MCLAREN – BOX D16 – DOC 1

Behind the Lines on the Markham Track BY JOHN McLAREN

I

On 6 December 1941, Stephen Murray-Smith, with his school friend Robert Hamilton, had just been out shooting on the Mornington Peninsula when they heard the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. For a year they had been planning ways of joining the AIF, preferably with a commission, rather than being conscripted into the militia for home defence duties only.[1] Robert wanted to rush straight off, but Stephen persuaded him to wait a few days. After a medical examination just before Christmas, they enlisted in the AIF on 29 December. Rob was sent off immediately to an infantry training, but Stephen remained in Caulfield until he volunteered for service in a "special unit". By the end of January he had become the first recruit to the Fifth Independent Company, where he was soon joined by Rob Hamilton and then by Rob's brother Jim. In April the three went with the company to Port Moresby, where he fired his first shots in action just after breakfast on about 25 April. He had just taken over a Bren gun when a dozen Zeros appeared, one heading straight over Brigade headquarters at a height of 150 feet.

> It is not inappropriate to say that it was going like a bat out of hell; I swung the gun round and let it have a dozen or more rounds as it passed over. Whether I frightened the Zero pilot I do not know; but I do know that the majority of the company thought they were being staffed. and Jim dived under a hut, severely skinning himself; and several of our blokes who were on top of the hill said I parted their hair for them![i]

Jim and Rob Hamilton and Murray-Smith all transferred to the Cipher section in Melbourne in April, 1943. Stephen apparently became fascinated with ciphers, as his papers contain several accounts of an all-purpose code he apparently devised for use in the field. During this time he also made several attempts to realise in words his experiences as a soldier in New Guinea. His fragments of fiction take us into the into the fear and loneliness of sentry duty, as well as the boredom and discomfort that for almost twelve months constituted his daily life. A journalistic account of 'Kanga Force' tells the story of the group of commandos and members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles who harried the Japanese behind their lines after their first advances into New Guinea. His most extensive account is a war diary that, he explained, he wrote as an exercise in contemporary history. The military historian who interviewed him at this time described him as "talkative, but a very good type of young man."[ii] His diary describes the arbitrary nature of military command, the sudden precipitation of the Fifth Independent Company into the New Guinea jungle, and the isolation and desperation of their subsequent actions. Yet, even while lumping heavy equipment along rough tracks, he still had time to notice the beauty of the jungle, particularly in his earlier days. So he writes of the first long walk they did along the Markham Trail, north of Lae, which was in Japanese hands:

> Soon after this we got into undulating country and then into thickly timbered hills. About an hour's walk through some of the prettiest country in N.G. brought us to Partep Camp ...The camp was in a steep and narrow gully through which flowed a fast stream, bearing along great quantities of mica particles. It was one of the best concealed camps we were ever in, blanketed too for a large part of the time in fog. Needless to say it was very cold.
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> ...About half a mile along the track we turned a bluff ...and saw unfolded the whole great valley, 40 miles down to the Markham River, shining faintly in the distance. Peaks rising each side of the valley, falling into tropical rain forest, green and humid, into which we were about to descend. (p. 7, 7 June 42)

We may compare this with his account of a desperate night march some time later:

> Trekking at night is hellish. Trekking at night over an unknown and very rough track is doubly hellish. But trekking at night over an unknown track, trying to shepherd sulky natives, feeling yourself getting slowly soaked from within by sweat and without by rain,

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[1] In the event, the limits on the militia's area of service were extended, and its units served alongside the AIF in New Guinea. See David Forrest's novel, The Last Blue Sea, ABS, Melbourne, 1959. It should also be pointed out that numbers of men, my father among them, foreseeing a Japanese attack, deliberately joined the militia rather than then AIF so that they would not be sent overseas and woujld be available to defend their homes and families.

lacking lamps and with God knows what ahead of one is the eighth circle of Hell and a dreadful task.

Even in these circumstances he has time to appreciate the landscape.

> The country we passed through we saw, prior to the light's failing, to be very picturesque. After the heavily wooded Crystal Creek area one passes over the Bulolo on a light swing bridge and continues to wind in and out along then sharp ridges rising up from the bed of then Bulolo on a light swing bridge and continues in and out along the sharp ridges rising up from the actual river. We rested here and watched the light fade. (p. 37, 30 Aug, 42)

The respite however was short. Enormous fires light up the horizon and sky behind them. They reach the camp where they expect to spend the night, only to be sent further on. For a time they become lost, and find themselves on the notorious Bulldog track, the hazardous escape route from the valley. The weather turns against them.

> ...We toiled in the pelting rain, our groundsheets about us, rain running down our bare legs as it dripped off the bottom of then "gumi", our bodies sweating under its stifling embrace. Unsprigged boots slipped and slithered on the red mud track which was now the runnel of the stream rushing down the hill. ...There were not enough lamps and the ones there were blinded us. We were fighting for breath and sobbing with exhaustion as we slogged our way up that hill ...(pp. 37-38, 30 Aug 42).

Murray-Smith's nightmare trek is broken when his section runs into survivors from a Japanese attack on a camp ahead of them, and he is sent back. By the end of the day he and his companions had walked steadily for ten or twelve hours, covering about thirty miles. He comments that "Although this was one of my hardest days walking in New Guinea, we were in pretty good nick and were not over exhausted. But I should hate ever to try and cover that country in that time again." Their effort had not ended, for they soon found themselves involved in what he sardonically described as the "Bulldog Stakes", when the commanders panicked and ordered their men to withdraw from the Bulolo Valley along the Bulldog Track. This event occurred when the local commander, Colonel Fleay, ordered the retreat from Wau and the burning of the valley. Then, attempting his own escape by a safer route, he became lost and had to follow his men on foot. When he finally caught up with them, and unable to walk further, he set up his headquarters where he was, but not before venting his rage on those who were still ahead of him:

> Infuriated with the knowledge of the laughable and rather disgraceful figure he had cut, Fleay sent out a message by runner recalling the men who, being astute, had taken full advantage of his order to withdraw. In this message he made the tactical error of referring to the men who, after all, [had] done no more than obey his orders as "yellow", among other epithets, and in this he sowed the real seeds of deep hate in the men who afterwards came to loathe him. (p. 43)

These circumstances made Murray-Smith more appreciative of the times of respite. He writes that he immediately after this debacle he entered "on one of the pleasantest interludes of the whole of my time in N.G." (pp. 42, 2 Sept 42)

A theme emerging with growing strength through the diary is Murray-Smith's contempt for the arrogance, stupidity and venality of many of the officers, including "the notorious colonel Fleay and his sycophantic captain West, plus the various parasites of their intelligence and cipher sections" (p. 35). A pen portrait of one of his company officers sums up his relationships to immediate authority:

> I looked on his as a general menace; convinced he was endowed with divine wisdom, he prided himself on his snap judgements, an expert in his own line. As someone has said before me, "an expert is a man who decides quickly and is sometimes right." To be just, the most frequently applied phrase used concerning [him] was that he was "a good soldier": and certainly the dubious virtues of "a good solider" [he] did have. He had a strong overbearing personality and a whisky-cured face which earned him ...the title of the "Red Steer". ...To complete the portrait of our relationships I put on record that he probably looked on me as a conceited and accomplished bludger. (p. 82)

Murray-Smith's detestation of most of his officers contrasts with his admiration for the men of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, which on the outbreak of war had recruited "every available man," including the one-eyed, one-legged and one armed. He particularly admired their specialists, although

they shared the faults of "whingeing, and a certain amount of hauteur". The medicos were distinguished by "their unaffectedness, their kindness and their knowledge." The signallers were "a fine lot," and their scouts outstanding. "Little can explain the fearlessness shown by these men, but a feeling of familiarity with the country... And the tragedy was that these bare dozen of willing horses were worked unceasingly and unsparingly. I think that Australia should honour these men of the New Guinea fighting as England does her 200 of the Battle of Britain." These men contrasted with the regiment's "base-wallahing bludgers and moaners of the worst type," who were responsible for the Bulldog Stakes and the disaster of Bulolo. (p. 33). In his own unit Murray-Smith had known officers like his first commander, Major Kneen, a "forceful and inspiring leader", and his successor, Pat Lang, in many ways preferable with "his quiet logic, his thoroughness and sincerity".(p. 47) But he had also seen junior officers endangering their men by squabbles over their authority and by rash decisions in battle. He had witnessed Fleay's jealous misuse of his authority to dismiss Lang, and later to remove a Padre who offended him, and who as a consequence lost his house, which was burnt without any reference to him, and the records of six years' research (p. 81n). His account shows the senior officers repeatedly interfering arbitrarily, and sometimes vengefully, with the duties and arrangements of their men, while they hold themselves aloof, enjoying relatively luxurious food and accommodation. Even when he commandeers a spacious hut for the wounded as they withdraw from a failed action, the officers crowd in with them (p. 71). Yet it is this action that shows the worst failures of leadership. Although the attack on the Japanese camp is in itself well-planned, and inflicts significant casualties on the Japanese, it is entrusted to men who, despite their impaired physical and mental condition, have first to complete a three-day march and who then are deserted by their officers. Murray-Smith explains that his company

> had already lost a few battle casualties, probably forty sick, and 70 men sent out labelled "undesirables" ... The fact that it was judged expedient to send these men out even with no chance of replacing them is symptomatic. Sickness, malnutrition and the lack of any seeming object, bad liaison between officers and men, disillusionment at the lack of any kind of outside support, a malignant dislike of Fleay and the Kanga H.Q. he stood for, ...contributed to a steady rotting of the Company. To what was originally a fine lot of men, keen to do the toughest job that could be given them, the term "commando" was now a bad joke, unfailingly greeted with a bitter laugh and a sneer. (p. 70)

Although they nevertheless performed creditably and courageously in the action, the eventual result was to stir the Japanese to launch their own action, leading to six months of "heartbreaking fighting" and a waste of lives before Australians "were once more to stand overlooking Mubo so augustly as I did on January 11."

Even more than the officers, the New Guinea jungle determines the fate of the men who struggle in its depths. The jungle hides them from the enemy, but it also conceals the enemy. If it offers intervals of freedom, it also makes life miserable with its constant moisture, its steamy depths and the chill mists on its heights. The ears of the lonely sentry translate jungle noises into the chatter of the enemy. Before an attack can commence, the men must traverse its obstacles, and when they withdraw from action they have to force themselves through the same barriers. Yet Murray-Smith explains that

> Despite all this there is no doubt that the Company, partly by experience, partly under N.G.V.R. tuition, had become 'identified' with the jungle. The jungle was our friend, not our enemy, and through necessity we learned how to conceal ourselves, how to feed ourselves, how to shelter ourselves, how to treat the coons [sic], and occasionally, true to Kneen's most famous dictum, how to "think with our feet." (p. 70)

But the jungle "sea-green, incorruptible" in itself (p.87), can corrupt others and madden with its loneliness and contradictions. On a wearisome trek with the wounded into the Bulolo Valley, he finds himself mentally and physically exhausted, and is suddenly overcome by tears. "I had been quite happy this morning up to then, and for the rest of the day I was in quite a high good humour. But for a minute or so I had to weep." Then on the next day, finally arriving at the valley, he is forced to catch his breath as "suddenly the panorama opened beneath us, and we were on top of the world. Xenophon saw the Pontus Euxinus with less pleasure than I, emerging from the befouling jungle, drank in the greenness and openness of the sight." (p. 76) He describes one of his companions as "a bit bush-happy, a

condition many of us succumbed to: and his wild hot eyes gave the clue to his long periods of isolation in the bush, with only his natives to talk to, and the cafard that inevitably develops in such circumstances." (p. 72) This madness comes from isolation from other Europeans, not from the natives who belong in the jungle, and whose support is indispensable to the troops. Although Murray-Smith naturally distinguishes the "good" natives who support them from those whom he suspects of inclining towards the Japanese, and refers to them in the terms the troops inherited from the planters, his attitude to them is one of respect and gratitude. When, during the withdrawal from Mubo, he slips on a rock and falls heavily into a deep pool, one of then two 'boys' with him plunges in to save him. "Peter," he writes, "was an exceptionally fine type of native, but then the type that stuck with us was mostly very fine. ..."

> Of course, most of the success of the N.G.V.R. ...was due to the co-operation of their boys. ... the big majority of natives was controlled by ANGAU, at all times an unpopular but probably maligned institution, which generally relied on 'coonbashing' technique to get the requisite amount of work done. The patience and longsuffering with which the natives carried for us never failed to amaze me, and they did some wonderful jobs." (p. 66)

These accounts of the jungle and the men who were brought together within it would have no point if it were not for the war being fought through its hills and along its tracks. Murray-Smith writes of the three major actions he was involved in –his platoon's raid on an enemy post, an attack by Kanga Force on an enemy base at Mubo, and the defence of Wau against an offensive by some 1500 Japanese troops. The first two of these are inconclusive. The Australian forces, thanks to an element of luck and the support given by the US air force (USAAC), eventually repel the attack on Wau. But these experiences set Murray-Smith and his fellows off from their past and from those who have not shared them – even from the reinforcements who play their part in the battle for Wau but who have not shared the jungle experience that has led up to it. Their coming, and the absorption of Kanga Force into a new brigade formation, seem to take from the men of the Independent Company a place they have made their own by virtue of their struggle with it. These changes complete the disintegration of the Company, and the diary ends with Murray-Smith and the Hamilton brothers transferring to cipher. With the Company, they share "a longing to go home ,although home had already lost its meaning." (p. 109)

Before getting home, Murray-Smith had a spell as hospital orderly, and in the final part of his diary he describes the dedicated skill of the doctors, the sufferings of the wounded, and the sadness of helplessly watching men die. This section is something of a coda, confirming the theme of waste that runs right through the diary. He shows how war exalts some of the meanest of men, while it elicits in others the finest qualities of courage and dedication, only to throw them away. The feeling that their efforts have been futile, or at least unrecognised, has undermined their sense of purpose. This points to the transformation the war had wrought on these combatants. At the start of the diary, they are loyal, enthusiastic, keen to play their part in repelling the enemies of their country. Just a year later they are "thoroughly demoralised opportunists, with a grudge against everything and Fleay in particular..." . There is a sense of bitterness that they have been put down in the jungle and ,until the last days, forgotten. The higher command has ignored the reports sent from the watchers in the jungle.[iii] Trained as commandos, the men of the Independent Companies feel their function has been abused as they have been employed mainly on garrison, patrol and observation duties. They are content to hand over responsibility for the ensuing "long drawn out sordid fighting of the infanteer proper, the only man deserving what can be the fine title of soldier." (pp. 108-109)

These New Guinea experiences confirmed Murray-Smith's pride in his country and in the ordinary men who constituted its armed forces, and implanted a lifelong detestation for the cruelly and waste of war. They strengthened the humanism and loyalty to friends that went back to his schooldays. But above all they generated the total distrust of authority that proved to be the core of his later politics. Like most ex-servicemen, he returned to civilian life determined that the world must be made safe from war. Some, like Joe Gullett, who features in Murray-Smith's account of the Battle for Wau as one of the minority of sensible and courageous officers he encountered, came away with the belief that this aim was best secured by strong defensive alliances. Murray-Smith was among those who believed that peace could be secured only by removing the causes of war. The stupidities of authority that he

encountered were firmly based in the injustices of capitalism and imperialism, and there was no reason to believe that this authority could keep the peace any more effectively than it had waged the war. Consequently, after some searching elsewhere, after the war he was able to give his total commitment to the ideals of the Communist Party, which seemed to promise a different basis for action. Although he, in common with other university members, was from the first sceptical of its leadership, it was not until Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's perfidy, and the attempts of the Australian leadership to hide them, that he recognised the absolutely corrupting nature of authority in the Communist Party. Yet this does not explain why he was so long able to accept that authority. Perhaps it was simply that the Party provided what school and the army had given him earlier – a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. In all of them, he had found good mates.

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[i] S. Murray-Smith, War Diary, typescript, AWM67 3/283 Part 1, p. 3, about 25 April 1942. The diary in its present form was apparently written in 1944, but its detail suggests that Murray-Smith had at the time made extensive notes of the events he describes. I have not come across any of these notes in the files. Internal evidence suggests he used his letters home as a resource – see ms pp. 79, 104. Where he had only his memory to rely on, he cross-checked as far as possible, presumably with other participants (p. 99).

[ii] Ibid., part 2, comment by an anonymous interviewer from HQ, Military History Section, AIF, Melbourne. The interviews took place on 9 Sept 44 and 15 Sept 44. The interviewer was apparently conducting a series of interviews with combatants to compiled a record of their war service: he notes that in view of the excellence of Murray-Smith's diary, which was being copied in full, "no effort was made to obtain complete accounts of events described in the diary."

[iii] "...the day had by luck been won at Milne Bay and nearly lost as it deserved to be at Kokoda (the NGVR forewarned us by months that the Japanese would land at Buna)..." p. 108.