



From January to September 1943, Australian and American forces in Papua New Guinea fought a difficult and bitter battle with the Japanese Imperial Army for possession of Salamaua, a port town and commercial centre on the Huon Gulf on the island's northern coast. The main aim of these operations was to tie down Japanese troops that could otherwise be deployed in the defence of Lae, further north, where a major Allied landing was planned to take place in early

September. This was all part of Operation 'Elkton', later replaced by 'Cartwheel', the Allied grand design to isolate and neutralise the main Japanese supply base of Rabaul on New Britain. Most of the fighting at Salamaua took place in the incredibly difficult jungle country inland from the town, on hills and ridges flanking the valleys of the Bulolo river near Wau, the Buisaval river in the south-west, and the Francisco river leading to Salamaua itself.

THE BATTLE FOR SALAMAUA

Having captured the important supply base of Rabaul (see *After the Battle* No. 133) on January 23, 1942, the Japanese landed on the New Guinea mainland at the towns of Lae and Salamaua six weeks later on March 8. The Australian defenders, the local elements of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR), pulled back from both centres to defend the Bulolo Valley and Wau, which were expected to be the next Japanese objectives. In response to the Japanese landings, two US Navy aircraft carriers, *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, conducted an air raid across the Owen Stanley Range against Lae and Salamaua on March 10. Two transport vessels were sunk, delaying the planned Japanese amphibious operation against Port Moresby.

Even before the fall of Salamaua, a company of about 100 men from the NGVR had assembled at Mubo to oppose any Japanese move towards Wau and to observe the enemy base at Salamaua. The 250 commandos of the Australian 2/5th Independent Company were flown into Bulolo and Wau on May 23-24 and a month later on the night of June 28/29 the commandos raided Salamaua. Seven separate raiding parties reached their attack positions undetected due to detailed reconnaissance and the skills of the local NGVR guides. Japanese-occupied buildings were targeted using improvised blast bombs while a 3-inch mortar shelled Japanese positions along the

Salamaua isthmus. During the raid as many as 113 Japanese troops were killed for no Australian loss.

By Phil Bradley



Completely wrecked by Allied bombing during the campaign, although rebuilt after the war, Salamaua town never regained the same size or importance of pre-war days.



On July 21, 1942 about 130 Japanese naval troops with local guides advanced on the Australian outpost of Mubo. The Japanese force took heavy casualties on this occasion but when they returned on August 30, the Australians could offer little resistance. Though the Japanese did not move beyond Mubo, the Australian commander, Colonel Norman Fleay, panicked and withdrew from Wau, destroying much of the town as he went. However, anticipating that the operation across the Kokoda Trail (see *After the Battle* No. 137) to capture Port Moresby would succeed, the Japanese command saw no need to occupy Wau at this stage and three weeks later the Australians returned to the damaged town. The Australian command now recognised the strategic value of Wau and the Bulolo Valley, from which any future offensive to retake Salamaua and Lae would originate, and in October 1942 Major Fergus MacAdie's 2/7th Independent Company was flown to Wau.

Following the failure of the Kokoda campaign the Japanese command had also reassessed the importance of Wau. A five-ship convoy carrying Colonel Kohei Maruoka's 102nd Infantry Regiment, part of Lieutenant-General Hidemitsu Nakano's 51st Division, left Rabaul on the afternoon of January 5, 1943 heading for Lae. Before it was light on the morning of January 7, Flight Lieutenant David Vernon in a Catalina from No. 11 Squadron, RAAF, was able to drop two 250lb bombs on the *Nichiryu Maru*, killing 456 men and wounding another 85. Air attacks also damaged the *Myoko Maru*, which was deliberately run aground just east of Lae. However the majority of the 102nd Regiment had reached Lae and the Japanese Eighth Area Army's Chief-of-Staff reported that 'this will send chills through our conceited enemy'.

Meanwhile, 300 Australian commandos, supported by 400 native carriers, attacked the 200-strong Japanese garrison at Mubo. The Australian force was split into five separate parties spread out over three locations, each divided from the next by jungle and mountainous terrain. Though partially successful, lack of communication between the groups and poor command led to a withdrawal back to the Saddle to protect the main track to Wau.

When the first Japanese reports of the Mubo attack had reached Salamaua late on January 11, a fresh infantry company from the 102nd Regiment was immediately sent to

Right: Village dwellings still occupy the area between Mubo's former airfield and the lower slopes of Observation Hill.



AWM 127955

One of the first actions in the campaign was a raid by 63 Australian commandos of the 2/5th Independent Company on Salamaua on the night of June 28/29, 1942. No photos were taken during the raid so when Australian official war photographer and cine cameraman Damien Parer reached Mubo, an Australian outpost position 15 miles inland from Salamaua, in early August he asked the commandos to re-enact it. This frame from his footage shows them blowing up one of the native huts.



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Right: On January 8, 1943, Allied bombers attacked a ship convoy bringing the Japanese 102nd Infantry Regiment from Rabaul to Lae, the main port north of Salamaua. One of the aircraft involved in the attacks was a B-17 Fortress of the USAAF 65th Bomb Squadron (serial 41-9234), piloted by 1st Lieutenant Ray Dau. As it lined up for a bomb run on an escorting destroyer, the aircraft was struck by both anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighters. Dau's crippled plane headed for Wau, steadily losing altitude before crash-landing into the upward-sloping side of a ridge near Kaisenik, breaking its back and losing the tail turret as it hit the ground, then slewing to the right before coming to rest. As Dau later noted, the aircraft 'glided in on the side of a mountain at about 110 miles an hour and, as luck would have it, there were no trees, nothing but nice soft grass, so we slid along into a crash landing'. The surviving crew and the valuable bombsight were brought back to Wau by an Australian patrol.



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Mubo. Most of the company had reached the place by midday on January 13 and soon began attacking the Saddle area. Concerned at the prospect of being cut off, on January 17 Major MacAdie ordered his men to pull back from the Saddle along the Buisaval Track towards Skindiwai.

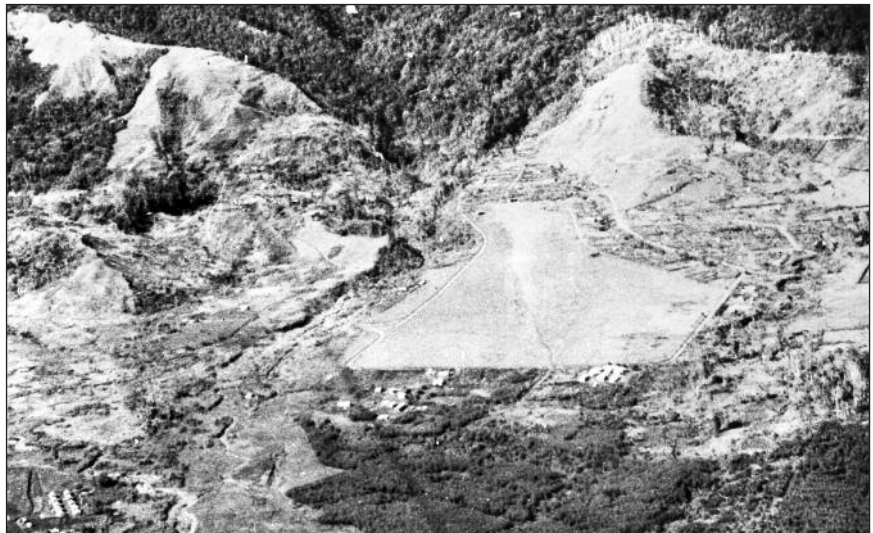
The Australians were also reinforcing the Wau area. Brigadier Murray Moten's 17th Brigade of the 6th Infantry Division, comprising the 2/5th, 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions, was ordered to Wau. However, troops could only be flown from Port Moresby to Wau while the passes through the Owen Stanley mountain range were clear of cloud. By January 18, on the same day that the Japanese had captured the heights above Mubo, the 2/6th Battalion reached Wau and was split up to cover the major routes of advance thereto. The strongest force, comprising two infantry companies and one independent company, covered the Buisaval Track, which was thought to be the most likely avenue of approach, as it was considered doubtful that the Japanese would advance from Mubo up the rugged Black Cat Track, given the difficulty of negotiating the Bitoi river gorge.

However, that was exactly the route the Japanese were now following until they branched off onto an old miner's track, later termed the Jap Track, which led through exceptionally rugged country to Wau. Two battalions of Japanese troops with attached engineers, some 1,500 men in all, moved unhindered towards a near-defenceless Wau and its precious airfield.

Captain Wilfrid 'Bill' Sherlock's A Company from the 2/6th Battalion had reached Wandumi Ridge, on the outskirts of Wau, on January 27. The company was less than half strength but had been bolstered by some 20 commandos from the 2/5th Independent Company. The first clashes between Australian and Japanese patrols came that same afternoon before the Japanese force began its attack on Wandumi Ridge on the morning of January 28. Though somewhat disoriented by the terrain and suffering from hunger, the Japanese had assembled over 1,000 men against less than 100 Australians defending the crucial ridge. However, the Japanese battalion attacking the feature was severely dislocated by the loss of its commander, Lieu-

Right: Wau airfield is one of the most challenging in Papua New Guinea as it slopes upwards to the mountain range behind. Landings could only take place uphill with no chance of going around while downhill take-offs struggled for lift. Though hardly used today, the airfield remains operational.

The aircraft still remains where it came down below Black Cat Pass, bleached of its colour over the years. The aircraft was originally designated to go to RAF Coastal Command and the latter's grey colour scheme and the RAF roundel and serial number FL461 had already been applied when it was diverted to the Pacific theatre where it was repainted.



AWM 014688

The early phase of the fighting evolved not so much around recapturing Salamaua as preventing the Japanese from capturing the inland town of Wau and its airfield, vital to the Australians as a forward base for bringing in supplies and troops. This picture of the airstrip was taken on March 3, 1943 by Australian official Department of Information cameraman Frank Bagnall.



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AWM 059001



That Wau and its airfield remained in Australian hands was primarily due to the dogged defence put up by A Company of the 2/6th Battalion under its indomitable commander Captain Wilfrid 'Bill' Sherlock. A farmer from Coleraine in Western Victoria, Sherlock had served as a platoon commander and company second-in-command in the North African and Greek campaigns before being put in command of A Company in late 1941.

tenant-Colonel Shosaku Seki. The other battalion got lost as it tried to find the Kaisenik bridge to cross the Bulolo river.

The Japanese troops then tried to bypass the ridge on either flank but the terrain and the Australian fire slowed their advance. Back in Wau Brigadier Moten waited with increasing anxiety for the 30 transport flights that were scheduled to arrive that day (January 28), but after the first four aircraft had landed at 0900 hours, the weather closed in across the mountains, preventing any more flights that day. Now Moten had to face an increasingly serious threat on his doorstep with what he had left in Wau, and that was very little.

Captain Sherlock's men continued to fight for the precious time that would keep the airfield in Australian hands for at least another day. Observers in Wau spotted 'long lines of Japs like a plague of ants' moving towards Wau. Another Australian platoon arrived on the ridge at 1400 as the Japanese pressure increased. At 1510 Sherlock signalled 'things very hot, any help sent may be too late, one platoon overrun, countering now'. He led a desperate counter-attack, grabbing a rifle and dashing past his men with fixed bayonet,



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Reinforced by some 20 commandos of the 2/5th Independent Company, Sherlock took up position on Wandumi Ridge on January 27 and for a full 24 hours held up the Japanese columns. This aerial photo shows how close the ridge was to Wau airfield.

inspiring them to follow him. The bayonet charge was too much for the Japanese on the knoll, one of Sherlock's men later observed that 'the Nips simply could not stand it . . . they all turned tail and shot back down the other side'.

A scratch company of about 180 men from the 2/5th Battalion was sent to reinforce Wandumi Ridge and as night fell Captain Sherlock pulled his remaining men back along the ridge towards the Bulolo, now in flood from increasing rainfall. With a rearguard in place, Sherlock reached the river early on January 29 but as his men crossed over via a fallen log, he was cut down by Japanese machine-gun fire. However, by holding the ridge for a crucial 24 hours, Sherlock's men had kept the Wau airfield in Australian hands.

The first of 59 transports to fly in that day of January 29 began landing at Wau at 0915. The aircraft landed in pairs before taxiing up to the top end of the strip to disembark the troops. The balance of the 2/5th Battalion



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As his force finally pulled back behind the Bulolo river early on the 29th, Sherlock was cut down by Japanese machine-gun fire. Though apparently recommended for a VC, he was only mentioned in dispatches for his outstanding leadership. Today, he lies buried at the Commonwealth war cemetery in Lae alongside all the other casualties from the Wau-Salamaua and later New Guinea campaigns.

AWM 128154

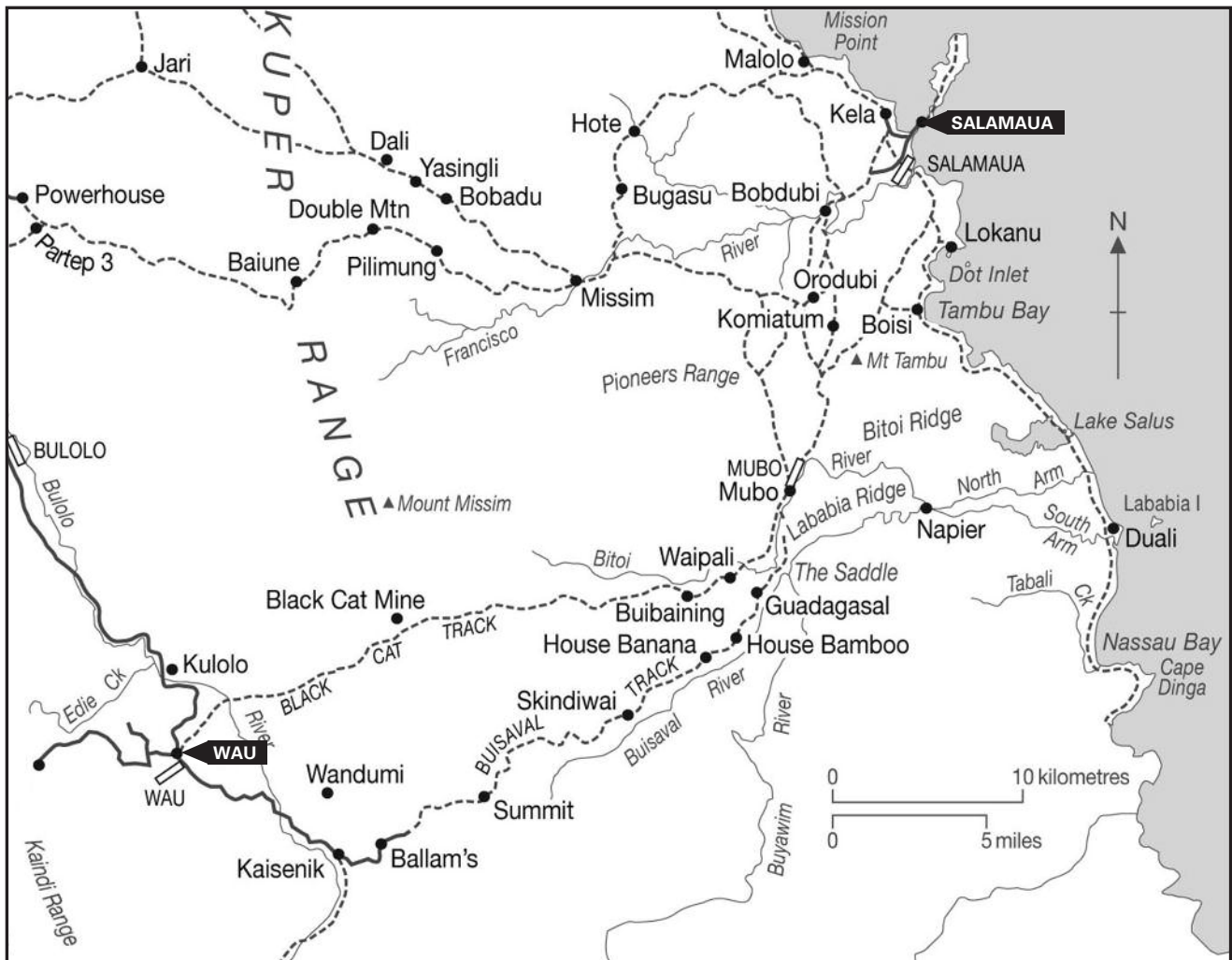


Left: On February 6, 1943, nine Japanese Kawasaki Ki-48 'Lily' light bombers escorted by 29 Nakajima Ki-43 'Oscar' fighters unexpectedly attacked Wau airstrip. Captain John May of the 2/2nd Field Ambulance watched as 'suddenly we heard planes approaching from the top end of the aerodrome, we thought that's funny they are coming in the wrong way'. The bombing caused chaos amongst the Allied aircraft that were coming in to land at the time. Flight Sergeant Arthur Rodbourn of No. 4



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(Army Cooperation) Squadron, RAAF, had just touched down in his Wirraway observation aircraft when bombs began falling along the airstrip. Both he and his observer, Sergeant Andrew Cole, ran for cover, throwing themselves flat, Cole being wounded by shrapnel in the process. Blasted and set on fire by a near miss, the Wirraway was left to burn out at the end of the airstrip. Right: The shape of the hills in the background confirms the match.



The area of operations between Wau and Salamaua had no roads, only tortuous trails running along jungle-clad hills and ridges.

and all of the 2/7th Battalion, 814 men in all, were flown in that day. 'Lifblood of green' was how one described it. Two 25-pounder guns were flown in the next day and by the time the Japanese organised a concerted attack on Wau later that afternoon of January 30, it was easily halted. On February 9 the Japanese force began the withdrawal of what troops remained from Wau to Mubo.

Australian front-line casualties during the battle for Wau were 120 killed and about 180 wounded. The total number of Japanese killed during the same period was assessed at 1,045, with only 12 prisoners taken alive.

In early March another Japanese convoy left Rabaul for Lae but all eight transports plus four escorting destroyers were sunk by Allied air strikes in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. At this time the only area in New Guinea where Allied troops were in direct contact with the Japanese was in the ridges around Salamaua. On March 2, 1943, General Thomas Blamey, the Australian Commander in Chief, signalled Brigadier Moten: 'I would be glad if you would give consideration to the question of inflicting a severe blow on the enemy in the Salamaua area with a view to seizing the opportunity should

it present itself, since it may have far-reaching results if successful.'

As a consequence of this directive, Major George Warfe's 2/3rd Independent Company was moved from Wau down the Bulolo Valley and across the daunting Double Mountain Track into the Missim area west of Salamaua. On April 21 a commando patrol ambushed the Japanese on the Komiatum Track, the main supply route to Mubo, killing about 20 enemy naval troops before withdrawing.

The imposing Bobdubi Ridge protected the western flank of the Japanese position at

On March 18, 1943 six A-20 Boston bombers from No. 22 Squadron, RAAF, flying out of Ward's Drome at Port Moresby, attacked Salamaua. Flight Lieutenant Bill Newton was the pilot of Boston A28-3 with Flight Sergeant John Lyon as his navigator and Sergeant Basil Eastwood his rear gunner. After dropping its bombs on the airfield, Newton's aircraft turned to strafe some buildings nearby. Attacking one adjacent to an anti-aircraft battery, it was hit and he was forced to ditch into the ocean off the Salamaua isthmus. Other aircraft circled for about 30 minutes and watched as Newton and Lyon swam to the shore, Eastwood having been killed in the action. Both men were captured and taken to Lae where the Japanese noted of Newton 'that he is a person of importance, possessing considerable rank and ability'. The airmen told their interrogators that they were only attacking the store buildings, not Japanese personnel, and stressed that 'we are fighting to preserve the Australian mainland'. Their fate was not uncommon for Allied airmen captured by the Japanese: Newton was returned to Salamaua and beheaded on March 29 (his body was recovered from a bomb crater after the Allied recapture of the town); Lyon was bayoneted adjacent to the Lae airfield. Newton had flown 52 operational missions, some 90 per cent of them under enemy anti-aircraft fire. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, the only such award made during the entire Wau-Salamaua campaign.



AWM 100644



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Left: A native supply train moving across the swing bridge over the Bulolo river at Kaisenik. This was the start of the Buisaval Track, one of the two main jungle trails leading to Mubo and from there to Salamaua. The picture was taken by Australian war photographer Gordon Short on June 28, 1943. Above: A suspension bridge capable of carrying Jeeps was later built from Marsden pressed-steel planking at the same site and although one of the support cables has since given way, it still provides a handy footbridge.

Salamaua. The northern end of the ridge was surrounded on three sides by the bend of the Francisco river and had been occupied by the Japanese since April 10. If the Australian commandos could capture this position they would be able to bring machine-gun fire to bear on Komiatum Ridge, thus severely disrupting the supply route to Mubo. However, Major Warfe was only allowed to deploy a single platoon for the operation.

There were three main Japanese positions set up along the northern end of Bobdubi Ridge, each centred on a clump of coconut trees, named South, Centre and North Coconuts. On May 3, the South Coconuts position was captured and the Japanese withdrew to Centre Coconuts. Denied reinforce-

ment and supplies, the Japanese defenders at Centre Coconuts continued to hold out until Warfe organised a night attack for May 9/10 accompanied by flares and screaming from a speaker. His bold ploy worked and the next morning the Centre Coconuts position was found vacant. Now having control of the ridge, Warfe set up four Vickers guns and flayed the Japanese columns moving along Komiatum Track. However, on the morning of May 14 the Japanese counter-attacked and, after getting up onto Bobdubi Ridge unobserved, they drove the Australian commandos off it.

Despite the loss of the Bismarck Sea convoy, many of the Japanese it had carried were rescued and ultimately reached the

Salamaua area either by destroyer, motorised landing craft or even submarine as the latter were being used for bringing supplies from Rabaul to Lae and Salamaua. However, the Japanese front-line soldier was always hungry and relied on scarce native garden food. The Australians were much better supplied but were completely reliant on the American transports flying in or air-dropping ammunition and supplies to them. A basic road was under construction from the south coast to Wau but by the time it was complete the campaign would be almost over. One key advantage the Australians had was the native carrier force they could use to bring the supplies forward from Wau to the front lines at Mubo and Missim.



AWM 015240



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Left: The Australian troops fighting in the Salamaua jungle depended heavily on supplies dropped from the air. One of the drop zones used was Skindiwai, a small clearing hacked out on the southern slope of the Buisaval valley. It was a difficult drop zone as the aircraft had to fly into the narrow vale and then come in low over the kunai grass before flying a figure eight to allow a second run. As a further handicap, there was a big tree on the DZ that could not be felled as it would have fallen across the camp. On March 11, 1943, a

C-47 transport, 41-38662 piloted by Staff Sergeant Elmer L. Crowley from the US 22nd Troop Carrier Squadron, hit the top of the tree with a wing. Down below the anxious Australians could hear the roar of the engines as the damaged aircraft tried to gain height before it crashed to the ground. The eight men on board, six crewmen and two Australian air dispatchers, were all killed. Gordon Short pictured the wreck in July 1943. Right: The wreckage remains to this day along the old Buisaval Track.



AWM 055628

On August 9, 1943, Australian official war photographer Robert Buchanan reached a position from where he could see the ultimate objective, Japanese-occupied Salamaua. Taken from the ridge at the head of the Buirali Creek, his pictures shows the valley of the Francisco river and two of the jungle-covered ridges that played a key role in the battle, Bobdubi Ridge on the left (surrounded on three sides at the northern end by a bend of the Francisco river) and Komiatum Ridge on the right. Fighting here began in early May and lasted until early September.

By May 1943 the Japanese had gathered enough troops to attack the Australians at Mubo. The first attempt on May 9 targeted Lababia Ridge above Mubo, with four more heavy attacks taking place the following day. The position was staunchly defended by a company of the 2/7th Battalion and a wounded Private Ray Pope watched as 'the Japs came on very bravely and resolutely, but our automatic weapons cut them to pieces'.

Having held off eight enemy attacks, the Australians pulled back along the ridge to a better defensive position and the Japanese attack petered out. On June 21 there was a second attack on the ridge, this time against a company from the 2/6th Battalion but after two days the Japanese withdrew having lost at least 42 men killed and 131 wounded.

Following the loss of Bobdubi Ridge the Australian 58/59th Battalion was sent into the area west of Salamaua. The battalion had come across to Missim to be part of an intricate three-pronged offensive against the Japanese at Salamaua in Operation 'Doublet'. Following an amphibious landing by units of the US 41st Infantry Division on the eastern flank at Nassau Bay on the night of June 29/30, the 58/59th Battalion was to attack on the west flank the following day. As the Japanese command tried to deal with these threats to both its flanks, Brigadier Moten's 17th Brigade would then attack at Mubo. To face the coming Allied assault the Japanese had 673 front-line troops at Mubo, 127 in the Bobdubi area, 122 at Nassau Bay, 543 at Salamaua, 540 at Malolo (between Lae and Salamaua) and 43 at Komiatum, in all a total of 2,048 troops.

Two companies from the 58/59th Battalion made the initial attack on Bobdubi Ridge, one at the south end near Orodubi and the other at Old Vickers. However, the Japanese defenders were well prepared and both attacks were unsuccessful. Three days later than originally planned, a third company crossed Bobdubi Ridge, reached the Komiatum Track junction, and set up an ambush on the morning of July 3. Later that afternoon 20 enemy troops were ambushed as they moved up to Bobdubi Ridge and Colonel Tadao Hongo, the Chief-of-Staff of the

Japanese 51st Division, was killed. The Bobdubi Ridge defence now comprised five Japanese infantry companies, two of them fresh, some 500 men in all with artillery support. It would be a hard nut to crack.

The landing of a battalion from Colonel Archibald R. MacKechnie's US 162nd Infantry Regiment at Nassau Bay was scheduled for the night of June 29/30. The landing force used 29 Higgins Boats escorted by four PT boats for the 50-mile trip up the coast from the base at Morobe. Unfortunately it was a foul night for such an operation with heavy rain and high seas and to Corporal Alfred Smith 'a landing seemed impossible in that high surf'. As his landing craft grounded, a following wave smashed it into some rocks which tore a gash in the hull.



PHIL BRADLEY

Phil Bradley took his comparison from a lower viewpoint near Ambush Knoll. The mouth of the Francisco can be seen to the right of Salamaua.

All but two of the landing craft in the first wave foundered in the towering waves. 'Those 12-foot breakers', Corporal John Stephens wrote, 'hurtled the big square-nosed barges into the beach like so many match-boxes, sideways, and backwards and almost upside down.' Nonetheless, 770 men got ashore, 440 of them infantrymen from Lieutenant Colonel Harold R. Taylor's 1st Battalion of the 162nd Infantry. However with the loss of all but one of the landing craft, reinforcements and supplies would be significantly delayed. Fortunately there were few Japanese troops on the beach that night.

On July 8 two of Taylor's companies were ordered to occupy Bitoi Ridge to block the escape of Japanese troops from Mubo. Though Taylor's men were on the upper southern slopes of the ridge by that afternoon, with patrols forward on the crest, it did not have the desired effect of forcing the Japanese to withdraw from the Mubo area. The Australians would now have to take Mubo by force, a daunting task.

The operation was meant to start on July 5 but due to the delays with the Americans moving inland from Nassau Bay, it was postponed for two days. According to Lieutenant Masao Shinoda, 'the artillery intensified again in the morning of July 8, followed by the advance of superior ground forces.' The Australians advanced steadily and slowly cleared the heights around Mubo. On July 11, a US patrol finally contacted them near Mubo and the previous day a commando patrol had also made contact on the other flank. Although there was still no iron ring around the Japanese at Mubo nevertheless, bowing to the pressure, Lieutenant-General Nakano, the 51st Division commander, ordered the garrison to retreat to Komiatum.

The withdrawing troops soon realised that the main track was blocked behind them and they had to find an alternative route out. Lieutenant Shinoda later explained that 'we were taking our sick and injured troops with us on the advance through the dark jungle terrain. Climbing and descending through the steep mountainous terrain made our withdrawal operation extremely difficult.'

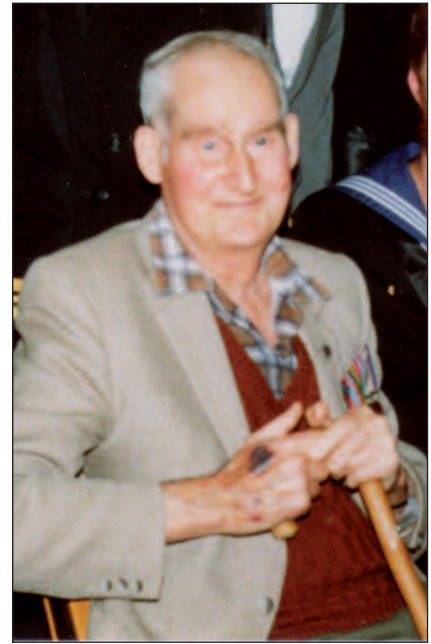
An American patrol spotted a large enemy force withdrawing north-east on July 11 and was able to call down mortar and artillery fire. The American gunners noted that 'we had four rounds per gun — 16 rounds in the air in 36 seconds — fired a total of nine



AWM 127971

Left: One of the men wounded during the 58/59th Battalion attacks on Bobdubi Ridge on July 13 was Private Wal Johnson. He had been on a two-man patrol that morning looking at Japanese positions at the hillock feature known as the Coconuts when they were spotted, the Japanese throwing grenades and opening up with a machine gun. Both men were driven off the ridge and Johnson was badly hit in the arm while a grenade explosion had wounded his face. Sergeant Gordon Ayre took Johnson back to the regimental aid post at the edge of Uliap Creek where he collapsed. Damien Parer, who had been in the area since early July, watched and filmed as 'a blinded

digger led by an RAP sergeant stumbles over a stony creek, then squelches ankle deep through the clinging mud of the jungle track'. Considered one of Parer's finest film sequences, it has often been compared to George Silk's iconic photo of the blinded digger at Buna (see *After the Battle* No. 162). **Right:** Johnson was back in action ten days later but wounded again when his mate stepped on a mine, which killed his companion and caused Johnson to lose an eye. This time he was evacuated, ultimately back to Australia. Johnson, who shunned any limelight, was from Moe in Victoria where Bernie Border pictured him at the local RSL Club on Anzac Day, April 25, 1993.



BERNIE BORDER

rounds per howitzer.' The next day another patrol followed an artillery barrage forward and found 40 to 50 dead Japanese and a profusion of hurriedly abandoned equipment. More artillery fire on July 13 targeted enemy positions at the head of the Buigap Creek resulting in 'literally hundreds of dead Japanese'. However, by that afternoon the majority of the retreating Japanese had reached a line of well-prepared positions along the saddle from Goodview Junction to Mount Tambu.

Meanwhile, the role of Major Warfe's commandos in the 'Doublet' plan was to establish a strong blocking position west of Mount Tambu at Goodview Junction 'to pre-

vent the escape northwards of enemy forces in the Mubo area'. On July 6 Warfe's supply line was ambushed by a Japanese patrol astride the track near Orodubi. The native carriers dropped their loads, which included two Vickers guns and one 3-inch mortar, and fled, the site thus becoming known as Ambush Knoll.

The Japanese occupied Ambush Knoll in strength on July 12 and heavy Australian attacks along the narrow ridge were repulsed until the Japanese withdrew during the night of July 15/16. The position, encircled by some 100 yards of trenches with two log bunkers, had been defended by a reinforced platoon of engineers. When the Australians

took over the knoll, Lieutenant Ron Garland said 'the place was a shambles'.

The loss of Ambush Knoll rankled the Japanese command. With the fall of Mubo, it now became a key point in securing the Japanese western flank. Following artillery support from Komiatum Ridge, on July 19 fresh Japanese troops used the light of a full moon to scale the ridge and attack Ambush Knoll from the north along the crest. Lieutenant Garland's commandos were ready and the opening burst of fire caught the enemy on their feet.

At dawn on July 20 a weakened commando platoon reached Ambush Knoll to augment the defence and, although there



AWM 127970

Left: One of the key points in the battle was Ambush Knoll, a hillock astride the Mubo to Salamaua track near Orodubi. On July 19, two Vickers machine guns were sent up to reinforce the position. Damien Parer filmed the one that was emplaced at the north end of the knoll covering the track up from Orodubi. The commando at left (with the beret) is Lieutenant Hugh Egan of the 2/3rd Independent Company and on the right of the gun is Trooper Hilton May. Egan would be killed



PHIL BRADLEY

a few days later, on July 21. The other Vickers, manned by Privates Arthur 'Matey' Crossley and Ferdinand 'Bunny' Sides, was emplaced to the right, covering the main approach up Sugarcane Ridge from Buirali Creek. The weight of fire from the Vickers, set up on loose mountings, was vital in stopping the Japanese attacks on the knoll. **Right:** The forward weapon pit is still there, littered with machine-gun cartridges from the action.



Left: On July 29, a platoon of commandos from the 2/3rd Independent Company attacked Timbered Knoll, further north along Bobdubi Ridge. The three men killed in the attack, Private Percy Hooks, Corporal Don Buckingham and Corporal Andrew Muir, were buried on the misty knoll the following morning. Damien Parer watched and filmed as ‘they prayed with sincerity their



homage to their three fellow comrades’. Father James English (second from left) reads the prayers. His batman, Private Francis Ryan, is protecting the prayer book with his groundsheet. **Right:** In 2008 a plaque with the names of the three dead men was placed on the knoll by Darren Robins, the grandson of Bill Robins who was wounded during the Timbered Knoll action.

were 14 attacks that day, the feature was held. More Japanese attacks began before dawn the following morning against the knoll’s north end. Ammunition supply was becoming critical and the order came through to switch automatic weapons to single-round fire. Resupply came through that night, the photographer Damien Parer being one of the carriers.

In the 18th attack the Japanese infantry advanced to within six yards of the Australian positions before being driven off. Further attacks continued throughout the night, with two more before dawn on July 22. Having lost at least 61 men in the battle for Ambush Knoll, the Japanese gave up the next day and the 2/6th Battalion moved up from Mubo to relieve the exhausted commandos.

There was no rest for Warfe’s commandos. On July 29 Lieutenant John Lewin’s platoon attacked Timbered Knoll further north along Bobdubi Ridge. The first attack up an open steep side of the ridge faltered and the lead section was pinned down by machine-gun fire, three commandos being killed: Private Percy Hooks, Corporal Don Buckingham and Corporal Andrew ‘Bonnie’ Muir. Damien Parer, who filmed the attack, wrote ‘on the right, three men have been killed. The lanes of Jap fire are too accurate from this side. They pin us down.’

With the initial thrust parried, Lewin took Lieutenant Sid Read’s section around the flank. The commandos were faced with a steep razor-backed ridge with heavy covering fire from pillboxes and trenches but Private Wal Dawson went forward with his Tommy-gun and grenades and opened the way. Read’s section fought on the ridge-line along the knoll, clearing 20 yards of foxholes. Damien Parer later wrote, ‘we moved around to the Japs’ position feeling out the pits with grenades. Just rolling them in and ducking before the grenade went off.’ The commandos found 18 enemy troops dead when they captured the knoll.

On the late afternoon of July 16, Captain Mick Walters led the 60 men of his understrength company from the 2/5th Battalion up a steep track leading to the southern crest of Mount Tambu, the most dominant feature protecting Salamaua. Walters’ scouts reported that the Japanese occupied two knolls just over the crest and were busy digging weapon pits. He boldly attacked and captured the two heights, leaving 20 Japanese dead while many others fled north across

Right: Phil Bradley’s comparison, taken on the same narrow approach to Mount Tambu just forward of the start line.



The most dominant feature protecting Salamaua was Mount Tambu. The 2/5th Battalion captured a first foothold on the height on July 16, defending it against dozens of Japanese counter-attacks and gradually extending its grip further northwards. Then on the morning of July 24, after a heavy artillery and mortar preparation, Captain Lin Cameron’s D Company attacked the Japanese bunker line on Tambu Knoll at the ridge’s northern end. Robert Buchanan photographed the men as they moved into action.



Right: On July 30, the 1st Battalion of the US 162nd Infantry Regiment, newly arrived to reinforce the Salamaua front, attacked the same Japanese bunker line. The initial assault by Company C ended in bloodshed, one third of the force being killed or wounded. Gordon Short pictured Corporal Leslie 'Bull' Allen, a stretcher bearer from the 2/5th Battalion, bringing back the last of at least 12 wounded Americans he rescued that day. The man across his shoulders is Sergeant Jay Bixler. Others that Allen carried out that day were Captain Delmar Newman (the company commander), Lieutenant Barney Ryan, Tom Boothby, Joe Bradshaw, Lyle Walter, Tom Moyer, Hank Roser, Darrell Donaldson, Ted Richter, Dan Juarez and Richard Monger, a wounded medic who was the first man Allen rescued and who later died. The Australian *Saturday Sun* later stated that Allen carried out a total 17 men over four and a half hours, quoting him as saying 'A stretcher-bearer has to be strong and willing'. Allen, who had been awarded the Military Medal for similar bravery at Wau six months earlier, was awarded the American Silver Star for his work on this occasion but no Australian award was made — an extraordinary omission.

the narrow mountain plateau. It was an extraordinary coup as the Japanese had built positions for over 100 men but only a single platoon was present when the surprise attack came.

That night the Japanese made eight separate assaults on the Australian position. Walters noted that the 'fighting was thick and furious during these counter-attacks and the small-arms fire was the heaviest I've known'. Over the 36 hours that Walters' company held the key position there were 24 separate Japanese attacks but these waves broke on an immovable shore with Japanese losses in the hundreds. Every spare man at the 2/5th Battalion headquarters was used to carry supplies up to the besieged company. It was a three-hour climb up the near-vertical track onto Mount Tambu, each man carrying around 30lbs of supplies. The next day Captain Lin Cameron arrived with two fresh platoons and a 3-inch mortar crew.

Having held off the Japanese, Walters now did the unexpected: he attacked again. On the morning of July 18, after heavy concentrations of mortar and artillery shells, his company captured the next knoll along the ridge top. However, early the following morning a Japanese force attacked the rear of the Australian positions. Two Australian Bren gunners, Privates Jim Regan and Fred Allan, held the attack at bay by firing straight down the approach track from the crest, the Japanese losing half of the 40 men involved in their bold but unsuccessful attack.

The remaining Japanese position at the northern end of Mount Tambu was a fortress protected by near-vertical walls on all sides. Ten log-reinforced bunkers and a chain of weapon pits connected by tunnels had been constructed to augment this natural defence. The overhead cover on the weapon pits was up to four logs thick and all were interconnected by crawl trenches.

At 1130 on July 24, after Allied artillery and mortars had lashed the ridge, Captain Cameron led his company forward to attack the Japanese fortress. One of the men in the lead section was soon killed and Cameron was hit in his right elbow. As he saw his men hesitate, the wounded captain shouted out: 'Forward, get stuck into them!' Corporal John Smith then led his 11-man platoon forward, heading for the crest through three lines of enemy bunkers. 'Follow me!' the courageous, blonde-haired Smith called back as he pushed on. Cameron's last view of him was 'Smith heading up Tambu with



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the bayonet'. Three men managed to keep up with Smith but Japanese grenades soon caught them as they broke through a third line of bunkers. Though also hit, Smith kept going and soon stood on the top of Mount Tambu with his back to the enemy yelling: 'Come on boys, come on boys!' The gallant Smith was dragged out and died of his severe wounds two days later, Cameron noting 'some 40-odd the doctor told me later'.

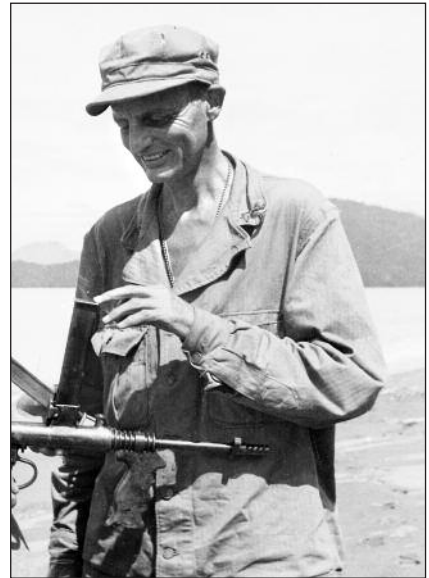
On July 28 the American infantry from the 1st Battalion, 162nd Infantry, arrived on Mount Tambu, Captain Delmar Newman's Company C taking over the Australian front line, about 100 yards south of Tambu Knoll. Two days later on July 30, as the artillery fire stopped and the Browning machine guns opened up, Newman's three platoons attacked the knoll. Bombardier Clyde Paton watched as the attack progressed: 'After the barrage we stood up and watched as the Yanks moved in, or rather up. Down they went on our side of the neck, were lost to sight, and then slowly climbed a further side, steep and impossible really, as hand-grenades were rolled down upon them.' Now forward with his men, the gallant Captain Newman had machine-gun rounds pass through his shirt sleeve and take the pockets off his webbing belt. The Japanese had waited out the barrage in their tunnels and

then emerged as the Americans reached the ravine. Though Newman's men took the first line of bunkers, the assault ended in carnage, with one third of the attackers killed or wounded trying to break through the well-echeloned enemy bunker lines. When an attack by Captain John George's Company A was also unsuccessful, Colonel Taylor ordered a withdrawal.

At least three American medics, Corporal Byron Hurley, Staff Sergeant Samuel Sather and Private Richard Monger, were killed trying to recover the 36 wounded Americans. An Australian stretcher-bearer, the 2/5th Battalion's Corporal Les 'Bull' Allen also responded to the plaintive cries of 'Bull, Bull, Bull' from the wounded Americans. Clyde Paton watched as 'Allen came ploughing hurriedly upwards through the slippery mud. He brushed past me and then was lost to view. Shortly, back came Bull Allen with a soldier draped over his shoulders. Under the weight he staggered a little and then lowered the body to the ground, right before me.' Paton watched Allen go out again facing the prospect of being shot like the men he rescued, however 'Providence watched over him'. Allen went forward at least 12 times carrying back wounded Americans, working himself to exhaustion over some four and a half hours.



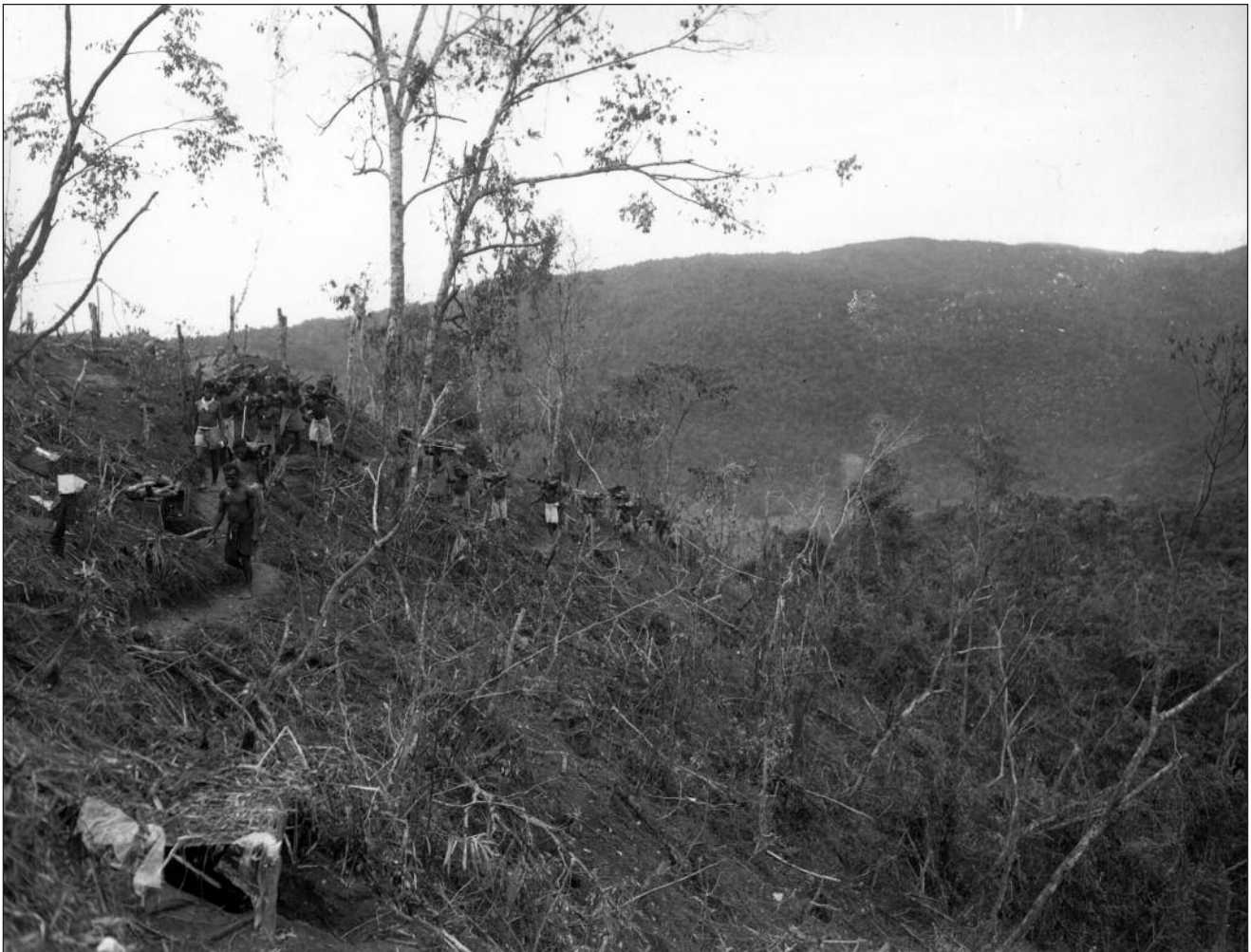
STEVE DARMODY



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Left: A further battalion of the 162nd Infantry was sent up from Nassau Bay in early July with the mission to capture the ridge that jutted into the sea south of Salamaua and formed the northern arm of Tambu Bay. This ridge — described by ABC war correspondent Peter Hemery as ‘a piece of old-style razor blade jutting into the sea’ — needed to be taken in order to secure the bay area for Allied field artillery. Seen here in mid-distance, running down from the slopes of Mount Tambu, it soon came to be known as Roosevelt Ridge. The name came from Major Archibald B. Roo-

sevelt (*right*), the commander of the 3rd Battalion, the unit sent to seize it. He was the fourth child of the late US President ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt. Serving as a 1st lieutenant with the US 1st Division during the First World War, he had been thrice wounded and awarded the French Croix de Guerre. Due to his age (he turned 50 in 1943) and a previous disability discharge, Roosevelt was exempt from active service in the Second World War but he had successfully lobbied his cousin, the incumbent President Franklin D. Roosevelt, for a chance to serve in a front-line unit.



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The first two attempts to take the ridge failed, the Americans being driven off with heavy casualties, and it was not until August 14, after intense shelling and with bomber support,

that they finally succeeded in capturing the feature. Here a supply train of native carriers moves along Roosevelt Ridge on August 25, 1943.

On July 3 the New Guinea Force commander, Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring, had met with General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific Area, and obtained permission to deploy a second battalion from MacKechnie's 162nd Regiment to the Salamaua front. After landing at Nassau Bay that battalion, the 3rd under Major Archibald R. Roosevelt (a son of the 26th US President Theodore Roosevelt), moved north to Tambu Bay to secure that area for the deployment of artillery.

What came to be known as Roosevelt Ridge extended westwards from the sea towards Mount Tambu, forming an imposing bulwark shielding the northern end of Tambu Bay, and until it was taken the bay was under threat. General Stan Savage, the Australian 3rd Division commander, suggested to Brigadier General Ralph W. Coane who commanded Coan Force, the US 41st Division's detachment fighting under Savage's command in the Tambu Bay sector, that Roosevelt Ridge be attacked from the western end and rolled up to the east from the higher ground. However, Coane made his major move at the eastern end with an attack by two companies. The men climbed up the steep side of the ridge, hand over hand, but were hampered by grenades and mortar bombs rolled down from above. Then, as they neared the crest, enemy machine-gun and rifle fire broke out from well-concealed positions and the attack failed as did another attempt later that day. Both companies were forced off the ridge two days later.

On July 27 the Americans had another go at Roosevelt Ridge. One hundred infantrymen moved in single file up through the jungle, following a creek south of the ridge before moving along a spur leading to a small knoll on the crest. However, enemy fire stopped further advance on a shoulder slightly below the ridge top. Another company joined up on the left but was also unable to gain the ridge top and further attacks only lost more men without gaining any ground.

The failure to secure Roosevelt Ridge was frustrating to the Australian command as it dominated Tambu Bay which was urgently required to bring in supplies. When General Savage requested that both Coane and the battalion commander, Roosevelt, be relieved, General MacArthur became involved and Savage later wrote that 'I had my bags packed but MacArthur supported me'. Coane was replaced by Colonel MacKechnie, whose regiment was now detached



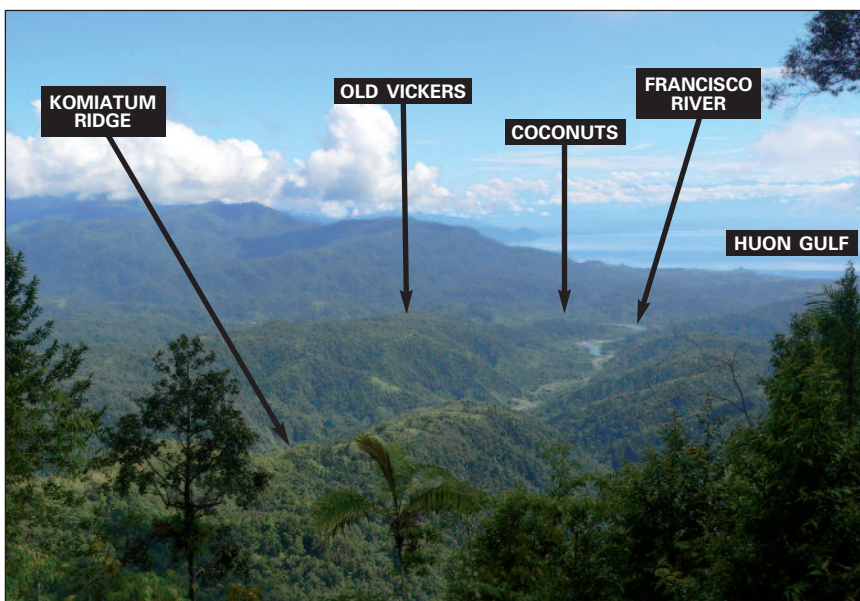
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Once Tambu Bay was secure heavy artillery was brought ashore to support the Allied advance on Salamaua. This photo was taken on August 23, 1943.



STEVE DARMODY

The same beach seven decades on, pictured by Steve Darmody.



PHIL BRADLEY

from the 41st Division and would be directly controlled by New Guinea Force. Major Roosevelt was also relieved though he would resume command of his battalion after the Salamaua campaign.

Early on August 14 the Americans established a lodgement along the crest at the western end of the ridge, forcing the Japanese back to the eastern end where they came under heavy shell-fire. The intense shelling included Bofors guns that had been dragged up the rough track onto a knoll adjacent to the ridge from where they fired on a horizontal trajectory directly into the Japanese positions. 'Section by section the target was laid bare. When one section was devastated the guns were trained on the next section . . . the whole deadly show might have been controlled by a switch.' Bombers followed and 'those who watched from the beach saw the top fourth of the ridge lift perceptibly into the air and then fall into the waiting sea.' Roosevelt Ridge was finally in American hands.

Left: Komiatum Ridge and Bobdubi Ridge, with its two embattled features, Old Vickers and the Coconuts, as seen from Mount Tambu.



Left: On July 28, the 58/59th Battalion attacked and finally captured the Old Vickers knoll. Damien Parer and Australian war artist Ivor Hele had moved up behind the troops during the attack to record the action on cine and in paint. Parer wrote

Meanwhile, the lack of operational success by the 58/59th Battalion on Bobdubi Ridge meant that the Japanese had been able to maintain the supply line up the Komiatum Track to the critical defensive positions at Goodview Junction and Mount Tambu. The inability to capture the Old Vickers position at the northern end of Bobdubi Ridge was at the heart of the 58/59th Battalion's problems. The Japanese had held the position since retaking it from Major Warfe's commandos on May 15. One of those defenders, Sergeant Kobayashi, wrote in his diary that 'the situation grows worse from day to day. This is the 71st day at Bobdubi and there is no relief yet. We must trust our lives to God. Everyday there are bombings and we feel so lonely. We do not know when the day will come for us to join our dead comrades.'

With artillery support now available from the 2/6th Field Regiment's 25-pounder guns down at Tambu Bay, a new attack was ordered. On July 27 Lieutenant Roy Dawson began directing very accurate shell-fire onto Old Vickers. The following day the attack went in hard on the heels of the shelling so catching many of the defenders still under shelter. When the bombardment finished, the Australians were cresting the slope in front of the enemy positions.

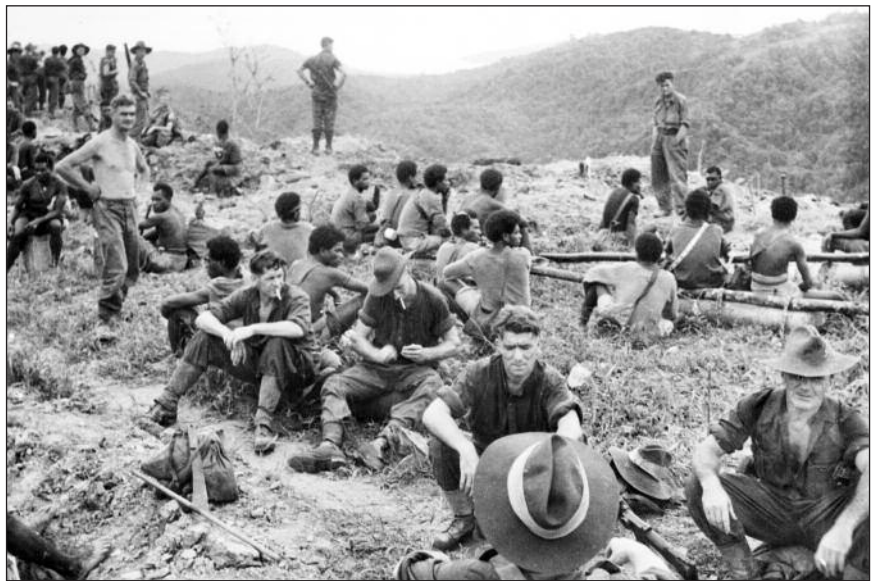
Lieutenant Laurie Proby's platoon had been allocated the direct approach, across the gully at its steepest point and then up a steep and narrow spur with only room for one man at a time. 'During the bombardment we approached as far as possible. What a high climb we have to gain our objective. On the way up the ridge, it is obvious that our request for lots of smoke has borne results, the smoke was so thick we had the chance to organise near the top of our spur and extend for our final charge. We surprised Nips coming up from underground positions tossing grenades to which we retaliated with the same medicine — ours was the best obviously.' After its capture, four pillboxes and 57 weapon pits were found on the Old Vickers position along with 17 dead defenders. The Australians lost one officer and four men killed with another two officers and nine men wounded.

The Coconuts position at the north end of Bobdubi Ridge was the next objective. Lieutenant Ted Griff's company from the 58/59th Battalion soon captured South Coconuts but Griff realised there was no chance of a successful attack along such a narrow ridge-line which was well covered by machine guns.

Right: The shape of Davidson Ridge in the background allowed Phil Bradley to match up the shot.



that 'after artillery show today the boys went in and from this position we could see a wonderful battle panorama of smoke and men advancing. We were both as excited as hell.' Right: The slopes of Old Vickers today.



Komiatum Ridge, the Japanese stronghold north of Mount Tambu, was finally captured by the 2/6th Battalion after the Japanese defenders withdrew from the latter position during the night of August 18/19. Official photographer Harold Dick pictured Australian troops and native carriers resting near the ridge's eastern edge on September 14, after the end of the battle.





USNA

The Allied aim in the final phase was to drive the Japanese north of the Francisco river. The first Australian troops crossed the stream on August 21 but the Japanese would continue to fight for their positions on the north bank until their final withdrawal to Lae on the night of September 10/11. Signal Corps photographer Pfc Ovid Di Fiore pictured American and Australian troops crossing the Francisco west of Salamaua on September 12.

Early on the morning of July 31 there were three Japanese counter-attacks on South Coconuts, accompanied by much noise and clamour. All were repulsed but seven men were evacuated with stab wounds, reflecting the closeness and ferocity of the fighting. Japanese attacks resumed the next day and Griff's men, now down to two officers and 36 men, had to withdraw back along the ridge.

At dawn on the same morning, Japanese troops that had infiltrated overnight opened fire on the Old Vickers position before attacking from many directions. The battle continued for four days and nights but the men of the 2/7th Battalion held onto the key position.

Another Australian attack on the Coconuts followed, this time with heavy air support. On August 14, 27 B-24s, 14 B-17s and 12 B-25s dropped 133 tons of bombs on the Salamaua area including the Coconuts. 'Trees, logs and other rubbish flew through the fall of dust which now cloaked the target', observers noted. 'It seemed that nothing could have lived in the midst of devastation loosed by the planes.' An artillery and mortar barrage followed, but despite the support it proved a tough day for the 2/7th Battalion with nine men, including two officers, killed and another 17 men wounded. The Japanese remained on the position for another two days before pulling out.

In the 17th Brigade sector, the dominating peak of Mount Tambu remained in Japanese hands and attacks at Goodview Junction made little progress. Meanwhile, the Japanese had emplaced a mountain gun on Komiatum Ridge that fired across the Buirali Creek valley onto the 2/6th Battalion positions around Ambush Knoll. The gun was so close that the first shot arrived before the men on the ridge heard the gun-fire. Each day during the first week of August the gun, dug into the ridge for protection from counter-fire, would fire no more than 12 rounds before being returned to its shelter.

Regular patrols from Lieutenant-Colonel Fred Wood's 2/6th Battalion were sent out to find the best way to get the unit up onto Komiatum Ridge behind the Japanese positions at Goodview Junction and Mount Tambu. This critical task was given to Cap-

tain Harold Laver's D Company. General Savige later noted: 'By the 8th [of August] it was apparent that the key to Mount Tambu was in Wood's hands, but the trouble was to find the keyhole.'

At daybreak on August 16, Captain Cam Bennett's company of the 2/5th Battalion put in a diversionary attack at Goodview Junction to hold the Japanese front line in place. When it proved a success Bennett was told to hold up which he reluctantly did, telling his battalion commander 'I had 'em! I had 'em in the palm of my hand and you called me off!'

Meanwhile, under cover of artillery fire, Captain Laver's men made their move up onto Komiatum Ridge and soon captured a key knoll and then another, forming a blocking position across the ridge. As Sergeant James Gibson noted, the Japanese hit back

hard the next night. 'They attacked for three hours before moonrise, throwing everything they had at us. We hurled grenade after grenade and patted them with everything.' Following orders from the Japanese commander General Nakano, the remaining Japanese defenders withdrew from Mount Tambu during the night of August 18/19 via the steep valley between Komiatum Ridge and Davidson Ridge.

The role of General Savige's 3rd Division was to drive the enemy north of the Francisco river while 'the capture of Salamaua is of course devoutly to be wished but no attempt upon it is to be allowed to interfere with the major operation being planned'. That operation was the invasion of Lae and the role of the 3rd Division was to hold the maximum number of the enemy at Salamaua. On August 25, Major-General Edward Milford's Australian 5th Division took over that role. At dawn on September 4 the troops on the ridges around Salamaua observed warships in the Huon Gulf, part of the Allied invasion force on the way to land on the coast east of Lae. The need to continue the fighting around Salamaua, to hold the enemy in place, suddenly assumed even greater importance. General Nakano had already been ordered to return to Lae and some of his front-line troops accompanied him on barges from Salamaua on the night of September 4/5.

On August 12 Major Warfe had assumed command of the 58/59th Battalion. Captain Bob Hancock took over Warfe's former unit, the 2/3rd Independent Company, which was now ordered to cut the Komiatum Track at its junction with the Bobdubi to Salamaua track. As Lance Sergeant Cliff Crossley later noted, the river flats were 'a bewildering tangle of marshy stinking jungle, visibility five yards until terrific small-arms fire literally cut a clearing'. Lieutenant Stan Jeffery's commando section came under heavy fire from a machine gun bunker covering the track junction up to Bobdubi Ridge. Though the ground was open between the now prone men and the bunker, the headstrong Jeffery gave the order to charge and the resultant losses were heavy. Meanwhile Captain Vic Baird's infantry company from the 2/7th Battalion attacked enemy positions astride the Buirali Creek junction but the attack foundered at the bunker system. Following the withdrawal from Mount Tambu on August 19, the Japanese troops also withdrew from these positions.



PHIL BRADLEY

A perfect comparison by Phil Bradley.

Right: That same day, American troops from the 641st Tank Destroyer Battalion disembarked from a Higgins Boat onto the Salamaua isthmus.

Two days later the 2/7th Battalion crossed the Francisco river at the south end of Bobdubi Ridge and captured Rough Hill and Arnold's Crest. This unhinged the Japanese defence of Salamaua but, for strategic reasons, the opportunity to advance into Salamaua was refused. General Nakano ordered a counter-attack on Arnold's Crest and a later attack on the night of August 27/28 cut off the Australian position. Lieutenant John Bethune's men of the 58/59th Battalion managed to drive the attackers off, leaving some 40 Japanese dead but, with ammunition rapidly running out and four men killed and another six wounded, Bethune withdrew from Arnold's Crest. Despite the Lae landing, the Japanese continued to fight for the positions north of the river and they would hold them until the final withdrawal to Lae on September 10-11.

Following the loss of Mount Tambu, the keystone position in the new Japanese line south of the Francisco river was a prominent peak towards the northern end of Davidson Ridge known as Charlie Hill to the Australians. On August 24 General Nakano told his men that 'if this line cannot be maintained, the division is to be honourably annihilated'. Nakano would have had in mind the comments on Salamaua by the area commander, Lieutenant-General Hatazo Adachi: 'In light of the great importance of this place, it is my hope that it can be held till the very last, just like the Soviet Army did at

Right: The shore line has retreated with the narrowing of the isthmus.



USNA



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USNA

Left: With Salamaua finally in Allied hands, Pfc George Bridges and Pfc Ray Waybright, both from Company L of the US 162nd Infantry, inspect a Japanese Model 10, 3-inch dual-purpose anti-aircraft and coastal defence gun left behind on the beach.



PHIL BRADLEY

The picture was taken by Pfc John Moore of the 161st Signal Photo Company on September 12, 1943. Right: The very same gun (note the shell damage on the barrel) is still in place on the beach with an old gas cylinder now hanging off it as an improvised gong.



USNA

Salamaua was a ruin when finally captured, just wrecked buildings and bomb craters. Most of the damage had been done by an air raid carried out by the US Fifth Air Force on July 18, 1943.

Stalingrad.’ Although the Australian brigade commanders agreed that Charlie Hill could not be taken from the front, General Milford, with a penchant for artillery, insisted that it could if enough support fire was laid on. In the event, it was not taken until the Japanese pulled out on the night of September 8/9.

Milford’s 5th Division was now advancing on Salamaua on three fronts, the third of which was the coastal route along Scout Ridge. On August 30 he moved Lieutenant-Colonel Jack Amies’s 15th Battalion onto the coastal flank of the American 162nd Regiment with orders that ‘the crest of Scout Ridge must be secured at all cost and with least possible delay’. Heavy mortar and artillery fire was brought down onto the Japanese positions along the crest of the ridge and on September 3 a patrol reported that it was clear. Two platoons moved up to occupy the position but the Japanese counter-attacked before they could do so. The 15th Battalion made another attack on Scout Ridge on September 9, more to continue to pin down the Japanese rather than to actually gain the position.

Astonishingly, despite the landings at Lae, the Japanese command continued to stress that Salamaua must be held and the Japanese south of the Francisco did not begin to withdraw until the night of September 9/10. Heavy rain helped to mask the withdrawal and by the following morning all organised enemy resistance south of the river had ceased. Unfortunately the heavy rain also prevented the Australians from crossing the river that day; somewhat ironic that, even with the Japanese defenders gone, the natural defences still protected Salamaua from capture. The next morning Captain Alfred Ganter’s company from the Australian 42nd Battalion finally got across, he and six of his men becoming the first Allied troops to enter the ruins of Salamaua.

Salamaua was a shell, the Allied bombing that had hit the settlement repeatedly during the campaign having been particularly destructive, Lieutenant Griff of the 58/59th Battalion observing that ‘the isthmus was lined with bomb craters’. Australian war correspondent Peter Hemery reported that ‘not a building is left standing, just an occasional heap of scattered wreckage’.

The evacuation of Salamaua had come as a relief for the Japanese troops stationed there. At a parade on September 16, an Australian army chaplain, Lieutenant Vernon Sherwin, raised the Australian flag over Salamaua. The tattered emblem had been taken from Salamaua in March 1942 and Sherwin had carried it with him ever since, waiting for the day to fly it there again.



PHIL BRADLEY

The sea is doing the damage today although the fight goes on to save the isthmus.