

Copy of a Report Written by NX23759 Lt. Sylvester Timbs.

The raising of the 2/5 Australian General Hospital as a Unit of the AIF was authorised in April 1940, when Colonel W.E.Kay was appointed to command with some discretion, as to whom he would command. The selection of officers in particular, and of senior NCOs, was a process which allowed the Commander some latitude to choose from volunteers, according to his estimation of skills, personalities and other qualities that best met the requirements of a specialised military hospital.

In the event - it was not until twelve months later that the Unit was committed to the task for which it was formed.

Five months after arrival in the Middle East, orders came to move from the site at Rehovot in Palestine, where a tented hospital had been established without a great deal of work to be done. The destination was Greece, and though that was necessarily a military secret there was little doubt about that prospect. As the site was cleared and the vast quantity of equipment and supplies was transported to Haifa, for loading on board ship under the supervision of Sergeant S.C. (Barney) Benjamin and his proven companion Private Vic. Bartlett.

That was on the 27 March (1941) and those members of the Unit who had been detached to other localities for duty, were recalled and prepared for the impending move.

Medical services being necessary wherever troops were, the under-employed members of the 2/5 AGH had been seconded to other Units wherever there was a need; as regimental medical officers, RAP orderlies, nurses and in other rolls where they could be used to advantage.

After a false start, movement orders having been changed on 5 April, the Unit finally moved out in bus loads of twenty men to a bus on the 9 April, for Rehovot Railway Station. The buses, operated by a local civilian Contractors arrived at the Camp site at 0800 hours, and though it was only fifteen minutes' drive to the railway, it was not until 1330 hours that the train moved out and proceeded south, via Gaza (1530 hours) and arrived at El Kantara on the Suez Canal at 2230 hours.

There it was necessary to transfer to a train on the western side of the Canal; that operation, and having a supper of sausages and mash in the NAFFI canteen took nearly five hours, and it was not until 0315 hours on the 10 April that the Unit was on the move again. This time across the Nile Delta to Alexandria, perhaps 200 miles distant. That journey occupied over ten hours and terminated at the dockside where the Unit was embarked, without delay, on *HMT Pennland*.

Forty eight hours after embarkation at Alexandria, *HMT Pennland* was standing off Piraeus, the port of Athens. Embarkation was hazardous as the port facilities had been dislocated by aerial bombing the night before, and troops had to be ferried ashore in a motley collection of small craft.

The nurses were first to go ashore at 1900 hours, disembarkation was suspended in failing light and the face of possible renewal of the bombing of the previous night. *Pennland* put out to sea.

Next morning 13 April, disembarkation was resumed and the Unit was taken by truck from Piraeus to a location about 20 miles beyond Athens on the Marathon Road: "a beautiful spot called Ekali", as one member recorded in his diary.

Ekali was the appointed site for the hospital to receive wounded from the action further north, where the German forces were advancing towards Athens. Tented wards were established under cover of pine trees and stores, laboratory and kitchens similarly accommodated. Operating theatre and X-ray facilities were set up in an old adjacent hotel building, Admission centre and medical records in another, and Nurses Quarters in another. The troops were under canvas and the officers occupied cottages vacated by local citizens, some of whom had evacuated the area.

After arrival on the site in mid-afternoon of Sunday 13 April, the first patients were received in the evening of 15 April.

The following week was occupied by consolidating the establishment of the hospital, the hastily improvised facilities set up in the first couple of days were elaborated, as stores were sorted out and equipment became available. Meanwhile patients continued to arrive by convoy including one hundred and fifty in the evening of Sunday 20 April.

At 0200 hours in the morning of Tuesday 22 April, ADMS at headquarters in Athens advised by telephone that the Unit was to be evacuated. By 0545 an advance party of about eighty men were marshalled on to vehicles for movement. Their immediate destination was Athens railway yards for further movement by train. This was a critical time in the story of the 2/5 AGH.

Those who were moved by road to Athens were to be the First Flight, the remainder to follow them at the first opportunity. The opportunity never came and the Unit that had been formed in Greta Camp less than twelve months earlier was broken into two parts, the majority remaining at their posts, destined to spend all or part of the next four years as prisoners of war.

The story of the prisoners of war, some 140 men is a saga in itself, and not the least purpose of this history is to leave a record of the experiences of these men, of their vicissitudes and achievements, of their work for fellow prisoners who were wounded or suffered illness throughout captivity, and how they contrived, against all odds, to continue as members of the medical corps to do their work.

But that must be another chapter.

For those who got clear of Ekali in the early morning of the 22 April, the next four weeks were eventful, and the first experience for most of them, of the hazards of war.

Not all of those who were left at Ekali when the First Flight moved out were destined to be prisoners of war. The exceptions were three: the commanding officer, Colonel W.E.Kay – Major J. Kingsley, Registrar – Private Peter Morris, an orderly and Private Thomas Maddison.

Headquarters at Athens decreed that Colonel Kay should be evacuated, and he was moved to Piraeus for embarkation, taking the Registrar, Todd and Maddison with him.

Alas, the ship they boarded was bombed before it left its berth, and Colonel Kay was seriously injured, (He died in hospital a few days later.)

The first causality in action of the Unit he formed - trained and took from Australia.

Maddison escaped without serious injury, and on the 27 April joined those who had left Ekali on 22 April, at a staging camp in Crete.

Note: The orderly was probably Pte Todd, the Colonels driver.