

SYDNEY CLARENCE FRANCIS (By Clarice Napier: daughter)

Sydney was born in Broken Hill on the 24th June 1910. He was born premature and weighed only 2 pounds.

Sydney was left handed and had trouble at school because of this. The Teachers made him use his right hand. He had to walk 4 miles to school with his brothers. They were quite poor and the boys rarely had shoes on their feet. He left home quite young with his brother Len, and they worked at any job they could get, eventually finding themselves in the north of Australia as a horse breaker, cattle man and stockman. He had a special way with horses and was sort after as a horse breaker. Syd and Len learnt saddlery and had a small business together in Victoria. Syd left Victoria and came to Western Australia on a boat in 1938.

During the depression he worked at any job available. Killing rabbits for the farmers was a lucrative one as there was a rabbit plague.

Syd enlisted in army on the 18th of June 1941 aged 31 years. He was considered the old man and looked out for his younger friends; Fred Goodchild was 23 and Ken Hudson who were much younger, around 18.

There was such a shortage of personal that they received very little training and were sent straight to the Middle East on the troop ship Queen Mary leaving Fremantle on the 9.09.1941 and arriving in Suez Canal on the 23.09.1941, to bolster the depleted troop numbers after Tobruk. The boat landed at Port Tewfik, in the Gulf of Suez, at the base of the Suez Canal and then they were transported by train to Gaza then onto Syria. There they joined the 2nd /32nd Syd and Fred became part of A Company.

Conditions were very hard, living in tents, coping with sand and dust.

Because all water had to be distilled before use it was in short supply and was rationed at 1 pint (600 ml) per man per day

Time was spent training and participating in sporting competitions between the divisions. One day there was a donkey race which was enjoyed by all participants.



Ken Hudson on the right hand side.

Australians were to relieve the tired British troops at El-Alamein. The Australian troops were to move in a covert operation so that the enemy did not know that relief troops were on the way. All signs of nationality were hidden, such as the Australian hats, all titles and signs. Their camp was left as though they were on a training exercise. The locals however knew they were headed for Egypt as they took the road to Egypt and they knew they were Australians as only they wore tan boots. Each village greeted them with good luck Aussies.

By July 4th the units had dug in trenches out of sandstone, 5 miles from the battle front of El-Alamein. For the 2nd/32nd the battle of El-Alamein had begun.

On the night of 16/17th of July the battalion was taken by trucks to an assembly point on the telephone line. From there they marched to form an extended line of 3 companies ready to attack in a line.

A company to the right to capture "trigg 22", B company to the centre and C company to the left to go along the Qattara track.

At 2.30 am on the 17th of July 1942 the troops advanced through heavy shelling and machine gun fire. The objective was for A company to take out an Italian machine gun post. This was achieved very quickly. However A Company took the Italian position and 50 prisoners and kept going. The prisoners and 2 wounded men went back to headquarters to report a successful raid. The last communication from A company was that it had overshot the mark and asked for instructions. Then all communication with them broke down. A company decided to stay put until daylight not realising that they were 1500 m past the objective and surrounded by German troops. Daylight revealed the armoured vehicles surrounding them. The Germans called for surrender and the captain decided there was no other option for them to take. As a result the whole company was taken prisoner.

Syd and Fred were among 225 of the 2nd/32nd who were taken prisoner at El-Alamein and Tobruk.

Although caught by the Germans the POWs were handed over to the Italians. As North Africa was considered Italian territory.

The POWs were marched westward toward the port of Benghazi. Syd and Fred and the rest of A Company were marched to El Dada camp. Along the way they had to pass 100 yards from the Australian line coming under friendly fire. They considered this more frightening than being fired on by the enemy.

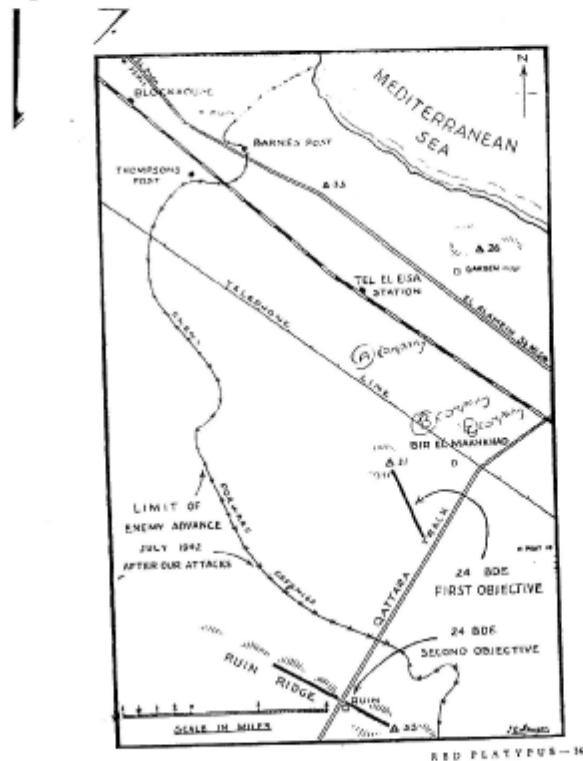


1941 in Egypt



Syd boarding the train to leave for war

The position of A, B and C companies the morning of July 18th 1942



El Daba camp was an old army barrack and was infested with lice and bed bugs. There was no food or water and the men had not received since capture. When it was finally issued they received 300 ml of water per man and one 100gm tin of bully beef between 2 men. Only a few men had penknives so opening the tins took quite a while.

The Pow's march continued along the African coast through Mersa, Matruh, Bardia, Tobruk and Derna before arriving at Palm Springs camp. Here they had their first taste of red rice. This was rice cooked in a 44 gallon drum with watery tomato puree. This was rationed out once a day. They received 600ml cup of rice and a 100gm bread roll each. To make sure the ration was fair to each man; the rice was ladled into a mug to the top scraped level and given to the next man in line. He

emptied the rice into his container and wiped the cup clean with his finger. This was repeated until everyone had been given his share. It is no wonder that many suffered from dysentery.

There were a lot of escape attempts from the camps. One method was by holding on to the chassis of the ration truck. They were found when the truck was searched and punished by tying their thumbs above their heads so that their heels were off the ground. If they tried to put their heels down their arms were nearly dislocated. In early August 1942 a large number of POW's were lined up and the guards counted them to go to Italy by boat. Fred got to the front of the line with Syd right behind him when the guard said no more people for this boat. Which was just as well as on the 17th August the Nino Bixio was torpedoed by a British submarine off the coast of Greece. The carnage was horrific. Many men were wounded or killed by the blast or drowned as there was a large hole in the side. The Italian crew deserted the ship and left the men to die. The ship did not sink but was beached on the coast of Greece. Instead of going on the boat, Syd and Fred were sent to a large camp with 6000 POW's in Benghazi. Food was very short and there was no water. Fleas and lice and dust were everywhere.

The RAF was bombing the area around the wharf. One day they hit an ammunition ship shaking the ground and cheering the POW's.

They were so hungry the food only the POW's were hoping to be liberated by the allies, but before this could happen they were packed into trucks and travelled 4 days to Tarhuna. Here they had lots of water and were able to bath and wash their clothes for the first time in several months. They were also deloused except their clothes were not done properly and the louse eggs hatched reinfesting everyone.

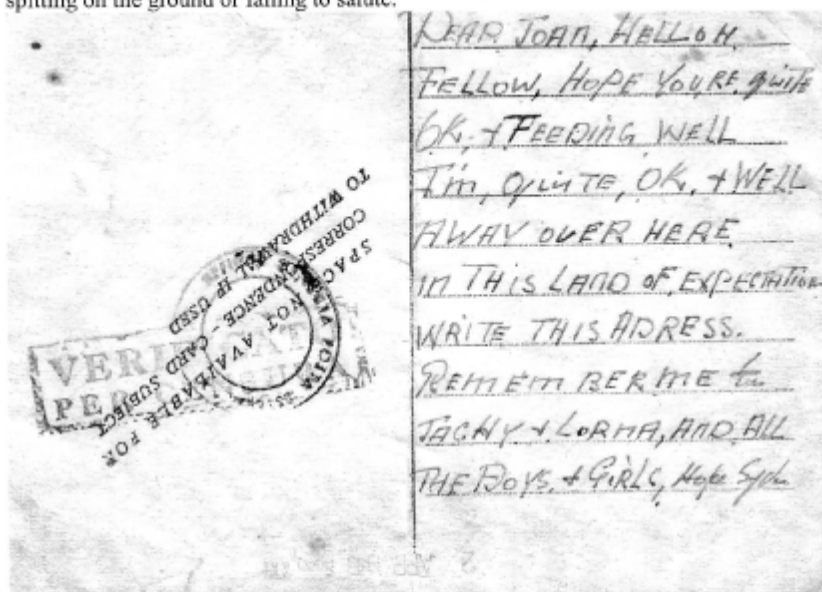
As the Americans landed in Tunisia on New Year's Day 1943 the POW's including Syd and Fred were herded onto a dirty Italian tramp steamer with 3 days rations. They were so hungry it only lasted to the second day. Before the boat could leave the wharf there was an air raid which blew up the dock they were tied to. Luckily the boat was undamaged and no one was hurt. The conditions on board were terrible. So crowded the men could only sit back to back not lie down. Many were too weak to climb the ladder to the deck to relieve themselves so the floor was soon a wash with excrement. The ship was lucky to reach Italy as it was chased by a submarine, bombed by the RAF and depth charged by a destroyer. They docked in Palermo Italy on the 5th January 1943. Then loaded onto a train with no rations and sent 30 miles north of Naples to camp PG 66 Capua, arriving on 7th of January 1943. It was in this camp that they received Red Cross parcels for the first time. They were supposed to be issued weekly but the guards would often refuse to give them out. Syd and Fred looked forward to these as they contained much needed food and clothes.

Here the men found they could trade goods with the guards. This scrounging suited the Australians. One example: 1 cigarette bought an empty Red Cross tea packet, filled it with bunt sawdust, sold it to an Italian guard for 2 loaves of bread, and then sold 1 loaf of bread for 2 cigarettes. He then had 1 loaf of bread and 2 cigarettes. They could also trade some work for food. Fred could speak a little Italian and he and Syd talked a captain into letting them do some jobs for bread and cheese.

Syd was a Saddler before the war and was able to get himself and Fred a job at a tailors sewing on pockets and putting up trouser hems. Each shirt was only allowed one pocket and one day an Italian officer demanded two pockets. Syd refused to put on the extra pocket and they were sacked from the tailors.

When they got the Red Cross parcels Syd cut out feet shapes and sewed them into canvas as the soles, two straps and you had a pair of sandals. These he swapped for loaves of bread.

The next camp they were sent to was pg 57 Gruppignano, which was the camp for the Australians and New Zealanders. Here the 2nd /32nd prisoners were united. They were not treated well here. There were night parades where half asleep pow's were made to stand for hours while they were counted and recounted. The Red Cross food parcels were withheld and solitary confinement given for the smallest infringement like spitting on the ground or failing to salute.



Letter sent To Joan Slavin from camp 85 Italy. Dated April 2nd 1943.

Syd and Fred were sent to work in the olive groves weeding and clearing the ground. They took advantage of this by helping themselves to what ever food they could find. Syd kept the farmer busy by pretending to offer his boots for sale while Fred stole milk from the cow. They also worked at a flour mill and supplemented there food supply by stealing flour or dropping bags of semolina breaking it open ,filling their pockets while clearing it up. This gave them porridge for breakfast.

In September 1943 the Italians surrendered and Syd thought they would be released. Instead the Germans moved in and took over the camps, evacuating the prisoners to Austria. Syd and Fred were taken to stalag 18 and then onto work camp 18a Wolfsburg in the south east corner of Austria near the Hungary and Yugoslav borders. The work was hard manual labour and tunnel digging.

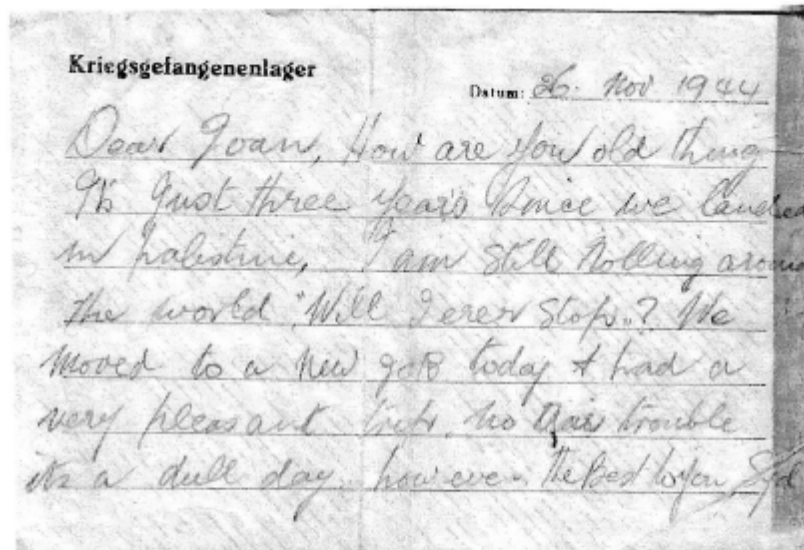
One cold morning they slept in. The German guard was sent to hurry them up for work. Fred told him shut up you German bastard. He kept yelling at them so Fred punched him knocking him over. The guard got up and left but was soon back pointing a gun at them. Instead of backing down they disarmed him by kicking the gun out of his hand and punching him again. Fred then picked up the gun and handed

back to the guard and told him to bugger off. Which he promptly did leaving them alone.

Several men had escaped by cutting the wire fence and walking out. The guards would search the camp looking for the wire cutters. In the search they overlooked things like a crystal radio set as they were only told to look for the wire cutters. These were hidden in the flue of the copper heater. They never found them.

In the yard one day Syd and Fred noticed a pile of frozen potatoes in the field outside the fence. They decided to go and get some. Some others kept a look out and when the guard was out of sight Syd and Fred climbed over the fence ran over to the potato pile and dug up a bag of potatoes. Those on lookout signalled when to come back in. They got back into the barracks before the guard noticed the foot prints in the snow. Everyone was lined up and counted to find out how many had escaped. But they were all present. This confused the guards who then counted 3 more times, never finding anyone missing.

Syd and Fred did however escape. They discovered a door that was nailed shut. They worked the nails loose until they could be easily pulled in and out. They then gathered supplies of bread, tea and nestles milk opened the door and walked away. They planned to get across the River Drau near Marburg and into Yugoslavia. Where the Yugoslav partisans would aid them to reach the British military mission there. They travelled through the mountains for 11 days, stealing chickens and potatoes and whatever else they could find. It was hard going as the mountains had some very steep cliffs. They were above the town of Marburg. Instead of waiting until the next day and surveying the town they went in at night. The town had a curfew and was patrolled by the night watch. Syd and Fred walked straight into them and were captured straight away.



Postcard to Joan Slavin Sent from Germany Stalag 18a Wolfsberg. Date November 26th 1944

They were sent to an old prison and put in solitary confinement in a cell 5 foot by 2 foot. They were given only bread and water and allowed half hour exercise per day. They could barely walk after this treatment for 2 weeks. This was a particularly bad camp and was later closed after strong complaint by the Australian Government. Then they were sent to work digging air raid shelters with very little food and 20 people to a small room. The dirt had to be put in a skip and pushed up a steep hill, and emptied out at the top. They then rode in the skip down the hill again. As Syd and Fred were always trying to sabotage things they decided to crash it on the way down. They wound the brake out so the skip would not slow down and then jumped out half way down the hill. The skip crashed and there was no work for 2 days while it was fixed. Their German Guard said he would rather be sent to the front than guard the Aussies as they caused too much trouble.

Syd and Fred stayed in this camp until the end of the war. They then had to make their own way to join up with the allied troops.

A group of them got hold of a Mercedes Benz To drive, but could not agree on which direction they should drive to, so a coin was tossed. Syd and Fred lost so they had to find alternative transport.

They found an old van with faulty brakes that failed going down the mountain. At the bottom they met up with the American forces.

As they parked the van the front tyre exploded. Lucky for them it had lasted the drive down the mountain.

While they were with the Americans they confiscated a motor bike off a German and spent days driving around being supplied food and petrol by the Americans.

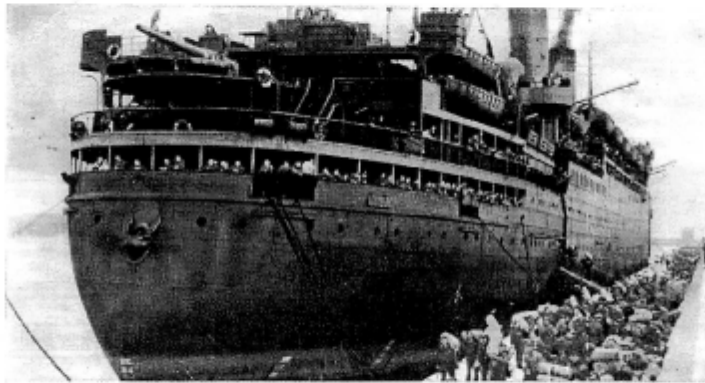
They then boarded a bomber plane for the flight to England. It was the first time either of them had ever been on a plane. The flight lasted 5 hours and was very bumpy. The plane was shaking so badly they thought it was going to crash.

They stayed in England for 5 weeks to recuperate before boarding the "Stirling Castle" to sail home.

The trip took them through the Panama Canal Through rough seas to New Zealand. 2 days out of New Zealand one of the propellers was damaged and had to be repaired. Here they were welcomed by the prime minister and treated like royalty. None of the businesses would accept payment for anything. Once the boat was repaired they continued onto Sydney to another welcome home parade, greeted by the Governor general "The Duke of Gloucester".

The ship was greeted this was in every town they stoped in.

Syd went home to see his family before travelling by train to Perth and then onto Geraldton. Arriving on Tuesday August 25th



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This telegram has been received by the Post and Telegraph Office at the end of the telegram.		POSTMASTER GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT		The date of the telegram is the date of the telegram.	
TELEGRAM					
Office of Origin	No. of Words	Time of Telegram			
24, PERTH STGEORGES TCE	15	9 26AM			
MISS JOAN SLAVIN BREDE ST GERALDTON					
MISSED TRAIN LEAVING HERE MONDAY ARRIVING TUESDAY MORNING					
SYD		11 35AMR			

Syd and Joan were married in St Francis cathedral in Geraldton
Because it was a mixed religion marriage, the priest would not let the organist play
the wedding march or let us walk down the centre isle in the cathedral. Joan took this
as an insult as I had sung in the cathedral choir and it was my parish church.
Syd was insulted because the Italian wedding prior to ours had been given the full
works and he had just spent 3 years as a prisoner of war held by the Italians and
Germans. He never forgave the church for this insult

After they were married Syd and Joan could not go on a honeymoon as there was a
train strike so they spent there honeymoon in the furnished rooms attached to a
saddlery shop Syd had rented in Northampton.



Syd and Joan Wedding Photo 15 December 1945

Extracts from "Syd's war diary", the boat trip home.

June 14

Goodbye to Bridgend and the best people I've met in England. Must come back sometime.

June 15

Everything going fine. Arrived 7 o'clock this morning on time for parade. Was put on cook fatigue, peeling potatoes.

June 16

Watched for the boat this morning, probably leave tonight. Fred and I went up to London to see Mr and Mrs Barton. Had a good time, really got drunk.

June 17

Arrived East Bourne at 10 o'clock this morning, missed the first parade, but everything is o.k. Leaving tonight 11 o'clock. Big rush for packing. Wrote Ted a letter for Mr Webb and everything is ready. Waiting around is very depressing.

June 18

Travelled all night through train changes, slept most of the time. Boarded the Stirling Castle and sailed at 6 pm. 4600 people on board. New Zealanders, Aussies and English marines. I believe we are going via Panama. 28 days to New Zealand. Saw quite a few wrecks in the river at Liverpool.

Goodbye to England and some very good new friends. Once again we are heading in to the unknown.

June 19

Nothing special today. Saw a big shoal of young Porpoises flying out of the water. They looked like little pigs. We are 1000 miles out and the sea is calm and the weather is good. Just 9 hours ahead of schedule. For the last 2 days we have put the clock back 1 hour a day.

June 20

Very dull today, slept and read all day. The food is not so hot, the first two days was terrible but has improved a little now.

We have battened down the hatches and are sleeping in an iron bunk. It is fairly warm, with foul weather. I saw no trees or water holes in the desert- today I didn't think there was this much water on earth.

June 22

This morning I sighted a tramp boat off to the North. Glad to see somebody lives on this plain of water. Later I also sighted a destroyer and two more tramp boats. It is getting very hot we must be near the Equator.

June 23

Tomorrow is my birthday; I guess it will pass quietly.

June 24

Bought some sweets today. 10 shillings a 5 pound carton. It is now tea time 5.30 pm. I am sleeping on the deck tonight as it is hot. It rained so I had to go below.

June 25

Today makes a week at sea; I like it a bit better now, not so giddy.

June 26

Rained all day; no boat parade. Stayed below and melted. Free issues of English tin plums and lemonade.

June 27

Nothing very important happened today. I'm flat out dodging the sun. It sure is hot, plenty of boys are really sunburnt.

June 28

The clock has gone back 6.5 hours.

This morning I had a black out going up the stairs. Luckily there was a big queue behind me to break my fall. We have arrived in Panama.

June 29

We have arrived in Colon, the mouth of the Panama Canal on the Atlantic side. There is nothing much to see here, just a lot of jungle and palm trees.

June 30

There is no shore leave for us as the last boat had some trouble with the wogs over the exchange rate of dollars to the pound. It is very hot here. We are taking on fresh stores and water etc.

July 1

We passed through three big locks, each time rising up to the level of the lake. Then we passed through the big lake in the centre and through four more locks dropping back down to sea level. It was 44 miles from ocean to ocean. The lakes in the centre are fresh water.

July 3

We slowed down today. They say there was a big naval loss in the waters around here. I had a touch of fever today.

July 4

We passed the equator yesterday. It was marked by a mall island, just a rock really. It was called Malpiero