
**Within Reach,
Beyond Care:** an
examination of medical
care during the Papuan
(Kokoda) Campaign
1942-43 through the
lens of the Australian
Field Ambulance

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Acknowledgments

The seeds for this thesis were sown over twenty years ago when I first transcribed the diary of my great-uncle, Lawrence Nicholas (Nick) Kennedy. I presented the notes to my father (Nick's nephew), Jack, on his sixtieth birthday. I was completely hooked by what I had read, and wanted to learn more.

Nick and his brother, Bill, enlisted in the 2/4th Field Ambulance 7 Division AIF in May 1940. They served together in the Middle East, Papuan, and New Guinea Campaigns, and Bill later served in Balikpapan, Borneo. They were emotionally, mentally and physically affected by their experiences, though dealt with the scars in different ways. Both men gave up their best years for their country. They passed away many years ago, but have left their mark on the family. My father, Jack, passed away in 2014. It is to these three Kennedy men that I dedicate this thesis.

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Abstract

Among the many military histories written about campaigns fought, won and lost, the voice of Field Ambulance personnel has seldom been heard. This thesis aims to address this omission. In 1942, a full strength Australian Field Ambulance comprised approximately 240 men. The unarmed unit was divided into three companies, all of which were staffed by medical officers and other ranks. The Headquarters Company was responsible for the Main Dressing Station, while the two stretcher bearer companies (A and B) were generally assigned to man the Advanced Dressing Stations. The whole unit was supported by a Service or Transport Company. Their task was to provide medical care for an infantry brigade and attached troops.¹ In World War Two, an infantry brigade in the Australian Army had a strength of between 2 500 and 5 000 soldiers, and was made up of three battalions.² At no time during the 1942 Papuan Campaign were the Australian troops accompanied by a full strength, fully equipped, fully supported Field Ambulance unit. As a result, the medical companies and small detachments who *were* there struggled to provide adequate medical care to sick and wounded soldiers.

Although close to mainland Australia, the Field Ambulance units were effectively isolated in Papua. Yet the difficulties they encountered there did not occur in isolation. This thesis examines the role of the Australian Field Ambulance during the Papuan Campaign by considering relevant themes, issues and events which impacted on these units before, during and immediately after 1942. The thesis assesses the level of care given to the soldiers, and the circumstances which contributed to the problems that plagued these medical units. The ability of the Field Ambulance to render optimum treatment was compromised by many factors including organisation, logistics, strategy, priorities, leadership, and the nature of the campaign itself. All of these issues impacted not only on the medical personnel, but also on the Australian soldiers entrusted to their care.

¹ Bill Sweeting, *The 2/4th Field Ambulance A.I.F. during the Owen Stanleys Campaign 1942: Memories of Sgt A.J. (Bill) Sweeting M.B.E.* (unpublished manuscript: n. d.).

² For detailed explanation of Australian Army organisation and structure, see Australian War Memorial, Military organisation and structure, <https://secure.awm.gov.au/atwar/structure/army-structure/#1941>