**Remembrance Day 2019**

by Margaret Bennett.

Today, I would like to share with you the writings of a soldier. In 1939 aged 18, he emigrated from England to join the Big Brother Movement as a jackeroo. At the end of 1940 he enlisted in the Second AIF and by 1942 was a trooper in the Second Fourth Australian Armoured Regiment. He was soon part of a four man tank crew, with four tanks making up a troop. He must have soon started to understand the Australian sense of humour; the tank call signs were A Beer, A Rum, A Whisky and A Chaser.

Almost three years were spent preparing for war and on 25 May 1945 he was in the jungles of Bougainville, fighting the Japanese. A few weeks later he was in the thick of it and saw the point tank in front of his tank take a direct hit. As a result, he lost his best mate and fellow Jackeroo, John Arkley-Smith, who died of wounds two weeks later.

The following graphic and moving account was written shortly after this incident - one soldier’s vivid memories of his first grave experience in battle, and how it really was.

“Then at midday we moved on. Slowly and cautiously we moved on. I was thinking of the point tank. No one could have been further forward then they were. I wondered what it felt like. I thought of all the men behind, it took to keep that one tank moving. I thought about the people who grumbled about taxis when this tank was facing death, surprise, violent and immediate.

My wireless was out of order, uncertain and blurred. My batteries were low. It was hot and humid, my guns were loaded and the gunner engrossed with his eye to the telescope. The Crew Commander, Owen, intent on his slow moving cupola. The turret was moving, now fast, now cautiously. Faintly from the set I heard, “Hello Rum, yes out.” A two pounder followed, startling me, then another.

The engine built up revs and then dropped. We moved forward slowly. The engine idling over. I wondered if something did happen would I hear it. I tried to think of something else. What does it matter if I am killed anyway. Any of us? That's what we're here for, some one has got to do it, why not us? We've got to die sometime, why not now? Suddenly I realised that I did not want to die, I wanted to go home to fight the foe. My attempts at reassurance were empty, the will to live asserted itself. I was not afraid of being wounded, I would be alive and that was all I wanted. I tried to think of home, but it was no good.

Crump! - the dull sound of an explosion - what the hell? Not a two pounder? - another mine - Jesus - Crump! Another one, God, point tank, Owen's voice. “She's on fire, Christ, mines all around her, she's stopped. Someone's out. I think its Lennie, couldn't see, Johnnie's out, Jesus he's bad, he's bad. He's just got out. Ernie's not out yet, yes thank Christ he's coming, very slowly though, he's fallen onto the back, Christ, there's another one, Fraser's gone, he's gone, disappeared in the flames.

Fraser’s voice came on the air clearly, gasping. “I am in - Hello Three, I am in a ditch, in a ditch on the, on the side of the road - ask, ask the Company Commander to send a section out on left flank,” Clearly, crisply from Guy - “Three O.K. out.”

Owen climbed out, my hatch opened. Fraser stood there covered in blood, the stench of cordite came in nauseatingly. He poked a piece of paper at me, I nodded. “TAC R REPORTS ENEMY GUN POSITION 500 YDS North, POSITION 354 649 FIRE LANE CLEARED DIRECT TO BUIN ROAD. CAN WE USE ARTY?” “Contact TAC R” he said.

I nodded and tried. I failed. I gave the message to Guy over the ACK set, he tried and failed. Message was passed rearwards. Reports of casualties followed, “One killed, three wounded.” “How badly wounded?” “Walking wounded, but liable to suffer severe shock.” “Anyone else?” “Troop leader, wounded, but says not badly.” “Tell him not to be a bloody fool and come out.”

Somewhere a faint explosion, Owen scrambled in - “They're shelling”. A numbness took hold of me. A dread, a fear, we will have to go on, who's to be next? It's suicide on the road, infantry should be forward on the flanks, why aren't they on the flanks? They should be up, looking. We're support troops, this had to come, some tank, one tank had to go. Can they move the gun, can they get at us here? They may be working now, retraining it on us. We should move, do something now. Strike now out onto the road. A shell lobbed about 200 yards away. I thought how feeble it was when we were in this position.

The tank in front reserve, opened up on a tree in which movement had been seen, something fell. Hope to Christ it was one of the Bastards, one for Lennie. Hope Johnnie's alright, Jesus he looked bad. “Hello Three, the advance will continue.” “Three Wilco out.” God, if we're going to move, let's move and get it over with. No movement, no one in sight, everyone in shell holes, craters, ditches, some dug in.

I'm not going down into this hell hole, I hate it, I loathe it, it's a trap, a death trap, the lights inside flickering, the dirt and mud, empty shell cases, brass fittings, first aid kit, dim inside, cramped, torn skin, blast it! Let's go, or stop, no movement, “You had better close down - they're coming nearer.”

Down I go. Three tanks on the road, one behind the other, couldn't move forward, or back, or to the side. Stuck here, hopeless. Thank God they haven't got an Air Force. Wonder how Johnnie is, he's the worst of the three. “Hello Three, the advance will cease, Three over.” “Three Roger out.” Thank God for that.

Dark soon - had nothing to eat since six. No appetite, like a drink tho'. Try and roll the bed rolls out. Oil dripping, heat from the engine coming down. She's hot. A brew. There's a brew on, thank God, I need it. Into the sleeping rolls, boots off, half a mug of tea. A cigarette, two, three, it's dark. I'm tired.”

This soldier was my dad, Les Stansfield. who died 16 years later, aged 40, when I was 10. It was not until 2015 that I was able to find my father again through his diary and people he served with in World War Two.

Along with my spouse, we set out to right the injustices that had bereft his short life. His name, along with John Arkely-Smith, was placed on the Adelong Cenotaph in 2016; the place where they enlisted 75 years earlier. In 2017, his resting place in the King Island Cemetery became a War Grave. His words “A cigarette, two, three,” along with other information were accepted by Veteran Affairs as contributing to his heart failure.

As his eldest daughter I am very proud of my father and mother Dorothy, who stood by him in the challenging times of being soldier settlers on King Island.

Lest we forget.

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