



The Bloody Beachheads:

The Battles of Gona, Buna and Sananda

One-Day Conference Saturday 12 November 2022

East Malvern RSL, Stanley Grose Dr, Victoria, 3145

Keynote Speaker

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THE JAPANESE WAR PLAN IN THE PACIFIC AND THE BATTLE OF BUNA-GONA

by Dr Peter Williams

Paper presented to 'The Bloody Beachheads: The Battles of Gona, Buna and Sananda' conference of Military History and Heritage Victoria Inc., East Malvern RSL Club, Melbourne, Saturday 25 September 2021



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The Japanese War Plan in the Pacific and the battle of Buna-Gona 4

I'd like to thank Military History and Heritage Victoria for inviting me here to speak about the Japanese War Plan in the Pacific and the battle of Buna-Gona.

We are going to hear about the battle of Buna-Gona on land sea and in the air, about the Australian-US alliance, Australian medical issues, the Australian war dead, and remembrance of the battle. But you can't have a battle without an enemy, and I'm here to speak on their behalf.

If it was early 1941 and we were thinking of the places of obvious geographical significance to armies, navies and air forces operating in the south-western Pacific: Rabaul, Milne Bay and Port Moresby would come to mind. Their harbours alone demand the attention of those planning a war, providing shelter for fleets and docking facilities. But not Buna, it wasn't on anyone's list that year, except for the Japanese, as you'll hear in a moment. Even so it wasn't of any particular significance to them when the war in the Pacific began and was of no importance to the Allies. It became significant because of events in the three months before the landing of the South Seas force there in July of 1942. A series of prior battles lost and won, and decisions, both wise and unwise, brought Buna out of obscurity. It came to pass that several square kilometres of remote swampy flat land in Papua saw a two month battle involving over 30,000 men, one of the largest battles fought in the south-west and south pacific theatres, which resulted in the ending of the six month Japanese invasion of Papua, and ending the last slim chance that the Japanese might show up in far north Queensland one day.

In May 1940, 18 months before the war in the Pacific began, the Caroline Maru, a 320 ton coastal rust-bucket with three Japanese intelligence officers on board, sailed to Buna, checked the depth of water at Basabua, the anchorage between Buna and Gona where the South Seas force later landed. They also looked for, and found, suitable ground for an airfield. The investigation of Buna was part of an effort to gather intelligence on eastern New Guinea which commenced in 1937. The Australian Directorate of Naval Intelligence, by the way, was aware of this.

In Papua the Japanese discovered that there were really only three places where a first-rate airfield complex might be built, owing to the lack of enough flat land, not too swampy, and close by the sea. The three places were Port Moresby, Milne Bay and Buna. They knew there were several second rate airstrips, apart from Kokoda, but a first rate airfield complex, one with several

runways, a fuel farm, proper bomb storage, had to be by the sea as only by sea could the many tons of bombs, fuel and spare parts needed for an air base be transported to it. In the Pacific large air bases not fairly close to the sea didn't exist.

Why were the Japanese interested at all in such an obscure spot on the north coast of Papua? Why did they later select it as a place to build a base and launch an offensive directed at Port Moresby? Why was there a battle at Buna at all? Why did they attempt to hold it when their offensive against Port Moresby failed? These are some of the questions I aim to answer in what follows.

There are four levels to look at when we talk about war. Grand strategy, strategy, operations and tactics. I'm going to cover the first three of these from the Japanese perspective. The battle of Buna-Gona itself, the tactics, I leave to my colleagues to explain. I hope to show where the battle fits into the big picture when looked at from Tokyo in first year of war.

The three borders to these four categories are fuzzy. Where exactly strategic questions end and operational level questions begin could be discussed at length, but I'm not going to do that. I think there are clear enough distinctions between them for my purposes.

Grand strategy is a level of war planning where a nation expects not only to achieve its war aims, but also to secure a satisfactory peace after the war. Japan's grand strategy in the Pacific was to capture the resources it needed to continue to be a great power; tin, rubber, oil and quinine in Malaya, Borneo, Sumatra and Java. Lesser raw materials Japan was in need of, which could also be obtained in the south were coal, iron ore, copper, aluminium and wood.

The second part of the plan, which developed as a result of Japan's rapid successes in achieving the first part in December 1941, was to capture a wide buffer zone east of those places, roughly from the Aleutian islands, via the Marshalls and the Gilberts, south to the Solomon Islands. This was to protect the resources captured from the direction the major enemy would approach from. This enemy, the USA would, so the plan envisaged, spend so much blood and treasure attempting to cut its way through that buffer zone that it would eventually make a peace allowing Japan to keep all or most of what it had conquered. In particular the Imperial Japanese Navy foresaw a decisive naval battle being fought within the buffer zone, where Japanese air power from Pacific islands would combine with the fleet and naval air to destroy the United States Pacific Fleet. That there would be fighting in the eastern New Guinea region at all, in the Solomon Sea and perhaps also the Coral Sea, was

determined by this second part of the grand strategic plan, to secure this buffer zone.

Lest it be thought that this was fairly optimistic assessment-that the USA would negotiate a peace, it should be noted that the great majority of wars do end with a negotiated peace. A much lesser number end by the victor marching into the enemy capital and imposing harsh terms. A Carthaginian peace. The Potsdam declaration of 26 July 1945, which covered the terms imposed on Japan , unconditional surrender, is unusual historically. The Japanese noted that all of the United States major external wars had ended with a negotiated peace, the war of independence, the war of 1812, the Mexican-American war, the Spanish-American war and WWI. All ended with a negotiated peace. Japan's own recent wars had ended the same way, the 1895 war with China, the Russo-Japanese war and WWI. The thinking in Japan was that provided German's war in Europe continued to go as well as it had been going, then the USA and the Soviet Union would be too deeply engaged there and a negotiated peace in the Pacific would be the likely outcome for Japan.

In my book of interviews with Japanese veterans I asked what the veterans thought about the Japanese war plan. Some didn't see the southward march as a war of unprovoked aggression. Rather, they thought it was prompted by the western embargo, when in August 1941 the United States, Britain and others imposed sanctions on Japan. Of these the most important sanction was oil. Japan was entirely dependent upon imported oil. If cut off from access to oil Japanese industry, the army and the navy would all grind to a halt.

Masao Horie, who was on the headquarters staff of Adachi's 18th Army at Wewak, told me "In World War II Japan was cornered and forced to fight in self-defence. The United States froze Japanese financial assets and imposed an oil embargo on us... Japan had no choice but to stand up and fight, otherwise Japan would perish."

Takuru Tzuzuku, who story is a fascinating one as he was on the bridge of the battleship Yamato during the battle of Leyte Gulf, and you can read his story here, had this to say. "To provoke war Roosevelt harassed Japan in various ways. I am still angry towards the Americans for dragging us into war."

Yoshiaki Iwasaki, a bomber pilot participated in the sinking of Prince of Wales and Repulse in December 1941, had a different view. He saw the Japanese plan as a war of liberation. "I think the fall of Singapore was one of the most crucial events for the development of former western colonies in Asia...The war brought South-East Asian and other colonized countries liberation and a chance for independence from western countries. They now have that independence and I believe many Japanese sacrificed their lives for it."

If one counters this view by saying that the western imposition of economic sanctions was an attempt to curb Japanese expansion in China and Vietnam, then a Japanese response of that time was to point out that the western nations had empires in Asia- how did they get them other than by conquest? The United States had the Philippines, the British Malaya , Singapore and Hong Kong, the French Indo-China. The Dutch had the Dutch East Indies. Why could not Japan have an empire too?

There was a complication for the grand strategic plan, a problem for the eastern buffer zone was there was this big continent in the south called Australia and it was one of Japan's enemies. While it had small industrial and military capacity compared to the USA it was only 2000 kilometres from Borneo to Australia, but it was 12700 kilometres from Borneo to San Francisco. Australia was then too close for comfort to the resources zone the Japanese wanted and on the flank of their buffer zone. It was a good spot for any Allied counteroffensive to build up and launch from. An invasion of Australia was felt in Tokyo to be beyond their capacity. They considered it in February and March 1942, and had Japan won the battle of Midway I expect they would have considered it again later. Short of invasion two things could be done to mitigate the problem of Australia. The first was to seize Port Moresby, the only practical entry point into New Guinea for the Allies in Australia and the only practical base for an Allied offensive northwards. Port Moresby had the harbour, an adequate fresh water supply, some storage space for supplies, airfields and a suitable location for building more. It had what you want if you are going to mount an offensive. North or south. If the Japanese ever decided to invade Australia they'd need Port Moresby. And just holding it provided a useful threat against Australia, forcing the Allies to maintain a large force in Queensland.

Secondly, what could be done is to make it hard for United States to build up forces in Australia. By establishing air bases down the Solomon island chain, and possibly through Espiritu Santo on to Fiji. The Allied shipping route, 13000 kilometres via Fiji and Bora Bora from California to the east coast of Australia could be forced further south, losing its refueling and repair facilities along the route, and possibly up to doubling the number of merchant ships required to build up a large force in Australia- an additional several hundred merchant ships which were simply not available to the Allies. This add-on to the buffer zone plan resulted in the battle of Guadalcanal, when the Americans halted the Japanese advance in the Solomons. I'll come back to the battle of Guadalcanal later. Fought at the same time as Buna it had a significant bearing on it.

The Grand strategic level tells us why the region Buna is in was likely to be fought over, but it doesn't explain why there was to be a battle at Buna itself.

Going down a level now, to strategy. Strategy is as Karl von Clausewitz, the theorist of war described it, the use of battles to achieve war aims. Now this is not necessarily the same as the aim of grand strategy which looks to how to get, via war, to a satisfactory peace following the war. Pearl Harbour is an example of using a battle to further war aims. Sink the US fleet in Hawaii and it won't be able to intervene while Malaya, Borneo and the Dutch East Indies are being captured. The invasion of the Phillipines in December 41 was also done for strategic reasons. It didn't have any resources the Japanese could not get elsewhere, but it could not be left as an American possession astride the shipping lanes Japan would use to send the oil from Borneo to Japan.

Its at this strategic level where we encounter a part of the Japanese plan which points to Buna as a place of importance to the Japanese. Within the eastern facing buffer zone the Japanese decided to capture Rabaul and turn it into a major fleet base, a southern Pacific version of what they already had at Truk, in the Caroline Islands 2000 kilometres north of New Guinea. A major fleet base should be out of range of effective enemy air attack, so the capture of Rabaul would also require the capture of enemy air bases within say 800 kilometres of it. Port Moresby was the obvious example, so they have a second reason to capture Port Moresby, apart from the Australia problem we've already covered in grand strategy. Its capture prevents air raids on the fleet base which, if intense enough, could make it unusable.

Port Moresby could be attacked by land or by sea. Using Rabaul as the port from which to launch the operation, there were two options: The direct seaward approach was around the eastern end of Papua, the best landward approach, as the Japanese already knew, was by landing at Buna and going through Kokoda and across the Owen Stanley Range via the Kokoda track. The Japanese opted for the direct approach, to land a force by sea on the beaches at Port Moresby.

It's here at the next level, the third level, the operational level, where Buna is thrust into the limelight. It's the failure of a Japanese operation, the battle of the Coral Sea, which does this.

The attempt failed, but not by much. The outcome was a draw. The United States lost a fleet carrier and the Japanese a light carrier. The Japanese landing force withdrew to Rabaul. Had the IJN landed and captured Port Moresby, then there would have been no Kokoda track fighting and no battle at Buna. Had the Japanese been badly defeated at Coral Sea, losing both their fleet carriers, the Shokaku and Zuikaku, then its likely the attempt to capture Port Moresby would have been abandoned, so again no Kokoda and no Buna. But it was a draw. And that fact that it was a drawn game pushed Buna towards the top of the list of

places of importance. The Japanese decided that they'd not try a direct amphibious landing again, but nor would they give up on Port Moresby. A middle course was to land on the north coast of Papua and advance over the mountains. This way their ships didn't have to go round the tip of the tail of eastern New Guinea and expose themselves to air attack from both Port Moresby and north Queensland, where there was an American and Australian air force more powerful than that based at Port Moresby. In addition their own land based air was strong in the Solomon Sea, north of the Coral Sea and between New Britain and Papua, so US carriers were unlikely to risk intervening there.

In 1942 carrier borne airpower was weak against land-based air power. Carriers did sometimes move within land-based air range for a surprise strike, but they then withdrew as they would lose any protracted contest with land based air. Both the Papua and Guadalcanal campaigns, demonstrate the point about superiority of land-based air power. Carriers simply could not go toe to toe with it for long and expect to stay afloat, so they didn't try to.

What the Japanese knew about Buna was, it was at one end of a route leading over the mountains to Port Moresby, it had a passable small anchorage and an airfield, hopefully more than one, could be built there. It was the obvious choice and one that had already been considered as Plan B, should the Coral Sea approach fail. Imperial Headquarters took the decision to build a significant base at Buna and from there launch an attack on Port Moresby.

The relationship between land based and sea based airpower was an important consideration in the decision. The Pacific War was first an air war, secondly a sea war and last, a land war. Regardless of victories on land, armies on Pacific islands eventually starved if denied food coming from by sea. Ships carrying supplies would be sunk by aircraft unless the air above those ships was denied to the enemy.

For transport ships, anywhere within say 400 kilometres of an enemy airfield was particularly hazardous. The greatest dangers were posed to the Japanese by medium bombers such as the B 25 and B 26 which could do two sorties a day and with a larger bomb load, at that range. They were not worried about the B-17 which failed to sink a single Japanese ship at sea until mid 1942. This is why the Japanese landings of troops and supplies at Buna had to be done only at night as it was less than 200 kilometres from Port Moresby.

It was then the outcome of Coral Sea, a draw, and the balance of land versus sea based airpower that decided the Japanese to land at Buna and make a second attempt to capture Port Moresby from there. The battle of Midway in June 1942,

where they lost 4 carriers to one United States Navy carrier, did not deter them from offensive operations, after it their superiority in carriers in the Pacific was slim, but still existed.

The Japanese landed at Buna in July, advanced over the Kokoda track, were defeated at Milne Bay, retreated along the Kokoda track to Buna by mid-November.

As an aside, I see in the conference papers there is mention of the Japanese being told to 'advance to the rear' 'advance in a new direction' when they retreated along the Kokoda track. There is some idea abroad that there was no word for retreat or they didn't like to use the word.

Perhaps some officer somewhere did once express retreat in this way, but there are lots of words for retreat in Japanese and the army and navy used them.

Taikyaku is retreat, *tettai* is withdraw, *kotai suru* is fall back and *intai suru* is retire

Please forget the 'advance to the rear' story. Its *uso*, not true. Erase it from your mind.

The reason the Japanese advance to Port Moresby was halted was because of the battle at Guadalcanal, which as I mentioned earlier was a result of the Japanese attempt to somewhat isolate Australia and make it difficult for the Allied buildup there. Imperial HQ decided that operations in Papua should be put on hold till Guadalcanal was recaptured. The Australian offensive through Kokoda continued and at Oivi-Gorari the Japanese were decisively defeated and driven back to Buna.

In November 1942 the Allies were closing in on Buna. Buna could have been evacuated, but instead the South Seas force was ordered to stay and fight there. Why didn't they evacuate? The answer is because the Japanese still expected to win on both fronts, in Papua and at Guadalcanal. But 8th Area Army in Rabaul knew it wasn't going to get the resources to be proactive on both fronts and selected Guadalcanal as the main effort. Once Guadalcanal was solved reinforcements would be sent to Buna and the advance on Port Moresby would recommence. As Admiral Matome Ugaki wrote on 16 November 1942, as the battle of Buna was about to begin "If ... Buna falls into enemy hands, the South Sea detachment would be cut off and our foundation for the Moresby offensive lost forever.... "some Japanese officers were reported to have advocated ... giving up Buna. That would be outrageous! In such a case, air raids on Rabaul would be intensified ultimately making it impossible for us to hold there. Until early December some reinforcements were sent to Buna, not enough to stage a

breakout, but enough, it was hoped to hold the place until victory at Guadalcanal was achieved.” By mid-December Imperial HQ realised that Buna would have to be given up eventually, but not yet. They left it too late. By January, with Allied air superiority over the battlefield and the Solomon Sea, a mass evacuation by sea was no longer possible and the South Seas force was destroyed.

Had the Japanese decided to prioritise Buna over Guadalcanal then at least another 10,000 troops would have been available at Buna, and the advance on Port Moresby restarted, meaning, once again, no battle at Buna. As it was over 40,000 IJA and IJN troops fought on Guadalcanal and a bit over 10,000 in the Buna region. The deciding factor for the preference of Guadalcanal over Buna was the IJN argument that Guadalcanal provided many more options for them to use their fleet. Guadalcanal could be cut off by sea in a way Papua could not be cut off from Australia because land-based air in Queensland, from Horn Island, Iron Range, and airfields further south, could dominate the western coral sea, which between Moresby and north Queensland was only 500 kilometres wide. With Guadalcanal in contrast the nearest air base the Allies had to it was 1000 kilometres south in Espiritu Santo, now Vanuatu. Few Allied aircraft could fly that far with a bomb load, meaning Japanese carriers could operate between Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo.

CONCLUSION

It was the Japanese Grand Strategy which determined that there would be fighting in eastern New Guinea, as that was to be a part of Japanese defensive line protecting their newly captured resource zone. The problem of Australia meant that Port Moresby should be captured. The decision at the strategic level to make Rabaul into a major fleet base further reinforced the necessity of capturing Port Moresby.

At the operational level the failure of the first IJN attempt to capture Moresby, resulting in the battle of the Coral Sea, prompting the Japanese to take Buna so as to make a second attempt at Port Moresby. The landing of the Americans at Guadalcanal further determined the shape any fighting at Buna would take when the Japanese decided Guadalcanal was to be won first, then Buna. A defensive battle would be fought in Papua until Guadalcanal was won. The Japanese defeat at Oivi-Gorari, a little east of Kokoda and near the Kumusi River, determined that the final battle in Papua would not be along the Kumusi River, but at Buna.

The surprising thing to me is the number of reasons why there almost wasn't a battle at Buna. Had the decision not been taken to establish a major naval base at Rabaul, had the Coral Sea not been a drawn battle, had the Japanese not been defeated at Oivi-Gorari, had they decided to abandon Papua after that defeat, had the Japanese decided to prioritise Papua over Guadalcanal, then there would not have been a battle at Buna. As it was an intriguing sequence of events occurred and decisions were taken which determined that there would be a long bloody battle in a place that, before May 1942, was not of much interest to anyone who didn't live there.

Thankyou.