

CHAPTER 4

Overseas

Early on the morning of 3 May, the 7th Battalion at last set foot on New Guinea soil and was allocated an area some miles inland from the port of Lae. Whoever had chosen this site was either inexperienced in the job, or had a grudge against the unit. The site was in the middle of a low lying area resembling a swamp more than a camp site. Mud more than a foot deep was quite prevalent, making it necessary for much hard work to be done such as board-walks to tents and kitchen areas, and building roads so that vehicles would not get bogged.

Fortunately, the stay in this area was of rather short duration. After the CO, Adjt, QM, IO and I Sgt had carried out a reconnaissance to Wau in the Central Highlands, and the rear party had arrived aboard the vessel, "Van Derliz" on 19 May, an advance party moved out to Labu for on-movement to Wau by road. All members of the battalion had concentrated in that area by 1 June.

Wau, as far as climate was concerned, was just about the best one could ask for. Being high in the mountains, it was quite cool at night, necessitating the use of blankets, certainly something not necessary in the jungle of the lowlands. Nor was it necessary to use mosquito nets. All in all, a very pleasant place to be a garrison soldier, if indeed one had to be a soldier at all.

It was about this time that Capt Keith Blaby and Lt Leith Donald, who had left the unit in November, 1942 arrived back at the battalion. Capt Blaby was appointed OC A Coy on the departure of Capt Bob Shearer for the mainland. Leith Donald took over 7 Pl. Cpl M.S. "Mick" McKenzie left to attend OCTU, and Cpl H.J. "Snowy" Sutcliffe left to become an instructor at the Training Battalion in New South Wales. Lts Smith, Firth and Kemp paraded to the Brigadier in reference to being released from the Army. It was apparently Government policy to reduce the armed services, and anyone with specified civilian qualifications could be claimed by their former employer if it was deemed necessary.

A farewell parade was also held on the Wau airstrip in honour of the departure of Maj Gen Boase, Commander 5 Div.

With plenty of time on their hands, all companies undertook the organising of their own concert party, with each being judged to ascertain the best. C Coy won this honour. At the performance given by A Coy, it was a privilege to have Maj Gen M.G. Whitelaw, a former member of the original 7th Battalion AIF (1914-18) visit the unit. Max Deacon, son of the former RSM of the original 7th, was afforded the honour of accompanying the General to the performance.

After much patrolling to the Black Cat Mine and the Mubo area, and after a very pleasant two and a half months in the highlands, the battalion departed once more for Lae. This time, however, to a much better prepared camp site formerly occupied by 2/8 Cav Commando Regt, and a battery of 2 Fd Regt.

Here again the men were required for working parties at HQ Lae Base, as well as trying to improve their own area.

On 1 September, Lt Col Norris left by air to reconnoitre the area to which another move was soon to occur. This was to a small island group known as the Treasury Islands, at that time occupied by 93 US Divisional HQ commanded by Maj Gen Johnson. Lt Col Norris also flew to Munda, another US base on the island of New Georgia, where the 369 US Regt was stationed.

Soon after the return of the CO to Lae, a warning order was promulgated for the pending move to the Solomon Islands area. By 2 October, the US troopship "Cape Victory" had arrived and loading of 23 Brigade's stores and equipment commenced. 7 Bn embarked on 9 October, with the rear party of 8 Bn. The ship sailed via Finschhafen, en route to Emirau Island where 8 Bn was stationed. After unloading the stores belonging to 8 Bn, the "Cape Victory" departed 17 October for Stirling Island, arriving at 1400 hrs on the 19th.

During the course of this voyage, members of the battalion were to learn of the accidental death, in an aeroplane crash, of the CO, and VX5012 Capt Howard V. Brown. The accident had occurred some time before, but the men were not to learn of it until Lt Alexander of 23 Brigade HQ came aboard the "Cape Victory" at Emirau Island.

Lt Col Harry L.E. Dunkley MC, was appointed the new CO and arrived at the battalion on 11 November. He had previously served with 2/6 Aust Inf Bn in its Middle East campaigns, and with 2/7 Aust Inf Bn during the Salamaua-Wau operations in 1943. He was one of the growing number of officers who had risen from the ranks to command battalions since the beginning of the war.

On arrival at Stirling the battalion disembarked, with the exception of D Coy which sailed for Munda on 21 October, 1944.

After disembarkation, A and C companies were allocated the eastern end of the island, while HQ and B companies the western end. The following day, however, B Coy moved to the centre of the island, and C Coy again moved to Mono, the larger island of the group.

The group of islands had been captured from the Japanese on 27 October, 1943 by the 3rd New Zealand Division, who had long since moved out. Only a few Americans remained to man the port facilities, and to operate the air strip.

Whilst on patrol on the island of Mono, a party led by Sgt Kevin F. Cresp of 14 Pl, captured the last remaining Japanese who, after being clothed and fed, was escorted by his captor to Acorb Island by air for interrogation.

C Coy was ultimately relieved on Mono by A Coy just before Christmas 1944. Of all the Christmases spent in the Army, the one on Mono, whilst a member of A Coy, was the most memorable. Mono is only a small island with, at that time, only one small village of about 100 people. They were beautiful, brown skinned, fun loving Polynesians who were raised in the Christian faith.

It was our privilege to have the village choir visit the camp area for a performance of carol singing. They sang firstly in their own language, and then in English, with the audience of "hard nut" soldiers listening spellbound.

Coy HQ with two platoons were camped on the foreshore of a natural bay at a spot where a fresh-water stream flowed into the sea. A substantial wooden bridge had been built across the stream and this structure was utilised by both soldiers and native children as a diving platform. Water polo and swimming was also a means of passing "off duty" hours.

Another very pleasant duty was the task of augmenting the daily rations for both troops and villagers, by fishing in the bay. The natives supplied a lakatoi (outrigger canoe) and the troops the means of fishing — hand grenades. The natives would paddle the canoe for about 200 metres from the shore, and the duty party would drop their grenades over the side. The resulting explosion would stun the fish, and the natives would jump over the side to retrieve them. It was usually quite a job to restrain the enthusiastic natives from entering the water before the grenades had exploded.

As with everything else, all good things must come to an end, for by the middle of January, 1945 A Coy was again moved back to Stirling Island.

On 27 January, 1945 a swimming carnival was organised, with teams from the US Navy, US Army and our battalion. The meet consisted of ten events commencing at 1330 hrs with the first event being the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ yards freestyle, followed in order by a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ yard breast stroke, an underwater swim, an exhibition by the US Navy in life-saving, a 100 yards freestyle, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ yard backstroke, a diving championship, 200 yards freestyle, a novelty egg and spoon race, and 300 yards relay (6 man teams). Unfortunately we came second to the US Navy, with the US Army running third. Those swimming for 7 Bn were: Event 1 Dougherty, Townsend. Event 2 Brannelly, Wells. Event 3 Geerke. Event 5 Wickham, Garth. Event 6 Cahill, Francis. Event 7 O'Shea, Stirrat. Event 8 Tyers, Sitch. Event 9 Francis. Event 10 Wickham, Stirrat, Pedder, Doherty, Sitch, Townsend. No other detail was recorded on the events.

On the demise of Capt Brown, Capt Wallace O. Cameron, a member of the battalion from pre-war days, was appointed OC D Coy. He was later to represent the battalion on a visit to Hombo Mumbo, to meet the Governor of Fiji.

In the meantime, life for D Coy on Munda was quite pleasant. The company was being supplied from American sources, and rations included ice-cream every day. Many sporting activities were also organised here. A tennis tournament against the US Navy and US Army was billed as a mini "Davis Cup." Representing 7 Bn were Charlie Krelle, "Digger" Midgley, Roy Phippard, Ron Ziersch and Geoff Midgley. 7 Bn won the tournament easily. A cricket match against the local population, and a boxing match against the Americans, in which Basil Carl played a major part, were some of the other sporting activities.

Basketball was most popular and teams from each platoon and Coy HQs were matched against each other. Basketball was also played against the American black personnel who were camped adjacent, and taught the finer arts of the sport to those lucky enough to get a game.

With D Coy on Munda was a detachment of 7 Bn Sigs, and their task was to maintain communications with Battalion HQ on Stirling, to operate the 100-line switchboard at the US HQ, and to keep telephone lines in the area in working order. This detachment was led by Lt C.F. Cameron, ably supported by Cpl W.L. Roberts and by signalmen such as Ron Harford, Ron Ziersch, Ron Burrows, Geo Isaacs, Keith Bird, Bill Shuttlewood, Syd Holland, Stan Tucker, Rex Baguley, Ken Adams, Keith Alexander, Ken Lawn, Ron Wilson, Keith Stackpole, Harold Cook, Henry McGauchie and Allan Pedder. Some of these men were relieved by others mentioned, and did not spend the whole time in that location.

Back at BHQ on Stirling, it was now considered appropriate for a new Reconnaissance Platoon to be formed should a recce of the neighbouring island become necessary. Lt George L. Nicholson MM, was appointed Pl Comd, and members were recruited from volunteers from all companies. George Nicholson was a former sergeant with 2/11 Aust Inf Bn and later returned to that battalion to serve out his time in the Army. Other rank members of the platoon were personally interviewed by the CO to ascertain their suitability for the job, and were later instructed in the use of Pidgin English. Approval was also sought and eventually granted for the platoon to scout around Turube Island, but for some unknown reason this mission was cancelled. Lt Nicholson did, however, take some of his platoon on a patrol to Choiseul Island. His account of this patrol is as follows:

"The patrol left Stirling by PT boats to investigate the number and condition of Japanese troops crossing the straits from Bougainville to Choiseul. PT boats had sunk many Japanese landing craft in the straits, and this was evident by the sight of a wrecked craft lying abandoned on the reef.

The patrol was landed at a village called Sasamunga, and in the approved style, was inhabited by old men only. On the following day, young men began to appear and the party set out by canoe, up the west coast of Choiseul.

A man by the name of Ramon was the head scout, and the skill at handling the boats, the happy athletic native and their cadence count as the call came

for more speed, is something still not forgotten. Somewhere up the coast, the patrol landed and went on by foot through the thick scrub, on a barely definable track, to a spot further up the coast where a stop for the night was made on another small island just off shore. Using this island as a base, I and the head scout went a little further north and identified Japanese troops on the beach. After observing these troops for some time, a return journey to the start point on the island of Choiseul was made. We were welcomed in the approved style by the villagers, this time including women and children. Through Ramon, the head man of the village requested a couple of hand grenades, which were duly given. In the evening, after "fishing" in the local lagoon, the whole village including members of the patrol feasted on fish.

The patrol was picked up by PT boat, three in number, the Commander of which had been given permission to engage "targets of opportunity." That night the PT boats cruised up the coast to the earlier mentioned beach where the enemy had been observed, to blast the hell out of the area. The run back to Stirling was early morning, and it has been rumoured since, that one of the PT boats on that expedition was commanded by a fellow named "Kennedy."

The book by Gavin Long titled "The Final Campaigns" makes mention of a patrol of eight days duration that concluded on 2 December, 1944 by saying:

"The party into Choiseul, where there were some 700 Japanese, consisted initially of Sub-Lieutenant Andreson and Sgt L.G. Selmes, both experienced scouts who knew the Solomons well, and a Signaller. For eight days ending 2 December, 1944 a patrol of the 7th Battalion from Mono Island, led by Lieutenant Rhodes (RANVR) of the AIB, and Lieutenant Nicholson of 7 Aust Inf Bn, moved about on Choiseul guided by Andreson's native scout."

It is known that other patrols to neighbouring islands took place, because former members of the battalion have related their experiences to the author, but no written record can be found as to the destination and details of such patrols. It is recorded, however, that the posted strength of the battalion at this time was 39 officers and 859 other ranks, the strongest it had been since the early days of 1942.

Again 7 Aust Inf Bn (AIF) was due for a move, and on 10 April, 1945 the Advance Party under Lt Smith, with twenty members of A Coy, departed by air for Torokina. From then on, and throughout the entire month of April, personnel were transported by various means to Bougainville.

General Sir Thomas Blamey, who had been appointed Commander, Allied Land Forces, South West Pacific Area in 1942, disagreed with General MacArthur's opinion that the by-passed Japanese were "strategically impotent" and would "wither on the vine." He pointed out that they had tied up six American divisions and part of a seventh, and were now tying up three Australian divisions, and part of a fourth. He therefore decided to order the destruction of the enemy where that was possible without many casualties, and elsewhere to aim at containing the enemy in a restricted area, by the use of a smaller force. One of these restricted areas was the Solomon Islands, of which Bougainville formed a part, and was the farthest region in the South West Pacific Area reached by the Japanese during their thrust in 1942.

The island of Bougainville, these days, is synonymous with copper mines operating in the region, but when the Australian troops relieved the Americans in 1944, not many people knew of its existence. The island, about 200 kilometres long and probably 65 kilometres wide at its widest point, is dominated by a volcanic range about 2600 metres at its highest point. This is of course Mt Balbi.

The coastal strip is no more than 16 kilometres and in places much narrower. The whole island at that time was covered with thick rain forest, with a smattering of minor areas cleared for cultivation. The annual rainfall is extremely high at about 2540 millimetres.

An American force had landed at Torokina on 1 November, 1943 in Empress Augusta Bay, but by 1944 had little interest in Bougainville, other than a minor base for their advance northwards to the Philippines. They had decidedly defeated the Japanese in two counter attacks of March, 1944 from which time an unofficial truce had existed.

The intelligence assessment of the total strength of the Japanese on Bougainville was very inaccurate. The Americans believed there were about 12,000 enemy, but the Australians thought 25,000 was nearer the mark, and estimated that approximately 35% of the force was employed on gardening and fishing, 15% on transport duties, 30% on the sick list, and only 20% in the forward area. The actual strength was later ascertained at between 37,000 and 40,000 troops, including 7000 sailors and some "elite" marines.

Gardens were known to grow sweet potato, corn, eggfruit, beans, peanuts and green vegetables. Pawpaws, bananas, coconuts and pineapples were plentiful, and each unit had their own chickens. The policy of concentrating on food production had been made so much easier, because the Americans had not pressed to extend their area of occupation.

Australian intelligence had been aware as early as August, 1944 that only 250 tons of food and no reinforcements had been received by the Japanese. There was virtually no way in which General Hyakutake and his men could receive reinforcements. Allied supremacy at sea and in the air was absolute.

The Japanese force on Bougainville was concentrated in three main areas — the Buka Passage in the north, Numa Numa and Kieta in the east, and in the south, Buin and Mossigetta.

On 6 October, 1944 Maj Gen W. Bridgeford, GOC 3 Div opened his HQ on the northern edge of Empress Augusta Bay. This was followed six weeks later, on 22 November, by 2 Aust Corps HQ. The Corps was commanded by Lt Gen S. Savige, who had under command, 3 Div (7th, 15th and 29th Brigades) plus the 11th and 23rd Brigades. Of these only Brig Potts' 23rd Brigade (7th, 8th and 27th Infantry Battalions) had seen no action against the enemy.

From the beginning, the shortage of shipping was quite a problem for the Australian Commander being, it was said, due to the require-

ments of the Americans in their operation against the Philippines. This shortage was to remain with the logistic support throughout the entire campaign, so much so, that at Christmas, 1944 the force was down to three days rations, with some other smaller quantities being held by the units.

The constant shortage, however, did not deter the Australians from altering the pace of the war, when final relief of the Americans had been completed by mid-December.

The initial thrust by the Australians came on 29 November, 1944 when 9 Inf Bn (7 Bde, 3 Div) took over from the Americans in the Doiabie area, some 16 kilometres inland along the Numa Numa Trail at a place called Piaterapaia. After an hour's sharp fight, Little George Hill was in their possession. On 18 December, 1944 Artillery Hill fell to the 9th Battalion, which placed them on the feature next to Pearl Ridge.

On 30 December, 1944 all four rifle companies of the 25th Battalion which had taken over from the 9th, converged on Pearl Ridge, and by mid-afternoon on the following day, the enemy had been cleared from the ridge.

It was the Corps Commander's ultimate aim to destroy the enemy in southern Bougainville, but he did, however, intend to retain close control over the subordinate formations and units under command. He stipulated that no force exceeding one battalion would be committed to an attack without his prior approval, and he detailed how the offensive was to be carried out.

One of General Savage's earliest tasks was to curb the enthusiasm of Brig Potts who had served with the 16th Battalion AIF in 1914-18, and who had been CO of 2/16 Inf Bn in 1941/42. Brig Potts had also commanded the 21st Brigade during the campaign on the Owen Stanley Ranges in 1942, but had been relieved of his command under adverse circumstances, and had reason to believe he had been badly treated by General Sir Thomas Blamey and Lt Gen E. Herring. Brig Potts was now keen to get on with the job. It was natural for him to seek an active role for his troops, for some of his men had been in the services for nearly four years, and had not been in action against the enemy.

From his HQ on Green Island north of Bougainville, Brig Potts outlined a series of tasks he thought his troops could be usefully employed in doing, and urged that at least one of the following should be executed:

1. General reconnaissance of neighbouring enemy territory.
2. An operation against Choiseul, where some 700 Japanese were believed to be at large.
3. An operation against northern Bougainville at Buka Passage.
4. An operation against Buka Island.

All of these suggestions were rejected.