BB 60¢
AN ORIGINAL BALLANTINE BOOK U5019

DAVID FORREST

A SUPERB NOVEL OF FIGHTING MEN IN THE SAVAGE JUNGLE WARFARE OF NEW GUINEA □

THE LAST BLUE SEA

"If there is weakness in a man, the night will find it..."

The night was complete, so that if a man opened his eyes or closed them, there was no difference. Ron Fisher was awake, for it was his turn to watch, while Corporal Thorn slept beside him in the pit.

A few feet away in the darkness, a Japanese soldier was crawling toward him, delicately disarming the hair-trigger tripwires of the grenades.

A piece of mud fell off the bank and splashed in the water. The sound drove Fisher up from the pit, swinging the heavy timber in his hands. Driven by his bulging shoulders, driven by reflex, the timber cut through the night, smashing into bone, smashing bone into splinters.

You broke his legs! He's down on his back! He can't move. He can't even cry.

Kill him!

He drove the timber upon legs again. Upon ribs, caving in a chest. Smash it all up. Smash it and smash it and smash it . . .

For a complete catalogue of Ballantine Books write in care of Dept. C.S., Ballantine Books, Inc., 101 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, 10003

THE LAST BLUE SEA

DAVID FORREST

Ballantine Books *New York*

Copyright © 1964 by David Forrest

Printed in the United States of America

First Ballantine Printing December 1964

Ballantine Books, Inc., 101 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y., 10003

All incidents, situations, military units, and all but one of the characters in this book are fictitious. The scene is incidental, being the best one I could find to serve as a background.

To avoid digressions, a word of explanation is necessary here respecting the wartime conscript-volunteer structure of the army. In the Australian Army this structure was very complicated. Suffice for this story to say that the cynics recognized three categories of soldiers: A.I.F., Chockos, and Rainbows.

A.I.F. (Australian Imperial Force) were volunteers, including militiamen who transferred before the end of 1942.

Militiamen (Chocolate Soldiers, Chockos) were mostly wartime conscripts, led by a mixture of pre-war militia officers and N.C.O.'s, and of A.I.F. officers with overseas battle experience during 1940-41.

Rainbows were militiamen who transferred to the A.I.F. after 1942 and who were almost invariably retained in their militia units.

The Chocko War, the bitter discord between the A.I.F. and the Militia, began in Liverpool Camp near Sydney in October, 1939, and could be deemed to have finished about October, 1944.

This story alters historical and geographical fact, but I trust that what remains is the spirit of the Army of New Guinea; a spirit embodied in the person of the late Damien Parer, who is the one real-life character to appear in these pages.

It is to Parer that this book is dedicated.

THE CHARACTERS TO BEGIN THE STORY:

David Wilson . . . Lieutenant-Colonel, Commanding Officer of the battalion, the battalion having a Headquarter Company (Q Store, Signals, Mortars, etc.) and four rifle companies: A, B, C, D.

Neil Howard . . . Captain, Officer Commanding A Company, the company having three platoons: One, Two, Three.

Desmond O'Grady . . . Lieutenant, Commander Three Platoon, the platoon having a *Platoon Sergeant,*

Ralph Townsend . . . and three sections: Seven, Eight, Nine.

Edward Thorn . . . Corporal, Commander (Leader) Nine Section, the section comprising eight privates:

Robert Horatio "The Admiral" Nelson, an Owen gunner.

Ronald Fisher, a Bren gunner.

Frank "Mitch" Mitchell
Peter Mitchell } twins, riflemen.

"Carnal Knowledge", a rifleman.

Jack "Nervous" Lincoln, a rifleman.

Timothy Lalor, a rifleman.

"Old Miserable", an Owen gunner.

A major-general; a brigadier; a brigade major; a padre; adjutants; sergeant-majors; signalmen; mortar-men; surgeons; medical orderlies; sundry officers; Eric Parker, a Salvation Army man; Damien Parer, a cameraman; George, a native; Ardarit, a native; native carriers; A.I.F. soldiers; Commandos; and Chocolate Soldiers.

The enemy held the coastline, and commanded the sea. Therefore, the army approached by land, over the ranges: over the Owen Stanleys, over the Kupers, over the Finisterres. There was no other way.

Black and razor-backed, wet and rotting, confined in choking jungle, buried in fogs and cloud, the ranges rose into the sky. Under the jungle, upon the mud and the putrefaction, the sun had never shone.

Across the ranges climbed the great Trails . . . the Kokoda, and the Missim, and others without name.

Always, at the end, they came down to the sea, and when one had fought the enemy there and killed him, then one reached the sea, so that to do this became an unbearable yearning, and the sea a symbol.

For then a man was free again, granted an extension of life. And always, there was another sea beyond the ranges, and life again; seas without number, and one knew that beyond them all was a sea that no one had ever seen.

It was somewhere in the future, cool and sparkling and incredibly blue. It was cleansed of all evil, and no storm troubled its glory. Its waves sang, and the winds caressed it, and the sun shone upon it, and there, when that one had been reached, there was no more war.

For this was the last blue sea. . . .

THE DEEP BLUE SEA

One

THE natives were singing softly in the dusk when Colonel Wilson came to Poppendetta on the Papuan plain in Eastern New Guinea. It was different from the time before, and now one would never know that across the plain, fourteen miles away, were the swamps of Gona and Buna and Sanananda. In the twilight, there was only the singing of the Papuans, and the silence of the eight thousand dead men beyond the swamps.

He saluted in the dusk to a Staff Officer and proceeded immediately to the Map Room where a lieutenant he knew slightly was working from a pile of messages and reports, translating them into visual presentation on the great wall-map.

As the man worked, the meaning of the days to come began to emerge on the map as a sculpture emerges under the hands of an artist. The lieutenant worked with meticulous speed and presently Wilson found himself slipping into harmony with the sea and the land and the stern orders of the Supreme Command.

On the right of the map, to the east of the Solomon Sea, spread the islands of the lovely names, San Christoval and Ysabel, Choiseul and Vella Lavella. The lieutenant's hands, working on the map, sketched the death-sentence for three of them in the dawn . . . Rendova and Munda and New Georgia.

On the left of the map, to the west of the Solomon Sea, was the coast of New Guinea, running north-west to the plain of Papua with Poppendetta in its forest.

Inland, along the spine of New Guinea, stand the immense jungle ranges; and beyond the plain of Papua, great broken detachments of them stretch out, black and

monstrous, almost to the sea itself. To the north of them, guarded by them, almost surrounded by them, nestles Salamaua on a little peninsula, with the Solomon Sea on one side and Samoa Bay on the other.

The lieutenant did not lift his head from his work, "You understand, sir . . . all this information is Top Secret. . . ."

"Quite."

The lieutenant's hands drew swiftly on the map. His coloured pencils made neat squares and rectangles, numbers and arrows. His markings came to an end and he threw the last message into a tray.

"There you are, sir," he said, and tidied the messages into a pile. "How to take Salamaua in one easy lesson. You'll find the large-scale maps on that far wall."

"Thank you," said Wilson, and searched for an ash tray.

"You're commanding the Eighty-Third, are you, sir?"

"Yes," said Wilson, and was aware that the lieutenant saw the ribbons on his shirt and identified them one by one.

"They've never been in before, have they, sir?"

"First time in," said Wilson, and studied the way to Salamaua. He had found the place-names he sought and he said them softly to himself so that they might begin to have a meaning to him, "Wau . . . Bulwa . . . Missim . . . Bobdubi . . . Salamaua."

He said aloud, "Has this track a name?"

"The Missim Trail, sir."

Wilson said, "I thought all the trails to Salamaua went through Mubo."

"No, sir. The rest do, but the Missim's well to the north of them. It comes into Salamaua from the west, over the Kuper Ranges."

"Do the Japs know it's there?"

"That's the point, sir. They don't. That's what's Top Secret. Until Salamaua is over, the Missim Trail doesn't exist. The Nips will think you were smuggled in via one of the Mubo tracks. And that is impossible, which is why the Missim has been reopened."

"Reopened?" said Wilson.

He turned about to look at the lieutenant.

"As far as I can make out, sir," said the lieutenant, "until last April, nobody'd walked the Missim for twenty years."

He moved his finger along the broken black line on the map.

Broken black line . . . foot-track.

Where the line ran, it crossed the chocolate-coloured contour lines.

Every contour line equals fifty feet of altitude.

Where the lieutenant pointed, the contour lines grouped in tens and dozens and scores. Where Colonel Wilson's gaze came to rest, the contours massed in groups of fifties.

His eyes contracted and he began to search the map with a methodical urgency.

"How do we get the wounded out?"

"Do you remember Myola, sir?" said the lieutenant. "When you couldn't be carried, you walked."

Colonel Wilson said, "Myola . . ."

His eyes followed the line of the Missim Trail, to Missim, and Bobdubi, to Salamaua, and so to the sea.

"I saw the wounded from the Thirty-Ninth and the Second Fourteenth come down from Myola. I prayed that we would never have to do that again to any man."

He inspected the lieutenant. "This is going to be worse."

"That bit there, sir. The bit they call Double Mountain. It'll knock Myola silly."

Out on the plain, beyond the singing, was the silence by the swamps. The singing was a requiem in the Papuan night.

Or perhaps, thought Colonel Wilson, it is simply that the people have come home, and they are singing for the new dawn over Gona and Buna and Sanananda.

One day, soon, they will sing in Salamaua; and one day, over all New Guinea.

"I'll be away to see the G One," said Colonel Wilson.

. . .

Night came to Poppendetta and the singing died away. The rain fell, and the night passed by, and daylight came again.

Dawn came to the plain of Papua: to Myola and Kokoda and the Owen Stanleys in the south: and across the Papuan border, to Wau, in the broken highlands, where the Salamaua trails begin. The trails wind across the ranges, from Wau to Mubo, from Mubo to Salamaua.

Early in the morning, Colonel Wilson was driven out to the aerodrome from Corps Headquarters. He was sensitive to the unspoken implications in a Battalion Commander being summoned to Corps on the eve of a battle. They had told him that his battalion and a Commando squadron were to outflank Mubo by crossing the Missim Trail, but he had not come one hundred and forty miles simply to be told his orders. He did not have to be told that Corps had summoned him because they were concerned, about himself, or about his battalion, or about some feature of the coming battle. Whatever it was, it was not discussed, but he knew when he left Poppendetta that Corps had made up its mind on the subject. He was very quiet and sombre as he was driven over the last one of his battlefields to the aerodrome. He thought that he was setting out to his last battle of all.

The day progressed, and Colonel Wilson flew back to Wau; and in the melancholy mists of the Mubo hills, men fought all through that day with bayonet and grenade and machine-gun.

They fought, as the armies had always fought in New Guinea, with a personal hate that would have been recognised and understood only by the armies of the Russian steppes and by the British armies of the Burmese jungle.

On the soaring, miserable heights around the Mubo Gorge, the smoke of the grenades and the machine-guns augmented the mists, and sometimes, looking to the east, one saw the sea.

. . .

Yet so immense were the ranges, and so limitless the jungle, that the ranges and the jungle absorbed the sound of war as they have absorbed all their wounds inflicted by the hand of man; and the only evidence of battle which was perceptible in Wau was the strident chatter of Morse

Code in the Signal Office of the Headquarters of the First Australian Division.

Earlier in the day there had been other evidence of an indirect kind: an enemy reconnaissance bomber over Wau, a squadron of Allied bombers flying to Salamaua, a jeep-load of wounded men from the Mubo track. These had long vanished from view when Colonel Wilson arrived, and it was the Morse Code that he heard when he reported to Division.

On that day, shortly after noon, a young soldier was sitting cross-legged on a groundsheet beside his Bren gun. From his vantage point he commanded views of the hospital, the aerodrome and Divisional Headquarters; and across the river, the kunai-grassed heights of Wandumi Ridge.

When you go to Wau, he had been told, you must see Wandumi, for it was there that Sherlock and his one hundred men decided to fight for Wau against two thousand of the enemy: but Sherlock had been dead for four and a half months, and Wandumi was only one high ridge in a land of high ridges.

The war was not there, and the young soldier turned his eyes elsewhere. He had watchful, brown eyes, touched with a serene reserve, and whenever he took off his hat a curl of unruly brown hair fell down over his forehead. He lived with a quite unconscious assurance, a detachment which military martinets took to be insolence and they exercised their paucity of mind in reprisals.

His philosophy, if he had one, was little more than that the good of life eventually outweighed the bad.

His name was Ron Fisher and he was nineteen.

He had been the Bren gunner of Nine Section since the previous machine-gunner had deserted from the battalion on the first night of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Curiously, it was the silence of the Bulolo Valley that brought him a sense of the war and the sea, for then he was conscious of the extraneous signs and noises etched against the silence of the valley. High above him a squadron of fighter planes suddenly accelerated its speed, and, while he watched, the planes raced urgently away toward Mubo; so urgently that the straining howl of their engines came

down the sky to his ears and made his body tingle with a nameless quickening.

Then there was silence again, and Ron Fisher sat there quite still, and one would have thought that he was waiting for a sign, or perhaps a revelation of the war. He had known, since early morning, that for him there was only one way home from Wau, and that that was by marching to the sea. In the afternoon, he accepted the possibility that the sea was unattainable, and that he might be near the end of his life.

He waited for a revelation, for he had no way of knowing what was before him; and it occurred to him that his father had failed him in this respect, for his father had never said what was in *his* mind, on the day long ago, when the regiments of the Light Horse rode out of Egypt, to Gaza, and the Wells of Beersheba.

In the silence of noon some men sleep, and some men dream. Other men think of Beersheba, and other men play cards. In Nine Section of Three Platoon there were two packs of cards. One was a communal possession in the custody of Corporal Thorn. The other belonged to Robert Horatio Nelson, commonly known as the Admiral.

More so than did Ron Fisher, he knew that the past was gone. It was a closed chapter, to which no good deed could be added, from which no consequence of weakness could be subtracted. It was finished, with its aborted dreams, so he shuffled the cards of his pack slowly and watched the faces of the natives gathered about him; faces ugly and handsome, old and young, all with the unity of colour and expectant wonder.

"This one I will do for you," said the Admiral gently to the youngest native of all, and George, the one who spoke English, interpreted this honour, and from one of the Admiral's hands to the other the cards fell in the Great Waterfall. The eyes of the youngest native shone in wonder, and a sigh of the same emotion escaped upon the air from the gathering.

"And sometimes," said the Admiral, "water does silly things like running uphill."

And the cards flew in a flickering barrage from his lower hand to the other.

"When do you go to Salamaua?" said George.

"Today," said the Admiral, "or tomorrow."

George interpreted in pidgin English and in his own dialect, so that as many conversations broke out as there were dialects represented in the group. Then the process would reverse itself, until conversation moved once again along the channel of understanding between the Admiral and the interpreter.

"You go to Bulwa," said George, "and then you go to Missim over the big mountain."

The Admiral appeared to find a card in his hair and another behind his hand.

"Is it a very big mountain?" he asked.

"It is bigger than all the mountains of Salamaua," said George, and the Admiral's eyes roved, locating the native from whom this information had come.

"Oyez," said the Admiral, reaching forward slowly, and appeared to discover four cards in a lap-lap.

He was a lean, tall man of twenty-six, and when his mind activated itself, one saw in his eyes that he had a probing, critical mind not content to accept fact until proof was forthcoming.

He was an enigma to the men of Nine Section of Three Platoon, for he had been a schoolteacher, had revealed an ability to take reasoned decisions, and yet remained in the ranks. The Commander of Three Platoon, Lieutenant O'Grady, regarded these facts with ill-formulated suspicion.

Nelson's sombre, dark eyes could twinkle, quite unexpectedly, so that one realised that their frequent sobriety was little more than a mask, ready to be torn away by an unexpected word, or an action, or a thought. On occasion they sharpened with irony, an effect heightened by his black hair and a transient sardonic twist to the corners of his mouth.

And on occasion, the perceptive observed an aimlessness, as though the eyes dimmed with a sense of frustration, or, perhaps, lack of achievement.

Women found his dark eyes attractive, and men, on meeting him, fancied that here could be a friend. The men who found him an enigma resolved their quandary

by deciding he was a rebel, an intellectual rebel, which they found more attractive and glamorous than the rebellious stupidities of men who made their resistance to the army a physical one.

"Have you ever walked over the big mountain?" he asked, and produced cards from unlikely places.

"Long ago, when I was a piccaninny, men walked the Missim. But none since."

The Admiral brought his cards together again.

"Three moons ago, some white soldiers with green berets went to Bulwa and over the big mountain to Missim. They went to Bobdubi."

George added, "Japan is on Bobdubi."

The Admiral made a card disappear.

There is Missim, beyond the mountain, and then Bobdubi; and that is where the Salamaua trails converge, proceeding from there as the Komiatum Track along the river flats to Salamaua and the sea; and north and south, protecting the junction of the Missim and the Mubo trails, is the dark-green ridge of Bobdubi, protruding from the Mubo hills like a finger pointed outwards from a hand.

"There will be a great fight," said George, "on Bobdubi."

The Admiral found the card under his groundsheet.

"That is all," he said, and on an impulse gave the card to the youngest native, a gesture that caused all eyes to regard him alertly.

"You have children?" said George.

"No," said the Admiral, and the sombre mask screened his eyes again. "No, I haven't."

That was a part of the past, which was finished. Married at twenty-two, separated at twenty-three. No children. No home. Disillusion. Drift.

Perhaps, when we go home, I'll go and see Gloria again. Perhaps.

The natives regarded him uncertainly, and dispersed, leaving him alone.

As he walked past Corporal Thorne he said, "Got a job for you, Corporal. Go and take Bobdubi Ridge off the Nips so the A.I.F. can take Mubo."

"It'll have to wait until I have a leak," said Corporal Thorn.

The Admiral sat down beside Ron Fisher.

"The first time I ever saw you," said the Admiral, "I was the age you are now."

"Congratulations," said Ron Fisher, and added, "What brought that on?"

"You were doing what you're doing now. Contemplating the distance like a tribal elder in search of wisdom."

"I was thinking about Colonel Maitland," said Ron Fisher.

"The lowest form of life Australia's ever spewed up," said the Admiral authoritatively. "We've come a long way since those days."

"It's only a year ago."

"Some year," said the Admiral drily.

It was the year in which the nation discovered itself to be something less than perfect. Dogmas broke asunder and the pieces fell like hailstones in their capacity to hurt. It was the year in which a call to America for help was branded as disloyalty to the Throne, the year in which the Australian uniform rendered its wearer invisible to many women, most publicans and all taxi-drivers.

Along the Brisbane River and the shores of Sydney Harbour, substantial homes sold for a few hundred pounds while the owners of more modest dwellings dug air-raid trenches: on the Kokoda Trail one lonely militia battalion held up the Japanese for thirty-five days and nights, while men of another militia battalion deserted the battlefield so hastily that some of them ran over a wounded comrade, leaving him pulped and dead in the mud.

It was Australia's saddest, most dreadful and greatest year of all its history, and no Australian who lived in that year could ever be the same again.

For the Eighty-Third Battalion, it was a year that took it to the canefields east of Bundaberg, near the sands of Bargara Beach, on the first night of the Battle of the Coral Sea; and in the end to Wau, in the mountains of New Guinea, thirty miles by air, but over fifty miles by land, from Salamaua. It was the year in which the Eighty-Third

Battalion had a succession of five commanders; the year in which the Eighty-Third plumbed the depths of disillusionment and began to climb up again from where it had fallen.

"Some year," said the Admiral drily, and a solitary bomber flew high over Wau, leaving an uneven, droning noise in the air.

Two

THE sound of the bomber stirred Corporal Thorn's mind with a sense of misgiving. He lifted the hat off his face and although he did not sit up, his eyes began to search the sky with sharp precision.

He was a wiry, little man in his early thirties. He was a cheerful, unhandsome man with blue eyes, a red face, and a ridiculously crumpled nose which had been permanently bent to the left thirteen years earlier in a Melbourne dole-riot.

Now, as on that day, his eyes were not cheerful, but hard, hard as a gibber plain under a summer sun. The bomber glinted in the sunlight and flew directly over Wau once more. Thorn sat up and looked swiftly about at Nine Section.

Beside him, Peter Mitchell still held his text-book of German in front of him, but he was not reading. He was listening to the bomber. Thorn turned his head. Ron Fisher and the Admiral were staring up at the sky. The three men playing poker sat with their cards held in front of them, quite still, and their heads upturned, watching—like, Corporal Thorn thought with a sudden grin, a group of praying mantis at devotions.

The remaining two men of Nine Section were not in sight.

"That's him back again," said Peter Mitchell.

Corporal Thorn said critically, "I wonder when his mates turn up."

"I'll hit 'em with the book," said Peter.

"Yair," said Thorn. "You'll be down in that ditch over there. Corporal Thorn will be with you."

"Where are you going?"

"Over to talk to the Admiral."

"Ask him what the German is for 'pyjamas'."

Thorn said, "Are you going to carry them books over the Missim?"

"There's only two of them," said Peter Mitchell stiffly. "They're not very big."

Thorn shrugged. "It's your back'll be carrying them."

"That's right," said Peter Mitchell.

Peter Mitchell was barely twenty, and an orphan, with a queer stubborn streak which Corporal Thorn could never quite reconcile with Mitchell's easy grin and wide strong mouth. Peter Mitchell was of medium height, and stocky, like Ron Fisher, but where Fisher's shoulders sloped and were almost ungainly, his were wider and more square.

The trouble with you, thought Corporal Thorn, is you were in that orphanage too long. You got stubborn having to stand up to The Hand of Man and all Its Works; like me and me cops.

Corporal Thorn scratched his crumpled nose, stared up at the bomber again, and when he walked away revealed by his gait that he was bow-legged; a characteristic that made him the subject of an immortal army couplet which begins, "Behold! What manner of man is this . . ."

"Where is everybody?" said the Admiral. "Bend your knees out a bit more and sit down."

"All eyeing off our mate up there," said Thorn, jerking a thumb toward the sky. "Except Lalor, and I suppose he's chasing butterflies. And Carnal, of course, but he just gives me the sturks."

The Admiral said, "Carnal is young, and handsome and virile. And you are just a broken-down old battler off the Track. Jealousy is your main trouble, Teddy."

"I'm just married," said Corporal Thorn.

He watched the bomber fly away, and silence returned to the Bulolo Valley.

He said, "Remember what I said this morning. If he brings his mates back, everybody into that ditch beside the dump."

The Admiral said darkly, "Someone better go and round up Carnal and the Butterfly Man."

"Who, Lalor?"

"Timothy James Lalor."

Thorn said, "I wish to God he'd forget his butterflies for a while and try and clean his rifle."

The Admiral said, "I wish he was a thousand miles away."

"I'll go and fetch him," said Ron Fisher, and rose to his feet.

Thorn said, "I wonder who the animal was who called him up?"

"Who was the animal of a quack who passed him A One?" said the Admiral.

"There should be a Hell for those blokes. A special reserved corner of it for them."

"On three or four thousand a year," said the Admiral, "I daresay Hell can be made quite comfortable."

* * *

"The Admiral said to give you this," said Ron Fisher. and handed Peter Mitchell a piece of paper with a word written on it. "Ted also said not to go too far from the ditch."

"Nobody'll get me away from here, you can bet on that," said Peter, and examined the piece of paper, "Schlafanzug."

"What's that?"

"Pyjamas."

Air-raids . . . Colonel Maitland . . . Lalor . . . Salamaua . . . pyjamas.

Ron Fisher felt there was an incongruity about the pyjamas, or perhaps it was that different people had different perspectives of warfare.

He said aloud, "Seen Carnal?"

Peter said, "He was here about five minutes ago. Moanin' about the last great natural monastery left on earth. New Guinea, he means."

"That's one of the penalties of being a hero," said Ron Fisher comfortably.

"It doesn't seem to bother *you,*" said Peter.

"I'm like Lalor," said Ron Fisher with rare candour. "My next'll be my first."

Peter said cautiously, "I don't think Lalor would know where to find it."

"No, there's nothing wrong with me, but," said Ron Fisher, "bit slow off the mark, that's all. I'll turn into a stayer."

He added, "Seen Lalor?"

Peter said mildly, "Are you serious?"

"What do you mean? Am I serious? I'm looking for him."

Peter said, "I thought everybody knew where he was. He's over there in the ditch."

Ron Fisher said, "What's he doing over there?"

"Waiting for the air-raid. He's been there ever since that bomber turned up the first time. Don't get me wrong. He's just being cautious."

There was a quite fantastic silence.

"But," said Ron Fisher, and stopped. With patent negligence, he sauntered to the edge of the ditch and stood looking down at Lalor. Lalor was reading an old newspaper.

Tim?

What are you going to do, Tim, when the bombers *do* come? What are you going to do when we go to Salamaua? Are *you* going to stay on Bobdubi Ridge, filling magazines for me when I'm too busy emptying them?

Bob and Ted are right. You've got two legs and two arms and a head. You must have, else the quacks would have noticed it and kept you out of the infantry. And it's not funny at all, and I'm scared, because you're Number Two on the Bren. It's a nightmare, and there's only one man in the Army would put a stop to it, and that's Captain Howard; and if Captain Howard doesn't come back before tonight, it'll be too late; and Bob and Ted

and the rest of them all reckon Captain Howard's been shanghaied because he argued with too many colonels.

"What's the matter?" said Lalor.

Lalor's not conscious of anything the matter. He's just behaving by his own lights.

"Nothing," said Ron Fisher, taken unawares. "I'm just wanderin' about."

What's anything matter? Colonel Wilson went to Poppendetta, and he came back again, which is more than any of his predecessors ever did. Captain Howard's been in the Army seventeen years and now he's on the skids. Carnal's looking for women and Lalor's hiding in the ditch. Colonel Maitland resigned the first night of the Battle of the Coral Sea, like the Bren gunner before me in Nine Section did, and Lieutenant O'Grady looks like being commander of A Company, and he's the bloke who got my cousin killed at Bundaberg and nearly wiped Nine Section out at Byron Bay.

Does anything matter? Mitch is playing poker with Nervous and Old Miserable; and Peter's studying like mad to be an engineer, some day, when the war's all over. None of them are worried.

We're a better battalion now than we were that night Maitland went out of our lives. But that was only the beginning, and the end has yet to come. Perhaps there is no end, and no end to the Maitlands, not even beyond the sea. Maybe life is like that, and perhaps we'll never know.

For there is the big mountain, and beyond that is Missim, and the dark-green ridge of Bobdubi. And beyond Bobdubi there is only Salamaua and the sea. Some day, I suppose, some of us will find out.

Three

I WONDER what will happen to Lalor? But then, I suppose, it will be all right. Someone will do something about him. Or will they? Lieutenant O'Grady didn't lose any sleep over getting my cousin killed. And then, perhaps, you have to let people look after themselves. Perhaps the Admiral's right. What's it matter!

Ron Fisher shrugged and stared into the sky toward Mubo. He was restless now, and in looking about for diversion, found it in the game of poker.

Mitch barely lifted his attention from his cards, "How y' goin', mate?"

Mitch was Peter Mitchell's twin brother, Frank; with the same square shoulders and strong wide mouth. The two were separately identifiable by a faint bullet burn on Mitch's chin. Mitch was strong and extroverted, and looked carelessly upon the world about him. If he was to be believed, he and his brother had been the bane of the orphanage in which they had lived most of their lives.

"Sit in," said Mitch, and raked a heap of matches towards himself from the centre.

"What's the limit?"

"Two," said Old Miserable sharply.

"Yair, we're in a big game," said Nervous.

Some subtle shape of his face, and his curiously staring eyes, gave Nervous Lincoln the appearance of being permanently startled. When one had known Nervous for a long time, one knew that he was indefinably incapable of friendship. He had lived all his life by the creed of the survival of the fittest, and was not aware of anything unusual in his way of life.

It was impossible to remain indifferent to Nervous, and

Ron Fisher and Mitch accepted every opportunity to prove their superiority. Being young, victory fed their self-esteem. Victory also helped to keep Nervous reasonably bearable.

"Colonel Wilson came back," said Ron Fisher.

Old Miserable picked up his cards.

Mitch said, "Did Captain Howard come back?"

"No," said Ron Fisher. "He's not coming back."

"Mister O'Grady'll be taking the parade, men. He'll be prancin' around down there like a kid with a new toy."

"*Captain* O'Grady," said Ron Fisher, and with an almost imperceptible nod toward Nervous, winked very slowly and solemnly at Mitch.

Superficially, the prize was the heap of matches in front of Nervous Lincoln, but they were only tokens in the zest of living. Old Miserable had long forgotten about the zest of living and continued to play his normal, careful game.

The silence of the Bulolo Valley began to break up. A long line of infantry in battle-order sauntered along the road past the aerodrome and disappeared from view. Some of the natives clustered around the Admiral again while they waited for the trucks to take them to their ANGAU camp in the Bulolo Gorge. This time, they wanted no card-tricks, but an interpretation of the activity stirring in the Valley.

A signalman wearing the blue-and-white arm-band of a despatch rider climbed into a jeep and drove rapidly away from Divisional Headquarters.

"There goes trouble," said Ron Fisher.

He considered himself an authority on despatch riders and trouble. Like most of the men in the battalion, he had been a soldier for only twenty-nine days when he first saw a despatch rider. On that twenty-ninth day, the day that Rabaul fell, the Eighty-Third Battalion departed from Melbourne for one of the invasion beaches of the Australian Pacific coast.

He had seen another Don R arrive, at Bargara, east of Bundaberg, on the day that the Battle of the Coral Sea

began. And that time the battalion camped in the open, all night, in battle-order, waiting for the signal to march and fight. There could have been no retreat, because there was no transport. They waited all night, knowing that if the order came, there could never be a sunrise.

The Don R came again, in the morning, after Colonel Maitland had resigned in the night. The Don R went away, and that time a new battalion commander arrived.

Despatch riders had become objects of suspicion to Ron Fisher and he distrusted their proximity to his interests.

The other three card players raised their eyes briefly from their cards.

"When I 'ave kids of my own," said Mitch, "I'll drum 'em about the facts of life."

"They'll be in good hands," said Old Miserable darkly.

"And the facts of life," said Mitch, "include *that* bloke. Kids, I'll tell 'em ev'ry mornin', you see that bloke with the blue-an'-white arm-band comin', you 'ead f'r the scrub."

Nervous said with a faintly false disinterest, "Yair, you reckon he's headin' our way?"

Mitch looked at him speculatively.

"I reckon so, Private Lincoln. I reckon we 'ave t' go chargin' to the rescue of the A.I.F. Forced marchin'. Blood an' guts. Bayonets in the dawn. All that kind of thing."

"Yair, shut up," said Nervous.

"You talk too much," said Mitch.

He looked expressionlessly at Ron Fisher and a shred of amusement linked them together.

"Two," said Nervous, and dropped two matches into the centre. "And two more."

Mitch studied his cards and scuffled matches from his box.

"Up y' two."

There was a little silence.

"You blokes are making it too willing," said Old Miserable.

He threw down his cards and left the game. Presently, when Nervous had won all the matches, the game broke up.

"You frightened Nervous," said Ron Fisher.

"I frightened meself," said Mitch with a careless grin.

It was a day for candid admissions, and one accepted them as the truth, which they were, or as near the truth as they would ever be.

"O'Grady'll get us all killed," said Mitch.

He rubbed his finger along the bullet burn on his chin, the burn that always became vividly noticeable when he was angry or upset.

He added, "I wish Captain Howard'd come back."

Ron Fisher said, "He only went to a three-week school."

"That was two months ago," said Mitch.

He went on, "You could have knocked me down with a feather when we came out o' church the day of Peter's weddin' an' there was Captain Howard and his missus snuck in t' give Peter the best of everything. It was real beaut of them t' do a thing like that. I wonder why he can pick good sergeants and corporals, and such lousy officers."

"He never picked *them,*" said Ron Fisher, "I heard him tell the brigadier that he got them by the Grace of God."

"This God's not all He's cracked up to be, Private Fisher. He made a botch of Desmond Lionel O'Grady."

"Captain Howard'd keep him under control."

There's something queer between Captain Howard and the rest of them. Or a lot of them. They don't hate him, really. Not that so much as distrust him. He upsets their peace of mind, if that's what it is. They'd find life much more comfortable without him, but I don't believe they'd gang up on him. They haven't got the brains to do that. If he's gone, it's the work of one or two of them.

Mister O'Grady has been after his job for eighteen months. And the adjutant thinks Captain Howard's a joke. I know, because I've heard him say so. But the major always comes to heel when Captain Howard stands up to him.

It's something you can't define, the way the major

does that. It's like he shrinks a little bit, as though he suddenly remembers something he'd much prefer to forget. And yet, he's not so much scared as uncertain. You'd think he thought Captain Howard was some sort of grenade he wasn't familiar enough with.

Now they all reckon the skipper won't come back, and they're all older than me, so perhaps they know. And if he doesn't come back, Mister O'Grady will get promoted, and there's something queer about Mister O'Grady because he wasn't upset enough to miss his daily beer when he got my cousin killed. And all O'Grady ever did that time at Byron Bay was crime Mitch because Mitch swore at him when he got that whack on the chin with the Vickers bullet.

I never felt like this the night we thought the Japs were coming, that night we went down from Bundaberg to Bargara. But Captain Howard was there, and he had it all worked out. I wish he was here now, to work it all out. We'd have followed him that night. Or a lot of us. The first man down the road that night with the bayonet would have been him. He never actually said so, but that's right. And it would have been the bayonet, because there wasn't much else, except for that old truck we had for an ambulance.

Bayonets were no good for Colonel Maitland. He got sick. He got so sick he had to resign.

Four

PETER MITCHELL closed his text-book of German and rubbed his eyes.

"You'll finish up having to wear spectacles," said Old Miserable.

Old Miserable was the oldest man in the ranks of A

Company. For Old Miserable, every facet of life had been designed expressly to crucify his endurance. Life went past him in a grand, careless cavalcade, leaving him the stale crumbs for comfort: a dead-end job when he was adolescent; the dust of the Depression Track when he was a man; a marriage to a woman who was both fertile and a hopeless manager of children and bills; and a call-up for the Pacific War.

Old Miserable was A Company's sole survivor of the purge of the militia battalions following the first Battle of Kokoda, when the militia was ordered to adopt the higher medical and physical standards of the A.I.F. That he alone of the oldest men survived was a crumb attributable to fate and the Japanese and incompetent doctors; although aloud, he agreed with the doctors and found the rest of Nine Section to be so many striplings.

To Peter Mitchell, come almost directly from an orphanage to the Army, Old Miserable was the epitome of all that was the saddest and the most hopeless in the years between the two world wars. That thought alone was sufficient to drive Peter to his studies, not from fear, but from a vague instinct that Old Miserable's weary road was a road that was never meant for human beings.

* * *

Peter rubbed his eyes, and looked about, and thus bringing his full attention to the scene from which he had been divorced for some time, became aware of an indefinable change in the Bulolo Valley, and in Nine Section.

He saw the Admiral looking at him, and knew that the Admiral was alive to the change. On the surface, it was activity in the Valley, and a flippancy in Nine Section that was almost incongruous.

"It's time we ate," said Corporal Thorn, and began taking tins of bully-beef from a box on the dump. "All up to the self-service, men."

The Admiral stood up and stared for a long time into the ditch.

"Tucker and coffee coming up, Tim," he said, without expression, and Lalor climbed out of the ditch and sat with

his dixie of food in such a position that he could watch the sky towards Salamaua.

"We got any tea?" said Ted Thorn.

"Coffee pot'll be on down the battery," said Ron Fisher.

"Coffee!" said Mitch with unnatural glee, and Nine Section looked first at Lalor, and then at the Admiral.

The Admiral looked thoughtfully at Lalor, and appeared to have difficulty in reaching some decision.

"Crow gets the coffee," he said finally, but he was not bland, as usual, but almost abrupt. He tipped some pieces of paper from a tobacco-tin into his hat, and carried the hat from person to person so that each could select a piece of paper. On each piece of paper there was the name of a bird, and when there was a spare fragment left, the Admiral stared about, identifying the person he had missed.

He said, "Where's Nervous?"

There was a little silence.

"He got on that last plane," said Ron Fisher.

Mitch looked at him sideways.

Thorn's blue eyes grew still, watching, and waiting, and the humour went out of Mitch slowly, leaving him momentarily without any feeling at all.

"You mean that?" said Thorn.

"I saw him," said Ron Fisher solemnly.

There was a long silence.

"Yes," said the Admiral, and crumpled up the piece of paper; for they knew, as they had always really known, that Nervous had been with them, but never of them.

"Crow gets the coffee," said the Admiral, and then Nervous' behavior began to feed their self-esteem, except for Lalor, who had grown uncertain of himself.

"Bird of Paradise," said Corporal Thorn, and folded up his piece of paper again.

Ron Fisher studied his own. The word on it was "crow."

"Willy wagtail," he said distinctly.

Old Miserable said, "I'm not drinking."

"Pee-wee," said the Admiral blandly.

Mitch said, "The scarlet or red-billed flamingo."

"Jackass," said Peter Mitchell.

"Tom-tit," said Carnal Knowledge.

Everybody looked at Lalor.

"Crow," said Lalor unhappily.

Ron Fisher located the section billy-can. "Right up to the brim, lad."

"If you spill a drop on the way back," said Mitch evilly, "Carnal will rape you at the rising of the sun."

"Gee," said Lalor, and took the billy, to set out down the road to the battery cook-house. There was an element of the crow ballot that mystified Lalor. He had now got the coffee for seventeen times in a row.

"You're a mob of rotten dingoes," said Old Miserable.

"Anything to keep him out of that ditch," said the Admiral, and then Old Miserable made the longest speech he ever made to Nine Section of A Company of the Eighty-Third Battalion.

"I been doing you an injustice. I thought you was only up to doing card-tricks for the boongs."

The Admiral was at a loss for words. He elevated an eyebrow enquiringly, but the attempt was a failure and in the end he took another mouthful of food, aware that men were looking at him as though they had never seen him before.

"If Lalor had any brains," said Ron Fisher pessimistically, "he'd pick up that rifle of his and shoot himself through the foot."

"He won't do that," said the Admiral. "He's a patriot."

"He's a possum," said Carnal.

"Same thing," said the Admiral.

Lalor returned with the coffee and proceeded to pour out a ration for each man. He sat down beside Ron Fisher, from where he could watch the sky.

The Admiral said, "We've been having a go at you, mate. We've all been drawing 'crow'."

"I thought there was something crooked about it," said Timothy Lalor.

* * *

Signalman Murphy of Headquarters of the First Australian Division pushed Secret Message Number G Thirteen into his satchel and reached for his helmet.

He said, "Anybody wants me, I'm down the Eighty-Third."

"Good luck," said a corporal.

A signalman said, "They'll jack-up like they did on the Townsville wharf."

"What did they do that for?" said Murphy.

"War!" said the signalman. "Frightens them. No good to the Eighty-Third."

"They'll stand behind the A.I.F. to a man," said the corporal insincerely.

"*Well* behind," said the signalman.

Five

THE day became brittle with action, while the natives watched, and Nine Section waited; and on the Mubo hills the enemy charged to the bugle-call, but all that was heard of this in Wau was the chatter of Morse Code in the Signal Office of the First Division.

It was through this office that the General Staff kept watch on the tactical development of the battle for Mubo and Lababia Ridge; and it was from this office, during the day, that the signals went out to the reserve battalions that come what may around the Mubo Gorge, the Battle of Salamaua would begin as had been laid down by the Supreme Command.

One by one, the reserve battalions struck camp, and vanished, soldier by soldier, into the Bulolo Valley. It was shortly after three in the afternoon that Secret Message Number G Thirteen was delivered by safe hand to the Eighty-Third Infantry Battalion, and it was for this signal that the Eighty-Third Battalion had waited almost twenty-two years.

* * *

When the time came, there were few men who were conscious of that great interval of preparation for war. Colonel Maitland would have been aware of it, but Colonel Maitland was gone.

Captain Howard would have been aware of the time, for he had served with the Eighty-Third for seventeen years, but he had been sent to a school, and he was not there in the Valley to hear the signal read to Commander's Conference.

It was Lieutenant O'Grady, temporarily commanding A Company, who reported to Colonel Wilson for Commander's Conference; and of all those present, it was Lieutenant O'Grady who most savoured the passage of the years, for the time had come to establish himself where he believed he naturally belonged, among the five or six men who direct the destiny of an infantry battalion.

It was left to his platoon sergeant, Ralph Townsend, to contemplate ironically that the day of reckoning had arrived, for it was Sergeant Townsend who had joined the Eighty-Third Battalion, during the Depression, simply to supplement his wages.

Carrying his rifle in a most unconventional manner, held loosely in the crook of his arm, Sergeant Townsend strolled up the mile of road from Battalion to the new dump near the aerodrome.

Townsend was a tall, raw-boned man approaching his thirtieth birthday. He was known widely as Horse—because of an alleged facial similarity to that animal—so widely that he was sometimes innocently addressed as Sergeant Horse by reinforcements.

He was a bachelor, and was popularly believed to be the father of a horde of illegitimate children whom he maintained as a family unit in a house in Maribyrnong; a legend through which he commanded considerable respect from the moral, immoral and amoral members of Three Platoon.

Townsend had two principal facial expressions: the one, gloomy; the other, impassive. Generally speaking, he was gloomy to the Other Ranks, and impassive to the officers.

Because he was conscious of the afternoon, and all

that it signified, he sauntered up the road with an air of sobriety which was an accurate mirror of his mind.

He could, and probably should, have sent a soldier of lesser rank on the errand to Nine Section, but he did not believe that anyone else was capable of maintaining the welfare of Three Platoon.

It was a sober afternoon, and a sober walk, for he had become a different man from the one who had enlisted for the wages. In that span of ten years, living on the fringe of a small coterie of hard and ruthless men, he grew up in their image, not by contamination, but by necessity. Their motives and manoeuvres clashed almost continually, generally with a veneer of urbanity; but sometimes quite naked and brutal, as it was on the night Colonel Maitland resigned.

Townsend had grown as hard and ruthless as they were, because their suave war did not confine itself to the coterie that fought it, but threw itself down into the ranks with little regard of the consequences; and so it was that Sergeant Townsend's stroll in the afternoon at Wau was an interval of time in which he accepted again the responsibility for the lives and dreams of men whose only attachment to him was one of accident and rank.

• • •

"G'day," said Sergeant Townsend to no one in particular.

"G'day, Horrible," said the Admiral.

"You can call me 'Horse'," said Townsend, and added gloomily, "Everybody else does."

He sat on a box and assured himself that the Section was all present and tolerably correct.

Corporal Thorn; the Bren gunner, Ron Fisher; the Owen gunners, Old Miserable and the Admiral; Peter Mitchell; the grenade bombardier; and four riflemen, Mitch, Carnal Knowledge, Timothy Lalor and Nervous Lincoln.

Townsend said, "Where's Private Lincoln?"

Ron Fisher said, "He went."

"Went?" said Townsend.

Fisher spread his arms like aeroplane wings, "Like that."

Townsend stared at him for a moment.

"You mean," he said slowly, "That he got into an aeroplane and flew away. Just like that."

"Yes."

"He never even said good-bye," said Old Miserable.

Townsend wrote gloomily in the platoon roll-book.

He sat up straight on the box and was aware that the section was waiting to hear the reason for his visit.

"The battalion is on one minute's notice to march."

Bingo, like that.

"We're leaving for Salamaua."

So the moment came, and in a way it was an echo, for although they knew themselves better than they had done a year before, it was so like that afternoon east of Bundaberg when the Japanese Fleet cleared to battle stations in the Coral Sea.

"Anything else?" said Corporal Thorn.

"That's the lot," said Sergeant Townsend. "Pack up. Leave the area tidy before you go. When the battalion comes past, tack yourselves on to Three Platoon."

Good-bye, Mum. Look after the kids.

Thorn said, "Well, if that's all you have to tell us, you can leave."

The Admiral said helpfully, "I suppose you can find your way back to Battalion all right?"

"You'll keep," said Townsend, and sauntered away, carrying his rifle comfortably in the crook of his arm.

. . .

"When do you go to Salamaua, white master?"

"Very soon," said the Admiral, and the word went out through English, and then through pidgin, and spread far beyond that in a score of dialects.

"The white masters go today, to Salamaua."

The highlands were astir, and the natives watched, and while they kept their own counsel, some emotion stirred in them. They were natives from the highlands; from the coast; from far away on the Sepik River; some even from New Britain over the Solomon Sea.

Some emotion stirred in them, for those who called the highlands their home had not seen a parade of warriors like this since the days of the rising of the mountain men of Bulolo and Kaisenik; and those to whom the highlands were a chill and alien land dared to think that the day was near when they would go home again to the island, and to the great river, to the sand, and the sea.

"What is the old man saying to me?" asked the Admiral.

George said simply, "May you be a great warrior and have a white missus and many children."

"Thank you," said the Admiral. "Tell him . . . tell him to have a great sing-sing when the Japanese have gone."

* * *

The sun shone late on Wau that day, and in the chill late afternoon, the last Douglas from Moresby landed on the fantastic uphill aerodrome above the Bulolo River.

From the aeroplane, one solitary soldier descended.

In the middle of the aerodrome he paused and embraced the ranges in a comprehensive scrutiny, and when he had done that his grey eyes grew bleak, reminding one of a winter mist rising from a river.

Then when he had examined the mountains, he sought directions from the corporal in the Transit Office, and, having declined the offer of a jeep, set foot on the road to the bivouac of the Eighty-Third Battalion.

Nine Section saw him and rose to its feet.

The major saw him and said, "Well, he came back."

"Yes," said the adjutant slowly, and Colonel Wilson walked out of his tent.

"Who is that man, Major?"

"Captain Howard, sir," said the major.

"Bang go a few promotions," said Colonel Wilson drily, so drily that the adjutant began searching for the innuendo, and was not particularly pleased with his conclusions.

Wilson had taken command of the battalion after Howard had gone to the school, and they met now for the first time, exchanging salutes, assessing each other for whatever it might be worth.

Six

It required only one hour to last light when the Eighty-Third Battalion turned its back on the past, leaving for posterity's inspection nothing but a field of kunai grass bearing signs that men had camped there.

The signs were as transient as any that the Eighty-Third had left in its wake: a parade ground at Byron Bay; weapon pits at Bargara; and boot-prints, thousands and hundreds of thousands of boot-prints, on the roads of the continent; roads that go to Gippsland and Ballarat; roads to Mullumbimby and Byron Bay; to Caboolture and Bundaberg, Sellheim and Charters Towers.

The grass grew anew and straight; and the rain made puddles of the boot-prints and the sun dried out the puddles and the winds smoothed the configurations of the ground; and when that had been done, the past was gone, for the men who had made the past took it with them, for it was a part of them, having made them what they were; and that is where the past was, within them, though they might live casually and think seldom of it.

So the men of the Eighty-Third left the kunai field behind them, and went up the road to Wau and Bulolo and Bulwa; marching as they had learned to march in the dust and heat and rain on the roads of the continent; marching with a loose-limbed elegance in their long single files of sections straggled out along the road.

They went past Division, and the picquet stood to attention. They went past B Battery, and the cook saluted Nine Section with his metal ladle fresh from a dixie of tea. They went past A Battery, and the gun-crew watched them go.

The duty picquet yawned over his shoulder and re-

garded his colleagues, "Can I have a quid they'll be back in a week?"

"You're on, mate. Seven days from now. At ten past five."

"It's a shame to take the money."

"The mountain'll slow 'em down a bit on the way back."

"My friend," said the picquet, "it only took the Greyhounds twenty minutes to do a two-day march."

"Uphill," he added thoughtfully, and planned how he would spend the pound that was coming to him.

The Eighty-Third went up into Wau, and turned through the ruined streets, and a group of Commandos came out to watch.

"There they go. Australia's last hope. They start a fight. We finish it."

"That's how my brother got killed, goin' to the rescue of our Chocolate Heroes."

The Eighty-Third Battalion left the ruined streets behind it and went down into the Gorge, and before Ron Fisher and the Admiral, Sergeant Townsend and Captain Howard, the road to Bulwa opened like the road from Bundaberg to Bargara and the sea. It was one of the few times in a man's life when the past comes back to him, vividly, with meaning, as it will do when it has contributed to the moulding of a man's character.

The sun went out of the Bulolo Gorge, and night came to the last wild land on earth.

* * *

In the night, a Top Secret message was transmitted from Wau, via Poppendetta and Moresby, to Brisbane. Another signal originated in Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, and went to Brisbane.

The two messages were identical. They stated that the marshalling phase of the Allied offensive had begun.

The day was D-minus-Eight.

* * *

In the night, far in the Bulolo Valley, an old native was dreaming, and he dreamed that he heard the drums

beating in the mountains. He was partly awake, and partly asleep, and for a long time his mind hung in that state, searching the night for the location of the drums.

The ground thudded, ever so faintly, and went on thudding. It thudded with the one, even, monotonous beat, each no whit different from all those that went before it; and while the old man's slowly waking mind listened, the note came nearer, causing his pulse to stir from its even rhythm.

He said softly, or perhaps he only thought that he said it, "It is the drums."

It is the drums calling the mountain men of Bulolo and Kaisenik, as they called them long ago, to the rising of the mountain clans.

And then he knew that it was not the drums, but the sound of many feet, beating upon the unyielding earth: many and countless feet, as many feet as there are leaves on a tree, as many feet as there are trees on a hill.

"Who are they, father of my father?"

"It is they of whom it was spoken by the white master who made magic with the cards, son of my son."

"It is so, old one," said another.

"They march by night," said the old man in awe, "and sing a strange song."

"Do they sing to be brave, father of my father?"

"I do not think so," said the old man.

It was a simple, casual melody, placed note by note upon the night; not a melody to stir a man to war, or anger, or any conspicuous emotion, but a melody for a man who marches to his first battle with the innocent faith and assurance that comes but once to a soldier.

"No, I do not think so," said the old man, and raised his voice a little, "Tell us, Gerjari, what it is that they sing."

"It is a strange song," said George, the interpreter, and the countless feet tramped past, seemingly without end, like the river flowing down to the sea.

"They are singing about a dog: it sits on a box. There are no clouds in the sky, and the sun shines over all the land. Some day they will go home; and there the dog will be, sitting on its box. It waits for them there to come home again."

"That is a strange song," said the old man, and another, who came from the coast, said, "And then we will all go home, and also sing, as we used to do in the old days."

"Yes," said the old man, but said no more, for he remembered the highlands before the Germans left New Guinea, and remembered the digging for gold, and the great rising, and the coming of the aeroplane, and the advent of the Japanese, and the tremendous battle between the Australians and the Japanese for the aerodrome of Wau: and now came men who marched by night, where no man had ever marched by night before; and he knew, even then, that no matter who won the Battle of Salamaua, the old ways were almost gone, and he grew wistful, and sad, and a little afraid of the future as the simple melody played upon the night.

He spoke not of this, and contained his loneliness; and presently the sound of feet and the singing died away, and the night was familiar, immense and still, as nights in the broken highlands have been since time began.

Seven

THE jungle and the ranges were ancient and without end. There was day, and then there was night, and this was how time had been measured in the jungle since man first walked upon the earth. There were no months, and no years, and no seasons, but only day, and then night.

Rain swept through the high ranges and the fogs seeped through their forests and the undergrowth: and under the passing of many feet, the Missim Trail began to break up, boots chopping the fetid ground into sludge, and in

the sludge tree-roots caught at feet and became steps on the side of the mountain.

The sun had never shone there, and a man did not walk on earth, but thirty feet above it, on thirty feet of decay laid down by the forest over scores and centuries of years: and in the decay caverns lurked, with their roofs of muck supported by the roots of trees, so that occasionally, under the pressure of climbing feet, the roof collapsed, flinging a man through the ground into danger of being staked or even more gravely injured.

The sun had never shone there, and the forest grew in a mantle of moss and fungus and slime; and in the forest, moss hung from branches and roots and trunks and vines like putrid, grey fairy-floss. The mosses dripped with water and slime, and the roots of the trees were as much in the air as they were in the ground. That part of them that was visible writhed and twisted in the air like a witches' ballet stilled in a grotesque climax, as though captured in a photograph to be seen for all the rest of time.

The whole ancient rotting forest perched precariously on the sides of the mountain.The ranges and the moss and the forest and the slime went up and up into the sky, into the realms of the aeroplane. The rarefied air made a man's ears pain, and burned his lungs and his throat raw and then almost numb, while he struggled over the mountain under sixty or seventy pounds of weapons and ammunition and gear.

His hands groped for tree-roots and vines and his feet flailed in the putrid sludge, and his hands slid on the slimy timber when he grasped at it for support.

When he could not climb on his feet, then he crawled, like a beetle, living intimately with the sludge and the smell of it till it soaked and plastered his body and cargo and uniform with additional weight; plastered his face, got in his ears; he lived intimately with it, smelling it, tasting it, sleeping in it, till his green uniform turned black: lived in it with the fogs and the rain; and at night, curled in a ground-sheet and a damp half-blanket to fend off the freezing cold.

So the Missim Trail climbed into the clouds, and when it reached its pinnacle it fell down through the moss forest

and a man slipped and stumbled and tripped and fell down the trench of sludge and tree-roots and slimy hand-holds. Then when he thought that he had taken leave of the moss forest, then the Missim Trail almost broke his heart, for the ranges rose again, in a massive wall, as great as the one he had traversed.

He dragged his heavy feet after him, and sometimes he crawled, and sometimes he slid backwards from a breaking, rotten hand-hold, losing height he had gained: and his universe contracted about him until it encompassed himself and the twilight and the muck he lived in. On the wide steppes south of Moscow, the Russian Army fought for Orel, but he had forgotten that Russia existed. The bombers flew to the invasion of Sicily in the Mediterranean, but the Mediterranean, too, had disappeared from his mind.

In the United States, in Detroit, white men and Negroes fought out a race-riot with rifles and machine-guns; and in Australia, politicians abused each other concerning the Brisbane Line, a returned soldiers' organisation denied membership to militiamen, and people complained about the shortage of petrol and beer and butter: but he dragged himself up the ranges, and when he crawled in the forest, he finally forgot even the land that he came from.

There was the Trail, and the nature of it; and beyond the Trail, in front of it, behind, to the side, there was no existence: and once, a wounded Commando came over the Missim in the other direction; no longer, it seemed, a man but a bit of debris spat out of war, like a derelict ejected from civilisation.

"Make way for the wounded," and the cry echoed through the silent forest, carried from voice to voice in a croak. "Make way."

The debris moved like a jerky puppet, and one saw that he was young, young as Ron Fisher, but weary with a great age upon him. This was what Ron Fisher remembered, that as the debris passed him by, it winked.

Then from the top of the eastern wall of the ranges, the Missim Trail fell down from the sky, for thousands and thousands of feet, down into a wild, twisted land of

ranges and chasms and razor-backed ridges: and a man understood why the enemy believed the Kuper Ranges to be impassable, and why a man who set out from Bulwa weighing twelve stone should be less than eleven when he came to the end of the Missim Trail.

The days and nights went away, one by one, until they receded, indistinguishable from each other in a blur of time; and somewhere in that time, the Eighty-Third Battalion came to Missim and went down to the Uliap Creek, which runs, burbling and swirling, along the foot of the dark-green ridge of Bobdubi.

On the other side of Bobdubi Ridge was the Komiatum Track, leading from Salamaua to Mubo and Wau. Bobdubi Ridge protected the Track like a shield, and the enemy were on the Ridge, on Old Bobdubi and Old Vickers, on the Triangle and Gwaibalom, Orodubi and Sugarcane Knoll.

The companies of the Eighty-Third Battalion began to disperse in the jungle west of the Uliap, covering off, as it were, against their objectives; Don Company for Old Vickers, A Company for the Triangle, B Company for Orodubi.

Bobdubi rose above them, high and green, but they could not see it for the density of the jungle. They could not see the Ridge, but they knew it was there, and it came into their lives, subduing their voices, colouring their thoughts, and because time had almost run out, they wrote home, borrowing stubs of pencil from one another, writing on miserly preserved pieces of letter-paper which the jungle humidity had already begun to attack.

When they had written their letters, they prepared: a day, a night, and then another day, and in the late afternoon they moved down through the undergrowth to the bank of the Uliap Creek, there to wait for the sun to come up. There, in the hour before dawn, while the rain thundered upon the jungle, a young soldier in Seven Section shot himself in the foot, and Sergeant Townsend carried him away to the Regimental Aid Post as though he carried a baby to its mother.

At that same hour, south-east of Mubo, the American regiment landed in Nassau Bay, and on the heights around

the Mubo Gorge, ten miles south of Bobdubi Ridge, the troops of the A.I.F. stirred themselves to another jungle day of twilight and fighting.

Beyond Poppendetta, on the Buna airfields, the bombers and the fighters rolled out on the runways, and while they stood there, bombed up and waiting, the night went away, and the morning came.

Eight

THE forest was wet and dark, and the rain ensured a permanent twilight in which the battle would have to be fought.

Ron Fisher cleaned the machine-gun very carefully, piece by piece, shielding each under his ground-sheet from the rain. Apart from the gun and his pack, he had very little to carry into battle, not even a photograph of a girl-friend. He had never owned a wristwatch, nor a fountain pen. He had never owned very much at all, except the love of his mother and the adult comradeship of his father.

When he cleaned the pieces of the Bren, he reassembled them, slowly, feeling them slide easily as they were meant to do, hearing each piece fit into place with a satisfying click. No gun is infallible, but he knew the Bren so well that he was master of it and of its imperfections. In that light, he trusted the Bren. He trusted the machine-gun, and his father, and Captain Howard.

When he had assembled the gun, under the cover of the ground-sheet, he crouched there in the undergrowth, identifying the contents of his wallet: a steel mirror, a letter from his mother, his pay-book, some blank sheets of writing paper, and a stub of lead-pencil. He put the leather wallet in his shirt pocket, counted the Bren magazines in his basic-pouches, felt for the tobacco and

match tin in his trouser pocket and the first-aid bandage in his hip pocket.

The rain made his shirt and trousers cling to his skin, so that when he stood up with his pack and swung the heavy gun on to his shoulder, one saw the play of his strong shoulders and observed the line made by the leather thong of his identity discs under the shirt.

"All right, mate," he said, and Lalor emerged from the undergrowth.

"It's time to go, Tim."

"Is it?" said Lalor, and Ron Fisher looked at him curiously. "What are you doing?"

Lalor said reluctantly, "I was saying a prayer."

"Oh," said Ron Fisher, and began to walk down the track.

"I said a prayer for you, too."

Ron Fisher said matter-of-factly, "Thanks, mate."

When he came to the place where they had to wait, he stopped and looked at Lalor's rifle, and then at Lalor.

"You got the safety-catch on," he said.

Then he said, "I'll tell you something, Tim. If you want to put your feet under the table at Christmas, take your safety-catch off before you say your prayers."

. . .

Lalor discovered he had forgotten his ground-sheet and went back for it. Ron Fisher sighed and sat on a log.

Carnal Knowledge gave up regretting the loss of his attractive sun-tan and said, "How you going, kid?"

"None the better for your asking, thank you."

Lalor reappeared on the track.

Carnal said, "Fancy having to fight a war with *that!*"

"What's crawling on you?" said Ron Fisher. "It's *me* that's stuck with him."

"You're a bigger prawn than I thought you were."

Ron Fisher said, "You don't think I'm enjoying it, do you?"

"Every man for himself," said Carnal Knowledge.

"I'll remember that when you want a hand," said Ron Fisher.

° ° °

Lalor discovered he had forgotten his water-bottle and went back for it. Ron Fisher and Carnal regarded each other without expression, and Mitch and Peter, appearing from the undergrowth, looked at them curiously.

"Good morning, men," said Mitch.

In a flat, meaningless way, he was aware of Bobdubi Ridge across the valley; so flat a way that he wondered whether it was a symptom of courage. Life, he remembered, had a verve to it, an edge; verve in a flower, in work, in sport, in women, in simply being alive.

That was what was missing. In the wet, dark undergrowth, the morning held an element of trance. There was no tension in it, no feeling. Life was suspended.

Ron Fisher said, "How are you, Private Mitchell, F.?"

Mitch said, "The condemned ate an 'earty meal."

He looked up the track and said, "How's Field Marshal Lalor?"

"He's put on the Armour of God," said Carnal Knowledge.

"He put some on me, too," said Ron Fisher.

Mitch said, "That'll come off when them yellow blokes start peering at you through the scrub."

He put out a hand and touched the undergrowth in front of him.

He said thoughtfully, "We have t' go an' fight in that. I wonder how far it goes?"

"Right to Salamaua," said Ron Fisher.

Mitch said, "I didn't know when I was well off. Peter, we should have stayed in that orphanage."

His brother said darkly, "We should have all resigned with Colonel Maitland."

° ° °

The Admiral said, "What are we going to do about Lalor?"

Sergeant Townsend shrugged and studied the approach of Corporal Thorn and Old Miserable. Several men arrived from Seven and Eight Sections.

Townsend looked gloomily at Corporal Thorn, "How's my bow-legged little mate with the misdirected nose?"

"Who'd have you for a mate?" said Thorn.

Old Miserable said, "I hope you're never told to follow your nose."

"All right," said Townsend, "I called you blokes down here to chew your ears."

In the shadowy murk he was little more than another shadow among the leaves. At close quarters, his face looked wan and devoid of life.

"It's on as soon as the bombers have been."

He nodded in the direction of the platoon, "Some of *us* have had to battle all our lives. Some of us have been on the Track. I reckon we can look after ourselves."

He nodded toward Three Platoon again. "They're only kids. Even Carnal's only twenty-two. Look after them."

"I'll be looking after myself," said Old Miserable. "Nobody ever worried about me."

"That's right," said Townsend, "but look after them, otherwise you'll have *me* to deal with."

"What are *you* getting out of this?" said Old Miserable.

"You know the old saying," said Townsend. "The infantry has to cash the politicians' cheques. Well, here's one to cash. And if you speak to me like that again I'll job your teeth down past your tonsils."

He said to Ted Thorn, "You're *it*, mate. We drew straws. Nine Section will conduct the advance to battle. Collect the kids and line up along the track this side of the creek. The mob'll line up behind you. Captain Howard'll be behind Three Platoon. Then Two Platoon. And One'll be at the back."

He plodded away, carrying his rifle in the crook of his arm. When he came to the starting point, he drew a line in the mud with the heel of his boot, and waited there, wondering who would look after his step-brothers and step-sisters if he did not survive the Battle of Salamaua: the State, he supposed, the well-meaning, sterile, loveless State.

Captain Howard beckoned to him and Townsend walked away from the mud furrow he had drawn across the track.

"How did they take it?" asked Captain Howard.

"They didn't like it, sir," said Townsend.

"I wouldn't like it myself," said Howard.

He was crouched in the undergrowth, with his back to the creek and Bobdubi Ridge; Lieutenant O'Grady, dominant and confident, to the right of him; the other platoon commanders, Cislowski and Westinghouse, beyond O'Grady.

Today, thought Lieutenant O'Grady, I start to get my own back. There's something due to me for the A.I.F. Board that said I wasn't good enough for them, and for Colonel Maitland who cost me everything I had in Civvie Street, and for Captain Howard who's blocked my way ever since we first met. Winner take all. You get nothing for nothing—you have to go and take it, and that is what I will do. And then it will be my turn.

I'll show the Board who is no good, and I'll show Maitland I can rebuild my career in Civvie Street without crawling back to him for my job. And as for Howard . . . he won't last long. He hasn't got the necessary.

When he had thought this, Lieutenant Desmond Lionel O'Grady felt enormously confident, and some part of this reposed on his big, fleshy face and was accentuated by the controlled droop of his moustache. The thin line of his moustache curved downwards, like the corners of his mouth did, with a suggestion of arrogance.

"The bombers are due," said Captain Howard. "Has that Commando screen left the Ridge?"

"They just came through, sir," said Lieutenant Cislowski of Two Platoon.

"O.K.," said Howard, and then he thought about the youngster in Seven Section who had shot himself in the foot before the sun rose.

He said, "Did you find out about Caswell?"

"Yes, sir," said Townsend. "He made a muck of it. Right through the ankle."

Lieutenant O'Grady said pensively, "Pity he didn't aim three or four feet higher. The death-penalty would smarten up some of these blokes."

Howard said mildly, "You got thirty-three of your men here without it."

• • •

Sergeant Townsend went off to inspect Three Platoon and presently the platoon commanders followed him, leaving Howard alone by the bank of the creek. The morning began to grow, and as it grew, Howard accepted it as the day for which he had enlisted in the part-time army almost half a lifetime away.

On his thirty-seventh birthday, he crouched in the undergrowth, a striking, austere man, dressed in thin green cotton shirt and trousers, green useless cloth gaiters and heavy military boots, webbing belt with buckles unpolished as was the custom, and a slouch hat with a drooping, untidy brim and no band or pugaree. He wore no insignia or officer-identification of any kind, for it was time for battle, in the way that jungle battles are fought.

His self-discipline had a spartan quality which had contrasted oddly with the opulence of an officers' mess and which blended unobtrusively into the sombre, wet twilight of the jungle.

The years had not been kind to Neil Howard, and he had been marked by their events. His lean jaw gave his face an austerity which was reflected in his voice, and one found this in harmony with his level grey eyes and his iron-grey hair and the lines of his face drawn there by conflict and responsibility.

He had known for years that he would come to this morning, and believing that it would be right to give battle, had chosen his duty accordingly, living a conflict between his personal predilections on the one hand, and the requirements of his decision on the other.

He had not known when the morning would come, nor where it would find him, and the only wonder of it now was that it was here, on the Uliap, in this wild and primitive land. For the rest of his life, he was to long poignantly that Sybil could have been there with him, to share that ineffable hour when he was vindicated at the end of his long years of preparation.

Then, in his mind, as the bombers wheeled toward Bobdubi through the rain, he saw her in the forest. She was far off, watching him, understanding the dark-green ridge

behind him, seeing that the ridge held them apart, and that if they would meet again, he had to climb the heights, as Man has had to do since human beings first began to search for the last blue sea.

• • •

The bombers flew away. The barrage of their bombs and machine-guns and motor-cannon had lacerated the jungle and made the dark morning shudder; and once and forever, when the morning shuddered, the trancelike grip of innocence went away from the men on the track, and the only sound in the jungle was the clicking of safety-catches.

In the silence, Captain Howard walked the full length of the line of the company, until he came to the forward scout of Nine Section standing by the furrow in the mud.

It was the Admiral, lean and sombre, the schoolteacher who had lost his faith. Behind him was Peter Mitchell. Behind Peter was Ron Fisher. While Howard watched, he pulled back the cocking-handle of the Bren gun. The handle stopped with an audible click.

For a moment they stood there together, Howard and the Admiral, listening to the rain, facing toward the Triangle on the crown of Bobdubi Ridge.

They were both aware of their hearts beating in their chests.

"Away you go, Bob."

"Yes, sir," said the Admiral, and waded out into the Uliap Creek.

Nine

It was the loneliest walk the Admiral had ever known. He could lift his elbows and touch the undergrowth on both sides of the track. The undergrowth brushed at his

face and drooped over his hat. The jungle towered over him. He disappeared into the green, wet blanket of vegetation.

There were one hundred and ten men behind him, on the track, but he was alone, searching in the leaves for the enemy: and after the desperate bombing through the rain, the enemy would know he was coming and brace himself for battle.

The mud did not give him a firm foot-hold. The atmosphere imprisoned under the jungle was fetid and warmly humid, so that, in climbing the muddy track, he soon began to perspire, and his clothes to cling to his skin.

Towards the end he began to walk more slowly, but he walked more lightly, searching for the balance of a ballerina; and his shoulders drooped a little, seeking the posture suitable for the free swing of the sub-machine-gun.

The rain had stopped, and in the wall of leaves there was only the dripping of water to break the silence. In the silence, among the leaves, the Admiral's feet caressed the mud.

The Admiral licked his lips, fleetingly. He walked slowly, for a long time, or so it seemed. It was the loneliest walk of his life.

Then he met the Japanese scout.

They stared at each other, at four paces, their muscles locked by their brains. They stood in mid-stride, rigid, like statuary. A third person could have shot them both.

The first shock went out of the Japanese and he began to quiver. When he began to quiver, his terror unlocked the Admiral's brain.

He shot the Japanese with a terrific burst from the sub-machine-gun. Behind the Japanese, on the track, feet raced away through the mud. The Admiral fired the rest of the magazine through the leaves at the sound.

Patrol! Out looking for the attack! This is not their defences. Keep going. Straightaway. Get after them.

The Admiral made a curt, chopping motion with his hand as a signal to Peter Mitchell and walked on.

He had not known before what it was he sought in

the jungle. He knew now. He knew that the next gunfire would be Japanese, directed at him.

The track went up over a knoll. The mud was greasy, and he thought that the knoll was the place where he was to die. He climbed very slowly, carrying the gun high, ready to fling himself back down the slope.

Then he was on top of the knoll, and he paused there to recover from the ascent. He went on, down the reverse side of the knoll and felt the mud greasy and treacherous under his boots. The track rose steadily, but he was only aware of that when he had traversed each part, for the track was not straight and the leaves hid even the shape of the ground.

In the humid, green twilight among the leaves at his face, he sensed with his feet, before he saw it, that the steady slope had begun to rise more abruptly. Because he stopped to think about the implications, he saved his life.

In his ears and eyes, the dark, hot, stinking twilight blew up.

Reflex flung him into the mud under the machine-gun fire and a torrent of leaves and twigs cascaded around him. The bullets threw up little splats of mud and a grenade exploded, flinging a piece of metal past his head with a whipping scream.

He began to wriggle backwards, dragging the gun after him. He came to a tree and rolled behind it. The shooting stopped.

Peter was flat in the mud, his face a white blob in the twilight, his rifle firm in his hands, his eyes scared and sharp. The Admiral made urgent pointing signals and Peter nodded and slid backwards out of sight. The Admiral rolled on his stomach again and his eyes began searching the leaves for the gun positions on the knoll. It was impossible. He was not even sure that there was a knoll there.

The leaves of the jungle obscured everything from a few feet in front of his face. He picked up a stick and threw it along the track. A machine-gun with a horrible thudding note shredded leaves off the undergrowth and cut a white, sloping scar through the bark on a tree-trunk.

The Admiral studied the scar, and listened to the machine-gun. Then he fired half a magazine at the sound, on the elevation he calculated.

There! That'll stop you from coming out and having a look!

He rolled on his back again and stared angrily down the track.

Come on! Come on! Get into it! I'm not staying here all by myself. Get into it before they get set.

The Admiral crawled gently to the other side of the tree. He had fired half a magazine into one enemy soldier, and the equivalent of a whole magazine into a lot of undergowth. That was wasting ammunition. He had only eight magazines altogether.

He fired a short burst in the direction of the heavy machine-gun. Every little while, he fired a burst. When he did, the machine-gun, and sometimes rifles, returned the fire. Presently, they had him pinned behind the tree.

The Admiral thought he could neither advance nor retreat. He was quite alone, against the enemy, and for a sickening moment he was seized by the horror that the Eighty-Third Battalion had run like the Greyhounds had run on the Kokoda Trail.

He addressed his mind to the high duty of keeping control of himself.

* * *

Corporal Thorn crawled out of the leaves and stopped beside the Admiral. The Admiral's hand took him by the back of the neck and pushed him flat in the mud. A fusillade of rifle shots thudded into the tree.

"Been back to Brigade for orders?" whispered the Admiral curtly.

"She's apples, mate." Thorn breathed, and massaged the back of his neck. "Nine Section's lined out on your left. We cover Eight. They're going in now."

"All right."

"Where's that machine-gun? Howard reckons it's a Woodpecker."

The Admiral fired another burst and the machine-gun sprayed bullets wildly through the undergrowth.

"O.K., mate. Heat him up while I get out of here."

. . .

There was a confusion in orders, and Eight Section did not attack. Down among the leaves, a new order came to Nine Section. Attack, with Seven Section in support.

When Mitch bumped a bush, it shook wildly, and the enemy discovered Nine Section in the undergrowth. The section was still moving into position and the machine-gun with the horrible thudding note traversed the slopes with one unbroken burst.

Lalor fell in terror into the mud. Afterwards, he found the water-bottle had been almost shot off his belt. Ron Fisher flung himself sideways with the Bren and almost hurled the gun across a log. He was being driven not by his mind but by an animal reflex. He fired without aiming, without a plan. The Bren stopped firing when the magazine was empty.

The Japanese machine-gun tore agony through Carnal Knowledge, agony which he had never believed could be, so that he sprawled in the mud, writhing and twisting to escape the dreadful torment. He died as he had lived, alone and for himself. He did not die bravely. The bullets explored him and extracted a strangled cry from his throat. He made this noise and his fingers carved little furrows in the mud. Then he was dead, lying in a twisted, tortured heap. The watch on his wrist went on ticking.

The enemy machine-gun caught Old Miserable by the thighs, and chopped him down with a cruelty that only Old Miserable would ever understand. His snarl, even then, was resentful. He snarled through his teeth, and fell to his knees, and tried to force up the Owen gun to shatter the jungle. It was a long way up to bring the gun. The pain dragged him down and the Owen was a tremendous weight which bent his wrists.

He cried silently at the dead weight in his hands and then his knees wilted under him and he fell forward while the Owen spurted fitfully, throwing up the mud in front of him.

"Beryl!" he cried. "Beryl!"

"Stretcher!" yelled a voice in the jungle, and the C.A.P. orderly crashed into the mud beside him.

"You're right, mate. Keep still."

"Beryl!" cried Old Miserable, "I've lost me legs. How are we ever going to live?"

The orderly cut his trousers away and said, "Shut up."

Oh, Godalmighty! They never told me it would be like this! Oh, Godalmighty, what do I do first!

"I've lost me legs. Who's going to pay all the bills . . . ?"

"Stretcher!" yelled the orderly, and the machine-gun began searching for him but he never knew about that until afterwards when he found the five holes through his pack.

"Stretcher!" he yelled, but nobody came, and that was when he grew up, while he secured the Shell dressings, firm and untidy, and having unbuckled Old Miserable from his gear, picked him up in his arms and staggered away in the greasy mud.

. . .

Then a voice spoke in the jungle. It was Lieutenant O'Grady, his voice dominant and controlled.

"Steady, Nine Section. Get that Woodpecker, Fisher. Forward, Nine Section. Seven Section, ready: prepare to leap-frog."

Ron Fisher had believed all his life that his father had never faltered at Beersheba. It could not be in his mind, in the undergrowth, facing the machine-gun; but a residue of it, imbibed and unconscious, directed him forward.

Through the leaves, in front of him, a stump was visible. It offered cover, and he walked steadily towards it, not looking at it, firing short bursts from the Bren in the direction of the invisible machine-gun. He came to the stump and crouched there, firing across it, resting the Bren on it.

"Keep it up, Fisher. You're getting onto him."

He did not hear the voice. At this range, there was only one thing left in the world, and that was the sound of the Japanese machine-gun. While they fought each other in the undergrowth, he forgot the jungle, completely forgot the Eighty-Third Battalion.

. . .

Mitch was crying. That it was his carelessness that had caused the havoc in Nine Section was a horror that would haunt him until it was expunged by greater horror. He threw his rifle and bandoliers in the mud and crouched beside Old Miserable's discarded equipment, pulling Owen magazines from the basic-pouches, ramming the magazines into his own. When he had done that, he picked up the Owen gun and put a new magazine on it.

He was crying among the leaves, but there was no one to see this. There was nothing to see, and only gunfire to hear. He wriggled behind a tree and began firing into the leaves at the sound of an enemy rifle.

Presently he realised that the sound of Ron Fisher's Bren gun was going away from him, towards the knoll. Mitch gathered himself on his knees, jumped to his feet, and ran erratically forward. He slid behind a tree, and it was then that he saw the knoll. It was as though he could almost have reached out and touched it.

The Owen gun jumped in his hands. He sprayed the whole magazine of bullets along the part of the crest of the knoll that was visible to him.

Seven Section came out of the undergrowth from behind him and went up the knoll and the gunfire died away.

. . .

Two Platoon came up the track over the knoll, one man at a time, each four yards apart. Each man, in turn, inspected Three Platoon without speaking. Their scout was a short, tubby man who had once been a wharf-labourer. He read the signs in Three Platoon, said nothing about the wooden expression on Mitch's face, winked when Ron Fisher winked at him, and walked past the Admiral.

"What's it like, Bob?"

"It's hard work," said the Admiral.

The lieutenant of Two Platoon, Lieutenant Aloysius Cislowski, surveyed Three Platoon as he walked past. His gaze met Ron Fisher's, and the lieutenant saw that he

was immeasurably older than he had been when he crossed the Uliap. For his part, Ron Fisher thought he learned something about the lieutenant.

You know something, thought Ron Fisher, you're no good. You're packing them.

He stared after Lieutenant Cislowski with hard, watchful eyes until Cislowski vanished in the undergrowth.

Behind the last man of Two Platoon came Captain Howard. He looked at no one, for his gaze was forward and upward, towards the high ground leading to the Triangle on Bobdubi Ridge. It was as though he could see through the jungle at the high ground, and planned and plotted as he walked.

Somewhere along the track he had discarded his pistol and acquired a rifle and bandoliers. To look into his eyes, thought the Admiral, was to believe that Howard had known for years that he would come to Bobdubi Ridge.

"We're going straight on, Mister O'Grady. Untangle Three Platoon and follow on the end."

Howard's gaze dropped for a moment and inspected the Admiral.

"Good work, Bob. Never let them get set."

Howard forgot about the Admiral and lifted his gaze again towards the high ground.

Corporal Thorn said, "Nine Section!"

He turned about and looked at the Admiral. "How are you?"

"I've been learning a bit about myself I never knew," said the Admiral.

"You got company," said Ted Thorn.

"Ted," said the Admiral.

"What's the matter?"

"Ted," said the Admiral, "when I was down there behind that tree before, I thought you blokes weren't coming. I thought you'd gone through. Like the Greyhounds."

"Yair, I know."

"Ted," said the Admiral.

"It's all right, Robert," said Thorn. "I waited for some friends once. The year I went on the Track. They never came. And don't confess. That was something else I learnt."

• • •

Nine Section had arranged itself in battle-order once more.

Corporal Thorn said, "How are you, Professor?"

"Just like the cow-boy pictures," said Peter Mitchell. "A thrill a minute."

"That's all right about the cow-boy pictures," said Ron Fisher. "They leave out the bit about what happens when you have to change magazines."

Thorn looked at Lalor, and then at Ron Fisher. Ron Fisher shook his head with a barely perceptible movement. Thorn became expressionless and wondered what he was going to do about Lalor.

He dropped to his haunches beside Mitch. "What's the matter, mate?"

"I killed them. Carnal and Old Miserable."

"Come on," said Thorn. "We got a job to do."

"I'll do something," said Mitch. "You'll see."

"That's good," said Thorn. "Come on. You got the Owen. Trot up the front and give Bob a break."

The men of One Platoon looked at them in curiosity and went on their way.

"Seven Section!" said Lieutenant O'Grady. "Eight Section! Nine! In that order. Away you go."

In retrieving the situation in Nine Section, Lieutenant O'Grady had found himself cool and self-possessed in battle, and as he took his place behind Seven Section with Sergeant Townsend he surveyed Three Platoon from his new mental eminence.

"Righto, Three Platoon."

The track went into the undergrowth and down the reverse side of the knoll. Ron Fisher began to walk. It was twilight there, and his feet slipped in the mud. There was no sign that the bombers had ever been to Bobdubi Ridge. The rain began again, and somewhere in the north on Bobdubi Ridge, in a sudden flurry of gunfire, Don Company and the enemy fought for Old Vickers.

Ron Fisher walked only fifteen or twenty paces. He stopped when the line stopped, when the enemy met the first scout of Two Platoon with a barrage of machine-gun

and rifle fire that made Three Platoon's battle appear like a skirmish with fire-crackers.

Ten

DOWN on the west bank of the Uliap Creek, Colonel Wilson's command post was a pack for a seat, a box for a table, and a ground-sheet supported on four stakes for a roof. The ground-sheet sagged, and every few minutes the colonel's batman lifted the ground-sheet to spill the accumulating rain-water out of it before it should collapse.

The colonel was there when the attack began, and he had no intention of leaving the post until the battle developed a coherent direction. It was a three-pronged attack, and one by one, the three companies forward closed with the enemy: A Company in the centre, striking upwards at the Triangle; then Don Company on the left, against Old Vickers; the last to engage was B Company, on the right, towards Orodubi.

The brigadier walked out of the rain with his personal escort and joined Colonel Wilson under the sagging ground-sheet.

He picked up the messages on the Battle Board and read them, looking occasionally at his map to verify the locations identified by the map references.

A Company shot one Jap. Encountered enemy dug in. Position thirty-four men. Position cleared. Enemy casualties three dead unknown wounded. Own casualties one dead two wounded.

"Chicken-feed," said the Brigadier. "When do they get into it?"

"They're into it now," said Colonel Wilson, and gestured toward the sound of battle.

"Are you going up at all?" said the brigadier.

"It's a two-mile front," said Colonel Wilson. "I'll go wherever they get the first break. They get that, we'll give it all we've got."

"One little break," said the brigadier. "That's all we want."

He had fought in the African Western Desert and Greece and Crete, and knew that battles which begin adversely are seldom won, and the fighting for Bobdubi Ridge had begun with every conceivable factor arrayed against him: weather, lines of communication, supply, fire support, inexperience of his troops, the unknown factor of junior leadership, and even at this stage a suspicion that Bobdubi was more heavily defended than had been believed.

He said, "Do you mind if I go and have a look at Old Vickers? Personal reconnaissance? It'd save you one trip, too."

"That's all right, sir. And thanks."

The brigadier scrambled out into the rain again. "Come on, you blokes. We're going for a walk."

. . .

The brigadier and his escort crossed the path of A Company's native carriers returning from the Regimental Aid Post.

"Good day, white master."

"G'day," said the brigadier. "How's business?"

"Good day, white master."

"Yair, g'day," said the brigadier.

He waded into the Uliap and set foot on the track to Old Vickers. The carrier team went south, along the creek, and found the track to the Triangle. The eight natives plodded up the track with Ardarit, the boss-boy, trailing at the rear, and an Owen gunner of the Regimental Police going in front of them. One by one, as the natives came to the Japanese scout the Admiral had killed, they spat on him.

They came to the place where they had collected Old Miserable and went on, over the knoll and up the long rise

towards the gunfire in the jungle, until they were inside the protection of Nine Section's weapons.

Ted Thorn said, "How's Old Misery?"

"He'll live," said the R.P. "He's down there in the R.A.P. going maggotty about doctors and Japs and boongs."

He raised his voice, "Stop along big fella dewai."

"Orright," said Ardarit, and the natives sat around the base of the huge tree and waited for more business.

• • •

"It's going wrong," said the Admiral. "I can feel it."

"Yair," said Thorn. "We better get ready. We'll be next."

He nodded towards Lalor. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Who?"

"Lalor," said Thorn, and the Admiral hesitated.

He said, "Give him to me."

"You don't have to do that, mate. You're my storm-trooper."

"You better get that idea out of your head, Teddy."

"I don't want him on your back."

"Someone has to be the bunny," said the Admiral, and grinned crookedly at Ted Thorn.

The carriers came down the track with another stretcher-case.

• • •

"It's the leaves," said Lalor, holding the end of the pull-through. "It's the leaves. There's nothing to see except the leaves. You can't see nothing."

"Lean on that," said Ron Fisher, and braced himself with the barrel of the Bren. The pull-through whipped out of the barrel and Lalor caught the end of the cord in his hand.

"Ta," said Ron Fisher, and relocked the barrel on the gun.

"It's the leaves," said Lalor. "You can't see nothing."

Ron Fisher located an empty Bren magazine and held it out.

"Bung thirty rounds in that."

"You can't see anything at all," said Lalor, and began to push the rounds of ammunition into the magazine. "It's the leaves."

"I'll tell you something, Tim. You're stuck with them. Nobody else can see anything either. You better start getting used to the idea."

He grabbed the magazine brutally out of Lalor's hands and pushed the top round out again so that it fell in the mud. The second round jammed with its rim caught over the one below it.

He yelled in fright, "You ever touch one of these mags again I'll smash your bloody skull in!"

Then he sat there aghast and sick at what he had done to Lalor, for he knew as Lalor quivered away from him that he had broken the last link that Lalor had with human companionship, the only sanity left in the jungle.

• • •

O'Grady came down the track from observing the fighting.

"Here it comes!" said Mitch. "Australia's man of the hour."

"He got us out of a mess this morning," said Peter.

"He hasn't got *you* sucked in, has he?" said Mitch. "He's not brave. He just don't know when to duck."

"He'll finish up with a decoration."

"He'll be trying hard enough," said Mitch.

Peter thought, how do I get through to you, Frank? We're only mouthing words. Carnal's dead, and he was no loss. And Old Misery'll live. They said so. So snap out of it.

Lieutenant O'Grady halted and studied Mitch's wooden expression.

"What are you doing with the Owen gun, Private Mitchell? Who told you you could have it?"

"I took it," said Mitch monotonously. "I went in and took it."

There was a little silence.

"Sir," said O'Grady softly.

"Sir!"

"Good! We progress. We'll leave you keep the gun. You'll find yourself using it very soon. And do you know the rest of it, Private Mitchell?"

"No, sir."

"If you don't do a good job with it, we will inform the platoon that you withheld it from someone more competent to use it. Clear!"

"Yes, sir."

O'Grady looked at his watch sharply and walked up the track.

"Someone ought to lock him up," said Peter, and was afraid.

"They mightn't have to," said Mitch slowly.

• • •

O'Grady said, "Section commanders! Three Platoon will prepare to advance in five minutes. It would appear that One and Two Platoons are incapable of offensive warfare. We will go in and show them how it is done. Line up the platoon."

For a long moment, after he had gone, the Admiral and Ted Thorn looked at each other without speaking.

Thorn said, "I must invite you and your mother over for Christmas the first time we're home."

He went down the track to marshal Nine Section.

Eleven

THE attack on Bobdubi Ridge broke down very slowly. The rain had cleared away, but the rain had done all the damage it was possible to do. The clouds remained, and no air-supply could be flown to replenish the reserve ammunition. The companies called for ammunition at a rate which at first disturbed the colonel and then alarmed him.

One by one, still consuming ammunition, the three prongs of his attack slowed to a halt.

There were many other reasons, apart from the weather.

A jungle offensive required intense internal cohesion between groups and between individuals. Men acquired that mutual cohesion either through battle or intensive training, and the Eighty-Third Battalion had had neither.

Without that cohesion, the jungle absorbed and dissipated an attack like a sponge absorbs water.

A jungle offensive required firm and intelligent direction by its junior commanders: not the officers sitting in command posts, but the officers within grenade range of the enemy. When the captains and the lieutenants vacillated, or were simply unclear in their own minds, they lost.

One by one, Colonel Wilson examined all the applicable reasons for the limited result emerging from the battle, and after each survey, his mind came back to the ammunition.

Shortly before noon, he ordered Don Company to break off its attack on Old Vickers and dig in.

• • •

Colonel Wilson was a mild, courteous little man, ageing prematurely under the stress of war. He was, in a sense, weak, so that his mind was incapable of sealing itself against the brutality of the war.

He had seen the Greek women and children of Larissa die under the dive-bombers on that day when the Australian soldier saw the naked truth of Nazism, which other people had already discovered in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald. In the snows of Mount Olympus, David Wilson had been the instrument that passed the order to his platoon that the wounded and the sick would be abandoned to their own endeavours in the raw night and the wind and the waist-deep snow.

Against the German airborne regiments, he had led a company with the naked bayonet in the last mad charge with the Maoris at Suda Bay. When the mind had died, save for the yearning vision of the sea, he had taken a

company, and then a battalion, down the Poppendetta Road to Gona and the sea.

On the day that the Battle of Salamaua began, there were no illusions left to him, for war had deprived him of the last and greatest illusion that a man can lose. He was far from Bardia Morning in the Western Desert, and he had lived long enough and survived enough battles to know that fortitude and courage wear out, like a gramophone needle or the sole of a shoe.

• • •

At twenty-five minutes past two in the afternoon, he ordered B Company to break off the attack on Orodubi and dig in.

After he had given the order, he sat with the map in front of him, and, listening to the distant gunfire, read the messages from A Company.

A Company was advancing, although the movement was barely discernible, and to call the movement an advance was a euphemism.

The spur the company had been climbing from the Uliap rose suddenly to a great shoulder before leading at a high level to the Triangle. By his map, the colonel saw that the company had closed against the high shoulder. He saw that until this ground was captured, the company had no purchase, let alone a foot-hold comparable to those secured facing Old Vickers and Orodubi.

The lack of a hold was extremely grave, for that threatened all operations against the central part of Bobdubi Ridge.

The high ground from the shoulder to the Triangle had been named Halligan's Spur to distinguish it from the main Ridge.

As always, Colonel Wilson's mind came back to the ammunition. Once, he searched through the messages and correlated A Company's casualty list with the ammunition expenditure and the tangible results; and there it was, as he had known all the time, one of the two fundamental reasons why the battle was breaking down.

The troops were using ammunition and reserving themselves, using ammunition to compensate for loss of co-

hesion. This was quite understandable, but only very well-trained battalions knew better when they came to their first battle; knew what the Eighty-Third Battalion had still to discover, and would not discover in the remaining four hours of daylight, that between the supply of ammunition and the supply of soldiers, there is a very finely preserved balance maintained, by accident or design, by the General Staff and the politicians.

The other fundamental reason for the lack of success was detected by the brigadier and Wilson and the infantry officers with battle experience.

Bobdubi Ridge had been heavily reinforced by the enemy.

The repercussions of that, he knew, would reach to Division and Corps and Army, with equal repercussions on their strategic plans.

The hour had come to arbitrate on the fate of the battle. It required courage to order A Company to go on. It required resilience and a special kind of courage to pick up the telephone and order A Company to withdraw.

While Wilson debated, a message came to him that A Company had captured another twenty yards of jungle.

"Runner!"

"Call up my escort."

Then a message came from Orodubi and took the decision out of his hands. The message decided the fate of Halligan's Spur for all time, because it informed him that between Battalion Headquarters and Orodubi, the adjutant and one of his escorts had been killed in an ambush.

The adjutant's body had been recovered, but too late. The enemy had removed all the contents of his pockets.

The contents of his pockets, the colonel well knew, included a sketch of the disposition of all troops east of Missim, and the entire Order of Battle of the First Australian Division.

David Wilson had need of his courage then: not the courage that one can demonstrate with a bayonet, but the courage a leader needs when he has to face an issue that has taken command of him and of his troops.

The issue could only be faced under the shoulder of

Halligan's Spur. Presently, Colonel Wilson set out with his escort and a hastily organised ammunition team of Headquarter troops.

• • •

A Company was advancing, very slowly. There was little room on the spur for manoeuvre or tactical finesse. The enemy fire commanded all the ground where it approached the high shoulder of Halligan's Spur.

It had taken several hours and several attacks to establish One Platoon on the left flank from where it could give battle to the enemy. The principal advance of Two and Three Platoons along the spur was a monotonous repetition of establishing a section forward to fire frontally on the enemy while the next section came forward, passed through the fire section, and advanced in its own right, advancing and shooting, until it in its turn came to a halt and established itself as the fire section.

Sometimes, a section gained five yards, and once, Five Section won fifteen yards of jungle and undergrowth; and sometimes, the advancing section obtained nothing at all.

At ten minutes to three, Three Platoon advanced to the attack.

"I'll stay beside you," said Lalor faintly.

"Get the hell away from me," said the Admiral curtly, and then he jabbed his thumb to the left. "Over there."

The dead Bren gunner of Four Section lay in Ron Fisher's path. Fisher did not look at him. Forward of him, slightly to the left of the track, was a large tree. Ron Fisher was exhausted and bemused, and his mind did not actually analyse the importance of the tree. O'Grady's voice steered him forward. He saw the trunk of the tree and he went towards it, firing at the sound of the enemy machine-gun as he went.

"Keep spread out," called O'Grady. "Nine Section! Take cover. Forward, Seven. Keep up to them, Eight!"

His voice represented sanity. When he commanded, they obeyed. A machine-gun began searching for O'Grady.

Nine Section had captured six yards of jungle.

• • •

Colonel Wilson crouched behind the rear section of Two Platoon and waited for Captain Howard. When Howard came out of the undergrowth, Wilson saw the rifle in his hands and the colonel's heart missed a beat.

He said, "What's the matter, Neil?"

"Nothing we can't fix," said Howard. "But it won't be fixed this afternoon."

"Cohesion?"

"Yes, sir."

"Using the ammo and sparing themselves?"

"Yes, sir."

"What else?"

"It'd take too long to tell, sir. Some other time."

"Very well," said the colonel. "Let's get down to cases. Something very grave has happened. The enemy has captured the Divisional Order of Battle. All our plans and deceptions have gone down the drain. Furthermore, the enemy has been reinforced."

While he was speaking he was watching Howard's eyes.

Into your hands, Captain Howard, I commit the Battle of Salamaua. Tonight will be too late. Even another hour may be too late.

He said aloud, "There is only one way out of this mess, as usual. We have to fight so hard, all day and every day, that the enemy will think *we've* been reinforced. Is that clear?"

Howard said, "That's very clear, sir."

"I'm glad you understand me," said the colonel evenly, and, looking at him, Howard perceived a fatigue, subtle yet measurable, which he thought came from the Desert and the snows and the swamps.

"Are your troops still moving?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel said, "Is there any sign of a break?"

• • •

The break came quite suddenly. For a long, bewildering moment the Japanese fire faltered, and while it faltered

Howard wheeled about from the colonel and ran up the track with his rifle at the port.

The break caught Lieutenant O'Grady off his guard. It was left to Sergeant Townsend to realise what had happened. He moved so fast that he left O'Grady crouching behind him.

"Into it!" he yelled at Three Platoon. "Bore it into them!"

He ran desperately, intently, flinging himself up the slope so wildly that his rush jerked men into movement like puppets on invisible strings.

Yelling at Three Platoon, with the most alert men coming after him, he charged at the point where he was needed, in the middle of the front section.

The Bren gunner was partly behind a tree. Empty brass cases sprayed out of the machine-gun.

"Come on, cock," said Townsend mildly, and set out with Seven Section for the top of the knoll. He discovered that it was all lies that a man can be too busy to be scared.

The tiny waves of sections followed after him.

• • •

During the day, much of the vegetation on the slopes of the shoulder had been cut down by gunfire, and it was into this partly cleared area that Three Platoon advanced.

For the first time they saw the slopes above them from which the enemy had fought them all day.

Neil Howard was coming up the track. He saw the impetus of the Platoon attack losing its way under a grenade barrage, saw Two Platoon hesitating for a direction, saw the crest in front of the company, saw a Japanese run.

There was no time to make plans, no time to delegate orders and responsibilities. The crisis was around him, upon him. He walked with it, lifting his rifle, sensing stray men of Two Platoon looking at him. The track rose before him. It was his path, his lonely road of command.

His voice picked men from behind trees, from the ground, from the jungle. "Two Platoon! Follow me!"

His voice gave them order and purpose. It was the voice of the man they had always believed would have led the

Eighty-Third Battalion to Bargara on the first night of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

They went with him on his lonely journey to the high shoulder of Halligan's Spur.

• • •

Colonel Wilson had not moved from where he had been standing when Howard left him. Inwardly, the colonel flinched at every syllable of every yelled order. It was a wild moment, and that anyone had to raise his voice was bad jungle warfare.

"Tell the commander of Two Platoon I want to see him," said the colonel and turned about on the track.

"Give me Brigade," he said to the signalman, and while he was still talking jubilantly to the brigadier, a tremendous silence fell on Halligan's Spur.

The colonel put down the phone and walked up the track to meet the lieutenant of Two Platoon.

Wilson said, "Mister Cislowski, the place for a company commander is behind his leading platoon from where he can keep control of his company. The next time Captain Howard has to lead your platoon for you, I shall be obliged to relieve you of your command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" said Cislowski.

"Keep it that way," said Wilson, and left him standing there.

In the silence above him, the patrols of One Platoon were scouting along Halligan's Spur towards the three defended knolls of the Triangle on Bobdubi Ridge.

As he walked, the colonel began planning a fresh attack. Until that attack, he had to take command of the jungle and keep it. He knew he faced a dirty, unspectacular fight.

Ron Fisher souvenired a Japanese sword. The Admiral thought about Lalor. The company dug in on the western end of the Spur. A queer silence took command of the jungle.

Twelve

THE only sign that Colonel Wilson ever offered that his infantry had rescued him from a perilous moment was his recommendation that Captain Howard and Sergeant Townsend be awarded Mentions in Despatches.

The night came to the jungle and the colonel went to bed in a wet lean-to shelter that an aborigine would have spurned. Colonel Wilson slept fully dressed, using his pack for a pillow; and cocked and loaded, his Luger pistol rested under his hand. He had fought in the jungle before, and he knew about the clubs and grenades and knives that came out of the night at careless men.

His last thought before he went to sleep was that he was fortunate that colonels need never spend their nights in a weapon-pit waiting for the knives.

• • •

Night settled over Halligan's Spur, and the time of waiting for the knives began. When the night was over, and daylight returned to the jungle, Ron Fisher was older and wiser.

With Nine Section, waiting for orders, he crouched in the undergrowth in the relative safety of platoon headquarters while Lieutenant O'Grady completed shaving.

Sergeant Townsend said, "What's it like out there, mate?"

"Like camping with a tiger-snake," said Ron Fisher, and then he grinned.

Ah, thought Townsend, the grin that covers a man's loss of his self-esteem. That's the ones I want. The ones that can come out of the night and grin.

O'Grady wiped his razor-blade and said, "You blokes were very quiet last night. Nobody let a gun off."

Ron Fisher said blankly, "There was nothing to shoot."

O'Grady's mouth drooped with a faint smile. "The compleat soldier, eh, Fisher? In full command of your nerves!"

Nerves! What would *you* bloody well know about nerves! You want to come out tonight and sit on the perimeter, like them Company Headquarter blokes sitting in our pits because we have to go out on patrol.

Sergeant Townsend said, "Where's Lalor?"

"Havin' a nervous pee," said Mitch.

In Nine Section there was a sudden unwinking silence.

Ted Thorn said, "I must ask you, sir, to remove Lalor from the section."

O'Grady stopped smiling.

"Don't come that caper with me, Corporal! This is a fight to a finish. *No one* leaves Bobdubi Ridge until he's bandaged up or carried out on a stretcher. Get that into your head and keep it there."

He turned very slowly, looking at Ted Thorn and then at the Admiral, at Ron Fisher, at Peter and Mitch: and Sergeant Townsend watched in fascination. In the mind, they went immeasurably far away. They did not recoil, but withdrew within themselves, the five of them. Then they went far away, facing O'Grady across an unbridgeable gulf; and while they stood there the five became one, to stand together for all time, and from the great distance Corporal Thorn said, "Yes, sir."

Townsend blinked and rose to his feet.

He said, "It's time, sir."

"Yes," said O'Grady. "Nine Section, report to Captain Howard for patrol briefing."

After a little while, O'Grady said, "Discipline! You see?"

"Yes, sir," said Townsend impassively.

He went off to the perimeter. While he was inspecting Seven and Eight Sections, he walked very silently and circumspectly, for in the jungle, that was where the war began. He preferred to remain alive, and his responsi-

bility to his step-brothers and step-sisters was an added inducement.

• • •

There were faint voices in the undergrowth, and Townsend stopped.

The first voice said, "He's not getting me out on patrol with him, and you can lay a tin of weed on that."

"*You* won't have any choice."

"That's all right about that. I want a sporting chance when I go."

The voices were muted, inaudible beyond ten paces.

Townsend said softly, "Who aren't you going patrolling with, Private Stanaway?"

There! Wriggle out of that one!

He stepped around a bush and crouched at the rear lip of the pit. He tapped Stanaway on the shoulder and waited for him to turn about.

"Listen, cock. Don't start that bloody act in this place. And now I'll ask you again. Who aren't you patrolling with?"

"It's nothing to do with you, Horse. You're O.K."

"Now listen to me, soldier. It's everything to do with me. *Who was it?*"

"Mister O'Grady," said Stanaway.

O'Grady!

Stanaway? You, too! You don't trust him. And Nine Section don't trust him. How many more of you? Where are they? Who are they? Dear bloody God, it's as bad as it ever was. I have to go on doing what I've always had to do, keeping order. Looking after them.

He leaned over Stanaway, "You don't *have* to like your platoon commander, soldier. And you don't *have* to like what he tells you to do. But you better be very clear about one thing, and that is that you'll go and do it."

Stanaway never called him Horse again.

• • •

Townsend took his rifle from the crook of his arm and sat in his pit beside O'Grady.

"Everything right there?" asked O'Grady.

"Yes, sir," said Townsend, and picked up the lieutenant's map to inspect the markings on its talc cover.

"Is that where he sent Nine Section, sir?"

"Yes. See there. They go straight along the Spur for a hundred yards . . . to there . . . that track junction. Three Section's further on . . . there . . . waiting to ambush anything approaching from the Triangle. Nine Section turns left at the junction . . . goes down that side track for three hundred paces."

"Where's their rendezvous point if they're jumped?"

"Here. Company. They're to set an ambush for two hours and come back the way they went out."

"That track leads over Bobdubi," said Townsend.

"Yes," said O'Grady. "It's a bit tricky sending a section down there, but if you sent a platoon this early, you'd be in trouble here if the Nips attacked the company."

His mouth drooped powerfully. "A difficult choice, Ralph. That's the sort of problem I am going to give *you* some exercise on as we go along. How to make a choice, and how to stick to it when you've made it. You are a sergeant, and you have to be ready for the day when *you* are an officer and you're doing my job, or even Captain Howard's. You will find there is more to war than charging through a grenade barrage. You have to be prepared to shoulder the immense responsibility of all that you do, such as sending Nine Section on a platoon mission."

"I see, sir," said Townsend, and listened to the oppressive silence of the jungle. He would do that a lot in the jungle, listen to the silence, wait for the distinctive note of a machine-gun, for the one that fires first is the one that wins: the hard, sharp hammering of a Bren gun; or the slow, drumming thud of a Woodpecker.

The silence was oppressive, and it was hot.

• • •

It was as Neil Howard had always known it would be. Send out a patrol. Two patrols. Four patrols. Fence delicately with the enemy among the leaves. Send out the patrols. Watch them go out. Count them as they go. Count Ron Fisher carrying the Admiral's Owen gun. Count

Mitch, and Ted Thorn of the dole road. Count Peter and Lalor and the Admiral.

Count them when they go out, and listen to the jungle, and wait for them to come back.

Only time will ever tell how many will come back from the forest. Is there a God? Or is there not? Was it God who uprooted the schools and the farms and the orphanages and the factories to create the patrols? If it was, the patrols have gone where God can never reach them.

Then I am God, for it was I who sent them into the forest. And if that is so, then they must answer to me, and I must answer to them. Here in the jungle.

. . .

Ron Fisher walked in the jungle with the Owen gun in his hands. His unruly hair had escaped from under his hat and wavered gently above his eyes. They were sharp and scared. The jungle stood over him, and around him, and behind him, and brushed at his face.

He was walking towards Japan.

The green, hot twilight made a shadow of him. He was not aware of the smell of the jungle, or of the heat, or of the mud. He was aware of the leaves: limitless millions of leaves. He thought that he swam in a dimension of leaves. He thought that there was a machine-gun muzzle behind each leaf.

When death came out of the leaves, it would come from twenty feet away, or even ten.

In five minutes, he walked one hundred yards.

The branch of a tree cracked and the patrol disappeared and for a long moment the track was empty.

. . .

It was only the branch of a tree, you twerp.

Ron Fisher rose to his feet, not knowing how he had come to be on the ground, and for a discernible space of time he stood quite still. He would never tell anyone that it took him that time to retrieve his self-control. He walked on slowly, into the monstrous game of tig.

A man had no illusions among the leaves, or if he had,

he quickly lost them. The Admiral walked at the tail of the patrol and knew that he could never tell anyone how he had stood paralysed with fear before the Japanese scout on the Uliap track.

I will walk humbly, Robert Horatio Nelson, and not laugh at the feeble any more. The crow ballot is dead. Do you know that, Lalor? There's nobody on this track will ever laugh at you again.

How do you think Ron feels up there in front, with the leaves all round him, and only Mitch behind him to save him? I know, because that's where I was, yesterday morning. But yesterday, there were a hundred and ten of us. And now, there's only the six of us, creeping among the leaves.

And we're afraid of you, Lalor, because we have as much right in this world as you have: and I'm waiting for the time when you have to go to the front. You won't! I can tell you that now. Then I'll have to go. Or Ted, or Peter or Mitch.

Alive, Timothy, you are a fear inside of us: and dead, you will be a tragic crime. And some day, the men who sent us here, and sent *you* here, will fit us into the correct perspective. We shall all be the glorious dead.

• • •

For a long time, an immense silence contained Bobdubi Ridge, from Old Bobdubi, south to Old Vickers, and south again to the Triangle and Halligan's Spur; and further again, to Gwaibalom and Orodubi: and beyond that to the front of the commando squadron, Nambling and Sugarcane Knoll.

It was as though the battle of the day before had been a preliminary trial of strength. In the silence, the patrols searched for the enemy, and the enemy searched for the patrols.

Then they began to meet, and Colonel Wilson knew that the battle for Bobdubi Ridge was joined: and joined it would remain until the Ridge was captured, and the Komiatum Track behind it was cut and held, depriving the enemy of aid to his defences around the Mubo Gorge,

and to his inner defences on the slopes of the Forbidden Mountain, Mount Tambu.

The silence was gone, and soon the transitory machine-gun battles became telephone calls, and the calls became markings on the colonel's battle map.

Patrol there. Ambushed the enemy. Patrol there. Nothing to report. Patrol there. Ambushed by the enemy. Don Company. Enemy estimated fifty-sixty charged company perimeter with machine-gun support. A Company. Enemy fire heard vicinity patrol Nine Section. Patrol missing.

• • •

It was as Neil Howard had always known it would be. Count them as they go out. And listen to the alien machine-gun in the jungle. And wait for them to come back.

God is not in Heaven. He is here on earth. I am God. What have I done to Nine Section?

"One and Two Platoons will transfer their reserve sections to Three Platoon's pits. Mister O'Grady, you will take Seven and Eight Sections and clear this track."

The colonel made another mark on his battle map and launched his desperate bluff that his battalion had been heavily reinforced.

• • •

Ron Fisher and Mitch were the first to come back. They sat on a log by Company Headquarters and waited. Howard interrogated them about the ambush and sent off a message.

He came back and said, "The others?"

Ron Fisher said, "I dunno. I was up front. I went over the side."

He added, "Thanks for that squirt you gave him, Mitch."

"Do the same for me sometime, lad."

Mitch spoke with his strong wide mouth sober and his eyes appraising and demanding.

"You'll be all right," said Ron Fisher evenly.

Howard said, "Did you see the others?"

"I waited a while down in the gully," said Mitch. "Once

you get off the track you could miss a bloke by six feet and never know he was there. Then I thought they must 'ave got ahead of me. So I started off and then I met Ron. We come up the side of the spur through Four Section."

Peter came up the track from the rear of the company and sat on the log.

He said, "What a dopey way to earn a living."

He sat up and said, "Where are the others?"

"Still coming," said Ron Fisher.

He lit another cigarette.

"Where were you?" asked Captain Howard.

"Four sir," said Peter. "Behind Ted. *He* got off the track all right. I saw him go."

He added, "Lalor was behind me, and Bob at the back. I don't know about them."

Howard said, "That's all right, Peter. You did what you have to do. Watch the bloke in front of you."

That is what you have to do. Watch the bloke in front. If he's alive, and he's still on the track, go and get him. If he leaves the track, even if he's hit, that's all right. Then it's every man for himself.

Ted Thorn arrived and sat on the log.

He said, "I saw you looking for me when I went over the side. You'll do for me, Peter."

He added, "I never had much time for you book-learning blokes."

Peter said, "Someone has to stick by the proletariat."

"That'll be news to them," said Ted Thorn, and looked at Mitch. "How are you?"

"I'm apples. Couple more runs like that an' I'll be ready f'r a bash at the four-minute mile."

Ron Fisher said, "I wish Bob and Tim'd come back."

"They'll be all right," said Mitch. "They were down the back."

The scar on Mitch's chin, Howard noticed, was quite perceptible.

Ted Thorn said, "You like the old Admiral, Ron, don't you?"

"He was very good to me," said Ron Fisher.

After a while he said, "He was my schoolteacher. He wanted me to go to high school. After I left school, he

used to send me books. I used to sit up in the timber-camp at the week-ends reading them all while the mob was in town on the scoot."

He lit another cigarette.

"What sort of books?" said Captain Howard.

Keep them talking. Keep them talking till Nelson and Lalor come in.

"It might sound a bit silly now," said Ron Fisher. "All sorts, sir. Shakespeare. Milton. Lawson. All the rest of them."

"That's Bob," said Ted Thorn. "Or it was. Something happened to him there before the war. He just dropped his bundle. Properly. Ever since then he's been what he calls living on the fringe of civilisation."

"Yeh," said Mitch. "That's where *we* were, Peter an' me."

"We've heard all about that orphanage," said Ted Thorn.

"I ever tell you about Custard Guts?" said Mitch. "He used to run the joint. Peter an' me used t' keep him in the pink of condition. Ev'ry day old Custard Guts'd look out over the wall and cry, 'There they go again.' "

"It gets better every time you tell it," said Ron Fisher.

"You talk too much," said Mitch.

Howard looked covertly at his watch and listened to the jungle. He was still God, and he still had four and a part patrols in the forest.

Ron Fisher lit another cigarette. The scar on Mitch's chin was sharply etched on the flesh.

. . .

Somewhere, there was a noise.

For a moment, after he woke, the C.A.P. orderly lay quite still, listening to the jungle. Far away, towards Old Vickers, a machine-gun puttered, but he knew that was not the sound that had disturbed him.

He turned his head left and stared without comprehension at the behaviour of Nine Section and Captain Howard. They were looking at some point beyond him, and walking towards him. Their careful walk and their

hard eyes reminded Jigger of men manoeuvring to attack a snake.

He rolled over flat against the ground. He saw Three Platoon coming in from the main track. He saw the Admiral coming in from a different direction. It was the Admiral that everybody was looking at.

He was without his shirt, and he staggered along, carrying Lalor hung across his shoulders.

When they took Lalor from him, the Admiral collapsed.

. . .

Three Platoon coalesced. In the flesh, it came together, all looking down at Lalor on the stretcher and Jigger working urgently to reinforce the dressings and the strips of the Admiral's shirt.

Then the platoon coalesced in an indefinable, ugly way that eluded Captain Howard for the rest of his life. Whatever it was, Lalor was its catalyst, and it spread out from there, embracing the platoon from the centre outwards. Its transit was almost visible, for, as it went, it left a silence as unnatural as night at noon; unnatural as the way one man raised his eyes and stared at O'Grady, and then at Townsend, and then at Howard himself; unnatural as the way men looked at one another, one by one, as though a message passed Howard by on an alien wave-length.

Whatever it was, Howard felt it reach out and eddy around him, so that, somewhere in his mind, a nerve twanged: and Townsend began to stiffen, subtly, exerting an animal dominance over the platoon that had nothing to do with his command of rank.

He moved through the platoon, gently, like a man separating the component ingredients of an explosive. Before him, very slowly, the platoon broke up and drifted away to its pits, leaving Nine Section and Jigger around Lalor, leaving Howard aware, while the nature of it eluded him, that his command was in peril.

That was a proposition he *did* understand, and he knew at once that he would send Three Platoon out again, and that he himself would command the patrol.

• • •

The rain was falling very lightly on Lalor's face and the touch of it brought him back from a vague and featureless fog.

Fingers settled on his pulse and Jigger said, "Keep going."

Keep going, thought Lalor. What's he mean? Going where? Who's going where? Why am I so tired? I'm so tired I could sleep forever.

His eyes opened slowly, reluctantly. For a stupid moment, he wondered where he was, in Heaven or Hell.

When the stupidity cleared, he realised that he was being carried on a stretcher.

Jigger said, "Steady there, Mitch."

Peter said, "Just as well we left Bob behind. He couldn't have taken this after what *he* did."

Lalor closed his eyes again.

He died without knowing that Nine Section had carried him over the Uliap with a compassion he had sought ever since he first went to school.

• • •

Captain Howard felt very old.

"I gave him what he wanted," he said. "He wanted to be a man, like the rest of us."

"Yes," said the sergeant-major. "And then, as Private Nelson says, he shot himself when he went over the side. He caught his trigger in a stick."

The Admiral was lying on the ground. Howard turned and looked down at him.

"Is that what happened?"

"Yes, sir," said the Admiral.

Howard stared at him without expression.

"Yes," Howard said finally. "That's what I was always afraid of. That he'd be a menace to you blokes or himself."

He turned to the sergeant-major and said, "That's why I told O'Grady at Bulwa to yank him out if there was any trouble."

The two men walked away.

The Admiral was still lying on the ground. His eyes were open, quite suddenly, completely unmasked, shining with a pain that would mould his mind all the days of his life.

He said quite distinctly, "Dear Mrs. Bloody Lalor."

. . .

In the night, the enemy came to A Company. He came, one man, his bare feet making no sound, a long bush knife held in his teeth, and another jungle machete swinging in one hand. He was neither seen nor heard, until he fell into a weapon-pit in One Platoon on top of its occupants. Then there was an elemental fight to the death.

It was the same night that time changed its quality, for when the sun rose over the jungle, the identification of days had gone, and for ever afterwards time was a moment with little memory preceding it, and only the sea before it; and which day or night was which, or when it was, was something that few men in the jungle would ever know.

. . .

On one of those anonymous days, Two Platoon failed to complete a patrol, and Lieutenant Cilowski was returned to Australia, where he eventually became an instructor at a jungle-warfare school.

One anonymous day, Nervous Lincoln rejoined Nine Section. He had hoped to be court-martialled in Moresby, and hence be safe, but he had encountered Battalion Rear Party on the aerodrome at Jackson's. His path and Cislowski's crossed on the Missim Trail.

Thirteen

COLONEL WILSON was coming back from Sugar-cane Knoll. He said good-bye to the commando major and called to his escort, and they went down the long track along the Uliap, west of Bobdubi Ridge: past Nambling and Orodubi and Gwaibalom, past the Triangle and Halligan's Spur and Old Vickers.

He had gone to Sugar-cane Knoll because it afforded a tactical view of the valley behind Bobdubi Ridge. From a study of his map, he had been prepared for the view, and the more distant view of the valley of the Francisco River, and beyond that the stern, green razor-backs of Kela Heights guarding Salamaua from sight. In the south, he had been prepared to see the clouds and the ranges, and the black bulk of Mount Tambu reinforcing the enemy defences of Mubo.

Colonel Wilson had not been prepared to expect the sea. The sea was a shock, it seemed so close. It was close, and then, vast and clean, it stretched away from him, a great noble lake that went out to the horizon and met the sky.

The sea was a shock, and he went down the long Uliap track, remembering the sweet and bitter day that the battalions came out of the swamps of Gona and saw the sea.

How does one find the sea? Take Bobdubi Ridge and cut the Komiatum Track. Then when Mubo has fallen, and Mount Tambu has fallen, and there is no enemy left to the south and west of the river, then cross the river and fight him on the Kela Heights: and from the Kela go down to Salamaua and walk on the white sand, and

trail your fingers in the water and marvel that the sea is soft and cool and clean.

That is how one finds the sea.

One has to fight for the sea, and I am getting old, and tired. I have learned something that is known only to the men of Bardia Morning, that a road can be too long, and that if you travel it far enough, all that you have left to fight for is the sea amd the last of your self-respect.

That is the truth, and now I must go on a little further, and find the sea.

• • •

The jungle was a mass too large for the eye to comprehend: a mass of trees, creepers, shrubs and undergrowth. This afternoon the jungle was still, so that from Old Bobdubi in the north, to Sugar-cane Knoll in the south, no sound arose and no breath of wind came to stir the leaves or the fetid heat.

The leaves stretched so far, and rose so high above a man's head, that they were the fourth dimension, the jungle.

The jungle appeared empty.

On Halligan's Spur, in the riot of leaves, on the Spur where it begins to turn towards the Triangle, Nine Section lay in ambush.

The jungle was far from being empty.

The Admiral stared through the leaves along the track. To his left, Peter Mitchell nursed his rifle and waited. To his right, Nervous Lincoln, who was on his first patrol, watched the track in trepidation. Ted Thorn dozed, as did Mitch and Ron Fisher.

That three of the six of them could doze was a supreme, sweet paradox of the war on the ridge. Ron Fisher treasured the lying in ambush, for then he escaped from the hunting, avoided the unpleasant, forgot the terror of the leaves, slept as he could never sleep at night in the perimeter. He dozed in the ambush, far from guns, from knives in the night, far from strain and Butcher O'Grady.

The ambush was a valve, releasing the pent-up pressure, for the mind desires to forget, and forget it does. Forget how Carnal Knowledge slid down in the mud,

making that dreadful noise in his throat. Forget the horrible suspicion one formed on looking into the eyes of Lieutenant Cislowski, wondering whether he is a particle of Colonel Maitland's estate, finding the doubt proved. Forget how a man clung to the mud while grenades pounded about him, forsaking self-respect for naked fear. That is the most shattering blow of all, and a man *must* forget, as he must forget the terrible temptation to leave his comrades for safety.

The mind takes a memory and sifts it, discarding the obvious, the detail. In a few days, a man has forgotten the noise Carnal made, but the memory of it is horror, and a thin stratum of horror sinks down into the mind. There is a layer in the mind that Jigger ran through fire to aid Old Miserable; and another that Lalor died, and that layer is of pity so infinite that a man feels very old at the age of nineteen.

When the mind had accumulated a certain number of layers, they constituted experience, and from them, one came to wisdom and understanding; setting out on a long road to the rediscovery of the simple truths of life; or if one was very young, like Ron Fisher, discovering them for the very first time, and taking them to himself as his father must have done, long ago, between Sinai and the Wells of Beersheba.

In the forest, on the day when the jungle was so still, from Old Bobdubi to Sugar-cane Knoll, a hand nudged the dozing Fisher. At the touch, serenity fled, and slowly his head came up from his hands folded across the gun-butt. His eyes, watching through the leaves, began to grow hard, and any pity that may have been there was submerged.

He had never seen a live Japanese before, and now there were ten of them, one behind the other, coming down the track from the Triangle. That they were men did not occur to him. They were something less than men.

He moved infinitesimally, wriggling and bracing himself behind the Bren gun, his eye finding the foresight in the aperture of the other, finding the enemy scout lined in both. Let him come, right up close. The closer they are, the harder they fall.

It was the Bren gun that would begin the ambush. He wriggled again, cuddling the gun-butt. The other five men waited upon his judgment. For twenty-five seconds, he led them, transcending rank and age and discipline.

His heart was thudding painfully against his ribs. He was aware of every bone and muscle and fibre in his body. He was alive, and entire, and he was going to live for a thousand years.

Do unto others, as they do unto you.

Steel and sound streamed out of the Bren gun, waking up the forest, punching the enemy into the mud, shredding all their lives and emotions in one great, gigantic flash of knowledge of death, and after the flash, there was nothing.

"Come on," said Ted Thorn, and Nine Section was gone, sliding and slipping down the side of the Spur, away from the place where they had waited in peace, and which would be for some little time the most dangerous place to be in all New Guinea.

They came home again to the perimeter, to the rain and the mud and the knives in the night, to the conversations conducted always in whispers, to the waterlogged weapon pits and belongings that were never dry, to the undergrowth and bully-beef and Lieutenant O'Grady.

Crouching under his dripping lean-to of sticks and leaves, Ron Fisher located his stub of pencil and the driest of his sheets of writing-paper and wrote to his mother.

I am keeping fine and in the best of health. We have had no mail for a while now, but we expect some very soon.

Mitch and Peter send their regards to you and Dad as usual. Do you think I could bring Mitch home again next time we come on leave? It doesn't matter about Peter. He's married now.

As you are putting my allotment away, give it to Dad to buy a cow to replace Princess. That can be a birthday present for him. The last time I was home old Sorensen had some good heifers coming along. There was a little bawley heifer with white feet and a sort of white cross on her face that I liked the look of. Maybe old Sorensen would let her go for a reasonable price.

I have not had malaria or anything. I'll be glad to come home again. Nothing ever happens here, and it is very dull and hot and rains all the time.

Ask Dad to give my regards to all the blokes up at the sawmill. Love. . . .

. . .

He slid into the pit beside Ted Thorn.

"O.K.?" said Ted Thorn in a whisper.

"Yeh. Go and write a letter. Anything to see?"

"Only New Guinea," whispered Ted Thorn. "Bye-bye."

. . .

The three weapon pits of Nine Section faced rearwards, towards the Uliap. On the left, Mitch and Peter alternated guard in their pit. On the right, the Admiral introduced Nervous Lincoln to the jungle.

The Bren pit was in the centre, facing down the Uliap track. The day or the night was coming, Ron Fisher knew, when the enemy would forsake the obvious direct attack from the Triangle, and attack from the rear of the company.

It was raining again, beating upon the leaves, until the rain found the mud and made rivulets in it. The rivulets took the line of least resistance, and some of them found the weapon pit and streamed into it, adding to the muddy water already there.

Ron Fisher was in the pit behind the Bren gun. The gun rested on the bank of mud in front of his face. He had found some long, wide jungle leaf and spread it over the gun. The rain soaked him to the skin again and found even the eyelets in the crown of his slouch hat. The brim of his hat drooped, softened by incessant moisture; and the rain, beating upon the mud around the gun, splashed a fine mist of water and particles of mud into his face.

He did not move, but his eyes did, all the time, slowly, watching the undergrowth on the slope, watching the track to where it disappeared from view into the leaves.

Every so often, there was gunfire in the forest, sometimes close at hand, sometimes far away, towards Old Vickers, on Halligan's Spur, towards Orodubi.

He was cold, and inured in his misery, and longed for the comfort of a cigarette. It was dangerous to smoke in the pit, so close to the leaves; and even if it had not been, he had nothing on which he could dry his hands to roll a cigarette.

Close to twilight, he ate his bully-beef and dog-biscuits, swallowed his atebrin under the supervision of Lieutenant O'Grady; and covered by Ted Thorn behind the Bren gun, crawled carefully down the slope into the war to restring his two booby-trap grenades across the track, and retreating up the slope, set a new rattletrap of wire and bully-tins.

When he had done this, he slid into the pit beside Ted Thorn. The rain had stopped, and while every man in the company attended the last-light stand-to from a pit, the day appeared to seep out of the jungle, and it was night.

. . .

The night was complete, so that if a man opened his eyes, or closed them, there was no difference. It was complete, and in it a grown man could take fright at the scuttlings of a wood-lizard.

Ron Fisher was awake, for it was his turn to watch, while Corporal Thorn slept beside him in the pit in the water and the mud. Ron Fisher sat quite still, feeling the urge to sleep induced by the days in the forest and by the nights in the pit, where one slept for no more than half the night, and sometimes less.

Then if a man slept when he should not, a grenade might come out of the dark, or, if not a grenade, a club or a knife. Guard was a war between fatigue and the desire to live.

Unseen, in the night, Ron Fisher could flex his fingers and brush the grenades sitting in the cavity cut in the bank of the pit. He could lift his hand before him and run his fingers along the butt of the Bren. He could drop his hand to his side and caress the lump of timber that could smash in a man's head.

It was an hour now since a voice in the night had called for Corporal Smith: and in the pits men waited. They did

not move, but at the merest betraying sound they would fight for self-survival, for in A Company there was no Corporal Smith. The enemy was near the perimeter, if not already inside it.

At the dragging sound, a shudder took Ron Fisher involuntarily. His hand slid down on the lump of timber. He breathed with his mouth open, without sound, forcing himself to function easily, straining his ears to identify the sound. He was young, and lonely and frightened and amongst murder. He was being repaid for the ambush.

The night is the testing time, the time when a man is laid bare to himself. The night probes him, draws his nerves tight, making them twang and vibrate. If there is a weakness in the animal composition of a man, the night will find it and take him apart.

The night is the extension of the jungle. By day, a man may see ten yards. By night, he cannot see at all: and the war is only as far from him as he can see. The war is there, inside the muddy pit, close to him, pressing against him, resting upon his eyeballs.

The night is not good. To move in it is to be killed. For this reason, a man stays in his pit. If he should leave it, no friend will wait to identify him.

He will kill him.

The dragging, perhaps, was the brushing of a leaf in a breeze. Ron Fisher's fingers slipped away from the timber.

When the night breaks a man he becomes trigger-happy, and this is a label his comrades will put on him and never forgive him, for when he fires, he discloses the perimeter and the lives that hold it.

That noise!

It was so close.

The noise was new to him. There were new sounds every night. If he stayed alive long enough, he would learn them all, and no longer fear them, and become master of the night. He would learn, too, the jesting of the night.

The tiny clacking: it is the night laughing with a frond touching another; or is it the smacking of a grenade-cap on a boot-heel?

Guess! If you don't guess right, you're dead!

A brushing in the undergrowth: it is a breeze stirring the leaves; or is it a leg moving slowly against a bush?

A snap! It is a piece of timber yielding to the decay of the jungle; or is it a careless boot on a twig?

There are no mines, no barbed-wire. There are no planes to bring them. Nothing can be brought over the Missim Trail. For mines and wire and flares, a man has only his hearing and his small arsenal of weapons.

The sound made Ron Fisher's skin to crawl on his face, and under his ribs his heart hurt, filling up his chest.

His hand went out and closed on a grenade. The touch of the cold metal stopped him, made him think.

Steady. A grenade must have a target. What do you think you're doing? He can't get through the booby-traps.

No? He got through them at Orodubi, didn't he, crawling along in the night, fingering the ground and the air before him; inch by inch, tracing a vine to find that it went up in the air; brushing his fingers upon another, to find it led into a tin tied to a tree. A hand over the tin, a quick snip on the vine; and the grenade in the tin can rust there for ever.

He did that, didn't he? Then the questing fingers found the rattle-trap, all the empty bully-beef tins swinging on a vine across the track. You remember what they said! When the sun came up, the vine was gone! How did the fingers take the tins down from that hair-trigger trap? When the sun came up, they said, all the tins were on the ground, standing in rows, like so many soldiers on parade! Then he went in and got McGregor.

It was not very pleasant to remember what they said of McGregor, how he screamed, and how they found him in the morning.

Ron Fisher put out his hand and tapped Ted Thorn three times on the knee, and then another three times, and Ted Thorn was awake, sharply, hearing his heart beat.

There was a faint thump, and then silence. It was in the silence that Ron Fisher realised the significance of the track.

The hunk of timber! That's it! The hunk of timber!

He's there somewhere. Of course! He'll come up the track. He will! It's the smooth open bit of mud with no leaves or anything to put him away. And if he comes up the track he'll come right past my shoulder.

Oh, Dear Bloody God. Let Ted fix him. It's too much for me. No, wait a minute. I can't do that. It'd be the end of me. I'd be finished.

A piece of mud fell off the bank and splashed in the water in the pit. A throat sucked in a breath, a cut-off sound of fright that left only raw certitude on Ron Fisher.

He must hear my heart beating, oh God, he must. He's there. On the track. He's only six feet away. I can smell him.

Get up out of the water so it doesn't make a sound. Get up! Tap Ted again and push him down out of the way. Get a hold of the lump of timber. Get hold of it!

Very softly, mud squelched beside him. The sound locked his hands to the timber, drove him up from the pit, spiralling, with the timber swinging in his hands. Driven by his bulging shoulders, driven by reflex, the timber cut through the night, smashing into bone, smashing bone into splinters.

You broke his legs! He's down on his back! He can't move. He can't even cry.

Kill him!

He drove the timber upon legs again. Upon ribs, caving in a chest. Smash it all up. Smash it and smash it and smash it.

Kill him!

Hear his helmet roll! That was his face went in. Get him before he gets away. Into him! Smash him through the mud!

The time came when he could swing the club no more: the frenzied strength flowed out of him and he began to collapse down into the pit, dragging the lump of timber after him, weakly, like a child. He felt the blood and the matter on the timber, but the meaning of it did not reach him.

He slumped in the pit, unaware of the shots that had been fired at him when he came up from the pit; unaware of the dread and consternation the sound of the clubbing

had flung across the perimeter; unaware, mercifully, that before him there was still the rest of the night and all the other nights yet to come.

It was when his head was clear again, and his body functioning quietly, that that thought came to him, but that was hours afterwards, towards morning. When the thought came into his mind and he accepted it, he began to grow old, growing away from many things that he would never find again.

When the sun rose on the obscenity spreadeagled on the Uliap track, he made another discovery, and was older still, for the Admiral and Ted Thorn and Ralph Townsend inspected the dead Japanese, and then looked at him. That was when he knew he belonged with them, in a strange, hard world.

"You'll do for me, Tiger," said Ted Thorn, and Tiger was what they called him for ever afterwards.

The sections of Three Platoon marshalled before O'Grady and went out into the forest to meet the new day.

Fourteen

THE night was the time when the war rested against a man's eyes: and day was the time when a man could not trust what he saw.

The jungle was for the man who waited. It was a weapon in his armoury, as much as was the rifle or machine-gun he poised with its muzzle pointing through the leaves. He was never known of until it was too late.

The jungle was the enemy of the man who moved. He began to feel that there were eyes in the jungle everywhere behind the leaves: on the tracks, outside the perimeter, up in the trees, behind him, beside him, with him. Some-

where behind the leaves were the eyes, and a man began to believe that the eyes waited for him alone and for no one else.

It was recognised officially that this was the beginning of mental destruction, and a man might not patrol at forward point for more than five minutes at one time.

When he patrolled, he had to conceal the great gaps on the ridge between the companies, force his bluff that he and his comrades were so many, when they were so few. He walked softly amongst the leaves, with his Owen gun up, and his senses aquiver for sound that he would never hear, and movement that he would never see.

• • •

Neil Howard was listening to the jungle. He had sent his patrols into the jungle, setting thrust and counter-thrust in motion, seeking control of the forest.

"Good morning," said Colonel Wilson.

Howard indicated a box to serve as a seat.

"Were you day-dreaming?" said the colonel.

Howard said, "I was listening to the jungle."

The colonel stretched his legs out. "And what are you listening for?"

"Men," said Howard.

Colonel Wilson appeared to require time to digest the idea.

He said, "Mankind, eh?"

He poked at the mud with his bush walking-stick.

"Who did you send out with those two commandos I sent you?"

"Three Platoon, sir. Mr. O'Grady."

The colonel flicked up a dollop of mud with the stick.

He said, "Does Mr. O'Grady listen to the jungle?"

There was silence for a little while and he turned his head. "Well?"

"I don't believe so, sir."

The colonel sighed.

"I'm afraid there's too many men in this battalion who don't listen to the jungle."

Howard said, "I knew that a long time ago, sir."

"How long ago?"

"Who knows? Perhaps when officers had too many drinks in the mess and read out the troops' letters they were supposed to be censoring. And maybe it was a lot of other times, like sending troops on a route march and going back to the tent. It begins nowhere, and this is where it ends."

"Is this what you meant, the other day? The day of the battle, when you told me it'd take too long to tell?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is where it always ends," said the colonel, and looked appraisingly at Howard. "It must have been a long road back. From Colonel Maitland."

Howard said. "You could call it that, sir."

"And is it also why you go patrolling with your troops?"

"Partly, sir."

The colonel laid his walking-stick on the ground.

"I came up here expressly to order you to cut it out."

He rubbed his face in fatigue and looked at Howard again. "And now I don't know. Whatever you do will be all right by me. I can only tell you what I told the others. In your case, you have to convince the enemy that there's almost a whole battalion operating from Halligan's Spur."

Machine-guns began firing in the jungle.

"There it is," said Howard and grabbed at his map.

He said, "That'll be Three Platoon. They've been jumped."

. . .

The first commando stood crouched over his Owen gun, in the middle of the track, firing into the heart of the ambush. He could not know the impression he made on Mitch, who had flung himself flat in the mud and fired from there.

The commando on the track beat the ambush into submission, and then, and only then, he fell in the mud to re-load. The patrol wriggled back under the cover of Ron Fisher's hammering Bren gun.

Chilla Troedson took Seven Section into the undergrowth to attack the ambush from the flank, but the am-

bush had been routed by the commando and only the dead remained.

• • •

"Well?" said Howard.

O'Grady put a pencil mark on his map. "Right here. Then we followed the track through to the crest of Bobdubi Ridge to give these commando blokes the look they wanted."

A little way off, Mitch lit a cigarette and looked at the commando who had fought the ambush with the Owen gun.

Mitch said diffidently, "Got a minute?"

"Sure," said the commando.

Mitch said, "I was wonderin' about standin' up in an ambush."

The commando's eyes searched him over at leisure.

"You don't get a trial gallop, colt." He added critically, "You married?"

"No."

"Fair enough," said the commando.

He said, "They've been waiting for you for hours. They're all set. They're all shooting at you. You in particular. You stand there and shoot back."

"Yes, I know."

"That's all right. Do you really want to do it?"

"I dunno. I'll think about it."

The commando said, "You know the quickest way to swing around? You jump. Bounce on your feet. Like this."

It was unexpected: he jumped. His feet thudded in the mud. He was facing the other way.

Sergeant Townsend thought, "What's going on over there?"

Ted Thorn said, "Horse. Come here a minute."

"What do you want?"

Townsend walked after him, joining the corporals of the other sections and the Admiral.

"Right," said Ted Thorn, and looked at the Admiral. "Now tell them what you told me. About Lalor."

The Admiral said, "Lieutenant O'Grady was under orders to pull Tim Lalor out if he was no good."

Townsend felt his skin prickle and he grew quite still. He said, "How do you know that?"

"I heard Captain Howard say so to the sergeant-major."

Ted Thorn said, "Someone else heard it, too. It's getting around. They're talking about the Butcher again."

The Admiral said to Townsend, "You've got a revolution on your hands. What are you going to do about it?"

Do? Do what I've been doing since that morning at Byron Bay when Mitch got whacked on the chin with the Vickers.

He said, "You remember that day Mitch got hit. Later on that cousin of Ron Fisher's got killed at Bargara. A certain party survived both those efforts. He'll survive this one."

Chilla Troedson said, "He must have connections."

"I wouldn't know about that," said Townsend, "but he'll survive this one."

"How about some of us surviving?" said Ted Thorn curtly.

Chilla Troedson said, "If he hurts anybody in Seven Section I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"All right," said Townsend. "There's more than us in this. We do what we've always done."

"What's that?" asked Lance Braithwaite, of Eight Section.

"As if you didn't know," said the Admiral.

He thought, "You're a nice bloke, Lance, but you're as dumb as that tree behind you."

"We go on doing as we're told," said Townsend. "Are you blokes with me?"

Silence.

The Admiral said grudgingly, "It's just as well it was you that asked me that one, Horse."

"Yair, that's right," said Lance Braithwaite. "It's just as well it was you."

"All right. Ted, you keep an eye on Jack Lincoln. And Lance, you keep an eye on Stanaway. That's where she'll come from. We can ride the rest of them."

"You hope," said the Admiral.

• • •

Ron Fisher had cleaned the Bren gun and reassembled it.

Ted Thorn said, "Just in time, Tiger. We're going out again."

Mitch looked up very slowly.

He said, "Says who?"

"Says me."

Ron Fisher wiped a mark off the Bren and looked at the Admiral.

The Admiral said, "You are an integral part of the war machine, lad. Follow me."

"Peter?" said Ted Thorn. "Jack?"

Nervous Lincoln said, "You know what you can do."

"You talk too much," said Mitch.

Fifteen

THE enemy fought back.

He infiltrated at night. He charged One Platoon with the bayonet three times in one day. He cut the signal lines on the track to the Uliap and ambushed the signalmen who came out to repair the lines.

He sniped the company from the tree-tops. He manoeuvred behind the company and attacked up the Uliap track at Three Platoon.

The war was in front of a man, and beside him. It was above him, and behind him. It walked with him and came after him while he slept in his weapon-pit. Shelling began.

Major-General Gilmore patted his battle map with satisfaction. The Japanese had done what he wanted

them to do, to take their eyes off Mubo and deal with the distraction in their rear.

The brigadier to the west of Bobdubi measured his success against the requirements of the general's orders, and found it wanting. To the north, his orders went to intensify the infantry guerrilla war against the coastal track that supplied Salamaua from the enemy bases. To the south, his orders went to the commandos to move out from Nambling and establish a road-block on the Mubo track for as long as it could be held.

In the centre, the enemy and the Eighty-Third Battalion struggled for the command of Bobdubi Ridge. B Company took Orodubi one morning and attacked north along the Ridge at Gwaibalom. Four hundred Japanese reinforcements came to the Ridge the same day. Colonel Wilson saw time running out faster than the success that should have gone with it, and rubbed his face in weariness.

While he planned and counter-planned, another combatant took the field against him. A man in C Company contracted malaria and a careless man in Don Company was carried away because his feet were never dry and the skin and the flesh had split and puffed into a soggy mess.

In his leaking lean-to on Halligan's Spur, Neil Howard read the colonel's memo concerning disease. He looked about the company at the green uniforms turning black from sweat and rain. In a certain time, the uniforms would fall apart, and the boots literally fall off men's feet. The wet skin created a host for the diseases of the jungle, and only the most fanatically disciplined hygiene could stave off the day when the jungle alone would destroy the battalion.

Time was running out, and time was no respecter of plans and careers and lives. The diseases of the jungle were upon them and the enemy still held the heights of Bobdubi Ridge.

It was then that Neil Howard took the colonel at his word, and patrolled with his troops, every morning, every afternoon, sometimes three times a day.

He and his company fought against the enemy, against

the jungle, and against the residual part of Colonel Maitland's estate, and endured.

• • •

There came a time when a man surrendered to the creeping paralysis of mind. He went on from there, with only emotions alive, going through the forms of living and fighting and sleeping and fighting again.

"Peter?" said Ted Thorn, and Peter pushed himself up from his back and looked at the corporal. He had almost passed the point where he acted from thought, and had entered into the time when he acted because a voice instructed him.

Peter looked at the corporal apathetically and reached for his rifle, the rifle that rarely left his hand by day or night.

He nearly said, "Here we go again."

Ted Thorn said, "You got a letter."

A letter? Mail? What are you saying, Ted?

He held the white square, looking at it, knowing the writing on it. It was written there by the woman who had married him, who had lived with him, for three days, and then for the two weeks before he sailed, loving him, sleeping with him. They had dreamed together, discovering each other, looking to all the years ahead.

"Thanks."

He let the rifle down again, brought his thumb up to rip the paper free, so that the sheets unfolded and a queer irrational emotion took charge of his eyes.

"God," he almost breathed, and lay back on the groundsheet. Before his face his strong hands flattened the sheets, of which the first began, "My Darling Man. . . ."

In the gloom he twisted to the light, to read more easily, yet if one had accused him, he would have said that he had never moved.

• • •

"Anything for me?" said Mitch.

"Who'd write to you?" said Ron Fisher.

"A lot of people would," said the Admiral. "if they knew where to find him."

"Jings! I can't help it," said Mitch. "It's the mother instinct in them."

. . .

Peter was sprawled on his back.

The jungle had gone.

It was not that the jungle was there, and began to fade away. It was simply that he had never been in the jungle, had not the first idea as to what the word meant.

He was with her, not in Melbourne, or in bed. He was with her in the Cat Walk, where it turns from the Gardens and begins to climb easily over the Lookout, up on the ridge where Eulorella fought in the long ago against the muskets of the strange white men.

Eulorella died there, with a spear in his hand and a bullet in his heart. Peter began to live there, with wonder in his heart and the warmth of woman in his hands.

The world was very innocent, and the buckle of his webbing-belt caught at a fold of her frock. He turned her to him, with his hands about her arms, pulling her to him, so that they brought her firmly up against him, pushing her face into the rough cloth of the khaki tunic.

She turned her head then, away from the fabric, resting her ear upon him, as though she listened to the trepidation in his heart. His face went down, brushing the dark shadow of her hair.

For that little time, at the base of the monument of Eulorella, he was the world, with the purpose of creation in his arms. His lips disturbed a strand.

"Glenda . . ." he breathed into her hair, so that after an awful moment of waiting she began to lift her head and in the darkness looked upward into his face.

On the high ridge, with the clouds driving across the sky, he bent his head and whispered in her ear the heart of his soul.

"Will you marry me?"

Her word was a soft sound that gave the night the wonder within her and cast a magic upon the racing sky.

"Yes."

He thought that his hands began to swell, pulling her

to him, holding the slight, lithe form that was the beginning and the end of all life on earth.

He moved his head, again, questing, brushing across her cheek.

She sighed urgently, "Oh, Peter. Don't go back—"

His mouth cut the word off and his strong hands held the passion against him.

"The world is not two, but one. I want to take you and have you and treasure you till the end of the world."

"Straightaway?"

"Tomorrow."

And the moon began to come up, shining upon the scudding clouds, lining the majestic stone of Eulorella, with his hand upraised, shading his eyes as he watched timelessly to the west, knowing as did the figures at his feet, that all men and all women must die, but that, before that, there is a time when they all must live.

• • • • •

The Admiral scratched an itch on his leg and turned a page.

"We always blamed each other, Robert. Perhaps we were both wrong. I don't know. Perhaps we could find out."

Could we? Perhaps we know too much about each other. Or did we ever know what we really wanted? What the hell; it's finished, why bring it back up again.

He started to crumple up the letter, and stopped, refolding it and laying it in his wallet. The letter disturbed him, he did not know quite why, and presently, he was annoyed at being disturbed.

His gaze fell on Peter.

He thought, "I hope for your sake, Peter, my friend, that she hasn't got interfering parents."

• • • • •

Neil Howard still carried his rifle in both hands. He came to a halt and permitted the file of men to pass by him.

The sergeant of Two Platoon said conversationally, "Do you want them any more, sir?"

"No, Glen. You might tell Bickerstaff he did a good job. Get them back to the pits."

By the side of his lean-to he stood for a moment, pulling the canteen off his belt and throwing it in a corner. The rifle he put down beside his bunk.

He thought, "I'm tired. I can't take it like these young blokes."

He sat down on the bunk and rested his head on his arms.

His runner said, "There's a letter for you, skipper."

A letter?

For a moment he did not move, or give a sign that he had heard. He was, wearily, conscious of the steaming wet grip of the jungle: the dampness of the box, the damp half-blanket, the dripping insecurity of the lean-to, the wet mud on his boots and on the useless cloth gaiters.

He thought, "Even a man will begin to go rotten."

Then he lifted his head, "A letter? Thanks, Bruce."

Sitting there, with the envelope in his hands, he watched the runner depart. Only then, when there was no one to see, did he lift the envelope and brush it gently across his nose.

Lavender this time, he thought. Nice and comfortable and old-fashioned, like both of us. When he opened the letter, Sybil flowered anew in his heart, and made it both difficult and worthwhile to go on to Salamaua.

• • •

"Not bad," said Mitch. "Who is she?"

Ron Fisher gave him the photograph. After a while, Mitch turned the photograph over and read, "This is Dorothy, the girl from the Land Army who is helping us on the farm."

"No good to me," said Mitch. "I don't like the look o' that pitchfork."

Ron Fisher said carelessly, "I could take it off her."

• • •

The buzzing of the telephone brought back the mud and the jungle.

Damn and blast the bloody war, thought Howard passionately. His hand rested on the telephone and it required almost an act of will to lift the receiver.

"Sunray One," he said curtly and listened to the colonel.

"Yes," he said, and put down the phone.

Fight day and night in the heat and the leaves until you forget where you came from; and then have it all come back to you, lavender and Sybil and life, all synonymous. Then have it taken from you again when the phone rings.

One Platoon this morning. Two Platoon at midday.

"Runner!"

"Sir!"

"Three Platoon will report for patrol."

"Yes, sir."

• • •

Peter Mitchell folded his letter and put it carefully in his shirt-pocket. He started to get up, and stopped again.

He said woodenly, "Have we got to go out with *him?*"

The Admiral said, "You just do everything I do, Peter."

Townsend stopped walking and said, "Who was that?"

"Peter," said the Admiral. "He just remembered somebody loves him."

"Look after them, mate," said Townsend.

• • •

It was Lalor's track. The track went down across the creek and climbed up to the crest of Bobdubi Ridge between Old Vickers and the Triangle.

Ron Fisher was uneasy, for they had used the track a little too much; but it was an order from Howard, and Howard was there with them. They had not expected that, and it made them forget O'Grady although he was in command.

They set an ambush on the crest of the Ridge, but no enemy came. They set off for the perimeter again, knowing that they had been lucky on the way out, and being

almost certain that there would be no luck on the way home.

Their rotting uniforms clung to the skin. Any suntan a man had ever had had been washed to a pallid grey by the rain and the sweat. The leaves brushed at their faces and the mud in the hollows yielded under their boots. It was twilight among the leaves. The patrol offered itself as bait.

They fought the ambush and escaped from it, routing it with a flanking attack through the undergrowth. They came home to sleep, but the enemy attacked the perimeter.

Sixteen

THE transfer of Nine Section to the reserve pits of Three Platoon was an unexpected comfort, for the pits were ten yards behind those on the perimeter.

"How are you?" said Ted Thorn.

"Admirin' the view," said Mitch, and nodded toward the front pits. "On a clear day y' c'n see the wart on Chilla's neck. An' ev'ry time Butcher O'Grady's head goes past there's an eclipse of the sun."

He saw Nervous looking at him and grinned at him challengingly.

You know something, Nervous? Me or Tiger could take you any time. You know what I'm going to do, Nervous? Next time I walk into an ambush? Be there when I do, an' I'll show you.

Butcher O'Grady, thought the Admiral, yes, that's right.

Ted Thorn sat down beside the Admiral and looked at Peter Mitchell. "No lessons today?"

"No," said Peter, and rolled over on his back.

"Goin' cranky on us?" said Ted.

"Pull your head in."

"All right, mate," said Ted comfortably.

He said very quietly, "What's biting Peter?"

"His books went mouldy," said the Admiral. "He threw them away."

"It was just his bloody stubbornness that made him bring them with him."

"He can dream, can't he?" said the Admiral.

"Don't *you* start going cranky on us."

"He's only trying to do what I did," said the Admiral. "But I didn't have a war to put up with. All I had to worry about was Mum and a job."

"That's one thing about a depression," said Ted. "Your feet wear down to the ankles, and your gut falls in like a bag of string, but your mind stays quite clear to the end."

"You an' your depression," said Mitch. "Did I ever tell you about Custard Guts?"

The gunfire on Old Vickers woke Ron Fisher. For a long while, he lay without moving, with his eyes open. He remembered the mud and Butcher O'Grady and the leaves and how he had fought the Japanese infiltrator beside his pit.

Listening to the gunfire, he realised that the second attack on Old Vickers had begun; and he wondered whether it was true as the commandos had said, that from the Triangle, he would be able to see the sea.

He thought that he would find out, very soon.

• • •

Lieutenant O'Grady wrote a letter to his brother.

Superficially, Harold, the problems of command are many and diverse. At heart, however, there is only one problem, and that is to obtain and command instant, unquestioning and unqualified obedience.

With *élite* troops, of course, this question would hardly arise, but you, like I, will never be given troops of that calibre. When you are commissioned you will find, as I have, that the average man in uniform has little conception of what is required of him in obedience, discipline and battle.

As an illustration, one section I have in mind comprises: one corporal who effects no visible control over his men; one intellectual poseur constitutionally incapable of perspective; one morose specimen of what I imagine to be slum life; one openly insolent larrikin from an orphanage, one, his brother, who conceals his insolence behind a facade of self-improvement; and one, the youngest and possibly the cleverest of the lot, who obeys every order to the letter, but does so with that docility which is the highest and most refined form of insolence.

That, Harold, is what you have to deal with. That is the reality.

. . . . .

"Section patrol, sir," said the runner.

"Certainly," said O'Grady, and glanced up from his writing. "Nine Section."

He looked up again. "Report to Captain Howard."

"Yes, sir," said Corporal Thorn.

He walked up the track to the lean-to. Behind him, the section gathered in a group, squatting as they always did when they waited, for in the jungle the war came into the perimeter without warning; and a man standing was that much more of a target.

Howard said briefly, "The sig-line's dead. You know what to do."

Ron Fisher put a new magazine on the Bren gun and walked after Nervous Lincoln.

The sig-line was dead. Many reasons could be given, but there was one in the mind that loomed over all the others.

The signalman dropped his pliers in his hip-pocket and followed the Admiral. The signalman's duty was to keep the telephones functioning. It was other men who did the fighting, until the sig-line went dead.

The patrol was in fighting formation before it was clear of the perimeter.

Nervous tried to watch everything; the jungle, the track, the tree-tops, the sig-line. The line lay on the right of the track. There was an almost irresistible urge to ignore the left. Somewhere, between Company and Battalion, the

line was broken. Within a few feet of the break, there was a machine-gun and a squad of rifles.

The track dipped down to the knoll where Carnal Knowledge was buried and went on from there towards the Uliap. A man could see only two others in front of him, and sometimes only one. For Nervous in front, the track was empty. Men were shadows, not feeling the heat or the sweat plastering their clothes, or hearing distant noises, or observing the passage of time.

Time had stopped, and only the patrol continued to move. While they hunted along the track, they were the war. Other men, other battles—they would never hear about them, for the war for the patrol was on the Uliap track.

The war was there, and time stood still. A man believed that the jungle held its breath, and shadows moved in a vacuum. The vacuum was shadow and deceit, ambush and stealth. The tension rose, slowly, inexorably, and Nervous felt the pressure flowing against him.

His sinews tensed slowly, gathering themselves. Images of guns and sound shook his mind. The leaves of the jungle swam towards his eyes. The pressure swelled up inside him, pressing upon him painfully. The force made him breathe through his open mouth. The pressure was in his mind, in his body, exploring him, searching for the weakest part of him.

Now, cried his mind. Let it be now and be done with it.

In the mind a battle raged in the vacuum, the vacuum that deceived and deluded and taunted, and having had its sport, shot.

Ron Fisher was within ten yards of him, but Nervous walked alone. The tension oppressed him. He walked until he could walk no further, and because Ron Fisher was still following him, went on step after step, along the twilight corridor in the leaves.

Death was somewhere, on the Uliap track. It was one thing to swing a broken bottle at a policeman. It was something else to play tig in the leaves. Somewhere—

The vacuum exploded. Nervous lay in the mud, not

knowing how he had got there, firing his Owen into the sound hammering at him from the jungle.

Flat in the mud, at five paces, he and the enemy fought it out until the nerve of the enemy cracked and the battle was over.

Ron Fisher and Peter had stopped firing. Only their experience told them that the enemy had died or retreated. For a moment, Mitch lay inert in the mud. Then he was on his feet, crouching, hunting into the undergrowth with Ted Thorn and the Admiral to ensure that the track was safe.

The enemy had gone, leaving their machine-gun abandoned. The signalman knelt by the track, twisting the ends of the wire together again, cutting in with his telephone.

The line was complete.

"O.K.," he said, and dropped the pliers into his pocket.

Carrying the Japanese machine-gun, they began to walk again, toward the perimeter. They had not been ambushed up there when they came out, but what did that prove?

The tension welled up in them again. There was no escape.

• • •

Ted Thorn said, "You didn't do a bad job with that Owen down there."

"Well what do you expect?" said Nervous. "I can look after myself."

He gave the Owen back to the Admiral.

Nervous Lincoln understood himself very well. He had no illusions as to why he stayed on Halligan's Spur. He was trapped by the Kuper Ranges, and there was, quite brutally, safety in numbers. He excelled in the art of self-preservation, avoided danger when he could; and when he could not, fought for himself without pity or thought for anyone else.

He had always been an unfathomable quantity to Ron Fisher and Mitch, and what they had seen him do on the

Uliap track startled and mystified them, for it was an action they found out of character.

They sat together, talking about him and looking at him, not understanding.

He saw them sitting there, like two uncertain children who had found the world had become a little too big for them. The sight of them rewarded Nervous with surly gratification.

You never seen me draw my fangs before, have you? he thought, and then he became aware of the Admiral's sombre eyes appraising him. The Admiral was not uncertain. He was not impressed. He only accepted fact when proof was forthcoming, and he put the evidence about Lincoln together as he might a jig-saw puzzle.

He thought, I wonder how he'll go when he has to look after someone else?

His appraisal had brought him inside Lincoln's guard, and they both knew this.

Reaction was immediate.

Lincoln said, "Why didn't you become an officer when it was offered you?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?" said the Admiral.

Seventeen

THE patrolling plan developed towards its climax. Time had almost run out, and in the breaks in the weather the supply planes flew every morning, dropping ammunition and food into the cleared square in the jungle behind Uliap. The food and the ammunition were carried to the companies, box by box, tin by tin. Pieces of sisalkraft from the cargoes were souvenired as roofs and at last the

command posts were secure from the rain. New maps were issued, and the C.A.P. orderlies replenished their Shell dressings and their morphia needles.

Ammunition and bully-beef and dog-biscuits, cleaning-oil and maps, dressings and morphia and atebrin tablets: nothing else ever came to Bobdubi Ridge. It was the way the war in New Guinea had always been fought, and if a man was to survive, he accepted these rules and lived for the precious moment of existence.

. . .

Count them as they go out. Count Jack Lincoln and Mitch and Ted. Count Peter who dreamed, and found of his dreams that all that was left was a mouldy book and a memory of his wife. Count the Admiral haunted by Lalor, and count Ron Fisher.

Count them as they go out, and listen to the sweltering jungle, and count them when they come back. Count the Admiral and Ron Fisher. Count Peter. Count Mitch and Ted and—

"They had the drop on him cold," said Ted Thorn. "He went over the side."

Bring out the map, and debate on a man's life.

"Who was behind him?"

"Young Tiger here, and then Bob. And then me."

Howard said, "Did he get away, Ron?"

Ron Fisher sat up.

He said, "He got off the track all right."

"What do you think? Was there much going down after him?"

Silence.

"I think," said Ron Fisher, and stopped, knowing that his opinion would be accepted as the truth, once and forever, and therefore it fell to him to dictate the words that would be spoken to another man's next-of-kin.

He said, "I reckon he got away."

Howard picked up his pencil and looked at the message awaiting despatch, "MISSING, BELIEVED KILLED IN ACTION. . . ."

Without hesitation, he drew a line through the words and wrote, "MISSING IN ACTION. . . ."

Then he called for his batman-runner. "You've got a new job, sport. You're in the infantry."

"Hell!" said Private Bruce Hannan.

. . .

Be stalked at night, be sniped by day. Live in the mud and the disease and the twilight. Wonder why the uniform has not fallen apart. Go to the C.A.P. to treat the patches of infection growing on the skin.

Eat bully-beef and dog-biscuits and swallow atebrin tablets, and go back into the forest and fight for Bobdubi Ridge.

. . . . .

Today, said Mitch to himself. He cleaned the Owen gun very carefully, and remembered all that the commando had told him. He was ready, for he trusted the Owen gun, and he trusted Ron Fisher.

"Private Fisher?" he said.

"I hear and obey, Private Mitchell, F."

"Stick close to me today, mate."

Today? Why today? Is something the matter?

"You'll be all right," said Ron Fisher.

"Best bloke in the company, this fella," Mitch said to the Admiral. "I got a lot o' time for these youngsters."

"Look who's talking!" said the Admiral.

"Jings! I'm an old man. I'll be able to vote next year."

"All right," said Townsend. "On your way."

Mitch walked on and there was no one to notice that the humour had gone from him. Before him stretched the track to the Triangle.

While he waited for the others to move into order, he stood looking up the track, his right hand flexing his fingers around the pistol grip. There was a speculative cast to his face, such as that when a man speculates upon a trifle.

He stood there, Frank Mitchell, believing that Ron Fisher would keep on coming no matter what happened.

At the last he began to walk.

Today, he said to himself, today.

He knew that if he died for it, he would take a lot with him.

• • •

Captain Howard said, "There's one thing you should do, sir, and that is to keep Colonel Maitland in perspective. When all's said and done, he was one part of a process that touched more than the Eighty-Third. What he did was villainy, but he wasn't alone."

"He hasn't done too bad for a villain," said Colonel Wilson. "I wonder if *I'll* ever be lionized on the Society pages."

He looked at Howard. "I have him in perspective. There was another one. Symes, I think. He had one of those Queensland battalions. Any time Colonel Symes was too tired or too hung over to get out of bed, Mrs. Symes used to take Commander's Conference. No doubt, someone died for that, too."

"Anyway," he added, "as I said to you before. Tomorrow morning. We'll have your full stores up to you by last light today."

"Very well, sir," said Captain Howard.

"By last light tomorrow, I want you dug in on the Triangle. How many men have you got left?"

"Ninety-two, less one man missing."

"Uhuh. Please remember there are no reinforcements. We have to get to Salamaua with what we've got. You might tell your troops that. I find men always fight better on the truth. Now where has that escort of mine got to?"

• • •

Mitch!

It worked!

God, how it worked!

Stand up on the track and hit them back! Like the commando did! Smack it back at them. Stand up in front of them and give them the bloody lot. Split it up amongst you and duck for cover. This is for Carnal and Tim and Old Miserable and all the mud you've made me eat.

It worked! Oh, God! It worked!

Mitch landed in the mud with the empty Owen gun. The Bren was hammering and the grenades were bursting in the undergrowth. Lying in the mud, Mitch forced a new magazine on the Owen and fired it in one burst, traversing the ambush.

He had taken the initiative from the enemy, and his mind functioned with a clarity he had never possessed before. He knew, while he was still firing, that he was not the best man in the section. There was a brain in the section faster than his own, for whoever it was, that one had with no warning pre-knowledge seized the opportunity created and thrown the grenades before Mitch had fallen in the mud.

Me and Tiger and Mister X, thought Mitch, now get out, and get out fast, before they come out of the Triangle and climb all over us.

"Away you go," said Ron Fisher, and covered his retreat.

They returned to the perimeter, and waiting for further orders the platoon squatted about Howard's lean-to.

Now, thought Mitch, who is Mister X?

He said, "Who whipped those grenades in?"

He thought, whoever it was, I'll follow him anywhere.

"I cannot tell a lie," said the Admiral. "It was I."

Mitch thought, why ever did I think you were a sleepy bugger? You know something, Robert? I think *you* should be leading this section.

"Yes, you bloody maniacs," said Ron Fisher. "Between looking after the two of you, me and the Bren have to hop about like Santa Claus on Christmas Eve."

"Verbosity's your main trouble," said the Admiral.

"He *talks* too much," said Mitch.

Ron Fisher spread his hands and looked at his outstretched fingers. He knew that from now on, he was committed to wielding the Bren gun faster than he had ever done before. He knew, too, that he and Mitch and the Admiral had banded together against the enemy and the jungle and O'Grady, and only death would ever set them apart.

He said, "We're going in tomorrow morning."

"Give us a look at her," said Mitch, and took the photograph from Ron Fisher.

"Quiet there," said O'Grady, and the three men raised their heads.

How are you, Butcher? Still want to take the Owen gun off Mitch? He give them a bit for you, too.

They're scared of me, thought O'Grady. That's good. Now I'll begin to make soldiers of them.

He particularly disliked Ron Fisher.

• • •

Nervous Lincoln had survived. He entered the perimeter from the Uliap track. He was unshaven, and still carried the Admiral's Owen gun.

"Here you are," said Nervous.

The Admiral said, "Give it back to me after you've cleaned it."

"You're a bit hard," said Nervous. "What are you grinning at, Tiger?"

"It's a free world," said Ron Fisher.

Lincoln began to clean the gun.

Even now, twenty-four hours afterwards, he could hear the Bren holding open his only way of escape while he rolled frantically down the slope through the undergrowth, flinging himself away in desperation from the fire of the enemy.

Still cleaning the Owen, he looked at Ron Fisher.

He said, "You're pretty fast with that Bren, aren't y'?"

"Practice," said Ron Fisher.

"You're not bad," said Lincoln.

He appeared to be having difficulty in reaching a particular point.

He said tentatively, "I suppose a bloke should thank you."

Ron Fisher shrugged.

He said, "I'd do the same for O'Grady."

Lincoln's curious, staring eyes became quite still, watching him in perplexity.

"Yair, I think you would. You're too good for me, Tiger."

He added, "You know something, kid? You wouldn't last five minutes down home. Someone'd get y'."

Ron Fisher said, "You mightn't last too long where I come from, either."

After a little while, Nervous appeared to be amused. At any rate, he laughed.

He said, "A kid like you's a mug to stay here."

"It wasn't my idea," said Ron Fisher.

"Yair, you know something, kid? I think you want to stay here."

Ron Fisher said wearily, "Aah, give up, will you?"

Nervous considered he had proved his case and gave the Admiral back his Owen gun.

Ron Fisher thought, do I want to stay here?

He thought not. He had not thought very much about it, and was unclear. Perhaps, he thought, it was not important. In the mud and the undergrowth and the humid twilight, he had discovered that the reasons a man went to a battle were a different set from the reasons that kept him in battle.

The two sets overlapped somewhere, and this was the part about which he was uncertain; but where they did not overlap, he saw the distinctinctions very clearly.

When he had discovered this, he found himself consciously wiser than many people older than himself. He was wiser than newspaper editors, most politicians, some representatives of the Church, old ladies who distributed white feathers, and loud-mouthed members both intellectual and yahoo of the A.I.F.

Because he was still on Bobdubi Ridge, he knew that he was wiser than they were. It was as though he had walked into the harsh clear light of day, leaving them lost in a pea-soup fog of ignorance.

He saw that he had left them behind, saw that so vividly he had no bitterness for them, until long afterwards, but only a tentative mixture of compassion and contempt for their wanderings in the fog.

To stay in battle, a man must have a faith, or be destroyed in the spirit. The padre found his faith in God, and Neil Howard found his faith in the destiny of man. Faith was a shield that a man built around himself, and

being protected with it, clung to life and Bobdubi Ridge.

Ron Fisher had no conscious faith. When he thought of it, he found the padre's God vaguely improbable. His mind had never had occasion to conceive the idea of faith in the destiny of man. His real faith lay in those parts of life which experience had proved reliable in time of need.

Those parts were few, but they were to be trusted: his father, the Bren gun, Sergeant Townsend and Captain Howard; all infallible, all enduring. The trust was a shield, and inside it there was another trust growing, trust in the Admiral and Mitch, trust from them returning.

It was an infant growth, and it flourished inside the shield.

In the morning, he cleaned the Bren gun carefully and prepared for the attack on the Triangle.

It was on Halligan's Spur and the Triangle that the outer shield began to fall apart.

Eighteen

TOWNSEND was dead.

They left him there, under the machine-gun fire, while they fell back from the Triangle in the last light of day.

"I'm going back to get him," said Lance Braithwaite.

"You'll do as you're bloodywell told," said O'Grady, and they hated him as they had never done, hating him deeply because he was right.

They dug in on Halligan's Spur where Lalor's track left the crest to go down to the creek. It was dark when the digging was finished, and it was by touch that Ron Fisher ate, gouging the bully-beef from its tin with his fingers. Then and afterwards, he hardly knew that he

had dug a pit and had a meal. The actions were mechanical and required no direction from the mind. His mind was still, like a machine jammed by an impediment caught in one of its cog-wheels.

Time was unreal and had never happened and the shock was defeat, and the men who had died, and the men who had walked away to face the Missim Trail and the men who had been carried away to the same ordeal.

His mind was jammed at a moment, and the moment was Townsend and the place where he lay with his back against a log and the words blown out of him in one last exhalation of breath.

"Get that bastard for me, Tiger."

He was dead, and Lance Braithwaite had his job, and the war went on; and His Majesty's Mails continued to pump his letters efficiently to the house in Maribyrnong. He was dead, but the vast assembly of the righteous did not notice it, for he had not worn the prescribed badge. The assembly continued to report that he had refused to leave Australia.

The life went out of him in one jagged burst of machine-gun fire, but on Halligan's Spur he took all night to die.

Soon, Ron Fisher knew, he would come walking down the track from the Triangle, walking as he always did, preoccupied and gloomy, with his rifle held comfortably in the crook of his arm.

Ron Fisher waited all night for him, and it was only toward morning that Horse began to die. He died very slowly. When he died, a god fell.

When gods fall, there is a time of nothing; and when that time has passed, then the world trembles.

Morning brought infinite pain.

Ron Fisher had killed of necessity. He had killed for self-preservation. Lying in ambush, he had killed with a vibrant exhilaration.

All that went away, and the earth shook.

Under it all was the pain, for where Three Platoon went, wherever it went, Horse was dead, and a man walked in a new chapter of life. They killed without smiling, but they almost enjoyed it. The pain gave them a new purpose, committed them to pitiless mind, deprived

them of their mercy and gave them anew the urge to kill and kill and kill.

Each man's eyes were dry, but his mind wept. He would speak of it to no one, for it was known to all. . . .

They killed me mate.

Nineteen

THE supply planes were flying again. Food and ammunition and stores. The primitive battle went on. Send the patrols out. Keep command of the jungle. Build up the supplies in the companies again for the next attack.

Colonel Wilson was weary beyond belief and clung to his private vision of the sea.

The time was near for the fall of Mubo: the commandos had moved out from Nambling to establish a road-block on the Salamaua-Mubo track. How long the block could be held was problematical: the sound of heavy gunfire carried over Bobdubi Ridge and was heard even at Battalion Headquarters.

When the road-block was surrendered the attention of the enemy had to be diverted elsewhere; and, above all, not to Mubo.

"You see how it is, Neil?"

"Yes, sir."

The brigadier ceased scratching an itch and focused his full attention on Howard. The new brigade major lifted his gaze from Howard's boots, critically, searching; until his harsh, restless eyes met Howard's and the two men respected and disliked each other at once.

At a distance, the new brigade major looked comical, but at close quarters the effect was otherwise. He had a face and a head of hair reminiscent of a pale golliwog—and the eyes of a killer.

That he and the brigadier were both away from

Brigade at the same time engendered in Howard a weird sensation of danger, as though he were back in Bargara the night Colonel Maitland resigned.

"Someone," thought Howard. "is going to get hurt."

He knew that Nine Section, watching him from the coffee-point, were looking for the implications in the conference.

"When the road-block goes," said the brigadier, "There'll be a lot of Nips looking for fresh employment. And they're *not* going to find it at Mubo or Tambu. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Howard, and his gaze locked with the brigade major's.

Colonel Wilson said, "You will therefore capture the Triangle tomorrow. We can work the details out later."

"You understand," said the brigadier, "if the Triangle is still in Nip hands tomorrow night, plans and lives'll be in the pot. There'll be heads rolling from here to Wau."

"Perhaps even further," said the Golliwog softly.

Was that Corps speaking? Or Army? It came from a long way off.

"Be honest," said the Golliwog. "Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir," said Howard evenly.

"Is that a considered statement?"

Howard's voice remained even.

"Naturally, Major Ellerslie."

There! Jam that one in your pipe!

The brigade major's eyes grew still.

He said dispassionately, "When we know each other a bit better, Captain Howard, there are a few matters you and I must go into."

The brigadier, oddly, said nothing. He might not have heard. He might not even have been there.

From a distance, Nine Section watched him with unformed disquiet.

The Admiral said, "I'd like to know who that character is that looks like a golliwog."

"Looks a bit of a pinhead from here," said Mitch.

"It's the brigadier's batman," said Ron Fisher, but the humour went out of his eyes again, leaving them watchful and suspicious.

He drank some more coffee.

Peter said, "Where'd Nervous get to?"

"Lookin' for a job in the Intelligence Section," said Mitch, and looked carelessly at Ron Fisher.

Jings, he thought, you're not the boy you were a fortnight ago.

Ted Thorn said, "What do you reckon's going on over there, Bob?"

"Trouble, my friend," said the Admiral, and sipped at his coffee.

He had forgotten on Halligan's Spur that they had some friends left in the world: a civilian of the Salvation Army to bring hot coffee to the jungle, a padre to bring comfort and comradeship, black men ready to carry stores to the Triangle as soon as it was captured and safe, a civilian camera-man whom some called mad and all called friend.

The Admiral had forgotten on Halligan's Spur that there might be a part of the world where people did not talk in whispers or shave in cold water, a part of the world where the sun shone and where one could lean against a tree and contemplate the simple wonder of being alive.

There were such friends, and there was such a place; it was Battalion Headquarters.

He did not want to go back to Halligan's Spur.

"It's trouble of some sort," said the Admiral, "and trouble for the skipper is trouble for us."

"It's that golliwog bloke that bothers me," he added.

He had a feeling, chill and disturbing, that he would never see the Uliap again.

I was a fool, he thought. I should have taken those stripes when they were offered me. Why is it I want to run Nine Section? I never wanted to do that before.

The Salvation Army man, Eric Parker, said over his shoulder, "I wrote to Tim Lalor's mother the other day. I thought you might like to know."

Lalor's mother? She only bore him. I wonder what you said to her, Eric? I tried four times, and I tore them all up.

"Thanks, Eric," said the Admiral.

Why kid myself? I know why I want to lead Nine Section.

He hated the years he had idled away. They frustrated

the hate he carried for O'Grady and the enemy and the jungle. He had let himself be brought here, and he had come to the point where he wanted to live, wanting the chance to find out whether he could live with Gloria again, wanting all the chances back he had thrown away; wanting them with an intensity that had been breeding in him a cruelty and a desperation with which he now stood face to face.

He wanted to live; O'Grady and the jungle and the enemy stood in his way. They frustrated him, one private soldier among anonymous thousands: and that was why he wanted to lead Nine Section. He wanted to shield them from O'Grady, and lead them to battle, and follow the skipper, and kill for Horse, and to kill and go on killing for Timothy Lalor. He did not want to go back to Halligan's Spur, but he would, and all these affairs followed as night follows day.

"Here comes the skipper," said Ron Fisher.

The brigadier was still looking at the ground. He listened to Howard's receding footsteps and raised his head to look at the brigade major.

The Golliwog said, "Where has *he* been all these years?"

"I wish I knew," said the brigadier.

"*I* know," said Colonel Wilson. "He stayed home because he saw what we were going to leave behind us in the Militia when we went to the Desert."

The Golliwog looked at him sceptically.

"It took me a long time to see some of *us* for what *we* were," said the colonel. "For some of *us*, our sense of duty didn't extend any further than our own personal interests. It's easy to do the popular thing. A man's real measure only comes when his sense of duty calls him elsewhere."

"Yes," said the brigadier after a while. "He must have had a lonely life amongst that mob."

"It gave him grey hair in four years," said Colonel Wilson.

"Yes?" said the brigadier, and straightened up. "Well, my friend, we better be shoving off."

To Wilson he said, "Give him all you've got tomorrow."

He thought, how would you like to be a civilian, Colonel Wilson? Say tomorrow night? Because if you are, I'll be a civilian with you, and I won't like that at all!

The brigadier and the brigade major went out of the perimeter with their escort.

"That wasn't no batman," said Mitch.

"It wasn't any golliwog, either," muttered Peter.

Ron Fisher said, "Poison's its name, Private Mitchell."

Howard said, "Right, Corporal Thorn. We're off."

They went up the Uliap track, away from the sunshine, away from hot coffee and normality and friends. They went back to the furious elusive war among the leaves. The jungle closed about them and within it the gun-fire from the road-block sounded hollow on the air. They did not want to go back to Halligan's Spur; and perhaps some of them would never really know why they did go back.

The section climbed in patrol order, with Peter at point, and Ron Fisher behind him with the Bren: Ted Thorn and Howard himself, the Admiral and Lincoln and Mitch.

Howard thought, "If I thought that my son would have to walk like this one day, I couldn't go on. It's as simple as that."

So they walked among the leaves, walking towards the saddest and the greatest day of the Battle of Salamaua.

Twenty

It was the day that Mubo fell.

It was the day that the commando squadron gave up the road-block. It was the day that the American troops

advancing from Nassau Bay met the soldiers of Mubo in the shadows of Mount Tambu.

The Triangle fell in fifty-five minutes.

"He's *done* it," shouted the brigade major. "We've got the Triangle!"

"You beaut!" said the brigadier. "You little beaut-ee!"

He had not felt so light-headed since Skipton won the Melbourne Cup.

"There's an M.C. for the man who did that," he said jubilantly. "Bring on the Chockos!"

He added, "He'll be a major, as soon as I can get it for him."

"Fifty-five minutes," said the Golliwog.

His harsh eyes glittered.

The brigadier patted his battle map. "Now for Gwaibalom and Old Vickers! Good God, man, I could waltz."

The Golliwog said quietly, "I don't dance, sir."

"Oh," said the brigadier, and studied his map. "What I want to hear now is that Zambanzien has taken Old Vickers."

"This'll be it," said the Intelligence officer when the Signal corporal approached.

"Another one, sir. Top secret this time. Priority. From the Eighty-Third. I haven't gone any further."

"He wants permission to capture Salamaua," said the brigadier, and the signalman sat down beside him.

"All right, go ahead with it," said the brigadier, and the corporal proceeded with the deciphering of the signal while the brigadier watched across his shoulder.

COLONEL . . . WILSON . . . WOUNDED . . . IN . . . AMBUSH . . . (.) . . . CAPTAIN . . . ZAMBANZIEN . . . WOUNDED . . . (.) . . . CAPTAIN . . . HOWARD . . . KILLED . . . IN . . . ACTION . . . (.) . . . ACKNOWLEDGE . . .

The brigadier thought that he floated out of the jungle and drifted far out into space. He floated there, disembodied, empty, with no feeling and the planet Earth spun on its way, leaving him behind.

While he was out there he discovered the infinity of time.

Then he came back through the Universe, falling to-

wards the Earth, falling against his will towards some part of life that was gross and unendurable and ugly beyond belief.

No. No, it's not true. It's a joke. Oh, dear bloody God.

His face was stiff.

He thought that he moved, to take the message, but he saw that it was still in the signalman's hands; and then he remembered the Battle of Salamaua, and he remembered that he was a brigadier.

Very slowly he moved. He spread his fingers as though he performed an exercise. He placed them with great deliberation upon his knees. When he lifted his head he found himself looking at the Golliwog.

The brigadier said, "Have you got a cigarette you don't want?"

Twenty-one

RON FISHER had almost stopped thinking. His Bren gun commanded the crest of Bobdubi Ridge in the direction of Old Vickers. That was where the first of the enemy came from, racing out of the jungle, revealing themselves so recklessly that Mitch stared at them agape for what seemed interminable seconds, but was perhaps a faint fraction of a second and no more.

"Here they come!" yelled the Admiral and his Owen gun chattered like a typewriter. When the magazine was empty, Lincoln began to refill it.

The screaming, yelling enemy ran into Mitch's Owen fire. He thought he killed them for Howard and Townsend and all the men who never reached the Triangle to see the sea. He was angry and sick at heart and scared, in that order, and he received the stupid charges in glee.

They came all afternoon, spending their lives against the barrage of machine-gun fire, falling back to re-form

their ranks, charging again for the glory of the Emperor. The attacks had been mounted in haste; and to Lieutenant O'Grady commanding the company there were abundant signs of this. The charges were disjointed, lacking depth and cohesion. Attacks were made in segments. There was no evidence of overall command and direction.

The reckless, insane persistence startled Ron Fisher. He fired at them in utter disbelief and in the same incredulity saw them fall. They fell lavishly, like Indians in cowboy films. It was mad and impossible; and the ranks formed again and charged forward.

They jumped and quivered and seemed to dance under the torrent of fire. A weird sense of power rose in Ron Fisher that he himself caused this to happen to the men in front of him.

Beside him in the pit knelt Ted Thorn, loading magazines, never lifting his eyes from the succession of cartridge rims under his thumbs. One rim permitted to catch over the one below it would jam the Bren. He completed a magazine and made a sharp, quick survey of the ridge. His senses were becoming accustomed to patterns and rhythms in the battle. He was beginning to judge accurately when a magazine on the Bren would be empty; so that when Ron Fisher knocked an empty one off the gun, he had a new one in his hand ready to slam it into the catch.

The enemy yelled and charged again. The machine-guns beat the attack into silence. Then for a long time extending towards night there was no sound on the Triangle: there was no sound anywhere south and west of Salamaua.

. . . . .

The brigadier understood the silence. He knew that whatever happened at the Triangle would remain a side-issue to the greater battle approaching his front.

"Here's another one," said the Intelligence officer.

ENEMY STRENGTH APPROX 500 SIGHTED 1350 HOURS MAP REF 448739 (.) MOVING EX LAE DIRECTION SALAMAUA . . .

The brigadier sought the map reference on his map.

"I wonder who's going to collect that lot," he said.

He was satisfied that he had been right in sending the Golliwog to take command of the Eighty-Third Battalion.

"That makes something like three thousand extra that Division knows of," said the Intelligence officer.

"They're welcome," said the brigadier.

He had planned that by the time a counter-attack developed he would hold Bobdubi Ridge from Sugar-cane Knoll to the Triangle; he had failed, insofar as the enemy were still entrenched in Gwaibalom. It was evident now that the enemy would drive at Nambling and Orodubi with one force and assault straight up the Mubo track with the other.

"Sig?"

"Sir?"

"Signal all units . . . major counter-offensive action developing . . . all units will stand to . . . institute own patrolling plans forthwith . . . Second Forty-Five Battalion en route Nambling ex Mubo . . . acknowledge. Read that back to me.

* * *

The Golliwog read the message at Battalion Headquarters. He realised that there was much concerning his command of which he was still quite ignorant, dangerously so.

"Did you get that ammo up to the Triangle?"

"Yes, sir."

"Food?"

"Yes, sir. There's one point, sir. They've only got fifty-seven men."

"So?" said the Golliwog. "You've had all afternoon to do something about it before I got there. You better buck your ideas up. Reinforce from Headquarters Company. Now!"

The Golliwog was not a happy man. He resented losing his staff posting, resented the existence of the enemy, the jungle and militiamen. When the war began he was an efficient but unenthusiastic cabinetmaker, and resented the war for being the avenue of his escape.

A signalman said, "Can't raise A Company, sir."

The Golliwog swore. It was too late to reinforce A Company. There was nothing he could do before morning came.

His experience told him that the battles of the afternoon had been skirmishes in strength, testing the defences of the Triangle for the weakest parts, or for what appeared to be the weakest parts. He wished urgently that he knew how firm Lieutenant O'Grady would be under exacting pressure.

• • •

The enemy came in the last light of day, south from Old Vickers, north from Gwaibalom. They came up Bobdubi Ridge from the east. They surrounded the Triangle and made it an island in a sea of Nippon.

A bugle blew; and they charged for the Son of Heaven.

They were so many. They closed their ranks as swiftly as they fell. *Banzai,* they screamed, *a thousand years to the Emperor.*

Their living and their dying appalled Ron Fisher, and he was one of the men who executed them. They came screaming out of the forest, offering themselves to his hot black machine-gun. It was medieval and insensate and grotesque and they charged at the call of the bugle, led by the caste swordsmen of their land. They sought the machine-guns, and the gaps between, and charged for the Emperor.

Ron Fisher fought back. Howard was dead, and Townsend was dead, and his father was not even a memory. There remained himself and the Bren. The pit was a fortuitous hole in the ground he and Thorn had seized and, when opportunity offered, deepened and enlarged.

The world was a ninety degree arc of mud and jungle extending beyond the mud bank of the pit. The two men lived there and, if they were slow or careless, they would die there. They fought back in the twilight for the most elemental reason of all, to stay alive.

Screaming and yelling, the pagan avalanche launched itself upon their nerve. Men charged into Ron Fisher's arc

of vision. His nerve held him in the pit against the wailing, screaming torrent while his brain commanded his body; and the Bren in his hands shot down the men before him.

He shot them down, but there were others coming who had been behind them, and these raced closer, partly obscured in the undergrowth. They fell, and there were more behind them, closer and closer. For a moment he feared their irresistible approach, like a great uncontrolled dumper coming in the surf. He dredged up more nerve than he thought he had and felt the Bren vibrating in his hands, shaking under the recoil and the driving spring of the piston.

Men fell before him. The screaming went on. More men charged at him. He saw their mouths open, screaming; saw their bayonets dull in the twilight; felt their insane strength reach out for him. How he stayed in the pit before the charge he never knew.

Ted Thorn slammed yet another magazine on the gun and Ron Fisher fired into the charging mass. Men fell down and others ran, flinging themselves away from the fire. The whole vast attack seemed to melt away. When they fled there was only the mud and the jungle in front of Ron Fisher.

He waited behind the Bren, suspiciously, waiting for a new manoeuvre, expecting men to spring from the ground and charge in on him. When, finally, he realised that the charge was over, he wanted some tangible proof of what he had done: a helmet perhaps, or another samurai sword.

His clothes stank and he was cold and hungry, but he had withstood the charge. He suspected the enemy's next manoeuvre and clung to the comradeship of Ted Thorn.

He said in a whisper, "What'll they do now?"

"Dunno. Watch they don't come in with a bloody knife."

. . . . .

They grew old in the pit that night. Before, they had had the illusory protection of booby traps and rattles for

comfort. Now, with the enemy camped about them, they had only their ears and their weapons.

It was the night that Three Platoon began to build a new order of unity and purpose to replace the familiar one that died with Captain Howard. Early in the night the enemy rendered the same service to One Platoon, and later again, to Two Platoon.

Lieutenant O'Grady almost welcomed the counter-attacks. They welded the company together; and established him in his position of command. He thought that when the attacks were over he would have a control that rivalled and even excelled Neil Howard's.

Silence came to the night, and O'Grady slept fitfully with grenades and a billet of timber in the pit. The morning, he knew, would bring the crucial time. The perimeter had been laid out in a hurry; there were no reserve pits, for there were no men to man them. He and his runner were the only men not on the perimeter.

It was towards morning when he remembered the spare Bren gun in Company Headquarters. At first light, he would send the gun where it was most needed. If necessary, he would use it himself. He visualised that the major attack would come across the favourable ground from the South, against Two Platoon. He found the Bren gun in the darkness and stacked up its magazines.

Then it was nearly morning and he sensed rather than heard that the enemy were closing in on the perimeter.

He heard the first far distant shots that opened the battle on the Mubo track south of Mount Tambu.

A grenade burst in front of Two Platoon.

"Here they come," he thought.

O'Grady listened astounded to the tearing blast of machine-gun fire that began the Battle of Nambling and Orodubi. The whole front was erupting while he lay forward on the bank of the pit in order to hear the first sounds of the enemy approaching his own perimeter.

There was no impediment to them. There was no barbed wire, no mines, no booby-traps, no rattles, no flares. Jungle war was primitive, and the primitive nature of it appealed to some streak in him.

He believed that help would come to him during the

day, but he knew that before help came the Company would have fought what might be the greatest battle it would ever know. He was assured his place in command of the company, and he almost welcomed the attack that would secure him there.

The jungle stirred, as though the trees and the leaves all came to life. A bugle blew, seemingly so close to him that he twitched in fright.

The bugle was in front of Three Platoon.

The enemy came from the north, waking up the night with their machine-gun attack, absorbing the battle into the greater attack against the divisional front. In the sordid jungle night, companies and battalions fought for nations and causes, or so it was said, and any one man who quailed could destroy an entire perimeter.

It was a crucial time before the light came, for one well-placed grenade, or one scoring burst of machine-gun fire would open the perimeter to the first charge. O'Grady thought that thirty minutes of machine-gun battle was a whole night. He did not know how many of his men were being hit, but his ears, separating sound from sound, told him that every pit was still fighting.

He smiled when the totality of the night went. It was a tight, cruel smile, most unlike his habitual controlled quirk of amusement.

The enemy stopped firing and O'Grady thought that the jungle shook.

In blood they came to the charge, hurling their flesh against the machine-gun fire. Against the three sections of Three Platoon they hurtled for the Emperor. For him they trod the divine road of glory. The road went to all the corners of the world.

At the first light of dawn their frenzy was mirrored in their eyes. Berserk, without mind, they charged and fell and rose and charged again.

There was a rhythm in the charges, heavy and surging like a high sea pounding at a beach.

With the light, for the first time reality came to Ron Fisher. His mind at last accepted the evidence of his ears and his eyes. This was how the enemy really fought.

His conscious mind moved only in the orbit of the Bren.

The fire beat back a charge and gave him a moment's rest, until another charge came after him. In the sights of the gun more enemy charged out of the jungle.

Banzai! they screamed, screeching and screaming, running hard at him with their bayonets down and their feet slapping in the mud.

His left hand knocked the empty magazine off the Bren. Thorn slammed a new one on.

Banzai! they screamed and raced towards him. The empty smoking shells cascaded down the cloth of his trousers. Gaps appeared in the charging lines. The gaps closed and the lines came on, to fall and rise up and charge again.

They came from the past, screeching; came with bayonets and swords. He thought they flowed over everything in their path. From the dark ages they came, waking the long dead years that Ron Fisher's race had left behind.

There was another magazine on the Bren gun and the wave of bodies was spent: a new and closer charge crashed towards him. They were through the overlapping fields of fire and they screamed anew. They were close now upon the line of pits and there was blood on the magazine when Thorn latched it on the gun.

Quite suddenly Ron Fisher was prepared to die. He traversed the Bren with ordered reasoning, shooting down the nearest of the enemy.

Kill or be killed, and somewhere a tree fell, cut down by machine-gun fire.

Kill or be killed, and then Ron Fisher was past that point and fighting to extract from the enemy the maximum cost they could be made to pay. They could not reach him with their swords and their bayonets while the Bren gun had ammunition. The charge reached out for him. He wanted them there. He wanted them where he could see them and kill them.

He was still prepared to die, and prepared to live. He felt the Bren firing like a jack-hammer.

At twenty-five feet he saw into the heart of the monstrous parade created in the name of the Emperor: it was human flesh, fallible like his own; and it was, unlike

his own, human mind depraved and drilled to the point of sterility.

He could not know that he saw what Colonel Wilson had seen on that day in Greece when the dive bombers came to Larissa, or what other people had discovered in Buchenwald, and others were yet to find on the Burma Railway. He could not know this, and he had no name for it, but his mind repelled it. He saw that it was amenable to force and capable of fear, and fear was what he gave it with the forces streaming from the barrel of the Bren.

The enemy sought to escape. Thorn's bloodied hand latched another magazine on the gun. The gunfire searched in the leaves, explored the spaces between trees, shot down the vegetation. The enemy faltered and their cohesion began to disintegrate. Fear took Ron Fisher that his prey might escape from him before it was exterminated.

He wanted them to come back and charge him again. He fought against the reflex urge to stand up in the pit and fight standing.

The enemy quailed, held between death and discipline.

It had been taught for two thousand six hundred years that the man behind the machine-gun would run away. It had been taught, and the gunfire filled up the forest, calling God a liar. The enemy sought a haven, but there was none.

If one hid behind a tree from a machine-gun, then another machine-gun searched out the haven. There was no mercy in the forest, no succour, no God. A thousand years to the Emperor. But the Emperor had gone from Bobdubi Ridge.

The enemy faded away into the jungle, leaving Ron Fisher angry and exhilarated.

He said brittlely, "They can come back and do that again whenever they like."

"Yeh, mate," said Ted Thorn. "Tie this up for me, Tiger."

His face was white under his grime and stubble.

"I've got meself a walking ticket," he said.

Ron Fisher began to bandage the wound.

"Over that bloody mountain," said Ted Thorn.

Twenty-two

THE days and nights became a time of repelling charges, of relaxing guardedly while other platoons received the fury of the enemy, of sneaking out on patrol in the quiet intervals to locate the enemy, of sneaking out in growing urgency on water patrol.

Few of the patrols reached more than twenty yards. It was an activity that Nine Section escaped for a long time while the assault came to its peak and then slowly began to break down.

Somewhere in that time the Golliwog shot his way into the perimeter with a heavy escort and reinforcements from Headquarters Company. He shot his way out again with the escort and the wounded. A company remembered him?

With an inner reserve perimeter established, O'Grady knew that the battle was virtually over but the enemy returned again and again to the attack.

O'Grady saw Nine Section coming towards him, and looking back at the battle long afterwards he found that it was the most satisfying part of his career, for it was the time when he glimpsed the ultimate strength of his men.

They were unshaven and unwashed and filthy. They were haggard and their eyes were rimmed. Their uniforms and their boots had finally begun to fall apart.

Their weapons were spotlessly clean.

The soul of the infantry was open to anyone who cared to look. The privilege fell to Lieutenant O'Grady.

"We're on top of them," said O'Grady. "I think it'll be all over by tonight."

Ron Fisher thought: How would you know? You're only passing on what that Golliwog bloke told you.

O'Grady said, "Go up the Old Vickers track and find out where they are."

Lincoln said, "Don't be bloody silly."

"Don't *you* be bloody silly," said O'Grady.

"Tie your jaw up, Jack," said Ron Fisher. "It flaps every time there's a breeze."

"Come on," said the Admiral curtly.

The battle had made him commander of Nine Section and he found the idea comfortable and satisfying. When the battle was over and they went back on the tracks, he would be needed where he was now; he knew that he was ready for it.

O'Grady said, "If you meet anybody, pelt them and run."

"The Golliwog *has* been talking to you," thought Ron Fisher.

They went up the track, each man counting the paces subconsciously. The Admiral fired a burst into the undergrowth and ran. A machine-gun threw bullets past his head.

"How far?" said O'Grady.

"A hundred and thirty-one," said the Admiral.

"And seventy-seven comin' back," said Mitch.

A grenade burst near the perimeter and they ran for their pits.

It was difficult to feel elation any more when the enemy advanced into the machine-gun fire.

The regiments went back to Nambling, to Orodubi, to Mount Tambu. They charged against the machine-gun fire. That they were losing was patent in their lack of spirit, but they went back.

It was for the Emperor.

They charged Two Platoon for an hour, and swung the attack about, advancing from the north against Three Platoon.

Ron Fisher saw the evil that his mind repelled, but he was so accustomed now to killing men that he fired the Bren gun at them with no feeling at all. He did not know when it was during that last attack that he knew the enemy were no longer fighting for the Emperor but fighting because they were driven there by their officers. They fell

when he fired, but how many died, and how many only sought cover he did not know.

The wounded lay crying on the slopes. Perhaps they cried in pain. Perhaps they cried for help. He thought the noise of it nerve-wracking and contemptible. The riflemen began to snipe at them, picking them off one by one.

Bruce Hannan, who had replaced Ted Thorn, settled himself across the parapet of the pit and waited for a scream or a cry or a moan. When he thought that he located one, he fired.

This methodical tidying of the battlefield lasted two hours. One by one, the wounded lay still. There was one that could not be located. He was moving slowly across the front of the perimeter.

The regiments returned to Nambling, but on the Triangle there was only the intermittent crack of a rifle and the moaning, uneven like an air raid siren, of a man in search of man.

He was quiet for a long time, leaving a blessed peace on the air; and then towards the end he moaned and whimpered, dying alone, knowing that no one would ever come. It was a friendless state that he came from. He was the pride of all Japan. He was a marine.

But no one came.

"There he is," said Bruce Hannan and lifted his rifle.

"No, don't," said Ron Fisher, seeing the movement, watching it resolve itself into a man crawling on all fours. The two men in the pit watched him lift his bloody head, turning it this way and that, blindly.

"Righto," said Ron Fisher and wiped his hands on his shirt. "He's for me."

He picked up the butt of the Bren and sighted on the bloody head.

"Here it comes, Tojo," said Ron Fisher and shot him.

The time had come to go back on the tracks and go down into the valley to cut the Komiatum Track that led from Salamaua to Mubo. That was the way home, to go to the east, into the valley.

The marine began to rot away in the jungle.

Twenty-three

It was O'Grady's hour.

The Triangle stood almost in the mathematical centre of Bobdubi Ridge. There were enemy to his left, on Old Vickers; to his right, on Gwaibalom.

East of the Ridge in the valley was the artery of the enemy army, the Komiatum Track. Before the counter-attacks, the Track had been raided by C Company from Orodubi, and raided and blocked by the commandos from Nambling.

There was another track, the Bench-cut. It went down the eastern face of Bobdubi Ridge at an angle, falling from right to left, joining Gwaibalom to the Komiatum Track; so that the track on top of the Ridge, and the Bench-cut, and the Komiatum made a pattern like the letter Z in reverse.

O'Grady could raid north along the Ridge to Old Vickers, south to Gwaibalom, down the east face of the Ridge at the Bench-cut, across the Bench-cut into the valley and the Komiatum Track.

It was an opportunity to set a lieutenant on the road to military fame. The sea beckoned him with its glittering allure of peace. The way ahead offered him solace for the wounds the Examining Board of the Australian Imperial Force had inflicted on his self-esteem; offered him eternal independence from the peace-time grip of Colonel Maitland.

During the counter-attack, O'Grady had found himself; he had not thought that the day would come when his troops obeyed him as readily as they had obeyed Neil Howard. It did not occur to him that in the elemental

struggle to survive during the counter-attack, his troops might have obeyed anyone at all.

He was a big man, fleshy, confident and responsive to the Golliwog's curt and insolent orders, with their thinly veiled threat to fight or resign.

O'Grady was a willing subordinate and the opportunity spread itself before him.

He reached out for it, touched it briefly, and lost it.

. . .

"He thinks he's Howard," said Ron Fisher.

There is a Suicide Road on every battlefield, and he knew, even then, that Three Platoon was very close to it.

He said, "Difference is, Howard used to let the patrol leader run a patrol."

"I don't mind who runs it," said Mitch, "so long as he quits shovin' me too hard when I'm up in front amongst them leaves."

Peter read to the end of his letter and held it partly folded in his hands. That Glenda was carrying his baby brought wonder and conceit and pride, all mixed inextricably together.

"I'm awake up to O'Grady," said Mitch. "He's playin' it up big f'r the Golliwog."

Peter put his letter away and said, "Not at my expense, he's not."

The Admiral opened his eyes slowly. He was sufficiently intelligent to recognise finality when he heard it. His gaze was covert and expressionless, seeking to turn the youngster's mind inside out for every thought within it.

The Admiral thought: You know something, Robert? *He*'s more dangerous than Lincoln.

What does one do about this? Do what Horse did? Sit on it, hold them down, keep walking back into the leaves?

But they could still laugh then. Mitch hasn't smiled for three days. I can't answer for Mitch any more. Now Peter. Lincoln and Peter and Mitch.

There's only Ron and myself, and the reinforcements. One of these days when O'Grady's shoving us at the gallop,

it'll be *my* turn to be out in front. I should have taken those pips or those stripes when I had the chance. I might have been big enough now to shove O'Grady back.

I have to look after these blokes, and look after myself. There's a lot of people mixed up in this. Mrs. Lalor was the first, she and Timothy. There's Peter and Glenda, and Mitch; Ron Fisher and his mother and father, and Jack Lincoln: and there's Gloria. I want to be able to go home and find out once and forever whether the two of us can make a go of it.

There's a lot of other people mixed up in this, too; the whole company, for if someone else has to straighten out a mess of ours, then *they* have to pay for it: One Platoon, or Two, or the Battalion, and mebbe the commandos or the A.I.F. battalions.

Someone has to pay in this place. Wars are designed that way. So is peace-time, but it's not so obvious. If you don't pay, then someone else has to. In peace-time the cost's a job, or a promotion, yours or someone else's. In this place you pay with your life, and you can only do that once.

It's a lot to put on any man. He has to add that to the knives in the night, and the leaves on the track, and the way to the Komiatum, and now the shells from Kela Heights that we can't answer back.

And Horse was right. A man has to just keep walking back into it. I hope the prize for it after the war is worth it. I don't want to be the commander of a section. I want to command the whole platoon.

The runner said, "Nine Section for patrol."

The Admiral reached for his Owen gun.

He said, "Follow me, kiddies."

They reported to O'Grady. They went down through the jungle to the Bench-cut, laid an ambush, successfully, and came home again in the humid heat.

Ron Fisher put the Bren down wearily and O'Grady said, "What happened? I heard shooting."

Ron Fisher muttered, "It's got ears, too."

The Admiral said, "We set the ambush. Bagged the first two and a bloke in the middle."

He drew on his cigarette and said harshly, "Funny thing. They were being led by a native."

"A native?" said O'Grady. "A boong?"

He added, "What sort of a boong?"

"Sort?" said the Admiral.

Mitch said stonily, "Black."

O'Grady turned about with the map in his hands.

"Sarn-Major?"

"Sir?"

"You heard him. Put him on a charge-sheet. Conduct prejudicial . . ."

He turned to the Admiral again. "D'you shoot him?"

"Who?"

"The boong."

"Yes, sir."

O'Grady said, "You don't sound very pleased about it."

"It's nothing to be proud of," said the Admiral.

Bruce Hannan and the other two reinforcements in the section looked at him as though they had not really noticed him before.

O'Grady said uncertainly, "All right. Break off. Whizz your report in soon as you can."

He had wanted to say more but the suitable words eluded him. Insolence he understood, or at least expected. One always expected that and knew how to deal with it.

Put Mitchell on a charge-sheet. Finish.

But there was some other atmosphere building itself rapidly around O'Grady and he was uneasy. Ron Fisher was a part of it. On the last day of the counter-attack, when Fisher had told Lincoln to tie his jaw up, O'Grady had modified his view of the Bren gunner for identifying himself with the orders given and with the officer who gave them.

The identification wore away, leaving Fisher remote from him, as though two paths had crossed at a point of self-interest and separated again. Suspicious and self-sufficient, Ron Fisher stood aloof from him. It was a part of the atmosphere that made O'Grady uneasy.

It came from Peter Mitchell's silence, from many men,

even from N.C.O.'s and the officer of One Platoon; it came in the most curious forms, like that of the Admiral's, who within the rigid limits of military etiquette expressed his mind with complete indifference to its reception.

O'Grady felt a sense of isolation. He shared no camaraderie, no smile, no personal revelation. He had had friends and willing subordinates when he was chief accountant in the enterprise of Maitland and Sons: he had met indifference and apathy and self-sufficiency there, but there were invariably exceptions.

On the Triangle there were no exceptions. He began to find that artificial, and therefore deliberate.

The sum of it was oppressive, unremitted by successful battle. He held indisputable command of the middle of the Ridge. His patrols kept provoking the enemy north and south of him, kept intimidating enemy movement on the Bench-cut across his front, reached out even now with Two Platoon to ambush the Komiatum Track.

He should have been grimly satisfied that he had taken the opportunity offered him for fame. It was a hard road. He accepted that. The patrols had to be pushed harder, pushed faster. Life was a crude and precarious existence. Driven by him, the company struggled toward the sanity waiting for it beyond the battle.

O'Grady should have been satisfied, but was uneasy. Two days passed before he realised that no one ever smiled, not even away from his presence.

Twenty-four

"WHO's this Nelson?" said the Golliwog.

He began searching through a pile of patrol reports.

The Intelligence officer said, "I don't know him very well. He's not much more than a face to me."

"He's getting a bit game," said the Golliwog, "pickin' twenty Nips with eight men."

"You never know what you'll find in the militia, sir," said the Intelligence officer and the Golliwog's basilisk gaze held him for inspection.

"You're getting a bit game yourself," said the Golliwog.

He found the patrol report he had been seeking.

"I thought so. Nelson again. Dolly, ask the adjutant to put Nelson's name on that list of mine."

"Yes, sir," said the runner.

The Golliwog reached for his tobacco tin.

He said, "There's that bloody gun again."

He listened to the brief silence before the shell began to sigh and then to whistle.

"Orodubi," said the Golliwog.

"The Triangle," said the Intelligence officer.

The Golliwog glowered at him.

"I'll bet you argue with your wife."

"I was expressing an opinion, sir."

The Golliwog picked up the tobacco tin. "Here, roll yourself a smoke and shut up."

The shell started its journey down the sky at the Triangle. The Admiral was too far from his pit and threw himself flat in the mud. He thought the screaming shell was coming straight down into the small of his back: he clung to the mud with no pretence of courage.

Ron Fisher flung himself into his pit with Bruce Hannan. Several natives fell in on top of them. The struggling mass of bodies and arms and legs held Ron Fisher against the bottom of the pit. There was a naked foot held heavily on his throat and he could not hear the shell coming because he was being strangled to death.

When the foot bore down on him he tried to twist his head and neck away. He clutched at the foot in naked fright but his arms were trapped. The foot came down more heavily. There was no escape. His whole body threshed and heaved up at the mass upon him. The foot pressed his head back.

He locked the powerful muscles of his neck against the weight. He screamed for help, without shame for the sound of it, until the weight gagged the air in his throat. His

arms were pinioned by the mass of bodies, leaving only his shoulders free in their frantic spasms. His legs threshed but the mass settled down on them. He was encased. He thought that his teeth tore like fangs through the foot at his throat, but the foot remained where it was.

It was a dreadful way to die and the remaining conscious part of his mind knew it. That part of his mind was clear. Life was over, at nineteen, and he was sufficiently conscious to regret it and harbour a dim anger. There was, he discovered, no future before him, and he was faintly surprised.

His mind and his body were bursting in a red world of pain. His mind flailed his shoulders against the mud, flung insane contortions through his body.

The red mist spread over his incredulity and anger and surprise, closing across his mind, and for an immense time the light was not red but faintly white, and there was no more pain. The world was heaving like the sea violent against a reef.

Voices came floating into his mind, and after a while smells came: the mud, the jungle, black men.

"That's right," said Jigger. "Hold him like that. Hold him true."

"Yes, master."

Ron Fisher opened his eyes. His chest was heaving without control, dragging the air through his slack, open mouth. He was lying with his head in Ardarit's lap.

Apart from the insensate heaving of his chest, there was no strength left in him.

"Master," sighed Ardarit and a smile touched his eyes.

He wiped the sweat from Ron Fisher's face.

Ron Fisher closed his eyes. When he opened them again he stared without comprehension at Jigger and the Admiral and Peter. They were grouped around a native, bandaging his face and giving him morphia.

Ron Fisher said gustily, "What's wrong with *him?*"

"Don't talk," said Mitch.

Bruce Hannan said, "You kicked his face in."

The words went into Ron Fisher's mind very slowly. When the idea formed, emotions came after it. He was

indifferent to the native, and then afraid of war. Then he blamed the native, and anger began; and none of it was right, except that he was afraid of war.

It was fear, shapeless and unreasoned. What it was that he wanted to hide from he did not know. It was too large for his mind to encompass it. He wanted to run away from it, desperately so, flee to some part of the earth beyond its clutches.

He was so spent that his mind could not hold the urgency and he sought sleep in exhaustion.

Finally, across the tract of mud, he and the native carrier watched each other with dull eyes, sharing together their impotence against the life they had been given.

"I'm going to wheel you down to the doc," said Jigger and rested a hand on Ardarit's shoulder, "Workim two fella stretcher."

Ron Fisher went without protest from the dark green ridge.

Twenty-five

"WHO's this Fowler?" said the Golliwog.

"Two Platoon, sir," said the adjutant.

The Golliwog read the charge-sheet again.

Conduct prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline . . . reprimanded.

The adjutant said, "There was one the other day. I squashed it."

He laid another charge-sheet before Major Ellerslie.

"This one, as a matter of fact."

"Mitchell . . . conduct prejudicial . . ."

The Golliwog pushed the charges away from his map. "What the bloody hell's going on up there?"

He was planning the Battle of Gwaibalom, with lives and plans and careers at stake; he wanted a clear head.

"Mortar support for Gwaibalom," he said. "Dolly! Get me the mortar officer."

He laid the patrolling trace across the map and said to the Intelligence officer. "I want to hear the results of that One Platoon patrol as soon as it's in."

"Yes, sir."

• • •

Sergeant Osborne of One Platoon came into the company perimeter with mixed feelings. He thought he detected estrangement between O'Grady and his own officer, Lieutenant Westinghouse. It was the third time One Platoon had patrolled under the command of O'Grady, and Osborne did not know whether he was afraid of O'Grady or whether he himself was beginning to crack.

He broke off from One Platoon and went in search of Corporal Braithwaite.

Osborne sat down slowly. "You run Three Platoon?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Braithwaite.

"Tell me," said Osborne. "We've just been out with your mad mate. What do you reckon about him?"

"You better work it out for yourself," said Lance. "I might be prejudiced."

"How do you mean?"

"I got a wife and two kids to think about," said Lance Braithwaite.

"Uh . . ."

• • •

I'm getting nervous, thought the Admiral, and then he forced the idea away from him.

There was the big gun on Kela Heights beyond the valley and the river. There was the big patrol into the valley coming for Three Platoon. There was the Butcher. Now there were two mountain-guns on a ridge beyond the Komiatum Track.

A man did not duck when they fired. When the gun and the shell became audible, it was too late to duck.

Open sights. Fire when ready.

The new mortar battery on the Triangle duelled with the mountain-guns from time to time.

"What *do* you believe in?" said the Padre.

"I believe in me," said the Admiral.

"Just you?"

"And the rest of us. Whoever's going *that* way. You. Eric and his coffee-pot. Damien Parer and his camera. Old Ardarit over there steaming up the track. You and Eric and Parer didn't *have* to come here. That makes you friends of mine."

The padre said, "Whoever walks with me to Salamaua shall be my brother. Eh?"

"Something like that," said the Admiral.

"And what are we all looking for?" asked the padre.

"The other day," said the Admiral, "Ron Fisher nearly died because a bloke stood on his throat."

"I heard about that," said the padre.

"And Ron Fisher," said the Admiral, "kicked a man's face in because you throw yourself about a bit when you're getting strangled."

"I heard about that, too."

The Admiral said, "I'm looking for the day when that doesn't have to happen any more. I don't know what you call that."

• • •

Ron Fisher was asleep in the Dressing Station. He was dreaming that he was being choked to death. There were faces in front of him. He kicked them all in, one by one.

He woke up trembling.

It's all right, he told himself, dreams don't mean anything. It never really happened. There's a lot of things have never really happened.

He willed himself to lie still.

Lalor and Howard were remote. Townsend was a vague memory. The Missim was a journey he had walked in some faraway year. Yesterday had slipped away from him and he was alone with the moment of life which has nothing before it and nothing after it. The eye sees, and the ear hears, but the mind does not accept the vision and the sound.

Who am I? Why am I? If my father and my mother had not joined to make me, would I be? Could I be?

"Give us a match, mate," said the patient next to him.

Eh? Uh . . .

"Help yourself."

Ron Fisher sat up and swung his feet to the ground. He wriggled his toes inside his boots, flexed his fingers and stared at his tobacco tin.

Roll a smoke. Go on, roll a smoke.

"You all right?" said the man who had borrowed the matches.

"Yes, I'm all right," said Ron Fisher.

He took the matches back, put the tobacco tin in his pocket and sauntered along the earth floor of the ward. He wanted to see whether the native who had had his face kicked in really existed.

A dream had conjured up Petari of Gasmata, of New Britain, from over the Solomon Sea. A dream could not occupy a bed.

Go and have a look and see for yourself.

Petari lay with a blanket over him and his face swathed in bandages, leaving his lips and eyes uncovered. His eyes were dull, or empty of immediacy, staring unfocussed into mysteries or into nothing.

Petari? You *are* real. Someone did kick your face in. Someone? Me? Why should I do that?

No, I wouldn't do that. It must have been somebody else.

What are you looking at, Petari? You're alone, aren't you? Like me. The world can get along just as well without us. It *is* getting along without us.

He thought he was on the verge of making an immense discovery.

He said aloud, "Can he smoke?"

"If he wants to," said the orderly.

"Petari," said Ron Fisher and squatted beside him. "you likem smoke?"

He lit the cigarette and waited there beside Petari until the native had smoked it to a tiny butt.

What do I say to you, Petari? We'll never see each other again. It's not right, but that's the way it is.

"How do you say, I hope he gets better quick?"

The orderly leaned forward. "White master he say, he like behind time lik-lik face belong you he no cry out."

"Yes, master," whispered Petari.

His eyes still held their distant focus; and whether he smiled behind the mask of bandages was something that Ron Fisher thought he would never know.

He patted Petari on the shoulder and went in search of the surgeon.

"My neck's all right now. I want to go back to the Ridge."

"You could have another twenty-four hours. You're clear on the X-ray, but you could do with another day."

"That's no good. I want to go back now."

The surgeon said, "Hold your hands out. Flat."

He looked up again from the hands and found himself baffled by Ron Fisher's remote ease.

"Okay," he said, against his instinct. "You can go."

• • •

"You picked a good time to come back," said Mitch.

"Yair, you came back at a good time," said Nervous Lincoln. "There's a court-martial coming."

Ron Fisher thought: This is like Petari. It doesn't mean anything.

He said, "Whose?"

"Mine."

"What have *you* done?"

"I haven't done it yet," said Lincoln.

Ron Fisher thought: He means that. Why *did* I come back? Perhaps I wasn't coming back here. Perhaps I was just running away from down there.

He said to Lincoln, "You talk too bloody much."

He was remote from Lincoln, from Mitch, from Peter. He was by himself, in spite of what he could see with his eyes.

Three Platoon went out on patrol with O'Grady, south along the Ridge towards Gwaibalom. Eight Section was leading and the speed of the patrol gradually fell to what had once been normal pace. O'Grady became livid, forc-

ing the pace to quicken again. It was his power that drove it down the track towards Gwaibalom.

He caught a worried and questioning glance from Lance Braithwaite and glowered at him in the humid silence of the jungle. The patrol returned the way it had come.

Ron Fisher came out slowly from the jungle, feeling the tension begin to deflate as he entered the perimeter. There was no escape anywhere. O'Grady was on the tracks. The enemy were in the leaves. The mountain-guns sniped the Triangle. There were knives in the night. There were careless feet in a pit.

O'Grady said, "Corporal Braithwaite! Section commanders!"

Lance said, "What's he going to do, Bob?"

"Take us out again," said the Admiral. "Chilla, you keep your guts shut."

He thought, irritably: I'm doing your job for you, Lance. Wake up to yourself. You're the boss.

Chilla Troedson said nothing.

Ken Ross said, "I'm going to be paraded to the Golliwog."

"That won't do you any good," said the Admiral. "He doesn't know anybody yet. We're just a lot of Chockos. And he doesn't like Chockos."

They squatted in front of O'Grady.

"We're going out again in five minutes," said O'Grady.

His mouth drooped with a suggestion of a smile.

"This time we will patrol as *I* decide, and there's real trouble for any section commander whose section tries it any other way. Is that perfectly clear?"

Lance Braithwaite said, "Yes, sir."

"All right. Get them out. Nine Section will lead."

Ron Fisher was lying behind his pit. He was in search of some part of the world that might want him, and searching, remembered the photograph of Dorothy, the Land Army girl. For a moment, while he inspected the photograph, he thought he would write to her. He put the photograph away again in his wallet.

He thought: Perhaps she's a bitch. Perhaps she wouldn't mind who it was. Perhaps that's why she's in uniform.

"Who's the dolly with the pitchfork?" said Peter.

"Queen Boadicea," said Ron Fisher curtly.

"Chew my head off," said Peter.

Mitch said, "Any kid of mine ever puts on a uniform I'll belt his bloody skull in."

The Admiral came out of the undergrowth.

"All right, you Anzacs. Line up for patrol."

"Yair, it's somebody else's turn to have a bash," said Lincoln.

"Don't pull that one on me," said the Admiral.

"But I'm going to," said Lincoln and threw his rifle in the mud at the Admiral's feet.

"There you are," said Lincoln. "Try that for size."

"That's right," said Peter, and sat back against his pack.

The Admiral was not quick enough.

"That won't do you any good," he said, and while he was still speaking Mitch let his Owen gun swing from his shoulder by the strap.

"You're one of us," said Mitch, and the scar on his chin was red against the flesh. "Keep out of the way, Bob."

The Admiral let his gaze drop to Ron Fisher. Ron Fisher had not moved. He sat with a withdrawn ease, looking at the rifle in the mud.

"Come on, Ron."

Come on? What's he mean, come on? O'Grady doesn't need me. The world can go on without Petari, without me. And if it can do that, it can go on without O'Grady. I've as much right in this world as he has.

He can't *make* me commit suicide, and if he can't do that, what *can* he do? A court-martial can't kill me. Neither can a lot of yakking about manhood. Who said I have to live by his rules? It's all bluff. There's no Beersheba, no rules, no obligations, except what *I* choose to live and die by.

"Ron," said the Admiral, truly shaken at last. "Get up."

"You've got it wrong, mate," said Ron Fisher. "I'm going to be a returned soldier."

The Admiral said, "You know what they'll call you."

"For *once*," said Mitch, "they'll be almost right."

Peter said, "Sit down, Bob. You're blocking the view."

"All right," said the Admiral, "you can stay here."

He pulled back the cocking-handle of his Owen gun, patted his belt to check the grenades hung on it and walked away.

They fought for Howard, he thought, and they fought for Townsend. I wonder if I've got what it takes? I wonder if they'll fight for me?

O'Grady had gone down to the perimeter and waited there. The Admiral walked on as though O'Grady did not exist. Ron Fisher stared in fascination, knowing what the Admiral was about to do, struggling against the unbearable magnetism of it.

The Admiral did not falter, or look back, and walked into the jungle.

"Bastards!" said Mitch passionately. "Bastards!"

He almost ran after the Admiral, clutching at his Owen with a swoop of the hand, throwing his cigarette in the mud. He passed O'Grady without hearing what he said.

The group broke up, like leaves sucked one by one into a vacuum cleaner. At the rear came Lincoln, wiping the mud off his rifle.

In his mind there was only one object in sight—O'Grady's back.

• • •

"Who's this Butcher?" said the Golliwog.

"Don't know," said the adjutant. "Don't think we've got anybody of that name. What's about him?"

"Latrine wireless," said the Golliwog. "A couple of disgruntled privates are going to do him. He must be an N.C.O."

He added fretfully, "There's something about this battalion I can't get my hands on."

His face became truculent.

"I'm going up to the Triangle to make sure O'Grady understands his orders about tomorrow. Any lousy officer lets me down tomorrow, I'll smear his name all over Australia."

He scowled as he climbed the track to the Triangle. In the primitive struggle with the enemy and the jungle he had completely denuded Headquarter Company and Bat-

talion Headquarters of every available man and sent them to the rifle companies.

The reinforcement stemmed the attrition of the enemy and the jungle hardly at all. It was the nadir point of the battle, after which many of the men now ill would be sufficiently recovered to return to duty.

Operational orders did not take account of it. Army spoke; Corps spoke; Division spoke: there was a supreme time-table for the prosecution of the war. Whether the premises of the plans were realistic or fatuous, there was no mercy for the man who upset the time-table.

The Golliwog was concisely clear in his mind about what he wanted in the morning and for weeks to come; he was sufficiently ruthless to see that it was obtained.

"I've come about Gwaibalom," he said and, while he talked, his searching, restless eyes probed A Company for clues.

"That's it," he said. "Tomorrow or bust."

It was only after he left the Triangle that he realised what it was that was unnatural there. It was the unsmiling silence.

Charge-sheets, he thought, insolence, silence, someone called Butcher, elusive disrespect . . .

They were the same men who had taken the Triangle in fifty-five minutes.

It must be you, O'Grady, thought the Golliwog. If it is, you're in my way.

Twenty-six

THERE was a network of patrols in the jungle when the Battle of Gwaibalom began: ambushes on the Bench-cut, standing patrols on the crest of the Ridge, fighting patrols

searching the tracks, a commando reserve on the Triangle.

An old faint track led directly down the face of Bobdubi Ridge from the Triangle; early in the morning Three Platoon moved down the old track to lay an ambush on the Bench-cut.

The Admiral lay on the bank in a new contentment.

The day before, he had walked into the jungle alone, caring very much but not knowing whether Nine section followed him or not. Out on the Gwaibalom track, among the leaves, he had discovered that he was capable of walking the track alone; and finding that, found himself beyond the need or the desire to ever bend a knee to any other man on earth again.

Then Nine Section had come to join him in his journey on the track, drawn to him, committing themselves to him, irretrievably, until the day should come when the last survivor of them could no longer stand or fight.

They gave him their lives for his keeping on the Gwaibalom track; and the map was wrong, because the track did not go to Gwaibalom but to the sea, going so far that no human eye could ever discern the end of it.

That was how they followed him, the next morning, to the Bench-cut, for their trust in him mitigated their fear of Butcher O'Grady; a fear sufficient for them to have rebelled against all discipline and tradition and history.

The Battle of Gwaibalom raged and the patrols of the brigade hunted in the forest.

The sections of Three Platoon lay for a long time on the bank above the Bench-cut. The time limit expired and they moved north, parallel with the Bench-cut, away from the battle.

It was slow work moving through the thick jungle undergrowth and presently the Admiral realised that they had come this way before, without O'Grady, while Ron Fisher was in the Dressing Station.

The jungle was an uncertain place in which to navigate, and a man could only hope to recognise a previous path if he travelled it again with meticulous precision. To walk several paces to either side was to move in a different world.

"What's the matter?" mumbled O'Grady.

"Nothing, sir," breathed the Admiral. "Just locating myself."

A wisp of a smile touched O'Grady's lips.

"You can tell where you are in the middle of nowhere?"

The Admiral thought: You silly bloody possum.

He said, "Sometimes, sir. We've been here before."

O'Grady stared at him uncertainly, searching for innuendo, and suspicious because there was none.

Lance Braithwaite walked softly to a halt beside O'Grady.

He said in a whisper, "Where do you make it, sir?"

"There," said O'Grady, spotting the map with a pencil.

"There," contradicted Braithwaite absently, making another mark, "this is where Chilla made whoopee with them Marines."

O'Grady's irritating smile touched his lips again.

"You're not too strong on your map-reading, Corporal."

"Doesn't matter," said Lance Braithwaite, still absently. "I know where I am on the ground."

He added, "Where are we heading, anyway, sir?"

O'Grady mumbled, "Just cruising around. I told you that before. You should pay attention."

He looked around himself.

"Put everybody down where they are. "We'll eat here. And bring the section commanders in with you."

They ate, listening to the Battle of Gwaibalom, O'Grady studying his map. When Gwaibalom fell, it would open the way to unrestricted raiding into the valley of the Komiatum Track. It gave the Admiral an eerie feeling to realise that he was sitting only five hundred yards from the Komiatum. It was so close, yet it had taken Two Platoon twenty-four hours to escape from the area.

O'Grady wiped the sweat from his face and folded his map. "On your feet. Eight Section lead. Then Seven. Then Nine. Across the gully and up the next spur, right to the top of the Ridge. And home along the Ridge."

A chill feeling washed through the Admiral.

He thought angrily: Well, you might have told us before that we were going to Old Vickers.

Ken Ross stared at O'Grady, and Lance Braithwaite said, "In that case, sir, I suggest we move in battle order."

"Battle order?" whispered O'Grady. "What for?"

"Old Vickers," said Braithwaite. "They'll come out after us."

"We're not going near Old Vickers," said O'Grady.

"We will if we go up the next spur," said Braithwaite.

"That's the one after it," said O'Grady. "I told you you couldn't read a map."

He picked up his rifle. "Away you go."

The fear started in the Admiral's gut. It left him breathless. It took command of his loins and went down his legs so that they quivered. It spread upwards and seized his chest and his heart and clutched at his throat.

O'Grady said, "What's the matter with you blokes? Get a move on."

The word seemed to pop out of Braithwaite's mouth. "No."

"No?" said O'Grady and stared blankly at Braithwaite. "What did you say?"

"I can't send any man up that spur."

The Admiral regained possession of himself, sufficient to stand still, sufficient for his mind to function sharply and clearly.

His mind picked his words with self-disciplined care. "If you would permit me, sir, I should like to make a couple of points. If we went up *this* spur we would come out about two hundred yards our side of Old Vickers. The other—"

O'Grady said, "You're as bad as Braithwaite. I expect obstruction from the men in the ranks. I don't expect it from my platoon and section leaders. You're not rabble."

The Admiral said, "Sir, I've never been more earnest in my life. The first bloke who walks up the next spur to this one is a dead duck. And perhaps the bloke after him. If you want us to go to Old Vickers, sir, that's all right, but you've just said that you don't want to go there."

O'Grady said in an intense whisper, "*I* am commanding this platoon. Braithwaite! Get on your way and get this platoon up that bloody spur."

Ron Fisher thought: What are they all whispering about?

O'Grady said, "I better advise you, Braithwaite, of your position. You have no choice but to carry out an order. You can do so under protest, and that will be recorded by the proper authority."

Braithwaite said stubbornly, "That'll do the bloke out in front a lot of good, sir."

"It'll do his next-of-kin a lot of good, too," said Chilla Troedson.

O'Grady said, in a livid whisper, "This is *mutiny*."

The Admiral's mind was ice cold and clear.

He said, "We submit that a man's life is at stake, sir. We would appeal to you, sir, to reconsider your decision."

They stared at O'Grady, feeling the impelling power of the man, feeling themselves losing the desperate battle.

I can stand up to him, thought the Admiral, I can talk him out of this yet. Stand up to him, Lance. You're *it*. *Fight* him.

Fear went out from the silent struggle and enveloped the patrol man by man.

"Sir," said the Admiral. "There——"

"Shut up," said O'Grady, without taking his eyes from Braithwaite. "Keep out of the way, Nelson."

He had found the weakest man of the four and enveloped his mind with the surety of years of power and command.

Lance. Fight the bastard! *Lance!*

Braithwaite surrendered with an audible sigh that pulled the skin tight on the Admiral's face.

"Move, Corporal Braithwaite," said O'Grady softly.

"I want you to remember me until the day you die," said Braithwaite, and walked out in front of the forward scout before anyone realised what he intended to do.

Lance!

Braithwaite went down into the gully and began to climb the spur to Old Vickers.

Three Platoon of the Eighty-Third Battalion followed him.

• • •

"Where——" said the Golliwog, and stopped.

"I am the resurrection and the life," said the padre.

The Golliwog and his runner took off their hats and placed their hands behind their backs.

". . . whosoever believeth in Me shall not die . . . but have everlasting life."

The Golliwog realised that he was almost standing on a biscuit tin lid that had been prepared for mounting on the crossed sticks. There was a name punched in the tin.

"Ashes to ashes . . ."

Braithwaite. Lance Edgar Braithwaite? Commander of Three Platoon?

". . . and dust to dust . . ."

The Golliwog's eyes came up slowly, searching. There was evil around him, and he knew it. He looked at the tall, dark-haired man with the Owen gun and wondered who he was: whoever he was, he was dangerous.

"As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be . . ."

And that bloke beside him. There's something brittle about him.

"World without end . . ."

And the rest of them! What the hell's going on here?

"Amen."

"Amen," said the Golliwog, and replaced his hat.

He said in a violent aside to his runner, "Who's that skinny, dark-haired bloke with the Owen gun?"

"Nelson, sir."

"And the bloke beside him?"

"Troedson, sir."

The Golliwog strode through the mud towards O'Grady's command post.

"Everlasting life," said Mitch. "How about a bit of life here on earth?"

Ken Ross began to tie the biscuit tin lid to the sticks.

• • •

"What are you going to do?" said the adjutant.

"What can I do?" said the Golliwog. "He gave an order. He did what he thought was right."

"It depends on how he thinks, sir," said the adjutant.

"Don't tell *me,*" yelled the Golliwog. "What do you think I am? A bloody idiot?"

He took a breath with the blood suffused in his face. "He's in my way. Or they are. Here I've got hold of Gwaibalom and I have to keep looking over my shoulder to see what A Company's going to do next!"

The adjutant said evenly, "What did you do about Three Platoon, sir?"

"Made Nelson commander and made him a sergeant. There's something about Troedson I don't like. I made Ross a corporal and gave Nine Section to Fisher. We'll see how good he is before he gets his stripes."

The adjutant said, "He's a bit young. He's only nineteen."

"It was Nelson's idea. He knows the bloke."

He was becoming angry again. "They're off to the Komiatum tomorrow morning. Keep them busy. I climbed on the sarn-major's back while I was up there, too. Discipline's one of his jobs. I'm going to shake A Company from top to bloody bottom."

• • •

The company sergeant-major said, "There's one thing I'd like to know."

"What's that?" said the Admiral. "Sir."

"Is Three Platoon going to take his orders?"

"We do as we're told," said the Admiral. "What's it got to do with you?"

"I *am* responsible for discipline in the company."

"All right," said the Admiral. "We climbed his ridge. What do you want? We'll call him 'sir'. We'll salute him. We'll stand up for him."

He thought: Shut up, Robert. You're talking too much.

He said, "Every time he cracks a joke, we'll laugh. Happy? Now go away, you stupid little man."

Twenty-seven

"THE Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

The padre raised his eyes to Peter Mitchell and let the Book fall shut.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

He added, "Is that what *you* want?"

"Yes," said Peter.

The padre glanced into the dark valley of the Komiatum.

"When do you go down there?"

" 'Bout ten minutes."

"Let me know when you get back," said the padre. "We'll chew the ear a bit."

"Yes," said Peter and went to collect his pack.

"What's the matter, Bob?" said the padre.

He sat down beside the Admiral. "Is it what happened yesterday morning?"

"Please!" said the Admiral.

Silence.

The padre gestured toward the gap in the jungle.

"Look over there. It's morning. There's the sea over there. And down here is the valley. The one I was telling Peter about."

His eyes inspected the Admiral's profile.

"I think you should tell me about yesterday. You're god of the valley, Bob. You'll need a clear head when you go down there."

Ron Fisher walked past to join Nine Section at the command post. He did not look at O'Grady and squatted beside Mitch and Peter.

"G'day, boss," said Mitch and added, as an after-

thought, "You want to give your job away before it kills you."

Jack Lincoln said, "I think I'm getting malaria."

"I know what you're getting," said Ron Fisher.

They stared at each other without animosity.

The Admiral said, "God of the valley? Yes, I know. You know what Nine Section did the other day? They gave me their lives to look after. I forced them to. Do you know what their lives are? They're the crown jewels of Australia."

He looked at the padre, "I do need a clear head when we go down there. I'll tell you about yesterday."

• • •

It was still early when the padre came back to the Uliap from the Triangle.

"Well?" said the Golliwog. "Have they gone?"

"Yes," said the padre, "they've gone."

"What shape's Nelson in?"

"He's all right. He's taken his crown jewels and gone down the valley."

"Eh?"

The padre raised his eyes.

"You can do your own dirty work after this, Major Ellerslie. They won't break your dirty little career, if that's what you're worried about. If you're man enough to trust them, you might find one day that they made it for you, along with Salamaua."

The Golliwog's eyes squinted.

He said softly, "Was it that bad?"

"I thought my Faith was invincible. I have believed in God ever since I was ten years old. I have to begin all over again."

The Golliwog said, "If it's any consolation to you, a certain person is leaving us. He's being sent to a school."

The padre stood unmoving.

"Is that how it's done?" he said.

"What else?" said the Golliwog. "From where I stand, all he has done is lose the confidence of his troops."

"Yes?" said the padre.

He said, "They've lost faith in everybody. I and my God can't tell them anything, except about the brotherhood of Man, and they know that already.

"Some of them are down in the valley now. Yesterday it was somebody else. Today it's Three Platoon. Tomorrow it'll be some other platoon. I wish I was a soldier."

"What would you do?" whispered the Golliwog.

"I'd be a part of the fabric that holds the infantry together," said the padre. "A part of the only sane thing left on the face of this earth. One for all, and all for one. There in the valley."

Twenty-eight

THEY were coming back from the Komiatum.

Nine Section was on the run with the wounded. The Admiral had taken the rest of the platoon and set out to mislead and distract the enemy while the wounded escaped.

Chance fell on Ron Fisher as suddenly as that, and he found himself alone with his command, in the middle of the valley.

He had to make decisions, and if his decisions were wrong he would shatter what the enemy and the jungle and O'Grady had left of Three Platoon.

There was no Howard, no Townsend, no Admiral to lean on, to turn to for aid, no one to follow. There was no time, as they had often done, to discuss what they would do.

There was time only for one man to stand up and give orders.

"That way," said Ron Fisher, and they went, Mitch hunting alone with his Owen gun, searching amongst the leaves for an escape route. Lincoln brought up the rear with the Bren gun. Peter and Bruce Hannan moved on

the flanks. The two wounded men from Eight Section walked in the centre, with Ron Fisher. The wounded walked very slowly, and if they walked too far, they would die.

The patrol had to stop frequently to let them rest. Then they all became aware that the Admiral's decoying tactics had not succeeded.

• • •

The Admiral was fighting unhampered. There was no one of superior rank present to influence his judgment or cause his decision to waver.

He pointed along the valley, and the platoon swung about, going back to divert the enemy. He felt enormously confident, felt himself driven by the emergency, and when he faced up to the emergency, found himself with no doubt or hesitation.

They came south with infinite caution, retaining their freedom of room for manoeuvre, observing the one immutable law operating against them, that they sustain no more casualties.

Chilla Troedson and Seven Section came on the enemy quite unexpectedly. The Bren and Troedson's Owen gun woke up the jungle with wild, traversing bursts that emptied their magazines. Then the eight men ran from the thirty or forty who turned to take reprisal.

"That way," said the Admiral, and the platoon went north again, firing shots into the jungle.

Then he found the tables turned against him, and there was a running fight while Three Platoon wriggled frantically out of the trap that had almost closed around it.

When he moved south again, he recognised and accepted the desperate risk of going back over his tracks. No word was spoken, but quite suddenly every man knew that the battle had changed for the worse, and that they were alone in the valley until the wounded had escaped.

They did not question the Admiral's decision. They had given themselves to him, and his decision was neither right nor wrong, but the best that could be taken. No one else could find a better one.

• • •

Late in the afternoon, Damien Parer slung his camera on his shoulder and walked up the long track from the Uliap, up on to Halligan's Spur, and along the Spur to the Triangle.

For the first time, he heard the intermittent gunfire of the battle in the valley.

The sergeant of Two Platoon said, "Someone's getting chased in earnest down there."

"Yes," said Parer.

It was an old, familiar story. He had found it before, in Greece, on Timor with the commandos, on the Kokoda Trail, and down in the swamps beyond Poppendetta.

He stood on the Triangle and listened to the battle.

• • •

The enemy came beating through the jungle and Nine Section hid in the thick undergrowth in a gully. The enemy went on, searching elsewhere.

Bartlett of Eight Section was dying on his feet, for the blood seeped slowly out of his wounds, and when he had lost a given quantity of blood, he would die.

"Leave me, Tiger. Take the rest of them and get out while you can."

Ron Fisher said, "We're not going to start that, mate."

He said no more. He did not have the Admiral's rapier mind, and the words failed to come. He eased his way through the undergrowth to consult Mitch.

They had been hunted for almost nine hours, with a persistence that ground them down imperceptibly until they were so weary that they leaned on Ron Fisher for support. He was denied an equal privilege, and instead of cracking, became more and more stubborn.

The two reinforcements, who had come to the Section from Headquarter Company during the counter-attacks, were together in the leaves.

One said, "How's Bart?"

"He wants us to leave him."

"What's he think this is?"

The other reinforcement said, "I suppose sooner or later we'll have to leave somebody behind."

A chill feeling caught at Ron Fisher's face, and anger came. Some kind of hate flowed out in his voice.

"Hey. You ever do that to us, you better go and join the A.I.F. 'Cause if you stay in this crowd, someone'll come for you with an Owen gun. Got that?"

He thought, did *I* say that? I never talked like that in my life. He's older than me. And he's scared of me. Smack him back into line.

Ron Fisher began to crawl through the leaves.

He thought, I want Mitch at the front with the Owen, because he fights like a demon. And I want Lincoln at the back with the Bren, because he fights like a maniac when he has to. And only demons and maniacs will get us out of the valley.

"Listen, mate," he whispered to Mitch. "Do me a special favour."

"What's that?"

"Go on leading."

Mitch had been leading for nine hours. There was a very long silence.

Mitch whispered, "Tell me something."

"What?"

"You got a good reason?"

"Yeh, Mitch. The best."

"All right," said Mitch.

"You'll do it?"

"For you, Tiger. This once."

Ron Fisher retreated again. He tightened Bartlett's bandages and examined those of the other man from Eight Section.

The enemy returned, beating the undergrowth. Distantly, near at hand, anywhere, without rhyme or reason, the jungle echoed to the scattered shots and bursts of machine-gun fire.

The battle went on, for Bartlett and the other man.

Will you walk into my parlour . . .

"O.K.," breathed Ron Fisher. "We're going home, Bart."

Bartlett and the other man walked together, supporting

each other. The section walked in a loose circle, to meet attack from any direction. The gun battle moved to the south, towards them, and went away again.

Ron Fisher did not know when it was that he realised they had escaped from the enemy. The knowledge left him unmoved. He felt strange. He was quite without any feeling of insecurity. Life became a question of how far Bartlett could walk before he died.

• • •

The Admiral came in first to the Triangle. Very late in the afternoon, Ron Fisher came up the track from the valley.

The strange mood persisted. It permitted Ron Fisher to listen without smiling to the new American artillery shelling Old Vickers from Tambu Bay; permitted him to tell Eight Section without exuberance that Bartlett had come home; permitted him to talk to the Admiral with a feeling of detachment.

He felt free of the bonds of dependency which had held him to the Admiral since his school days. It was as though he was setting out on a journey of which he was the principal and not a subordinate.

Lieutenant Westinghouse, the big, fat commander of One Platoon, was in O'Grady's lean-to when Ron Fisher reported.

"All O.K., Private Fisher?"

"Yes, sir. We made it all right."

When he had said this, he found himself regarding the lieutenant with the same detachment he had given the Admiral.

He said without interest, "Where's Mister O'Grady?"

"Gone," said Lieutenant Westinghouse.

"Gone?"

"To a school," said Westinghouse, and laid down his map. "I'm the boss."

Ron Fisher lifted his eyes slowly to the lieutenant's and their gaze met. The Lieutenant sought security and obedience. He discovered himself being evaluated. The youngster's eyes were grave and questioned him, and demanded life; demanded that the lieutenant give in kind for all that

he would receive; demanded that the more he received, the more he would need to give.

Ron Fisher said simply, "He killed my cousin."

He knew the meaning of the strange mood now. He had learned much about himself in the valley that he had not known. Having learned this, he had left the last of his youth in the valley, and stepped into manhood.

Twenty-Nine

THE brigadier raised his eyes from his map and found himself being inspected by a small native child.

"Good morning, young man," said the brigadier.

The child regarded him in grave wonder.

"How would you like to be a platoon commander?" said the brigadier, and searched in his pockets.

He offered a piece of chocolate.

"No? God, some people are hard to please."

He searched in his pockets again and doubtfully produced his tobacco-tin. He rolled a cigarette.

"Would you care for a smoke?"

The child took the cigarette.

"Want a light?"

The child bent forward and lit the cigarette.

"Jesus," said the brigadier in fascination.

He rolled a cigarette for himself and bent forward.

"Give us a light, will you, laddie?"

• • •

The brigadier put on his hat, picked up his map and straightened his gaiters.

"Good morning, young man," said the brigadier, and set out with his escort for the Uliap.

"Where is Major Ellerslie?"

"Gone up to the Triangle, sir."

"What for?"

The adjutant said, "I don't know, sir."

"How long will he be?" said the brigadier with a slight gesture of impatience.

"I don't know, sir."

The brigadier said slowly, "Didn't you ask?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he say?"

"He said he didn't know, sir," said the adjutant uncomfortably.

The brigadier began to stiffen. It was a long, slow curious transition. It left his face hard and his eyes bleak.

The adjutant remained silent.

"What the bloody hell's going on here?" said the brigadier.

• • •

"Here it comes," said Mitch. "The handsome commander of the Eighty-Third."

They stared covertly at the Golliwog. He was carrying an Owen gun. He was aware that they watched him, some with regard, some with distrust, some with indifference.

"Where are you going, Nelson?"

"Patrol Number Seven, sir," said the Admiral.

"All right. I want to come out and have a look around."

The Admiral said, "Do you wish to take over the patrol, sir?"

"Certainly not," said the Golliwog sourly. "That's your business."

He pulled a map out of his pocket. "I've changed my mind about Patrol Seven sneaking up and having a look at those Nips who have dug themselves in between here and Old Vickers. Don't bother looking at them. Just kick them out."

He put the map back in his pocket.

"I," he said, "am going to sneak around behind them and ambush them when they go flying home to Mumma. Give me half an hour's start."

He pointed at Stanaway. "You can be in this."

And at Mitch and Chilla Troedson. "And you and you."

"Come on," he said, with a harsh grin in his eyes. "Follow me."

Only the most detached and careful observer would have noticed the strain behind the eyes and under the voice.

They followed him without volition. He led the way down the side of the Ridge and then north, keeping away from the track on the crest. He thought, they follow me or they don't. He did not look back.

Stanaway followed the major's boots under some thick undergrowth in a gully and rose to his feet again where the going was easier. It did not occur to him that he was being taught a lesson in field-craft. Mitch and Chilla Troedson began to enjoy the expedition.

The major moved silently, and with surprising speed. The expedition ceased being humorous and became hard physical work. The sweat streamed from them.

"What's the matter with you blokes?" whispered the Golliwog. "Bit short of condition?"

He crawled a little further and stopped, to look at Stanaway's rifle.

"You got that thing cocked?"

Stanaway nodded.

"On safe?"

Another nod.

"Take it off."

The four men began to crawl gently up the slope to the track on the crest of Bobdubi Ridge.

* * *

"The place is getting madder every day," said Ron Fisher.

"Verily," said Peter Mitchell.

The Admiral looked at his watch, and then at Damien Parer. Parer was the man who had carried mortar-bombs with the native carriers, and the man who had thrown his camera away one day to rescue wounded commandos under fire.

"Want to be in this?" said the Admiral.

"I've used up my quota of film," said Parer blandly.

The Admiral looked at his watch again. Lieutenant Westinghouse was in his lean-to, at a loss as to what he should be doing or saying.

"All right," said the Admiral. "Away you go."

"Be good," said Parer benevolently.

• • •

Any time now, thought the Golliwog. He winked at Mitch and wriggled uncomfortably on the ground. He thought, I'm getting too old for this game.

He grinned at Stanaway, and the grin froze. There was the sound of feet on the track, from the wrong direction. The Admiral was still approaching his objective from the south. Now there was a supply train or reinforcements for the enemy approaching from the north, from Old Vickers.

The three men looked at him and he gestured. They began to change position with infinite care. They understood as well as the major did, that they had to delay the reinforcement, and that this could lead them to attack a force much heavier than their own, contrary to all the rules of jungle warfare.

Many things happened simultaneously. Eight Section moved to the attack against the dug-in position. The enemy patrol walked into the Golliwog's ambush.

The leading men of the patrol fell down under the fire of the ambush. There were more men behind them, an unknown number, and the Golliwog emptied the magazine in their general direction.

"The next rule to success," growled the Golliwog, "is to know when to blow."

• • •

"They ran like hell," said the Admiral, and the Golliwog came out of the undergrowth with his three men and made himself at ease on a stump near Westinghouse's lean-to.

He pushed his hat to the back of his head and studied Lieutenant Westinghouse and the platoon and section leaders.

"Two things," he said harshly, "you should know about me. I make mistakes, like everybody else, but I don't

make so many as some people. The other thing is, before I issue an order I consider if I would carry it out myself."

His restless, unlovable eyes surveyed the group.

I'm sure of them all, he thought, except that Troedson.

He said, "The brigade has exactly thirteen days to clear Bobdubi Ridge and break the Komiatum."

Having spoken, he slid off the stump and walked away. As he walked he wondered whether Troedson could stand the next thirteen days.

* * *

"I don't know," said the padre, "whether you did that out of conviction or bravado. I suppose only you will ever know that."

"It's my job," said the Golliwog simply, "as I told the brigadier."

"Besides," he added, "I like swimming, and the nearest surf's at Salamaua."

* * *

Nine Section was seven men. One morning malaria took one of the two reinforcements who had come from Headquarter Company during the counter-attacks: and the six men remaining in the section closed up the gap and lived for the sea. They hated the enemy, each for his own reasons and together because the enemy obstructed the way to the sea.

The sea was life. The sea was tomorrow. The sea was wives and children and dreams and aspirations. The enemy stood in the way of it, and if a man was to brood upon that, then he would break.

They did not break, because they had each other, and the padre and Ardarit and Damien Parer; and the Admiral and Lieutenant Westinghouse and the Golliwog to lead and direct them.

They had found the only sane thing left upon the face of the earth, and while some embraced God within it, most of them clung to it for its discernible simplicity.

It was real. It was true. Concrete and abstract, truth abiding. If any man sneer, let him come and walk in the

valley of the Komiatum, or above it, on the dark-green ridge of Bobdubi.

. . .

The Admiral said sombrely, "We were down in the valley yesterday. We have to go back in the morning."

"Yes," said the padre, and drew on his cigarette. "Yes, I know."

He stubbed his cigarette in the mud and added, "I wrote to Lance Braithwaite's wife."

The Admiral's forehead puckered uncertainly. "What did you tell her?"

"Mostly lies," said the padre. "You know how it is."

He stood up and wiped some mud from his trousers.

"See you. I've got a job to do."

. . .

"Ashes to ashes. . . ."

How many more. . . .

"And dust to dust. . . ."

In the jungle, the tracks are all the same. They start nowhere, and they lead nowhere, except to the grave. Occasionally, a track is sufficiently important to have a name, like the Missim or the Komiatum. But in a man's mind all the others are the same as one another, and simply the track.

Ron Fisher walked along the track. It was his turn to lead the way and he walked among the leaves with Mitch's Owen gun in his hands and the tight twisted pain in his gut. He was a taut spring ready to whip the gun and his body into the mouth of an ambush.

He was ready now to emulate Mitch, to stand up in an ambush and fight back. He had not spoken of it. He had not been certain, himself, until now.

If he never did it, no one in all the valley could count him the worse: but he was nineteen, and commander of a section of men all older than himself.

He searched among the leaves in the valley for the enemy he would never see.

They were waiting for him on a bend in the track. His being flung itself outwards at the ambush. He spun on the

track, not knowing himself. He was on his feet, fighting in a world of frenzied sound, with the Owen gun in his hands hammering on and on until he thought it would never stop.

When the silence came back to the valley, he was lying in the mud reloading the Owen.

. . .

The Golliwog said, "What do you reckon about Fisher?"

Lieutenant Westinghouse said, "I don't know what he did down there today, but he's got them all eating out of his hand like pet budgerigars."

"Fair enough," said the Golliwog, and yelled for Private Fisher.

"There it is again," said Mitch. "The man who never heard of Alexander G. Bell."

"Sir?" said Ron Fisher.

"You're a corporal," said the Golliwog. "That's all."

. . .

The battalion dwindled imperceptibly. The native stretcher-bearers plodded through the humid gloom.

The diseased man on the stretcher swayed gently and behind the party walked Ardarit, flicking absently at the undergrowth with his machete.

"Good day, Master Mitch."

"G'day, Ardarit."

Silence.

"There goes another one," said Lincoln at last.

"How many's that leave?" said Mitch.

"I dunno," said Ron Fisher.

He did not particularly care. Behind him were the ranges. Before him were the valley and the sea. He had only one real care. That was to stay alive.

. . .

SUNRAY TO SUNRAY ONE (.) SUNRAY FIVE WILL PROVIDE TWO REINFORCEMENTS (.) NO REPEAT NO MORE AVAILABLE. . . .

"One thing about a war," said Lieutenant Westing-

house, "when you hear bad news, you can be sure it's the truth."

He waited for One Platoon to come back from the valley. The markings on his map described their course and their mission: not an ambush, but a feint to induce an attack.

The plan was the Golliwog's. The execution was the platoon leader's. The company commander, conveniently, could sit in his lean-to and remain detached from responsibility and danger.

It was a thought that would have comforted some men, but it continued to irritate Westinghouse.

He was an indolent man, and knew it. He knew that he lacked the Golliwog's energy, and what had been Neil Howard's sense of urgency, and the Admiral's almost certain touch with other men's cares and lives.

Life for Westinghouse, as the solitary remaining officer of A Company, was a conscious preparation for the day when circumstances or orders required him to stand up and lead his men; and in doing it pay back the loyalty and trust they gave him.

• • •

Lincoln was reading a letter from his mother.

"Martha was over last night. She was telling me you boys are copping it bad."

Martha's a stupid, silly old bitch who don't know when to keep her guts shut.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about your bruther. I'm sure I don't. The demons have been at him all week. They reckon he knocked off a truck load of cigarettes. Joe reckons they got nothing on him, and so does Squiffy. But that's not what the demons reckon. I wish you was home again to take a hand with him. . . ."

You bloody old fool. If I was home again, *I'd* be knocking off the cigarettes.

Ron Fisher said, "Got a job for you, Jackie boy. Routine patrol to Battalion."

They went down the track silently: Ron Fisher and Jack Lincoln, Mitch and Peter, Bruce Hannan and McAllister the remaining reinforcement from Headquarter

Company. They came home again to the Ridge, to the intermittent shelling and the cold bully-beef, to muddy weapon-pits and long hours of picquet in the night.

It was June when they came over the Missim. Now it was July, or perhaps it was August. They were not certain, and hardly cared. June was a long time ago, and they were much older than they had been then. They had learned many things that are known only to the infantry and to the men who man fighting aircraft and warships.

• • •

"Christ!" said Mitch, and in his eyes there was a hurt, bewildered look.

He gave the newspaper to Ron Fisher and Peter.

In its columns, people wanted more petrol; wanted their sons out of the army; wanted the army kept in New Guinea so that malaria might not spread to Australia.

He listened to the gunfire in the valley. The newspaper also stated that the army should not be occupied with patrolling, but should go over at once to the offensive.

• • •

"Whoso riseth from the earth, must return to the earth. . . ."

But he was only patrolling. . . .

• • •

Lieutenant Westinghouse said, "What's McAllister limping for?"

McAllister was the reinforcement from Headquarter Company.

"He hurt his foot," said Ron Fisher. "He'll be all right."

Ron Fisher went in search of him. "You better give up, Mac. Forget what I said before. You won't get any medals for it."

"You mind your own bloody business," said McAllister.

"All right, mate. It's *your* feet."

Ron Fisher walked away. *He* knew why McAllister limped. He limped because his feet were splitting, because he doctored the puffy flesh, and went on fighting, and

hoped, living for the thirteenth day of the battle in the valley, staving off the hour when he must give in because he would be not only useless but a danger to his comrades.

Bruce Hannan saw it otherwise. A fever took him and he staggered from Bobdubi Ridge without any qualms.

He had done his duty, as much as McAllister, and which of them was right, and which was wrong, or whether they were both right, or wrong together, is an idle debate fit only for people who have never walked in the valley or gone in search of the sea.

• • •

The sea was tomorrow, and the sea was yesterday, for it is on yesterday that tomorrow is built. Yesterday left Mitch and Peter alone in an orphanage; left Ted Thorn to walk in the dust of the Track before the war; let Colonel Maitland be established in authority and command.

Yesterday was imperfect, but it was the sum of an unfinished advance, and what the enemy had to offer was retrogression.

The sea was tomorrow, in all the separate views that men had of it.

So thought the Admiral, but he was hardly aware of it, for it was embedded almost entirely in the subconscious part of his mind, and all that remained for a symbol was the sea shining beyond the dark ridges of Salamaua.

• • •

Peter Mitchell was led out of the valley.

Ron Fisher brought him up from the valley the last time the platoon was ever broken up by the enemy. Ardarit took Peter and led him down the Uliap track.

A grenade had exploded in his face. If there was a God, he would meet Him with his mind. There was a sea, but Peter would never look upon the sea again.

He was blind for life.

• • •

"Don't go away, Tiger," said Mitch, and never smiled again.

"It is quite evident," wrote Major-General Gilmore, "that no serious efforts are being made to take prisoners-of-war."

"Prisoners?" said Mitch, and they went back to the valley: McAllister limping in silence, Jack Lincoln empty and desperate, Mitch with his mind shrivelled, and Ron Fisher to lead them to wherever it was that war would take them.

For a little while, in the valley, they forgot even the sea.

• • •

Old Vickers fell to Don Company one morning near the end of July.

"They needed that," said the Golliwog.

"Yes," said the Brigadier, and looked long and searchingly at the major.

He said, "You needed it, too."

The runner came and gave the Golliwog an Owen gun.

"Where are you going with that?" said the brigadier.

"Orodubi. Please stand aside, sir."

"Be careful, Graham, for Christ's sake. Be careful."

• • •

The enemy clung to the Komiatum Track long after all reason had deserted them. They had need to, or give up the fortress in the hills. If they gave up the fortress, they gave up Salamaua.

They clung to the Track.

The white men came out of the battles and wondered whether they, too, had lost their reason. They would never have recognised themselves as they hid and hunted and shot and escaped again from the valley; and their kin would have started from them in fright.

Whether they were commandos or infantry, A.I.F. or militia, the variations had no meaning.

They fought all through the last dreadful week along the Komiatum as though they had been born solely for the killing of Japanese.

The jungle compounded a brew of hate and savagery,

contempt and retribution, and, at the last, acceptance that this was the way of war.

They drank of the compound, and it transformed them in its likeness. They had flung down their civilisation into the mud. The past was a blank, and the sea was dim, for their minds had shrunk to the radius of their sight.

They did not query. They did not remember. They did not think.

They ate and defecated and slept and fought, and when they fought, it was to exterminate every single enemy soldier who lived. His mere existence protracted the squalor, impeded the way to the sea, denied to every man the gift of life.

It was a gift that had been taken from the Japanese long before the war, and perhaps they had never had it, and it was a right that they had come to take from others.

Whether the Japanese were asleep, or armed, or prepared; ill or near to death or defenceless: if they were alive, they died.

The Japanese fought with equal ferocity, but it was the ferocity of the fearing and the doomed. Patrols hacked at their numbers. The American artillery shook the very earth. Over the ridges and the valleys the bombers and the fighters flew to augment their agony.

They hit back, hunting the patrols, shelling Bobdubi Ridge, sending the massed ranks to Tambu again in the name of the Emperor.

They came in the same fashion to beat against the machine-guns of the A.I.F. company that had taken charge of Old Vickers.

It was resolved that the army that was exterminated first, would lose the hills.

* * *

"I will fear not the terror by night, nor the arrow that flieth by day. . . ."

The Admiral brushed a strand of hair from his forehead and crouched in the undergrowth.

The words would not leave him. They clung in his mind, from some random conversation, making a statement of faith.

Consciously, while he waited to give the order, he thought about the words and willed himself to believe them, to make them a statement of faith in himself.

He trusted Three Platoon, and himself: Three Platoon trusted him. Knowing that, he began to rise to his feet. Looking at him one knew that he was a commander among men, although his sweat-soaked shirt bore no insignia. The insignia was in his assurance, in his critical searching eyes, in the physical ease with which he moved.

He had faith in himself, in his dwindling platoon, faith in man. He prepared to attack the enemy standing-patrol in its weapon-pits.

He glanced once at Stanaway and Ron Fisher and the others, and lifted his gaze to the undergrowth before them. He knew, when he gestured, that few men in the battalion could have asked them to return to the attack. They went, because *he* asked them. And each one of them deceived the eye, even Lincoln with a dead cigarette-butt hung on his lip, for an onlooker would have thought that they went entirely of their own will.

Parer nodded in salute as they went past.

The Admiral straightened up, looked at him, and in the camera-man's eyes, too, was the terror that walked by night and the arrow that flew by day.

The gunfire began at once. The Admiral began to walk, long, slow steps in the grey mud. Behind him, the civilian lifted his camera, as one does a rifle, lining it to the eye, finger curling on the trigger, eye searching for a particular target. In the view-finder, a soldier beyond the Admiral fired into the undergrowth.

Parer moved the camera a little, and held it still, waiting that he might show the world what happened that day in the valley.

The whirring of the camera was not heard for the murdering stutter of the Woodpecker, and the world would never see what happened that day, for the camera found a man's face twisted by the lightning agony of death within him, and this was a scene that could never be screened before his family.

"How'd you go?" said Westinghouse.

"All right," said the Admiral.

"Mac got a Nip," said Ron Fisher, "to square things up."

"Cut him off at his water," said McAllister gloomily.

• • •

It was a time when the field surgeons worked all night, every night.

It was a long way, sometimes four days, from a jungle track to the relief of surgery.

"I have to keep my nerve," thought Westinghouse solemnly. "I must believe that the battle will be over before the company has ceased to exist."

He wondered whether anyone was aware that he drew much of his fortitude and encouragement from the men to whom he was supposed to give such qualities.

• • •

"If I could relieve them for even a week," said the Golliwog, "they'd be able to get back some of the blokes laid up in the A.D.S."

The brigadier picked up the Strength State of the battalion.

"Some day," he said, "people are going to realise what a battle means to the few blokes who finally win it."

The struggle for the command of the valley moved towards its climax.

• • •

Mitch looked like a man, and he was a man, but there all resemblance ceased. He stood in the middle of the track, crouched over his hammering, quivering Owen gun. The bullets plucked and rained at the undergrowth and other bullets searched for him until his audacity and his fire overawed the hidden gunners.

Like all the other automatons in the jungle, he was not rational. He hated the enemy. They had darkened and shrivelled his mind, and they suffered for it. They were receiving now what they had given him and his brother. One day, the enemy might realise that, while Mitch lived,

they would pay and go on paying in blood for Peter's eyes.

Like all the other automatons, the jungle had Mitch. He rotted slowly, insidiously, and the heat sapped him.

His clothes were mouldy and rotted day by day. His body rotted from the suppressed fevers of the forest. Upon his legs were jungle rashes, and an ugly red blotch marred his left arm where the dermatitis ate its way steadily into his skin.

Little festerings and diseases marked him, had marked him steadily for weeks while Jigger in the C.A.P. doctored him with ointments and cures and failed to hold the spread in check. The sun would have cured him almost completely, but there was no time in the valley for trivialities.

He fired the last burst into the ambush and dived to the ground. Then, when he became only one man among several, it was seen that he differed from the others only in the degree of his festerings.

• • •

The Admiral did not expect the letter he received. ". . . look after yourself, Robert, look after yourself very well. Get yourself a job in the cook-house if it's necessary. . . ."

He closed the letter with a frown, trying to evaluate Gloria's change of attitude, regretting that she knew where he was.

"It must be all over Melbourne," he said.

"What?" said Ron Fisher.

"That we're in action."

All over Melbourne?

I wonder how long it'll take to reach Gippsland?

Ron Fisher felt a sudden, unreasoning panic that the news *would* reach Gippsland.

He thought, Dear Mum, if you could only see me now with one side of my face red with disease. And seen your little son running like buggery through the scrub with a busted rifle yesterday afternoon. It wasn't very nice, Mum. I thought I was naked. Every Jap within ten miles could see me and was waiting for me. I was on the run. I thought there was a Jap behind every bush.

Now I know how the natives feel when they come under fire. No wonder their eyes get big and scared. Dear Mum. I hope nobody tells you.

The Admiral said, "All out."

Ron Fisher thought, there is a nice sunny little dairy farm waiting for me in Gippsland. I must remember that.

"Come on," he said, and McAllister limped after him.

Mitch and Lincoln got up and followed.

. . .

Virtually, Lincoln differed from the other automatons only in his physical stature. Like them, his mind had died. There was no reasoning in an action. If he had heard a reason, he would not have understood it. He would have simply looked, having heard a meaningless noise in a human throat.

Like the others, he had forgotten the past, but he suffered more for it. A residue of life clung to the others; of some purpose in living.

Lincoln was bankrupt.

He moved and hunted and hid and fought by the promptings of blind instinct; primitive instincts of his race, fear and animal comfort, barbaric cunning and stealth.

This was the ruling dictate.

Beyond that, the only other factor he recognised was the voice of the army. The voice was officer and N.C.O., and it did not matter which throat the voice came from.

He hated the voice, hated it with an animal terror and tried to escape from it. But the voice pursued him. It found him, never mind where he was, or what hour of day or night it was. Sometimes the voice was the Golliwog, whose strength he had respected; or Westinghouse, whose indolence had deluded him; or Ron Fisher, whom he had thought to patronise, and found the role reversed.

The true hell saturated the jungle, and he hated the voice and its minions, hated them dumbly, in silence, and the leaves of the jungle hung all around him.

. . .

The Admiral was drawn and gaunt. He drew merci-

lessly on his reserves of mind and body and went back to battle.

From the look-out on the Triangle he scanned the sky and watched the bombers howl down across the ridges and vanish in the valley below.

His silence saluted them that there were men to fly like that, as though each of them fanatically believed that the outcome of the war depended upon himself, and himself alone.

• • •

There was the sea, and every man saw it differently.

It beckoned them in the morning, shining and clean, before the heat of noon brought clouds and obscured the day.

"Give us a look at her," said Mitch, and Ron Fisher produced the photograph of the Land Army girl with the pitchfork.

Mitch said, "D'you write to her?"

"Yeh."

"You want t'get onto her, Tiger. She'd be good for you."

Ron Fisher took the photograph back.

"I'm not ever getting married," said Mitch. "That way I won't know about the kids of mine that have t' go to a war."

McAllister said, "D'you hear what the Golliwog did yesterday? Up at Gwaibalom. He took Six Platoon out to show them how to patrol properly."

"He's my boy," said Ron Fisher.

"He got two bullet holes through his hat," said McAllister.

One by one, as they went into the valley, the surviving men of Three Platoon raised their eyes and looked at the sea.

• • •

"I can't send this on," said the brigadier.

"What's wrong with it?" said the Golliwog.

"It's too strong. Division'll have kittens. They'll have my blood."

"They can have mine," said the Golliwog. "I'm not going to stand around and let a yappin' lot of rat-bags from a Mobile Bath unit reckon my battalion refused to leave Australia."

"You yapped that way a bit yourself," said the brigadier.

"All right, I was wrong. You said so yourself. So did the padre. But who's done anything about it? I'll carry the can if you want to keep out of this."

"All right," said the brigadier, and reached for a pencil. "They can have the blood of us both. Can you play bowls?"

• • •

The Admiral commanded regard and brotherhood and respect. He walked up the long track from the valley and loved the file of men in front of him and behind him. They were his crown jewels while he lived, until they were handed to the keeping of some other man.

He liked to think that he followed after Howard and Horse Townsend and Lance Braithwaite. Like the rest of the men of the company who went down into the valley, his mind had utterly cast out any memory of O'Grady.

The bullet spun him around, threw him crashing into the mud. He felt nothing. Acutely, he heard the barrage, heard the Brens and the Owens, heard the grenades and the enemy machine-guns.

He pulled his face out of the mud, knew the bullet had gone into his shoulder, and groped with his other hand for the rifle.

In the mud he yelled stridently, "Chilla! Get around the bastards!"

He thought bleakly, I made a mistake. I didn't expect them this far up the Ridge.

Then his mind ceased directing his hand to search for the rifle and the clarity of his mind dissolved in a jumble of blurred waves of thought.

Ron Fisher tore his shirt away and began to bandage his shoulder.

"That bloody mountain," said the Admiral. "That bloody mountain."

"Lie still," said Ron Fisher. "Verbosity's your main trouble."

"That bloody mountain," said the Admiral.

• • •

Westinghouse said solemnly, "Reinforcements, sir. Is there no one at all?"

"There's no one at all," said the Golliwog, and drew a line in the mud with a stick. "Do what B Company's done. Three platoon now. Give it, say, to Fisher. Break up Nine Section. Even up Seven and Eight with them. Troedson and Ross carry on as the two section leaders. Something like that."

The Golliwog's eyes were rimmed, and his voice was flat.

Then he seemed to pull himself together and the impression vanished.

"Anyway, what the hell am I telling *you* for? You're paid to work these things out."

He stalked angrily out of the perimeter with his escort.

• • •

"Good on you, boss," said Mitch to Ron Fisher.

Ron Fisher said, "What's the matter with you, Mac?"

"Friends of mine," said McAllister, and extended a letter.

"Dear Geoffrey," said Ron Fisher aloud. "I notice by your last letter that you have now joined the A.I.F. Our very warm congratulations. I have advised the Crown Employees' Patriotic Fund and they will send you a cake and a Christmas parcel each year."

McAllister took the letter back.

He said distastefully, "I wonder is there any way of transferring back to the militia?"

They went off to the valley.

"Cheer-oo," said Ron Fisher to a signalman. "Chocko!"

Now I have to be what Bob was. I'm only a corporal, and I have to do what the Army says is to be done by a lieutenant with the support of a sergeant and three corporals. And I have to look after these blokes like Bob looked after me.

. . .

Chilla Troedson stared down through the fringe of the undergrowth at the track where he would presently have to lead the way. He stood there, staring, hating the leaves, feeling the terror of the unseen upon him.

He stared in dread, and began to quiver. The leaves of the jungle and the last of his self-respect fought madly in his mind. They made a battlefield of him and he could stand no more. His mind began to crumple, not courageously as history would have it, but pitifully, as it befell in the world of leaves.

He shook and could not control himself and the leaves of the jungle swept over his mind, degrading him, sneering at his futility, smearing his repute, smearing his courage.

Before his eyes the leaves and the track swelled to obscene dimensions, swelling up and rushing over him. Then he almost laughed, so that his jaw quivered and the last shred of control left to him clamped his teeth together in silence.

He could not know that there were only two more days of the battle for the valley.

"I———" he croaked, and shut his mouth, but it did not avail him.

With a great, shuddering sigh he surrendered.

He said huskily, "I can't do it."

And avoided the gaze of his men, *his* men, who looked to him for leadership. They stared, woodenly, knowing dimly that he was finished. He avoided their gaze, for in it there could be only contempt and derision. They hoped dimly that he would lift his head and look at them so that he would see that they did understand.

That was the most terrible part of all, that they did understand, but he thought they sneered.

Snowy Higgins squeezed his shoulder and began to walk toward the track, the track and the leaves that his mind loathed and shrank from; the track, the only track they knew, that led to Salamaua.

"It's the leaves," said Troedson, and began to weep.

"It's the leaves," thought Snowy, and started to walk down the track.

He was scared, and lonely, and the track went into the valley and the Komiatum. The sea became very dim.

. . .

Westinghouse and the Golliwog were sitting side by side in the lean-to.

"Same old answer," said Westinghouse. "It's the leaves."

"He's got to go back," said the Golliwog.

He thought, it's the leaves . . . and disease . . . and O'Grady.

Ron Fisher approached the lean-to quietly and the Golliwog's dark, killer eyes seemed to dissect him particle by particle.

Ron Fisher raised his eyes to Westinghouse. "It's no good, sir. He won't go."

He added with a sigh. "He's got to go back."

The Golliwog's eyes moved, ever so slightly, as though several trains of thought suddenly came together and fused into an unexpected unity. Troedson had brought the ideas together, but the Golliwog forgot about Troedson.

His voice was so soft it was arresting.

"Corporal Fisher?"

Ron Fisher glanced down and found himself unable to look away from the dark, compelling eyes.

Lieutenant Westinghouse sat quite still, pinned by the soft words, afraid in the silence that followed them.

"Corporal," said the Golliwog softly, "are you ready to carry out any order I ever give you . . . regardless of the consequences?"

Ron Fisher stared in fascination. He thought, this man's never been more deadly in his life, and he's a killer.

When he spoke he could feel his throat tight around the words. "Yes, sir."

Oh God, what have I said?

"I'm handing out a lot of dirty jobs tomorrow," said the Golliwog. "They're really dirty. I've got one for you."

He threw his tobacco-tin to Ron Fisher. "Here, roll yourself a smoke."

• • •

They crouched in the valley and waited, not knowing the final horror approaching them in the leaves.

Mitch grumbled, "The Golliwog must really want this information."

Ron Fisher nodded and studied the undergrowth.

He thought, "I don't like this. If they're not back in five minutes, we'll go in after them."

He had three men forward, three to one flank, and five including himself at a point where he could control the movement.

The group of five men waited for the three men forward to come back. They had no illusions, for they had seen the Golliwog's eyes when he issued the order.

"Trouble," thought Ron Fisher broodingly. "Trouble. I can feel it."

He brought in the three men from the flank and began to lead them forward after the front patrol.

"In this particular respect," the Golliwog had said, "this is an order which you will not question. You will find the enemy. If he finds you, you will run. Regardless of the consequences. This order will be obeyed to the letter."

Ron Fisher crept through the undergrowth. The three men followed him. He was within grenade range of the Komiatum Track, and if the reports were correct, within the area of a battalion of infantry temporarily encamped.

A bird flew wildly up from the jungle in front of him and he froze there, in the unwinking silence.

The silence exploded.

• • •

The major wanted the information. It was needed, to help tear open the road to the sea.

Of the three men in the forward patrol, someone had to escape, or they and all the platoon died for nothing.

"Run!" Stanaway screamed, knowing he had to die.

"Run!" he screamed in desperation, and hurled him-

self at the nearest Japanese. His rifle butt crunched against a skull and the man flopped into the mud. They all came at him then, beating him with rifles, uttering strange screams and cries and clawing at him.

He stood erect in the middle of the track and threshed at them with his rifle while his comrades ran. They ran, obeying the Golliwog. They ran, by his order stripped of the only rationality left to them, that they never leave a man on a track. They ran, demented.

They left him to fight in the valley. He stood erect in the grey jungle mud, and arms cracked and heads stained the butt with an obscenity of blood and grey matter and pieces of bone.

His chest heaved and his shoulders spread as he chopped and swung and threshed. He had lost his hat and half his shirt and the blood streamed down his face from a sword cut.

The butt whirled and stabbed and struck and the crunching nausea was lost upon him and his enemies, for in the whirlpool of his rifle there was no haven for reason.

He stood, alone, defending the track, having chosen to die, and his comrades brought the information to the Golliwog at the Triangle.

"It won't be long," said the major softly, and turned away, knowing from their eyes the price these men had paid for the scrap of information he had needed to complete the division's plan.

He began to walk, down the Uliap track, aware of their eyes, watching him, staring; executed eyes, naked to all the world.

He thought tightly, "They would have done it for no one else but me."

The jungle closed about Major Ellerslie and gave the eyes privacy. They had need of it, as he did.

Morning would bring them the knowledge that they were never going back to the valley: but only death could ever erase the day when they last walked east of Bobdubi Ridge.

Thirty

"BEHIND us," wrote the surgeon at the advanced dressing station, "there is a high spur from which there is a very fine view of Bobdubi Ridge and Tambu and Kela Heights. The sea looks enticing."

Then he wrote, "Evacuated two walking wounded today via the Missim."

The Admiral was climbing toward the mountain.

Across the wild land from the east came a rumbling murmur of war; and a far-off bomber glinted in the sun as it rolled into its attack, streaking down a ridge crest, trailing lines of smoke behind it from its hammering guns. It had all the perfection, all the cold-blooded majesty of a diving hawk.

The Admiral turned from watching it and stared upward at the mountain. His eyes squinted against the harsh light of the open ridges, and, somehow, he saw beyond the mountain and found a memory of the world outside.

He climbed towards it, walking as easily as he knew how, nursing the dormant pain in his shoulder. The sweat ran saltily into his eyes and onto his lips and dripped idiotically from the tip of his nose. Sweat plastered the uniform to his body, and what the bullet had done to his left shoulder was something to be felt to be really comprehended.

The mountain towered over him, and he climbed towards it to find the world beyond, to escape from the war, to reassure himself that civilisation did exist, to see whether he and Gloria could live as they had once dreamed.

He was in search of life, and running away from the

war, but the wounded can run away honourably from war and will never be judged.

Running away, thought the Admiral, appreciating the irony of his slow gait. He climbed with his left arm slung inside his shirt, balancing and bracing himself with a bush walking-stick. He walked in the fear that he might wake the pain in his shoulder.

His eyes riveted on a speck far up the Trail among the kunai grass.

Jonesy, thought the Admiral. Eric Jones. Young as Ron Fisher. All of nineteen. Bullet through his shoulder. Another one above the elbow. Same arm.

There's always something, thought the Admiral: because his mind had gone out to meet the challenge of the mountain, he did not look at the sea again. He climbed a spur and the spur led to another ridge.

* * *

Up there, on the great ridge, the young Bren gunner of Eight Section was alone, toiling upwards under the fury of the sun. The track was a corridor through the hot, stale kunai grass; the air choked him.

He would look down past his left foot at the foaming, freezing stream a thousand feet below him and wish to God that he was down there in the water. He would lift his eyes then, gazing up the ridges to the black mountain in the clouds.

The trouble, although he did not see it, was that he was beaten before he started.

Once, he thought it was a long time ago, he had crouched beside the Komiatum in agony and tried to believe that Australians don't cry.

"Hard as nails," they said afterwards. "He never made a sound."

But he was alone now, alone with the land. He was required to journey in it with his shoulder almost shattered.

The sheer immensity of the land intimidated him, and he had dropped his bundle, prostrating his mind before the mountain.

This abjection was something he had never known. Its

obscenity brought self-pity, until his mind submitted and he could not think to care any more. He went on, automatically, a man without a mind, except that the pain lanced his brain whenever he stumbled or did not step cleanly.

Then it was as though the Woodpecker smashed into him again, so that he would almost sob until the pain died down once more.

He climbed to Selebob, camping at the aid post, going on in the morning into the broken, rising land of kunai and jungle.

The mountain towered above him.

• • •

Climb a greasy jungle ridge, knowing there is an end to every labour. Climb a ridge, slipping, climbing, holding to a tree, a vine, with your one sound arm; climb it, believing that, when you collapse at the top, you will be home.

Stand on the top and see the Trail go down again, wasting the hours and the agony you spent coming up.

Yesterday, thought the Admiral, was only a bad dream. Today is worse. And tomorrow? Tomorrow is the mountain. I wonder what they call this country I'm in? Just hills? Ordinary ranges. Just like that.

The sweat had cooled on him and now he started down the ridge to the creek below. Jones was not to be seen. *He* apparently believed in making an early start.

I'll catch him this morning, thought the Admiral. I'm older and tougher than he is.

This morning, however, there were more serious matters than Jones to be considered. The Admiral's wound, the climbing, the sweating exhaustion, the heat—these had taken toll, before a man came to the mountain.

Even these things, bad as they were, were not the most serious matters.

It was something else, something that a few days before had been nothing greater than a tiny sore spot on his left leg. Admittedly, the spot itched sometimes and let a man know it was there, but all sorts of itches and

diseases and sores pestered a man's skin and flesh in the jungle.

The little spot was none of these. It was the beginning of a tropical ulcer. In ten days, left untouched, they could eat to the bone; they were just a hole growing in the flesh, growing and growing, monstrous and brutal.

The surgeon's knife and the sulphanilamide got to this one in time.

And now, as he climbed patiently, step after step, gaining three paces and slipping back two, the Admiral was not so sure: there was a ragged edge of feeling in his leg which should not have been there. There was, he thought, a recess in the rotting flesh which the knife and the drug had failed to scour. Even now, before he had reached the mountain, he was beginning to favour his right leg.

He came on Jones quite unexpectedly. In his misery, the Bren gunner thought he had conquered the worst, yet all he had done was to cross through the outliers of the range. It was then, half way up a ridge, that he made his mistake: he sat down in the cool damp, the seeping damp that chilled the sweat on him and sliced into his wounds.

Jones was down. He was close to weeping.

Leaning on his bush stick to recover from the climb, the Admiral contemplated the Bren gunner. He was a complication the Admiral had not foreseen.

Bugger him. A man ought to go on and leave him.

He said, "You better get up, Jonesy. You won't do yourself any good staying there."

Jones raised his head; the pain and the misery shone from his eyes.

The Admiral said, "It's a long way home, mate. Come on."

Jones thought, what does he mean by home? Tonight's camp? Or the hospital in Moresby? Or home in Australia?

And then he thought, what does it matter? They're all too far.

He almost moaned, "I've had it."

"Yair," said the Admiral. "You've had it. Your heart's ticking. You're sitting up. You can talk. Well, now stand up and bloodywell walk like the rest of them."

Jones got up very slowly. He took a faltering step.

"Not that way," said the Admiral patiently. "People shoot you down there."

Jones turned about and took a weak step up the ridge. The Admiral climbed after him, cursing himself silently that he had not left Jones to look after his own troubles.

What did I do it for? The natives would have found him anyway and carried him.

But if he had done that, he could never have looked anyone in the eye again. Or could he? He was not quite sure. And a man on a stretcher needed thirty-two natives to carry him over the Missim.

This is war, the Admiral told himself ironically, and laboured after Jones.

Gently with that leg . . . one step more, two, three, four. . . .

"Jones, you are a bloody fool. You really will bugger yourself if you stagger along like that. Here, steady a second. Do what I'm doing—nurse yourself along. Don't wake the pain up. Nurse it."

The pain is like a bayonet-instructor's foil. It smacks you every time you're careless or not quick enough. Off guard and it's into you. Every day. All day. Over the Missim. Come on, Jonesy.

• • •

They were climbing the mountain.

They had both walked it before, but they had been fit then, in the long ago. Or was it in the long ago? It seemed that way, but it was only six weeks.

The Admiral shrugged. What did it matter—six weeks or six years. Time was a dimension, and the mountain was timeless. But he was greater than the mountain, for he searched for the world beyond it and knew that the world belonged to him.

His mind swivelled slowly to the pathetic form in front of him. That's what *he* needs; an inspiration, a reason. He should have one. Have you a wife, Jones? No. Just like that, no! Brief, all-comprehensive, final. Have you ever loved anyone? No one thinks about you? There

are two thousand million people in this world—and you are just you, alone?

You poor mutt.

You know something, Jonesy? There must be something for you on the other side of the Missim. Whatever it is, find it and hang onto it. Mesmerise yourself with it. Fight with it like you did with your Bren gun.

Forget about the mud and the sweat and the pain. We'll be in Bulwa in another week. Go home and find yourself a girl and get married.

"Bloody fog," said the Admiral aloud.

The clouds had come in again at noon so that the jungle grew darker still with the moist, dead fog. The two men climbed little by little, their boots sinking in the mud-holes with a squelch, sucking noisily as they came out again: or slipping, throwing a blow up through the leg to the body, waking up the bandaged wounds.

In the hollows, where the ground dipped, was the mud that broke men's hearts—mud that yielded to mid-calf, a grey, stinking mud that in the end was smeared from boot to belt, caking on gaiter and cloth until it was a burden itself impeding every step.

Out of the hollows, when the ground rose again, was the mud that brought strong men to the verge of tears —mud that was clay, so that the hob-nails could not grip it, but won two paces and lost one, cutting vicious little streaks in the surface. Climb it to the crest. And climb to the next one. And the next. Climb to the last one of all, but how many are there on the way to it?

The rain came in again, drumming on the jungle, pounding its way through the canopy, crashing down to the undergrowth and the sodden mud. Grey rivulets poured down the Trail in little rapids. The trail had led a little way up to a crest, where the going was only steep, but now it swung away across a hollow beyond the crest and climbed sheerly into the jungle.

The rain was gone again then, leaving the two men struggling up the cruel slope, clawing their way hand and foot up thirty or forty precious feet of altitude before they took another rest.

There was something else that the rain left in its wake

—the lonely, incredible silence, the silence that encompassed the mountain above the four thousand-foot line. The rustle of Jones' handkerchief scraped on the silence.

It was lonely there. There was no artifice to soften existence; no flags, no drums, no cheers—and the Admiral was still driving Jones and driving himself. Sometimes he talked and sometimes he thought, and later on he was never sure which was which, or whether it was all in his imagination.

"All men need a reason to struggle . . . you must know that, Jonesy. It doesn't *have* to be love or regard. You must know that, too. You need something to live for, something to drive you.

"There's a bloke I knew once, Jonesy, who should have been classified unfit and kept at a base. They tried to, you know, but he worked his head, and played dumb at the right times, and finished up exactly where he planned. Slap in the infantry. He got to Kokoda, and he got to Gona, and if you had known him you'd have wondered how he did it.

"And yet it wasn't really strange at all. He just had a purpose. You see, when he was a kid, he couldn't stand up to the other kids. And you know what kids are like. They kept knocking him down, and the mug was too bloody silly to stay down. He kept on getting up and they kept on knocking him down. And later on it was no different. He couldn't hold a job like most people can. He mucked up everything he tried to do.

"Life's very hard for people like him, Jonesy. They get no mercy in this world. In the end, they believe they're no good. And when that happens, then they *are* finished.

"Which is where this bloke was a bit different. He made that trip over the Kokoda Trail to prove he was as good as the next man. Not to prove it to the next man, you understand, but to prove it to himself. And he proved it to everybody else, too, I suppose. The day he got hit, a hundred and thirty of his mates got bowled over too, all in one afternoon."

The Admiral stumbled on a root and the ragged pain

in his leg caught fire. He winced and the tears sprang mistily in front of his eyes.

Jones plodded on, not knowing, not feeling hurts beyond his own, while the Admiral held his leg in agony, mounting his mind desperately to attack the pain. He let Jones go, knowing that *he* would not go far alone.

The thought should have been cynical, but cynicism was a luxury, and the mountain permitted only rudimentary existence.

Think about something, Nelson! Quick! You've been telling Jones how it's done. Jones will do. What about him? That's easy. How am I going to get him over the mountain? How? How? How? Christ, the pain. It's easy to talk. Now stop talking and show Jones some action.

He put his foot to the greasy climb, forcing nothing, yanking himself a step up the track by levering against a stump at the edge of the track. Whenever he did that, his left arm swung in the sling; and he could only stop the incipient horror there by leaning backwards so that gravity carried the arm back against his body. The sling had been pinned inside his shirt, but the buttons were missing from his shirt, and the pin had gone somewhere in the grey mud. He never found the pin although he looked for it the moment he first missed it.

Jones had certainly stopped again, and it was not because he missed the Admiral, but because the mountain was still too big for him.

"Come on, Jonesy. You don't want to be trapped on the track. That staging post's a way off yet."

Jonesy looked at him from his misery.

What's *your* vision, Bob? What drove you when you led us in the valley? Is it what's pushing you across the mountain now?

Jones thought this, without speaking, for he was so demoralised that he was beyond speech.

He faced the mountain and climbed numbly up over the tree-roots towards the moss forest. One step on the mountain was a pin-hole in eternity. The only purchase was a tree-root or a swinging vine, and sometimes a niche that a passer-by had cut in the clay and which subsequent feet had almost battered out again.

"Come on, Jonesy. We must help each other up here. Grab my hand and haul. Get your foot wedged behind that tree."

He saw the mist in Jones' eyes and knew he had hurt him. They lay almost on their faces, yet if there had been no tree there to wedge their boots, they would have both slid back to the bottom of the slope.

So they climbed, nursing their pain, by one hand and by scrabbling boots, clawing their way up inch by inch toward the sky.

"It's not far now, fella. But don't ask me just how far, because I don't know."

I must haul Jones this time or he'll do his arm for keeps.

The greasy slope was smooth from wear and rain as they all were—sixty or seventy feet of it, greasy and fiendish.

He did not mention it to Jones for he needed all his strength for climbing: and how could he even whisper when the air sucked raspingly into his lungs and his lungs tortured him for more and could not get it.

Haul, climb, haul and climb. If you cannot walk to the sky, then crawl. The aching pains roused from their torpor. A moment of irresolution made the Admiral waver. He looked up the silent, lonely tunnel in the jungle.

Crack the whip on yourself, Robert, he thought. Get your face out of the mud. You won't be the first that's walked this way. Or the last. Get up.

He looked stupidly at the figure in front of him. He thought, that's not Jonesy. Then he saw that Jones was still sitting beside him.

"I saw you when you moved," said the stranger. "Can you climb another fifty feet?"

There was a hut in the gloom and the strange sparkle of a fire. Hot bully-beef wafted scent through the jungle.

The Admiral lay obediently on a bunk while the food and hot wash and attention soothed his body and his pain. It was as though he had come to a rude, humble heaven: Jones was already heavily in sleep.

"How are you making out?" said the orderly.

"All right," said the Admiral.

"I can't do much for this ulcer of yours. I can only see it doesn't get any worse."

They both thought, "It won't get any better."

The orderly said, "How's your mate taking it?"

"No good," said the Admiral.

"You got the moss forests tomorrow," said the orderly. "You can stop over if you want to."

"Bugger that," said the Admiral. "I'm going home."

"Look after your mate then, Sergeant."

The Admiral said paternally, "We always look after our mob, son."

The orderly said slowly, "Some mob, eh?"

But the Admiral was asleep.

• • •

And afterwards, it was as though the little heaven in the jungle had never existed; and the mud was like the day before, with the pain and the sweat and the rasping air. His arm did not swing about now, though, thought the Admiral. It was slung expertly and firmly inside his shirt.

When he looked at Jones, his bitterness gave way to compassion.

"You have nothing, have you, Jonesy? What's the matter, Eric? Have you lost sight of the sea . . . or is it that you've never seen the sea at all?

"Get something into your mind and build on it. Even if it's right out of this world and doesn't mean a thing. You must have had some ambition some time. What's the thing you ever wanted to do most?"

But Jonesy had retreated again—or rather, his mind had, retreating into the shadow of the mountain, and the Admiral thought, am I crazy, saying the things I do? For a little while he thought them stupid and exaggerated and then he was not sure and presently forgot his questioning.

"You know something, Jonesy? I don't think you realise what you're doing. When you've climbed over this mountain, you can climb over anything. And believe me, when you're able to sit back and say you crawled over Double Mountain with a wounded arm and a busted

shoulder, there'll be bloody few men on this earth can say they did any better."

It woke a flicker in Jones on the great wall of mud and jungle. He thought, I wish I could believe that, that I'll get over the mountain. It would be so good, just to lie down and sleep for years. But as always the thought was not strong enough in his mind and the Admiral cursed at him soundlessly.

"It's like I said, Jonesy. This is a real mountain. When we're up there looking down you'll be standing on top of three-quarters of the world. Those famous passes in Switzerland—you'll be standing above nearly all of them. And if you were that high in Australia you'd have wings and four engines. And you know the passes through the Rockies. They're higher than this, but people cross over them in first-class sleepers. And as for Kokoda, Kokoda'll be way under you."

The ribbon of mud twisted and climbed up through the jungle. Afternoon was the worst part of day, for the rain brought new misery; and the shadows came early, garbing the jungle with a deeper shade of melancholy. The chill air crept through the silence and passed under the bandages to the wounded flesh. Then the two men moved in a new torment, cold in spite of the exertion that brought the continual flood of sweat.

"You hear that plane going over, Jonesy? He'll be back in Poppendetta in half an hour. He'll hop into the mess for afternoon tea and tell them what a bloody hard day he's had. And maybe while he's flown a hundred and fifty miles, we might have climbed two hundred feet."

Jones was almost an automaton. He knew it, dimly, and the Admiral knew it, for automatons need a driving force and the Admiral provided it at his own expense.

The mud was getting under the bandage on his leg again, or perhaps it was only the cold. Whatever it was, it was a part of the mountain, making a mockery of gaiters and trousers and bandages.

The sea was never so far away from him, and there was no reprieve for either of them—except at that fantastic time of evening, at an aid post, when the body fled from the torment of the day to the oblivion of the night;

and the mind forgot that even when the first peak was reached, there was still a day and a half of agony between it and the next.

And high in the world of silence was the moss forest; the slime, the contorted trees, the moss.

The Missim went up through the muck, in the shadows where phosphorescent sticks and mould glowed at noon: a still world where nothing animate lived or moved, except wounded men climbing foot by foot through the yielding muck, a sludge that hid the tree-roots under the surface. Boots hooked on the roots, or stumbled on them or skidded wildly on the slimy timber, and a man grabbed desperately for support, wrenching the exhausted muscles of his one good arm, stirring the pain from its numbed chill.

The rarefied air of the high altitude burned, searing the throat and the tortured lungs. It was not pretty to look at Eric Jones, thought the Admiral, seeing him through the sweat in his eyes. He knew that to Jones he would look the same, with his mouth and lips twisted in a contorted phantasy in their search for air, and the sucking, shuddering haahing of air dragging down the throat to the lungs.

And the head reeled from the labour, for the air was thin and made a pain in the ears, adding a new misery as the Trail snaked cruelly over the false crests. They lured a man upwards with new hope that he was almost on the crown of the range: and having lured him up to it, revealed to his stunned and crumbling mind that there was yet above him a shadowy wall of mountain reaching to the sky.

The two men would halt then, resting, reviling the range: the halts were a new agony, for then the bitter cold attacked, biting into wounds, forcing the two men to move again although they could never be ready to do so. The mud which yesterday had terminated at their belts was today smeared all over them from stumbling and slipping and falling in it.

There was a night in some dimly remembered hut, a vague shelter somewhere in the crests of the mountain. The two men went on again, but whether the hut was

before the crest or after it was something that Jones could never recall. He knew when they had beaten the first crest. That is, he was aware he was over it, but the hour and the day he could not remember.

It might have been the third day, or the fourth, or any of them; and when he tried to think about it, the first range became confused with the second. All he could remember was a grey-green scrambled egg of mountain and muck and moss.

That was what his dim senses recorded, telling him that he was losing the altitude he had struggled for all the day before. The mountain descended four thousand feet, before it rose towering once more to the decaying heights among the clouds.

People thought that to climb a mountain was to cross it. They never thought of the descent. Jones already knew better, but the knowledge had not prepared him. The lurking roots in the sludge caught at his feet. Then his sound arm whipped out wildly for support, and always too slow and late because his mind and body were numbed.

His clutching fingers would catch on a slimy sapling and the physical shock of arrested movement brought back the brutality of the Woodpecker.

I'll give him this, thought the Admiral, he's all washed up and beaten . . . but how can he go on taking it so silently.

Not just once, or twice, but at every unsuspected root on which he tripped or slipped, or when the grade of the mountain caught at his balance so that he came close to pitching headlong down the slope. Not just once, or twice, but endlessly, as though pounded by a battering-ram, until he stopped in despair to let time soothe the pain. And when he stopped, he could never move again.

"Do you know what the bloke in the hut said about you last night, Jonesy? He reckoned you'd be famous one day. Think of that. He said that he'd seen few men walking who had been worse hit than you.

"You're going down in history, fella. Look around you at this bloody nightmare and think to yourself that when Salamaua's over, no one will ever walk this way

again. And when the war's over, there won't be any more wounded climbing over mountains anywhere at all.

"When that happens, mate, you'll be history, like the Crimea before Florence Nightingale. They'll shudder at us on this mountain like we shuddered at our great-grandfathers being operated on with saws and no anaesthetics. The world gets better all the time, and this will pass."

Thank Christ, thought the Admiral, balancing himself precariously between comfort and pain, bending down to get his hand under Jones' shoulder.

"Up you get, Jonesy. It'll be night soon. They'll put us to bed like we were a couple of kids and you can sleep all night. Come on, hold on to that tree.

"You're going to be famous, mate. Churchill and Stalin and Roosevelt and Jones."

They staggered haltingly down the first mountain through a passage of time that peeled the mind to its last bare fibre.

The Admiral would not admit it, for the mountain was not the place to admit it, but for all his surety and natural strength he was strained to breaking point. He had to drive himself, and then he had to drive Jones, as though one mind functioned for two bodies.

Jones might think the encouragement was intended for him. Not until the very end did he begin to realise that often the Admiral had been addressing himself as well.

• • •

This is it, thought the Admiral bleakly, looking up through the jungle. This is it, the four thousand feet of hell that set the mountain apart from all others and gave it its very name, Double Mountain.

Jones and the Admiral looked at each other fleetingly and began to climb into the indeterminate kaleidoscope of shadow and fog and jungle.

Up there was more desolation, more slime, more pain. It was, as the kunai ridges had seemed days earlier, as though all that had gone before was a mere preliminary, taunting debilitated bodies at their presumption that they dare to scale the muck-heap in the clouds.

They fumbled their way forwards and upwards, each with a broken shoulder; one with a diseased leg, the other with a wounded arm.

"Jonesy, get this into your head and hang on to it every waking minute. Don't let it ever get away from you. You're going over the top, whether you like it or not. Now climb, and be damned to you."

There was a danger up there in the moss forest and the Admiral saw it first, and knew that it would creep in on Jones even in his stupor.

They might have been at the beginning of time, before the first form of life came to inhabit the earth. So lonely, so gloomy, a man had only to step incautiously from the track and he would disappear forever from human ken. The product of millions of years of history, civilisation, retained but a fragile hold on protecting the two men in the moss forest.

It was like this, thought the Admiral, it must have been like this the day Burke and Wills died along the Cooper, in the great empty loneliness and the utter silence.

"You're only a kid, Jonesy. You've got all your life in front of you. You can make this mountain mean something. I climbed a mountain, once. When I was your age. And then I wasted the next seven years. You see, I should have gone on and climbed the next mountain. Only when I was over the first one I sat down. I had to come to New Guinea to wake up to myself. I don't suppose you'll take any notice of me, but that's how it is. And if you do take any notice of me, that might make this trip worthwhile. Maybe."

It was raining, soaking through their clothes where the sweat had paved the way. They climbed in the rain, on the slopes where they could stand erect and yet touch the ground with an outstretched hand: slopes up which there was no way but by crawling, like beetles, resting on the false crests.

The Admiral knew the time had come to move again. He knew that soon he would not be able to help Jones by physical effort any more. He helped Jones up, perhaps for the last time, and they climbed again.

• • •

Jones could look down and see where they had last halted; a pathetic hundred feet. He was optimistic; it was about sixty. He did not know how long it had taken, for time was nothing but an existence of pain and torment: his mind searched for release in the sleep of exhaustion, a release that tempted him, whispering of sublime unconsciousness. It tantalized him because when it came towards him, the voice that was Sergeant Nelson's would somehow get between and drive the release away for a little while, until the shades knew the voice had gone and came creeping in again.

The voice was weary, too, and rough and ragged. It had kept watch too long, and the Admiral struggling upwards knew that he was nearly at an end. He thought again, as he had done before, that perhaps he was under so much strain that the things he said to Jones were irrational or fatuous. He knew only that the words got Jones on his feet again for Jones had said so, diffidently, the night before.

It was harder now. He was worn out, and his mind clouded. His leg and shoulder were a burden from which his body cried to be freed. He knew with alarming certainty that the tropical ulcer in his leg was alive again.

"Didn't you have to fight for anything, Jonesy? Was life just dished out to you on a silver plate? Ron Fisher knows better than that, Jonesy. He's no older than you are. Where do some of you blokes spend your miserable little lives? Eh?"

It was, for Jones, the truth and although he did not answer, he admitted it forlornly to himself in self-pity; a passive acknowledgment of his fortune, or lack of fortune.

"This is the way home, mate. It's your bloody life and I'm stuck with you. There's only one way out of here, fella. Straight up this godforsaken mud-path. If you pike, you're through."

It was afternoon and the clouds had closed up the peaks and the hollows in the mountains and came seeping through the jungle in a silent shroud of fog. The mist thickened, darkening the forest. There was no more light. The sun was going from the world for ever. That was the

last thought that came to the climbing Admiral before he crumpled in the mud.

• • •

He never knew how long he lay there but it was the clammy embrace of the jungle that penetrated his mind: he realised apathetically that he was not moving but lying in the mud. The effort of rising was a needless torture.

His mind stirred dimly, feebly retreating again, until the pain of lying on his wounded shoulder began to cut its way into his brain. His mind willed his limbs to move in growing insistence and almost he believed himself on his feet again, until the sharpening pain told him he had not moved and the delusion seeped reluctantly away.

The raising of his head was a task that might have been the lifting of an enormous weight. When the task had been finally accomplished, he saw only the chill mud of the track rising before him into the mist.

His lips moved, and he swore, but no sound came and the silence frightened him more than mankind could ever do.

His eyes turned in despair for Jones and found him crumpled up in a heap against a tree. Like the Admiral, he was aware of their predicament, and waited dumbly for the Admiral to give a lead.

Jones saw that the Admiral had got his sound leg braced to raise himself to his knees. Jones saw, but that was all. He was lost entirely within his own adversity, an adversity that was only a week but which seemed to have lasted all his life.

He saw, but felt no reaction, that the Admiral had at long last struggled to his feet and lay back in exhaustion against a tree. He held his slung arm with his free hand and presented to Jones a face taut with pain.

Quite suddenly, a little shock went through Jones' mind. It was not a thought, but the first vague signal of man's foremost instinct, fear. He knew that the Admiral could not help him any more.

What was it the Admiral was saying? His own ears were so numbed, and the voice such a ragged whisper.

"Jonesy, get up. Jonesy, listen to me. I can't help you.

I'm heading for the top. It's up to you whether you come with me or stay here. You can please your bloody self."

Feebly, Jones wished the voice would go away and let him sleep. Always it was that voice that brought him back to the torture. He was not ungrateful. He knew that by himself, the Admiral would have been over the top and going down to the west. He was not ungrateful: he was past caring. The voice started again, ragged and urgent.

"It's lonely up here, mate. It won't be a very nice way to die, lying in the mud with the cold creeping in on you. You'll be all alone, like Burke on the Cooper. You're almost that way now, because you got to get up yourself."

I wonder would that happen to us, thought the Admiral. I suppose there are blokes who didn't get to the aid posts by night time. Wonder what happened to them? Christ, think about something else. Gloria! Gloria, I think I'm doing this for you. Climbing over the mountain. Christ, I hope I'm not wrong. What would that be? Some sort of a joke?

He realised that Eric Jones was on his knees.

There was, after all, only one way home. In the back of his mind, Jones had always known it and never faced up to it. He hardly faced it even now, but he was driven by the voice and the fears it engendered. He might hardly see where his feet ploughed in the mud and hardly feel the shock when his body was jarred, but he was forced up the mountain.

They moved in the mud, climbing to the sky.

"We are alone, Jonesy, alone with the land. What shall I give you to take you over the mountain?" Give him the truth, as we did in the valley.

"Come on, mate. I'm going to tell you something you're not supposed to know, but this is the time for you *to* know. You know the bone in your upper arm . . . the humerus. The one that's chipped just above your elbow. And the smack in your shoulder at the top of it. Hell, do you know, Eric, that when the bandages come off, the head of that bone is visible. That's why the bloke said you were going to be famous.

"Now walk over the mountain, Jonesy. Walk and crawl."

The Admiral was dragging his leg and he could have walked and crawled no faster than Jones if he had wished to. He concentrated his mind on the crest of the range, which was a mistake, but unavoidable. It was a snail race between reaching the crest and having another black-out.

"You know what's over this hill, Jonesy? It's life. Some call it the sea, and some call it home, and some don't call it anything at all except maybe Mum and beer and the races."

Jones was asleep on his feet. When his mind marshalled itself again, it was the sound of the Admiral climbing behind him that kept him moving. The reinforcement the voice had given him was wearing off again as they crawled up the treacherous way on hand and knees or stumbled on their feet on the easier slopes. His mind and body cried for sleep.

He shook his head abruptly. There was a roaring in his ears from the rarified air and the voice was a thousand miles away. He stopped, swaying on his feet, and stared at the Admiral, who had by some means got in front of him.

"Bob, what's the matter? How did you get there?"

"Jonesy! You beaut! Jonesy! You've walked over Double Mountain!"

The way he yelled, it made music in the forest, like a bugle call stabbing its notes into the night.

"Look," said the Admiral, and for a drunken time they stood together on the range of ranges, looking down through the fog, unconscious of the rain beginning, acutely aware that they stood at a point in their lives which they would remember until they had both gone to their graves.

They had thought that they had turned their backs on the sea, but it was only now that they realised that the sea was a symbol, and that what was before them was not a symbol, but the full meaning of it come to life.

"Let's blow," said the Admiral.

When they went forward, neither of them looked back.

. . .

The Admiral was driving again, mentally and physically. Dear God, he was tired. In all his life he had never known such exhaustion, and the jolting descent had brought the pain to such a pitch that it had passed almost beyond feeling, wringing from him the remnants of his endurance.

Now that he was falling victim to the stupor, he was driving himself as fiercely as he drove Jones. Now for the first time he betrayed the fact to Jones by the increasing fatigue in his voice. To Jones, the voice was as reassuring as always, but the undertones penetrated even through his mental haze and dumbly he was grateful to the Admiral. But the gratitude was a nebulous thing never likely to blossom on the Trail. It might do so, afterwards, but not there.

You're not fighting, are you, Jonesy?

He wanted to say something to Jones. The words formed in his mind, hazily, but it was too great an effort to say them. On a muddy slope he tripped, dropping his walking-stick in the flurry and clutched too late for support. He slid helplessly down the track until his diseased leg caught on a vine. Agony exploded in his leg and hurled a crash of fire from his shin-bone to his brain. He sobbed and twisted frantically from the pain so that his body slipped about and he skidded head first on his undamaged shoulder down the slope; to lie there in stupid impotence while the pain explored him for weakness.

Jones was leaning over him, jolted from his own self, feebly attempting to reach down and help him to his feet.

The Admiral saw that through the mist in his eyes. Jones came closer.

"Jonesy! Your shoulder! Get away!"

Jones faltered indecisively, knowing the words made sense, but not wanting to stand uselessly by. He turned about with great care on the slippery mud to look for the walking-stick the Admiral had dropped. It was not readily seen and he was distracted by a movement behind him.

The Admiral was getting up, holding awkwardly to a sapling. Jones pushed his own walking-stick at him. "Here,

you dropped it." The Admiral steadied himself with it and stood erect.

"Lolly legs," said the Admiral earnestly, and walked on.

Jones envied him his vitality. But he's older than me. "What does keep you going, Bob?"

The Admiral heard the question, but it required too much effort to answer it. I'll tell him sometime, maybe. Maybe I've been so busy finding it, I'm not sure yet what it is myself.

° ° °

The Missim Trail went to the west, from Baiune to Patep Four and on to Powerhouse and Bulwa. The two men went to the west. They were three days on that last leg of the Missim Trail.

Behind them, in the ranges, the great mountain in the skies rose in its banks of cloud, thousands and thousands of feet above their heads.

You're an odd sort of a bloke, Jonesy. You give your walking-stick away when I was too silly to notice otherwise. And times are you seem to snap out of it. And then, you lose yourself again.

The sun had slipped toward the west, hurling its afternoon fury on the open kunai hills. Seen in the light of day, the two men might be thought to have crossed a continent. They were drawn fine and driven by the resolution of one of them. They drifted, more so than they walked. Their eyes were old and bloodshot, and sweat and a residue of the jungle fouled their clothes.

And for a little while they stood in silence, looking down from the hills into the rational world. There were tiny specks a thousand feet below them that were people at the road-head. A moving jeep flashed sunlight from its windscreen, as though it winked to them in salutation.

And wherever they looked, to the north, south, east and west, the dark ranges towered among the clouds.

There will be no chance later on, thought Eric Jones, it must be now. What can I give the man who brought me over the mountain? And the answer is, nothing at all.

"Thanks, Bob."

He groped for words, a youngster groping for an older world. "I dunno. There's nothing else. . . ."

"That's right," said the Admiral. "There isn't. Do it for somebody else some time. That'll do."

They regarded each other for a moment. Then they went down the last ridge to another world, where there was no war; and they both forgot that the Eighty-Third Battalion was fighting at Salamaua.

The cook at the aid post said, "Christ, two more mouths to feed. They must think a man's a bloody magician."

"You are a scholar and a gentleman," said the Admiral.

"You're not a bad bloke yourself," said the cook.

Jones ate silently, and the cook gave him an extra helping of food for the bone that would be visible when the bandages were removed.

Thirty-one

A WILLY-WAGTAIL was singing on the Triangle.

It sang to the morning, cheekily, as willy-wagtails have sung to mornings for countless years over Australia and New Guinea.

The bird was alone on the battlefield, alone with the empty pits and the debris and the graves. There was no sound at all on Gwaibalom and Old Vickers and only the murmur of voices and the distant sound of gunfire came to disturb the peace of Old Bobdubi.

It was September and the battalions had gone to fight for Salamaua.

The Eighty-Third followed in the wake of the Second Sixty-Ninth and the commandos. Day by day, group by group, they crossed the river from the northern end of

Bobdubi Ridge and came to Sandy Creek, there to face the enemy entrenched on Wild Ridge and the Kela Heights.

For the inland battalions this was the road to Salamaua.

The willy-wagtail was singing on the Triangle and Ron Fisher was standing on the track between Old Bobdubi and the river. He was at a track junction, camping there with Three Platoon. From where he stood he had a glimpse of the swirling river. Beyond the river was Wild Ridge, dark and wild like its name, and beyond, showing its crown to the morning, was Kela.

The sea was on the other side.

"Which way, Corporal Fisher?"

"That way, sir."

"Thank you. Come on, Don Company."

Company, he called them, all twenty-eight of them.

And they asked me what all the others have asked. Which is the way to Salamaua? And I've answered them all. That way. Three Platoon knows. We've been over there on Sandy Creek.

This is the way to the river and Sandy Creek. This is the road to Salamaua. This is the way home for Mitch and me and Lincoln, for the Golliwog and Ardarit and the padre. There is only one way for all of us, and we will walk it together, the officers and the privates, the old and the young, the broken and the brave.

Come down from Old Bobdubi and cross the river. This is the way to Salamaua. Walk this last leg of the Missim Trail, from the big bend in the river where Amoele built the kunda-bridge along the banks of Sandy Creek in the knee-deep mud. And then they say go up the tiers of greasy, humid knolls, up to the Hand and over the Kela Heights; and go down through the twilight jungle and find the morning and walk on the white sand of Samoa Bay.

Then you shall be free, free to live as you were made. That is why Three Platoon is here at this junction, to set all men's steps on the road to the sea.

We will all walk it together, for if you listen now you can hear the mountain-guns on Wild Ridge and the Woodpeckers spewing down the rain-swept ridges into Sandy Creek.

Which way, Corporal?"

"That way, sir."

"Come on, Seven Platoon."

Platoon, he called them, all nine of them. They have gone to their last battle: and I am afraid.

• • •

The padre was coming down from Old Bobdubi. The way was dark and he walked alone, listening to the battle, searching for the sea. He came to the track junction and they showed him the road to Salamaua.

He plodded on mechanically through the mud and the rain, seeking his God in the gunfire and the leaves of the jungle. When the guard was down, there were only the sad, wise eyes; wise because he knew how little of certainty remained with him. He walked with the air of a man who had had to begin life all over again, and the guard was down. Around a turn in the track and he was waiting, it was written, waiting for him at the river.

• • •

Padre? You, too?

Padre, did you see when you came through here that I'm afraid to cross the river? Mitch? What are you thinking, Mitch? Why do you keep looking at those two reinforcements that came to us yesterday?

Mitch, lift your eyes when the rain stops, and see the crown of Kela. You'd think you could reach out and touch it. The sea is on the other side.

Lincoln said, "What's crawling on those two reos of ours?"

"They want to go to the war," said Mitch.

Chilla Troedson was coming down from Old Bobdubi. He walked, broken and troubled, through the rain. Troedson—grey with the fires and fevers of malaria, desperately swallowing atebrin tablets, holding himself together with desperate exercise of will in the service of Company Headquarters. Troedson—with the chilling ague holding him in tremor, the torture and agony on his eyes. It was a last fling to salvage himself from the leaves. It was the only way he knew that led to the sea.

• • •

One of the reinforcements said, "When are we going over there, Corporal Fisher?"

"When they tell us to go over there, Private Linklater," said Ron Fisher.

Nervous Lincoln lifted his eyes slowly and inspected him. Yes, Nervous. You can look. For once you're quite right.

Mitch said to Linklater, "Sit down, Napoleon."

Linklater, my friend, can you hear the grenades and the mortars roar? Is it adventure that calls you? Do you know what's going on over there, mate? The battalions are going up to war: not in columns and ranks, but a man here and a man there, walking alone with his fears, walking on because his friends are near at hand; a man here and a man there, appearing and vanishing like a shadow, a shadow with life inside it crying for the sea.

His rifle is clamped in his hands. His feet whisper on the rotting leaves. There is no humor in his face: his eyes are hard. His face belies his age. There is gun-smoke in his eyes and death in his ears and the caress of hell in his soul. He is a generation reaping the whirlwind, as another reaped it at Lone Pine and Beersheeba. He is a generation betrayed to the enemy and the jungle, betrayed to the maelstrom.

His faith took him across the river, took him back to the guns and the leaves. There will be no more war. It is all that holds him in the darkening jungle. It is the beacon in the night, calling the soldier home.

The peasants and the factory-workers hunt each other in the world of leaves. The cotton-spinner and the truck-driver close towards each other in the shadows. Their guns scream a desperate swan-song to the hills. Down the ridges hurtles the metal fury. Up the ridges go the battalions.

Behind them spreads the still, crazy wake of debris and waste, a desolate litter of bandages and broken boxes, of tins and ammunition, of gear and wasted blocks of compressed food: and the rich, crimson flow of life is burst, seeping away into the grey, jungle mud.

. . .

Lie quiet, white master while we carry you over the river to Old Bobdubi.

Peace, white master.

Mitch said, "Gangway for a stretcher."

"G'day, Ardarit," said Ron Fisher.

"Good day, Master Ron."

"Here's a cigarette for you, sport."

"Thanks, mate," said the commando on the stretcher.

The two reinforcements were very quiet for a long time, for the man on the stretcher had only one leg.

Nervous Lincoln reported sick to the field ambulance at Old Bobdubi.

"Which way, Corporal Fisher?"

"That way, sir."

"Come on, C Company."

Company, he called them. They'll drink to that, some day.

Do you know something, Linklater? You're one of us now, since that man went up the track with one leg. You're one of us, you and your mate. When the Golliwog speaks, you will obey him. When Lieutenant Westinghouse orders, you will obey him. When I, Corporal Fisher, speak, you will do as you're told.

And I give you this. We are together, for that is the way to the sea. You will do for us, what we will do for you. When we speak, we will tell you the truth. When you die, we will bury you. When you fall wounded on a track, we will rescue you. I do not swear this. I tell you. It is the truth, for the sea is ours; yours and mine, your mate's and Mitch's, and it belongs to the other six men of Three Platoon, and to Ardarit, and to the Golliwog.

If you would walk there, you will live by the rules.

We know the rules very well, for it was us who made them.

This is the truth, Linklater, for if it wasn't, I wouldn't have the guts to cross the river.

"Which way, Corporal Fisher?"

"That way, sir."

• • •

The natives were coming back from Old Bobdubi. They were weary of their toil and carried ammunition and food. Behind them walked Ardarit, swinging his machete idly at the undergrowth. He thought that one day he would go home to the Sepik, to live by the great river for the rest of his life, and in this new world see the sun rise every morning on his children and grandchildren.

When the line of natives faltered, he raised his eyes and found himself looking at the track junction.

"The white masters have gone," said Werara.

His voice was uncertain, as though he had come face to face with a life he had not expected.

Gone?

It is finished. We will never see them again, the strange white men who never seemed to want to kick us.

They have gone, for that is the way of soldiers.

They have gone over the river.

Thirty-two

COME Mitch, my comrade, come Three Platoon and walk in the leaves.

The battle is almost over and there's no danger. That's what they say. The whole of the division has crossed the river. They say there's been a landing on the coast north of here. At Lae. The Nips are cut off. They say that's why the Nips have packed it up and run from Wild Ridge and Kela and Salamaua. A thousand years to the Emperor. But the Emperor has gone. So they say.

But we know better, don't we, Mitch?

There's always one peanut who stays for the Emperor. Or is he just too scared to run? Whatever it is, if he gets in my way today, he dies.

. . .

They were walking among the leaves. It was the last patrol. The leaves went to the end of the world. The ten men of Three Platoon walked in the silence.

Far away, a machine-gun puttered.

Linklater's heart was thudding pain through his chest. He was forward scout. The skin on his face was taut. The patrol was a force pushing him along the track. The leaves swam toward his vision, swamping him, blurring his senses.

Mitch was on edge. He had lost his loose, balanced walk. His body, his nerves were too tight. His mind struggled with the tension and could not break it. Given the chance, he would kill again for Peter's eyes, but killing today was for himself and the sea. The leaves did not blur his vision. He saw them, leaf by leaf, in brittle clarity.

Ron Fisher thought, Mitch is pushing Linklater, and I'm pushing Mitch; and the blokes at the back are pushing me. And I'm shoving the lot of them. Forward the Eighty-Third.

His hard eyes never wandered from the tree-tops where the snipers would be. He commanded himself, and commanded lives. He was taking them to the sea, as many as war and orders would permit.

Your orders, Corporal Fisher, are to clear the track between the two points I will show you on the map.

The ten men of Three Platoon walked without sound. They might never mention it to anyone, but they would remember all their lives that Nervous Lincoln did not make the journey.

The patrol stopped. No one had told Linklater that the track divided.

. . .

The track divided for some little distance. One branch of it skirted the end of a ridge. The other branch went over the ridge. The two joined each other again beyond the high ground.

It was all self-evident on the map, but the Golliwog had not noticed it, nor had Westinghouse.

Nor did I, thought Ron Fisher. The time to notice it was when an officer asked if there were any questions. It was too late now.

There was a new order to be given, and there was only one man in all New Guinea who could give it.

Go around the ridge, or cross it?

Ron Fisher frowned over his map. He tilted his hat back and the curl of unruly hair escaped and fell down over his forehead.

Go around the ridge. Take them all home to the sea. If someone's stayed for the Emperor, he won't be on that track. He'll be up on the ridge. Leave him there.

Around or over—either way, they would have carried out orders. Mitch knew it. The others knew it. Linklater and his mate sensed it. They waited for Ron Fisher to move.

If there ever was censure, it would be only that he lacked enterprise. Censure on wrong premises, but comfortable to carry. More comfortable than the truth.

Why go and make trouble? If we go up there, then someone might get killed—Mitch, and Mitch has to live; or Linklater, and he has to live; or mebbe me, and I can't do that. Not now. Leave him there.

Yes, Corporal Fisher, leave him there. Duck around the ridge. And one day he'll kill someone else. You'll never know. You were told to clear the track. If you and Three Platoon suffer, you suffer for orders. If someone else suffers, remember that his blood is indelible. You can't scrub it off.

But what about ours? It sticks, too.

Mostly to war memorials, Corporal Fisher. You can duck around the ridge. Who knows? Perhaps it happens all the time. The A.I.F. you worshipped and once wanted to join, perhaps even they do it. You will have cleared the track.

Yes? Clear the track, said the Golliwog. I heard him. What he really meant was, find the peanut who stayed for the Emperor and do him over.

Major Ellerslie, what did you mean?

Why ask? Why ask? I know what he meant.

Ron Fisher nodded at the ridge.

. . .

Linklater was staring at him. The scar on Mitch's chin was marked vividly against his flesh. There was a silence vaster than the silence of the moss forest on the mountain.

Ron Fisher put the map away very carefully. He pushed his hair back and reset his hat.

In the silence, they steeled themselves to face the ridge: the coal-miner, the driver, and the bookie's clerk; the farmers the teller, and the brickie.

They rose to meet the man who was born to die for the Emperor.

Ron Fisher walked up the track. He took the Owen gun and the magazines from Linklater and gave him his rifle.

"You watch for the snipers," breathed Ron Fisher, and began to climb the spur. Mitch walked behind him, for that was how they had always walked, the one to look after the other: Linklater looking after Mitch, and Snowy Higgins after Linklater, and so on: ten men walking to Salamaua.

They would remember all their lives that Lincoln was not with them, and they would remember all their lives that they walked over the ridge. There was a touch of the sea upon the breeze, and the jungle stood as it had always done, green and wet and dark. They walked after their corporal, for he commanded them as they had been commanded by Neil Howard and Ralph Townsend, by Lance Braithwaite and the Admiral.

. . .

Two men met at the top of the ridge. They were shadows on the track. The one was Ron Fisher. The other was the Golliwog.

They moved fast, jumping to battle with the speed of men who have no scruples left to them. Their feet jumped in the mud. Their torsos swung. Their hands drove their Owen guns to battle.

It was for the sea.

They stood there, unmoving, crouched over their Owens, a split-second of mutual recognition arresting them but incapable of releasing them.

While they crouched there, they both discovered what the face of a killer is like: and at close quarters they discovered one another, the corporal and the major, the farmer and the cabinetmaker, the one come in pursuance of his orders, the other come to remedy the deficiency in the orders he had given.

The Golliwog straightened up very slowly. He took a deep breath and Ron Fisher let his Owen fall by its strap.

"G'day," said the Golliwog.

Ron Fisher said, "Good afternoon, sir."

The Golliwog stood quite still, staring down the track at the ten men of Three Platoon. Some of them were standing. Some of them were crouched along the edge of the track. Mitch was watching the leaves of the jungle.

"You can put your toys away," said the Golliwog quietly, and then he said, "Come down here and I'll show you something."

The sun was shining on it.

It was the sea, spread out to all the world.

While they stood there, waiting for the other patrols to come, bombers flew through the sunshine to destroy Lae.

It's not blue at all, thought Ron Fisher, trailing his hand in the water; and presently the noise of the bombers died away, leaving the men on the beach alone with the sun and the sea and the sky, leaving Ron Fisher alone with the wordless grandeur of being nineteen years old, and alive.

It was some little time before anyone lit a cigarette.

DON'T MISS!

THOMAS BERGER'S

CRAZY IN BERLIN

"One of the most impressive first novels of this or any other season."
—Martin Levin, *Saturday Review*

"I know of no other book by an American that searches more earnestly the meanings of the Nazi convulsion and its aftermath to discover their wider implications. Mr. Berger has a sure sense of the ludicrous; seriousness lights up with mockery; ideas can take the shape of sensual images. Berlin itself, its cellars, streets and ruins, stands before us. . . . A solid achievement, an original novel of unquestionable power."
—Gene Baro,
New York Herald Tribune Book Review

"Thomas Berger is a name to remember, an important addition to the small group of important American writers, and a novelist with a great career before him."
—Harvey Swados, *The New Leader*

U6014 75¢

And . . .

WATCH FOR THE NEXT GREAT THOMAS BERGER NOVEL,
REINHART IN LOVE

A Selection of New Titles from Ballantine

U5001	THE FAR COUNTRY, Nevil Shute	60¢
U2111	CHILDHOOD'S END, Arthur C. Clarke	50¢
U7002	THE PRESS, A. J. Liebling	95¢
U2155	DOUBLE DOOM, Josephine Bell	50¢
U6001	IN FLANDERS FIELDS, Leon Wolff	75¢
U6010	THE WANDERER, Fritz Leiber	75¢
U2170	HEAT WAVE, Caesar Smith	50¢
U7003	MOLLIE AND OTHER WAR PIECES, A. J. Liebling	95¢
U5004	IN THE WET, Nevil Shute	60¢
U2126	FOGGY, FOGGY, DEW, Charity Blackstock	50¢
U2190	THE HUMAN ANGLE, William Tenn	50¢
U5010	WING LEADER, J. E. Johnson	60¢
U2121	THE FASCINATOR, Theodora Keogh	50¢
U2192	INSIDE, OUTSIDE, Philip Jose Farmer	50¢
U2203	SPACE BY THE TALE, Jerome Bixby	50¢
U2200	THE HARRY HERSHFIELD JOKE BOOK	50¢
U1021	HANGROPE TOWN, Harry Whittington	40¢
U1040	LAW MAN, Lee Leighton	40¢
U2156	EASY PREY, Josephine Bell	50¢
U2202	THE SEA WOLVES, Wolfgang Frank	50¢
U2210	DEFEAT AT SEA, C. D. Bekker	50¢
U5012	THE PROBABLE CAUSE, Robert J. Serling	60¢
U2213	A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE, Robert Conquest	50¢
U2214	FUTURE TENSE, Jack Vance	50¢
U7010	IMMORTAL QUEEN, Elizabeth Byrd	95¢
U6012	FULL CIRCLE, J. E. Johnson	75¢
U1028	TEXAS RANGER, Wade Everett	50¢
U1029	TOP HAND, Wade Everett	40¢
U5005	THE BREAKING WAVE, Nevil Shute	60¢
U2215	CLOSE TO CRITICAL, Hal Clement	50¢
U2216	A PAIL OF AIR, Fritz Leiber	50¢
U2217	FLUSH AS MAY, P. M. Hubbard	50¢
U5013	BITTER CONQUEST, Charity Blackstock	60¢
U5014	THE SERPENT'S COIL, Farley Mowat	60¢

U2157	ROOM FOR A BODY, Josephine Bell	50¢
U1045	HANGING TREE, Dorothy Johnson	40¢
U2219	THE WHOLE MAN, John Brunner	50¢
U2220	NO LIMITS, J. H. Ferman	50¢
U2223	SQUADRON AIRBORN, Elleston Trevor	50¢
U6014	CRAZY IN BERLIN, Thomas Berger	75¢
U6013	WORLD FOLK SONGS, Marais and Miranda	75¢
U1046	AMBUSH AT THREE RIVERS, Robert Steelman	40¢
U2139	THE OCTOBER COUNTRY, Ray Bradbury	50¢
U2173	THE REEFS OF SPACE, Pohl & Williamson	50¢
U2130	DEATH IN AMSTERDAM, Nicolas Freeling	50¢
U6016	LOVE, WAR & FANCY, Sir Richard Burton	75¢
U6017	1918: THE LAST ACT, Barrie Pitt	75¢
U5017	THE BOMB IN THE ATTIC, Jacob Hay	60¢
U2225	MEMOIRS OF A SWORD SWALLOWER, Dan Mannix	50¢
U5006	SLIDE RULE, Nevil Shute	60¢
U2158	DEATH AT THE MEDICAL BOARD, Josephine Bell	50¢
U1048	TRUMPETS OF COMPANY K, Wm. Chamberlain	40¢
U2222	WHO FEARS THE DEVIL, Manly Wade Wellman	50¢

For a complete catalogue of Ballantine Books, write to: Dept. CS, Ballantine Books, Inc., 101 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003.

DON'T MISS!

U5016 DUEL FOR KILIMANJARO, Leonard Mosley 60¢

The incredible history of a military campaign in Africa during World War I in which General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck defeated forces literally a hundred times the size of his own. One of the most heroic episodes of the war of 1914-1918.

This is the story of a war fought long ago along the jungle trails of New Guinea—the Kokoda Trail, and the Missim, and others without a name.

From Port Moresby, on the southern coast, the trails lead upward, over razor-backed ridges, through black, rotting forests to the cold, mist-drenched passes of the towering Owen Stanley Range.

Here, in the last months of 1942, a few brigades of Australian soldiers fought and annihilated 20,000 Imperial Japanese Marines in a campaign that has become almost a legend of the Pacific War.

David Forrest served with the Australian Army in New Guinea. **THE LAST BLUE SEA** is his prize-winning Australian novel of a section of infantry in the savage jungle fighting that ended on the beaches of Buna and Salamaua. It is one of the half-dozen really superb combat novels of World War II.

THIS IS AN ORIGINAL—NOT A REPRINT PRINTED IN U.S.A.

U5019

THE LAST BLUE SEA • DAVID FORREST

88