

The Mice Of Moresby

Gordon French

We have been privileged to be allowed to bring you this story, an extract from Gordon French's unpublished book *The Mice Of Moresby*. If you are interested in learning more, contacting Gordon, or perhaps seeking copyright for the book, please don't hesitate to contact us at aMUSine.



This picture demonstrates the use we made of some of the purloined 44gal drums

Image courtesy of G. French

PREAMBLE:

This does not presume to be a History, although the events are of History. It is a personal anecdote of my involvement in and observations of events. There may at times be grounds for contradiction or charges of inaccuracy but what I write is my view and I endeavour to ensure that my statements are True and Accurate. There has been no research of Official records and little of documented accounts, only occasional search for reference as needed for verification of my recollections or to assure the chronology of events.

I have relied much on my memory and on the entries in my personal diaries although I've never regarded memory as infallible, either mine or that of any other. I have on occasion made reference to other's accounts or records which at times have varied with mine and I concede that in some particulars the accounts may not agree completely but what I state, if I claim as fact, is what I have personally experienced or witnessed.

THE COMING OF THE WIND.

In the year 1281, C.E. Japan faced the threat of Mongol invasion. A Typhoon [ever since known as Kamikaze] occurred. It scattered and destroyed the Mongol fleet. This 'Divine Wind' has ever since been revered by the Japanese.

About Aug. '41, with the tension building in the Asia-Pacific region, a friend and I decided that it was time for us to volunteer for overseas service. We were lacking in enthusiasm as we realised the probability of being allocated to 30 Bn. - 8th. Div. and it was in knowing the identity of the Commanding Officer that we were hesitant, we doubted his competence. [During the fighting in Malaysia a Battery of 2" Anti-tank guns joined his unit to be turned away with a comment to the effect that he could not see any use for them. Acting independently, the Officer in charge set up a defensive position which subsequently engaged enemy tanks effectively; and for the first short time in the campaign, at *Gemas*, halted the Japanese advance. In 1980 on a trip to Malaysia I visited the site.]

We submitted our applications for transfer to the A.I.F. and were not upset to be informed we were rejected. The reason given was that because of our service in training recruits we were considered more to be valued in that role than we would be as another couple of Officers in combat.

The Grape Vine, [rumour] conveyed information that an A.I.F. unit in Darwin was looking for reinforcements. We had Official advice that a Battalion, 53 rd., was being assembled to strengthen the Darwin garrison and that our Battalion was required to transfer a certain number of personnel to this unit. My friend 'John Hutchinson' and I applied to be included in this transfer believing that once in Darwin it would be reasonably easy to effect a further transfer.

On joining the 53 Bn. at Ingleburn we found it commanded by Lt. Col. K.H. Ward, a Militiaman. We understood that as a civilian he had held a senior clerical position with the Sydney Water Board. For the purpose of organising the formation of a new unit he was a good choice and in the initial stages all was well. He was however somewhat egocentric, vain of his appointment and his approach to his job very predictable when taking into consideration his work background. He favoured the sycophants when it came to appointment of his subordinates. Dissidents he regarded as rebels with the natural consequence that any tendency to independent thinking or initiative tended to be suppressed.

Few of the personnel of this unit were volunteers. The method adopted to obtain the numbers quickly was by requisition, and this had given all units concerned a first class opportunity to cleanse themselves, rid themselves of all the slackers, trouble makers and malcontents they had. The result was that we had command of probably the toughest bunch of hard heads in the CMF. But somewhat to our surprise they accepted the situation, settled down and developed into as good a body of troops as any other.

In Victoria there had been the simultaneous formation of the 39 Bn with the same method of acquiring the manpower. It was this ragtime collection of trouble making discards that would go on to make history as "The Mice of Moresby", the title bestowed on them in early January by 'Tokyo Rose', the Japanese propaganda Broadcaster.

The sudden Japanese intrusion into the conflict created chaos. Units were hurriedly transported to their battle stations but we, as one of the two new units in transition, had no such allocation. Rumour ran rife until eventually we received orders. In the few days Army HQ had decided that Port Moresby needed reinforcement. From 1 Aug 1941 PNG. had been designated as 8th Military District and the decision made to garrison Port Moresby but it was not effected until the 49th. Bn. was formed in Queensland for the purpose and sailed from Brisbane on 15 Nov. 1941. This unit, with part of 13th. Field Artillery Regt. and the appointment of Brigadier Basil Morris as Commandant, a Naval Contingent with Paga Point as Naval base with coastal defence battery and a very small RAAF force, principally ground staff, a total of little more than 1,000 personnel comprised the Port Moresby Garrison. It was now determined that the Infantry component should be a Brigade, approx 3,000. by allocating the two supernumerary Battalions, 39th Bn. [Victoria]. and 53rd. [NSW]. together with additional Army Service Corp, [ASC. including Bulk Issue Petrol Oil Depot, [BIPOD] and reinforcing the RAAF. and Naval Depot thus increasing the garrison to about 5,000.

Elementary training had been undertaken to make these two infantry units each a cohesive and effective body but with the entry of Japan into the War, and the quick decision to deploy to Moresby, it was regarded as most essential to deploy them as soon as possible, although neither unit could by any criteria have been considered as being a trained body of troops. Embarkation was delayed by trouble with Wharf Labour and the expected departure date was three times deferred.

When our Battalion rear party, of which I was part, arrived at the wharf to go aboard, loading was in progress but the wharf gangs left at noon with a cheery wave of the hand and a shouted, "See ya in the New Year fellers!" With the ship's crew we quickly organised our own loading gangs, a selected few were given a crash course in winch operation, and loading resumed. The task completed shortly after daybreak, the hatches were battened and we sailed at 0845, Sun. 28 th. Dec.; boxed the compass near Fort Denison and at 10.00 passed through the heads into a choppy sea with the rest of the convoy. We headed East for about an hour before turning North. Most of the troops were seasick by sunset and whilst I wasn't, I chose to not have an evening meal but being thoroughly exhausted went to bed about 17.30.

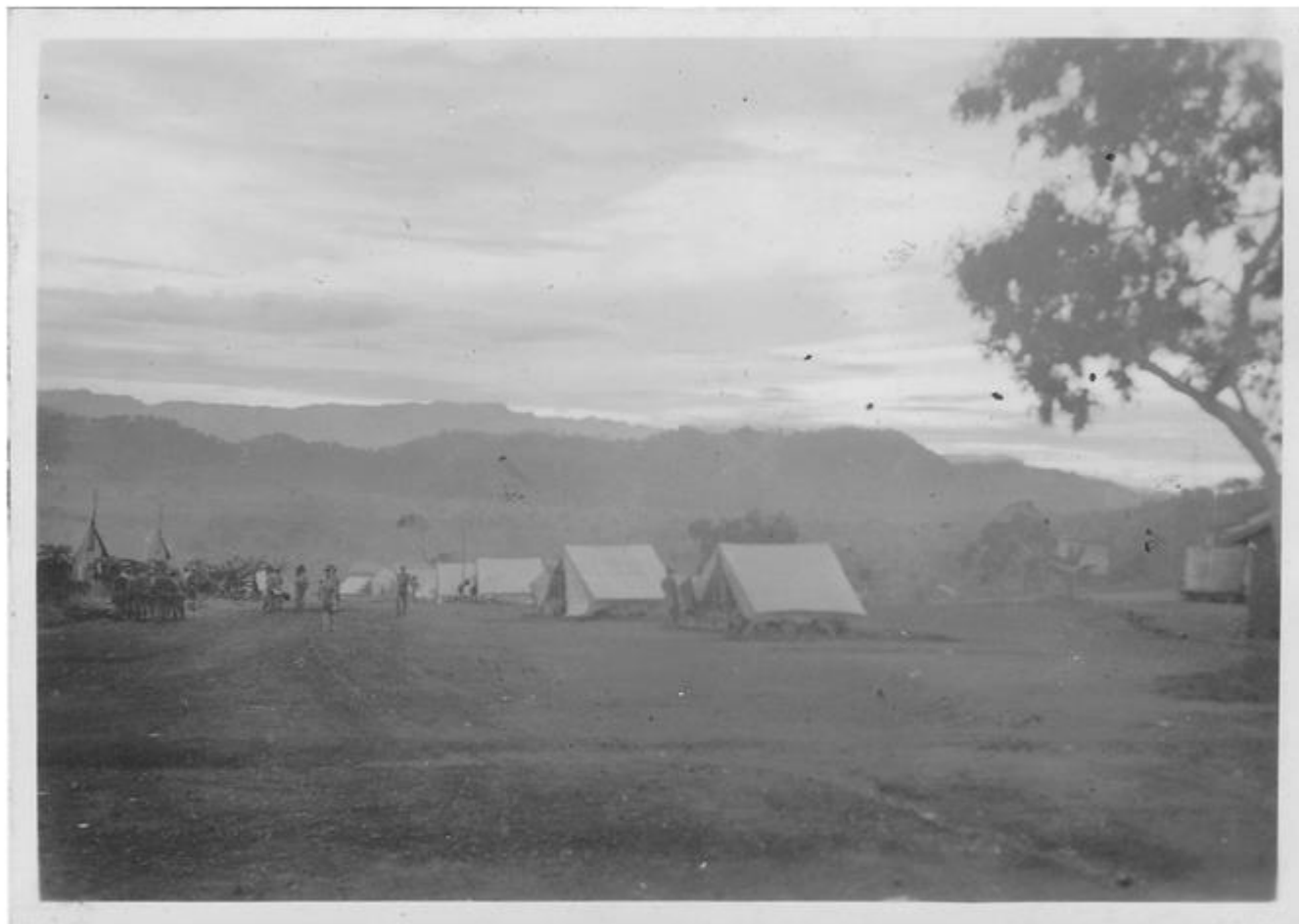
There were three Transports in the Convoy, the 'Acquitania' carrying 3700 troops, [official record], the 'Sarpedon' with approx. 300 troops plus supplies, 'Herstein' a Norwegian vessel carrying some Moresby cargo but mainly cargo for the Rabaul garrison; Petrol, light Armoured Vehicles, Medical supplies, small arms ammunition and food. We had a Naval escort of three vessels, a cruiser and two destroyers.

The voyage was uneventful except for a submarine alarm just on sunset of Tues. 30th. with a great deal of Naval rushing about laying smoke, dropping of depth charges and the following day an aircraft sighting caused another alarm until identified as 'friend'.

The whole Port Moresby story is no credit to our Military Staff. In August 1940 Aust. Army Command decided to garrison Port Moresby and for this purpose formed the 49 Bn. in Queensland. It and it's ancillaries were not despatched from Brisbane until 15 Mar. 1941 and I quote from Peter Brune's book "Those Ragged Bloody Heroes"; *"The staff work dealing with the arrival of this Battalion in Port Moresby was abysmal. It might be justifiably claimed that such a state of affairs would never have been tolerated had an AIF Battalion been involved. They had no mess tins, pannikins nor mosquito nets (all of which had to be purchased locally) and a number had no waterproof sheets"*.

Once in Moresby, *"Until the outbreak of War with Japan the degree of effort given to training, equipment and morale was a disgrace. Instead ----- it was given the tasks of Road building, wharf labouring, Building construction"*.

But on reaching our campsite ---- Chaos! We were totally without equipment or supplies. All we needed was on board the transports, most on Sarpedon. No kitchen or cooking equipment, blankets, tents, mosquito nets, no digging tools and no water. We borrowed enough implements that our cooks were enabled to produce meals of sorts. There was a residence from which we could get water. The premises were commandeered as our Bn. HQ., we scrounged some 44 gal. drums from the Shell Depot, cut them in half and had boilers for our kitchen, and our 'scroungers' came good with some digging tools [courtesy of the RAAF] so we could provide some drainage for our kitchen. Even when we could start unloading the cargo we had initially to use the transport available by loan from the present garrison, the 49 Bn., until we could get our own vehicles unloaded and ashore.



Murray Barracks, 1942

Image courtesy G. French

At this time civilian life proceeded fairly normally. All European women and children had been evacuated but Stores continued to trade, Banks operated, Hotels traded and it became commonplace to 'drop into the Pub'. We had not been in Moresby a week for this practise to cause a quite serious incident. On the afternoon of 6th Jan. one of the young soldiers emerged from Hotel Moresby slightly under the weather and finding himself face to face with one of the attractive young women, bare breasted, reached out and caressed her breasts. Some village men close by were carrying machetes, the common work tool anywhere in the tropics. They immediately attacked him. Two Officers nearby reacted instantly to draw revolvers and by brandishing their weapons and shouting, managed to control the situation enough to negotiate and compel an apology.

Our first couple of nights at the Gap had us intrigued by what was for most, our first sight of fire flies but as the novelty passed we became more concerned with the mosquitoes and not a net, and more personally, the complete absence of all my personal gear. Those of us on the 'Sarpedon' had come ashore as a work party and our personal goods had not been our responsibility but put ashore in bulk for transport to Bn. HQ for us to collect later in the day. Unfortunately for me, mine had been taken by a Company assigned to Nappa Nappy at the extreme far side of the harbour accessible only by water or a very primitive track of about 30km around the foreshores and therefore to me, inaccessible.

The C.O. made the trip daily as part of his routine so I asked him if either I could journey with him or get his driver to collect my kit. I was upbraided for my effrontery in asking that the C.O.'s transport should be even considered for the purpose and vehemently advised it had no role in providing a unit pick up and delivery service.

The 'Herstein' carried some small amount of cargo for Moresby, some canned food. Offloading this to enable it to proceed to Rabaul was obviously our first priority. This took a number of days but the brevity of this delay in accessing our own badly needed cargo on 'Sarpedon', even that it was food, did nothing to help morale and did nothing to impress us with the intelligence of whoever was responsible for the logistics of stowing the cargo. We were unaware at this date that our 3.7" Anti-aircraft guns had been shipped without breech blocks.

In emulation of the Germans the Japanese had set up a programme of utilising Tokyo Radio to transmit daily a short wave propaganda programme, broadcast in English, copying Berlin Radio's 'Lord Haw Haw'. "*Tokyo Rose*" was the voice. It was the evening of Weds. 7 Jan. that we heard her announce that *Port Moresby had been attacked by Japanese forces and occupied that day*. It was shortly after this, again following the German lead, that she referred to us and our situation as like to that of the '*Rats of Tobruk*' burrowing into the ground for our protection; but we were mere mice, '*The Mice of Moresby*'. We reacted by being quite proud of our appellation, that we should be regarded as important enough to be given special mention, that we were considered to be worth coupling our garrison with the defenders of Tobruk.



Planning the defence of Moresby was governed by consideration of it being screened by a coral reef with three navigable passages; one near the harbour entrance, one a few mile East, the other a few miles West and the assumption that any invader would make simultaneous attack at these points. In early March I was given charge of 30 men to maintain a permanent Coast Watch of the western passage. The camp was established on a hill top about 600 ft high.

The left picture is of our 50X telescope focussed seaward.

The centre photo is of a group listening to music on a Phonograph activated by finger propulsion of a turntable with a broken spring. The background is the Marquee, camp accommodation.

The righthand photo is our kitchen - scrounged few bits of timber & corrugated iron.

Images courtesy of G. French

It is of interest too that in May 1941 Brigadier, later to be Maj. General Morris was placed in command of 8th. Military District and it is a sad reflection on his competence that in the next twelve months there was absolutely no reconnaissance of the Owen Stanley Range nor of the Moresby Environs. Neither was anything done towards improving the state of readiness for the reinforcement he received in Jan 42. No maps were available nor were there any steps taken to rectify this omission. The reinforcements did arrive and work had commenced on the construction of Murray Barracks but 'commenced is the most that can be said. Nor was there anything undertaken to provide training for either the original garrison nor the reinforcements. Morris had served as an Artillery Officer through World War I, as Aust. Liaison Officer in India, 1940-1; and was with the Aust. Command base [ME] in 1940.

The MV. 'Herstein' left here on 13 Jan and arrived at Rabaul safely but within 24 hrs was under attack by Japanese Aircraft. It was attacked successively and on the third attack was sunk with most of it's cargo still on board. Little had been unloaded. The air attacks were the prelude to invasion which took place on 23 Jan. simultaneously with a landing at Kavieng. Both targets were invested the force gradually increased and extended to occupy most of the Island group. The majority of troops of our Rabaul Garrison, about 1500, were taken prisoner. Of these, 300 were manacled by tying them with hands flat, secured finger to finger with fishing line, and linked together in groups of five. They were marched to Toll rubber plantation, tied to trees and used for bayonet practise.

Few escaped. One who did, managed to crawl into the jungle and survived on what he was able to pick up in his mouth until he met a party of able bodied troops who released his bonds and helped him to the coast where he was amongst those rescued by the Yacht 'Laurabada'. This vessel, with a Motu name meaning 'South West Wind' was the Papuan Administrator's official vessel and on the fall of Rabaul was chosen to carry an entirely volunteer crew to scour the coast of New Britain for survivors, [refugees]. I was highly proficient with Light machine guns, both Lewis and Bren, and volunteered but rejected as sufficient soldiers were available without using an Officer. This patrol, from Port Moresby, was successful although we were disappointed in the poor number we were able to locate and rescue. They were sent to the mainland for treatment. The one man specifically mentioned returned to Moresby after his recovery and joined ANGAU which is how I came to know him.

It was in response to this activity in New Britain and New Ireland that we proclaimed Martial Law and ordered the evacuation or military enrolment of civilians. ANGAU [Australian New Guinea Administration Unit] was formed and appointed as the governing body in Papua and New Guinea.

Frequently various journalists and others, usually with the ignorance of not having been present at the time have availed themselves of the opportunity to report the sensational or detrimental, without consideration of verification; of Truth and Accuracy. Allegations have been made that the Moresby Garrison was comprised of an undisciplined, untrained virtual rabble. Undisciplined rabble I refute, untrained I agree. The method of recruitment and summary shipment caused much resentment, discontent and whinging. Discipline there was but it was loose, based on acceptance of 'fait accompli', camaraderie, a sense of duty, even pride of our responsibility and this prevailed even to the relationship between Officers and other ranks with disciplinary control maintained from respect, not bullying and fear. With the exception that in our Bn. the C.O. and those Officers who were regarded as his sycophants had neither the confidence nor respect of the bulk of the unit. This concept was notably lacking in Col. Ward's attitude toward his personnel.

I was a guest at Sydney Journalist's Club in the '50's when one journalist said to me in expressing his attitude to his craft, indeed his training; *'Verification is unimportant. What matters is being first to publish the item. If it subsequently proves to be untrue a correction can always be published later'*. Applying this standard, many slanders have been published.

The first slander was the accusation of poor morale and much is made of the lack of training, the garrison troops being used to provide the labour required to work the shipping, road construction, etc but these tasks had to be done and no alternative labour was available. Whilst this did cause discontent, the troops could see for themselves the problems and difficulties but though they whinged and cursed, they got on with the job. They resented the slur and particularly outspoken were those who had been so summarily shanghaied and shipped out. They had no hesitancy in voicing their resentment. Lack of training they agreed; poor morale; emphatically No.

It has frequently been said that almost as we came ashore we were planning escape routes. If a slander is to be credible it needs an element of truth and in this there was that essential element. In any military excursion there is the obligation in planning to consider the availability of lines of withdrawal in case of need. The garrison accepted that 5,000 men could not make a very prolonged successful defence of Moresby against the numbers the Japs would be likely use against us if they decided to attack. We accepted that our role would be to delay the occupation for as long as possible, to then withdraw and hope to by some means stage an emulation of Dunkirk. That whatever should be attempted, even withdrawal was not even open to serious speculation without some topographical knowledge of the task involved. To criticise the garrison for seeking maps, *[to planning escape routes]* merely highlights the complete ignorance and stupidity of the critics.

We regarded maps as also essential in order to find our way about, to establish locations of units, stores, communications, even within the Moresby area, and when it has been said we planned escape routes there was that element of truth. I reiterate that in any military defence situation it is obligatory to plan for the possibility of withdrawal and that consideration be given to make any withdrawal as safely and effectively as possible.

First Air Raids -- 3- 5 Feb.

The 1st was at 03:00 – 3 Feb. targeting Murray Barracks.
The 2nd at the same time – 5 Feb. target – the Town centre.



Hospital Wards – Murray Barracks.



Hospital Theatre – Murray Barracks.



Burns Philps' bulk store.



Steamship's Trading Store.

Murray Barracks comprised mainly tents the few permanent building being the Hospital and its Staff Quarters, about four or five of Admin Buildings, the rest; merely plans on paper and some tent lines.

The first raid, 3 Feb. completely demolished the Nurse's quarters and most of the hospital and the second, 5 Feb. targeting the town virtually destroyed the bulk stores of the two principal retailers Burns Philp & Steamship's Trading Coy. No one was injured in the raid.

Images courtesy of G. French

A further slander has become almost universally accepted as part of the unofficial history. The accusation of unbridled looting after the first air raids. The second air raid caused the first serious property damage with the bombing of B.P.'s. and Steamships trading stores and Ela Beach residential area.

Pickets were posted and all the property was respected but soon trucks from new New Guinea Force HQ. appeared accompanied by HQ Staff Officers who started removing furniture and household goods, canteens of cutlery, cut glass ware, porcelain ware etc. This is fact and I have yet to find an official document which gives it cognisance. It is apparently preferred that it should 'swept under the carpet' where it was hidden those years ago.

The reaction of the troops was immediate; *'We'll get our cut before those HQ b---- get it all'*. It started with food items, goods outside the normal military diet but quickly spread. Sanitary napkins; so obviously good medical dressings, went to Regimental Aid Posts and the Hospital and the security pickets changed role to become guides to where to find it! But as always happens when control is lost it quickly became out of hand and stopped only when there was nothing more left to loot.



*(Photo: Australian War Memorial, Canberra)
Carrier Line*

It was in May that the Battle of the Coral Sea took place. Whilst we cannot claim it a Victory we caused the convoy to reverse. A seaborne attack on Moresby had failed and we concluded that Moresby would henceforth become just an operational base with a resident garrison. Col. Ward made no secret that he would introduce some sort of pre-war social wining, dining, formal dress into our daily routine.

When the opportunity came to transfer to ANGAU I did so without hesitation and was part of it when the Kokoda campaign commenced with the attack on Buna. I quickly found myself employed on The line of Communication working with the natives who served as supply carriers & stretcher-bearers with out whom we could not have carried on the campaign. Our southern base depot was at the village of Uberi.

The picture [copied from a book] is of carriers assembling there for their trek, three Native Police & myself bare headed and wet coming from the river after my ablutions.

Image courtesy of G. French