

AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY HISTORY RECORD

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Contents

2/1 North Australia Observer Unit
Letter from HB Carter AM
The JA Gilruth Clock
The JA Gilruth Library
John Anderson Gilruth
Call for Papers for the Annual Meeting of the AVHS, 2002

2/1 North Australia Observer Unit

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In June 1942 the Japanese army was advancing southwards towards Australia after a very successful campaign in South-East Asia. They had easily overcome the coastal defences of northern New Guinea and were almost at the summit of the Owen Stanley Range. Near panic reigned in Australia and the Government decided that defence of the long northern coastline was impractical. A line was drawn across the country at the level of Brisbane at which the defences would be mounted.

Genesis of the North Australia Observer Unit

At that moment it was probably inevitable that some armchair warrior would dream up the North Australia Observer Unit (NAOU). It was decided that a force was required to stay north of the Brisbane line, to live off the country and to send information about the size and movement of Japanese forces to Australian Headquarters in the south. The unit was to be independent of the main armed forces and to be under the command, and answerable to the general command of all of the Australian forces. As such it had the status of an independent company and wore the coveted double diamond colour patches.

Personnel were recruited from existing army units and consisted of skilled horsemen and signallers in approximately equal numbers. Because of need for secrecy and speed of movement, and the availability of wild horses in the war zone, the unit was to be horsed so that officers and other ranks needed to be skilled in training and use of horses for the movement of troops and equipment. Instead of the usual sabotage equipment common to most independent units, the large bulk of NAOU ordinance was long-range radio sets and Briggs and Stratton generators needed to maintain them. Armament was minimal and provided only for a token self defence in minor engagements. The emphasis was on speed of movement and secrecy in a difficult and largely unpopulated terrain. The Officers selected were an academic anthropologist, Bill Stanner, as the Commanding Officer who had spent a great deal of time studying Aborigines. However, the need to rely on Aborigines for guidance or assistance did not occur. Stanner was expected to be the brains on which the information-gathering function of the unit depended. Major Max

White, an old light-horse man, was expected to be the military arm of the undertaking. The adjutant was a regular soldier, so was the Regimental Sergeant-Major,

Most of the Company Officers were from rural areas, with the signallers largely from the cities. The same applied to the other ranks, the horsemen from the country and the signallers from the city. All had joined the unit because they expected to be involved in activities that would be both dangerous and heroic.

Unbeknown to each other, two veterinarians had been enlisted, neither with any promise or understanding that their training would be utilised in the conduct of the unit's affairs. Both had the naïve view that they would be able to make themselves useful. It should be remembered that this took place during a critical time in the country's history. The policy in place since the beginning of the war was that scientific manpower, that is personnel with scientific or engineering training would only be allowed to enlist if their services were specifically required, had been relaxed. I was in the graduating class in veterinary science at the University of Sydney in 1940. Half of the class took the option of completing a telescoped final year of the course so that after graduation they could enlist immediately in one of the armed forces. Dr Ian Clunies Ross, was dean of the faculty at the time, and also chairman of the Scientific Manpower Board, arranged for me to go directly to the NAOU. By September I was in camp at Ingleburn, south of Sydney, with a listed function of orderly room clerk, mostly arranging leave rosters. Clunies Ross may have forgotten to tell them I was coming because the fact that I was a veterinarian was never discussed either then or at any other time of my enlistment in NAOU. Neither was the status of Cecil Mulhearn the other veterinarian in the unit. He had graduated a year and a half before me and had the advantage over me of having some practical experience as a veterinarian. He was in A Company enlisted as a Private, with horse experience. Both of us had previous military experience in the Mobile Veterinary Sections attached to the Sydney University Regiment. Cec was in the cavalry unit. I was in the infantry section with the rank of Staff Sergeant when I graduated.

We were camped in galvanised iron huts at Ingleburn. It was cold, wet and windy on the top of a bald hill in an enormous military training complex. Fortunately all ranks had already done their basic infantry training and there was not much else to do except get things ready for the big move north. I joined late when the advance guard had already left. After three weeks of learning how the unit worked and who was who, final leave was announced. I returned to Ingleburn full of foreboding. The Japanese military machine seemed unstoppable and we were patently unprepared. Before the month of September was over we left for Katherine in the Northern Territory where our HQ was to be. On the troop trains going north the rumour was that the Japanese had already landed and we were expected to be in the thick of things.

Troop trains carried us north as far as Townsville, then west to Camooweal. Then we ground our way further west across the Barkly Tablelands in a five day long truck convoy controlled by Black American truck drivers and finally in a one day crashing and banging ride in cattle trucks up the Birdum to Darwin rail line to Katherine. The rumour machine by then had it that the Japanese advance was halted and an uneasy quiet prevailed.

About three days after we hit Katherine, Cec Mulhearn and I were summoned to appear at the orderly room, complete with equipment and ready to move. This was the first time we had met for two years but we were destined to work very closely together for the next year and then go our separate ways. Major Hector Cawley was a permanent soldier, a

remount officer, attached to HQ NT Force for the purpose of acquiring horses for NAOU. Ostensibly we were there to ensure that no diseased horses were purchased although we were never asked to run a health check on an animal but we did a lot of ageing by dentition. The Major was a very efficient soldier. He knew the rules and applied them unmercifully. He also knew horses and which ones to check for age he was familiar with most of the possible causes of lameness and disability. He was adept at identifying the untruthful farmer trying to put one over on us. For the most part farmers were submissive and agreeable. They really had no choice because the first words the Major said were "You'll sell them to me at my price or I will commandeer them for much less."

We travelled thousands of miles, lived Spartan lives and worked rain or shine every day regardless of the calendar. In the east we reached as far as Cloncurry, then north to Burketown and Normanton, then back along the Barkly Tablelands to Anthony Lagoon, north from there to Boorooloola via Malapunyah Springs, then east to the north-south highway, north to Barrow Creek, Ingoorable, then north again to Koolpinyah and Cape (Point) Stuart and Mount Bundy Stations, and finally Oenpelli mission station on the East Alligator River. We stopped over in Katherine for a few days then south to Alice Springs and some stations to the south and west then back up the highway with a detour west to Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs finishing with a northerly drive through Lissadell, Doctor Stones and Helen Springs to Katherine.

We bought and branded (Cec and I did the branding with a red-hot broad arrow iron) mostly good types of stock horses, generally broken to ride, and some unbroken wild, scrubby brumbies. The Army Company for which each consignment was destined arranged the transfer of horses to their camps for distribution to their outposts. Although the Major was a martinet, he looked after our creature comforts well. We also decided one scorching hot day after a particularly stressful morning in some dusty yards with a cranky owner and even crankier horses, that after the war we would never again eat warm camp pie and sliced peaches in warm, heavy syrup out of cans. Whenever he could the Major would use army-staging camps for rations and beds, and especially toilets and showers. We never once accepted hospitality at a station although we must have visited 40 or 50 of them. We may never have been invited, the Major would have been a daunting dinner guest, but I rather think that the Major would have felt that to stay overnight would have obligated us to them in terms of purchasing their horses. So we followed an incredible timetable of camping beside the truck, on a ground sheet and a blanket, in our clothes with a blanket over us on as comfortable a piece of ground as we could locate in this dry, barren country. In the morning we would be up at crack of dawn, all fed and packed up and about 10 am we would spring into action and drive off in a cloud of dust arriving at the station 20 miles up the road.

When the horse buying was completed Cecil went back to A Company and I went back to office duties at Katherine. That lasted only a few days after which I was drafted to a droving party from B Company to ferry horses from Point Stuart to Carlton Reach, east of Wyndham. This proved to be the outstanding experience in my short and otherwise deadly dull army career.

The Great Horse Drive

Our horse-buying saga ended the first week in December. Almost immediately I was introduced to three fellows from B Company who had arrived to take a draft of horses from Katherine back to B Company headquarters at Carlton Reach. It was close to Christmas and the wet season had already arrived at this latitude. In order to get south of the rain belt it was necessary to start the drive quickly. The civilian drovers from Point Stuart and Mount Bundy, where the horses came from, were reluctant to bring them any further. Our detachment was ordered to go to the place where the horses were camped and start the drive from there rather than from Katherine.

Why I was selected for the job rather than Cecil Mulhearn I cannot imagine. He was a better horseman and had more practical experience than me. We both knew the horses, we had been there when they were bought for the army, we both knew the drovers and the way they would have to go from their camp about twenty miles east of Adelaide River, where Northern Territory Force HQ was located. Perhaps it was because he had responsibilities to his company. I was a freelance without a regimental home. For me it turned out to be exciting adventure with a good deal of physical danger involved but at the same time, an opportunity to confront the real hardships involved in travelling through the unmapped and trackless Australian bush.

We were lucky in the choice of personnel. Lance-Corporal Mick Shepley was the leader of the party. Older than the rest of us, he was about 35 and wise in the ways of men. He had a good knowledge of Aborigines, the bush and was an excellent horseman. Nothing upset him; he had a simple, often ingenious answer for every problem. Bill Baunach, the second-in-command, was the small, wiry competitive, 30-year-old horse handler. He could ride anything he could get a rope on. Mick had the wisdom; Bill had the derring-do and they were great mates too. I would have followed them anywhere. Les Bond was number three, a country lad who did everything with a whistle or a song, always finding something to laugh at. He was about 18 years old and looked upon by the leaders as an apprentice, to be taught the lore of the bush. I was a complete misfit, with no mission in this endeavour, with none of the experience of the bush that the others had, with a university degree that carried no currency whatsoever in the circumstances. But like the true Australian countrymen that they were, they tolerated me, treated me well and taught me a great deal. We parted good friends but I regret to say that when the drive was over they disappeared into their company and I never saw them again, an outcome that I will always regret.

We reached the camp and the horses and their drovers, about halfway between Point Stuart and Adelaide River, in pouring rain. It was still raining when we left the next morning. The horses soon learned to stay on the track. If they strayed off it they were soon belly deep in the mud. Bill was out in front giving the lead, and the horses, a pretty sorry looking lot, followed dispiritedly, heads down, ears drooped. We expected trouble crossing the north-south road but it was Sunday and sunny and the traffic thin and slow, what drovers there were looked amazed at the straggling pack that crossed the road, harried by stockmen wielding stock whips and wearing bushmen's hats. The resourceful Mike had also dug up some stock saddles from somewhere ensuring a modicum of comfort on the long ride, which we estimated to be 450 miles.

Crossing the Daly

We were a day late at Turner's Crossing over the Daly River. The previous day, the day set down on our itinerary for the crossing, a utility truck had driven across the ford. But it had rained heavily upriver and what had been a trickle was now a raging torrent, thirty feet deep, fifty yards across, and running at about ten knots. Mick was not to be denied. We were up early next morning and planning to swim the horses across. There was a problem with the saddles, the rifles and the Sten machine gun, the food, the packsaddles and the bedding and tent fly that we used to keep out the rain. Ted Turner, the policeman at the station on the other side of the river, had a launch but declined to risk it on what was an Army matter and of no concern to the civilian administration. Mike then talked some local Aborigines into ferrying us across in their dugout canoes.

We had cut a corridor in the brush on a steep part of our riverbank with a wider mouth at the top, the whole to act as a race down which the horses would be driven into the river. Bill was to take the lead and swim his horse across with the other horses, encouraged by Les and me behind, and with Mike on the upstream side of the horses to ensure that they did not break ranks and head for the shore on the other side, because opposite us and for some distance downstream, the bank was covered with dense vegetation. They could not swim straight across anyway because the current was too strong. Mike's plan was to let them sail with the current until they came to a wide, clear section of the opposite bank that a peanut farmer used as a landing place. Beyond that the bank was again unscalable. As it turned out our chute was too wide. The first horses went in all right but the next ones took fright and turned back. But they had gone past the scalable section and two of them drowned before we could cut them free from the brush. It was too late then to start again that day and we turned in to contemplate another attempt the next day.

Next day the new chute was only half as wide and the horses, after the previous day's experience, went into the water well and sailed down the river, bobbing up and down like a raft of ducks. Only three overshot the landing zone and became entangled in exposed tree roots. Mike, Bill and Les were already across but, as the 'brains trust', I was left on the other side to ferry all the gear across. There were two dugouts, each about twelve feet long with an Aboriginal standing at the front and the rear, each armed with a round stick about the dimensions of a broomstick. I was sitting in the middle of the first canoe, struck dumb with what I sensed as a complete absence of balance as the craft was about two feet across and eighteen inches deep. The gear was much higher than this, especially the saddlebags, which were standing up with alternate ones leaning in opposite directions. The craft did not even wobble. The crewmen eased us out into the flood by pulling on the branches hanging down from the trees. The man in the bow made a few leisurely passes through the water with his round stick and we gradually eased across the muddy current, landing dry and safe on the bare section of the farther bank. I think I held my breath the whole way. As I stepped on to the bank I saw fifty yards further down, the dead horses being pulled under water by their attending crocodiles. We dined in an outdoor, thatched dining area used by Cooper's black workers. They provided the food and waited on us. I felt greatly humbled by their friendliness and generosity.

Fletcher's Gully

