

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01732-0 - The Hard Slog: Australians in the Bougainville Campaign, 1944–45

Karl James

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

On 19 April 1945, 29-year-old Sergeant John Ewen looked at the map on the wall of his weapon pit. His unit, the 61st Battalion, had been in action in southern Bougainville for more than three months. In his journal he confessed to shuddering every time he looked at those dashes on the maps that indicated tracks. They looked so ‘cold and matter-of-fact’, but they meant more than just lines or features.

There are two inches of track which I mapped under fire the whole way and which cost 3 of our boys wounded . . . To us it means blood and sweat and days of intense nervous tension . . . Perhaps when years later school-kiddies pick up maps of these islands and find names of roads and hills and rivers such as Blanche’s Junction, Holland’s Stream and Slater’s Knoll [they] may wonder how they were named. How are they to know that somewhere along the road lays the body of the man it’s called after. Or that that little blue stream running along over the map once held hidden Jap foxholes in its banks, and out of which a stream of bullets cut the thin line of life of the soldier – who was the first to attempt to cross it.¹

Ewen’s prediction has not come true. Bougainville was one of the largest campaigns fought by Australians during the Second World War. More than 30 000 Australians served on the island, and more than 500 were killed. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded during the campaign. Today, however, few people know that Australians fought on the island during the war, let alone ask about a place called ‘Slater’s Knoll’. If they were aware of the campaign, it would only be as one of the unnecessary campaigns. When the war came to a sudden end in 1945, Australia had been marginalised from the key battles that would defeat Japan, relegated instead to bypassed areas carrying out ‘mopping-up’ operations in Australia’s Mandated Territory of New Guinea and Bougainville and on Borneo. Although the necessity and the political and strategic

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justifications for these campaigns have been passionately debated, the operations themselves have received scant serious attention. Beyond a handful of soldier memoirs, unit histories and specialist publications, there has been little scholarly work since Gavin Long's volume of the official history, *The Final Campaigns* (1963). Twenty years later, journalist Peter Charlton reinvigorated the debate with his provocative book, *The Unnecessary War* (1983), which was highly critical of the campaigns fought in the Mandated Territories. More recently, British war correspondent and historian Sir Max Hastings' sweeping *Nemesis* (2007), on the final year of the war in Pacific, caused a brief uproar when he alleged that Australian forces were 'bludging' in bypassed areas of New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo rather than fighting in more prominent areas.² Historian Peter Stanley's excellent *Tarakan* (1997), about the first of the Borneo operations, is the only detailed campaign study of this period. Stanley argued, contrary to popular opinion, that the Borneo operations were a justifiable use of Australia's forces acting as part of an international wartime alliance.³

This book uses an approach similar to that of Stanley, to appraise critically the notion that Bougainville was an 'unnecessary' campaign and arguing just the opposite. The campaign fulfilled the government's long-stated policies of maintaining an active military effort and employing Australian forces in Australian territory. Crucially, the campaign was initiated when the Australians mistakenly believed they outnumbered the Japanese and was conducted for the pragmatic reason of freeing the large force from garrisoning the island indefinitely. There were failings and reverses, both on and off the battlefield, but the Australians carried out their tasks with skill and success.

Bougainville was one of the longest and most exhausting campaigns conducted by Australians during the war. It was a slow, gruelling campaign. Lieutenant Colin Salmon, a tank commander from the 2/4th Armoured Regiment, later described the campaign as 'just one hard long bloody slog'.⁴ Relieving the Americans in Torokina on Bougainville's west coast in November 1944, Lieutenant-General Stanley Savige's Australian II Corps fought a nine-month campaign to destroy the Japanese, who had been occupying the island since 1942.

The campaign, fought with limited resources, was tightly controlled by Savige, who focused on keeping Australian casualties to a minimum. Savige divided the island into three operational areas: the Central, Northern and Southern Sectors. In the Central Sector, the Australians crossed the rugged mountains to the east coast. Savige used this sector as a

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‘nursery sector’ where inexperienced units were given the opportunity of gaining combat experience – to be ‘blooded’ – before being deployed to the other, more active areas. In the Northern Sector, the Australians followed the northwest coast towards Buka. Moving on foot and by a series of amphibious landings, the advance went well until a small force was landed at Porton Plantation in June 1945. Suffering heavy casualties, the force was eventually evacuated in what was the only Australian defeat of the campaign.

The main fight was in the Southern Sector as the Australians headed towards Buin, the major Japanese base on the island. The war the infantry knew was one of patrolling along stinking, humid jungle tracks and putrid swamps in an intimate, personal war of section patrols and the occasional company-size attack. The strain of constant clashes with the Japanese and harassing artillery fire eroded the men’s morale. ‘Strikes’ occurred in two Australian battalions as the stress became too much for some. They were soon faced with a greater test. In April 1945 the Japanese launched a major counter-attack. The main blow fell on an Australian battalion dug in around the feature called Slater’s Knoll. Although the attack was poorly coordinated, the encircled and outnumbered Australians were hard pressed by the Japanese. The battalion was close to being overrun before the arrival of Australian tanks broke the Japanese attack. With tanks, artillery and air support, the Australians were able to continue the slow advance towards Buin. The Japanese resisted stubbornly, fighting to hold each track and river crossing. They skilfully infiltrated the Australian lines, laying improvised mines and setting ambushes along muddy, corduroyed roads. The Japanese experience of the campaign was one of deprivation, desperation and defeat. In the most extreme instances, a few even resorted to cannibalism.

This book does not attempt to retell a narrative already comprehensively told in Long’s official history. This book is an analysis of the campaign that examines why and how it was fought, and it blends the experiences of those who fought it: the officers and soldiers, the Australians and the Japanese. The first chapter is a detailed discussion of the debates surrounding the final campaigns. The remaining chapters follow the campaign’s different sectors and phases.

As the person most responsible for the campaign’s conduct, General Savage receives the most attention. His career spanned two world wars. He entered the army as a private and retired a lieutenant-general. Brave and personable, he liked a drink and cared about his men’s welfare, thus earning himself the nickname ‘Uncle Stan’. He could also be moody,

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irritable, controlling and paranoid. The commander's role in an action or an operation is very different from the experiences of a soldier. There is a disparity between what commanders, such as Savige, see as they look at a map in a headquarters and what a soldier, such as Sergeant Ewen, sees as he looks over the edge of his weapon pit into an ominous jungle. A close study of personal diaries and documents reveals the pressures and tensions brought about by the varying and at times competing perspectives of senior and more junior officers, and officers and soldiers.

Another theme of this book is the AIF/militia rivalry that characterised the early years of the war. A legacy of the First AIF's achievements in the Great War was the celebration of the superior soldierly abilities of Australian volunteers over conscripted British and American soldiers. Volunteers, it was alleged, enjoyed a stronger *esprit de corps* and would not be reluctant or hesitant in battle. Such sentiments were lauded when the Second AIF was serving in the Middle East, but on its return to Australia in 1942 tensions quickly erupted between the AIF and the militia's conscripts. Discrepancies in pay, conditions of service and prestige exasperated the divisions. Such historians as Mark Johnston have examined the AIF/militia rivalry as it occurred during 1942.⁵ There has been a tendency to assume that this rivalry dissipated after the AIF and militia fought alongside each other in Papua. But on Bougainville, the AIF/militia rivalry was ever present, simmering just below the surface ready to ignite.

UNCLE STAN

Stanley Savige was no stranger to controversy; he had spent as much time fighting his critics as the Axis. Long thought Savige, in his mid-fifties, with spectacles and an increasing girth, looked more like a businessman than a soldier. Long wrote in his notebook that, while Savige's staff would invariably beat him badly at chequers, he had the 'gift of leadership, knowledge of men, great tact, and much common-sense'. He was loyal, both to his seniors and juniors, and did not believe ill of any unit that ever served under him, even briefly, and regarded any officer or man who had been under his command as one of his family. He received loyalty in return.⁶ Savige's most recent biographer, Gavin Keating, described him as one of the last examples of a time when 'senior commanders could rely on personal bravery, leadership skills and "knowledge of men" to be successful'.⁷

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Born in country Victoria in 1890, Savige left school when he was 12. He held a variety of casual and labouring jobs before enlisting in the AIF as a private in 1915. He served with the 24th Battalion on Gallipoli where he received a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant. He went on to serve on the Western Front in some of the AIF's bloodiest battles such as Pozières and Second Bullecourt, and was decorated for his good work and devotion to duty. In late 1917, now a captain, he volunteered for special service and was sent to Persia with Dunsterforce in 1918. In an outstanding feat of coolness and bravery, Savige led a small band in an epic rear-guard action that protected a column of 60 000 Armenian and Assyrian Christian refugees fleeing the Turks. Charles Bean considered it 'as fine as any episode known to the present writer in the history of this war'.⁸ Savige was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for the action. He wrote a book about his experiences, *Stalky's Forlorn Hope* (1920), after the war.

The Great War provided Stanley Savige with an opportunity for social and professional advancement that would have been unthinkable years earlier. He became a successful businessman and continued soldiering in the militia during the interwar period. His most significant achievement, though, was as one of the founders of Legacy (an organisation dedicated to caring for the widows and dependants of those killed in war) in 1923. During this time, he became close friends with Sir Thomas Blamey, who was then Victorian police commissioner and a senior officer in the militia.

When war was declared in September 1939, Blamey was appointed by the government as the commander of the Second AIF, and he chose Savige to raise and command the 6th Division's 17th Brigade. The 6th Division was riddled with factionalism, infighting and class snobbery among its senior officers. Savige and Brigadier Arthur 'Tubby' Allen, the 16th Brigade's commander, felt on the outer of their brother officers' clique. Fortunately the two liked and admired each other, becoming friends and allies. Differences in educational, social or professional backgrounds can make people super-sensitive to prejudices, and the two brigadiers with their modest origins suffered from this affliction; but it was not unwarranted. Brigadier Edmund 'Ned' Herring, commander of the division's artillery, had a particularly poor opinion of Savige, thinking he had reached his limit as a brigadier.⁹

During the AIF's first action in the war, the 17th Brigade performed unevenly in the Libyan campaign in January 1941. The brigade's advance during the battle for Bardia was described as 'disorganised and tired', and

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Savage's ability to cope with the fluid demands of modern warfare was doubted.¹⁰ The remainder of the campaign frustrated and disappointed Savage. His brigade was used piecemeal during the capture of Tobruk later in the month with its units dispersed over a wide area and as a pool of reinforcements for the other brigades. Savage had been promised a more prominent role, but he was continually disappointed. He felt that time and again his brigade was ordered to stop so that others could lead the way. He was a modest man but was proud and super-sensitive.¹¹ He rightly felt that he was being victimised by the professional officers of the Staff Corps on the division's headquarters' staff.¹² Unhappy, suspicious and increasingly bitter, Savage commanded his brigade in Greece during April, then during the battle for Damour during the Syrian campaign in July. Keating argued that the Greek campaign highlighted Savage's strongest leadership qualities. He was always at the 'hottest spot', one officer recalled, and his personal example and bravery encouraged his soldiers.¹³ In late November, Savage was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his part in the Libyan campaign, but he learnt soon afterwards that he was to return to Australia to become Director of Recruiting. Blamey thought that this would be a good way of retiring Savage with honour.¹⁴

Japan and the Pacific War saved Savage from obscurity, giving him the opportunity to restore his reputation. In January 1942 he was promoted to major-general and became commander of the militia's 3rd Division. He was unimpressed by many of the division's officers. They 'were the type who didn't want to fight', he later commented. 'I was really sick at heart when I saw the unreal outlook & effort which I could only term as "Gathering mushrooms and chasing rabbits". Bullshit, malingering, social ambitions and bugger all in the way of getting on with the job was in full cry.' Savage felt his only solution was to 'sack right & left' and 'obtain AIF people'. He noted there was a 'powerful jealousy towards AIF or anything AIF', but he dismissed this as simply an 'outward sign of inferiority complex'. Savage did, however, believe in the soldiers. 'I found the men & NCOs just the same honest to God blokes we found in the AIF... & I have no doubt, we shall get places with them.'¹⁵ This approach proved crucial for improving the quality of the 3rd Division, which was proved during the difficult Salamaua campaign in New Guinea during 1943.

During this campaign an incident occurred that revealed Savage's opinion of himself as well as his strengths and weaknesses as a commander. The commander of a nearby American force approached Savage for

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help with supply problems. The American recalled, ‘Savidge would not talk about supply. He waved his hand airily and said, “I don’t worry about supply problems – I leave that to others. I fight battles.”’¹⁶ In Savidge’s mind, a commander trained his men, looked after their welfare and morale, and led them into battle. An author of the official history, David Dexter, considered that this was one of Savidge’s strengths. ‘The sight of the well-loved general toiling along the rugged tracks’, Dexter wrote, ‘with his pack up and observing the battle area from the forward observation posts gave a great boost to the spirits of the men.’ As Savidge moved among the troops ‘pannikins of tea were offered in such numbers that he could drink no more’.¹⁷ But Savidge’s was a limited interpretation of generalship.

As the Australian campaign in New Guinea was winding down, in March 1944 Savidge was appointed lieutenant-general and the next month became commander of New Guinea Force in Port Moresby. His appointment came at a time when Australian operations had wound down, and it was not anticipated to be a challenging period. This changed unexpectedly in August when Savidge learnt that he would command the corps sent to Bougainville. Savidge took a tried and tested staff with him to Bougainville. They were the ‘others’ to whom he left supply problems and the like. This was no accident. Blamey was ‘well aware of Savidge’s military failings . . . and always kept an outstanding staff officer close to him’.¹⁸

Savidge’s principal staff officer was Brigadier Ragnar Garrett, a Staff Corps officer. Their association began in April 1941 when Blamey had sent Garrett to act as an operations staff officer for Savidge’s brigade in Greece.¹⁹ Garrett was the Brigadier General Staff when Savidge took over New Guinea Force, and the two worked together closely for the rest of the war. Garrett later told war correspondent and Blamey biographer John Hetherington that Garrett’s personal standing with Savidge depended on whether or not he agreed with Savidge. ‘When I agreed I was “Ragnar”. When I didn’t I became “Garrett”’.²⁰ After the war, Garrett went on to become Chief of the General Staff.

Savidge’s chief administrative officer was Brigadier Beauchamp ‘Roly’ Pulver, Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General. Another Staff Corps officer, Pulver had been Savidge’s original brigade major in the 17th Brigade. Similarly, Savidge’s artillery commander, Brigadier William Cremer, had commanded the field regiment usually attached to the 17th Brigade in the Middle East. Savidge’s personal assistant and *aide-de-camp* were also former members of the 17th Brigade.²¹

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That Blamey had selected Savige for Bougainville served as a strong indication of how Blamey thought the campaign should be conducted: in slow and tedious advances, with constant patrolling and small-scale actions. Special attention would have to be paid to morale and man management. It was exactly the type of campaign that suited Savige's strengths.

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CHAPTER

THE UNNECESSARY WAR

We have got to play our part.

Age (Melbourne), 28 June 1944

Conceived and conducted when the war was expected to continue until at least 1946, the aggressive operations fought in New Guinea and Bougainville during 1945 were initiated in order to shorten the campaigns with the ultimate goal of freeing up Australian manpower. They were also fought in accordance with the Australian Government's long-standing desire to see its troops shouldering such a burden of the fighting so as to ensure a favourable post-war position for Australia. Debate and controversy has surrounded these final campaigns ever since the war. In early 1945, for example, the United Australia Party's Senator Hattil Foll claimed that Australian forces were being 'whittled away on a more or less "face-saving" task' in New Guinea and Bougainville.¹ The campaigns were debated in parliament while the press echoed these criticisms. The soldiers had their own opinions, too. Major-General Jack Stevens commented that his veteran 6th Division had not been happy with returning to New Guinea instead of participating in something that would directly contribute to ending the struggle. No one wanted to become any more involved 'than was absolutely necessary'.² Sergeant S.E. Benson was more direct, writing bitterly that it had been 'a purely political decision' to fight an aggressive campaign on Bougainville in an obviously 'strategic backwater'.³

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Veterans, journalists and historians have often repeated this notion that the campaigns in Australia's Mandated Territories were an 'unnecessary war' in which men's lives were wasted needlessly for political rather than any strategic reasons.⁴ Some, most notably Charlton, have asserted that the campaigns were fought for the self-aggrandisement of old generals. The eminent historian David Horner, who has published more than anyone else on Australia's wartime strategy and high command, is one of the few people who have argued consistently that on balance the New Guinea and Bougainville offensives were 'probably necessary'.⁵

THE CONTROVERSIAL COMMANDER

The discussion and criticism usually focuses on General (later Field Marshal) Sir Thomas Blamey, charging him with initiating needless offensives against a bypassed and impotent enemy. Blamey is a man who still stirs heated passions. Short and rotund, he wore a short grey-white moustache and was called the 'little (fat) man' by one of his commanders.⁶ He was a skilled staff officer with a cutting intellect and forceful personality. He was fiercely loyal to friends and supporters. He was also tactless and attracted controversy. Blamey's military career spanned two world wars, and he is the only Australian to rise to the rank of field marshal.

In 1906, when the Australian army was still in its infancy, Blamey became one of a select few professional officers when he was commissioned as a lieutenant. Completing Staff College, Quetta (then in India), he was sent to London and briefly served in the War Office after war was declared in 1914, before joining the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), which was training in Egypt, as a staff officer. Landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, Blamey went on to serve with distinction during the Great War to become Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash's chief of staff on the Australian Corps in 1918. Monash later described Blamey as having a 'mind cultured far above the average, widely informed, alert and prehensile'.⁷

Blamey left the army in 1925 to become Victorian police commissioner but continued soldiering for most of the interwar period in the Citizen Military Forces, colloquially known as the militia. His time as police commissioner was dogged by scandal. Shortly after he became commissioner in 1925, police raided a brothel and found a man with Blamey's police badge, Badge 80. Privately, Blamey maintained that he had been dining at the Naval and Military Club that night and had lent his key ring, with his badge, to a man visiting Melbourne with whom he had served during the war. Savage, then a major in the militia, had been dining with Blamey and