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EX TIMOR

AN ACCOUNT OF THE TIME SPENT FIGHTING IN EAST TIMOR WITH  
THE 2/2 COMMANDO CORPS.

As requested I will attempt to give an account of the time we left Dutch Timor and entered the Portuguese end of Timor. Col Doig said we were to tell our story, warts and all, so I will take him at his word.

One day I went down to the coast to visit some of the Officers and men who were camping there in huts. On arrival there was one officer Lieutenant Williams sitting behind his desk with his cap on and looking important. He said

"Corporal, Brigadier Veale has commanded we make our way to Portuguese Timor to join with the 2/2 Commando Company."

The advise was that it would take three weeks and we had to carry enough supplies for that period.

We all assembled at Atambua where the AASC were formed again with our officers under Capt. Read and told we had to make our way to Beco. The first person of the 2/2 we met was Lieutenant Laffy, who said he would take us over. He gathered us together and gave us a lecture, saying there was a small band of Japanese not far away, and that we would probably raid them one night and cut their throats. We never did, and had an uneventful trip to Beco. There the A.A.S.C. re-formed with three officers, one R.S.M., several Sergeants, and I was the only Corporal. Our main Corporal did not make it, and we heard a story that the Dutch natives had captured him, tied him up like a pig and taken him in to the Japanese. I never heard of him again.

My job with the A.A.S.C. was 2/1.C. Field Bakery, charged with keeping the troops in bread. When the Japanese landed, the bakery was closed and I baked no more bread from then on. However, I had grown up in the bush, had used guns and rifles for many years, and knew how to survive in primitive conditions. On one occasion I was asked when I was with my section in D Platoon where I had learned jungle fighting. My response

"Going around my rabbit traps, Mate, I think it was very good training!"

After being in Beco two or three weeks, Lieutenant Scott came to me and said "Corporal, you have to take six men and go up and join the 2/2. "

This was good news to me. I had had enough of being bombed and strafed without any chance of hitting back. We set off early one morning. Unfortunately I had caught the 'flu and was not feeling the best, but that did not stop me. We arrived at the place about eleven o'clock that night. All the Top Brass were there. I thought we would be made a bit welcome, but one man who said he was an Officer said we were not wanted here, we would be of no use, and we could get back to where we came from.

This surprised and disappointed me, as I was responsible for the six men, one of whom said that he would not take that sort of thing from anyone, and intended going back the next day to Beco. I advised him against this. I was keen to find out what the general attitude was. No-one besides the that one Officer proved to have this attitude to us. I was in fact befriended by Brigadier Veale whom I had met previously at Champlong, and he gave me a pair of boots.

When we started our five days training, two of my men went back to their unit. About the second night we were given a lecture from Lieutenant Colonel Spence. He became very stern and said if we were caught with the native women, we would have the bolt taken from our rifles and be sent into enemy territory. He said

"You can't fight Japanese and fraternise with women," to put it politely.

Many months later, after a lot of experiences, I commented

"Quite a few men may have lost their bolt, but not out of their rifle!"

After five days of training D. Platoon was formed with Capt. Don Turton in charge. The Officer in charge of our section was Cam. Rodd. Firstly we were sent to the Atsabe area. Things were fairly quiet for a while but it was never dull with Com. Rodd. There was a lot of patrolling and seeking of information, and we soon found out that it was very necessary to handle the natives. On one occasion, Cam. Rodd found some machine gun ammo which was suitable for Capt. Laidlaw. who was up at Remexio. I was given two men and some natives, and went off to find Capt. Laidlaw. It was very good experience for me, because as you know "The Bull" was a legend. I presented myself to him, but whether he used the ammo I never found out. They told me they had a forward Op. overlooking Dili, and I wanted to have a look at it. The next day I went out with them and we could see Dili very clearly, see the boats in the harbour and people moving about. They also showed me the place where they ambushed the "Singapore Tiger". I thought he could not have been very smart, as it was a perfect place for an ambush. They told me they could have important information back to Australia in two hours.

The next day we started back to our section to make our report to Cam. Rodd. At about this time Cam. Rodd split the section and I took a section out on my own. It soon became apparent to me that the natives were becoming restive. One native with a couple of mates came to me with a sad story. He said

"If we go with the Jap, Australia come along, we are dead; if we go with Australia, Jap come along, we are dead". He said dead Hotoo, meaning it does not matter what they did they were dead. Then he asked me for money, which I did not have. That night they stole some of our gear and disappeared. It was becoming apparent to me that we must make every effort to keep the natives on side.

By this time we all had creado which were very necessary for the help they could give us in getting information. Earlier I had had a talk with Don Turton, and I remembered him telling me the cost of maintaining a section in Timor was about a quarter of the cost in Eastern Australia. We were given some silver money about this time, to buy food, so I wrote to Don to ask him if we could use some of the money to buy clothes for our creado, as I thought this was very important to keep them with us and satisfied. However, Don refused, and said any cost of the creado was our own expense. This seemed very unfair to me, and under the prevailing conditions, not practical.

My section was then sent to join a section with one of the 2/2 Officers, ( whose name I can't recall ), with the purpose of helping to control a native uprising. They were attacking and fighting each other. We started the morning with a friendly mob of natives who said they planned to attack the hostile mob. They got behind some rocks, had corroboree to work themselves up and came marching out with their spears and cantanas and shields made of tanned animal hides. They went after their enemies doing their war dance. We were sitting down thinking how easy it was, when they came back with a hell of a rush, because the other side had a rifle and had taken a pot shot at them. They told us we would have to do our own fighting, and with information about where the hostile natives were holed up, the Officer formed us up and we went after them. The Officer had a Bren gun, and when we were close enough, he set it up and started firing. He was using tracer bullets and I

could see he was right on target. We all advanced over the very rough and rocky terrain, but when we arrived there was not a native in sight, dead or alive. I thought it was the easiest fight I was ever in.

We returned to our usual haunt around Atsabe for a time, before being sent back to help the 2/2. This time we had to help them catch a live Japanese, as Australia was asking for Japanese prisoners. We set off one day, and on reaching the staging post we were told they were on the next hill. There was a deep gully in between, and we would have to wait until dark before we made off. We had a meal and lecture, and after dark, we would start off. The leader knew the place; each of us had to put his hand on the shoulder of the man in front and form a line so no one would get lost. We arrived along a rapid, noisy stream to conceal our arrival. We reached a point very close to where the five Japanese were, and waited. The three natives with us were to creep up and tell us when the Japanese were asleep. They checked it out a few times and told us that they were not yet asleep, and when they finally went to sleep we got ready for attack. The natives went back for a last look, and one got too game, and disturbed one of the Japanese who was not asleep. He rattled his rifle bolt and the native came back with a rush, saying, "Jap no tober" which meant he was not asleep, and we were spotted. We got out very smartly and back to our staging camp, without any hands on shoulders, but no-one got lost. We decided the only suitable Jap was a dead one, the campaign we had to fight did not allow prisoners to be taken.

On one of our patrols we went to a village and King Ananais was there. He had raided the next village and captured some women and children and whatever else he wanted. He was telling us about the women, and what would happen that night. I don't think his intentions were honourable. Later my section were patrolling close up to Dili. I can't remember the village, it was late when we stopped and it had been raining. We were told the only hut available was a large building with a lot of captive women using half of it, and we were told we could use the other half. if we were game. I said

"If Marilyn Monroe was there with a harem I would not be interested, all I want is a feed and a dry place to sleep"

We expected to see some poor frightened native women. Behold, they were not frightened, they were laughing and having a good time. It did not seem to worry them which side they were on. By this time we could not trust all the natives as they were getting some rifles. We had to watch our gear, particularly our rifles, and one night when we had returned to camp, I warned my section to sleep with their rifles under their arm. However, two of the men were careless and when we woke up in the morning their rifles were gone. Not long after that, the natives started having a shot at us from a long distance so that we would have to be unlucky to get hit, but a few bullets were lobbing a bit too close. When we fired a few in return they stopped shooting at us and started yelling instead. We could not understand what they were saying, but we had a creardo with us, we used to call him "Hong Kong", as they thought his mother had been chased by a Chinaman. He could speak our language fairly well, and he told us the natives were abusing us. We returned and reported the events to Cam. Rodd.

By this time we were expecting the Japs to attack, so Cam. Rodd sent my section forward towards Dili to intercept. We were watching from our O.P., and had some reinforcements with us, including a Sergeant. I don't know who was in charge, Com. Rodd never said. We spotted a large mob moving towards us, and the Sergeant and others said they were Japs and we would have to get back and tell Cam.. Rodd. I was not satisfied and got the field glasses and watched for a while. In my opinion they were not Japs but natives. I decided to go down and have a closer look, so I took a few men and took off with Butch Barnier in front...he would frighten any mob of Japanese. When we caught up with them they were

natives with about three rifles between them . They were not friendly. We had rifles and tommy guns so they did not attack us. We reported back to Cam. Rodd, who had seen them too, and showed me a note he had written to send back to Don Turton, saying "Enemy approaching in large numbers". We then went back to the Atsabe area and were sent to patrol south of the settlement. We were expecting the Japs to come from that direction. We patrolled forward for several days and found all natives were hostile. As we made our way back to Atsabe, we stopped for about an hour and a half on a hill, and decided to make a camp there. There were plenty of native huts to sleep in and plenty of food, and it was a natural fortress, with cover surrounded by gullies. From here we could send runners to Don Turton, letting him know where we were, and we posted sentries to watch out for trouble.

That day the Japs came along with their mountain gun and began firing, making a fierce noise. However, we were protected by the mountain and were quite safe. I was out with the sentries watching with field glasses. We noticed a track over the mountain, with some people on it, who appeared to be frightened natives. When the sentry was changed I reported to Cam. Rodd about this, and alerted him to keep watching although they seemed to be natives.

I was looking forward to food and a sleep. Apparently, Rodd took a look and formed a different opinion from mine, because he ordered everyone to put their packs on and we took off to the opposite side with packs and rifles but no food. I tried to argue that this was unnecessary. We had a fortress and plenty of food. However, we walked all the rest of the day arriving on the western side of Atsabe. My opinion was that we should go through Atsabe to the start of the highest mountain. Don Turton was there somewhere. Butch Barnier and I went through Atsabe to see if any Japs were there, although I was certain they weren't. We only found a light on in one house. Butch called out but when there was no response, he went up and kicked the door in , and we found only a frightened native inside, and he ran off. We returned and reported to Cam. Rodd, and the group then passed through , taking about ten minutes. At the other side there was some long grass, where we rested until morning , as we were all very tired. The only food we had was some sugar which Cam. Rodd was carrying, and he gave us a spoonful each.

In the morning Turton was there looking for us, with a lot of Letona brand tinned food and we made a good meal of it. Don took off back to his head quarters and we were to follow. However, as we were leaving Cam. Rodd took ill, as since it was too dangerous to leave a sick man on his own, we waited for him, and did not make it to headquarters until the next day. There we saw Smash Hodson, after he was done over by the natives and taken to the Japs, who for some reason let him go and sent him back to us with a surrender note. The next day Don Turton gave me the job of taking some medical supplies down the coast. Smash Hodson and some sick men came with me, and some natives to carry the supplies. I would rather have stopped to have a go at the Japs but orders were orders. When I delivered the medical supplies, Smash had to be taken down to the coast, where they apparently were expecting a ship to come in. I think the intention was to get Smash back to Australia. However, I believe the ship was sunk and Smash remained with us for the rest of the campaign.

The Japs were attacking us on the coast so I joined up with some 2/2 section men and we did some active patrolling. All sections were ready for an attack especially when we saw a light signal go up. Next day everything was normal and it became apparent that the Japs had in fact withdrawn. After making enquiries I found out where Cam. Rodd was and made my way back to my section.

When we were at Atsabe, Don Turton came to me and said

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"Griff, I want you to take 100 natives, 12 Timor Ponies and 4 men and go to the coast and report to Captain Baldwin".

It was a three day trip. When we reported to Capt. Baldwin, we found that we were expecting a ship with reinforcements and supplies. So on the following night I was on the beach with my team. At about midnight we saw a light and about 300 troops were brought in in small boats. They quickly moved off and supplies were brought in. The ship was H.M.A.S. "Voyager", and the idea was to unload quickly and get away before dawn. Alas the Captain made an error and his ship was stranded on the sandy beach and is still there.

This was a real disaster. All supplies had to be removed quickly as the Japs would spot it in the morning and start bombing. As well as 300 troops we had 180 sailors stranded, and a very unhappy Captain.

It was not long before the bombing started, but by this time we had taken all the supplies off the ship and had them hidden in the jungle ready to be taken inland. My team of 100 natives and 12 horses were intact, and I had no deserters. It took several days to get the supplies out to the troops in the mountains. My team of natives were very co-operative considering the Jap fighter planes were trying to find us. We had plenty of cover in the jungle.

When my job was completed I requested some supplies from Capt. Baldwin to take back to Don Turton. He agreed and also gave me a very nice letter thanking my team for the excellent job well done. We soon returned to Cam. Rodd again and were patrolling west of Atsabe. We camped on a hill with plenty of cover, and were joined by some extra men, including a Sergeant, a higher rank than mine. Cam. Rodd took off for a couple of days and left us patrolling on our own, the natives were getting restless and at night were yelling out and firing rifles occasionally. While I was doing my turn to keep the O.P. manned, the others decided to take their packs and leave without informing me. After a time I sensed something wrong and went to investigate. Two of my friends had stopped behind to wait for me, and were guarding all of our equipment, which included quite a lot of supplies. I thought it was too much for the three of us to guard, so I packed all supplies including three Timor ponies, and shifted camp to a safer place, to await the return of Com. Rodd. We sent a runner with a note to Capt. Turton.

The next day Cam. Rodd and all the men caught up with us, minus their packs. They had been frightened and left them. This was a disaster from which our section did not recover. The two men who had stayed behind to look after the supplies were two friends who had been with me all the way from Sydney, and we had been through a lot together. Their names were Jim Hocking and Ron Mears. Later Col. Doig took over our unit. The Japs and natives were pressing hard and we had some extra troops, some of higher rank than me. When I asked Col. Doig if I was to hand over control of my section, he said

"No. You are responsible for your section", so I knew where I was and no Japs or natives could get past without warning. Jerry Green took over for the time being. I always found him to be a very nice fellow as well as a good officer. He was in charge towards the end of our campaign and my section had to do some patrolling on the way to Same on the last days of our campaign. We could see some hostile natives all day without being attacked. We arrived at Same and settled in for the night, meeting up with Cam. Rodd who took command again. We were told in the morning we would make our way to the beach at Betano for evacuation. Cam. Rodd lined us up on the road, about 22 of us in his section, and many others as well. The natives and Japs were under cover and opened up on us. My section and I were alongside a native stone fence. I always claimed I beat the first bullet over that fence. Under cover of the fence, I listened to work out where the firing was coming

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from. There was a cement hut I could see in the distance and it was confirmed by a Portuguese that that was where it was coming from. Although the intention was to return the fire, all my section had gone, I could see them disappearing into the jungle. Since I could not fight the war by myself, I took off too. Being the last, I had to take a lot of bullets, but none of them hit me. We all caught up together and continued on our way to the beach. It started to rain very heavily and it was hard going. We arrived after dark, and a river we had to cross was running rapidly after the heavy rain. There were about 27 of us by now, and we linked hands to get across the river, as there was no chance of crossing alone. e had to wait on the beach for the ship to come in. The saddest part was to say goodbye to my native criado, who faithfully stopped with me for the whole of the campaign, carrying my pack. We were in many fights together, but we always got through and he would turn up with my pack intact. I gave him what little money I had, and some spare clothing. At 12 o'clock we saw a light out at sea, and some boats came in to pick us up and take us to the ship, which was a Dutch Destroyer. We climbed up the side of the ship on rope ladders and were soon all on board. The Dutch fed us and we lay down on the deck. In 36 hours we were back in Darwin, which we had left 12 months before. Darwin was flattened with Jap bombing, but it was home, and we had been longing to see home for a long time.

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