Laurance Alan Jones

MY STORY

This is written in February, 2005, in response to the "Tell us your story program" seeking wartime stories for inclusion in the Battye Library as a possible resource for future reference. It enlarges on the brief entry in the Australian War Memorial records, army number W6485, then WX34847.

My name is Laurance Alan Jones. I was born on 28 Nov, 1921, and spent my first fifteen years, in Brookton, a small Wheatbelt town on the Great Southern railway line, with the Avon River nearby. Because of the general poverty prevailing during the depression of the thirties, I was unable, despite having won a scholarship, to undertake secondary education in the city or a bigger country centre.
Nevertheless, I continued to Junior certificate level at the small local school. Arising from a competitive examination, I was selected for appointment to the Commonwealth as a telegraph messenger (the lowest level in the Public Service, yet a stepping stone for some of the most senior managers.) Curiously, I was not asked whether I could ride a bicycle (only one boy in the town had one, to my knowledge) so I had to learn the ropes on the busy streets of Fremantle, then an important passenger as well as freight terminal. In my spare time I took care to acquire some proficiency in the use of Morse code (first learned in the Boy Scouts) so that, if circumstances should dictate my remaining in the telegraph service, I would perhaps gain a promotion as telegraphist, then a respected and fairly well paid occupation.

It was in March, 1937 that I joined the service. Towards the end of the year I undertook another exam, this time for inclusion in a five-year course as "junior mechanic in training" leading to advancement as a mechanic (later called technician) in the field of telegraphy, telephony or radio. From some hundreds, seven were selected, with training starting early in 1938 at the old P.M.G. workshops in East Perth (near the start of today's Graham Farmer Freeway.) There was instruction in the use of tools, repair of telephones, and the theory of telephony and also telegraphy (then still a very important means of commercial and private communication.) Interested especially in radio, I found enough money to build a one-valve receiver so as to listen to the late-night broadcasts of Test cricket, relayed from England.

The following year was devoted to more theory, along with instruction in mathematics, physics and technical drawing at the old Perth Technical College, plus practical work assisting in the installation and maintenance of telephones. Early in the year (1939) I joined the militia unit, 13 Mixed Bde Signals, which trained weekly at night in the old Leederville drill hall: morse, signals procedure, drill and occasional rifle practice at the Bushmead range, where I earned two things: the tyro spoon (my sole present memento from those days) and a very sore shoulder because nobody had told me how one must hold the rifle butt firmly against the body before firing! Around November we underwent a full month's training, quartered in the old (since demolished) Swanbourne barracks.

On the declaration of war I was formally declared "reserved occupation" (because the armed forces would have need of telephone and telegraph facilities within

Australia) and remained so for about 12 months. Late in 1940, however, I was released in order to contribute to the training of new recruits to Army Signals, mainly from the compulsory enlistment scheme; our quarters were in what was then called the Melville camp. Progressing through the ranks, around mid-1941 I was promoted (at age 20) to commissioned level and appointed 2 i/c of a newly-formed unit, Area Signals, whose function was to provide communications for Western Command HQ, then located in Francis St, Perth. Thus my main occupation was to control the chief signals office for W. A. (in which capacity I was, I believe, the first officer to view the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.) Among other tasks undertaken was a survey of the original (1877) interstate telegraph line from Albany as far as Esperance to gauge its possible use should the Perth-Kalgoorlie line be destroyed by bombing; the result was negative.

In mid-1942 I learned of a new unit, approaching Divisional Signals in size and scope but of unknown purpose, that was being formed out of the Melville group. Finding that one of the appointed officers was to be released on compassionate grounds, I volunteered to fill the gap and was soon on the way across the Bight to an undisclosed destination. (Our ship was the "Westralia", one of the passenger/freight vessels of about 10,000 tons that plied interstate, and which had been converted to an armed merchant cruiser under Navy command.)

We disembarked at Sydney, where we received some tropical clothing and picked up some equipment and extra officers and men, then moved by train to Brisbane, where we embarked on the "Cremer", a vessel of moderate size and few pretensions formerly serving the Dutch East Indies trade, along with a similar ship, the "Anshun", and a small R.A.N. escort ship. Only when we were well offshore did we learn our destination: Milne Bay, at the eastern end of Papua, where we were meant to provide communications for the fighting force being assembled so as to resist any enemy attack.

Not until quite recently has the full story of the Milne Bay battle received serious attention from military historians. A cynical view of the reasons could be that, in the first place, it was not a popular locality for journalists and photographers; and secondly, that our commander, Major-General Clowes, declined to accept the tactical direction of MacArthur, sent from his office in southern Australia. (Supporting the latter opinion are two observations: McArthur's reputation as a determined self-publiciser; and the apparent consignment of Clowes to obscurity after he had won the battle.)

In any case, I shall make no attempt to describe the history, forces employed or tactics used in the course of the struggle: these matters are by now well documented, and at long last the Federal government has seen fit to erect a memorial on the site in honour of those who fought, suffered and, in all too many instances, died in the belief that defeat would mean a Japanese invasion of Australia -- such a short few miles across the sea.

However, since this is meant to be a personal account, a few observations on the conditions encountered may not be out of place.

Of all conceivable places in which to conduct a battle, the head of Milne Bay must rank among the worst. Always hot, very wet, covered (apart from the coconut plantations) by scarcely penetrable jungle; the home to countless species of insect, many of them harmful (especially the anopheles mosquito with its burden of malarial infection), and rats that would eat the soles of a man's feet while he slept; once cleared, deeply muddy and soon covered with fast-growing, tall, abrasive grass. No sooner were slit trenches dug than they filled with water. The "Anshun" was sunk at the wharf before it could be unloaded, carrying with it much of our equipment, stores and personal effects, along with several of our vehicles (which were, in any case, designed for desert conditions and hence highly unsuitable.) For my part, I was left to sleep in muddy water for the first week, at the end of which, duty allowing a little spare time, I was able to remove my boots and socks, along with which came the outer skin of my feet: no long-term harm, and indeed I was done a service, as the corns that had plagued me came off as well, never to return. Meanwhile, the enemy landing was imminent, and we laboured to set up the divisional signal office and run lines from Div HQ to the three brigades and other units. Much of our equipment, copied from British designs, gave trouble because of the endless humidity that prevailed. The customary, single-wire lines (with earth return) gave rise to intolerable crosstalk; an ingenious machine allowed twisted-pair conductors to be produced, but the meagre stocks of cable that had survived soon ran out.

Because of the enemy's naval superiority in the area, food supplies from the mainland became scarce. For some weeks our principal rations were warm, greasy bully beef along with biscuits, so hard that we were ready to swear that they had been in store since 1918. Malaria was rife, despite all available precautions, along with crippling tinea infections (treated initially with a preparation called Whitfield's Ointment, which we were ready to swear must be a mixture of sulphuric acid and vaseline; despite the better remedies that came later, the effects were long-lasting.) Malnutrition led, for me, to a vicious crop of boils on the face, approaching the eyes so closely that I was consigned to hospital, there to receive some of the first supplies of sulphanilamide: sickening but effective.

But if we in Signals had our difficulties and discomforts, matters were far worse for the infantry troops who had to endure and eventually repel the determined enemy's attacks, while suffering heavy casualties. Artillery and air support helped to turn the tide. At a critical stage, though, when an enemy breakthrough would have meant a direct attack on Div HQ, a staff officer rounded up our cooks, orderlies and sanitary men, some of whom scarcely knew one end of a rifle from the other, placed them under the command of myself and another junior officer, and said: "If they come it will be up this road; they may well be accompanied by two tanks; use your rifles and this Boyes anti-tank weapon." None of us had handled the latter (it fired 0.5-inch, armour-piercing bullets) but all were aware of its capacity to break shoulders; so there being no volunteers, I undertook the job. We dug in as best we could (the ground beneath the mud was hard) and prepared for what seemed a hopeless defence. News of the enemy's final defeat and withdrawal came as a welcome relief.

Although beaten off, there were fears that the Japanese would return in greater strength. But by early 1943, with the enemy in retreat northwards, it was time for

our unit to move by ship to Port Moresby, where we took over the signals function at New Guinea Force H.Q. For me, there was a welcome interlude when a signal arrived calling for two officers to attend a course at the "School of Radiophysics", Sydney. The 'radio' bit seemed to imply some sort of advanced signals training, so another officer and I were duly nominated and travelled by air to Brisbane, train to Sydney, and an overnight stay at the Showgrounds transit depot. But there was no official knowledge there of this evidently highly-secret establishment; however, a whisper from the cook's orderly hinted that it was "out Bondi way." So we took our bags, went into the city and boarded a Bondi tram, hoping to see some sign along the way. Hearing our guarded conjectures, the conductress said "don't worry, I'll let you off at the right stop"! So much for secrecy.

As it turned out, though, confidentiality was warranted, for this was the training establishment for the newly-developed radar system intended to yield advance warning of air attacks on the northern islands.
The C.O. received us pleasantly, but on scanning our papers told us that this was not a signals school, but one meant to train artillery forward-observation officers in setting up and operating the radar stations. He offered options: do the course and transfer to Artillery; or, having come so far, he would try to arrange some home leave. While interested, we nevertheless both took the second preference, which was how I came to travel to Perth, fall ill with malaria and consequently spend some weeks in hospital and convalescent depot before returning to Moresby.

A little later I was seconded to a signals training depot, quite pleasantly situated in the Owen Stanley foothills some distance north of Moresby, as an instructor. (A river, apparently fit for swimming, ran through the camp; it was here, I suspect, that some unwelcome organism entered my ear, giving rise to an abscess. Once treated, I thought no more of this until, many years later, the balance organ in my inner ear failed, with unpleasant and lasting results.)

After a few months, it was back to Moresby for a while. We were camped quite close to the "seven-mile strip" north of the town, whence American bombers took off on northwards raids. One day I took a look around the USAAF field; a close inspection of a B17 "Flying Fortress" revealed how limited was the bombload capacity on long-range missions: evidently the mass of armour designed to protect the crew had compromised the aircraft's primary function. Nearby was a cemetery for crew members who had not returned alive: predominantly, it seemed, the tail gunners, badly exposed to fighters attacking from the rear. Once, a Liberator, fully fuelled and loaded with bombs, crashed on takeoff, with dreadful results; there were rumours of fuel-tank sabotage by a disaffected soldier...

Our next move was to Dobodura, near Buna and Gona where the costly operations to clean up the enemy forces following the Kokoda Track affair had left their mark on the landscape. We stayed there for some months in support of the remaining troops, amidst some apprehension that the Japanese would attempt another landing; but they were successfully repulsed by naval and air defences. In the face of medical advice that our troops had still not fully recovered from the effects of the Milne Bay struggle, we did not join in the push northwards that progressively drove the enemy back. Instead, we took ship to the mainland on the way to the training depot at Balcombe, south of Melbourne, for physical recuperation and fresh training.

That done, we moved to the Atherton Tableland in Queensland to await an expected move to the northern islands. As this was not likely to occur for some time, I was granted a short home leave to coincide with my wife's confinement.

On reaching the transit camp at Cairns, instead of taking the train south I was directed to take command of a convoy of about 25 jeeps, each with a trailer full of equipment, and drive all night to Townsville so as to hand over to an infantry unit in time to embark for the north. On a moonless night, with barely-glowing headlights, no road signs, and drivers who (despite their declarations) in some cases had scarcely driven a jeep, never mind one with laden trailer, this was something of an adventure, but we managed to get there in time. Then it was, for me, the long train trip to Perth.

As it turned out, my wife became seriously ill and I was granted extended leave before returning to Atherton. Meanwhile, however, my unit had been despatched to the islands north of Papua to follow up the enemy's withdrawal. I was directed to join a local training unit as an instructor. Following the Japanese surrender, I sought early release to enable me to resume my civilian training and take care of my family; there was a system of priority points depending, mainly, on length of wartime service, and on this scale I ranked highly. Instead, however, I was transferred to the signals training establishment at Bonegilla (near Albury) where, despite my pleadings, I remained until April, 1946. (The army's curiously illogical justification for this long delay was that a batch of compulsorily-enlisted trainees had arrived just before the war ended; they were thus at the bottom of the priority list for release, so had to remain; therefore they must be trained; experienced officers were needed to carry this out; accordingly, I must stay. What ought to have happened, of course, was to have discharged the new arrivals so soon as the war ceased.)

My long-delayed release was to have very serious effects on me and my family. Rapid inflation, together with scarcity of materials, meant that by late 1949 when my house was finished the real value of my deferred pay, gratuity and other savings had diminished by about 50%, leaving me with no cash and a substantial mortgage. Thus, while not regretting my lengthy (albeit scarcely distinguished) contribution to the war effort, I was left with scant respect for the Army and all it’s works. So when, a few years later, I was asked to take part in the Korean affair (on pain of being struck off the Reserve of Officers) I replied: "go ahead and strike!"

As for life after the war, my ambition to become a professional telecommunications engineer was realised, after intensive study, and I retired from a branch-head position with Telecom Australia in 1982, having completed 45 years of public (including military) service.

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