

# THE ANZAC PAST AND PRESENT: THE PRIVATE DIARY OF A STRETCHER BEARER AT TOBRUK AND EL ALAMEIN

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*This paper explores the different manifestations of the Anzac in Les Perkins' war diary, a transcription of his diary, and the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion history. These three documents were written for different audiences at different times, and demonstrate how the Anzac legend and the past can be shaped to meet the needs of the present.*

Private Leslie Thomas Perkins NX20944, son of a World War One Anzac and stretcher bearer in the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division, wrote a diary while at Tobruk and El Alamein during the Second World War. The siege of Tobruk and the battle of El Alamein are icons in Australian war history. Tobruk, a port in Libya (formerly Cyrenaica), was strategically important for military access to the Middle East. Surrounded by desert, Tobruk was defended by a semi-circle with a radius of eight to nine miles of tank ditches, strong posts and barbed wire.<sup>1</sup> Men of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division made up a large proportion of the soldiers who were besieged there by the German-Italian army led by Rommel, from April to December in 1941. Taunted by German propagandists that they were caught like rats in a trap, these men proudly adopted the name Rats of Tobruk.<sup>2</sup> El Alamein, on the coast of North Egypt, was the site of an 'epic struggle' fought between 23 October and 5 November in 1942. More than 1200 Australians were killed at El Alamein, as they once again successfully defended against attacks by Rommel's army.<sup>3</sup>

Les's diary has a history of its own. It is a collection of six small books, three of which originally belonged to enemy soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Les left some of the original entries, writing around the words of their first owners and filling the remaining pages with his own story. In performing this act, probably motivated by economy and practicality, Les vanquished the enemy symbolically. Les wrote in his diary almost every day, he reread it, wrote over pencil with ink, and sometimes added comments later. His diary enabled him to escape from the present, and became a confirmation of his survival. When he joined up in May 1940, at the age of thirty four,<sup>5</sup> Les was a bachelor, so he requested that his diary be sent to his mother, if he should become separated from it. While Les had his mother in mind when he began to write, as the diary progressed he seemed to write more for himself and his mates; it became both ribald and bawdy as he shared intimate details about himself and the other men in his Platoon. Katie Holmes has argued that: 'Diaries do not reveal to us a unified, coherent sense of the writer's self. Just as we see a life in process, so do we also discover a shifting sense of the writer's identity'.<sup>6</sup> When he went to war, Les was a farmer accustomed to living rough in a man's world,<sup>7</sup> and readily adapted to the army lifestyle; his new identity as a soldier was reflected in the new audiences he chose for his diary.

Two of the soldiers who were mentioned in Les's diary had the opportunity to relive their wartime experiences when they became involved in its transcription. Bob Irvine did the transcript in 1988; John Searle wrote an introduction later. This more legible typed version made the diary more accessible and gave Les's story a greater chance of living on. Bob and some other army mates visited Les when he was elderly and in the first stages of dementia;

together, they read 'excerpts from the diaries which prompted many hilarious stories'.<sup>8</sup> The way Bob edited the diary in his transcript gives an interesting insight into the way these men wanted to be remembered. In the originals, Les gave a warts and all rendition of army life; in the transcript that image was toned down, and Bob sometimes added comments of his own. Alistair Thomson tells us that 'additions' like these 'add to the original story', and 'tell their own story' about remembering.<sup>9</sup> They reveal 'the changing ways in which the narrators and users of personal records understand and represent the past'.<sup>10</sup> The reworking of original material, by Les in the original diary, and Bob in the transcript, added layers of new meaning to the original story.

The official history of the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion *Bayonets Abroad*, was written in 1953, more than ten years after Les had begun his diary. Les is remembered in its pages for two things. Firstly, he is mentioned because he won a Military Medal for bravery. Secondly, he was written into history because he was captured by the Germans.

It seems impossible to write about Australian soldiers without making reference to the original Anzacs, against whom all other Australian war experience is measured. Alistair Thomson has argued that First World War historian, C.E.W. Bean, 'is widely regarded as the most influential of those who contributed to the creation of Australia's Anzac Legend'.<sup>11</sup> Bean attributed the Anzacs with specific masculine traits; they were bold in battle, independent, egalitarian, enterprising, loyal and cheerful larrikins.<sup>12</sup> Thomson suggests Bean wanted them to embody a 'typical', but recognisable, working class soldier that Australians could identify with.<sup>13</sup> Ken Inglis tells us that Bean's Anzacs were a product of the bush legend.<sup>14</sup>

This Anzac stereotype is a useful reference point for comparing and understanding the differences between Les's original diary, the transcript and the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion history. There are manifestations of Bean's WWI Anzac in all of them, indicating that the Anzac legend is dynamic and responsive to changing times. These documents were written at different times for different audiences, so by paying attention to audience, we can understand some of the forces at play when Les's diary, the transcript, and the Battalion history gave different renditions of the same story. These differences seem to occur most often when the topics of larrikin behaviour, bravery in battle, sex and brothels arose. This paper seeks to offer explanations for these differences and to understand their meanings.

On more than one occasion Les recorded larrikin behaviour in his diary that was later censored in the transcript and Battalion history. When he began 'No (2) book', Les was in the Middle East, and planned to copy his entries into one big book and send the originals home.<sup>15</sup> As was his habit, he began the book with a little verse.

*It is my diary  
And I'm aspiring  
To tell the exact truth  
For God hates all liars.*<sup>16</sup>

While Les said he aimed to tell the truth, and often wrote frankly about his mates' exploits, at times it seemed he was not always quite as forthcoming about his own, perhaps because there was a chance his mother may one day read what he had written. Janet Butler tells us that silences in diaries are an indication the author is playing to an audience; 'a diary is not a direct, unmediated reflection of reality'.<sup>17</sup>

In early March 1941, Les's Platoon had not yet engaged with the enemy. They were in the Libyan Desert and seemed more a danger to themselves than Rommel's army. Despite repeated warnings about the risk of injury,<sup>18</sup> Les noted in his diary, the 'boys amuse themselves firing off [Italian] hand grenades'.<sup>19</sup> 'Our lorry

caught alight by Scotty our driver dropping a match in the back all the hood was burnt but the top was alright. All rifles but mine + Ritchies were burnt + all our felt hats + a few respirators'. Bob Irvine edited this incident out of his transcript.<sup>20</sup>

The Platoon was disgruntled about being on emu parade the following week; 'we are all disgusted over it', Les wrote. Emu parade was a line of soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, walking slowly forward, bobbing up and down to pick up litter. Les also complained about 'inadequate rations'. Fed up with army life, Les and his mates got hold of '7 bottles' of beer and some Italian 'Coniac' and got 'pretty hilarious'.<sup>21</sup> Noel was sick '+ belched up a bit'; he was still drunk the next morning. 'Fred went away' and lay in the sun and was 'very sick' when he was found. 'The boys (what were sober enough)', wrote Les 'had another emu parade'.<sup>22</sup> Bob edited out all this detail in his transcript, simply saying, 'some of the boys a bit off colour'.<sup>23</sup>

Bob had his own reasons for censoring or toning Les's stories down. By the time he did the transcript, the men named in Les's diary were no longer soldiers; they were elderly husbands, fathers and grandparents. Perhaps he felt the need to guard their dignity and set examples for future generations. Bob didn't want his friends to be remembered for behaviour that tarnished their reputations. In the tradition of Bean who wrote about the 'high spirits' and 'pranks' of the original Anzacs, Bob sometimes took refuge in euphemism when larrikinism went too far.<sup>24</sup>

From 30 June the 2/13<sup>th</sup> was in reserve at Palastrino, where they were able to rest when not on practice manoeuvres and going on working parties. By then, Les and his mates were experienced soldiers and Les wrote explicitly in his diary about the indiscipline provoked by days of monotonous digging: 'We are out on another digging party today in a different place. The usual fooling about + clod throwing is going on + practically no work being done'.<sup>25</sup> Some of the men refused to get into the truck one day. Les said: 'A few of us did not know it was "on" + was already on the truck. Anyhow they changed their minds + went' after getting a 'talking to out there'.<sup>26</sup> The Battalion history told a different story. It claimed that after the rigours of the Salient, where enemy fire had prevented the men from moving around freely, the exercise they received on working parties, such as 'digging in the hot sun', was 'beneficial, if not enjoyable'.<sup>27</sup>

There was another rebellion the following year. On 16 April 1942 the 2/13<sup>th</sup> had: 'Commenced march to Tripoli' in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> They had marched for 'a total of about 90 miles for 5 days' before setting up camp.<sup>29</sup> Two days later the 'boys' started going AWL.<sup>30</sup> Les went to Tripoli '+ got pretty full. Won a few 100 at swy there'.<sup>31</sup> The next morning he '[f]elt off + would not work + Sgt Myers was going to put me in'.<sup>32</sup> The Battalion history attributed '[w]aves of wrong-doing' at this time, to 'periods of prolonged training' during which the 'imperfections and inconsistencies' of the army 'offend the innate democracy of the Australian soldier'.<sup>33</sup>

Thomson has argued that Bean presented a specific model of Australian masculinity that was not always realistic, but had the power to shape and censor the telling of wartime experiences.<sup>34</sup> The history's reference to 'the innate democracy of the Australian soldier' upheld the Anzac legend and excused the men's behaviour. The Battalion history was an official commemorative publication and the 'Rats' were well established as bearers of the Anzac tradition by the time it was written.

Similarly, Les's diary, Bob's transcript and the Battalion history had different agendas when they dealt with stories about Australian attitudes to battle. In early April 1941, while Les and his mates had been digging in near Benghazi in the Libyan Desert, the enemy had been advancing.<sup>35</sup> Les could hear 'heavy bombing' at the front. According to the Battalion history they were 'the only Australian unit barring the German path' and they were inadequately armed. 'Irrespective of this, there was no panic; a quiet, purposeful and confident attitude existed'. Endorsing the Anzac legend, it stated, 'this seemed the normal behaviour of Australian soldiers on the eve of battle'.<sup>36</sup> Les expressed feelings of trepidation missing from the history's

sanitised account, when he wrote in his diary: 'Lord knows where I'll write the next or what things will be'.<sup>37</sup> He wrote with raw emotion: 'Dearest mother we are in the middle of the battle shells falling around + over us'.<sup>38</sup>

The Australians were forced to retreat from Benghazi to Tobruk.<sup>39</sup> Les observed there were 'only sufficient vehicles for one platoon', so 'the remainder of the Company was to start off on foot and vehicles were to be sent to it as they became available'.<sup>40</sup> Bill and Les stuck together, they 'jumped on a Hqr truck mortar. We travelled alternately all night on the running board'.<sup>41</sup> The next day 5 April, they were 'resting in brush between Barce + Derna' after a sleepless night. Les listed the wounded, captured and killed that he knew of in his diary, and wrote about one near miss of note, 'two shells landed nearly each side of Treb + Noel whilst Treb was having a crap'.<sup>42</sup> Later, Les again mentioned intimate bodily functions, a topic not usually written about in war histories: 'Had another halt + you may laugh but I got off the truck + did a big sh— for myself Have been baking it for an hour'.<sup>43</sup> Bob Irvine changed 'sh—' to 'sh---t' in his transcript, to make sure the meaning was clear.<sup>44</sup> During this chaotic retreat, now known as the Benghazi Handicap,<sup>45</sup> Les and his mates were 'trying to get through to join' their Battalion. 'Gerry', said Les, was 'about 4 miles away'. He wrote in his diary as he travelled 'all night + bitterly cold in open truck, been stacked together + are a bit cramped'. He prayed: 'God forgive Hitler he will meet his just retribution God bless Mum + Blondie + all my dear ones'.<sup>46</sup>

Les wanted to 'make a stand', but stretcher bearers weren't supposed to carry rifles. He managed to have 'a shot but it was a bit shaky'. He claimed he 'really fired to say I have fired a shot', but vowed 'I'll have another go if I get a chance'.<sup>47</sup> He said it was not knowing 'whats doing', that caused panic. There was an incident when a 'light tank' had appeared and they were told to 'scatter'. The 'engine was running on our truck', wrote Les, so 'I sung out What about taking the truck', but 'the tank turned around + came towards the truck + the driver said fuck it + turned back again'. Then 'a team of us piled on Mr Coopers truck' until it 'dumped us off', eventually they got 'another truck for a few yards'. In this fashion they made their way back to their Battalion.<sup>48</sup> In the transcript, Bob edited the swearing. Vivian de Klerk has suggested 'that the violation of codes, the breaking of taboos implied by swearing, has connotations of strength which allies it to traditional masculinity'.<sup>49</sup> Swearing was an expression of masculinity appropriate to the situation at the time, but it was to remain confined to the arena of war. Bob held true to post war values that deemed Lawson Glassop's novel *We Were the Rats* obscene because it contained swearing and references to sex. It was banned two years after publication in 1946 by the New South Wales government because it offended sensibility and modesty.<sup>50</sup>

Afterwards, Les found out: 'They were our own tanks out on a reconnaissance', but 'Mr Cooper had not been told. The boys feel pretty humiliated over it after their fine showing at Regima'.<sup>51</sup> Four tanks appeared 'on the horizon' at sundown that night, and Les thought it would be a good idea to 'show the Easter spirit' and 'put the war off' for a while. On the night of 9 April the 2/13<sup>th</sup> 'moved into the famous Tobruk perimeter', where they were besieged for the 'next ten months'.<sup>52</sup> Les had used a pencil to scribble in his diary during the retreat, but his writing was so difficult to read he went over it in ink some time later. The jolting truck had made the pencil jump on the page, creating a visual effect that brings the past into the present, and dares the reader to imagine what it must have been like fleeing from the enemy.

Les was wounded in action on 14 April, receiving gunshot wounds to his left arm and hand.<sup>53</sup> Book number 5, which would have covered the period Les was in hospital, is missing, so we must pick up his story in Book 6. Les was on leave in Tel Aviv. While recuperating he had been fitted with new dentures, and complained more about the pain they caused him than his wounds. After a week they were giving him 'hell' when he ate, he was also 'constipated + often have felt better'.<sup>54</sup> The next day he had '[u]lcers in bottom of mouth + teeth got too sore', so he solved the problem by taking the bottom teeth out. Les was 'longing to get in the draft' so he could rejoin his Platoon, so he 'saw Mr Leach' and 'got on as first reserve'.<sup>55</sup>

Les left Tel Aviv with '1000 mils' pay and managed to lose it gambling on the way back to Tobruk, 'better to do it gambling than drinking it', he wrote.<sup>56</sup> On arrival, Les was confronted with a list of mates who had been wounded or killed.<sup>57</sup> Going back wasn't easy: 'My nerves don't seem what they were', Les wrote, 'very jumpy in fact hope they steady down in a day or two'. His diary took on the role of confidante as he wrote about his changed state of mind. He wrote about being 'upset' when he saw one of his mates in 'shock'.<sup>58</sup> In the transcript, Bob Irvine wrote himself into Les's story at this point, adding an explanation for the soldier's state of 'shock'. He made Les the narrator: 'Bob Irvine told me that Harry carried Barry Kelly',<sup>59</sup> a soldier who had been mortally wounded,<sup>60</sup> 'out the other night under heavy fire. Bob says it was the bravest thing he has seen'.<sup>61</sup> Bob must have felt compelled to add his own voice at this point, because Les's lack of explanation may have cast doubt on Harry's courage. By testifying to Harry's bravery, Bob echoed Bean, who wanted it known that even though an Australian might break down, it only happened in exceptional situations.<sup>62</sup>

Les regretted his enthusiasm to return to the front line. Anxiety changed the physical appearance of his writing; he began to run his words together, making them more difficult to read. One day he wrote: 'Still feeling nervy + keyed up, different to last time, sure had a good home in Palestine + I left'.<sup>63</sup> The next day: 'Feel real well + calm again now'; well enough to relieve Bill Snelson at the front.<sup>64</sup> Once he got there, Les wrote: 'Words can't describe what happened'. The men of the 2/13<sup>th</sup> had relieved the 2/10<sup>th</sup> in the Salient, three days earlier. The fighting had been intense.<sup>65</sup> Stretcher bearers had to get the sick and wounded out. Les wrote long unpunctuated sentences: 'Bill + I came back + got Jack Stewart + had a hell of a job getting him down as we only had one strap for stretcher + our hands kept slipping off'. They were dealing with men who were sometimes 'screaming with pain', and it took its toll on them: 'Bill + I were dead beat + both very nervy + excitable + arguing a little when we took the last chap down I came back to boys feeling awful + had had something to eat + had a lay down + a sleep till about four'. When he woke Les was told to go out and dig in, but he said he was 'was clean done, I couldn't have went out if I'd been shot'.<sup>66</sup>

There were no more casualties the next day 'thank God', Les wrote: 'God bless all at home dear Mother. Gods in his heaven are all well with the world'.<sup>67</sup> His muddled blessing was evidence that all was not well, and he was putting on a brave face like the others who he described as 'mostly cheery'. The 'wit here would amaze you at times'; the 'laughter' masked 'the strain', which was 'gruelling'.<sup>68</sup> On 19 June Les got out all his 'note books + read all my diary through. The writing was that bad in places I have had a job to read it'. He prayed: 'O. God that this war was over + back in Aussie with all my loved ones'. Les believed his 'Dad's old story whoever says they are not frightened is a liar' and marvelled at men who seemed unafraid.<sup>69</sup> Les had 'changed' his 'views on liking the army since I came back this time + pray to be home again but couldn't go home happy unless it was all over'.<sup>70</sup> Les echoed the values attributed to the original stretcher bearers at Anzac Beach, whom Bean described as resolved to 'show themselves not a hairsbreadth behind the combatants in hardihood'.<sup>71</sup>

On 3 August, Les was back in the action in the El Adem sector attending to the wounded.<sup>72</sup> 'We attacked last night' Les wrote in his diary, with the 43<sup>rd</sup> Battalion: 'We succeeded' but 'the 43<sup>rd</sup> failed in their objective with heavy casualties'.<sup>73</sup> 'They were coming in here towards daylight + carrying their wounded', so Les 'got Mr Woods permission to go out + give a hand'. Even though a 'few shells' landed 'close', Les continued to help. He was 'very proud', and 'pleased I done a bit but only did my best'.<sup>74</sup> On 17 November Les heard the news that he had been awarded a Military Medal for 'bravery on the morning of the 43<sup>rd</sup> attack'. He wrote in his diary: 'Was I excited I guess ... I am extra pleased for Mum's sake but don't think that I deserve it'. In the transcript, by changing Les's words to 'honestly don't think that I deserve it', Bob inscribed a tribute to the sincerity of Les's humility.<sup>75</sup> Les received his Military Medal from General Auchenleck in Tripoli, on 28 March 1942. He noted simply, 'Old Gen shook hands + congratulated us all'.<sup>76</sup>

Les had started 'No 7' book on 17 October, the day that the 2/13<sup>th</sup> was supposed to leave Tobruk.<sup>77</sup> They were 'issued with sand shoes for boat + orders of how we have to move' out. They were to 'embark on

“Lantana” from No 3 jetty’ but the boat failed to arrive.<sup>78</sup> Les and Blue found shelter sleeping ‘together in a shallow dugout’, waking ‘to find it blowing like hell’<sup>79</sup> and to be ‘told officially’ that their ‘boat “Lantana” was sunk + a lot of casualties’. They were ‘camped out in the open with only two blankets. Was it cold, I’ll say + Bob Irvine + I drank my two little bottles of rum at the beach’.<sup>80</sup> They were now ‘destined for the Derna Road sector’ and ‘worse off’ than they had ever been; they ‘had no weapons other than rifles, no food, no cooking utensils, and were without the sundry odds and ends’ that they had given away in preparation for departure.<sup>81</sup>

The 2/13<sup>th</sup> moved outside the defence perimeter on 28 November, to defend Ed Duda.<sup>82</sup> Les wrote: ‘Our forces have about 2000 enemy cut off outside perimeter towards the sea + we are here to be used for counter attack in case they break through’.<sup>83</sup> Les was busy attending to the wounded when he was captured by the enemy two days later: ‘Bud + I were tying them up then we were held up by about 10 Jerrys + taken prisoner’ he wrote: ‘They drove us before them + they took us about 300 yds when 13 PI challenged them + they had a short scrap + took (Jerry) them prisoner excepting two which escaped’. Bob Irvine added the information that John Searle, who wrote the introduction to the transcript, had led the party who challenged the Germans.<sup>84</sup> John has vivid memories of what he calls the ‘recapture’ of Les Perkins and “Buddy” Smith. After the Germans had ‘virtually all surrendered’, John recalls ordering two of his men to ‘get’ the soldiers hiding in the weapon pit ‘and get them quickly. They did so with great gusto, with bayonets fixed, and words to the effect “Get up you Jerry Bastards, or you’ll get this”’<sup>85</sup>, and were surprised to hear a voice from the darkness call out ‘it’s me – Perkins’.<sup>86</sup> Afterwards, Les took the opportunity to get ‘a few souvenirs off wounded German’.<sup>87</sup> Bob edited this information out of the transcript. Looting was ‘officially forbidden, although often practised’, and it is John’s opinion that Bob probably considered this information ‘dangerous ground’ so it would be better to leave it out.<sup>88</sup>

On 1 December, Jerry was ‘shelling like hell’. The Australians had ‘captured two trucks + crew’, Les wrote, and ‘now two tanks are advancing on us’. The ‘tanks withdrew after two had been here about 50 yds off us + we lay doggo’. That evening he signed off: ‘God bless all + keep them us all through this night’. The power of Les’s writing lies in its immediacy; his confused blessing conveys the thoughts of a man near exhaustion. The night was bitterly cold, so Les and a mate ‘went looking for blankets + got some good ground sheets + we rolled a dead Kiwi off a mattress’. Les ‘got a Bible off him + Bill got a champion cigarette case’.<sup>89</sup> Omitting all other details, Bob Irvine protected Les and Bill from censure for looting a dead ally, by toning down the transcript to, ‘found a dead Kiwi on a mattress’.<sup>90</sup> Les was comforted the next day by ‘reading a little of [his] new Bible’ after waking up feeling ‘terribly miserable + despondent’.<sup>91</sup>

Les appears to have written most candidly when he wrote for himself and several of these moments must have caused some concern for Bob when he came to transcribe the diary. At times his editing was protective of Les and his mates as well as the Anzac reputation. This protectiveness is perhaps evidence of the kind of Anzac mateship that Bean praised so highly. When Les wrote in his diary under battle conditions the audience he had in mind was not always clear; it shifted and overlapped as he wrote about the doubts, fears and weaknesses of individual soldiers. When Les was most fearful he directed comments to his mother. Other times it seems he wrote for himself or his mates. In contrast, the Battalion history’s account of Australians in battle was sanitised and eager to enhance the Anzac reputation of fearlessness.

The 2/13<sup>th</sup> left El Duda on 4 December, to return to Tobruk.<sup>92</sup> Back inside the perimeter, their spirits lifted.<sup>93</sup> On 15 December orders came to move out of Tobruk: ‘We are all excited + pleased to be going’ wrote Les.<sup>94</sup> On their way to camp, Hill 69 in Palestine, they bought luxurious eggs, figs, chocolate and beer from the locals.<sup>95</sup> On arrival Les was reunited with old friends. He ‘had a great old tea + then got drunk. Joe, Donk, two Cliffords, Bob Irvine got in a two up game + I lost 50P + got to bed about 3AM’.<sup>96</sup> It rained on Christmas Day, but the weather didn’t dampen Les’s spirits; after a meal of ‘soup then turkey, ham, fruit salad, jelly and cream + a bottle of free beer’, Les: ‘Got another bottle of beer with C Coy + went in + had a fair drop to drink with them’. He: ‘Got pretty full + made a drunken speech’.<sup>97</sup>

Les and his mates went to Tel Aviv on leave on 31 December. He made no mention of New Year celebrations in his diary and it was more than two weeks before he consistently recorded the correct date again. Like any tourist abroad, Les bought gifts for his family, had his 'Mo trimmed + shampoo' and posed for photos. Les positioned himself as the boy from home in his writing, the respectable tourist enjoying innocent pleasures, but in reality he was no longer that person. The locket, cross and photo that he mailed home were symbols of his old self. The new self lived for the day and sought pleasures and experiences that would transgress the boundaries of home and the past. Walter Ong uses the analogy of masks to explain the role-playing that diarists engage in when they put pen to paper; they create different personas, wear different masks, in response to an imagined audience.<sup>98</sup> Free of the battle field Les adopted the persona of tourist, but a tourist who was nevertheless still a soldier and hell bent on celebrating his survival.

Les 'had a fair drop to drink + I was in big with a little Belgian girl'. Afterwards he '[h]ad a good few more drinks + Scott + I took two of the girls home but could not even kiss them goodnight'.<sup>99</sup> If his family read his diary in the future they would be reassured that, unlike some of his friends, Les never got past first base; he would forever be remembered as the romantic who missed out on the kiss goodnight.<sup>100</sup> He went back to the café 'where "tomato blond" was yesterday but she was not here today'. Bob edited out the next story. Les had written it as he 'was just sobering up'. One of his mates had 'turned up + told' him he had given '1000 for a jump on a skinny piece'. Another had to be put 'to bed + he broke a glass window before he settled down'.<sup>101</sup> Les 'got pretty full with some Greek soldiers' the next day and 'had a good yarn [with] a Grouse Hungarian sort'.<sup>102</sup> He was 'just about broke' when he returned to camp'.<sup>103</sup>

While Les never hesitated to record his mates' sexual adventures, he was coy about his own. In March, when they were digging in near Benghazi Les named a member of his squad, who had 'cleared out', eventually coming 'back drunk', and telling Les he had 'had a jiggi jig for 10 piastres'. Les added a comment in ink some time later, saying that the soldier had 'said it was terrible + lowered his dignity'.<sup>104</sup> Paul Fussell claims the diarist writes 'without the dishonesty of hindsight'.<sup>105</sup> The diarist writes in the moment, not looking back in time or forward. When Les reread this diary entry, he had perhaps imagined his mother reading what he had written. His later comment about his friend's 'dignity', suggests that on reflection he felt further comment was necessary. Words that initially conveyed a sense of bragging were qualified, and the experience was given new meaning. With a new audience in mind, Bob edited the story of the visit to the brothel out of the transcript, perhaps out of consideration for wives and children who might later read it.

On 14 January 1942, the 2/13<sup>th</sup> left for Syria where they set up camp near Lattakia. Les was among those who went 'A.W.L + got fairly full'. Les and another soldier funded their trips to town by selling their clothing, a 'shirt + two pairs of socks'. They 'had a good time'.<sup>106</sup> Les started the last book, 'No.8', on 23 January. This small pocket sized book was: 'Taken of a wounded German on 29<sup>th</sup> Nov 41. He was hit by our own Tommy Guns'.<sup>107</sup> Les was on duty: 'Am now in with Treb in brothel on P.A.C.'. According to the Australian War Memorial Research Centre, PAC or Prophylactic Ablution Centre, is a 'mock-military acronym for a brothel'.<sup>108</sup> In a recent communication with John Searle, he claimed this was not 'strictly correct'; PAC 'was a sub-unit, formed on specific occasions, under command of the R.M.O.'. [Regimental Medical Officer] It was run by Stretcher Bearers, with the aim of preventing disease.<sup>109</sup> Les observed, 'Don't know how the boys can saddle up in cold blood', making it clear that duty was his only reason for being there.<sup>110</sup>

Robin Gerster has argued that the kind of Australian masculinity depicted in Glassop's novel, *We Were the Rats*, is different to its World War One counterpart. Glassop's soldiers, he says, were more worldly, sophisticated and virile; 'exhibiting a less constrained brand of antipodean machismo than the Digger of the Great War'.<sup>111</sup> The image portrayed in the novel was reinforced by the Battalion history when it dealt with this 'seamy side of the Battalion's activity' in a flamboyant and humorous style.

*For those impelled by basic passions, not assuaged but inflamed by alcohol, the goddess Aphrodite beckoned from the Maison Doree. For the first and only time in the history of the Unit, a broadminded acceptance was taken of the primal requirements of men who, by the nature of their service, were divorced from the leavening and strengthening influences normally engendered by healthy association with their own womenfolk. The "oldest profession" was sanctioned under the strictest possible supervision. The Maison Doree was "nationalized" and picketed strictly for the Battalion's use.<sup>112</sup>*

Les himself was part of that changing Anzac image. As well as references to sex and brothels, stories about indiscipline, gambling, drinking and fisticuffs filled the pages of Les's diary while in Lattakia: 'Ted + I ran a drunken game when we came home'.<sup>113</sup> A '[g]reat dinner last night was spoilt by boys breaking bottles trying to fight me'.<sup>114</sup> They were given a lecture 'on V.D'<sup>115</sup> and 'a lecture on discipline'.<sup>116</sup>

On 17 June they were entrained for Aleppo. They only: '[h]ad bull + dry bread for tea' and the same for breakfast. Les didn't mention in his diary that 'Tommy Red Caps searched train at small station as some of the boys had grabbed a case or two of apricots at Damascus station but the evidence had disappeared before Red Caps came'.<sup>117</sup> That information was added by Bob in the transcript. In Aleppo the: 'Little bints' were 'extra friendly' so Les and his mates planned to 'look around brothels tonight'.<sup>118</sup> Les reported he was 'not impressed'.<sup>119</sup> By transforming the Arabic word 'bint', meaning girl or daughter,<sup>120</sup> into a derogatory term, the soldiers effectively depersonalised the women, thereby portraying their own behaviour as less transgressive.

On 20 June, the war was once again the focus of Les's diary: 'Jerry is back on Egyptian border. Bad luck'.<sup>121</sup> Then: 'Tobruk has fallen to our dismay'.<sup>122</sup> Three days later: 'Bad news today. Jerry has come into Egypt'.<sup>123</sup> On 30 July the Australians were put on trains at 'Station Baghdad' bound for Alexandria.<sup>124</sup>

Throughout September Les wrote about sentry duty and patrols that occupied the Platoon. Sentry duty at night gave him time during the day to read 'old letters' and copy his diary.<sup>125</sup> They were receiving intensive training.<sup>126</sup> Les said the '[b]oys did manouvers afternoon + night. Very cold night'. They: 'Had very tiring route march today, about 14 miles everyone cranky'. Some of them had 'to do a week's mess orderly duty as penalty for sneaking a ride on' a 'truck'.<sup>127</sup>

On 20 October: 'Two yrs. today since we sailed', Les was 'up near Alamein'.<sup>128</sup> At this point in his diary Les stopped writing over pencil with ink; the remainder of his writing is barely legible and Bob stopped transcribing. The battle of El Alamein had begun.<sup>129</sup> The Battalion history recorded that on 23 October the 2/13<sup>th</sup> 'were on foot and preparing to advance behind the 2/15<sup>th</sup> and 2/17<sup>th</sup> Battalions who were to capture the enemy's first line defences'. When the battle began the: 'Desert behind them erupted into flame and shattering sound' and the ground beneath them 'vibrated like the skin of a kettledrum'.<sup>130</sup> Les described the 'barrage' that 'opened up' as 'terrific it nearly made me shell happy'.<sup>131</sup>

Les sustained a wound to his right arm on the second day of the battle.<sup>132</sup> He continued to write in his diary almost daily, but it's difficult to make sense of what he wrote. He didn't say how he was injured and only the odd word tells us how he felt. He was 'not feeling well' but the: 'Nurses are wonderful'. His arm became 'fearful' and he started to miss the odd day in his diary.<sup>133</sup> Les got Sgt. J. F. Meers to write a letter for him on 8 November, and in the tradition of a true Anzac, Les put on a brave front. 'The news I have for you is not the best', Meers began,

*Les Perkins was wounded during the action which the Division has just completed. A piece of shrapnel from a shell struck him in the right forearm smashing the bone. His arm was placed in plaster while at 7 AGH. He was moved to sixth where they removed the plaster had a look at the wound & again place the arm in plaster. Other than for this disability he is quite OK. Very cheerful & shows absolutely no sign of wear. Owing to the wound he is unable to write & has commissioned me to do so for him. His message to you is not to worry because in a few days he will be up & running around again. I saw him this afternoon, he was very cheery & was in no pain at all. His only complaint was that he was forced to stay in bed.*<sup>134</sup>

The plaster was removed in December and the doctors prescribed 'arm baths'.<sup>135</sup> When he was well enough, Les had a new 'impression taken of teeth', and ironically, after all he had endured during the war, the last thing he wrote in his diary on New Years Eve 1942 was 'teeth are hurting'.<sup>136</sup>

Les returned to Australia and was discharged from the army as 'Medically Unfit for Service' on 10 May 1943.<sup>137</sup> Les married and had four children after the war. His son Bill recalls:

*It was only after Dad had Alzheimer's that one of his old Army mates told me that he sustained his injury to his right elbow in El Alamein when trying to pull a German soldier out of a burning tank and the ammunition blew up. He was sent to Concorde hospital in Sydney and three times they wanted to remove his arm because of the infection. He did his own physio by carrying a milking bucket and gradually adding more and more rocks to it.*<sup>138</sup>

Les died 18 August 1991; Bob had died before him on 7 January that year. The friendship that Les and Bob had forged in the Tobruk desert endured for the rest of their lives. Les's original diaries were presented to the Australian War Memorial in 1997 by his widow and family members, accompanied by twelve members of the 2/13th Battalion Association.<sup>139</sup> The family kept Bob's transcript. Les's story no longer belonged to only him; in the transcribing and reading, others have claimed and transformed it, and given it new meaning. Les's diary had come to be seen as an unofficial history of his Platoon, so Les ultimately did write it for his mates. Bob's transcript was written for a wider audience that included family members. His editing adhered to social conventions and manners of his time, and showed concern for family members and individual reputations as well as the status of the Anzac. The Battalion history represented the men of the 2/13th as inheritors of Anzac the tradition, but as second generation Anzacs who refashioned that tradition. Taken together, Les's original diary, Bob's transcript of it, and the Battalion History provide a fascinating insight into the ways men have sought to record the experience of war, and have shaped the narratives they tell according to the time and place of their writing, and their imagined readers. The image of the original Anzac haunts them all.

## Endnotes

- 1 Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) Encyclopedia, *Tobruk*, AWM File of Research 581, 24 April 1958.
- 2 J. Cannon, 'The Defiant Diggers of Tobruk,' in *My War*, ed. J. Cannon (Melbourne: Schwartz & Wilkinson, 1990), 66.
- 3 Mark Johnston, *Remembering 1942: The Battle of El Alamein, 23 October 1942*, presented by Dr. Mark Johnston Wednesday, 23 October 2002 in the Courtyard Gallery at the Memorial (AWM PASU0177).
- 4 Lelie Perkins diaries, (hereafter Perkins), Records ID Number PR00809, AWM Canberra.
- 5 NAA: B883, NX20944, Perkins, Service Records, Attestation Form.
- 6 Katie Holmes, *Spaces in Her Day*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), xvii.
- 7 Bill Perkins, e-mail message to author, 23 May 2007.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 5 June 2007.
- 9 Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in War History,' *War & Society* 25:2 (October 2006):1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 11 Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 46.

- 12 Alistair Thomson, 'Passing Shots at the Anzac Legend,' in *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, eds V. Burgmann and J. Lee (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988), 190.
- 13 Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 144.
- 14 Ken Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition,' *Meanjin Quarterly* 100: xxiv:1 (1965): 9.
- 15 Perkins, 16 January 1941.
- 16 *Ibid.*, poem at beginning of Book 2.
- 17 Janet Butler, 'Nursing Gallipoli: Identity and the Challenge of Experience,' *The Journal of Australian Studies* 78 (2003): 53
- 18 G.H. Fearnside, *Bayonets Abroad a History of the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, A.I.F.*, (Swanbourne: John Burr ridge Military Antiques, 1993), 43.
- 19 Perkins, 3 March 1941.
- 20 Bob Irvine, (hereafter Irvine), March 1941, transcription of Les Perkins diary (1988).
- 21 Perkins, 12 March 1941.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 13 March 1941.
- 23 Irvine, 13 March 1941.
- 24 C.E.W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac: from the Outbreak of War to the End of the First Phase of the Gallipoli Campaign May 4, 1915*, Vol.1, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 128.
- 25 Perkins, 22 July 1941.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 25 July 1941.
- 27 Fearnside, 111.
- 28 Perkins, 16 April 1942.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 20 April 1942.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 22 April 1942.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 28 April 1942. 'Swy' is another name for Two Up.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 29 April 1942.
- 33 Fearnside, 188.
- 34 Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 156.
- 35 Perkins, 2 April 1941.
- 36 Fearnside, 55.
- 37 Perkins, 4 April 1941.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Fearnside, 69.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 41 Perkins, 4 April 1941.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 5 April 1941.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 7 April 1941.
- 44 Irvine, 7 April 1941.
- 45 Fearnside, 69.
- 46 Perkins, 7 April 1941. Blondie was Les's girlfriend.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 9 April 1941.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Bethan Benwell, 'Male Gossip and Language Play in Letters Pages of Men's Lifestyle Magazines,' *Journal of Popular Culture* 34:4 (Spring 2001): 26.
- 50 Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 107.
- 51 Perkins, 9 April 1941.
- 52 Fearnside, p.75.
- 53 NAA: B883, NX20944, Perkins, Service Records, Service and Casualty Form.
- 54 Perkins, 30 May 1941.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 31 May 1941.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 3 June 1941.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 6 June 1941.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 7 June 1941.
- 59 Irvine, 7 June 1941.

- 60 Perkins, 6 June 1941.
- 61 Irvine, 7 June 1941.
- 62 Alistair Thomson, "'Steadfast Until Death'? C.E.W. Bean and the Representation of Australian Military Manhood,' *Australian Historical Studies* 23:93 (October 1989): 447.
- 63 Perkins, 8 June 1941,
- 64 *Ibid.*, 9 June 1941.
- 65 Fearnside, 107.
- 66 Perkins, 12 June 1941.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 13 June 1941.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 14 June 1941.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 19 June 1941.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 21 June 1941.
- 71 C.E.W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens: A Shorter History of the Australian Fighting Services in the First World War*, (Canberra: AWM, 1968), 135.
- 72 Fearnside, 112.
- 73 Perkins, 3 August 1941.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 Perkins, 17 November 1941 and Irvine, 17 November 1941.
- 76 Perkins, 28 March 1942.
- 77 Fearnside, 124.
- 78 Perkins, 25 October 1941.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 27 October 1941.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 28 October 1941.
- 81 Fearnside, 126.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 83 Perkins, 28 November 1941.
- 84 Perkins, 30 November 1941 and Irvine, 30 November 1941. Sgt. Searle was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions. Fearnside, 151-2.
- 85 John Searle (hereafter Searle), e-mail message to author, 23 June 2007.
- 86 Fearnside, 151-2.
- 87 Perkins, 30 November 1941.
- 88 Searle, e-mail message to author, 23 June 2007. Also, 'In its worst form, the practice of souveniring could be called looting.' It was 'common practice amongst Australian soldiers (and probably other nationalities as well).' It is 'officially unlawful and can result in penalties.' AWM, e-mail message to author, 27 June 2007.
- 89 Perkins, 1 December 1941.
- 90 Irvine, 1 December 1941.
- 91 Perkins, 2 December 1941.
- 92 Fearnside, 156.
- 93 *Ibid.*
- 94 Perkins, 15 December 1941.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 18-20 December 1941.
- 96 *Ibid.*, 21 December 1941.
- 97 *Ibid.*, 25 December 1941.
- 98 Walter Ong, 'The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction,' *PMLA* 90:1 (Jan., 1975): 21.
- 99 Perkins, 1 January 1941, should be 1942.
- 100 Butler, 53
- 101 Perkins, 2 January 1942.
- 102 *Ibid.*, 3 January 1942.
- 103 *Ibid.*, 4 January 1941, should be 1942.
- 104 *Ibid.*, 28 March 1941.
- 105 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 24.
- 106 Perkins, 17 January 1942.
- 107 *Ibid.*, diary, book 8 back cover.

- 108 AWM, e-mail message to author, 16 April 2007.  
109 Searle, e-mail message to author, 31 July 2007.  
110 Perkins, 25 January 1942.  
111 Robin Gerster, *Big Noting* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 180.  
112 Fearnside, 175.  
113 Perkins, 14 March 1942.  
114 *Ibid.*, 15 March 1942.  
115 *Ibid.*, 13 February 1942.  
116 *Ibid.*, 25 February 1942.  
117 Perkins, 18 June 1942 and Irvine, 18 June 1942.  
118 Perkins, 21 June 1942.  
119 *Ibid.*, 22 June 1942.  
120 A. Laugesen, *Diggerspeak: the Language of Australians at War* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26.  
121 Perkins, 20 June 1942.  
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124 *Ibid.*, 1 July 1942.  
125 *Ibid.*, 14 September 1942.  
126 Fearnside, 259.  
127 Irvine, 29 September 1942.  
128 Perkins, 20 October 1942.  
129 Mark Johnstone and Peter Stanley, *Alamein the Australian Story* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.  
130 Fearnside, 265.  
131 Perkins, 23 October 1942.  
132 NAA: B883, NX20944, Perkins, Service Records, Service and Casualty Form.  
133 Perkins, 25 October – 11 November 1942.  
134 Meers, J. F., letter, 8 November 1942.  
135 Perkins, 24-27 December 1942.  
136 *Ibid.*, 31 December 1942.  
137 NAA: B883, NX20944, Perkins, Service Records, Service and Casualty Form.  
138 Bill Perkins, e-mail message to author, 5 June 2007.  
139 Searle, Introduction to transcript.

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J. F. Meers, letter, 8 November 1942, photocopy courtesy of Bill Perkins.