AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

SERIES ONE

ARMY

VOLUME V

SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC AREA—FIRST YEAR

Kokoda to Wau

AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1939-1945

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SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC AREA—FIRST YEAR

Kokoda to Wau

by

DUDLEY McCARTHY

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CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
	Preface	xi
	List of Events	xiii
1	REINFORCEMENT OF AUSTRALIA	1
2	THE ISLAND BARRIER	34
3	KANGA FORCE	84
4	THE JAPANESE ADVANCE TO KOKODA	108
5	MILNE BAY	147
6	WITHDRAWAL TO IORIBAIWA	193
7	IORIBAIWA: AND A COMMAND CRISIS	229
8	TO TEMPLETON'S CROSSING	254
9	EORA CREEK	280
10	OIVI-GORARI	311
11	THE BUILD-UP BEFORE BUNA	336
12	THE AMERICANS AT BUNA	356
13	ON THE SANANANDA TRACK	384
14	GONA	418
15	THE AUSTRALIANS AT BUNA	459
16	BUNA GOVERNMENT STATION TAKEN	484
17	THE END OF THE ROAD	497
18	WAU	534
	APPENDIXES:	
	1 After Alola	592
	2 Timor	597
	3 Brisbane, November 1942	625
	4 Abbreviations	628
	INDEX	631

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
The bombing of Darwin, 19th February 1942	66
Major-General B. M. Morris and some of his staff	66
Port Moresby	66
Bombs falling on the Port Moresby waterfront	67
An anti-aircraft position at Port Moresby	67
Salamaua	67
Kudjeru	67
A group of New Guinea Volunteer Rifles	130
Brigadier S. H. W. C. Porter with 30th Brigade officers and O.C. Kanga Force	130
Gona Mission	130
Native stretcher bearers in the Owen Stanleys	131
A wounded infantryman at a staging post in the Owen Stanleys	131
"D" Company, 39th Battalion on the way to the base area	146
A parade of the 39th Battalion at Menari	146
Major-General C A. Clowes	147
Lieut-General S. F. Rowell	147
Milne Bay	147
Abandoned Japanese tanks at Milne Bay	178
M.v. *Anshun* at Milne Bay	178
Kit inspection of American troops in Australia	179
General Grant tanks of the 1st Armoured Division	179
The track from Owers' Corner	194
Native carriers on the Kokoda Track	194
Kokoda village and airfield	194
A native carrier line at Eora Creek village	195
A 25-pounder field gun of the 14th Field Regiment	195
Loading supplies for air dropping	210
Dropping supplies from a transport plane near Nauro	210
Brigadier A. W. Potts and some of his staff	211
The Owen Stanleys, looking north from a high point near Nauro	211
The "Golden Stairs", rising towards Imita Ridge	242
Major-General A. S. Allen and Brigadier K. W. Eather	243
The 2/33rd Battalion crossing the Brown River	243
Survivors of the 2/27th Battalion at Itiki	274
The march of the 16th Brigade through Sydney	274
The 16th Brigade on the Kokoda Track	275
Mr F. M. Forde, General Douglas MacArthur and General Sir Thomas Blamey	306
Raising the flag at Kokoda after its recapture on 2nd November	307
A group of American and Australian officers at Wanigela	307
The Kokoda-Wairopi track, near Oivi	322

Page
Wounded Australians at the M.D.S. Kokoda 322
The destruction of the Wairopi bridge 322
Lieut-General Robert L. Eichelberger 323
Brigadier J. E. Lloyd 323
Crossing the Kumusi River at Wairopi 323
Bombing and strafing Japanese positions at Gona 323
An aid post on the track to Gona 418
Corporal F. R. Smith and Private W. A. Musgrove of the 2/33rd Battalion . 418
Buna Government Station 418
Australian and Japanese casualties at Gona 419
Major-General G. A. Vasey; Brigadiers J. R. Broadbent and G. F. Wootten; and Lieut-General E. F. Herring 450
The 2/9th Battalion at Cape Endaiadere 450
Last moments of a Japanese bid for freedom 450
Infantry-tank cooperation in the Buna area 451
Australian Bren gunners at Giropa Point 451
A mortar crew and a General Stuart tank in action at Giropa Point . . 451
A Vickers gun in action in the Buna area 466
A smashed Japanese pill-box at Giropa Point 466
Clearing the tree-tops of snipers at Buna 467
A gun emplacement and observation post of the 2/5th Field Regiment at Buna 498
Three infantrymen during a lull in the fighting at Gona 499
A Papuan boy guiding a wounded Australian at Buna 499
Australians moving forward to take up the fight at Sanananda . . 514
Sanananda 514
Conditions at Sanananda 515
The beaches at Buna, after the fighting 530
Tending graves at Gona 530
Wau airfield 531
The arrival of the 17th Brigade at Wau 531
A section of the Wau-Bulldog road 562
On the move forward from Wau 562
A line-up of native boys in Portuguese Timor 563
An Australian patrol in Portuguese Timor 563

MAPS

	Page
The Pacific Theatre	19
Territories of Papua and New Guinea	34
Western Pacific and Indian Ocean areas	37
The Kokoda Track	114
Milne Bay	156
The withdrawal from Isurava, 30th August to 5th September 1942	216
The approach to Oivi-Gorari, 31st October to 8th November	313
Allied advance on Buna-Gona area, 16th to 21st November	370
Kanga Force dispositions, 17th April 1943	585

SKETCH MAPS

Australia: Military Districts, Commands and defended ports	7
Philippine Islands	35
Wau-Lakekamu River mouth area	51
Wau-Salamaua-Lae area	52
Observation posts, Komiatum-Salamaua area	60
Bay of Bengal	78
Coral Sea Battle	81
Lower Markham Valley	87
The raid on Salamaua	93
Kokoda-Buna area	123
Kokoda-Alola area	128
Solomon Islands	148
Guadalcanal	149
Milne Bay, 6 p.m. 25th August 1942	160
Milne Bay, 6 p.m. 28th August	173
Milne Bay, 6 p.m. 31st August	179
Isurava-Alola, 26th August	199
Isurava-Alola, afternoon 29th August	205
Isurava-Alola, 3 p.m. 30th August	210
The Japanese advance to Menari, 5th-8th September	220
Ioribaiwa, noon 15th September	230
Imita Ridge, 20th September	233
Imita Ridge, noon 23rd September	246
The 2/27th Battalion's withdrawal from Menari	250
Templeton's Crossing, 6 p.m. 12th October	270
Templeton's Crossing, 6 p.m. 16th October	273
Templeton's Crossing, 6 p.m. 20th October	285
Eora Creek, 22nd-23rd October	288
Eora Creek, 27th-28th October	301

Oivi-Gorari, nightfall 9th November 324
Gorari, 10th-11th November 326
D'Entrecasteaux Islands 346
Allied advance across Owen Stanley Range towards Buna, 26th September-15th November 353
Routes of Allied advance on Buna-Gona area from mid-November . . . 357
Situation before Buna, evening 30th November 370
The Australian advance on Sanananda and Gona 385
Sanananda Track, 20th November 387
Sanananda Track, evening 21st November 389
Sanananda-Killerton Tracks, 21st-30th November 396
The Japanese defences at Gona 420
Gona area, 27th November 423
Gona area, 6 p.m. 29th November 428
Gona area, 6 p.m. 4th December 436
Haddy's village, nightfall 15th December 444
Cape Endaiadere-Strip Point area, 18th to 23rd December 455
The clearing of Old Strip, 23rd to 29th December 467
Giropa Point, 1st-2nd January 1943 481
American operations before Buna to 17th December 486
American operations before Buna, 18th December to 2nd January . . . 495
Allied dispositions on Sanananda Track prior to 19th December . . . 502
Sanananda Track, 24th December 506
Sanananda Track, 8 a.m. 12th January 514
Final operations along Sanananda Track, 15th-22nd January 518
The Buisaval and Black Cat Tracks 535
Routes of advance on Mubo, 11th January 1943 541
Wau-Mubo area, dawn 28th January 549
Wau-Mubo area, dawn 30th January 552
The Japanese attack on Wau, dawn 30th January 553
Wau-Crystal Creek area, dawn 31st January 556
Wau-Crystal Creek area, nightfall 3rd February 559
Wau-Crystal Creek area, dawn 6th February 564
Wau-Mubo area, nightfall 9th February 569
Wau-Bulldog road 579
Routes of main 21st Brigade escape groups after Alola 593
Portuguese Timor 599
Timor-northern Australia area 612

PREFACE

THIS volume is concerned mainly with the operations of the Australian army in Papua and New Guinea (except those in New Britain and New Ireland, which were dealt with in the preceding volume of this series) from the beginning of the war with Japan up to the end of April 1943. It records also (though naturally in lesser detail) the operations of the American ground forces in that area, and during that period, from the time of their first entry into action in November 1942; and the American operations on and around Guadalcanal which, in certain vital respects, were the key to developments in Papua and New Guinea from August 1942 until the end of that year. While these Australian and American operations were taking place, a small Australian guerilla force was fighting in Timor, and the story of that fighting is carried forward from March 1942 where the author of the preceding volume left it.

Principally, however, this is the story of the fighting along the Kokoda Track, at Milne Bay, in the coastal swamps of the Buna-Sanananda-Gona area, and around Wau—and of the events which led immediately up to that fighting. In it there is none of the wild, heart-thrilling drama of great bodies of men meeting on wide battlefields in the shocks of massed encounter. Instead, for the most part, it is the story of small groups of men, infinitesimally small against the mountains in which they fought, who killed one another in stealthy and isolated encounters beside the tracks which were life to all of them; of warfare in which men first conquered the country and then allied themselves with it and then killed or died in the midst of a great loneliness.

Fundamentally this story is concerned with the Australian infantryman whom I first knew when in the ranks myself (and later as an officer) in the 2/17th Battalion, A.I.F., and whose qualities of courage, endurance, comradeship and skill-at-arms, from personal experience first roused my love and admiration in the deserts of North Africa and in Tobruk. I had then no inkling that it would fall to my lot in these later years to chronicle the doings of such men in other battalions of the Australian Army in the vastly different setting represented by New Guinea—a setting in which, from my own earlier experiences as a young New Guinea Patrol Officer, I would have said it was quite impossible even for these great men to perform the deeds which they made their commonplace daily occasions. And so, first from my own experiences among them, and later from years of steeping myself in the records of their deeds to such an extent that I could truly say that the contemplation of them indeed changed the whole basis of my own approach to the problems of living and dying, I offer whatever of merit and personal sacrifice this book might represent as a tribute to these men and with the hope that others may be inspired as I have been by the stories of their lives and deaths.

Because the story is primarily that of the infantry soldier, I have feared that less than justice might have been done to many other brave and devoted

men—gunners, sappers, signallers, staff officers, and the many thousands in the various services which kept the infantryman in the field. I take comfort, however, from the certainty that these men will agree that the emphasis is as properly placed as it can be within the covers of one book. Similarly the story has in it comparatively little of generals and generalship; for it belongs most of all to the private soldier, the infantry N.C.O. and the battalion officer. Nor have I forgotten that the campaigns could not have been fought at all without the air forces and the magnificent application of their skill and courage at critical times, and without the naval forces whose operations were vital to the success of the operations ashore; but it is the purpose of other volumes to record the exploits of these in detail.

It would be a poor tribute to the Australian soldiers who defeated them, and poor history, not to recognise the outstanding martial attributes of the Japanese. Their record is marred by deeds of barbarism and wanton cruelty of a kind quite beyond our own understanding. But despite this they were superb in their acceptance of death as a soldier's obligation, and they were worthy of any soldier's steel in the way they themselves fought and died.

The stuff from which this story is made is to be found primarily in the war diaries of all the units which were engaged. But round that strong thread have been woven details gathered from many other sources: from various published works; from letters and other personal papers; from conversations and discussions and personal accounts; from the many most valuable interviews recorded by Gavin Long while the war was still in progress; from War Cabinet papers. I would like to pay a personal tribute to the work of my old friend, Lieut-Colonel A. G. Fenton, who wrote the first narrative of the earlier part of the Kanga Force operations before his death in the last stages of the war in one of the many aircraft which set out across New Guinea and never returned. I am also deeply indebted to Samuel Milner, American war historian and good friend of Australia, whose *Victory in Papua* provided the broad basis for the story of American operations in Papua and much of the material for "the Japanese story". I am grateful also for the help of those many former officers and men of the Australian Army who have read and criticised and added to this narrative, and given their time for discussion and patient explanation.

Throughout the years of work which this book has represented I have been unfailingly sustained and guided by the wisdom, scholarship, patience, faith, and friendship of the General Editor, Gavin Long, and by the quiet and humorous comradeship, ever-ready aid and great skill of Bill (A. J.) Sweeting of Mr Long's staff.

D.McC.

Canberra,
12th June 1958.

LIST OF EVENTS

FROM AUGUST 1941 TO APRIL 1943

Events described in this volume are printed in italics

1941	5 Aug	*Lieut-General Sir Iven Mackay appointed G.O.C. Home Forces*
	25 Aug	British and Russian troops enter Iran
	7 Oct	Mr Curtin becomes Prime Minister of Australia
	19 Oct	State of siege proclaimed in Moscow
	7-8 Dec	Japanese attack Malaya and Pearl Harbour
1942	23 Jan	Japanese capture Rabaul
	3 Feb	*First Japanese air raid on Port Moresby*
	14 Feb	*Cessation of Civil Government in Papua*
	19-20 Feb	Japanese forces land on Timor
	28 Feb-1 Mar	Japanese invade Java
	8 Mar	Japanese troops enter Rangoon *Japanese forces occupy Lae and Salamaua*
	9 Mar	*Leading brigade of 7th Division A.I.F. arrives Adelaide*
	17 Mar	*General MacArthur arrives in Australia*
	26 Mar	*General Blamey becomes Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces*
	5 Apr	*Japanese carrier-borne aircraft attack Colombo*
	6 Apr	*41st U.S. Division arrives in Australia*
	18 Apr	*G.H.Q., S.W.P.A. established at Melbourne*
	5-8 May	*Battle of the Coral Sea*
	6 May	*Corregidor surrenders*
	26 May	German offensive in Western Desert begins
	31 May-1 June	Japanese midget submarines attack Sydney Harbour
	4-6 June	*Battle of Midway Island*
	7 June	Japanese land in Aleutian Islands
	21 July	*Japanese land Gona area, Papua*
	7 Aug	*Americans land in Solomons*
	19 Aug	Dieppe raid
	25-26 Aug	*Japanese land at Milne Bay*

1942	17 Sept	*Japanese drive over Owen Stanleys halted at Imita Ridge*
	23-24 Oct	Battle of El Alamein begins
	2 Nov	*Kokoda recaptured*
	7-8 Nov	Allied landings in French North Africa
	12 Nov	British Eighth Army captures Tobruk
	12-15 Nov	*Naval battle of Guadalcanal*
	22 Nov	Russians announce launching of counter-offensive at Stalingrad
	9 Dec	*Australians capture Gona*
	21 Dec	British and Indian troops cross Burma frontier and advance in direction of Akyab
1943	2 Jan	*Buna Government Station captured*
	23 Jan	*Organised Japanese resistance in Papua ends*
	29 Jan	British Eighth Army enters Tripoli *Japanese attack Wau airfield*
	18 Feb	9th Australian Division arrives Fremantle
	2-4 Mar	*Battle of Bismarck Sea*
	20-21 Mar	Eighth Army moves against Mareth Line
	23 Apr	*Headquarters 3rd Australian Division established at Bulolo*