



"I've just met some of the Armoured Division!!!"

Chapter 2

In The Beginning

Do You Have the Qualities of a Fighter Pilot?

Seeing the need for a more forceful response to the threat of Rommel in the sands of North Africa the Australian Government enacted legislation to raise the 1st Australian Armoured Division (1st AAD). Headquarters of the Division opened on 1 July 1941 in St Kilda Road Melbourne, under the command of Major-General Northcott with regiments raised soon afterwards. Recruiting posters ran the slogan *Do you have the Qualities of a Fighter Pilot* and soon there were schools in most capital cities that trained men (with aptitude) to be anything from mechanics or cooks, to wireless operators. Other posters talked of 'Brains as Well as Biceps' leading many young men to join the 1st AAD.

These men became the backbone of the regiments which were drawn together in 1941-1942.

Norman McMaster of Headquarters Squadron (HQ Sqn) of the 1st Armoured Brigade (1st Armd Bde,) 1st AAD recalls:

*Formation of the 1st Australian Armoured Division started with recruitment posters posing the question **Do you have the qualities of a fighter pilot?** Then join the Armoured Division. While this may have been a slight overstatement, it was a particularly apt question. Many young men wanted to join the Air Force and become fighter pilots, but could not make the grade, often because of age, so the inference was that this was the next best thing.*

One local who enlisted directly into the 1st AAD HQ Sqn (later 2/1st Reconnaissance Squadron) of the 1st AAD was James Challinor from Tamworth.



Recruitment poster for the 1st AAD. Courtesy: Des Dobson Collection, Army Tank Museum



Jim Challinor 1st AAD HQ Sqn and new wife Irene. Photo: Courtesy Irene Challinor

The first his fiancé Irene heard of him joining up was when they went swimming together at the local baths! (That she loved him was evident. Despite Jim neglecting to discuss with her this important piece of information Irene Campbell and James Challinor were married on the 12th December 1942 at St Nicholas' Catholic Church in Tamworth – before Jim was shipped out to Western Australia).

Brian 'Lucky' Leader, (later a mechanic from the 2/8th Armoured Regiment (2/8th Armd Regt) of the 2nd Armoured Brigade) was there almost from the beginning: *I had just joined the Army and they called for volunteers who were mechanically minded to go to technical school. So I went, put my hand up, as I had always liked mucking around with motor cars, even as a kid. They sent me to Swinburne Technical College in Melbourne and there were twenty of us in this school. ... After six months we came out fully qualified mechanics. I am glad they took us to train. And then they sent us to Puckapunyal. We got there just before December '41 when the 2/8th was formed.*

Reg Skinner of the 2/9th Armoured Regiment (2/9th Armd Regt) was also there from the beginning. *I joined up straight into the Armoured Corps. I did my [initial] training at Puckapunyal and then they formed the Division after that.*

Jim 'Thomo' Thomas was another who was there at the start, loving every minute of training – *we were the proudest buggers on Earth as we were the most trained.*

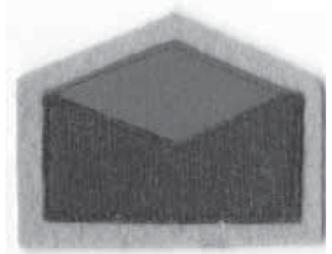
To go with the rather natty khaki beret (The beret was used by armoured troops instead of the slouch hat – this was a matter of necessity as tanks did not have the room for larger head attire.) Thomo was also required to wear the rising sun hat and collar badge. On the arms of both sleeves of the uniform a colour



The Class of 41. Thomo in third row from the bottom at extreme right. Photo: Courtesy of 'Thomo' Thomas.

patch was worn, the shape and colour of which indicated the formation or unit with which the soldier or officer was serving. (These patches often became a form of the unit badge, representing much of the unit's identity and morale).

Early recruits to the 1st Armoured Training Regiment (1st Armd Trg Regt), such as Thomo, had a three colour patch, from bottom to top, brown, red and green. Irene Challinor recalls that this signified: *Through Mud and Blood to the Green Fields Beyond*. The Armoured Regiments had two colours slashed by a diagonal from bottom left to top right. In the case of the 2/5th Armoured Regiment (2/5th Armd Regt) for example, it was pale blue over red and the 2/7th Armoured Regiment (2/7th Armd Regt) black over red. Brigade HQ was plain red no diagonal.



2/16th Field Regiment Patch. Red at top, dark blue on the base.
Courtesy: Fred Lovelock

All troops had a regular army uniform, but these weren't worn much; except perhaps at more formal occasions, some parades and leave. Most often worn were what the troops commonly (but not affectionately) called 'giggle suits' which comprised cotton khaki trousers and shirt. Dick Parkes of HQ Signals recalling that the trousers *were the most horrible looking things. The wind used to blow up them badly. You could put your full boot through the leg hole.*

They came directly from England – which just about says it all really ...

Great ... You Can Peel the Spuds Then

Norm McMaster, previously a clerk in the Railway's Office, learned soon after enlistment that you never volunteer for anything.

*Dick [Richard] Turner and I enlisted together and he and I ended up at Sydney Showground ... we were a motley bunch of civilians ... the Sergeant Major came out and he said "Youse fellas get fell in 'ere at h'ease" (No idea reader? You weren't the only ones! Norm and Dick were no doubt shaking their heads and cleaning out their ears.) What he was really saying was "Fall in over here, standing at ease." We all [eventually] moved into some formation ... then he says "Does anyone here write shorthand?" I thought **never volunteer** ... but then I thought: shorthand you can't get into trouble for shorthand. So I put my hand up and he said "Come here they are shorthanded in the kitchen get in there and peel some spuds." I made my mind up there and then to be an NCO in a hurry; just to avoid peeling spuds!*



1st Bde HQ Sqn, October 1941, Greta NSW: Unknown, Richard (Dick) Turner, Ronald Vippond, Arthur Ryan, Harry Williams, Norman Frankford from HQ Sqn. Photo: Courtesy Norm McMaster

A Near Miss for Many

At the time [of recruitment into the 1st AAD] recruitment was taking place for the 8th Division. In fact, at the Sydney Showground there were two desks, about 15 feet apart. On the left 8th Division and on the right 1st Armd Trg Regt (McMaster; Armour).

Families in the Gunnedah region felt the loss of thirty one treasured sons in the 8th Division AIF (8th Div AIF). The loss was so great, that separate to all other memorials for the fallen, in the town, a memorial grove of trees was grown down the median strip of a dedicated street – ‘The 8th Division Memorial Avenue’. If many of these fallen soldiers had joined the 1st Australian Armoured Division the town’s casualties would have lessened.

Of course this is a retrospective observation! No one could have predicted the loss/capture of an entire division. However, it wasn’t only Norman McMaster who noted this parallel between the fortunes of the 1st AAD and the 8th Div AIF. Peter Fitzhardinge-Seton of the 2/11th Armoured Car Regiment (2/11th Armd Car Regt) also considered himself fortunate:

I joined from the 30th Battalion NSW Scottish Regiment – the voluntary militia – when I was 18 years old. Then the AIF age came down to 19 and my mother signed the papers and off I went. Fortunately I was grabbed by the newly forming Armoured Division because [at] the next table they were recruiting for the 8th Division which would have meant Malaya.

Soon the armoured regiments and support groups that would, one day, take part in the largest single military exercise in the southern hemisphere were formed

First Look at the North West

Needing a place to train, the 1st Armd Bde (which had been gazetted at the same time as the Division) turned its eyes to the Tamworth Region. Soon the 2/5th, 2/6th, Armd Regts arrived along with support troops such as the 16th Field Regiment Royal Australian Artillery, and the 2/93rd Light Aid Detachment (2/93 LAD). Arriving in the middle of December, troops from the Brigade were spread out from Goonoo Goonoo to Bendemeer, Manilla and Attunga, with some troops arriving in Gunnedah and befriending locals.

Kath (Davies) Barton takes up the story: *I was 21 in 1942 and I promised the boys, there were quite a few of them, [that they would be] invited to my party ... When they left so soon, ... right at the last minute I said to them “I’ll make the cake much bigger than usual so that you all get a piece.” My boyfriend at the time, the boyfriend that I married, ... he smoked ... tobacco ... that was in the one pound tin. So I told him to save all the tins and every one of these boys that was to come to my party got a green ‘Flying Cloud’ tobacco tin and each one of them got a piece of cake. I cooked it in these flying cloud tins. I gave them a thorough cleaning and everyone got one of them.*

Nice Kath ... really nice!

Lew Wicking of the 2/16th Field Regiment (2/16th Fd Regt) wasn’t one of those lucky enough to receive some birthday cake. Rather, Lew was given the opportunity (somewhere in the region) to witness a rather attractive birthday ... suit!

In what appears to be a well known tale, with other residents and veterans interviewed also reporting the same scene, *To Fight and Do Our Best* will leave it to wordsmith Lew, with his impeccable choice of phrasing, to describe the evening’s entertainment ... ah ... events.

And He Sees a Vision Splendid

Both the soldiers and local girls had become frustrated when the troops could not get any official leave to sample the town’s hospitality. And so it came to pass, as the old saying goes, that if the mountain won’t come to Mohammed then Mohammed must, of necessity, go the mountain.



*Kath Davies with two recent acquaintances.
Photo: Courtesy Kath Barton*

Because there had been complaints concerning the local girls penetrating the tent lines after lights out at 2200 hours, it was discreetly arranged that the police would make a raid on the camp to apprehend the culprits. Around midnight on a certain moonless night, scuffles, curses and screams punctuated the stillness. Flashes from several torches pierced the pitch blackness.

This resulted in a number of startled young ladies, bursting in a most undignified manner from the tent lines. One petrified girl stood rigid, her frightened and shivering body transfixed by the beam of a torch. In an effort to regain some semblance of modesty, she clutched her clothes to her naked bosom, like a nervous virgin ... albeit a little too belatedly. Suddenly, much to the girl's relief, the torch was extinguished. But not before she had recognised that the policeman who held it, was none other than her own father (Wicking; 2000).

The Real Deal

All of these much enjoyed and much remembered activities were only the side show to the real business at hand; training for war. Whilst in the region, regiments took part in many activities designed to teach them how to operate effectively as a fighting unit.



2/11th Armoured Car Regiment troops near Tamworth: Frank Lodge, Bill Annetts, John Lambert, Jock Lomont, Joe Watson, Bert Stoker, Lt Hayes. At front: Jack Carpenter, Harry Watling, Alex Caincross, John Farrand. Photo: Courtesy John Farrand

Major-General Northcott visited the Brigade in early January, observing firsthand the Group's progress. The 2/6th Armoured Regiment (2/6th Armd Regt), for example, *during their time in the region participated in route marches, night driving and troop tactical training* (Handel). The 2/7th Armoured Regiment (2/7th Armd Regt), according to Len Earle *had a very good stay in and around Tamworth camping here and there doing tank-like manoeuvres. ... During initial training we had to take to pieces and put together again our machine guns blindfolded, which we learnt to do quite efficiently ...* (Earle in Lewis).

Soon after this, all regiments returned to Singleton/Greta for further training, and just as the first tanks were rolling into use, Major-General Northcott was replaced as GOC by Major-General Horace Robertson in late March 1942. Robertson, a graduate of Duntroon Military College, had recently returned from the Western Desert and had taken part in the capture of Tobruk. Known to his troops as 'Red Robbie', perhaps for his hair colour or perhaps for his temperament, it was Robertson's vision of uniting all elements of both the 1st and 2nd Armd Bdes for intensive military training that led approximately 20,000 troops, in July to September, to the North West region of New South Wales.

Why the North West of NSW?

It cannot be stated with certainty why Robertson chose the North West region of NSW for the extensive training of the 1st AAD. However, the region did have a number of features which would have been integral to optimising the training experience. Firstly, the region possessed geographic formations similar to that of North Africa; remembering that at this time whilst Japan had come into the war, the main reason for the creation of the Division was to provide assistance toward defeating Rommel. (This only changed in August 1942 when Curtin realised how desperately all troops were needed to protect against the Japanese). Secondly there were good supply routes available both by road and by rail and, lastly, it was reasonably isolated so that there would be less chance of observation.

In truth *nothing approaching the scale and extent of this project had ever before taken place in Australia ... The principle object in the mind of the GOC was training for war; to this end, the exercises were extremely practical and introduced the harsh realities of active service conditions* (Hopkins).