

Submission to Review of Veterans' Entitlements

Background

This submission is made on behalf of members of the Australian Defence Forces who served in what was then the Territory of Papua New Guinea (TPNG) in the years leading up to Independence in 1975, particularly during the period between 1952 and 1972. During this period Officers and senior NCOs of all services serving in TPNG may have missed on postings to other areas where qualifying or eligible service was available and hardship or threat (excluding South Vietnam and Borneo during Confrontation) were not noticeably more significant.

More specifically service would be:

- RAN - HMAS Tarangau Lombrum Manus Island from 1950s; Port Moresby Lae and Wewak, 1960s to 1975.
- RAAF - Momote Manus Island until mid 1950s and Port Moresby from 1967,
- Army - Murray Barracks Port Moresby from 1951, Taurama Barracks Port Moresby from 1951, Goldie Barracks Port Moresby from 1964, Nutt Point Barracks Manus Island from 1954 to 1962, Moem Barracks Wewak from 1962, Igam Barracks Lae from 1968, Vanimo from 1955.

While there were considerable numbers of Australian soldiers, sailors, airmen and junior Non Commissioned Officers of all services who served during this period, by far the preponderance of those who served were from the ranks of senior NCOs, and Junior and Field Grade Officers in the Army. While the hardships and dangers suffered were unevenly balanced towards officers and senior NCOs serving specifically in the Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR) it would be inappropriate to suggest that eligibility be reserved to them alone.

This paper will concentrate however on the specific issues which confronted young officers of PIR particularly during this period. The point should be made early in the piece that there is a recognition already in place whereby service in that area in that period was special enough to deserve the granting of a clasp to the Australian Service Medal. We now seek to address the anomaly relating to non-recognition of that service by DVA as deserving of qualification for rehabilitation and repatriation purposes.

We have no way of knowing how many are affected as most regular servicemen would have seen qualifying service in other areas. It must be admitted though that there will be numbers of National Service Officers and NCOs, as well as Naval and RAAF personnel who served in only TPNG.

The Environment

During the 1950s and up until the early 1960s TPNG was regarded as a fairly primitive **place with** underdeveloped cultures, much unexplored territory and many remaining **uncontacted** tribal groups. Services even in the major towns were unsophisticated to **say the** least and in the outlying areas were quite rudimentary. The major Australian defence locations were HMAS Tarangau on Manus Island and Taurama Barracks and Murray Barracks in Port Moresby. There was a RAAF presence in small numbers on Manus at Momote until the mid fifties. The role of the Defence Force until the mid sixties remained largely undefined.

The greatest concentration of Australian Service personnel in TPNG up until 1964 was at the Headquarters of the PIR at Taurama Barracks in Port Moresby. Here there were based approximately thirty-five officers and twenty-five senior NCOs. A somewhat lesser number were based in Murray Barracks until 1964 when a rapid expansion took place. At the same time there would have been some thirty or forty RAN personnel on Manus. Until 1960 the standard period of posting was two years for officers and senior NCOs. In 1960 the standard period for officers in the PIR was extended to three years.

For reasons which were again somewhat obscure the PIR established outstations on Manus Island in 1954 and at Vanimo on the far north-west coast in 1955. Five officers and three senior NCOs from Taurama Barracks served a six month rotation on each of Manus and Vanimo until 1962 ~~when~~ the Manus outstation was transferred to Moem Barracks. In 1964 the Moem outstation became the home of the second battalion (2PIR).

Thus until 1964, in eighteen months of service it was possible for a junior or field grade officer or senior NCO to serve six months on outstation, six months in Port Moresby and six months further on outstation. Outstation service was unaccompanied.

The Facilities

Until 1964 there were approximately twelve married quarters in Taurama and about twenty in Murray Barracks. Other accommodation in Port Moresby was scarce, primitive and expensive. One young officer and his wife lived with a young child in a **con**verted garage for two years. Until 1966 a young officer under normal **circum**stances could not expect to qualify for a married quarter during a three year **po**sting. Even field grade officers sometimes had to wait up to eighteen months to **qual**ify. Some officers spent their whole posting "house sitting" accomodation **belo**nging to admin services couples going on three month extended leaves and thus they moved house every three months.

In Taurama single officers lived in small open sided rooms with inadequate insect proofing and until 1964 lived two to a room where only one officer at a time could use the only desk facility. Communal bathing facilities were appallingly inadequate and there was not even any hot water until 1959.

On Manus Island each officer had an inadequately partitioned single room 8ft by 10ft with panels only seven feet high. All rooms were in reclaimed WWII Nissan huts which were leaky, noisy and totally lacking in privacy. Junior Officers spent two weeks in three in makeshift native bush camps with no ablution facilities. The situation in Vanimo was similar except that from Vanimo junior officers regularly went out on six week exploratory patrols under very trying conditions.

Communication from Outstation to Port Moresby was by radio, generally using CW. One aircraft a week was scheduled but subject to the vagaries of weather and was often cancelled. On Vanimo there were no roads to anywhere, on Manus there was one road to Momote, one to HMAS Tarangau, and one to the Island admin centre at Lorengau fifteen miles away. Opportunities for meaningful recreation were few and far between.

In 1960 a semi-permanent outstation for recruit training was established about fifteen miles from Port Moresby on the Goldie River. Six officers and five senior NCOs lived there in native built huts for up to twelve months at a time in the most primitive conditions while those with families were only able to visit them in Port Moresby every two weeks or so. This continued until permanent barracks were built in 1966.

From Port Moresby there were two roads outwards, one to Brown River (in the same general direction as the Goldie) in the Goilala about twenty miles out and one to Owers' Corner at the head of the Kokoda track a similar distance away. None of the roads leading out beyond eight miles from Port Moresby were sealed. Again opportunities for meaningful recreation were few and far between.

Facilities for RAN personnel at HMAS Tarangau were more self contained in that there were sufficient married quarters, there was access to water craft and isolation was not as acute as in the case of the army personnel on outstation. Nevertheless facilities were primitive and the society was extremely enclosed. Families had few places of recreation and there were no facilities for older children.

Families

Families suffered hardships in the selected group from Taurama such that if it were to occur to-day there would be massive repercussions and it would be impossible to service the location.

While the evidence is largely anecdotal there is no doubt that husbands, wives and children suffered traumas which have had repercussions on families in all the years since. In one two year period in TPNG (1970-72) one officer lost his wife, at least three officers lost very young children to unknown diseases. Young children were particularly prone to serious tropical diseases and several other soldiers lost children in their service in TPNG.

Schooling for children was in all cases barely adequate and did not cater for older children at all such that many families were forced to remain in Australia during their husband's /father's service.

Houses were for the most part inadequately furnished but members were forced to use **government** furniture while their own remained in store. Possessions which were **allowed to** be taken to TPNG invariably deteriorated in the tropical climate and were **discarded on** return home. No compensation was offered for deterioration beyond **standard** inadequate Defence Dept Removal devaluation.

Similarly it was found that three years of driving on unmade roads together with the climate caused such deterioration in motor vehicles that few lasted beyond a year or two on return.

Perhaps the most telling problem for servicemen during that period was separation. Even up until 1966 it was not unusual for an officer or NCO in PIR to wait for four or five months to have their families join them and then after three weeks to be sent off to outstation unaccompanied for six months. This often left the family in Port Moresby not in Married Quarters and in a strange environment for six months. Even on return it was likely that the husband could be sent on six weeks patrol during the next six months or even have to spend three months unaccompanied at the Goldie River before going off on six months outstation again. To this was added weekly duties which meant at least one spell weekly of living in for twenty four hours as well as other weekly exercises etc. The wonder is that not more marriages suffered irreparable damage or broke up. While comprehensive studies are not available it is suggested that the incidence of break up of marriages involving servicemen who served in TPNG in the 60s and 70s would be higher than among the cohort who did not serve.

Conditions

Military personnel and their families endured conditions which were not tolerated by the civil community. Air conditioning was **unknown**, temperatures were never below 30°, and illness was rife. Conditions were such that leave was earned at 50% above the normal rate i.e 30 as opposed to 18 days per year. Then with typical military irony personnel were forbidden to take **leave until after two years service**. Small wonder that large numbers of members and their families arrived back in Australia exhausted and emaciated.

On at least five occasions between 1957 and 1970 there were serious disturbances within the fledging TPNG armed forces culminating in major riots in 1957 and 1961 in **the PIR** in which Australian Officers and NCOs were injured and families felt **threatened**. Several of these disturbances were over the conditions under which the **indigenous** soldiers served. Though conditions for Australian personnel were better **they nevertheless** didn't have the luxury of going on strike!

Operational Matters

Service in the PIR during the 1960s at least was semi **operational**. There were a number of fields of endeavour which would equate to the types of activity involving service personnel which have been approved or are under consideration as qualifying service:

- **Flag Showing.** For a period in excess of twenty years the PIR and often other support troops mounted a regular patrol program throughout the territory and its islands. These patrols were multi-purpose: to show the flag, to collect intelligence on both tribal groups and ground, to provide a presence presumably for pacification and communication purposes, to familiarise troops with the ground and environment in which it may have become necessary to operate, to provide Civic Action from time to time for development and peacekeeping purposes and to provide training for both officers and soldiers.

Patrols were mounted for periods from one week to two months and they operated in the most trying conditions where loads of 80lbs (36Kilos) were quite normal. Rations were generally restricted to the indigenous diet of rice and meat with occasional supplements. Live ammunition was carried for safety purposes and not for the procurement of game, normally on the basis of ten rounds per man carried centrally. Carriage of live ammunition indicated a tacit acceptance that there was a possible risk involved with many patrols. Six or eight long patrols and eight or nine short patrols per year was normal for each battalion of the PIR.

Patrols mounted by the PIR in the early sixties made a number of initial contacts and in many cases came under serious scrutiny from the contacted peoples. The patrols often had the effect of calming local fears and encouraging local participation in the development process.

- **Civic Action.** Civic action patrols became common in the mid sixties when as well as PIR patrols assistance by support troops from Murray Barracks was provided to build wells dispensaries and schools from local materials and with local assistance and self-help. Additionally during the early 1960's Australian Army Engineers built a strategic operational airstrip at Vanimo and a strategic road from Wewak to Maprik in the Sepik hinterland, all of which was done under trying and difficult conditions which brought long periods of family separation.
- **Medical Assistance.** During the late sixties and early seventies considerable medical assistance was provided in remote locations often in conjunction with civic action patrols. In 1969 it is on record that up to thousands of lives were probably saved by the intervention of the Army with RAAF support in the Highlands during a serious influenza epidemic that took many lives. The troops deployed from both 1 and 2 PIR were responsible for the vaccination of thousands of people in the Southern Highlands and the Eastern Sepik. The major responsibility fell on the Australian officers and NCOs who had to cope with many uncontacted primitive groups of people being vaccinated by only partially trained medical staff and in some cases non medical staff.
- **Indonesian Border.** From the time of the handing over of Dutch New Guinea to the UN in 1962 through the early period of Indonesian occupation and the period of *Konfrontasi* right up to independence there was continual tension along the border between *West Irian* and TPNG. This was exacerbated by the fact that the tension was largely unacknowledged in Australia. The border was patrolled regularly by the PIR, there were regular Indonesian incursions and several half hearted attempts were made to create contingency plans against incursions and refugee movements.

Rules of engagement were ill-defined even during periods of very real threat such as the period of Indonesian *Konfrontasi* in Malaysia in 1964/65. Subsequently from 1966 to 1972 with the concentration of the Government turned towards Vietnam little heed was paid to the operational anachronisms of TPNG and field and junior officers regularly experienced tensions and stress which were unacknowledged. Patrols continued to be armed and clear the border regularly but with no real directions regarding rules of engagement. That major diplomatic incidents were avoided may have been more by good luck than good management.

- **Aid to the Civil Power.** During 1969 and 1970 clear directives were received that the PIR train in Aid To the Civil Power. The training used was British in origin and amongst other things involved a concentration on crowd control and riot procedures. Companies of 1PIR trained with live ammunition with very clear objectives which were not known generally in Australia at the time.

At this time field and junior officers had thrust upon them quite extraordinary responsibilities which at one stage involved one rifle company being issued with live ammunition and placed on five minutes notice to be flown to Rabaul where serious disturbances were in full force. These had followed the murder of a District Commissioner by members of the Mataungan Society. Serious riots were in train and actual operational commitment was avoided by a hair's breadth.

The Mataungan crisis lasted several months which involved at least one company being on constant stand-by for weeks on end with all that involves. The tension at the time was palpable and consideration was given to evacuating large numbers of families. The stress of course conveyed itself to families.

At the same time was seen the genesis of the Bougainville problem relating to land and other compensation in Panguna. Contingency plans were being laid as early as 1969 against possible insurrection in Bougainville and deployment by companies of either battalion of the PIR. This tension lasted at least until the latter half of 1970.

Responsibilities

The foregoing matters all went to create a level of responsibility under stress for large numbers of officers and NCOs not in any way replicated by service in Australia or even in Malaysia during most of the same period. These responsibilities were reflected in pressures on their families which when combined with the tropical climate and conditions were such as to be recognised by the eventual award of the Australian Service Medal.

In addition to the above, Officers and NCOs were in an extraordinary period of nation building probably more important than anything similar that Australian troops have been involved in before or since. This was a process of trial and error for which no blue-print existed which required that in 1975 the troops would walk away and leave behind a new country with a new army. Again this had to be done under conditions which involved the need for stamina and hardihood to a degree at least as much if not more than all the peace keeping and peace making efforts since.

On longer patrols junior officers were often expected to make decisions regarding resupply, evacuation and illness often while as much as fifteen days march from the nearest patrol post. All this needed to be done in an environment of exploration, flash floods, hostile tribal groups and often seriously ill soldiers. Patrol records of 1960, 61 and 62 from Vanimo paint a picture of patrols where half the soldiers were down with illness at one time. Where essential medical supplies had dried up and resupply was difficult because radio communications were unreliable or non-existent.

In this environment a young officer applied sutures and needles to soldiers without even having a modicum of training and only the resources of a possibly illiterate medical orderly with one week's training. It was not unusual for patrols to need to make good time even when the patrol commander would under other circumstances have been bed-ridden.

Residual Illnesses

Perhaps the most important aspect of this submission is not the hardships, hazards and operational exigencies of service in TPNG during the period in question but the residual complaints suffered by many ex-soldiers which have been in no way compensated for. The history of the Army in particular in TPNG in the years from 1952 to 1963 is a history of medical neglect. Lessons learned during WWII were faithfully carried forward into the period up to independence-to the extent that no efforts were made to update treatments, knowledge or understanding. Measures applied in WWII were again applied willy-nilly with no thought of progress. On the other hand diseases which rendered the sufferer TPI as a result of New Guinea service during WWII were as often as not totally ignored when contracted in the years 1952-1975.

- **Malaria.** In common with the Australian Army's experience in Vietnam no one was allowed to get malaria. This was because the use of paludrine according to the Australian Army was a perfectly good suppressant if taken daily. It apparently wasn't as good for the RAN as they used something different.

By the late 1960's as a result of Vietnam experience it was arbitrarily decided that two pills a day were needed. Subsequently in the early seventies it was realised that even that was insufficient against virulent strains of malaria. No effort has been made to re-visit the large number of cases of "not malaria" which service personnel contracted particularly from Vanimo in the years from 1955 to 1970. Personnel contracted fevers presumed to be something else and as no prophylaxis was taken prior to return to Australia (it not being necessary because it was "not malaria") many people suffered recurrence of symptoms often quite severely for many years afterwards back in Australia. The late Dr Bertram Wainer tried to draw attention to this anomaly as early as 1960.

- **Dengue.** Personnel contracted many other debilitating tropical fevers over the period, many of which like dengue and scrub typhus had quite severe residual

effects. These diseases were particularly virulent in the tropical hinterland and **those** engaged in patrolling activity were especially susceptible despite elaborate **precautions**. It is now widely accepted that the medical advice at the time “don’t **get bitten**” was trite and naïve and largely an excuse for the inactivity of the **medical** services in the area of tropical diseases in the immediate post war period. **It was** impossible for even the most conscientious person to “not get bitten” and precautions were at best only partially effective.

- **Amoebic Dysentery.** Few personnel who served outside the major centres of Port Moresby, Lae and Wewak would have survived a three-year posting without an attack of amoebic dysentery. Even in the major centres most people would have succumbed at some stage. There are recorded cases of personnel suffering for six months on end and there is anecdotal evidence of family members having to be evacuated.
- **Skin Disorders.** Severe tropical skin disorders were common. Dermatitis was commonly contracted causing severe debilitation while in theatre. There are recorded cases of the disease never being cured and where the sufferer was permanently medically downgraded. Such fungal skin complaints as tinea and ringworm (grille) were ever present and often exacerbated by the rigid dress code demanded in the Army. Severe cases often caused infections resulting in severe tropical ulcers and cellulitis that lasted for the residual period one was in the territory.
- **Other Disorders.** Psychiatric and nervous disorders suffered as a result of stress often necessitated evacuation of personnel and especially families with the result that many careers subsequently suffered. At the end of two years service personnel often returned to Australia on leave totally exhausted mentally and physically often with alcohol and tobacco addictions contracted or worsened by the conditions of service. In many cases these symptoms could have become masked by attribution to other periods of eligible service.

Conclusion

Over a period of nearly twenty-five years the Australian Government spent more money and poured in more resources to the defence of TPNG and the training of its **Armed** Forces than on any other military activity outside of WWI and WWII. This **occurred** during periods of outright hostility from neighbours, civil disturbance within **the country** and at times insurrection from within the indigenous **Armed Forces themselves**. This was also done in an environment of family and personal hardship with **the added** dangers of tropical diseases. Hundreds of Australian **Armed Forces** personnel served there often at significant personal risk and ultimate cost.

The Australian Defence Force acquitted itself creditably during this period and contributed in no small way to the building of a nation which is our closest and arguably our most important neighbour. Except for a brief period of eligible service from 1972 till independence (and subsequently till 1994) not one service person is eligible for DVA assistance as a result of that service and no service is regarded as qualifying. This is despite the fact that personnel serving in many parts of TPNG from

1944 till war's end were under no significant enemy threat and their service contributed nothing more to Australia's defence that did the service of those personnel who served in TPNG in the post war years.

Since the late eighties and early nineties efforts have been made to redress the anomalies relating to personnel who have seen Peacekeeping service in other theatres and this is certainly to be applauded. It is understood that even hazardous training is being considered for eligibility and this too is to be applauded.

Given the defence resources poured into PNG in the years leading to independence and the obvious importance placed on our relationship with Papua New Guinea to-day which in no small way was fostered by Defence personnel, it is extraordinary that no recognition exists of their status as veterans for repatriation or rehabilitation purposes. It strongly suggested that it is high time this anomaly of TPNG service be addressed.