

CHAPTER 7

MOROBE, NASSAU BAY, TAMBUBAY AND THE PUSH ON SALAMAUA AND LAE

(16th June to 23rd October 1943)

MOROBE

The next objective of the allies was to deny the enemy the use of their bases at Salamaua and Lae which they had occupied since March 1942. The strategy was to hold the inland bases in the Wau area overlooking Salamaua and Lae at all costs and then to advance on the Japanese from inland and up the coast from Morobe with a final amphibious landing near Lae. Already Morobe had been occupied and was being used as a forward allied base.

When the Japanese occupied Salamaua and Lae the only allied troops in the area were two companies of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles. They carried out demolitions and harassed the enemy and retired inland to the Wau - Bulola region where they were able to observe enemy movements and probe and harass them as they spread inland from the coast. They also guarded the vital airfields of Wau and Bulola. This situation prevailed for the remainder of 1942 whilst the Japanese were busy on their advance and subsequent retreat across the Owen Stanley range towards Port Moresby.

In January 1943 the N.G.V.R. were reinforced with the 17th Brigade and the combined force named Kanga Force. These reinforcements had to be flown into Wau. Wau was a mountainous region and the difficulty was to find an area large enough and flat enough for an air strip. The best location was chosen but the runway still had 15 degree slope! When some of the 2/5th and 2/7th Battalions landed at the air strip they encountered small arms fire from an estimated force of some 2,000 to 2,500 Japanese who had in places got to within 400 yards of the Wau airfield. Eventually the threat to the airstrip was removed and the Japanese were pushed back from the Wau-Bulola region thus ensuring continued communication by air to Port Moresby and river communication via Bulldog to the south coast of New Guinea.

In April 1943 Kanga Force was further strengthened by the arrival of the 3rd Division under Major General Stan Savage and preparations were made for the retaking of Salamaua and Lae.

Our unit was not involved until June 1943 when on the 16th Capt. Bill Brand

was sent to Morobe, about 70 miles up the coast from Buna to look for a suitable site to establish an advanced dressing station and sea evacuation post. On the 22nd June the detachment of 51 personnel under Capt. Brand listed in the previous chapter embarked on the *M.V. Tung Song* late in the afternoon and headed for Morobe. As darkness fell the captain would periodically order the engines to be stopped and the vessel would drift, thus eliminating both the wake and the conspicuous phosphorescent glow which could easily be seen by enemy pilots. While still dark they arrived at the beautiful harbour of Morobe and were taken ashore in small boats and marched to the site which had been chosen for their Dressing Station. By the end of the month their post was established and operating. Patients were received from the fighting just north in the Nassau Bay area and included battle casualties as well as sick. Evacuation of patients was by sea to Oro Bay where they were met at the wharf by our ambulances and taken to the Camp Hospital.

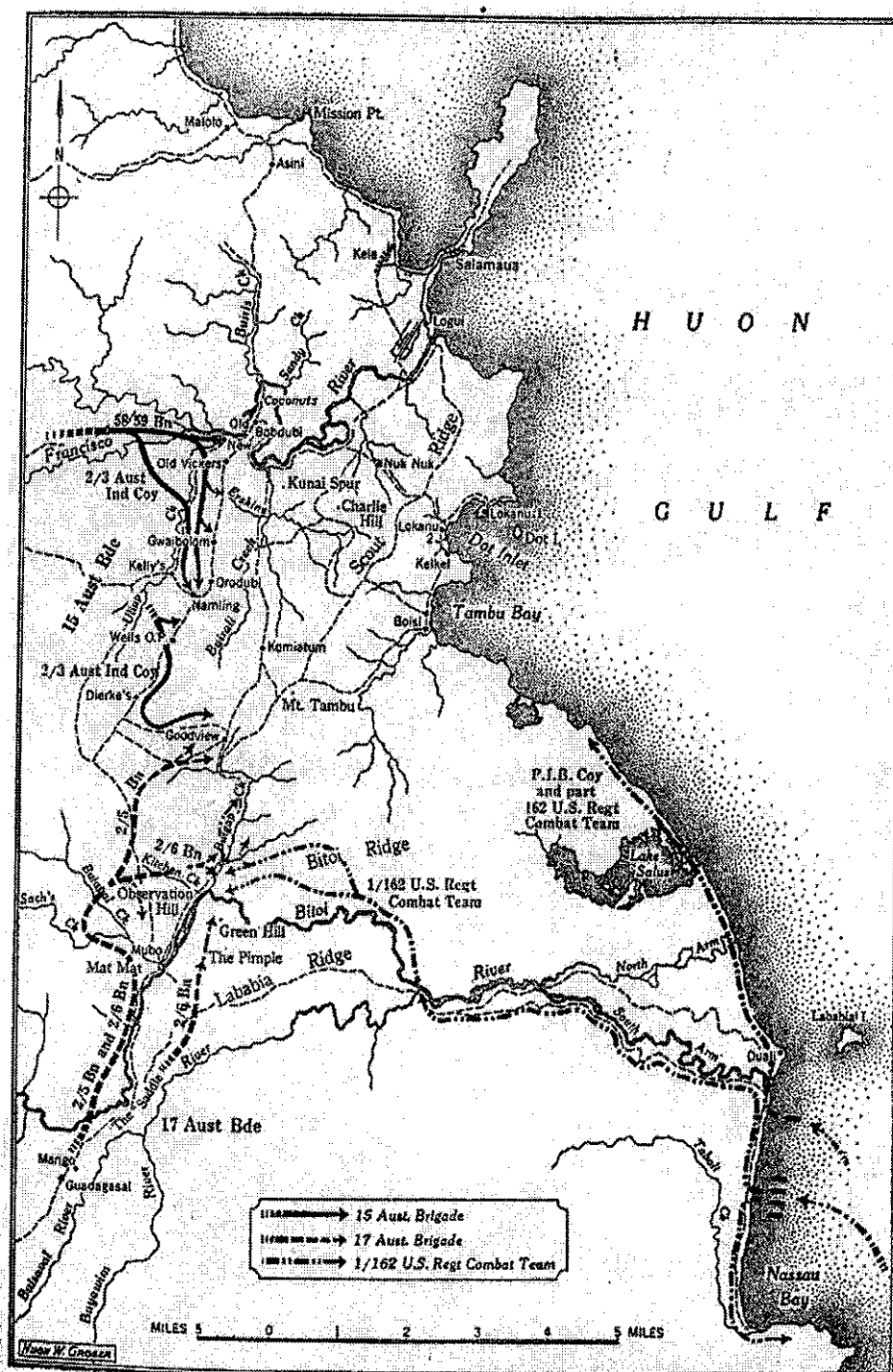
An operating theatre was constructed at Morobe and Major Gatenby of the 2/2nd C.C.S. and his surgical team took charge of this. Casualties soon commenced to arrive and the first evacuations by boat with two orderlies accompanying them, took place on the 5th July. The new operating theatre was ready by the 7th and in use by Major Gatenby immediately after. Pte. Ross Hayter was detached to ANGAU for duty as R.A.P. orderly at their native hospital. Four additional drivers arrived from Oro Bay.

Dick Holmes recalls what he describes as his worst night in the army when, because of circumstances he was asked to accompany alone, nineteen post operative stretcher cases and nineteen seriously ill Malaria and Scrub Typhus stretcher cases on the *Tung Song*. The demand was constant all night, bed pans, injections, medication, morphia. The worst case was a large man with one leg amputated who also had diarrhoea and had to be lifted constantly on to a bed pan.

Native huts were built to serve as wards accommodating approximately 100 patients. Captain Brand was appointed Hygiene Officer for the Morobe area. The 2/2nd C.C.S. arrived at Morobe in early August and less serious cases were admitted there instead of being evacuated to Oro Bay. Our evacuation team then had to handle evacuation of post operative and serious cases from the C.C.S. to Oro Bay by sea. On the 10th August the operating theatre was moved to the 2/2nd C.C.S.

On 13th August Capt. Brand was notified that the 11th Division Headquarters was moving in to the Morobe area and that our A.D.S. was to be responsible for medical services to these additional personnel whilst they remained in the area.

Meanwhile the net was now tightening around Salamaua and the 15th Brigade



The 3rd Division attack, 13th July

Map

was similarly closing in on Nadzab and Lae so that the effectiveness of these two bases for the Japanese was already diminished. It was decided however that the final assault on Salamaua would be deferred to coincide with that on Lae.

Admissions at the A.D.S. at Morobe now commenced to increase and orderlies were recalled from the native R.A.P. which was closed and from the 2/2nd C.C.S. Nursing orderlies at the A.D.S. were working twelve hour shifts. On

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

the 18th August sixty patients were evacuated to Oro Bay by boat and two orderlies went with them. It required a lot of men to supply orderlies for all the vessels transporting patients between Tambu Bay, Nassau Bay, Morobe and Oro Bay.

Another story from Dick Holmes' diary concerns the bombing of the *Wombat* on a trip from Morobe to Oro Bay with a load of patients and is best told in his own words as follows :-

The M.V. Wombat Aug 1943

This very small vessel was an Australian coastal vessel. For it's size it had reasonable deck space fore and aft. The superstructure had one level at main deck level, a second level and the bridge. A passageway on each side of the vessel linked the fore and aft decks. John Bagshaw and I were instructed to accompany forty stretcher cases whose sicknesses were typhus, malaria, and dysentery. In additon there were twenty U.S. army stretcher patients. As usual, we sailed at dusk. The night was clear and the moon was rising. As we sailed through the calm sea, we enjoyed the gentle breeze. The patients were all calm having received their sedatives earlier. John and I talked quietly, standing at the bow. There was sufficient moonlight to enable us to see the tree-covered coastline several miles away. At about eleven o'clock, I said to John, "What a beautiful night, just the night for Nippon". John agreed. He then suggested that as all the patients were asleep, we might as well use the two spare ambulance stretchers and lie down for a while one each side of the patients. We hardly got on to our stretchers when there was a mighty roar above us and a



Loading patients on to ambulances.

huge explosion. A pilot of a Japanese seaplane commonly known as 'Washing Machine Charlie' had spotted us and caught us by surprise. The bomb exploded in the sea and the plane could be seen flying away. John and I were on our feet in an instant and made sure that all patients put on their life jackets. The ship's captain ordered everybody to get into the passageways where it would provide some shelter. John and I made sure his order was carried out.

In the meantime, we could see the Japanese plane flying further out to sea, when all of a sudden we saw hundreds of tracer bullets racing towards the plane, having been fired from allied ships which had not been observed. So intense was this fire that it drove the plane back towards us. We waited in frightened anticipation. On our bridge were two Bren guns, which were now manned. At the critical moment both started firing but the plane continued towards us until driven away by the intense machine gun fire. At the stern was a 37mm naval gun manned by chief Officer Deere of Camberwell, Victoria. Aiming the gun at the passing plane, the single shot went off with a mighty bang. No more was seen of 'Washing Machine Charlie'. Chief Officer Deere declared that he hit the plane. Slowly, one by one, the patients were settled down and we reached Oro Bay safely.

In 1946, the M.V. Wombat paid a visit to Melbourne berthing near to 21 South Wharf. One of its peculiarities was that the whole ship vibrated, commencing at the bow. The effect went right through to the stern. This got it the name of "The Passion Ship".

Capt. Alec Reith arrived at Morobe from Oro Bay to assist with the influx of patients. On the 25th August 104 patients were evacuated to Oro Bay with four orderlies. The conditions for patients improved greatly when hot boxes were supplied on board from which patients could be served a hot meal on the voyage. Reinforcements were received from Oro Bay with Lieut. Merv Featonby and twelve orderlies and one driver.

Horrie Hamer was one of our Sea Ambulance Transport orderlies and he remembers on one trip to Buna when he would rather have been back in Morobe. He says,

"It was one very noisy night on the beach at Buna. Two of us had travelled down from Morobe overnight, courtesy of the Sea Ambulance Transport - an American L.C.T., and a cargo of sick and wounded who had been involved in the fighting in the Salamaua - Lae area. I can't remember who the other member was - it may have been Dick Rhodes.

We were not able to get a boat back to Morobe, there were no rides to be hitched that day, so we were left to sleep on the beach that night.

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

We were about 200 yards north of the busy wharf area, all so different from the time some months earlier when we were involved in the Buna, Sanananda, Gona operation.

Darkness came suddenly as is the custom in the tropics. Work continued on the wharf with all lights blazing, lots of shouting and vehicles coming and going constantly. In the event of an air raid the orders were that lights were not to be extinguished until bombs were actually falling.

Well, a raid did occur that night and the sirens screamed making enough noise to be heard in Morobe. Work continued on the wharf.

It soon became obvious that this was for real, not just an odd plane flying high in the attempt to disrupt work without doing any material damage.

There were a number of planes and one that really got our attention appeared to be heading directly towards the two of us. We made desperate but futile efforts to scoop out a hole in the sand while the decidedly unpleasant, shrill whistle of bombs followed by the big bang came closer and closer. The last bomb to come in our direction landed between us and the sea. We were more than somewhat relieved that it was slightly off line or the allied war effort might have been deprived of two loyal, albeit undistinguished soldiers. The bomb actually landed beside a tent, created a big hole in the sand and blasted four blokes, asleep on stretchers, out of their comfortable cots, or maybe they were already out!

The way in which the sand absorbed the blast was quite extraordinary. I can't remember just how we got back to the unit, but we did get there, to the calm of the beautiful harbour at Morobe and the magnificent tropical beach across the road from our camp. Oh yes, and the dengue".

BLANKETS ARMY GREY- TROOPS FOR THE USE OF

The following story was sent in by Eddie Mott's widow after Eddie's death and it illustrates that the regulation army blanket was not always used as the army intended -

"Early in 1943 a number of our unit were sent from Oro Bay to Morobe on the north coast of New Guinea for the purpose of evacuating patients by sea, first to our hospital at Oro Bay and then later to the A.G.H. at Moresby. On one such trip we had to bring back replacements such as blankets and stretchers. One of our personnel nicknamed "Mate", went down the coast with some patients and on returning to Morobe arrived at our holding camp on foot to get a jeep to go to the jetty to bring three packs of blankets to our camp. On arriving

with the three packs he said two packs were to go to the Q.M. Store and one to our tent. We of course became curious as to what was in the third pack. When opened in the tent it turned out to be a large carton full of packs of cornflakes!

It appears that on the trip back to Morobe the two packs of blankets were put on board the barge or small ship near the carton of cornflakes. We always travelled at night and under cover of darkness the cornflakes pack was made to look like a pack of blankets. So our tent enjoyed cornflakes (a real luxury) for breakfast for three months! That was what we called "scrounging".

The native carriers often preferred improvised blanket stretchers to the regular army stretcher. It was simply a blanket wrapped around two poles. They found this lighter, more manageable in difficult terrain and sometimes safer and more comfortable for the patient. They could not be used of course in ambulances, ships or planes as the poles were much longer than a standard stretcher.

This was not the only unorthodox use of army issue supplies. On occasions gauze bandages have been known to have disappeared from the wards to end up marking out the boundaries of a battington court! A more legitimate and necessary use, although again not their normal use, was when it became necessary, to avoid losing staff or patients at night, to mark out the track to the latrines in one jungle camp.

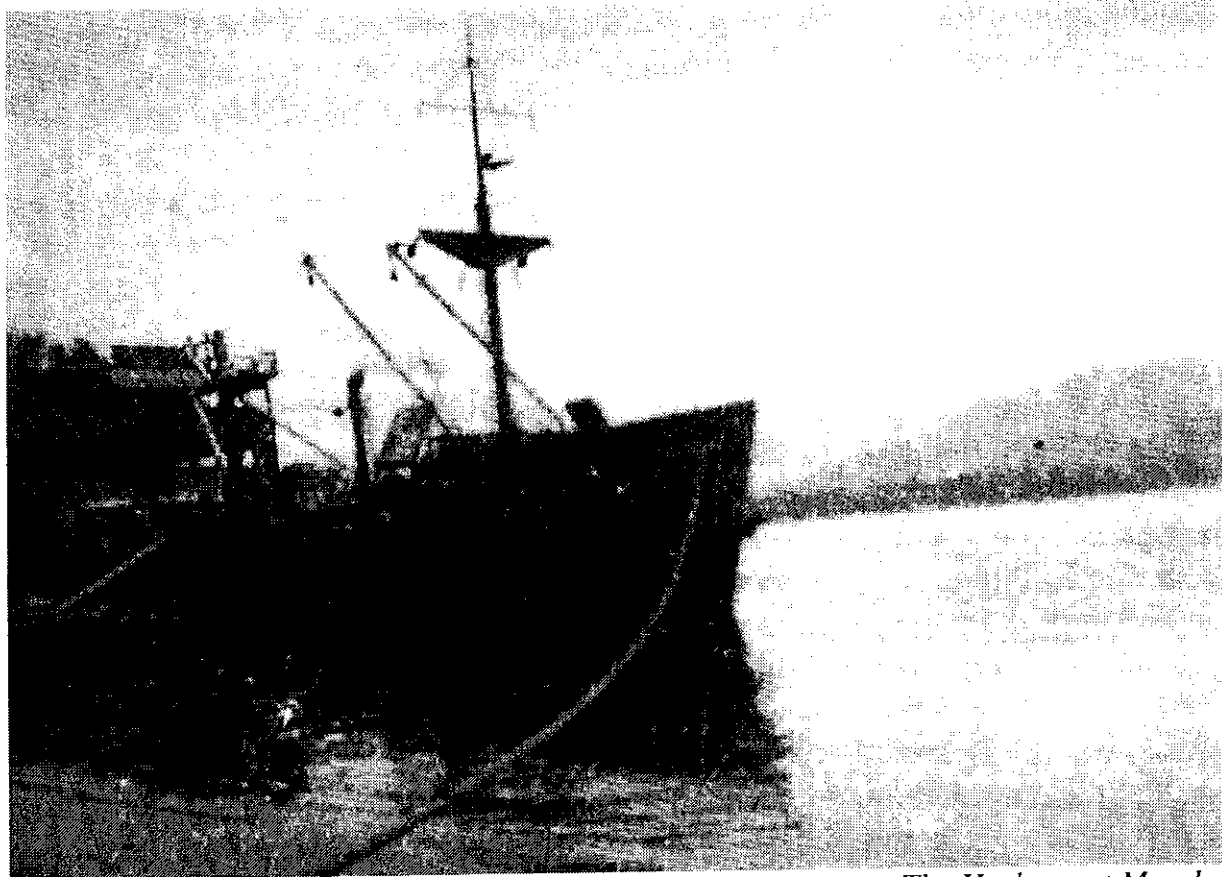
It is strange to think that we are talking about the days before the invention of many things we now take for granted. However there was certainly no cellotape or durex and the surgical sticking plaster did quite a good job as a substitute.

NASSAU BAY AND TAMBU BAY

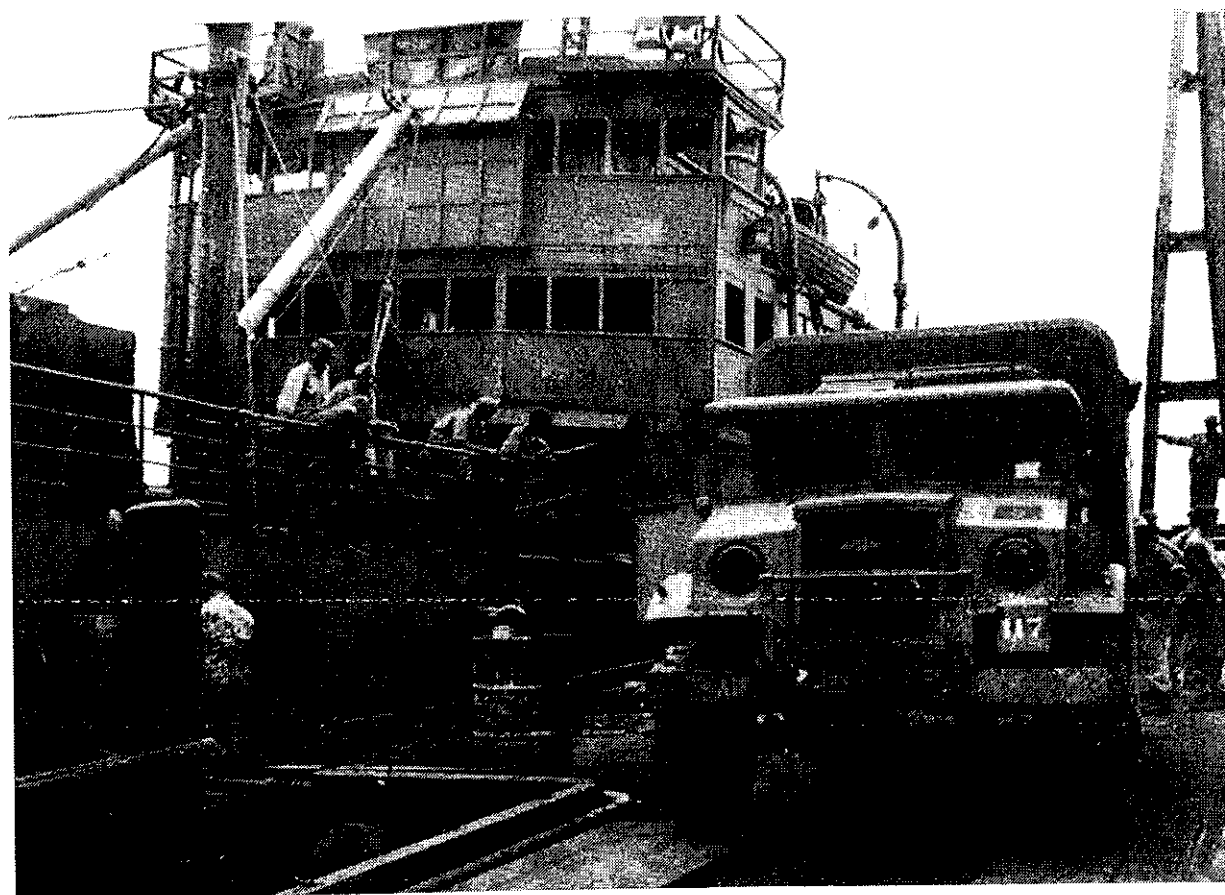
On the 30th June the Americans landed at Nassau Bay some 50 miles further up the coast from Morobe towards Salamaua. The landing was supported by Australian troops of the 17th Brigade who covered the landing from inland and also the 15th Brigade who carried out diversionary attacks on Japanese strongholds nearer Salamaua.

A surgical team from the 2/2nd Field Ambulance went forward to Nassau Bay with S/Sgt. Parker and 5 O/R's from our unit to operate a sea evacuation post there.

Major Francis arrived from Oro Bay and went to Nassau Bay with Ptes. Don Braine and Alan Patrick to join the staff operating the staging post for evacuation of patients by sea to Morobe. Two Japanese POW's were brought in for treatment and evacuated to Oro Bay. After consolidating the base at Nassau Bay the next objective was Tambu Bay a further 10 miles up the coast.



The Harbour at Morobe.



*Ambulance loading patients on to USS ship "Karu Maru".
(AWM Neg. No. 079524)*

The Americans from Nassau Bay, together with the Papuan Infantry Battalion pushed up the coast from Nassau Bay, another section pushed inland to join up with the 2/6th Battalion. The 2/3rd Independent Company from inland were closing in on Mount Tambu. U.S. troops occupied the southern headland of Tambu Bay and by the 21st of July guns and equipment had been landed at Tambu Bay. Once the sea route between Tambu and Nassau Bays was safe casualties were cleared through the former.

Sgt. Ken Phillips and Ptes. Geoff Flower, Neville Stephens and Martin Smith joined by Don Braine and Allan Patrick from Nassau Bay and accompanied by Major Hill of the 7th Field Ambulance went to Tambu Bay to act as Sea Transport orderlies between Tambu Bay and Morobe.

Geoff Flower gives a good report of their activities at Tambu Bay as follows:-

"We arrived at Tambu Bay by barge from Nassau Bay at 3 A.M. on or about the 7th August, 1943. It was pitch dark, drizzling with rain and we were told to sleep where we were.

When daylight came I was 10 yards from a flea infested boong hut. While sitting on the beach side latrine I heard a bang in Salamaua and a shell went screaming overhead. The Japs had fired a salvo at the 2/5th Artillery who then responded with a salvo. This continued periodically for a week.

I met Captain Hitchcock in charge of a company of Papuan Infantry. His sergeant paddled to Salamaua and came back with a lot of enemy information. The Jap gun was on railway lines and in a tunnel, that is why our guns couldn't knock it out.

The poor Yanks were up against a heavily fortified and tunnelled ridge. They had three attempts at taking it. The Japs would roll grenades down on the Yanks. These attacks were unsuccessful. The C.O. was sacked and McKeckney and Roosevelt both promoted. I met young Roosevelt on several occasions at Nassau Bay. He was a lovely chap, well educated and knew more about Australia than I did. They stayed at the bottom of the ridge until thirty five Bofor guns and forty 0.5 machine guns were brought in. The Yanks got out of bed and attended to their ablutions, had a hearty breakfast and then fired at the ridge for two hours. The 29th Brigade then moved towards Mt. Tambu and a few minutes later there was a scream for stretcher bearers. The boy from Yackandandah (Ming Stephens) and I hastened up the track. We were on a ridge overlooking the ridge the Yanks were now attacking and their first salvo had scared a flock of white cockatoos (life would have been a lot easier for me if I had had a bofor gun to scare the cockies off my Dad's three acres of corn)! The Yanks occupied the ridge and Sgt. Harry Cowan wanted me to go with him but I chickened out. I think young Roosevelt lost his life on that ridge.

The Japs had several attempts at dropping a mortar on that boong hut which we were using to shelter the sick and wounded whilst waiting for barges to evacuate them. Someone realized that the Japs were more likely to get a direct hit now they were back a few hundred yards. The Yanks bulldozed a big trench 200 yards up the beach to shelter the wounded. The barges did not know we'd moved the wounded and landed in the old place. The Jap mortars opened up and the first shell killed the fleas in the boong hut, another hit the barge I was to have gone on. The craft then retreated to where we were, amid confusion and panic. I was put in a disabled barge, a tropical storm broke and we were all cold and wet. We were marooned on a reef for an hour but finally a huge wave washed us free and we limped into Nassau Bay. Next morning we journeyed to Morobe, stayed the night and went to Oro Bay on the M.V "Tung Song". At Oro Bay we had a week's school and then went in with the 9th Div. to Lae."

Sgt. Harry Cowan, an older man, was sent to us as a reinforcement after having served with the 2/7th Field Ambulance in the Middle East. While serving with the 2/7th in the Middle East in 1941 he earned a Mention in Despatches. The notification came through to our unit but there was no mention of the circumstances.

Lieut. Jack McGill and thirty six orderlies were readied to go forward and act as Sea Ambulance Transport orderlies between Lae and Buna. Sgt Harry Cowan and Pte. John Garlepp left for Tambu Bay and Ptes. Harry Mead and Bill Jones arrived at Nassau Bay to strengthen the personnel there and to act as orderlies on the vessels transporting patients.

The 29th Brigade landed at Nassau Bay and relieved the 17th Brigade on the 24th of August 1943. The 7th Field Ambulance arrived with the 29th Brigade.

With sea transport from Tambu Bay now safe, air evacuations via Wau ceased and all patients were brought to the coast for evacuation by sea. By the end of August our men were withdrawn from Tambu Bay, the 7th Field Ambulance handling evacuation from there.

CAPTURE OF SALAMAUA AND LAE

The attack on Lae commenced on 4th September with amphibious landings by the 9th Division at both Red Beach and Yellow Beach east of Lae. Between these beaches and the town of Lae were a number of fast flowing streams such as the Bunga, Burep, Busu and Butibum rivers and to the west of Lae was the larger Markham River. These rivers added to the obstacles confronting the attacking forces. The landing forces had the advantage of support from aircraft based at Tsili Tsili in the Watut Valley. Medium bombers from Dobodura were also supporting the operation by bombing Salamaua and Lae. By the 6th

September the beach head was established and the 26th Brigade was advancing north along the Burep River and the 24th Brigade along the coast to the swift flowing Busu River.

Lieut. Merv Featonby arrived at Red Beach, Lae on the 9th of September with eighteen nursing orderlies to take over the evacuation of 9th Division patients by sea to Morobe and thence to Buna and Dobodura. The first evacuations commenced the next day when a load of patients were evacuated by L.S.T. accompanied by four orderlies. Evacuation was by L.S.T. or L.C.I. when available or otherwise by barge.

Lieut. Featonby's detachment were attached to the 2/3rd C.C.S. for duty and rations. They remained with the C.C.S. right through the battle for the capture of Lae and then throughout the Finschhafen campaign. A typical entry in the War Diary is that for the 16th of September :

"64 Stretcher cases evacuated by L.S.T. with four orderlies and Capt. Hughes, a walking patient. Two other L.C.T.'s took 244 walking patients and 40 stretcher cases. Air alert, 12 bombs dropped in vicinity."

The first objective of the 7th Division operating from inland was the capture of Nadzab. This was successfully carried out by U.S. paratroops accompanied by the Australian 2/4th Field Regiment on the 5th September. There were fifty five jump casualties amongst the paratroopers. Engineers soon had a rough landing strip prepared and the 25th Brigade was flown direct into Nadzab and immediately commenced the task of moving in on the town of Lae and preventing Japanese reinforcements arriving overland.

With the operation to capture Lae commenced there was no need to further delay the advance on Salamaua. Accordingly the 15th Battalion overcame resistance on the coast and drove the Japanese south of the Frisco River. The 29th Brigade pushed forward to the Salamaua airstrip and successfully crossed the flooded Frisco River and entered Salamaua. Eventually by the 13th September the 15th Brigade met troops from the 24th Battalion advancing from the Markham Valley and the remaining resistance surrounding Salamaua was cleared. Apart from mopping up operations Salamaua was in allied hands.

The 26th Brigade were at the Busu River on the East side of Lae and the Japanese were on the West bank. The river was running shoulder high. However, on the 9th September the 2/28th Battalion forced a crossing despite some members being drowned and most of their equipment being swept away. They held their position against enemy attacks until the 2/32nd and 2/43rd Battalions crossed either by boat or by a road across the Burep river upstream and came to their assistance. Casualties were heavy and collecting them often involved

Care, Courage & Camaraderie

exhausting carries over slippery jungle tracks and then problems arose in arranging evacuation from the beachhead.

Most of the movement in and out of Red Beach by sea craft was done at night and the whole area was subjected to heavy air bombardment by the Japanese and continuous air alerts day and night. The 4th Field Ambulance arrived at Red Beach on the night of the 10th-11th September.

The 9th Division having successfully crossed the Busu River pushed on towards Lae and on the 16th made contact with 7th Division advancing from Nadzab. Heavy rain made evacuation of patients from forward areas difficult as deep mud made tracks impassable for jeeps. The Japanese resisted strongly, but sustained land and air attacks soon weakened their hold. By now there was evidence of many Japanese escaping from Lae but, already weakened by starvation and illness, it is doubtful how many would survive to reach Japanese positions further north. The 7th Division found all resistance had disappeared on the outskirts of Lae and the only hindrance to their entering and occupying the town was the fire from the 9th Division's 25 pounders. By the 16th September Lae was in allied hands.

By the 26th of September the 2/11th Field Ambulance had established an A.D.S. at Lae and were evacuating patients. The 10th Field Ambulance took over this A.D.S. in early October. Patients arrived by sea and were evacuated by air to either Dobodura or Port Moresby. By the 27th of September the 2/3rd C.C.S. was preparing to move from Red Beach and on the 29th Lieut. Merv Featonby's section of the 10th Field Ambulance moved with them to Kedam Beach, Finschhafen.

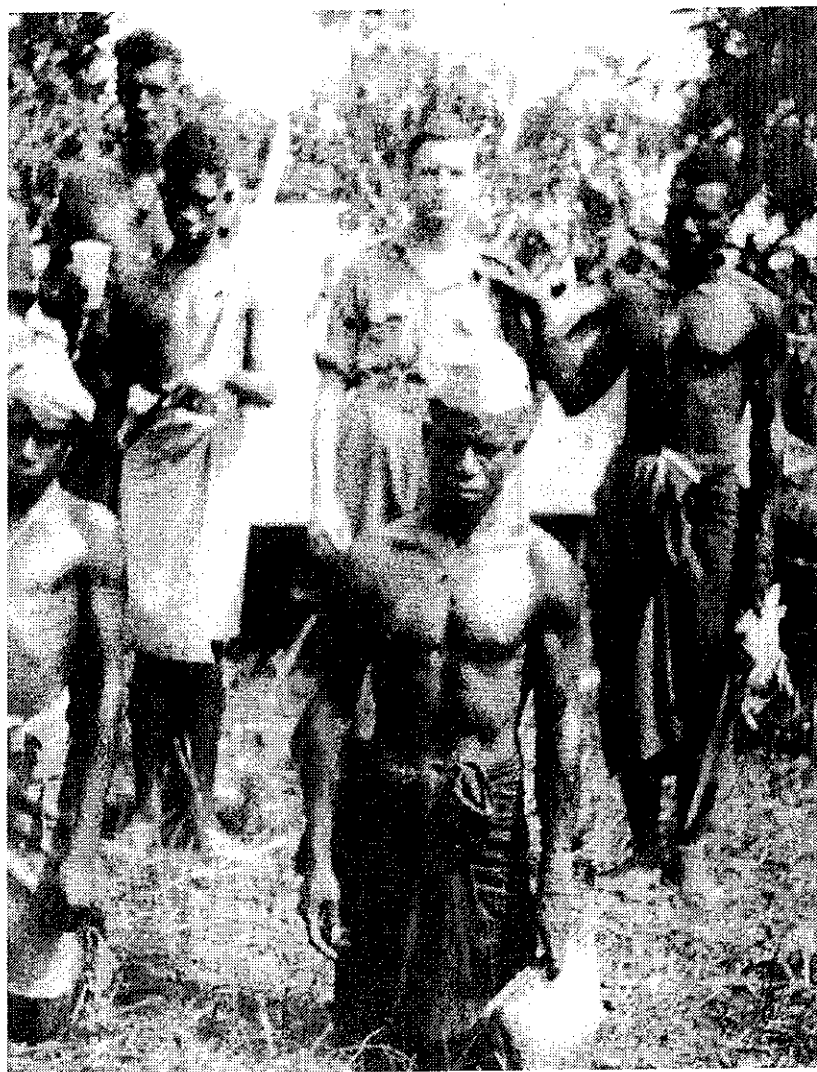
During September the unit's operations spread from Red Beach, east of Lae, to Tambu Bay and Nassau Bay where there were sea evacuation staging posts, to Morobe where Captain Bill Brand had his A.D.S. and evacuation post, to Oro Bay and finally the air evacuation post at Dobodura. Casualties as a result of the 7th and 9th Divisions' attacks on Salamaua and Lae passed through all of these sections on their way to the general hospitals in either Dobodura or Port Moresby.

The fighting in the mountains outside Lae-Salamaua was in the most difficult country and the Japanese resisted strongly. The evacuation of patients can be better understood by a description of the evacuation route for a patient from the 15th Brigade in the fighting for Bobdubi or Old Vickers overlooking Salamaua given by Alan Walker in his excellent book, 'The Island Campaigns.' He writes: -



The coast looking towards Salamaua.

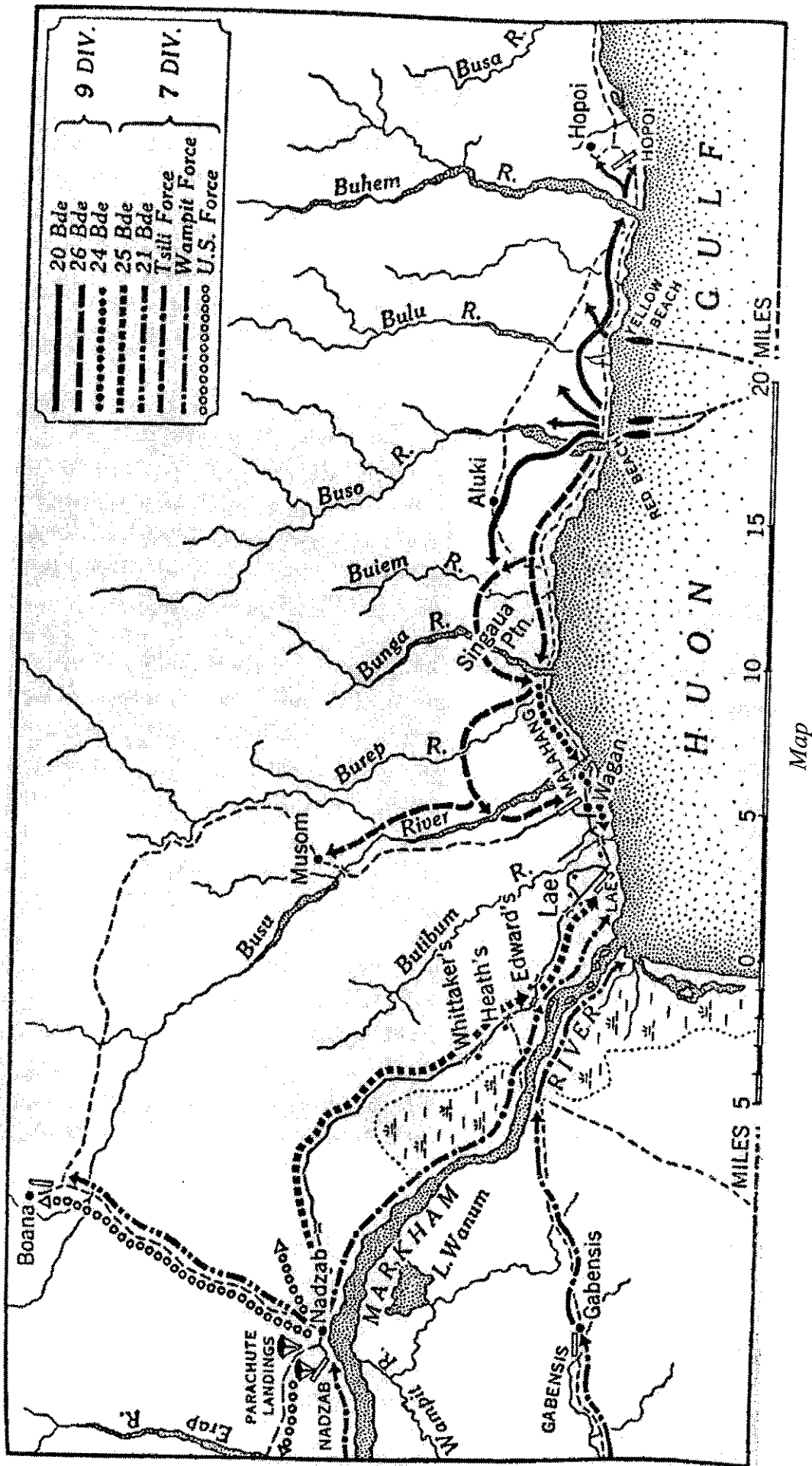
“ The actual experiences of a sick or wounded man from a forward surgical post to a hospital base are best appreciated by a brief description of the movement from an A.D.S. such as Kelly’s to Moresby via sea transport from Tambu or Nassau Bay. Usually a wounded man was fit for onward movement one or two days after an operation and left the A.D.S. at Kelly’s after breakfast. A team of twelve native bearers carried him on a stretcher to the A.D.S. at Dierke’s in three or four hours. During the first hour the bearers waded one to two feet deep along the Uliap Creek, and then climbed a fairly steep track to Dierke’s where the 2/2nd Field Ambulance fed and rested the patient and gave him any necessary medical care till next morning. The trail then led past the A.D.S. at Goodview, where a very ill patient could be left if unable to continue the journey at once, and Buigap was reached in three or four hours over a track at first steep and slippery and then leading over a part much improved by the engineers, past the 17th Brigade headquarters. Again, at Buigap the patient and his fellows fed and were rested overnight, and on the third day were carried to the 7th Field Ambulance’s M.D.S. at Tambu Bay over a steep but well made track. A good road now led to the coast, where the patients were taken after nightfall and were kept in a safe dugout until barges arrived. After these had been loaded in the dark they sailed late at night for Nassau Bay. Here the men were moved to the beach, where a medical officer was available if needed, and orderlies provided hot drinks. Early next morning large barges went on to Morobe, and here the sick were disembarked and taken by ambulance a short distance to the A.D.S. The 2/2nd C.C.S. ran a light section here, a mile from



*Ned Mathews and Ted Young with
native working party.*

the beach. Patients who needed prompt surgical treatment could be taken to the C.C.S., and any who required further rest or care were left at the A.D.S. Most of the men were taken on the same evening after dusk by sea transport, usually a barge and arrived during the next morning at Oro Bay. On the fifth day they were taken by road to the M.D.S. of the pleasantly situated 10th Field Ambulance, where they were fed and given any necessary attention. Medical orderlies were in attendance throughout the trip, and most of the patients were able to move on the same afternoon to Dobodura, where at the A.D.S. they had a meal

and slept the night. Early on the sixth day the patients were driven to the airstrip; usually the hour of start was unnecessarily early, as the times of the arrival of planes was often uncertain. As a rule the men were returned for breakfast and did not leave the ground till the morning was well advanced. There remained now only a brief air trip over the range in transport aircraft, and early afternoon saw them in Moresby. Ambulances took them to hospital and the long journey was over, unless their condition warranted return to the mainland by hospital ship, sea ambulance transport or aeroplane."



Map