

MILITARY HISTORY AND 1943: A
PERSPECTIVE 70 YEARS ON

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This book is a sibling of last year’s production *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*. That book focused on Australia’s first traumatic year of the Pacific War from the fall of Singapore until the victory in Papua in January 1943. It demonstrated that while a Japanese invasion of Australia may have been possible it was never probable and that ultimately the country was not under direct threat. Instead, stretched to their limits, the Japanese had decided in February 1942 to isolate Australia. This meant that the battles of 1942 were to be fought in the air and sea approaches to the Australian continent and in the islands of the archipelago to Australia’s north. It is here that the security of Australia was achieved.

The events of 1942 had shown that Australia, with its small population and limited industrial base, needed to develop a close strategic partnership with a global power. When Great Britain failed to be able to meet this need in 1942 Australia was fortunate that the United States was both capable and willing to fill the void. In partnership with the United States, Australia’s Army, Navy and Air Force had defeated the Japanese attempts to isolate Australia during 1942. At the dawn of a new year – 1943 – Australian and US forces in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) would plan and launch offensive operations to push the Japanese far away from Australia’s shores and to strike at the heart of Japanese military power in the South Pacific.

This book is about Australia’s role in the SWPA during 1943. Throughout this important phase of the Pacific War Australia would

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make major contributions to both her own security and to the defeat of the Japanese via the provision of key air, naval and ground forces to a US-led coalition. This coalition would decisively defeat the Japanese based at Rabaul during the year. Australia would be called upon to forward deploy her forces in offensive operations in the islands to our north; a proposition that had been almost impossible to conceive only 12 months earlier.

At the beginning of 1942 the bulk of the elite, all volunteer, Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was still serving in North Africa. The 8th Division AIF was staring at defeat in Singapore and the overall military situation for the Allies was grim. Back home the Australian Military Forces were still trying to recover from decades of austerity while at the same time providing men and resources to Europe, the Middle East and Malaya. By February 1942, with the collapse of resistance in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies and the bombing of Darwin, Australia had reached its most perilous point.

A year later the situation was radically different. The tide had turned in the Allies' favour. The 'Japanese spearhead . . . [was] blunted at [Coral Sea and] Midway and broken at Guadalcanal [and Papua].'¹ With the Japanese advance across the Pacific stopped, the bulk of the AIF, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) returned to Australia from the Middle East and with the broad, sweeping reforms of 1942 in place, the nation's military forces were restructured to take the fight to the enemy. These moves along with the provision of large-scale US reinforcements to the SWPA meant that during 1943 the Allies were able to assemble substantial air and naval assets to project force across the vast distances of this theatre. This enabled Australia's military to fight major expeditionary operations against the Japanese in New Guinea and its surrounding islands. The role of this book is to investigate and understand the experience of Australia's military forces in this challenge.

In doing so it will endeavour to outline the strategic challenges that the Allies faced in 1943 while focusing on Australia's own unique state of affairs. It provides the context to Australia's experience by detailing the partnership with the United States and the role of the theatre's strategic commander, General Douglas MacArthur, as well as providing insights into Australian war strategy, Allied strategic objectives and intentions in the Pacific, Japanese strategy in the South Pacific, the role of the RAN and RAAF as well as the operations that encompassed the 1943 campaign in New Guinea.

WHY 'THE LIBERATION OF NEW GUINEA'?

The title of this book deserves some explanation. *Australia 1943: The Liberation of New Guinea* is about the 'long' history of Australia's 1943 campaign in the SWPA and the 'short' history of the liberation of New Guinea. It is long in that while the major operations for this campaign were conducted during 1943 it was well into 1944 before they drew to a close. It is short in that it details one of the three campaigns (the most decisive one) for the liberation of this territory from Japanese control. These long and short elements can be explained by the nature of the region's political geography and the vagrancies of time in military campaigns.

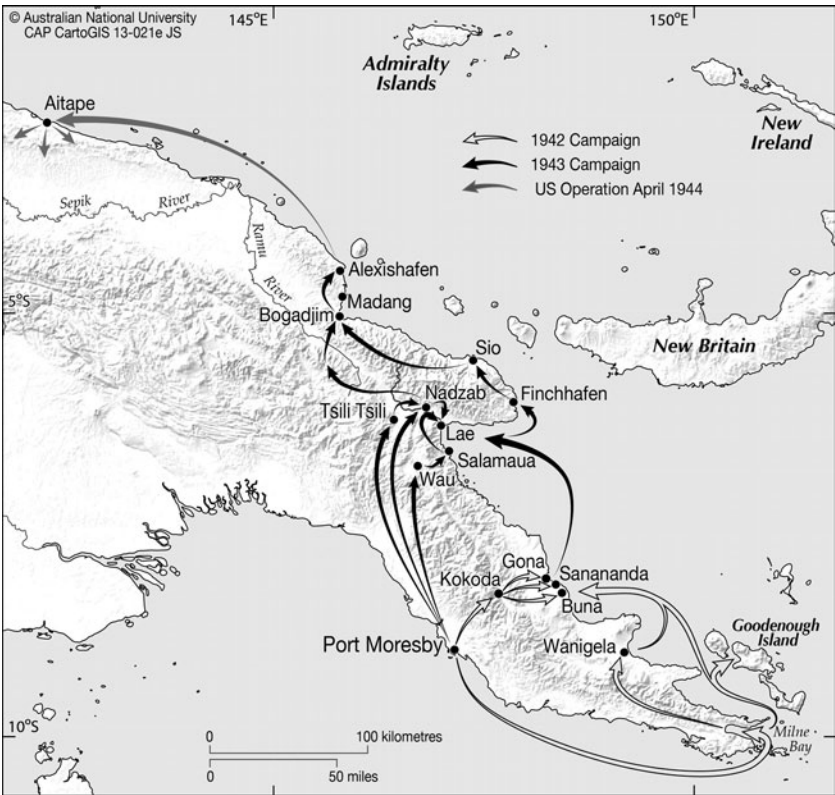
Political geography is critical to understanding the campaigns in the SWPA during the Second World War. The dominating land mass in Australia's operations during 1943 was, as the US naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison described it, that 'half bird and half reptile . . . prehistoric monster'² of an island to Australia's north known as New Guinea.

New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. Today the western half of the island is known as Irian Jiya Barat (or West Papua) and forms a critical province within the Republic of Indonesia. The eastern half of the island, with which most Australians are more familiar, consists of the independent nation state of Papua New Guinea (PNG). While many Australians recognise this division few would be familiar with the political geography of the island during the Second World War.

At this time the western portion of the island (Irian Jiya) was part of the Dutch East Indies. The eastern half of the island (PNG) was further divided into two parts. The south and south-eastern portion was the territory of Papua where the major campaign of the SWPA was fought in 1942. This area includes Port Moresby, Milne Bay, the Kokoda Trail and Buna, Gona and Sanananda. To the north of Papua lay the territory known as New Guinea where the Australian operations in 1943 would be undertaken and that is the focus of this book.

As mentioned this is a long history of the 1943 campaign in New Guinea. For, while most of the operations took place during 1943, military campaigns do not tend to confine themselves to the niceties of the Gregorian calendar. The capture of Madang in New Guinea, which signifies the conclusion of the 1943 campaign in New Guinea and the SWPA, did not occur until 24 April 1944.

It is also a short history in that while the fall of Madang provides a clear culmination point for the end of the 1943 campaign it did not



Map I Australian operations in Papua, 1942, and mainland New Guinea, 1943

lead to the full liberation of the territory of New Guinea. The second and third campaigns would begin in late 1944 and would continue until the war ended in August 1945. The finer points of political geography and military strategy in this region provide an explanation to this anomaly.

The Australian mandated territory of New Guinea at this point in time was not restricted to a portion of the world’s second biggest island. The New Guinea territory unified under administrative control of the Australian government at this time also included the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago – New Britain, New Ireland and the Admiralties – as well as those of the northern Solomon Islands of Buka and Bougainville; areas that remained largely under Japanese occupation at the time of the capture of Madang.

These areas had been the focus of operations by US military forces from both the US Navy’s South Pacific Area Command (SOPAC) as well

as US forces in the SWPA during the 1943 campaign. Five months after the fall of Madang, US forces at Cape Gloucester in New Britain and in Bougainville would hand over their bases to Australia's military forces. From this point onwards the Australians would fight a holding action on New Britain and a long, slow campaign to eliminate the Japanese from Bougainville. They were to be boosted by the 6th Australian Division in 1945, which was tasked with the elimination of a pocket of Japanese isolated around Wewak on the mainland. These final campaigns, which lasted until the end of the war, is one of the reasons why the Australian Army battle honour The Liberation of New Guinea is awarded to units who fought across this region during 1943–45.

While the complexities of the geopolitics and military operations are enough to cause confusion to both the public and historians alike, the Australian Army has also managed to obscure the issue even more through its complicated and confusing organisational structure. During the war the major Australian Army headquarters that controlled operations in this area during 1942–44 was known as 'New Guinea Force' (later First Australian Army), irrespective of whether operations were being conducted in the territories of Papua or New Guinea. This is also reflective of the language of the diggers, who saw no need to distinguish one piece of jungle on the island from another via a seemingly arbitrary line on an outdated map.

After the war, in an endeavour that clouded matters further, the Army awarded the battle honour The Liberation of New Guinea to units that had served in the mandated territories only *after* 18 September 1943; effectively cutting out recognition to the units that served in the first nine months of the 1943 campaign. This is a bizarre and arbitrary distinction. As the Australian War Memorial's website states, this means that 'for no apparent reason, the [battle] honour does not encompass [two of the most decisive operations in the 1943 campaign] Wau–Salamaua or Nadzab–Lae . . . and there appears no consistency in the manner [in which this honour] was awarded to the units that participated in the[se] . . . operations'.³

In terms of military strategy there is little doubt that the decisive campaign occurred in New Guinea between January 1943 and April 1944. Thereafter the main battlefront of the war would skip past New Guinea. These latter campaigns on both the mainland and the surrounding islands were fought principally to clear up Japanese outposts in order to free Australian troops for both participation in the planned invasion of Japan in 1945–46 and to release men from the military to support the war economy.⁴ In that most horrible of military terms, and one that is often

completely at odds with the intensity and nature of the fighting, the Australian operations in New Guinea during 1944–45 are more often than not described as ‘mopping up’.

Geopolitical and campaign distinctions aside, the capture of Madang represents a critical moment in the history of Australia’s role in the Pacific War. It was both the culmination point of Australia’s largest and most successful military campaign and the last time that Australia would have a significant impact on the strategic direction of the war in the SWPA. It was at Madang that the Australian Army would forfeit to the Americans its predominant role in operations in the SWPA.

From this moment on General Douglas MacArthur’s US military forces would take full control of the drive to, and liberation of, the Philippines. The capture of Madang in many ways stands as a clear demarcation point between combined US–Australian operations that served to liberate Australian mandated territories from the Japanese and the US drive north to free their former colonial empire in the Pacific.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: 1942–1943

This volume, with its focus on military operations in the SWPA during 1943, is designed specifically as a companion the 2012 text *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*. Like its predecessor this book brings together a range of expert historians on the Second World War. It is focused on bridging the gap between readability and scholarly rigour. While designed to provide a coherent story of Australia’s 1943 campaign in New Guinea the chapters are also, where possible, self-contained to allow the reader to approach them in order of interest, if so desired. Such an approach entails some degree of overlap between chapters, but not so much as to remove the primary focus of the work. If read from start to finish the text provides a coherent and comprehensive story of this critical period in Australian military history.

Like *Australia 1942* the focus is mainly on the Australian experience of war, but in order to provide context and depth of understanding it includes perspectives from beyond Australia. While both are military histories *Australia 1942* has a much broader scope than this volume. It speaks of social, political and cultural interactions in Australia in order to contextualise the events of 1942 and to provide a broad overview of the changes during this time to Australian society. For *Australia 1943* the focus is much more centred on military operations and strategy. The broader context is provided by an examination of Allied and Japanese

strategy in the Pacific as well as the operations undertaken by US forces in the SOPAC and the SWPA. It is hoped that this context will provide a firm platform for understanding the role and importance of the Australian operations in New Guinea and the surrounding region. This close focus on military events does not seek to deny the critical importance of the home front. Rather it is an acknowledgement that many of the major policy and social reforms in Australia's war effort occurred in 1942 and that 1943 was a year of execution and implementation. While major decisions in the realms of politics and Australian strategy are covered, the aim is not to provide a definitive account of all areas of Australia's wartime experience. There is more than enough scope to write a dozen books on such aspects of Australia's war effort and the editor hopes to cover a number of these critical topics in future projects.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND AIM

While a number of offensive operations had taken place in 1942, the broad Allied strategic posture during this year had been defensive. In 1943 the major campaigns in the South and Southwest Pacific were both operationally and strategically offensive. They were the culmination of plans laid in 1942 that had been disrupted by the Japanese military.

For example, MacArthur planned to establish an airfield on the northern shore of Papua at Buna in mid-1942. His orders for Operation Providence were issued on 15 July 1942 with D-Day set for 3–5 August 1942. However, the Japanese had exactly the same idea and beat MacArthur to the punch by landing their forces at Giruwa, 4 kilometres from Buna, on 21 July 1942. This landing and the subsequent Japanese move across the Owen Stanley Range led to the Papuan Campaign and it was not until mid-January 1943 that the Australian and US forces were able to eliminate the Japanese in the area and secure the Buna airfield – some five months and thousands of casualties later than MacArthur intended.⁵

The 1943 Allied campaign against the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul is neither well-known nor understood in the historiography. In Australia these battles are overshadowed by the epic struggle along the Kokoda Trail in 1942 that, along with the fall of Singapore and the subsequent prisoner-of-war experience, dominates Australian memory of the Pacific War. In both the United States and Japan this campaign is generally overshadowed by the titanic struggles for the Philippines, Okinawa and Iwo Jima that occurred in 1944–45.

This neglect was apparent soon after the end of war. When the first histories started to appear, the focus fell clearly onto the events of 1942 and 1944–45. It is a trend that has continued in the historiography of the Pacific War ever since. As Vincent O'Hara notes in the introduction to the 2010 edition of Samuel Eliot Morison's sixth volume of his history of US Naval Operations in the Second World War, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier: 22 July 1942 – 1 May 1944*, this time and place in the Pacific War:

is [the] history of a shadowy mid-period of the war fought in the distant southwest Pacific between the victories at Guadalcanal and Midway and the climactic actions in the Philippines Sea and off Leyte, a period that many historians skip or summarize, treating it as if nothing much had happened.⁶

This is an unfortunate occurrence, for, as O'Hara argues, 'perhaps this campaign receives so little notice precisely because so much actually did happen'.⁷

Morison's account of US naval operations during this period as well as those by the official historians of the Australian and US armies in the 1950s and 1960s provided the first detailed assessment of these actions. While these volumes are required reading for any serious scholar of the Pacific War they are exceptionally long, detailed and often dense accounts. They also often roam widely, detailing events at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. In addition they are often not written in a style that is readily accessible to the public and at times their scholarship is dated.

For the Australian operations in 1943 the quantity of works is small and the quality is mixed. The best of these titles include Professor David Horner's ground-breaking accounts of Australian strategy and operations, most notably his works: *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945*, *Blamey: The Commander-in-Chief* and *Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy*. At the operational level John Coates's excellent *Bravery over Blunder* analyses the 9th Australian Division's operations during 1943, especially the amphibious landing at Finschhafen. Peter Dean's biography of Blamey's senior operations staff officer Lieutenant-General Sir Frank Horton Berryman, *The Architect of Victory*, provides a detailed appraisal of the planning of these operations and the conduct of the I (later II) Corps operations in the Huon Peninsula. While at the tactical level Phillip

Bradley’s work has provided a window into life in combat at the section, platoon and company level, through his works *The Battle for Wau*, *To Salamaua* and *On Shaggy Ridge* and his sweeping overview of the New Guinea campaigns *Hell’s Battlefield*. Many other works by journalists, ex-military officers, academics and enthusiasts have covered elements of Australia’s operations, yet few have focused specifically on the operations in 1943. In the works listed here, and in most others, the events of 1943 are either a small part of a much wider study or focus exclusively on only one narrow action, battle or element of the campaign.

The most recent attempt to detail the events of the 1943 campaign in the SWPA in a single volume was in 2003 when the Australian Army History Unit published a volume of conference proceedings: *The Foundations of Victory 1943–44*. This work provides broad coverage of this period with some excellent papers on strategy, operations, tactics, memory and historiography. However, it does not consider the individual operations that constitute the 1943 campaign in New Guinea, nor does it provide detail on US operations in the SWPA or SOPAC. This volume, derived from a conference on land power, also lacks broader perspectives on the role of air and naval power. To be fair, it was never the intention of that volume of papers to provide a comprehensive coverage of the 1943 campaign in New Guinea. As the editors, Jeffery Grey and Peter Dennis, note, the ‘volume provides a snapshot of the state of current knowledge about the war in New Guinea, and suggests at the same time the many areas that await further research and publication’.⁸

This volume is an attempt to take up these suggestions and fill in some of the gaps in the historiography by bringing together aspects of research on 1943 that have not generally been seen in one volume before and to provide a number of fresh perspectives on this period of Australia’s wartime history. As such, this work aims to fill some of the cracks left in the historiography of this campaign. It does so while offering the first one-volume, operationally focused study of Australia’s campaign in the SWPA in 1943 that encompasses a contextualised framework of strategy in the Pacific War;⁹ the roles of the major services and operations in the SOPAC and SWPA; and a consideration of Japanese plans and strategy.

CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE

It was never the intention of this work to have a single purpose, such as addressing one of the shortfalls in the historiography of the Pacific War,

or to commemorate the 70th anniversary of these battles. While these issues, or the production of history itself, are enough of a rationale to justify writing this book, the significance of this work is also underscored by its relevance to the contemporary era.

Seventy years on from 1943 one could expect that these operations would have long been relegated to the dustbin of military irrelevance and that any lessons for the modern-day Australian Defence Force (ADF) would have long since passed. Yet this is not the case. While in the current strategic environment no one expects Australia to fight a major global conflict in the islands to the nation's north in the foreseeable future, the region remains exceptionally important to Australia. In addition, while the last 70 years have seen some dramatic changes in military technology they are not so significant as to render 1943 obsolete. In the end, current Australian defence policy and military strategy can apply many of the lessons from this conflict to current and future thinking.

Fundamentally the nature of war remains the same and in most cases the character of war is yet to change so dramatically as to make the events of the Pacific War redundant. The geographical relevance of the archipelago to Australia's north remains enduring and the adoption of a maritime strategy by the ADF further cements this campaign's relevance. It means many of the lessons from 1943 endure.

Furthermore, the basic tenets of ground, jungle, amphibious, air and naval warfare remain as relevant today as they did 70 years ago. While technology may have seen Super Hornets replace Kittyhawks the four fundamental roles of airpower – strike, interdiction, transport and supply, and control of the air – remain as relevant and applicable today as they were in the Second World War. In amphibious operations the idea of projecting force into distant operational areas was used extensively by the US and Australian Navies during the Pacific War and is one of the current focuses of the ADF. While helicopters may have added an extra dimension in terms of vertical assault, it should not be overlooked that such operations were exercised for the first time in the Pacific during 1943 through the use of airborne forces.

Technological innovations, such as the helicopter, have however led to changes in doctrine. In one critical area of amphibious operations the development of the helicopter has given rise to modern-day concepts, such as Ship-to-Objective Manoeuvre (STOM). STOM theoretically removes the notion of a build-up of military force on shore after an amphibious assault followed by a break-out to the objective. This notionally reduces or negates a period of 'operational pause' after the initial landing. However,