



Kokoda and Beyond: Papua and New Guinea 1942-1945

One-Day Conference Saturday 16 April 2016
Pompey Elliott Memorial Hall, 403 Camberwell Road, Melbourne

Keynote Speaker – Dr Adrian Threlfall
author of *Jungle Warriors*

Register at www.mhhv.org.au



The Proceedings of the Conference held at the Pompey Elliott Memorial Hall, Camberwell RSL, Victoria on 16 April 2016

In early 1942 the Japanese set their sights on capturing Papua and New Guinea.

A series of defensive battles at Milne Bay and along the Kokoda Track, as well as the naval victories in the Coral Sea and at Midway Island put the Japanese on the back foot.

Then followed a series of Allied offensive operations that drove the Japanese back and provided the springboard for General Douglas MacArthur's successful advance into the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines.

This one day conference examines this critical period of Australia's military history. This conference will include fresh analysis and insights from a highly informed and relevant range of historians and veterans.

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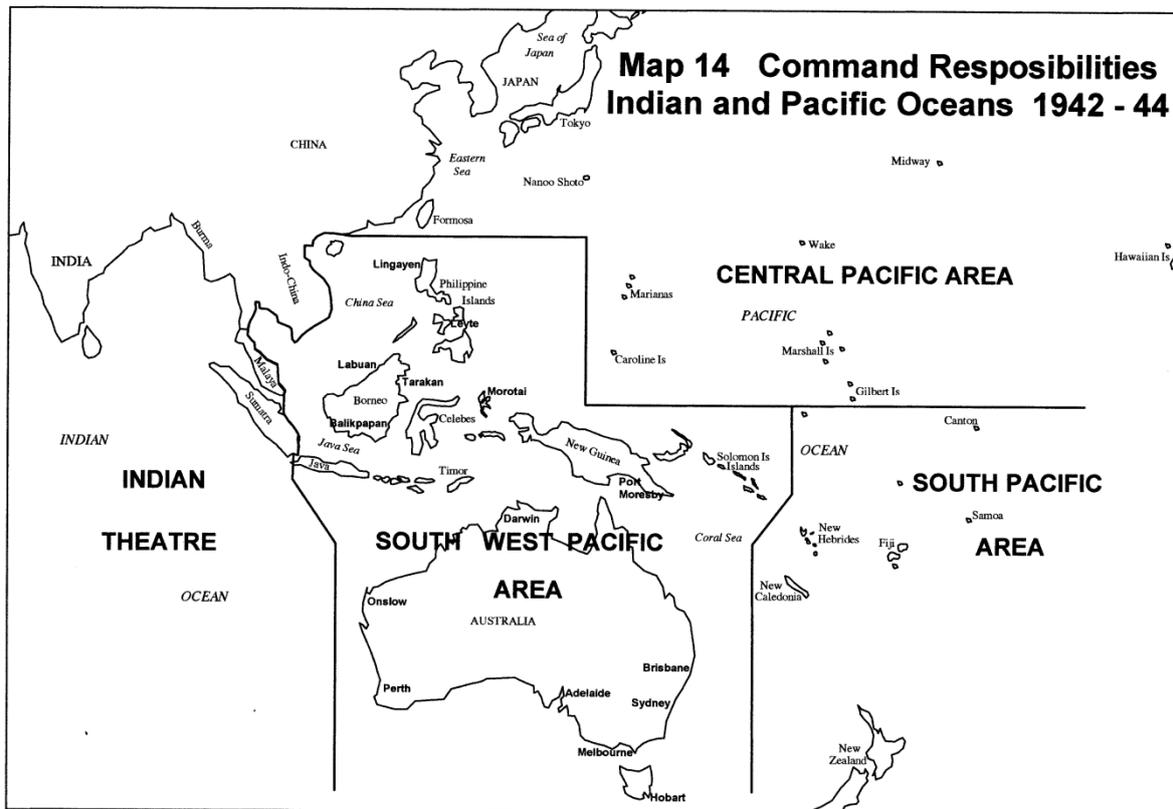


Sea Power and the Campaigns in Papua and New Guinea 1942-1945

Dr Ian Pfennigwerth

Strategic Considerations

The war in the Pacific was a maritime war with one maritime power – the USA, with assistance from its allies – ranged against another – Imperial Japan. It was also a logistics war, and as the antagonists were separated by large stretches of water, that meant it was a war of shipping, both naval and mercantile. These facts shaped the Allied strategy. The major assault on Japan was to be waged primarily by the US Navy under the overall command of Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii driving through the Central Pacific until it could capture air bases close enough to the Japanese home islands to bring them under effective and sustained air attack. A second thrust northwards would be made from Australia, which would also support a campaign to drive the Japanese out of the Solomons. The map was carved up appropriately, with all the Pacific commands going to US naval officers except for Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), which was given to General Douglas MacArthur.



Naval Organisation in SWPA from April 1942

The appointment of General Douglas MacArthur as Supreme Commander had a lesser impact on the RAN than the other two Australian services. For its part, the Australian navy had the professional advantage of war service in the Atlantic and Mediterranean involving shore bombardments, fleet actions and convoy defence as well as clandestine and special operations. This could only be envied by the Americans as their own massive expansion in personnel produced large numbers but without the leavening of experienced men, especially in a naval 'backwater' like SWPA. The RAN also had the ships; it would be some time before the USN could come up with the ships and men to match MacArthur's ambitious program to get back to the Philippines. The RAN's organisation was sufficiently similar to that of the USN to cause no concern to the Americans, who brought to the partnership Intelligence, technology, vigour, superior logistics and submarines.

Specific RAN capabilities to attract the attention of General Headquarters (GHQ) were its three naval direction finding stations, channelling intercepted Japanese messages to the RAN-led Special Intelligence Bureau. This soon became part of the joint Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne (FRUMEL) with immediate results. The Director of Naval Intelligence had established and led the Combined Operational Intelligence Centre in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, and General MacArthur took this with him when he moved GHQ to Brisbane in mid-1942. The other jewel in the RAN intelligence crown was the Coast Watcher Service. Although the Japanese assault on New Britain and New Ireland resulted in the loss of those posts and the death of their Coast Watchers, sufficient of the network remained to provide very useful reporting on Japanese activities and to allow for the insertion of parties behind enemy lines. In 1944 there were 72 active Coast Watch stations in SWPA.



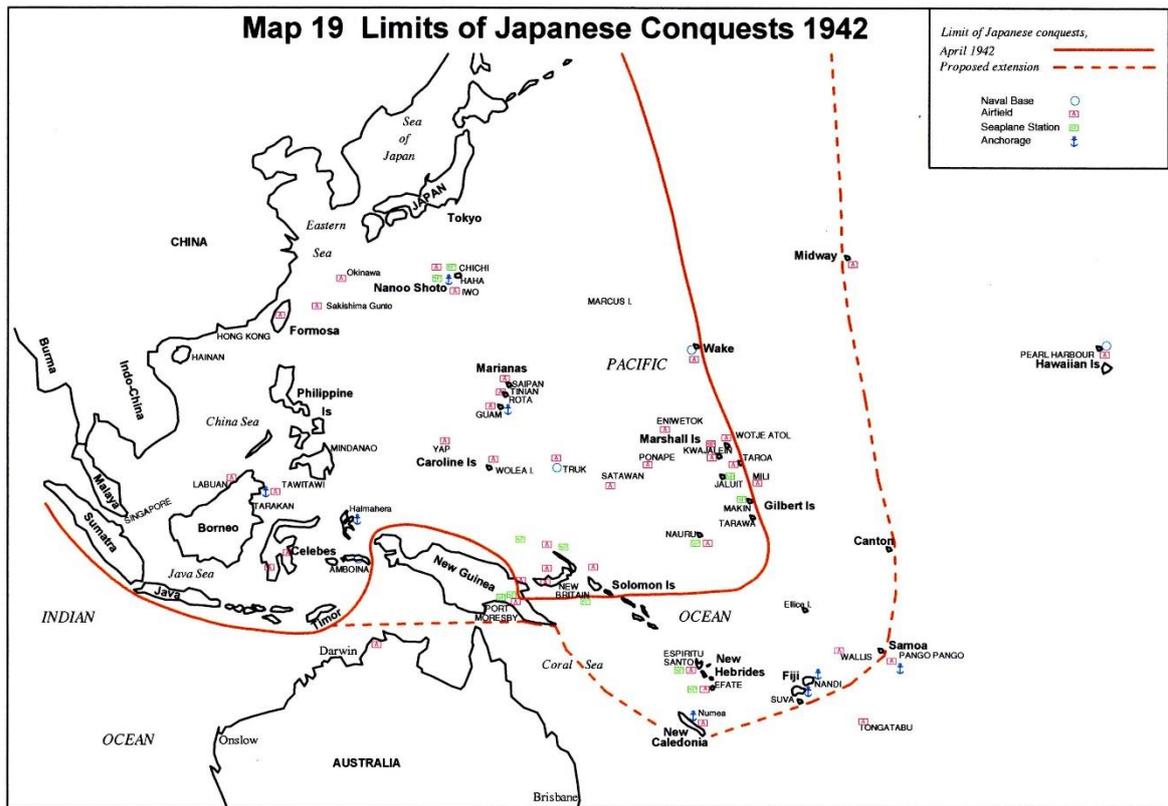
RAN Coast
Watcher
communications
operator using
the famous
'Teleradio'

Three other RAN initiatives were both attractive and significant to GHQ in its war planning. The RAN had established its Hydrographic Service in 1920 to tackle the gargantuan task of charting Australian and its Pacific mandates waters. This work was suspended during the Depression, but in 1933 the task of surveying Papuan and New Guinea waters was resumed. RAN hydrography was well supported with expertise, and the collective knowledge of the Service was undoubtedly a treasure beyond price for a command in which amphibious assault was to feature. The Australians had also given thought to the requirements of amphibious warfare, and had selected Port Stephens north of Newcastle in New South Wales as the site for a base at which naval crews and soldiers would be trained.

MacArthur's staff reacted energetically to that initiative, and when the base opened as HMAS *Assault* in September 1942, work to convert the RAN's armed merchant cruisers into landing ships had already been put in train. Not least, the RAN had its own Anti-submarine Warfare (ASW) School in Sydney. Established principally to ensure a supply of trained Australian personnel to man British and Canadian ships in the Battle of the Atlantic, its existence made the task of training the ships and men of the Allied navies in the SWPA in the theory of ASW much easier. The practice was harder to obtain: submarines to act as 'clockwork mice' for Allied escorts were in short supply in the theatre until 1944.

Naval Operations 1942

Until Japanese intentions following the success of their 'Stage 1' assaults in the colonial possessions of the 'Malay Barrier' became clear and Allied forces could be concentrated to oppose them, a holding strategy was all that could be adopted. This was particularly so for the Allied naval forces, with a 'front' of over 2,000 miles to defend, few bases to support them and fewer ships. Anzac Force created in December 1941 now became Task Force 44, a joint cruiser-destroyer formation under the command of Rear Admiral John Crace, an RN officer who had been born in Australia. The task force had little to do until indications emerged that the Japanese were, in fact, planning an amphibious assault on Port Moresby, and that the likely time frame was early May.



The Battle of the Coral Sea, May 1942

This intelligence was coming mainly from FRUMEL. This was not a 'happy ship', because USN paranoia about limiting the distribution of its product became a major irritant to the Australians, who were more interested in defeating the Japanese. But at this early stage in the relationship the importance of the intelligence being derived overrode the internal conflict between its components. As days passed, FRUMEL, with assistance from the USN in Honolulu, pieced together almost the entire, complex instructions to all the Japanese forces participating in what they designated 'Operation MO'. It was one of the most important penetrations of Japanese codes of the war.

Port Moresby was to be one of the 'Stage Two' strongpoints providing the outer defence of the new Japanese empire. The revelation that two IJN aircraft carriers were to be involved heightened USN interest, and the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral King, directed that two of the precious Pacific Fleet carriers were to form the core of the Allied response. US submarines were deployed to intercept the advancing Japanese covering force, which was first to attack Tulagi in the Solomons before swinging north to support the troop convoy sailing from Rabaul. This would emerge into the Coral Sea through Jomard Passage in the Louisiade Archipelago. The Allied force was under the

command of USN Admiral Frank Fletcher with Crace in command of the cruisers and destroyers.

Fletcher's plan for defeating the Japanese was unsound. After the humiliation of Pearl Harbor, his primary targets were the IJN carriers, rather than the troop transports at the heart of Operation MO. He also looked askance at operations with an ally. Crace was sent, unsupported, to wait off Jomard Passage, while Fletcher and the Japanese carrier force performed pirouettes around each other off the Solomons, unaware of the other's presence within striking range. Once they did discover one other the fighting was furious and both sides lost a carrier, large in the USN case, small for the IJN, and damage to the others. Meanwhile, the cruisers and destroyers pressed on to their position to block the Japanese convoy. Attacked three times, twice by the Japanese and once by MacArthur's Army Air Force, they beat off the attacks without loss. The misidentification of one of the cruisers as a battleship by the Japanese sufficiently rattled the Japanese convoy commander into reversing course and returning to Rabaul. The Battle of the Coral Sea had been won. Crace had achieved his objective and preserved his force in the face of determined Japanese efforts to destroy it. This was more than any Allied force commander had managed in the five months of the Pacific War.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02497.004

**Allied cruisers and destroyers at Jomard Passage
during battle of the Coral Sea**

Despite an apparent 'win' for the Japanese in the carrier battle, Coral Sea was a serious strategic setback for the Japanese 'Stage 2'. Its remaining carrier strength was largely destroyed and its experienced aircrew lost in an attempt to capture another strong point at Midway Island in June. Besides its mandated Marshall Islands possessions, of all its planned Stage 2 conquests only Attu Island in the Aleutians was taken and held by the Japanese. For SWPA, the defeat at Coral Sea led to two further attempts to take Port Moresby – at Milne Bay and then via the Kokoda Track later in the year. It was turning point in the Pacific War and shaped Allied strategy thenceforward. It was also the only major naval action in the Papua New Guinea area. For the reason why, read on.

Defending Convoys

Following the unsuccessful attack by midget submarines on Sydney Harbour, the Japanese launched a desultory submarine campaign against convoys using the Australian east coast, a battle of the greatest seriousness. Finding the ships and then protecting them from enemy attack was a game both sides played – and the Japanese lost. From mid-1943 USN submarines based in Hawaii and Australia began to concentrate on attacking the merchant shipping taking the booty from the newly expanded Japanese Empire to the home islands. This would cripple the Japanese war effort and provide material support the Allied advance through territories occupied by Japanese in the Pacific. It was going to make finding shipping for military purposes increasingly difficult for the Japanese, especially as they started the war with barely sufficient ships to meet the military and civil demands.

In SWPA, at the outset, the Japanese appeared to hold all the cards, with a sizeable and highly regarded submarine fleet. For the Allies, bulky cargoes, military and civilian, had no option but to be transported by sea as the Australian road and rail systems were already stretched to breaking point. This particularly applied to the transport of coal from the fields in the Hunter Valley to the nation's furnaces and power stations and iron ore from South Australia to the furnaces at Port Kembla and Newcastle in New South Wales. For GHQ, ships moving men, supplies and equipment inbound from the United States or forward to Papua and New Guinea were subject to interdiction at any point in their passage outside the Great Barrier Reef.

The defences were maritime patrols by the RAAF, a growing anti-submarine force of RAN and American ships and signals intelligence from FRUMEL. It also became obvious that Japanese submarines were professionally unable to use their advantages against convoys, although the RAN's corvettes were no match for the Japanese I Class oceanic submarines, and were even out-gunned by them. However, in the six months from August 1942 they managed to sink

only five ships and to damage seven others, incurring only one loss. This was grim but manageable. The Australian Chief of Naval Staff now accepted the heavy operational burden as commander of convoy operations in SWPA. His organisation and its effectiveness grew over the next two years, and in its final form in 1944 more 100 Allied ships involved in the ASW and convoying effort.

The major Allied trunk supply route ran to Port Moresby or Milne Bay and thence up the coast of Papua towards Salamaua. This route had supported the operations to recapture Buna and Gona by establishing a forward base in Oro Bay between the two villages. Convoys there had commenced on 18 December 1942 as Operation LILLIPUT. Forces involved were Australian destroyers and corvettes, and merchant ships from the Netherlands East Indies merchant marine, precious vessels guarded and protected as well as they could be. The major ports from which the ships came were Townsville and Cairns in North Queensland and along this route passed all the reinforcements, equipment, the ammunition, fuel and food for the ground and air forces. Apart from the guns of the corvettes the convoys had protection from Allied aircraft operating from Port Moresby or Milne Bay, but there were insufficient available to cover all convoys. The ships faced Japanese fighters and bombers, which sank and damaged some of the irreplaceable merchant ships and inflicted casualties on the escorts Nevertheless, by June 1943 there had been 39 separate voyages transporting 60,000 tonnes of supplies and almost 4,000 Australian troops to the forward areas.

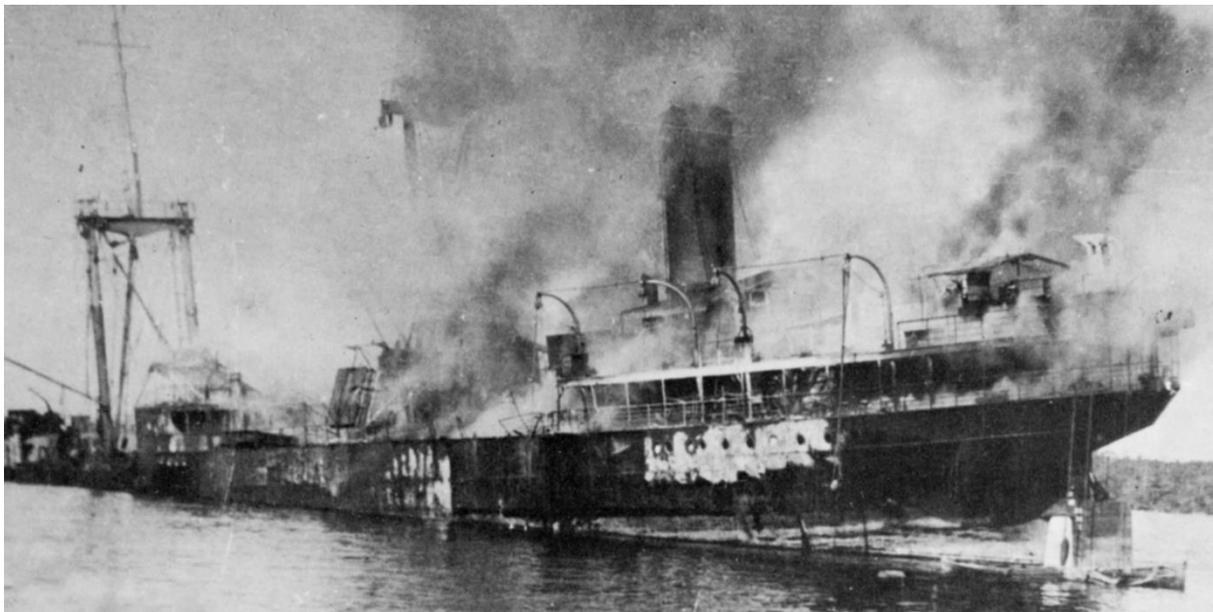


The convoy escort HMAS *Broome*, 'rolling on wet grass'

Simultaneously Operation ACCOUNTANT transferred over 3,000 US troops forward to Oro Bay. In June 1943 welcome support in the form of the first US Liberty Ship arrived in Oro Bay. She would be the first of many. This was important: the war in Europe was absorbing all the shipping their planners could lay their hands on and the Australian shipbuilding industry managed to construct a total of just eight merchant ships in World War II. Henry Kaiser's organisation in America was putting 'liberty' ships in the water 46 days after the keel was laid.

Milne Bay and the Battle for Buna and Gona

MacArthur's strategy to advance to the Philippines depended on the seizure of suitable locations to isolate Japanese garrisons and from which his air power could destroy the enemy's capability to respond. This required command of the sea from which to launch his assaults and over which to build up his forces and their logistics support. Milne Bay was selected as the site of the first new air base and in June orders were issued for its occupation. The 36 km-long fiord was check-surveyed by the RAN Coast Watchers and the first convoy entered on 24 June. Within six weeks there were over 10,000 Australian and US troops at Milne Bay, with RAAF fighter squadrons operating from two completed airstrips and a further runway under construction. All had been got there in convoys defended by the RAN.



Dutch merchant ship *Bantam*, bombed and sinking at Oro Bay 1943

The Japanese, meanwhile, had determined on a land assault on Port Moresby through the Buna-Gona area. They landed on 21-22 July, impeded but not stopped by Allied air attacks, and commenced stockpiling supplies for an advance over the Owen Stanley Range. However, they also determined to seize Milne Bay and on 26 August it was assaulted by Japanese Special Landing Forces supported by cruisers. By 7 September the Japanese remnants had been withdrawn in utter defeat. Task Force 44 was on alert to intervene if necessary, but was not called forward, although its destroyers were engaged in the defence. This defeat finally put paid to any hopes of further Japanese attacks on Port Moresby by sea which, in turn, certainly doomed to failure the cross-country assault, known to Australians as the battle for Kokoda. The Japanese would fight tenaciously but in vain. Their fate was effectively sealed when GHQ decided on a strategy to retake Buna, Gona and Sanananda.

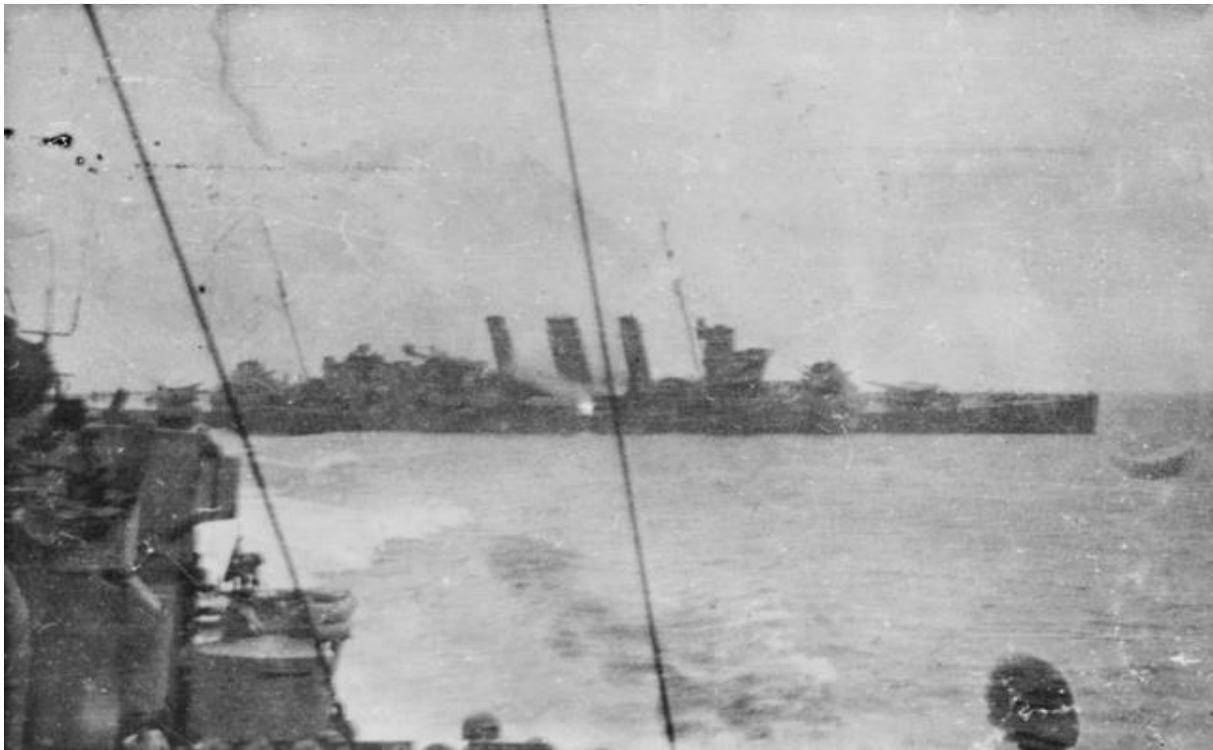
It is difficult understate the difficulties that this plan faced. The Japanese apparently controlled the sea approaches and had control of the air. Suitable shipping and escorts were in short supply, and the waters through which the convoys would have to sail were poorly charted; there was no point in having precious ships hung up on coral reefs for the Japanese to pick off at will. As it was, strandings and groundings were regular occurrences in SWPA throughout the offensive phase from mid-1943 and early assaults almost failed because of navigational errors. So, a safe route had to be surveyed without drawing Japanese attention to the fact. This task was carried out by the RAN Hydrographic Service and the Coast Watchers who, between September and the end of October surveyed a passage for ships from China Strait to Oro Bay, from where the Japanese defences could be outflanked. The first supplies were ferried forward in small ships and the troops in corvettes. The first convoys – Dutch merchant ships escorted by RAN corvettes - began shuttling equipment and supplies, including tanks, north from Port Moresby in early December. Despite fanatical Japanese resistance, the land battle concluded on 22 January 1943. The threat to Port Moresby by land and sea had been eliminated.

One consequence of these efforts was that the RAN became lead service in all hydrographic efforts in the SWPA and commanded the US Seventh Fleet hydrographic force throughout the war.

Assault on the Solomons

The other part of the Japanese ‘Stage 2’ plan of most importance to Australia was their determination to seize the southern Solomons and to establish Guadalcanal as a major air base. While GHQ SWPA struggled with its own problems, Admiral Halsey in South Pacific Area waged a ferocious campaign to

drive the Japanese back from their conquests in the Solomon Islands, with the assistance of MacArthur's forces. This is noted in this paper because the ensuing battle of attrition which cost both sides dearly, had a major impact in dividing the attention which could be paid to Papua and New Guinea by the Japanese in Rabaul. The naval battles accounted for more than 24 warships, including a Japanese battleship, hundreds of aircraft and thousands of officers and men, and forever giving the waters surrounding Savo Island the nickname 'Ironbottom Sound'. But the end of the worst of the slaughter came in November 1942 when the Japanese left the field of the Battle of Tassafaronga. They would never again directly challenge the Allied navies in battle in the South Pacific or SWPA. By defeating the Japanese Navy in the Solomons, Admiral Halsey had ensured that Papua and New Guinea would not become a naval battleground.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Heavy cruiser HMAS *Canberra* sinking after battle of Savo Island 9 August 1942,
one of four Allied cruisers lost that day

Preparing for the Advance, 1942-43

Men, ships and equipment were poured into the South Pacific area throughout the rest of 1942 as the US struggled to blunt and defeat Japanese efforts to retake Guadalcanal. Some, however, reached Australia, as part of the build-up of forces and capabilities necessary to advance against the Japanese in SWPA. The great need was amphibious capability and material. The RAN undertook the conversion of three armed merchant cruisers – *Manoora*, *Westralia*, and *Kanimbla* – into Landing Ships Infantry (LSI), capable of carrying around 1200 troops and their supporting stores and ammunition for landing using small landing craft. In fact, *Manoora* was the first ship to join the VII Amphibious Force under the command of Admiral Barbey USN, who arrived in Australia in December 1942. Amphibious warfare training bases had already been established at Toorbul on Bribie Island near Brisbane and in Port Stephens, and in 1943 the pace of activity picked up with over 20,000 troops being trained in Port Stephens alone. Barbey's amphibious assets continued to trickle in from the United States, not always as he would have liked. Only in March did the first large US attack transport arrive and in June another appeared which became by this flagship - just in time for the first assaults. By then the SWPA naval forces had become the US Seventh Fleet and the cruisers Under Admiral Crutchley RN, were in Task Force 74.



Australian troops disembarking from HMAS *Manoora* at Tarakan, May 1945

Finding safe routes for the ships which were going to deliver assault troops onto the beaches in poorly charted waters continued to be a matter of great concern to the naval planners. Even experienced local skippers could often find themselves in difficulties, which was no reassurance when the majority of the bridge teams making the assaults were very inexperienced in navigation.

The solution was to put experienced navigators in the lead ships which the less adept would follow. Frequently the guides were ships of the RAN - corvettes and the new motor launches, which were so important in the New Guinea fighting. Meanwhile, Coast Watcher parties inserted in advance of landings reported on local conditions and made a number of improvements to passage arrangements, including the installation of lighting up the coast of Papua. This made it possible to run cargoes by night without Japanese air interference. The 13 vessels of the hydrographic force carried out their tasks under the threat of Japanese air attack and although several were damaged, they completed their tasks magnificently. A third means of improving navigation was the development of interpretation of aerial photography, then in its infancy, and for which Barbey had to persuade a reluctant Fifth Air Force commander to risk aircraft and aircrew in low-level photographic missions. As the standard Japanese treatment of captured Allied aircrew was beheading, he needed some powerful arguments to advance.

The planners also encountered serious discrepancies in the actual physical location of some of the beaches they were to assault. The first target, Woodlark Island, was found to be seven miles out of its true position, and charts of Finschhafen were discovered to be 11 miles in error. This hadn't mattered to the skippers of coastal steamers and schooners using these waters before the war, but it was really important now. This point is belaboured because the seriousness of navigational hazards and inaccuracies may not be apparent to a non-naval person.

Intelligence

A change of command at FRUMEL in 1943 produced a marked improvement in the exchange between the naval signals intelligence organisation and its military and air counterpart in Central Bureau, located in Brisbane. Central Bureau under US Army command had the task of breaking the Japanese Army's mainline code, but the Australian Army and RAAF expanded their capabilities to support these activities and to field groups capable of providing tactical intelligence in operationally-significant time to local commanders. From early 1943 the work of the Australian Commander Eric Nave produced a steady flow of significant intelligence from low-grade codes. These were especially important in giving GHQ planners accurate insights into the status and numbers

of Japanese aircraft deployed into the theatre. The breaking of a Japanese Navy low-grade code had allowed US Army Air Corps fighters in the Solomons to intercept and shoot down Admiral Yamamoto's aircraft on 18 April 1943.

Operations 1943

The only practicable way of moving the quantity of men and supplies required for the advance up the New Guinea coast was by sea. If the Allies could minimise or eliminate the air threat from Rabaul, principally using air power, then the fortress need not be assaulted because control over the Solomons and Bismarck Seas - linking the Coral Sea to the broader South Pacific Ocean and the route to the Philippines - would pass to the Allies. The implementation of that strategy formed the basis of operations in 1943 in SWPA after the Quadrant conference in Québec in August 1943 had decided that Rabaul should be isolated and bypassed.

At the end of June 1943 unopposed landings on Kiriwina and Woodlark Islands went ahead to sort out the bugs in the newly created VII Amphibious Force and its procedures. The first landing on occupied territory was by a small force of 1,000 US soldiers in three PT boats and 32 landing craft at Nassau Bay on 29 June. They had done this because of a Coast Watcher report that the position was lightly held by the Japanese. However, the operation demonstrated many of the problems GHQ would have to confront. The PT boats overshot the beach through navigation error and the landing craft were obliged to beach through heavy surf, which deposited them as mangled wreckage from which few could be salvaged. 770 officers and men had made it safely to shore, but it was an example of how amphibious landings should not be conducted, especially with the loss of so many of the scarce landing craft.

The next assault was at Lae. In March 1943 a convoy of eight ships escorted by eight destroyers sailed from Rabaul for Lae on the mainland, carrying some 7,000 men, fuel and ammunition and with a heavy air cover of Zeros. Spotted and trailed by Allied surveillance aircraft, the convoy was attacked by Allied bombers at low altitude. The results of this Battle of the Bismarck Sea were devastating: all the transports and five destroyers were sunk, and the Japanese lost almost 3,000 men. Only 850 reached Lae in rescuing destroyers. Now the Allies attacked the isolated garrison at first light on 4 September when Barbey's destroyers opened fire to suppress Japanese defences along the landing beaches before the landing craft with troops from Milne Bay, Buna and Morobe went in shortly before 0900. This was the first major opposed landing by Australian forces since Anzac Cove on 25 April 1915, and it was a complete success.

The way was now open to seize Finschhafen, which commanded Vitiaz Strait separating New Guinea from New Britain. Conditions for amphibious landing were not good, and it was known that the beach was enfiladed by machine gun nests, but aerial photography had also failed the planners. The landing took place at night and most of the landing craft reached the beach within a few minutes of the allotted time. Although the troops quickly overwhelmed the defenders they had a hard battle ahead against stubborn Japanese resistance, and Finschhafen was not taken until 11 October. The link-up of Australian and US forces at Saidor at the same time secured the western side of the vital Vitiaz Strait.

With the western coast of the Solomon Sea now also in Allied hands, MacArthur began planning an assault on western New Britain, which was closer to Allied bases than Madang, the original next target. As early as March 1943 Coast Watcher parties had been inserted on the island east from Arawe to provide information on Japanese strengths and activities and to give warning of air attacks and surface movements from Rabaul; by November five parties were in place. As a preliminary, Task Force 74 conducted a bombardment of Gasmata on 28 November and landing ships carrying US troops assaulted Arawe on 15 December. The first full-scale assault in SWPA was launched against the Japanese air bases and garrison at Cape Gloucester on 26 December. It, too, was a complete success.

Operations 1944

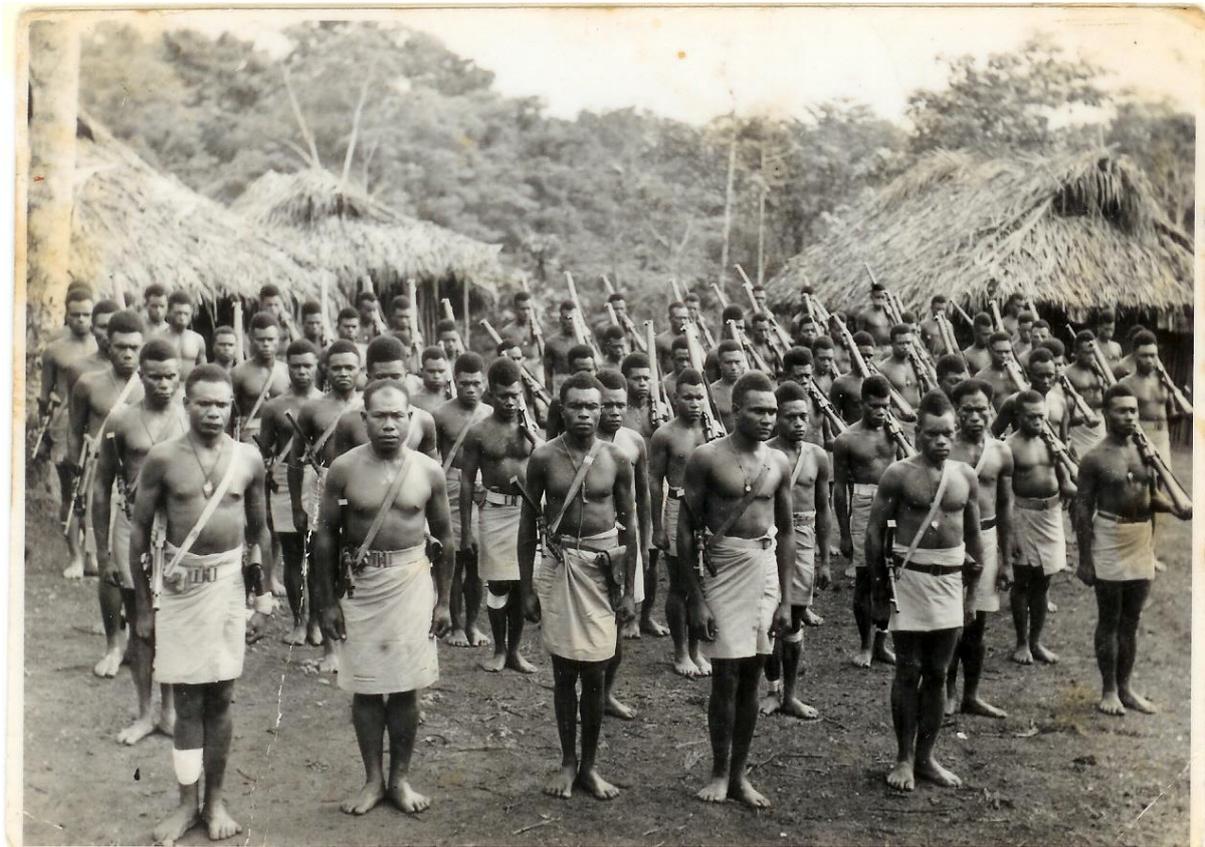
1944 was the year in which the two great Allied - essentially American - thrusts against the Japanese Empire in the Pacific were able to combine for the first time. The landings at Arawe and Cape Gloucester cut off Japanese forces there from support from the New Guinea mainland. The only support to the Japanese in Rabaul now available was from Truk, but on 17 February Admiral Nimitz ordered a massive air attack on this outpost by his Central Pacific carrier force. The success of this removed all possibility of reinforcing Rabaul and its fighter protection was withdrawn to Truk two days later. Until the landing of the Australian 5th Division at Jacquinot Bay in November 1944, the Japanese forward positions were harried and overrun by a Melanesian guerrilla force led by RAN Coast Watchers, driving the enemy back behind fixed defences erected around the Gazelle Peninsula. With Rabaul neutralised the Japanese submarine threat was also diminished: convoying south of Townsville was discontinued in February 1944.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley VC RN commanded the joint USN/RAN Task Force 44/74 throughout 1942-44. On his relief he was admitted to the US Legion of Merit in the degree of Chief Commander, a unique honour for an 'Australian' officer



Melanesian infantry in New Britain organised and led by RAN Coast Watchers
1944-45

The USN advance westwards also drew Japanese Navy attention to that theatre. Ever seeking an opportunity for the 'decisive battle', it waited and dithered, passing up opportunities to seriously impede MacArthur's advance until it was too late. A battleship force sent to destroy the Allied forces assaulting Biak in May 1944 was recalled; that would have been an interesting experience for the cruisers of MacArthur's navy!

The next target was Manus Island in the Admiralty Group to provide a secure fleet anchorage, the capacity to hold a large number of major ships and the land on which to construct the necessary support facilities, workshops, stores, ammunition dumps and airfields. When a 'reconnaissance in strength' on the 29 February met unexpectedly stout Japanese resistance Task Force 74 was sent to the rescue of the US troops. Their divisional commander made the laconic remark that 'The Navy didn't support us, they saved our necks!' Manus was secured by 3 April at a cost of over 1,200 US casualties and within a few weeks it was on track to become a major naval base. By September, anchorages for 44 capital ships, 104 cruisers and 114 destroyers had been established and there

were 37,000 personnel in the area manning hospitals, stores, repair facilities, messing and recreation facilities and staffs. There was even a floating dock capable of taking 100,000 ton ships.

In mid-March, Task Force 74 bombarded the major Japanese base at Wewak and headquarters of the Japanese XVIII Army of three divisions spread out over a distance of more than 900 miles. This activity was aimed at weakening Japanese capabilities in Eastern New Guinea while disguising the fact that MacArthur's next target for assault was Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea. MacArthur was counting on the growing power of his air forces to neutralise Japanese attempts to reinforce and protect the base, bolstered by aircraft carriers from Nimitz's forces cooperating with MacArthur for the first time. Hollandia's airfields were expected to provide bases from which his heavy bombers could strike targets in the eastern Indonesian archipelago.

The attack on Hollandia, with a concurrent assault on Aitape to capture the nearby airfield, went in on 22 April and was a complete success. Although the area was not yet totally in Allied hands. Japanese forces along the north coast of the island of New Guinea were now isolated from each other. The Allied pressure was relentless and in a series of assaults MacArthur's forces took the islands of Sarmi and Wakde, 120 miles west of Hollandia and then on 27 May assaulted Biak, a further 180 miles westward. The ships of Task Force 74 supported all three landings and *Manoora* landed US troops at Wakde on 16 May. US bombers from Wakde flew over Mindanao in the Philippines for the first time in two years on 27 May.

The advance on the Philippines took most of the major ships of the Seventh Fleet away from the New Guinea, and MacArthur withdrew most of his US troops and replaced them in New Guinea and Bougainville with Australians. In strategic and naval terms the area had become a backwater and a long way from the front line. Frigates and smaller vessels remained to carry out essential naval duties in supporting the Australian Army in reclaiming Australian territory in New Guinea. The 6th Division, fighting its way eastwards from Aitape, received the assistance of *Swan*, fresh from a harassment and interdiction mission with other RAN ships in the Halmaheras, with bombardments on 24 February and interdiction of Japanese barge traffic with the assistance on the motor launch force. She was switched to New Britain for the latter half of March to work with the 5th Division and returned to the 6th Division in April, where planning for an amphibious assault on Wewak were being developed. Joined by corvettes and motor launches, and renamed 'Wewak Force', this small flotilla supported the landings on 9 May with the help of an Australian cruiser and destroyers and the RN cruiser *Newfoundland*, which were transiting to Borneo. The 6th Division had vanquished the Japanese defenders by the end of May.



RAN Motor Launch
prepares to engage
Japanese positions on
Karkar Island, May
1945

This marked the virtual end of naval hostilities in New Guinea. The main RAN force, of course served with distinction in the Philippines and in the assaults on Borneo, and at the time of the Japanese surrender were preparing for the assault on Kyushu. There was plenty of work for the Navy too, in cleaning up the mess following the surrender and in getting the Army and Air Force (and the Japanese) home.

Summation

Allied strategy for the Pacific and the successful application of sea power at Coral Sea and in the Solomons ensured that the campaign in Papua and New Guinea was never under serious threat of disruption by the Japanese Navy. Nor was Australia, at any time. It also ensured the protection of the vital convoys taking men and supplies to the battlefronts. The image Australians have of the fighting in the area is of jungle-green clad 'diggers' clutching Owen guns. The questions of how they got there and how they were sustained with food, clothing, ammunition and the other necessities of war are rarely asked or even considered. Fuel, bombs, spares and ammunition and even aircraft for the Allied air forces also relied on sea transportation, defended by Allied ships under RAN command. As ever, the media in 1942-45 couldn't see naval strategy in action but they could witness and report on firefights in the jungle. Thus Damien Parer's fine footage on 'diggers' in Papua survives to inspire us all. I wonder what sort of film he might have made of life at sea.

It would only fair, therefore, were military historians to include a line or two in their work on the essential contribution made by the Navy in the Papua and

New Guinea campaigns – and well beyond that, of course. How long would Tobruk have held out without the Navy?

And with due respect to those who espouse the notion that there was something which could be identified as a Battle for Australia, as early as May 1942 the navies had demonstrated the impossibility of the concept, a Japanese dream which faded rapidly as the full consequences of strategic maritime warfare were hammered home. One cannot fight a maritime war with insufficient ships, a fact that is true today as it was then.



A mess deck in an RAN corvette – home for 25 sailors for three years. This shot was clearly taken in a southern winter. In the tropics the ship's company slept on the upper deck because it was cooler



Surrender of Japanese garrison of Ocean Island in the Pacific October
1945 in HMAS *Diamantina*