

26 Battalion Association Victorian Branch

26 AUST. INF. BN (AIF) "NEVER UNPREPARED"

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NEWSLETTER

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Above: Peter Millynn and Chief of Security, Ken at Yamamoto's plane in Bougainville.

Welcome to
Newsletter No. 23

WELCOME to the latest issue of
26 Battalion Association,
Newsletter.

Our main feature writer in this
Newsletter is Peter Millynn
who has recently returned from
a trip to Bougainville. During his
time there he included a
'pilgrimage', where he traced
the footsteps of his uncle, Lance
Corporal Paul Maher.

Also we have **Laurie Hill's** first
hand experience of sloshing
through the muddy swamps of
the Soraken Plantation during the
War.

You may remember that Laurie
wrote an award winning article to
the Australian Defence Force
Journal as reproduced in our
Newsletter 18 (April 2011)

"Objective Soraken Peninsula"

On Page xii of the official
book *Never Unprepared* there
are some names missing from the

1939 Original Officers photo
that can now be identified,
thanks to an email from
Genevieve I sbell. The complete
caption can be found on the
back page of this Newsletter.

Genevieve's father was Major
Alan Spence and Bernard
Callinan was his 2IC in 2/2nd
Independent Company. When
Spence became Commander of
Sparrow Force in May 1942,
Callinan took over the 2/2nd.

Colin Block, Editor

Pilgrimage to Soraken Peninsula

By PETER MILLYNN

FOR some it's Gallipoli or Kokoda. I understand and respect the mythic stature of both.

My wife's grandfather **Frank Pierce** was with the 10th Btn in the first wave at the landing on the 25th of April at Gallipoli. He was wounded and evacuated to Egypt on the 26th April. She is keen to make a pilgrimage to Gallipoli for the 100th anniversary next year.

In 2007 I spent a great deal of time assisting a group of my ex-students from the *Australian Film Television and Radio School* in the development and production of the feature film *Kokoda* and in producing the making of a feature that accompanied the DVD release.

For me though there has always been a personal, if slightly obscure, grail of Australian Military History ... Soraken Peninsula, Bougainville.

My uncle **Paul Maher** (NX105437) was a Bren Gunner with 7 platoon *A Coy 26th Battalion*.

He was much more than some distant relative to me. When I was a child he would appear on the doorstep on his holidays from Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory, a stockman from his Cuban heeled RM Williams boots to his Akubra Stetson with his beaming matinee idol smile and swag over his shoulder. Quite a sight in suburban Sydney. By the time my Dad died when I was 20 Paul had moved to the city due to health issues and was always there for me as a friend, trusted confidant and father figure. I had only the briefest of glimpses into his experiences

during the war in a short piece he wrote for Dispatch that later was included in the 26th Btn unit history *Never Unprepared* by Norm Turrell.

The piece dealt with an action at Soraken Plantation in March 1945. To a pampered and privileged youth living an easy life in Sydney this was another world. Paul would sometimes reluctantly chat about Bougainville but how could I hope to understand?

Fast forward to earlier this year. I have a film project set in PNG that requires me to meet with various public servants in Moresby.

My mate **Dave Lornie** who I played in a band with in the late 80's is now a journalist with *Post Courier*, PNG's major newspaper. He is the author of the book I'm looking to film and offers to facilitate the meetings so I travel to Moresby in June of this year.

Dave is the Bougainville Bureau Chief for the *Post Courier* so when things have been attended to in Moresby we travel to where he lives with his Bougainvillian wife and kids in Buka, Bougainville.

Using the unit diaries which the Australian War Memorial now has made available online I had located pretty much the exact position of the action at Soraken Peninsula that is described in Paul's published account. I was also able to pin point the sites of the amphibious landings in that area.

Soraken Peninsula is not readily accessible by vehicle. It's possible but complicated and will probably take two days. Apparently two days in

Peter Millynn gains a new perspective of the 26th Battalion after his recent trip to Bougainville.



PNG can in fact mean anything up to a week. I have a lot that I want to fit into this trip so I need some degree of certainty. Studying the map further reveals that from Buka the most direct access to Soraken peninsula is by water. We approach one of many 4mtr open boat operators who ferry folk across the passage between Buka and the main South Island and agree on a price, ninety Kina or roughly forty Australian dollars.

Although it's broad daylight and we are aboard a very different craft it is not too much of a stretch to imagine approaching these beaches in a landing craft at first light with their short steep stretch of black granite volcanic sand and a wall of jungle only meters from the shore. Visibility ashore is no more than two meters beyond the sand. There is no way to penetrate the jungle's veil except by slashing through it using the ubiquitous bush knives carried by everyone on the island over the age of five.

The plantation has fallen into disrepair many years ago and the towering coconut palms are covered in blankets of clinging green creepers. The jungle has taken over between them making moving about difficult. There are no discernible tracks.

At the site of the *A Company* landing the shoreline is

bizarrely speckled with cattle; Brahman-cross cattle. Dave who has lived in PNG for 12 years and speaks fluent Pidgin asks our boat skipper about the cows. Apparently they are the remnants of some long forgotten, well meaning but failed aid program. I'm to see numerous similar examples in my time on the island.

place us near the site of the action at Soraken Plantation that Paul described.

Anyway you slice it we are close to the location. Certainly closer than anyone else has been intentionally since March 1945. It's only around 9.45am but the heat is already close and oppressive. The ground underfoot is damp and cloying.

mountains and the heat and humidity fills me with admiration for men who were able to not only deal with these conditions but to fight and defeat a determined and often fanatical foe. I can't believe that I am in the very place that I has fascinated me for so long. It is a sacred place among many on the Island.

Over the next four days we travel around most of Bougainville and the men of the 26th are never far from my mind. The National Highway ... a D grade dirt and gravel road with more holes than an echidna's pyjamas ... runs down the east coast. We pass the Numa River and the Numa Numa Trail. The trail is being upgraded but is at the moment impassable. It's also the only road into Torikina. We continue down the East coast toward Arawa, a mining town just north of Kieta that serviced the now abandoned Panguna Mine. After staying overnight in Arawa we take our chances and head out to Morgan's Corner where the Bougainville Revolutionary Army have had a roadblock and outpost since the start of the crisis in 1990. Up until a couple of years ago this was an armed checkpoint. I am assured that their weapons are in storage and that our travelling companion and security chief Ken who is a local rascal and son of a BRA commander will do the talking. The fact that Ken is constantly chewing beetle-nut and drinking cans of warm SP lager does nothing for my confidence.

At the roadblock Dave is OK because he is married to a Siwai and the newspaper already pay an access fee but I must pay an access tax for foreigners. This



Dave rides with the 'security' team on the PMV on the Buin Rd between Torikina and Buin

We head north round the point to the site of the final pincer movement on the Japanese HQ. There are what appear to be the remnants of the plantation's post war infrastructure including concrete foundations, fuel tanks and a coral and concrete jetty pointing to the North like a massive compass needle.

We leave the boat and our skipper and make our way on foot south to the grid reference given in the unit diary. The diary states clearly that maps were reissued around this time and that all of the maps are hopelessly inaccurate. I have superimposed these inaccurate maps over the current survey maps and can only hope that there is enough in common to

When we stop for a breather everything stops. The sucking quiet is deafening. A spoonbill flies above us and its wings churn the fetid air. Maybe we are only somewhere near the location of the action but the ghosts are all around us. I feel completely alone but strangely surrounded.

I pause and take a moment to remember all the men of the 26th Btn. Those who were killed in action, those who have died since and those precious few who remain. Dave senses the import of the moment to me and is also silent. It crosses my mind to say something but nothing comes. What words could adequately express the respect that I feel? The ever present reality of the jungle, the

is determined to be K200 ... about A\$80 ... but they do issue me a receipt.

The roads are appalling and a testament to the reliability and durability of the ubiquitous Toyota Landcruisers that act as the only form of public transport on the island. The river crossings north of Kieta have been upgraded in the past year or so by a Japanese aid project that supplied men, materials and expertise to literally build bridges. Probably the best approach to foreign aid after some of the horror stories that I heard of cash aid funding not being applied where it was intended. Corruption is endemic and expected.

I see a few crumbling displays of WW2 ordinance as memorials. Mostly Japanese equipment. Tanks, small artillery pieces, large coastal/ naval guns and even a Zero on a plinth. I can't tell by whom, why or when these were established as the bronze plaques were removed during the crisis for scrap. While I did see one Japanese memorial on Sohano Island I was devastated by the lack of any memorial to Australian or for that matter American troops.

We travel past Panguna mine where, twenty-five years after the mine ceased operation, the river that flows through the tailings dump runs green and is full of heavy metals and sulphates. Past the mind bogglingly massive mine we pull up at the summit of a mountain surrounded by fog. But it's not fog. We are in the clouds. The mountains are precipice like clad in a thick cloak of jungle and vine. We drive on through Siwai country toward Buin. We stop at a

village where Ken tells me the inquisitive swarm of kids have probably never seen a white man. There are very few tourists and those who do come mostly can't pass the roadblock through to Panguna. Maybe a



*Japanese War Memorial on
Sohano Island*

dozen white men have stopped here since 1989.

We make Buin in time to check in to a basic but clean local lodge. A local contact of Dave's takes us 10 kms south to Kango Beach where he wants to build a resort. We trudge up the almost vertical hill overlooking the ocean and out to the Solomon Islands. Our guide points out a hole in the side of the hill that is one of the entrances to a system of tunnels that links the numerous concrete Japanese bunkers that pock mark the mountain behind the beach. The beach itself is punctuated by a half dozen remarkably well preserved concrete bunkers. The beachfront has a couple of Japanese naval artillery pieces mounted overlooking the wharf.

Driving back to Buin I notice a washing line in a front yard strung between a bush pole and

a rusting Japanese anti aircraft gun.

We get an early start the next morning driving half an hour north on the Buin Road. Our driver knows who he's looking for and spots Matthew by the roadside. Matthew is the local traditional landowner. After a brief negotiation ... this is not a bartering culture ... we agree to pay Matthew the K250 each he asks for to be escorted to a wrecked plane about an hours trek into the bush. The plane is a Japanese Betty bomber that was shot down carrying Yamamoto, the architect of Pearl Harbour and the Japanese commander in the Pacific. The track is quite obviously rarely used and is very overgrown. Visibility into the jungle is maybe a meter beyond the track. Matthew makes good use of his machete wielding it like some demented manual whiper-snipper. Tiny flecks of leaves and foliage momentarily hang in the air then stick to my sweat encrusted forearms. We cross waist deep streams and my boots are squelching like liquid filled piano accordions. How would you progress stealthfully with water filled boots? I am constantly aware that these conditions were an everyday challenge to the men of the 26th and I try to imagine how one would move along the slippery, root entwined track while looking out for an ambush. Every turn of the track would present a world of potential danger to an Australian patrol.

Sure enough after a little over an hour we break into a small clearing filled with the overgrown fuselage and engines of a large plane. The aluminium of the airframe and panels is both corroded and



The traditional land owners at Yamamoto's plane

perfectly preserved. Some parts are twisted and melted alloy yet others like the rear machine gun mount are in almost perfect condition. I pick up a piece of metal glinting in the kunai at my feet. It is clearly the tuning potentiometer of the aircraft's radio. Did this very device convey the last ditch desperate SOS to the Japanese command as the plane plunged headlong into the jungle? Whatever, part of a momentous event in the Pacific war is in my hands. I place it in the fuselage of the plane.

Our local guides and Ken appear no worse for wear but Dave and I are wringing wet and gasping for breath. All I am carrying is probably fifteen extra kilos of good living around my waist. I try to imagine having to carry rations, ammunition and a .303 let alone a Bren Gun.

Matthew puts his bush-knife to good use clearing the wreckage of vines and creepers. Dave takes some pics intended for the cover of a future edition of the *Post Courier* and I snap a few tourist shots. When quizzed Matthew tells us that he brings people here about six times a year and that most are, understandably, Japanese. Six months ago the Japanese

Ambassador was trucked out in a Landcruiser. Yesterday a western couple turned up unannounced and he sent them packing. It's very much who you know.

Over the next hour we walk back to the Buin road and call our lift. Bizarrely most of the island has better mobile

phone coverage than rural NSW thanks to a series of towers high in the mountains. Most locals seem to have but two possessions. Their bush knife and a mobile phone.

Our last day is taken up travelling from Buin back to Buka. Seven hours in the back of a Landcruiser perched on a slab of 7x2 hardwood on dirt roads with wet river crossings up to Kieta is never going to catch on as any kind of even extreme tourism. My ever-expanding butt is bruised and battered. By the time we reach the Buka passage crossing I'm pretty much done for. We manage to get to the markets where we buy sweet potatoes, choko shoots, coconuts and a massive red emperor fish. Dave's wife turns these into a feast fit for a king. We are tired but content that we have managed to see most of what we set out to see.

Dave is my good and trusted friend. Sure we were in a band together and have been mates for the best part of thirty years and I trust him completely. I could not have made this trip without him. I would do anything that was within my power for Dave. He is my true friend. What more would men who had fought together feel

for each other?

I fly out the next day Buka to Moresby, change for Moresby to Brisbane, change for Brisbane to Newcastle then an hours drive to our farm in the Hunter. Fifteen hours from Buka to my home.

For me the Soraken Peninsula is no longer words on a page. For me the efforts of the men of the 26th are no longer just amorphous tales of daring do. I have seen the almost vertical mountains that they scaled. I have been to the long green shore of Soraken Plantation where they landed at dawn. I have seen and trekked through the jungle that they patrolled. I have experienced the heat and the humidity that they endured. I did all of this as a pampered tourist. I did all of this without an unseen fanatical enemy intent on my demise. But I have done these things. I have been to these places. I did them out of respect for every man in the 26th. I did them for my beloved Uncle Paul. Some things should never be forgotten.

Lest we forget. Indeed.

Japanese Betty Bomber



Two Mitsubishi 'Betty' Bombers would carry Yamamoto and his general staff on their tour of the Japanese commands in the South Pacific.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Vengeance

Dealing with the swaps of Soraken Peninsula



IN 2004
Laurie Hill
told the
*Australians
At War Film
Archive*:

“WE were advancing through the area to get further north to where Soraken Peninsula was, but this swamp area made it difficult to get there quickly, because we had to try and go around or through.

There were parts of it that were too deep for us to go through and, as I said, it wasn't a very good spot because it was open area where the Japs were, and the Japs could be sitting in amongst the jungle and pick you off. So you had to either

skirt around it or take a chance and go through, so it wasn't the easiest part of the job.

A few times we came under attack, but we were lucky enough to get away without any casualties that I can remember in my platoon. The other [platoons] may have suffered. [They] might have, because they had different ways of reaching where they wanted to go.

Of a night time you would try and get around to the edge where there might be a bit of higher ground and set up a perimeter there for the night.

But I can't remember being really attacked in the night time

in that area, but as I said, it was a difficult area.

But when we got out of that area we came to a creek. The running noise of the creek was very helpful to us because when you're going through that swamp

you're going through mud and you're up to your ankle or calves in mud and that's sloshing and making a noise, but walking down the creek with the rush of the water the enemy wouldn't be able to hear us.”

“ ... walking down the creek with the rush of the water the enemy wouldn't be able to hear us.

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Source:

www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/

Original Officers of the 26th Battalion and Attached Officers, 1939



Front Row—Lieut. S. C. Wharton, Lieut. E. G. Murray, M.M., Lieut. F. Graham, Lieut. B. W. Carroll, Capt. L. G. Tansing, Lieut-Col. H. W. Murray, V.C., C.M.G., D.S.O., D.C.M., Capt. H. H. Morrell, M.C., Lieut. A. Skinner, D.O.M., M.M., Lieut. A. H. Hart, Lieut. J. Kennedy, Capt. S. E. McKewen.

Second Row—Lieut. K. W. Willis, Lieut. C. C. Kelly, Lieut. J. T. Kellman, Lieut. F. L. Bode, Lieut. C. B. Reid, Lieut. J. D. Louill, Lieut. W. W. Cobb, Lieut. A. Spence, Lieut. E. M. C. Steddy, Lieut. S. O. Strange.

Back Row—Lieut. M. R. Stuart, Lieut. D. R. Milson, Lieut. L. A. Wall, Lieut. W. H. Anning, Lieut. R. A. Yates, Lieut. A. C. M. Taylor, Lieut. R. A. Cowley, Lieut. A. V. Meilefent, Lieut. S. G. Searler, Lieut. J. A. Gaiter, Lieut. A. C. Stewart.

Absent—Lieut. J. Garden Collins, Lieut. T. O. Irwin.

DON J. PEINIGER, Photographer
TOWNSVILLE