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During the past two centuries the load carried by individual infantry soldiers on operations has been an area of concern for all armies, especially when infantry operated independently and away from base areas, mobility and regular re-supply. This concern can be seen in the official histories and especially in books and research papers that deal specifically with infantry operations. The only campaigns where the weights carried by individual soldiers are not mentioned are those where the soldiers are carrying out a short-duration operation from a firm base or defensive position or are operating with vehicles that carry their large packs, additional equipment and support weapons.

In the early 1900s it was determined that a man should carry more than one-third of his own body weight and this led most armies during the twentieth century to determine that the ideal load for a soldier should be about 45 pounds (20.5 kilograms). More recent industrial research has determined that a workman can carry a maximum weight of up to 88 pounds (40 kilograms), however the duration for carriage of this load is not specified.

The infantryman's load over the past two centuries regardless of changes in technology has always consisted of clothing and footwear, weapons and ammunition, rations and water, operational equipment, individual hygiene requirements, shelter and sleeping equipment. To carry this load the infantryman has worn a variety of belt and harness combinations to which a variety of pouches, water bottles, small packs, ammunition bandoliers and equipment carriers have been attached to make up what is commonly identified as either fighting or patrol order. The weight of this load including the soldier's weapon has usually worked out at between 30 to 50 pounds. This is a fighting load and would sustain a soldier for a period of ideally up to 12 hours and no more than 24 hours. To be able to operate in the field for a period of longer than 24 hours, the soldier

requires his large pack containing rations, shelter, sleeping equipment, spare clothing, additional ammunition and operational equipment. When wearing fighting order and large pack the soldier is in marching order and the weight carried has usually worked out at between 60 to 100 pounds and on occasions since the late 1950s of weights in excess of 100 pounds.

This research from a wide variety of sources concentrates on loads for Australian infantrymen in the twentieth century, however for interest I have also added the weights carried by British infantrymen on operations during the nineteenth century to provide a more complete picture of the problem and to cover the period of Australian military history.

British Infantry, early 1800s (Napoleonic Wars): 50 pounds (22.7kg) to 75 pounds (34kg) (up to 80 pounds (36.4kg) if extra rations were carried).

British Infantry, 1850s (Crimean War): 68 pounds (30.9kg) (three days rations and a blanket).

British Infantry, 1882: marching order – 56 pounds (25.45kg) reduced to 38 pounds (17.25kg) when the knapsack was carried by regimental transport.

British Infantry 1899-1903 (Boer War): fighting order with rolled greatcoat – about 40 pounds (18.18kg) and marching order of around 58 pounds (26.4kg).

British Infantry 1911: marching order – 58.25 pounds (26.45kg).

British and Australian Infantry 1914-1918 (World War I)
Marching Order:

1914 – 59 pounds (26.8kg).

1916 – 66 pounds (30kg) (addition of helmet, grenades, etc).

1918 – 74 pounds (33.65kg) (summer) and 80 pounds (36.35kg) (winter) (add 14 pounds (6.35kg) during wet and muddy conditions).

Australian Infantry 1939-1945 (World War II):

Western Desert

Bardia (1941) and El Alamein (1942) – 48 pounds (21.8kg) to 70 pounds (31.8kg) for deliberate attacks on foot.
(At El Alamein soldiers carrying 2-3 days rations).

New Guinea

Kokoda Track (September 1942) – average loads of 45 pounds (20.45kg) to 55 pounds (25kg) (soldiers carrying 6 days rations).

Wau-Mubo-Salamaua (May-July 1943) – loads of 60 pounds (27.25kg) to 100 pounds (45.45kg).

Lae Landing, 2/17 Battalion (3 September 1943) – fighting order loads of around 35 pounds (15.9kg) to 40 pounds (18.2kg).

Huon Peninsula (September 1943-January 1944) – loads of 80 pounds (36.35kg) to 90 pounds (40.9kg).

Torricelli Mountains, 2/6 Battalion (February 1945) – loads of 60 pounds (27.25kg) plus.

Australian Infantry, Malayan Emergency (1955-1960): soldiers carried 7-10 days rations.

3 RAR (1957-59) – average load 80 pounds (36.35kg).
Owen gunner – 66 pounds (30kg).
Bren Gunner – 84 pounds (38.2kg).

Australian Army Infantry Section Leading Pamphlet (1956):

Rifleman – 58 pounds (26.35kg).
Machine Gunner – 68 pounds (30.9kg).
Signaller – 64 pounds (29.1kg).

Malay-Thai Border Operations, 2 RAR (1963):

loads of up to 90 pounds (40.9kg).

Borneo – Confrontation (1964-1966): soldiers carried 7-10 days rations.

loads of 41 pounds (18.65kg) to 114 pounds (51.8kg).

4 RAR (1966) – average load for a rifleman was 88 pounds (40 kg).
Average load for a radio operator or machine gunner was over 100 pounds (45.45kg).

Vietnam (1964-1971): soldiers carried 5-7 days rations and 5-9 water bottles.

1 RAR (1965-66) – Mortar Platoon MFC with Radio Set AN/PRC 25, three days rations and four water bottles - 123 pounds (55.9 kg)

8 RAR (1969-70) -
Machine Gunner - 105 pounds (47.72 kg)
Platoon Commander - 80 pounds (36.35 kg)

4 RAR (1971) - average loads of 77 pounds (35 kg) to 88 pounds (40 kg)
Radio Operators - loads of up to 105 pounds (47.7 kg), probably applied to machine gunners as well.

Falkland Islands (1982), British Infantry and Royal Marines:

Fighting Order loads of 70 pounds (31.8 kg) to 80 pounds (36.35 kg)
Marching order loads of around 100 pounds (45.45 kg) to 120 pounds (54.55 kg)

Grenada (1983), United States Rangers: sustained operations for 72 hours.

Marching Order loads of around 120 pounds (54.55 kg).

Infantry Rifleman (July 1984) DINF Discussion Paper:

Average load in marching order - 101 pounds (46 kg)

Australian Army, The Rifle Platoon Pamphlet (1986):

Average load for the member of an infantry section carrying three days rations, four water bottles, water bladder, helmet and a share of section equipment and ammunition was 103 pounds (47 kg)

Infantry Rifleman, Depot Company RAR (November 1995)

Marching order, personal equipment only - 86 pounds (39 kg)

Marching order, including a share of section equipment - 101 pounds (49 kg).