

## **New Guinea**

### **Salamaua**

The 3rd Australian Division slowly fought its way towards Salamaua in a series of exacting and grim battles from April to August 1943 in a campaign largely overshadowed by the Papuan campaign that preceded it and by the capture of Lae that followed. The Salamaua campaign was designed to screen the preparations for the Lae offensive and to act as a magnet to draw reinforcements from Lae to Salamaua. The capture of Lae, the centre of the Japanese defensive line in New Guinea, was the allied target after the defeat of the Japanese in Papua. General Sir Thomas Blamey, the Australian Commander-in-Chief, directed that Salamaua be starved out after Lae was captured.

The Japanese landed at Lae and Salamaua on 8 March 1942. The New Guinea Volunteer Rifles and survivors of the 2/22nd Battalion from Rabaul destroyed all military supplies and withdrew into the hinterland where they observed the Japanese build-up. In May, Kanga Force, which included the 2/5th Independent Company, was airlifted into Wau to operate as a guerrilla force against the Japanese in the Markham Valley. On 29 June Kanga force raided Salamaua inflicting heavy casualties and capturing the first Japanese equipment and documents taken by the Australian Army. On 31 August a strong Japanese group arrived at Mubo but with the Japanese on the offensive along the Kokoda Trail and at Milne Bay reinforcements were not available for Kanga Force until October when 2/7th Independent Company joined.

### **Wau**

In response to the defeat in Papua, the Japanese resolved to strengthen their hold on New Guinea. In January 1943, 3000 Japanese troops set out from Mubo along winding jungle tracks to seize Wau airfield. The Victorian 17th Brigade (2/5th, 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions) was flown into Wau to repel the Japanese advance. At the height of the crisis on 30 January, Japanese shots fell on the airfield as the troops disembarked. The last Japanese offensive to gain new ground in New Guinea was stopped by the Australians but they did not have the strength to go onto the offensive. The Australian units in the Wau-Bulolo area were completely dependent on air support for reinforcements as well as supplies.

### **Battle of the Bismarck Sea**

The RAAF and US Army Air Force (USAAF) also conducted offensive missions against the Japanese. In the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in early March, the RAAF and USAAF destroyed a Japanese convoy which attempted to reinforce Lae. All eight transports and four of eight escorting destroyers were sunk. Nearly 3000 Japanese were killed and only 850 troops were landed at Lae. Throughout March, the RAAF continued its air attack on the Salamaua Isthmus. On 16 March, Flight Lt William Newton of 22 Squadron, RAAF flew his Boston bomber through intense and accurate shell fire and although his aircraft was repeatedly hit, he held to his course and bombed his target from a low level. The attack resulted in the destruction of many buildings and dumps including two 40,000 gallon fuel installations. Newton managed to fly his crippled aircraft back to base and successfully land. Two days later, he again attacked Salamaua at low level but this time was shot down and captured. On 29 March he was executed by the Japanese. For his ten months operational flying but particularly for his actions on 16 March he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. The citations states that:

'Flight Lieutenant William Ellis Newton served with No. 22 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, in New Guinea from May 1942 to March 1943 and completed 52 operational sorties. Throughout, he displayed great courage and an iron determination to inflict the utmost damage on the enemy. His splendid offensive flying and fighting were attended with brilliant success. Disdaining evasive tactics when under the heaviest fire, he always went straight to his objective. He carried out many daring machine-gun attacks on enemy positions involving low-flying over long distances in the face of continuous fire at point-blank range. On three occasions, he dived through intense anti-aircraft fire to release his bombs on important targets on the Salamaua Isthmus. On one of these occasions, his starboard engine failed over the target, but he succeeded in flying back to an airfield 160 miles away.

When leading an attack on an objective on 16 March 1943, he dived through intense and accurate shell fire and his aircraft was hit repeatedly. Nevertheless, he held to his course and bombed his target from low level. The attack resulted in destruction of many buildings and dumps, including two 40,000 gallon fuel installations. Although his aircraft was crippled, with fuselage and wing sections torn, petrol tanks pierced, main-planes and engines seriously damaged, and one of the main tyres flat, Flight Lieutenant Newton managed to fly back to base and make a successful landing. Despite this harassing experience, he returned next day to the same locality. His target, this time a single building, was even more difficult but he again attacked with his usual courage and resolution, flying a steady course through a barrage of fire. He scored a hit on the building but at the same moment his aircraft burst into flames.

Flight Lieutenant Newton maintained control and calmly turned his aircraft away and flew along the shore. He saw it as his duty to keep the aircraft in the air as long as he could so as to take his crew as far away as possible from the enemy's positions. With great skill, he brought his blazing aircraft down on the water. Two members of the crew were able to extricate themselves and were seen swimming to the

shore, but the gallant pilot is missing. According to other air crews who witnessed the occurrence, his escape hatch was not opened and his dinghy was not inflated. Without regard to his own safety, he had done all that man could do to prevent his crew from falling into enemy hands. Flight Lieutenant Newton's many examples of conspicuous bravery have rarely been equalled and will serve as a shining inspiration to all who follow him.' (London Gazette: 19 October 1943)

### **3rd Division**

On 23 April, the 3rd Division under command of Major-General Savige assumed control in the Wau-Bulolo area and Kanga Force ceased to exist. Savige's force originally included only the 17th Brigade and three Independent Companies (2/3rd, 2/5th and 2/7th). Savige was instructed to turn the area into an active operational zone for mobile defence. It was estimated that there were 5,500 Japanese around Lae and Salamaua with between 6,000 and 8,000 at Madang and from 9,000 to 11,000 at Wewak. Savige, who was ordered not to attack Salamaua directly, decided to establish firm bases as far forward as possible and to harass the enemy with patrols. However, only small forces could be maintained in the forward area and no useful military purpose was served by attacks and raids which were not properly organised, supported by superior fire and fully driven home.

The Japanese were dug in on the Pimple, Green Hill and Observation Hill along the main track from Wau to Mubo. On 24 April a company of the 2/7th attacked the Pimple and Green Hill, Four aircraft strafed the Japanese position and then the company advanced in two columns supported by mortar fire, but the enemy were firmly entrenched on the precipitous feature and the Australians were halted. Next day another attack, supported by aircraft and the 1st Mountain Battery, limited to fifty rounds a gun, also failed. On 7 May a company attack was again launched against the Pimple but again it failed. On 9 May the Japanese themselves attacked in the Pimple area and surrounded the forward Australian company, which was not relieved until the afternoon of the 11th, by which time it had withstood eight attacks by parts of two Japanese battalions.

The 2/3rd Independent Company had been probing deeply and seeing that the Japanese were only lightly holding Bobdubi Ridge obtained permission to attack it. On 3 and 4 May the Japanese were pushed off part of Bobdubi Ridge and in the following days drove back Japanese moving up to retake it. From Bobdubi, the 2/3rd Independent Company was able to severely harass the Japanese with raids and ambushes. So successful were the 2/3rd Independent Company's tactics that Savige felt constrained to warn them not to attempt too much; 'premature commitments in the Salamaua area could not be backed at present by an adequate force', he signalled. The pressure was kept up round Bobdubi and on 11 May a patrol found the ridge to be abandoned, quickly occupied it, and exchanged fire with the enemy on Komiatum Ridge on which the main track travelled. The Japanese reacted strongly to this threat to their communications, launching a full-scale attack supported by guns and mortars on the 14th and forced the Australians to withdraw. On 15 May, over 100 Japanese aircraft attacked the Australian positions in three heavy raids. The Japanese maintained their air attacks in the following days, but generally against targets farther to the Australian rear. On 17 and 18 May large formations of Japanese aircraft raided Wau airfield.

In late May, the 2/6th Battalion relieved the 2/7th Battalion and the 15th Brigade headquarters and another battalion of that brigade began to arrive in Savige's area. During May Australian Beaufighters and Bostons with American Mitchells attacked Madang and Lae, maintaining steady pressure on these bases. The RAAF now had three squadrons tied more or less to the Salamaua operations with four squadrons based on Milne Bay and engaged chiefly in attacks on shipping and in reconnaissance. Two Catalina flying boat squadrons based on Cairns also played a part in the operations in New Guinea by dropping mines in the enemy's harbours, making night raids and supporting coast-watchers in enemy-held territory.

Instructions were issued for an advanced base on the coast to be seized within sixty miles of Lae, this being the farthest distance landing craft could carry troops in one night. Nassau Bay was chosen and its occupation would enable the force round Mubo to be at least partly supplied by sea. In addition to the bay, the high ground around Goodview Junction and Mount Tambu and the ridge running thence to the sea were to be seized. The focus of the operations towards Salamaua were to draw the Japanese away from Lae and Salamaua was not to be assaulted until after the Lae operation. Until the Lae offensive commenced, the Japanese were to be led to believe that Salamaua was the main objective.

On 19 and 20 June there were signs that the enemy was about to anticipate the allied attack. They were patrolling aggressively; during the 20th enemy aircraft made more than eighty bombing sorties against the Australian positions. The right forward company of the 2/6th, holding its wide area towards Nassau Bay, was under sharp fire on the afternoon of the 20th. Next morning an attack in strength was dispersed; in the afternoon a stronger attack was made and soon the Australians were closely engaged. A fresh company reinforced the one under attack. At nightfall the Japanese withdrew having lost an estimated 100 men, but they renewed the attack on the 22nd and 23rd, when the beleaguered troops were heartened by the sight of Beaufighters strafing along the track. That afternoon the Japanese attacks ceased. The 150 Australians on Lababia Ridge lost eleven were killed and twelve wounded. They had been attacked by two Japanese battalions, 1,500 troops, who lost forty-one killed and 131 wounded.

### **Nassau Bay**

The 162nd US Regiment landed at Nassau Bay on the night of the 29/30 June and next morning moved out of

the bridgehead. On 1 July the easternmost company of the 2/6th Battalion advanced to the coast along the south arm of the Bitoi driving off a company of Japanese. On the morning of the third day ashore, 2 July, the main American force remained clustered round the beach, but that afternoon one company advanced to the Bitoi. Next day four 75-mm guns were landed at Nassau, a most important reinforcement, and by the 4th more than 1,400 troops were ashore. Papuan soldiers advancing along the coast ahead of the 162nd US Regiment reached Lake Salus on 9 July and then pushed on to Tambu Bay.

On the morning of 7 July the 2/6th had attacked Observation Hill and by nightfall held most of it. Next day the leading Australian company advanced a stage farther towards a creek where it was to link with the Americans from the Bitoi. On the 9th, now supported by the American field guns whereas formerly there had been only two mountain guns behind them, five Australian companies pressed on with aggressive patrols until, on the 10th, only seventy-five Japanese survived in the area, and their line of retreat was cut. On the 12 May the Pimple was occupied. On 13 May there was a general advance and on 14 May Mubo airfield and Green Hill were taken. The Japanese still stoutly defended Old Vickers where they were strongly dug in to defend the track to Salamaua and on 7 and 9 July stopped attacks by the 58th/59th Battalion.

The US III/162nd Battalion (Major Archibald B Roosevelt) was assembled at Nassau Bay by 12 July as a preliminary move to establish artillery at Tambu Bay. On the 21st the American battalion reached Tambu Bay and supplies were being unloaded there. The Americans' task was to capture Scout Ridge, overlooking the bay. Attacks on the 22nd failed and a second battalion (the US II/162nd) was sent into reinforce the attack.

On 16 July a company of the 2/5th Battalion had assaulted Mount Tambu with great dash and captured all but the main northern knoll. The Japanese counter-attacked again and again that night, supported by mortar bombs and shells from a mountain gun. A second company reached the area next morning. On the night of the 18 May the Japanese attacked and almost encircled the two Australian companies on Tambu, and next day a fierce struggle developed. By 2.30 pm, after much slaughter of the Japanese, they accepted defeat and left the Australians in possession of the southern slopes. Farther north, on 15 July, after mortar and Vickers-gun fire, two platoons of the 2/3rd Independent Company attacked Ambush Knoll south of Namling, while the 58th/59th Battalion attacked towards Bobdubi in another effort to cut the Japanese communications. One platoon of the Independent Company drove the Japanese from their forward positions, the other thrust them from Orodubi, and that night the Japanese abandoned Ambush Knoll. The attack by the 58th/59th was upset, however, by Japanese counter-moves. In a renewed attack on the 17th the Independent Company again carried out its task but the 58th/59th was held up.

The establishment of the Nassau Bay base had made it possible to bring in and supply a substantial quantity of artillery. By 23 May two US field artillery battalions, two Australian field batteries, the 1st Australian Mountain Battery, the 2/6th Australian Survey Battery, and four anti-aircraft batteries were in place. On the right flank the American regiment was still making little progress. In the fourth week of July the US II/162nd battalion completed its arrival at Tambu Bay and was given the task of capturing 'Roosevelt Ridge' as it was now named. The battalion attacked and gained and held a foothold on the ridge. The Japanese were well dug in and not to be driven out by frontal attacks. Roosevelt's battalion, aided by Papuan patrols, was now employed cutting the enemy's supply route to the west.

On 28 July a flanking attack by a company of the 2/6th took a feature forward of Ambush Knoll. The same day 58th/59th Battalion supported by artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire at last took the stubborn Old Vickers position and drove the Japanese from Bobdubi Ridge. It was estimated that in the six weeks to 6 August, the 15th Brigade had killed 400 Japanese for a loss of forty-six killed and 152 wounded, an indication of the increasing tactical superiority of the attackers.

The leading battalion of the 29th Australian Brigade, the 42nd, was moved forward into the Nassau Bay area and thence marched northward and at length went into position between the Americans on the right and the 17th Brigade, of which it became part. As a preliminary to the capture of Mount Tambu the 42nd Battalion occupied Davidson Ridge between Tambu and Roosevelt Ridge. Then on 13/14 August the II/162nd Battalion took Roosevelt Ridge after a heavy artillery barrage which bared it of vegetation. The 15th Brigade's attack opened on 14 August. Twenty-nine heavy bombers accurately bombed Coconut Ridge with devastating effect, and guns, mortars and machine-guns brought down a barrage. A company of the 2/7th Battalion then attacked up a cliff so steep that the men had to crawl on hands and knees, but by early in the afternoon they had gained the North Coconuts position. On the night of the 16/17 August the Japanese abandoned South Coconuts.

The 2/6th Battalion opened its attack on Komiatum Ridge on 16 August. After about 500 shells had been fired into the Japanese positions two companies attacked and in twenty-five minutes had occupied the objective. The enemy in the Mount Tambu area were now surrounded, their routes to the north being cut on Komiatum and Davidson Ridges. It was expected that lack of rations (patrols had discovered they were delivered every three days) would cause the Japanese to attempt the break out on the third night. On 19 August patrols of the 2/5th found Goodview Junction deserted and US I/162nd Battalion occupied Tambu without opposition.

The 15th Brigade now pressed in towards the track leading to Salamaua. On 17 August after a bombardment two platoons of the 2/3rd Independent Company advanced; one occupied the junction of the Bobdubi-Salamaua track and another track from the south without opposition, but the other was held. Heavy fighting developed, the Japanese launching strong counter-attacks. On 19 August Savige ordered that every effort must be made to close the enemy's avenues of escape between Komiatum and Bobdubi Ridges. Next day the brigade attacked on a wide front, and the 58th/59th succeeded in cutting the Komiatum track in

several places.

In preparation for the new offensive, Savige was instructed that his force should be so organised that by 28 August it could be maintained from the sea without air supply. From 21 August the 29th Brigade began to relieve the 17th Brigade (excluding the 2/7th Battalion attached to the 15th Brigade) which had been fighting its way through the jungle-clad tangle of mountains from Wau towards Salamaua since January. The Australians rapidly advanced towards Salamaua but Savige ordered that the Japanese were not to be pressed so hard that would cause an early evacuation of Salamaua.

### **Salamaua falls**

On 26 August, Savige and his 3rd Division headquarters were relieved by General Milford and his 5th Division headquarters. The 5th Division conducted the final operations around Salamaua which was occupied by the 42nd Battalion on 11 September, a week after the Lae offensive opened and five days before the 7th and 9th Australian Divisions entered Lae.

The 3rd Division's long winter campaign of 1943 achieved impressive strategic gains. A great part of the strength of the XVIII Japanese Army had been diverted from the areas which were to be the objectives of the offensive which could not be mounted until the spring, when veteran divisions would be rested and retrained, landing craft available, and air superiority increased. At the same time immensely valuable experience had been gained in jungle tactics and in methods of supply. For the first time Australian infantry and independent companies had worked closely together in a lengthy campaign and each had learnt from the other. Artillery had been used on a scale hitherto unattained in mountain warfare in New Guinea. Doctrines were developed which gave the Australians decisive tactical and administrative superiority over the Japanese in bush warfare. In the six months to August 1943 the strength of the XVIII Japanese Army had been depleted and dispersed while, behind the front on which the 3rd Australian Division fought, the Allied strength in the South West Pacific had greatly increased.

### **The Huon Peninsula Campaign**

The Japanese thrust towards Australia had been stopped by the Australian defence of the Kokoda Trail and the defeat of the Japanese landing at Milne Bay. Organised Japanese resistance in Papua ceased in January 1943 and the Australian and American forces advanced towards Salamaua. In mid-1943, General Sir Thomas Blamey's planned a major offensive in the New Guinea area with the immediate objective of seizing the airfields in the Lae-Markham Valley area and the overall objective of driving through the corridor running along the north coast of the island of New Guinea.

The offensive was to be conducted by Lt-General Sir Edmund Herring's New Guinea Force with the 7th and 9th Australian Divisions. The Huon Peninsula had been occupied by the Japanese for quite some time and the Japanese were well dug in, Lae and the Markham-Ramu Valley were within range of Japanese air bases at Boram and in the Wewak area. The allied command did not know how many Japanese troops were in the peninsula and the Japanese were capable of sending in reinforcements.

The mountain ranges of the Huon Peninsula rose to heights nearly twice that of Mount Kosciuszko. There were few beaches and those that did exist were short and narrow and backed into mangroves. The mountain tops were often covered in rain mists and the humidity was oppressive all year round. The Huon Peninsula had a very small native population and virtually no food resources. The Australians would fight in overbearing continual perspiration and dampness and the extremely heavy rains dramatically affected visibility. Prior to the Japanese invasion there had probably been about 30 cows, 500 goats and several hundred chickens in the Peninsula. The insects and pests were abundant and there was little opportunity for the troops to give too much attention to personal hygiene. There was no shelter from the rain and the area above the tree line was covered with moss. The foothills mostly ran down to the sea and at times were engorged by the rain and turned into rivers flowing at fifteen knots. Behind the coastal hills were cliffs and gorges, with thin approaches strangled by scrub. Grass grew up to fifteen feet high and bamboo presented its own problems. Roads did not exist but there was a network of tracks and paths.

The 9th Division was commanded by Major-General George Wootten. It had behind it a record of great distinction in the Middle East, culminating in the actions at El Alamein. The Huon Peninsula would be its first jungle campaign. The 7th Division was commanded by Major-General George Vasey, and it had fought at Tobruk and in Syria. It was well-seasoned in jungle warfare having fought in the Owen Stanley and Buna-Gona campaigns. The 9th Division's plan was to capture Lae from the east while the 7th Division was to advance from Nadzab in the Markham Valley. After taking Lae and having acquired a main foothold, the two divisions were to surround the Peninsula, the 7th moving down the Markham-Ramu Valley on the west and the 9th proceeding along the Finschhafen coast until it linked up with the Markham Valley force. Once the Huon country was surrounded, any remaining Japanese troops could be dealt with relatively easily. The 7th Division was to be airlifted over the Owen Stanley's and land about 19 miles from Lae at Nadzab on the opposite side of that town from the landing place of the 9th Division. It was to become the first Australian division to be flown into battle.

Before the major offensive was to start, attempts were made to lull the Japanese into believing that Salamaua was the Australian objective. In effect, the intention was to persuade the Japanese that the Australians were fighting the decisive battle for Huon on the Salamaua front, and to have the Japanese denude the Lae area of

its defensive strength while Lae was attacked and captured. This was achieved by constant attacks on Japanese outposts by troops who were operating from Wau in the Salamaua hinterland. Their skirmishes forced the Japanese to constantly transfer troops from Lae to Salamaua.

At 6.30 am on 4 September 1943, a short naval bombardment preceded the landing of the 9th Division's 20th Brigade on Red and Yellow Beaches. Both beaches were of firm black sand and about twenty yards wide. There was no opposition on the beaches and it was not until the fifth wave was landing that Japanese aircraft appeared. The 26th Brigade followed the 20th Brigade. The 2/17th Battalion (20th Brigade) and the 2/23rd and 2/24th Battalions (26th Brigade) commenced the advance towards Lae. The 24th Brigade disembarked at Red Beach on the night of 5 September.

On the morning of 5 September, 24 hours after the 9th Division landed on the beaches, the largest air armada seen in the South Pacific dropped 1720 men of the US 503rd Paratroop Infantry Regiment into Nadzab. Also dropped by parachute were 36 men of the 2/4th Australian Field Regiment with a field guns. The 2/6th Field Company meanwhile had built a footbridge across the Markham River and across this bridge poured the men of the aerodrome constructive company to begin work on the Nadzab airstrips. On 7 September, the first two brigades of the 7th Division, over 250 aircraft loads, were flown to Nadzab with its third brigade following a week later.

While the 9th Division moved west along the shore of Huon Gulf, the 7th Division struck south-east along the bank of the broad Markham River. The two divisions would converge at Lae. With the 24th Brigade carrying out a parallel movement inland, the 9th Division crossed the Burep River and faced the rushing waters of the Busu. Swollen by tropical downpours, the river presented a difficult barrier. It became clear that engineers, even under covering fire, could not build a bridge across the river without bringing up heavy equipment. A daylight frontal assault was led by the 2/28th Battalion, on 9 September, and after ferocious fighting, the Australians dug in on the Japanese side of the Busu. On 11 September, the 7th Division's 25th Brigade drove 200 Japanese from their trenches in Jensen's plantation and killed 33 of them. It was a fierce clash at a range of 15 metres with the 2/24th Field Regiment providing close artillery support. Having crushed many counter-attacks, the 25th Brigade engaged the Japanese force at Heath plantation which left 312 Japanese dead.

## **Lae**

Lae was pounded from the air and from the 25 pounders of the approaching Australian divisions. On 16 September the 7th and 9th Divisions entered Lae and found the Japanese there weakened from lack of food and short of ammunition. The Japanese in falling back towards Lae had abandoned position after position. Never had the Japanese been pushed back so swiftly. However, the 9th Division lost 77 killed and the 7th Division 38 killed in the advance towards Lae.

With Lae in Australian hands, new tasks confronted the 7th and 9th Divisions. The Japanese line of withdrawal was along a track leading north, west from Lae via Bumbu and Boana and on up to the Rai coast. The main Japanese force was by now many days ahead in the mountainous country to the north and this force was to be hunted down by the converging thrusts of both divisions. The 7th planned to push through the Markham and Ramu valleys and the 9th intended to move along the coast to Finschhafen.

Kaiapit was 45 air-miles north-west of Nadzab and a Japanese force, equivalent to a brigade, moved down the valley in a last-ditch attempt to retake Nadzab. The 2/6th Australian Commando Squadron and B Company Papuan Infantry Battalion arrived at Kaiapit just before the leading elements of the Japanese force. The Japanese fanned out but was quickly routed and they withdrew up the Markham Valley to Dumpu. On 29 September 1943 the Australians entered the Ramu Valley. With Gusap in their hands, the Australians had a valuable advanced airfield and Dumpu was occupied without opposition on 4 October 1943.

## **Finschhafen**

Meanwhile, units of the 9th Division were pushing along the coast in their bid for Finschhafen. The 20th Brigade, which had been first ashore at Red Beach on 4 September, fought their way ashore at Scarlet Beach before dawn on 22 September. Scarlet Beach, six miles north of Finschhafen, consisted of a narrow sandy beach about 900 yards long and about 40 feet wide. Japanese fire came from well-constructed bunkers on the fringe of the jungle, causing casualties to the troops both in the landing craft and as they waded ashore.

The advance towards Finschhafen continued on the following day. Japanese defences barred the way with heavy bunker defences behind thickets of barbed wire near the mouth of the Bumi River. Wading the river under fire, the 2/15th Battalion forced a crossing on 24 September. A grim struggle for Kakakog, a commanding crest, marked the opening of the final drive. Having crossed the Bumi River, the 2/15th Battalion was confronted by a sheer cliff face and a wild tangle of jungle. Experienced Japanese marines defended the cliff top, behind machine guns in solidly sandbagged positions. This slope had to be climbed, on occasions with the Australians on their hands and knees. They had to use tomahawks and machetes and haul their way up using hanging vines and branches. Under continuous Japanese fire, the Australians gained the crest. They stormed the gun positions and fought the Japanese with bayonets and grenades. Kakakog was deserted by the Japanese on 2 October. The 2/17th advanced and reached Finschhafen late that afternoon and there it linked up with the 22nd Battalion of the 4th Brigade which had fought its way up the coast from Hopoi. By the

next day Australian troops were in control of Finschhafen and all anchorages from Lae to Scarlet Beach.

### **Sattelberg**

As the 20th Brigade advanced on Finschhafen, which was taken on 2 October, the Japanese withdrew their forces from the area south of the Mape River via an inland track to Sattelberg. In early October, the Japanese at Sattelberg, estimated at 4700 men, posed a threat to the Australian supply lines between Scarlet Beach and Finschhafen. Substantial reinforcements on the coast indicated that the Japanese was preparing to attempt to recapture Finschhafen. Australian patrols designed to contain the Japanese around Sattelberg resulted in fierce clashes. On 16 October the Japanese launched a major counter-attack. The 2/17th Battalion at Jivevaneng were hit hard, and there was hand-to-hand combat at Scarlet Beach when the Japanese landed troops from barges. The Japanese attempted to establish a wedge between the 20th and 24th Brigades at a point near the mouth of Siki Creek. Heavy fighting continued for some days until the Japanese were forced to withdraw in the face of greater Australian fire-power and reinforcements from the 26th Brigade.

The defeat of the Japanese counter-attack paved the way for an assault on Sattelberg. The attack commenced on 17 November supported by strong air and artillery fire. The Australians pushed steadily forward, dislodging the Japanese from bamboo thickets and deep, concealed dug-outs. High above the climbing Australians was a strong force of Japanese and it was tough, uphill slogging on rain-drenched tracks. The Australians resisted two counter-attacks and by dark on 24 November were within 150 yards of the crest. Attacking from the east, south and south-east, three Australian battalions routed the Japanese garrison on Sattelberg peak at 9 am on 25 November. The capture of Sattelberg ended a sustained eight days attack through a well developed Japanese defensive scheme. For his gallantry in the final assault, Sergeant Tom Derrick was awarded the Victoria Cross. The citation for the award stated that:

'On 24 November 1943 a company of an Australian infantry battalion was ordered to outflank a strong enemy position sited on a precipitous cliff-face and then to attack a feature 150 yards from the township of Sattelberg. Sergeant Derrick was in command of his platoon of the company. Due to the nature of the country, the only possible approach to the town lay through an open kunai patch situated directly beneath the top of the cliffs. Over a period of two hours many attempts were made by our troops to clamber up the slopes to their objective, but on each occasion the enemy prevented success with intense machine-gun fire and grenades. Shortly before last light it appeared that it would be impossible to reach the objective or even to hold the ground already occupied and the company was ordered to retire. On receipt of this order, Sergeant Derrick, displaying dogged tenacity, requested one last attempt to reach the objective. His request was granted. Moving ahead of his forward section he personally destroyed, with grenades, an enemy post which had been holding up this section. He then ordered his second section around on the right flank. This section came under heavy fire from light machine-guns and grenades from six enemy posts. Without regard for personal safety he clambered forward well ahead of the leading men of the section and hurled grenade after grenade, so completely demoralising the enemy that they fled leaving weapons and grenades. By this action alone the company was able to gain its first foothold on the precipitous ground.

Not content with the work already done he returned to the first section, and together with the third section of his platoon advanced to deal with three of the remaining posts in the area. On four separate occasions he dashed forward and threw grenades at a range of six to eight yards until these positions were finally silenced. In all, Sergeant Derrick had reduced ten enemy posts. From the vital ground he had captured the remainder of the Battalion moved on to capture Sattelberg the following morning. Undoubtedly Sergeant Derrick's fine leadership and refusal to admit defeat in the face of a seemingly impossible situation resulted in the capture of Sattelberg. His outstanding gallantry, thoroughness and devotion to duty were an inspiration not only to his platoon and company, but to the whole battalion.'

(London Gazette: 23 March 1944.)

### **Shaggy Ridge**

After sixty-five days, the Japanese had been thoroughly defeated in the Finschhafen area and what was left of their forces retreated northward. While the 9th Division was pursuing the Japanese along the coast, the 7th Division was, on the other side of the Finisterre Range, preparing for an assault on Shaggy Ridge which would open the way to the sea and join up with the coastal drive at Bogadjim. Rising sharply against the skyline, Shaggy Ridge was a knife-edged mountain range broken by three conical outcrops. Of these, the most important tactically was known as The Pimple and it was a rocky pinnacle sprouting perpendicularly from the main mountain spur. Strong posts and foxholes made it a formidable fortress within which two other conical outcrops, a few hundred yards away, became known as Intermediate Snipers' Pimple and Green Snipers' Pimple.

On the morning of 27 December 1943 before the infantry attack, about 3500 25 pounder shells were fired at Shaggy Ridge. A squadron of Australian Boomerangs and American manned Kittyhawks bombed and strafed every Japanese strongpost. Men of the 2/16th Battalion (21st Brigade) began the ascent and crawled over loose shale along a track so narrow that it afforded barely enough room for two men to move abreast. The Japanese was fought hand to hand and from dug-out to dugout. The Australian attack was halted near the summit of The Pimple where a strong Japanese pillbox barred their approach. The next day the pillbox was

blasted by high explosives supplied by the engineers and by the morning of 28 December the Japanese had been thrust from The Pimple but still held the northern half of Shaggy Ridge. In early January 1944, the 15th and 18th Brigades relieved the 21st and 25th Brigades. Following air and artillery support the 18th Brigade attacked on the morning of 20 January. The 2/12th Battalion moved up the steep ridge to assault Prothero I and, after close-range grenade duels, the 2/9th Battalion captured Green Snipers' Pimple. Fighting continued all night on the thickly wooded slopes and several counter-attacks failed to budge the 2/9th Battalion. The Japanese made a desperate attempt to escape from Shaggy Ridge but the escape bid failed in face of the steady fire of the dug-in Australians.

The capture of Shaggy Ridge completely eliminated Japanese domination of the Ramu Valley. The link up of Australian troops with American troops at Saidor on 10 February 1944 marked the end of the five month Huon Peninsula campaign. With the Huon Peninsula firmly in Australian hands the Americans began to assume an increasing role in the fighting in New Guinea. The 7th and 9th Division were withdrawn to Australia where after a well deserved rest they began preparations for the final campaigns in 1945.

### **Saidor**

About the time the 7th Division was driving the Japanese from the Shaggy Ridge area, the 5th Division, was taking over from 9th Division at Sio the pursuit of the enemy along the coast. The experienced leader of the Fifth was Major General A H Ramsay, who had commanded the artillery of the 9th Division in the Middle East.

Up to this time the formation had not operated as a complete division. Elements of the division had gained battle experience in New Guinea in the action at Milne Bay in August 1942. In those early days the 7th Brigade, led by Brigadier J Field under command of the Eleventh Australian Division, played its part in the rout of the Japanese forces in that area. For the most part the men were raw troops, though their officers included several with experience in the Middle East. They acquitted themselves well. Other units of the division were blooded exactly one year later when the 29th Brigade participated in the Australian American action which drove the Japanese from Salamaua. On 20 January 1944, 5th Division with the 8th Brigade leading, began its advance up the coast from Sio on the heels the disorganised enemy believed to be making for the safety of his main base at Wewak. This difficult journey through rugged barely penetrable country called for the maximum of endurance, stamina and determination on the part of every officer and soldier of the division. Once more the wild and inhospitable terrain of New Guinea, now commonplace with the veteran soldier campaigning on the island, was to prove the major obstacle to the drive westward of Australian force. From Sio to Saidor, where on the 2 January 1944, American forces had established a perimeter defence, the country consisted of a narrow coastal belt extending inland no more than a mile in its widest part, and intersected with numerous rivers and swamps. A natural obstacle to heavily equipped Australian troops, the treacherous lip of land disappeared beneath the feet of rugged unmapped mountains, rearing up to heights of between 4000 and 6000 feet. When the division began its move, the "north-west" season had just begun. Aerial reconnaissance disclosed that all the rivers: swollen by torrential downpours, were in full flood. Tracks, the very few of them, were impassable to any form of wheeled traffic. The vital task of pushing forward the formation's supplies confronted the divisional commander. So it was decided to place under command for the purpose of the advance a company of American barges. This decision brought new problems in its train. Pilots of reconnaissance aircraft flying over the area reported that sheltered beach heads for barge landings along the proposed route were not plentiful. It was agreed finally that the advance should be made in a series of bounds--each designed to carry troops forward to secure beachheads. In this way a constant flow of supplies would be provided. That this plan did not always work was due to the vagaries of weather now notorious for unpredictability rather than to any breakdown in organisation. Major resistance from the Japanese was not expected. The primary object of the task set the 5th Division was to endeavour to maintain contact with the enemy, harrying and accelerating his retreat and allowing him no time to halt and consolidate defensive positions. Australian troops could look with confidence to full support from the air. The aggressive policy of smashing Japanese bases and airfields which formed so important a part of the general co ordinated plan of attack was bringing rich rewards as Australian forces pushed onward. Concentrated bombing had deprived the enemy of airstrips at Nadzab and Lae, and his army air arm was a pale shadow of a once powerful weapon.

On 21 January 1944, the 4th Battalion relieved the 2/17th Battalion. Three days later, supported by a troop of the 2/14th Field Regiment, and engineers of the 8th Field Company, the battalion and its attached troops began its long march. The men of the 4th Battalion were inexperienced in battle. This inexperience combined with the sheer difficulty of natural obstacles caused an initial delay of three days when they reached the Kwama River, which, swollen to almost double its width and crocodile-infested, had, somehow, to be crossed. Valuable time was lost in probing channels which might lead across the barrier. Finally, strong swimmers, dragging a tow-wire with them, battled their way to the far side, and hauled in their wire to which a rope had been attached. The rope was secured to trees on either side of the rapid Kwama, and so the remainder of the force crossed, clinging tenaciously to the slender thread which alone prevented their being swept away by the rushing waters. The battalion was quick to learn by this experience, and from this point on it maintained a rate of progress so rapid that the supply column found difficulty in keeping up with the forward troops. It was a miserable journey. Incessant rain pelted through the vegetation creating a morass underfoot. Some times, when they halted for the night, the men would find themselves literally floating out of their blankets. Heavy seas too were pounding the coastline and the supply barges, struggling to maintain supplies for the advancing land columns, were frequently unable to breast the beaches to land their precious supplies. Reserve stores

had to be used, and, at one period, when supplies could not get through, the men were on reduced rations. This imposed added strain on troops who were at times struggling through mud that was waist-high.

During the move the unit signals performed yeoman service, maintaining contact with the rear at all times. They were the means of relieving the difficult supply position when they transmitted a request for the dropping of airborne supplies. The efficiency of air transport of army supplies was amply demonstrated here. There was an immediate response to an appeal for supplies from the air, and eighty-two per cent of all supplies dropped were recovered. Giant air transports dropped food, tobacco and copies of Guinea Gold. If anything, this little newspaper was more eagerly sought than rations. To troops practically marooned in the thick of the jungle swamps this link with news of the outside world came almost as tidings from another planet. So far slight contact only, mainly with stragglers, had been made with the enemy, but Japanese dead were numerous--all of them striking evidence of malnutrition and sickness. On 3 February the battalion was relieved at Malasanga by the 30th Battalion, also facing its first campaign. The 30th Battalion experienced the same conditions as its predecessor. It too was forced by bitter, heart-breaking circumstances to learn that only in the jungle can the soldier learn the real difficulties of jungle fighting. For the next stage of the advance, planning was similar, and called for a series of daily bounds designed to permit relief of the 30th Battalion by the 35th Battalion at the Yupna River. This was designed to provide all battalions with experience in actual operations. But a number of factors, not the least of which was the continued heavy weather, made it impracticable to carry out the relief and the 30th Battalion was ordered to continue the advance. For ten days the battalion ploughed through mud, rain, and thick undergrowth, the troops hacking their way through in a rapid advance. In their ninety-mile trek the advancing Australians crossed no fewer than sixty flooded streams. One, the Urawa River, was more than a hundred yards wide, and several men were swept nearly a mile downstream before they managed to struggle to the opposite bank. Sickness now began to take toll of the battalion's strength, and three men were lost from cerebral malaria. Others were suffering from dengue and all were weak with fatigue. Continuing its fast advance the battalion pushed on, and on 10 February made contact with American forces at the Yaut River. Despite its three days' delay at the Kwama River the brigade had arrived at the rendezvous on the appointed day. No pitched battle was fought, but the total enemy losses during the advance from the 24 January to the 3 February were 1291, of whom 300 were killed in running fights and the remainder found dead along the track. Many of the Japanese had been dead for some time. After contact had been made with the American forces at the Yaut River the 8th Brigade paused to rest the men. Then the 35th Battalion, relieving the 30th Battalion, continued patrolling the country inland from Weber Point. Japanese were known to have escaped into the hills, having bypassed the Americans at Saidor, and the 35th Battalion split into companies, and, assisted by a company of the Papuan Infantry Battalion, deployed into the mountains to comb out these stragglers. "A" Company of the 35th Battalion moved round in the direction of Gabutamon while "D" Company was assigned the task of completing the pincers through Ruange and Tapen. Members of the PIB. were attached to each company and their bush craft and native instinct proved invaluable; on several occasions Australian troops were saved from ambush by their uncanny knack of sensing the whereabouts of the Japanese. Inland from Weber Point the country is as rugged and precipitous as anywhere in New Guinea. But unlike most mountainous country the ranges are a poor watershed. This caused hardship for Australian patrols. There were no streams in the vicinity and once they were forced to boil muddy water from bomb craters to quench their thirst. Finally it was found necessary to supply the patrols with water transported from the coast--a journey of seven hours up and along a mountain footpad. At this time it was impossible to find enough native labourers to do the work, the natives having "gone bush" with the advent of the Japanese. So members of "C" Company became carriers and carried the water to their mates in the hills. Each man's pack was emptied to carry a two-gallon can. Each morning they began the long climb up from the river. Fortunately it was possible, some days later, to recruit sufficient natives for the job, but mean while the troops of "C" Company performed a back-breaking task. It was on these patrols that the only "pitched" battle was fought with the enemy. At Tapen, in a fifty-minute engagement, Australians wiped out 103 Japanese. One member of "D" Company, creased by a bullet from an enemy sniper, killing fourteen Japanese with his Bren. Tapen is 4500 feet above sea-level and the troops who had jettisoned weight, including their blankets, when the climb began, found the cold so intense that they were using mosquito-nets as covers for such extra warmth as they would give. During this time "A" Company, patrolling in the Gabutamon area had accounted for seventy Japanese, and when the patrols finally returned to their base camp on the coast, they had killed 467 of the enemy. Another 795 Japanese were found dead, and twenty-four prisoners of war were taken. The area had been cleared of the enemy. The arrival of the Fifth at Saidor marked the end of the first phase of its pursuit of the Japanese, an operation successfully carried out to schedule. But it was not without cost. Within a fortnight of the completion of the operation more than thirty per cent of the troops were evacuated to hospital suffering mainly from malaria, dengue, and skin complaints.

## **Madang**

On 8 April 1944, the 11th Division had assumed command from 7th Division of all units in the Ramu Valley. The headquarters of the 11th Division had just been established at Dumpu, detachments of the headquarters having been flown in from the former site at Dobodura. Elements of the 11th Division, Milne Force as it was then known, had taken a major part in the fighting in August 1942 when the Japanese were decisively defeated at Milne Bay. The GOC at that time was Major General C A Clowes. In January 1943, the division transferred to Moresby, remaining until July when it left Ward's Drome to fly to Dobodura, where it remained



until the move to Dumpu. On 12 September 1943, the 11th Division came under command of Major-General A J Boase.

The aggressive patrolling which had been Australian policy in the Ramu Valley went on, and patrols from the 15th Brigade thrust forward along the Bogadjim road. Reports received at this time indicated that the enemy was thickening his outpost-line to a radius approximately five miles south-west and south-east of Bogadjim. These positions covered all tracks into Bogadjim south of the Gori River. One of Australian patrols pushed between enemy defensive positions, reaching a point half a mile from Bogadjim village without meeting any enemy. This lack of depth to his defences, coupled with native and other reports of activity in Erima Plantation, probably directed at shifting dumps of stores behind Madang, suggested that this movement would soon be complete. Natives from Bogadjim encountered about this time were found to be wearing Japanese clothing and equipment. They declared that there were no Japanese in Bogadjim, but many in Erima Plantation, a statement which was accepted with reservations.

On 13 April one platoon of the divisional carrier company was flown from Gusap to Kaiapit, then ferried by five Piper Cub aircraft to Wantoat to investigate reports of the presence of the enemy in the immediate vicinity. In a sharp clash next day the carrier company engaged approximately twenty Japanese. The enemy fled leaving four killed. One Australian was wounded. Further patrols were sent out to investigate a native report that large numbers of the enemy were in the fertile cultivated land at the headwaters of the Wantoat and Ikwap rivers. The patrol returned to Wantoat on 15 April to report that a small body of Japanese was moving north. Later the patrol captured four prisoners. Meanwhile patrols from the 57th/60th and 58th/59th Battalions were active over a wide area, on either side of and along the Bogadjim Road. Contact was made with the Americans at Sungum and communications established. New enemy positions were located at Rereo, Redu, Wenga and a village 1000 yards north-north east of Alibu One. One patrol, avoiding the enemy positions one mile south of Kaliko, reached the coastal track just east of Kaliko, and observed a small party of enemy approaching from the direction of Bonggu. Another patrol, using a devious route to the enemy position south of Kaliko, drew fire and then withdrew. On the return journey an enemy ambush 800 yards south of the position was observed and bypassed. It was evident that the speed of the advance of units of the 15th Brigade up the Bogadjim Road from Bridge Six had interfered with the enemy's evacuation of the area between the Kabenau and Mindjim rivers. Some, at least, of the rearguard troops from this area were taken out by barge from the vicinity of Kaliko, a course which could not have been over attractive to the enemy, because of fear of attack by aircraft and patrol torpedo boats. Reports also indicated that the enemy was reluctant to use the coast route for withdrawal from the Erima-Amele area. Instead he used a track from Amele to Rambu to Amron. Routine patrols from the 57th/60th Battalion entered Bogadjim on 17 April to find an American patrol examining gun-positions in the abandoned enemy beach defences. Routine patrols were, at this stage, operating throughout the Bogadjim area. On 22 April patrols of the 57th/60th Battalion discovered six six-wheeled ammunition trucks, and fifty cases of ammunition at Balama, while between the Palpa and Gori rivers sixteen trucks, wrecked by Allied strafing, were located.

On 23 April approximately 450 troops of 8th Brigade landed at Bogadjim and amalgamated with a patrol from the 15th Brigade, thus uniting coastal forces of the 5th Division and inland forces of the 11th Division. Extensive patrolling continued throughout the Bogadjim area, each successive patrol getting nearer and nearer to Madang. No enemy opposition had been encountered north of Bogadjim. All eyes were now focused on Madang. On 25 April a patrol of the 57/60th Battalion, with one platoon from the 30th Battalion, entered and occupied Madang. South of Madang resistance came from a small rear party of Japanese equipped with automatic weapons and one horse-drawn mountain-gun. Australian patrol engaged the enemy, forcing him to withdraw. The mountain-gun, because of insufficient depression, was ineffective, the shells whistling harmlessly over the heads of the advancing Australian troops. On entering Madang the patrol found abandoned dumps of ordnance and signals stores and equipment, as well as a hospital and its medical equipment. Evidence of the eagerness of the Japanese to escape is shown in the fact that in the advance from Bogadjim to Madang only two were encountered. These were taken prisoner. Madang had been well plastered by Australian aircraft and showed every sign of a hasty departure. Australian bombing had been, if anything, too good, and rather defeated Australian purpose as the aerodrome was unserviceable for Australian own aircraft. On 27 April the 15th Brigade began to move, its headquarters and some units travelling by air to Saidor, and other groups on foot to Bogadjim. The air moves were completed by 3 May, and on that day the brigade passed from the command of the 11th Division to the 5th Division. Advice was received from New Guinea Force on 15 May that the Ramu Valley was to be cleared of Australian units with the exception of 11th Division Carrier Company, which was to move from Gusap to Dumpu. The 11th Division was to move to Wau, which it did, via Lae, four days later.

The 5th Division forged along the coast, the 8th and 15th Brigades proceeding to Madang, the intention being to give the battle-weary 15th Brigade a well-earned rest if conditions permitted. The 30th Battalion continued up the coast in the direction of Alexishafen. From Madang to Alexishafen the road had been well mined by the retreating Japanese, resulting in casualties to Australian troops. The battalion entered Alexishafen on 26 April, and here again was evidence of the enemy's singleness of thought--escape. Again great quantities of stores, much undamaged was left behind. Here, too, for the first time in New Guinea, the Japanese had adopted a policy of deliberate destruction of airstrips by blowing craters with unexpended aerial bombs. By the capture of Madang and Alexishafen the Australians had possession of two first-class, deep, well-sheltered harbours.

Without pause pursuit of the enemy continued, the 35th Battalion moving rapidly up the coast. On 2 June a

landing was made by the 37th/52nd Battalion on Kar Kar Island and, from information received from Chinese found there, it was learned that the Japanese had left some time in March. This further strengthened the earlier belief that after the fall of Finschhafen the enemy had no idea but to retreat to his foxhole at Wewak. On 12 June patrols of the 35th Battalion reached Hansa Bay and this, with patrols probing forward as far as the Sepik River, completed the second and final phase of the advance. At Hansa the enemy had abandoned stores equal in quantity to any material captured in the New Guinea campaign. With the landing of American forces at Aitape, and with Australian forces grouped as a bulwark to the east, the fate of the starved and weakened Japanese garrison in Wewak was sealed, despite a desperate attempt to fight its way out.