

# Ordeal

## AT PORTON

BY DONALD LAWIE

*An attempt to outflank the Japanese on Bougainville toward the end of the  
Second World War went terribly wrong*

**I**n June 1945, in the north of Bougainville, Japanese troops occupied the narrow Bonis Peninsula. Australians of the 3rd Division held a line about eight kilometres along the peninsula's base, from Ratsua to Ruri Bay. The Japanese defence was strong, so the Australians decided to

outflank them by landing a small force on the coast behind the Japanese line.

The assault force was a reinforced company from 31st/51st Battalion, led by Captain Henry Clyde Downs – a total of 190 men in six landing craft. Just before 4 am on 8 June, the first wave of three landing craft

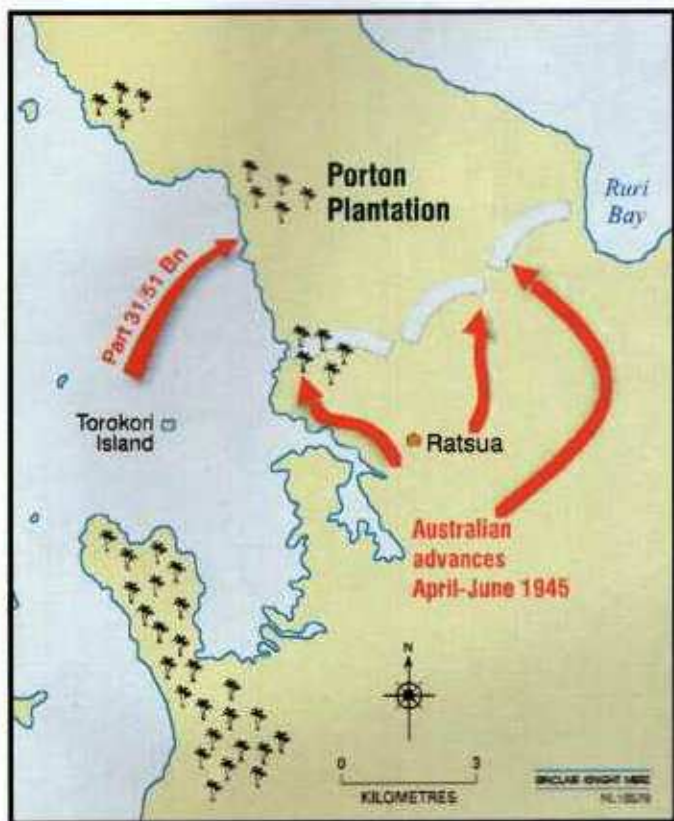
approached the shore. The chosen landing place was Porton Plantation, five kilometres north of Ratsua. The first craft grounded on the coral reef in the dark, 50 metres from shore and north of the intended jetties. The men waded ashore undetected and set up a perimeter 100 metres wide and deep, before sending out reconnaissance patrols.

At 4.30 am, the second wave of landing craft, laden with heavy weapons and stores, grounded on the coral 75 metres from shore. Unloading had hardly commenced when the Japanese opened heavy machine-gun fire on the barges. All the stores had to be left behind as the men waded ashore under fire.

As daylight broke it became apparent that the Australians faced far more Japanese opposition than had been expected. The Japanese had anticipated a seaborne assault and prepared the Porton area's defences.

**An aerial view** of the peninsula in the Soraken area on which Porton Plantation was located.  
AWM P02729.009





A system of pillboxes was well sited, and reinforcements could be rapidly brought up from the Buka Passage area.

The Australians found they had to maintain a fighting defence, all the while cut off from their mortars, machine-guns, reserve ammunition, and rations in the two barges stranded offshore. Any attempt to approach the barges was stopped by fire from the pillboxes, which were hidden underground bunkers, lined with earth-filled oil drums and roofed with iron topped by coconut tree logs.

The Australians had two factors working for them: artillery supremacy and command of the skies. Lieutenant D.F. Spark, of 2/4th Field Regiment, had come ashore with the first wave, and as soon as it was light he organised accurate artillery fire. The 31st/51st Battalion had previously operated with this regiment and a strong bond of trust existed between them. The soldiers reckoned that the gunners could "drive a nail into a post" with their 25-pounders, and so had no hesitation in calling down fire almost on top of their positions. In addition, F4U Corsairs flew tactical missions above Porton, bombing, strafing, and also spotting for the artillery.

The company held their established perimeter throughout the day. Probing patrols that were sent out discovered just how close the Japanese were. That night, Captain Downs made further attempts to unload the stores, but every move towards the barges resulted in heavy fire and the supplies had to be abandoned.

At dawn the next morning, Downs appraised the situation: his men had only their personal weapons,



Artillery support was crucial to the success of the Australian withdrawal from Porton Plantation. Australians of E Troop, 12th Battery, 4th Field Regiment, prepare to fire their 25-pounder at Japanese positions. AWM 092785

they were short of ammunition and food, were taking casualties and faced an increasing number of well-supplied enemy troops. Withdrawal was the only answer, and so arrangements were made by radio to recover the force that evening.

In an admirable fighting extraction, three LC15 barges hit the beach and, under intense fire, loaded first the wounded, then the soldiers. Within five minutes the barges were backing out to sea. But the now heavily-laden barges were unable to clear the coral reef. One just managed to scrape clear, but the other two



**ABOVE:** Men wounded during the evacuation from Porton Plantation begin their journey from the main dressing station to the hospital ship Stradbroke. AWM 093062

**BELOW:** These men from 42nd Landing Craft Company played a vital role in evacuating 31st/51st Infantry Battalion troops from Porton Plantation. AWM 093132





A formation of six Royal New Zealand Air Force F4U Corsairs in flight over Bougainville in 1945. Corsairs flew in support of the Australians at Porton. AWM OG2067

stuck fast. After more than five hours of duelling with the Japanese, a second barge managed to break free on the rising tide and escape. But the third was holed below the waterline and half-filled with water. It held 60 men, of whom 12 were wounded. The barge was fired on throughout the night, and enemy soldiers swam out to try to lob grenades on board. Sharpshooters kept them from getting close, but a phosphorus grenade exploded, causing casualties, and in the ensuing confusion some men were lost overboard, including Captain Downs. A lone Japanese who swam out and unsuccessfully tried to trick the men into showing themselves by calling out in English was taken by a shark as he returned to shore.

The men remained on the barge throughout 10 June, protected by artillery fire and the Corsairs. Attempts to take them off by other armoured LC15s were frustrated by concentrated machine-gun fire. Beaufort bombers dropped life rafts near the barge but the men were unable to reach them and they floated away. After dark, more Japanese tried to swim out to the craft but they too were shot. However, the situation on board was desperate. Private W.J. Crawford later recalled:

*The intense heat of the day, fatigue and exposure, plus the fact that we had not slept for three days and nights, was beginning to take effect. Men often collapsed due to utter exhaustion, a few were delirious. Men were half deaf from the continual explosion of bombs, shells and machine-gun fire.*

At 1 am, a determined Japanese soldier managed to climb on board and open fire, killing two of the occupants and wounding others before he was cut down. Shortly after this, the Japanese opened fire with an anti-tank gun. It got away only two rounds before being silenced by artillery, but these tore off the stern, exposing the craft's interior.

The final rescue attempt came a few hours later. Under constant artillery cover, three assault boats managed to reach the barge and take off all those still alive. Some managed to swim to safety, one man covering a distance of some 5,500 metres – nearly to Torokori Island – all the while helping a non-swimmer. Of the 190 men in the initial assault, 23 had been killed and 109 wounded.

The Porton position remained in Japanese hands until the end of the war. Today it is a wasteland, strewn with the debris from this desperate engagement. General Blamey thought the action "one of the most stirring episodes" he had ever heard of, while Lt Gen Savage stated that "the bravery of the men in the Porton operation had not been surpassed by Australian troops in either World War 1 or World War 2".

As a lasting memorial to the men lost in this action, the headquarters of 51st Battalion, Far North Queensland Regiment, is named Porton Barracks.

#### AUTHOR

Donald Lawie is a retired pharmacist and amateur historian who served with the Citizen Military Forces 1959–69.