

**A TALE OF THREE BATTALIONS:
COMBAT MORALE AND
BATTLE FATIGUE IN THE 7TH
AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE,
BOUGAINVILLE, 1944-45**

Major Gavin Keating

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Finally, I am acutely aware of the debt that I owe to the men of the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, whose personal papers and diaries made this study possible. It was at times difficult analysing their successes and failures, particularly when one has not faced similar trials. Theodore Roosevelt put it best when he said in 1910:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly ...¹

I can only hope that the officers and soldiers of the brigade who were in the Bougainville arena in 1944 and 1945 view this paper from Roosevelt's perspective. Their experiences, good *and* bad, are most valuable for those in the modern Australian Army who carry on their memory.

This paper is dedicated to my sister, Dr Elizabeth Karlie Keating.

Cover images

Upper front: Private J.J. Ryan, 9th Battalion, receives medical attention after being wounded during the attack on Little George Hill, November 1944. Fear of death and maiming and exposure to dead and wounded men were significant combat stressors. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 077315)

Lower front: Private R.C. Male, 25th Battalion, receives a cigarette after being wounded in late December 1944. Sound logistics and administration, particularly the provision of adequate medical support, played key roles in maintaining combat effectiveness. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 078035)

Back: Extreme physical discomfort and fatigue were potential sources of combat stress. Here Private W.T. Rae rests beside his water-filled weapon pit after an all night vigil against possible Japanese infiltration, Bougainville, January 1945. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 078552)

1 Theodore Roosevelt, 'Citizen in a Republic: The Man in the Arena', address at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910.

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Abstract

The Anzac tradition does not talk much about what happens when combat morale falters and battle fatigue undermines military effectiveness. Yet, despite the Australian Army's proud history, it has not been immune from such problems. Evidence of this is not, however, likely to be found in any official history or unit report. Fortunately, the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade's campaign on Bougainville, 1944–45, allows these issues to be studied in detail. The existence of candid personal diaries and memoirs written by the brigade commander, two of his unit commanding officers and a private soldier offer a rare glimpse into the realities of life on combat operations.

This paper traces the fortunes of the brigade's battalions and assesses their relative experiences: one disintegrated under the weight of combat stress, one was placed under considerable pressure and one appeared to escape relatively unaffected. In this tale of three battalions, the fate of each unit offers important insights into the nature of combat and the maintenance of morale and fighting effectiveness when soldiers are engaged in battle. It is not just an interesting story but offers much that remains relevant for the Australian Army's current leaders as they seek to face the contemporary challenges of the 'Long War'.

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Introduction

To those who have known the firing line, it would scarcely be necessary to point out that morale in combat is never a steady current of force but a rapidly oscillating wave whose variations are both immeasurable and unpredictable.

S.L.A. Marshall¹

Men wear out in war like clothes.

Lord Moran²

On 9 May 1945, Brigadier John Field, commander of the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade on Bougainville, released a special order of the day. He stated that ‘On completion of the recent period of operations, I desire to extend to all ranks my sincere congratulations and thanks for the splendid work in which they have upheld the reputation of the Brigade.’³ He noted that in three months the brigade had cleared 220 square miles of jungle and killed 1500 Japanese. The Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Stanley Savige, also proclaimed that ‘It is my considered opinion that never before in this war has the gallantry of Australian troops, directed with skill and determination by Brigade and Battalion Commanders, been higher than displayed by 7 Aust Inf Bde during recent weeks.’⁴ These sentiments, and most of the official records covering this

1 S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, 1978, p. 179.

2 Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, Constable, London, 1966, p. 64.

3 ‘Special Order of the Day by Comd 7 Aust Inf Bde’, 6 May 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32.

4 ‘Special Order of the Day by Comd 7 Aust Inf Bde’, 6 May 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32.

period, conceal a different assessment. Field's command had actually been beset by very serious problems with combat morale and battle fatigue. Such was the extent of the problem that one battalion, despite suffering relatively few casualties, was essentially rendered combat ineffective. The brigade's relief was actually based on the fact that this battalion could not be reconstituted for further operations. Perhaps the fact that such issues were ignored should not be surprising—the Anzac tradition, where soldiers embody the nation's best characteristics, does not encourage discussion about the less heroic aspects of life in combat.⁵ The existence of three personal diaries and an unpublished memoir fortunately allow the issue of combat morale within the brigade to be more thoroughly examined.

The diaries of Brigadier Field, Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Matthews, Commanding Officer (CO) of the 9th Battalion, and Private John Ewen, Intelligence Section 61st Battalion, offer a rare glimpse into the realities of life on combat operations. The wartime memoir of the 61st Battalion's CO, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Dexter, provides similar insight. Together, these papers help trace the morale problems within the 9th Battalion and the gradual breakdown of the 61st Battalion. Three scholars have used these sources to consider aspects of command and combat stress. Garth Pratten concluded that the leadership displayed by Matthews assisted in keeping the 9th Battalion effective, whilst Dexter's leadership was largely to blame for the disintegration of his battalion.⁶ This conclusion was supported by Karl James's study of the wider Bougainville campaign, although James also used the sources to consider the wider question of combat stress.⁷ Mark Johnston, in an earlier work, used Matthew's and Ewen's diaries to conclude that the 'chief blame for the undisciplined behaviour in the two battalions should be laid at the feet of the authorities who were obviously too slow in recognising and reacting when soldiers had been driven beyond the

5 J.J. Mackenzie, 'A Disabling Minority: Mutiny in the First Battalion AIF, September 1918', BA(Hons) Thesis, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1988, p. 5; Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 257–8.

6 Garth Pratten, 'The 'Old Man': Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War', Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy, Deakin University, Melbourne, 2005, pp. 347–52.

7 Karl James, 'The Final Campaigns: Bougainville 1944–1945', Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, 2005, pp. 244–56.

limitations of military efficiency.⁸ Whilst these studies are valuable they do not examine in detail the causes of these morale problems, beyond the role of unit COs, or why the brigade's third unit, the 25th Battalion, did not *seem* to have suffered similar issues.⁹ This paper will trace the fortunes of the 7th Brigade's battalions during their operations on Bougainville in late 1944 and early 1945, and re-assess the reasons why one battalion disintegrated under the weight of combat stress, one was placed under considerable pressure and one appeared to escape relatively unaffected.

Background

The main Australian campaign on Bougainville began with the relief of the XIV US Corps in November 1944 by Savige's II Australian Corps. The US forces had secured a foothold at Torokina a year earlier, but had done little beyond developing this area as a base for subsequent operations and protecting the perimeter. This relief was part of the larger movement to replace all US forces in Australia's mandated territories, something that effectively tied up two-thirds of the Australian Army throughout 1945. General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief Australian Military Forces (AMF), ordered 'such offensive operations to be undertaken as would not commit major forces.'¹⁰ These offensives became an issue of intense debate, both during and after the war, prompting some to claim that they were unnecessary and wasted lives.¹¹ It is a complex issue and involved high-level strategic considerations—including the continuation of sufficient military activity to secure Australia's status in post-war settlement talks and the desirability of Australians liberating the indigenous peoples in Australian territories.¹² For

8 Mark Johnston, *At the Frontline: Experiences of Australian Soldiers in World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 57–62.

9 No unit history exists for the 25th Battalion and the Australian War Memorial does not appear to hold any personal diaries from unit members.

10 'Report on Operational and Administrative Activities 2 Aust Corps in the North Solomons Area October 1944–August 1945', p. 1, AWM 3DRL6643, Item 3/83.

11 See Peter Charlton, *The Unnecessary War: Island Campaigns in the South-West Pacific 1944–45*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1983.

12 For the debate see D.M. Horner, 'Strategic Policy-Making, 1943–45', in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988, pp. 289–94.

this study, suffice to say that such considerations were not readily appreciated by soldiers at the tactical level, particularly as US forces advanced further north. As one observer wrote:

At Salamaua [New Guinea, 1943] men went after the Jap because every inch of ground won meant so much less distance to Tokyo. But what did an inch of ground – or a mile – mean on Bougainville? Nothing! Whether Bougainville could be taken in a week, or a year, would make no difference to the war in general.¹³

Whilst such attitudes probably hardened with the value of hindsight, they did indicate that the strategic value of the campaign was not a motivating factor for the troops and instead served as a negative background influence. As Brigadier Noel Simpson, the 29th Brigade's second commander on Bougainville, noted, there was 'a tendency among all ranks including officers, to question the purpose and soundness of operations in the Solomons'.¹⁴ The political sensitivity of operations also placed pressure on all levels of command to minimise casualties, resulting on Bougainville in what was called a corps 'no casualties policy'.¹⁵ This created considerable dilemmas for tactical-level commanders who had to reconcile the requirement to achieve their tasks, and maintain an aggressive fighting spirit in their troops, with such constraints. It also resulted in Corps headquarters placing highly restrictive conditions on subordinate formations.¹⁶

There were a number of other background issues which probably impacted indirectly on general morale throughout II Corps. Manpower problems in Australia and shipping limitations severely restricted the number of available reinforcements, particularly infantrymen.¹⁷ The low priority placed on the campaign by the United States meant that the resources required to prosecute

13 S.E. Benson, *The Story of the 42nd Australian Infantry Battalion*, Dymock's Book Arcade, Sydney, 1952, p. 147. See also Peter Medcalf, *War in the Shadows: Bougainville 1944–45*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1986, p. 87.

14 'Bougainville, Report on Operations 29 Australian Infantry Brigade, May to August 1945', p.2, AWM 3DRL 2529, Item 79.

15 'Report on Operations of 23 Australian Infantry Brigade Group, Solomon Islands 1944–1945', p. 54, AWM 54, Item 613/6/37.

16 Gavin Keating, *The Right Man for the Right Job: Lieutenant General S.G. Savige as a Military Commander*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 152–3.

17 'Report on Operational and Administrative Activities 2 Aust Corps in the North Solomons Area October 1944–August 1945', p. 82, AWM 3DRL6643, Item 3/83.

operations in the most expeditious way, an amphibious assault on Buin, were not available.¹⁸ This was recognised by the commanders on the ground.¹⁹ Reports in the Australian press about the campaign described it as ‘mopping up’ operations, which underplayed the scale and ferocity of the fighting.²⁰ Finally, there was always an underlying sense, which increased as time went on, that Australian operations on Bougainville were overly optimistic.²¹ A major factor was the gross underestimation of the Japanese strengths on the island. These were reckoned to be around 18 000 at the start of Australian operations, but after the war were found to be over 36 000.²² As Gavin Long concluded, ‘by the second quarter of 1945, the task that the II Corps undertook was too great for its resources.’²³

Each of these factors impacted upon morale, but were not unique to the 7th Brigade and will only be discussed further where they had a particular impact within this formation. As later noted by Brigadier Heathcote Howard Hammer, commander of the 15th Brigade, in the end the fighting soldier had to ignore such issues ‘and get on with the job in hand.’²⁴ The problems in the 7th Brigade were much more a result of its individual circumstances.

During a visit to Torokina in February 1945, Gavin Long, Australia’s official historian of the Second World War, noted that Bougainville represented one of the largest operations ever undertaken by the Australian Army.²⁵ By July Savage commanded 32 000 soldiers. His main fighting force was Major General William Bridgeford’s 3rd Division, consisting of the 7th, 15th and 29th Brigades and the 2/8th Commando Squadron. It soon became apparent that the main enemy concentration was at Buin, in the south of the island, and the division spent most

18 Keating, *The Right Man for the Job*, p. 149.

19 Field’s diary, 24 April 1945, AWM PR6937, Item 7.

20 Long’s notes on conversation with Lieutenant Colonel E.H. Wilson, 1 February 1945, p. 45, AWM 67, Item 2/69; Ewen’s diary 2, 1 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

21 For example see Lieutenant General Sir Frank Berryman’s notes on Chapter 3 of Long’s draft of *The Final Campaigns*, September 1953, p. 2, AWM 67, Item 3/30, Part 4; Berryman’s diary, 26 March 1945, AWM PR 84/370, Item 5.

22 ‘Report on Operational and Administrative Activities 2 Aust Corps in the North Solomons Area October 1944–August 1945’, pp. 75–6, AWM 3DRL6643, Item 3/83.

23 Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p. 240.

24 ‘Notes on Bougainville by Major General H.H. Hammer’, p. 2, AWM 67, Item 3/156.

25 Long’s notes, February 1945, p. 69, AWM 67, Item 2/69.

of the remainder of the war advancing in this direction. Its ultimate mission was to 'To destroy Japanese forces in Southern Bougainville'.²⁶

Field's 7th Brigade was a militia formation, consisting of both volunteers and conscripts, as opposed to the all-volunteer formations in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).²⁷ It consisted of the 9th, 25th and 61st Battalions and was the first to enter the line in November 1944. Its only previous combat experience had been during the short, but strategically critical, Milne Bay campaign in August–September 1942.²⁸ The main fighting lasted a fortnight and the 9th Battalion was not heavily engaged.²⁹ Despite the fact that Field estimated less than one third of his troops on Bougainville had served with him at Milne Bay,³⁰ this action was very much part of the brigade's identity. Thereafter, however, the brigade had spent long periods of time completing garrison duties in New Guinea, only returning to Australia between December 1943 and August 1944.³¹ Field considered this period of relative inactivity 'far too long' and possibly resulted from a bias in the Australian Army against militia troops.³² He had previously commanded the 2/12th Battalion, an AIF unit, during the siege of Tobruk and was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for action at Milne Bay.³³ When movement difficulties looked like delaying the brigade's relocation to Bougainville, Field noted that 'Here is a well trained Brigade, enthusiastic and keen to get on with the job, frustrated from action because of shipping'.³⁴

26 '2 Aust Corps Operation Instruction No.3', 23 December 1944, Appendix B to '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944-August 1945', AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

27 The creation of two different forces within the Army during the Second World War has been described as 'one of the great mistakes of Australian war policy'. D.M Horner, 'Staff Corps Versus Militia: The Australian Experience in World War II', *Defence Force Journal*, Number 26, January/ February 1981, p. 13.

28 Notes by Savige on Chapter 4 of Long's draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 4, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 128.

29 Gavin Long, *The Six Years War: A Concise History of Australian in the 1939–45 War*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1973, pp. 210–14; notes by Field on Long's draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 4, AWM 67, Item 3/126/4.

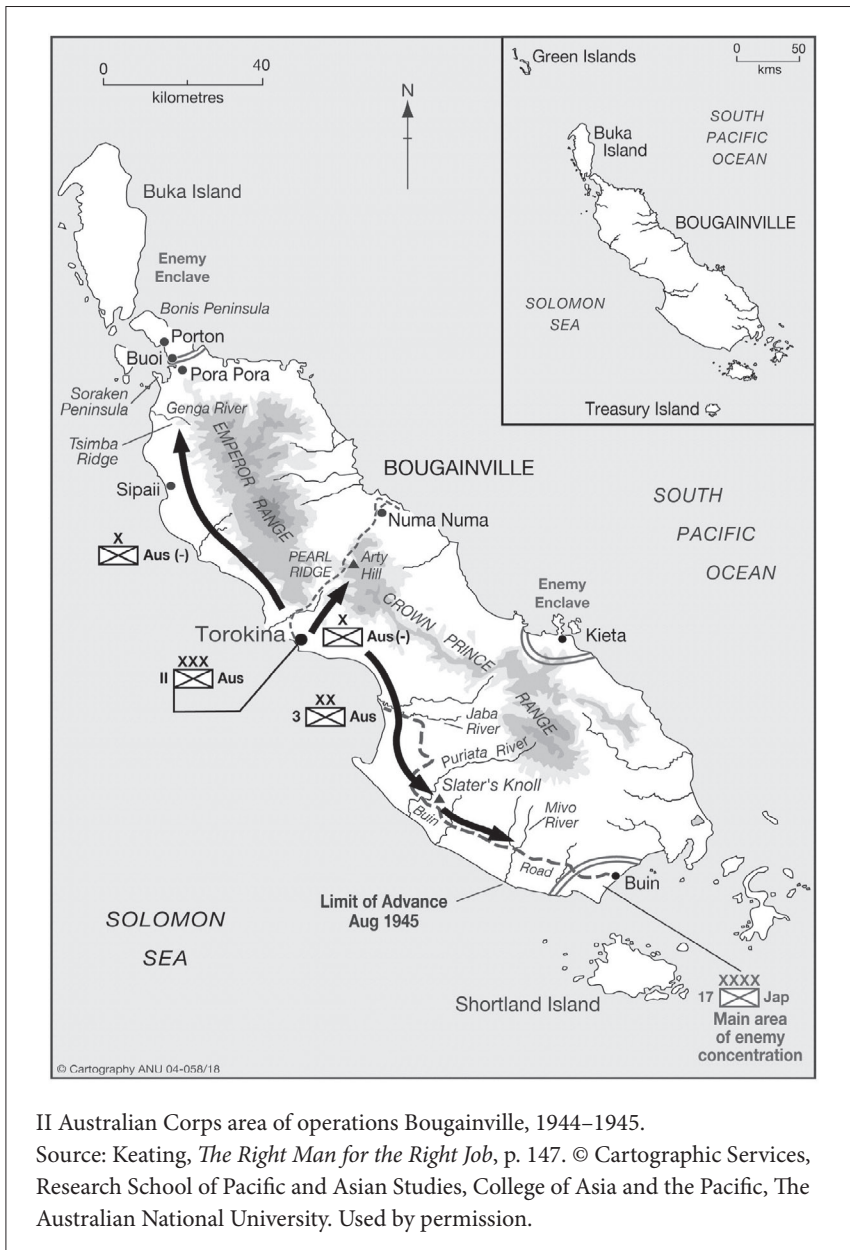
30 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 97.

31 Peter Denham, *The Blue Diamonds: History of the 7th Brigade*, Denham, Melbourne, 1987, p. 68.

32 Notes by Field on Long's draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 3, AWM 67, Item 3/126/4.

33 Biographical notes on Field, AWM 76, Item B175.

34 Field's diary, 25 October 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.



II Australian Corps area of operations Bougainville, 1944–1945.

Source: Keating, *The Right Man for the Right Job*, p. 147. © Cartographic Services, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. Used by permission.

Savage did not consider the 7th Brigade an experienced formation, but later rated Field as the best brigade commander on Bougainville.³⁵ Field was later awarded a Companion of the British Empire (CBE) for his leadership during the campaign.³⁶

The brigade benefited from a deliberate policy of transferring experienced AIF officers to command militia battalions. Matthews had seen action in North Africa as a junior officer with the 2/10th Battalion, served as its second-in-command at Milne Bay, and had temporarily administered a brigade during the closing stages of the fighting around Buna-Gona in early 1943.³⁷ He took command of the 9th Battalion in 1943, and like Field was keen to commence operations.³⁸ Lieutenant Colonel John McKinna, CO of the 25th Battalion from January 1944, had previously served with the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion at El Alamein, and was later described by Field as ‘a “beau sabreur” of the first quality’.³⁹ Dexter, thirty-one years old, was the youngest of the COs, having risen through the ranks and seen action in North Africa, Greece and New Guinea with the 2/6th Battalion.⁴⁰ Dexter had won a DSO as a company commander during the Salamaua campaign (April–August 1943).⁴¹ He took command of the 61st Battalion in April 1944. His first impressions of Bougainville were that ‘it didn’t look inviting – just another jungle clad, uncivilised, comfortless, malaria ridden island’.⁴² Few of the remaining officers of these battalions seem to have had any combat experience with the

35 Notes by Savage on Chapter 4 of Long’s draft of *The Final Campaigns*, pp. 3–4, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 128.

36 Biographical notes on Field, AWM 76, Item B175.

37 Long’s notes on conversation with Matthews, 12 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/67.

38 *Gradation List of Officers of the Australian Military Forces, Active List, Volume 1*, Australian Military Forces, Melbourne, 18 January 1945, p. 56; Dudley McCarthy, *South-West Pacific – First Year: Kokoda to Wau*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1959, p. 512; 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 22 November 1944, October–November 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

39 Biographical notes on McKinna, AWM 76, Item B34; notes by Field on Chapter 6 of Long’s draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 1, AWM 67, Item 3/126/4.

40 Matthews was thirty-five years old and McKinna was thirty-nine. *Gradation List of Officers of the Australian Military Forces, Volume 1*, 18 January 1945, pp. 56, 89.

41 Biographical notes on Dexter, AWM 76, Item B10.

42 W.R. Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, 1992, p. 161, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

AIF. Only two of the battalion 2ICs had seen active service, both at Milne Bay. About half of the company commanders had served with the brigade at Milne Bay, their only combat experience until Bougainville. Their average ages ranged from twenty-seven years in the 25th Battalion, twenty-eight years in the 9th and thirty-three years in the 61st. Three of the captains and majors in the 25th and three in the 61st Battalion had essentially spent their entire careers, since 1940, in their units. Only one of the lieutenants across the battalions had seen action other than at Milne Bay and over two thirds of them joined their units after 1942, too late to have seen action there. Just over half had arrived as reinforcements throughout 1944. Their average age was twenty-seven.⁴³ The majority of the troops were from Queensland.⁴⁴ McKinna and Matthews estimated that 50 per cent of the soldiers in their battalions were AIF volunteers, while Dexter estimated 40 per cent for the 61st.⁴⁵ 3rd Division records as late as April 1945 still designated the 7th Brigade's battalions as Citizen Military Forces (CMF), suggesting that they had all failed to get the 75 per cent volunteer rate to be entitled to AIF status, at least by early 1945.⁴⁶

43 These statistics have been compiled by cross referencing the nominal rolls of officers posted on strength across each of the battalions, as at 3 February 1945, with the *Gradation List of Officers of the Australian Military Forces, Active List, Volumes 1 and II*, 18 January 1945. It does not include officers posted to the unit but not present at that time, nor does it include the Regimental Medical Officers. The nominal rolls can be found in the respective battalion war diaries for February 1945, AWM 54, Items 8/3/46, 8/3/63 and 8/3/96.

44 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 99; Denham, *The Blue Diamonds*, p. 51.

45 Long's notes on conversation with McKinna, 14 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/73; Long's notes on conversation with Matthews, 12 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/67; Long's notes on conversation with Dexter, 6 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/68. In his memoir Dexter says that the AIF percentage rate in his battalion was 25 per cent when he first took command in 1944 'and during my time with the unit I only raised the AIF percentage rate by 2%'. This contradicts the 40 per cent he quoted to Long in 1945, which is assessed as more likely. Regardless, the important fact is that the volunteer rate was lower in the 61st Battalion than in the other battalions. See Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', p. 158, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

46 '3 Aust Div Strengths as at 14 April 1945', 2 Australian Corps Adjutant General Branch War Diary, March–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 1/4/10/11. Johnston states that at some stage in 1945 the 61st Battalion was entitled to be designated as AIF. Johnston, *At*

Combat Morale and Battle Fatigue

Before examining the fortunes of the 7th Brigade's battalions on Bougainville it is necessary to consider the nature of combat and the maintenance of morale and fighting effectiveness whilst soldiers are engaged in it. John Keegan wrote that battle is fundamentally aimed at the disintegration of human groups.⁴⁷ One observer of soldiers in combat wrote that 'A state of tension and anxiety is so prevalent in the front lines that it must be regarded as a normal reaction in this grossly abnormal situation.'⁴⁸ The post-World War II Stouffer study listed twelve potential sources of combat stress; these include fear of death and maiming, extreme physical discomfort and fatigue, loss of comrades, exposure to the sight and sound of wounded and dying men and continual uncertainty and 'lack of cognitive orientation.'⁴⁹ The same study noted that jungle warfare in the Pacific provided particular stresses. 'The combination of relative isolation, confusion and incessant danger – even far behind the most advanced positions – imposed a peculiarly insidious strain upon morale.'⁵⁰ In addition, the effects of tropical climate and disease had particularly pronounced effects on physical conditioning. What ultimately kept men functioning under such conditions was courage. Lord Moran wrote:

Courage is will-power, whereof no man has an unlimited stock; and when in war it is used up, he is finished. A man's courage is his capital and he is always spending. The call on the bank may be only the daily drain of the front line or it may be a sudden draft which threatens to close the account.⁵¹

the Front Line, p. 61. The title of the 61st Battalion's history also indicates that the unit became entitled to the AIF designation sometime before its disbandment. James Watt, *History of the 61st Infantry Battalion (AIF): Queensland Cameron Highlanders, 1938–1945*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, 2001.

47 John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, Pimlico, London, 1991, p. 298.

48 American doctor quoted in John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II*, Pimlico, London, 1993, p. 248.

49 Samuel A. Stouffer, *et al*, *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1949, p. 77.

50 Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, p. 67.

51 Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, Constable, London, 1966, p. xvi.

Swank and Marchland's study of Allied soldiers in Normandy in 1944 concluded that troops reached maximum efficiency after ten to thirty days of continuous combat but became exhausted after around fifty days.⁵² While this was a good guide, Holmes noted that the exact 'amount of time to produce combat exhaustion depends upon a number of factors, not the least the intensity of combat.'⁵³ Another post-Second World War study stated:

There is no such thing as 'getting used to combat' ... Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will inevitably break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure.⁵⁴

Simply, an overexposure to combat led to battle fatigue, something cited by Stouffer as the single biggest impact on battle performance.⁵⁵

Lord Moran observed that 'it has always been a military axiom ... that a man's will to fight is the ultimate arbiter of battles and that this is governed by the thoughts which pass through his head.'⁵⁶ In terms of combat, morale describes the 'quality of mind and spirit which combines courage, self-discipline, and endurance' and which manifests itself 'in the soldier's absolute determination to do his duty to the best of his ability in any circumstances.'⁵⁷ Given that the conditions of combat inevitably broke men down, maintaining morale was the key to sustained combat effectiveness. This was been the subject of much comment but the essentials are relatively simple. Shils and Janowitz's study of the Wehrmacht's sustained cohesion during the Second World War emphasised the importance of the 'primary group' in avoiding disintegration.⁵⁸ As Richardson put it:

52 Richard Holmes, *Firing Line*, Pimlico, London, 1994, p. 214.

53 Holmes, *Firing Line*, p. 215.

54 Quoted in Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, p. 329.

55 Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, pp. 73-4.

56 Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, pp. 13-14.

57 John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage - The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle 1915*, Cassell, London, 1967, p. 108.

58 Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2, Summer 1948, pp. 314-15.

In the last ditch, when the 'Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead', the soldier will be thinking more of his comrades in his section or platoon than of 'The Cause, Democracy, Queen and Country...'⁵⁹

It is with the troops beside them in battle that a soldier's personal honour and survival ultimately rest. As some have noted, however, strong small-group cohesion could, in some cases, undermine the will to fight.⁶⁰ *Esprit de corps*, the 'feelings of pride, unity of purpose, and adherence to an ideal represented by the unit', was the way in which small group-solidarity was linked to the attainment of an army's higher goals.⁶¹ Formal acknowledgement of a unit's achievements in battle helped foster this sense of purpose—even one small triumph could be crucial.⁶²

Professionally competent leadership was perhaps the critical factor for maintaining morale. Small-group cohesion was the province of non-commissioned and junior officers, whilst battalion *esprit de corps* was influenced primarily by the CO and his company commanders. Such was the power of a CO's influence that it was 'almost frightening to see how the character of a Commanding Officer can be reflected in his battalion.'⁶³ An Australian operational report from 1945 noted 'That the only time the soldier becomes so exhausted as to feel incapable of further action is when the officer in command succumbs to fatigue.'⁶⁴ Sometimes the death of a particularly well-loved leader could be problematic.⁶⁵ A critical leadership function in combat was monitoring battle fatigue, and managing the finite stock of courage within units.⁶⁶ This could only be accomplished by leaders, particularly officers, being forward with the troops. Leadership was also important

59 F.M. Richardson, *Fighting Spirit: A Study of the Psychological Factors in War*, Leo Cooper, London, 1978, p. 12.

60 Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2006, p. 281.

61 Anthony Kellett, 'Combat Motivation', in Gregory Belenky (ed.), *Contemporary Studies in Combat Psychiatry*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1987, p. 208.

62 Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, pp. 120–2.

63 Baynes, *Morale*, p. 110.

64 Margaret Barter, *Far Above Battle: The Experience and Memory of Australian Soldiers in War 1939–1945*, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 243.

65 Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, p. 193.

66 Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2006, pp. 222–3.

for giving meaning to the efforts of the frontline soldier, whether this was in terms of patriotism, ideology or practical reality.⁶⁷ Discipline and training helped slow down the onset of battle fatigue by underpinning small-group cohesion and unit *esprit de corps*.⁶⁸ Sound logistics and administration—the provision of adequate food, rest, other required military resources and medical support—also played important, but less glamorous, roles in maintaining combat effectiveness.⁶⁹ The nature of combat tended to ‘magnify the perception of grievances’, particularly if the troops felt they had been in action for too long.⁷⁰ Dealing effectively with such perceptions was also important. Finally, it should be noted that when the factors that served to strengthen morale failed, and the psychological contest against battle fatigue was lost, the collective decline in will could spread quickly and make recovery difficult.⁷¹

67 ‘Notes on Bougainville by Major General H.H. Hammer’, p. 2, AWM 67, Item 3/156.

68 Strachan, ‘Training, Morale and Modern War’, pp. 216–18.

69 Baynes, *Morale*, pp. 253–4.

70 Kellett, ‘Combat Motivation’, in Belenky (ed.), *Contemporary Studies in Combat Psychiatry*, p. 228.

71 Marshal, *Men Against Fire*, p. 105 and Holmes, *Firing Line*, pp. 334–5.

Part One

7th Brigade's Campaign on Bougainville

Central Sector—November 1944 to January 1945

Matthews' 9th Battalion was the first Australian force on Bougainville to be committed to action. It relieved US forces in the central sector between 23 and 26 November 1944. The battalion's war diary noted that '9 Bn has been allotted the priority to "go in" first, although a lot is expected of this Bn it will not be for the want of keenness on the part of the officers and men to give a good account of themselves.'⁷² After initial reconnaissance Matthews was directed to focus his efforts on capturing Pearl Ridge, a position on the crest of the central mountain range on the island, which provided observation on the east coast. A platoon from D Coy successfully attacked the Little George feature, a preliminary objective, on 29 November, suffering two killed and six wounded.⁷³ Field visited the company the following day and noted 'tails up' with 'plenty of cheerful grins everywhere.'⁷⁴ The battalion's weekly report recorded that 'The effect of the recent action by D company has raised the morale of the unit to a high pitch.'⁷⁵ As a result of the enemy's reaction to Little George's capture, Matthews became

72 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 22 November 1944, November 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

73 'Attack and Counter Attack on Little George Hill - 29 Nov 44', Appendix C to '9 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations Piaterapaia-Sisivie Areas, 23 Nov 44 - 21 Dec 44', 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

74 Field's diary, 30 November 1944, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.

75 'Report on Ops From Commencement of Relief of 2 Bn 132 US Inf Regt on 23 Nov 1944 to 2400 Hrs 1 Dec 44', 2 December 1944, 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary October–November 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

concerned about his lines of communication; subsequently a company from the 61st Battalion was placed under his command, on 5 December, to provide rear security. Inauspiciously, two of its soldiers were wounded in a grenade accident whilst preparing to move forward.⁷⁶ While this company was kept busy with patrol tasks it was not involved in any of the subsequent fighting.

The 9th's next task was to secure Artillery Ridge, the final obstacle before the capture of Pearl Ridge. In the lead up to this attack Matthews clashed with Brigadier Field over what was considered the battalion's excessive use of artillery.

Matthews's recorded on 16 December:

I rang up the Brig after tea ... he does not agree that arty fire is better than casualties! Would not give me a direct order to take Arty Ridge; says its up to me. Says my object is to hold Pearl Ridge and secure it and told him this would take a month. He got annoyed and said if I couldn't do it somebody would! ... It seems he wants me to take Arty Ridge so that he can get the honour and glory, but will not order me to do it, and passes the buck. His previous policy was no casualties, push on slowly.⁷⁷

Five days before Field noted that 'Matthews is realizing his responsibilities in commanding a Bn in the presence of the enemy and contrary to my idea that he might be too hasty and impetuous requires pushing at times to get the job done.'⁷⁸ Despite these misgivings, C Company succeeded in taking the ridge on 18 December, killing twenty-five Japanese for five dead and eight wounded.⁷⁹ The brigade commander believed that the attack 'once again proves my contention that the average Australian can do anything given good leadership, encouragement and man management – whether he be AIF or Militia.'⁸⁰ The 9th Battalion was subsequently relieved on 21 December, after almost a month, in 'order to conserve the troops as much as possible for later divisional operations and to give others

76 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 4 December 1944, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

77 Extract from Matthews diary, 15 December 1944, AWM 67, Item 3/260, Part 2.

78 Field's diary, 9 December 1944, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.

79 'Attack and Capture of Arty Ridge', Appendix D to '9 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations Piaterapaia-Sisivie Areas, 23 Nov 44 – 21 Dec 44', 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

80 Field's diary, 20 December 1944, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.

battle experience.⁸¹ Matthews later presented Bridgeford with an artillery shell inscribed with 'Little George' and 'Arty Ridge', noting in his diary 'I'll get on!' Of greater concern was the fact that some of his officers were 'showing signs of nervousness and inability to carry on'. One was diagnosed with 'neurosis' and Matthews assessed another as 'yellow'. Further, in late December he received requests from three officers to be released for university studies.⁸² Commenting on the increasing number of such requests, Field noted 'it is a poor show when officers seek this exit'.⁸³

Lieutenant Colonel McKinna's 25th Battalion relieved the 9th, and in the short period until its subsequent relief, 4–5 January 1945, succeeded in taking Pearl Ridge. A battalion attack was launched on 30 December but encountered stiff resistance and it was not until 1 January that the feature was completely cleared. The battalion's total casualties for its time in the line were thirty five, including ten dead.⁸⁴ However, it was subsequently learnt that Pearl Ridge had been held by a battalion of fresh Japanese troops. Long wrote that this action 'by an Australian battalion whose experience of battle was limited to a brief encounter more than two years before was thus one of the outstanding feats of arms in this campaign'.⁸⁵ McKinna signalled Field on 1 January: 'For Brig Field. The members of the unit wish you a prosperous New Year and present Pearl Ridge to you as a New Years gift'. Field noted that this was 'A grand start for 1945'.⁸⁶ The battalion report covering the operations stated that 'This small op was most valuable in shaking the whole unit down to an organised team, and refreshing memories regarding points brought out in previous training'.⁸⁷

81 '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', p. 3, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

82 Extract from Matthews diary, 25, 28 December 1944 and 2 January 1945, AWM 67, Item 3/260, Part 2.

83 Field's diary, 26 December 1944, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.

84 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations Piaterapaia Area 15 Dec 1944 to 5 Jan 1945', pp. 3–5, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

85 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 117.

86 Field's diary, 1 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

87 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations Piaterapaia Area 15 Dec 1944 to 5 Jan 1945', p. 6, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

While short in duration, this period of action set important conditions within the 7th Brigade before its more gruelling operations in the south. The attacks conducted by the 9th and, in particular, the 25th Battalions gave these units tangible victories that attracted the attention of the senior commanders on Bougainville. The divisional commander sent congratulatory signals to both units and Savage told Field on 4 January that ‘I’m proud of you and your boys.’⁸⁸ Importantly for the COs, regardless of any tensions that may have existed, their victories had won them their brigade commander’s confidence. Field later told the official historian that ‘The leadership of these two officers laid a solid foundation for later successes in the southern zone of Bougainville.’⁸⁹ As the 25th Battalion had noted, these actions also provided an opportunity for the two battalions to gain valuable combat experience. The 61st Battalion enjoyed neither of these advantages. In addition to providing a company for the 9th Battalion’s rear security, Dexter also provided a platoon to the 25th Battalion for the same purpose, as well as maintaining security tasks within Torokina. On 26 December an additional company also relieved the 2/8th Commando Squadron of its security responsibilities in the Hanemo sector.⁹⁰ The fighting also demonstrated the practical difficulties of meeting the higher level imperative to minimise casualties at the tactical level. If any offensive action was to be undertaken, no amount of firepower would ever remove the requirement for infantry to close with the enemy and this inevitably meant at least some casualties. Importantly, Matthews’s diary entries concerning officer morale indicated a potentially serious problem that sustained operations would exacerbate.

88 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 19 December 1944, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46; Field’s diary, 2 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7; Field’s diary, 4 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

89 Notes by Field on Long’s draft of Chapter 6 of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 7, AWM 67, Item 3/126/4.

90 ‘61 Aust Inf Bn Op Instr No.3’, 25 December 1944, Appendix 18 to 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, December 1944, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

Southern Sector—January to May 1945

The 29th Brigade began the main divisional push south in mid December. It soon ran into difficulties, however, with Field noting on 2 January that General Bridgeford had ‘told me of certain difficulties on the Jaba River sector and tasked me to visit that area with a view to the early relief of 29 Bde.’ A week later he added:

Activities on 29 Bde front do not seem to be making much forward progress... [Brigadier R.F.] Monaghan is edging south to Mawaraka in what looks like a ‘thin red stream’ strung out along the coast. I don’t like the way this is going and fear we shall be involved in taking over a half baked plot from 29 Bde instead of getting away to a clean start in Phase 2.⁹¹

Lieutenant General Savage later described the 29th Brigade’s advance as a ‘disorderly confusion’ and criticised the tactical handling of the operations and the general standard of training in the brigade.⁹² Field’s fears proved founded and Bridgeford decided to ‘relieve 29 Bde from ops for further training and to put in 7 Bde to complete current tasks.’⁹³ As Field noted, the 29th Brigade had not penetrated far inland from the coast and this difficult task now became the focus of his operations.

The 61st Battalion’s campaign in the south started significantly earlier than the remainder of the brigade. On 7 January it was placed under direct command of the 3rd Division and ordered to move to the vicinity of the Jaba River to provide rear area security for the 29th Brigade. A week later Dexter received further orders to assume the 2/8th Commando Squadron’s area of responsibility south of the Jaba. On 18 January the battalion had its first contact on Bougainville, when a patrol encountered two enemy at a range of ten yards and killed one, suffering one wounded. Thereafter patrol clashes were frequent; during the night of 23–24 January a platoon base was probed by an estimated force of forty Japanese. By 29 January these various contacts by the 61st Battalion’s patrols had killed twenty

91 Field’s diary, 2 and 9 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

92 Notes by Savage on Chapter 7 of Long’s draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 6, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 128; letter from Savage to Sturdee, 21 January 1945, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 84. Brigadier Monaghan was subsequently sacked. Notes by Savage on Chapter 5 of Long’s draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 3, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 128.

93 Field’s diary, 16 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

Japanese.⁹⁴ Brigadier Field saw Dexter on 26 January and ‘visited 61 Bn localities on Jaba River road – some excellent work done by pioneers on bridging. Troops and Dexter in very good form.’⁹⁵ Two days later, however, the battalion had its second refusal during the campaign. When ordered to proceed to a forward position, a soldier told his platoon sergeant ‘I have been dodging this day for four years and I’m not going to be in it now.’⁹⁶ He was sentenced to eighty-nine days field punishment and loss of pay.

Meanwhile, on 23 January, the 9th and 25th Battalions began the relief of the 29th Brigade’s units on the coast, south of the Jaba River, and 7th Brigade assumed command of the southern sector. Bridgeford’s orders to the brigade were to clear the enemy from south of the Jaba River to the Puriata River. On 26 January Field issued his orders for the first phase of this mission. Dexter’s battalion was instructed to clear the inland axis of advance, around Kupon, Mosina and Sisiruai and cooperate with the 9th Battalion’s advance from Mawaraka along the track inland to capture Mosigetta. The 25th Battalion was given patrol responsibilities along the Tavera River and tasked with controlling the Gazelle Peninsula and the coastline to the Puriata River, although it was restricted to employing only one company for this latter purpose.⁹⁷ Field’s diary made it clear that he appreciated the difficulties that his troops would face.

The country is full of difficulties with so many creeks and river mouths and treacherous swamps. The firm ground is barely more than 100 yards wide all along Empress Augusta Bay to Mawaraka and inland patrolling is consequently very hard and slow.⁹⁸

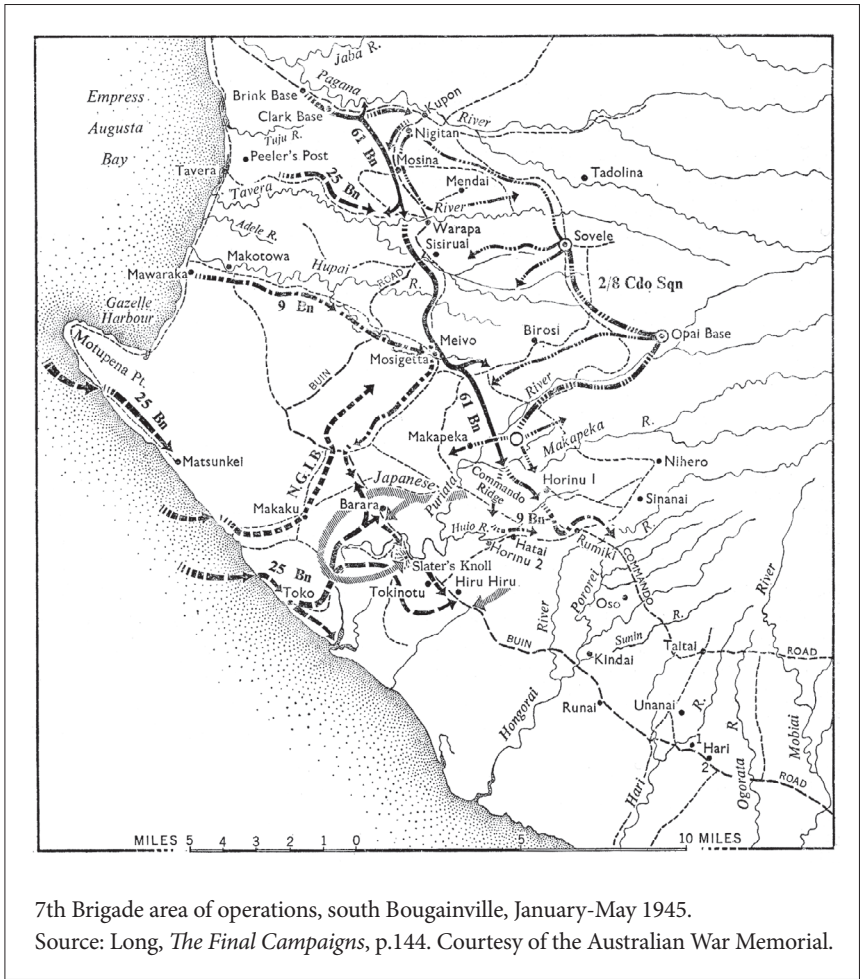
94 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 18, 24 and 29 January 1945, January 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

95 Field’s diary, 26 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

96 61 Battalion Routine Orders, 28 February 1945, Appendix A to 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, February–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96. The first refusal occurred on 28 December 1944, but the offender was only fined five pounds. 61 Battalion Routine Orders, 23 January 1945, 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

97 ‘7 Aust Inf Bde OO No, 8’, 26 January 1945, Appendix B to ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45’, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

98 Field’s diary, 18 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.



7th Brigade area of operations, south Bougainville, January-May 1945.
 Source: Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p.144. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

The brigade report noted that subsequent operations were ‘characterised by all the factors common to previous campaigns in undeveloped areas, where jungle, poor communications and climate have exercised great influence on tactical progress.’⁹⁹ Of particular concern were the supply lines, which relied on track systems that required significant engineering improvement and were highly susceptible to degradation by the region’s regular rains.

Dexter’s operations initially went smoothly and he succeeded in pushing south through a succession of company firm bases until his troops occupied Mosina on 9 February. Long visited the battalion on 11 February and recorded that it ‘is as happy a crowd as I’ve ever seen.’¹⁰⁰ Dexter, however, recorded that the weather changed in early February, the track became ‘a morass of mud’ and that the battalion became reliant on native carriers for casualty evacuation and aircraft for resupply.¹⁰¹ Contacts with the enemy were light, but relatively frequent, and by the end of February the battalion had killed a total of sixty Japanese, nearly twice as many as any of the other battalions since the start of operations in the south.¹⁰² Of particular note was a successful platoon raid on a Japanese position at Warapa, which was later identified as a Japanese battalion headquarters.¹⁰³ It was potentially the most significant action of the battalion’s entire campaign but the rapid withdrawal of the raiding party may have resulted in lost opportunities to exploit this lucky success—Dexter certainly thought so.¹⁰⁴ The battalion report summarised this period, and the unit’s overall campaign in the south, as:

99 ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45’, p. 1, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

100 Long’s notes, 11 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/71.

101 Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, p. 165, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

102 ‘Enemy Casualties from 18 Jan 45 to 28 Feb 45’, Appendix 107 to 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, February 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

103 Field’s diary, 14 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

104 Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, p. 165, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

a series of patrol clashes with small parties of enemy, and rarely was there more than a pl of the bn engaged at one time. There were a few occasions when coys were used against enemy posns, but there were no operations in which the bn was used as such against an enemy posn.¹⁰⁵

On 17 February elements of the 61st Battalion linked with the 9th Battalion at Mosigetta. Dexter ruefully recalled that his men had been beaten to the junction by an hour, and that the men of the 9th Battalion had erected a signpost naming the place 'Matthews Junction.'¹⁰⁶ Casualties had been light, although the battalion did suffer its only officer killed on Bougainville when Lieutenant H.D. Robinson was ambushed on 1 February. Robinson had played a notable part in the battalion's fighting at Milne Bay, for which he had been recommended for a Military Cross.¹⁰⁷ Both Dexter and Field noted that he was a fine officer and Dexter, in particular, 'felt his death keenly.'¹⁰⁸ Such sentiments were shared by the troops.¹⁰⁹

While the 9th Battalion had beaten the 61st to Mosigetta, its advance had been difficult. The old government road leading inland from Mawaraka was largely surrounded by swamp, which made outflanking a succession of small Japanese delaying positions along this axis very slow work. The battalion's war diary noted that on at least one occasion a patrol was forced to spend the night sitting on logs in a swamp.¹¹⁰ The Japanese also employed 75mm and 150mm guns against the battalion's advance, and whilst not particularly accurate this fire was disruptive. Strains in the battalion's morale became evident early. On 29 January Matthews recorded a case of a suspected self-inflicted wound and an instance of a soldier refusing to go on patrol, writing that 'Once cowardice was punished by death

105 '61 Aust Inf Bn Summary of Ops - Period 29 Jan to 7 May 45', 20 May 1945, p. 1, AWM 54, Item 613/6/48. This four page document is significantly smaller and less detailed than the reports from the other battalions covering the same period.

106 Dexter, 'The Battalion - My Home', p. 166, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

107 Long's conversation with C.H. Bicks, 10 February, AWM 67, Item 2/71.

108 Field's diary, 1 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7; Dexter, 'The Battalion - My Home', p. 164, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

109 Tod Schacht, *My War On Bougainville: War Under the Southern Cross*, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, 1999, p. 174; Watt, *History of the 61st Infantry Battalion*, p. 182.

110 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 26 January 1945, January 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

but now we give them medicine'. He also noted that Field had told him that he 'must push on as quickly as possible'.¹¹¹ The next day the CO confided in his diary: 'MO [Regimental Medical Officer] reports diarrhoea in C Coy very bad, also men nearly dead on their feet and morale very low. I had given them the task of capturing the posn ahead but sent them back.'¹¹² After his battalion headquarters was shelled on the morning of 31 January, Matthews rang D Coy and instructed them to 'get the guns' after first light.

Coy Comd said his men were too fatigued. I ordered him to do it and rang off. 1/2 hr later he rang to say he had told his Coy and no man would leave his posn, all refusing duty. I asked him why and they said they were too tired, they were cut off from the world and could not get casualties back and weren't prepared to get any anyway. I told Coy Comd to order his officers fwd and he said he knew they wouldn't but would give it a go. His 2IC rang shortly after and said the Coy Comd cracked up, mental strain, crying. Put 2IC in command and relieved Coy Comd from duty.¹¹³

The CO went forward in the morning and, after sending the company commander to the rear, noted: 'I'll have to charge each officer for disobeying orders later when a complete investigation is made'.¹¹⁴ Brigadier Field noted in his diary on the same day:

BM [Brigade Major] forward to see Matthews this morning as the latter seems to have got a bit low. Problems of morale with troops successively wet and cold each day, living in weapon pits at night when the water is only 9 inches below ground level, and patrolling and movement has to be done through swamp.¹¹⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Matthews had problems with a third company on 1 February 1945 when a platoon commander failed to clear out a Japanese position. 'I sent Pl Comd back and told him to do his task, he said his men were frightened but they went off and completed a good job'. Later that day OC B Company, Captain D.P. Radford, told Matthews that:

111 Matthews diary 13, 29 January 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

112 Matthews diary 13, 30 January 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

113 Matthews diary 13, 31 January 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

114 Ibid. The author could find no official evidence that any formal disciplinary action was taken, despite searching the battalion, brigade, division and corps war diaries.

115 Field's diary, 31 January 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

his officers and men are saying openly that they have no confidence in *me* and that all men are tired and jittery. This Coy has not been in any action yet, only patrols and no one hurt. Officers to blame for creating depressed feelings around them.

The OC C Coy reported on the same day ‘some feeling in his Coy, men say why no tanks, no air spt, no arty?’ That evening Matthews had an encounter with a lieutenant in B Coy over the latter’s failure to enforce malarial precautions, and was informed by a ‘belligerent’ junior that he also had no confidence in his CO.¹¹⁶

The 9th Battalion seems to have weathered this low point and there were no other serious instances of breakdown in morale before the unit was rested in late February. A soldier in the battalion noted that the unit’s morale was raised on 2 February by the capture of a 150mm howitzer which had been shelling the battalion’s rear areas.¹¹⁷ On 21 February, however, Matthews noted the poor performance of a company from the 61st Battalion and deduced that ‘they must be no better than some of my Coys.’¹¹⁸

Matthews kept Field informed about his problems, writing on 3 February:

I discussed the posn with him this morning about morale. He knew something of what had happened and I told him the rest. He was most sympathetic and said he was behind me and hoped I could continue to do well for he wanted me to earn a distinction. His talk bucked me up no end.¹¹⁹

Field appears to have kept a very close eye on developments within the battalion because the brigade’s war diary notes about half a dozen visits by the brigadier, and about the same number of separate visits by the BM, during the remainder of February.¹²⁰ Such visits were made relatively simple by the proximity of Matthews’s headquarters to the coast. Given the circumstances it is not surprising that the 9th Battalion became Field’s priority for relief, which he ordered on 25 February. Significantly, this particular date was forced on the 7th Brigade by General Savige’s insistence that the battalion be withdrawn to the

116 Matthews diary 13, 1 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

117 Schacht, *My War On Bougainville*, p. 170.

118 Matthews diary 14, 21 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

119 Matthews diary 13, 3 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

120 These visits were substantially more numerous than those made by Field and his BM to the other battalions at this time. ‘Record of Movement of Officers – HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde’, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, February 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

coast because of supply difficulties.¹²¹ Matthews recorded that ‘Loud cheers from everyone when news was spread.’¹²² The war diary noted that until 15 March the troops ‘indulged in swimming, fishing’ and film screenings.¹²³ The CO was aware of the critical importance of this rest and resisted pressure to change what Savage saw as apparent idleness.¹²⁴

The 9th Battalion’s responsibilities were taken over by Dexter. The 61st Battalion was now tasked with securing the Mosigetta–Meivo–Pikei area, holding the Mosigetta–Mariga track and linking it to the 25th Battalion at Barara and patrolling within assigned areas to the Puriata River.¹²⁵ Ewen felt that the 9th Battalion’s relief was unfair because ‘they haven’t [done] half as much as our Bn nor have they struck half the opposition.’¹²⁶ Dexter, considering the relief, wrote ‘It was confidently expected that 61 Battalion would soon be withdrawn for a well earned rest.’¹²⁷ There were already signs of battle fatigue becoming a problem in the unit. On a visit to B Coy on 25 February the unit’s RMO noted men ‘sitting and lying around the perimeter, disconsolate to a morbid degree. The company commander said the men could not go much further.’¹²⁸ Dexter also ‘noticed the telltale signs of stress and a distinct inclination to avoid contact with the enemy. In one Company, not in contact with the enemy, the men were too frightened to get out of their trenches.’¹²⁹ According to the CO he talked to Brigadier Field and Major John Summerton, the BM, about his concerns. Rumours abounded about possible relief and Ewen probably spoke for many others when he wrote:

121 Field’s diary, 25 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7; draft letter from Field to Bridgeford, undated (probably 26 February 1945), AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32.

122 Matthews diary 14, 25 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

123 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 1–15 Mar 1945, March–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

124 Pratten, ‘The ‘Old Man’: Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War’, p. 349.

125 ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Op Instr No.4’, 25 February 1945, Appendix MM to ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45’, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

126 Ewen’s diary 1, 26 February 1945, AWM PR89/190.

127 Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, p. 166, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

128 ‘Medical Report on 61 Aust Inf Bn, 10 April 1945’, p. 1, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder ‘W.R. Dexter’.

129 Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, p. 166, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

‘We have been in contact for seven weeks now, which is as long as any Bn has yet done.’¹³⁰ On 1 March the battalion received a signal from the brigade warning that it would be withdrawn to a rest area on the coast. The signal was subsequently cancelled, but not before the adjutant had advised the companies.¹³¹ Dexter believed ‘this signal was the final nail in the coffin for the Battalion ... Apparently John Summerton, the Brigade Major, wrongly anticipated the Brigadier’s thinking and sent the message without confirmation.’¹³²

Throughout the next fortnight the 61st continued having regular, but generally small scale, contacts with the Japanese. In an April report to Field the 61st’s RMO traced a consistent decline in the battalion’s fighting spirit. On 12 March he noted signs of nervous strain in A Company and that ‘the men no longer showed desire to get at grips with the enemy ... The platoon commanders LTs Sloane and Tomlinson, stated that men were refusing to go out on patrols’. In C Company a soldier refused to go on patrol on 8 March and at about the same time ‘LT Brinkley when ordered to take a patrol out ... refused to do so, stating that his men were incapable of carrying on as “their nerves had gone”’. D Company experienced similar problems, with one lieutenant requiring a sedative on 18 March, along with fifteen other soldiers.¹³³ The RMO’s observations are corroborated throughout Ewen’s diary for March. For example, on 9 March he noted that:

130 Ewen’s diary 1, 23 February 1945, AWM PR89/190.

131 ‘Adjutant’s Diary’, 1 March 1945, Appendix 12 to 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, February–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96; Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, p. 166, AWM PR01182, Item 4.

132 A few days later, when Dexter spoke to Brigadier Field about the signal, the latter was unaware it had been sent and told Dexter that ‘the situation did not warrant our withdrawal’. Dexter’s staff could not produce a copy of the message and he later accused the BM of covering up the mistake by hiding the original. However, both the brigade operational report covering the period and the 25th Battalion war diary state that such a signal was sent. Dexter, ‘The Battalion – My Home’, pp. 166–7, AWM PR01182, Item 4; ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45’, p. 30, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7; 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 1 March 1945, March, May–June 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63. Summerton left the brigade shortly afterwards to attend a training course in Australia.

133 ‘Medical Report on 61 Aust Inf Bn, 10 April 1945’, pp. 1–2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder ‘W.R. Dexter’.

Coy (C) has had it. Most of the boys' nerves have gone, and they just can't take it anymore. About a month ago if they bumped trouble they would hop in and have a go, but now it takes the ofrs all their time to get them to hold their ground.¹³⁴

Others outside the battalion also saw the signs. A brigade liaison officer noted on 8 March that 'Troops of the 61 Bn are weary. Their morale, as I have personally noticed, is still high, but it can be seen that they are suffering mental strain.'¹³⁵ The BM visited the battalion on 13 March to discuss morale and two days later Field wrote in his diary, 'Dexter has also represented that his people are now very tired and he is worried.'¹³⁶ On 19 March Dexter wrote to Field what was probably the hardest letter for any CO to pen:

It is very difficult for me to say it, but this unit has now reached such a state of mental and physical strain that it can no longer be regarded as an efficient striking force. The unit has been in for 9 weeks now without a break, which in my experience is a longer stretch for a single unit than I have previously experienced... The men are not yellow, I consider they have done a magnificent job and everything, up to the present, which has been asked of them, but they are just incapable of moving forward.¹³⁷

Field had already begun making preparations for the 61st Battalion's relief before he received Dexter's letter. He briefed Matthews on the evening of 18 March that '61 Bn are completely fatigued and must be relieved as quickly as possible'. Matthews recorded that Brigadier Field spoke to him again on 20 March warning him 'of possible infection of 61 Bn's low spirits on my tps. Says I'll have to combat it. My tps should be OK for a while but if the going gets tough they may crack too'. Major Summerton related further problems to the CO 9th Battalion on 21 March:

134 Ewen diary 1, 9 March 1945, AWM PR89/190.

135 'Report on Visit to 25 Aust Inf Bn, 61 Aust Inf Bn, 2/8 Aust Cdo Sqn - 6,7,8 March 1945'; LT L.J. Rudd, 8 March 1945, Appendix 43 to 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

136 'Record of Movement of Officers - HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde', 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7; Field's diary, 15 March 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

137 Letter from Dexter to Field, 19 March 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

BM says 61 Bn in bad state, troops when fired on rush back in disorder leaving their officers. They are frightened to move out of their perimeters. Patrols go out and do not complete their tasks, sit in jungle and wait for time to elapse, then come in. Brig is very worried naturally.¹³⁸

The relief was complete by 26 March and the 61st Battalion assumed responsibility for lines of communication security and was also tasked to remain ready to assist the 25th Battalion.¹³⁹ In light of subsequent events it is hard not to agree with Dexter's assessment that this relief was akin to 'going from the frying pan into the fire'.¹⁴⁰

As one observer from the 9th Battalion wrote, 'It seems that the 25th Battalion were destined to take the honours in this campaign.'¹⁴¹ In late January a company was initially tasked to patrol inland along the Tavera River, but very quickly McKinna's main effort became moving his forces southwards to Toko via a series of small amphibious landings. By late February the bulk of the battalion had been concentrated in this area and Barara was secured. On 1 March the battalion received orders to spearhead the brigade's movement south of the Puriata River, which was commenced on 4 March. For the remainder of the month the battalion encountered increasingly strong Japanese opposition. On 19 March McKinna launched a two company attack to clear the Buin Road, running south from the Puriata River. The ensuing two-hour firefight was eventually ended by a company bayonet charge. The CO commented that it was the 'bloodiest fight he had seen'.¹⁴² Australian losses were five dead, including two officers, and seventeen wounded, with twenty-nine Japanese confirmed dead. In a follow up attack three days later Corporal R.R. Rattey won a Victoria Cross.¹⁴³

By this time it was evident that a major Japanese offensive was developing. A company from the 25th Battalion was heavily attacked by a large Japanese force during the night of 29–30 March and was forced to withdrawal to a neighbouring

138 Matthews diary 14, 18, 20 and 21 March 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

139 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 20 March 1945, February–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

140 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', p. 167, AWM PR01182, Item 4

141 Schacht, *My War on Bougainville*, p. 190.

142 Matthews diary 14, 19 March 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

143 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, pp. 154–5; Field's diary, 19 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

company position, which then also came under attack. On 31 March McKinna led a composite relief force of infantry, engineers and a tank troop, which had been released for the brigade's use given 'evidence of the vigorous counter offensive by the enemy',¹⁴⁴ to the besieged companies. Over the course of this fighting eight Australians were killed, fifty-eight wounded and 130 Japanese confirmed killed.¹⁴⁵ On the morning of 5 April the 25th Battalion's headquarters group at Slater's Knoll was attacked in great strength, and later two of the forward companies were also attacked. By early afternoon airstrikes, artillery fire and infantry and tank counter-attacks had succeeded in defeating these attacks, which cost the enemy 296 dead at Slater's Knoll alone.¹⁴⁶ McKinna was awarded an immediate DSO and by 14 April the entire battalion had been relieved by a unit from the 15th Brigade.¹⁴⁷

Both the 9th and 61st Battalions were involved in this hard fighting in late March. For example, the 9th Battalion's B echelon at Barara was attacked on the night of 28–29 March, resulting in twenty-three Japanese dead, while a company of the 61st, located near McKinna's B echelon, was similarly attacked on the same night. The following morning the same company was tasked with clearing the track to Slater's Knoll, but after a forty-five minute firefight, resulting in two Australian dead, was unable to dislodge what was estimated to be an entrenched force of seventy Japanese.¹⁴⁸ The 25th Battalion's report pointedly noted that on 30 March, 'Although the responsibility of opening the LOC [lines of communication] to 25 Bn HQ was that of A Coy 61 Bn, the CO decided not to wait any longer, but

144 '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', p. 8, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

145 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', pp. 22–3, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63; Long, *The Final Campaigns*, pp. 161–162.

146 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, pp. 162–3; '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', p. 25, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

147 Field's diary, 8 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7; '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', p. 26, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

148 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 29 March, February–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96; '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', p. 21, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

to endeavour to open the LOC with tps from Bn HQ.¹⁴⁹ This was duly achieved. Elements of the 61st Battalion also escorted the tanks forward on both 31 March and 5 April and assisted with the battlefield clearance at Slater's Knoll on the afternoon of 5 April. The war diaries of both the 9th and 61st Battalions reported numerous minor contacts around this time.

This period was not easy for the 61st Battalion. Field wrote in his diary on 27 March:

Lt Col Dexter and his Bn HQ got in this afternoon – looking pretty tired and very thin. Also looked very worried. I told him to get as much rest as possible and to arrange the rotation of his Coys from along the main track back to the beach areas.¹⁵⁰

Given the unfolding events this was rather optimistic advice. On 7 April Dexter was medically evacuated and wrote to Field five days later:

My complaint has ... been diagnosed as arthritis of the neck causing neuritis of the shoulder and arm ... I feel ashamed and distressed to realise that my health gave away at a critical time; but I am certain now that I would have been useless if I had remained tho it was very hard leaving. This is the first time my health has let me down during a campaign and I feel very strongly about it.¹⁵¹

Field had already made his own assessment, writing on the day of Dexter's evacuation:

I feel he has infected the whole of his Bn with a tired and defeatist attitude so that everyone is now convincing himself that he is tired and 'has had it'. As a CO he has proved unequal to pulling his Bn together and how much of his complaint is real and how much is psychopathic remains to be seen.¹⁵²

149 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', p. 22, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

150 Field's diary, 27 March 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

151 Letter from Dexter to Field, 12 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

152 Field's diary, 7 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

On 9 April he drafted a report to the divisional commander, writing that:

Due apparently to the nervous strain which the officer has experienced and which may have produced a neuritis, it is evident that he has been unable to perform his duties as a Commanding Officer to the extent necessary to support morale and fighting effectiveness in operations for a prolonged period.

The brigadier's final recommendation was that 'I cannot repose any further confidence in this officer, but in view of his long and distinguished war service and experience, recommend that he be transferred to a training appointment'.¹⁵³ Ultimately Savige, who knew Dexter from this service in the 2/6th Battalion, intervened and arranged to send Dexter out on extended leave, from which he did not return.¹⁵⁴

Field moved quickly in an attempt to reconstitute the 61st Battalion as an effective fighting force. On 7 April he informed Major W.G. Fry, the 2IC of the 9th Battalion, that he had the 'task of pulling 61 Bn together'.¹⁵⁵ Fry had played a key role in the defence of the 9th Battalion's B echelon on 29 March and was a highly respected officer.¹⁵⁶ Field informed Bridgeford that he was 'the only Major in the Brigade who is competent to handle the problem and in whom I have confidence'.¹⁵⁷ Field noted after a visit to Fry on 10 April:

discussed the fitness of the unit for further ops. He drew a rather pessimistic picture of the fatigue and the nervous tension of the men some of whom have cried like children under shell fire. He thinks he could push them for another three weeks but is very doubtful if they run into any stiff fighting. It is a serious business and it would never do to risk an anti-climax.

153 Draft report, 'VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn', 9 April 1945, pp. 1–2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'. It appears this report was sent to Bridgeford with a covering letter on 14 April 1945.

154 Notes by Savige on Chapter 6 of Long's draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 2, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 128.

155 Field's diary, 7 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

156 Schacht, *My War on Bougainville*, p. 190.

157 Letter from Field to Bridgeford, 14 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.



Plate 1: Brigadier J. Field, commander of the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade, April 1945. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 091307)

Plate 2: Key officers of the 61st Battalion, just prior to the unit's move to Bougainville: (left to right) Major C.H. Bicks (2IC), Lieutenant Colonel W.R. Dexter (CO) and Captain J.J.S. Hobbs (Adjutant). Although Dexter was a highly experienced officer the battalion's morale was highly problematic during operations on Bougainville. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 075780)





Plate 3: Lieutenant Colonel G.R. Matthews (right), CO of the 9th Battalion, shakes hands with his American counterpart during the relief of US forces in the central sector, November 1944. Matthews was highly motivated to succeed as a commander but learnt that his troops could not be continually pushed. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 077266)

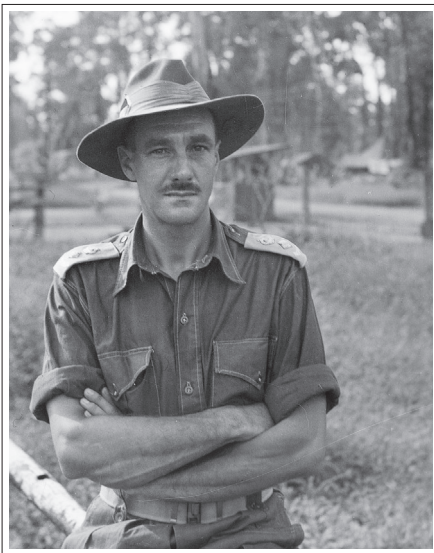


Plate 4: Lieutenant Colonel J.G. McKinna, CO of the 25th Battalion, April 1945. McKinna's troops were involved in unusually heavy fighting in both the central and southern sectors of Bougainville. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 091300)



Plate 5: A jeep train, in support of the 9th Battalion, negotiating a section of road flooded by the Hupai River, March 1945. Resupply operations were severely hampered by the tenuous lines of communication. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 079312)



Plate 6: Matilda tanks moving forward to support the 25th Battalion at Slater's Knoll, 30 March 1945. This was the first time that armour had been employed during Australian operations on Bougainville and it proved decisive. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 018384)



Plate 7: Lieutenant Colonel McKinna (far left) briefs Brigadier Field (second left) and Major General W. Bridgeford (second right), General Officer Commanding 3rd Division, on the fighting at Slater's Knoll, 6 April 1945. The 25th Battalion's experience of combat on Bougainville was one of high intensity, short duration action and heavy casualties. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 090381)



Plate 8: Japanese dead being buried in a mass grave after the failed attack on Slater's Knoll, 6 April 1945. The fierce fighting resulting from the major Japanese offensive in late March and early April tested all elements of the 7th Brigade. (Credit: Australian War Memorial Negative Number 090376)

The brigadier visited a 61st company that afternoon but:

this didn't at all raise my hopes and I came to the conclusion that too much time would be lost and nothing effective done with tired troops. Saw the GOC [Bridgefurd] and reluctantly asked that steps be taken to relieve the Bde. He was very kind and said if anyone was going to worry it would only be myself. We could go out with flags flying.¹⁵⁸

A staff report put the matter more clinically. 'After discussion with sub-unit comds of 61 Inf Bn 9 and 10 Apr [Bde Comd] decided time required to revitalise 61 Inf Bn NOT warranted as whole Div Ops being delayed.'¹⁵⁹

While the 25th Battalion's relief was rapidly expedited, the relief of the brigade's remaining battalions took considerably longer. The 61st remained tasked with rear area security, whilst the 9th Battalion was instructed to continue the advance to the Hongorai River. The 9th was not fully relieved until 4 May, but it was not until 12 May, almost a week after Field's order of the day, that the majority of 61st Battalion was back in Torokina.¹⁶⁰ During this protracted period morale did not improve. Matthews observed on 10 April that 'Bill Fry having a lot of trouble with 61 Bn. They have been ordered to takeover task of 25 Bn and most troops won't budge.'¹⁶¹ What difference Fry may have made was negated by his unexpected promotion to command another battalion in the division, something which Field took 'a poor view of ... with the present situation in 61 Bn.'¹⁶² Ewen noted around this time:

We are well past the previous record established by the 15 Bde for contact with the Nips in the SWPA. Their record was 70 days. We have been in now for 89 days, just three weeks too long. The Bn is in a bad way as the men are all cracked up. Today 9 from D Coy and three from B refused to go on patrol and I believe that A Coy patrols

158 Field's diary, 10 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

159 'STA FF Staff Captain's Report – Period April 1945', Appendix 155 to 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

160 '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', p. 51, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

161 Ewen's diary 2, 24 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

162 Field's diary, 11 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7. It was not until 30 May that Lieutenant Colonel T.J. Farrell arrived as the permanent CO. 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 30 May 1945, April–May 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

only go 200 yards out and sit down. If they send us in again the Coys are going to refuse to go. So things are in a very bad state. Already two officers have been sent back for standing-up for the men. Nearly all the boys have a vacant look in their eyes and look dazed.¹⁶³

Towards the end of April Ewen recorded that 'About 14 of the boys were up for a DCM [court martial] today ... They refused to go out on patrol.'¹⁶⁴ The fact that on 21 April a small Japanese raiding party was able to infiltrate 'under [the] noses' of one company, to attack a bridge on the main track, was illustrative of the level of demoralisation.¹⁶⁵ The battalion's routine orders recorded that six soldiers were formally tried at this time for refusing to go on patrol at various times between 28 March and 22 April.¹⁶⁶

Matthews was not without his own problems in the 9th Battalion, and unlike the 61st Battalion his unit continued having contacts until the day before their relief. In late March his diary recorded that one of his platoon commanders had 'dropped his bundle' after reporting sick instead of leading a patrol.¹⁶⁷ On 11 April he was informed that his battalion was 'to push on as fast as possible and put a good finale on the Bde's campaign' before being relieved. He noted: 'I don't know what the effect will be on the tps when the news is known, they are sure to be less enthusiastic.'¹⁶⁸ Later in April, whilst visiting forward, he recorded that a platoon had 'the jitters and would not go on ... they were about to have a sit down strike. I went amongst them, cheered them up a bit and off they went'. Coming upon the remainder of the company he noted, 'These lads seemed cheerful but a bit nervous. I told the Coy they would be there for a few days and I would relieve them from patrols for as long as I could. The word got around quickly and spirits went up.'¹⁶⁹ He recorded no other significant problems before the battalion's final relief.

163 Ewen's diary 2, 9 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

164 Ewen's diary 2, 24 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

165 'Adjutant's Diary April 1945', p. 4, Appendix 14 to 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, April–May 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

166 61 Battalion Routine Orders, 3 May 1945, 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, April–May 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96.

167 Matthews diary 14, 26 March 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

168 Matthews diary 14, 11 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

169 Matthews diary 15, 17 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

Part Two

Explanations of Morale and Combat Fatigue Problems

On statistical evidence alone the 61st Battalion was not an obvious choice as the battalion most likely to have morale problems. As the tables below demonstrate, it had substantially fewer casualties than either of the other two units, a lower incidence of sickness than the 9th Battalion and its strength state between November and May had not seen a dramatic reduction in numbers. According to calculations in Field's papers, up until 10 April the 61st had also spent a fraction less time in the presence of the enemy than either of its sister battalions, when their time in the central sector was taken into account.¹⁷⁰ Given the ferocity of the 25th Battalion's battles in late March and early April it is highly likely that the 61st killed fewer Japanese than this unit and probably marginally fewer than the 9th. What then explains the dramatic decline in its morale and battle effectiveness?

There can be little doubt that Field placed the blame firmly on Dexter's personal leadership. As he wrote in his report:

It is definitely established in my mind that the deterioration in morale of this Battalion began from the top and originated in the mind of the CO, who from war-weariness does not now possess the robust mentality and stamina needed to deal with a problem of this nature.¹⁷¹

170 'Period Spent in Ops Commitments', undated, 3DRL6937, Item 35.

171 Draft report, 'VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn', 9 April 1945, p. 2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

Table 1: 7th Brigade Strength States, Bougainville, November 1944–May 1945

	9th Battalion		25th Battalion		61st Battalion	
	Officers	Other Ranks	Officers	Other Ranks	Officers	Other Ranks
26 November 1944 (start of operations central sector)	36	682	34	682	36	670
5 January 1945 (start of operations southern sector)	33	608	32	576	35	652
5 May 1945 (end of operations southern sector)	33	595	29	554	33	569

Source: Appendix C to '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

Table 2: 7th Brigade Casualties, Bougainville, November 1944–May 1945

	9th Battalion		25th Battalion		61st Battalion	
	Officers	Other Ranks	Officers	Other Ranks	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed in action/ died of wounds	1	26	4	42	1	14
Wounded	4	75	9	166	0	35
Accidentally killed	0	3	0	3	0	0
Accidentally wounded	0	13	0	4	0	8
Total all types	122		228		58	

Source: Appendix LLL to '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

Table 3: 7th Brigade Incidence of Disease Causing Evacuation, Bougainville, November 1944–May 1945

	9th Battalion	25th Battalion	61st Battalion
Diarrhoea	28	2	20
Skin	81	22	56
Malaria	7	3	12
Total all types	116	27	88

Source: Appendix KKK to ‘7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45’, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

He added later, ‘I am not satisfied that, apart from his mental condition, he has exercised the functions of CO efficiently and in a manner which commands the respect and loyalty of his officers and men.’¹⁷² Faults he listed to justify this conclusion included Dexter’s ‘inefficient use of his 2IC in the forward area in respect to maintaining touch with the critical situation’; his over reliance on his adjutant; recommendations on officer management that ‘suggested a lack of measured judgement’ and, most damning of all, ‘insufficient personal contact with Companies in their operational localities.’ With respect to this last point it was stated:

One Company was not visited by the CO for 5 weeks, and the others infrequently in the period preceding the withdrawal of the Battalion. They were all within easy walking distance. The effect of this on morale has obviously been highly detrimental.¹⁷³

Aspects of this criticism were corroborated by others. The battalion’s RMO concluded in his April medical report on the battalion: ‘I consider that very firm handling is the *only* [emphasis added] treatment these men need, and a new attitude of mind needs to be instilled into the troops.’¹⁷⁴ Ewen related in mid-March that ‘This CO is well named “Dugout Dexter”. I’ve only seen him down here forward

172 Letter from Field to Bridgeford, 14 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder ‘W.R. Dexter.’

173 Draft report, ‘VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn’, 9 April 1945, p. 2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder ‘W.R. Dexter.’

174 ‘Medical Report on 61 Aust Inf Bn, 10 April 1945’, p. 2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder ‘W.R. Dexter.’

twice since the campaign started'.¹⁷⁵ When noting Dexter's departure from the battalion he added, 'Don't think Dexter is a Bowler hat job as he has handled this show well even if he never got off his spine'.¹⁷⁶ Lieutenant Colonel K.S. Picken, a contemporary of Dexter's from the 2/6th Battalion, later told Long:

he had expected he [Dexter] would crack up in comd of a bn during a hard campaign. D was one of those men who could not relax and soon was tired and living on his nerves. His appearance of alertness and hardness was a cloak for the strain beneath. There were many like him who came out of every campaign whether it lasted 2 days or 6 months utterly done.¹⁷⁷

In his own memoir Dexter noted that, as the morale situation worsened, he went 'from being completely on the ball and confident, I began to worry and experience shame at the negative attitude within the Battalion'.¹⁷⁸ He added that, after the action at Slater's Knoll, 'the constant pressure of trying to inspire a ... militia battalion had finally sapped my strength and I was physically and mentally worn out'. Whilst recovering in hospital he learnt:

that original members of the AIF would be granted a discharge from the service if applied for. I had completed over five and a half years in the Army practically all overseas and I thought what the hell. I was browned off anyway and there was no indication of an early end to the war. I thought the fighting in Bougainville futile and unnecessary, and I did not relish returning to the Battalion with its negative attitude – the 'sixty-worst' not the 61st I thought.¹⁷⁹

As Pratten has noted, however, Dexter's case was not unique. 'In 1945, at least nine [COs] were removed from command for what is best termed combat exhaustion. All but one had joined the AIF in 1939 and their decorations included three DSOs, an MC and three Mentions in Despatches'.¹⁸⁰

175 Ewen's diary 2, 13 March 1945, AWM PR89/190.

176 Ewen's diary 2, 16 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

177 Long's conversation with K.S. Picken, 20 August 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/94.

178 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', p. 167, AWM PR01182.

179 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', pp. 165–9, AWM PR01182. Long, who was Dexter's cousin, recorded in February that Dexter had only had twenty-four days leave between August 1942 and February 1945. Long's notes, 6 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/68.

180 Pratten, 'The 'Old Man': Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War', p. 351.

It has been argued that Dexter's strong identification with his AIF background militated against him forming an effective attachment to his command.¹⁸¹ He made it clear in his memoir that he never felt comfortable in a militia unit and that he found the 61st Battalion's fighting spirit lacking, even before its commitment to action.¹⁸² How much of this was retrospective it is difficult to tell. However, it might shed light on Dexter's apparent problems with his 2IC, Major C.H. Bicks. Bicks had been with the battalion since 1939, initially as a private, and won a DSO at Milne Bay as a company commander. He told Long that he had not joined the AIF because his age would have precluded him getting a commission.¹⁸³ This alone was not something likely to endear him to Dexter and they were twelve years apart in age. Evidence of a clash is suggested by Field's explanation of Dexter's misuse of his 2IC.

This officer [Bicks] has had a long and distinguished service with the Battalion, possessed my confidence and was held in high respect throughout. He should have been employed by his CO to assist him in his responsibilities.¹⁸⁴

Regardless of the state of their relationship, Bicks left the battalion some time in March for Europe to assist with the repatriation of prisoners of war, just as the battalion started to break down.¹⁸⁵

While Dexter's leadership undoubtedly had a significant impact on the 61st's morale, it is hard to see how an officer accused of not having enough contact with his forward troops could have had such a thoroughly negative impact upon them. Although the RMO's report pointed to the requirement for a new mindset, one that the CO was beholden to provide, it did point out that the 'lack of self confidence reflected by officers and NCOs' was a significant factor in the soldiers' anxiety states. Private Ewen wrote in late April, 'Even the officers have

181 Pratten, 'The 'Old Man'', p. 350; James, 'The Final Campaigns: Bougainville 1944–1945', p. 254.

182 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', pp. 158–60, AWM PR01182.

183 Long's conversation with C.H. Bicks, 10 February, AWM 67, Item 2/71.

184 Draft report, 'VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn', 9 April 1945, p. 2, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

185 'Adjutant's Operation and Action Diary – February 1945', p. 5, 61 Infantry Battalion War Diary, February–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/96; 'A Branch Information Summary No. 11', 14 March 1945, 3 Australian Division Adjutant and Quartermaster General Branch War Diary, January–March 1945, AWM 52, Item 1/5/6/27.

given the game away. During this show there were about six officers given Bowler hats.¹⁸⁶ An undated draft letter by Field mentions Dexter's concerns about one of his majors.

It appears to me that in all the other circumstances you relate there are sufficient grounds for the submission of an adverse report. I consider that you have no option but to submit this since you appear to have insufficient confidence in him even to give him a trial in action.¹⁸⁷

This may have been one of the cases where Dexter displayed 'a lack of measured judgement' but it should be noted that the officer in question was medically down-graded in April and then employed as the area commander at the Toko Base.¹⁸⁸

The question of leadership at the more junior levels was one that Field repeatedly turned to in his diary. Commenting on the early difficulties in the 9th Battalion he wrote, 'This unit is undoubtedly cramped by a shortage of good officers and more particularly good NCO section leaders. This is largely due to the pernicious policy of draining us of good NCOs for training units.'¹⁸⁹ Given the largely small-team nature of much of the brigade's operations in the jungle, this was a particular handicap and Field felt strongly enough about it to raise the issue with the Chief of the General Staff when he visited on 13 February.¹⁹⁰ The 3rd Division's final report on operations made a similar observation, adding: 'Units actively engaged in operations have been obliged to send competent NCOs to Training Battalions at a time when reinforcements were not available. Few reinforcements arrived to offset the constant drain in unit NCO strength.'¹⁹¹ The lack of experience at the lieutenant level across the 7th Brigade has already been noted. The divisional report also noted that:

186 Ewen's diary 2, 28 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

187 Draft letter from Field to Dexter, undated (after 7 March 1945), AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

188 'A Branch Report April 1945', 3 Australian Division Adjutant and Quartermaster General Branch War Diary, April–May 1945, AWM 52, Item 1/5/6/28.

189 Field's diary, 7 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

190 Field's diary, 13 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

191 '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945', pp. 159–60, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

Many adverse reports on officers were dealt with. In the majority of cases the necessity for the report arose when the officer went into operations for the first time and it was found that he was not capable of commanding troops in action.¹⁹²

Matthews, in commenting on his general lack of first-rate officers, told Long that it was 'not surprising when the best officers were picked from the militia bns for the AIF'.¹⁹³ Whilst these problems obviously existed across the brigade they help explain why Dexter's difficulties were not the sole leadership failure in his battalion.

When Field wrote to General Bridgeford about Dexter on 9 April he noted:

All Battalions of this Bde have taken part in operations in south Bougainville for a period of 13 weeks, in which they have been in contact with the enemy. Although much good work was done by 61 Aust Inf Bn in the earlier weeks of operations, this unit has not experienced the severity of fighting and adverse terrain conditions met with by the other two Battalions, nor have numbers been reduced to the same level as the others.¹⁹⁴

If the collective failure of leadership in the battalion was the biggest factor in its disintegration, Field's failure to appreciate the accumulated effects of battle fatigue on the 61st Battalion was a contributing factor of almost equal importance. Field readily acknowledged that 'Rotations of Bns from a fwd to reserve position is a matter for myself who can estimate the conditions of the troops much better than any higher authority'.¹⁹⁵ However, it was misleading to suggest that all of the battalions had spent an equal period in frontline duties. As previously noted, the 61st actually arrived in the Jaba River area on 7 January, under command of the division, and within a week was pushed further south. Its first contact was on 18 January, almost a week before the brigade's remaining two battalions arrived in the southern sector. The 7th Brigade's own records showed that by 28 February

192 '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945'; p. 159, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

193 Long's notes on conversation with Matthews, 12 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/67.

194 Draft report, 'VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn', 9 April 1945, p. 1, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

195 Draft letter from Field to Bridgeford, undated (probably 26 February 1945), p. 3, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32.

Dexter's troops had killed the same number of Japanese as the other two battalions combined. These results were generally obtained in repeated clashes, rather than larger, less-frequent actions. Whilst the 9th Battalion's movement from Mawaraka was undoubtedly arduous, the 61st Battalion was further inland, had a greater distance to cover and was suffering supply difficulties.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this misunderstanding was the failure at the brigade level to fully understand the 'peculiarly insidious strain upon morale' made by jungle operations. Matthews put it best when he wrote: 'Our tps will go anywhere if they know they have a great chance of success, but probing by manpower only into the thick jungle and being shot at from the unseen enemy daunts the strongest heart.'¹⁹⁶ Peter Medcalf, a soldier in the 29th Brigade, explained that the strain of waiting for a possible encounter with the Japanese was what wore down a man's nerves.¹⁹⁷ The 61st Battalion's operational report summed it up best: 'The long period during which the unit was engaged, although comprising minor patrol clashes and not big engagements, resulted in a severe sapping of res[erves] physically and mentally.'¹⁹⁸ In essence, whilst the 61st Battalion could not point to spectacular successes, by the time it started showing consistent signs of fatigue in early March it had been continuously in the field since mid-January, experiencing all the stresses that jungle warfare inflicted. During the same time the 9th Battalion had enjoyed a fortnight of rest on the coast and it is doubtful whether the 25th Battalion's coastal moves had exposed it to the same degree of stress. Ironically, when the situation got so bad that Field was forced to relieve Dexter's men they were moved into a rear security role just at the point when the Japanese commenced their counterattacks throughout the brigade's entire area of operations. The battalion was then left in a rear-area security role for another month before being the last unit of the brigade withdrawn from the southern sector, over three and a half months after it had first pushed south of the Jaba River. In the simplest terms, the 'countdown to breakdown' caused by the realities of combat had been allowed to continue for far too long.

196 Matthews diary 15, 22 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

197 James, 'The Final Campaigns', p. 358.

198 '61 Aust Inf Bn Summary of Ops – Period 29 Jan to 7 May 45', 30 May 1945, p. 2, AWM 54, Item 613/6/48.

There was also irony in Field's criticism of Dexter for not visiting the forward troops often enough because the brigade's records indicate that the brigadier visited the 61st Battalion only once during March, on the 3rd.¹⁹⁹ Field explained that "The conduct of operations and the period of absence entailed away from my HQ made personal visits to this Battalion on my part irregular and infrequent. Numerous visits were however, made with great regularity by members of my Staff."²⁰⁰ This was true and Dexter's location on the inland flank made personal contact more difficult. Field also noted that "Assurances were conveyed to me that the Unit would carry out its allotted role in the advance to the Hongorai River although it was reiterated on a number of occasions that the troops were tired."²⁰¹ Dexter's memoir and his letter to Field of 19 March suggest a sense of frustration in getting his concerns through to the brigade headquarters, and it is tempting to speculate that more frequent visits by the brigade commander in late February and the first half of March might have resulted in prompter recognition of the battalion's state.²⁰² Interestingly, the 9th Battalion's CO complained in late April that Field had not visited his battalion's troops in over five weeks.²⁰³

Undoubtedly a multitude of other factors played a part in the 61st Battalion's demise. The lack of any noteworthy victory, and corresponding lack of recognition by the military hierarchy, was important. The battalion did not get the same opportunity as the other units to have a limited exposure to combat in the central sector. One observer has suggested that the death of Lieutenant Robinson was a factor.²⁰⁴ Dexter noted the obvious ramifications of the misunderstanding over the cancelled relief on 1 March.²⁰⁵ Dexter's personal relationship with his brigade commander may also have been a factor—Dexter was the newest of the COs within the brigade and probably did not have a well-developed understanding with his commander. A relatively obscure issue that seemed to generate considerable angst

199 See 'Record of Movement of Officers – HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde', March 1945, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, February and March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

200 Draft report, 'VX5172 Lt Col W.R. Dexter 61 Aust Inf Bn', 9 April 1945, p. 1, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

201 Ibid.

202 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', pp. 166–7, AWM PR01182; Letter from Dexter to Field, 19 March 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32, sub folder 'W.R. Dexter'.

203 Matthews diary 16, 26 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

204 Schacht, *My War on Bougainville*, p. 185.

205 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', p. 167, AWM PR01182.

was the question of leave. As early as 15 December Field noted that a complaint 'had been transmitted via II Corps that "61 Bn has had no leave for 3 years most of which period has been spent in New Guinea"'.²⁰⁶ While this was not true, all units of the 7th Brigade had commenced service in Bougainville with many men having very large leave credits. In contrast, the 15th and 29th Brigades had leave before departing from Australia.²⁰⁷ Statistics in Field's papers showed that 633 personnel within the 61st Battalion had not had leave for 12 to 18 months, considerably higher than either of the other two battalions.²⁰⁸ On 18 February he was compelled to write a confidential memo to his COs 'on the subject of leave rumours.'²⁰⁹ Ewen's diary contains a substantial number of references to that very subject. On 19 March he noted 'it is quite possible that we may be back in Aussie for the Anzac March ... next month.'²¹⁰ The issue of arranging leave after the brigade's relief occupied Field throughout late April.²¹¹ The final arrangements dictated by higher authorities, which limited the amount of leave that could be taken and only allowed drafts to depart when the preceding one had been concentrated for return, were described by Field as 'an injustice to all concerned and will be widely resented.'²¹² Like junior leadership, this was a brigade-wide problem but one that was particularly sensitive in the 61st Battalion. Long noted, 'There are men in this Bn (61) who've had only 24 days leave since Milne Bay.'²¹³ On the departure of men from the battalion on leave, Ewen noted:

206 Field's diary, 15 December 1944, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 6.

207 '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945', p. 158, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

208 'Leave – 7 Aust Inf Bde Gp', undated, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 35. It is probable that this was part of a 'comprehensive memorandum on leave' Field mentioned in his diary in April. Field's diary, 19 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

209 Field's diary, 18 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

210 Ewen's diary 1, 19 March 1945, AWM PR89/190. See also entries 23 February and 25 March.

211 Field's diary, 17, 19, 20 and 27 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

212 Field's diary, 28 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

213 Long's notes, 6 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/68.

That is 60 men they will never see again unless of course we all go back within the next couple of months. Old Doc Carrington went from the sec[*tion*]. I think he has 50 odd days leave due and all the others have the same so they will not come back till they have their leave, even if it means going AWL [*absent without leave*].²¹⁴

This issue was to play a part in the last major incident in the battalion's history. When Field was finally advised, in the second week of May, that Dexter would definitely not be returning, he requested Lieutenant Colonel Terence Farrell as his replacement.²¹⁵ Farrell arrived from Australia on 30 May, and in July Field noted 'I'm satisfied that he will bring 61 Bn up to the old standards again.'²¹⁶ However, when the battalion was again ordered to assume responsibility for rear-area security in the south on 7 August, more than seventy members of the battalion refused to move. Field recorded that 'They are nursing a grievance about leave and possibly think that the end of the war is imminent.'²¹⁷ Farrell was sent back from the south to sort the problem out. Brigadier Field noted that Farrell was 'unable to effect any change in the attitude of the 70 men who had refused duty. Charges were accordingly being drawn up. This is a poor finish and a stain on the name of the 61 Bn.'²¹⁸ It also suggested that not all of the problems within the battalion were of Dexter's making.

214 Ewen's diary 2, 28 April 1945, AWM PR89/190. There were similar sentiments in the 9th Battalion. Matthews diary 16, 2 and 4 May 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

215 Field's diary, 11 May 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

216 Field's diary, 11 July 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

217 Field's diary, 9 August 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7. This incident is also covered in Ewen's diary and the II Corps report on operations in the Solomons. The numbers vary between 70–76 personnel, depending on the source. Ewen was one of the dissenters and received eighteen months field punishment, although he only served three months. His explanation was, 'It's a long story of Bad Army Adm. All the officers had leave and half the Bn were on leave when we were ordered back up'. The corps report noted 'This instance of ill-discipline was isolated and directly attributable to failure of troops to get leave which they had been expecting'. Ewen's diary 2, 7 January 1946, AWM PR89/190; 'Report on Operational and Administrative Activities 2 Aust Corps in the North Solomons Area October 1944–August 1945', p. 79, AWM 3DRL6643, Item 3/83.

218 Field's diary, 10 August 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

The twin factors of leadership and exposure time to combat were also critically important for the 9th Battalion. It has been argued that when the battalion's first difficulties began Matthews was out of touch with the conditions his troops were experiencing. It has also been suggested that D Company's collective refusal to continue on 31 January was a 'wake-up' call for the CO and that he subsequently modified his approach and paid closer attention to the needs of his troops.²¹⁹ These observations are supported by the instances related above, where Matthews resisted pressure from his superiors to interfere with the men's rest during the battalion's break from operations and his willingness to modify tasking when required. Perhaps, however, they also say something about Matthews's own intrinsic motivation. Unlike Dexter he was not war weary. In March, when Matthews recorded news of his brother's death in a POW camp, he wrote: 'There are men in this unit who do not want to fight and plenty in Australia. I feel more determined than ever now.'²²⁰ Tod Schacht, a private in the 9th Battalion, writing about the morale problems in February, noted:

Colonel Matthews, who was a big, strong man, and very much a bold, ambitious Australian soldier, was faced with growing and conflicting opposition to his aggressive leadership. His superiors were not without the desire to seek a piece of glory in military history ... There seems to have been constant pressure for aggressive advances, with the chance for our leader to gain distinction for himself.²²¹

Matthews had not seen action since early 1943 and, given his reaction to Field's suggestion that he might earn a decoration if he 'kept up the good work', it is not difficult to surmise that he was highly motivated to prove himself as a battalion commander. While this motivation was initially a cause of the unit's difficulties, it also provided the strength Matthews needed to coax the 9th through its problems and he eventually did receive a DSO.²²²

The fact that these problems manifested themselves so early demonstrated that under the right conditions battle exhaustion could develop rapidly. Unlike the 61st Battalion, where this developed slowly, the conditions faced by the 9th Battalion during its initial introduction to the southern sector led to serious morale issues

219 Pratten, 'The 'Old Man'', pp. 347-9.

220 Matthews diary 14, 14 March 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

221 Schacht, *My War on Bougainville*, p. 170.

222 Letter from Matthews to Field, 28 March 1947, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 35.

just over a week after it commenced operations. This was perhaps a good example of how quickly a 'collective decline in will' could spread through a unit. Matthews' leadership, the deficiency in experienced junior officers and NCOs already noted and the particularly difficult nature of the terrain all combined to wear down rapidly much of the unit's morale within the space of two to three weeks. Whether Matthews' change in approach alone would have been sufficient to overcome these problems over an extended exposure to combat is debatable. In retrospect, the relief of the battalion in late February, enforced on the brigade for reasons that had little to do with morale, was most fortunate. The fortnight of collective rest that the 9th Battalion enjoyed on the beach in early March must be seen as a critical factor in its ability to continue functioning effectively until its final relief in early May. Even then signs of battle fatigue and lowered morale became evident after this break. Had fortunes been reversed, and the 61st Battalion been given such rest, it is by no means a sure thing that the 9th Battalion would not have suffered the same disintegration suffered by Dexter's unit. It should be remembered that when his battalion was relieved in late March it did not enjoy any real rest but instead became embroiled in the Japanese counterattacks of late March and April. In commenting on Dexter's removal Matthews wrote, somewhat uncharitably, 'he has shown his inability to comd. "Uneasy lies the head"'²²³ As Pratten noted, however, Matthews probably should have added "There but for the grace of God ..."²²⁴

Other factors also contributed to the stabilisation of the 9th Battalion's performance. It had already won accolades for its activities in the central sector and thus had creditability with brigade headquarters. Matthews seems to have enjoyed a better relationship with his 2IC, Major Fry, who probably provided much needed support to the CO during his 'crisis of command' in early February.²²⁵ At the very least Fry was present in the unit at this critical time—unlike Bicks. Perhaps most importantly, Matthews seems to have enjoyed a stronger relationship with his brigade commander than Dexter. This should not be surprising because Matthews had been a CO in the 7th Brigade since early 1943 and, as the senior unit commander, would have administered the brigade on occasions when Field

223 Matthews diary 16, 27 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

224 Pratten, 'The 'Old Man', p. 351.

225 For instance, Fry accompanied Matthews on his visit to B Coy on 1 February when the latter was challenged by one of the lieutenants. Matthews diary 13, 1 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

was absent.²²⁶ Field was a frequent visitor to Matthews' headquarters during early February, aided by its proximity to the coast.²²⁷ The fact that the CO was able to candidly discuss his unit's problems with the brigade commander may well have played a part in the brigadier's decision to make the 9th Battalion a priority for relief, or at least gave Field a clear appreciation of what one of his units was going through. This set of factors did not coalesce for Dexter.

With no private records in the public domain to shed light on the inner workings of the 25th Battalion it is difficult even to know whether it had any morale problems. Its official report on operations recorded:

The troops fought magnificently and showed courage, dash and determination. Their spirit and morale was reasonably good up to 19 March 45, when B Coy made their memorable bayonet charge. After that it soared amazingly – the lads were 'on top of the world'; and it would have taken more than the Japs on Bougainville to reduce their spirit and enthusiasm. Morale continued to rise if that was possible, until the end of the campaign, when it was second to none.²²⁸

This made for good reading and fitted comfortably within the Anzac stereotype but is unlikely to have been entirely true. Not surprisingly, members of the battalion displayed signs of extreme combat fatigue after their battles of late March and early April. Ewen observed that the troops of the two forward companies cut off in late March 'cried when the tanks arrived and no wonder they had been fighting for their lives three days not knowing what had happened to the rest of the Bn'.²²⁹ Participants recalled the exhaustion and fraying of nerves associated with such testing times.²³⁰ The speed with which the battalion was relieved after the final battle on 5 April was a good indication of the truer state of affairs within the unit. Morale may not have been a problem, but battle fatigue certainly was.

226 This was certainly the case when Field became the acting divisional commander in May 1945. 9 Infantry Battalion War Diary, 21 May 1945, May–July 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/46.

227 See 'Record of Movement of Officers – HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde', February 1945, 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, February and March 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

228 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', p. 27, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

229 Ewen's diary 2, 1 April 1945, AWM PR89/190.

230 James, 'The Final Campaigns', p. 273.

In many ways the 25th Battalion's experiences were the complete opposite of the 61st's campaign. It arrived in the south later, after a dramatic unit victory in the central sector. Although it was never rested in the same manner as the 9th Battalion, it was fortunate to have been on the coastal flank of the advance and does not seem to have experienced the difficulties encountered by the 61st or 9th Battalions. From mid-March onwards it fought a succession of company and battalion actions, suffered heavy casualties and was then rapidly withdrawn. In essence, its primary experience of combat was one of high-intensity, short-duration action where men had little option but 'to do or die'. In comparison, the 61st's war on Bougainville was dominated by sustained patrolling, often uneventful but still straining. This suggests that it is misleading to measure battle exhaustion only in terms of frequency of battle, number of friendly casualties and kills inflicted on the enemy. Less dramatic exposure to the stresses of the combat zone, over a longer timeframe, could result in breakdown just as easily as more recognisable causes.

McKinna features strongly in the March and April battles, and undoubtedly his leadership contributed greatly to the battalion's successes. He was well forward during the attacks on 19 and 22 March, personally led the relief party to his isolated forward companies on 31 March, and was instrumental in coordinating the defence of Slater's Knoll on 5 April. At one point in late March his reconnaissance group was contacted and captured a prisoner, light machine gun, sword and some documents.²³¹ It is difficult to disagree with Dexter's assessment that he was a 'top soldier', or with Long's observation that the CO 'had led his battalion with great skill and coolness.'²³² Field also felt that McKinna 'has done a magnificent job.'²³³ Given that it was the 25th Battalion that had delivered nearly all of the brigade's most dramatic results it is difficult to see how he could have thought otherwise. This admiration seems to have been reciprocated. McKinna's unit report on operations concluded its general comment by saying:

231 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945', pp. 18–19, 21–23, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63; 'Operations in the Puriata River Region, Part 1', 19 May 1945, pp. 7–8, 10, AWM 54, Item 613/6/47; 'Operations in the Puriata River Region, Part 2', 24 May 1945, pp. 9, 11, AWM 54, Item 613/6/47.

232 Dexter, 'The Battalion – My Home', p. 167, AWM PR01182; Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 163.

233 Field's diary, 4 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

This report would not be complete without mention of the valuable guidance and assistance provided by the Bde Comd and his staff... The fact that each request from this Unit received the approval and support of Bde HQ, gave assurance that the Unit was being solidly backed up by Bde and that they had a full appreciation of the situation forward.²³⁴

It is most doubtful that Dexter felt the same way. The strong relationship between Field and McKinna should be considered an important contributing factor to the 25th Battalion's effectiveness.

Field told the official historian that the Bougainville campaign 'often seemed to be conducted "on a shoestring" and required results with minimum casualties despite the hard tasks.'²³⁵ This was not a feeling unique to the 7th Brigade, but a review of its operations in the southern sector does suggest that this brigade, in particular, was simply asked to do too much with too little—something that must have placed considerable stress on the morale of the formation's units. This manifested itself in a constant pressure to produce results, as Matthews' diary indicates on more than one occasion. Bridgeford's divisional order of 3 February specifically stated that once the junction at Mosigetta was secured 'not more than inf bn should be based inland in order that the maintenance problem be kept to the minimum.'²³⁶ Field's appreciation the next day concluded: 'It is my opinion that the decision to base not more than one Battalion inland following the capture of Mosigetta will be quite inadequate for tasks ensuing thereafter.'²³⁷ He developed his subsequent operations on the basis that this assessment had Bridgeford's endorsement but on 25 February the corps commander intervened when he

234 '25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville 16 January to 14 April 1945'; p. 28, 25 Infantry Battalion War Diary, January–April 1945, AWM 52, Item 8/3/63.

235 Notes by Field on Long's draft of *The Final Campaigns*, p. 1, AWM 67, Item 3/126/4.

236 '3 Aust Div OP Instr No 19', 2 February 1945, Appendix DD to '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

237 Field's appreciation, 3 February 1945, Appendix D to '7 Aust Inf Bde Report on Operations 26 Oct 44 to 16 May 45', 7 Infantry Brigade War Diary, August 1945, Appendices, AWM 52, Item 8/2/7.

believed that his instructions to the divisional commander had been ignored.²³⁸ It was this that actually initiated the 9th Battalion's immediate relief. Brigadier Field felt so badly treated by Savige's interference that he drafted a resignation letter which explained the difficulties of both fighting and maintaining the supply routes. He reiterated that 'I have no confidence that such a result [placing forces at the decisive point and maintaining the tracks] will be achieved by operations based on *one* Bn inland and sea movement on an unfavourable coast.'²³⁹ Ultimately Field was forced to accept the order but it was largely the 61st Battalion, operating inland, that was left to deal with the repercussions. As the campaign progressed higher policy was refined to the point where it allowed one brigade to be in action while another was deployed forward to provide rear-area security and maintain the lines of communication.²⁴⁰ In this respect the 7th Brigade suffered from being the first formation to undertake protracted operations in the south. As always, the people who bore the results of such deliberations were the frontline soldiers. It is not surprising that the 61st Battalion's historian made a number of general references to the unrealistic expectations of higher headquarters.²⁴¹

The other area where this basic underestimation of the challenges facing the brigade was demonstrated was in the limited offensive support provided for its operations. Matthews was critical of the artillery ammunition allocations available to the 9th Battalion, both in the central and southern sectors.²⁴² During the brigade's relief in late April Matthews wrote: 'Brig is very annoyed with 15 Bde, they get all they ask for particularly arty fire. Says he should now apologise to his COs for all the restrictions he has placed on them in the past.'²⁴³ Although

238 Field's diary, 25–26 February 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7; 'Telephone conversation GOC 2 Aust Corps and GOC 3 Aust Div', 25 February 1945, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 32.

239 Draft letter from Field to Bridgeford, undated (probably 26 February 1945), p. 3, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 32.

240 '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945', pp. 31–2, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75. Compare '2 Aust Corps Operation Instruction No 7', 26 February 1945 to 'Operational Directive Issued by Comd 2 Aust Corps to GOC 3 Aust Div, 19 April 1945', 3DRL2529, Item 88.

241 Watt, *History of the 61st Infantry Battalion*, pp. 209–10.

242 Matthews diary 13, 3 February 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5; Matthews diary 14, 23 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

243 Matthews diary 16, 27 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

a squadron of tanks and a medium battery were available on the island, corps policy dictated that these were withheld from use in the south until late March.²⁴⁴ While there may have been sound reasons for this policy,²⁴⁵ and these assets did arrive just in time for the critical battles, this did little to help the brigade's units in the first two months of their deployment. Inadequate air support was another of Field's concerns, forcing him to raise the matter formally in early April.²⁴⁶ The divisional report on operations later noted that the 7th Brigade had suffered from inadequate allocation of air support during the majority of its campaign in the south. By way of comparison, in the period from late April to late June, the 15th Brigade was supported by 2262 aircraft sorties, while between February and April the 7th Brigade received only 394 sorties.²⁴⁷ Although this disparity was caused partly by the arrival of more aircraft, even before this occurred Field estimated that the brigade was receiving only sixty airstrike sorties a month out of possible total of 868.²⁴⁸ The overall result of these problems was a feeling in the brigade that it had been inadequately supported, as evidenced by an entry in Matthews' diary:

24 Bn [15th Brigade] moved fwd with 2 ½ Btys arty, airforce, 6 tanks and flame throwers also hy arty... We could have been at Kahile by now if we had that much. It makes me sore to think we had to use *man* power to get our kills.²⁴⁹

Wider Implications

The breakdown in morale in the 9th and 61st Battalions raises the obvious question of whether these were isolated incidents, produced by a unique and complex set of factors, or were in fact more commonplace on Bougainville. There are no obvious indications of large-scale problems in the 3rd Division's and II Corps' official records of this period. Yet a number of factors are suggestive of underlying problems. A *draft* copy of the division's legal branch report on the campaign noted

244 '2 Aust Corps Conference Notes,' 24 May 1945, p. 2, 3DRL2529, Item 88.

245 Long's notes on conversation with Savige, 2 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/67.

246 Field's diary, 3 April 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

247 '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945,' pp. 130–1, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

248 'Summary of Requests Accepted and Declined, 1 Mar–1 Apr 45' attached to Field memo on air support, 2 April 1945, 3DRL6937, Item 35.

249 Matthews diary 15, 17 April 1945, AWM PR89/079, Item 5.

'A number of refusals to go on patrol were also encountered'.²⁵⁰ In late April, II Corps released an administrative instruction on self-inflicted wounds, directing that 'Where a wound or injury which is sustained by a member at a time when he is in action is of such a nature that it could have been self-inflicted' it was to be investigated under the supervision of the relevant unit CO.²⁵¹ Savige also released a directive entitled 'Man Management – Prevention and Handling of Battle and Long Service Fatigue'. It appears that this was produced in early May, just after the 7th Brigade's relief in the south.²⁵² This in itself suggests that the problems in the brigade did not go unnoticed at the corps level. The directive highlighted that 'During recent months heavy wastage has been suffered in the loss of leaders, from Battalion Commanders to Section Leaders, from mental and physical deterioration due to operational fatigue'. It noted that 'conditions in jungle warfare first attack the mental outlook of troops', and instructed that dedicated rest areas be established in the forward areas. It also ordered 'Frequent inter Coy and inter Battalion relief in forward areas to the fullest extent which operations permit'.²⁵³ The Bougainville campaign involved simultaneous offensives in the north, central and southern sectors and involved two independent brigades, as well as the 3rd Division. Given that these were all militia formations and had

250 'Report on Operations, Legal Branch HQ 3 Aust Div', draft, AWM 54, Item 613/5/9. The paragraph containing this sentence has the word 'omit' written beside it and the published report contains no reference to patrol refusals. See '3 Aust Div Report on Operations November 1944–August 1945', pp. 162, AWM 3DRL2529, Item 75.

251 '2 Aust Corps Administrative Instruction 9 – Self-Inflicted Wounds', 27 April 1945, AWM 54, Item 421/2/1.

252 See 'A Branch Conference With Service Representatives, 10 May 1945', p. 1, 2 Australian Corps Adjutant General Branch War Diary, May–June 1945, AWM 52, Item 1/4/10/12.

253 'Tactical and Administrative Doctrine for Jungle Warfare, Administrative Directive No 7, Man Management – Prevention and Handling of Battle and Long Service Fatigue', undated (probably May 1945), pp. 3–4, AWM PR82/074. There is no issuing authority listed on the document but its style makes it very likely that it was issued as an addition to Savige's pamphlet on jungle warfare printed in January 1945. See 'Tactical and Administrative Doctrine for Jungle Warfare', 20 January 1945, 3DRL2529, Item 123; 'A Branch Conference With Service Representatives, 10 May 1945', p. 1, 2 Australian Corps Adjutant General Branch War Diary, May–June 1945, AWM 52, Item 1/4/10/12.

similar compositions to the 7th Brigade in terms of military demographics, it is not improbable that other instances of *collective* combat fatigue and failures in morale occurred. There is some evidence that this is true, but further research is required.²⁵⁴ Concerns about junior leadership, in particular, were not confined to the 7th Brigade. Brigadier Simpson, Monaghan's replacement as commander of the 29th Brigade, noted in his final operational report that the majority of his junior officers had 'limited tactical knowledge', required special supervision because of their 'lack of self confidence and stability' and that the 'standard of the average officer, including some of field rank, was below that which might reasonably have been expected.'²⁵⁵

Two broader questions are raised. The first is whether the fact that the 7th Brigade was a militia formation made it more susceptible to morale and battle fatigue problems than AIF formations. The comparative fighting effectiveness of the militia and the AIF was a source of heated debate throughout most of the Second World War.²⁵⁶ Field obviously believed that with the right leadership there would be no difference. Commenting on reports of low morale and malarial problems in the 6th Division (AIF), he stated: 'All this is a matter of discipline and we have substantially proved it here.'²⁵⁷ However, Dexter became scathing about the general fighting spirit of his militia troops and even McKinna believed that 'the X numbers [AIF volunteers] ... were the best soldiers. The casualties among X numbers were far higher than among militiamen.'²⁵⁸ If this is the case the difference in numbers of AIF volunteers between the 61st Battalion and its sister battalions might go some small way towards explaining its deterioration. Even Gavin Long, the most impartial of observers, wrote: 'AIF units contained a

254 For example, see James, 'The Final Campaigns', p. 199. For another instance of an individual company commander refusing to obey orders see Robin Corfield, *Hold Hard Cobbers: The Story of the 57th and 60th and 57/60th Australian Infantry Battalions 1912-1990, Volume Two, 1930-1990*, 57/60th Battalion Association, Glenhuntly, 1991, p. 249.

255 'Bougainville, Report on Operations 29 Australian Infantry Brigade, May to August 1945', p. 3, AWM 3DRL 2529, Item 79.

256 For example, see John Barrett, *We Were There: Australian Soldiers of World War II*, Viking, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 287-97; Johnston, *At the Front Line*, pp. 62, 178.

257 Field's diary, 1 May 1945, AWM 3DRL6937, Item 7.

258 Long's notes on conversation with McKinna, 14 February 1945, AWM 67, Item 2/73.

higher proportion of forceful leaders both in the ranks and among the officers, and there was probably a greater dash and aggressiveness in the AIF units.²⁵⁹ He added that:

the fact that AIF units were regarded as being senior and superior to militia ones was not concealed. For example, promising commanding officers who had led militia battalions for a year or more were transferred to AIF battalions as though such a transfer were a promotion.

He further noted: 'It was generally agreed that, as a rule, in mixed units the volunteers were the better soldiers.'²⁶⁰

A conclusive answer to the relative fighting worth of these two groups, and their relative vulnerability to battle fatigue, is beyond the scope of this study. However, if Long's observations are accepted, and the old adage that there are 'no bad units, only bad officers' is applied, it does suggest that the Army policy of sending experienced AIF officers to command militia battalions was insufficient. Aside from its commander and three infantry battalion commanders, the 7th Brigade had essentially no other experienced AIF infantry commanders in its ranks, at least at the officer level. While COs were unquestionably critical, jungle warfare required equally competent company commanders, junior officers and NCOs. Given that it was militia formations who, by a quirk of fate, ended up in the biggest campaign fought by Australians in 1945, the Army, as a whole, might have been better served by the more liberal provision of experienced AIF leaders, of all ranks, to militia units. High quality NCOs and junior officers, in particular, were needed to form and sustain the primary groups required to successfully resist battle fatigue.²⁶¹ The requirement for a more measured rotation of personnel, in reverse, was also true. A small but generally older and more senior core of militia leaders spent almost their entire wartime careers in one battalion. Whether

259 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 77.

260 Ibid, pp. 77–8.

261 Field Marshal Slim's concern about elite units stripping the wider Army of quality leaders is perhaps instructive in this regards. William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942–1945*, Cooper Square Press, New York, 2000, pp. 546–7.

this was an entirely healthy trend is questionable, and a personnel system that enforced a greater two way movement between the AIF and the militia might have been beneficial.

The second question concerns the extent to which the story of combat morale and battle fatigue in the 9th, 25th and 61st Battalions reflected other systemic problems in the AMF. Long believed that the Army was ‘in many respects, at the peak of its efficiency’ by 1945.²⁶² But in many ways the Army was more an organisation that had reached a peak and was commencing a gradual decline. By July Australia was maintaining seven infantry divisions, six of which were in action—a higher number than at any other time during the war.²⁶³ The long years of war since 1939 had taken their toll. Simpson noted: ‘It is realised, that as war progresses, so, after a certain time the peak quality of manpower in an Army commences to show signs of deterioration.’²⁶⁴ As Pratten has remarked, by 1945 the AMF was ‘facing a potential command crisis’ as it attempted to spread its increasingly tired cohort of experienced regimental leaders across an organisation that was bigger than the nation could sustain.²⁶⁵ Perhaps this explains the absence of experienced AIF leaders in the 7th Brigade. Some doubt must also be placed on the effectiveness of the training regime that was charged with preparing for battle the emerging junior leaders, who increasingly had no previous combat experience. Half of the lieutenants in the 7th Brigade joined their units in 1944, most without the benefit of any combat experience, and junior leadership problems do seem to have been a contributing factor to morale problems within the formation. On the other hand, perhaps this simply demonstrated that there were limits to what training could reasonably be expected to achieve in preparing junior leaders for the realities of combat. Given the complexity of these issues, perhaps the only thing that can be said with any confidence is that the AMF was indeed fortunate that it was not required for the invasion of mainland Japan in 1946.

262 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 73.

263 David Horner, ‘The Final Campaigns of the Pacific War’, in Peter Dennis (ed.), *1945: War and Peace in the Pacific*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1999, p. 93.

264 Notes by Simpson on the official history of the Lae and Huon campaigns, 22 April 1955, p. 6, AWM 93, Item 50/2/23/474.

265 Pratten, ‘The ‘Old Man’’, pp. 327, 353. Australia had a greater percentage of its population serving in the Army during the war than any of the other Commonwealth countries and the United States. Ellis, *The Sharp End*, p. 396.

Conclusion

Previous studies of the combat morale and battle fatigue problems experienced in the 7th Brigade during its campaign on Bougainville have explained these mainly in terms of leadership at the CO level, or by general discussion of combat fatigue. The two central themes that emerge from this study are similar—the critical part of leadership in maintaining combat morale, and the fact that the stresses of the battlefield inevitably took their toll and had to be managed accordingly. However, critical factors can be obscured unless these themes are examined in all their complexity.

The different fates of each of the battalions in the 7th Brigade were strongly influenced by their respective COs, something that validates just about everything that has ever been written about command at the regimental level. However, leadership influences also operated at other levels and, while it is tempting to think of COs as omniscient, this ignores the fact that their leadership, on its own, was not enough. Jungle warfare, in particular, required high-quality leadership at the company and platoon levels and there were evident problems with this in the brigade. COs established and maintained *esprit de corps*, linking wider Army purposes to the identity of the unit. The junior battalion leaders established and maintained the primary group cohesion required to keep men motivated to fight. It was very difficult for one to work without the other. The differences in support that the COs of the 9th and 61st Battalions received from their 2ICs might also have been a factor. The relationship between leaders above the unit level was also important. Matthews and McKinna enjoyed Brigadier Field's confidence and support. This was not so evident in his relationship with Dexter. Commanders were responsible for monitoring morale and battle fatigue. It has been argued that one of the other important leadership failures in the campaign was Field's slow appreciation of just how badly demoralised and fatigued the 61st Battalion had become. In essence, for whatever reason, it took him too long to understand the severity of the problem. Perhaps this was partly Dexter's fault, but the fact that he actually had to write his letter of 19 March is symptomatic of Field's failure to

read the signs. Even when the 61st was relieved it is arguable whether Field did enough to allow it to be reconstituted, although enemy action certainly made this difficult. The fact that the battalion was the last unit relieved in the brigade, more than three and a half months after it had started operations in the south, smacked more of neglect than personnel management.

In fairness to Field, what this study also demonstrates is that measuring combat fatigue is actually a very difficult art. Reliance on statistics alone was not enough. The realities of combat on Bougainville meant that from the time the brigade's units crossed the Jaba River the countdown to breakdown had commenced, regardless of how many contacts with the enemy occurred. How quickly this countdown approached a critical level was based on a myriad of factors, including the quality of unit leadership, difficulty of terrain, sense of achievement, ability to obtain rest, number of tasks allocated and the intensity and frequency of combat. In this sense the story of the 7th Brigade on Bougainville really is a tale of three battalions with very different campaign experiences.

The 61st Battalion missed out on action in the central sector and the benefits that this provided to its sister battalions, and commenced operations in the south early. Its war was one of constant patrols and frequent, but comparatively low intensity, contacts. The battalion's decline in morale and accumulation of battle fatigue was gradual and not acted upon until too late. When it was relieved, enemy action meant that it was not able to gain proper rest. Even after this, its long period conducting rear security was not sufficient to revive its collective will. The 9th Battalion, in comparison, scored early success in the central sector and began operations in the south later. The decline in its collective stock of courage was actually rather rapid, but this was mitigated by a CO who adjusted his approach and, perhaps more importantly, by a fortnight of proper rest. Significantly, this occurred before its problems had reached breaking point. For the remainder of its campaign the countdown continued, but at a rate that allowed it to remain effective until its relief. The 25th Battalion enjoyed a spectacular victory in the central sector and commenced operations in the south at the same time as the 9th. The available sources do not allow close examination of the real state of its morale, but a number of points can be made. It was fortunate at being allocated the coastal flank of the advance and seems to have remained fresher than the other two battalions during the first half of the campaign. During the second half it was involved in a series of high-intensity company and battalions actions that probably saw its stock of courage rapidly worn down. Its subsequent rapid relief

and return to Torokina supports this assessment. Thus measuring morale and combat fatigue was a complex business, with no ready templates, and necessitated constant vigilance. Most importantly, if judgements were mistaken they could not readily be rectified.

A number of other factors could impact on morale and fatigue. An unrealistic appraisal by superior headquarters of the difficulty of the tasks given to subordinate formations and units could obviously place considerable stress on morale and make battle fatigue more likely. There is evidence that this was the case for the 7th Brigade, which for all intents and purposes was the first formation to undertake protracted operations in the south. Orders placing limits on the number of troops that could be employed for certain tasks risked placing too much burden on those so employed. Field argued strongly for the use of two battalions in the inland sector but was overruled. This forced the relief of the 9th Battalion and left its tasks to the 61st Battalion, which was unlikely to have helped the latter's cohesion at a critical time. The limited offensive support and fire support assets made available to the brigade, particularly during the first stage of its campaign, is also an indication that the difficulties associated with its tasks were not appreciated at the higher levels. Other intangibles played a part, such as how perceptions of leave inequalities were managed. Finally, simple chance must be said to have impacted on events. If the 61st Battalion had been closer to the coast and selected for early rest, instead of the 9th Battalion, the tale of three battalions might have been very different.

This study raises a host of other questions about whether the collective failures of morale within the 7th Brigade were evident elsewhere on Bougainville, whether militia units were more prone to morale and battle fatigue pressures than their counterparts in the AIF, and whether the problems encountered in southern Bougainville between January and May 1945 were signs of more significant underlying weaknesses in the wider Army. It suggests that a personnel policy that provided more experienced AIF leaders, of all ranks, to the militia and enforced the movement of militia officers outside of their original battalions might have been beneficial. It also suggests problems in the training regime used to prepare junior leaders lacking the benefits of battle experience for their duties.

It is fair to ask whether this tale is nothing more than an interesting story, which occurred over half a century ago under conditions not likely to be repeated, or if it has relevance to the present. The 61st Battalion's experience of war on Bougainville could be said to share much in common with current deployments—long periods of operating in complex terrain against a largely unseen enemy, where

the experience of combat is not of big battles but instead numerous small actions. In this age of the 'Long War', the way in which the combat fatigue induced by this type of environment gradually wore down morale in the 61st Battalion, over a prolonged period, is of particular importance. As the 7th Brigade found, training leaders to maintain morale and manage battle fatigue under these circumstances is not an easy task.

Finally, this study suggests that attempts to generalise about collective failures in combat morale and the results of battle fatigue reaching critical levels are flawed. Tolstoy commences *Anna Karenina* with the wise observation that 'All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'²⁶⁶ The same applies for military units with combat morale and battle fatigue problems—each must be studied with due regard for the individual circumstances and complexities that combined to break the primary group and *esprit de corps* bonds required for success in combat. Evidence of such problems is not, however, likely to be found in any official history. This is unfortunate as it does nothing to help future Australian soldiers to appreciate, and train for, the morale and battle fatigue pressures inflicted by war.

266 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 1.

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