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# *The* HARD SLOG

Australians in the Bougainville  
Campaign, 1944–45

KARL JAMES



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BOUGAINVILLE CAMPAIGN,  
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# THE HARD SLOG

## AUSTRALIANS IN THE BOUGAINVILLE CAMPAIGN, 1944-45

The island of Bougainville in the South Pacific was the site of one of the largest and most gruelling campaigns fought by Australian forces during the Second World War. During the offensive against the Japanese from November 1944 to August 1945, more than 500 Australians were killed and two Victoria Crosses were awarded. A veteran later described Bougainville as 'one long bloody hard slog'. Despite this, little is known about the campaign, which was dismissed as an unnecessary and costly operation.

In the first major study of the Bougainville campaign since publication of the official history in 1963, Karl James argues that it was in fact a justifiable use of Australia's military resources. He draws on original archival research, including wartime reports and soldiers' letters and diaries, to illustrate the experience of Australian soldiers who fought in the campaign. James shows that it fulfilled the Australian Government's long-standing plans for victory in the Second World War.

Generously illustrated with more than forty photographs, this important book tells the story of a campaign often overlooked or ignored in Australia's military history.

**Karl James** is Senior Historian in the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

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For my grandparents Doug (N265505) and Coral James,  
Tom and Nan (W/193451) McLaughlin,  
and their generation who fought the Second World War

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAWFA	Australians at War Film Archive
ADC	<i>aide-de-camp</i>
AIB	Allied Intelligence Bureau
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ANZAC	Australian New Zealand Army Corps
Arty	artillery
Aust	Australian
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bde	brigade
Bn	battalion
Brig	brigadier
CARO	Central Army Records Office
Comd	commander
Coy	company
CPD	Commonwealth Parliament Debates
Div	division
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
Fwd	Forward
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Inf	infantry
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-Colonel
Maj	Major
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NGIB	New Guinea Infantry Battalion
NLA	National Library of Australia
PIB	Papuan Infantry Battalion
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
SWPA	South West Pacific Area

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This book has been with me for some time, and many people too numerous to name have helped, inspired and encouraged me over the years. The most important group who contributed to this book were those veterans of the Bougainville campaign who corresponded and welcomed me into their homes to discuss their wartime experiences and post-war lives. I have always been grateful to the late Captain David Radford and the late Major-General John Whitelaw for sharing their insights on the nature of jungle warfare and their observation on leadership. General Whitelaw was also particularly encouraging and kindly made personal papers available. Meeting these officers and gentlemen was a privilege. The Second World War is now all too quickly slipping from living memory.

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I hope this book will not disappoint.

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## INTRODUCTION

On 19 April 1945, 29-year-old Sergeant John Ewen looked at the map on the wall of his weapon pit. His unit, the 61st Battalion, had been in action in southern Bougainville for more than three months. In his journal he confessed to shuddering every time he looked at those dashes on the maps that indicated tracks. They looked so ‘cold and matter-of-fact’, but they meant more than just lines or features.

There are two inches of track which I mapped under fire the whole way and which cost 3 of our boys wounded . . . To us it means blood and sweat and days of intense nervous tension . . . Perhaps when years later school-kiddies pick up maps of these islands and find names of roads and hills and rivers such as Blanche’s Junction, Holland’s Stream and Slater’s Knoll [they] may wonder how they were named. How are they to know that somewhere along the road lays the body of the man it’s called after. Or that that little blue stream running along over the map once held hidden Jap foxholes in its banks, and out of which a stream of bullets cut the thin line of life of the soldier – who was the first to attempt to cross it.<sup>1</sup>

Ewen’s prediction has not come true. Bougainville was one of the largest campaigns fought by Australians during the Second World War. More than 30 000 Australians served on the island, and more than 500 were killed. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded during the campaign. Today, however, few people know that Australians fought on the island during the war, let alone ask about a place called ‘Slater’s Knoll’. If they were aware of the campaign, it would only be as one of the unnecessary campaigns. When the war came to a sudden end in 1945, Australia had been marginalised from the key battles that would defeat Japan, relegated instead to bypassed areas carrying out ‘mopping-up’ operations in Australia’s Mandated Territory of New Guinea and Bougainville and on Borneo. Although the necessity and the political and strategic

justifications for these campaigns have been passionately debated, the operations themselves have received scant serious attention. Beyond a handful of soldier memoirs, unit histories and specialist publications, there has been little scholarly work since Gavin Long's volume of the official history, *The Final Campaigns* (1963). Twenty years later, journalist Peter Charlton reinvigorated the debate with his provocative book, *The Unnecessary War* (1983), which was highly critical of the campaigns fought in the Mandated Territories. More recently, British war correspondent and historian Sir Max Hastings' sweeping *Nemesis* (2007), on the final year of the war in Pacific, caused a brief uproar when he alleged that Australian forces were 'bludging' in bypassed areas of New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo rather than fighting in more prominent areas.<sup>2</sup> Historian Peter Stanley's excellent *Tarakan* (1997), about the first of the Borneo operations, is the only detailed campaign study of this period. Stanley argued, contrary to popular opinion, that the Borneo operations were a justifiable use of Australia's forces acting as part of an international wartime alliance.<sup>3</sup>

This book uses an approach similar to that of Stanley, to appraise critically the notion that Bougainville was an 'unnecessary' campaign and arguing just the opposite. The campaign fulfilled the government's long-stated policies of maintaining an active military effort and employing Australian forces in Australian territory. Crucially, the campaign was initiated when the Australians mistakenly believed they outnumbered the Japanese and was conducted for the pragmatic reason of freeing the large force from garrisoning the island indefinitely. There were failings and reverses, both on and off the battlefield, but the Australians carried out their tasks with skill and success.

Bougainville was one of the longest and most exhausting campaigns conducted by Australians during the war. It was a slow, gruelling campaign. Lieutenant Colin Salmon, a tank commander from the 2/4th Armoured Regiment, later described the campaign as 'just one hard long bloody slog'.<sup>4</sup> Relieving the Americans in Torokina on Bougainville's west coast in November 1944, Lieutenant-General Stanley Savage's Australian II Corps fought a nine-month campaign to destroy the Japanese, who had been occupying the island since 1942.

The campaign, fought with limited resources, was tightly controlled by Savage, who focused on keeping Australian casualties to a minimum. Savage divided the island into three operational areas: the Central, Northern and Southern Sectors. In the Central Sector, the Australians crossed the rugged mountains to the east coast. Savage used this sector as a

'nursery sector' where inexperienced units were given the opportunity of gaining combat experience – to be 'blooded' – before being deployed to the other, more active areas. In the Northern Sector, the Australians followed the northwest coast towards Buka. Moving on foot and by a series of amphibious landings, the advance went well until a small force was landed at Porton Plantation in June 1945. Suffering heavy casualties, the force was eventually evacuated in what was the only Australian defeat of the campaign.

The main fight was in the Southern Sector as the Australians headed towards Buin, the major Japanese base on the island. The war the infantry knew was one of patrolling along stinking, humid jungle tracks and putrid swamps in an intimate, personal war of section patrols and the occasional company-size attack. The strain of constant clashes with the Japanese and harassing artillery fire eroded the men's morale. 'Strikes' occurred in two Australian battalions as the stress became too much for some. They were soon faced with a greater test. In April 1945 the Japanese launched a major counter-attack. The main blow fell on an Australian battalion dug in around the feature called Slater's Knoll. Although the attack was poorly coordinated, the encircled and outnumbered Australians were hard pressed by the Japanese. The battalion was close to being overrun before the arrival of Australian tanks broke the Japanese attack. With tanks, artillery and air support, the Australians were able to continue the slow advance towards Buin. The Japanese resisted stubbornly, fighting to hold each track and river crossing. They skilfully infiltrated the Australian lines, laying improvised mines and setting ambushes along muddy, corduroyed roads. The Japanese experience of the campaign was one of deprivation, desperation and defeat. In the most extreme instances, a few even resorted to cannibalism.

This book does not attempt to retell a narrative already comprehensively told in Long's official history. This book is an analysis of the campaign that examines why and how it was fought, and it blends the experiences of those who fought it: the officers and soldiers, the Australians and the Japanese. The first chapter is a detailed discussion of the debates surrounding the final campaigns. The remaining chapters follow the campaign's different sectors and phases.

As the person most responsible for the campaign's conduct, General Savage receives the most attention. His career spanned two world wars. He entered the army as a private and retired a lieutenant-general. Brave and personable, he liked a drink and cared about his men's welfare, thus earning himself the nickname 'Uncle Stan'. He could also be moody,



irritable, controlling and paranoid. The commander's role in an action or an operation is very different from the experiences of a soldier. There is a disparity between what commanders, such as Savage, see as they look at a map in a headquarters and what a soldier, such as Sergeant Ewen, sees as he looks over the edge of his weapon pit into an ominous jungle. A close study of personal diaries and documents reveals the pressures and tensions brought about by the varying and at times competing perspectives of senior and more junior officers, and officers and soldiers.

Another theme of this book is the AIF/militia rivalry that characterised the early years of the war. A legacy of the First AIF's achievements in the Great War was the celebration of the superior soldierly abilities of Australian volunteers over conscripted British and American soldiers. Volunteers, it was alleged, enjoyed a stronger *esprit de corps* and would not be reluctant or hesitant in battle. Such sentiments were lauded when the Second AIF was serving in the Middle East, but on its return to Australia in 1942 tensions quickly erupted between the AIF and the militia's conscripts. Discrepancies in pay, conditions of service and prestige exasperated the divisions. Such historians as Mark Johnston have examined the AIF/militia rivalry as it occurred during 1942.<sup>5</sup> There has been a tendency to assume that this rivalry dissipated after the AIF and militia fought alongside each other in Papua. But on Bougainville, the AIF/militia rivalry was ever present, simmering just below the surface ready to ignite.

## UNCLE STAN

Stanley Savage was no stranger to controversy; he had spent as much time fighting his critics as the Axis. Long thought Savage, in his mid-fifties, with spectacles and an increasing girth, looked more like a businessman than a soldier. Long wrote in his notebook that, while Savage's staff would invariably beat him badly at chequers, he had the 'gift of leadership, knowledge of men, great tact, and much common-sense'. He was loyal, both to his seniors and juniors, and did not believe ill of any unit that ever served under him, even briefly, and regarded any officer or man who had been under his command as one of his family. He received loyalty in return.<sup>6</sup> Savage's most recent biographer, Gavin Keating, described him as one of the last examples of a time when 'senior commanders could rely on personal bravery, leadership skills and "knowledge of men" to be successful'.<sup>7</sup>