Representation of Japanese in Australian Military History and the Effect on Commemoration

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1 Introduction

Peter Brune’s Bastard of a place: the Australians in Papua, which was published in 2004, opens with a description of an archetypal Australian “digger” moving through the devastation of the battleground during the final battles at Sanananda in Papua. The passage is confronting, and the actions described are brutal: “Three of the Japanese had maggots in their mouths and eyes, while the fourth just lay with his eyes shut. The digger belted that fourth soldier on the head, his eyes opened with a start, and one of the digger’s mates shot him.”\(^{(2)}\) Brune, placing words in the digger’s mouth, writes: “Kill all the bastards, trust not one of them and get this nightmare over with.”\(^{(2)}\)

There is no doubt that this passage, and others in the book, illustrates the uncompromising, violent nature of the war fought in Papua. There are few more emotive accounts of how, in the words of Eugene Sledge, “decent men were reduced to a brutish existence in their fight for survival amid the violent death, terror, tension, fatigue, and filth that was the infantryman’s war.”\(^{(3)}\) However, far from reinserting reality into military history, Brune elevates such actions and campaigns, at Kokoda, Milne Bay, Gona, Buna and Sanananda, to the level of national myth. He laments that many Australians are still ignorant of this “great Australian legend”, and that such men “fought not for the birth of a nation, 

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*(豪戦争記念館)*
Representation of Japanese in Australian military history and the effect on commemoration but for its very rites of passage.\(^{(4)}\)

How did these circumstances arise? How does the way in which the Japanese story is presented within military histories in Australia contribute to, or otherwise influence, how as a society we continue to represent the experience of war some 60 years ago? This paper will explore this complex issue by looking at how the Japanese experience has been described within Australian military histories. I have limited the topic of enquiry to the campaigns in Papua in 1942 because of their recent prominence. This paper will also explore how these representations have contributed to the nature of commemoration of war, particularly the emergence of Battle for Australia Day.

2 Representations of the Japanese Experience in the Australian Official History

The main work for understanding the Australian experience of the Second World War remains the official history series published by the Australian War Memorial. Among the 22 volumes of the official history, four which concern the land campaigns against the Japanese in the South-West Pacific Area were published from 1957 to 1963\(^{(5)}\). Following on from the style adopted by Charles Bean in the First World War, these works are a comprehensive account of a largely personal experience of war based on a vast source of official and private sources. Detailed biographical information is provided for all soldiers appearing in the series, regardless of status. However, to ensure the reader can place the soldier within a civilian context, all mentioned are given a pre-war occupation, home town, and mention of notable achievements.

But, what were the sources that were used to describe the Japanese experience in these volumes? Several relied heavily on official historians from elsewhere to provide the bulk of information about the Japanese. Gavin Long, the general editor of the Australian series, in his words "largely filched" details of Japanese strengths from Kirby, the general editor of the British project\(^{(6)}\). The United States official historian of the Papua campaign, Samuel Milner, also provided many details of the Japanese campaigns in 1942, both through his published work and through private correspondence with the authors\(^{(7)}\). Other sources included the series of 180 accounts, generally referred to as the Japanese Monographs, which were written by former Japanese officers in the post-war years\(^{(8)}\). The information in the monographs was supplemented by translated captured materials\(^{(9)}\). Also of use in the official histories were post-war interviews with commanders who had served in the field against Australian units. These range from officers at battalion level, through staff officers at divisional level, right up to army commanders.

The main volume concerning the Papua campaign was written by Dudley McCarthy, a former patrol officer in New Guinea and veteran of fighting in North Africa and New Guinea. The jacket blurb to his volume states that "the Japanese story is told side by side with the Allied one". References to Japanese sources, however, are often veiled. Elsewhere in the narrative, the generic "Japanese" is used almost exclusively to refer to formations, units, officers and soldiers, further depersonalising the Japanese "enemy". The main narrative of the Japanese experience is contained in isolated sections at the end of chapters, rather than alongside descriptions of Australian soldiers fighting, dying and
Excerpts from Japanese accounts and diary entries which were cited in the official histories were often used to highlight favourably the actions of Australian troops. For example, an extract from an unnamed Japanese officer’s diary was used by McCarthy to describe the situation during the night of 9 August around the village of Kokoda. The officer wrote that the "attack ended in failure", that "everyday I am losing my men", that "the enemy’s fire forced us to withdraw", and that "I could not repress tears of bitterness". These are powerful sentiments, but perhaps not representative in describing the overall battle situation in which Japanese forces were successful in driving back the Australians and pursuing them for a further seven weeks.

3 Trends in Other Accounts of the War in Papua

It must be noted that we cannot harshly judge works written in a different time by today’s standards and approaches. However, it is essential to understand how the Japanese experience is presented in the official histories — especially as they remain an authoritative reference today. However, some four decades after the publication of the first comprehensive accounts of the Papuan campaigns, what advances have been made in using Japanese sources or in describing the Japanese experience of these campaigns?

The volume of writings on the Papuan campaigns in Australia is immense. While it is beyond this paper to evaluate the broad range of these works, there are several trends which are discernable. One large body of work was written by, or for, veterans and unit associations. They are filled with former glories and hardships, and aim generally to incorporate as many names and stories of a unit’s activities as possible — many with little relevance for outsiders. The attitude to the Japanese in these works was, according to Richard Pelvin, "not complex". While containing some respect for the Japanese soldier’s abilities, the works are filled with references to “Japs”, “nips” and the like to capture wartime language and sentiment. Overall, however, there is little use of Japanese sources in these works, though those published more recently have incorporated stories of reunions with former Japanese soldiers.

Many academic works dealing with the Papua campaigns tend to focus on specific issues, such as Malaria or biographies of Australian commanders, and do not incorporate much in the way of Japanese perspective. Other works pick at most one or two Japanese accounts to provide all the details for the "Japanese story", even when attempts are made to integrate the Japanese story within the narrative. Used in this way, these sources are not subjected to the same historical scrutiny as the often extensive use of Australian sources, which often include numerous interviews with Australian veterans, letters and diaries.

Another trend is that few histories provide a context for the Japanese campaigns in the region. Published just prior to the 50th anniversary of the battle of the Coral Sea, Lex McAulay’s two books dealing with the Papua campaigns make extensive use of wartime intelligence material in an
Representation of Japanese in Australian military history and the effect on commemoration attempt to fully incorporate the Japanese experience\textsuperscript{17}. There is still, however, no analysis of why the Japanese are fighting in the region, how this relates to campaigns in other theatres, and what are the overall Japanese strategic objectives. In the almost 700 pages of Peter Brune's latest book, there is no explanation of why the Japanese are in Papua at all\textsuperscript{18}.

4 Battle for Australia Commemorations

The term Battle for Australia was famously used by war-time prime minister, John Curtin, after the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942: "Dunkirk's fall initiated the Battle for Britain; Singapore's fall opens the Battle for Australia"\textsuperscript{19}. The term has gained particular recent prominence with the adoption of ceremonies commemorating the Battle for Australia held in early September each year. The first such ceremony was held in 1998, with others held nationwide from the following year\textsuperscript{20}. The 2005 ceremony was attended by the prime minister, senior politicians, military leaders and representatives of wartime Allied countries.

The focus on commemorating the campaigns in the region around Australia is important to the rhetoric of Battle for Australia day supporters. However, promotion of an understanding of these campaigns is their primary aim. James Bowen, public affairs consultant to the RSL and one of the earliest supporters of a national Battle for Australia day, lamented in a 1999 newspaper interview that young Australians knew more about the European theatre, or even more about the United States campaigns in the Pacific than Australian's role in the "assault on our north"\textsuperscript{21}.

The official aims of the Battle for Australia National Council include efforts "educating Australian children to appreciate, honour and learn from the heroism, sacrifice and service" of those defending "Australia, its territories and national interests from attack and ultimately to expel the Japanese from Australian territory and waters"\textsuperscript{22}. This educational aspect is reflected in the significant emphasis placed on the participation of school children in Battle for Australia ceremonies. Not only should children be taught the history of these campaigns, but the symbolism of commemoration should firmly entrench this history within a nationalism infused with a spirit of sacrifice in war.

Implicit within this aim, however, is the ever-present shadow of threat — to our land, to our people, and to our ideals — that the encroaching Japanese forces posed. The Battle for Australia Committee claims that "the threat of invasion of Australia is even to this day, little appreciated by much of the Australian people, particularly by the younger generation"\textsuperscript{23}. It is this threat, the argument goes, that gives significance to these sacrifices, and motivates the supporters of Battle for Australia day to increase the profile of these campaigns. The device of threat, however, cannot be sustained without reference to certain historical evidence. Despite what Australians believed at the time, the Japanese army had no intention to use these campaigns as a prelude for invasion of Australia\textsuperscript{24}. The lack of Japanese perspective in writings about the campaigns, and the general ignorance of the "realities of 1942", to use Hank Nelson's phrase, has led to widespread use of the threat of invasion to justify the Battle for Australia Day\textsuperscript{25}. 

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5 Conclusion

As has been comprehensively examined by Hank Nelson, claims linking the Kokoda battles in particular to national identity have come to gain a popular credence owing to the powerful messages that have been espoused by politicians, journalists, popular writers and some historians in recent times. Such efforts have sought to reposition symbols of nationhood closer in time and space to the Australian continent, and in a continuity from Anzac Cove, through the Second World War, down to the present. However, many of the claims concerning the Japanese in the battles for Kokoda, but also for the wider New Guinea campaigns, reflect an academic historiography in military history in Australia that has not made sufficient use of the available source material in translation, let alone original Japanese language material. Popular authors, commentators and the media have been able to make outrageous statements in support of nationalistic claims precisely because they have not been brought to task by military historians, many of whom are guilty of similar tendencies.

If the Anzac and digger tradition are central to the mythology of the Australian people, as argued by Graham Seal and others, they are being infused with an increasingly persuasive force realigning them to the Second World War and to the Australian region. While time will tell how pervasive and mainstream this force becomes, the implicit emphasis on the threat facing Australia during the war contained within this movement has the further consequence of affirming a specific collective identity. It was our land, our people, and our ideals which were threatened by the Japanese in 1942. Contemporary affirmation of "our" collective identity through such commemoration assumes and reinforces "their" identity — in the past and the present. The shadow of a past threat emerges and merges with a threat in the present, and impacts on imaginings of the future.

The building of national myth is well suited to a story of extremes: the harshest environment, the strongest adversary, insurmountable odds, and dire consequences for failure. This is precisely the ethos and domain of writers like Brune and FitzSimons. Eric Hobsbawm commented that historians "must resist the formation of national, ethnic and other myths, as they are being formed". The prime reason is that fundamental nationalisms are not conducive to tolerance, reconciliation and diversity — there is no invitation on Battle for Australia day to the Japanese Ambassador to commemorate and mourn the Australian dead, or the Japanese dead for that matter. Osmar White, a first-hand observer of the Kokoda campaign, was one who was able to see beyond a narrow nationalistic gaze to ponder "if all men were creatures of the spirit, eternal and indestructible as the stars". In today's world such sentiments seem, sadly, few and far between.

[Notes]
(1) Peter Brune, Bastard of a place: the Australians in Papua (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p.3.
(2) Brune, Bastard of a place, p.4.
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(4) Brune, Bastard of a place, pp.4-5.
(5) These are, in order of publication: Lionel Wigmore, The Japanese thrust (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957); Dudley McCarthy, South West Pacific Area first year (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1959); David Dexter, The New Guinea offensives (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961); and Gavin Long, The final campaigns (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1963).
(6) AWM67 11/3 (Records of Gavin Long).
(9) "Tanaka Hiromi, "Japanese historical sources after the war", Australia-Japan Research Project website (www.awm.gov.au/ajrp); and Series AWM55 and AWM56, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
(10) McCarthy, South West Pacific Area first year, p.144.
(11) McCarthy, South West Pacific Area first year, p.135.
(13) Pelvin, "Australian Pacific War unit histories".
(18) Brune, Bastard of a place.
(21) Ballantine, "Reviving our history".
(24) This issue is discussed in Stanley, "They're (not) coming south"; and Henry Frei, Japan's southward advance and Australia: from the sixteenth century to World War II (Maryborough: Melbourne University Press, 1991).
(28) Peter FitzSimons, Kokoda (Sydney: Hodder, 2004).