

1944 – 1946: SERVING OVERSEAS

By Keith Alexander, Signaller 7th Battalion

After returning from Darwin and enjoying 24 days of soft beds and good food, we reformed in Watsonia in Melbourne and then headed for Queensland to do jungle training. We travelled to Cairns, then Atherton and Kauri where our camp was situated.

Our camp was on the Barron River before the dam was built. We had a swim before parade each day as there was no water laid on to the camp. After six months of jungle training in the Lamb Ranges and other places we were put on the train again down to Cairns where the troop ship *Duntroon* was waiting to take us to New Guinea.

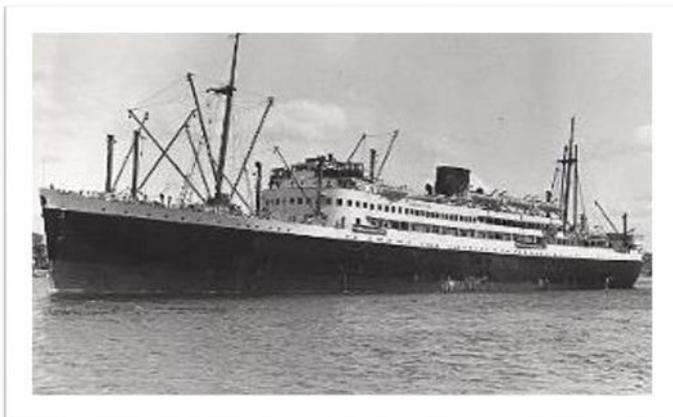
LAE AND WAU

It was my first trip at sea and was all a new experience. I was a bit sick the first day but then came good. The ship was very smooth and the only scare was a sub (submarine) alert. This sent us into Oro Bay for a day, then on to Lae (Papua New Guinea) on the north coast where we disembarked in June 1944.

Our camp in Lae was a swamp when it rained - which it did all the time. We didn't do much at Lae and were pleased when we were told we were going to Wau in the Bulolo Valley to map the trails between there and the coast.

The climate at Wau was much better as it was 3000+ feet above sea level and cooler than at the coast. A couple of other Sigs and I were given the job manning a relay station at the Black Cat (gold) Mine in the hills above Wau. This was a bungalow which was carted up by donkey and built on the spot. It was quite comfortable and we spent three weeks there. Our rations were brought in by native carriers and we had to cook for ourselves.

The trail up to the Black Cat Mine was up a creek for miles then up a very steep slope to a ridge. While we were on the ridge we had an earth tremor, the ground shook, the trees rattled and it was a very unpleasant feeling. Some men who knew how to look for it found enough gold to make a ring or two as keepsakes.



MV Duntroon (stock photo)



Troops boarding MV Duntroon about 1945 (stock photo)

When we got back to Lae we were used as navvies unloading boats which was very heavy work. Our main pleasure was swimming at Malahang Beach where we would swim in warm sea water then run about 50 yards (45m) into cool fresh water pools behind the beach. After a few weeks of this we got word we were going to the Solomon's to relieve the Americans who were moving out to the Philippines. We boarded the *Cape Victory* and sailed to Emirau Island (Bismark Archipelago) where the 8th Battalion were camped, then on to Stirling Island where the 7th Battalion unloaded except for D Company and a section of Sigs of which I was one.

MUNDA, NEW GEORGIA

We went on to the airbase at Munda on New Georgia to take over a big centre of 300 lines. The Americans were also there and we worked with and were supplied by them on a lend lease arrangement. We were even on the ice cream roster! When the C.O. back at Stirling heard we were getting ice cream he cut it out of our list of items to get from the Yanks, but when we told the Yanks this they just laughed and said they would put it down as carrots or something so we got it on a regular basis.

My turn came for leave. The 7th Battalion moved to Bougainville while I was away so myself and 20 others returning from leave landed at Torokina and re-joined the unit there. I was joyfully informed that I was just in time because we were going up the track into action in three days' time.

THE FRONT LINE, BOUGAINVILLE

We were trucked to Barges Hill, a 1200+ foot (365m) feature on the Numa Numa trail. We had to climb this by marching along wide zigzags, each one gaining 6 - 10 feet (2 to 3m) up at a time. All our supplies had to be carried up this hill by native porters.

At the top of the hill the Numa Numa trail went along five miles of hilltops and razor backed ridges to where it descended 1000 feet (300m) at Berry's Hill. A bulldozer had been winched up to the top to clear a jeep track along the ridge tops. Two jeeps and trailers had then been disassembled and carried up the hill then reassembled at the top. The track was covered with mesh because of the mud. The fighting pushed the Japanese back along the track and the jeeps were eventually able to get through to Berry's Hill which made getting supplies through much easier. Eventually a funicular rail line



was built and small trucks were winched up to the top.

My first station was at Battalion Headquarters at Wearne's Hill, about half way along the jeep track. It was a war-time Headquarters with trenches and stand-to's each morning where everyone rose before dawn to prepare for a potential dawn attack by the enemy. Only one company could operate on the track at once in direct action facing the Japanese positions and three Sigs were sent with each company to provide the communications.

Battalion HQ was moved to Berry's Hill as the fighting passed on to the next line of ridges. Each company took a turn at pushing the Japanese back in a series of attacks on their positions. One sad part of being with Battalion HQ was that we saw the dead and wounded being brought back, many of them men I knew. One I had been on leave with just weeks before. I sat and talked with one lad who was wounded and waiting for a carrier for some time. I learnt the next day he had died overnight.

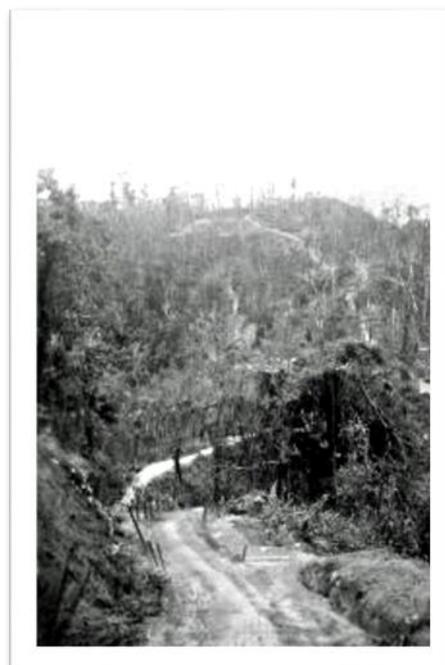
There were many stories of lucky escapes and others whose luck ran out like our Company Sergeant Major who was shot in the head while jumping between two trees. C Company had been the first company to go in and when their turn came around again I was given the job of leading the other Sigs while we were at the front. Wireless was useless in the jungle and normal cable was too heavy. A light patrol cable had been developed which was run out and left behind, with no attempt made to recover it. It was a thin cable thread covered with a waterproof coating.

The Japanese positions were heavily defended from the front so we tried to attack from the side or rear. During one attack 40 men were sitting waiting for the mortar barrage to stop when a whoosh came in and a large piece of shrapnel from a mountain gun landed in the middle without hitting anyone. Another day we had a severe earth tremor. The Numa Numa trail ran between two volcanoes, Mt Balbi and Mt Bagana and we often had tremors.

My worst experience in this period was when we were attacking a hill top position. One Sig



27 June 1945. Bougainville locals bringing Pte J. Sporn into Wearne's Hill for treatment



Left: Track used by the jeeps looking from Berry's Hill to Barges Hill

went with a phone with the attacking platoon while I went with the platoon providing covering fire. The riflemen were along the ridge firing into the Japanese position and I had the phone just below them. We had arranged a signal for when to stop firing so the attacking platoon could move in. However, when the time came my phone wouldn't work.

Fortunately, the lads had arranged a back-up signal which worked ok but we were not popular with the Company Officer! Our tech expert said I was too close to the riflemen and the noise had packed the carbon in the earpiece so that it didn't vibrate. C Company was relieved soon after and I returned to Battalion HQ for a while.

As well as attacking along the trail, we had two patrol bases out in no man's land on each side of the track and a day's march forward. Their job was to ambush and generally harass the Japanese food gardens and camps towards the coast. The one on the left was called Tokua and the one on the right was Wakunai.

My final action was behind the Japanese position when the forward platoon came up upon an occupied Japanese bunker without

being seen. I was about 70 yards behind with the phone line when all hell broke loose with shots and grenades flying. Our boys could not retreat back along the track without being shot so they went over the side of the steep ridge and then climbed their way back further down the track. The sergeant came back and said "Come on Blue, this is no place for us". We dropped back about 50 yards, collected the others who were climbing up the ridge and pulled out. The position was taken the next day unopposed. *(Men with red hair were often given the nickname 'Blue'.)*

After a spell at Berry's Hill I was seconded to C Company again with two other Sigs to relieve sections of D Company at Tokua patrol base. We arrived there after an all-day march through the jungle very tired as we carried extra cable, ammunition and food as well as our gun. However, one other group was worse off than us because they had carried a mountain gun and 6 shells all the way there.

We settled in, found our dugouts and fields of fire, had tea and fell in a heap to sleep it off. At 2am the phone went. I answered and Major Jones, our Adjutant back at Battalion HQ, told me that the Americans had dropped



Mt Bagana, Bougainville

a super bomb on Japan and it could end the war. I was to tell the Patrol's Commanding Officer not to go out on patrol, sit tight, defend the base and await further orders. It was a bright moonlight night when I crawled out, found the patrol officer and told him the news. "Fine" he said, "tell the artillery boys".

I went further along the rise to where they were camped and woke them. Their officer immediately woke all the boys, got a map, took a bearing on the nearest Japanese position, and fired all 6 shells into the night. The reason? There was no way they were going to carry those shells back to Berry's Hill if the war was over! A few days later we all marched back to Berry's Hill when the surrender was announced.

Major Jones led a patrol out and met the Japanese officers to arrange their move back through Berry's Hill and Barges Hill to Torokina. Most of the unit went back to Torokina but I stayed on at Berry's Hill until all the Japanese had come in. We then moved to Torokina where Japanese from all over the area were arriving.

A point system was devised to send home men who were married or had long service

records. 132 points was the cut off; over this you went home, under you stayed.

CAKETAKING JAPANESE AWAITING REPATRIATION

All the low pointers from the other units moved to the 7th Battalion, then we moved to Tower Hills south of Bougainville to act as caretaker Battalion to 26,000 Japanese who had surrendered and were awaiting ships to take them home. This took 8 months, mostly boring but we had to man a switchboard 24 hours a day, 7 days a week so that kept us busy.

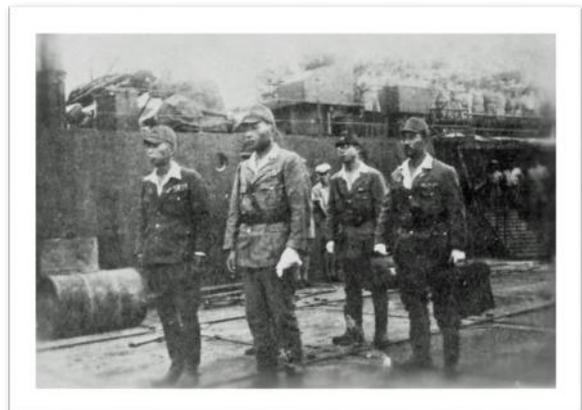
We got to know some of the Japanese as they had work parties into camp every day. We did a bit of trading, mostly Japanese money or badges for tobacco.



Sigs at Berry's Hill, Bougainville



7th Battalion Headquarters area, Berry's Hill, July 1945



Japanese forces surrendering

In April 1946 the last of the Japanese left for home and we packed up and boarded the HMAS Kanimbla to start our trip home.

It was an uneventful trip apart from being very crowded sleeping in tiers in the holds. On the last morning we sailed down the NSW coast to Sydney and knew that we were on our way home at last after nearly 5 years. After we docked we were taken to a camp at Redfern, processed and put on a train for Melbourne. Our kit bags had been sent to Ipswich and would meet us in Melbourne. It meant we had no warm clothes and changing trains at 6 o'clock in the morning was freezing cold. I caught a cold and didn't feel very bright as I went to Royal Park in Melbourne to be discharged.

It was April 17th 1946.

I went to Uncle Henry's then caught then next night's train home to Mildura. By this time, I was very sick and went to the doctor the next day because I had all the signs of malaria. He promptly bunged me into the Mildura Base Hospital without a welcome home. I was not happy! However I recovered and started to adjust to normal "civvy" life by working for my father and his neighbours.

The years spent in the Army taught me to live and work with other people under all kinds of conditions. Especially I learned to survive. I developed close friendships with a number of men and we remained in contact for the rest of our lives.



December 1945.
Fauro Island. Battalion
HQ located in village in
the foreground

7th Battalion members
leaving Bougainville and
returning to Australia



Loads carried by signalmen

Like many soldiers the sigs had to carry a lot of equipment which meant heavy loads. This included:

- ◆ 108 backpack wireless (48lbs or 22kg)
- ◆ Spares bag (22lbs or 10kg)
- ◆ Drum/s with 1 mile of insulated phone cable (100lbs or 45kg each)
- ◆ Telephones, switchboards etc.
- ◆ Drum/s with ½mile of light patrol cable
- ◆ Rifle, ammunition, rations, water bottle, personal gear

Camp site routine (Signals)

A signal office (tent) was set up at each camp site and 20 lines would be run out to all who need a phone. The mile drum of cable would be carried, running the cable out along the way. Sometimes two drums would be needed. This line was reclaimed when we shifted camp. In New Guinea two drums were lashed to a pole and carried by two men on their shoulders. All cable laying and reclaiming was done by hand and carried back to the sig tent. The pole method of carrying was fine on the flat but up the steep ridges all the weight came on to the low man and was very heavy and difficult to manage.



Map showing where the 7th Battalion served overseas in World War 2