

THE 'GOD OF STRATEGY'

Right: A Japanese Type 97 tankette, camouflaged with leaves, during the invasion of Malaya. AWM 127895



An Allied air attack changed the career of a fanatical ideologue and pathologically brutal staff officer headed for Kokoda.

By Steven Bullard



Right below: Smoke rising from Singapore Harbour early in 1942. It took the Japanese no more than 10 weeks to overrun the British naval base. AWM012468

In the late afternoon of 26 July 1942, a B-17 Flying Fortress and two B-26 Marauders attacked the Japanese destroyer *Asanagi* as it approached anchorage off Cape Killerton, near Buna on the north coast of Papua. On board the ship were about 30 senior army officers sent by the commander of the Japanese 17th Army in Rabaul to ascertain first-hand the conditions in the area. At that time, the Yokoyama Advance Party was pushing toward Kokoda, undertaking reconnaissance for the planned overland assault on Port Moresby. One of the officers aboard *Asanagi* was Lieutenant Colonel Tsuji Masanobu from Imperial Headquarters, who also wished to offer his support to the commander of the advance party, a personal friend and colleague from the recent Malaya campaign. However, a



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serious shrapnel wound to Tsuji's throat suffered during the attack on *Asanagi* prevented the reunion and resulted in Tsuji's immediate evacuation to Rabaul, then to Tokyo to recuperate.

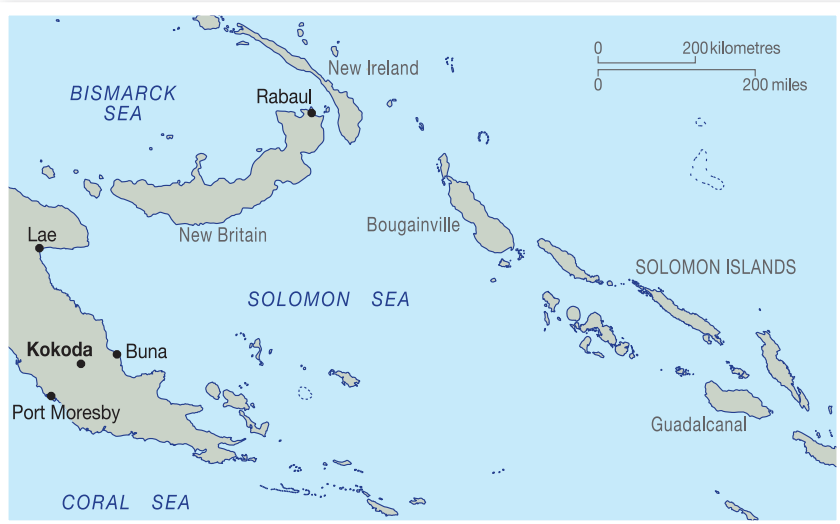
On first sight, Tsuji may seem just another Japanese officer. He was admired by many for his dedication and talent as a staff officer. He became known as the "god of strategy" for developing the plan for the Malaya campaign and was thereafter despatched to various battlefields as a trouble-shooter. There was, however, a darker side to his character which brought him as many enemies as admirers.

Considered by many to be personally responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands during the war, Tsuji was, arguably, the Japanese officer most deserving of being tried for war crimes, though he never was.

Instead, he emerged in the postwar period as a member of the Japanese parliament, from 1952 until his mysterious disappearance in Thailand in 1961. Tsuji's name may have been more widely known in Australia had he not suffered injury on board *Asanagi* in 1942, for he was heading ashore as the officer who had personally authorised the offensive against Port Moresby along the Kokoda Trail.

Tsuji was born the third son of a relatively well-off charcoal-maker in Ishikawa Prefecture in 1902. After graduating top of the class in both his military preparatory school and the Military Academy (*Shikan Gakkō*), he was presented a sword in 1931 for graduating third in his year from the Military Staff College (*Rikugun Daigakkō*) in Tokyo. He was wounded in Shanghai the following year during his first field appointment,

Above: Commander-in-chief of the Japanese 25th Army in Malaya, Lieutenant General Yamashita, inspects an area captured after bitter fighting. Yamashita was later executed for Tsuji Masanobu's crimes. AWM127913



where he was serving as a company commander in the 7th Regiment. Thereafter, as was customary for a distinguished officer of obvious talent, he was appointed to a position as staff officer, serving with various armies in Manchuria and northern China.

Though the terms are too often misapplied, Tsuji can rightly be described as a maverick and a fanatic. Attracted to Zen asceticism, he lived an austere existence apart from his fellow officers; he was once rumoured to have burned down a geisha house often frequented by his colleagues. During the Malaya campaign, he offered his resignation to General Yamashita in a fit of pique after the latter's chief of staff ignored Tsuji's recommendation for an attack. After sulking for a week, Tsuji reappeared and continued his duties as if nothing had happened.

The Malaya campaign was Tsuji's finest military hour. During 1941, he was the leading figure in the Taiwan Army Research Department, where detailed investigations of the conditions in Malaya changed the way the Japanese army approached campaigns in the tropics and led to a brilliantly conceived and executed plan. The British fortress of Singapore was overrun in only 10 weeks. It was here, however, that the darker side of Tsuji's character emerged. In the days following the British surrender, Tsuji's mandate to seek out insurgents to secure the city resulted in the so-called Sook Ching Massacre, when more than 5,000 Chinese and Chinese Malaysians were killed – some historians have given the death toll as being between 25,000 and 50,000.

Tsuji's military exploits in Malaya earned him the reputation as a trouble-shooter of difficult campaigns. He was sent to the Philippines in April 1942 but there was implicated in the Bataan death march, in

which several tens of thousands of Allied prisoners died while being transported to camps. He also ordered the execution of the Philippines chief justice, Jose Santos. Tsuji was then despatched to the South Pacific Area in July 1942 to assist the command of the 17th Army. Up to that time, the invasion of Port Moresby was a cornerstone of plans to occupy Fiji and Samoa (the FS Operation) in an attempt to blockade Allied supply lines between mainland Australia and the United States. Though the naval disaster at Midway in June 1942 forced the cancellation of the FS Operation, the 17th Army was still investigating the feasibility of an overland attack on Port Moresby by the South Seas Force.

When Tsuji arrived at 17th Army command in Davao on 15 July, the Yokoyama Advance Party was preparing to land in Papua. The commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Horii Tomitaro, was sceptical that the invasion of Port Moresby could succeed without suitable roads through the Owen Stanley Range to support and supply the advancing Japanese infantry troops. Imperial Headquarters would decide whether or not to proceed with the invasion after receiving the assessment of the Yokoyama Advance Party's commander, an engineer.

According to *Senshi Soshō* (*Japanese army operations in the South Pacific Area*), the official Japanese account of these campaigns (see the review of the author's recent translation on page 67), Tsuji gave the go-ahead for the overland assault on Port Moresby on his own authority, claiming to have orders from Imperial Headquarters and without waiting for the reconnaissance party's report. While both 17th Army headquarters and Imperial Headquarters were leaning toward launching the operation, in fact a decision had not yet been made; Tsuji's decision was only retrospectively supported by appropriate orders. Tsuji's impulsiveness and obsession with striking decisively contributed to the campaign's disastrous end. By the end of January 1943, more than 15,000 Japanese and 3,000 Allied soldiers had been killed in the resultant fighting. A proper assessment of the conditions and the logistic difficulties should have seen an early abandonment of the plan.

Tsuji was later sent to Guadalcanal, where he failed to recapture Henderson Field, the American airfield and key to controlling the island. Tsuji offered his resignation (again) for this failure, but was sent to Burma to direct operations against British forces



IJA MILITARY ACADEMY CLIQUES

Tsuji, then a lieutenant colonel, had more influence on the decision in July 1942 to begin the offensive proper against Port Moresby than did the commander of the South Seas Force, Major General Horii. Although Horii was senior officer, Tsuji had not only attended the prestigious Military Staff College but had been one of the top six graduates in his class, making him a member of the so-called “Military Sword Clique” (*Guntōgumi*). Only a small minority of officers were selected to attend the staff college and the prestige attached to this guaranteed them prime appointments and fast-track promotions. They also exercised more influence and

authority than did more senior officers who had not attended the staff college. Members of the *Guntōgumi* held even more prestige. In Tsuji’s case, he reached the rank of major seven years faster than had Horii.

The elitism this system engendered had become so pervasive that graduates were discouraged in 1936 even from wearing their Staff College graduation medals. Nevertheless, officers knew who belonged to this clique, and they found it difficult to counter their influence in the field, despite actual rank and seniority, which is why Tsuji could order the Port Moresby invasion on his own authority.

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instead. There is evidence that while in Burma he consumed the liver of a captured American airman – a bizarre ritual reputed to transfer the strength of a vanquished foe. Whether the various independent accounts of this episode are true is uncertain, but the fact that it is plausible is indicative of Tsuji’s character.

Tsuji was serving on the staff of the 18th Area Army in Thailand at the end of the war. Rather than surrendering and facing possible war crimes trials, Tsuji disguised himself as a Japanese monk and hid in a Bangkok Buddhist temple with seven hand-picked soldiers, all of whom were monks in civilian life. After several months, Tsuji fled north, through Laos and Vietnam, to southern China, where he joined nationalist Chinese forces as a military adviser to Chiang Kai-shek. Still fearful of prosecution for war crimes, Tsuji re-entered Japan secretly in 1948 under the protection of his former Imperial Headquarters friend, Hattori Takushiro. Hattori worked for the CIA to foster anti-communist sentiments in postwar Japan and was under the protection of Charles Willoughby, the head of G-2, the US Army intelligence agency. The CIA then employed Tsuji as well. However, Tsuji’s intelligence was next to useless and he and Hattori used CIA funds to their own nationalist ends, including

planning the assassination of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru.

Tsuji reappeared in public after his status as an alleged war criminal was lifted by the US occupation authorities in early 1950. He was elected as an independent to the newly formed Japanese parliament in 1952 on the strength of the popularity of his published account of his escape at the end of the war. Ironically, the forward to the English translation of another of Tsuji’s best sellers, about the Malaya campaign, was written by Gordon Bennett, the Australian commander heavily criticised for fleeing from Singapore in 1942.

As a politician, Tsuji was never far from controversy, or from the shadow of his past. A strong believer of a rearmed Japan, he was a vocal critic of the US–Japan security alliance. In 1961, after riding through several scandals, including accusations by a long-time rival in the Imperial Japanese Army implicating Tsuji in various war crimes, Tsuji left for a tour of South-east Asia. In a parallel to his escape from the Allies at the end of the war, Tsuji again donned Buddhist garb in an attempt to infiltrate northern Laos to meet with Pathet Lao rebels. He was never seen alive again, though some rumours placed him in Hanoi as late as 1968.

Tsuji – the “god of strategy” – was described by historian John Dower as a “fanatical ideologue and pathologically brutal staff officer”. His effect on the Kokoda campaign and his prominence in Australian memory of the war might have been much greater had it not been for the injury suffered on board *Asanagi* in July 1942. 🏰

Above: Tsuji Masanobu in the formal dress of a major in the imperial army. Photo courtesy of *Mainichi* newspaper, Tokyo.