

## Diary of Rupert Vowles

These excerpts from Rupert Vowles' diary describes life in the Moore Park encampment (at the Engineers Depot).



Portion of the Engineers Depot Camp taken from the southeast corner

Rupert Taylor Vowles was 21 when he re-enlisted in Sydney, 25 Aug. 1915. He embarked from Melbourne, Victoria, on board HMAT A19 Afric, 5 Jan. 1916. He trained as a signaller in Sydney and as a sapper in the 1st Signal Squadron, Anzac Mounted Division in Egypt, Sinai and Palestine. He returned to Sydney on HT Burma, 1 Sept. 1919.

### Excerpts

#### *Camp Life, Moore Park, 23rd August*

'It was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1915 that I reported at Moore Park Engineer Depot to Capt Fewtrell then OC. and asked to be taken on the strength of the Engineer Signallers. At first, I was told that no vacancies existed but on shewing my discharge he found a place for me and I reported to him 16th September - Thursday at 11am.'

#### *Checking in and getting fitted out*

'Nothing occurred until 3pm, when I was given blankets (3) and a waterproof sheet and told to sleep for the time being in the Engineer Drill Hall. Here amongst the other sigs I found some old pals. One of them called Ron Gow who remembered me years back at

school introduced me as "Smacker" and that name remains with me and whenever ?? wanted in tram train or boat it is always "SMACKER" - Certainly an aristocratic name. Things went anyhow that day but I waited my chance when the uniforms were issued to some reinforcements then leaving and rushed the joint as the saying goes and got a complete uniform that night. Next day and so on everyday it was one glorious loaf ...? The first parade would be at 6.30 - how many times I was on that parade I really don't know but they could be counted on the fingers of one hand easily. Eric Long was a very bad starter and always wanted 'just a minute longer'. Hoppy was a darned nuisance and would not listen to reason at all and always wanted to get out and do physical culture, which usually consisted of a series of spasmodic movements of the arms legs and head.'

### ***Camp Life under canvas - looking after our belongings***

'My sentiments were altogether with Eric and we were the only two in our tent that would lie in. As for Fat and Balfour - they slept on until breakfast in a corner of the drill hall. Our dresser in which we kept our eating utensils was a soap box and stood near the entrance to the tent and of all the untidy conglomerations of boot polish, butter, corn cure and hair oils ours was the limit. It generally was full of sand and shaving paper waste, but one soon says goodbye to home comforts and does not think of absolute cleanliness in everything as he would at home. A wipe round a greasy plate with a piece of dry bread was considered sufficient to prepare it for the next meal, whilst at times there would be several different articles such as porridge, meat and jam all on the one plate at the same time. This is necessary so as to get one's share before it was "done in".'

### ***Sleeping arrangements and lights out***

'The bed consists of a "tick" or a bag partly filled with straw under which is laid the waterproof sheet and over which is placed one blanket or in hot weather two and one left to cover with. A pillow consists of a pair of boots covered with dungarees generally but may be anything at all. A short piece of candle is given to each tent daily to see to go to bed with and usually this gets burnt out long before the last one arrives in the fold as ancient writers say. In such a case when one or two arrive home about one am. and find no candle or matches it usually caused a mild riot owing to treading on the sleeping dorgs or falling over the dresser, muttering all kinds of wild imprecations and cursing the day they enlisted. Lights out was sounded at 10.15pm previous to which are sounded two warnings by bugle, one at 9.30pm called First Post, another at 10pm called Last Post and then two mournful wails on the bugle termed Lights out but which generally brought forth a storm of counting outs from the tents. For half an hour after Lights out, the orderly corporal would have the time of his life yelling out "Put that light out here" - The usual answer being "go to - ." As fast as one went out another would light up. Eric's arrival on a late night was generally heralded by his well known footsteps, his exclamations of "Struth", "Stone the crows" and various other expressions, then followed a splendid exhibition of how to get into bed in the dark ...'

### ***Breakfast and chores***

'..... From 7.30 till 8am was spent in washing and making beds [more housework] At 8am breakfast came on. This consisted of the main guard that lined up on the parade ground and on the command rushed the mess tables yelling pig! pig! pig! The scouts we may say, one of whom was Fat Wild quietly got there first via the back door and were well into it on arrival of the main guard.

The food was excellent and we had comfortable seats to sit upon. Manners were few. Not

much please and thanks, but more Hey! you with a white lid (hat) pass the jam or shove the dodger (bread) along. It was far more satisfactory to get up and get it, not forgetting to ask the one next to you to mount guard over your posy (place) in your absence.'

### ***Roll call and orders for the morning***

'At 9am the general fall in would sound and Lieut Calder then second in command now O.C. would call out in his Scotch dialect Double oot! Double oot! The Roll call amongst the sigs was generally very poor. Generally speaking out of the seven of us there were five absent. Hop and Pierce of course being there. Poor Hop! How he would hunt for us, beg, pray, bargain, command and entreat with us to come on parade, but in vain. After roll call the orders were read out and naturally we were always ignorant of them. For the first few weeks we fell in for general fatigues which means carrying timber sweeping out and sundry other Housework. One morning I got out with Eric to do Physical Training and after running for three miles round Centennial Park I returned almost dead. That was the extent of my physical training. At times we would have to get out for a few minutes so as to get our names marked on the roll but after that, well, we just faded away. Well, at 9 o'clock the fall in would sound and we would get squad drill all the morning ... '

### ***Relaxing the rules***

'When I returned Major Fewtrell became Lieut Col Fewtrell and left the Engineer Depot in charge of Lieut Jock Calder. From now on, we had the time of our lives. As soon as little Jock, as he was called, took command he began to make the men comfortable by building showers and having electric light on the camp and so on until now it is a respectable camp with asphalt roads and green grass that does not need describing, He then extended the leave from 5pm to 8pm to 5pm to 10pm. This was his first step towards gaining the name he now has, this meant that at 5pm we were at liberty to go out or come into camp as we pleased until 10pm, after which time the guard on the gate would stop us and trouble would follow. So far so good, so we began to look for other ways into camp after 10pm and succeeded in finding an old drain that led under the footpath leading into the sports ground. It was simply necessary to walk down here and crawl along the drain until it opened up into the camp. This worked well for a week or two when it was discovered and the acid put on it by mounting a guard over it with a fixed bayonet.'

### ***Unwritten rules for night passes***

'Before going any farther it may as well be said here that the guard will not stop a man returning late providing there is no officer nearby. Nobody would think of telling tales on his mate for coming in late like a naughty schoolboy. It only became necessary to exercise caution when an officer or a bumptious non com was about. These two specimens of humanity delighted in making trouble and incidentally gaining notoriety, The usual "Good day lad" greeting to the guard was sufficient to pass in - sometimes with a caution about a "red light" (danger -that is an officer or mistrusted non com) being in such and such a place. By this friendly action, although strictly speaking wrongful, the men practically became immune from being punished.'

### ***Bending the rules on night leave***

'Many a night we came in later than 10pm - 1am If the officer does catch a man he simply assumes a fictitious name and says he belongs to some other unit, and the following day of course he cannot be found. The worst part of coming in late is the risk one runs for

lighting a candle and thereby drawing the officers towards it as moths fly to a candle. Once caught in this way when just arrived at some late hour, fully dressed there are but two slender ways out. One is to say the guard has your name, the other is to either cut out via the back or else to jump into the bed clothes and all snore like a pig. He [the officer] often thinks he mistook the tent.

On a wet night it is fairly safe as the officers keep inside. Eric's arrival on a wet night, when the tent had been laced up when dry, and now as tight as a drum was always accompanied by comments upon trying to get 'home' was like breaking into the Bank of England. I often got that way that when I was home for the night on a weekend that I would almost blow out the gas when I heard footsteps, thinking for the time that I was in camp. Occasionally a late comer would wake everyone at midnight in order to have a feed, and it was seldom refused. Such pranks as tying one's pyjamas in knots and putting bricks between the blankets were not worthwhile as it only caused a great amount of noise.'

### *Sick Parade and tidying up*

'After breakfast comes Sick Parade and those who are seedy, fall in and dead march it up to the doctor at Victoria Barracks where one would wait till 12 o'clock before receiving attention ... Many were the arguments about the tent orderly, who it was for the day and what he should do. The tent orderly was expected to tidy up the tent and see that everything was in order, also to get the tucker at mealtimes and serve them out. (At Moore Park, we had long tables in a shed) and then to clean up the mess after for this he usually got out of a lot of work. Jock however made other arrangements whereby we were relieved of all the cleaning up after meals. He appointed two old men to cut the bread and to clean up. Of course, each man had to wash his own utensils. A handful of sand or grass and water would do this fairly well. The meals were splendid and there was plenty. I may also here say without any boasting that the Engineer section of the army are looked upon from a higher view on account of the technical work that has to be done ...'

### *Concerts and churchgoing*

'Concerts were given in the Recreation Room at Moore Park and some talented artists gave interesting amusements that broke the monotony of camp life. Out of two months in Moore Park I only spent three nights in camp and was always out somewhere making a nuisance of myself. Church parades were always held on Sunday morning. The Church of England section left at 10.30am for St. Matthias Church Paddington and returned at 12.45pm. The Nonconformists left at 10am and returned at 10.30am - their service being short and sweet and held in the Show Ground. We soon took a tumble and went to the Nonconformist's section and on return nicked over the back fence and went home, returning at midnight or later.

Saturday was an open camp from 2pm onwards but we were generally home and out again by that time. This went on for some considerable time and we always had an enjoyable time in camp. The ground in the camp was sand and in windy weather we got plenty of it in our tucker and all over our beds. Sleeping out went well too and I never regret the time we had whilst under Jock Calder. Time and time again he had the opportunity of giving us severe punishment but he always overlooked it. On Nov 28th however our turn came for a removal. For the past 18 months Melbourne had held the Signal School and we were on the point of leaving for there when word came that we were to go to Casula Camp - just the other side of Liverpool.'

Source of complete manuscript: State Library of New South Wales  
[\*\*R.T. Vowles diary, call number MLMSS 3052/Item 1\*\*](#)