

26 Battalion Association

26 AUST. INF. BN (AIF) "NEVER UNPREPARED"

President
Colin Block

Vice President
Alan Preston

Editor of Newsletter
Colin Block

Web: www.26bn.org

Email: WebMaster26Bn@gmail.com

NEWSLETTER

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ISSUE 30



Above: Families gather for photos under the 26th Battalion banner at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, Anzac Day 2016

Welcome to Newsletter No. 30

WELCOME to the latest issue of 26 Battalion Association, Newsletter.

This is the 30th edition of this Newsletter representing fifteen years of connecting with family and friends of veterans from the 26th Infantry Battalion (AIF).

Whilst preparing them, I have learnt so much about some of the difficulties that our servicemen

faced in the theatre of war.

In this edition veteran, Laurie Hill, has written another story about his early times in the army.

We are so privileged to have such an enthusiastic contributor and we appreciate all the others who have put words to paper to add to the history of the Battalion via these Newsletters, so that we can continue to share

in remembering those who fought to defend this country and to honour those who never came home.

Full details of this year's Melbourne Anzac Day March are on page 3.

As always, your contribution to this Newsletter would be gratefully accepted.

Colin Block, Editor

EMAILS

Intergenerational Visit

Hi Colin,

About two weeks ago I was in Bundaberg and was able to call 'round and spend some time with Keith Miles. Enjoyed it a lot, gee for 94 he is fairly sharp.

When he opened the door, the first thing he said was "Gees you are like your dad"

Thank you for passing on the request, it was appreciated.

Regards

Bob Dooley

Victorian Veteran Story Writing Competitions

Hi Colin,

My father, Laurie (Mervyn) Hill asked me to email these stories he has entered in the Victorian Veteran Story Writing Competitions. He thought you might like them for your Newsletter. He won a Highly Commended Award for the story "**Can You Hear Me?**" which he entered last year!

Kind regards

Julie Hill

Many thanks Julie. Laurie's story "Can You Hear Me?" is published on Page 5 of this edition. I loved the way he signed off at the end. - Editor.

Tough in Bougainville

Hi Colin,

I thought I would share with you this article that appeared in an American History Magazine. It covers what happened in Bougainville before the Australians arrived.

Regards Peter Nowlan

Thanks Peter for that.

This extensive article in the Summer 2016 edition of American History Magazine titled "Battling for Bougainville" is written by Jon Diamond and reports on the American defence of Bougainville.

The article starts, as quoted below, by telling about the first impressions of the officers and gives us an insight to some of the conditions encountered there. -Editor

☞ MAJ. GEN. Allen H. Turnage, commanding the 3rd Marine Division which had invaded Bougainville in November 1943, wrote, "Never had men in the Marine Corps had to fight and maintain themselves over such difficult terrain as was encountered on Bougainville."

Major General Alexander

A. Vandegift, who commanded the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal and then the I Marine Amphibious Corps (IMAC) for the Bougainville landings, commented that the Bougainville "jungle [was] worse than we had found on Guadalcanal." Stanley Frankel, the U.S. Army's 37th Infantry Division historian, wrote about the Japanese counteroffensive against the U.S. Army's XIV Corps perimeter at Cape Torokina on Bougainville in



Major General Allen H. Turnage (centre) giving orders in Bougainville.

March 1944: "The curtain was about to rise on one of the bloodiest, most fanatical Banzai attacks made by the Japanese in the South Pacific War against a civilian army of battling clerks, farmers, mechanics, schoolboys, business men." Another Marine veteran of Guam and Iwo Jima recounted, "Of all the 28 months I spent overseas, nothing compared to Bougainville for miserable living conditions... Bougainville had to be the closest thing to a living hell that I ever saw in my life."

INVITATION

WWI Tank Lunchtime Talk

Hello Mr Block,

I wonder if you have any Queensland members/relatives/friends who would be interested in attending the Royal Historical Society of Queensland's April 12th Wednesday Lunchtime Talk on *The Mephisto Tank* presented by Mark Whitmore, Director of Collections and Research, IWM, London.

He will describe the battle history and eventual capture of the tank, *Mephisto*, the only remaining German tank from WWI, by Australian troops, as well as its unexpected delivery to the Norman Wharf, Brisbane in 1919.

Come and see previously unpublished photographs, hear the story of its conservation and details of its construction and armaments.

The talk will be followed by light lunch by donation. Please advise the RHSQ of attendances for catering purposes at (07) 3221 4198 info@queenslandhistory.org.au

Details:

The Mephisto Tank by **Mark Whitmore**, Director of Collections and Research, IWM, London

on

Wednesday, 12 April 2017
at **12.30 – 2.00 pm**

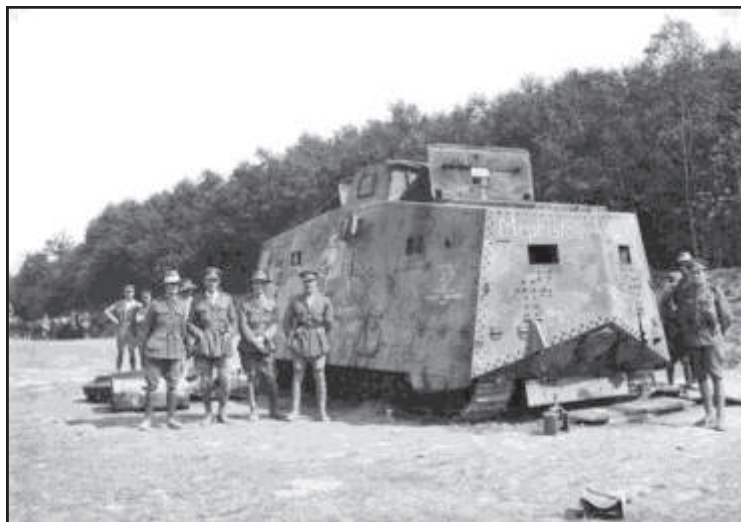
at

The Commissariat Store Museum,
115 William Street,
Brisbane.

My connection: I am a volunteer historian at the RHSQ every Thursday, and I also wrote a book about First World War veterans for my local RSL Sub-Branch – one of whom, Joseph Dellit, was one of the **26th Battalion**. “lads” involved in the capture of *Mephisto*

Kind regards,

Elizabeth Nunn



Above: The WWI Mephisto Tank

AWME02876

MELB ANZAC DAY MARCH & REUNION

Once again former 26th Battalion members and descendants are invited to march on ANZAC Day in Melbourne to join families of former comrades from our unit.

We will be meeting at the new time of 9.30am to 10.00am in Swanston St near Flinders Lane (near McDonald's, look for 26 INFANTRY BN sign).

Vice President, Alan Preston has secured adequate transport for this year's march for those who are unable to make the full distance.

Immediately after the unit has completed their march, we will meet at the 26th Bn Tree - the third tree on the driveway from the Shrine, on the St Kilda Rd side.

After the parade, we will return to The George Hotel, 139 Cecil Street, South Melbourne (corner of Coventry Street) at 12.30pm for the reunion lunch.



The latest updates are on the website via this QR code or Web: 26bn.org/anzac-day.html

Who is the 2/26 Battalion?

Because their name and colour patch are very similar to the 26th Battalion, we sometimes get inquires about the 2/26th Battalion. For clarification here is an extract from Wikipedia about their military service. As you will see, they had a completely difference experience to the 26th Battalion. - Editor.

FORMED as part of the Second Australian Imperial Force for service during the Second World War, the 2/26th Battalion was raised in November 1940 at Grovely in Brisbane, Queensland. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Boyes, the battalion formed part of the 27th Brigade.

The colours chosen for the battalion's Unit Colour Patch were the same as those of the 26th Battalion, a unit which had served during World War I before being raised as a Militia formation in 1921. These colours were purple over blue, in a diamond shape, although a border of gray in an oval shape was added to the Unit Colour Patch to distinguish the battalion from its Militia counterpart; the oval border denoted that the battalion was an 8th Division unit.

Brigade-level exercises were conducted and the battalion paraded through the town of Bathurst before finally they received orders for embarkation. [The majority of the 2/26th's personnel were drawn from Queensland and northern New South Wales. The cold of Bathurst was a hell of a shock to the boys from sunny Queensland. Earlier in their training days, they were given the name *The Gallopers*, and the name stuck like glue.]

Although initially it had been intended that the 2/26th would be sent to the Middle East, concerns about Japanese intentions in the Pacific led to the decision to deploy them to Singapore.

Upon landing on 15 August 1941 they moved to Camp Wavell at Changi where they settled in to serve as a garrison force. On 6 December 1941, the battalion received the code word to adopt battle stations and adopted a defensive position to the north of Kota Tinggi. In the early hours of 8 December, fighting began as the Japanese launched their invasion of Malaya, by landing troops at Kota Bharu.

On 10 January 1942 it was moved to Johore, where the 27th Brigade took up a position in the Segamat sector as part of *Westforce*, alongside British and Indian troops. As the Japanese attempted to outflank the Allied positions west of Gemas at Muar, *Westforce* began the withdrawal back to Singapore Island. They crossed the Strait on

30 January and along with the rest of the 27th Brigade took up positions in the defence of the Causeway in anticipation of the Japanese assault which came a week later on 8 February 1942.

After being subjected to heavy aerial and artillery bombardment, the following day the battalion's commanding officer, Arthur Boyes, handed over command to Lieutenant Colonel Roland Oakes.

Boyes was called away to help organise the island's rear area defence and was subsequently given command of 'X' Battalion, a composite unit made up of reinforcements that had been separated from their units. Shortly after taking up this appointment, however, Boyes was killed along with a number of his men when the battalion was ambushed while attempting to fill a gap in the lines that had resulted from a Japanese breakthrough.

By 15 February, the Allied defence had crumbled and Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, the general officer in command of British Empire troops in Malaya, announced that the garrison would surrender.

Following this, men from the 2/26th Battalion were detained at Changi until May 1942 when they were dispersed to different locations throughout the Pacific—Burma, Thailand, Borneo and Japan—where they were used as slave labour by the Japanese. They spent the next three and a half years as prisoners of war until the war came to an end, when they were liberated and repatriated back to Australia.

**Their official website is
www.2-26bn.org**



Can You Hear Me?

by Mervyn Laurie Hill



ON THE third of September 1935 the year of my tenth birthday, my brother Cliff and I were lying on the carpet in front of the families' brand new console radio listening to the kids programme. The announcer was reading out birthday greetings,

and I got a big surprise when she announced my name and told me to look behind the sofa.

On the top of my present was a battery that I was pestering my mother to buy. I had seen in a monthly magazine called 'Radio and Hobbies' how to make a telephone using this battery. By collecting beer bottles and selling them I was able to buy for two shillings and sixpence, two old upright type telephones from a second hand dealer. This type of phone had the mouthpiece on the upright section and the earpiece could be lifted to your ear. I then connected wires and a battery to one of the phones, gave it to Cliff who moved about fifty yards away, and with the circuit completed I spoke into the mouthpiece "Can you hear me?" and I was thrilled when I heard him through the phone say "yes". From then on we had a lot of fun with our own personal phones.



In those days professional wrestling was broadcast on the radio late at night but our mother insisted we young ones had to go to bed before nine o'clock. I then had an idea. I could put the mouthpiece of the phone in front of the radio and with wires up to our bedroom I could listen to the wrestling. At first my mother would not allow me to do it but when she heard how well it worked she relented and I was able to listen to the radio in bed. She probably thought I would fall asleep before the wrestling was over, as I

did many times.

As I grew older electronics became the hobby for me and my mate Bob who lived three doors along. We rigged up a telephone line between us, running the wires along the back fences, which was very handy when we wanted to discuss problems with circuitry etc. One of the neighbours found the wire and told us to pull it down; he said it could be dangerous and electrocute somebody. I explained that it was only using a three and a half volts battery and was harmless but he insisted that we take it down.

Bob and I were the same age and at fifteen we both worked for the same company who made Astor radios. Here we learned a lot about the components of a radio, and with circuits from the Radio and Hobbies magazine we were able to make our own amplifiers, radios etc., starting from one valve to five valve radios. My best effort at the time was to make a portable radio, cabinet and all! The cabinet was about twenty by thirty centimetres and the radio was powered by three batteries, two large batteries, about twelve by six centimetres and a small one. I used to lug the radio over to Albert Park Lake, to meet friends at the yacht club, where I would throw the aerial over the top of the mast of the yacht and sail around listening to music.

Having five older brothers in the services and on turning eighteen I also volunteered to join the Army, and was inducted into the A.I.F. at Royal Park.

Cliff, our youngest brother, was keen to join up but would not have been accepted because of his health problems. At Royal Park I had an aptitude test and at the end of the week I was interviewed by an officer who had the results of the test and information about my background. He asked which branch of the Army I would like to serve in. I replied I would prefer to be in an infantry Battalion. He was surprised at this and suggested there would be other branches more suited to me considering the results of the aptitude test. But if I insisted he would send me to an infantry training battalion.

After finishing training in Queensland and New South Wales and a confrontation with Japanese escapees at the Cowra Japanese prison of war camp breakout in 1944, I was transferred to the jungle training school in Conungra, Queensland. After a month's training there I was posted to the 26th Battalion which was stationed at Strathpine,

Queensland and was preparing to be sent to Bougainville in the South Pacific. On arrival at the 26th Battalion I was attached to *C Company* and after about a week I was told to report to the Orderly room, where I was told I would be transferred to the Signals Platoon.

I spent the next few weeks learning all that is involved with signal work, and getting to know the other members of the signal platoon, most of whom were Queenslanders. I picked up Morse code and the phonetic alphabet very quickly but never once did I use them in any of the subsequent campaigns.

Most of the Battalion arrived in Bougainville on December 9, 1944 and in the next couple of days



relieved the American forces of the area known as Torokina, on the western coast of the island. The first campaign for the 26th Battalion was in the Numa Numa area on the eastern coast of Bougainville Island, and consisted of mainly patrolling and tactics in preparation for future campaigns. I was not required to do any signal work here and took up duties as a rifleman.

After resting at Torokina our next campaign was the Soraken Peninsula where we relieved the 31/51 Battalion, which had been

pushing north. Our objective was to attack the Japanese aggressively and proceed north until we cleared them from the peninsula. I resumed my duties as a signaller and as radio was not effective in the jungle and mountainous conditions we had to rely on a telephone system for communication.

The 'Sigs' were supplied with field telephones and a reel of red cable which was fed out as we progressed. This was a very cumbersome procedure in the jungle,

as well as a backpack and rifle I had to carry a large phone and a heavy reel of red cable. My method of carrying the cable was to put a short stick through



the centre of the reel, tie two pieces of wire to the ends and then tie wires to another stick to act as a handle and as we progressed the cable was fed out. For a test I connected my phone into the Tactical Headquarters cable, and when they answered I said "Can you hear me?" They replied, "Yes loud and clear!" To make the connection to the cable you had to cut the insulation with pliers to bare the wire and then attach the lead from the telephone. This was not a good method and took some time. I overcame this problem by attaching a large safety pin to the phone lead and pushed it through the cable making certain it was through the wire.

On the first day of our push north we came across old Japanese yellow phone wire which we followed. It led us to an abandoned enemy position.

We then proceeded along a track that we could see was being used by the Japanese, and then all of a sudden shells started falling just ahead of us. I handed the phone to the Platoon Commander and he called Tactical Headquarters. They told him to fall back about fifty yards, form a perimeter and dig in. They would then call on our artillery and heavy mortar platoon to bomb ahead of our position. Next day we inched our way along the track until the forward scouts reported back that they had come to trenches with three dead Japanese in them. I was glad the phone system worked well and this type of work was repeated often.

My greatest fear was the cable being cut behind our lines and having to go and find the cut and reconnect it. The Japanese used this tactic often setting up an ambush or taking the pin out of a grenade and placing it under the body of a dead Japanese soldier. There were many times I had to repair the lines that had been cut by shelling or mortar bombs. On our first patrol of ten men we got caught in an ambush but were lucky to get away with only one man being wounded. We learned a lot from that patrol and the

next time our scouts spotted the Japanese first and were able to kill two of them before they retreated. Some weeks later the situation was very unusual. We were dug in on a ridge and when the Platoon Commander wanted to speak to Tactical HQ the line was dead. He then said ten men would accompany me to go and repair the line. As it was mid-morning I asked could we leave it until later in the afternoon to which he agreed. I was hoping that if it was an ambush the Japanese would get tired and leave.

It had been raining very heavily and when it was time to go down it was very steep and muddy, the eleven of us slithered to the bottom, we then had to inch our way following the cable expecting an ambush all the way.

The forward scouts would move a few yards, survey the situation ahead and then move another few yards. There was a scare when the scouts reported a noise ahead and to go for cover but it turned out to be a scrub turkey foraging in the undergrowth. After what seemed like hours we came to the severed line and no ambush! I then proceeded to repair the line and just as I was about to do this the line was dragged about a yard apart, everybody was alerted and we all took cover expecting an attack any minute. After a stressful half hour and no attack I again crawled over and re-joined the cable, tapped my phone into it and spoke to both Tac HQ, and the Platoon Commander. The trip back was just as hairy as the Japanese could have come in behind us. Later the forward scouts told me there were signs of an ambush at the break. I never did find out why the cable moved.

Most Japanese soldiers were very astute but there were also some who were not well trained in jungle warfare. For example, on one occasion our Platoon came across an obviously heavily used Japanese track with their yellow phone cable running alongside it.

The Platoon Commander decided to set up an ambush about fifty yards back along this track. I tried to camouflage our red signal cable in the undergrowth, but had to cross the track at one point. Our ambush was positioned so that we could clearly see that area of the track. Sometime later two Japanese soldiers with their rifles slung over their shoulders and carrying food containers were approaching the ambush position, one even picked up our red signal cable to get under, and as they continued on to the ambush became easy targets for our Bren gunner.

Later that day three Japanese approached the ambush from the other direction and were also killed.

The tactics of setting up ambushes at the junction of these tracks proved to be very successful for us. On one occasion we were dug in next to a Japanese phone line, and five Japanese soldiers approached, three were killed by our Bren gunners. Later that afternoon, shells were exploding very close to our position. I suggested to the O.C. the phone line may be an artillery line and a decision was made to cut it, and shortly after the shelling stopped. We were now sure it was an artillery line to an observation post.

The 26th Battalion continued to advance north despite stiff resistance and shelling by the enemy and on March the 16th reached the southern end of a coconut plantation on Soraken Peninsula. Patrols by our platoon reported heavy fortified Japanese positions ahead so the platoon commander decided to form a perimeter on the main track and dig in. He then phoned Tac HQ for the artillery and heavy mortars to bombard the Japanese before we advanced. During an attack on one of the enemy's positions we ran into a lot of trouble. The Japanese spotted us and counter attacked. As they charged towards us they were screaming out and some were yelling out in English "come out and fight Aussies". This area was close to the beach and was very sandy and with no cover. We tried to scoop trenches in the sand by hand, but struck coral about a foot down leaving most of our bodies exposed.

Fortunately the Bren gunners firing from the hip were able to keep the Japanese from closing in on us and despite bullets thudding into the sand all around us we were able to scramble back to our weapon pits. We were lucky to get out of that skirmish with only one minor injury.

Back at our perimeter there was a Japanese phone line next to my weapon pit so I decided to tap into it to see if it was being used. I quickly disconnected as there were two Japanese talking to each other. I then suggested to the O.C. that I could connect the Japanese line back to Tac HQ and an interpreter may be able to get some information. This was agreed upon and after all Australian lines were cleared I made the connection. The interpreter relayed that at the time the Japanese were very concerned about fifteen of their troops who were missing. The reason they were missing was because on March 13th

A Company, with the support of artillery, attacked a Japanese position and killed them.

The battle in the Soraken area lasted forty six days and ended with the capture of the Peninsula. I was very proud when the O.C. said my signal work during the campaign was outstanding. Afterwards we were all very glad to get back to Torokina to live in a tent, have a decent shower, sleep on a stretcher and get issued with new clothing.

On the sixteenth of August 1945 Gracie Fields (the famous English entertainer) arrived on the Island. When she approached the microphone and at the start of her concert she asked "Can you hear me?" There was an almighty yell, "YES!"

Then she announced that the Japanese had surrendered and the war was over.

Gracie then sang the 'Lord's Prayer' to thousands of service personnel and everything was so quiet in the jungle you could have heard a pin drop.



English entertainer, Gracie Fields (right)

After this announcement I was hoping I would be returning home soon but it was many months later after garrison duty on Rabaul. Then one day I was ecstatic when the adjutant poked his head into our tent and said 'Hilly' be packed and ready in half an hour for transport to the wharf to board the 'Kanimbla' for home.

Soon after disembarking in Sydney I made a 'trunk' phone call to my mother in Melbourne, after waiting for an hour I was put through.

When my mother answered, I said. "Mum, ...
Can you hear me?"

Tango Hotel Echo Echo November Delta

Melbourne, Anzac Day 2016



Above: Janet and Kathy Donaldson, banner bearers for 26th Battalion in Melbourne 2016



Above: Colin Block, Bob Preston and Jeff Collings, Melbourne 2016



Veterans Bob Preston and Vin Frawley at the 2016 Anzac Day reunion lunch