

## Andrews - Gunning at War -1492 words

1942. War was raging in the Pacific Islands; Sydney was attacked by Japanese submarines, Singapore had fallen, Gunning School tennis courts had been excavated and replaced by slit trenches, the school bell was now an air raid warning. Windows were blacked out at night and Air Raid Wardens appointed. The Nation was scared.

Gunning's front line of defence was the Voluntary Defence Corp. the VDC, composed of WW1 veterans and men who because of their "essential occupations" would not be released by the Government to enlist for active service. Others failed the health requirements for service.

The VDC was equipped with the left-over WW1 uniforms but because of a shortage of uniforms many wore civilian clothes. The VDC was "Dad's Army" "right down to the last leather bootlace and wrap around puttee.

Some men proudly displayed service ribbons from earlier conflicts, some wore plumed army slouch hats.

In everyone's eyes the VDC was always "alert", proudly marching up and down Yass Street Gunning on parade days.

Some limping, some from time to time marching out of step, but their hearts always fully in step with what they were doing and the reason that they were there.

It was absolute heaven, when Gunning Platoon acquired their most prized possession, a World War 1 Bren Gun carrier.

The old Carrier was not operational but after a few weeks in "Bailey's Garage", with voluntary work by Frank Bailey and his mechanics she was in running order although emitting copious clouds of black smoke.

One memorable Saturday afternoon during those darkest years of the war the VDC, in all its Glory, planned a demonstration of firepower at the Gunning Showground.

The Army, after much wheeling and dealing, had allocated to the platoon another marvelous piece of modern warfare ordnance.

This latest addition to the VDC's armory was a state-of-the-art weapon. I might add World War 1 equipment.

A .303 "Ballistite Rifle"

This "new" weapon was a modified and specially strengthened .303 Lee Enfield rifle with an apparatus fitted to the muzzle capable of launching a hand grenade, purportedly with some degree of accuracy, over a fair distance.

Essentially to launch the grenade when fired was a special Ballistite .303 cartridge, having no projectile but charged with many times the normal amount of the explosive cordite.

As a show of absolute strength and commitment the Ballistite rifle was to be trialed before the town's people with a real action display of this weapon by the VDC at the Gunning showground on this Saturday afternoon.

To advertise this exhibition of modern weaponry to all citizens a handwritten poster had been specially prepared by Captain Davis and was proudly displayed in the front window of the Busy Bee Cafe for all to see.

All was going well. News had spread quickly and more than half of the townsfolk had turned up at the Gunning oval eager to see the VDC in action and to witness this momentous display of fire power.

There were some minor hitches, but Captain Davis thought that they could be easily overcome.

The firstly, the grenade was not a real grenade just a casing, therefore much lighter in weight than a real grenade. Secondly the Army had supplied only one of these grenades, so it was important not to lose it on the first firing.

The VDC experts on site, together with the Gunning Cricket Club experienced in this field had calculated that the dummy grenade, lighter than a normal fully charged grenade or a cricket ball, would be propelled much further with the possibility of it being lost.

To avoid such an occurrence the able-bodied townsfolk were asked to spread out over a circle greater than the football field and be very watchful and careful to track the projectile in its flight path to ensure a safe recovery.

A special invitation had been given to the members of the Gunning Cricket Club to man the boundaries as they were experienced in catching objects falling from the sky.

No warning had been issued by the VDC to those participating in the exercise of the distinct possibility of their losing sight of the grenade and in the worst circumstances the grenade hitting someone on the head.

The launch site closely resembled a small fortress near the pine trees and out of site of the crowd.

Nestled down behind the sandbags were Sergeant Bob Rudd and Captain Les Davis with a few other troops standing by.

Captain Davis operated the Gunning Literary Institute and Billiard Room; therefore, he knew quite a bit about playing a good shot and he had a keen eye. He appointed himself as the man in charge.

When the long-awaited moment arrived Sergeant Bob Rudd, who was the local barber and as you know the barber knows everything about everything that needs to be known in the town, confidently nudged up towards the launching site. He placed the rifle butt firmly on the ground with the muzzle pointing upwards and outwards to the selected trajectory, just as had been directed in the manual that came with the rifle.

The precious grenade was then with the care given to a freshly laid egg taken from Captain Davis's tunic pocket and placed in the launcher.

The cartridge was carefully inserted into the rifle's breech and the bolt pushed home, forward and down, locking the round in the chamber.

Then there was this other problem that had been ignored without a lot of thought being given and accordingly considered to be of little importance. The VDC failed to understand that there was no way the army would trust the VDC with a highly charged functional Ballestite Cartridge.

It would be dangerous. Consequently, and in all their wisdom with safety to personnel being paramount, the Army had supplied the VDC with a supply of reasonably harmless blank .303 rounds used in mock battles.

A blank round has a small charge of gunpowder and a wad of cotton and cardboard.

No danger, but little power.

Mum had said that I was too young to get out there onto the oval, so I took up a perfect position with my mates near the sandbags. I saw it all.

That long-awaited moment finally arrived as Captain Davis called out in bated breath,

"Are you ready Sergeant Rudd?"

"All is ready Sir,"

Was the confident response from VDC Sergeant Bob Rudd.

"Eyes up and Fire" bellowed Captain Davis.

Sergeant Rudd responded by squeezing the trigger with his right hand and at the same time the forefinger of his left hand plugged his left ear.

Then, there it was, what everyone had been waiting for. It all happened.

The blank cartridge fired in a weak

"Phfffffft."

The dummy grenade, struggling, barely flopped over the lip on the grenade launcher and fell to the ground twelve inches in front of the rifle next to Sergeant Rudd's boots.

Not to be denied the glamour and excitement of the moment Sergeant Rudd refrained from making the crowd aware of the "failure." He jumped to his feet, hands in the air waving and bellowing out at the top of his voice to those gathered around the oval.

"Watch out boys, here she comes"

Heads jerked back, eyes went skyward, but the only thing that could be plainly seen overhead was a pair of galahs flying past oblivious to the excitement below. No matter how eyes strained no one could see the grenade.

Some ten or fifteen seconds passed slowly, it seemed like an eternity.

Would it hit those waiting on the oval on the head and injure them, or perhaps kill them?

People raced madly around the oval for fully a minute, hands over their heads to shield themselves and seeking refuge under the pine trees whilst trying desperately to predict the position and pace of this projectile hurtling through space.

Maybe because of its light weight it had far exceeded expectations. Was it on its way to the Collector Road, up past the Catholic Cemetery?

Soon all was revealed amid much mirth. Many said that the galahs that had flown over the oval, were not the only galahs in Gunning that day.

In the end the sandbags were emptied, the gear packed up and everyone had a good laugh.

The VDC packed up their beloved Ballestite Rifle and secured the dummy grenade in its box like a delicate "Faberge Egg", never to be seen or heard of again.

The "troops" climbed triumphantly into their Bren Gun Carrier and sped away in a cloud of smoke to the Telegraph Hotel for a few beers and to discuss the real war and the part that they were playing in it.

Us kids, all fired up with excitement jumped on our pushbikes and hurtled down to the Post Office climbing over the World War 1 Vickers Machine Gun mounted on its concrete pad, playing out our part in the war as we saw it.