

Chapter 17

Christmas 1942

*And then Xmas! Xmas as provided by the generous people of the North West ... It is fitting that this History should record something of the gratitude we felt towards these kind folk who that day opened their homes and their hearts that we might experience something of the spirit of Xmas – **Tank Tracks: The War History of the 2/4 Australian Armoured Regimental Group***

Christmas 1942 was a hot one – which is no surprise, Christmases in Australia generally are. In fact it was to be expected. No matter what the age, background or surroundings, Aussies in 1942 still carried this sense of expectation. Troops were not excluded from this just because they happened to be in uniform.

Nor were the Australian based troops excluded with the other expectations associated with Christmas – that of keeping cool in the heat, a good feed, a few beers and above all things family and friends.

The Army knew this. It also knew how much a positive Christmas experience could influence morale. The question was what could be done to make such a Christmas happen to members or ex-members of the 1 AAD which were, at this time, spread out from New Guinea to Western Australia?

Troops in the North West of NSW were some of the easiest to ‘find a way’ for.



Happy Christmas 1942. Bill and Maud Mitchell with daughter Patricia of ‘Erinmoor’, near Merah North. Courtesy: Moya Morris

Christmas North West NSW Style

The Lieutenants went around and asked if somebody could take soldiers in for a Christmas meal – Mollie Browning (Staines)

At Wee Waa

It didn't matter where troops were located in the North West for, as much as possible, they were included in Christmas celebrations.

In Wee Waa Bern Gill (and his entire 4 Troop) from the 2/9 Armd Regt went into Wee Waa to have lunch (a full roast with all the trimmings) with a family by the name of Boyle. We had a Christmas dinner just like we would have had at home – to have fifteen or so men turn up at your place – it was a big gamble not knowing any of them. I think that they did a marvellous job in coping with it.

He was part of the lucky half of the regiment – although the remaining half didn't fare that badly either, enjoying a time of camaraderie around campfires on Christmas Eve and then a rest day on Christmas.

Ken Pike of the 2/8 Armd Regt has always remembered the North West's hospitality.

They treated us well. Everyone went away to a Christmas dinner. I think that there were three thousand Army soldiers involved and 'every man and Jack' was invited out to lunch.

How it worked was that the one going the furthest would drive the truck. Unfortunately it rained in that period and some of them didn't get back for about three days. I know that some of them went miles. I know that they catered for three thousand people. It was magnificent.

As Ken and Bern have pointed out, Christmas 1942 was spent in or near Wee Waa for most of the 2 Armd Bde with many of its soldiers billeted with residents so as to have the atmosphere of family as well as, obviously, a good home cooked meal.

With rumours abounding as to the soldiers leaving the district the Bell Family *had issued invitations to some people that we liked. However, some were sent away and some stayed ... the ones who stayed coming to Christmas dinner; the soldiers having already enjoyed a pre-dinner dip in the dear old Namoi on [our] uncle's property, 'Molleen'* (Margaret and Harry Bell).



Enjoying a Pre-dinner Dip. At the Namoi River on 'Molleen'. L to R are: Frank Chapman, George Arne, ? Smith, 'Tony' Williams, Lindsay Quilliam and Trooper ???ovitch. Courtesy: Harry Bell

Margaret Holcombe (Gray) also was part of the 1 AAD and Wee Waa's festivities that Christmas: *They were arranging for people to take soldiers for Christmas. We were told it was only tea but we had our lunch quite early to be ready. A lady rang from Wee Waa and said "They haven't had lunch" so Mum hurriedly got them some lunch. I don't recall what happened during the afternoon – but they also had tea. Then we went out and sat on the lawn again in the cool – we didn't have a fan. Being wet we had a good fruit crop and the flying foxes started to fly over. One of the men said "What are they". I said "They are flying foxes". One of the others remarked – I thought that they were Flying Fortresses! (You certainly could tell by the humour there was a war on – when else would bombers be mentioned in connection with flying foxes?)*



*The Haymakers. A photo given to the Gray Family of Wee Waa by troopers who assisted with haymaking! They likely enjoyed a nice Christmas lunch with the family also.
Courtesy: Margaret Holcombe*

At Burren Junction

Drumard was the name of the Slacksmith family's farm at Burren Junction. Leah Carolan grew up on the bank of the creek which flowed through the property. *We booked someone to come for Christmas and it rained and they pretended that they couldn't get away (everything is black soil out here). So they notified the officer that they couldn't get out – they were rained in! We had some more coming the next day for Boxing Day – so that meant that we had to kill another turkey. As Valda Breneger (who grew up in the same area) notes wryly they decided on this strategy even though they had four wheel drives!*

In Narrabri

In Narrabri, the community connectedness was also in overdrive. Mollie Browning as a girl of fifteen, together with her family at Christmas 1942, exemplified the spirit of caring present to soldiers so very far away from home. *When Christmas Day came the Lieutenants went around and asked if somebody could take soldiers in for a Christmas meal in Newtown [outskirts of Narrabri]. At least two or three people ... men ... boys were to come to tea. But then the soldiers came back to Mum and said that there was*

someone from Newtown that pulled out could she take a couple more? We ended up with either four or five. Gert Staines was happy to oblige saying, with a touch of sadness, "I only hope that someone is giving my son a Christmas meal" (Leo was at Tobruk and had been taken as a POW.) They were really nice men – they were Victorians, two of them at least were. One was a Lieutenant.



Joan and Mollie Staines with 'their' Christmas soldiers. Courtesy: Mollie Browning.

It was one of those Christmases to remember for Noelene Wales, also of Narrabri. *I would have been about seven. I can remember all these nice looking young boys turning up at our house – we fed them ... for the whole day. Christmas ... went into the night.*

Toohey Foster remembers some young fellows turning up for a Christmas sing song. One of those fellows – Lew Dowsett from the Army Service Corps, seventy years later, recalled Toohey's sister Jean playing the piano beautifully that Christmas Day. It obviously meant something special to these young fellows as Lew, when being interviewed, asked after Toohey and recalled that *she lived by the Namoi River near the bridge. They were lovely people. I always remember the three girls – they were lovely girls.*

At Bellata

Sadly, no matter how many local families volunteered to share Christmas with troopers there were just too many soldiers for the population to cope with. The ones that didn't score a meal with residents had to make their own arrangements for a special meal. Tom Howard of Bellata gleefully shared the following Christmas anecdote.

A Christmas Tail ... and Shoulder ... and Rib

Jimmy Meppem was the butcher in Bellata and no doubt was run off his feet in the lead up to Christmas 1942. He had promised some soldiers some pigs for their Yuletide feast but was unable to slaughter the animals for them. He asked young Tom Howard and his mate Mickey Ryan, who just happened to be around, to show the soldiers to the holding yard so that they could collect the animals. Tom continues: *We knew which yard they were in. The soldiers were there and were going to shoot them. They were the worst shots in the world and they were using .303s [which wouldn't have left much of the animal]. I remember that when they got them they didn't realise that you had to cut a pig's throat first and bleed him. Otherwise you spoil the pig. They didn't know that until we told them. And that fixed up that.*

We were laughing a bit. We also thought that they weren't doing the pigs much good.

They didn't have a clue about cleaning the pigs and they were unaware that you had to boil them to get the skin off. Mickey and I got them organised on that and then we had to show them how to shave the hair off. They were plucking it out and they would have taken forever.

Yes they were city boys all right – they didn't know anything.

In Gunnedah

Gunnedah also served up lunch to 1 AAD soldiers. Joy McClelland (Debney) explains: *For Christmas '42 there was an appeal. Would people like to invite a soldier to Christmas dinner – midday dinner? So Mum and Dad said "we will have two soldiers for Christmas dinner" and so we had all the usual things prepared. Mum cooked a ham and a couple of chooks – she always did it Christmas Eve (it was always too hot Christmas Day). So we had the cold chicken and ham and salad and of course the Christmas pudding which was always made well beforehand.*

Mum made 'Brandy Butter' as well – so there was the pudding and the brandy butter and cream of course. But Mum also made something that she didn't usually make at Christmas – a trifle with sherry in it. That was a bit special for the soldiers I suppose. Anyway we waited and waited and nobody came so eventually we sat down to a late Christmas dinner and were really disappointed that they never turned up. Of course we never knew until ... recently that on Christmas Eve they were pulled out of Gunnedah on a train going to Western Australia.

Neil Graham of the 227 Australian Light Anti Aircraft Battery (227 LAA Bty) confirms this as a reason for a 'no show'.

We didn't know that we were going until the morning of Christmas Eve of course and spent the day packing up and burning our bush beds and eventually arrived at Gunnedah station at sunset.

Missed out by a day ... awfully bad luck Neil!

Dick Frend remembers a less ... sober occasion on Christmas 1942.

We were going over to Premer to visit our relations there on Christmas Day. But on our way we happened to pick up a couple of blokes out along the road. They were Armoured Division guys and they said they wanted to "Go to the Tambar Springs pub to have Christmas Day". 'Okay' we said "We go past there". Which we did, and dropped them off there. The arrangement was that we would pick them up upon our return after having seen the family ...

The time eventually came that we would call in and pick these fellows up at the Tambar Springs pub. The problem came with finding a way over all the bodies!!

They were spread all around the floor.

And I'm sorry to say that those fellows could be still there now, as we had to leave! No one was even in a fit state to stagger out. How they got back I have no idea. But they would have had incredibly sore heads.

When local hospitality didn't stretch as far as an invite from a local family, each unit had its own Christmas dinner with funds being raised to do so through regimental profits from military canteens.

The 16 Fd Regt chose, for example, to hire the Town Hall in Gunnedah in order to provide a sit down meal rather than a meal eaten whilst sitting on your friendly neighbourhood tree stump. Also, as Army tradition dictated, the officers served the ordinary ranks – something that no doubt they would have enjoyed!

And whilst the 16 Fd Regt would have preferred to have been billeted out for Christmas like so many men from the other regiments – what they had to deal with for Christmas pales into insignificance when the 2/6 Armd Regt's Christmas 1942 is considered.

Christmas in New Guinea

If it was hot in Australia it was bloody hot in New Guinea – and not just weather hot. B Sqn from the 2/6 Armd Regt was, on Christmas Eve 1942, engaged in a ferocious attempt to seize an area known as 'Old Strip' away from Japanese control near Buna. In a matter of minutes half the tanks taking part were out of action.

*A round stuck the front of the turret to the left of the gun killing Corporal Jones, the turret gunner instantly. Barnett was standing directly behind Jones and was severely wounded in the left arm, the blast pushing him partly out of the open hatch ... Sergeant Jack Lattimore's tank was next in line. A Japanese 75mm round struck his tank ... it bit the hull gunner's visor, penetrating it and killing instantly Trooper Floyd Forster ... the turret gunner, Corporal Reg Leggatt was severely wounded and Jack Lattimore's leg was blown off (Handel: **The Vital Factor**; p 165-166).*

On a barge bringing in replacement tanks the following day from Milne Bay was Major Ken Tye. As the troops ate their dinner (which was normal rations) they were also pleased to receive Christmas parcels from the Australian Comforts Fund – at this time unaware that they had lost several comrades.

The 24th of December traditionally begins the celebration the birth of Christ – but in 1942, to the men of the 2/6 Armd Regt, it became synonymous with death. Excluding Sanananda, this Christmas Eve action at Buna had the dubious 'honour' of causing the most fatalities of the Regiment.

Not a Christmas that they would particularly want to remember, but sadly one that they cannot forget, and also a sober reminder that war doesn't stop for anything – including Christmas, which for Christians, is the holiest day of the year.