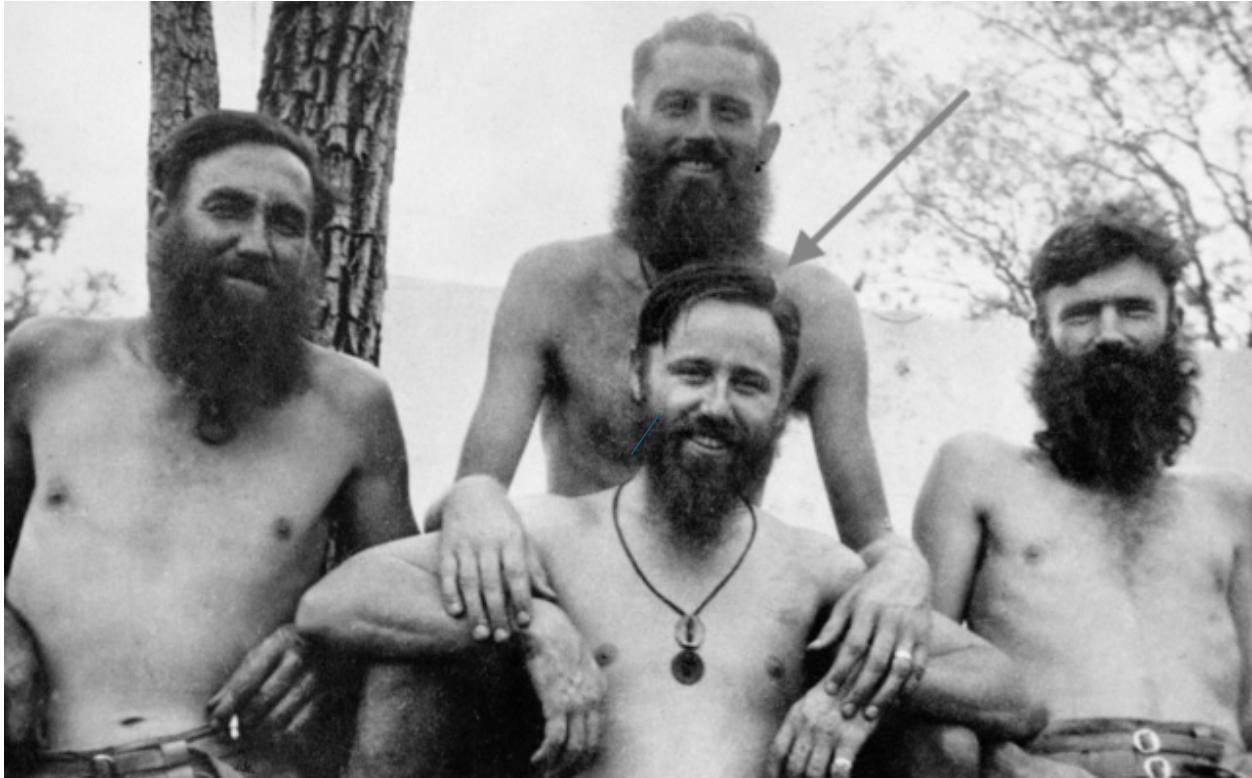


LIEUTENANT (LATER CAPTAIN) DAVID ST ALBAN DEXTER (VX38890) - 1917-1992

OC NO. 1 SECTION A PLATOON

<https://doublereds.org.au/history/men-of-the-22/vx/david-st-alban-dexter-r89/>

BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P08424.032

Description: Members of 2/2 Independent Company (Sparrow Force) have just returned from service in Timor and are recovering from their ordeal. The men are still wearing the long thick beards grown during the months of fighting and evading capture by the Japanese. Most of these guerilla fighters grew beards because of the lack of shaving gear and also as a means of camouflage in the jungle. 2/2 Independent Company was later renamed 2/2 Cavalry Commando Squadron and fought in New Guinea and New Britain. Identified are, left to right: WX8507 Sergeant Douglas Raymond Fullerton; **VX38890 Captain (Capt) David St Alban "Dade" Dexter (front)**; WX9954 Lieutenant (Lt) Harry John Morgan (back) and WX11488 Lance Corporal John Lawrence Maley. Promoted to Corporal, Maley was later killed in action in New Guinea on 12 August 1943, just before Capt Dexter was seriously wounded. This image is from the collection of Lieutenant Paul Merrick (Mick) Dexter, brother of David Dexter, who enlisted in the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RANV) in 1943, and was a watchkeeper and anti-

submarine specialist on Corvettes between 1944 and 1946.

(<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1238312>)

Private Records of David Dexter

David Dexter, one of the officers of the 2/2 Independent Company and eventually the officer in charge of special operations in Timor, had a long career as a diplomat, university official, and as a military historian responsible for composing the official history of the New Guinea Campaigns. From the late 1970s until close to his death in 1992, he was working on documenting events in Timor in 1942 and related to Timor from the 1930s until after the end of the war. His files thus include a handwritten "diary" of events in 1942 drawn from the sources he read in 1979-81, as well as a very well organized collection of source documents copied from other archival sources, or in a few cases in original form. These include a few handwritten platoon patrol orders from 1942, situation reports from 1942, Dutch reports (in English), photographs of troops moving near the North coast of Timor, lists of codes, etc.

This is the best starting point for research on Timor during WWII, especially related to military policy and the involvement of Allied troops. [1]

[1] *Materials on East Timor during World War II* / edited by the Forum for Historical Documents on East Timor during the Japanese Occupation Period. - Tōkyō: Ryūkeisha, 2008: 217.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Cleary, Paul. - *The men who came out of the ground : a gripping account of Australia's first commando campaign : Timor 1942*. - Sydney : Hachette Australia, 2010

<https://www.hachette.com.au/paul-cleary/the-men-who-came-out-of-the-ground-a-gripping-account-of-australias-first-commando-campaign>

Cleary extensively utilised Dexter's papers held at the Australian War Memorial (<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/PR00249>) to prepare his book and this reflected in the numerous references to him that can be located using the index:

Dexter, Lieutenant David xii, 6-7, 16, 24, 37, 39, 42, 100, 102-3, 113, 146, 150, 205, 217, 221, 225, 246, 250, 255, 273, 275, 276, 324-5, 330, 333, 339-40, 344, 351

A Platoon 189, 203, 235-6, 248, 261, 263, 265, 272, 324

Japanese August Push 168-70, 172

Nunamogue ambush 211-16, 230

training 8-13, 320

Prime Minister John Curtin highlighted the importance of this campaign when he looked back at the long year that was 1942.

Our guerrilla forces in Timor have been doing bold and courageous work. Though the spotlight has been more on New Guinea because of the larger forces engaged, the people of Australia

should not overlook the importance of Timor as a base for operations against the north-west of Australia. [4]

One important perspective on the 2/2's guerilla campaign, and how it compared to New Guinea, was provided by David Dexter, a platoon commander with the 2/2 Company who went on to lead offensive actions to recapture New Guinea in the latter years of the war. After the war Dexter wrote Volume VI of the official history of the Second World War, *The New Guinea Offensives*. For this senior army officer, diplomat, war historian, and son of a Boer War and Gallipoli veteran, the Timor campaign could not be compared to anything else he had seen or heard of in Australian military history. 'They were a remarkable unit,' he said of the 2/2 Company, 'like no other in Australian military history.' [5] The 2/2's year-long campaign was fought by a 'tattered cavalry of Australians and Timorese' in the 'real wild hills' of the colony. Remarkable too was the war fought in the air and on sea in this campaign, and yet little is known of how the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), and the naval forces of Australia, the United States, and Holland supported this force garrisoned in an enemy-controlled territory.

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'Warfare—not new type but oldest known to man.'

Handwritten note by David Dexter after commencing training in guerilla warfare at Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, April 1941 [1]

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Chapman explained to the young men that he was on a 'very secret mission' and was looking to recruit 'very rugged types for secret service'. Despite knowing little about what was involved, one of the young soldiers at the bar that night, David Dexter, 24, knew instinctively that something different from the mainstream army was for him, and so he gladly accepted one of the forms handed out by Chapman. [5]

David Dexter had joined the army in October 1940 after finishing his honours year in arts at Melbourne University and a part-time post of sports master at prestigious Melbourne Grammar School. Soon after arriving at Melbourne's Royal Park army base, Dexter was unimpressed by the 'very pansy looking lot of officers' running the show. He wrote in his diary on day three at Royal Park: 'Terrible red tape. Sjs and Corporals in abundance and all frightened of treading on one another's corns. I'm damned if we can win the war like this. Perhaps when the bash comes they will clean out the staff officers.' This was a remarkably prescient comment for a 24-year-old with no previous military experience, though Dexter's perspective may have been broadened by his father's impressive service in two wars.

Dexter was impatient. He had already missed the 'spring offensive' in the Middle East where his brother Bill was fighting. As his frustration grew, the young private had a fortuitous meeting with a member of the Australian Army's top brass, Brigadier Frank Lind, the commander of the 23 Brigade, a unit of more than 5,000 men within the 8th Division. Lind also happened to share Dexter's concerns about Australia's readiness for war. Dexter met this senior officer with a towering reputation because his father, Walter, had written to Lind about his son's difficulties. Walter Dexter and Brigadier Lind had served together in Gallipoli and on the Western Front in

the First World War; Dexter served as an army chaplain throughout. For his service in the front-line trenches he won the DSO and the Military Cross, making him Australia's most highly decorated padre of that war. After receiving the letter, Lind promptly arranged for David Dexter's transfer to the 2/21 Battalion, which was part of the 23 Brigade. 'If he is a chip off the old block his future progress is assured,' Lind wrote in reply to Walter Dexter. One month later, Dexter was waiting outside Lind's office at brigade headquarters after he and his mate Private Eric Kendall had been summoned there. At first Lind upbraided the two because they were dressed in their best uniforms. He then told young Dexter that he had wanted to meet him because of his father. Lind gave Dexter and Kendall some insights into how they could progress up the ranks.

By the summer of 1941, Dexter was biding his time at the 2/21 camp at Bonegilla, near Albury on the border of Victoria and New South Wales. He often travelled back to Melbourne when on leave, and this afforded him the opportunity to meet his sweetheart, Margy. They often walked and picnicked in the Fitzroy Gardens on the edge of the city before seeing a movie or going to the theatre. On one of these visits, he met Chapman at Scott's Hotel. Dexter decided immediately that what he called 'secret service' was very much for him. And Chapman had found exactly the type of soldier he was looking for. Dexter was an accomplished sportsman, intellectually gifted and, above all, he knew instinctively what good soldiering was all about. Chapman might have thought he was going to recruit giants in Australia, but he found in Dexter, who stood only 167 cm tall, and many other diminutive recruits, that small men were among the best. Gordon Hart and Charlie King were even smaller than Dexter, but they too were powerfully built.

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Moving in, David Dexter saw a makeshift training base of tents and huts, and all manner of war materiel—explosives, ammunition, and many 'gadgets'. Dexter was among the very first recruits who began arriving at the new camp in March 1941 to form the first 'cadre'. The British officers had decided to create a core group of 30 men who were potential leaders of companies. As they knew their time in Australia would be short, the instructors used the concept of the 'cadre', a nucleus comprised of the toughest and brightest who could train subsequent recruits to independent companies after Mission 104 returned to the UK. The British instructors planned to create what they called 'independent companies' of about 270 officers and men. These companies would differ from the regular army by having twice the amount of automatic weapons, a wide assortment of demolition equipment, and double the number of officers. The companies comprised of three platoons of 60 men commanded by captains, and each platoon was made up of three sections of 20 men commanded by lieutenants. In addition, the company was supported by separate signals and engineers sections. The units were structured so that the officers would work closely, and in a more egalitarian way, with small groups of soldiers. The Australian Army formed a total of 12 independent companies, later known as commando squadrons, during the Second World War.

On his third day at Wilsons Promontory, David Dexter was putting up tents when he was told to report to headquarters. The Australian commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel William Scott, 53, told Dexter that he thought he could be used more effectively in the unit. It was Scott who

had led the recruitment drive around Australia, including Northam. Scott introduced Dexter to Chapman, who in turn gave Dexter a personal explanation of the four elements of their work: weapons, demolition, field-craft, and signals. Chapman's speciality was 'field-craft'—the ability to navigate remote areas with the aid of maps, compasses, and the stars. At the end of this discussion Chapman told Dexter that he wanted to make him a sergeant and a member of the cadre immediately. It was just as Brigadier Lind had foreshadowed.

Dexter might have had a better idea than most as to what this new type of training was all about. Prior to becoming a clergyman, his father Walter Dexter had served with the British Army as a mounted trooper in the Boer war (1899–1901) and earned the Distinguished Conduct Medal, second only to the Victoria Cross. It was in this conflict that bands of hit and-run Afrikaner 'commandos' on horseback harried British and Commonwealth troops in South Africa for three years. The Boers were the stuff of legend, and a classic book on the campaign, *Commando*, by Deneys Reitz, who had served as one of the Boer bandits before becoming a parliamentarian, was keenly read and passed around at Wilsons Promontory.

In the cadre, Dexter was joined by Bernard Callinan, 28, an engineer and highly disciplined type, whose formative years were spent under the Christian Brothers in Melbourne, and Rolf Baldwin, 32, who had taught with him at Melbourne Grammar. Dexter, Baldwin, and Callinan all read and discussed Reitz's book, which described how a small force of well-organised guerillas could tie up a conventional army many times their number. Chapman's first cadre was thinking deeply about what lay ahead. He had indeed recruited leaders who had intellect as well as brute strength. The salutary lesson of the book for Dexter and his mates was why the Boers eventually failed: through exhaustion, lack of food, and because the friendly population had been driven away from them.

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Within a fortnight of Dexter's arrival, the serious training got underway as the men went out in the night on mock raids and battles. Dexter joined a 20-man section that had the task of establishing a bridgehead at Sealers Cove for a force to oppose the 'yellow men'. But in an ambush under a 'silvery moon' the section's leader was 'killed' and Dexter found himself being 'killed' after standing on a dummy land mine. In total, he was 'killed' three times that evening. After the exercise, Dexter's section camped the night at the cove, building a huge fire in a hut, which they stoked throughout the night. The following day, Chapman led a group of five men over unmapped country—swamp, river, and scrub—before they struck out along crests of east-west ranges. It was hard going, Dexter admitted. They ventured out of the mountain country and into open rolling scrub with Corner Inlet on one side and Five Mile Beach on the other. Along the way they saw kangaroos, wallabies, and eagles. After being on the move all day, Dexter and two others then headed for the ranger's cottage at Corner Inlet, where they 'slept like the dead' in down sleeping bags. The following morning they woke to find the inlet had become a vast mudflat scattered with countless black swans. On this and other training exercises, the men were not required to haul heavy packs loaded with all sorts of equipment and gadgetry. The British instructors deliberately trained the men to carry very little gear, thereby making them as mobile as possible. [6]

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Chapman taught the men 'a new conception of fitness', how to track and memorise routes, and how to escape if captured. During one lecture, Dexter wrote in a small pocket book a prescient note on what lay ahead. Under the underlined heading 'Warfare' he jotted down with a pencil: 'Not new type but oldest known to man.'

The instructors of these raw, overly keen recruits made clear that they were to be more disciplined and more effective than any of those who had previously called themselves guerillas or commandos. 'How we differ from accepted guerillas,' pencilled Dexter. 'They are organised untrained bands of people. Use surprise. Sweep on enemy in haphazard fashion. We get regular soldiers and teach one fundamental—must be self-reliant. Sweep enemy with swift hard blow and fade away. We make enemy disperse his forces. Weaken his will to resist. Lower morale.'

An important difference, Dexter noted, was to employ brain over brute force or sheer numbers, and to never underestimate your opponent. 'Strategy is the ability to anticipate. Requires great mental ability. Think that man opposed is a cleverer man.' The lectures given by the British instructors often captivated the young recruits, although not everything they said was accurate or helpful. In Calvert's introduction on the Japanese, which as an Axis power with Germany loomed large as a threat in Asia, he said they were 'bone headed and have outdated equipment', a comment both wrong and inconsistent with earlier advice on not underestimating the enemy.

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By July 1941, the First Australian Independent Company (AIC) marched out of Wilsons Promontory just as the recruits for the second company were filing in. The recruits for the second company, drawn mainly from Western Australia, arrived on 11 July after travelling across the country on a troop train. Most of the new trainees had enlisted in the army just two months before in response to a big recruitment drive launched at the time. The men in the second company came from the farms, outback stations, and mining towns of the vast state of Western Australia, while a small minority came from the capital, Perth. They were, after all, training to become bush soldiers, and a significant number were descendants of the original white settlers of the state. It was to be a cultural clash as rugged and often foul-mouthed bushmen and miners met officers from the eastern-states establishment. Bernard Callinan, Rolf Baldwin, and David Dexter all stayed on to instruct and train with the second unit. They were joined by several Western Australians who had undergone officer training at Bonegilla, most notably Lieutenant Gerry McKenzie, 26, a butcher from Busselton, WA, and Don Turton, 23, a clerk from Fremantle.

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After six weeks training at the Prom, the Second Australian Independent Company had taken shape and by the end of August 1941 it was ready to be marched out. It would be known as the 2/2 Independent Company; the 2/ stood for its being part of the 2nd Australian Imperial Force, and the /2 stood for it being the second such company. Some NCOs were promoted to the rank of lieutenant, including David Dexter. The company was led by Major Alexander Spence, 35, a journalist from Proserpine, Queensland, with Captain Callinan as his second-in-command.

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AFTER RETURNING from leave, the 2/2 Independent Company assembled in Adelaide, where it awaited further orders. Adelaide afforded military planners the option of sending the company by ship to the Middle East, or sending it north to Darwin and then to the Dutch East Indies. Now that war clouds were gathering in Asia, the odds in favour of the Darwin option were growing by the day. In Adelaide, the 2/2 camped at the showground where the commanders staged a sports carnival to help keep the men occupied. Corporal Kevin Curran, the Hawthorn footballer, won the 100 yard dash, closely followed by David Dexter. Curran was not only fast, he was tall and powerfully built; he stood 183 cm and weighed 95 kg. Irish-born Private Cyril Doyle won the mile, followed by Lieutenant Arch Campbell.

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With most of the 2/2 Company stationed in the hills west of Dili, a small contingent of men was left to guard the airfield that had taken on a strategic importance far beyond its real utility. Even though intelligence reports had said the boggy runway surrounded by tall coconut trees was useless for anything other than small planes, the company made preparations to defend it, and to demolish it in the event of an enemy landing. Lieutenant Dexter was given the initial responsibility for guarding the airfield with a section of just 20 men from A Platoon's No. 1 Section, together with demolition experts from the engineers corps and a group of signallers.

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It was also on 30 January that the Japanese descended on the island of Ambon, 1,000 km directly north of Darwin, where Australian troops in Gull Force had been deployed. It was in Ambon that David Dexter's mate Eric Kendall had been sent as part of the 2/21 Battalion after Dexter had transferred to the 2/2 Company. The commanding officer of the 2/21, Lieutenant-Colonel Roach, had been sacked on 17 January after recommending immediate evacuation of Ambon. Just four days after the Japanese landing in Ambon, the Allied resistance had been overwhelmed, and Private Eric Kendall was among those killed in a vain attempt to defend the island. When David Dexter learned of the fate of Kendall and his former battalion, he wrote: 'What delivering angel watched over me and took me from that ill-starred battalion?'

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AFTER SPENDING a long, hot month with the mosquitoes at Dili's boggy airfield, Lieutenant David Dexter's section of 20 men was relieved in early February by A Platoon's 2 Section commanded by Lieutenant Charles 'Gerry' McKenzie, 26.

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In the wake of the 23 February surrender, the stragglers from Sparrow Force began drifting across the border, where they met the men from A Platoon. One of those who turned up was Brigadier Veale, fresh from his decision to break up his force, dispatch a decoy party to the north coast, and destroy Sparrow Force's last surviving radio. Lieutenant David Dexter, who was commanding A Platoon's 1 section at Mapé, near the south-west Dutch border, met Veale when his select party arrived from its meandering journey through the mountains of central Timor. Veale looked as though he brought with him a caravan of goods loaded onto Timor

ponies; he even carried fresh linen. Dexter greeted Veale and offered him his quarters. After Veale had settled in that evening, he expressed great surprise at the physical appearance of Dexter's men, who were all unshaven. When Veale asked why the men had no razors and were unshaven, Dexter hit back with a comment about the discarding of weapons by Veale's men: 'Oh no, sir, but they've got their weapons.' Dexter knew full well that many of Veale's men had deliberately thrown away their weapons after Veale had issued his infamous order; the patrol by Corporal Bob Palmer had reported to Dexter. [14]

After this first encounter, Dexter and his men did little to make Veale feel welcome. Dexter believed that the 2/2 Company had to 'get him out of the way so we could go on with the guerilla campaign'. When Veale complained that a bottle of Scotch kept hidden under his pillow had gone missing, Dexter said his troops must have taken it as he had shared a bottle of Scotch with them the previous night. Veale soon left Dexter's base and headed further inland, where he set up a base at Maucatar (Suai), from which he sent a message for Spence to meet with him. The unexpected arrival of Veale and other officers from Dutch Timor meant that the 2/2 Company now had to deal with a surfeit of top brass, both Australian and Dutch. So Callinan and Spence created a 'Force Headquarters' that had nominal command over the Dutch and Australian troops of Sparrow Force, while command of the 2/2 Company was run by Company HQ. The Dutch numbers see-sawed considerably, but as more indigenous troops trickled in from Dutch Timor there were about 260 by mid-year. In addition, 17 wives and about 50 children had joined the force that patrolled the south-west border area of Portuguese Timor. [15] Veale, van Straatan and Spence were sent to run Force HQ, along with several other redundant officers. The reorganisation echoed what Dexter had written in his diary when he first enlisted: 'I'm damned if we can win the war like this. Perhaps when the bash comes they will clean out the staff officers.'

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Late in 1942, Corporal Jack Maley was manning an observation post above the Samé valley when he and his mate Tom Foster spotted a distressed girl being chased by an Australian soldier in the valley below. Maley was sitting about 800 metres or more from the girl and her pursuer, and immediately he became alarmed. At the age of 32, Maley was one of the older men in the 2/2 Company, and the tall, square-jawed farmer from the fringe of the wheat belt east of Geraldton was a gentleman through and through. If there was one thing Maley had learned from his mother Lucy, a devout Catholic, it was respect for women.

The soldier from Maley's A Platoon was too far away to be apprehended, and nor would he hear Maley if he tried to call out, so Maley exercised the only option that he had available. He turned his powerful Bren gun in the direction of the soldier and fired a burst of carefully aimed rounds right over his head. From the extreme range any ordinary soldier may well have missed and hit the pursuing soldier by accident, but the powerfully built Maley was one of the best marksmen in the 2/2 Company. The bullets passed right over the head of the miscreant, close enough to stop him dead in his tracks. The chase was over. In saving the girl, Maley had ignored an instruction not to open fire in the valley at that time, and he later had to explain his actions to his commanding officer, David Dexter. [5]

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Brigadier Veale suffered no disciplinary action for his decision to disband his unit at Atamboea and destroy the radio. Upon returning to Australia, he was shunted into a cushy desk job in army headquarters where he remained for the rest of the war. When he heard later in the war of plans to recapture Timor, he even volunteered to lead troops given his 'experience' in the territory. The hostile treatment by Dexter and other officers gave rise to a grudge on Veale's part, who sought to undermine the men who had rescued him. Veale wrote in a report that the 'great amount of publicity' given to the 2/2 Company was misplaced. 'In view of the highly meritorious services rendered by other troops also under command, this distinction seems invidious,' said Veale. [6]

AIR SUPPORT captured the imagination of the men on the ground, who looked for possible landing strips for the Hudsons. David Dexter's section found a location for one such strip near Maliana. They drew a panoramic map of the proposed 1,350 metre strip, which they claimed could be built within a week by a labour force of 100 Timorese. But the RAAF's efforts did not represent a long-term solution to supplying Sparrow Force. What the men on the ground needed most was large quantities of heavy supplies—ammunition, food, medical supplies, and silver coins. Dropping these by air would tie up too many of the RAAF's Hudsons, which were needed for dropping bombs rather than supplies. The RAAF's chief in Darwin, Air Commodore Frank Bladen, 42, argued strongly that the Hudsons were only suitable for sea reconnaissance and the bombing of ships, and they should not be expected to supply the men in Timor. [7]

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On 11 August, a 20-man section from A Platoon led by Corporal Curran engaged one of the main Japanese drives from Dutch Timor at the town of Memo, which was on the Dutch border. Facing a force of 500 enemy soldiers and militia surging towards them, Curran's section engaged the force and delayed its drive, before falling back east towards Maliana. Dexter had set an ambush that evening but the following day the Japanese marched into the low-lying centre of Maliana with the force of 300 Japanese soldiers and 200 Dutch Timorese, known as 'Black Columns' or *coluna negra*.

Mobilising the Black Columns was a particularly effective innovation. The Japanese used them like human shields, driving large numbers ahead of their soldiers and into the Australian and Dutch positions. The militias drove a wedge between the Australians and the Timorese population, and as the Dutch and Portuguese Timorese were ethnically the same, it became impossible to tell friend from foe. The Japanese thrust targeted the Dutch force near the south coast centre of Maucatar, forcing them to completely abandon their positions and flee towards the east. Dexter's A Platoon, based in the Fronteira Province, responded to the Japanese drive from Dutch Timor by blowing bridges and roads to slow the advance. As the Japanese and Timorese surged over the border, A Platoon fought a series of running battles as part of a staged retreat into the mountains around Fronteira. The attack from the west threatened the cornerstone of the Australian operation in Timor, the province of Fronteira which was run by the avidly-partisan administrator Sousa Santos. The Japanese assault made Sousa Santos fear for his life, and he abandoned his post and fled to the eastern provinces with his wife and young daughter. The Japanese drive towards Sousa Santos's base offered the added prize of capturing the stables where more than 100 Timor ponies were kept. In these encounters, the

2/2 Company suffered its first casualties in the August push when, on the night of 12–13 August, Privates David Waller and Arthur Yeates, both 21, were killed on the southern approach to Bobonaro when their section engaged the large force. Waller, a farmer from Wyalkatchem, WA, had joined the company with his brother Frank, 22.

Dexter realised that he risked being encircled. A Japanese drive from the south was also coming his way, so he ordered his less mobile men—the sick, the signallers, a medical orderly, and men with supplies—to withdraw to the east to Atsabe, where they would link up with Don Turton's D Platoon, which had established a defensive stronghold. Atsabe, at the foot of 3,000 metre high Mount Ramelau, was the place where much of the 2/2's store of ammunition had been stashed after being hauled up the mountain by Wilby's pony train in March. As Dexter made preparations to stage another ambush on a narrow pass linking the road from Bobonaro to Atsabe, a local elder, Chief Martinho, approached him with a surrender note distributed by the Japanese. Martinho told Dexter that the Japanese were advancing towards him with big guns. Dexter's party of 28 men contacted the approaching enemy briefly before they withdrew and joined the flight to Atsabe.

Upon reaching the town, Dexter and his group learned that the Japanese were already there, so they climbed further up into the mountains, departing within minutes of the Japanese opening up on the town with mortars and artillery. Eventually Dexter regrouped at Turton's 'hideout'—a group of huts perched on a very steep hilltop—where the hungry men dined on a meal of grilled buffalo as the Japanese continued shelling the deserted nearby town. [8] Joining the exodus to the cold and hungry high country was Callinan's headquarters, which set up a new base on the western slope of the Ramelau range on the night of 13 August.

The Australians faced an increasingly brazen militia force of Black Columns from West Timor who were prepared to throw themselves at positions. The Black Columns seemed well trained as they swarmed upon the defensive positions of A Platoon, sometimes under the cover of fire from Japanese mountain guns, other times without. One of Dexter's Bren gunners was forced to shoot three attackers with his hand-gun in self-defence. The use of the militia forces by the Japanese completely changed the nature of the conflict; it now meant that in order to survive these engagements the Australians would have to shoot and kill indigenous people who might only be armed with spears.

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While A Platoon remained an integrated fighting unit throughout the offensive, the Dutch contingent abandoned its area near the Dutch border and soon melted under the intense attack. The joint Australian–Dutch command operated by Spence evacuated its base at Mapé and its radio set was smashed by hostile Timorese. The Dutch embarked on an 18-day march led by Captain Breemouer, which finished in Ossu, towards the eastern end of the island. Breemouer's party dodged Japanese patrols and mobs of hostile Timorese, with little food or shelter along the way. The contrast with Dexter's platoon, which fought in an area adjoining the Dutch, could not have been greater. Instead of running, they remained a fighting unit that staged a tactical retreat against vastly superior numbers. Seven men in A Platoon were decorated for their actions in this furious fighting. [10]

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The bushmen in the company described the justice meted out in Timor as a 'kangaroo court', and together with Callinan, the B Platoon commander Laidlaw presided over many such short and sharp hearings and executions. Tom Foster, who served in David Dexter's A Platoon, saw firsthand the way rough justice was administered by the 2/2 Company's senior officers in this dirty war.

You had to have a kangaroo court. It was only by officer's decision—you have to eliminate that man, either a section commander or a platoon commander. You had to make some formality about it. You'd explain the situation to your officer, and they'd decide they had to be eliminated because it was to your disadvantage to have these fellows sending information back to the Japs. It was dog eat dog I'm afraid. [9]

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The 2/2 men took Walker's party to Sparrow Force HQ at Alas, a tiny settlement in the hills above Betano Bay, where Walker and his senior officers were briefed on the Timor operation. At the meeting, the 2/2 officers outlined a policy of joining the platoons of the 2/4 Company with those of the 2/2 so that the new arrivals could quickly learn the ropes. For example, the three sections in Dexter's A Platoon would each be joined by the three sections of the 2/4's A Platoon, with the same principle applied for its B and C platoons (the 2/4 Company did not have an improvised D Platoon like the 2/2). The policy sounded fine in theory but it might not work on the ground. With food supplies still acute in the wake of the August push, it would be impossible to find sufficient local food for groups of 40 men in any one area.

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These new forces, backed by the ruthless *kikan* intelligence units, threatened the Australians like never before. On 22 September, just as the 2/4 men landed in Darwin, Dexter learned from his sources that the Japanese reinforcements had begun mobilising troops for a major drive south from Aileu to Maubisse. The Company HQ concluded that 'evidence points to a Japanese drive to Ainaro' and it ordered Dexter to confront the Japanese head-on astride the Maubisse–Ainaro track, while supported by C and D platoons. The following day Dexter received an intelligence report from the *chef de posto* in Ainaro that the Japanese intended to move to Maubisse, and then to Ainaro. This was confirmed in part when C Platoon fired from long range at a large force of Japanese as it entered Maubisse.

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'From my observations of the 4½ hour fight I am convinced that when surprised the Jap is a ditherer.'

Report by Lieutenant Dexter, 25 September 1942

WHEN DAVID Dexter saw a massive column of Japanese troops moving south towards Ainaro on 25 September, it was like nothing he had ever seen so far in this war. The newly arrived battalion from the 47 Regiment marched 'as though they owned all the island'. [1] With fresh battalions thrown into the campaign, the Japanese were making an audacious strike at strategic

centres in the southern highlands, driving columns of troops to the pivotal mountain centre of Maubisse, before heading further south. [2]

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After futile, brief engagements by two small patrols to challenge the Japanese in previous days, about 30 men from Dexter's A Platoon moved into position near the village of Nunamogue, about 10 km north of Ainaro. With some of the best marksmen in the 2/2 Company in his platoon, Dexter was about to deploy more fire power than had been previously used by the Australians in Portuguese Timor. While his platoon was only entitled to three Bren guns, Dexter had got hold of another two, and deployed them in a location that he knew well. After the August offensive, A Platoon had been operating from the village of Nunamogue, which occupied a hill looking down onto the Maubisse–Ainaro track. Ruled by the *lurrai* (local king) Ananais, an ardent supporter of the Australians, Dexter's HQ in Ananais's tall, thatched roof hut in Nunamogue looked like 'a palace' to the newly arrived men from the 2/4 Company. Dexter chose a position halfway down the hill that looked onto the road at an angle of about 45 degrees, giving a clear view up the road for a distance of several hundred metres. The lightly wooded hills gave the men little cover, but Dexter positioned them so they could barely be seen by the approaching enemy. The five Bren gunners, with their weapons propped on bipods, were joined by several men with sniper and standard .303 rifles. [3]

Don Turton's D Platoon, which had also been sent to contact the Japanese drive, spotted the Japanese column of about 500 men as it marched south along the track. Turton's men opened up on them from a distance of a few hundred metres, but the enemy immediately returned accurate fire, forcing Turton's group to break off the engagement and retreat into the hills. D Platoon had made little impression on the Japanese in the five-minute firefight. As the Japanese pursued Turton's platoon, they moved down the road, where they came within range of Dexter's platoon, which immediately opened up on them. A general stampede ensued when the Bren gunners and rifleman filled the valley with the crack of their .303 bullets, firing at a range of 800–1,200 metres. The Japanese took cover by diving into a culvert or climbing to higher ground, or into Timorese huts, where they made themselves easy targets against the skyline. The Australians were so far away, and so well camouflaged, that the Japanese could not see where the fire was coming from. [4]

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As darkness crept over the mountains, Dexter realised it was time to break off the engagement, which had now lasted four and a half hours. He sent a small party led by Tom Foster down to the junction of the track to Nunamogue village and the Ainaro road to cover his withdrawal back into the mountains. As a result, Dexter lost contact with the enemy as they continued their march into Ainaro. Dexter's close observation of the ambush revealed a lot about the Japanese training and tactics. He reported later:

'From my observations of the 4½ hour fight I am convinced that when surprised the Jap is a ditherer. His field-craft was very bad. When first fired on, he first stood or lay on the open track. Then he climbed to higher ground and presented a beautiful target against the skyline.

He made for obvious positions such as prominent native huts upon which our Brens already had range’.

The Japanese force reached Ainaro at 4 a.m. the following day, but then departed the next day. After they had left, A Platoon snuck quietly into the town and interviewed several people to learn more about the Japanese force. **Dexter’s** best informant was the ageing Catholic priest, Padre Norberto Barros, and his younger curate Padre Antonio Pires. They told him about the physical condition, morale, dress, and weapons of the Japanese force and its Timorese troops. Norbert told **Dexter** how he was interviewed by Japanese officers via two Chinese interpreters. They asked about the numbers of Australians and if they knew where they had gone. Norbert said the Japanese were very tired when they finally arrived in the town and nearly all of them had gone to sleep immediately. Barros told **Dexter** that some of the Japanese carried Allied weapons—the Vickers gun, Tommy guns, Johnson automatics, and Dutch rifles—and they even wore the leather boots used by the Australian army. The Dutch Timorese who marched in with the Japanese told the priests that the Australians had killed many of them and were ‘bad men’. The Japanese helped themselves to whatever property they wanted. After entering the home of Padre Norbert, one of the officers took his watch, glasses, cutlery, fowls, pigs, and horses in return for just 3 patacas—about three days’ wages for an Australian private. During the conversation one of the officers said there were 30 Christians among the Japanese force in Timor. The officers looked over to the priest’s wireless radio—the one that had been relied on by the Australians to listen to the BBC—and then turned and looked back at him with a smirk. Then, suddenly, the force departed in a great hurry.

Dexter also learned that the 100 or more Timorese were mainly from Dutch Timor and the coastal areas of Liquiçá and Maubara in Portuguese Timor, which had been turned into a concentration zone for the Portuguese population. Most of the Timorese spoke Malay—indicating that they came from Dutch Timor—and they were dressed in motley Australian and Dutch uniforms. Not all of them were armed. Many Timorese in Ainaro had vanished from the area before the Japanese had arrived, but after they left they returned and supplied food to **Dexter’s** hungry troops. ‘It was quite like the old times to have the natives bring in food in adversity,’ **Dexter** wrote in his report.

After the battle for the Dili airport in February, Nunamogue became the 2/2 Company’s biggest engagement with the numerically superior enemy, and possibly its deadliest, although it was impossible to say how many Japanese and Timorese were killed. After speaking to the priests in Ainaro, some of **Dexter’s** men returned to Nunamogue and saw what was left of the battle scene. **Dexter** noted in his report on the ambush:

‘At the scene of action a cursory examination revealed no graves ... or bodies, but there were traces of large fires which the natives say were used for burning the dead. The position will be further investigated’.

Nonetheless, **Dexter** claimed 60 enemy casualties in his report to Company HQ, with much of the success attributed to the skilful deployment of the platoon and the marksmanship of Jack Maley. Immediately after the war, the military artist Charles Bush returned to Timor to produce a painting that immortalised Maley and Foster’s teamwork. But the portrait showed

them the wrong way around, with Foster on the Bren gun and Maley, clearly identified with his long, Ned Kelly-style beard, spotting targets.

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The Australians had killed or wounded as many as 100 enemy troops in the Nunamogue and Samé ambushes. Even so, the Japanese had succeeded in making a major inroad into their territory. The southern region of the island was no longer the exclusive domain of the Australians. **Dexter's** platoon was ordered to step in and hit the Japanese at the coastal town of Betano, where stores were still awaiting transport. **Dexter's** platoon set up a position covering the village, but the enemy avoided it and headed for the *Voyager*. The Japanese then moved west along the beach before turning inland towards Ainaro, burning villages as they went, including all the Timorese huts in the town of Hatudo, which contained much equipment left by the Australians. **Dexter** sent out patrols to search for this rampaging column but in the deceptive landscape of Portuguese Timor it passed through undetected. This enormous body of troops had moved right through an area swarming with Australian patrols. For Callinan, the result of his ambitious plan to hit the Japanese head-on had been 'most disappointing', given the numbers of troops deployed. [7] The Australians had thrown 200 troops against an enemy strength of 600–700, putting 'more troops in that area than we had ever been able to muster previously', and yet the Japanese by and large moved around the territory unchallenged.

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In the meantime, platoon commanders employed novel techniques to maintain an offensive footing. Increasingly, the war in Timor was going 'native' and the Australians could only counter the tactics being used by the Japanese by doing the same. Disguising themselves as Timorese was one of the innovative techniques employed by **Dexter's** A Platoon in the mountains around Samé. On 4 November, two men put on indigenous dress and darkened their skin with soot. Accompanied by about 50 Timorese, they attacked a group of hostile Timorese and some Japanese troops near the Samé saddle. The ruse resulted in a reported death toll of 10 Timorese killed, while the rest scattered. **Dexter's** men then burnt the huts that the hostile troops had occupied.

Three days later, A Platoon moved into the Aitutu valley where they launched a wave of scorched-earth warfare. **Dexter** oversaw the operation spearheaded by Private Tom Foster, who drove as many as 200 Timorese towards the enemy territory and burnt huts as they went. Foster's strategy was designed to create a 'no man's land' in between A Platoon's area and the area controlled by the hostile Timorese. Foster saw many women and children run for their lives as he drove his army through the valley. At one point, a group took refuge in a cave. Foster thought about 'peppering' them with his Tommy gun, but he realised that most of the refugees were women and children, and he thought better of it. Many of the huts burnt by Foster and his Timorese army were made of beautiful timber with intricate carvings. He felt bad as he watched them go up in flames, but this was not a conventional war and he had his orders. [8]

AT THIS tipping point in the conflict, the poor physical condition of the 2/2 men seriously impaired operations to the point where orders could not be followed. As **Dexter** put it, his men

were 'as lean as kangaroo dogs'. By early November, Laidlaw's frenzied campaign broke men and officers. Their desperately poor condition became starkly apparent when on 2 November platoon commanders effectively defied another order for a mobilisation against Maubisse. In a concerted response, they told Laidlaw that their men were wrecked. Lieutenant **Dexter** said that his men were only capable of conducting short patrols. Similar reports came in from the other platoons. Lieutenant McKenzie warned that his platoon was only fit for one day's hard work, stating categorically that his men were 'completely exhausted' and required long rests. Lieutenant Turton attributed their poor condition to the 'lack of proper food and being in areas where to exist they must be on the alert 24 hours each day'.

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The bombing campaign instigated by MacArthur had been a masterstroke, but it wouldn't have worked had the Australians not been hitting the enemy hard on the ground. These reinforcements were in reality a stunning affirmation of the effectiveness of the 2/2 and 2/4 companies; 700 men had drawn a massive enemy force to Timor. They had achieved exactly what Callinan, Baldwin, and **Dexter** had discussed in the very early days at Wilsons Promontory after reading the book *Commando*, on the Boer Campaign—that well-organised guerillas could tie up a conventional army many times their number. These were troops that could have been deployed by the Japanese at the front, but instead they were tied up in an area that in strategic terms was a backwater. It was just as **Dexter** had jotted down in his notebook during training: 'We make enemy disperse his forces.'

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The RAAF crews were still struggling with the erratic terrain of Timor. In an early morning raid on 17 November, crews mistook Samé for Maubisse. The RAAF had been asked to bomb Maubisse but at 6.25 a.m. the low-flying planes 'hedge-hopped' towards Samé, about 20 km south, where **Dexter's** A Platoon was based. Despite 'heavy strafing', there were no Australian casualties. **Dexter** advised that 'this form of air attack would be very effective when used against the Japanese'. [17] **Dexter** believed the planes were Hudsons, but in fact they were the RAAF's latest acquisition, twin-engine Bristol Beaufighters flown by the newly formed 31 Squadron based at Coomalie Creek, south of Darwin.

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Callinan requested the bombing of Hatudo 'with all possible aircraft', and had thought that five was the most he could hope for. [19] What followed involved as many as nine medium bombers from 2 and 13 squadrons and three Beaufighters, which in the early hours of 26 November scored direct hits on the *posto* and other buildings in the town. The bombs fell among the hundreds of Japanese and Timorese who were gathered there, leaving more than 150 dead. A 2/4 Company patrol reported 'blood everywhere on tracks'. A patrol sent by **Dexter** counted 50 Japanese and nearly 100 Timorese dead, and it seemed that some of the Timorese killed were in fact loyal to the Australians. **Dexter's** men noted that some of them had ropes tied around their necks, apparently in preparation for hanging. 'All the evidence pointed to the Japanese having arranged a ceremonial hanging before an assembly of natives. This was their usual procedure for commencing the subjugation of an area, but in this case the RAAF reversed the

action,' Callinan said. After this raid, the Japanese withdrew westwards and the area remained an 'invaluable buffer' for some months. If any respite was gained from this attack at all, it was more like a matter of weeks rather than months. [20]

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This was about as close as Parer got to seeing the real fighting in Timor. Dexter said that Parer had wanted to film up in the mountains of Ramelau and Kablaki where he was based, but he didn't make it there. Most of his footage was made around headquarters, Dexter said, and one of the re-created action shots comprised 'a so-called patrol of no-hoppers we were sending back to Australia'. Dexter later lamented that Parer didn't get to see the 'real wild hills' of Portuguese Timor: 'He got some good pictures around headquarters near the coast. And he got pictures of lots of fellows round HQ, but if only he could have got into the real wild hills, where he could have seen what went on with this tattered cavalry of Australians and Timorese, it would have been really something.'

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All platoons informed of the preliminary plans for a raid on Maubisse. The object of this raid is to clear that area of hostile natives and to burn the town down together with all surrounding *oomahs* (native huts). The Air Force is to cooperate in the attack. C Pl will attack from the Northeast, A Pl from the Southeast and D Pl, with one section from No 4 Coy attached, will attack from the Southwest. As many loyal natives as can be mustered for the event are to assist.

It was an ambitious plan, and like the ambitious plan developed by Laidlaw the previous month, it was entirely unrealistic given the wretched state of his troops. The platoon commanders rebelled. Lieutenant Dexter told Laidlaw that none of the men in A Platoon was in fit enough condition for the job. All that his platoon was capable of doing was guarding and patrolling to keep the Samé Saddle clear. Dexter also warned that the Timorese would not go north of the saddle into the hostile hills of Maubisse.

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BY LATE November, word spread like wildfire throughout the company. At last, they would soon be heading home. There was little time for sentimentality in this war, but such emotions sprang forth for those who knew for certain that the company would be leaving at long last. When Rolf Baldwin learned of the plan, he knew immediately that he would soon be separated from his men because he and Callinan were to remain as commanders of Lancer Force. Baldwin wrote to his best and brightest officer, David Dexter, who had taken over his role as commander of A Platoon. Baldwin and Dexter had shared the journey from the very beginning. They had both taught at Melbourne Grammar before enlisting and had formed the first cadre of officers at Wilsons Promontory in March 1941, which must have seemed a lifetime ago. Baldwin reflected on how much he and Dexter had achieved in turning A Platoon into one of the best platoons in the entire AIF, and how much of what they had achieved came down to their relationships with the men.

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At the Timor end, Callinan and Baldwin drew up plans for the withdrawal over a vast front, making it difficult to maintain secrecy. To allay suspicion they ordered D and C Platoons to mount increased activity in their areas around the Kablaki mountain range, while **Dexter's** A Platoon would withdraw to cover the beachhead. The order also moved B Platoon further west so that it was within one day's march of the beachhead.

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As platoons were converging on the beachhead a force of about 300 Japanese and Timorese drove south, reaching Fatu-Cuac on 15 December. **Dexter** was conducting a reconnaissance search north of Fatu-Cuac that morning and as he patrolled on his Timorese pony, together with the criados Mau Luli and Mota Kar, he heard chattering and then saw the approaching column. He leapt off the track into a thicket of bamboo, let go of his pony and allowed the Japanese to pass by. When they were far enough away, he shot the last Japanese soldier in the backside, thereby warning his platoon at Fatu-Cauc of the impending attack.

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Dexter was not satisfied that the threat had passed and so he ordered Corporal Foster to mount a reconnaissance patrol. When Foster asked for volunteers, Privates Joe Poynton and John Darge stepped forward. Poynton, who had fought heroically in the 2/2's first action against the Japanese in Timor, was to bookend his service by taking part in its very last mission. At around 6 p.m., just after sunset, the three-man party departed with orders to search for the enemy and return by midnight that evening in time for the evacuation. Following the coast for about 20 km, Foster's party finally reached the Japanese force near Beco, where they could see that the enemy had dug in on the beach with artillery. They were anticipating an invasion, rather than an evacuation, perhaps as a result of the intelligence report received via the Italians on 10 November. [12]

AT THE beach south of Fatu-Cuac, it was an emotional scene as the men suddenly realised that they had to leave their Timorese comrades-in-arms for good. Edward 'Smash' Hodgson had brought one of the bags of silver coins to the beach and began distributing them to the criados, who had never been formally paid for their service. [13] As Callinan put it, 'money could not repay them'. [14] **Dexter** was still patrolling in the hills above the beachhead and arrived at the beach with Mau Luli and Mota Ka just an hour before the transfer began. He wanted to take both boys with him, but he had received a 'stern warning' that the Timorese were not to board the ship. **Dexter** thought the Timorese were barred from entry due to Australia's 'White Australia Policy'. The Timorese certainly wanted to come too. Mau Luli, the youngest of **Dexter's** criados, kept saying in Malay '*Kam bali Tuan, kam bali Tuan*' (come back, sir). [15]

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The destroyer weighed anchor at 3 a.m. and soon it was heading across the Timor Sea towards Darwin. **Dexter** thought it went like 'a bat out of hell' on a reassuringly misty night. [19]

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The men sent to Timor as part of Sparrow Force got off lightly. In Rabaul, 845 POWs and 208 civilians were killed when their ship, the *Montevideo Maru*, was torpedoed near Luzon on 30

June 1942. Among those who had died were the men of the 2/1 Independent Company that trained at Wilsons Promontory in early 1941. They were the men who were filing out of the camp as the new recruits for the 2/2 Company marched in. They were the men trained by a cadre of officers that included Bernard Callinan, David Dexter and Rolf Baldwin. Dexter had been bitterly disappointed when he was told by Freddie Spencer Chapman that he had to stay behind at the training camp, but, like his decision to leave the ill-fated 2/21 Battalion which went to Ambon, a 'delivering angel' had watched over him a second time.

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A total of 610 men had served in the 2/2 Company, and of these 51 were killed during the war. One of the fallen most sadly missed was Jack Maley, who was killed in an ambush in New Guinea's Ramu Valley in August 1943. His mother Lucy never got over his death, believing that the army had rushed him back to the front before he had recovered from a year of hard service and illness in Timor. [1] The men of A Platoon, including Captain David Dexter, buried Maley near where he fell, and after the war his body was interred in the Lae Memorial Cemetery. Dexter wrote a long letter to Lucy Maley that said in part: 'I made a cross for his grave and I can assure you that when we placed the cross above him, there was within our hearts a deep grief but also a great pride and gratitude that such a man could be.' [2] So upset was Dexter by the loss of his beloved mate that he decided to set an ambush for the Japanese the following day. Dexter opened the engagement by jumping onto the middle of a track and firing an Owen gun on a column of about 100 enemy troops. The Japanese returned accurate fire, hitting Dexter five times. Miraculously, he survived his wounds.

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David Dexter decided against returning to teaching and instead embarked on new horizons as a diplomat. On one of his first assignments, he accompanied Australia's foreign minister Dr 'H.V.' Evatt to important post-war meetings in Washington. Dexter modestly described his role as that of bag carrier for Evatt, who introduced Dexter as 'our war hero'. Postings to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India followed, and in between he took time out to write Volume VI of Australia's official history of the Second World War: *The New Guinea Offensives*. He signed off on this book from a hill station in the mountains above New Delhi. Dexter did more 'bag carrying' when he worked closely with the Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey. He thought Casey was a 'thorough gentleman who didn't have the bastardry to be prime minister'. In the late 1960s, Dexter was poached to head the Australian Universities Commission, which had the job of dramatically expanding tertiary education in Australia. Dexter's time in Timor and New Guinea influenced the decision to open a 'university of the tropics', the Northern Territory University, which later became Charles Darwin University.

Although Dexter became Australia's top authority on the offensive to recapture New Guinea, the 2/2 Company's guerilla war in Portuguese Timor stood head and shoulders above the rest as his sentimental favourite. In fact, he thought the 2/2 Company's campaign was the greatest episode of the Second World War. Dexter said in his later years of the 2/2 Company: 'They were a remarkable unit, like no other in Australian military history.' And the Timor veterans thoroughly agreed. The 2/2 and 2/4 companies were deployed in the Australian offensives to drive the Japanese out of New Guinea, but these engagements were more like conventional

warfare. New Guinea had nothing like what Dexter called the 'tattered cavalry of Australians and Timorese' operating in wild mountains. In New Guinea, the 2/2 and 2/4 men worked with the renowned 'Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels', who carried the wounded and hauled supplies, but the relationships they had forged with the *criados* of Portuguese Timor went far beyond this. In Timor, the Australians lived with the villagers in their huts where they shared everything: food, plates and spoons. In New Guinea, they lived in army camps. In Timor, the locals were their eyes and ears as they went together on patrols for weeks and months; in New Guinea the relationship was more like servitude. The relationship the 2/2 had with the Timorese people was unique. Despite this special relationship, few men from the 2/2 Company attempted to discover the fate of those who had served alongside them in the years immediately after the war. Air travel to Timor was expensive and difficult, and in any case the men were busy building careers and raising young families, and many just wanted to forget.

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The men began thinking about what they could do to mark their debt to the Timorese who had saved their lives. The notion of making a substantial gesture gained momentum in the mid-1960s after a visit to the territory by John Burridge, the former lieutenant in C Platoon. The veterans did not want to build a monument to themselves; they wanted it to be something to honour the Timorese and Portuguese who had stood by them. They wanted to build a substantial monument that would also serve a useful purpose. Eventually, they decided to build a 'rest house' in the hills above Dili that could be used by people to stop on their way into the capital. The veterans knew that many people walked long distances on foot from the districts into the capital, often carrying large loads of produce for sale at the markets. Designed by a Portuguese architect, the rest house would feature a large concrete canopy to provide shade from the hot sun, or shelter from the rain, accompanied by a large swimming pool, fed by spring water, for bathing. The location of the rest house, at Daré, was chosen because it was in the vicinity of the observation post at Darlau, while being located on the main road to Dili.

A fund raising campaign began in earnest. The 2/2 *Commando Courier* badgered members to dig deep, reminding them that many owed their lives to the support of the Timorese. By 1968, they had raised more than \$3,000, about half the estimated construction cost, so they decided to take their project all the way to the prime minister in order to get the job done properly. In April that year, they planned to travel to Canberra for Anzac Day, where they would also hold their annual 'safari' and attempt to meet with Prime Minister John Gorton, who had served in the RAAF during the war. David Dexter's position in Canberra gave him good access to the corridors of power. He approached Tony Eggleton, the press secretary to Gorton, about arranging a meeting to discuss the project. Dexter showed Eggleton his scrapbook on the Timor campaign. Eggleton was quite taken with the pictures and newspaper clippings and said he would do all he could to arrange the meeting. What seemed to impress him most was not so much the unit's wartime achievements, but the fact that so many planned to come from the other side of the country to press their case.

Eggleton secured a meeting with Gorton at his official residence, *The Lodge*, on 19 April. Three members of the association attended: Ron Kirkwood the secretary, David Dexter, and Colin Doig. Gorton told them he was reluctant to commit government funds because he feared the

gesture might set a precedent for other units. The 2/2 Association wrote back to Gorton after the meeting pointing out that the support rendered to the Australians in Timor was unique and therefore worthy of making an exception. The letter said:

‘We would be honoured to have the Commonwealth Government join with us in commemorating a unique form of assistance to Australian soldiers and one that is likely to remain without precedent. Through Mr Hasluck [External Affairs Minister] your previous concern about the danger of establishing a precedent was conveyed to us but I trust that our discussions on 19 April now make it appropriate for us to seek your final reaction to our proposal for support for the Timor memorial’.

Two months later, Gorton agreed to offer substantial financial support of \$4,000, provided this amount was matched by the veterans, which it was, and the memorial was built. In total, they raised \$10,421 for the project. At the time the average annual wage in Australia was about \$3,000. At the opening of the rest house in April 1969, Ron Kirkwood wrote that the memorial combined ‘utilitarian Australian planning, and Portuguese flamboyance and ingenuity. It is a Memorial dedicated, not to our prowess as soldiers, nor to our dead, but to a country and its people who befriended us in the full meaning of that word, when we most needed friends.’ [9]

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SHORTLY AFTER retiring from a 43-year career in the public service, David Dexter immersed himself in what he called his ‘Timor project’. He fronted up at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra to begin expansive research on the former colony and its experience in the Second World War. From 1978 to 1981, Dexter amassed a huge collection of materials with the aim of writing the definitive book about the unique campaign of Timor 1942. During this research, Dexter came to see the campaign in which he had fought as somehow related to the Indonesian invasion of 1975—part of a continuum of domination by big near-neighbours. ‘The idea is emerging that the Australian/Dutch invasion of 1941 could be shown in perspective—just another invasion of which the Indonesian attack of December 1975 is the latest,’ Dexter wrote in the notes he kept while working in the memorial’s research centre.

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This book benefits from the lifelong interest in this campaign by four outstanding veterans who have since passed away: Bernard Callinan, David Dexter, Colin Doig and Paddy Kenneally. Callinan’s published account of this campaign and Doig’s self-published memoir provided a solid foundation, but the additional work of Dexter and Kenneally give intricate detail and important nuances. Before passing away in 1992, Dexter carefully catalogued and filed all of his Timor research before giving it to the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. Dexter’s personal record at the AWM, which is filed next to that of his father Walter, consists of 81 files covering every facet of this campaign. Dexter filed these records with someone like me in mind, and I feel privileged to be able to bring to fruition what he had set out to achieve.

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Paul Cleary ‘A very rugged type’ *ANU Reporter* Summer 2010

PhD scholar PAUL CLEARY reveals the interesting and varied history of former ANU registrar David Dexter – a man who served with distinction during World War II and helped reform university education in Australia.

The ANU archives contain a treasure trove of papers left behind by significant figures in the history of the University, as well as those of the seemingly insignificant. They include the papers of vice-chancellors, such as Douglas Copland and John Crawford, and distinguished academics like Professor Howard Florey.

They also include the papers of someone I've come to know well, former ANU registrar David Dexter, who retired in the late 1970s after a distinguished career as a World War II army officer, diplomat, military historian, and a champion of higher education.

Dexter's papers at ANU measure five linear metres, making them one of the biggest collections at the archive. They are a mark of his belief in the value of creating records and filing them in an accessible way for future use.

These records cover his time as secretary of the Australian Universities Commission, which presided over a dramatic expansion in tertiary education from the late 1960s onwards, and the last few years of his career at ANU. After retiring, Dexter wrote a book about the development of the University, *The ANU Campus*. It was published in 1991, a year before his death.

While I've not had the need to look at Dexter's ANU papers, I have certainly delved through another collection he created and deposited at the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. This collection extends to 81 files, covering Dexter's time as a lieutenant in Portuguese Timor during the Second World War with one of the first units of Australians trained as commandos, the 2/2nd Independent Company.

After retiring, Dexter spent four years pulling together materials on this campaign with the aim of writing the definitive account of what film-maker Damien Parer described as an "epic of guerrilla warfare". Each file in the collection begins with a foolscap page containing instructions written with a thick felt-tip pen that explain how this piece of the puzzle fits in with the rest.

David Dexter never got around to writing that book, even though he was more than capable of doing so: he had authored one of the enormous volumes of the official history of the Second World War, *The New Guinea Offensives* (Volume VI, 1961). Declining health may have explained why he never completed what he called his "Timor project".

But my new book, *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground*, draws heavily on Dexter's files at the AWM. I like to think it is the book that Dexter would have wanted to have seen published on the Timor campaign.

Dexter believed that the 2/2nd Company, and the relationship it developed with Timorese and Portuguese partisans, was unrivalled in Australian military history, and yet the unit and this campaign have largely gone unnoticed.

So here are a few key facts to put it in perspective.

Of the 23,000 men deployed to the Asia-Pacific region on the eve of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in late 1941, only the 270 men in Dexter's company, plus another 130 survivors from

other units within Sparrow Force, were able to face the Japanese and remain an integrated fighting force. They survived by virtue of their courage, ingenuity, and the support of the locals.

The story really begins in late 1940, after the fall of Dunkirk, when British Prime Minister Winston Churchill set up the Special Operations Executive (SOE) to develop a new brand of commando warfare. SOE's brief was to establish small raiding parties that could be dropped behind enemy lines. Immediately, the British looked to Australia to provide what they called "very rugged types".

A training mission from the UK set up a secret base at Wilsons Promontory, east of Melbourne, with the aim of training 'independent companies' in guerrilla warfare. David Dexter was one of the first men to arrive at this new base as a member of a cadre of instructors. He and a handful of officers from the eastern states were joined by about 200 men recruited mainly from the wheatbelts of Western Australia and beyond.

Initially, Britain's SOE had wanted to retain control of these companies and send them into Europe and the Middle East, but this all changed when Japan became more of a threat in late 1941.

The 2/2nd Company was included in Sparrow Force, a unit of 1400 men sent to reinforce Dutch Timor. Sparrow Force was one of a number of units deployed as part of a disastrous strategy to reinforce forward bases in Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and Rabaul. Within a matter of weeks, all of these lightly-armed units fell like dominos when they met the air, sea and land forces of the Japanese war machine.

All of them, that is, except for the 2/2nd Company, which took to the hills and mounted a daring guerrilla campaign that tied up several thousand Japanese troops throughout 1942.

The good conduct of the Australians towards the Timorese people paid huge dividends and within weeks of the invasion every commando had a local Timorese boy or man serving beside them, providing intelligence and food, and hauling heavy supplies. Some of the Timorese and Portuguese went into action with the Australians.

The Japanese began their Timor campaign with around 5000 men, but by the end of the year they had pushed numbers to close to 10,000. All the result of these deadly hit and run tactics.

These Japanese forces could have been deployed in the strategically vital theatre of New Guinea, but instead a few hundred men had them tied up in Timor. The 2/2nd Company claimed as many as 1500 enemy casualties for just eight Australians killed in combat.

Dexter emerged as one of the outstanding commanders of this campaign. He was revered by his men because he combined a disciplined and highly professional approach with an easy going manner.

Although the Australians were prohibited from carrying diaries in Timor, Dexter made sure afterwards that the campaign would not be lost forever, through his collection at the AWM.

Paul Cleary is a PhD scholar in public policy at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, an author and journalist. His book *The Men Who Came Out of the Ground* is available through Hachette Australia.

Col Doig 'Vale: David St. Albans Dexter' *2/2 Commando Courier* 94 April 1992: 2-3.
<https://doublereds.org.au/couriers/1992/Courier%20April%201992.pdf>

VALE: DAVID ST. ALBANS DEXTER

It is with extreme sorrow that I have to announce the death of David Dexter on Sunday, 15th March, 1992 after a long and debilitating illness. David was 75 years of age.

Dave Dexter was one of the real personalities of the 2/2 Commando Squadron, a brilliant and courageous soldier, a most pleasant and lovable personality who endeared himself to the troops in the whole of the Squadron. The world and Australia is much the poorer for the passing of such a valuable citizen.

David was the son of an Anglican Minister (in the age before they were priests). Always a brilliant student, he was educated at Geelong Grammar School and Melbourne University and graduated with a bachelor's degree with Honours in History. Pre-war he was a teacher at Geelong Grammar School and was then employed in the Dept of External Affairs, later to be called Foreign Affairs.

Soon after enlistment in the A.I.F. he became caught up in the 'Hush Hush' training on Wilsons Promontory and was part of Capt. Frederick Chapman's field craft wing and was a most proficient Sergeant Instructor.

On the formation of the 2nd Independent Company, Dave was commissioned and became O.C. No. 1 Section A Platoon. After training on Wilsons Promontory and the onward movements through Adelaide, Katherine and eventually Timor, David was to show his outstanding leadership qualities and on the promotion of Capt. Baldwin to 2 i/c Company David took command of 'A' Platoon and brilliantly led to the finish of the arduous Timor Campaign. After re-formation at Canungra he continued to command A Platoon and his platoon was first into action in New Guinea. Once again he served with great distinction and was severely wounded in one of the actions in the Ramu Valley. About halfway through the New Guinea Campaign David was selected to go as an instructor at the O.C.T.U. at Woodville in South Australia. This appointment did not suit David and he promptly joined Z Force and had command of the Northern Section which included Timor.

He left Z Force and rejoined the 2/2nd Command Squadron, as it was now designated, at Strathpine, this time to command B Troop. He took his Troop to New Britain and later was promoted 2 i/c of the Unit when Capt. Don Turton went to command the Training Squadron at Canungra.

It was not long before Dave went to the Tactical School at Beenleigh and was promoted to Major and commanded the 4th Squadron at the tail end of the Borneo Campaign.

Upon demobilisation David rejoined the Dept of External Affairs and made rapid promotion and served overseas at many stations, finally as Senior Counsellor at New Delhi. On return to Australia he was to become Registrar of the National University at Canberra.

In the meantime David had been selected to write a volume of the Official War History of the Army in World War II. This volume '*The New Guinea Offensive*' was completed after taking one year leave of absence after his return to Australia from India. This was a most significant history as it told of Australian victories against the Japanese in a very trying period of the bitter jungle war in New Guinea.

His role as Registrar A.N.U. also was one of great purpose when the University was reaching true international status. David was then appointed as Senior Secretary of the Universities Commission when this was first formed. He served firstly under Senator John Gorton.

Illness forced early retirement but his indomitable will forced him to continue to work on a voluntary basis for the Australian War Memorial. His services were always available to that body whenever specialist advice was required.

Despite his absences from Australia and his busy schedule of duties, David always took a keen interest in Association affairs and was a true member of our great Association.

So passes a truly great and memorable character whose efforts have provided the Australian community with much to remember. His editorship of that Official History volume will ensure his name is preserved for posterity.

The 2/2 Commando Association has lost a truly memorable character and many of us have had a true friend taken from us.

David was the loving husband of Freda and loving father of his family. He was a great citizen of his chosen city, Canberra, and a pillar of any society.

Our most sincere sympathy to Freda and family and may time heal the wound of the passing of a loved one.

Vale David St. Alban Dexter, a mate true and a soldier supreme.

Col Doig

Barry Clissold 'David St Alban Dexter, 1917-1992' *Sabretache* vol. XXXIII - July/September 1992: 44-45.

David Dexter was born in England on a cold 8 January 1917 at a time when Australian infantry were expecting relief after a depressing 1916-17 winter on the Somme. Charles Bean had earlier said of these Australians that with their lives they had purchased a tradition beyond all human power to appraise. Years later Dexter himself would recall these words as he drafted *The New Guinea Offensives*, which would record the operations of the Australian Army in New Guinea from April 1943 until mid-1944. Like Bean, Dexter had a vision, an uncompromising vision to tell the story of the front-line. For Dexter, it was to record a story of individuals, and small sub-units on patrol, in ambush, in attack or defence. He argued that the war in New Guinea was not a war of massed battalions but of the forward scout, the section, the platoon and the company. Inspired by Bean and guided by his guru Gavin Long, Dexter left an account of war along gloomy jungle tracks and rain-drenched razor-backs that yielded a magnum opus.

He was born in Saint Albans the son of an Australian clergyman, who, at the time of his birth, was serving in the AIF in France. His earliest memories were of a swampy soldier settler block at Kilsyth in Victoria that his father took up when he left the ministry. When his father returned to the ministry as Vicar of Lara and Little River he, like his brothers, attended Geelong Grammar where his father was an occasional teacher. It was an ambivalent experience as he received an excellent education, which stressed the social responsibility of privilege and which his parents could not otherwise have afforded, but he was a poor boy amongst great affluence. From this stemmed his distrust of any distinction based upon class or material possessions, and his commitment to work for the betterment of society.

In 1940 he graduated from Melbourne University with honours in history, one of his great passions. During his university years he was also a teacher at Grimwade House. But the outbreak of war the year before had doomed a promising teaching career. In 1940 Dexter enlisted in the infantry in the A.I.F. but soon transferred to the independent Companies then being formed. After training at the guerrilla warfare school on Wilson's Promontory he was commissioned in the 2/2nd Independent Company (later 2/2nd Commando Squadron) with which he served in 1942 on Timor for 10 months of guerrilla fighting, and in the Ramu Valley operations of 1943-44. He was second-in-command of the 2/2nd Commando Squadron on New Britain in 1945 and later commanded the 2/4th Commando Squadron on Tarakan, with the rank of major. He was severely wounded in action and mentioned dispatches.

Dexter's experiences with 2/2 Commando Squadron in Timor remained with him the most. There he, with just 300 others, and the help of the Timorese people, held out against 30,000 Japanese troops for over ten months during 1942. He survived, and the following year a still young 26-year-old captain continued the war in New Guinea. In September he led a fighting patrol of 2/2 Commando against a strong Japanese position at Kesawai. His children speak about this as a classic ambush and it was one obviously spoken about by Dexter himself years after the war.

Ordered to "take advantage of all favourable chances to harass [the enemy]", Dexter crossed the Ramu River in darkness on 28 September 1943 with a heavily armed 24-man patrol and advanced through kunai and swamp to within two miles of known Japanese positions. Dexter was intent on setting an ambush but despaired in not knowing the precise location of the Japanese or their movements. In a rather novel solution despatched a three-man patrol toward the enemy in the hope that the patrol would attract some interest. It did and the patrol withdrew hastily toward Dexter's position now organised in ambush. The Japanese followed in force and in the subsequent successful Australian ambush Dexter was wounded but not before the Japanese suffered heavy casualties. Then, whatever the Japanese expected Dexter to do, he did the opposite. Boldly, and in broad daylight, Dexter withdrew his small force back across the Ramu River while his enemy scoured the foothills of the Finisterres. Dexter was to recall and record these events many years later in his military history, *The New Guinea Offensives*.

His membership of the "green-clad fighting machine" as he aptly described it, came to an end with the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. The following year he joined Australia's foreign service and from 1947 attended the United Nations General Assembly. Back in Canberra he worked on the development of the Colombo Plan. He also served in both Colombo and New Delhi. In

1960 he became Secretary of the Australian Universities Commission, and in 1967 Registrar at the Australian National University.

His passion for history, and his experiences during the war, were to result in him being asked to write one of the official war histories. The volume he would write would relate how the Australian Army, supported by Allied naval and air forces, and with the help of some American regiments, drove the Japanese out of most of the mainland of Australian New Guinea in 1943 and early 1944. It would also describe the concurrent operations of the American Army and amphibious forces in the Pacific.

Commenced sometime in 1948, his military history is a tour de force. Like Bean's towering masterpiece of 1914-1918 Dexter's history is similarly enriched with the exploits of individuals and small units. While Bean records the deeds of his ghosts of tomorrow, the fettlers, drovers, miners and butter-makers turned soldier, Dexter tells the story of his soldiers, the engine drivers, surveyors, bricklayers and insurance clerks as they fought, not on the flattened plains of Pozieres but in the confines of wet and foetid jungle. He had himself tramped and fought over much of the country he described, and borne on stretcher, wounded.

That his history was ever published is a tribute to his tenacity and skill, and, importantly, the encouragement of his wife Freda and his devoted children. For it took more than a decade to put together. He commenced writing in Canberra, but this was interrupted by a diplomatic posting to Ceylon in 1952. Undeterred, the writing continued in Colombo and on a tea estate in the high country; the finishing touches were put to it during his next posting to India. There in New Delhi and at Himalayan hill stations his Private Smiths and Corporal Halls relived their wartime dangers with their patrols cut off, without support, fighting last ditch battles against a tenacious foe, one which Dexter himself respected as a fighter. Finally, in 1959, the task was complete. The volume was published in 1961 to sit alongside the other six volumes in Series 1 (Army).

It is as a military historian, and his immense contribution to Australian history that we will wish to remember David. As a member of the Military Historical Society of Australia we will miss him greatly. -

Michael McKernan, 'Dexter, David St Alban (1917–1992)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dexter-david-st-alban-307/text29034>, published online 2016, accessed online 16 April 2021.

Dexter, David St Alban (1917–1992)

by Michael McKernan

This article was published online in 2016

David St Alban Dexter, (1917–1992), army officer, historian, public servant, and university administrator, was born on 8 January 1917 at St Albans, Hertfordshire, England, the second of five sons and one daughter of English-born Walter Ernest Dexter, Church of England chaplain, and his Victorian-born wife Dora Stirling, née Roadknight. His father, a much-loved senior

chaplain in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), returned to Australia with his family in 1920 and his appointment was terminated. David lived at Kilsyth, Victoria, until 1923 when his father failed on his soldier-settler block, and then in clergy houses at Romsey, Lara, and West Footscray.

Educated at Geelong Grammar School (1930–35), Dexter accepted an appointment as a student teacher at Grimwade House, Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. He studied history at the University of Melbourne (BA Hons, 1940). On 8 October 1940 he enlisted in the AIF and in March the following year volunteered for commando training. Commissioned as a lieutenant in July, he was posted to the 2nd Independent Company (later 2/2nd Commando Squadron). British specialists rigorously trained him, and about 270 other recruits, in secret on Wilsons Promontory. He was impressed by the concentrated nature of the instruction, which emphasised mobility, initiative, and speed.

The novice company arrived in Portuguese Timor (Timor-Leste) in December 1941 and then spent a year waging guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. A short, strongly built man, Dexter revelled in the bush life and independence. With the cooperation of the local people, ingenuity, and some luck, the company confused and harried much larger Japanese forces until their position became too dangerous; those who survived were evacuated to Darwin. Dexter was mentioned in despatches.

From June 1943 the company fought in New Guinea. During an operation in Japanese-held territory in the Ramu Valley in September, Dexter, now a captain, suffered five bullet wounds. He returned to Australia in March 1944, having been mentioned in despatches a second time. Between April and June 1945 he served with his squadron in New Britain. Promoted to major in June, he commanded the 2/4th Commando Squadron on Tarakan Island, Borneo, from September. His AIF appointment was terminated in Australia on 16 January 1946. He remained proud of the 2/2nd, describing it as ‘a pretty good unit, something quite remarkable, there hadn’t been anything like it in Australian military history’ (Dexter 1976). There were only twelve such Australian squadrons formed during World War II.

On 29 September 1944 at St Mark’s Church, Camberwell, Melbourne, where his father was the minister, Dexter had married Freda Doris Irene Harper, a teacher.

Reluctant to resume a career in education, in 1946 he joined the Department of External Affairs in Canberra and worked closely with the minister, H.V. Evatt, with whom he attended the second (1947) and third (1948) sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization. He admired Evatt’s ‘vast intellect,’ describing his time with him as ‘that of bag carrier’ (Cleary 2010, 330). In 1955 he headed the foreign aid branch of the department, working under a new minister, Richard (Baron) Casey. Dexter was involved in the Colombo Plan and with formulating systems of foreign aid associated with the South-East Asia Treaty Organization and the UNO. He attended a number of international conferences on aid, and in 1959 was appointed a counsellor to the Australian High Commission in India.

In 1946 Dexter had accepted a commission from Gavin Long, Australia’s second official war historian, to write volume six of Australia’s official history of World War II.

In doing this he consciously adopted the method of the first official historian, Charles Bean, when writing his own official history, by gathering all his material into six 'master diaries.' Much of his writing was undertaken while he served as first secretary of the Australian High Commission in Ceylon (1952–55). He completed his lengthy manuscript in 1959 and the book, *The New Guinea Offensives*, appeared in 1961. It was warmly reviewed as 'a splendid readable and authoritative account' (Mackie and Ross 1992).

Appointed secretary of the Australian Universities Commission in 1960 on the urging of (Sir) John Bunting, he relished his new opportunities. Sir Leslie Martin chaired the commission and had the ear of Prime Minister (Sir) Robert Menzies. Dexter found that 'any recommendations you made were bound to go through' (Dexter 1976). He wrote much of the commission's findings on Australian universities (the Martin Report). Resigning from the commission in 1967, he was recruited by the Australian National University (ANU) as registrar (property and plans) where he had responsibility for development of the grounds and buildings. Successful completion of numerous projects has been attributed to his 'sensitivity to people's needs and aspirations, combined with huge administrative competence, a card index mind, close attention to detail, and Puckish energy' (Mackie and Ross 1992, 11).

Dexter retired in May 1978 on medical grounds. He retained great respect for the people of South-East Asia, most notably the Timorese, for whom he felt a special affinity. He was also a regular researcher at the Australian War Memorial, to which he had donated his father's important letters and diaries. His book, *The ANU Campus*, a history of the ANU site, was published in 1991. Survived by his wife and five children (one son had predeceased him), he died at home in Canberra on 15 March 1992 and was cremated. A generous and gregarious man with many friends, his first and lasting love was for Freda and their children. He had a wide interest in politics and respected politicians and parliament.

Research edited by Brian Wimborne

J.A.C. Mackie and I.G. Ross 'Obituary: David St Alban Dexter' *ANU Reporter* Wednesday 24 June 1992: 11. <https://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/dexter-david-st-alban-307>

OBITUARY: DAVID ST ALBAN DEXTER

DAVID Dexter, for 11 formative years (1968-78) the University's Registrar (Property and Plans), died on 15 March, aged 75.

Just a few months before he had seen the publication of his book, *The ANU Campus*, which brings together in accessible form the convoluted history, from the earliest days, of the site on which the University stands and which it holds in trust for generations to come.

David Dexter was born in the English cathedral city for which he was named but came to Australia as an infant. He was brought up near Geelong, where his father was the vicar of a rural parish and also of Geelong Grammar where the young Dexter was educated.

He took a history degree at Melbourne and was teaching at Grimwade House in the early years of the war when he enlisted for army service.

His military career was remarkable. He was one of the handful of officers of the 2/2nd Independent Company on Timor, which defied the Japanese throughout 1942, the darkest year of World War II, despite lack of radio contact with Darwin for most of the that time.

Later he was nearly killed in another perilous commando operation up the Ramu Valley in New Guinea, far into Japanese territory again, for which he was mentioned in despatches. By the end of the war he was a Major, commanding the 2/4th Independent Company at the Tarakan landing in Kalimantan. He was wounded five times. This was an impressive record for a man who joined up as a private and was one of the first volunteers for Colonel Spencer Chapman's embryonic (and seemingly bizarre at the time) commando unit on Wilson's Promontory in early 1941.

After the war he became a diplomat in the newly established Department of External Affairs, working closely with H.V. Evatt at the United Nations. He later served in the Australian High Commissions in Colombo and in Delhi and then as head of the foreign aid division of DEA during its formative years. He took time out also to write Part VI of the *Official War History, The New Guinea Offensives*, a splendid readable and authoritative account.

In 1960 he became Secretary of the Australian Universities Commission in its earliest years, and he was heavily involved in the work that went into preparation of the influential Martin Report of 1964, which he virtually wrote on the Commission's behalf.

When eventually (1967) he wanted to resign from the AUC, he was quickly and deftly recruited by the ANU. Shortly after he was designated as Registrar responsible for the University's estate and fabric and for the preparation of its triennial submissions to the Commission he had just left.

The Dexter years in Buildings and Grounds saw a major development program which included RSBS; the Mathematical Sciences, Leonard Huxley, A.D. Hope, John Dedman and Biochemistry buildings; Melville Hall; the Coombs Theatre; the Union; Graduate House and Toad Hall; and two ovals. To start, a new site plan was commissioned, with Dusseldorp of Lend Lease, as the Chairman of the B&G Committee, eager to apply public sector practices in an academic milieu. The conflicting backgrounds of key players made for interesting watching: Dexter seemed unperturbed. The tempo of activity increased; the strong and representative B&G committee, now under John Yencken, gained in experience.

But the success of the complex program was due primarily to Dexter's sensitivity to people's needs and aspirations, combined with huge administrative competence, a card index mind, close attention to detail, and Puckish energy. Especially notable was the way he extracted maximum value out of lump-sum triennial provisions for cost escalation by having his priority project tenders signed up on almost the first day of each new triennium.

Off duty, David Dexter was warm and companionable (and quite often thirsty), and at his nearby home in Turner he and Freda - they married during the war, in 1944 - raised a loving family. Their tributes to him were delivered movingly and eloquently at his lay funeral - while a son of the church, his life experiences had led him away from formal religions.

The stresses of a notable life caught up with him in 1978, when he was medically retired from 1 May. That formal date of retirement was unmarked by any immediate change in his work style or habits. It just meant that every manifesto and file note written for some weeks thereafter bore the date 1/5/78.

A little later, the Vice-Chancellor of the day, Anthony Low, wrote to him to put on record his 'central responsibility for the development of this remarkable campus, and as one historian to another to invite him to set down the story of the site and of our often tortuous relations with government authorities.

David Dexter worked on this task for years. Its completion, ISBN 0731512162, was his final gift to the University.

J.A.C. Mackie

"OBITUARY: David Dexter Public servant, war hero" *The Canberra Times* (ACT : 1926 - 1995) 25 March 1992: 20. Web 11 June 2025 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article122405833>>.

OBITUARY: David Dexter

Public servant, war hero

Former ANU administrator, war hero, diplomat, historian and prominent public servant David Dexter, 75, of Turner, died on March 15.

The son of an Anglican clergyman, Mr Dexter was born in St Albans, England, in 1917, and moved to Victoria after World War I. Educated at Geelong Grammar School, Mr Dexter worked as a part-time teacher while studying arts at the University of Melbourne before enlisting in the Australian Imperial Forces in 1940.

in 1941 he volunteered for a special duties unit, 2 Independent Company, later renamed 2/2 Commando Squadron, which fought the Japanese in Timor in a famous guerrilla warfare campaign during 1942 after the rest of the Australian forces on Timor surrendered.

2/2 Commando Squadron was withdrawn from Timor and sent to Papua New Guinea, where Mr Dexter was twice wounded. He rose to the rank of major and commanded 2/4 Commando Squadron in Borneo and New Britain.

After leaving the army in 1946, Mr Dexter joined the Department of External Affairs, representing Australia at the United Nations, in Ceylon and India. He also worked part-time as the Australian War Memorial's war historian for Volume 6 of the official war history, *The New Guinea Offensives*, published in 1961.

From 1960 to 1967, Mr Dexter served as secretary of the Universities Commission, presiding over the increase of universities at that time and developing planning for the Colleges of Advanced Education system.

Mr Dexter moved to the ANU in 1968 as Registrar (Property and Plans), overseeing the university's landscaping and development until his retirement in 1978.

He is survived by his wife, Freda, and four surviving children.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

David Dexter (No. 2 Independent Company) - David Dexter interviewed by Mel Pratt for the Mel Pratt collection, National Library of Australia [sound recording] - 25 August–21 September 1976 - ca. 274 min.

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-221579220/listen>

Prepared by Ed Willis

Revised 16 May 2026

JAP TACTICS.

As distinct from their August drive when they advanced cautiously but with overwhelming numbers, with a screen of native Scouts and O.P.s, and with the aid of mortars, field guns and dogs, the Japs during their September drive down the MONDISEE VALLEY advanced as though they owned all the Island. Their only weapon at all able to deal with the Australians was their Vickers and this was used inefficiently. The Japs advanced towards ANARO during afternoon of SEP 25, with only a few natives ahead. When fired on the natives did not know what to do. The Japs seemed very surprised when fired on and I consider their carelessness was due to the fact that their rice plains over the ANARO - MONDISEE area during the 3 previous days had opened no movement.

As once the Japs did the division and advanced down the track as we hoped they would until they sprung our ambush. A general stampede ensued when they were fired on until they threw up ramparts of stones on the outer side of the mountain track. Here they lay in rather an aimless fashion until they were either killed by Bren Gun fire or they withdrew. Subsequent investigation of this position showed signs of a forward R.P. Also 2 freshly cut beamless may have been for a forward wireless station.

From my observations of the 4 1/2 hour fight, I am convinced that when surprised the Jap is a delinquent. His fieldcraft was very bad. When he was first fired on, for he first stood or lay on the open track. Then he climbed to higher ground and presented a beautiful target against the skyline. He made for divisions positions such as prominent native huts upon which our Brens already had the range.

His first Vickers was put out of action by PTE ST. MARK'S first burst. His other Vickers only got two bursts during the whole afternoon anywhere near our position. After half an hour the Japs pushed their natives down from the road and attempted to cross the GOUTEE RIVER to our positions on the opposite side. They waded into our fifth Bren and fled.

AUSTRALIAN TACTICS. This ambush seems to me to be the ideal kind of action to adopt against the Jap at present. The range varied between 500 and 1000 yards. This enabled the vastly superior marksmanship of the Australians to be exploited to the full. It was a field day for

Buns and rifles, particularly the Surfer's rifles.

After dark it was impossible for one and a half sections to hold up 400 Japs and natives, so we withdrew to watch the obvious approach to AMARO. However the Jap climbed from the GOOSENE RIVER straight over the AMARO saddle and entered AMARO at about 0400 hrs 26 SEP without our knowledge. In their subsequent questioning of priests and natives the Japs gained no idea of the direction in which we had gone.

JAP CHARACTERISTICS IN AMARO.

The Japs behaved well in AMARO. They slept during the day in the PALACE, the Rest Home, the Secretary and the Hospital, while their natives provided the patrols and scoured the vicinity of AMARO for horses.

Following information comes from the priests -

a. Treatment. Japs treated priests well but gave the red bearded priest \$5 for his watch, his glasses, all his cutlery, all his fowls and pigs, and his three horses. A Jap Scout and Captain with 2 silver stars and 3 silver stars respectively on red collar patches spoke to the priests through their 2 Chinese interpreters, told the priests that there were 20 Christians among the Japs, grinned at the mindless and suddenly cleared out in a great hurry, woke the troops and left for AMAROE.

b. Movement. The Japs kept asking the Priest how many Christians there were, and where they had gone. The Japs then said the Japs were going to ~~AMAROE~~ MAPE. Such was their haste when they left, that they dropped many footstuffs. One good horse was too noisy, and a native slew it slowly with a knife.

c. Dress uniforms - Age of Japs.

all Japs were dressed in khaki shirts, long khaki pants, Aussie boots and skull caps with their helmets hanging on their backs. all Japs had a rectangular colour patch of either red or white above their left breast. They were armed with Vickers, T30's, Johnson Automatics and Smith rifles. The Japs were of a very small size.

d. Condition and morale of Japs.

Japs were very tired when they arrived at AMARO. They flopped into sleep immediately inside locked doors.

The priests said they appeared very frightened of the Australians, and when at native house near Belov in the hills there was a great commotion. The natives told the priests that the Australians were bad men for killing many of them.

NATIVES

Of the 400 enemy who entered AINARO about 100 were natives from DUTCH TIMOR, LIOBUCA and MAUBARA. Most spoke Malay. About half were dressed in motley Australian and Dutch uniforms and some were armed with rifles.

The local natives were very loyal and vanished from AINARO. They did not give away our hideout perhaps because they did not know it. It was quite like old times to have the natives bringing in food in adversity.

CONDITION OF AINARO AFTER SAP OCCUPATION.

The Japs left the Poste skintily alone. They merely cut the telephone line to AISABE and ginned at the rubberers. They made no attempt to find our stores and even left our large supplies of potatoes and coffee untouched. They only kicked over two potted plants on the steps of the Palace and actually used the corner places as latrines, using water to wash it down. They left very few traces and altogether behaved as though AINARO were sacred, or as though the Governor had told them to go easy. They seemed very upset that the Chef de Poste and the King had not extended hospitality to them.

TRACES OF SAPS. (ARTICLES UNDER SEPARATE COVER)

- a. The bundle of jells and the tin of ointment accompanying this report were found near the site which we think was the assumed RAP.
- b. The cartridge cases were found at the spot where the Japs first replied to our fire.
- c. The papers were found in the various buildings.
- d. The opened tin of dried piment ? was found in the Palace.
- e. The Jap Sento collar patch was found outside the Palace.
- f. The biscuits were found in the street.
- g. The note book containing the Moore code was found by the Priest outside his house after the officers had left.

4.

B.

The priests said there were about 6-10 skeletons carried with occupants by the Japs.

At the scene of action a cursory examination revealed no graves, skulls or bones, but there were traces of large pits which the natives say were used for burning the dead.

The position will be further investigated.

The priests say that Chief Anemis of NUNAMIOGUE removed a Jap Pistol from a dead Jap. I shall attempt to recover same.

(Signed) J. DEXTER, LIEUT.
28 SEP 42.

6. Every day the Japans are out marching. They also indulge in much shooting practice. Always they can be heard singing war songs. All ranks spread propaganda to the effect that they are only out to kill all white men, and the natives need not fear them.

7. BILLEDS.

all troops are billeted within the town area.

ADMIN'S HOUSE. Apparently an officers mess and is always inhabited by Liepts and Lieuts.

PALACE. CHRIS-FIEN seemed sure that there was one or more higher officers in AILEU, and that they occupy the PALACE.

He could not remember having seen an officer of higher rank than Capt but reckons the Jap troops and natives also pay tribute when passing the building.

SENTRIES. There are many sentries placed around the Palace on duty day and night.

Every billet that is occupied by troops also has one sentry on duty constantly.

EMPLACEMENTS. There are two guns (probably Vickers) mounted on the small hill TOCALULI side of AILEU (no definite position given) and many troops men and camp nearby the guns. (may be PIA defense).

11 SEP 42.

Our patrols have just brought in another native (half-caste Arab) boy. His name is MARTIEUSE. This boy was BROVER! (British servant in DILLI) servant.

He ran away from DILLI and recently spent three weeks in AILEU. ~~But~~ on being interrogated with mixed questions he corroborated in detail with information gleaned from CHRIS-FIEN.

The only additional information offered by MARTIEUSE was:-