AT THE FRONT LINE

Experiences of Australian Soldiers in World War II

MARK JOHNSTON

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CHAPTER ONE

THE UNNATURAL LIFE AT THE FRONT

Soon after arriving in a forward area in Papua, a diarist in a regiment waiting for its first action wrote of an encounter with a group of veterans who were being evacuated: 'Those fellows certainly looked "all in". "Yes", they told us, "it's tough up there".'[1]

Front-line soldiering, the life 'up there', has always been the art of the barely possible. In executing orders, the combat soldier frequently pushes himself to the very limits of endurance. His is what one Australian infantryman called an 'unnatural life'.[2] That life's exacting quality emerges again and again in the testimonies written by Australian front-line soldiers in World War II.

FEET AND BACKS

Combat soldiers commented repeatedly on their trying physical experience. Australians marched themselves to exhaustion in almost every campaign. Men in rifle companies, especially, could be sure that in any operation, marching would comprise a substantial and tiring part of their movements to and at the front.

For example, although motorization was important in the Australians' first campaign, in Libya, the infantry covered great distances on foot. During the two main battles, the assaults on Bardia and Tobruk, men of all three participating brigades made wearying marches. At Tobruk on 21 January 1941, for instance, the 2/8th

Battalion marched 32 kilometres, the last 8 of them in action. Of the march preparatory to the assault, one member wrote 'my feet felt as though they were worn down to the knees'.[3]

Much more footslogging was ahead of this and other units in the two weeks between the fall of Tobruk and the entry into Benghazi. In the three days culminating in the fall of Giovanni Berta, for instance, the 2/8th marched approximately 85 kilometres and the 2/7th Battalion 120 kilometres, mostly over difficult country. Writing home about this chase to Benghazi, Signalman Neeman, who had travelled by truck throughout, noted that ' "the infantry god protect them" were almost marched off their feet in the effort to close up on the retreating enemy'.[4]

Australians marched further in this than in any other Middle Eastern campaign, although the mountainous terrain of Greece, Crete and Syria made for treks that were even more gruelling. In Syria, which probably saw the most physically exhausting campaign of Australia's Middle Eastern war, Signalman Neeman wrote sadly that his signals section had had to abandon the luxuries of the truck and, accompanied by load-carrying mules, proceed laboriously on foot.[5] This was a foretaste of things to come, for in the South-West Pacific Area (S.W.P.A.) nearly all soldiers became foot soldiers.

An official wartime publication reported that any Australian in New Guinea's jungles would tell you: 'You can't get any place in this blanky country without going on your flat feet.'[6] In fact, occasionally it was possible to use air and motor transport, but only as a prelude to hard marching.

Footslogging in the S.W.P.A. was nearly always exhausting. Most movement was confined to tracks or trails, which under concentrated foot traffic and constant dampness were almost universally and perpetually muddy. Ankle-deep mud was commonplace, and knee-deep not unusual on these tenuous lifelines. As well as having to drag their feet laboriously through the quagmire, most soldiers suffered energy-sapping falls in the mud. Two extracts from diaries kept on the Kokoda Trail note the difficulty of maintaining one's footing:

> . . . we move on over dreadful tracks mud ankle deep added to this. it commences to rain. moving down a mountain side almost straight up and down. slipping and sliding in all directions.

> Trail rough steep and slippery ... Track slippery some place had to crawl hands and knees ... Slip, slide slither, Climbing almost perpen-dicular descent likewise.[7]

Negotiating, and especially climbing, the hills, ridges and mountains of New Guinea were the greatest physical challenges on these tracks. After reaching the end of the Kokoda Trail, an infantry officer wrote to his former headmaster: 'I have seen men standing knee deep in the mud of a narrow mountain track, looking with complete despair at yet another seemingly insurmountable ridge. Ridge after ridge, ridge after ridge, heart breaking, hopeless, futile country'.[8]

'Heart breaking' also figured in another infantryman's compelling description of the physical demands of the same mountainous trail:

> For a heart-breaking trail I don't think that Hannibal or Napoleon when they crossed the Alps could have wept the tears of blood that we did. They consist not of one vast mountain range but a series of peaks and valleys which follow each other in rapid and monotonous succession. How our legs took us over them I am to this day uncertain. The slopes are almost perpendicular and the track lay along a native pad ... The pad always passes over the highest point of the mountains – there is no way around as the contours do not run true to form and on the sides you will be confronted by precipitous slopes.[9]

Watery tears are also said to have been shed over the climbs necessitated by the trail.

Other tracks also imposed arduous climbs. Soldiers in nearly every campaign had reason to agree with Signalman Neeman's remark to his wife that there was 'always a damn mountain somewhere ahead which we have to climb over'. In commenting on a track in the Wau-Salamaua region, he also pointed out that climbing in the steepest areas was not merely backbreaking and exhausting, but also dangerous:

> The track over which we travelled wound its way over the worst part of New Guinea, what I've seen anyway; just a narrow ledge track around steep sided mountains sheer drops of hundreds of feet in places ... been several lucky escapes ... Capt Scott went over only saved himself from a long drop by managing to grab hold of some nettles which took his weight for long enough for somebody to give assistance.[10]

Writing from the same area, a 34-year-old officer told his wife: 'You should see me scrambling up almost vertical slopes in the mud, hanging on with everything but my teeth. Tarzan of the Apes would have to go into severe training to stand up to this country.'[11] New Guinea was essentially a young man's country, particularly in the steep areas that sometimes had to be ascended without the benefit of a track. Campaigning in inland regions was largely a matter of capturing the high ground that dominated tracks and valleys. However, despite the drawbacks of mountain life, some found it preferable to the denser vegetation and greater heat of the coast.

Wherever they experienced jungle warfare, Australians sweated so profusely that compensatory salt tablets became regular issue in the S.W.P.A. If the need to travel almost exclusively on foot was a major reason for this, so was the need to carry virtually all one's requirements when marching. Unlike the operational areas in the Middle East, those in the Pacific were generally inaccessible to support vehicles. Moreover, in circumstances that often decreed units would become widely dispersed or would advance rapidly, men could leave fewer of their possessions in organized dumps. One's home tended to be on one's back, especially in mountainous areas.

Thus troops advancing on various tracks in the S.W.P.A. faced the prospect of going into action at any moment loaded with up to 32 kilograms of gear. Table 1 gives a sample of what men carried in the New Guinea campaigns.

These weights alone ensured the rapid exhaustion of their bearers, but other factors increased the loads; for instance, the mud which gathered on boots and the water which soaked clothing, adding 1.5 kilograms weight to webbing alone. Riflemen also frequently had to carry ammunition for Bren guns and mortars, as well as taking turns with equipment such as Brens and tools. For signallers, mortarmen and machine-gunners the loads were often even heavier, although behind the lines in most New Guinea campaigns native carriers helped with the heaviest items.

The physical cost of carrying such weights was high. Some members of the 58/59th Battalion were said to have lost two stone (about 14 kilograms) in an appalling four-day march to the front line in June 1943. The legendary rigours of the Kokoda Trail were arguably due more to the weights carried than to the difficulty of the terrain. Certainly the 7th Division's senior medical officer concluded that the

TABLE 1: Some typical loads carried by Australian soldiers in New Guinea, 1942–5

(Weights are given in the measures presented in the sources. 1 lb = 0.45 kg)

1 September 1942: Riflemen of the 2/27th Battalion at the beginning of the Kokoda Trail.[12]
Haversack: Dixie, rations, toilet gear, quinine, water tablets, mosquito ointment, boot brush, boot polish (3), tea, sugar, half towel, handkerchief, few odds and ends. *Roll on back:* Groundsheet, mosquito net, pullover, long pants, spare shirt, underclothes, socks. *Pouches:* 150 rounds small arms ammunition, 3 grenades, dozen matches, baseplates. Water bottle. Rifle. Bayonet.
Total weight: 65 lb. (An improved walking-stick was also virtually universal.)
Other recorded weights on the Kokoda Trail: 3rd Battalion (a) 15–20 kg and (b) 35 lb and 3 grenades; 2/1st Battalion 55 lb; 2/14th Battalion (a) 45 lb minimum (b) 65 lb; 2/16th Battalion 45 lb minimum; 2/33rd Battalion (a) on 10 September 1942 *c.* 55 lb and (b) from 12 September 1942 40–50 lb; 21st Brigade up to 70 lb.

May 1943: 2/6th Battalion riflemen moving to the front near Mubo[13]
Haversack: 1 tin emergency rations, one field operations ration, one day's ordinary ration, mess gear, towel, anti-mosquito cream, toilet gear, atebrin tablets. *Pack:* Spare pair boots, 2 pairs socks, one singlet, one shirt, one pair underpants, one pair trousers, mosquito net. Groundsheet, blanket. Steel helmet. Webbing equipment, clasp knife, field dressing, 1 tin emergency rations. Weapon, ammunition (50 rounds per rifleman, 100 rounds per Tommy-gunner, 100 rounds for each Bren). Water bottle. One grenade.
Total weight: Over 60 lb.
Other recorded weights in the Wau-Salamaua area: 58/59th Battalion (a) moving to Bobdubi Ridge, 19 June 1943 60 lb and (b) moving to start-line on Bobdubi Ridge, 30 June 1943 60–100 lb; some 2/6th Battalion members carried in excess of 100 lb.

September 1943–January 1944. Forward infantrymen, 9th Division, Lae-Huon Peninsula offensive.[14]
Haversack: mess tin, cigarettes, shaving and washing gear, half towel, emergency ration, mosquito repellent, chlorinating tablets, atebrin, handkerchief, writing material. *Bed-roll:* Groundsheet, mosquito net, gas cape, ration, spare socks. *Pouches:* 2–4 grenades, pair bootlaces, four-by-two to clean weapon, ammunition. Weapon.
Total weight: Unknown.
Recorded weights on Huon Peninsula: 2/32nd Battalion on way to attack Pabu, November 1943 up to 80 lb; 29/46th Battalion 80–90 lb.

February 1945: 2/6th Battalion march over the Torricellis.[15]
(In this campaign, the 2/6th generally carried less than earlier, for they had better access to supplies.)
Packs: mosquito net, shirt, trousers, 2 pairs socks, pullover, towel, laces, mess gear, day's ration. Half-tent shelter. Gas cape. Weapon and ammunition.
Total weight: Over 60 lb.

prevalence of haemorrhoids in the Owen Stanleys campaign was 'undoubtedly related to the excessive straining in climbing hills with heavy loads'.[16] A brief diary entry, written on the first full day of one man's Kokoda experience, said simply:

> Most strenuous day of my life
> heavily loaded

The three subsequent entries started with the word 'ditto'.[17] A similar trial emerges in a soldier's account of a move up the Sattelberg Track, a year later:

> We are all loaded up with our personal equipment plus bed rolls which are wet and weigh a ton plus a bag of rations each. It's bad enough climbing mountains with only a small pack on your back, but with all this gear is going to be tough going. What a hell of a load to lump uphill all the way through mud and slush. Some of us loose our footing and finish up flat out in the mud. One feels like just lying there for ever. I don't think I have been so exhausted in all my life. After hours of agony we at last reach Coy H.Q. . . . [18]

Another participant in that campaign was one of many soldiers who have drawn parallels between Australian troops and beasts of burden: 'If ever I see a man overloading a horse in future there'll be trouble. But no horse ever carried as much as an infantryman does.'[19]

Officers in the field often considered higher headquarters to be unrealistic or vague in their expectations concerning loads and, in the light of their experiences, devised scales of equipment for their men or even told them what to reduce. The men needed no prompting, and from the first New Guinea campaign not only took the approved actions of cutting towels, blankets and toothbrushes in half, but also jettisoned equipment they did not want. The general attitude of veterans in this matter was well summed up by an old campaigner who, on being invited to speak to men of a militia unit newly arrived in New Guinea, advised them to drop, 'accidentally', all surplus gear in the first river they crossed.[20]

Gear considered surplus often included helmets, gas masks (still being issued to reinforcements in mid-1943), anti-tank rifles, 2-inch mortars, blankets, and spare clothing. So intolerable was the combination of weight and terrain that even personal effects were discarded. By 1945, the army was in a better position to enable men to retrieve gear quickly and to replenish food and ammunition periodically, rather than take everything on their backs. However in 1945 soldiers still had to carry great loads, for even ruthless reductions could never safely go below a certain heavy minimum or prevent the army from adding more to the lighter loads.

On arriving in the S.W.P.A., desert veterans generally found the loads heavier than they had previously experienced, but there had always been something to carry in the Middle East too. For instance, Australians went into the assault on Bardia with loads of 22 to 32 kilograms each, and at least as much at El Alamein the following year.

DIGGING IN AND OTHER HARD LABOUR

Once the burdened and tired infantryman had reached his destination, he usually had to join in preparing a defensive position. In the jungle, for instance, he would probably be engaged in cutting any scrub that hampered observation and accurate gunfire (at least beyond grenade-throwing distance), placing barbed wire and tripwires with attached tins and booby traps, clearing spaces for headquarters, latrines, reserve ammunition, and, most arduous of all, 'digging in': that is, excavating weapon pits, a platoon headquarters, latrines, an ammunition pit and, if possible, crawl trenches.

Digging in was regarded as an even stronger imperative in the open spaces of the desert than in the more confined world of the jungle. Australian digging efforts in the desert alone would have been enough to justify the persistence of the nickname 'digger'. A shortage of excavating machinery and the fact that solid rock lay only 30 centimetres or less below ground in many areas at Bardia, Tobruk and Alamein usually made digging wearying and disheartening work.

In many places it was also never-ending work. Where positions were relatively static, notably in Tobruk, soldiers were ordered to improve and extend them through excavation. When soldiers were on the move, positions had to be dug afresh. So incessant was the digging at Alamein, for instance, that one tired diarist was struck by similarities with other burrowing animals: 'we are honestly worse than rats, at least they only use one hole but every time we move we immediately start to dig, either another one or deepen one already there'.[21]

During an earlier desert campaign, an artillery officer tried to quantify the digging, and also exemplified attitudes to it:

> This war so far has consisted of 2% fighting and 98% digging. You dig gun pits and holes to sleep in and holes to crawl into if shelled or bombed and just when everything is finished and with sighs of relief you relax orders to move come down. After moving a few miles the same old digging starts all over again, and so life goes on. There is no doubt that the digging has saved many lives so far but it gets awful tiresome after a while.[22]

Towards the end of the war, some four years later, another 6th Division veteran made a similar point in the jungle: 'One gets very tired of putting up tents, cutting bamboos making beds digging weapon pits only to move on again a couple of days after.'[23]

As important, constant and tiring as digging was the chore of carrying supplies. Few if any members of combat units entirely escaped this labour in each campaign, for there was a steady demand for rations and ammunition to be brought into the most forward positions. The work was often done by men already tired from other exertions. After several days of fighting in Syria, for instance, Corporal Clive Edwards wrote of being included in a party carrying rations to other men within his battalion: 'Dog tired to start with, we set off on a nightmare trip which led us over the worst hills we've climbed and over some seemingly impossible obstacles.'[24]

In New Guinea, native carriers were invaluable in supplying the front, but they were not supposed to be sent into the firing zones and there were rarely enough of them to fill all other requirements. Thus Australians regularly had to be sent back to make the carry from dumps one or two hours behind the line. Aircraft dropping or landing supplies nearby might reduce the carrying time, but still longer trips were required of Australians when there were few or no native carriers at any point on the supply line. The latter was the case in the Lae-Finschhafen campaigns, wherein certain combat units did little else but make exhausting journeys supplying other combat units that were in contact with the enemy.

Corporal Jack Craig, who at Finschhafen endured both combat and carrying, offered a vivid description of the latter:

> Today we are carrying rations up to B Coy. and what a bastard of a job. The track up the mountain in some places is perpendicular and we are down on our hands and knees, pushing boxes and bags of rations up a foot at a time Christ! the places

> they pick for us to fight in. It took us hours just to go a few hundred yards. Yesterday the ration party had to carry wounded back down this track. How they managed, I do not know.[25]

Over extended periods such labour was naturally harmful to health. A 9th Division brigadier even described such work as 'worse than fighting'.[26]

'Fighting' was never less than physically exacting. The marching involved in moving to and at the front did not end when combat began, for a feature of World War II combat on all fronts was, that regardless of the weight of fire from supporting arms, victory had ultimately to be won by the foot soldiers who advanced and took enemy ground. When Australian attacks failed to achieve that goal, physical exhaustion was often a factor.

The wide gaps between front lines in the desert campaigns – at Alamein, for instance, they were about ten times further apart than the average forward trenches in World War I – ensured that a day's fighting demanded wearying movement there. Similarly, reaching the point of contact in Syria's mountains or the jungle was often an ordeal that left men exhausted even before they began to fight. We already have noted that it was tiring to march at a steady pace in the jungle: add to that a need to charge or take cover and the enervating nature of jungle fighting becomes clear.

SLEEP LOSS, DISEASE AND HUNGER

Combat often entailed not only tiring exertion but also loss of sleep. A World War I veteran participating in the fighting on the Kokoda Trail noted in his diary: 'Lay down on ground Slept till daybreak. first sleep for over 30 hrs : Had held up Japs for that period.'[27] During the Battle of El Alamein, some went without sleep for four to five days. Others endured the same period with just three or four hours' sleep in the fighting on Singapore. Their one consolation in its surrender was that they could at last get some rest. The Malayan campaign was for many not just a matter of costly and ultimately unsuccessful fighting, but a wearying mixture of fighting and withdrawing. Retreat was always exhausting.

Men at the front also lost sleep because of nocturnal patrols, sentry duty, the noise of shelling and bombing, lack of adequate bedding, the hard ground of the Middle East and the damp ground in the tropics. Australians in North Africa often spent their nights fighting, patrolling or digging so that they had some concealment in the desert's open expanses. They then had to try to sleep during the day, in great heat, and plagued by flies and fleas.

A powerful source of insomnia during the fighting in Papua were the mites that caused 'scrub itch', which consisted of intensely irritating bites scattered over the body and especially around the feet and ankles. A still more potent enemy of vigour in the tropics was the mosquito; this was not only a 24-hour pest but a source of debilitating disease. After 1942, malaria was by far the greatest pathological threat, and arguably the greatest military threat, facing the Australian army. It accounted for 44 per cent and 83 per cent respectively of the 9th and 7th divisions' casualties from all sources in the New Guinea campaigns from September 1943 to January 1944. Eighty-six per cent of the average posted strength of the 9th Division, and 96 per cent of the 7th Division, were evacuated sick at some time during these operations. Virtually all who served in the Papuan campaigns of 1942 and 1943 contracted the disease.[28] One might argue that because the victims were evacuated, their sickness is not relevant to the physical strain of soldiering. Yet thousands were treated in their own lines or treated themselves, and were evacuated only at the last possible moment. This was also the case with other debilitating diseases on all fronts. For example, many soldiered on with bowel diseases, which were very common in Tobruk, Alamein and on the Kokoda Trail.

Front-line soldiers who had no experience of being weakened by sickness were very fortunate. Less common, but far from unknown, was the experience of hunger and thirst worsening one's plight. This was clear in Bombardier Adeney's account of the gruelling withdrawal across Crete:

> We had marched 65 miles in two days the last day and night in which we had no water and one tin of bully beef which we wouldn't open because it makes you thirsty . . . Its an experience I never want to go through again Ive been on some dry tracks but never one to touch that. I don't think anybody who took part in that march will ever forget it.[29]

His conclusion was verified in his commanding officer's correspondence: '. . . that 53 miles over the mountains with water scarce and in the conditions it was made was the worst experience of my life'.[30] The march to Sfakia beach drove most 'close to the limit of endurance'.[31]

In the New Guinea campaigns of 1942 and 1943, difficulties and mistakes in the organization of supply condemned Australians to long periods with little food. Of the Kokoda campaign, the official medical historian writes: 'Most of the troops on the trail from Uberi to Wairopi felt the constant urge of hunger'. The word 'starvation' seemed appropriate to one veteran of the trail when he looked back later in the war. His diary of the Owen Stanleys operations offers some evidence for that impression, with references to a meal consisting of half a raw potato, and to men going without food for 24 hours at one point.[32]

In the Lae campaign, the initial ration scale set by the 9th Division's headquarters was inadequate, and circumstances forbade planned increases in rations after the landings on 4 September 1943. As a consequence, the 9th Division's first two weeks of campaigning in New Guinea's exhausting conditions were undertaken on reduced rations. Private Murphy wrote at Lae on 18 September: 'We are still living on hard rations and I think that only for Jap rice and vegetables we find in their gardens we would starve'. The problems continued after the subsequent landing at Finschhafen. A participant noted wryly in his diary: 'Finschafen fell on the 2nd Oct. Not. a bad record Lae and Finschafen in four weeks. What would happen if they fed the lad well on fruit, beer etc.'[33]

Hunger made itself felt in other campaigns, too: notably, in Greece, Syria, Malaya, Singapore and Wau-Salamaua. However, cases of malnutrition were uncommon, even amidst the privations of the Kokoda Trail. Generally, Australian troops had enough food, but considered it disgusting or monotonous. In fact, its monotony, and especially its lack of nutritional variety, seems to have been at least partly responsible for the 'mindless exhaustion' of men on the Kokoda Trail. In several other campaigns – Tobruk, Wau-Salamaua and the Huon Peninsula, for instance – the limited range of food supplies produced or threatened vitamin deficiency. The yeast extract Marmite was introduced to fill a need for Vitamin B at Wau and also at Tobruk, where ascorbic acid tablets and vitamin-reinforced margarine were used to provide other necessary supplements. Nevertheless, at least one front-line defender in Tobruk considered the consumption of tinned food the prime reason for a general 'lassitude'.[34]

EXHAUSTION

What soldiers meant when they wrote of being 'exhausted', 'dog tired' or 'done' varied, but in several campaigns participants reached a state of physical exhaustion that was extreme by any measure. At the conclusion of the retreat on the Kokoda Trail, for instance, Clive Edwards noted 'we all had a bath in the creek and I've never seen such a mob of wrecks in my life. I look so skinny that I frightened myself... I've lost 2 stone over this terrible trek.'[35] A corporal who was in reserve during that withdrawal said of those of his unit who were ordered forward that 'it is no exaggeration to say that I hardly knew some of the men when they returned. Capt Smith looked like a slim boy. Capt Fraser lost 3 stone.'[36]

On the retreat, many became so tired that they were barely aware that they were moving, and some had hallucinations. Even after the tide turned on the trail, most men reached much the same state at the conclusion of their advance as their colleagues had at the end of the retreat. Thus the medical officer of the 2/1st Battalion calculated that on average each member had lost 18 kilograms in the 1942 campaign. The men of the 2/2nd Battalion were so debilitated on being relieved in December 1942 that they were incapable of carrying their automatic weapons.[37]

The official history says that some Australians engaged in the fighting on Singapore actually died of exhaustion. More often, campaigning soldiers collapsed, dropped out or were evacuated because of physical fatigue. Some men succumbed to the need for sleep, even in the most unlikely places. For example, a medical officer with an infantry unit in Malaya noted in his diary: 'I was so fatigued by this time that whenever I went to ground I immediately dropped off to sleep, in spite of bursting shells and mortars'. During the fighting on the Kokoda Trail, some men of the 39th Battalion were so tired that they were 'falling asleep over their weapons even as their enemies pressed them closely'.[38]

Front-line soldiering could be as much a battle against fatigue as against the enemy. This was almost literally true at Sananda where, in order to combat the powerful desire to sleep, some men on watch in perilously forward positions pulled the pins from grenades and held down the levers, knowing that sleep, and the release of their grip, would bring death.

Another Australian soldier's attempt to inflict mental defeat on his fatigued physical self emerges in this diary comment concerning a march during the Aitape-Wewak campaign: 'Knocker Mackenzie was my inspiration, not wishing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me crack first, I kept going, although I would have sooner sat down at more frequent intervals and rested the weary body.'[39]

Sometimes the mind was barely able to struggle with physical exhaustion, which, especially in the form of sleep deprivation, could sap powers of concentration and logical thought. The soldier might be capable of no more than telling himself that he must go on. One artillery regiment's history describes those driving its trucks during the retreat through Greece as becoming 'so drugged by exhaustion that they were insensitive to all feeling save the vital one of movement.'[40]

Battle seems often to have 'galvanized' tired Australians – one unit war diary uses that very term to describe the effect on its members of an order to make a bayonet charge during the Cretan campaign.[41] Because of this stimulation, men sometimes recognized their own exhausted state only as the fighting ended. Frank Hole recalls reaching a safe area behind the lines after barely avoiding encirclement by advancing Japanese troops in Malaya. Only then realizing how totally exhausted he was, he lay by the road and slept in his full battle equipment, including helmet.[42] Captain Laybourne Smith had a similar reaction at the end of his first, hectic day of action, the decisive day in the capture of Tobruk: 'It was only when I arrived back at the bty. position that evening that I found out what a strain all this had been as when I got out of my carrier I felt absolutely done and could only just walk.'[43]

When soldiers had to force themselves to persevere in physically trying circumstances, a concomitant was mental stress. This was clearly so among those who cried and despaired on the ridges of the Kokoda Trail. It appears too in a letter from a soldier who had been evacuated to hospital in Tobruk with a temperature of 102°: 'the Drs . . . give it various medical names, but I think that really, though the Germans couldnt kill me the desert nearly did, after 4 months trying. Many went before me. Thank God for a rest from eternal dugouts sleepless nights and all the other hardships I've told you about.'[44]

A further illustration of this point is a diarist's note written at the end of Alamein: 'So "done" that I trembled uncontrollably for 1/2 hr.' So too is an officer's diary note from the retreat in Greece: 'Bombed and machine gunned for over an hour in the pass before reaching our destination. Absolutely rooted.' Physical fatigue was a predisposing factor, though not a prerequisite, for mental breakdown.[45]

Mental struggles and stress often bore a direct relationship to physical strain, but there was in many cases little or no connection between the two. The mental battles fought by soldiers were frequently less a matter of the spirit fighting the flesh than the spirit fighting itself; not so much mind against body as mind against itself.