ARMY LIFE - WITH SPENCER BROWN

Dear Jeanette,

It was really a pleasure for me to meet you and Spencer's sister Barbara at the Anzac Day march this year. During our short chat you asked whether it would be possible to put words to paper - to recount some of the war experiences shared with Spencer during those years. I offered to do this, as we were together in the same units for nearly five years as very young fellows - and because of my very high personal regard for him.

My first memory of Spencer was when he arrived at 'PARAP BARRACKS' Darwin, late in 1941. He was laden with haversack, "sausage bag" kit bag etc etc. - in other words most of his personal possessions. No doubt he would have travelled to Darwin in much the same manner as did I, some two or three months before him. We set out from Ingleburn Army Camp, Sydney by troop train and travelled west through the Blue Mountains, Bathurst, Dubbo - then through the night to Broken Hill. I shall never forget the arrival of dawn - between the Darling River and Broken Hill - we were absolutely covered in red dust and looked just like Red Indians - in our hair, eyes - just everywhere!! We arrived at Broken Hill mid morning - were transported to a nearby mine and were able to shower and cleanse ourselves, which was really needed and was great. The troops marched through the town and were treated to a sit-down luncheon by the ladies of the COMFORTS FUND. These ladies were mostly the mums of sons away in the services. The troop train rumbled on into South Australia to a town called TEROWIE. We then transferred to another train, bound for Alice Springs. The carriages of this S.A. train were most unusual - very like some of the old Sydney Trams - one long seat along the sides of the carriage, with our backs to the windows. In the middle of the carriage we stacked our luggage and rifles. This part of the journey was quite unusual, to say the least. We crossed Sturts Stoney Desert - flat, dry, hardly a tree or vegetation to be seen. We stopped at OODNADATTA - why only Heaven knows - absolutely nothing to be seen except a railway station sign and ONE corrugated tin shed. We travelled on to the north toward the MacDonald Ranges - just mountains of rock and hardly a tree. Looking at these ranges from a distance, is most unusual - various shades of purple in colour. Namatjura, the aboriginal painter certainly was able to depict the correct colour. Alice Springs in 1941 was just a small town nestling in a valley of these mountains. The houses were mostly painted green and cream, which was delightful to see after days in the desert. The day temperature was hot, but nighttime was freezing. Next day we boarded flat top army trucks for the next part of the journey - over corrugated dirt track - north through Tennant Creek, Daly Waters, Birdum, Larramar to Katherine. Then we boarded a cattle train which we named "Leaping Lena" (gosh!, the odour!!) for the 300 mile trip to Darwin. This stretch was fairly densely timbered and very heavily populated - with kangaroos. Average speed of the train -10m.p.h.!!

Darwin was then just a small town - I think about only 5000 people - of all colours even then. The town itself is on the point of the peninsular (about 4 miles long and up to 2 miles across). Darwin harbour is large and very beautiful - mostly surrounded by
dense mangrove trees, except for a few sandy beaches with lots of coconut trees. The climate is HOT - day and night and always extremely humid. The main streets were rough and the footpaths were elevated wooden boardwalks. The doors on the hotels were the "bat wing" type-just like an old Western movie!! The town itself comprised four hotels (3 of which were extremely rough and tough establishments) and the best was the New Darwin Hotel - which WAS NEW and kept in pretty good order. There was one post office (which suffered a direct hit during the first bombing on February 19th '42- one theatre (picture show in those days) which was "open air" and the seating was canvas deck chair type - just too bad if it rained!! There were a few soft drink shops and our favourite drink was lime cordial in a large glass filled with ice chips and water - we used to walk 2 miles from our camp to enjoy this treat. Many of us were too young then to think or be interested in alcoholic beverage. The main industries appeared to be beer gambling and beef - in that order!! Wharf labouring was the largest employer in the town - they certainly were tough and rough men. There must have been at least 12 shops in the township which were gambling houses where a dice game was played called "Ins and Outs" - Ins to mean even number of both dices and Outs being odd number. Most of us would chance our luck occasionally - knowing full well that we couldn't do much harm to our fragile finances - as army pay WAS just 5 shillings per day!!

Our camp was 2 miles from town just about in the centre of the peninsular, and our unit was '18th FIELD BATTERY'. We were Field Artillery and were equipped with 18 pounder field guns. We were support troops attached to Infantry - the Darwin Infantry Battalion - who were also camped at Parap Barracks. The Barracks comprised about 30 army huts - about 30 metres by 10 metres. They had cement slab floors and the walls and roof were corrugated iron, unpainted. The hut would sleep about 30 men. Our beds were iron frame and wire base - we filled Hessian sacks with straw to use as a mattress. Actually we were quite comfortable. Oh yes, we were issued each with a mosquito net. The Barracks were on high ground overlooking mangrove swamp (infested with mosquitoes and crocodiles) and overlooking the inner Darwin harbour. The big problem of the mosquito was DANGUE FEVER, which many of us enjoyed!! very similar to Malaria - which most of us enjoyed!! later on in New Guinea.

Looking back to end 1941 - our army life was fairly easy going. Reveille "awake" at 6 a.m. - "roll call" - then off to the showers - cold water only was available, but even so the water was really warm due to the constant heat. In fact by the time we had walked from our huts to the showers, we were all perspiring freely - just 50 metres!! Breakfast (usually fried eggs and bacon, cereal, bread and tea (Army tea - ouch) - then Roll-Call again - then off to our respective tasks - i.e. gun maintenance and training for the gun teams (Spencer was one of a 6 man team) in each gun squad. Our Battery consisted of 2 troops, each with 2, 18 Pounder Field Guns, which were capable of firing high explosive shells, accurately for up to about 5 miles. My job, as an artillery signaller, was to establish and maintain communication between the forward observation outpost (which was actually with the Infantry) and our gun position. This was done either by telephone or wireless. Forward observation post would determine preferred targets in consultation with Infantry Commanders and then issue fire instructions to the guns. We often had practice gunnery training of this nature (not at the Barracks - but out in what is now popularly known as Kakadu country). Lunch at the Barracks was usually Bully Beef and salad, potato (unmashed) and fruit drink (which was usually lemon - just awful - sour and bitter - they didn't know how to process juice in those days).
However I suppose it was a necessary part of our diet. The evening meal was Bully Beef again - but cooked into a stew, or curry, or made into rissoles with vegetables. Sometimes we would get steak - perhaps about once per week. Sweets were cooked apricots and "army" custard - almost always!!

Whilst at Barracks, lunch was followed by Siesta - yes, believe it, we actually were sent off to bed rest for an hour and a half. I believe this was a tradition we Aussies inherited from the British Army when serving in the tropics.

We played sport in our spare time. The ground was too hard for rugby (the Peninsular is solid rock). However we kicked a ball around despite the heat. Soccer was the only football team game played, so we had to be content with that. We also played cricket on extremely rough wickets. Spencer joined in everything with his normal gusto and enthusiasm.

So, that was army life in Darwin towards the end of 1941 - certainly there was war in Europe, Greece, Crete, North Africa and the Middle East - but a long way away from Darwin. Little did we realise then what was in store for us. Pearl Harbour, Malaya, Singapore, The Philippines, Timor, Rabaul were all to fall to the Japanese by mid February 1942. Darwin suddenly became a prime target for enemy attack and military commanders finally commenced preparation for what was felt by all to be an inevitable Japanese invasion. Gone were the after lunch siestas!! - gosh how we worked. We were all on the job from dawn to dark with pick and shovel digging four alternate gun positions for our 18 pounders - that's 16 holes, approximately 20 feet diameter circles x 5 feet deep - all in solid rock. There were no jackhammers or dynamite to assist - just pick and shovel. We also cut "fields of fire" for machine gun and rifle fire through mangrove swamps. This was done by hand held machetti knives. Such "fields of fire" were about 50 metres wide and up to some 300 metres to water edge. By about mid February we were ready for the expected invasion. We were still based at Parap Barracks and had almost completed the digging of slit trenches - about 3 metres long by half metre wide by one and a half metres depth. This was to protect us from strafing, anti personal bombing etc.

On the morning of 19th February, 1942, our Battery were all on a grassy slope, between the Barrack huts and mangrove swamp, finishing off the digging of slit trenches, when we heard the drone of aircraft. We soon could see many many flights of aircraft flying toward us from the south. We all thought them to be American and cheered their arrival loudly. If they were Japanese, surely they would have flown in from the north!! The planes flew at about 20,000 feet altitude, in flights of 7, in the shape of a boomerang. It was not until they were almost directly overhead that we realised the worst - we were under attack. Dive bombs peeled off - some to attack ships in the harbour and others to the RAAF base, four miles from Darwin town at the start of the peninsular. Parap Barracks was not bombed but we were continuously strafed by both dive bombers and "zero" fighter planes. We later learned that these Japanese planes were from the same aircraft carriers which attacked Pearl Harbour. About half an hour after the dive bombers and zeros had finished their job, we were bombed again, very heavily by their "heavy bombers", from high altitude. The noise was indescribable. Darwin was absolutely flattened - nearly every ship in the harbour was destroyed as was the RAAF Base. Casualties were heavy, especially on the harbour and at the RAAF Base. 18th Field Battery had no casualties, which was
extremely fortunate, considering the severity of the strafing experienced. I think no less than 284 Japanese planes attacked us that day.

Well, to say the least, our lives and routines changed dramatically after the air raid. A Japanese invasion was considered imminent - we were on "alert" - day and night - during the next days, weeks and months. There were very few troops in Darwin - just the Darwin Infantry Battalion, 18th Field Battery, Heavy Anti Aircraft Batteries - a few naval and RAAF personnel - that's all!!

Well - our lives and routines changed - and so too did our food!! Someone had forgotten - in the chaos - that troops need to be fed!! We had only "tinned herrings in tomato sauce" - and we had to eat that for breakfast, lunch and dinner - that's all - and this continued for 6 weeks!! - until we became 'WHARF LABOURERS'. American transport ships bound for Bataan, by then captured by the Japanese, were diverted to Darwin. All Darwin civilians, including the wharfies, had been evacuated. So, 18th Field Battery were sent to unload these ships in the harbour. This operation was carried out, day and night, for several weeks. The food was excellent - far, far better than Australian rations. Needless to say, we all "souvenired" plenty of extra rations for ourselves.

Japanese air raids continued - sometimes at night but usually during the day, but not with the intensity of the first raid. Our anti-aircraft guns were performing much better and commenced to shoot down several Japanese planes. American Kittyhawk fighter planes were arriving in Darwin which strengthened our defences greatly. Our Hudson bombers were by now frequently bombing Japanese bases in Timor and Ambon.

By September 1942 the build up of troops in Darwin was substantial. 18th Field Battery was no longer needed and the real threat of invasion had receded. We received orders to move the Battery to Narellan N.S.W. (near Camden). So, cattle train again to Katherine - then by army truck to Larimar which was a staging camp in the bush - and the flies, just millions and millions!! We all had dysentery, which made the truck trip from Tennant Creek to Mount Isa an absolute nightmare. Troop train from Mount Isa to Townsville - then to Brisbane, Sydney and Narellan. We were given 7 days home leave. After home leave we reported back to Narellan and were camped there under canvas for some 3 weeks. The Unit was to be disbanded and we were to be absorbed into 22nd. Field Regiment. We were given several day leave passes and during this short time several of my army friends visited my parents home - Spencer, Bruce Lawson, Fred Oliver, Ron Enright and Ross Miller.

22nd Field Regiment comprised mostly of Victorians and was based at Frankston, on Port Philip Bay. We arrived there by troop train - were there only one week and then moved to Tallarook - near Seymour and Pukapunyal Artillery Firing Range. It was winter - and a particularly cold winter at that - quite a change from the continual heat of Darwin. We were camped in tents, near the Goulburn River and I have NEVER been so cold in my life. We trained constantly at Pukapunyal Range - equipped with new 25 pounder field guns, so our gunner teams, including Spencer, had to master the new equipment. We worked six days per week - were reasonably fed and Sunday, after church parade, was sport - Aussie Rules football - not enough New South Welshmen to man a rugby team!! Spencer and I were in the regimental team - I shall never forget our first game. An opposing player had the ball and made a run (bouncing
(bouncing once each 10 yards as per their rules) - however, in a flash the ball runner was grounded by a perfect knee high flying tackle!! Yes, by none other than our Spencer. The Victorians were deeply offended - rugby tackles are not permitted in their game!!

Once again, toward the end of winter the order to move was received. We were troop trained to Gympie Queensland - about 100 miles north of Brisbane - once again under canvas. There, we continued training with the new equipment - mostly west of Gympie near Kingaroy. However, we did get some sport and sufficient reinforcements had come to the Regiment from N.S.W. and Queensland to man a rugby team. We played several games against other units. Spencer at half back, Ray Black (ex North Sydney rugby league player) at centre and I played five eight - we had some great games - Spencer was always our star player - signs of things to come from him.

The war was moving on - Japanese troops had been driven out of Milne Bay and back from Kokoda to the northern beaches of New Guinea. Our AIF Divisions had returned from the middle east and required reinforcement. So, 22nd Field Regiment was disbanded. Many of us - Spencer, Bruce Lawson, Ron Enright, Ross Miller, Bruce Walker, Frank Brown, Ken McQuinn and I, all Darwin boys, were transferred to 2/4th Field Regiment, 7th AIF Division which was then camped on the Atherton Tablelands west of Cairns. We were quickly assimilated and told we were to train for jungle warfare - New Guinea. We were camped in tents, reasonably fed and trained and trained.

Eventually we were moved to Townsville - embarked on the old coastal passenger ship 'Katoomba' and sailed for Port Moresby over a placid beautiful deep blue sea. Entering Port Moresby harbour was the ominous sight of the wreck of a large ship which had been bombed or torpedoed (memories of Darwin) - we had not entered a safety zone!! We camped at "Pom Pom Valley", 13 miles from Moresby, about half way toward the Owen Stanley Ranges and quite near Jackson Airfield. Training really began in earnest - day and night - forced marches, up and over mountains - through mud and slush and thick jungle - this continued for about 6 weeks. One morning, at about 3 a.m. - August 1943 - we were awakened, packed our personal clothing etc. into haversack, gathered all equipment including rifles and sub machine guns which were packed on to trucks to get us to the airfield before dawn. The 25 pounder field guns had been dismantled previously - to be flown in other planes. We were to fly to Nadzab. Prior to boarding the "Biscuit Bombers" DC3 troop carrying aircraft, our convoy was halted at the end of the airstrip. While we were there an American Liberator Bomber squadron was to fly out and bomb Nadzab in preparation of our landing. Several of these bombers flew out - BUT the last one couldn't gain altitude - crashed into trees at the end of the airstrip and exploded, bombs, fuel and all, just about 100 yards from our trucks and directly above D for "Don" Company 2/33rd Battalion - asleep, in the bush. Words cannot describe the catastrophe - over 100 killed - we all did what was possible to help and comfort them but their burns were just terrible. The blast was so extreme that we in the army trucks were literally thrown yards into the scrub. What a dreadful start to our mission - which was the capture of Lae.

We boarded the DC3's (with trepidation after the accident - as most of us had never flown before) and took off at dawn. The landing at Nadzab took place without problems and 54th Battery, 2/4th Field Regiment, together with 2/33rd, 2/31st and
were yellow (from atebren tablets taken daily to combat malaria) I remember Christmas 1943 - our guns peppered "The Pimple" with a very heavy barrage. Early next month, January 1944, we launched the most intense artillery barrage of the whole New Guinea campaign when our troops attacked and seized "The Pimple" - our guns fired over 3,300 rounds of high explosive shells at the target without pause. This softened the enemy positions for our infantry to move forward. Within a couple of days our 54th Battery was relieved and flown back to Port Moresby. We rested there for a month, battled with more bouts of malaria, but were well fed and regained strength. We then received the wonderful news that we were to be given home leave.

We sailed from Moresby in February 1944 per US ship "Orisaba" to Brisbane to a really exciting welcome home, sailing up the Brisbane river. Householders, from their verandahs waved flags, sheets, towels to welcome our troop ship home - quite exciting for us. Then we marched in full uniform through the streets of Brisbane, also a memorable occasion - then by troop train to Sydney and home - for the Sydney boys - 21 days home leave, terrific!!

It was wonderful to be home after such a long time away. The city seemed to be full of American servicemen. Our 7th Division marched through the city with full pomp and regalia - some good photos of our Regiment in the paper (which I did not keep unfortunately - must pay a visit to Sydney Morning Herald one day to see whether it is possible to obtain old photos - also "Courier Mail" in Brisbane).

After home leave, we re-grouped at Strathpine, just about 20 miles from Brisbane - only for 6 weeks, then back to Atherton Tablelands again to await and prepare for the next campaign - which was to re-capture Borneo. Well, we waited and trained and waited. We were camped at Keiri - only about 3 or 4 houses in the village - some few miles from our tent campsite. Occasionally we would join a truckload to Atherton (about 10 miles from camp) to see a film - apart from that and some sport - we were just bored to our bootlaces!! The Borneo campaign was delayed several times - in fact we were in Keiri camp for 14 months, without home leave.

Just a couple of days before the Regiment set off for the Borneo campaign (quite unbeknown to us) our football team played the rugby "final" against 2/5th Field Regiment. Spencer passed the ball to me and I had a clear run for the try line (so I thought!!) - well, I was crash tackled just a metre short of the line and the bones in my left leg cracked like a pistol shot - bone broken in 3 places. I was unaware then, but that was the end of the war for me. I recall Spencer being most concerned for me and helped lift me from the ground. I was flown to Brisbane - then to Towoomba orthopaedic Hospital where I was out of action for almost 2 months. The Regiment sailed for Borneo just 2 days after my injury.

After Towoomba, I was granted 21 days leave, so I went home to marry my childhood sweetheart, Judy, who has been my bride for over 47 years. Whilst on our honeymoon the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan - the war was over - and WON.

The Regiment was then in Borneo and hostilities soon ceased. They were then repatriated home for demobilisation. By then, I had been discharged from army service and was back to civilian work - then - one day, I was sitting on Burwood railway station waiting for a train to go to the city. A train pulled in to Burwood, 2 platforms
away from me, heading for Liverpool. Suddenly I heard a call "Hey Buffalo" (my army nick-name) - yes, it was Spencer - on his way to the Liverpool army discharge base. He waved madly - we exchanged good wishes - then his train pulled out and sped away.

My memories of Spencer are of a young and very fit man. I can clearly remember his arrival at Parap Barracks Darwin. Average height, athletic figure, high and broad forehead, blue usually laughing eyes, broad jaw line, light brown hair and gleaming teeth. His acceleration and skills on the footy field were terrific. Above all, he was always very fair. His fellow gunners held him in very high regard - always.

I last spoke to him on the phone, just before his departure to tour South Africa with the Wallabies, to wish him well. It is interesting to note that we had one other outstanding footballer in our Regimental team - Jack Horrigan, a Queenslander. Jack toured U.K. with the rugby league Kangaroos, as a centre three quarter. However, we had him playing second row in our army team.

Jeanette, I have tried and tested my memory to endeavour to relate some of the army life Spencer experienced over a period of almost five years - but nearly fifty years ago. You asked for this story, mainly for your sons Ian, Glen and Niel, as they know little about this part of his life. I hope this little story is of interest to you all - I also wish that I were more able to relate these memories more clearly. If your sons are like my old pal "Spanner", you can and must be very proud of them.