

CHAPTER 7

TO SLATER'S KNOLL AND SORAKEN

BY the third week of January the 3rd Division had advanced 13 miles and secured the coast as far south as Mawaraka. General Savage considered that the main enemy force would be unable to offer determined resistance north of the Puriata River, now some 10 miles beyond his leading forces, and that the hard crust of the enemy's defence would be met along that river. For the present, the Japanese were still holding at points on the tracks leading from the coast to the foothills along the three rivers to the north of the Puriata: the Pagana, Tavera, and Hupai. South of the Hupai was Mosigetta, a main track junction and the first of the enemy's big garden areas.

"The time has now arrived," General Savage wrote to General Bridgeford on 21st January, "when swift and vigorous action is necessary to fulfil the task allotted to you in Operation Instruction No. 3, paragraph 8" (the instruction issued on 23rd December). It will be recalled that this had stated that the ultimate role of the 3rd Division was "to destroy Japanese forces in southern Bougainville", and the immediate task was to advance to the Puriata and send patrols beyond it. Savage considered that the Japanese on Bridgeford's front were "weak and off balance".

On the inland flank the 2/8th Commando was now concentrating in the hill country at Sovele Mission whence it could operate from the east against the Japanese strung out between the Pagana and the Hupai while the infantry pressed from the west. On 1st February Savage suggested to Bridgeford that he should use the 2/8th Commando to secure crossings over the Puriata in its area, five miles and more from the coast, and to patrol to the Hongorai if possible; that he should use one battalion to secure a crossing farther west; and another to clear the inland tracks to Mosina and Nigitan. He wished to hold his tanks in reserve until the more open country farther south was reached. The tanks were old, spare parts were short, and he did not wish to wear the tanks out on tasks that infantry and artillery could do. He was considering landing a battalion (the 58th/59th under Lieut-Colonel Mayberry,¹ who had been trained in amphibious operations) at a point on the south coast whence it could cut the main track to Buin, but at length it was decided that there were not enough craft to execute this operation.

The task allotted to the 11th Brigade in the northern sector was to drive the enemy from that end of the island by advancing along the coast and not across the rugged country through which travelled the Numa Numa trail. Savage considered that he might eventually turn the corner and advance south towards Numa Numa.

¹ Lt-Col W. M. Mayberry, DSO, VX3272. 2/5 Bn; CO 58/59 Bn 1945. Jackaroo; of Jerilderie. NSW; b. London, 10 Mar 1915.

In the coming phase, as hitherto, only five of Savige's fifteen battalions would be in contact with the enemy. It was not possible to maintain more than those.

Already, on 23rd January, Bridgeford had given the 7th Brigade its roles: to take Mosigetta, clear the enemy from the Kupon-Nigitan-Sisiruai area, and patrol along the Puriata; the 2/8th Commando was to deny to the enemy the track system round Tadolina in the foothills to the east, protecting the flank of the brigade's advance on Mosigetta—a more modest and appropriate role than its former one of "active reconnaissance" into the area now allotted to the infantry. However, when Major Winning soon reported his new area free of the enemy, the squadron's task was again changed, on 2nd February, to reconnaissance of the Puriata crossings inland from a point about four miles from the coast. It was to be maintained by air-dropping until supply by road was possible. Brigadier Field, of the 7th Brigade, planned his operation in three phases. In the first the 61st Battalion would patrol east along the Pagana to Kupon, then south to Nigitan and Mosina; the 25th would patrol along the Tavera to the Mendai-Sisiruai area; the 9th would consolidate a base in the Mawaraka area and patrol. In the second phase the 61st would clear the enemy from the area from Kupon to Sisiruai, the 9th take Mosigetta, and the 25th protect the base at Mawaraka. In the third phase the brigade would be re-grouped for an advance to the Puriata.²

Even at this late stage of the war this big Australian force was short not only of heavy equipment such as landing craft and armour but of standard items of infantry equipment. When it began operations the 7th Brigade held only nine wireless sets (No. 108 Mark III of ancient vintage) and no walkie-talkie sets at all. It was entitled to 119 sets of various types including 90 light walkie-talkies.

Wireless is not only an alternative means of communication (stated the brigade's report). In jungle warfare, patrolling plays an integral part. The use of [light walkie-talkie] sets on short patrols and "108" or "208" sets on long-range patrols is essential to good communication and rapid receipt of information . . . had further wireless sets been made available the amount of line laid (over 600 miles within the brigade) would have been considerably lessened thus obviating the acute shortage which was prevalent owing to transport difficulties.

Each of the tracks along which the battalions would travel was through dense bush, on land sloping up very gradually from the coast. For example, from the sea to Mosigetta the plain rose only some 50 feet above sea level, and for the first few miles about half the area was covered by deep swamp, constantly refilled by rain which, in January and February, fell almost every afternoon. From Beech's Crossing over a tributary of the Hupai the land was higher, and clad with tall trees and light undergrowth. Movement was easier there, and often men could see as much as 50 yards ahead. An old "Government road" led through the bush to

² The Order of Battle of the 7th Brigade Group on 26th January was: HQ 7 Bde, 9 Bn, 25 Bn, 61 Bn, 20 Pl "E" Coy 2/1 Gd Regt, 2 Fd Regt, 7 Bde Sig Sec, "A" Coy 1 NG Inf Bn, 19 Supply Depot Pl, two Secs 56 Transport Pl, 11 Fd Amb, 241 Light Aid Detachment, Angau detachment.

Mosigetta. Like most such tracks in this area it was from 10 to 15 feet wide and bounded on each side by a deep narrow ditch. In the timbered country the trees met above the track forming a green tunnel, and the secondary growth was so dense as to hide a man standing a yard or two off the track. When the infantry began patrolling forward the tracks were still carpeted with grass, but the jeeps and trucks that followed tore this up and churned the surface into deep mud. At length the worst sections of each track had to be "corduroyed"—paved with logs laid edge to edge—and over these the vehicles would lumber until, as the days passed, they pressed the logs deep into the mire.

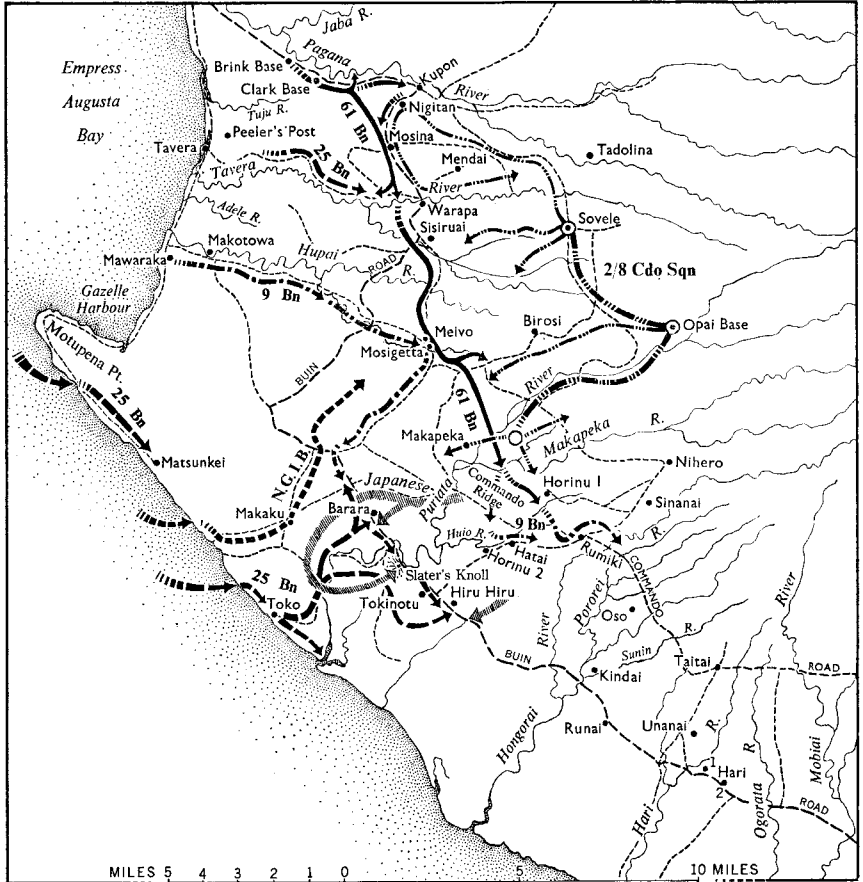
The tracks were seldom visible from the air and consequently the targets against which aircraft could be used effectively were relatively few. Field made a practice of inviting each of the pilots of the reconnaissance aircraft to stay with his brigade for a few days and move along the tracks with the infantry so that they could see what the bush hid—roads wide enough to carry heavy trucks entirely concealed by the arching trees. In the Numa Numa sector Brigadier Stevenson organised similar tours for pilots, and also airmen, who enjoyed spending free days with the forward troops.

Along the edges of these tracks the infantry patrols silently advanced. When they met an enemy outpost there would be a burst of fire, then silence again. The advancing patrol would begin a wide outflanking move through the bush on either side of the track. Perhaps when the move had been carried out the enemy would have withdrawn, escaping encirclement. It was a common Japanese device to dig one post at the bole of a large tree and another covering post behind it, each with a narrow escape track cut through the bush and joining the main one behind a bend. When the man or men in the leading post came under heavy fire they could take to the escape track; the machine-gun in the covering post would briefly take up the fight until perhaps its crew also withdrew silently along its narrow pad to join the main track at a point invisible to the attackers. It was easy for the unwary to move along an empty, innocent-seeming track, right up to the forward men, the first warning being a quiet "psst" from the dense bush. "Where are you going?" "Up to Don Company." "We're it."

Part of the 61st Battalion had begun to move south from the Jaba on 15th January. On the 18th and 19th its patrols clashed with the enemy in the area of Brink Base, losing one man killed and two wounded, and killing eight "thin and ragged" Japanese. Thence the 61st advanced systematically, occupying a series of company bases, each ready to meet attack from any direction. On the night of the 23rd-24th, for example, some 40 Japanese probed forward round Clark Base, established that day about a mile forward of Brink Base.³ Fire was exchanged and grenades thrown, and the Japanese cut the telephone line to battalion

³ These bases were named after Lieutenants F. R. Brinkley and A. G. Clarkson (both of Brisbane).

headquarters, but when the fight was over no Australians had been hit; the Japanese, when they withdrew, left one wounded man behind. By the 30th the 61st had killed 20 Japanese, and their own losses had been 4 wounded in action and 3 in accidents. On 1st February a patrol of 6, including one native soldier, swung south towards Mosina and after moving 2,300 yards clashed with a Japanese force. Lieutenant H. D.



7th Brigade, January-March

Robinson was killed and the patrol withdrew. On the same day, however, other patrols reported Kupon empty of enemy troops and only four Japanese encountered between Kupon and Nigitan. Next day a platoon entered Kupon, the battalion's easternmost objective in this phase. The leading troops of the battalion were now being supplied along a long and muddy track, which the infantry pioneers, and the engineers following

behind with their heavy equipment, were striving to improve. A good dropping ground existed near Kupon and on 9th February aircraft dropped some rations, and all were recovered; next day six days' rations for the whole battalion were dropped. On the 9th Mosina was entered.

Natives had reported some thirty Japanese at Warapa south of Mosina. A patrol was sent out, reached Warapa without being seen, and at dawn on the 11th poured fire into the huts there for five minutes, then withdrew. Later 15 bodies—and 13 swords—were found. On the 13th a patrol went to Mendai without meeting any Japanese.

In all contacts to date (wrote Lieut-Colonel Dexter, commanding the 61st Battalion) the enemy had adopted hit and run tactics. On making contact, our forward troops have returned fire while remainder execute an outflanking move to cut track behind enemy. However, on each occasion the Jap had withdrawn before movement was completed. The counter measure appears to be a wide outflanking move on a previously reced route with the object of setting an ambush behind the enemy before contact is made.

Meanwhile the 2/8th Commando had been closing in from the east. The map was so inaccurate that the move to Sovele Mission placed the squadron 4,000 yards farther forward than was intended. The 61st Battalion were then advancing from Clark Base, some ten miles away. The 2/8th's base at Sovele was the first of a chain of similar bases which the squadron occupied. This one was on a high feature with plenty of open ground on which supplies from the air could be dropped, and had a good water supply near by. The two troops and headquarters formed a ragged perimeter enclosing a far greater area than would normally be considered consistent with safety, since the squadron's most formidable weapon of defence was the Bren. The safety of the position rested mainly on a thorough knowledge of the tracks leading into it, and a system of guards and observation posts manned by natives twenty-four hours a day. Refugees soon began to arrive from the surrounding hills, in long lines. They were laden with their few possessions and captured Japanese weapons, ranging from rifles to heavy machine-guns. Until they could be sent on to the coast, they camped inside the perimeter, and would have presented a considerable liability in the event of an attack, since a great proportion of them were women and children, or old and sick people. They brought information about pockets of Japanese settled in gardens in the area and were eager to help the soldiers exterminate them. At Sovele the squadron came into contact with Musiyama, a native leader who was to prove most valuable in smoothing over differences between the Nargovissi, who lived in the Sovele area, and the Siwais, in whose territory lay Nihero, a village already chosen by Major Winning as a future base.

From Sovele patrols moved out plotting tracks and investigating reports from the natives about enemy parties. After one such reconnaissance two sections led by Captain C. J. P. Dunshea of the 2/8th Commando and an Angau officer, Captain R. Watson, made a surprise attack on 26th January on a group of huts at a large garden. Of probably 25 Japanese who were there, 8 were killed in the fight, 3 next day, and the remainder

fled. Useful documents were captured. Three days later another Japanese garden was raided and all 9 occupants killed.

These were promising successes, but Winning believed that his force had been set an unduly heavy task. He was responsible for flank protection of the main force and reconnaissance over a wide area; his base was important to the Angau detachment in its efforts to recover natives from Japanese-occupied areas. But his squadron was tired and depleted. (On the 29th a troop was ordered back to the Jaba mouth; it went there on rafts only to be ordered to return, and after an arduous march reached the base again on the 3rd and 4th February.) The enemy were fit, well-equipped and high-spirited, though it was to their disadvantage that their program compelled them to live in isolated groups cultivating gardens. Winning considered that his best course was to maintain a strong base, strike each scattered group of Japanese and return, maintain light reconnaissance to the west and south-west and security patrols to the south-east, and rely on the natives for information about the mountain areas to the east. Thus, on 2nd February, when (as mentioned above) he was ordered to secure crossings over the Puriata River without delay, Winning asked that an infantry company be based at Sovele, or that the squadron be required not to secure and hold crossings but to harass the enemy in the Makapeka fords area. Savige, however, was convinced that the squadron could secure the crossings. Being short both of men and suitable officers Winning reorganised the squadron into two troops⁴ and formed a section of scouts from "old campaigners with good bush sense and ability to handle natives" who were to be given the more difficult reconnaissance tasks. Strong patrols examined the Sisiruai area, the headwaters of the Tavera River and gardens east of Mosigetta. A strong enemy force was found south of Biroisi. Tracks along both banks of the upper Puriata were explored.

It will be recalled that the 25th Battalion was to patrol forward along the Tavera and link with the 61st in the Mendai-Sisiruai area. At the outset the company to which this task was allotted met determined opposition by an enemy force established about a mile from the coast on the track along the Tavera River. On 26th January a platoon attack was cancelled after one Australian had been killed and one wounded in an ambush. After each clash the enemy would change his position astride a track that was "little more than a wading passage through swamp knee to neck deep, with movement to either side barred by the swamp. Movement was by single file only."⁵ However, patrols pushed gradually forward through this country and by 12th February were established one-third of the way to the Sisiruai villages; on the 14th a patrol from the 61st reached the 25th there.

The country along the Hupai through which the 9th Battalion had to advance was even more swampy than that through which the Tavera

⁴ Even so he lacked a second-in-command and a signals officer.

⁵ 25 Aust Inf Bn Report on Operations in South Bougainville, 16 Jan to 14 Apr 1945.

flowed. Soon after arriving on the Hupai and taking over from the 42nd Battalion, Lieut-Colonel Matthews of the 9th decided that the Japanese he faced were in small scattered groups whose role was to fight delaying actions. On 25th January Field told Matthews, whose main task was to protect the base at Mawaraka, that he might begin moving along the road to Mosigetta but must not go so far that he could not be supplied by jeep. Between Mawaraka and Makotowa lay deep swamps into which patrols of the 9th moved, often waist-deep in water, using pigeons to carry their signals back. On the 26th Matthews wrote:

Werda's⁶ patrol at lunchtime reported that they were in the middle of a swamp, five men exhausted, so I said to withdraw. Tonight they said they were in the middle of the swamp still, perched on trees trying to get some sleep. They will be in tomorrow. Clark's⁷ patrol reported by pigeon this morning that they were in a swamp last night and were going to get out this morning. Later message said they were still on their way.

On his return Clark reported that his patrol ran short of food and had to eat the pigeons' blue peas.

That night from 20 to 30 Japanese attacked along the track, while three of their guns shelled the Australian positions farther back, firing some 40 rounds. (It was the first time this battalion had been under artillery fire.) The attack was repulsed, but though there was much firing no Japanese dead were found.

On 27th January patrols reached Makotowa and found Japanese digging in round the garden there. On the morning of the 28th Major Blanch's company of the 9th was sent forward along the Mosigetta Road to take and hold the track at this large garden area. As the leading platoon was circling it, the forward scout, Private Cameron,⁸ was killed. While trying to outflank the enemy the leading platoon came under fire from three concealed pill-boxes and two more men were killed and three wounded. Blanch took up a perimeter position astride the road past the garden. A second company (Captain Gaul⁹) was sent forward to cut the track beyond Makotowa; but that evening reported that it had been halted by swamps.¹

Indeed, during this phase, the infantry were moving along narrow islands in a huge swamp. There was no way of precisely mapping the boundaries of the islands except to patrol them, though aerial photographs helped. These photographs were assembled, sometimes at battalion headquarters, information from patrols was added, and at length each battalion created

⁶ Lt E. C. Werda, QX55210; 9 Bn. Labourer; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 18 Aug 1918.

⁷ Lt C. E. Clark, QX41900; 9 Bn. Insurance clerk; of Rockhampton, Qld; b. Rockhampton, 2 Aug 1912.

⁸ Pte C. J. Cameron, NX118028; 9 Bn. Farmhand; of Llangothlin, NSW; b. Guyra, NSW, 9 Jun 1921. Killed in action 28 Jan 1945.

⁹ Maj A. J. F. Gaul, NX116813; 9 Bn. Regular soldier; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 7 Aug 1915.

¹ On 28th January Captain J. C. Kerridge (of Cheltenham, NSW), the medical officer of the 9th Battalion, and a stretcher bearer were walking along the road 300 yards beyond a company position when they saw two Japanese armed with rifles sitting by the road. The Japanese made signs that they wished to surrender and the Australians disarmed them and took them back. They were thin, poorly clad and lacked boots, and when questioned said that they were artillerymen of the 6th Field Artillery, who had recently been sent as riflemen to the 2nd Company of the 13th Regiment. They had surrendered, they said, because they resented being used as infantry, and because of the lack of food and medical care.

a new map of its own area of perhaps five miles by five. On these the patrols were "briefed". In this instance an aircraft was flown over the swamps south of Makotowa to ascertain the position of the reinforcing company which was found somewhat farther south than was intended. It reached the road east of Makotowa soon after midday on the 30th and during the afternoon parties of fully-equipped Japanese walked from the west into the position it established there; six were killed. It was evident that the enemy was abandoning Makotowa, and next day a jeep was driven along the track to the company east of that place.

In eight days the 9th had advanced 400 yards along the road to Mosigetta. Japanese tactics on these and the following days were to fight from ambush positions flanked by swamps and dense bush, to mine the track, and repeatedly cut the signal lines of the leading Australian groups. They counter-attacked at night using handlines of vine to guide them along the tracks. The Australians' tactics were first to try to overcome opposition with mortar and artillery fire, and if this failed to make a wide and deep outflanking move. During the following weeks the usual aim of such a move would be to penetrate about 1,000 yards behind the Japanese position, establish a perimeter there and patrol back towards the Japanese flanks and rear. Although losses were not heavy, conditions were extremely uncomfortable and there was a constant sense of danger. Officers and men showed signs of strain, and the first self-inflicted wounds recorded on Bougainville occurred at this time. Spirits were improved by the capture on 2nd February of an abandoned 150-mm gun—one of those which had been regularly shelling the area.

During the 3rd several patrols searched the areas to the north and south of the Mosigetta Road and reported some abandoned enemy positions. Some had apparently been sites for 75-mm guns, and small quantities of shell cases and projectiles were scattered around. Among the other equipment were Japanese hurricane lamps with brass candlesticks inside. "These candlesticks were impressed by Padre Ganly,² after cleaning, for use on his altar."

General Savage reconnoitred the Puriata sector in an aircraft on the 5th and, later that day, instructed General Bridgeford that a battalion should advance on Mosigetta, and he repeated that the 2/8th Commando should secure crossings over the Puriata about Makapeka. The squadron was ordered so to do, provided the enemy was not defending the crossings when it arrived. By 13th February the squadron had established a new base at Opai, and in the following week found the gardens north of the Puriata to be clear of the enemy. Savage was critical of Winning's failure to secure the fords more promptly. Winning explained that he had to keep pace with the 61st Battalion. Savage informed him, through Colonel Edgar,³ that the pace of the 61st was no concern of Winning's.

² Chaplain Rev D. A. Ganly, VX114018; 9 Bn. Church of England clergyman; of Bendigo, Vic; b. Geelong West, Vic, 9 Aug 1913.

³ Lt-Gen H. G. Edgar, CB, CBE, VX85015, DD of SD (Eqpt) LHQ 1943-44; GSO1 3 Div 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Wedderburn, Vic, 31 Oct 1903.

On 19th February Savige told Bridgeford that the Chief of the General Staff had said that it was difficult to find replacements and they might have to break up a brigade. Their tactics must be such as to reduce casualties. Indeed it was becoming evident that the II Corps was engaged in a stern struggle against a dogged and formidable enemy force, and might find itself lacking the strength to continue the offensive effectively.

In the southern sector the infantry continued to advance systematically, with a company sweeping round either to the right or the left of the track. Movement was still impeded by swamps and thick undergrowth; nearly every day there was at least one clash with a Japanese rearguard. By 11th February, having crossed a tributary of the Hupai at Beech's Crossing, the leading companies of the 9th were beyond the swamp country and among tall trees standing in thin undergrowth, so that usually men could see 50 yards ahead. The men were happy to be out of the dense swampy bush. Meanwhile the road from the coast was being rapidly improved.

Natives have cleaned out the ditches and cut away all grass on each side (wrote a South Australian diarist). New bridges built, three-ton trucks everywhere and sand spread over the road. Camps of engineers, artillery, sigs, etc., all the way down and the road as busy as Rundle Street on a Friday night.

The battalion was now nearing Mosigetta. Each day abandoned Japanese positions were occupied and one or two straying Japanese were killed. On the 14th eight Corsairs of the R.N.Z.A.F. (the Corsairs had been giving strong support) dropped 1,000-lb bombs ahead of the leading company. On the night of the 14th-15th Japanese guns fired more heavily than usual, expending 110 rounds. The Australians considered that they were using up a dump of ammunition before withdrawing. Next day (the 15th) a patrol from Captain Beech's⁴ company reached the junction with the Meivo Track (which was named Matthews' Junction). Later patrols found signs of hasty retreat from the whole neighbourhood. The men dug out freshly-filled holes and found "two anti-tank barrels, many documents, seals, two swords, fountain pens, much money in notes, clothing, medical supplies; a few fires still burning". Next day a platoon under Lieutenant Mulcahy⁵ thrust south into the Mosigetta area. This completed the attainment of the 7th Brigade's second phase in this area. On the 17th a company of the 61st Battalion from the north linked with the 9th. They were greeted by a "Welcome" sign erected by the 9th Battalion at the track junction.

A detached company of the 25th Battalion had been given the task of gaining the coast from Motupena Point to the mouth of the Puriata. Consequently, on 25th January, Captain Just's company had been landed by barge on the coast some distance south of Motupena Point and began patrolling along the coast to Matsunkei. Brigadier Field decided to land a platoon of the New Guinea Infantry at a point about a mile farther

⁴ Maj A. T. Beech, QX40871; 9 Bn. Apprentice fitter and turner; of Nambour, Qld; b. Brisbane, 6 Nov 1921.

⁵ Capt E. R. Mulcahy, QX40835; 9 Bn. Dairy farmer; of Eumundi, Qld; b. Brisbane, 19 Jul 1913.

south whence it would move stealthily towards Mosigetta, and to move Just's company in barges to Toko still farther south, whence it would push inland towards Barara.

On 2nd February a platoon of the 25th was already on the beach at a lagoon well north of Toko, where it killed one Japanese, and then marched south. A second platoon sailed down the coast in a barge. On the way it was signalled into the shore by the New Guinea troops who said that they had found some 30 Japanese at Makaku and placed an ambush between that village and the coast. The platoon landed at 2 p.m. and was joined next day by the platoon moving along the coast. By the 4th the whole company was ashore. In the following days patrols moved inland through dense bush but soon came under fire from a Japanese outpost at a crossing not far from the coast and were held; a patrol probed south to the mouth of the Puriata. By 11th February the company was more than a mile inland. That day Field granted a request by Lieut-Colonel McKinna that he be allowed to land a second company (Captain Corbould⁶) at Toko to assist in an ambitious thrust by this isolated force. Just was to take Barara and Corbould to move through to the ford over which the main southward track passed and ambush the Japanese withdrawing from Mosigetta. Meanwhile the remainder of the 25th was to be ferried to Toko.

The Japanese policy of resisting the southward advance more strongly even if it entailed heavier casualties failed to impose the hoped-for delay of the Australians. Nevertheless the Japanese leaders considered that the *13th Regiment's* "swift damaging hit-and-run tactics" were well executed. However, Mosigetta was at length abandoned and a withdrawal south of the Puriata ordered. The landing at Toko was unexpected and caused an acceleration of this withdrawal.

There now occurred a major crisis in the Japanese command. The young reserve officers were highly critical of the conduct of the campaign and blamed the policies of the older professional officers for the constant reverses. This criticism became so outspoken that, in February, a number of the younger officers were relieved of their commands; perhaps partly as an outcome of this crisis, General Hyakutake suffered a paralysis of his left side. Lieut-General Kanda took command of the *XVII Army* and Lieut-General Tsutomu Akinaga, Chief of Staff of the Army, succeeded him in command of the *6th Division*. "This change of command was regarded favourably by the younger officers, but it soon became apparent that Kanda intended to pursue the same policy as Hyakutake. Kanda was a shrewd, hard, fussy little professional soldier of long experience. He was steeped in tradition and a ruthless commander, but even his bitterest critics admitted his capabilities. Akinaga . . . was a dyed in the wool militarist and a strict disciplinarian. Unused to an active command he was plunged into a situation which was a little out of his depth. One of his staff stated that he spent too much time doing a corporal's job in his forward battalions to be a good divisional commander."⁷

In the country between Mosigetta and the Puriata River only small Japanese rearguards opposed the advance. In a withdrawal such as this, in which it was necessary to coordinate numbers of small groups, the defects of Japanese staff work, and particularly of their communications,

⁶ Capt R. W. Corbould, VX100095. 39, 7 MG and 25 Bns. Oil company superintendent; of Mildura, Vic; b. Mildura, 25 Aug 1916.

⁷ 23rd Brigade, "History of the Japanese Occupation of Bougainville, March 1942-August 1945". (As mentioned, this was written after comprehensive interrogation of the Japanese staff.)

were evident, and many Japanese were killed either as lonely stragglers or in parties that seemed ill-informed about the progress of the withdrawal. The advance on the Puriata was continued by the 25th and 61st Battalions, the 9th being rested. The Australians passed through elaborate Japanese bivouacs with many huts and bomb-proof shelters, and through big gardens.

There were fairly frequent clashes. On 22nd February the 61st Battalion sent out a fighting patrol to drive the enemy from between two company positions. One group of four, including Private Haines,⁸ became separated and one man was severely wounded. Haines took command, hoisted the wounded man on his shoulder, and set out, with another man, to carry him through the enemy's lines. Twice he hid the wounded man and drove off enemy parties with his Bren. At nightfall they were within the enemy's perimeter, and hid there waiting for light. At daylight a mortar barrage was brought down on the Japanese and, while it was falling, Haines and his companion got back to the battalion's lines whence Haines led out a patrol which recovered the wounded man. It was found that Haines and his Bren had caused the enemy to abandon their position.

Also on 22nd February, the 25th Battalion advancing from Toko reached Barara, and later that day the track behind the battalion had been made "jeepable" all the way to that point. For five days the leading troops had been living partly on vegetables from Japanese gardens. On 24th February the battalion came to one garden of five acres growing sweet potatoes, peanuts, melons, pumpkins, marrows, paw paws and corn; on 1st March the 61st occupied a garden extending 600 yards by 400. Abandoned pack saddles and horse dung were found. By this time patrols had reached the Puriata along a wide front.

Meanwhile, on 20th February Bridgeford had ordered the 2/8th Commando on the inland flank to seize the fords eastward from a point south of Makapeka, and destroy enemy troops crossing the Puriata from Mosigetga. A section (Lieutenant Perry⁹) had already set ambushes in the area of the Makapeka forks; a second section (Lieutenant Maxwell¹) took over the area to the west. Between 17th February and 5th March 26 Japanese were killed, mostly in a series of sharp attacks against an enemy force covering one of the main exits from Mosigetga.

This position was discovered in a singular manner. Maxwell's section was in position near the junction of the Makapeka and Puriata Rivers. Nothing was known of any Japanese concentration in the vicinity until one morning a three-man patrol under Corporal Spitz² found a well-defined and recently used track leading up the south bank of the Makapeka. The patrol followed it and entered the rear of a Japanese ambush which

⁸ Pte E. J. Haines, MM, S45748; 61 Bn. Brickyard worker; of West Thebarton, SA; b. Thebarton, 15 April 1923.

⁹ Lt R. W. Perry, NX131893; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Articled clerk; of Bellevue Hill, NSW; b. Randwick, NSW, 2 Dec 1921.

¹ Maj K. J. Maxwell, SX13328; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Laboratory assistant; of Renmark, SA; b. Adelaide, 13 Jan 1922.

² Cpl L. E. Spitz, WX16575; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Railway ganger; of Nannup, WA; b. Nannup, 5 Jan 1917.

had been established in a commanding position high above the crossing. Spitz, who was in the lead, suddenly saw almost at his feet, the back of a Japanese who, from a very well-concealed slit-trench, was peering through the cover at the river below. Spitz put a burst into the Japanese and, before those in the ambush were really aware of what had happened, the three Australians were well away down the track towards Maxwell's position to report.

In the next few days patrol after patrol crossed the Makapeka River to probe the Japanese positions. Maxwell led out a fighting patrol eight strong to establish the strength of the enemy and try to force them to withdraw by firing on them from an adjoining knoll. When near the Japanese position Maxwell sent Sergeant Brahatiss³ with a Bren gun group to select a fire position while he himself picked a position for a rifle-grenade group. Brahatiss' party came under heavy small arms fire. Brahatiss attacked immediately with the Bren and silenced one Japanese machine-gun position and engaged another. Maxwell decided that he was not strong enough to overcome the enemy, who were well dug in on the rim of a plateau in approximately platoon strength, and withdrew his men under cover of rifle grenades. Next morning Maxwell reconnoitred the position from the west. Later the entire squadron, aided by an air strike, attacked and took it, securing a ford across the Makapeka (Maxwell's Crossing). The position was named Commando Ridge.

The Australian lines of communication were being steadily improved. By 18th February a strip on which little Auster aircraft could land was open at Mawaraka,⁴ which one diarist described as now being "a little city". On the 25th rations were dropped for the first time at Barara. In the forward area the advancing troops were often moving along wide, well-drained tracks, but farther to the rear the rain and the wear and tear caused by heavy vehicles made it difficult to keep the tracks in order. On 25th February the 9th Battalion recorded that it had rained for a week, the mud was knee deep, and trains of six or seven jeeps were being hauled forward by tractors.

Savige now believed that the enemy would use only delaying tactics until the Hari River was reached, but would fight on that river to retain garden areas on which they largely depended for food. He ordered Bridgeford to establish control of the area between the Puriata and the Hari. In a first stage he was to clear to the line of the Hongorai, in a second to clear the country of the enemy to the line Hari River-Monoitu-Kapana. Barge landing points had to be found between the Puriata and Hari and a road built from the coast to link with the road Hiru Hiru-Aku. Bridgeford was to use only one brigade group in the forward area. On 28th February, after Bridgeford received these orders, the 9th Battalion was resting, the 61st was in and forward of Mosigetta from which the

³ WO2 S. Brahatiss, DCM, NX101098; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. 3 Bn RAR Korea 1952. Builder's labourer; of Katoomba, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 8 Jan 1918.

⁴ Named Vernon Strip after Flight Lieutenant W. R. Vernon of No. 5 Squadron RAAF, killed there on 11th January 1945.

enemy had been driven by Captain Hutchinson's⁵ company, the 25th was round Barara, the New Guinea company was patrolling to the east between the Puriata and Hongorai, and the 2/8th Commando was harassing the enemy between the two rivers farther to the north.

The 61st continued to probe forward. On 7th March, for example, a patrol of the 61st went to Horinu 2 without meeting any enemy, but next day a platoon patrol opened fire on a party of 15 to 20 and killed six. The guns of the 10th Battery (4th Field Regiment) directed by Captain Koch,⁶ the artillery observer with the 61st, drove out the surviving Japanese who were found to have been in occupation of four machine-gun pits and 20 other weapon-pits.

Brigadier Field decided to rest the 61st while the 25th, with the New Guinea company patrolling ahead of it, on 11th March continued to advance to the Hongorai in the western sector and the 2/8th Commando in the eastern. Eventually Field was to establish his headquarters at Toko. It was estimated that 850 men of the *13th Japanese Regiment* were between the Australians and the Hongorai and could be quickly reinforced from beyond the Hari.

Toko had now become a main base. From early in February landing craft had been ferrying supplies thither from both the Adele River and Torokina, and from 7th March small ships carried stores from Torokina to Toko, where landing craft off-loaded them to the beach, an operation greatly hampered by the heavy surf. (At length on 11th April the calmer beach at Motupena Point was used for off-loading the small ships and the cargo was taken on to Toko by road.)

On 4th March the leading company of the 25th Battalion had crossed the Puriata and established a perimeter 200 yards south along the Buin Road. The first man to reach the south bank was Private Galvin⁷ and the crossing was named after him.⁸ Next day the enemy were easily thrust off a knoll close to the river where it converges with the Buin Road. On the 6th the enemy shelled the area, causing one casualty—the wounding of Private Slater,⁹ who carried on at his post until relieved. The knoll was named Slater's. Although some 600 shells were fired into this battalion's area during March he was the only casualty caused by such fire.

The company sent out patrols daily, and on the 9th one of these reported having killed ten Japanese without loss to itself. At the same time it became evident that the enemy intended to dispute the advance vigorously. Often a party of Japanese would advance stealthily at first

⁵ Maj T. C. Hutchinson, MC, ED, QX40906; 61 Bn. Engineering draftsman; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 12 Jan 1910.

⁶ Capt A. M. Koch, MC, VX117140; 4 Fd Regt. Costing clerk; of Caulfield, Vic; b. Melbourne, 2 Jan 1918.

⁷ Pte P. J. Galvin, Q16917; 25 Bn. Shop assistant; of Sandgate, Qld; b. Murwillumbah, NSW, 17 May 1918.

⁸ The following account of the operations of the 25th Battalion in this phase is largely drawn from a narrative compiled in May 1945 by Corporal A. C. Wann of the Military History Section.

⁹ Pte C. R. Slater, T101924; 25 Bn. Textile worker; of Beauty Point, Tas; b. Launceston, Tas, 19 Sep 1924.

light, pour machine-gun fire on to Slater's Knoll and then retire to a position some 250 yards along the track. On the 9th a patrol led by Lieutenant King¹ penetrated the Tokinotu area and reported large gardens there.

On the 11th, when, in accordance with the orders outlined above, the battalion was to advance, the leading company found the enemy dug in firmly astride the Buin Road. After several patrol clashes a long duel between mortars opened. Meanwhile two other companies had moved south along the right bank of the river, crossed it and struck out for Tokinotu. They pressed on, reaching a point near the Buin Road after several skirmishes in which two Japanese officers were killed. At length Hiru Hiru was reached, and these companies stood firm and waited for the company to the north to push along the Buin Road and join them. However, this company found that it was fighting a more determined enemy than had been met north of the Puriata. On the 13th Lieutenant Shaw's platoon, which was leading, entered an area in which were recently-dug but unoccupied positions, large enough (as was afterwards found) to harbour two companies. Shaw, who was scouting forward with a corporal, realised just in time that the Japanese intended to reoccupy these positions behind him, and that he was walking into a trap. He and the corporal managed to make their way back. In the ensuing fire fight one Australian was killed and two wounded. The company formed a perimeter. That evening and next day a patrol from Lieutenant Jefferies'² company in the south moved along the east side of the Buin Road to Slater's and back along the west side to Jefferies' "firm base" behind the Japanese positions. In heavy rain the leading company pressed on through a bivouac area in which enemy dead were lying unburied.

On the 15th an enemy force thrice vainly counter-attacked this company as the men were digging in. It attacked again on the 16th and 17th. The company was now under fire from three sides. Part of Captain Just's company pressed forward, reached the forward company and all withdrew to Just's perimeter. It was now evident that an aggressive Japanese force of considerable size was active between the leading and the rear companies of the 25th Battalion. Captured documents suggested that reinforcements were moving from Buin towards the Puriata. McKinna decided to make a strong thrust along the Buin Road with Captain McInnes'³ company on the west of the road, and Just's followed by two platoons of Jefferies' on the east. The aim would be to clear the road as far as the company at Tokinotu.

At 8.30 a.m. on 19th March the attacking companies of the 25th Battalion advanced, supported by fire from artillery, mortars and medium machine-guns, and drove the Japanese from their positions, killing six.

¹ Lt B. W. King, NX112256; 25 Bn. Clerk; of Sydney; b. Mosman, NSW, 23 Jun 1923. Killed in action 19 Mar 1945.

² Capt R. D. K. Jefferies, DSO, QX36185; 25 Bn. Trainee theatre manager; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Armidale, NSW, 2 Dec 1920.

³ Maj R. D. McInnes, MC, QX53202. 25 Bn; 2/Royal Berkshire Regt 1945-46. Trust officer; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Toowoomba, 12 Apr 1922.

Jefferies' two platoons encountered more Japanese in an extensive system of pill-boxes near the junction of the road with a track leading to Hatai. Jefferies telephoned McKinna for orders. McKinna decided to attack, and himself went forward with a section of machine-guns and a Pita.⁴ Jefferies had thirty-five men, and estimated the enemy at fifteen. After a fire fight lasting more than two hours he decided to charge with the bayonet. This entailed borrowing bayonets from Just's company near by, as his platoons, being in patrol formation, were not carrying them. After a final burst of machine-gun fire Jefferies led the men forward. The fire had kept the Japanese underground and the Australians advanced 25 yards before the enemy opened fire. Jefferies was wounded by a grenade, and Lieutenant Chesterton took command. On the right Corporal Gurski's⁵ section veered towards a group of pill-boxes from which a damaging fire was coming and, attacking with rifles, bayonets, Brens and grenades, forced the enemy out of some posts and into others farther to the right. After three-quarters of an hour the platoons withdrew to the road leaving 23 enemy dead apart from 6 others seen to fall before reaching their rear positions. Five Australians, including Lieutenants Stewart⁶ and King, were killed and 17 wounded, 3 fatally.

The positions to which the enemy had fallen back were located with the help of a scouting Auster aircraft, and McKinna decided to attack again with air and artillery support. Thus, on the morning of the 22nd, eight New Zealand Corsairs bombed the enemy's positions, and accurate fire was brought down by two field batteries, an anti-tank gun, mortars and machine-guns. As soon as the aircraft reported that they had finished with the target, Captain McInnes' company advanced. Corporal Rattey⁷ led his section firing a Bren from the hip until he was on top of the first Japanese weapon-pit, when he flung in a grenade and called his men forward. Using the same tactics he killed the Japanese in two more weapon-pits. He then advanced on a Japanese machine-gun post and with his Bren killed one of the team and put the others to flight. Some 2,000 rounds of ammunition were beside the gun. In an hour the Japanese positions were taken, the enemy leaving 18 dead on the field. Five Australians were wounded of whom two remained in action.

On 14th March Field sent Bridgeford a review of "current operations" in which he expressed the opinion that in view of the value of the gardens east of the Hongorai and Hari Rivers the enemy would vigorously contest the crossing of the Hongorai; the enemy appeared to be fighting delaying engagements along the north-south roads eastwards from the Puriata. The 7th Brigade was securing the Tokinotu-Hatai-Rumiki lateral

⁴ Projector Infantry Tank Attack (now Piat). It was a counterpart of the American Bazooka but with a different firing principle. It succeeded the Boyes anti-tank rifle and fired a 2½-lb H.E. charge with a maximum effective range of 150 yards.

⁵ Cpl D. W. Gurski, QX61725; 25 Bn. Foundry packer; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Laidley, Qld, 21 Jan 1922.

⁶ Lt R. K. Stewart, QX33589; 25 Bn. Clerk; of Cairns, Qld; b. Cairns, 17 Nov 1919. Killed in action 19 Mar 1945.

⁷ Sgt R. R. Rattey, VC, NX102964; 25 Bn. Farmer; of Barmedman, NSW; b. Barmedman, 28 Mar 1917. (Rattey was awarded the Victoria Cross for this action.)

track. When this had been achieved the line of communications would be shortened, the 61st Battalion could be relieved by the 9th via Toko and Tokinotu and the 2/8th Commando would have a shorter route for supplies. Field added that he considered that the thrust against the Hongorai should be supported by tanks and medium artillery, brought in through Toko. The tanks would "constitute a valuable reserve in support of the two forward battalions to deal with any emergency situation". Medium guns were essential in view of the presence of large-calibre Japanese guns east of the Hongorai.

On 17th March Savage gave Bridgeford permission to move tanks and medium guns to the Toko area and, on the 18th, Bridgeford issued detailed instructions for the coming operation.⁸ In these he expressed the opinion that the enemy would "stage his main battle" in the area between the Hongorai and Hari Rivers and would fight a series of delaying actions west of the Hongorai to gain time for re-grouping his forces and completing defence works along the Hongorai guarding the main approaches to the Taitai area. A prisoner had said that if the attack on the Hongorai assumed grave proportions *XVII Army* would send a force, perhaps the *45th Regiment* from Kieta, to move over the foothills and attack the Australian rear. The A.I.B. had reported that there were concentrations in the foothills north-east from Monoitu.

Bridgeford concluded that it would be unwise to advance, except by patrolling, farther east than the Hongorai until the force in the forward area included a striking force of one brigade group, with tanks and heavy artillery, and a reserve of one brigade group to relieve the striking force if need be and maintain the momentum of the attack. Before relieving the striking force the reserve brigade would guard the lines of communication in the forward area. But reinforcement of the forward area depended on ability to maintain more forces. "Road and track construction is, therefore, of urgent priority." The divisional engineers, with all possible speed, were to make a durable truck road from Toko to the Tokinotu area and a corduroy jeep track thence as far forward towards Rumiki and the Hongorai crossing as possible. The 15th Brigade and "B" Squadron of the 2/4th Armoured Regiment would prepare to move to Toko, and the leading battalion would help in this road building. The defence of the Torokina perimeter would be allotted to the 29th Brigade. The wisdom of this re-deployment was confirmed by important Intelligence obtained by the 2/8th Commando which from 9th March onwards had been based at Nihero.

This area (wrote Sergeant Hungerford⁹ later) had been a considerable kanaka place on a main Government road to the south. There were two large "house garamuts", or ceremonial sing-sing houses, whose saccac thatch, although in a ruinous state, proved a boon to the squadron when building shelters. On the west was

⁸ A fortnight earlier a few Japanese tanks had been located. A New Zealand Corsair pilot reported having seen enemy tanks at Ruri Bay in the north-east of the island. Squadron Leader B. M. H. Palmer, commanding No. 5 Squadron RAAF, led other Corsairs to the target and guided them while they attacked three tanks, all of which they damaged. As a result of this and a later attack two were destroyed but the third was evidently moved away.

⁹ Sgt T. A. G. Hungerford, WX14902; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Of Perth; b. Perth, 5 May 1915.

a high ridge along which the road ran, and in the east a small but swiftly-flowing river, the essential water supply, bucketed through a deep and rocky gorge that was a fine defence.

Between the ridge and the river was a wide basin where the jungle was flattened to make a dropping ground. Headquarters was established on a knoll overlooking the river and the dropping ground, and below headquarters on the ledge immediately above the river a large native camp grew up to accommodate first Angau and the carriers allotted to the squadron, and later on the hordes of refugees who came in for protection.

As usual, the troops were arrayed in a ragged perimeter around the dropping-ground and headquarters, the main reliance for protection being placed on the terrain and the system of "houses-look" on all tracks leading into the position.

The surrounding country was precipitous in the extreme, with razor-back ridges falling sheer into impenetrable gullies and re-entrants, and the whole covered with a dense mat of jungle. One troop was established in a small perimeter about a mile down the road towards Sinanai, where there was a cluster of inhabited places known to be occupied in some numbers by the Japanese. Its job was to report on and if possible prevent any movement of the enemy on Nihero.

Actually, in the early stages before the Japanese had been annoyed into relinquishing Sinanai, it would have been a fairly easy matter for them to force the squadron to evacuate Nihero, but they never realised it. They were held back, it was later discovered, by the report of a warrant officer who conducted a reconnaissance of the position for three days soon after the Australians moved in. He observed the camp from a tall tree on the eastern bank of the river, and was so impressed with the number of kanakas in the area, the widely spread nature of the perimeter, and the size of the dropping ground that had been cleared, that he reported "at least 1,000 white troops were in occupation in Nihero". He later was taken prisoner by some of the "thousand white troops" and proved a mine of information.

Long-range patrols began probing from Nihero as far south as Unanai, Hari and the Buin Road between the Hongorai and Mivo Rivers. On 17th March a patrol under Lieutenant Lawson-Dook¹ attacked five huts in the Sinanai area, killed fourteen Japanese and captured documents. Such attacks had been reduced to a copy-book routine: a patrol looked the position over in the evening and found a good spot from which to launch the attack, the men involved moved in under cover of darkness and at first light poured fire into the huts, usually killing all occupants in their sleep. This patrol of Lawson-Dook's, however, differed in important respects. No suitable spot could be found from which to deliver the broad-side, so the patrol waited until the Japanese were at their breakfast and then ran out of the undergrowth—as one of them later described it, "like a football team running on to the field"—lined up under the gaze of the astonished Japanese and "sent them to their ancestors with their rice-bowls still in their hands."

On 11th March Major Winning warned Corps headquarters that several parties each of 12 Japanese were moving towards the Torokina perimeter and one had the task of killing the commander. News of this enterprise excited much interest and some anxiety at Torokina. The 15th Brigade, then garrisoning the perimeter area, took measures to intercept any intruders but none got so far.

¹ Lt R. Lawson-Dook, WX12529; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Compressor driver; of Kalgoorlie, WA; b. Perth, 15 Oct 1915.

A few days later the commando squadron obtained more important information. In ambushes on 18th and 20th March eight Japanese were killed and an order of the *6th Division* dated 16th March was captured indicating that there would be a large-scale Japanese offensive early in April.

The 25th Battalion which was likely to bear the brunt of such an offensive was now deployed with one company in the Tokinotu area, one company across the Hatai Track-Buin Road junction, and the remainder in depth along the Buin Road. McKinna's headquarters and part of Headquarters Company were on Slater's Knoll. Forward of Slater's Knoll the road was now a morass: from 25th to 29th March it was impassable and natives were used to carry supplies forward. Further warning of the impending offensive arrived on the 26th when it was learnt from a captured document that the *23rd Regiment* was concentrating at Oso, and patrols reported large enemy parties moving west. In response to this threat Bridgeford informed Field on the 28th that the squadron of tanks which, fortunately, would begin arriving at Toko next day would be available to him in an emergency.

The Japanese attack was prefaced by a series of raids on the Australian lines of communication and troops in the rear. The eight guns of the 5th Field Battery were in position on the west bank of the Puriata eastward from Toko. At 5.25 a.m. on the 28th a booby-trap exploded in the forest to the rear of the battery. It was not unusual for lightly-set traps to explode without being touched by a man, but Gunner Cheeseman,² on guard, fired two bursts in the direction and heard men crashing through the bush. A few minutes later five or six Japanese appeared a few feet from Bombardier Green³ in a weapon-pit on the left of the battery near the river bank. He fired with his Bren and heard bodies falling into the river. Later two men who had been sent out to disarm the booby-traps, as was usual each morning, were fired on. By midday firing had ceased; the battery suffered no casualties.

Meanwhile on the night of the 27th in the 25th Battalion's area the enemy had been heard moving stealthily on the Buin Road and the east bank of the Puriata near Slater's Knoll. The scouting aircraft reported three large parties of Japanese on the move.

On Slater's Knoll Major Weppner,⁴ second-in-command 25th Battalion, supervised the reorganisation of the pit and weapon sightings of battalion headquarters, and after the evening meal called an inspection stand-to. Officers checked on the pits and an hour later the troops stood down. The moon came up and after a while the officers drifted over to hear the evening news from the I.O. Suddenly the wire to "B" echelon went dead.⁵

² Cpl A. Cheeseman, NX108831; 2 Fd Regt. Photo engraving apprentice; of Randwick, NSW; b. Sydney, 29 May 1923.

³ Bdr K. E. Green, VX87753; 2 Fd Regt. Carpenter; of Terang, Vic; b. Terang, 27 Oct 1920.

⁴ Maj R. Weppner, QX40879; 25 Bn. Advertising contractor, artist and signwriter; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Colbinabbin, Vic, 30 Aug 1903.

⁵ From Corporal Wann's narrative.

The "B" echelon, protected by a company of the 61st Battalion, was only 400 yards to the rear. Immediately runners were sent out to warn the sections round the perimeter. It was then about 8 p.m. At 8.15 about 100 Japanese charged from the rear, screaming and with bayonets fixed. Occasionally one would shout a phrase picked up from attacking Australians—for example, "It's on." The attack was beaten off. The Japanese re-formed and attacked again, first from the direction of the river and then from the south. These thrusts also failed. Next morning 19 enemy dead were found round the perimeter and one wounded man was taken; the Australians had lost 3 killed and 7 wounded. Some of the Japanese survivors, dug in between this perimeter and "B" echelon, fired on a patrol led by Weppner. Another patrol discovered Japanese dug in to the south astride the Buin Road between battalion headquarters and the forward companies.

The 9th Battalion, farther north, guessed that an enemy attack was to be made because of the frequency with which its wires were cut. At 11 p.m. on 28th March a party of Japanese was seen approaching the battalion's rear echelon at Barara astride the Toko-Mosigetta-Buin Road junction, where Major Fry⁶ commanded part of Headquarters Company, the transport and quartermaster staffs and others. They possessed only four Bren guns but these were well sited. One Japanese was killed in the initial advance and spasmodic fire continued throughout the night. At 4.45 a.m. in the light of a full moon, and after a prolonged concentration of machine-gun and rifle fire and grenade throwing, about 100 Japanese charged with fixed bayonets. They were driven back and at daybreak withdrew out of range. Soon they could be heard chopping wood, evidently to make stretchers for their wounded. Four Australians were wounded, but the Japanese left 23 dead on the field.

The 29th was comparatively quiet. Chesterton's company of the 25th Battalion was attacked in the morning and afternoon by relatively small enemy parties, and the headquarters of the 25th was again attacked. That morning Japanese attacked also the company of the 61st, killing two Australians and wounding two, but were repulsed. It was estimated that about 70 Japanese were dug in between this company and the headquarters of the 25th. However, a Japanese prisoner taken this day left no doubt that the raids and sporadic attacks were a prelude to a full-scale offensive, so far as the Japanese were able to stage one. He was a sergeant of the *13th Regiment* and said that the whole regiment (probably only 800 or 900 strong) was to be engaged in a battle that was to last five days; each man would carry 15 days' rations, 100 rounds and three grenades.

At 7 a.m. on the 30th (Good Friday) Chesterton's company was strongly attacked; at the time a patrol of 15 was out, leaving only 31 men in the perimeter. The patrol skirted the fight and joined McInnes' company farther north. Thence it was ordered back to Chesterton, but had not arrived when the Japanese, having been once repulsed, attacked again,

⁶ Lt-Col W. G. Fry, VX117038. 9 Bn; CO 47 Bn 1945. Schoolteacher; of Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 12 Jun 1909.

and the patrol again returned to the rearward company. During the day the Japanese attacked four times. The last attack, at 1 p.m., was the most severe. After a mortar bombardment the Japanese charged with bayonets fixed, hurling grenades and screaming. Twelve Japanese were killed; one Australian was killed and two were missing. Only 16 remained alive and unwounded in the perimeter, and the survivors withdrew to McInnes' perimeter carrying their wounded. The combined fire-power of the two companies now included one Vickers and fourteen Brens, but three mortars with 250 bombs had been left behind, and in the evening the Japanese brought them into action, dropping bombs throughout the night round Just's company on the east side of the Buin Road, about 500 yards beyond Kero Creek.⁷ It was known how many bombs had been left at the abandoned perimeter and the Australians counted the explosions anxiously. Meanwhile a Japanese mortar dropped bombs accurately on McInnes' company, wounding Sergeant Townsley⁸ and most of the members of his Vickers gun team.

For considerable periods on the 30th Field's headquarters and McKinna's were out of touch with three of the forward companies. The line to McInnes' combined company was out of action from midday onwards, but that to the company of the 61st was repaired about midday. When Chesterton arrived at McInnes' perimeter he sent back Private Hall⁹ with a message that the two companies were together and their position would be held until further orders. Hall followed the signal line 1,100 yards to Just's company arriving at 4.50 p.m.

Bridgeford had now placed Major Arnott's¹ squadron of the 2/4th Armoured Regiment under Field's command and instructed McKinna that he might use a troop of these tanks on the 31st. Meanwhile McInnes' force had been gradually reduced by casualties until it numbered only 83. After midday on the 30th the men had no food and their water-bottles were empty, but more water was obtained by sinking a hole within the perimeter, scooping water out in tins and waiting until the mud settled. The isolated force, now completely surrounded, guessed that Hall had reached the rear companies when, in the evening of the 30th, their own artillery fire fell forward of their perimeter. Many of the attacks on McInnes' force fell on a sector commanded by Sergeant E. N. Jorgensen who exposed himself to Japanese fire while directing his own men and dragging forward ammunition. Although himself wounded he took over a Bren gun whose gunner was disabled and halted a Japanese bayonet charge only a few yards from his position.

⁷ Battalion headquarters asked Just where the bombs were falling and he told them. Immediately the Japanese altered their deflection. After two more such inquiries and replies had been followed by a switching of Japanese fire, Just realised that they had tapped his line and, in effect, he was ranging the enemy on to his own position.

⁸ Sgt C. J. Townsley, QX61658; 25 Bn. Pastoral worker; of Roma, Qld; b. Roma, 23 Nov 1919. (Townsley and another wounded man, Private S. C. White, of Toowoomba, Qld, returned to the gun after treatment.)

⁹ Sgt P. J. Hall, MM, QX56727; 25 Bn. Shop assistant; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Toowoomba, 17 Jan 1924.

¹ Brig K. M. H. Arnott, DSO, ED, NX70790; 2/4 Armd Regt. Grazier; of Murrurundi, NSW; b. Strathfield, NSW, 15 Oct 1906.

The leading tanks of Major Arnott's squadron had run up on to the beach at Toko from landing craft only on the 29th. At 2.30 p.m. Arnott was warned that a troop would be needed in the 25th Battalion's area. To bring the tanks forward to the Buin Road and thence across the Puriata was a severe test for the engineers who were maintaining roads and bridges leading to the battle area.² At Coombes' Crossing not far inland from Toko a gully was spanned by a bridge built to carry three-ton trucks. On the 30th the engineers of the 15th Field Company, helped by clerks, cooks and others, completed a bridge to carry the 24-ton Matilda tanks; the four advancing tanks crossed at 2.30 p.m., having been kept waiting only a quarter of an hour. At the Puriata the tanks were waterproofed with canvas and grease in two hours. One bogged in the stream and dropped out of the race. Three crossed with the aid of bulldozers, and reached "B" echelon of the 25th Battalion at 7 p.m. Nothing had been heard of the isolated forward companies since midday, but it was too late to attempt to thrust the tanks forward that night. Field wished to know whether the tanks had reached McKinna. Surprise was essential and the enemy might be listening; it would be inadvisable to use the word "tank" on the telephone. "Arnott's biscuits" were well known in Australia, so McKinna was asked whether "Arnott's biscuits" had arrived and replied that they had.

Next morning the tanks advanced the remaining 400 yards to Slater's and came under McKinna's command. With a composite platoon from the headquarters company they advanced. A bulldozer hauled them through Kero Creek. At 4 p.m. they moved forward from Just's perimeter, now accompanied also by two platoons of his company. With a bulldozer improving the track ahead, the tanks rolled forward until they were about 400 yards from the besieged companies. Thence they advanced to the attack, with the infantry to the right and left.³ A few minutes earlier the Japanese had opened a fierce attack on McInnes' force—the heaviest of the day. Then the engines of tanks were heard about 100 yards away. McInnes' men, uncertain whether or not they were Japanese tanks, loaded and aimed their Pita. When the Japanese came under fire from the tanks they fled. Sergeant Taylor⁴ and Private Hall pressed forward of the tanks towards the perimeter. Eight Japanese were killed by the tanks; 94 more lay dead round the perimeter, killed in the earlier fighting. While McInnes' weary men, escorted by one tank and a platoon of Just's company, marched back along the road, McKinna, with the remaining two tanks and about two platoons of infantry, continued along the road to the abandoned perimeter at the Hatai junction. There the tanks killed 11, and 16 more bodies were found lying where Lieutenant Chesterton's

² Arnott had reconnoitred the route from Toko to Slater's Knoll on 11th March and had reported that he had seen no country over which tanks could not operate with the help of suitable bridges, waterproofing, bulldozers and powered winches.

³ The battalions of the 7th Brigade were well prepared for cooperation with tanks, having trained with the 2/6th and 2/8th Armoured Regiments in Papua and with the 2/4th at Madang.

⁴ Lt W. J. Taylor, QX54848; 25 Bn. Schoolteacher; of Cleveland, Qld; b. Brisbane, 27 Mar 1917.

men had killed them. The abandoned weapons and ammunition were either salvaged or destroyed lest the Japanese should repeat their achievement of bringing down galling fire on Australian positions with abandoned Australian mortars.

Meanwhile McKinna had ordered that jeeps be sent forward to carry back the wounded. Five set out, drawn by a bulldozer and carrying a total of 26 men. A little north of Just's perimeter they ran into an ambush; three drivers and one man of the escort were killed and most of the remainder left the jeeps and made off the way they had come, covered by fire from Private McGrath⁵ who, though severely wounded, continued shooting with his Owen gun until hit again and killed. Craftsman Oliver⁶ fired two magazines from his Owen and dived into the scrub where he lay low.

McKinna's group heard the firing and correctly guessed its cause. They moved back along the road with a tank fore and aft. At 6.50 p.m., after having joined the third tank, they attacked the Japanese in the ambush position, killing eleven. Just's company lost three men; Arnott was wounded while going forward to help the wounded men, and Oliver while exposing himself and shouting a warning. It was now too dark to continue moving, so the wounded were made as comfortable as possible in the ditch by the road and the infantry formed a perimeter round tanks and jeeps.

Next morning at 7 a.m. the column crossed Kero Creek and continued north to the Puriata where McInnes' and Just's companies established a perimeter 1,000 yards south of Slater's, Chesterton's going on to battalion headquarters carrying 7 wounded men and escorting 51 walking wounded. In the fighting on 30th and 31st March and 1st April 8 Australians had been killed and 58 wounded; 130 Japanese dead were counted. The enemy was still busy, and that evening (1st April) the line from Slater's to the forward companies was cut again.

For the next three days many small parties of Japanese were seen round Barara and Slater's Knoll and as far north as Mosigetta, evidently reconnoitring and forming up. There were exchanges of fire, but the enemy always made off quickly. Captured papers revealed that the fresh *23rd Japanese Regiment* was in the Barara area preparing to attack. The Australians made ready to fend off the next blow.

On the night of the 4th-5th nearly 200 enemy shells fell round the Australian battery near McKinna Bridge over the Puriata. Just before 5 a.m. on the 5th the lines connecting the 7th Brigade to the 25th Battalion and the 25th Battalion to its forward companies were cut. In a few minutes the posts round Slater's Knoll had been warned that attack was imminent. There were 129 men within the perimeter. Precisely at 5 o'clock Japanese attacked from the north, and almost immediately, as though they had been awaiting this signal, a stronger body attacked from

⁵ Pte S. W. McGrath, QX63631; 25 Bn. Pig grader; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Toowoomba, 14 Nov 1914. Killed in action 31 Mar 1945.

⁶ Cfn A. R. S. Oliver, MM, NX92169; 2/4 Armd Regt. Barman; of Harden, NSW; b. Moonee Ponds, Vic, 11 Mar 1916.

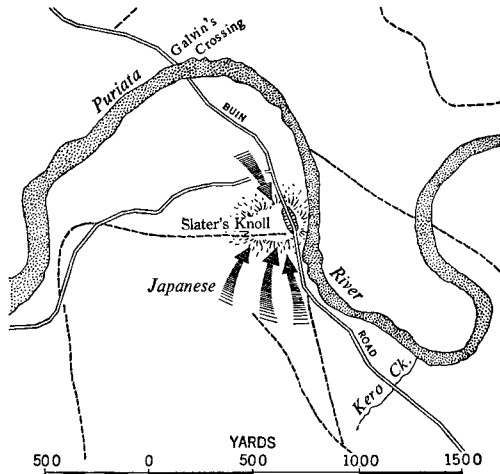
the south-west. Until 6.20 a.m. wave after wave charged forward and was brought low. Some Japanese fell within four yards of the weapon-pits. The artillery sent over accurate defensive fire, registered the previous day. At dawn the surviving Japanese were heard digging in on dead ground. As the light became clearer, the Australians saw that "enemy dead lay, literally, in heaps in front of the wire", and bodies could be seen scattered over an area some 200 yards square. It was gruesome evidence of the efficient siting of weapons and choice of fields of fire in preparation for expected attack.

Twenty minutes after the opening of this attack about 100 Japanese thrust at the two forward companies of the 25th, in a perimeter 1,000 yards along the Buin Road, but were driven off, finally abandoning the

effort at 8.30. At 12.50 p.m. two tanks advanced towards Slater's from the "B" echelon position with a company of the 61st Battalion. By 1.45 they were at Slater's where a company of the 25th advanced to mop up the remaining Japanese, covered by the fire of the tanks. One by one small groups of Japanese emerging from cover were shot down. Few escaped.

On 6th April 292 Japanese dead were counted round Slater's Knoll. A bulldozer borrowed from the engineers dug three communal graves in which the enemy dead were buried. Four wounded men were taken. Among the dead were one lieutenant-colonel (Kawano, commanding the *23rd Regiment*), two majors and many junior officers. Fifteen dead lay round the companies of McInnes and Just, which the main Japanese force by-passed when advancing on battalion headquarters. On the field lay 44 Japanese machine-guns, 219 rifles and 22 swords. Since 28th March a total of 620 Japanese dead had been counted. On the other hand in southern Bougainville from January to April the 25th Battalion, which bore the main force of the attacks from 28th March to 5th April, lost 10 officers and 179 other ranks killed or wounded. At the end of the battle it was 567 strong—270 short. McKinna had led his battalion with great skill and coolness and his men had demonstrated their innate soldierly qualities and the excellence of their training and tactics.

Interrogation of prisoners and examination of captured documents suggested that the Japanese troops assembled for the counter-offensive



5th April

totalled about 2,400, mostly fresh troops. Since at least 620 Japanese had been killed, and it could be assumed that at least 1,000 had been wounded, it was decided that the main formations engaged—the *13th* and *23rd Regiments*—had been made temporarily ineffective. The operations had underlined both the strength and weakness of the Japanese tactics. Their patrolling had been enterprising and thorough. On the other hand their staff work was confused, their artillery fire inaccurate, the practice of invariably cutting signal wires immediately before their attacks robbed them of surprise, and the habit of making repeated charges against strong positions and often from the same direction led to crippling losses.

The operations round Slater's Knoll had demonstrated the effectiveness of employing tanks with the forward companies and on the lines of communication. Field advocated using also machine-gun carriers to patrol the main tracks and bring out wounded.

When it appeared that the Australians were determined to continue advancing south, General Kanda had ordered General Akinaga of the *6th Division* to make a full-scale attack if the Australians crossed the Puriata. His object was to delay the Australians and give time to prepare for the decisive battle, which was to be fought on the line of the Silibai-Porror Rivers with a strong mobile striking force poised in the west.

After the war those who interrogated Japanese officers about this battle found it difficult to reconcile conflicting accounts, evidently not because memories had failed but because the Japanese operation had been "unbelievably confused". The attack was planned by Akinaga, incompetent as a field commander. He had in his division the *13th* and *23rd Regiments*, a field artillery regiment and, in the later stage, a medium artillery regiment. The fighting strength of the battered division was only about 2,700. They believed that there were 400 Australians south of the Puriata.

Officers of both regiments complained afterwards that neither regiment knew what the other was doing. On the first day Colonel Toyoharu Muda's *13th Regiment* believed that it attacked alone. Muda reported that he had taken his objective. But the same day Lieut-Colonel Kawano's *23rd Regiment* attacked a feature and claimed its capture. Akinaga thereupon ordered a further attack to annihilate the remaining enemy forces in the Puriata ford area. Four days later—in moonlight on the morning of the 5th—this attack opened.

The *23rd Regiment* attacked about 1,000 yards to the right of the *13th* and north-east of it. The attack failed, Kawano was killed and the regiment withdrew south to the rear of the *13th*. The *13th Regiment* with 600 men made the main attack from north and east. It made good progress until dawn when the attackers were ordered to dig in until darkness and make full use of grenades and mortars. However, in the afternoon, tanks and artillery fire drove the Japanese from the positions they had gained, and the Japanese commander accepted defeat. All three battalion commanders in the *13th* were killed. After Akinaga had reported his failure Kanda said to his Chief of Staff, Colonel Yoshiyuki Ejima: "It would not have happened if I had been in command. The enemy right flank was wide open. I would have severed his life line and controlled Toko. We could have delayed the enemy for three months."

The Japanese leaders estimated that 1,800 Australians were killed (a perplexing total in view of the fact that they considered that there were only 400 south of the Puriata at the outset). They gave their own casualties as 280 killed, including 30 officers, and 320 wounded (but 620 dead, including 52 officers, were counted).

The Japanese leaders said afterwards that they considered that it was fortunate that the Australians did not exploit their success, since, after the defeat at Slater's,

there could have been no organised resistance as far south and east as the Hongorai. They concluded that the length of the supply line was hampering the Australians' rate of progress.

Throughout the operations in the southern and other sectors New Guinea native troops had been strenuously employed. More and more reliance was being placed on them as guides. On 26th March the company of the 1st New Guinea Battalion serving in the southern sector had been withdrawn for a fortnight's rest, though its detached platoon in the central sector remained forward. The company was in need of rest, particularly its European members, whose responsibilities were heavier and, as a rule, more constant than those of their opposite numbers in other units.

In his report for March Captain Hegarty,⁷ the medical officer of the 1st New Guinea Battalion, wrote that information from the commanding officer of the battalion and from the company itself made it

obvious that 90 per cent of the Europeans of this company are exhausted and even now will be ineffective as a fighting force for a minimum of three months. . . . Of the platoon commanders, two . . . have been completely incapacitated for three weeks and the third took ill whilst on leave. Of the N.C.O's, four have been returned to Australia unfit for service outside Australia and every other N.C.O. has spent . . . time in hospital. . . . These Europeans were selected, amongst other things, for good health. . . . There is only one explanation and that is too much work for too long. Four of the five officers have been on service in New Guinea respectively 20, 19, 18 and 16 months.

He pointed out that the officers and N.C.O's had worked for six months on training and camp building and then had been "in action solidly for six months working in succession with three brigades and always with the forward battalion". The natives also had had too little relaxation and about 25 per cent were ineffective at any one time.

During March Savige had been pressing for reinforcements, but without much result. On 4th March he mentioned to Sturdee that the movement to Bougainville of two artillery regiments—the 2/11th and 13th—had been deferred mainly because of lack of shipping. He should, he said, have five field, one medium and one anti-tank regiment, but had only two field regiments, a mountain battery, and a troop of medium guns to cope with a major operation against the *6th Japanese Division* in the south, an "essential operation" on the Numa Numa trail, and an important operation in the north.⁸ Sturdee replied that there was no shipping to move new units. As it was, 5,000 men who should be in New Guinea were held up at Townsville.

As you know (he continued) G.H.Q. controls all shipping and I doubt whether they are the least bit interested in what goes on in Bougainville now that U.S. troops are out of it.

⁷ Capt V. H. Hegarty, NX200475; RMO 1 NG Inf Bn. Medical practitioner; of Burwood, NSW; b. Burwood, 8 Feb 1918.

⁸ The "troop of medium guns" was in fact "U" Heavy Battery. This battery was armed with four 155-mm guns and manned by men of the Port Kembla coast artillery. The battery, commanded by Captain J. I. McKenna (of Ashgrove, Qld), had arrived at Torokina in January and was transported to Toko in landing craft on 3rd and 4th April.

On 11th March Savige informed Sturdee that his infantry units lacked 112 officers, and asked that he be allowed to promote officers from the ranks.⁹

General Blamey had been on Bougainville from 24th to 27th March. About ten days earlier the attacks launched against him in Parliament and Press had reached their climax. The troops had been reading about these and knew that the necessity of the offensive in which they were engaged had been questioned in the House and in the newspapers. On the day of his arrival Blamey was invited to a football match in the area of the 15th Brigade, then in reserve. Savige who accompanied him was anxious lest the spectators—about 7,000 troops—should show signs that they shared the sentiments of the critics at home. But after Blamey had shaken hands with the teams and spun a coin for the captains “the troops broke into cheers which continued until he arrived in his seat” and Blamey seemed “moved and bucked up” by this welcome.

Blamey greatly encouraged Savige on this visit by granting several requests and giving evidence of confidence in him. For example, he approved the commissioning of men from the ranks,¹ promised some L.C.T's and the 2/11th Field Regiment, and agreed that the Base Sub-Area at Torokina should be placed under Savige's command.

In the southern sector patrolling continued. On 7th April a patrol of the 9th Battalion encountered thirty Japanese and killed four. Next day a party of the 61st killed five. The 7th Brigade had now been in action since late January and was weary and depleted. On the 13th Bridgeford ordered the gradual relief of the 7th Brigade by the 15th Brigade, which had not yet been in action on Bougainville. When re-grouping was complete the 7th Brigade would move back to Torokina and the 29th would come forward and be responsible for protecting and maintaining the lines of communication. That day the 58th/59th Battalion relieved the 25th in the Slater's Knoll perimeter, and the 24th moved through and occupied a position astride the Buin Road. The 9th remained in the northern area where it pressed on steadily.

On 20th April a platoon of the 9th under Sergeant Lambert² with an artillery officer moved out to search the area ahead of a post on the north bank of the Huio River and, if necessary, register the position for artillery fire. It crossed the Huio and established a base; thence a patrol of 11 under Corporal Baker³ moved forward. After 100 yards it came under fire from a strong party in an ambush position. The men went to ground

⁹ On 14th March, after Savige had complained that Brigadier Bierwirth of First Army had sent a signal direct to Brigadier Garrett on Savige's staff, Sturdee asked Savige to go to Lae for a rest and a conference. At Lae after a discussion that at times was apparently acrimonious, Sturdee agreed to forbid demi-official correspondence between the two staffs.

¹ On 1st April Savige was given formal permission to commission in the field enough men to fill half the vacancies.

² WO2 C. H. Lambert, QX37992; 9 Bn. Farm worker; of Nambour, Qld; b. Brisbane, 22 Aug 1919.

³ Cpl E. E. Baker, Q100073; 9 Bn. Grocer's assistant; of Kedron, Qld; b. Brisbane, 26 Nov 1920.

until Private Budden⁴ deliberately exposed himself, shouting and firing his Bren, and, covered by this fire, the patrol got out. Later Lance-Corporal West,⁵ when leading scout, was hit in the shoulder with a dum-dum bullet. The patrol managed to reach the platoon base, whence artillery fire was directed into the enemy's area.

A patrol of thirteen men of the 9th which went out at 8.30 a.m. on 24th April had the task of setting an ambush on a well-worn Japanese track. By 4 p.m. the patrol had not reached its destination and the leader, Sergeant Bolton,⁶ decided to establish a perimeter for the night on high ground above a creek. While the men were digging in Bolton saw a Japanese and shot him, and soon the sounds of voices, the smell of cooking, and the discovery of fresh footprints made it evident that the patrol was close to a Japanese bivouac. The patrol began to skirt this area but had gone only 100 yards when a group of Japanese appeared ahead. Bolton, who was leading, fired into the Japanese.

It was a cunning enemy trap (says the unit's report) for no sooner had Sgt Bolton fired his Owen than hell was let loose. The enemy were in position and opened with 3 HMG's, 4 LMG's, numerous rifles and grenade dischargers. Sgt Bolton was seen to clutch his chest and fall mortally wounded. The remainder of the patrol immediately spread out and returned the fire. After some minutes Pte Birch⁷ was severely wounded in the knee and fell to the ground where he lay in intense agony. At this stage Pte Norman⁸ took command and directed his men to withdraw, but before the command could be carried out Private Roberts,⁹ without regard for his own safety, rushed into the position under terrific enemy fire, grasped his wounded mate under the shoulders and dragged him to safety. The patrol then eased out of the position and moved a further 100 yards where Pte Birch had his wounds attended to.

The patrol now had no map and compass because these had been lost with Bolton, but Norman led the men west guided by the sun. They formed a perimeter that night and reached their unit on the 28th.

From 23rd April onwards Colonel Matthews of the 9th had a troop of tanks under his command. By 27th April the 9th had cleared the important lateral track, Tokinotu-Horinu 2-Rumiki, and a company had reached the Hongorai south-east of Rumiki. The battalion was relieved on 2nd May, thus ending the 7th Brigade's extended term in active operations.¹

During the period of the Slater's Knoll engagement the 2/8th Commando had been active on the inland flank. On 3rd April it carried out a bloody ambush on the Commando Road. A patrol under Lieutenant Killen² established the ambush where the road crossed the Taromi River, 3,000 yards east of the Hongorai.

⁴ Pte H. G. Budden, MM, N168572; 9 Bn. Rabbitier; of Tingha, NSW; b. Tingha, 1 Apr 1923.

⁵ L-Cpl A. F. West, NX162355; 9 Bn. Farmer; of Valla, NSW; b. Kempsey, NSW, 27 Apr 1924.

⁶ Sgt P. F. Bolton, QX37979; 9 Bn. Traveller; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Tamworth, 13 Feb 1917. Killed in action 24 Apr 1945.

⁷ Pte S. G. Birch, N34931; 9 Bn. Labourer; of Wagga Wagga, NSW; b. Grong Grong, NSW, 11 Aug 1917.

⁸ Pte A. W. Norman, Q16607; 9 Bn. Labourer; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 29 Oct 1917.

⁹ Pte R. C. Roberts, MM, NX163354; 9 Bn. Farmer; of Camden, NSW; b. Homebush, NSW, 1 Jan 1924.

¹ In that period the 25th Battalion alone had killed 646 Japanese.

² Lt B. G. L. Killen, NX132865; 2/8 Cdo Sqn. Station overseer; of Nyngan, NSW; b. Nyngan, 30 Dec 1923.

Forty to fifty enemy moving up the track disconcertingly halted for a rest in the cleared area which part of the ambush was covering. After a tense 15 minutes in which the enemy smoked and wandered round in scattered, chattering groups, they concentrated ready to move off again. Our patrol opened heavy grenade, automatic and rifle fire which killed 15 of the enemy and probably killed a further ten.³

After this ambush no Japanese were seen on the Commando Road for sixteen days.

There had been some anxiety lest the natives beyond the Puriata in this area might be as hostile to the advancing Australians as they were to the neighbouring native tribes north of the river. On 16th March Captain Dunshea took out a patrol to explore the track systems and possible enemy dispositions east of Nihero and discover where the sympathies of the natives lay. The natives proved friendly and ready to swing to the Australian side at the first show of strength. The enemy was disposed in small gardens and not patrolling.

In this area the Japanese seldom retaliated effectively. On 5th April, however, they placed an ambush on the commandos' line of communication where it crossed the Taar River and fired on a patrol bringing in a prisoner. The patrol—two troopers and two police boys—dispersed and the Japanese recovered the prisoner. This was a serious loss because the prisoner had knowledge of the bases from which the A.I.B. and the commando squadron were operating. That afternoon and next day patrols combed the area west of Nihero with orders to destroy the ambushers. They traced them to a House Garamut, where they killed nine Japanese, and later Angau natives captured the only survivor—the commander, a 2nd lieutenant; it was decided that this was a party returning after the attempt to raid the Torokina perimeter.

It will be recalled that at the end of January Lieutenant Mason and his party were in the Sipuru area obtaining information, supporting the natives in their guerilla war against the Japanese, and caring for refugee natives over a wide area. On 9th February Mason learnt that Pilot Officer Stuart,⁴ who had been behind the Japanese lines on Bougainville in 1943-44, was leading a party of four, including Sergeant Wigley, south into the Buin-Siwai area. Soon afterwards Mason learnt from his native scouts that a large number of Japanese were assembling at Kovidau and planned to attack him on 16th February. He called for an air attack on Kovidau, but the bombs were dropped on another village five miles away, and soon this Japanese force was camped about two miles from Sipuru, another party was at Orami and a third at Forma.

The enemy continued to mill around us for a couple of days (wrote Mason). The track to our ridge was plain enough owing to heavy traffic backwards and forwards. All tracks seemed to lead to us. Perhaps it appeared too obvious to the enemy. Eventually they moved to Mau. . . . The enemy suffered four casualties by rifle fire and two by arrows before reaching Orami via Mau and Meridau.

³ 2/8 Aust Commando Squadron Report on Operations in Southern Bougainville, Nov 44-Aug 45.

⁴ F-O R. Stuart, MC. AIB (RANVR 1943-44; served as civilian with XIV American Corps June-December 1944; RAAF 1944-45). Planter; of Bougainville; b. Mysore, India, 30 Apr 1904.

Roubai who was returning from Torokina with a new rifle found the enemy at Orami and added two Nips to his score. . . . The Japanese left the next morning travelling by moonlight to avoid being ambushed again. . . . It is my opinion that the enemy intended to establish a post at Orami for attacking the 3rd Division's flank at Sovele, only three hours jeepable track from Orami. With hostile natives on their flank and their L of C it was impracticable to hold Orami.

Mason now asked for fuses and explosives to enable him to destroy Japanese ammunition dumps. These arrived, and on 12th March Corporal Narakas and a native leader named Asina blew up a dump near Kieta. At the same time the intrepid Roubai was sent out with ten other natives and two cases of T.N.T. on a double mission: to blow up two other dumps and to bring in Father Muller, a Roman Catholic missionary of German origin, who was in the Arawa Plantation area.

Roubai found one dump guarded by sixteen Japanese; Father Muller was guarded by nine. He reported afterwards that he and his men killed the priest's guard and put him on the road to Mason with a small escort. Roubai and his men then killed the Japanese guarding the dump and blew it up. Mason sent Muller to Torokina.

In February the Japanese sent out a force to relieve their men who were besieged by the Kapikavi natives and succeeded in extricating them and withdrawing to Kekemona, where they dug in. In the fighting 51 Japanese were killed. Indeed the losses inflicted by the native guerillas were now reaching high figures. Mason had sent patrols into the country between Koromira and Toimonapu Plantations where the Japanese were treating the natives well and the natives were working for them. A patrol brought back two envoys and Mason sent these to Torokina to be shown that the Australians were more powerful than the Japanese, and, when the envoys returned, Mason sent them to their own villages to spread the news. Eventually these natives, supported by Mason's scouts, killed by "treachery and surprise" 40 Japanese and took 4 prisoners. These natives then gathered in a remote village for protection against Japanese reprisals. There 14 of them were killed and 45 wounded when an aircraft mistakenly bombed the village.

Until March (wrote Mason) we were in a continual state of alertness. We all slept fully dressed. White and Warner slept with their boots on until the end of March. . . . I always had the pack with the codes and records ready to throw across my shoulders while Warner had his W/T equipment always packed ready, when not in use, for a quick get-away. . . . We had now definitely taken the offensive. I believed that the harder we hit the enemy now, the harder it would be for him to attack us. . . . I had eventually armed thousands of irregulars. Many were armed with bows and arrows and some were given grenades. It was my policy to appoint leaders and sub-leaders to every district. Ammunition, grenades and booby-trap material were only issued to these leaders for distribution and never given to individuals. This was important as everyone wanted to be someone of importance and it gave the leader more power to be able to dispense fighting material to whom he wished. He therefore got unity within his own area and had a responsibility which gave him enthusiasm which he was able to inspire into his men.

At first most Japanese were killed with grenades thrown into their huts, in ambushes, or with booby-traps. At length the Japanese cleared

wide areas round their camps and put up palisades; later they dug themselves in. For example, at Moroni, 40 Japanese were dug in, and whenever parties went out to work in the gardens they were protected by a machine-gun team. Nevertheless 23 had been killed by April, and in May 5, including the officer in command, were killed. A party came from Kaino and extricated the survivors. An order had been given that natives should be paid 10 shillings' worth of trade goods for every Japanese killed. Mason declined to do this on the grounds that it would not have increased the killing and goods were difficult to obtain. "We offered to pay handsomely for prisoners but seldom got any. The natives preferred the honour of killing them to payment. Air support would have been more satisfying to the native than remuneration."

In March and April a series of effective air attacks was made on targets indicated by Mason. On 15th April raiders led by Asina destroyed two coast guns and three ammunition dumps on the heights above Kieta harbour. Asina laid the charges in daylight while the Japanese were away for their midday meal. "Our offensive was now in full swing from Buin to Rorovana," Mason wrote. "Confirmed enemy dead were reaching nearly 400 a month. The enemy were now confined to foxholes when not working under cover of machine-guns in the gardens and they only moved about at night, and then avoiding the usual tracks as the shrapnel mines and booby-traps were taking a heavy toll of them." At the end of May Mason was told that Lieutenant Seton⁵ (who had been a coast-watcher on Choiseul from October 1942 to March 1944, and on New Britain from August to March 1945) was coming to relieve him. Mason was disappointed that "now that the place was safe and our forces well organised it should be given to somebody else".

Stuart had been attached to the Intelligence staff of the XIV American Corps during its period on Bougainville and had guided a number of long-range patrols. After leave in Australia he arrived back at Torokina early in February, when Mason, Sandford and Bridge were already well established in the mountainous no-man's land. He set off on 17th February with Warrant-Officer Colley,⁶ Sergeant Wigley, Corporal Craze,⁷ and a party of natives, and on the 20th arrived at Sikiomoni where the natives welcomed them. A camp was made and natives were detailed to watch all tracks. The natives were becoming short of food and Stuart helped them with rations and later distributed 30 rifles.

By the time the 3rd Division was nearing the Hari, Stuart's natives were well organised and were harassing the Japanese by cutting telephone lines, destroying gardens, placing flags on tree tops to guide bombers, and

⁵ Capt C. W. Seton, DCM, NX91635; AIB. Plantation manager; of Faisi, British Solomon Is; b. Wellingrove Stn, NSW, 14 Jun 1901.

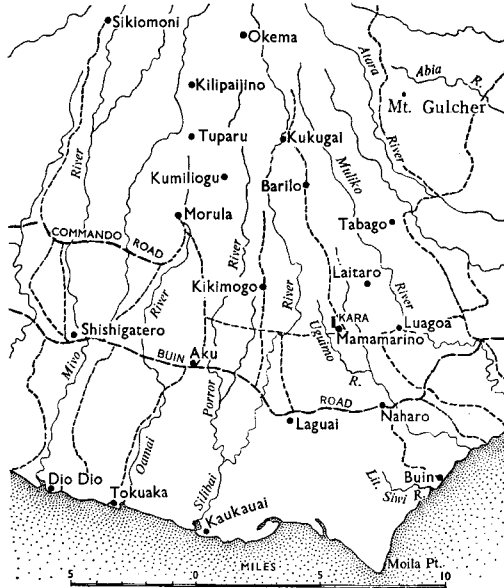
⁶ WO2 D. Colley, MM, NX15042. (1st AIF: Anzac Mtd Div Train 1917-19.) I Corps Amn Pk AASC, "M" Special Unit and Angau. Plantation manager; of Mosman, NSW; b. Ingleburn, NSW, 27 Jan 1901.

⁷ Cpl W. A. C. Craze, WX13612; "Z" Special Unit. Clerk; of Swanbourne, WA; b. Esperance, WA, 4 Apr 1922.

attacking isolated parties. It was difficult to persuade the natives to take the risk of capturing a prisoner but on 16th March a native brought in a Japanese whom he had persuaded to desert, and who gave useful information.

As an outcome of a bombing raid on Japanese headquarters between the headwaters of the Mivo and Silibai Rivers in which the two senior Japanese officers were killed, the natives in that area, hitherto very much afraid of the Japanese, were won over.

On 7th April Stuart's natives attacked a small force of naval men at Okema, and killed the senior officer in the area and three others. This led to the withdrawal of all Japanese from the area north of Kumiliogu and Barilo. About this time Stuart learnt that some missionaries, nuns and about 12 Chinese were held but had a good deal of freedom at Naharo and Laguai. On 12th April natives escorted two priests, Fathers Junkers and Le Breton, and four Chinese into Stuart's camp, and later two nuns, Sisters Ludwig and Ludwina, and two more priests, Fathers Seiller and Griswald arrived.⁸



Meanwhile in the northern sector a difficult operation had been successfully carried out. The main body of the 26th Battalion⁹ arrived at Puto to relieve the 31st/51st on 21st February, and its leading companies were

⁸ See "The Nuns' Patrol" by T. A. G. Hungerford in *Stand-To*, August-September 1950.

⁹ The Order of Battle of Callinan's force illustrates the diversity of the specialised groups employed in the field at this time:

	Posted strength	
	Officers	Other ranks
26th Battalion	43	746
HQ 4th Field Regiment	7	60
12th Field Battery	8	181
2nd Mountain Battery	5	97
Platoon 16th Field Company RAE	6	107
Detachment 5th Mobile Meteorological Flight	—	2
Platoon 101st Heavy Mortar Company	3	63
Company 19th Field Ambulance	4	81
Detachment 42nd Watercraft Company	3	42
Detachment 223rd Supply Depot Platoon	1	12
Detachment "B" Corps Wireless Section	—	8
Detachment 11th Brigade Signals	1	16
Detachment Angau	2	6 whites,
		249 natives
Detachment 1st Water Transport Signals	—	3
Detachment 102nd Workshops	—	8

Footnote continued next page.

in the forward area that evening. Lieut-Colonel B. J. Callinan (commanding the 26th), an able and experienced leader who had distinguished himself with the 2/2nd Independent Company and later as Force commander on Timor in 1942, gave one company (Captain Gibson¹) the task of moving round the enemy's coastal flank and cutting his communications, while a second company (Captain McNair²) advanced astride the track travelling north about 1,000 yards from the coast, its objective being Lalum, shown on maps as the beginning of a road to Pora Pora. This company found itself flanked by swamps and sent out patrols to find firm ground leading to the foothills on which Lalum was shown to be on the map. On the 24th a patrol reached the east-west track and a company perimeter was established there. Next day, after a fight in which four Japanese were killed, another track junction was seized on the eastern flank and a patrol reached the coast. McNair's company was now astride the enemy's main lines of communication. On the 26th Callinan sent a company (Captain Coleman's³) through McNair's to cut the coastal track near the Compton River, outflanking an area which a captured map showed as containing the enemy's main strength.

Meanwhile Gibson's company had cut the tracks leading to the enemy's positions north of the Gillman River—"a maze of tracks covered by logged pill-boxes and recently-dug foxholes joined by communication trenches"—and forced the Japanese out. They abandoned a field gun, two anti-tank guns and a headquarters with office equipment. On the inland flank, where a company of the 31st/51st was still operating, Captain Searles'⁴ company of the 26th moved round the enemy's flank on the 23rd but was held by the force strongly sited on Downs' Ridge. On the 25th-26th the enemy, between 30 and 40 strong, was forced out by accurate artillery and mortar fire. The company of the 31st/51st, which had been fighting there for three weeks, was now relieved. Searles' company advanced along the track, met the enemy again on the 27th and withstood two sharp attacks. Throughout this period the enemy regularly shelled the left flank companies and the troops advancing along the coastal track.

	Posted strength	
	Officers	Other ranks
Detachment 102nd Ordnance Field Park	—	5
Detachment II Corps Salvage Unit	—	7
Detachment 72nd Dental Unit	1	4
Detachment 4th Division Provost Company	—	4
Detachment Electrical and Mechanical Engineers	—	5
Detachment ATIS	1	2
Detachment 7th Pigeon Section	—	6
Detachment 1st Pigeon Section	—	2
Detachment 25th Section Field Security Service	—	5
Public Relations Officer and Photographer	1	—
3rd Survey Battery	1	14
Detachment Field Bakery	1	10
Detachment 76th Transport Platoon	1	14
Detachment 2nd Field Survey Company	1	6
Amenities	—	1
HQ 11th Brigade	3	10

¹ Capt J. McL. Gibson, NX124620; 26 Bn. Bank officer; of Harden, NSW; b. Murrumburrah, NSW, 9 Nov 1917.

² Capt S. H. H. McNair, NX101320; 26 Bn. Public servant; of Randwick, NSW; b. Randwick, 4 Nov 1916.

³ Col K. R. G. Coleman, MC, VX133644; 26 Bn. Regular soldier; b. Hobart, 17 Jan 1921.

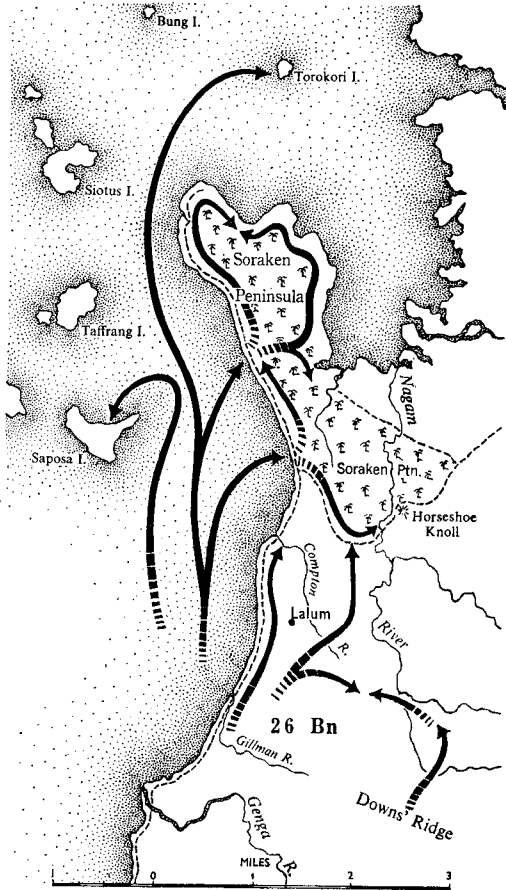
⁴ Maj S. G. Searles, MC, QX36511; 26 Bn. Clerk; of Longreach, Qld; b. Longreach, 4 Oct 1916.

The Australian guns bombarded the enemy's artillery and their fire was effective in stopping some counter-attacks.

The beach-head area having been cleared, McNair's company advanced east to establish a base and send strong patrols farther east to link with Searles' company, still fighting hard. Maps were inaccurate and both companies were encountering well-dug enemy machine-gun posts. By the evening of 3rd March the leading platoons of both companies were close to each other; each indicated its exact position in the dense bush by firing grenades on which the other took compass bearings. After having overcome a post the companies joined on the morning of the 4th and Searles' company went into reserve.

That day Gibson's company moved north along a formed road. A document found on a Japanese sergeant killed that morning gave the dispositions of the enemy forces near the Compton River, and the number of Japanese carrying messages and food killed that day showed that the company was striking the enemy's main line of communication. A series of enemy positions was engaged and captured and on 8th March huts capable of housing about 120 were found; on an enemy map these were marked "old battle headquarters". Farther left Coleman's company had been probing for the enemy's flanks at the mouth of the Compton River.

Coleman's company continued to advance northward to seize the crossing of the Nagam River. On the 7th and 8th its carrier line was attacked by Japanese. Patrols on the inland flank found the enemy well dug in north of Downs' Ridge. McNair advanced and on 13th March, supported by artillery fire, attacked the position, killed fifteen Japanese and, next day, pursued the survivors.



26th Battalion, February-April

On the night of the 12th-13th March Searles' company plus an additional platoon landed from the sea in two waves near the southern end of Soraken Plantation, pushed inland to the main track and advanced southward along it. Some Japanese were killed. On the 14th the company was in contact with Gibson's company at the southern end of the plantation. The Japanese made a series of attacks on this force astride their track from the Soraken Peninsula to the Compton and Nagam River areas. Gibson's company advanced through the Soraken Peninsula from its southern boundary to the Nagam River. The enemy were dug in to protect the river crossing, but were forced back to rising ground to the east (later known as Horseshoe Knoll). On the 16th a Japanese signal line was tapped. The Australian lines were cleared of all other traffic and the Japanese line connected to Callinan's tactical headquarters where an interpreter learned that the enemy were greatly worried by the way in which their patrols and runners were disappearing without a trace.⁵ Australian patrols continued to harass the Japanese force round Horseshoe Knoll until the 20th when, after continuing losses, it withdrew.

Meanwhile, on 10th March Coleman's company, supported by artillery, had attacked the centre of the enemy's defensive line and overrun the position. An attack on the western part of the line at the mouth of the Compton River was made on the 14th. This position was discovered to be extensive—some 80 by 50 yards—and well dug in. After a long fire fight the company withdrew to its own perimeter having lost four killed, including Lieutenant Compton,⁶ and six wounded, among whom was Lieutenant Moore.⁷ Four Japanese were certainly killed and probably others. The enemy was ejected on the night of the 16th after accurate artillery bombardment; and on the 19th this company passed through Searles' beach-head.

While two companies were forcing the enemy back from the Nagam River area into the foothills and one was clearing the Compton River area, Callinan delivered another left hook when McNair's company on the night of the 19th-20th was landed some miles to the north. The landing craft were fired on by an anti-tank gun and rifles but the men gained the shore and next morning one platoon was astride the coastal track and another, to the south, had captured the anti-tank gun and a "75", both undamaged and with much ammunition. On the 20th this company linked with the troops moving from the south, who had killed an officer carrying an operation order for the defence of the Soraken Peninsula revealing the whereabouts of the enemy's headquarters and supply base. As a result of the capture of the operation order Coleman's company was moved immediately to the east side of the peninsula to attack the enemy's

⁵ On another occasion when a Japanese line was tapped the listeners heard their own artillery orders, a result of induction and the swampy nature of the ground. As a result all lines were laid with metallic return, so that two lines were needed. The 11th Brigade laid 541 miles of wire, excluding assault cable.

⁶ Lieut J. W. Compton, QX36516; 26 Bn. Branch manager; of Winton, Qld; b. Gayndah, Qld, 12 Mar 1913. Killed in action 14 Mar 1945.

⁷ Capt E. H. Moore, MC, NX111499; 26 Bn. Advertising artist; of Milson's Point, NSW; b. Kensington, Vic, 11 Feb 1915.

headquarters. Coleman planned this movement and the subsequent attack with great efficiency and on the 26th organised resistance on the Soraken Peninsula ceased; the battalion had taken its objective after a brilliant series of manoeuvres. The enemy abandoned barges, engines, electrical gear, ammunition and tools. The other companies, patrolling 1,500 yards east of the Nagam River, found abandoned field gun positions containing much ammunition.

Meanwhile two islands off the coast—Taiof and Saposa—had been taken. It was learnt from a native police patrol on the 5th that 25 Japanese had arrived at Taiof and that it was intended to land a field gun there on the night of the 6th. Just before midnight on the 5th-6th Searles' company landed on Saposa, killed four Japanese and captured two anti-tank guns and 20 rifles. Natives now reported that 25 Japanese from Taiof had departed northward on the night of the 3rd; the presence of the rifles suggested that they might return. On the night of the 6th an assault craft loaded with Japanese was engaged by mortars and machine-guns and sunk.

On 10th March an Angau patrol under Captain Cambridge ambushed 11 Japanese left on Taiof Island killing 10 and capturing the warrant-officer in command; later four guns and much equipment were found. An observation post was established giving a view of Soraken harbour, Bonis Peninsula and Buka Passage.

From 22nd February to 4th April, when they were relieved, the 26th Battalion killed and recovered the bodies of 157 Japanese, and were certain that they killed 13 others; 8 additional graves were found; 2 prisoners were taken. They captured 12 guns from 20-mm to 75-mm calibre, 2,650 rounds of artillery ammunition, and 11 machine-guns.

The Japanese forces in the Tarlena area were commanded by Lieut-Colonel Nakamura, mentioned earlier, but the operations in the field were controlled by Captain Matsunami. Under him the force in the Genga-Compton River area was commanded by Captain Kawakami and was built round the *10th Company, 81st Regiment*.

During this period the A.I.B. party behind the enemy's lines in northern Bougainville was sending back detailed information of enemy movements and indicating targets to the supporting aircraft. In February they reported a submarine landing stores at Tinputz. An example of the detailed information obtained is given in the following signal of 21st April:

40 Japs at Ratsua, 46 Umum Gorge, 40 at Ruri, 8 at Chindawon, 50 in kunai behind Ruri, 8 at Tanimbaubau, 100 at Siara, 70 at Ton. 3 field guns at Pora Pora, 2 at Subiana, 1 at Ruri, 1 at Siara, 1 at Chindawon. Large ammunition and stores dump at Umum Gorge.

Flight Lieutenant Sandford's party in the Numa Numa area found that efforts to penetrate to Numa Numa itself were proving "abortive and costly" and was instructed to operate farther north. There they engaged in highly successful guerilla fighting. At Teopasino scouts led by Sergeant Lae and Corporal Sinavina "caught the enemy garrison indulging in

physical jerks and 53 were killed by our scouts who suffered only minor casualties". A few days later 17 Japanese were killed near Surango. As a result of these achievements the local people, hitherto apathetic, began to side with Sandford, with the result that he received more information, and, from February onwards, knowledge of enemy movements and dispositions from Inus to Tinputz was fairly complete.