The Battle for Wau
NEW GUINEA’S FRONTLINE 1942–1943

The Battle for Wau presents for the first time the full story of the early World War II conflicts in New Guinea, from the landing of the Japanese at Salamaua in March 1942 to their defeat at Wau in February 1943.

The story unfolds with the early commando operations in Salamaua, leading to the burning of Wau, the clashes around Mubo, the Japanese convoy to Lae and the United States air operation to Wau. The book climaxes with the fortitude of Captain Sherlock’s outnumbered company. Desperately fighting an enemy regiment debouching from the rugged unguarded ranges to the east, Sherlock’s men fought to hold Wau airfield open for the arrival of vital reinforcements.

Phillip Bradley draws on the recollections of over 70 veterans from the campaign and on his own first-hand knowledge of the region. The commanders, soldiers, carriers and airmen are all given a voice in this book, whether Australian, Japanese, American or New Guinean.

Phillip Bradley holds a Bachelor of Science degree. He is the author of On Shaggy Ridge and writes for Wartime and After the Battle magazines.
To VX 3561 Captain Wilfrid ‘Bill’ Sherlock,
Officer Commanding, A Company, 2/6th Battalion,
Second Australian Imperial Force

‘Go tell the Australians’
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Foreword

by Peter Ryan

The battle for Wau? Wau? How many Australians recall even the name of this old goldfields township, lost in the high mountains of New Guinea’s main island? Yet, for a whole year during the Second World War, Wau and its surrounding hills and jungles were the stage on which was played a crucial act in the great Pacific drama of Japan’s defeat.

Throughout 1942, heavily outnumbered Australian guerrillas fought a campaign of savage stealth to keep Wau and its valuable airstrip in our hands.

The climax, in January–February 1943, saw a fresh and strong enemy special force launch an all-out assault on the town. The Japanese were beaten by seasoned Australian commandos, and by fresh infantry troops airlifted in at the last moment. It was one of the ‘narrowest squeaks’ of Australia’s military history, and offers Phillip Bradley a challenging theme; no one who has read his history of another New Guinea campaign, On Shaggy Ridge, will be surprised at the full grasp and meticulous exposition he shows with The Battle for Wau.

Bradley has read widely in the Australian, US and Japanese published material; he has studied those most immediate and authentic sources, the unit war diaries, with the intelligence reports and other riches stored in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra; he has digested the individual unit histories, in which largely the men themselves tell the stories of their own service; he has interviewed scores of soldiers who survived. And he has that most basic of all qualifications for any writer whose theme is battle: he has recently worn out almost as much of his own bootleather on the tracks around Wau as any soldier who fought there sixty years ago.

Bradley’s book recovers for Australian memory the crucial importance of the 1942–43 campaigning of Kanga Force which, based on Wau, extended over the length of the Bulolo Valley, and into the hinterlands of the Japanese coastal bases of Lae and Salamaua.
The Japanese invaders had invested heavily in the troops and air capacity they had established at Lae–Salamaua. They well knew from Kanga Force’s patrolling and raids that the brooding swamps and mountains behind them contained some Australians, but they never guessed how few. So they took no chances, and tied down forces that might otherwise have been applied with critical effect elsewhere in the Pacific – say in Guadalcanal, or at Milne Bay in Papua.

The Wau campaign positively bristles with novel (or forgotten) themes, and part of our debt to Bradley is that he displays them, afresh or anew, for our fascination. For example, for six months in 1942, Kanga Force’s guerrillas were the only Allied troops conducting offensive land operations against the Japanese in the whole of General MacArthur’s vast South-West Pacific Area.

It was to Wau that the first airlift of an entire army unit was attempted – successfully – when the 2/5th Independent Company flew in from Port Moresby. The technique prospered and was developed, and soon the much-enlarged Wau–Bulolo–Salamaua–Lae operations were being wholly supplied by air from Port Moresby, hundreds of kilometres away. These were the glory-days of that grand old aerial warhorse the Dakota (or DC-3).

Here too were sharpened the vital skills of coordination between the land, sea and air arms. It is true that the Australians bore the burden of the land fighting – the deaths and wounds, malaria and other diseases, exposure, exhaustion and hunger. But without the US Navy and the US Army Air Forces, Kanga Force would have been helpless.

There are ‘close-ups’ of the men in action in the green jungle twilight; of their courage in attack, their pugnacious resolution in withdrawal, the tenderness and grace with which they cared for their wounded. Bradley does not conceal the weakness of the Australian local command – in the early months an incompetent lieutenant colonel, who was followed by a complacent brigadier – but his criticisms are well based. The penultimate paragraph of the author’s text conveys the basic truth: this campaign of appalling difficulties was won by well-trained and determined soldiers serving under experienced and respected officers.

As a soldier who served in the Kanga Force area for over a year, I offer the opinion that Phillip Bradley has given us all a very fine book indeed.
Acknowledgements

To those veterans of the Wau campaign who helped me in the writing of this book. All are noted in the bibliography. Previous outstanding work by Andy Pirie, David Hay, Syd Trigellis-Smith and Ron Garland in contacting veterans for their unit histories was also of great benefit. Dudley McCarthy’s volume of the official history also provided an excellent framework.

To the Australian Army for their support of this series of books and for ensuring that funds are made available for the extensive research required. To David Horner for his unwavering support throughout, and to the staff at the Army History Unit who facilitated the maps and many of the photographs used. Keith Mitchell’s work on the maps was outstanding. To Mark Johnston for his research grant support and his editing help. To Peter Stanley for his research grant support and encouragement; the book should help to fill his ‘Green Hole’. To Peter Ryan for his support and encouragement and for writing a fine Foreword. To Elaine Sherlock for her kind assistance and the use of her records. To Sava Pinney for permission to use her father’s original diary transcripts; his words are an inspiration.

To the staff at the Australian War Memorial research centre for their help and patience with my requests and for the unit war diary digitisation project, a wonderful research resource. To Stephen Bullard for his Senshi Sōsho and Okabe Detachment translations. To the National Archives of Australia for the digitisation of RAAF and service personnel records. To Michael Caulfield and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs for producing the Australians at War Film film archive.

To Donna Harvey Hall for her assistance and hospitality in Wau, and to the villagers of Kaisenik, Mubo and Komiatum for their interest and help. To Martin and Ray for their guidance and endeavour on the trek from Wau down to Salamaua, and to Steve Darmody for sharing the experience. To John Douglas and Ian Priestley for their hospitality in Port Moresby and Lae. To Justin Taylan and Michael Claringbould for...
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Finally, to the staff at Cambridge University Press for their support and to Jean Dunn for the professional polish of the final production.

Phillip Bradley
Lennox Head
The grass-covered, rounded lower slopes of the Australian Snowy Mountain Range outside Mansfield have an eerie similarity to the kunai foothills around Wau. This was in my thoughts as I made my way to a meeting with Elaine Sherlock to find out more about her late husband.

On the strong wooden table in the dining room, with past family members looking down from their frames along the wall, Captain Bill Sherlock’s history was laid out for me. From the childhood photos and the newspaper cuttings of his rowing and athletic prowess, I learned more of this man. Dominant among the ephemera of his life were the letters and notes relating to his role in the critical action at Wandumi Ridge, among those kunai foothills overlooking Wau. There were handwritten letters from General Herring, Colonel Wood, Colonel Starr, Major Muir, Captain Gullett and Captain Lyndon among others.

There was much to peruse, but before I had finished Mrs Sherlock wanted to show me another collection of books, letters and photographs. ‘These are my father’s records’, she told me. Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest Knox-Knight had been a battalion commander in the First World War, killed at the head of his men during the decisive August 1918 offensive. He would have been proud of the son-in-law he never met.