

Saving Twelve Men: Mount Tambu

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Bull Allen was a stretcher-bearer, a medic responsible for looking after the wounded. A tall and strong man, he would carry wounded men over his shoulders because he found using the stretcher too slow. He earned the nickname 'Bull' from his notorious football-playing technique - he would knock players over, even those on his own team. His friends said he played football like a 'Bull in a China shop.'

In July 1943 Bull's company was in the foothills of Mt Tambu, a strategic high point near Salamaua occupied by the Japanese, who by this stage were becoming increasingly desperate to maintain their hold in New Guinea. Australian troops of the 2/5th Battalion, Bull's attachment, had taken the lower ground around Tambu. On the 24th of July the Australians attempted to take the mountain. They failed with heavy casualties. The military hierarchy ordered another try for Tambu, and this time American troops were brought in, fresh off the boat, to attack.

On the 30th July the US 1/162nd Battalion attacked Tambu and fared no better than the Australians had the week before. They got into trouble very quickly in the face of Japanese snipers, machine guns and mortar fire. They suffered heavily with fifty wounded. Military historian David Dexter describes the terrain around Salamaua and Lae as "One of the most difficult and unpleasant areas ever to confront troops" requiring "endurance and determination in generous quantities." The land around Tambu was murderous, muddy, damp and steep-sloped, and two US medics were killed trying to retrieve the wounded from the battle.

At this point Bull, who was in the area as part of the residual Australian presence, walked up alone into the battlefield and started bringing back wounded one at a time by hoisting them up and carrying them over his shoulders. He walked in and out in this way at least twelve times, stopping eventually from exhaustion. He had holes in his sleeves and holes in his hat from the machine gun fire which had grazed him several times.

Allen's actions in rescuing the wounded at Tambu were extraordinary. He was under no obligation, apart from his own compassionate impulse, to risk his life in a US action and save men he had known only for a few days. The US recognised this and awarded him a Silver Star, one of their highest gallantry awards.