INTRODUCTION

The Salamaua campaign began as the Kokoda campaign ended and ended as the Markham–Ramu Valley campaign began. In scale, it was the largest commitment by the Australian army in New Guinea up to that time and during a period when the war against Japan was still in the balance. In the end it was a diversion, a feint for the subsequent operation to seize Lae, a magnet to draw the Japanese away from the main game. Yet it involved some of the most intense and drawn-out fighting of the entire war, undertaken on a battlefield of the devil's choosing.

From the northern crest of Mount Tambu there is a view to die for, and many men did. Below are the ridges marching down to the Francisco River, much like the gnarled fingers of a claw, a claw that held three armies in its grasp for much of 1943. If not for the deep green canopy it could be the broken terrain of Gallipoli, your eyrie as Chunuk Bair. Beyond the ridge and the river, the shimmering blue sea of the Huon Gulf beckons like the Dardanelles. Like the craggy ranges above Anzac Cove, it is as absurd a place to fight a battle as you could find.

The battles here are little known and seldom mentioned; the dead and those who endured deserve better. This story is theirs.

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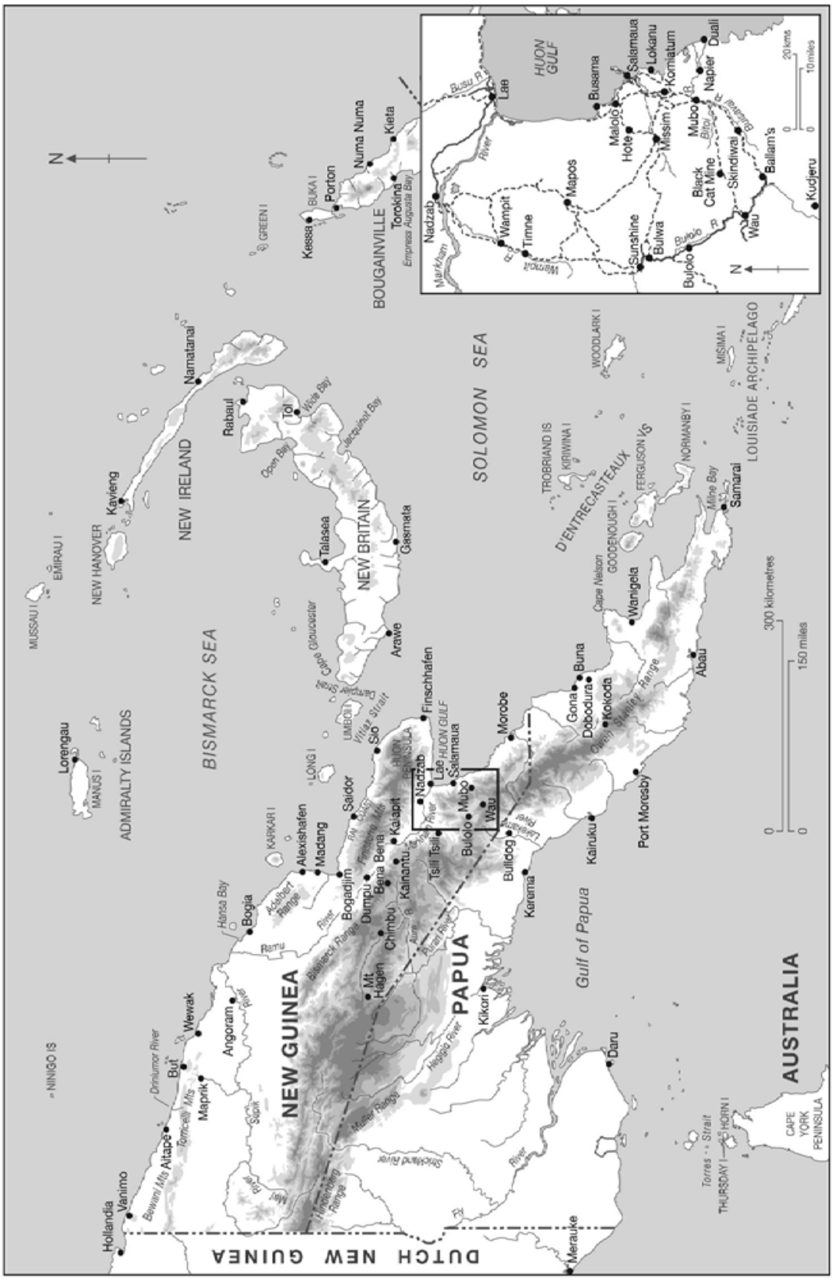
More information



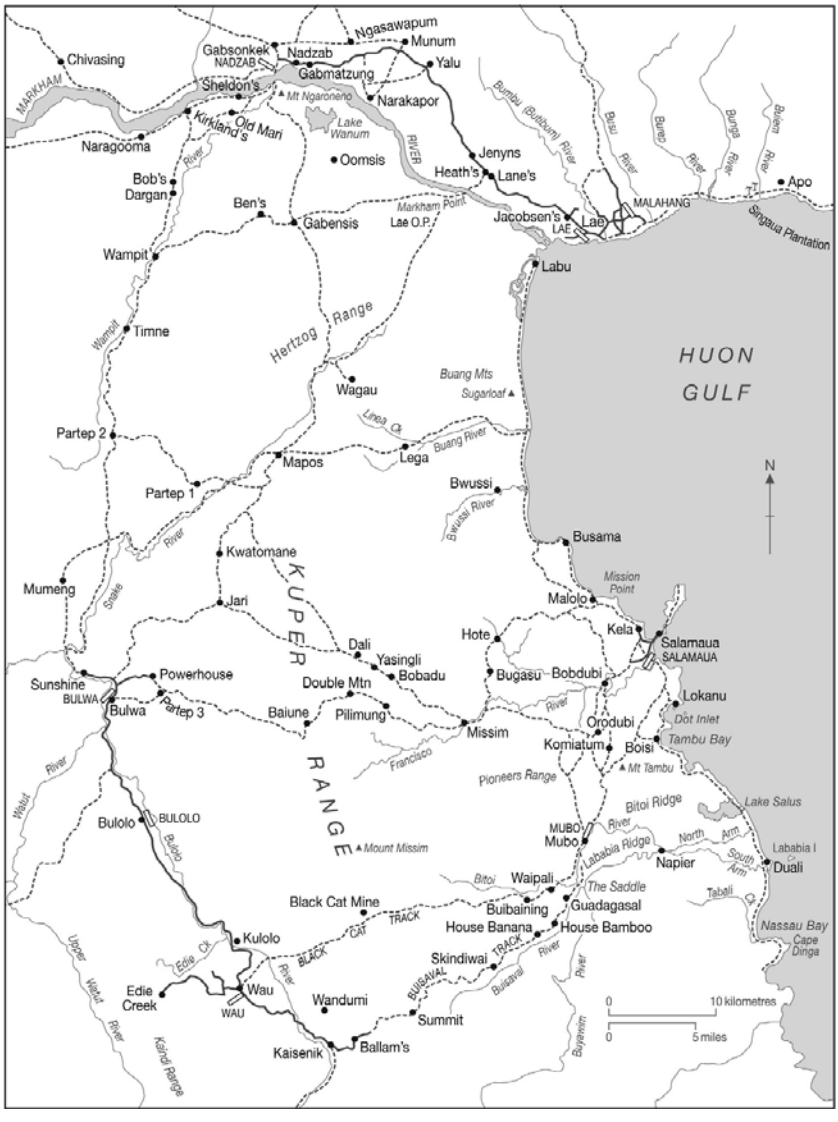
Map 1 The New Guinea theatre

CHAPTER 1

DEATH IN THE BISMARCK SEA

The glassy blue surface of the Bismarck Sea shimmered beneath a cloudless sky, the morning mist gone 'as though wiped away' by the sun. Major-General Kane Yoshihara, the Chief of Staff of the Japanese Eighteenth Army, was aboard the destroyer *Tokitsukaze*, part of a fifteen-vessel convoy afloat on the Bismarck Sea, headed for Lae. Although *Tokitsukaze* translated as 'favourable wind', the weather would do the Japanese convoy no favours on this morning. Yoshihara was below deck discussing debarkation procedures with the troops when disaster struck from the sky. The destroyer then stopped dead in the water, 'as though the ship had struck a rock'. By the time he reached the deck, a bewildered Yoshihara could see that only half the convoy vessels were left afloat and, like the *Tokitsukaze*, smoke billowed skywards from most of them, signifying their fate.[1]

By the end of February 1943 World War II was at a turning point. In the European theatre the German army on the eastern front had been decisively defeated at Stalingrad and was in retreat, desperately trying to hold back the Soviet tide. In North Africa it was a similar story for the German army as the British and American armies approached Tunisia. In the Atlantic Ocean the crucial battle for control of the convoy routes over the marauding U-boats was approaching its climax while in the skies above Western Europe Allied air power was remorselessly gaining the upper hand.



Map 2 The Lae–Salamaua–Wau area

In the Central Pacific, the US Navy, having crippled the Imperial Japanese Navy at Midway in June 1942, was gathering strength to move its considerable might closer to Japan. Meanwhile, US Navy submarine operations increasingly strangled the Japanese supply lines both to and from Japan. In the South-West Pacific the Japanese armed forces had been defeated at Guadalcanal and in Papua.

In New Guinea the Japanese had established a new defence perimeter north of the Owen Stanley Range. A bold advance by a Japanese army detachment to the outskirts of Wau in January 1943 had caught the Australian command off guard and had been defeated only at the eleventh hour. Emboldened by that near success, the Japanese command was not only determined to hold the Lae–Salamaua area but would again try to capture Wau and drive the Australians from that area.

On the Allied side, the way the Salamaua campaign was fought was decided by higher command decisions in early 1943. At the end of January 1943, the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff met at Casablanca to consider the priorities for 1943. The first priority was to win the Battle for the Atlantic, second was assistance to Russia, third was the capture of Sicily in the Mediterranean theatre, fourth was the build-up of forces in the United Kingdom and fifth concerned the operations in the Pacific and Far East theatre.[2]

Thus the Pacific theatre was a lower priority for the Allied commanders at this time. This was the result of the 'beat Germany first' strategy, which limited the war in the Pacific to maintaining the initiative against Japan. Much to his chagrin, the commander of the South-West Pacific area, General Douglas MacArthur, had an even lower priority, with most of the American resources in the Pacific theatre being allocated to Admiral Chester Nimitz's Central Pacific area, including almost all naval forces. Without further significant reinforcements and denied access to the major US Navy forces, MacArthur was facing an extended hiatus while his air and ground forces recovered from the exceptionally heavy fighting of the Papuan campaign.

General MacArthur's tasks for 1943 began with the capture of Lae, followed by the capture of bases on the Huon Peninsula, including Finschhafen, and finally the capture of Madang on the northern coast of New Guinea. Operations in New Britain and Bougainville were also proposed with the objective of capturing Kavieng and Rabaul. With his reliance on land-based air power, MacArthur's operations would be aimed at obtaining a string of suitable air bases ever closer to Rabaul and the Philippines. Coordinated with MacArthur's operations, Admiral Nimitz's naval forces would capture New Georgia and re-establish control over the Solomon Islands.

In January 1943 a bold incursion by two Japanese battalions behind the Australian lines had reached the outskirts of Wau. After flying in desperately needed reinforcements, the Australians had managed to hold

Wau and its vital airfield before driving the Japanese force back down the Jap Track towards Mubo.[3] By late February Japanese troops still held the vital high ground around Waipali and Guadagasal, a prerequisite for any renewed operations against Wau. However, what was the most significant action of the Salamaua campaign would take place at sea.

While the Australians made their plans and deployments to attack the Japanese at Mubo and thus threaten Salamaua, the Japanese Eighth Area Army commander in Rabaul, Lieutenant-General Hitoshi Imamura, made reciprocal plans to reinforce the Japanese presence in front of Salamaua. Considerable reinforcements from the 51st Division had gathered in Rabaul, the division having been carried in eight transports from Korea in mid-November 1942. Sailing from Whampoa via Hong Kong and Palau, the convoy had arrived in Rabaul in December 1942.[4] Following the successful transport of most of the division's 102nd Regiment from Rabaul to Lae in January, it was proposed that another convoy be sent from Rabaul at the end of February 1943. The aim of the operation was to 'strengthen the strategic position in the Lae–Salamaua sector and prepare for further operations'.[5]

Included in the convoy were 172 men from the 51st Division HQ, 2205 men from Lieutenant-Colonel Torahei Endo's 115th Infantry Regiment, 374 men of the 14th Field Artillery Regiment and 481 men from Lieutenant-Colonel Hiroshi Hondo's 51st Engineer Regiment. There would also be 152 men from the 3rd Field Hospital, 346 men from the 21st Independent Brigade and 262 men from the 50th Anti-Aircraft Battalion in the convoy. Another thousand men were earmarked for unloading the ships.[6]

A total of 6616 men from army units were to be carried by the convoy as well as some naval troops and the ship crews. Table 1.1, based on a movement order issued one week before the convoy sailed, shows the major units to be carried.

The force would be carried in a convoy of eight vessels and would leave Rabaul for Lae on 28 February. Lessons had been learned from the previous convoy that had followed the southern coast of New Britain, and this time the convoy would follow a route along the northern coast. This would put more distance between the convoy and the Allied reconnaissance aircraft until the convoy reached Vitiaz and Dampier Straits.

The eight transport vessels in the convoy were:

- *Nojima*, a naval collier of 8251 tons that carried naval supplies as well as some Special Naval Landing Party troops not included in the loading table.

Table 1.1: Units allocated to the Lae convoy

Unit	*Transports*	*Destroyers*
18th Army headquarters	83 men	94 men
21st Independent Brigade	346 men	
50th Anti-Aircraft battalion	362 men	
18th Army signals	70 men	
15th Independent Engineer Regiment	50 men	
8th Shipping Engineer Regiment	570 men	184 men
3rd Debarkation Unit	370 men	
51st Division headquarters	172 men	103 men
115th Infantry Regiment	2205 men	400 men
14th Field Artillery Regiment	374 men	50 men
51st Engineer Regiment	481 men	54 men
51st Division signals	78 men	73 men
3rd Field Hospital	152 men	
Miscellaneous	50 men	
Water purifying unit	25 men	
Nada Unit	270 men	
Total:	5658 men	958 men

Source: ATIS enemy publications, AWM 55, 5/1, EP-05.

- *Kyokusei Maru*, a 5493-ton vessel, carried 1203 personnel. On board were four large Motorised Landing Craft (MLC), ten smaller collapsible boats, eight rowing boats and 500 sealed supply drums. Three anti-aircraft guns and six field guns were also carried.[7]
- *Oigawa Maru*, a 6493-ton coal-burner built in 1941, carrying 1324 personnel. Also carried were eight large Daihatsu MLCs, six of them on the forward deck and 300 sealed supply drums. Three anti-aircraft guns and six field guns were carried as well as 150 to 200 50-litre gasoline drums.[8]
- *Teiyo Maru*, a 6869-ton vessel, carried 1923 personnel. In August 1942 the ship had sailed unescorted from Yokohama to Rabaul. Six large Daihatsu MLCs and 500 sealed supply drums were on board. Two anti-aircraft guns were carried, one forward and one aft, as well as one field gun and two pom-pom guns.[9]
- *Shinai Maru*, a 3793-ton vessel, carried 1052 personnel. Two or three MLCs were carried on board and, for defence, two anti-aircraft guns were positioned fore and aft as well as two pom-pom guns.[10]

- *Aiyo Maru*, a 2746-ton vessel, carried 252 personnel along with five large MLCs, fuel and ammunition. For defence the ship had two anti-aircraft guns, one field gun and two pom-pom guns.[11]
- *Taimei Maru*, a 2883-ton vessel, carried 200 personnel as well as at least eleven large MLCs and 200 sealed supply drums. The bulkheads between holds 1 and 2 and between holds 3 and 4 had been removed, making two long holds that were more readily accessible. The ship was defended by two 75mm field guns, one heavy machine-gun forward and aft and two single 25mm pom-pom guns amidships on the bridge. In early January the *Taimei Maru* had taken twelve large and twelve small MLCs from Rabaul to Wewak, and in early February the ship had made a similar delivery to the Shortland Islands.[12]
- *Kembu Maru*, a 900-ton vessel, commonly known as a sea truck, was less than six months old and carried a crew of thirty. It had arrived in Rabaul from Truk on 19 February and would carry a small number of personnel from the 221st Airfield Battalion not included in the loading table. The ship mainly carried gasoline, which was stored in 300 drums in the two holds. While in Rabaul two 12mm guns were installed on the bridge with 600 rounds for each. The guns were operated by fifteen men under Probationary Officer Kinjiro Oku.[13]

Although most of the transports could travel at ten knots, the *Shinai Maru* was only capable of eight and a half knots, so the convoy was limited to that speed. The troopships would travel in two centre rows with a screen of destroyers on either side. The eight escorting destroyers were *Shirayuki*, *Tokitsukaze*, *Arashio*, *Yukikaze*, *Asashio*, *Uranami*, *Shikinami* and *Asagumo*. These destroyers carried 958 personnel as well as 1650 crewmen. Admiral Masatomi Kimura, commander of the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla and the convoy, travelled on *Shirayuki*. The Eighteenth Army commander, General Hatazo Adachi, travelled on *Tokitsukaze*, and the 51st Division commander, Lieutenant-General Hidemitsu Nakano, travelled on board *Yukikaze*.[14]

The convoy was scheduled to reach Lae by 1630 on 3 March, although this was later adjusted to 2300. Upon arrival at Lae the ships would anchor 600 metres apart along the shoreline from just west of the airfield to the mouth of the Busu River, around 500 metres offshore. It was also planned to establish smoke screens over the anchorage, which would be operated from collapsible boats by three squads from the 'Smoke Group' of the 8th Shipping Engineer Regiment. Floating smoke candles would be used to mask both the unloading vessels and the shore storage areas if any air attacks occurred. An escort of forty naval and six army aircraft

would provide aerial protection over the convoy from 0500 to 1800 on each day.[15]

On 19 February 1943 Allied intelligence reports had warned that further troop movements to Lae could be expected but also stated that submarines were being used to bring supplies to Lae and that an alternative supply line was being set up via Madang and Wewak. The report concluded, 'It is likely therefore, that the enemy has found surface convoys into Lae too costly for normal running.' However, the same report observed that there were fifteen warships and fifty-one transport vessels in Rabaul harbour on 14 February, far in excess of normal supply and maintenance needs. Further reconnaissance on 22 February showed the large concentration of ships still present, and Allied intelligence raised the possibility of another convoy to Lae, observing, 'It is possible that an effort will be made again.'[16]

Although aerial reconnaissance hinted at such a convoy, Allied intelligence was working with an ace up its sleeve, ULTRA decrypts from the Japanese naval signals. When war broke out with Japan, a foundation of crypto-analysts was already in place, and Japanese naval message decrypts had already proved decisive during the Coral Sea and Midway naval actions. On 19 February Lieutenant Rudolph J. Fabian's Fleet Radio Unit in Melbourne had handed MacArthur Japanese naval decrypts that indicated there would be a convoy to Lae in early March. It had taken eight days to decipher the critical message, but it gave MacArthur vital lead time to organise an appropriate response. Further decrypts pinpointed the date for the arrival in Lae on or around 5 March.[17]

General Sir Thomas Blamey, commander of Allied land forces in the South-West Pacific Area, realised the impact such a convoy could have on his ground forces in New Guinea. In a letter to New Guinea Force headquarters, Blamey observed that radio intercepts from 23 and 25 February indicated that the departure of a major convoy from Rabaul to Lae was imminent. It was estimated that ten to twenty destroyers would be involved as well as six large merchant ships and an aerial escort of 120 to 150 fighter planes. Blamey wrote, 'Every effort will be made by our own air force to deal with the enemy as he approaches.'[18]

The commander of the Allied Air Forces, comprising the Fifth United States Army Air Force (United States Army Air Force, Fifth) and the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), was Lieutenant-General George C. Kenney, who reported directly to MacArthur in Brisbane. The 5th USAAF had been activated in September 1942, although many of its component units had been operating since early 1942 with the Advanced Echelon

headquarters based in Port Moresby under the command of Brigadier-General Ennis Whitehead. Whitehead was responsible for the operation of V Fighter Command and V Bomber Command. Air Service Command, later renamed Troop Carrier Command, was based in Brisbane, although the 374th Troop Carrier Group was under the operational control of Whitehead in Port Moresby.[19]

Brigadier-General Paul Wurtsmith's V Fighter Command comprised three fighter groups, the 8th, 35th and 49th, each of three squadrons, all based at Port Moresby. Although Wurtsmith's command had 330 fighter aircraft available, only about eighty of them were P-38 Lightnings, the most capable Allied fighter at that time. The 8th Fighter Group, which had been based at Milne Bay where malaria was rampant, was withdrawn to Australia in February 1943.[20]

At the start of February 1943 Brigadier-General Howard Ramey's V Bomber Command comprised two heavy-bomber groups, each of four squadrons. The 43rd Bombardment Group was equipped with B-17 Flying Fortresses, and the 90th Bombardment Group flew the B-24 Liberator. Of the eight heavy-bomber squadrons, five were based on airfields at Port Moresby. The 43rd Bombardment Group had fifty-five B-17s on strength, about twenty of which were undergoing overhaul and only half the remainder were available for operations at any time. Most of these operations were regular reconnaissance flights, leaving only fourteen aircraft available for strike missions. The 90th Bombardment Group had the same problems with the sixty B-24 Liberators it had on establishment, having no more than fifteen aircraft available for strike missions at any one time.[21]

General Kenney had two medium-bomber groups available at this time, the 22nd and the 38th. The 22nd Bombardment Group was equipped with four squadrons of B-26 Marauders and had been in action since April 1942, losing thirty aircraft in that time and receiving only eight replacement aircraft. In January 1943 the entire group, now down to twenty-eight worn-out aircraft, had been withdrawn to Australia to be rebuilt. The 38th Bombardment Group comprised four squadrons of B-25 Mitchells, but two of them had never reached Australia, having being diverted to the South Pacific area. The two other squadrons, the 71st and 405th, were based at Port Moresby, although their twenty-seven aircraft only represented 73 per cent of their authorised strength of thirty-seven aircraft.[22]

The 3rd Bombardment Group, nicknamed the Grim Reapers, was Kenney's only light-bomber group, made up of the 8th, 13th, 89th and