

SOME KALEIDOSCOPE VIEWS OF 101 TANK ATTACK REGIMENT

by **J.M. Barnett**

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Originally called "101 Anti Tank Regiment", the title was changed after the early adverse tides of defeat in the war. Although the unit was eventually a four battery regiment with each battery consisting of four troops equipped with four anti tank guns, or 64 guns on paper, the name Tank Attack was adopted to show our population an aggressive stance to survive at least the morale war. German tanks — or more correctly their tactics — were achieving great military successes. Thus the regimental title reflected the atmosphere of total war.

The Regiment was raised at Kelvin Grove Barracks in the 9RQR area, where the Ninth Battalion Association has its museum. Its first and only commanding officer was Major (later temporary Lieutenant Colonel) Cyril Cahill. Originally two batteries were raised, 1 Battery and 2 Battery. Equipment was the two pounder anti-tank gun as its primary fighting weapon on a semi-mobile portee mount carried by either a Ford or Chevrolet truck. The Regiment, however, did not see a two-pounder gun until August 1941 when it was taken from Grovely Camp to the R.N.A. Show in Brisbane to view one at the Army display in the John Reid Industrial Hall. The guns themselves were not issued until November 1941. Training was achieved using mock facsimiles and firing practice with the old 18 pound mkII field gun.

Among 101's members were late Historical Society President Lt. Col. Dr Drury Clarke, then a sergeant. In 1941 a young barrister Charles Sheehan joined 101 and was posted to B Troop of 2 Battery as a Sergeant; Hon. Charles Sheehan was subsequently elevated to the Queensland Supreme Court, although now retired. The artists Mr Hugh Sawrey and Mr John Rigby were members of 101, their artistic skills used in the production of hand-drawn maps, a most important task in an artillery regiment at a time when centralised cartography was pressed to the limit, and home units had a low priority. Their skills were also used (or misused perhaps) in the painting of unit signs.

There was also one full-blooded Aboriginal member who was accepted in the unit like any other ordinary soldier. He was paid the full rate of pay, abnormal for the period. It was possible because, unlike the Torres Strait Islanders who were formed into indigenous units, 101 was an ordinary unit on the Order of Battle. One sergeant in 101 was a Malayan but the greatest display of ‘multiculturalism’ came with the reorganisation of December 1941. This was designed to bring the Regiment up to full strength. It involved raising two new batteries, numbers 3 and 4. This was achieved by dividing 2 Battery into three cadres of varying strengths. Two cadres were retained in south-east Queensland to form the nucleus of the new 3 and 4 Batteries while the third was transferred to Townsville with the Battery Headquarter Staff and 101’s first two pounds. Here the now detached battery was reraised, gaining its strength from men who had worked as cane cutters, miners and stockmen.

A large proportion of these soldiers were from the North Queensland Italian and Maltese communities. (There was some friendly rivalry between them during the siege of Malta with reports of Italian bombers raiding the island.) These were good loyal soldiers, mostly Australian born.

After the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Commonwealth Government reacted to the invasion scare by interning persons of enemy racial origin. Despite the fact that most of 2 Battery’s Italians were either Australian born or naturalised, they were discharged and interned. Later some were permitted to perform “Land Army” type of work. One interviewee recalls how they were stunned with disbelief when informed of the decision to intern them. In the harshness of the total War environment, this was the safest decision to make, to concentrate a potential fifth column even though personal injustices resulted. There had been some worrying incidents among the farming community — cane fires at night, and reports of swastika crosses cut into growing cane crops. Whatever the justification, it was one of the saddest events in 101’s life.

One reason for posting 2 Battery to Townsville was to provide anti-tank defences and training to the north. The Battery made its first contact with United States Forces in April 1942. U.S. Engineers were constructing a large airport at Woodstock and rumours were rife in Townsville that Japanese paratroopers had been dropped. The U.S. engineers had the new pattern U.S. helmet, not unlike those worn by the Japanese. A truck from 101 containing an officer and NCO’s saw them and, having no briefing of their presence, prepared to broadside the truck and open fire with machine guns. The Americans made similar preparations but fortunately caution by all parties prevented a dreadful accident.

After Japan entered the war, the officers of 101 were told that in the event of invasion, Townsville would be modelled on Tobruk Fortress to allow a springboard to retake the north. A battalion commander was extracted from Tobruk under siege and sent to Townsville as a temporary brigadier to plan the defences. This officer, Brigadier Crawford, planned extensive anti-tank defences including a tank trap. During the Coral Sea Battle, the rest of 101 was sent north in the feverish build up of 5 Division. Reconnoitres for anti-tank positions within the proposed Townsville defence perimeter was not unnoticed as the Japanese had at least one spy in town. Tokyo Rose sent a message to 101 suggesting they place a gun in the Townsville band rotunda. The spy was later capture by Boy Scouts. A 101 officer, who was a group scout master, was sent to investigate and found sufficient evidence to justify the arrest and reported that the boys had tied the agent with so many ropes that he looked like an Egyptian mummy.

Up until the Coral Sea Battle, "D" Troop was almost a phantom troop, and were only issued their two-pounders at the stage. Before then, even side arms were at a premium, consisting only of one Thompson sub-machine gun with a thousand rounds, one .303 rifle with three bayonets, one Lewis light machine gun with one ammunition pan, and one .455 Webley and Scott Pistol. Twelve rounds of soft nose ammunition, illegal under the Geneva Convention, were supplied with the Webley and it was suggested that should capture appear possible, unused rounds should be discarded. It is rumoured that Townsville City Council lost many tools at that time. Rations for 2 Battery in North Queensland were adequate up until the Coral Sea Battle, but during the build up, rations were cut to two meals per day. One troop commander purchased a herd of twenty goats while stock that strayed into the unit lines disappeared.

The Coral Sea Battle brought the realities of war to members of 101. Reconnaissance patrols along with other units reported Japanese bodies washed up on shore. One officer watching with Drury Clarke from a vantage point on Mount Spec, saw United States Army Air Force Airacobras attacking a single Japanese aircraft off Townsville. Part of the Japanese plan had been to raid Townsville heavily, along with Cairns and Mackay, with carrier-borne aircraft. The war was closer than my generation had been taught, and I consider that such lack of knowledge has been detrimental to the public attitude to the Defence needs of this country.

In mid 1943, 101 was on alert to go to Burma but due to the submarine crisis, the troop ships were not embarked. In the South West Pacific, Tank Attack was not to be a role of priority, so, soon after being re-equipped with the six-pounder gun for the Burma campaign, the unit was disbanded and the men sent to other artillery duties such as anti-aircraft and field artillery. 101 was an interesting unit, and one battery did see action at Milne Bay where a Military cross was won. Its morale was high and judging by well attended regimental reunions, it was a happy unit.