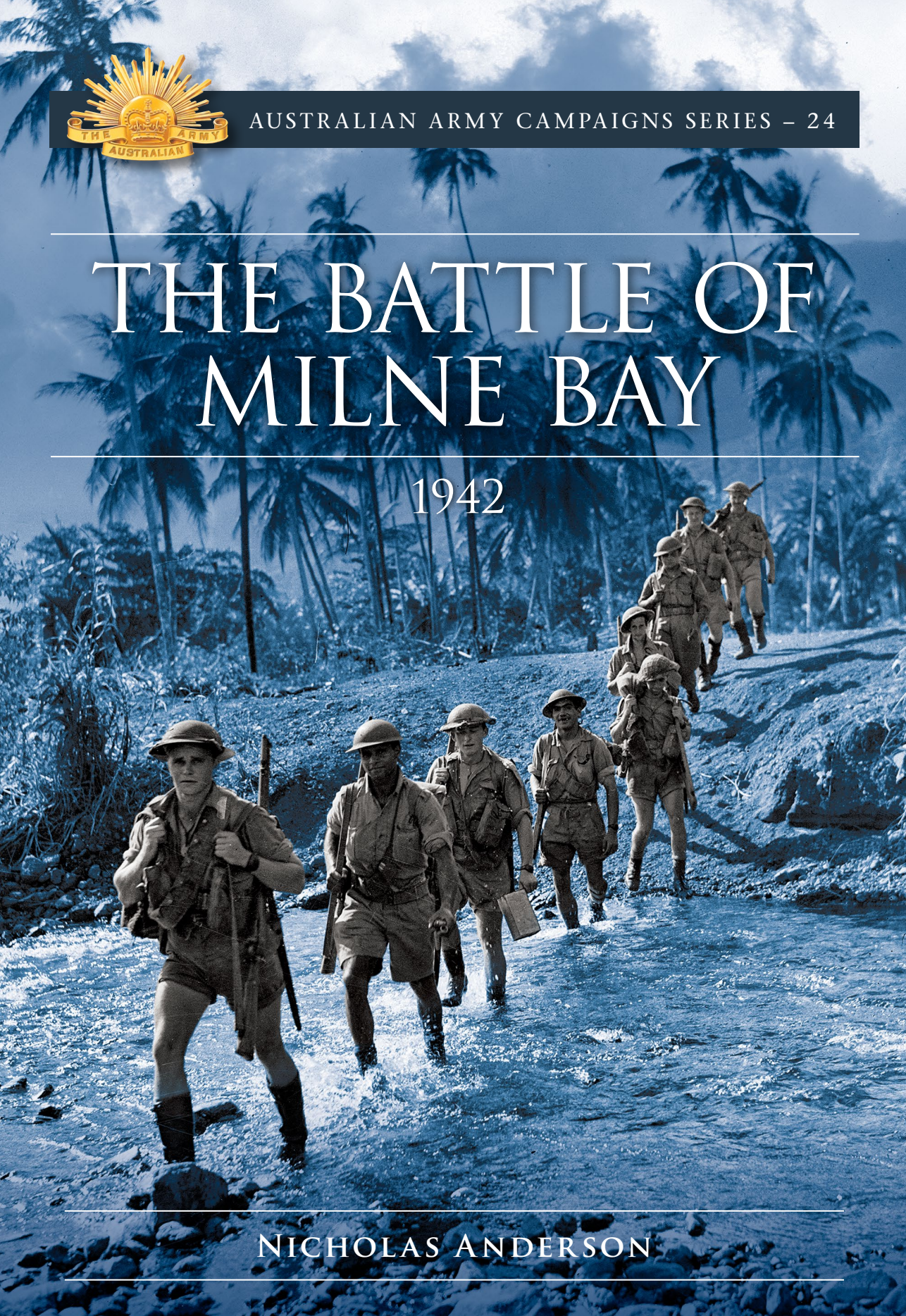

AUSTRALIAN ARMY CAMPAIGNS SERIES – 24
THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY
1942
NICHOLAS ANDERSON

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AUSTRALIAN ARMY CAMPAIGNS SERIES – 24

# THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY

## 1942



Nicholas Anderson

ARMY•HISTORY•UNIT
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# LEGEND OF MAP SYMBOLS

## MILITARY SYMBOLS

Allied Unit Attacking

Allied Unit Defending

Japanese Unit Attacking

Japanese Unit Defending

Allied Movements

Japanese Movements

Map scales are indicated where known. Most are diagrammatic.

Unit Names are written within the unit marker, and the commanders' name is written to the side. For example:

9th Bn **Matthews**

Kure No. 3 **Yano**

## GEOGRAPHICAL SYMBOLS

**COUNTRY**

DISTRICT/PROVINCE

*Natural Features*

City/Town

Village

Structure

*RIVER*

Government Track

Other Track

Elevated Ground

*Mountain*

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# SERIES INTRODUCTION

In 2004, the then Chief of Army's Strategic Advisory Group, the Australian Army's senior generals, established a scheme to promote the study and understanding of military history within the Army. The focus was the Army's future generation of leaders and, from this, the Campaign Series was created. The series is intended to complement the Army's other history publications which are major analytical works of high quality, academically rigorous and referenced.

The Campaign Series focuses on leadership, command, strategy, tactics, lessons and personal experiences of war. Each title within the series includes extensive visual sources of information — maps, including specifically prepared maps in colour and 3D, specifically commissioned artwork, photographs and computer graphics.

Covering major campaigns and battles, as well as those less known, the Australian Army History Unit and its Campaign Series provides a significant contribution to the history of the Australian Army and an excellent introduction to its campaigns and battles.

**Tim Gellel**

Head, Australian Army History Unit

# ACKOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to my mum, Kim Anderson. I owe her an enormous amount.

*The Battle of Milne Bay* has been a long time in gestation. Having started work on this volume in 2011, I then put it aside and it remained dormant for four years while other projects took precedence. However the desire to return and complete it always remained. It is immensely satisfying to now finish the book and, hopefully, shine some light on a battle that has disappeared from public memory.

Many individuals advised and assisted with the production of this book. Once again it was a pleasure to work with Cathy McCullagh. She is the consummate professional and this book has been improved by her editing. My thanks to Glenn Wahlert, the project manager for this important series, and to Denny Neave, the publisher, both of whom assisted with the book's post-production work. Tim Gellel shares my passion for Milne Bay and for many years we discussed the topic and swapped ideas. He was incredibly generous with his time and helpful with his unsurpassed knowledge of the Japanese perspective of the battle.

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Warrant Officer Class 2 Fred Barnes, Major Ian Finlayson and Mr Brenton Brooks read the manuscript and provided useful commentary. I'd particularly like to note the input of Ric Pelvin, who offered comprehensive feedback on the first draft.

Finally, my thanks to my most ardent supporters, Kim and Steve Anderson and Sara Maliyasena. Their inspiration and patience allowed me to make the commitment required to see an idea grow into a book.

# GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **2IC** | second-in-command |
| **AAF** | Allied Air Force |
| **ABC** | Australian Broadcasting Corporation |
| **AIF** | Australian Imperial Force |
| **ANGAU** | Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit |
| **CO** | Commanding Officer |
| **CRE** | Commander, Royal Engineers |
| **DCM** | Distinguished Conduct Medal |
| **GHQ** | General Headquarters |
| **GOC** | General Officer Commanding |
| **IJA** | Imperial Japanese Army |
| **IJN** | Imperial Japanese Navy |
| **LHQ** | Allied Land Headquarters |
| **MB** | Milne Bay |
| **MC** | Military Cross |
| **MFHQ** | Milne Force Headquarters |
| **NCO** | non-commissioned officer |
| **NG** | New Guinea |
| **NGF** | New Guinea Force |
| **OC** | Officer Commanding |
| **OP** | observation post |
| **PNG** | Papua New Guinea |
| **POW** | prisoner of war |
| **QF Gun** | quick firing gun |
| **RAAF** | Royal Australian Air Force |
| **RAP** | Regimental Aid Post |
| **RSM** | Regimental Sergeant Major |
| **Sitreps** | situation reports |
| **SNLF** | Special Naval Landing Force |
| **SWPA** | South-West Pacific Area |
| **US** | United States |
| **USN** | United States Navy |
| **VC** | Victoria Cross |

## THE MAIN AUSTRALIAN UNITS AND COMMANDERS INVOLVED IN THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY

| | |
|---|---|
| New Guinea Force (NGF) | Major General Basil Morris<br>(Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell) |
| Milne Force | Major General Cyril Clowes |
| Australian New Guinea Administration Unit (ANGAU) | Major General Basil Morris |
| 7th Brigade | Brigadier John Field |
| 9th Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel Harold Morgan<br>(Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Matthews) |
| 25th Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel Edward Miles |
| 61st Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Meldrum |
| 18th Brigade | Brigadier George Wootten |
| 2/9th Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel Clement Cummings |
| 2/10th Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel James Dobbs |
| 2/12th Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Arnold |
| 2/5th Field Regiment | |
| 2/9th Field Battery | Major Max Quinton |
| 101st Anti-Tank Regiment | |
| 4th Anti-Tank Battery | Captain Samuel Gamlin |
| 2/4th Field Company | Major Norman Jelbart |
| 24th Field Company | Major John Stafford |
| Milne Force Signals | Lieutenant Colonel William Clementson |
| Assistant Director Medical Services | Colonel George Maitland |
| 11th Field Ambulance | Lieutenant Colonel John Murray Blair |
| 2/5th Field Ambulance | Lieutenant Colonel John Crakanthorp |
| Senior Air Officer at Milne Bay | Group Captain William Garing |
| No. 75 Squadron | Squadron Leader Leslie Jackson |
| No. 76 Squadron | Squadron Leader Peter Turnbull |

## THE MAIN JAPANESE UNITS AND COMMANDERS INVOLVED IN THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY

| | |
|---|---|
| 8th Fleet | Vice Admiral Mikawa Gun-ichi |
| 18th Cruiser Squadron | Rear Admiral Matsuyama Mitsuharu |
| Kure No. 5 Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) | Commander Hayashi Shōjirō<br>Adjutant: Lieutenant Sakurai Yoshimasa |
| Kure No. 3 SNLF | Commander Yano Minoru<br>Adjutant: Lieutenant Nagata Yukio |
| Yokosuka No. 5 SNLF | Lieutenant Yoshioka Fumiharu |
| Sasebo No. 5 SNLF | Commander Tsukioka Torashige (Goodenough Island)<br>Lieutenant Fujikawa Kaoru (Milne Bay) |
| 10th Establishment Unit | Engineer Tsutsui* |
| 2nd Air Group | Chief Petty Officer Kobayashi* |

* No other name listed in available records.

## AUSTRALIAN FORMATION STRUCTURES AND STRENGTHS (APPROXIMATE)

| **Formation name:** | **Commanded by:** | **Strength:** |
|---|---|---|
| Section | Corporal | 10 men |
| Platoon | Lieutenant | 30 men |
| Company | Captain | 120–150 men |
| Battalion | Lieutenant Colonel | 700–1000 men |
| Brigade | Brigadier | 2500 men |
| Division | Major General | 10,000 men |
| Corps | Lieutenant General | 20,000+ men |

## ORDER OF RANK

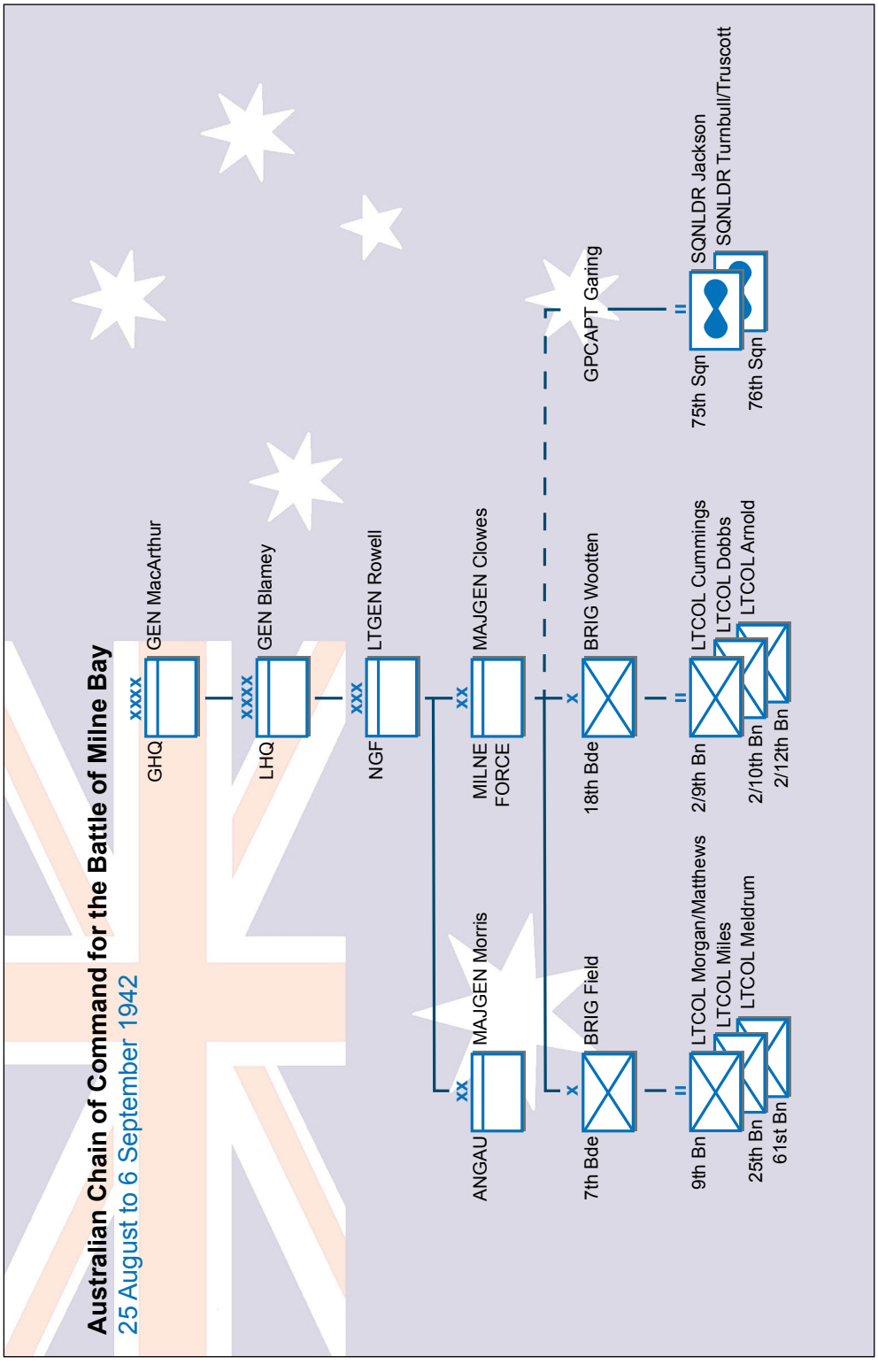
| **Officers** | **Non-Commissioned Officers** | **Soldiers/Diggers** |
|---|---|---|
| General | Warrant Officer Class 1 | Private |
| Lieutenant General | Warrant Officer Class 2 | |
| Major General | Sergeant | |
| Brigadier | Corporal | |
| Colonel | Lance Corporal | |
| Lieutenant Colonel | | |
| Major | | |
| Captain | | |
| Lieutenant | | |

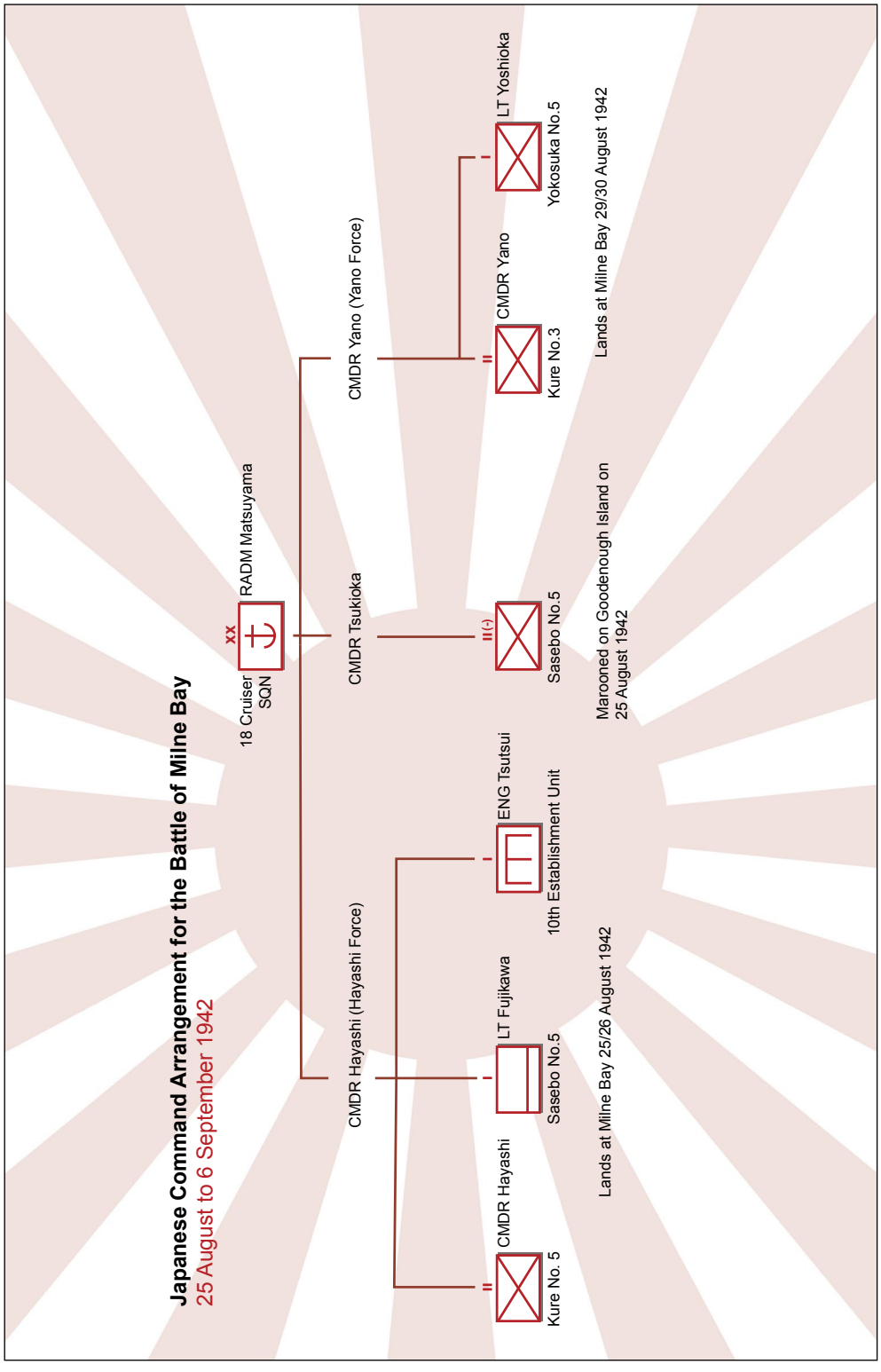
## JAPANESE FORMATION STRUCTURES AND STRENGTHS (APPROXIMATE)

| **Formation name:** | **Commanded by:** | **Strength:** |
|---|---|---|
| Section | Petty Officer | 15 men |
| Platoon | Chief Petty Officer / Midshipman / | 45–55 men |
| Company | Sub-Lieutenant / Lieutenant | 200–250 men |
| Battalion | Commander | 700–1000 men |

## ORDER OF RANK

| **Officers** | **Non-Commissioned Officers** | **Sailors** |
|---|---|---|
| Rear Admiral | Chief Petty Officer | Seaman 1st Class |
| Captain | Petty Officer 1st Class | Seaman 2nd Class |
| Commander | Petty Officer 2nd Class | Seaman 3rd Class |
| Lieutenant Commander | Petty Officer 3rd Class | |
| Lieutenant / 1st Lieutenant | | |
| Sub-Lieutenant / Lieutenant Junior Grade | | |
| Midshipman / Ensign | | |


Australian Chain of Command for the Battle of Milne Bay
25 August to 6 September 1942
GHQ
xxxx
GEN MacArthur
LHQ
xxxx
GEN Blamey
NGF
xxx
LTGEN Rowell
MILNE FORCE
xx
MAJGEN Clowes
ANGAU
xx
MAJGEN Morris
18th Bde
x
BRIG Wootten
7th Bde
x
BRIG Field
GPCAPT Garing
2/9th Bn
LTCOL Cummings
2/10th Bn
LTCOL Dobbs
2/12th Bn
LTCOL Arnold
9th Bn
LTCOL Morgan/Matthews
25th Bn
LTCOL Miles
61st Bn
LTCOL Meldrum
75th Sqn
SQNLDR Jackson
76th Sqn
SQNLDR Turnbull/Truscott


Japanese Command Arrangement for the Battle of Milne Bay
25 August to 6 September 1942
18 Cruiser SQN
XX
RADM Matsuyama
CMDR Tsukioka
CMDR Yano (Yano Force)
II(-)
Sasebo No.5
Marooned on Goodenough Island on 25 August 1942
II
Kure No.3
CMDR Yano
I
Yokosuka No.5
LT Yoshioka
Lands at Milne Bay 29/30 August 1942
CMDR Hayashi (Hayashi Force)
I
10th Establishment Unit
ENG Tsutsui
I
Sasebo No.5
LT Fujikawa
II
Kure No. 5
CMDR Hayashi
Lands at Milne Bay 25/26 August 1942

# INTRODUCTION

On 3 July 1944, the Australian Prime Minister John Curtin was entertaining a group of trusted journalists in his office. Curtin regularly hosted such gatherings, enjoying the opportunity to discuss war and politics with an attentive audience. At this particular assembly Curtin, while discussing the Pacific War in general, questioned whether the public realised the significance of the Battle of Milne Bay. 'It was', Curtin asserted, 'the original trap for the Japanese' and would 'go down in history.'

Contrary to Curtin's unprompted claim — made almost two years after the battle concluded — Milne Bay has largely fallen from the public consciousness. Fought concurrently with the Kokoda campaign in mid-1942, Milne Bay delivered the Japanese one of their first defeats on land during the Pacific War. While Kokoda attracts the majority of public attention, Milne Bay deserves recognition as a significant battle that contributed to the momentum shift against Japan in the Pacific War.

Milne Bay is located on the far eastern tip of the island of New Guinea. On a map, it appears to possess the natural requirements for a thriving port. It is a large, deep harbour, approximately 32 kilometres long and 11 kilometres wide, with a mouth that opens directly onto the China Strait, the shortest sea route for vessels sailing between Rabaul and Port Moresby. However, appearances can be deceiving and a glance at a map of Milne Bay in 1942 would not have revealed the complete picture.

A map would identify Milne Bay's numerous swamps, but not the mosquitoes that infest them. Unless the map had contour lines, it would be difficult to appreciate how claustrophobic the inlet is, blocked in on three sides by mountains that rise to 5000 feet. Milne Bay's roads were 'roads' in name only; in reality, they were little more than narrow corridors between the mangrove and coconut trees and restricted to the slivers of level ground that hem the ocean. Moreover, countless streams tumbled down the mountainsides and emptied into the ocean. This inundated the few areas of flat land rendering it a sticky morass of mud which further hampered the movement of man and vehicles. While the region has changed considerably since the war, the one thing that has not changed is the weather. Milne Bay endures frequent rain and is often shrouded in mist.

Despite these inherent difficulties, Milne Bay's geographic location held a strategic advantage that counterbalanced the negatives. Control of Milne Bay enabled command of the sea and air surrounding eastern New Guinea and the Coral Sea. Thus, Allied control of Milne Bay would deny the Japanese the freedom of movement necessary for a seaborne invasion of Port Moresby. It was for this reason the Allies chose the undeveloped bay as the site for a secret military base.

Conflict came to this dreary corner of the globe as the Second World War inched its way towards the Australian mainland. Japan's role in the conflict was born of its quest for

supremacy of east and South-East Asia. Having spent centuries in self-imposed isolation, Japan's contact with Commodore Mathew Perry of the United States (US) Navy in the mid-nineteenth century drew the country into the international sphere as it underwent a rapid transformation known as the Meiji Restoration. This process was intended to mimic the industrialisation of the west, while retaining eastern values and traditions. The policy was enormously successful, and Japan's economic output skyrocketed.

But Japanese economic engagement with other nations was by no means benign. Trade and expansion also brought tension and rivalries. By the end of the nineteenth century Japan was embroiled in conflict, fighting China over control of Korea. This heralded Japanese military involvement on the Asian mainland and was a precursor to events that would occur over the next 50 years as the island nation sought to increase its influence and holdings.

Following victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 — which surprised the traditional European powers — Japan's territorial interest in Asia intensified. During the First World War Japan was a willing member of the Allied powers, and enthusiastically prosecuted war against the German-held colonies in China. Nevertheless, Japan's overall part in the war was limited by a European misconception that Oriental nationals made inferior soldiers. As a consequence, when the First World War concluded, unlike many of the old world nations which had lost their taste for conflict, Japan's desire had yet to be sated.

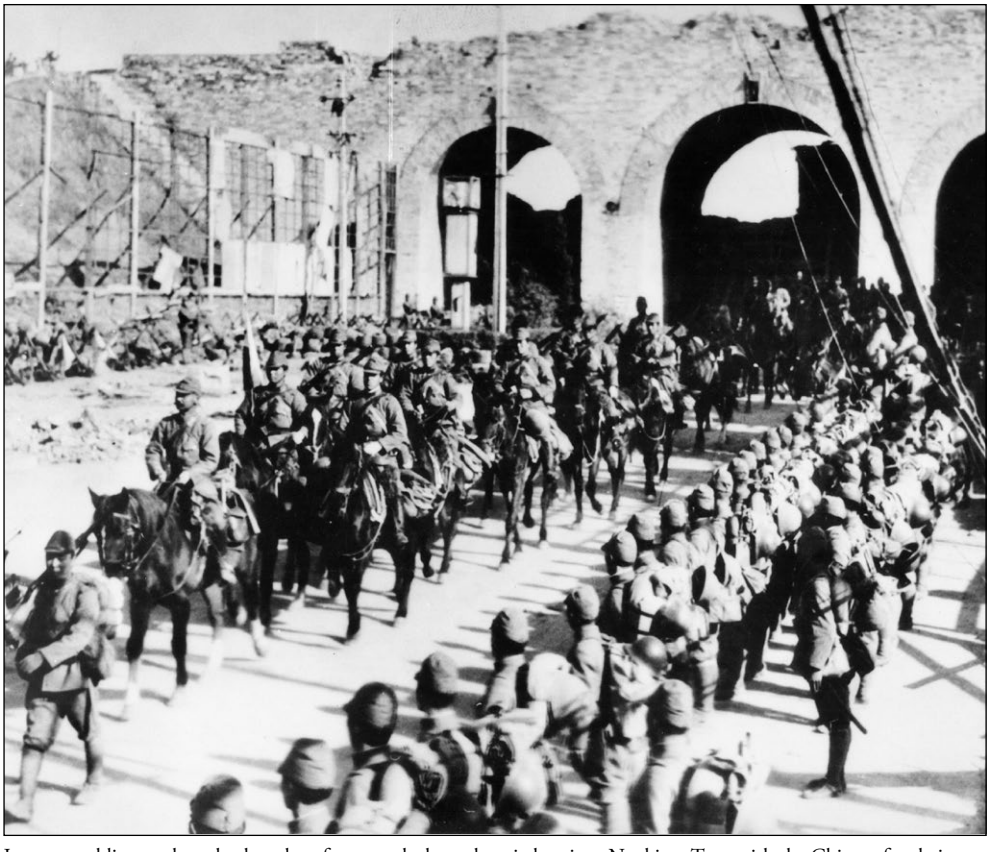
In 1919, the victorious nations gathered in France to set the terms of the peace and the resultant Treaty of Versailles distributed the spoils of war. Australia inherited control of German territories in the Pacific south of the equator, while Japan gained territorial possessions — notably the German-held Chinese province of Shandong and all German possessions in the Pacific north of the equator. But Japan was not satisfied with the terms of the treaty, having hoped for further territorial acquisitions, and a Japanese-sponsored vote to recognise racial equality was unsuccessful. While the Japanese motion was defeated largely because of contemporary racism, the intent of the motion was to cement Japan's own status as a great empire, and was not driven by altruism or moral enlightenment. Japan considered itself superior to other Asiatic peoples.

The 1922 Washington Naval Treaty imposed restrictions on the numbers of capital ships in the fleets of the three main Pacific powers. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was permitted just two-thirds the number of these vessels granted to the British Royal Navy and the US Navy. This cap further incensed the Japanese who resented what they perceived as ongoing attempts to deny Japan its rightful place as an international power.

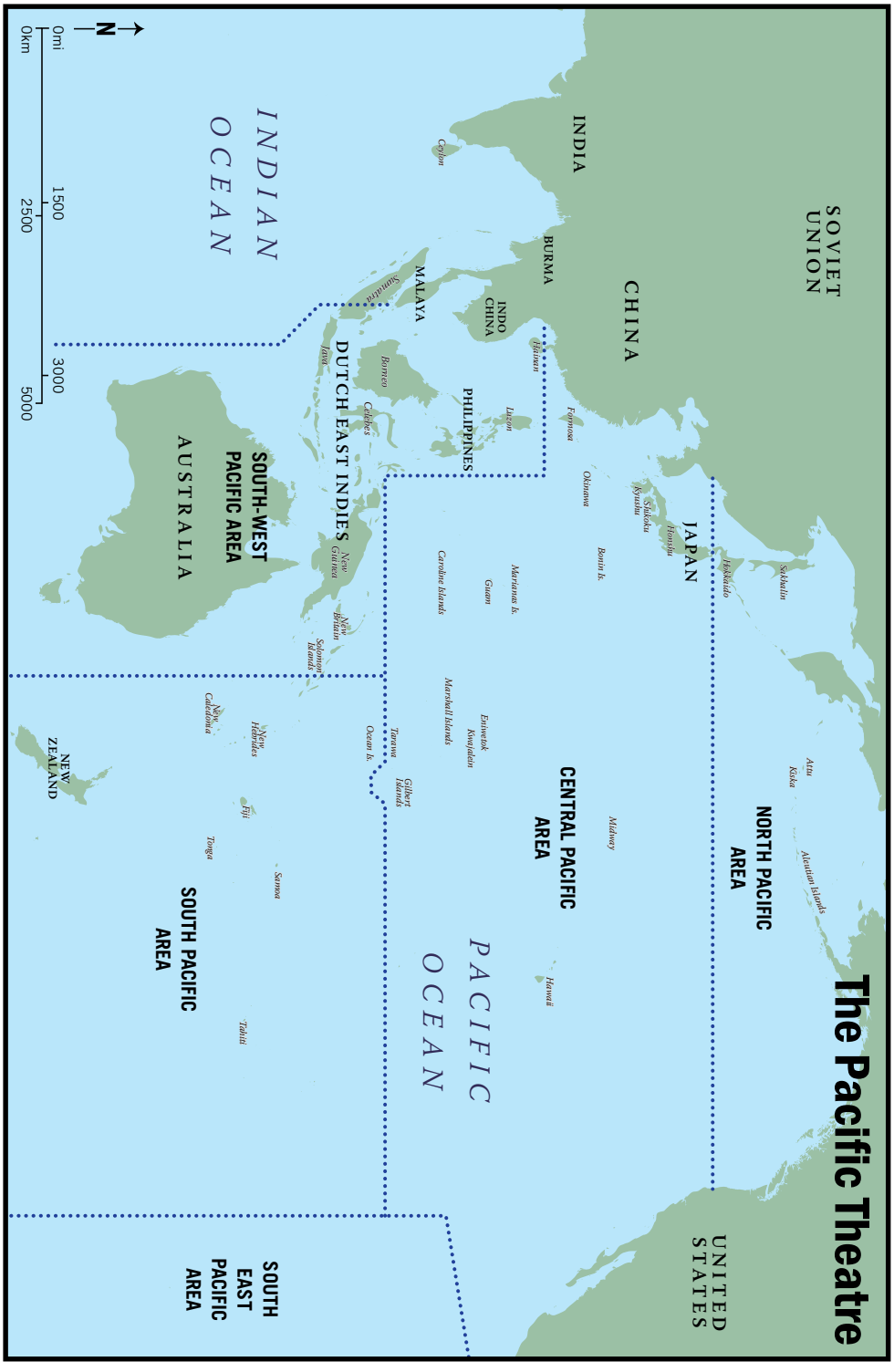
By the early 1930s nationalism was rife across the globe. Japan was engulfed in this wave and its domestic politics were commandeered by hawkish politicians and militarists, intent on driving their nation along the road to conquest. With a mountainous and heavily populated country, Japan subscribed to an ideology of 'social domination' — in effect, the belief that a strong nation was justified in conquering weaker countries in order to acquire living space.

The Japanese gaze was fixed most strongly on north-east China where the Japanese government orchestrated the creation of Manchukuo, a puppet state carved out of the Chinese territory of Manchuria. Japan defended the creation of Manchukuo by claiming that it was a reaction to the Mukden Incident, a short, one-sided skirmish between Japanese and Chinese forces over the sabotage of a Japanese-owned railway line purportedly vandalised by Chinese militia. In reality, the Mukden Incident was fabricated. Young Japanese Army officers were responsible for the attack, designed to concoct a plausible self-defence argument for the invasion of Manchuria.

Once this scheming was uncovered, Japan's actions were criticised by the League of Nations. The League refused to acknowledge Manchukuo and demanded that Japan withdraw from Manchuria. Instead, the Japanese withdrew from the League. With an increasingly belligerent attitude towards international law and opinion, Japan drifted closer and closer to war with the west. By 1937 the Japanese were heavily committed in China and, following the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, what had started as a small flame erupted into a conflagration. Thus began the Second Sino-Japanese War, or what the Japanese chose to euphemistically call the Greater East Asian War of Co-Prosperity.



Japanese soldiers on horseback and on foot march through a viaduct into Nanking. To punish the Chinese for their purported anti-Japanese agitation in occupied Manchuria, the Imperial Japanese Army unleashed days of wanton slaughter in the city, the so-called 'Rape of Nanking' (AWM P02164.001).




Map 1. Pacific Ocean

Despite the disorganised nature of the Chinese forces, the Japanese were unable to suppress all resistance. Fighting against China dragged on into a new decade and Japan's ability to continue military operations was tested by its shortage of essential raw materials, namely oil and rubber. Japan looked further afield. Territory to the north was not an option. The Soviet Union had already delivered the Japanese a stern warning against moving in that direction after resoundingly defeating them in a series of border stoushes. Consequently, Japan's interest turned to new opportunities in the south. Most of the European countries with colonies in the region were focussed on fighting the Axis in Europe. Japan's attention was particularly drawn to French Indochina (modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos). Following France's capitulation to Nazi Germany, its Indochinese colony was ripe for the picking. Japan bullied its way into the country in a move that earned a swift rebuke from the international community, foremost among them the US. An oil embargo was imposed on Japan with the threat that it would not be removed until Japanese troops left Indochina. A lengthy round of diplomacy worked to find a solution but, with negotiations faltering (although still under way), Japan struck.

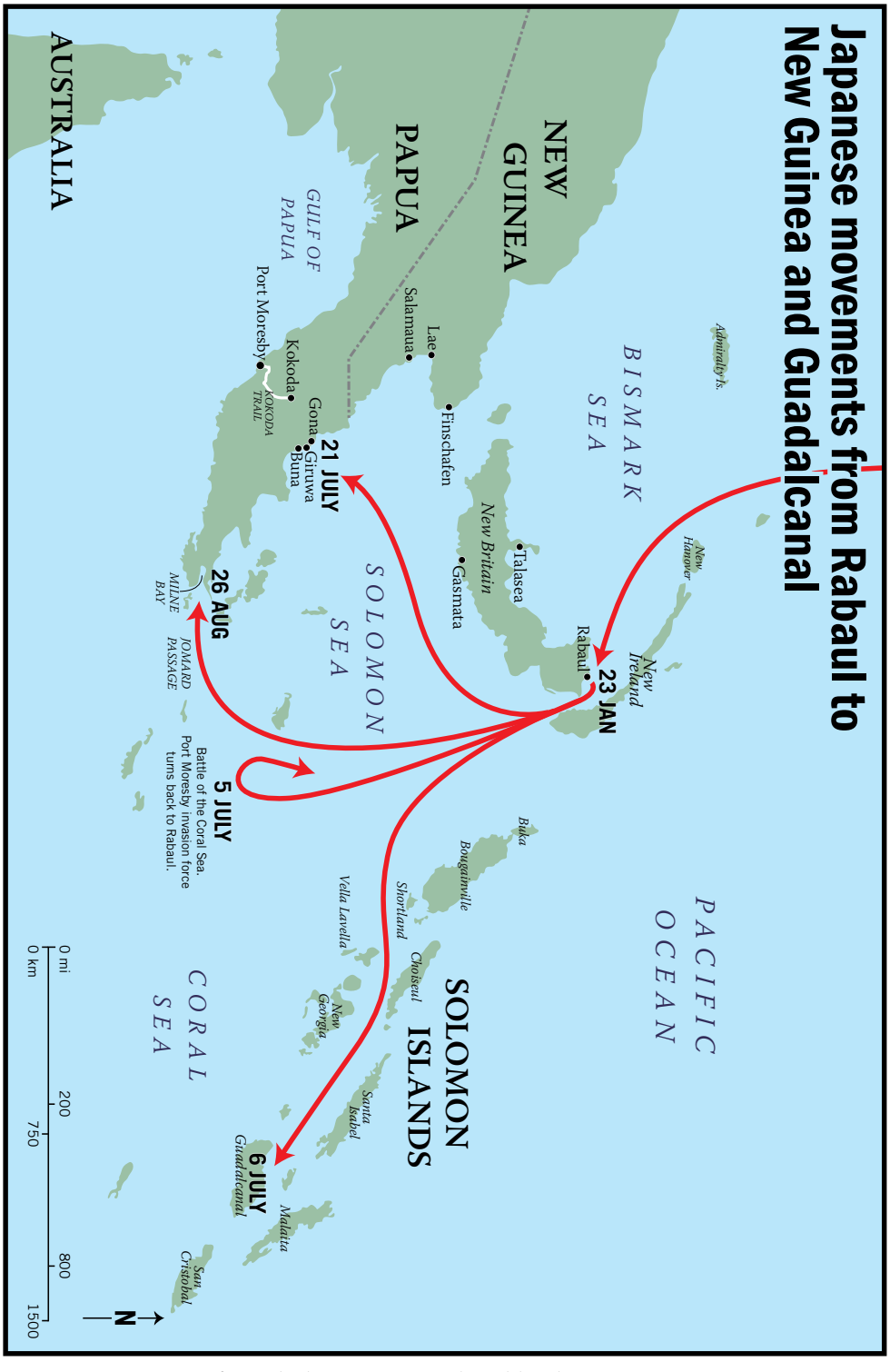
On 7/8 December 1941, despite the absence of a formal declaration, Japan launched a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor and on British Army regiments in Malaya. Within 24 hours of this initial onslaught, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Wake Island were also attacked. The Pacific War had begun.

Japan never believed that it could defeat the US or the Allies. Nor did it desire a protracted war. Instead, it hoped that, by paralysing the US Pacific Fleet, it could quickly secure the resources in South-East Asia required for self-sufficiency before forming a defensive perimeter to protect its newly won territory. Japan hoped that the initial blows struck against Allied targets would prove so damaging that the Allies would be discouraged from counter-attacking because of the heavy casualties they would incur in reclaiming their lost lands. On this point, Japan underestimated the outrage that its subterfuge and underhanded attack would provoke. The US public was stirred into action. President Franklin Roosevelt described the attack as a 'date that will live in infamy' and declared war on Japan.

In the first six months of fighting, Japan ran rampant over an enormous swathe of land and sea territory in Asia and the Pacific Ocean. One by one, colonial possessions and symbols of Allied power were overrun. By mid-1942, the Japanese empire was at its zenith and was still yet to face defeat on the battlefield.

Closer to Australia, Japanese forces captured Rabaul on the island of New Britain in January 1942 where they established their major naval base in the South Pacific. When the new base was subjected to Allied air attacks, Japan sought to protect Rabaul by planning operations that would expand their defensive perimeter south to incorporate New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, namely Guadalcanal.

To that end, the Japanese conceived the MO Operation, a naval invasion of Port Moresby, which was launched from Rabaul in May 1942. The Japanese invasion fleet was en route to Port Moresby when a combined US-Australian fleet intervened, leading to the Battle of the




Map 2. Japanese movements from Rabaul to New Guinea and Guadalcanal

Coral Sea. Although neither side could claim a decisive victory, the battle forced the Japanese invasion fleet to return to Rabaul. As a consequence, Japan devised the FS Operation — the subjugation of Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia. Using Guadalcanal (which was occupied in May) as a staging point, the Japanese goal was to sever the lines of communication between Australia and the US. This plan also failed to come to fruition because of Japan's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Midway. Here, in protecting a nondescript coral atoll from occupation, the US sank four Japanese aircraft carriers for the loss of one of its own. This defeat had far-reaching consequences. It forced the Japanese to rethink their strategic posture and prompted the cancellation of the FS Operation.



Japanese troops on Kavieng, New Ireland, in 1942. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese troops embarking for the South-West Pacific were given a pamphlet which stated, 'The purpose of the forthcoming campaign is to exalt to the world the virtues of His Imperial Majesty, the Marshal Commander-in-Chief, and to complete the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. Our great mission is to shatter at one stroke the attempts of [blank space] to obstruct the disposal of the China Affair, and the spreading of the Imperial Way far and wide in these territories.' (AWM 127910)

Nevertheless, the Japanese did not abandon their plans to occupy Port Moresby. Now however, lacking the naval capacity to protect a maritime invasion, they organised an overland march on the town across the Kokoda Trail from the north. The success of this march would depend on support from a base the Japanese planned to establish on Samarai Island, at the southern end of the China Strait. Unbeknown to the Japanese, Australian and American units had secretly slipped into nearby Milne Bay and were working feverishly to establish a series of airfields. The Japanese preparations for their march on Port Moresby were well advanced when a reconnaissance plane detected the Allied base at Milne Bay. The Japanese decided that extinguishing the Allied presence at Milne Bay was a priority, and that Milne Bay represented a ready substitute for their planned base at Samarai. To that end, the Japanese hastily assembled a force ready to attack Milne Bay.

The Allies meanwhile, aware of the discovery of their secret base, accelerated their construction and heavily reinforced the burgeoning base with additional combat troops. A Japanese attack now seemed certain. The main questions were when it would occur and, specifically, where the Japanese would land within the bay. For the Australian and American troops stationed in Milne Bay, isolated and at the forefront of Allied lines, an uncomfortable waiting game developed. The Japanese were coming, and no Allied army had yet successfully resisted their advance.

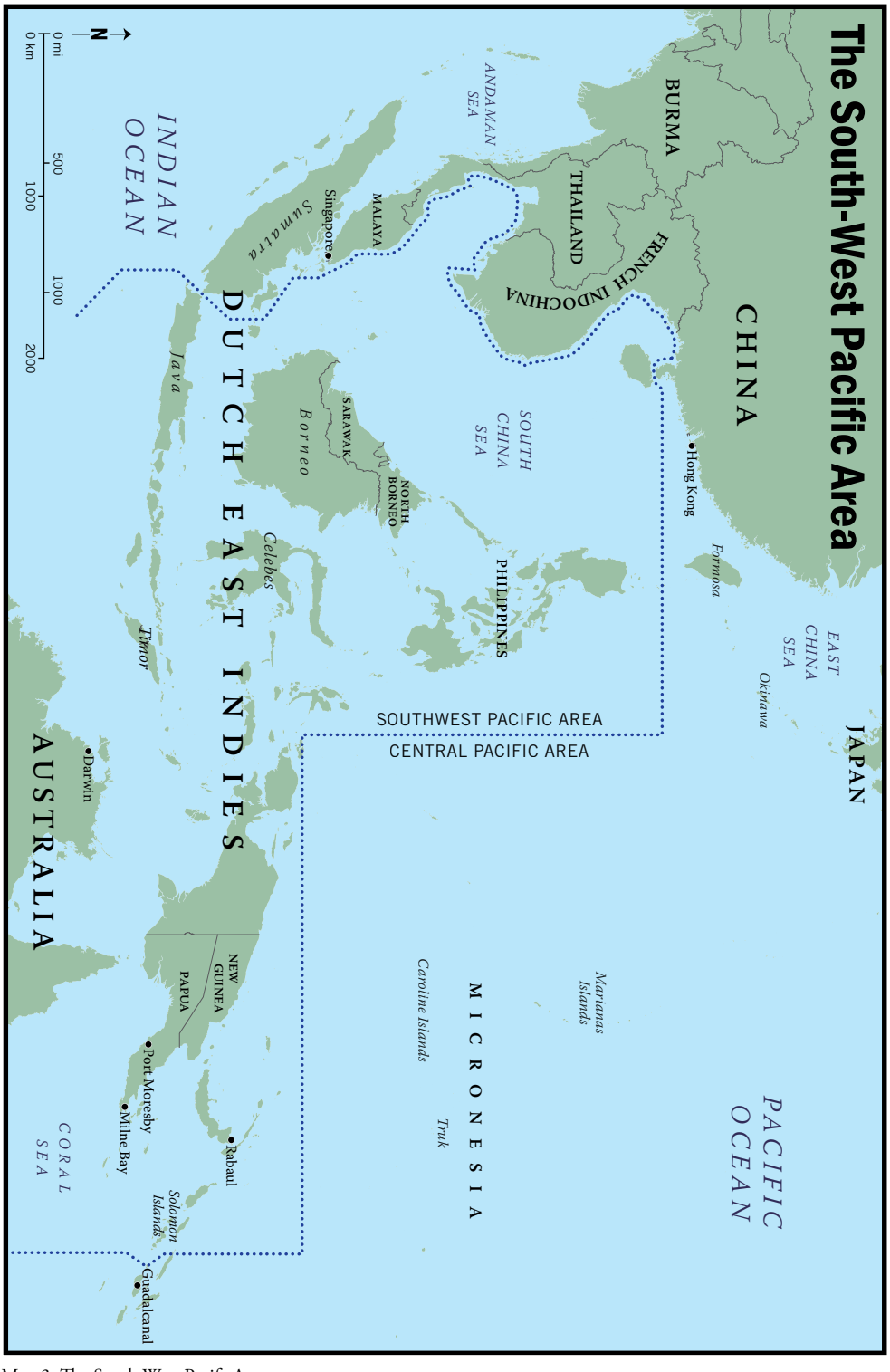
# CHAPTER 1
# BUILDING MILNE BAY

Prior to the Second World War, Australia's interest in New Guinea was lukewarm at best. The island, which is the second largest in the world, was split into three separate administrative regions. The western half formed part of the Dutch East Indies, while the eastern half was divided into two territories, Papua and New Guinea (the latter sharing its name with the island itself). Australian control of the protectorate of Papua, consisting of the southern and eastern portions of the island, was gained from the British in 1906. Later, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1920, Australian Prime Minister William Hughes lobbied for a mandate over the territory of New Guinea, which comprised the remainder of the island in addition to the Bismarck archipelago. Hughes argued that Australian control of New Guinea was necessary to prevent it falling into 'the hands of an actual or potential enemy'.

Despite Hughes' public declaration of New Guinea's importance as a bulwark between Australia and potential enemies to the north, very little was done over the following two decades to prepare the territories for the defence of Australia. The native population was estimated at 1.8 million, mostly tribal and clan based, with a diverse range of languages and cultures. The European population was 6000 and consisted largely of government officials, copra and rubber planters, gold miners and missionaries. The largest settlements with European populations were Rabaul, Samarai Island and Port Moresby.

For the purposes of the Australian Army's administration, the two territories were collectively designated the 8th Military District, commanded by Major General Basil Morris. The soldiers under his command principally fell into three groups. The first was the 30th Brigade of which, at that time, only the 49th Battalion was in Port Moresby. The second was the Papuan Infantry Battalion, raised in 1940 for the defence of Papua and comprising Papuans led by European officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The final group was the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, formed by Europeans living in New Guinea who were determined to play a role in the defence of their homes. Morris had to contend with numerous problems. There were insufficient naval and air assets to adequately defend Port Moresby and the soldiers garrisoning the town were poorly trained.

Tensions in New Guinea climaxed in 1942. By 3 February the Japanese were bombing Port Moresby provoking mass panic, while the civil administration began to unravel. Martial law was declared and Morris assumed absolute power in New Guinea from the island's Administrator. On 21 February, the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) was formed to supervise labour, maintain law and order, and to oversee native welfare. Even with this development, the situation in New Guinea continued to deteriorate, prompting stricter measures. On 10 June the territories of Papua and New Guinea were amalgamated to form one territory called Australian New Guinea. By 15 June Morris had introduced




Map 3. The South-West Pacifc Area

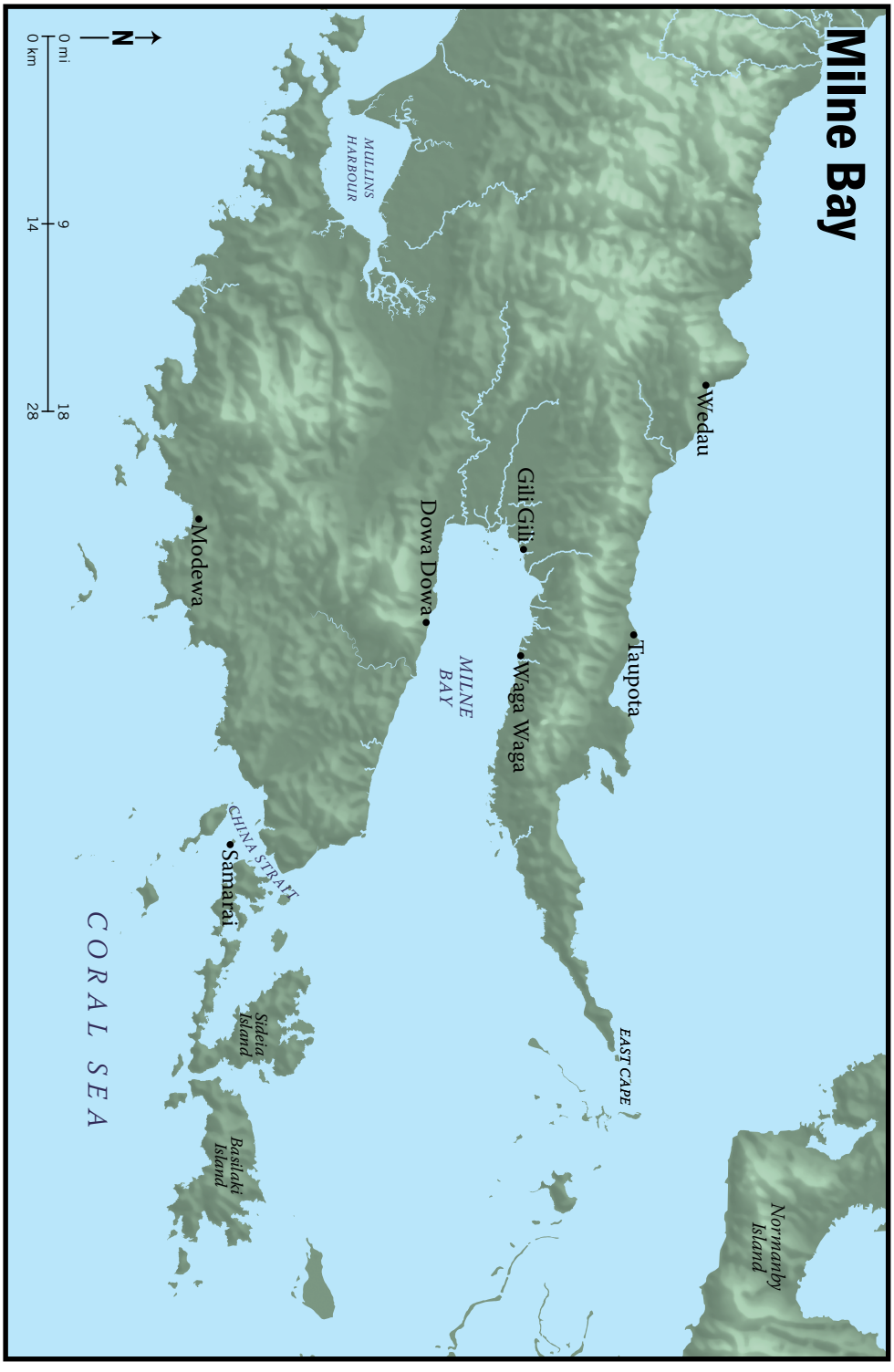
regulations which allowed him to terminate all existing labour contracts, making all New Guinea natives liable for conscription for any labour required by the military. Rates of pay and conditions of service were specified, including the provision of food and other necessities.

The Allies were now starting to pay more attention to New Guinea. Several months earlier American general Douglas MacArthur had been ordered to leave the Philippines and travel to Australia, arriving on 17 March and assuming the new position of Commander-in-Chief, South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). MacArthur was now responsible for all Allied military forces and assets in Australia and New Guinea, and all islands to the immediate north and north-west. Soon after, Australian general Thomas Blamey was appointed to two senior positions: Commander-in-Chief Australian Military Forces and Commander of Allied Land Forces, SWPA. These positions made Blamey the highest ranked officer in the Australian Army and directly subordinate to MacArthur.



The three most influential figures in Australia during the Second World War (from right to left): Prime Minister John Curtin, General Douglas MacArthur and General Thomas Blamey (AWM 042766).

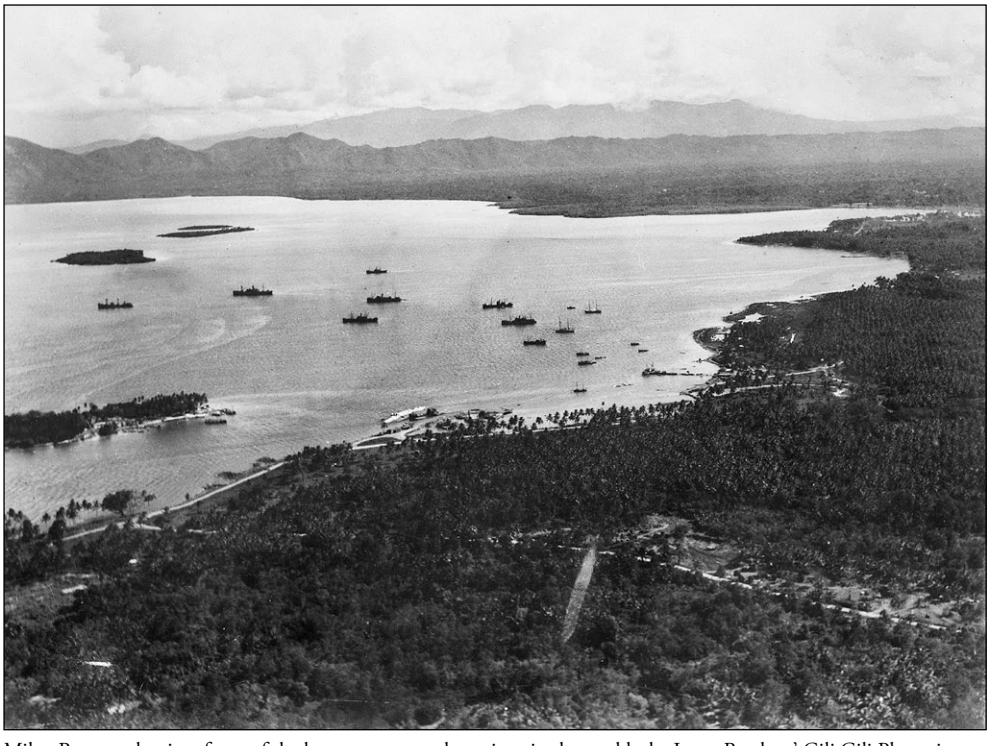
MacArthur established his General Headquarters (GHQ) in Australia, first in Melbourne and then later in Brisbane. Hamstrung by its distance from the front line, GHQ struggled to keep abreast of the Japanese advance, resulting in numerous poor decisions throughout 1942. By contrast, the decision to build an Allied base at Milne Bay was a masterstroke. MacArthur was eager for offensive action to recapture Rabaul. Building a forward base at Milne Bay was a preliminary step as it would extend the range of Allied bombers; aircraft flying from Milne Bay could attack Rabaul without having to fly over the Owen Stanley




Map 4. Milne Bay

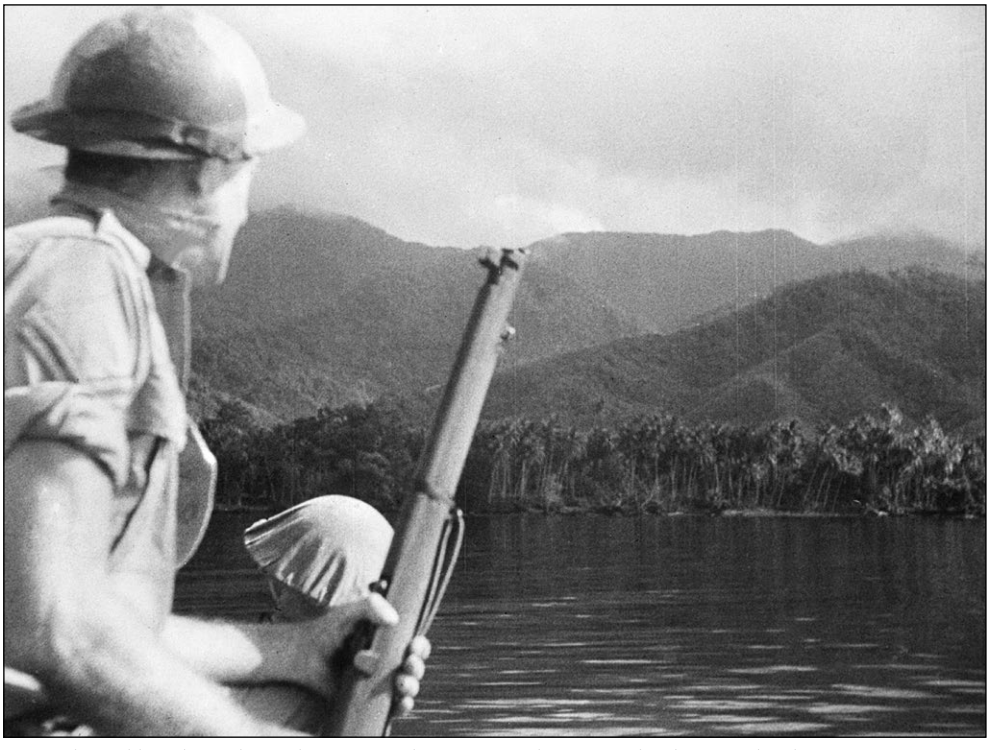
Ranges, the rugged spine of mountains that bisects New Guinea. Allied airmen did not enjoy flying over the often mist-covered mountains because the altitude and turbulence made it exceptionally dangerous. From a defensive viewpoint, MacArthur told Morris, 'I can't afford to lose Port Moresby' and explained to the American Chiefs of Staff that the primary reason for building a base at Milne Bay was to 'secure the southern end of the Owen Stanley Range bastion', which would protect Port Moresby from the seaward approach of enemy vessels.

Milne Bay was not the first choice of location for a base. On 20 May MacArthur authorised the construction of a base at Mullins Harbour, another large indent in eastern Papua. However, scoping missions to Mullins Harbour assessed that the soggy land was not suitable for the construction of an airfield. Fortunately, an ANGAU officer, Major Sydney Elliot-Smith, was familiar with eastern Papua. During a meeting with Morris, Elliot-Smith exclaimed, 'Undoubtedly the best place for a field is on the Gili Gili plantation [at Milne Bay].' At the time, Milne Bay's only distinction was that it hosted one of the largest coconut plantations in the world, the tremendously wealthy Lever Brothers' Gili Gili Plantation, which occupied a flat area of land at the head of the bay. Elliot-Smith's suggestion proved fruitful as a reconnaissance team's scoping mission to the site returned with a positive assessment. As a result, on 12 June GHQ approved plans for the construction of an airfield at Milne Bay. The area was code-named 'Fall River' to protect its true location from Japanese espionage.



Milne Bay was the site of one of the largest coconut plantations in the world, the Lever Brothers' Gili Gili Plantation, occupying a flat area of land at the head of the bay. The Lever Brothers' merger with Margarine Unie formed the multinational company Unilever (AWM 014684).

By 25 June, less than two weeks later, the first Allied troops had arrived at Milne Bay. The initial arrivals were two companies from the 55th Battalion (militia), sent from Port Moresby to guard the site. On 29 June a company of American engineers from the 46th General Service Engineering Regiment arrived and immediately began construction of the airfield. Specifications for the airfield stipulated that it must be able to accommodate heavy bombers, and that work should be completed as quickly as possible. The Allied soldiers were supported in their toil by ANGAU, supervising 800 Papuan men and women from local villages. Their efforts in the early days at Milne Bay were Herculean. In just five days in June 1942, using nothing but hand tools, they cleared the airstrip and built a wharf facility to assist the US engineers.



Corporal Harold Jacobs, 55th Battalion, surveys the mountains that surround Milne Bay's shoreline (AWM 013315).

Within a fortnight of the fledgling base's establishment the Allies decided to enlarge it by increasing the number of airfields to three. To that end John Field, a recently promoted brigadier, arrived on 11 July with the advance elements of his 7th Brigade. Field, who in civilian life lectured in engineering at the University of Tasmania, was a judicious selection to oversee the base's construction. In addition to his vocational background, Field was an intelligent and forward-looking officer. He had previously won a gold medal in an Army essay-writing competition for a paper titled 'The New Warfare', which analysed the influence of modern technology on military tactics. Field wrote in his diary that the job given to him was interesting and presented 'an opportunity I never dreamed of. What a grand chance for me.' His spirits were further buoyed following a discussion with an

American officer on the ship to New Guinea, who confirmed that Milne Bay was General MacArthur's number one priority.

However Field's authority was not absolute as MacArthur was loath to allow American servicemen to serve under Australian officers. Consequently, Field's orders stated that he could only assert authority over all Allied assets at Milne Bay — namely the American and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) units — when an enemy attack was imminent. This limitation caused difficulties, as Field wrote, 'The basic work in the preparatory stages might have been simpler if … [I] had been vested with greater and more precise authority.' Field was specifically referring to his inability as commander to persuade the American units to take responsibility for improving their local defensive positions. In this case, because Field's authority was limited by a proviso, he could not compel the American units to act.



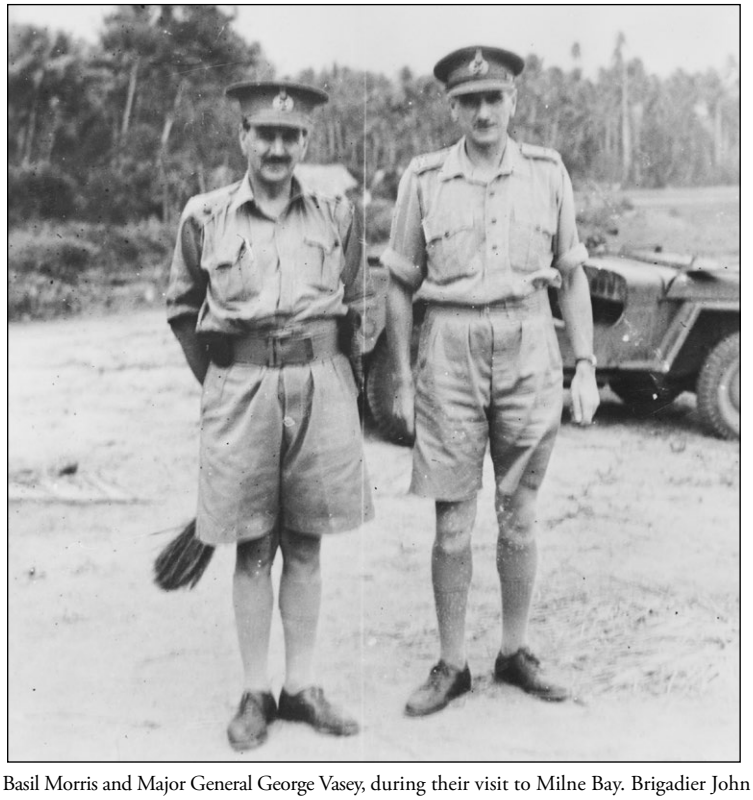
The transport SS *Kremer* unloading men and equipment at the wharf at Gili Gili (AWM 090750).

The 7th Brigade was a militia unit. Its members comprised both conscripts and volunteers whose service was restricted to Australia and Australian territories. The infantry battalions of the 7th Brigade were the 9th, 25th and 61st battalions, with the 24th Field Company and the 11th Field Ambulance also deploying to Milne Bay. With plans to expand the size of the garrison at Milne Bay beyond that of a brigade, the name 'Milne Force' was coined to administratively refer to the burgeoning body of troops. The major roles assigned to Milne Force were: the protection and facilitation of operations of the Allied Air Forces (AAF), the denial to the enemy of the area occupied by Milne Force (including the vital outlying sea, land and islands) and, more generally, the restriction of Japanese penetration into New Guinea. Importantly, the following order was stressed: 'The basis of the defence [of Milne Bay] will … be the maintenance of the offensive spirit and offensive action … defended

localities are to be regarded primarily as bases from which mobile, offensive operations can be initiated, and within which units can reorganize and replenish ammunition and supplies.'

While Field was grateful for his appointment, he was already looking to the future. He speculated that, as a junior brigadier ordered to report directly to General Blamey (as he was) and given combined operational control of such an important site, his appointment was sure to ruffle feathers. He foresaw that the political machinations of the Army's senior officers would eventually see Milne Force lose its privileged command arrangement. Ultimately he was proven correct. Morris — who resented being bypassed — visited Milne Bay and bluntly told Field that Milne Force should be shifted to his own chain of command.

Various other Allied generals flew in to inspect Milne Bay during the construction of the base. Visitors included Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee, Chief of the General Staff, Major General George Vasey, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and Major General James Cannan, the Quartermaster General. On 20 July Field confided in his diary that, despite the official visits, praise from the Army's leadership was sparse and he recorded his belief that the materiel requirements of Milne Force were not being passed back by the base's visitors. Field was particularly rankled by Cannan, who described the troops he inspected at Milne Bay as 'uncouth'. Nevertheless, the build-up of the base continued and, by the end of July, 11 transport ships from Australia had discharged troops and cargo.



Major General Basil Morris and Major General George Vasey, during their visit to Milne Bay. Brigadier John Field took the photograph (AWM 148940).

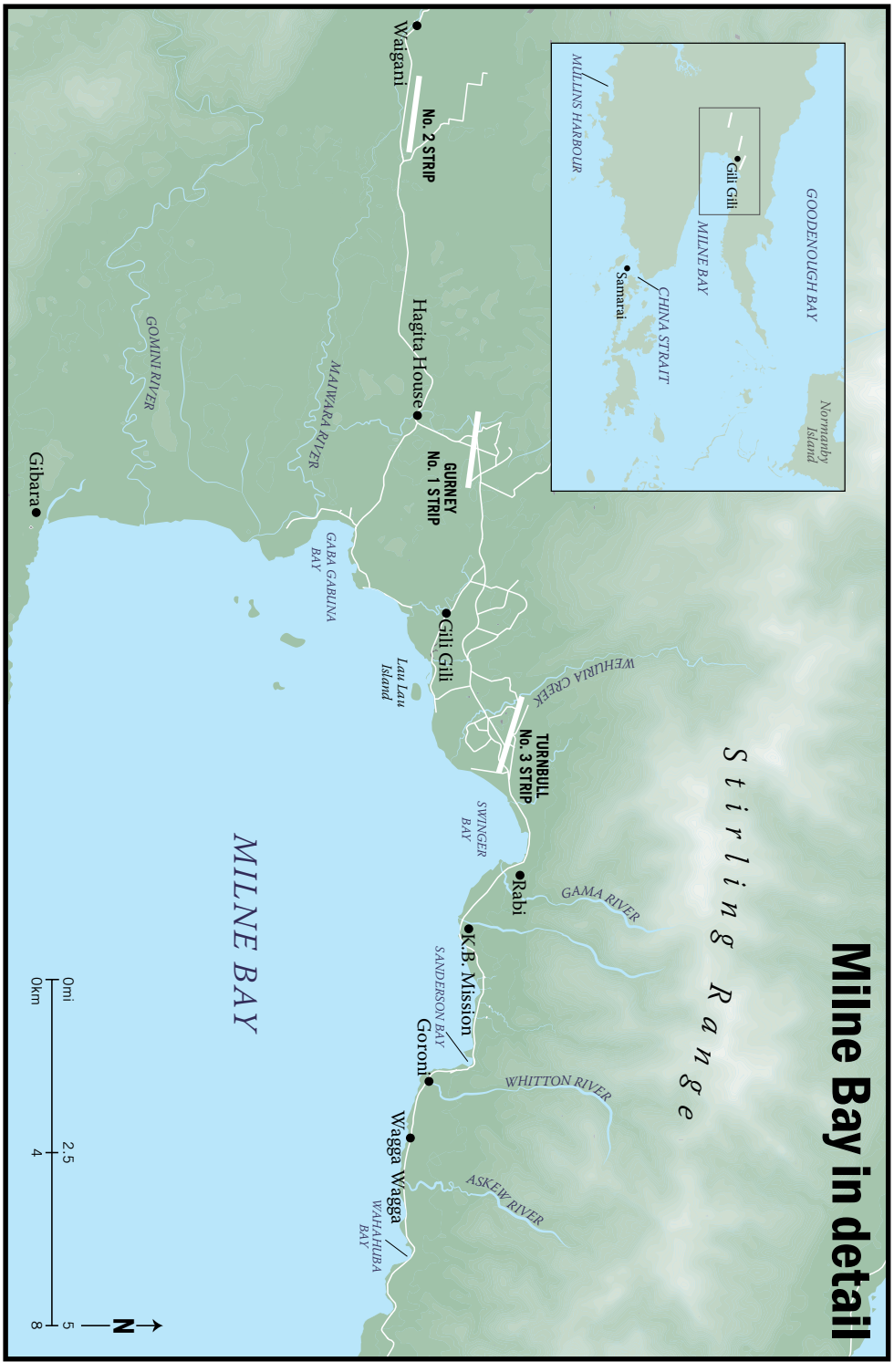
Japanese air reconnaissance intensified throughout mid-July and into August. Field, assuming that it was only a matter of time before the Japanese confirmed the Allied presence at Milne Bay, made further arrangements to defend the base from attack. A nascent idea, and one that was skilfully implemented, was the establishment of 'lightning forces'. This concept involved securing positions in forward locations in eastern Papua for the construction of additional landing strips. The lightning forces were to deploy by either aircraft or ship. To improve their mobility they were to carry the bare minimum of equipment. Once installed, the lightning forces had to be self-sufficient because consistency of supply was not guaranteed. The most prominent lightning forces were despatched to the north coast of Papua, with a platoon based at Taupota and a further detachment, Clifton Force, deployed to Wedau.

The lightning forces were also tasked with safeguarding the multitude of bush tracks that led into Milne Bay. Field stressed that no bush track should be assumed as impassable for the Japanese, no matter how difficult it appeared. Accordingly, Field ordered the diligent patrolling of all bush tracks in each battalion's allocated area. Patrolling had additional benefits. It acclimatised the troops to moving and living in the jungle, and provided familiarity with the ground over which the troops would have to fight in the event of a Japanese invasion. It was strenuous work. Having completed a week-long patrol, Lieutenant Eric Schlyder of the 25th Battalion remarked, 'The members of the patrol showed great determination and fortitude … For the first 4 days and nights it rained heavily and the [troops] were only having one meal per day; but no member complained of the hardships under which he travelled.'

With the infantry battalions steadily improving their positions and mapping the surrounding land, Field issued an order to all ranks describing how the defence of Milne Bay would be conducted. It included the stern direction: 'A determination never to surrender, but to fight to the last, will be inculcated in all ranks.'

As the calendar ticked into August and the danger to Port Moresby crystallised, new command arrangements were constituted in New Guinea. The 8th Military District morphed into New Guinea Force (NGF) for the purpose of conducting all military operations in New Guinea. On 12 August Blamey's former Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell, was appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) NGF. Morris was retained in Port Moresby, but in the reduced position of GOC ANGAU. To rub salt into his wounds, on the same day Morris was supplanted by Rowell, Milne Force's direct access to Blamey was severed and it was placed under command of NGF. This was the exact command arrangement that Morris had been advocating earlier.

Two further developments in mid-August highlighted the fact that GHQ recognised Milne Bay's growing importance. First, also on 12 August, Brigadier George Wootten arrived at Milne Bay with the 18th Brigade. This experienced Australian Imperial Force (AIF) brigade comprised three infantry battalions, the 2/9th, 2/10th and 2/12th, with attachments including the 9th Battery from the 2/5th Field Regiment, engineers, anti-tank gunners and medics. Unlike the militia whose service was restricted to Australian




Map 5. Milne Bay in detail

territory, the AIF volunteered for service in any location and for an indefinite period of time. The next day, Major General Cyril Clowes, the newly appointed Milne Force commander, also arrived at Milne Bay. Clowes, a taciturn leader nicknamed 'Silent Cyril', did not assume formal command until 22 August when the remainder of his headquarters staff reached Milne Bay.

The arrival of Clowes and his accompanying staff was far from seamless. Brigadier Field noted in his diary his dissatisfaction with the new Milne Force signallers, who erected their white tents 'cheek by jowl' and made no attempt at camouflage or track discipline. Field also criticised the new logistics staff who dumped a large quantity of supplies in an untidy heap around the force canteen, an action he described as 'amateurish'. Field noted that cleaning up the mess would take weeks and, in the interim, added to the size of the target area around the canteen. However Field's displeasure was most fiercely drawn by the junior officers in Clowes' headquarters, 'young pups' he wrote, who brashly claimed they had been sent to Milne Bay to put 'affairs right' and straighten 'things out'.



Major General Cyril Clowes (AWM 107752).

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From the Japanese perspective, preparations for capturing Milne Bay were made by the *8th Fleet Headquarters* in Rabaul, almost from the moment the base was discovered by a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft on 3 August. The Japanese called their planned attack the 'Rabi Operation', after the area within Milne Bay where they thought the Allied airfields were located and scheduled the attack for 25/26 August. The *8th Fleet* had significant reservations over this operation. First, they anticipated a naval surface engagement, which they were eager to avoid following the recent naval defeats at Coral Sea and Midway. Second, there were no Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) units available to participate in the Rabi Operation, and thus the IJN would have to conduct the operation alone. The lack of available IJA troops was a result of the increased fighting on Guadalcanal. IJA formations such as the *Kawaguchi Detachment*, which were originally slated for use in the Rabi Operation, were instead redirected to Guadalcanal. However, despite these obstacles, the Japanese preparations continued.

With the IJA unable to support the attack on Milne Bay, the combat elements for the Rabi Operation comprised Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) belonging to the *8th Fleet*. Although referred to as marines, the SNLF were not as highly trained as the US marines. While trained to conduct amphibious landings and capture Allied territory, most SNLF units reverted to a garrison role once their mission was complete. Consequently, the experience gained by individual SNLF units could not always be harnessed and used in future amphibious landings. Each SNLF was named after the IJN base in which it was raised, with a number designating the order in which the units were raised in that city. The SNLF units were also referred to by the name of their commander. The two main SNLF units committed to the Rabi Operation from the outset were *Kure No. 5 SNLF* and *Sasebo No. 5 SNLF*.

The Japanese plan for seizing Milne Bay was straightforward. A naval convoy would transport the SNLF into Milne Bay and then cover its amphibious landing to the west of Rabi on Milne Bay's north shore. The SNLF was to suppress any opposition it encountered, and then secure and protect the operational airstrip from counter-attack. The operational orders for the landing force emphasised the necessity for speed:

> [I]n the dead of night quickly complete the landing in the enemy area and strike the white soldier without remorse. Unitedly smash to pieces the enemy lines and take aerodrome by storm.

Not content with merely securing Milne Bay, the Rabi Operation was even more ambitious. Three days after Milne Bay's conquest, the landing force was to leave a garrison of 150 troops at the base and then proceed to attack Samarai. Once that target was neutralised, a garrison of 100 troops would be left at Samarai and the remainder of the force would conduct mopping-up operations on the nearby islands.

Commander Hayashi Shōjirō was the senior officer appointed to lead the Japanese landing force. Hayashi was a pensive officer. He hoped to gain as much intelligence as possible on

his forthcoming mission and was keen to personally reconnoitre the area of operations from the air. Counting against Hayashi's chance of success was the meagre number of combat troops that the Japanese battle planners originally committed to the operation. While 1200 men would accompany Hayashi in the initial landing at Milne Bay, less than half of these were combat troops, configured in two rifle companies of approximately 250 men each from his own *Kure No. 5 SNLF*. Hayashi's most significant firepower would be provided by two Type 95 Ha-Go light tanks. Although these three-man tanks had proven effective in Malaya, they had limitations. The Ha-Go lacked the road speed, armament and armour thickness of equivalent Allied tanks. In addition, Milne Bay's mud-sludge roads offered doubtful operating conditions for armoured vehicles.

The remainder of the men committed to the initial landing were generally from either Lieutenant Fujikawa Kaoru's unit or from the *10th Establishment Unit*. Although the *Fujikawa Unit* was notionally part of *Sasebo No. 5 SNLF*, in reality it was a logistics element that had spent no time with its parent unit. Fujikawa's role in the Rabi Operation was to establish a beachhead following the amphibious landing, and then manage the sea-to-shore link between the Japanese ships and Hayashi's assault group. The *10th Establishment Unit* was a construction unit that contained Japanese officers, although the majority of its 350 members were indentured Korean and Formosan (Taiwanese) labourers. Smaller components of the initial landing force included signals and meteorological staff, and an advance party of approximately 35 men from the *2nd Air Group*, whose role was to maintain and operate the airstrip following its capture.

No aircraft was available to fly Hayashi over Milne Bay. With worrying question marks dangling over the size of the Milne Bay garrison, a small force led by Commander Tsukioka Torashige was added to the Rabi Operation at the eleventh hour. Situated at Buna, the *Tsukioka Unit* comprised one rifle company from *Sasebo No. 5 SNLF*, supported by a small complement of medical and logistics personnel. Tsukioka's orders were to travel by barge along Papua's north coast to the village of Taupota. From there, he was to march across the Stirling Range to link up with Hayashi in attacking Milne Bay, thereby subjecting the Allied base to a two-pronged assault.

However Tsukioka did not receive orders to support the attack on Milne Bay until 5.00 pm on 23 August, suggesting that the Rabi Operation was conceived in haste. The late notice highlights one of the main flaws of the Japanese planning. The *Tsukioka Unit* was not included in the Rabi Operation as a shrewd manoeuvre designed to drag Allied resources away from the site of the main landing. The decision to attack across the Stirling Range was a matter of convenience as ferrying troops from Buna to Taupota was easier than transporting them all the way around East Cape and into Milne Bay. The glitches in Japanese planning for the Rabi Operation would be magnified in the days ahead.

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By the eve of the battle in late August the Allies, with the assistance of 1200 Papuan labourers, had established a secret base accommodating almost 10,000 men in just two months. The

garrison comprised 7500 soldiers, 660 RAAF airmen, and 1340 American troops. This impressive feat was accomplished in a saturated environment that did not lend itself to the use of heavy plant equipment and most of the labour was provided by the men themselves. While there were ample supplies of water and timber, many other construction staples were in such short supply that the soldiers scavenged whatever stores they came across. In some cases, this involved pilfering from other Allied units, a practice that drew condemnation from Milne Force command, but which the troops themselves downplayed as 'borrowing without permission'.



Papuan labourers handling petrol drums from ship to beach at Milne Bay. SS *Bantam* is visible in the distance with a Catalina flying boat to the right of the vessel (AWM 148937).

In addition to the hot and humid working conditions, Milne Bay teemed with disease and parasites. Lice, hookworm and ringworm, sandflies and, worst of all, malaria-carrying mosquitoes were rife. As Private Desmond Balkin observed, 'The mosquitoes were just thick and swarms of them … everywhere you went you'd get bitten.' To prevent infection, the troops were forbidden to walk barefoot and were ordered to ensure that the floors of their shelters were elevated. However, even with these precautions, the number of men incapacitated by tropical diseases grew steadily.

But crucially, the gruelling work paid off. By 25 August the base at Milne Bay was well established and one of the airfields was operational and able to accommodate heavy bombers. Brigadier Field's disciplined leadership was exemplary during the construction phase. Port Moresby was now better protected from sea attack and a maritime invasion could only succeed if Milne Bay was neutralised first.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Anderson was born in Bathurst, NSW where he completed his education at The Scots School.

Nicholas holds degrees in Arts and Law from the University of Canberra, and is undertaking a Masters degree by research at the University of New South Wales. Nicholas is based in Canberra and is an historian with the Australian Army History Unit.

His first book *To Kokoda*, was a history of the Kokoda campaign. This is his second book.

# THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY

## 1942

ARMY•HISTORY•UNIT

PROTECTING ARMY HERITAGE
PROMOTING ARMY HISTORY

By 1942 the formidable Japanese military had conquered swathes of territory across south-east Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Despite its defeat at the Battle of Midway, Japan remained a potent enemy committed to the creation of a defensive arc to shield its captured possessions in the Pacific.

The capture of Port Moresby would cement the southern border of this defensive arc and sever the vital lines of communication between Australia and the United States. It was the Japanese plan to seize Moresby that would set the course for the Battle of Milne Bay.

Situated on the eastern tip of New Guinea, Milne Bay was a wretched hell-hole: swamp-riddled, a haven for malaria and cursed with torrential rain. It was here that General Douglas MacArthur ordered the secret construction of an Allied base with airfields to protect the maritime approach to Port Moresby.

But the Japanese soon discovered the base at Milne Bay and despatched a task force to destroy its garrison and occupy the base. All that stood between the Japanese and their prize was a brigade of regular Australian soldiers untrained in tropical warfare and a brigade of Australian militia with no combat experience whatsoever.

While the Kokoda campaign is etched in public memory, its sister battle at Milne Bay has long been neglected. However the bitter fighting over this isolated harbour played an equally important role in protecting Port Moresby and made a valuable contribution to shifting Allied fortunes in the Pacific War.







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