New Guinea Gold: Commando comics in the Pacific

By Dr Philip Cass & Dr Jonathan (Jack) Ford
Abstract

Commando comics have always been well regarded by their readers for the accuracy of its depictions of conflict and the research that goes into each story.

However, much of Commando is Anglo and Euro-Centric, operating with clearly defined tropes. Stories may be improbable, but rarely impossible.

However, there are times when the stories move beyond the known, when the borders of geography, history, time, narrative, ethnicity and probability become stretched and break.

Drawing on depictions of the war in Burma, Papua New Guinea and Australia, this paper looks at the ways in which this loss of boundaries provides a space for narratives that are often far more complex than those presented within the more constrained boundaries of European theatres of conflict.

Yet while the blurring of geographical boundaries, the reconstruction of historical reality and overriding of local perceptions of identity has sometimes led to the creation of stories that verge on the fantastical, they are still bounded by the invisible frameworks of assumptions and expectations about how people must behave, the roles of particular ethnic or national groups and the unspoken assumptions about culture, society and empire of the period 1939-45.
Jungle madness

“Stories set in the jungles of Malay and Burma are, like all other Commando comics, packed with action and adventure. But there is something about these plots that really get the writers in top gear and they pull out all the stops.

Who couldn't get enthusiastic about ambushes, impenetrable undergrowth, mysterious caves, deep river gorges flooded by monsoons, samurai swords, slithering snakes, fiendish fevers, strange cries in the night, menacing idols, dangerous insects and animals added to the usual threats from bullets and bombs?”

George Low, Rumble in the Jungle (2008).
A question of accuracy

“[Commando] is not a history book. It is not a documentary. It is not an ethnographical text book. It is not a 100% accurate depiction of participants in war. It is not a photographically accurate rendering of images.

Commando strives to provide an authentic and accurate background to stories of action and adventure — described elsewhere as modern morality tales. At no point does it say, “this is what happened in reality.” Generally we like to think that we use plots that “could” have happened.”

Callum Laird, personal communication, 2014.

[Illustration: In the Shark’s Lair, 1984]
Attention to detail

And yet, it is precisely its attention to historical detail for which Commando is famous. With illustrations of uniforms, unit badges, weapons and aeroplanes it was a great educational resource.
“Stone the wombats!”

All of these comics display their lack of cultural awareness by their frequent misuse of Antipodean English. Much of what is used as colourful language to enhance a storyline, is dated and so no longer in current use in either country. This is appropriate as these graphic novels are set during the Second World War.

It is difficult for a modern reader to assess whether the slang was in common use during the 1930s and the 1940s. Where Commando fails most often is in allotting nicknames to characters to indicate their nationality.

An Australian may be nicknamed ‘Digger’, while a New Zealander may be highlighted by the use of ‘Kiwi’. Both nicknames are inappropriate. During World War Two, Australian soldiers collectively referred to themselves ad ‘Diggers’ in order to differentiate them from their World War One predecessors, who were known as ANZACS. As any Australian serviceman could be a ‘Digger’ it was highly unlikely that an individual would accept this as his nickname. Similarly, ‘Kiwi’ is the collective slang term for any New Zealander. It would be pointless for a New Zealand serviceman to have a personal nickname of ‘Kiwi’. This is illustrated in the Commando story Mosquito Ace. In a RAF squadron crewed entirely by New Zealanders, the squadron’s commander is known as ‘Kiwi’ Dean to his men.
Reality and art

Joe Sacco’s comics-as journalism (Footnotes in Gaza (2009), Palestine, 1991) makes it clear that the art form can be hyper-realistic because of the mundane details as well as the depiction of horrors.

His Bayeux tapestry-like reconstruction of the Battle of the Somme (2013) is equally detailed and realistic even though it is quite clearly a work of art as much as a historical recreation.
The problem of reality

But reality can have its problems.

Mizuki’s Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths (Sōin Gyokusai Seyo!, 1973, English tr., 2011) is based on his recollections of his time with the Japanese occupation forces in Rabaul, but is essentially a universal story of drunken, disaffected, abused, sex obsessed recruits who all die pointlessly.

Using a mixture of artistic techniques and intending to evoke sympathy through its biographical detail, as a depiction of reality it fails utterly because it ignores the horrors Mizuki and his comrades inflicted on indigenous people, POWs and civilians alike.

Despite an implicit claim that because it is autobiographical it must be true, it is in many ways a lie.
A wild mix

Mizuki’s graphic novel is a rare ‘serious’ attempts to depict the war in Asia and the Pacific.

Visually it is correct in its depiction of Rabaul, but this is not always the case.

Even a graphic novel such as Hugo Pratt’s Corto Maltese tale, *Ballad of the Salt Sea* (*La Ballade de la Mer Salee*, 1975; Eng tr. 1996) is a wild mix of ethnographic detail, imagination and fragments of reality.
Iron clad comics

Other comics have represented the Second World War in the Pacific with varying degrees of accuracy.

The American *Iron Corporal* depicted the adventures of an American fighting with the Australians who somehow stayed alive because his real ribs had been replaced by iron ones which, naturally, deflected Japanese bullets.

There have also been a number of American comics depicting the fighting in the Pacific in a more or less documentary form.

[Illustration: *The Iron Corporal*, 1:30, 1969]
Comics as history

These are more history comics than fictional war stories comics. Issue Number 34, January 1972, which is entitled *Fighting Back in New Guinea*, the first year of the Papua and New Guinea Campaign is covered. It begins on 23 January 1942 and ends on 23 January 1943. While the storyline and illustrations are far more accurate than the Charlton Comics examples, there remain some glaring errors.

The Australians are shown reaching Sanananda and Gona on Papua’s north coast before they had driven the Japanese all the way back along the Kokoda Track; and the ‘Golden Staircase’ terraced entry path is shown at the northern end of the Track and not, where it was, at the southern end, near Port Moresby.

Being an American war comic it refers to the fighting along the Kokoda Trail and not, as the Australians, who fought there called it, the Kokoda Track.

[Illustration: *Combat* No.32, 1972]
At the mercy of the Scots

Since the collapse of the Australian comic industry in the 1960s under the pressure of American imports (and excluding one-offs like the Z Beach graphic novel *Kokoda*) the war in the Pacific and in Asia have been largely the province of Commando comics, which remains the longest running and most popular war comic in the Commonwealth.

Those of us living in the antipodes are, therefore, somewhat at the mercy of this hybrid offspring of a Scots publishing house, English writers and South American artists.
We will now look at four Commando stories and discuss how they represent our part of the world.
Outback Army (1989)

While very entertaining, this is an example of a total fantasy storyline that is based on a few shreds of historical fact. The Japanese did capture some Blenheim IV bombers and Hurricane II fighters, but on Java and not Singapore, as suggested. The Dragon Rapide was a standard civil aircraft in Australia. In 1942, the three Australian Imperial Force divisions (6th, 7th & 9th) returning to Australia from the Middle East, did carry some German and Italian war trophies. The Axis vehicles were then sent to the 1st Armoured Division's firing range at Puckapunyal, Victoria, where they were destroyed for target practice. So, the Afrika Corps half-tracks and kubelwagen featured in this comic have some basis in fact, but the rest of the storyline does not.

How a group of merchant seamen, civilian miners and Aborigines learn to use this enemy equipment is not explained. That a fleet of Japanese merchantmen could invade Western Australia, unseen, in 1942, was impossible. The terrain depicted maybe 'The Outback' but it is not what is found in north-western Australia, which is more rocky cliffs and canyons than the flat desert that is drawn.
Stereotypes abound. The Japanese all die, usually due to weak tactics. The Japanese soldiers appear to be poorly armed with standard infantry weapons, as no grenades or machine guns are employed by the invaders.

The Australians, including the Aborigines and the Muslim Afghan cameleers are all deadly shots. The Allied warriors are all heroic, while the Japanese are either nasty or hopeless cannon-fodder.

It is the inclusion of 1980s political concepts into this story that show the misconceptions employed in this comic. While set in 1942, amidst the ‘White Australia Policy’ period, the comic features the late, postwar concept of Aboriginal sacred sites. Defiled by the Japanese, a sacred site is still recognised and respected by two white men, one of whom is Irish.

In 1940s’ Australia, respect for Aboriginal sacred sites was largely unknown. This would have been more so for someone from Europe. All of these errors illustrate how the writers of Commando know so little about the ‘ANZACs’ in the Pacific War.

[Illustration: Outback Army 1989]
War in the Wet (2004)

This is another comic using the plot of a Japanese attack on north-western Australia. The Japanese never envisaged invading this bit of Australia, as it had no road or rail network and each of its few ports was completely isolated.

‘The Wet’ refers to the monsoonal weather, which features twice as a plot device. Clichés are invoked. Even though most Second World War Australians were urban dwellers, the comic again focuses on the tough men of ‘The Outback’.

While the hero begins, as a naive university student, he learns bushcraft, aided by a local named ‘Bluey’, an Aussie nickname beloved by Commando.

The hero battles Germans in the Western Desert and in Greece, where he has a run-in with the SS. These Nazis are all heartless murderers and the plot follows a standard revenge storyline. The evil SS are made POWs and exiled to north-western Australia, where the hero is also sent to recuperate from his wounds.
The Japanese and the Nazi HQ concoct a scheme to invade this place, including freeing and arming the POWs to aid the attack. The hero leads a platoon of raw but tough Australian recruits to track the SS.

The recruits, again, are all expert shots, who destroy the SS, aided by the area’s rugged terrain, including its deadly snakes and crocodiles. Stereotypes are maintained, such as the Germans being more professional and so more formidable soldiers than the hapless Japanese.

An Australian helps the SS, only because he is a criminal and even he dislikes the SS.

It is the secondary storyline that veers, absurdly into the environmental message popular in the ‘Oughties. The hero develops a bond with the legendary crocodile ‘Old Sawtooth’.

Finally, the crocodile saves the hero from the chief SS villain. This storyline was most likely inspired by the then popularity of Steve Irwin, television’s The Crocodile Hunter.
Halt or Die (1969)

This is probably the most egregiously silly story we have come across. The boundaries of reality, time, space and geography are ripped apart and put back together in ways that defy belief.
For a start, the two heroes are Australian infantrymen fighting in Burma. There were no Australian infantry in Burma. The Australian government thwarted an attempt by Churchill to divert two Australian divisions there.
Then there is the plot, which involves an attempt to recover a box of gold that has been thrown out of a DC3 and which was intended for the Chinese. Fair enough – lost treasure is a standard plot device for stories set in the Pacific and Far East.
But then our heroes stumble on a tribe of what are quite clearly New Guinea highlanders, who have somehow wandered into Burma.
But then it turns out that our heroes have to prove themselves to the wandering Highlanders – by using boomerangs and woomeras which are Australian Aboriginal weapons. Fortunately, one of our antipodean heroes has whiled away the time during their trek through the jungle whittling a boomerang. As you do. Naturally, this is not a problem, for he has been schooled in the art of Aboriginal weaponry and deeply impresses the wandering New Guinea Highlanders. In terms of how badly the borders of credibility can be stretched and with what disregard reality can be treated, this story quite takes one’s breath away.

[Illustration: *Halt - or Die!,* 1969]
Idol of Hate (1976)

In the popular consciousness of the western allies there were good Germans and Italians even during the Second World War. Rommel was admired in the way the British army has always admired people who have given them a good thrashing and it was not too long before post war depictions of the enemy began to paint the former enemies in a sympathetic light. Indeed if you watched films like Ice Cold in Alex or The Best of Enemies you might think that the Germans and Italians in Africa were really decent chaps after all and that it was a pity we couldn’t just all get along. But good Japanese?

This is what Idol of Hate offers and it is a story that I suspect really stretches the boundaries of what might have been acceptable or believable to Commando readers of a certain generation. Just as Outback Army inserted anachronistic attitudes towards Aborigines, so some readers in 1976 might have found the idea of a good Japanese as equally out of place.
If you had grown up in Australia during the 1960s and 70s with stories of Japanese atrocities, of the death railway in Burma or the massacre at Tol plantation, or been to PNG and seen the graves of all those 18 year olds in Bomana cemetery outside Port Moresby then the idea of a good Japanese would have been, to most people, inconceivable. This reflected the war time opinion, for as Kowner and Demel (2012) note: “there was no Japanese equivalent of the ‘Good German’ in the popular consciousness of the Western Allies.” In this sense, for Commando to have depicted good Japanese (and there are several Commando stories which reflect this theme) was to push against very deeply held cultural boundaries.
So what are we to make of all this?

The Burmese jungle and the Australian outback appear to be places so far beyond the borders of Commando’s world that anything can happen. Countries and people become mixed up and historical details fly out the window.

And yet for all the strangeness and occasional absurdity of these stories, the fact is that they are based on real elements, even when those fragments of truth are sorely abused. No matter how far outside the boundaries of geography and reality they stray, the central characters are governed by certain inexorable rules. Indigenous people, ‘the natives’ as they were called only a lifetime ago, play a prominent part in many of these stories. Even when modern day ideas of cultural sensitivity are imposed upon them, the fact is that the role of the local people, even when egregiously transplanted from New Guinea to Burma, is to fight bravely for the white man. One is reminded of a caption in another Commando story, *McGinty’s Mob*, about a Pioneer Battalion, which is described as containing – among other flotsam, such as “anti-Nazi Germans, Czechs and Poles... natives of the colonies and India, men willing to do anything for the king-emperor.”

The Australians will behave outrageously as they always do in Commando comics. More importantly, they will always win, with the indigenous people, the jungle and the wildlife helping them along.

Sinkholes full of snakes and giant crocodiles will despatch Germans and treacherous natives alike, but not our heroes. No matter how fantastic the stories, the outcomes are always set in very firm boundaries.
**About the authors**

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A journal article, ‘What are you waiting for, Diggers? The ANZAC image in Commando comics’ based on a paper presented to the Media, War and Memory conference at Auckland University of Technology is due for publication at the end of this year.