

Down but not Out

Extracts

After instructing the Brits, I was told to join five other soldiers and board a destroyer in Tobruk harbour that was going to Alexandria in Egypt. We were each given rum rations while we were waiting to set off on the two to three miles walk to the harbour. I didn't drink alcohol at all until well after the war, but my companions starting drinking their ration immediately. They were all drunk before we took one step towards the harbour. They weren't so much drunk as 'paralytic', and as they swerved and swayed their way towards our destination, still drinking, and cursing the weight of the gear they were carrying, they started to discard their 'unnecessary' baggage, one item at a time. Tin hats, water bottles, rifles – nothing was sacred. I took up the rear, collected their discarded armoury and other paraphernalia and arrived at the ship looking like an overloaded packhorse.

Half an hour after leaving Tobruk, we were dive-bombed by the Germans and had to batten down. The ship zig-zagged, increasing the sideways motion. Predictably ...



I was blown off the truck. Mick moved the truck forward so he could pick me up and unload the gun. Paddy Ambrose and Peggy O'Neill attended to me while under fire and should each have won a medal for bravery.

My back was damaged and my arm had been blown right around and was facing behind me. Peggy decided to twist it around so it was facing the right direction. He asked Paddy how it looked. Paddy said,

'It's got a twist in it. You have taken it the wrong way.'

Peggy then had to twist it around twice to get it facing the right way. I was conscious but in shock, so didn't feel what Peggy was doing. I did feel a wet sensation over my body and told them,

'I've copped one in the guts as well' ...



I was in better condition than many. Cries of pain or anguish reverberated throughout the ship. Even in the rare moments free of these mournful cries, a low-level moaning formed a constant back-drop to our endless weeks at sea. The frequently rough seas only added to our distress and the workload of our carers on board. One wounded soldier would be physically ill from the combination of injury, pain, medication and the relentless motion of the ship, and soon those close to him would also be sick until, from aft to bow, from port to starboard, wounded soldier after wounded soldier would be vomiting. Agony upon agony ...



Following Pearl Harbour, Japan soon took Singapore, Indonesia and New Britain. On 21 January 1942, Japan attacked Kavieng with over 50 bombers and 50 fighter planes, and Buka two days later. Those members of Collie's company based at Kavieng destroyed the airfield and then tried to escape to Buka, but were captured and were held at Rabaul, the capital of New Britain, for a number of months. They were then sent on a Japanese ship, the Montevideo Maru, to Japan, but never reached their destination as the ship was torpedoed by an American submarine. Though the Americans weren't to know it at the time, one hundred and thirty three members of the 1st Independent Company, together with over 900 other prisoners of war and missionaries died.

My mother and father were informed by the government that Collie was missing, believed to be dead. We grieved as a family for our lost brother and son ...