

GOING BACK



RICHARD'S WARTIME SCRAPBOOK.

couple of nights there we were flown out from the Dobodura airstrip to an Australian hospital at Port Moresby.

The Americans were with us at Buna. They had a light canvas structure that had been built as an operating theatre. I remember it had a lot of small shelving, where your things, hospital gear and the stretchers were put.

I'll always remember when I was lying on the stretcher before I was put on to the make-shift table. They had chaps with very powerful torches in the operating theatre. They held them aloft to make sure that they could see what they were operating on.

Before I was admitted to the 23rd Portable American Hospital, I was on a stretcher outside the unit, and voice came along, "Would you like a cup of tea?" It was the Salvation Army. I always remember the Sally's, "Would you like a cup of tea."

I was wounded on the 1st of January 1943 and I came out on the hospital ship *Wan-ganella* to the 2nd 9th AGH, the main Australian hospital at Port Moresby.

By January 26 I was back home where I was admitted to hospital at Concord. That was when my parents visited me, and that was the first time, from the time they got the telegram on the 1st of January, that they knew what the wounds were. So they had to wait all that time before they found out whether I'd lost a leg, or an eye, or something. Even though my wounds were not too wonderful, visibly, you couldn't see anything wrong with me.

charge was a man called Felix Schwartz, from Alabama, and he operated on my stomach and all down my right side. After a few days in the 23rd Portable Hospital, I was carried by 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' (the name Australians gave to Indigenous New Guinea people who carried supplies and helped with the wounded) to the 5th Casualty Clearing Station, an assembly point for the wounded. After I spent a

Reunited

When I was discharged after three days from the American hospital in Buna, I'd said to Felix Schwartz the doctor, "If you ever have a leave in Sydney, come visit me, we must have a beer together." I just said that flippantly. Then I went on to the hospital in Port Moresby.

Also at the 23rd Portable in Buna, there was an American chap called Bill Spencer, who had the same blood grouping as I did, B3. He gave me some of his blood.

Back home, some months later, I was convalescing at a large home in Wahroonga owned by Sir Sydney Snow, who had a big store in Sydney called Snow's. My dad rang up one day and said, "Guess who's in Sydney and wants to see you. He's on leave from New Guinea".

My dad made a booking for three at the Union Club in Sydney, and as I was walking along to the table, Felix Schwartz jumped up and said, "Richard, can you lie down? I can't recognise you standing up. I've come for that beer".

On another occasion I was with my mother convalescing at home and we were having afternoon tea. A Yank walked up the drive. And mum said, "Yes, can I help you?" He said, "I'm looking for Dick Harrowell, does he live here?" "He's right beside me," my mother replied. It was Bill Spence, the man who gave me blood grouping B3. That was a wonderful surprise.

So the doctor who operated on me and the chap that gave me his blood, both looked me up in Sydney. I couldn't get over those two chaps. When you're on leave, you want to make the most of your time, before going back to your unit, and yet they had time to do that. I thought it was wonderful.

Revisiting the past

In June 2009 I returned to New Guinea with my sons Tim and Phillip and his son, Richard. I wanted to see the wreck of the ship *Macdhu*, bombed and sunk by the Japanese [see BWD #5 p4], visit the Bomana War Cemetery and return to Buna to see the changes in the last 66 years.

[Tim Harrowell] I remember as we came into land in Port Moresby, we were filling out our arrival cards, and it said, "When was the last time you visited Papua New Guinea?" And dad wrote, 'WW2'. Then, when we were getting our bags, some people came and presented dad with a pig's tooth necklace, which we giggled about ini-

GETTING ON



DICK IS FAREWELLED BY THE LOCALS.

tially, but then we found out it is a very high honour. Dad wore that tooth, and his medals on special occasions.

[Richard] The Bomana War Cemetery contains 3,819 Commonwealth burials from WW2, 702 of them unidentified. It was opened in August 1944 by Governor-General, Field Marshall Sir William Slim who concluded the ceremony with the words, "When you go home, tell them of us, and say, 'For your tomorrow we gave our today'".

For me it was a very moving experience to be once again with my mates. I found my mate John 'Dusty' Harris, one of my closest friends in the battalion, killed by a sniper right at the start of our attack on New Years Day 1943.

The Japanese snipers were very accurate and picked out the troops carrying automatic weapons like Dusty with his Bren gun.

[Tim] When we reached the village of Siremi there were about 400 people waiting to see dad. The village people get excited when veterans of the Buna campaign come to visit and make quite a fuss. They'd built a little hut, where they'd cooked a stack of food, and they put on this huge welcome for dad.

Dad turned to me and he said, "How did you organise all this?" I said, "I didn't know any of this was going to happen." There was one guy who was particularly

moved when he was looking at dad, and screaming and crying, and we all thought, 'gosh'. And it turned out he was the son of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel in the famous war-time photo.

We realised, none of them thought they'd ever see a World War Two veteran, an Australia soldier, again. So they put on this huge event. The whole village came and wanted to shake dad's hand; which took about an hour.

We had a big lunch then went on to Buna township. A flood had washed away a bridge, so we had to walk along the beach for a couple of kilometres. When we got to the village of Buna they put on another huge, big celebration. They wanted us all to dance and I had to say, "Hang on, he's 90." So I stayed with dad, while Philip and his son Richard did the ceremony. We stayed the night in that very primitive village, no electricity, but that's where the battle was and you could just see bullet holes in some of the palm trees.

Heading for 100

[Richard] I knew I've still got shrapnel in my knees. Recently I had a fall, and dislodged it a bit. They didn't want to operate on it, because it's embedded in the gristle under the fibula, the knee cap. But then the other day, after I'd fallen here in Mongarlowe, I had another x-ray on my arm. The radiologist said, "You've got a bit of shrapnel in there." It's been there nearly eighty years and never caused a problem. I've played cricket, I've played tennis, it's never worried me. But I got the shock of my life when the chap at Queanbeyan Hospital said, "Oh, you've got shrapnel in your elbow there."

I've been very lucky. My life might have ended that New Years Day in 1943 but thanks to the American medics and later, two wonderful Australian surgeons, I hope to celebrate my 100th on 11 August this year [2020].

Years ago my wife and I were shopping in Forbes one day, in a fruit shop, and I saw this chap there serving the lady in front of us, and I said to my wife, "I'm sure that's Reggie Edwards". He finished serving the lady, came over and said, "Yes?" He looked at me, and I looked at him. He said, "You were in the bed opposite, weren't you, in the 113th Hospital at Concord?" I said, "Yeah." And even though the big hole he'd had in his cheek was filled up, the skin, instead of being pinkish, it was yellowish colour, but it was healed up. He asked, "How are all your scars?"

It was probably 35 years since I'd last seen him I would say. The scars of war never leave you but they do heal.



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