

How memories came back to me of my great staunch mate Doug Bowman when I read the letter sent to me by Mr. Ashby, Secretary of the committee for the official opening of the 'Memorial Arch-Gates' on 14th April in memory of Doug Bowman who paid the supreme sacrifice.

Doug Bowman was a fine type of fellow, plenty of life and vigour when on recreation and a great mate under such trying conditions in Trobruk. On very light dry rations, not enough water to drink, no wash or shave for several weeks, to put up with such conditions with such great mates as Doug Bowman helps a lot. "The grin and Bear it attitude".

We lost some great mates during the siege of Tobruk during which Doug was wounded. He was again wounded in New Guinea before he paid the supreme sacrifice in a later battle.

We landed in New Guinea a short time before the battle of Milne Bay began, our Battalion were under strength, our section had only seven men, other sections more or less. I guess the reason we did not get reinforcements before landing in New Guinea was the emergency of the situation.

For a couple of nights before going into action we were on patrol along the beach to spot enemy landing, our area along the beach was raked by naval shell fire from a Jap warship from out at sea during the nights. We layed low until the shelling range was lifted, one of our mates was killed by a piece of shrapnel. I think some of the other patrols had casualties, each patrol only being of a few men, We would only know the happenings of our own small area, as for results of other areas we could only guess of or go on hearsay. The rank and file are only told necessary information.

At daybreak our patrol reported back to Head quarters where we received brief instructions to prepare equipment, check ammunition etc. and to be ready to move at a minutes notice. Instead of resting for a day after our night patrol we had to keep alert.

The 2nd Bn. moved out from Milne Bay in the afternoon, the rest of the Brigade had their fixed lines along the air strip at Milne Bay. Our Bn moved on about six or seven miles to a place we called K.B Mission off the beach. There was some hold up, probably while waiting for some scouts to come back with their reports.

It was nearly night time when B Coy were told where their positions were to be, and then each section took up its position some distance apart from each other. We did not know whether we were to stay there for the night or to be moving on later. Our section of seven men drew lots to see who would keep the first watch, the rest of us then settled down the best we could for a sleep the best we could with all our equipment and boots on. We were all dog tired after a couple of nights patrol without much sleep, we did not get any sleep this night either.

I do not know which section post gave the warning of the advancing Japs. The yells and screams from those monkey face cowardly curs sounded like all the devils in hell at each others throat. They came in from the jungle with their tank guns firing as they moved among our positions. We did not have an anti-tank gun to deal with them as we did in Tobruk and our artillery could not send shells from their fixed lines because the Jap tanks were too mixed up among us.

They had light tanks that seemed to be active in jungle and close fighting. We threw sticky bombs on top of their tanks with no good results- probably too wet, it was raining all that night. These sticky bombs proved very effective on tanks sometimes in Tobruk.

Those few hours fighting that night was very grim and tragic for B Coy.

They had our company cut off from the Battalion, even our section posts were not connected. During the fighting we occasionally heard the Japs' bugle call which we thought unusual when fighting. We were firing our rifles and bren guns at any movement in the high grass, occasionally coming to grips with a slinking form dodging around coconut palms. They seemed to be all around us in the semi darkness. We often exchanged machine gun fire at each others gun flashes.

Our section of seven men were fighting side by side firing in all directions. We fired our Bren Gun at a tank then quickly moved away a few feet before their tank sent a burst of machine gun fire at our position. The Bren Gun did no good against the tanks so we made better use of our Bren firing at those monkey face curs.

There was on incident where I got a creeping feeling running up my spine, we could hear a steady crawling movement in the high grass behind us. We reckoned there were two or more and we guessed their distance behind us as half a dozen paces. They were trying to get our exact position before they threw their hand grenades at us or spring at us with knives. Doug gave me a nudge to warn me but we could not turn and fire on them at that moment. We were kept busy firing in other close quarters when Doug and I got the opportunity. We both spun around quickly and sent a burst of fire into that rattling sound- we heard a yelp with a gurgling sound. It was a relief ~~getthi~~ getting them first shot.

This was a nerve wracking battle- so keyed up and tense. I think after affects are worse than when fighting. I know how it feels to be afraid, I even prayed to be given courage that I would never let any of my mates down when in a tight corner. Thank God my prayers must have been answered because I had respect and friendship from my mates right through the test. All through the fighting our section did not have any contact with our Company. We guessed they were getting a rough go.

Our first casualty was killed instantly, the second slumped forward on one knee- the kneeling firing position, the third said to us faintly "Got mine mate". Just a few minutes later Doug got a bullet in his arm and something grazed his forehead. Next day I could see a red furrow across his forehead. My young mate and I used a field dressing on Doug's arm. That great mate with his one arm useless kept me supplied with ammunition as I fired the Bren Gun.

(3)

Soon after Doug was wounded a terrible tragedy happened that shocked me more than this nerve wracking battle did. My young mate and I were exchanging shots with the Japs right up around us at the time. We were very much keyed up as we crouched there in the high grass, we heard a cautious rustle a few feet away, we opened fire on that rustling sound the same as we often did that night. The moment I had an uncanny feeling that something was wrong. I could have heard a groan or a faint call of the dying - if so the few words of our language would jolt through my mind instantly because most screams and yells were of a foreign voice. It was all confusion some feeling made me crawl over cautiously - I saw two of our own mates from another section dead. What a mistake. My young mate threw himself across their bodies sobbing, as for myself a lump rose in my throat nearly choking me. In those few moments of grief I stood looking down in a dazed manner, by doing so I exposed myself to enemy fire. A burst of machine gun fire sprayed about us - I crouched down quickly a few paces away. I could imagine how my young mate felt about this tragic incident as this was his first battle as he was one of the reinforcements to the Middle East when our Brigade was relieved from Tobruk.

Doug and I were the only two originals left in the section there would not be too many in the whole Company after this show.

When the fighting calmed down the three of us had to think a plan to get away. We did not know how the rest of the Company had fared but we guessed that some of our mates were thinking like us three now that the battle is over - thinking of the best way to get out. The Japs seemed to be assembling their troops and tanks and we thought they might send out a patrol to mop up our strays.

Doug had the better sense of direction of us three so we agreed on his route to get back to Milne Bay. We could not get back the way we had come as we were cut off by the Japs. The three of us started cautiously, Doug carried the barrel of our Bren as a handy weapon for his one good arm. We left the Bren Gun, having two rifles and a few rounds of ammunition. We had to get away before day break as we did not want to get rounded up by the mopping up patrol. Cautiously leaving in the shelter of coconut palms and high grass until coming to the edge of the jungle we stood a few minutes to get our bearings then continued in the jungle for a short distance until daybreak. We sat down for a rest intending to move on soon but I instead dozed off to sound sleep from exhaustion.

We might have slept for hours but luckily we were woken up with cramp in our legs and swarms of mosquitos on our faces and bare legs (We were wearing shorts). When we woke up from our sleep we could not get our minds clear for a while, we seemed to be a bit hazy as to where we were or what we were doing but however when the show came back to our minds and looking at each others dirty appearance we paid some complimentary remarks. Also some unkind remarks about this mosquito infected, stinking swamp country.

Well we had to make a move, Doug seemed to be in fairly good shape, he was one of those tough wiry mates worth a dozen of some men, a great mate in a tight corner. We had a rough four days trip back to Milne Bay - if we could have gone back the way we had come it would have been less than four hours. We climbed a steep mountain - the climbing used up a lot of our energy, our legs dragged like weights of lead. At times

(4)

At times following the bed of a river up to armpits in water scrambling over boulders not seeing them until ~~we~~ bumping against them our legs would be knocked from under us and send us sprawling into the water. Those boulders seemed very big and high, some reaching our thighs and others we could step over. Another hazard was parts where the water was considerably deeper than other parts. We followed the river because of less chance of meeting a Jap patrol, also our planes were staving any ground movement now that the Japs had control of this area. We kept away from open spaces as much as possible because our planes would not recognise us from the air.

After laying down for a sleep we would have a job to straighten out our limbs to get going again. Even though our clothes would dry on us at times they would soon be wringing wet with perspiration. Our webbing equipment gave us sores around our waists and shoulders. Our feet were not the best- our boots were not off our feet for some days.

On the third day of our trek we met up with two or three fellows of our company and next day we met a dozen more who were just about to move off with a native guide to Milne Bay.

On reaching our lines Doug went ~~with~~ along with other walking wounded to a dressing station. My young mate and I tried to eat some bully beef and hard biscuits but we vomitted it up- our stomachs could not take it after our four days fast.

I had not heard about Doug for a few days but later when I was in hospital for a few days I heard from the orderly that Doug had been sent to a Main land hospital. I got ~~an~~ a slight bayonet wound in my arm in another battle in another battalion's lines.

I met Doug again after he came back from hospital just about the time I was waiting at a regimental aid post to be sent to a main land hospital. My health had given out, my old carcass could not take these rough conditions. This was the last talk to that great mate. When I heard of his death I was in a Queensland hospital and memories came to my mind of our rough experiences we shared together.

The few originals left of our Company came up to shake my hands wishing me the best. Those sincere farewells from Officers as well as the rank and ~~file~~ file made me think how great it is to have the respect of a fellows own mates regardless of their rank. Most of them called me Old Mick. It was while I was in a Queensland hospital that I heard the sad news that some of those staunch mates who shook my hand wishing me luck were killed or wounded soon after I left New Guinea. My only thoughts were that if they could have only seen ahead it was themselves that needed all the luck that they had wished me.

(5)

When I received the invitation to attend the ceremony of the opening of the Memorial Arch Gates in memory of that great mate Doug Bowman it was with regret that I could not attend. I had my back injured in Tobruk, it did not hurt me much at the time, only occasionally after being discharged from the army. About three years ago it had properly laid me up for some time, I had to sleep with pillows under my back. When I did get out of bed I used a stick to walk about and was off from work for several months. I was drawing a T.T.I. War Pension and I now wear a back support. I had started work again on light duties.

At the time I received the invitation for the Memorial ceremony I was off work again for a few days so with much regret I could not accept the great honour bestowed on me by the relations and friends of Doug Bowman.

Written by Mick O'Brien.