

Chapter Three— Relationships in the battalion

A soldier's rank defines his role. Every military rank carries with it particular obligations and privileges and it is on the principles from which these emanate that a unit functions, carrying out its duties in peace and war. A social history of 2/18th Battalion may neither presuppose the dynamics involved in the battalion's day-to-day operation nor in its development over time. Observation at the "micro" level reveals a network of relationships and a growing interdependence among the members of the 2/18th Battalion as well as the extent of their contribution, regardless of rank, to the battalion's changing role over the eighteen month period since its formation.

While headquarters of the new battalion had officially "opened its doors" on 24 July 1940 and the paybooks of some of officers dated from 13 July 1940, the battalion at that early stage was little more than an organization shaped on paper to which men were allocated. That he might transform it into an effective fighting unit, which was the sole reason for its formation, Colonel Varley imposed strict discipline and demanding training schedules as well as taking every opportunity to promote the men's identification with the battalion.

Discipline was effected by the rigorous application of regulations. Regulations covered every action or interaction at any moment every day and affected, for example, training, duties, punishments, off-duty times, dress, parades, *reveille*, meals, bathing, bedtime and "lights out". They included both the standard army regulations and those promulgated in Varley's headquarters which were posted as "Routine Orders" each week. Officers advised the NCOs and the troops of their existence and the NCOs then ensured that they were enforced. Varley, a commander with twenty years' military experience, subscribed to the ethos that "discipline is the distinguishing mark between the trained soldier and the unorganised rabble" and that without it, "all military bodies become mobs

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and worse than useless.”¹ Thus he made no apologies for the stringent discipline that was applied within the battalion and the soldiers had no recourse from it. However, Varley’s assurance that, as a consequence of their compliance, the men could, at least in theory, expect fair treatment, probably helped to make it palatable:

What must be aimed at is that high standard of discipline which springs from a military system administered with impartiality and judgement so as to induce in all ranks a feeling of duty and the assurance that, while no offence will be passed over, no offender will be unjustly dealt with.²

Varley and his officers drew up the training syllabus each month. It was a detailed timetable that covered all aspects of training for all troops. If necessary, officers coached NCOs in skills required in the evening. The following day the NCOs coached the troops. The “bull ring” ensured that across the battalion the same standard was attained in all facets of training. Discipline ensured that the men remained focused even when their interest flagged, and that they learned what was required no matter how uninspiring that might be. It also ensured the completion of any work regardless of difficulty or fatigue. The pace of the training and the quantity of work never slackened. Men bonded together at least partly in defence against the combined onslaught of discipline and training. Their mutual support was the foundation on which the battalion spirit rested. The Israeli sergeant quoted in Dyer’s *War* could have referred to the 2/18th Battalion when he said:

...I try to make soldiers of them. I give them hell from morning to sunset. They begin to curse me, curse the army, curse the state. Then they begin to curse together, and become a truly cohesive group, a unit, a fighting unit.³

¹ Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Varley, 2/18th Battalion War Diary entry, in “Routine Orders”, Part 1 No.39, 1 September 1940, AWM 52 8/3/18; <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

² *Ibid.*, 1 September 1940.

³ Dyer, *War*, pp.102-103.

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Nevertheless, surviving members of the battalion believe that the attitude of the men themselves was of considerable aid to Varley in his task of forming the battalion and transforming it into a fighting unit. More than a quarter of the 2/18th Battalion men who enlisted in the AIF when France fell had previously served in militia units but both they and the “new hands” saw the 2/18th Battalion as the vehicle that would take them into the war.⁴ The vast majority had volunteered in order to fight but they recognised they must have the requisite skills.⁵ Consequently, from the outset they were generally amenable to both training and discipline. Of course, there were exceptions. The 2/18th Battalion comprised a cross section of the community and had within its ranks “all types”.⁶ However, for the most part, those troops who could or would never have adapted to its requirements were quickly boarded out. Twenty unsuitable men left the battalion on 5 August 1940, another 52 a fortnight later.⁷ The battalion war diary described their discharge as being “on account of age, bad conduct or [being] otherwise unsuitable...”.⁸ A soldier observed six months later that the few remaining exceptions were merely “isolated cases...who do not count in the make-up of good-spirited soldiers.”⁹ For the vast majority, the objective outweighed the host of minor and not so minor irritations attendant upon military camp life and training. It also underpinned relationships across the battalion. In Col Spence’s words, “There was great toleration among the fellows.”¹⁰

This attitude was evident across the battalion from the earliest days. Under its mantle, disagreements dissolved into good humour, quarrels into friendship. It was, of course, inevitable that different personalities would clash and fights erupt as men adjusted to daily life in the army, a life bound by regulations that signified the loss of personal

⁴ Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p.12.

⁵ Ross, *Myth of the Digger*, p.115.

⁶ Burfitt, *Against All Odds*, p.12.

⁷ 2/18th Battalion War Diary entries, Serial No. 17, 5 August, 1940 & Serial No.51, 19 August, 1940, AWM 52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Serial No.51, 19 August, 1940, AWM 52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

⁹ J. A. Shrimpton, “Smoke Rings”, *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.3, February 1941, unpaginated.

¹⁰ Colin Spence, interview, 10 January 2002.

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freedom, space and privacy but which did not immediately reveal all its compensations. That most disputes were quickly settled is evidence of the men's growing tolerance for the foibles of others. If the consequences of a dispute might be more serious, others stepped in to end it. By the time the battalion left Australia, the soldiers had long since adjusted to army conditions. However they now had also to adjust to daily life in the army in Malaya. Conditions in Malaya exacerbated individual irritability and from time to time tempers flared. However, such moments rarely led to ongoing rancour. The resolution of any argument was assured because its continuation was pointless.

Men sometimes used their fists to settle their disputes quickly and effectively. In 1940 boxing was a popular professional sport in Australia and most men had at least some experience of its science. A boxing tournament open to all units stationed at Ingleburn lacked neither competitors nor spectators, drawing its contestants from a crowd of some two thousand men.¹¹ Oregon Barlow of Captain Charles O'Brien's B Company was one of three men from his section who won their bouts that night.¹² However, Corporal Stan O'Grady of Captain John Edgeley's Don Company admitted that he had been "a bit cocky" when he "took on" heavyweight Private Sandy MacGregor to settle an argument at Bathurst. He recalled his relief and gratitude when Private Jimmy Darlington, heavyweight boxing champion of the 8th Division, interceded on his behalf:

We started to shape up... when who comes to the door but MacGregor's mate, Jimmy Darlington. Jimmy said, "What's going on here?" We stopped and MacGregor said, "This bloody bloke, I'll fix him up." And Jimmy taps him...and said, "I'll tell you something, Sandy. When you've done the Corp, then you can have a go at me." MacGregor looked at me, and he had a look at Jimmy, and he said to me, "Gee, we get on all right, don't

¹¹ An entry in the 2/18th Battalion War Diary gives details of a tournament which was organised by the 2/5 Field Regiment at Ingleburn on 28 August 1940, AWM 52 8/3/18, <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/awm52/8x3x18.htm>.

¹² Oregon Barlow, manuscript, AWM MSS1446, unpaginated.

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we?” That was the end of it. We were good friends always, after that. But he would have killed me.¹³

Aboard ship, Captain John Edgeley, CO of Don Company, himself took an active hand in resolving an argument between two of his men. He ordered them to settle it with their “gloves on”. His interference was effective. Fred Harris recalled: “They fought like threshing machines and came out about even. And after that they were good mates.”¹⁴

Malaya tested the most even temperaments. The enervating climate, the frustration that many felt at being sidelined away from the war, and their growing boredom with their present circumstances all contributed to short lived quarrels and quick punches. Still, surviving members of the battalion remember particularly that friendship or at least tolerance was always speedily re-established. Harris recalled his own fight with Private Baldy Balston:

We went on leave. We had a few drinks. We were going through the markets. He started doing stupid things, knocking stuff over. I said, “Don’t do that.” He said, “I’ll knock you over.” So we had a bit of a punch up. Out along the beach a bit...I won. But I still have a bad thumb today from that fight. It got bent back. We were friends after.¹⁵

Col Spence of A Company remembered the haymaker with which he felled Private Bob “Boof” Collins in Malaya:

Boof Collins...wouldn’t have been the brightest fellow in the world. It was a joke for him to walk along behind you when you’re marching, say to Mess Parade, and clip your heel with his toe. I told him, “I don’t want to be in it, Boof.” So he would do it again and laugh. To him, it was just a good natured bit of play,

¹³ Stan O’Grady, in interview with Stan O’Grady and Fred Harris, 14 July, 2000.

¹⁴ Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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you see. So the third time I swung round and I gave him a haymaker. I hit him under the ear. The only response I got for two or three days from him, was: “By Jesus, you can punch,” and he would rub his neck.¹⁶

As the battalion formed and during the early months of training, the men were eager and impatient to go overseas. While the men grumbled at the relentless pace of the work, their purpose was clear. Consequently quarrels were settled, brushed aside or ignored. At first they saw their posting to Malaya merely as a delay in their plans but, as the months passed and conditions in Malaya took their inevitable toll, irritability became commonplace. Tempers certainly rose but they then subsided. As Spence said:

I never saw a fight in the 120 fellows in A Company. There were blows thrown. I punched a couple of fellows. But they just took it as a mark of horseplay or something like that.¹⁷

A punch was usually enough to release tension and bad temper. While in their letters home the soldiers rarely expressed their dependency on each other explicitly, their forbearance and their tolerance demonstrate, at least, an implicit awareness of it. This dependency on each other sprang in part from the men’s sense of isolation from the rest of the Malayan community as well as from their sense of separation from the people at home—from their families and friends and particularly from their womenfolk and women generally—and from the rest of AIF who were in the Middle East. In Cliff Olsen’s words:

In Malaya it was a different atmosphere. You’re part of a team against someone else. And you’re all in the same team. No matter what it is. And you’re in a strange country and they’re all

¹⁶ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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different colours all around you, black and yellow. And you stick out. You're in a band.¹⁸

Isolated and conspicuous in a foreign country, the men of the 2/18th Battalion identified with each other and with their unit, and the *esprit de corps* that Varley had sought to encourage from the first days of training in Australia flourished. This team spirit, the interdependence that it implied and the tolerance it demonstrated amounted to a sense of good will among the men that permeated the battalion, from the platoon sections to its commanding officer. In Changi, after his transfer to 22nd Brigade away from the battalion, Brigadier Varley would write in his diary:

I cannot describe the dreadful loneliness I feel here in Changi. I never felt this way with the 2/18th. Although I may not have known every man's name in the Battalion, I knew their faces and looked upon them as friends...¹⁹

Traditional army training has always intended that men identify first with their particular section within a platoon.²⁰ Enduring and surmounting hardships together and sharing small triumphs cement men's loyalty to each other and boost group morale at the expense of their individualism. Metaphorically speaking, they meshed together until they become inseparable. In the 2/18th Battalion a man's section—it was made up of between seven and ten soldiers—was comparable to his immediate family. Spence explained:

You knew them best. You slept with them, ate with them. You did everything in the section. The Corporal was the brains of the outfit. He had to live with the men and keep the discipline. You knew all the others in the platoon all right, but you mightn't see them for a week.²¹

¹⁸ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

¹⁹ Quoted in *Men May Smoke*, Final Edition, Sydney, 1948, p.86.

²⁰ Dyer, *War*, p.114.

²¹ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

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Within their section men helped each other, providing further evidence of general goodwill, as the story of Private Cec Stanford, recounted by Harris, demonstrates:

He had just met his mother for the first time. He was so pleased and happy. Back in those days, she might have had a baby out of wedlock. She must have been in the background, knowing about him. She came to get in touch with him when he joined the army... Anyway, we sailed. He was a mate of mine. He couldn't actually read or write. He used to get my brother to write a letter to his mother and put in what he wanted. Nearly made out that he wrote it. When he would get letters back, my brother would always read them to him.²²

The characteristics of the Australian ethos of mateship were discernible in any section. The men's commitment to each other, the loyalty and mutual support, had developed over the long months of training at home and were only more pertinent now that they were abroad. Despite their general disdain for both Malaya and their role as part of its garrison, the soldiers nevertheless preferred to be there, with their "mates". Private Ginty Pearson rejected the opportunity to go to India as batman to the adjutant, Captain Dave ("Myrtle") Wilson, whom he liked and admired, not because he would not have preferred the proposed destination to the present situation, but because, "You wouldn't leave those blokes for anything."²³ Platoon commander, Lieutenant George McLaughlin, wrote to his wife about those men who were invalided home from Malaya in June 1941. "With very few exceptions they were sorry to go. Of course when this job of work is completed [in Malaya], there will not be many sorry to go."²⁴

Sections combine to form a platoon, the base unit in an army's hierarchical structure. In the 2/18th Battalion the infantry platoon was a tactical unit of about thirty

²² Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

²³ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

²⁴ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 8 June 1941.

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men under the command of a lieutenant. Several of the six specialist platoons of Headquarter Company were larger and some were further expanded in Malaya. Those lieutenants who had been appointed when the battalion was forming had initially trained in militia units and had, since joining the 2/18th Battalion, attended officer training camps. Traditional officer training in a regular army instils in officers their difference from other ranks, including and especially their “social” difference.²⁵ However, the 2/18th Battalion comprised citizens—both officers and other ranks—who were not regulars. They had volunteered for the duration of the war only and for them the “social difference” was sometimes difficult to accept. Old school friends found themselves separated by rank. So too did different members of the same family. In Lieutenant Vern Toose’s platoon (prior to his promotion to captain) was the private who, only a year before, had been the manager at the branch of the bank where Toose was employed. And, while other ranks might envy the perquisites pertaining to officer rank, at least one young officer saw much that was enviable across the divide. Fuller expressed a personal regret:

I am very fortunate in having such a great lot of chaps in my platoon. I only wish I could be a private for a while and really get to know them. The privileges of being an officer are often far outweighed by the fun that a private can have. I have been both and I know.²⁶

While he did not become “a private for a while”, certainly by August he did, from time to time, ignore the edict that officers and other ranks should not be seen socializing:

Tonight I had a feed at the All Services Canteen with some lads from my platoon. I will probably get into trouble one of these

²⁵ Dyer, *War*, pp.140-141.

²⁶ John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 March 1941.

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days for “publicly associating with the men” but I am not worrying.²⁷

There *were* repercussions. Mervyn Blyth recalled: “He did get into trouble. But I think it went right over his head.”²⁸

In contrast to Fuller’s approach, the behaviour of a number of 2/18th Battalion officers in their dealings with the men in the ranks was officious and self-important. The resentment their arrogance roused in the men was almost palpable. One man wrote from Malaya condemning

... Those pipsqueaks of which we have plenty who, even off parade, have already forgotten that they were ever ordinary men or kids. I think the English Army complex has got them. The buggers will come back to earth with a jolt though when they get back to Aussie.²⁹

Such officers might be disliked but if they could exact obedience then they could maintain a form of discipline. The obedience such an officer could command might be grudging. Men would comply with an order, albeit as slowly or even as slackly as they dared. In such instances, despite the abeyance of battalion spirit, the work or whatever else was required would eventually be done. Such a state of affairs amounted to discipline by compulsion only—the lack of good will between such officers and their men could be detrimental in the long term.

Varley had no particular interest in an officer’s popularity and he was equally unconcerned with his own. Ironically, the troops always liked him immensely. He was concerned, however, by those officers who sought popularity. In his 1942 diary, Varley criticised young officers (and NCOs) for attempting to “curry favour” with their men. “All junior officers, or rather a big majority, also NCOs...are frightened to take full command.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, letter to his mother, 21 August 1941.

²⁸ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

²⁹ Bruce Munro, letter to his sister, 4 April 1941.

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Result is that the men soon sum them up as weaklings and discipline generally is undermined...”.³⁰

The indiscipline to which Varley referred was effective in despatching (by means of transfer or a return to the ranks) those who failed to satisfy. For example, when on an exercise a corporal ordered that his section proceed silently, the men, as they climbed through a fence, “played its wires like a musical instrument”, thereby demonstrating the corporal’s ineffectiveness to all concerned.³¹ The process by which the troops judged their officers and NCOs was without kindness or sentimentality. Spence explained:

In our section, at times, we would be getting different corporals, trying them out... You would look at the fellow and you would say, “He might be all right as a fellow, but I don’t want to risk being under him if he gives orders.” Another might say, “Give me a fair go and I’ll give you a fair go.” Out he goes for a start, because he doesn’t trust himself. He’s currying favour, he’s not taking command.³²

When a lieutenant takes command of his platoon, he undertakes to lead it in training, discipline and combat. In the 2/18th Battalion, as in all military units, his or any officer’s success depended on his having the respect of his men. While his competence, fairness and even strictness, when it was required, were qualities that men respected, liking, too, was an important factor. When officers met such criteria, discipline could almost be assumed and good will flowed. Oral and written testimony allows that a number of officers in the 2/18th Battalion met such criteria:

The officers were not all gentlemen like Jack Vernon was or Jack Carey or George McLaughlin. They were our leaders. Not

³⁰ Arthur Varley, diary entry 11 July 1942, transcript of diary 12 May 1942 to 26 March 1944, AWM54, 3DRL/2691.

³¹ Colin Spence, telephone conversation, 15 July 2004.

³² Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

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elected by us but we quite agreed on the fact that they were officers... They never gave orders. They just said, "We'll do this or that," and it was done.³³

Lieutenant (later Captain) Ken Mosher commanded D Company's 18 Platoon, three-quarters of which comprised the "wild boys" from the northern NSW town of Barraba. Mosher was a martinet who kept his men "on their toes" but they respected him. Fred Harris remembered:

He used to give them hell and they used to give him hell. Mosher would get up in the middle of the night to try and catch them sitting up talking or not having their mosquito netting on. The next night he would take them up to the canteen and drink with them all. Next morning, he'd be roaring at them... On route marches, Mosher was always out singing ditties in front.³⁴

When Harris left Australia in February 1941, he had expected to fight. Like most troops, he believed they were marking time in Malaya. Although the men had no time for pettiness, officiousness or arrogance from officers, they were soldiers. They obeyed orders and expected discipline. Thus discipline itself, generally, was not a problem. For Harris, particularly, discipline in the army had less impact than the discipline to which he had been subjected by the dairy farmer who had employed him during his teen years. Besides, he said, it would have been impossible for him to do anything wrong while he was in the army. "Not under George McLaughlin. I *never* got into trouble."³⁵ Harris liked and respected his platoon commander and it was in expressing his esteem for McLaughlin that he identified the criterion by which men in a platoon judged their officer and, in consequence, that officer's effectiveness:

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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We knew he was an officer. We did what we were told. He was good. He would come around to us in the night, sit down with us and talk. He would just as soon come and sit down and have a talk and a smoke with us as with his own fellow officers...*He didn't think we were nothing.*³⁶

Certainly leadership skills were essential but the men valued the officer who valued them and was prepared to show that he did so.

Fuller's men appreciated that he shared with them the fruit cakes his mother sent to him. "He would bring the fruitcake down to the lines—the OR [Other Ranks] lines, into our hut—and he would sit down and share it round with the fellows."³⁷ Much later, when opportunities came for them to return the compliment, they did so. On one occasion Fuller wrote, "Last night my batman 'invited' me to a magnificent chicken dinner. I didn't know he was such a good cook and naturally I never asked where he got the chickens."³⁸ On another, he wrote of being invited to lunch with Mervyn Blyth's detachment. "It was some lunch. One of the lads caught, killed and cooked a couple of roosters and believe me, it was a great feed."³⁹

Socializing between platoon commanders and their men contravened the regulations when conducted in public places and served to irritate the battalion's commanding officer. Nevertheless, provided that the officer had the requisite leadership skills and that the respect between him and his men was mutual, it is probable that the officer's ability to command, even in battle, was not only unaffected but even enhanced by the shared goodwill that implied trust. In the army, the ultimate test of which is its performance in battle, men needed the assurance that their leader was competent to lead

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

³⁸ John Fuller, letter to a family friend and resident of Malaya, 20 December 1941. Dr Duncan took the letter with him to Australia.

³⁹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 19 January 1941.

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them. Such assurance required trust and, in order to trust, men needed to feel trusted.⁴⁰

Respect is and has always been fundamental to trust. Without it, trust would not be possible.

The traditional social distance between officers and their men, in a regular army, has always made it easier, in battle, for an officer to order men to what might very well be their deaths.⁴¹ His job, again in battle, is to maintain control over men whose training, self-esteem and loyalty to each other might, in dire circumstances, be overwhelmed by sheer physical terror.⁴² However, the 2/18th Battalion differed in several respects from a battalion in a traditional regular army. The men were citizens who had voluntarily enlisted to learn how to fight and then to do so. Becoming a soldier was a by-product of this process—the men of the 2/18th Battalion were not career soldiers. After six long months of basic training in Australia, they underwent further training in Malaya. Here they learned that the best way to operate was in small sections scattered over wide areas of difficult terrain.⁴³ Their experience foreshadowed that facet of modern ground warfare in which small groups of troops are often widely dispersed.⁴⁴ In Malaya this type of training revealed that it was often impossible for an officer to supervise and directly control all his men's actions. Ultimately, in battle as in the training exercises, he would have to depend as much or more on his ability to persuade and his men's commitment to their purpose as upon compulsion and the men's obedience. In other words, in battle, mutual trust would be as vital as entrenched discipline.

More than sixty years later the affection some surviving members of the battalion felt for some of their platoon commanders has not abated. These officers were among those whose performances in battle at Nithsdale, on Singapore Island or in both places,

⁴⁰ David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, London, 1983, pp.99-100.

⁴¹ Dyer, *War*, pp.141-142.

⁴² Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p.99.

⁴³ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, p.15.

⁴⁴ Dyer, *War*, p.142.

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had ultimately earned Varley's approval.⁴⁵ Ginty Pearson, who named his son after Lieutenant Ray Griffin, said: "I can still see Griffin standing up on the *Queen Mary* waving good-bye as we were sailing out the Heads. A terrific guy."⁴⁶ Frank Adams declared his respect for Lieutenant Alan Loxton.⁴⁷ Barlow wrote of Lieutenant Les Sulman, "He was a good officer."⁴⁸ Mervyn Blyth said of Fuller, "We could see right from the start that he was going to be a leader. He showed that right from the start."⁴⁹

Taking command was not a matter of barking orders and using discipline to exact obedience on a route march or the parade ground although no doubt the ability to do so was mandatory. Neither was it a matter of impressing upon the soldiers their "social" inferiority. Taking command meant engaging the interest, support and even enthusiasm of the men in whatever work was at hand so that all involved knew what was expected of them and set about accomplishing the goal with minimum fuss and maximum efficiency. Command meant smoothing difficulties and obstacles from the path so that in their place arose a sense of confidence, achievement and satisfaction that came from being a resourceful and competent team. When an officer took command, he established his leadership as a matter of fact. His men could be sure that their future, whether in battle or not, was in good hands and, with this certainty, mutual trust was established.

Taking command, therefore, was not a heroic act. An officer did not rise in his men's estimation for performing valiant deeds. Indeed, at Walgrove, Ingleburn and Bathurst, as the battalion took shape, opportunities to perform valiantly occurred, at most, very infrequently. For the most part men learned to appreciate an officer for his leadership in what were seemingly small and unimportant matters that were not usually worthy of

⁴⁵ Arthur Varley, Original Diary of Brigadier Arthur Varley, Diary 5, no date or page number, AWM 54 3DRL/2691. Varley's assessment of each of his officers is in the earliest diary, which has not been included in the Australian War Memorial's transcript of the original.

⁴⁶ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁴⁷ Frank Adams, interview, 20 August 2002.

⁴⁸ Oregon Barlow, manuscript, AWM MSS1446.

⁴⁹ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

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attention and are rarely recorded but which, nevertheless, had the potential to cause stress and angst. Blyth gave an early example of Fuller's leadership that his men appreciated:

Our fellows at Bathurst—once we had drunk a bit. We had a paliass fight. There was straw everywhere. The sergeant-major, he was going to put us all on charge sheets, but John [Fuller] stepped in and said, “No, this was all in fun. Nobody was hurt.” He just gave us a bit of a lecture.⁵⁰

Spence explained why Lieutenant Warden earned his men's approval:

This would illustrate George's way of running his platoon and his character. Arthur Kelly was a grazier. He was honest as the day was long and he would never think that anyone would steal anything. And we were having a kit inspection and George Warden said to Arthur, “Of course, you have a ground sheet, Arthur.” “Oh yes Mr Warden,” he said. “I've got a ground sheet but I haven't seen it for three or four weeks.” George Warden didn't institute an enquiry or anything like that. He just saw to it that Arthur got another ground sheet. That's the way you should run a platoon.

Surviving members of the 2/18th Battalion proffered opinions as to the necessary credentials of a good officer. Alan Loxton believed that the essential ingredients were “commonsense” and “guts”.⁵¹ Mervyn Blyth added “character”.⁵² Keith Forsyth said that officers should be practical, not merely theoretical, and added, “I think they have got to listen. By listening, and working with you, that's when they get the work out of you.”⁵³

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

⁵² Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

⁵³ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

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John McGrory said that in order to win respect, “An officer must be fair about things and do what he’s got to do without fear or favour.”⁵⁴

Lieutenants Mosher, Griffin and McLaughlin were older and married and among those who received captaincies during 1941. Lieutenants Loxton, Fuller and Warden were less than two years out of school when they took command of their platoons, but they were among a number of junior officers who were approved by their men. Such officers received the men’s help and support in carrying out duties and tasks. Men did the “decent thing” by an officer whom they respected. On the other hand, a fundamental quality that was manifested when they deliberately withheld help was a discernible mockery. In any group of Australian soldiers there was always a “wag at the back” whose primary intention was to make men laugh but this could also be at a despised officer’s expense.

Spence offered an example of how that help and support might be withheld or granted:

In Malaya...an officer was trying to work something out. We were looking for the equator on the map. He said, “How do we know we are north of the equator?” The only response he got was someone in the background said, “We crossed it in the *Queen Mary*.” Then George Warden took over...He was standing at the side of the map, which is a very different thing to read, a military map, contours and things. He was misreading some figures. My mate...and I were straight in front where we could see it. As soon as we saw he was in trouble, we asked him guiding questions...That is the difference. The other officer, we would have let him flounder, we would have asked him the wrong questions.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ John McGrory, interview, 13 July 2000.

⁵⁵ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

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Tensions between men and particular officers did arise. Some were personal and irrelevant to the battalion as a whole or to the individual companies. Nevertheless, such “run ins” could cause resentment in an individual soldier that are not forgotten sixty years later. One man recalled: “I tangled with an officer on the *Mary*...He gave me a burst...He had a go at me and it upset me.” Such incidents could not derail the battalion but neither did they promote good will among its members.

“Run ins” also occurred with NCOs, particularly with sergeants. Within the battalion, sergeants wielded immense power in individual circumstances. That they acted for the officers, especially in matters of discipline, and that they had their own mess and their separate toilet facilities, all contributed to a “bit of feeling there”.⁵⁶ Some sergeants earned immense respect. A good sergeant smoothed the connection between men and officers and, in so doing, improved his unit’s efficiency. He assigned duties with a fair hand and in certain circumstances might exercise his personal discretion and judgement. Over time the Mortar platoon had a number of sergeants. The men regarded Sergeant Bill (“Pookah”) Leonard as a “terrific man” and Les Higgs as “very good too”, but they knew one of the others as a “snake in the grass”. A “snake” was a man whose only motivation was a self interest that was always at the expense of others. As a type, he provoked Private Raymond Colenso twice to verse:

I have one in mind at the moment
Who crawls like his forbear, the snake...
By trying to force his promotion
He belittles the men who are smart...⁵⁷

And:

The clock was showing ten sixteen,
His eyes were shining bright,

⁵⁶ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 2000.

⁵⁷ Raymond Colenso, “Promotion”, in *Poems from the Frontline: A Collection of Verse*, p.38, AWM PR00689.

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The tattoo roll was incomplete,
He'd got a haul tonight...
Chaps not in the mortars
Say that he's alright,
That's because they're absent,
When he patrols at night...
When he starts his nightly purge
The Nazis hide in shame,
He's improved their methods
But the system is the same...⁵⁸

The men endured much from their particular Snake, a sergeant who had risen from the ranks to which he intended not to return. He wielded his power to the men's discredit. "He would be watching his back. There were a lot of young fellows who could probably buy and sell him as far as his job went. He was looking after himself all right."⁵⁹ Blyth, whose departure for officer training camp was only prevented by the outbreak of war, remembered the time that he was paraded:

I had refused to go on kitchen fatigue because I had been on it time and time again. This sergeant, I reckoned he was picking on me. And I jacked up and said, "No, I'm not going."⁶⁰

Against Blyth, the sergeant's efforts failed. Captain Jack Carey dismissed the charge with the recommendation: "Consider yourself severely reprimanded."⁶¹

The sergeant continued to find fault and reason for punishment. Eventually the men took counter measures, drawing on and defending their right to fair treatment:

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, "CB", p.45. A "tattoo roll" was the final, evening roll call.

⁵⁹ Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

⁶⁰ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 2000.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

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We couldn't speak in the barracks after lights out. So he used to wear sandshoes and come up to see if he could catch us talking. We got sick of it. So we went down and got paraded to Major Frazer, the Company OC. We said, "Mustn't the duty sergeant be dressed in his boots, puttees and so on?" And he said, "Yes." And we said, "Will you stop him from doing it?" And he said, "No." We said, "We want to be paraded to Varley." He said, "I don't think so." We said, "We understand the law is that we can go." Anyway, Frazer backed down. After that, the sergeant had to wear boots.⁶²

While the sergeant in the Mortar Platoon was possibly an exceptional case, others also provoked resentment. Joe Forsyth remembered an incident, the repercussions of which he had deeply resented at the time. Forsyth's complaint was a sergeant's refusal to use his discretion at the men's very great expense:

We were on leave. We tried to get a taxi home, to be back in time. And of course, if you weren't back in time, you were put on report. So this sergeant he had to put in the report to the orderly room. He had only just put it in. He could have taken it back out, because we were home, but he wouldn't do it. And that time Colonel Varley had just brought in a pack drill for anyone who wasn't back in time... We got a week's pack drill...⁶³

Finally, at Mersing, the sergeants' toilet block burned to the ground. Sited in the middle of Headquarter Company lines, smelling unpleasantly and the preserve of sergeants alone—a regulation published in Routine Orders forbade its use by others—it was bitterly resented. Three previous attempts to set it alight had failed and an extremely unpopular picket had

⁶² Keith Forsyth, interview, 25 July 2000.

⁶³ Joe Forsyth, interview, 26 July 2000.

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been mounted to guard it. Colenso recorded its ultimate demise in a light hearted-poem, much of which was at the sergeants' expense. It was entitled "Exit the Sergeants' Shed":

...Twice this picquet mounted,
It may have lasted for all time,
Only in the early hours,
Occurred an awful crime.
The men were deep in slumber,
And the time was almost three,
When the little shed just disappeared,
As all can plainly see.
For a match alone it wouldn't burn,
It went out with kerosene,
So perhaps the flames started,
With the army's best benzine...
The little shed has left us,
Only embers now remain,
And the sergeants wait, all doubled up,
For the shed to be built again.⁶⁴

Because it was located in the Headquarter Company lines, popular opinion presumed Headquarter Company's guilt. Only the sergeants regretted the loss of the shed, for, as Blyth remembered, "The fellows were a bit anti-sergeants...". The culprits were never caught. "The OC was quite hostile" wrote Colenso, but despite threats and punishments—the men lost their leave and were ordered to "Picket the Ashes"—their identity, even sixty years later, remains a firmly kept secret!

Across the battalion, where respect between ranks was mutual, goodwill was discernible and the work flowed smoothly. Antagonising the men served no useful

⁶⁴ Raymond Colenso, "Exit the Sergeants' Shed", in *Poems from the Frontline*, p.39, AWMPR00689.

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purpose. Although they were constrained by the unrelenting discipline, discipline did not and could not preclude independent thought. With enough provocation the men would from time to time find ways to resist but for the most part, although they grumbled, they remained stoic. Indeed, they had no alternative, for in a garrison army few changes occur.

The 2/18th Battalion was very much a static organisation. Its original design worked satisfactorily and required few changes. The army did not alter, nor did positions in its hierarchy. The low attrition rate of a garrison army that protected a peaceful country in some cases enabled inappropriate officers with seniority to retain positions at the expense of more talented junior officers or men from the ranks. Australia's policy of appointing officers and NCOs to newly raised units so that even an untrained unit had no senior vacancies available upon its arrival in Malaya further exacerbated the problem. The military authorities' reasoning behind this policy was that "only with the formation of new units [was there] any chance of Staff Corps, Militia or ATC officers getting away for active Service."⁶⁵ Finally, the GOC was moved to protest to Sturdee, Australia's Chief of General Staff. In arguing for a more efficient system, Bennett nevertheless pointed out the unfairness inherent in rewarding men who, having refrained from enlisting in the AIF until the rush was over, had gained rapid promotion in their AMF units at home. Consequently, when they finally went overseas with the AIF, they held higher rank and so denied opportunities for promotion to men who had served longer and had more experience.⁶⁶ Bennett's argument won the day but by then it was already October 1941, the 2/18th Battalion had been in Malaya for eight long months, and war was only two months away. During that time, within the 2/18th Battalion only two rounds of promotion had occurred, one at the beginning of May, another in August. These brought change, not all of which was welcome. For Fuller it signified the loss of his command of the Mortars. He wrote regretfully to his parents that his youth was responsible:

⁶⁵ Cable from Sturdee to Bennett, Department of Army Minute Paper, 3 October 1941, National Australian Archives MP729/7 37/421/400.

⁶⁶ Bennett, cable (SP 167) to Army Headquarters Melbourne, 7 October 1941, NAA MP729/7 37/421/400.

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My tender age has cost me promotion. Had I been a couple of years older I would have been a Captain. The great increase in the number of my platoon has made it a Captain's command with a Lieutenant as Second-in-Command. It is very disappointing losing my platoon especially seeing that I am the only one who knows anything about my job in the Battalion...Don't think I have been dumped or anything like that... The trouble is I am too young (or so they tell me) and there are a hell of a lot of lieutenants who are my senior...⁶⁷

Promotions, too, did not come without cause for regret. The change a promotion brought, akin perhaps to the break up of a family, was often deeply felt by both officer and men. New Captain, George McLaughlin, wrote: "I will be sorry to leave D Coy and have had a very happy time there. As I have said before, we were one happy family...I am also sorry to lose my Platoon. I am very proud of it you know."⁶⁸

The round of promotions meant that a number of platoons had new commanding officers, a testing time for both men and officers. Some platoons accepted the change easily. "We got our new officer into line very quickly," one man remembered.⁶⁹ Another commented:

We could have cried when he left. The new man was different. He was the officer. He only came near us when he had to come near us. He was the officer and we were the privates.⁷⁰

For other platoons, the change of officer was felt to be a disaster:

⁶⁷ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 10 June 1941.

⁶⁸ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 8 August 1941.

⁶⁹ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁷⁰ Fred Harris, interview, 12 December 2000.

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Our morale went down to zero, down to zero when he was there.

And the fellows were just antagonistic towards him. He just wanted to be so officious and—we didn't like it.⁷¹

A lieutenant's "tender age" was not the only bar to promotion in the 2/18th Battalion. The greatest leap was across the divide between the other ranks and officers. To date, the attrition rate of officers was limited to those few whose health had been seriously affected by the tropical conditions. Officer Cadet Roger McKee was one of only six men chosen from the 2/18th Battalion to attend the Officers Cadet Training Unit in May 1941.⁷² The selection of McGee at 26 years of age made nonsense of the belief, held by at least one private, that to be chosen one had to be aged 24 or younger. The latter wrote to his parents:

Regarding your enquiries re promotion—I'm less inclined than I ever was, even if I had a chance which is unlikely as I'm too old for a chance of a commission in this division, and I wouldn't bother exerting myself for anything less. I've seen excellent NCOs knocked back on account of their age —limit seems to be about 24. I'm much better off in the ranks...⁷³

Again, either being "too young" or "too old" was not perceived as the only obstacle to promotion in the 2/18th Battalion. Warrant Officer Jack Amos, from Moree, one of the battalion's Rough Riders and, in consequence, a soldier with a high profile in the battalion, proffered a different explanation in reply to a query from his father: "I'm afraid Sergeants and Warrant Officers are sunk as far as getting commissions as, if they are OK at their job, the officers don't like to lose them."⁷⁴ And a sergeant from Sydney believed that simply being in the 2/18th Battalion dashed his chances for promotion. In his letter home, he

⁷¹ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 17 August 1999.

⁷² Roger McGee, letter to his parents, 11 May 1941.

⁷³ Colin Spence, letter to his mother, 23 October 1941.

⁷⁴ Jack Amos, letter to his father, undated but sent at the end of May 1941, after the battalion had moved to Seremban.

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accused the battalion of practising its own brand of nepotism. He had lodged a formal protest:

As you know, this battalion is a Country Battalion and they have their cliques so not unnaturally most of the appointments have gone to country men. I have just, this day, sent a note to the Colonel over this unjust state of affairs and I want to know why I have been passed over. Otherwise I have applied for a transfer...⁷⁵

Most soldiers of the 2/18th Battalion, however, while recognising the different experiences between those who grew up in the country and those in the city, saw no real difference among Australians generally. "They all mixed well,"⁷⁶ said a man from the city, while a country man said of the city men, "Most of them were pretty good."⁷⁷ When the men from the country organised fights or races on which they could bet between snakes or spiders or frogs, the city men were naturally impressed: "They knew more about these things."⁷⁸ On the other hand, the country men saw the city men as more sophisticated, or at least, less innocent. "They lorded it over us a bit,"⁷⁹ one remembered.

In August the appointment of Charles Assheton, Varley's 2IC, as CO of the 2/20th Battalion in place of Colonel Jeater, who had been ill, set off a new round of senior appointments within the 2/18th Battalion. Major Fraser was appointed Varley's new 2IC, Major Davis took over Headquarter Company and B Company's CO became Major O'Brien. By this time Varley had reason to feel as satisfied as a perfectionist could be with the progress of his unit. As its commander, it had been his responsibility that the battalion prove itself in Malaya. It seemed that it had done so successfully. Most men had acclimatised to the heat and the humidity and understood the terrain (see Chapter Four).

⁷⁵ Alan Black, letter to his parents, 18 September 1941.

⁷⁶ Cliff Olsen, interview, 30 May 2002.

⁷⁷ Ginty Pearson, interview, 22 May 2001.

⁷⁸ Mervyn Blyth, interview, 2 September 1999.

⁷⁹ Mac Cottee, interview, 19 June 2001.

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Certainly, replacement personnel were required from time to time (for which purpose reinforcement companies came from Australia. Colonel Jeater's new appointment was command of the General Base Depot in Johore Bahru, which included the training of reinforcements before they were sent to the battalions.)⁸⁰ August also signified a change in the battalion's role. It moved across the country to its battle station and set about preparing for war. The troops, who would have preferred to learn of their imminent departure from Malaya, were noticeably more purposeful in the new post.⁸¹ Varley's pride in his unit and its operations at this time is reflected in his words: "The spirit of the Battalion and its determination to do a 100% job when the time comes for it to be tested is evidenced in the enthusiastic manner in which the present task is being carried out."⁸² Of course, whether war would eventuate remained in question. If it was not quite a watershed, August 1941 nevertheless marked the beginning of a new phase for both the men of the 2/18th Battalion and their commanding officer.

When, after the war, Bennett assessed Varley's qualities as the commander of the 2/18th Battalion, he used expressions such as "sound judgement", "every inch a soldier", "cool, efficient leader" and "valiant" to support his assertion that Varley "welded the Battalion into a fine unit and instilled into it a grand fighting spirit."⁸³ Another officer described him as a "solid and thoughtful leader with the gift of being able to inspire profound confidence."⁸⁴ The men who served under him were perhaps more prosaic. Lieutenant Alan Loxton saw him as a "superb leader of men because he understood men. He wouldn't stand any nonsense but there was no harsh military discipline just for the sake of discipline."⁸⁵ Private Merv Mullins commented: "The Colonel's word was his

⁸⁰ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.99n.

⁸¹ Battalion diarist in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated.

⁸² Arthur Varley, in *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated.

⁸³ Gordon Bennett, tribute to Varley in *Men May Smoke*, Final Edition of the 2/18th Battalion AIF Magazine, June 1948, p.9.

⁸⁴ Tribute by an officer to Assheton in *Men May Smoke*, Final Edition of the 2/18th Battalion AIF Magazine, June 1948, p.11.

⁸⁵ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

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bond.”⁸⁶ Private John McGrory observed, “I hardly knew him enough to say I liked him. I liked what I saw—his attitude, that sort of thing.”⁸⁷ Spence described him as “a sensible chap”⁸⁸ while Fuller captioned a photograph in which, it must be admitted, the colonel was escorting film star Betty Bryant, with the words: “First in everything.”⁸⁹

Since Brigadier Taylor’s phone call to Varley in which he offered him the command, Varley’s *raison d’être* was always the 2/18th Battalion. His concern was its exemplary performance on every occasion. In Malaya he expected his men to behave as no less than ambassadors for their country. What moved him to wrath was the battalion’s failure, or the failure of any of its members, to conduct themselves in a fitting manner.

Incidents did occur that definitely tested the CO. He was outraged when two of his junior officers sparked what might have escalated into an international crisis. On 26 May Lieutenants Crago and Warden, who were on leave and exploring in the north, inadvertently crossed the frontier into Thailand and were arrested by Thai authorities. The Japanese could have used their presence in Thailand as a violation of its neutrality and entered Thailand themselves. Axis propaganda suggested that they would be so justified.⁹⁰ Official statements declared the men guilty merely of carelessness but speculation since has suggested that they were indeed spying out the land on behalf of Malayan defence.⁹¹ Varley, however, said that they were not. Fuller remembered him “practically jumping with rage that two of his officers should have caused such furore.”⁹² The danger resulting from heightened international tension soon subsided. Only a week later Bennett, in touch with the Australian Government about the affair, intimated to Taylor that Crago and

⁸⁶ Mullins, *Birth of a Battalion: A History of the 2/18th Battalion*, unpaginated.

⁸⁷ John McGrory, interview, 13 July 2000.

⁸⁸ Colin Spence, interview, 3 May 2000.

⁸⁹ John Fuller, photograph No. 111 in diarized photograph album, Vol.2.

⁹⁰ Wigmore, *Japanese Thrust*, p.73.

⁹¹ Timothy Hall, *The Fall of Singapore*, Melbourne, 1990, pp.29-30.

⁹² John Fuller, interview with the author, 1990.

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Warden would not be returned to Australia.⁹³ Instead Crago and Warden returned to the battalion to face their Commanding Officer, a more daunting prospect!

It seems that Varley was also outraged by the results of an accident that he believed reflected poorly on the battalion's image. Fuller, in his role as battalion sports officer, accompanied the 2/18th Battalion Boxing Team to a tournament in Malacca. Although the road system on the western side of the Malayan peninsula was extensive, drivers criticised the roads themselves. As one driver wrote, "Even the most important highways here are...besides being narrow...either banked the wrong way or not at all at the corners."⁹⁴ Accidents were, if not commonplace, certainly not unusual. Colonel Derham, ADMS (Assistant Director Medical Services) Malaya, had suggested in a medical appreciation to AHQ Melbourne that car sickness was a contributing factor in transport accidents.⁹⁵ The lorry in which the 2/18th Battalion boxing team travelled skidded on the wet road and overturned, damaging all the occupants, except Fuller, to a greater or lesser extent. Several hours later, patched and rested, some of the men decided they would still fight. Fuller recorded that, "Our three lads did well considering what had happened, getting one win and two draws." Varley, however, was less impressed by the men's fortitude and success than he was irritated by the image they had presented. He was annoyed that the accident occurred, concerned for the injured men, and angry at the public appearance of damaged men in a damaged vehicle representing his battalion. He targeted the driver. Fuller recalled: "Varley berated the driver. I had to intercede for him. It was an accident."⁹⁶

For Varley, the preservation of the battalion's good name and reputation was paramount. Early in October the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, came to inspect the new 2/18th Battalion Army Camp at Mersing. The new, hatted camp had

⁹³ Harold Taylor, diary entry, 3 June 1941, AWM 3DRL/1892.

⁹⁴ Gordon Cruickshank, letter, dated 3 February 1942 but probable date 3 January 1942, AWM PR00077.

⁹⁵ Derham, medical appreciation 3 April 1941, AWM54 553/2/ 1.

⁹⁶ John Fuller, interview with author, June 1990.

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been built with Military Defence money and civilian labour. Varley's officers made certain that Brooke-Popham would not realise the significance of the burned patch of ground in Headquarter Company's lines where the sergeants' "shed" had once stood. A number of men detailed to clean up duty were ordered to build on it a bonfire of unwanted timber. The subterfuge was successful: the Commander-in-Chief showed no interest as he passed.⁹⁷

Good relations between officers and troops were essential to the smooth operation of the battalion. They were equally important among the officers themselves, (who included in their number the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO), Dr Sandy Barrett, and the 2/18th Battalion padre, Rev William Fleming). The success of Varley's commission had always depended on the appointment of his officers and his original choice of Charles Assheton as his 2IC had been a masterstroke. Battalion officers believed they would feel the loss of Assheton keenly, for himself but also for his organisational skills. One of his successes, according to the battalion magazine, was the happy *esprit de corps* that existed in the Officers' Mess.⁹⁸ Assheton had instigated the presentation of the Oxo Shield during Formal Mess Evenings which were held on Wednesdays. Its presentation contributed continuity, excitement and humour. Alan Loxton remembered, "Wednesday night was fun night." The shield itself was a trophy that had been "souvenired" from a golf club during one of the Narellan Officers Training Schools. It was presented to Assheton "on account of his promotion" at his farewell party, an event recorded by Fuller in a letter home:

Last night we had a big "beano" in the mess—a send off to Charlie Assheton. All of us are terribly sorry to lose him. He is a wonderful organizer and a great chap all round. He will probably go a long way before this war is over. I have always got on wonderfully well with him. The 2/20th are very lucky. The party

⁹⁷ *Men May Smoke*, Vol.1, No.7, October 1941, unpaginated; Col Spence, interview, 10 January 2002.

⁹⁸ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

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last night was very wild. Charlie Assheton received the Oxo shield for the last time, the "shout" of course being on him on account of his promotion.⁹⁹

Normally, the officers awarded the shield to whichever member of the Mess they judged, in Loxton's polite phrase, "to have told the tallest story or whatever."¹⁰⁰ Loxton never received it but Fuller did. Varley had evidently tested his specialist knowledge of mortars which, in itself, was an indictment of the military authorities that a trained unit had come overseas with little or no practical experience in having fired its weapons. The OC Mortars, because he had none with which to practice, could only imagine his ammunition (see Chapter Four). No wonder then that his efforts at so doing were deemed worthy of the Oxo Shield.¹⁰¹ Fuller wrote:

Yesterday the CO was trying to tie me up by shooting questions at me about my Mortars. I had an answer for every question. Imagining ammunition etc. seemed to come from thin air—or rather I produced them from thin air. Anyhow the effort evidently was deemed the Oxo Shield and I was duly presented with same...¹⁰²

The battalion magazine claimed that their mess became a "veritable home from home" for the officers.¹⁰³ However, although Wednesday nights could be designated as "fun", junior officers, particularly, had little other time for wholehearted enjoyment. Among the troops was a belief that they worked while officers enjoyed privileges. Certainly this was true in part but young officers in particular also worked hard and often for longer hours in order to complete their duties.

⁹⁹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 7 August 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Loxton, interview, 27 August 1999.

¹⁰¹ "Oxo", the brand name for beef stock or bouillon cubes, was a fitting name for a trophy awarded to an officer of the 2/18th Battalion who was judged to have produced the most or best bullshit on any particular occasion.

¹⁰² John Fuller, letter to his parents, 20 March 1941.

¹⁰³ *Men May Smoke*, Final Edition of the 2/18th Battalion AIF Magazine, June 1948, p.14.

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Both officers and men often battled to finish their work. In Australia Private Merton Short had once complained that a sergeant had threatened him with an AWL (Absence Without Leave) charge because he was late for a duty. “He was lucky to get me at all as I was detailed for three different duties at the one time.”¹⁰⁴ Failure to show up resulted in confinement to barracks or, as it was popularly known, “CB”. Every man at some stage felt overwhelmed by the duties to which he was assigned, a sensation Raymond Colenso described in verse.

...Even carefree soldiers,
Have a reason to complain,
I mean the many duties
That follow in a chain.
Some of them are easy,
But most of them are bad
They must think I like them...
When they post the duties,
I'm always on the list,
Even though my turn is past,
My name is never missed...
I soldier on without complaint
But inwardly I moan...¹⁰⁵

For the officer, the performance and completion of his every duty were both voluntary and obligatory (given that in accepting his commission he had undertaken such responsibility.) Officers wrote letters home offering apologies for the brevity of their letters, saying that they were tired or had been busy, but rarely complaining. Nevertheless, Lieutenant

¹⁰⁴ Merton Short, letter to his parents, June 1940, undated.

¹⁰⁵ Raymond Colenso, “Duties”, in *Poems from the Frontline*, p.41, AWM PR00689.

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Mosher's explosion in a letter to his wife was an indication of the demands made on their time after a full day's work:

This damned Army will drive me mad. Last night of course is a censorship night and all junior officers are usually involved in a mad rush with mail... Time and time again I've asked that Monday and Thursday nights be left vacant for us, but nobody pays attention. Late last night it was decided that we would entertain an artillery mob, i.e. everyone stays in the mess whether he wants to or not. Then John Edgeley [OC D Coy] decided to give the NCOs a lecture on camouflage. He decided also that officers would attend in spite of the fact that we heard the Div expert talking on the subject a fortnight ago. I tried to squib the entertainment but apparently everyone else did too so we were rounded up. I got away at 2300...¹⁰⁶

Censorship was, of course, the bane of a junior officer's existence. On another occasion when war appeared certain, Mosher wrote in appalled wonder:

In the past I've had to battle with anything up to 20 letters for censorship but today I have done 260... In addition to that 260 there are at least 80 which I am not touching tonight...

Officers accepted that censoring letters was a necessary evil, loathing the imposition as they dealt with the troops' letters and each other's. Among the troops, however, there was resentment that their letters could not be private. The right to privacy in one's correspondence was a citizen's right and its loss to military regulations was heartfelt.

Spence recalled:

¹⁰⁶ Ken Mosher, letter to his wife, 4 November 1941.

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They were censored by your own platoon officer. To think I would be writing to my wife and there's a whippersnapper of twenty censoring it. They used to put their initials on the bottom....My father died...I wrote my letter to my mother and in my first paragraph I stated what it was about. And then I put it in [A Coy Captain] Jack Vernon's box. He wasn't my platoon officer. And he did not initial it. I saw him after the war and I thanked him.¹⁰⁷

Receiving mail was always a high point in every soldier's existence. As Private Leo McCosker commented, "Mail day is a day that is looked forward to by everyone. There is always a big commotion when A Company mail is called out. There's a lot of eager faces appear from all angles..."¹⁰⁸ When the mail was delayed, however, gloom descended on the battalion:

I believe some people at home were very upset at not hearing from their lads over here. Let me tell you that the boys are much more upset when the mail comes with nothing for them. You have no idea how disappointed they are.¹⁰⁹

When letters and parcels arrived, spirits lifted and morale received a boost. Even the basic parcels sent by the 2/18th Battalion Comforts Fund were very gratefully received. "People's generosity in sending parcels is appreciated more than it is possible to describe," wrote Darlington.¹¹⁰ News from home about home mattered enormously. In return, the men wrote letters in their spare time. For those men with private means or for those whose salaries were being "made up" by their former employers in order to ensure their loyalty and eventual return, the cost of a stamp for a letter weighing half an ounce, although notably high at 9d, was not a problem. But for the men whose total income was their pay,

¹⁰⁷ Colin Spence, interview, January 2002.

¹⁰⁸ Leo McCosker, letter to his mother, 22 April 1941.

¹⁰⁹ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 9 March 1941.

¹¹⁰ Jim Darlington, letter to Mrs Mosher, 20 November 1941.

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and particularly for those married men who had assigned most of their pay to their wives and families, the cost was exorbitant. They had other ongoing costs to cover as well—1/3d was deducted from their paybooks each week to cover the cost of laundry and 3/- a month for haircuts. Nevertheless, they wrote their letters, found enough money to pay for paper and stamps, and eagerly awaited return mails.

Consequently the series of articles about the Australian soldiers in Malaya published in the *Australian Women's Weekly* had a devastating impact on the troops' morale. Media scrutiny was not new to the 22nd Brigade which had been in the public eye from the day it arrived in Singapore. It was inevitable given its posting in peaceful Malaya that the troops' performance would be gauged by a variety of correspondents, some less qualified than others. The *Australian Women's Weekly* sent Miss Adele Shelton Smith to report "direct to its thousands of women readers just how their menfolk are faring."¹¹¹ Shelton Smith freely admitted that she had no military expertise and even a cursory reading of the articles reveals both her pride in the Australian soldiers and her patriotic and "friendly" intentions. Both the AIF and Shelton Smith were to blame for the furore that followed. The AIF feted her, staged performances for her, and posed for her photographer. She believed that she had seen the men training in the jungle and in the rubber plantations; that the food that they ate regularly was the food that she ate when she was with them; that they could visit the exotic city of Singapore as she could; and that they danced in the dance halls as she did. Shelton Smith, enjoying every moment of her visit (or so her stories suggest) remained insensitive throughout to both the realities of the troops' everyday lives and to the plight of many of their wives left behind in Australia. Some of these women suffered real hardship. Staff Sergeant (Quartermaster Stores) Richard Jones's daughter remembered that year in her childhood:

¹¹¹ *Australian Women's Weekly*, Vol.8, No.43, 29 March 1941, p.9.

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We—my mother, my brother and I—moved five times in that year. Nobody wanted to rent a room to a woman with two small children. We were never allowed to stay...¹¹²

Men did recognise that their wives coped with difficulties far worse than their own and did so alone. An officer, whose child was born after he arrived in Malaya, wrote:

I may feel just a little homesick, but I realise it is you that is doing the big job and I know how much harder it is for you at home than it is for me. I have so much company and great pals, one has not much time to be lonely.¹¹³

Even before the *Australian Women's Weekly* series appeared, emotions in the 2/18th Battalion were raw, exacerbated by articles that appeared during March in Sydney newspapers.¹¹⁴ An angry Fuller wrote:

I believe the *Truth* has been referring to us as "overseas militia" and "glamour boys". Everyone here is very hostile. This place is hard enough to put up with without having things like that published at home. It's not our damn fault. I didn't join up for this.¹¹⁵

Now in April and May, in response to Adele Shelton Smith's articles, resentful wives wrote angry letters to their startled husbands, many of whom had not yet been granted more than afternoon leave since their arrival and who, having assigned most of their pay to their wives, could not afford to buy extras at the canteen. They had never even seen Adele Shelton Smith nor she them, but the whole affair caused extra stresses in marriages that were already pressured by separation. Colenso expressed the bitterness and dawning

¹¹² Mrs Patricia Mostyn, telephone interview, 19 August 2004.

¹¹³ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 2 March 1941.

¹¹⁴ The relevant article could not be found in Sydney *Truth* during March 1941. It may have been in another city's edition or even in another publication altogether.

¹¹⁵ John Fuller, letter to his mother, 23 March 1941.

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cynicism that the men felt in some pithy stanzas entitled, in a play on Miss Smith's initials, "ASS":

Because of women waiting
For news of men abroad,
[Reporters] paint a perfect picture,
The truth, it is ignored.
They create a wrong impression,
It's sure to boost their sales,
Though truth may be stranger
Lies make the better tales.

Our unit never saw her,
Our camp was far from town,
Think of the discomfort
In a weary travel down.
Now she's back in Aussie,
We'd like to be there, too.
She goes on writing falsehoods,
There's nothing we can do.¹¹⁶

Perhaps it was fortunate for Smith that she had returned to Australia. The 2/18th Battalion developed a new wariness of visitors that did not quite evaporate even when Betty Bryant, star of *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, arrived. Her visit to the battalion is recorded in detail in Fuller's photograph album—she visited and posed for photographs with the men, among whom were some of her old school friends, before lunching with the officers. Although she was quite charming, one officer at least remained unmoved: "I am

¹¹⁶ Raymond Colenso, "ASS", in *Poems from the Frontline*, p.53, AWM PR00689.

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JOHN FULLER'S DIARISED PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM—
FILM STAR BETTY BRYANT VISITED THE 2/18TH BATTALION
IN JUNE 1941



Source: John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 2.

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wondering if she will go back with stories, photographs etc like that Smith woman we had over here.”¹¹⁷

In fact Miss Bryant’s visit was carefully orchestrated by the authorities who were intent on erasing memories of Miss Smith. Bennett had acceded to requests for broadcasts given by Australian soldiers about the conditions in which they worked. Betty Bryant was included in the first of these broadcasts because her presence was expected to arouse interest and because she had an attractive voice but at all times the content was controlled and satisfactory to the AIF.¹¹⁸ Another eminent visitor to the battalion at the end of July was Sir Hubert Wilkins, the explorer, for whom the Mortar Platoon put on a special demonstration using live ammunition for the first time in Malaya. Lesser dignitaries visited from time to time as well as a variety of military “top brass” of different nationalities and Australian politicians including Senator Foll, who came with a party of journalists in August¹¹⁹ and Sir Earle Page, who was *en route* to London in September.¹²⁰ The 2/18th Battalion had plenty of practice at entertaining in its ambassadorial role.

The general response from the 2/18th Battalion to the magazine and newspaper articles that appeared in Australia was bitter. Although the mood of the men calmed, they continued to describe themselves, in self-deprecating fashion, as “glamour boys”. Moreover, while the consequences of the *Australian Women’s Weekly* series were extraordinarily hurtful and in some cases damaged relationships or were believed to have done so, the men had been concerned by their presence in Malaya from the outset.

However, at all times the 2/18th battalion operated smoothly, each soldier fulfilling his prescribed role. While its reputation might be battered by the written word,

¹¹⁷ George McLaughlin, letter to his wife, 8 June 1941.

¹¹⁸ Lionel Wigmore, letter to Australian Army Headquarters, Melbourne, NAA MP729/6 31/8/13.

¹¹⁹ Senator Foll was the Minister for Information in Menzies’ government during 1941.

¹²⁰ Sir Earl Page, former Prime Minister (for 19 days in 1939) had been appointed the Australian Representative on the British War Council, a post he held 1941-1942.

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THE VISIT OF EXPLORER SIR HUBERT WILKINS

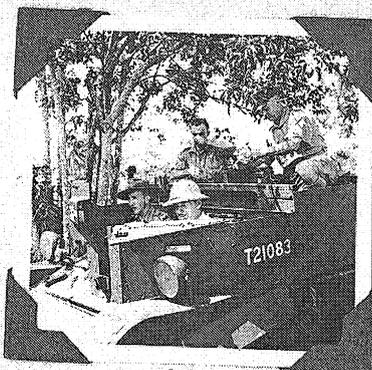
MARAYA — July 1941

— THE VISIT OF SIR HUBERT WILKINS —

One day in July we were visited by Sir Hubert Wilkins, the famous explorer. He lunched on the mess & afterwards had a look at the carriers & the motor.



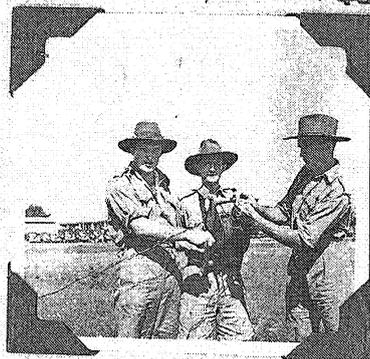
28 Lt. Col. Parry & Sir Hubert.



29 Sir H.W. in a Bush Carrier with Fred Evans & The Co.



30 Sir H.W., Fred, The Co. & Pte Macdonald (Fred's ex-badman).



31 Paul Walker, Doug Brooker & Don Eddy.

Source: John Fuller's diarised photograph album Volume 3.

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its function was, and remained, unimpaired. Until the end of July 1941 it continued to train on the western side of the Malayan Peninsula. In August, Bennett undertook responsibility for the defence of the state of Johore by the AIF. At Mersing, the work of the 2/18th Battalion was, at last, purpose driven. Varley demanded from his troops a high level of efficiency and productivity. Discipline, training and spirit combined to ensure that this was maintained. Despite the hard work, the mood of soldiers lightened. Although, in Malaya, the battalion was at all times subject to scrutiny and assessment by those who might or might not have been qualified to judge its performance, external criticism was essentially immaterial to it. During twelve months in Malaya the battalion had to face and deal with numerous challenges, some of which had been anticipated and others that had surprised. Nevertheless, the real focus of its members was on the ultimate test of the battlefield. There, its achievements or otherwise would depend upon the level of strength, commitment, skill and stamina that could be generated by its network of co-ordinated and co-operative individual soldiers, each fulfilling his prescribed role.