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Uncle Paddy's Letters Home



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Category
Original Research

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Patrick Charles Joseph LYONS, Paddy, was born on the 9th July 1917. He grew up in Victoria Park. After attending St Joachim's Catholic primary school, he worked as a labourer. World War II had begun in September 1939 and Australia needed forces for its defence, as well as sending volunteer soldiers overseas to fight in Europe in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). In October 1939 Australia introduced the conscription of single men aged twenty-one and over to the Citizen Military Force (CMF) in order to keep up its strength, as many of the CMF soldiers were joining the AIF to fight overseas. Paddy was enlisted on the 18th of August 1940 with the 11th Battalion (City of Perth Regiment), part of the 13th Brigade of the Citizen Military Force, a militia for the defence of Australia and its protectorates such as Papua New Guinea.

The Citizen Military Force

Paddy's hair is described as fair and his eyes as grey-blue on his enlistment form, in records under his Service Number WX42411. No doubt his brown hair was sun-bleached, with his outdoor work and his swimming. Paddy was, by the age of 23, well known in Perth as a champion surf life-saver at Scarborough, and a winner in long distance swimming events, "swim-thrus" on the Swan River, with a large collection of shiny trophies. Paddy lived with his parents Maggy and Bill, and twin sisters Annie and Kath, at 18 Swansea Street, Victoria Park. Four of his six older sisters – Mary, Maggy, Mabel and Nellie, and older brother Bill, were married. Paddy passed his Medical as A1 the day after enlistment. And he was officially enrolled in the 11th Battalion on the 9th of September 1940.

A three-month camp was held at Melville No.2 Camp from the 8th of October to the 9th of December. And a further three months from the 16th of April to the 14th July 1941. The Regiment was mobilized for War Service on 15th December 1941 – immediately after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, which began "War in the Pacific", threatening Australia. Paddy was "called up". The Brigade was in camp at Maida Vale at that time. Paddy was in camp again on the 23rd of December. Records show Paddy Absent Without Leave (AWL) on the 26th of February 1942, and again on the 11th of March. On the 17th of March he was AWL for a day and forfeited one day's pay. In July he was given three days Leave Without Pay. And on July the 30th he was fined two pounds for "Wilful Defiance". In 1942 the 11th Battalion was in training, first at Chidlows. Their role at this stage was to counter-attack any attempted Japanese landing. In May they moved to Moora. There was a brief rest, then back to Moora in July. In late July they began manning the coast, based at Dandaragan until August, then again from November until June 1943.

During his time of military service between August 1940 and February 1946 Paddy clearly wrote home regularly, and received loving letters regularly from members of his family. His address once called up was 11th Battalion, Australian Infantry Forces (AIF). But there must have

been many more letters from Paddy sent than the sixty-one that have survived – there are gaps of several months, and Paddy sometimes refers to a previous letter he had sent which is not among this collection. Most are addressed to his mother and begin “Dear Mum”. A few begin “Dear Mum and Family”. There is no evidence of correspondence between him and his father. He frequently mentions members of the family, all of whom he knows will be wanting to read the latest letter.

These letters that survive were kept by his mother Maggy, then by his sisters Annie and Kathleen, then by his sister Nellie, who handed them on to his niece Barbara, daughter of his sister Maggy. One letter is addressed to Nellie, and maybe this had been handed on to be read by the rest of the family, then kept with the others, or Nellie might have treasured it and later put it with the larger collection when she took it over.

Defending the Coast

Eight of the letters were written from his training camps in the West Australian bush in 1942 – the first on June the 20th from “in the scrub” at Moora. They were in training for guerilla warfare. He vaguely refers to a few “stunts ... you might have read about them in the paper.” This could refer to accidents – someone received a broken collarbone. He complains of the cold, and having caught two colds, and of having been nearly run down by a truck. He asks his mother to collect a swimming trophy from Harris Scarf and Sandovers before the 1st of July. And he hopes for Leave soon. In another letter from “the scrub” he tells how they searched day and night for a fellow lost for two days, who was found “a bit shaken up”. He complains of shovelling gravel, and of “wicked mossies” which “nearly managed to carry me off the other night.” Another time they go kangaroo hunting with little success, and see plenty of rabbits. Paddy says to tell Lucy and Peggy, his little nieces, that he tried to catch a couple of small ones for them. In August he is pleased to say he will have three days Leave the next week and asks to have his suit pressed. But in the next week’s letter he says that was a mistake – he won’t be coming home until three weeks.

Later in the year, still from camp in the bush, Paddy writes that they have been playing football, and Paddy has been remarked on as playing a good game. And at a sports afternoon he has won the mile run. It is not all good news - “It’s dangerous as two boys have been shot one at the beach and one at camp.” And the discomfort of it all is always there. In October he complains of the blowflies and their maggots: “... they blow your blankets and plates ... and keep buzzing in your ears.” Once again, he has to say he won’t be home in three weeks after-all, but hopes to get eight days Leave in a month or two. They have just had a one-hundred mile route march to the beach - “baking in the sun”. He got sunburnt. After the third day, and then with another twenty-two mile march, he was sent back to camp to train for the one mile Brigade running championship, to be held in “the Big Smoke”. He starred again in the football final. Some of the men were keeping young kangaroos in camp, and Paddy says he’d love to

get one for Lucy and Peggy. At the end of one letter he says: "I hope Father still has the garden going ...", looking forward to home-grown potatoes and green peas. He signs off "From the Bad Lad of the Bush, Paddy".

The 11th Brigade was again manning the coast from November 1942 until January 1943. Paddy wrote that he would not be home for Christmas, but hopes to be in Perth for a sports meeting on January the 16th. He asks for "a Xmas cake, a bottle of tomato sauce and a few nuts." He writes again about a sports meeting where he came third in a mile race, winning a canteen order worth five shillings. And of the football final which they won by twelve goals, but where he crashed into another player – "it knocked me rotten I had to be taken off the field I'm alright now." But after a five-course sports dinner and "lots of tonic was I crook".

Then they returned to Perth in February to prepare for leaving for Darwin. No doubt the family, and his friends - including his girlfriend Pat, turned out at Perth Station to farewell their loved Paddy. On the 3rd of March 1943 Paddy writes to "Dear Mum and Family" and tells of his trip over the Nullarbor: "We stopped off at a niggers camp and had a wongie to them." They watched the Aborigines throwing spears, and he calls them "wicked", seemingly because they don't wash – water being scarce. He jokes to tell Lucy and Peggy about a little picaninny: "I had a sweet little one under my wing when one of the big bucks started chasing me and I had to drop him so see they nearly had a little cousin." "I had about five days in the big city it is a beautiful place." This must be Adelaide. He says the people there are friendly and social and sports-loving. They have surf clubs. Paddy's mates Digger, Tubby, and Lefty send their regards. Mac is also there. These mates had met the family on a picnic, and are looking forward to another when they all return home.

Defending Darwin

In December 1941 the Japanese had bombed targets throughout the Pacific, as well as the American fleet at Pearl Harbour on December the 7th. Women and children were evacuated from Darwin. The first disastrous Japanese raids on Darwin began on the 19th of February 1942. Australian and American military units hurried to reinforce the defence there, with rough airfields being cleared to the south, and those existing improved. Aircraft and servicemen amassed from the Royal Australian Air Force, the Royal Air Force, American units, and the Dutch. Paddy was with the 11th Battalion with other forces from all over Australia in the Northern Territory to defend Darwin from Japanese invasion over nineteen months, from March 1943 until late November 1944.

The City of Perth Regiment was first based 85km south of Darwin on the Adelaide River. This formed part of the second of three rings for Darwin's protection. Later they had amphibious landing training at Mindil Beach, Darwin. Twenty of Paddy's letters are from the Northern

Territory. On the 2nd of January 1944 Paddy writes home that everything is “honky dory”, even after too much Christmas fare has given him a “crook head”. “I got your letter, Joe Blake, paper and the wallet OK thanks very much.” [“Joe Blake” is rhyming slang for “snake” or even “steak”, but that does not fit here. Maybe a brand of tobacco?] He reports on a sports carnival – football, soccer, basketball, cricket, tennis, swimming, and hockey. Paddy won a heat in the back-stroke, but was just beaten in the final by the New South Wales champion. Digger, however, won the three-mile race, ahead of an Eastern States champion, but after this race Digger “partly went out to it” because of the heat. Paddy watched the boxing championships where the losers “take a horrible bashing”. Tubby has been in hospital with a poisoned finger, and Lefty is “writing to a bundle of sheilas.” Paddy thinks he’ll be home in February, and signs off: “Hoping to see you soon, Your Loving Son, Paddy.”

When Paddy writes to thank his mother for Christmas presents, which came late due to a change of camps, he is “down in the dumps”. He has made her a pendant, which he has posted. A friend at home, Steve, is engaged to be married, and he asks after others. By April of 1944, over a year now in the Northern Territory, Paddy is more “down in the dumps”: “It’s a battle to get a smile out of me now. The first three weeks was alright but I was just kidding myself along. She’s a different tale now.” “Tubby’s gone haywire already.” In another letter after Easter when he thinks of his family all gathered at Scarborough “soaking down a few” he writes: “I’d like to show them what a drinker really is, I’ve haven’t had a nip for over three weeks now.” They get a ration of beer - Paddy may have stopped after being “crook” from overdoing his drinking. The work sounds hard: “I’ve just come back with the boys after being on the axe for a week. Did I give that wood Larry Dooley.” Tubby is in the cook-house, Lefty is working on the roads. They are camped by the river, so they try fishing – without luck, and never miss the opportunity for a swim, and they go kangarooing. They have had Leave in town [presumably Darwin], and gotten into trouble. After sight-seeing with Tubby and Lefty, they must have been drinking heavily - they “could have done more damage at Coleman’s” [which seems a reference to their local pub back home], they “Had dinner at the old Jail house ... it’s a good place (to keep out of).” Lefty had climbed a coconut tree and got three, and they swam in the ocean – “it reminded me of South Beach.” On Easter Monday Paddy was lucky to go to a race meeting. There was a crowd of five to six thousand – “a bigger crowd than Goodwood.” There was betting with “a five-shilling tote.” Also “ten games of two up, Crown and Anchor, etc.” Paddy won four quid.

Paddy replies to his sister Nell [who apparently has asked what happened between him and his girl Pat] in a letter to Mrs A. Lemmey, Mundaring, on the 16th of June 1944. It is sixteen months since Paddy left Perth, and it seems Pat has fallen for someone else. Nelly, close in age to Paddy, would have moved in the same circle of friends. He writes: “I knew there would be a change of things in a fellas absence. I’ve been receiving letters and parcels since I arrived and not bad ones either, but they gradually started to get uninteresting so I sent a telegram this morning just to say everything was OK with me, and no hard feelings, but I was not anxious to write anymore. So that’s the plot in a nutshell. If you or the mob ever see Pat, speak to her

as friends like before, as she's not a bad kid." He goes on with six more pages of news. Then in a letter to his mother who seems to have asked of the same matter, he refers her to "ask Nell." On the 12th of June he tells his mother he is "'tip-top' although I'd rather be down at the Vic Park or Carlisle." News is mainly of being camped at the lagoon. He went swimming twice a day. "A fishing party brought back twenty-one dozen, so last night we had a fish supper." A barbecue is to be held where they take their own beer – "three big Buffaloes". Also a swimming carnival is coming up. Good news is that they have progressed from "Learners" class in the band – Paddy plays the drums - and are now "advanced". "The mosquitos are giving me larry-dooley." But they do have nets for sleeping.

Paddy tells Nell about the "pretty lagoon" they had been camped by. There was marching, but also a sports carnival in which he led a team, the programme of which he includes. It was followed by a barbecue where "the steaks were under-done. The CO gave a talk and gave myself and a few of the swimmers a good wrap up." Then they got drunk, followed by "many blues" ... "so you see we still get a few laughs up here." He still hopes to be home soon. But the letters home continue. The day after his birthday, the 9th of July - his twenty-seventh, he writes home and asks his Mum to thank Nellie, Maggy and Mabel for their telegrams, and her for a cake and pullover. He says "we made a hog of it when the cake arrived". He asks for Billie's address. [Brother Bill was a navvy on the Great Southern Railway, moving from camp to camp.] Two letters to his mother are regarding her sending a tiny spare spring for his clippers, and he thanks her for that. Paddy refers to playing the drums – "on the musical side of things there is going to be a N.T. band competition in August. At present they've got me on the Side drums, Bass drum, Cymbal, Triangle and bells at the same time."

Entertainment is appreciated by the men. In July "a concert was given by Miss Marjory Lawrence the world-renowned singer". She sat on a couch, being paralysed, and sang fifteen songs. A very large crowd had travelled long distances. He liked it, but in the intervals between singing there was a pianist playing classical music, and that "didn't appeal to me". "Tivoli entertained us again with a change of programme." There was a swing band and "pictures", and a supper of "hamburger with eggs and all sorts of cakes also oranges." The authorities had put a stop to two-up, "so Housy Housy is all the go now." In October he tells of good movies – "Foot Light Serenade" with Betty Grable, and "Pop Always Pays". And they had a Vaudeville show - the Porter mob "with twenty-one sheilas". Digger went on stage with the magician. They had a couple of days at the beach, ate oysters off the rocks, and "got stuck in a mango plantation" - Paddy says "my tummy's crooked at me". He is pleased with their new canteen, with billiards, table tennis, quoits, and "the old original game of two-up out the back." He has read in the "West" that five of his mates are prisoners of war, including John and Jim Gilmore and Jim Dore. He thinks that Jim is lucky to be in prison in Japan, as Jim's cobbler has died of illness in the islands.

By the 22nd of August 1944 Paddy is obviously despondent about not getting back home, but he tries to remain cheerful: "I suppose Father is keeping the beer up at Coleman's cool for us when we come down again." He would like to be "down there putting away a few noggins." He tells of a session on Saturday night when he "passed out early" from too much "Gibbey's" and got lost fifty yards from his hut. He was rescued and carted home, and was "crook" the next day – "Never again though"! Tubby was in hospital again, this time with pain in the stomach. He reports that the picture show was good the night before, especially a newsreel on the invasion of France – "They give them Huns a bit of Larry alright." And the movies were Deanna Durban in "His Butler's Sister", and "At the Circus" - a good laugh. He writes "Tell Aunty I haven't seen a fly all the time I've been up." Paddy asks his mother to send photos of his trophies – "I forget what they look like now." And he thinks of his young days, of being ducked by his older sisters swimming in the river at Como.

The beer is plentiful in town, "but not as good as EB or lager". The hotels are not as good because of "having no lounges for the lounge lizards." There is even grog available after hours out of town. "There are a bundle of girls here ... I fell in love with a girl named Dawn, she looks like Ann Sheridan the film star." And the Australian Comforts Fund have a place to eat, shower, shave, etc. They were treated to a "Tivoli show with 14 chorus girls straight from Sydney". And the picture shows improved, such as "Wings for the Eagles" and Deanna Durban in "The Amazing Mrs Halliday." After "Tubby had pack drill for being a bad little boy" they went to watch Dot Lamour and Bob Hope in "I've got you Covered". He writes how swimming with the strong tides doubles his speed. And how they "tea-leaved" fourteen coconuts, but after over-indulging on them "I was sore in the comic cuts (no more for me thanks)." Paddy describes mosquitos "as big as aeroplanes", and says they are having fun catching butterflies and robbing bird nests. He refers to the "pretty little sheila" he told his Mum about before, when he had fell for her, writing that he is now over it, and will return single and happy – "I don't think you would like her anyway." Him and his mates have reminisced on the march, the picnic at The Lakes, and the dance, where Mac had passed out, before they left home. They hope for a similar occasion when they return – "just to make up for what we've lost." Then in October they had been at the beach for eight days, expecting a holiday but instead were being drilled in bayonet training. They collected a bag of mangos. Lefty tried climbing a tree for coconuts but "all he got was a few splinters in his 'never mind'." And Tubby is "a mass of Theatre Royals, looks as though he's going to a fancy-dress ball with all his bandages. Talk about a sooky kid ...". ["Theatre royals" being boils.] He thanks his mother for sending combs, and mentions receiving letters from his sister Nell and her daughter June.

In November Paddy writes that Tubby and Lefty have set up a "National Cleaning Depot", charging "sixpence an article with sox tossed in". In a later letter he jokes that they have gone broke "because I've started opposition at a threepenny rate" - claiming he puts the dirty clothes on and swims in them three or four laps to wash them. But it has all dragged on too long. "I couldn't say how long I'll last as she's starting to get a bit tough without any leave." Paddy writes this on the 14th November. He has been to watch boxing with Digger and Mac,

but it was “not up to scratch”. The wrestling was better – the “big bloke” poured a bucket of water over his opponent. Paddy thinks Jimmy, Maggy’s husband, would have enjoyed it. There has been a concert with “a sheila in it, or rather a fella dressed up as a girl, he sure looked slashing.” He writes again about a sports meeting where he came third in a mile race, winning a canteen order worth five shillings. And of the football final which they won by five goals, but where he crashed into another player – “it knocked me rotten I had to be taken off the field I’m alright now.” But the rain has poured down solidly for two hours in a storm – “I’ll be sleeping under my bed tonight.” On the 23rd of November: “No news of any leave yet.” Playing football Paddy hurt his ankle and got “two days no duties” to the envy of Tubby and Lefty. Lefty is captain of the basketball team. But “the national game is now softball.”

On a Saturday night they enjoyed a “‘Bungarra supper’, the chief cook being Lefty, with Tubby as offsider, it was that delicious.” He jokes about going out next hunting for bardies. The latest picture was “Holiday Inn”, starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astair – “a swell show”. They had been to a swimming pool. The Band formed a team to play softball against another platoon, and won by one run, with Lefty scoring a home run. “The rain is still coming regular as clockwork at five o’clock in the afternoon ... batten down or get washed away.” And he had a few beers with Mac and Tubby.

On Patrol in New Britain

Paddy never got the Leave to visit home he was hoping for! The Japanese threat to Darwin had lessened, with the Japanese Navy having suffered heavy aircraft losses over Rabaul and the Solomons. The City of Perth Regiment of the 11th Battalion embarked at Darwin for New Britain on the 25th of November 1944, arriving on the island in December. New Britain is the largest island (600 by 80km) of the Bismarck Archipelago, part of Papua, and only 88km from mainland Papua, New Guinea. Papua was then a protectorate of Australia. Australia and our Allies had been fighting the Japanese invasion on mainland New Guinea since December 1941. The New Britain Campaign had begun on the 15th of December 1943. The Kokoda track offensive had saved Port Moresby from invasion, and fighting continued to rescue other mainland western towns and ports of N.G., and the islands of the western Pacific, from Japanese control. New Britain was mountainous with jungles, mangrove swamps, and torrential rains. There were tropical diseases, heat, snakes, and mosquitoes and other pests.

The 11th Battalion’s Head Quarters were at Jacquinet Bay, on the Gazelle Peninsula, first at Wunung Plantation, then in January at Palmal Plantation, and then at Toll Plantation - copra and cacao plantations. Six months later in October, with the war won, Paddy wrote to his mother giving a description of how they had embarked from Jacquinet bay to “Toll” in twenty-four barges at 8pm at night. With no lights the barges were knocking into one another. And “‘Old nip’ came over in a couple of planes and dropped a few bombs on the harbour very close to us.” “When we got to Toll everybody got trigger happy and a lot of our own fellas got shot

by their mates on guard.” “A few stray nips being left behind and at the sides as well make them all nervous.”

In 1941 the Japanese had invaded the island and captured the town of Rabaul on the north-east peninsula and occupied the whole island. Australia and the Allies had over three years beaten them back, so that by - the beginning of 1945 the Japanese were largely confined to Rabaul. The 11th and other troupes were now daily patrolling a narrow neck of the peninsula – a line between Wide Bay and Open Bay – which separated the Japanese held port of Rabaul and any Japanese soldiers still holding out in the jungle. In April 1945 they moved to Wide Bay, relieving the 6th Battalion. A history of the 11th Battalion reads: “Little contact was made and actual contact was limited; the battalion’s casualties amounted to three dead and four wounded.” When Japan surrendered after the United States bombing by atomic bomb of Hiroshima on the 6th of August 1945, and Nagasaki on the 9th of August, Paddy’s battalion was part of the Allied forces who occupied Rabaul, which was captured on September the 13th, where they assisted in supervising Japanese prisoners.

Thirty-three letters home are saved which were written between Paddy’s arrival on the island in January 1945, covering the surrender of the Japanese in August, until he left New Britain in January 1946. His reports of day-to-day activities are similar to those from Darwin. But he is interested in this new tropical world, even though conditions there are worse. On the 4th of January Paddy writes home to tell of the ocean trip and the new tropical place they have come to. He had not been seasick, the food was excellent, he played Chinese checkers, defeating the Chinese cook. And he watched sailors flying kites at sea – “yes kites at sea a funny sight. Ah.” Where they are camped the river is cold, the water gushing out of the side of the hill. He writes that death adders and scorpions are a common danger. The butterflies are as big as pigeons, well almost, and there are lizards with blue tails. And earthquakes at times. There is a craze for building dug-out canoes with axe and hammer. Paddy is making a racing scull. There is a ferry service to plantations where they can help themselves to coconuts and bananas – “as many as you can carry.” While Paddy is writing there is a lot going on in the tent, with loud arguments, Tubby trying to mend his strides, and then a two-foot snake passes through causing havoc.

On the 18th of January he writes to thank his Mum for a Christmas parcel just arrived. He has also had a telegram from Lake View Street [from his sister Mabel and niece Margaret – Mabel’s husband Baden was also fighting overseas - and sister Maggy, brother in-law Jimmy, and nieces Lucy, and Peggy] and a parcel of goods from Fauldings. [It seems, like older brother Bill, he had worked for Fauldings after leaving school.] Rain has been pouring down in bucketfuls, but they get wet anyway by crossing creeks full dressed. They are camped 200 yards from the sea, and 100 yards from a river, which is “below zero, and a fella has to wash and swim in it ... at five o’clock in the morning.” Pictures are shown at 6-8.30pm, but they have been “crook lately”. Tubby goes out to get bananas and coconuts. Paddy himself was “hoodwinked” by a

native to whom he gave “a couple of smokes” to get coconuts down, who then “turns around and says he’s got a crook foot” and can’t climb. “There are some beautiful butterflies here, so if I manage to catch one, I’ll frame it and send it down.” [He certainly did, I remember more than one on the walls at Swansea Street.]

In a swimming carnival Paddy and digger win prizes of writing cases, and had “photos taken by a war photographer”. Another early letter shows Paddy taking heart at Allied successes in the war: “I’ve brightened up a little since I heard of a few of our victories. But if only I could be drawing wages on a Friday”. Years as a soldier away from home have impacted on his life. He has had a letter from Billie. And Paddy asks his mother how much she has now saved since he asked her to put away ten shillings a week from his pay. Nostalgia for home returns in a dream he tells of: “Last night I was dreaming of the springs”. [The Springs was a popular swimming hole on the Swan River at Riverton.] The dream he tells of is that he “saves a young kid there ...as I saved the other three.” The band is due to play at the canteen on Sunday night. They play reveille each morning, with “all the dogs about the place chiming in, like spot used to under the window sill.” He has heard natives beating on a hollow log used as a drum, reminding him of some of the dance rhythms at The Embassy in Perth. “They have wild pigs “and the one with the most pigs is ranked highest in the village.” When out canoeing he has watched native women doing all the work, such as fetching water, and writes that they “wear nothing but a smile.”

On February the 1st Paddy writes that he is building a boat to enter a race, a racing skull. Also butterfly catching – “I hit a Blue Empress with a dishcloth and brought it down.” He will be making a frame for it and sending it down.” Lefty and Tubby are up to mischief, following others who throw gelignite into the river to catch fish. But they were “collared” by the game keeper, who took the fish. The picture shows are “crook” – “Banjo on my Knee” and “Crime Doctor” - and so crowded anyway “you might have to sit at the back of the screen, with the writing backward and hard to read.” He hears news of people back home, asking how Dixie got on regarding a charge of receiving stolen goods. And has read in the “Globe” of Don Christie coming third in the “Swim thru Yarra” of three miles. He sends photos home of him and his mates – “I should have torn them up as I look like a nigger.” He tells his Mum the combs and cakes arrived, and signs off “To the one and only from Paddy. Love and kisses”. “On Sunday Mac, Lefty, Tubby, Peter, and myself went out on a sort of picnic”, Paddy writes on the 19th of March 1945. They went on a five-man outrigger across the bay to native villages. Paddy bartered with a young boy for fish, but felt cheated when he saw him hide the biggest. They bought grass skirts for two shillings each, and Paddy got six wild oranges for two razor blades – rusty ones he had kept covered in their papers. He was disappointed when his racing boat had been ruled out of class for the Boat and Swimming Regatta. “I’ve got it looking like a racing scroll a Bobby Pearce with twelve-foot oars.”

Paddy writes again about trading at a native village on the 8th of April 1945. He describes a baby "about the size of two 'Sal Vital' tins" he wanted to get for Peggy. While buying oranges he saw "a kid about the size of two hurricane lamps" "... about two years old ... he could just toddle along and in his gob he had a big cigarette butt smoking away like a goodun." It is Tubby's birthday and they will be having a few beers with Digger and Mac. One night last week, he writes, they drank "three bottles of booze each" resulting in "crook heads next morning." On the 23rd of April Paddy is feeling cheered now that "Old Joe and Monty have got the upper hand now ... the mob ride the wireless for news. Paddy himself had apparently "had a wrap up" in Perth's "Daily News" paper. "At least six jokers had got that slip in their letters. The news report must have been on the band, as Tubby too was mentioned in it as "the champion trombone player." There have been earth tremors, reminding Paddy of feeling sea-sick when he went on a barge.

Writing home on the 2nd of July Paddy says how he and Tubby were eight days in the wilderness with no wash or shave, and meals were "eighteen out of twenty-four bully and biscuits." "What if the ladies of the lounge should see us now, said Tubby." Paddy had a letter from his little niece Margaret. He has twenty bottles of his beer ration now owing to him. Thinking of the Balmoral pub at home, he asks that they look out for "some of our fellas down on compassionate leave, so don't forget to have a wongie to them." Paddy has already received telegrams from home for his birthday on the 9th. He sends a local paper home, "The Guinea Gold". The boxing championships were good entertainment. A few letters on he says he is not doing well with Tattersalls so will bet on the Melbourne Cup. He has run out of barbers' combs and draws the comb on the back page to show the size [seven inches] for his Mum to send him some. Paddy had finally found the spring for his clippers he had asked his Mum for when at Darwin – "Lefty had it tucked away in his little string bag."

Another story is of being with Lefty out to get some paw-paws, taking their guns. They suddenly ran into an armed "native police boy": "Lefty and the native propped at the same time and both went for their guns like the cowboys..." causing "a hell of a fright." He has sent home a book, "Jungle Gun". Another letter tells those at home "I'm not doing it so bad now, seeing that the whole thing is gradually coming to an end." He writes that he gets war news from the wireless at the YMCA. Sending home a photo of the band Paddy writes "I'm on the right-hand side behind a side drum." The band is going strong. They had played for the Dutch, who were celebrating their Queen's birthday, and they were given icy cold beers! Tubby had been in hospital for appendicitis but was not operated on. Digger was also in hospital for two days from drinking too much, whiskey on top of beer – "He went out like a light." In a later letter, having just recovered from "a crook head", Paddy says "it will be all on with the Dutchies again this Friday night", the band playing at a dinner. The next letter reports they were given "bottled E.B very rarely seen around these parts, also whiskey and gin". He "puts the nips in" by asking his mother to increase his savings of ten shillings a week to one pound. White ants and borers have eaten his cupboard, even his soap which he'd left on a pole three foot high. Picture night will next feature "Mutiny on the Bounty", and James Cagney in "Johnny Come

Lately". The Javanese also asked the band to play for New Year's Eve. It was a wild show: "It was like 'Harlem' with Jarvenese West Indians Dutch and a few Aussie airmen." The crowd had already been drinking and gave them a roaring welcome. Stewards served beer, whiskey, gin and cocktails, and "a beautiful supper of rice salad fried goat's meat on sticks cow and roast chicken." "Just as we were leaving the crowd were well oiled up and the fights started so we got."

General Blamey had inspected them a few weeks before – "the same old thing: 'you are superior to the jap' if he knew how bored most of us were that day he wouldn't bother to come. I'm sure he wouldn't be missed." In Europe, following the Allies entering Berlin in April, the war is over on the 8th of May, 1945. In New Britain Paddy is still on patrol "looking for the little Japon man", War in the Pacific continuing. With no contact with the enemy, he remarks: "I'm only hoping all my patrols are as successful as this one." He has heard of two medals that are due to his regiment, and he is proud of that. He writes that he is acting as a stretcher bearer now. Describing the surf there –he says "The waves are twice the size of our house and they give you a bit of curry." With sandflies a big problem he complains that tropical islands are not like what they see on the pictures. On the 30th of June Paddy writes he has been "out chasing Jappys" for several days. "Gee cripes these hills are big..." He complains of having had to help a native soldier who was "as crook as a dog". But most nuisance seems to come from sandflies, mosquitos, and leeches – "it's the common leech from Tomato Lake" – and soldiers have had them on their tonsils and in their eye, they are so prolific. On the 14th of May Paddy says: "I am still on the topline". He had sent his mother a telegram on Mothers' Day, and one for his niece Betty's wedding to Frank, a Yankie serviceman. He had performed with his drums to march the guard on, which went well, in spite of his nerves – he even thinks he might be playing with Niddy Roberts and his orchestra at The Embassy when he gets home. He signs off: "I'll have to close now as I'm off to church."

gum), apples, boot polish, tobacco and papers, and so on, all much appreciated. On the 28th of May Paddy writes that he had followed a snake track from the bush to the Officers' Mess where an officer shot it – it was ten foot long. (A few months later he tells of Tubby cooking a snake which the mates share to eat.) He thanks his Mum for the fountain pen she sent. Digger is to run in a mile race, which they will be watching and "have a little wager on him to win." On the 14th of June Paddy complains of no sign of Leave, hoping "these yellow madmen will give in, then we would be able to unstrangle ourselves from the red tape." Their new name for Tubby is "the Bully of New Britain", because Tubby had been on patrol and "came across a couple of dead-uns." He is said to have booted the leg off a body whilst cursing them. "I hate to see what he'd do to a live one", quips Paddy. Tubby says they will "have some wonderful yarns to tell over the Balmoral bar." When he writes on the 14th of August he is "waiting for these little nips to give in." Whereas he had again not been drinking for a few weeks, he now enjoys a bottle of beer a night from his rations. On the 12th they had "Sports Day at Golden Beach. Inter Unit Sports Carnival", of which he encloses the programme. The main event was a life-saving belt race of a team of five, with one beltman to swim seventy-five yards. Paddy

was the fastest swimmer, but he swam to the wrong bouy, so lost to the winner by two seconds. He won the half-mile swim – the prize was a leather writing case. Digger came third to a pearl diver from Thursday Island in the under-water swim. Pictures were “Kings Row” and “Ice Capades”. Another boxing competition is being held. He had got the cake his Mum sent. “The boys” are making cats’ eyes necklaces from shells, but Paddy has not got the patience.

Then Japan surrenders on August the 14th, 1945 – the war is over! Paddy begins his letter of the 7th of September: “Well at last the game is sewn up for us here. Do you think the little yellow bellies had to let their pride go and pull their heads in when we met up with them.” “Yesterday the heads signed the agreement out of Rabaul ... I believe there are about a hundred thousand of them.” The job now was to be guarding these prisoners of war until they were shipped back to Japan. Because of heavy celebrations the beer has run out! Paddy writes: “Tubby, Digger, Mac and myself have been getting together and running the rabbit and it ran out at an average of four bottles a night so I think you could say we drowned all our sorrows.” [Perhaps Lefty was celebrating with a service woman.]

They had a series of very strong earth tremors, with coconuts falling on their tents and limbs breaking from trees. And a deluge of rain had washed big logs out to sea - “A man has to be very careful he doesn’t surf into them.” Rifle drill and “smartening up exercises” continue. Paddy is positive when he writes home on the 21st of August that when they “get these buggers off the island the sooner the better we get it finished with”. He has had a hamper of goodies from a high school boy in South Australia. There is to be another surf carnival, and he sends home his last years clothing coupon. He hopes “to be drinking at the Balmoral at about Xmas.”

Rabaul

On the 17th of September 1945 the 11th Battalion sailed overnight on the “Manoora” to Rabaul. This town and port had been central to the Japanese as a supply base for their troupes on New Guinea and islands in the West Pacific. Paddy writes a long letter home on the 19th about his new location near the city: “... much to my surprise japs are touring up and down in slashing big motor cars.” He describes the town as a ruin “all overgrown with undergrowth” from the bombing raids of previous years. There are miles of tunnels in the hills – with stores of ammunition and supplies, and used as safe living spaces for Japanese soldiers. “They gave the Aussies seventy trucks and twenty cars and still have plenty themselves.”

There are active volcanoes close by, Paddy writes. The largest, called “the Mother”, is two thousand feet high. On the rich soil of mountainsides and every available place are “lush Jap gardens” growing paw-paws, sweet potatoes and tomatoes. Soldiers trade, until that is taken over by the army for the Allied kitchens. “All this you hear of them being half starved here is

all hoey.” Paddy complains of the heat and the tropical rain. He says that 200 white people and nine thousand Indians had been prisoners held by the Japanese. The Japanese now salute the Aussies - “only we don’t salute back not even to the generals.” “We have 3000 Jap volunteers working for the brigade.” Even so, Tubby and Paddy had to dig a latrine – “Sometimes I wonder if we really did win the war.”

Sunk in the harbour are hundreds of boats and barges, and battered seaplanes are on the beach. Japanese defence of Rabaul meant plenty of tanks, and the coast was fortified with big guns. “Just as well we didn’t have a crack at the place, as I think it would have been curtains for us.” Flying boats were now busy taking sick Indian prisoners to the main Allied hospital at Jacquinot Bay. There were 5000 Indian prisoners-of-war held by the Japanese at Rabaul. These had been transported from Singapore as forced labour, captured from Indian Army units in the British army when Singapore fell. They had suffered starvation, illness, and brutality as P.O.Ws. But thin and ragged as they were they remained proud Indian soldiers.

Ninety thousand men of the Japanese force were camped two miles away from Paddy’s camp. Japanese barges continued to take supplies to their troupes along the coast. Paddy reflects disappointedly that the caves full of supplies and other booty are guarded now by “our blokes ... so there are no spoils of victory.” In a few months’ time Tubby and Paddy are on a Sunday excursion and discover a couple of midget submarines on a beach, and various gun emplacements, including a pom-pom gun. In September he sees a return home before too long – “I’ll be home when Tom Blamey says I can go.”

Before he left the island Paddy had a ride around Rabaul in a jeep. He saw a large Japanese cemetery: “A nigger told us one of the bombs landed on a hospital and knocked it flying and killed six hundred.” They went up to an active volcano, Vulcan, and felt the hot steam coming from cracks on its side. They passed an airstrip with many downed planes still in their bays. On a hill he saw two six-inch naval guns and one Japanese gun. And at a Chinese village he saw some very pretty girls. In the harbour was a 14000 ton ship and an aircraft waiting to take the Indian former P.O.Ws home via Brisbane.

Waiting to Come Home

By early October they have been told that they “haven’t Buckley’s chance of getting home before six months”. There is a points system – the highest being 200. Paddy has 186. “Old Tom is sure getting his money’s worth out of us.” On October the 4th Paddy tells his Mum that he and Tubby are now Special Constables in the local police.: “...we expect to make our first arrest on Saturday at the S.P. shop.” Digger has answered a call for “Jap Bashers”. He is on guard “with owen gun and a four-foot piece of jarrah for a waddie.” As Paddy and the others marched past him Digger yelled “Hirohito!” to the Japanese to make them stand to attention.

With little response he then yells “Ha you!”, which Paddy says is Irish. On a Sunday walk to a native village over the hills they found the natives wanting to play cards, “starting at three shillings a hand and upping it to a quid”. They found a beach that had been fortified by the Japanese with rows of covered bombs, some up to 4000 pounds, now disconnected.

“Still in Rabaul” writes Paddy on the 15th of October 1945 – “this forgotten world of Rabaul.” The points system determines those who return home early. Those men with over 200 points now go home two at a time each day in a flying boat. On the 15th of November Paddy says: “The harbour is always filled with boats but they take Indians home or go for troupes on Bougainville.” He hopes to be “on the second big boat that leaves here full.” As well as the continuing nuisance of “mossies, sandflies and mud” there is a plague of rats, even under their beds. “Another thing that has invaded us here is the yanks. Every time you look up you see one of them peeping in - “Have you got any swords, revolvers or guns and we’ll give you some cigarettes and canned beer.” Education classes have been organized for the men, but Paddy has “played the wag” – don’t tell young Dennis, his nephew, he says. Digger has managed to get a case of booze “by fair or foul ... and I got full.” Tubby and Digger are now on the police force. By the 10th of December Paddy complains from “this godforsaken joint” that “it won’t be long before I’m ding bats”. He has given up hope of getting home before Christmas. “Lefty got down to Perth on a Liberator and has been discharged already.” Men with 188 points have left on a ship which came in on the 18th of December. There is not much work. They parade for inspection each morning and are put on guard occasionally. Paddy finds this “a waste of a lot of good time ... I could find a lot of more important things to do down south.

“Out of 250 war criminals they have caged up 70 which are guarded by native soldiers with two bren guns on each corner.” There was rough justice too. One of the Chinese from the Chinese compound stopped passing trucks of Japanese “and looks for certain nips. He found two that had been responsible for 30 of his mates’ death so in he goes with a piece of wood and lathers them.” Australians sent to stop him urged him on. The Japanese prisoners of war can be in bad trouble. “One of the nips working at the jetty filled his water bottle with sugar and got ten years behind bars, another two attacked one of our fellas with a crow bar so the guard shot them both.” “One jap drove a pick into a land mine and blew eight of his mates up and injured two of our fellas.” Paddy himself was not impressed when he had four Japanese P.O.Ws to supervise working. And “The Chinese got stuck into the Japs and killed four. One of the Chinese died another got fined three shillings for fighting.”

But Paddy is “in the pink”. The latest picture show was “Since You Went”. He got the cake, and he encloses some invasion money and “tally brand” reading “Royal Imperialist Japanese Navy”. In a couple of days they will get a ration of a bottle of beer each day. “The natives are also guarding the beer so that the Aussies can’t run amok.” And there are five rows of barb wire surrounding it. This is because seventy cases, plus spirits, previously “went off at the beach head” while being unloaded. Out on a Sunday walk Tubby and Paddy traded with a

native for eggs but two of them had chickens in them. They did well with paw-paws and bananas. And the Rabaul Racing Club will be starting its season. There are sixty horses, with the 11th Battalion allotted two to train and jockey. "The last week we have been filling in demobilization forms and having dental and medical examinations."

Tom Blamey came on a Sunday to tell them most of them would be waiting a long time yet – "the old tale of shipping is short, this was met with one big gro...oan from the whole division on parade, then he follows up with they needed the ships to take food to Japan and Germany that knocked the mob back altogether." It was "the biggest shambels I've been on yet." The men on parade talked, leant on their rifles, looked around at the nurses – there were thirty of them. They had got up to breakfast at one in the morning on a Sunday, and were marched four miles to the parade held at 7.30, being the coolest time of day. All the battalions had done the same, and then were marched home again.

The heat is unbearable, with the need to wash, and to change clothes due to the heavy perspiration. In late November, because "some blokes burnt their Officers' Mess down and threw all the officer's seats out of the picture show" the whole battalion got punished by a fifteen-mile route march a week, and guard duties. After Christmas they are still on "the island of forgotten men." It was a disappointing Christmas, with even the turkey and beer "not up to the standard of last year ... I guess we have all had a bellyful." Even a sports meeting was "scrubbed" due to loss of interest. Paddy had made a yacht in nine days, "the size and sail size that of a Vi." "On Xmas day the crowd over the other side of the island were so fed up they burnt down the Officers' Mess, that's the second time that it has occurred."

"At last they have broken our unit the famous 11th up, and are dividing what are left amongst the other units which are under strength." This meant Tubby and Digger would go to another battalion. The Japanese are now in a big compound. Two of the war criminals have been sentenced to hang. Boxing championships were held, with six silver cups presented. The weather has been "wicked" with storms at night, and heat. "Last night I sat in the rain for three hours to see Abbott and Costello in 'Hit the Ice', and 'Yankee Doodle Dandee'." The ship the "Ormiston" has been and gone, next due is the "Salamora", then the "Duntroon" in on the 6th of January, to leave on the 9th. Paddy is hoping to be on that.

Paddy was on that ship home, the "Duntroon", which left Rabaul on the 8th of January and arrived in Brisbane on the 13th. On the 28th of January he was demobilized in Western Australia, and discharged on the 1st of February. He was by then 28 years old and had served 1510 days of active service – 976 in Australia and 414 in New Britain. His Full Time War Service was in the C.M.F. 15-12-1941 – 8-1-1945, and the A.I.F. 29-1-1945 – 1-2-1946. The 11th Battalion was disbanded on the 11th April 1946.

Battle honours due to Paddy were the “S.W. Pacific 1944-45” and “Liberation of Aust-NG.” Five medals due to him were the Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal, Australian Service Medal, and 1939-1945 Star. It is not on his record that these were ever sent to him. Whereas he had, many months before, been tickled when he was told about medals due to him, imagining himself wearing them proudly at the Balmoral or the Carlyle, his experience of abandonment at the end of the war by the government, in the harsh conditions of the tropics so far from home and his loved ones, may have meant he never wanted to apply for them.

Norma Lyons

December, 2024



Private Patrick Lyons



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