

Lababia Ridge - New Guinea 1943

A memento of members of 11 platoon B Company 2/6 Battalion AIF by Tony James

A Japanese Invasion Money note for Oceania, denomination one shilling, condition circulated with some singeing on one end. Not something a banknote collector would go out of his way to obtain or hold on to. However, when turning over the note I found a list of names written in ink, beginning with an officer with the rank of lieutenant, followed by non commissioned officers and a list of privates. What is this, just a list of names? A search of the WWII Nominal Roll gave me a common thread; all those listed were members of the 2nd/6th Battalion AIF and all served in New Guinea during 1943.

2/6th Battalion

It is amazing how much information is now available on line. Not just Google and Wikipedia, but the National Archives of Australia and the Australian War Memorial both have records and books that have been digitalised, many are available for download for free. The War Diary of 2/6th Battalion for the month of June 1943 and the Official History of Australia in WWII are there for the viewing and the world of the jungles and mountains of New Guinea open up 68 years on, with unexpected detail.

The 2/6th Battalion was raised in Melbourne at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds on October 25 1939. At the time Coles store were running a popular advertising campaign with the slogan- "Nothing over 2/6d," so the 6th Battalion adopted the motto "Nothing over us."

After training at Puckapunyal, the unit left for the Middle East in April 1940 and

fought in campaigns in Libya, Greece and Crete before returning to Australia in 1942 to meet the threat of Japanese invasion. As part of 17 Brigade, the 2/6th was sent to New Guinea in January 1943 under the command of Brigadier Frederick G. Wood DSO. It moved from Milne Bay to Port Moresby and was the first battalion to arrive in Wau, on 13th January. Operation Postern was the name given to the offensive against Lae beginning with airborne landings at Nadzab in the west and amphibious operations to the east. Under orders dated 31st of May, the Battalion replaced the 2/7th in the Mubo area on the 2nd of June, their enemy being the Japanese 66th Infantry Regiment less 3 battalions.

Out of 150 Australians on Lababia Ridge 11 were killed and 12 wounded in the

action. The initial Australian force was composed of D Company plus 11 Platoon, plus a Tank Attack Platoon, who were attacked by two Japanese battalions, a total of 1,500 troops, who lost 41 killed and 131 wounded. The Unit history notes that "the Lababia action was one of the most important in which troops of the Battalion took part." The defeat of the Japanese, who had already decided that there was no opposition to their advance according to documents recovered earlier, meant that the next part of Operation Postern could go ahead, and that for the first time in the fighting of the campaign, that the Australians had scored a notable success.

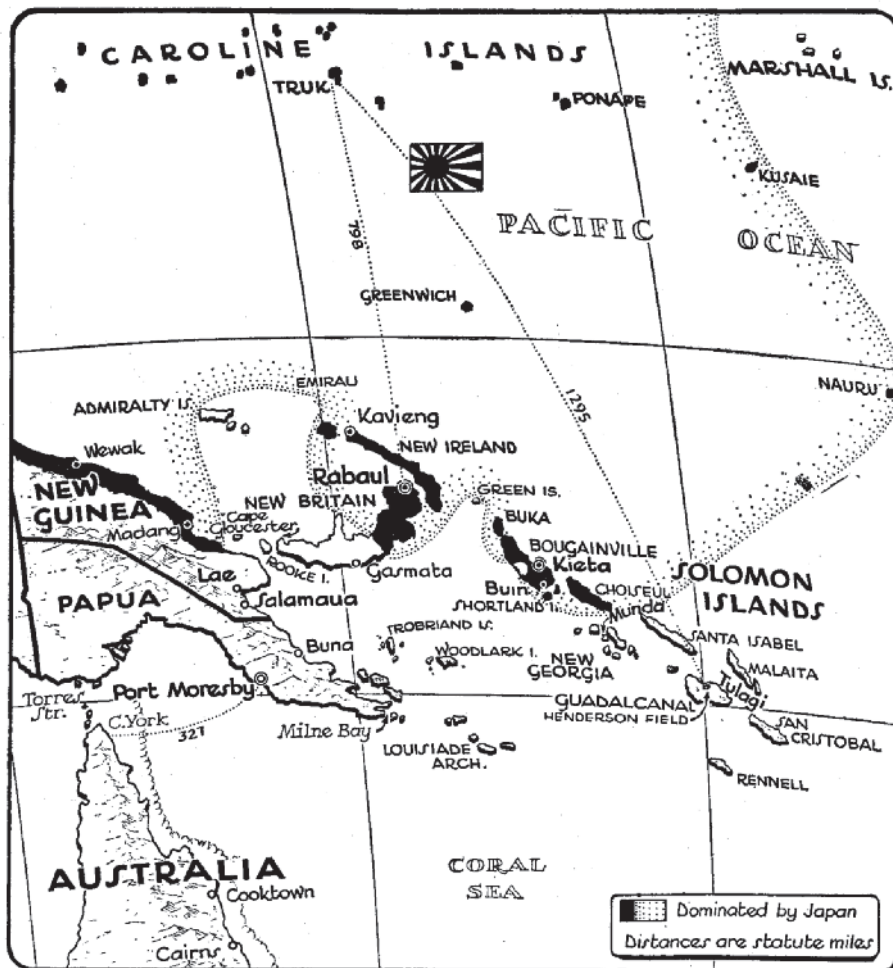
The 16 names listed on the back of the note were for the most part members of 11 Platoon and my curiosity was sufficiently



Front: Japanese Invasion Money, Oceania, One shilling, Pick 2a.



Back: Japanese Invasion Money, Oceania, One shilling, Pick 2a with the names of 11 Platoon members.



Map of New Guinea after the Wau and Salamaua campaign.

aroused to find out all I could about them. The resulting story of the action and heroism is considerably more important than what I first expected!

Lieutenant E.G. Exton MC

Edward (Ted) George Exton born Boston, England in 1919, enlisted in the Militia in 1940 joined the 41st Infantry Battalion, and was promoted Lieutenant in April 1942. He transferred to the Australian Imperial Force in July of that year and qualified as a Small Arms Instructor in November, prior to being posted to New Guinea at the end of the month. He joined 2/6th Battalion and took charge of 11 Platoon.

Malaria caused his return to Australia in September 1943. His military record shows he was a Captain at Reception and Leave Section NSW in January 1945. Posted to 65th Battalion, he joined the British Occu-

pation Forces Kure, Japan, in March 1947. Returning to Australia in 1951, he was posted to the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn, becoming Adjutant of the 2nd Infantry Battalion in December 1952. He moved to the 14th National Service Training Battalion in May 1953 and 15th Battalion in 1954. He was promoted to the rank of Major in June 1960, and he joined the 2nd Royal NSW Regiment three months later. Further postings followed, to the Army Air Support Unit and 12th Cadet Battalion before he retired in January 1974 as a Lieutenant Colonel. He passed away on January 30 1992.

Ted Exton was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry 21/22nd June 1943 during the Defence of Lababia against repeated Banzai attacks, and his heroism is described in the Official History of Australia in the war of 1939-1945, which records that:



Pictures of New Guinea showing the ridge country where 2/6th Battalion fought.



Military Cross of GV era similar to that awarded to Lt Ted Exton 2/6th Battalion

"The Japanese continued to attack Lt. Roach's, Sgt. Hedderman's and Lt. Exton's positions throughout the late afternoon, and, although suffering heavy casualties, it seemed that they might break through Exton's position where their shouting and determined attacks appeared to unnerve one post. Lieutenant Exton and Corporal Martin ran forward and rallied the men, who, encouraged by their example, waited until the enemy was within 30 yards before firing..."

In the evening another company reached the ridge and reinforced Roach and Exton's platoons. The next morning the Japanese attempted to outflank the Australians who responded by "sniping at those enemy who climbed trees and fired down into the Australian weapon pits, however they reckoned without Exton being a crack shot. Dexter (Captain Dexter company commander) was telephoning Exton's platoon sergeant who said suddenly: "just a minute - there's a Nip getting up a tree about 100 yards away - Exton's going to have a shot - he's got him and he's bouncing"

Sergeant R. E. Walsh

Reginald Edward Walsh enlisted at Caulfield on July 2 1940 and was posted to 2/5th Battalion. He embarked for the Middle East in February 1941 and upon arrival at the Suez base was posted to 2/6th Battalion, with which he served during the operations in Greece. With other members of the battalion he went to New Guinea in October 1942 and was promoted to Lance



Military Medal of the type awarded to Corporal Gary Martin for the Defence of Lababia Ridge

Corporal the following January and then Corporal and Acting Sergeant on six weeks later. Following the Wau and Lababia actions he returned to Australia in September 1943 and to another posting in June 1944. Five months later he rejoined the 17th Brigade which was at Aitape, serving with the Brigade until he returned to Australia in September 1945 and his discharge.

Corporal G. Martin MM

Gary Martin, farmer, of Williamstown Victoria, enlisted in the AIF on March 13 1940 at Royal Park, Melbourne. Joining the 2/6th Battalion he fought through the North Africa campaigns of Tobruk, Bardia and Benghazi as well as Greece and was promoted to Corporal upon his return to Australia prior to going to New Guinea in October 1942.

He was awarded the Military Medal for his part in the Defence of Lababia, the citation reading:

"On 21 June 43 at Lababia Ridge, Mubo area, the enemy heavily attacked Cpl Martin's section, part of 12 Platoon B Company (L/Sgt Hedderman's platoon - later Lt Hedderman DCM, MM). Their shouting and obvious force tended to make his men jumpy and, under heavy fire, Cpl Martin ran from post to post to encourage his men and succeeded in steadying them so that their main fire was held until the enemy

was within 30 yards, and in a comparatively open area with clear lanes of fire. The section inflicted heavy casualties, but the number of the enemy succeeded in digging in about 40 yards from the post.

At dusk Cpl Martin led a small patrol which crept forward to the enemy pits. Hurling grenades into the nearer pits he rushed them killing some of the enemy and forcing the remainder to withdraw. Throughout the whole period of the action Cpl Martin behaved magnificently, and his courage, coolness and determination was a continual inspiration to his section". The official history also records that during this action he carried two badly wounded men to comparative safety, then distributed ammunition to the weapon pits and joined in the fighting where it was hottest.

After the Wau and Salamaua campaign he spent six months with the 1st Recruit Battalion before returning to New Guinea in March 1945 to take part in the Maprik and Yamil operations.

Gary was discharged on October 12 1945 and re-enlisted on April 1 1946 as a Corporal for duty with the London Victory March Contingent. He sailed on HMAS *Shropshire* for the UK in April returning in August to be discharged on September 12 1946.

Corporal B. Hill

Born in India, Brian Hill enlisted on October 20 1939 and served throughout the North Africa campaigns including Greece with the 2/6th Battalion. He was wounded in action in the Defence of Lababia and continued to serve with the battalion including operations Maprik and Yamil 1944/45 until his discharge on October 11 1945.

In September 2010 his medals were included in Auction 17 held by Colonial Coins and Medals of Brisbane, as Lot 939 with an estimate of \$400.



L to R General Blamey, General A. S. 'Tubby' Allen, unknown, Arthur Drakeford Minister for the Air, Air Vice Marshall George Jones

Corporal S. R. Crawford

Selwyn Rowe Crawford enlisted on June 25th 1940 and joined 2/40th Battalion. In November 1941 he embarked for Palestine and joined the 2/6th Battalion in February 1942. The battalion returned to Australia via Ceylon and Selwyn remained with the unit through the New Guinea campaign being promoted Corporal on January 7 1943, in September he returned to Australia to serve on the Atherton Tablelands and was discharged on compassionate grounds on June 2 1944.

Private W. T. McMahon

William Thomas McMahon enlisted on April 27 1940 at Caulfield, Victoria, and served with the 2/6th Battalion throughout the war until he was discharged as a Private on October 6 1945 from the Battalion Reinforcements.

Private J.D.Kerr (James Donald McGrath-Kerr)

James Kerr enlisted on August 12 1940 at Launceston. He had two other regimental service numbers so may have made several attempts to join up. He was with the platoon at the Defence of Lababia, serving with the 2/6 Battalion throughout the war. He was discharged on December 3 1945.

Private J Lamont

John Leonard Lamont enlisted on October 30 1939 in Melbourne and joined the 2/6 Battalion. He served with the unit throughout the war until discharged as a Private on October 12 1945.

Private W H Bennett

Born on King Island in 1920, William Harold Bennett enlisted at Romaine, Tasmania, on December 5 1940. His rank is given as Sapper which would indicate that he possibly changed units after the

Defence of Labadia and joined the Engineers, resulting in the rank given on his discharge on October 10th 1945.

Private R F Duggan

Ronald Francis Duggan enlisted July 22 1941 at Hobart and served with the battalion in the Middle East and then in the New Guinea campaigns. He reached the rank of corporal with 2/6th Battalion, serving until discharged on October 9 1945.

Private A V Bell

Albert Victor Bell enlisted May 19 1941 at Royal Park, Melbourne, Victoria. He was in a reinforcement draft sent to the battalion and was wounded during the Defence of Labadia. It is possible that his wounds led to his discharge on July 18 1944.

Private J J Wilson

James Johnson Wilson was born at Slemnairmen, Scotland and enlisted at Caulfield Victoria on June 18 1940. He was wounded during the Defence of Lababia on 21 June 1943, and died on January 1st 1944. His name is listed on the Roll of Honour at Wonthaggi, Victoria, where he was living at the time of his enlistment.

Private D A Ryan

David Allan Ryan was born at Tallangata, Victoria. He first enlisted on 19 August 1940 with regimental number T2829 at Georgetown; however a further record of enlistment on 29 July 1941 (TX5661) at Launceston gives more details. He was wounded at Lababia on 21 June 1943 and was later promoted to Corporal in the Battalion. He was discharged on April 16 1946.

Private W Morrison

Another Englishman born in Western-super-Mare, Wilfrid Morrison enlisted on July 3 1940 at Caulfield Victoria. While the JIM note lists him as a private, he received his commission as a Lieutenant in the 2/6 Battalion before being discharged on February 18 1946.

Private G D Gleeson

David George Cornelius Gleeson enlisted on June 28 1940 at Launceston Tasmania at the age of 28. He served with the 2/6 Battalion throughout the Middle East campaigns and was killed in action on 21 June 1943 at the Defence of Lababia. His name is included on a roll of honour at his home town of Smithton, Tasmania.

Private D Spalding

Dalman Keith Spaulding enlisted on August 12 1941 at Hobart. His record shows two Army service numbers and he was only 19 at the time of enlistment. Serving throughout the war, he took part in the Lababia action and attained the rank of Corporal before being discharged on March 21 1946 from the 2/6th Battalion.

Congratulations

On June 26 1943, Lieutenant Colonel F. G. Wood, Commanding Officer of the Battalion, sent the following message to Major W. E. Dexter DSO and Captain W.J. Cameron, the Officers in Charge of the companies involved:

"Please convey my appreciation and admiration to all under your command who so ably and heroically defeated the enemy. Every member of your force has the right to feel very proud of their splendid achievement.

Their courage and tenacity is an epic of this war and has probably never been surpassed.

I am more than proud that I belong to such a fine body of men and sincerely hope that I may long continue to have that privilege.

May I extend to you my congratulations on your own leadership and courage and wish you and your command the very best. Signed F.G Wood Lt Col"

Other awards for this action include: one DSO, three MCs, two DCMs and nine MMs including one MC to 1st Mountain Battery and two MMs to the 2/7th Battalion.

From the time that the 2/6th Battalion was raised until it was disbanded at Puckapunyal on February 18 1946, it lost 179 men killed and 335 wounded. The battalion received four Distinguished Service Orders (DSO), 15 Military Crosses (MC), 5 Distinguished Conduct Medals (DCM), 35 Military Medals (MM) and 63 Mentioned in Despatches (MID).

The Defence of Lababia Ridge was also significant as the action underlined a development in Australian defensive tactics. Previously the teaching had been to camouflage defensive positions and conceal the defenders. The Lababia Ridge defence was based on positions which to some extent sacrificed concealment for clearing the fields of fire. In this case, with the enemy approaching uphill, little could be seen by the Japanese until they were on a level with the diggings. Japanese records noted that this engagement was a classic example of how well dug-in determined troops can resist heavy attacks from a numerically superior enemy.

For my part, maybe I will collect more JIM notes with graffiti on them.

Acknowledgment,

Paul O'Brien of I.S. Wright for photos and information

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WWW.hut-six.co.uk / WW2data / WO373-44-U.html