

Pushing Towards Salamaua: New Guinea in World War II

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The jungled island of New Guinea was in the early 1940s an unpleasant locus of intense fighting between Japanese and Allied forces.

The Japanese had invaded China in the 1930s and moved swiftly through the Southeast Asian archipelago capturing territory after territory. They reached as far south as Darwin in February 1942, bombing it in a surprise attack. They landed New Guinea in May 1942. To Australians, the Japanese threat felt very close and very real.

When we think of the Australian involvement in Papua New Guinea most of us think of Kokoda. The Japanese attack and initial defeat of the Australians at Kokoda in 1942 and subsequent campaign along the Kokoda Track looms large in the Australian psyche. But there were many difficult battles in New Guinea. The Australians and the Japanese fought each other in murderous, muddy terrain until 1945, with significant battles in Buna-Gona (1942-1943), Wau (1943) and Salamaua-Lae (1943).

In many ways the New Guinea story is a particularly Australian one as the majority of Allied land forces in New Guinea were Australian. But in most of the New Guinea campaigns Australians fought alongside other Allied forces from the Netherlands, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, New Guinea and the United States. And the contribution of US forces with their well-equipped infantry and their naval and aerial power was crucial to the Allies' eventual success.

Bull Allen's New Guinea story begins after Kokoda, when in late 1942 the 2/5th Australian Infantry Battalion, made up largely of recruits from around Victoria, already war-weary from fighting in Syria and Libya, landed in New Guinea to aid the military campaign to retake Lae and Salamaua.