old as we who are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them.
Lest we forget.