

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSIONS

*T*hroughout their service, whenever the strain and intense physical demands of the front were relaxed, soldiers reflected on the loss of dead friends. In New Guinea, for instance, a lieutenant wrote: 'I am suffering from reaction today, even tho' it is over three weeks since I have fired a shot in anger. The oppressive heat, our present inaction and restless nights, gives one too much time to think – of home, of those we knew so well and liked so much who copped it.'¹ Frank Rolleston recalls that only with the ending of the fighting at Buna did he have time to comprehend fully that two of his best friends had 'ended their life on this earth'.²

Whereas a laconic, masculine veneer covered relations between living mates, those whose friends were killed tended to drop their reticence when talking of the dead, and it is evident that many shared a Tobruk diarist's lament that 'it is the worst part of the war seeing your pals go down'. One soldier's struggle to cope with the deaths of close friends emerges in a note written from the Middle East: '... Don was a great pal of mine, now all the other pals are gone so I don't intend to make any more'.³ Another touching effort to deal with death is recorded in Jack Craig's diary entry, written a week after El Alamein: 'Bought a case of beer and had a good session with Cobber. Yarning of our experiences and those that "bought" it an never came through the battle and finally singing our heads off to blot out the sorrow of loosing our mates'.⁴

That sorrow could only temporarily be blotted out. In the aftermath of battle, sometimes months later, men did find some way of carrying on, some equanimity. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the conclusion reached by John Lovegrove when, two weeks after the battle of El Alamein, he recalled the bloody first night of the fighting:

I am totally shattered and could weep as I look back now and feel just so strongly for my men . . . We had virtually all been together since enlistment 2½ years ago and entwined with a bond of respect and comradeship that mere words can't adequately describe – every bit as strong as a family 'blood' relationship and the horror of that night will live with those of us who survived for the remainder of our days . . .⁵

Just as relaxation of the stress of an individual battle or campaign was followed by thoughts of the dead, so too was the end of the war. The initial reaction to news of the Japanese surrender was usually relief: at having survived the war, at being able to sleep at ease and to get out of one's muddy hole in the ground – in short at no longer being under threat of sudden, violent death. Various sources report that men's thoughts soon turned to those who had not survived, and one can well imagine that ruminations such as the following, reported by Allan Jones to be a typical post-battle reflection, had doubled significance on and after 15 August 1945: 'There seemed no logic in destiny, and what survivor does not ponder the question of why he still lives, and others do not?'⁶ If this was a common reaction, it seems likely that Australian front-line veterans, while being happy on leaving the army and the war, usually emerged from the experience with a more serious outlook, and for some, an improved ability to 'take' the knocks of civilian life.

In the postwar period, the attitude of the combat veteran towards his war presumably developed in much the same way as those of his counterparts in other armies. Time probably softened or erased many bad memories, as it had done even during the war, and strengthened recollections of the joy taken in the simple pleasures that had relieved the monotony and strain of service.

Yet nostalgia probably has strict limits for most veterans. Even if they do not remember their wartime anxiety to leave both front and camp for ever, few would forget their own frightening brushes with

prospective death, and still fewer would forget the actual and often horrible deaths of friends. These would not be forgotten, because wartime friendship is what Australian ex-soldiers, like all veterans, remember most fondly. The efforts of organized veterans to glorify their dead mates in the name of the war's morally upright purpose suggest that those friends are still intimately associated with wartime memories, and thus that not all such memories are jolly and sanitized. One can also reasonably assume that after the war, as in it, Australian veterans saw in their mates' violent deaths ineradicable evidence of war's tragic nature. If so, it is ironic that while living mates have, inevitably, drifted from contact with each other since 1945, those killed in the war exert some influence from the grave.

A reading of Australian soldiers' wartime writings, and of the supplementary evidence, leaves impressions that can be summarized under five main headings.

AUSTRALIANS UNDER STRESS

Australian combat soldiers were under enormous strain both in and behind the front line. Each campaign brought participants to the limits of their physical endurance. It also brought to the fore a constant and heightened fear of death. Australians were not fearless, and some of them became unable to cope with their terror of artillery or aerial bombardment, the prospect of ambush or other chilling features of this war. The vast majority of Australian soldiers did not 'crack', largely because of the authorities' concern that units be relieved before most men reached breaking point. Few Australians in the line, however, were under any illusions that the conditions at the front had the potential to break them all.

Beyond the firing line, Australians were disquieted and angered by the inefficient organization of their lives. The boredom of army camps was so stressful that men soon became willing to exchange it for the front-line ordeal which they had recently been desperate to leave. They were also frustrated by callous or indifferent treatment from their seemingly all-powerful superiors. The privileges of those superiors rankled, as did the injustice of the supposed facts that the dishonest and cowardly soldiers behind the lines got the best of the military life, and that the best of the civilian life fell to the even more execrable villains who had not gone to war.

THE DISCIPLINED AUSTRALIAN

Australian soldiers entered the war with a reputation for indiscipline. The reputation lived on, but the reality did not justify its survival. For the Australian 'took' the ill-feeling and strain created by his life in and out of the line. Fear of punishment and a willingness to accept the extraordinary conditions of wartime were the main reasons. If on rare occasions the soldier defied authority, it was usually by overextending his precious leave, rather than misbehaving in camp, where his C.O. ruled with a firm hand. Statistical and anecdotal evidence does not support the myth that the typical Australian soldier was a larrikin, or that the minority of undisciplined men in the ranks made effective soldiers. The digger's anger and frustration were expressed not in disobedience, but in grumbling. However, he also tried to do something positive to overcome the terror of the front and the barrenness and monotony of life in camp and in transit.

MATESHIP: SALVATION AND DAMNATION

The Australian soldier maintained precious communications with the outside world, but these were tenuous. His chief source of comfort and enjoyment in the army lay in conversations and experiences shared with his friends.

The mateship found in Australian front-line units was a wonderful thing: it saved lives, it gave lives purpose, and it encouraged men to contribute to winning the war. Mateship and the associated considerations of self-esteem were the elements of a sense of honour, which ensured that most soldiers persevered in their ordeal to the very limits of their strength, patience and even sanity. However, the restricted scope of this mateship also hurt men who craved it and were prepared to risk death at the front: especially reinforcements and militiamen. Reinforcements who in their first campaign survived the enemy's attentions and their fellow soldiers' inattention were usually accepted as mates. However, A.I.F. fighting soldiers never considered their C.M.F. counterparts as equals, and thus never as true comrades or brothers-in-arms. Consequently, the comradeship unique to front-line soldiers, and known in every army, was peculiarly and sadly divided in the Australian Military Forces of World War II.

A few soldier-writers expressed the unrealistic hope that the troops' special mateship would play a role in peacetime Australia, and

after the war veterans did try to recapture or maintain that feeling in unit associations or the R.S.S.A.I.L.A. (later R.S.L.).⁷ Yet when they left the army, soldiers knew that they were returning to face society alone, as individuals.

THE PRIMACY OF MISERY

One postwar survey offers an alternative to the negative image of soldiering presented here. John Barrett suggests that the great majority of Australian soldiers (considered as a group undifferentiated by base or front-line status) either tolerated or enjoyed most features of the military life.⁸ That most men in combat units tolerated the life, albeit with a large amount of complaining, is consistent with the wartime writings. However, one senses that in many cases the enjoyment has grown since the war, just as it has for the soldiers of other nations. During the war, positive remarks about Australian army life seem to have been unusual, and favourable comments about 'the army' still less common. Men expressed pride in the qualities and achievements of Australian soldiers and their units, and indeed of the A.I.F. and C.M.F., but not in those of the army itself.

Apart from the petty harassments, the frustrations and the calousness that Australian soldiers suffered like men of other armies, reasons for disliking their army existed within contemporary Australian life and traditions. There was, for instance, a traditional antipathy towards armed authority: Gammage considers 'an endemic dislike of the military' to have been chiefly responsible for Australian indiscipline in World War I.⁹ This animosity was presumably greater in the army of 1939-45, which, unlike that of 1914-18, contained some unwilling conscripts.

There is also the Australian tradition, already mentioned, which allows one to talk of an ingrained 'impudence and science of bucking the system'. Added to a tendency for Australians of the 1930s and 1940s to distrust big organizations, these factors leave little wonder that where 'the army' was concerned, Australian front-line soldiers tended to say something unpleasant or nothing at all.¹⁰

For combat soldiers, especially, the redeeming features of the military life were considered insufficient compensation for its drawbacks. 'The great adventure' for which many had signed up soon palled, or proved itself illusory or horrible. In a sense the soldiers' experience was an adventure - 'We've starved and thirsted and have gone through

experiences such as I thought existed only in fiction', wrote an exhausted survivor of a Malayan operation – but it was an adventure exciting and enjoyable only to non-participants, such as readers of fiction (or history).¹¹ Travel also proved to be less rewarding than Australians might have expected: most found little to admire in the places they visited, and could not wait to get home.

Numerous Australians did see some redeeming features in their service. They felt that they gained in maturity, and particularly in self-confidence and knowledge of human nature. Yet many of those who obtained such benefits were killed in the process.¹² The chief insight gained by Australian fighting soldiers was that war, far from benefiting those who waged it, was blindly destructive and wasteful.

The mateship, which mitigated that waste, was also at the heart of the 'maturing' process; men grew in their ability to relate to others. Yet inspiring and sustaining as it obviously was, wartime comradeship – the sharing of misery – was not enough. Even this powerful positive feeling was generally weaker than the negative emotions aroused by the 'unnatural life'. Nearly all who experienced service in a front-line unit had never regarded it as more than a temporary engagement, and once engaged, they soon wanted it to end. The passions aroused amongst soldiers by the matter of leave entitlements reflected dissatisfaction with army life. Even more telling evidence of the primacy of misery over mateship were the large discharge rates that applied throughout the war and the enthusiasm with which veterans embraced the possibility of early release in 1945.

One regimental historian makes an illuminating comment in his discussion of the end of the war: 'From the moment they had known that the fighting was indeed over, there had been one question on every man's lips. It was not, "When can we go home?" but "When can I go home?"'¹³ Obviously many had asked that personal question long before the war's end, but this is a neat illustration of the fact that, as soon as their sense of propriety allowed it, Australians were keen to return to civilian individualism and to leave behind the herd existence that was army life.

THE HEROISM OF THE FRONT-LINE SOLDIER

The fact that Australian front-line troops were scared in battle does not detract from their military achievements. The magnitude of the Aus-

tralian's effort in winning the respect of his opponents on every battlefield is actually enhanced by the fact that he succeeded despite his trepidation: with fear rather than without it. The willingness and determination of Australians to face and endure their ordeal – to 'take it' – were remarkable by any measure. This uplifting fact must not be forgotten in any discussion of the negative aspects of their service.

An appropriate conclusion on the Australian front-line soldier's experience is the following unforgettable tribute to his courage. It was written by a chaplain working among the sick and wounded during the fighting on the Papuan beachheads, which involved more Australian troops than any other campaign:

Although I find this [work] a great strain I am grateful for the opportunity of serving these men. I do not believe there has ever been a campaign when men have suffered, hardship, privation and incredible difficulties as in this one. To see these men arrive here wounded and ill from terrible tropical diseases, absolutely exhausted, clothes in tatters and filthy, long matted hair and beards, without a wash for days, having lain in mud and slush, fighting a desperate cruel foe they could not see, emaciated through having been weeks in the jungle, wracked with malaria and prostrated by scrub typhus, has made me feel that nothing is too good for them. No description of their incredible sufferings could possibly be an exaggeration . . . I have seen so much suffering and sorrow here that more than ever before I have realised the tragedy of war and the heroism of our men.¹⁴