

Recollections of 7th Bde Retard (M)

In 1937 I was a Corporal in 1 Cav. Div. Signals. This unit was located at the Engineers Dept in Waddington, and as I lived at Neutral Bay, the travel to and from Leazes was quite a problem. At the time I worked in the Perpetual Trustee Co, Ltd. and Tom Hanson (now Brig. ad. G. Hanson) also worked there. He was a Lieut. in 7 Bde. Retard and on his recommendation I transferred to the unit. I was posted to 107 Bde. Retard (M) as Sgt. M. B. O. Sig. and given the rank of Bombadier.

The unit was then commanded by Lt. Col. H. ed. F. Lavelle, and had 3 4-gun Btys. raised - 25 Bde Retard Maj. E. Woodall, 27 Bde Retard Maj. J. Kelsa, and 107 Bde Retard (M) Maj. F. B. McEldister. There was also a survey section under Capt. G. E. Mason. The gun btys. were equipped with 19 lbs Mk IV and the heavy bty with 4.5" Howitzers Mk II. All equipment had wooden wheels, even tyres for horse traction.

The unit was located then, as now, at Wamona Rd Willoughby, and in addition to the main drill hall there was a separate complex of stables and a ménage for training in equitation. The main building housed the main hall with offices & g.m. stables and ^{on} one side gun parks and harness rooms.

The organization of a Field Battery when I joined was 5 officers - BC (Major) Bty Capt. Wagon Line Officer, and 2 Section Commanders, one of whom was GPO.

Bty HQ included the BSM, BQMS, BCA, CPOA, MEDIC, a rangefinder, signaller and trumpeter who also acted as horseholders and orderlies for the officers.

Batt section comprised 2 guns, with 6 man crews under a Sgt. with one Bdr. (usually quartermaster). The guns were drawn by 10 horse teams, horse-drawn carriage, and

The ammunition limbers by 4 horse teams. Therefore there were normally nominally 5 drivers attached to each gun. The lead driver was usually a L/Adj.

The uniform consisted of navy tunic with yellow piping and scarlet collar worn with field dress with khaki breeches, black leggings & boots & black bandolier, felt hat with navy puggaree with scarlet insert, & or undress uniform navy frock with a broad scarlet stripe, and a navy peaked cap with scarlet band were worn.

Evening parades were held weekly, commencing with a full unit parade when routine orders were read, followed by 1/4 parades for individual training.

Gunners learned gun drill, laying, mechanisms and ammunition Drivers, equitation, animal management & harness assembly Battery Staff, elementary survey, use of the No. 6 Director, Boat & Strand Rangefinder, plotting boards etc. Signallers, were trained with DMK III field telephones, lines signalling lamps & semaphore flags & cable laying. No radio was issued.

The unit had an excellent spirit, instruction was very thorough, and as all ranks were volunteers, most were eager to learn. There was almost no regular army input in training as the only regulars in the unit comprised the adjutant (usually a Capt. Staff Corps but sometimes from edent. Instructional Corps) & 2 Warrant Officers (Lt. J.C.) one as R.D.M. and one as R.Q.M.D. Equitation training was carried out by N.E.O.'s from the Demount Section A.S.C.

Equitation was an important part of training as apart from the gun crews who rode on the gun and ammunition limbers, nearly everyone else was mounted. Initial training in horsemanship was given in the ménage which consisted of an enclosed area about the size of a couple of tennis courts, with high bulwark-rising wooden

walls and a tin bath floor - as essential soft landing when gunners inevitably fell off! The horses were large, heavy-boned, hard-mouthed and headstrong. They usually did what they wanted. In addition to riding, instruction of a very practical kind was given in feeding, watering, grooming & harnessing (and cleaning up).

Annual camps were 9 thru only of 6 days duration, and consisted in one year of a manoeuvre camp, and the next a shooting camp. The first camp I attended in 1938 was a manoeuvre camp held in the Port Stephens area. Prior to this camp a week-end business was held in which guns were taken from the Depot on to the beach at Dee Why. The return journey up the hills in torrential rain was quite a test for the horses.

The camp itself was quite an exercise with the issue of horses and equipment. There were about 200 horses!

It was quite a sight to see the unit on the move. Col. Officer followed by his trumpeter with his trumpet slung across his back, the gun teams with No. 1's sole mounted alongside. The BSA & CPDA with auxiliary boards on their backs & signallers, leader with telephones & drums of cable.

As N&O Regs I was in the "R" Party and rode alongside the BSM - Sgt. Maj. O. N. Rosewar (late Major) and well known as the starter for the G. O. D. rowing regatta. As can be imagined, with so little time not everything went well and the horses were always a problem. At night they were tethered to a rope stretched between luminous, with each horse tethered by a head rope and a tail rope attached to a peg in the ground. Night time tether duty all night could be exciting. In addition they all had to be fed and watered.

In this camp 107 Regt was in the one of ANNA BAY and the gun trials carried out time serving over open

sights from the beach at FINGAL BAY. It sounds incredible now, but at that time there were unobscured areas of scrub and sandhills.

In 1938 and early in 1939 the Federal Government caused a recruiting drive to the militia and 73d Bde fared very well with a steady influx of very high quality recruits.

Also in 1939, to the great delight of many, it was announced that the unit was to be mechanised, and it received some (I think 4) of the first Marmion-Morrington gun tractors issued to the Army. They were remarkable vehicles, the forerunners of all to-day's 4-wheel drive. They were powered by Ford petrol motors - 4 wheel drive & with 6 or 7 ratio gears. They were equipped with heavy wheels and had track grip tyres. Training on these vehicles was commenced immediately.

As a result of the increased numbers the 3 existing batteries were brought up to strength and 26 70d Bty was raised. A number of officers from the Reserve of Officers returned to the unit. Personally, I had by then at my own request transferred to the guns, qualified for 1st and 2nd Lieut No. 1 of "A" Bde. (A) Bty.

Shortly after the outbreak of World War II all militia units were called up for one month's full time training & there in Sept 1939. The unit assembled at Willoughby with a most heterogeneous collection of vehicles, some Army, and many hired civilian vehicles of all shapes & sizes - utilities, 30-cwt & 3-ton trucks even motor cycles. 30-cwt trucks were fitted with tow-bars and became gun tractors. As the guns still had wooden wheels they could not be towed at speeds more than about 15 m.p.h. however that was a great improvement on the 4 m.p.h. horse drawn. (The increased speed increased the stress on the gun wheels and made accurate laying very difficult.)

The unit proceeded by road up the Cracoe Highway to a place called ABERGLASYN just outside MATTLAND, where it occupied a tented camp. The camp culminated in a shoot at a temporary range nearby, and concentrated on individual training.

edt about that time 6 Div. cd. 9.2 was raised, and a number of officers including Capt. Hanson and Lieuts. James, Dwyer & Richards left to join 2/13th Regt. I did not go to 6 Div. because I had been told that I was to be commissioned and was advised to wait. I received my commission as a Lieut (transient) in Oct. 1939, together with about 6 other spts. and I was posted to 26 Bty under Major McClellan.

Rapid progress was made with mechanisation, the guns were equipped with rubber tyres and many more new vehicles appeared. Training at Wulloughby continued at an increased tempo.

The unit was called up for a 3 months camp for the first 3 months of 1940. The unit was housed at GRETA on the northern coalfields in a new hatted camp which at the time accommodated just the one unit. Later it became a very large camp. The camp culminated in exercises with a full infantry brigade. Having been promoted rapidly, with little artillery experience, I found my life as a junior subaltern pretty difficult.

Immediately after the conclusion of the 3 months camp, 7th Div. was raised, and Lt. Col R. Dobby, C.O. of 7th Bde was appointed to command and raise 2/16th Regt. He selected a number of his officers from 7th Bde to join him, but because of my inexperience I was not selected. I temporarily enlisted as a Gunner and was posted to 2/16th Regt with its formation party on 13 May 1940. I was immediately promoted to the rank of spt.

The 2/6 Fd Regt was raised at Engleburn and the original officers and NCO's worked extremely hard in recruit training. The full regiment was raised in about 2 weeks which meant the reception and training of hundreds of recruits. The ex 7 Fd Bde personnel played a major part. After about 3 months the 2/6 moved to Ballymore and shortly afterwards I was sent to a Junior Leaders Course at Warwick Farm. Whilst I was there the 2/6 sailed for the Middle East. I had expected to rejoin the Regt but I was again commissioned in November 1940 and posted as an original officer to 2/15 Fd Regt 8 Div which was then being raised. I found once again that there was a strong cadre of ex 7 Fd Bde men including 5 officers.

The 2/15 was a wonderful unit. It took part in the first Australian engagement against the Japanese at GEMAS in Malaya on 15 Jan 1942 and thereafter in all major engagements on the Malayan mainland. It was in the forward position when the Japanese landed on Singapore Island. Between 13 Jan ¹⁹⁴² & 15 Feb ¹⁹⁴² the regiment expended over 45000 rounds of ammunition! The 2/15 lost 287 killed in action or died of ~~illness~~ ^{out at a total of 855 on the nominal roll.} ~~illness~~ ^{illness}. Quite a number of these had served with 7 Fd Bde.

7 Fd Bde provided a remarkable number of officers and NCO's particularly for 2/1, 2/6, 2/9 & 2/15 Fd Regiments. It was indeed a tribute to the training they had received.