

Talk to 2/24 Reunion at Wangaratta 8 November 2014 - Norm Gray

I have been asked to give a short talk today about my father, Mr Douglas Haig Gray, and his experiences in W.W. 2. I feel very honoured to be able to share with you some of his stories and anecdotes that he passed on to me over the years, and hope that it gives you some insight into what it was like to be a soldier during the last world war. I have chosen to only speak about his experiences fighting with the 2/24th Battalion A.I.F. in the North African Western Desert campaign, between 1941-1943. But first, let me give you a little bit of history just to set the scene.

This year, 2014, marks the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the 1st W.W. It was supposed to have been the “war to end all wars”, but sadly, that was not to be. When the 1st W.W. ended in 1918, reparations and conditions were placed upon the defeated peoples of Europe that were so harsh it only served to produce intolerable economic conditions that would eventually set off a chain of events that would lead to yet another World War. This happened in 1939 – just 21 years after the end of the 1st W.W.

So at this point, I would like to introduce to you an old “acquaintance” of my fathers to help me out with the rest of my talk.

This old “acquaintance” witnessed events in both the 1st W.W., and the 2nd W.W. No, it isn't a person – if it was, then that person would have to be at least 130 years old! It is, instead, an object that I would like to show to you. Yes, it's a musical instrument. It's called a bugle. It is silver plated and it has quite a history behind it. It was made in 1895 by Henry Potter & Co, Military Drums, Flutes and Bugle specialists of Charing Cross Road, London. The Henry Potter Company made these musical instruments for the military for use in Britain, Canada and Australia. This particular bugle made it to Australia where it was presented to the original 24th Battalion of the 1st Australian Imperial Force, on their formation at Broadmeadows army camp in 1915, and it went overseas with the 24th Battalion on their way to the Western Front to fight in W.W. 1. The 24th Battalion were first sent to fight at Gallipoli. They spent 16 weeks fighting at Lone Pine, sharing the duties with the 23rd Battalion where the fighting was so dangerous and exhausting the Battalions were rotated every day. The 24th Battalion were the very last unit to leave Gallipoli, and it was assumed that the rear guard would not survive. Next year, 2015, it will be 100 years since this bugle was probably last heard sounding over the rugged gullies and steep cliffs of Gallipoli.

The 24th Battalion was sent then to the Western Front to fight in France and Belgium. Around the bell of the bugle are engraved some of the the Battle Honours, that are official recognition and commemoration of outstanding achievement in war, These battle-fields are quite historically significant, to say, their casualties were appalling, especially at Bullecourt where they suffered 80% casualties in one night. The overall casualties for the 24th Battalion in the 1st W.W. were 909 killed, and 2,494 wounded (including being gassed). When you consider that one battalion consists of approximately 900 men, it is hard to imagine the losses they sustained and the number of reinforcements used to keep the battalion up to fighting strength. I will read out the Battle Honours engraved on the W.W.1 side of the bugle for the 24th Battalion.

[READ OUT OFF BUGLE] Are they the same as below?

Battle Honours

After the armistice, this bugle came back to Australia with the 24th Battalion which was disbanded, as were all other military units. Militia units, which were a forerunner of what we would come to know as the Citizens Military Forces, or the C.M.F. were then formed to act as a kind of security force for Australia and this bugle was then presented to a Melbourne-based Militia unit with the same numerical designation (24th Bn) but was known as the “KOOYONG REGIMENT” and the bugle was played for their ceremonial duties in between W.W.1 and W.W.2. Now fast forward to 1939. The 2nd W.W. had now begun. I will now give you a brief history of my father's battalion, the 2/24th Battalion, A.I.F. The 2/24th Battalion was formed in Victoria as part of the 26th Brigade in the 7th division in 1940. They set off from Caulfield, where they had joined up, for the still-being-built Bonegilla Army Camp, stopping on the way at Wangaratta where they camped at the showgrounds sleeping in the cattle and pig stalls. They were welcomed with open arms by the local Wangaratta community as they rapidly built up their numbers. The people of Wangaratta adopted the Battalion and they become known as “Wangaratta's Own”. This bugle was presented to the 2/24th Battalion and after marching to Bonegilla for further training, the soldiers sailed on the HMT Strathmore for the Middle East on the 16th of Nov. 1940. My father said that the pink granite outcrops of Albany in Western Australia would be the last glimpse of Australia many of the men would ever see again. Dad said there was a sense of great excitement at that moment. They sailed out into the Indian Ocean where they were soon joined by other troopships and several destroyers to accompany them until the convoy reached the Gulf of

Suez after 3 ½ weeks at sea. They disembarked at Suez and then travelled by troop train to a desert training camp at Dimra, in Palestine. This Battalion became part of the 9th Australian Division, destined to become one of the most famous army fighting formations in W.W.2. In early 1941, along with the remainder of the 26th Brigade, the 2/24th moved to Tobra in what is now known as Libya to complete its training and to relieve the Australian 6th Division that had pushed the Italian Army back beyond Benghazi. The Australian 6th Division were being sent to Greece to try and stop the Germans there. However, on reaching Benghazi, the Aussie 9th Division were confronted by the German Panzer Armee Afrika Korps, commanded by Hitler's favourite General, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel. Rommel attacked them with his far superior tanks and armour, forcing the Australian 9th Division to make a hasty retreat back to Tobruk where they had to very quickly form defensive perimeters around Tobruk and dig in. This retreat would be colloquially referred to by the diggers as "The Benghazi Handicap". The Australian 9th Division was ordered by Commander-In-Chief, General Wavell, to hold Tobruk for two months, or basically die doing it!

The Australian General Leslie Moreshead told his officers, "There's be no dunkrk here, there will be no surrender and no retreat". Let me explain at this point why holding Tobruk had suddenly become so crucial. Simply put, if Rommel captured Tobruk, he then had access to a deep water harbour, meaning he could supply his troops and armour with fuel, food and ammunition. Rommel would then be able to sweep into Egypt, and then move on to capture the Middle Eastern oil fields. Basically, we were facing the probability of losing the war. The 2/24th, along with other units of the 9th Division and soldiers from Poland and Czechoslovakia held Tobruk not for 2 months, but for 8 long months, from the 10th of April until the 20th October, allowing the allies to build up a fighting force in Egypt strong enough to withstand Rommel's impending attack. They defended this fortress against Rommel's Tanks, his dreaded 88mm field guns, and the constant aerial dive-bombing. They had very limited water, fuel and ammunition. Dad's battalion manned The Red Line at various locations, but mostly to the south-west. The Red-Line was an outer land defence perimeter of approx. 60 kilometres that arced around Tobruk consisting of barbed wire entanglements and fields of landmines based along a series of Italian concrete fortifications. The Aussie dugouts, or "rat holes" were spaced out along this perimeter. The Red-Line perimeter was backed up by the Blue-Line of reserve troops inside this outer perimeter. A British traitor nick-named "Lord Haw Haw", who worked for the Germans as a propagandist, called the Aussie troops in Tobruk "Desert Rats", because they lived and fought from holes in the ground. The diggers embraced this name with pride and wore it as a badge of honour. Rommel would soon learn to his detriment that "Desert Rats", especially the two-legged Aussie variety, were a very brave, tenacious, tough and determined breed of rat, and when they bit, they bit hard, very, very hard. On the night of 30th April – 1st of May 1941, the German and Italian Axis Forces broke through the perimeter defence at Hill 209, creating a salient. My father told me that the fighting that followed was ferocious. Although the enemy had penetrated the Red perimeter line, the 2/24th Battalion managed to hold them off and stop them from breaking through to Tobruk. However, the 2/24th Battalion paid a terrible price during this battle as more than half of the Battalion were captured or killed along with most of their officers. My father managed to make it back to the relative safety of the Blue Line after 2 days. He spent the daytime hiding in the sand, and at night time he crawled through the surrounding minefields feeling for the mines with his bare hands. I would like to mention at this point that a member of the College staff where I work has a direct link to that particular battle on the 30th April – 1st May, 1941. Sue Cahill's father was a member of the 2/24th Battalion and he was unfortunately one of those brave diggers captured on that night and then sent to a prison-camp at Grupignano in northern Italy. Luckily he survived the war and the harsh prison conditions and was able to come home to raise a family and to continue farming.

Because of this battle and its ramifications, the Australian 9th Division commanding officer, General Leslie Moreshead, decreed that the land beyond the defensive perimeter wire would become our land, not no-mans land, and certainly not Rommel's. If he wanted it, he could come and get it! So an intensive patrolling and harassment regime was instantly put in place. These nightly patrols caused much havoc and great fear amongst the enemy. A detachment of Nepalese Gurkhas also fought alongside the diggers and they also went out on these patrols. Dad said that that was the only time he ever felt sorry for the enemy while he was in Tobruk. The father of legendary AFL footballer Ron Barassi, Ron senior, was mortally wounded at Tobruk. He was on his way to get supplies from the Harbour when a Stuka dive-bombed their truck. He died of wounds a few days later in Alexandria hospital.

The 2/24th Battalion was evacuated from Tobruk on the night of 20th October. Royal Navy destroyers took them out of Tobruk under cover of darkness on a moonless night and silently slid out of Tobruk harbour. My father said they were overjoyed to be leaving that horrible place of blazing hot days, freezing cold nights,

sandstorms, flies, fleas, bombs, Germans and of course, the dreaded night patrols. Everyone was so overjoyed at leaving this terrible place, but as the destroyer they were on picked up speed it also changed course, and as it heeled over to port, some diggers in battle dress and full kit were lost overboard and drowned. This deeply saddened all of the battalion. To have survived Tobruk and then for that to have happened to them just didn't make any sense.

The Battalion was taken back to Alexandria and then on to Dimra in Palestine for rest and recuperation and to be supplied with more reinforcements. But very soon, in just a few weeks' time, they were rushed back to fight at the two Battles of El Alamein. Rommel had decided to make his move to capture the Middle Eastern oil fields. The very outcome of the war was at stake. The 2/24th could only muster 270 fit troops. They were sent to their positions which were Right of the Line at a place called Tel El Eisa hard up against the sea. It was here in July 1942 that the 2/24th captured Rommel's radio intelligence unit. Rommel had amassed his armour and intelligence suggested that he would attack the Southern sector of the line. At 10.40pm on the night of 23rd October, 1942, a combined Allied artillery barrage consisting of over 800 artillery guns of every shape and size, including captured German and Italian artillery opened up to soften up the enemy. It was the single biggest artillery barrage in military history. Dad said the horizon behind them instantly lit up like daylight, and the noise was deafening. He said you couldn't lie still on the ground because the vibration from the guns shook the ground so much. The guns then continued firing in a creeping barrage pattern for approx. 7.00 hours nonstop. He noticed that some of the British artillery gunner's ears were bleeding because of the sustained firing. Rommel then retaliated by, surprisingly, counter-attacking the 9th Division who were positioned North of the line past Tel El Eisa where the 2/24th along with the 2/48th Battalion had to take the brunt of Rommel's offensive at sites that are famous in this battle – Fig Garden, Thompson's Post, the Block House and 'The Saucer. Once again Rommel had managed to outwit our army intelligence! My father said that they fought a bitter and savage battle – at times hand-to-hand, for many days. At the end of this epic battle Rommel's once great Panzar Armee Afrika was decimated. Rommel was now in full retreat. Dad said the battle field was strewn with burning tanks as far as the eye could see in all directions, a sight he could never forget. During the last night of the battle, Dad said that the transport trucks arrived to relieve the 2/24th from the battle field. The transport officers were yelling at the men to get on the trucks quickly as shells and shrapnel were still flying around. RSM Jim McNicol recalls that the transport officer was worried about being still there at daylight and said, "I wish you would bloody well hurry up!" McNicol said to him "We are here". The Transport Officer replied rather testily, "Yes I I know that, I'm not blind but where are the rest of your mob". McNicol replied, "This is the 2/24th Battalion" only 55 men were left standing out of 270 men that went into action. When the transport Officer realised that McNicol was not being funny he just said, "God Almighty" and left.

This was the first time Adolf Hitler had experienced a defeat. After El Alamein he never had another victory.

This bugle returned to Australia with the 2/24th and the battalion was reinforced and sent up to Ravenshoe and the Atherton Tablelands in Queensland for jungle warfare training in preparation to face yet another enemy, this time the Japanese who were threatening to invade Australia. That is another story entirely.

The overall casualties of the 2/24th Battalion during the war were:- 360 killed, and 900 wounded, the highest casualty rate of any Battalion in the 2nd W.W. Over the course of the war 3974 men passed through the battalion – more than four times the size of a battalion.

I will read out the Battle Honours engraved on the W.W.2 side of the bugle:

[READ OUT BATTLE HONOURS]

My father continued to play the bugle for the Battalion functions since the War and I have been greatly honoured to do so since his passing in 2004, having recently played it on two occasions at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra to dedicate plaques for the 24th Battalion W.W.1, and the 2/24th Battalion W.W.2.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the 2/24th Battalion Association for allowing me to show you their bugle and to tell you of its journey through history.

If this bugle could only talk, think of the stories it could tell from those past 100 years. Thank you.

Lest We Forget.