

# The 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance

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I shared with you  
The Lifting of the Mountain Mists  
From where we stood on the Stony Crest  
Of our Achievement.

*Ron Leech NX 65948. Lines written as a successful escapee from the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on Hainan Island, 1945. In Memoriam: Lin Po [S/Sgt Ron Leech, 2/12 Field Ambulance, and of Gull Force, Ambon].*

SCORES OF MEDICAL UNITS have distinguished themselves during the first century of Australia's nationhood, but the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance (AFA) holds a special place in our military heritage. During the six years of its existence its members served in Australia, Indonesia and Borneo. More than 200 of its soldiers, a ratio greater than one in every three of all members on the cumulative unit roll, were to give their lives in the service of their country. This ratio is the highest for any non-combatants in the nation's history.

## Formation

The 2/12 AFA was formed at an inaugural muster at the Sydney Showgrounds on 22 November 1940.<sup>1</sup> Many of its recruits came from rural areas of both southern and northern New South Wales and had worn the emu feathers and military jodhpurs of the Light Horse regiments for which those regions were renowned. Its first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Colonel N D Barton, a former First World War lighthorseman, who had commanded the 6th Australian Light Horse Regiment.

A Field Ambulance is the army's most forward specialty medical unit. Highly mobile, a field ambulance cares for between 5000 and 8000 troops. After its foundation, the 2/12 AFA formed part of the 23rd Infantry Brigade within 8 Division; and served in this role until February 1943, when it became a part of 2 Australian Corps — this formation comprising 6, 7 and 9 AIF Divisions.

The 2/12 AFA was the proud successor to the 12 AFA, which had served in France and Belgium as part of the 4th Australian Division in the later years of the First World War. That unit had served with great distinction in the medical

## Synopsis

- ◆ During World War Two, more than one in three of all members of the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance lost their lives on active service, the highest ratio of any Australian military medical unit. Its record of service, sacrifice and courage comprised one of the finest examples of resilience and duty in the annals of Australian military medical history.

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evacuation after the carnage at Messines (7-14 June, 1917) and at the Battle of Polygon Wood (where seven of the unit's stretcher bearers were killed).<sup>2</sup>

## Consolidation and training

On 29 December 1940, 2/12 AFA deployed to Cowra in support of field training of the troops who formed the 23 Australian Infantry Brigade.<sup>3</sup> The 2/12 AFA moved in stages to Katherine in the Northern Territory over the four weeks from 12 March 1941 and commenced training for tropical warfare. Besides providing clinical medical support to 23 Brigade, the soldiers of the unit undertook much of the physical construction of the fixed hospital medical facilities in the bush at both Katherine and Winnellie. The rural origins of most of its members and their background of bush carpentry, improvisation and resourcefulness then came to the fore. It was recorded that the medics took their places with hammers and nails, bailing wire, saws and "concrete mixers" (largely shovels), assisting sappers of the Royal Australian Engineers and infantry soldiers of pioneer assault units — to the extent that the 2/12 AFA was referred to humorously as the "2/12 Pioneers".<sup>1</sup>

## Gull Force and Sparrow Force

Immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (7 December 1941), the military commanders and the Australian Government made a controversial (some would say infamous) decision to send three forces to occupy the (at that time) indefensible islands of Ambon, Timor and New Britain.

Forty-five members of the 2/12 AFA were chosen to support Gull Force on Ambon, including its two medical officers, Captain P M Davidson and Captain S B M White. These personnel deployed with ambulance drivers of the Australian Army Service Corps and supporting tradesmen.

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The soldiers of 2/12 AFA initially established their medical post at Tan Toey. Gull Force (like Sparrow Force) was deployed in the face of the huge Japanese amphibious assault, without any significant air cover, with no chance of resupply or support and no chance of evacuation. The medical post (with its two Regimental Medical Officers and 48 other ranks) was captured on 1 February 1942.<sup>3</sup> Eighteen members of 2/12 AFA were executed by the Japanese at the airfield at Laha. Six died as prisoners-of-war on Ambon from the effects of disease, brutality and injury.

In October 1942, 263 prisoners of war on Ambon were embarked on the Japanese ship *Taiko Maru*, under the pretext of the offer of hospital treatment for the starving, sick and dying. Sixty of those 263 were to die on Hainan (an island off the coast of China) of disease, starvation and brutality. Among the dead were Captain White and Captain Davidson.

Five of the Australian prisoners escaped from the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on Hainan. Their adventures, privations, and ultimate return to active service are recounted by one of the survivors, Staff Sergeant Ron Leech of 2/12 AFA, in his book *Pacific War Odyssey*.<sup>4</sup>

Another 45 volunteers from 2/12 AFA deployed as medical support to Sparrow Force on Timor. With them was Captain Les Poidevin, with an initial team of seven medics; and Major R H Stevens, with 36 men. On Timor, Captain Poidevin established a 190-bed hospital in January 1942, the medical teams working to exhaustion.<sup>3</sup> Sparrow Force was also overwhelmed by the advancing Japanese, and once again many of the 2/12 AFA non-combatants died from brutality and disease.

After the disasters of Gull Force and Sparrow Force, 2/12 AFA was reduced to half its strength, but the unit regrouped and started afresh.

## HMAHS CENTAUR

The Australian hospital ship HMAHS CENTAUR was named after the mythical half-man half-horse to whom Zeus had given the knowledge of medicine; and by this gift had bestowed the control of life and death through the wisdom of the healing art. On 10 May 1943, the regrouped 2/12 AFA embarked on the CENTAUR from Sydney, heading for Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. As well as the 200 members of 2/12 AFA, the ship's complement included 12 nursing sisters, the ship's hospital staff, and a crew of merchant seamen.

CENTAUR travelled as a non-combatant vessel, fully lit, and displaying the markings of the Red Cross. It was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine just after 4 am on 14 May 1943 and sank within three minutes. Of the total complement of 332, 268 perished. Sister Eleanor Savage was the sole survivor of the Australian nurses. Only 14 members of the 2/12 AFA survived the disaster. A graphic first-hand account by one of those survivors,<sup>9</sup> George McGrath, recorded the heroism and the resilience of those who managed to survive

on floats until rescued some 13 hours later by the American destroyer USS MUGFORD. George McGrath described how 22 survivors supported each other on an overloaded float and a hatch-cover, which the soldiers attached to the float by rope as a tow:

...after swimming for some time, I heard voices and was able to make out the outline of a float which I swam for and scrambled on board along with a number of other survivors. We eventually totalled 22 which in the open sea required a sense of balance from all to keep the float on an even keel...as the sun came up and the day wore on...a hatch-way cover with a rope hawser attached to the central lifting ring was taken in tow and used to lessen the stress on the overloaded float. With four of the fittest taking turns on the hatch-way cover, sitting back-to-back...I was naked with the exception of my wristwatch having lost my briefs in the exit from the ship....I did rescue a Red Cross Pennant which afforded me some little protection. The day wore on and there were no signs of rescue. Limited rations kept in watertight containers were issued and we prepared for the night to come which in my mind was to be the most stressful in my war career. We all realised that death, a violent one, was possible (sharks) but did not stop praying or giving up hope. Dawn eventually came which was a great relief. The bloody sharks were ever present and even attacked an empty flare tin which fell into the water. My eyes were affected by the oil and saltwater....I had to constantly rub them but I ended up keeping them shut most of the time for relief...It was after a period of time in the evening, after the longest day, that the Destroyer [USS MUGFORD] glided alongside our raft, with sailors lowering rope ladders...the sailors gave us plenty of support hauling us aboard. I recall one chap who had been burnt screaming and then fainting when the skin came off his arms. The sharks were still with us and I remember a sailor emptying a magazine into the pack. There was a tremendous flurry in the water with the sharks tearing each other apart...

The deliberate destruction of the hospital ship by a Japanese submarine outraged the Allied nations.<sup>6-8</sup>

The 14 surviving members of the 2/12 AFA were to form the core of the unit which was to reform for its third and final period of service. The unit regrouped at Reidtown, near Wollongong, in southern New South Wales. It received its new members from the 4th Australian Light Field Ambulance. That unit, in turn, had had its origins in the 4th Cavalry Field Ambulance — mounted soldiers who brought with them the pragmatic skills of rural Australians.

## Borneo

The 2/12 AFA rejoined the war effort in support of Allied amphibious landings in Borneo in the last year of the War after training on the Atherton Tableland in north Queensland. The 2/12 AFA served with distinction at Morotai, Tarakan, Lutong and Kuching. The unit served also at Brunei Bay and at Miri in British North Borneo (present-day Sarawak). Its service there is briefly recorded in the official Australian Medical War History.<sup>3</sup> The unit took a major role in the

## Memorial to the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance



*Tribute Group at the Unveiling of the Memorial to the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance, in the Western Garden of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, on 22 October 2000. Left to right: Mr George McGrath [NX33029, Ambulance Driver AASC, of 2/12 Field Ambulance; a survivor of the sinking of HMAHS CENTAUR on 14 May 1943];<sup>5</sup> Mr Mark Whitmore, Assistant Director (National Collection) of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra; Dr Les Poidevin [Medical Officer of 2/12 AFA, who served with distinction in captivity on Timor as a member of Sparrow Force]; Mr Derek J Robson (formerly RAN), National Secretary of the Returned & Services League of Australia; and Major General John Pearn, Surgeon General, Australian Defence Force. (Photograph, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.)*



soldiers of the 2/12 Field Ambulance had a higher proportion of deaths on operational service than any other non-combatant unit, and higher than most operational combat units. The simple bronze plaque at the Australian War Memorial records such service, and perhaps will be a focus for those who pass by, and momentarily pause and reflect on the highest professionalism of those special military medical units.

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medical rescue of the surviving prisoners-of-war and of the sick and wounded combat troops who had fought to rescue them. The 2/12 AFA worked to exhaustion on numerous occasions involved with stabilising and subsequently evacuating the 2051 prisoners-of-war and internees at Kuching. The unit continued working well after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, until it was finally stood down in 1946, its tasks completed.

## Reprise

On the occasion of the 60th (Diamond) Jubilee of 2/12 AFA, a bronze plaque was unveiled at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, as the nation's acknowledgement of the service and sacrifice of the soldiers and nursing sisters of HMAHS CENTAUR and 2/12 AFA. All who have been on operational service know that military units obtain their strength from the efficiency and reliability of their component parts. The preservation of health and the saving and support of life on operational service is one of the most important determinants in the outcome of armed conflict. Although they were non-combatants and serving under the blazon of the Red Cross,

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