

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

What is there to tell?

Captain W. H. J. Phillips, OAM, ED, JP (Retd)

Recognising the desire of new generations of soldiers, and Australians more generally, to learn what war was like for those who have fought for Australia and the frequent reluctance of those who have fought to share their experiences, Bill Phillips has drawn on his diaries to record a typical day in the life of an Australian infantryman on Bougainville in 1945¹.

“Why doesn’t Dad ever talk about his wartime experiences?” is a question frequently asked by young people who are interested in their father’s or grandfather’s part in ‘the war’. Wives have long since accepted that their men are reluctant to relive the most difficult moments of their lives, but young people are aware that the men and women who served in the armed forces in war are now part of our history and there may be stories of heroism or courage under duress worth listening to or recording.

An infantry soldier in World War II, I initially served in New Guinea as a medium machine-gunner in the mountainous country above Salamaua and Lae. The aim was to draw the Japanese forces out of their bases and engage them, so as to enable 7th and 9th Divisions to land with reduced opposition. The fighting was fierce and our casualties numerous, but the operation was successful.

We were returned to Australia for reinforcement and a short rest during which we were given a morale building ‘victory march’ through Brisbane before embarking for our next battle, on the island of Bougainville. Australia had been allotted the task of clearing by-passed enemy from occupied territories like Bougainville, while the numerically superior American forces began their ‘island hopping’ campaigns toward Tokyo. To explain battle conditions on Bougainville during the latter months of the war, I now present a diary amplification of service during July 1945.

Following several fanatical Japanese attacks on the forward companies of 47th Battalion, dug in on the north bank of the Mivo River, tanks were called forward. The first two were knocked out and the others went into ‘hull down’ positions to support the infantry. The Japanese increased their artillery and mortar bombardments and life was difficult. Our artillery sought to knock out the Japanese guns. Due to excessive tropical rains all patrolling was called off.

I had joined the Flamethrower Platoon which had been formed just prior to a ferocious attack on Slaters

Knoll and we were now ‘on call’ wherever enemy activity seemed to be increasing. We were called in by 47th Battalion to support A and D Companies and were soon dug in and waiting.

Digging into perpetually wet mud is not particularly arduous, but we had to do it silently and also make sure that we did not remove too much of our jungle growth cover. Flamethrowers are heavy and quite bulky, so we had to try to provide some cover for ours, yet not limit its immediate availability. It was our primary weapon and we had to locate it so that it could be brought into action rapidly, unhindered by excessive camouflage.

We were two to a pit and, once dug, the pit filled rapidly with rain water and seepage so we sat in water-filled pits by both day and night. In our present position, any above-ground movement was likely to draw fire. Talking, or even the metallic click of a weapon being checked, could reveal our position to the Japanese, who were only metres away from us, and could result in incoming fire. Coughing, snoring, and the occasional screams of a lad having a nightmare, were sounds that had to be suppressed.

As a flamethrower operator, my personal or supplementary weapon was a pistol and my offside carried a rifle. In this Mivo River position, I also had an Owen gun (which I had acquired from a lad who had been killed earlier) and about eight grenades – we normally carried two, but any lads wounded-in-action handed their spare grenades or ammunition on to those still capable of using them.

In such a front-line position, tension is high – my diary reminds me that I was feeling sick at the time and I guess that this was caused by nerves or stress. While in position, we had a few visitors – a green tree snake dropped onto me while we were clearing lines of sight (thinning the leaves obstructing our forward view) and I almost beheaded a foraging bird rustling through the undergrowth in front of our pit (I thought it was a Jap’ crawling forward) and the occasional Cus-Cus (a type of possum) as it raced past. Tree ants were always busy and at night we watched in fascination as fireflies reminded us that we were in dense jungle.

During the night, the Japanese probed and attempted to draw noise from us so that they could map our positions. This annoyed some of the lads so a few shots were fired. Japanese mortars and artillery kept dropping bombs and shells among us, so we kept our

¹Editor’s Note: There has been a remarkable response from readers to the review of *Somme mud: the war experiences of an Australian infantryman in France 1916 – 1919* which we published in the last issue [United Service 60 (4), 35 (December 2009)]. This article is one of the responses received.

heads down while remaining as alert as our weary minds and bodies would allow.

Then at 0300 hours, a Japanese woodpecker (a medium machine-gun) began raking our company position and an intense mortar bombardment plastered us. We began to suffer casualties. The early morning attention, together with the fact that they had gotten behind us and had cut our telephone cables (the wet weather had rendered our radios useless), meant that we were isolated. We now expected another fanatical frontal attack by the Japanese infantry.

They came at 0500 hours, running, screaming and firing. Their artillery joined in and it made it difficult for us to return fire without being hit. We opened up with everything we had, but as ammunition was running low, we had to make sure that we had a target. Some of us stood up, in our pits, and fired a few bursts from our automatic weapons. Neither my mate nor I fired the flamethrower, for we were looking for a bigger target and, had we given our location away, they may have turned their attention to our little corner and we could have lost the fight. So we joined the 'fire fight'. Some assistance came from neighbouring companies who fired across our front and an intense barrage by our artillery soon broke up the attack. We felt for wounds – it is strange that we should do that, but the intense concentration on what you are doing masks any fear or minor injuries. We checked on each other as fighting subsided. We reloaded weapons and waited. I had found blood on my knee, but it was a graze and I still have the scar as a memento. I found three bullet holes in the armpit of my shirt. I didn't feel the burst that did it, but thought I must have had a guardian angel. We knew that they would come again and began our preparations. Our casualties could not be evacuated so we patched the wounded and covered the couple that had been killed. I do not recall having eaten that day but it wasn't an occasion to 'dine out'.

The above sample of life on the front line is typical of the life of the infantrymen in New Guinea and the

Solomon Islands during World War II. This event was not an isolated incident. It is simply an example of the day-to-day events in the forward areas. Patrols were the primary contact operation against the enemy and kept us 'on our toes'. We were in contact with the enemy on Bougainville for eight months, without adequate rest or reinforcement, and many savage battles were fought².

I trust that the questions 'What was it like?' and 'Why don't they talk about it?' are partly answered in this short epistle.

The Author: Bill Phillips, a member of the Institute, served in New Guinea and Bougainville during World War II as an infantryman in 29th Australian Infantry Brigade and subsequently with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan until discharged in 1947. Re-enlisting in the Citizen Military Forces in 1948, he served as a platoon commander in the St. George Regiment until undertaking full-time service in the 1950s with the Royal Australian Army Service Corps and 19th National Service Training Battalion. He returned to part-time duty in the 1960s and commanded D Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal New South Wales Regiment at Merrylands. Following transfer to Headquarters 2nd Division in 1968, Captain Phillips was awarded the Efficiency Decoration (ED) before retiring from the Army. He subsequently developed an interest in writing Australian military history. His *Living History* series of military campaign booklets, covering the Boer War and the two world wars, sell through the Australian War Memorial and selected military museums. His most recent book, *By the Blood of Infantrymen*, is a record of brave men and a generation lost. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2002.

²Australian troops were deployed to Bougainville again in the 1990s, this time on peacekeeping operations.

Mont St Quentin: A soldier's battle

(Right) Three former commanders of the 2nd Division pay homage at the 2nd Division Memorial, Mont St Quentin, France, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Mont St Quentin in 1918. From left they are:- Major Generals R. G. Fay, G. L. Maitland and R. G. Sharp. The catafalque party, guard and colours were mounted by the Royal New South Wales Regiment.

See related book review on page 33.

[Photo: General Maitland]

