Dad’s Mobile Force


By

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Introduction

The following account of my father’s life in the Darwin Mobile Force comes from a larger work, looking at his life, written as part of a wide ranging family history. I have extracted the relevant chapters to prepare for a planned trip to Darwin. My wife and I hope to be able to see some of the sites that my father, Langton Opie, photographed.

Lang died in 1951 when I was two. He left behind a large collection of photographs of his military service, both in the Darwin Mobile Force and later when he served in Borneo in 1945. I have spent many years trying to interpret these photographs to gain an understanding of my father’s life. Otherwise he would forever remain a mere shadow, barely even a name.

I also have to confess to following lines of inquiry that relate to personal interests. If Dad had lived long enough for us to have had discussions, chats and talks, I am convinced I would have asked him questions about the ships he travelled on, the planes he saw, the personages he encountered and the life he experienced. The photographs are Lang’s, the text, its emphasise and its flavour, is purely mine.

Langton Leslie Opie was born in Queensland in 1918. He spent most of his childhood in the Geelong (Batesford and Lara) area, where he lived with his great aunt and uncle, Maggie and Willie McErvale. The photograph of Lang, at the left, was taken during his days as a commando. I have included this shot because it was signed by Lang to his future wife, my mother, Marjorie Piggin and hung for many years in our lounge. It was the photo I looked at as a child, to remember my father and it hangs today in my study.

The Depression years were tough for the McErvales. They lost their farm. Langton possibly chaffed under the watchful eye of Auntie Maggie. The army, the cadets and the militia were integral parts of his life as was work, cricketing, boxing, bike riding and dancing.

According to John Holden, a life long friend, Lang started his apprenticeship as a painter and decorator when he was about fifteen. Lang and John, both 15 and extremely keen to be soldiers apparently, lied to get into the Cadets (age limit 16) and John felt that the two events, work and Cadets, were contemporaneous.

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1 Langton was the youngest son of Ruby and Washington Opie. I understand that TB forced Lang to be moved as a small child to Batesford, for the fresh air. At his death by accident, his lungs showed clear scaring.
Jim Pettit, a neighbour of Lang’s, thought Lang may have attended night school at Geelong. John Holden writes:

While he was still doing his apprenticeship, he commenced a draughting course at the Gordon Technical School I Geelong and he continued with the course after he joined the DMF. ²

Lang wrote on his enlistment papers, in 1938, that he was a painter, but on his marriage certificate, in 1944, Lang wrote that he was a draftsman!

The Army, even in his days at Geelong, formed an important part of Lang’s daily life. He and John Holden first met as cadets in the 23/21st Battalion, City of Geelong Regiment. John writes:

In those days each militia battalion had a Cadet platoon; the cadets were aged 16 to 18 years of age. When they turned 18, they went to the battalion, a fully fledged soldier.

All the photographs are in my possession and I once assumed that Lang was the photographer. Many were neatly laid out in a large album, many others were discovered as negatives stored in a cigarette tin. Unless, I say otherwise in the text, the photographs come from this collection. Much research and careful consideration later, it is possible that Lang may have borrowed or swapped some of these photographs. Which ones are which it is impossible for me to tell. Many come from his album for which there appears to be no negatives. I have negatives of others of these photographs. Lang was known to be a keen amateur photographer and learnt to develop his own films. Only two photographs have his name on them and a few have his comments written on the back. I know that some or all of these photographs are in the collection of the Darwin Library, where I have also sent copies of the photos in my possession.

Frank Alcorta in his book, *Australia’s Frontline: The Northern Territory’s war*³ has one photograph I have, showing the arrival of the DMF in 1939⁴ and he sources that photograph to the Royal Australian Artillery Association (NT) Inc. (Lee Collection). It is not my desire to breach copyright. As a family document meant for private circulation, ownership issues probably are irrelevant.

However, as a whole collection, which is in my possession, the photographs present an interesting time in my father’s life and show us a time now long gone.

I dedicate this book to my father’s memory and acknowledge him as the photographer and/or compiler of the collection.

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² Darwin Mobile Force
³ Allen and Unwin 1991 8 Napier ST, North Sydney. Copyright held by the Northern Territory Government.
⁴ p 15
Chapter 1

Darwin Mobile Force established

The Australian Army of the period between the two World Wars, was not like the current Army of the 1990s, with its large permanent units. During the 1920s and 1930s, due partly to financial stringency and a belief that the war to end all wars had been fought and won, the military defence of the Commonwealth was detailed to a militia\(^1\), serviced by a cadre of permanent officers and instructors. The few permanent units included coastal artillery\(^2\).

The 23/21\(^{st}\) Infantry Battalion was such a militia unit and it possessed by its nature of manning by part-time soldiers, a strong local identity. It was known as the City of Geelong Battalion.

As already stated Lang lied to join the Cadet Platoon, which was attached to the Battalion. The Platoon took boys, 16 to 18 years of age, after which, they joined the Battalion as fully-fledged soldiers. According to Army Central Records\(^1\), Lang joined the Battalion on the 16\(^{th}\) July 1935, five days after his 17\(^{th}\) birthday. He entered an army that was beginning to grow in size.

The permanent forces were raised to maintain these coastal defences, to train and administer militia units and to maintain the equipment, which has been described as, “…outdated and barely operational.”\(^2\)

The Permanent Forces included the Staff Corp, the Australian Instructor Corp, Artillery, Survey, Service Corp, Medical, Veterinarian and Ordnance Corps.

It was obvious to many people as the thirties drew on that trouble was brewing both in Europe, with the establishment of Hitler’s Third Reich, in Germany and in Asia with an expansionist Japan, already at war with China. The Darwin Mobile Force was established as part of this military build up. It was to be one of seven such forces considered necessary as a defence against possible attacks.

A British Lieutenant General E.K. Squires\(^{iii}\) gave the advice. He asked for small, self-contained units, which would be located strategically, around Australia.

As it turned out, the DMF was the only one raised as one suspects events swamped the Australian Government efforts. The DMF was self-contained. It consisted of 90

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\(^1\) Central Army records, now …………. was of great assistance to me and eventually allowed me to have a full set of Lang’s records. These records form much of the following narrative. They are a mine of details for the family historian

\(^2\) *Australian Historical Statistics* p410
infantry, supported by 18 pounder field guns\textsuperscript{3}, four 3” mortars and four medium machine guns, beside elements of pioneers, signals and intelligence, cooks etc. The DMF came with its own transport of trucks and vans and motor cycles and armoured cars.

The Darwin Mobile Force was given four roles:

- To provide a mobile force to guard against sporadic raids in the Darwin area.
- To provide basic training for all members of the force.
- To give experience to personnel of the DMF before joining the AIC (Australian Instructors Corp).
- To provide training in command for graduates of the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

The Darwin Mobile Force was classified as Artillery, to comply with the Defence Act of the day, which prohibited the raising of permanent military forces, other than administration and instructional staff, except in time of war.\textsuperscript{4} Lang, subsequently, was ranked as a Gunner (instead of private) and explains the number of Artillery buttons in my possession.

To join the DMF, recruits had to be over 5 feet, seven inches (Lang’s records show that he was 5’8 1/2”), the chest at normal rest was to be 35 inches, (Lang’s measured 34 1/2”, with an expansion of 31 1/2”). Lang was certified as physically fit at Victoria Barracks on 21\textsuperscript{st} November 1938. A scar on the left buttock and leg was noted.\textsuperscript{5}

While it was desirable to have militia service, it was not mandatory. Lang had served for three years with the 23/21\textsuperscript{st} Battalion, number 445060.

On his Attestation Form, Lang is described as having a fresh complexion, with grey eyes and brown hair. He was listed as Church of England.

On his Particulars Form, his mother, Ruby’s address was given, as 61 Ashworth St, Albert Park, Victoria. Lang, a painter, stated that he had never been convicted in a civil court.

Lang signed the Oath of Enlistment, swearing to: “Well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord, the King, in the Military forces” and that he would “…resist His Majesty’s enemies and cause His Majesty’s peace to be kept and maintained”. Lang would

\textsuperscript{3} Small and out of date by the late 1930s. They had a range of 9970 metres. Grey, Jeffrey \textit{A Military History of Australia}, Cambridge University Press 1990, p137.

\textsuperscript{4} This small fact explained why there were a number of Artillery uniform buttons at home. It really confused, as there was no evidence of Lang belonging to any Artillery unit, as such.

\textsuperscript{5} Lang had an accident as a youngster and it is possible that the broken leg was badly set. I have been told that he had an operation to shorten the other leg to give him a balance. Careful examination of his stance seems to suggest that he stood oddly, at least.
faithfully discharge his duty, “SO HELP ME GOD”. The wording may be archaic and its spirit unfashionable today but it has to be said that for the rest of his life, Lang kept true to this oath.

Langton Leslie Opie formally enlisted on the 29th November 1938 for a five-year period. War in Europe was but nine months away.

Keith Trevan, in his article, “The D.M.F.”6 quotes Lt.Gen Sir Horace Robertson, who wrote:

No unit of the Australian Military Forces has in proportion to its size and short life left such a mark on the Australian Army, as the Darwin Mobile Force: indeed I doubt if there has been anything comparable in influence in any army in the world.

Lang’s first pay packet was 3 pounds 6/9 per week or 196 pounds per year. Deductions of 14/9 were made for rations and quarters. Lang contributed to a superannuation fund. A tropical allowance of 80 pounds was paid on top of this.

A free uniform was issued. It consisted of shorts, pith helmet7, cap etc. The pith helmet went quickly. It is not to be seen in the official marching into Darwin.

Nor, to be seen from the guard mounted at Darwin airport to receive a VIP.

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6 Article in my possession.
7 The World Book Dictionary gives the following definition: a helmet-shaped sun hat made originally of the dried pith of the East Indian sola or spongwood, but now made of various substances; sola topee.
June Collins in her book *Bandy’s Boys*, quotes the general expectations of the recruits:

> Only men of good character will be accepted, and candidates should have a reference from some person of good standing in their district or their employer. Well-educated and conducted men are likely to obtain quick promotion, qualifications for which is determined by examination. Sport is encouraged in all its branches.\(^8\)

Lang was certainly sporting. We have read about his cricketing, boxing\(^9\) and cycling.

Of the 3000 applicants, 245 men were selected. They started basic three months of training at Liverpool, NSW, in December 1938 under the command of Colonel A.B. Macdonald, a graduate of RMC, Dunroon, who was attached, while serving in India, to the Black Watch and 51\(^{st}\) Sikhs, and had worked his way through the ranks of the Militia.

In June Collin’s book, Colonel Macdonald is quoted as saying “In commanding I took as a pattern the 42\(^{nd}\) Royal Highlanders (The Black Watch)...So the DMF had as its example the finest Regiment in the British Army”.\(^{10,iv}\)

Finally, Keith Treven notes that the DMF’s contributions “…to staffing and training units of the Second AIF totalled over 100 commissioned officers and also as many warrant officers and senior NCOs. The contribution to the post-war Regular Army by members of the DMF was significant”. Lang was obvious part of this history and his career was standard as far as his fellow members of the DMF were concerned.\(^{11}\)

I feel that it may be appropriate to discuss some of my other, informal sources. I am gald that I did not leave my quest too late. I started my quest in the 1980s, some time after my mother’s death. If I had left it to the 1990’s when I typed up my hand written notes, I may have missed out on access to June Collin’s book and to the help of Keith Treven.

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\(^8\) Book privately published.  
\(^9\) John Holden said that he thought Lang went on to win a boxing title during the war.  
\(^10\) I must double-check this quote – is it this long? My notes are unclear.  
\(^11\) Lang went on to serve in the AIF, the Interim Army and the ARA up till his death in 1951.
More importantly, as it is apparent from the text, I would probably have missed out on many eyewitness accounts.

The views of Lang’s contemporaries are as close as we can get to his own experiences and views. We must not forget however that they are not his views. Nevertheless they must give us a valuable insight into what his life and times were like and the life and times of the DMF. I received many letters courtesy of Keith Trevan who encouraged his contemporaries to write. I am very grateful that so many took the time and trouble to record their remembrances. Now, in the 21st century, it would have been too late. I say to any family researcher, do not leave it too late.

I wrote a reply to each letter stating that they had helped “…to get the feel of the camaraderie of the force”. I continued, “I have found little bits of information a help. From my viewpoint, everything is significant, because it is so rare.”

Most of the ex-members would have been well into their seventies when they wrote to me. Lang would now be 87, and even when they wrote, so long ago now, they found that their memories were fading. They all wanted to write and they rang their friends and they wrote and they kindly sent photographs.12

Arthur Gooding of Hobart wrote:

When the DMF went to Liverpool Hospital Block for formation and training, the eight squads were formed up in alphabetical order and were quartered likewise. Then later on when we became specialists the majority of sections seemed to be along the same line generally. So you can see the F, G and Hs did not become so friendly with the M, N and Os etc.

This tendency to know only the little group that men worked within is echoed by Ivy Stingemore, who writing for her husband, said that he had “…little recollection of anyone, apart from his own little West Australian group.”

Reg Lawrence again states that the different sections made close associations impossible between the sections. He also remembered Lang, as Les.

From what I have read the DMF was driven hard and you can imagine the sections becoming very dependant upon each of its own members and then becoming a ‘closed shop’ of close knit ‘mates’.

Some of the training tasks seemed odd. J.F. Langland of Glen Iris sent a photo (below) of a section working on manually digging a great hole, watched carefully by a neatly turned out swagger sticked NCO. Perhaps some free foundations for a building?

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12 Many remembered Lang as Les. Leslie was Lang’s middle name.
Other members had more personal memories of Lang. Les Mouchmore\(^\text{13}\) of Albury wrote: “I first met your father the first weekend leave we had in Sydney”.

Both soldiers, new to Sydney, teamed up. As Les says, it was: “…the blind leading the blind.” Both men had heard about Luna Park. Les continues: “…it was the only a penny boat ride across the harbour to the park and nothing to go in, so across we went.”

Both young soldiers apparently had a good time and met two sisters. Les wanted to marry one, Ruth. “Your father and I went out a bit then” but with changes, moves and war, both men lost touch but Les was convinced that “I doubt if I had not met your father I would never have met my wife.”

Keith Gardiner wrote that he sold Langton in 1940, his Matchless Motorcycle and sidecar. That was in Darwin – Lang was now a young soldier with wheels, in a frontier town.

Kev Heenan\(^\text{14}\), of Pascoe Vale, Victoria, described Lang as about 5’9” – 5’10” and weighing 150-160 pounds. These figures fit pretty closely Dad’s dimensions when he applied to join the AIF in Darwin in 1941. (5’9” and 146 pounds). Kev recalls that Lang had sandy hair and had thin features. We know Lang had thin features but sandy hair is new to us.

Kev then mentions Lang’s brother Vern\(^\text{15}\) – who Kev claimed to be a light welter weight amateur boxing champion of Australia. He writes: “Your old man was no slouch with

\(^{13}\) I must double-check the spelling. All letters are in my possession.

\(^{14}\) Again, double check. Letter is in my possession.

\(^{15}\) Verdun Opie. I will have to double check this boxing thing. Dohertys were into boxing.
his fists.” Kev thought Dad was in the rifle company, Kev was in mortars. It is Kev who summed up the spirit of the Force and its surviving members.

In any case you can tell your kids that their Grand Pa was a good bloke, a fine soldier and that he belonged to an elite unit, the Darwin Mobile Force.

You cannot ask for a finer memorial.

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i The Militia was intended to be a nucleus force. It was based upon the five divisions of the old AIF, although there was some reductions in the overall number of units. There was also a senior cadet force, aged between 14 and 17, with a proposed establishment of 7000. Training times were inadequate, the men being required to attend only six days of continuous training in camp and six separate days home training each year. In any case units were often under strength, sometimes by as much as 40%, which further reduced the value of the instruction. It made it particularly hard to train the officers, of whom there never were enough in any case. The intention expressed in 1929 that the militia would be equipped with modern weapons and equipment was never fulfilled. Units used the surplus equipment brought back to Australia by the AI in 1919; much of it was obsolete and worn out. Grey, Jeffrey *A Military History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press 1990, pp136 – 137.

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iii Military Statistics

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<th>CMF(Militia)</th>
<th>Def Budgets (000 pounds)</th>
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<td>3688</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>2795</td>
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<td>9357</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Not only do these figures chart Australia’s march to war but clearly show the growing army that Lang was to join, an army preparing for a crisis.

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iv It is interesting to note that later in World War II, Colonel Macdonald commanded the Guerilla Warfare School at Wilson’s Promontory and he transferred that school to Canungra. Did Lang meet up with his old commanding officer when he trained as a commando at these locations?
Chapter 2

Getting there

The DMF paraded on 9th March 1939, in Martin Place, Sydney. This was to mark the conclusion of their training and an advance party of 191, including Lang, embarked on the Burns Philp liner SS Marella, for Darwin.

The above photograph from the Sydney Morning Herald, shows the Darwin Mobile Force at the salute.

Many ships were to figure in my father’s military career. Troop movements in the 1930s were by sea. When you consider it, how else to get to Darwin – no trains and the planes of the time were small and for the elite. Ships, still in the 1930s were a popular and efficient means of travelling around Australia and great ships sailed on regular line voyages, linking the coastal capitals of the continent with each other and the world. Only in the 1960s were planes to replace these ships.

The first of these ships in Lang’s life was the Marella.

1 There is some dispute as to the exact number. Some give as high as 40.
The photographs in Lang’s possession, show a rather leisured time, days spent restfully at sea, chatting with fellow passengers, displays of daring etc. For a young man beginning the great adventure, it must have been a special time. The only photograph I possess of the ship came courtesy of the company, Burns Philp, who kindly forwarded a copy at my request.

Burns Philp, by 1938, was a famous name synonymous with New Guinea and the romantic South Sea islands. The company had been established in 1883 in Townsville, Queensland. It was involved in island trading, shipping, plantations, shops and travel and shipping agencies and so on. The Marella was part of the fortnightly service maintained by the company, linking Melbourne and Singapore via Darwin, using as well the Merkur of 5952 tons and Montoro and Tulagi (2300 tons).

The Marella had an interesting story. She was built in Germany and completed in 1917 as the Wahehe. She was one of two ships short-listed to take the Kaiser on a world victory cruise, but owing to circumstances, she never sailed under German colours, remaining in Hamburg as an accommodation ship. She was taken over by the British Government and managed by Shaw Savill, she brought troops home from World War One, to Sydney, in July 1919. Burns Philp bought her on the 4th November 1920 and she was renamed Marella.

Joan Humphreys, Burns Philp’s archivist, wrote in a letter (and the source of much of this section) the following:

Every aspect of the ship’s appearance gave an impression of beauty and power, from the well raked, tall masts and large oval funnel to the graceful hull lines with noticeable sheer.

A beauty on the outside and equally smart on the inside.

She was lavishly appointed with white marble walls and teak wood parquet flooring – the first class saloon. Walls of creamy black-flecked marble in the lounge with a high domed ceiling in the center.

A ship truly fit for an emperor. I suspect that Lang did not use this luxury obviously, as a common soldier, sailing at less than first class. However, his photographs show, all the same, a comfortable voyage, during the day. The Marella had a cinema, a music room, a swimming pool lined with pale blue tiles and a fully equipped gymnasium.

Of 7495 gross tons and 426 feet in length, the Marella carried 165 first class passengers, 75 second class passengers and a number in 3rd. Here Lang was probably to be found. Usually first class occupied the midships of a vessel and the main, promenade and boat decks. Lang’s photos show that he could access the bows and that he had a chance to sit in a comfortable section of a promenade deck.

Another ship of Burns Philp was passed on the voyage. This was the Merkur seen in the next photograph under way in slightly less than tropical calm.
The *Merkur* was to serve in the coming war as a naval victualling stores issuing ship serving among other places in New Caledonia and at the Leyte Gulf landings and she was at Subic Bay when the Japanese surrender was announced\(^2\). She had been built in 1924.

Let us now explore this leisurely progress north, passed the Whitsunday, around Cape York and on to Darwin. Cruises, then as now, allowed for relaxation and a chance to make female acquaintances, if you could get past the chaperone.

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Sleeping, reading books and magazines helped fill in the days. It seemed that the advanced party had a reasonable run of the ship. My guess is that this photo is towards the stern, looking forward over the aft well deck.

The gunner, facing the camera, in the centre of the photograph, is unknown to me. However, he features in a number of Lang’s photographs and appeared to share a tent.

Other activities, more daring, could fill in time.

Magnification clearly shows that this daring young man is not Lang! Shipboard ‘romances’ might have bloomed. I suspect the couple, below, may be first class, however, as the ship’s funnel appears in the background.
There were the familiar ‘tourist’ sights to photograph and to plot the progress of the voyage north, through waters that were either ‘familiar’ to Lang or would be visited later in his military service. I have tried to list the next photographs in order they would be seen going north.

The Bluff, or Alexandra Head near Maroochydore. This is just 100 miles north of where Lang was born, Sandgate, Brisbane.

Lang was to sail through these waters on his return from the fighting around Lae in the Sea Snipe, landing at Brisbane on the 4th March 1944.
The Whitsunday Islands through a port-hole. A perfect peacetime cruise.

Dunk Island, between Cairns and Townsville. Five years later, Lang was to be in these waters under very different circumstances.

Like thousands of other AIF personnel, Lang, found himself going to war in these very waters. Five years after the Marella took the Darwin Mobile Force north Lang sailed for New Guinea from Townsville on the Gorgon.3 Lang joined the ship on the 7th January 1944, moving out from 13 Personnel Staging Camp. The Gorgon sailed at 0844hrs on the 7th January 1944 for Milne Bay (10–11 Jan), Buna (12th Jan) and Lae where it arrived at 2130hrs on the 13th January 1944. Records show that it was instructed to sail via the Grafton Passage, the access to the sea through the reef, near Cairns. Returned servicemen with whom I have talked said that the Gorgon (a former live sheep boat), stunk and had inadequate toileting. Men slept and ate in the hold.

Mr Peter Nielsen of North Queensland, the compiler of DIARY of WWII: North Queensland was kind enough to give me a preview of his second edition where he notes

3 The Gorgon was built in 1933 and owned by the Blue Funnel Line (of the UK) and of 3535 gross tonnage, a half-sister to the ill-fated Centaur. Their peacetime route was from Perth to Singapore via western Australian ports.
that the *Gorgon* sailed in a convoy of ten ships, including two LSTs. They were escorted by two corvettes, HMAS Bowen and HMAS Kapunda. The convoy was joined by other ships at Grafton Passage along with the escorts HMAS Ballarat and HMAS Katoomba. How different from the holiday atmosphere of that slow cruise to Darwin in 1938.

In 1945, Lang sailed through these waters again, but in different style in an American ship. Lang was to sail on the *Sea Barb* which arrived in Cairns, 2000hrs March 12 1945, from Townsville. My father embarked 13 March 1945, as member of 2/2nd Australian Infantry Workshops.

The *Sea Barb* sailed 0352 hrs, at 16.5 knots on the 18 March 1945 and was to proceed via the China St. Peter Nielsen in his DIARY of WWII: North Queensland notes that the Sea Barb had actually sailed from Cairns on the 16th March 1945, but had spent two very rough days at anchor in Trinity Bay, just beyond the port, riding out a very bad storm before being able to proceed on the 18th.

The Unit history of the 2/2nd Australian Pioneer Bn, which sailed on the same voyage gives some further details. The troops were seasick and although the conditions on board were crowded they were considered comfortable. The soldiers slept in bunks and ate American Army rations served on trays, cafeteria-style. Deck space was at a premium restricting exercise and the troops spent most of their time sun-baking. While at sea the troops received their cholera shots. Again, a very different experience.

A coral reef with an iron framed navigational tower un-named and unknown.
Cape York Peninsula (above) and Thursday Island, with its pilot vessel and lugger.

Again, demands of the service saw Lang back in Torres Strait, eight years after the Marella had passed, taking him to Darwin. The second time he was returning from service in North Borneo, in the Lake Charles Victory. The ship picked up the pilot in the morning of the 18th January 1946 and arrived in Brisbane on the 20th January 1946. By this time other things had changed in Lang’s life, he was married.
In 1939, such travelling and life’s adventures were in the unknown future. After traversing Torres Strait and crossing the northern Gulf of Carpentaria and the Arafura Sea, came Lang’s first sighting of Darwin.

This is Fort Hill.

This is the jetty at Darwin. The ship alongside is another Burns Philp vessel, the Mongola. (sic)

The reader can use their imaginations with these two photographs. They are essentially contiguous. Fort Hill and the jetty are next to each other. These two sites were much bombed during World War Two.
Dad misspelt the *Mangola*. *The Mangola* was in harbour the day Lang arrived at Darwin. The *Northern Standard* on March 21\textsuperscript{st} 1939, reported that:

Forty-three members of the Darwin’s mobile unit arrived on the *Marella* on Sunday\textsuperscript{4}.

There were three officers and 40 enlisted men, including Lang.

The *Mangola* delayed the *Marella*’s docking by six hours, as it was not yet unloaded itself. While the DMF men were not to leave the ship till Monday, many were able to visit the town that Sunday evening, returning to the ship to sleep.

The authorities had re-opened the railway line to Vestey’s\textsuperscript{5} meat works and most of the unit’s material was transported by train and what a train! The meatworks were just outside and north of the main Darwin township, close to Fannie Bay, surrounded by swamps and the sea. No wonder they were to need the mosquito nets! There was a spur railway into it. Today it is the site of the Darwin High School.

\textsuperscript{4} The 19\textsuperscript{th} March 1939, was a Sunday. The 21\textsuperscript{st} was a Tuesday.

\textsuperscript{5} Vestey’s was a large British meat canning concern, which owned its own cattle stations and at one time, processing plants, and the ships which carried the exported finished product.
Darwin, from the air. The main wharf is in the top left corner. Fort Hill is on the left. These two features are Lang’s first views of Darwin and can be identified from the earlier photographs. The Meat works were located somewhere behind the photographer. (This photograph was kindly lent to me by a member of the DMF.)

The Northern Standard reported:

Many residents visited the jetty on Sunday afternoon to get a glimpse of the vanguard of Darwin’s new forces.

The Darwin Mobile Force’s ‘vanguard’ disembarked around 10am on Monday 20\textsuperscript{th} March 1939, after heavy rain. The men from the south must have impressed the reporter, who wrote:

The average height of the men appeared to be about 5 feet 10 inches.

The reporter goes on to comment on the buildings at Vestey’s. The DMF was to occupy these abandoned meat works on the edge of town, near Fannie Bay and the airport/airbase. The processing halls had no walls and the newspaper reported that bagging had been erected as protection against the rain. The bagging is clearly visible in the photograph, to the left.
The newspaper, in the same article, comments on the comic posters and hangman’s noose, which greeted the DMF. Local wags were poking fun at the Force’s living conditions.⁶

Some members of the DMF must have wondered what they had got themselves into. In the photograph below, the men are wearing the pith helmet. I can count 24 helmets which makes me think that this is the advanced party.

⁶ The paper makes mention of the hangman’s noose with the advice of ‘Do it now’, and comments like: ‘Bagtown, you'll love it’, Young Ladies Boarding School” and ‘Girls’ Dormitory’. Photocopies of the newspaper were kindly forwarded to me by the NT Library.
The Main Body of the DMF arrive.

The Montoro sailed from Sydney in the middle of March 1939, with the main body of the Darwin Mobile Force. The transportation of the DMF was, up till that date, the largest peacetime movement by sea, of Australian troops, since the end of World War One and the repatriation home of the diggers from Europe and the Middle East.

The Montoro sails from Sydney. These scenes were common during World War One. Less so, in the war that is only 6 months off because of secrecy. Photo sent to me by a former member of the DMF.

The Montoro, was built by Clyde Shipbuilding for Burns Philp and she arrived in Australia in 1912. She was 360.6 feet in length and 47.2 feet in breadth, with a gross tonnage of 4057. She sailed in the Company’s Australia – Java – Singapore and Brisbane – Townsville NG Ports services until 1938, when she was laid up in Sydney Harbour.

On the 26th December 1938 the Montoro re-entered the Singapore service and sailed for Brisbane, Thursday Island, Darwin, Javanese Ports and Singapore on the 9th January 1939. She was to make four such voyages prior to the Company’s intention to sell her in July 1939. As there are apparently civilians among her passengers visible on the top deck, it was possibly on one of these regular voyages that she transported the main body of the Darwin Mobile Force.
The international situation changed all these plans and with the declaration of war, she was requisitioned for government service. The *Montoro* served safely throughout the war, visiting Darwin in January 1942 to evacuate women and children, to Sydney.¹

The *Montoro* was sold for scrap in Japan in 1955.

Among the *Montoro*’s cargo on this particular voyage were 3000 cases of beer and a large quantity of draught beer, eagerly awaited, since Darwin had been without beer for several days.

Alcohol was an important part of the lifestyle of Darwin of the time. In *Poor Fellow, My Country* by Xavier Herbert, the Territorians supposedly drank themselves into oblivion, built towers of bottles behind the pubs, that were the central feature of the outback towns of the day. A drought of even several days was a calamity.

Kevin Trevan in his article, *Darwin Mobile Force* writes:

> It was rumoured and was possibly true, that the shipping company had Darwin’s beer loaded at the bottom of the ship’s hold so that the waterside workers would have to unload the general cargo before unloading the beer.

Frank Alcorta, in his book, *Australia’s frontline: the Northern Territory’s war*, writes that as late as 1943, with the continuing beer shortage, many diggers defending the north believed that the Japanese were deliberately sinking the ‘beer’ ships.

The main body of the Darwin Mobile Force arrived in Darwin on Wednesday 29th March 1939. The Darwin Garrison was there to meet them. The garrison consisted of the 9th Heavy battery Royal Australian Artillery and 7th Fortress Engineers, Royal Australian Engineers. Lang was there to greet the 250 men of his DMF. Many of the following

¹ The *Montoro* transported soldiers to New Guinea in 1941 and then was regularly used throughout 1942 to evacuate soldiers and civilians from Port Moresby, New Guinea.
photographs have appeared in other publications and copies are held by the Darwin Library. Who the photographer was I can only guess. My copies come from Lang’s photograph album. He could have had access to other people’s photographs. There may well have been a general swapping of photographs.

The *Montoro* arrives at Darwin from Sydney, via Brisbane and Thursday Island. This is the photograph that is reproduced in Frank Alcorta’s book.²

It looks as if the photographer attempted to get the ship in completely. The *Montoro* was registered in Singapore. In the days of the empire that still meant the ship flew the British merchant marine Red Duster from the stern.

² Alcorta, Frank  *Australia’s Frontline: The Northern Territory’s War*  Allen and Unwin. 8 Napier St, North Sydney 1991. p15
The first parade and roll call at Darwin. It was from this wharf that Lang and the Darwin Mobile Force would be required to unload ships tied up due to industrial strife.

The Darwin Mobile Force parades on the foreshore prior to marching into Darwin.
The Darwin Mobile Force marching into Darwin. It is led by the bagpipes and drums of the Force’s Band. The Colonel would have this memory of the Black Watch.

The Darwin Mobile Force marches into Darwin, prior to the official reception. Officers have their swords drawn and the men have their rifles at the slope, for marching. The DMF parade, was commanded by, Major A.B. MacDonald, the OC of the DMF. Marching this day, with Lang if Lang was not the photographer, was Private J Cosgrove, father of Lt General Peter Cosgrove, of East Timor fame and now Chief of the Defence
Force. One hundred of these men were to gain commissions in the years to come and another 100 became Warrant Officers\(^3\) and Sergeants.

The Darwin Mobile Force is greeted by the Darwin Garrison troops. This parade was at the time, the largest military parade ever seen in Darwin. It attracted most of the town’s population. Visible on the left is the Commercial bank of Australia’s building and on the right, Cashman’s store. It is interesting to observe the bugler ‘boy’ in centre foreground. Note that the Garrison troops (to the left) are wearing the pith helmet of legend.

\(^3\) Lang finished his army career as a Warrant Officer Second Class.
The size of the reception can be gained from this final photograph. The Commander of the 7th Military District\(^4\), Lt Colonel H.C.H. Robertson took the salute. After finishing here the Force marched to the Vestey’s meat works, in stifling heat!!

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\(^4\) Australia was divided into a number of military commands (major population centres – eg Southern Command, based on Melbourne and Victoria, and districts. Darwin and the Northern Territory made up the 7th Military District.
Barracks Life

The following photographs I developed from the stack of negatives I found in a cigarette box. They are, without doubt, Lang’s photographs. I have decided to name this chapter, “Barracks Life”, as they general and domestic in nature. The Darwin Mobile Force occupied two sites before it moved to its permanent quarters at Larrakeyah Barracks.

We have seen Vestey’s Meat Works already. It was the first location. Later the DMF occupied a camp at Parap. Some of these photographs are obviously at Vestey’s but others may be at Parap. Parap, like Vestey’s was north of the main town, but on the otherside of the highway to Alice Springs.

The photograph (above) shows us offices at Vestey’s meat works, rather than the processing halls which served as barracks. This main central building may the DMF’s HQ? or mess hall?

Parades and drills are part and parcel of all military life. The following photographs are part of a series which show what has to be the entire Darwin Mobile Force including the ‘band’, the bass drum visible in the centre.
A squad practising the present arms. One Gunner has his knee bandaged.

Notice in the above photograph, tents in the background. I suspect, without any proof, that these parade photographs are taken at Parap Camp.
The soldier in the gas mask is Lang. It is possible to tell it is so by the odd leg stance. This is taken at Vestey’s. The hessian is clearly visible and is perhaps, more than the drill photographs above, a clear symbol of the seriousness of purpose of the Darwin Mobile Force and the threats considered possible. Gas, as experienced by the First AIF, 1914-1918, was considered a real possibility in the Second World War and Lang and his mates had to be ready for whatever horror they might confront.

Tented accommodation seemed to play a part at some stage in the lives of Lang and his fellow gunners of the Darwin Mobile Force. Tents are visible in the drill photographs, seen above, possibly at Parap.
The buildings and the fence seen through the opening of the tent flap are well established. Mosquito nets are clearly visible and one soldier has been reading a newspaper. All equipment not in use is stored under the iron camp beds.

Most of the photographs are of soldiers. There are only a couple of photographs of civilians. They are shown below.
In a camp of young men, the presence of women must have been welcomed. This one is of a mother and daughters or at least sisters (they look alike) with aboriginal girl. I assume the woman in the centre is the mother of the two girls. Lang thought them important enough to photograph and they have happily posed for him.

The same woman and aboriginal girl appear in this photograph. Again, posed. Perhaps they provided washing services?
Small boys love to play soldiers. This youngster is happily wearing the bandolier, the .303 rifle with bayonet and the hat. He is standing by a tent.

Here he is (above) proudly standing to attention. In the photograph below, we see the ‘barracks’ at Vestey’s. Again, the mosquito nets are prominent. The mosquitoes would not have been made fewer by the close proximity of the camp to swamps.
Probably at Parap. The double water tank in the left centre, was a prominent feature of this camp. It is interesting to note the three different hats.
The Darwin Mobile Force eventually moved into purpose built barracks at Larrakeyah, east of the town. The photograph below shows a very neat and smart Lang before the new barracks. This purpose built building with its louvred windows etc was designed for the tropics.

Lang again, all spruced up. Might be a twin to the photo above it. We can only guess where he might be going.
Leisure time had to be filled in but the soldiers in this photograph look too ‘dressed up’ for down time. They have water bottles. Beneath the left hand of the soldier, second from left, there is some writing. Under closer examination, it appears as a series of numbers or a combination of numbers and letters. Did they register dug out canoes??? Probably not!

More standard leisure activities involved the beach. Vestey’s was close to a beach with cliffs. These soldiers seem more appropriately dressed for beach combing.
A typical Aussie pastime, sport at the beach.

If all else failed, there was swimming ‘au naturel’ in the large tank at Vestey’s.
In the chapter dealing with the arrival of the Darwin Mobile Force’s advanced party, a local journalist had already commented negatively on the conditions to be found at Vestey’s. In the accompanying photographs, you can see exactly to what the reporter was referring. People, I have spoken to, also commented on the smell of dead cattle, which permeated the entire site and was an enduring part of the ‘atmosphere’.

![Photograph of soldiers lying on beds in what appears to be a temporary military setting. One soldier lays on a bed taking a pulse, while another wears a military cap and lies under a hessian tarp. Other soldiers are fully clothed, lying on beds with a chest under the bed and at least a side cupboard. The medico is sitting on one of these side cupboards.]

Notice in the above photograph, the hessian protecting from the elements, the iron bed frames and the military cap on the bed on the right. All the photographs that I have seen show either pith helmets or the more familiar slouch hat! The pipe smoker is taking the pulse of the bed ridden soldier, who is clearly in his pyjamas. Other soldiers photographed lying down are fully clothed. Unlike in the tents, soldiers here, have a chest under the bed and at least a side cupboard. The medico is sitting on one of these side cupboards.

The arriving troops were greeted, apparently by some locals by placards, warning of disaster and one, at least was decorated with a hangman’s noose¹. However the reporter noted the advanced party’s enthusiasm by concluding:

As soon as they arrived they set to cleaning up and although there is much to be done they should have settled down within a few days.²

¹ I cannot recall where I got this piece of information.

²
And settled down they seemed to do. There were some compensations. Christmas of 1939, had some of the home comforts.

\[\text{Photo 1: Christmas 1939, DMF.}\]

\[\text{Photo 2: Swimming pool.}\]

\[^{2}\text{A sign of things to come was evident in an article beside the news about the DMF. The article details the dispute at the building site for the new Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac). The dispute was over who should be able to give orders to the workers. It was quickly resolved. The DMF was used to unload ships during industrial disputes. Lang was also, later, to go to the mines in the great strikes of the late 1940s.}\]
This large and very deep swimming pool had served the meat works as the water tanks. Today, the pool is in fact the gymnasium of Darwin High School. No chance of crocodiles in the tank. I understand that crocs are to be found around Darwin. The snakes were bad enough.

The Darwin Mobile Force had arrived and settled in.
It must be said that the men made an effort to be as comfortable as possible. There was even the regimental cat and kitten.

Lang on guard, possibly at Parap. Some of his fellow soldiers are included below.
This soldier has a bandaged hand. There seemed to be some minor health issues in the Force – knees, hands, fevers etc.

The final picture of this chapter shows Lang at rest in a wash house? Certainly there are boilers for hot water in the background. Clearly visible beside Lang is a camera
case and in front of the first boiler from the left is a pile of books. John Holden tells
that he understood that Lang continued his studies in drafting while in Darwin. We
cannot tell whether they are text books or novels. In a time before TV books,
newspapers and magazines provided much relief from boredom and promised self-
improvement.
**Darwin 1939**

What was the Darwin of 1939 like?

Lang did not take many photographs of civilian Darwin. However, we can see in some of his photographs, evidence of a wider world beyond the Darwin Mobile Force. This wider world shows the new age of air transport and hints at the approaching war.

G. Hermon Gill in his official history, *Royal Australian Navy: Vol 1. 1939 – 1942* gives us an official view of this front line defence outpost of Australia, facing the Timor Sea and 300 miles from the then Dutch/Portuguese island of Timor.

The town stands on a low eminence on the eastern side of a capacious, deep water harbour which gives Darwin its value as a port. Within its entrance – seven miles across from east Point to West Point – the harbour reaches inland with bays and coves, and long arms of water fringed with mangroves, backed by low, wooded shores. In 1941 the port was connected by railway with Birdum, some 270 miles to the south east, but thence the route was some 600 miles by poor roads to the southern railhead at Alice Springs. Thus Darwin’s communications with the rest of the world were mainly by sea: both by coastal steamer services, and by occasional ships of lines running between Australia, Indonesia, Malaya and the Far East.¹

Sea transport was still the key. However, things were changing and Lang recorded the new developments in transport – air travel. The Vestey’s meat works were close to the air port/air base. The Darwin Mobile Force was often expected to provide official guards to visiting VIPs.

¹ P586
A guard mounted before the hangar of Guinea Airways. In Frank Alcorta’s book, *Australia’s Front Line: the Northern Territory at War* there is a striking photograph of this hangar destroyed in one of the Japanese raids.

These gave photographers an opportunity to photograph the latest in airliners that carried the VIP, possibly Gen Squires (below), to this remote part of Australia.

Lieutenant General E.K. Squires, whose report recommended the establishment of the Darwin Mobile Force, was definitely accorded a full. This photograph is taken from Lang’s album and shows his care in preserving photographs he considered important.
Guinea Airways “Salamaua”.

In *At the other end of Australia*, PF Donovan writes:

Besides facilitating ministerial visits to the Territory, aviation promoted the introduction of air mail services. Abbott said that those services ‘three official Darwin right out of its placid monotony’. The steamer mail service had given officials a month in which to respond to official mail: the air mails permitted a three day turn-around.²

These services increased efficiency within the Territory.

In 1937, Guinea Airways commenced a service between Adelaide and Darwin through Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. ³

These formal occasions gave the Darwin Mobile Force a chance to show the world how they looked. As well as the guard shown above, the trucks were lined up ready for inspection.

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² pp100 - 102
³ p 101 Guinea Airways was formed in 1927 to service the gold fields of Guinea Gold in New Guinea.
This photograph shows a very important parade. On the left and right of the rows of soldiers are men in pith helmets, the Darwin garrison. In between is the Darwin Mobile Force. The town’s establishment can be found seated in the bottom left. In the centre is the great man. Who it is, is uncertain, but the flag flying from the flagpole at left top, could be the Governor General’s standard. I do not know if Darwin was paid a vice regal visit during Lang’s time at Darwin. Lord Gowrie was the Governor General at the time. The photograph could have been taken in any tropical outpost of the Empire. It is pure Kiplingesque.
As well as seeing civilian aircraft, Darwin airport shared space with the Royal Australian Air Force. The RAAF also stationed aircraft in Darwin.

In the above photograph you can see in the foreground an Anson light bomber used for coastal patrols. In September 1939, No 12 Squadron, RAAF, had a number of these aircraft on active duty in Darwin.\(^4\) In the background are two biplane fighters, Bristol Bulldogs. Australia possessed about a dozen of this type.

Still on matters aeronautical, Darwin was also one of the stages for the Empire Flying Boats, a joint service of Imperial and Qantas Airways. The flying boat base was between the port and the Lavarack barracks, the DMF’s final and purpose built barracks.

Lang photographed G-ADUW. This Short S23 Empire flying boat belonging to what was designated the ‘C’ class, was the forerunner of the famous submarine hunter of World War 2, the Short S 25, Sunderland.

The Empire flying boats were operated between London and Singapore by Imperial Airways\(^5\). Qantas flew the final stages of the route, Singapore to Sydney, stopping at Darwin. Lang’s plane was called the ‘Castor’. Her construction number was S 814. She first flew on 22\(^{nd}\) December 1936 and on 2\(^{nd}\) January 1937 was delivered to her owners and operators. On 6\(^{th}\) February 1937 ‘Castor’ inaugurated the Southampton to Alexandria route for Imperial Airways and later, regularly flew the Australian route with Imperial to Singapore and then onto Sydney with a Qantas crew. This particular service commenced on the 5\(^{th}\) July 1938.

Lang was witness to one of the wonders of the age, at it very earliest. As with the Overland telegraph of the 1850s, this Empire service helped break the very real sense of Australian isolation and made a significant contribution to the elimination of the ‘tyranny of distance’.

\(^5\) Renamed BOAC in 1940 and now known as British Airways.
These Empire boats carried 15 passengers and offered stylish colour schemes, adjustable seats, with ample head room and a full meal service. The bacon and eggs or roast mutton, peas and potatoes were kept hot in thermos flasks. The passengers had the comfort of a smoking cabin and a promenade deck and they got to London in nine days!

The service operated three flights a week calling at Brisbane, Gladstone, Townsville, Karumba, Darwin, Koepang, Sourabaya, Batavia (modern Jakarta), Singapore and then onto Bangkok, Calcutta, Karachi, Alexandria and Southampton.

The boats did not fly at night – the passengers being put up at rest houses. At Darwin, the DMF, provided security by detailing pickets.

To my father, the small town farm boy, these giants of the air, spanning continents and linking the far corners of the empire, with the United Kingdom, must have appeared romantic and remote. The fare, well beyond Lang’s reach, was open only to the wealthy few and government officials.

However, The Times of London, on the 20th May 1937, wrote of the introduction of these aircraft, that they would make; “air mail almost as free as air”. These planes, the paper enthused, would link “…the ordinary British overseas more closely with his fellow in other parts. At last the plain citizen will have a personal reason for wishing the aircraft good voyage and he may congratulate himself, if he will, that, is bringing him advantages, he is helping to save himself his share of subsidies by giving the mail aeroplanes something worth while to carry”.

Mail, under half an ounce, would go by air at the same rate as by sea, dramatically cutting time and providing the Empire boats with a valuable cargo. As with the royal Mail steamers, government mail subsidies were important to fund the business of carrying the rich and famous.

G. Hermon Gill writes:

…Darwin had few facilities as a commercial port. There was one L-shaped wharf, with berthing accommodation for only two average-sized ships…Shore cargo handling gear consisted of two mobile hand worked cranes – one of ten tons, and one of half a tons’ capacity., and two mobile power operated cranes, of three tons and one and a half tons’ capacity respectively. Railway trucks could use the wharf, but not road transport. All cargo was slung from ships into railway trucks, which meant a very slow rate of handling. There were four privately owned, self propelled lighter-luggers, of 10 to 30 tons each.6

We have discussed some of the ships that used this port. Photographs in earlier chapters clearly show the primitive facilities, G Hermon Gill, writes about and we must remember that the Marella had to wait for berthing space. For a town dependent on the sea, things were pretty rough and ready. Two companies maintained regular services to Darwin. From Perth, the two ships of the West Australian Government Steamship Service,

6 Ibid p586
maintained a fortnightly or monthly service depending on the time of year. Burns Philp maintained four ships, calling at least once a fortnight.\(^7\)

Gill recalls the industrial strife:

Labour troubles had long existed, and persisted during the two years of the European war while Darwin grew in importance as a base. The Communist-led North Australian Worker’s Union held complete control over the labour, and wielded it in a disruptive fashion. On 4th November 1939, the first of several troublesome and delaying strikes started when the railway employees stopped work, resulting in a shortage of all perishable foodstuffs. Then, as later, the navy and the army had to take action in unloading supplies.\(^8\)

Gill mentions that in the early 1930s a District Naval Officer, with a small staff, was appointed to the port.

I have in my possession a book; *The Price of Admiralty* by Peter and Frances Margaret McGuire. It was once owned by the Australian Army Educational Library. Dad must have borrowed it. One of the name cards has been defaced. Why Dad owned this book, intrigued me as a youngster. It is the story of an Australian Naval Officer and his loss, in action, when his ship was sunk beneath him, in the Mediterranean Sea. I had to understand the experience of the Darwin Mobile Force and to develop the non-developed photos to see the link.

Lt Commander Jefferson Hirst Walker MVO DSO RAN, was appointed in August 1938 as the District Naval Officer, Darwin.

There was much inter-service visiting. I feel that the officer on the far left is Lt Cdr Walker. This officer’s campaign medals are just visible under magnification. It is recorded that his wife accompanied Lt Cdr Walker to Darwin.

\(^7\) They are the already discussed *Montoro, Marella, and Merkur*. The fourth ship was the *Tulagi*. 
\(^8\) Op cit p587.
It is unlikely that Lang would have met personally, such a senior member of the Darwin military establishment, but he would have known Walker by sight and later, by reputation. Lang also could have photographed him. The Price of Admiralty, was a momento to a past period and acknowledged a brave man.

Darwin is described in The Price of Admiralty as: “…a dreary prospect, despite Darwin’s broad, bright waters and strong sun. The end of August in Darwin is the height of the dry season, when the galvanised-ion glares and even the sea-weed shrivels.”

Later, Walker, was to assume command of HMAS Parramatta, a sloop, of 1060 tons. She was an escort ship with a top speed of 16.5 knots. She carried 3 four inch guns. HMAS Parramatta was completed in 1940.

HMAS Parramatta saw extensive service in the Mediterranean, patrolling and escorting merchant ships into and out of the besieged fortress of Tobruk.

She was sunk on 27th November 1941 by a torpedo fired from a German U Boat, U 559. She sank in two minutes with most of her officers and crew. Lt Commander Walker went down with his ship. In her short career the Parramatta had participated in one successful hunt of a U Boat, having located a submarine off Mersa Matruh, North Africa. In her final action she had turned towards her tormentor with all guns blazing when she was sunk. She went down with her flag flying. Lang would have appreciated the bravery and the gesture.

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9 The Price of Admiralty  Paul and Frances Margaret McGuire, Oxford university Press, Leighton House, Melbourne, 1944
Going Bush

It is obvious that the Darwin Mobile Force was intended as an active fighting unit. It needed then to know and experience its natural operating area beyond the barracks and ceremonial of Darwin.

Lang’s photographs include a series of scenes taken, obviously, on such exercises. Carefully viewing leads me to the conclusion that they cover at least two different types of exercises.

June Collins in her book, Bandy’s Boys, speaks of a number of such exercises in a very general way. These are the bivouacs along the Adelaide River, all ready discussed. However, she spends some time on one ‘expedition’ the ‘Survey Party’ which departed from Vestey’s Barracks on 10th July 139.

This Survey Party raises many questions. Lang’s name is not mentioned as a member of the party either in the text or in a phone conversation I had with Mrs Collins many years ago. However, Lang includes photographs, of this expedition.

I have included an enlargement of one photograph to clearly show that at least Lang had photographs of this Survey.

It is quite plain to read “D.M.F. 1st Survey Camp 15/7/39”.

This is not the only time that some of Lang’s photographs create problems of ownership. As has been already seen, many of the photographs in his album, are the official photographs that are shown on formal documents, momentoes etc. Either Lang took them and gave copies to officials or he collected other peoples’ photographs. They must have swap photographs. It is interesting to note that there are no negatives of the official photographs in the album. Why put together a complete album of other peoples’ photographs? However, we cannot claim the following photos as Lang’s, nor can we claim later his Borneo photographs. The best we can say is that he was there in a general way and he saw these photographs. They demonstrate in a general way, his own experiences when he went on bivouacs, regardless of source. He would have at least seen them as we do, interesting and informative and accurate portrayals of his life, even if not his personal shots.

The account in June Collin’s book is as follows.

The party, absent from Darwin for three weeks, travelled south for 120 kilometers down the Adelaide road and then turned west until they met the coast. There were no roads and they relied on compasses and three aboriginal guides. They met with impenetrable mangroves, got to the sea only to discover that the beaches would not allow any landings, hostile or otherwise because of the mangroves and headed north and then returned to Darwin.

The party took with them a single Ford truck and a motor cycle. Below, is a photograph of the motor cycle. It is without a side car. This fact is important, later.

The brief inscription, already discussed, can be seen against the bike’s rear wheel. The photograph shows a group of men participating in a relaxed atmosphere. By examining carefully, a number of other photographs, we can perhaps identify the motorcyclist as Corporal J Gaul. June Collins names but one corporal in her book.
Careful observation makes me certain that the man on the left, in the group photograph, above, is the same man in the centre of the photograph, below.

Corporal strips are clearly visible in the man on the right, clearly the motor cyclist of the first photograph. This, I argue is another photograph of the Survey group.

Again, Corporal Gaul is visible in the next photograph, the man on the far right of the group. Also clearly seen on the bottom left of the group are three aboriginal guides. June Collins mentions three guides.

June Collins writes about the shooting of a wild pig. The pig was killed with a number of pistol shots. The men then organised a further hunt of pigs and a second one, a young pig, was shot and killed. Note the two pigs in the following photograph. The pistols are clearly visible. So is Corporal Gaul, who is the man in the right foreground, without a shirt!
The motor bike, without a side car, is again shown in the following photograph. It clearly shows the tough, terrain, the survey party traversed.

All we can assume is that Lang took the photographs or collected them as a souvenir from the man who did photograph them. But there is number of them and they follow closely June Collins’ account.
Hunting was obviously one very appropriate activity for a military unit that was, to some degree, expected to live off the land. This is a water buffalo.

Fishing provided the troops with a much needed variety to their diet.

The bush offered dangers. There were crocodiles.
Other activities include preparing for a real war. This is an artillery unit. There were guns to move:

While the Survey Party failed to find beaches over which an enemy might conveniently invade, it was obvious that some points had to be defended or at least some practice at defence had to be experienced, so digging fox holes was required.
This post, with fox hole and sandbags commands a coastal plain and the sea beyond. Soldiers here are dressed for battle, with pouches and steel helmets. One soldier, in soft hat and standing to the left, appears to be blowing a bugle! This is an exercise at the Darwin Mobile Force’s raison d’etre.

The unit was made up of young men and many of them away from home for the first time. They would have seen many exotic sights. We have already discussed crocodiles and pig hunts and wild buffalos. The country visible in the back ground looks inhospitable and often, almost impenetrable. The photographs show trucks combating sandy terrain amid thick bush and confronting unbridged water ways. This was all done in the days before 4 wheel drive vehicles.

In the above photograph, the truck is stopped before a water way on the left, centre.
They had to cross great rivers. Is this the Adelaide River?

Yet, at other times, they had to find what water they could, where they could.

As befitting country where tourists today are advised to carry sufficient water, there were also the trusty water bottles, seen here dangling (below) from the truck’s rear view mirror.
Accommodation, was even rougher out bush, than it was back at Vestey’s former meat works. The accommodation of the unit, on bivouacs etc ranged from rough shade from the tropical sun:

(Note the presence of a motorcycle and side car. We can assume that this photograph was not taken on the survey expedition.), to:
private, individual accommodation, which allowed for the quiet contemplation of a good book or a magazine or newspaper or a letter from home! I bet the mosquito nets were essential items.

The well equipped gunner, .303 rifles, billies, kitbags, bandoliers (a very distinctive feature of the DMF’s uniform) and the empty bush.

Then, there was ‘smoko’.

Some one once said that war was 2% terror and 98% boredom. There must be a lot of waiting around.
And the showers? Nothing like running water and all mod cons!

Like good ‘tourists’ they posed proudly before giant anthills.

Even in the immensity that was the Northern Territory with its tough bush country, there was a chance of meeting the locals. Here is a scene straight from Xavier Herbert.
Modern communications kept the troops in contact with Darwin. What would even our fathers and grandfathers done without cans of spaghetti.

It was not all, hard work or just waiting around. The gunner, below, is playing a mouth organ, while a stew pot steams and others clean up ready to eat!
They also had time to admire sunsets. Lang included a number of sunsets (seven all told) in his album and even had them hand tinted.
We do not know Lang’s opinion of his time in the DMF but in some ways these sunsets suggest strongly that he was alert to the natural beauty which surrounded him.

There exists only one photograph of Lang which obviously belongs to this period of his life. We cannot tell who took most of these photographs, cannot even claim that Lang participated in the events that we see in these photographs. We don’t know who had the camera. However, that only one photo of Lang exists may suggest that on the whole he is behind the camera.

This following photograph shows Lang using a device that may have mapping applications. I say mapping because he may also be carrying a map case strapped to his back. Mapping would be a suitable activity for a young man who does drafting (even if building) later in his army career.

Here is Lang again, possibly on the same day, ‘fag’ in mouth and clutching notebooks.
And, his companions;
Dad only acknowledged two photographs as his own work. The following studies are, I feel, classics of their type. We cannot now tell of Lang’s attitude to the Aborigines of the Northern Territory. Xavier Herbert’s novels convey a sense of oppression and injustice. Massacres had only stopped within recent years and the late 1930s was the high tide of the stolen generations. As a Victorian of his time, Lang’s experiences of Aborigines would have been very limited. My mother told me once that she could not recall seeing an Aborigine at anytime before the war.

I feel that in these photographs, Lang, acknowledge the Aborigines as his equal. That he chose to stamp his name on the back and also have them blown up to almost A4 size, gives them a special place in his photography. Lang saw them as special.
Here are the traditional owners of the land, masterful and in control. They are unlike the other photos that Lang has collected of Aborigines – little boys in uniform as mascot, girls in soldier’s tent etc. Those shots merely show the dispossessed. These two photographs show the possessed and Lang was proud of the images he had captured.
Conclusion

Lang Moves On.

When Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that Australia was at war with Germany, on the 3rd September 1939, Lang was, as we have seen, a member of the Darwin Mobile Force, based in Darwin.

On the 22nd of September, 1940, Lang was transferred from the DMF to the Darwin Battalion. June Collins in her book, Bandy’s Boys, writes:

In August 1940 the DMF moved from Vestey’s to Larrakeyah Barracks and was renamed the Darwin Infantry Battalion. This in turn was renamed the 19th Infantry Battalion about the beginning of November 1941. With these changes came a change of command and the CO (Major A.B. McDonald) handed over to Colonel P.H.G. Cardale.1

Lang missed the second change. He has granted recreational leave of 109 days in July 1940 and marched out from Darwin on the 6th July 1941.

How Lang got to Perth we don’t know – very likely by ship as there was a regular service between Darwin and Perth operated by the State Shipping.

In Perth, staying at the Derward, Murray St, Lang signed his application to enlist, in the AIF, for service in Australia or abroad. Lang gave his height as 5 feet 9 inches and his weight as 146 pounds. He claimed prior militia service in the 23/21 Battalion (“D” company). He was able to drive a motor car and a motor cycle but not a lorry. Lang could use a typewriter and had experience in signalling – with the wireless and morse code. He could not take shorthand nor did he have any first aid. His application was counter signed by a Lieutenant Ryan, 10th Armoured Regiment, as “Required for this unit”.

I understand that this was a common ruse to allow men to get recruited into the AIF. Lang did not serve in any 10th Armoured Regiment.

Lang joined the AIF on the 6th January 1942 in Claremont, Perth, Western Australia. June Collins writes about the urgency many of the Darwin garrison felt to get into active service and many soldiers tried to transfer to the AIF in Darwin, without success. Some even ‘escaped’ and joined the AIF. A couple of hardy types flew south in Guinea Airways planes.

Lang served out his leave that finished on 22nd October 1941. What Lang did from then until early January 1942, we have no record. On February 19th 1942 Darwin was subject to its first air raid. At that time Lang was at Northam, Western Australia waiting to join his unit, the 2nd/4th Independent Company in training at Wilson’s Promontory, Victoria. Lang’s time at Northam was at least different. On the 16th January 1942, Lang had injured his left shoulder, spending three days in hospital. Lang, then went Absent Without Leave on the night of 4th/5th February. Lang

1 Collins p34
forfeited 16 shillings in fines. Again, Lang was involved in an accident on the 10th February 1942. His Service and Casualty Form states that; “soldier not to blame.”

Lang was promoted to Acting Corporal on the 27th March 1942. He finally joined his new unit on the 6th April 1942. Lang’s war was about to begin.