



The Huon Peninsula *1943–1944*

Australians in the Pacific War





The Huon Peninsula *1943–1944*

Australians in the Pacific War

Front cover

Japanese resistance in the Lae campaign was relatively light, especially after the crossing of the Busu on 9 September 1943. Nevertheless, as this photograph testifies, there was some tough fighting west of the Busu. This photo probably shows men of the 2/43rd Battalion wounded on 12 September. That day the unit suffered 18 wounded, while inflicting 25 casualties at New Yanga. Evacuating casualties was difficult in this rain-soaked area, and the light ambulance sections accompanying the battalions did invaluable work. (*Australian War Memorial (AWM) 015788*)

Back cover

Sister Nellie Luke bandages the wound of Private Geoffrey Abson in a tent ward at the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station at Hellsbach Mission in March 1944.

For full caption see page 56. (AWM 071020)

Inside cover

On 17 November 1943, stretcher-bearer Private Ted Woodroffe carries a wounded comrade of the 2/48th Battalion back to the Advanced Dressing Station, while tanks and infantry move forward. *For full caption see page 44. (AWM 060615)*

The 2/48th Battalion lost six men killed on 17 November 1943, amongst them 20-year-old Private Lindsay Dixon who died in the fight to secure Coconut Ridge.

For full caption see page 45. (AWM 060627)

Title page

American engineers lay two lanes of steel matting on the narrow beach near Lae for the vehicles coming ashore from the landing craft on 4 September 1943.

For full caption see page 17. (AWM 015856)

Metric conversions of imperial measurements quoted in this text are approximate.

ISBN 1 920720 55 3

© Commonwealth of Australia 2005

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission from the Commonwealth. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the Commonwealth Copyright Administration, Attorney General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, Barton ACT 2600 or posted at <http://www.ag.gov.au/cca>

Published by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, September 2005.

Researched and written by Dr Mark Johnston, Head of History, Scotch College, Melbourne

Text and photo editing by Courtney Page-Allen

Commissioning editor Ian Kelly

Map by Keith Mitchell

Layout and design by Kris Vetz

Printed on New Silk Gloss 300gsm (cover) and Euro matt Art 155gsm (inside),

by Union Offset Printers, 16 Nyrang street, Fyshwick, ACT 2609

P01122 2005

Message from the Minister

The Huon Peninsula, on the north coast of New Guinea, was a tough place to be introduced to 'jungle warfare'. When the campaign for the Peninsula began in September 1943, Australians had considerable experience of jungle warfare against the Japanese, but this was the first test in 'the islands' for our 9th Division.

The men of the 9th Division had become famous earlier in the war—they had started as 'Rats of Tobruk' in 1941 and went on to fight in the great battle of El Alamein in Egypt, helping to turn the tide of the war in North Africa. Now, reinforced, the 9th Division joined the campaigns to push back the Japanese in the Pacific.

In the jungles and swamps of the Huon Peninsula, Australians were tested by difficult terrain and tough resistance from the enemy. One of the most stirring images of the war was that of Sergeant Tom 'Diver' Derrick raising the Australian flag atop Sattelberg mountain, ground which he had taken almost single-handedly in one final push known as 'Derrick's show', for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Huon Peninsula was finally taken by Australian forces in March 1944. This book tells the story of those who fought against the Japanese along jungle tracks, battling also against tropical disease, to continue the Allied advance across the Pacific.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "De-Anne Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a long horizontal stroke.

*The Honourable De-Anne Kelly MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence*

The Huon Peninsula 1943–1944

In 1943, the Western Allies were able to take the initiative against Japan on all fronts. In their plans for the Pacific, they designated as high priority objectives the Japanese bases at Lae and Finschhafen in New Guinea. Their capture was required in a directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in March, following recommendations from General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). He saw the capture of the Huon Peninsula, including Lae and Finschhafen, as an essential preliminary to operations against the great Japanese base at Rabaul, against the Philippines and ultimately against Japan itself.

The main force at his disposal for achieving this and his other tasks in New Guinea was the Australian Army. Its commander-in-chief, who was also officially Commander of Allied Land Forces, SWPA, was General Sir Thomas Blamey, and it fell to him to control the forthcoming operations.

On 17 May, Blamey issued orders for the seizure of the Huon Gulf area, beginning with Lae and the Markham Valley. The 9th Australian Division was allocated the capture of Lae, in the first large-scale Australian seaborne assault since Gallipoli in 1915. Meanwhile, the 7th Australian Division would be flown to the Markham Valley, whence it too could advance on Lae.

The brunt of the fighting in the Lae–Finschhafen campaign of September 1943 to January 1944 fell to the 9th Division, which was already world famous for taking a leading role in North Africa in the defence of Tobruk in 1941 and in the Battle of El Alamein in 1942. Yet even veterans of those desert epics would face much that was new in the 1943 campaign. It would be the division's first experience of working in action with their American allies and with the Australian militia. It would also be the division's initiation to the conditions of jungle warfare imposed by New Guinea's climate, vegetation, mud and mountains. Most dauntingly, it would be their introduction to combat with the Japanese, whose reputation amongst Australians of other formations, after the gruelling campaigns of 1942, was fearsome. Although in this campaign the Australians would benefit from some of the best technology then available, a remarkably high proportion of the decisive fighting would fall to infantrymen relying on unsophisticated small arms.

There was considerable wrangling between Australian and American commanders about the 9th Division's operation, including whether all or part of the division would land, and how and when it would be transported. Eventually, US Rear Admiral Daniel E Barbey's naval task force carried all three of the division's brigades in the largest amphibious operation yet undertaken by Allied forces in the SWPA.

The 20th Brigade made the initial landing, 25 kilometres east of Lae, early on 4 September 1943. Captain Edmund 'Ted' Lecky, 9th Division Signals, wrote to his father about the experience:

The landings in these businesses are rather impressive—first the dim outline of a hostile shore in the dawn and the sole thought in everyones mind—Are the bastards there to meet us', then the rather impressive and very effective pasting of the beach and environs by the navy's five inch guns, then a hell of a pause—about ten years—waiting your turn to go in. Finally the time comes but in the case of Lae it was fairly obvious by that time that all one had to worry about was keeping the feet dry.

As Lecky intimated, the landing was something of an anti-climax, for there was no opposition to the initial landings on Red and Yellow Beaches. However, 35 minutes later, as landing craft brought the 26th Brigade towards Red Beach, nine Japanese aircraft attacked. A bomb hit one landing craft, inflicting twenty-eight casualties. Among the eight killed was Lieutenant Colonel Reg Wall, who was leading the 2/23rd Battalion into action for the first time.

War correspondent Allan Dawes, who went ashore that day, sought details of the bombing. He saw one man 'at the moment when he was turning over the broken body of his dead mate. It is not a memory that will easily die'. Yet, amidst signs of loss and destruction, he also found the beach to be:

... throbbing with business like a market-place. The red guiding sign for the landing craft was reminiscent of a country sale. Bull-dozer, caterpillar, tractor and truck rolled out of the great holds of a long line of transports, laying steel mesh strips over soft earth, cutting out the road and carrying off supplies.

These vehicles reflected the industrial might that was now behind Australians in New Guinea. So too did the frequent references in captured Japanese documents to the need for Japanese troops to depend on their spiritual strength to match Allied matériel superiority.

During the campaign for Lae, Sergeant Tom ‘Diver’ Derrick of the 2/48th Battalion would tell his diary: ‘Their weapons are definitely inferior to ours, being old & crude yet effective. I cannot see how they can possibly have a chance at all!’

Despite some further aerial harassment of landing craft, by the end of the first day an amazing 1500 tons of stores had been unloaded. Nevertheless, lack of supplies was to be a problem for the 9th Division in the weeks ahead.

More than 7000 troops had been landed by mid-morning, and they set out along the coast for Lae. No Japanese opposed them that day, but thick jungle, swamps, kunai grass and numerous rain-swollen rivers and streams lay in their path.

The first contact with the Japanese was on the night of 5–6 September when a 2/23rd Battalion patrol fought off numerous attacks. Sergeant Derrick recorded in his diary that ‘morale is one hundred per cent’. He did complain, however, that the rations were a problem: three tins of bully beef per day for four men, and one packet of biscuits each. This was a cry being heard in the other battalions.

While the 26th Brigade moved north to approach Lae from the north-east, the 24th continued the advance along the coast. The latter’s 2/28th Battalion reached the formidable obstacle of the Busu River on 8 September. The next day, supported by the first friendly artillery fire of the campaign, the battalion achieved a crossing. After wading to a sheltered island, they moved to the far bank in four extended lines. Private William Loh, 2/28th Battalion, wrote a vivid eyewitness report:

There was no hesitating even among non-swimmers when the men reached the river. They had reduced their packs to a minimum, but rifles, Brens, 2-inch mortars, grenades, Owens, signals equipment and plentiful ammunition were terrific handicaps as they struggled valiantly on the rocky bottom against the all-powerful tide. Some men allowed themselves to be carried downstream and gradually worked their way to the opposite bank to help their less fortunate comrades. Some—and of these some were drowned—at once fell victims and were carried away at an incredible speed towards the sea and the enemy’s fire, only their tin hats showing above the water. It was a terrifying but magnificent spectacle.

Thirteen Australians drowned in this daring and significant manoeuvre. Despite many attempts, the 26th Brigade was unable to bridge the Busu until 14 September. The 24th Brigade faced some stiff opposition, but on 16 September crossed the Butibum River, the last natural obstacle before Lae.

The capture of Lae had been allotted to the 9th Division, but units of the 7th Division got there first, on 16 September. Patrols of the two divisions met that afternoon, and the Australian flag was raised over Lae. Although Lae had been captured with very few Australian casualties, the main body of Japanese defenders succeeded in fleeing to fight another day. The official historian, David Dexter, concluded:

The badly led and often beaten [Japanese] fighting units ... had carried out a creditable defence of Lae in face of the onslaughts of two of the finest divisions on the Allied side. Had the flooded Busu not delayed the 9th Division for such a period the enemy would in all probability not have escaped. Fortune and Nature, however, favoured a valiant defender despite the equally valiant striving of the attackers.

Finschhafen

The swifter than expected capture of Lae encouraged MacArthur and Blamey to press ahead with the capture of Finschhafen, along the coast of the Huon Peninsula. Finschhafen could be developed into a major air and naval base to support other operations, especially across the Vitiaz Strait to New Britain. One brigade, the 20th, was allocated to capture Finschhafen, despite reservations among Blamey, Major General George Wootten, commander of the 9th Division, and Brigadier William Windeyer, commander of the 20th Brigade, as to whether this would be a strong enough force. Private KR Rose of the 2/13th Battalion speculated in his diary on 21 September: 'Leaving tonight for Finchaven [sic] by the plan its going to be sticky.'

He wrote his next entry in hospital at Buna, having been wounded during the 'sticky' fighting. Faulty maps, or the dark, or fear of the Japanese fire that greeted them led the first wave of landing craft to veer well to the left of their intended places, on 'Scarlet Beach'. Corporal Jack Craig, who landed with the 2/13th at Siki Cove, south of the intended landing place, described it vividly:

Small arms fire and mortar fire is spewing out from pill boxes on the beach coming our way. Yes! The Jap is here this time. The Devil's Own's [2/13th Battalion's] first encounter with the Japanese and hope to do as good a job as we did in the desert of Africa.

The second wave hit the beach and the ramps crash down with a thud. There is no time lost getting on the beach this time as there is 'shit' flying everywhere. Some have not made it and lay on the beach on ramps dead or wounded.

The beach is crowded with troops lying flat on their faces in the sand. Calls for stretcher bearers can be heard all along the line. It seemed we had been lying here for hours, but actually about a minute before reorganising was completed and our move up the beach to the protection of the thick timber continued.

For all the echoes of Gallipoli, the Australians were too experienced and their opponents too scarce to permit the feared repeat of that disaster.

The defenders were soon cleared from the beach defences, and the drive inland began. By nightfall, the reorganised Australians were occupying the beaches and several kilometres of surrounding ground. In the advance south towards Finschhafen, the first obstacle was the Bumi River and the Japanese defending its south bank. By hard marching, the 2/15th Battalion found a crossing and then forced Japanese marines off a dominant hill. This permitted the 2/13th Battalion to approach Finschhafen from the west. As the brigade's forces reached for Finschhafen, their lines of communication back to Scarlet Beach became increasingly exposed. The 2/17th Battalion was sent to guard the approaches to the beachhead, including the village of Jivevaneng, along the track to the dominating mountain in the area, Sattelberg.

Captured enemy orders pointed to an imminent Japanese attack from Sattelberg towards Scarlet Beach. On the basis of faulty intelligence reports that only 350 Japanese were defending the Finschhafen area, General MacArthur now refused an Australian request for reinforcements. However, by 30 September the 2/43rd Battalion had been brought forward and reached Jivevaneng, where the 2/17th had by then repulsed six Japanese attacks. The 2/43rd's arrival allowed the whole 20th Brigade to concentrate on Finschhafen. The 2/13th Battalion attacked the main Japanese defensive positions at Kakakog. One member of the battalion, Signaller Bill Collins, wrote afterwards of support by 24 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF):

The R.A.A.F. Vultees [Vengeances] divebombed the Japs—and can they dive! They knocked out some of the Jap posts before our attack.

Artillery support from the 2/12th Field Regiment also contributed to the 2/13th Battalion's success in forcing the Japanese out of Kakakog. Private John Holmes, a stretcher-bearer, watched the assault:

We caught glimpses of our men from time to time—crouching, firing, moving forward—and the quick glint of bayonets. And I saw a man with a Bren gun walking at a steady pace, firing bursts as he walked. As for human shouting there was very little. The Japs called to each other occasionally and set up their Bushido warcry once or twice, a kind of wailing song, which began to die away as they died.

On 2 October the Australians occupied Finschhafen. Private Arthur Armstrong of the 2/13th Battalion asserted in his diary soon afterwards: 'Not a bad record Lae and Finschafen [sic] in four weeks. What would happen if they fed the lad well on fruit, beer etc.'

In just eleven days since landing at Scarlet Beach, the 20th Brigade had captured Finschhafen despite awful terrain, supply shortages and heavy fighting. They were not to know that three more months of such fighting lay ahead before the Huon Peninsula was cleared. That day, the brigade joined forces with the 22nd Battalion, which had advanced round the coast and helped secure this strategically valuable area.

Its value was also apparent to the Japanese, who were determined to reconquer it with the 5000 troops they had in the Sattelberg–Finschhafen area. A struggle continued at Jivevaneng, where, on 10 October, the 2/17th Battalion won a vital position—the Knoll'. Sergeant Harry Wells saw Japanese determined to win it back:

A voice roared 'Watch out for the bastards now'. Peering down the hill, I felt my heart pound as I saw the points of bayonets moving slowly forward. Instead of crouching with rifles flat to the ground, the Japs were crawling, their rifles held perpendicular.

This counter-attack was beaten off, as were eleven others Wells counted that day.

By 11 October, the Japanese force on the Sattelberg–Finschhafen front had grown to 12,000 men, but by then the rest of the 24th Brigade and 9th Division Headquarters under General Wootten had also arrived, as Allied misunderstandings evaporated. Wootten's assignment included capturing the Huon Peninsula up to Sio. Before he could start fulfilling his plans, he found his forces under attack.

The Japanese Counter-attack

A captured enemy operation order had divulged many details of the Japanese counter-offensive. Wootten allotted the 24th Brigade to defend the north and the 20th Brigade the south. The latter was attacked first, at Jivevaneng, and on 16 October drove the Japanese off. The following day, a heavy Japanese air raid in the Scarlet Bay area foreshadowed the expected seaborne assault. Rain and darkness could not save the three bargeloads of Japanese from the annihilating efficiency of American gunners and Australian infantry and anti-aircraft gunners. The main Japanese onslaught came later that morning, when attackers, who had slipped through the Australian screen the previous day, seized high ground just 2700 metres west of Scarlet Beach. The 2/28th and 2/43rd Battalions fought off determined attacks on 17 and 18 October, as the entire beachhead, and especially the Australian gun positions, came under serious threat.

Late on 18 October, the Japanese advanced towards Siki Cove and the nearby Australian artillery. Bofors guns of the 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment and 25-pounders of the 2/12th Field Regiment fired over open sights at the Japanese attackers. With small arms fire hitting their gun shields, the 2/12th Field Regiment gunners fired more than 200 rounds, repulsing the enemy from about 750 metres. The Bofors gunners used their weapons like machine-guns against Japanese as close as 200 metres away. These attackers were repulsed, but others reached Siki Cove, thereby dividing the 24th and 20th Brigades. Isolated Australian companies depended on Wirraway aircraft of 4 Squadron RAAF dropping ammunition, food and messages.

Brigadier Bernard Evans, commander of the 24th Brigade, controversially ordered the 2/28th Battalion to withdraw from the high ground at Katika. To exacerbate Wootten's problems, on the night of 18–19 October, the Japanese established a roadblock east of Jivevaneng, thus isolating that vital position. Fortunately, the Australians found an alternative supply lifeline.

By 19 October, the Australians could go on the offensive. The 2/28th recaptured Katika. Over the next five days, the Japanese brought to bear all in their power to recapture it, including an artillery piece firing at point-blank range, but the Australians held on.

The Japanese at Siki Cove did not retreat until 21 October, but the defeat of their army's counter-offensive was sealed the day before, when the 26th Brigade and a squadron of the Australian 1st Tank Battalion arrived at Langemak Bay. The counter-offensive had cost the Japanese some 1500 casualties, including at least 679 killed; the Australians suffered 228 casualties, including 49 dead.

Sattelberg

General Wootten could now take the initiative and follow his deferred plans for the capture of Sattelberg and Wareo. He decided to use nine tanks and the relatively fresh 26th Brigade to capture Sattelberg, after which the 24th Brigade would take Wareo from the east. Two preliminaries to this were the transfer of the 4th Brigade to garrison the Finschhafen base and the elimination by the 20th Brigade, in brutal fighting, of the Japanese roadblock east of Jivevaneng, on 6 November. The following day, the Matilda tanks moved to an assembly point near Jivevaneng. They had been brought forward in great secrecy, their engine noise being concealed by the sound of artillery fire.

On 13 November, with the big offensive near, Sergeant Derrick was confident about the operation, but more concerned with a matter close to many Australian hearts—the Melbourne Cup. 'The Cup has stolen the thunder from the coming attack', he asserted. Another concern in previous weeks—the food supply—seems to have diminished in November. Derrick wrote: 'Rations good and plentiful, all troops in the pink and confident'

On 16 November, the 2/48th demonstrated its confidence and skill by capturing Green Ridge, an important feature overlooking the main track. The 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion and 2/12th Field Regiment provided valuable support.

The main advance began on 17 November. The tanks soon encountered opposition from enemy pillboxes and foxholes, but apart from a two-hour pause to rearm, spent most of the morning slowly eliminating all opposition. Soon after midday, tanks and infantry were within view of the first objective, Coconut Ridge, when the leading tank struck an unexploded 25-pounder shell, which blew off its track. It now blocked the narrow road in a position where it could not be towed away. While Japanese machine-gun fire pinned down the infantry, an enemy party attacked the two leading tanks with explosives, disabling the machine-gun and wireless of the second.

Australian infantry now pushed forward to clear the enemy from Coconut Ridge, but could not capture it. The 2/23rd and 2/24th Battalions did not reach the day's objectives either, despite courageous efforts. In the 2/23rd, Sergeant Perc de Forest single-handedly attacked an enemy machine-gun post, only stopping when hit a third time when he was right near the gun. It took great effort, not least by four stretcher-bearers, to rescue de Forest from the precipitous slope where he lay. By then he had eight wounds, but was conscious and concerned for the bearers. He died at the Regimental Aid Post. Another bearer in the battalion, Private Leslie Baird, risked his life to crawl out and attend a mortally wounded corporal on this day, only to be shot dead while applying a field dressing. His devotion exemplifies that of medical men throughout this taxing campaign.

Coconut Ridge was found abandoned on 18 November. Progress in the difficult terrain and against a skilful enemy was slow over subsequent days, even with tank support. However, the capture of Steeple Tree Hill on 20 November was crucial, as it represented the last Japanese line before Sattelberg.

Another momentous event occurred that day on the 24th Brigade's front, further north. In order to cut the track from Gusika, on the coast, to Wareo, the 2/32nd Battalion occupied 'Pabu Hill', named after a New Guinean boy who was assisting Major Bill Mollard, the 2/32nd Battalion's acting commanding officer. Helped by two New Guineans, the Australians moved undetected from the Song River to Pabu, which they occupied without loss. Pabu was surrounded by open spaces, and in subsequent days by Japanese troops desperate to recapture it. Its occupation severed the main Japanese supply route to Sattelberg and Wareo. Its defence for more than a week by the 2/32nd Battalion and then the 2/43rd Battalion was one of the classic stories of the Second Australian Imperial Force. General Hatazo Adachi, the Japanese commander in the Huon Peninsula campaign, later named Pabu as one of the prime causes of Japanese defeat.

On 22 November, the 2/48th Battalion reached the southern slopes of Sattelberg, 550 metres from the summit. Those metres were well defended. The 2/23rd Battalion was also nearby and at one point there was a danger of the Australians shooting at each other. They established each other's identity by using the division's unofficial war cry 'Ho! Ho! Ho!'

Disaster was averted then, but not when fragments from a Japanese shell burst in a tree in the 2/48th area, killing the second-in-command and adjutant. Good news was the speedy repulse of another Japanese counter-attack, this time against the 24th Brigade on the Song River.

Although the 26th Brigade was edging towards the summit of Sattelberg, a protracted siege loomed if the defenders remained alert and determined. However, the Australians decided to try a surprise attack on 24 November from an unlikely south-easterly direction, where the terrain was such that anything more than the lightest resistance would prevent success. Captain Deane Hill's company of the 2/48th Battalion was chosen for the task, while the 2/23rd Battalion advanced on the left. A landslide precluded the use of tanks.

Superior numbers eventually repulsed the 2/23rd Battalion's advance. Moving in silence and under cover, at 5.30 pm Hill's company reached the base of a steep cliff. There, Japanese machine-gun fire and grenades forced back repeated attempts on the heights, which in places were almost vertical and nowhere rose less than 45 degrees. Sergeant Derrick, commanding a platoon, tried to outflank the position, but was held up. When Hill reported to the commanding officer (CO) that the situation was hopeless, he was ordered to withdraw.

'Bugger the CO,' said Derrick when he came back to speak to Hill. His men had just subdued several posts, and Derrick asked for another 20 minutes. Hill hesitated as it was late in the day and ammunition was low. Then he nodded agreement, and 'Derrick's Show,' as the subsequent action came to be called, began. Supported by fire from his sections, he moved forward alone and, using a collection of grenades on which he had loosened the pins, he methodically blew up the Japanese positions ahead. After finishing the job with his rifle, he had personally destroyed ten enemy posts. While his platoon clung to the newly won ground 100 metres below the summit, reinforcements came up to resume the advance next day.

On doing so, following a mortar and artillery barrage, they found the summit unoccupied. Derrick was given the honour of raising the Australian flag on a shell-torn limb over Sattelberg. Derrick had already won the Distinguished Conduct Medal at El Alamein, but the Victoria Cross he received for Sattelberg made him a national hero.

That day, the 2/48th Battalion sent an encouraging message to the beleaguered 2/32nd: 'Torpy sits on Sat.' 'Torpy' was the nickname of Brigadier David Whitehead, the 2/32nd's former commanding officer and now the proud commander of the 26th Brigade.

Wareo

The focus of operations now moved north to the spur between Gusika, on the coast, and Wareo, some 7 kilometres inland. The 26th Brigade was ordered to move inland from Sattelberg to Wareo, while the 24th Brigade would secure the track from Gusika. Supported by three tanks, the 2/28th Battalion took Gusika without loss and then relieved the Pabu garrison. The 2/43rd Battalion subsequently took up the advance on the Wareo track.

The distance from Sattelberg to Wareo was roughly 5500 metres in a straight line, but about four times that over the winding, precipitous tracks. The terrain, heavy rain and lack of New Guinean bearers made supplying the advance very difficult. For about five days, the 2/24th Battalion laboured on the slimy track, in airless kunai grass and under the burning sun, acting as porters for the 2/23rd, which was in front. The Japanese rearguard counter-attacked the 2/23rd Battalion for several days at Kuanko, but on 6 December the 2/24th outflanked this position by occupying Peak Hill. On 8 December, the 2/23rd found Wareo village abandoned.

Two days later, exhausted infantrymen of the two advancing brigades met. Japanese in the area were still fighting hard: twenty-seven fought to the death at the 2200 Feature, killing four 2/24th men on 12 December. This fight ensured that the Wareo–Bonga Track was open, but for the 2/24th this was a bitter ending to a lethal and soul-destroying campaign.

The 9th Division's hardest New Guinea fighting was over, but for the 4th Brigade — comprising the 22nd, 29th/46th and 37th/52nd Battalions — the toughest challenge lay ahead, as it advanced along the coast north of Gusika. These battalions had been raised as part of the Citizen Military Forces, or militia, and were still called 'militia battalions'. However many of their men had since volunteered for the AIF, while remaining in their battalions. Determined and relatively fresh Japanese sought to hinder their progress to enable comrades from the Wareo area to escape. Patrols, including men from the 2/4th Commando Squadron and Papuan Infantry Battalion, which repeatedly proved its worth in this campaign, sought out many of these stragglers. Although the militia battalions were relatively inexperienced, their men fought courageously. When Corporal RCA Deslandes' section of the 29th/46th Battalion became isolated close to an enemy machine-gun,

he ignored four wounds to attack the gun, and was pulling the pin from a grenade when a fifth wound felled him. He was killed by the blast of the grenade. The rest of his section were killed or wounded in the same action.

With the clearance of the remainder of the Huon Peninsula, the Australian artillery now concentrated on supporting the 4th Brigade's advance. Tank support was also crucial, as was demonstrated at Lakona. For two days, the Australian infantry reduced but could not subdue the Japanese garrison. On 16 December, sappers managed to get five Matildas across a ravine. The official historian, David Dexter, recorded:

*At 5.30 p.m. the five tanks lined up ahead of [an infantry] company with their guns pointing at the doomed Japanese whose backs were now so literally to the sea. From 150 yards [135 metres] the deadly fire crashed into the Japanese positions. Eight minutes after the start the tanks reached the cliff and the infantry mopped up a Japanese pocket ... Many Japanese were killed and others were thought to have leapt from the cliffs ...
to the rocks below.*

The 4th Brigade reached the high ground at Fortification Point on 20 December. Here, its campaigning ended for the moment. The coastal advance had cost it 201 casualties, including 65 killed. The following day, the 20th Brigade returned to the fray, taking over the pursuit. The 4th Brigade had broken the Japanese defence. Private Armstrong, 2/13th Battalion, recorded in his diary:

Boxing day advanced 7,000 yds [6400 metres] before contacting the Jap. As usual the animal tossed a few mortars and 75s [artillery shells] at us then withdrew. He has been doing this since we started our advance.

The enemy's forlorn plight was apparent in the abandoned supplies and equipment, and especially the many dead left behind.

On 28 December, the 2/13th Battalion caught up with the Japanese at Blucher Point. A member of the battalion, Acting Sergeant Jack Craig, wrote:

Japs are running out of the jungle everywhere and we start some very good shooting ... [Corporal] Carter ran after some Japs who turned and killed him ... There is bullets flying all around us as we are in the open with little cover. Still we settle down and return the fire with our Brens and rifle fire. Saw one with his pack on his back walking up the track

and soon everyone was stuck into him. He soon hit terra firma.

Craig then described a gesture symbolic of the brutality of this campaign: 'Later in the day we saw his body and pushed it over the cliff into the sea.'

On the same day, an American amphibious landing at Saidor, west of Sio, clinched the Japanese decision to abandon the Sio area. American planning for future operations would be greatly aided by an Australian discovery near Sio in mid-January: a cache of Japanese code books. This followed the 20th Brigade's occupation of Sio on 15 January 1944. Its battle casualties had been tiny, but by then sickness was making major inroads into the entire 9th Division. More than 85 per cent of its average strength was evacuated sick at some time during the New Guinea operations. Malaria alone accounted for 44 per cent of the division's casualties from all sources between September 1943 and January 1944.

Between the landing at Scarlet Beach and the handover to the 5th Division at Sio on 21 January 1944, the 9th Division suffered 1028 battle casualties, including 283 killed and one missing. This was not even half as many as in the Battle of El Alamein, yet one battalion diarist wrote at the fall of Sattelberg that the operations there were to many of the men 'harder and more nerve-racking than any 10 days at Tobruk or El Alamein'. The main problems he listed were the steep country, proximity of the enemy, lack of sleep and hot food, scarcity of water, necessity of carrying everything and the enervating climate.

Charles Lemaire, who was badly wounded at El Alamein, cited the same reasons why he found New Guinea more testing. He added as another factor the qualities of the Japanese: tenacious, brave, self-sacrificing, and perhaps most importantly, not willing to take prisoners. All 9th Division men who patrolled knew that if they were trapped, they would die.

In return for its 1028 casualties, the 9th Division inflicted well over seven times that number. Only about 4300 of the Japanese force of 12,600 who were originally forward of Sio escaped. In this campaign, the Australians smashed the last Japanese attempts to take the initiative in eastern New Guinea and then relentlessly and skilfully attacked and pursued the enemy's forces. They captured 18 of the 26 Japanese 75 mm guns and 28 of 36 heavy machine-guns in the area. Their excellent infantry tactics and combined arms procedures, notably in the use of artillery and tank support, proved decisive. At the Busu River, Scarlet Beach, Kakakog, Jivevaneng, Katika, Pabu, Sattelberg and half a dozen other places, the Australians enhanced their military tradition of Homeric fighting in New Guinea. The 9th Division retained its edge into a fourth year of operations, while the

militia battalions exceeded many expectations in their efficiency and determination.

This campaign was, in the words of its most perceptive analyst, John Coates, a 'watershed' in New Guinea operations:

When Wootten's troops were fighting the battles around Jivevaneng and Sattelberg, no American ground forces in MacArthur's command were in combat with the Japanese. From then on it became principally the American army's war as increasing numbers of its divisions arrived and the Australian strike divisions took a breather after carrying the brunt of fighting over two years.

The Huon Peninsula operations were the largest yet undertaken by the Australian Army. They, and more precisely their successful conclusions, were the prelude to a handover to a much bigger Allied army.

References

The official history of the Australian Army's Huon Peninsula campaign is David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives* (Canberra, 1961). Quotes of the official historian are drawn from this book.

An important source was original diaries and other private records and manuscripts held in the collection of the Australian War Memorial. Quotes were drawn from the collections of Arthur Armstrong (PR85/165); Jack Craig (PR00906); TC 'Diver' Derrick (PR82/190); and Edmund 'Ted' Lecky (3DRL/7816).

Unit histories from which quotes were drawn are Philip Masel, *The Second 28th* (Swanbourne, 1995) for the quote of William Loh; R Serle, *The Second Twenty-Fourth* (Brisbane, 1963) for the 2/24th's 'bitter ending'; and HD Wells, *'B' Company, Second Seventeenth Infantry* (Toowoomb Bay, 1984) for Henry Wells.

Memoirs and other first-hand accounts include Bill Collins, 'Finschhafen fighting', *Army Magazine* (December 1943); Allan Dawes, *Soldier Superb* (Sydney, 1944); and John Holmes, *Smiles of Fortune* (Sydney, 2001).

The most perceptive analysis of the campaign is John Coates, *Bravery Above Blunder: The 9th Australian Division at Finschhafen, Sattelberg and Sio* (Melbourne, 1999).



As aircraft circle overhead, troops relax on one of nearly 100 Allied vessels that took part in the landing at Lae in September 1943, the largest combined land, sea and air operation undertaken by the Australian armed forces to that date. Only after they had boarded the ships were the troops told of their destination. One battalion diarist wrote 'Long lines of ships formed a formidable but inspiring sight, giving [a] complete feeling of confidence.'

(AWM 015853)



American engineers lay two lanes of steel matting on the narrow beach near Lae for the vehicles coming ashore from the landing craft on 4 September 1943. At rear right is one of the six huge Landing Ships, Tank (LSTs) that began unloading that morning. Each vessel carried 400 men, 35 vehicles and 80 tons of stores; all six vessels were unloaded in just over two hours.

(AWM 015856)



Australian troops waded ashore near Lae on 5 September, from a US Navy Landing Ship, Tank (LST). The Japanese offered no resistance on the beach, although their aircraft inflicted some casualties. ([AWM 305245](#))



Within four hours of the initial landing, nearly 8000 Australian troops had come ashore. Facilitating the march on Lae was crucial, and pioneers worked knee-deep in mud to construct a road for motor transport. The area behind the beach was a swamp with few exits. (*AWM 015706*)



Sergeant Don Lawrie (centre, signing a Japanese flag) was prominent in the first engagement with the Japanese in this campaign. His platoon of the 2/23rd Battalion repulsed six enemy attacks on the night of 5 September. Lawrie, who killed at least ten Japanese, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. (*AWM 061700*)



Australians marching to Lae file past the body of a Japanese on 22 September. More than 2200 Japanese died defending Lae from the 9th and 7th Divisions. ([AWM 015783](#))



For the second time in three weeks, Australians of the 9th Division prepare to board a Landing Ship, Tank (LST) for an amphibious invasion, this time at Finschhafen. *(AWM 057454)*



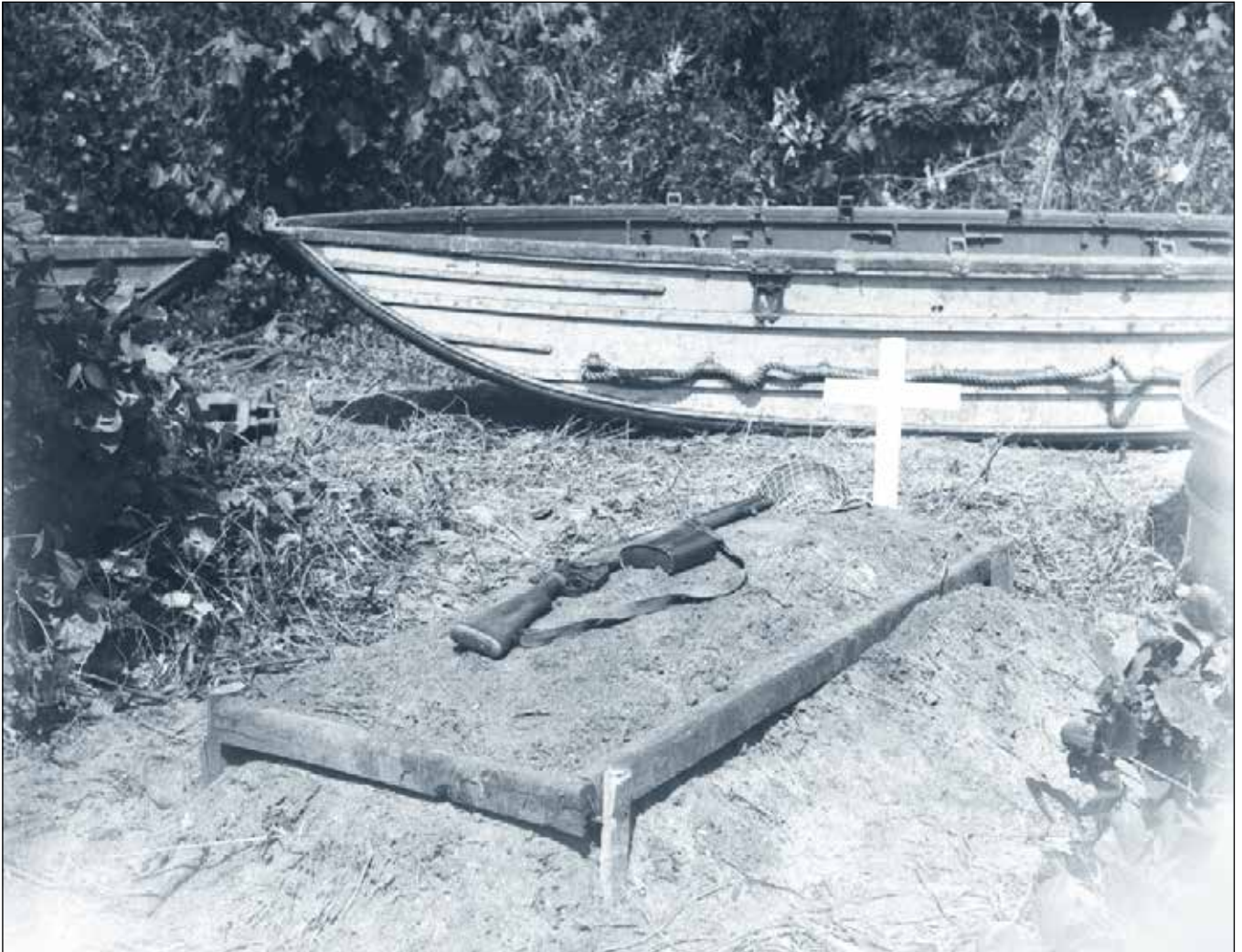
Scarlet Beach on the morning of the landing, 22 September. Unlike Red and Yellow Beaches north-west of Lae, this beach was defended. However, the Japanese defenders were soon pushed back, and within four hours of the landing eight Bofors guns like this one, of the 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, were in position on the 550-metre-long beachhead. In the background are North Hill, which was a crucial feature also captured on the first day, and a Landing Ship, Tank (LST). (*AWM 057470*)



Australian and American servicemen crowd around to look at a forlorn Japanese, the first prisoner taken in the Scarlet Beach landing. He is probably a Japanese encountered that day by men of the 2/3rd Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers, who, after getting ahead of the advancing infantry, wounded and captured an enemy soldier. ([AWM 057472](#))



There was stiff fighting on the day of the Finschhafen landing at Katika, pictured here with a sign later erected to mark its significance. On being pushed back from the beaches, the Japanese retreated to strong defences here, only to be driven off by elements of all three 20th Brigade battalions. Katika was an important feature during the Japanese counter-attack in October, when the Australians briefly lost it, then retook it and held it against vigorous assaults. (AWM 071411)



An early Australian casualty of the advance on Finschhafen was Corporal Reece Tart, who was killed on 23 September as the Australians sought to cross the Bumi River. Tart, a section leader in the 2/15th Battalion, was shot dead while examining a river crossing. Corporal Harry Cousens risked his life trying to save Tart, only to be wounded himself. Private Leslie Thomas then rescued Cousens and another wounded man. Cousens and Thomas received the Military Medal. Tart's helmet and rifle were laid on top of his grave, on the northern bank of the river, and an assault boat placed at the head. ([AWM 059562](#))



Gunners of the 2/12th Field Regiment use a 25-pounder gun to shell the Kakakog spur, a key Japanese defensive position near Finschhafen, on 23 September. Japanese troops often commented on the effectiveness of Australian artillery in this campaign. This gun was located at the partly overgrown Finschhafen airstrip; the crew had arrived at Scarlet Beach at 11.30 the previous night. An enemy air attack would inflict eighteen casualties on the regiment at the airstrip on 24 September. ([AWM 057836](#))



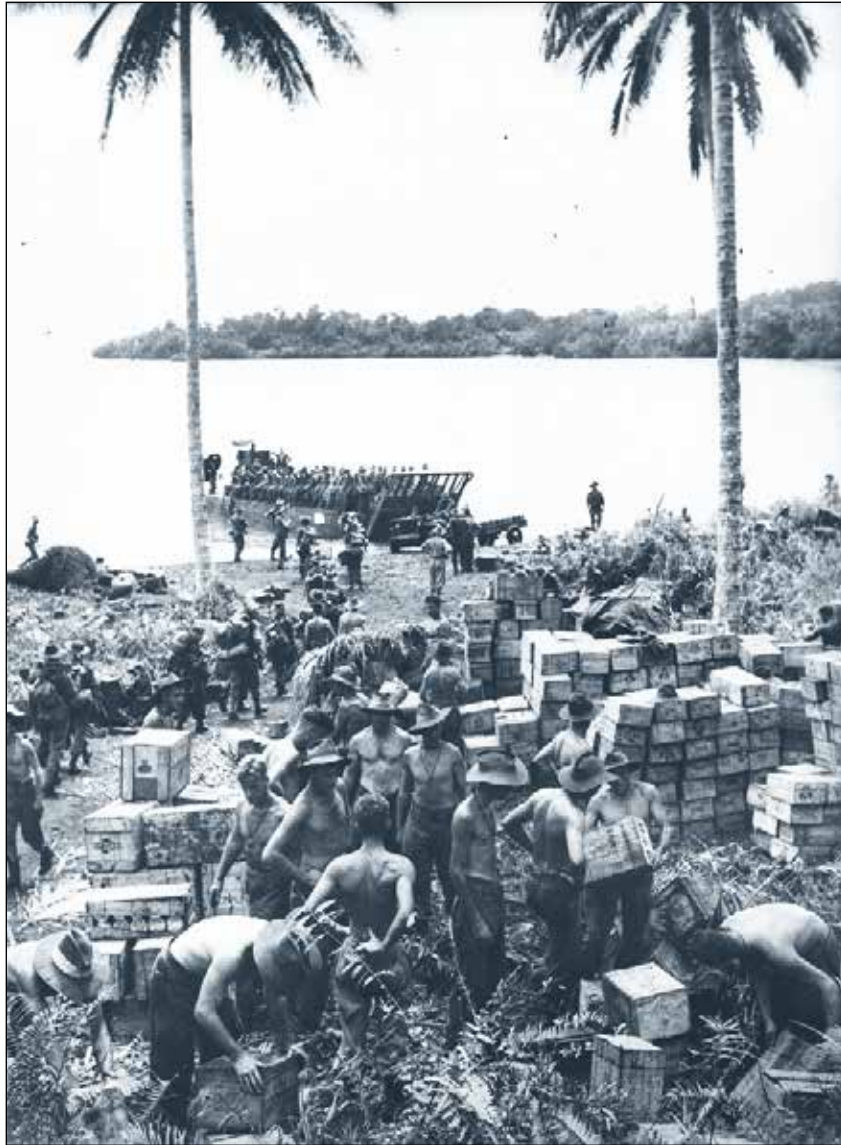
On 2 October, the day Finschhafen was captured, RAAF Vultee Vengeance dive-bombers of 24 Squadron attack Japanese positions on the headland. 'Can they dive!' said an Australian of the 2/13th Battalion, grateful for the support the dive-bombers gave in the attack on the main Japanese positions at Kakakog. ([AWM 058100](#))



An Australian inspects a powerful 13mm machine-gun found in a Japanese pillbox on the coast at Finschhafen on 2 October. Hard fighting was needed to clear the Japanese from their well-entrenched positions. The 2/13th Battalion alone suffered ten killed and seventy wounded at Kakakog on 1 October. *(AWM 058109)*



A human supply chain labours to get ammunition and food to the forward troops near Finschhafen in October 1943. Supplying the forward troops in the Huon Peninsula campaign required extreme effort from New Guineans and Australian troops. In the advance on Lae, the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion and 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion did little else but carry supplies. ([AWM 058093](#))



An unloading party clears an American landing craft at Scarlet Beach. The 9th Division's command had to rely on these small craft for supplies and men. Until mid-October it was impossible with the available craft to replace more than 600 artillery rounds per day, and at one stage there were just two days' balanced rations at Finschhafen. The 2/6th Supply Depot Company ran the beach depot. ([AWM 068605](#))



Senior Australian officers discuss the situation at 24th Brigade Headquarters, Scarlet Beach, on 25 October. The smiles hide tension. At far right is Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, General Officer Commanding, 2nd Australian Corps. Next to him is Brigadier Bernard Evans, commanding 24th Brigade, and next to him, Evans' divisional commander, Major General George Wootten. All three had served together in Tobruk. Morshead had appointed Evans brigade commander at El Alamein, North Africa, in 1942. However, Wootten was unhappy with Evans' performance at Scarlet Beach, and Morshead concurred: on 1 November, Evans was relieved of his command, and soon afterwards was replaced by Brigadier Selwyn Porter. ([AWM 059141](#))



Sergeant GT 'Junior' Melsom of the 2/32nd Battalion anti-tank platoon sits proudly on a captured 75 mm Japanese gun, used against the Australians at Katika. An Australian 2-pounder anti-tank gun eventually silenced the gun after hitting it at least eight times. The 2/32nd Battalion had arrived at Scarlet Beach between 20 and 22 October and been sent to Katika as part of the Australian defence against the major Japanese counter-attack. There, the battalion threw back repeated attacks, which cost well over 300 Japanese lives.

(AWM 016104)



In the defence of Scarlet Beach, a platoon of the 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion helped the 2/43rd Battalion to repel fierce attacks. This photo, taken later that month, gives a good idea of the terrain on the defence perimeter in that area. ([AWM 059578](#))



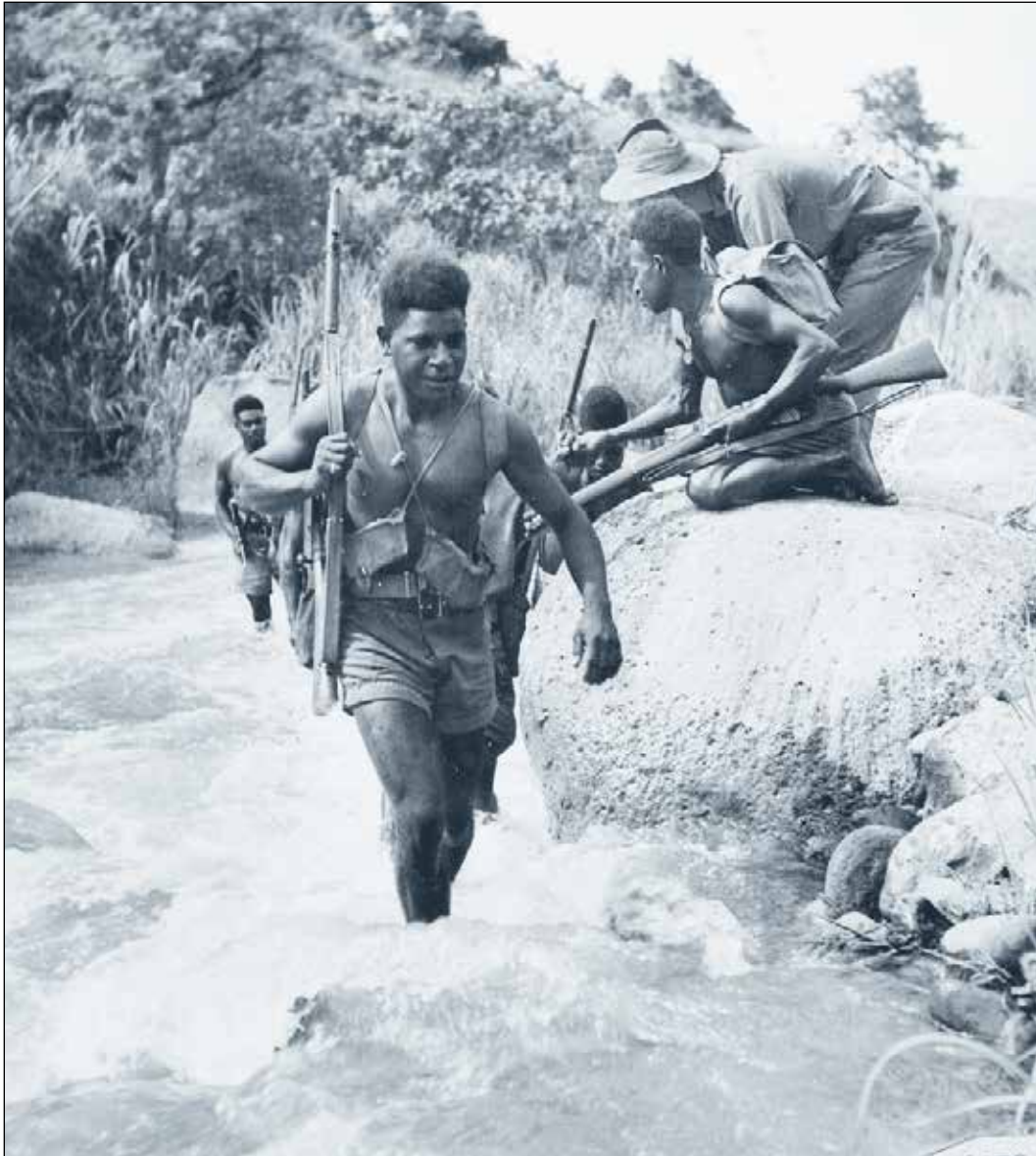
After participating in the battles at Scarlet Beach, Corporal Robert Tongue fills magazines of his Owen sub-machine-gun in a forward post. From positions such as this, the 2/28th had repulsed numerous Japanese attacks. ([AWM 016111](#))



During the Japanese counter-attack in October, some troops of C Company, 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion, became isolated and dependent on emergency air drops. Afterwards, some of the grateful soldiers presented captured Japanese swords and a bugle to the airmen of 4 Squadron RAAF. Standing in front of the Wirraway aircraft (left of the engine) during the ceremony are (from left) Flying Officer Donald Begg, Captain Richard Garnsey (Air Liaison Officer), Squadron Leader James Bell, Flying Officer John Birrell, Flight Lieutenant Fred Watchorn and, helmet in hand, Major Peter Siekmann, officer commanding C Company. Garnsey received the Military Cross and Watchorn the Distinguished Flying Cross, each for courage and devotion to duty, in this campaign. ([AWM 016076](#))



Arriving at Kedam Beach on 27 October, one of nine tanks that General Wootten had at his disposal for the capture of Sattelberg is unloaded from a Landing Craft, Mechanised (LCM). The arrival on the Finschhafen front of Matilda tanks signified the fact that the initiative had returned to the Australians. Every attempt was made to prevent the enemy from finding out about the tanks' arrival. ([AWM 058987](#))



A patrol of the Papuan Infantry Battalion sets out early in November, with Australian Sergeant Francis Wust of the battalion looking on. The Papuan infantry were an invaluable source of information to the Australian commanders throughout the Finschhafen campaign.

(AWM 016078)



Two Australians of the 2/24th Battalion sit at an advanced lookout post near Sattelberg on 15 November, sheltering under a frame giving rain protection. Private Thomas Hargreaves, the soldier writing, would be wounded later that month, and had been earlier in Tobruk.

(AWM 060579)



The attack on Sattelberg begins. A Matilda tank of 1st Tank Battalion advances as men of the 2/48th Battalion look on from the thick undergrowth on 17 November. There were four tanks involved that day. The track along which they advanced was muddy, narrow and steep, with dense bamboo and jungle on either side. The infantry protected the tanks, which that morning slowly eliminated enemy troops in pillboxes and foxholes. ([AWM 060606](#))



During the advance on Sattelberg, Australian infantrymen prepare to attack Japanese positions.

(AWM 060600)



Shortly after the previous photo was taken, Private Douglas Maher comes back through the jungle, sporting a head-wound. The tanks have crushed much of the bamboo. (*AWM 016205*)



On 17 November 1943, stretcher-bearer Private Ted Woodroffe carries a wounded comrade of the 2/48th Battalion back to the Advanced Dressing Station, while tanks and infantry move forward. Woodroffe was not out of danger; he was shot dead later that day while going to the aid of another wounded man. ([AWM 060615](#))



The 2/48th Battalion lost six men killed on 17 November, amongst them 20-year-old Private Lindsay Dixon who died in the fight to secure Coconut Ridge. He was buried there the following day. Padre Sidney Stewart, officiating at right, was himself wounded during the campaign. ([AWM 060627](#))



The Australian tanks did not have an easy run on Sattelberg. Two were disabled on the first day, and this photograph probably shows one of two that became bogged on 19 November. Each appeared to be on the verge of sliding down the hillside, but engineers of the 2/13th Field Company freed them with the help of a bulldozer, visible in the background. In the foreground a YMCA officer deals out coffee. (*AWM 016228*)



The unopposed occupation by the 2/32nd Battalion of this hill, 'Pabu', on 20 November, was a momentous event in the campaign. Its occupation severed the main Japanese supply route from the coast to Sattelberg and Wareo, so in subsequent days the Japanese surrounded, shelled and stormed it. The defenders held on. The black rectangle at bottom left is a battle sign erected to commemorate the epic seven-day action of the 2/32nd and later 2/43rd Battalion in the area. General Hatazo Adachi, the Japanese commander in the Huon Peninsula campaign, later named Pabu as one of the prime causes of Japanese defeat. ([AWM 071425](#))



Sattelberg falls. In one of the most famous images of the war, Sergeant Tom 'Diver' Derrick hoists an Australian flag on a tree at Sattelberg on 25 November 1943. The previous day he had single-handedly destroyed ten enemy posts on the precipitous slopes below this summit. This feat earned him not only the honour of raising the flag, but also the Victoria Cross.

(AWM 016246)



Casualties of the Huon Peninsula campaign wait on stretchers for transport south in a Douglas C-47 Dakota. In the month of November, when this photograph was taken, 966 patients from the Huon Peninsula operations passed through the Lae evacuation post. About one-quarter were battle casualties. Travelling from the Finschhafen Casualty Clearing Station to hospital at Dobodura required journeys by barge, sea-ambulance, DUKW amphibious vehicle, ambulance wagon, aircraft and ambulance. ([AWM 079521](#))



2/24th Battalion soldiers fire a 3-inch mortar at Japanese forces on the track ahead at Peak Hill, near Wareo, on 7 December: (left to right) Lance-Corporal John McLay, Private Robert Adams, Private Leslie Knersch and Sergeant Malcolm Hutton. Australian mortars were used to great effect in the Sattelberg campaign. On the day of this photograph, the 2/24th Battalion met the 2/32nd Battalion, completing the linkup between the 24th and 26th Brigade advances on Wareo.

(AWM 061717)



Sergeant Clifford Gaunt and Corporal John Brown of the 2/23rd Battalion pose for the camera with a Vickers machine-gun in a captured Japanese position at Wareo on 9 December. The Australians had occupied the village's abandoned ruins the previous day. *(AWM 061702)*



In an image reminiscent of a scene from World War I, men of the 2/23rd Battalion move up the line at Wareo on 9 December, shortly after it fell. ([AWM 061707](#))



The 29th/46th Battalion led the advance along the coast from Gusika. On 5 December it fought well in its first action of the war. There was further heavy fighting the following day, during which Private Patrick Hayes, seen here being evacuated by stretcher, was shot in the shoulder. Within a few metres of him machine-gun fire had killed the leading scout, Corporal John Henry. ([AWM 016277](#))



Matilda tanks of the 1st Tank Battalion, supported by infantry of the 29th/46th Battalion, in the coastal advance, probably on 19 December. That day, one tank sustained four hits from a Japanese 37 mm gun at close range before knocking out the gun and helping to break the enemy's resistance. A key objective, Fortification Point, was captured without loss the following day. ([AWM 016290](#))



Men of 4th Battalion headquarters in the ruins of Sio Mission on 24 January 1944, soon after it took over responsibility for the area from the 2/17th Battalion. ([AWM 070054](#))



Sister Nellie Luke bandages the wound of Private Geoffrey Abson in a tent ward at the 2/3rd Casualty Clearing Station at Heldsbach Mission in March 1944. This unit had a heavy and sustained burden during the Sattelberg fighting, when the daily intake reached 150. In February the unit used penicillin for the first time, to treat a patient with septicaemia.

(AWM 071020)

Titles currently available in the series:
Australians in the Pacific War

Aitape–Wewak 1944–1945

Battle of the Beachheads 1942–1943

Borneo 1942–1945

Bougainville 1942–1945

Kokoda 1942

Milne Bay 1942

New Britain 1941–1945

Royal Australian Air Force 1941–1945

Royal Australian Navy 1939–1945

The Huon Peninsula 1943–1944

The Markham and Ramu Valleys 1943–1944

Victory in the Pacific 1945

Wau–Salamaua 1942–1943



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



