# Thomas Arthur Acton Mills

## The Longest Day

No doubt we all can recall one particular day that remains as a very significant event, to be long remembered and mused over for many years after it occurred. One such was some 60 years ago and far away from home, in the deep, dank jungle of South Bougainville, at age 19 and about to be involved in a whole lot of sometimes very strange and new experiences.

It began with a posting, as a reinforcement, to a well tried and long serving infantry battalion whose home city was Brisbane. One of two newcomers posted to the same platoon, the other being the platoon Commander or as more often known the Lieut. We were embarked from Brisbane into a war built Victory Troop Ship; one of many so produced in the U.S.A. A journey of several days within No. 3 lower hold of said vessel that was terminated when this stout transport anchored off the base area known as Torokina on the island of Bougainville. Once ashore and settled temporarily into a holding area we were issued with the usual paraphernalia for going to a forward area and to encounter a force of unknown number of Japanese. In fact it was later proved there were a good deal more than the Divisional General Staff had assumed.

We personally, all some 1000 young 18 year old West Australians that had been posted to reinforce the Queensland 29th Infantry Brigade were well trained. An initial experience at a Jungle Warfare Training Centre that had been established in Collie. This I have always held was far more arduous than the subsequent one we were later sent to at Canungra in Queensland. I have often wondered if there is still any evidence of that Jungle Training Centre in Collie. With its obstacle course and live firing exercises when we had to climb very high up in a very large tree and fire at objects moving quite quickly along a wire down on ground level. This after I discovered that the old .303 rifle whilst ever reliable was obviously not designed for use by a left-handed person. Being of that type myself but fortunately ambidextrous I had automatically picked up such weapon when first issued and just fitted it into my right shoulder and to become a first-class shot to my own utter astonishment!

So now here we were all set to go down south to the Forward End and about to proceed in that direction. So as it always was very early one morning the battalion was paraded and moved off for what was to be a long day's march south to take over from a U.S. Infantry Regiment in area north of the Mivo River. This waterway being the forward perimeter for whatever number of Japanese Marines were in residence.

It was a strange experience, to be in a real, deep tropical jungle just marching along, a ten-minute halt then on again. Still not yet quite knowing all the other chaps or blokes of the platoon to which I had been posted and as yet to be proved to their satisfaction if I would measure up. Inevitably the feeling of what it would be like to arrive in a strange place with a lot of new chaps, to

have to face up to being shot at and/or to have to shoot at a Japanese. Or perhaps not be able to face this totally strange and new experience and just want to run away and hide. Would I be able to meet all the demands of living and fighting in a deep and so strange jungle, so far away from home and in such a new and totally unfamiliar setting? At that age still very naïve and unsure of one's own capabilities and possible reaction to being under fire, perhaps even wounded or crippled. Would all the training we had received ensure my own correct obedience and performance?

Even worse perhaps there was no-one to whom to ask about the sense or nonsense of these somewhat morbid thoughts, it was just the need to keep trudging along and desperately trying to appear self-confident and not quite bewildered at the utter strangeness of the surroundings. Then, during that long afternoon after a brief halt for the midday meal, another totally unexpected sight. At one side of the track two men under a little lean-to, a table supporting a large urn and three or four large teapots. A jeep was parked just off the track, in fact our route was only a jeep track and the first such or any kind of vehicle we'd seen all day. A large container of water suspended over a small fire close by the lean-to.

The Salvation Army was in evidence with a cup of tea poured into one's enamel mug as we gathered in organised groups to receive this welcomed sustenance. It seemed quite incredible, just these two chaps seemingly miles from anywhere but to offer this welcome so readily for us. From that day on the Salvation Army has always been one of my favourite charities. Eventually late in the afternoon we arrived at an assigned rendezvous to be greeted by a company group of the U.S. Infantry Regiment we were to replace. The hand-over was fairly brief and then the hard work began, for us to settle down and occupy the area the Americans had established.

The long day was over but the previously dreaded trials were yet to be experienced. This is one sense was a let-down as an individual I was now part of a team and just continued to function as if all this was maybe what our rigorous training had prepared us for, as far back as when it began in the Collie Jungle Training Centre. I found that once we were in direct action against the Japanese the overriding consideration was that of a very old fashioned expression, for want of a better term might be called mateship.

It is not a word to be found in any dictionary but its meaning became very evident with the realization that every member of the platoon was bound by a common bond. The need to care for and look after each other, never to turn your back or look the other way when another was in trouble or grieving for a lost mate, as was inevitable. Strangely also there was no continuous fear, we were always too busy, too alert, too mindful of being able to function, as we had been so carefully taught. Not that an exercise devised could equate to the real drama, intensity of alertness whilst being shot at by Japanese rifles or machine guns, mortars or his heavier artillery.

The quick realization that all ranks worked as one and that as no doubt in every infantry platoon the platoon sergeant is often the mentor for the

instruction of any newcomer in the group. The section leaders were always most zealous and mindful of the need to see all tasks were equally shared and only the platoon commander or the Lieut. (lieutenant) as we all referred to him in our conversations stood just slightly apart. Again this and only when he had revealed his leadership capacity, abilities and true potential. Mostly all were on first name terms, the Lieut. the only exception but even then Bluey, our platoon sergeant (that bright red hair) would not hesitate to overrule any errors or misjudgement, even unfair allocation of tasks by the Lieut. as he saw fit. But for myself I knew I had been accepted into a good platoon in a good unit.

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**Vignettes of Adversity**

We have mentioned that the jungle of South Bougainville was a dank but was also a very oppressive place and totally alien to any newcomers, especially if hailed from the premier State of Western Australia. For a start the overhead canopy was quite dense and only in developed clearings or when moving out onto the many rivers that bisected this area was it possible to view the heavens above and the warmth of sunlight, if it was not raining again!

The region itself was almost some vast swamp and seemed to have a most unpleasant delight of raining with an endless and depressing frequency. Added to that there were quite a few occasions when earth tremors would seem to sweep across this whole southern end of the island. For anyone obliged to live in a hole in the ground, known as weapon pits this so often meant that such residences were also very damp and unhygienic but a good deal safer if there was any other unpleasantness to be endured.

One surprising aspect that we did not expect to see was that at night instead of a black and inky darkness there were many vines that had almost intense phosphorus glow that served us well if required to move about within our platoon area during the dark hours. There was of course such need, listening posts to be manned for example that required us to regularly move about at night. Some of the flying insects that abounded at night also had a quite visible small illumination. We did utilize these phosphorus vines by laying them out along the ground for use as pathways during the dark hours.
Daylight was often not cause for any greetings or great enthusiasm as this meant a stand to at dawn until we were sure that there were no inquisitive Japanese lurking about beyond the barbed wire. It had become necessary to install barbed wire fences about the varied localities that we occupied as quite often the Japanese would feel for any weakness in our defensive postures and were always ready to exploit these if it suited their purpose. Empty cans with empty cartridges cases within were often affixed to the wire so these would jangle and alert us if the Japanese were about at night and investigating the prospects of breaking in come the dawn, if they so minded.

Breakfast usually the next item on the agenda with a nourishing repast of baked beans and/or herrings in tomato sauce. Supplemented by Army biscuits, universally known as dog biscuits and a plenitude of tea. That lunch and the evening meal saw this same cuisine; there was no menu offering, no choice to titillate the palate by perhaps an offer of lobster mornay, just meant front up or go without! There was some diversion as various smaller inhabitants of the jungle sometimes supplemented the baked beans. Baked beans became to our company cooks in 4-gallon cans to be opened and stand around the cooks' tent until emptied. Thus any small flying insect, spiders or others that may drop from above often found themselves keeping company with the beans.

To this day, baked beans or herrings in tomato sauces are strictly verboten as a culinary offering that may well still be adhered to by survivors of this long past era. Otherwise we were fully occupied with an intensive pattern of patrolling to ascertain the positions and strength of the Japanese, as the deliberate but steady forward advance brought us to yet another river to reconnoitre and plan for a suitable crossing. There always seemed to be an abundance of waterways in this vast swampy area.

We did get an issue of 10 cigarettes every week, no doubt as a planned for palliative to relieve the monotonousness of the diet. In that era most adults smoked and every moving picture show or movies if you prefer depicted heroes and heroines puffing away with consummate ease when not otherwise occupied with consummating on a different and perhaps more exciting plain! The company cooks were at times a much-reviled twosome but always did a really great job usually under the most trying of circumstances. At least the tea was always hot, plentiful and a blessing.

Mostly the day would be occupied with routine patrols, the continuous strengthening of our perimeter defences or quite often to accompany a FOO out into the jungle for a particular task. These FOOs or Forward Observation Officers were Artillery Officers sent out to call down fire and/or observe its results from their regiment's 25-pounders field artillery. There were very dedicated and did a great of at easing the pain when infantry units became hard pressed by the activities of the iniquitous and annoying Japanese.

Other than that the hardest part of this existence was coping with the harshness of climate and conditions. We were required to accept a daily intake of Atebrin tablets to ward off fears of malaria, with a resultant yellow tone to our otherwise totally white and often wrinkled skin. Leeches were a regular pest and regularly encountered in our forays into the jungle. We were strictly instructed to not brush these horrible blood-sucking insects from the skin, as this usually meant the head would remain to become as known tropical ulcer. This was a deep festering sore that created a whole so deep that one could actually feel right down to the bone in whatever joint the leech so visited.

Actually any knock or abrasion usually developed into a tropical ulcer in this dank and perpetually damp atmosphere. We had been issued with two of

everything, shirts, pants, underwear, socks and boots and wore these together with the U.S. Army gaiters that had wisely been issued to replace our own ankle length gaiters. This plus jungle hat, we did not get steel helmets, obviously considered to be not really suitable for the type of terrain and activities in which we operated and faced. So whatever we wore was wet and remained so and stayed thus on our bodies for 24 hours of every day. We also had the issued rubber groundsheet used generally as a head covering above the weapons pits in which we lived, usually in pairs.

The Japanese also began another annoying habit of regularly visiting our company and platoon area with their medium artillery fire. This required a quick dive into a weapon pit or other suitable hole or shelter to get below ground level and avoid the spray of white, hot steel splinters from the bursting shells. In one area we occupied a hole near our weapon pit had an intriguing little three-letter notice too wit UBX. Naively enough this seemed an appropriate hole in which to shelter until idly inquired of our platoon sergeant what did these three letters indicate. His reply was to the effect that in our hole was an unexploded 500-pound aerial bomb dropped by a U.S. Marine Fighter Bomber. If a Japanese shell landed close enough to simultaneously detonate this UXB he would scrape whatever remains may be removed from the nearby trees and post it home to my Mum in a matchbox. That is, if the better half of the platoon suffered the same fate he would no doubt require several more boxes. Platoon sergeants were an undeniable fount of knowledge and wisdom.

This deliberate forward movement obviously was causing some agitation among the Japanese as they intensified the shelling of each new position we occupied and developed. Then blessed relief as a sister battalion came forward to relieve us for return to the main base at Torokina. Another long days march and then to be briskly shepherded into an allotted area for the battalion to regroup. Our soiled and frayed uniforms quickly replaced by new issues including boots even as these could not cope with the endless dampness of the deep jungle.

Hot showers, better meals, 8 man tents that kept out the rain, a palliasse on which to sleep, even room to spread our few personal belongings. Nevertheless still a great deal of activity, battalion parades every week and work parties assembled to help unload stores and supplies on beaches from the landing craft that ferried such ashore from ships anchored off the base area. A constant demand for other work parties to assist with the numerous activities necessary to receive and to pack supplies for dispatch to those units in the forward areas. Then new issues for our next foray south.

The accepted procedure was for each battalion of our brigade to spend some three months probing forward and steadily driving the Japanese back towards the far southern end of the island. So that on each occasion when we were called forward we found the Japanese resistance steadily strengthening. The shelling of our positions intensified and the Japanese began a series of assaults to try and break into company or platoon areas. These became

known as Banzai attacks from the war cry the Japanese used to spur themselves against our barbed wire and perimeter defences. We would hear them assembling at night just beyond the barbed wire, trying to cut a way through this defence and then at first light launch a desperate attack to overrun a selected position be it company or platoon.

So the weary months wore on until a day or too prior to the 18th August 1945 found our battalion again to be the most forward and with orders on that day to effect a crossing of the Mivo River. The final major obstacle for access to the Japanese main defensive areas. On that day our company was to lead this advance and our platoon to lead the company across the river. We all knew this was not going to be a very comfortable outing as the Japanese had become increasingly active and belligerent, knowing they must defend this last bastion with all their strength and resources.

Then a strange undercurrent of orders and counter orders began to permeate the company localities; advance was to be held pending clarification of news that Japan had surrendered and the War was over. Then confirmation that this was indeed factual and there would be no further movement forward. So we packed our meagre belongings, had a final meal of baked beans and herrings in tomato sauce and began another long march back to where a comparative level of civilisation existed in the Torokina Main Base. The next two or three weeks saw even more frenetic activity. Our battalion was going home, it had been one of the longest serving units, initially in New Guinea after the weariness and bloodiness of Kokoda, and then to Bougainville. We were going home but suddenly a change of orders for me, to report to the Battalion Adjutant. A composite battalion was to be formed to go to Rabaul to take the surrender of a Japanese garrison still active in that area and seemingly not ready to accept that World War 2 was indeed over, that their Empire had surrendered.

This particular soldier was to report to where a newly formed composite battalion was being rather hastily assembled. It was to be composed where possible of younger men with a leavening of more experiences officers and non-commissioned officers for movement to Rabaul by sea as soon as possible. As this was one of the chosen still only 20 years of age but not too war weary; it seemed a logical choice. Not that there was any choice, consultation or debate offered, once more orders were orders.

So back to the platoon to say goodbye to a great group of real good mates. A time for one last oft-repeated sally, “what will be the second thing you do when you get back to your Missus?” (read loving wife). The expected response, “take off me hat.” Otherwise it was just “well so long mate, take care, have a good trip home.” The usual expected and laconic exchange, maybe a quick handshake and nod and go. We are not a demonstrative people and especially so in such circumstances.

So it was across to Rabaul and another long stint of rather dangerous dodging about in dark and dusty caves and tunnels in the hills around the old and war battered principal town on the island of New Britain. Working quite hard to

finally convince these reluctant Japanese to quit their resistance. Regrettably it only became apparent the only way to achieve this was the need to drive them out of the hiding places in which they had retired. Again another rather pointless exercise with the most vivid recall being of a foray into a dusty, dark tunnel one morning and the need to shoot three Japanese there encountered.

We had been ordered to engage this sizeable force that had been required to hide in these caves and tunnels at the order of their commander. He had exhorted them to fight on to the final victory as he was convinced his Emperor would never surrender. It was at times quite eerie as many of the tunnels were long with the need to carefully probe around sharp corners. The occasional earth tremor did not make us feel any safer or welcome the need to return tomorrow.

On this particular morning we returned to our platoon area where someone announced that the date today was 21st February. Instant recall for once, this date was that of my own 21st birthday. But so what, it was just another day as it had been all the other times on Bougainville. One is never or rarely aware of the date or even the day of the week. Days and weeks just seem to blur into each other, occasionally someone may say “hey, next week it will be Christmas Day.” The usual response, “so what!”

Ironically enough I received a letter from my Mother a week or so later on which she made the comment that I would have had my 21st birthday and hoped my new friends may have given a little celebration. At this stage we did get mail quite promptly, the war was over and things were beginning to return to normal. We were also allowed to relate where we were and that we were involved with trying to round up some errant Japanese. Our own mail was still censored but it was more of a formality, mainly to not make any adverse comments as to why we had been required to get this messy job where there must be other units being formed as occupation troops to go to Japan. So I did not write back and remark it was just another day, did shoot three Japanese before lunch but nothing else much happened. She would never have understood anyway.

Finally the interpreters brought in to negotiate with these then mostly reluctant survivors were able to convince the Japanese commander to bring his men out of hiding and assemble for return home. A newly formed battalion all spick and span arrived from Australia to escort them home and to continue on as part of the Allied Occupation Force in Japan. At last we too were allowed to go home after three long and weary years. Since then there has so far as I am aware very little ever been said about this rather strange episode. The only way it has been acknowledged quite a long time after was to be awarded another medal with clasp and ribbon for active service between the years 1945 and 1950. This separate to and apart from the Korean Campaign of course.

So adversity was finally laid to rest as by the time we got home in 1946 all the victory parades and speeches were over and it was back to the Company I joined in 1940. Then enlisted in 1943 and returned in 1946 and to work for

another 40 years until by mutual consent they granted me early retirement. War related health problems being the main reason. I did manage to put 25 years service with the then Citizen Military Forces during those 40 years, to retire at the mandatory age of 50 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (Retired).

**THROUGHOUT the war years a young man from "Smith's" staff, serving in the AIF, has written a story each week for you "By 'Smith's' Staff Reporter." At war's end he was slogging it out with the Jap on Bougainville. He had arrived in from a successful fighting patrol a few hours before peace was announced to his unit. Here is his account of that last patrol.**

# "LAST PATROL"

By "SMITH'S" STAFF REPORTER.

PICKETS from the weapon pits creep round the foxholes and shake your foot.

"0530. Stand to," is whispered.

You sit up, pull on your boots and rest your rifle across your knees. It is still black as the pit. From now till dawn is the time when they "Banzai" the perimeter wire.

Rain is heavier than usual. Bleak, soaking rain. Step into it and you'll be soaked in two minutes.

Those of us nominated to go on the fighting patrol grumble. Who the hell in his right senses would want to hunt the Nip in the rain? It's just the normal wet dawn whinge.

A quick breakfast. We crowd round the blackest pot in the cook tent and smear greasy black on face and hands. Nips don't black their dials and you see 'em shining among the leaves.

The lieutenant patrol leader calls his boys together.

"Usual drill. Single file. If they jump us go to earth, withdraw 20 paces and reform. If we smell 'em first, etc., etc."

The three sections line up. All of us are soaking wet now and feel warm.

"Number four section will lead for the first 400 yards, 150 paces to the 100 yards. March on bearing of 173 degrees."

We file out over the wire. After 50 paces the jungle has swallowed us. We are in no man's land.

Every palm, every tree may have death behind it. That will be in our minds till we go in over the wire before dusk.

Rain blots out every sound. The Nips won't hear us coming. But we won't hear them moving in ambush positions. The advantage of the rain is theirs.

Progress is slow, very slow. Five or ten paces, then halt. Automatically down on one knee. Fix your eyes out to the flanks. The scouts aren't taking any chances. This area stinks with Nips. Patrols hit 'em every day. We'll hit 'em sometime before we get home. If [illegible]

the front, blessing the rain now for covering the[illegible]

The face of the patrol leader is beaming beneath its greasy black.

"Beaut," he whispers. "Two palm huts full of 'em. They're staying indoors because of the rain, bless 'em. Four section, right flank, five [illegible] You, Bertie, put your boys on the left flank. Rifle bombers in the centre. Arty group, form half-moon, face out and screen our rear. I'll open with an Owen."

Five minutes, ten minutes. The sections are getting into position. Rain! Rain! Rain!

A rifle shot!

In they come with a roar. One Bren, two Brens, three Brens. Lovely! The Owens spit with a soprano note above the Bren basso. Rifles crack. There's a grenade, and another—rifle bombers firing from the hip.

Two Brens only now—one changing his mag. There he goes again. Bore it into 'em the ——s.

A Nip officer dives from a hut into a pit. He has an LMG to his shoulder. A Bren burst cops him and he falls.

Another yellow belly is crawling off on hands and knees. Only the seat of his pants is exposed. A rifleman opens on him. Five .303's stop him.

The Nip rolls over and exposes his head which collects the sixth round.

"Cease fire," from the patrol leader. "Four section, move in and mop up, others cover us."

Individual bursts of Owen send moaning Japs on their way to wherever dead Nips go.

We grab kits, maps, weapons, a sword—a beauty, too.

"Five section lead. Bearing 353 degrees. Straight home.

The jungle is a nice place now. The blood sings in our ears. We are the victors. We've trapped and wiped out those who sought to kill us. And not a single casualty on our side. We crash [illegible]

"For heaven's sake wake up to yourselves," snaps the lieutenant, lugging the bloody Nip LMG. "You'll