

**55TH/53RD  
AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BATTALION**

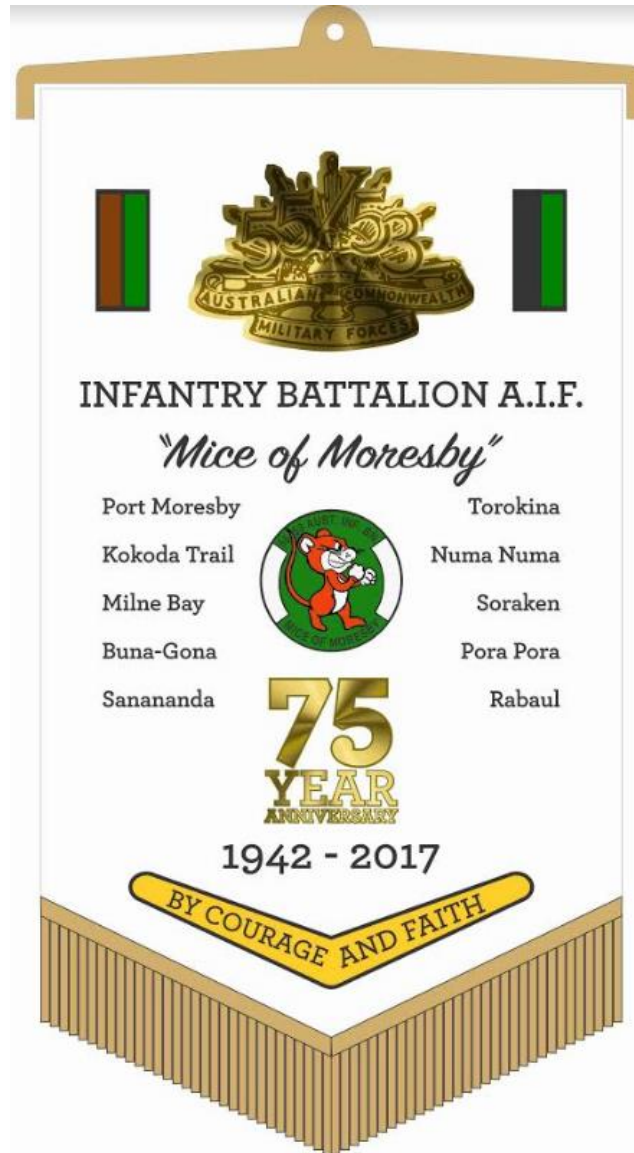


In honour of those who served  
**LEST WE FORGET**





Produced for Saturday, 2 December 2017 by the 55th/53rd Battalion Association  
on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Sanananda campaign  
honouring those who served in the 55th/53rd Australian Infantry Battalion.



SOUTH WEST PACIFIC AREA 1939 - 1946

PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA 1942 – 43  
Port Moresby – Milne Bay – Kokoda Track – Sanananda – Gona

BOUGAINVILLE 1944 – 1945  
Pearl Ridge – Soraken Plantation

NEW BRITAIN 1945 – 1946  
Rabaul

All effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this document,  
but you may have information that can be added.

If so, please contact a member of the 55th/53rd Battalion Association.

(REVISED MARCH 2018)





*55/53 Aust. Inf. Bn. Association  
("The Mice of Moresby")*



*"Animo Et Fide"  
Courage & Faith)*



*'Esque Ad Finem'  
(All the way to the end)*

We are pleased to welcome you and present to you this booklet at the 2017 anniversary luncheon of the 55th/53rd Battalion Association.

Today we celebrate all veterans of the 55th/53rd Australian Infantry Battalion and commemorate their achievements at Sanananda on the 75th anniversary of the battle that commenced on 7 December 1942.

The soldiers that served in the Battalion volunteered for service from all over Australia, from varied walks of life, and from other nations. Together they reinforced that wonderful Aussie concept of mateship.

They have our eternal gratitude for their courage, spirit and dedication in serving Australia and keeping our country a safe and free nation - a legacy that we so gratefully continue to enjoy today.

There have been many commemorative re-unions over past years but we trust that this one today will be notable for you through its solemnity at the Cenotaph and the contribution of our special guests. It is our great privilege to be in their company today.

The Battalion Association prepared this booklet for you as a souvenir and wherever possible you may be able to provide material for its electronic counterpart. The plan is to create a website where the information will be placed so that it will never be lost, but be available to our children and their children, and so on. Our hope is that they share the knowledge that we have today recorded and any that we gain in future.

Lest we forget.

Two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature is 'Arthur Perry' and the second is 'Peter Dowling'.

Arthur Perry                      Peter Dowling  
President                          Secretary  
55th/53rd Battalion Association  
2 December 2017





Veterans left to right: Ray Gentles; Fred Denny; Frank Rogers; and Louis Collett.

### OVERVIEW OF THE 55th/53rd BATTALION in WWII

By December 1942 the Japanese had been driven back from the mountains into their garrisons at Buna, Gona and Sanananda. The linked 55th/53rd, now 527 strong, was airlifted from Port Moresby and went into action at Sanananda alongside the 49th (Queensland) Battalion and the U.S. 126th Regiment. In one day, 7th December, the Battalion lost eight officers and 122 other ranks in bitter fighting in the impregnable swamps - the majority of these in the first half hour. Casualties steadily mounted and the Battalion again attacked.

The 7th Division Headquarter situation report on 7th December praised the efforts of the 49th and 55/53rd Battalions - to quote:-"Elements of the US troops under command are performing a block on the track between companies of the 55/53rd Bn --- 49th and 55/53 Battalions made very fine performance."

After the Sananada and Gona campaign the Battalion returned to Queensland, and was involved in training and guarding vital installations at Ravenshoe, Townsville and Brisbane until November 1944, when they went overseas once more, this time to Bougainville, one of the Solomon Islands. They were in the 11th Brigade along with the 26th and 31st Battalions, both militia units.

The 55th/53rd Battalion, after the Japanese surrender on 8th September 1945, moved to the large Japanese base at Rabaul, New Britain, where it carried out occupational duties until returning to Australia for disbandment in May 1946.



# The structure of the 55th/53rd Battalion

## Why 55th/53rd?

1 August 1937 – 53rd/3rd Battalions become 3rd Battalion. The 55th Battalion becomes the 55th/53rd Battalion.

November 1941 – The battalions were delinked to become the 53rd and 55th Battalions (Militia).

26 October 1942 – The battalions were linked to become 55th/53rd Battalion (AIF). The Commanding Officer (CO) of the 55th Battalion became the CO of the 55th/53rd Battalion, and brought along him with much of his HQ and officers. The Infantry Museum's understanding (having also seen it mentioned in Australian Army Orders) is that the battalion with the Headquarters becomes the first listed in the name, ie. 55th/53rd, 29th/22nd Battalion, 23rd/21st Battalion and currently 8th/7th Royal Victorian Regiment.

(source: *Australian Army Historical Unit, Department of Defence, Canberra, ACT, August, 2017*)

## An historical overview

The 55th/53rd Battalion was formed briefly in 1919 in Belgium following the cessation of hostilities through the amalgamation of the 55th and 53rd Battalions as men were transferred out of these units as part of the demobilisation of the Australian Imperial Force. As this process reached completion, however, the battalion was disbanded shortly afterwards. In 1921, both the 55th and 53rd Battalions were re-raised as part of the Citizen Forces, in the Sydney, New South Wales, region part of a reorganisation of Australia's part-time military forces.

After the First World War the defence of the Australian mainland lay with the part-time soldiers of the Citizens Military Force (CMF), also known as the Militia. The Militia was organized to maintain the structure of the First AIF and kept the same numerical designations. Consequently, Militia units were also known by the name of their shire. Thus Sydney's 53rd Infantry Battalion was the West Sydney Regiment and the 55th Infantry Battalion was the "New South Wales Rifle Regiment". During the 1930s, little was spent on defence and the Militia had few volunteers. Thus, in 1937 the 55th merged with the 53rd Battalion, forming the 55th/53rd Infantry Battalion. However, it was separated again in October 1941.

While both battalions served in Papua in 1942, the 55th and 53rd had very different histories. The 55th demonstrated good potential for active fighting. However, the 53rd did not fare well when it went into action for the first time along the Kokoda Trail. It was thereafter disparagingly referred to as "that mob".

## 11th Australian Infantry Brigade

In December 1941 the 11th Brigade reformed under Brigadier F.R. North CB, MC, ED, and comprised of 26th Battalion, 31st Battalion and 51st Battalion. In the ensuing period 42nd Battalion transferred to 29 Brigade, the 11th Brigade moved to Cairns and 31st Battalion and 51st Battalion linked as the 31st/51st Battalion. In July 1943 the Brigade embarked for Merauke, Dutch New Guinea, Commanded by Brigadier J.R. Stevenson CBE, DSO, ED. The Brigade returned to Strathpine in April 1944 for retraining and was reinforced by 53rd/55th Battalion. In January 1945 they sailed for Bougainville under 3rd Division where 31st/51st Battalion fought the Battle of Porton Plantation on 8 June 1945.

## 14th Australian Infantry Brigade

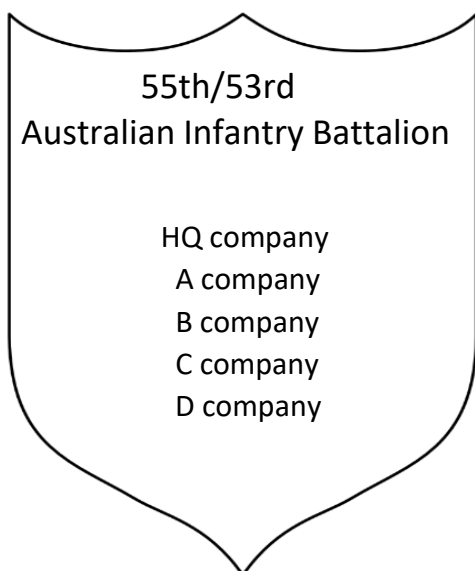
In September 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, the brigade was mobilised for war service and Brigadier Walter Smith was appointed commander. With a strength of around 3,500 men, it consisted of the 3rd, 34th and 55th/53rd Battalions and was assigned to the 2nd Division. As a result of the provisions of the *Defence Act*, which initially precluded units of the Militia from being deployed outside Australian territory, throughout the early years of the war the brigade was used as a garrison force, defending mainland Australia and providing training to recruits called up under the provisions of the compulsory training scheme, which was reinstated in January 1940. Periods of continuous training were undertaken around Bathurst, New South Wales, initially before the brigade was moved to Newcastle, New South Wales, to defend against a possible invasion following Japan's entry into the war.



The invasion never came and in May 1942, the brigade – consisting of the 3rd and 36th Battalions and the recently delinked 55th – was sent to Port Moresby to bolster the garrison there. At the time, the brigade was assessed as being only partially trained. The 3rd Battalion undertook defensive duties around Port Moresby initially, but was later committed to the fighting along the Kokoda Track in September and October 1942 undertaking patrols and taking part in several actions including the Battle of Ioribaiwa, the Second Battle of Eora Creek – Templeton's Crossing and the Battle of Oivi–Gorari. Later, the battalion was committed to the assault on the Japanese beachheads around Buna–Gona.

The 55th Battalion subsequently served in New Guinea from May to October 1942, undertaking garrison duties around Port Moresby and Milne Bay before carrying out patrols along the Goldie River Valley throughout September, when the 14th Brigade was tasked with keeping lines of communication secure. In October 1942, they were amalgamated once again with the 53rd and together they were assigned to the 30th Brigade. In early 1943, this battalion was reassigned to the 14th Brigade before returning to Australia; however, in April 1943 they were assigned to the 11th Brigade with whom they remained for the rest of the war. The 36th Battalion, which had replaced the 34th, was assigned to the brigade between 8 April 1941 and 14 December 1942 and then again between 3 January 1943 and 24 April 1943, and undertook patrolling operations before later being reassigned to the 30th Brigade, with whom they took part in the fighting around Sanananda, before rejoining the 14th Brigade when it was transferred north to Gona where they briefly took part in the fighting there throughout January 1943.

Other units that were assigned to the brigade around this time were the 49th Battalion (11–21 August 1942), and the 39th Battalion (18–27 September 1942). Its divisional assignments were changed a number of times after the outbreak of the war as it was moved from the 2nd Division to New Guinea Force in May 1942, the 7th Division in September 1942, the 11th Division in February 1943 and then finally to the 4th Division in March 1943. By April 1943, the 14th Brigade had returned to Australia, and on 11 September 1943 it was disbanded, as manpower shortages required the Australian Army to merge or disband a number of Militia formations to reallocate resources elsewhere. Upon disbandment, the brigade consisted of two battalions, the 55th/53rd and the 36th. The brigade's final commander was Brigadier Ian Fullarton, who took over from Smith on 31 March 1943.

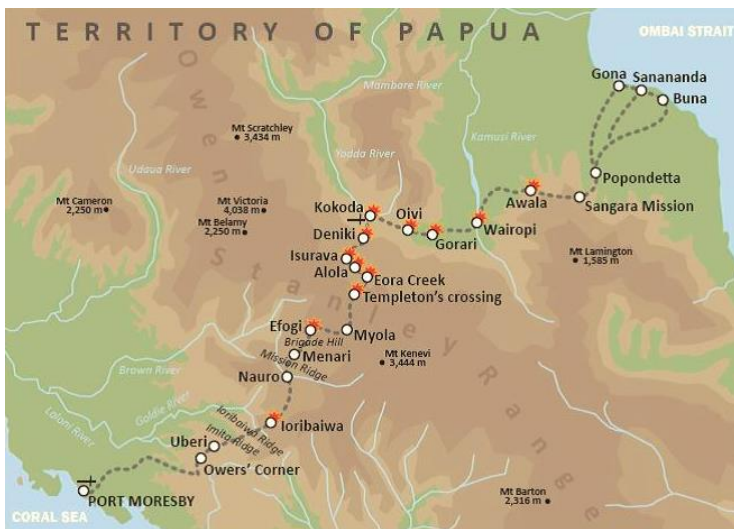


In emulation of the Germans, the Japanese established a program of utilising Tokyo Radio to transmit daily a short wave propaganda program, broadcast in English, copying Berlin Radio's Lord Haw Haw. *Tokyo Rose* was the voice. It was the evening of Wednesday, 7 January that we heard her announce that Port Moresby had been attacked by Japanese forces and occupied that day. It was shortly after this, again following the German lead, that she referred to us and our situation as like to that of the *Rats of Tobruk* burrowing into the ground for our protection; but we were mere mice, *The Mice of Moresby*. We reacted by being quite proud of our appellation, that we should be regarded as important enough to be given special mention, that we were considered to be worth coupling our garrison with the defenders of Tobruk.

Gordon French: The Mice Of Moresby  
<http://amusine.typepad.com/war/the-mice-of-moresby.html>

The term *Mice of Moresby* was directed at the entire garrison force in Port Moresby by Tokyo Rose. It included AIF, RAAF and US service personnel.





## LITTLE SNIPPETS

A contingent from Newcastle travelled to Glebe to enlist in the Army at the Glebe scout hall.

On 13 March 1996, some 14 members of the Association met to discuss the development of the then newly formed 55th/53rd Battalion Association Support Group. On 25 April 1996 a memorial service was held at the St John's church at Glebe.

The 3 December 1999 commemorative luncheon was held at the Petersham RSL, the first time outside of the Sydney CBD.

Continuing a tradition that goes back to the 1920s, an annual church parade was held on Sunday 7 May 2000 at St Johns Church at Glebe. The ladies church congregation provided morning tea.

Not all Battalion members were volunteers – some were conscripts.



55th/53rd Battalion Association  
Comprised of ex-servicemen

Established in the 1950s  
Met at Chatswood, Five Dock, and  
later at Auburn RSL

----- link with Glebe and St Johns -----

Presidents:

Alec Bell, OAM and editor of *Orderly  
Room Gossip*  
Peter Wright

1994 – first edition of *Orderly Room*  
distributed.

2001, 7 December – the annual  
general meeting was at the NSW  
Leagues Club, from 11:30 hrs.  
At the same time, a luncheon was  
held at Hamilton RSL.

### 55/53 BATTALION

A meeting of the 55/53 Battalion  
Association will be held on Tuesday,  
August 6, at 7.30 p.m., at the Maccabean  
Hall, Darlinghurst.

SMH, 24 July, 1946

### 55/53 Battalion Association

The 55/53 Battalion Associ-  
ation will hold its annual re-  
union at 8 p.m. on December  
3 at the 17/18 Infantry Bat-  
talion Drill Hall, Stanley  
Street, Chatswood.

Members will assemble at  
the Cenotaph for a ceremony  
at 6 p.m. on December 7.

SMH, Fri, 19 November, 1954

Association re-unions were for the  
men; the women's auxiliary had  
separate luncheons.

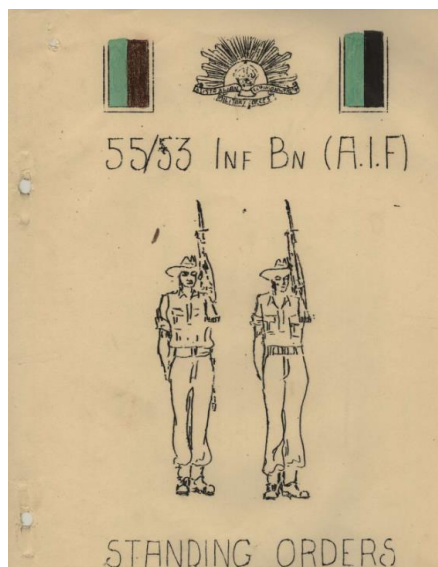
Re-unions were held at Mittagong,  
Newcastle and at Wollongong

55th/53rd Battalion Support Group  
later the Battalion Association

Comprised family members  
and other supporters

Presidents:

Fred Travis  
Peter Wright  
Clyde Parsons  
Arthur Perry



After approval of the RSL, the  
Support Group amalgamated with the Association.

25 April, 1986 was the first march of the combined association.

1973 Members self-funded a trip to Port Moresby and to Sanananda.

In September 1996 the Support Group acquired the Sanananda station on  
the Kokoda Track Memorial  
Walkway at Rhodes. It provided  
sponsorship of in excess of \$3,000  
for this station.

16 January 1998 – a cabinet arrives  
at Glebe library to store service  
souvenirs. The cabinet was made  
by prisoners in a NSW prison.

1996 - Harry Clancy made a wood  
carving for the memorabilia  
cabinet at Glebe.



### COLOURS FOR ALL RACES

- 1 SILVER-BLUE STRIPES—MAUVE CAP
- 2 MAUVE-SILVER HOOPS—GREEN CAP
- 3 BUFF-GOLD STRIPES—MAUVE CAP
- 4 MAUVE AND SILVER HALVES—BUFF CAP
- 5 SILVER-BLUE HOOPS—MAUVE CAP
- 6 BUFF AND PURPLE STRIPES—SILVER CAP
- 7 BLUE AND PURPLE HALVES—BUFF CAP
- 8 SILVER AND BLUE HALVES—BLUE CAP
- 9 GREEN-ORANGE STRIPES—BLUE CAP
- 10 ALL MAUVE—SILVER CAP

### FLAG INDICATORS

White Flag	Weight Correct
Red Flag	Process Failed
Blue Flag	Empty Hurdle
Green Flag	Process Disturbed
White Flag Down	Horses in Starters Hands (Tote Closed)

SCRATCHINGS: All scratchings 1 hour before race.

TOTE OPENS AT ONE HOUR

GATE OPENINGS: Personnel will cross track only at special openings. Openings close 10 minutes before start of each race.

JOCKEY'S ROOM AND ENCLOSURE: Out of Bounds to ALL ranks.

MEDICAL POST: Marked by RED CROSS

TOTE RULES:

Five Shilling Tote.  
 Correct Account only accepted at selling windows.  
 Special window for all bets over £2 (Win only).  
 Late Dividends Paid.  
 Saddle cloth numbers agree with tote betting numbers.

STABLES: OUT OF BOUNDS

## Rabaul Army Race Club

# SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

## FINAL MEETING

### Rabaul Racecourse

#### SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1946

Patron: Major General B. M. Morris, DSO.  
 President: Brig. R. G. H. Irving, OBE.  
 Secretary: Capt. F. J. Duxal  
 Treasurer: Capt. K. Kenneally

Executive Committee:  
 Col. A. J. Stewart  
 Lt-Col. A. G. Cameron, DSO  
 Lt-Col. H. H. McDonald, ED  
 Lt-Col. E. Barnes  
 Lt. Col. R. W. Myward

Judges:  
 Capt. J. Thornton  
 Capt. F. Fallon  
 Capt. G. Cook

Stipendiary Stewards:  
 Maj. J. A. Wilson  
 Capt. Kiley  
 Sgt. N. Clinton

Starter: Lt. R. Diamond  
 Marshall: Lt. A. Lidgerwood  
 Clerk Of Course: Pro. P. McNuff.  
 Auditors: Capt. G. Jones, Capt. G. L. Dunn.

1 RACE 0900 Hours <b>Kokopo Plate</b>					2 RACE 0935 Hours <b>Karavia Gift</b>					3 RACE 1010 Hours <b>Kabakaul Stakes</b>				
No.	NAME	OWNER	JOCKEY	Hurdle No.	No.	NAME	OWNER	JOCKEY	Hurdle No.	No.	NAME	OWNER	JOCKEY	Hurdle No.
1	RABBLE	55/53 Inf Bn	Sapper—Bounds	Weight	1	RUNAWAY	22 Inf Bn	Horse—Germany	Weight	1	GOOD NEWS	59/53 Inf Bn	Sapper—Gulson Gold	Weight
2	BIG HILL	55/53 Inf Bn	U.S.—Cash	Weight	2	RESTRICTION	22 Inf Bn	Closed Camp—Bounds	Weight	2	HIGH FLYING	12 Adv W Craft Sec	Young Thinks—Gin Sling	Weight
3	DISCHARGE	12 Adv W Craft Sec	June—New Britain	Weight	3	FOUR X	14 Bn Sig Sec	Thirst—Bottle	Weight	3	RUMOURS	31/51 Inf Bn	Galah—Orderly Room	Weight
4	RED LAD	37/12 Inf Bn	Mistake—Bleedie	Weight	4	MANHUNT NOIC (Navy)	Process—Christman	Weight	4	AUDACITY	22 Inf Bn	Young Man—Pace	Weight	
5	DIFFERENTIAL	22 Inf Bn	Accident—Alignment	Weight	5	FINANCE	DFD	Civilian—Taxation	Weight	5	LADY LOU	11 Div Diagonal	Mistake—Lulu	Weight
6	BALDRINE	116 A.G.H.	Industry—Research	Weight	5	SLY GROC	5 Mob Laundry	Battle—Back Door	Weight	6	HOMER	29/46 Inf Bn	High Points—Garrison	Weight
7	FOND EMBRACE	2 Sqn Dep. Pl	Cudgill—Wiley	Weight	7	DISAPPOINTED	8 MD Prov	Soldiers—Points	Weight	7	MIS-TUSSI	18 ACD	Dumper—Bottle	Weight
8	TOUGH BABY	29/46 Inf Bn	Papego—Spillive	Weight	8	SILVER	26 Inf Bn	Change—Ten Bob	Weight	8	HOME SICK	12 Adv W 8 Sqn	Low Priority—Australia	Weight
9	CYDRIC	5 Mob Laundry	Edgar—Army	Weight	9	RED FLAME	8 MD Sig Sec	Fuse—Floort Circuit	Weight	9	KEWPIE'S CHOICE	26 Inf Bn	Stuffins—Rag Doll	Weight
10	ROAN GOLD	37/12 Inf Bn	Prospector—Lucif	Weight	10	SCROUNGER	1 Ed Coy	After Dark—Bounds	Weight					
1.....	2.....	3.....			1.....	2.....	3.....			1.....	2.....	3.....		
TOTE:					TOTE:					TOTE:				

The Glebe Society Bulletin



### WHO ARE THE MICE OF MORESBY?

The Mice of Moresby are the men of the 55/53 Australian Infantry Battalion Association, and the formal handover of their memorabilia to the Glebe Library took place at the Library on 24 April. It was hosted by the Friends of Benledi, and dignitaries and members of the Association and the Glebe community were welcomed by President Alex Bell, and Margaret Whittaker, the Glebe Librarian.

Kris Cruden, the Mayor of Leichhardt, said the Municipality was honoured to receive and house the material which included letters, photographs, medals, uniforms, ration packs, the Padre's stole and communion set, currency, newspapers, etc. etc. which would be of great benefit to researchers and historians.

Rusty Priest, the State President of the RSL, making a presentation to two sons of a veteran who had made the memorabilia cabinet, said it would also benefit young people who knew of war only from television which glorified it - "the veterans" he said, "abhorred war", and the material may prompt them to ask questions of those who had taken part.

Max Solling told us that both the 55th and the 53rd Battalions had strong Glebe connections and many who enlisted for overseas service did so at the Forest Lodge Drill Hall in Hereford Street; many others came from Balmain, Annandale, Rozelle, Leichhardt and Lilyfield. The last surviving Gallipoli veteran in NSW is 101 year old Fred Kelly who was a member of the 53rd Battalion.

The Mice of Moresby were generous financial supporters of the restoration of the Glebe Diggers Memorial in Foley Park, and members have attended all the early morning Anzac services there since they resumed five years ago. They intended to be there again at 7.30 am on 25 April, 1998, before going into town for the March.

Why are you called the 'Mice of Moresby?' I asked Warwick Davis and Trevor Harper, two Association members. Well, they said, it was Lord Haw Haw who coined the term 'the Rats of Tobruk' referring to Australian soldiers in the Middle East who were cornered by the German army in a particular battle; and it was Tokyo Rose who disparagingly called the 55/53 men their little brothers, 'the Mice of Moresby', scurrying around in their holes while under attack from the Japanese army. The 55/53 men decided to ignore the insult, and to adopt the name with pride.

Bobbie Burke



The memorial at Dr H J Foley Rest Park, Glebe, adjacent to St John's Church. In the mid-1980s the memorial's busts of a soldier and a sailor were stolen, but were returned. In 1987 vandals removed the busts, and destroyed the head of the angel above the front portal and spray-painted over the names on the roll of honour.

The Association donated \$500 to assist with its restoration.



63. The following letter from GOC 2 Aust Corps, Lt-Gen S.B.SAVIGE to Comd 11 Aust Inf Bde, Brig J.R.STEVENSON will be brought to the notice of all troops.


" Now that the 55/53 Bn has been relieved in the PEARL RIDGE area, I would like to express my appreciation for the all round splendid job this Bn did while garrisoning that area. I had heard unpleasant remarks about this Bn in the past. This had no effect on me whatever as my experience over two wars has fixed an opinion that all Australian Troops are good.

It may be that a unit has struck a bad bit of luck, which is always round the corner with the best of units. It may be that a unit has been given a task unjustly, and without the wherewithal to obtain success; but that does not indicate that the men of the unit are not all right.

I reserved my opinion until these lads had been in action. Their job of work proved my contention that the Australian soldier can and will deliver the goods always, providing he is given a reasonable break.

The work the 55/53 Bn did in the forward area along the NUMA NUMA Trail is equal to the best yet done by any other Bn on the Island, and I congratulate them on a fine job of work. If I may be permitted to use an expression familiar to all troops, I would say "The 55/53 Bn will do me".

I would appreciate any arrangements you can make to let officers, NCOs and men of the 55/53 Bn know the high value I place on them. They, themselves, have created this value. Good luck to them all."

  
Capt  
Adjt 55/53 Aust Inf Bn

an "all-round splendid job". "The 55th/53rd Battalion will do me".

Lieutenant General Stanley Savige, the Australian commander on Bougainville, March 1945.

On 8 September 1945, Savige accepted the Japanese surrender at Torokina.

Savige died on 15 May 1954, aged 63 years, at Kew, Melbourne. He was a co-founder of Legacy.



## Quotes taken from a book for a diamond jubilee reunion of 24 October, 2001

I joined the 53rd Battalion as reinforcement in September 1942 after it came down from Kokoda. With 55th/53rd Battalion went to Sanananda in December 1942. After a hernia operation, I was returned to Australia on the hospital ship "Katoomba". Later at Alligator Creek, then Jacky Jacky. "Canberra" ran aground on Thursday Island. Then to Bougainville, Torokina, Soraken Ratsua, McKinnons Ridge. Ambushed at Bovi plantation. Went to surrender of Japanese at south Bougainville in September 1945. To Rabaul in September 1945. Discharged in October 1946.

Hugh Eadie.

As an eighteen year old called up to serve the country, I was a member of the 55th Battalion who landed in New Guinea in May 1942. I fought on the Kokoda Track, at Sanananda, later in Bougainville on the Numa Numa track and Soraben peninsula with a fine batch of guys.

Peter Wright

One day one of my sections was sent to the American mortar to fire in a certain area. It was commenced by Sergeant Les Chin and the first bomb was faulty, and when fired it only came out of the mortar and fell at their feet. Fortunately the bomb had not primed and did not explode. The men all hit the deck, except Les. "It's too late" he said, "you are all dead". I do not know what I would have done.

Tom Cole, Platoon Sergeant, Mortar Platoon.

As an original 53rd member from 30 Battalion (Scottish regiment) it was an adventure for a young fellow. But our learning curve was bloody hard. Either you made it or not.

Warwick (Punchy) Davis

Transferred from the 18th Battalion to the 53rd. Just another "chocko" as we were known. Army number gave me away – N17856. Too many memories with 53rd Battalion. Owen Stanly, etc, etc, Sanananda, and Bougainville with 55th/53rd Battalion. Friends and brothers always and forever.

Eric (Poppa) Day

Joined the battalion at Strathpine from Canungra in October 1944. Was immediately made welcome. Sailed to Torokina on Bougainville in November 1944. Served on Pearl Ridge and northern Bougainville. When the war ended went to Rabaul. Came home in June 1946. I do not regret one moment of serving with the 55th/53rd Battalion. My battalion, my brothers, my family.

Harry (Skeeter) Matthew  
NX177446 B Coy.

Joined the AIF, reinforced the 55th Battalion at Bobs Farm. Proud to be a member of the 55th and 55th/53rd Battalions. I regard the treatment of this battalion by senior AIF a bloody disgrace. The battalion was thanked and congratulated on its effort by General Vasey on its withdrawal from Sanananda. And also General Savige praised the battalion's effort on Bougainville.

Len Brown (Dorrigo)



Joined the 55th battalion at Greta on 5 January 1942. Went to Port Moresby May 1942. Went into the mountains as part of Honner Force (a composite force of three companys.) After that we were merged with the 53rd and went into action at Sanananda. Survived that and served with the unit at Bougainville and Rabaul until the war ended (Bougainville and Rabaul).

Jack Stevens, B Coy

Born in Bangalow in 1917. Joined the army in 1939; camp Rutherford 1940. Then Tragabura 1940. Then to Port Moresby and Larf NG. Stayed there 3½ years. Back to north Queensland. War ended on the way home, 6 August 1945. And I am still here.

Milton Evans

May we always remember these young lads who gave their lives in the jungles of the south-west Pacific. I emphasise young, for most of them were teenagers. May they ever stay young, and we that grow old, may we remember them, thanks to their sacrifice, enjoy peace and security.

Norm King, B Coy, 10 Pl, 55th/53rd BN.

Joined Army Day 1942, aged 19. Taken on strength 2nd Australian Bomb Disposal Company, R.A.E. On being disbanded became an instructor 3 ARTB. Joined the battalion in 1944 at Jacky Jacky, north Queensland. Trained at Strathpine, Queensland and embarked at Brisbane for Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Landed at Torokina and served on Nema Nema track at Pearl Ridge. Later across the island to Ruri Bay.

Clarrie Lee, B Coy, 10 Pl, 55th/53rd

I was in HQ Coy as the officer's cook. My brother, Terry, was the L/Sgt in the P platoon. I was a casualty on the Torokina peninsular, being burnt in an explosion in the R.A.P, along with Sgt Ted Flarty and we were evacuated to Torokina with severe burns to face and body.

Bob Quinn

Sixty years on and I still feel strongly about the 53rd and the shabby treatment they received in Ingleburn after formation and in Port Moresby on our arrival in Port Moresby. I have written my thoughts in *Angau – One Man Law* published in 1999. God bless the 53rd and all those who passed through its ranks.

Clarrie James  
L/Cpl Bn HQ, 53 Bn.  
Later Patrol Officer, ANGAU



I was an original member of the 18th Battalion and was transferred to the 53rd Battalion. One night I was on duty at battalion HQ and was asked by Major Hawkins to go and quieten the Batman and as I had no rank was offered a Blamey glass of gin which I drank. I never heard the phone ring all night.

Harvey Blundell.

January 1943 at Sanananda. We were all asleep. Early morning and a Jap came up and sat on the side of the trench. "Chunger" Pierce captured him. He was promised a bottle of whisky, but did not take delivery. He was K.I.A.

Gilbert Cooper, D Coy.

Just pleased to be able to say I am a proud survivor of Sanananda – Gona and Bougainville with the 55th/53rd Battalion.

Rex Marsden, HQ Coy, 55th/53rd

Despite all the years of sickness from our time in New Guinea, I am very proud to have been part of the battalion's efforts in protecting the Jap advance towards Australia.

Charlie Wilkins

CMF part-time duty 31/12/41. Full-time duty 5/1/42 – 22/6/45 AIF 23/6/45 – 23/7/46. Arrived Greta camp 5/1/42, 55th Battalion Pioneer Platoon, then mortar platoon until December 1942, when not being nineteen years old was detached to 6 Aust Div Carrier Group (C.O. Major RWS Tuckerman, M. M. WW1 53rd Battalion) having arrived in Port Moresby on M.V. Taroon 21st May. Group comprised Carrier platoons of 3, 36, 39, 49, 53 and 55th battalions, allocated 'drome defense Port Moresby and surrounds. Duties orderly room corporal, returned to Australia September 1943, rejoined unit (now 55th/53rd Battalion) at Alligator Creek Queensland as Ord Room Corp. Served with battalion Jacky Jacky (north Queensland), Bougainville in Solomons and Rabaul, returned to Australia February 1946, sent to "B" Sub HQ kit stores, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney until discharge. During my service I only fired three shots on an ambush patrol in north Bougainville with 17 Platoon members a few days before the unit returned to Torokina shortly before the cessation of hostilities. Eternally grateful to my guardian angel especially on 5th July 1942 when HQ Company was bombed and the unit suffered its first casualties. Don McLeod and B Morris both killed, and very, very proud to have served with a fine bunch of men and to be able at present to be secretary/treasurer of their association.

Corporal Trevor Allen Harper

N247472

NX195287



## Reminiscences of some of those who are still with us.

Fred Denny, a member of the Thirlmere RSL sub-branch since 1946.

I was 19 years old. In 1941 it was my duty to serve my country. We saw a lot of action when the 53rd Battalion joined up with us after Kokoda, where they lost a lot of blokes. So they arranged the amalgamation of the two battalions and it became the 55th/53rd Battalion.

After he returned home to Thirlmere he worked for the Water Board during the construction of Warragamba Dam. "I was there from start to finish".

Ray Gentles, A coy.

As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Kokoda Track and of Sanananda and enjoy this commemorative luncheon, our thoughts are with our fallen comrades. As soldiers we served our battalion with pride just as the battalion association is doing today. As General George Vasey said in his report at Sanananda "the 49th and the 55th/53rd put in fine performances; and as General Stan Savage said in his report at Bougainville "the 55th/53rd will do me".

After discharge from the army, I returned to my career with a company that made tyres and other rubber components. I was with the company until I retired.

A merry Christmas to all.

Reg Chard, C coy.

After the medical exam at Addison Road, Marrickville, we were sent by train to Greta for training. Later we went from Townsville to Port Moresby – it took me two days to acclimatize to the heat and humidity. My group was sent to Milne Bay to build an airstrip. The enemy attacked, but unknown to them, extra troops had arrived during the nights and their estimate of our strength was significantly under estimated. We attacked and saved Milne Bay from occupation.

I had enlisted at 18 years of age because, if they got through us, they would have got to our families in Australia.

Later, I served on the Kokoda track where food was less important than getting ammunition to the front. Food rations were bully beef (like Spam), baked beans and dried fruit. They were light and easy to carry in bulk by the Fuzzy Wuzzy angels, to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude. We lost a third of our body weight. If you did not have a mate to look after you, you could not survive.

We never knew the date, but on one occasion we knew it was Christmas Day because the Salvation Army chaplain presented us with a lolly as a gift. I contracted malaria a number of times and was sent to Concord for recovery.

After discharge I worked in an iron foundry and drove interstate trucks.

Charlie Jennings, C coy

I was posted to the 55th/53rd battalion at Bougainville.

Previously I had been with a heavy anti-aircraft gun regiment, and saw Japanese printed currency for use in a invaded Australia. Being supernumerary, I was sent to Townsville. Leaving Papua from Port Moresby, we travelled at night in covered trucks.

Australia was desperately short of army men, so I enlisted at Waverley a few weeks prior to my eighteen birthday.

On Bougainville my job was to protect the natives who carried supplies for us. This was known as the Kylene patrol.

I left to return to Australia in 1 June 1946 and the journey took three days on board the Kanimbla to Sydney. After discharge I did not return to farming, but joined the staff of the *Daily Telegraph* until I retired in 1990.



## Books and articles written about the 55th/53rd Battalion

Budden, Frank M. *That Mob!—The Story of the 55/53 Australian Infantry Battalion*, A.I.F., self published, Ashfield, New South Wales, 1973

James, Clarrie. *ANGAU - One Man Law - Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit*, 1999

A Service Resume of the 55th/53rd Australian Infantry Battalion ???? author when???

The Australian War Memorial download at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U56135> (July 2017)

Laycock, Kenneth George, *Memories of a militiaman 1938 – 1944* (Griffith, ACT; K.G. & F.F. Laycock, 1955)



Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' selfless contribution to Australia



**HONOUR ROLL – 53rd, 55th and 55th/53rd Battalions**  
**161 FALLEN COMRADES**

**53rd Battalion**

Davey, W.A.  
 Fitzsimon, H. E.  
 Foster, R.W.  
 Hayes, H.J.  
 Hayward, D.A.  
 Hillman, O.A.  
 Hunter, H.B.  
 Isaachsen, A.  
 Kurtz, B.E.  
 Logan, R.L.  
 Lowery, F.L.  
 MacGraw, D.J.  
 Malouf, M.  
 Meagher, W.  
 Morton, W.C.  
 Reynolds, S.W.G.  
 Spalding, R.W.N.  
 Sullivan, K.T.  
 Thomson, D.J.  
 Ward, K.H.  
 Waters, J.T.

**55th Battalion**

Boulton, J.G.  
 Castle, C.  
 Graham, J.  
 McGovern, J.M.  
 McLeod, D.G.  
 Mills, A.E.  
 Morris, B.F.

**55th/53rd Battalion**

Addison, W.L.  
 Agnew, T.M.  
 Barnes, A.E.  
 Barrett, J.S.  
 Bastock, L.T.  
 Bayley, R.E.  
 Budden, W.A.  
 Bunworth, E.R.J.  
 Campbell, J.P.  
 Carlson, C.W.  
 Carruthers, W.C.  
 Carver, J.  
 Casey, W.R.  
 Cherrie, W.H.  
 Clarke, C.H.V.  
 Coleman, R.J.  
 Collison, E.C.  
 Coote, F.G.  
 Croft, F.W.  
 Cross, L.W.  
 Cullen, D.G.R.  
 Curr, J.E.

Davidson, H.A.  
 Davison, J.J.  
 Deadman, C.F.  
 Drane, J.

East, A.J.  
 Egan, C.H.  
 Elletson, W.R.  
 Elliott, K.  
 Esen, T.J.  
 Evans, E.L.  
 Evans, L.H.

Farry, J.W.  
 Faulkner, R.B.  
 Forbes, G.E.  
 Fuller, R.W.P.

Gale, H.  
 Gayden, W.N.  
 Giblett, A.G.  
 Gill, E.  
 Gilleland, J.R.  
 Goss, R.C.  
 Graham, R.L.  
 Greenfield, F.H.

Harrison, E.L.  
 Harvey, W.A.  
 Hayes, W.H.  
 Henderson, H.K.  
 Hill, G.R.  
 Holmes, F.  
 Hudson, H.P.  
 Hulme, P.J.  
 Hush, R.C.  
 Hussey, R.R.

Iles, G.L.  
 Irwin, N.H.

Johnston, K.  
 Jones, G.R.

Kayess, R.O.  
 Keedle, J.C.  
 Keegan, D.K.  
 Kenny, E.H.  
 Kern, G.E.  
 King, A.G.  
 Knapp, A.T.  
 Kohen, S.A.L.

Laggan, V.G.  
 Lega, A.L.  
 Lewis, R.G.

McCall, R.J.  
 McCallum, R.J.  
 McCormack, B.B.P.  
 McKinnon, H.  
 McLean, P.W.J.  
 McLennan, H.N.  
 McLeod, R.D.  
 McMahan, R. J.  
 MacMaster, W.A.

Marshall, B.J.  
 Mathews, J.W.  
 Mathews, W.H.J.  
 Mayo-Jaffray, N.E.  
 Middleton, C.E.  
 Miley, K.J.  
 Miller, H.L.  
 Moore, A.  
 Muir, W.C.  
 Mulliner, H.W.

O 'Callaghan, O.  
 O'Donnell L.R.

Payne, P.J.A.  
 Pearce, J. C.  
 Plaza, B.F.  
 Punch, A.J.

Risby, L.J.  
 Robertson, J.  
 Robson, W.M.  
 Rogers, S.K.  
 Romer, C.F.  
 Russell, A.L.  
 Ryan, J.S.  
 Ryan, W.J.

Sanders, H.R.  
 Scholefield, W.E.  
 Scruse, A.L.  
 Searle, A.L.  
 Simmons, R.F.  
 Skimmins, C.R.  
 Smith, F.A.  
 Solomon, R.G.  
 St. George-Ryder, H.W.  
 Street, R.E.  
 Strickland, H.F.  
 Strong, W.B.S.  
 Sutton, R.P.  
 Swift, E.L.S.

Tarlington, C.C.  
 Taylor, P. V.  
 Thompson, G.L.  
 Thompson, L.F.  
 Thurgood, C.A.  
 Tulley, R.B.

Valentin, G.

Walch, W.C.  
 Warnes, W.G.  
 Watts, H.D.  
 White, A.  
 Wilson, F.G.  
 Wiseman, R.G.  
 Wolfson, N.

Young, C.R.A.  
 Young, J.T.



Notation of the Japanese surrender in the 55th/53rd Battalion war diary of 10 August, 1945.

11 Aug		<p>At midnight a broadcast announcing that Japan had made surrender offers was heard. The news spread quickly and all men in the camp area were soon astir. Crowds gathered in the Rec Hut where community singing was held and the celebrations continued until the early hours of the morning. Pdes held this morning and tps addressed by coy OCs. It was pointed out that early discharge could not be anticipated due to the fact that certain work would have to be done on Bougainville and elsewhere. Another factor was the limited shipping available to return tps to Australia from the various theatres of ops; also that absorption into civil industry would be on a gradual scale. Men were reminded that they were still subject to Army discipline and importance was stressed of smartness at all times.</p>
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WAR DIARY or INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.				Army Form C.2118 (Adapted)
(Erase heading not required.)				
Unit <u>55/53 Aust Inf Bn(ATF)</u> Date and Time.—From _____ To _____				
Place.	Date.	Hour.	Summary of Events and Information.	Remarks and references to Appendices, Diaries, &c.
			<p>tps. Maj Reid presided and representatives for each branch of sport were elected.</p>	
		1900	<p>Table Tennis: 76 AGT defeated 55/53 Bn. Bridge Tournament in Rec Hut. Improvements have been made in the form of an extension to the Rec Hut. This is used as a writing room and for Bridge Tournaments. Extra table tennis and billiards tables have also been obtained by Rep Galloway.</p>	
	15 Aug		<p>Official news of the Japanese surrender to hand today and the news was received by tps with a sense of quiet relief rather than wild jubilation. The Bn has been selected to supply a guard for the GOC and will move SOUTH when advice received. Gd will be of pl str men to be of large physique. Lt H. Rowland will be OC and Sgt Moore J.G. Pl Sgt.</p>	
		1300	<p>Rugby Football : Bde knockout competition in which six teams competed. Final was won by 55/53 Bn who defeated 31/51 Bn 6 - 0</p>	





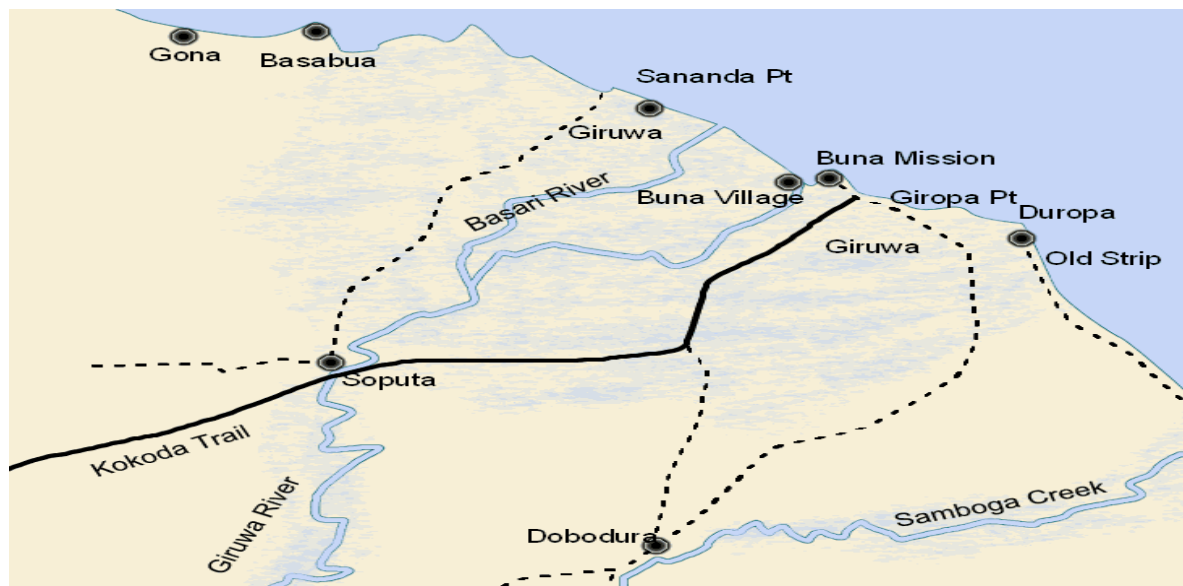


75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Battle of the Beaches  
1942 – 1943



Compiled by 55th/53rd Australian Infantry Battalion Association, 2017





## Location

Sanananda Point, half way between Buna and Gona on the northern Papuan coast, was an uninviting desolate area. However, it formed the centre of the main Japanese defensive position in the final battles of the Papuan campaign. Unlike Buna and Gona, where the defences were mainly on the coast, in the central sector, the defences were placed along the track which left Wairopi and passed through Popondetta and Soputa before entering an area of swamp some seven kilometres from the coast.

The Japanese positions astride the track were protected by deep camouflaged bunkers made of logs and placed in depth behind each other. The Australians were sick with malaria and other tropical diseases and under strength. The 7th Division was reinforced by a regiment of Americans which moved around the Japanese and established a road-block, known as Huggin's Road Block.

The 16th Brigade was relieved by Brigadier Porter's 30th Brigade consisting of the 49th and 55th/53rd Battalions and later the 2/7th Cavalry Regiment (without vehicles) and the 36th Battalion. These units conducted a series of determined attacks, but without heavier support could not eject the Japanese from their bunkers. The problem was that when the Allies by-passed the Japanese positions, the Japanese did not withdraw and it became extremely difficult to supply the Australian positions which could only be reached by circuitous routes through the swamp.

Sanananda allies were always short of supplies and ammunition. On 22 December the Australians at Sanananda were further reinforced by the 21st Brigade (each battalion down to less than company strength) and the 39th Battalion. The largest number of troops on the Sanananda Track were from militia units rather than the Australian Imperial Force. The militia units bravely threw themselves into attacks against well-concealed Japanese positions and lost heavily. The 55th/53rd Battalion casualties alone numbered 264 and when the number of evacuations due to sickness are added, the total casualties were 542, which was greater than the Battalion strength at the beginning of the campaign. Buna; the victory at Sanananda marked the end of a six month Papuan campaign, during which the Japanese employed about 20,000 troops of whom more than 13,000 died.



# Bloody Beachheads – The Battles of Gona, Buna and Sanananda,

November 1942 – January 1943

By James Brien, AWM Summer Scholar 2013

## Abstract

The beachhead battles of Gona, Buna and Sanananda formed the final, bloody stage of the campaign in Papua during 1942–43. Yet the story of these battles is often overlooked, meaning that their challenges, their tragedy and their significance remain largely unrealised. From mid-November 1942 exhausted, battle-weary Australian and inexperienced American troops began a brutal and uncompromising two-month campaign against the Japanese-held beachheads at Gona, Buna and Sanananda. The Allies' attacks stalled against desperate Japanese defenders and their labyrinth of bunkers and trenches.

The swamps and jungles of the Papuan coast compounded the already difficult task facing the Allies. In these conditions, conventional tactics and fire support were rendered ineffective forcing commanders to adapt operations on the ground. These tactical issues were further complicated by a persistent “pressure from above” from General Douglas MacArthur, commander of Allied forces in the South West Pacific Area, with his exhortations of a quick victory, no matter the cost.



This presented commanders at all levels with a series of tactical problems unlike any that they had previously encountered, to which there was no easy solution. The three main factors – the terrain, the mentality of the Japanese defenders and MacArthur's constant pressure – greatly influenced the tactical approaches and application of resources during the campaign, forcing a regression in some aspects and innovation in others. This paper seeks to examine the factors at work and their influence on the tactics involved and the experiences of those who fought.

### The strategic situation

Following defeats at Eora Creek and Oivi–Gorari on the Kokoda Trail, Japanese forces in Papua retreated to three key positions along a 25-kilometre stretch of the north coast: Gona to the west, Buna to the east, and Sanananda–Giruwa in the centre. <sup>(1)</sup>

Believing that the remaining Japanese forces were the demoralised and battle-weary remnants of the South Seas Force, MacArthur resolved to eliminate these positions once sufficient supplies had been built up by mid-November. It was decided that the Australian 7th Division would be assigned the tasks of capturing Gona and Sanananda, leaving the US 32nd Division to seize Buna. Initial intelligence reports estimated that there were between 1,000 and 4,000 Japanese defenders, most of whom were sick, wounded or exhausted after the retreat from Kokoda. In actual fact, <sup>(2)</sup> the American soldiers of the 32nd Division were told that they would not face more than two squads defending beachheads were defended by around 10,000 Japanese servicemen.



From the outset, neither MacArthur nor General Sir Thomas Blamey, commander of the Allied Land Forces, truly appreciated the difficulty of the task they had given their forces, particularly the impact terrain would have on the battles. Terrain influenced all facets of warfare, from the objectives of Gona, Buna and Sanananda themselves to the movement of troops, logistics, and the layout of Japanese defensive positions. The coastal plains of Papua therefore need to be considered when assessing the overall course of the battles.

### **Terrain**

Large swathes of kunai grass covered the drier areas, and could easily grow over two metres tall. In the humid conditions the grass trapped the heat, and it was not uncommon for temperatures to reach 50°C in the grass. (3) Along the drier coastal strips were coconut plantations established by white traders before the war. The plantations were generally about 100 metres wide, and though the terrain was usually flat, undergrowth had quickly reclaimed the ground since war had broken out.

The campaign also started at the beginning of the wet season in Papua, which brought tremendous rainfall. Combined with intense daytime heat, the humidity was oppressive, sapping the energy of soldiers and service personnel. Nothing remained dry for long and the shallow foxholes of the Allied soldiers and the bunkers and trenches of the Japanese filled with inches of water. The terrain took a physical and psychological toll on the men fighting in the jungles and swamps. This was apparent to General Robert Eichelberger, who took command of the US 32nd Division in December. The psychological factors resulting from the terrain were also tremendous. After a man had lain for days in a wet slit trench or in the swamp, his physical stamina was reduced materially. This reduction served to make him extremely nervous and to attribute to the unfamiliar noises of the jungle spectres of Japanese activity. These reactions preyed on his mind until he was reduced to a pitiable abject state, incapable of aggressive action.(4)

There was little in the way of infrastructure in Papua to facilitate movement and transport. Only the largest tracks were charted on maps, but even these were little more than footworn trails. The only “road” was a corduroy track that ran between Soputa and Sanananda, but this quickly became boggy after the wet season rains which fell during December.(5)

The few tracks and the nature of the terrain severely restricted the routes which the advancing Allied soldiers could take. Efforts to move off these paths were fraught with difficulty as units sent to outflank positions would often run into impenetrable swamps or jungle. General Vasey’s plan to strike at Sanananda from Gona with two battalions had to be abandoned after patrols were unable locate a route through dense jungle and swamps.(6)

### **Disease**

The impact disease had on the health of the soldiers involved in the campaign was far greater than any military planner could have imagined.(7) Moving into the beachhead region, Australian, American and Japanese forces entered one of the most malarial environments in the world.(16) While malaria was the greatest threat, other tropical diseases such as scrub typhus, ulcers and dysentery were also commonly encountered.(8)

Malaria served to debilitate a large proportion of the forces involved – it is estimated that between 85 and 95 per cent of all soldiers in the area carried malaria during the battles. (18) The impact of the disease was greatly exacerbated by the already weakened condition of the soldiers and a lack of nutrition. Despite the prevalence of the illness, it was necessary for most men to stay in the line as there were so few reinforcements available. It was not uncommon for men to be kept in the line running a temperature of 40°C. (10)



By January 1943, for every one Allied battle casualty, there were 4.8 sick casualties being admitted to hospitals in the forward area. Japanese accounts of the prevalence of the disease are similarly shocking. One Japanese soldier recalled that between 20 and 30 Japanese soldiers died each day during December in the hospital at Buna. <sup>(11)</sup> Japanese medical officers simply could not treat their men, given the shortage of supplies, and their greatly weakened state made them extremely susceptible to tropical disease.

Areas of ground which looked flat and relatively clear often turned out to be large patches of kunai grass or swamp. <sup>(12)</sup> They also failed to identify many of the Japanese defensive positions. Even when there were aerial photos, they were not always in sufficient numbers, nor distributed in a timely fashion to commanders. The 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade at Sanananda did not receive any aerial photos of the area until 18 December, almost two weeks after arriving at the front. <sup>(13)</sup>

### **Infantry on the beachheads**

While the campaign began optimistically, it soon became clear that the Japanese defenders were not prepared to relinquish the beachheads. <sup>(14)</sup> Constantly under pressure, battalion commanders were forced to push their already exhausted troops into battle with little preliminary intelligence, no time for reconnaissance, and without adequate supplies.

They were not able to follow standard operating procedures, to concentrate their forces or be provided with adequate fire support for the operations they were undertaking. In most cases, units were committed to piecemeal frontal assaults against well-concealed strongpoints. <sup>(15)</sup> The battle experience of the AIF units could not save them from a terrible rate of casualties, while the inexperienced Militia and American National Guardsmen received a brutal and bloody baptism of fire. Infantry would attack shortly after a preliminary artillery or air bombardment, but this pattern was frequently repeated and the Japanese defenders came to recognise it. They would seek shelter out of the fire and then reoccupy the forward positions in time to meet the Australian attacks.

When the infantry reached the Japanese defences they had usually sustained too many casualties to hold the position, and there were rarely reserves to bring up. Success at Gona came on 8 December, when Honner's 39th Battalion did not follow the pattern laid down before. Honner used a delay in his attack to scout an approach through jungle which led right up to the Japanese defences. He also made use of the few delayed-fuse artillery shells that were available for the attack. Honner ordered his troops to advance during the barrage, catching the Japanese while they were sheltering. The 39th Battalion's attack cut through the middle of Japanese defences, and that evening the Japanese garrison began a desperate attempt to break out. Sadly, the ingenuity of Honner's plan was rarely replicated along the beachhead front.



SANANANDA, NEW GUINEA, 5 December 1942.

Members of B Company, 55/53 Battalion fording a river. The first man in the line without a hat is Private J. Hunter. The next three in line are Privates J. Stevens, T. Watkins and K. Elliot. The first man to the right is Private J. Scrusse; further back and just in front of men out to each side are Lieutenant A. Brown (on right) and Private W. Fernandez (on left).



The Australian attack at Sanananda on 7 December demonstrates the tragedy of rushing inexperienced units into attacks without adequate preparation, training or support. As available forces were being worn down by battle and disease, Blamey had no choice but to commit the Australian Militia's 36th, 49th and 55th/53rd Battalions to Sanananda. These units had spent most of their time in Papua unloading boats or constructing roads rather than training or in combat. The 49th Battalion in particular had received very little weapons or jungle fighting training.

Many men received their first training in the use of Bren and Owen guns or throwing grenades on their arrival at the front, just a few days prior to being sent in to battle <sup>(16)</sup>. Private Kevin Barry recalled the experience. Bearing in mind at this time I'd never held a rifle in my hand, never ever fired one – didn't know anything about it ... Next minute we're over there [Sanananda] and we're lining up at 3.15 pm on the 7th of December, fixed bayonets <sup>(17)</sup>.

Battalion commanders were briefed late on the evening before the attack, giving them little time to brief their officers or reconnoitre the terrain. Brigadier Selwyn Porter simply issued an order to the 55th/53rd Battalion to "attack enemy positions astride the road" at 2:45 that afternoon. <sup>(18)</sup>

The 49th Battalion attacked as ordered on the morning of 7 December, but quickly ran into trouble as communications broke down and the supporting companies became separated. The battalion lost 14 officers and 215 men in just five hours of fighting – 48% of the battalion's fighting strength – for no gain<sup>(19)</sup>.

The 55th/53rd Battalion was still ordered to attack, with similar results. Private Barry described the chaos and uncertainty of the attack:



Men of the 55/53 Battalion march to the front line.

*So out we go and they say charge – into the jungle we go ... and all of a sudden the shit hits the fan. Machine-guns; and I'm going along and I can hear this and I'm hanging on to the rifle and I'm shit scared – then in the next minute I'm up in the air – lost the rifle, lost my tin hat – hit in the shoulder ... that was the sum total of my wartime experience.*<sup>(20)</sup>

The battalion lost 8 officers and 122 men (28 of them NCOs) in the ill-fated attack. Towards the end of December the Militia units became highly disillusioned and demoralised after numerous failed attacks and high casualties. This led to instances of mutiny, such as when C Company of the 36th Battalion refused orders to advance on 28 December. <sup>(21)</sup>

Over one third of Australian casualties at Sanananda were sustained by Militia battalions during their brief occupation of the front line, a result of the persistent need for haste and the horrible rate of attrition suffered by all units. <sup>(22)</sup>

By this stage it was clear that the continuation of these tactics was not feasible. Allied commanders had to repeatedly fall back on a policy of aggressive patrolling and continual bombardment rather than committing to direct attacks. <sup>(23)</sup> Vasey effectively summed up the dilemma after abortive attack on 12 January:



*To attack [the enemy] with infantry using their own weapons is repeating the costly mistakes of 1915–1917 and, in view of the limited resources which can be, at present, put into the field in this area, such attacks seem unlikely to succeed. (50)*

Vasey had long been aware of the issue, but progress had been limited by a lack of supporting resources. He wrote: *For weeks and weeks now I have been trying to make bricks without straw, which in itself is bad enough, but which is made much worse when others believe you have the straw. (51)* There was no question about the Australians' willingness to attack, but without adequate artillery, shells and supplies, it was unreasonable to expect infantry alone to win the battles.

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- 1 For an account of these battles see Dudley McCarthy, *South West Pacific Area first year: Kokoda to Wau*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1959, pp. 281–335
  - 2 Peter Brune, *A bastard of a place: Kokoda, Milne Bay, Gona, Buna, Sanananda, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2004*, p. 419.
  - 3 Bergerud, *Touched with fire*, p. 75.
  - 4 Lt-Gen R. Eichelberger, cited in Harold A. Winters, *Battling the elements: weather and terrain in the conduct of war*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, p. 235.
  - 5 Bergerud, *Touched with fire*, p. 68, 79.
  - 6 Brune, *A bastard of a place*, p. 466.
  - 7 Steve Bullard, "'The great enemy of humanity': Malaria and the Japanese Medical Corps in Papua, 1942–43", *The Journal of Pacific History*, 39:2, 2004, p. 218.
  - 8 Bullard, "'The great enemy of humanity'", p. 203.
  - 9 Bullard, "'The great enemy of humanity'", p. 203; Brune, *A bastard of a place*, p. 429; Bergerud, *Touched with fire*, pp. 89–98.
  - 10 Allen S. Walker, *The island campaigns*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, p. 86.
  - 11 Unknown Japanese Soldier cited in McAulay, *To the bitter end*, p. 201
  - 12 McAulay, *To the bitter end*, p. 147.
  - 13 War diary, 30th Brigade, 18 December 1942, AWM52 8/2/30
  - 14 Horner, *Crisis of command*, p. 224.
  - 15 Pratten, *Australian battalion commanders*, p. 184.
  - 16 Fred Cranston cited in Brune, *A bastard of a place*, p. 561.
  - 17 Pte Kevin Barry, 55th/53rd Battalion, cited in Brune, *A bastard of a place*, p. 565.
  - 18 War diary, 55th/53rd Battalion, 7 December 1942, Appendix No. 2, AWM52 8/3/91.
  - 19 Brune, *A bastard of a place*, p. 564.
  - 20 Pte Kevin Barry, 55th/53rd Battalion, cited in Brune, *A bastard of a place* p. 565.
  - 21 War diary, 36th Battalion, 28 December 1942, AWM52 8/3/75.
  - 22 Brune, *A Bastard of a place*, p. 574.
  - 23 McCarthy, *South West Pacific area first year*, p. 412.
  - 24 Maj Gen G. Vasey cited in Horner, *General Vasey's war*, p. 253
  - 25 Maj Gen G. Vasey cited in McAulay, *To the bitter end*, p. 262.





# **SANANANDA**



**1942 - 2017**



**LEST WE FORGET**

