



Kokoda and Beyond: Papua and New Guinea 1942-1945

One-Day Conference Saturday 16 April 2016
Pompey Elliott Memorial Hall, 403 Camberwell Road, Melbourne

Keynote Speaker – Dr Adrian Threlfall
author of *Jungle Warriors*

Register at www.mhhv.org.au



The Proceedings of the Conference held at the Pompey Elliott Memorial Hall, Camberwell RSL, Victoria on 16 April 2016

In early 1942 the Japanese set their sights on capturing Papua and New Guinea.

A series of defensive battles at Milne Bay and along the Kokoda Track, as well as the naval victories in the Coral Sea and at Midway Island put the Japanese on the back foot.

Then followed a series of Allied offensive operations that drove the Japanese back and provided the springboard for General Douglas MacArthur's successful advance into the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines.

This one day conference examines this critical period of Australia's military history. This conference will include fresh analysis and insights from a highly informed and relevant range of historians and veterans.

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The Utterly Unknown: How the Australian Army Adapted to Jungle Warfare 1941-45

By Dr Adrian Threlfall, Lecturer, Victoria University

Combat operations in the South West Pacific Area campaign from 1942-45, whether on the sea, in the air or on the ground, involved some marked differences to the combat Australian forces had been involved in during the first three years of the war. They required changes at every level of command, from General Thomas Blamey and Land Headquarters down to the privates and corporals in dozens of different infantry battalions in the jungles, swamps and mountains of the islands to our north.

So how did the Australian Army adapt to jungle warfare in the Second World War? How did an army of approximately 2,800 regulars and 70,000 inadequately trained militia soldiers in 1939 become, by 1944, an army of 464,000? Not only was this a massive increase in numbers, it was the first time, as historian Albert Palazzo has argued, that the Australian Army 'had developed on its own an organisation expressly for conditions in which its forces would fight'. Between 1939 and 1942 the Australian Army's structure mirrored that of the British Army, which made interoperability much easier in the North African or Mediterranean Theatres, when serving alongside other Commonwealth forces, all of which were structured along similar lines. But after 7 December 1941, it quickly became apparent that change was necessary.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Photo: June 1941, Tobruk, Libya

How hard had that transition from the desert to the jungle been? What changes had needed to be made? Decades ago the books of authors such as John Laffin and Peter Firkins with their tales of brave Anzacs had captured the imagination of many readers. Laffin's *Anzacs at War* with the blurb 'the epic story of the battle exploits that have made Australia and New Zealand a fighting legend since the tragedy of Gallipoli' was probably one starting point. But as I started looking more deeply I began to realise just how extraordinary this process had been.

And I would find myself agreeing with the esteemed British military historian Sir Michael Howard, who in 1973 said and I will quote: This is an aspect of military science needs to be studied above all others in the Armed forces: the capacity to adapt oneself to the utterly unpredictable, the utterly unknown. I believe it is correct to say that what the Australian military forces did in the SWPA campaign was adapting to the utterly unpredictable and the utterly unknown. Although, while I would not call myself a revisionist I must admit that I found it difficult to believe some of those Australian authors who claimed that adaptation to the jungle had been rapid or seamless and that Australians were natural-born jungle warriors who quickly beat the Japanese at their own game.

Two quotes, both from authors and historians who I admire, one from 1991 and one from 2003, although far more nuanced than the “boys own” style of books I just mentioned, sum up this attitude. The first is from Lex McAulay in his *To the Bitter End*: ‘The battles of Buna, Gona and Sanananda 1942-43 were a benchmark in the life of the Australian Army, and set it on the road to mastery of jungle warfare, from which it has barely deviated for the next 30 years’. And the second is from Peter Brune’s *A Bastard of a Place*: ‘some of the veterans of Papua were destined to be amongst the first instructors at Canungra and the instigators of a reputation in jungle fighting that sees Australia at the forefront of such campaigning to this day’. On one level I think many of us would agree with those sentiments and it is not my intention to attack or defame those authors, but they still leave questions unanswered.

To set out how I believe the 2nd AIF adapted to the utterly unknown I will focus upon the 6, 7 and 9 Divisions of the 2nd Australian Imperial Force. They were the only formations to serve in North Africa and the Mediterranean Theatre between 1939 and 1942 and who then returned to Australia to fight again in the islands to our north against the Japanese Imperial Army. It is they who had to make that transition, shake the sand out of their boots and fight a new and unknown enemy in an undreamt of environment. That they managed to do this so quickly is an incredible achievement, but it was far more difficult and far more nuanced than many authors would have us believe. As they were the first of the divisions to return to Australia in early 1942 and the first to fight the Japanese I will focus on 7 Division for the next few minutes. I know 8 Division met the Japanese first in Malaya, Timor, Ambon and New Britain and that the 39th Militia Battalion held them on the Kokoda Track in July 1942, but as I mentioned earlier, it is that transition across theatres, across terrains and climates that was so complex and multi-faceted which I am going to try and focus upon.

And the enormity of that transition is brought into focus when we think of the quote by US Army General John Galvin (who was NATO SACEUR Supreme Allied Commander, Europe from 1987-92) nearly 35 years ago:

‘We tend to invent for ourselves a comfortable vision of war, a theatre with battlefields we know, conflict that fits our understanding of strategy and tactics, a combat environment that is consistent and predictable, fightable with the resources we have...we arrange in our minds a war we can comprehend on our own terms, usually with an enemy who looks like us and acts like us’.

This is just as true of the Australian Army in 1941 as it was of the US Army during the Vietnam War – which is what Gen Galvin was talking about. Most of us are guilty of this tendency, not just the military. To understand a new situation we compare it to something that we already have an understanding of, something familiar, something we can relate to.

Training in Australia: 7 Division training priorities and issues

And I would argue that this was one of the reasons that the training period of March to August 1942 was largely wasted. After 7 Division arrived home they had a multiplicity of challenges to deal with. These challenges were as follows:

1. From January to June 1942 a series of military setbacks occurred throughout the region and the return of 7 Division was met with a wave of relief in Australia. Here finally was a battle-hardened formation that would provide the first line of defence against what many people at the time believed was an imminent Japanese invasion. As such the division spent too much time preparing to defend Australia and too little time preparing to fight in Papua or New Guinea.
2. Fitness was, of course, deemed vital for the hard combat which was sure to come. As such route marches were frequent as were training exercises in lightly timbered terrain in northern NSW or Southern Queensland. None of these adequately prepared 7 Division for Milne Bay or the Kokoda Track.
3. As the most recently completed campaign, any lessons from Malaya were eagerly sought by 7 Division and others in Australia. Unfortunately General Gordon Bennett and the lessons he brought back from Malaya were of little use, although many units developed training programs based on the supposed lessons. These ideas would be quickly discarded once Japanese forces were encountered in August and September.
4. During training in Australia between March and August at company, battalion and brigade level multiple reports were written and suggestions made with regard to weapons, vehicles, webbing, clothing, food and most importantly, tactics, training and doctrine. Almost universally they were ignored or rejected. One infantry battalion after determining that more automatic weapons were going to be crucial in the close quarters battle of the jungle approached a nearby field artillery regiment which had just been issued with 42 Thompson sub-machine guns and managed to convince their CO to swap them for 42 .303 rifles. Some other lessons were unofficially adopted by the units but most were not and many of these were then validated in action. Opportunities were missed and men lost their lives because of this.
5. Although the historian Hank Nelson has categorically proven that the Kokoda Track was one of the best and most well-used footpaths in PNG, it is clear that 7 Division had little knowledge of the country they were about to be deployed to. And in the five months that they were training in Australia, not one member of the division was sent to Port Moresby to see what the terrain is like. The militia units based in Port Moresby were mostly used as navvies or service troops and had little chance to send patrols up the track although some did go and wrote reports, in June and July. 7 Division never received those reports.



Photo: 2/14th Bn, Kokoda Track

If those lessons had been heeded then the first units of 7 Division would not have looked like these men of the Victorian 2/14th Battalion when they arrived in Papua in late August 1942. They could be preparing for action in Syria or Tobruk. At the simplest level a fiery exchange between Australian war correspondent Chester Wilmot and Australian Army Commander General Thomas Blamey over camouflage uniforms sums up what General Galvin was talking about and also demonstrates the problem of inflexibility, being close-minded and not able to concede that you might be wrong. At a press conference on 13 September 1942, as 21 Brigade, 7 Division was being forced back along the Kokoda Track towards Port Moresby, Blamey responded to Wilmot that camouflage uniforms were not necessary as 'khaki had been designed in India as the ideal camouflage for the jungle; and that he had no evidence that this jungle was any different from that in India'. Blamey was falling into the same trap that Galvin accused the US military of doing during the Vietnam War and many militaries have done throughout history. Similar sentiments to Blamey's were echoed by other senior officers in 1942.

Thankfully that resistance to change epitomised by Blamey's comments was relatively short lived, but sadly, many hundreds of Australian soldiers were killed and thousands wounded before the army admitted that change was necessary. These changes were bottom up not top down. They occurred at the unit level and below; that is infantry battalions, artillery field regiments and cavalry and armoured squadrons and regiments. As the men on the ground experienced the tropical conditions of Papua and New Guinea they made changes and once they met the Japanese these changes became more numerous and self-evident. It was clear that battalion and company commanders were frequently unable to see their men or enemy positions so trust in the ability of junior leaders to carry out and interpret their superiors' orders was critical. As it became clear that tactics from campaigns in North Africa and the Middle East were causing casualties, battalions changed them. IMT, infantry minor tactics had to change. Section and platoon formations had to change. Listening posts, FDLs, night defensive positions, all of these had to change in the vastly different terrain of the South West

Pacific. And nowhere was the problem of the new terrain more visible than with regard to the employment of the supporting arms, artillery, armour and also engineers.



Photo: Sanananda, Jan 1943

But it was really only after Kokoda and the Beachheads of Buna, Gona and Sanananda that ‘after action reports’ and ‘lessons learnt’ documents could be collated, discussed and argued over before they began to appear in training manuals and filtered through the whole army. Sadly many of these lessons had been discovered in training, passed on to higher authority, either by 8 Division in Malaya before 7 December 1941, or by 6 Division on Ceylon between March and July 1942 or by 7 Division in Southern Queensland at the same time and they had not been acted upon or were rejected outright. A case in point was a report written on Ceylon in July 1942 stating that in thick jungle conditions, where visibility was reduced and action therefore unfolded at close range (under ten metres), there was a need for more automatic weapons, particular sub-machine guns. In the margin of this report a handwritten note stated “GOC AIF Ceylon does not concur”. Thus in the final version of this report the recommendation was not included. As the Victorians of 39th Battalion and 2/14th Battalion would discover only a few weeks later, automatic weapons were crucial in jungle warfare, as the Japanese woodpecker machine guns cut their defences to pieces.

You can argue that all big institutions are resistant to change, whether a bank, a government department, a university, a motor company or an army and you’d be correct. We’ve all heard it; our way of doing things works; it has worked for many years or decades; why throw the baby out with the bathwater? But when those other institutions fail to adapt to a changing environment or a new competitor, jobs can be lost, a business collapses, profits decrease, but

as Elizabeth Kier, an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Washington University succinctly argued in her book about British and French military doctrine between 1919 and 1939, 'if an army fails to adequately adapt to a new form of warfare, there is not an auxiliary army ready to assume its place when the unprepared army is defeated'. More importantly, failure to prepare for new challenges in combat results in the death of soldiers and in the worst case scenario, defeat. Ideally the military would be unnecessary and we'd solve international problems with negotiation and diplomacy but until then the ADF must be prepared for deployment and to sustain casualties. But losses must be reduced as far as is humanly possible by better training, tactics and doctrine. Unfortunately this was not the case in the early period of the Pacific War.

Thankfully, by early 1943 changes were happening and soon the Australian Army was an efficient jungle warfare fighting force. So proficient that the US Army and the armies of many allied nations sent their troops to train at the Jungle Warfare Training Centre, known to many as Canungra. By 1945 no army on earth had the jungle warfare ability of the Australian Army. Those in higher authority had listened to the men on the ground and changes had been put in place. Thus by 1945 the comments by McAulay and Brune were largely correct and it is thanks to the combat arms of the Australian Army that this was so.