

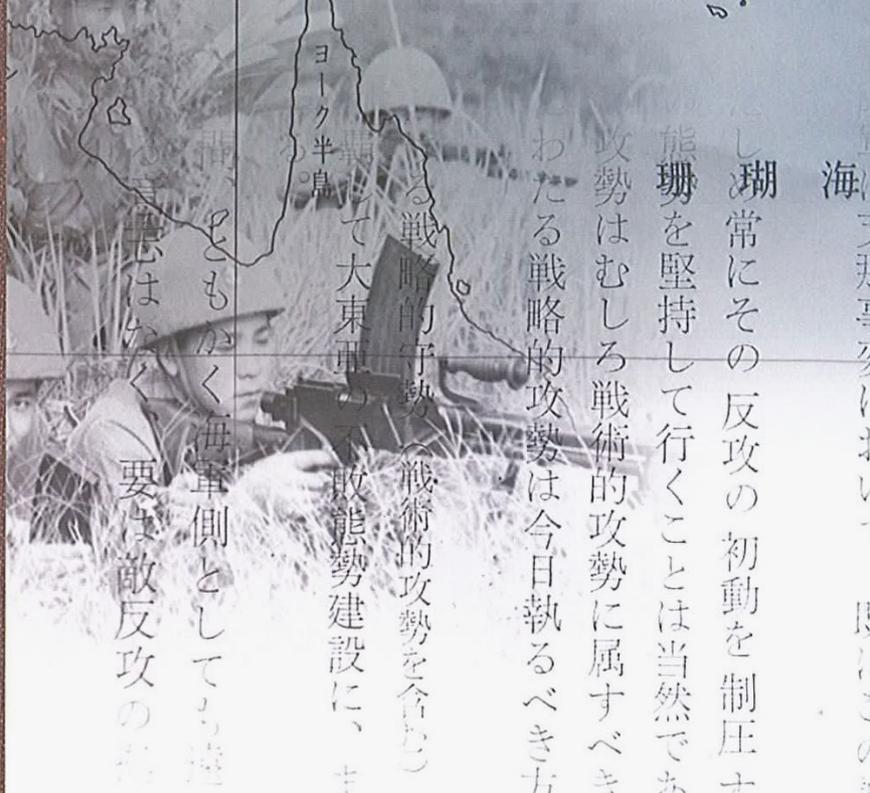
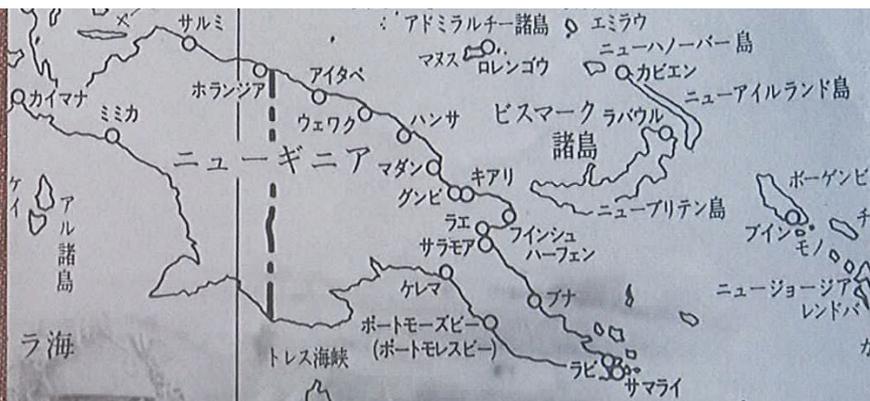
戦史  
叢書

南太平洋

# 陸軍作戦

<1>

ポートモレスビー  
ガ島初期作戦



海軍は常にその反攻の初動を制圧する  
態勢を堅持して行くことは当然である  
攻勢はむしろ戦術的攻勢に属すべき  
わたる戦略的攻勢は今日執るべき方策  
る戦略的守勢(戦術的攻勢を含む)  
戦して大東軍の敗態勢建設に、ま  
もかく海軍側として、遠  
言志はたかく、要は敵反攻のた

## JAPANESE ARMY OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC AREA

New Britain and Papua campaigns, 1942-43

Translator  
Steven Bullard

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### *Translator's introduction*

Recent years have seen an abundance of published works in Australia dealing with the military campaigns in Papua and New Guinea during the Second World War. The Kokoda Trail in particular has been a most popular subject in print, is becoming a well-trodden pilgrimage site, and lends its name to an increasing number of walking trails and sporting events in Australia. Several professional football teams have forgone more traditional pre-season training sessions to trek the Kokoda Trail in search of mystical bonding within the ravines and forests of Papua New Guinea. The experience of Australian soldiers along the trail during the war evokes those qualities central to the myth of Australian identity – a spirit of mateship under adversity and struggle against the odds. The importance of these campaigns – along the Kokoda Trail, at Milne Bay, and in the naval battle of the Coral Sea – is emphasised in these works as central to the defence of the Australian mainland under threat from a rampaging Japanese military.

Missing in all this debate, however, is analysis of a Japanese perspective in these campaigns based on substantial research in primary, or even secondary, sources. Material used to describe the Japanese experience is limited to well-worn snippets of translations from several secondary works in Japanese and wartime Allied intelligence reports. Recent attempts to portray the Japanese experience in Papua in 1942–43 using new translations have fallen short on detail or perspective, or fail to weigh the importance of the campaigns against operations and conditions in other theatres. This lacuna has allowed generalisations and misinformation about Japanese intentions, capabilities, and experiences to go largely unchecked. More disturbing is the widening gulf between historical reality and the increasingly virile national mythology which surrounds these campaigns. One of the reasons for this has been the lack of Japanese-language skills among military historians in Australia despite a generous number of such specialists in other fields. This translation is an attempt to balance the ledger by providing a substantial translation of the official history of Japanese land operations in Papua and New Guinea in the first year or so of the war.

Australian fears of a military threat from Japan had increased in the period after the First World War despite Japan being allied with Australia at that time. Political leaders and defence strategists viewed Japanese intentions with suspicion, even though Japan had agreed to limit its naval expansion at the Washington Conference of 1922. Economic ties and trade with Australia had strengthened by the early 1930s, but deteriorating relations with Japan saw it resign from the League of Nations in 1934 and continue military and naval expansion into China and the Pacific. For its part, Japan was galled at what it saw as discriminatory treatment, and sought to strengthen its position in a world dominated, in its view, by greedy Western colonial powers. In mid-1937, Japan effectively embarked on full-scale war in China after engineering an incident at the Marco Polo bridge outside Peking. By 1941, Japan had become bogged down in an increasingly costly war despite having occupied vast areas of northern China and the Yangtze River valley.

War in the Pacific did not begin until 7 December 1941 with the attacks on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii by a Japanese naval task force. Japanese military forces made other attacks that day on targets as far afield as Khota Bharu in northern Malaya, Wake Island, Guam, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. These campaigns were part of a bold strategy, or perhaps a foolish gamble, to disable the US Pacific fleet long enough to invade and secure key areas of South-East Asia and the Pacific. Japan could not, however, match the industrial might of the Americans in a protracted war of attrition. The long-term plan was to lure the United States into a decisive fleet action in Japanese-controlled waters. It was hoped that American public reaction to a planned Japanese victory would then force the US government to sue for peace, which would allow Japan to maintain their newly expanded foreign territory with its rich deposits of oil, rubber, tin, bauxite, and other natural resources.

The speed of early successes surprised even the most optimistic of Japanese strategists. The first phase of operations were completed ahead of schedule in early 1942. Japanese army and naval forces had secured Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Netherlands East Indies, and had footholds in Burma, New Guinea, and the Pacific. The response in Australia to these events bordered on panic. Air raids on Darwin and the north of Australia convinced the government, the general populace, and even military planners, that their long-held fears of the “yellow peril” were to be realised, and that invasion was imminent. By early 1942 overconfidence had led some members of the Japanese Naval General Staff to propose continuing the advance south to invade all or part of the Australian mainland. We now know that Japan at the time had neither the capacity to seriously threaten Australia’s long-term freedom nor the intention to occupy and subjugate the Australian people. Instead, Japanese Imperial Headquarters adopted a policy to consolidate its new territories in anticipation of the expected Allied counter-attacks in the region. To this end, Japanese planners decided to thwart the build up for these attacks by implementing a blockade of the main supply route between the United States and Australia.

This involved the invasion and occupation of Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia in the Pacific in what the Japanese called the FS Operation.

This translation spans the events from the invasion of Rabaul in New Britain in January 1942 to the destruction of the South Seas Force on the beaches of northern Papua in January 1943. This period witnessed great change in the South-West Pacific Area. Isolated Australian forces were initially outnumbered and overpowered by Japanese forces buoyed by a series of successes across the region. Australia, committed to the war in Europe, could not respond quickly to the coordinated movement of Japanese forces into New Britain, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and Papua. The United States, still recovering from the shock of Pearl Harbor, was just beginning to apply its considerable industrial strength to the problem of the Pacific, even while adopting a policy of first meeting the threat in Europe.

The main army formation involved in the campaigns described in the text was the South Seas Force, led by Major General Horii Tomitarō. The South Seas Force was initially based on one infantry regiment and various support units drawn from the 55th Division, which was raised in Kōchi in Shikoku. The 144th Infantry Regiment was reinforced by the 41st Infantry Regiment prior to the Papua campaign, and later by elements from the 229th Infantry Regiment. Support for the South Seas Force included artillery, signals, transport, and medical units. The 144th Infantry Regiment had served previously in China but had little experience of tropical warfare apart from the invasion of Guam in December 1941. The 41st Infantry Regiment had faced Australian and British troops during the Malaya campaign, as had some of the engineer support troops for the South Seas Force. The jungles of the Malayan peninsula, however, turned out to be very different from the conditions in the Owen Stanley Range.

Naval landing troops from Yokosuka, Sasebo, and Maizuru fought alongside the South Seas Force in landing operations in the region. In most cases, the army units withdrew after completion of the operations, leaving the navy to garrison the area. Naval landing troops accompanied the South Seas Force to Buna, and fought at Milne Bay, but both these operations were aimed at securing and strengthening airfields for navy use. The Buna airfield became operational in early August 1942, but its contingent of Zero fighters was quickly destroyed while providing support to the failed Milne Bay campaign.

Despite high-level differences in setting priorities and maintaining communications, many of the operations in the region were undertaken with good army–navy cooperation at a local level. The navy had assigned the South Seas Fleet, based on the 4th Fleet, and the 11th Air Fleet to operations in the region. These naval formations provided transportation, escort, supply, evacuation, and air support for the army campaigns in Papua, though these became increasingly limited by available strengths and commitments to other campaigns.

The invasion and occupation of Port Moresby on the southern coast of Papua was originally scheduled for May 1942 as part of the plan to enforce the FS Operation. Securing Port Moresby would deny the Allies a key base for counter-attacks against Rabaul and other locations in the region, and provide a forward position to launch Japanese attacks against airfields and military installations across the north of Australia. The convoy transporting members of the South Seas Force and other support troops bound for Port Moresby was turned back to Rabaul after the naval battle of the Coral Sea. Thereafter, the loss of four aircraft carriers and hundreds of skilled pilots and aircraft during the naval battle of Midway forced a rethink by Japanese strategists. Despite the postponement and ultimate cancellation of the FS Operation, plans were set in motion to proceed with the Port Moresby operation overland through the rugged Owen Stanley Range.

As described in detail in this translation, the South Seas Force did push south over the mountains, supposedly to within sight of the lights of Port Moresby. However, a combination of factors – poor maintenance of supply, lack of air support, stubborn resistance from the Australian forces, the failure of the Milne Bay campaign, and pressures from the Allied counter-attack at Guadalcanal – all conspired to condemn the campaign to failure. The Japanese forces retreated to the north coast of Papua and fortified their positions around the villages of Gona, Buna, and Giruwa. The subsequent attempts by Australian and American troops to retake the area resulted in some of the most costly and bloody battles of the war to that time. Armed with the lessons of that campaign, and with increasing control of the skies and seas in the region, the Allies pushed on to isolate and ultimately defeat the Japanese forces in the South-West Pacific Area.

### **The text**

The task of compiling the official account of Japanese involvement in the Second World War, the *Senshi sōsho* (*War history series*), began in October 1955 with the opening of the War History Bureau within the Defense

Studies Institute (now the National Institute for Defense Studies). The bureau was led by Colonel Nishiura Susumu, a senior official in the War Ministry during the war. The 102 volumes of the series – the first of which was published in 1966 and the last in 1980 – include: 37 volumes for Imperial Headquarters, 34 volumes for army campaigns, 21 volumes for navy campaigns, nine volumes for air services campaigns, and a one volume chronology.

*Japanese army campaigns* consists of translated extracts from two of the five volumes which deal with army operations in what the Japanese called the South Pacific area. Several large sections, which detail the campaigns on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, have not been included. This decision was taken to limit the size and scope of the project. In many ways, it was an unfortunate decision to have made, as the Guadalcanal operations are closely linked to those in Papua. However, the important aspects of this relation, such as the diversion of reinforcements from Milne Bay to Guadalcanal at a crucial time in early September, and the decision to prioritise the withdrawal from Guadalcanal over that from Papua, are outlined in *Japanese army campaigns*.

The compilers of the *War history series* were ex-military personnel who had served in some capacity during the war. Without formal historical training, their task was made more difficult by the relative lack of source materials. In the two weeks between the end of the war and the arrival of the Allied occupation forces in Japan, the vast majority of official documents relating to Japan's war effort had been destroyed by government order. In addition, many field reports and unit diaries which should have been sent to Tokyo for evaluation and storage were destroyed on the battlefields of the Pacific or captured and used by Allied intelligence agencies. Most of these latter class of document were subsequently lost, but a number were returned to the War History Bureau in the decades following the war. Many other books and documents which were taken by the occupation forces in the immediate postwar period were also returned to the bureau. The first task of the compilers of the *War history series* was to locate these and other extant sources which had escaped the conflagration, seek out surviving military personnel to interview, and to gather other accounts and memoirs from those with first-hand experience of events.

Official historians in Australia, the United States, and Britain were writing their national histories of these campaigns at the same time as the *War history series*. Blessed with an abundance of official and private sources, including complete sets of unit diaries, official documents, and a range of personal diaries, letters, and interviews, the Allied historians were in some instances able to provide more detail of the Japanese experience than could be reconstructed from Japanese sources. Several passages in *Japanese army campaigns* incorporate direct quotations or paraphrases from the Allied histories to fill in these gaps.

Unlike the Australian official history, which was written from the perspective of the front-line soldier, the Japanese account of these campaigns is written from the perspective of higher commanders. This is both a strength and a weakness of the work. It would seem from a reading of the Australian official history, and to a lesser extent the United States account, that the Japanese army and navy arrived in the South-West Pacific Area in early 1942 from a strategic and logistic vacuum. *Japanese army campaigns* contains detailed discussion, including lengthy extracts of orders and instructions, of the complex planning and preparations for the campaigns, flawed though much of this planning and preparation may have been. The strategic background to the Japanese invasions of Rabaul, Port Moresby, Milne Bay, and Guadalcanal are placed within broad operational frameworks. While the numerous personal accounts, diaries, and reminiscences which have subsequently surfaced or been published may have significantly added to the colour and depth of the Japanese official account, the voice of the front-line Japanese soldier is largely missing from *Japanese army campaigns*.

One would expect the history of a campaign that ended in retreat and the complete destruction of fighting strength of the South Seas Force to contain some analysis of the reasons for this failure. The compilers of *Japanese army campaigns*, however, were content to limit their analysis to providing background to strategic decisions and examining the circumstances of the withdrawal from Giruwa under extreme conditions. For example, numerous orders and instructions had been issued to commander Horii from the 17th Army and Army General Staff in Tokyo from late August to halt the southward advance of the South Seas Force. These orders, however, were ignored until late September when the withdrawal actually began. Further, several factors were raised for the decision to withdraw – the threat of Allied landings at Buna, the supply situation, and the failure of the Kawaguchi Detachment to retake Guadalcanal. Beyond this, however, there is no detailed discussion of the reasons for the delay in the actual withdrawal, no critical analysis of the reasons for the overall failure of the campaign, and, perhaps more importantly, no discussion of why the campaign was undertaken at all in the face of the evident strategic and logistic difficulties.

A further related feature of the text is that it presents a relatively uncritical account of the performance and actions of Japanese commanders and soldiers. The war in Papua was fought under extremely difficult conditions, with both sides unflinching and, in many cases, unmerciful in their treatment of wounded, sick and able soldiers alike. The text of *Japanese army campaigns* discusses, for example, the effects of malaria on troops of the South Seas Force during the “clean-up” operations after the invasion of Rabaul in January 1942. There is no discussion, however, of the massacre on 3 February of approximately 150 Australian soldiers and civilians who had surrendered near Tol Plantation on Wide Bay during these same operations.

### Translation

Technical and specialist language poses a dilemma for all translators and this is certainly no different in military histories. Military terminology is filled with words familiar to the lay person but which possess nuances and technicalities. This translation was often guided by terms used by the compilers of the Australian official history series. These in turn were influenced by translations and glossaries provided by the wartime Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS). At other times, consideration was given to the target audience, to conventions of military terminology, to official and popular terms, and to the function or meaning of terms.

Many of the names given to campaigns described in the *War history series* are unfamiliar to English readers. The campaign over the Owen Stanley Range was called either the “Mo Operation” or the “Port Moresby overland offensive”. The Milne Bay campaign is known in Japanese as the “Rabi Operation” owing to the planned Japanese landing near the village of Rabi on the north shore of Milne Bay. The planned blockade between Australia and the United States was the “FS Operation”.

One of the difficult aspects of the translation was to provide accurate renderings of place names in the text. The Japanese assigned names to some geographical features in areas of their control. These names were often approximate pronunciations of local names, such as *Oibi* for Oivi or *Isuraba* for Isurava, while many others, such as Kokoda, Buna, and Gona, translated directly with little confusion. Elsewhere, such as around Rabaul early in the campaign, newly constructed Japanese names were applied to local geographical features. This was probably because the Japanese lacked detailed information about these areas prior to their landing and needed to identify them for planning purposes. Some examples are: Araozaki for Laweo Point, Fujimi Bay for Ataliklikun Bay, Kita (North) Point for Tawui Point, Kusunose Bay for Nordup, and Naka (Central) Point for Praed Point. The two main airfields around Rabaul – Lakunai and Vunakanau – were simply called Eastern and Western airfield respectively. In some cases, the compilers of the original text were unsure of the exact location of localities in the documents. Every effort has been made to match these to known localities in the translation, but some remain unidentified and have been rendered as they appear in the original text.

Basic ranks in the Japanese armed services during the Second World War were described with terms common across the services. *Taishō*, for example, could be translated as “general” or “admiral” depending on the service. A further complication is that English ranks differ by country. For example, the Japanese rank *sōchō* is equivalent to an American sergeant major, but to an Australian staff sergeant. Because the readership of this translation is assumed to be primarily Australian, Australian equivalent terms have been used. Units and formations posed other problems. For example, the Japanese formations *rentai* and *daitai* have been translated as “regiment” and “battalion”. While few would argue with this choice, it is worth noting that the function and structure of a Japanese regiment was similar to an Australian brigade. Both were commanded by a colonel and contained around 6,000–7,000 men. The unit type *rikusentai* has elsewhere been translated as “marines”. This term, however, is so strongly associated with the US Marine Corps that we chose to translate it as “naval landing party”, which was the term adopted by ATIS and used in the Australian official history. Some terms have no direct equivalent translation in English. The army air formation *hikō sentai* has been translated variously in the past as “air regiment”, “air combat group”, or even “squadron”. In this translation, the term “sentai” will be retained, as it is now commonly used in English texts. The term “squadron” is used more correctly as a translation of *hikō chūtai*, though even this term is often translated as “air company”.

Euphemisms which appear in the text are often culturally loaded with meaning and associations and do not translate easily. One example is *gyokusai*, which was used to refer to the complete destruction of the Buna Garrison in January 1943. The term literally means “smashing jewels” and refers to the idea of the glorious death of a soldier in the service of the emperor, often in a campaign with little or no hope of success. Some have translated *gyokusai* as “banzai charge” or “suicide attack”. “Glorious sacrifice” has been used in this translation to avoid ideas of despair and failure common in the English sense of suicide, and to impart some sense of the ideology behind the word.

Japanese forces were reluctant to publicly admit failure or defeat. The most famous instance was contained in the emperor's surrender speech, when he announced that "the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage". During the war, reports of enemy casualties and war results were often exaggerated or blatantly misrepresented. Some element of this remains in the text of the *War history series*. The compilers did not always weed out wartime casualty reports or carefully cross-reference Allied sources, resulting in some discrepancies with Allied histories. The most conspicuous of these in the text is the claim that the United States had lost two aircraft carriers, *Saratoga* and *Yorktown*, during the naval battle of the Coral Sea on 8 May. *Yorktown* was damaged but made Hawaii for repairs, and it was *Saratoga's* sister ship, *Lexington*, that was the significant Allied loss of the battle. The US Navy damages were correctly attributed later in the text, but the wartime misinformation was not corrected in the earlier reference.

Another aspect of the reluctance by the Japanese forces to admit defeat, either by an enemy or by the situation, concerned description of retreat. "Withdrawal" was not in the vocabulary of the Japanese army, which preferred the term "*tenshin*" – literally "advance in a different direction". In such cases, orders were couched in terms of making preparations for future offensives, rather than accepting the situation where a defensive position or a tactical withdrawal was required. This reliance on offensive campaigns was a major weakness of Japanese infantry tactics when adapted to the jungle and island battlefields of the Pacific. An example of this occurred after the decision had been taken to abandon the overland offensive against Port Moresby. The commander of the South Seas Force was ordered to "assemble his main strength in the Isurava and Kokoda areas and secure these as a base for future offensives". In reality, the situation in the region dictated that these were never more than staging points for a withdrawal to the coast around Buna, Gona, and Giruwa.

Japanese names in the text have been given in the traditional Japanese order, that is, family name followed by personal name. All notes which appear in the text were included by the original editors of the work. Any notes added by the translator have been incorporated in footnotes at the bottom of the page. Detailed references which were contained in the original text can be viewed in the online version of the translation ([www.awm.gov.au/ajrp](http://www.awm.gov.au/ajrp)).

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Steven Bullard  
October 2006

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## *Introduction*

The main aim of the southern operations at the outbreak of the Greater East Asian War was to secure the natural resources of the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>1</sup> This involved mounting surprise attacks on British Malaya and the US-occupied Philippines, and using these areas as a stepping stone for an early invasion of the Netherlands East Indies. In addition to securing areas of natural resources, the idea was to construct a “line of defence” along the Sunda Island archipelago.

If the event that the Japanese attacked Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, the US Pacific Fleet had planned to curb the Japanese advance by undertaking attacks in the Marshall Islands area, by disrupting sea transport routes, and by conducting air raids on strategic areas. In addition, the US had decided to provide support to Allied nations to mount defensive operations in Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies areas.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Japanese Combined Fleet prepared for operations based on the fundamental policy of destroying the US Pacific Fleet in the waters of the inner south Pacific islands. While Palau, Saipan, Truk, and elsewhere were raised as bases for this purpose, Truk was considered the most important base.

Imperial General Headquarters incorporated the invasion of the Bismarck Archipelago in the south Pacific into the sphere of strategic plans, which were developed in November 1941.<sup>3</sup> This was based in the notion that Truk would not be safe while Rabaul remained in Allied hands.

The Japanese forces offensive operations, which began at the outbreak of the war with the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, had progressed fairly smoothly in all theatres of operation. Consequently, the army and navy cooperated in late January 1942 to invade Rabaul and key surrounding areas. The army committed the South Seas Force, an infantry group based on three battalions, to these operations.<sup>4</sup>

Thereafter, naval landing troops, acting in concert with army infantry companies, advanced into strategic locations at Lae and Salamaua in eastern New Guinea, and on Bougainville in the Solomon islands. In May, naval units occupied the island of Guadalcanal, and Tulagi on Florida Island.<sup>5</sup>

At that time, Imperial Headquarters had completed attacks on key areas in the southern region. Recognising that the main base for Allied counter-attacks would be the Australian mainland, Imperial Headquarters planned a blockade operation to isolate Australia from the US. This would involve attacks on the islands of Samoa, Fiji, and New Caledonia, the main air and sea relay bases between Hawaii and the Australian mainland. The army formed the 17th Army (based on 12 infantry battalions), and the navy the 8th Fleet, in response to the requirements of this operation.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, after many twists and turns, the decision was ultimately made to attempt an overland attack against Port Moresby, on the south coast of New Guinea, through the Owen Stanley Range. The South Seas Force, which had undertaken the attack against Rabaul, was appointed to the task. The advance party landed at Buna in July 1942, with the main strength of the force landing in mid-August. The advance on Port Moresby began, with troops carrying 16 days of supplies on their backs.<sup>7</sup> Imperial Headquarters had judged that the Allied counter-offensive in the South Pacific would not commence until after the start of 1943, so they were cautiously investigating operations in the Indian Ocean and against Chungking.<sup>8</sup> However, preparations for Allied counter-offensives in the South Pacific had proceeded much more quickly than Japanese planners anticipated.

A fleet of seven warships began shelling Lunga Bay on Guadalcanal at 4.13 pm on 7 August 1942. The Allied counter-offensive in the Solomon islands, with an eye on the ultimate prize of Rabaul, had now begun.<sup>9</sup> The naval units on Guadalcanal and Tulagi, who were responsible for establishing an airfield and a seaplane base, were no match for the full-scale Allied counter-offensive.

There was little true appreciation that this was the beginning of the Allied counter-attack.

The Ichiki Detachment (based on one infantry battalion), which was heading to Ujina from Guam, was hastily despatched. The detachment landed on Guadalcanal on 18 August and began its attack during the night of 20 August. Following that, the Kawaguchi Detachment (four infantry battalions) was quickly dispatched from Palau, landing on Guadalcanal between 30 August and 7 September. Attacks were then made during the nights of 12 and 13 September. The attacks of both the Ichiki and Kawaguchi Detachments, however, ended in

failure.<sup>10</sup> During this time, fierce air and sea battles raged around the island. These battles had a significant flow-on effect for the land battles by both detachments.

Since the start of the war on 8 December the previous year, army units had virtually swept all before them across a range of battlefields. The reality of defeat and failure, however, sent a shock wave across all theatres of operation. How could this situation be handled, and what was the reaction going to be? This was a major headache, even one that raised wider war leadership issues.

The result of the battles on Guadalcanal also had an impact on the South Seas Force, which was at that time thrusting towards Port Moresby in New Guinea. The force commander, on 14 September, made the determination based on orders from the army to begin a difficult withdrawal operation.<sup>11</sup>

Imperial Headquarters and local army commanders all felt that if Guadalcanal could be retaken, then the situation in the South Pacific could be salvaged. Full-scale preparations were consequently undertaken in late September 1942.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, fierce battles were being fought in Europe between German and Soviet armies within the great curve of the Don River and at Stalingrad. On the Chinese mainland, thorough successes along the entire Zhejiang–Jiangxi line encouraged discreet preparations for No. 5 Operation against Chungking.\*

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\* Japanese operations in Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces were designed to prevent the build up of Chinese air strength in the region. They were also motivated in part by US air raids on the Japanese mainland: US pilots received aid from locals in these provinces when they ditched their planes short of the planned landing zones after the raids.

## ***Chapter 1. Offensive operations against Rabaul and surrounding strategic areas***

A convoy of Japanese forces landing craft set out for Rabaul, a key strategic site in the South Seas some 5,000 kilometres from Tokyo, at 11.40 pm on 22 January 1942.

The flares launched by the Australian forces gave sharp focus to the white chop raised by the ships, as the crescent moon shone through the wispy clouds covering the ocean.<sup>13</sup>

The curtain had been lifted on the desperate struggle that would continue for the next three years: 220,000 men of the Japanese army and navy were to be committed to the land operations in the South Pacific.

The army had deployed the South Seas Force, based on the 144th Infantry Regiment of the 55th Division (from Shikoku), and the navy had sent the main strength of the 4th Fleet.

Since the start of the war, Japanese operations in the south had progressed smoothly. By early January on the Malaya front, Japanese troops had advanced the best part of the way to Singapore, and had swept down to the strategically important Kuala Lumpur. In the Philippines, the capital Manila was completely occupied on 2 January 1942. Even in the Pacific, Guam had been occupied on 10 December and Wake Island on 23 December 1941. The invasion of Rabaul occurred within the context of offensives at other key areas in the South Seas, such as at Balikpapan on Borneo, Kendari in the Celebes, and Ambon in the Moluccas.

The overall strategic superiority of the Japanese and Australian misjudgment of Japanese landing positions meant that the Rabaul operation went very smoothly.

The navy occupied Kavieng on the north-west coast of New Ireland at the same time as the Rabaul offensive, and then attacked Surumi (Gasmata) on the south coast of New Britain.

At that time, the forward observation line for the defence of Australia was considered to consist of Vila in the New Hebrides, Tulagi on Florida Island, the Buka Passage at Bougainville, Namatanai in central New Ireland, and Lorengau on Manus Island. The invasion of Rabaul and its surrounds breached this observation line, resulting in the immediate commencement of Allied aerial attacks on 24 January, the day after the landing.

### **Strategic issues concerning Rabaul**

#### Background to offensive operations in Rabaul

The concept of adopting a defensive position and then luring the US fleet to an ambush and defeat in battle near Japanese waters had not altered as a fundamental strategy of the Japanese navy since the idea was formulated in the Meiji period.\*

The waters near the Japanese mainland were initially chosen as the site of this decisive battle. However, advances in military technology and the changing strategic situation resulted in a re-evaluation in 1936 that moved the site to the seas west of the Marianas (with a reconnaissance line in the Marshall Islands). By 1940, the seas to the east of the Marianas and to the north of the Marshall Islands were the planned location.

Focusing on this strategy, Truk Atoll in the Caroline Islands had become the major forward base for the Japanese Combined Fleet. Rabaul lay approximately 2,800 kilometres to the south in the Bismarck Archipelago, territory administered by Australia as part of the British Commonwealth. In the event of war with Britain and the United States, particularly with the development of the B-17, Japanese Imperial Headquarters became concerned that Truk would be vulnerable from attack by air units stationed at Rabaul. The occupation of Rabaul was therefore necessary to prevent this kind of attack and to ensure the safety of the fleet base at Truk.

The Combined Fleet, the strike force for these operations and responsible for strategic campaign planning, realised the importance of air superiority, and viewed the campaign as a series of airbase offensive and defensive operations. The Marianas, Caroline Islands, and Rabaul were considered the main base line, so great importance was placed on Rabaul to support the extreme right flank of this line.

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\* The Meiji period was from 1868–1912.

Control of Rabaul would prevent its future development as an air and navy base to threaten Truk, and reduce the Allies' ability to advance into the Solomon Islands and to the north coast of New Guinea.

In this way, although there were minor differences of opinion between the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters and the Combined Fleet concerning the strategic importance of Rabaul, there was absolute agreement as to the necessity of its occupation.

#### Problems concerning the despatch of army troops

In planning carried out in August 1941 for future operations in the southern area, the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters had determined the strategic importance of occupying Rabaul in preparation for future battles against the US navy. The navy had strongly requested a combined force to undertake the initial offensive operation. Army high command realised the need for ground troops to support navy operations in this area, but considered that naval landing troops would be the most appropriate force. The army's view, regardless of the importance placed on Rabaul, was that deploying army troops would be outside the scope of army force deployment. In particular, the assistant chief of staff, Lieutenant General Tsukada Isamu, strongly objected, saying that, "Deploying a small army force to isolated islands at the ends of the earth is like scattering salt in the ocean."<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the "Bismarck Islands" were included as an essential area to occupy in the Imperial Army's strategic plan developed in the case of war with Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands and presented to the emperor on 3 November 1941. According to the outline of strategic orders, "The South Seas Force will seek an opportunity to cooperate with the navy to invade Rabaul and seize its airfields."<sup>15</sup>

This outline clearly states not the "outbreak of war", but "seek an opportunity". Something had happened to change the army's mind concerning the deployment of troops.

#### Relation to the Malaya operations

It was an unwritten law in the development of strategic planning following the outbreak of war that responsibility for operations on the continent lay with the army, in the Pacific with the navy, and that operations in the South-West Area would be shared. The army, which was responsible for the Malaya invasion, estimated on the basis of the conditions at the end of September 1941 that, owing to the air and naval strength of the Allies at Singapore, progress of the operation along the Malayan peninsula would be extremely slow. They concluded that it would not be possible for the 38th Division, which was in Canton, to directly advance south to Sumatra before the units that would have left from eastern Borneo via the Java Sea. Consequently, as a result of the combined study meeting of staff officers from Imperial Headquarters and the 16th Army held on 28 September, it was proposed that the South Seas Force be sent to Palembang in Sumatra after its invasion of Guam, in order for units to reach the oilfield region as quickly as possible.<sup>16</sup>

However, the navy, which had responsibility for the area, had planned to secure the oilfields at Miri (Borneo) at the start of the campaign. Further, they had strongly petitioned for Rabaul, Ambon, and Kupang (Timor) to be quickly invaded according to the progress of the war, but they did not have the required troop strength.

As October arrived, further discussions resulted in the army and navy agreeing to cooperate. The navy would provide air units to hasten conclusion of the army's Malaya operation. For its part, the army would send the South Seas Force to assist the navy's invasion of Rabaul. However, modifications were made, with the South Seas Force to be transferred to the 16th Army (Netherlands East Indies invasion) after the completion of the Rabaul operation.<sup>17</sup>

[Editor's note: Strategic plans for the South Seas Force's invasion of Guam had been in preparation since 1923, so there was no problem per se with the deployment of army troops.]

### **Basic preparations for the offensive**

#### Formation of army units

The formation of the South Seas Force, which had the fundamental responsibility for the Guam offensive, made steady progress while preparations and research were undertaken during the planning for the Rabaul offensive.

Orders for the mobilisation of the South Seas Force were delivered on 27 September 1941, and were enacted on 1 October in Marugame in Shikoku. The force was to be led by the commander of the infantry group of the 55th Division, and was formed around one infantry regiment and one artillery battalion.

Mobilisation was completed by 4 October. The main formation of the force is outlined as follows:<sup>18</sup>

Commander: Major General Horii Tomitarō  
55th Infantry Group Headquarters  
144th Infantry Regiment (see note)  
55th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Company (less one platoon) plus 55th Cavalry Regiment Rapid-fire Gun Squad (two machine-guns, one rapid-fire gun)  
55th Mountain Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion (three companies, 12 guns)  
55th Engineer Regiment, 1st Company (four platoons) plus Materials Platoon (part strength)  
55th Division Signals Unit (part strength, two wired squads)  
55th Supply and Transport Regiment, 2nd Company (motorised)  
55th Division Medical Unit (one-third strength)  
55th Division 1st Field Hospital  
55th Division Veterinary Workshop (one-third strength)  
55th Division Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (part strength)  
47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (type B, one company)  
10th Independent Engineer Regiment, 3rd Company (less one platoon)  
Shipping Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment (part strength)  
37th Anchorage Command (part strength)  
105th Sea Duty Company (one platoon)  
1st Shipping Signals Unit, 15th Platoon

Lines-of-communication matériel, including one engagement of munitions, fuel, medical supplies, six months' veterinary supplies, and five months' food supply (including two months' supply in transit) were issued from Hiroshima (except for clothing, which came from Sakaide).<sup>19</sup>

The nominal strength of the force was 5,000 men, 1,000 horses, and 100 vehicles, with approximately 50,000 tons of maritime transport required.

[Editor's note: The 144th Infantry Regiment consisted of regimental headquarters, three battalions, an infantry artillery company, signals unit, and munitions squad. A battalion comprised three infantry companies, one machine-gun company (four guns), and one battalion artillery platoon (two guns). An infantry artillery company comprised two regimental guns and two rapid-fire artillery guns. A signals unit had a Type-5 radio (however, the regimental headquarters signals squad had a Type-3 radio).]

[Editor's reference: One engagement of munitions is the basic amount presumed to be required for battle. While this amount will vary according to the circumstances, it generally includes 2,000 field mountain gun rounds, and approximately one thousand 15-centimetre howitzer and 10-centimetre machine-cannon rounds.]

#### Navy preparations

By October 1941, the army had agreed that the South Seas Force would cooperate with the navy in operations in the Central South Pacific Area.

The navy unit responsible for these operations was the South Seas Fleet (based on the 4th Fleet) under the leadership of the 4th Fleet commander, Vice Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi. The 4th Fleet was formed in the fleet reorganisation of 1940 and given the main responsibility of the South Pacific Area under the command of the Combined Fleet. On 5 November, the duties of the 4th Fleet were contained in operational instructions issued to the Combined Fleet by Imperial Headquarters (Navy Department), as follows:

Units based on the 4th Fleet will be responsible for the defence of islands in the South Pacific Area, for patrolling the region, and for protecting shipping transport routes. In the event of the outbreak of war, these units will invade Wake Island, and with cooperation from the army, invade Guam. When the opportunity arises, they will then attack strategic locations in the Bismarck Archipelago.

Further, enemy forward bases in the South Pacific Area will be attacked and destroyed as deemed appropriate.

The day after these instructions were received by the Combined Fleet, the following “Operational order no. 1” was issued to the South Seas Fleet:

Stage one operational policy

The South Seas Fleet will invade and destroy strategic locations in the region and make preparations against the enemy fleet in Australian waters.

Stage one phase one: From the time of preparations to begin the war to 30 days after the landing of army troops in the invasion of the Philippines.

Commander

4th Fleet Commander

Strength

[Stated below]

Main responsibilities

1. Defend and patrol the area of responsibility
2. Invade Wake Island and Guam
3. At an appropriate opportunity, prevent the utilisation of enemy airbases in the Howland Island area
4. In response to the situation, invade Rabaul

Operational outline

1. As soon as possible attack Wake Island and Guam. In addition, patrol and defend the area of responsibility and prepare for mobilisation by the US and British fleets.
2. [Omitted by editor]
3. Invade Rabaul and other key areas with the cooperation of the mobile carrier force according to the “No. 2 method for strategies against the US fleet”.

[Editor’s note: The “No. 2 method for strategies against the US fleet” was a strategic measure of the Combined Fleet against the US fleet. In the case of the outbreak of war, and if the mobile carrier force has difficulty attacking the US fleet, then:

1. Advance units (6th Fleet, mainly submarines) will observe the US fleet and undergo a surprise attack, and according to the situation, will attack the airbases at Howland Island, Tutuila, and Fiji, etc., with an appropriate force.
2. The mobile carrier force (1st Air Fleet) will establish a strategic area in preparation for the US fleet.]

Phase two of the operation was “up to 40 days after the completion of landing of army troops in British Malaya”. Phase three was “up to the completion of stage one operations in the Southern Area”. Main responsibilities were divided according to these phases.

According to navy orders, it is clear that the object of Imperial Headquarters offensives was to secure key areas in the Bismarck Archipelago, while the Combined Fleet had indicated it had targeted Rabaul with the South Seas Fleet. The breakdown of the timing of the Combined Fleet’s “Stage one phase one” was different to that of the army.

Announcement of the order of battle and instructions on preparations for the offensive

The army issued “Great army order no. 555”, which outlined the order of battle of the South Seas Force, on 6 November, the day after the navy orders were promulgated.

[Editor’s reference: The order of battle consists of the organisational, command, financial, and medical measures of the operational army issued by the emperor at the time of war or emergency.]

The force commander, Major General Horii Tomitarō, presented himself to Imperial Headquarters on 8 November after receiving the orders. He was given the following instructions concerning preparations for the operations by the army chief of staff.

Great Army Instruction No. 992<sup>20</sup>

Instruction

Instructions hereby given are based in Great Army Order No. 558.

1. Preparations for operations of the South Seas Force will be in accordance with the South Seas Force commander. An outline of operations of the South Seas Force and central agreements of the army and navy concerning the operations of the South Seas Force are contained in the attachment.
  2. The South Seas Force commander will have preparations for the operation mostly completed by the end of November.
  3. Central Defence Headquarters will assist the anti-aircraft defence and patrolling of the South Seas Force in the Bonin Islands region using the defence units of that area.
  4. Plans in preparation for the execution of this operation will be kept in great confidentiality.
- 6 November 1941

Great Army Instruction No. 992 Attachment 1<sup>21</sup>  
 Operational outline of the South Seas Force  
 6 November 1941  
 Imperial Headquarters Army Department

No. 1 Operational objective

1. To invade the strategic locations of Guam and the Bismarck Archipelago, and to suppress the menace of the enemy in the South Pacific islands area.

No. 2 Operational policy

2. The South Seas Force will attack Guam in cooperation with the navy, and then attack and secure the airfields at Rabaul when the conditions are favourable.

No. 3 Operational leadership outline

3. The South Seas Force will begin the operation after confirmation of the first air strike against the United States.
4. The South Seas Force will, in cooperation with the navy, land and attack Guam.
5. After securing Guam, its defence will be handed over to the navy. At an appropriate opportunity, the force will assemble at Truk and, with the cooperation of the navy, invade and occupy Rabaul on New Britain and secure the airfields.
6. At the most opportune time, after this operation is completed, the force will hand over the garrison to the navy and assemble its strength at Palau.
7. Landings will be undertaken in principle in the face of the enemy to sweep away the resistance of Allied army, navy and air forces.

No. 4 Operational outline

8. Navy air units will begin operations at Guam after confirmation of air attacks on the Philippines.
9. The South Seas Force, in readiness in the Bonin Islands, will land on Guam with the cooperation of the navy after confirmation of the first air strike against the United States.
10. The main strength of the force will attack Apra Harbour from the rear after landing, while a part-strength force will occupy the capital, Agana. After that, pockets of enemy resistance will be mopped up.
11. When mopping-up operations are completed, the garrison will be handed over to the navy. The South Seas Force will assemble at Truk under the protection of the navy and then make preparations for operations in the Bismarck Archipelago.
12. In as far as the conditions of the naval protective force allows, the South Seas Force will, in cooperation with the navy, land in the vicinity of Rabaul in New Britain when the opportunity presents, and then proceed as soon as possible to attack and occupy airfields in the area.
13. As soon as the situation permits after the completion of the occupation of Rabaul, the South Seas Force will hand over the garrison to the navy and assemble in Palau.

No. 5 Staging points and transport

14. The outline of transport and staging points following on from the execution of the operation will be carried out according to diagram 1. [Editor's note: Diagram 1 is not in the possession of the War History Office.] Great efforts must be taken to ensure that the staging and preparations for the operation are kept secret.

Great Army Instruction No. 992 Attachment 2<sup>22</sup>  
 Army–Navy Central Agreement Concerning the Operations at Guam and Bismarck  
 6 November 1941  
 Imperial Headquarters Army Department  
 Imperial Headquarters Navy Department

No. 1 Operational objective [Editor's note: As above]

No. 2 Operational policy [As above]

No. 3. Operation commencement

The offensive will begin after confirmation of the first air strikes against the United States

No. 4. Operational outline

1. At the beginning of the operation, navy air units in Saipan will attack and destroy enemy fleet defence installations on Guam.

2. The navy will protect the transport of army troops to Guam and assist in landing operations.
  3. The main strength of the army force will attack Apra Harbour after landing, while elements of the force will occupy the capital, Agana. After that, pockets of enemy resistance will be mopped up.
  4. After Guam is secured, the army will hand over the garrison to the navy, and under their protection, re-deploy to Truk to prepare for operations in the Bismarck Island area.
  5. The navy will undertake aerial reconnaissance of the Bismarck Islands and carry out appropriate bombing operations.
  6. The army and navy will cooperate to invade Rabaul when appropriate and within the limits of naval protective capabilities. Further, the navy will occupy the airfield at Kavieng if the conditions are suitable.
  7. As soon as the situation permits after the completion of the occupation of Rabaul, the army will hand over the garrison to the navy and assemble in Palau.
- No. 5 Staging points  
The staging points are as follows.  
Guam operation: Bonin Islands  
Bismarck operation: Truk Island
- No. 6 Unit deployment  
Army: South Seas Force (based on three battalions from the 55th Infantry Division)  
Navy: units based on the 4th Fleet
- No. 7 Command  
The army and navy will cooperate.  
However, army and naval landing party units will be under the combined command of the officer with highest authority for operations on land.
- No. 8 Defence duties  
Appropriate arrangements will be made between the army and navy commanders in the area concerning defence on land.
- No. 9 Communications  
The navy will have responsibility for the army's logistics liaison communications. All others will be in accordance with the "Army-navy central agreement concerning communications for Southern Area operations".
- No. 10 Supply and medical  
The navy will assist as necessary with the transport of provisions and the evacuation of army casualties.
- No. 11 Operation date and standard time  
1. Date and time of the operation  
The date will be calculated from the commencement of Southern Area operations according to imperial orders.  
2. Standard time  
The time used will be Central Standard Time.
- No. 12 Command agreement between the army and navy  
The commanders of the South Seas Force and the 4th Fleet will enter into an agreement in Tokyo or another appropriate location as soon as possible after a determination is reached concerning the commencement of the operation.
- No. 13 Intelligence  
Intelligence will be collected by Imperial Headquarters prior to the issue of separate orders.
- No. 14 Operational names and strategic maps  
1. Operational names  
Guam operation: G Operation  
Bismarck operation: R Operation  
2. Strategic maps  
Indication of position will be according to exclusive military location maps.

The following points are of great interest concerning these operations:

1. The objective of the operation, namely "to invade the strategic locations of Guam and the Bismarck Archipelago, and suppress the menace of the enemy in the South Pacific islands area", established a fundamentally defensive position for the operation.
2. The scope of the operation was indicated to be from the time of the landing on Guam to the attack on Rabaul.
3. The transfer from Guam to the Rabaul operation was modified by the expression, "as the conditions of the protective strength of the navy allows".
4. Command for this joint land and sea operation was shared by the army and navy. However, command for land operations was unified under the officer with the highest responsibility.

5. After the completion of operations both in Guam and Rabaul, the army was to hand over responsibility to the navy and regroup in Truk and Palau respectively.

Specific issues and modifications to these fundamental conditions will be addressed in the following chapters.

#### Condition of the South Seas Force at the beginning of the Pacific War

Following these executive instructions, the South Seas Force in cooperation with the navy, boarded nine transports and departed Sakaide Harbour in Shikoku heading for Guam. The force assembled and prepared for the operation in the harbours of Hahajima in the Bonin Islands on 28 November 1941.

On 2 December while still in Hahajima, the commander of the force received a great army order concerning the start of the offensive operation. The force set out for Guam at 9 am on 4 December under the protection of the 4th Fleet.\* The convoy passed Rota Island en route, and began a three-way landing at around 2.30 am on 10 December. There was no large-scale opposition to the landing, and by mid-morning key areas of the island were occupied by the army and navy.

On the same day, navy forces occupied Makin Island and Tarawa Island north of the Gilbert Islands. The attack on Wake Island had also begun without success, so the South Seas Force remained in readiness at Guam.<sup>23</sup> Later in the month, on 23 December, the second offensive against Wake Island was successful, after which preparations for the offensive against Rabaul began in earnest.

#### Cancellation of the transfer of the South Seas Force to the 16th Army

The army initially had problems using the South Seas Force for the Rabaul offensive. As stated earlier, the result of this was that “as soon as the situation permits after the completion of the occupation of Rabaul, the South Seas Force will ... assemble in Palau”.<sup>24</sup> The plan was modified further so that the force would subsequently be transferred to the 16th Army, which was responsible for the invasion of the Netherlands East Indies. However, this transfer was cancelled during the planning stage owing to the following circumstances.

According to the situation in November 1941, it was estimated that the South Seas Force would require at least forty days to invade Guam and Rabaul and then assemble in readiness near Palau. The Southern Area Army had greatly desired a speedy resolution to the southern operation, so it was not possible to anticipate only the advance of the South Seas Force for the invasion of Ambon and Kupang by around 20 January 1942. Consequently, it was decided in operational planning that “the South Seas Force and elements of the 38th Division” would attack in these areas.

An agreement was subsequently reached on 14 November at the Iwakuni navy airbase by the navy’s Netherlands East Indies Force (3rd Fleet) and the 16th Army. It was decided that “as a general principle, Ambon and Kupang will be attacked with part of the 38th Division (B Detachment)”.

The text of the agreement relating to the South Seas Force was as follows:

3. The South Seas Force will assemble in readiness at Palau at x+40 days, and be transported to the main strength of the army at Camranh Bay as soon as possible.
4. According to the circumstances, the South Seas Force will replace the B Detachment and land at Ambon and Kupang. According to strategic requirements at that time, elements of the B Detachment will be transferred from the Hong Kong area to Palau.  
In any event, this is agreed up to x+40 days. Command of the 3rd Fleet will be notified by the commander of the 16th Army.

Incidentally, in the situation that had developed in the thirty days since the start of the war on 8 December, the 38th Division had landed on Hong Kong and progressed smoothly with the operation.

In the Pacific Area, the South Seas Force had remained in readiness on Guam after the completion of the offensive operation on the island. Subsequently, the Rabaul offensive was inevitably delayed. This resulted in the 38th Division being given responsibility for the invasion of Ambon and Kupang.

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\* All references to times in the text relate to Tokyo standard time, which was 2 hours earlier than local time.

The staff of the Southern Area Army held a coordination conference in Saigon on 21 December with Colonel Hattori Takushirō, the head of the 2nd (Operations) Section of Imperial Headquarters. It was formally stated to the Southern Area Army that “the operation will not be altered even though the South Seas Force will not reinforce the 16th Army”.<sup>25</sup>

It was through this transition that Imperial Headquarters terminated the transfer of the South Seas Force to the 16th Army. The effect of this can be seen in the issue of the following instructions:

Great Army Instruction No. 1,068<sup>26</sup>

Instruction

This instruction is based on Great Army Order No. 584.

1. Following on from the completion of the offensive against R, the commander of the South Seas Force will secure the area around <blank> regardless of the “Army–navy central agreement concerning the operations at Guam and Rabaul”. However, it should make preparations for redeployment to operations in other areas.
  2. The commander of the South Seas Force will transport part of its packhorse strength to Japan (including necessary handling troops) and temporarily place them under the 55th Division commander.
- 4 January 1942

[Editor’s note: The <blank> in this text is presumed to be “R”.]

Although the actual text of this instruction was contained in several lines, its meaning was extremely significant. As stated above, the army had expressed some reluctance to despatch troops, but eventually agreed to proceed “to Palau after the completion of the Rabaul offensive”. The significance lies in the change to “secure the area around [Rabaul] ... and make preparations for redeployment to operations in other areas”.

Because the Southern Area Army had a surplus of troops, it would be easy to understand the cancellation of the transfer if the force was returned to Palau under the direct command of Imperial Headquarters. The placement at Rabaul under the command of Imperial Headquarters, however, given that the army itself had considered that “deploying army troops would be outside the scope of utilising army military forces”, meant that the army had changed its position. The reason for this change is thought to be as follows.

The formal determination of the “Outline of future war leadership” that followed from the management of the offensive operations at the start of the Pacific War was in effect until early March 1942. The instruction to secure Rabaul was discharged on 4 January. The success of the navy’s attack on Pearl Harbor and operations in the sea off Malaya, and the speed of the army’s occupation of Hong Kong, Manila, and Malaya, were better than anticipated at the start of the war. The conditions of the war, such that the Netherlands East Indies operations could be advanced by one month, led senior staff officers to begin investigating operations against Port Moresby, which is the subject of a later chapter. These instructions, in the period prior to the issue on 2 February of official orders for the Port Moresby operation, must be seen in this context as preparations for the campaign.

Consequently, because the merits and faults of this instruction leave the determination to invade Port Moresby and the “Outline of future war leadership” open to debate, they will be examined in more detail below.

#### Offensive orders from Imperial Headquarters

The following orders were issued to the commander of the South Seas Force on 4 January 1942, the same day as the above-mentioned instructions. He was busy at Guam with preparations for operations according to the prearranged plan.

Great Army Order No. 584<sup>27</sup>

Operational orders

1. The operations of the Imperial Army and Navy are progressing favourably.
2. The commander of the South Seas Force will cooperate with the navy and invade “r” as soon as possible after the middle of January.
3. The chief of staff will provide detailed instructions.

[Editor’s note: It is presumed that “r” is an error for “R” (Bismarck Archipelago).]

## Orders to the South Seas Fleet

Meanwhile, the navy commander, Vice Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi, on 5 January issued “Top secret South Seas Fleet operational order no. 7”, which outlined the invasion of Rabaul and other key strategic locations.<sup>28</sup>

The disposition of units and main responsibilities according to this plan were as follows:

1. R Invasion Force
  - a. Main unit
    - In cooperation with the South Seas Force of the army, invade the R region and destroy any enemy in the locality. In addition, establish a base for navy air operations.
    - i. Protection of the army
    - ii. Invasion of Rabaul in cooperation with the army
    - iii. Establishment of a base in the R region
    - iv. Defence of the R region
    - v. Cooperation to provide navy air operations from the R region
  - b. Detachment
    - i. Invasion of Kavieng
    - ii. Establishment of a base
    - iii. Defence of Kavieng
    - iv. Cooperation to provide navy air operations

Orders were subsequently issued to units to assist the invasion force. These included support elements, submarine units, air units, and a mobile carrier force, etc., with the following responsibilities:

- Provide direct support for the invasion force
- Patrol and protect the St George’s Channel
- Destroy air capability in the Rabaul area
- Engage in operations against Australian air strength in New Guinea (including after the invasion of Rabaul), etc.

Details of the strength of these units will be discussed below, but many of the aircrew that formed the main strength of the navy’s air flotilla had participated in the attack on Hawaii and were experienced and highly skilled.

The unit responsible for the establishment and defence of the base after the invasion operation, as mentioned in the operation orders, was the same 8th Special Base Force that participated in the offensive. This will be discussed below.

## Formation and strength of navy units

The formation and strength of navy units outlined in “Top secret South Seas Fleet operational order no. 7” were as follows:

1. Main force
  - Command: 19th Squadron Headquarters
  - 19th Squadron (*Okinoshima, Tsugaru, Ten’yō Maru, Mogamikawa Maru*)
  - 6th Torpedo Squadron (*Yūbari*), 29th Destroyer Squadron (*Oite, Asanagi, Yūnagi*), 30th Destroyer Squadron (*Muzuki, Yayoi, Mochizuki*)
  - Kiyokawa Maru, Kongō Maru*, 5th Gunboat Squadron (*Nikkai Maru, Seikai Maru*)
  - 56th Submarine Chaser Squadron (*No. 5 Kotobuki Maru, No. 8 Tama Maru, No. 3 Toshi Maru*)
  - 14th Minesweeper Flotilla (*Tama Maru, No. 2 Tama Maru, Hagoromo Maru, No. 2 Noshiro Maru*)
  - Maizuru 2nd Special Naval Landing Party (part strength), 7th Establishment Squad (*Kōkai Maru, Takahata Maru*), 5th Base Force 8-centimetre Anti-aircraft Unit (four guns)
  - No. 2 Kaijō Maru*, several fishing vessels
2. Detachment
  - Command: 18th Squadron Headquarters
  - 18th Squadron (*Tenryū, Tatsuta*)
  - 23rd Destroyer Squadron (*Kikuzuki, Uzuki, Yūzuki*)
  - Kinryū Maru, Goyō Maru, Azumayama Maru*
  - Maizuru 2nd Special Naval Landing Party (main strength), 5th Base Force 8-centimetre Anti-aircraft Unit (two guns), Kashima Naval Landing Party (one company strength)

When divided into type, this force comprised three light cruisers, two minelayers, nine destroyers, two special cruisers, one special seaplane carrier, two special minelayers, two special gunboats, three special submarine chasers, four special minesweepers, and five other vessels.

The main strength of the units cooperating with the invasion force included four heavy cruisers in support, six submarines, an air unit of 41 aircraft, and a mobile fleet based on four carriers (with approximately three hundred aircraft), two battleships, and two heavy cruisers.

### **Geographical description of Rabaul and Allied forces dispositions**

#### Geographical description of Rabaul

Considering the range of aircraft in early 1942, a 1,000 kilometre patrolling area centred on Rabaul would incorporate the Solomon Islands to the east, most of eastern New Guinea to the west, and half of the Solomon Sea to the south. New Ireland was draped over Rabaul to the north and extended towards the Admiralty Islands in the north-west. This was the sphere of activity at this stage. Within this, eastern New Guinea was an unfamiliar wilderness, and the Solomon Islands, Bismarck Archipelago, and Admiralty Islands were all isolated on the far edges of civilisation.

This region was mostly covered with mountains, valleys, and dense jungle. Moss thrived in the shadows under the canopy of the huge trees. Level ground was flooded in time of heavy rain, and low-lying areas were boggy marshland. In addition to the climatic conditions of heavy rainfall and severe heat, diseases such as endemic malaria, dysentery, and tropical fevers were rife.

Rabaul, the capital of the Australian Mandated Territory, was the only city in the region. With a population of around four thousand, the city was equipped with street lights and telephones. Rabaul was reached from the Australian mainland via the Coral Sea and served as the access route for Papua, Lae, Salamaua, the Bismarck Archipelago, and on to Truk. It was the primary communications route for Hawaii, Samoa, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, the Bismarck Archipelago, and Truk. Rabaul was consequently an excellent base for an operational army, and would serve as a route for an advancing force into the southern area. From the opposite perspective looking north, securing Rabaul would enable Truk to be attacked, and would threaten the various Japanese forces stationed on the left flank in the central Pacific.

#### Allied forces dispositions

The strength of Allied forces at the time of the start of the offensive was judged by the Japanese from the available sources to be as follows:

The enemy has despatched troops to key areas in New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and the Solomon Islands as one line in its stance against Japan. In addition to strengthening these defences, airfields continue to be established at Tulagi, Kavieng, Rabaul, Madang, Lae, Wau, Salamaua, Samarai, Port Moresby, and elsewhere.

It seems that Rabaul is the enemy's base of operations in the region, with a defensive strength of approximately fifteen hundred troops plus air units. Although there is no intelligence concerning Allied troops garrisoned at Kavieng, it seems that several hundred locals are undertaking patrolling duties, in addition to the establishment of an advanced airbase.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning the Allied naval strength, it was determined that "although not confirmed, it seems that a strength of two A-class cruisers and four B-class cruisers from England, and two B-class cruisers from the United States have assembled in the southern waters of Australia".<sup>30</sup>

According to postwar investigations, the defence of New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and the Solomon Islands at that time was entrusted to Australia.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the disposition of troops was as follows: the main strength of one Australian independent company, in addition to a native volunteer rifle unit, was sent to Bulolo in New Guinea (approximately 15 kilometres north of Wau). Part strength companies were advanced to Wau, Lae, and Salamaua, with detachments sent to Lorengau in the Admiralty Islands, Kavieng and Namatanai on New Ireland, Buka in Bougainville, and Tulagi on Florida Island.

The garrison at the strategically important Rabaul was strengthened from March 1941. The disposition of troops by December was approximately as follows:<sup>32</sup>

Commander: Colonel Scanlon  
Two companies from the 2/22nd Battalion of the 23rd Brigade  
New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (approximately 100 men)  
17th Anti-tank Battery (104 men including command)  
Two 6-inch naval guns  
Two 3-inch anti-aircraft guns (51 men including command)  
Royal Australian Air Force unit (ten Wirraway aircraft, four Hudsons)  
One squad from the 10th Field Ambulance

The actual strength was around fourteen hundred men. From July 1941, however, an independent company under the command of a major had been stationed in Kavieng. In addition, it was judged that the troops stationed in Port Moresby had been reinforced by January 1942 to the following strength:

One infantry battalion  
One 6-inch naval gun battery (two guns)  
One 3.7-inch anti-aircraft company (four guns)  
Numerous anti-tank guns  
Numerous aircraft  
This amounts to a total of approximately three thousand troops.

When compared to the above-mentioned Japanese estimates, the number of troops despatched by the Japanese forces seemed adequate. However, what was significant is that the Allied coastal naval patrols, which were highly influential to the movements of forces on both sides, were probably not given adequate consideration by the Japanese. These coastal patrols provided “instant reports of discoveries of dubious happenings, suspicious vessels, floating mines, or other events related to the defence of the country”. Consequently, reports of the Japanese attack force, down to flights of individual reconnaissance planes, were delivered to headquarters in Port Moresby.

### **Operational preparations**

As previously noted, the South Seas Force spent approximately one month in Guam making preparations and undergoing training for the offensive against Rabaul. The cooperating naval force, the South Seas Fleet, made its preparations for the operation at Truk. There was sufficient time for preparations for both the army and navy after the completion of the offensive operation against Guam. There was an intimate understanding and mutual intent in the relations between the army and navy.

### Gathering of intelligence

Although an outline of the climatic conditions and geography of the Rabaul area was known from pre-war intelligence, the South Seas Force had learned a lesson from the Guam offensive, which was unexpectedly difficult owing to insufficient reconnaissance of the landing sites. The South Seas Force coordinated with the navy to place army intelligence staff (Major Ikezoe Mitsunori of the 144th Infantry Regiment, which formed the main strength of the South Seas Force) on board navy reconnaissance flights. Major Ikezoe left Guam on 30 December and remained in Truk for about one week. Two reconnaissance flights were undertaken over the target area during this period. Major Ikezoe’s surveillance focused on:

1. Placement and number of guns
2. Placement and number of barracks
3. The condition of obstacles in the area of the landing site.<sup>33</sup>

It was felt that knowledge of the geography of Rabaul was understood sufficiently from pre-war sources. The purpose of the intelligence flights was to focus on the situation of the enemy.<sup>34</sup>

### Selection of a landing point

The choice of landing site is the most essential element in a landing operation. There were three proposals for the location from the investigations, as follows:

Proposal 1: First land at Kokopo and secure a position, then invade Rabaul.

Proposal 2: Land on the northern coast to the west of Rabaul and attack Rabaul from the rear.

Proposal 3: Undertake multiple landings near Rabaul and attack from several fronts. Specifically, directly attack the township, attack the airstrip, and land on the coast between Tawui Point and Praed Point and directly attack along the main road to Rabaul.\*

The condition of the landing site for proposal 1 was favourable, but English troops had landed at this part of the coast against German colonial troops during the First World War. Consequently, it was to be expected that this location would be heavily guarded and the advantage of the attack lost.

The strategic strength of rear attacks made proposal 2 a strong plan. There was a high probability, however, of damage to the landing force from coral reefs when landing on the coast. It also seemed from reconnaissance that some artificial barriers had been erected. Furthermore, the plan was disadvantaged by early detection from scouts that would in all likelihood be positioned on Watom Island.

The landing site for proposal 3 was suitable. The streets of Rabaul could possibly be approached from the blind spot between the artillery batteries at Tawui Point and Praed Point. However, a direct attack on the city and airfields of Rabaul seemed at first glance somewhat reckless. Further, there was intelligence that the ground to the west of the Lakunai (eastern) airfield had subsided and was covered with trees, making the arrival of landing craft difficult.

As a result of an investigation into the advantages and disadvantages of these three proposals, the commander of the South Seas Force adopted a modified proposal 3: a three-pronged attack focusing on both airfields and the coast between Tawui Point and Praed Point. The aim of the commander's plan was to exploit the lack of Australian numbers by attacking from all quarters so that the airfields could be quickly overrun before defences could be organised.<sup>35</sup>

There is no documentary evidence for the intelligence evaluation on which the commander of the South Seas Force based this judgment of the situation. However, Major Toyofuku Tetsuo, who was attached to the force headquarters, recalled the situation as follows:

From the general lay of the land and position of barbed wire entanglements, the enemy had placed great stock in the dispositions in the coast at Talili Bay and near Nordup. It was judged that there was probably not a large strength positioned to the south of Raluana Point. In any case, if battalion strength was positioned defensively in Rabaul, then there would be a weaker deployment up to that point. Consequently, it was unknown whether or not they would suspect the location of the landing site and quickly mobilise troops to that area. [Editor: A short section has been omitted here.]

We felt that enemy air attacks on our convoy would most certainly come when we drew near to Rabaul. However, (owing to the lack of numbers) we didn't expect to initially receive attacks from large formations while the fleet was still under way. Furthermore, we didn't fear attack from enemy naval units because we had control of the sea at that time. It was suspected, nevertheless, that attacks would come from submarines.

#### Agreement between the army and navy

A detailed agreement with the navy, based on the "Army-navy central agreement" previously transmitted to the commander of the South Seas Force from Imperial Headquarters on 6 November 1941, was later arranged as follows.

First, on 23 December, the South Seas Force chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Toyoshige, flew to Truk from Guam to undertake discussions with the navy concerning a preliminary agreement. Next, the commander of the South Seas Force, along with Chief of Staff Tanaka and the infantry regiment and battalion leaders, arrived in Truk on 4 January. The following day, the "Army and navy agreement for the offensive operation on Rabaul" was signed aboard the battleship *Kashima* with the commander of the 4th Fleet, Vice Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi. Further details of the agreement were established on 10 January aboard *Yokohama Maru*, at berth in Apra Harbour, through discussions with the commander of the 19th Squadron, Rear Admiral Shima Kiyohide, who had just arrived from Guam.<sup>36</sup>

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\* Several geographical features in the campaigns were given names by the Japanese. For example, Tawui Point was called Kitazaki (Northern Point), Praed Point was called Nakazaki (Central Point), Raluana Point was called Minamizaki (Southern Point), Talili Bay was called Tanoura, and the coast near Nordup was called Kusunose Bay.

There were no fundamental differences of opinion stated in the deliberations for the agreement between the army and navy, and it seemed to progress smoothly, although no complete copy of the actual agreement survives. However, the content of the agreements on 5 and 10 January can be deduced to a certain extent based on the offensive orders of the South Seas Force on the army side, from extracts of the navy's orders to the units involved in the R Operation, and from the surviving complete text of the agreement of the army and navy that was established for the invasion of Guam.

#### Operational orders for the South Seas Force

As mentioned above, the commander of the South Seas Force received orders from Imperial Headquarters on 4 January to "cooperate with the navy and invade as soon as possible after the middle of January". The main agreement with the navy was completed on 5 January, so the head of various independent units above battalion level were gathered in the former government offices in Guam and given "South Seas Force orders for the Rabaul offensive".

The main strength of the force would be deployed to attack Rabaul township and Lakunai (eastern) airfield. It was conceived that another strong force would occupy Vunakanau (western) airfield, while the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment, led by the regimental commander, would land between Tawui Point and Praed Point and invade along the main road to Rabaul from the coast. One detachment from this force would attack Lakunai airfield from the sea to the south of Praed Point. One infantry battalion directly led by the force commander would land to the south of Vulcan Crater and attempt to occupy Vunakanau airfield.

An outline of the landing and details of troop dispositions for this complicated landing operation was delivered in instructions separate from these orders, along with documents outlining discussions resulting from the above-mentioned agreement with the navy. The landing operation orders issued to the regimental offensive group outlining the regulation and distribution of reinforcements and munitions, including discussion of how much food needed to be carried, was a model for landing operations, and is quoted below:

Horii Operational Order B, No. 34<sup>37</sup>  
7 January 1700 hrs, Guam former government offices

1. The conditions at Rabaul are according to appendix 1 and actual aerial photographs.
2. The force will attack Rabaul.  
The main strength will attack Rabaul township and Rabaul airfield, while another strong force will occupy Vunakanau airfield.
  - a. The operation will start at 1 am on 23 January. Operation plans are according to appendix 2.
  - b. Units from the navy will cooperate with the operation. The disposition of these units is contained in appendix 3.
  - c. The disposition of shipping transport units is contained in appendix 4. [Editor's note: Original document missing]
  - d. Plans for air protection units are contained in appendix 5. [Editor's note: Original document missing]
  - e. An outline of the landing is contained in appendix 6.
  - f. Sunrise, sunset, phases of the moon, and tides at the landing point are detailed in appendix 7. [Abbreviated]
3. The Kusunose Unit and the Kuwada Unit will mobilise according to appendix 8.
4. The Disembarkation Duty Unit (exclusive use of small landing craft, armoured and high-speed) will be responsible for debarking the main strength of the force.  
They will lead the disembarkation as follows.
  - a. The disembarkation unit related to each transport squad for the first and second landings will receive instructions from the commander of the front-line infantry unit (regimental or battalion commanders).
  - b. The transport vessels will move into Rabaul harbour after dawn as quickly as the artillery and aerial bombing situation permits, and then endeavour to proceed from the landing area towards the area of the Rabaul township.
  - c. Disembarkation at Rabaul should be undertaken at individual landing sites within the area where military strength is applied at the front line, at an appropriate time after ceasing hostilities.
  - d. All ships will be appropriately utilised after the second landing to strive for the most effective disembarkation.
5. The Cavalry Unit (less one artillery gun squad) will be used in reserve. Its main strength will land on foot with the force headquarters on the second and third landings and follow the headquarters in train.
6. The Supply and Transport Unit will proceed to the front line and cooperate with each unit at key locations.
7. The Field Hospital will supply a combat first-aid squad for each troop transport and be responsible for administering first aid to casualties behind the front-line units.

Emergency aid stations will be established on *Clyde Maru* and *Venice Maru*. Preparations will be made to accommodate casualties during the battle.

Preparations will be undertaken for a hospital to be established in the existing hospital facilities in Rabaul.

8. The Medical Unit will land behind the front line and will be responsible for housing casualties.

9. The Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit will continue to land necessary personnel and equipment behind the front-line battalions and make key preparations to supply water to the front line.

10. The Veterinary Workshop will land following the disembarkation of horses and be responsible for providing them first aid.

11. Each unit indicated in articles 7 and 10 above will be given arrangements by the regimental commander for items directly related to front-line fighting.

Items not directly related to combat at the front line will be unloaded into the city after the transport ships return to Rabaul harbour.

12. Disposal of munitions in addition to formal equipment will be carried out by the infantry battalion commanders within the front line when necessary, as follows:

a. Engineer troops (amount to be used by one infantry battalion at the front)

Small flamethrower	2
Medium inflatable boat	5
Hand-thrown incendiary bomb	10 (5 more for the Praed Point offensive unit)
Grenade launcher signal rocket (1935 model)	10
Propellant smoke grenade	50
Demolition charge	5
<i>Akazutsu</i> poison gas *	100 (Use prohibited unless special authorisation)
Hand-thrown gas canister	100 (Use prohibited unless special authorisation)

b. Use only up to one-sixth of stocks of ammunition for infantry guns, grenades, and artillery.

c. Details of the amounts and transfer of these will be given by Lieutenant Tsurumi Seitarō.

13. The landing party will receive the following provisions from the captain of the ship to be carried.

a. Two days' supply of B field rations

b. Two lunch-box meals

c. Two packs of sweets

d. Each company and platoon will carry in addition two days' supply of provisions

14. The code word has been determined as follows:

“South Seas victory”

15. The night signals for the first landing will be as follows:

Company commander and above, including regiment and battalion commander, white X-shaped sash on the torso.

Platoon commander, white sash from the left shoulder to right waist.

Squad commander, white band around left arm (10 centimetres wide).

16. My movements will be as follows:

a. I will be at the old government office, and will board *Yokohama Maru* at 12 noon on 10 January.

b. I will accompany the second landing on 23 January and then move according to appendix 8.

Force Commander Horii Tomitarō

#### Distribution method

Regiment commander and above will coordinate with all independent units and infantry battalion commanders. Commanders will gather and be given oral instructions, then written instructions to be distributed.

However, map names will be erased and kept secret. The landing date, as well as appendices 4 and 5 will be placed in sealed envelopes with orders to open after boarding and vessels are under way.

[Editor's note: Appendix 1 to these operational orders has been omitted by the editors.]

Horii Operational Order B, No. 34, Appendix 2

Operation timetable

Date	Activity

\* A vomiting agent such as Diphenylcyanoarsine (DC).

4 Jan	Army and navy agreement	
5 Jan	Army and navy agreement	Submission of personnel equipment certificates (1000 hrs) Load condition inspections (1000 hrs)
6 Jan	Army and navy agreement	Transport headquarters inspection of vessels (until evening)
7 Jan		Arrangements concerning load (0830 hrs) Transmission of orders from transport headquarters (1500 hrs)
8 Jan	Embarkation and loading (horses excluded)	Various agreements following on from transmission of orders for offensive operations (from 1600 hrs)
9 Jan	Embarkation and loading (horses excluded)	Transmission of orders to units directly attached to force (1600 hrs) Transmission of battalion commander's orders (continued from previously)
10 Jan	Embarkation and loading (horses excluded)	Supplementary preparations for the army and navy agreement (1400 hrs, <i>Yokohama Maru</i> )
11 Jan		Bulletin from the landing craft maintenance captain (0800 hrs, <i>Yokohama Maru</i> )
12 Jan		Combined training (from 1500 hrs 11 January to 0600 12 January) Study group (Army: 1000 hrs, <i>Yokohama Maru</i> ; Navy: 1400 hrs) Fitting out of landing craft
13 Jan		Loading of horses, then loading of landing craft
14 Jan		Force commander's instructions Fitting out of landing craft Supplementary preparations for operation

#### Horii Operational Order B, No. 34, Appendix 3

##### Participating naval strength

##### 1. Escort Fleet

Commander: Rear Admiral Shima Kiyohide

a. Main force (same as listed in "Formation and strength of navy units" above.)

##### 2. Air units currently in Truk

Commander: Captain Yokoi Toshiyuki

Yokohama Air Corps, half detachment (14 large flying boats)

Chitose Air Corps, half strength (nine fighter planes, 18 medium attack planes)

##### 3. Secondary escort units

##### a. Support Group

6th Squadron

Commander: Rear Admiral Gotō Aritomo (*Aoba* (flagship), *Kinugasa*, *Kako*, *Furutaka*)

##### b. Truk Area Defence Group

Commander: Vice Admiral Moizumi Shin'ichi

##### c. Saipan Area Defence Group

Commander: Rear Admiral Kasuga Atsushi

##### 4. Cooperating Force

Commander: Vice Admiral Nagumo Chūichi

1st Air Fleet main strength

3rd Squadron half detachment

#### Horii Operational Order B, No. 34, Appendix 6

##### South Seas Force landing operation overview

##### 1. Overview

The arrival of the first landing group will be approximately 1.5 hours prior to first light. The main strength of front-line troops will be in the second landing group. Subsequent landings will build up the strength of these units, which will be at independent fighting strength before noon on that day.

##### 2. Landing

a. The timing from entering the anchorage point to arriving at land will be as follows:

2300 hrs – enter anchorage  
0000 hrs  
0100 hrs – begin landing  
0200 hrs  
0300 hrs – arrive at shore  
0400 hrs – first light  
0500 hrs – dawn

b. The transport ships will range approximately 6 kilometres offshore to facilitate the boarding of landing craft (those landing within the bay will range to the east of the harbour).

c. The commencement of the landing will be enforced for each transport squad by the commander of the force, and by heads of infantry regiments and battalions.

d. Operation of landing craft will be organised into squads for each battalion in the first landing. Returning craft will operate individually.

### 3. Utilisation of transport vessels

Transport vessels will land at Rabaul harbour after daybreak as conditions under fire and mines in Simpson Harbour permit.

If the transport vessels remain under fire, they will be disengaged to a suitably distant evacuation point.

4. Liaison between the force command and the navy to facilitate the movement of the transport vessels for disembarkation will be the responsibility of Major Morimoto.

Movement of the transport vessels in response to danger or the situation of the enemy will be the prime responsibility of the navy in close liaison with the force command and Major Morimoto.

Movement of the transport fleet will be carried out as a rule by the lead vessel.

## Combined training

The transmission of orders to lower units and various supplementary agreements with the army and navy followed for three days after the commander issued the offensive operational orders. Units were embarked during this time. Combined training between the army and navy was conducted from the morning of 11 January to the following morning on the seas off Apra Harbour. The content of this training was as follows: escort vessel formations and landing craft operations at night.

The seas were very rough during the night, so the transport vessels could not retrieve the landing craft. However, as the result of a joint study group during the morning, it was declared that “landing is achievable”.<sup>38</sup> The commander of the force gathered the various unit commanders and captains of vessels aboard *Yokohama Maru* the following day, 13 January, and delivered instructions for achieving the objectives of the operation.<sup>39</sup> The entire convoy was at anchorage in Apra Harbour with all preparations complete. All to be done was to wait for departure the following day.

## **The offensive**

### The advance of the transport fleet

At 1.30 pm on 14 January 1942, the nine ships of the South Seas Force transport fleet set out from Apra Harbour in Guam escorted by the navy and the main invasion force. The fleet was arranged in the “No. 3 defensive formation”, with the South Seas Force commander boarding *Yokohama Maru* as planned. The area had been patrolled in advance for submarine activity on 14 and 15 January by reconnaissance flying boats belonging to the 18th Air Corps of the Saipan 5th Base Force.

While the weather on 15 January was cloudy, with fairly high waves, the following day was clear, with visibility to approximately 50 kilometres. On this day, the forward patrol had been taken over by the reconnaissance flying boat belonging to the special seaplane tender *Kiyokawa Maru*. On 17 January, at 7 am, *Kiyokawa Maru* rendezvoused on the western side of Woleai Atoll with the 6th Torpedo Squadron (less the 30th Destroyer Squadron) and the 4th Force (*Seikai Maru*, *Kōkai Maru*, and *Takahata Maru*, carrying the 7th Establishment Squad), which had arrived from Truk. Upon meeting, these units regrouped into a “No. 1 defensive formation”.

Around this time, the following episode also took place: at about 6.25 pm, a mast was sighted on the horizon from the right deck of the warship *Tsugaru*, about 30 kilometres away. At first this was thought to belong to *Yūbari*, the leading ship of the 6th Torpedo Squadron, but at about 7.20 pm, the crew of *Tsugaru* realised that it belonged not to a warship, but a sailing ship.<sup>40</sup> Later, Captain Inagaki of *Tsugaru* recorded the following passage as an addendum in the margin of his detailed battle report:

At first, on seeing the sailing ship, we suspected it to be MacArthur fleeing from the Philippines to Australia in a small vessel, and pursued it with great excitement. As we put on more speed, however, our doubts increased, and finally upon catching up with the vessel, we realised that it was a Japanese fishing boat. For their part, the crew had believed themselves to be under pursuit from an American destroyer; and such was their relief upon finding out the truth that they gave us a rousing “Banzai”, and presented our crew with three or four tuna fish from their catch.

Several clouds were scattered across the dawn sky on 18 January. The naval commander of the offensive force received a semaphore message from the commander of the South Seas Force, that stated: “Profound thanks for our naval escort. A ceremony is being arranged to mark our crossing the equator and your safe and speedy return to port.”

Up to this day, the flying boats of *Kiyokawa Maru* had continued their advance patrolling of the route. Upon notice that the force had now entered the range of the Allied forces, the ships of the fleet now broke formation, spreading out to a distance of about 5 kilometres.<sup>41</sup>

The morning of 19 January dawned cloudy, with a visibility range of approximately 40 kilometres. At 6.30 am, the regiment leader on board *Cheribon Maru* received the following message from *Tsugaru*, which carried the 2nd Squad, which consisted of the main force of the 144th Infantry Regiment:

1. The plateau to the north of the government office is defended by two high-angle anti-aircraft guns. The 2nd Squad is expected to infiltrate from an anchorage point beyond Laweo Point.
2. In the event that *Tsugaru* engages enemy artillery, command will be issued, depending on the circumstances, from *Kongō Maru*, and in extraordinary circumstances, according to the discretion of unit commanders.

At 9 am, upon receipt of the message, the regiment commander signalled the following reply:

1. We plan to occupy the artillery positions to the north of the government office by dawn. The anchorage point for the 2nd Squad will be adopted as planned, paying attention to the battery on Tawui Point.
2. Anticipating that elements of the army force will attack the battery at Tawui Point by 4 am, the shelling of this area by the naval fleet will cease from that time onward.

At 9.53 am, the captain of *Tsugaru* expressed his willingness to act as the regiment commander saw fit, provided no major damage was sustained by the transport fleet prior to the landing. This message was also relayed to the captain of *Kongō Maru*, but it is not recorded whether details of the coordination plan were acknowledged by the commander of the South Seas Force.<sup>42</sup>

The morning of 20 January dawned cloudy, and at 5 am, upon crossing the equator, the force was in high spirits, proclaiming their achievement as “the first by an army formation since Emperor Jinmu”.<sup>\*</sup> As they approached Mussau Island, the fleet began to take precautions against their smoke being sighted from the island. At 5.30 pm, the destroyer *Yūnagi* detached from the formation in order to reconnoitre Mussau Island. In the afternoon of this day, the R Invasion Force detachment (based on the 18th Squadron) had left Truk Atoll for Kavieng.

The morning of 21 January dawned calm and bright. At last, the fleet was drawing close to Rabaul, and at 4.40 pm, the South Seas Fleet (4th Fleet) issued the following wireless: “From approximately 1140 hrs on 21 January, until the afternoon, an enemy flying boat engaged the Japanese 6th Squadron.”<sup>43</sup>

According to postwar sources, a message was issued from this flying boat stating only that “Four enemy cruisers are approaching Rabaul, from a position about 120 kilometres south-west of Kavieng.” Despite this, the New Guinea Area Headquarters at Rabaul decided that an attack must be imminent, and began to ready their troops for immediate action, including the despatch of emergency troops to man likely points of landing.<sup>44</sup>

From the morning of 22 January, the task force could just glimpse the islands of New Britain and New Ireland despite poor visibility. According to the diary of Rear Admiral Shima, the commanding officer of the R Invasion Force, “The morning brought frequent sudden showers and dense cloud all around us. As we gradually drew closer to the coastline, we were very much worried about being taken unawares by the enemy. Indeed, it was truly by the aid of the gods that we were not troubled by them.”

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<sup>\*</sup> Jinmu was the semi-mythical founder of the Japanese imperial line.

Meanwhile, the fleet approached its moment of truth, as the shady outline of New Ireland drew closer.<sup>45</sup>

At 4.20 pm, the following signal was sent out by the flagship *Okinoshima*: “*Tsugaru* and the 2nd Squad will break with the battle formation according to plan.”

Six hours later, all formations had arrived at their designated places of anchorage. The fierce north-westerly breeze, which had been a source of some concern, had dropped, and the sea was calm and quiet.<sup>46</sup>

#### Air battles by navy air units

Air operations at Rabaul and its surrounding areas can be divided into three basic types:

1. Operations carried out by the 24th Air Flotilla as the “Air Unit” according to unit formations made under “South Seas Fleet operational order no. 7”.
2. Operations carried out by the 1st Air Fleet as the “Mobile Carrier Fleet” according to the same unit formations.
3. Operations carried out by a “Special Air Attack Unit” that was put together for this purpose by the Mobile Carrier Fleet.

A summary of air operations, to place the land campaign within an appropriate context, is as follows:

1. The main task of the 24th Air Flotilla (composed of half each of the Yokohama Air Corps and the Chitose Air Corps) was the “complete destruction of enemy air power in the Rabaul area”. Their force consisted of a total of 41 aircraft: 14 large flying boats, 9 fighter planes, and 18 medium attack planes. The flotilla opened its campaign on 4 January 1942 after it received orders to commence reconnaissance and attack operations. The flotilla bombed Rabaul on that day with 16 aircraft, followed by further attacks on 6 and 7 January. On 9 January, while the flotilla was carrying out reconnaissance of the entire Solomon Islands region between Bougainville and Tulagi, it discovered two flying boats and their tender in the Buka Passage, as well as a medium flying boat in Tulagi Bay. Although the flotilla sent a unit to the Buka Passage the following day to attack and destroy the flying boat tender, it was unable to find the vessel. On 15 and 16 January, the flotilla carried out its fourth and fifth successive air attacks on Rabaul, and from 19 January, it expanded its reconnaissance and patrol duties towards the Solomon Islands and New Guinea.
2. It had been decided that the Mobile Carrier Fleet, which was based on the 1st Air Fleet, would cooperate with the attack on Rabaul by the South Seas Fleet under unit dispositions determined by the Combined Fleet for phase one of stage one operations. Their duty was the destruction of enemy air power in the New Guinea and Bismarck Islands region, as well as to patrol this region in advance of the invasion force. The unit reached Truk Atoll on 14 January, left it again on 18 January, and made the first attack on Rabaul on 20 January. A total of 109 planes took off from the aircraft carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Zuikaku*, and *Shōkaku*. From 11.45 am, the unit attacked the Rabaul airfield and the coastline for about 20 minutes, destroying oil tankers and five or six enemy aircraft. On 21 January, a force of 52 aircraft from *Akagi* and *Kaga* advanced to attack Kavieng. Following this attack, a force of 46 aircraft launched a second decisive attack on Rabaul, but the response from the Allies was feeble.
3. The 5th Air Flotilla of the 1st Air Fleet (based around *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku*) had been formed as a Special Air Attack Force whose task was to help destroy enemy air and naval forces at Lae, Salamaua, and Madang, and to provide support for operations in the Rabaul and Kavieng areas. The flotilla divided its 75 planes into two groups, which left the carriers at 9 am on 21 January. The planes attacked Allied installations, grounded aircraft and other vehicles at Lae, Salamaua, Bulolo, and Madang, and then returned safely to the carriers between 1 pm and 2.40 pm. Although the number of enemy aircraft was greater than expected, the unit sustained no damage apart from some return fire at Lae. There had been no counter-attack from Allied aircraft.

Submarine operations were also carried out in coordination with the activities of the naval units. The unit concerned was the 7th Submarine Squadron (made up of the 23rd and 27th Submarine Groups), and it had been given the duty of patrolling and attacking enemy craft in the St George’s Channel. The squadron was in the St George’s Channel area for several days from 21 January, but, although it was prepared to encounter Allied shipping, no Allied warships were sighted during this period. The squadron therefore dismantled its formation; by the end of January all vessels had returned to Truk.

#### Landing engagements

During the above-mentioned air campaigns against Rabaul and its surrounding areas, the landing fleet was finally drawing close to Rabaul. The account begins with the activities of the 2nd Squad (Kusunose Unit) as it approached the first landing point.

At 8.15 pm on 22 January, the order came to “Make preparations for landing.”<sup>47</sup>

It was a dark, moonless night, although the stars sparkled brilliant in the sky. The tide was strong and swift. At 9.48 pm, two flares erupted from the black outline of the mountains of Rabaul, some 5–6 kilometres away. As their light died down, the order came to “Prepare to enter to the anchorage point.” At that time, the last boat in the flotilla, *China Maru*, had still not been sighted. On board *China Maru* were the main strength of the 4th Company and the Mountain Artillery Battalion, who were to occupy the battery at Tawui Point. Later, at 10.35 pm, the following order was distributed: “Proceed to the anchorage and commence landing operations.”

*China Maru* had still not arrived, although the designated time had come and gone. The commander of the Kusunose Unit (Colonel Kusunose Masao) decided to proceed with only two landing craft. Landing barges began to be lowered into the sea from the transport ships from about 11 pm. *Tsugaru* left to search for *China Maru*.

At 11.40 pm, the landing craft took off en masse. The officers and men aboard the barges seemed to glide across the surface of the water under the light of the flares. The mainland was still pitch black and the men were tense, shouting to each other, “Have you been attacked?”, “Are you under attack?” Light rising from the distant volcano and the burning streets of Rabaul reflected with a weird beauty into the night sky, making finding the way relatively easy.<sup>48</sup>

Although the beach where the first wave of men came ashore was known as a “good place for landing, with a convenient beaching place”, in reality it was a 2–3 metre-high earthen cliff. Luckily, however, there was nobody about. Dense forest immediately behind the cliffs made discovery of Three Ways extremely difficult. After 30 or 40 minutes of searching, the unit located the road and set out towards the mountain pass.

It was about 5 am and the dawn was well advanced when, having overwhelmed the small band of Australian soldiers who were stationed at the pass, the Japanese troops occupied the former administrator’s residence, located on the saddle between The Mother and South Daughter. The tardy *China Maru* had rejoined the formation at about 4 am, and the 4th Company proceeded swiftly to the landing area of the main force. They advanced to Tawui Point by about 6.20 am along the northern coastal road, but did not find the artillery battery. There had been a native hut about the same size and shape as an artillery battery, but it had been reduced to rubble by the naval bombardment.

The 3rd Squad (Kuwada Unit) followed the Kusunose Unit. The Kuwada Unit, whose duty was to occupy Vunakanau airfield, was led into the berthing by *Nikkai Maru* at 10.30 pm. The unit completed preparations and began landing at 12.18 am. The main force of the Kuwada Unit (based on the 3rd Infantry Battalion) was expected to advance directly to Vunakanau airfield from the shore to the south of Vulcan. The 8th Company was to land near Raluana and take up a position on the left flank of the main force to cover the advance to the airfield.

There were low hills stretching beyond the shore, and no landmarks could be identified at night. This made it extremely difficult to confirm the designated landing points. For this reason, the 9th Company ended up straying to the north of Vulcan. The battalion commander, however, simply assumed that the 9th Company was heading for Vunakanau airfield after his main force had managed to reach the designated landing point. He was anxious to occupy the airfield without delay so as to prevent Allied aircraft from taking off and bombing Japanese troops. The problem was that the route identified on photographs was covered in jungle and could not be located. Unavoidably, the troops advanced behind engineers cutting a path through the jungle.

Meanwhile, the 9th Company faced serious resistance after landing on the north shore of Vulcan. Wire entanglements were set on the shore. The Australian official war history stated the following: “The Australians could see the landing craft and their occupants silhouetted against a boat and dumps ablaze in Rabaul harbour and township .... As they landed the Japanese were laughing, talking .... We allowed most of them to get out of the boats and then fired everything we had.”<sup>49</sup>

The 9th Company moved southwards because of this counter-attack, avoiding the front of the Australian positions. There were many gorges to cross. As soon as the Japanese attempted to assemble, the Australians began firing machine-guns and mortars. The Australians were targeting the signal shots that indicated assembly positions.

The main strength of the battalion was advancing through the jungle. The commander mistook the gun shots from the front of the 9th Company for those from Rabaul township where the 1st Battalion was mounting an attack. Day broke while the battalion was in the jungle, after which they finally reached the road on the central highland.

Given the task of occupying Raluana, the 8th Company had landed according to plan and driven out the small Australian force by 2 am to take control of Raluana Point. The 8th Company then despatched a platoon to occupy Kokopo.

The main strength of the Kuwada Unit encountered Australians troops withdrawing from Rabaul, as well as those retreating from Raluana Point under the attack of the 8th Company. The 7th Company was pivotal in these battles, unexpectedly encountering Australian troops on three occasions. At 1.15 pm they broke through to Vunakanau airfield.

#### Occupation of the Praed Point battery

The 1st Battalion of the Kusunose Unit, aboard the transports as the 1st Squad, entered the anchorage at 10.20 pm charged with the task of occupying the Praed Point battery and Lakunai airfield. The Praed Point battery was equipped with ten artillery guns. The Japanese therefore planned to move the entire convoy back a further 5 kilometres from the shore if Praed Point was not occupied by 4 am owing to the danger of the battery attacking the transport convoy. The commander of the 2nd Company, while heading for Praed Point onboard the transports, was told: "If you cannot occupy the battery by 4 am, then you must cut open your bowels and die!"<sup>50</sup> The 2nd Company advanced at 1.20 am at the head of the main strength of the 1st Battalion, and reached the landing point 1,500 meters to the west of Praed Point as planned at 2.10 am. There were some wire entanglements in place, but no Australian troops were present. The 2nd Company advanced along the coast to the east and found two destroyed 16-inch artillery guns near the point. They frantically scoured the area for the other eight guns. Time was quickly running out.

The designated time of 4 am passed without South Seas Force headquarters receiving notification of the success of the operation. The commander of the naval invasion force ordered all vessels to "move to the special anchorage position". The commander of the South Seas Force considered deploying the reserve unit, a cavalry company, at the front of the 1st Battalion, so ordered his troops to prepare for a second landing. Soon after the order had been communicated, however, three white signal flares rose from the slopes of South Daughter. As members of the force headquarters breathed a sigh of relief, the naval commander issued the order for the "convoy movement to cease".<sup>51</sup>

In actual fact, the front-line company, unwilling to give the signal without confirmation, had searched around for the remaining seven or eight artillery emplacements suggested by intelligence. It turned out that there were not ten but only two guns in the area and that the information provided had been wrong.

The main strength of the 1st Battalion advanced to the eastern shore of Matupi Island without the anticipated resistance, and the 3rd Company was deployed to the western shore. Meanwhile, as shots were continuously fired down on them from Vulcan, the battalion commander decided at 5 am to lead the 3rd Company towards Rabaul township.

#### Leadership by the commander of the South Sea Force and naval support

The commander of the South Seas Force had anticipated a great deal of resistance. He recognised the enemy's planes flying over the area and flames like signal flares on the ground at the time when *Yokohama Maru* had led the 1st Squad of the transport convoy into the anchorage.

The first landing units went ashore and the commander received radio communication and signal flares reporting successful landings from all fronts at about 2 am. The front of the main strength of the Kusunose Unit was quiet. The sound of heavy fighting could be heard for some time from the direction of Praed Point prior to the report that the artillery battery had been occupied. After the capture of Praed Point, the commander moved from *Yokohama Maru* to a barge with the cavalry company.

The weather on 23 January was fine. The sound of gunshots from various fronts stopped with the rising sun. The commander of the South Seas Force assumed that the situation of the battle had proceeded favourably. At

5.28 am, he decided to advance the cavalry company to the western shore of Rabaul harbour in order to intercept the Australian's retreat from the township.

The force commander arrived at the eastern shore of Matupi at 5.30 am. After communicating an order for all ground units to be transported to Rabaul township, he again boarded the barge and headed for Rabaul. On board he heard gunshots from the area to the north of Vulcan. While disembarking at the second pier of Rabaul harbour, he saw a cavalry company courageously landing in that area under a rain of fire that poured down from Vulcan.

The force commander proceeded to Rabaul township in search of the location of the commander of the 2nd Battalion. The commanders met near the western edge of the township. The force commander received briefings on the situation of the 2nd Battalion and the cavalry company. He then returned to Chinatown, where he met the commanders of the infantry regiment and the 1st Battalion, who provided him with more information concerning the battle. At just that time he received the following telegram from the Kuwada Unit:

Sent 8.20 am. Main strength of the 3rd Battalion currently engaging enemy troops retreating from the airfield at Three Ways to the north of Mt Seto (the central high ground). The situation around the airfield is unclear.

This prompted the force commander to order the regiment commander to deploy the 1st Battalion by barge from Rabaul harbour in order to assist the 3rd Battalion.

The 1st Battalion left Rabaul harbour at about 11.00 am, landed on the shore to the south of Vulcan, and advanced to the airfield via Raluana. They found out on the way that the airfield had already been captured by the 3rd Battalion, so the 1st Battalion decided to assemble to the east of the airfield to prepare for future operations.

The naval carrier fleet despatched a total of thirty carrier-based fighters and 18 carrier-based bombers between 4.30 am and 2.45 pm. These provided aerial protection for ground offensive units and reconnaissance on the Australian's positions. Vessels at sea contributed to the landing operations by liaising with ground units and clearing the sea around the harbour.

#### Dispositions of the Australian army<sup>52</sup>

The situation of the Australian garrison in Rabaul was changing as follows:

The commander of the garrison, Colonel Scanlan, was informed that a Japanese convoy was heading for Rabaul and that Kavieng had been attacked. He issued the following orders in the afternoon of 21 January:

1. Move all troops from the camp to the west of Rabaul, which is in an exposed position.
2. Send an improvised company under the command of a captain to Raluana to prepare for a landing by Japanese troops.
3. Prepare other companies for movement but inform troops that it is "an exercise only".

Colonel Scanlan ordered these changed dispositions to prevent losses from naval gunfire and bombardments on the assumption that a Japanese strength would land within Keravia Bay. The third order, however, later inflicted mischief on his men, as some of them went into action without essentials like rations.

Early in the morning of 22 January, the Australians sent their only remaining plane to Lae via Gasmata and buried more than one hundred bombs in the runway to destroy Vunakanau airfield. As discussed above, the Japanese navy's dive bombers had completely destroyed the Praed Point battery by 6 am.\*

With the destruction of the Praed Point battery, the evacuation of the air force, and the cratering of the airfields, Scanlan decided that the garrison could no longer fulfil its responsibilities. He subsequently ordered the destruction of all military facilities and withdrawal from the township of Rabaul.

An engineering unit was sent to destroy a bomb dump in the town at 2 pm. The blast from the explosion shattered all the valves of wireless sets in the telegraph office in Rabaul, as well as damaging the radio

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\* References to time in this section relate to Tokyo standard time, which was 2 hours earlier than local time.

transmitter at headquarters. As a result, the only means of communications with the outside world was via a telerradio that had been set up at Toma (6 kilometres south-east of Vunakanau airfield).

Colonel Scanlan judged that the main Japanese landing would take place within the harbour. He therefore moved his headquarters to the central highland, moved his front-line troops to the established camp on the west coast of the harbour and moved the reserve units to the area around Four Ways.

The redeployment of all units to their new positions was completed by 3 pm. Most civilians were being evacuated by transport vehicles, cars, or on foot along the road leading to Kokopo. Columns of black smoke rising from the heavily bombed Rabaul township darkened the sky over their heads.

The improvised company deployed to Raluana finally completed establishing its position by 9 pm. With no time to pause for breath, the Australians prepared to face the Japanese landing.

The heaviest fighting occurred on the coast to the north of Vulcan in front of the established camp. Communications had broken down after 12.30 am between the front-line troops and the battalion commander, as well as between the battalion commander and Colonel Scanlan. The Australian commanders could only hope that front-line troops provided brave resistance. The garrison commander temporarily moved the reserve unit from Four Ways to prepared positions 2 kilometres east of Vunakanau airfield and ordered them to cover the Kokopo Ridge Road.

The improvised company in Raluana began to retreat at 1.45 am. At dawn the units located on the north of Vulcan also began withdrawing. At 4.45 am, Colonel Scanlan decided to move his headquarters to Tomavatur.

After daybreak Japanese naval aircraft repeatedly dive-bombed and strafed the entire battlefield. The telephone line between the reserve unit and battalion headquarters was cut at 6.15 am. From then until 10 am, fierce battles were fought by stubbornly resisting Australians and ever infiltrating Japanese in areas between Three Ways and Taligap. When the garrison commander decided that it was useless to prolong the action, he ordered the northern companies to withdraw to Keravat River, the southern to Warangoi River, and both to hold these positions as long as they could. This virtually meant that organised resistance by the Australians had come to an end.

#### Naval offensive operations at Kavieng

The commander of the South Seas Fleet planned concurrent attacks on Rabaul and on Kavieng, New Ireland, using the R Invasion Force detachment (based on the 18th Squadron). He ordered this on 5 January, as previously discussed.

According to general information and reconnaissance by a navy flying unit, blackouts were not enforced in Kavieng, and there no signs that the airfield had been recently used. It was confirmed that Kavieng was guarded by a few hundred native soldiers and some patrol officers, but no information was available regarding the Australian reinforcements and military facilities.

The Kavieng Invasion Force left Truk on 20 January.

Air units began bombarding Kavieng on 21 January, resulting in most ground facilities being burned down. The invasion force approached the designated landing place during the evening of 22 January using this smoke as a guide. Units designated for the western shore effected a successful landing at 2.30 am on 23 January and secured the airfield. Kavieng township was completely occupied by 4 am. The eastern shore units effected a successful landing at around 4.40 am.

Neither party encountered either Australian soldiers or local civilians. The Australians had attempted to destroy the airfield by igniting aircraft fuel immediately after the Japanese came ashore, but the runway was repaired within a few days to the extent that fighters could safely take off and land.

Investigations after landing revealed that nine Australian commissioned officers, including a Major Wilson, and about two hundred servicemen had been stationed in Kavieng and surroundings. They were said to have fled to the south-east at the time of the 21 January air raids. Local residents gradually returned to Kavieng after the Japanese had occupied the island.

Naval landing troops completed mopping-up operations on the island on 24 January, and swept through Namatanai and neighbouring islands such as Ambitle Island, Mussau Island, Tabar Island, and Djaul Island between 25 and 28 January.

#### Imperial Headquarters' announcement of military achievements

Imperial General Headquarters made the following public announcement at 5.15 pm on 24 January:

1. The Imperial Army and the Imperial Navy, working in close cooperation, eliminated the enemy's resistance and successfully landed in the Rabaul area of New Britain in eastern New Guinea before dawn on 23 January. They are steadily extending their gains.
2. A special naval landing party of the Imperial Navy made a successful opposed landing at Kavieng in New Ireland before dawn on the same day.

The comment attached to the announcement emphasised the significance and effect of the operation as follows:

Rabaul and Kavieng, which were the front positions of the Australian defence, formed the most important part of the strategic communication line of Britain and the United States between their enveloping positions against Japan before and during the Greater East Asian War.

The successful capture of these areas has not only brought the destruction of British and American strategic positions but also gained us the advantage of using these positions to establish an airbase in the South Pacific and to extend our control of the skies from the western Pacific into the south Pacific. The capture of this important position, from where it will be possible to spread our influence to the Australian mainland, is extremely significant in terms of our ability to attack and menace Australia.

The United States is currently desperate to secure a strategic line linking the United States and Australia, while endeavouring to defend the Dutch East Indies and Singapore in cooperation with Australia. However, the successful capture of Rabaul and Kavieng makes it possible for the Japanese to occupy the sea around New Zealand, and increases the possibility of blockading the line of communication between the United States and Australia.<sup>53</sup>

Whether Japan was actually able to cut the line of communication between the United States and Australia as envisaged in the above statement, and whether Japan gained the absolute advantage in the war in the South Pacific, will be discussed in a later chapter.

#### Pursuit by the South Seas Force

The following describes the situation of various units of the South Seas Force during the afternoon of 23 January.

The main force of the regiment (based on the 2nd Battalion), which had landed between Tawui Point and Praed Point, advanced to the eastern outskirts of Rabaul and was engaged in clearing out the township and surrounding areas. \* The 4th Company, despatched to occupy the battery at Tawui Point, joined the main force at about 1 pm after making a detour along the western shore of the peninsula. The 3rd Battalion occupied Vunakanau airfield and was in the process of mopping up the surrounding area.

The 1st Battalion was transported from Rabaul by barge to assist the 3rd Battalion and assembled at Vunakanau airfield.

The force commander ordered an "initial thorough clearing of the surrounding area", so assigned the Kusunose Unit (the regiment main force) to the high ground to the west of Vulcan, and the Kuwada Unit (based on the 3rd Battalion) to the area between Vunakanau airfield and Kokopo. The clearing operation began on 24 January.<sup>54</sup>

The following day, the force commander concluded from the compiled intelligence that the Australian forces consisted of five infantry companies under Colonel Scanlan, one heavy artillery company, one anti-aircraft artillery platoon, and others, including approximately fifteen hundred servicemen. The commander became

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\* The original text mistakenly refers to the "western outskirts of Rabaul".

aware that the main Australian force had retreated to Ataliklikun Bay, and that elements had fled to the south of Kokopo.<sup>55</sup>

The commander also found that all Japanese civilians had been sent to Sydney in the middle of January.<sup>56</sup> The commander led the movements of all units, aiming to mop up the Rabaul area and quickly repair the airfield according to the pressing duties of the force. When the initial cleanup was completed, the navy requested “a thorough clearing of the area as it is unknown when the army will be redeployed”. As a result, the army decided to undertake a thorough pursuit from 27 January.

On 26 January, planes sent from the special tender *Kiyokawa Maru* discovered five small ships in Open Bay and one ship in Wide Bay. The main strength of the regiment then was sent to Ataliklikun Bay to conduct a pursuit attack, following the Australians along the coastline. They crossed several rivers by building temporary bridges, but jungles and swamps beyond the Vudal River impeded their advance. They had no choice but to continue the pursuit by boat. The pursuit party cleaned up major coastal points up to Lassul Bay on 28 January under the protection of a destroyer. The forces suspended the pursuit and returned to Rabaul in the evening of 29 January after the rain had made passage through the coral reef dangerous.

The force completed the clearing operation in the northern half of the Gazelle Peninsula by the end of January.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, the Japanese received intelligence indicating that the majority of the Australian forces were still in the forest to the north of Wide Bay. In response to the suggestion from the 3rd Battalion commander, the South Seas Force commander deployed a company for pursuit along the coast line to Put Put Harbour, and the main strength of the 3rd Battalion to Wide Bay by sea. They left Kokopo on 2 February and carried on the pursuit as planned during 3 and 4 February.

The Australian garrison commander, the former administrator, and others were captured during this operation, which completed the clearing and pursuit campaigns.\* The troops were then deployed in defensive positions on a line to the north of the Warangoi River and the Keravat River.

## **The conclusion of fighting**

### Direct military results

It had become clear by 10 March that the Australians had suffered the following in damage and lost matériel:

- Killed in battle: approximately 300
- Prisoners: 833
- Aircraft: 8
- Battery guns: 2
- Anti-aircraft guns: 2
- Rapid-fire guns: 15
- Mortars: 11
- Machine-guns: 27
- Light machine-guns: 7
- Rifles: 548
- Armoured vehicles: 12
- Cars: 180
- Motorbikes: 17
- Armoured boats: 3

In contrast, the Japanese losses were:

- NCOs and enlisted men killed in battle: 16
- Officers wounded: 3
- NCOs and enlisted men wounded: 46
- Horses killed: 4

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\* This was actually the government secretary, Harold Page, the most senior civil official in the region.

Allied planes appeared in the night skies over Rabaul every other day after the offensive operation against Rabaul commenced on 23 January, bombing transport vessels and ground units. The damage inflicted (not including damage to the navy) up to 5 February was as follows:

Killed: 4  
Wounded: 18  
Damage to transports: slight<sup>58</sup>

#### Development of the airbase

When the airfields around Rabaul were occupied, it was discovered that the facilities were insufficient, and they were not in a condition to be used immediately owing to damage inflicted during the invasion. Further, there were substantial discrepancies from what could be determined from intelligence photographs.

The situation after 23 January was as follows: the ground at Vunakanau airfield was soft and the airstrip was uneven because it was situated on high ground. Consequently, it was not suitable for large planes to take off and land and required paving for medium bombers. A work party of approximately one thousand men was quickly despatched from various units to assist the navy's 7th Establishment Squad. In addition, it was decided that a detachment of army engineers would provide assistance to hasten the repair effort. Furthermore, the road between the disembarkation point and the airfield was long and steep, and the terrain was also a liability.

It was expected that fighter planes would be able to use Lakunai airfield by 25 January. Further, expansion works and logging of required lumber was planned to be completed by mid-February in anticipation of the advance of 18 medium bombers. Buoys were positioned and repairs undertaken to the timber refuelling jetties in the expectation that approximately twelve seaplanes would be able to use the harbour base at Rabaul.<sup>59</sup>

The commander of the 8th Special Base Force, Rear Admiral Kanazawa Masao, who had planned to mobilise on 1 February, disembarked at Rabaul with his staff during the afternoon of 23 January. The commander took leadership of the airfield repairs by the 7th Establishment Squad and other units on 26 January based on the "Operational support for the 19th Squadron" instructions.

Seaplanes (those onboard *Kiyokawa Maru* and *Okinoshima*) began using the harbour base from 24 January, while fighter planes (from the Chitose Air Corps Rabaul Detachment) first advanced to the Lakunai airfield on 31 January.

It was possible for land-based attack aircraft (24th Air Flotilla 4th Air Corps) to advance to Vunakanau airfield from about 10 February.

By 20 February, a total of 51 aircraft, including 18 land-based bombers, 18 carrier-based fighter planes, nine flying boats, and six reconnaissance seaplanes, had been assembled at the various airfields around Rabaul.

#### Orders for a new naval formation<sup>60</sup>

The commander of the South Seas Fleet issued the following orders on 29 January after the completion of offensive operations in Rabaul:

1. Operations will be conducted according to the following third order of battle from midnight on 1 February:  
The Rabaul Invasion Force is dispersed and the Rabaul Area Force formed (command and disposition) as indicated below.  
8th Special Base Force Headquarters  
8th Special Base Force, 6th Torpedo Squadron, 14th Minesweeper Flotilla, *Tsugaru*, *Kiyokawa Maru*, *Kinryū Maru*, Kashima Special Naval Landing Party, Combined Air Unit (*Kashima*, 17th Air Corps Detachment), 7th Establishment Squad, *Kōkai Maru*, *Takahata Maru*, 4th Construction Detachment Establishment Squad, 4th Supply Detachment personnel, 105th Air Workshop Detachment personnel, 8-Centimetre Anti-aircraft Unit (5th Base Force Detachment) [Editor: The following section has been abbreviated.]
2. The area of responsibility for the 4th Base Force and the 8th Special Base Force extends to the equator.
3. Units will mobilise according to the second order of battle and existing responsibilities under operational orders, in addition to the following.

a. Bismarck area units

- i. In addition to quickly constructing the airbase at Rabaul, the Surumi area will be invaded as soon as possible and an airbase established.
  - ii. In cooperation with the army, efforts will be made to mop up enemy strengths in the Rabaul area.
  - iii. Transport routes will be secured in addition to guarding and patrolling the assigned defensive maritime region.
- b. [Editor: The following section has been abbreviated.]

The navy units responsible for the defence of the Bismarck area were formed as a result of the issue of these orders. Further, these orders were responsible for the speedy development of the airbase at Rabaul. The 8th Special Base Force Headquarters assumed responsibility from the 19th Squadron for guarding and patrolling the Rabaul area based on these orders of 1 February.

Meanwhile, the 24th Air Flotilla, under the command of the South Seas Fleet, assumed command of the newly formed 4th Air Corps and advanced to Rabaul on 14 February.

#### Violent outbreak of malaria<sup>61</sup>

There was a violent outbreak of malaria during the clean-up operations at Rabaul, especially during the pursuit of Australians in Ataliklikun Bay. Almost the entire 1st Infantry Battalion was afflicted to the extent that it was not possible to post sufficient sentries. Neither was it possible to transport the large numbers of patients with high fevers to hospital. Despite efforts to administer treatment on the spot, many soldiers perished. The physical exhaustion of the survivors had a significant impact on the outcome of later battles. Many cases of malaria emerged within the 3rd Battalion in the Kokopo area, but these were few compared to the 1st Battalion. The least affected was the 2nd Battalion in Rabaul.

The importance of anti-malarial measures in tropical warfare was underscored from the beginning of the campaign. Despite the use of anti-mosquito headgear and gloves, and the administering of preventative medicine, the reasons for such a sudden outbreak are thought to be as follows:

1. The majority of officers and men had no experience of tropical warfare, and while they had received some instruction in the dangers of malaria, the reality of these dangers had not sunk in.
2. The complete absence of malaria during the Guam offensive naturally put them off their guard.
3. When large numbers were afflicted, the senior officers and medical staff, most of whom specialised in infectious disease prevention, were initially unable to diagnose malaria.

Concerning this last point, because the diagnosis of tropical malaria was not made until several days after admission to hospital, some of the afflicted seemed to deteriorate into a state of madness.

#### **Consequences of the capture of Rabaul**

The Japanese invasion of Rabaul and key surrounding areas was intended in planning at the beginning of the war to provide an advance base to protect the naval base at Truk, and to develop the air strength on the flank during a decisive battle. The successful completion of the operation saw the realisation of these aims for the present.

The Allied uncertainty as to how to stop the Japanese juggernaut after the defeat on the Malayan peninsula and the loss of Rabaul began to impact greatly on the citizens of Australia. In fact, the general mood in Australia at that time was one of extreme alarm.

Four well-trained divisions, plus a New Zealand division, were all serving overseas with the best officers. Defence of the huge expanse of the Australian coastline was absolutely impossible by either sea or sky. With the hope of protection from Great Britain gone owing to rising tensions in Malaya and the Middle East, Australia could only look to the United States for assistance.<sup>62</sup>

On 14 February, the US army minister responded by sending the 41st Infantry Division for the defence of the Australian mainland. Transport of the approximately twenty-five thousand troops of the division, including support elements, could not be undertaken, however, until the period from mid-March into early April.<sup>63</sup>

The Allied force was faced with a crisis in early February as to how to cover this deficiency. Admiral Leary, the commander of the ANZAC area of responsibility established as an interim emergency command area, initially considered bombing Rabaul from the recently reinforced Lexington Task Force and by B-17 raids from the Australian mainland.<sup>64</sup>

The changing conditions and responses to the Rabaul invasion by both armies during mid-February will be discussed below.

Regardless of the propriety of the campaign, it was a model offensive operation conducted on a distant island.

It could be claimed that the army and navy cooperative operational outline established at the beginning of the campaign was ideal when seen from any of its elements: the strategic bombing prior to the invasion, the protection of the transport fleet, support for the landing operation by tactical air groups, and the advance of the land and naval forces.

With the exception of the Fire Support Coordination Centre (FSCC) established later by the US army for the Guadalcanal offensive, the outline of Allied counter-offensive operations after mid-1942 was largely conducted from a strategic perspective according to the operational model of the Japanese armed forces.

## *Chapter 2. The advance to the Solomon Islands and eastern New Guinea*

### **Operational plan by Imperial Headquarters**

As described previously, it was evident from 24 January 1942, the first day after landing, that the Japanese offensive operations against Rabaul and surrounding key areas were not being met by strong Allied resistance. Two airfields and the good natural harbour that protected the strategic operational area of Rabaul had fallen into the hands of the Japanese army, in addition to the outer defensive base at Kavieng.

The Yokohama Air Corps, which had advanced to Rabaul immediately after the offensive, conducted reconnaissance over Port Moresby on 24 January. They reported no more than one special duty ship and four small vessels at harbour, and only two large and one small aircraft at the airfields to the east of the township.<sup>65</sup>

Rabaul was bombed by the Allies three times after 9 pm on 24 January, resulting in damage to one army transport ship.<sup>66</sup> Night bombing raids on Rabaul were conducted in small parties by the Allies every other night thereafter, heralding the beginning of the air war of attrition between Rabaul and Port Moresby that would escalate over time. It was also a prelude for the bitter fighting that would continue over the following three years.

Offensive operations by the Japanese army against key locations in the southern area developed more quickly than anticipated, even while the bitter fighting against American and Filipino troops on the Bataan Peninsula dragged on into mid-January. Japanese forces had advanced through the Malayan peninsula, and reached the Johore Strait by the end of January. By this time the operational army in the Netherlands East Indies had placed pressure on the main island of Java through positions on Borneo, the Celebes, and the Moluccas. The army's invasion of the Tenasserim district airbase in Burma was completed with the occupation of the strategic location of Moulmein on 31 January.

In response to this situation, Imperial Headquarters undertook to advance operations for the southern area by one month, and decided to speed up the completion of the entire Burma area operations. Orders to this effect were issued on 22 January.

### Orders from Imperial Headquarters and the army–navy central agreement

The Army and Navy Departments of Imperial Headquarters commenced investigation into operations to be conducted after the completion of the opening offensives (stage one operations, Southern Area key offensive operations) from early in 1942.<sup>67</sup> The results of these investigations were incrementally adopted and implemented independently by Imperial Headquarters, or through discussion in Imperial Headquarters–government liaison committees. This process will be examined in detail in the next chapter. This chapter will discuss operations adopted by Imperial Headquarters from the end of January to early February to invade key areas in the Solomon Islands and eastern New Guinea – newly devised operations that were not included in planning at the beginning of the war.

[Editor's note: War leadership after the completion of the Southern Area key offensive operations was established with the "Outline of war leadership to be hereafter adopted" dated 7 March 1942.]

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters issued "Great navy instruction no. 47" on 29 January, while the Army Department issued "Great army instruction no. 596" on 2 February (unofficially telegraphed on 28 January). This order was promulgated as follows:

#### Orders

1. Imperial Headquarters will plan the invasion of key locations in British New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.
2. The commander of the South Seas Force will, in cooperation with the navy, invade these locations as soon as possible.
3. The chief of staff will issue instructions detailing the operation.

The army–navy central agreement on which the commanders of the South Seas Force and the Combined Fleet based the execution of this operation is cited below:<sup>68</sup>

#### Army–Navy Central Agreement Concerning Operations in British New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

1. Operational objective

To invade key areas in eastern British New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in order to blockade the communication lines between the Australian mainland and the region, and in order to control the seas to the north of eastern Australia.

2. Operational policy

The army and navy will cooperate to invade the areas around Lae and Salamaua as soon as possible. The navy will seek an opportunity to independently (or in cooperation with the army according to the conditions) invade Tulagi and secure the airbase on the island.

The army and navy will cooperate after the completion of the invasions of Lae and Salamaua to invade Port Moresby.

3. Unit deployment

Army: South Seas Force

Navy: Units based on the 4th Fleet

4. Operational outline

To be determined through discussions between army and navy commands.

5. Defence duties

The navy will have responsibility for defending the Lae, Salamaua, and Tulagi areas, and the army for defending Port Moresby.

The continuation of offensive operations into Tulagi in the southern Solomon Islands, and into Port Moresby on the south coast of eastern New Guinea was an expansion of the offensive scope of planning that had been established by Imperial Headquarters at the beginning of the war. Only a fraction of the entire force of the army and navy was committed to these operations, even though the objective was roughly 1,000 square kilometres from Rabaul. Moreover, the orders were adopted prior to conclusions emerging from overall war leadership, or even from operational leadership.

What was the purpose of these operations? Were they an attempt to incorporate the Port Moresby and Tulagi areas within the so-called “final line of offence” (opposed to the “line of defence”) of the South Pacific region; or to promote a base for direct operations against the Australian mainland, or islands in the Fiji and Samoa areas? These questions will be addressed in a following chapter.

The operational policy section of the army–navy central agreement included the indefinite conditions that “the navy will *seek an opportunity* to independently (or in cooperation with the army *according to the conditions*) invade Tulagi ...”, and “the army and navy will cooperate *after the completion* of the invasions of Lae and Salamaua to invade Port Moresby”. These consultative decisions were entrusted entirely to the field commands of the army and navy in the region.

This operation was set in motion by a great order (provisionally called a “Great army order”) issued by the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters, and by instructions (provisionally called “Great navy instructions”) issued by the chief of staff of the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters to the command of the Combined Fleet.

The navy considered this operation to fall within the scope of the fundamental responsibilities granted to the commander of the Combined Fleet at the start of the war (“Great navy order no. 9”). Consequently it was mobilised by the navy chief of staff simply according to this army–navy central agreement.

[Editor’s note: The main operational responsibilities granted to the command of the Combined Fleet based on “Great navy order no. 9” were as follows:

1. Destroy the enemy fleet and air power already in the eastern Pacific area, and attack and destroy any enemy fleet that may enter the area.
2. In cooperation with the command of the Southern Area Army, occupy and secure key locations of the southern region by invading the main US, British, and then Dutch bases in the area.]

## **Offensive operations in Lae and Salamaua**

### Military preparations before the operations

A flying boat from the Yokohama Air Corps discovered an airfield at Surumi, approximately 300 kilometres south-west of Rabaul, on 27 January 1942. There were suspicions that the Allies would use this as a relay base for attacks on Rabaul. Detailed air reconnaissance confirmed the existence of a paved airstrip and five

Western-style buildings. Further, approximately twenty buildings were discovered at Gasmata, 5 kilometres from Surumi. However, there were neither defensive installations nor an airstrip at this site.

Section 3 of orders to the South Seas Fleet, which came into effect on 1 February, outlined the responsibilities for units in the “R” area, as follows: “The Surumi area will be invaded as soon as possible and an airbase established.” This was postponed, however, because of air raids from a US task force in the Marshall Islands on 1 February. The commander of the 4th Fleet telegraphed that it would be “possible for the Surumi operation to commence after 8 February” and ordered the command of the 8th Special Base Force to undertake a limited offensive.

An outline of the operational plan was as follows:<sup>69</sup>

1. Operational objective
  - To invade the Surumi region as soon as possible and quickly establish an airbase in the area, and suppress the threat of enemy attack while at the same time strengthening our strategic preparedness. Further, to obtain a position of advantage in order to develop an aggressive strategy to blockade the communication route from the United States to the Australian mainland and the various islands of the South Pacific.
2. Operational outline
  - a. Strengthen aerial reconnaissance from the base at Rabaul
  - b. Transport troops of the Maizuru 2nd Special Naval Landing Force and an establishment unit from Rabaul in two ships and land them at Surumi and Gasmata.
  - c. One cruiser and five destroyers under the command of the 6th Torpedo Squadron, and also two cruisers and three destroyers under the command of the 18th Squadron, shall provide direct protection of this transport.
  - d. One seaplane carrier will provide direct air support for the operation.

The invasion force and support group sortied from Rabaul between 5.15 am and 6.22 am on 8 February. The heavy rain at that time provided cover for the fleet. Landings were made the following day at 4.40 am at Surumi, and at 5.00 am at Gasmata. There were no Australian troops to oppose either landing.

Munitions and supplies were immediately debarked, airfields were quickly established, and defensive preparations for the area commenced. The support vessels for the invasion force were slightly damaged during aerial attacks by small numbers of planes on 10 and 11 February.

Approximately one hundred and seventy soldiers from the naval landing force were installed as a garrison force at Surumi on 13 February, while the main strength returned to Rabaul. The formation of the Surumi Invasion Force was dissolved on 15 February.

The airfield at Surumi was long enough to service carrier-based fighters (800 metres by 100 metres) and was operational by 12 February.<sup>70</sup> The airfield had great value as a relay base for eastern New Guinea and the Lae and Salamaua areas.<sup>71</sup>

By the end of February 1942, the situation at other airfields was as follows:

Lakunai	No hindrance to use by fighters <sup>72</sup>
Vunakanau	Useable by land-based bombers; being repaired and widened <sup>73</sup>
Kavieng	1,200 metres by 90 metres unpaved strip; difficult for land-based attack planes after rain <sup>74</sup>

The 24th Air Flotilla, which provided the main air strength in the region, was called the South Seas Fleet Airbase Western Area Attack Force. Its strength at the beginning of March was as follows:

1. 4th Air Corps: based on 27 Type-96 fighters, but strengthened with 12 Zero fighters at the beginning of March. The 4th Air Corps also had 9 Type-1 land-based attack planes, but training was insufficient.\*
2. Yokohama Air Corps: 8 Type-97 flying boats.

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\* Aircraft in the text are as follows: Type-96 fighter – Mitsubishi A5M (Claude); Type-1 land-based attack plane – Mitsubishi G4M (Betty); Type-97 flying boat – Kawanishi H6K (Mavis); Type 96 land-based attack plane – Mitsubishi G3M (Nell); Zero fighter – Mitsubishi A6M (Zeke).

3. 1st Air Corps (placed under the command of the 24th Air Flotilla from the 21st Air Flotilla): 18 Type-96 land-based attack planes. The 1st Air Corps also had 9 planes at Tarawa (in the Marshall Islands).<sup>75</sup>

There were no changes to either the South Seas Force of the army after it returned to garrison duties from 5 February, or to the navy's 8th Special Base Force after the offensive against Surumi.

The army and navy held a combined Empire Day banquet on 11 February hosted by the command of the 8th Special Base Force. The commander, Rear Admiral Kanazawa, recorded in his diary for that day: "Banquet. Army officers were surprised at our Western-style food. Collaboration between the army and navy is most satisfactory." One that same day, the troops of the 25th Army in Malaya entered the streets of Singapore.

#### Dispositions of the Allied forces near Lae and Salamaua

Fighter planes were operational from the airstrips at both Lae and Salamaua. Each strip was 800 to 1,000 metres long and 100 metres wide.

There was also a small airfield at Wau, approximately 50 kilometres south-west of Salamaua. Expansion of airfields and various preparations were also continuing at Port Moresby.

Allied airbase units continued to attack Rabaul and the Gasmata region from bases in Townsville and Darwin, using Port Moresby as a relay base and Lae, Salamaua, and Wau as forward bases.

Lae and Salamaua each were staffed by approximately fifty to one hundred volunteer troops – civilians who gathered to receive military training three or four days in the week. Aerial photographs and forward reconnaissance by commanders of the invasion force revealed only what looked like a small, scattered base. There were, of course, no capital ships or aircraft stationed there.

Meanwhile, the movements of the American task force that raided the Marshall Islands on 1 February were unclear. Units were consequently on high alert owing to the high chance of further raids in the Bismarck Archipelago region.<sup>76</sup>

#### The army–navy local agreement and South Seas Force operational orders

The terms of the army–navy local agreement concerning the invasion of the Lae and Salamaua areas were agreed in principle on 13 February between the chief of staff of the South Seas Force, Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Toyoshige, who had been despatched to Truk, and the command of the 4th Fleet.

The agreement, based on this understanding, was finally established on 16 February. The main points were as follows:

1. Landing date and operational name  
Determined for 3 March, to be called "SR Operation".
2. Unit deployment  
Navy  
Formations of the 4th Fleet, as follows:  
Invasion Force: 6th Torpedo Squadron, one special naval landing force battalion  
Support Group: 6th Squadron, 18th Squadron, 23rd Destroyer Squadron  
Air Unit: 24th Air Flotilla  
Army  
One infantry battalion and one mountain artillery company from the South Seas Force
3. Offensive responsibility  
Lae: Naval landing force  
Salamaua: Army
4. Staging point and departure date  
Assemble at Rabaul, at day  $x-3$

At noon on 17 February, the commander of the South Seas Force issued orders to Major Horie Masao, the commander of the unit directly responsible for the offensive, the 2nd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment.<sup>77</sup>

1. Salamaua and Lae are important bases for the Allied air force. According to intelligence, these are being guarded by approximately 100 volunteer troops. The actual conditions are according to the attached aerial photographs.

2. The South Seas Force will invade Salamaua with the cooperation of the 4th Fleet. Special naval landing force troops will invade Lae.

The landing will be effected on day *s*.

Navy units will assemble at Nankai City [Editor's note: Rabaul] on day *s-7*.

Departure from Nankai City will be on day *s-3*.

*Yokohama Maru* and *China Maru* will be used as transport vessels. (Though both are small, approximately 30 days' provisions can be accommodated.)

3. The Horie Unit will invade Salamaua.

The navy's Escort Fleet will be comprised as follows.

Commander: Rear Admiral Kajioka Sadamichi

6th Torpedo Squadron (*Yūbari*, 29th and 30th Destroyer Squadrons)

*Kiyokawa Maru*, *Ten'yō Maru*, *Tsugaru*, *Kongō Maru* [Editor's note: *Kōkai Maru* should have been listed, but did not appear in the original text.]

4. The disposition of the Horie Unit was strengthened with the following units added to its command at noon on 20 February.

Commander: Major Horie Masao

144th Infantry Regiment 2nd Battalion (with part of the regimental cipher staff and the interpreter Sakurai)

2nd Mountain Artillery Company

1st Engineer Company (two platoons missing)

2nd Supply and Transport Company (one platoon)

South Seas Force Signals Squad (main strength: one-third of Type-3 cipher staff, and one-half of wired signal staff)

Regiment Signals Unit (part strength: two Type-5 radios, six Type-6 radios)

South Seas Force Munitions and Maintenance Squad (main strength)

Medical Unit (part strength: main strength of staff)

Anchorage Command (part strength: Lieutenant Sasaki and part staff and matériel)

Independent Engineer Company (one platoon: 2nd Lieutenant Hino, five large landing barges, five small landing barges) [Editor's note: Correctly refers to shipping engineers.]

Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Company (main strength) Shipping Signals Platoon (part strength)

Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (part strength)

Each unit will leave behind most horses and a detachment of personnel, and will submit disposition charts to the South Seas Force commander and Major Horie before noon on 22 February.

5. Staff Officer Tanaka (with Lieutenant Shiraishi and Staff Sergeant Aihara attached) shall participate in cooperating with the escort fleet and will be responsible for leadership of the campaign on the battlefield. The agreement will be according to the agreement text for the SR Operation established with the command of the South Seas Fleet.

6. I will be in Nankai City.

South Seas Force commander, Horii Tomitarō

Distribution method

Oral instruction to Major Horie on 17 February

The main points shall be distributed in printed form after distribution through the direct command of each unit.

Major Horie undertook reconnaissance of the terrain and enemy situation in the Salamaua area in a navy aircraft on 19 February, two days after receiving these South Seas Force orders. Commanders of the various units subsequently gathered at headquarters on 20 February and received operational preparation orders concerning unit disposition and transport details.

On precisely that day, the navy discovered a US aircraft carrier task force moving north-west approximately 740 kilometres north-east of Rabaul. As will be described later, this force sortied against and attacked air and surface units of the 4th Fleet. This delayed the planned landing, with discussions held on 25 February deciding on a new landing date of 8 March.<sup>78</sup>

#### Preparations for the offensive by the 4th Fleet

The attack by the US carrier task force resulted in no discernible advantage. Contact was broken on 21 February, so a golden opportunity was lost. Consequently, it was decided to continue with preparations for the invasion of Lae and Salamaua. The following orders were telegraphed to individual units on 25 February:

South Seas Fleet Operational Telegraph Order No. 109<sup>79</sup>

1. Day *s* will be 8 March.

2. All SR Operation units will remain on alert for the mobilisation of the enemy task force, and will operate in response to the requirements of the SR Operation.

3. Submarine units will undertake responsibilities as per “Top secret South Seas Fleet operational order no. 10”.

4. Airbase Force Command will mobilise all but one flight of its land-based air strength currently in Truk to Rabaul.

5. *Azumayama Maru*, *Goyō Maru*, Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Force, and 10th Establishment Squad (aboard three vessels) will conduct training during this period in preparation for the offensive.

The strength of dispositions indicated at this time was as follows:

	Command	Strength	Main responsibilities
	4th Fleet (Vice Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi)		
Lae–Salamaua Area Invasion Force	6th Torpedo Squadron (Rear Admiral Kajioaka Sadamichi)	(see attachment below)	1. To attack and destroy the enemy in the Lae and Salamaua area in cooperation with the army. 2. To secure this area, quickly establish an airbase, and cooperate with air operation units.
Support Group	6th Squadron (Rear Admiral Gotō Aritomo)	6th Squadron ( <i>Aoba</i> , <i>Kako</i> , <i>Kinugasa</i> , <i>Furutaka</i> ) 18th Squadron ( <i>Tenryū</i> , <i>Tatsuta</i> ) 23rd Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Kikuzuki</i> , <i>Uzuki</i> )	Support for Lae–Salamaua operation
Air Unit	24th Air Flotilla (Rear Admiral Gotō Eiji)	4th Air Corps (main strength Yokohama Air Corps) 1st Air Corps, <i>Kamoi</i> [Editor’s note: Submarine tender]	Assist Lae–Salamaua operation
Bismarck Area Defence Force	8th Special Base Force (Rear Admiral Kanazawa Masao)	[Abbreviated]	Assist Lae–Salamaua operation

Attachment: Lae–Salamaua Area Invasion Force

Unit	Command	Strength	Main responsibilities
	6th Torpedo Squadron (Rear Admiral Kajioaka Sadamichi)		
Main Force	Direct command	<i>Yūbari</i>	Support for entire operation
1st Force	29th Destroyer Squadron commander	29th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Oite</i> , <i>Yūnagi</i> , <i>Asanagi</i> <sup>*</sup> )	1. Defence patrols of sea around Lae and Salamaua 2. Cooperation with army units
2nd Force	<i>Tsugaru</i>	<i>Tsugaru</i> 30th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Muzuki</i> , <i>Yayoi</i> )	1. Defence patrols of sea around Lae and Salamaua 2. Cooperation with naval landing force and establishment units
Air Unit	<i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> commander	<i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> , <i>Mochizuki</i> (from the 30th Destroyer Squadron)	Patrols against air and submarine attack, enemy reconnaissance, and cooperation with land operations
Patrol Group	14th Minesweeper Flotilla commander	14th Minesweeper Flotilla ( <i>Hagoromo Maru</i> , No. 2 <i>Noshiro Maru</i> , <i>Tama Maru</i> , No.	Minesweeping the anchorage, patrolling, defence

\* The text mistakenly names the destroyer *Asakaze*.

		<i>2 Tama Maru</i> )	
Landing Party	Naval landing force commander	8th Base Force based on one battalion special naval landing force [Editor's note: Approximately 620 men]	Destroy enemy in the area, and defend key offensive positions
Establishment Unit	Establishment Unit commander	4th Establishment Squad 7th Establishment Squad (part strength) [Editor's note: Approximately 500 men]	Establishment of airfield as soon as possible
Attached units		<i>Ten'yō Maru, Kongō Maru, Kōkai Maru, Kinryū Maru</i> (stand-by at Rabaul)	1. Cooperate with naval landing force and establishment unit 2. Defence and guarding anchorage

The operational outline for each unit of the 4th Fleet indicated in the above disposition chart was determined as follows:

1. Invasion Force

Sortie from Rabaul 5 March, effect landing on 9 March, seize enemy airfield, and quickly establish base. Also responsible for sweeping anchorage for mines.

Army units will hand over the garrison to the navy and return to Rabaul after completion of the invasion of Salamaua.

Navy units will carry out the offensive against Lae, and then also undertake garrison duties at Salamaua.

2. Support Group

Responsible for vigilance against attack by the US task force, and for support of the invasion force during the invasion.

Occupy the Queen Carola area on Buka Island and establish an anchorage during this period.

3. Air Unit

Undertake reconnaissance of enemy, patrolling, and secure air defence of the invasion force. Further, prepare for immediate deployment as Lae and Salamaua air units. As soon as airfield establishment is completed, fighter units will be despatched.

4. Bismarck Area Defence Force

Fully assist the operations of the invasion force and support group, and be responsible for protecting these units while they are at harbour in Rabaul.

Operational orders to the Horie Battalion

The following battalion order, based on South Seas Force orders issued on 17 February, was transmitted by Major Horie at 1 pm on 28 February:

8th Operational Order No. 3

Horie Battalion orders

1300 hrs 28 February

South Seas Force Headquarters

1. [Omitted by editor as the same as South Seas Force orders]

2. The Horie Battalion will be the Salamaua Invasion Force. Undertake a surprise landing during early dawn on 8 March and immediately occupy the airfield and Salamaua.

The campaign will be executed according to outline diagrams no. 1, no. 2 [Editor's note: No original], no. 3, and no. 4.

3. Units will be mobilised according to attachment 2 and associated map.

4. I will be on *Yokohama Maru* from 3 February until the landing.

I will accompany the 5th Company during the first landing and thereafter move toward the airfield with the vanguard of the main force.

Major Horie, Battalion Commander

Distribution method

Various unit commanders will gather to be given oral and written instructions.

8th Operational Order No. 3 Attached Map 1

Outline map of general execution of the campaign (first proposal)

Objective

The unit will undertake a surprise landing on the southern "S" coastline during the early dawn of 8 March, and then immediately occupy the airfield. Thereafter, a small force will guard the airfield while the main

strength occupies "S" as soon as possible, and then the area around Kela. Mopping-up operations will then be conducted in the whole area.

8th Operational Order No. 3 Attached Map 3

Outline map of general execution of the battle (second proposal)

Objective

Land on the southern coastline of Salamaua taking account of the conditions, particularly the wind and waves. Without waiting for the second landing, first secure the area around the radio room, and then as soon as possible occupy the airfield. Thereafter, position a guard at the airfield while the main strength invades Salamaua.

There are three distinctive features of these battalion orders:

1. Two operational outlines based on different conceptions were conveyed to the various units in the diagrams contained in section two of the orders.
2. Section three of the orders (unit responsibilities) distributed strategic responsibility according to only one of these conceptions.
3. The organisation of vessels and movement at sea for both plans was the same. (Consequently, the formation of army units was the same, but the responsibilities differed according to the proposal.)

The prevailing winds at that time were strong and from the north-east. It was unknown whether it would be possible to land at the coastline to the south of Salamaua on the short route between the airfield and township, or to land at the coastline to the west. Eventually, the battalion commander, after long and careful consideration of the options, judged that the former option had better odds for success.

The operational outline, based on historical records, was as follows:

8th Operational Order No. 3 Attachment 2  
Unit duty and movement chart (first proposal)

Formation		Duty	Movement
Right front	6th Company (less 1/3) 1/4 Machine Gun 1/2 Engineers (less 2/10) 1/4 Machine Gun to return to original unit after advancing to the road	1. Immediately after landing proceed to line of road and prepare for future advance 2. Occupy area indicated on sketch with one platoon, and guard right flank with main strength 3. Act as reserve during attack on airfield; after 4th Company has occupied the position in its orders, proceed past them and occupy warehouses	1. Follow the advance of the main unit Contact enemy units according to the sketch
Centre front	5th Company (less 1/3) Radio Unit (1) Engineers (2 squads)	1. Immediately after landing proceed to line of road and prepare for future advance 2. During the attack on the airfield, occupy and hold the radio communication room, then occupy the three junction road (airfield to Kela road) and be alert to attack from the north	1. Advance at the rear of the main unit and battalion headquarters 2. Unit position at the point of contact with the enemy according to the sketch 3. The advance to contact the enemy will be led according to reconnaissance by officers
Left front	4th Company (less 1/3) 1/4 Machine Gun Engineers (2 squads) (Machine Gun will return to the main	1. Immediately after landing proceed to three junction road, protect the assembly and advance of the main strength 2. During the attack on the airfield, occupy the enemy headquarters and storerooms at the front line	1. Lead the advance of the main strength, part occupy three junction road to north of airfield; main strength protects left flank during attack preparations, above-mentioned squad will return to main strength during advance to

	force during the advance)		contact enemy 2. Unit position at the point of contact with the enemy according to the sketch
Rearguard and Transport Control Squad	1/3 6th Company Type-3 radio (1)	1. Occupy position according to sketch immediately after landing, protect main strength rear line during advance to Salamaua township, also conduct reconnaissance of enemy situation and terrain at Salamaua 2. Transport Control Squad will form and be responsible for leading landing and preparing transport around the landing site	1. Remain at specified location and carry out duties up to transit through location by main strength during attack on Salamaua township 2. Unit will act as advance guard for main strength during advance on Salamaua
Machine-gun Company	2nd Machine-gun Company	1. Assemble at the area indicated after the landing of the main strength and prepare for advance 2. Mobilise with the reserve units during the attack on the airfield	1. Unit position at the point of contact with the enemy according to the sketch
Engineer Company		1. Responsible first for destruction of landing barriers, then assemble with main force on road and prepare for advance 2. Mobilise with the reserve units during the attack on the airfield, then make preparations to cooperate with the 4th Company at an appropriate time	
Battalion Artillery Platoon		1. Assemble on the road after landing and prepare for advance 2. Mobilise at the rear of the reserve unit during the attack on the airfield	
Mountain Artillery Company		Occupy the camp at three junction road after the second landing with the main strength, then prepare to assist fighting after dawn	Accompany the cadre unit during the first landing and mobilise with headquarters
A Officer reconnaissance	(Six men led by a warrant officer)	Scout enemy situation and terrain around the buildings at the centre and eastern flank of the airfield	Assemble at headquarters after landing, departure time according to separate orders
B NCO reconnaissance	(Five men led by a non-commissioned officer)	Scout enemy situation around the buildings at the centre and western flank of the airfield	
Signals Unit		1. Part strength to accompany first landing and conduct communications between landing point and airfield, and transport ships 2. Make preparations according to the development of the situation for a communications network between the airfield, Salamaua, Kela, Lae, and the navy	
Supply and Transport Platoon		Stand by to disembark vehicles at the landing point as soon as possible after the second landing	
Medical Unit		Elements with the first landing, the main strength with the second landing, responsible for collecting casualties	
Disease Prevention and Water Supply		Land at Salamaua after transport ships have returned to Salamaua bay, then	

Unit		responsible for disease prevention and water supply	
Disembarkation Duty Unit		1. Responsible for disembarking the force 2. After the second landing, prepare two small barges at the landing point for the assault on Salamaua township 3. As soon as possible after the occupation of Salamaua and Kela, transports and landing craft will return to Salamaua bay and undertake disembarkation	
Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Company		Mainly responsible for aerial protection of the transport fleet	
Anchorage Finance Officer		Disembark two days' supplies at the landing point and near Salamaua as the situation permits; when transports return to Salamaua bay, disembark supplies at Salamaua township	
Second and later landing units		Stand by at the landing point for deployment by the Transport Control Squad	Particularly clear roads, and ensure anti-air evacuation is thoroughly implemented

#### Notes

##### 1. Landing munitions and baggage

The following is required in addition to that prepared for the invasion of Rabaul.

- a. Generally, troops must carry one lunch-box meal, one day each A and B field rations, and two packs of sweets.

However, units in the first landing do not carry A field rations. These are carried by the second landing troops and stockpiled at the landing site.

- b. Do not carry combat boots.

- c. Do not carry excess hot water and tea apart from water bottles.

- d. Each unit commander will devise how to decrease the landing equipment apart from that mentioned above.

##### 2. Night marking

1. Company and platoon commanders will make preparations as per the invasion on Rabaul.

2. Squad commanders will wear a white band (10 centimetres wide) on their left arm, and clearly indicate white cloth on the front and back of their tropical hats.

3. Infantrymen will wear a white band (4 centimetres wide) on their right arm.

##### 3. Code words

“Emperor’s army”, “Victory”

4. Make preparations to fire only one of the machine-guns on board the barges in the first landing group. It is strictly prohibited to load any of the others.

#### Detailed agreement with the escort fleet

The landing of the 16th Army on Java began on 1 March 1942. On that day, the South Seas Force reached an agreement at Rabaul with the 6th Torpedo Squadron, which provided a direct escort for the force. Chief of staff Tanaka, battalion commander Major Horie Masao, and the escort fleet chief of staff, Commander Enoo Yoshio, met to thrash out the details. The commanders of both forces approved the draft agreement reached the following day, 2 March.<sup>80</sup>

The details of the agreement were virtually the same as for the Rabaul operation. However, there were two proposals for the route: to the south of New Britain (proposal A), or to the north (proposal B). Distinctive to these proposals were the different departure times – at 5 pm and 5 am on 5 March respectively – and the fact that the movement of the army units after landing was in part established and mostly agreed on, as follows:

1. The whole strength of the Horie Unit will occupy the airfield. Then, after the assault on Salamaua township, the unit will mop up an area ranging approximately 10 kilometres (to an appropriate point along the roads) centring on Salamaua and including the promontory around Kela and the area to the west of the airfield.
2. The main strength of the unit will guard Salamaua township, Kela, and the airfield.
3. After mopping-up operations in the designated areas has been completed, the force will as soon as possible hand the garrison over to the Tomita Unit of the navy and return to Rabaul.<sup>81</sup>

Agreement on the problematic issues of the escort at sea and protection of the landing point was reached as follows:

1. Protection at sea shall be conducted by the whole strength of the escort fleet prior to the anchorage point being reached, and by *Yūbari* and the 29th Destroyer Squadron afterwards.
2. Protection from the air (and submarine) will be conducted during day *s*-1 by two fighters from the 24th Air Flotilla and two reconnaissance planes from *Kiyokawa Maru*. Protection of the landing point will be the responsibility of the 29th Destroyer Squadron, the 14th Minesweeper Flotilla, and *Kiyokawa Maru*.<sup>82</sup>

The escort fleet, as mentioned previously, was comprised according to section 3 of offensive orders of the South Seas Force. However, in contrast to the army component of two transports, the navy had provided two light cruisers, six destroyers, and one special seaplane tender (in addition to three navy transports).

#### The offensive operation

The Horie Battalion boarded *Yokohama Maru* and *China Maru* on 3 March, and was fitted out according to the army and navy agreement the following day. It was decided on 4 March to adopt proposal A for the sea-route, namely the course to the south of New Britain. Comprehensive training was undertaken on both 3 and 4 March. All units of the army and navy invasion force and support group were assembled in Rabaul by the morning of 5 March. From that time, a lone Lockheed flew in the skies over Rabaul.<sup>83</sup>

The 24th Air Flotilla stepped up its aerial attacks and reconnaissance over Port Moresby, Lae, and Bulolo (approximately 20 kilometres north of Wau) and elsewhere each day from 3-7 March. What looked like large-style aircraft were discovered at Salamaua and Wau.<sup>84</sup>

The invasion force sortied from Rabaul at 1 pm on 5 March; the support group followed at 4 pm. Aircraft aboard *Kiyokawa Maru* maintained daily reconnaissance of the enemy and conducted aerial patrols. Fighter units from the 24th Air Flotilla carried out direct protection in the skies over the invasion force. The army and navy units divided at 9 pm on 7 March for Lae and Salamaua respectively. Successive tropical storms hit from 7 March, limiting visibility and making it a difficult task to enter the anchorage.<sup>85</sup>

The army transport fleet encountered a violent storm at 10.30 pm when it entered the anchorage area to the east of Salamaua. The wind at that time was 20 kilometres per hour from the south-west, with the seas 1.8 metres on the coast. The landing barges were lowered at 11 pm, with boarding completed by midnight. They headed for the south-east coast of Salamaua at 12.15 am.

Despite several signal flares being visible over the land around the time the fleet entered the anchorage position, the Horie Battalion reached the landing point unopposed at the planned time of 12.55 am. One aircraft left the ground just at that moment. The advance began immediately and the airfield was successfully occupied by 3 am.<sup>86</sup>

The Australian troops had in fact withdrawn to the south during the night of 7 March, leaving none of their units in the Salamaua and Kela areas. Consequently, battalion commander Horie altered his plans. He despatched elements of his force to occupy the Salamaua township and Kela, and kept his main strength assembled near the airfield.<sup>87</sup>

By 4.30 am, the Salamaua township and Kela were successfully occupied. Combined intelligence reports indicated that the Australians had withdrawn to Wau along the San Francisco River valley, and the local people had evacuated to Wau and Port Moresby in the face of the Japanese army's invasion of Rabaul and advance to this area. Wau was the centre of the gold mining district and was reached by a narrow road from Salamaua.

After dawn, a lone Lockheed bombed the transport ships three times, resulting in slight damage to *Yokohama Maru*, with three killed and eight casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka, the chief of staff of the South Seas Force aboard the flagship *Yūbari*, telegraphed the commander of the necessity of controlling the air with navy air units owing to increasing concerns over Allied air attacks.<sup>88</sup>

The Kure Special Naval Landing Force troops landed at the coast to the south of Lae at 2.30 am on 8 March and occupied the airfield and township unopposed.

The establishment units began work on the airfields during the morning of 8 March, with preparations for its use as a fighter base completed by 1 pm the following day.<sup>89</sup> Mopping-up operations were completed in the area during the day of 9 March, with two high-angle anti-aircraft guns debarked and placed in position during that afternoon. A single Lockheed also attacked Lae, but the only damage was a single strike on the destroyer *Asanagi*.\*

The support group entered Queen Carola Harbour on the west side of Buka Island during the morning of 9 March. In addition to minesweeping operations, a naval landing force landed on the island and carried out mopping-up on the coast around the anchorage the following day.<sup>90</sup>

#### Allied air raids after the landing

Although Lae and Salamaua had been occupied virtually without incident, it was not long before there were repercussions. Lae and Salamaua were attacked at 7.40 am on 10 March by numerous carrier-based fighters and large-scale bombers. Torpedo bombing and strafing attacks were carried out against units on land and at sea. The attacks continued in waves until 9.45 am, with approximately twenty torpedo bombers, forty carrier-based bombers, eight Lockheeds and eight B-17s. The entire Japanese strength was mobilised immediately, from the patrol planes aboard *Kiyokawa Maru* to the naval and land units, resulting in the reported shooting down of around ten Allied planes.<sup>91</sup> At that time, fighter units from the 4th Air Corps had planned to advance to the area following the completion of the airfield preparations at Lae. Poor communications, however, resulted in 11 fighters missing the battle, arriving in the area from 1 to 3 pm.<sup>92</sup>

The damage to Japanese forces from this attack was as follows:

Sunk: *Kongō Maru*, *Ten'yō Maru*, No. 2 *Tama Maru*, *Yokohama Maru*  
Medium damage: *Yūnagi*, *Kōkai Maru*, *Kiyokawa Maru*  
Light damage: *Yūbari*, *Tsugaru*, *Asanagi*, *Tama Maru*  
Killed: 6 army, 126 navy personnel  
Wounded: 17 army, 240 navy personnel

This was the first time the Allies had inflicted large-scale damage during a counter-attack since the start of the war, and was a portent of the future direction of campaigns in the South Pacific Area. However, stage one of the Southern Area operations was successfully completed ahead of schedule following the unconditional surrender of the Netherlands East Indies on 9 March. The issues raised by the successful counter-attack were hidden in the shadow of these brilliant successes.

These Allied surprise air attacks will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Five B-17s and one Lockheed attacked Lae on 11 March. The Japanese fighter unit intercepted and downed the Lockheed, but the poor condition of the runway resulted in damage to two fighters.

The Horie Battalion, engaged in the offensive at Salamaua, handed over the garrison to the naval landing force at noon on 12 March in accord with the previously mentioned agreement. The entire unit left Salamaua aboard *China Maru* at 2 am on 13 March, and arrived in Rabaul two days later. The seaborne invasion force, with the exception of the naval landing force and establishment unit, continued to provide escort and returned to Rabaul at the same time.<sup>93</sup>

The support group at Queen Carola Harbour departed for Rabaul at 4 pm on 10 March. However, it sortied again from Rabaul at 5 pm on 14 March and returned to Queen Carola Harbour at 7 am the following day to patrol in preparation for engagements with the US task force. The support group was transferred to Kavieng on 17 March, thus bringing to completion the offensive against Lae and Salamaua, the first planned advance by the Japanese army into New Guinea proper.

### **Occupation of strategic areas in the northern Solomon Islands and Admiralty Islands by the 4th Fleet**

#### Occupation of strategic areas in the northern Solomon Islands

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\* The original text mistakenly names this destroyer "Asakaze".

4th Fleet Headquarters wanted to invade and position the 8th Special Base Force in key areas in the northern Solomon Islands as soon as possible after the completion of the invasion of Lae and Salamaua.

The target locations were Shortland Island and Kieta on the north coast of Bougainville. Shortland Island was positioned at the south-eastern end of Bougainville. The so-called "Shortland anchorage" comprised the area between these two islands and Ballale Island. This area permitted a large force to shelter, with the inlet at the eastern side of Shortland Island suitable as a seaplane base.

The airfield at Kieta and the area between the coast and the nearby islands were promising locations for a navy base. Both could act as transit bases for the offensive against Tulagi, the ultimate objective in the Solomon Islands area. Precautions at that time were only taken against the movements of the US task force, as the existence of large numbers of ground troops was not anticipated.

Rear Admiral Kanazawa of the 8th Special Base Force, the commander of the invasion force, took direct command of the 30th Destroyer Squadron. He boarded the flagship destroyer *Muzuki* and sortied from Rabaul at 10 am on 28 March.

On board was a two platoon-strong naval landing force. Protection was provided by the 6th and 18th Squadrons. The naval landing force disembarked at Shortland Island after Shortland anchorage was entered at 2 am on 30 March. No enemy troops were located on the ground, and only one enemy aircraft flew overhead at 10 am. One platoon from the naval landing force was deployed to establish the seaplane base.

The invasion force left Shortland anchorage to the north at 4pm on 30 March, and occupied Kieta at first light the following day. There was absolutely no resistance at this location either. Command of the invasion force withdrew the naval landing force troops, which arrived in Rabaul at 11.30 am on 1 April. The operation was completed.

#### Occupation of strategic areas in the Admiralty Islands<sup>94</sup>

The Admiralty Islands consist of Manus Island and other isolated islands in the area. It was a rear strategic location situated deep into the lateral area of the region. There was, as previously mentioned, a small airstrip at Lorengau on the north-east of Manus Island. The so-called "Lorengau anchorage" between Manus Island and the crescent-shaped Los Negros Island could accommodate large fleet vessels. The northern half of Los Negros was flat ground covered in coconut palms suitable for an excellent airfield.

The 4th Fleet had planned to send the 6th Torpedo Squadron to invade the Admiralty Islands immediately after the offensive at Rabaul. However, it was decided to invade Gasmata first, so the Admiralty operation was, for a time, set aside.

For the first stage of the operation, an invasion force sortied from Rabaul on 6 April, occupying the Lorengau airfield and anchorage on 8 April. On that same day, the north-western New Britain mopping-up force entered the bay at Talasea (eastern coast of the Willaumez Peninsula in central-north New Britain), landed unopposed and proceeded to clean up the area.

The 8th Special Base Force was reorganised on 10 April. Its name was changed to 8th Base Force, and the naval landing force was attached as the 81st and 82nd Garrisons.

#### **The emergence of an air war of attrition**

The air war that centred over Rabaul from early February to April 1942 was more ferocious than any within the sphere of the Pacific War at that time. Further, it was a substantial problem from the standpoint of the overall direction of war strategy. Allied ground troops had offered no resistance during the invasion operations against key areas in eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, so the advance proceeded as planned. However, the situation had developed such that it was increasingly difficult to ignore the Allied counter-offensive from airbase units and a carrier task force. The situation surrounding the air war of attrition at Rabaul at this time had direct consequences on later ground operations in the region. Consequently, several aspects of the actual situation will be discussed in detail here.

### Air raids on Port Moresby in early February

The circumstances surrounding the 24th Air Flotilla's advance for the Rabaul offensive has previously been discussed. Allied air raids conducted by lone or small numbers of aircraft on Rabaul occurred every other night from 24 January until 3 February. The aircraft were Short Sunderland flying boats of the Royal Australian Air Force operating from a base at Port Moresby. The air raids generally came during the early evening, at 8 or 9 pm. A lone reconnaissance plane was also occasionally seen during the day. These raids prompted return fire from the 8-centimetre high-angle anti-aircraft guns of the 8th Special Base Force, or from guns on vessels at anchorage in the harbour. Carrier-based reconnaissance planes from *Kiyokawa Maru* were also deployed. However poor communication with the searchlight units meant that neither method was particularly successful as the planes could not be located.<sup>95</sup>

The first air raid on Port Moresby by the Yokohama Air Corps, which was delayed by poor weather conditions, was finally conducted on 3 February. Eight Type-97 flying boats split into two formations and set out during the night, bombing the township of Port Moresby from 1.30 am to 2.30 am on 3 February. All aircraft returned safely to Rabaul.<sup>96</sup>

A further air raid on Port Moresby was carried out the following night by five large flying boats. With this focus on Port Moresby, Allied air raids on Rabaul completely ceased for a time, although Gasmata received daily air raids after Japanese forces occupied the area on 9 February.

[Editor's note: According to the US Air Force history, the air strength at Port Moresby at this time was as follows: two squadrons (small number of aircraft) of Catalina flying boats; one squadron of Hudsons; and one squadron of Wirraways.]

### Strategic background and manoeuvres of the US carrier task force<sup>97</sup>

After suffering heavy losses at Hawaii at the opening of the war, a strategic review of the options open to the US task force left no room for a defensive position in its fundamental strategy against Japan. Prior to the outbreak of war, the US defensive strategy for the Pacific had centred on the Hawaiian islands. From Hawaii the US fleet could secure the triangular maritime region between Midway Island, Johnston Island, and Palmyra Island, and protect the United States–Australia supply line between the US mainland and the 180 degree meridian, while also including the islands of Fiji and Samoa.

This idea did not fundamentally change even after the appointment of Admiral Ernest King and Admiral Chester Nimitz to the US navy high command at the end of December 1941. Admiral King, commander-in-chief of the US Fleet, immediately appointed Admiral Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, to the task of securing this triangular region, as well as maintaining the supply line between the United States and Australia, including the islands of Fiji and Samoa.

At the same time, however, and also to appease public opinion, the US navy carried out strategic attacks against the previously mentioned Japanese bases and maritime transport fleet using submarines and high-speed aircraft carriers. Furthermore, there also was an optimistic opinion that this would check the advance of the main strength of the Japanese forces into key areas in the southern region. The attack on the Marshall Islands on 1 February, and the successive air raids by the US task force on Rabaul (20 February), Wake Island (24 February), Marcus Island (4 March), Lae and Salamaua (10 March), and Tokyo (18 April), were based on this strategic policy.

The Japanese advance to Rabaul on 23 January caused great anxiety to the government of Australia. On 27 January, the government warned Admiral Nimitz, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, that there were reasonable fears that the Japanese would attack Noumea in New Caledonia prior to its occupation by US forces, at that time en route to the area. The Australian government held concerns that they were exposed to a Japanese advance to Port Moresby. On the other hand, the Americans felt that the Japanese would advance into the New Hebrides and New Caledonia areas after they had gained a secure foothold in Rabaul.

Given these conditions, Admiral King ordered Admiral Nimitz to despatch the carrier task force (based on USS *Lexington*), under the command of Vice Admiral Wilson Brown, to the Fiji and New Caledonia area and to place it under the command Vice Admiral Leary of the ANZAC Area.

### Air raid on Rabaul by the Lexington Task Force<sup>98</sup>

The US carrier group that had attacked the Marshall Islands on 1 February consisted of a task force under the command of Rear Admiral Frank Fletcher built around the aircraft carrier *Yorktown*, and a second group based on the carrier *Enterprise* under the command of Vice Admiral William Halsey. The total strength of the force was two aircraft carriers, three cruisers, and four destroyers.

In response to the incursion by the US task force, the 24th Air Flotilla at Rabaul instigated daily patrols of the waters to the north of the Solomon Islands and the Coral Sea from 5 February using two to four flying boats.<sup>99</sup>

According to postwar investigations, the force that attacked the Marshall Islands had returned to Hawaii at the time of the heightened patrols by the 24th Air Flotilla, with a different force drawing near to Rabaul after having set out from Hawaii on 31 January.

This was the above-mentioned task force led by Vice Admiral Brown (hereafter called the Lexington Task Force), with a strength of four heavy cruisers and ten destroyers in addition to *Lexington*. The sole objective for the offensive planned by Brown was none other than the Japanese-occupied Rabaul. This recommendation was readily approved by Brown's superior, Vice Admiral Leary.<sup>100</sup>

The Lexington Task Force proceeded south-west and swept the waters to the north of Fiji and Samoa after passing through the seas to the east of the Phoenix Islands on 8 February. The Japanese forces received intelligence that "an enemy carrier force was proceeding to the Samoa area" on 7 February, but it thereafter disappeared.<sup>101</sup>

The task force veered to the north, while east of the New Hebrides, on 15 February and proceeded north-west through the waters to the east and north of the Solomon Islands. It was Vice Admiral Brown's plan to despatch bombers from a position 230 kilometres from Rabaul at 2 am on 21 February.

However, the Japanese forces received intelligence that two enemy destroyers had suddenly appeared in the waters near Truk on 19 February. This report proved to be false, but flying boats were despatched from Rabaul during the evening of 20 February to carry out reconnaissance for the enemy destroyers in the rear waters near Truk. The lead plane radioed the following message at 8.30 am before losing communications: "Large enemy force 110 kilometres north-east of Rabaul, heading north-east."<sup>102</sup> The 4th Air Corps lifted from Vunakanau airfield at 12.20 am after receiving orders from 24th Air Flotilla command to engage the enemy force.

As the 4th Air Corps was not at full strength at that time, it was unable to put fighters in the air to support the assault group (bomber group), and the bomber's torpedoes had not even arrived. However, the aircrews had participated in the superb campaigns in the South-West Area at the beginning of the war and were flushed with these successes. They had great confidence in the outcome of the assault using only fixed bombs.

The Lexington Task Force, however, proceeded north observing extremely strict radio silence. At 8.50 am on 20 February, several unidentified aircraft were identified by radar on board *Lexington* (these were the first fitted in the US navy and could not show altitude). These aircraft were the above-mentioned patrol flying boats.

The assault group that had sortied from Rabaul reported the discovery of the enemy carrier force at 2.35 pm and again at 3 pm. The Rabaul base waited expectantly for a report indicating a successful attack.

However, two bombers in the first wave of nine were brought down by US fighters before they reached their targets. The other seven were able to drop their bombs, but the carriers took evasive action and were able to avoid any direct hits. Fighters launched from the carriers engaged with the bombers in the skies over the task force. Without an escort of fighters, all in the first wave of Japanese land-based bombers were destroyed. Similarly, three bombers in the second wave of eight were brought down prior to reaching the target, and two more were brought down immediately after bombing the carrier force.

During the attack, two Japanese bombers damaged by US hits attempted unsuccessfully to ram the carriers. Of the remaining three bombers, only one returned to the Rabaul base, with one ditching into the ocean and the other crash-landing in Simpson Harbour.

The Americans lost one pilot and two fighters. Commander Brown, however, fearing the opportunity to bomb Rabaul was lost, abandoned the planned air raid and withdrew without further action.

The Japanese had lost 14 land-based bombers, two flying boats, and one reconnaissance seaplane, with the two ditched bombers suffering serious damage. Although the damages were great, the planned air raid on Rabaul had been averted.

#### Air raid on Salamaua<sup>103</sup>

Vice Admiral Brown, in the light of the failed air raid on Rabaul, submitted the following proposals to Pacific Fleet Commander Nimitz:

1. At least two carriers should be used in future operations against airbases with the strength of Rabaul;
2. It is essential to increase by two the number of fuel tankers required in operations in warm regions in the tropics owing to increased fuel consumption from the requirement for aircraft to take off at full speed.

Nimitz accepted both requests and assigned him *Yorktown* under Rear Admiral Fletcher, thus forming a mobile force based on two aircraft carriers.

The Lexington Task Force, which had withdrawn to the north-east on 20 February, veered to the west in the waters to the east of Santa Cruz Islands and entered the Coral Sea. It joined the *Yorktown* group to the south-west of Espiritu Santo soon after it had entered the patrol region of Japanese reconnaissance planes. At that time, there were no suitable targets for air raids other than Rabaul.

It was precisely at this time that Japanese forces had landed in the Lae and Salamaua area, presenting a perfect target for air attack by the task force. The problem was whether to take the dangerous course through the Bismarck Sea to launch an assault, or to launch an attack over the 5,000 metre-high Owen Stanley Range from the waters to the south of eastern New Guinea. Suitable nautical charts of the Bismarck Sea for the first option had not been prepared and, furthermore, this would take the carrier force too close to Rabaul.

The task force launched an assault group from 80 kilometres off the south coast of eastern New Guinea on 10 March, some 900 kilometres from Rabaul on a line through Lae and Salamaua. By 6.40 am, 104 planes were airborne.

The air raid was a success, with Japanese losses as previously described. The Americans lost only one aircraft and one pilot. [Editor's note: This differs from the Japanese record of losses.]

The following is taken from the detailed battle report on *Tsugaru*, which had participated as an escort in this battle:

For an offensive operation, there is a necessity for prior discussion concerning the expectation of counter-attack by an enemy force of considerable strength.

The support units, even for this current Lae and Salamaua operation, need to be of sufficient strength concomitant with the powerful Allied task force. Up until that time when Lae and Salamaua have been secured, establishments have been completed, air raid units have been deployed, and the bases can sufficiently demonstrate their functioning strength, there is a necessity for preparations against movements of the enemy into the waters south-east of New Guinea.

[Editor's note: The main strength of the Japanese mobile carrier fleet, after it had conducted air raids on 5 March against Cilacap (south coast of Java), was at that time in the waters around the Cocos Islands (south of Sumatra) preparing for counter-offensives from the British navy's Eastern Fleet.]

#### Air battles over the bases from late February to early March

Allied air attacks, which as previously mentioned had temporarily ceased, began again on 23 February. Early that morning, five American four-engine B-17s surprised Japanese troops in a daring attack. This was the first appearance of the B-17, a plane the Japanese were thoroughly unable to contend with in the South-East Area from that point on.

Thereafter, small scale air raids against Rabaul continued uninterrupted. The trend was for a lone reconnaissance plane during the day to be followed by an attack from small numbers of bombers at night. There were also, however, numerous occasions when B-17s would attack during the day, especially early in the morning. The raids were generally directed towards the airfields and ships at anchorage in the harbour. Damage to aircraft and personnel was insignificant but steadily mounted.

Japanese anti-aircraft measures were at that time inadequate to cope with this level of air attack.

As the majority of the land-based attack planes planned for Rabaul had been destroyed in the raid on the US carrier task force on 20 February, a squadron of land-based attack planes from the 24th Air Flotilla, which were training on Tinian, were quickly advanced to Rabaul. The total air strength in the South-East Area was further strengthened when the Combined Fleet diverted a detachment consisting of one fighter squadron and one land-based attack squadron from the 1st Air Fleet to Rabaul.

Preparations for the Lae and Salamaua operations, which were unavoidably postponed after the loss of contact with the US task force, were recommenced. The most pressing preparation was the destruction of the anticipated build up of Allied air strength in eastern New Guinea. The 24th Air Flotilla conducted daily patrols in the waters south-east of the Solomon Islands and reconnaissance flights over eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in search of the US carrier task force. In addition, operations to destroy Allied air strength in the eastern New Guinea area began on 24 February with the first combined fighter and bomber raid on Port Moresby.

The main feature of these raids was the destruction of land and sea facilities at the central base at Port Moresby. Aircraft stationed at the base were damaged and burned, weakening Allied strength in the region. Under these conditions, the transportation and landing of the invasion force to Lae and Salamaua was effected safely and successfully. Still, damage inflicted from air raids by the US task force was considerable.

#### Air battles over the bases from middle to late March<sup>104</sup>

Elements of fighter units from the 4th Air Corps had advanced to Lae by the afternoon of 10 March following the speedy establishment of the base. Soon after, approximately half the strength of fighter and land-based attack units from the 4th Air Corps had been mobilised to Lae. The 24th Air Flotilla intensified its patrols in the Coral Sea area and its attacks against Port Moresby and the north-eastern sector of the Australian mainland.

On 14 March, nine land-based attack planes were directed to Port Moresby, while eight land-based attack planes and 12 Zero fighters attacked Australia for the first time, targeting Horn Island on York Peninsula at the north-eastern tip of Australia. No aircraft were engaged at Port Moresby. Thirteen Hawker Hurricanes and P-40s were engaged over Horn Island, with reports of nine aircraft shot down and three Lockheeds on the ground destroyed by fire.\* The airfield on Horn Island was crucifix-shaped and 1,200 metres long and 100 metres wide. It had not appeared in any intelligence until reference to it was found in documents taken from a Lockheed brought down at Gasmata on 3 March.

Reconnaissance was also carried out on Allied airbases at Townsville and Cooktown on the Australian mainland by two land-based attack planes on 21 March.

The 24th Air Flotilla participated in the offensive operations against the Solomon Islands in late March. In addition to conducting reconnaissance flights over key areas, flying boats and land-based attack planes attacked Tulagi on 17 and 18 March, though there was no significant resistance by the Allies to this raid.

The air war in eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands had proceeded well by March 1942, with Japanese forces establishing a central base at Rabaul and advance bases at Gasmata, Lae, and Salamaua. Port Moresby, the only remaining Allied base in the South Pacific Area, had been more or less contained.

The Allies, however, had initially intended to use Port Moresby simply as a relay station for their main bases on mainland Australia. Without effective attacks on these bases, the Japanese could not effectively assess damage to Allied air power and continual surveillance attacks on Port Moresby would become a necessity.

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\* The planes were in fact American Kittyhawks. Allied losses in this engagement were counted at one aircraft for three Japanese.

The Allies were simultaneously gradually expanding the base at Port Moresby and endeavouring to establish a base at Horn Island. The only airfields at Port Moresby by early February were at Kila and Bomana. By early March, however, more airfields were discovered on both banks of the Laloki River and on the right bank of the Goldie River, with airfields also being prepared approximately 50 kilometres to the north-west of Port Moresby.

No fighter aircraft were involved in the raids on Rabaul, Gasmata, Lae, and Salamaua up to this point, only large planes such as Lockheed Hudsons and B-17s. Neither were fighters in evidence in counter-attacks at Port Moresby. By mid-March, just as the Japanese had eased raids on Port Moresby, it seemed that Port Moresby had been reinforced with smaller aircraft. A land-based attack plane sent to Moresby for reconnaissance on 21 March failed to return.

At 6 am the following day, 22 March, nine Hawker Hurricane fighters and several Lockheed Hudson bombers raided Lae. Virtually the entire contingent of planes (nine Zeros and one land-based attack plane) were strafed on the ground and caught fire, and two Zeros were lost in the air. This was the first Allied raid against a Japanese base in which both fighters and bombers participated.

An assault force of 19 land-based attack planes and three Zero fighters from the 24th Air Flotilla set out for Port Moresby on 23 March, reporting a considerable force of small aircraft, and the bombing and burning of six small and one large aircraft. Thereafter, counter-attack by small aircraft during raids on Port Moresby became the norm, with increasing losses to the Japanese. Following from the build up of the US air force, the Allied powers had taken gradual steps towards a counter-offensive, using Port Moresby and Port Darwin as stepping stones in the South-East and South-West Areas, respectively.<sup>105</sup>

#### Advance of the 25th Air Flotilla to Rabaul

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters at that time assigned responsibility for air operations in the Inner South Pacific to the 24th Air Flotilla attached to the 4th Fleet as part of stage one of the campaign. It had raised the 11th Air Fleet (21st to 23rd Air Flotillas), an air formation for bases outside this line, to assist offensive operations in the southern area.

The 4th Fleet had advanced the main strength of the 24th Air Flotilla to Rabaul in response to the development of campaigns in the South-East Area. Ultimately, however, the flotilla had a responsibility, of increasing importance, for air operations in the Inner South Pacific, specifically in the Marshall Islands area. This point was especially driven home by the movements of the US task force in the waters of the Inner South Pacific Area.

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters redeployed its entire airbase units after the completion of stage one of the campaign. This important stage of the air campaign attempted to alter the situation in the entire Pacific area.

As a result, the 24th Air Flotilla was dedicated to duties in the Inner South Pacific Area, and the 25th Air Flotilla assigned to operations in the South-East Area.

The headquarters of the 25th Air Flotilla (commanded by Rear Admiral Yamada Sadayoshi) advanced to Rabaul on 29 March, and the formation was activated on 1 April 1942. The constituent units of the 25th Air Flotilla were the Yokohama Air Corps, which had previously participated in campaigns in the Rabaul area, the 4th Air Corps, and the Tainan Air Corps, the latter of which was diverted from campaigns in the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>106</sup>

Unit	Newly formed strength	Numbers of crews
4th Air Corps	36 land-based attack planes (Type-1, 2 in reserve)	9 crews from 1st Air Corps, and 5 crews transferred from Kisarazu Air Corps on 1 April Total of 37 crews
Tainan Air Corps	45 fighters 6 land-based reconnaissance planes	31 crews transferred from 4th Air Corps on 1 April, reinforced with 3 crews from Japan

Yokohama Air Corps	9 carrier-based fighters 12 flying boats	5 crews reinforcements for the present from Japan Total of 13 crews including main unit and detachment
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The commander of the Combined Fleet issued orders incorporating the 25th Air Flotilla into the formation of the South Seas Fleet (4th Fleet) effective from zero hour on 1 April. South Seas Fleet headquarters assigned the 25th Air Flotilla to duties that day as the “Bismarck Area Airbase Force”. It inherited the duties of the 24th Air Flotilla Western Area Attack Force and was deployed in the Bismarck Archipelago area.

The current campaigns in the South-East Area were offensives against Port Moresby and Tulagi. Headquarters of the South Seas Fleet telegraphed orders to its constituent units on 4 April specifying early May for the Port Moresby invasion operation, thus granting authority for preparations.<sup>107</sup>

#### Intensification of the air war of attrition<sup>108</sup>

The aerial assault of Port Moresby by the 25th Air Flotilla began on 5 April. Its headquarters issued orders the previous day for the execution of repeated assaults on Port Moresby using most of its strength.

During the first two days, 5 and 6 April, combined attacks were carried out by land-based attack units from Rabaul and fighters from the Lae base. For the first of these attacks, nine Type-1 land-based bombers joined nine Zeros in the skies over Lae, and then carried out the raid on the Port Moresby airfields at 10.20 am. Seven attack planes (two turned back owing to engine trouble) rained shells over one large and one medium aircraft (possibly decoy planes), while the Zeros brought down two aircraft in aerial combat for the loss of one. A force of around ten Allied fighters was encountered.

On 6 April at 10.15, seven land-based attack planes (two turned back owing to engine trouble) and five Zeros carried out the raid and returned safely, reporting eight enemy aircraft down. There were 15 Allied fighters over the base.

Shortages of Zero crews on 7 April led to concerns over their ability to escort the attack planes. Consequently, a decision was made for a “fighter only” raid that day. However, the raid was cancelled when what were identified as eight American fighters attacked the Lae base at 6 am.

Bad weather delayed the resumption of raids on 9 April, but seven land-based attack planes and six Zeros attacked at 9.40 am on 10 April, reporting three Allied aircraft down for the loss of one Japanese plane.

In this manner, the assault on Port Moresby, the first real test of the 25th Air Flotilla, was not decisive, as it was conducted on a small scale and hampered by insufficient personnel. Further, the counter-attacks by Allied fighter planes in the skies over the Port Moresby base, and even in counter-offensives against Rabaul and Lae, became more formidable and gradually gained momentum into April.

The Allied attack on Lae by fighters at 3 pm on 4 April resulted in the destruction by fire of two Zeros, and damage by hits on eight Zeros and nine land-based attack planes. A further nine attack planes were hit at the time of the raid on 7 April by eight Allied dive-bombers.

At 1.20 on the afternoon of 9 April, four new-style bombers (judged to be B-26s with larger ejection tanks) raided the airstrip at Rabaul from an altitude of approximately 300 metres.

Rear Admiral Kanazawa, commander of the 8th Base Force, recorded the following in his diary for that day: “Suffered a severe raid from four English (*sic*) aircraft in the morning. At Vunakanau, 30 casualties from the 7th and 10th Establishment Squads, with one dead at the airfield under a torrent of exploding torpedoes. Conspicuous signs of defeat in the air war.”

#### **Sea-route invasion of Port Moresby**

##### Difficult strategic conditions<sup>109</sup>

As previously described, Imperial Headquarters issued orders at the end of January 1942 for a force comprising the South Seas Force and the 4th Fleet to “invade Port Moresby if at all possible”. In fact, this offensive operation was not recognised as a serious difficulty given the conditions immediately after the invasion of Rabaul.

Meanwhile, as introduced above, the appearance of Allied air strength on mainland Australia and at Port Moresby, and the intensity in activity of the US task force, gave rise to conditions whereby Japanese army and navy commanders in the region were forced to adopt a measured attitude towards the invasion of Moresby.

Headquarters of the 25th Air Flotilla judged the total strength of Allied air power at the beginning of April in the South-East Area, including mainland Australia, to be approximately one thousand aircraft, including six hundred training planes. The US task force on manoeuvres in the Pacific was thought to be divided into two formations to the north and south. The southern group was formed around *Saratoga* using bases on mainland Australia and New Zealand.

Investigations were being carried out for the South Seas Force to land on the north coast of eastern New Guinea and invade Port Moresby overland. At the same time, Imperial Headquarters and navy units in the region were considering the original sea-route invasion plan.

The main difficulty for the sea-route invasion was that the transport convoy needed to pass along the south coast of New Guinea with one eye on the Allied airbases in northern Australia, some 480 kilometres distant from New Guinea’s eastern flank. However, within an arc some 440 kilometres from this area were interspersed a chain of numerous islands surrounded by coral reefs, severely limiting passage by ships.

The route to the Coral Sea needed to be either through the China Strait or the Jomard Passage, or by the longer detour to the east of the Louisiade Archipelago.

The shortest route was through the China Strait, which was mostly deep water. However, this option was deficient as the current was swift and there were many reefs. Further, it was extremely narrow, only allowing vessels to pass in single file.

The third option, the detour to the east of the Louisiades, was to be avoided as it would double the time to reach the target.

Ultimately, this left only the Jomard Passage as a route for the sea-bound invasion force. The distance from the passage to Port Moresby was around 650 kilometres.

This plan involved the invasion convoy departing Rabaul and steaming south for 780 kilometres before passing through the Jomard Passage. During the next 650 kilometres, the convoy was forced to conduct this operation across the sea, all the while susceptible to attack from Allied airbases at Townsville and Cooktown. If the Jomard Passage was navigated during the evening and the convoy maintained a constant 20 kilometres per hour, then it would be exposed in the Coral Sea during the following day for around 12 hours. An expectation of success was only possible once air and sea superiority was secured in the Coral Sea.

The next problem was how to penetrate the barrier reef near the site of the planned offensive landing at Port Moresby. A world-famous barrier reef runs the length of the south coast of New Guinea. It continues from the eastern tip of New Guinea to near Port Moresby, running roughly parallel 3 to 16 kilometres from the coast in the shape of a natural fortress. Passage by landing craft is certainly restricted during low tide, but also during high tide.

The large Sinavi and Nateara reefs needed to be penetrated in order to land craft at Port Moresby. Three possible routes seemed available: the Liljeblad Passage, the Basilisk Passage, and Padana Nafua. The Liljeblad Passage was within firing range for the Paga Coastal Defence Battery established to the south of Moresby township. Further, the current was swift, and with sunken reefs in the passage and en route to the harbour, it was unsuitable for an operation with a large force.

Basilisk Passage was a standard waterway, but held the disadvantage that it opened directly on to the line of fire of the battery. Padana Nafua avoided these problems and was considered the most appropriate passage for the invasion of Port Moresby. Even so, a landing in the face of the enemy through a fortress-like barrier reef had

not been planned since the opening of the war. This problem of penetration so close to enemy positions faced the Japanese forces.

If these strategic and technical problems could be overcome and Port Moresby could be invaded, then the great concern of maintenance of supply to hold a garrison force had to be addressed, along with unfavourable trends in Allied superiority of the air and sea. The South Seas Force, the unit given responsibility for garrison duties after the invasion, held grave concerns over the ability to maintain supply. The most pressing concern was the lack of water at Port Moresby, with supply needing to be transported many kilometres from inland areas. Consequently, the number of troops that could rely on rainwater was limited to approximately three to four thousand. The South Seas Force expressed the opinion that these limitations would severely hamper the garrison after the invasion.

[Editor's note: According to the memoirs of Lieutenant Colonel Akita Hiroshi, chief of intelligence in the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters, there also was a proposal for elements of the garrison force to prevent the enemy from using the area, while withdrawing the main strength of the force.]

#### Operational preparations by the South Seas Force

The entire strength of the Horie Battalion of the South Seas Force assembled at Rabaul and proceeded with preparations for the invasion of Port Moresby after it had returned from the operations at Salamaua.

The air raids on Lae and Salamaua by the US task force on 10 March caused great anxiety in the commanders of the South Seas Force concerning the execution of the invasion of Port Moresby. Imperial Headquarters at that time had only given orders to "invade Port Moresby if at all possible." The overview and initiation of the operation was left to an agreement between local navy and army commanders. There was absolutely no discussion concerning concrete mechanisms to simply execute the operation.

At this time, the commander of the South Seas Force telegraphed the following appraisal to Imperial Headquarters on 20 March:<sup>110</sup>

1. When considering the experience of the Salamaua–Lae operation, particularly the appearance of the enemy navy's carrier task force, then I believe it will be very difficult to assign protection for the transport convoy by land-based air units, and to protect the airbase establishments and the landing point after disembarkation. I would like to see discussion during a central agreement to doubly ensure the strengthening of land-based air units and the cooperation of a fully equipped aircraft carrier for the coming operation. The carrier *Shōhō* currently assigned to the 4th Fleet is not sufficient by itself.
2. I would like to see an increase by one in the number of transports exclusively assigned to anti-aircraft duties (fitted out at Ujina for this operation).
3. I would like consideration for the use of an advance force of paratroopers to disrupt the enemy and occupy the airfield near the landing point. The capture of airbase installations prior to landing would be extremely beneficial.

These proposals were appropriate for the strategic conditions discussed above. Imperial Headquarters Army Department, possibly in response to the proposals, assigned the high-speed anti-aircraft ship *Asakayama Maru* to the South Seas Force. However, *Asakayama Maru* did not leave port at Moji for Rabaul until 25 April.\*

[Editor's note: A high-speed anti-aircraft ship was equipped with six anti-aircraft guns and assigned to protect a transport convoy. Eight of these were prepared after the outbreak of war.]

At this time, South Seas Force headquarters had been researching strategic proposals for attacking Port Moresby. The following three proposals were most seriously considered: land-route over the mountains; barge mobilisation; and standard landing operation by convoy.

The land-route over the mountains proposal was identical to the plan that was later actually carried out. At this stage the proposal was only considered feasible if there was a road over the mountains; however reconnaissance to confirm that had not yet been undertaken. The commander of the South Seas Force sought opinions from his three battalion commanders, two of whom supported the land-route plan on the basis that it would be possible to advance at least half of the total troop strength to Port Moresby overland, rather than risking them all should the convoy be sunk in the Coral Sea.<sup>111</sup>

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\* Moji is located in Fukuoka Prefecture at the northern tip of Kyūshū.

The barge mobilisation proposal involved landing troops in the eastern part of New Guinea, who would then carry out the invasion on Port Moresby after successive mobilisations along the south coast using landing barges. Landings would be conducted during the night to avoid attack from Allied aircraft. It was estimated that 5 nights would be required, based on nightly movements of approximately 110 kilometres. It was recognised that conducting these movements shoreward of the above-mentioned reefs would be difficult, so it was felt the advance would need to be carried out further to seaward.

It is clear that this mobilisation proposal would have been extremely difficult to execute. Nevertheless, the commander of the South Seas Force considered there was a chance of success, and judged the dangers of being sunk were higher during a standard transport and landing operation. Preparations for the mobilisation plan began to increase from early April. Research into methods of transporting food and munitions, embarkation rosters, cooking arrangements en route, and other aspects of the preparations proceeded.

In either case, the pressing task at hand was reconnaissance of the local area around Port Moresby. The commander of the South Seas Force sought the assistance of the navy prior to 15 April in the following tasks preparatory to the execution of the operation. These were relayed by the 24th to the 25th Air Flotilla:

1. Photographs of the landing point in the Port Moresby area
2. Army commanders to accompany reconnaissance flights over the landing area
3. Navy reconnaissance of the waterways from Samarai (a small island in the China Strait at the eastern tip of New Guinea) to Port Moresby.

As a result, army commanders accompanied several reconnaissance flights after 10 April. At that time, difficulties had arisen in the use of the Lae base by units of land-based attack planes, and counter-attacks by the Allies had continued to intensify.

Land-based attack plane units traversed the Owen Stanley Range at an altitude of 6,000 metres, flying reconnaissance and bombing missions over Port Moresby. Consequently, reconnaissance was largely ineffective, providing results that were less than anticipated.

#### Reinforcements for the 4th Fleet

The 4th Fleet recognised the need for reinforcements to its air strength for the Port Moresby invasion operation, specifically for the despatch of an additional aircraft carrier, and entered into negotiations with the Combined Fleet. As a result, *Shōhō*, which was attached to the 4th Air Flotilla, was transferred to the 4th Fleet in the middle of March. *Shōhō* was a converted aircraft carrier with a complement of barely 28 planes, and was hardly suitable for the purposes of the army and navy units in the region. The Combined Fleet had completed invasion operations in the Netherlands East Indies on 10 March, and was currently planning offensive operations using a mobile carrier force in the Indian Ocean. As a result, it was judged that there was very little excess strength to be diverted to the South-East Area.

A Japanese carrier force sortied from Kendari on 28 March and carried out raids on Colombo on 6 April and on Trincomalee (east coast of Ceylon) on 9 April. The Combined Fleet progressed to stage two of the war with the completion of these attacks. Reorganisation of the formation was ordered on 10 April as the first phase of stage two operations. This governed the operations of the Combined Fleet until late May.<sup>112</sup>

The thrust of the reorganisation involved the main strength of the Combined Fleet assembling in the western part of the Inland Sea to prepare and train for the next phase of the campaign, which had two goals. The first involved the execution of the Port Moresby invasion in early May, and the associated strengthening of units in the South Pacific Area. The second, as previously discussed, involved diverting priority for airbase units to the Pacific region.

These orders of the Combined Fleet specified the requirements of the 4th Fleet for the Port Moresby operation in early May. They also strengthened the formation of the 4th Fleet with the addition of the 5th Squadron (less *Nachi*), *Kaga* (a large aircraft carrier), *Zuiho* (a seaplane tender), and the 7th and 20th Destroyer Squadrons. These units were to be attached to the 4th Fleet on 10 May, but this was brought forward to 20 April through specially issued orders.

The basic strength of the South Seas Fleet (4th Fleet) indicated in this order of battle was as follows:

Constituent units

*Kashima*

18th Squadron (*Tenryū, Tatsuta*)

19th Squadron (*Okinoshima, Tokiwa, Tsugaru*)

6th Torpedo Squadron (*Yūbari, 23rd, 29th, and 30th Destroyer Squadrons*)

7th Submarine Squadron (*Jingei, 21st, 26th, and 33rd Submarine Groups*)

Attached units

5th Squadron (*Haguro; Myōkō and Nachi missing*)

6th Squadron (*Aoba, Kinugasa, Kako, Furutaka*)

*Kaga*

*Shōhō*

*Zuiho*

7th Destroyer Squadron

27th Destroyer Squadron

Orders for this formation were issued on 5 April.<sup>113</sup>

However, even with these reinforcements, the 4th Fleet was still not satisfied. Further negotiations with the Combined Fleet resulted in “Operational telegraph order no. 109” being issued on 10 April for *Kaga* to be replaced by the 5th Air Flotilla (*Shōkaku, Zuikaku*).<sup>114</sup>

#### Reinforcements for the 25th Air Flotilla

According to the new order of battle, the 11th Air Fleet (airbase units), based on the 21st (elements missing), 24th, 25th, and 26th Air Flotillas, was responsible for securing eastern New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, the Marshall Islands, Wake Island, the East Caroline Basin, and the area around the Japanese homeland, as well as cooperating with the 4th Fleet (South Seas Fleet) and 5th Fleet (Northern Fleet) in air campaigns in various regions.

The 24th and 25th Air Flotillas, which were attached to the South Seas Fleet, were returned to their original command.

The headquarters of the 11th Air Fleet moved to Tinian on 17 April.

Prior to this, on 10 April, the Airbase Force Command formed the 1st Air Attack Force from the 21st Air Flotilla, and the 4th, 5th, and 6th Air Attack Forces from the 24th, 25th, and 26th Air Flotillas, respectively. The 5th Air Attack Force was assigned to: “Patrol the region and destroy any invading enemy units; and destroy enemy air strength in the north-east area of Australia and cooperate with the Port Moresby invasion operation.”

Meanwhile, the 25th Air Flotilla was strengthened by the Motoyama Air Corps (less its fighter elements). This unit had been assigned to the 22nd Air Flotilla in the South-West Area, but was especially transferred by the Combined Fleet for the Port Moresby invasion operation. Completion of the transfer was planned for 1 May.

Command of the 25th Air Flotilla issued on 11 April the following overview of the operational policy for the 5th Air Attack Force based on these new responsibilities:

1. Main responsibilities

- a. To destroy enemy forces in north-east Australia, New Caledonia, and the Fiji areas, and to prevent the build up of Allied air strength.
- b. To patrol the southern area of British New Guinea and the seas to the east [Editor’s note: Thought to include not only eastern New Guinea, but also the Bismarck Archipelago area], to destroy enemy mobile (assault) forces, and to disrupt enemy supply lines.
- c. Cooperate with invasion operations at key locations.
- d. Seek out and destroy the enemy fleet.

2. Operational movements

- a. Destroy enemy air units in British New Guinea and Fiji as soon as possible, as well as enemy strength in the north-east Australia area. Provide escort for the Port Moresby and Tulagi invasion operations.
- b. After destruction of enemy strength in the north-east Australia area, suppress enemy build-up of troops in the region by progressively annihilating concentrations of Allied forces. In addition, attack enemy base installations to render them useless.

- If possible, strengthen the Port Moresby invasion operation to relay supplies towards Port Moresby.
- c. Take extreme caution against enemy movements in the southern area of British New Guinea and the seas to the east. If enemy mobile carrier forces appear in the region, despatch the full strength to destroy them (2nd and 4th Air Attack Forces in concert, according to the conditions). The 5th Air Attack Force is also responsible for attacks against enemy shipping in the area.
- The patrolling area of the 4th Air Attack Force is bounded by the equator and [blank] degrees south latitude, and 130 and 166 degrees east longitude.
- d. Raid enemy airbases at New Caledonia, Fiji, and in the northern part of Australia at an appropriate time using large flying boats in concert with submarine units. Take measures to destroy reinforcements to, as well as units stationed at, enemy relay and main bases.
- When Tulagi is invaded, quickly advance elements, or a larger force, to assist in the operations and to strengthen the campaign to disrupt Allied supply routes.
- e. Destroy the invading enemy fleet using assault units in the order of battle.

An overview of the order of battle for the operational policy outline was issued on 10 April, as follows:

Formation	Command	Strength	Base	Main responsibilities
1st Force	Tainan Air Corps commander	45 Zeros, 6 land-based reconnaissance planes	Lae, Rabaul (Lakunai)	1. Aerial patrols over Lae and Rabaul areas 2. Destroy enemy planes in British New Guinea and north-east Australia 3. Cooperate with Moresby invasion
2nd Force	4th Air Corps commander	36 land-based attack planes	Lae, Rabaul (Vunakanau)	1. Patrol the YZ patrol sector (see table below) 2. Destroy enemy planes in British New Guinea and north-east Australia 3. Stand by for attack by enemy fleet vessels 4. Cooperate with Moresby invasion
3rd Force	Motoyama Air Corps commander	27 land-based attack planes	Rabaul	[As above]
4th Force	Yokohama Air Corps commander	12 large flying boats 9 float planes	Rabaul	1. Patrol the patrol sector 2. Cooperate with Moresby invasion 3. Elements to stand by for contact
Special Duty Force	<i>Mogamikawa Maru</i> commander	<i>Mogamikawa Maru</i>		Transport according to special orders

This would seem to indicate that the strategic position of airbase units had steadily been strengthened in the South Pacific Area. However, what was the actual situation? After the reorganisation, the front-line strength of the relatively new 25th Air Flotilla was quite different from its listed complement.

While the main strength of the Yokohama Air Corps had advanced to Rabaul by 5 April, it would take time to assemble at Rabaul the elements remaining in the Marshall Islands. Elements of the Tainan Air Corps, consisting mainly of fighters, which had been temporarily transferred to the 4th Air Corps, finally arrived in Rabaul on 16 April owing to shortages of transport ships.

Although preparations were quickly undertaken after reinforcements arrived – 12 Zeros on *Goshū Maru* and 24 Zeros on *Kasuga Maru* arrived on 7 and 12 April, respectively – numbers were insufficient and the 4th Air Corps never reached a full complement.

Nine Zeros which had been transferred to the 1st Air Corps from among the strength of the 4th Air Corps, which consisted mainly of land-based attack planes, were returned to Rabaul on 2 May. This was in addition to some Type-1 land-based attack planes that were transported to Japan for training. Nine land-based attack

planes of the Motoyama Air Corps (fighter elements missing) advanced to Rabaul on 20 April. The main strength (18 attack planes), however, did not arrive until 1 May.

The working complement of aircraft from 1 April to 1 May 1942 was as follows. Crew numbers generally were greater than the number of aircraft:<sup>115</sup>

Date	Fighters (Type-96 and Zero)	Land-based attack planes (Type-1 and Type-96)	Flying boats
1 April	15	16	11
5 April	13	13	13
10 April	12	8	13
15 April	8	9	12
20 April	31	25	14
25 April	29	20	14
1 May	23	42	13

[Editor's note: The patrol sectors at that time were as follows.<sup>116</sup>]

Patrol sector	Base	Area	Range	Aircraft
P	Rabaul	45–75 degrees	1,100 kilometres	Two per sector as a general rule
Q	Rabaul	75–105 degrees	”	
R	Rabaul	135–165 degrees	”	
Y	Lae	130–160 degrees	”	
Z	Lae	160–190 degrees	”	

#### Air battles in April 1942

Allied air attacks on Rabaul and Lae intensified after the beginning of April. The powerful raid by the impressive B-26s on 9 April in particular has already been mentioned. Formations of six or seven B-26s also conducted raids on 11, 12, 18, and 19 April. This was the start of raids on Rabaul by US Army Air Force medium bombers. The lead plane during the raid on 18 April was shot down. Intelligence gained from the two crew members indicated the raid had originated from a US base in eastern Australia. As this intelligence was on the whole deemed to be accurate, the following report was telegraphed immediately to Imperial Headquarters:<sup>117</sup>

1. Approximately 200 fighters (P-39). One crew member advised that approximately 150 in Townsville (slightly vague), while the other indicated 25 in Brisbane, 50 in Townsville, 100 in Sydney, and 75 in Melbourne (all P-39s).

- Also approximately 30 P-40s in Sydney and Melbourne, 35 bombers (B-26) in Townsville from the 22nd Bombardment Group, also 15 B-17s in Townsville, which were evacuated from the Netherlands East Indies area.
2. The crew and aircraft of the 22nd Bombardment Group had left San Francisco Bay on 6 February and arrived in Honolulu on 15 February where they were joined by a B-26 group. They left on 20 February and arrived by air transport at Brisbane on 24 March by way of Canton Island, Palmyra Island, Suva (Fiji), and Noumea. They moved to Townsville in early April after preparations, and began campaigns against Rabaul.

3. Maintenance staff left San Francisco on a commercial ship on 21 January and arrived at Brisbane on 25 February. After approximately 3 weeks' preparations, the 150 P-39s that were ready were joined to the 22nd Bombardment Group and transferred to Townsville. Approximately 2,000 maintenance crewmen boarded nine American commercial vessels, which were berthed at Brisbane, and, with two other cargo boats, set out for Townsville.

4. It seems that the P-39s were transported from San Francisco and New York by the southern route via Panama to Sydney and Brisbane.

Meanwhile, Lae suffered additional attacks from combined fighter and bomber groups. Eight bombers and eight fighters raided on 11 April, and six fighters and four bombers raided again on 13 April. Japanese fighter units scrambled and reported shooting down around one-third of the raiders on each occasion. Damage to Japanese aircraft was not slight, however, and the land-based attack planes in the area were ordered to evacuate

to Rabaul on 11 April. Thereafter, patrols over the Y sector, which was the responsibility of land-based attack planes at Lae, were conducted from the base at Rabaul.

In this way, Japanese air attacks on Port Moresby after 10 April were postponed for around a week in order to repair aircraft. Commander Yamada of the 25th Air Flotilla lamented that “The number of serviceable aircraft for attacks on Port Moresby on 14 April did not exceed three fighters and three attack planes.” At the same time, General Douglas MacArthur in Australia declared that “The Japanese have suffered a deadly blow to their aircraft numbers, and are currently unable to mount an attack.”

During this time, the 25th Air Flotilla undertook the following reconnaissance in preparation for attacks on Port Moresby:

1. Gizo Island, Tetepare (in the central Solomon Islands), Kiriwina Island, Egum Atoll, Normanby Island, Deboyne Island, Rossel Island, Paria Reef, Long Reef, Samarai (Louisiade Archipelago), Eagle Point, Abau, and Keppel Point, research for suitability as advance seaplane base.
2. Surveys of various waterways in the waters to the east of Australia, and research into accuracy of naval charts.
3. Reconnaissance of land airbases to the north of the base of Cape York in northern Australia.
4. Photographs of landing sites at Port Moresby, and reconnaissance of barge mobilisation routes from Samarai to Keppel Point.

The 25th Air Flotilla had reached its lowest strength by 13–14 April. However, it unexpectedly reached a state of preparedness after the completion of the assembly at Rabaul of the Tainan Air Corps on 16 April, and through efforts to quickly prepare Zeros that had arrived as reinforcements. The 25th Air Flotilla began full-scale raids on Port Moresby on 17 April after a planned raid the previous day was cancelled owing to inclement weather. Raids were conducted by a force of 15 fighters and seven land-based attack planes (two returned with malfunctions en route), with reports of five Allied planes downed for the loss of one fighter.

Raids were carried out almost daily thereafter until the beginning of May. Of particular note were raids in two or three waves. Horn Island was attacked on 30 April using six fighters and eight attack planes. Tulagi was also attacked on 25 and 30 April with land-based attack planes and large flying boats.

Allied counter-attacks also were persistent. Daily raids were directed exclusively at Lae after the attacks on Rabaul on 22 and 23 April. However, these raids were only conducted with bombers, such as B-17s, B-26s, and Lockheeds, in formations of two or three planes. This led the commander of the 25th Air Flotilla to judge that Allied air strength at Port Moresby had been smashed by 29 April.<sup>118</sup>

Nevertheless, the very next day, on 30 April, Lae was raided by a formation of three B-26s bombers and twelve P-39 fighters. It was clear that the Allies had reinforced Moresby with a considerable number of P-39s. Further, the discovery of the impressive B-25s at Horn Island led to the inevitable conclusion that the build up of the US Army Air Force in the Australian region was continuing and intensifying.

The sea-route offensive against Port Moresby was to have been carried out under these conditions, but the course of events during the air war to smash the enemy in eastern New Guinea and the region in the north-east of Australia had introduced an element of doubt.

#### Operational planning by the Navy<sup>119</sup>

Confidence in the execution of the operation firmed within headquarters of the 4th Fleet after the 5th Squadron (*Nachi* missing) and the 5th Air Flotilla were attached to the formation. Offensive plans were formulated and preparations for the operation continued.

As indicated by the above quoted army–navy central agreement, the 4th Fleet still had on its plate the invasion of the strategically important Tulagi in the southern Solomon Islands in addition to the Port Moresby operation.

The occupation of Shortland Island, a relay base for the Tulagi offensive, was completed by late March.

In addition, the 4th Fleet was responsible for offensives against Nauru and Ocean Island in the Gilbert Islands. These operations had been previously planned primarily to secure supplies of phosphorus.

These offensives in three different areas were planned together by the 4th Fleet, which named the entire operation the Moresby Operation (MO Operation). Samarai, a small island of some 4 kilometres circumference overlooking the China Strait, was the administrative centre for the area and a key transport link. As previously mentioned, the passages through the Louisiade Archipelago were extremely few. The occupation of Samarai to secure the China Strait was consequently of great importance. The 4th Fleet planned for elements of the special naval landing force from the Port Moresby invasion to occupy the island.

The objectives of the Moresby Operation, as formulated by the 4th Fleet, were as follows:

Invade and occupy Tulagi and key areas in south-east New Guinea. Further, in cooperation with the army's South Seas Force, invade and secure Port Moresby, establish airbases in these locations, and intensify the air war against Australia.

Following on from these operations, undertake surprise attacks against Nauru and Ocean Island to secure supplies of phosphorus.

The 4th Fleet planned successive offensives against Tulagi on 3 May, Port Moresby on 10 May, and Nauru and Ocean Island on 15 May. An order of battle was prepared for these operations, as well as for the occupation of Samarai on 12 May. Further, the commander of the 4th Fleet divided the order of battle into the period up to the completion of the Tulagi offensive (A) and the period thereafter (B). "Secret South Seas Fleet operational order no. 13" was subsequently issued on 23 April. An overview of this order is as follows:

Formation	Command (4th Fleet)	Strength	Main responsibilities
Moresby (MO) Main Force	6th Squadron commander	6th Squadron ( <i>Aoba, Kako, Kinugasa, Furutaka, Shōhō, Sazanami</i> (7th Destroyer Squadron)	
Tulagi Invasion Force (RXB)	19th Squadron commander	19th Squadron ( <i>Okinoshima (Tsugaru and Tokiwa missing)**</i> ) Half of 23rd Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Kikuzuki, Yūzuki**</i> ) 14th Minesweeper Flotilla ( <i>Tama Maru, Hagoromo Maru, No. 2 Noshiro Maru*</i> ) <i>No. 1 and No. 2 Special Minesweeper</i> 56th Submarine Chaser Squadron ( <i>No. 8 Tama Maru, No. 3 Toshi Maru</i> ) Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party (part strength)*** <i>Azumayama Maru*, Kōei Maru</i> 7th Establishment Squad (part strength)***	1. Tulagi offensive at dawn 3 May 2. Establishment of airbase
Moresby Invasion Force (RZP)	6th Torpedo Squadron commander	6th Torpedo Squadron ( <i>Yūbari, 29th Destroyer Squadron (Oite, Asanagi), 30th Destroyer Squadron (Muzuki, Mochizuki, Yayoi), 23rd Destroyer Squadron (Uzuki (Yūnagi, Kikuzuki and Yūzuki missing))</i> ) <i>Tsugaru</i> <i>No. 20 Minesweeper</i> Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party (elements missing) <i>Azumayama Maru, Goyō Maru, Akihasan Maru, Shōkai Maru,</i>	1. Direct protection of South Seas Force 2. Moresby invasion at dawn 10 May 3. Establishment of airbase 4. Secure supply route 5. Protect transport route

		<i>Chōwa Maru, Oshima, No. 2 Fumi Maru, No. 3 Seki Maru, Mogamikawa Maru</i> 10th Establishment Squad	
Covering Force	18th Squadron commander	18th Squadron ( <i>Tenryū, Tatsuta</i> ) <i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> air corps <i>Kamikawa Maru</i> Two specially fitted gunboats from 5th Gunboat Squadron ( <i>Nikkai Maru, Keijō Maru</i> ) <i>Shōei Maru</i> 14th Minesweeper Flotilla part ( <i>Hagoromo Maru, No. 2 Noshiro Maru</i> ) Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party (part strength)	1. Protection of the Tulagi Invasion Force 2. Protection of the Moresby Invasion Force and escort for the South Seas Force 3. Establishment of invasion bases at key areas 4. Samarai offensive on 12 May
Raiding Force		21st Submarine Group ( <i>Ro-33</i> and <i>Ro-34</i> )	1. Seek and attack enemy fleet 2. Surveillance lead vessel in Moresby harbour
Supply Units		<i>Ishirō, Hōyō Maru</i>	Supply
Moresby (MO) Carrier Force	5th Squadron commander	5th Squadron ( <i>Myōkō, Haguro</i> ( <i>Nachi</i> missing)) 5th Air Flotilla ( <i>Zuikaku, Shōkaku</i> ) 27th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Shigure, Yūgure, Ariake, Shiratsuyu</i> ) 7th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Shioakebono</i> ( <i>Sazanami</i> missing))	1. Destroy enemy vessels 2. Destroy enemy air strength
Nauru and Ocean Island Invasion Force	19th Squadron commander	19th Squadron ( <i>Okinoshima</i> ( <i>Tsugaru</i> and <i>Tokiwa</i> missing))*** 23rd Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Kikuzuki, Yūzuki</i> )*** <i>Kinryū Maru, Takahata Maru</i> 6th Base Naval Landing Party, Kashima Naval Landing Party (separate orders on formation) <i>Tatsuta, Tsugaru</i> (after 11 May)	Nauru and Ocean Island offensives on 15 May [Editor's note: <i>Okinoshima</i> was sunk on 11 May, so it was replaced with <i>Tatsuta</i> .]
Bismarck Area (R) Defence Force	8th Base Force commander	8th Signals Unit 8th Submarine Base Force 81st Garrison Rabaul Unit 5th Gunboat Squadron ( <i>Seikai Maru</i> ) 56th Submarine Chaser Squadron ( <i>No. 5 Kotobuki Maru</i> )	

Notes: The Tulagi Invasion Force was dispersed according to orders issued for the “B order of battle”, indicated as follows: “\*” to Moresby Invasion Force; “\*\*\*” to Nauru and Ocean Island Invasion Force; and “\*\*\*\*” to Bismarck Area Defence Force.

The central command unit as indicated in the order of battle, taking into account the general situation, was naturally the Moresby Carrier Force. The commander of the 4th Fleet issued instructions to the carrier force through the above-mentioned orders issued on 23 April, as follows:

Secret South Seas Fleet Operational Order no. 13: Instructions for Unit Movements

1. Moresby Carrier Force

Sortie from Truk towards the Solomon Islands on about day  $x-10$  through waters to the north-east, and then continue to provide direct support for the Tulagi invasion operation. On day  $x-5$  (the day after the start of reconnaissance flying boat patrols from Tulagi) enter the Coral Sea from the east of the Solomon Islands, begin to provide direct support to the Moresby Invasion Force as required, according to the following strategies.

- a. When a powerful naval force is detected, first attack and destroy.
- b. Continue to make preparations for the appearance of a powerful naval force while none can be detected, and mobilise to protect the Moresby Invasion Force as required. Provide limited air patrolling and support for the Port Moresby Invasion Force when this becomes especially necessary according to the situation.
- c. Up until day  $x+5$  after the successful landing at Port Moresby, continue preparations for the appearance of a powerful enemy naval force in the area of the Coral Sea within range of Japanese airbases. After mobilisation as required, provide direct support for the Gilbert Island Invasion Force, then return to Truk.
- d. During these actions, keep particularly close contact with the invasion forces, the airbase units, and the submarine units. Command of naval units in the area shall be combined when engaging a powerful enemy force. [Editor's note: The section of the original text which was revised the day following this entry has been corrected.]

The Tulagi and Moresby Invasion Forces assembled and made preparations at Rabaul, while other units did the same at Truk. Departure of the units from Rabaul and Truk was planned as follows, according to the B order of battle issued on 4 May:

Tulagi Invasion Force: 29 April, sortie from Rabaul  
Moresby Escort Fleet: 29 April, sortie from Truk  
Moresby Main Force: 30 April, sortie from Truk  
Moresby Carrier Force: 1 May, sortie from Truk  
Moresby Invasion Force: 4 May, sortie from Rabaul

Operational planning by the South Seas Force<sup>120</sup>

The South Seas Force had been leaning towards adopting a barge mobilisation plan for the invasion of Port Moresby. The strengthening of the 4th Fleet, however, had increased confidence in the success of a standard landing-style operation.

Strategic planning and discussions for the Moresby invasion were held at 4th Fleet headquarters in Truk on 16–17 April, with the participation of Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka, the chief of staff of the South Seas Force. Meanwhile, with a superior navy escort strength in the region, and with three carriers en route to the Coral Sea to engage in direct support, optimism was mounting that the campaign would be successful.

Until this time, the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters had not given any specific instructions or leadership concerning the Port Moresby campaign. Consequently, chief of staff Tanaka wrote to Imperial Headquarters from Truk outlining the commander's appraisal of the campaign and seeking instructions from central headquarters.

The reply, addressed to the South Seas Force commander, was telegraphed on 18 April. The main thrust was as follows:

The Port Moresby offensive is essential for later operations, and should be carried out according to the commander's judgment. This campaign is an opportunity to test army and navy cooperation for later operations, and should be executed by 10 May at the latest.

Meanwhile, Imperial Headquarters had advised of the despatch of the high-speed anti-aircraft ship *Asakayama Maru*. In addition, the opinion was submitted that "the navy has judged that it will be possible to compensate for the lack of speed in the convoy by the use of the large force planned for the current campaign".

At that time, the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters was not particularly enthusiastic about the Port Moresby invasion operation. As will be discussed below, they became confrontational over the operation to

blockade the supply route between the United States and Australia, and over the operations to invade Midway and the Aleutian Islands.

An agreement was reached between the army and navy at the 8th Base Force headquarters in Rabaul on 25 and 26 April. Details were fleshed out by 3 May.

The transport convoy consisted of a total of 11 ships. The army had five in addition to *Asakayama Maru*, and the navy six, including *Azumayama Maru*. The route adopted for the convoy was as follows: depart Rabaul, then after passing through the St George's Channel, proceed south-south-west in the seas to the west of Bougainville, turn south-west when to the east of Woodlark Island and head towards Deboyne Island, and then enter the Coral Sea through the Jomard Passage. The support group had occupied Deboyne Island on 4 May with plans to construct a seaplane base for the Moresby operation.

The commander of the South Seas Force issued the order of battle for the Port Moresby invasion on 29 April. This outlined a movement of barges outside of the reef, with the main force landing at Taurama after passing through Padana Nafua passage, and elements (based on 1st Battalion of 144th Infantry Regiment) passing through the Liljeblad Passage and landing on the coast at Oiso. These landings were to be completed by early dawn on 10 May, followed by offensives against Kila airfield and the Moresby peninsula. Finally, attacks against the airfields to the north were planned.

The airfields, particularly those to the north of Port Moresby, were the main objective of the offensive.

Intelligence from the start of the war confirmed the existence of a garrison of approximately battalion strength to the north of Port Moresby township. Accurate information concerning establishments and army strength was not available, but it was estimated that the Allied land strength was approximately five thousand men.<sup>121</sup>

#### Operational planning by the 25th Air Flotilla<sup>122</sup>

The 25th Air Flotilla had intensified its air raids against Port Moresby and in the northern Australian area since early April in preparation for the Port Moresby invasion operation.

As the operation finally approached, the 25th Air Flotilla was given the following responsibilities:

##### Airbase Force Operational Order No. 3

1. The South Seas Fleet and the South Seas Force of the army will attack Port Moresby on day *x* (10 May), the South Seas Fleet will attack Tulagi on day *y* (3 May) and Nauru and Ocean Islands on day *m* (5 May).
2. The 5th Air Attack Force will cooperate in the following operations and at locations prescribed by their commander.
  - a. Intensify raids with force against northern Australia and Port Moresby after 1 May.
  - b. Patrol the route during movements of the carrier force during the Port Moresby invasion (both en route and returning), and patrol Tulagi and the route of the Tulagi Invasion Force.
  - c. Carry out aerial protection of the convoy, and aerial protection over Port Moresby during the offensive with the entire strength used for item a.
  - d. Undertake reconnaissance of the landing sites.
  - e. Receive deployment instructions from the commander of the offensive concerning the movements of transports by *Mogamikawa Maru* [Details below abbreviated by editor].

##### 5th Air Attack Force Secret Operational Order No. 2

[Abbreviated]

##### 2. Operational policy

- a. Patrol the seas on high alert and make efforts to provide speedy information concerning enemy naval activities. In addition, complete preparations for military preparedness, then seek and destroy the enemy.
- b. Undertake repeated attacks and crush Allied air strength in New Guinea with the full strength of the 1st and 2nd Forces prior to the start of the Moresby operation.
- c. Patrol the skies over Rabaul on alert, and in cooperation with the army, seek and destroy enemy planes which have come to raid, thus smashing the Allies' plans for attacks in the region.
- d. Undertake reconnaissance, first over New Guinea, then over the northern Australian region using reconnaissance planes.
- e. Cooperate with the Port Moresby invasion.

[Abbreviated by editor] Carry out the following based on the agreement documents for the Port Moresby operation.

- i. Carry out XYZ duties [Editor's note: Various reconnaissance duties] and take aerial photographs of the landing site as preparation for the operation based on "5th Air Attack Force secret operational order no. 1".
- ii. Patrol the skies as indicated in attached map 1.
- iii. Provide aerial protection for the Port Moresby invasion transport convoy.
- iv. Provide aerial protection in the region of the target from the day of the start of the operation.
- v. Attack and destroy enemy military installations at Port Moresby.
- f. When Allied air strength at Port Moresby is destroyed, seek out and destroy powerful air units in north-east Australia.

### 3. Order of battle

Formation	Command and strength	Base to utilise	Main responsibilities
1st Force	Tainan Air Corps	Lakunai, Lae, Moresby, Kila	1. Smash air strength in New Guinea and north-east Australia 2. Patrol bases and skies over convoy 3. Z duties
2nd Force	4th Air Corps	Vunakanau, Lae, Moresby	1. [As above] 2. Patrolling 3. Attack enemy task force 4. Y duties 5. Assist land operations
3rd Force	Motoyama Air Corps	Vunakanau	1. Patrolling 2. Attack enemy task force 3. Smash air strength in New Guinea and north-east Australia
4th Force	Yokohama Air Corps	Tulagi, Shortland Island, Deboyne Island	1. Patrolling 2. Prepare for contact 3. Attack enemy task force
Special Duty Force	<i>Mogamikawa Maru</i>		1. Transport 2. Provisions

### 4. Unit movements [Abbreviated]

An overview of the patrol plan corresponding to the operation overview was as follows.

Patrol	Base	Extent	Notes
A	Lae	124–190 degrees	Search lines no. 1–5
B	Rabaul	135–172 degrees	Search lines no. 1–4
C	Rabaul	53–115 degrees	Search line no. 1–4
D	Shortland Island	100–194 degrees	Search line no. 1–4
E	Shortland Island	45–100 degrees	
F	Tulagi	95–225 degrees	Search line no. 1–11
G	Tulagi	45–95 degrees	Search line no. 1–5
I	Deboyne Island	155–180 degrees	Search line no. 1, 2

The range of all patrols was 1,100 kilometres.

#### Departure of the transport fleet

The Tulagi Invasion Force (based on the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party) occupied Tulagi as planned without resistance at dawn on 3 May.

The South Seas Force embarked at Rabaul harbour during 2 and 3 May and set out south at 4 pm on 4 May (*Asakayama Maru* left on 5 May) under the protection of the main strength of the 4th Fleet in high spirits for adventure.<sup>123</sup>

This formation unexpectedly encountered the US task force two days after setting sail and engaged in the battle of the Coral Sea, the first ever carrier-based naval air battle. The formation returned to Rabaul with their offensive capability intact.

Information about enemy strengths and deployments to be used for the sea-route operation was contained in unit orders for the Port Moresby operation (issued on 23 April), as follows:

Operational Order No. 1 Attachment 1

1. Enemy situation

US air forces have been strengthened in the area to the north of Australia, with approximately 200 aircraft at the front line, and a considerable strength continuing to operate from Port Darwin and Townsville.

Although there is *little probability of the existence* of a powerful force in the area after the withdrawal of the US task force, the British navy could place a force in Australian waters based on one battleship, with 2–3 heavy cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers. In this way, even with a slight US presence, there is a chance of a force remaining active in the region.

Even if enemy submarines are not particularly active, there is a strong chance that at least two or three will continue to mobilise around Rabaul.

[Abbreviated]

The essential point in terms of aerial protection is the difficulty in keeping our plans secret from the active enemy reconnaissance planes. It is necessary to be extra vigilant against air attack from large-scale heavily armoured bombers, and against attack planes conducting extremely skilled bomb raids at low levels.

## **Outline of the naval battle of the Coral Sea**

### The situation before the battle

Airbase units intensified their daily attacks during April and into early May.

The field strength of the 5th Air Attack Force (25th Air Flotilla) on 1 May was 28 Zero fighters (18 in service), 11 Type-96 fighters (6 in service), 28 Type-1 land-based attack planes (17 in service), 26 Type-96 land-based attack planes (25 in service), and 16 Type-97 large flying boats (12 in service).<sup>124</sup>

It had been judged that the use of small-scale aircraft based at Port Moresby had been suppressed by 4 May. However, there was no means to continue attacks on the logistics bases after this time, so the control of the air could not be maintained. Further, the range of daily patrols seeking enemy incursions had widened, finding no trace of the enemy in the seas in the region from the Coral Sea to the Solomon Islands.

Meanwhile, the Tulagi operation had proceeded favourably on 3 May as planned. Consequently, some of the flying boats were advanced to Tulagi that same afternoon. However, the force was attacked suddenly by a US task force of approximately eighty carrier-based aircraft the following day for about 6 hours from 6.30 am. The raid resulted in the sinking of one destroyer, two minesweepers, and one submarine chaser.

At that time, the Port Moresby operation carrier force had commenced refuelling approximately 670 kilometres north of Tulagi. It had been delayed in sailing south because the Zeros, which were aboard the fleet as replacements, were unable to be transported to Rabaul owing to poor weather.

Raids on Tulagi by carrier-based aircraft meant that the US task force had advanced into the region. The opinion from within Combined Fleet headquarters was as follows:

Having confidence in the strength of the 5th Air Flotilla, it will be possible to catch and destroy the enemy aircraft carriers that have eluded us since the beginning of the war. In addition to bringing us great joy, this will inform the enemy appropriately of our strength. The South Seas Fleet has yearned for suitable hard fighting, given that there was a good chance of receiving raids from enemy carriers up until the completion of the Port Moresby operation.<sup>125</sup>

However, rather than advancing air units, the 5th Air Flotilla feared the Allies and withdrew, concerned that they would be unable to defeat the US carrier fleet.<sup>126</sup>

Issued by commander 4th Fleet, 4 May 0720 hrs

1. The Allied task force is within 370 kilometres of Tulagi.
2. The Port Moresby Carrier Force will immediately proceed towards and destroy the enemy task force.<sup>127</sup>

Upon receipt of this telegraph, the carrier force (5th Air Flotilla) immediately ceased refuelling and steamed south. Submarine units immediately proceeded to the deployment line.

The South Seas Fleet (4th Fleet) remained confident in its air strength, so decided to proceed as planned with the invasion of Port Moresby. The Tulagi Invasion Force was withdrawn to the north during the raids, but the Port Moresby Invasion Force was ordered to depart from Rabaul according to the plan.

The 5th Air Attack Force and the 5th Air Flotilla hunted for the Allied task force on 5 May without any success. The Japanese carrier force headed north-east from its position to the south of Guadalcanal, while the invasion force proceeded as planned to the south. Meanwhile, the US task force, which was based on two aircraft carriers, assembled approximately 670 kilometres south of Guadalcanal. Owing to refuelling, only the carrier *Yorktown* participated in the Tulagi attack, after which it headed south to rendezvous with the main force. The movements of the Japanese Port Moresby Invasion Force were carried out according to the offensive plan.<sup>128</sup>

A report was received at 8.10 am on 6 May from a reconnaissance plane from the Yokohama Air Corps: "Sighting of what seems a large enemy force. Bearing 192 degrees from base, distance 780 kilometres."<sup>129</sup>

The Port Moresby Invasion Force was even at that time refuelling west of Guadalcanal, but turned south at 10 am immediately upon receiving this report.

However, the reconnaissance plane lost contact with the US task force at midday. The distance between the two forces was felt to be around 670 kilometres. Vice Admiral Takagi Takeo, the commander of the carrier force, determined that the opportunity of an attack during the day had been lost, so turned north at 6 pm to wait for a chance to attack during the following day. Takagi considered that: "The enemy may attack our invasion force on 7 May, but the chances are good that it will be steaming south on 7 May for an attack on 8 May. Consequently, it is essential that we seek out and attack the task force during 7 May." Patrols were sent to the estimated position of the US task force during the morning of 7 May. The commander had decided that, if it was not possible to locate the enemy, the group would proceed west into the Coral Sea.

Meanwhile, the Japanese invasion force had continued from the previous day to steam south in the central Coral Sea, but made contact with Allied planes just after 9 am. An attack from the US task force now seemed inevitable, so patrols were placed on high alert.

Airbase units deployed at midday after a large flying boat had made contact with the task force. However, preparations for the planned attack by flying boats were not ready and the attack was not possible. Units of the escort fleet had arrived at Deboyne Island as planned and begun preparations for the seaplane base.

The US task force had judged that the Japanese invasion force would pass through the Jomard Passage on 7 or 8 May, but had not yet determined the exact position of the Port Moresby Carrier Force.

#### The battle on 7 May

Finally, as 7 May arrived, the convoy planned to exit the Jomard Passage into the Coral Sea, while the Moresby Main Force and the Port Moresby Escort Force had left Deboyne Island and were deployed in the waters to the north of Rossel Island. The Port Moresby Carrier Force was some 560 kilometres to the south-west looking for the US task force that had appeared during the previous few days.

On the other side, Allied units were carrying out raids using airbase units, while the task force had left its course to the north-west to pursue the Japanese invasion force in the waters to the south of Rossel Island.

Contact and engagements by each side to the east and west occurred almost simultaneously.

First, search planes from the 5th Air Flotilla discovered at 5.22 am an enemy formation based on one aircraft carrier situated 740 kilometres south-west of Tulagi. Rear Admiral Hara, commander of the 5th Air Flotilla,

immediately ordered a full strength attack. The attack force (approximately 78 planes) left the carriers between 6 and 6.15 am.

Next, a report was received from a reconnaissance seaplane at around 6.40 am that “one battleship, one cruiser, seven destroyers and what looks like one aircraft carrier discovered at bearing 170 degrees, range 152 kilometres from Rossel Island”.<sup>130</sup>

Command of the 4th Fleet, on hearing these reports, judged that the US task force had broken into two formations. A decision was made first to attack the formation near Rossel island. The full strength of their force was mobilised at 8.45 am.<sup>131</sup>

In accordance with a judgment of the conditions, the invasion force, under the protection of the escort fleet, began to withdraw to the north-west.

The attack units of the 5th Air Flotilla arrived at the target area under the guidance of the contact plane to find that the aircraft carrier had gone, leaving an oil tanker and one destroyer. The attack unit split into two formations and searched the area for over 2 hours, but was unable to locate the aircraft carrier. The carrier-based attack planes bombarded the tanker and nearby destroyer and then returned.

Meanwhile, attacks had begun on the transport convoy to the west from aircraft of the US task force. Attack units from *Lexington* departed at 7.26 am, and from *Yorktown* at 8 am (total of 93 planes).

US torpedo bombers concentrated on the Japanese carrier *Shōhō*, which was providing direct support to the convoy. It sunk at 9.35 am at a position 59 degrees and 96 kilometres from Deboyne Island. The receipt of the report, “*Shōhō* has sunk”, was a great shock to the commanders of the South Seas Fleet.<sup>132</sup>

As previously mentioned, the Port Moresby Carrier Force had been delayed from loading the first attack group, but was now steaming south at full speed. Unfortunately, the 5th Air Flotilla had been formed just prior to the start of the war. Its crew were insufficiently trained and had great difficulties with night operations. Consequently, only experienced crews left the carrier after 2 pm for twilight battles. These units were unable to locate the task force so dumped their bombs and torpedos and headed back to the carriers. An enemy carrier was located, however, near to the Japanese carrier, but by that time the attack units could provide no assistance.

The commander of the Combined Fleet stated the following in his official diary for this day:

The dream of a great victory is gone. The battle belongs to the enemy. It was impossible, as feared. When the expected enemy raid came, we could not even mobilise the slightest united strength. In the end, we cannot even blame inadequate reconnaissance seaplanes. I am all the more concerned.

The South Seas Fleet received the report that contact had been lost with the Allied task force, which was at that time some 560 kilometres distant. Recognising that a night battle would be difficult, the decision was taken at 6.20 pm to cease the attack and postpone the invasion of Port Moresby for two days.<sup>133</sup>

#### The battle on 8 May

Search planes, which lifted from *Shōkaku* at 4 am on 8 May, located the US task force at a bearing of 205 degrees and a range of 435 kilometres. Its heading was 170 degrees at a speed of 30 kilometres per hour.

An attack unit from the 5th Air Flotilla sortied at 7.15 am. Its strength totalled 69 aircraft, including 18 fighters, 33 bombers, and 18 attack planes. The Japanese carrier fleet was speeding south at 55 kilometres per hour ahead of a squall.

Meanwhile, contact was made by US search planes at about 6.30 am, and thinking this was an early morning raid by an enemy formation, the Japanese went to high alert. Concentrated attacks by US aircraft began at 8.50 am. By 9.40 am, *Shōkaku* had received four waves of attacks, which left it on fire and unserviceable by aircraft.

Meanwhile, the Japanese attack group had reached the target and successfully undertaken an air strike at 9.20 am. At 9.25 am, a report was sent that read: “*Saratoga* attacked and sunk.” The attack units were taken on board the remaining carrier *Zuikaku*. It was confirmed from this report that *Saratoga* and *Yorktown* had been

sunk, and heavy damage inflicted to one battleship and one heavy cruiser.\* The entire complement of the attack force had received damage from shellfire.<sup>134</sup>

The commander of the Port Moresby Carrier Force was determined to conserve fuel and offensive strength and was apprehensive about high-speed travel in night battles. Consequently, he telegraphed the following message to the commanders of the South Seas Fleet at 12.30 pm: "The assault units returned at around 1100 hrs. Owing to the need for repairs, a second attack today is unlikely."

After taking on board the assault units, the Port Moresby Carrier Force turned and headed north at about 1 pm. At that time, only two vessels from the 5th Squadron could undertake night operations. The commander of the carrier force, Vice Admiral Takagi, received a telegraphic order from the South Seas Fleet at 2 pm to "Cease offensive and head north." The group reluctantly disengaged from the enemy to refuel and undertake repairs to aircraft.<sup>135</sup>

The commander of the 4th Fleet (South Seas Fleet) telegraphed the commander of the South Seas Force, as follows: "The day for the offensive against Port Moresby has been revised to day  $x+2$ ."

*Tsugaru*, the relay ship for this message, received the telegraph at 7.30 pm on 7 May, but did not relay it to the commander of the South Seas Force on board *Matsue Maru* until 5.30 am the following day.<sup>136</sup> This delay is thought to be because of a wish to avoid signal flares at night.

The South Seas Force commander relayed the following back to *Tsugaru*: "First, I have been informed of the delay of the invasion day. Secondly, I would like information on yesterday's battles."

The reply from *Tsugaru* was telegraphed:

It was not possible to capture the enemy yesterday evening. We are currently searching for them this morning. Enemy losses so far amount to one warship and one oil tanker sunk, and damage to one heavy cruiser. Remaining enemy strength totals one aircraft carrier, two heavy cruisers, and seven destroyers.

#### Conclusion of the naval battle

The South Seas Fleet for a time disengaged from the enemy and headed north. At 9 am on 8 May, orders were received from the Combined Fleet: "At this time, destroy the powerful remaining enemy force."<sup>137</sup> The fleet immediately turned south and commenced searching, but at this time it was not possible to locate the Allied task force.

The commander of the South Seas Force received the following message just after 3 pm on 8 May from the commander of the 4th Fleet via the captain of *Tsugaru*: "The Port Moresby operation is postponed and the convoy will return to Rabaul. Be advised that your unit will land and return to their barracks." The commander replied. "First, I offer my deepest congratulations for such an unprecedented victory. Secondly, I confirm that I understand we will return to Rabaul."<sup>138</sup>

Under these circumstances, the Port Moresby invasion convoy returned to Rabaul, all the while under high alert. The 30th Destroyer Squadron joined the convoy at 9.40 am and was deployed defensively prior to entering the St George's Channel owing to fears of the presence of US submarines.

The convoy safely steamed through the channel and entered Rabaul at 3 pm.

The Combined Fleet command, which was considering the date of the next invasion attempt, issued orders at 1.30 pm on 10 May advising that, "The Port Moresby operation will be postponed until phase three (July)." Further, the chief of staff advised that, "If there are no signs of the enemy today, the Port Moresby Carrier Force (5th Squadron and 5th Air Flotilla) will be removed from the South Seas Fleet." This was effectively the end of the Port Moresby sea-route invasion.

An overview of the losses on each side during this naval battle was as follows:<sup>139</sup>

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\* It was actually *Lexington* which was the only major Allied casualty of the battle (see below). *Yorktown* was damaged, but returned to Hawaii for repairs.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Japanese</b>	<b>United States</b>
Ships	1 carrier ( <i>Shōhō</i> ) 1 destroyer 4 specialty vessels Total 6 sunk	1 carrier ( <i>Lexington</i> ) 1 oil tanker 1 destroyer Total 3 sunk
Aircraft	80	66
Personnel	Approximately 900	543

Imperial Headquarters instructed the commander of the South Seas Force that: “The execution of the Port Moresby invasion operation has been temporarily postponed. The force will be transferred to the command of the newly established 17th Army. The operation will be executed around July.”<sup>140</sup>

### ***Chapter 3. Planning and cancellation of the United States–Australia blockade operation***

The war entered a new stage after the fall of Java and Rangoon in early March 1942. This was the transition from stage one to stage two operations. The campaign adopted for the opening of stage two was an advance into key strategic areas at the periphery of the region occupied during stage one. Representative of these operations were the advances into Midway and the Aleutian Islands, and the operation to blockade the United States and Australia.

The United States–Australia blockade operation (known as the “FS Operation”, or simply the “F Operation”) consisted of invading New Caledonia and Fiji, key locations in the South Pacific on the line of communication between the United States and Australia.

While the operation was scheduled to start on 18 May 1942, internal wrangling within Imperial Headquarters over the leadership of stage two operations caused numerous serious arguments. This wrangling characterises the antagonism that developed between the army and navy concerning the war more generally and operational leadership in the wider context of the Greater East Asian War. This is detailed in the *History of Imperial Headquarters* volume, but the issue as it relates to the FS Operation will be discussed in this chapter.

#### **Imperial Headquarters’ conception of stage two operations**

##### Plans for stage two operations at the outbreak of war

Did Imperial Headquarters hold plans for, or have any conception of, stage two operations at the time of the start of the war in December 1941?

The operation against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands planned by the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters was called the Southern Operation. As the name implies, it was limited to the invasion of key strategic areas in the Southern Area. The extract in the planning documents relating to the objective of stage two operations stated the following: “The strongholds of the United States, Britain, and then the Netherlands in eastern Asia will be destroyed, and key strategic locations in the Southern Area will be occupied and secured.”<sup>141</sup>

Planning for offensive campaigns in the Southern Area specified nothing more than that key areas were to be secured after the invasion.

In contrast, the navy’s operational policy (within the navy, planning an operation was called “operational policy”) against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands clearly divided the operation into two stages: offensive campaigns in the Southern Area, and subsequent campaigns. An outline of operational leadership for both stages was clearly established, and contained the following:

Quickly attack and destroy enemy fleet and air strengths in the eastern Pacific. Occupy and secure key strategic locations in the southern region and establish a long-term and unassailable footing. In addition, attack and destroy the enemy fleet, ultimately crushing their fighting spirit.<sup>142</sup>

This makes clear, in general, the policy through to the end of the war. The overview of leadership for stage two was established with the same gravity as stage one, as follows:<sup>143</sup>

1. Occupy various regions, prepare to take key strategic sites, and secure maritime transport routes using a naval strength based on elements of the 3rd and 5th Fleets.
2. Make efforts to disrupt the enemy’s secure supply routes using elements of submarine and seaplane units.
3. Attack and destroy enemy forward bases using airbase units, a mobile carrier fleet, and units from item 1 above.
4. If it is possible to attack the main strength of the US fleet, then make efforts to destroy enemy strength with elements of the Combined Fleet, then muster the main strength to ambush and destroy them.  
If it is possible to attack a significant British naval formation, then make efforts to seek out and destroy it after the US fleet has been silenced.

From this overview it seems clear that a protracted campaign was envisaged, with the securing of Japanese transport routes and the disruption of Allied supply lines as the central elements. A decisive ambush was planned within the scope of Japanese influence for attacks on the main Allied naval strength. With agreement on this point, this policy was clearly dealt with in the content of the submission to the emperor by the navy chief

of staff, as well as in the investigations of the “Strategic prospects for the early stages and subsequent years of war against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands” in discussions at the Imperial Headquarters–government liaison conference held in October 1941.

The fact that the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters had no plans whatsoever for stage two operations against the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands is principally put down to the traditional ideology of apportioning operational regions of responsibility to the army and navy (although this ideology was itself the target of much criticism). The main strategic concerns for the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters in the period after the invasion of key areas in the southern region were the continental fronts in China and Burma, and preparations against the Soviet Union. The main thrust of the operations in the southern region concerned breaking transport routes and air battles. Any decisive counter-attack from the Allies would come from air and sea strengths through the Pacific. This was to be carried out through a decisive naval battle, and was felt to be the sole domain of the navy.<sup>144</sup>

From these historical conditions, the conceptions of stage two campaigns adopted by Imperial Headquarters in planning at the beginning of the war were fundamentally policies adopting maintenance and protection, with the central point being a decisive battle against the main strength of the US fleet within the Japanese sphere of operations. A “Draft plan facilitating the end of war with the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, and Chiang Kai-shek” was formulated at the liaison conference on 15 November 1941. [Editor’s note: This was the actual leadership plan during the war.] The object of military conflict was modified in this plan as follows:<sup>145</sup>

Quickly execute military operations and destroy US, British, and Dutch bases in east Asia and the south-west Pacific. In addition to adopting a superior strategic position, secure the important natural resources and main transport routes and work towards establishing a position of long-term self sufficiency.

At an appropriate time after the completion of various stages of the campaign, lure the main strength of the US fleet into a destructive battle.

#### Consequences of early operational success

The sweeping naval victory at Hawaii at the opening of the war allowed contemplation that Japan was on the verge of an unprecedented victory. Subsequent army campaigns also continued to achieve unimagined successes.

Evaluation of the actual conditions within this mood was calm and reasonable, but it was extremely difficult to appropriately conduct operational leadership in subsequent battles.

Immediately after the victory at Hawaii, senior officers within the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters began investigating campaigns and operational leadership for offensive operations in key southern areas.

The Army Department’s strategy was to try and establish a long-term unassailable position from a base of largely predetermined occupied territories. The essential underlying policy was the completion of military preparations guarding against attack from the Soviet Union. The conclusion of the “Judgment of the situation in the northern region following the outbreak of war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands” was as follows:<sup>146</sup>

The possibility of the Soviet Union positively mobilising against Japan at the outbreak of war is small. However, there is a strong chance of the United States strengthening military installations in the far east of the Soviet Union. It is essential that we are aware that the Soviet Union will adopt a variety of measures against us.

There is a potential for the outbreak of war between Japan and the Soviet Union depending on the development of the situation.

The army was most alert to the possible outbreak of war between Japan and the Soviet Union owing to military cooperation between the United States and the Soviets.

As early as 15 December 1941, the 2nd (Operations) Section and 3rd (War Mobilisation) Section of Imperial Headquarters and the head of the Military Affairs Section of the Army Ministry presented a memorandum of understanding, as follows: “Following on the completion of offensive operations in the southern area, military strength in the region will be reduced to approximately two hundred thousand (from approximately four hundred thousand at the start of the war).”

On 18 December, army chief of staff General Sugiyama Gen impressed on his subordinates the necessity of accelerating preparations for operations against the Soviet Union by the Kwantung Army, with the northern summer of 1942 set as a target date. His chief of operations confirmed in principle that “Preparations for operations against the Soviet Union would be completed by the spring of 1942.”<sup>147</sup>

Army General Staff subsequently explained to the Army Ministry the plan that if the southern region operations could be completed by 24 February 1942, then an appropriate force from the south could be redeployed to the north (Manchuria).

In this way, the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters generally envisaged establishing a long-term unassailable position based in conducting a military build up against Soviet military action, and in adopting a defensive strategy in the southern region. But what had the Navy Department envisaged?

The navy had noted the smooth progress of various victories to this point, but was extremely anxious about initiating the second stage of the operation. The navy’s operational planning was divided into two broad categories.

The first concerned launching a direct attack against Australia and as much as possible foiling any counter-attack by blockading the supply route between Australia and the United States, all the while aiming to establish a long-term unassailable position. The second involved luring the main strength of the US fleet into destruction in a short-term decisive battle through attacks against places like Midway and Hawaii.

At that time, the idea of establishing a long-term position was favoured within the Navy General Staff. The Combined Fleet, however, was opposed to this view, and strongly pressed for a decisive short-term victory.

Neither the policies of a decisive short-term victory nor of protracted offensives were, however, made clear in stage two operational policies developed in the pre-war period.

The chief of staff of the Combined Fleet, Vice Admiral Ugaki Matome, recorded the following in his diary dated 5 January 1942:<sup>148</sup>

Stage one of operations must be generally completed by mid-March, in terms of overall offensive operations. As to where we should then spread our wings, whether to proceed to Australia, whether to set out against Hawaii, or whether to prepare a stand against the Soviet Union and take the opportunity to attack, needs to be planned for in mid-February. Research must be undertaken for the General Staff for this purpose.

Ugaki’s diary entry clearly indicates the mood of uncertainty prevalent at that time.

#### Debate concerning attack on the Australian mainland

Research for stage two operations was undertaken by the army and navy as a basis for their planning. Staff officers from the Army Department and Navy Department carried out concurrent research and discussions, including at the Imperial Headquarters–government liaison conferences. Research continued through late February and early March, further delaying the conclusion of the debate on whether to attack Australia.

Fundamentally, however, the army opposed the invasion of Australia and Hawaii on the grounds that they would extend national strengths beyond their limits. They did not oppose the United States–Australia blockade operation because of their faith in the absolute superiority of the Japanese navy’s capabilities.

The navy’s argument was that establishing a defensive posture was disadvantageous to the execution of long-term strategies. It was vital to adopt aggressive operational leadership whenever possible, thus forcing the enemy to take the defensive position.<sup>149</sup> Underlying this basic policy was support for the invasion of Australia, the main area from which the United States would launch counter-offensives against the Japanese. This was leadership of stage two operations through offensive strategies in the Pacific Ocean area, strategies that it was hoped would hasten the end of the war through naval surface battles in the region.<sup>150</sup>

The reasons for the army’s opposition to this policy were that the invasion of Australia was expected to require 12 army divisions, in addition to transport shipping requirements of approximately 1,500,000 tons. Reflecting

on the bitter experience of the China Incident, the chances were high that an invasion would extend over the whole of the Australian continent.

In order to supply these troops, the size of the Japanese build up against the Soviet Union in Manchuria and the strength of the main China front would need to be substantially reduced. This was, however, considered extremely disadvantageous to the stability of the overall long-term position.

Of more importance was the problem of shipping. The total amount of shipping conscripted by the army at the beginning of the war amounted to 2,100,000 tons. However, it was planned that following the operations in the southern region, these ships would be gradually discharged after five months had elapsed from the outbreak of war (around April 1942) until the total tonnage was around 1,000,000 tons by July 1942. In normal times, Japan maintained around 3,000,000 tons of civilian commercial shipping. Virtually this entire amount was initially mobilised for the war effort. This plan facilitated a long-term war of a scale commensurate with the national strength outlined in the materials mobilisation plan of fiscal 1941.

This way of thinking was a fundamental prerequisite for war leadership. If the required levels of shipping were allowed to deteriorate, then it was clear that this would directly damage national material strength. Even if the army could supply the required strength for the proposal to invade Australia, there were grave fears that the problem of supplying shipping would destroy the fundamental basis for executing the war.<sup>151</sup>

The pressing issue of strengthening policies was discussed at the Imperial Headquarters–government liaison conference on 10 January 1942. It was decided to blockade the supply from Britain and the United States in India, and to deny British cooperation. With regards to Australia (including New Zealand), the following was determined:

Proceed with the southern operations, all the while blockading supply from Britain and the United States and strengthening the pressure on Australia, ultimately with the aim to force Australia to be freed from the shackles of Britain and the United States.

Consequently, the proposal was made on 15 January that the Army Department mainly be responsible for India, and the Navy Department be responsible for Australia.<sup>152</sup> The designs of the navy concerning Australia increasingly came to be supported in this way.

Central to this problem was the “Outline of future war leadership”. Discussions within the army and navy offices of Imperial Headquarters continued from mid-February, but confusion compounded without any conclusions being reached.

To alleviate this confusion, a conference between heads of the various army and navy sections (comprising the heads of both the army and navy Military Administration Bureau and Operations Department) was held on 4 March. The initial position argued by the navy was as follows:

1. We are currently engaged in pursuit operations in the Pacific as a result of the overwhelming victory at Hawaii.
2. The enemy will be able to take a breather and regroup if we do not take this opportunity to completely smash their naval strength.
3. Further, the enemy’s base for counter-offensives must be ruined, preventing them from mobilising a counter-attack at any time or place.
4. This is a heaven-sent opportunity to attack the United States individually (distinct from Britain, the Netherlands, etc.).
5. The offensive must be undertaken to fulfil the strategic requirements outlined above. We are determined not to allow the establishment of a defensive posture at this time.

The opinions in opposition to this expressed by the army were as follows:

1. It is not valid to claim that future operations in the Pacific will be “pursuit operations”. With no pursuit at the actual site of battle at this time, it must be considered [a phase of] a “strategic pursuit”. To seek the enemy main strengths in Australia or Hawaii must be said to be exceedingly dangerous. We cannot dispel misgivings over this expression “pursuit operations”.
2. We would like to pay close attention to the extent of this offensive. An operation that exceeds the limits of both military and national strength can have no other fate than failure.

3. When an enemy is forced into a defensive position, it is natural for us to take hold of the offensive in order to suppress initiation of the inevitable counter-offensive. However, such an offensive must be a tactical offensive. This strategic operation is not a measure that we must take at this time.
4. Dominion over the western Pacific, in order to establish an unassailable position in Greater East Asia, must first have the contribution of a strategic position (including tactical offensives) in the Pacific Ocean.

The discussion continued for three hours, after which time the navy did not express a desire to invade the distant areas of Hawaii and Australia, but argued the necessity of destroying the enemy's bases of operations and preventing the initiation of the enemy counter-attack at an appropriate time and place.

As a result, agreement was reached concerning the essence of the "Outline of war leadership to be hereafter adopted", as follows:

1. In order for Britain to yield and to force the United States to lose its will to fight, discussions on concrete measures will be undertaken at an appropriate time, while continuing preparations to establish a long-term unassailable position through extending heretofore military victories.
2. Territories and key transport routes will be secured, the exploitation of vital national raw materials will proceed, and efforts will be made to reach a position of self-sufficiency and to increase national military strength.
3. More positive tangible means of war leadership will be established taking into consideration our national strength, the promotion of strategy, the military situation between Germany and the Soviet Union, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the situation in Chungking, and other factors.

Up to that point, the navy had strongly emphasised the removal of "continuing preparations to establish a long-term unassailable position" in the first clause introduced above.

This overview of war leadership was adopted without alteration at the Imperial Headquarters–government liaison conference three days later. Detailed investigation of the issues surrounding the "Outline of war leadership to be hereafter adopted", which seems to have been moderated by army and navy disagreements, is undertaken in the *History of Imperial Headquarters* and *History of war leadership* volumes of this series. The establishment of the outline effectively ended debate concerning the invasion of Australia.

#### Research for the FS Operation

The army also keenly felt the need for measures to bring about the end of the war. To this end, there was approval for limited offensive operations to establish an unassailable position providing they did not impede the progress of military preparations against the Soviet Union or damage operations in China.<sup>153</sup>

The army chief of staff, Sugiyama Gen, submitted the following response to the emperor on 6 January 1942:

Having achieved the completion of stage one of the campaign, operations to blockade the United States and Australia, as well as operations in the Indian Ocean, are being undertaken primarily by the navy. Investigations by subordinates are continuing in accordance with previously submitted draft proposals to promote the end of the war.<sup>154</sup>

It would seem, even from this report, that the FS Operation had become a topic of discussion within the offices of the army and navy responsible for operations prior to early January, and that preparations at a lower level had already begun.

On 24 January, staff officer Prince Takeda Tsuneyoshi presented chief of operations Tanaka Shin'ichi with a report outlining the results of research, as follows:

1. The navy will use second string air strengths from Rabaul for the invasion of Samoa and Fiji. Because base strengths are not sufficient, a large garrison will not be established after the operation to secure the area. It is expected that four aircraft carriers will be used in the operation.
2. [Abbreviated by editor: Relates to Indian Ocean]
3. Concerning the relationship between the Samoa and southern operations, the former must be executed at a time after the southern operations have been completed.

This indicates the clear necessity, according to Tanaka, of linking the operation to break trade in the Indian Ocean with the Pacific problem.

On 26 January, the army made the following announcement during a meeting between the offices of the army and navy responsible for operations:<sup>155</sup>

1. It is essential to monitor the relationship between the Fiji–Samoa Operation and the north, given the necessity of considering a possible deployment to the north if military actions occur.
2. We would like to see a slight strengthening of operations to break trade in the Indian Ocean.

The navy position was as follows:

1. It is our consideration that the Fiji–Samoa–New Caledonia Operation should be carried out as the next navy operation.
2. A defensive position will initially be adopted in the case of military action in the north.
3. The FS Operation will be carried out after the operation to break trade in the Indian Ocean is scaled back.

The army feared an outbreak of war with the Soviet Union in the period between the two operations.

On 30 January the head of the 2nd (Operations) Section of the Army Department, Colonel Hattori Takushirō, explained the operation proposals discussed up to that time with the navy to the army minister, Tōjō Hideki.

The army minister indicated his assent concerning the FS Operation, as follows:

There is no consensus on the Australia operation even between high command and the ministers. Agreement has been reached concerning the plans to invade Fiji and Samoa. I think there is reason for caution concerning the method of execution of the New Caledonia invasion, though I cannot say there is no agreement.

Although there was never a formal decision concerning the FS Operation, the army nevertheless continued with concrete preparations, and on the following day sought approval for invasion operations against eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Army Department's chief of operations, Tanaka, who had championed operations on the southern front, submitted his opinions in a telegraph on 10 February. The telegraph outlined the planned units to be used in the FS Operation, and indicated that the shipping for the operation was to be that returning from the Java operation. Further, the operation was to be initiated from as early as late March through to early April.<sup>156</sup>

Army chief of staff Sugiyama expressed his convictions to his navy counterpart, Admiral Nagano Osami, on 16 February as follows:<sup>157</sup>

Discussions have previously been conducted concerning leadership in operations after the completion of stage one in the southern region. We have now achieved our goal of favourably advancing the operation, even in Java. It is now essential that subsequent strategies be formulated as soon as possible, and that decisions are taken on research on various related issues at the upcoming liaison conference.

An essential part of this research concerns strategies against Australia. Great deliberation must be given to this consideration. It is thought that Australia will be the main base for mounting the US and British counter-attack against Japan, so strategies to crush this counter-offensive are essential. However, these strategies, which will not aim to deal with the entire continent, will probably develop from operations in one part of Australia into a war of attrition spread over many areas. There are grave fears that the operation will gradually expand uncontrollably and slide into a total multi-front war. Consequently, because measures to control all of Australia should not be adopted, it is felt necessary to refrain from invasion operations in any part of Australia.

However, it is essential to blockade the transport of troops and matériel to Australia in order to smash the enemy counter-offensive. To this end, the operations to occupy Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia in the Pacific are felt to be of great importance.

As is clear from the trends in research undertaken by those responsible for the development of these strategies, I would especially like consideration of these matters.

It can be said that this statement by the army to the navy is a formal declaration of the army's position: "We do not support operations against Australia; however, the execution of blockade operations between the United States and Australia is acceptable."

### Postponement and reinstatement of the FS Operation

Preparations for the FS Operation were under way after an internal decision was taken by the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters for its execution in April. The decision was then taken, however, to postpone the operation owing to the overall development of the war situation.

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters decided on an overview for stage two operations in mid-March according to the “Outline of war leadership to be hereafter adopted” established on 7 March, as follows:<sup>158</sup>

1. The occupation of key areas must be completed and a defensive position adopted as soon as possible. In addition, military government must be established to secure order and the long-term unassailable position.
2. Key areas of central Burma will be occupied. Plans will be formulated to destroy the enemy army, particularly the Chungking Army currently in Burma.
3. The strategic dominance we have obtained in the opening stages of the war must be expanded to prepare for the long-term unassailable position. In addition, we must steadily force the United States and Britain into adopting a passive defensive position, and in order to bring about the end of the war, preparations must be made to undertake operations in key strategic locations outside of previously occupied areas.
4. In addition to strengthening the effectiveness of national defences, troops despatched at an appropriate time to the south must be prepared, similar to the adjustment of previous operations, and military preparedness in key areas strengthened.
5. Efforts must be made to quickly resolve the China Incident through the combined application of military and political strategies and, where circumstances permit, by using the results of the southern campaigns.
6. The outbreak of new incidents with the Soviet Union must be avoided. In addition, military preparedness guarding against a change in circumstances relating to the Soviet Union must be strengthened.

This outline of operations and the details of individual campaigns were submitted to the emperor numerous times in late March. The submission concerning the FS Operation was as follows:

Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia are not just important locations on the line of communication between the United States and Australia; they are also key localities for the enemy’s counter-attack from the south-east direction. Consequently, invading these areas will be highly advantageous from both a political and military perspective, by establishing a strong strategic position in the southern area and increasingly isolating Australia.

As an extension to current operational planning in the southern area, a force based on nine infantry battalions, directly controlled by Imperial Headquarters, should undertake the invasion at an opportune time no earlier than June. The navy has also undertaken similar research in cooperation with the army.

The FS Operation was scheduled for “an opportune time no earlier than June” because the fourth phase of the navy’s stage one operations in the Indian Ocean was to finish in early April, and because the army’s Port Moresby operation was slated for May.

However, a US navy task force raided Marcus Island on 4 April. The Japanese Combined Fleet was at that time undertaking redeployment of the formation of its two aircraft carriers for the Indian Ocean operations. As a result of the attack, the schedule for the Indian Ocean operation was extended by ten days.

On the other hand, the army too had decided to temporarily deploy the Kawaguchi Detachment and the 41st Infantry Regiment, which were planned for assignment to the FS Operation, to subjugation operations in central-south Philippines. This sequence of measures naturally delayed the timing of the FS Operation.

After that, on 5 April, the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters made an internal decision to undertake the Midway invasion operation, which was based on submissions by the Combined Fleet.<sup>159</sup> The date of the operation was set at early June. The FS Operation was fated yet again to be delayed.

The Navy Department, on that day, delivered to the army an unofficial memorandum containing the contents of the decision. The main points of this were as follows:

1. Strengthen the 4th Fleet and invade Port Moresby by 10 May.
2. Invade Midway, and Kiska in the Aleutian Islands, in early June, and at the same time raid Dutch Harbour and Attu. Seek an opportunity to destroy the main strength of the enemy fleet during this time.
3. Invade Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia in early July.

Further, it is hoped that the Midway invasion will be a joint operation between the army and navy, given the precedent of the planned Kiska invasion. If this is not possible, the navy will execute the invasion independently.

The operational policies signifying the start of stage two operations, as contained in this internal memorandum, were officially discussed between the operations offices of the army and navy on 12 April.

The army had previously admitted the necessity of the operations in the Aleutian Islands, and so readily agreed in principle with the invasion, but temporarily held the deployment of its units in reserve. The army strongly opposed the Midway invasion, however, but was unable to veto it because the navy had indicated that it could execute the operation independently.

It was decided to overview the deployment of army units based on previous research through mutual consent of the army and navy, and that the operation would be undertaken in early July. Meanwhile, the invasion of the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines had ended and the fortress at Corregidor came to be regarded as a problem. The Southern Area Army swept away all opposition during its pursuit operations in northern Burma. The Anglo-Indian conference, which aimed to strengthen the union between the two, was held on 10 April, but the political situation between Britain and India was in turmoil.

### **Preparations for the FS Operation by Imperial Headquarters**

#### Strategic situation in the Fiji and Samoa area

On 19 March 1942, the army chief of staff Sugiyama presented the emperor with an overview of outlying strategic areas. According to a note in the margin of the original response to a question from the emperor, the military situation in the Fiji and Samoa area was as follows:<sup>160</sup>

- Fijian islands (Viti Levu) (British)
  - New Zealand troops: 7,000–8,000
  - Local volunteer troops: 3,000
  - Approximately 50 aircraft
- Samoaan islands (New Zealand mandated territory), Tutuila (US territory)
  - US Marines: 750
  - Aircraft: 1 (?) squadron
- New Caledonia
  - Troops: approximately 3,000 (said to be an American–Australian garrison, but not confirmed)
  - Aircraft: approximately 60

According to postwar investigations, the Allies paid great attention to the line of supply between the United States and Australia from an early time. The brigade of New Zealand troops which had been sent to Fiji in November 1940 was further strengthened to total approximately four thousand troops by December 1941.

The Allies in the pre-war period had underestimated the offensive strength of the Japanese armed forces. As a reaction against this, even experts tended to overstate the speed of the Japanese thrust once the war had started. For example, a prominent US authority issued the following warning concerning New Zealand on 8 January 1942: “There is a possibility that a Japanese force comprising one division and four aircraft carriers will invade Fiji after 10 January.” The British chief of staff concluded at the end of March that: “The Japanese advance will be limited to the line of New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, and while it would be extremely difficult, is not impossible that they would continue to New Zealand.”

The main strength of a US reinforcement detachment headed for New Caledonia at the beginning of 1942. This force included an infantry brigade, an artillery regiment, a light tank battalion, an anti-aircraft regiment, and a pursuit battalion under the command of a major general. Only a pursuit battalion was stationed on Fiji.<sup>161</sup>

The situation adjusted to the beginning of April 1942 was as follows:

- Fijian islands
  - New Zealand army: 8,000
  - US army land personnel: 10
  - US army aircrew: 700
  - (Pursuit planes: 25)
- Samoaan islands

US army marines: approximately 500  
New Caledonia  
US army land personnel: 16,000  
US army aircrew: 2,000  
(Pursuit planes: 40)  
Australian army: 330

#### Decision on the operational outline<sup>162</sup>

Research preparations for the FS Operation were undertaken prior to the battle of the Coral Sea with the assumption that Port Moresby would be in Japanese hands. The first problem to be the subject of research for the operation was the order of invasion of the three key areas of Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia. Naturally, three proposals were considered:

- Proposal 1: First invade New Caledonia, then invade Fiji and Samoa at roughly the same time.
- Proposal 2: First invade Fiji and Samoa at roughly the same time, then invade New Caledonia.
- Proposal 3: Invade Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia at roughly the same time.

After consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of the three proposals, the first was adopted.

The next issue was whether the extremely distant island of Samoa should be secured after the initial invasion. It would certainly be beneficial for a thorough blockade of the supply route between the United States and Australia for all three locations to be heavily secured. Samoa would have high value as an advance base for Fiji; furthermore, its naval strategic value would increase after the invasion. However, there were doubts as to whether the island could be secured. The Combined Fleet in particular expressed the seriousness of this doubt. The army initially argued for army garrisons to be stationed on Fiji and New Caledonia, and for a navy garrison at Samoa. The navy, however, argued for the withdrawal of troops after key installations on Samoa had been destroyed. As a result of discussion, it was decided that an army garrison would initially be established on Samoa, and a final decision whether to secure the island or to destroy installations and withdraw would be made dependent on the conditions after the invasion.

The site of the invasion operations was 7,000–8,000 kilometres distant from the Japanese mainland. It was natural, therefore, that great concerns were held for the maintenance of supply after the invasion. The navy had initial responsibility for supplying army units and evacuating casualties, for example, so it was recognised that no disruption to the supply line would occur as long as the Japanese navy maintained its dominance in the region.

The army strength for the operation comprised nine infantry battalions, as detailed below, and an army strength command group (17th Army):

- South Seas Force (based on the 144th Infantry Regiment from the 55th Division)
- 41st Infantry Regiment from the 5th Division
- 35th Brigade Headquarters and 124th Infantry Regiment from the 18th Division
- One tank company
- One mountain artillery regiment
- One heavy artillery company
- Two anti-aircraft battalions
- One independent engineer regiment
- Other related army units

Among these, the unit from the 18th Division led by Major General Kawaguchi Kiyotake had, at the beginning of the war, invaded British Borneo and the 41st Division had participated in the Malaya campaign. These units were considered expert troops, and, along with the South Seas Force, had experience since the start of the war in sea crossings and landings in the face of the enemy.

Army strength for the operation was divided between key targets (with Fiji as the main target) as follows:

- Fiji: Main strength of army, based on five infantry battalions (Kawaguchi Detachment plus two battalions from 41st Infantry Regiment)
- New Caledonia: Based on two infantry battalions (South Seas Force)
- Samoa: Based on one infantry battalion (41st Infantry Regiment, two battalions missing, and one special naval landing force battalion)

The naval strength for the operation, in addition to the landing force troops mentioned above, included the following units:

- 2nd Fleet (based on two warships, ten heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and 32 destroyers)
- 4th Fleet (based on four heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, eight destroyers, and four submarines)
- 1st Air Fleet (based on six aircraft carriers)

The Army Department and Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters established the following operational schedule on 18 April:

- 7 May: invade Port Moresby, South Seas Force to assemble at Rabaul by mid-June after invasion to prepare for invasion of New Caledonia
- 7 June: invade Midway
- 18 June: Midway operation units to assemble at Truk and prepare for FS Operation
- 1 July: mobile carrier fleet (based on six aircraft carriers) to sortie from Truk
- 8 July: invade New Caledonia
- 18 July: invade Fiji
- 21 July: invade Samoa

Imperial Headquarters had concluded preparations for the FS Operation by the end of April. All that remained was to set the operation in motion.

The South Seas Force sea-route invasion of Port Moresby returned in failure owing to the battle of the Coral Sea, which occurred in early March. As a result, Imperial Headquarters decided to incorporate a second invasion of Port Moresby as part of the FS Operation. The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters, however, determined that the double deployment of the South Seas Force was untenable, so consequently assigned a detachment based on the 4th Infantry Regiment from the 2nd Division (called the Aoba Detachment) as the force to participate in the operation. The Aoba Detachment also had experience from the invasion of Java.

#### Operational outline for the FS Operation

Following this course of events, Imperial Headquarters decided on an operational outline on 18 May. The main points of this plan are as follows:<sup>163</sup>

##### No. 1 Operational objective

1. The objective of operations by the 17th Army is to invade key locations in the New Caledonia, Fijian islands, and Samoan islands areas. In addition to strengthening the blockade of the communication route between the United States and Australia, Port Moresby will be invaded, thus bringing the Coral Sea under control and smashing enemy plans for a counter-offensive in that region.

##### No. 2 Operational policy

2. The army will cooperate with the navy to seek an opportunity to make a surprise landing with one detachment in southern New Caledonia and invade that key area. Following this, the main force shall strike and land at Viti Levu, with elements simultaneously landing on Tutuila. The islands and surrounding areas will then be brought under control.

At an opportune time during this period, a force will be landed near Port Moresby to invade and secure the town and surrounding areas.

##### No. 3 Operational leadership outline

3. The army will begin the operation at an appropriate time around the beginning of July according to the situation with naval operations.

4. The army will act in concert with the navy's mobile carrier force operations in the waters to the east of the Australian mainland and in the area around the landing site. The following landing operation will be conducted under the protection of naval forces.

First, a surprise attack and landing at the south of New Caledonia, Noumea, and other areas will be undertaken by a detachment that will have assembled at Rabaul in late June.

Next, a force that will have assembled at Palau in mid-June will land near Port Moresby and invade the surrounding area.

The final force, after assembling at Truk in early July, will attack and land an appropriate force on Viti Levu, with elements to mount a surprise landing on Tutuila, Suva, Pago Pago and other key areas.

5. The New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa offensive units will occupy the key areas of Noumea, Suva, and Pago Pago, and then conduct mopping-up operations on the islands. At an appropriate time, in cooperation with the navy, the surrounding islands will be subjugated.

The Port Moresby offensive unit will secure Port Moresby in cooperation with the navy, and then subjugate the surrounding area.

6. After the invasion, key areas in New Caledonia and Fiji will be secured.

Up until immediately after the invasion on Samoa, Imperial Headquarters will issue instructions either to destroy certain installations in specified areas and then withdraw, or to secure them indefinitely.

The army will hand over the garrison at Port Moresby to the navy and withdraw, as far as the conditions of the navy permits.

No. 4 Unit deployment

7. The deployment and responsibilities of army units is as follows:

The South Seas Force (based on three infantry battalions) will land in southern New Caledonia, and after attacking key strategic sites in Noumea, will subjugate the entire island and secure key sites, especially areas of natural resources.

The Aoba Detachment (based on three infantry battalions) will land near Port Moresby, then attack and secure key strategic areas.

The army main strength (based on approximately five infantry battalions) will land on Viti Levu island, then after attacking key strategic sites, will conduct mopping-up operations throughout the island and subjugate the surrounding islands. Key locations in Fiji will be secured.

The Higashi Detachment (based on one infantry battalion) will land on Tutuila with a special naval landing force (reduced strength battalion), then attack military installations at Pago Pago before subjugating the surrounding islands.

No. 5 Operational outline

8. The army will assemble the South Seas Force in Rabaul in late June. The Aoba Detachment and remaining units will first assemble in Davao in mid-June, and then the Aoba Detachment will assemble in Truk, by way of Palau, in late July.

9. The South Seas Force will sortie from Rabaul under naval escort at an appropriate time following on the commencement of operations by the naval mobile carrier force assembled in Truk. The South Seas Force will take advantage of the naval operation near New Caledonia and attack and land at Noumea, and then attack key locations, particularly airfields.

10. The Aoba Detachment will leave from Palau under the protection of the 4th Fleet to land and attack Port Moresby at an appropriate time between the start of the New Caledonia operation and the start of the Fiji and Samoa operations.

11. The army main strength and the Higashi Detachment will seek an opportunity to leave Truk at an appropriate time under naval escort. Surprise landings will be undertaken virtually simultaneously on Viti Levu island, following from the operations of the mobile carrier force in the Fiji and Samoa areas. Key locations, particularly military installations and airfields at Suva and Pago Pago, will be attacked.

12. Thereafter, the operations of all units will be as follows:

The South Seas Force, in addition to securing key areas around Noumea, will then subjugate the entire island, particularly securing areas of natural resources.

The Aoba Detachment, in addition to securing Port Moresby in concert with the navy, will then subjugate key neighbouring areas.

The army main strength, in addition to securing Suva and other key areas, will undertake mopping-up operations within Viti Levu island, and will then subjugate nearby islands at an appropriate time with the cooperation of the navy.

The Higashi Detachment, in addition to attacking military installations, will undertake mopping-up operations within Tutuila island, then will subjugate nearby islands at an appropriate time with the cooperation of the navy.

13. The army will move to a defensive stance after the invasion of each key strategic area and, in cooperation with the navy, will secure key locations within the occupied area. However, the garrison in the Port Moresby area, in line with naval reserve strengths, will be handed over to the navy at an appropriate time, after which the army force will withdraw. Furthermore, in the case of a withdrawal from Samoa, all military installations will be thoroughly destroyed prior to withdrawal at a time one month after the end of the invasion operation.

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters issued an outline of operational policy in response to this, as follows:

No. 1 Operations against New Caledonia, Fijian islands, and Samoan Islands areas

1. A force based on the 2nd Fleet and 1st Air Fleet under the command of the 2nd Fleet will enter Truk in mid-June and begin preparations for the operation after the completion of the offensive operations against Midway.

2. A mobile carrier force, based on the 1st Air Fleet, will sortie from Truk at the beginning of July and assist the New Caledonia invasion force in the vicinity of Noumea. After that, it will undertake appropriate manoeuvres in the waters to the east of Australia before proceeding to the Fiji and Samoa area on around 20 July. In addition to destroying enemy sea and air strengths in the area, the force will assist the invasion operations in each location.

3. The various escort units, in association with the aforementioned movements of the mobile carrier force, will protect army forces and, after departing from appropriate staging points, will undertake landings in the face of the enemy at New Caledonia, then at Viti Levu and Tutuila.
4. The naval landing force to be used in this operation will be a one battalion strength special naval landing force, planned to primarily be used in the invasion of Tutuila.
5. The decision whether to secure or abandon Samoa immediately after the invasion stems from a deficiency in air strength. A decision will be made immediately after the Tutuila invasion, after discussions concerning the result of the Midway operation, and from estimations after the New Caledonia invasion.

No 2. Operations in the Port Moresby area

1. The 4th Fleet, the unit assigned for the operation, will proceed to the waters east of Australia to wait an appropriate opportunity to escort the army force to undertake a landing in the vicinity of Port Moresby.
2. The landing will be undertaken by a battalion of special naval landing troops in concert with the army troops.

Army–navy central agreement

As seen above, the various operational outlines of the army and navy were concurrently formulated. Discussions also continued concerning a central agreement between the army and navy in order to execute the operation. It was completed and adopted on 15 May and divided into two parts: agreement on the operations in the New Caledonia, Fijian islands, and Samoan islands areas; and agreement on the Port Moresby operation.<sup>164</sup> The complete text of the agreement is given below:

Army–navy central agreement concerning operations in New Caledonia, Fijian islands, and Samoan islands areas

No. 1 Operational objective

Invade key locations in the area of New Caledonia and the islands of Fiji and Samoa. In addition to strengthening the blockade between the United States and Australia, the operation will smash enemy plans to counter-attack from that region.

No 2 Operational policy

1. The invasion of key locations in the area of New Caledonia and the islands of Fiji and Samoa will be executed by the army and navy in cooperation.
2. Maintain mastery over the enemy fleet and air strength. First, undertake a surprise attack at New Caledonia. Then undertake surprise landings on the islands of Fiji and Samoa by invading key locations such as Noumea, Suva, and Pago Pago.
3. Mopping-up operations will be conducted within the islands after such key locations as Noumea, Suva, and Pago Pago have been invaded, then the surrounding islands will be subjugated at an appropriate juncture.
4. The army and navy will cooperate to secure key locations after the invasion of New Caledonia and Fiji. The navy will then proceed with the establishment of an operational base. After the invasion of key areas of Samoa, either destroy various military installations and withdraw, or secure the area.

No. 3 Command and unit deployment

Army

Command: 17th Army headquarters

Strength: main force of 17th Army (three battalions each from the 5th Division, 18th Division, and 55th Division)

Navy

Command: 2nd Fleet headquarters

Strength: force based on 1st Air Fleet of the 2nd Fleet

No. 4 Operational preparations

1. The main strength of naval units will assemble at Truk in mid-June.
2. After the majority strength of army units have assembled at Davao in mid-June, then proceed to the staging point by way of Palau.
3. Elements of the army units will assemble and stand to at Rabaul and undertake preparations for the operation.

No. 5 Staging point and time

New Caledonia offensive units will assemble at Rabaul in late June.

Fiji and Samoa offensive units will assemble at Truk in early July.

No. 6 Operational commencement

At an appropriate time in early July according to the situation of the Combined Fleet operations.

No. 7 Operational outline

1. The navy is responsible for undertaking operations with a strong mobile carrier force to smash enemy sea and air strengths in the waters to the east of Australia and around the landing point, in addition to air elements assisting the landing.
2. The New Caledonia offensive units (based on three infantry battalions) will leave the assembly point after the start of operations by the mobile carrier force, then proceed under naval protection to undertake

a surprise landing in the southern part of New Caledonia. Noumea will be invaded first, followed by other key locations.

3. The Fiji offensive units (based on five infantry battalions) and the Samoa offensive units (based on one infantry battalion and one naval landing battalion) will leave the staging point at an appropriate time and proceed under naval protection to undertake simultaneous surprise attacks at Viti Levu and Tutuila. Invade Suva and Pago Pago followed by other key locations.

4. Mopping-up operations will be conducted within the islands after such key locations as Noumea, Suva, and Pago Pago have been invaded, then the surrounding islands will be subjugated by the army and navy in concert at an appropriate juncture.

5. Priority will be given to establishing defences at key locations with the cooperation of the army and navy after the invasion of key areas. The navy will proceed with the establishment of an operational base and strive to fulfil the objectives of the operations.

6. A decision will be made by central authorities up to immediately after the invasion whether to destroy military installations and withdraw from the Samoan Islands, or whether to secure the area for the long term.

In the case of withdrawal, various military installations will be completely destroyed at a time approximately one month after the operation.

The outline of the withdrawal operation will be conducted according to the central agreement and agreements with the local army and navy commanders.

#### No. 8 Command

The army and navy will cooperate.

However, in the case where the army and navy, including naval landing troops, participate in concurrent operations in the same area, command will be unified in the position of the most senior officer.

#### No. 9 Garrison and patrol duties

1. Garrison duties on New Caledonia and Fiji will mainly be the responsibility of the army. Patrolling of the sea and sky in the area will be the responsibility of the navy.

2. The army will be responsible for the garrison on Samoa in the case it is to be secured. The navy will be responsible for securing the logistics line of communication. Responsibility for anti-aircraft patrolling of the sea and sky in the area will be with the navy, as far as conditions permit.

3. Appropriate agreements concerning garrisons on land will be reached between army and navy commanders in an area where troops from both services are stationed.

#### No. 10 Communications

1. Communications will be according to the "Army–navy central agreement concerning communications for the AL, MI, and F Operations".

2. The navy will provide aircraft, whenever possible, in order to coordinate command with the army when required.

#### No. 11 Supply and medical

The navy will assist in supplying the army and evacuating casualties as required.

#### No. 12 Agreements between army and navy commanders

Agreements between commanders of the army and navy will be formulated as follows:

Agreements between the commanders of the 17th Army and the 2nd Fleet will be made at Truk on around 20 June.

Agreements between the commanders of army detachments and naval escort units will be made immediately prior to each operation at the respective staging points.

#### No. 13 Operational maps

Exclusive military location maps

Topographical maps

New Caledonia, 1:300,000 scale

Viti Levu, 1:300,000 scale

Hydrographical maps

No. 2212, No. 2336, No. 2401, and No. 2402

#### No. 14 Standard time

Central Standard Time

#### No. 15 Operational names

New Caledonia operation: No. 2 (also NK) Operation

Fiji operation: Fu (also FI) Operation

Samoa operation: Sa (Also SA) Operation

All above known combined as F Operation

#### Army–navy central agreement concerning the Port Moresby Operation

##### No. 1 Operational objective

Invade Port Moresby, destroy enemy offensive positions in eastern New Guinea, and bring the Coral Sea under control.

##### No. 2 Operational policy

At an appropriate opportunity during the operations against New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, the army and navy will cooperate to land near Port Moresby and invade and secure the surrounding area.

- No. 3 Command and unit deployment  
 Army  
 Command: 17th Army Headquarters  
 Strength: elements of the 17th Army (Aoba Detachment based on three battalions from the 2nd Division)  
 Navy  
 Command: 4th Fleet Headquarters  
 Strength: force based on 4th Fleet (including approximately one battalion strength naval landing party)  
 Note: elements of the 11th Air Fleet will participate in this operation.
- No. 4 Operational preparations  
 1. Army units will assemble in Davao by mid-June, then proceed to the operation staging point.  
 2. The navy will use an appropriate force (including units not assigned to the actual operation) to protect the transport of the army units to the staging point.
- No. 5 Staging point and time  
 The staging point and time have been determined for Davao in mid-June.
- No. 6 Operational commencement  
 The operation will begin at an appropriate time after the start of the New Caledonia operation and prior to the start of the Fiji and Samoa operations.
- No. 7 Operational outline  
 Determined in discussions between the commanders of the army and navy.
- No. 8 Command  
 The army and navy will cooperate.  
 However, in the case where the army and navy, including naval landing troops, participate in concurrent operations in the same area, command will be unified in the position of the most senior officer.
- No. 9 Garrison and patrol duties  
 1. Guarding of key landing sites in the vicinity of Port Moresby will initially be undertaken through cooperation between the army and navy. If there is a surplus of navy troops available after the completion of the New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa operations, then the army will hand over the garrison to the navy and withdraw at an appropriate time.  
 2. The navy will be responsible for patrolling the seas and sky in the Port Moresby area.
- No. 10 Communications  
 Communications will be according to the "Army-navy central agreement concerning communications for the AL, MI, and F Operations".
- No. 11 Supply and medical  
 The navy will assist in supplying the army and evacuating casualties as required.
- No. 12 Agreements between army and navy commanders  
 Agreements between commanders of the army and navy will be formulated as follows:  
 Agreements between the commanders of the 17th Army and the 4th Fleet will be made at Truk on around 20 June.  
 Agreements between the commanders of army detachments and naval escort units will be made at Palau on around 27 June.
- No. 13 Operational maps  
 Exclusive military location map  
 Hydrographical maps  
 No. 815 and No. 816
- No. 14 Standard time  
 Central Standard Time
- No. 15 Operational name  
 Port Moresby operation: Mo (also MO) Operation

#### Various issues concerning the operation

Some issues of particular interest concerning the FS Operation emerged at Imperial Headquarters.

The first was the issue of responsibility for military administration of the occupied territories. Since the start of the war, the army and navy had jointly determined responsibility for the administration of each particular invaded territory.

The responsibility for the military administration of occupied territories in the South Pacific Area was with the navy. It had been planned that the army's South Seas Force would be transferred to the South-West Area after the completion of the invasion of Rabaul. Consequently, that the navy was to be responsibility for this area was not at issue. However, a problem developed between the army and navy over the issue of responsibility for military administration during the FS Operation.

This concerned the operation of units, guarding, placement and other key factors in the region of the operation (area of occupation). The army felt that it was natural for them to have main responsibility for military administration of operational areas because army units were primarily deployed in the land operations.

Nickel deposits on New Caledonia further complicated the argument over military administration. The issue was not resolved, despite the responsibility for its administration being apportioned in the order of battle for the operation, which was issued on 18 May.

The Operations Section of the Army Department in Imperial Headquarters would not yield and stressed that the army should take charge. The reason for their position was:

The main strategic reason for the New Caledonia operation is not to secure natural resources, but to effect a blockade between the United States and Australia. We will not be swayed into accepting that the primary strategic reason for the operation is to secure natural resources.

There were some among Army General Staff who went as far to say that the army should withdraw its troops from the New Caledonia operation if the navy persisted in taking charge of military administration in the operation. The head of the Navy Department Operations Section, Vice Admiral Fukudome Shigeru, proposed the following to his army counterpart, Lieutenant General Tanaka Shin'ichi:

It is not appropriate to decide matters of agreement between the army and navy because of contingency over military administration. [Editor's note: Spoken in opposition to the above statements made in Army General Staff.] The Navy General Staff is not disposed to the navy taking charge of military administration in the future. Navy units being concerned with issues like military administration may distract them from their primary focus on strategic mobility. It is natural that the army take charge of military administration in New Caledonia within the limits of maintaining peace and regional self-sufficiency. However, it is also natural that securing natural resources must be incorporated in the materials mobilisation plan. Further, it is desirable that natural resources in the region be developed with the cooperation of the navy and army. There will, by necessity, be navy bases within the sphere of the army's military administration. I would like to see every effort given by the army to accommodate these bases.<sup>165</sup>

Lieutenant General Tanaka agreed with this proposal, and subsequently those responsible for army and navy military administration bureaus agreed, on 28 May, that the army had responsibility for military administration and that the development of natural resources would be managed with the cooperation of the army and navy.

By this process, the 17th Army command issued the "Overview of control in occupied territories following on from the F Operation" on 3 June. It also determined that the base yield for the first year of developing essential natural resources would be 2,000 tonnes of nickel, and as much cobalt as could be mined. As New Caledonia was French territory, and as Imperial Headquarters wished to remain on friendly terms with the Vichy French, it took the position that formal military control would not be administered on the island.

A further issue concerned strategies against the Australian government. While the Navy Department within Imperial Headquarters championed the debate over the invasion of Australia, the army opposed the plan for a range of reasons.

On 25 May, chief of operations Tanaka made inquiries concerning this issue to assistant chief of staff Tanabe Moritake. They recognised the need to integrate a strategy against Australia during the execution of the FS Operation. Psychological warfare was considered especially important.

The prime minister, Tōjō, in response to the situation after the fall of Singapore, made an address in the Imperial Japanese Diet on 17 February, calling on the leaders and people of India, Australia, and the Netherlands East Indies to end their futile resistance. He again called on the leaders of Australia in an administrative policy speech during an extraordinary session of the Diet on 28 May, indicating that there would be no other opportunity but the present to act decisively.

Assistant chief of staff Tanabe and chief of operations Tanaka, following the spirit of the address by the prime minister, pursued a strategy to accurately illustrate Japan's true intention to Australia's leaders, namely to respect the sovereignty of Australia's territories in return for Australia promising to maintain neutrality. The ultimate aim was to incorporate Australia politically into the fold of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, but in the short term the strategy was to remove Australia from the war.

Chief of operations Tanaka investigated the feasibility of several methods, including the despatch of junior special emissaries, and political manoeuvring by using the Australian government representative in New Caledonia and the undersea telegraph cable that ran between Sydney and Noumea.

Tanaka considered that, in the case where Australia would not respond to these demands, it would be necessary to undertake psychological warfare in the form of attacks on Australia. In addition, he would plan to disrupt contact between the Australian government and the governments of other countries. High command of the army had also long waited for the arrival of a good chance to solve the Australia problem, an opportunity that was presented with the execution of the FS Operation.

## **Formation of the 17th Army**

### Announcement of the order of battle

The order of battle for the 17th Army, the army for the FS Area Operation, was promulgated by “Great army order no. 632” on 18 May 1942 and came into effect at zero hour on 20 May. This was the first time that a new operational army had been formed since the start of the war.

The order of battle of the 17th Army was as follows (the brackets indicate the unit’s previous association or location):

- 17th Army
  - Commander: Lieutenant General Hyakutake Haruyoshi
  - 17th Army Headquarters
  - 35th Infantry Brigade (114th Infantry Regiment missing) (25th Army, southern Philippines)
- South Seas Force (Rabaul)
  - Commander: 55th Infantry Group commander
  - 55th Infantry Group Headquarters
  - 144th Infantry Regiment
  - 55th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Company (part strength) plus Rapid-fire Gun Squad
  - 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion
  - 55th Engineer Regiment, 1st Company plus materials platoon (part strength)
  - 55th Division Signals Unit (part strength)
  - 55th Supply and Transport Regiment, 2nd Company
  - 55th Division Medical Unit (part strength)
  - 55th Division, 1st Field Hospital
  - 55th Division Veterinary Workshop (part strength)
  - 55th Division Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (part strength)
  - 47th Field Anti-aircraft Aircraft Battalion (type B, less one company) (14th Army)
- Aoba Detachment (16th Army, Java)
  - Commander: 2nd Infantry Group commander
  - 2nd Infantry Group Headquarters
  - 4th Infantry Regiment
  - 2nd Reconnaissance Regiment, 4th Company (light armour)
  - 2nd Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion (motorised)
  - 2nd Engineer Regiment, 1st Company plus materials platoon (motorised, part strength)
  - 2nd Division Signals Unit (part)
  - 2nd Supply and Transport Regiment, 3rd Company (motorised, one platoon)
  - 2nd Division Medical Unit (part strength)
  - 2nd Division, 2nd Field Hospital
  - 2nd Division Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (half strength)
- 41st Infantry Regiment (25th Army)
- 9th Independent Rapid-fire Gun Company (14th Army)
- 2nd Tank Regiment (one company) (16th Army)
- 20th Independent Mountain Artillery Battalion (23rd Army)
- 21st Field Heavy Artillery Battalion (one company) (25th Army)
- 45th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (type B) (16th Army)
- 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (type B, one company) (14th Army)
- 15th Independent Engineer Regiment (armoured) (25th Army)
- 4th Independent Engineer Company (heavy river crossing) (16th Army)
- 17th Army Signals Unit
  - Commander: 17th Army Signals Unit commander
  - 17th Army Signals Unit Headquarters
  - 88th Independent Wired Company (motorised) (Southern Area Army)

3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th Independent Wireless Platoons (motorised) (16th Army)  
33rd Fixed Wireless Unit (16th Army)  
37th Fixed Wireless Unit (25th Army)  
44th Fixed Wireless Unit (14th Army)  
45th Fixed Wireless Unit (16th Army)  
212th Independent Motor Car Company (16th Army)  
67th Line-of-Communication Hospital (16th Army)  
24th Field Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (type B, part strength) (25th Army)

The South Seas Force, which had assembled at Rabaul, came under the authority of the 17th Army Headquarters as a result of this order. The South Seas Force was simultaneously strengthened with the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (two companies missing) from the 14th Army. One company from this unit had previously been transferred to the force.

The staging point for the main strength of the army was at Davao on Mindanao Island. Units would come under the authority of the 17th Army Headquarters upon their arrival at Davao. However, the 7th Independent Wireless Platoon and the 44th and 45th Fixed Wireless Units were ordered to proceed directly to Rabaul. They would come under the authority of the 17th Army Headquarters immediately on their departure from Hong Kong towards the Philippines.

The 17th Army command came under the administration of the Eastern Army Headquarters. It was ordered to form on 2 May, and this was completed at the Military Staff College on 20 May. On that day, "From zero hour, units not yet under army command will undertake administrative formations in preparation for operations."<sup>166</sup> The command of the South Seas Force was activated from that day.

The commander of the 17th Army was Lieutenant General Hyakutake Haruyoshi. He had transferred from the Army Signals Academy, and was therefore an authority on Japanese communications, especially regarding codes. The army chief of staff was Major General Futami Akisaburō, and the senior staff officer was Lieutenant Colonel Matsumoto Hiroshi.

The command of the 17th Army had no logistics-related units, only several lightly staffed bridge-building and military administration squads. Even so, the staff office had only three men. Further, the attack units were not organised as an offensive force, but a miscellany of units based on three infantry battalions. It would perhaps be more appropriate to call it a garrison army rather than an operational army. The critical defect was the lack of aircraft absolutely necessary for quality operations, especially the lack of aircraft needed for command coordination. Staff officer Matsumoto requested army aircraft for this purpose from the staff officer responsible for aircraft within the Operations Section in Imperial Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Kumon Arifumi. His request, however, was denied because the Army Department wanted to rely on the navy's air strength.

There was virtually no practical role for the 17th Army as an army. The army command could only fulfil a subjugation management role after landing.

#### Announcement of the great army order

Imperial Headquarters telegraphed the following orders to 17th Army Headquarters on the same day that the order of battle was issued:

Great Army Order No. 633

1. Imperial Headquarters plans to invade key areas in each of the islands of New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, and also to invade Port Moresby.
  2. 17th Army Headquarters must cooperate with the navy to invade these key areas.
  3. The army chief of staff will issue detailed instructions for these operations.
- 18 May 1942

The army chief of staff subsequently issued the operational outline on that day, as well as a central agreement concerning the operation.

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters also issued orders to the command of the Combined Fleet on 18 May. These ordered the Combined Fleet to "cooperate with the commanders of the 17th Army to invade key

areas in the New Caledonia and Fijian islands and in the region of Samoa, and to smash main enemy bases in these areas". The Navy Department also issued instructions as follows:

Appendix: Execute an invasion of the New Caledonia and Fijian islands and in the region of the Samoan islands according to the central agreement between the army and navy, and smash the main enemy bases in these areas. In addition, prepare bases at Suva and Noumea to control the waters to the east of Australia and blockade the line of supply between the United States and Australia.

The operation against Port Moresby was only mentioned in the new central agreement cited above.

Air operations were determined according to documents attached to the central agreement, as follows:

1. The navy will be responsible for air operations during the F and MO Operations.
2. The navy will establish airbases on New Caledonia, Fiji, and at Port Moresby. An airbase will be established at Samoa if it is to be secured and if the conditions are suitable.
3. For the present, 12 fighters and 12 carrier-based bombers will be deployed to New Caledonia. Elements of the 11th Air Fleet will be deployed for the Port Moresby operation. Units may be deployed to areas other than those specified above in response to operational requirements.
4. Army units in the area will cooperate to establish navy airbases and the execution of air operations.

However, instructions concerning transport along the line of communication between the command of the 17th Army and the command of the Southern Area Army were as follows:<sup>167</sup>

Great Army Instruction No. 1,153

Instructions

Instructions concerning transport along the line of communication based on "Great army order no. 633"

1. Munitions and matériel indicated in the chart below will be transported to the staging point for 17th Army operations, including weapons, approximately one engagement of munitions (in supply depots), three months' fuel, and six months' each of food supplies, clothing, necessities, medical supplies, and veterinary supplies.
2. Units which have transferred from the command of the Southern Area Army to the 17th Army will carry the following military supplies in addition to its full complement.
  - a. Aoba Detachment
    - Approximately one engagement of munitions (including special munitions for landing operations)
    - 15 inflatable boats
    - Four months' signals consumables
    - Three months' fuel
    - Four months' each supplies, clothing, and necessities (including daily necessities and canteen goods)
    - Six months' each medical and veterinary supplies
  - b. Other units
    - 35th Infantry Brigade, 20 inflatable boats
    - One month each fuel, supplies, clothes, and medical and veterinary supplies
3. Future supply will be despatched directly from Imperial Headquarters according to the requirements of the army.
4. The army will plan to be completely self-reliant on the local area. Efforts will be made to reduce the amount of supply from rear areas.
5. The army will establish a Type-5 wireless and Type-1 anti-air wireless radio within six months and build a signals base at Rabaul. Local electricity and housing will be provided in key areas by the navy.
6. A signals network roughly according to attached diagram no. 1 will be established between the departure and arrival at the anchorage. A signals network corresponding to attached diagram no. 2 will be set up using the fixed wireless that will be established at the landing point.
7. The post-landing signals centre will broadcast as soon as possible after an appropriate determination by army headquarters.

The Type-5 wireless will be despatched to Rabaul after Tokyo receives communication that the above-mentioned signals centre has been completed.
8. A land-based fixed wireless must be established within four days from reaching the anchorage.
9. The execution of signals communication will be according to the appropriate sections of the "Army-navy central agreement concerning communications for the AL, MI, and F Operations", the "Imperial Headquarters Army Department communications rules", and the "Transport signals commander communications rules". However, the Signals Unit of Imperial Headquarters will undertake communications such as is transmitted for special convoys or emergency transport signals.

The signals commander will issue further detailed directions.
10. Tents and established buildings will be used for the housing of troop horses. Do not expend much energy constructing new buildings for this purpose.

As a general rule, use materials found in the local area for construction.
11. Currency to be used by the army in the operations area will be as follows:

NK area: military pound notes

Elsewhere: Japanese currency

12. The army will develop and obtain natural resources vital for the national defence effort in the area of operations. Separate detailed instructions will be issued.
13. A hospital ship shall accompany the main strength of the army to take responsibility for medical duties and evacuation of casualties during the landing operations.
14. Patients who require long-term treatment will be evacuated to Taiwan or Japan.
15. The commander of the Southern Area Army will grant line-of-communication functions to the 17th Army as required.

The army chief of staff, Sugiyama, requested the following of the commanders of the 17th Army:

Not only are your duties extremely important, you are conducting operations in areas that are essential to the enemy. Further, face counter-attacks with a fresh mind, and provide leadership to strive for completion of your new duties with equal amounts of caution and a vigorous heart.

Further, the chief of operations, Tanaka, provided explanation to the high command of the 17th Army concerning key aspects of the operational outline and the central agreement, as follows:

1. Concerning New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a French colony, and although it was placed under the control of the governor of French Indo-China, this is in name only. The island is governed in actuality by those loyal to the De Gaulle faction.

The situation in which the authority of the Vichy government is completely ignored is in no way related to the existence of a several hundred-strong garrison comprised entirely of local people with no military aptitude. According to recent intelligence, approximately 5,000 US and Australian troops have arrived on the island. This must be interpreted as an act of aggression. The Japanese army is invading at the request of the Vichy government. The Japanese operational mobilisation is purely in response to the actions of an enemy power.

Diplomatic relations with the Vichy government must be handled with discretion by the Japanese authorities. I would therefore like extreme caution to be taken to ensure that the operation is conducted smoothly, and especially that the operational plans are not disclosed prior to the event.

2. Concerning the invasion locations

New Caledonia

The centre of military government is located at Noumea in the south-west of the island. The main airfields are located in the south of the island. There is no reason to expect that enemy fortifications will be especially strong, so control of the centre can be gained with one fell swoop. For this reason, make plans to land in the south of New Caledonia.

Fijian islands

The Fijian Islands are British territory and are administered by the governor of the British South Pacific Colonies. There is also a garrison force of approximately 10,000 troops. The fact that it is also the centre point for the line of supply between the United States and Australia is particularly noteworthy. For these reasons, Fiji must be considered the most important location within the sphere of this operation and the main strength of the force must be used in this area.

The centre of military government is located on the main island of Viti Levu, so the objective of the operation can be achieved if this area is controlled first. It would be then sufficient to subsequently subjugate other islands such as Vanua Levu with elements of the main force.

Samoa Islands

Samoa is divided into Western and Eastern Samoa. Western Samoa is an Australian mandated territory and contains no garrison or visible military installations.\* Eastern Samoa is controlled directly by the US navy. For this reason, the important port of Tutuila in Eastern Samoa must be attacked first. After that, it would be sufficient to control Rose Island in Eastern Samoa (intelligence indicates an airfield under construction), and Apia, the capital of Western Samoa.

Port Moresby

Port Moresby has significance not only for being capital of British New Guinea, but for being an essential base of enemy operations (especially air) for the region. Much of New Guinea is undeveloped, so it is thought that the objectives of the operation can be achieved if Port Moresby and Kila airfield can be occupied.

Other islands

The navy has previously occupied the Solomon and Gilbert Islands.

The New Hebrides are jointly administered by Britain and France. The garrison and defences do not warrant concern in terms of mobilisation. The navy is expected to invade independently if the situation requires.

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\* Western Samoa was actually a New Zealand mandated territory.

Tonga is a British protectorate governed by a local monarch, who at this time is a queen. The strength of the local garrison is not sufficiently strong to pose any problem. Further, it is hoped that good relations can be formed with the Tongans, and that there will be no necessity for the army to invade.

3. Concerning the start of the operation

The start of the operation is dependent on the circumstances of operations of the Combined Fleet. The army will continue preparations for deployment of its units for this operation. The navy will redeploy units currently operating in other areas. A judgment concerning the start of the operation will be made once the situation of other naval operations is made clear.

However, despite the start of the operation depending on the circumstances of naval operations, the navy central authorities must be canvassed if the start of the operation seems like being delayed much past the first weeks of July.

4. Concerning measures to be taken after the invasion of Samoa

In the case that military installations are destroyed and then troops withdraw after the invasion of Samoa, then the garrison will be manned exclusively by navy troops, though it is not possible at this time to indicate what the strength of this garrison will be.

Samoa, along with other islands, is located on the supply route between the United States and Australia. Even if Fiji and New Caledonia are controlled and Samoa is discarded, this will leave the air supply route from Hawaii through Canton Island and Tutuila to New Zealand. The army has argued from the beginning for the island to be secured in order to further the aims of strengthening the blockade between the United States and Australia. The Navy General Staff has argued for a deployment to the island of a contingent sufficient for the circumstances, or for the army to secure it alone in the interim. In either case, I hope that the enemy is in some way prevented from using the island, and that we realise the need to prepare for operations to well isolate the position.

If the overall situation requires the central authorities to issue instructions to abandon the island, then all installations, not just related to the military, must be completely and thoroughly destroyed. All civilians should be moved to other islands to make it difficult for the enemy to once again use Samoa as a base.

5. Concerning the Port Moresby operation

The commander of the South Seas Force received imperial orders on 2 February to invade key areas in British New Guinea. This contained instructions consistent with the army–navy central agreement: “When possible, the army and navy will cooperate to invade Port Moresby.” The army and navy authorities in the region began to carry out this operation in early May, but were delayed by losses in the naval battle in the Coral Sea. Gradually, the 17th Army began to undertake the operation.

In this way, the navy separately determined to undertake operations in the region, with a force based on the 2nd Fleet deployed in the New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa areas, and on the 4th Fleet in the Port Moresby area.

6. Propaganda strategies

Propaganda will be devised and executed by Imperial Headquarters under consideration of the entire Greater East Asian War.

7. Concerning military administration

a. Concerning responsibility for military administration

This issue is under negotiation between subordinates of the army and navy bureaus of Imperial Headquarters. Even so, effort is being taken to recognise the appropriateness of the army having this duty, given its responsibility for military strength.

b. Concerning policies for the execution of military administration

Military administration contributes to the urgent need of securing a position of self-support for the army to attain the objectives of the war, in addition to restoring law and order and quickly securing resources vital for national defence. I would prefer preparations to achieve these to be based on “Great army instruction no. 993, appendix no. 1”, “Outline of control of occupied territories following on from southern operations”, “Army–navy central agreement concerning the execution of military administration in occupied territories”, “Outline of army financial measures in the southern region”, and “Outline of implementation of transport for the army in the southern region”.

It is expected that instructions concerning the type and amount of raw materials vital for national defence will have already been issued.

c. Division of administrative duties by the army minister

The duties that must be allocated by the headquarters of the army minister will be administrative duties based on the fundamentals of military administration, and will be mobilised after the operation has been completed.

d. Various preparations for the execution of military administration

Five senior civil officials and essential clerical staff are currently being chosen as personnel for military administration.

Instructions will be issued concerning army and navy responsibilities for the development of mining operations on New Caledonia.

e. Concerning policies for New Caledonia

The execution of military administration of New Caledonia is on the surface problematic because it is French territory. However, as in other cases, it must be considered necessary to secure resources vital for national defence.

f. Details will be given to those responsible separately.

The official support of the army minister was sought concerning the initiation of the FS Operation. To this end, the head of the Imperial Headquarters Operations Section, Hattori, visited army minister Tōjō on 18 May. The minister expressed his discontent, explaining that “It is problematic that you seek support for such an important operation just prior to its execution.” In fact, as previously explained, the Military Affairs Bureau of the Army Ministry and the army minister had been consulted from the earliest stages concerning the operation.

Army minister Tōjō also stated at this meeting that “The Samoa invasion must be carried out only by navy forces.” The decision whether to secure or abandon Samoa was to be made immediately after the invasion. However, it was explained that this would place the occupation of Fiji itself in a very difficult situation, because in the case a force was to be stationed on Samoa, then it would be extremely difficult to secure Samoa without the participation of army troops.

Finally, army minister Tōjō indicated that he was opposed to using army air units in this operation. However, this did not become an issue as no air units were planned for the operation. This was primarily because the army minister held great concerns for air defences in the war of attrition in the Burma theatre and at Palembang.<sup>168</sup>

#### The departure of the 17th Army headquarters

The 17th Army headquarters were dissatisfied with their formation and the army’s order of battle. However, they had the full support of the Combined Fleet, which had achieved great successes since the start of the war, so approached the coming operation with optimism.

The 17th Army staff office had received news of the results of the battle of the Coral Sea and the cancellation of the South Seas Force sea-route invasion of Port Moresby prior to leaving Tokyo, but was relatively unconcerned. The Coral Sea battle had been a standard naval engagement, but the staff office considered it a great victory for the Japanese navy.<sup>169</sup>

The staff office did not feel that future battles would be any fiercer than previous engagements. Establishment personnel were insufficient, so female typists were employed. Complaints were issued by the assistant staff officer when they were allocated the code number “Oki 9802”. The Japanese reading of this code suggested that they would “become swallowed by the open sea”, so it was changed to “Oki 9811”.<sup>170</sup>

The military deployment topographical charts given to the 17th Army headquarters by Imperial Headquarters were nothing more than civil topographical maps. Consequently, a survey of people residing in the area of the FS Operation was undertaken. Allied military deployments in the area were limited to those previously indicated by Imperial Headquarters. It was judged that only a small force made up of local troops would oppose them, providing very little resistance. Their only concern was for maintenance of supply.<sup>171</sup> Research into local self-sufficiency was consequently undertaken without waiting for instructions from Imperial Headquarters.

Preparations for issues of cooperation with the navy for the operation were undertaken solely by Imperial Headquarters. However, very few of the arrangements actually required, aside from some ceremonial matters, could be made in Tokyo. The only business remaining was to be completed by the navy at the Truk staging point.

As a result of investigations based on the operational outline provided to 17th Army headquarters by Imperial Headquarters, the following infantry group order of battle was issued:

- Fiji invasion operation
  - 35th Infantry Brigade (with two battalions from the 41st Infantry Regiment attached)
- New Caledonia invasion operation
  - South Seas Force
- Samoa invasion operation
  - Higashi Detachment (based on one battalion under the command of the 41st Infantry Regiment commander)
- Port Moresby invasion operation
  - Aoba Detachment

It was decided that the various elements of the army would assemble between late June and early July: the main strength at Truk, the Aoba Detachment at Palau, and the South Seas Force at Rabaul. Military orders concerning the operational preparations were issued in Tokyo on 28 May. Operational plans for the army were subsequently defined on 4 June.

Imperial Headquarters had previously considered whether to strengthen the 17th Army with an anti-aircraft presence, and on 4 June, agreed to deploy two field anti-aircraft battalions: one battalion for the Fiji area, one company for the Samoa area, and the remaining two companies to New Caledonia.

Headquarters of the 17th Army planned to leave Japan after 10 June and proceed to Truk on the high-speed transport *Ayatosan Maru*. The commander and chief of staff left Tokyo in high spirits on 7 June by plane bound for Davao via Fukuoka and Manila.

### **Cancellation of the FS Operation**

The naval battle at Midway on 5 June ended in defeat for the Japanese navy. The effect of this defeat on the overall operational situation of the Greater East Asian War and war leadership was enormous. The operations in the South Pacific also were highly sensitive to the effects of the defeat. The FS Operation was initially postponed for two months, then cancelled outright. In addition, the Port Moresby invasion was switched from the sea route to the overland route.

### Postponement of the FS Operation

The Operations Section of Navy General Staff summoned all staff officers at noon on 6 June and advised them that the four aircraft carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Sōryū*, and *Hiryū* had sunk, and that the main strength of the Combined Fleet was assembled behind the engagement line some 2,500 kilometres to the west of Hawaii. They added the opinion that the FS Operation should be delayed by at least two months.<sup>172</sup>

The countenance of chief of staff Yamamoto Isoroku was grave as he announced the news. For the army chief of staff, this was a bolt from the blue. Chief of army operations, Tanaka, who had already known of the news, said: “We have lost supremacy in the Pacific through this unforeseen great defeat.” The army chief of staff, Sugiyama, stated: “The two years of security provided by Admiral Nagano is smashed. We must choose a method outside of the Pacific region to lay low the enemy.”<sup>173</sup>

At 4.40 pm on 6 June, the chief of staff of the Combined Fleet telegraphed the following to the chief of operations in the Navy General Staff:

The Midway Operation has unavoidably been delayed. The prospects are that it will require two to three months in order to recover (mainly to the air strength). This will also flow on to delay upcoming operations. Negotiations will have to be undertaken again with the army concerning their cooperation in these campaigns.

The chief of operations replied by telegraph:

In light of the changed circumstances, such as the great reduction in our carrier strength, the Midway Operation will be postponed. Preparations for future operations that have been proposed, such as in the New Caledonia and Fiji areas, will also take some time. I would like decisions to be made based on further research.<sup>174</sup>

The following day, 7 June, the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters proposed to the emperor that the Midway Operation be cancelled. Orders to this effect were subsequently issued by the commander of the Combined Fleet. Agreement on direction of future operations was reached that afternoon in a research conference between the operations sections of the Army Department and Navy Department. The outline of this was as follows:<sup>175</sup>

1. The Midway Operation is cancelled for the present.
2. The start of the FS Operation is delayed for two to three months.
3. Research to determine how to secure the Aleutian Islands for the long term will proceed.
4. Research will be immediately undertaken to find out if Port Moresby can be invaded by the overland route.

That same day the Operations Section determined the following “Outline of managing the FS Operation in response to the conditions”:<sup>176</sup>

#### Policy

The F Operation will, for the present, be postponed for around two months.

The main strength of the F Operation units will assemble in Mindanao and Palau, with other units in the Bismarck Islands area. These units will exclusively make preparations and undertake training for the operation.

Transport ships allocated for the operation will be temporarily redeployed to other areas during the time of the postponement.

#### Outline

1. The army commander will depart (from Fukuoka on 9 June) as planned. However, the advance will be delayed from Davao, where unit command training will be carried out.

2. Army headquarters (less the commander) will leave port in Japan on 12 June as planned (on a 9,600 ton hospital ship). However, the destination will be Davao, not Truk as planned (arriving in Davao on 20 June).

The various transport vessels will then proceed to Manila to be used for troop transportation.

3. The main strength of the 17th Army (35th Infantry Brigade, Higashi Detachment included) will remain on standby at their present locations at Cotabato and Cagayan. Although they are planned for redeployment with the Oki Group (17th Army), they will be used as transport troops to sail to Manila. An allocation will stay at Manila (arriving on 9 June) for use as transport vessels.

4. The Aoba Detachment will remain on standby at Davao, and exclusively undertake training at appropriate locations on Mindanao and Palau.

The allocation of shipping will be used to transport raw materials to Japan.

5. The South Seas Force will exclusively make preparations and undertake training at Rabaul and elsewhere.

6. The *Ryōyō Maru* (approximately 6,000 tons, 22 kilometres per hour) will stand by at Davao for the present; thereafter, it will transport the reinforcements (anti-artillery) and signals units for the South Seas Force to Rabaul. These vessels will be available for use by the South Seas Force after completing these transports.

7. Those vessels to be used for the South Seas Force's operations that are currently sailing from Palau to Rabaul (approximately 45,000 tons, seven ships) will, for the present, stop and standby at Palau (due to arrive on 13 June). Thereafter, they will be transferred to the main strength of the Oki Group according to the need, and then used for troop transports to Manila.

8. The departure from Japan of military matériel transports (approximately 12,000 tons, three ships) bound for Truk will be postponed. The ships will be used elsewhere for the present.

9. The use of operational shipping for the F Operation during the postponement will be determined separately.

10. Take appropriate measures to cover immediate demands. For other items, report to Prince Takeda, who will be despatched to nearby Davao, then take measures.

On the following day, 8 June, the army and navy high commanders together presented to the emperor future measures to be taken following on from the operational changes. This took the form of amendments to the army–navy central agreements concerning operations in the Aleutian Islands and Midway, and the FS Operation.

Chief of Navy General Staff, Admiral Nagano, stated in the proposal to the emperor that the Midway Operation “should be postponed for the present as current conditions do not permit its adequate prosecution”. Concerning the FS Operation, he explained that: “It was planned to start in early July. However, the operation should be postponed by about two months given the need to prepare reinforcements for naval air strength for Midway, and the unknown strength of our fleet.”<sup>177</sup>

The commanders of the 17th Army were informed of these plans by a staff officer from Imperial Headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Imoto Kumao, at Fukuoka on 8 June. The army chief of staff expressed his deep wish that the operation be carried out as soon as possible.<sup>178</sup>

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters issued the following instructions to the commander of the 17th Army on 12 June:

The execution of the F and MO Operations will be postponed. Elements of your force will assemble in the Bismarck Islands, with the main strength on Mindanao, and Palau if required, where you will prepare for future campaigns.

Imperial Headquarters was to send elements of the Ichiki Detachment back to Japan, but they decided to send them to Guam owing to concerns over counter-espionage. After their arrival at Guam, they would be removed from the command of the 2nd Fleet, and though continuing their previous duties, would undertake training under the direct command of Imperial Headquarters.

#### Cancellation of the FS Operation

The above measures taken in the South-East Area after the defeat at Midway were now completed. The Navy General Staff issued the following “Operational leadership policy for the area” on 13 June.<sup>179</sup>

1. Operations in the South Pacific Area  
Operations carried out in mid-September  
A land airbase must be established at Tulagi as soon as possible in preparation for the execution of operations (aim to have this operational by early August). Next, attack the land base in the New Hebrides and advance an air strength to the area.
2. Operations in the North Pacific Area  
[The strengthening of Kiska and Attu has been omitted by the editor.]
3. Operations around Australia
  - a. MO Operation  
The invasion will be carried out, if possible, by the overland route. Commence and complete preparations as soon as possible.  
The attack will be changed to a sea-route attack during the overland invasion if conditions permit.
  - b. Strengthen mainly submarine attacks against enemy shipping in Australian waters, and strengthen operations to smash the supply line between Australia and the United States.
4. Operations in the Indian Sea  
[Attacks on enemy ships and the invasion of Ceylon omitted by the editor.]
5. Operations in the Central Pacific Area
  - a. The timing of the AL and MI Operations will be determined according to the conditions and after special attack training is completed.
  - b. Seek an opportunity to adopt measures to entice and destroy the enemy fleet.
6. Operations to smash enemy shipping transport  
[Key points related to the Indian Ocean omitted by the editor.]

The Operations Section of Navy General Staff undertook more research for the operational outline of the FS Operation. The advantages and disadvantages of the three proposals discussed above concerning the order of attacks on key sites at New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa were also reinvestigated.

The first proposal (to attack New Caledonia, then Fiji and Samoa) had the advantage of nearby Japanese bases. The Allied base at Efate in the New Hebrides would be invaded and used as an advance base. However, there were fears that the Allies would then strengthen the defences at Fiji, but especially at Samoa. It was judged that if the invasion was undertaken within a month or so, the build-up would only be small scale.

The second proposal (to invade all three simultaneously) needed sufficient troop numbers to be effective. Though this was the preferred proposal, it had the disadvantage of dividing the strength of units. It was felt that difficulties could arise if the circumstances changed after pursuing several attacking fronts.

Proposal three (to attack New Caledonia after invading Fiji and Samoa) would strike through the Allies’ strongest point first. However, this proposal’s flaw lay in its dependence on air support from Japanese bases, and the unpredictability of that support being available.

Ultimately, it was decided that proposal one was still the most advantageous.<sup>180</sup>

The Combined Fleet returned to the western sector of home waters on 14 June.

The following day, Vice Admiral Itō Seiichi, assistant chief of navy staff, and other senior staff officers were despatched to the Combined Fleet to hold discussions concerning the new operations leadership policy. The Combined Fleet agreed in general to the points in the leadership policy, and came to an overall consensus concerning the reorganisation of the Combined Fleet.<sup>181</sup>

Incidentally, two Combined Fleet staff officers, Miwa Yoshitake and Fujii Shigeru, visited Imperial Headquarters on 22 June. They strongly pressed for the cautious argument that the mobile carrier force should only be used against enemy sea units. There would be no uncertainty if airbase units were used at New Caledonia during the FS Operation. However, with no such certainty for the Fiji and Samoa operations, these invasions should be postponed and reconsidered. The staff officers also added that these were also the opinions of the commander of the Combined Fleet.<sup>182</sup>

The 11th Air Fleet sent its appraisal of the FS Operation to Imperial Headquarters on 30 June. This stated that the inability to utilise Zero fighters would be a difficulty for the campaign. (Zero fighters had an 87 per cent strike-rate, compared to 13 per cent for land-based attack planes in the air war of attrition in the South-West

Area.) They further stated that if reinforcements to equipment and personnel could be supplied, then while the execution of the operation would not be easy, they were confident of success. However, because the attack on Moresby was to be undertaken before the FS Operation, the enemy air strength at the Port Moresby bases had to be dealt with. Consequently, the 11th Air Fleet proposed the following timetable for the execution of the campaigns:<sup>183</sup>

Efate (New Hebrides): 20 September (day *x*)  
New Caledonia: day *x*+15  
Nandi (Fiji): day *x*+30  
Samoa: day *x*+50

This proposal was adopted on 18 May, but contained points of fundamental difference with the operational outline mentioned above. This proposal was based on the idea that airbases would be successively advanced to cover a series of invasion operations within the sphere of air control.

Negotiations between the Navy Department and the Combined Fleet concerning subsequent operations reached a decisive stage on 5 July. At that time, staff officer Miwa forwarded the commanders the frank view that he would like the FS Operation to be discontinued. Further, he wanted the newly formed 3rd Fleet to be sent to the Canton Island area in the Phoenix Islands under the protection of Japanese airbases in the Gilbert Islands to lure the Allied fleet into a decisive battle. If the Allied fleet could be destroyed in this battle, then the FS Operation could be carried out quite simply.<sup>184</sup>

The Navy Department subsequently made the decision to temporarily discontinue the FS Operation.

While the navy was undertaking research for these various modified proposals, the Operations Section of the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters in the latter half of June was continuing preparations for research into overall plans for second stage operations, immersing itself in studies for the Szechwan Operations (the so-called Chungking Invasion Operation).<sup>185</sup>

The Navy's Operations Section submitted to its army counterparts on 7 July the plan to temporarily discontinue the FS Operation. These documents provided a detailed explanation of the reasons for this decision, and are reproduced below:<sup>186</sup>

Reasons why the FS Operation must be unavoidably discontinued at this time

1. With the current reduction of our carrier fleet, and learning from the lessons of the Midway battle, it is essential that Japanese air strength should smash and control Allied fleet air power in air battles within base invasion operations. These operations should follow on from the outlines of stage one operations in the southern area.
2. Concerning the F Operation, Allied air power should be destroyed first during the NK Operation at Efate (1,300 kilometres from Guadalcanal) and New Caledonia by base aircraft from the seaplane base at Tulagi and the land base at Guadalcanal (prospects for start in August), after which the airbase on Efate should be the object of a surprise attack. It is then essential to advance Japanese air units to Efate to neutralise Allied air power on New Caledonia. Japanese air units at Efate and New Caledonia can then be used in the FI Operation to attack Fiji (Nandi is 1,000 kilometres, and Suva 1,100 kilometres, from Efate). In the same way, units at the base on Fiji can then reach Tutuila at a range of 1,200–1,300 kilometres.
3. The 87 per cent success rate of Japanese air units against Allied air units in operations in the south relates to fighter planes. With the exception of the surprise attacks at the outset of the war, Allied bases within a range of 560 kilometres from Japanese bases are subject to attack. Fighters can also be used within this sphere. For the F Operation, New Caledonia can be attacked by fighters operating from a base at Efate. Operations must also be carried out by all medium attack planes and large flying boats within the limits of the range of offensive operations.
4. Under these conditions, and considering what has been learned to date, it is naturally difficult to expect to complete aerial destructive attacks using only medium attack planes. Furthermore, it is essential to use a force of troops absolutely superior to that of the enemy. Enemy fighters cause considerable damage during daytime air raids by Japanese bombers, but it cannot be ignored that damage during night raids will be reduced. Consequently, this operation should be undertaken with an air force of superior strength. It must be expected that attrition losses during the start of the campaign will be relatively high for an operation of this nature.
5. Consideration must be given to using carrier-based air strengths to compensate for the short-comings in these airbase battles. There is some uncertainty concerning Allied air strength in the area of the operation. There is no method to guarantee success in reconnaissance, but gradually increase strength day by day until the required amount of reconnaissance is reached. Further, ensure sufficient protection is given to aircraft carriers if they are to be mobilised. There is no suitable location for airbases, but on the other hand, the sea-route is extremely complicated, as the waters have not been sufficiently surveyed and movements are restricted. Failure to heed the

dangers would herald dire consequences. It is therefore necessary to avoid the use of carriers where possible, within certain limits.

6. The campaign in New Guinea has developed into a war of attrition. The Allies have reinforced their air power at Moresby, particularly since the start of July (judged to be around 40 bombers). Their counter-attack after reaching full strength will tend to increase the attrition rate of Japanese aircraft. There is no argument over the necessity in overcoming the innumerable difficulties to invade Port Moresby as soon as possible. After the invasion, it will be difficult for the Allies to redeploy their air strength within the region. Losses will be high, but we must press on expecting a certain degree of reduction in strength.

However, reinforcements for losses in strength are, as will be discussed below, basically at a standstill, so numbers will decrease day by day. The large numbers of Zero fighters in the area will continue to attack the Allied B-17 and B-26 bombers, intending to hit their target with every shell. The current situation, however, is that we are unable to shoot them down. Recently, we have seen the appearance of the tragic situation whereby we are using our planes, as a last resort, as bombs to ram into the enemy. In the light of this situation, we have come to the conclusion that campaigns such as the F Operation are not a preferred option.

7. Approximately 400 carrier and land-based planes were lost during the Midway and Coral Sea battles. Various means are being investigated to reinforce and reorganise these strengths. In the past, even though production rates were low, they were increasing and losses to attrition could be replaced with a slight surplus. However, we are facing a huge challenge to cater for the scale of losses described above. In addition, there are no prospects that we will be able to increase production rates. The truth is that we have fallen into a huge rut. The situation at the end of June during the current campaign is that aircraft numbers for airbase units are 54 per cent of full complement for fighters, 37 per cent for reconnaissance planes, 75 per cent for medium bombers, and 80 per cent for flying boats. There are no prospects for this situation to be improved by reinforcements. On the contrary, the trend is that the situation will gradually worsen.

8. Current production rates for naval aircraft per month barely compensate for present attrition levels. Of particular concern is the disappointing production rate for fighter aircraft (less than 90 per month).

Neither are there currently prospects to restore operational strength owing to our reduced military capacity. There are grave fears that the intensification of the war of attrition at the front lines under the current circumstances may severely damage our ability to continue to prosecute the war. There are currently no prospects of increasing production levels. Because of this situation, we must debate emergency measures.

9. However, the enemy has temporarily suffered great damage in New Guinea and in the Port Moresby area from our aggressive attacks. Even so, they are extremely quick to reinforce their lines and mount counter-attacks. In contrast to our military strength, which is slowly being ground down, the enemy is able to freely maintain its strength. Japanese fighters are unable to mount very effective attacks against Allied bombers, who continue vigorous counter-attacks. If these conditions continue, the chances are extremely high that the Allies will gradually increase their strength until they have the numerical advantage and take complete control of the air war.

10. Taking all the above factors in combination, we should plan to postpone the current operation because of aircraft production levels, and take measures to make attacks against enemy bombers more effective. In the meantime, wide-ranging strategies should be debated, and planning undertaken to accelerate aircraft production levels. Only after these goals are met can we identify when it will be appropriate to start the operation.

Of interest in these instructions is the first concrete reference in item 2 to the plan recommending the establishment of a land airbase in the Tulagi area. This will be discussed below in further detail.

#### Future operational leadership

In addition to the above-quoted “Reasons why the FS Operation must be unavoidably discontinued at this time”, the Operations Section of the Navy General Staff also issued to the army “Instructions relating to the process of modifying the operational leadership policy”. Appendix no. 3 of this document, reproduced below, contains a statement of the navy concerning subsequent operational leadership:<sup>187</sup>

##### Operational leadership policy

1. The F Operation has for the moment been discontinued. The 17th Army and the 8th Fleet will invade Port Moresby as soon as possible. In addition, mopping-up operations will be conducted to remove enemy units remaining in British New Guinea. Take advantage of previously established airbases in key locations through air operations against Australia. Strengthen our counter-offensive standing against recovery operations that the Allies will be planning. In the meantime, proceed with research and preparations for the operation.

2. Occupy Nauru and Ocean Island and establish airbases. In addition, reinforce previously occupied airbases in the Gilbert Islands and intensify patrols in the region.

3. Strengthen operations to smash supply lines in the Indian Ocean using submarines and warships. In addition, intensify submarine operations to blockade transport along the line of communication between the United States and Australia.

4. Strengthen defences in occupied territories, and make preparations against enemy recovery operations that they will be planning.

5. The F Operation is planned to start sometime after December this year. This will occur after the completion of aggressive operations in the Indian Ocean to smash transport routes, after the development of air strengths in New

Guinea following on the invasion of Port Moresby, after the increase in aircraft production, and after consideration of enemy strengths at that time. Operational preparations in key areas will be accelerated.

#### Explanatory notes

##### Concerning item 1

1. The cancellation of the F Operation has already been discussed in detail. The situation of the Allied troops in New Guinea must not be neglected. Installations and enemy land strengths must have been suitably strengthened in the light of reinforcements made by the Allies to the present. We must also assume that defence mechanisms also have been prepared, though we do not yet have accurate information to confirm this. Consequently, it is recognised that a vastly superior force must be used in order to attack these positions. It is therefore essential to completely clear Madang and Lae of the few remaining enemy troops, to invade Port Moresby, and to bring all of British New Guinea completely under Japanese control.

2. The fronts at New Caledonia and in the Solomon Islands must be secured. An appropriate number of airfields must be established in key areas in order to plan to advance southwards. In addition, effective army troops must be stationed to keep a sharp eye on the enemy and to maintain close contact and cooperation with the navy. It is essential to continue a wide range of research and preparations.

##### Concerning item 2

Instructions have previously been issued concerning the occupation of Nauru and Ocean Island, though to date, this operation has not commenced. These areas are not only a source of phosphoric ore, but have the advantage of filling in the gap in patrols between the Solomon Islands and Marshall Islands. It is expected that the navy will undertake this operation independently.

##### Concerning item 3

The campaigns to smash transport routes and shipping in the Indian Ocean, which flows from the sudden development of the war in northern Asia and the conditions of the war between Russia and Germany, are extremely effective when seen centrally as cooperative operations. Given the stage of the war overall, it is essential to quickly strengthen these effective measures also in terms of war leadership for Imperial Japan. If we were to undertake the F Operation, then our hands would be full for the rest of the year and we would be forced to abandon operations in the western Indian Ocean. If the F Operation were to be temporarily postponed, then we could mount large-scale submarine and fleet operations in this region, and even have a surplus strength. From the perspective of the overall war situation, strengthening operations to smash transport routes in the Indian Ocean is consistent with Imperial Japan's war leadership policies in the region.

The reasons for cancelling the F Operation are also contained in appendix 2. As explained here, however, there are also considerations from the perspective of strategic leadership. This is because it is recognised that cancelling the operation will almost certainly be overall an advantage.

##### Concerning item 5

The operations in the Indian Ocean are planned to continue until the end of this year. We must, however, have a fairly clear understanding of the war situation in New Guinea and of the military condition of the Allies through the results of reconnaissance in the F region. Further, we must make estimates of the prospects for aircraft production. We must take into account all of these conditions and look past the necessity or appropriateness of conducting the F Operation to recognise when it could commence. We are of the opinion that preparations should proceed to begin the operation after December this year.

We are of the opinion that there is a good likelihood of the F Operation going ahead in the future. With the exception of the drastic case of the possibility of an invasion of Australia, planning for the F Operation should not be entirely abandoned.

The army accepted the navy's detailed reasoning in this submission and eventually agreed to the proposal to invade Port Moresby by the overland route. The duties of the Ichiki Detachment were subsequently cancelled on 9 July and it was ordered back to Japan. In addition, the duties of the 17th Army were modified to speedily adopt measures only to aid the invasion of Port Moresby and key areas in New Guinea, thus adopting a stance conforming to subsequent overall strategic leadership.<sup>188</sup>

On the following day, 10 July, talks were held between the navy chief of staff, Admiral Nagano, and the army chief of staff, General Sugiyama. The main points of these talks were as follows:<sup>189</sup>

Nagano: The Combined Fleet at the moment lacks confidence in the offensive operations on Fiji and Samoa. Of course, it must be done if the emperor orders it, but at this time it is a dead end. It should be stopped.

Sugiyama: We cannot deal with the issue if it can't be done from the point of view of naval strength. New Caledonia is not of particular benefit. The essential places are Samoa and Fiji.

Nagano: The air war of attrition has gradually intensified even in the region of Moresby alone. This issue is being investigated by responsible officers of the army and navy. Our air strength is not all that stretched.

Sugiyama: There are rumours within the Allies that the Japanese will land on the coast and attack Moresby after the monsoon is over. We have to form units and reorganise munitions, etc., if we intend to mount an overland attack. Speed is of the essence.

It is expected that the commander of the 17th Army will make a decision concerning the overland attack at the beginning of August.

What's the situation at Rabaul?

Nagano: There will probably be nothing more than the seaplane base. Current thinking is to spread our strength into the Indian Ocean.

This conversation between the commanders contains important hints of subsequent war and strategic leadership. It is evident that concerning attacks on Australia, the navy tended to apply its strength to the Indian Ocean rather than the Pacific, and that it was never confident of success in the blockade operation between the United States and Australia by means of the FS Operation. Of special note is the inauspicious appraisal of the future of the Rabaul base.

The statement of the army chief of staff contained a favourable account of the army's continuing great interest in India and western Asia. This conforms to the aim at the opening of the war to break the spirit of the United States by first forcing Britain to surrender, rather than taking direct measures of this kind against the United States.

The preoccupation of the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters with research into the invasion of Chungking has previously been mentioned. Chief of operations Tanaka stressed either the importance of attacking Chungking with army troops and abandoning plans for a decisive naval battle against the United States somewhere in the Pacific, or the idea of joint army and navy incursions into India and western Asia to act in concert with Germany.<sup>190</sup>

At that time, the Japanese army's domination of Burma was almost complete, and its pressure on India was intensifying. In Africa, it seemed that the German and Italian armies were sweeping all before them.

The Army Department and Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters decided on 11 July to abandon plans to restage the Midway Operation, and also decided to cancel the FS Operation for the time being. There were great expectations for the proposal that the FS Operation would be undertaken after December 1942. Later that day, Admiral Nagano presented these items to the emperor.<sup>191</sup> Orders were issued for the responsibility of the "Midway Operation and the invasion of key areas in the FS Region" to be taken from the commander of the Combined Fleet, and for the "Army-navy central agreement concerning the FS and Moresby Operations" to be scrapped.

On the army side, orders were issued on that day dissolving the duties of the Ichiki Detachment and ordering its formation to stand down after it returned to port in Japan. The following "Great army order no. 657" was also issued to the commander of the 17th Army:<sup>192</sup>

1. The responsibility of the 17th Army to invade key areas in New Caledonia, and the islands of Fiji and Samoa based on "Great army order no. 633" is hereby removed.
2. The commander of the 17th Army will cooperate with the navy to invade and secure Port Moresby, and to subjugate key areas of eastern New Guinea at an appropriate time.
3. Detailed instructions will be issued by the army chief of staff.

As mentioned above, the operational outline for the Port Moresby invasion was leaning towards the overland route. At the time, however, instructions for the operation were pending on the outcome of the Ri Operation research. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

## *Chapter 4. Commencement of the overland-route offensive on Port Moresby*

### **Ri Operation Study**

#### Commencement of the Ri Operation Study

The headquarters of the 17th Army flew out of Tokyo on 7 June 1942 and lodged at Fukuoka with the intention of flying on to Manila the following day via Taipei. That evening, however, a telegram was received from Imperial Headquarters that stated: “Delay your departure and wait to be contacted by staff officer Imoto.”

At around 9 pm the following night at the Matsushima Ryokan, staff officer Imoto from Imperial Headquarters secretly informed the 17th Army staff officers of the setback in the Midway operation and the postponement of the FS Operation. Though he did not mention the real truth of the defeat, the news was a great shock to the general staff. There were none among them who had considered that the operation would be cancelled.<sup>193</sup>

Staff officer Imoto presented the “Outline of implementing the F Operation according to the prevailing conditions”, which had been adopted by the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters. After that, he relayed the intentions of Imperial Headquarters, as follows:

According to the latest intelligence from the navy, it is felt that the strategic course of an overland attack of Port Moresby is possible. The 17th Army should use the time while the [FS] Operation is postponed to gather intelligence concerning the feasibility of this strategy.<sup>194</sup>

The 17th Army command party left Fukuoka on 9 June and arrived at Davao on 15 June by way of Taipei and Manila. The following instruction from the chief of staff at Imperial Headquarters was received from Prince Takeda, an army staff officer, at Manila the previous day:

Great Army Instruction No. 1,179<sup>195</sup>

The following directions are based in Great Army Order No. 633.

1. The command of the 17th Army will temporarily postpone its execution of the F and Mo Operations. Its main strength should be concentrated at Mindanao and Davao, with part strength in the Bismarck Island area, to begin preparations for subsequent operations.
2. The headquarters of the Southern Area Army will facilitate the execution of 17th Army headquarters operational preparations.
3. Security of the 17th Army garrison at Mindanao is the responsibility of the 17th Army headquarters. Details will be determined through coordination between headquarters of the 17th Army and the 14th Army.

Great Army Instruction No. 1,180

The following directions are based in Great Army Order No. 633.

1. In addition to preparations for operations according to Great Army Instruction No. 1,152, 17th Army headquarters will immediately begin research, in cooperation with navy units in the area, for the feasibility of an overland attack of Port Moresby from the north coast of British New Guinea.
2. Cooperation with the navy shall be attained to occupy an area along the banks of the Mambare River in order to carry out research for the previous item.
3. The results of this research must be immediately forwarded to the chief of staff.

12 June 1942

At this time, Prince Takeda showed the staff of the 17th Army the account of an English explorer that indicated a road to Port Moresby. Further, the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters gained the cooperation of the navy and explained the “Outline of the Ri Operation Study” on 13 June, as follows:<sup>196</sup>

#### Research for the Mo Overland Operation

##### Overview

An opportunity for preparation has resulted from the postponement of execution of the F and Mo Operations. Detailed research and preparations for an overland attack on Port Moresby will be undertaken owing to difficulties encountered in the sea-route attack.

##### Details

1. This study will be undertaken with the cooperation of the army and the navy. Responsibility for this lies with the 17th Army and the 4th Fleet.
2. It is expected that the necessary units under the command of the 17th Army will be despatched to the region. It is planned that these units will be transported from Davao to Rabaul by *Ryōyō Maru* (approximately 6,000 tons, 22 kilometres per hour) at the appropriate time.

3. A force will occupy an area on the banks of the Mambare River, in collaboration with the navy, in order to carry out this research. The aforementioned vessel will be used to accomplish this task.
4. Overland routes other than previously specified will also be researched.
5. Navy aircraft in the region will undertake reconnaissance (including aerial photography) and will positively cooperate with the research preparations.
6. The headquarters of the 17th Army will notify Imperial Headquarters, who will determine if the results of the research warrant amendments to the existing outline of the Mo Operation plan.
7. It is anticipated that the results of the research will call for repairs (and construction) of roads. An independent engineer regiment (armoured) and Taiwanese labourers will be despatched to the area for this purpose.
8. It is expected that in the case of an overland attack on Port Moresby, with the exception of the Aoba Detachment, appropriate units for this operation will be changed.
9. In the case of an overland attack on Port Moresby, consideration shall be made to amend the organisation and equipment of these units, and to strengthen necessary units (engineers (armoured), packhorse supply, medical system, water supply and disease prevention units, land duty units, etc.).
10. This feasibility study will be conducted as much as possible in secret.
11. This study will be called the "Ri Operation Study".

#### Dispositions of units under the command of the 17th Army

The strength of the 17th Army at the time of the arrival of its headquarters in Davao on 15 June was as follows.

The South Seas Force was stationed in Rabaul after the difficulties encountered in the sea-route attack of Port Moresby. It was incorporated into the 17th Army command structure on 20 May.

The 35th Infantry Brigade (brigade headquarters and 124th Infantry Regiment, less the 114th Infantry Regiment – after that known as the Kawaguchi Detachment) participated in the invasion of British Borneo. After completion of those operations, it was transferred to the Philippines and took up subjugation duties from the beginning of April. The brigade was transferred from Cagayan (200 kilometres north of Davao) to Davao after receiving the great order of 18 May. After arriving on 6 June, the brigade was incorporated into the 17th Army command structure. The commander of the brigade was Major General Kawaguchi Kiyotake, and the chief of staff was Major Ōsone Yoshihiko.

After participating in the invasion of Java, the various units of the Aoba Detachment were deployed in subjugation duties in the western area of Java. The detachment was mobilised according to the great order of 18 May and departed from Batavia on 26 May. It landed in the Davao area (Tebunko and Lasang) on 5 June and was incorporated into the command of the 17th Army.

Operational preparation orders issued previously on 28 May required the detachment to assemble at Palau in readiness for the offensive against Port Moresby. The delay in the offensive resulted in the detachment remaining at Davao. The commander was Major General Nasu Yumio, and the chief of staff was Captain Taguchi Kazuo.

The 41st Infantry Regiment of the 5th Division participated in the Malaya campaign. It was subsequently attached to the 9th Infantry Brigade and redeployed to the Philippines, where it was assigned to subjugation duties in the southern Philippines from April. The operation was postponed while the unit was preparing to advance to Davao from Cagayan according to the great order of 15 May. Consequently, the 41st Infantry Regiment was incorporated into the 17th Army command structure on 15 June.

Imperial Headquarters had determined that the South Seas Force and the main force of the 17th Army (less the advance communications units in Rabaul) would be incorporated into the 17th Army command when they arrived in Davao. However, units that had not arrived in Davao by 12 June were also incorporated from 15 June at their present locations. The commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment was Colonel Yazawa Kiyomi. The two battalions under his command were called the Higashi Detachment according to the operational preparation orders issued on 28 May. The other two battalions were attached to the command of the 35th Infantry Regiment.

The 15th Independent Engineer Regiment had arrived previously in Davao and was incorporated into the 17th Army command.

Command of the 17th Army had units stationed on Mindanao, with some at Davao and Rabaul. On 17 June, 17th Army headquarters ordered units to deploy to the following locations to prepare for operations.

17th Army headquarters was to be located at Davao. It arrived by the high-speed *Ayatosan Maru* on 22 June.

Unit	Location
35th Infantry Brigade (less two battalions seconded)	Palau
South Seas Force	Rabaul
Aoba Detachment	Davao
Higashi Detachment (two battalions of 41st Infantry Regiment returned)	Davao
Army units	Davao

These orders resulted in the redeployment of the 35th Infantry Brigade and the Aoba Detachment. The 35th Brigade was intended for the Fiji offensive operations. Palau had numerous coral shelves that enabled the brigade to practice landing operations.<sup>197</sup> In accord with these orders, the brigade left Davao on 2 July and arrived in Palau on 4 July. The Higashi Detachment arrived in the Davao area (Dariaon) from Cagayan on 28 June.

The main basis for the activities of the 17th Army lay in the Ri Operation Study issued by the chief of staff. At this time, Imperial Headquarters was leaning heavily towards an overland offensive against Port Moresby owing to the expected results of the Ri Operation Study.

#### Conception of the advance by land

It was natural that the reduction of air power and strategic limitations based on the ability to directly apply military power on the battlefield were also influential on the success or failure of any overland offensive. At that time, however, the dominant concerns were topographical: could a land army advance overland from eastern New Guinea and approach Port Moresby from the rear?

The highest peaks of the Owen Stanley Range that run along the spine of eastern New Guinea are Mt Albert Edward (75 kilometres south-west of the mouth of the Mambare River) and Mt Victoria (50 kilometres further south of Mt Albert Edward). Both peaks are over 4,000 metres above sea level and are covered with snow year-round. In the upper reaches of the Mambare River valley to the south-east of the foothills of Mt Victoria lies the plateau called Kokoda. The Owen Stanley Range is narrowest to the south-west of Kokoda. If the range could be traversed at this point then the prize of Port Moresby would be ready for the taking.

Immediately after the battle of the Coral Sea, the navy's 8th Base Force and the South Seas Force at Rabaul continued investigations from documents and local testimony into the existence of roads across to Port Moresby. Initially, overland supply routes were sought after the revival of the sea-route invasion of Port Moresby.<sup>198</sup> As a result of this, an early report was submitted to Imperial Headquarters that there seemed to be a road to Port Moresby.

Investigations by Imperial Headquarters and local units up to the end of June was not conclusive concerning the track to the west of Kokoda, but showed that it divided en route into two pack-horse trails and two other narrow trails that led to Port Moresby. The existence of the following from the coast to Kokoda was determined: a narrow trail along Mambare River valley up to Kokoda (native trail); a narrow trail along Kumusi River valley up to Kokoda (native trail); a pack-horse trail from Buna to Kokoda.

Meanwhile, two reconnaissance aircraft from the 25th Air Flotilla had discovered a road between Buna and Kokoda on 27 June that could accommodate motor vehicles. Another reconnaissance plane was despatched on 30 June escorted by four Zero fighters. As a consequence of these investigations, the 25th Air Flotilla telegraphed the following fighter report (no. 82) to related units:

1. There exists a 2–3 metre wide track along the Mambare River and Kumusi River for approximately 5 kilometres inland, and a 1 metre wide track for a further 10 kilometres. Thereafter a road was not detected owing to thick jungle.

2. There is a road passable by motor transport between Buna and Kokoda. There is a bridge over the Kumusi River passable by motor transport to the east of Papaki. This road is in flat terrain devoid of ravines.
3. Detected a prominent road winding through the rugged valleys between Kokoda and Fada. [Editor's note: Mountains north of Isurava] Determined areas that are passable by motor transport and areas where difficulties would arise.  
This road emerges from Fada at the summit of the mountain, and then runs west along the Waume Creek [Editor's note: Probably the upper reaches of the Brown River] until it disappears in the clouds. It is judged to be a road passable by motor transport that proceeds to Port Moresby.
4. No other prominent roads were detected in the area.

Reconnaissance on 3 July added to this intelligence the existence of a simple wooden bridge to the south-west of Kokoda. It was barely 1.5 metres wide and was deemed unsuitable for trucks. (The height of reconnaissance was 500 metres.) While sufficient investigation of these roads was considered essential, an overland offensive was now considered possible. Further, the central authorities, including the emperor, had taken a keen interest in this intelligence through special orders issued on 1 July by chief of staff Sugiyama.

Imperial Headquarters requested a force to occupy the banks of the Mambare River according to the results of the Ri Operation Study. This was a decision to advance a so-called "bridgehead reconnaissance force". With information on the existence of the previously mentioned roads, 17th Army headquarters despatched this reconnaissance bridgehead not to the banks of the Mambare River, but to Buna.

#### Issues related to the selection of units

The next problem was the selection of units to undertake the study. The headquarters of the 17th Army considered assigning the main body of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment, which had performed with distinction in the Malaya campaign, together with elements of an infantry unit. Whether this infantry unit should be the South Seas Force or the Aoba Detachment was to be determined by future deployment concerns.

As previously described, the South Seas Force was initially intended for the sea-route offensive against Port Moresby, but was transferred to the capture of New Caledonia under the FS Operation. The Aoba Detachment was planned for use in the offensive against Port Moresby. Both detachments had been informed of these arrangements and had begun appropriate preparations.

After the difficulties they encountered in the sea-route offensive against Port Moresby, the commander and staff of the South Seas Force were enthusiastic about the prospects for the New Caledonia operations, and had lost interest in the Port Moresby offensive.<sup>199</sup> It was natural, therefore, for the 17th Army headquarters to consider assigning the Aoba Detachment as infantry support to the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment on the Port Moresby operation as planned.

However, there were considerations over and above the condition of the despatched units. There was advantage in using the South Seas Force stationed in Rabaul over the Aoba Detachment in Davao if rescue was considered necessary, or if an overland offensive against Port Moresby was considered urgent. For the Aoba Detachment to be deployed, the main strength of the unit would need to be transferred to Rabaul, where accommodation was limited and losses from enemy air attacks would need to be considered. This was not considered the best course of action.<sup>200</sup>

The 17th Army command risked the possibility of failure of the overland offensive against Port Moresby if it assigned the responsibility for the Ri Operation Study to the South Seas Force, whose command had not shown enthusiasm for the task. Further, the psychological impact of suddenly changing arrangements and month-long preparations were given great consideration, so the plan to assign the Ri Operation Study to the Aoba Detachment was kept in reserve.

At this time it had become clear that Imperial Headquarters could barely supply one vessel for use in the Ri Operation Study. The availability of suitable shipping had not been an issue in the abovementioned consideration concerning the deployment of the Aoba Detachment. Without delay, the 17th Army command once again assigned the Port Moresby offensive to the South Seas Force, and consequently entrusted the unit with undertaking the Ri Operation Study. The commander of the 17th Army summoned the commander of the South Seas Force to Davao in order to communicate his responsibilities directly and to urge him to undertake his duties with resolve.<sup>201</sup>

Commander Horii and staff officer Tanaka of the South Seas Force arrived in Davao on 30 June. Commander Horii's opinion was sought on the feasibility of the overland offensive based on the research done to that time. As expected, he was unenthusiastic about the overland offensive, stating that it would be extremely difficult with a high risk of failure. His reasons were as follows:<sup>202</sup>

The South Seas Force will identify the best route from Buna to Kokoda to Port Moresby. From Buna to Kokoda is approximately 100 kilometres as the crow flies, but is in fact around 160 kilometres. Likewise, Kokoda to Port Moresby is 120 kilometres direct but is judged to be around 200 kilometres actual distance. In short, this route requires over 360 kilometres of trudging.

The problem is securing supplies. This would not be an issue if there was a road suitable for motor transport. However, without so much as a pack-horse trail, all supplies would need to be transported by human carriers.

The current number of men on the front line would be approximately 5,000. Given an average daily food requirement of 600 grams per person, this would result in a daily supply requirement for the detachment amounting to 3 tonnes. If each man could carry 25 kilograms of supplies, this would limit a day's march in the mountains to 20 kilometres.

A round trip march to the front line would take 20 days if the detachment were to advance to the saddle of the Owen Stanley Range approximately 100 kilometres from Buna. Given that supplies for each soldier would be depleted by 12 kilograms after 20 days, the amount he could deliver to the front line would be 13 kilograms.

Securing the daily 3-tonne supply for the detachment would require approximately 230 carriers per day reaching the front line. This amounts in total, given the 20 day round trip, to a requirement for approximately 4,600 carriers. If the front were to advance to Port Moresby, some 360 kilometres distant from Buna, then to supply food alone would require 32,000 carriers.

If one considers munitions and other supplies, the requirement for carriers would be immense. Ultimately, the overland route is probably not possible unless a road for motor transport can be pushed out from Buna.

However, as this conclusion was based on the calculations of the South Seas Force headquarters, even commander Horii did not strongly press his objections at the time.

#### Orders from the 17th Army

17th Army headquarters issued the following orders on 1 July:

Oki Group Operational Order B, No. 8

17th Army orders, 1 July

1. The army will, in cooperation with the navy (in Davao), undertake reconnaissance of the lines of advance for the Mo Offensive.

2. The commander of the South Seas Force will land the force described below in the Buna area and quickly advance to the saddle of the Owen Stanley Range to the south of Kokoda and evaluate the roads for an offensive against Port Moresby.

The main strength of the detachment will submit as soon as possible information concerning the difficulties for an overland attack of Port Moresby.

The 15th Independent Engineer Regiment (less the 1st Company) will be incorporated into the force after its arrival at Rabaul.

Note: The 15th Independent Engineer Regiment plus one infantry battalion will be the basis of the force.

3. The commander of the Aoba Detachment will come under the command of the South Seas Force after the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment arrives in Rabaul.

4. Further details for the operation will be provided by the staff office as instructions.

I will be in Davao.

Army Commander, Hyakutake Haruyoshi

Distribution method: South Seas Force commander summoned. After oral instruction, printed orders to be distributed.

Distribution: South Seas Force, Aoba Detachment, 1st Landing Group

cc: Imperial Headquarters

Instructions from the chief of staff concerning these orders were as follows:

1. Memoranda between the 17th Army headquarters and the command of the 4th Fleet concerning the Ri Operation Study are per the attached (oral instruction).
2. Required intelligence  
Information concerning the evaluation of the condition of roads and the speed of road improvement must be collated and submitted by no later than the beginning of August.
  - a. Buna to Kokoda road
  - b. Road along the Kumusi River
  - c. Road from Kokoda through to Port Moresby
  - d. Road along the Mambare River
  - e. The existence and condition of any other roads across the Owen Stanley Range
3. Required military strength, landing craft, and transport ships
  - i. Shipping transport units shall carry the maximum number of large and small landing barges and collapsible craft. A suitable number will be left with each unit after disembarkation. The rest will be returned to Rabaul by transport ship.
  - ii. The transport vessels to be used will be *Ryōyō Maru* and *Ayatosan Maru*.
4. Communications will be limited to timely reports of a successful landing, occupation of Kokoda, and occupation of the saddle to the south of Kokoda. The commander of the South Seas Force shall also send reports to Imperial Headquarters at those times.
5. It is expected that in the case of an overland offensive against Port Moresby, Imperial Headquarters will make consideration concerning the reorganisation of the detachment, resupply of equipment, and supporting units (engineers (armoured), bridging supply company, pack-horse supply, medical system, disease prevention and water supply unit, land duty unit, etc.).
6. The main strength of the South Seas Force will apply itself as ever to the task of researching strategic advantage in the case of an order to attack Port Moresby by the overland route.

#### Army–navy local agreement

Agreement was reached at Truk on 4 July 1942 between the 17th Army and the 4th Fleet concerning the strategy of the Ri Operation Study. Prior to this, the navy had determined that responsibility for the execution of the Ri Operation Study would lie with the 4th Fleet. This was an express command issued by the commander of the Combined Fleet, as contained in the following instruction on 11 June concerning the study: “Primary responsibility for the Ri Operation Study lies with the commander of the 4th Fleet.” Consequently, because the study was solely the responsibility of the 17th Army and the 4th Fleet, it was no more than simply a general cooperative relationship with the 11th Air Fleet (the air unit in the area).

With the Buna area only 20 minutes flying time from the airbase at Port Moresby, there were still concerns for the 17th Army units advancing by sea. The 25th Air Flotilla of the navy, however, made provision for staff officer Miyazaki Atsushi to be despatched as an observer.

Further, the 17th Army considered that there should be continuity between operations to undertake research for the Ri Operation, and any overland offensive strategy which developed from the research itself. Consequently, there was a desire to make reference to the Port Moresby offensive even with the cooperative agreements with the 4th Fleet. At the same time, the navy was reorganising its order of battle for units in the South-East Area of operations. After mid-July, the 8th Fleet, and not the 4th Fleet, was expected to be the formation actually involved in the operation. Consequently, the 4th Fleet could not reach agreement on any offensive strategy outside of its responsibility: that is, beyond the early phase of the Port Moresby campaign. Operational agreements for the Port Moresby offensive were therefore not all-encompassing, and until the first official telegram agreements from the 8th Fleet, consisted of no more than responses between the two staffs.<sup>203</sup>

In accord with these agreements, the commander of the 4th Fleet despatched units for the Ri Operation Study to Rabaul. These units were commanded by Rear Admiral Matsuyama Mitsuharu and comprised the 18th Squadron (*Tenryū* and *Atsuta*) and the 29th Destroyer Squadron (*Asanagi*, *Yūzuki*, and *Uzuki*). These units arrived in Rabaul on 9 July and continued preparations for the operation.

#### Deployment of the Yokoyama Advance Party

The commander of the South Seas Force presently returned to Rabaul and allocated the main strength of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment, the 1st Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment, and the 1st Company, 1st Battalion of the 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment to the advance force. This was to be called the Yokoyama Advance Party and was commanded by Colonel Yokoyama Yosuke of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment.

The two greatest issues facing the South Seas Force in the despatch of the advance party were supplies and anti-aircraft strategies. There was no other option than to rely on the 25th Air Flotilla for anti-aircraft protection, but preparations and training were required in the case of transports being sunk prior to disembarkation at Buna. To implement a supply policy, changes were made to organisation and equipment. The mountain artillery company had barely one mountain gun and was limited to 200 rounds carried by individual soldiers in backpacks for ease of transport.

The increase in the number of carriers was an unavoidable problem. The navy's 8th Base Force agreed to release approximately five hundred members of the Formosan Takasago Volunteers and Korean labourers to the South Seas Force. Both groups were attached at the time to the navy.

Approximately two thousand natives were also commandeered. This action had unfavourable repercussions for occupation administration and for later attempts to indoctrinate and pacify the local populace. Operational demands, however, took precedence.<sup>204</sup>

Detailed agreements were made between the South Seas Force and the 18th Squadron and 25th Air Flotilla from the navy's 8th Base Force on 13 July.<sup>205</sup> Although preparations were almost complete for despatch of the advance party, the main elements of the unit had not yet arrived in Rabaul.

The main strength of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment and the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion, newly formed for inclusion in the South Seas Force, left Davao on 2 July and eventually arrived in Rabaul on 14 July. The anti-aircraft capacity of the South Seas Force had increased from the original one company at the start of the war to two companies.

The commander of the South Seas Force issued orders ("Horii operational order B, no. 85") to the Yokoyama Advance Party on 14 July. These orders made clear to the advance party that, in addition to simply investigating the advance route, it should "Carry out partial preparations with a view to the operations of the main strength of the force."<sup>206</sup> The movement of the advance party in compliance with these orders was made clear as follows:

1. Occupation of the line of cover

As quickly as possible advance with force to a line to the west of the Owen Stanley Range and to occupy and protect the line at all cost. Take precautions against enemy unit attacks.

2. Reconnaissance of the advance line

Information concerning the evaluation of the condition of the following roads and the speed of road improvement must be collated by no later than the beginning of August. A determination must be made concerning the possibility of an overland offensive by the main strength of the force.

- a. Buna to Kokoda road
- b. Road along the Kumusi River
- c. Road from Kokoda through to Port Moresby
- d. Road along the Mambare River

Concerning the last item, reconnoitre the Buna-Kokoda road after it leaves Kokoda. Further, investigate the rivers to see if barge transport is possible along these waterways.

3. Repair of roads

Repair the roads to the east of the Owen Stanley Range as best as possible to enable them to carry motor transport. Repair the roads to the west of the Owen Stanley Range as best as possible to enable them to act as a pack-horse supply line.

4. Stockpiling of ordnance

- a. The target for mobilisation of the force to Kokoda should be late August. At least 20 tonnes of staples, 50 tonnes of other foodstuffs, 80 tonnes of stock feed, and 16 tonnes of food for the natives should be stockpiled in the mountains near to that area.
- b. As much of this ordnance as possible should be stockpiled, as conditions allow, near the line of cover to the west of the Owen Stanley Range.

Orders concerning repair to roads and the stockpiling of ordnance appeared to be preparations in anticipation of the overland offensive by the main strength of the force. Consequently, the Yokoyama Advance Party, as the name suggests, was not so much deployed to reconnoitre the possibility of an overland attack, but must be recognised as a unit deployed to prepare for an overland attack.

However, the decision to conduct an overland offensive, which was a burning issue for Imperial Headquarters at that time, was probably waiting for a judgment by the commander of the engineer regiment on the front line.

## **Transition to the advance by land**

### Commencement of the advance by land

Imperial Headquarters officially cancelled the FS Operation on 11 July. The orders for the 17th Army to change duties had not yet been discussed. These had been received by telegram by 17th Army headquarters at Davao before 14 July. However, Imperial Headquarters had withheld operational outline instructions for the new responsibilities of the 17th Army, no doubt because they were waiting for the results of the Ri Operation Study before issuing definitive orders.

On 15 July, an Imperial Headquarters army staff officer, Tsuji Masanobu, arrived at 17th Army headquarters in Davao. He was sent as a result of the decision to cancel the FS Operation on 11 July. Staff officer Tsuji and the 17th Army chief of staff, Futami, had both been attached to the Army General Staff 3rd (War Mobilisation) Section, and had been friends for some nine or ten years.

Staff officer Tsuji discovered that there were female typists within the army headquarters and recommended to chief of staff Futami that they be immediately repatriated to Japan, to which he agreed straight away.<sup>207</sup> This was a trivial issue, but unexpectedly for the high command of the 17th Army, Tsuji informed them that day that Imperial Headquarters had already decided to undertake the overland offensive.

Lieutenant Colonel Tsuji delivered them a great order dated 11 July, and after he explained the conditions of the navy in particular in cancelling the FS Operation, he stated the following:

In order to effectively carry out an air war of attrition against eastern New Guinea, it is imperative that Port Moresby be attacked as soon as possible. Even the emperor is particularly concerned about this issue. Therefore, without waiting for the results of the Ri Operation Study, Imperial Headquarters has ordered the 17th Army, by this great order, to attack Port Moresby. It is expected that army–navy central agreements concerning this will be telegraphed to Rabaul and Davao no later than 24 July. The Ri Operation must now be executed without the feasibility study. I would like the 17th Army to proceed with local agreements with the navy and begin the offensive against Port Moresby. I would like this achieved with all haste and with firm resolve.<sup>208</sup>

The 17th Army was at this time in preparations to conduct the Ri Operation Study, with the Yokoyama Advance Party to land at Buna one week later.

However, a great order had already been issued. Prior to the issue of the great order, the plan had been to issue operational outlines after the results of the Ri Operation Study were known. It was not improbable that Imperial Headquarters would then not wait for the study results and decide on the overland attack option.

17th Army Headquarters confirmed the intent of Imperial Headquarters through staff officer Tsuji, and immediately decided to begin the overland offensive. Operational outlines were quickly drawn up on 15 July.<sup>209</sup>

However, all of this was an independent decision by Imperial Headquarters staff officer Tsuji. Imperial Headquarters were certainly leaning towards the overland offensive, but they had in fact not changed their position to wait for the results of the Ri Operation Study before making a determination. The first the 17th Army chief of staff knew of this was on 25 July when he received a telegram from Colonel Hattori, the head of the Operations Section in Imperial Headquarters, stating that he was “waiting for the results of the 17th Army study”.<sup>210</sup>

Senior staff officer Imoto, at Imperial Headquarters at this time, had the following memory of these events after the war:

I see this clearly as an independent judgment of Lieutenant Colonel Tsuji. It was, however, recognised as not particularly problematic, though I think some people felt slightly awkward. Personally, I too had some reservations over whether this would be a good thing in the end, but I didn't have the confidence to argue against it and present an alternative.

Staff officer Tsuji, in addition to the previous statement, passed on the intent of Imperial Headquarters on 15 July. The main points of this were as follows:

1. Four pack-horse supply companies and four bridging supply companies will be despatched from Davao in early August. Approximately 40,000 tonnes of supplies previously sent to Davao from other areas will be sent to Rabaul by high-speed transport for inclusion in the 17th Army order of battle.
2. The Aoba Detachment and other units not required for the Port Moresby operations will remain in the order of battle, but I would like to see them temporarily transferred to the command of the 14th Army. I would like the 41st Infantry Regiment used if possible as a reserve force for redeployment elsewhere.
3. The maritime transports that will be able to be used continuously are *Ryōyō Maru* and *Ayatosan Maru*. In addition, the 20,000 tons of shipping used for the sea-route campaign will return to Palau in mid-August.
4. It is expected that the navy will cooperate to transport 17th Army units in nine old-style destroyers. The destroyers have a top speed of 26 kilometres per hour and can each transport 2,000 troops.
5. Concerning the provision of an independent engineer regiment (armoured), it is not possible to further strengthen the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment.

According to the “Operations of the 17th Army at Guadalcanal”, the following exchange took place between the general staff of the 17th Army.<sup>211</sup>

Army staff officer: Concerning the central agreement, I would like the 11th Air Fleet added to the 8th Fleet as necessary navy units in cooperation. Further, I would like the areas of army administrative responsibility made clear.

Staff officer Tsuji: I shall seek this of central command.

Army staff officer: I would like the approximately 35,000 tons of shipping near Manila made available for the transport of the army headquarters and provisional supply units, etc.

Staff officer Tsuji: I would like to make it 30,000 tons.

Army staff officer: I would like around 50,000 tons of shipping to return from Palau in early August to transport the 35th Infantry Brigade.

Staff officer Tsuji: That will be dealt with.

Army staff officer: What has been decided concerning the command, arrival time, and place of the nine destroyers? This is related to the sea-route offensive of Port Moresby and the invasion offensive of Samarai.

Staff officer Tsuji: I shall refer this to central command.

Army staff officer: Are we not required to submit the report of the results of the Ri Operation Study?

Staff officer Tsuji: That is correct. It is not required.

Army Staff Officer: Will the announcement concerning the Moresby operation be regulated by central command?

Staff Officer Tsuji: That is correct. It will be regulated by central command.

Army staff officer: It is perceived that a large portion of the army administration squad will be made to disband. Will this not be a difficulty?

Staff officer Tsuji: It might be better to retain one part of the squad.

Army staff officer: This army campaign has many variable conditions. Consequently, I want it understood that there may be the situation where the progress of the battle does not proceed with all haste.

Staff officer Tsuji: Understood.

Previously, on 18 May, when the battle order for the 17th Army was issued, the shipping transport headquarters, led by the transport communications commander (Imperial Headquarters Army Department, head of the 3rd Department), was placed under the command of the 17th Army headquarters for the execution of the FS Operation. The shipping transport units were as follows. The independent engineer regiment was responsible for coastal landing (unloading) using large and small barges. In effect, they were shipping engineers:

1st Landing Group Headquarters  
6th Independent Engineer Regiment  
10th Independent Engineer Regiment

- Floating Work Party
- 39th Sea Duty Company
- 40th Sea Duty Company
- 47th Sea Duty Company
- 106th Land Duty Company
- 120th Land Duty Company
- 37th Anchorage Command
- 42nd Anchorage Command
- Shipping Artillery Regiment (part strength)
- Shipping Signals Regiment (part strength)

Up to that time, the shipping transport units for the South Seas Force had only consisted of one company of the 10th Independent Engineer Regiment (less one platoon), elements of the 37th Anchorage Command, and a platoon strength sea duty unit. After the cancellation of the FS Operation, the abovementioned units remained under the command of the 17th Army.

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters had made provision for approximately 100,000 tons of shipping for the execution of the FS Operation. With the cancellation of the operation, 50,000 tons was deemed appropriate for use by the 17th Army in its campaigns, with the remainder to be used in reserve as conditions dictated.

#### Operational orders from the 17th Army

17th Army headquarters in Davao issued orders on 18 July for the offensive against Port Moresby. The outline of these orders is as follows:<sup>212</sup>

##### Army formation

##### South Seas Force

Commander: Major General Horii

Missing units

47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (less the 3rd Company)

Attached units

15th Independent Engineer Regiment (less one company (two platoons), with Takasago Volunteers)

Army Signals Unit (88th Independent Cable Company, one independent wireless platoon, and one fixed wireless platoon)

24th Field Water Supply and Disease Prevention Unit (part strength)

Shipping transport units

10th Independent Engineer Regiment (one company and one platoon)

40th Sea Duty Company (less two platoons)

105th Sea Duty Company (one platoon)

120th Land Duty Company (one platoon)

37th Anchorage Command

Shipping Signals Regiment (part strength)

##### 35th Infantry Brigade (less the 114th Infantry Regiment)

Commander: Major General Kawaguchi

Attached units

15th Independent Engineer Regiment (one platoon)

Two independent wireless platoons

24th Field Water Supply and Disease Prevention Unit

Shipping transport units

6th Independent Engineer Regiment

40th Sea Duty Company (one platoon)

##### Ryūtō Unit

Commander: Lieutenant Colonel Ryūtō [Editor's note: Lieutenant Colonel Ryūtō Shigeto was commander of the 42nd Anchorage Command.]

4th Independent Engineer Company

Provisional Road and Bridge Construction Unit

212th Independent Motor Car Company

Provisional motor car unit

Provisional supply and transport unit

88th Independent Wired Company (part strength)

Independent wireless platoon

Military police unit (part strength)

Shipping transport units  
40th Sea Duty Company (one platoon)  
106th Land Duty Company  
120th Land Duty Company (one platoon)  
42nd Anchorage Command (part strength)

1st Landing Group

Commander: Major General Itō  
1st Landing Party Headquarters  
10th Independent Engineer Regiment (less one company and one platoon)  
Shipping transport units attached to the South Seas Force (transferred along with the completion of the landing of the main strength of the South Seas Force)  
Floating Work Party  
39th Sea Duty Company  
40th Sea Duty Company  
120th Land Duty Company (less two platoons)  
Shipping Signals Regiment (part strength)

Direct army units

2nd Tank Regiment, 4th Company  
20th Independent Mountain Gun Battalion  
21st Field Heavy Artillery Battalion, 2nd Company  
45th Field Anti-aircraft Battalion  
47th Field Anti-aircraft Battalion  
9th Independent Rapid-fire Gun Company  
Army signals unit (part strength)  
67th Line-of-communication Hospital

Army reserve units

Yazawa Detachment  
Commander: Captain Yazawa  
41st Infantry Regiment  
Military police (part strength)

Aoba Detachment

Oki Group Orders B, No. 10

18 July, 1500 hrs

17th Army orders

1. The army, in cooperation with the navy, will promptly carry out offensive operations in the key areas of Port Moresby and New Guinea.
2. The South Seas Force will promptly land near Buna, quickly advance along the Kokoda road, and attack the airfields in the Port Moresby area.  
The transport and disposition of the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion and elements of the Ryūtō Unit in train with the South Seas Force will be deployed with other units under the command of the force until the commander of the Ryūtō Unit arrives in Buna.  
Shipping transport units attached to the force will be under the command of the 1st Landing Group commander until the disembarkation is completed.
3. The 35th Infantry Brigade, stationed as before in Palau, will land elements direct by sea in the South-East Area to prepare to facilitate the operations of the South Seas Force.  
Further, elements will prepare for operations in the key areas at Samarai and in the islands to the east.
4. The Ryūtō unit will land in the Buna area and establish a supply base to commence provision of supply to the South Seas Force.  
A large stockpile of munitions and supplies will be established near Kokoda. Matériel carried with the force will be disposed by the force commander until the commander of the Ryūtō Unit arrives in Buna.
5. The 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion will land at Buna and will be responsible for defence of the air over Buna and for constructing bridges over the Kumusi River.  
Navigation and landing of the main strength accompanying the South Seas Force will be deployed by the commander of the force.
6. Army units (except for the 4th Company of the 2nd Tank Regiment and the 2nd Company of the 21st Field Infantry Heavy-gun Regiment) will advance to Rabaul.  
The 4th Company of the 2nd Tank Regiment and the 2nd Company of the 21st Field Infantry Heavy-gun Regiment will be deployed in their current position by the commander of the Yazawa Unit.
7. The Army Signals Unit will promptly establish a base at Rabaul. They will be responsible for communications between the South Seas Force and Imperial Headquarters, and also between units attached to the army and navy.
8. The 1st Landing Group will allocate vessels and discharge the transportation of matériel and army units.  
Their main strength will advance to Rabaul at the appropriate time.
9. The Yazawa Unit will be stationed as previous in Davao and will undertake preparations for the army.

The commander of the Yazawa Unit will deploy the 4th Company of the 2nd Tank Regiment, and the 2nd Company of the 21st Field Infantry Heavy-gun Regiment at Davao, along with their associated personnel, horses, and vehicles.

10. The Aoba Detachment will be stationed as previously in Davao and will undertake preparations for the army.  
11. The commander of the previous army disposition must assign various units according to the new army formation.

The new command transfers will take effect at noon on 20 July, given no extraordinary circumstances.

However, for essential transport elements, units to be transferred will be deployed after departure from the harbour by the previous disposition officer.

12. The chief of staff will issue detailed instructions.

13. I will depart Davao on 22 July and will thereafter be stationed in Rabaul.

Army commander  
Hyakutake Haruyoshi

As these orders make clear, the 17th Army had planned for one part of the 35th Infantry Brigade to land to the east of Port Moresby in concert with the overland offensive of the South Seas Force. At that time, this small force had an infantry battalion as its core. It was also considered sufficient for a force of about company strength to occupy Samarai and the Louisiade Archipelago to the east.

The mobilisation of the overland offensive was a credit to the positive and prompt leadership of staff officer Tsuji. On 19 July, staff officer Tsuji transmitted the following report to Imperial Headquarters: “The Oki Unit has been issued army orders for the execution (not research) of the Ri Operation according to the central conception of the operation.”

This “execution (not research)” refers to the overland offensive. Whether this was precisely understood by Imperial Headquarters is open to question.

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters added to the order of battle of the 17th Army the 52nd and 54th Independent Supply and Transport Companies from the 15th Army, and the 1st Bridging Supply Company of the 9th Division from the 23rd Army. This was made clear in contact to Tsuji from Imperial Headquarters on 20 July. It was indicated that these transfers were “for the purpose of the Ri Operation Study”. On the same day, the Army Department ordered the Aoba Detachment, one company of the 2nd Tank Regiment, and one company of the 21st Field Heavy Artillery Battalion to the order of battle of the 14th Army. This was, however, with the condition that these units were to be prepared for redeployment to other areas as the conditions dictated from the middle of September.

The 17th Army made various necessary notifications to the 4th Fleet concerning previously established arrangements. The navy considered these arrangements to be part of the Ri Operation Study, as they replied, “In considering at this time the Ri Operation Study ...”. The navy imagined that the army had not yet received a great order for the Port Moresby offensive.

The commander and staff of the 17th Army left Palau on 22 July and arrived in Rabaul by way of Truk. Staff officer Tsuji accompanied them.

#### Orders from the South Seas Force

Previously, the transport of the Yokoyama Advance Party to conduct the Ri Operation Study was divided into two echelons. The first comprised the main strength of the unit and had completed its preparations by 19 July. It had planned to depart Rabaul harbour at 8 pm the following evening. Immediately prior to the departure, the aforementioned army order for the overland offensive was received. By this, the commander of the South Seas Force determined to “Prepare for an offensive on Moresby and nearby airstrips over the Buna to Kokoda road after landing the force in the Buna area.”

At midday on 20 July, the Yokoyama Advance Party was ordered as follows:

Mobilise according to Horii Operational Order B, No. 85. [Editor’s note: Previously issued] Further, the advance party commander will charge Lieutenant Sakigawa (commander of the supply and transport company) to form a supply company to be led by 2nd Lieutenant [Editor’s note: Original text blank] formed primarily around modified and captured motor vehicles.

According to Major Koiwai, the South Seas Force at this time included the following main personnel:

Force commander: Lieutenant General Horii Tomitarō

Staff officer: Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Toyoshige

Staff officer: Lieutenant Colonel Tomita Yoshinobu

Staff officer: Major Toyofuku Tetsuo

144th Infantry Regiment commander: Colonel Kusunose Masao

144th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion commander: Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto Hatsuo

144th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion commander: Major Horie Tadashi

144th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion commander: Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada Genshirō

55th Mountain Artillery Battalion commander: Lieutenant Colonel Hozumi Shizuo

#### Preparedness of the navy

At that time, the 4th Fleet had planned for units under the command of the 5th Yokosuka Naval Landing Party to land in the Buna area at the same time as the landing of the Yokoyama Advance Party. This was to establish a landing outpost and construct an airbase. Even local navy units, in line with the army, considered these to be more than simply reconnaissance operations, but were measures to establish advance air and ground bases in preparation for an assault on Port Moresby. This way of thinking did not indicate a “determination for an overland route” by the army, but rather recognised the need for advance airbases in the Buna area even if the overland route was considered too difficult and the sea route was adopted after all.

The 4th Fleet, in cooperation with the 17th Army, provided transport and protection for the Yokoyama Advance Party, and mobilised the following units for the invasion in the Buna area:

Formation	Command	Strength	Responsibility
Main force	18th Squadron commander (Rear Admiral Matsuyama Mitsuharu)	18th Squadron ( <i>Tenryū, Tatsuta</i> )	Maintain supply line for entire operation
1st Security Detachment		<i>Tsugaru</i> commander <i>Tsugaru, No. 32 Submarine Chaser</i>	Escort and protect transport convoy
2nd Security Detachment		<i>Asanagi</i> commander <i>Asanagi, Yūzuki, Uzuki</i>	Sea-route guidance
Sea Mobilisation Unit		Air unit commander Three observation planes from <i>Kiyokawa Maru</i>	Anti-submarine, sea-route guidance, cooperation with landing operation
Landing Unit		Sasebo Special Naval Landing Party commander One company Sasebo SNLP (rapid-fire and anti-artillery guns), 15th Establishment Unit Signals Base Unit	Establishment of airfields in area of occupation, secure landing points, repair of roads and bridges
Transport Unit		<i>Kinryū Maru,</i> <i>Hakozaki Maru,</i> <i>Kōtoku Maru</i>	Transport

The 25th Air Flotilla had, from the beginning, placed pressure on Allied airbases in eastern New Guinea and to the north of Australia, and had provided air support and reconnaissance for the offensive units.

#### Landing of the advance party

The invasion force, led by Rear Admiral Matsuyama, left Rabaul as planned at 8 pm on 20 July. It included the main strength of the Yokoyama Advance Party (on board the high-speed *Ryōyō Maru* and *Ayatosan Maru*), as well as the naval landing units. The convoy proceeded south-west along the sea lane to the south of New Britain without directly encountering enemy aircraft or submarines. The naval units were successfully debarked 5 kilometres north-west of Buna (Giruwa) at 5.30 pm on 21 July, and the Yokoyama Advance Party at 7 pm in Gona.

The landing was effected with relatively little enemy resistance and continued into the morning of 22 July. The Yokoyama Advance Party had planned to land at Basabua but had mistakenly landed at Gona to the west of the planned position. There were numerous reefs directly off the coast at Buna that did not allow landing craft to approach the shore.

The 25th Air Flotilla conducted special attacks on the airbases around Port Moresby on 18 and 20 July with 27 land-based attack planes, and with 15 and 13 Zero fighters respectively. On 21 and 22 July, they undertook aerial support for the transport convoy. Eighteen Zero fighters were unable to protect the anchorage early in the morning of 22 July owing to bad weather, but did so from 10.45 am to 4.15 pm.<sup>213</sup>

From 6 am that day, approximately one hundred planes attacked the anchorage in six or seven waves. *Ayatosan Maru* was hit at 7.10 am, resulting in a fire. It was subsequently disabled near the anchorage. The destroyer *Uzuki* received slight damage from a near miss in aiding *Ayatosan Maru* and was forced to return to base at Rabaul.

The naval landing party occupied Buna at 7 am on 22 July and began constructing a base. The forward sections of the Yokoyama Advance Party (one infantry company with motor vehicles) moved quickly towards Kokoda as soon as it landed. The main strength of the party proceeded to Buna during the morning of 22 July. It became clear after the landing that there had been a platoon of Australian observer troops at Buna and a smaller party at Gona, but they had withdrawn prior to the Japanese landing.

The 18th Squadron and *Uzuki* returned to Rabaul along the south of New Britain on 23 July, and the remaining units returned along the north of New Britain by 24 July. Preparations for the second transport proceeded.

The roads around the coast were in relatively good condition. The 40 kilometres of road from Buna and Gona inland to Soputa was passable by motor vehicle without repairs. In other places, movement through the jungle and occasional grassland was difficult for units, with many rivers and steep gullies.<sup>214</sup>

The forward party proceeded quickly from Giruwa, Soputa, and Sonbo along the Kokoda road. At Awala on 23 July, the unit defeated approximately thirty native troops and then one hundred Australian troops. The unit then advanced to the high ground at Oivi approximately 16 kilometres to the east of Kokoda, where they were joined by the main strength of the advance party on 26 July.

Five or six waves of aerial attacks during successive days forced the main strength of the advance party to move at night. They attacked a company of Australian defenders at Kokoda during the night of 28 July, and by the following morning had occupied Kokoda and the adjacent airstrip. The battle took the lives of a company commander and twenty other troops. Australian prisoners of war captured at Kokoda set out the situation of the Australian forces at that time.<sup>215</sup>

Prior to the landing of the Japanese forces, the Australians had only despatched one company to Kokoda and sent observers to Buna and Gona. Upon the Japanese landing, a battalion of Australians in Port Moresby was quickly deployed to Kokoda. This was the 39th Australian Battalion under the command of Colonel Owen. It comprised four companies, A, B, C, and D, with C Company airlifted to Kokoda. The battalion commander, who was in Kokoda, ordered A Company to proceed to Awala to engage the Japanese. Colonel Owen, however, determined that holding Kokoda against a superior Japanese force would be difficult. He consequently withdrew the main strength of the battalion to Deniki with a plan to hold the Japanese in the Owen Stanley Range, leaving one company in Kokoda.

There were approximately five to six hundred native troops led by Australian officers in the area along the banks of the Mambare River. In addition, there were said to be approximately twenty thousand American, Australian, and Indian troops under the command of General Morris in the Port Moresby area, giving a total of around six infantry battalions. The Allied army had established a strong base in the Port Moresby region during the previous six months.

The Yokoyama Advance Party was able to repair roads, making motor transport possible for 60 kilometres from the coast to Sonbo. The road west of Sonbo, however, was suitable only for pack horse, and west of Papaki was only a walking track. The original plan called for advancing and stockpiling munitions and supplies at Kokoda. This stockpile, however, had to be brought back to Sonbo. Each soldier of the advance party was provided with 10.8 litres of rice, or fifteen days' supplies, to carry from Soputa towards Kokoda.

### The 17th Army's judgment

The 17th Army command train left Davao on 22 July and arrived in Rabaul on 24 July to mixed news of the success of the landing of the Yokoyama Advance Party and the abandonment of *Ayatosan Maru*. The command of the newly formed 8th Fleet also arrived in Truk on 25 July with plans to proceed immediately to Rabaul.

17th Army headquarters, as previously advised by staff officer Tsuji, were expecting imminent notification of the army–navy central agreement concerning the Port Moresby offensive and subjugation operations in eastern New Guinea. However, as previously mentioned, the head of the army Operations Section of Imperial Headquarters on 25 July requested notice of the results of the Ri Operation Study. This was an extremely unforeseen telegram for the 17th Army.

A decision had already been made for the army concerning the overland offensive. In addition, it was determined that after the Buna landing of the Yokoyama Advance Party, the main strength of the South Seas Force would push on the front line using the principle of meeting engagements. Regardless of whether or not the required central agreement had arrived, the landing occurred precisely when it was decided that the main force of the South Seas Force would advance. Both the 4th Fleet and the 8th Fleet were in agreement on this point. Subsequently, on 27 July, transportation switched from the remainder of the Yokoyama Advance Party and the navy's base force to the transport of the first echelon of the South Seas Force main strength. The 17th Army conveyed to Imperial Headquarters by telegram the events to date along with an appraisal that the overland Port Moresby offensive was, by and large, possible.<sup>216</sup>

### Army–navy central agreement

At this point, the army and navy sections of Imperial Headquarters agreed in principle on the execution of an overland offensive to Port Moresby and issued the following army–navy central agreement (“Great army instruction no. 1,318”) on 28 July to the army and navy commanders in the field:

#### Army–Navy Central Agreement Concerning Operations in Eastern New Guinea

##### 1. Operational objective

To invade and secure the key areas of Port Moresby, to annihilate the enemy from eastern New Guinea, and in combination to use the Solomon Islands, to bring the Coral Sea under control.

##### 2. Operational policy

With the cooperation of the army and the navy, invade Port Moresby by the overland route, eastern New Guinea, and other key areas, and to occupy and secure each of these areas.

##### 3. Command and unit deployment

###### Army

Command: 17th Army commander

Strength: 17th Army main strength (based on approximately 6 battalions)

###### Navy

Command: 8th Fleet commander, 11th Air Fleet commander

Units: force based on the 8th Fleet and the 25th Air Flotilla

##### 4. Operational outline

i. Using the results of the research into the overland route to invade Port Moresby, the army will promptly land its main force in the Buna area, and then proceed along the Kokoda road to attack the cluster of airfields around Port Moresby.

ii. In accordance with the progress of the above-mentioned overland offensive, a part-strength of army units will land at an appropriate time in the vicinity of Port Moresby and assist the overland attack.

iii. In addition to destroying enemy air capabilities in the Port Moresby area, the navy will control enemy naval vessels in the northern section of the Coral Sea, escort the sea-route forces, and thereby support the land offensive.

iv. During or after the Port Moresby offensive operations, occupy and subjugate appropriate key locations in eastern New Guinea and elsewhere.

During these operations, offensives against key islands and coastal areas will be primarily conducted by naval landing party troops and other army troops.

##### 5. Command

The army and navy will cooperate.

However, in the case where army units and naval landing party troops are in operation at the same place at the same time, then the highest rank commander responsible for the landing operations will lead the operation.

## 6. Defence

i. As a general principle, and in the absence of extenuating factors, the navy will have responsibility for defence of the sea and air over occupied territories, and the army over the land. Direct defence of key areas will be divided as below, but will meet the demands of the operation, and shall be conducted in close mutual cooperation.

Port Moresby area and the region of the supply road: mainly the army

Other areas: mainly the navy

ii. The army will protect the key islands of the Solomon Islands, and the navy will provide assistance in accordance with requirements.

## 7. Supply

The navy will assist the army in transporting supplies and in evacuating casualties.

## 8. Agreements between army and navy commanders

At an appropriate time prior to the operation, the commanders of the 17th Army, the 8th Fleet, and the 11 Air Fleet will enter into an agreement at Rabaul.

## 9. Intelligence

This will be conducted according to separate orders issued from Imperial Headquarters.

## 10. Standard time

Central Standard Time will be used.

## 11. Operational names

Eastern New Guinea operation: "To Operation"

Aforementioned offensive operation against Port Moresby: "Re Operation"

### Transport of troops to Buna

As previously mentioned, the 17th Army and 4th Fleet (8th Fleet) had changed their plan and decided to transport the main strength of the South Seas Force in the second transport convoy to Buna. However, because the central agreement had not been received, it was decided to revert to the original plan and transport the remainder of the Yokoyama Advance Party and naval base force, as well as military matériel.

*Ryōyō Maru* and *Kōtoku Maru* left Rabaul on 27 July under the protection of *Tatsuta*, *Yūzuki*, and *No. 32 Submarine Chaser*. Disembarkation began at Basabua on the evening of 29 July under intense bombardment from Allied planes.

The 25th Air Flotilla had planned to patrol the sky over Buna daily since the landing of the first transport convoy. However, air mobilisation was hampered owing to bad weather, with the exception of patrols by 21 planes on 25 July, and 18 planes the following day.

Direct aerial protection of the convoy on 29 July was entrusted to 27 planes from the navy's Tainan Air Corps. Approximately ten SBD-3s and four P-39s descended from the clouds at 2.45 pm and attacked the convoy.\* *Kōtoku Maru* was hit and took on water before any equipment could be offloaded, though most personnel were rescued. *Ryōyō Maru* was safe during the day on 29 July, but was attacked at night and was forced to leave the harbour early in the morning of 30 July to return to Rabaul.

The Tainan Air Corps provided air cover again on 30 July with a total of 18 planes. At 7.45 am, five Zero fighters shot down a lone B-17 attempting to attack *Ryōyō Maru*. *Kōtoku Maru*, under the protection of *Tatsuta* and *Yūzuki*, turned around and headed back for Buna at 1.30 that afternoon, but was engaged by Allied aircraft at around 3.15 pm. It came under attack by eight B-17s at 4.40 pm and was disabled. *Tatsuta* and *Yūzuki* rescued survivors from the abandoned vessel and returned to Rabaul on 31 July.

*Nankai Maru*, under the protection of *Tsugaru* and *No. 28 Submarine Chaser*, was especially loaded with part of the 15th Base Establishment Unit and supplies. It left Rabaul on 31 July and headed south, but was attacked by a B-17 en route. As a result, it was forced to abandon its landing and returned to Rabaul on 1 August.

The second transport convoy was completed, but with less than anticipated results owing to the heavy attacks from Allied aircraft.

Imperial Headquarters staff officer Tsuji left for Buna aboard a destroyer on 25 July. He arrived in Rabaul the day after, along with the 17th Army staff. His purpose was to encourage the commander of the Yokoyama

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\* The SBD-3 was the Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber, and the P-39 was the Bell Airacobra.

Advance Party, who he had known from the Malaya campaign, and to carry out geographical observations on the roads from Buna to Kokoda.

Staff officer Futami (of the 17th Army) described the following incident from that time in his memoirs:

The day after Tsuji's heavy-handed departure from us, I heard from the army commander over a meal that Tsuji had been the cause of several difficulties, and he expressed the opinion that it would perhaps be better for the army if Tsuji returned. I ... felt that if he was made to return at this time, then his influence on future events would perhaps be quite significant. "Please give this consideration and then I shall carry out your wishes." The commander replied, "I see: leave it with me."

Incidentally, Tsuji was struck by shrapnel on 27 July near the coast of Buna and suffered an injury to his throat. His disembarkation was cancelled and he was repatriated to Rabaul the following day. Tsuji, dissatisfied with the cooperation of the navy's air corps, immediately contacted the commander of the 25th Air Flotilla and addressed the following message to the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters: "At the end of July, the enemy has air superiority over the Buna area. Although the navy's air strength amounts to only twenty fighters and thirty bombers, the realities of the situation are not passed on to army command."

#### Army–navy local agreement

Local agreements between the commanders of the 17th Army, the 8th Fleet, and the 11th Air Fleet were based in the central agreements and went into effect on 28 July.

The fresh command of the 8th Fleet was extremely positive about the operation. First, the 8th Fleet proposed that the navy carry out offensives against Samarai and the coast of Milne Bay near Rabi.<sup>217</sup> As will be discussed below, airfields had previously been constructed by the Allies near Rabi, and by mid-July it acted as a base for an air strength built around P-40s, and had a garrison of approximately five thousand American and Australian troops. However, the Japanese army did not discover the airstrip to the west of Rabi until 3 August. The offensive against Rabi that was discussed in relation to the agreement aimed to secure a midway base for the sea-route operations against Port Moresby via the Coral Sea, and was to be conducted in concert with an invasion and base construction at Samarai. At that time, the presence of the 5,000-strong garrison was completely unknown.

The 17th Army ordered the 35th Infantry Brigade to prepare for operations in the Samarai area, and felt that the Rabi and Samarai operations were the responsibility of the army. Further, the army agreed with navy proposals that the main objective was the invasion of Port Moresby.<sup>218</sup>

Later, however, problems arose between the army and navy concerning the distribution of responsibilities for the proposed sea-route offensive against Port Moresby. The 17th Army considered their responsibilities and proposed the 35th Infantry Brigade for the task. At that time, the 8th Fleet had proposed the following:

Proposal no. 1: The army will land with motorised barges (50 vessels), and the navy conduct transport by destroyers.

Proposal no. 2: The navy alone will conduct transport by destroyers if the army does not wish to deploy barges.

The 17th Army asserted that:

The success rate of transport by motorised barges is judged to be low owing to the conditions of air superiority held by the Allies. Consequently, we do not accept these proposals. There are advantages and disadvantages in despatching army troops or naval landing party troops. However, when considering the fighting strength after the landing, we favour army troops.

The navy, in response, would not change their proposals, stating the opinion that: "Transporting army troops by destroyer will give rise to command-related and other complications. Therefore, we would like the operation to be the responsibility of the navy."<sup>219</sup>

The 17th Army determined that they could not hang their hopes on the success of a maritime landing operation, and for the time being decided to leave responsibility with the navy. It was later made clear that the strategic plan of the 8th Fleet would facilitate the operation by landing units at Port Moresby precisely at the moment when it was to fall to the South Seas Force. However, according to the draft of the army–navy central agreement in possession of the navy (the complete text had not yet arrived, and the army had been given the

main points in communication from staff officer Tsuji): “In essence, one part of the army unit strength shall be landed near Port Moresby at the appropriate time.” In this way, the army stubbornly insisted on taking responsibility for the operation.<sup>220</sup>

Consensus on the agreement was not reached that day. On 28 July, the following day, the navy submitted a further proposal, as follows: “Elements of the army will board navy vessels and be mobilised by sea. In concert with the operations of the South Seas Force, these units will be landed in the vicinity of Port Moresby, thus facilitating the operation.”

The 17th Army agreed with this proposal. The army’s wish for these seaborne units to be conveyed by army transport vessels was opposed by the navy because it was felt the speed of these transports and Allied air strength would make it virtually impossible. Consequently, unavoidable limits were placed on the strength of units and the amount of supplies that could be carried.

On the evening of 30 July, the 8th Fleet again discussed landing the army units with the naval landing party, and received consent from the army. The 8th Fleet planned to place the 7th Special Base Force, which was intended for disposition in the Fiji and Solomon Islands area, primarily in the Moresby area.

The main points of the agreement contained in the memorandum drafted on 31 July were as follows:

Agreement related to the subjugation of Port Moresby and eastern New Guinea

Commander 17th Army: Hyakutake Haruyoshi  
Commander 11th Air Fleet: Tsukahara Nishizō  
Commander 8th Fleet: Mikawa Gun’ichi

1. Policy

The army and navy, working in cooperation, will speedily invade and secure the key areas of Port Moresby and eastern New Guinea

2. Leadership outline

i. The army will use the South Seas Force to advance along the Buna to Kokoda Road and quickly attack and secure Port Moresby and the surrounding airfields.

ii. Elements of the army units and naval landing party troops will board navy vessels and be mobilised by sea. In concert with the operations of the South Seas Force, these units will be landed in the vicinity of Port Moresby, thus facilitating the operation. The time of the landing at Port Moresby shall be determined immediately after the South Seas Force advances to the pass of the Owen Stanley Range.

iii. The navy will as soon as possible occupy Samarai and construct a naval base, while at the same time transferring part of its strength from Lae and Salamaua to the Wau area to facilitate the Moresby offensive.

[Editor’s note: There is no reference here to the Rabi operation.]

iv. The navy, using considerable strength, will conduct operations to blockade Allied reinforcements to, and retreat from, Port Moresby.

3. Unit deployment

i. Army

17th Army, Lieutenant General Hyakutake  
South Seas Force, Major General Horii  
35th Infantry Brigade, Major General Kawaguchi  
41st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Yazawa

ii. Navy

Outer South Seas Fleet, Vice Admiral Mikawa (8th Fleet commander)  
Airbase force (part strength), Vice Admiral Tsukahara (11th Air Fleet commander)  
5th Air Attack Force, Rear Admiral Yamada (25th Air Flotilla commander)

4. Landing points and time

South Seas Force (landing of the Advance Party on 21 July)

i. Third convoy (main strength)

*Ryōyō Maru*, *Meiyō Maru*, plus *Nankai Maru* (navy establishment unit)

Landing on day  $x$

ii. Fourth convoy (remainder units)

*Ryōyō Maru*, *Yasukawa Maru*, *Kazuura Maru*, *Nankai Maru*, plus *Meiyō Maru* (navy establishment unit)

Landing on day  $x+8$

iii. Fifth convoy (remainder units)

*Sugie Maru*, *Myōkō Maru* (provisional supply unit and bridging supply company, etc.)

Landing day  $x+10$

iv. Sixth convoy (4th Independent Supply Company)

Late August

v. Landing site will be to the north of Buna, near the mouth of Giruwa River

vi. Each convoy will arrive at berth in the evening and depart the following dawn

vii. Day  $x$  is determined to be 7 August

The sea-route units (approximately one battalion from the 35th Infantry Brigade) will board several destroyers and seven patrol boats and land to the east of Port Moresby. The departure date will coincide with the advance of the South Seas Force past the Owen Stanley Range.

5. Items relating to air operations

i. The navy will place great emphasis on controlling the air over harbours where transport units are berthed.

ii. The navy will endeavour to quickly establish an airbase at Buna and gain air supremacy over the harbour.

The army will cooperate to provide a land guard for this location.

iii. The navy will cooperate to provide leadership liaison between units of the South Seas Force after the main force has landed. For this purpose, if the army has the opportunity to secure the airfield near Kokoda, then the navy will establish an advance airfield.

The first notable feature of this local agreement is the strength of the 17th Army commitment. Whereas the central agreement stipulated a limited strength of six battalions (the South Seas Force and the 35th Infantry Brigade), the 17th Army added the 41st Infantry Regiment to give a force based around a strength of nine battalions. As described earlier, the 17th Army only knew of the conditions in the Port Moresby area after they had occupied Kokoda. It was natural for them to immediately realise the necessity of including the 41st Infantry Regiment as a garrison force.

The second notable feature concerns special provisions for air operations, which included positive planning for not only Buna but for Kokoda. As was made clear earlier, air superiority over the Buna area was firmly in the hands of the Allies, so advancing at least a fighter unit to Buna was an unavoidable demand.

Morale for the Port Moresby offensive among the 17th Army staff, which had arrived in Rabaul on 24 July, was very high. As mentioned, the 17th Army had notified Imperial Headquarters on 25 July their determination that “an offensive against Moresby primarily by the overland route is possible”. On 26 July, they telegraphed: “The army has confidence in the success of the overland operation. We beg you not to be concerned.”<sup>221</sup>

#### Operational leadership by the 17th Army

However, the commander of the South Seas Force and staff officers were rather pessimistic about the actual execution of the operation against Port Moresby. Commander Horii of the South Seas Force visited the chief of staff of the 17th Army after the staff office had arrived in Rabaul on 24 July. He stated that it would be impossible to advance beyond Kokoda if he wasn't given command of all the motor units, not just those attached to the Ryūtō Unit (which was designated on 18 July as the logistics support unit). Further, South Seas Force chief of staff Tanaka stressed that further advance was impossible if 120 tonnes of supplies were not stockpiled at Kokoda. 17th Army staff officer Futami considered these opinions weak-willed and would not act to prevent the deficiencies.<sup>222</sup>

On the other hand, Colonel Yokoyama, commander of the advance party, reported optimistically on 27 July that it would be possible to repair the road between Sonbo and Kokoda, so that if each soldier carried a total of 12 days' supply – four days to Kokoda and eight days to Port Moresby – then an attack on Port Moresby would be possible at one stretch. The staff of the 17th Army was overjoyed with this report. The judgment that it would take only 12 days to break through from Buna to Port Moresby was based on the knowledge that locals required 12 days to walk this distance.

Commander Horii visited the chief of staff again on 1 August. He stated that previous prisoner-of-war interrogations had revealed that there were approximately twenty thousand Allied troops stationed at Port Moresby. The chief of staff enquired whether the commander had the confidence to defeat an enemy of 20,000. Horii replied that confidence was not the issue, as they had been ordered to mobilise. Rather, he inquired if the strength of the units at the front line would be sufficient, and expressed his disinclination by pointing out the losses they would suffer in the Kumusi River between Buna and Kokoda.<sup>223</sup>

The army chief of staff did not believe that there were 20,000 enemy troops at Port Moresby, and deeply felt that the position of the South Seas Force commander was “grossly overestimating the actual strength of the

enemy”. However, he cannot be forgiven for completely disregarding the position of the commander. The 17th Army adopted two main measures for the operation.

The first was to summon to Rabaul the 41st Infantry Regiment to strengthen the South Seas Force. The army had initially sent for part of the 35th Infantry Brigade for the sea-route invasion of Moresby when the main strength of army units advanced from Davao. This unit was, however, exchanged for the 41st Infantry Regiment. This measure resulted from orders issued on 1 August. The 41st Infantry Regiment was despatched to Buna and assigned to supply duties, but directly participated in the battle as the necessity arose.

The second measure concerned the point that the conception of the operation, which involved landing the main strength of the South Seas Force at Buna after substantial military supplies had been stockpiled, had changed. Up to that time, the plan was to land the South Seas Force at Buna, provide limited supplies to be carried by each soldier, and make a headlong charge over the mountains to Port Moresby. However, the first and second convoys to Buna had both lost a vessel, and *Ryōyō Maru* in the second convoy was forced to return to Rabaul suffering engine damage. The planned stockpile was markedly delayed. On the other hand, the Yokoyama Advance Party had continued to make preparations for an airbase at Buna, expecting a favourable development in the local air situation, but did not recognise at the beginning the dangers of the constant air attacks from Allied planes.

At precisely this time, the Army Department of Imperial Headquarters telegraphed the opinion that the timing of the landing of the main strength of the South Seas Force must be determined in the light of the information that the navy planned to strengthen its air presence in the South Pacific, and that the navy air policy was in transition. Consequently, the 17th Army temporarily abandoned its plan to storm through to Port Moresby with no consideration of logistics and supply.

On 3 August, the advance of the main force of the South Seas Force by the third convoy was postponed. In its place, it was decided to accelerate the transport of the navy’s establishment units in order to speed up preparations for construction of an airfield at Buna. If successful, completion of the airstrip was planned for 12 August. The proposal was to strengthen transport of the main force by providing protection from air units advanced to the Buna airstrip.

The 17th Army sent the following telegram to Imperial Headquarters on 6 August concerning their plans up to that time:

1. In order to supply by land and reinforce the fighting strength of the South Seas Force, the 41st Infantry Regiment has been summoned. It left Davao on 5 August and is planned to arrive in Rabaul on 15 August.
2. The army intends at all costs to land the main strength of the South Seas Force in the Buna area around 16 August. Consequently, the navy is urged to strive to complete the airfield at Buna.

The commander of the South Seas Force gathered his senior officers on 7 August, and with the authority of the army chief of staff, advanced planning for the execution of the overland attack on Port Moresby. The senior command of the 17th Army, based on the evidence of the Allied army, which had strengthened preparations for the Port Moresby operation, was concentrating all its strength on this operation.

### **Formation and dispositions of the 8th Fleet**

#### Plans for fleet reorganisation in the Pacific area<sup>224</sup>

The command structure in the Pacific, in the case that operations proceeded according to policies for stage two operations established by the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters, became an important issue in mid-April 1942. This involved investigation into the proposal to reorganise the fleet in the Pacific after the completion of phase three of stage two (FS Operation) of the Combined Fleet’s operations.

Navy operations to this point in the Central Pacific Area (a sector of command in the South Seas) and the South-East Area (South Pacific) were, of course, conducted with the overall support of the main strength of the Combined Fleet. Air operations were the responsibility of the 11th Air Fleet, with the 4th Fleet responsible for naval surface operations. The surface operations aimed to defend key areas, to patrol and protect shipping, and to seek and destroy enemy ships. The 4th Fleet was therefore an operational fleet, as well as possessing garrison functions owing to the requirements of military administration in occupied territories.

The invasion of key areas in the Fiji and Samoa areas, to be conducted after the Midway Operation, was naturally to be carried out by the main strength of the Combined Fleet. There were, however, several problems to be overcome to undertake grand strategies in the Eastern Pacific Area after the completion of the operations with the military formations described above.

First, it was difficult to unify command over the relatively wide area of responsibility of the 4th Fleet. It would be extremely difficult for one command to coordinate operations to defend key areas, protect shipping, and administer occupied territories, as well as more traditional naval surface operations.

Secondly, it was essential to have a unified command to effectively integrate surface and air operations. Thirdly, a newly established fleet command was desired to allow intimate and direct contact with the recently formed command of the 17th Army.

Subsequent operations in the Central Pacific were to be carried out mainly as air operations. The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters unified command of air and surface units and considered it vital that an exclusively operational standing be adopted, not one of defence and administration of occupied territories.

As the result of numerous investigations, it was decided to enact a navy structure to reflect this purpose. The proposal to reorganise the fleet in the Pacific area after the completion of phase three of stage two, set for around 18 May, was as follows:

Formation		Vessels and units	Specially installed units
Combined Fleet			
4th Fleet	4th Base Force		(Truk and Palau areas)
	5th Special Base Force		(Saipan and Guam areas)
	6th Base Force		(Marshall Islands and Wake Islands areas)
	2nd Surface Escort Fleet	<i>Yūbari</i> 29th Destroyer Squadron 30th Destroyer Squadron	<i>Noshiro Maru</i> <i>Chōun Maru</i>
	Attached units		4th Harbour Duty Unit 4th Survey Unit <i>Kunikawa Maru</i>
8th Fleet	18th Squadron	<i>Natori, Tenryū, Tatsuta</i>	
	7th Submarine Squadron	<i>Jingei</i> 21st Submarine Group 22nd Submarine Group 23rd Submarine Group	
	7th Special Base Force		(New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa areas)
	8th Base Force		(New Guinea and Solomon Islands areas)
	Attached units		10th Establishment Unit 11th Establishment Unit 14th Establishment Unit <i>Kiyokawa Maru</i>
11th Air Fleet	22nd Air Flotilla		
	24th Air Flotilla		
	25th Air Flotilla		
	26th Air Flotilla		
	2nd Special Base Force		(Midway area)

	Attached units	34th Destroyer Squadron	<i>Lyon Maru</i> <i>Keiyō Maru</i> <i>Nagoya Maru</i> 11th Establishment Unit 12th Establishment Unit
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#### Notes

1. Under this formation, the commander of the 11th Air Fleet is considered commander of the South Seas Fleet. Surface forces (cruiser squadrons, torpedo squadrons, and aircraft carrier groups) will be joined to the South Seas Fleet and have the responsibility of capturing and destroying the enemy carrier task force.
2. Staff officers required to combine the command of the surface fleet and the South Seas Fleet will be despatched to the command of the 11th Air Fleet.

In this way, the duties of the 8th Fleet were basically defined. They included the FS Operation and other surface campaigns in the South-East Area. This also anticipated the establishment of the 7th Special Base Force, charged with garrison duties for the area of the FS Operation under the command of the 8th Fleet. Consequently, the 8th Fleet was not just a garrison force, but an operational fleet under the command of the South Seas Fleet (11th Air Fleet commander) responsible for leading, with substantial reinforcements, surface campaigns in the South Pacific Area.

#### Reorganisation after the naval battle of Midway<sup>225</sup>

As a result of the battle of Midway on 5 June and the subsequent cancellation of the FS Operation, the above-mentioned planning and research also had to be started afresh. It was clear that it was necessary to reorganise the fleet, which had to that time been devoted to preparations in the South Pacific Area for an invasion of Port Moresby. However, the reorganisation had to be managed with regard to the reorganisation of the Combined Fleet that was happening at that time.

Investigations into these reconstructions were immediately started by Imperial Headquarters and the Combined Fleet. The first issue to be faced followed on from the successive realisation of the progress of naval battles and the overall war situation. The fundamental problem was how the reconstruction should be undertaken to ensure long-term Japanese naval strength to bring the war to a successful end.

The second problem concerned how to reconstruct the Japanese mobile carrier fleet, which for the moment had suffered great damage. Four carriers from the 1st and 2nd Air Flotillas, *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryū*, and *Sōryū*, were lost at Midway. There remained, however: *Zuihō* from the 3rd Air Flotilla (*Shōhō* had been sunk in the battle of the Coral Sea); *Zuikaku* and *Shōkaku* from the 5th Air Flotilla; and *Jun'yō* and *Ryūjō* from the 4th Air Flotilla. Repairs on *Shōkaku*, which was damaged in the Coral Sea battle, were expected to be completed by mid-July. In addition, remodelling of *Hiyō*, a smaller aircraft carrier, was due to be completed by the end of July.

Until that time, the Japanese mobile carrier fleet had on each occasion been formed from an appropriate strength of battleships, cruisers, and submarines in accordance with the situation. This state of affairs did not arise out of the standing formation, but from the available naval strength. Formalising this arrangement to create a standing fleet would be advantageous from the point of view of training, mobilisation, and command.

Further investigations resulted in reformation of the fleet into a standing mobile fleet. The 1st Air Fleet was stood down and the 5th and 4th Air Flotillas reorganised as the 1st and 2nd Air Flotillas, respectively. With these units as a core, the formations indicated below were reorganised as the newly formed 3rd Fleet:

- 1st Air Flotilla: *Zuikaku*, *Shōkaku*, *Zuihō*
- 2nd Air Flotilla: *Jun'yō*, *Ryūjō*, *Hiyō*
- 11th Squadron: *Hiei*, *Kirishima*
- 7th Squadron: *Kumano*, *Suzuya*, *Mogami*
- 8th Squadron: *Tone*, *Chikuma*
- 10th Squadron: *Nagara*, 4th, 16th, and 17th Destroyer Squadrons

Orders were issued to form the 3rd Fleet on 14 July, as well as other reorganisations. The commander and chief of staff of the 1st Air Fleet, Vice Admiral Nagumo Chūichi and Rear Admiral Kusaka Ryūnosuke, were retained in these positions for the 3rd Fleet.

*Hōshō*, *Yūnagi*, and the 1st Airbase Force (in Kyushu) were also attached to the newly formed 3rd Fleet to be used to train aircrews through a combination of actual battle experience and training exercises. The 3rd Fleet was to be gradually strengthened to the point that the 50th Air Flotilla was expected to be formed by 15 January 1943.

The formation of the 8th Fleet was also ordered to stand alongside the newly assembled 3rd Fleet. The concept of the fleet reorganisation in the Pacific Area, research for which had proceeded as described above, was adapted to incorporate successive essential operations in eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands despite the cancellation of the FS Operation. The formation of the 8th Fleet, orders for which were issued on 14 July, was as follows:

<b>Formation and command</b>	<b>Units</b>	<b>Special fleet units</b>	<b>Base for special fleet units</b>
Combined Fleet 8th Fleet			
	<i>Chōkai</i>		
18th Squadron	<i>Tenryū</i> <i>Atsuta</i>		
7th Submarine Squadron	<i>Jingei</i> 13th Submarine Group 21st Submarine Group		
7th Base Force	23rd Submarine Chaser Squadron 32nd Submarine Chaser Squadron	85th Signals Unit 85th Submarine Base Force	
8th Base Force	<i>No. 20 Minesweeper</i> <i>No. 21 Minesweeper</i> 21st Submarine Chaser Squadron 31st Submarine Chaser Squadron	5th Gunboat Squadron 56th Submarine Chaser Squadron 81st Garrison 82nd Garrison 84th Garrison 8th Submarine Base Force 8th Signals Unit	
Attached units	<i>Tsugaru</i> 30th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Muzuki</i> , <i>Yayoi</i> , <i>Mochizuki</i> , <i>Uzuki</i> )	Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party 12th Establishment Unit	Kure
		<i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> 2nd Air Corps 10th Establishment Unit 11th Establishment Unit 15th Establishment Unit	Yokosuka
		13th Establishment Unit 14th Establishment Unit Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party	Sasebo

The 7th Base Force had been newly formed during this reorganisation. Further, the 2nd Air Corps of the attached units was comprised of 16 each of fighters and bombers. This unit was originally intended for the FS Operation. Its orders to form were issued on 1 June, based on the idea that the unit would seize the opportunity to advance to the region after the completion of the invasion of New Caledonia.

The attached units were formed with five establishment units. This provided for an unparalleled capacity in the South Pacific to swiftly construct airbases. In addition, orders were issued between 1 May and 15 June to form other new units. It was planned that the 11th and 12th Establishment Units were to be despatched to Midway, and the 13th and 14th Establishment Units to the area of the FS Operation.

The commander and chief of staff of the 8th Fleet were Vice Admiral Mikawa Gun'ichi and Rear Admiral Ōnishi Shinzō. Most of the remaining staff officers were drawn from men who had served at central headquarters in Japan. The senior staff officer was Captain Kami Shigenori, and the next in line was Commander Ōmae Toshikazu.

#### Activation of command of the 8th Fleet<sup>226</sup>

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters issued the following “Great navy instruction no. 112” to the commander of the Combined Fleet:

The operations of the 4th and 8th Fleets will be executed according to these instructions.

1. The 4th Fleet will be mainly responsible for operations in the islands of the South Seas and the waters to the east, and for maintaining security on the islands of the South Seas (including the Gilbert Islands). In addition, it will be responsible for protecting shipping on the waters between Japan, the islands of the South Seas, and the occupied islands in the South Pacific.

2. The 8th Fleet will be mainly responsible for operations in the South Pacific Area, in addition to subjugating eastern New Guinea and guarding the occupied territories in the South Pacific that lie to the east of New Guinea.

Furthermore, under this military formation, the commander of the Combined Fleet was also given responsibility for the aforementioned operations with the Outer South Seas Fleet, which included the 8th Fleet strengthened by the 6th Squadron, *Yūbari*, the 29th Destroyer Squadron, and other units. The 11th Air Fleet was placed in a cooperative role.

The aim of the reorganisation of the fleet in the Pacific Ocean, namely to unify command for surface and air operations, was not, for the moment, realised. The 6th Squadron comprised four ships: *Aoba*, *Kinugasa*, *Furutaka*, and *Kako*. It had previously been placed under the command of the 4th Fleet and had advanced to Rabaul.

The command group of the 8th Fleet (main strength) left Kure on 19 July on board the flagship *Chōkai* and arrived at Truk on 25 July. Discussions concerning the succession of command continued during 25–26 July, command being activated at midnight on 27 July.

Staff officers Kami and Ōnishi went on ahead to Rabaul, where they occupied themselves with the local agreement with the 17th Army after 28 July. Meanwhile, the standing strength of the 4th Fleet at that time was engaged in the second transport operation to Buna. The command of the 8th Fleet arrived in Rabaul at 3 pm on 30 July and ordered the continuation of current operations based on the old order of battle after moving headquarters from the flagship to land.

The local agreement with the 17th Army was more or less completed on 31 July, but it was amended on 3 August after modifications to the 17th Army's plans concerning the transport of the main strength of the South Seas Force, as previously discussed. The commander of the 8th Fleet issued the following order of battle on 5 August for the Port Moresby invasion and subjugation of eastern New Guinea operations. This was precisely two days before the Allied landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi:

Formation	Command	Strength	Duties
Main Force	8th Fleet commander Vice Admiral Mikawa Gun'ichi	<i>Chōkai</i>	Support for the entire operation
Support Group	6th Squadron commander Rear Admiral Gotō Aritomo	6th Squadron ( <i>Aoba</i> , <i>Kinugasa</i> , <i>Furutaka</i> , <i>Kako</i> )	Support for other units
Escort Fleet	18th Squadron commander Rear Admiral Matsuyama Mitsuharu	18th Squadron ( <i>Tenryū</i> , <i>Tatsuta</i> ) <i>Tsugaru</i> , <i>Yūbari</i> 29th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Yūzuki</i> , <i>Yūnagi</i> , <i>Oite</i> , <i>Uzuki</i> )	1. Escort of Port Moresby invasion units and patrols of anchorage 2. Speedy establishment of

		<p>23rd Submarine Chaser Squadron (<i>No. 22, No. 23, No. 24 Submarine Chasers</i>)</p> <p>22nd Submarine Chaser Squadron (<i>No. 28, No. 29 Submarine Chasers</i>)</p> <p><i>No. 20 Minesweeper</i></p> <p>Sasebo Special Naval Landing Party</p> <p><i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> observation planes (3)</p> <p>10th Establishment Unit (part strength)</p> <p>14th Establishment Unit (part strength)</p> <p>15th Establishment Unit</p>	<p>Buna area base</p> <p>3. Occupation of Samarai and speedy establishment of base</p> <p>4. Mopping up at Cape Ward Hunt</p> <p>5. Transport of establishment units</p>
Strike Force	7th Base Force commander Rear Admiral Fujita Ruitarō	<p>7th Base Force (missing 23rd, 32nd Submarine Chaser Squadrons)</p> <p>Seven patrol boats</p> <p>Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party</p>	<p>1. Surface mobile operations</p> <p>2. Preparations for offensive in eastern New Guinea</p>
Bismarck Area Defence Force	8th Base Force commander Rear Admiral Kanazawa Masao	<p>8th Base Force (<i>No. 20 Minesweeper</i> missing)</p> <p><i>Kiyokawa Maru</i> (three reconnaissance seaplanes missing)</p> <p><i>Shirataka, Hatsutaka, Wakataka Futabumi Maru, No. 3 Seki Maru</i></p> <p>10th Establishment Unit (part strength)</p> <p>11th Establishment Unit</p> <p>12th Establishment Unit</p> <p>13th Establishment Unit</p> <p>14th Establishment Unit</p>	<p>1. Landing operations in the Wau area</p> <p>2. Guard waters near Rabaul</p> <p>3. Defence of Bismarck area</p> <p>4. Mopping up and occupation at Madang and Wewak</p>
Submarine Units	7th Submarine Squadron commander Rear Admiral Yoshitomi Setsuzō	7th Submarine Squadron ( <i>Ro-33, Ro-34</i> )	<p>1. Search and surveillance, attack of enemy fleet</p> <p>2. Destroy enemy surface transport</p>
Attached		<i>Kōan Maru</i> plus eight others	Supply

#### Dispositions of various formations<sup>227</sup>

The disposition of these various formations under the command of the 8th Fleet was as follows:

One company of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party and elements of the Base Signals Unit were transported to Buna and occupied the area and the airfield on 21 July 1942. The accompanying elements of the 15th Establishment Unit were responsible for speedily reconstructing the airstrip. The third Buna transport was changed to carry mainly navy establishment units. This was because the transport of the main strength of the South Seas Force had been delayed, and completion of the airfield at Buna was an urgent task at that time. Consequently, the main strength of the 15th Establishment Unit and elements of the 14th Establishment Unit steamed south from Rabaul on 6 August on three transports (*Nankai Maru, Kinai Maru, and Kan'yō Maru*), escorted by *Tatsuta, Yūzuki, Uzuki, No. 23 Submarine Chaser, and No. 30 Submarine Chaser*.

The 82nd Garrison and other landing party units, in addition to base force units, were guarding the Lae and Salamaua areas. The 82nd Garrison had been responsible for the defence of Lae since early March (strengthened by the Maizuru 2nd Special Naval Landing Party since 12 April), while one company of the 81st Garrison guarded Salamaua. The only Allied force facing them were elements of an independent force based around the mining town of Wau. The company of the 81st Garrison eventually ceded the defence of Salamaua to a company from the 82nd Garrison, then returned to Rabaul on 28 June 1942.

Meanwhile, a 200-strong enemy force armed with mortars and machine-guns raided Salamaua at around 2 am on 29 June. Japanese casualties amounted to 18 killed and injured. A further 100-strong party raided Lae at 1 am on 1 July resulting in ten Japanese casualties. Two companies of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party, which had rushed to Lae, landed under fire from Allied planes on 1 July. These units were placed under the command of the 82nd Garrison and advanced to Salamaua to strengthen its defences.

These counter-attacks by a land-based enemy unit, though small-scale, could not be ignored. Staff officer Yamamoto from the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters relayed the following information to Imoto from the Army Department on 1 July:<sup>228</sup>

There are reports that the Americans have landed several thousand marines on islands in the Pacific. Further, it is thought that reinforcements arrived in Port Moresby in mid-June. There is a strong possibility of an enemy counter-attack from Port Moresby, as well as from the Pacific islands.

According to the agreement with the 17th Army, the 82nd Garrison was responsible for undertaking diversionary attacks in the Wau area. However, operations to stop the schemes of the Allied units had already been transferred through plans of the 8th Base Force.

[Editor's note: Mopping-up and offensive operations were undertaken from 21–23 July at Nadzab airfield (35 kilometres north-west of Lae) and at Mubo airfield (23 kilometres south-west of Salamaua).]

Meanwhile, the airfield on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands was completed on 5 August, slightly earlier than planned. This airfield was quickly established for the execution of the FS Operation, which was planned for mid-September and based on the operational leadership policy for the region adopted on 13 June by the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters, immediately after the naval battle at Midway. Thereafter, the Combined Fleet expected to quickly establish airbases in the South Pacific region, the so-called SN (base establishment) Operation.

#### Airfield at Guadalcanal

Local navy units had undertaken a search for the most appropriate location for an airbase having previously realised the necessity of a base in the Solomon Islands. A large flying boat from the 25th Air Corps was specially despatched to Tulagi on 25 May. Specially chosen officers and engineers from the 8th Base Force, as well as members of the 25th Air Corps, subsequently undertook a search for a location on Guadalcanal.<sup>229</sup> An appropriate location for a base was found approximately 2 kilometres from the sea to the east of the Lunga River in the north-west of the island.

The commander of the 25th Air Corps wrote to the commander of the 11th Air Fleet on 1 June requesting a survey of the area and the speedy establishment of an airbase:<sup>230</sup>

We have recognised the necessity of an airbase on Guadalcanal Island for the reasons outlined below, and would like to see it established as soon as possible.

1. A base on Guadalcanal will extend the offensive and patrol range of Bismarck Island airbase operations into the Coral Sea. Land-based bombers and fighters could be advanced to Guadalcanal and it could be used as a relay base for forces deployed in the Bismarck area. It would also enable a strengthening of the anti-air capability of Tulagi.
2. It will enable an offensive capability in the New Hebrides in anticipation of reinforcements for airbases in future operations and, furthermore, will provide a staging point for base planes travelling between the Bismarck area and the New Hebrides and New Caledonia.

This request was telegraphed to the chief of staff of the Combined Fleet and the head of the 1st (Operations) Department of the Navy General Staff. It also complied with the overall plans of Imperial Headquarters after the defeat at Midway.

On 19 June, senior officers from the 4th Fleet, 25th Air Flotilla, and the 8th Base Force once again accompanied reconnaissance for a suitable airbase on Guadalcanal. Consequently, the 13th Establishment Unit (Lieutenant Commander Okamura Tokunaga and 1,350 men) and the 11th Establishment Unit (Captain Monzen Tei and 1,221 men) began landing on Guadalcanal on 6 July. An advance party had landed on 1 July, but owing to fears from attack by large Allied aircraft, the main strength of the establishment units was transported in successive groups two vessels at a time. In this way, the landing was successfully completed.

The construction of the airfield commenced on 16 July. Work proceeded quickly despite Allied air attacks. Construction of stage one (an 800 by 60 metre runway) was completed on 5 August.

Lieutenant Commander Okamura had reported the estimated completion date previously, so fighter units were able to advance to the base almost immediately after its completion. Most of the establishment unit personnel were, naturally, construction troops. The number of men combat ready, armed with rifles and pistols, only totalled about one hundred and eighty and one hundred for the 11th and 13th Establishment Units, respectively.<sup>231</sup>

#### Tulagi and Gavutu

Elements of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party had occupied Tulagi and Gavutu, two small islands off the southern coast of Florida Island facing Guadalcanal, from 3 May 1942, thus providing a base for the Yokohama Air Corps and small vessel elements. These were strengthened by a company from the 81st Garrison on 1 July, re-forming as the 84th Garrison.

The unit was led by Commander Suzuki Masaaki. The main strength of the unit (approximately two hundred men) were garrisoned at Tulagi, with approximately fifty men on Gavutu, and a detachment of approximately one hundred and fifty men sent to guard the area around Lunga Point on Guadalcanal. In addition, elements of the 14th Establishment Unit had been sent to Tulagi to construct the base.

#### Surface units and the 2nd Air Corps<sup>232</sup>

*Tatsuta*, *Uzuki*, and *Yūzuki* had steamed south from Rabaul to escort the third transport convoy to Buna, as mentioned above. Separate surface units, *Tenryū*, *Yūbari*, *Yūnagi*, and others, were at anchorage in Rabaul harbour. The 30th Destroyer Squadron was under the direct control of the 8th Fleet. Its ships, with the exception of *Uzuki*, were returning to Japan for repairs.

The 13th Submarine Group (submarines *I-121*, *I-122*, *I-123*), under the command of the 7th Submarine Squadron, had completed repairs in Japan and were currently returning to Truk and Rabaul. Submarine combat strength at that time comprised only *Ro-33* and *Ro-34* of the 21st Submarine Group, while the flagship *Jingei* was at Truk. These two submarines had been allocated to escort the Port Moresby invasion force so there were no vessels to undertake patrols in the Solomon Islands area. It was planned for the 13th Submarine Group to be advanced to the Espiritu Santo area after they arrived.

Meanwhile, the 2nd Air Corps, the pride of the 8th Fleet, advanced to Lakunai airfield near Rabaul on 6 August and was placed under the command of the 25th Air Flotilla. It was planned for the 2nd Air Corps to advance to Moresby after the 8th Fleet had invaded.

#### Assessment of the situation

On reflection, how did the command of the newly formed 8th Fleet assess the situation at that time? Reference was, of course, made to this issue in the above-mentioned discussions with the command of the 4th Fleet at Truk.

The 4th Fleet was, as a general rule, leaning towards the rather optimistic opinion that the Allies were probably not considering mounting a fundamental counter-offensive at that time. By way of contrast, the 8th Fleet thought it necessary to expect a counter-offensive sooner rather than later. The target of this counter-offensive

was thought to be either the Marshall Islands or Solomon Islands, with the general opinion that the latter was more likely.<sup>233</sup> The 8th Fleet, however, was not concerned enough about a possible counter-offensive to immediately strengthen fighting capabilities.

Of most concern to the commanders of the 8th Fleet was the insufficient strength of the garrisons on Tulagi and at the airfield at Guadalcanal, some eleven hundred kilometres distant from Rabaul. The 8th Fleet recognised the need to advance fighter plane units to Guadalcanal immediately on the completion of the airfield. Proposals to this effect were strongly pressed to the staff officer responsible for the 11th Air Fleet, Captain Takahashi Chihaya, who was at that time visiting Rabaul.<sup>234</sup> Captain Takahashi had come to Rabaul to discuss the Port Moresby operation, and to investigate the feasibility of using the airfield on Guadalcanal. This followed an extremely agitated appraisal concerning the despatch of fighters to the airfield, which was telegraphed from Lieutenant Commander Okamura, the head of the 13th Establishment Unit stationed at that time on Guadalcanal.

However, the 11th Air Fleet had made no preparations to quickly advance fighter units to Guadalcanal. Even the 8th Fleet had no plans to advance its own 2nd Air Corps to Guadalcanal, as they had previously been earmarked for deployment to Port Moresby.

Allied raids against Tulagi and Guadalcanal intensified from about the time the command of the 8th Fleet arrived in Rabaul. Previous raids to that time had consisted of only one to three planes on reconnaissance or offensive raids. The raids suddenly intensified after 31 July, with daily attacks by seven to ten aircraft. This situation is recorded by the overview reports of the 25th Air Flotilla, as follows:

- 29 July  
All clear on patrols over Rabaul and Tulagi.  
2300 hrs, one large enemy aircraft raided Tulagi; no damage apart from shell damage to one large flying boat.
- 30 July  
All clear on patrols over Rabaul and Tulagi.
- 31 July  
0900 hrs, seven B-17s raided Guadalcanal; pursued by three float planes but escaped.
- 1 August  
0900 hrs, three large enemy aircraft raided Guadalcanal; pursued by six fighters but escaped.  
1030 hrs, seven B-17s raided Tulagi; engaged by six fighters; three enemy planes severely damaged but not downed. Two fighters damaged by gunfire; two large flying boats damaged by bombs, but all can be repaired.
- 2 August  
0820–1200 hrs, ten B-17s raided Guadalcanal and one B-17 raided Tulagi. Total of 12 fighters counter-attacked; two B-17s downed (one unconfirmed), two others severely damaged. Two fighters damaged by gunfire, one fighter under repairs suffered bomb damage, but can be repaired.
- 3 August  
0830 hrs, two B-17s raided Tulagi; three fighters pursued and attacked but escaped.  
No damage.
- 4 August  
0820–1020 hrs, total of nine B-17s raided Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Six fighters counter-attacked, with one fighter lost ramming into and downing one B-17.
- 5 August  
0810–1200 hrs, five B-17s raided Guadalcanal and Tulagi; total of nine fighters counter-attacked. Afflicted serious damage to two B-17s but not downed. One fighter received shell damage but can be repaired.
- 6 August  
All clear on patrols over Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

In the New Guinea area, meanwhile, a new airfield was discovered at the beginning of August near Rabi in Milne Bay. A large number of aircraft were confirmed to be stationed at the airfield. It was also clear that the region had been strongly reinforced by Allied transport ships. The difficulties encountered during the transport operations to Buna have been previously discussed.

Command of the 8th Fleet judged from these conditions that the Allies' main focus would be to stop the Japanese offensive against Port Moresby, and that attacks on Guadalcanal would be limited to raiding operations.<sup>235</sup>

The locals on Guadalcanal fled into the mountains on 5 August. However, the Japanese forces thought this was the result of local conditions. No one imagined this was a forewarning of a full-scale Allied invasion.

Despite this, the 8th Signals Unit attached to the 8th Base Force noticed a change in signals communications towards the end of July and judged that the Allies were planning some strategy. This intelligence was passed on to the appropriate commanders. The 8th Fleet chief of staff, Rear Admiral Onishi, recorded in his memoirs that he personally visited the 8th Signals Unit and listened to these communications. He states that these indicated an imminent Allied counter-offensive, and that the target would be Guadalcanal. Despite this, the 8th Fleet did not undertake discussion of any mechanisms to meet this threat.

The Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters was also aware of the change in Allied signals. The head of the 1st (Operations) Department despatched the following telegraph to the chiefs of staff of all fleets on 4 August:

In consideration of the following signals intelligence, the recent movements of Allied aircraft in British New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, but also in the regions of Wake Island and the Marshall Islands, admit a need for vigilance.

1. Reinforced air strength appeared in the Hawaii area on 2 August; thought to indicate the presence of a strong force.
2. Amount of communications traffic from Hawaii increased at the end of July. The recipient of a large number of these signals was the Pacific Fleet and the commander of the South-East Pacific Area Fleet.
3. A strengthened presence of British and American capital ships in the waters to the east of Australia on 2–3 August.

Further, the Navy Department received intelligence in mid-July that “A large transport convoy (37 ships) left port from San Diego on 2 July, and another from somewhere on the west coast (45 ships), both expected to reach the waters to the east of Australia by early August.”

In regard to this information, the Navy Department judged that: “The Allied objective is simply to reinforce and support Australia. Given Japanese inability to advance to Australia, it is thought that the Allies will instead land reinforcements directly at Port Moresby.”<sup>236</sup> The chief of staff of the Combined Fleet, Vice Admiral Ugaki, directly alerted the navy chief of staff, Admiral Nagano, of this intelligence on 17 July.

However, even the Combined Fleet did not discuss any particular strategies based on this intelligence to counter the threat. It was anticipated that the formation of the 8th Fleet and the unprecedented preparations undertaken in the South Pacific Area were the result of these considerations.

## **Operations of the 25th Air Flotilla**

### Intensification of the air war of attrition

As discussed above, the outbreak of the battle of the Coral Sea resulted in orders issued on 10 May postponing the invasion of Port Moresby. The 25th Air Flotilla subsequently returned to its previous duties.

These previous duties involved patrols of the region, pursuit and destruction of enemy offensive units, destruction of Allied strength in the north-east of Australia, and cooperation with the Port Moresby offensive operation (based on orders from the Airbase Force Command issued on 10 April). At this stage, the operational policy of the 25th Air Flotilla was outlined as follows:

1. Main responsibilities
  - a. Destroy Allied air strength in eastern New Guinea and north-eastern Australia.
  - b. Patrol waters of the Solomon Islands, eastern New Guinea, and to the east of Rabaul.
  - c. Cooperate with defensive units on New Britain.
  - d. Cooperate with Japanese forces to destroy an Allied task force when it is detected.
  - e. Cooperate to construct airbases.
2. Operational movements

Destroy enemy aircraft in the Port Moresby region, be vigilant against an Allied task force, and with destruction of enemy aircraft the main priority, make preparations for the rescheduled Port Moresby offensive operations, undertake training of reinforcements, and strive to advance preparations at bases.

  - a. Intensify the air war against Port Moresby and Horn Island using fighters from the Lae base.
  - b. Maintain vigilance in the skies over bases, and intensify the air war.
  - c. Undertake daily patrols of the seas using flying boats and land-based attack planes (mainly Type-96) to seek out the Allied task force.

d. Undertake surveys for suitable locations for bases in the Solomon Islands and eastern New Guinea.

The order of battle was essentially unchanged, but the base of operations had changed somewhat. The main strength of the land-based attack units (4th Air Corps and the Motoyama Air Corps) were assembled at Rabaul (Vunakanau). The main strength of the fighter unit (Tainan Air Corps) had been advanced to Lae, with elements stationed at Rabaul (Lakunai). Elements of the Yokohama Air Corps (the main strength from 3–17 May) were advanced to Tulagi.

The fighting strength in the area on 15 May was as follows:

- 23 Zero fighters
- 33 land-based attack planes (13 Type-1, 20 Type-96)
- 7 large flying boats

It goes without saying that the 25th Air Flotilla faced a difficult air war of attrition. The policy was adopted to mainly use the fighters for the offensive air war and to hold the strength of the attack planes in reserve.

The Rabaul detachment of the 24th Air Flotilla (15 Zero fighters) was temporarily placed under the command of the 25th Air Flotilla on 25 May 1942. It was further strengthened by 12 float planes from Japan on 3 June, and by three Type-96 land reconnaissance planes despatched from the 3rd Air Corps on 5 June.

The Japanese force operated raids from bases in Rabaul and Lae between mid-May and mid-June primarily against Port Moresby, and occasionally against Horn Island. The Allies flew raids in large aircraft against Rabaul and in medium aircraft against Lae. This was surely an air war of attrition.

The Allies mainly bombed Rabaul with B-17s, and Lae with B-25s and B-26s. As a rule, the Allied air raids increased in intensity when Japanese raids on Rabaul subsided. Although the Allies bombed Lae, this was mostly undertaken unaccompanied by fighters. The Japanese Zero fighters were overwhelmingly superior to Allied fighters, but they were ineffective against Allied bombers, particularly the B-17, which the Allies proudly called the “flying fortress”. For example, six B-17s raided Rabaul at 1.15 pm on 25 May from an altitude of 8,000 metres. Fifteen Zero fighters took-off, six of which engaged the B-17s. One Allied bomber in particular was pursued and attacked for two hours, suffering repeated attacks. One engine was damaged, but the Zeros could not force it down.

Attacks on Port Moresby by lone fighters were discontinued after mid-June owing to the offensive operations. These were replaced by a combination of night attacks by small groups of fighters, and daytime raids using fighters and bombers in combination. The number of operational aircraft at that time did not exceed thirty, with fighters outnumbering bombers. There were only three night raids and ten daytime raids (including one against Horn Island) during the period from mid-June to mid-July.

Several missions to reconnoitre roads for the Ri Operation Study were undertaken by land-based reconnaissance and attack aircraft under escort by fighters during the period from late June to early July. The reports from these missions were introduced above as evidence in support of the overland invasion route.

A decision was taken in mid-July to despatch the first transport of the Yokoyama Advance Party to Buna for the Ri Operation Study. The commander of the 25th Air Flotilla issued the following operational policy on 17 July to enable cooperation between the 18th Squadron and the South Seas Force:<sup>237</sup>

1. Operational outline
  - a. Patrol the assigned sector.
  - b. Attack and place under pressure troops stationed in New Guinea and north-eastern Australia, but especially those at Port Moresby.
  - c. Aerial protection of the transport convoy for the Ri Operation Study.
  - d. Reconnaissance of key locations for the Ri Operation Study.
2. Unit duties and movements
  - a. 1st Force (Tainan Air Corps)
    - i. Days  $x-3$  to  $x-1$ , attack Port Moresby in cooperation with the 2nd Force.
    - ii. Day  $x-1$ , undertake aerial protection of the convoy by special order.
    - iii. Day  $x$  (0930–1600 hrs) and day  $x+1$  (0530–1500 hrs), undertake aerial protection of the convoy (six fighters within the sphere of enemy fighter movements, the rest disposed at the discretion of the commander).
    - iv. After day  $x$ , undertake patrols of sector A until special orders are issued.

- b. 2nd Force (4th Air Corps)
  - i. Days x-3 to x-1, attack Port Moresby in cooperation with the 1st Force.
  - ii. After day x, undertake patrols of sectors A and B until special orders are issued.
- c. 4th Force (Yokohama Air Corps)
  - Continue previous duties.
- d. 1st and 2nd Special Duty Units (*Akitsushima* and *Mogamikawa Maru*)
  - Continue previous duties; respond as required to special orders.

The campaign was executed according to these general principles after the second transport to Buna.

The night raids at this time on key locations along the eastern coast of Australia by Type-2 flying boats are worthy of mention. The Airbase Force Command issued orders to the command of the 25th Air Flotilla on 17 July titled, "Orders for the reconnaissance of the Fiji, New Hebrides, and New Caledonia areas and the execution of night raids on key locations in eastern Australia by Type-2 flying boats". Two Type-2 large flying boats from the 14th Air Corps Detachment of the 24th Air Flotilla were placed under the command of the 25th Air Flotilla especially for this purpose. These flying boats advanced to Rabaul on 20 July, raided Townsville during the nights of 25 and 28 July, and Cairns during the night of 31 July. Although the targets on each occasion were airfield facilities, the success of the raids was not clear.

While the Japanese forces had difficulty dealing with the might of Allied B-17s, the new B-24 made its first appearance in the South Pacific Area in July. The main strength of the 11th and 13th Establishment Units landed on Guadalcanal on 6 July. At 2.40 pm that day, they were raided by one large aircraft. It was pursued by six float planes, but regrettably escaped. This was a B-24. It was reported that its speed was approximately 20 kilometres per hour superior to that of the float planes. However, there were reports that two B-24s were shot down: one of the two from the raid on 10 July, and one on 17 July. After those incidents, B-17s were the aircraft used to raid Guadalcanal.<sup>238</sup>

#### Airbase preparations

The airbase war after that ebbed and flowed, arriving at a situation where both sides held their own. The remarkable change up to early August was the steady preparation of new Allied airfields in the Port Moresby area. At that time, the Japanese had only two airfields at Rabaul: Vunakanau and Lakunai. Even counting the main base for the 25th Air Flotilla at Lae, this totalled only three airfields. (The strip at Gasmata was only for emergency landings.) From the end of June, the Combined Fleet began the SN Operation, a ground-breaking attempt to quickly establish airbases in the South Pacific Area. The unit mainly responsible for this operation was the 4th Fleet, but the 25th Air Flotilla was charged with reconnoitring suitable sites for bases, and responsible for protecting establishment units while under transport and while constructing bases.

The bases at Guadalcanal and Buna were swiftly constructed in accordance with the terms of the SN Operation. Elsewhere, the airfields at Rabaul and Lae were repaired and enlarged, and an airfield constructed at Kavieng. The problem area was in the central-north Solomon Islands. The distance from Guadalcanal to Rabaul is about 1,000 kilometres, so there was no question that a land base was required between the two. Reconnaissance of Kieta and Buka islands was undertaken by a single aircraft on 19 June. A runway was discovered around 6 kilometres from the southern coastline of Kieta (800 by 80 metres), and a further runway in the south of Buka Island (700 by 60 metres). The latter had an emergency runway (500 by 60 metres) arranged in an "L" formation with the main runway.

The staff officers responsible for the 25th Air Flotilla and the 8th Base Force, and the commander of the 14th Establishment Unit, personally flew over and inspected the Kieta runway in a large flying boat on 8 July. As a result of this reconnaissance, the commander of the 25th Air Flotilla sent a report outlining his conclusions to the Airbase Force Command that evening, as follows:<sup>239</sup>

As a result of this intelligence, it is anticipated that one runway can be completed by early September using the main strength of the 14th Establishment Unit (currently at Rabaul).

However, even with the completion of the airfield, it cannot be expected to be used as an emergency landing strip for medium-attack aircraft owing to the obstructions on the periphery of the runway and the drainage on the airfield. There is no room for expansion of the airbase, so there is absolutely no prospect for using this site according to the requirements of Telegraph no. 183. In addition, no suitable sites for an airbase have been located on Bougainville.

This telegraph was also sent to the Combined Fleet and the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters. The Airbase Force Command received this message and submitted the following request with regard to the Combined Fleet the next day (9 July):<sup>240</sup>

Even if construction of the airfield on Kieta begins immediately, in accord with the report from the commander of the 25th Air Flotilla, it would still be completed after the base at Guadalcanal. The value of a base on Kieta in that instance would be negligible. Consequently, we would like to see the suspension of the construction of the Kieta base.

The plans to construct the base on Kieta were, regrettably, discarded, a decision with which the Navy Department agreed. On 26 July, a special detachment was sent to personally inspect the Buka base, but this too was considered unacceptable as one of the speedily constructed bases.

#### Reconnaissance of the situation of the Allies

The 25th Air Flotilla, in addition to reconnaissance over north-eastern Australia for its own operations, carried out reconnaissance from time to time over the Santa Cruz Islands, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, and the Fijian islands area.

Reconnaissance of the New Hebrides and the Chesterfield Islands (in north-east New Caledonia) was carried out on 1 June by flying boat from the Tulagi base. Special orders had been issued by the Airbase Force Command for the reconnaissance, at the request of the 2nd Fleet. The mission confirmed that the Allies had been steadily constructing an airbase on Efate in the New Hebrides. Tulagi is approximately 1,100 kilometres from Rabaul, and 1,300 kilometres from Efate. It will be recalled that in planning for the FS Operation after the battle of Midway, consideration was given for an invasion of Efate as a stepping stone for an invasion of New Caledonia.

The Airbase Force Command, on 22 June, demanded reconnaissance as soon as possible of the Santa Cruz Islands and the New Hebrides areas for suitable sites for flying boat and land airbases. Subsequently, while undertaking patrols over patrol sector F, one aircraft secretly reconnoitred Efate and another surveyed the New Hebrides and Santa Cruz. The latter of these missions was accompanied by Imperial Headquarters staff officer Major Yamauchi Toyooki, who had been at that time sent to the South-East Area to gather intelligence.

Airbase Force Command specially transferred the 14th Air Corps Detachment to the 25th Air Flotilla on 17 July.<sup>241</sup> Reconnaissance to this point had mainly looked for suitable sites for airbases to be used for the New Caledonia invasion. From this point on, however, its role would be strategic reconnaissance to uncover Allied movements. The commander of the 25th Air Flotilla, after the completion of the night raids on key sites in northern Australia, ordered the 14th Air Corps Detachment on 2 August, as follows: "Two Type-2 flying boats will quickly advance to Tulagi, carry out reconnaissance according to oral instructions from 3 August, then return to Rabaul." The two Type-2 flying boats carried out these orders and undertook strategic reconnaissance over Fiji and New Caledonia on 4 August.

Meanwhile, an American composite force under the command of Rear Admiral Richmond Turner and based on the 1st Marine Division had completed exercises on Koro island in Fiji, and after departing on 31 July, was steaming towards Guadalcanal with the escort fleet. The convoy passed to the south of the New Hebrides during 3 August, then turned to the north-west at a position to the north of New Caledonia the following day (latitude 159 degrees 6 minutes east, longitude 16 degrees 36 minutes south). This was the huge invasion fleet group comprising some 82 vessels.<sup>242</sup>

Unfortunately for the Japanese forces, the two Type-2 reconnaissance flying boats were unable to locate the invasion group. The commander of the 25th Air Flotilla filed the following initial report: "Two Type-2 flying boats carried out reconnaissance over the Fiji and New Caledonia areas and returned successfully to Tulagi. Report of intelligence to follow."

On reflection, patrol duties had been one of the 25th Air Flotilla's main strategic responsibilities. Patrols had continued on a daily basis after 25 April.

Three flying boats set out on 4 August to patrol sector F(a). Poor weather, however, limited no. 1 and no. 2 reconnaissance aircraft to a patrol radius of 120 kilometres, and no. 3 aircraft to a range of 740 kilometres.

Visibility was barely 9 kilometres. Other than passing a large enemy aircraft at a bearing of 170 degrees and 180 kilometres from Tulagi, there was nothing to report.

The same three aircraft patrolled sector F(a) again on 5 August. Again, the patrol was hampered by heavy rain and limited to a radius of 180 kilometres. No sign of the enemy was found. On 6 August, no. 1 reconnaissance plane patrolled an area of 690 kilometres, and no. 2 and no. 3 each patrolled an area of 740 kilometres. The convoy carrying the US marine division was within the range of these patrols, but were not caught within the trap. A thorough search of the sector was completed, with the report of "Scattered clouds, occasional squalls, visibility from 20–40 kilometres, enemy not sighted."<sup>243</sup> A huge opportunity had been lost.

### Airfield at Rabi

To return somewhat to earlier events, the 8th Fleet had decided on the basis of investigations carried out by the army and navy at the end of July to invade key areas in Milne Bay and Samarai. The commander of the 25th Air Flotilla consequently ordered the 4th Air Corps on 1 August to undertake aerial photographic surveillance of Samarai, which was carried out on 3 August by a Type-1 land-based attack plane from patrol sector A. During this mission, however, what looked like an airfield was discovered to the west of Rabi (approximately 55 kilometres north-west of Samarai), with two small aircraft about 500 metres above the airfield. The reconnaissance aircraft was sent again to investigate the following day, 4 August, with an escort of four Zero fighters. An air battle ensued and the land-based attack plane in the end did not return. The 25th Air Flotilla compiled the results of intelligence and submitted the following report:<sup>244</sup>

1. The airfield is located 1–2 kilometres to the west of Rabi. The runway is from 1,200–1,500 metres long and 60 metres wide and runs east–west. There are coconut plantations to the north and south of the runway, and there are dispersal areas.
2. There were approximately eight P-40s on the runway, 20 P-40s on the dispersal area to the north, seven P-40s on the dispersal area to the south, and around 11 P-40s in the air.
3. There are three jetties at Rabi, with one 5,000 ton merchant ship alongside, and what looks like one 1,500 ton destroyer at anchorage.
4. As a result of the air battle, four P-40s were shot down and five burnt. One Japanese reconnaissance plane did not return.

The Allies had recognised the need for an airfield in Milne Bay in May, and thereafter began construction of the base for use by fighter units. Instructions issued on 12 June expanded the base for use by bombers. By mid-July, the base had an Australian infantry brigade of around four thousand five hundred men, as well as a US fighter battalion equipped with P-40s and anti-aircraft defence units.

In any case, the appearance of the airfield at Rabi was a great threat to the Japanese forces that had first planned to invade Port Moresby. Without first taking this airfield, it would be impossible to mount an attack on Port Moresby by the sea route. Even if the overland offensive against Port Moresby was successful, it was not possible to ignore the airfield at Rabi.

The commander of the 25th Air Flotilla initially planned to attack the Rabi airfield with his entire force. Orders were issued for all Zero fighters that were combat ready to leave Lae and assemble at Rabaul. The following day at 11.30 am, the entire strength of the Tainan Air Corps (including 12 aircraft providing direct cover) and 27 land-based attack planes from the 4th Air Corps were ordered to attack the Rabi airfield and destroy all enemy aircraft in the area. As it transpired, the American invasion force was at that time in the waters to the east of Rennell Island heading north towards the west coast of Guadalcanal.

The number of operational aircraft available to the 25th Air Flotilla on 6 August was barely as follows:

- 32 Type-1 land-based attack planes
- 18 Zero fighters
- 2 land-based reconnaissance planes
- 2 Type-2 flying boats
- 10 Type-96 flying boats
- 6 float planes

On that very day, the fresh 2nd Air Corps under the command of the 8th Fleet arrived in Rabaul and were incorporated into the 25th Air Flotilla. The operational aircraft of the 2nd Air Corps numbered 15 Zero fighters and 16 carrier-based bombers.

### Plan to transfer the 26th Air Flotilla to the South Pacific Area

During these events, the 11th Air Fleet was planning to advance the 26th Air Flotilla to the South Pacific Area and have it replace the 25th Air Flotilla.

The 26th Air Flotilla was formed at the same time as the 25th Air Flotilla, as previously mentioned. It comprised the 6th Air Corps (based on fighters), the Mizawa Air Corps (land-based attack planes), and the Kisarazu Air Corps (land-based attack planes). The standing strength of the formation, including reserves, was sixty fighter planes for the 6th Air Corps and 36 land-based attack planes for each of the Mizawa and Kisarazu Air Corps.

The 26th Air Flotilla was stationed primarily in the Mizawa and Kisarazu areas of Japan at the beginning of stage two operations, and was responsible for operations in the home islands and in the North-East Pacific Area. At the time of the Midway Operation, the 24th and 26th Air Flotillas were advanced to the Midway area to participate in later offensives against Hawaii.<sup>245</sup>

Consequently, the fighter units of the 6th Air Corps were aboard the mobile carrier fleet and directly participated in the Midway naval battle. Further, elements of the Mizawa Air Corps had been advanced to Wake Island and made responsible for reconnaissance attack operations.

After the Midway battle, the Combined Fleet continued preparations for the execution of the FS Operation using units from the 2nd Fleet, the 1st Air Fleet, and the 11th Air Fleet.

The staff office of the 26th Air Flotilla received on 30 June an explanation of the overview of the FS Operation that was to commence on 20 September.<sup>246</sup> The content of this, which had been arranged with the 11th Air Fleet, was that the unit would advance to Guadalcanal on around 20 August, when stage two of the airfield construction was completed. Then, under protection from units at the airfield, they would first attack Efate, then New Caledonia. For this purpose, the 26th Air Flotilla was strengthened with units that included the Yokohama Air Corps (flying boats), the 14th Air Corps (flying boats), and the 2nd Air Corps (fighters and bombers). With Guadalcanal and Tulagi as bases, Type-2 flying boats were to attack New Caledonia, and land-based attack aircraft to attack and harass Efate. The 2nd and 6th Air Corps were to advance to Efate when it had been occupied, from where they could attack and harass New Caledonia.

Meanwhile, the plan for airfield construction on Guadalcanal comprised two stages. Stage one involved accommodating 27 fighters and 27 land-based attack planes, while stage two would aim to cater for 45 Zero fighters and 60 land-based attack planes. In other words, the advance of the main strength of the 26th Air Flotilla to Guadalcanal was planned for early September. Until then, units would remain in their current disposition.

However, the FS Operation was cancelled in July, so the plan was changed such that the 26th Air Flotilla would replace the 25th Air Flotilla and be responsible for air operations in the South Pacific Area.

To this end, the staff officers of the 11th Air Fleet and the 26th Air Flotilla met on 1 August. The 11th Air Fleet proposed that elements of the 6th Air Corps be advanced to the newly completed airfield on Guadalcanal as soon as possible after its planned completion date on 5 August. Meanwhile, seven float planes from the Yokohama Air Corps were patrolling the skies over Tulagi. However, it was considered necessary to transfer these to protect the transport convoy operations to Buna.<sup>247</sup> The 6th Air Corps had participated in the Midway battle and lost a large portion of its complement of aircraft, as well as suffering attrition to its aircrew. At this time, the unit was being rebuilt at Kisarazu. It was estimated that from 9–12 aircraft could be loaded on an aircraft carrier and advanced to Guadalcanal by around 16 August.

Further, a proposal was drawn up concerning the advance of the main force of the 26th Air Flotilla into the South Pacific Area. The airbase at Kavieng, built as part of the base establishment policy, would be completed by 15 August to the extent that it could accommodate the main strength of the 6th Air Corps and the Mizawa Air Corps. The base would be expanded so that, in addition to the Mizawa Air Corps, which would arrive in the latter part of August, the air flotilla headquarters and the remainder of the 6th Air Corps would arrive in early September. The Mizawa Air Corps was at that time stationed in Saipan. It was planned that the Kisarazu Air

Corps would advance to the area in late September or early October. The transfer with the 25th Air Flotilla could then happen after that date.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Commander Okamura from the 13th Establishment Unit had submitted his demands for air strength to be advanced to the Guadalcanal area. In response, the 11th Air Fleet senior staff officer and supply staff officer were despatched to Rabaul to undertake discussions concerning the Port Moresby operation and to undertake firsthand reconnaissance of the Guadalcanal base area. They had planned to set out from Rabaul for Tulagi aboard a Type-2 flying boat on 6 August, but were delayed by one day owing to discussions about the Port Moresby operation with the 17th Army and the 8th Fleet. On the following day, 8 August, the US army landed troops on Guadalcanal.

### **Plans of Imperial Headquarters in early August**

#### From the Pacific Ocean to Chungking and the Indian Ocean

The situation of the local army and navy forces in the face of a US counter-attack on Guadalcanal has been described. It is now necessary to turn to an examination of the overall strategic plans of Imperial Headquarters.

Notions of a quick decisive battle on the surface of the Pacific Ocean held by the Army Department and Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters were frustrated in early July after the results of the battle of Midway. The prime concern of strategic leadership at that time shifted to operations against Chungking and the Indian Ocean.

Research into detailed strategies for seizing power in Chungking had proceeded since the time when the operational overview for stage two was determined by the Army Department in mid-March. However, by the latter part of June, the army's Operations Department had changed its position and was pressing for the No. 50 Operation, an invasion in the first instance of Sian, then continuing into an offensive along the Yangtze River, ultimately leading to No. 51 Operation to invade both Chungking and Chengdu.<sup>248</sup> The campaign was to be the scale of the Szechwan invasion force of 15 infantry division and two air divisions, and was due to commence in December 1942 and be completed in March the following year.

Meanwhile, another issue that emerged at that time, and that flowed on from the end of the Burma campaign, was whether to invade eastern India to foment Indian discontent with Britain and promote civil disorder.

The Burma campaign was basically over by early May. The Southern Area Army consequently despatched its staff officers to Tokyo to present appraisals of the plan to invade India. The army's Operations Department requested the Southern Area Army to proceed with detailed research into the feasibility of the plan, while waiting for the results of its own investigations.

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters at that time favoured political stratagems and destruction of merchant shipping rather than a land invasion. The latter was considered too difficult, and there were fears that it would result in indigenous resistance from the general population.<sup>249</sup>

The invasion of Ceylon, however, would be beneficial to the development of German and Italian operations in the Western Atlantic Area. They held the idea that the India operation would be executed if it could be carried out in collusion with Germany and Italy.

A decision had not been reached by 26 June, but the Army Department issued instructions for an outline of the preparations for the Ceylon operation, and ordered the designated infantry group (38th Division) to carry out preparatory training exercises.

Meanwhile, the staff office of the Combined Fleet presented a proposal on 22 June to the Navy Department outlining the commander of the Combined Fleet's proposal to cancel the FS Operation. The proposal also argued the merits of using the mobile carrier fleet in the Indian Ocean to smash merchant shipping routes in order to force Britain to sue for peace in the area. Later, in early July, the FS Operation was indeed cancelled, and the Navy Department and Combined Fleet proceeded with research into operations in the Indian Ocean area.

There were two aims to the Indian Ocean operations. First was primarily to try and promote separation and civil unrest in India by invading Ceylon and key locations in India such as Calcutta. Secondly, enforcing a blockade between India and Britain by intensifying operations against merchant shipping was an attempt to break British will to continue the war.

The operation against key locations in India and the blockade operations in the Indian Ocean were related. There were pre-existing plans of the army for the former operation, but it was waiting on further research. The navy was conducting its own independent research for the supply-route blockade operation. The focal point of the discussions involved large-scale proposals to send submarines, and also surface units, to the Indian Ocean to do battle with enemy surface units.

The bones of an agreement were hammered out by early August as the result of discussions between the Navy Department and the Combined Fleet. This involved a force based on the 2nd and 3rd Fleets sortieing from Japan on 20 September. Supply preparations and operations in the western Indian Ocean and to the north-west of Australia would be completed in stage one beginning in early October and taking around a month. After that, stage two operations would commence in early November in the Bengal Bay area.<sup>250</sup>

In this way, from late June through to early August, the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters was undertaking various investigations into three different operational proposals: the Chungking invasion operation, the invasion of key locations in India, and the supply blockade in the Indian Ocean. The Army Department was completely obsessed with realising the plan to invade Chungking. The navy placed most importance on the Indian Ocean operation. Both operations had their merits and demerits. Army minister Tōjō transmitted the following opinion to chief of operations Tanaka on 21 July:

I would be greatly pleased if the Chungking invasion and operations in the Indian Ocean were undertaken simultaneously, but if this is not possible, are not operations in the Indian Ocean area more beneficial to the overall war effort at this time? However, the strategic results to be gained are not sufficient to undertake the Indian Ocean operations alone. What if the army cooperates with the navy to carry out the Indian Ocean operations as much as is possible while also executing the invasion of Chungking operation?

#### Imperial Headquarters' operational policy in the South Pacific Area

Let us now bring together the ideas of Imperial Headquarters relating to operations in the South-East Area (South Pacific Area) carried out under the overall operational leadership policy.

First, the "Army–navy central agreement concerning operations in eastern New Guinea" was issued on 28 July. According to this agreement, the operational objective was, "To invade and secure the key areas of Port Moresby, to annihilate the enemy from eastern New Guinea, and in combination with taking advantage of the Solomon Islands, to bring the Coral Sea under control." Originally, this agreement primarily specified the invasion of Port Moresby, but it did not specify any tactics for after the invasion, especially in the Solomon Islands region. However, the clause "in combination with taking advantage of the Solomon Islands, to bring the Coral Sea under control" provides just a glimpse of the notion of adopting a defensive stance on the important eastern New Guinea and Solomon Islands fronts concerning the Coral Sea.

However, the operational leadership policy for subsequent operations adopted by the Navy Department of Imperial Headquarters in early July made clear the following:

The 17th Army and the 8th Fleet will invade Port Moresby as quickly as possible, and also thoroughly remove remaining enemy units in British New Guinea. Previous preparations to establish airbases in key areas will be advantageous in mounting air operations against mainland Australia. Counter-offensives against Allied operations to regain these areas must be intensified. Research preparations for operations must proceed in the interim.

The policy to strengthen counter-offensives against Allied operations to reclaim key areas was announced. Further, the navy chief of staff, in his submission to the emperor dated 11 July, stated:

The 8th Fleet will cooperate with the 17th Army in operations in the South-East Area to quickly subjugate eastern New Guinea, including Port Moresby. In addition, defences of key areas will be greatly strengthened and as many airfields as possible established. It is our intention to secure the supply line between New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and also to the Gilbert Islands.

This makes clear that the intention of the strengthening of the Japanese strategic position was to try and smash the Allied counter-offensive at the line of eastern New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Gilbert Islands.

The beginning of the Combined Fleet's SN Operation in late June to swiftly establish airbases in the South Pacific was a manifestation of the conception of this strategic position.

Army chief of staff Sugiyama also pointed out on 11 July that:

We must hold the fronts in eastern New Guinea and Rabaul to the end. If they fall, not only will the Pacific Ocean be in peril, but it will allow the western advance of MacArthur's counter-attack through New Guinea and herald the fall of our dominion in the southern area.

This prompted caution in assistant chief of staff Tanabe and operations chief Tanaka.<sup>251</sup>

As these examples make clear, Imperial Headquarters shifted for the moment from an offensive to a strategic defensive position with regard to the South Pacific Area. It was also the reality that they anticipated a fast Allied counter-attack in the direction of this region. However, it is also true that no specific discussions or research was carried out jointly by the Army and Navy Departments concerning the operations to break this counter-attack, particularly defensive operations in the Solomon Islands area.

Even at the Guadalcanal airfield, which was originally established to support the invasion of New Caledonia, there were few defensive mechanisms installed. Furthermore, senior officers in the Army Department and staff officers had not even heard of Guadalcanal, let alone that the navy had established an airfield there.<sup>252</sup> The army held no interest and disregarded any information on Guadalcanal despite the navy having made clear their intentions.

Of final concern is Imperial Headquarters' intention for local army and navy units to "Pursue investigations and gather intelligence relating to operations against mainland Australia and the invasion of New Caledonia and Fiji areas."<sup>253</sup> This was made clear in the above-mentioned submission to the emperor on 11 July by the army chief of staff. At that time, the FS Operation had not been completely called off. Consequently, Imperial Headquarters originally established a strategic defensive policy, but did not pay sufficient attention to the establishment of their line of defence. The urgent task in the area was thought to be the speedy occupation of Port Moresby, so their strength was wholeheartedly concentrated on achieving this goal.

## *Chapter 5. Thrust through the Owen Stanley Range and the offensive operations at Rabi*

### **Landing at Buna by the main strength of the South Seas Force**

#### Situation prior to the landing

The Re Operation to invade Port Moresby overland was based on pre-existing plans and was not a reaction to Allied counter-offensives directed towards Guadalcanal. The speed of its implementation was an operational strategy agreed between Imperial Headquarters and the army and navy in the field.

The postponement of the landing of the main strength of the South Seas Force at Buna to 16–18 August has been discussed previously. Navy establishment units had planned to arrive at Buna on 7 August to construct an airfield. However, their transports were turned back en route, resulting in the delay of the landing of the main force. The transportation of the establishment units resumed on 12 and 13 August.

The commander of *Tatsuta* led a convoy consisting of *Tatsuta*, the 29th Destroyer Squadron (*Yūzuki* and *Uzuki*), and two submarine chasers. This convoy left Rabaul in the early morning of 12 August to provide protection for *Nankai Maru* and *Kinai Maru*, which were transporting the 14th Establishment Unit (part strength), the 15th Establishment Unit, and 70 tonnes of army supplies. A group of 14 Allied fighters attacked the convoy in four waves on 13 August, but no damage was inflicted. The convoy arrived at Basabua that evening and effected a successful landing.

The full force of the 25th Air Flotilla undertook direct aerial protection of the convoy from 12–14 August.

As mentioned earlier, the 5th Sasebo Special Naval Landing Party (430 men consisting of one command company and associated units) had landed at Buna on 21 July. They had enlisted the local population to undertake preparations for a base. These preparations had advanced with the arrival of the establishment units (approximately three thousand men) to the point that a reduced fighter unit (six Zeros) was operational at Buna by 18 August.

Part of the invasion force carried out mopping-up operations in the area of Cape Ward Hunt (east of the mouth of the Mambare River) during this period.

The 41st Infantry Regiment was ordered to proceed to Rabaul on 1 August. The main strength of the regiment, less one battalion, left Davao on Mindanao Island on 5 August aboard *Kiyokawa Maru* and *Myōkō Maru*.<sup>\*</sup> They arrived in Rabaul by way of Palau at 7.00 am on 16 August.

Headquarters of the 17th Army assigned the 41st Infantry Regiment to the command of the South Seas Force under Major General Horii after their arrival in Rabaul.

The strength of the overland invasion force to Port Moresby had reached six infantry battalions. However, with the majority of this force still at Rabaul, the challenge to transport and land them at Buna was still to be overcome.

#### Plan for the transport of troops

The third transport convoy was planned for 15 August. Landings were planned at Basabua (6 kilometres north-west of Buna) as follows: the main strength of the South Seas Force (force headquarters, main strength 144th Infantry Regiment, mountain artillery battalion) on 18 August; the 41st Infantry Regiment (less 1st Battalion) on 21 August; and one battalion from the 41st Infantry Regiment with a provisional supply and transport unit (two companies including approximately five hundred horses) on 27 August.

The plan for a successful landing by the convoy involved approaching the landing site at sunset and completing disembarkation by the following sunrise.

A certain battalion commander from the 41st Infantry Regiment, which had arrived in Rabaul on 16 August, issued the following admonition to his troops: “We must not be beaten by the likes of the South Seas Force!”

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<sup>\*</sup>The *Kiyokawa Maru* listed here was an army transport ship, not the seaplane tender of the same name mentioned elsewhere.

This fuelled the natural competition between officers in both units to be first into battle, and even served to mobilise the officers of the South Seas Force, who to that point had been somewhat sluggish in their actions.<sup>254</sup>

The airfield at Rabi continued to pose problems, but attacks on 11 August by the 25th Air Flotilla were thwarted by poor weather. Only a few fighters were able to undertake low altitude raids, with limited results.

Further, 25 land-based fighters and 22 Zeros from the 25th Air Flotilla attacked Port Moresby at 8.20 am on 17 August – the first such raid for some time. Sporadic night attacks from a small number of aircraft had been conducted since 24 July. This day raid was carried out to protect the convoy carrying the main strength of the South Seas Force.

Approximately twenty medium or large aircraft and ten to twenty small aircraft were confirmed to be at an airfield to the north of Port Moresby, but no Allied planes were in the air. It was reported that: “Four large aircraft burned; one installation building damaged by fire, with the exception of several small aircraft; all aircraft on the ground targeted, with the infliction of great damage.”<sup>255</sup>

#### Landing of the main strength of the South Seas Force

The convoy left Rabaul on 17 August. It comprised *Kazuura Maru* and *Ryōyō Maru* with the main strength of the South Seas Force, and *Kan'yō Maru* transporting the 25th Air Flotilla base supplies. The convoy was under the protection of *Tenryū*, the 23rd Submarine Chaser Squadron, and *No. 20 Minesweeper* as it proceeded to Basabua along the sea route south of New Britain.

The convoy arrived at Basabua at 5.30 pm on 18 August without sight of enemy aircraft and effected a successful landing. This occurred at about the same time as the landing of the Ichiki Detachment Advance Party at Guadalcanal.

Three carrier-based bombers from the 25th Air Flotilla had planned to provide protection for the convoy on 17 August but had had to withdraw owing to bad weather. On the following day, aerial cover was provided by the three bombers and an additional 27 Zeros.

[Editor's note: No direct air cover was provided for the transport ships to Guadalcanal.]

The main strength of the South Seas Force had arrived in Basabua by the afternoon of 19 August and proceeded towards Kokoda.

#### The second landing: 41st Infantry Regiment

The 41st Infantry Regiment (less the 1st Battalion) left Rabaul on 19 August on *Kiyokawa Maru* and *Myōkō Maru*. The convoy, escorted by *Tsugaru* and the 32nd Submarine Chaser Squadron, effected a successful landing on the evening of 21 August. Contact was made with a lone B-17 en route but the convoy suffered no damage.

Air cover for the second transport convoy was provided by 12 Zeros and three carrier-based bombers on 19 August, and three bombers the following day.

The 41st Infantry Regiment placed the main strength of its 3rd Battalion, less the 12th Company that acted as flag-bearer unit, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tomita Yoshinobu of the force headquarters. It was charged with the responsibility of guarding the rear and overseeing the transport of supplies. It left Basabua on the afternoon of 21 August, following in the wake of the main strength of the South Seas Force.

Lieutenant Colonel Tomita's duties were to command logistic units of the Ryūtō Unit as set out in army orders issued on 18 July. These units provided line-of-communications functions for the South Seas Force. As mentioned previously, these were the realisation of submissions by the commander of the South Seas Force to the general staff of the 17th Army.

#### Plans of the 17th Army at the end of August

The transportation of the convoy had proceeded favourably without any of the anticipated difficulties. Reports of a Japanese victory in the second battle of the Solomon Sea on 24 August had also been received.

Although ill tidings concerning the Ichiki Detachment Advance Party had been confirmed, it was thought that the second echelon of the Ichiki Detachment and the Kawaguchi Detachment would be sufficient to retake Guadalcanal.

Headquarters of the 17th Army felt that the Aoba Detachment, which had previously returned to its control, would be the most suitable force to effect a speedy invasion of Port Moresby by the sea route. The cooperation of a navy carrier was considered essential to this plan, so at 1.50 pm on 25 August the request below was telegraphed to Imperial Headquarters.<sup>256</sup>

At this time, the Rabi naval invasion force was heading south towards Milne Bay. Furthermore, the 17th Army headquarters had not received confirmation that the transport convoy of the Ichiki second echelon had been turned back:

There are indications of a build-up of enemy troops in the Port Moresby area.

The army anticipates that, following the departure of the Aoba Detachment from Rabaul in early September, the main force of the said unit will be transported by sea to the vicinity of Port Moresby to assist the South Seas Force invasion.

The assistance of a navy aircraft carrier is requested to destroy enemy air capabilities and, mindful of our own air strength in the Port Moresby area, to prevent a build up of enemy strength and mobilisation at sea on our right flank. We suggest a redeployment as a continuation of the naval campaigns in the Solomon Islands to take advantage of the completion of the current stage of the battle.

The cooperation of the 8th Fleet is also desired.

However, events quickly turned for the worst.

Three ships in the convoy transporting logistical units, which comprised the 1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment and a provisional supply and transport unit, left Rabaul on 25 August as planned. However, the battle at Rabi took an unfavourable turn at precisely this time. The fighter unit stationed at Buna was also destroyed at Rabi, so the 11th Air Fleet headquarters decided rather belligerently to order the convoy to return to Rabaul on 26 August. It was a situation that the 17th Army headquarters could not ignore.

The difficulty of supply for the overland offensive continued, as discussed earlier. The four independent supply companies ordered to Rabaul by Imperial Headquarters were due to arrive on 15 September. It was anticipated that they would arrive in Buna by 20 September. The total supply unit would then comprise the 700 officers and men of the 41st Infantry Regiment, engineers, and others, and 500 horses. The transport of this convoy was subsequently delayed.

The mechanism for maintaining supply for the South Seas Force was broken.

The situation in the Solomon Islands was strengthened significantly on 26 August. Transportation of the second echelon of the Ichiki Detachment and Kawaguchi Detachment was switched to destroyer. Headquarters of the 17th Army was even now standing at the crossroads.

First, they had only gradually come to consider the importance of the campaigns in the Solomon Islands. Consequently, they began to doubt the ultimate suitability of the Aoba Detachment for the sea-route invasion of Port Moresby. Furthermore, news of the build up of Allied troops in the Port Moresby area resulted in anticipation of great difficulties for the overland invasion of Port Moresby by the South Seas Force at current strength.<sup>257</sup>

This was not simply a consideration based on problems of supply. There emerged within 17th Army headquarters a debate over whether to stop the advance of the South Seas Force.

Opinions of the chief of the general staff of the 17th Army and other staff officers concerning this problem emerged on 26–27 August. The gist of these was as follows:<sup>258</sup>

Chief of staff Futami: I favour restricting the advance of the South Seas Force and the temporary cessation of the Re Operation. If orders to this effect are not issued immediately, there is a danger that they will not be transmitted in time should communications be cut.

Staff officer Etsugu Kazuo: This is too premature. There is no reason to change the existing plan. I feel that transport of supplies for the South Seas Force can be guaranteed if Rabi is occupied. The key to this lies in Rabi. I recommend waiting a further one or two days to see the outcome.

Staff officer Matsumoto: I consider that the unforeseen situation concerning supply for the South Seas Force is a circumstance outside the limits of current strategy. I therefore favour orders to halt the advance.

At that time, the South Seas Force was engaged in battles at Isurava, at what could be called the entrance to the mountain range. It was not too late to issue orders to restrict the advance prior to crossing the Owen Stanley Range, but there were fears that such orders would break the spirit of the troops of the South Seas Force. Moreover, wireless communications at that time were poor, and there were doubts as to whether or not orders could be transmitted and received in time.<sup>259</sup>

The following orders were issued on 28 August by 17th Army headquarters to the commander of the South Seas Force:

Advance to the southern slopes of the Owen Stanley Range and destroy enemy troops there. Use one section of your strength to secure the front, but amass your main strength on the north side of the range in preparation for future operations.

On 29 August, Lieutenant General Hyakutake received the following telegraph that had been transmitted at 7.30 pm the previous day by the adjutant chief of Army General Staff:

The offensive against Port Moresby, seen in the light of conditions in the Guadalcanal region of the Pacific, was judged to require adequate preparations and a strengthening of troop numbers, and cooperation between the army and navy.

Consequently, I must approve the appropriate restriction of the advance of the South Seas Force to the south side of the Owen Stanley Range.

Moreover, the matter of the transfer of the 1st Infantry Regiment under the command of the 2nd Division to the army headquarters at Rabaul is currently under consideration.

#### Completion of the third transport and the fighting capacity of the force

The planned transport of the logistics units, which included the 41st Infantry Regiment and the provisional supply and transport unit, soon resumed. A successful landing was effected on the evening of 2 September. The number of horses had been depleted to around 300 head. The transport of units, aside from the aforementioned four independent supply companies, was virtually completed.

The initial plan was to transport approximately eight thousand army and 3,430 navy personnel. The fighting strength of these troops was to comprise six infantry battalions and a mountain artillery battalion. The actual fighting strength of the force, however, was considerably weakened.

The troops of the 144th Infantry Regiment were sufficient in number, but their munitions were limited to what they could carry with them. Consequently, the regiment had only 18 machine-guns (six per battalion), three battalion artillery guns (one per battalion), two rapid-fire guns, and two regimental artillery guns. The mountain artillery battalion carried one artillery piece for each of its three companies, and kept a reserve gun at Buna.

The number of weapons carried by the 41st Infantry Regiment was even less, with only 13 machine-guns, three battalion artillery guns, and one each of quick-firing and regimental artillery pieces. The total strength of the regiment, which, as previously described, was reduced by approximately 800 men used for the purpose of supply and road construction, amounted to only 1,900 troops. The 2nd Battalion had a full complement of 755 troops, but the 1st and 3rd Battalions were under-strength with 343 and 424 men, respectively.

Given this dearth of firepower, the amount of munitions transported to Buna by 2 September amounted to 150 rounds for each battalion artillery gun, 300 rounds for each rapid-fire gun, and 180 rounds for each mountain artillery and regimental gun.<sup>260</sup>

Each unit was required to carry 16 days of provisions for the advance from Buna. Consequently, on 2 September, approximately 300 tonnes of supplies were warehoused at Buna from the transports. The distance between Buna and Sonbo was only 40 kilometres. Advance supplies had been approved for transport directly from Truk to Sonbo. Supplies past Sonbo had to be transported by packhorse or by person. It was calculated that 3 tonnes of supplies could be advanced to Kokoda by the end of August using 600 men and 150 horses on this supply route. Even so, this would only cover daily consumption.

[Editor's note: These figures were reported by the adjutant chief of staff of the 17th Army general staff. It is unclear if they reflected the actual conditions of supply.]

A unit detached from the 8th Base Force, which comprised the Takasago Volunteers along with approximately five hundred Koreans and twelve hundred New Guinean labourers from Rabaul, had arrived previously in late July and were also assigned to the transportation of supplies.

Headquarters of the 17th Army considered a southward push from Kokoda possible owing to the some 6 tonnes of supplies that had been advanced to Kokoda by the provisional supply and transport unit.

### **Thrust through the Owen Stanley Range**

#### Advance to Kokoda by the main force

The South Seas Force headquarters, the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment, and the main strength of the 1st Battalion of the 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment left Basabua on the afternoon of 19 August. They arrived at Kokoda on 23 and 24 August by way of Soputa, Sonbo, Papaki, and Oivi. The main force of the 41st Infantry Regiment arrived on 26 August.

The senior commanders of these forces had been given hastily compiled mimeographed maps based on reconnaissance photographs taken by the 25th Air Flotilla. These maps indicated that the road west of Sonbo was a walking trail unsuitable for motor vehicles. Intelligence gathered in the planning stage of the campaign around 27 July had indicated "There is one road suitable for motor vehicle transport from Buna to Kokoda." This has been mentioned in a previous chapter. However, it became clear that this erroneous judgment was based on a misreading of intelligence and photographs.

Senior intelligence officers of the South Seas Force also misread the photographs. The grassy and open areas of the photographs indicated a relatively wide serviceable road. Conditions in the jungle, however, were completely unknown. The judgment of the suitability of the road was based on the visible sections in the photographs, and assumed the same for those sections within the jungle.<sup>261</sup>

Kokoda is approximately 400 metres above sea level, so the troops had relatively easy progress to that point. The Kumusi River east of Papaki is approximately 100 metres wide and no more than 1–2 metres deep. The volume of water, however, increases drastically after rain, and nearby ground is inundated from breaches in the banks. Seen before and after these episodes, it is a river of violent moods.

There were cases of troops who drowned in their sleep after setting up camp in the beds of New Guinea's rivers. The Allied armies had destroyed suspension bridges prior to their withdrawal. The Yokoyama Advance Party had initial success in constructing wooden bridges, but these would often be destroyed by logs floating downstream. Further, it was not possible to cross the rivers by day owing to heavy bombing from Allied planes. Consequently, engineers would set up rope-and-pulley arrangements at night to enable troops to cross the rivers by boat.

In the rainy season from August to December, there would be a deluge almost every evening, which would last into the night. This was the first affliction to be borne by Japanese troops after they landed in New Guinea.

As mentioned previously, the 1st Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment (commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto Hatsuo) was attached to the Yokoyama Advance Party, and occupied Kokoda on the morning of 29

July. The battalion was ordered to secure the line of the Owen Stanley Range in preparation for a continued advance.

The Tsukamoto Battalion left Kokoda on 7 August and advanced to Gira and Deniki. They encountered constant resistance along the way from approximately two hundred Allied troops. By 23–24 August, they had come into contact with the enemy base at Isurava. The strength of the Allied force facing them was thought to be about one battalion (Australian 39th Battalion).<sup>262</sup>

Gira was occupied on 14 August. However, supplies to Kokoda had not arrived, so Tsukamoto despatched infantry troops to Sonbo and Buna in order to resupply the battalion. This combined with the rough terrain to slow the advance.

It was roughly two days' march from Kokoda to the first high point on the Owen Stanley Range (south-west of Isurava). However, the track entered steep mountains almost as soon as it left Kokoda. The terrain approaching Isurava from Deniki consisted of convoluted mountains covered with dense, matted jungle. The track that meandered along the precipitous mountainside would be barely traversable by packhorse, even after some repairs.

An *Asahi Newspaper* reporter who accompanied the South Seas Force reported the conditions as follows:<sup>263</sup>

All the main strength of the unit continued to walk with single-mindedness through day and night. Each man was required to carry provisions in his backpack, comprising 18 litres of rice, a rifle, ammunition, hand grenades, a spoon, a pickaxe, etc., and weighing approximately 49 kilograms. Each man in a machine-gun unit carried approximately 56 kilograms.

The backpacks loaded with this luggage rose about 30 centimetres above the heads of the soldiers. They would walk step by step with staff in hand, using it as an extra leg to propel them along.

Undergrowth in the dense mountain forests, unlike that in jungles on the plains, was sparse, making passage for the infantry troops relatively easier. However, the burden of climbing over the fallen giant trees was significant. Visibility was severely limited, so there was no way to know where the enemy were encamped. In many cases, the first sign of the enemy was through coming under attack, or by signs of smoke from their cooking fires.<sup>264</sup>

The commander of the South Seas Force arrived in Kokoda on 23 August and held discussions with the commander of the advance party. A determination was made to destroy Allied troops in the Isurava area and then quickly penetrate into the Owen Stanley Range. For this purpose, the Yokoyama Advance party was disbanded. The 144th Infantry Regiment would attack the enemy at Isurava, and the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment would take up a position in train.

The commander of the South Seas Force left Kokoda on the afternoon of 24 August with the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment.

#### Dispositions of Allied forces in the Kokoda area

Deployment of Allied forces in the Kokoda area at the opening of the offensive by the South Seas Force was surmised to be the following:<sup>265</sup>

In early June, headquarters of the South-West Pacific Area realised the significance of the small airfield near Kokoda. They knew from a recently completed survey of the area that the commander of forces in the region, Major General Morris, had stationed no troops at the airfield. Orders issued on 9 June spoke of “the necessity of the Allies securing the Kokoda area and also the road leading west”. Morris’s reply was optimistic and implied that the defence of Kokoda was sufficient. It read:

There are several ANGAU officers in the region with wireless radios.

There are native patrols in all villages.

Not less than two platoons of the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB), comprising light scouting parties drawn from the local population, are patrolling the area around Kokoda. The PIB is in the process of being strengthened.

An infantry company stationed in Port Moresby is preparing for immediate deployment to Kokoda.

Commander of the Australian Military Forces, General Blamey, immediately telegraphed the following instructions to Major General Morris:

Immediate adequate measures must be taken to prevent Japanese offensive landings north of Buna and along the coast to the south, in order to prevent Japanese use of the grass airstrip at Kokoda, and in order for us to secure the pass at Kokoda.

Major General Morris raised Maroubra Force based on these instructions and charged it with the responsibility of securing Kokoda. Maroubra Force was made up of the Australian 39th Infantry Battalion (less one company) from the 3rd Brigade (stationed at Port Moresby), and part of a PIB infantry battalion comprising twenty Australians and 28 natives. B Company of the 39th Battalion left for Kokoda on 7 July (with a full complement of 129 men), while the main strength of the battalion undertook road repair and training on the southern slopes of the Owen Stanley Range.

[Editor's note: The Australian official history does not give a reason why the main strength of the battalion was left behind.]

B Company arrived at Kokoda on 12 July. Heavy equipment and machine-guns had been transported to Buna by sea, so a platoon was despatched from Kokoda to collect them.

At that time, the main strength of the PIB (approximately three hundred men) was in Awala. A scouting party first made contact with Japanese forces at 3.50 pm on 22 July at a point several kilometres east of Awala. [Editor's note: The Yokoyama Advance Party had landed that day.] The Japanese attacked Awala just as the main strength of B Company, on hearing the alarm, prepared to rush out of the village.

The battle at Awala, however, was over almost as soon as it started. Resistance was encountered at Gorari (approximately 13 kilometres west of Wairopi) and pursuit made up to Oivi. The rapid advance of the Japanese army continued.

Major General Morris ordered Lieutenant Colonel Owen to fly to the only usable airstrip at Kokoda to "press on at the Japanese east of Kokoda, and if that fails, to retire to the south and prevent the advance of the Japanese army." At the same time, C Company, at the foot of the mountain, was ordered to proceed to Kokoda, and the remaining three companies were ordered to stand by and prepare for transportation by air.

[Editor's note: An Australian infantry battalion at that time comprised a main company (including heavy munitions, signals, transport, supply, and kitchen mess personnel) and four rifle companies.]

The battalion commander arrived in Kokoda on 24 July. Major General Morris had used all means at his disposal to forward troops to Kokoda. Thirty men from D Company arrived on 26 July. The battalion commander kept half in reserve and sent the rest to Oivi. Their resistance at Oivi, however, did not last long, so that evening the commander decided to withdraw from Kokoda. In the middle of the night, the commander led his men through the lines towards Deniki.

The Australians gradually reinforced their numbers and made two counter-offensives against Kokoda on 28 July and 10 August.<sup>266</sup>

[Editor's note: The official Japanese record indicates that Kokoda was occupied during the repelling of the first of these attacks.]

During the second counter-offensive, a flanking party reached the airstrip. However, pressure from the Japanese forces on the main front against Deniki forced a withdrawal during the night of 11 August. Immediately prior to this operation, on 7 August, Maroubra Force numbered 480 men after successful reinforcement by the 5th Company of the battalion.

The Japanese attacked Deniki on 13 August with the Tsukamoto Battalion. The Japanese army decided to wait for the arrival of the main force (South Seas Force) before carrying out the next phase of the attack on Isurava.<sup>267</sup>

Just prior to this, all Australian and American units fighting in the campaigns in Australian New Guinea (Papua and north-eastern New Guinea) were formed into New Guinea Force. Major General Rowell, Commander of I Corps, took command of the force on 9 August. His duties essentially were to:<sup>268</sup>

Prevent the advance of enemy forces within Australian New Guinea, and while protecting the upper sections of the Owen Stanley Range, to recapture first Kokoda, Buna, and Gona areas, and finally Lae and Salamaua.

At that time, one battalion and two companies of the 30th Brigade were defensively positioned at Isurava. Advance reinforcements from the 7th Division stationed in Australia, the 21st Infantry Brigade, had begun mobilising towards Isurava. The strength of the garrison at Port Moresby had reached about 22,000 troops, and included three infantry brigades, Australian and US air force units, anti-aircraft units, engineers, and support troops. With the continued arrival of the 7th Division Headquarters, the 25th Brigade and other units, its strength would be boosted to 28,000 men.

A total of four airfields had been completed by this stage, two suitable for fighters and one each for medium and heavy bombers. A further three, one for medium bombers and two for heavy bombers, were planned for completion by early September.

The struggle over the Owen Stanley Range had begun, with the advance of the Japanese South Seas Force on the one side, and the reinforcement of the Allied army on the other.<sup>269</sup>

#### Attack on Isurava

Major General Horii's plan of attack near Isurava involved the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment (less the 2nd Battalion), which would attack from the area along the road from Kokoda to Isurava. The 2nd Battalion would attack the right flank of the enemy via a detour from upstream of the Mambare River.

The attack began at dawn on 26 August with the main force of the 1st Battalion.

The Japanese army strove to gain high positions on the ridgelines because they considered thrusting attacks from above the best means to break through enemy troops. The Australian army controlled the roads and targeted weapons towards the slopes, with a focus on skilfully constructing a barrier of artillery fire through breaks in the jungle cover. Because of their reliance on the "advantage of height" doctrine, the Japanese failed to appreciate that they could not establish artillery cover from areas of thick jungle.<sup>270</sup>

The Australians did not begin their attack until the Japanese were at point blank range, only 20–30 metres away. Consequently, the Japanese had no idea where the Australian positions were located. Friendly fire accidents also occurred because of the difficulties in maintaining a course and keeping contact with one's unit in the thick jungle.<sup>271</sup>

The commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment, Colonel Kusunose, issued the following order from his vantage point for the 3rd Battalion in the rear to join the fighting at 1.00 pm on 26 August:

1. The enemy on this front are attacking with hearty spirit and are providing tenacious resistance. It seems that the 2nd Battalion broke through enemy positions near Kaile and arrived at the main road from their left (*sic*) flank.
2. The regiment will combine with the newly arrived 3rd Battalion on the western side of the main road and continue the attack.
3. The 3rd Battalion (less the 9th Company, one-third of the 8th Company, and the 3rd Battalion Artillery) will join with the 1st Company of the 1st Battalion, one-half of the 1st Machine-gun Company, and the 1st and 2nd Battalion Artillery Companies, and lead them in an attack from the western side of the main road against enemy troops in the "isolated building".
4. Other units will continue their current responsibilities. The 9th Company of the 3rd Battalion will advance with the regimental headquarters in reserve.
5. I will move to the south of the main road through the "deadwood forest" in the area that flanks the road.

The 3rd Battalion left the vantage position at 3.00 am on 27 August and arrived at the "deadwood forest" at 10.00 am. They met up with the 1st Battalion, which had been in contact with Australian troops since the previous day. At 11.00 am, the commander of the 3rd Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada, issued the following offensive orders on the south side of the "deadwood forest":<sup>272</sup>

1. Enemy troops retreating from Deniki have entrenched themselves in the gorges around Isurava. They seem to comprise the retreating 39th Battalion and a newly arrived element, deployed as follows:

[Editor's note: This judgment was correct, as postwar investigations indicate that the 39th Battalion was strengthened on this day with a newly arrived unit of the 2/14th Battalion.]

The regiment will aim to encircle and annihilate enemy troops north of Isurava. Part of the 1st Battalion will counter-attack from the high ground, while the main strength of the battalion will remain in their location and prepare for battle. It seems that the 2nd Battalion has broken through the enemy at Kaile in a flanking operation, thus arriving at the enemy's left near the main road. Mountain artillery will occupy the camp at the lookout post and fire on the three buildings and the front lines.

2. The 3rd Battalion (less one-third of the 8th Company, the 9th Company, and the 3rd Battalion Artillery, joined by 1st Battalion Artillery) will mobilise at 1330 hrs on 27 August. The main force will attack from the western side of the main road, while one part will develop the eastern side and attack enemy troops in the "isolated building".

3. The 7th Company, with one-quarter of a machine-gun company, will attack the left of the main line until 1500 hrs, and prepare for an attack on the river front, attacking troops in that direction and advancing towards the "isolated building".

4. The 8th Company will join with the 7th Company on the right of the main line, will prepare to attack by encircling the enemy's left flank, and will advance towards the "isolated building" after breaking through.

5. The 1st Company will depart its current location as a flanking unit and attack the "isolated building" from the east of the main road.

6. The 3rd Machine-gun Company will occupy positions near their current location and prepare to fire up the main road, thus assisting the attack of the 7th Company.

7. The 1st Battalion Artillery will occupy a position near the current location and assist the attacks by the front-line companies.

8. The passwords shall be "Tosa" and "Kōchi".

9. I shall advance towards the "isolated building" at the rear of the 7th Company.

[Editor's note: These orders were delivered orally according to the conditions of the battle and then modified afterwards. It is adjudged that the content of the orders did not change.]

This relatively long quotation of attack orders for the regiment and battalion is included because it refers to the first battle against a substantial field base encountered in the Japanese army's advance into the South Pacific. The result of considerations of aspects of the battle, delegation of responsibility, and regulation of cooperation in the battle is evident in the course of later campaigns.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions began their attacks against the "spring", "summer", and "isolated building" positions in the afternoon of 27 August. At the perimeter, however, as mentioned earlier, the advance unit found it extremely difficult to cross the huge boulders piled up in the torrential Eora Creek deep within the dense jungle.

The Australians, occupying positions on the steep southern bank, opened with ferocious fire. Although the southern bank was occupied by 1.00 pm through this torrent of fire, the Japanese position was not geographically advantageous and casualties mounted. The company of the 3rd Battalion on the left flank fought on and by 3.00 pm had breached the precinct of the "isolated building".

Regimental commander Kusunose planned to redirect the attack to the left rear flank. Consequently, he issued orders at 4.00 pm on 27 August for the 1st Battalion to continue to pressure the front, while the 3rd Battalion outflanked and attacked the "summer" position from the high ground to the west during the evening. The thrust toward the three buildings would then proceed as a descent from this high ground. The 3rd Battalion regrouped temporarily at "deadwood forest" and then began its redirected attack on the "summer" position from the western high ground at 2.00 am on 28 August.

Resistance by the Australians to the 2nd Battalion detour party also continued on several fronts, with little change in the overall situation. The party arrived at the waterfall via Missima on 27 August, but were halted there by reinforced Australian units.

For eight hours from the morning of 29 August, repeated attacks were made on the front line by the main Japanese strength. Finally, a position on a secondary front on the left flank was occupied. The Australians offered fierce resistance without withdrawal, resorting to hand-to-hand combat with the Japanese troops. There were numerous point-blank hand-grenade exchanges. The battle developed with repeated localised Japanese thrusts from rear positions.

At 1.00 pm on 30 August, the commander of the South Seas Force deployed the main force of the 41st Infantry Regiment, which had been held in train since 27 August, to reinforce the right flank of the 144th Infantry Regiment and attack the rear left flank of the Australian units.

Officers and troops of the 41st Infantry Regiment had experience fighting Australian troops in the Malaya campaign, so they held no concerns about facing them again.<sup>273</sup> At this time, the regiment's 1st and 3rd Battalions (less the 12th Company) had not yet arrived at the front.

The main strength of the 2nd Battalion (commanded by Major Koiwai Mitsuo) made a detour through the thick jungle nestled against the high western ground. In the evening of 30 August, they unexpectedly found a road and then proceeded along it. Although this turned out to be the road to Port Moresby, there were no Australian troops in sight.

Major Koiwai's battalion held the road until 6.00 am on 31 August, when they advanced and occupied three buildings approximately 800 metres south on the road. This turned out to be Isurava. One week after the battle started, Isurava had been successfully penetrated.

The 144th Infantry Regiment suffered casualties and losses owing to sickness during this battle such that a company of 170–80 men was reduced to 50–60. However, the damage inflicted on the Australians was also not small. This was confirmed by statements by an Australian battalion commander who was later captured. The battalion under his command had been virtually annihilated, with one company reduced to the sergeant in command and twenty men. The Australians also had difficulty maintaining contact with their units in the thick jungle. They suffered heavy casualties owing to localised Japanese incursions and encirclement. The strength of the Australian forces after the engagement was judged to be approximately three battalions.<sup>274</sup>

[Editor's note: Postwar sources indicate that the units encountered in the Isurava area were the 39th Battalion, the 2/14th Battalion, the 2/16th Battalion, and the 53rd Battalion.<sup>275</sup>]

Supplies for the Koiwai Battalion, which now occupied Isurava, had dwindled in the ten days since the unit had landed at Basabua. However, an unexpectedly large amount of supplies had been stockpiled at Isurava. This included ammunition, food (dried bread and tinned food), as well as a certain quantity of clothing. There was an abundance of food over and above what the men of the 41st Infantry Regiment could carry, to the extent that some was also distributed to the 144th Infantry Regiment.<sup>276</sup>

#### Pursuit towards Port Moresby

The Owen Stanley Range takes about five days to cross. The commander of the Yokohama Advance Party reported that he had controlled the peak of the range when he had occupied Deniki. This brought great joy to the commander of the South Seas Force and headquarters of the 17th Army. However, the South Seas Force had not yet taken control of the highest peaks of the range when Isurava was occupied.

The Japanese forces originally thought that it would be possible to advance to Port Moresby down the southern slopes once the peak of the Owen Stanley Range was controlled. This illusion of an easy descent is often held by those crossing a mountain. However, the Owen Stanley Range consists of a chain of mountain peak after mountain peak.

At this stage, the South Seas Force commander was in receipt of the aforementioned orders from the 17th Army to restrict the advance. According to these orders, "Further progress shall be restricted after advancing to the southern slopes of the Owen Stanley Range."

The South Seas Force had only surmounted the first high peaks in the range. Military orders had been despatched without an understanding of the lie of the land in the mountains. It was a natural consequence that the commander of the South Seas Force, the unit entrusted to invade Port Moresby, would consider it essential to secure the high ground on the southern slopes of the range.

[Editor's note: The wireless set had been left at Kokoda because of carrier difficulties. Communication between Kokoda and the force headquarters was by runner and short-range regimental wireless set (according to the statement of Major Koiwai). It is thought that because the orders to moderate the advance were delayed,

the commander of the force considered that the push on to Port Moresby should continue as previously instructed.]

On the evening of 31 August, the South Seas force commander ordered the 41st Infantry Regiment to pursue the enemy troops in front of their position, and stationed the 144th Infantry Regiment in train.

The Koiwai Battalion (less the 7th Company), at the vanguard of the pursuit, left Isurava in the early hours of 1 September. The Australian units offered repeated resistance to halt the Japanese advance.

The first resistance action occurred at Gap. The pursuit party broke through the Australians in an evening offensive. The attack continued south of Gap throughout the following day. The Australians withdrew as night fell.

The Japanese units suffered 53 injured and 40 dead during this second battle.<sup>277</sup> From this time on, Japanese units in close formation in the undergrowth and in steep valleys started to come under fire from Australian aircraft. However, this resulted in no casualties.

The unit passed through Eora Creek on 3 September. Although there were storehouses in Gap and Eora Creek, nothing could be salvaged.

The pursuit party went up the mountain road that ran along the river in the valley. As they approached the crossing point for one of the small creeks during the evening, they came across five or six Australians washing their mess kits while whistling a tune. They were only 50–60 metres apart. The pursuit party did not think they were the troops encountered the previous evening because their uniforms and shoes were relatively clean.<sup>278</sup> After a rapid machine-gun burst from the pursuit party, all of the Australians fled into the jungle close to the nearest bank of the stream. Return fire then came from that area. This area was the second-highest point in the range, where a pass ran under the highest peak.

On the following day, 4 September, the pursuit party swung around to the west of an Australian camp. Skirting along the ridgeline, the party suddenly attacked a group of Australians in the evening as they gathered in a saddle of the mountains. A torrential downpour started just as night fell. The two forces held their positions while enduring the cold, and waited for the rain to stop. At some time during the night, the Australians withdrew. The Japanese greeted the morning at the pass over the highest peaks of the Owen Stanley Range. It was at least 2,000 metres above sea level, and all the trees were covered in moss. All the officers and men shouted out *banzai* together.

At this point, Major General Horii redeployed the 144th Infantry Regiment to the front as the pursuit party and placed the 41st Infantry Regiment in train.

Colonel Kusunose Masao, the commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment, was carried forward by stretcher owing to illness.

The pursuit party went down the slope and passed through Kagi on 6 September. Soon after, they stumbled across an Australian camp south of Efogi. The expectations of the Japanese troops that they would soon reach the plains of Port Moresby after crossing the path were soon dashed. Mountain after mountain stretched in front of them as far as the eye could see.

The pursuit party deployed its main force and made repeated attacks against the Australian camp from the evening of 7 September. The area south of the Australian camp at Efogi was finally penetrated late the following evening.

The Japanese troops endured sustained fire from enemy planes during preparations for the attack on the morning of 7 September. Major General Horii telegraphed the following message to the 17th Army headquarters:<sup>279</sup>

Enemy planes made three passes this morning, 7 September, from 0630 hrs to 1000 hrs. Some tens of enemy planes inflicted approximately 100 casualties and deaths in a sustained attack. The lack of Japanese fighter activity means that enemy planes have complete control of the air. It is felt that these attacks will certainly continue in this way. I wish for steps to be taken to despatch Japanese fighters.

This message was received by the command of the 25th Air Flotilla on 10 September.

At this time, malaria and diarrhea continued to afflict all units. However, serious cases were not evacuated but were carried forward by the units to be admitted to a field hospital that was to be established in the Port Moresby area. On 8 September, the first supplies for some time were delivered from the rear. These were distributed first to units at the front line of advance.

The pursuit party relentlessly continued the pursuit. Commander Horii advanced to the rear of the pursuit party and arrived in Mawai on the evening of 11 September. The road south of Mawai had been repaired and provided easy going for the advancing troops. The pursuit party consequently reached Ioribaiwa on 12 September and made contact with enemy positions.

Major General Horii attacked the front of the enemy position with the 144th Infantry Regiment, and assembled at the ready the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment on the right bank area of the Nauro River. Since leaving Kokoda, the commander had planned to assemble both regiments for an assault on Port Moresby if Mawai could be reached.

The 1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, which had earlier landed at Basabua, joined the main force of the regiment on 14 September.

Headquarters of the 17th Army ordered the commander of the South Seas Force on 8 September to assemble the 41st Infantry Regiment in the Kokoda area, owing to the worsening situation of the campaign in the Solomon Islands. Furthermore, the commander was ordered on 14 September to give highest priority to stationing a battalion in Buna to guard against enemy landings in the area. However, either the orders did not reach the force commander, or they were ignored.

[Editor's note: Telegrams issued by the South Seas Force headquarters at this time were reaching Rabaul, but they took three days. It is unclear how long it took for telegrams from Rabaul to reach the force headquarters, but it must have been at least three days.]

It is not clear if the orders described in this section were ever transmitted. The evidence surrounding the 1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment presents two interpretations, as introduced in a previous note: that is, concerning the differing understandings of the "southern slopes", and the delays in transmission of orders.

According to the testimony of an officer captured and questioned by the 1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, the Japanese pursuit was so fast that the Australian troops were forced to disperse into the mountains rather than retreat along the main road. Allied broadcasts at the time were astonished at the speed of the South Seas Force advance. The physical strength of the troops of the force was ebbing day by day owing to scarce food reserves. However, they were morally boosted by the imminent attack on Port Moresby and the promise of securing the food supplies of the enemy.

#### Occupation of Ioribaiwa

The 144th Infantry Regiment began the assault on the Ioribaiwa camp on 13 September, and by the evening of 16 September had occupied the high ground to the east and the west. The 144th Infantry Regiment suffered 36 deaths and 106 casualties in this battle. It was reported that the Australians had abandoned approximately one hundred and twenty bodies. Since the start of the Port Moresby offensive by the South Seas Force, there had been a total of approximately one thousand casualties, including those from illness and injury and those resulting in death.

The previously mentioned special correspondent wrote the following:<sup>280</sup>

We gazed over the Gulf of Papua from the peak of the last main ridge we had fought to ascend. "I can see the ocean! The sea of Port Moresby!" The officers and men who had endured such bloody conflict embraced on the top of a stony ridge, crying and pointing. There were no longer any deep mountain ranges in front to block their progress. An undulating ocean of verdant green forest fell away before us. In the gaps between the trees, half obscured by the mountain mist, something was glittering. It was undoubtedly the sea. The Gulf of Papua .... Later that evening, we stood on the peak and saw the lights of Port Moresby. We could just make out the searchlights shining over the airfield at Seven Mile to the north of the city.

The commander of the South Seas Force, as previously mentioned, was initially unenthusiastic about the plan to invade Port Moresby by the land route. Once he had landed in New Guinea on 18 August, however, he carried through the task like a new man. The troops had overcome searing heat, rainstorms, and starvation. The hazards of the cloud-covered Owen Stanley Range had been surmounted and the successive resistance of the Australian troops swept away with super-human speed.

On 19 September, the commander of the 17th Army, General Hyakutake, upon hearing of the occupation of Ioribaiwa by the South Seas Force on 16 September, issued strict orders for front-line troops to immediately occupy a position to the north of Mawai.<sup>281</sup>

#### Dispositions of Allied forces from early to mid-September<sup>282</sup>

The Australian 2/14th Battalion, as mentioned earlier, participated in the defence of the Isurava area. It was the advance battalion of the 21st Brigade that had been sent to strengthen Allied numbers. This unit replaced at the front line the 39th Battalion, which was exhausted from the fighting retreat back from Kokoda. The 2/16th Battalion had also reinforced the rear lines, but the Japanese advance could not be halted.

The Australians retreated along the Kokoda Track while staging successive resistance actions at Isurava, Alola, Eora Creek, and Myola. The 2/27th Battalion arrived in the Efogi area during the retreat from Alola on 5 September. This fresh battalion occupied a defensive position to the south of Efogi and was engaged in battles there on 7–8 September.

The Japanese encirclement operations cut off the retreat of the Australians. The main force of the 2/16th, 2/14th, and 2/27th Battalions were forced to retreat to Menari through the thick jungle to the south of the main track.

[Editor's note: At this time, the 39th and the 53rd Battalions had retreated to the rear lines for reorganisation.]

The retreat from Menari and Nauro continued till the morning of 10 September, when they finally arrived at the ridge between Nauro and Ioribaiwa.

The strength of the units that had retreated to Ioribaiwa numbered only 307 men at that time. Consequently, the two units were reorganised into a composite battalion. On that day, the commander of 21st Brigade was replaced. The responsibilities of the new commander, Brigadier Porter, were to take control of all troops from Uberi forward, to hold the Japanese, and to gain what ground he could.

Brigadier Porter, from his experience fighting south of Efogi, decided to retreat to the ridgeline at Ioribaiwa for two reasons: owing to the current danger to the rear of the two battalions at the front; and the tactical advantage to the Australians offered by the topography of Ioribaiwa. Porter's force was strengthened by the 3rd Battalion (less one company), by the 2/1st Pioneer Battalion (less one company), and by patrols of the 2/6th Independent Company.

The fresh units of the 25th Brigade moved northwards in succession after their arrival in Port Moresby with these orders: "To halt the enemy advance towards Port Moresby by offensive action as far forward as possible; to regain control of the route to Kokoda through the Isurava–Deniki area with a view to the recapture of Kokoda." Brigadier Eather, the commander of the unit, arrived at Uberi on 11 September. He decided to reinforce both flanks and the rear of the 21st Brigade at Ioribaiwa with three battalions (the 2/33rd, 2/31st, and 2/25th Battalions).

The South Seas Force, which had overcome hunger and fatigue to advance this far, encountered approximately five Australian battalions at Ioribaiwa, three of which were fresh, having just arrived.

The result was as previously described. By the evening of 16 September, after three days of bitter fighting, the Japanese had occupied the high positions to the east and west of the Australians.

The Commander of New Guinea Force, Lieutenant General Rowell, addressed the following letter to headquarters on 20 September:<sup>283</sup>

1. The main reasons for the success of the Japanese in forcing the Owen Stanley Range and advancing on Moresby are as follows:
  - a. Superior enemy strength at the decisive time and place;

- b. Simpler administrative needs of the Japanese soldier and his better clothing and equipment, particularly in respect of camouflage;
  - c. Lack of [Australian] reinforcing troops to restore a situation where the enemy was gaining superiority, for example, at Isurava and Efogi;
  - d. Higher standard of training of enemy in jungle warfare. Our men have been bewildered and are still dominated by their environment.
2. A stage has now been reached where there is every prospect, owing to the enemy administrative difficulties and to the very considerable reinforcements arriving for us here, that any further deep penetration, other than by small patrols, can be stopped. The problem now to be solved is what is to be the future role of New Guinea Force in the Port Moresby area.
3. The primary task, as I see it, is the retention of Port Moresby as an air operational base.  
[Further on the defence of Port Moresby omitted.]
6. Operations astride the Myola–Kokoda track will be costly, both in combat troops and administrative effort. I consider the best results are likely to be obtained by applying steady pressure on the main track as far to the north as possible, and relying on exploitation of side-tracks to cut into the enemy line of communication and so force him to withdraw.
7. The limiting factor in these proposals is always administrative. Lack of pack transport and continual decrease in availability of native porters will restrict the size of flanking forces that can be employed. Improvement of tracks and arrival of pack transport companies will, however, increase the probable scope of such moves.  
[Details of organisation of forces omitted]
9. In this regard there are two important factors to be stressed:
- a. Manpower. Wastage of manpower in jungle and mountain warfare. The wastage of personnel from battle casualties and physical exhaustion is extremely high. This demands greater infantry war establishments as well as reserves of fresh units to replace those temporarily depleted in numbers or otherwise battle weary.
  - b. Training. Training in this type of warfare. Training as known in Queensland bears no relation to jungle conditions. The Port Moresby area itself is just as bad a training ground. It is essential that troops get into actual jungle and learn to master its difficulties of tactics, movement, and control.  
[Details omitted]

To what extent the Allies benefited from the lessons learned from the thrust of the Japanese army up to Ioribaiwa, and what the judgment of MacArthur would be on this point, will be explored in the following section dealing with offensive operations at Rabi.

## **Offensive operations at Rabi**

### Start of the operations

When the South Seas Force was in Kokoda and about to thrust through the Owen Stanley Range towards Port Moresby, the Ichiki Detachment 2nd Echelon was about to land at Guadalcanal during the second naval battle of the Solomon Islands. A third Japanese offensive force was simultaneously heading for Rabi in Milne Bay at the southern tip of New Guinea.

The 8th Fleet was to control the China Strait, the corridor to the Coral Sea, according to the agreement between local army and navy commanders concluded on 31 July. This involved landing and establishing a seaplane base on Samarai Island, as previously mentioned.

However, immediately after this, on 4 August, the 25th Air Flotilla confirmed the existence of a new airfield being used to the west of Rabi in Milne Bay, some 60 kilometres north-west of Samarai Island. Not only would this be a threat to the sea offensives in coordination with operations of the South Seas Force, but was a threat as least as grave as that from Port Moresby or Guadalcanal to the strategic situation in the South Pacific Area centred on Rabaul. This would be the linchpin for Allied counter-offensives against the Japanese strategic front from New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Gilbert Islands.

The headquarters of the 8th Fleet quickly changed the target of the operation from Samarai to Rabi and decided to mount the attack solely with naval forces. The Combined Fleet agreed with this decision. There was no reason to expect, given the circumstances, that the Allies had stationed a garrison of approximately five thousand troops at Rabi.

It was clear that twenty to thirty P-40s were stationed at Rabi, and anti-aircraft fire was quite intense. It was thought that the garrison would be quite small because the base had not been operational for very long. The

command of 17th Army had some reservations about an assault by navy troops only, but had no strength in reserve to support the operation.<sup>284</sup>

#### Commencement of the Operational plan

The 8th Fleet had planned to begin the operation in mid-August after preparatory air raids, but this was unavoidably delayed by the launch of the Allied counter-offensive at Guadalcanal. They decided to carry out the operation as soon as possible after the completion of the airfield at Buna, expected by 16 August, as long as the situation in Guadalcanal permitted. Preparations for the offensive were mainly advanced by the 7th Base Force headquarters.

The command of the 8th Fleet had been aboard the flagship *Chōkai* on the seas to the north of the Solomon Islands since 19 August. Not only was it expected that Guadalcanal would be recaptured by the landing of the Ichiki Detachment Advance Party, but the enemy counter-attack was not anticipated to be significant owing to the arrival of the main force of the Combined Fleet to the waters to the east of the Solomon Islands from 23 August. Consequently, orders were issued to commence the attack on Rabi on 21 August. Reports of the defeat of the Ichiki Detachment Advance Party had not yet been relayed from the observation post on Taivu Point.<sup>285</sup>

The assault force was led by the commander of the 18th Squadron, Vice Admiral Matsuyama. The essentials of the plan were that the Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party (led by Commander Hayashi Shōjirō, 612 men) and elements of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party (led by Lieutenant Fujikawa, 197 men) would be transported and landed on the coast to the east of Rabi under escort and with support from vessels of the 18th Squadron. Simultaneously, the main force of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party (led by Commander Tsukioka Torashige, 353 men) would set out separately from Buna on seven motorised barges, and proceed via Goodenough Island to Taupota, situated on the north coast opposite Rabi. Both units were to work together to occupy and secure the Rabi airfields. It was planned that elements of the 10th Establishment Unit (led by Engineer Tsutsui, 362 men) would travel with the main force and repair the airfield. The order of battle for the entire force was as follows:

Formation	Command	Strength	Main responsibilities
Main force	18th Squadron commander	18th Squadron ( <i>Tenryū, Tatsuta</i> ), 29th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Yūzuki, Oite</i> ), 17th Destroyer Squadron ( <i>Tanikaze, Hamakaze, Urakaze</i> )	Protect transport group
Patrol Group	23rd Submarine Chaser Squadron commander	23rd Submarine Chaser Squadron ( <i>No. 23 Submarine Chaser</i> and <i>No. 24 Submarine Chaser</i> )	Patrol and protect transport group
Detachment	Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party commander	Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party, Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party (part strength), 19th Establishment Unit (part strength), 8th Signals Unit (part strength)	Secure occupation of Rabi, occupy airfields, meteorological station
Transport Group		<i>Nankai Maru, Kinai Maru</i>	Transport naval landing units

[Editor's note: There were also separate movements from Buna (see main text).]

As noted above, the 25th Air Flotilla had little reserve strength to execute attacks on the Allied airbase after its raids on Rabi on 11 August and Port Moresby on 17 August. The six Zero fighters advanced to Buna on 18 August were reinforced by a further 16 Zeros on 22 August.

#### Air support and the departure of the offensive units

Sixteen Zero fighters from the 25th Air Flotilla attacked Rabi at 9.15 am on 23 August. There was an aerial engagement with only one P-40, and no sign of other aircraft taking off. A 6,000-ton transport ship was unloading cargo from its anchorage 200 metres off the coast west of Rabi.

The Airbase Force Command specially placed land-based attack planes from the 26th Air Flotilla based at Kavieng (naval air unit from Kisarazu) under the command of the 25th Air Flotilla for the attack on the airbase

at Rabi on 24 August. The 25th Air Flotilla was to attack Rabi on 24 August with protection from the fighters at Buna, but the full complement of bombers only numbered 14 aircraft (with half of these from Kavieng).

However, the land-based attack planes withdrew owing to bad weather, and only the 15 fighters were ordered to attack. The fighters engaged around twenty enemy P-39s and P-40s in the skies over Rabi for around 30 minutes from 2.15 pm. All returned safely to Buna and reporting shooting down nine P-39s and one P-40. Five large aircraft were sighted in an above-ground concealment area at Rabi, and another five small aircraft on the service runway to the north. Defensive fire was intense from anti-aircraft positions on the coast about 1,000 metres to the east of the runway.<sup>286</sup>

The assault force left Rabaul at 7 am on 24 August. The convoy was contacted by enemy aircraft the following morning, then strafed and bombed by a total of 13 aircraft in four passes from 2.40 pm, suffering some damage. The anticipated counter-assault by surface craft did not eventuate and the force safely entered Milne Bay and successfully landed at 10.30 pm. The landing site was 3 kilometres further east than intended, near a place called Reknira.

[Editor's note: This was the day planned for the landing of the Ichiki Detachment 2nd Echelon.]

Aerial reconnaissance over the convoy on 24 August was carried out by a total of eight carrier-based bombers. It was to be carried out the following day from 8.30 am by the full strength of the Buna fighter unit. However, four P-39s carried out strafing attacks on the Buna airstrip from 7.10 am, and one P-39 continued through the rain at 10.20 am. Four Zeros and one transport were destroyed, reducing the number of serviceable aircraft to six Zeros. Because of this, the aerial surveillance over the convoy was not carried out.

The 25th Air Flotilla deployed the Buna fighters, and also the main strength of the Rabaul carrier-based bombers (2nd Air Corps) under escort from five Zeros, to cooperate in air surveillance over the landing point for the convoy on 26 August.<sup>287</sup>

#### Landing on 26 August

The naval landing troops proceeded east along the coast immediately after landing. They had advanced to the east edge of Rabi by 5.30 am on 26 August after overcoming resistance by small Allied units en route.<sup>288</sup> Surface forces shelled the suspected position of the airfield to the north-west of Gili Gili to support the advance of the land troops, then ceased at 4.30 am and withdrew to the east.

Direct contact was made with Allied aircraft over the anchorage from midnight on 25 August. Allied aircraft bombarded and strafed the landing point from early the following day, destroying almost all the ammunition, fuel, and rations before they could be dispersed.

At 5.30 am, three B-17s and two B-25s attacked the surface forces that had withdrawn, but no damage was inflicted. At around this time, the six fighters at Buna were again attacked by seven P-39s as they were taking off to carry out surveillance over Rabi. Under these unfortunate circumstances, three fighters were destroyed and one heavily damaged while undertaking an emergency landing at about 6.25 am. Six fighters and eight carrier-based bombers left Rabaul at 6 am to support the naval landing party at Rabi, but were forced to return to Buna at 3.30 pm owing to bad weather.

Not a single Japanese plane flew over the landing site on 26 August, and the skies were dominated by the Allies. The naval landing troops remained on standby in the jungle during the day, planning to undertake a night raid on the airfield from 6 pm.<sup>289</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron (the assault force commander) led *Tenryū* and the 17th Destroyer Squadron (*Tanikaze*, *Hamakaze*, and *Urakaze*) back to the anchorage at 7.50 pm, having sent the rest of the force back to Rabaul for the present.

However, communications with the naval landing force had been severed since 5.20 pm. It was only possible to observe, at around 1 pm on 27 August, that that fighting was in progress near Kilarbo (around 2 kilometres west of Rabi).<sup>290</sup> The surface forces again bombarded the suspected location of the airfield to the north-west of Gili Gili to support the land troops, then withdrew to the east before dawn.

The separate force that had left Buna in seven motorised barges at 5 am on 24 August (the main strength of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party) were to have landed near Taupota before dawn on 26 August and advanced on the airfield at Rabi and attacked from the rear. Their fate, however, was completely unknown at this time.

The Airbase Force Command (Vice Admiral Tsukahara, commander of 11th Air Fleet) issued special orders to the 25th Air Flotilla at 4 pm on 26 August to carry out a night raid on the airfields at Port Moresby. Four land-based attack planes carried out five waves of attacks from 12.42 am to 2.05 am on 27 August. The target, however, was covered with cloud, so the result of the raid was unclear.

As previously mentioned, three transports carrying the provisional supply and transport unit for the South Seas Force were sailing to Buna on 26 August. Under these conditions, however, the 25th Air Flotilla was preoccupied with conducting the air attacks over Rabi and supporting the naval landing troops, so could not provide an escort for the transport convoy. It was subsequently forced to return to Rabaul.

#### Situation on 27 August

More than ten enemy fighters attacked Buna at 6.10 am on 27 August, while Japanese forces attacked Rabi from Buna with seven Zeros and eight carrier-based bombers. The bomber unit attacked anti-aircraft and machine-gun positions.

There were at least twenty anti-aircraft guns at Rabi, and defensive fire was intense. As a result, four Zeros and two bombers were lost, and the 25th Air Flotilla had to refrain from advancing for a time.

Wireless communications with the naval landing party were re-established temporarily for an hour from noon. It was discovered that the attacks the previous night had ended in failure, and that the landing party would renew the attack that night.<sup>291</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron, sailing back to Rabaul, sent the destroyer *Hamakaze* back to Rabi to establish communications with the landing party and to supply ammunition and rations. *Hamakaze* turned back at 1 pm and arrived at a position 2,000 metres off Rabi at midnight. Attempts were made to contact the landing party, but communications had been out since 2 pm. Visual communications were also unsuccessful owing to the prevailing rain. *Hamakaze* consequently ceased attempts to make contact and once again turned for Rabaul at 2.30 am on 28 August.

#### Reinforcement of the naval landing party on 29 August

*Chōkai*, which had been supporting the transport of the Ichiki Detachment 2nd Echelon through the waters to the north of the Solomon Islands, returned to Rabaul at 3 pm on 26 August. The commander of the 8th Fleet immediately moved the command of *Chōkai* ashore. The 8th Fleet had expected that the naval landing party at Rabi would have broken through to the airfield on the night of the landing and completed its occupation by dawn on 26 August. However, the actual situation did not conform to these expectations.<sup>292</sup> It was not until the afternoon of 27 August that the 8th Fleet learned of the failure of the attack the previous nights.

The commander of the 8th Fleet, Vice Admiral Mikawa, decided to send urgent reinforcements. Orders were issued at 8.47 pm on 27 August to despatch to Rabi the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party (led by Commander Yano Minoru, 567 men), and elements of the Yokohama 5th Special Naval Landing Party (led by Special Sub-Lieutenant Yoshioka Fumiharu, 200 men). The destroyers *Arashi* (4th Destroyer Squadron), *Yayoi* (30th Destroyer Squadron), and *Murakumo* (11th Destroyer Squadron), as well as *No. 36 Patrol Boat*, *No. 38 Patrol Boat*, and *No. 39 Patrol Boat*, were temporarily placed under the command of the 8th Fleet and charged with the urgent transport of the reinforcements.

The reinforcements boarded the destroyers and patrol boats and left Rabaul harbour for Milne Bay at 3.30 pm on 28 August under escort from the 18th Squadron (*Tenryū*) and the 17th Destroyer Squadron (*Tanikaze* and *Urakaze*). The convoy was attacked by Allied aircraft from the afternoon of 29 August until dusk through driving rain, but suffered no damage, so entered the bay at Reknira (6 kilometres east of Rabi) at 8.15 pm. Unloading of personnel, ammunition, and supplies began at 8.40 pm and was completed by 11.30 pm.

Communications with the landing party was established after the flagship *Tenryū* entered Milne Bay. The adjutants of the Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party and the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party were invited aboard while the disembarkation was in progress. These two described the current situation of the battle directly, as follows.<sup>293</sup>

#### The situation as understood

The main Allied line seemed to extend north and south near Gili Gili, and resistance was also encountered from forward positions near Rabi and Kilarbo. It was also thought that defensive positions around the airfield were being strengthened. Passage through the jungle away from the roads was generally very difficult. Defensive positions had been established mainly to control the roads.

Around five hundred Australian troops were engaged with the Japanese forces, though the total number, according to a prisoner, was approximately fifteen hundred troops. The Australians also had at least ten light tanks and armoured cars, though the Japanese troops had put seven out of action, and were well armed with mortars and machine-guns. Their will to resist was high, and some had used Japanese passwords to get close to Japanese positions and fire.

The position of the airfield was still not confirmed, though it was certain to be at Gili Gili or to its west. There was a strong possibility that there were two or more airfields. Two illumination posts were set up near the airfields, allowing night take-offs and landings. Stubborn resistance was encountered from Allied aircraft strafing, which continued through the night, hampering movements of Japanese forces. It seemed that poor weather and limited visibility did not restrict enemy aircraft movements.

The night attack by naval landing troops on 27 August broke through several lines of defence and approached the airfield, but did not near the main base, so they had to withdraw to their original position.

The force was currently assembled about 2 kilometres east of Rabi, led by Commander Hayashi. Their strength had been reduced to around one-half (with ten casualties over the rank of platoon commander), but spirits were still high.

The situation of the separate force was not known. However, as Allied aircraft were making fierce attacks on the mountains to the north of the airfield, it was thought the force had advanced to the southern slopes of the Stirling Range.

The commander of the 18th Squadron, on learning of the circumstances of the battle, recognised the need to move the landing point closer to the enemy line to the west. However, as over half of the disembarkation had already been completed, he left this decision to the commander of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party, who led the reinforcement unit. Commander Yano decided to establish a foothold as far west as possible on the night of 29 August, and then disperse in the jungle during the following day to avoid enemy aircraft fire. That night, 30 August, Yano's unit, in combination with the original landing force, would mount a thrust on the airfield.<sup>294</sup>

The surface vessels under the command of the 18th Squadron left the anchorage for the return journey as soon as the unloading was completed. The 17th Destroyer Squadron, along with *Murakumo*, headed directly for Shortland Island, while the rest returned to Rabaul.

The commander of the 18th Squadron left the anchorage at 11.50 pm on 29 August, and sent the following telegraph to 8th Fleet headquarters:

Reinforcements have started to land and have been joined by the Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party. The landing point is some 8 kilometres from the airfield, so there are no prospects of an attack before dawn. The force will advance as far as possible tonight and avoid air attacks during the day, then mount an all out attack on the airfield in the evening. Would like an air strike to be undertaken on 30 August regardless of the difficulties.<sup>295</sup>

#### The situation on 30–31 August

The reinforcements began their move west at 11.30 pm and soon joined with the original landing party. The commander of the Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party, Hayashi, had planned defensive actions, but a night attack was settled on owing to the opinion of Commander Yano of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party.

Enemy aircraft attacked all day, so the force withdrew into the jungle. The advance resumed at nightfall, and contact was made with the Allies' main position near Gili Gili at around 3 am on 31 August. Suddenly, the force came under concentrated mortar and machine-gun fire. Allied aircraft attacks resumed at dawn, so the attack was promptly thwarted. Commander Yano reported at 8 am the following:

1. We attacked as planned, but came under heavy cross-fire from well dug-in positions when we drew near the enemy, sustaining heavy casualties. Though the reserve units were summoned, they did not arrive before dawn, making the assault problematic.
2. Force withdrew about 1,000 metres to the rear to await reinforcements.

Seven Zeros from the 25th Air Flotilla (2nd Air Corps), under special orders issued early that morning, were charged with controlling the skies over Rabi between 10.20 am and 11 am. There was no sign of Allied aircraft during that time. Apart from a Japanese flag and banner indicating a no-drop zone located around 8 kilometres north-west of the airfield, there was no indication of the condition of the Japanese troops.<sup>296</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron sent the following telegraph to Commander Yano at 1.15 pm: "Secure the occupied positions. Air attacks planned for early morning. Covering fire from surface ships will be undertaken tomorrow night. Indicate targets for the attack. Endeavour to maintain communications."

Next, the 18th Squadron sent the following orders to Commander Hayashi at 8 pm: "According to intelligence from a reconnaissance plane today, it seems the separate force has advanced to the foothills to the north-west of the airfield. Make contact with them during the night of 31 August, and attempt a night attack that evening to seize the airfield."<sup>297</sup>

This intelligence was based on the report of aircraft fire in the hills to the north-west of the airfield. However, as will be seen, this was completely wrong, as the separate force had their barges and radio equipment destroyed by Allied aircraft fire, and had been marooned on Goodenough Island since 25 August.

Despite these encouraging reports, there were no prospects for a favourable turn of events in the battle. Commander Hayashi was killed in battle, and the various units fell into disorder and were repeatedly forced to withdraw. A halt was made near Hilna on the evening of 31 August to concentrate the force and prepare for enemy pursuit. The road had turned to heavy mud from the constant rain. Movement by the troops was consequently difficult owing to skin disease, tinea, and foot sores.

The force constantly fell back under pursuit from the enemy during the morning of 1 September. Six Zeros and five carrier-based bombers set out for air raids over Rabi at 5.30 am that morning, but struck heavy weather en route and fruitlessly turned back. At this time, the convoy of the provisional supply and transport unit for the South Seas Force was sailing to Buna.

#### Change of operational plans by the 17th Army and the 8th Fleet

As previously mentioned, the command of the 17th Army had planned to despatch one battalion from the Kawaguchi Detachment to assist the operation at Rabi, but this was cancelled after the difficulties suffered by the Ichiki Detachment Advance Party on 23 August had become known. The command of the 17th Army subsequently decided on 31 August to send the units of the Aoba Detachment, which had arrived in Rabaul on the first transport on 31 August (based on one infantry battalion and one artillery company), but this unit was also quickly sent to Guadalcanal. Despite the worsening situation at Rabi, the 8th Fleet consented to these measures on 31 August.

The command of the 8th Fleet, after conducting discussions with the 17th Army, concluded that the force at Rabi should maintain a holding position some distance from the enemy to wait for the arrival of the main force of the Aoba Detachment, due to arrive in Rabaul on 11 September. It was planned that this combined force would then make a concerted attack on the airfield.<sup>298</sup>

#### Second reinforcement of the naval landing party and unification of command

Under these conditions, command of the 8th Fleet determined on 1 September to send the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party as reinforcements. This unit was led by Captain Yasuda Yoshitatsu (with 130 men), who would take charge of the entire landing force. In addition, prior to the arrival of army troops, naval

surface units would take turns every night to enter Milne Bay, make contact with the landing party, and provide covering fire.<sup>299</sup>

Captain Yasuda and other elements of the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party, with support from the 18th Squadron, boarded *No. 39 Patrol Boat* and left Rabaul harbour under escort from the 4th Destroyer Squadron (less *Arashi* and others) and *Hamakaze*. At precisely that time, 10.25 am on 2 September, Commander Yano from the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party sent the urgent message that an enemy transport and a cruiser had entered Milne Bay.

The command of the 18th Squadron, while steaming south, immediately ordered the 4th Destroyer Squadron to lead an attack with *Hamakaze* to trap and destroy these vessels. In addition, the Airbase Force Command ordered the 25th Air Flotilla at 11.35 am to mobilise its entire strength and attack the vessels.

From 12.25 pm to 2.30 pm, three carrier-based bombers, nine Zeros, one large flying boat (with torpedoes), and five Type-1 land-based attack planes left Rabaul. They were forced to turn back, however, owing to poor weather conditions in the Rabi area, with the loss of the three carrier-based bombers.<sup>300</sup>

Meanwhile, a report from Rabi indicated that the vessels had completed their unloading and left the harbour at 2.40 pm. Command of the 18th Squadron then ordered *No. 39 Patrol Boat*, which had temporarily withdrawn, to turn back for Rabi under the protection of *Tatsuta*, and to undertake the planned landing during the night of 3 September.<sup>301</sup>

#### Disturbing report

Meanwhile, *Hamakaze* and *Arashi* of the 4th Destroyer Squadron were steaming towards Milne Bay and arrived outside the harbour at 6 pm. There was no sign, however, of the Allied ships as they had already finished unloading. The commander of the 4th Destroyer Squadron sent the following message at 10 pm:

No sign of enemy surface craft. Land battles continuing from Reknira area to near the airfield. Enemy attack considered intense owing to numerous mortar flashes and tracers visible at night. It seems Japanese units are scattered and grimly holding on. Battles also underway to the west of the original landing position. It is considered there is a high chance that the landing tomorrow will be conducted in the face of the enemy.

This report gives the impression that the battle had reached its final stages. The following report was sent at 11.30 pm:<sup>302</sup>

Arrived at the China Strait at 1800 hrs and searched for enemy from south of the entrance of the harbour up to the landing point. After contact made with the landing party, again searched for the enemy to the north of the harbour, but found nothing.

*Hamakaze* despatched a launch to attempt to establish communications with the landing party, but failed to do so and returned to ship. (The launch was attacked from land when signal lamps were used, indicating that the Japanese landing party had withdrawn.) The land battle seemed to have entered a lull after 2200 hrs, with only an occasional flare up. Communications not yet established with the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party, said to be positioned 3 kilometres east of Rabi, owing to heavy rain and poor visibility since morning. Position of enemy ships also unknown, so withdrew at 0100 hrs on 3 September.

The commander of the 8th Fleet received the following final message from the commander of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party at 4.50 pm: "We have reached the worst possible situation. We will together calmly defend our position to the death. We pray for absolute victory for the empire and for long-lasting fortune in battle for you all." The above report from the 8th Destroyer Squadron sent at 10 pm confirmed that the situation had become catastrophic.

#### Cancellation of reinforcements and decision on holding operation

The commander of the 8th Fleet, in discussion with the 17th Army, decided that the situation would not be rescued with a small naval landing force, so decided to cancel the reinforcements and wait for the arrival of the second transport of the Aoba Detachment (based on one infantry battalion, approximately one thousand men), expected in Rabaul on 9 September. A concerted attack would then be undertaken in the Rabi area in concert with the renewed attack of the South Seas Force in the Owen Stanley Range.<sup>303</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron consequently issued the following message at 10.30 pm on 2 September: "I am of the opinion that reinforcements by the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party will not turn the situation to our advantage. The landing of the unit is therefore to be deferred." This request was then sent at 10.42 pm: "I desire the 4th Destroyer Squadron (less *Hagikaze*, *Nowaki*, and *Maikaze*) to aid *Hamakaze* to provide surface support for the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party."<sup>304</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron cancelled the landing of elements of the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party led by Commander Yasuda and sent them back to base, then issued the following orders to the commander of the 4th Destroyer Squadron at 7.15 am on 3 September:

Continue to try and contact the landing party during the day and enter the harbour near Rabi during the night. You must endeavour to contact the naval landing units, whatever the circumstances, and if at all possible, evacuate them.

[Editor's note: According to the detailed battle report of the 18th Squadron, the "evacuate them" in this order referred to evacuation of casualties and construction units.]

Meanwhile, staff officer Ōmae from the 8th Fleet consulted with Imperial Headquarters staff officer Imoto, who had been sent to the 17th Army, concerning withdrawal of units from Rabi. Ōmae was encouraged by Imoto's explanation that losses during a successive withdrawal from a land battle over several days from were normally not as high as might be expected.

The commander of the 18th Squadron subsequently sent the following message to the commander of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party at 4.40 pm on 3 September: "Construct and defend a safe staging point in the jungle. Endeavour to communicate and transmit your position when one is decided. Strong reinforcements to arrive on 12 September." In addition, the commander had intended to lead *Tenryū* and two patrol boats from Rabaul that evening, to arrive in Rabi harbour during the evening of 4 September to evacuate casualties. However, this operation was delayed for one day owing to the shipping plan being fully committed.

The 4th Destroyer Squadron (*Arashi* and *Hamakaze*) re-entered Rabi harbour during the night of 3 September and successfully made contact with the landing force, as well as evacuating some of the wounded. Among these was Commander Yano from the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party. The adjutant of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party reported the situation of the landing party as of 11.45 pm to the commander of the 4th Destroyer Squadron:<sup>305</sup>

1. Resistance continues at the front line approximately 1 kilometre east of Hilna.
2. Personnel (all assembled)
  - Commander Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Party killed in action
  - Commander Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party seriously wounded
  - Adjutant Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party (senior officer in battle) lightly wounded
  - Fully fit warrant officers and higher ranks down to one-third strength
  - NCOs and men approximately 560 remain (around 200 capable of battle)
  - Fujikawa Unit (including construction troops) all fit
3. We could hold the position about one-half kilometre east of Reknira for 2–3 days if we withdraw to the line of the river.
4. Concentration at safe position and construction of base extremely difficult owing to all personnel exhausted and many casualties. Strongly urge arrival of Yasuda Unit for this purpose.

[Editor's note: The contradiction between items 3 and 4 in the original text has been reproduced. The diary of Yamada conveys the meaning by integrating the "hold the position ... Reknira" and "all personnel exhausted and many casualties."]

Regarding the fate of the separate force, both local units and commanders in Rabaul had believed that it had landed at Taupota and advanced to the rear of the airfield, but its subsequent situation was quite unclear. The commander of the 4th Destroyer Squadron sent the following report at 9.30 am on 4 September while returning:

According to reports by Captain Fujikawa to the commander of the Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party, a red flare was visible near the airfield during the previous evening (time unknown), causing speculation that the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party had penetrated to the airfield.

### Decision for further reinforcements and report from the front

The commander of the 8th Fleet decided again to despatch elements of Captain Yasuda's naval landing party as special reinforcements. The plan was reported at 10.10 am on 4 September:<sup>306</sup>

Depart Rabaul on 4 September on board three 18th Squadron patrol boats, to arrive following day to disembark Yasuda Unit and evacuate casualties. A decision will be made after the arrival of Yasuda whether to concentrate strength and wait for the arrival of two army battalions due on 12 September, or to evacuate.

Some officers within 8th Fleet headquarters argued for the complete withdrawal of all operational units at this stage, but the 17th Army continued to request that a foothold be secured in the Rabi area.<sup>307</sup>

After a break of some days, six land-based attack planes and nine Zero fighters from the 25th Air Flotilla set out for Rabi on 4 September, but were again forced to return owing to poor weather. The commander of the 18th Squadron left Rabaul during the evening of that day on *Tenryū* with three patrol boats. The reinforcement unit of Captain Yasuda, which numbered approximately three hundred men (an increase from the original plan), was aboard these vessels.

*Yayoi*, which had left previously, entered Rabi harbour during the night of 4 September and evacuated 224 casualties after making contact with the landing party. In addition, *Yayoi* reported at 10.30 pm the result of communication with the adjutant of Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party, which is summarised below:<sup>308</sup>

Number of able bodies reduced to under 50 men. Situation such that it would be extremely difficult to achieve results even after reinforcement by Yasuda Unit. Strongly urge withdrawal of the entire complement.

Kure 3rd Special Naval Landing Party fallen into disarray and situation not entirely clear. All company commanders killed in action, while only three or four platoon commanders alive.

Almost all seriously wounded have killed themselves.

Those unable to walk owing to severe foot sores continue to fight sitting down at the front line.

We are making every effort to continue to defend our positions, but enemy encirclement attacks will result in our complete annihilation.

The commander of the 30th Destroyer Squadron also expressed the opinion that: "The landing party has already reached the point where they must evacuate. Landing the Yasuda Unit reinforcements cannot be expected to succeed."

### Withdrawal

The commander of the 18th Squadron received this report at 7.10 am on 5 September, and signalled the following important message to the 8th Fleet exactly one hour later:

1. Landing of the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party reinforcements has been cancelled.
2. *Tenryū* will lead *No. 34 Patrol Boat* and *No. 38 Patrol Boat* to withdraw the entire Milne Bay landing force this evening.
3. *No. 39 Patrol Boat* will be sent back to Rabaul under command of the 30th Destroyer Squadron.

[Editor's note: After the war, the commander of the 18th Squadron, Rear Admiral Matsuyama Mitsuharu, recalled the following: "The telegraph indicating withdrawal was sent early in the morning. We felt that if the 8th Fleet had any objections, there was plenty of time for them to reply."]

The 8th Fleet replied by telegraph at 9.40 am, as follows: "As the number of evacuees is anticipated to be large, *No. 39 Patrol Boat* should go with you."

South-East Area Fleet headquarters made the final decision concerning the evacuation based on the opinions of the commander of the 8th Fleet.<sup>309</sup> All personnel were successfully evacuated under the local commander during the night of 5 September.

The total number withdrawn, including earlier evacuations, was 1,318 (including 311 wounded). The total number landed during the operation, not including the separate force, was 1,943. In total, 625 men did not return, including 311 confirmed killed in action.<sup>310</sup>

The Combined Fleet chief of staff, Vice Admiral Ugaki, recorded the following reasons for the failure of the operation in his diary for that day:

1. The fact that the enemy airfield was heavily defended and our landing party could not capture it.
2. The fact we charged into the operation, in addition to the attack on Port Moresby, while we were at a loss over the issue of Guadalcanal, thus dispersing our strength over three operations.
3. The fact that the naval landing party was not of high calibre, as it contained numerous 30–35-year-old conscripts with poor endurance and inferior fighting spirit. The movements of the operation were also inadequate, with thrusts from the north and south unable to act in concert.
4. The fact that the high rainfall resulted in many with foot sores in the muddy conditions, and that air support could not be expected owing to the poor weather.

#### Movements of the separate force

What most concerned the 8th Fleet during the evacuation of the Rabi force was the location and withdrawal of the separate force of the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party led by Commander Tsukioka.

Rear Admiral Kanazawa from the 8th Base Force headquarters, who was not involved in the Rabi operations, wrote in his diary for 5 September: “Rabi a disaster. Withdrawal finally ordered. Evacuation to be done today by destroyer *Tenryū* of the 18th Squadron. What has happened to the Tsukioka Unit? The outlook is bleak.”

It was generally believed that the Tsukioka Unit had landed on the north coast at Taupota in the morning of 26 August and advanced to the hills to the north of the Rabi airfield by around 30 August. There were several reports of signs suggesting this, as previously mentioned, but these reports were completely wrong. In fact, the force had been concentrated in the south of Goodenough Island since 25 August.

The plan was to leave Buna on 24 August on board seven motorised barges moving mainly at night via Cape Nelson and the south coast of Goodenough Island to land near Taupota before dawn on 26 August, then cross the Stirling Range to advance on the airfield from the north. Though the Kawaguchi Detachment effected a sea mobilisation soon after in the Solomon Islands area (to be discussed below), the mobilisation by barge of the Tsukioka Unit was the first for the Japanese army or navy to span three days and two nights.

The Tsukioka Unit left Buna at 5 am on 24 August and arrived safely at Ansari on Cape Nelson by 1 pm. They then set out for the south coast of Goodenough Island at 6 pm after an extended rest. It was extremely difficult to escape the gaze of enemy reconnaissance when moving during the day. The distance between Ansari and the south coast of Goodenough was the maximum range of movement in one night concealed from enemy patrols. The unit entered an inlet on the south coast of Goodenough Island after dawn on 25 August and dropped anchor. Unfortunately, there was no suitable place to conceal the barges.

As a result, all the barges were destroyed by strafing from ten enemy aircraft at 10.30 am on 25 August. All provisions and the sole radio transmitter were also destroyed. The unit was literally stranded. A group of three messengers were twice sent to Buna by canoe, arriving on the second attempt on 9 September. It was then that the movements of the separate force were known for the first time since 24 August.

#### Rescue of the separate force

*Yayoi* and *Isokaze* of the 30th Destroyer Squadron (the latter attached to the 17th Destroyer Squadron) left Rabaul for Goodenough Island the following day, 10 September, to rescue the separate force.

However, they were subjected to waves of attacks by a total of ten B-17s and B-25s from noon on 11 September. *Yayoi* suffered damage to its steering gear at 3.30 pm and became stranded, finally sinking 30 kilometres east of Normanby Island at 4.25 pm. The accompanying *Isokaze* was separated from *Yayoi* after evasive manoeuvres, and finally returned around sunset to begin rescue operations. However, as there was no visible wreckage, only an oily residue, the search was called off at 8.25 pm and *Isokaze* steamed north.<sup>311</sup>

The commander of the 18th Squadron on *Tenryū* led *Hamakaze* from Rabaul on a mission to rescue survivors from *Yayoi* and the separate Tsukioka Unit. Although they hurried to the location where the vessel went down, their search found no trace of *Yayoi* or its crew. The 18th Squadron, recognising that rescue of the separate force would be difficult without the assistance of friendly air support, decided to temporarily return to Rabaul. Six enemy aircraft were encountered during the return voyage, but they were repulsed.<sup>312</sup>

*Isokaze*, which had accompanied *Yayoi*, and *Mochizuki* (attached to 30th Destroyer Squadron), once again set out to rescue survivors of *Yayoi* on 22 September. Ten survivors were picked up in a launch from *Yayoi* to the south of Gasmata on New Britain. They learned that 87 survivors, including the captain of the ship, had drifted to the north-east coast of Normanby Island. *Isokaze* and *Mochizuki* hurried to the location and conducted searches for one and a half hours during the night of 22 September using searchlights and sirens, but could not make contact so returned unsuccessfully to Rabaul.<sup>313</sup>

Air drops of supplies were successfully carried out on 23 September for both the South Seas Force on the Kokoda Trail and the separate force on Goodenough Island. At that time, Japanese land-attack planes sighted what were assumed to be approximately ten survivors from *Yayoi* on the north-east coast of Normanby island. These survivors were successfully evacuated by *Isokaze* and *Mochizuki* during the night of 26 September. The rescue of the separate force, however, was still very difficult. Both reconnaissance and attacks from enemy aircraft continued daily. Further, rations were short and more were struck down by malaria.

Submarine *I-1* successfully made contact with the separate force in October. Casualties were embarked and the force supplied with rations, ammunition, and a barge.

The danger, however, continued. Approximately three hundred Allied troops landed on the south and east coasts and advanced on the staging point of the separate force. There were also signs that elements of the Allied force were to attack overland from the north-west.

The Tsukioka Unit repulsed the Allies who landed on the west coast and moved to Aprapra on the south-east coast of Ferguson Island by barge during the night of 24 October. They were finally rescued by *Tenryū* from the 18th Destroyer Squadron during the night of 26 October.

This was precisely two months since all trace of them was initially lost. During that time, the situation in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea had worsened to an extent not imaginable when the force set out.

## **Allied preparations for counter-offensives in New Guinea**

### Strategic preparedness

New Guinea was placed into the South-West Pacific Area after the determination of Allied areas of responsibility in March 1942. General MacArthur was appointed supreme Allied commander. He assumed command on 18 April, as previously mentioned.

General MacArthur issued the following “General orders no. 1” on 18 April:<sup>314</sup>

1. By agreement among the governments of Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States, there has been constituted, effective 1400 GMT, 18 April 1942, the South-West Pacific Area, with boundaries as defined in annex 1.
2. By virtue of the same authority, the undersigned hereby assumes command.
3. The following commands are hereby created with commanders as indicated, composed of forces assigned to the South-West Pacific Area by the respective governments, and assigned to specific commands by this headquarters, initially as provided in annex 1.
  - a. Allied Land Forces, South-West Pacific Area: General Sir Thomas Blamey, Australian Army
  - b. Allied Air Forces, South-West Pacific Area: General George H Brett, US Army
  - c. Allied Naval Forces, South-West Pacific Area: Vice Admiral Herbert F Leary, US Navy
  - d. US Forces in the Philippines: Lieutenant General Jonathan Wainright, US Army
  - e. US Army Forces in Australia: Major General Julian F Barnes, US Army

Commander-in-chief  
General Douglas MacArthur

There were deficiencies in the fundamental strategy of the defence of Australia from the time that General MacArthur arrived in Australia after escaping from the Philippines, as seen in the following decision of the

chiefs of staff conference discussions: “More importance must be placed on the defence of the Australian mainland, rather than defence of the main routes to the mainland.” The key to the defence of Australia was not on the mainland, but in New Guinea.

On 4 April 1942, the Australian chiefs of staff conference merged with MacArthur’s headquarters and prepared a joint situation appraisal. The results of this reflected the above-mentioned opinion:<sup>315</sup>

The one part of Australia essential to the prosecution of the war is on the south-east and east coasts in the general area between Melbourne and Brisbane. The critical point which controls this area is Port Moresby, against which a major offensive could be expected at any time.

A successful defence will require several aircraft carriers and at least 675 land-based aircraft, including 70 B-17s.

Meanwhile, the command of the I Australian Corps and the 7th Australian Division were in Adelaide (on the south coast of Australia). The main strength of the American 41st Division arrived in Melbourne on 6 April, while the remaining elements of the 41st Division and the American 32nd Division received orders to proceed to Australia several days later.<sup>316</sup>

Concerning the naval forces, three heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, 15 destroyers, a total of 31 old and new submarines, and six or seven sloops (small craft for patrolling coastal areas) were placed under the command of Vice Admiral Leary.

The US air force had 247 operational aircraft on 18 March 1942 (including 175 fighters). An airfield suitable for heavy bombers was operational at Port Moresby from late February, and a dispersed reconnaissance and bombing capability was available at Rabaul.

The base at Port Moresby was strengthened for the first time at the end of April with American engineer units, followed by US anti-aircraft units. The airbase at Port Moresby was gradually attaining a suitable strength, but MacArthur requested an increase in troop numbers three or four times to the American combined chiefs of staff.

Meanwhile, from the point of view of the “Beat Germany first” policy, with the intensity of the Japanese invasion of Burma causing great concern for the defence of India, and with MacArthur having at least three aircraft carriers, 1,000 aircraft, and three first-class infantry divisions, his demands were generally not heeded.<sup>317</sup>

However, successive encouraging signs were beginning to emerge in the overall war situation in the Pacific, such as the battle of the Coral Sea on 7 May and the battle of Midway on 5 June. Meanwhile, the remaining elements of the American 41st Division and the American 32nd Division arrived in Australia on 14 May 1942. On the following day, the Australian 14th Brigade Group (approximately three thousand four hundred troops) began to move to Port Moresby.

#### Reinforcement of Milne Bay<sup>318</sup>

One of the lessons of the battle of the Coral Sea was that it was necessary to have an airbase at the south-eastern tip of New Guinea, or somewhere in that area, to protect the direct sea route to Port Moresby from the east. Another purpose, in addition to protection of Port Moresby’s flank, was to provide a relay base for attacks on Japanese bases to the north and north-west without being exposed to the bad weather over the Owen Stanley Range.

A reconnaissance unit set out by flying boat on 8 June to reconnoitre Milne Bay. This unit identified several suitable sites for airfields. Orders for the construction of airfields were directly issued on 11 June. Garrison units arrived on 25 June, closely followed by engineer units four days later. Construction proceeded quickly. The Australian 7th Brigade (militia) arrived from Townsville in early July, followed by a squadron of P-40s in late July.<sup>319</sup>

The plan of Allied command for the defence of New Guinea on 2 August was as follows:<sup>320</sup>

1. To improve transport measures, especially inadequacies of naval strength to protect supply routes.
2. Before augmenting defences in New Guinea:
  - a. First complete airfields in the Townsville area and improve Port Moresby as an advance airbase

- b. Next, move two infantry brigades, engineers, and anti-aircraft units to Port Moresby to increase its capabilities
- c. Finally, construct airfields at Milne Bay and Merauke (central south coast New Guinea) and deploy units to secure the mountains at Wau and Kokoda.

This plan was based on General MacArthur deploying two brigades from the 7th Australian Division to Port Moresby and one brigade (18th Brigade) to Milne Bay. The Australian 18th Brigade arrived in Milne Bay on 21 August; on the following day, Major General Cyril Clowes assumed command of all Allied ground forces in the area. The forces under his command numbered 9,458 American and Australian troops. One runway was completed by that time, with two others under construction.<sup>321</sup>

Japanese forces attacked Milne Bay on 25 August 1942, as described in detail earlier.

The main strength of the 7th Australian Division, the 21st and 25th Brigades, was rushed to Port Moresby. These units fought the Japanese South Seas Force between Isurava and Ioribaiwa, also as described above.

#### Assessments and deployment along the Kokoda Trail

Of interest here is the assessment of the situation by the Allied command in the South-West Pacific Area from late August through early September. The impression was that, “the number of Japanese troops deployed along the Kokoda Trail is too small for them to be planning an advance to Port Moresby”. MacArthur was also personally perplexed by the situation.

This opinion was naturally opposed by the commander in the field, Lieutenant General Sidney Rowell, who went and explained the situation personally to the supreme commander on 8 September. He stated that in order to regain the ascendancy, rather than deploying the 25th Brigade who were currently steaming to Port Moresby, it was essential to deploy one of the two brigades of the 6th Australian Division, which had recently arrived from Ceylon, on the Kokoda Trail.

The 16th Brigade of the 6th Australian Division received orders the following day, 9 September, to proceed to Port Moresby.<sup>322</sup>

Next, General MacArthur, considering the reinforcement of the Australian units sufficient to meet the advance of the Japanese force, established a plan to deploy American units in a flanking manoeuvre to accelerate the capture of Japanese units retreating from the Kokoda–Gap area.<sup>323</sup>

At that time, the commander of the I American Army Corps, Major General Robert Eichelberger (soon to be promoted to Lieutenant General), arrived in Australia. He was immediately given command of the American 32nd and 41st Divisions.

Eichelberger was responsible for choosing the units for the flanking manoeuvre. The 32nd Division had arrived in New Guinea first, so, after inquiring of the condition of the unit from the divisional commander, he chose the 126th Regiment (commanded by Colonel King) for the mission.

Orders for the manoeuvre were issued by General Blamey, the commander of Allied land forces, including the I American Corps, on 11 September. Cadre elements of the 126th Regiment left Brisbane by air for Port Moresby on 15 September. The troops' uniforms were still wet from the camouflage dye. These were the first American infantry troops deployed to New Guinea.<sup>324</sup>

The main strength of the 126th Regiment departed for Port Moresby by transport ship on 18 September.

Fears for the front at Ioribaiwa were increasing on 23 September, so the American 128th Regiment was hurriedly flown to Port Moresby in the biggest airlift operation by air units at that time. The regiment was placed under the command of the 6th Australian Division and made responsible for ground defence of the Port Moresby area.

The main strength of the 126th Regiment arrived at Port Moresby by the sea route on 28 September and was placed under the direct command of New Guinea Force.<sup>325</sup> In this way, the plan to force the Japanese troops back to the north side of the mountains past Kokoda was being implemented.

### Outline of Allied air power<sup>326</sup>

The air strength at the end of June was bolstered to include three fighter groups, two each heavy bomber, light bomber, and transport groups, and one photo-reconnaissance squadron, but it was difficult to maintain an operational ratio over 50 per cent.

The combined chiefs of staff issued orders outlining the plan for an Allied counter-offensive in the South-West Pacific Area on 2 July. Consequently, attacks on the Japanese airbase at Rabaul would assist the counter-offensive against the Solomon Islands area.

Meanwhile, the number of aircraft available to the commander of Allied air forces in the South-West Pacific Area (Lieutenant General Brett was replaced in mid-July by Major General George Kenney), included 245 fighters, 62 heavy bombers, 70 medium bombers, 53 light bombers, 36 transport planes, and 51 others. Only 150 of this total of 517 aircraft were operational.

### **Retreat of the South Seas Force**

#### Threat of Allied counter-offensive in the Buna area

Allied air attacks in eastern New Guinea gradually intensified from early September, with two or three raids of over ten aircraft attacking Japanese units every day.

For this reason, the departure of transport ships carrying munitions and supplies for the South Seas Force was temporarily suspended until their protection could be guaranteed under escort from naval air units..<sup>327</sup> The 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion was responsible for air defences at Buna and Giruwa against the daily Allied raids. It shot down 14 aircraft in the period up to 28 September, after which the Allied air attacks temporarily ceased.<sup>328</sup>

There were other factors, however, that were deemed responsible for the Allies concentrating their attacks on the Buna area. If the Allies could land at the Buna, Giruwa, and Basabua logistics bases, then the South Seas Force, which at that time was about to look down on Port Moresby after its thrust through the Owen Stanley Range, would be in grave peril.

At this time, commanders in Rabaul received this message from the naval commander of the Buna airbase: "Fears of enemy air attacks; deployed personnel to withdraw." This was received at 6.10 pm on 12 September. A further telegram at 6.30 pm stated: "1. In light of an anticipated enemy attack and insufficient garrison strength in the area, will withdraw the anti-air observation post. 2. Currently maintaining rigorous patrols."

At 8 pm on 13 September, the following telegram was sent:

According to army reports, an Allied force (strength unknown) has landed at Basabua. Great likelihood that paratroopers will land here and at Basabua from first light tomorrow. Request aerial patrols. Buna airfield not operational.

A further telegram was sent 20 minutes later:

According to intelligence from the commander of the army's Tomita Unit, the enemy has undertaken a landing at Basabua. Strength unknown.

The receipt of this report was a great shock to the commands of the South-East Area Fleet and the 17th Army.<sup>329</sup>

The report of Allied landings on Basabua were confirmed to have "no basis in fact" on 15 September. As a result of them, however, the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party advanced to Buna, and its commander, Naval Captain Yasuda, took command of all navy units in the area.

The strength of naval garrison troops in the Buna area at that time was as follows:

Unit	Personnel	Munitions
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Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party	290	Two 8-centimetre anti-aircraft guns One 25-millimetre machine-gun Three rapid-fire cannons Three 13-millimetre machine guns
Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party	110	
14th Establishment Unit	30 military 200 labourers	
15th Establishment Unit	50 military 200 labourers	
Total	480 military 400 labourers	

Units from the airbase at Lae had at this time been transferred to Guadalcanal owing to the intensification of the situation there. Consequently, the air strength in New Guinea was temporarily totally depleted. Allied aircraft were increasingly rampant, leaving Japanese units to defend against constant strafing attacks.<sup>330</sup>

In response to this situation, the commander of the 17th Army ordered the South Seas Force commander to assemble one infantry battalion at Buna and to place great importance on patrolling and guarding the area.

#### Decision to cancel the offensive by the South Seas Force commander

The commander of the South Seas Force had repelled Allied resistance since landing in New Guinea on 18 August, and gradually thrust through the Owen Stanley Range.

Upon hearing the news that Port Moresby was soon to fall, Naval Lieutenant Koya from the Kokoda Signals Base went to the South Seas Force headquarters on 12 September to advise the commander of the situation in the Solomon Islands. On hearing this news, the commander said in high spirits that: "In all the Solomon Islands and New Guinea areas, only our South Seas Force is resisting the enemy."

Force headquarters was positioned in the base of a valley immediately behind the front line at Ioribaiwa on 14 September. At that time, the full strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment was attacking Allied positions at Ioribaiwa. It was decided that evening that the offensive would be cancelled and the force reassemble to the north of the Owen Stanley Range. Coincidentally, this was the same day that the attack of the Kawaguchi Detachment at Guadalcanal had failed and a decision was made to withdraw.

Few provisions remained after early September. Extreme rationing limited rice to around 180 millilitres per day, leaving the soldiers fatigued. Each day passed with hopes that either a storehouse would be captured during the battle, or that provisions would arrive from the rear. Neither proved to be true. To advance any further would be suicidal. At Buna, it was thought that Allied troops would land at any time.

Commander Horii choked back his tears and decided to cancel the offensive. The following deployment policy was adopted:<sup>331</sup>

1. If we can capture the camp that is the object of current offensives, immediately occupy it for defence of the front line.
2. Elements will be deployed to the Mawai district to appropriate all foods from native villages.
3. Leave a minimum force at the front line and despatch all remaining troops to the rear to carry provisions.

#### Conditions at the front

The 144th Infantry Regiment at the front was undertaking a vigorous attack on the Allied camp around the village of Ioribaiwa. The first line of defence of the camp was attacked during 15 September, and the second line the following day. The final line of defence was penetrated in the evening of 16 September. The following order was transmitted to the front line infantry battalion at 6 pm: "The regiment will secure the Ioribaiwa area and prepare for future offensives."<sup>332</sup>

Meanwhile, the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment had, under orders from the commander, begun to withdraw that same day, 16 September, to Kokoda in the rear. The 41st Infantry Regiment 3rd Battalion was ordered to proceed as far as Efogi with the main strength, then head for Giruwa. The 2nd Battalion of the 41st

Infantry Regiment (less 6th and 8th Companies and a machine-gun platoon) were placed under the direct command of the South Seas Force commander and ordered to assemble near Mawai.<sup>333</sup>

The main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment was in contact with Australian troops at the line of the camp at Ioribaiwa. Reinforcement elements strengthened the unit during 18 September. The Australians sent forward frequent scouting parties to engage the Japanese troops in small battles, and thus secured the camp.

The command of the 17th Army heard the report that the South Seas Force had occupied Ioribaiwa on 19 September. As previously mentioned, they immediately issued strict orders for the front line to be withdrawn to north of Mawai.<sup>334</sup>

#### The supply situation

The supply situation for the South Seas Force was critical owing to the extreme difficulties of resupply from the base in the Basabua area. Provisions for the main strength of the force were close to depleted. The force commander petitioned the 17th Army to airlift food supplies on 20 September. The command of 17th Army immediately requested the 11th Air Fleet to undertake the drop. Turned back by poor weather on 21 and 22 September, naval medium land-based attack planes under escort from fighters finally carried out a drop of supplies over Kokoda on 23 September.<sup>335</sup> Major Yamamoto Chikurō, a new staff officer of the 17th Army, accompanied the mission.

#### Operational leadership by the 17th Army

Signals intelligence from the New Caledonia area on 22 September closely resembled that prior to the Allied landings on Guadalcanal. It was surmised that a new Allied landing was planned for eastern New Guinea or the Solomon Islands area. The commander of the 17th Army subsequently issued the following orders on 23 September:<sup>336</sup>

1. Signals intelligence indicates that the Allies are planning a new landing operation in eastern New Guinea or the Solomon Islands area.
2. In addition to offensive preparations continuing at Guadalcanal, the army will adjust the front line in the area of South Seas Force operations to strengthen the defences at Buna.
3. The commander of the South Seas Force will assemble his main strength in the Isurava and Kokoda areas and secure these as a base for future offensives. In addition, the defences in the Buna area will be strengthened. To this end, a force based on the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment will be immediately deployed to Buna to resist any planned Allied landings and to secure the area around the airfield. This unit will be placed under the command of the Tomita Unit.

Following this, on 30 September, the 17th Army ordered the South Seas Force to comply with these orders in response to preparations for the Port Moresby offensive and the strengthening of defences in the Buna area.

According to these orders, elements of the South Seas Force were to prepare an offensive base at Isurava and to secure defensive positions in the Buna and Giruwa areas. The main strength of the South Seas Force was ordered to repair the roads from Giruwa to Kokoda and the horse trails from Kokoda to Isurava by the end of October, and then to secure a foothold on the south side of the Owen Stanley Range.<sup>337</sup>

Attacks on the Buna airfield by Allied planes persisted into late September. As an example, the following was the air raid situation on 25 September:<sup>338</sup>

0640–0730 hrs, one B-17 and two B-26s  
0750–0830 hrs, one B-17  
0830–0850 hrs, two B-17s  
0900–0952 hrs, six B-17s  
1110–1125 hrs, six B-17s

The airfield was strafed, making the runway unusable.

#### Withdrawal from the front line at Ioribaiwa

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada, commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment, issued the following orders at noon on 25 September after it had been decided to withdraw from the front line at Ioribaiwa:<sup>339</sup>

1. The battalion will protect the rear of the regiment according to "Kusunose operational order no. 145". The unit will withdraw from the front line according to the schedule below after nightfall on 26 September and head for the high ground to the east of Kagi.

Schedule

a. 1800 hrs 25 September: Battalion artillery, stretcher cases (Sergeant Kawata)

b. 1900 hrs 26 September: 7th Company, Machine-gun Company, 8th Company, Battalion Headquarters

c. 2300 hrs 26 September: 9th Company (with machine-gun squad)

2. The 9th Company (with machine-gun squad) will act as the rearguard, advancing around 500 metres behind the withdrawing main force.

3. All units will strive to keep plans for withdrawal from the camp secret.

4. Other units will remain in their present locations and withdraw with the battalion headquarters at 1900 hrs on 26 September and head for Kagi.

The Australians commenced artillery attacks from the direction of Uberi at 11 am on 25 September, and mounted a frontal attack on the 9th Company with several men. The battalion commander ordered a counter-artillery strike. Two waves of artillery fire (each eighty rounds) repulsed the Australians.

The South Seas Force commander deployed the Stanley Detachment at Mt Lefunto near the pass in the Owen Stanley Range. Stanley Detachment was led by the commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment, Major Horie Masao, and was based on Horie's battalion, one mountain artillery company, and one engineer company. The 2nd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment was positioned to protect the rear.<sup>340</sup>

#### Withdrawal of the South Seas Force

The withdrawal from the front line took place successively from 10 pm, one hour earlier than the time specified in the orders to the rearguard. However, the actual withdrawal after that was undertaken under extreme conditions. Fortunately, there was no immediate Australian pursuit, but supplies were completely exhausted. The mood at that time was later captured in the following recollection by Major Koiwai:<sup>341</sup>

Our bodies were completely fatigued, so climbing even the smallest hill required a great effort. The majority of members of the unit were carrying wounded on stretchers. My battalion's 7th Company was meant to be protecting the rear, but they were carrying casualties from the field hospital, as were members of the force's wireless radio unit.

Because there was no life-sustaining rice, every step seemed to exhaust one's entire strength. Progress was exceedingly slow, as we climbed the mountain counting each step, gasping for each breath.

Despite some encouragement to struggle through the pain, many were stooped over, their eyes filled with tears and without even the strength to urge themselves on. My heart was filled with sorrow.

The withdrawal of the South Seas Force continued smoothly despite the hardship of the officers and men. The main strength of the force was assembled at Kokoda by 4 October.<sup>342</sup>

Meanwhile, the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment had arrived in Kokoda on 22 September. They were then ordered to leave Kokoda on 25 September and to arrive in Buna and complete defensive preparations by 4 October.<sup>343</sup>

The main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment (missing 6th and 8th Companies and a machine-gun platoon) assembled in the plantations near Kokoda and made efforts to restore their fighting strength. Provisions were not sufficient, with daily rations remaining at 360 millilitres per day. Around this time, the commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment, Colonel Kusunose, fell ill and was evacuated to the rear. He was replaced by the commander of the 1st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto.<sup>344</sup>

Air drop of supplies was only a temporary measure. Continuing supply for the entire force remained a critical problem. A desperate supply plan was instituted with the cooperation of the army and navy during the evening of 4 October. Approximately ten thousand 40-day portions of provisions were unloaded at Buna from the army transport *Yamaura Maru*. This rescued the immediate supply situation.

### Navy air unit operations

Meanwhile, pressure from the Allies began to intensify at the camp of the Stanley Detachment in the Owen Stanley Range.

Navy airbase units had daily braved poor weather and sortied to attack Port Moresby during the retreat of the South Seas Force. The sorties carried out by these units in the eastern New Guinea area in the latter part of September were as follows:

Date	Notes
17 September	Eight land-based attack planes attacked Port Moresby; only three returned
18 September	Plan to raid Port Moresby, but cancelled owing to poor weather
20 September	Three carrier-based bombers set out to raid New Guinea area, but turned back owing to poor weather
21 September	27 land-based attack planes and 39 fighters raided Port Moresby Four land-based attack planes set out for night raid on Port Moresby, but turned back owing to poor weather
23 September	Nine carrier-based bombers and three land-based attack planes dropped supplies over Kokoda Night raid on Port Moresby by two land-based attack planes
25 September	Two land-based attack planes set out for night raid on Port Moresby, but turned back owing to poor weather

[Editor's note: Despite the domination by Allied fighters, the air drop on 23 September greatly buoyed morale among the troops of the South Seas Force.]

### The 17th Army's assessment of Allied strengths in the eastern New Guinea area

The 17th Army made the following assessment of Allied strengths in early October 1942:<sup>345</sup>

1. Because they are led by a major, it is estimated that the Allied strength at Rabi is based on an Australian battalion, or at most two battalions.
2. The Allied strength at Moresby is led by a lieutenant general and comprises no more than 10,000 Australian troops (including the 2nd Australian Division). It has been tentatively confirmed that this includes 1,000–2,000 American army and navy troops.
3. Allied air strengths include 30–40 aircraft at Port Moresby. In addition to gradually replacing losses from Japanese raids, it seems pilots and aircrews are being gradually replaced from air units in Australia and the New Hebrides.  
The overall quality of Allied pilots cannot be confirmed.

This assessment does not touch on Allied counter-offensive planning. However, as was described above, the reality was that Allied military strength was very strong.

### **Leadership by Imperial Headquarters**

#### Reinforcements for the 17th Army

On 17 September 1942, army chief of staff Sugiyama presented to the emperor the following "Operational leadership policies and essential measures for Imperial Headquarters related to future operations in the area of the 17th Army".<sup>346</sup>

1. The main reason for the failure of the attack by the Kawaguchi Detachment was because Allied defensive organization, especially in material strength, was prepared to a much greater extent than anticipated. Further, it was not possible to fully concentrate our fighting strength owing to a dispersal of troops and insufficient contact between units, which resulted from a focus on carrying out raids using the jungle as cover. We have completely lost our capacity to fight on the island in present battles.
2. Research is currently being undertaken into future operational leadership for the 17th Army. While detailed plans have not yet been finalised, Imperial Headquarters has already reinforced the army with remnant units of the Aoba Detachment and the 2nd Division main force, including a tank company and heavy artillery company.

In addition, all military supplies and munitions will be reinforced, including ten motorised artillery guns, 30 grenade launchers, and ten flamethrowers. Plans are in place for the fighting strength of the army and navy to be concentrated to retake the airfield. The offensive is planned for October.

3. The navy is endeavouring to prevent reinforcement of the Allied position in the Solomon Islands area. However, while this activity is for the present continuing, it is anticipated that there may be the necessity to further reinforce our strength in the area. Further, there is still a necessity to quickly occupy the airfield at Rabi, and after that undertake the Moresby operation. At that time, it will be appropriate to strengthen the 17th Army with the 38th Division, two rapid-fire gun battalions, a tank regiment, a 15-centimetre howitzer regiment, a 10-centimetre machine-cannon regiment, two field anti-aircraft artillery battalions, a 30-centimetre mortar battalion, an independent engineer regiment, a landing group, and essential logistics units.

4. With these reinforcements, the 17th Army will have the strength to decisively carry out its operational responsibilities in the New Guinea area. Furthermore, not only will we be able to concentrate on the Solomon Islands area, but it will be possible to quickly respond to any future change in the enemy's situation. There is also great advantage in taking measures to quickly occupy the airfield at Rabi. This is an essential measure to ensure the successful completion of the Port Moresby offensive operation.

The following great army order was issued on 17 September in response to this report concerning reinforcements:<sup>347</sup>

Great Army Order No. 688

#### Orders

1. Units listed in appendix 1 will be removed from the command of their current dispositions and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army.
2. Units listed in appendix 2 will, notwithstanding Great Army Order No. 681, be removed from the order of battle of the 14th Army and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army.  
[Editor's note: "Great army order no. 681" relates to the transfer of transport units of the 14th Army to the 11th Army and the North China Area Army.]
3. The commanders of the Kwantung Army, 4th Division and the garrisoned 3rd Division will despatch the units listed in appendices 1 and 2 to the Rabaul area, where they will be placed under the command of the 17th Army.
4. The transfers shall take effect from when the units leave harbour in Japan, north of Australia, China and the southern area.
5. The chief of staff will issue detailed instructions concerning these moves.

#### Appendix 1

1. Units to be removed from the command of the Kwantung Army and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army are as follows:

- 6th Independent Rapid-fire Gun Battalion
- 4th Field Heavy Artillery Regiment (type A)
- 7th Field Heavy Artillery Regiment (type B, one company)
- 1st Independent Mortar Regiment (based on three companies)

[Editor's note: These units were from the 20th Army, 3rd Army, 5th Army, and 3rd Army respectively, and were the first units transferred from the Kwantung Army owing to the situation of the war in the Pacific. "Type A" heavy artillery refers to a 10-centimetre machine-cannon, and "mortar" refers to a 30-centimetre armour piercing gun.]

2. Units to be removed from the command of the China Expeditionary Army and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army are as follows:

- 8th Tank Regiment (from the China Area Army)
- 10th Independent Mountain Artillery Regiment (from the 23rd Army)
- 19th Independent Engineer Regiment (armoured) (from the 23rd Army)

3. Units to be removed from the command of the Southern Area Army and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army are as follows:

- 38th Division (from the 16th Army)
- 2nd Independent Rapid-fire Gun Battalion (less one company)
- 80th Independent Wireless Platoon (horse-drawn) (from the 25th Army to the signals unit)
- 53rd Independent Wireless Platoon (motorised)
- 42nd Wired Unit

5. Units to be removed from the 4th Division and the unoccupied 3rd Division command and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army are as follows:

- 41st Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (type B)
- 38th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (type B)

#### Appendix 2

- Units to be removed from the command of the 14th Army and added to the order of battle of the 17th Army are as follows:

- 3rd Field Transport Command

38th Independent Motor Car Battalion  
10th Casualty Transport Headquarters

[Editor's note: On 7 September, the 3rd Field Transport Command was transferred by great army order to the North China Area Army, and the other units to the 11th Army, for the No. 5 Operation.]

### Dispositions of the 38th Division

At the time of the despatch of these orders, a telegraph indicated the following disposition of the 38th Division:<sup>348</sup>

Formation	Location	Status	Notes
Division main strength	Northern Sumatra	Ready for immediate departure	
Tanaka Detachment	Palembang	Departure date under investigation	Based on two battalions of the 229th Regiment
Higashikata Detachment main strength	Java	Ready for immediate departure	Based on two battalions from Major General Itō's 228th Regiment
Migi Detachment infantry battalion	Timor	Ready for departure in approximately ten days	

On 18 September, Imperial Headquarters issued the following instruction concerning the formation of the 38th Division:<sup>349</sup>

The number of horses should be increased by approximately 200 to give a total of 1,200, and the number of motor vehicles increased to give a total complement of around 100. However, the main strength not on foot will be divided into two: the first to be a mounted infantry regiment, and the second a motorised formation.

The 38th Division was given the responsibility of invading Hong Kong at the start of the war. It was then added to the order of battle of the 16th Army on 4 January 1942, after which the main strength of the division campaigned in southern Sumatra. In addition to occupying vital sources of oil at Palembang and elsewhere, the division occupied airbases to be used for the invasion of Java. Further, the Higashikata Detachment, under the direct command of army headquarters, occupied Timor, while the Shōji Detachment, also under direct army command, marched directly to Bandung and accepted the surrender of the Netherlands East Indies. Thereafter the division's main strength was concentrated in central Sumatra under the command of the 25th Army, where it was earmarked for the Ceylon invasion and undertook training in tropical landing operations.

The disposition and commanders of the 38th Division at that time were as follows:

Division commander: Lieutenant General Sano Tadayoshi  
Chief of staff: Colonel Abe Yoshimitsu  
Staff officer: Lieutenant Colonel Oyadomari Chōsei  
Staff officer: Major Hosokawa Naotomo  
Staff officer: Major Kurosaki Sadaaki  
(Taking office in Rabaul)  
38th Infantry Group commander: Major General Itō Takeo  
228th Infantry Regiment commander: Colonel Doi Sadashichi  
229th Infantry Regiment commander: Colonel Tanaka Yoshisaburō  
230th Infantry Regiment commander: Colonel Shōji Toshinari  
38th Mountain Artillery Regiment commander: Colonel Kanki Takekichi  
38th Engineer Regiment commander: Lieutenant Colonel Iwabuchi Tsuneo  
38th Supply and Transport Regiment commander: Lieutenant Colonel Yabuta Hidekazu  
38th Division Signals Unit commander: Major Itō Ryōichi  
38th Division Munitions Duty Unit commander: Captain Koide Sadaharu  
38th Division Medical Unit commander: Lieutenant Colonel Hattori Otokazu  
38th Division 1st Field Hospital commander: Medical Major Suzuki Toshimi  
38th Division 2nd Field Hospital commander: Medical Major Itō Teizō  
38th Division Veterinary Workshop commander: Veterinary Major Hayashi Jirō

Each infantry regiment contained a regimental headquarters, three infantry battalions, an infantry artillery unit (four guns), and a signals unit. Each battalion was formed with four infantry companies, a machine-gun company, and a battalion artillery platoon (two guns).

A mountain artillery regiment contained a regimental headquarters and three battalions. Each battalion was formed with three companies, each of which contained four mountain artillery guns.

#### Strengthening line-of-communications units

Orders had been issued on 17 September 1942 to various units directly under the command of the army, similar to the main reinforcement, the 38th Division. The following, mostly line-of-communications units, were added to the order of battle of the 17th Army at around that time.

- Great Army Order No. 687 (14 September)
  - 39th Field Road Construction Unit
  - 76th Line-of-communication Hospital
  - 22nd Field Munitions Depot (part strength)
  - 22nd Field Motor Car Workshop (part strength)
  - 22nd Field Supply Depot (part strength)
- Great Army Order No. 695 (23 September)
  - 24th Signals Regiment (one company)
  - 61st Bridge Construction Duty Company
  - 17th Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit
  - 55th Bridge Construction Duty Company
  - 16th Veterinary Workshop
- Great Army Order No. 699 (2 October)
  - 2nd Independent Supply and Transport Regiment
  - 7th Imperial Guard Land Transport Unit
  - 8th Division, 9th Land Transport Unit
  - 35th Sea Duty Company

Units from various places across Greater East Asia navigated across seas patrolled by Allied submarines and arrived at Rabaul. Many of them then had to penetrate seas controlled by Allied aircraft to land at Guadalcanal. Precise coordination with the navy was essential to the success of these movements.

#### The eighth army–navy central agreement

The Army Department of Imperial Headquarters formulated an eighth central agreement between the army and navy. The complete text of the agreement is as follows:

Great Army Instruction No. 1,275

##### Instruction

The following are additions for campaigns in the eastern New Guinea and Solomon Islands areas in response to the situation as detailed in the appendix to Great Army Instruction No. 1,246.

18 September 1942

##### Appendix

Army–Navy Central Agreement Supplement in Response to the Situation in the Eastern New Guinea and Solomon Islands Areas

18 September

Imperial Headquarters Army Department

Imperial Headquarters Navy Department

1. The following is an addition to clause 1 of the Operational Outline.
  - A combined army and navy force under unified command, and with strengthened army firepower, will attack and reoccupy the airfield at Guadalcanal.
  - The navy will take various measures to prevent the enemy reinforcing the Solomon Islands region during the offensive.
2. The following replaces clause 2 of the Operational Outline.
  - A combined army and navy force will quickly occupy the airfield at Rabi prior to the Re Operation, as the situation of the abovementioned operation allows.
3. The following is an addition to the Operational Outline.
  - The navy will take efforts to further strengthen airfields in the eastern New Guinea and Solomon Islands areas.
  - The army will provide assistance to these efforts in key areas.

4. Key locations to secure as an outer defence after the completion of the Ka Operation (operation to reoccupy the Guadalcanal airfield) and the To Operation (operations in eastern New Guinea) will be as follows:

Solomon Islands (including San Cristobal Island and Rennell Island)  
Louisiade Archipelago  
Rabi and Samarai areas  
Port Moresby area (including Kila airfield)

The seventh army–navy central agreement was a “revision” to the sixth agreement, but the eighth was promulgated as a “supplement”. In either case, they were based in the fundamental policy outlined in “Great army order no. 673”, that: “In addition to prosecuting the campaign in the eastern New Guinea area, the 17th Army commander will cooperate with the navy to recapture key areas in the Solomon Islands.”

#### Strengthening the army general staff

Assistant chief of staff Tanabe at Imperial Headquarters was requested to strengthen the staff office of the 17th Army from three to 11 officers as a result of the survey of South-East Pacific Area.

Chief of staff Matsumoto was transferred to oversee 2nd Division operations. Colonel Konuma Haruo, who was head of the Imperial Headquarters research squad, received his orders on 15 September to replace Matsumoto.

Konuma left Tokyo on 18 September after meeting with officers from related areas, and arrived at Truk the following day. After key discussions with Combined Fleet staff officers, he finally took up his post at Rabaul on 20 September.

Further, Lieutenant Colonel Tsuji Masanobu, the head of the Imperial Headquarters operations office, arrived in Rabaul on 25 September on a planned rotation with staff officer Imoto, who had been sent by Imperial Headquarters. Tsuji arrived with the text of the supplement for the army–navy central agreement, with instructions from the chief of staff as follows:

Leave Tokyo on 18 September for a six-week tour of the 17th Army’s area of operations. In addition to being responsible for liaison between the 17th Army and Imperial Headquarters, you will assist the 17th Army in operational duties. You must receive instruction from the commander of the 17th Army while in the area.

The staff of the 17th Army at that time was as follows:

Chief of staff: Major General Futami Akisaburō  
Senior staff officer: Colonel Konuma Haruo (operations)  
Imperial Headquarters liaison officer: Lieutenant Colonel Tsuji Masanobu (operations)  
Imperial Headquarters liaison officer: Lieutenant Colonel Sugita Ichiji (intelligence)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Shinohara Masaru (shipping)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Etsugu Kazuo (logistics)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Hiraoka Yoichirō (communications)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Tanaka Kōji (air)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Yamauchi Toyooki (intelligence)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Hayashi Tadahiko (operations)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Yamamoto Chikurō (logistics)  
17th Army staff officer: Major Iemura Einosuke (shipping)

In this way, Imperial Headquarters strengthened various key units of the 17th Army and instituted a combined army–navy operational plan (eighth army–navy central agreement). Further, the staff office of the army was significantly strengthened and accelerated preparations for the operation.

But did the results of these preparations truly give rise to measures that would surely recapture Guadalcanal? That would have to wait from late September to early October.

## *Chapter 6. Retreat to Buna*

### **The fighting withdrawal of the South Seas Force**

#### Leadership by the 17th Army

The commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Major Kobayashi Asao, while fighting in the Owen Stanley Range, received orders that transferred him to duty in Japan. The commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Horii, ordered Major Kobayashi to “Clearly communicate to 17th Army command the actual overall conditions of the battle.” Kobayashi left the front in the Owen Stanley Range on 20 September and arrived at army headquarters in Rabaul on 6 October.

His report was as follows:

The supply situation for the South Seas Force has already reached a crisis. The number of troops who are collapsing continues to rise. Allied pressure mounts daily with no improvement in sight. I would like to see an immediate transport of supplies by destroyer to ease the situation.

However, the 17th Army had at that time concentrated its entire efforts towards the Guadalcanal campaign. After reports of the failure of the first stage of operations in Guadalcanal, the supply situation in the New Guinea area after the beginning of November was decided in one fell swoop – the lack of supplies for the South Seas Force simply had to be endured.

The 17th Army command formulated the “Strategic plan for operations after the Guadalcanal invasion” and left several staff officers in Rabaul charged with preparations and leadership of the Re Operation (Port Moresby invasion).

The first echelon of the 38th Division, which was to be appropriated for the Re Operation, arrived at Rabaul on 6 October. The commander of the South Seas Force, on hearing the news that the 38th Division was to be now despatched to New Guinea, telegraphed its commander: “Serving under the command of such a glorious, valorous division is indeed a great honour.” At this stage, the commander was very pleased that the occupation of Port Moresby might now be possible.<sup>350</sup>

Even this joy, however, was fleeting. The main strength of the 38th Division was despatched to the Guadalcanal area owing to the intensification of the battle in the latter stages of October. The Re Operation was again postponed. Meanwhile, from early October, the Allies had gradually sent a force to meet the Stanley Detachment (2nd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment with one artillery company and one engineer company, led by Major Horie Masao). The strength of the Allied commitment was judged to be around two battalions. The main strength of the South Seas Force had intended to mobilise on 15 October to reinforce the detachment, but the intensification of the Allied attack saw the beginning of a blockade of the South Seas Force’s own line of communication. The combination of daily heavy rain and lack of supplies gradually wore down the fighting strength of the force.<sup>351</sup>

#### The battle near Gap

According to the *Detailed battle report of the 144th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion*, which was the second reinforcement group for the front line of the Stanley Detachment, the battles proceeded as follows:

Engaged a strong enemy force from 3 October. Our forward positions were breached on 13 October but we denied the enemy at our main camp. With the unfavourable climate and severe cold, combined with the lack of supplies, casualties in the unit continue to mount. The conditions of the battle are extremely harsh.

The main strength of the regiment set out to reinforce us, but they were encircled by the enemy and gradually forced back. On 21 October, we repelled a strong enemy assault while retreating to Gap.

The battalion left its current position and quickly proceeded to Gap after orders were issued by the detachment commander on 22 October.

The third reinforcement unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment (92 men), received orders on 25 October, and arrived at the rear of the front line by 9 am the following day.<sup>352</sup>

The camp was prepared by around noon on 26 October. Meanwhile, the commander of the South Seas Force ordered the Stanley Detachment to “Repel the frontal attacks of the enemy and withdraw during the evening of 28 October.” Further, the 2nd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment (led by Major Koiwai Mitsuo, hereafter referred to as the Koiwai Battalion) was issued instructions to “Act as the rearguard of the Stanley Detachment.”

Meanwhile, the Allies began operations from around 20 October to break through the positions of the Stanley Detachment in a pass in the Owen Stanley Range (Templeton’s Crossing). However, the effective resistance of the Stanley Detachment (at that time based on 2nd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment) resulted in the Allies achieving little progress. Consequently, measures were taken to replace Allied front-line units with the fresh 16th Brigade (based on three battalions) and the 25th Brigade of the 7th Australian Division.<sup>353</sup>

[Editor’s note: Localities in this area were not designated with names, so references in different sources are very confused. For example, the location known as “Gap” by the Japanese is around 5 kilometres from what the Allies refer to as “Gap”. In this text, designations have been standardised according to Japanese official records, with discrepancies indicated with a note.]

The area around Gap was the most suitable location to hold the track from Kokoda to Port Moresby. Advanced troops of the Stanley Detachment engaged Australian troops early in the morning of 23 October. The Australian official history records the situation in this engagement through the words of a conscript soldier, as follows:<sup>354</sup>

The Japanese had the good sense to establish this forest fort on the only water to be found on the ridge. Consequently, for the four days before support arrived, the men of the company had to catch rain water in their gas capes and drink water from the roots of the “water tree”. Their only food was dehydrated emergency ration, eaten dry and cold. Every time patrols from the company located one of the outlying Japanese machine-gun posts, scouts were killed or wounded.

Great courage was being asked of forward scout units. The Australian divisional commander responsible for field operations received an urgent telegram from his superiors, as follows:<sup>355</sup>

Your difficulties are very great but enemy has similar. In view of your superior strength energy and force on the part of all commanders should overcome the enemy speedily. In spite of your superior strength enemy appears able to delay advance at will. Essential that forward commanders should control situation and not allow situation control them.

Attacks on the Stanley Detachment’s main line of defence began on 27 October, but they repelled strong Australian attacks on both flanks. Rain fell at around 4 pm. The troops immediately gathered water with their tents, and collected it in unused utensils and canteens while washing their rice.<sup>356</sup>

The day for the withdrawal was 28 October. Attacks on both flanks continued during the morning like the previous day, then ceased for about an hour. Signals scouts from the Koiwai Battalion discovered Allied signals wires running between the track and the camp. The battalion commander recognised this as preparations for an Allied attack on the camp, so detached a platoon to close the gap.

The 3rd Battalion positions, which to this point had been spared attack, suffered a strong Allied assault at around 3 pm. According to postwar investigations, the Australians had applied two companies to the front line of the 3rd Battalion while applying one company to encircle the left flank.

The following passage is taken from the *Detailed battle report of the 144th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion*:

Enemy troops who attacked the left flank of the 7th and 9th Companies approached within 5 metres of the front of our position. The front line company put up good resistance. Casualties to our machine-gun platoon gradually mounted but they kept being replaced under extreme fire from the attack by the Allies, which was finally repelled at 1400 hrs.

Although orders had previously been issued to withdraw at 1300 hrs, there were reports that a strong enemy force had penetrated behind the lines of the 41st Infantry Regiment. Major Koiwai was consulted over the route of withdrawal, with the 41st Infantry Regiment cooperating to attack and secure a passage.

There are some discrepancies between this passage and the memoirs of Major Koiwai. According to the latter, there was neither a “strong enemy force” nor did they “attack and secure a passage”. Major Koiwai personally visited the position of the 3rd Battalion at around 1 pm. At that time, his comment to the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada Genshirō, was to the effect that, “If there are incursions by an enemy force, my battalion will attack.” It seems that this exchange entered into the battle reports as if it was a fact. Koiwai stated in his memoirs as follows:

The time designated to leave our position was 8 pm. According to previous arrangements, the Kuwada Battalion was to have withdrawn to our position by that time, then proceed to positions on the road held by Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto Masao. Our battalion also undertook preparations for withdrawal, then waited for Kuwada’s unit. However, 8 pm passed without any sign of them. We began to think something had befallen them but they finally arrived around 8.30 pm. Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada then said: “Elements of an enemy force penetrated our battalion’s position and engaged us in close fighting. We were finally able to repel them and I issued the order to withdraw.”

Only the battalion headquarters and machine-gun company returned with the battalion commander. [Section omitted by editor]

We waited for a further hour, but there was still no sign of the rest of the battalion by 10 pm. The moon was bright and thin beams of light penetrated here and there between the thick growth of the forest. Lieutenant Colonel Kuwada said to me: “We cannot wait any longer for the unit. We have to leave. The company commanders may be somehow able to withdraw.”

I replied: “No. Our unit is to defend the withdrawal. We must leave friendly forces to the rear of the unit. Let’s wait for another hour. Any longer, and it will become difficult to secure a position for tomorrow.”

Kuwada then replied: “But perhaps another company will come out on the road further down. Even if we wait here it will be a waste. Let’s leave now.”

The 3rd Battalion’s detailed battle report contains the following record:

The unit debouched from the mountain having taking longer than expected to maintain contact and seek a path in the dark ... However, the 7th and 9th Companies and the Machine-gun Company needed time to accommodate their casualties, so they detached from the main unit.

It is not possible to verify which is the correct account. Both versions, however, speak of aspects of separation of command during periods of difficult prolonged combat.

#### Retreat of the rearguard unit

The Stanley Detachment withdrew from contact with the Australian forces in the Gap area during the evening of 28 October. It was planned that Isurava was to be the location of the next camp.

The unit arrived in Isurava village at around 3.30 am and immediately began preparing their position. There were no pursuing attacks from the Australians that day. The main strength of the Stanley Detachment (based on the 144th Infantry Regiment) continued its withdrawal towards Kokoda.

The commander of the rearguard battalion, sensing a change in future battles, took the decision on 30 October to retain only able-bodied men, sending all casualties to the rear. Sixteen men, plus the battalion commander, remained in the camp after this selection process. Major General Horii had ordered them to “delay their withdrawal to arrive in Kokoda by 31 October”. Though it was only 10 kilometres from the camp to Kokoda, it was doubtful if 16 men could effectively obstruct the Australian pursuit. At around 10 am, the unit withdrew to the position planned for the second line of resistance. It was here that the previously mentioned front-line company from the 3rd Battalion, which had lost communications with the battalion headquarters, had withdrawn and assembled without either food or water. The company commander told of how they had lost their way in the jungle, then, all the while carrying their casualties, had arrived through the mountains.

The unit withdrew to the third line of resistance at around 2 pm, despite there being no offensive from the Australians. Incidentally, this was the line of attack at the time of the start of the offensive against Isurava in late August, when the South Seas Force was pressing on to Port Moresby full of vigour and spirit.

By nightfall, the unit had withdrawn to Deniki, some 3 kilometres to the rear. Battalion commander Koiwai heard on 31 October that: “The South Seas Force will occupy the high ground at Oivi, approximately 8 kilometres to the east of Kokoda. The main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment will prepare the camp. The Koiwai Battalion will be positioned on the right flank.” Koiwai’s battalion quickly proceeded to Oivi. Fortunately, there were no Australian attacks on that day.

#### Battles near Oivi

The 41st Infantry Regiment was the primary unit deployed around Oivi.

The Australian divisional commander, as previously mentioned, was replaced on 28 October. The Australian plan at that time was for a direct pursuit by the 25th Brigade to Kokoda, and for the 16th Brigade to quickly occupy Oivi then establish and hold a bridgehead over the Kumusi River.<sup>357</sup>

The Australians occupied Kokoda on 3 November, and made contact with the camp at Oivi two days later. The Australian official history records: “On that day, our advance was halted at the Oivi front by Japanese mortar fire.” Two Australian battalions were undertaking this offensive.

There was no great difference in this attack from that at Gap. Heavy fire would be poured on Japanese positions at set times twice a day, in the morning and evening, with no attacks at other times of the day.

However, as the days passed, there were indications of an encirclement on the flank to the left of the front line. The commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Yazawa Kiyomi, was on high alert for this kind of encirclement attack by the Australians.

The situation for the Japanese troops quickly deteriorated – worse than that feared by Colonel Yazawa. The Australian troops had penetrated to the immediate vicinity of the headquarters of the South Seas Force, located at that time around 5 kilometres to the rear of the Oivi front. This occurred on 8 November. According to the memoirs of Major Koiwai, the Australian unit penetrated the front line between the 1st Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment and the mountain artillery company on the left flank, and then proceeded east along the main track. This explanation is, however, problematic on one point – namely, the strategic deployment of troops on the southern side track. There is no evidence of discussions concerning deployments along this track after the decision was taken by the commander of the South Seas Force to defend Oivi in late October.

Given the common-sense approach to deploy the main strength of the crack 41st Infantry Regiment on the point of most resistance at the high ground at Oivi, it would have been routine to assign the 144th Infantry Regiment, which had been involved in fighting at the front line as part of the Stanley Detachment, to guard the southern branch track and remain in reserve for the South Seas Force.

The only official record relating to this point is contained in the *Detailed battle report of the 144th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion*: “Departed from Kokoda at 0200 hrs on 31 October and headed for Ilimo. Regiment occupied a camp at Ilimo, then was ordered to vigilantly guard the flanks of the South Seas Force along the track from Isurava to Papaki.”

This may on first glance seem a reasonable statement, but Ilimo, the location referred to in the text, is some 12 kilometres distant from the camp at Oivi where the main strength of the regiment was deployed. Given that there were at least two possible lines of infiltration between these two positions, there are doubts that the battalion could “vigilantly guard the flanks” from Ilimo.

With the occasional confusion of place names, and when considered from strategic common sense, it is possible that the location referred to as “Ilimo” in the 3rd Battalion’s detailed battle report was in fact to the south of Gorari. The following entry appeared in the report dated 3 November: “Departed Ilimo at 0800 hrs for Baribe. Arrived at 1100 hrs and immediately executed the aforementioned orders. Occupied the main camp at the line of the three-forked stream. Ordered to occupy the advance camp at Waju to the south.”

This advance camp, according to the battalion’s detailed battle report, was attacked on 5 November and held for ten days. After that, the unit was encircled by a superior force and the company commander and other men died a heroic death.

However, the memoir of Major Koiwai contains the record of the following conversation with the South Seas Force chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Toyoshige:

(8 November) A telephone call came from chief of staff Tanaka during the evening.

“I have also just now received a telephone message from the regimental commander. As you know, the enemy has appeared to the rear of the force. We have been vigorously trying to repulse them since yesterday. However, the situation is deteriorating.”

I replied: “If that’s the case, why didn’t we withdraw to the right bank of the Kumusi River in line with the original decision? Is support to be forthcoming from the army?”

“No, there will be no reinforcements. However, the commander will not allow the enemy to easily cross the plain at Kokoda. Therefore, our decision must change and the present strategy be undertaken while returning from Gap.”

“It seems that the 144th Infantry Regiment is deployed on the branch track. Do you have contact with them?”

“No. I have no idea what the trouble may be, and I am gravely concerned. I wonder if they have already withdrawn to the line of the Kumusi River.”

This conversation occurred on 8 November. It is clear that the lines of command between the South Seas Force and the headquarters of the 144th Infantry Regiment had been cut sometime prior to this time. Meanwhile, the location of the South Seas Force headquarters is clearly indicated to be west of Gorari.

If one applies the notion introduced above that the “Ilimo” referred to by the 144th Infantry Regiment was in fact “Gorari”, then the headquarters of the regiment was only separated from the force headquarters by a few kilometres. This gives rise to doubts over the claim of lack of contact between the two. It is clear from the content of the phone conversation that the chief of staff was unaware that contact with the enemy had been made some three days previously at the advance camp on the branch track. From the course of the subsequent battle, it seems that communications were not restored between the force headquarters and the main strength of the regiment. Incursions through the defensive perimeter were, tragically, allowed to get completely out of hand after the departure from Oivi.

In contrast, Australian postwar sources indicate that the commander of the 7th Division felt that frontal attacks on Japanese positions near Oivi on 4 November were ineffective. Consequently, he quickly ordered a battalion to advance along the branch track to the south through Ilimo. The unit departed early in the morning of 5 November and advanced to Waju by evening, passing Japanese footprints, cigarette cases, and remains of cooking fires along the way.<sup>358</sup>

This unit lost its way between 6–7 November, but turned north towards Gorari after the commander discovered that the 16th Brigade was involved in fierce fighting at the Oivi front.

Meanwhile, the divisional commander had taken the step of despatching the 25th Brigade along the southern branch track. Consequently, there were four battalions deployed along the branch track. At 11.50 am on 8 November, the lead units made contact with Japanese troops equipped with machine-guns. This unit had entered the branch track at Waju.

Thereafter, the overwhelmingly superior Australian force poured fire on the encircled Japanese troops. Fierce fighting continued around Gorari from 9 to 11 November.

The Japanese record generally agrees with this account, though there are slight differences in time and date. It can be reasonably ascertained from these accounts that the 144th Infantry Regiment was stationed to the south of Gorari to guard the perimeter of the South Seas Force position, that they came under heavy attack from Australian forces, and that they returned fire then withdrew piecemeal in the direction of Ilimo.

Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo had transferred the 51st Division to the order of battle of the 17th Army on 20 October for the Re Operation. However, the division did not arrive in the region until late November, making them too late to assist the stricken South Seas Force.<sup>359</sup>

The commander of the South Seas Force had three times sent telegrams to Rabaul outlining the difficult situation of his units. Chief of staff Miyazaki personally ordered the despatch of the 1st Battalion of the 229th Infantry Regiment, set to arrive in Rabaul on 30 October, to quickly reinforce the South Seas Force. However, this order was cancelled owing to every available unit being prioritised to Guadalcanal owing to the defeat in the area. Lieutenant General Miyazaki reminisced later that, unavoidably, the whole affair just had to be endured.

The chief of staff received a report on 28 October, the night prior to his departure for Guadalcanal, that the commander of the South Seas Force at Kokoda had decided to withdraw from the front line and retreat. The chief of staff immediately issued an army order for the South Seas Force to “withdraw and secure the Papaki area”. This order was dated prior to any telegram from the force commander indicating his decision to withdraw, which was a measure to make the retreat the responsibility of the army rather than of the force commander.<sup>360</sup>

#### Early doubts over the invasion of Port Moresby

The chief of staff of the 17th Army relayed the situation to the adjutant and to the chiefs of staff of the Southern Area Army and the 14th Army as follows:<sup>361</sup>

Oki Group Operations Staff Telegram No. 137

The South Seas Force has been engaged in combat with 300–400 enemy troops who have appeared in the Owen Stanley Range since around 20 October. The strength of the force gradually deteriorated owing to the constant heavy rain and depletion of supplies. The commander led approximately 100 of his men to the front line to the west of Isurava on 25 October, but the fighting strength at the front was depleted to one company (20–30 men). Meanwhile, the commander realised that attacks from Allied planes had disrupted the transport of supplies further forward than the bridge at Papaki. He consequently made the unavoidable decision on 27 October to withdraw the force to the north bank of the Kumusi River at Papaki. There are reports that elements of the force have already arrived at this position. Consequently, in addition to current measures to supply the force (two army transport ships to land at Buna on 1 November), orders were issued endorsing the force commander’s decision to withdraw to and secure the line at Papaki.

The transport vessels quoted in the telegram (*Chōryō Maru* and *Kiyokawa Maru*) arrived at Buna safely on 2 November and debarked ammunition and supplies.<sup>362</sup>

Under these circumstances, Imperial Headquarters sought opinions from the 17th Army concerning the deployment of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade, which had been added to the order of battle of the 17th Army, to the New Guinea area. Staff officer Tsuji replied by telegram (“Oki group operations staff telegram no. 219”) that the artillery unit of the brigade would be deployed to Guadalcanal and the main strength to Buna.

[Editor’s note: The 21st Independent Mixed Brigade consisted of approximately three thousand seven hundred troops of various types, including brigade headquarters, the 170th Infantry Regiment, a tank company, an artillery unit, an anti-aircraft company, engineers, a signals unit, and a field hospital.]

Meanwhile, the South Seas Force was carrying out a courageous defensive battle to hold Oivi, and had considered a withdrawal to the line of the Kumusi River as a last resort. At such a time, it would be natural to evaluate the feasibility of the Port Moresby operation in light of the long-term strategic position. However, no one would have publicly stated this in the mood of the time.

On 1 November, the head of the Military Affairs Section in the Army Ministry, Colonel Nishiura Susumu, formally submitted to the Operations Section of the Army General Staff a consideration titled: “Is it essential to take Port Moresby?” These remarks stemmed from a position that considered that the demands on merchant shipping for the operation would be too great.

This issue surely had its origins in enquiries made by commanders in the field. A reply was despatched to the Chief of Operations on 10 November by staff officer Tsuji in Rabaul:<sup>363</sup>

Oki Group Telegram No. 1,262

We know only too well from the bitter experience of the South Seas Force that a strong invasion of Port Moresby over the Owen Stanley Range is extremely difficult. Furthermore, we must expect an exceptionally strong defence in the vicinity of Port Moresby to counter a seaborne attack, as was made evident through the sacrifices made at Guadalcanal. According to information I have received from Major Iwakoshi, it seems that the navy can

spare no air strength and that we must rely exclusively on the army to provide air power for the Port Moresby operation. As a result, we hold *absolutely no hope for success* in the Port Moresby campaign. In the light of these events, there is no doubt that the objectives of the Ka Operation will be achieved, regardless of the sacrifice to be paid. The execution of the Re Operation, however, requires careful study of the responsibilities given to the area army and the operational army, owing to the necessity of making decisions based on the overall war situation. Particular care must be taken in making *decisions in light of the navy's resolve*, and in retaining the flexibility to incorporate movements prompted by the navy's own agenda.

[Editor's note: Major Iwakoshi was an Imperial Headquarters staff officer who was despatched to Rabaul from 4–18 November.]

This issue of air support was deeply intertwined with the feasibility of the Port Moresby operation, so a solution was not quickly forthcoming. Meanwhile, the main strength of the South Seas Force, which had occupied Oivi, had been cut off at the rear by a superior Australian force.

#### Crossing the tributary of the Kumusi River by the main strength of the South Seas Force

A decision was taken on 10 November for a general withdrawal by the South Seas Force.

The initial consideration was to break through the blockade to the rear and withdraw. However, this would have left them open to a swift pursuit from the front line at Oivi and the possible complete destruction of the force. A unit (based on the 41st Infantry Regiment), would first cross to the north bank of the tributary of the Kumusi River, then would lead a withdrawal from the Australian units along the north (left) bank.<sup>364</sup>

Meanwhile, the movements of the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment, which had lost contact with the force, were recorded in the previously cited *Detailed battle report of the 144th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion*, as follows:

Meanwhile, the units at Ilimo [Editor's note: As previously discussed, this was in fact Gorari] were completely surrounded by the enemy. Though some had escaped after fierce fighting, reports were received of the complete destruction of those remaining units. Consequently, the plan was changed and a withdrawal to Papaki undertaken (rather than to Gorari).

The withdrawal of the regiment began at 2200 hrs that night. The plan was to break through the enemy lines, then occupy key locations between Ilimo and Papaki, which could be used to accommodate the main strength of the South Seas Force.

In this way, the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment became isolated from the South Seas Force and came to withdraw towards the direction of the main track from Kokoda. As discussed, it is unclear to what degree command lines were effective between the two forces under the conditions of the battle.

The 41st Infantry Regiment was ordered to disengage from the Australians during the evening of 10 November. When the troops arrived at Gorari in the morning, they discovered that the days of continual rain had flooded the Kumusi River, making a crossing by weary soldiers difficult.<sup>365</sup>

During preparations for the withdrawal, the commander of the 3rd Company, 1st Battalion of the 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment, Lieutenant Takagi Yoshifumi, committed suicide. According to Koiwai's memoir, the commander of the force ordered Takagi to bury his artillery gun and made the artillery company carry the wounded from force headquarters. Takagi, unable to bring himself to bury the artillery piece, went to the commander and implored him: "If we can carry out wounded, then please let us carry out the gun." The commander flatly refused this request. Takagi had no option but to return to his unit, gather his troops, and explain the situation. The breach was broken up and the gun buried. After the company had given a final parting salute to the buried gun and then dispersed, Lieutenant Takagi took his life with his pistol.

Major Koiwai commented on this incident in his memoir, as follows:

Artillery officers fresh from officers' college hold equal sentiment for their guns and military orders. Older army commanders hold human life as the fundamental principle. Though there is a great difference between these two positions, a judgment of which position is right and which is wrong cannot question the character of each man. The military spirit which compelled the lieutenant to act will live forever. At the same time, even the decision of the commander to bury the gun was principled when seen from a wider perspective, owing to his desire to save the young troops in his charge.

### The withdrawal

Australian units were attacking hard on the heels of the Koiwai Battalion around 10 November. The battalion, which was responsible for protecting the rear of the main force, met these repeated attacks with counter-attacks, and held firm. The unit continued to walk, without food, through the boggy, trackless jungle. Physical strength was drained owing to lack of food. Heavy firearms were discarded, as was ammunition; finally, even pistols were disposed of. Shoes were worn out, with many walking barefoot.<sup>366</sup>

The memoir of Major Koiwai described the situation at that time as follows:

On the way, there was an officer waiting for me on the side of the track. It was the commander of a cavalry company from the South Seas Force. He said: "I've been at my wits' end wondering what to do, so I have been waiting for you." I asked him what was wrong. I knew his face but could not recall his name.

"We have been carrying the company's wounded, but three out of the four have died. The remaining patient has sunk into a coma, and I think, more than likely, he too will soon breathe his last. The men of my company have continued to carry these casualties over trackless mountains to the point of collapse. They have had no food, and I am virtually the only one left who can still walk. I think that if they continue to carry the patient, they will probably all die for the sake of trying to save one man. Of course I would like to be able to save both the troops and the patient, but under these conditions this is not possible. Is the answer to this dilemma to just leave the patient, who is without hope anyway, somewhere in the mountains? Or should we just end it all by putting him out of his misery once and for all? However, I don't have the spirit to do this, so I am at a complete loss what to do."

I listened to his story, but I, too, was unable to muster a reply.

The following story, related to the problem of munitions, was recorded for the following day:

The next day, more and more men fell by the way. But even those who tottered on left their pistols by their sides. This was evidence of their comprehensive military education. Discarding weapons without permission would naturally bring down heavy punishment. This lesson had seeped to the very marrow of the soldiers.

"Throw away your weapons!" I yelled this to exhausted soldiers who were dragging their legs as if in a dream. "You will travel lighter without them. Throw them away, then walk on and leave them in these mountains."

Some bewildered soldiers, however, cast an incriminating glance my way, then, as expected, showed no desire to discard their pistols.

"I am Major Koiwai of the 41st. I will look after the pistols for you." I took the weapons from them. I then told them: "If the company commander asks you where they are, tell him that Major Koiwai is keeping charge of them."

Despite it only being that one time, I had lowered myself to the point of personally destroying the weapons of ten soldiers.

### Crossing the main stream of the Kumusi River by the South Seas Force

Judging from the sound of artillery fire around the Giruwa area after 17 November, the enemy had captured the camp at Oivi and had advanced towards Giruwa and Basabua.

The unit camped on flat ground next to the Kumusi River near Pinga the following evening. Heavy rain fell during the night, causing the river to overflow and flood the camp. Officers and men alike were forced to stand through the night like horses, shivering from the intense cold.<sup>367</sup>

The commander of the South Seas Force, Lieutenant General Horii, decided on 19 November to go ahead to Giruwa by raft down the Kumusi River with several of his staff officers after hearing artillery fire from the direction of Giruwa. Horii left the main strength of the South Seas Force in the charge of the commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Yazawa, with orders to cross the Kumusi River near Pinga, their present location, then advance towards Gona.<sup>368</sup>

The force commander boarded a large raft with his staff officers and adjutant, with a small number of other ranks and some troops in train. The commander issued the parting remark: "I go on ahead!" after which the raft headed down the Kumusi River.<sup>369</sup>

The main strength of the force commenced preparations on the bank to carry out orders to cross the Kumusi, which was 120 metres across and 2 metres deep. How to achieve this, however, was a huge obstacle.

While the senior officers were racking their brains over how to cross the river, a member of the Takasago Volunteers proposed the following method: four or five 1.8 metre lengths of sapling, each around 6 centimetres in diameter, were to be lashed together to form a raft. This was not for a soldier to ride on, but to carry clothes and weapons, etc. The other side would be reached if a soldier pushed the raft as far as possible into the middle, where the river bent outwards, then clutched hold of the raft as it flowed around the bend.

The unit crossed the river using this method. However, many soldiers were physically exhausted and drowned during the crossing. The loss of equipment under these circumstances was also regrettable.

The right bank of the Kumusi River was flat and easy going for the marching troops, who set out on a native track. Fields of sweet potato and fruit were discovered, giving the troops the feeling that they had suddenly emerged into the world of light after having endured the underworld the previous days. The advance continued, with various units able to assemble at Gona by 27 November.<sup>370</sup>

All the while, however, the losses in numbers of troops and military equipment were very high, with military strength for the battles in the Buna area much less than expected.

Meanwhile, troops of the 144th Infantry Regiment were retreating along the main track from Kokoda, having crossed the Kumusi River near an old ford at Papaki. On 14 November, the unit received the following army order: "The South Seas Force will withdraw to Giruwa and facilitate the landing of reinforcement units." They arrived at Giruwa in the morning of 17 November.<sup>371</sup>

The situation at Buna, Giruwa, and Basabua was as follows: Colonel Yokoyama Yosuke, the commander of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment, was in charge of the defence of the Giruwa and Basabua areas. Most of his troops, however, were weakened by disease, and included those who could not participate in the thrust over the Owen Stanley Range, as well as engineers and supply troops charged with transport and road construction duties. They had no discernable fighting strength.

In addition, Captain Yasuda Yoshitatsu and his Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party were defending the Buna area. Their strength included approximately nine hundred engineers and soldiers equipped with two 8-centimetre anti-aircraft guns, four machine-guns, and three rapid-fire guns.

#### The death of the commander of the South Seas Force

On 19 November, the commander boarded a raft and set out before his unit with a cadre force in train. The raft became stuck, however, on a large tree that had fallen into the river around 2 kilometres downstream. The group abandoned the raft and clambered ashore, then continued to follow the river along its right bank, where a single canoe was discovered. The commander's duty soldier happened to be a fisherman, so he navigated the commander and his chief of staff in the canoe safely to the mouth of the Kumusi River.

The commander had heard fierce gunfire from the direction of Giruwa continually over several days. Despite the danger, the commander set off out to sea in the canoe in order to quickly advance to Giruwa to lead the battle.

As it happened, a fierce tropical storm hit that afternoon. The canoe, which had drifted some 10 kilometres off shore, was tossed like a twig in the turbulent seas, then suddenly capsized. The head of chief of staff Tanaka, who could not swim, appeared once, then twice above the surface of the water, then disappeared.

The commander and his duty soldier began the swim towards the shore. After swimming about 4 kilometres, however, the commander said to his duty soldier: "I have no strength to swim any further. Tell the troops that Horii died here." He lifted both arms above the surface of the water, cried "Banzai to the emperor!" with his remaining strength, and sank beneath the waves. This account is contained in the memoir of Major Koiwai, and

is based on the report given to the unit by the duty soldier after he had reached shore. The commander's death at the vanguard of the New Guinea operation was perhaps foreshadowed by his desire to lead from the front of his force: during the invasion of Guam by the South Seas Force in 1941 at the outset of the war, in the occupation of Rabaul, and finally during the advance into New Guinea.

#### The discovery of an Allied base

On 16 November, just prior to these events, the survey headquarters of the navy at Rabaul received an intelligence report of enormous significance. Allied ships, in the middle of landing operations, were sighted by air patrols at Oro Bay, around 15 kilometres south of Buna. The landing force was approximately one thousand strong.

The Airbase Force Command scrambled a group of thirty fighters and bombers at just after 1 pm. These engaged the Allied force at 5 pm, immediately sinking three transports and setting fire to two others, which later sank. Army reconnaissance planes discovered an airfield approximately 10 kilometres south-east of Buna, and two airfields at Mendaropu (approximately 25 kilometres south-east of Buna).<sup>372</sup> An offensive against the airfields on a scale suitable to halt the damage to numerous Japanese transport ships was not contemplated.

The entry in the diary of the chief of staff of the Combined Fleet for that day was as follows:

If the Buna and Salamaua areas are left to the Allies, then the South Seas Force will be caught like a mouse in a trap and we will lose the sector from where to mount the offensive on Port Moresby. (It is said there has been some discussion within the 17th Army in Rabaul to abandon the Buna area, which is scandalous.) The air attacks on Rabaul are becoming more intense. Buna is becoming a bigger issue in this region than the problematic Solomon Islands, in terms of national defence. It is essential to nip this in the bud now, and deprive the Allies of any room for a counter-offensive.

If the sentiment of this entry is compared to the previously quoted telegram from staff officer Tsuji, it is clear that great differences of opinion in the fundamental position were held by many.

At any rate, the main strength of the South Seas Force was retreating along the left bank of the Kumusi River carrying their wounded, all the while battling malaria and malnutrition. The crossing points over the Kumusi had been controlled by the Allies, so there was no choice but to continue north along the river.

#### **The Allied counter-offensive**

##### The fundamental strategy of the Allies

Preparations for the Allied operation to mop up Japanese resistance in the Buna area of eastern New Guinea gradually came together in October 1942.

MacArthur had a total strength of ten brigades in the area for this task at the end of October. Allied air units would sortie from Port Moresby and attack Japanese transports at Rabaul with the aid of accurate intelligence from secretly placed coast watchers.

General MacArthur advanced towards the Buna area along four axes. The first two were on the Owen Stanley Range front, along the Kokoda Trail and the Kapa Kapa (Jaure) Track to the south-east. The third was along the north coast of Papua from Milne Bay. The fourth was a direct air route to Buna from the south-east, with troops airlifted from Wanigela south of Cape Nelson.

Operations to take and completely eject Japanese troops from Papua were conducted in concert with campaigns by marine units on Guadalcanal. One of the reasons why General MacArthur prosecuted the Buna campaign with insufficient strength was that the Japanese troops at Guadalcanal had offered little resistance.

On 17 October 1942, MacArthur sent the following telegram to the US army minister:<sup>373</sup>

My operation to capture the north coast of New Guinea in full swing: am greatly hampered by the total lack of light shipping, landing boats, and barges, which I have previously requested; in their absence am moving overland and by air; supply is the controlling factor and must be accomplished by native carrier and by air;

improvised landing fields have been and are being prepared ... supply difficulties incredible and limit speed of movement and size of forces and are of course multiplied by lack of shipping and shortage of transport planes.

[Under these conditions] the major effort has been expended in Rabaul area, because it can be reached with full bomb loads, while planes going to Solomon Islands area must carry bomb bay tanks, reducing bomb load by 50 per cent.

The Allies discovered a runway at Wanigela to the south of Cape Nelson, which they knew was suitable for use by transport planes. The Allies made uninterrupted use of the airfield, despite it being discovered by the Japanese on 5 October.

The headquarters and two battalions of the American 128th Infantry Regiment, along with the 2/6th Australian Independent Company, were airlifted to Wanigela from Port Moresby in mid-October. These units were to establish a footing before heading towards Buna. However, prior to the American landings at Oro Bay on 16 November, the existence of these was not known to the Japanese.

Meanwhile, the Allied units crossing the Owen Stanley Range along the Kokoda Trail made steady northward progress. Only two or three months before, the Japanese troops had been fighting their way south along the same precipitous mountain trails. The present Allied advance, however, was conducted at much greater speed than the former southward thrust of the Japanese. The 7th Australian Division occupied the airfield at Kokoda in early November 1942. The Japanese forces resisted from the high ground in the area, but effected a complete withdrawal by 10 November.

General MacArthur made the following statement concerning the situation when the Japanese troops were surrounded:<sup>374</sup>

The enemy was forced from his main positions near Oivi with heavy losses. His retreat has been blocked by our enveloping troops astride the main track and he is endeavouring to cut his way through the rear. Simultaneously our forces enveloped and destroyed enemy forces trapped south of Gorari.

Our ground troops have reached the vicinity of Ilimor [Ilimo]. Here the enemy defending force had been surrounded. Of the enemy detachment which was encircled and destroyed at Gorari, bodies of five officers and more than 500 men have already been counted in the jungle. In the Oivi pocket, several hundred additional dead have been found. Allied fighters cooperating with ground units strafed and silenced enemy positions in the rear areas.

The Allied force, which had captured the Japanese camp at Oivi on 10 November, quickly pursued the Japanese army towards Giruwa and Basabua. Simultaneously, on 16 November, the Allies began to land troops at Oro Bay to the south of Buna. The Japanese units, who had adopted a policy to secure the Buna sector at all costs, began literally to wage a bloody resistance.

## *Chapter 7. Commencement of command of the 18th Army*

### **The struggle to hold Buna, and its consequences**

#### The advance of the Allies

As dawn broke on 16 November 1942, the Buna area was bombarded by several tens of formations of American bombers.

As expected, the first report at 8 am from the lookout station of the Japanese naval garrison at Buna read that, "Enemy transport ships are visible in the waters off Cape Endaiadere." From 10 am that morning, six small landing craft began the Allied force landing at Oro Bay, 13 kilometres south-east of Buna. It was reported that the landing was made on the left bank of the Samboga River by a force of approximately one thousand men.<sup>375</sup>

The Japanese navy's Airbase Force Command sortied 18 carrier-based fighters, 12 carrier-based bombers, and three land-based attack planes at 2 pm to engage the landing force. It was reported that three landing craft were sunk and that a further two were on fire and sinking after the Allied force was discovered at 5 pm. A lone land-based attack plane was despatched forty minutes after the raiding party to confirm the results of the battle. This reconnaissance confirmed that two landing craft survived, and that the wrecks of destroyed craft were visible in the area.<sup>376</sup>

On that day, the commander of the 17th Army tasked Colonel Yamamoto Hiroshi, who had arrived to replace Colonel Kusunose Masao as commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment, to secure the Buna, Giruwa and Soputa (10 kilometres south of Giruwa) areas at all costs, and to protect the landing of reinforcement units. Colonel Yamamoto led a force that included the 3rd Battalion of the 229th Infantry Regiment (Major Kenmotsu Heishichi), the 2nd Company of the 38th Mountain Artillery Regiment (Lieutenant Shiiki Kazuo), and approximately seven hundred replacement troops for the 144th Infantry Regiment.<sup>377</sup>

The transport of the troops led by Colonel Yamamoto (approximately fifteen hundred troops) was divided into two echelons. The units of the first echelon, which consisted of Colonel Yamamoto and one thousand men, were transported by five destroyers (*Kazagumo*, *Makigumo*, *Yūgumo*, *Oyashio*, and *Kagiroi*). The convoy left Rabaul at 8 am on 17 November and arrived safely at the Buna anchorage at 11.40 pm that day by way of the sea route to the south of New Britain. Disembarkation was carried out during the night and completed by 2.30 am.

The second echelon units (approximately five hundred troops) boarded three destroyers (*Asashio*, *Umikaze*, and *Kawakaze*) at Rabaul at midnight on 17 November, and arrived at the Buna anchorage at 5 pm on 18 November. Just prior to the planned completion of the disembarkation work at 7.40 am, an Allied heavy bomber attacked using the light of the moon. *Umikaze* sustained medium damage and *Kawakaze* slight damage in the raid.<sup>378</sup>

The situation of the Japanese forces at the time the Allies had landed at Oro Bay was as follows. The South Seas Force headquarters and the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment were retreating along the left bank of the Kumusi River after the crossing point over the river had been occupied by Australian forces. Their condition was unknown. As previously mentioned, the 144th Infantry Regiment had crossed the Kumusi near the old crossing and was retreating along the main track. The unit retreated to Giruwa during the morning of 17 November after the following orders were received on 14 November at Sonbo from the 17th Army Headquarters: "The South Seas Force will withdraw to Giruwa and facilitate the landing of reinforcement units."

The 15th Independent Engineer Regiment (Colonel Yokoyama Yosuke) and the main strength of the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama Sadahide) were stationed at the rear in the Giruwa area under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tomita, who was attached to the South Seas Force.

At Basabua, Major Yamamoto Tsuneichi, a 17th Army fortification officer, was in command of a 700–800-strong provisional road construction unit. Many in the unit were labourers from the Tasasago Volunteers.

[Editor's note: According to Koiwai's memoir, there were also around five hundred infirmary troops stationed at Soputa.]

Further, one company from the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion had positioned three anti-aircraft guns at Buna to defend the camp. On the navy side, the commander of the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party, Captain Yasuda Yoshitatsu, was responsible for guarding the facilities at the Buna airstrip with 400 naval landing troops and 600 construction unit troops.

The various units of the South Seas Force were unaware of the fate of their leader, Major General Horii, so Colonel Yokoyama temporarily unified command in the Basabua, Giruwa, and Buna areas.

#### Leadership by the commander of the 17th Army

Under these conditions, the commander of the 17th Army, General Hyakutake Haruyoshi, deployed reinforcements based on an infantry battalion led by Colonel Yamamoto. That same day (16 November 1942), the commander received the following telegraph orders from Imperial Headquarters ("Staff telegraph order no. 627"):

It is essential for the execution of future operations that the Buna area be secured. Our strategic position in the seas will be fundamentally shaken if this area is lost. Consequently, as indicated in "Staff telegraph order no. 621" and "Staff telegraph order no. 622", we would like all assurances that this area will be secured. Speedily confirm reports that the enemy has established an airbase to the south of the Buna area. It will be essential to destroy this base if it is not possible to occupy the area before the enemy can mobilise a substantial force. Quickly deploy a limited amount of troops and matériel necessary to achieve this purpose. (However, future supply needs to be confirmed in discussions with the navy.) The naval central authorities have concerns and are oriented towards a limited air operation and protection of transport lines.

The commander of the 17th Army consequently reached the following agreement with the local naval authorities on 18 November:<sup>379</sup>

1. The main strength of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade will be transported to Buna and landed during the night of 23 November.
2. As there are no prospects for the future operations of the Buna airstrip owing to its poor quality, make preparations to quickly seize the airfield under construction by the Allies approximately 10 kilometres to the south of Buna.

The unit commanded by Colonel Yamamoto arrived at the Buna base of the naval units during that evening (18 November). Allied forces raided the Buna area from 6 am the following morning. Colonel Yamamoto's unit held its own amidst fierce fighting at close range.<sup>380</sup>

Allied attacks again began from early in the morning of 20 November. They were driven back, though their main thrust was against the coastal area.<sup>381</sup> Heavy attacks continued on 21 November on two fronts: against the coastal area and against the airstrip.

An Allied force of around one thousand men armed with mortars attacked the Giruwa and Basabua areas to the north on 19 and 20 November. At that time, intelligence was received that the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment and the commander of the South Seas Force were heading along the left bank towards the mouth of the Kumusi River. Plans were formulated to send barges from Basabua on 22 November to rescue them.

The 17th Army commander, after considering the situation, took the measure of deploying a battalion of infantry reinforcements for the South Seas Force, which had recently arrived in Rabaul. This temporarily organised unit of approximately eight hundred men, led by Lieutenant Ogi, arrived by destroyer in the Basabua area during the evening of 21 November and was placed under the command of Colonel Yokoyama. The operational plan at that time was for the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade main strength to quickly enter and secure the Buna area. In addition, new reinforcements from the Philippines, consisting of the main strength of the 65th Brigade, based on two infantry battalions, were to occupy the airfield to the south of Buna.<sup>382</sup>

The command of the Combined Fleet basically agreed with this plan, and went as far as to investigate policies to implement this positive offensive while maintaining a stable position at Guadalcanal. The commander of the 8th Area Army had arrived with his headquarters at Truk precisely at this time, 21 November, and had expressed his opinions concerning the plans. There was little chance of gaining quick assent from him,

however, as the commander had received great army orders for the “Solomon Islands offensive” only three days previously (details to follow).<sup>383</sup>

Meanwhile, the infantry battalion led by Lieutenant Ogi boarded four destroyers (*Makigumo*, *Kazagumo*, *Yūgumo*, and *Arashio*) and departed from Rabaul in the early morning of 21 November. Contact was made by a lone B-17 bomber during the passage south of New Britain, but the convoy arrived at Basabua that evening and the unit disembarked safely.<sup>384</sup> Lieutenant Ogi’s battalion succeeded the 3rd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment led by Major Kobayashi Asao. It was placed at Giruwa under the command of Major Murase Gohei, who had only arrived and taken up duty on 18 November, but, contrary to expectations, was only held in reserve.

The activity of the battle in the Giruwa and Basabua areas intensified from the evening of 22 November. Hand-to-hand fighting was especially intense on the Giruwa front, though the attack was eventually repelled during the evening of 23 November, after which the battle settled down. However, it was clear that, overall, the Allies were gradually encircling and constricting the Japanese positions.<sup>385</sup>

Meanwhile, the 41st Infantry Regiment had crossed the Kumusi River near Pinga and arrived in the Gona area. The main strength of the regiment was unfit for battle, owing to the lack of provisions during the withdrawal and fatigue from long periods of battle. Many had become so desperate, during the withdrawal in particular, that they disposed of their weapons. Combined with the losses sustained in crossing the Kumusi River, there was little expectation that the unit would have the strength for another major battle around Buna and Giruwa. Despite this, the regiment (less the 1st Battalion) advanced to Giruwa from Gona by barge during the evening of 28 November and was placed under the command of Colonel Yokoyama.<sup>386</sup>

#### Conflicting strategies

Army and navy strategies concerning the value of the front at Buna, in response to the worsening situation in the area, were in opposition at the end of November.

On 18 November, the headquarters of the 8th Area Army, the supreme army authority in the region, received a great army order from Tokyo that charged them to “Cooperate with the navy to first invade the Solomon Islands while securing key areas in New Guinea and preparing for future operations in that area.” The bottom line for the army, as indicated in the operational outline based on these responsibilities, was to “Secure key areas around Lae, Salamaua and Buna in cooperation with the navy.”<sup>387</sup> Namely, this indicated that priority be given to the invasion of Guadalcanal. The operational policy was to “Continue to secure the Buna area with reinforcements consisting of the 21st Mixed Brigade, first defeat and clean up the Australian force attacking from the Owen Stanley Range, then destroy the American force advancing on the Buna front from the coast.”<sup>388</sup>

On the other hand, the navy felt that this campaign would go the way of Guadalcanal if the airfield to the south of Buna was not quickly seized. Not only would the execution of future operations become extremely difficult if this airfield became operational, but it would even come to threaten the Japanese position at Rabaul. Consequently, the navy proposed that the airfields in the area be occupied at the earliest opportunity.

The army opposed this proposal by countering that even if military strengths in the area were reinforced to seize the airfield (with the expectation of the navy redeploying the 65th Brigade and elements of the 51st Division), the current difficulty in supplying the Guadalcanal campaign would be compounded by any attempt to increase supply to a large force in New Guinea.<sup>389</sup>

On this point, the navy argued that if the Buna airfield was captured and key areas secured, then there would be no impediment for advancing army air units into the area. In addition to enabling a strengthening of the air war against Port Moresby, this would provide the capability for aerial protection of small supply ships, thus alleviating, rather than hindering, the overall supply situation.<sup>390</sup>

The sub-plot of the army’s argument was, of course, the desire not to abandon army troops on Guadalcanal to starvation.

#### Operational leadership by the 8th Area Army commander and mobilisation of the 18th Army command

After it had arrived in Rabaul, debate within the staff office of the 8th Area Army ensued whether to secure Buna. However, a decision to continue to hold the area was made clear in the above-mentioned operational outline from the commander of the area army. Notable at this time was the strongly advocated proposal by staff officer Sugita Ichiji to abandon Buna.<sup>391</sup>

The first operational orders for the campaign were issued by the commander on 26 November, which placed the main strength of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade and one infantry battalion from the 38th Division under the command of the 18th Army to “first secure the key areas around Buna village”.

At the time of the activation of these orders, at midnight on 26 November, the combined situation of Japanese army and navy troops deployed in the Buna area was as follows:<sup>392</sup>

South-east sector (south of Giruwa)

Commander: Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto Hatsuo (144th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion commander)  
144th Infantry Regiment main strength  
41st Infantry Regiment part strength (approximately 300 troops led by Lieutenant Takenaka)  
Field Hospital patients (Takeda Unit)  
Takasago Volunteer Unit (small number)

[Editor’s note: Lieutenant Takenaka’s unit was included under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto because the main road had been blockaded by Australian troops when they were proceeding from rear positions to the front line.]

Central sector

(This position was originally intended for reserve units, but became a camp under attack, the same as front-line areas, when it was assaulted by the Allies)  
South Seas Force Headquarters (commander and staff officers missing)  
South Seas Force mountain artillery battalion (55th Mountain Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion)  
15th Independent Engineer Regiment main strength (approximately 300 troops)  
47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion main strength (commander Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama Sadahide)  
South Seas Force Medical Unit (total with two hospitals approximately 2,500 men, mainly patients)  
South Seas Force field hospital  
Line-of-communication hospital  
Murase Battalion (South Seas Force reinforcements, approximately 800 troops)

Rear sector (area north of Giruwa to the north of central sector units)

Line-of-communication units (units led by Lieutenant Colonel Tomita attached to the South Seas Force Headquarters)  
South Seas Force cavalry units  
41st Infantry Regiment (led by Colonel Yazawa Kiyomi, missing 1st Battalion, advanced to Giruwa on 28 November)

Basabua sector

Commander: Major Yamamoto Tsuneichi (17th Army fortifications officer)  
Uchida Unit (formed from patients of the Line of communication hospital)  
Nakamura Unit (formed from the Takasago Volunteers)  
Mori Unit (formed from the Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit)  
Sōda Unit (69 men from the 41st Infantry Regiment led by Lieutenant Sōda, reinforcements who had arrived on 19 November)

Buna Garrison

Reinforcement units led by Colonel Yamamoto Hiroshi, replacement commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment (approximately 700 troops)  
229th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion (led by Major Kenmotsu Heishichi)  
38th Mountain Artillery Regiment, 2nd Company (led by Lieutenant Shiiki Kazuo)  
47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion (one company)  
Navy units (led by Navy Captain Yasuda Yoshitatsu, approximately 800 men).

Gona area

41st Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion (led by Major Miyamoto Kikumatsu) being assembled

The only fresh troops who had recently disembarked among these units were the Buna Garrison (with the exception of navy troops) and the 800 reinforcements for the South Seas Force.

On 26 November, the commander of the 18th Army ordered Colonel Yokoyama, the commander of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment, to doggedly defend his current position at Giruwa. The main strength of the

21st Independent Mixed Brigade was ordered to land near Basabua. The brigade commander, Major General Yamagata Tsuyuo, took command of all 18th Army units in the Buna, Giruwa, and Basabua areas (with the exception of units directly under the command of the South Seas Force commander), with orders for the main strength to first repel Australian attacks in the area, then secure a line from Basabua through south Giruwa to the navy airfield in the Buna area and prepare for future assaults.<sup>393</sup>

The 21st Independent Mixed Brigade was quickly transported to Basabua by four destroyer transports.

Major General Yamagata first deployed one infantry battalion and one mountain artillery battalion, along with army staff officers Lieutenant Colonel Kita Gozō and Major Tanaka Kengorō, for operational leadership and intelligence-gathering duties. This cadre force boarded four destroyers and sortied from Rabaul on 28 November, but was forced to return after two of the vessels suffered damage from Allied planes encountered en route.

The units were transferred to another four destroyers on 30 November, this time arriving in the Basabua anchorage during the evening of 1 December. However, it was not possible to launch the landing barges owing to a fierce attack from Allied planes. The landing point was changed to the mouth of the Kumusi River, and the unit was disembarked and dispersed on a wide front from the left bank of the river to the area near Gona. The troops directly in train with the brigade commander numbered little more than one infantry battalion and the signals unit.<sup>394</sup>

The command of the 18th Army decided to send a second reinforcement unit based around one infantry battalion. A senior staff officer from the army, Colonel Aotsu Kikutarō, accompanied the reinforcements. The unit boarded six destroyers and left Rabaul early on the morning of 8 December, but, similar to the previous attempt, the vessels were prevented from disembarking by Allied planes and were forced to return to Rabaul.<sup>395</sup>

The commander of the 18th Army had, just prior to this on 6 December, added the 41st Infantry Regiment to the command of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade. This formation, called the Buna Detachment, inherited previous responsibilities of the regiment, which included orders to quickly pacify the situation around Basabua, and to clear the occupied area of enemy troops using reinforcement units. On that day, the entire complement of units engaged in battle in New Guinea were united under the command of Major General Yamagata.

#### The plan to resupply the Buna area

Transport of supplies to the Buna area was not being undertaken at the time when the command of the 18th Army was mobilised. Allied air superiority prevented transport ships from arriving in the region and, as described above, even transport by destroyer was difficult.

Meanwhile, 18th Army Headquarters estimated that approximately ten thousand troops were deployed in the Buna area. The following outline of a plan for resupply was formulated in late November:

##### Outline of resupply plan for the Buna area

###### 1. Policy

Quickly strengthen supply to the South Seas Force, restore the fighting strength of the troops, and make preparations to reactivate the invasion of Port Moresby.

###### 2. Outline

1. First, carry out land operations in the Buna sector. While applying reinforcement units, carry out transport of supplies of food for the South Seas Force and strengthen Buna as a supply base.

It is assumed that the Buna sector requires supplies for approximately 10,000 men. Supplies will be loaded on vessels used for landing operations sufficient to supply these troops for one month.

If these operations are successful, sufficient supplies for three months will be successively advanced to the area.

2. The Buna base will be strengthened in preparation for a future assault against Port Moresby. In addition, new bases will be established near the mouth of the Mambare River, Zaka, and Morobe. A new line of communication will be established from the Zaka sector to Port Moresby.

The transport of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade as reinforcements under this plan, as well as the transport of supplies, was to be carried out by destroyer. There were many occasions, however, when destroyers were only able to debark their human cargo before being turned back by Allied air attacks. There was no time to unload the military supplies and food. The immediate result was that the supply situation on land was becoming desperate.

The commander of the 18th Army discussed plans with the area army commander and related navy units for resupply by plane and submarine. As a result, aerial drops of supplies were undertaken over the Buna area by navy air units on 4 and 10 December.<sup>396</sup> In response to the supply from Rabaul of pickled plums, powdered miso, and soy sauce, troops in the field demanded only rice, powdered miso, and rifles – all else was considered a luxury. It was at this time that the previously quoted telegram lamenting the lack of understanding by the Rabaul authorities was received.<sup>397</sup>

Resupply by submarine was undertaken three or four times (once on 16 December, twice around 19 December) with disembarkation taking place near Mambare Bay.

Major General Oda Kensaku, who had only arrived at Rabaul on 8 December, was appointed by the commander of the 18th Army to succeed Major General Horii as commander of the South Seas Force. The reinforcement units that were turned back to Rabaul en route (with staff officer Colonel Aotsu) were to be placed under the command of the Buna Detachment.

[Editor's note: Although both Major General Yamagata and Major General Oda were of equal seniority, Yamagata was the ranking officer.]

Oda's unit landed at the mouth of the Mambare River at 4 am on 14 December.<sup>398</sup>

The Allied attacks had eased somewhat since late November. From early December, however, the intensity of attacks resumed in close cooperation with aerial bombing along the Basabua, south Giruwa, and Buna fronts.

Despite the valiant resistance of commander Yamamoto and his garrison of 800 men at Basabua, the unit was eventually overrun and annihilated on 8 December. Allied pressure consequently came to bear on the Japanese positions at south Giruwa and Buna.

#### Change of operational policy

The commander of the 18th Army received "Staff telegraph order no. 119" from Imperial Headquarters on 12 December.

The gist of the telegram was as follows: "Great importance must be placed on securing the north-eastern end of New Guinea. Buna will not be reinforced, but should eventually be evacuated."

This arrived just a month after the telegram addressed to the 17 Army commander ("Staff telegraph order no. 627"), dated 16 November, which stated the opposite, that, "It is essential for the execution of future operations that the Buna area be secured. Our strategic position in the seas will be fundamentally shaken if this area is lost. Consequently ... we would like all assurances that this area will be secured."

The command of the 8th Area Army was activated on 26 November. General Imamura and his army commanders were of the opinion that Guadalcanal was the most important region. In addition, the difficulties of successive transports by destroyer to the Buna area from early December forced "operations to adopt a passive stance owing to the extreme difficulties of the situation, despite future reinforcements". The "true conditions" of the situation were clear.<sup>399</sup> The following passage from the diary of the chief of staff of the Combined Fleet on 12 November outlines the change in position over this period:

The area army has forced on us a weak position, which has resulted in harm to everyone. From the beginning, an understanding of the situation should surely have resulted in consideration during the campaign of an overall policy to secure key areas. In other words, though extremely regrettable, we must accept that Buna should be abandoned.

Meanwhile, the new chief of operations from Imperial Headquarters, Colonel Sanada Jōichirō, arrived in Rabaul on 19 December. He explained the new operational policy as follows:<sup>400</sup>

When seen in the light of the rapid advance of Allied operations in New Guinea, and its overall strategic importance, Imperial Headquarters considers that if a firm foothold is not maintained for an offensive against Guadalcanal, and eastern New Guinea is not quickly secured, then there are fears that the 8th Area Army will suffer a total loss.

Consequently, there are those who feel that New Guinea should be accorded less importance. On the other hand, there are also those who feel that New Guinea should be quickly secured and stabilised.

Hence this outline. If Lae, Salamaua, and Madang are firmly secured, then there will be the opportunity to retake Buna later, even if it is now lost. We are currently facing two options: to simply discard Buna; or to support a withdrawal from Buna. If withdrawal is chosen, it must be done now. This means that the area army needs to spread itself in a manageable fashion.

This explanation was understood by the command of the 8th Area Army.<sup>401</sup>

Imperial Headquarters consequently amended parts of the South Pacific Area army–navy central agreement and the 8th Area Army operational outline based on this new understanding (“Great army instruction no. 1376”, dated 21 December 1942).

The content of these amendments were: “The current situation demands that units in the Buna area withdraw to the Salamaua area and occupy key locations.”

[Editor’s note: Navy amendments were contained in “Great navy instruction no. 181”, dated 23 December 1942.]

#### Lieutenant Colonel Kita’s intelligence

Lieutenant Colonel Kita, the 18th Army staff officer who had accompanied the reinforcements to New Guinea led by Major General Yamagata, reported on the “Conditions in the Buna area” to army headquarters on 12 December. Chief of operations, Colonel Sanada, was at that time in Rabaul. He attended the briefing and heard Kita’s report. Both the diary of Colonel Sanada and the duty diary of area army staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Imoto, contained the following transmission:

According to reports from staff officer Kita of the 18th Army, the actual situation in the Buna area is as expected and does *not seem to be acute*. With the exception of continuing supplies of food, there seems to be *absolutely no difficulty in securing the area at this time*.

There were, however, different interpretations of this same report. Imoto’s diary for that day continues with these words:

Although the words of the report were delivered with no particular emphasis or importance, the circumstances they described were especially tragic. I was later asked by Kita: “Is it possible to withdraw (towards Salamaua)?” I replied that, “Such an action would be a debacle.”

Comparing this with the telegram of the chief of operations reveals the difficulty of interpreting the report:

<b>Sanada diary</b>	<b>Imoto diary</b>
Situation better than expected. 6,000 troops at Buna and Giruwa. About half fit for battle. Hospital unit 2,000 strong, around 500 sick, half overall sick, rest with malaria? Those with light injuries carrying out duties in units. 15–16 days of supplies left, 180 millilitres rice ration per day. No deaths from malnutrition this month. No problem in storing rice if it is cooked and distributed in balls. Average 50 deaths per day in November. Average 20 deaths per day into December. Patients stand up during rain. Passage possible between Giruwa and south Giruwa.	6,000 at Buna and Giruwa, 2,000 dead, 500–600 in hospital. Rest have malaria, etc., all sick. 270 millilitres of rice ration per day at Giruwa. No fighting at second-line camps as enemy attack repulsed. Around 20 dying per day. Not possible even at Giruwa to reduce number of patients. Mountain gun at Buna with 20 men, no attacks by Allied units. Transport by sea secure at Giruwa and Buna.

#### Operational preparations and leadership in Rabaul

Imperial Headquarters, on 23 December 1942, removed the 51st Division from the order of battle of the 17th Army and removed the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade (less motor car units) from the 8th Area Army and placed them both in the order of battle of the 18th Army (“Great army order no. 729”).

As previously mentioned, elements of the 51st Division were to reinforce the Lae and Salamaua areas, with the main strength of the division to occupy and secure the area around Madang.

Meanwhile, the fierce Allied assault on the Buna sector continued.

The Americans concentrated their attack from the south and to the north-west of the airstrip. One side of the Japanese position was finally penetrated on 5 December. Contact between the garrison headquarters and the Buna camp was lost on 20 December. The overall situation in the Buna area became progressively desperate. In response to the overall progress in the area, 8th Area Army headquarters maintained close links between its own staff officers and those of the 18th Army in the area. The pattern of these links can be seen from the following entries in Imoto's diary:

25 December

Sugiyama (Lieutenant Colonel Sugiyama Shigeru, 18th Army staff officer): I would like to see orders and instructions for the army issued at the discretion of the army commander.

Imoto: Was there some issue related to area army orders and the like?

Sugiyama: We had no alternative but to make a furious dash into Buna when orders were issued to secure the area.

Imoto: This was contained in a great army order issued by Imperial Headquarters. The area army cannot issue such an order. Imperial Headquarters cancelled the order to secure Buna based on the army-navy central agreement. [Following section deleted by the editor.]

27 December

Yoshihara (Major General Yoshihara Kane, 18th Army chief of staff): I would like clarification concerning the future use of the 51st Division. Pouring military strength into Buna is problematic from a strategic point of view, but it is not possible for the army just to abandon the area. It is essential to retake Buna by gradually deploying the 51st Division from the coast. If the navy is not willing to cooperate, the operation will have to be conducted with our army barges. The distance between Salamaua and Buna can be divided into five 50 kilometre stages. Four barges can make 40 round trips over each stage. This can be accomplished with one shipping engineer regiment.

Katō (Lieutenant General Katō Rinpei, 8th Area Army chief of staff): As I have explained, advancing troops to Buna is problematic. It is only possible to indicate the first stage of our plan at this time.

Yoshihara: Even if we attempted to withdraw from Buna, it would not be possible. To do nothing would also be a disaster. Staff officer Aotsu's battalion entered north Giruwa last night carrying some provisions. It will be possible to restore the situation at Buna if military strength can be applied to key battlefields. If we now attempt to bring relief to Buna, it must be an infantry regiment that is first disembarked. We would have withdrawn from Buna if this had been possible.

Katō: Even if the navy could supply assistance and key areas were reinforced, this would, on the contrary, increase our troubles. Resupply is simply not possible.

Yoshihara: Well, what do you propose?

Katō: There is no alternative at this time but to adopt a policy to strengthen our position to the west of Lae and Salamaua.

Yoshihara: The army commander may have visited commander Imamura, but if not, he should go and speak to him immediately. It is not satisfactory that Adachi speaks only to his staff officers.

Meanwhile, on 18 December, the Buna Garrison came under attack near the forward positions by a force accompanied by more than ten tanks. The troops of the 3rd Battalion of the 229th Infantry Regiment fought fiercely, setting fire to four enemy tanks and disabling another two. However, reports indicated that the unit had received substantial damage and was finally forced to withdraw to the west of the creek.

The Japanese navy anti-aircraft artillery positions were taken by the Allies on 26 December. The following day, a combined force of all available army and navy aircraft, totalling sixty planes, attacked the Allied mortar positions in the central airfield sector. The overall situation, however, remained extremely difficult.<sup>402</sup>

The commander of the 18th Army issued the following orders on 26 December to the commander of the Buna Detachment, who was at that time in Gona:

Quickly mobilise your available strength by sea to an area to the north of Giruwa and attack the flank of the Allied force to the west of Buna. Bring aid to the army and navy units in the Buna area, and secure north Giruwa, regardless of how desperate the situation becomes.

Two days later, however, on 28 December, owing to the delay of the relief party to Buna and the worsening of the situation of the Buna Garrison, the army commander ordered the garrison to “Withdraw from Buna, assemble at north Giruwa, and hold that position.”<sup>403</sup>

#### Reinforcement by the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade

The main strength of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade was deployed as emergency reinforcements for the Buna area. The first echelon, which consisted of the 1st Battalion of the 170th Infantry Regiment and the main strength of the 1st Battalion of the 38th Mountain Artillery Regiment, and led by Major General Yamagata, sortied from Rabaul on 28 November aboard four destroyers, *Makigumo*, *Kazagumo*, *Yūgumo*, and *Shiratsuyu*, and headed for Basabua.

The convoy, however, was attacked by three waves of 12 B-17 bombers from noon the following day until 5.30 pm. *Shiratsuyu* suffered substantial damage (a direct hit to the fore section, and while there was no damage to the engine, water seepage had reduced speed to 19 kilometres per hour). *Makigumo* survived a near miss, but a fire somehow broke out in Number 2 boiler room. Emergency mechanisms contained the fire and the ship remained operational, but *Makigumo* returned to Rabaul with *Shiratsuyu*.

*Kazagumo* and *Yūgumo* proceeded as planned and entered the anchorage, but were forced to leave and head back to Rabaul. This was owing to Allied air activity and a lack of visibility that compelled them to abandon disembarkation. The first transport had ended in failure.<sup>404</sup>

During the transport on 28 November, 12 carrier-based fighters and four carrier-based bombers from navy air units provided direct protection over the convoy, engaging five B-17s. Six carrier-based fighters were deployed the following day to provide aerial protection. The objective of the transport convoy was not attained, though reports were received that one of three B-17s engaged on 29 November was downed.<sup>405</sup>

[Editor’s note: The postwar reminiscence of the 18th Army chief of staff, Yoshihara Kane, records that, contrary to official navy records, there was no aerial escort during the first transport.]

The reorganised first landing party, consisting of brigade headquarters, the main strength of the 3rd Battalion of the 170th Infantry Battalion, and elements of the brigade signals unit, boarded four destroyers, *Asashio*, *Arashio*, *Inazuma*, and *Isonami*, and left Rabaul during the evening of 30 November. The convoy proceeded under direct escort from Japanese fighters, who kept Allied planes at bay. The destroyers entered the Basabua anchorage during the evening of 1 December but the troops could not board the landing barges owing to Allied air attacks.

As an emergency measure, the landing point was changed to the mouth of the Kumusi River. Troops barely managed to board the landing barges under the spotlights of Allied planes. Each destroyer was equipped with two small landing barges and two inflatable boats, with an additional large barge for the brigade headquarters on their vessel. The units headed towards the shore at 12.45 am on 2 December, but with no time to organise the barges into formations, the units were dispersed and landed along the coast between Gona and the left bank of the Kumusi a little before first light. The brigade commander had barely one infantry company and elements of the brigade signals unit with him.<sup>406</sup>

The destroyers returned to Rabaul safely, though they were attacked by Allied submarines en route.

Meanwhile, 24 carrier-based fighters deployed for aerial patrolling engaged 16 B-17s and several B-25s. On 2 December, 15 fighters engaged three B-17s, reporting that one of the B-17s was shot down.<sup>407</sup>

Brigade commander Yamagata reached the Gona area during the evening of 6 December with his small force in train. He took command of the entire strength of the first reinforcement units (400 men) and the members of the

1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment at Gona (led by Major Miyamoto Kikumatsu, with 50 rifles and one heavy machine gun).<sup>408</sup>

Brigade commander Yamagata received army orders on 5 December to “Form the Buna Detachment, and stabilise the situation around Basabua.” In order to bring aid to the Basabua Garrison in accordance with these army orders, the detachment advanced to the east towards the coast. This resulted in fierce fighting with Australian forces in the area to the east of Gona.<sup>409</sup>

The formation directly led by Major General Yamagata also suffered heavy casualties in these actions. Out of a formation of 280 men on 10 December, it was recorded that one hundred (including five officers) had been killed or wounded. Commander Yamagata, faced with the sudden depletion of his force, decided to “secure our current position in the Gona area, wait for the arrival of the second echelon of reinforcements, and plan subsequent strategies”.

Consequently, elements of the force were deployed near Kigoku from 11 December (though they withdrew to Napapo on 13 December), with the main strength stationed around Gona. These units repulsed fierce attacks from Allied forces for two weeks.

[Editor’s note: Napapo is a coastal village about 3 kilometres north-west of Gona. It is thought that Kigoku was to the south, but the location of this deployment is unclear.]

During this time, a staff officer of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade, Major Aoyagi Sumiharu, was killed while making contact with the front line.<sup>410</sup>

The 18th Army loaded the second echelon reinforcements, which included the main strength of the 1st Battalion of the 170th Infantry Regiment, the 9th Company, the regimental artillery company, and the 25th Field Machine-cannon Company, onto the destroyers *Asashio*, *Arashio*, *Kazagumo*, *Yūgumo*, *Inazuma*, and *Isonami*. The ships sortied from Rabaul on the morning of 8 December and attempted to disembark that evening near Gona. The convoy was engaged by 23 B-17s from as early as 8.25 am. *Asashio* and *Isonami* received direct hits and suffered slight damage. The commander of the 8th Destroyer Squadron was determined to continue, but a telegraph was received at 1 pm from the commander of the 18th Squadron cancelling the landing operation. The convoy headed back to Rabaul from a position near Cape Alford on New Britain.

During this time, a total of 48 carrier-based navy fighters, in groups of 6–9 planes, carried out aerial protection of the convoy. It was reported that five B-17s (three unconfirmed) were shot down out of a total of 23 that engaged the convoy. Again, however, the objective of the operation was not achieved.

[Editor’s note: The American official history records that none of the B-17s were damaged.<sup>411</sup>]

On 30 November, elements of Allied units penetrated the area between Japanese units in the south-west sector (main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment) and the central sector (which included the main strength of the 41st Infantry Regiment and the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment). The distance between the Japanese forces was approximately 1.5 kilometres.

Colonel Yokoyama ordered the commander of the 3rd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Major Murase Gohei, to take his battalion and the reinforcements troops for the 144th Infantry Regiment to drive out the Allied troops.

The Australian troops facing Major Murase’s unit were ground troop reinforcements assisted by strong artillery troops. Murase could not repulse the Allies, and the battle came to a standstill, with the Australians occupying positions close to the Japanese camp (the position occupied by Murase’s unit was later called the “advance camp”).<sup>412</sup>

In this manner, the line of communication between the south-west sector and central sector units was broken.

#### The landing of Major General Oda at the Mambare River

The commander of the 18th Army placed Major General Oda Kensaku, the new head of the South Seas Force, in command of the second echelon reinforcements that had been turned back to Rabaul on 8 December. Oda, on

board the destroyer with staff officer Aotsu, left Rabaul during the evening of 12 December and landed near Gona, where he was deployed under the Buna Detachment commander.<sup>413</sup>

The second echelon reinforcement units were loaded on five destroyers (*Arashio*, *Kazagumo*, *Yūgumo*, *Inazuma*, and *Isonami*), which pressed on towards Gona through poor weather. Enemy planes attacked en route but the convoy sustained no damage. The ships entered the mouth of the Mambare River (50 kilometres north-west of the mouth of the Kumusi River) at 2 am on 14 December, owing to a judgment that landing near Gona would be difficult under attack from Allied planes. They immediately began disembarkation. A second disembarkation took place from 3.30 am and was completed by 4 am. *Isonami* was attacked by Allied planes during the passage back to Rabaul but suffered only slight damage.<sup>414</sup>

Thirty carrier-based naval fighters provided direct cover for the destroyers on 30 December, repulsing two B-17s and two B-25s. The following day, 29 fighters engaged over forty B-24s, reporting one shot down, for the loss of two Japanese planes that did not return, and two which crash-landed.

The makeup of the units which were landed near the Mambare River was as follows:<sup>415</sup>

Unit	Strength
21st Independent Mixed Brigade headquarters	14
South Seas Force headquarters	11
Signals unit	20
Infantry battalion (battalion headquarters, four infantry companies, one machine-gun company)	451
Machine-cannon company (six machine-cannons)	65
Brigade engineer unit	3
Shipping engineer unit	17
Field hospital	10
Total	591
Lost after landing	51

The units travelled by barge along the coast and successively arrived in the Napapo area (3 kilometres north-west of Gona) between the evening of 18 and 25 December.

The new commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Oda Kensaku, also arrived at Napapo by barge on 18 December. The commander of the Buna Detachment, Major General Yamagata, ordered Oda to proceed by barge to Giruwa on 19 December. There he was ordered to occupy and secure key areas using troops of the South Seas Force presently under the command of Colonel Yokoyama.<sup>416</sup>

[Editor's note: The regimental flag of the 170th Infantry Regiment was lost when the barge carrying the commander of the regiment was sunk during the operation. Thereafter, the commander was left at Rabaul.]

#### Destruction of positions on the right flank of the Basabua camp

The Basabua Garrison was commanded by Major Yamamoto Tsuneichi and was formed from the Uchida, Nakamura, Mori, and Sōda Units.

The Basabua camp initially had no depth owing to its proximity to the shore. After the battle had turned and the camp was driven to the south, Major Yamamoto launched a temporary counter-offensive up to 8 December to secure the line of the camp.

[Editor's note: Postwar investigations of various sources indicate that the location of this battle was Gona, though the Japanese army called this place Basabua.]

On 21 November, the sixty-strong Yamamoto Medical Unit, led by Medical Captain Yamamoto, was placed under the command of Major Yamamoto Tsuneichi.<sup>417</sup> Reinforcements consisting of eighty men led by Lieutenant Yamazaki (including two machine-guns) arrived on 24 November. The Yamazaki Unit was

deployed at the point of strongest attack by the Australians, and casualties continued to mount from heavy mortar fire. By 6 December, the unit had been completely destroyed.

The wired line of communication with Giruwa had previously been severed. Despatch troops would swim out to sea, then penetrate the Allied perimeter to deliver messages. Aid from Giruwa and Gona, however, was blocked by the presence of Australian troops. The Basabua Garrison was initially a mixed formation primarily consisting of labourers who were not accustomed to military manoeuvres. They bore well this heavy burden, however, and died defending the camp.

The last stage of resistance was reached on 8 December 1942 when Major Yamamoto and his senior officers were killed at the camp. The few who survived escaped to the east.

The 41st Infantry Regiment, which had arrived at Giruwa on 29 November, received orders to rescue the Basabua units on 30 November. The 2nd Battalion was quickly advanced to Basabua by barge. Communication with Major Yamamoto, however, could not be established, so the unit returned empty-handed to Giruwa.<sup>418</sup>

According to the memoir of the commander of the battalion, Major Koikai Mitsuo, the 2nd Battalion, based on troops from the 5th and 8th Companies with 50–60 men each, was divided into two barges. The battalion left Giruwa but could not identify the landing point at Basabua in the darkness. The only response to the lighting of signal flares was a burst of fierce machine-gun fire from the land. Thinking they would try again the following day, the barges returned to Giruwa close to the shore.

The above account of the battle conditions at the Basabua Garrison was primarily taken from the *Outline of operations of the 41st Infantry Regiment* and the *Record of operations of the 18th Army, volume 1*. The actual conditions of the battle by the garrison, as described in original documents that were destroyed, will remain a mystery. Major General Yoshihara, the chief of staff of the 18th Army, included the following account in his memoir from what is felt to have occurred:

The real story of the fate of the Basabua Garrison will remain a mystery. The first accounts came from Takasago Volunteer troops after the withdrawal of the Buna Garrison. According to these accounts, the Yamamoto Road Construction Unit was under attack from a superior Australian force on three fronts. Bitter fighting continued over three attacks, with the unit inflicting some casualties on the Allies. However, they were hopelessly outnumbered and were eventually totally destroyed. The major entrusted his papers to the surviving Takasago Volunteers with plans for them to make contact with the main strength of the Buna unit and to pass on the tragic story.

The last papers of Major Yamamoto would probably have been basic texts, as most original documents for the Japanese side are short and without detail. In contrast, the Allied records for units involved in these campaigns are extremely detailed, containing high praise for the fighting of Major Yamamoto and his men. Though somewhat long, the following extract indicates the true outcome of the units who made the ultimate sacrifice for their emperor:

The Basabua battle from Allied sources<sup>419</sup>

The Australian 2/14th and 2/27th Battalions, the first units of the 21st Brigade to reach the Gona area, were committed to action there on the afternoon of 28 November. A patrol of the 2/14th Battalion was sent to investigate a small creek on the beach 800 metres east of the mission. It was planned that the battalion would attack from there the next morning. The patrol reported the area clear of the enemy, and the battalion at once began moving into position. When it broke out at dusk on the coast 200 metres east of the creek, it ran into a hornet's nest of opposition. From a network of concealed and well prepared positions, the Japanese hit the battalion hard, inflicting 32 casualties on the Australians before they could disengage.

The next day, after an air strike on known enemy positions east of the mission, the 2/27th Battalion under its commander ... moved into position west of the creek. Swinging wide through bush and swamp, the 2/14th ... debouched onto the beach several hundred metres east of the creek.

The 2/27th was to attack westward along the beach. The 2/14th, in addition to clearing out any remaining opposition east of the creek, was to send a detachment eastward to *deny the enemy the anchorage at Basabua*. The 2/27th was slow in moving forward. When it finally attacked, it met heavy opposition from hidden enemy positions and in short order suffered 55 casualties.

The 2/14th Battalion, moving west to clear out the enemy east of the creek, encountered the same kind of opposition and sustained 38 casualties. The pattern was familiar. Heavy losses had thus far characterised every attack on Gona, and the 21st Brigade's first attack on the place was no exception. Although the brigade had not gone into action until the 28th, it had already lost 138 men and gained little more than a favourable line of departure from which to mount further attacks.

On 30 November, the 2/27th continued its attack westward and again met strong opposition from the hidden enemy. This time it lost 45 men. The 2/14th, meeting lighter opposition, lost only 11 men and finished clearing the enemy out of his positions east of the creek. The Australians now held most of the beach between Basabua on the right and Gona on the left, but Gona itself was still firmly in Japanese hands.

That evening, the brigade commander drew up the plan for another attack the next day, 1 December, which would include part of the newly arrived 2/16th Battalion. The plan provided that the 2/27th Battalion, with a company of the 2/16th on its left, would attack straight east in the morning. At a designated point, the 3rd Infantry Battalion, coming up from the headquarters area to the south, would move in on the left and join with the AIF in the reduction of Gona, which lay immediately to the Australian left front.

About 0200 hrs the next morning the Japanese at Giruwa made a last attempt to reinforce Gona. Loaded with 200 41st Infantry troops who had come in from the mouth of the Kumusi the night before, three barges tried to land about 550 metres east of Gona, but patrols of the 2/27th Battalion drove them off. The barges returned to Giruwa, their mission a failure.

[Editor's note: This section is in agreement with the memoir of Major Koiwai.]

Shortly after the Japanese landing craft had been driven off, the day's attack on Gona began. At 0545 hrs artillery and mortars opened up on the enemy, and at 0600 hrs the troops attacked with bayonets fixed. The attack on the beach started off well, but the 3rd Battalion mistook its rendezvous point and did not move far enough north. As a result, it failed to link up, as planned, with the company of the 2/16th Battalion on the 2/27th's left.

Everything went wrong after that. Swinging south-west to cover the front along which the 3rd Battalion was to have attacked, the company of the 2/16th on the left and part of a company of the 2/27th on its right, broke into the village that morning, but *the Japanese, who were there in strength, promptly drove the Australians out*. Casualties were heavy: the company of the 2/16th alone lost 58 killed, wounded, and missing in the abortive attack.

On 3 December, the 39th Battalion reached the front. On 6 December, the brigade commander launched still another attack on Gona. The remaining troops of the 2/16th and 2/27th Battalions, now organised as a composite battalion, jumped off from their positions east of the mission and attacked straight west along the beach. The 39th Battalion, following a now-familiar tactic, moved up from the south and attacked northwest, hoping to reduce the village. The result was the same as before: heavy casualties and only a slight improvement in the Australian position.

Yet for all their losses, the Australians were doing much better than they thought. The Japanese had taken a terrific pounding. They were utterly worn out and there were only a few hundred of them left. The time had come for the knockout blow. It was delivered on 8 December. At 1245 hrs, after a 15-minute artillery and mortar preparation, the 39th Battalion attacked Gona from the south-east. It broke into the village without great difficulty and began systematically clearing the enemy out. Exactly an hour later, the composite 2/16-2/27th Battalion, which had been supporting the 39th Battalion's attack with fire, moved forward – the troops of the 2/27th along the beach, and those of the 2/16th from a start line a few hundred yards south of it.

By evening the militia and the AIF had a pincers on the mission, and only a small corridor 200 yards wide separated them. Acting on Colonel Yokoyama's orders, Major Yamamoto, still leading the defence, tried to make his way by stealth to Giruwa that night with as much of his force as he could muster – about 100 men. The attempt failed, and the Japanese were cut down in the darkness by the Bren guns of the Australians.

The end came early on 9 December when patrols of the 2/16th, 2/27th, and 39th Battalions moved into the mission area to mop up. It was a grim business with much hand-to-hand fighting, but the last enemy positions were overrun by 1630 hrs that afternoon. The Australians found a little food and ammunition and took 16 prisoners, 10 of them stretcher cases.

The Japanese at Gona had fought with such single-minded ferocity that they had not even taken time to bury their dead. Instead, they had fired over the corpses and used them to stand on or to prop up their redoubts. Toward the end, the living had been driven to put on gas masks, so great was the stench from the dead.

The stench was indeed so appalling that it had nauseated the Australians. When the fighting was over and the victors were able to examine the Japanese positions, they wondered how human beings could have endured such conditions and gone on living. An Australian journalist who was with the troops describes the scene thus:

Rotting bodies, sometimes weeks old, formed part of the fortifications. The living fired over the bodies of the dead, slept side by side with them. In one trench was a Japanese who had not been able to stand the strain. His rifle was still pointed at his head, his big toe was on the trigger, and the top of his head was blown off .... Everywhere, pervading everything, was the stench of putrescent flesh.

The Australians buried 638 Japanese dead at Gona, but they themselves had suffered more than 750 killed, wounded, and missing.

[Editor's note: According to the sources, there are various opinions as to whether orders were issued to withdraw from the Basabua Garrison. According to 18th Army staff officer, Major Tanaka Kengorō: "I do not think orders were issued to withdraw from Basabua. Perhaps Colonel Yokoyama issued orders for the troops of the Basabua Garrison to withdraw to Giruwa, but they probably did not reach the garrison."]

#### Offensive against Buna by Japanese army air units

The situation at Buna had become desperate. On 23 December, 18th Army staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sugiyama, approached the 8th Area Army for an offensive against Buna by army air units. Reinforcements to the area had previously been unsuccessful by sea. The only force available to assist the campaign was by air.

Consequently, the navy planned a night attack for 23 December using medium attack planes, and the army decided to attack the Buna area with elements of its fighter strength the following day.<sup>420</sup>

Navy air units undertook night attacks on Allied positions in the Buna area and on the airfield at Dobodura from 6.55 to 8.45 pm on 23 December. The attack consisted of four waves using eight land-based attack planes, with signs of damage to Allied positions at several locations.<sup>421</sup>

On the army side, the command of the 6th Air Division had been activated from 11 December. Though the 1st Sentai of the 12th Air Brigade was still being transported to Rabaul, the main strength of the brigade had completed assembly at Vunakanau airfield west of Rabaul. The air division and brigade commanders wanted to apply their entire strength to what was their first air battle. However, the situation at Buna would not allow any delay.<sup>422</sup>

The 11th Sentai advanced in waves on 24 December but all were forced back en route owing to poor weather. The sentai made another attempt the following day with the assistance of two reconnaissance planes, but it was still not possible to penetrate to the Buna area. Seven navy land-based attack planes were able to penetrate the Buna area that evening and carry out night raids.<sup>423</sup>

Though the weather had not entirely cleared on 26 December, 15 fighters led by the commander of the 1st Squadron of the 11th Sentai were able to advance at 6.55 am and attack the airfield to the south of Buna. Some of the fighters destroyed a number of large planes on the ground, while the main strength of the squadron was engaged in fierce aerial combat. There were reports that four P-40s (one unconfirmed) and two Lockheed bombers were downed, for the loss of two Japanese planes.

Army and navy air units carried out a joint operation at 10 am on 27 December, with 31 fighters from the army's 11th Sentai, and 11 fighters and 12 carrier-based bombers from the navy advancing to Buna. As on the previous day, fierce fighting developed against 16 P-38s in the skies over Buna, with reports of three shot down, and four more unconfirmed, for the loss of one army and one navy plane.<sup>424</sup> However, that day marked the completion of preparations for the next stage of operations, so the sorties to Buna by the 12th Air Brigade ceased.

#### The Buna Garrison up to 3 December

The army units of the Buna Garrison, led by Colonel Yamamoto Hiroshi, had arrived in the Buna area on 18 November and had taken up positions within the Duropa Plantation (hereafter called the "outer camp") and at key points outside the Old Strip and New Strip airfields (called the "eastern sector"). The formation was based on the 144th Infantry Regiment reinforcements and the 3rd Battalion of the 229th Infantry Regiment.

The navy units were led by Naval Captain Yasuda Yoshitatsu and were deployed to protect Buna village and the area around the Buna mission (hereafter the “western sector”). They were based on the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party and the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Party.

The first Allied assault on the front line came at 5.58 am on 19 November 1942. The Allied force numbered around seven hundred, but their attack was repulsed by 8.20 am. The Allies were not budged and remained at close quarters after the second attack began at 1.20 pm, with Japanese units holding their positions. It became clear that the Allied force was much larger than anticipated and the Japanese army and navy garrison’s front was largely encircled.<sup>425</sup>

At 5.20 am the following day, the Allies attacked along the coastal road and were repulsed. The fighting then eased off and the battlefield went quiet after 9.20 am. Seven Japanese carrier-based fighters assisted in the land battle.

Over fifty Allied planes attacked on 21 December, with approximately eighteen assisting in the land battle. The strength of Allied land forces numbered approximately one thousand men, but the attack was repulsed by 4 pm. The Allies were held only 300 metres from the Japanese positions. Given the state of affairs, the Yasuda Unit destroyed all important documents to prevent them falling into enemy hands.<sup>426</sup>

Twelve each of navy carrier-based fighters and bombers flew over the skies of Buna on 22 November. The fighter unit engaged 14 Allied fighters and reported shooting two down (unconfirmed). The bombers strafed the native village.<sup>427</sup>

Allied land forces appeared to the west of Buna village in the western sector on 23 November, adopting a position for an east–west pincer attack. The front line was guarded by sentries from the 14th and 15th Establishment Units, and by engineers. Approximately forty Allied planes mounted heavy air raids on that day.<sup>428</sup>

There was little fighting of note on 24 November. The Japanese navy air forces sortied ten carrier-based fighters to control the skies over Buna and four carrier-based bombers to raid the Dobodura airfield. Twenty Allied planes were engaged over Dobodura with reports of four shot down (one unconfirmed) for the loss of two Japanese bombers.

The following day was also relatively quiet except for four P-38s, which engaged Japanese bombers in the skies.

Intensive Allied air attacks were carried out on the following day, 26 November. Raids came from thirty Allied planes at 5.30 am and from a further 35 planes at 11.30 am. The Japanese navy air forces deployed 12 carrier-based fighters and four carrier-based bombers to raid the Dobodura airfield. A further seven fighters and four bombers were sent to attack land troop concentrations and transport ships in the Buna area. A 500-ton transport ship was sunk, an armoured vessel received a direct hit, and a bridge over the mouth of the Samboga River was bombed. During the night, three Japanese land-based attack planes were sent to raid the airfields at Emboga (south of Buna) and Port Moresby.

The anti-aircraft defence unit at Buna shot down four Allied aircraft on this day, but the army’s mountain artillery gun was destroyed.

At 1 pm on 27 November, nine Japanese navy carrier-based bombers and 12 carrier-based fighters raided Soputa (10 kilometres south of Buna). Three land-based attack planes later carried out a night attack on Emboga.<sup>429</sup>

On the following day, six Japanese carrier-based bombers and 12 carrier-based fighters attacked a transport convoy in Buna Bay, leaving one 500-ton transport on fire. Three other carrier-based bombers raided the staging point at Sumpit village (near Buna).

There was little change to the land battle through 29 November. At a little after 2 am the following morning, however, a strong Allied force attacked the “jungle unit” (so-called for the terrain at the front line protected by the 14th and 15th Establishment Units and thirty infantry troops). Fighting at close quarters ensued in the

jungle. Realising that the situation on this front had become desperate by 3 December, the labourers were withdrawn and their positions strengthened by an infantry platoon.

#### The situation of the 1st American Corps<sup>430</sup>

The American troops on the Buna front had been assembling their main strength near Pongani, with elements near Bofu, since mid-October. The unit, which had arrived by a combination of air, sea, and overland transport, was the 32nd American Division (based on the 126th and 128th Regiments, with the 127th Regiment missing).

The offensive against Japanese positions in the Buna area began from mid-November. The Australian units had thrust over the Owen Stanley Range while continuing to harass the South Seas Force. They arrived at Wairopi, the crossing over the Kumusi River, and headed for the Gona and Giruwa areas. The 32nd American Division commenced its assault on 19 November. However, they encountered stubborn Japanese resistance both on the airfield and at the Buna front, making little progress.

Offensive methods were improved, such as the alteration of deployments, and cooperation with the air forces. Two weeks after the start of the operation, however, the only change was an increase in the number of casualties (divisional losses amounted to 492 men). The unit was exhausted from jungle fighting in unsanitary, swampy conditions. The divisional supply line was strained owing to counter-attacks from Japanese air units since the start of the campaign. Food and ammunition were in short supply, and some front-line units were down to one-third their nominal strength.

In order to resolve the impasse, senior command sent several senior officers and staff officers to divisional headquarters. General MacArthur, on the basis of their reports, decided to replace the commander and senior officers of the 32nd Division.

Lieutenant General Eichelberger was appointed commander of the 1st American Corps on 1 December 1942, thus taking command of all American troops in the Buna area. He proceeded to the front line the following day and, as a result of his inspection, issued orders relieving the commander of the 32nd Division of his position. He then placed the head of the divisional artillery unit as divisional commander.

The following day, Eichelberger visited units at the airfield and Buna village fronts, discharging both unit commanders. The new regimental commanders arrived in the morning and afternoon of 3 February and immediately took command.

The Allied position in the Buna area was in this way revived after 3 February.

[Editor's note: According to the memoir of General Eichelberger, MacArthur had told him: "I want you to take Buna, or not come back alive."<sup>431</sup>]

#### The Buna Garrison up to 27 December

The battle in the eastern sector started early on 5 December. For 35 minutes from 6.20 am, six Allied fighters strafed the outer camp from the direction of New Strip. Supporting artillery fire began at the same time, while front-line infantry troops with armoured reconnaissance carriers began advancing at 6.42 am.\*

The Japanese garrison at the eastern sector targeted the carriers with hand grenades, adhesion mines, and some anti-tank artillery. The five carriers were all destroyed within only twenty minutes.

[Editor's note: The reconnaissance carriers were lightly armoured on the sides, with an open top and no armour underneath.]

The company of the American 128th Regiment, which had advanced with the carriers, suffered heavy casualties. Fierce fire from the Japanese defenders and the intensity of the heat halted the advance.

The new American regimental commander telegraphed to his senior command that: "We have thrown everything at the enemy, but it has bounced straight back."

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\* These are Tokyo time, that is, 8.20 am and 8.42 am local time.

The battle in the western sector commenced at 8 am with an attack by nine B-25s against the Buna mission. The assault continued with artillery and mortar fire against Buna village. The advance of infantry troops began at 8.30 am.

The Japanese naval units led by Captain Yasuda returned heavy fire and halted the American advance. Meanwhile, a platoon from the American 126th Regiment, in defiance of the Japanese attack, penetrated into the coastal sector between the Buna mission and village. This unit encircled and attacked the Japanese position from both sides. However, the Japanese units were not destroyed, but fought all the stronger for being cornered in the village. The front-line other-ranks sentry position was destroyed in this attack.

The Americans, having failed in their attempt to assault the eastern sector, determined that a frontal attack would not penetrate the Japanese camp and so altered their operational plan. The Japanese position was to be weakened through a war of attrition and infiltration undertaken by strengthened tank units and reserves of Australian troops.

In reality, the attacks undertaken by American troops did not achieve any significant results. The operation to occupy the bridge between the two airstrips was consistently repelled, and the unit which attacked the south side of Old Strip gained only yards despite a large investment in time. The battle seemed like an assault on a heavily guarded fortress.

Relative quiet continued for several days in the eastern sector owing to the change in operational policy by the Americans. In contrast, the western sector came under constant attack. The navy units in the Buna sector were effectively surrounded and, though they received heavy fire from the front and on the flank, the garrison stubbornly defended the position. However, feeling that the end had come, all important documents were destroyed on 6 December.<sup>432</sup>

The Americans planned a major attack for 7 December. Though the required preparations had been completed, the Japanese forces mobilised first. At 4 am, the Japanese garrison switched the offensive to two fronts at Buna village and the mission. When the assault was held, reinforcements were to arrive during the evening at Buna village by boat from the mission, but the plan failed.

The Japanese navy units again mounted a counter-offensive on 8 December. Approximately forty men from Buna village attacked the American's left flank, and one hundred men from the mission sector sortied against the Americans' right flank. After a brief encounter, the sallying parties were forced back by heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. However, the strong defences of the Japanese garrison withstood over 12 assaults by the American force.

A concentrated barrage of over two thousand artillery shells in the half hour from 5.30 am on 9 December destroyed the second-line other-ranks sentry position, which consisted of 130 men. Many of these men were buried alive.<sup>433</sup>

According to the American official history, concentrated artillery and heavy mortar on 13 December resulted in the withdrawal of the Japanese troops to Giruwa that evening. Further concentrated artillery early in the morning of 14 December was followed by an advance into Buna village at 7 am. The village was completely occupied by 10 am with no resistance.

Mopping-up operations continued until noon the following day, 15 December. It was recorded that 2,000 pounds of rice and oatmeal, barley meal, and several barrels of barley grain were collected. A wounded non-commissioned officer was also captured. No records survived from the Japanese side to describe the battle on the Buna front from 13–16 December. The only records list that "The number of navy personnel in battle at Buna on 15 December totals 585 men, including 17 warrant officers and higher ranks, 372 non-commissioned officers, and 196 labourers," and that "Communication with the rear has been severed by enemy troops who have infiltrated our position in the jungle camp, with the cookhouse of the 15th Establishment Unit completely destroyed by encirclement attacks from enemy troops on 16 December."<sup>434</sup> Though the dates differ by one day, there is surely a connection between the reference to the cookhouse and the discovery of the supplies by the Americans. The following account of events is possible from a combination of the records of both armies.

Allied M3 light tanks arrived at the eastern sector front on 17 December. The tank company proceeded to the staging point in preparation for the beginning of operations that evening. The Japanese troops were more concerned with the constant mortar and artillery fire than the penetration of the tanks.

Air raids and mortar fire began as planned at 4.45 am on 18 December. The shelling stopped at 5 am, whereupon the freshly arrived Australian troops, with the tanks in the lead, began their advance. The concealed Japanese positions could not be destroyed despite the heavy clearing fire in front of the advance. The appearance of the tanks, however, was a great shock to the Japanese troops. This was because the tanks were not visible under heavy fire until they were right over the concealed Japanese positions. The tanks had been diverted via the coastline near the outer camp to penetrate the Japanese positions. The Japanese defended grimly and set fire to two of the tanks near the front line. The remaining three tanks halted at pillboxes and concealments positioned some 500 metres to the rear of the outer camp.

The Japanese garrison at the Old Strip front safely defended their position during the day. The turret of one of the two tanks that was providing direct support stopped moving owing to damage by machine-gun fire. Four further tanks arrived at the front at 4 pm, and the Japanese defensive line was finally breached. The 3rd Battalion of the 229th Infantry Regiment had been guarding the outer camp during the day's battle. It suffered heavy casualties and withdrew to a line east of the creek.

The army troops led by Colonel Yamamoto withdrew over the bridge or by wading through the shallows near the river mouth and established a second-line camp. The fire fight over the bridge continued throughout 20 December. Meanwhile, communications had been severed between the garrison headquarters and the Buna area camp.<sup>435</sup>

The Australians discovered a crossing near a bend in the river about 350 metres north of the bridge late in the afternoon of 21 December. A company of Australian riflemen had crossed over the creek by the following morning. Apart from occasional mortar fire, the Australians did not meet any Japanese resistance.

A superior force of Allied tanks and accompanying infantry, under heavy artillery cover, assaulted the front line of the Japanese garrison headquarters for 30 minutes from 5.50 am on 22 December.<sup>436</sup> Most of the important documents of the unit were destroyed at this time.

The Allies had repaired the bridge sufficiently for tanks to cross by 23 December. A Japanese torpedo boat raided the Allied anchorage at Hariko at dusk that evening, sinking a barge as it was disembarking. In addition, eight navy land-based attack planes carried out night raids on Allied positions near Buna and on the airfield at Dobodura.

Fighting resumed in the area of Old Strip on 24 December. Australian troops, as usual with preparatory covering fire, departed from the offensive line 180 metres from the northern end of the strip at 7.55 am. The Japanese defenders withstood the assault, then aimed the two navy anti-aircraft guns at the tanks, three of which were instantly destroyed. The Japanese then turned their firepower towards the airstrip, whereupon the offensive units became completely tied down. The Australians tried to attack the Japanese concealments during the night, but they were repelled by Japanese sentries.

The battle developed and intensified along the front on 25 December, but with little overall change.

The Allies closed in on the flank of the anti-aircraft gun emplacement at 7.02 am on 26 December. The emplacement was overrun after an hour of close combat. The Japanese garrison mounted a counter-offensive against the Australians' right flank, but were unsuccessful and withdrew.

The battle around the airstrips finally moved into the final stages on 27 December. Colonel Yamamoto withdrew his main strength to the plantations near Giropa Point and mounted a second counter-offensive against the Australians' right flank with troops in the strip's aircraft concealments. However, their strength was not effectively applied, and they were repelled with heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, the commander of the 18th Army, realising the situation had turned for the worse, issued orders on 26 December for the Buna Detachment commander, Major General Yamagata, at that time in Gona, to send aid to the Buna units.

Major General Yamagata subsequently ordered the 41st Infantry Regiment commander to lead a force of approximately four hundred and thirty men to assist the troops at Buna. These troops were formed from the 1st Battalion of the 170th Infantry Regiment (less the 3rd and 4th Companies), the 9th Company, the Regimental Artillery Company, the Brigade Signals Unit, the 25th Machine-cannon Company, elements of the Brigade Engineer Unit, and whatever troops from the South Seas Force could be released. The relief party mobilised by barge during that day to a staging point near north Giruwa.

#### The glorious sacrifice of the Buna Garrison

The Buna Garrison received telegrams of support and encouragement from the navy chief of staff, the commander of the Combined Fleet, and the commander of the 8th Fleet. In reply, Naval Captain Yasuda despatched the following telegram at 5.30 am on 28 December:<sup>437</sup>

The garrison is being gradually destroyed by concentrated enemy fire. Our troops repeatedly mount counter-attacks, often inflicting heavy casualties on the Allies in hand-to-hand combat. Our assessment of the overall situation is that we will be able to hold the garrison until tomorrow morning. On reflection, in over forty days of battle, all the men, whether navy personnel or labourers, have given all that could be asked of them.

Our gratitude to our commanders and the support of navy air and surface forces is boundless. We pray for the prosperity of our imperial land far away, and for lasting success in battle for all.

After sending this final message, the telegraph machine was destroyed and the codebook burned. On that day, the commander of the South-East Fleet (also commander of the 11th Air Fleet), Vice Admiral Kusaka Jin'ichi, sent an order to "withdraw to Giruwa".\* The commander of the 18th Army also issued orders to "Withdraw and assemble in the north Giruwa area, then secure the area."

Major General Yamagata advanced to north Giruwa on 29 December. The assembly of the relief party, which was to concentrate at north Giruwa, gradually came to a standstill.

Four Allied tanks appeared in the area near the garrison headquarters at 3.15 pm. A fierce battle developed. The navy units' headquarters destroyed its last radio receiver at 5.10 pm that day.

Though surrounded, a party of twenty Japanese soldiers infiltrated the American command post during the night, where they killed 15 and wounded a further 12 men before withdrawing. Two accomplished swimmers were despatched from Giruwa as messengers. One was killed, but the other was able to provide the information that there were no barges at Giruwa. There was no alternative but to break through the enemy line and conduct a fighting withdrawal.<sup>438</sup>

Major General Yamagata at north Giruwa ordered the commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment to lead a relief party to immediately bring aid to the Buna troops. The 230 troops included 26 from regimental headquarters, and others from the 1st Battalion of the 170th Infantry Regiment (elements missing) and the 9th Company.

The commanders at Giruwa were unaware of the situation at Buna. The first information they received was on 30 December from the one of the two messengers who swam to the area. His report was: "Enemy tanks have already penetrated near unit headquarters, and fierce fighting has developed. Numbers are down to around 250 and food is scarce. They will be able to hold out for only a short time longer."<sup>439</sup>

Allied tanks encircled the Buna Garrison headquarters on 1 January 1943. All members of the garrison fought bravely. Many who formed human anti-tank attack squads met a heroic death in battle. Some of the troops held on for over 12 hours against tank shells and turret-mounted machine-guns from a range of less than 50 metres. The attack was finally repulsed by nightfall.

A general withdrawal was decided on during the night. A total of 70–80 army and navy staff from garrison headquarters, including 30–40 walking wounded, left their air-raid shelters and joined soldiers holed up at Buna village to break through the Australian lines and head for north Giruwa.

The night assault party, led by the commander of the mountain artillery company, Lieutenant Shiiki Kazuo, suffered almost complete losses of its seventy men when it attempted to break through the Allied lines. The

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\* The order was to "*tenshin*": literally to "change the direction of advance".

members of the garrison returned to the air-raid shelters, recognising the low probability of successfully penetrating the lines. At this time, a total of barely ten army and navy personnel were fit to fight.

The surviving army and navy commanders, adjutants, doctors, and probationary officers huddled around the last candle and discussed the coming of their final day. Just before the arrival of the tanks early in the morning two days previously, the commanders had led an assault that penetrated the Allied camp. Now, the unit's place of death had been chosen and the final stage of the Buna Garrison headquarters was determined.

Having foreseen this situation, it had been established that able-bodied swimmers would provide a last report to those at Giruwa. However, none who could swim became available in the frantic continuing battle. Consequently, Captain Yasuda ordered Ensign Suzuki Kiyotaka from the Yokosuka 5th Special Naval Landing Party to steal through the heavy Allied encirclement and head for Giruwa by sea.<sup>440</sup> Captain Yasuda entrusted Suzuki with his final report to his superiors, as follows: "It is deeply regrettable that we have not been able to hold out for the arrival of the relief party."

Ensign Suzuki entered the sea at 2.30 am. The distant shore was approximately 1,000 metres away in the dark. It seemed from the glimpses between the swell that the battle on land had started early. Leaving his unit behind was unbearable. However, he kept swimming. He finally arrived on the beach at Giruwa around 9.30 am.<sup>441</sup>

[Editor's note: It is not possible to authenticate the details of the movements of the commander of the Buna Garrison, Colonel Yamamoto Hiroshi (144th Infantry Regiment commander), owing to the lack of evidence contained in army documents.]

Meanwhile, the relief party, which was led by the commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Colonel Yazawa, had not assembled by the evening of 31 December owing to the lack of fuel for the transport barges. Major General Yamagata then ordered just the present strength to advance on 2 January.<sup>442</sup>

The relief party crossed the first arm of the Giruwa River during that night and advanced into the jungle. Contact was made with a party of around one hundred enemy troops near the second arm of the river during the evening of 3 January. These troops were attacked during the night of 4 January and the party advanced to a point about 2 kilometres to the west of Buna. However, they arrived too late, as the garrison had already been destroyed and most of its troops killed in battle.

By the evening of 6 January, the relief party had picked up 180 army and 190 navy personnel.<sup>443</sup>

The key location of Basabua on the right flank had already fallen, and with the destruction of the Buna Garrison, the left flank was now taken. Pressure by American and Australian troops on the central sector at Giruwa subsequently intensified.

The new commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Oda Kensaku, took leadership of fighting in the area to the south of Giruwa, while Major General Yamagata Tsuyuo, the commander of the Buna Detachment (21st Independent Mixed Brigade commander), assumed overall command and directed the fighting against the Americans advancing to the west from Buna.<sup>444</sup>

Imperial Headquarters had issued instructions on 21 December 1942 granting permission for "units in the Buna area, when the situation allows, to withdraw to the Salamaua area". However, the commander of the 8th Area Army did not rescind the orders to "secure Buna". This was because he wished to buy time to strengthen the position in the Salamaua area and, further, he did not want to compromise the strategic position at Guadalcanal.

## *Chapter 8. Withdrawal operations from the Buna area*

### **Withdrawal from north and south Giruwa**

#### The Giruwa camp on the verge of collapse

The circumstances of the war in the New Guinea area up to the fall of the Buna Garrison in early January 1943 have been described. As a result of the fall to the Allies of the flanking camps at Basabua and Buna, the central camp at Giruwa came to receive encirclement attacks from three sides.

The Allies moved the focus of their artillery attacks from the Buna area to Giruwa. In addition, the Allies intensified these attacks on Japanese positions in the south-west sector, after elements had applied pressure along the coastal area.

The South Seas Force commander, Major General Oda Kensaku, primarily led the fighting in the south Giruwa area, while the Buna Detachment commander, Major General Yamagata Tsuyuo, took command of the overall battle in the Buna area, as well as taking direct control of fighting against the Allied force advancing to the west from Buna village.<sup>445</sup>

The contents of an intelligence report telegraphed from the South Seas Force commander to the chief of staff of the 18th Army on 12 January 1943 speaks plainly about the situation at that time:<sup>446</sup>

Enemy planes fly overhead all day, and have no regard for where they drop their bombs. Further, enemy artillery is strong, and fire is concentrated into our camp. Casualties among the army and navy are steadily mounting.

Communications between the central camp and front-line positions have been severed since yesterday. Enemy troops have also infiltrated the central camp area in large numbers. Artillery fire on our coastal positions is also intense.

Fresh enemy troops are mounting spirited attacks from the Buna area. The supply road bringing provisions from the coast has also been cut off.

Around half of the officers and troops within the camp are stricken with malnutrition. Those without food and bereft of energy, who can barely lift their weapons, are gradually dying. Our scattered troops continue to be all the more isolated.

The garrison here at Giruwa will suffer the same fate as that of the camps at Basabua and Buna before too many days pass. Despite the soldiers' cherished wish to die in battle, the sacrifices which have spanned half a year will ultimately come to nothing. It is deeply regrettable that the framework established for the invasion of New Guinea will be lost. If the opportunity is to be saved, then the [Word missing] must be urged to immediately send reinforcements to land near Gona.

The officers and men within the camp endure constant air raids and mortar fire during the day, while at night, there is no time for sleep within the flooded redoubts. For two months we have been besieged, waiting for nothing other than the arrival of friendly troops.

[Editor's note: The communications station to Rabaul was near the South Seas Force command, so it is thought that the information about the current situation was accurately transmitted from the South Seas Force commander.]

The overall situation for the Buna Detachment in the middle of January was as follows: the South Seas Force was deployed to the south of Giruwa as the south-west sector unit; the 144th Infantry Regiment had secured an outer circular camp to hold Allied forces in the area; the Buna Detachment Headquarters was located at north Giruwa; while the South Seas Force headquarters, the 41st Infantry Regiment, and the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment occupied positions on the line of the main road between these sectors.

Supplies were transported to north Giruwa by boats detached from units near the Mambare River (eight barges from the 5th Marine Engineer Regiment 3rd Company). Approximately five thousand men needed to be supplied. At the end of December, each man received around 360 millilitres of rice per day, but this was reduced to 40–80 millilitres in early January. There was no food for the period 8–12 January.<sup>447</sup>

In addition to detaching Major Tanaka Kengorō, an army staff officer, to the Buna Detachment, the commander of the 18th Army established a supply base at Mambare and advanced officers from all sections of the army (staff office, munitions section, finance section, medical section) to liaise closely with the front line to maintain continuous supply. The transport units also established an interim base near the mouth of the Kumusi River. Communications were maintained with the wireless receiver at Giruwa.

The 18th Army command had recognised that the area from Giruwa to Kokoda to the west was occupied by Australian forces, and the area to the east by American forces (around a regiment from both the 32nd and 41st Divisions). Further, the front-line Allied troops were known to be planning a campaign of gradual encroachment, infiltrating and occupying positions within the Japanese camps. However, it was observed that the exhaustive tactics seen in the attack on Buna were not being adopted. Instead, the attacks were carried out by artillery fire and the infiltration of smaller-scale units in contact with the gunners.

The pressure enclosing the Japanese positions intensified each passing day. The Japanese were convinced that the Allied forces in the Buna area were planning to advance along the coast to north Giruwa, and that the final stage of the campaign was drawing near.

The Allies had established a base and an airbase at Oro Bay, and had begun construction of an airfield at Dobodura closer to the Japanese positions. Torpedo boats from these bases would often sortie to the waters east of Mambare, causing increasing difficulties for Japanese transport vessels.<sup>448</sup>

The situation at various Allied airfields as reported by Japanese navy reconnaissance planes in the latter part of January was as follows:

Location	Type of airfield	Notes
Soputa airfield	Runway	Being expanded to three runways
Dobodura airfield	Runway	No evidence of three runways
Horanda airfield	T-type	Seaplane base
Running along north bank Samboga River	Runway	Five runways
Emboga airfield	T-type	Transport planes recognised
Horu airfield		No evidence of recent use

In March 1958, the US government returned to Japan the set of documents titled *Records of the former Japanese army*. Among these records, which were collected during battles by Allied forces, were approximately thirty items that concern the situation in the Giruwa area.

These primarily consisted of battle reports, presumably written by battalion commanders at the front line and addressed to the South Seas Force commander. Among these was one document written by an officer in the field and addressed to the officers of the South Seas Force. Written under the conditions of battle as described above, the reports are little more than pencil scribbled on straw paper – far from the uniform appearance of normal battle reports. The following extract, probably drafted in late December 1942, describes the situation at the time:<sup>449</sup>

1. No evidence of any significant change in the enemy's situation. Unusually quiet.
2. Mortar attacks continue as usual. Just after sunset, rapid-fire guns? Several shells fell within the camp, but there were no casualties.
3. 2nd Lieutenant Hisasue has fallen ill, as per previous reports. Though he has continued to command until today, this will be a pressing problem as his condition has deteriorated. Though his treatment continues within the camp, there is no improvement. 2nd Lieutenant Munenaga has developed a malignant fever. He continues to command within the redoubt, though he sleeps often. There are no officers or men who are not patients. According to the testimony of the battalion commander, this is especially the case for the troops.
4. Though few in total, the number of men who have lost their minds continues to rise.
5. The camp is becoming a graveyard for officers and men, though we continue to defend it to the best of our abilities.
6. The Murase Unit applied the 11th Company to the Takenaka Unit (elements of the 41st Infantry Regiment) by order of the Yokoyama Detachment. When the 2nd Company, 1st Platoon was withdrawing, Lieutenant Takenaka implored them to remain behind. However, all 112 men of the company, including the company

commander, were patients. Among them were 30 men who were clinically ill at the front line, but there was no one available to take their place.

It is no exaggeration to say that the end will come if one element fails under the current conditions.

Food is gradually becoming scarce, but even if we have no rations, all units will continue to defend the front line with all their strength.

This state of affairs is truly lamentable. Day by day, we cannot escape this situation, which is becoming worse. It is the good fight, which is tear-provoking.

On another matter, if the reinforcements for the Asai Unit do not arrive on the 19th of the month, then we must consider that fate is not with us.

I present this report in the hope that its contents are comprehended by my superiors.

2nd Lieutenant Ogawa.

### Operational leadership of the withdrawal by the 18th Army commander

The commander of the 18th Army received orders on 13 January 1943 from the 8th Area Army commander to “Withdraw strengths in the Buna area at an appropriate time to Lae and Salamaua in cooperation with the navy.” The decision was made to withdraw the force and the following “Outline of the withdrawal of the Buna Detachment” was formulated:<sup>450</sup>

#### 1. Policy

The army will first transport all casualties by barge to the Kumusi River area. Then, in consideration of the physical strength of the detachment, remaining troops will assemble near the mouth of the Kumusi River. The primary aim is to disengage from the enemy, then transfer all personnel to Lae and Salamaua via Mambare. If the situation does not permit this withdrawal by sea, then it is anticipated that units will break through enemy lines at Giruwa and proceed overland to the first staging point near the mouth of the Kumusi. It is planned for the barges to assemble as soon as possible and, in consideration of such factors as the light available from the moon, that the evacuation of casualties will begin on 25th January and be completed by 29th January.

#### 2. Outline

- a. In accordance with this policy, the evacuation of casualties will be undertaken first. Barges from the Lae area will assemble in the Mambare area.
- b. The base at Mambare will be strengthened.
- c. The army will indicate the time for the withdrawal to the west of Mambare.
- d. Elements from the 2nd Company of the Okabe Detachment will be deployed to provide protection for the Buna Detachment. These troops will be under the command of the Buna Detachment commander until they reach Mambare.

The condition in this outline that “the army will indicate the time for the withdrawal to the west of Mambare” was because the 18th Army was considering at that time transporting the second echelon to Lae and so barges would consequently be needed in the Lae area. There was also consideration for reinforcing the Lae and Salamaua areas with a view to recapturing Buna. If that were to happen, there would be a necessity to secure Mambare as an offensive base, and to secure the Lae and Salamaua areas as advance bases. Consequently, the decision concerning when to withdraw needed to be taken in accordance with the current situation.<sup>451</sup>

The commander of the 18th Army issued the following general orders based on the withdrawal overview on 13 January (“Mō operational order A no. 72”).<sup>452</sup>

1. In general, there has been no great change in the enemy situation in New Guinea. In addition to the arrival of fresh Japanese air groups, the Allied air strength continues to be destroyed. A powerful army formation (Okabe Detachment) is currently advancing on Wau, having landed at Lae on 7 January.
2. The army has secured a strategic position for securing key areas in New Guinea to the west of Lae, Salamaua, and Wau, and is currently planning preparations for future offensive operations. For this purpose, troops in the Buna area will be evacuated to the Lae and Salamaua areas in cooperation with the navy.
3. The Buna Detachment will withdraw independently from the area, with the following units to retreat and assemble at the designated locations. The withdrawal of main units will commence on 29 January and be completed by 7–8 February.

Unit	Staging point
21st Independent Mixed Brigade (main strength)	Mambare area
21st Independent Mixed Brigade (part strength)	Zaka, Morobe area
Main strength of other units	Lae area

Part strength of other units	Salamaua area
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Withdrawal of units to the west of Zaka and Morobe is indicated separately.

The commencement of the withdrawal is given in *Operational records of the 18th Army* as “around 25 January”. However, *Operational documents of the South Pacific* compiled by the 4th (History and Tactics) Department of the Army General Staff records that the withdrawal would commence on “29 January with plans to complete by 7–8 February”. The leadership of the Buna operation would seem appropriate when considered in relation to the withdrawal from Guadalcanal. However, the postwar reminiscence by the chief of staff of the 18th Army, Major General Yoshihara Kane, contains the following statement, which generally supports the position of the Army General Staff:

When considered solely from the perspective of military regulations, a withdrawal should take place immediately once the decision is taken. Lieutenant General Adachi issued such orders from a moral standpoint to ensure that the situation would not become desperate at Guadalcanal precisely at the time when the earliest withdrawal could have been effected from Giruwa.

In addition, 18th Army staff officer Major Tanaka Kengorō recalled the following:

The plan to “commence withdrawal on 29 January and complete by 7–8 February” was formulated by the 8th Area Army, while the 18th Army outlined that the withdrawal would take place “between 25 and 29 January”. It was my opinion that if the withdrawal was to be undertaken, then it should have taken place at the earliest opportunity. Delaying the withdrawal would risk complete destruction of the force. I even addressed these concerns in a letter to the army chief of staff, Sugiyama. My idea was for the army to withdraw after the arrival at Giruwa of the transport unit that was currently advancing from Rabaul.

The transport unit mentioned here refers to the unit temporarily formed as a measure of the 18th Army to strengthen coastal transport capabilities to the Lae sector and elsewhere. It was deployed in mid-December and was based on ten barges manned by engineers from the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade.

After no more than a week’s worth of instructions in procedures and operations, the vessels set off through the Dampier Strait. This was a treacherous passage only 90 kilometres wide with strong currents and frequent sorties by Allied planes and submarines. Travelling by night, without even a compass, the ships set off for Buna some 830 kilometres distant.<sup>453</sup>

#### Conditions at the Giruwa front

The conditions of the battle at the front line at Giruwa until the end of January were as follows:

In light of the situation since the end of December, the commander of the South Seas Force gave consideration to adopting a final strategy to withdraw units in the south-west and central sectors and consolidate them in the coastal sector. A bell-shaped bridgehead camp would then be constructed to await army reinforcements.<sup>454</sup>

Meanwhile, the penetration by Allied troops strengthened day by day. On 9 January, contact with the south-west sector unit was finally lost. The South Seas Force commander, in the midst of efforts to extract the south-west sector units and reform units at the bridgehead camp, received news on 12 January that “the entire complement of the south-west sector unit has withdrawn to the mouth of the Kumusi River”.

The escape of the south-west sector units, which was made up primarily of the 144th Infantry Regiment, had a great impact on the reformed plans for the bridgehead camp. Ultimately, however, the South Seas Force commander moved his headquarters nearer the coast and entrusted command of the central sector, which protruded into the front line, to Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama Sadahide, commander of the 47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion. The 2nd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, led by Major Koiwai Mitsuo, and the 2nd Battalion of the 144th Infantry Regiment, led by Major Katō Kōkichi (newly appointed), were placed under the command of Colonel Fuchiyama.<sup>455</sup> The 3rd Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment, led by Major Murase Gohei, which was previously positioned in the sector, was now deployed at the western flank of the bell-shaped bridgehead. The Murase Battalion safely withdrew during the evening of 15 January and joined the new line.

[Editor's note: Colonel Yazawa Kiyomi, the commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment, contracted malaria during the rescue operation in the Buna sector and was evacuated to the Kumusi River during the night of 19 January.]

Meanwhile, the Allied forces mounted an unprecedented, ferocious artillery and mortar attack from 9 am on 16 January, then began a wholesale assault on the Japanese positions. The difference in firepower between the sides made going very difficult for the defenders. Finally, at 3 pm that afternoon, Allied troops breached the lines from the west at a central position between the newly established coastal bridgehead sector (north Giruwa) and the front line (south Giruwa). The units of the central sector in south Giruwa led by Colonel Fuchiyama were completely encircled.

#### Operational leadership of the withdrawal by the commander of the Buna Detachment

Meanwhile, the commander of the Buna Detachment, Major General Yamagata, had received orders on 14 January from the 18th Army ("Mō operational order A no. 72") for the detachment to withdraw to the west of the Mambare River. According to the army orders, the withdrawal was to commence from 25 January. However, the situation for the detachment had deteriorated to the point where it could not wait that long.

At that time, the detachment had possession of eight serviceable barges. These were used to evacuate around two hundred casualties per day. By 18 January, all sick and injured had been transferred to the Line-of-communication Hospital staging area.<sup>456</sup>

The detachment commander subsequently drafted the following order ("Nishi operational order A no. 65") at noon on 18 January:

1. The enemy continues to infiltrate our camp from the west. Despite this, all units are stubbornly holding their positions.
2. The detachment has been ordered to withdraw to the mouth of the Kumusi River to undertake preparations for the next stage of operations. For this purpose, all fronts will change the direction of the offensive to the west at 2000 hrs on day  $x$ . Units will first withdraw to near Bekabari, while continuing to destroy enemy troops in the area.  
Day  $x$  has been designated in separate orders as 20 January.  
It is anticipated that Colonel Yoshida will lead the former Tsukamoto Battalion and clear the path from the Kumusi to Basabua to aid the withdrawal of the detachment.  
[Editor's note: Colonel Yoshida Akio was the newly appointed commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment.]
3. The South Seas Force (with the exception of elements at Garara and near the disembarkation point) will first head west from their current positions and begin their attack at 2000 hrs on day  $x$ . They will aim to withdraw to the sector on the right bank at the mouth of the Kumusi River along a front approximately 4 kilometres from the line of the coast.  
Navy units and the 45th Fixed Wireless Unit will be subsumed under this command.
4. The Nojiri Battalion (1st Battalion, 170th Infantry Regiment) will withdraw from the front line at 2000 hrs on day  $x$  and breakthrough to Basabua along the line of the coast, aiming first to head for Bekabari. The units at Garara and near the disembarkation point will be subsumed under this command.
5. The Hozumi Battalion (South Seas Force Mountain Artillery Battalion) will withdraw with the Nojiri Battalion.
6. The Brigade Signals Unit, in addition to continuing present duties up to day  $x-1$ , will secure wireless communications between the Kumusi River and Giruwa up to 1700 hrs on day  $x$ . The 170th Infantry Regiment Signals Unit will be subsumed under this command.
7. Units to withdraw by boat will be as follows:  
Day  $x-1$  (five barges)
  - Buna Detachment headquarters
  - Brigade Signals Unit main strength (with the exception of the 170th Infantry Regiment Signals Unit and the Type-3 Wireless Squad)
  - Detachment reserve troopsDay  $x$  (five barges)
  - Machine-cannon Platoon
  - Sick and injured who emerged since day  $x-2$
  - Disembarkation duty officersUnits not to board barges will withdraw with the Nojiri Battalion.
8. Units will make every effort to carry their own casualties with the withdrawal, and shall securely dispose of all munitions, etc.
9. The South Seas Force commander will order the Tomita Unit to make every effort to speedily distribute debarked military supplies to all units.

10. I shall withdraw with the detachment headquarters on day *x-1*, first proceeding to the Hashimoto River (approximately 6 kilometres north of Bekabari).

Method of distribution of orders

1. Notes shall be distributed only to the South Seas Force commander at 0900 hrs on day *x-1*. However, the South Seas Force commander may distribute his own orders based on the original orders after 1600 hrs on day *x-1*. Until that time, the South Seas Force commander and senior officers will not disclose the orders.
2. Staff officers will distribute orders in sealed envelopes to the Nojiri and Hozumi Battalions at 0900 hrs on day *x-1*, with instructions to open the orders at 1600 hrs that same day.
3. Orders will be passed orally to the Brigade Signals Unit, etc.

South Seas Force commander's orders to withdraw and the situation of front-line units

The commander of the South Seas Force distributed the following orders, which were based on the detachment commander's orders, during the morning of 20 January:<sup>457</sup>

1. The force has been ordered to withdraw towards the mouth of the Kumusi River during the evening of 20 January.
2. All units will undertake various preparations, then infiltrate and break through gaps in the enemy lines at 2000 hrs on 20 January and head for the mouth of the Kumusi River.  
\*Casualties who cannot travel must remain behind at the camp.

Five scouting parties were deployed to deliver these orders to the Fuchiyama Unit, who, as previously mentioned, had been completely encircled by Allied troops. The orders were written on signals paper in Japanese phonetic characters in case anything happened.<sup>458</sup>

Corporal Watanabe Jinsuke penetrated the Allied lines and reached the Fuchiyama Unit at 9 am.

According to the memoir of Major Koiwai, the line with the asterisk was missing from the orders at that time. Leaving their immobile comrades behind would have been unbearable for the troops.

When Major Koiwai handed over the orders, even Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama, with an expression unlike what one would expect after suddenly receiving orders to withdraw, said: "This is not possible." Major Koiwai agreed. The reason was that the unit had absolutely no strength, either to break through the complete encirclement, or to carry out their casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama decided to stay and die an honourable death.<sup>459</sup>

However, when Major Koiwai had returned to his unit, talk of a withdrawal had somehow already spread through the entire camp. Aside from infantry units, those in charge of engineer and supply company troops had gone out to find out if the rumours were true. Major Koiwai, confident he could explain the proposal to fight for an honourable death to the troops of his own regiment, was unsure if he could face other units when pressed with: "If they are military orders, shouldn't we withdraw?"

There was no certainty that such a situation wouldn't result in a breakdown of solidarity in the troops and the descent into chaos. The great irony for Major Koiwai, in addition to the concern over not executing orders that were delivered, was that everyone knew that he had previously looked into the feasibility of withdrawal and had gone to Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama to present the case for its success.

Fuchiyama agreed to preparations for withdrawal, but had charged Koiwai, as a man of infantry background, to devise a method to break through the Allied perimeter. When Koiwai remarked that "the problem is the transport of casualties", the lieutenant colonel immediately bowed his head in silence, a pained expression crossing his face. After a while, he spoke quietly with a deep sigh: "Living is certainly harder than dying."

Major Koiwai gave the responsibility of how to tell the immobile casualties about the withdrawal to each company commander. A second liaison officer, 1st Lieutenant Ikeda Shigeyoshi from the South Seas Force Signals Unit, arrived at that time, which was about 5.30 pm. He was one of the scouts sent out that morning.

1st Lieutenant Ikeda delivered the following message from Major General Oda, the commander of the South Seas Force:

Commander Oda told me to especially transmit to you that you must leave the wounded at the camp and withdraw. Further, you have received orders, so the unit must head for the coast this evening. The signal will be two continuous bursts of 60 rounds of machine-gun fire.

The message was worded such that the treatment of casualties was the sole responsibility of the commander of the South Seas Force. While the emotional scars of this action could not be healed, the heavy burden of distress was placed firmly on the shoulders of the two commanders.

The line in front of the 7th Company was chosen as the location of the disengagement because no Allied attacks had yet come from that sector. The senior officer who was despatched for reconnaissance of the site reported that “disengagement is possible”.

A torrent of rain continued from the afternoon into the evening. The rain that had tormented them continuously since their landing in New Guinea was this night, for the first time, a welcome visitor. The planned disengagement under concealment through the front line, which was only 20–30 metres from the Allied positions, was made possible by this heavy rain.

The various units assembled on the road in the centre of the camp from 8 pm amidst the pouring rain. There were concerns, however, that Allied troops would be encountered further on even if they could disengage from the front line. Food was also in short supply. Disease constantly shadowed their weak bodies. The path of death was only certain for those who would remain behind in the camp. For those who were to escape, their future seemed only supported by a fragile thread.

The stretcher-bound casualties were bid farewell with instructions to “take their lives before the Allies arrived the next morning”. Major Koiwai explained the situation at that time in his memoir, as follows:

Suicide was the only possible path open to soldiers in such circumstances. They did not know surrender and the shame of being captured was considered worse than death. To take one’s life with the weapons used to attack the enemy protected the country and avoided disgrace to one’s family – in other words, it was considered to be an act of loyalty to the emperor and filial piety to one’s parents. Further, it was believed that such an act would ensure the everlasting repose of one’s soul as a deity in Yasukuni Shrine.

The advance into the dark commenced in the continuing heavy rain at 10 pm on 20 January. The Murase Battalion (approximately one hundred men) led, with the Fuchiyama Unit, the 41st Infantry Regiment Headquarters, and other units in train.

Officers of the forward sector units, who had advanced safely through the first line of the Allied encirclement by dawn, judged that by noon they had advanced to a location near the second line of encirclement through which passed the road from Basabua to Soputa. They were on high alert for Allied troops.

To break through this barrier, the Fuchiyama Unit adopted a strategy whereby battalion-sized units were divided into smaller sections to creep forward under cover of darkness and penetrate gaps between Allied positions. All officers over company commander were assembled. Major Koiwai provided a detailed briefing, which included an appraisal of Allied positions, the direction of the mouth of the Kumusi River, and the order of departure.

Three of the most able-bodied men from each unit were organised under the acting regimental commander, Major Koiwai, with Major Murase and Lieutenant Hayashi, to protect the colours of the 41st Infantry Regiment. It was reported to the commander that even if the colours did not reach the mouth of the Kumusi River, the flag would be destroyed and would not fall into the hands of the enemy. Two points were transmitted from man to man: that they would die in battle, and that the colours would be destroyed.

Lieutenant Colonel Fuchiyama and the senior command, in light of the breakdown of communications to date, decided to travel in train with the colour party.<sup>460</sup>

#### Escape from the coastal sector

Meanwhile, the Buna Detachment was weathering heavy artillery attacks from the west. Major General Yamagata, with the detachment headquarters, elements of the Brigade Signals Unit, the Detachment Reserve Unit (Ikegami Unit), and about one hundred and forty casualties, boarded two recently arrived barges at 9.30

pm on 19 January and headed for the mouth of the Kumusi River. They arrived at their destination at 2.30 am the following morning.<sup>461</sup>

The headquarters of the South Seas Force, along with detached units, including the Noshiro Battalion and the Mountain Artillery Battalion, commenced their overland retreat as per their orders during the night of 20 January. The commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Oda Kensaku, remained behind after the withdrawal had commenced. On 21 January, he committed suicide together with his senior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Tomita Yoshinobu.

On the evening of 20 January, as planned, Major General Yamagata assigned responsibilities for loading the main strength of the Brigade Signals Unit and casualties on four barges, which had arrived in Giruwa at 9 pm on 20 January. Efforts were made to board the troops, but Allied artillery fire was too strong. The situation became confused and dangerous, with ultimately only elements of the signals unit and the remainder of the 9th Company able to board and return.

Two barges set off to board the troops again the following night. By that time, however, Allied troops had occupied the coastal area around Giruwa and it was not possible for the men to embark.<sup>462</sup>

The coastal units that had commenced their overland withdrawal divided into platoons and broke through the Allied containment. The Noshiro Battalion advanced along the coastal sector, receiving heavy attacks from the time when they initially broke through the Allied positions. The majority of the unit, including the battalion commander, were killed in the repeated engagements, but the rest finally arrived at Basabua.<sup>463</sup>

The Mountain Artillery Battalion also penetrated the Allied front lines. The commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hozumi, was extremely weakened by a bout of diarrhoea. He told his subordinates: "If I go on like this, I will bring disaster on us all. Do not worry about me. Advance!" His subordinates, forcibly trying to take the commander's hand, replied: "We will push on, even if we have to carry you on our backs." At that, the commander firmly pushed them away, saying, "I cannot ask this of you under these circumstances", whereupon he killed himself with his pistol. Almost all personnel of the artillery company, including the commander, were also killed on the battlefield and the commander of the supply company was missing.<sup>464</sup> The pressure brought to bear by the Allies in the face of the Japanese retreat was truly immense.

The navy units and Formosan Volunteers did not encounter the Allies and continued their advance concealed in the depths of the jungle.

#### The situation after the arrival at the Kumusi River

The acting commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto, whose unit had withdrawn from the south-west sector during the evening of 20 January, arrived at the Kumusi River on 23 January. There he was placed under the command of the newly appointed regimental commander, Colonel Yoshida Akio. Only 140 out of the 300 men who left the south-west sector had arrived at the Kumusi River.<sup>465</sup>

The 26-man colour party led by the acting commander of the 41st Infantry Regiment, Major Koiwai Mitsuo, arrived at the mouth of the Kumusi River with the regimental flag on 28 January. The unit had safely broken through to the Basabua–Soputa road, then proceeded north for a week before arriving at the river. The unit there occupied the camp held by Major Miyamoto Kikumatsu, leader of the 1st Battalion of the same regiment. They were joined by 45 men from the Takenaka Unit of the regiment who had escaped from the south-west sector under the command of Colonel Tsukamoto. However, 2nd Lieutenant Takenaka and his entire command were missing.<sup>466</sup>

Other units, through the sacrifice of officers and men killed en route, gradually arrived at the right bank of the Kumusi River, with the assembly basically complete by 5 February. Meanwhile, the withdrawal to Mambare was progressively being undertaken, with the entire strength of the Buna Detachment assembled there by 7 February.

Major Tanaka Kengorō, the 18th Army staff officer assigned to the Buna Detachment, had travelled with the detachment during the withdrawal to the Kumusi River. He was replaced at the Kumusi River on 24 January by Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Seiji, staff officer with the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade, and then returned to Rabaul.<sup>467</sup>

The advance barge party, led by Lieutenant Ishikawa, arrived at Mambare on 23 January. It was now possible to apply a total of around twenty barges to the withdrawal effort when used in combination with the army barges at Lae.

The 2nd and 8th Companies of the 102nd Infantry Regiment, to provide aid from the Okabe Detachment, arrived at Mambare on 23 January. The 8th Company occupied the left bank near the mouth of the river, then carried out clearing operations at Tatututu and Manau along the river valley. The 2nd Company travelled by barge to the Kumusi River on 24 January, then left the next day towards the Ampolo River, where they were charged with establishing a holding camp for the overland withdrawal units. This company succeeded in discharging their responsibilities when they repelled numerous attacks from an Allied pursuit party around the mouth of the Ampolo River.<sup>468</sup>

The Buna Detachment commander, Major General Yamagata, moved to Mambare on 2 February 1943. Out of an estimated standing strength of five thousand men prior to the withdrawal, only 3,400 were assembled by 7 February, including navy personnel. The number of troops at the beginning of the battle at Giruwa and Buna in early November, plus subsequent reinforcements, totalled approximately eleven thousand troops. This means that around seven thousand six hundred men had been lost since then.<sup>469</sup>

Navy units were removed from Major General Yamagata's command once they had arrived at Mambare.

[Editor's note: The regimental colours of the 144th Infantry Regiment were temporarily evacuated to Rabaul owing to a misunderstanding in orders, but returned to Mambare by submarine on 2 February. It was said that the colour party's uniforms were tattered and that they were without shoes when they arrived in Rabaul.]

The numbers of troops at the end of the battle were listed by the Buna Detachment staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Seiji, as follows:

1. Survivors, casualties, and equipment from the Giruwa withdrawal operation

Strength immediately prior to withdrawal operation	4,000
Casualties evacuated by barge	1,200
Those who arrived at the Kumusi River	1,900
Casualties left at the Giruwa camp	300
Killed in battle during the withdrawal	400
Those who dropped out and were lost during the withdrawal	150
Completely equipped soldiers	15
Those carrying only pistols or rifles	450
Those carrying only bayonets	600
Unarmed soldiers	1,000

[Editor's note: All the troops who arrived at the Kumusi River carried empty mess tins.]

2. Makeup of survivors for each unit at the Kumusi River

South Seas Force headquarters	12
144th Infantry Regiment	445
South Seas Force Cavalry	3
South Seas Force Mountain Artillery Battalion	65
South Seas Force Engineer Unit	18
South Seas Force Supply and Transport Company	30
41st Infantry Regiment	430
47th Field Anti-aircraft Artillery Battalion	60
15th Independent Engineer Regiment	170
19th Independent Engineer Regiment (one company)	15
7th, 8th Independent Wireless Platoons	40

17th Army Military Police (part strength)	12
Anchorage Command (part strength)	30
Shipping Engineer Regiment (one company)	120
25th Field Anti-aircraft Machine-cannon Company	35
Takasago Volunteer Unit	65
Korean Volunteer Unit	15
21st Independent Mixed Brigade	270
Navy units	70
Casualties	1,200
Total	3,105

### **Various issues raised by the withdrawal from Giruwa**

At the time of the Giruwa evacuation, Major General Yamagata travelled with his Buna Detachment commanders by boat to the mouth of the Kumusi River during the evening of 19 January 1943. The commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Oda, was ordered to lead his troops on an overland withdrawal, but he remained at the Giruwa camp and took his own life. The commander of the 15th Independent Engineer Regiment, Colonel Yokoyama, withdrew by boat to the Kumusi River with fifty of his troops by his own authority on 17 January. Further, the main strength of the 144th Infantry Regiment, which was led into fierce fighting at the south-west sector camp by its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto, withdrew to the Kumusi River without orders during the night of 12 January.

The various issues raised here relate to decisions taken under extreme conditions of battle. These decisions also stemmed from differences of opinion arising from strategic and moral perspectives. The actual events were extremely complex, with those concerned perhaps having different reasons altogether. Consequently, there follows several accounts from the memoirs of those involved.

#### The death of the commander of the South Seas Force

The 18th Army chief of staff, Major General Yoshihara Kane, wrote in his memoir concerning the death of the commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Oda Kensaku:

Someone once remarked that this was not “self-determination”, and that it would have been expected for Oda to withdraw to the Kumusi River and recommence his duties. In theory, one certainly has to agree. However, while in agreement, for a battle-hardened officer renowned for his calm courage, there is no expectation that such an idea did not occur to him.

According to what we heard, the commander oversaw the withdrawal of the last of his units. He then turned to the duty soldier and said: “That’s done then. I wish to smoke a last cigarette. Go on ahead.” The duty soldier, following his commander’s orders, turned and followed the retreating unit with heavy feet. Some time later, he heard gunshots from the rear. Thinking the enemy had started a fight, he quickly returned to find that, incredibly, the Major General and Lieutenant Colonel Tomita had laid out a cloak and together committed suicide.

It seems likely that the commander had previously decided to end his life. On this day, having endured all hardships and settled his affairs, he realised his cherished desire and killed himself. It is beyond my simple understanding how he could have considered that he had settled his affairs, for were not the 10,000 men of the South Seas Force, a force based on two regiments, at that time under his care? Further, the majority of these troops were sick and injured. How could they have assembled after the withdrawal? How would this be recalled under tragic circumstances, and how could you alone return from this? How could he have returned leaving the corpses of so many of the South Seas Force behind? At the very least, is not the true path of a warrior to remain with the spirits of his men and make appeal on their behalf to the spirits of their ancestors? Did he not recognise the time to discard the present and die for others? Did he not become a martyr for his men?

Further details are contained in the memoir of Major Koiwai, the acting commander of the 144th Infantry Regiment:

Commander Oda's headquarters also began to withdraw at 8 pm on 20 January, but encountered the enemy prior to reaching the destination, and thus were thwarted in their attempts to penetrate the lines before daybreak. The commander, thinking it was now impossible to escape during the day, decided to remain and die, thus sharing the fate of the sick and injured. Consequently, he gave away his remaining food, tobacco, and other possessions to those in the headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Tomita declared that he, too, would stay. The commander gave his assent, the two entrusted the officers to settle their affairs, and they parted. [Abbreviated by editor]

Despite this, the other officers continued to make every effort to escape, but there were absolutely no gaps in the Allied lines. The officers returned again to the spot where they parted from the commander and Lieutenant Colonel Tomita only to find that the two senior officers had carried out their heroic suicide. The officers again attempted to penetrate the enemy lines, this time with nothing to lose. Though some non-commissioned officers just managed to escape, the remaining officers were all lost without a trace.

Aside from some details, the great difference between this description and that given by Yoshihara was that Oda was at first determined to escape, then changed his mind. Both, however, viewed the incident sympathetically. A critical opinion was expressed by Tanaka Seiji, staff officer of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade (Buna Detachment), as follows:

At the same time, when considering the great responsibility as commander for the withdrawal campaign during its most difficult stage, is it a little premature not to press on at all costs to fulfil one's duty? Did not the main strength of the South Seas Force escape relatively easily? Furthermore, you cannot escape the slight criticism that Major General Oda, who had only been on the battlefield for less than a month, would have had sufficient strength to undertake an overland withdrawal.

There are some doubts, however, about the "escape relatively easily" claim given the progress of the battle and the great losses incurred, as described in this section.

#### Issues concerning the withdrawal of Colonel Yokoyama

Staff officer Yoshihara recalled the circumstances of the unauthorised retreat of Colonel Yokoyama, as follows:

Colonel Yokoyama was afflicted with a high malarial fever at the time of the unauthorised withdrawal. Up to that time, he had command of all army units in the Buna sector. There is also the view that, when he had lost his command after Major General Oda had taken up duties, he naturally boarded the barge himself and retreated. Colonel Yokoyama had retreated using the barge that Major General Yamagata was to return on. Yamagata became extremely angry and telegraphed army headquarters to initiate a court martial for Yokoyama. The facts of the matter were investigated by the 18th Army, who notified Yamagata that the matter would be dealt with in a manner suitable for a military man.

Staff officer Tanaka Kengorō later recalled this same incident: "The situation was worsening day by day, and being commander of the detachment just prior to its descent into chaos must have had a great psychological impact."

This question was addressed in a long statement, entitled "The true account of the withdrawal from the Giruwa area" submitted to the War History Office in February 1958 by Colonel Yokoyama. This account states the details of the incident and is divided in two parts: the conditions at Giruwa in mid-January; and the motivations for withdrawal. The following extract summarises the main points:

The responsibilities assigned to Colonel Yokoyama at that time were: "To evacuate casualties up to, but not including, the coastal area at Giruwa." Pressure from the Allied encirclement increased around 16 January. Casualties from the area around the road were assembled at the coast, but as there were no defensive placements, the men were subjected to constant shelling. This tragic situation is difficult to express in words.

The beach was very narrow at that point, with only 3–4 metres between the water and the jungle. With no tools to dig trenches, the casualties lay down among the roots of trees with the waves crashing at their feet. Under these conditions, they literally had their backs against a wall.

Many among the gathered casualties and lightly wounded were killed or injured at this place. The intensity of the mortar attacks increased during the night of 16 January, but all the troops could do was continue to bear the attack from an untouchable enemy.

The artillery attacks increased again from the morning of 17 January. Periodic attacks came from all sides. Only about twenty Japanese troops were able to move freely, so these were dispersed to provide occasional nuisance hand-grenade attacks, though these were more for show than effect. Contact with the detachment headquarters had been lost, but according to the reports of casualties recently evacuated, the front line had retreated to the west and the Allies had assembled in the Japanese camp. The numbers of dead and injured continued to rise with each passing hour, with a total of less than thirty sick and wounded soldiers remaining. Recognising that they were gradually being destroyed, I ordered the officers as follows: "Quickly assemble all casualties in this camp, and if no boats come from elsewhere, guide the boat that is coming tonight to this area."

Since the beginning of the withdrawal from the mountains behind Port Moresby, there had been ineffective lines of command from officers to troops in operations within the trackless jungle. On numerous occasions, withdrawal from a particular area had always been according to the judgment of officers on the spot. Among all these incidents, only one or two were conducted after receipt of orders. The retreat to Giruwa was conducted by independent judgment, as we were separated from the detachment commander with no line of communication. The deployments at Giruwa and the occupation of Basabua were undertaken by the judgment of junior officers. Major General Oda was suffering from high malarial fevers after he commenced command, so he said: "I am not used to this place, so I entrust the situation to you, Colonel Yokoyama." The fact of the matter was that decisions were made and carried out by me.

I was also suffering malarial fevers, with some over 40 degrees. Diarrhoea was severe, but just bearable with injections of morphine and camphor. However, the unit was crawling among the roots at the waters edge, with bouts of diarrhoea every half hour. The Allied troops drew increasingly close by nightfall of 17 January, with the artillery fire almost constant. What emplacements were available became filled with water owing to the intense downpour of rain. The situation became unmanageable.

I moved along the coastline at around 7 pm to take charge of the fighting at the machine-gun placement on the western side of the camp, but turned back at the sight of their courageous resistance. After I had moved 40 or 50 metres, I was fired on by an Allied light machine-gun that had appeared on the path back to the regimental headquarters, thus pinning me down.

I managed to run around 5 metres at a time, using the lightning, the bursts of artillery and flare bombs, hiding face down in the water when I might be seen. During the next lightning flash, I would run again, in this way slowly withdrawing. When I returned to my starting point among the tree roots, I discovered two barges on the beach. I ordered everyone to get aboard, and the troops carried me into the boat. Later, I heard that a particular officer had said: "I had never in the previous five years seen such a sight of madmen than I did that day." I felt great shame on hearing this. The high fever and diarrhoea were caused by a strain of malignant malaria, and my judgment was somewhat impaired. I think my courage had perhaps faltered as well.

Our boat was fired on through the rain by an enemy patrol boat, so we headed back for the jungle towards the Kumusi. I received a telegraph from Major General Yamagata the following day to return to Giruwa, but as a result of a medical exam diagnosing high fever and severe diarrhoea, I cabled back that I could not return.

Apart from the memoirs of chief of staff Yoshihara, staff officer Tanaka, and Colonel Yokoyama, there are no historical records to verify the truth of the details of the story.

#### Issues concerning the withdrawal of the Tsukamoto Unit

The third issue concerns the withdrawal of the Tsukamoto Unit. The reasons behind the withdrawal are contained in an extract from the detailed battle report for the 3rd Battalion of the 144th Regiment. A unit travelling with the Tsukamoto Unit wrote as follows ("Kuwa operational order no. 72", dated 1800 hrs 12 January): "The south-west sector unit and the Takenaka Unit sortied in the direction of Soputa. Meeting stiff enemy resistance, they intended to head for Gona, then return to Giruwa by boat."

This is in accord with the postwar memoir of Major Tajima Norikuni, who had arrived at Giruwa on 7 January and was assigned as South Seas Force staff officer responsible for protecting the retreat of Lieutenant Colonel Tanaka Toyoshige. "Major General Oda and I were sleeping in the same bunker. A report came the night before the withdrawal that Lieutenant Colonel Tsukamoto was 'about to contrive a plan and was seeking food'." In other words, seeking food for a starved unit meant he was about to break through the Allied encirclement.

Even with the main strength of his unit, Tsukamoto did not have the strength to "sortie in the direction of Soputa". According to the 3rd Battalion's detailed battle report, the situation was as follows: "It would not be possible to reach the objective, as losses would continue after contact with the enemy outside the camp. Scouts

had even been despatched to Gona to reveal that the area was in Allied hands, so a direct retreat towards Gona naturally become an advance to the Kumusi River.”

According to Tajima’s memoir, the “report [that] came the night before the withdrawal” described the placement of anti-tank land mines as the only measure taken by the South Seas Force to prevent Australian penetration into Japanese positions.

[Editor’s note: Tajima was wounded in fighting during the night of 12 January and evacuated. There were no staff officers in South Seas Force headquarters during the withdrawal of 20 January.]

The Buna Detachment staff officer, Tanaka Kengorō, later recalled that “When seen from the overall strategic situation in the Buna sector, the news of the escape of the Tsukamoto Unit was the first shock to the operational command.”

However, there was no time in the quickly changing situation of the campaign for a detailed investigation of the issues of responsibility for Tsukamoto’s “unauthorised” actions. The reality was that most of those involved lay dead at the camp, and the issue did not surface at the army or area army level.

### **End of the Buna force**

#### Withdrawal to Lae and Salamaua

The commander of the 18th Army gave the following outline orders on 8 February (“Mō operational order A no. 118”):<sup>470</sup>

1. The Buna Detachment will assemble in the Lae and Salamaua areas and prepare for subsequent operations.
2. The commander of the Buna Detachment will withdraw and assemble at Lae and Salamaua the following strengths, then carry out the indicated adjustments:
  - a. Time of withdrawal  
To commence as soon as possible, to be completed by early March
  - b. Order of withdrawal  
Two companies of 102nd Infantry Regiment  
Elements of the engineer regiment and medical units  
Casualties  
Navy units  
Others
3. Staging point  
Salamaua area: 102 Infantry Regiment companies, 41st Infantry Regiment  
Lae area: other units, except those elements that are able to assemble at Salamaua  
Details of these locations will be advised by staff officer Kita, who will be despatched by the army.
4. Command  
All units from the 51st Division will be returned to their original commands immediately after arrival at Salamaua.

The transport of the Buna Detachment from Mambare to Lae and Salamaua commenced from 11 February, based on these army orders. However, the barges suffered frequent breakdowns, and as the scale of the operation was immense, the withdrawal did not make good progress. Consequently, the detachment was forced to wait longer near the Mambare River. The conditions near the mouth of the river were not hygienic, and many troops suffered gastric disorders. The bulk of the detachment were then moved to Mambare village to wait.

Meanwhile, the situation of the war in eastern New Guinea moved into a new phase. It was time for the offensive units of the 18th Army (51st Division) to open up a logistics line, so the transport of the Buna Detachment was temporarily suspended.

The withdrawal was recommenced, with the main strength of the Buna Detachment evacuated to Hopoi, east of Lae, by 11 March. The various units of the Buna Detachment, the formation of which was disbanded upon the completion of the withdrawal, were placed under the command of the 51st Division and gradually reassembled at Rabaul while efforts were taken to restore their strength as a fighting force.

The circumstances of the main elements of the Buna Detachment over the following months is as follows:

The South Seas Force assembled in Rabaul by late April. The force was removed from the order of battle of the 18th Army by an order dated 17 June (“Great army order no. 804”). This order dissolved the formation, and returned units to the order of battle of the 55th Division, at that time in Burma.

In summary, the South Seas Force was a unique formation directly commanded by Imperial Headquarters at the beginning of the war. It had been given the responsibility of invading Guam and then Rabaul, had participated in fierce fighting after landing in New Guinea, and had crossed the Owen Stanley Range to within sight of Port Moresby. Thereafter, the force had fought desperately against the odds, had lost two commanders in succession, and lost most of its officers in battle.

The losses for the South Seas Force were compiled by the No. 1 Demobilisation Bureau as follows:

South Seas Force personnel table

Unit	Mobilised in Japan	Reinforcements	Killed in action or lost	Survivors
55th Infantry Group headquarters	180	155	253	82
144th Infantry Regiment	3,500	1,150	3,264	1,386
55th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Company	130	30	130	30
55th Mountain Artillery Regiment, 1st Battalion	900	257	905	252
55th Engineer Regiment, 1st Company	300	50	310	40
55th Supply and Transport Regiment, 2nd Company	145	30	140	35
55th Division Medical Unit (one-third strength)	220	80	250	50
55th Division Disease Prevention and Water Supply Unit (part strength)	50	10	45	15
55th Division Veterinary Workshop (part strength)	21	5	20	6
55th Division 1st Field Hospital	140	30	115	55
Total	5,586	1,797	5,432	1,951

The 41st Infantry Regiment assembled in Rabaul by mid-June 1943. The regiment was removed from the order of battle of the 18th Army by “Great army order no. 834” on 2 September. The regiment was returned to Korea and placed under the command of the Demobilisation Duty Officer.

According to the memoir of Koizumi Mitsuo, the commander of the 2nd Battalion, the regiment lost over two thousand men and approximately three hundred casualties were evacuated. There were barely two hundred survivors when the regiment arrived in Rabaul. The commander of the regiment, Colonel Yazawa Kiyomi, died on active service after the evacuation from the Mambare River.

The withdrawal to Rabaul of the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade was completed in early June. The brigade was ordered back to Japan by “Great army order no. 800” issued on 12 June. The brigade’s artillery and anti-aircraft units formed the 5th Independent Field Heavy Artillery Battalion and the 42nd Independent Field Anti-aircraft Company respectively. They were then placed in the order of battle of the 18th Army. The brigade’s tank unit was transferred to Wake Island on 22 June and placed under the command of the 170th Infantry Regiment 2nd Battalion.

The brigade commander, Major General Yamagata Tsuyuo, was transferred to the headquarters of the garrison division in Kyoto.

The 15th Independent Engineer Regiment was transferred from the order of battle of the 18th Army to the 19th Army by “Great army order no. 868” on 18 October. The regiment then headed for the new battlefields of western New Guinea.

So the majority of units first involved in campaigns in eastern New Guinea had suffered great losses. They had reassembled at Rabaul and, by the autumn of 1943, most had departed from the battlefields of the South Pacific.

Maps

Pacific region



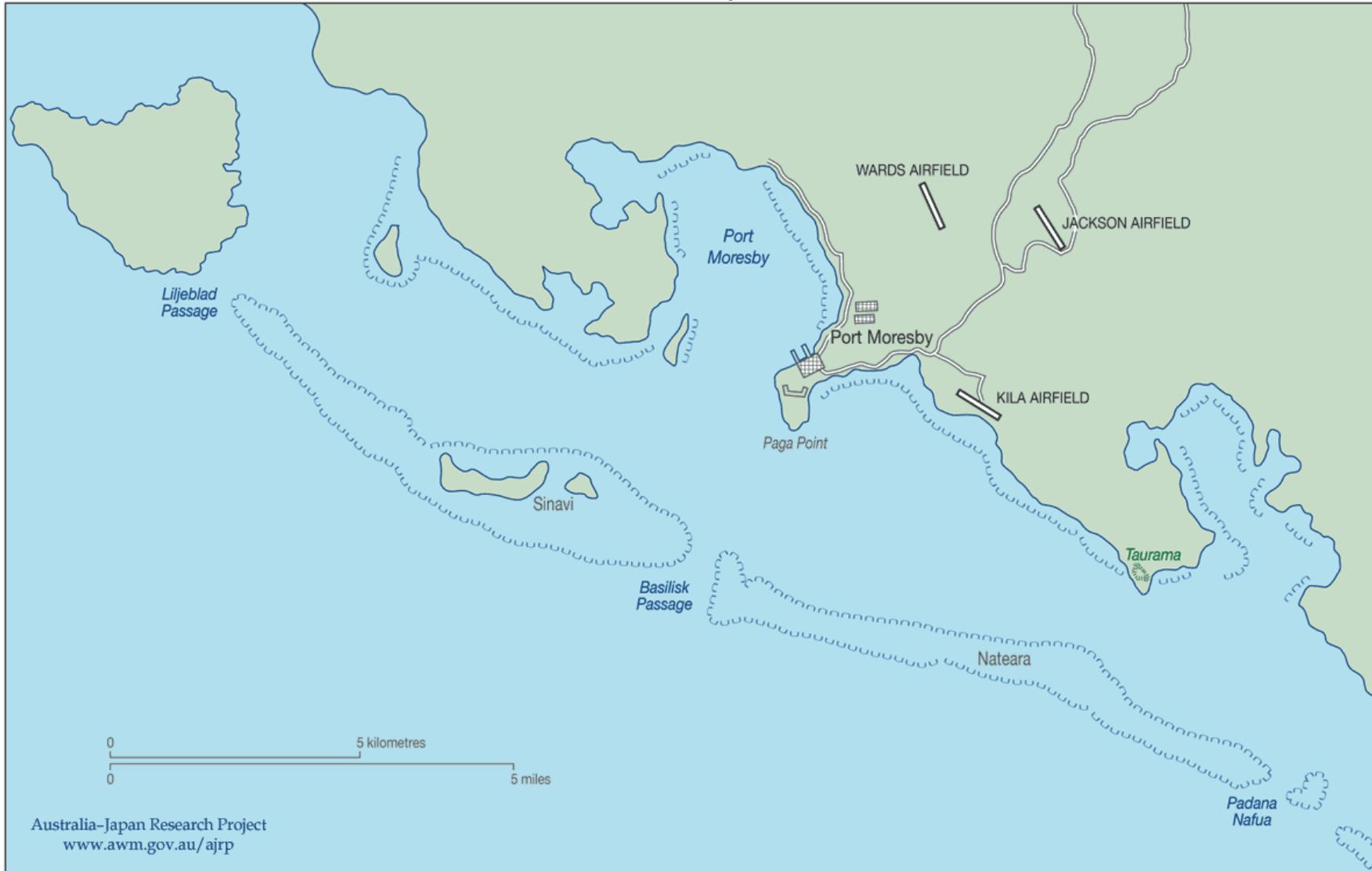
### Bismarck Archipelago, Solomon Islands, and Papua region



Rabaul area



Port Moresby area



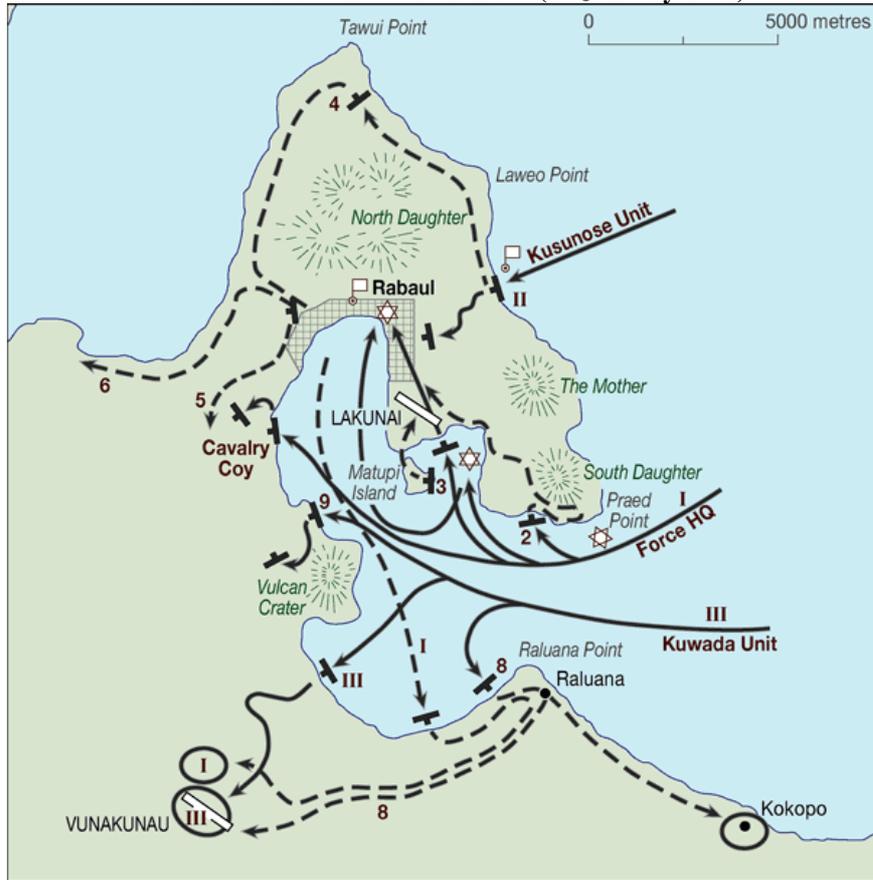
### Owen Stanley Range area



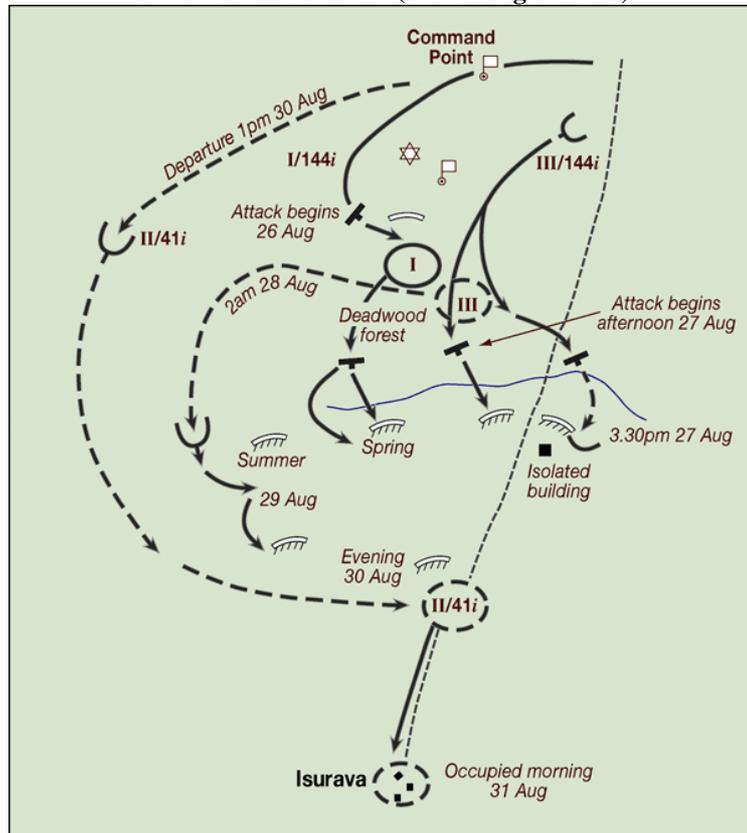
Milne Bay area



**South Seas Force Rabaul offensive (23 January 1942)**



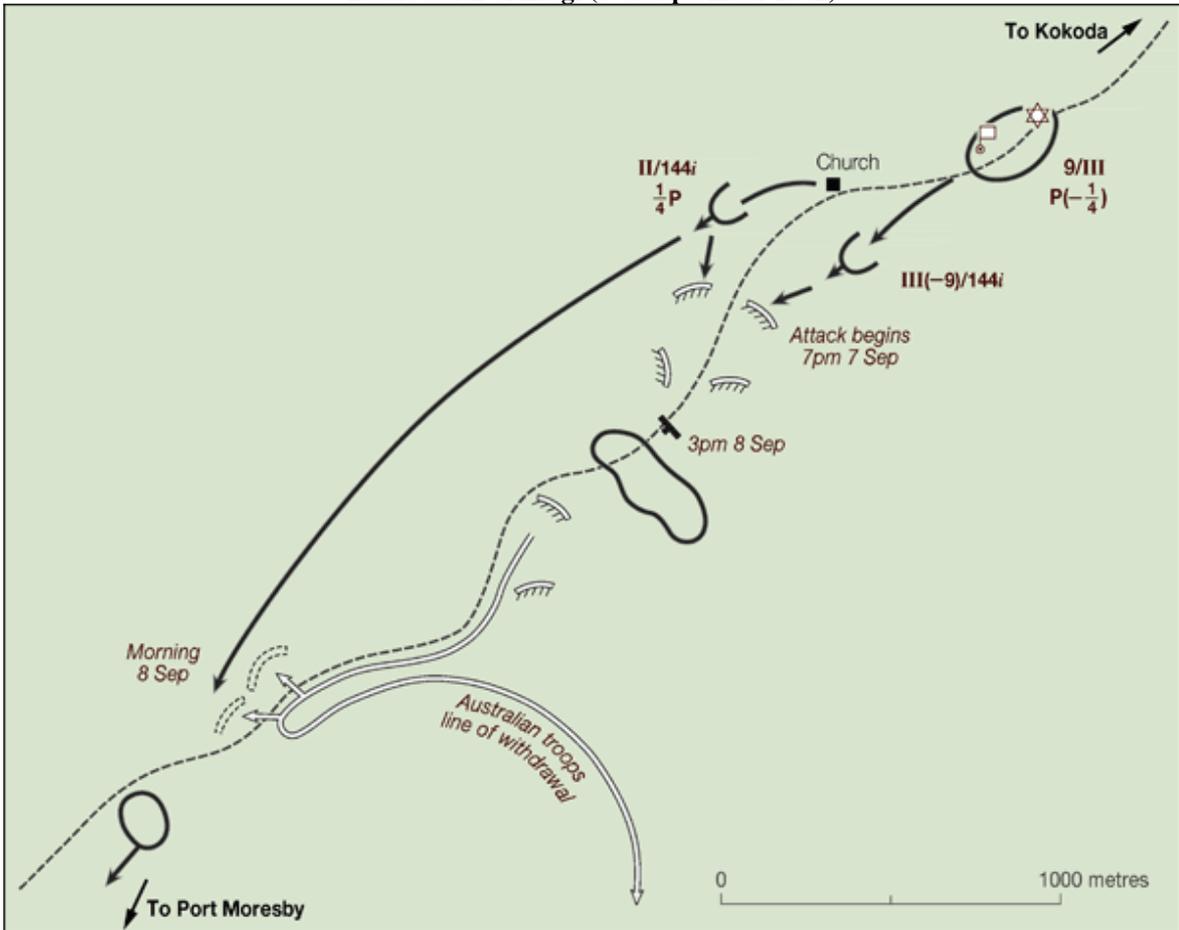
**Battle around Isurava (26–31 August 1942)**



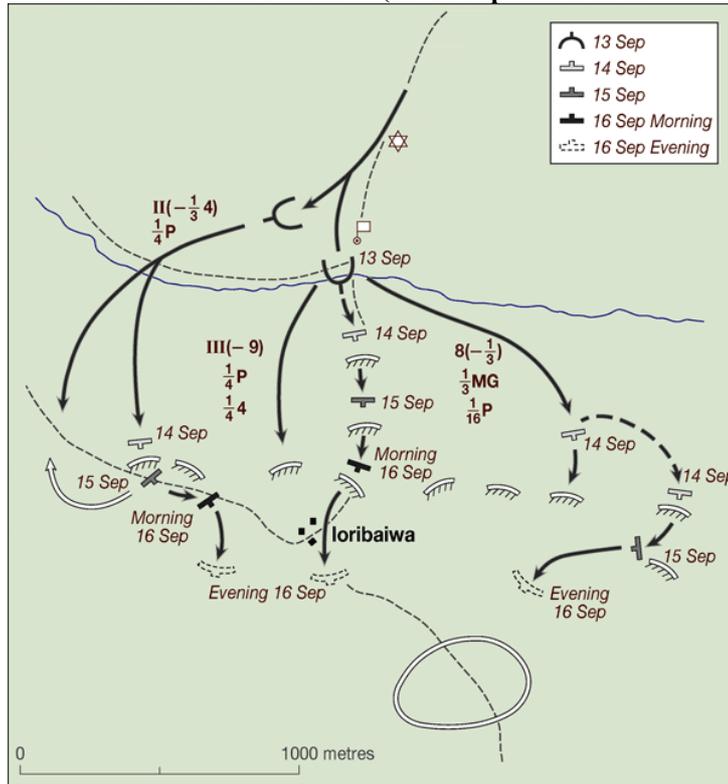
**Overview of the Rabi offensive (24 August – 5 September 1942)**



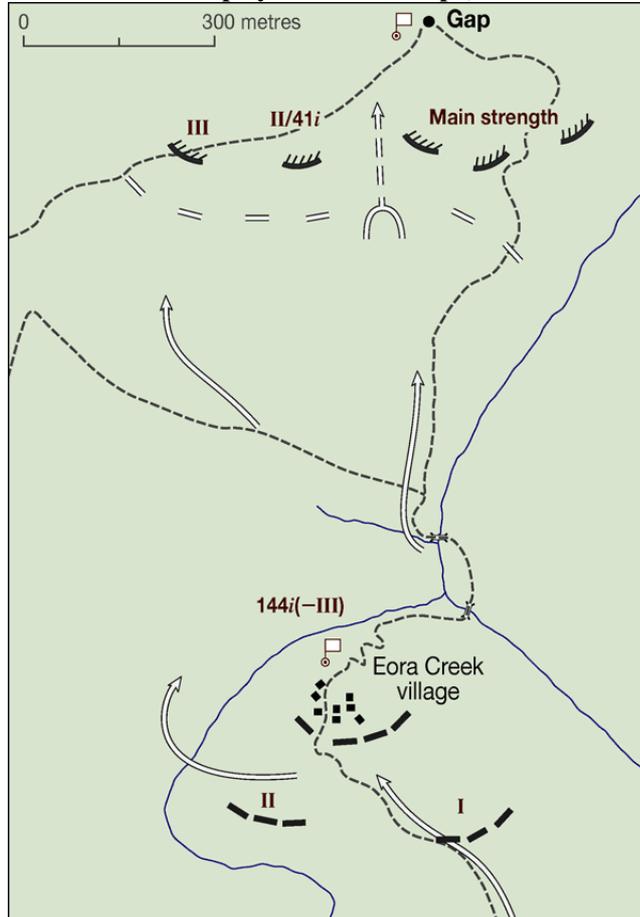
**Battle south of Efogi (7–8 September 1942)**



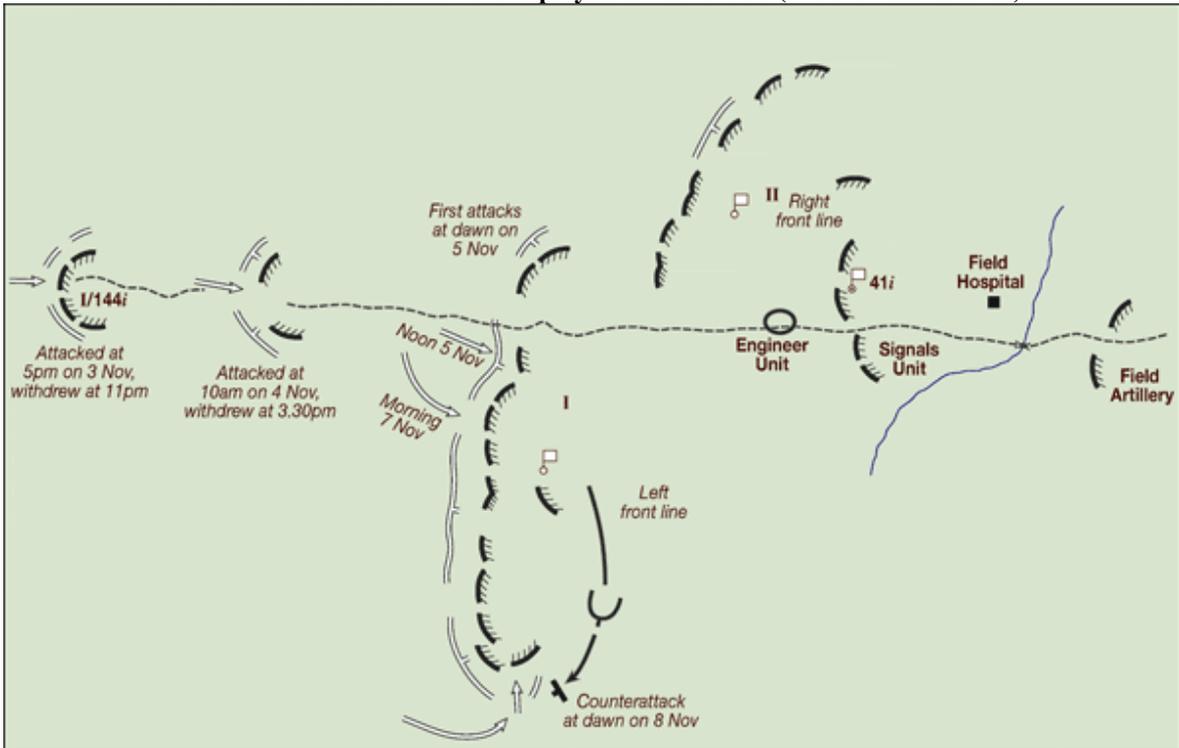
**Battle around Ioribaiwa (13–16 September 1942)**



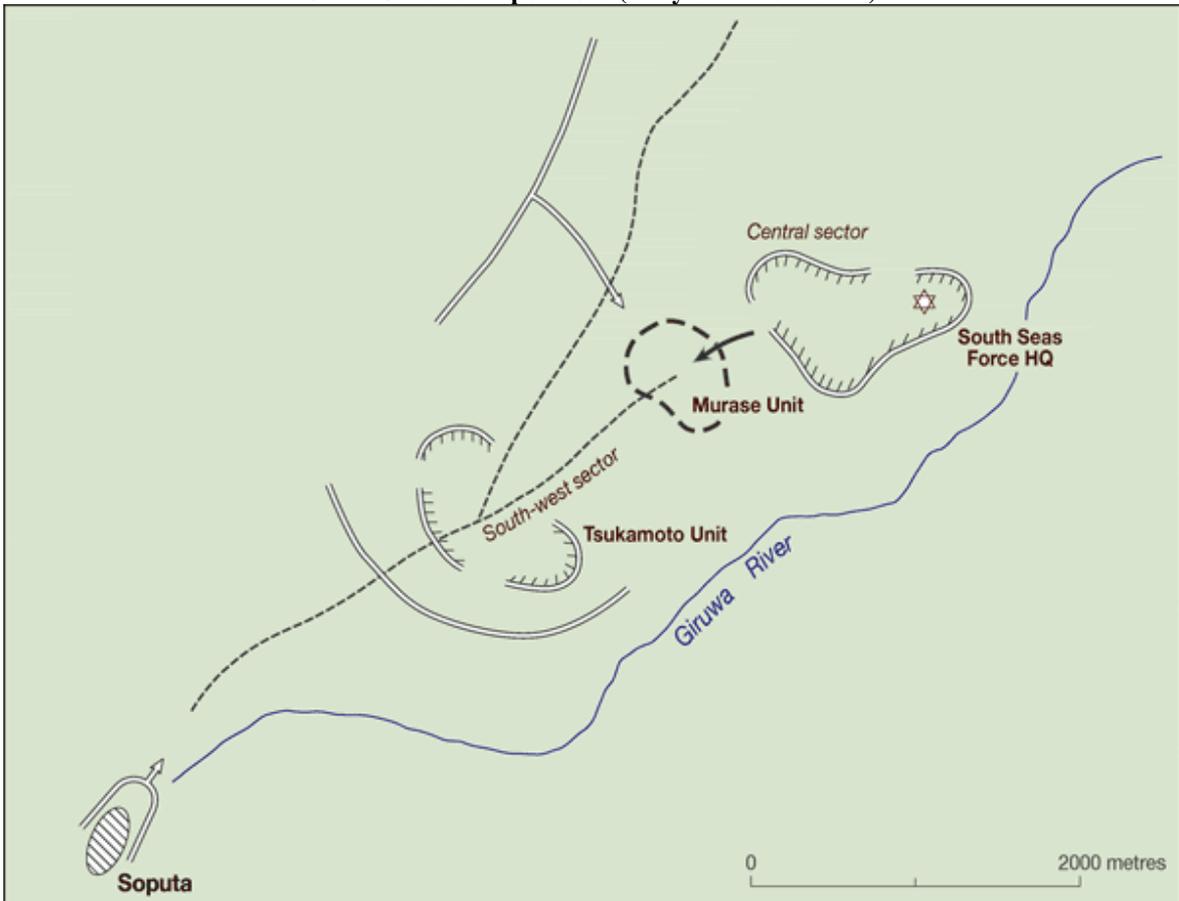
**South Seas Force deployments near Gap (26 October 1942)**



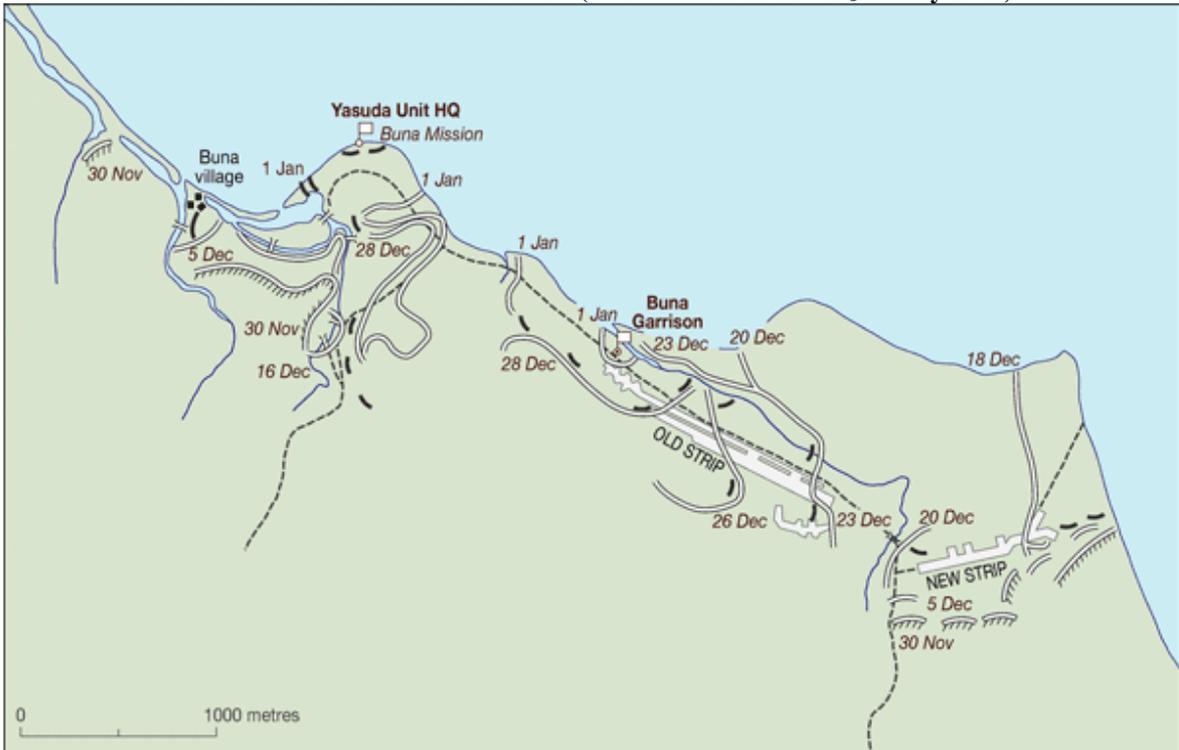
**Overview of South Seas Force deployments near Oivi (3–8 November 1942)**



**South Seas Force positions (early December 1942)**



**Overview of Buna Garrison battles (30 November 1942 – 1 January 1943)**



**Buna Detachment positions (early January 1943)**



### Key to map symbols

	Airfield		Force HQ
	Japanese position		Regimental HQ
	Allied position		Battalion HQ
	Fortified position	<b>144i</b>	144th Infantry Regiment
	Infantry movement	<b>III</b>	3rd Battalion
	Occupied area	<b>6</b>	6th Company
	Line of advance	<b><math>\frac{1}{4}</math>P</b>	Engineers ( $\frac{1}{4}$ strength)
	Diversion or withdrawal	<b>P(-<math>\frac{1}{4}</math>)</b>	Engineers (minus $\frac{1}{4}$ strength)
	River	<b>MG</b>	Machine-gun unit
	Track		

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Tanaka Shin'ichi, *Tanaka Shin'ichi Shōshō no nisshi ni motozuku shuki* [Notes based on the diary of Major General Tanaka Shin'ichi]; and Okamura Masayuki, *Okamura Masayuki Shōsa no kaisō* [Recollections of Major Okamura Masayuki].
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- <sup>469</sup> *Dai 18 Gun sakusen kiroku [Records of 18th Army campaigns].*
- <sup>470</sup> *Daitōa senshi Minami Taiheiyo sakusen [Greater East Asian War South Pacific operations].*