

## Sid Thompson and D Company

From Coogee's northern headland, the view sweeps over the beach to the next point now dominated by Wylie's baths. Beyond and unseen is a place of my childhood where my grandfather, Sid Thompson, often visited in the 1950s. Here a dramatic embayment, a spectacular sandstone overhang and a small waterfall cascading from swampy land combine to create something unique a place infused with a special energy.

"Let's go'n look at the lions, Rusty," he'd say, capturing my imagination. Then off we set down Neptune Street, the smell of the sea enticing as we made for the old Batty Mansion. Here on the hill above the overhang, impassive stone lions gazed to the north and to the south.

On another day, Sid said, "Come'n, I'll show y'the coral," and we scrambled down beside the waterfall at low tide and stepped amongst squirting cunjevois to explore the pools and bogey holes, gouged along the lower parts of the rock by the action of waves.

"Have a look here in that pool," Sid pointed. "See the colour? Soft coral, that is. A long way from here, where the water's warmer, it grows with branches like plants' n lots of other shapes too."

I peered into the pool fascinated by the blues, mauves and pinks; the starfish, whelks, anemones, limpets, sea urchins and crabs. Further on, beneath the massive overhang, waves surged against stone except when tides ebbed to their lowest. Here the display reached beyond the pools, clinging to the rock shelf and fallen boulders. Shadows, salt spray and seepage created a sombre space in a child's mind. In this place of primal energies, Sid was in his element.

All these years later, I still hear his voice. Perhaps I should say I feel his presence when I step back upon that tidal zone where sea and stone meet: a nuance, a flow of ideas and a sense of his reactions, his meanings. Most manifest in that primal space we visited, his presence enriches my thought. We spoke of so many things back then, and sometimes, I even catch glimpses of him.

The sea was calm when I found Sid there again after 50 years. He had scrambled up onto one of the large boulders and sat relaxed, gazing seaward and drawing on his pipe.

"Sid, can you hear me?" I called.

He turned, that serious look on his face that he so often wore.

"Rusty! What are you doing here?"

"I often come here, ever since you first brought me."

"Is that so? So you like this place?"

"How did you find it?"

He drew on his pipe, watching a flock of sea gulls diving on baitfish off shore. At first there was no reply. Then he removed his pipe and looked at me. "I loved the sea. It runs in the family, y'know. M'dad was a sailor from Jersey. Loved the coast, he did, and like him, I enjoyed long coastal strolls'n fossickin around. Sometimes I'd throw in a line. If the tide was right I'd have a dip in a bogey hole. That's how I found this special place."

He continued, as he drew up his legs and squatted. "I like sittin here looking out to the east. There's a deep channel runnin just off shore n'sometimes in the spring y'can see whales passin."

I looked at my watch as I scrambled onto the boulder beside him. We had an hour or so before the tide blocked my retreat. Here in this shady place his incorporal presence was so intense. It seemed like a good a time to listen to what he was prepared to tell me and I hoped he

would tell me about his war experience. Over the years, I'd often wondered how he must have felt, when right after the move to Bondi, he picked up the *Sydney Morning Herald* one morning only to read:

Great Britain's position in relation to Germany has now been clearly defined. Since the neutrality of Belgium has been violated by the latter Power, Britain is at war, and that is now the condition into which the Empire has been flung. For good or ill, we are engaged with the mother country in fighting for liberty and peace. It is no war of aggression upon which Britons have entered, but one in defence of small nations threatened with humiliation and absorption, if not with extinction; and above and beyond everything our armies will fight for British honour.

And so I asked him: "Sid, how did you feel when right after the move from Summer Hill the war broke out and you were called on to fight?"

"I loved Australia, y'know," he replied, gazing out to sea. "I wasn't so fussed about protectin' Britain, the Motherland' as they called it, but I didn't like the Prussian militarists'n I knew there were German colonies on the islands up north. Livin' at Bondi made me think about the importance of our sea trade. I knew anythin' interferin' with that trade well 'n truly threatened our prosperity, our freedom. I had some skills from the 39<sup>th</sup> militia 'n there was that young man's sense of adventure. I'd just left home 'n the world was a splendid and excitin' place. They called for volunteers so I enlisted."

For Sid, like many other Australians, war in Europe must have seemed remote but when the British War Office called for Australian support in seizing the German colonies in New Guinea, New Britain and New Ireland the response was prompt. German wireless stations on New Britain were critical to the operational effectiveness of the Imperial German Navy's East Asiatic Squadron linking it

with German naval head quarters in Kiau Chau<sup>1</sup> China and back to Germany. Such links made sea-lanes between Australia and the Middle East vulnerable and afforded the German squadron great freedom of movement in Asia and the Pacific.

Sid continued, "They called for volunteers for a special Naval' n Military Expeditionary Force almost immediately. ANMEF they called it. I was an ideal recruit. When I joined up, I was put in D Company, Tropical Unit 1st Battalion."

"I knew you went to New Guinea, Sid, but I don't know much about it."

"Well, I'll tell y'the story. Leavin Sydney was a big event. Crowds of people linin' the streets callin out 'Hooroo', 'Good luck', 'Give it to em, boys' or singin 'God Save the King' 'n 'Rule, Britannia!' Marchin' down Macquarie Street on our way to the Man o'War Steps, this beautiful well-dressed woman ran out 'n grabbed her son's arm. Suddenly there was a bloke with a big camera takin a photo."

"That photo! It's iconic! It's in lots of children's history books. Funny thing, you know it's seldom associated with ANMEF. Usually with Gallipoli."

"Ah yeah, pretty awful Gallipoli, the first of many tragedies. I won't say our lot was easier but it was simpler."

Within a fortnight of war's declaration, the ANMEF consisting of 1,000 infantry plus 500 naval reservists and former Royal Navy seaman set sail for Palm Island off the coast of Queensland.

"I'll never forget goin' to the tropics for the first time," said Sid. "I'd never been in that sticky heat before. We had two weeks trainin for the exercise'n it was bloody hard yakka in that heat. We knew sorta where we were headed but officially it was secret. We knew it was well

<sup>1</sup> Now known as Qingdao (青島) and located on the The Shāndōng Peninsula (山东半島).

n' truly on when the battleship *Australia* arrived. Things moved pretty fast after that. We left Palm Island with a naval escort 'n these new submarines called HMAS AE1 'n AE2. Steamin' for four days through the Coral Sea there was no sight of the Kaiser's navy. Then early one mornin', we stood off New Britain. We went ashore in boats. One group landed at a place called Kabakaul 'n made straight for a radio transmitter at Bitapaka. Our group landed at Herbertshöhe. We reckoned we'd find a radio transmitter but there was naught. We didn't encounter any resistance either."

On the road to Bitapaka, ANMEF came under fire from snipers in trees and trenches set beside on the verges. Resistance was aided by the road's narrowness and dense lowland rainforest forest laced with thorny rattan palms. With vision limited to less than a dozen paces along sections of the road contact was intense but short. German resistance quickly overwhelmed; Bitapaka was taken by 7pm. Within days, the acting governor surrendered German New Guinea.

All further operations in Bougainville and on the mainland of New Guinea were unopposed. Total losses in action amounted to six servicemen. The only substantial loss of the campaign was submarine *HMAS AE1*, which disappeared without trace, probably striking an uncharted reef off the Gazelle Peninsula and sinking with all 35 hands.

"No one knows much about ANMEF," Sid observed. "Gallipoli and the Western Front were really crook 'n it's what they remember. I reckon people don't even know much about the German colonies."

"They don't," I said, "but I see the action up there as having a different significance. It flagged the emergence of an embryonic strategic regional engagement. For me, looking back, this event had a geopolitical significance.

As you say, it was dwarfed by the scale and gravity of the losses in the Middle East and on the Western Front but these were more directly serving British interests. To my mind, your operation highlights what was just outside the consciousness of most Australians at the time. In fact, it revealed forces that continue to shape our culture and our region. Our ally Japan, for one, was very put out that it wasn't involved in this action or in the carving up of territories later."

"Struth, I've buckley's of understandin' that, Russ. We were just try'n'te survive. The Germans were easy to beat but there were other dangers things ya couldn't see. For starters, we lost that submarine, then we had ta get through the wet season. It started rainin' in late October 'n by December, Hughie was sendin' it down in buckets." He laughed, using the old Australian phrase for God throwing down the rain, then he continued, "Lucky I'd been promoted to lance corporal 'n was workin on the telephone switchboard. It was no bludge but it was mostly out of the rain."

"What was Rabaul like in those days, Sid? It was badly damaged by a volcanic eruption in 1994. I can't imagine it before that."

"It was beaut back then, with wide streets n' nice colonial buildins. A lot of the houses were on piles surrounded by verandahs 'n hedges at the front. Down the middle of the roads there were flame trees, acacia n' she-oaks. Kitchens were out the back of the houses in case of fire, so the servants were out the back too. Yeah, 'n another thing: Rabaul even had a cinema 'n botanic gardens."

"Sounds like you were comfortably accommodated, Sid."

"It was oright, comfortable, plenty of fresh fish, prawns 'n mud crabs. It helped havin' lots of Chinese in Rabaul."

"Yeah, the Chinese. They were visiting and settling

in places all the way from New Britain to Sumatra as far back as the Ming Dynasty.”

“Looked like they’d been around for a while. By the time we came, they were plenty. Most worked in the copra industry, some worked for the Germans ’n some had gone out on their own buyin ’n sellin copra. Big money in copra, y’know. Maybe there were 500 in town and maybe another 1000 livin’ about. There was a Chinatown runnin’ along the main street near the Tolai markets. Me ’n me mates enjoyed a Chinese feed. We ate at a Chinese restaurant called The Asiatic.”

“That’s amazing. I had no idea.”

“Oh yeah, the Chinese were well organised ’n good at doin business with the Tolai –better than the Germans or us. We all respected their business skills. They got the go-ahead to build The Asiatic. Good tucker it was. There was a ‘big man’ behind it all. If I remember rightly his name was Ah Tam.”

“What sort of businesses did he run in Rabaul? Were they legitimate?”

“Ah Tam’d been in Rabaul for a while. A drivin’ force behind Chinatown, he was. Apart from the restaurant, he recruited ’n managed carpenters, cooks and coolies, a finger in many pies. Then there was his license to import opium. I reckon he was runnin’ the gambling ’n rumour has it he imported ’n ran 20 to 30 Japanese prostitutes. As the telephone operator, I picked up on a lot of this.”

“So this was Rabaul, 1914. None of this comes out in the newspapers of the time. Reports back to Australia just announced the ANMEF victory. I’d always assumed there was little for you to do other than wait out the wet season.”

“In a way, our victory wasn’t real,” Sid reflected. “Just when we thought everythin’ was apples, the real enemies got organised. We didn’t see ’em at first. They moved

through our ranks very quietly. Expert in camouflage, they were, n' chose their targets well. They used all sorts of tricks like fallen palm fronds, coconut shells, boats, tin cans 'n tarpaulins. Comin' right in among us'n we didn't realise they were dangerous. Then out on the edge of the town in low lyin' 'n swampy areas there was another lot gatherin' strength. They were even more dangerous. I reckon y'd know them better as dengue<sup>2</sup> fever' n malaria<sup>3</sup> these days."

What Sid described is well documented. Medical reports from the time tell us that two varieties of malaria, *Plasmodium vivax* and *Plasmodium falciparum*, were common in the area and that in ANMEF's case immunity was the key to the problem. Then it must have been most disquieting. Few if any would have known about these dangers and fewer still would have had any degree of immunity.

Sid continued, "Apart from a few marines who'd served time in India or the Malay States, few of us had ever been exposed to anythin' like this. Our medical officer requisitioned quinine but for some it was useless. It was only good for one sort of malaria; the other sort killed the boys pretty quickly, but we lined up for quinine

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<sup>2</sup> Dengue is a virus spread by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. It causes an acute viral fever often with symptoms such as headaches, bone and muscular pain, rash and a lower than normal white blood cell count.

<sup>3</sup> Malaria is a far more dangerous condition produced by one of four protozoan parasites of the genus *Plasmodium*. Carried by female *anopheline* mosquito, its resistance to treatment varies, depending on the parasite involved. Its life cycle is complex. Both *Plasmodium vivax* and *Plasmodium falciparum* were common in the area. *Vivax* tends to recur in three day cycles causing high fevers alternating with chills, profuse sweating, severe headaches and extreme weakness. It is particularly debilitating because it destroys red blood cells. It commonly recurs and relapses may occur years after infection. *Falciparum* malaria is far graver and if left untreated, amongst people without immunity, is often fatal within three to four weeks.

when it arrived.”

“Yeah, that deadly one is *Falciparum*, and quinine’s no use with it.”

In Sid’s time, the doctor probably didn’t know much about the epidemiology of malaria or that Melanesian people of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago had a degree of immunity to it. Though death rates amongst children were high, the Tolai had learned to live with it. In coastal areas where it was endemic, constant reinfection stimulated and maintained an immune response to *vivax*. Mosquitos, parasites and humans lived in a type of environmental balance but the sudden appearance of a large alien population had significant ecological implications. It created a new ecological space, increasing the number of opportunities for the plasmodium parasites to flourish unconstrained by the problem of immunity. Amongst the ANMEF men, there was a parasitic population explosion and accelerating rates of transmission.

“Sometime durin’ the wet season I caught vivax malaria,” Sid continued. “I kept havin these bouts of high fever’n chills, intense sweats, thumpin headaches’n I felt as weak as a bloody kitten. I couldn’t get off me bunk. Later they told me it destroys red blood cells. I got what they called anaemia. I felt like the wreck of the Hesperus.”

“So that was the ANMEF story but what about the Chinese? How were they dealing with it and what about the Germans?”

“I don’t know much about the Germans but seems the Chinese had their own medicines. Of course it was all unofficial ’n our medical officer didn’t want to know about it.”

“So he didn’t go looking for answers?”

“No, it was like out of sight out of mind, but the cook at The Asiatic was a very clever man. He saw I had malaria ’n he took me over to the Tolai markets. He knew Ah Tam

was growin' plants for Chinese medicine on a big patch of land just outside Rabaul. Some of this was sold through the markets. Ah Tam also imported a lot from China. It was expensive but I managed to get enough Black Cardamom 'n a fruit that he called Ya tan tzu. Later on I found the fruit was called Java Brucea fruit in English. Both of these did me a lot of good. They eased the effects of the malaria."

Certainly there's no evidence that ANMEF did anything more than issue quinine tablets to the troops, yet alternative treatments like these must have been everywhere but unseen to ANMEF's leaders. Agus, an old friend from Jakarta, knowledgeable in traditional medicine, confirmed this with me when he said: "Sid's right. There are many alternatives in Indonesia and Melanesia, simple things like a ginger known as tsaoko fruit<sup>4</sup> and the widely available Java brucea fruit. There is also an herb imported from China called sweet wormwood. It's widely used in Chinese medicine as an anti-malarial. It's more effective than quinine in treating *vivax*."

"The tides are comin' in, Rusty," said Sid. "You'd better be movin'."

"Yeah, I'd better, but tell me about the malaria," I asked, wanting to get to the end of the story.

"I had bouts of it for years 'n I'm sure it contributed to me death in 1952."

"But the Chinese medicine helped, did it?"

"Yeah for sure," Sid confirmed. "I'd have been much worse off without it. After the war I used to pick it up in Chinatown, down in Dixon Street."

Sid's confidence in traditional Chinese medicine was unusual for people of his background. In the last months of his life, he was receiving treatment from a Chinese herbalist. How effective it was for him then is unclear

<sup>4</sup> *Amomum costatum*, 草果; also known as Black Cardamom, a member of the ginger family.

because his heart was the main problem towards the end of his life, but he confirmed that it helped with the malaria.

“Come on, Rusty, time to go. I’ll come along for a ways. Y’know, I’ve been thinkin’ of old Colonel Holmes, the CO of ANMEF. He understood our effort. When he came back from the Western Front, he said, ‘While they hadn’t undergone all the risks and hardships of other overseas forces, when looking at the casualty lists from malaria, their lot was not an enviable one.’”

Sid stopped along the rocks as I continued. He said: “There’s no point ‘n bein’ bitter about war. The point is what we do to remember the sacrifice of the many ‘n what we do to prevent future wars.”

His response to the tragedy was remarkably adaptive. He sought neither glory nor compensation. He understood and felt the sacrifices of war yet I can’t remember him having much to say about war at all. As an adult I often wondered how he must have felt when 27 years later a militia unit, bearing the same name as his old unit, fought the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track sustaining massive casualties from the unseen enemy, malaria.