

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

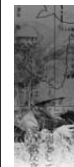
on full-scale war in China after engineering an incident at the Marco Polo bridge outside Peking. By 1941, Japan had become bogged down in an increasingly costly war despite having occupied vast areas of northern China and the Yangtze River valley.

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 Navy 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.



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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.

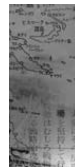
The invasion and occupation of Port Moresby on the southern coast of Papua was originally scheduled for May 1942 as part of the plan to enforce the FS Operation. Securing Port Moresby would deny the Allies a key base for counter-attacks against Rabaul and other locations in the region, and provide a 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 operations in the South Pacific Area 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 operations*.



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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 this 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 operations* 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 operations* 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 operations*.

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 operations*, 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 operations* 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.

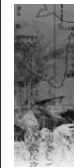
Translation

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 Tawvui 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 I 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 *bikō 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 *bikō chūtai*, though even this term is often translated as “air company”.



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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).

The translator would like to acknowledge support for this translation from the Australian War Memorial, the Embassy of Japan, and the Japan Foundation. Particular thanks go to the editors of the text, Mark Taylor and Michael Thomas, and to Haruki Yoshida, who supplied many corrections for the translation. Thanks go also to Meredith Patton, who provided a pilot translation for “The offensive” in chapter 1. Though many have provided assistance with aspects of the translation, any errors and faults contained in the text are entirely my own.

Steven Bullard

October 2006

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