



*The Life
of
TX2584 Private John Wesley Lamprill*



2nd/3rd Machine Gun Battalion



7th Division, 2nd Australian Imperial Force

(13th February 1920 to 2nd March 2014)

By

Maxwell (Max) Callen

Part A

John (Johnny) Wesley Lamprill (Figure 1) was born in Hobart, Tasmania on 13th February 1920. He was one of three children but as his parents were both previously widowed, he also had three half-brothers and five half-sisters. Johnny lived in Hobart and attended the Friends' School. His father owned a department store but lost this business as well as the family home during the Depression.¹



Figure 1: John (Johnny) Wesley Lamprill, 1940.

The family relocated to a house with an orchard which they owned in Kingston, Tasmania. Johnny attended the local school but left at the age of 14 to help his father with the orchard.² He worked in the orchard until June 1940 but also played rugby for Tasmania and did some brief stints as a jackaroo.³



Figure 2: Group Portrait of C Company, 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion at Brighton Camp, Tasmania, 1940.

On 18th June 1940, TX2584 Private John Lamprill enlisted in the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (2nd AIF) and as he had rugby friends in the unit,^{4 5} joined C Company, 2/3rd Machine Gun (MG) Battalion.⁶ He undertook his initial training in Tasmania. (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 3: C Company of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion, Murray Street, Hobart, Tasmania, 20th July 1940.

In October 1940, C Company relocated to Adelaide and trained with the rest of the 2/3rd MG Battalion under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Blackburn. As the Battalion Headquarters and other sub-units were raised in Adelaide, it ‘was essentially a South Australian Battalion’⁷ (Figure 4).



Figure 4: 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion Marching along Victoria Drive, Adelaide, 15th January 1941.

A newspaper article about the Battalion parading through the streets of Adelaide is at Appendix A and another article about a gruelling march through South Australia is at Appendix B.

On 11th April 1941, the Battalion sailed out of Sydney for the Middle East joining the rest of the 7th Division in preparation the Syrian invasion. On 7th June, the Allies invaded Syria and fought in a brief campaign against the Vichy French.^{8 9}

At one point, an anti-tank ditch blocked the Battalion’s path and as Johnny was climbing out, he hesitated momentarily to avoid the heavy shell fire overhead. He felt a nudge in his back and was shocked to find it was Colonel Blackburn asking; “How is the war going soldier?”¹⁰ Johnny said he “obviously got moving pretty quickly” following this encounter with his Commanding Officer.¹¹

C Company fought well, and together with British units captured the town of Quneitra.^{12 13} The Vichy French surrendered on 9th July, but Johnny remained in Syria as part of the garrison until January 1942.^{14 15}

The war had started in the Pacific and the Battalion was ordered to return to Australia. On the 1st of February 1942, the men boarded the troopship, *SS Orcades*, while their equipment and weapons were loaded onto other ships. As *Orcades* was faster than the rest of the convoy, it was ordered to divert to Java to support the Dutch who were fighting the Japanese in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI).

The men aboard *Orcades*, formed 'Blackforce' under the command of Brigadier Blackburn.^{16 17 18 19} Johnny recalled that he and some of the men were given Dutch rifles and artillery²⁰ but that other men had no weapons and were advised to "cut ... a stout stick and when someone drops, grab their rifle".²¹

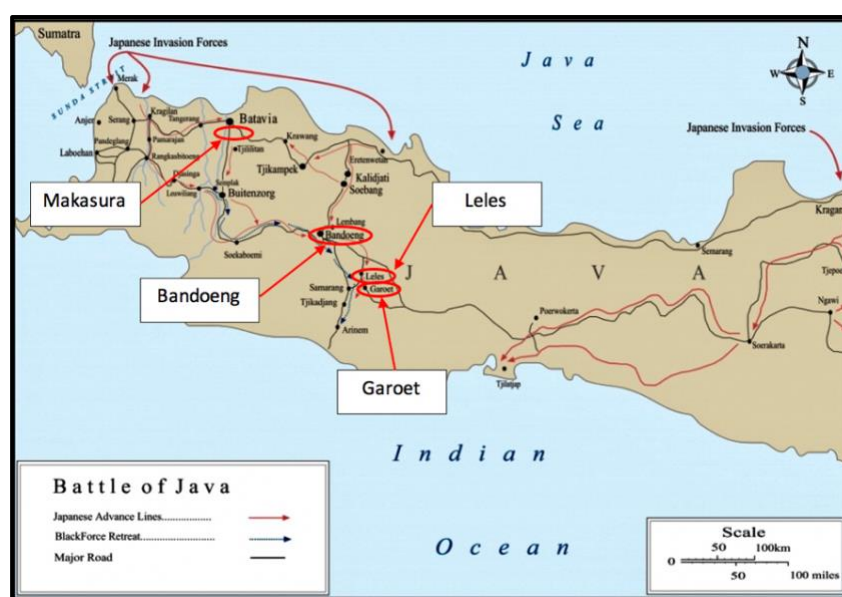


Figure 5: The POW camps where Johnny was imprisoned at Leles, Garoet, Bandoeng and Makasura are circled in red.

Early on 3rd March 1942, the Japanese attacked C Company, which was positioned on the frontline, overlooking Leuwiliang. The men fought hard but by the afternoon, the Japanese commenced using mortars.²² Within 15 minutes, some 20 men of the Company were killed or injured, including Johnny who was concussed by mortar fire.^{23 24} Blackburn was proud of his men and later wrote about their 'sheer courage and fighting ability'.²⁵

On 8th March, the Dutch surrendered and 'Blackforce' was ordered to surrender on 9th March 1942 making Johnny a Prisoner of War (POW).²⁶ Johnny spent ten months as a POW in Java (Figure 5) mostly under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Edward 'Weary' Dunlop.²⁷ Johnny's daughter recalled that Johnny credited 'Weary Dunlop' with saving his infected right leg from amputation.²⁸

In January 1943, the Japanese ordered 'Dunlop Force' to depart Java to work on a project.^{29 30} The men were dressed in rags and were referred to by other Australians as 'the Java Rabble' when they transited through Changi in Singapore.^{31 32 33}

In February 1943, Johnny arrived in Thailand to work on the Thailand - Burma Railway and spent the following 16 months at various POW camps including Konyu (Hellfire Pass), Hintok Road Camp, Hintok River Camp, Tarsau and Chungkai (Figure 6).^{34 35 36}



Figure 6: POW Camps along the Thailand-Burma Railway. Johnny spent time in the area circled in red.

The railway was built almost exclusively ‘by the hands of human beings’³⁷ and was backbreaking work for the POWs (Figure 7). Johnny’s contribution included cutting rock using a ‘hammer and tap’, as well as land clearing and construction.³⁸



Figure 7: A curved wooden trestle bridge built by POWs, located near Hintok, Thailand.

The POWs were starving and many were ill and this was compounded by a devastating cholera outbreak at Hintok in June 1943.^{39 40} The Japanese had no regard for the lives of the POWs⁴¹ and Johnny recalled the guards dragging sick men out of the hospital tent to work.⁴² In the words of Private Max McGee, also of the 2/3rd MG Battalion,

*“Every man who worked on the railway, in whichever section, would have an automatic passport to Heaven. They have all done the requisite stretch in Hell”.*⁴³

In July 1944, Johnny left Thailand and boarded a Japanese ship, *Rashin Maru* (Figure 8), for a perilous 70-day journey to Japan. The POWs nicknamed the ship ‘Byoki Maru’, meaning ‘sick ship’ as it had previously been bombed and was badly damaged.^{44 45}



Figure 8: The Rashin Maru

During the voyage, Johnny contracted malaria and beriberi and witnessed another ship in the convoy being torpedoed by an allied submarine.^{46 47 48} The Rashin Maru was subsequently caught in a typhoon and almost did not survive.^{49 50 51} Finally, the ship arrived in Moji in Japan on 8th September 1944 and Johnny was sent to work in the coalmines at Ohama Camp #9-B (Figure 9).^{52 53 54}



Figure 2: The location of Ohama # 9-B Camp in Japan is circled in red.

The work was tough and dangerous and the winter was bitterly cold.^{55 56} During this time, Johnny was ill with pleurisy and ongoing dysentery.⁵⁷ In August 1945, as Johnny was waiting to commence his shift at the mine, POWs came running up shouting “*she’s over, she’s over*”.⁵⁸

It took some time before the POWs were spotted by American fighter pilots who then advised “*hasten your rescue by staying where you are*”.⁵⁹ On 26th September 1945, Johnny left Ohama arriving in Sydney on 16th October.⁶⁰

Johnny spent a few months in Melbourne before relocating to Adelaide in 1946 to commence work in the Head Office of the Australian Finance Company (AFC).⁶¹ He enjoyed sailing and in 1951 competed in the ‘Sydney to Hobart’ yacht race placing 5th.⁶²

In 1954, Johnny married Pauline Darwent (Figure 10) and their daughter, Shauna, was born in 1955. He retired from his role as the Sales Manager for SA/NT at AFC in 1981 and continued to live in Adelaide until his death at the age of 90 on 2nd March 2014.⁶³



Figure 10: Johnny, Pauline and flower girl (Susan Darwent) – St Laurence’s Church, North Adelaide, 13 February 1954.

Despite the danger and hardship, Johnny personified the ANZAC characteristics of perseverance and mateship. He fought bravely in Syria and Java and narrowly escaped death in Leuwiliang. He subsequently endured three and a half years as a POW and was subjected to relentless physical labour, starvation, illness, disease, brutality, freezing temperatures, and the constant presence and threat of death.

When he was captured by the Japanese, he remembered telling himself:

*“There is nothing you can do about it, and there is no way in the world that we won’t win, and so you’ve just got to make the best of it all the way through.”*⁶⁴

Johnny watched others give up, such as an English POW who turned to Johnny one night and said “*Aussie, I’ve had it*” and he was dead the following morning.⁶⁵ Despite all this, Johnny persevered and never gave up and his thoughts and actions embodied the ANZAC spirit of perseverance.

The ANZAC characteristic of mateship is ‘embedded in the Australian psyche’.⁶⁶ Johnny joined the 2/3rd MG Battalion so that he would be in the same unit as his mates.^{67 68} He fought bravely on the frontline with his mates and he survived the horrors of being a POW stating that “*we looked after each other the best we could.*”⁶⁹ This is the essence of mateship and it permeated through the ranks of the 2nd AIF.

Johnny had the utmost respect for his Commander, Brigadier Arthur Blackburn, whom he referred to as “Blackie” and “a great bloke”.⁷⁰ The Australian POWs helped each other, and Johnny credited this to the fact that they acted as a Battalion with leadership, discipline, teamwork and mateship.⁷¹

On the way back to Australia, Johnny was on a hospital ship when some fellow POWs received and shared their mail. He said they “*would open the letter and then everyone would be waiting to hear*” their news.⁷² These bonds of mateship were unbreakable and continued long after the war. Johnny cherished the times when he and his mates were reunited stating that being together “*was a saviour*”.⁷³

Johnny was a humble man and at 90 years of age he reflected that he had been lucky.⁷⁴ In addition to having luck and courage, it is evident that Johnny also embodied the ANZAC characteristics of perseverance and mateship.

Part A: 1,494 words

Part B

I was only six years old when Johnny died in 2014. Until a few months ago, I had a vague recollection of Johnny. He had been a friend of my grandparents and parents and had attended all our family functions. I recall him as a kind and cheerful man who had been a Prisoner of War in WW2.

When I was discussing the ANZAC Spirt Prize with my father, he mentioned that he had recorded an interview with Johnny in 2010. I knew this interview would be a good starting point and I was grateful to be able to research someone who I had met and who was loved by my family.

I learned from the interview that Johnny had spent his childhood in Tasmania but had joined a South Australian Battalion and he had made his life in South Australia after the war. After seeking clarification from the Anzac School Prize Office, it was confirmed that Johnny met the competition criteria for 'being a South Australian serviceman'.

I am grateful to Johnny's daughter, Shauna, for sharing her knowledge with me and particularly for filling in the details of Johnny's life before and after the war. Shauna referred me to an extremely useful book titled *Arthur Blackburn VC* by Andrew Faulkner. Andrew had been a neighbour of Johnny's and had interviewed Johnny for this book in 2003. Shauna also showed me an original document detailing Johnny's health after he was rescued by the US Army in Japan.

When I visited the State Library, the librarian showed me how to find specific books and where to find other books relevant to WW2 and POWs. Johnny had mentioned two of his friends in the interview - Arch Flanagan and Des Jackson - and when I googled these men, I discovered that they had written books about their POW experiences and so I located these books too.

The VWMA, AWM and NAA provided valuable online resources, and, after a thorough internet search, I was excited to find a 2009 interview of Johnny and another former POW, Bill Schmitt, on YouTube. I also discovered a great website created by the 2/4th MG Battalion which was a very useful resource as these men, like Johnny, had worked on the Thai-Burma Railway and travelled to Japan on the *Rashin Maru*.

I was unsure how to reference sources, so I met with my history teacher for guidance. Also, I attended the VWMA School Holiday workshop where I learned how to use Trove. This helped me in finding some newspaper articles about the Battalion from 1941 as well as a photo from Johnny's wedding in 1954.

My research comprises both primary and secondary sources which I cross-referenced to provide a detailed and true account of Johnny's life. As Johnny was interviewed more than 60 years after the war, his service records were helpful in providing exact dates and locations. The secondary sources provided valuable information about the movements and experiences of the Battalion as a whole.

Part B: 498 Words

References

Figures

- Figure 1: John Wesley Lamprill: Australian War Memorial – AWM-PO8672002
- Figure 2: Brighton Camp, Tasmania: Australian War Memorial- AWM-PO8672002
- Figure 3: C Company of 2/3rd MG Battalion - Australian War Memorial – AWM-01662
- Figure 4: 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion - Australian Virtual War Memorial
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/367>
- Figure 5: Map of POW Camps in Java - 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion,
<https://2nd4thmgb.com.au/story/java-pow-camps/>
- Figure 6: POW Camps – Thai-Burma Railway - Australian War Memorial,
<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/stolenyears/ww2/japan/burmatahai>
- Figure 7: Curved Trestle Bridge, Hintok - Australian War Memorial – AWM 122309
- Figure 8: Rashin Maru - 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion,
<https://2nd4thmgb.com.au/story/rashin-byoke-maru/>
- Figure 9: Map showing POW camps - Japan - 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion,
<https://2nd4thmgb.com.au/soldiers-all/camps-and-maps/>
- Figure 10: Johnny and Pauline’s Wedding Day - Women’s Pages, 1954, ‘They were Brides at Weekend Weddings’, *The Sunday Mail*, Adelaide, 13 February, p.17.,
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/57694469?searchTerm=%22John%20%20Lamprill%22>

Appendices

Appendix A:

1941, ‘*Fine City March by A.I.F. Machine Gunners*’ *The Advertiser*, 16 January, p.23., Accessed 18 April 2023,
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/41915347?searchTerm=%22Fine%20City%20March%20by%20A.I.F.%20Machine%20Gunner%22>

Appendix B:

1941, ‘*Machine Gunners at end of long March*’, *The Mail*, Adelaide, 15 February, p. 22., Accessed 18 April 2023,
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/55763207?searchTerm=%22Machine%20Gunners%20at%20end%20of%20long%20March%22>

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Appendix A:

1941 Debutantes!
1940 Debutants' Dances successfully executed by
FLAVEL'S HIRING SERVICE
Madras Charges. Consult our Experts.
Crest. 2744. 211 Rundle Street

The Advertiser
THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 1941

BARGAINS IN PORTABLE RADIO
from **10 Gns.**
Full particulars?
MOTOR PARTS & SERVICE LTD.
C. Pitt & Palfrey etc.

FINE CITY MARCH BY A.I.F. MACHINE GUNNERS

ABOVE—A GENERAL view showing A.I.F. machine gunners marching along King William street yesterday in one of the most impressive military parades seen in Adelaide. Nearly 900 men took part. At right—A section of the ranks, smartly dressed in their summer uniform, advancing towards the saluting base at the Town Hall.

MOTOR CYCLISTS in the parade passing the Adelaide Town Hall. The salute was taken by the Governor (Sir Malcolm Sturt), the Premier (Mr. Playford), the Lord Mayor (Mr. Barrett) and other official spectators.

ABOVE—Despite the rain, a huge lunch-hour crowd lined the barricades and gave an enthusiastic reception to the troops. A portion of the crowd in front of the Commonwealth Bank. At right—A scene at the Parade Ground, showing soldiers getting ready for the march.

ADMIRING CROWDS watching the men, who looked particularly fit after six months' continuous training, as they swung past the saluting base.

Appendix A: On 15th January 1941, Lieutenant-Colonel Blackburn led the 2/3rd MG Battalion Parade along King William Street past the Premier and other dignitaries watched by 30, 000 people who were lining the route.

Appendix B:

"Don't just say PORT and be disappointed—STIPULATE"

Orlando

GOLD MEDAL AND BE SATISFIED.
Good Wine is so Economical Today.

THE MAIL

ADLAIDE, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1941

Machine-Gunners at End of Long March

DYEI
Suits—Cos
Brons
Phone 3

A.I.F. MACHINE GUNNERS who have been on a 200-mile march through the Atholhurst Valley to Cape Jervis and back through Neameville, Williams Meadows and Mount Barker reached Woodside on their return shortly before noon today. The march was considered one of the longest, if not the longest, ever undertaken by a unit in Australia. On the march fewer than half a dozen men had their fall out, and those who finished were in a wonderfully fit condition. This picture (below) shows Tasmanian members of the unit reading letters from home. The first they received since the march started on February 1.





PTE. TEDMAN taking off the boots which he wore on the trek.



REX LETTE, a former Victorian and Tasmanian league footballer, saved no time in getting under a shower when the unit arrived at Woodside.



SHOWER AT WOODSIDE CAMP were in great demand today when the machine-gunners arrived there at the conclusion of their 200-mile march. Those who could not get a shower to themselves agreed to share one.



F. LEYLAND with the mascot "Nigger" at the Woodside camp after the march. Nigger, who adopted Leyland in Western Australia and came over here with him, completed the march with the men.



CPL. R. E. CHIPPER decided that his first need on returning to camp was a long drink of milk.

ROSE DIXON'S

GREATEST YET

SUMMER SALE

SECOND and FINAL WEEK
Doors to Open Again at 8.45
MONDAY MORNING

ALL REMAINING SUMMER STOCK Being Literally THROWN OUT!

READ THIS!
200 only! Pretty Satin-back Marocain and Flat-Crown Frocks in Black and Navy, trimmed with white and with short and long sleeves, 15 W., 15 W., and 16 W., only. Usually up to 49/11 each. Go for **19/11**
Black and Navy Skirt, also Marocain Coats, 15 W., 15 W., 16 W., 16 W., and O.S., 39/11 for **19/11**
Beautiful Linen Frocks in numerous styles, featuring Draw-head, Waist, Embroidery, and Tailored Styles, buttonholed right down the front. Back of 100 only. **29/11**
Dainty and Cool Cotton Linen Frocks that launder beautifully, guaranteed fast dye and washable, in very snappy, well-cut styles. A genuine bargain. 19/11 each. Go for 7/11.

Can't we afford to have this floor re-covered, John? It looks so shabby and spoils the look of the room.



TWO MEMBERS OF THE A.I.F. MACHINE-GUNNERS using their feet in a specially prepared bath at Woodside this afternoon. Great care of the feet is taken on a long march like the one just completed, and every precaution against infection or injury is taken. There were one or two cases of ankle sprain.

Appendix B: On 3rd February 1941, Lieutenant-Colonel Blackburn led the 2/3rd MG Battalion on a 12-day march from Woodside to Victor Harbour and return, covering more than 300 kilometres.

Endnotes

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