

## **Kit Cullen:**

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I have been interested in military history for over fifty years, and being a child during the sixties, I watched the Vietnam War unfold on black and white television nearly every night on the ABC news and current affairs programs. After gaining an Arts degree from the University of Wollongong I spent my working life at Berkeley/Illawarra Sports High School as an English/History teacher for 34 years. Throughout those years I continued to read about Australian involvement in military conflicts, particularly Gallipoli, Kokoda and Vietnam.

My first book, *Jack's Journey: An Anzac's Descent into Death, Disaster and Controversy at Gallipoli*, began innocently enough. I initially saw Jack Collyer's three World War One diaries as an 11-year-old, soon after reading *The Anzac Book*. One of my mates and Jack's great nephew, David McClymont, showed them to me. I was overwhelmed to be handling and reading actual Gallipoli campaign diaries. 35 years later in 2005 I asked Mac if I could borrow Jack's diaries to "see if I could do something with them for the centenary of the Landing", without knowing what that might be. Jack landed at Gallipoli as part of the 4th Battalion on Sunday 25 April 1915 and was wounded a week later on 1 May. He died from his wound on 4 May at sea while being transported on a hospital ship to Cairo. Jack was buried at sea. His third tiny diary, written in pencil while under fire at Gallipoli, ended somewhat dramatically on the evening of the twenty fifth as his battalion entered the firing line on Bolton's Hill during a heavy Turkish attack. The rest of Jack's time at Anzac was missing from the diary. The Collyer family mystery was - where was Jack when he was wounded and what was he doing? They had no idea. What I discovered was quite extraordinary for two reasons. Firstly, I found out that on 1 May Jack and his mates from No.15 Platoon were rescuing a party of sixty British Marines cut off in an outpost in Wire Gully in front of the Australian firing line on Second Ridge, a place of infamy in the 4th Battalion who dubbed it Death Trap Valley because most of the fifty plus rescue party were either killed or wounded saving the Marines, including Jack. Another party from No.3 Platoon, 4th Battalion, entered the valley later that afternoon to reinforce No.15 Platoon and it also suffered severe casualties. Tragically, forty men from the 4th Battalion died and at least another forty were wounded in the action. Somehow most of the Marines survived. Secondly, I stumbled across the disturbing fact that Charles Bean, the Official Historian, deliberately misrepresented what happened in the valley on 1 May in the Official History, attributing the rescue of the Marines to another battalion - his brother's - leaving out any reference at all to Jack and his mates from the 4th Battalion. I was outraged that Bean denied the members of the 4th Battalion's rescue parties their place in our military history, despite evidence showing he knew about their sacrifice and courage. Even though Charles Bean is one of my heroes, my book exposed his intentional misuse of historical documents and flawed account of the Marines' rescue. It was written to right that wrong. I was fortunate enough to have it published by Allen & Unwin in 2013.

My next story, which is currently being assessed for publication by Allen & Unwin, has the working title of *Kokoda Watershed: The Guns of Owers' Corner* and is about the two 25-pounders that fired on the Japanese on the Kokoda Track in September 1942, the only time the Diggers received artillery support in that campaign. My father's first cousin, Captain Jim 'Punchy' Cullen, the commanding officer of Baker Troop, 53rd Battery, 14th Field Regiment, was the organiser and driving force behind the deployment of the guns. He was also the Forward Observation Officer and was awarded a Mention in Despatches for his actions over about a week, some of which he spent on his own in Japanese territory near Ioribaiwa Ridge, directing the gunfire from his men's guns located over ten kilometres behind Punchy at their gun position on Owers' Corner. Yet again, history has failed to do the gunners' story justice. What has been written about the Baker Troop guns has been brief, at times perfunctory and, more often than not, incorrect. The Official History hardly mentioned their presence on the Track.

The 25-pounders formed a crucial tactical part of Brigadier Eather's counter offensive against the Japanese. Just getting the guns into position on the Kokoda Track was an impressive feat of arms. In writing the story of the Baker Troop guns I have come to a far greater understanding of the role of guns and gunners in battle. Once more, my motivation was to correct the inadequate account of the guns in the Official History and the wildly inaccurate and brief versions of Baker Troop's 25-pounders in virtually every other book written about the Kokoda campaign.

After sending off my Kokoda manuscript to Allen & Unwin I wondered what I might investigate next. I did think it would be great to write a Vietnam War story, my other lifelong military history interest. While I was pondering this, I was contacted by Mark Jamieson who had heard of me through his cousin, a friend of mine. Despite not knowing Mark, I have had a very long association with his extended family. Mark told me the story of the Battle of FSPB Coral and the remarkable research he had done about the role of 102 Field Battery in the battle. His thesis exposed mistakes in the Official History's version of the events of 12/13 May 1968 and expanded on the gunners' decisive part in the battle. Mark also informed me about Ian Ahearn's incisive analysis of the events at Coral in relation to the shortcomings of the Official History. When Mark said he would like me to write the story of 102 Field Battery at the battle using the extensive research he had already done, I was gobsmacked! The History Gods must have smiled on me. All I did was answer the phone and a Vietnam War story literally fell into my lap(top). It sounded like it was right up my alley – writing the true story of the Battle of FSPB Coral from the gunners' perspective. Your experiences that night were quite incredible and deserve to be told, not buried in an inaccurate Official History account that did not interview a single member of 102 Field Battery and barely acknowledged your heroic role in the battle.

### **Battle of Coral questions.**

Please only answer those questions that you feel like answering. Don't feel obligated if something is too personal or upsetting.

What is your name and date of birth? What was your rank, service number and role at FSPB Coral?

What was your nickname and how did it come about?

What was your reaction to the news of the new deployment to Coral? What were you told to expect?

When did you fly in? What did you see on the ground as you arrived?

What was the terrain like? What sort of foliage was there? Was it hot and humid?

Where was your position in the base, especially in relation to the other units? How many of you were in your position?

Could you see the guns that afternoon from your position?

What did you do from when you arrived until midnight? What defensive measures did you and those in your position take?

Did it rain that night? Was the moon out? Did the temperature change as night settled over the base?

When did you first realise you were under attack?

What was your experience of the battle over next three to four hours? Do you recall any conversations during that time?

What air support did you notice?

What artillery support did you observe?

Describe your physical and mental state in the aftermath of the battle.

What did the base look like in the morning?

How did you feel when the other units arrived at FSPB Coral the next day?

Thanks for your time and sharing your invaluable knowledge.