

## 'The Last Patrol'



**NX14894 NEUSS (NOYCE) William George, Lieut, 2/13 Bn, 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade.**

### **Bill Noyce's return to Tobruk 3 November 2005**

We were on *Le Ponant* a French motorised sailing boat and had just departed Malta enroute to Crete via Libya when we were all called together and told that the boat had been refused entry into Libya. My father Bill Noyce<sup>1</sup>, my wife Val and I were the only Australians in a group of about 30 US citizens and were caught up in a diplomatic row between the United States and Libya.

The purpose of our trip was a return to the World War 2 Tobruk battlefields where Bill was a member of the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Australian 9 Division that was surrounded from April to November 1941 by the German and Italian armies. We had arranged for local guides to meet us when *Le Ponant* berthed at Benghazi and Tobruk and then undertake battlefield tours. Tobruk was part of the battles in the Middle East in World War 2 with the objectives being a harbour to supply the military forces, the control of Mediterranean, the link with the east through the Suez Canal, the Middle East oil supplies and the supply route to Russia through Persia.

It seemed that we had come over 12,000km only to be defeated at the last minute. Our journey was really a pilgrimage for Bill to a battlefield where he lost many close family friends from Inverell and 'Kalimna' (the family property) and where Bill's generation came of age, as he said in his diary (5/4/41) with "*the best Anzac traditions upheld*".

Nevertheless, all was not lost. We found an old atlas on *Le Ponant* and worked out that on our re-scheduled trip to Tunisia, Sicily and Greece we would be approaching Greece in about 10 days. We further learnt that we might be

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<sup>1</sup> William George Neuss (3/6/19 – 10/8/07) NX14894, 13 Platoon, 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Anti Tank Pl Sgt at Alamein, Commissioned Lieut 1944, joined Z Special in 1945, solicitor post war, changed surname to Noyce in 1950.

able as Australians, to obtain visas into Libya, but if approved this could take about 10 days. So, we took the gamble, applied for visas, disembarked at 7am in Greece, drove for 6 hours to Athens and flew to Cairo. On arrival we were told our Libyan visas had just come through. Boy, we were happy!

At Cairo airport we were met by a young guide, a driver and a bodyguard and then driven 250km to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast where Bill lunched on 28 February 1941 and had also been in hospital in November 1942 after being wounded on the Alamein battlefield. We arrived at about 10pm and had a nice dinner in the dinning room of our hotel that General Montgomery used as one of his headquarters during the Alamein campaign. It really had been a very long day.

In many ways our change in plans from going by boat to Libya to driving was most fortuitous. We would now be following the path Bill took in January and February 1941 when the Australians in the 9<sup>th</sup> Division advanced westward through Egypt into Libya, as Bill described in his diary. The added bonus was that we would be going through the Alamein battlefields where Bill was from June to 29 October 1942. Bill first followed this path on 28 February 1941 and in his diary he says that *"from 6am we journey all day through the Nile Delta. The land reminds me of India, more progressive, but less picturesque. The same style of homes as in Palestine. My map comes in very handy. All day long we travel westward, ever westwards – Where? Lunch at camp west of Alexandria."* The Battalion had stopped for a while at Bombay, India while travelling from Australia to the Middle East.

For us at Alexandria in 2005 it was an early start the next morning as we had to drive to El Solloum on the Egyptian/Libyan border, about 530kms on the coastal road. Alamein was about 120kms west of Alexandria and we drove straight to the Museum, then the Cemetery and the Memorial to the Australian 9th Division. Bill had previously returned to Alamein with his wife Philippa<sup>2</sup> in 1972 for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle and he remembered the area quite well. He was able to accurately identify Trig 33 around where he was dug in for some time as the area was just off the main road and close to other features. We drove through the areas where Bill and his mates patrolled, and past the Fig Orchard, the site of heavy fighting in October 1941 where Bill was badly wounded by a booby trapped German Anti-Tank gun that blew up as he was moving it with Darky Wellwood<sup>3</sup> who was killed.

Mersa Matruh was our next stop, about 200kms west and on the coast. In 1941 Bill arrived there by train at about midnight on 28 February and said in his diary *"Its blinding rain and cold and bleak"*, but in November 2005 it was very hot and dusty. Bill was now becoming more animated and talked a lot about his experiences in 1941. On 3 March 1941 Bill and his Battalion boarded trucks and continued west towards Sollum and Libya. As we drove towards Sollum Bill would tell Val and I about places we were coming to and what he saw in 1941. At one stage he said that we would soon be at Bug Bug and sure enough, in about 30 minutes we drove through Bug Bug: only a few old houses. Bill last stayed the night there on 3 March 1941, not long after the British had captured the area

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<sup>2</sup> Philippa Evelyn Mary Neuss (16/5/16 – 1/9/03) NX112330 102 Australian General Hospital, married WG Noyce on 4/3/43 only 4 days after the 9<sup>th</sup> Division returned to Australia

<sup>3</sup> W Wellwood NX23418 killed at Alamein on 29/10/42

from the Italians. In his diary Bill said that there was just “*a crumbled mass of masonry*” and that “*hand grenades and Italian material are plentiful*”.

El Solloum, about 10kms from the border was an old Roman port and in 1941/42 the site of fierce battles between the German and British armies. We arrived there at about 5pm and went straight to our hotel, The Sert. We were told it was only 3 years old, but it looked about 100.

Dinner was chicken barbequed in half a 44 gallon drum over the remains of wooden smoking pipes from the Arab smoking and coffee room next door to the hotel. Our rooms opened onto the main road, the windows would not close and noise and dust came in all night. Goats and cows wandered all around our hotel grazing on whatever they could find, which was not much. That night we were not game to shower so slept in our clothes on top of the filthy beds; not much better than Bill experienced in 1941. But it was great fun and Bill loved every minute. It was the month of Ramadan and no alcohol. Nevertheless, we were able to enjoy a bottle of contraband Johnny Walker whisky that Bill found by chance in his suitcase. We laughed a lot!

Call to prayer had us up pretty early the next day and after a quick breakfast we left for the border. All across Egypt we had mobile phone reception and on the escarpment above Sollum Bill telephoned his great friend John Searle<sup>4</sup>. This was Bill’s ‘Last Patrol’ to Tobruk and he was reporting to John who was his platoon commander during much of the siege of Tobruk. Bill and John were very excited and as they chatted and for a little while it was if they were both back in 1941. And then no phone reception, we must be close to Libya.

Crossing the border to Libya was interesting and frustrating, taking over 2 hours. Barbed wire fences everywhere, guards with AK47s, many checkpoints to traverse but finally we were in no mans land. This was about 2 km long, again surrounded by big fences and there in the middle were our Libyan guides and driver. A quick swap of vans and away we went into Libya and onwards to Tobruk about 140 kms further west.

Bill last drove along this road on 4 March 1941. The Australians had camped overnight at Bug Bug, arose at 6am in very cold weather and then continued westward on very bumpy roads through Sollum and into Libya. In his diary he talked about “*more abandoned material, thousands of trucks, rifles, field guns about. Our first true sight of what an army in flight leaves behind*”. Tobruk had been captured from the Italians by the Australian 6 Division only 6 weeks earlier (22/1/41) and this was Italian debris of war.

In November 2005 the roads through Egypt and Libya were all sealed and good and the only debris was the large amounts of rubbish, mainly plastic shopping bags along the roads particularly when we were approaching a settlement. Sollum and the border areas were really quite filthy. About half way to Tobruk we passed a very modern and recently completed roadhouse comprising petrol bowsers, accommodation, a very nice restaurant

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<sup>4</sup> John Edward Searle NX21876 Sgt in Tobruk and led 13 Pl for most of sieze and at Ed Duda. Awarded DCM for Ed Duda action. Commissioned in 1942. Banking career post war. OM for services to Legacy. Secretary of 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Association.

and a large, round Bedouin tent. Our guide told us that the roadhouse complex was owned by one of Colonel Gadhafi's sons who was building a chain of them across Libya.

It had taken a lot longer to drive to Tobruk than expected but suddenly our guide said "*we are now inside the perimeter*". Great excitement; we had arrived. The Tobruk perimeter about 30 kms long, surrounded the port and comprised a series of Italian made concrete posts and trenches. Its was these posts that the Australians occupied during the siege of Tobruk from about 10 April 1941 until the relief in late November 1941.

Bill first arrived in Tobruk at about 3-30pm on 4 March 1941 and left on Thursday 6 March. He says they "*camped a few miles beyond town and dug in well. See scores of prisoners. Am very comfy at night*". A number of Inverell men were with the Australian troops that captured Tobruk and on 5 March Bill says that the "*Inverell boys came to see us in an Italian truck, are full of beans and very contented*". He further says that the "*war has been kind to the Inverell boys*" and quotes someone as saying, "*they are too tough to die*". Bill also says that "*Len Adams<sup>5</sup> pays me a visit and declares he is very happy at present job*". Len was from Inverell and was in Bill's Battalion. Tragically, the following day on leaving Tobruk Bill's truck convoy was attacked by German planes and Len Adams was the first Australian soldier killed by the German army in WW2. Bill knew him well and was very upset by his death and says on 6 March "*I am often thinking of Len Adams. So fine, so manly and yet gone. A little bluish tonight. SHIT*" (Bill's capitals).

But back to 2005 and we were soon driving down the El Adem Road. This was a very strategic area during the siege and the Germans attacked up this road during the Easter battle a little over a month after Bill was first there in March. Driving along we saw on one side newer villages while the other (eastern) side was pretty well undeveloped, rocky and quite open. In the distance we could see an escarpment that in fact ran all the way from Sollum. Bill was a little disorientated, it was over 60 years since he was last here and we were probably driving too fast to pick up much.

We soon came to the top of the escarpment that during the siege was very much inside the German lines. Bill stood on the top of the escarpment and looked north across what was in fact the Australian front line and slowly he was able to make a little sense of his surroundings. He told us that where we were was what he and his mates would look at each day while they were in their posts and he could now see what a strategic view the Germans had of the Australians. He told us about the patrols that the Australians would make each night into no mans land and across where we were now standing. Somewhere below and not far from us was his mate Jimmy Kelman<sup>6</sup> was killed on 23 June 1941 and where Monty Wood<sup>7</sup> the much loved platoon commander was killed on a night patrol on 17 August 1941. Monty's body was never found. Jimmy Kelman, an Inverell boy was only 24 and pre-war worked in the Bank of NSW with Bill and enlisted with him. These were emotional times and not just for Bill.

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<sup>5</sup> Lieut Len C Adams NX12376 killed 6/3/41

<sup>6</sup> James Leslie Kelman NX14884 killed 23/6/41

<sup>7</sup> Lieut Monty C Wood NX70203 killed 17/8/41

Bill was in 13 Platoon and on the retreat into Tobruk on 7 April 1941 his section was allocated Post R42 to defend. This was very close to the El Adem Road and was somewhere below us. Bill looked down and slowly in the distance he thought he could make out where R42 might now be. Not much had changed in this part of Tobruk and a lot of the battlefield and posts were in 2005 pretty well intact. So, it was back into the van and again along the El Adem Road from where we had come. Slowly we drove, past a very small village on our right (east) and much open and undeveloped areas. We could see a lot of debris and barbed wire fences and suddenly Bill said, "*This is it, we are near R42*". We stopped, got out of the van and started to walk around.

Bill had an old battlefield map that showed the location of the posts and with the help of the map we were able to work out that Bill probably was in fact in the vicinity of R42, after nearly 64 years. Pretty amazing. Unfortunately, many of the posts on the eastern side of the El Adem Road had been blown up post war, but there was still much around including the concrete and steel remains of the posts and many old food tins and other debris. Bill told us about the Easter battle in 1941 when the Germans attacked the Tobruk garrison. The Australians had only been there a few days and the Germans initially probed in front of Bill's post on the eastern side of the road. The next night they attacked on the western side near R33 and the fighting was very intense with John Edmondson (2/17<sup>TH</sup>) being awarded the first VC to an Australian soldier in WW2. The Germans were pushed back.

In April 1941 before the Australians retreated into Tobruk Bill explained that C Company including 13 platoon had been on garrison duty in Barce, west of Tobruk. During the chaos of the 'Benghazi Handicap' (the British retreat back east from the advancing Germans) his platoon was left stranded in Barce with no transport. Someone found an old Royal Air Force trailer at the abandoned RAF Barce airfield and this was hooked up to a tractor commandeered from an Italian farmer. The platoon crowded together on the trailer and escaped from Barce, just ahead of the German vanguard. They travelled all day and caught up with the Battalion late evening. Bill says in his diary (4/4/41) "*Leave Barce on RAF trailer drawn by tractor, 'Kelly's gang awaring'*".

Bill was reflecting very quietly when he suddenly said "*Now to the cemetery*". He had seen enough of this part of the battlefield and wanted dearly to pay his respects to his lost mates. The cemetery was a little distance from the El Adem Road and close to the harbour. The Roll of Honour contained the names of those buried and Bill worked out the graves he wished to see. He saw Jimmy Kelman's grave and continued walking. Suddenly he stopped and said, "*Now this is a very important grave*". It was that of Inverell boy Geoff Hewitt<sup>8</sup> who Bill went on to explain, saved Tobruk.

Geoff and Bill enlisted together and Geoff was killed on 25 June 1941 (2 days after Jimmy) when shrapnel came into a dugout and hit him in the head. Bill explained that on the night of 1 May 1941 Geoff led a 6 man patrol which routed about 50 German engineers advancing up El Adem Road with the objective of blowing up the perimeter and anti-tank defences to prepare the way for tanks. The German armour could then drive up the road into Tobruk. Bill said that this was the patrol that saved Tobruk. This attempted German penetration of the Tobruk perimeter

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Vigors Hewitt NX14887 killed 25/6/41

occurred at the same time as the German attack in the Salient, and if successful would have opened up 2 serious and simultaneous penetrations of the perimeter, severely stretching the garrison's resources. In the early 1980's at an Africa Corp reunion in Mainz, Germany Bill met the German officer who led this patrol who confirmed the patrol's objectives and talked about his confrontation with Geoff's brave men.

Bill continued to tour the cemetery and came to the grave of a great friend Geoff Hunt<sup>9</sup> who also enlisted with Bill. The Neuss (Noyce) and Hunt families were very close friends and Geoff on occasions took out Bill's sister Kath. Jeff was 29 when he was killed by shell fire on 30 November 1941 at Ed Duda and had previously been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for outstanding bravery and leadership.

The one grave that Bill knew he would not find was that of Paddy Duff<sup>10</sup> who also enlisted with Bill, Jimmy Kelman, Geoff Hewitt and Geoff Hunt and was a bit older than the others. The Duff and Neuss families farmed adjoining land and Bill told us about how all the kids would play on Duffs Hill that overlooked 'Kalimna', the Neuss homestead. Paddy was wounded at Ed Duda and drowned during evacuation from Tobruk on 5 December 1941, when SS *Chakdina* was sunk by German bombs.

After the cemetery we drove around Tobruk township which was now a city of about 75,000, very different to the small town of 1941. But we needed to be back into Egypt before nightfall so with heavy hearts and much emotion we left Tobruk. It was a very quiet trip back to the border with Bill saying very little. He had finished his last patrol and now only wanted to get home.

Our little adventure, however, was not yet over. By the time we eventually got through the border checkpoints and into Egypt it was dark and we needed to drive another 250 kms through the desert to Mersa Matruh where we were staying overnight. Because of the possibility of 'bandits' attacking us in the dark the police would not allow us to drive without an escort to Mersa Matruh. Eventually, a Toyota pickup turned up carrying 4 police wearing body armour, steel helmets and carrying AK47s. So, for the next 3 hours we followed the police Toyota with a flashing blue light through the desert and finally arrived very tired at our hotel. It had been an extremely long and intensely interesting day. And for a moment things got even more interesting.

At the hotel reception we were told they had no reservations for us; despite us having reservation papers. And then the reception clerk said "Are you from the Russian Embassy?" We were momentary speechless and for a second I know Bill had thoughts of again spending a night in the desert at Mersa Matruh as he did in 1941. Nevertheless, after a bit of talking all was well, we were given very nice rooms and could then wash off the Sollum and Tobruk dust and dirt that covered us.

The next day we started early on our 450 km drive to Cairo airport. On the way Bill phoned John Searle and amid much animated excitement gave a report of the last patrol. Soon we flew to Rome, civilisation, comfortable clean

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Hunt DCM NX14892 killed 30/11/41

<sup>10</sup> A W (Paddy) Duff NX16532 drowned on 5/12/41

beds, and great food and wine. It seemed a lifetime since we had enjoyed any of these luxuries but in fact, the last patrol was over after only 3 days; an unforgettable and almost surreal experience.

Its interesting to reflect on this trip over 6 years later and sometime after I first wrote much of The Last Patrol. Bill was 86 years old at the time of our trip and although physically a little slow, his mind was still very sharp. We had been travelling in Europe for nearly a month by this time and Bill where possible would use a wheelchair; but not on The Last Patrol! A really fascinating aspect was following the exact journey Bill took over 64 years earlier and comparing our trip with Bill's diary writings. His journey, over really only a few months, was the transition of a young 21 year old 'innocent' adventurer, to a 22 year old seasoned warrior who saw and faced death every day.

Bill's 1941 diary was sent to him by his sister Kath<sup>11</sup>, and on the inside cover she wrote "*Fill this in and I will send you one for 1942, Kath xx*". It is history that Kath, an Australian Army nurse, was murdered by the Japanese on Banka Island off Singapore on 16 February 1942. Bill did not receive his 1942 diary from her.

**Michael Noyce**

**Sydney 2012**

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<sup>11</sup> Sister (Lieut) Kathleen Margaret Neuss NX70527, 10<sup>TH</sup> Australian General Hospital. Executed by Japanese soldiers on Radji Beach Bangka Is, Indonesia on 16/2/42, following the sinking of SS Vyner Brooke on 14/2/42