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**Sustaining to the end: the impact of morale on Australian troops in New Guinea,
Bougainville, and New Britain, 1944-45**

2010 summer scholar report prepared for the Australian War Memorial,
Military History Section

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Abstract

Currently on display at the Australian War Memorial's Second World War gallery, the theme panel for the Aitape-Wewak Campaign reads, "the campaign sapped the troop's morale." From this and other references made in the exhibit, visitors to the War Memorial are likely to conclude Australian troops fighting in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) campaigns towards the end of the war were demoralised.

Is it possible to state that low levels of morale existed to a degree which impacted upon the operational outcomes of these campaigns? Were Australian troops involved in the campaign demoralised? Examination of private correspondence, diaries, and official documents from personnel involved in these campaigns, demonstrates that pockets of low morale within the Australian Divisions did not seriously affect the operational effectiveness of the campaign.

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adoption of a non-aggressive stance, aimed at containing or bypassing the Japanese within small pockets or enclaves.² However, contrary to General MacArthur's assumptions, the Japanese had not withered on the vine. For example, the Japanese on the islands of New Britain and Bougainville had developed a network of market gardens and adopted farming practices so as to survive.

Campaign and operational objectives

The American policy of containment was deemed unacceptable to the Australian high command and government. Australian Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Thomas Blamey, adopted plans for a far more aggressive campaign, though the Australian government sought an undertaking that there would be "minimal casualties" within these areas.³

Due to the large number of Japanese on New Britain, initially estimated to be approximately 38,000 (the actual total was 93,000), it was decided there would not be an offensive against the Japanese positions; rather, Blamey chose to push back the Japanese to an area within the Gazelle Peninsula, effectively restricting the Japanese to the north-eastern corner of the island at Rabaul.⁴

Blamey's broad objectives for the Bougainville and New Guinea (Aitape-Wewak) campaigns were explained as to "destroy the enemy", to "liberate the natives from Japanese domination" and "to gain all possible information of the enemy by active patrolling."⁵ In 1945 Blamey further justified this aggressive stance by arguing that passivity in troops resulted in a reduction of "their resistance to sickness and disease", and that it would afford the Australians "moral superiority" over their enemy.

² Long, *the final campaigns*, pp. 608-09.

³ <http://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/underattack/end/macarthur.asp>

⁴ Long, *The final campaigns*, pp. 241, 612.

⁵ Long, *The final campaigns*, pp. 608-11.

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Furthermore, he believed, a failure to act aggressively would have been “a colossal waste of manpower, material and money”.⁶

The difficulties of maintaining good levels of morale in jungle warfare

The jungle campaign, conducted under the harshest of conditions from October 1944 through to the war’s conclusion in August 1945, sapped the physical and mental strength of even the fittest and best trained Australian soldiers. Disease was a serious problem and recurrent cases of malaria and other tropical diseases were an element largely beyond the control of even the most effective of commanders.

The islands were considered by many to be the worst environs in which to wage a war. Phil Roden, the commanding officer of the 2nd/14th Battalion stated, “Give me open warfare any day. Jungle I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”⁷ The 6th Division’s commander, Major General Jackie Stevens, described New Guinea as “unpleasantly malarious”⁸ and lamented a return to the island: “We were all dismayed at being sent to back to New Guinea ... our only prayer was to get out of it alive.”⁹ Demonstrating a widespread reluctance to return to the jungles of New Guinea, one battalion commander wrote, “Oh Jesus! What am I going to tell my men?”¹⁰

Jungle warfare required “endurance and determination”.¹¹ As the historian Garth Pratten noted in his study of Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War, commanders had to demonstrate a “calmness” that belied the confusion around them and to “rise above the privations of hunger, disease and exhaustion”. To succeed in jungle fighting, it was also necessary that Australian commanders made a

⁶ Long, *The final campaigns*, pp. 610–11.

⁷ Pratten, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, , p. 179.

⁸ Maj-Gen Jackie Stevens, in Wieneke, J., “*6th Division Sketches: Aitape to Wewak*”, foreword.

⁹ Stevens, Major-General Sir Jack, ‘A personal story of the service, as a citizen soldier’, AWM: 3DRL3561, 419/99/7, p. 93.

¹⁰ Pratten, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, p. 192.

¹¹ Keating, ‘A tale of three battalions’, p. 77.

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commitment to sustaining “established tactical and organisational principles”.¹² This was not a place for losing one’s head. Combat in jungle conditions was undertaken in oppressive humidity and constant rain, resulting in rapid growth of fungus and rot. Front-line troops were hampered by poor visibility, as the low light under the heavy canopy made it difficult to distinguish fellow platoon members. Tropical storms rendered tracks and rivers impassable and the enemy hid unseen in trees, under the cover of fallen logs and bushes, or buried in dugouts. Further problems centred around re-supply, with few usable roads and airfields available.

How effective commanders maintain good levels of morale in combat units

In order to withstand the rigours of combat, and particularly jungle combat, Australian commanders needed to be vigilant about levels of morale and the prevention of battle fatigue within their troops.

In a recent conversation with a former SAS commander,¹³ the question of leadership was raised. Specifically, what effect does a commander have on the morale of men in his charge? He said that commanders who advocate open communication channels and who inspire their men with confidence in their own abilities were able to maintain sufficient levels of positive morale in a unit. Additionally, commanders must ensure that their men are well trained and disciplined, resulting in troops that have greater levels of physical and psychological resilience. The performance and morale of the unit, he argued, rest ultimately with the actions and standards of the commander and his group leaders, expressed through advanced leadership skills, open communication practices, and high standards of managerial skills and experience. He related evidence that overwhelmingly demonstrated that military units which experienced higher levels of morale had the “toughest” commanding officer, one who is able to enforce strict levels of discipline and control. Personnel in such units draw from

¹² Pratten, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, pp. 193, 197.

¹³ His name will be withheld in this report in order to protect his anonymity.

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their commander a sense of stability, trust and security, gained through their awareness of his commitment to them.

What is meant by morale?

Simply put, morale can be described as the “level of confidence or optimism felt by a person”.¹⁴ Positive or good morale can work to reduce the effects of battle fatigue and stress. It does not eliminate it, but studies have demonstrated that military units with a positive outlook suffer lower incidences of battle stress. Positive morale can help to manage levels of fear and to instil courage, which Lord Moran regarded as “a man’s capital – of which no man has unlimited stock and when it is spent he is finished.”¹⁵ Good commanders, argued Moran, will endeavour to, “watch the expenditure of their men’s courage.”¹⁶ Unmanaged fear affects a soldier’s reservoir of courage, which can lead to errors in judgement or a failure to meet operational requirements.

Morale is a command function

There are certain attributes that commanders of combat units need to adopt in order to promote good levels of morale, which are leadership, communication, management skills, and experience.

Leadership

Leadership is the skill of men and women to instruct, inspire, and communicate effectively with their subordinates. In the military, it is a commander’s ability to “persuad[e] others to carry... [their orders] out”.¹⁷ During war and battle, effective leaders, such as divisional, battalion, and platoon commanders can “ameliorate stress”¹⁸

¹⁴ *Encarta Dictionary*

¹⁵ Moran, Lord, *The anatomy of courage*, p. x.

¹⁶ Moran, Lord, *The anatomy of courage*, p. 69.

¹⁷ Moran, Lord, *The anatomy of courage*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Kearney, *The management of stress in the Australian Defence Force*, p. 16.

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through their guidance and direction. If a commander fails to properly lead his or her subordinates, then those under command, "look to the strongest personality who steps forward",¹⁹ resulting in a situation in which a lack of authority and respect eventuates, inevitably leading to a breakdown in relationships between the personnel involved.

Communication

Efficient and effective commanders will facilitate the free flow of communication with subordinates within his group. This task allows for, in a military context, the sharing of campaign objectives and outcomes, and assurance for personnel of their role and contribution to the campaign. As Lord Moran stated, soldiers "must have a reason for what they do."²⁰ Marshall confirms the importance of two-way communication, because "information is the soul of morale in combat."²¹

Commanders should also conduct timely debriefing of troops, as it confirms whether the objectives were met, and allows for a repositioning and reassessment of tactics; it should include praise and reinforcement where due and it will correct inadequacies or concerns immediately. Commanders also have a responsibility to keep in close contact with their personnel. Failure to make contact with their charges results in a breakdown in respect and confidence, leading to disintegration of morale and group cohesion, dissent, and rejection of a commander's power role within the model.

Management skills

Effective commanders must take reasonable steps to manage their human resources just as much as they would their materiel resources.²² Management of leave, relief, and job rotation contributes to the maintenance of good morale within a unit; more importantly, adequate periods of rest allow soldiers to rebuild their levels of

¹⁹ Ellis, *The sharp end of war*, p. 228.

²⁰ Moran, *The anatomy of courage*, p. 179.

²¹ Marshall, *Men against fire*, p. 34.

²² Pratten, Garth, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, p. 16.

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“courage.”²³ An effective commander should take reasonable steps to ensure that his subordinates have the necessary equipment to complete their tasks, including suitable weaponry and ammunition, appropriate clothing, access to plentiful and nutritious food; he must ensure they are clean and dry where possible, and have access to expert medical attention both in the field and at base.

Experience

An effective commander contributes to positive morale through his “authority of experience”, generally gained through years of rigorous training, education or on the front line. By communicating his knowledge and experience of possible outcomes during an operation, the commander not only confirms his “legal and constitutional status” but also his moral authority.²⁴

Command and morale in the SWPA Campaign, October 1944 – August 1945

The preceding key attributes can be used in an examination of the leadership styles of commanders of four Australian battalions during the campaign in the South West Pacific. Gavin Keating’s case study “A tale of three battalions: combat morale and battle fatigue in the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, Bougainville, 1944–45” is taken as the model for an examination of certain issues which demonstrate that a commander should not underestimate the place of good morale within a unit.

Keating’s comprehensive case study of the problems of morale experienced by two battalions of the 3rd Division on Bougainville clearly demonstrates the effect when commanders fail in their obligations to maintain adequate levels of morale.²⁵ Keating demonstrates that falling levels of morale and escalating levels of battle fatigue did undermine military effectiveness, but only within two battalions of the 7th Brigade, specifically the 9th and 61st. These problems did not spread to other units within the

²³ Moran, *The anatomy of courage*, p. x.

²⁴ Pratten, Garth, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, p. 16.

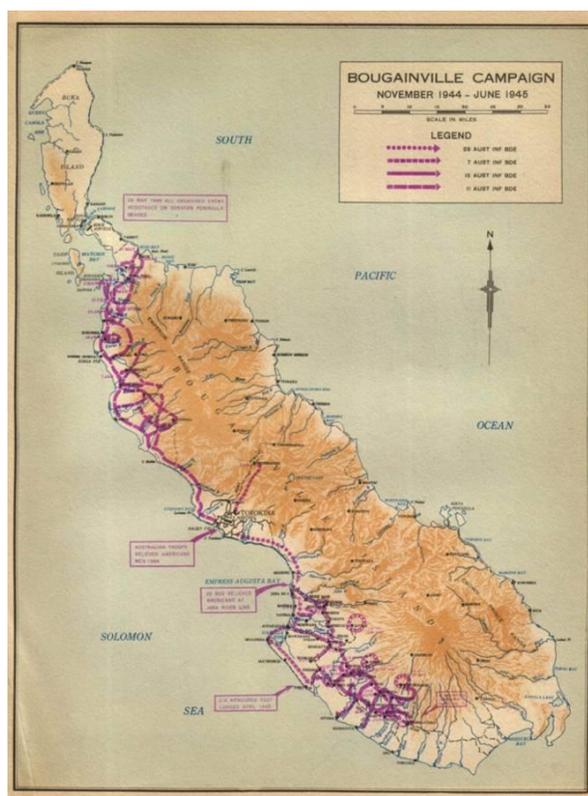
²⁵ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, passim

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brigade, nor did they impact upon the division as a whole. This is a clear example of what happens to soldiers when they are “driven beyond the limitations of military efficiency”.²⁶

Australian forces of the 3rd Division under Major General William Bridgeford undertook a three-pronged attack against the Japanese commencing in November 1944. The identified Japanese target areas were at Numa Numa, Buin, and the Boris Peninsula.

Map 2: the 3rd Division’s Bougainville campaign



Source: *Stand easy: after the defeat of Japan, 1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1945

Within the 7th Brigade, under the command of Brigadier John Field, there occurred a breakdown in morale, order, and control. On two occasions, front-line

²⁶ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, p. 2.

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personnel from the 61st Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Dexter, refused to follow orders; and in the 9th Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel Geoff Matthews, there was one occurrence of strike action and one case of a self-inflicted wound. Keating highlights that there existed within the command structure a bias against the militia personnel. The resulting animosity between AIF and the “Chocos” destroyed any *esprit de corps*.

The 61st Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Bill Dexter

By January 1945 Dexter’s battalion had been subjected to a great deal of stress through constant patrolling of enemy territory. Members of the battalion had begun to display overt signs of battle fatigue, brought on by the protracted nature of jungle warfare and the length of time without relief. The battalion’s refusal to carry out orders was a clear indicator the men had reached their breaking point. Dexter had failed to manage and communicate (to the upper echelon of command) the serious nature of the demise of his group’s “finite stock of courage”.²⁷ Brigadier Field must also bear some responsibility for failing to properly gauge the increasing levels of battle fatigue among Dexter’s men.

Keating says that another of the central problems for Dexter’s 61st Battalion was the inexperience of line commanders, such as the platoon and section leaders. Dexter’s relationship with his second-in-command was fractious and Dexter seemed to have little regard for the line commanders from the militia. His line commanders had minimal combat experience and there was “a tendency among all ranks including officers to question the purpose and soundness of operations”.²⁸

²⁷ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, p. 12.

²⁸ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, pp. 8, 61.

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Dexter was eventually “medically” relieved in April 1945 and his successor, Bill Fry, could not revitalise the exhausted 61st. The battalion was finally relieved on 12 May 1945 after having been on continuous duty for a total of 89 days.²⁹

The 9th Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Geoff Matthews

Matthews experienced similar problems but was able to address them effectively, and as a result the issues were swiftly resolved. In April 1945, a platoon refused to go out on patrol and “were about to have a sit down strike”.³⁰ Matthews was able to talk the men through their problems. He achieved this by being on the front line with the men and promising to seek as much relief as possible. This is a clear demonstration that communication and management by experienced commanders can effectively control combat fatigue and improve morale levels.

Though morale posed serious problems for these two battalions, poor morale was not endemic on Bougainville, and consequently did not undermine the operational effectiveness of the Bougainville campaign. Australian forces who served there are indelibly linked to success over the Japanese 17th Army, with many of the battles being enshrined in Australian military history as some of the most ferocious and costly, such as the battle for Slater’s Knoll.³¹

The effects of morale issues in New Britain and New Guinea

New Britain – 5th Division

It is essential to consider, when examining levels of Australian morale on the island of New Britain, the level of Japanese morale. Though the 93,000 Japanese heavily outnumbered the Australians, intelligence reports from the period clearly suggest that the morale of Imamura’s 8th Area command group was low, and that they were largely

²⁹ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, p. 37.

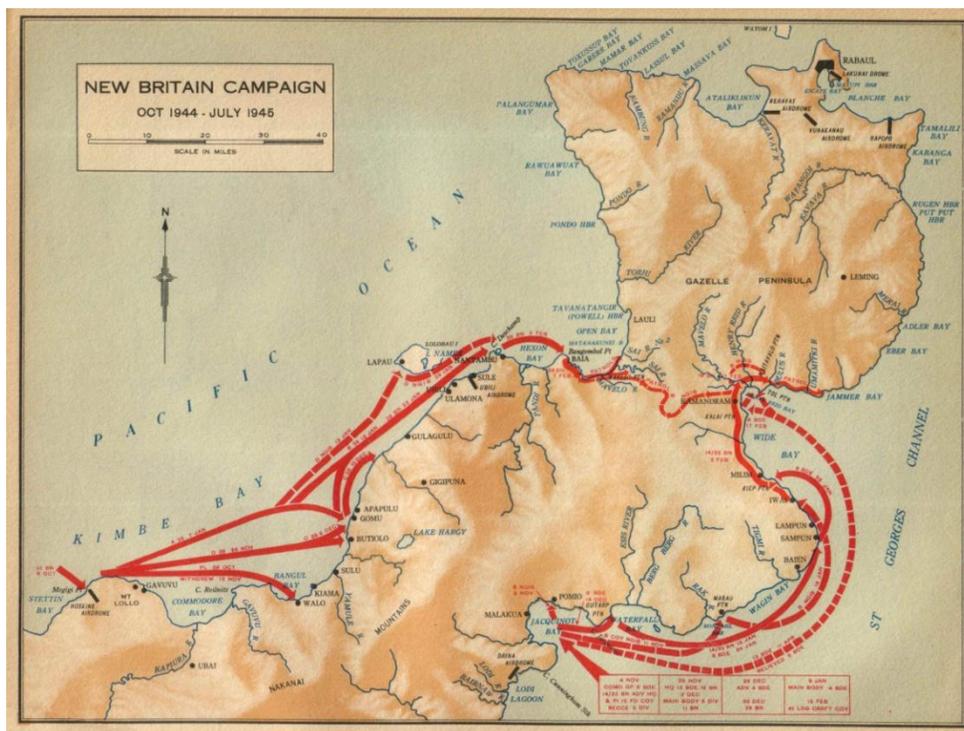
³⁰ Keating, *A tale of three battalions*, p. 38.

³¹ N.B. for a full account of the offensive during February – April 1945, see Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 141.

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content to remain within their enclave at Rabaul and were not prepared to launch offensive action.³²

Map 3: the 5th Division's New Britain Campaign



Source: *Stand easy: after the defeat of Japan, 1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1945

Troops of the Australian 5th Division, under the command of Major General Alan Ramsay, landed at Cape Hoskins on the north coast of New Britain on 8 October 1944, with further units landing at Jacquinot Bay on the south coast on 4 November 1944. The operation called for Australian troops on both the northern and southern coasts to move in an easterly direction pushing small bands of Japanese to a line across the Isthmus at the Gazelle Peninsula.

Two battalions from the 5th Division are examined: the 37/52nd Battalion of Brigadier Cedric Edgar's 4th Brigade, and the 14/32nd Battalion of Brigadier Ray

³² Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 241; AIB Intelligence Field Reports, New Britain, Maj B. Fairfax Ross, (part 1, point 3), AWM54 423/9/31.

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Sandover's 6th Brigade. Both battalions demonstrate that effective command resulted in high levels of morale and a clear commitment to operational objectives.

1) *The 37/52nd Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Fred Embrey*

The 37/52nd Battalion was an experienced unit, having just completed 16 months' duty in New Guinea, where they had carried out intensive jungle training, conducted patrols, undertaken garrison work at Madang, and were used as a source of labour. The unit was relieved in September 1944 and returned to Australia for a period of extensive leave and recuperation. During this period of leave, in December 1944 their "much loved" commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Rowan, retired due to ill health. In his place in January 1945 the battalion gained a new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Embrey. Embrey was described in the battalion's history as tough but fair and, reflecting his regimental origins, a man who liked "things to be done the 2/1st [Battalion] way".³³ While in Australia, Embrey enforced tough regular training, battalion exercises, and sporting carnivals to keep his unit fit and jungle ready.

In April on New Britain, Embrey led his battalion to the northern side of the island, undertaking a six-day "gruelling march across the Gazelle Peninsula to Open Bay." The march was described in the battalion's history as "a never ending nightmare" of rough terrain, rain, mud, and high humidity. Exacerbating their concerns, along the track they discovered "the bleached bones of some of the 2/22nd [Battalion, from the 1942 Tol Plantation massacre] tied to trees and bayoneted." Corporal Terry Andrews described the march as "just like the Kokoda trail ... except there is no fighting."³⁴

When they arrived at Open Bay, Embrey effectively divided the battalion into small posts, which were widely dispersed, poorly supplied, and largely out of contact with the rest of the division. The battalion then began a campaign of "ceaseless patrols"

³³ Blair, *A young man's war*, p. 258.

³⁴ Blair, *A young man's war*, pp. 274, 278, 284.

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against pockets of resistance from the Japanese.³⁵ Despite the constant patrolling and the conditions, the weekly reports from the company commanders demonstrated that very good levels of morale were being maintained.

The process of adjustment to a new commander, combined with a return to the hardships of jungle warfare and the dispersion of the battalion into small remote groups, might have led to low morale, but this did not occur. Embrey took full control of the situation, ensuring that the necessary communication channels were open. He made frequent visits to the sections at the front line and quickly gained the confidence and respect of those men in his battalions. He ensured that though the battalion was split up, companies were supplied with sufficient rations, hot meals were provided where possible, and that the men had access to sporting activities and plenty of rest.

2) The 14/32nd Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Bill Caldwell

The 14/32nd Battalion's history is quite different from that of the 37/52nd. This battalion was largely inexperienced, having undertaken only periods of garrison work in Melbourne, Western Australia, and a short period in New Guinea. This battalion had not seen any combat, though it did have a cadre of AIF men who had. Their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Caldwell, lamented, "The men were anxious lest the war should end before they had heard a shot fired in action."³⁶

Sent to New Britain in December 1944, they were instructed to follow the coast up the main Japanese defensive line at the Waitavalo – Tol Plantation area in March 1945. Caldwell had instilled in his experienced AIF section leaders and NCOs a commitment to regular training and high levels of physical fitness. At Bacon Hill the 14/32nd had the opportunity finally to prove themselves as combat soldiers. Coming upon a group of Japanese, the well trained and well led Australian militia captured the

³⁵ Blair, *A young man's war*, p. 94.

³⁶ Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 249.

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position.³⁷ This was to be the final major engagement of the New Britain campaign as well as being the 14/32nd's first and last battle. The 14/32nd had exceeded all expectations of both their ability and spirit, and had demonstrated that highly trained troops, though inexperienced in combat, can achieve operational success when guided by effective commanders.

This performance is worth noting, as there were problems within the 5th Division. The formation's censor reports that complaints centred on "boredom and monotony due to the static nature of operations" and the lack of postal services: for example, "some liar wrote in the paper we were getting mail every second day up here." Complaints were also made regarding leave and relief: "Everybody is in a very shitty mood, I don't blame them, 23 months without leave." The atrocious weather and conditions also caused many to write home. "I was so cold that I was shivering ... I have never felt so horrible in all my life, I could have cried."³⁸ However, this had no effect on the operations on New Britain.

New Guinea (Aitape-Wewak campaign) - 6th Division

Japanese morale on New Guinea was very different from that on New Britain. Lieutenant General Adachi's Japanese 28th Army, with an estimated strength of 35,000, was dispersed into small groups across the north-eastern area, with its headquarters being near Wewak.³⁹ The poorly supplied Japanese were described as nevertheless having "a fanatical determination to resist our attacks on his position".⁴⁰ When told of the plan for his 6th Division to undertake operations against them, Major General Jackie

³⁷ For the full examination of the Battle for Bacon Hill, see Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 260.

³⁸ Headquarters, First Australian Army - Censorship: Extracts from letters concerning complaints by troops, 1945, AWM54 175/3/34.

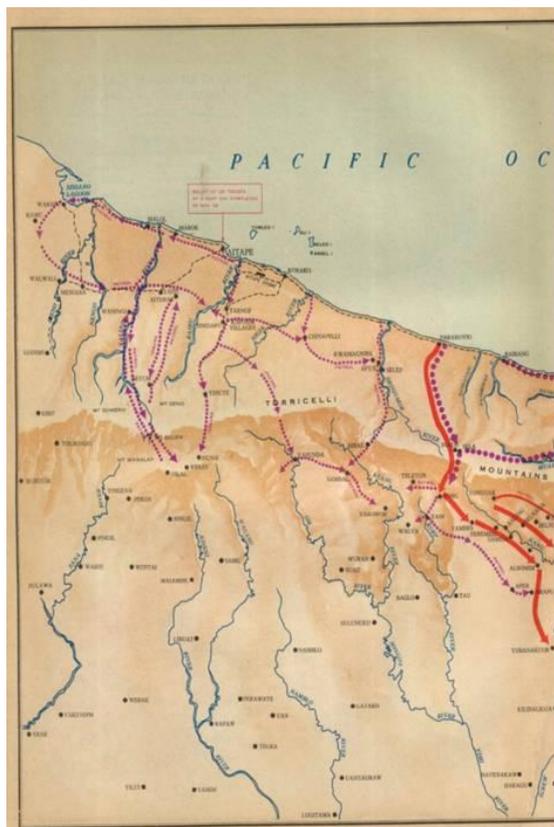
³⁹ Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 272.

⁴⁰ 19th Infantry Battalion, Report on operations - Coastal Section, Aitape - Wewak, part 1, AWM54 603/7/21.

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Stevens lamented that “no one in the 6th Division was happy in being involved in it.”⁴¹ The 6th Division, a tough formation with a formidable reputation, was experiencing a period of low morale; they were bored and frustrated, having spent nearly two years on garrison duties in Australia or in training, and were now forced to return to jungle fighting in New Guinea.

Map 4: the 6th Division’s Aitape – Wewak Campaign



Source: *Stand easy: after the defeat of Japan, 1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1945

The division began to arrive in Aitape during October–November 1944. They commenced an easterly advance along the coast to Wewak and moved inland along the Torricelli Mountains to capture the garden areas from which the Japanese were

⁴¹Stevens, Major General Sir Jack, “A personal story of the service, as a citizen soldier”, p. 93, AWM, 3DRL3561, 419/99/7.

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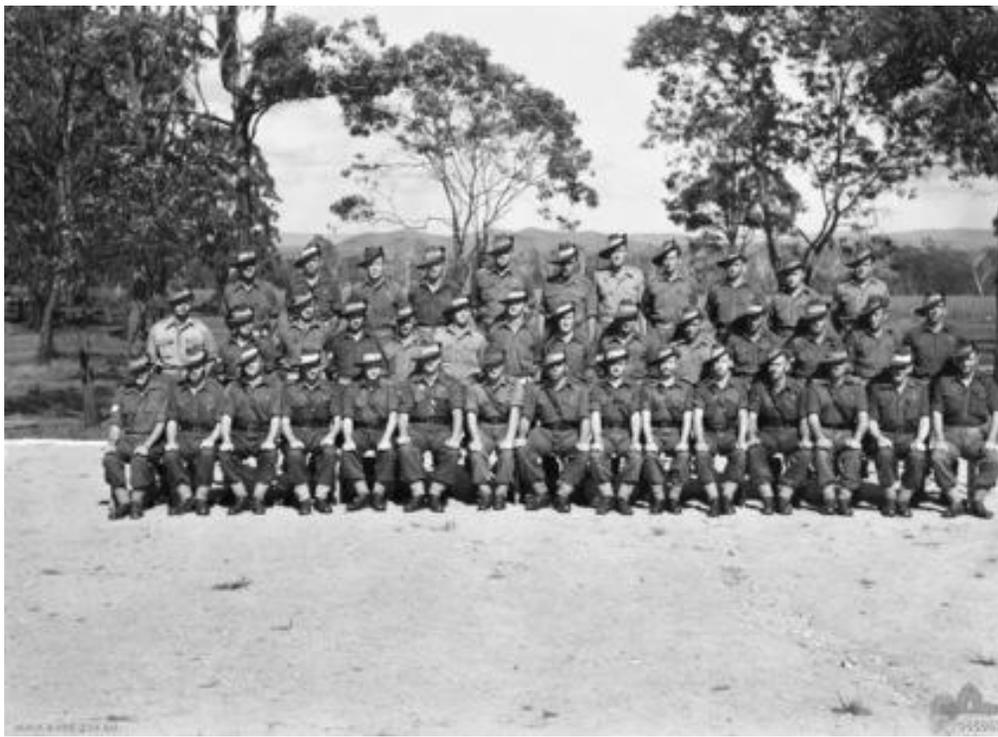
sustaining themselves. On New Guinea, the battalions of the 6th Division were under similar pressures to those affecting the 3rd Division on Bougainville. The men faced similar hardships, such as the weather and supply, and the same enemy. Moreover, “the question of the purpose of the campaign was discussed [among the men], not too favourably.”⁴²

The two battalions examined here are the 2/1st Battalion of the 16th Brigade under Brigadier Roy King, and the 2/11th Battalion of the 19th Brigade under Brigadier James Martin. These battalions demonstrate how the commanding officers arrested declining morale by actively working with their men so that the battalions were able to contribute to the success of the campaign.

3) The 2/1st Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Paul Cullen

Cullen’s 2/1st Battalion had experience in both desert and jungle warfare. In the Middle East, at Bardia and Tobruk, they suffered many losses and in Greece and Crete they lost 43 killed in action and had 511 taken as prisoners of war. When they regrouped in Palestine after the evacuation from Crete, only 70 of the original members of the unit remained. The battalion subsequently went to fight in Papua in 1942, where they suffered more losses at the hands of Japanese forces. Returned to Australia in 1943, the battalion had a long period of relative inactivity, with their main tasks limited to garrison work and training.

⁴² Givney, *The First at war*, p. 391.



The remaining members of the original 2/1st Battalion in Queensland, April 1944, AWM 065862

In order to prepare his battalion for a return to New Guinea and the rigours of jungle fighting, Cullen implemented a rigorous course of physical and mental training and adherence to discipline during the 22 months the battalion was based in Queensland. Cullen was fortunate to be supported by loyal commanders and NCOs, all of whom had been with the battalion since 1939. He respected his men, saying that “it was a marvellous team to be the captain of.”⁴³

In New Guinea morale within the battalion quickly began to suffer. Illness was rife and the dangerous nature of their patrolling began to exact a heavy toll. Unrest began to filter through the ranks. In order to quash the growing disharmony, on 20 January 1945 at Aitape, Cullen called the whole battalion together for an extraordinary meeting. He explained that within the next week they would be undertaking a dangerous operation and that he wanted to clear the air. He said, “There is just one

⁴³ Givney, *The First at war*, p. 235.

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thing that there is a little misunderstanding about, and that is that this is just not a real campaign at all. That is not so ... whatever we are going to do, there is only one standard of doing it, and that is the best.”⁴⁴

This is an excellent example of a battalion depleted by losses being able to successfully re-form and re-group, given the right commander, particularly one with excellent communication and leadership skills. After the war Cullen stated that he didn't actively work to maintain morale; rather, “the battalion just held itself together” as the troops knew he was doing his best.⁴⁵

4) *The 2/11th Battalion – Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green*

This battalion has a similar story to that of the 2/1st. They were highly experienced and had also suffered heavy losses in the Middle East, Greece, and Crete campaigns. After Crete the battalion returned to Australia for garrison duties and then a lengthy period of training in Queensland. However, before their departure to the New Guinea campaign in 1945, the battalion had had no experience of jungle warfare.

In New Guinea, the battalion spent a great deal of their time patrolling along precipitous mountain tracks. They were involved in frequent, arduous encounters against the determined Japanese, in which many were killed or wounded. By May 1945, the battalion was down to 552 men.⁴⁶ Green insisted that the lines of communication be maintained at all times. In the event of a breakdown in the lines of communication at the front line, he ensured company officers would move to the front. Green regularly relayed information about the operation to his men, providing feedback about objectives and targets, ensuring all the men felt included.

Green took command of maintaining good levels of morale by equitably distributing the scarce rations and through the control of supply trains. He consistently

⁴⁴ Address by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Cullen, 20 Jan 1945, 2/1 Bn Unit diary, AWM52 8/3/1/41, appendix F.

⁴⁵ Pratten, *Australian battalion commanders in the Second World War*, p. 263

⁴⁶ Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 353–54.

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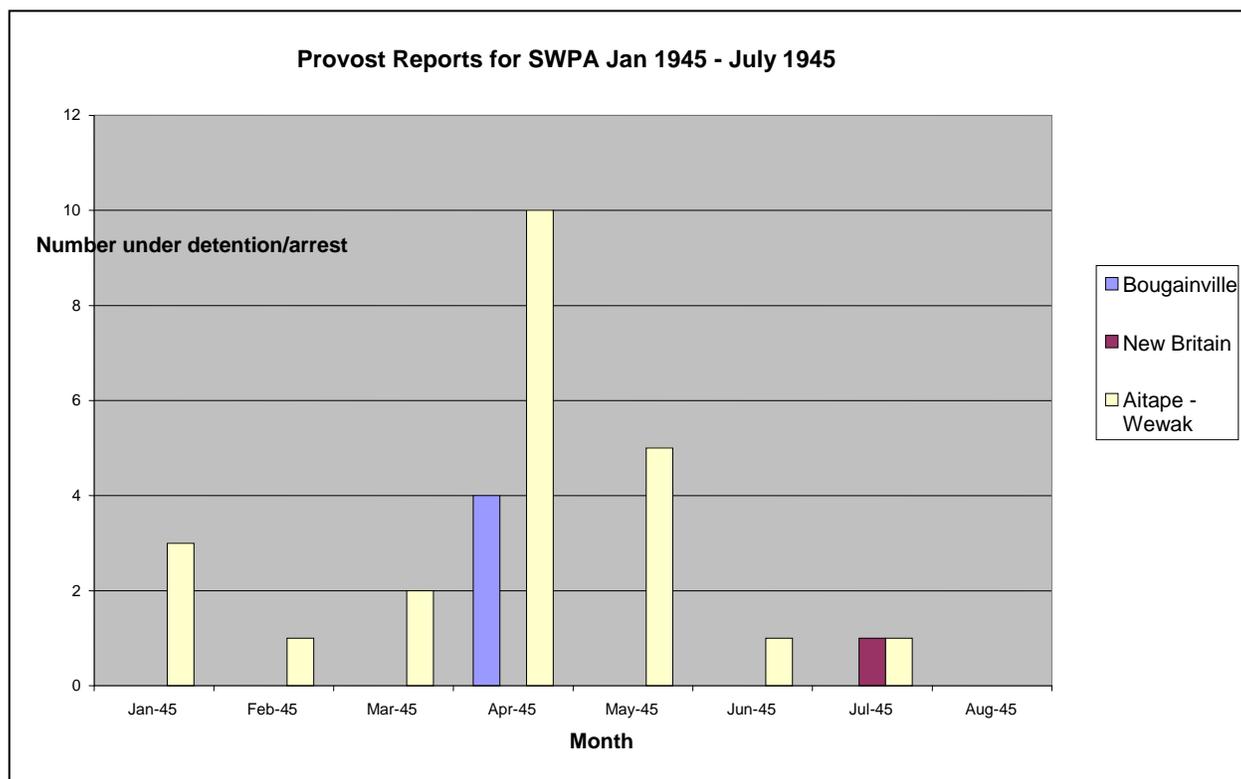
rotated men through the companies, ensuring that there were enough well men in each. Green also constantly worked to have regular supplies of mail, tobacco and other canteen goods available to his battalion, as well as periods of relief where possible. A rigorous adherence to sanitation and the upkeep of health standards was also of the highest importance. He worked tirelessly to improve conditions for his men in this inhospitable environment and managed to maintain high levels of morale, for which he earned his men's respect. This battalion demonstrates that though the troops were adapting to new physical conditions which surely tested their morale, they were well prepared and expertly led by experienced commanders.⁴⁷

Both battalions were highly successful against the Japanese. However, the strain of months of combat and illness began to take its toll on the morale of the whole division. Due to the ineffectiveness of drug treatment for a particularly resistant strain of malaria, there were abnormally high rates of illness within the division, which left battalions seriously under strength. More than 16,000 cases needed hospital treatment in this period.⁴⁸

An examination of Provost Reports for all three divisions during the period November 1944 - August 1945 shows that in April and May of that year, there was an upswing in the number of men detained, particularly from the 6th Division. Without access to the charge sheets, only an assumption can be made to explain this anomaly.

⁴⁷ For an example of the hardships faced by the 2/11th when approaching Wirui Mission in May 1945, see Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 348.

⁴⁸ Long, *The final campaigns*, p. 385.



Source: 2nd AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and CMF (Citizen Military Forces) unit war diaries, 1939–45 War, Provost Reports, AWM52 18/219.

A possible explanation for the growing unrest may be that the extended hardships of jungle warfare had begun to take a physical and mental toll on the troops. This period coincided with the lifting of the ban on the publication of Australian troop movements;⁴⁹ yet this division was afforded very little praise for its work in New Guinea, whereas the landing of the 9th division on Borneo received much publicity, with the Australian press declaring the “gallant” 9th the heroes of the hour. Additionally, this period also coincided with the end of the European war, leaving many Australian soldiers considering the purpose and necessity of the Pacific campaign.

⁴⁹ For a concise assessment of the lifting of the publication ban see, Deane, “The balancing act: the Australian government and the war in the South-West Pacific, 1944-45”.

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However, though there was a spread of low morale within the division, this did not affect operational objectives, and two personnel (Chowne and Kenna) from the division were awarded the Victoria Cross during this campaign.⁵⁰

Conclusion

An examination of the Chief Censor's reports for these three divisions during the period October 1944 to August 1945 reveals that although men complained about the inhospitable conditions, such as the rain, heat and mud, or about the poor quality of rations and the like, these were relative trivialities that waxed and waned in importance.

Problems clearly did exist within the divisions taking part in the SWPA campaigning. However, these can generally be classed as being driven by external factors such as those related to fighting the Japanese, the nature of the terrain and conditions, the problems of relief, recurrent tropical disease, and issues of poor supply. These elements were not exclusive to one locale: they were an omnipresent condition of conducting war in the SWPA. It is acknowledged there were problems of morale in the SWPA, and as time went on the problems began to manifest themselves more frequently. However, it is wrong to categorically state that morale was low; moreover, morale issues did not impact upon operational effectiveness in the South-West Pacific Area campaign.

⁵⁰ <http://www.anzacday.org.au/education/medals/vc/austlist.html>

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