



South Australians at war – transcript – PRG 369/17/2

Diary of Colin Kerr

Work with the Far Eastern Liaison Office in New Guinea

September-October 1944

Colin Kerr edited propaganda leaflets for the Office

September 1944

1 Sept: Bates turned up last night, on his way to — . He looked very cheerful & spectacularly unshaven. It was good to see him. He says I'm urgently required at Hollandia. Gave me the staggering news that I'll accompany the Americans to — . It sounds like a tough assignment, but I couldn't wish for a better one.

Old (?) brought up a bottle of gin. We blessed his name. He sent it into us at the mess, so there was not chance for it to be whisked off for semi-private consumption, as often seems to happen. ~~He said that I'm wanted urgently at —, so I hope it will be only a matter of days before I leave.~~ The job, as he outlined it, sounds a tougher assignment than I'd thought, & at the same time ~~far~~ even more interesting and worthwhile. I'm very pleased about it, although I know now that it may be a long time before I see Australia again.

Read the story, "Fail Not Our (?)", at the Writers' Club last night, & to my surprise they had nothing but praise for it. I hope to get it published in the "Argory."

Played tennis this afternoon until Colin Turner and two sisters. One was an attractive dark girl who took my fancy mightily. Slim, which is rare in these parts. I always seem to meet nice people when I'm on the point of pushing off elsewhere. Vide Haifa.

Today is the fifth anniversary of the German attack on Poland, and the brutes are getting a thorough hiding on all fronts. The wheel has almost come full circle.

Listened to an extraordinary Jap broadcast from Jocrata the other night. Making spirited fun of the Australian language, the speaker quoted the lines,



“The captain of the lugger

He was a dirty bugger”,

and went on to say that the Australians would probably refer to him as a “dirty old bastard.” I don’t know what propaganda value he saw in all this.

A few nights previously, the Jap referred to the Dutch, “sitting on their broad (?) in Australia.” He then asked wonderingly, “For Christ’s sake! How long do they think the war’s going to last?”

I can imagine the P.M.G.’s department, and all those gentlemen at Canberra who guard the purity of our morals, dancing in impotent rage at this sullyng of the ether.

The Japs seem to be pretty short on material, as they broadcast the same recorded speeches several nights running.

Townsend broadcast in Pidgin to the N.G. natives yesterday, from Brisbane. The coons came rushing to the mess from all parts of the compound, to hear him. There was great excitement when he mentioned Malpit and Broseci by name. Yeroka said it was “good feller talk.” (I have stopped trying to write Pidgin phonetically. I’ll leave that to the academicians).

2 Sept: Rained all the morning. Couldn’t sleep last night. Am in a state of complete jitters, and more depressed than I’ve ever been before. God knows what is the matter. Is it reaction to recent worries? I can’t get the idea out of my head that some further unpleasantness is in store for me. It is all I can do to keep my outward appearance & manner as near as possible to normal, and not to let myself go to pieces.

The sky was an even, dull grey all day. Life would be miserable but for one thing—lots of letters from M. and T. are coming in. Even so, they take only a few minutes to read.

It would be better if I could get some word of when I am to go to H. — Force are blitzing us again. This time they want to know why the major put me back on duty after — Force had signalled that I was to be suspended from duty pending the disposal of charges against me. Now the poor old major is faced with a “please explain.” He acted, I know, on the advice of



– Force Legal Section in putting me back on normal duty. Apparently the – was thumbing through the files of my case, and he dug this alleged misdemeanour of the major's out of the recorded evidence. Will this bloody (?) business never be allowed to die a natural death, or must I be persecuted for the rest of my military career by the periodic arrival of papers headed, "Subject: SX 7083, Lieut. Kerr, C.G?"

My hearty curses on army beaurocrats. May they rot in hell.

John Moulden turned up for a few minutes, in the usual casual way. We run into each other every year or so in all sorts of odd places. I was glad to see him. He asked me rather pointedly how the island was agreeing with me. I suppose he thought I looked peculiar, sitting there frowning and shaking like a drunk after a four-day bender.

This whole entry is too bloody much of a winge. I'm talking off my guard.

3 Sept: Still grey, but not unduly wet. Went for a swim with Maj. Roberts this afternoon & had dinner at his mess. They had some good rum. Feel much more cheerful.

16 Sept: Much water has flowed under the bridges, and a heavy tonnage of bombs been dropped on the Japs, since the last entry was written. To recapitulate, I had John Bagot to dinner on the 4th, on the 5th I went to the airstrip to get a plane to Hollandia, but couldn't get one until the following day. Spent the night of the 6th at – H.Q., where Prim, Swanson, Cleave Beatty and I had a rum party.

Settled in at this H.Q. on the 7th, and after an initial period of despondency decided that I liked the place and the people, & was prepared to stay here. Lae, with its trivialities and anxieties, is over and done with. For personal and nature notes, see the pages that follow.

Am reading "Government by Assassination," by Hugh (?), formerly Tokyo Correspondent of the "New York Times." Excellent exposé of Jap politics.

18 Sept: I can't raise any enthusiasm for continuing this diary, but I'd better jot down a few notes, for future reference.



The H.Q. here is set on a (?) of sandy beach, in a thickly-planted grove of coconut palms. At night I fall asleep with the sound of the sea in my ears - that is, when the wash of the waves is not drowned by ~~sound~~ noises of carousal in the hut.

Looking out to sea, the eye rests first on little rocky islands, with an occasional native fishing boat creeping among them. At the far edge of the silver water there are many big ships and hundreds of smaller craft standing in the bay. The mountains, perpetually misted, are like a hanging backcloth.

This is a clean camp, & seems very well run. Our own office is in a tent, & we are liberally furnished with chairs, tables, typewriters and filing cabinets; and electric light of course.

The food is well prepared and excellent in quality. We have fresh eggs for breakfast several days a week, which reminds me of Bob Hope's remark to the troops:- "You've no idea what the folks at home have to put up with! They can't get egg powder. They have to use the old style, and crack them themselves."

I've become a glutton for coffee, probably because I've been starved for it since leaving the Middle East.

ó office is about an hour's to two hours' travel distance. You take a jeep or a command car with comfortable leather seats, and whizz for five miles along the beach, skimming along by the water's edge, until you come to "White 3". There you take barge to "Pim." So far the journey is delightful. The rest of it, over the dustiest roads in the world, is frightful. You get filthy in five minutes, the eyes get crusted & sore, & it is hard to breathe. I spend as much time as possible at home. On most days it's possible to sunbathe & swim for an hour or so after lunch. I'm deeply browned & feel pretty fit again.

As for the people here, I like them. With the exception of a liaison officer - a major - and a ~~signal~~ S.O. subaltern, I'm the A only Australian officer in the whole H.Q. I seldom see the other two. The Americans have made me feel welcome, & I don't feel at all strange or out of my depth. The job, of course, is excellent. It looks as though it will keep me away from home for a long time, but I seem to have got my second wind, & want to go on. A week ago I felt that after more than four years of being separated from Margaret and Nick, I wanted nothing so much as a job near home. In fact, I didn't see how I could face another long



period of absence & remain sane. However, the worst of that feeling seems to have passed, & as I say, I've got my second wind.

Paul Anderson, captain commanding this section, is a nice chap, & I don't think there'll be any difficulty in working well with him.

19 Sept: A great flap about Germany's having unconditionally surrendered. The hut was buzzing with it when I awoke. The story ran that the news had been flashed through during the night. There was nothing about it in the A.B.C. 7 a.m. news. "It hasn't been released yet," said the people in the hut. At breakfast we tackled the G2 officers, to learn if whether they knew anything official, & found that they were waiting to see us for the same reason. We spent an hour or two ranging the ether, but only got jive & some Japanese propaganda. At 9 a.m. K. whispered to me portentously that the news had been confirmed by G.H.Q.

I took ship to the other side of the bay, to see Taylor, & at Pim I found everybody in a state of high excitement. They weren't even treating the news as a possible rumour. Germany had surrendered unconditionally as far as they were concerned.

Taylor didn't turn up. It was a disappointing day. I returned at nightfall, & as far as we know at present the War in the West is still going on.

20 Sep: Yesterdays surrender flap was explained. Apparently some wits at FEAF drafted out a fake message & left it for the information & amusement of the on-coming duty officer. He took it seriously & transmitted it to G.H.Q. Precisely what G.H.Q. did about it I don't know, but I do know that over an area of several hundred square miles men were waking each other up in the small hours of the morning to pass on the great news, & God knows how many troops were repeating it happily & the rumour had bowed its head and died.

I should hate to be the man who drafted that message just in fun.

23 Sep. The major arrived yesterday, and I went across to see him. He's sending my report on to the Director. He's also forwarding my request for fourteen days leave.

A horrible thing happened. While I was sitting in the major's hut, we heard a B2x roaring over, very low. Then there was a crash, and by the time we ran out into the open we could



see nothing but a mass of flame and black smoke, near the base of a cliff, about a quarter of a mile distant. The bomber had crashed into a dump of empty fuel drums, and the gas in these ignited & spread the fire. We could do nothing to help. The plane blazed for about fifteen minutes. The ammunition exploded loudly. When I drove past on my way home, half an hour after the crash, there was still a column of greasy smoke pouring from the fire. A lieutenant whom I met on the road told me there were three men in the plane.

Latest gem from the Jap radio, on the 21st:- “A campaign to turn in discardable chopsticks as a direct aid to wooden ship building has spread into all the cities of Manchuria.”

4 Oct: This diary is being badly neglected, chiefly because we have been very busy, and also because I can't decide to what extent I should commit our activities to paper. Apart from work, very little of interest has happened. So for the moment; I'll merely record the fact that it is my thirty-second birthday, and let it go at that.

7 Oct: I resume this intermittent journal merely to record one or two sayings which strike me as apt or otherwise intriguing.

Two airmen at a party; One to the other: “If you have another of them drinks you'll take off.” The other: “Boy, if I have another I'll be able to take off on a ruptured duck from off a ricefield.”

Major Hawley, trying to get quarters for an OWI executive who has the simulated rank of a fuel colonel, but doesn't wear the silver eagles:- “Now this man has the rank of a full colonel.”

Billeting officer (first lieutenant): “Bub, if he ain't got them chickens, he ain't nothing.”

Life now consists of long busy days, enlivened by short spells of swimming & sunbathing. I feel so much healthier & happier than I did a month ago that the whole world seems different.

There's not an earthly chance of leave - either fourteen days or four. We are getting ready for the move. The ships in the harbour grow more numerous each day.

Watkins to me, today: “You'll be the only Australian going in with this outfit, wont you.”



Myself: "As far as I know I'm the only officer.

W. "(?)," the Adelaide "Bugle" I'll have a picture of your ugly-lookin' puss on the front page, and the story, "Local Lad Helps MacArthur Retake Philippines."

9 Oct: We are beginning to pack the less essential equipment. The presses will be carted in six days' time. We have been running two Davidson offset litho press here, and keeping one in reserve. In good conditions the Davidson turns out about 2,500 ~~10"~~ ^{14"} sheets an hour, at cruising speed. The sheets are 10" ^{14"}, so that you can get one large leaflet to the sheet, two medium-sized leaflets, or four very small leaflets. In typical conditions, there are all sorts of technical difficulties to contend with. The paper is always moist; the sheets stick together & won't feed properly into the machine. The inks behave queerly. Stan Koppel, the OWI man, & my two chaps, Bickham & Young, have been working very hard, & a lot of the troubles have been overcome. We are learning as we go.

Two things we badly need are a drying cabinet for the paper stocks, & an exhaust fan or some other kind of cooling system for the dark-room. It is so hellishly hot in there that the photo men prefer to work at night, where the temperature is slightly more bearable.

The Davidsons have to be stripped down for moving, and reassembled when we get to the new place. When they arrived here they were badly knocked about & several smashed parts had to be welded. That is why we are keeping a spare press - to provide spare parts if necessary. I'm hoping we can do our own packing and handling this time, to avoid breakages and delays when we set up on the beach head.

The other night I was looking at a Harrison offset press at the 69th (?) Reproduction Unit. The Harrison takes a ~~3,000~~ 20" ^{22"} sheet, & she turns out 3,000 an hour with ease. That would be 12,000 leaflets an hour, printing four-up. She was printing the brown contour lines on maps when I saw her - a beautiful precision job. The registration was perfect. Incidentally, the maps were 1/100,000 sheets of 6, which made me think how hard it is to keep details of a coming operation secret from the rank & file. The chaps operating the press must have known quite well what the map meant.

The sergeant pressman said that the Harrison gave very little trouble. The press is in an air-conditioned trailer (as is the dark room & all the rest of the litho apparatus). It is



completely mobile. It does not need to be dismantled for movement. It is simply cleaned and coated with grease, to resist salt damp. The trailer is shipped ashore, and the press can be working within an hour.

When I thought of all our crating & uncrating, our broken parts & mechanical hitches, I nearly wept. Propaganda, as an auxiliary weapon, is of prime operational importance; nothing should stand in the way of its speedy printing & distribution. For months, in Brisbane, I tried to get a complete mobile litho section assigned for our exclusive use, with all its staff complete - less map draftsmen & administrative personnel. This section, with writers, artists & translators, would constitute the perfect mobile propaganda unit. We couldn't get what we wanted, and so badly needed. The Americans have apparently met with the same blank attitude from their authorities.

If propaganda is worthwhile ñ and every competent commander today realises it's immense value ñ the propagandists should be given every possible facility to do his job. I hope that my brethren in the next war don't have to waste weeks & months digging up technicians, training unskilled men - in fact, building up their organisation as they go along.

13 Oct: The time for movement draws closer & closer, but we don't yet know exactly when it will be. Crossing the harbour in the general's 64-footer yesterday, I could see the ships extending for miles along the horizon. If you had fired a point blank cannon shot at the sky line, you couldn't have avoided hitting a ship. Last night, their lights were like the lights of a great city. Anderson said this evening that there were 150 flat-tops waiting at Manus.

Today I took Bickham & Young to G.H.Q., to get ourselves equipped. We are going to be a strangely bastardised mixture of Australian and American. Myself, I'm choosing what I like best out of each kind - Australian-style tin hat, boots, gaiters, and clothing; American belt and waterbottle (the latter is lighter than ours), American ~~red-cross~~ first-aid outfit and pack - or musette bag, as they call it. At the last minute, Battalion supply at G.H.Q. got worried about issuing us with (?), so I took my chaps back to FELO and we dug out some .38 revolvers. The supply people refused to give the OWI men weapons, apparently on the ground that they were non-combatant troops.



I got myself a “shelter-half” - a sort of tent, sleeping bag arrangement which I haven’t sorted out yet, although during the course of a rough cruise across the harbour in a Buffalo, I became horribly involved with the ropes and zipper.

Big American air raid on Formosa. Jap radio claims 110 of our planes shot down. Americans have been raiding Balipapaan heavily, busting up Jap oil supplies.