



The Bloody Beachheads:

The Battles of Gona, Buna and Sanananda

One-Day Conference Saturday 12 November 2022

East Malvern RSL, Stanley Grose Dr, Victoria, 3145

Keynote Speaker

Dr Peter Williams - author of *Japan's Pacific War*

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THE LAND BATTLE FOR THE BEACHHEADS

by Phillip Bradley

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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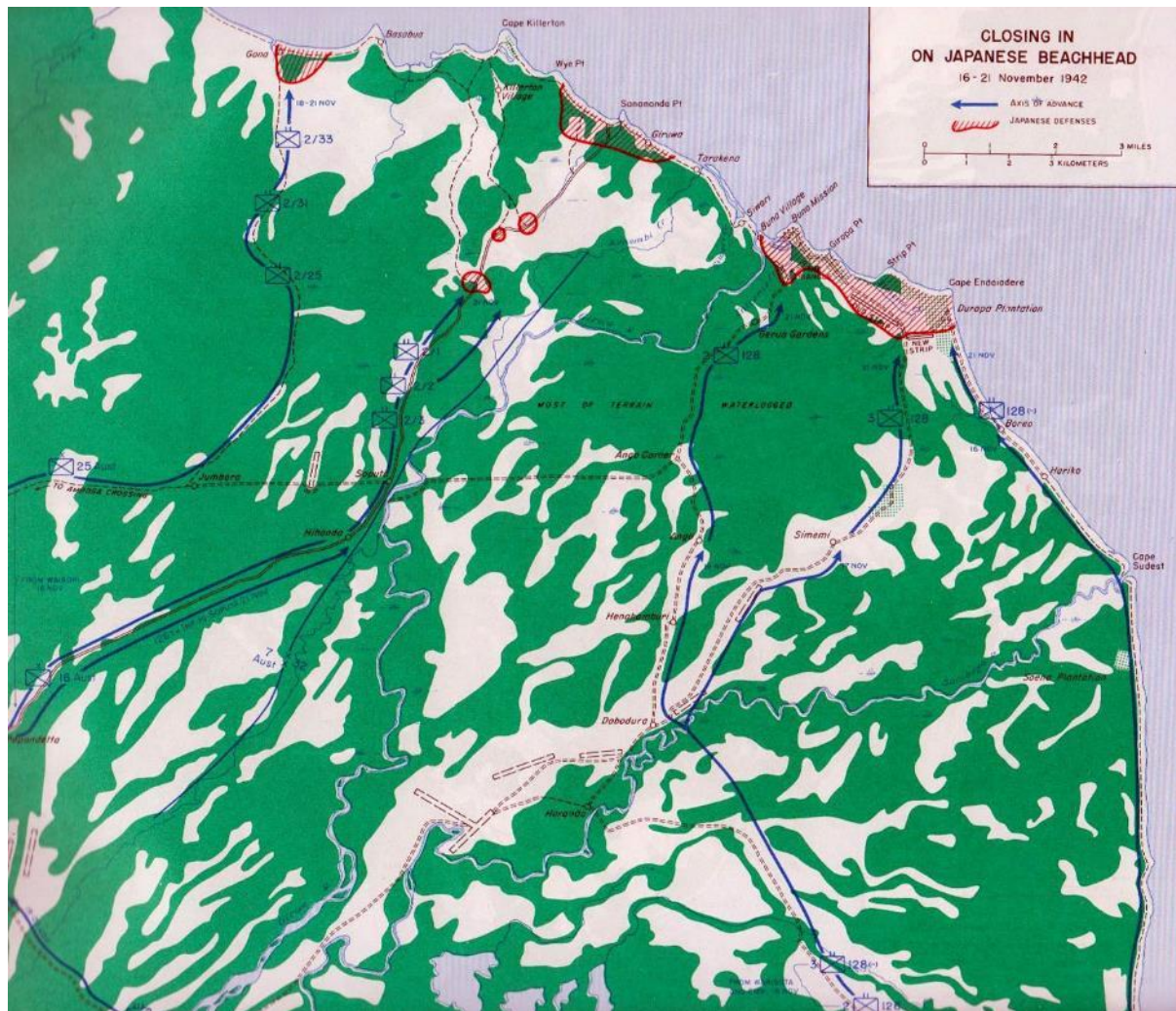


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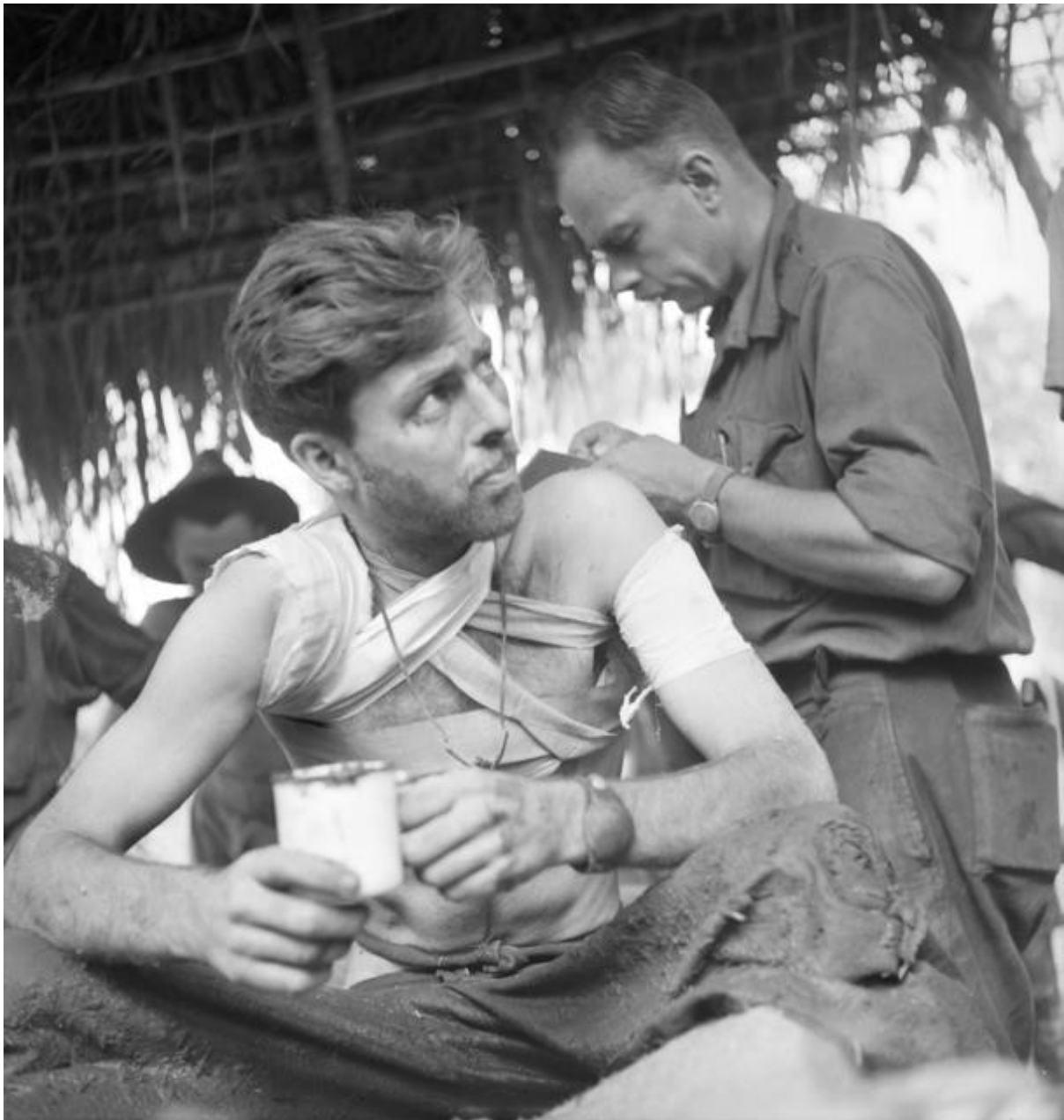
Following the capture of Kokoda the Australian 16th Brigade and 25th Brigade advanced to the coast. Meanwhile two regiments from the US 32nd Division had been sent across to Buna, mainly by air. One battalion had crossed the Owen Stanley Range south of the Kokoda Track by foot and shown that method was not feasible.



Map showing the approach routes of the Allied forces to the three Japanese beachheads.

GONA:

On 21 November 1942 the Australian 25th Brigade reached the Gona area, the most western of the three Japanese beachheads on the northern Papuan coast. The 2/31st Battalion made an attack the next day but it came up against strong defences and failed with 65 casualties. A 2/25th Battalion attack on 23 November also failed and there were 64 casualties. On 25 November an attack by the attached 3rd Battalion also failed, despite the support of four 25-pounder guns.



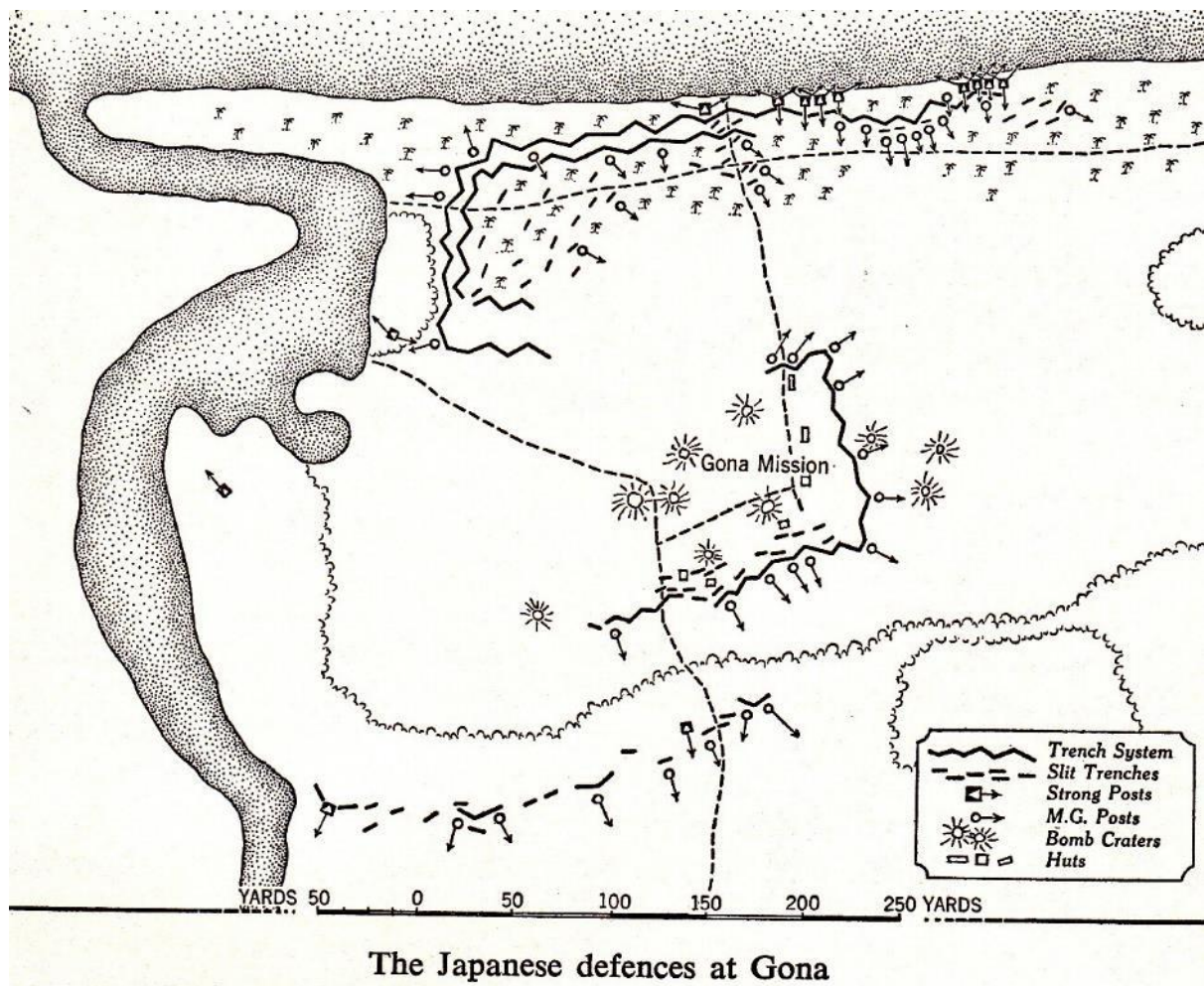
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Lt Bruce Taylor was badly wounded in the 2/31st Battalion attack on 25 November. He sustained a throat wound which prevented him calling for help or drinking water and it was eight days before he was found. He died from his ordeal a few months later.

On 25 November there was a conference of senior commanders regarding the beachheads, all of which had now been attacked without any success. General Douglas MacArthur was particularly embarrassed by the lack of progress of the Americans at Buna, so when he offered to bring up a fresh US regiment to Gona, General Thomas Blamey, the Australian commander in chief, told him that he'd rather put in more Australians as he knew they would fight. Blamey decided to fly in the weakened 21st Brigade, still rebuilding after the Kokoda Track fighting.

The first two battalions, the 2/14th and 2/27th, each of only three weakened companies, reached the forward battle area on 28 November. The 2/14th Battalion immediately ran into Japanese opposition at Small Creek, east of Gona and 11 men were killed including a company commander, while a second was wounded. The 2/27th Battalion was then informed at midnight that it was to make an attack against Gona the next day. The battalion had no chance for reconnaissance, so despite some air and artillery support, as soon as the two attacking companies crossed the start line just inland from the beach, they faced "a murderous curtain of lead". Most of the officers were among the 55 casualties in the failed attack. The third 2/27th company attacked the next day further inland and also faced a wall of fire and took 13 casualties in a failed attack. The New Guinea Force commander, Lieutenant General Ned Herring, told General Blamey that the 2/27th had been slightly shaken by the resistance. In fact the battalion had almost ceased to exist. On 1 December, the 2/16th Battalion made some progress further inland but took 59 casualties and had to pull back.



This map of the Japanese defences at Gona was drawn after the battle but it is clear the defences were strong and well sited. Those defences on the coast could be turned inland against the 21st Brigade attacks.



View west along the coast from above Small Creek to Gona. The 2/27th Battalion attack took place just inland from the beach. Photo by Mark Vele.

Meanwhile west of Gona, Chaforce (a mix of 21st Brigade men) had the job of holding off some 400 Japanese reinforcements which had landed further up the coast. On 6 December a brave group of men under Lieutenant Alan Haddy stopped the Japanese at a village two kilometres west of Gona but it was clear that unless Gona fell soon, it would be reinforced. Haddy was killed in the action and a platoon from 2/14th Battalion was sent around to shore up that flank.



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Australian 3-inch mortar firing at a steep angle onto Japanese positions in the tree line.

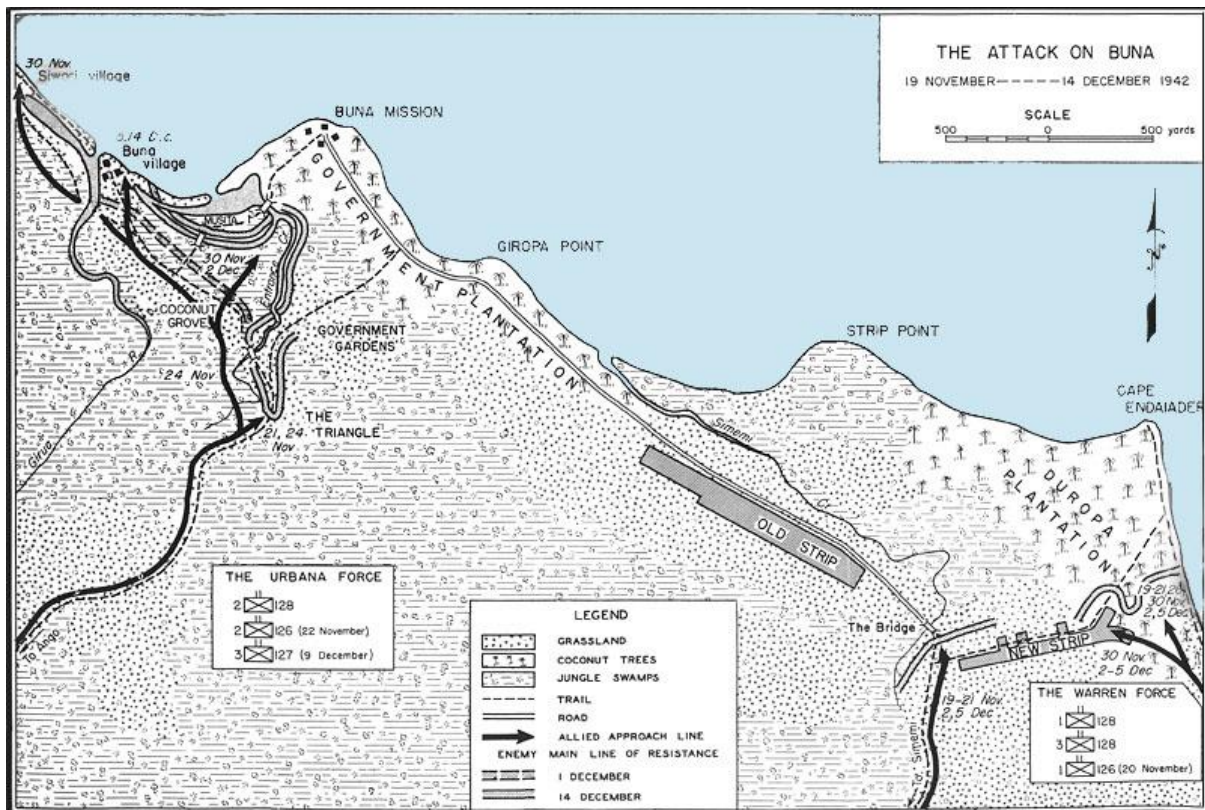
On 4 December the 39th Battalion, the veterans of the Kokoda Track, had arrived at Gona and was immediately ordered to attack up the road from the south. On 6 December D Company made the attack but this sector was as well defended as the rest of the Gona perimeter. The attack failed with 58 casualties but one section under Corporal Reg Edgell had managed to get into the Japanese lines where the vegetation grew close to those lines. The 39th commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner, was ordered to repeat the attack the next day but Honner managed to defer it due to inaccurate air support. He used the day wisely, coordinating his artillery support so it would target those identified Japanese positions and getting the artillery to use delayed fuses so the shells would penetrate the ground before exploding, a more effective way to deal with dug in defences. Honner also arranged for the artillery to fire for an extra two minutes beyond H Hour, when the two lead platoons would leave the Australian lines. He did not tell the two platoon commanders, lieutenants Dalby and Kelly of his decision and did not realise that they had already decided to send their men over a minute early. So as the men got about halfway across the 100 metre gap to contact they found the barrage had not lifted as expected and had to go to ground before dashing forward again. Although two of the Australians were wounded by the barrage, when the troops reached the Japanese lines they found the defenders still cowering down in their trenches and quickly took the position, capturing three light machine guns and killing 38 Japanese defenders. Another company followed up and that afternoon Honner was able to send the message "Gona's gone". Troops from 21st Brigade were now able to get forward and help mop up the beachhead.

Amongst the dead, a diary was recovered and the last entry read: "Shells dropped near us like rain. It was only through the protection of the Gods that we were safe. Everyone expected us to die at any moment." The Australians buried 638 enemy bodies at Gona and that was not all of them. The Australian losses are shown in the table below.

Unit	KIA or DOW (374)		WIA (743)	
	Off	ORs	Off	ORs
21st Brigade				
2/14th Battalion	8	39	6	85
2/16th Battalion	10	55	3	75
2/27th Battalion	8	85	11	153
25th Brigade				
2/25th Battalion		13	2	17
2/31st Battalion	5	34		76
2/33rd Battalion	1	8	5	49
Other units				
39th Battalion	1	65	7	171
Chaforce	1	29	2	55
3rd Battalion		12	6	20

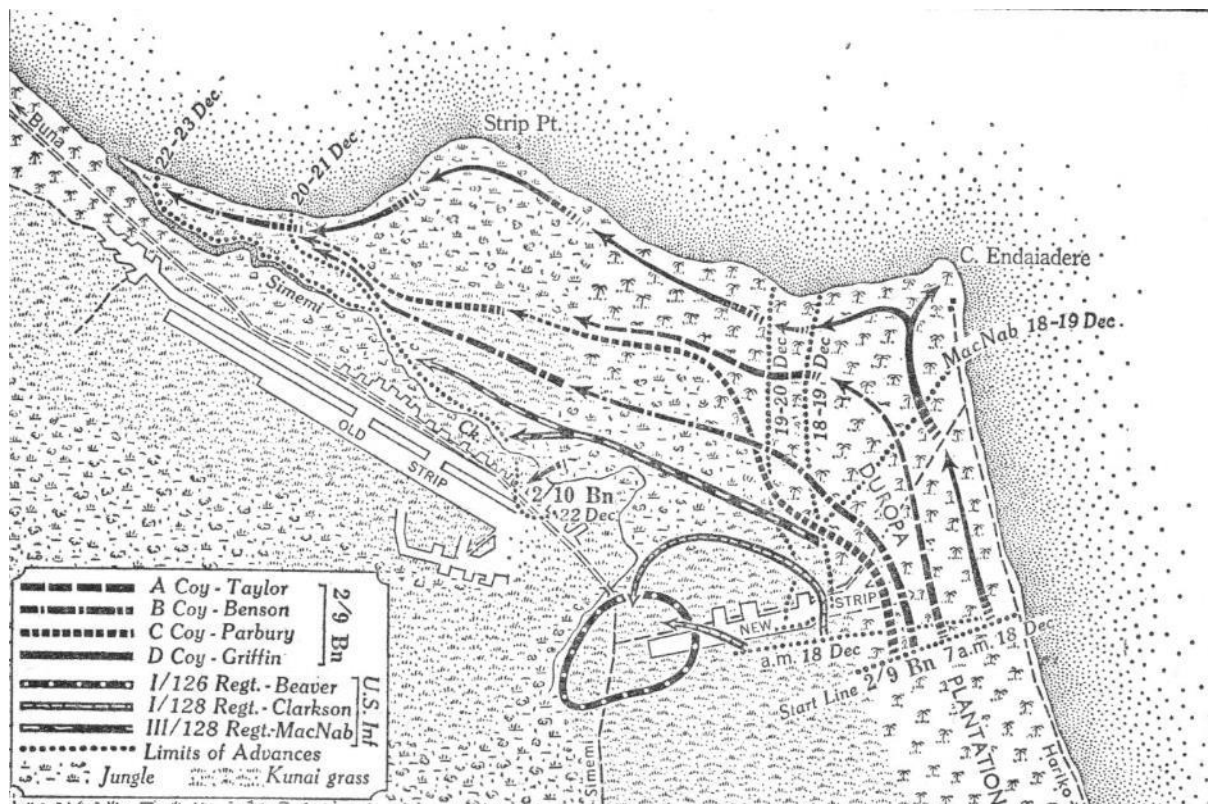
BUNA:

The Americans advanced on Buna from two directions, west along the coast to what would be termed Warren Front and north along the Ango road to the Buna Mission area, what would be named Urbana Front. On 16 November the American troops at Buna had their first contact with the Japanese and they were "stopped cold". Within two days the fresh Japanese III/229th Battalion was landed at Buna and this considerably stiffened the defence. After the 25 November conference it was clear that MacArthur was dissatisfied with progress at Buna and Lieutenant General Robert Eichelberger was sent across to take over as the commander at Buna from Major General Edwin Harding. After another failed attack on 2 December Harding was relieved of command of 32nd Division. His replacement, Brigadier General Albert Waldron was wounded the following day and in turn his replacement, Brigadier General Clovis Byers suffered the same fate two weeks later. The main problem was that the troops were surviving on meagre rations and sickness and exhaustion took a daily toll.



American troops at Buna.

On 5 December another attack was made on both fronts. The Warren Front attack was supported by five Australian Bren gun carriers but they were unsupported by the US infantry and were soon knocked out. One Japanese defender wrote of the Americans that "even though we fire a shot they present a large portion of their body and look around". Not a good idea in the close country of a coconut plantation with enemy defenders in the trees and in camouflaged bunkers at ground level. On Urbana Front an 18-man patrol led by Sergeant Herman Bottcher managed to reach the headland at Buna Mission and they held on there for 17 days.



The 2/9th Battalion attack at Cape Endaiadere.

It was now decided to bring the Australian 18th Brigade up from Milne Bay to Warren Front at Buna. On 16 December the 2/9th Battalion was the first battalion to arrive after a tough march up from Oro Bay. Eight M3 Stuart tanks had also been brought up by barge from Oro Bay and then driven along the beach to the front line and they would support the attack. The attack went in at 0700 on 18 December with three companies going forward between New Strip and the beach. The company on the coast made the best progress and by 0750 a platoon had reached Cape Endaiadere. However the two companies further inland ran into a network of camouflaged bunkers and took heavy casualties. When the reserve company was also sent in it also lost heavily with all forward officers killed or wounded. Corporal Tom Clarke gathered 11 men and was able to clear 12 bunkers despite being twice wounded. The tanks helped here, firing their 37 mm guns at a spot on the bunker until a gap was opened up into which grenades could be dropped. But if the tanks were isolated they were in trouble. One

was knocked out by a mine placed on the rear deck while another bellied out on a log and was then burned out. However by the end of the day the battalion had made good progress although it would take until 23 December before the area on the coastal side of Simemi Creek was secured.



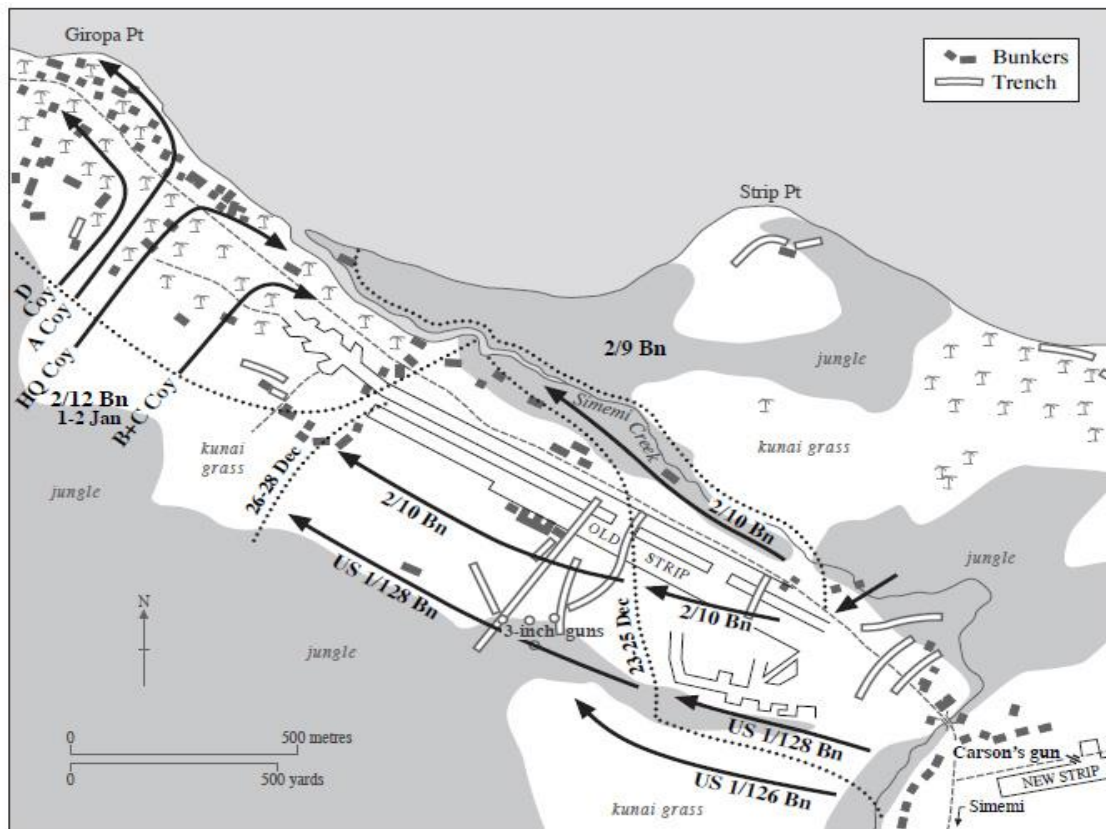
Tanks and infantry advance through Duropa Plantation to Cape Endaiadere.

The second phase of the attack on Buna would see the 2/10th Battalion tasked with securing Buna Old Strip. Following the repair of the bridge across Simemi Creek, four tanks moved up to lead the attack on 24 December. The tanks had only advanced 250 metres when all four were knocked out by a battery 3-inch dual purpose guns on the southern side of the airfield. This left the infantry very vulnerable as the airfield had no cover so the only significant progress was along Simemi Creek on the right flank. On 26 December an aircraft revetment was captured which gave some cover for a further advance but double and triple barrel 25 mm AA guns were proving deadly.



The 25-pounder gun emplaced at the eastern end of Old Strip proved crucial to capturing the airfield.

On the night of 25/26 December a 25-pounder gun was brought forward in pieces and reassembled and dug in on a captured Japanese position near the bridge. Firing a flat trajectory, the gun was able to deal with the Japanese positions at the far end of Old Strip and allowed the 2/10th to capture the airfield. The Japanese commander, Major General Tsuyuo Yamagata wrote "On account of the attack on Buna on 26th it seems the last stage has been entered."



Supported by six Stuart tanks, the 2/12th Battalion would carry out the final phase of the operation to attack through to the coast. The attack went in on 1 January 1943 with six Vickers machine guns spraying the treetops before the men moved off. But as Geoff Holmes noted, "As soon as we stopped firing and started to go over, that's when they got into our blokes."



George Silk's photo of one of the Vickers guns in action. One of the gunners has already been killed and the other one told Silk, "Get down you bloody fool."

Although it was only a short distance to the coast there was, "line after line of pillboxes" that needed to be dealt with. The tanks were vital, again opening gaps into which not just grenades but new amatol blast bombs could be dropped. Casualties were heavy particularly amongst the officers and at the end all four infantry companies plus a scratch headquarters company were sent into the battle. On the following day the Australians met up with the Americans from Urbana Front and Buna Mission fell.



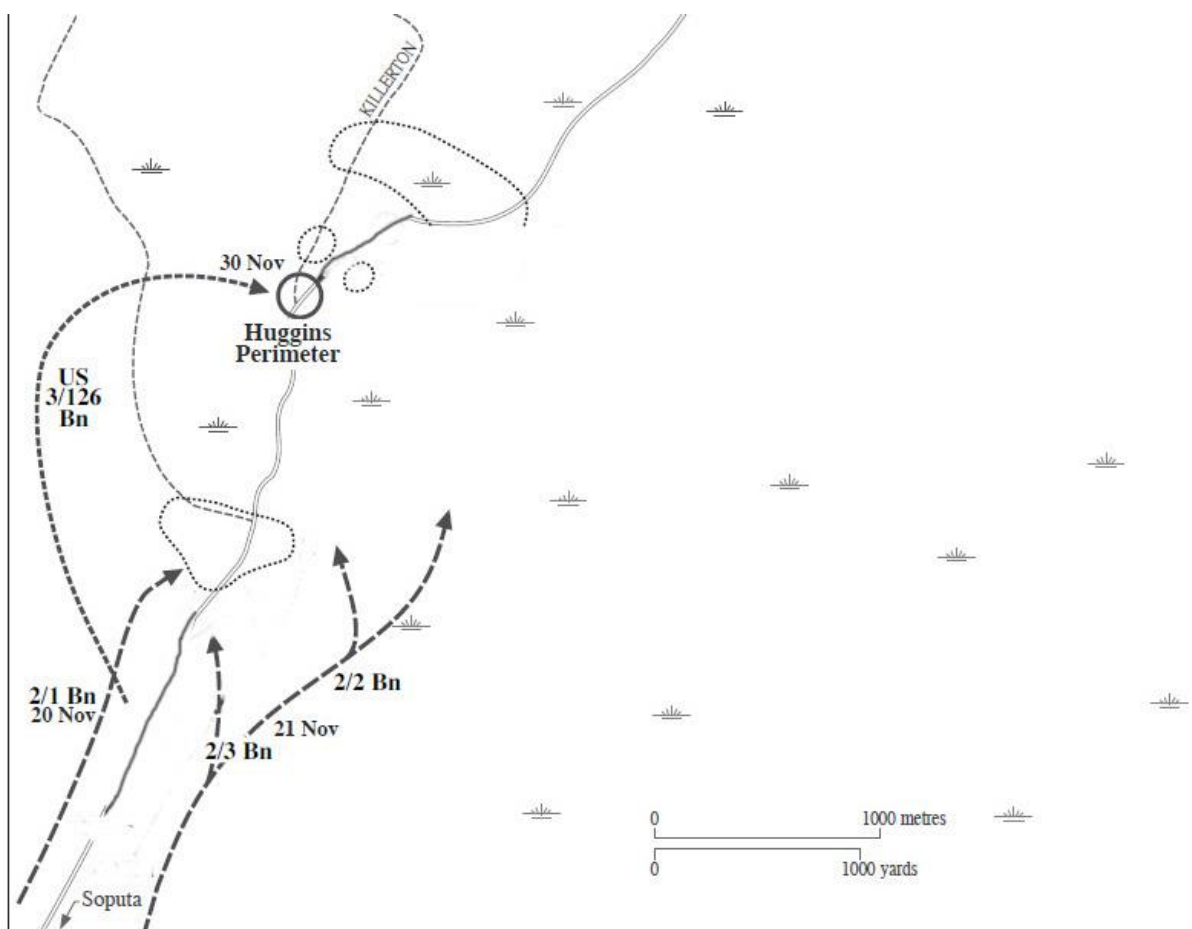
Two 2/12th Battalion Bren gunners moving through Giropa Plantation alongside one of the Stuart tanks.

Buna Casualties:

Unit	KIA or DOW (303)		WIA (638)	
	Off	ORs	Off	ORs
18th Brigade				
2/9th Battalion	9	103	14	227
2/10th Battalion	9	99	11	226
2/12th Battalion	6	61	10	120
Other				
2/7th Battalion	2	1		5
2/6th Independent Coy	1	8	2	14
2/6th Armoured Regt		4	2	7
32nd Division				
	KIA		WIA	MIA
	580		1357	62

SANANANDA:

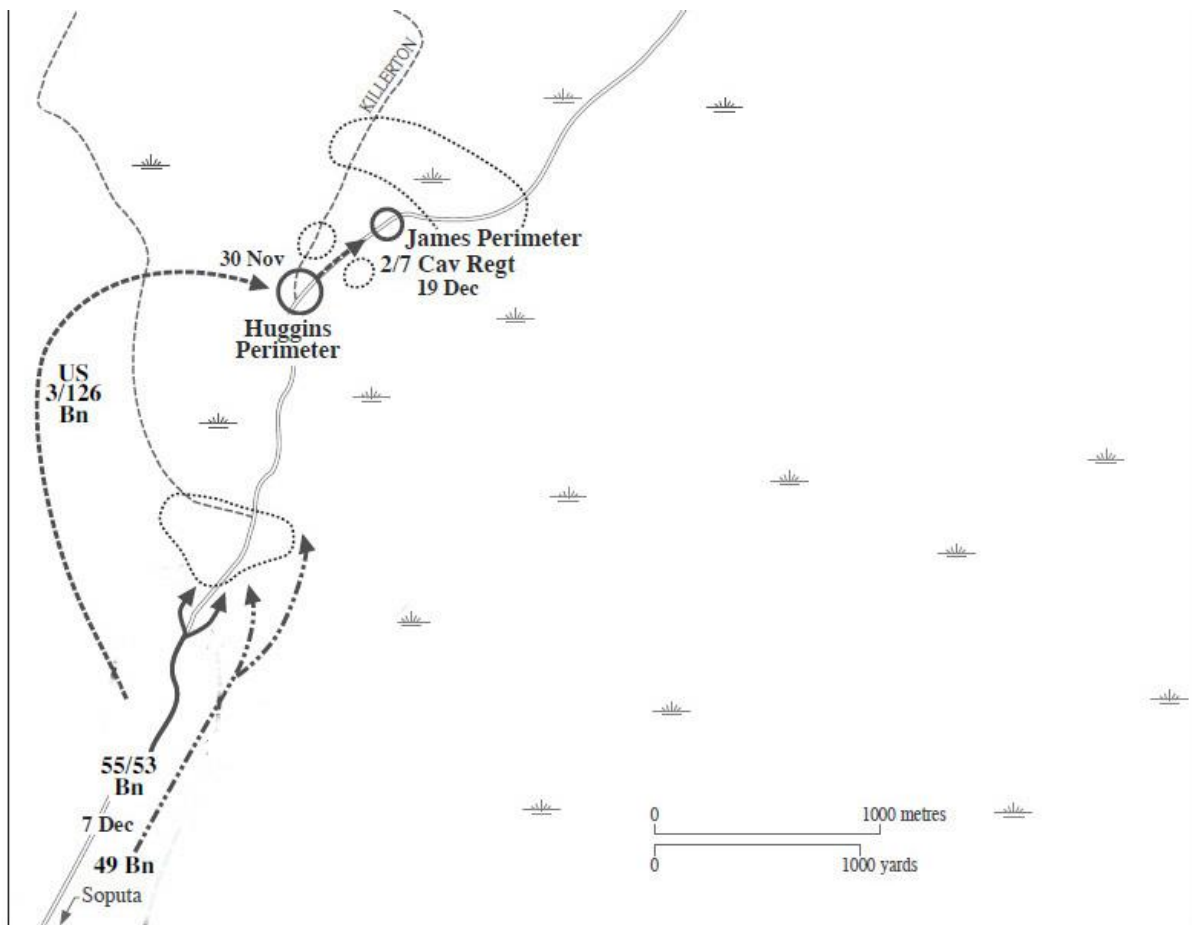
The Sanananda beachhead was between Gona and Buna and extended further inland than the other two. This was dictated by the swampy terrain which made the Sanananda Track the key piece of ground. On 20 November 1942 the 16th Brigade made the first contact with the Japanese position blocking the track. Two companies from the 2/1st Battalion under Captain Basil Catterns made the initial attack, moving around the left flank of the position. The problem for Catterns was that he only had 90 men in total and although his men broke into the enemy position and held on for two days, they were unable to hold on. They killed some 80 defenders, including a Japanese colonel but they also took heavy casualties and, down to 24 men, pulled out. On 21 November the 2/2nd and 2/3rd battalions also made attacks but by now the Japanese defenders were reinforced and prepared and the attacks failed.

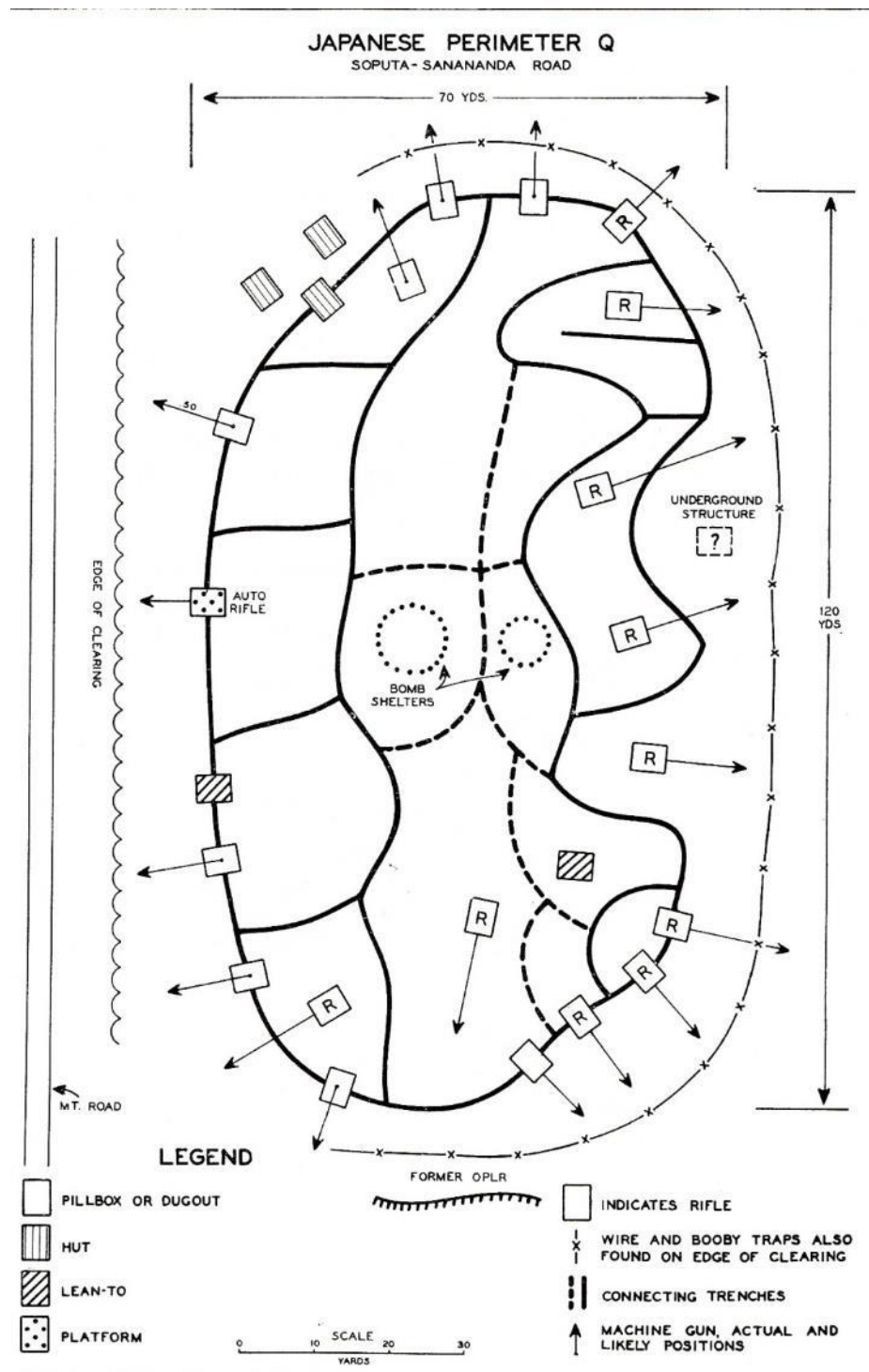


On 22 November the US 3/126th Battalion attacked with two companies on each flank. The right flank move was stopped cold but on the left flank the two companies went well out into the swamps and after nine days finally reached the road behind the Japanese position to set up their own perimeter, known as Huggin's roadblock after one of the US officers.

Since the start of the Kokoda campaign the 16th Brigade had taken 605 casualties with another 978 men evacuated sick. The 16th was now relieved by Brigadier Selwyn Porter's 30th Brigade with the 49th and 55/53rd battalions arriving on 6 December. Seemingly learning nothing from the previous actions, Porter ordered both battalions to attack, although

separately. The 49th went in first with two companies forward and, despite having some artillery support, the attack stalled with heavy losses. Because the next two companies were too far behind, the defenders had time to reset and this second attack also stalled. Porter ordered the survivors to withdraw and the 55/53rd Battalion was then sent in straight up the track with three companies and unsurprisingly the attack failed. The two battalions had lost 14 officers and 250 men killed in action. Herring told General Blamey that, "Porter's casualties much higher than anticipated".





The Australians were up against an egg shaped perimeter with no flanks, manned by Kokoda veterans from Lieutenant Colonel Tsukumoto's I/144th Battalion and some engineers.

On 15 December the 36th Battalion and the 2/7th Cavalry Regiment arrived. The 2/7th was sent up to Huggins roadblock and arrived there on 18 December. The next day A Squadron was sent up the track towards the coast but was halted. The squadron commander Major Strang was killed. Two of the other three squadrons were then sent in either side of the track and Captain Jack James's squadron established another perimeter further up the track. When

Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Logan went forward to see what was happening he was shot by an enemy sniper.



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2/7th Cavalry Regiment conditions at James Perimeter.

Back at the Japanese perimeter Brigadier Porter threw the 36th Battalion into another attack up the track and it also failed. "Not fit for war" and "not suitably trained" was all Porter could say about the men he had sent to their deaths or who had been "exterminated", as he put it. Porter failed to add that the brigade had spent much of its time at Port Moresby unloading shipping rather than training.

The Japanese were also having their difficulties. On 31 December Susumu Kawano wrote in his diary that, "I am bony and skinny. I walk with faltering steps. I want to see my children."

On 2 January the US 163rd Regiment moved up to take over at Huggin's roadblock while the 18th Brigade moved across from Buna. Supported by three Stuart tanks, the 2/12th Battalion would make yet another attack on the southern Japanese perimeter on 12 January. The first two tanks were knocked out by a Japanese anti tank gun fire before the third under Sergeant MacGregor knocked the gun out. But the tank then set off a mine and a Japanese soldier threw a Molotov cocktail which burned the tank out, killing all crew. The 2/12th Battalion then attacked with two companies and took 99 casualties without apparent result. But the Japanese defenders were spent and pulled out that night opening the way forward to Huggins roadblock and beyond.

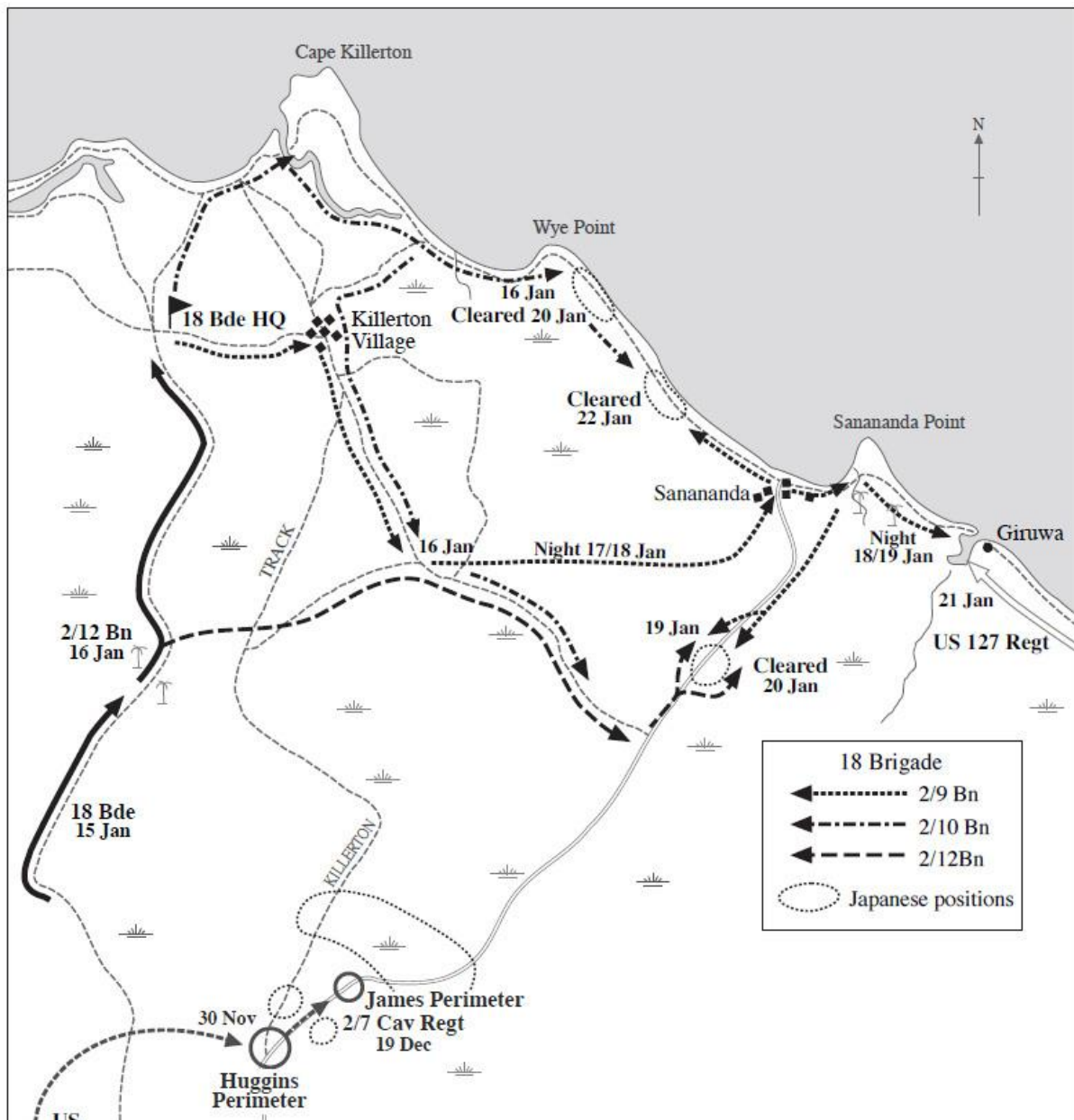


Sergeant MacGregor's tank at Sanananda.



It still exists.

The three 18th Brigade battalions pushed on towards the coast, somehow advancing through the swampy terrain. When passing through the Japanese hospital area further up the track, the ground was "covered with enemy dead ... the stench is overpowering". On 21 January the Australians met up with American troops advancing along the coast from Buna and the Sanananda beachhead was secured.



The final advance



Australian troops moving towards the coast at Sanananda.

As General Eichelberger later wrote, "One can't imagine a more unfriendly country or worse conditions to fight in ... the whole campaign was a military nightmare".