

CHAPTER

SALAMAUA FALLS

The town of Wau, at the head of the Bulolo Valley in what is now Papua New Guinea, had its foundation in gold. It was in the early 1920s that the first gold was found in the Bulolo Valley, with the first miner's right issued in December 1923. As the goldfields developed, the coastal town of Salamaua became their key supply port.

Salamaua lies some 50 kilometres to the northeast of Wau and almost 40 kilometres directly south of Lae across the Huon Gulf. The old town is on the isthmus of a peninsula that juts out into the Solomon Sea like an accusing finger, pointed to the northeast. On 21 October 1925 the first cargo boat, the MV *Marsina*, called at its port. As the news spread, more people came to Salamaua to head up into the mountains for the promise of riches at Wau. Both towns grew, though that growth would always be limited by the strenuous eight-day trek from the coast up to Wau. An air route was sorely needed.

In 1927 a former Australian officer from the First World War, Cecil Levien, brought 250 native labourers to Lae and constructed a landing ground there. Ray Parer, who had been narrowly beaten by Sir Ross and Keith Smith as the first to fly from England to Australia, flew the first aeroplane, a De Havilland DH-4, from Rabaul to Lae. Soon thereafter, Levien headed up to Wau and cleared another landing field there, the extraordinary Wau strip, on an incline of some 10 degrees and hard up against a mountain range. On 19 April 1927 Ernest 'Pard' Mustar, who had flown with the pioneering Australian aviator Sir Ross Smith in the First World War, made the first landing at Wau in his De Havilland DH-37.¹

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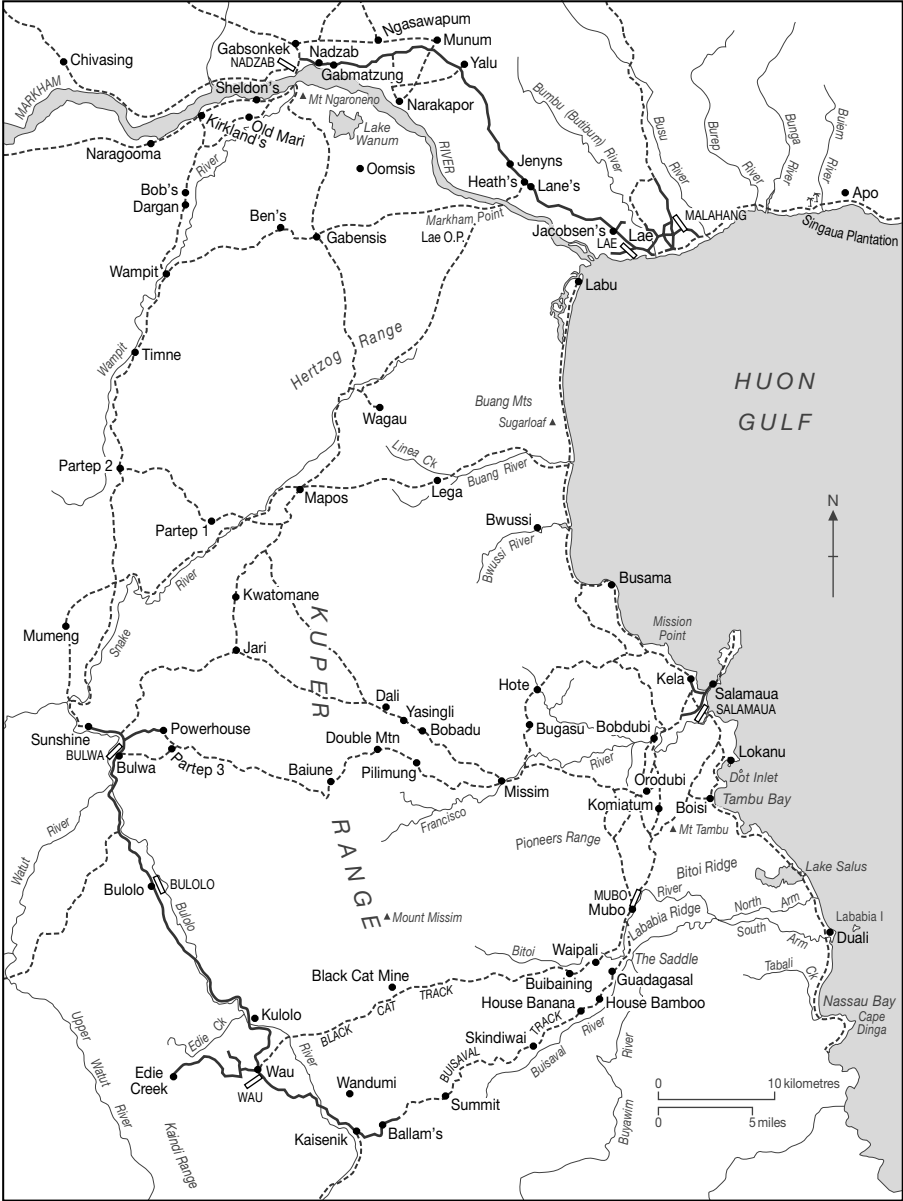
Excerpt

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With the development of air travel, Wau and the Bulolo Valley grew, and by 1940 had an expatriate population of over 3000. Salamaua also built an airfield and thus grew in parallel with Wau as planes from Salamaua lifted cargo up to the goldfields while a daily boat service carried goods back and forth to Lae. The planes were upgraded and were able to fly the components for eight huge gold dredges into the Bulolo Valley, where they were reassembled. Wau and Salamaua prospered until the intervention of war in early 1942.

At that stage the only army units in the area of Salamaua, Wau and Lae were from the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR), a part-time militia force manned by the local Europeans. The NGVR was raised on 4 September 1939, following the declaration of war in Europe, and on 8 December 1941, the day after war began in the Pacific, was called up for full-time duty. The military plans for the defence of Papua and New Guinea – both territories then administered by Australia – were for the deployment of Australian troops to Rabaul and Port Moresby only, so the defence of Lae and Salamaua was left in the hands of the local NGVR units. On 12 December the compulsory evacuation of all remaining European women (other than missionaries and nurses) and children from Papua and New Guinea was ordered.²

A Japanese carrier-based air raid hit Salamaua at 1155 on 21 January 1942, barely six weeks after the opening moves of the Pacific War. Twenty-one fighter and bomber aircraft arrived over the isthmus township, the fighters strafing the town before the bombers hit the airfield. The air raid destroyed at least 11 aircraft, including three De Havilland DH-84 Dragons and one Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Hudson bomber.³ A warning from Lloyd Pursehouse, a coastwatcher at Finschhafen, was picked up at Lae but not at Salamaua, because the power unit for the radio station was not working. Kevin Parer, who owned a small airfreight business, was taxiing his De Havilland Dragon at the time of the raid and was killed.⁴ Meanwhile, the pilot of a Junkers G-31 freight plane that was about to land quickly ducked into some cloud and headed to Wau.⁵ Four other transport planes at Wau escaped the Japanese raid but six aircraft were destroyed at Lae.⁶ A flight of five Zeros from the force raiding Lae watched Bertie Heath's Junkers G-31 take off and followed it to Bulolo airfield. Once Heath had landed, the Zeros strafed his plane and two other G-31s on the airfield, destroying them all.⁷



The Lae-Salamaua-Wau area

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On the following evening, 22 January, a message came in to Salamaua warning of a Japanese invasion fleet at sea. The fleet was in fact headed for Rabaul, which was invaded on 23 January, but the people at Salamaua were unaware of that, or that the air raid had only been part of the diversion for that operation. Within three hours the 132 male expatriate residents plus the nursing sister, Esther Stock, had assembled for evacuation and, at nightfall, the group left Salamaua and headed to the previously prepared Butu evacuation camp, some eight kilometres inland. Even Bert Beer, unable to walk, had somehow crawled out to the camp that night.⁸ However, the Japanese invasion force did not yet come to Salamaua.

Some 100 of the evacuated group walked inland via Mubo to Wau. The others returned to Salamaua, and 30 of them headed off down the coast in canoes with their supplies in an accompanying pinnace. One of them was Bert Rowe, who had arrived in Port Moresby just under a year previously, then worked in Lae before moving across to Salamaua to carry out customs office work. Living off rice and Vegemite until the pinnace sunk on 31 January, the group made their way past the Papuan border at the Mambare River and finally reached Gona on 2 February. The group were then flown out of Kokoda to Port Moresby and from there evacuated to Cairns on the *MV Malaita*.⁹

Back at Salamaua, six RAAF ground signallers remained to man the wireless station. Five or six local NGVR men under the command of Sergeant Bob Phillips also stayed to help keep the airfield open. It was an important staging point for the RAAF and on most days a number of aircraft were refuelled from drums.¹⁰ A second air raid on 1 February damaged those houses still standing on the isthmus but left the airfield alone. Nine enemy bombers attacked Wau on the same day, six bombs hitting the airfield.

The local men stationed at Salamaua were part of the NGVR, which had detachments at most of the main centres of population in New Guinea. At this early stage of the war the NGVR came under the command of the 8th Military District, headquartered in Port Moresby. Given the total lack of preparedness by the Australian high command for the speed of the Japanese invasion of the New Guinea mainland, the NGVR would provide the only armed resistance to the Japanese on the ground during most of the first half of 1942. By July 1940 the NGVR comprised 520 men, 226 of them based at Rabaul, 151 at Wau, 85 at Bulolo, 39 at Salamaua and 19 at Madang. It was by no means a well-trained fighting force, having suffered considerable turnover in men due to enlistments in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and having to make do

with obsolescent First World War era weaponry and locally tailored clothing.¹¹

The NGVR detachment from Wau joined the Salamaua detachment at Mubo, a meagre village midway between the two centres. This small company of men prepared to fight a guerrilla war from the hinterland when the expected Japanese invasion came. Another company had formed at Lae with similar aims and both units would also ensure that no major facilities were left for the Japanese when they came. On 2 February instructions were received that Wau airfield was to remain intact for the time being, but would probably have to be destroyed in a few days time, either by ploughing or flooding.¹²

The instructions to the Salamaua invading force were:

1. The whole strength of the Horii Unit will occupy the airfield. Then, after the assault on Salamaua township, the unit will mop up an area ranging approximately 10 kilometres (to an appropriate point along the roads) centring on Salamaua and including the promontory around Kela and the area to the west of the airfield.
2. The main strength of the unit will guard Salamaua township, Kela, and the airfield.
3. After mopping-up operations in the designated areas has been completed, the force will as soon as possible hand the garrison over to the Tomita Unit of the navy and return to Rabaul.¹³

An RAAF Hudson aircraft, piloted by Flying Officer Alfred Hermes, spotted the Japanese invasion convoy on the afternoon of 7 March while returning to Salamaua after a reconnaissance flight to Rabaul.¹⁴ The Japanese troops invaded before dawn on 8 March, landing at Lae with naval troops and at Salamaua with a battalion from Major-General Tomitaro Horii's South Seas Force.¹⁵ The first troops landed at 0155 on the east side of the Salamaua isthmus but, because their motors could not be heard over the sound of the surf, they were not noticed until the landing craft touched the shore.¹⁶

The NGVR rifleman, Jim Keenan, on guard duty at the isthmus, had noticed the landing ships as they approached shore. 'Hey, come and have a look, this looks like ships out here', he called out to the rifleman in charge. They took off for the aerodrome in a blacked out car with Rifleman Garth Rayner at the wheel as the enemy landing barges approached the shoreline.¹⁷

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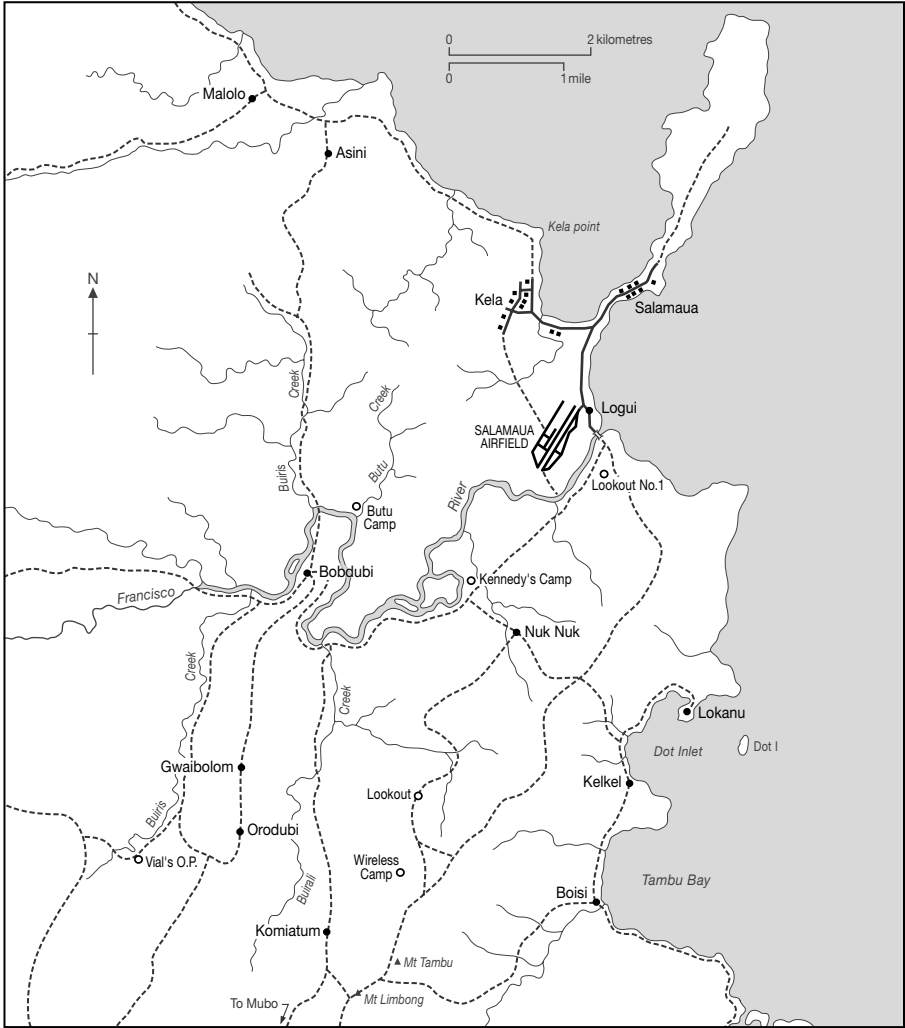
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Captain Allan Cameron had served with the 2/22nd Battalion during the Japanese invasion of Rabaul and had managed to escape by boat. He had only arrived at Salamaua the previous day and was the senior officer present. Word of the landing was called through to Cameron at the airfield by phone, and he told the pilot of the RAAF Hudson on the airfield to take off with the aid of kerosene-soaked rags laid down by the NGVR to act as a flare path. The plane was gone and the flare path extinguished by 0205. Then at 0210 Cameron sent a small group of NGVR men under Sergeant Bob Phillips to blow the petrol dumps south and southeast of the airfield. Rifleman Horace Harris was one of the men involved. Sergeant Hilary Farr had earlier woken him with the words, 'Quick Lockie, the Japs have landed'. As he ran across the aerodrome he noticed the 44-gallon fuel drums were still intact, so he bayoneted some of them and threw a match on the fuel. Though the fuel caught fire, not all the drums went up.¹⁸

Captain Cameron, with his runner, Lance-Corporal Tom Brannelly, and NGVR Riflemen Fred Leather and Bill Hanrahan in tow, waited for the Japanese troops to arrive on the aerodrome. A party of 30 Japanese, led by their officer, approached along the road at the eastern side of the drome while another party moved into the buildings on the other side. Small-arms fire broke out from the direction of Kela. Brannelly, who had served with Cameron at Rabaul, headed towards the Japanese party on the road, dropping down into a roadside drain as he first saw and then heard the approaching officer speaking to his men. At point-blank range Brannelly shot him and then scampered off to rejoin Cameron and the other two men behind a house. The plunger for the airfield demolitions was there, and was depressed as the Japanese came rushing up to the house. The explosion sounded dull, but this was no time to wait around and ponder. Leather followed Brannelly into the grass, while Cameron and Hanrahan headed first towards one of the hangars and then to the river. In final defiance, Cameron fired his .45 pistol at the pursuing enemy.¹⁹

The small remaining group made their way across the Francisco River by the swing bridge near the river mouth. Hilary Farr had stayed back, waiting for them to cross, and as they did so Freddie Leather cut the support ropes with an axe. Soon thereafter the Japanese troops arrived at the far bank.²⁰ Farr remained in order to round up any other men. One of them was Rifleman Jim Currie, waiting for Rifleman Gordon Kinsey to come back from the observation post. 'Come on, Jim! We are going now, the bridge is down!' Farr told him. Currie went looking for Kinsey as Farr



The Salamaua area

added, ‘Don’t come back through this camp. Make for Kennedy’s Camp and if nobody’s there, make for Komiatum’. Currie and Kinsey were still in the area at daylight, collecting the telescope from the observation post and destroying the logbook there. They watched the Japanese operation continue, as six landing barges moved troops ashore from the anchored mother ship. Two Japanese warships stood by off the coast and a larger cruiser was visible on the horizon. Currie and Kinsey did not linger and,



View over Salamaua from Nuk Nuk observation post, August 1942. The cleared area of the airfield is directly below the isthmus. The Francisco River runs across the photograph below the airfield. Unfortunately the publication of this photograph compromised the operation of the OP. Photograph by Damien Parer. (AWM I27963)

after a stop at Kennedy's Camp, the weary duo reached Komiatum around 1700, joining up with a group who had pulled back along Kela Ridge.²¹

Five RAAF No 32 Squadron Hudson bombers, staging out of Horn Island, attacked the Salamaua anchorage on 9 March. There were now two Japanese transports anchored there, and Squadron Leader Deryck Kingwell reportedly hit an 8000-ton transport that was 'seen burning and listing'.²² This would have been the *Yokohama Maru*, the ship suffering slight damage and 11 casualties.²³ A follow-up raid on the same day by four United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) B-17 bombers out of Townsville failed to locate the target.²⁴

The Japanese landings elicited a more serious response from the United States Navy on the following day, 10 March. There were no more

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A similar view over Salamaua in 2006. The airfield site is now overgrown and the Francisco River is clearly visible. The isthmus is frequently cut by high seas. Photograph by Steve Darmody.

important naval vessels in the Allied armoury in early 1942 than the two US aircraft carriers, *Yorktown* and *Lexington*. The Salamaua landings seriously concerned the Allied command, and Vice Admiral Wilson Brown junior, commander of the *Lexington* taskforce, TF-11, had been ordered to attack the landing. The easiest means of attack was from the north but that would put the US carriers within range of Rabaul and the Japanese aircraft based there. Admiral Brown's *Lexington* taskforce had tried to attack Rabaul two days earlier but his carrier group had been spotted and attacked.

Now joined by the *Yorktown* taskforce, TF-17, Admiral Brown took his combined force down around the eastern tip of New Guinea and launched his attack from the south, coast to coast across the mountains. It was a unique approach for a naval air strike but, given the circumstances and the need to ensure the safety of the carriers from Rabaul-based strike aircraft, most astute. The launching point for the strike, some 70 kilometres off the southern Papuan coast, was well out of range of any enemy counter strike.²⁵

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10 THE BATTLE FOR WAU

However, the Owen Stanley Range was some 3900 metres high and would test the performance of the fully loaded strike aircraft. The 12 ageing Devastator torpedo bombers from the *Lexington*, each carrying a weighty Mk 13 torpedo, would have the greatest struggle and would need to use a 2250-metre pass through the range. The problem was that cloud would close the pass after 1000 hours, so the raid had to be over by then. The 13 Devastators from *Yorktown*, with a lighter load of two 500-pound bombs, could fly at a higher altitude. Sixty-one Douglas Dauntless dive-bombers and 18 Grumman Wildcat fighters completed the strike force, 104 aircraft in all.

Commander William Ault, from the *Lexington's* air group, had flown to Port Moresby prior to the raid to get a briefing on the route across the ranges, as well as weather data. He now positioned his scout plane over the gap in the range, between Mount Lawson and Mount Chapman, confirming the mountain pass was free of cloud.²⁶ Lieutenant Commander 'Jimmy' Thach, the commander of the *Yorktown's* Wildcat fighter squadron, also circled over the pass, watching the heavily loaded Devastators trying to reach sufficient altitude to traverse the mountain range. The *Lexington* torpedo squadron (VL-14) chief was Commander Jimmy Brett, a former glider pilot, who now used that experience to get his planes high enough to pass through the gap. Brett found an area clear of jungle and, circling above it, he found a thermal updraft that gave him enough altitude to get through the pass. His squadron followed.²⁷

Lae was the first target. The Dauntlesses dive-bombed three ships, sinking the 8600-ton armed merchant cruiser *Kongo Maru* and forcing the 5400-ton converted minelayer *Tenyo Maru* to beach off the end of the airfield.²⁸ The transport *Kokai Maru* was also damaged. One of the Dauntlesses was shot down over Huon Gulf, the only US casualty from the raid. Off Salamaua, the *Lexington's* Devastator torpedo bombers attacked two transports at anchor, followed up by attacks by more Dauntless dive-bombers. The 6143-ton *Yokohama Maru* was sunk, probably by bombs, as the Mk 13 torpedoes were notoriously unreliable at this stage of the war. Eight USAAF B-17 bombers and two RAAF Hudsons also bombed Salamaua. A minesweeper, the No 2 *Tama Maru*, was also sunk during the air attacks and a number of other vessels were damaged.²⁹ Moving back along the track to Wau, the men retreating from Salamaua could hear the sounds of the bombing raid: 'Although we must be 18–20 mile away by direct line, we can feel the ground vibrate with the explosions'.³⁰