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The 8th Australian Infantry Brigade Group in World War II

an address to Headquarters 8th Brigade on 22 March 2014 by

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The 8th Brigade, a Militia formation, participated in the defence of Australia in 1942-43, first in Sydney and then in Western Australia. In 1944-45, as a brigade group of the 5th Australian Division, it participated in liberating Australian New Guinea from the Japanese, clearing the northern coast of New Guinea from Sio west to the Sepik River and then assisting the 6th Australian Division to capture Wewak.

Key words: World War II; Australia; New Guinea; 8th Brigade; Sio; Saidor; Madang; Alexishafen; Hansa Bay; Sepik River; Wewak.

2014 is the 70th anniversary of the deployment of the 8th Australian Infantry Brigade Group to New Guinea in 1944 where it participated in the liberation of Australian New Guinea from the Japanese. The brigade had proud antecedents. The 8th Brigade, 5th Division, Australia Imperial Force (AIF), had been raised in Egypt in 1915 and had then fought with distinction in France and Flanders in 1916–1918, before being disbanded in 1919. It was re-raised in New South Wales as a Militia infantry brigade in 1921 and continued as such until war was declared in 1939.

The *Defence Act 1904* prohibited the Militia from serving abroad so in 1939 the government raised a separate expeditionary force, the 2nd AIF, for service in the Middle East and Europe; and it retained the Militia for home defence. While the 8th Brigade and its three infantry battalions – 4th, 30th and 35th Battalions – were prohibited by government policy from volunteering *en masse* for the 2nd AIF, individual members were encouraged to do so and 8th Brigade was well represented by former members in the 2nd AIF.

Defence of Australia

Following the declaration of war, 8th Brigade continued initially as a part-time formation, albeit with increasing length and frequency of its camps of continuous training, absorbing and training newly-conscripted recruits to replace those drafts of trained men who had progressively volunteered for the AIF.

Its commander from May 1940 was Brigadier Claude Cameron,² a citizen soldier who was a veteran of the Great War during which he had twice been awarded the Military Cross for gallantry.

On 1 October 1941, with war in the Pacific appearing ever more likely, 8th Brigade was placed on continuous full-time service. The brigade was brought to strength with conscripted reinforcements and trained intensively at unit level before being deployed in the defence of Sydney from possible Japanese attack. From March to May 1942 the brigade was allocated the defence of Sydney's northern beaches from Palm Beach in the north to Manly in the south. When Japanese midget submarines attacked Sydney Harbour on the night of 31 May/1 June 1942, the brigade was 'stood to', but it otherwise saw no action (Wade-Ferrell 1986: 51 – 68).

In June, the brigade underwent intensive training in the Hunter Valley and conducted brigade exercises in the Stroud-Dungog area, before embarking at Sydney in troop ships in July for Fremantle, Western Australia, where a Japanese attack from bases in the Dutch East Indies was feared (Wade-Ferrell 1986: 70 – 72).

In Western Australia, as part of the 2nd Australian Division, 3rd Australian Corps, 8th Brigade was employed intermittently in coastal surveillance. It was allocated sections of coast between Geraldton in the north and Perth in the south along which its units manned coast-watch strongpoints and patrolled the beaches and the coastline. These periods were interspersed with intensive training away from the coast, including in jungle warfare and Japanese tactics. There were also lengthy route and compass marches (of up to 170 – 250 km at times), sports gymkhanas and occasional periods of leave in Geraldton and Perth (Wade-Ferrell 1986: 69 – 93).

By mid-1943, it was evident that the Japanese threat to Western Australian was receding. The brigade was shipped back to Melbourne in September and thence by train to Sydney for leave, before being kitted out for tropical warfare. Training, with emphasis on weapons and route marches, recommenced before the brigade was shipped to north Queensland in December for acclimatisation.

¹David Leece, President of the Institute, is a former commander of the 8th Brigade (1988–1990). These are his personal views. They are based almost entirely on secondary sources, especially the official history of Australia in World War II and the 30th Battalion's history. The other units involved did not produce histories. A study of the war diaries of Headquarters 8th Brigade, 4th Battalion and 35th Battalion might establish a need to fine-tune some of the detail herein.

²Brigadier C. E. Cameron, MC & Bar, ED, an accountant of Turramurra, NSW, commanded 8th Brigade from 1940 to 1944 and then 2nd Brigade in 1944. In the Great War, he had served as a lieutenant in 20th Battalion, 5th Brigade, 2nd Division, 1st AIF. He was born at Balmain on 13 September 1894 (Dexter 1961: 736).

Liberation of Australian New Guinea

8th Brigade arrived in Finschhafen by ship on 20 January 1944. The 9th Australian Division had landed near Finschhafen on 22 September 1943 and in four months of heavy fighting had severely defeated the 20th Japanese Division, driving the remnants up the coast as far as Sio by 15 January 1944. It was estimated that some 4300 Japanese had survived and these were now withdrawing from Sio towards Saidor (Dexter 1961: 736). The 126th United States Regiment had landed amphibiously at Saidor on 2 January 1944 to form an air and naval base (Dexter 1961: 731). Saidor was astride the Japanese axis of withdrawal, but the Americans did not take the opportunity to cut off and destroy the Japanese.

At Sio on 22 January, 5th Australian Division relieved 9th Division, and 8th Brigade (5th Division) relieved 20th Brigade (9th Division). Beginning on 25 January, 8th Brigade resumed the advance towards Saidor, 4th Battalion leading, against a frightened and starving enemy capable of anything. Numerous river crossings were necessary and the brigade alternated its lead battalion and used barges (LCMs³) for transportation around obstacles and for resupply. Papuan scouts proved invaluable, locating and summarily despatching enemy parties. 4th Battalion reached Crossingtown by 3 February where it was relieved by 30th Battalion, which in turn reached the eastern fringe of the Americans' Saidor beachhead by 10 February. Considerable mopping up followed and 35th Battalion had engagements at Tapen and Wandiluk. In less than six weeks to the end of February, the brigade had killed 734 of the enemy, found 1793 dead and taken 48 prisoners; the Australians and Papuans had lost three killed and five wounded (Maitland 1999: 92-93; Maitland 2002: 314-324; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 101-129).

After a welcome six-week pause east of Saidor, 8th Brigade was ordered to relieve the Americans at Saidor. It began doing so on 19 April. 30th Battalion was immediately ordered to occupy Madang, which the Japanese had evacuated in mid-March. On 24 April, a company of 30th Battalion was landed from barges at Ort, just south of the Gum River which in turn was just south of Madang. During the company's advance into the town a mountain gun fired a dozen shells which landed out to sea, there was a burst of machine-gun fire which did not appear to be directed at the Australians, and a couple of grenade explosions. Australia's official war historian, David Dexter, comments that: "In all probability this was the final defiant gesture by the rearguard of the XVIII Army as it left its great base of Madang which had been in Japanese hands since 1942".



New Guinea 1944-45 [after Wade-Ferrell 1986]

Some 10 enemy were seen in the distance, but it was a deserted Madang which a platoon from 30th Battalion, accompanied by a patrol from 57th/60th Battalion (15th Brigade), entered at 1630 hours. Brigadier Cameron and the vanguard of the 8th Brigade landed from LCMs and entered the town at 1730 hours (Dexter 1961: 782-787; Maitland 1999: 98; Maitland 2002: 324; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 130-155).

On 26 April, 30th Battalion commenced the advance to Alexishafen along a road sections of which had been mined – the battalion lost five killed by mines in separate incidents – and as the leading company entered the town it came under heavy machine-gun fire from a United States corvette which mistook them for Japanese. By late afternoon Alexishafen was secure. On 27 April, 30th Battalion was ordered to defend Alexishafen by offensive patrolling (Maitland 2002: 324; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 140-143).

The advance was resumed on 10 May when 35th Battalion was moved by barge to Megiar Harbour. 35th Battalion reached Suara Bay on 9 June where it was relieved by 4th Battalion. The 4th pushed on to Hansa Bay, where it in turn was relieved by 30th Battalion on 13 July. 8th Brigade had now advanced to within 170 km of the

³Landing Craft, Mechanised

Japanese stronghold of Wewak and vigorous patrolling in the Hansa Bay, Ramu River and Sepik River area commenced to harass and contain the enemy (Maitland 1999: 98; Maitland 2002: 324; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 156-203).

On 18 August 1944, Brigadier Claude Cameron handed over command of 8th Brigade to Brigadier Maurice Fergusson⁴ (Wade-Ferrell 1986: 176). In September, Headquarters 5th Division moved to New Britain, leaving 8th Brigade Group to function semi-independently in New Guinea.

Meanwhile, the Americans had landed at Aitape on 22 April 1944 and, after failed counterattacks, the Japanese withdrew to Wewak. 6th Australian Division landed at Aitape during October to December in order to relieve the Americans and to launch the final offensive in New Guinea. The eastwards advance towards Wewak began in late December (Maitland 1999: 112).

While 6th Division was advancing east to Wewak, 8th Brigade, based on Madang, continued the necessary task of patrolling the country east of the Sepik River, now abandoned by all Japanese forces except some small but aggressive groups posted there to watch the XVIII Army's eastern flank. So, for the last year of the war, the main task of 8th Brigade east of the Sepik River was to hold the Hansa Bay area, to hold an outpost at Annanberg on a knoll enclosed in a bend of the Ramu River, about 100 km by air from the mouth, and to watch any Japanese who might remain in or enter the triangle enclosed by the lower Ramu, the lower Sepik and the highlands. Part of this task was performed by aircraft of No. 4 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, flying daily low-level surveillance missions. The patrolling tasks were shared by 8th Brigade's infantry battalions and detachments of the Papuan Infantry Battalion, 1st New Guinea Infantry Battalion, Royal Papuan Constabulary and Angau⁵ (Long 1963: 354-355; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 156-203).

In June 1945, 30th Battalion was moved by sea to Wewak to support 6th Division as it closed on the Japanese base. It relieved 2/4th Battalion from defensive tasks in the hills to the south of Wewak and conducted vigorous and aggressive patrolling to deny the Japanese any high ground from whence they could observe movements along the coastal strip. The war officially ended on 15 August 1945 and the local Japanese surrender took place at Cape Wam on 13 September. Protective patrolling continued while the Japanese were being rounded up for repatriation, which occurred by ship from Wewak on 25-27 November. The brigade began returning to Australia in January 1946. During the brigade's stay in the Wewak area it lost nine killed and 32 wounded (Maitland 2002: 399; Wade-Ferrell 1986: 204-221).

⁴Brigadier M. A. Fergusson, DSO, MC, ED, a farmer of Whittlesea, Vic., had served in the Great War as a gunner in No. 3 Battery, Australian Field Artillery, and as a lieutenant in 4th Division Artillery, AIF. In the 2nd AIF, he had been C.O. of 6th Division Cavalry Regiment in the Middle East, 1939-41, and Commander 2nd Armoured Brigade in Western Australia, 1942-44, before becoming Commander 8th Brigade in 1944 aged 49 years (Long 1963: 355).

⁵Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit

Battle Honours

Two of the brigade's three battalions were awarded battle honours: 'Sio-Sepik River 25 January – 19 June 1944' was awarded to the 30th and 35th Battalions; and 'Madang 24 April 1944' to 30th Battalion (Maitland 1999: 144). The separate battle honour awarded for 'Madang 24 April 1944' has been controversial in military history circles, the contra argument being that 30th Battalion's occupation of Madang on 24 April was against only token Japanese opposition (Colonel T. J. Jackson, personal communication). The 4th, 30th and 35th Battalions were also awarded the campaign honour 'Liberation of Australian New Guinea 18 September 1943 – 8 August 1945' and the theatre honour, 'South-West Pacific 1944-45'.

Conclusion

During the war in the Pacific from 1941 to 1945, the 8th Australian Infantry Brigade Group undertook a series of unglamorous and thankless tasks, first in the direct defence of the Australian mainland – Sydney, March to May 1942; Western Australia, July 1942 to September 1943 – and then during the liberation of Australian New Guinea from January 1944 to November 1945. During the latter campaign, it cleared the Rai Coast of Japanese then contained the few remaining east of the Sepik River, before assisting 6th Division in the capture of the Japanese base at Wewak. Thankless these tasks may have been, but they were tasks that someone had to do. They were done well, under at times dangerous conditions and were performed often in atrocious weather over very difficult terrain. Like its Great War predecessor, the 8th Brigade of World War II set a standard of loyal service to Australia that its successors over the last 70 years have striven to emulate.

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