MORE THAN MOPPING UP: BOUGAINVILLE

Karl James

Bougainville was one of the largest campaigns fought by Australians during the Second World War. More than 30,000 Australians served on the island, over 500 were killed and two Victoria Crosses were awarded. By 1945, Australia had been marginalised from the key battles that would defeat Japan, relegated instead to bypassed areas in Australia's Mandated Territory of New Guinea and Bougainville, and on Borneo. The necessity of these campaigns was debated in parliament while the press echoed such criticisms. Soldiers too had their own opinions. Brigadier Heathcoat 'Tack' Hammer, who commanded an infantry battalion at El Alamein and an infantry brigade on Bougainville, later commented: 'everyman knew, as well as I knew, that the Operations were mopping up and that they were not vital to the winning of the war'.¹ As this author has argued elsewhere, Bougainville was a necessary campaign. It fulfilled the Australian government's long-stated policies of maintaining an active military effort and employing Australian forces in Australian territory, and was conceived when the war was expected to continue until at least 1946.

Commanded by Lieutenant General Stanley Savige, the Australian operations on Bougainville were initiated in order to shorten the campaign in the Mandated Territories, with the ultimate goal of freeing up manpower. The alternative was to statically garrison the island indefinitely. Crucially, the campaign was initiated when the Australians mistakenly believed they outnumbered the Japanese.² A Great War veteran, Savige had commanded a brigade in North Africa in 1941 and a division in New Guinea in 1943. A strong supporter of General Sir Thomas Blamey, Savige was no stranger to controversy.

Savige tightly controlled the campaign. He divided the island into three areas: the Central, Northern and Southern Sectors. In the Central Sector, the Australians crossed the Numa Numa trail over the island's mountainous spine. This was the 'nursery sector' where units gained combat experience before being deployed to more active areas. In the Northern Sector, the Australians followed the northwest coast towards Buka. The advance went well until a small force made a disastrous landing at Porton Plantation in June 1945. It was the only Australian defeat of the campaign. The main fight, however, was in the Southern Sector where the Australians advanced towards Buin, the major Japanese base on the island. The war the infantry knew was one of patrolling along stinking, humid jungle tracks and putrid swamps; the strain eroded some men's morale. In April 1945, the Japanese launched a major counterattack but were defeated with heavy losses at the battle of Slater's Knoll. The Australians continued the advance against overwhelming stubborn and skilful Japanese resistance until virtually the end of the war.

THE NEUTRALISATION OF THE JAPANESE

On 2 August 1944, MacArthur directed that the minimal forces to be employed in relieving the American garrisons in the islands, including the use of four Australian brigades on Bougainville. Another brigade was distributed among Emirau, Green, Treasury and New Georgia Islands – collectively referred to as the 'Outer Islands'. Consequently Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee's First Australian Army headquarters moved from Queensland to Lae, in New Guinea, where it replaced New Guinea Force headquarters, which in turn formed the headquarters for Savige's II Corps. Savige's corps consisted of Major General William Bridgeford's 3rd Division (7th, 15th and 29th Brigades) along with Brigadier John Stevenson's 11th Brigade and Brigadier Arnold Potts' 23rd Brigade. The 3rd Division and 11th Brigade were sent to Bougainville, while the 23rd Brigade was distributed among Green and the Outer Islands.

The forces Blamey had to commit were considerably larger than he thought necessary for garrison duties. The Australians were fresh, well supplied and, in New Guinea and Bougainville at least, were thought to outnumber the isolated Japanese, estimated at only 13,400 on Bougainville, while they actually numbered around 40,000.³ On

18 October, Blamey issued Sturdee with the order for 'offensive action to destroy enemy resistance as opportunity offers without committing major forces'.⁴ Not surprising, Sturdee queried this vague and contradictory order. On 7 November, Blamey replied that 'action must be of a gradual nature' to 'locate the enemy and continually harass him, and ultimately, prepare plans to destroy him'.⁵ Blamey was ordering a limited offensive. What was of overriding importance, though, was keeping Australian casualties to a minimum.

The largest island in the Solomon Islands chain, Bougainville had been a German territory but was mandated to Australia by the League of Nations following the First World War. The Japanese invaded Bougainville on 30 March 1942, landing at Kieta, on the island's east coast, followed up by landings at Buka, in north Bougainville, on 1 April, and at Buin, in south Bougainville, a week later. After their defeat at Guadalcanal in early 1943, most of Lieutenant General Hyakutake Harukichi's Seventeenth Army were evacuated to Shortland and Fauro Islands with the army's headquarters established around Buin. Bougainville was also reinforced from Rabaul with troops, weapons and equipment, although there were only enough food reserves for four months.

On 1 November, the US 3rd Marine Division landed at Cape Torokina, in Empress Augusta Bay, on the island's west coast. A fortnight later they were replaced by the US Army's XIV Corps consisting of some 62,000 men from the 37th Infantry and the American Divisions. The Americans established a large base at Torokina with airstrips and a fortified perimeter. In March 1944, Hyakutake attacked Torokina in a major offensive, but the Japanese were beaten back with heavy casualties, losing an estimated 3500 men killed and 5500 wounded.

The main focus of the Japanese subsequently became horticulture, growing fruit and vegetables. By their own calculations, 30 per cent of their overall strength on Bougainville during 1944 were sick. Of the remainder, 35 per cent were working in gardens while 15 per cent were on transport duties. Only 20 per cent of Japanese forces were deployed in frontline areas.⁶ In May and June 1944, approximately 4000 Japanese died from disease and malnutrition. Once their gardens began yielding produce in late 1944 mortality rates began to drop to 850 a month.⁷

TOROKINA AND THE OUTER ISLANDS

Brigadier Arnold Potts' 23rd Brigade (7th, 8th and 27th Battalions) began to relieve the small US garrisons in the Outer Islands in early October.

Potts placed his brigade headquarters along with the 27th Battalion in Green Island group, a coral atoll lying 60 kilometres northwest of Buka. The group consisted of Green Island, also known as Nissan Island, and two smaller islands. The 8th Battalion was sent further afield to Emirau Island, 400 kilometres northwest of Rabaul. The 7th Battalion, meanwhile, went to the Treasury Islands group, and a company was sent to Munda, New Georgia. The Treasuries were 45 kilometres south of Bougainville and consisted of Mono and the smaller Stirling Islands.

A Great War veteran, Potts commanded the Australian forces during their withdrawal along the Kokoda Trail where he was controversially relieved of his command. Now, Potts was to cause his corps commander many headaches with what Savige thought were 'hare brained adventures' for plans to attack the Japanese on nearby islands.⁸ Eventually, at the end of December, Savige recommended the island garrisons be reduced and the main body of the brigade brought to Torokina. MacArthur's headquarters approved this request in January 1945.

The first Australians to arrive at Torokina disembarked on 8 September 1944. Torokina was a semi-circle with nearly 10 kilometres of beach frontage, a perimeter that extended for 22 kilometres and was 6 kilometres across at its broadest point. The perimeter was a continuous line of pillboxes and machine-gun positions, connected by wire and minefields. Torokina was hardly comfortless. There were tennis courts and baseball fields, even plants for making ice cream and soft drinks. Sport and inter-unit sports competitions were routine, and swimming carnivals were also held. The Americans and Japanese largely observed an unofficial 'live and let live' policy. The Americans had not kept an accurate list of Japanese units and estimated that there were only 2000 combat troops out of the estimated 11,000 Japanese thought to be on the island.⁹

As with the army, the US Army Air Force and US Marine air squadrons in the northern Solomons were relieved by those from the Royal New Zealand Air Force. Initially two New Zealand fighter squadrons, flying Corsairs, were based at Torokina, but from April 1945 this was increased to four squadrons. The Royal Australian Air Force provided an army cooperation wing comprising No. 5 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, flying Wirraways and Boomerangs, along with smaller units flying twin-engine Beauforts for aerial dropping of supplies and equipment, and Auster light aircraft used as 'spotters' for the army.

A problem of the Australian build-up was the difficulty in recruiting enough Bougainvilleans to work as carriers. They were vital for the conduct of the campaign, but at the time of the Australian takeover there were

only 300 male Bougainvilleans fit enough to work as carriers. To make up for the initial labour shortage, the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit, whose role was to recruit and provide native labour, brought over 2000 carriers from New Guinea and recruited – conscripted – the remaining labour from surrounding villages. Bougainvilleans were paid between 5 and 15 shillings a month as well as food, depending on the work. In normal country, the carriers' load was about 18 kilograms, or 15 kilograms in rough country. The Bougainvilleans also worked in plantations, built huts and crewed small watercraft. The Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit also became responsible for administering the refugee compounds in liberated territory where the Bougainvilleans received rations and medical treatment.¹⁰ Many villages conducted their own guerrilla war against the Japanese, killing straggling individual Japanese soldiers or operating under the control of Australian officers as part of the Allied Intelligence Bureau.

SAVIGE TAKES COMMAND

At one minute past midnight on 22 November 1944, Savage and II Corps assumed command of operations in the North Solomons. He had issued his first orders one day earlier. General Bridgeford's 3rd Division and Brigadier Stevenson's 11th Brigade were to relieve the Americans along the Torokina perimeter. Savage wanted a battalion from the 7th Brigade in the mountains, along the Numa Numa Trail, blocking the overland approach to Torokina. The bulk of Japanese were deployed in southern Bougainville and on the island's east coast. Savage wanted to build up detailed information about the Japanese and the terrain before formulating plans for future operations.¹¹

Savage knew that he did not have the means to conduct a major offensive, so he tightly controlled the deployment and use of his troops. 'Time and again', he later wrote, 'I was forced not only to improvise but to shape the garment according to the cloth available.' His solution, 'was based on economy of force, and building up a firm base on attaining an objective from which to launch the next attack'.¹²

THE CENTRAL SECTOR

Some of the first troops to move beyond Torokina's perimeter were from the 7th Brigade (9th, 25th and 61st Battalions) with the 9th Battalion relieving the Americans on the feature named 'George Hill' along the

Numa Numa Trail. With rainforest-covered hills, sheer slopes and numerous streams, the country was difficult to supply. Only one battalion could be forward, with each of its companies deployed in a line along the narrow razorback. From George Hill the Australians could look down on the Japanese outpost on Little George Hill just 45 metres away, and beyond that 'Artillery Hill'.¹³

On 29 November, the 9th Battalion heralded the opening of the Australian campaign with an attack on Little George Hill. Advancing under a bombardment of artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire, the infantrymen captured and cleared the feature in 50 minutes, killing 20. Twenty-eight-year-old Spanish-born Private Edwin Barges, a stretcher-bearer, was killed in action and another private died of wounds. Six other Australians were wounded. The battalion went on to capture Artillery Hill on 17 December before being relieved by the 25th Battalion a few days later.

Pearl Ridge, the dominated high ground across the Empire Range, was set as the next objective. Its capture would block the Japanese's eastern approach to Torokina from Numa Numa and Kieta, and harass the Japanese lines of communication along the east coast, preventing any large movement of Japanese troops between the north and south of the island.

The offensive began on 30 December. In what became the usual pattern of attack, Australian Boomerang pilots directed mortar fire to mark targets on the ridge before leading in New Zealand Corsairs for their bombing runs. As the aircraft circled overhead, infantry from the 25th Battalion began moving along Artillery Hill pushing up onto the ridge, but the Japanese resisted skilfully and fighting continued into the next day. The Japanese abandoned the ridge on New Year's Day.

In early January 1945, the 11th Brigade (26th, 31st/51st and the 55th/53rd Battalions) assumed responsibility for the Central Sector. Brigadier John Stevenson had a busy time during the first months of 1945, with his battalions divided between Torokina, and the Northern and Central Sectors. Having commanded a battalion in Syria and on the Kokoda Trail, Stevenson realised the importance of improving the lines of communications in the Central Sector. A jeep track from Barges' Hill to Pearl Ridge was developed as well as an air-dropping ground. A light-rail link was even built up the face of Barges' Hill. During their 14 weeks in the sector, the 11th Brigade patrolled continuously. Patrols penetrated deep into Japanese territory, with one patrol even reaching Numa Numa plantation on the island's east coast. They had accounted for 236 Japanese

killed, 15 possible 'kills' and four prisoners, for the loss of four Australians and 19 wounded.¹⁴

On 18 April, Potts' 23rd Brigade, recently arrived from the Outer Islands, became responsible for the Central Sector. The 27th Battalion began patrolling on 21 April, ambushing, sniping, raiding and generally harassing the enemy. The battalion's war diarist commented:

After three and a half years of hard training ... the unit has at last been committed to an operational role, and is fighting live enemy ... The troops are in high spirits and the great majority are very keen to get at grips with the Jap.¹⁵

By early June 1945, the campaign on the island was going well for the Australians. As well as virtually controlling the Numa Numa Trail, the 11th Brigade in the north had pushed the Japanese back to the Bonis Peninsula while in the south the 3rd Division was threatening the main Japanese garden areas and was only 45 kilometres from Buin. With the 23rd Brigade's arrival on Bougainville, Savige's force, as of 9 June, numbered about 32,000 troops. The best estimates of the Japanese strength were considerably lower. In April, the total number of Japanese army personnel thought to be on Bougainville was 11,000. By June this figure had risen to an estimated 14,500. It was thought that there were 1780 soldiers in the north; 1630 around Numa Numa; 1130 in Kieta; 7850 in Buin, and an estimated 1310 soldiers on Shortland, Fauro and other nearby islands. It was also estimated that 1400 Japanese civilian labourers plus up to 3000 naval personnel were spread across the island. The total estimated Japanese strength was between 19,000 and 20,000. (The estimate for the army's strength was almost accurate, but once naval and civilians were included, whose numbers were double what was estimated, the actual Japanese strength was about 24,000.)¹⁶ Savige's ultimate goal was the 'annihilation of the Japanese'. To do this he had to concentrate his forces in the south for the final advance on Buin, while still keeping enough forces in the other sectors to keep pressure on the Japanese. Savige decided the 23rd Brigade would become responsible for both the Northern and Central sectors. This would give the 11th Brigade a brief respite in Torokina before joining the 3rd Division in the Southern Sector.¹⁷

Savige now eased his earlier restrictions in the Central Sector and Lieutenant Colonel Harry Dunkley's 7th Battalion unleashed a new offensive. Savige told Dunkley the battalion was expected to 'inflict casualties of at least four to our one'.¹⁸ Dunkley exceeded Savige's expectations. Between 7 June and 15 August, the 7th Battalion captured 25 Japanese

positions and claimed 181 Japanese killed for the loss of 25 Australians and 54 wounded.¹⁹

On 10 August, First Australian Army warned II Corps that Japan's surrender was imminent. This message was immediately passed to all forward units. The next day, General Sturdee signalled Savige that, in view of the probability of cessation of hostilities, all operations were restricted, patrols were to be recalled, and that every effort must be made to avoid further Australian casualties. They could defend themselves if attacked, but hostilities were otherwise suspended.²⁰ During the morning of 13 August, the Japanese opened fire on an Australian platoon, killing Private Eric Bahr and wounding three others. A shearer from northwest Victoria, 26-year-old Bahr was the last Australian killed in action in the campaign. His death came just as Dunkley was informing his company commanders of his instructions for the Japanese surrender.²¹

THE NORTHERN SECTOR

As the Australians wore down the Japanese in the Central Sector, the campaign in the north also gathered momentum. With the cutting of Japanese communications between the north and south by controlling the Numa Numa Trail, Savige wanted the Japanese in the north contained to Buka Island and the narrow Bonis Peninsula on Bougainville's northern tip. The Americans had patrolled along the northwest coast to Cape Moltke and Kuraio Mission, about 30 kilometres from Torokina, once a week by landing craft. Prior to the 11th Brigade's takeover of the sector, Savige stressed to Stevenson, who passed it on to his battalion commanders, that there was no need for haste; they were to 'proceed cautiously' and 'avoid costly frontal attacks'.²²

Moving from Torokina by foot and by landing craft along the coast, the Australians progressed steadily, and by mid-January 1945 the 31st/51st Battalion had reached Tsimba Ridge, a strongly fortified Japanese position honeycombed with elaborate trench systems and gun emplacements, and supported by artillery, including 75-millimetre mountain guns.²³ The battalion unsuccessfully attacked the ridge on 21 January and also tried to outflank the feature. Tsimba Ridge and the nearby area were finally captured on 9 February. The Australians acknowledged the skill and formidability of their foe. An after-action report stated Tsimba Ridge's defences were 'characterised' by 'stubborn and determined resolve' to hold this stronghold 'at all costs'. Japanese camouflage was 'excellent' and accurate Japanese snipers caused many casualties.²⁴

The 31st/51st Battalion was relieved by the 26th Battalion in late February. The incoming battalion conducted a complicated series of manoeuvres, cutting the Japanese lines of communications, outflanking and forcing them to abandon one position after another. By employing a series of amphibious landings on Saposa and Taiof Islands, and Soraken Peninsula, the battalion cleared the peninsula by the end of March. The 26th Battalion remained at Soraken while the 55th/53rd Battalion took over in April, pushing north, through mangrove swamps on the coast and rugged foothills. Australian patrols met little resistance, but the difficult country slowed their progress and they were shelled continually. By mid-May, the Australians had established a line across the neck of the Bonis Peninsula, a front about 8 kilometres long.²⁵ The Japanese, however, were increasingly aggressive. Patrol clashes occurred daily: there were regular attacks on the 55th/53rd Battalion's thinly deployed companies, and more than 700 shells fell in the battalion's area.²⁶ The 26th Battalion relieved the fatigued 55th/53rd Battalion in mid-May, although the former was not much better off. Stevenson even described the 26th Battalion as being 'a little sore' at being sent back into action without a rest in Torokina.²⁷

The Bonis Peninsula was laced with Japanese pillboxes and bunkers, and in order to overcome these defences an ambitious plan was devised where a small force would land by barge at Porton Plantation and push inland to link up with the main Australian force moving north. Early on 8 June, a force based around the 31st/51st Battalion's A Company, commanded by Captain Clyde Downs, landed at Porton. They established a small u-shaped perimeter, but from the outset the tactical plan went wrong. The barge carrying the force's heavy weapons became grounded on a reef offshore, and within 50 minutes of the first troops coming ashore they were under machine-gun fire. By dawn it was clear that the perimeter was ringed by pillboxes and the Japanese were reinforcing the area. The situation deteriorated throughout the day. It was only the accurate artillery support, firing from Soraken and called down skilfully by Lieutenant David 'Pete' Spark, which prevented the Japanese from overrunning the beachhead. Attempts to reinforce Downs during the night had to be abandoned when the Australian landing craft came under intense fire. Stevenson consequently decided to evacuate Downs' force.²⁸ An officer later described the conditions in the perimeter:

Our sector was subject to rifle fire from hidden snipers making it impossible to raise one's head . . . Eating, drinking and movement were impossible, personnel were cramped from lack of movement and the

continued immersion in swamp water, and sun heated our rifles until they were almost too hot to handle.²⁹

The rescuing landing craft broke through to evacuate Downs' men late in the afternoon. Overloaded, three craft became ground. One floated off, but the other two remained stuck fast. Low flying Boomerangs and Corsairs, as well as ongoing artillery fire, tried to protect the trapped men, but they still came under fire from the Japanese on the shore, and from soldiers who tried to swim out to the vessels. One of the two stranded craft drifted off during the night, but the other remained stuck. A soldier afterwards described the desperate conditions in the remaining landing craft:

The intense heat of the day, fatigue and exposure, plus the fact that we had not slept for three days and nights was beginning to take effect. Men often collapsed due to their exhaustion. A few were delirious. Men were half deaf from the continual explosion of bombs, shelling, and machine-gun fire.³⁰

Finally, in the early hours of 11 June, the survivors were rescued. Of the 190 members of Downs' company group, 22 were killed or missing, including Downs, and 62 were wounded. More were hospitalised. Five more men were killed from the landing craft company, and seven were wounded.³¹

Brigadier Potts' 23rd Brigade began taking over the Northern Sector on 20 June. Potts was enthusiastic, but Savage was not interested in the brigadier's plans for an offensive push into the Bonis Peninsula. Having only just avoided a total disaster at Porton, Savage was not prepared to risk another major operation in an area that had 'no great bearing on the general campaign'.³² While his caution is understandable, Savage's restrictions on Potts surrendered the initiative to the Japanese and put the Australians well and truly on the defensive.

By late June, the 23rd Brigade's 27th and 8th Battalions were experiencing the same setbacks as the 11th Brigade. To counter the Japanese tactics, the Australians placed standing patrols to guard the main roads. These patrols stayed in position from dusk until late morning, while ambush positions were manned 24 hours a day. Patrols hunted for ambush parties and searched the roads and tracks for mines.³³ Such efforts met with only limited success. It tied down and fatigued soldiers, and limited the number available for offensive patrolling. The Japanese simply carried on using other numerous small paths off the main tracks. In early

July, a troop of four Matilda tanks from the 2/4th Armoured Regiment were allocated to the Northern Sector. The swampy terrain and heavy rains limited their usefulness. The Matildas were more symbolic than practical; there was no better way to boost the infantry's morale. Savage and Potts decided to abandon the Ruri Bay position and concentrate both the 27th and 8th Battalions around the Ratsua-Buoi Plantation area. This was a shorter front, at less than 3 kilometres.³⁴

On the 24th, the 8th Battalion attacked a series of Japanese bunkers named 'Base 5'. Despite already being wounded twice in the left arm and once in the thigh, Private Frank Partridge rushed forward under heavy fire, retrieved a Bren light machine gun from the dead gunner and fired into the Japanese bunker. Handing the Bren to another man, Partridge threw a smoke grenade into the bunker. The grenade exploded and Partridge dived in, killing the surviving occupant with a knife. He then went on to clear another bunker before blood loss finally forced him to stop. Others rushed forward and held the ground long enough to collect the dead and wounded. For this action Partridge was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Australians attacked Base 5, now renamed 'Part Ridge', again on 5 August and captured the position. The Australians were slowly regaining control of the sector, but by now it was too late. The campaign in the Northern Sector ended in a stalemate.

THE SOUTHERN SECTOR

About 70 per cent of the Japanese on Bougainville were around Buin, although at least half were in no condition to fight a strenuous campaign. As their rations dropped, the numbers of Japanese suffering dysentery, malaria and malnutrition rose.³⁵ Savage outlined his plans to General Bridgeford for the sector on 23 December. The 3rd Division's ultimate role was to 'destroy [the] Japanese forces in Southern Bougainville'. Its immediate task was to clear the area south of the Jaba and move forward to the Puriata River. Once there, patrols were to push southward in preparation for the next advance. Keeping with Savage's policy governing the campaign, however, nothing larger than a battalion would be committed to an attack without his prior approval.³⁶ He also insisted Bridgeford rotate each of his three brigades through the area, shifting in turn from the front to the reserve, then the rear. Savage did not loosen his grip with time. When the Southern Sector was later divided between the south axis, along the Buin Road, and north axis, along a second track named the Commando Road, Savage insisted that a battalion advance

along each axis with the third battalion in reserve. Savage directed: 'Not a single man more than was absolutely essential would be employed in the area' and 'Not a single ration would be consumed in these areas by any man whose presence was not absolutely essential to the conduct of the operation.'³⁷

By the end of January 1945, the 29th Brigade (15th, 42nd and 47th Battalions) were across the Jaba River and reached Mawaraka by the middle of the month. It was relieved by the 7th Brigade soon afterwards. The 7th Brigade would advance to the Puriata River in three axes. The 9th and 61st Battalions would each head inland to Mosiegetta along different routes while the 25th Battalion would follow the coast around Motupena Point to Toko. The 61st Battalion's Sergeant John Ewen recorded in his journal the fatigue experienced by frontline soldiers. On 17 February, he commented they were 'just about had':

Living on your nerves in mud, rain, sleeping in holes in the ground soon wears a fellow down. I have watched the boys faces get drawn and haggard, and their movements slow and listless. I suppose I must look the same.³⁸

Throughout February and into March, Ewen's journal is full of descriptions of patrols, ambushes and attacks. These contacts were small but frequent, and each night the men expected an attack. Stress was constant.³⁹ The 9th Battalion was also tiring. By the end of January there were several instances of company commanders reporting their men being 'too frightened' to leave their positions and refusing to go on patrol. One company commander 'cracked up'.⁴⁰ The 9th and 61st Battalions reached Mosiegetta in mid-February. The 61st Battalion's own regimental medical officer noted a marked decline in each of the four rifle companies from the second and third weeks in March. Soldiers, non-commissioned officers and even a few subalterns were anxious and nervy, and several platoon commanders stated that their men refused to go on patrols.⁴¹ On 19 March, the battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Dexter, wrote to his brigadier commander asking for his battalion to be relieved. Although he considered his men had so far 'done a magnificent job', Dexter conceded his battalion had 'reached such a state of mental and physical strain that it can no longer be regarded as an efficient striking force'.⁴²

Following the battle of Slater's Knoll, both the 9th and the 61st Battalions remained in action into April. On the 17th Lieutenant Colonel Geoff Matthews, commanding the 9th Battalion, recorded a

platoon had 'the jitters' and were about to have a 'sit down strike'. He cheered them up a little, and the patrol set off. The rest of the company were also a 'bit nervous', so Matthews told them he would relieve them from patrolling for as long as he could. 'The word got around quickly and spirits went up.'⁴³ A forceful commander, Matthews was able to use persuasion and patience to coax his 9th Battalion through its problems.

The situation in the 61st Battalion was bleaker. 'Bn is in a bad way as the men are all cracking up', Sergeant Ewen wrote on 9 April, with the soldiers refusing to go on patrol: 'Nearly all the boys have a vacant look in their eyes and look dazed.'⁴⁴ On 7 April, shortly after the battle of Slater's Knoll, Dexter was evacuated suffering from neuritis. He never returned. Having enlisted in the 1939 as a private, Dexter's own physical and emotional decline left him unable to encourage or manage his men's exhaustion and frayed nerves. The 'jack ups' or 'strikes' that occurred in the 9th and 61st Battalions are examples of what can happen when front-line soldiers were pushed beyond their limits of endurance.

The 25th Battalion's experience in the Southern Sector, however, was the exact opposite. At the start of January, the 25th Battalion's operations were focused on securing the coastline from Gazelle Harbour to the mouth of the Puriata River.⁴⁵ This was done in a series of small amphibious landings that cleared Motupena Point and moved on to Toko in early February. Toko subsequently became a major base for the Australians. In March the battalion crossed the Puriata River and advanced down the Buin Road with orders to clear the enemy to the Hongorai and then the Hari Rivers. In one action, on 22 March, after two men were hit, Corporal Reginald Rattey ran forward, firing his Bren from the hip. Reaching a Japanese weapon pit, he flung in a grenade, and called his section forward. He then cleared another pit using the same tactics. Still under heavy fire, he returned to his section, collected two more grenades, and went on to kill the Japanese in a third pit and captured a machine-gun post as his company moved up and consolidated the position. Rattey was awarded the Victoria Cross.

In response to the strong Australian push along the Buin Road, Lieutenant General Kanda Masatane, who replaced Hyakutake after he had a stroke, ordered the Japanese 6th Division to launch a full-scale attack on the Australians if they crossed the Puriata River. This counterattack was to inflict as many casualties as possible and delay the Australian advance, so as to allow Kanda time to prepare for Buin's defence. The focus of the attack would be against a feature called *Goshu-dai* (Australian Heights) – Slater's Knoll.⁴⁶

The Japanese offensive began with an artillery barrage on 26 March followed by assaults on the 25th Battalion's most forward companies along

the Buin Road the next day. By 31 March, the Australian companies were besieged. If it had not been for the relief column led by Matilda tanks from the 2/4th Armoured Regiment, the Australians would have been overrun. Emerging from the jungle, the Matilda tanks opened fire and 'blasted and machine-gunned the Japs out of their pits' who 'fled in disorder'.⁴⁷ Thereafter a slight lull followed. Before the 25th Battalion's headquarters company, along with the battered survivors of B Company, who were dug-in on Slater's Knoll were hit by the Japanese just before dawn on 5 April. The attackers rushed headlong into barbed wire and ferocious machine-gun and rifle fire. Bodies were scattered over an area less than 170 square metres.⁴⁸ A Japanese officer afterwards likened it to being 'caught in a rain of bullets'. Men were tangled on the wire and killed. Those following behind used their bodies to climb the wire.⁴⁹ Fighting continued throughout the morning. At 12.50 p.m., two Matildas reached Slater's Knoll from the battalion's rear echelon, escorted by men from the 61st Battalion. Again the Matildas' firepower proved decisive. Individually and in small groups, the Japanese broke. They were shot down as they ran. Some Australians even stood up in their weapon pits to get a better shot.⁵⁰ Mopping up continued for about an hour, but the battle of Slater's Knoll was over.

The fighting left the survivors with powerful memories. An Australian sergeant remembered the Japanese screaming as they attacked: 'They came at us over and over again.' Some Japanese came within metres of the Australians' weapon pits and 'were shot at point-blank range or hit with a bayonet but a lot more collided with the barbed wire and were picked off in mid-stride'.⁵¹ A Japanese lieutenant likened the battle to a scene from hell. The wire was tangled with the heaped bodies of the dead and the groans and cries of the dying. He saw one Japanese soldier, with an arm missing and covered in blood, crawling on his knees trying to get away. Elsewhere, wounded cried out for water while others begged to be killed.⁵²

All told, between 28 March and 5 April, 620 Japanese dead were counted. As a point of comparison between January and April, the 25th Battalion lost 36 officers and men killed and 154 wounded. The 7th Brigade's total losses during this time were 70 dead and 260 wounded.⁵³ Slater's Knoll brought the 7th Brigade's campaign to a close.

Brigadier Hammer's 15th Brigade (24th, 57th/60th and 58th/59th Battalions) now advanced on a two-battalion front: one battalion along the Commando Road and another on the Buin Road. The two roads were connected by lateral tracks, which had been improved to allow Matilda tanks to move from one road to the other.⁵⁴ By comparison to earlier phases of the campaign, the 15th Brigade enjoyed an almost luxurious amount of

Figure 11.1: Brigadier Heathcote Hammer points out a map feature to Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee (left), watched by Major General William Bridgeford and Lieutenant General Stanley Savage, Bougainville, 12 May 1945. (Australian War Memorial 091 857)

air, artillery and armour support. Hammer's tactic was to drive the Japanese back into confined areas, with patrols harassing their flanks, and then employing the Australians' superior firepower to destroy them. When a 'worthy' target was found, he reported, 'we hit hard and often'. His approach was to use firepower as much as possible to save manpower and casualties. Approximately 68,000 artillery shells, 38,000 mortars and 768 tonnes of bombs were fired and dropped in support of his brigade.⁵⁵ By the end of the first week of May, the 24th Battalion's lead company reached the Hongorai River. It took 31 days to advance 6.5 kilometres.⁵⁶ Further inland, the 57th/60th Battalion on the Commando Road reached the Hongorai River in mid-May. The brigade continued on to the Hari and the Mivo Rivers in June.

Savage considered the 15th Brigade his 'most efficient and best fighting brigade', but he was mindful of it becoming too exhausted.⁵⁷ He consequently ordered General Bridgeford to relieve it with the 29th Brigade. As mentioned earlier, in June Savage reviewed the overall situation on Bougainville, with the object of 'completing the annihilation' of the remaining Japanese. Savage felt

that he was in a good position to take a more aggressive approach. Using Brigadier Stevenson's 11th Brigade and the 3rd Division, Savage would build up a concentrated force in the Southern Sector large enough to destroy the Japanese in Buin. After this was done, he felt that the 'elimination' of the Japanese in the other sectors would be a relatively 'simple task'.⁵⁸

The 29th Brigade began relieving the 15th Brigade around the Mivo River in early July. Torrential rain and floods hit the Southern Sector in the middle of the month. The Mivo River rose 2 metres; bridges were destroyed; the corduroy surfaces of roads and tracks floated away; and the Buin Road was reduced to a sea of mud. Water dripped from the men; clothes, boots and socks were sodden. Eating was an ordeal; sleeping was worse. Equipment and ammunition deteriorated quickly if not stored undercover and properly maintained. Stores became mouldy. Throughout it all, the Japanese continued to probe, setting mines and booby traps.

The 15th Battalion, around Siskatekori, where the Buin Road crossed the Mivo, was subjected to intense action. Patrols reported large clashes with the enemy. A series of minor attacks against the battalion culminated in a major assault on D Company on 9 July. Fighting continued for much of the morning. More than 30 Japanese bodies were counted afterwards. The 15th Battalion was pounded by Japanese artillery, sometimes being hit by more than 200 shells a day. By August, over 3000 rounds had landed in the battalion's area.⁵⁹

At 10 a.m. on 15 August, Australian Prime Minister Chifley announced in a radio broadcast that the war was over. After the Japanese began shelling Soraken at 7 p.m., a soldier in the 8th Battalion wrote in his diary: 'Who said the war was over?'⁶⁰ The mood was very different in Torokina where celebrations erupted like 'wildfire'.⁶¹ II Corps was not going to take any chances. Forty-five minutes after Chifley's broadcast, four specially prepared Beauforts took off from Torokina on a leaflet-dropping mission, dropping more than 230,000 leaflets over the main Japanese areas on Bougainville. Each Beaufort also had 'Japan surrenders' painted in large Japanese characters on the underside of the wings. A few weeks later, in a highly choreographed and formal ceremony in Torokina on 8 September, General Kanda and Vice-Admiral Baron Samejime signed the instrument of surrender in Savage's headquarters. All Japanese forces on Bougainville and the adjacent islands surrendered.

CONCLUSION

Bougainville did not change the outcome of the war nor contribute to its end. But it *was* a justifiable campaign, one conducted by Australian forces with brutal skill and efficiency. From the very outset, the ultimate

Australian objective was the 'destruction' of the Japanese. When the war came to an end, II Corps controlled about two thirds of Bougainville: in the Central Sector, the Japanese were harassed and contained around Numa Numa; in the Northern Sector, although still aggressive, the Japanese were contained in the northernmost tip of the island; and in the Southern Sector preparations were underway for the final advance on Buin. This advance came at a price. Between October 1944 and August 1945, 516 Australians died on Bougainville and another 1572 were wounded. The infantry suffered most of these casualties.

The Japanese fared far worse. When the Americans landed at Torokina in November 1943, about 65,000 Japanese occupied the island. When the Japanese surrendered nearly two years later there were just over 23,800. The US Marines and the US Army's XIV Corps estimated they had killed 9890 Japanese between November 1943 and November 1944. From November 1944 until August 1945, II Corps claimed 8789 Japanese killed; this figure included those killed by the Bougainvilleans. This meant that 17 Japanese soldiers died for every Australian killed, while another 138 Japanese were taken prisoner. The exact number of Japanese deaths, however, will never be known. Some 30,000 died from sickness and disease.⁶² Any assessment of the campaign should also consider the people of Bougainville. Their support and assistance was vital to the Australians. From Bougainville's pre-war population of 52,000 people it is thought up to a quarter died either during or as a result of the war.⁶³

Bougainville will always be a controversial campaign. Torokina, Pearl Ridge, Porton and Slater's Knoll will never become household names. But the campaign should never be dismissed. 'As somebody who was there throughout the campaign', a soldier later wrote, 'it certainly was not just "mopping up"'.⁶⁴

FURTHER READING

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Notes

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- 3 Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, pp. 22-3.
- 4 Sturdee to Blamey, letter, 31 October 1944, 3DRL 6643, 2/35 (2 of 3).
- 5 Blamey to Sturdee, letter, 7 November 1944, 3DRL 6643, 2/35 (2 of 3).
- 6 History of the Japanese Occupation of Bougainville, p. 13, AWM54, 492/4/4 part 1.
- 7 Information on Japanese operations in Solomons, p. 5, AWM54, 423/6/15; Bōeichō Bōei Kenshūjo Senshishitsu (ed.), *Senshi sōho: Minami Taieiyō Rikugun sakusen <5> Aitape, Puriaka and Rabaul* [War History Series: South Pacific Army Operations (vol. 5), *Aitape, Puriaka, and Rabaul*], Asagumo Shinbunsha, Tokyo, 1975, p. 227.
- 8 Savige to Sturdee, letter, 3 December 1944, 3DRL 2529, 84.
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- 25 2 Aust. Corps (AIF) in the North Solomons, p. 9, 3DRL 2529, 72; 11th Brigade Report on Operations, pp. 11–14, 3DRL 2529, 73.
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- 27 Notes on the Official History, chapter 8, p. 7, AWM67, 3/382.
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- 30 Report on events subsequent to boarding stranded ALCA on Porton beach until rescued by Private W. J. Crawford, p. 6, AWM54, 613/7/7.
- 31 Davidson, *Porton*, pp. 168–72. The casualty figures in the official history are slightly lower, giving 23 killed and 106 wounded. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 215.
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- 39 See, for example, *ibid.*, 23–28 February 1945.
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