

FROM 'THE PHOENIX RISES ETERNAL'

By Hal Holman OL OAM

Chapter 22 - Return to the fray

On my return to Port Moresby, after my leave expired in late 1943, I was informed that my unit was located at Dumpu in the Ramu Valley. I was flown there in a biscuit bomber. The company, under the command of the 7th Australian Division, had incurred some sad losses in previous actions, particularly battles at Buna on the northern coast and Kaiapit in the Markham Valley.

The Markham-Ramu campaign was launched to prevent the Japanese from penetrating south-east through the Ramu and Markham valleys towards Lae and the Huon Gulf. It was also to protect the Allied Air Force on the Highlands plateau behind the Bismark Range to the south-west, in the Bena Bena-Goroka area.

When I rejoined my unit in Dumpu they were in the Shaggy Ridge phase of the campaign. Our company was directed to Kesawai about thirty kilometres downstream. We camped beside a creek that was one of the many small tributaries of the mighty Ramu. My first assignment was to record all aircraft movements for intelligence purposes. This required aircraft identification, counting numbers and recording the direction of flight paths.

The creek bed was eroded to a depth of about two metres and had isolated potholes containing little water. We enjoyed a brief respite bivouacked on the embankment and were fortunate that the Sallies (Salvation Army) had their guy right there in the front line with us, dispensing writing materials, games (Monopoly, chess and dominoes), literature and religious comfort to those in need. We were twenty kilometres beyond the 7th Division's protective perimeter yet there he was, sitting up in his tiny tent in a folding canvas chair with his official white flag proudly bearing the resplendent Salvation Army red shield in the middle. The flag was suspended from two corners so it remained unfurled facing in the direction of Australia (a nice touch I thought) above the entrance to his tent.

We had enough time between battles for our cook to do his Aussie wombat stunt by burrowing into the rich clay bank of the creek to make a splendid oven. Within the maw of his creation he brought forth the magic of scones and buns: a feast never to be forgotten by any of us.

Looking back I am incredulous that we were so blatantly exposed in a sea of kunai grass. There were few trees in the area. Our signallers' tent stood out like Nobby's Lighthouse.

When compiling information on aircraft movements I would usually walk a few metres away from the camp and stand on the edge of the creek bank to gain an all-round view of the sky. Complete with clipboard and pen I was soon busy; the sky crowded with aircraft, mostly ours. Lightnings, Kittyhawks, Wirraways, Boomerangs, Avro Ansons, Mitchells, Hurricanes and the ubiquitous Dakotas zotting in all directions.

On 18 November I was on the bank when I observed, and began recording, the passage of a flight of eight American Kittyhawks. They were skimming over the kunai and heading downstream toward Faita. I watched them as they banked over Faita and, astonished, witnessed through binoculars as they strafed the village - which was supposed to be friendly. Then they went out of view briefly before reappearing.

They hedgehopped over the kunai and it wasn't until they were almost level with us that the pilot of the leading aircraft banked sharply and flattened out, swooping directly at us. Simultaneously I noticed two smoke trails streak from the guns in both wings. We were being strafed!

"Air raid!" I screamed, doubling up and rolling into the creek bed. As the bursts tore through the camp our entire unit scrambled in behind me.

There were several strafing runs and what saved most of us was the shelter afforded by the natural trench. Had the Kittyhawks approached up the creek we would have been wiped out.

"What the bloody hell are the bastards doing?" Peter Danne called. "Don't they recognise us?"

"I'm stuffed if I know! But don't stick up your head to find out!"

I began frantically to scoop out river sand from under my belly to worm lower still.

Mulga Don, also lying prone, could only see the soles of my boots and my backside bucking up and down. "Are you hit Gidgee — or are you screwing some poor bastard?"

"I'm digging for victory, lame brain, and stop looking up my Khyber Pass."

After one more savage burst of gunfire, the aircraft peeled off and disappeared.

Signaller FP Sutcliffe was killed and one of our cargo carriers was also shot. We had two men wounded, Troopers WC Nicholson and WJ Whelton.

Our cook was shot through both cheeks of his backside. He cursed the pain and vociferously regretted that he could hardly show people his war wound. "They'll think I was shot up the backside like a bronze wing pigeon running away. All I was doing was trying to save my buns from burning," he declared, "and now my bum's burning!"

It was another of those 'friendly' mistakes. I recall a message sent by a submarine around the same time: "Expect to arrive at destination 0600 providing attacks from friendly aircraft cease."

I am adamant the pilots were not to blame; it was the Sallies. From the air and at a distance, the rounded red shield against a white sheet was easily mistaken for a Japanese flag. The commander of the American Kittyhawk squadron later apologised. It was appreciated.

We were aware the Japanese were encroaching, and skirmishes were not uncommon: we were under attack from the Japanese 1/78th Battalion.

At night, when we bedded down on our ground sheets, we always formed a circle, ensuring we were within reach of each other - that way we could talk, or give a tap on the shoulder to get attention. It was essential that each of us pointed outward. Soldiers suddenly disturbed while pointing inwards can think they see movement 'out there' and open fire on each other thinking the enemy has infiltrated.

With our unit I patrolled forward from Kesewai to Isareba, where we could see the Japanese in their encampment. They went about their duties completely unaware of our presence. They were dug in with foxholes supported by formidable Woodpecker heavy machine guns. We also observed their visits to the latrines.

We returned from these patrols to our fixed-defence Vickers machine gun on the precipitous Isareba ridge that covered the approaches to our camp. We laid grenade booby traps guarding alternative approaches on the steep slopes, leaving a booby-trap-free escape track in case the need arose to withdraw. These defences proved successful shortly afterwards when they took their toll during a Japanese assault.

Prior to that, several of us were sent on a patrol crossing the Ramu and trekking to the Faita area. Our Sally padre insisted he be allowed to join us; and our CO approved the request. He started the trip all sunshine and smiles and by the halfway mark he was as good at swearing as we were. One of the obstacles on the way was a couple of square kilometres of jungle that could not be skirted but had to be traversed. The area had been flattened by some sort of cyclone. Huge tree trunks criss-crossed each other in a maze. We crawled under some, others had to be scaled and we walked the full length of many more. It was there the padre learnt to swear.

Groping through the fallen canopy was an extra hazard. In addition, it seemed to be business as usual for countless irate creepy crawlies and denizens that set about tattooing our skin.

When we finally arrived in the Faita area, all seemed peaceful. Having no radio - only a walkie talkie far out of radio reception range - we were unaware of what was going on elsewhere.

After an overnight stay in a *haus kiap* under the protection of mosquito nets, we decided to return to Isareba by crossing the Ramu at Weiso where Sergeant Golden had been killed on the Bena Bena patrol.

On the way, we encountered bad swamp country but finally found our booby trap-free track up to the Isareba ridge. We could hear the 7th Division Artillery lobbing shells somewhere near us, an ominous indication that we were probably in Jap territory. We moved cautiously along the track, pausing at the edge of the ridge near some grass huts. The silence was awesome - only the usual jungle noises broke the peace. "Seems to be deserted," the padre whispered. We slipped closer until we had a clear view of a larger stretch of the ridge. It was our camp, all right, but there was no one home! With care we moved to the clearing and crept to the signaller's hut. It had been ransacked and the radio equipment destroyed. At the end of the ridge we found that the Vickers gun with its breech bolt removed. A grenade had been used to render it useless. There were all the signs of an assault on our position.

In a moment of sheer luck we heard Japanese voices down the precipitous side of the ridge, which we knew had been heavily booby-trapped. We guessed were removing fallen troops. Linger no longer, we scurried back down the safe exit and clambered to the river flats. When we were a safe distance from the ridge we called a halt to discuss our next move.

Unknown to us, it appears that, while we were on patrol to Faita, the Japs made an effort to secure our Ketoba outpost (under Lieutenant Balderstone). A booby trap exploded and footprints and dumped bloodstained gear was discovered. This was on 7 December. Simultaneously, communications between squadron headquarters and Isareba were cut off.

Meanwhile, about 200 Japanese had entrenched themselves in 80 weapon pits on a ridge overlooking our outpost at Kesewai. Two Boomerang aircraft observed this on 9 December.

It seems that late on the afternoon of 8 December an order had been issued by Vasey to withdraw. It failed to get through. The troops at Ketoba and Isareba, with no knowledge of the order, opposed the enemy's advance at 2.30 am. The Japs struck with superior numbers and force, so Lieutenant Balderstone was forced to withdraw to Isareba.

The enemy launched several attacks on Isareba and was repelled by a barrage from the Vickers gun with the support of grenade launchers and sub-machine guns. One of the enemy's unsuccessful thrusts was a bayonet charge. That was why we found Isareba in its sorry state.

The Boomerangs and Kittyhawks wiped out the Japanese force overlooking Kesewai with two bomb and strafing runs during the day.

When we descended to the valley floor and headed for the Ramu, we came to a track that cut straight across our path. The mud on the surface showed traffic had passed that way only a couple of hours before. There were hundreds of footprints all heading in the direction of Kesewai. We were taken aback.

"Would those be our troops withdrawing after Isareba and Ketoba?" asked the padre. The tracks told me worse. The footprints said it all. Mostly two-toed boots. Jap boots!

"Bloody Japs. Look at the boot prints, like cloven hoofs on cows. Obviously we're not going to follow the yellow mud road." After careful scrutiny we crossed the track and infiltrated the underbrush. The ground was swampy but, after some wading, we found a small knoll where we could rest and decide what to do next.

One of the troopers spoke up. "If you don't mind me saying so, the shelling seems to be where Kesawai is. It indicates the Japs have moved from Isareba and taken Kesawai." The 7th Division artillery was lobbing shells on the area.

We realised that to rejoin our mob, we had to cross the Ramu again, then re-cross further up when we were sure we were behind our lines.

We were down to the last can of bully beef but now within walkie talkie range, so managed to contact headquarters and were able explain we were trekking due south and were fresh out of grub.

After two hours of foot slogging, halfway to the river, we heard the drone of an aircraft heading our way. We squatted in the shoulder-high kunai until we were sure it was one of ours. It was a biscuit bomber with the fuselage door open. We leapt up and waved madly to attract attention. They saw us and banked for the delivery run. Two bundles were ejected from the open door and two brilliant yellow parachutes blossomed above them. The cargo drifted sedately down.

"Bloody hell! What do they think they're doing? They're letting the Japs know exactly where we are! Look, look, Hirohito, we're over here!" I complained.

"Let's be thankful and collect our blessings before the bloody Japs arrive to investigate," chimed in the padre. There followed a mad scramble to the cargo.

It was food (bully beef and dog biscuits), and ammunition which we did not need, having seen no action on the patrol. However, we took some extra in case we struck problems and loaded ten hard rations each — enough for ten days. One can of meat and one packet of biscuits per man per day. Then we hightailed towards the river, distancing ourselves from the bright yellow parachutes that we had rolled tightly and tried to hide in the kunai.

Within minutes shells began lobbing close to us. Had we been mistaken for the enemy — or were the Japs that close? Now, fully provisioned, our burden slowed our progress. We managed to reach and cross the river unscathed. The rest was smooth sailing but it took us two days to rejoin our forces.

We were there during the Shaggy Ridge campaign; in fact we enjoyed Christmas Day on the slopes of Shaggy Ridge with traditional Christmas fare as supplied by the Army and Air Force, and generous contributions from the Americans. The Yanks donated tobacco as a special request from us. The average Australian, especially in wartime, preferred to roll his own cigarettes from fine-cut tobacco, which he placed in the palm of his hand and rubbed to the right consistency. The Americans' donation was delivered with wild appreciation among the addicts — our stocks had run out.

However, when the crate was feverishly opened, we were astounded. It was alien stuff. We had seen it in Western movies, yet we were unprepared for it. 'Bull Durham' was a granulated tobacco in drawstring cotton bags with appropriate king-size cigarette papers! In the movies we had witnessed cowboys undo the drawstrings with their teeth and, by giving their steed free rein, ungluing the paper from their bottom lip. Then with slick sleight of hand they'd manage to curl the paper to make a channel, forming a bed for the tobacco. Then followed a laudable performance where the would-be cancer victim poured a precise amount of grains of tobacco into the paper and

twirled it to enclose the magic weed. Then he licked the glue line by sliding the paper tube across his tongue, twirling both ends in his moistened lips to stop the tobacco running out.

I am not sure why the cowboy rolled the cigarette down one side of his chaps — I think to ensure a cylindrical product. I never saw a movie where the fag was dropped or ruptured. The cowboy does all this to perfection while keeping one eye on the herd, one eye on a straggler, and one eye on the approaching storm. Where was I? Ah, yes! Somehow or other he manages to spirit away the drawstring bag together with the packet of papers, then from nowhere he brings forth a wax match, possibly using a prehensile foot. Unbelievably it lights first time in spite of the fact that all this is staged in a brisk breeze and it remains a faultless performance. Ron Norton called it granulated bullshit.

When we attempted to make a cigarette from the ingredients whilst perched precariously in a saddle of Shaggy Ridge, where it was impossible to shelter from sixty knot gale-force winds, the tobacco blew away like aerosol spray. So did the papers and the wax match and our patience too.

I was bowled over with another malaria attack and flown to a field hospital at Finschhafen. From what I can remember, the infection was classified as a benign tertian fever. The Anopheles mosquito is the only known transmitter of malaria. Only the female feeds on blood and infects the host; the male feeds solely on plant juices. The disease is injected through the mosquito's salivary glands with the insect siphoning blood from its victim. Once in the bloodstream of the host, the plasmodia enter the red blood cells and undergo a number of changes. Untreated, the infection can result in death. The worst scenario is deterioration to blackwater fever, where one's kidneys try desperately to dispose of ruptured dead red blood cells, resulting in bloody and near black urine. Around that time the kidneys give up the ghost.

An infusion of the bark of Peru's Cinchona tree, quinine, had been known since the 16th Century as a treatment for malaria. The word 'malaria' comes from *mal aire* (the disease was more prevalent in swampy areas, mosquitos needing water to breed.) The first person to describe the malarial plasmodium was Alphonse Laveran in Algeria in 1880. Although malaria was known as long ago as the 15th Century, it wasn't until 1948 that parasitologists discovered the stages of malaria in human tissues.

As soldiers on our initial landfall in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, as it was then known, we were issued with quinine tablets to ward off infection. Later, when the Japanese invasion cut off supplies of quinine from Java, it was replaced by atebrine. Scientists were hard pressed to keep ahead of the parasite but during World War II advances were made in the control of the disease. For example, new pesticides such as DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane) were used and, later, Dieldrin was added to the list. Also, surface-feeding fish were introduced, small American fish called *Gambusia affinis*, to prey on mosquito larvae in ponds and creeks. Although this resulted in a creditable reduction of mosquitos, it was limited by the fact that mosquitos breed anywhere there is water; even knot holes in trees or shallow craters in rocks.

After ten days in hospital, I was up and about and, after a lot of soul searching, I decided to apply for a transfer to the Australian New Guinea Administration Unit (ANGAU) in their native labour section. With my command of Pidgin English, it was an ideal place for me. To qualify for the appointment I had to take a 'crash course' in native labour administration: this entailed classes in Pidgin and Motu. The school was located at Koki Beach, Port Moresby and was named 'West's Academy'.

We learned about human relations, conflict resolution, cargo line rationing (particularly for long patrols where provisioning was vital) requiring quite a bit of maths and first aid. This was around the end of January 1944 and the course lasted several weeks.

From 'The Phoenix Rises Eternal' by Hal Holman