CHAPTER 29

KOKODA AND MILNE BAY

In mid-August much remained to be done before Port Moresby could claim to be a powerful base. To an observer approaching by air this unreadiness was not immediately apparent. In the absence of raiding enemy aircraft the harbour was a placid enough though busy scene, and the scars of war were scarcely visible in the town itself with its houses and other buildings spilling down to the water's edge. It was the area a few miles inland—acres of stony arid hills and undulating land covered in dry grass with a scattering of meagre gum trees—that gave the real picture. Here there were dark blotches on the land caused by fires started by bursting bombs; dumps of fuel, stores of all kinds and bombs and ammunition; hutted and tented camps, anti-aircraft gun emplacements and slit trenches. The ground was scarred by earthworks, the result of quarrying, aerodrome construction and the making of roads that were now being ploughed by heavy transport into deep furrows of dust.

The work going on at the aerodrome sites was very visibly incomplete. American engineer units that had been at work since May on a variety of tasks were now extending the Seven Mile and constructing satellite fields—Kila, the old town aerodrome; Berry, situated about nine miles north-east of the town; and a third aerodrome about 9 miles north-northeast, to become known as Durand. But none of these satellites was yet ready for operations. As a pointer to the immediate threat, there was a particular road heavily burdened by urgent traffic that reached across the "dry area", and up through the foothills, winding among rubber plantations and rain forest until, about 25 miles from Port Moresby, it reached Ilolo on the far side of the Sogeri plateau. Three or four miles beyond Ilolo this road ended with disconcerting abruptness, its place being taken by a narrow track that plunged steeply into a jungle-filled ravine and became the route to Kokoda and, beyond, to Buna.

These were two place-names that were uppermost in the minds of the defenders of Port Moresby; that of Kokoda more immediately perhaps because, lying in the Yodda Valley on the northern side and virtually in the shadow of the Owen Stanley Range, it had the only aerodrome between Port Moresby and the Japanese-held Buna-Gona area.

By now, after little more than two weeks of bitter jungle fighting, the enemy were not very far away—about 50 air miles from Port Moresby—and there were those, including some who had been in Port Moresby from the beginning of the war and others very recently arrived, who thought dangerously of evacuation. Behind such thinking were the black clouds of Allied defeat in Malaya, Singapore, Java, Burma and, so close at hand,

Within a few weeks No. 5 Mobile Works Squadron RAAF was to arrive and begin the construction of Ward's aerodrome about 5 miles north-east of Port Moresby.

at Rabaul. Here again the Japanese, undefeated since they went to war, were closing in on a vital base. What could stop them? Why would not disaster come again?

To counter these dark thoughts there had come very recently the men of the 21st Brigade of the 7th Division of the A.I.F. which, with part of the 6th Division, had returned to Australia in March from the Middle East. These were now fresh and rested troops, well-trained and battle-hardened. Lieut-General Rowell,² commander of I Australian Corps, had arrived in New Guinea with his headquarters on 11th August. Three days later he issued a Special Order of the Day in which he called for the maximum effort adding:

We are receiving reinforcements of fresh troops and are assured of the greatest possible support from the air force and administrative services. With this aid and your determination to succeed, I am confident that we will achieve satisfactory results.

It was over this scene that 24 enemy bombers flew on the morning of 17th August. There had been a complete respite from air attacks since the 77th raid on 1st August. Now it was broken by 150 bombs dropped accurately and in perfect pattern on the Seven Mile aerodrome. With but four minutes' warning the American fighter pilots did not get off the ground and the enemy formation, despite the anti-aircraft fire, made their attack unscathed. Their bombs demolished the aerodrome control tower and operations hut at the side of the runway, destroyed 5 aircraft and damaged 11 others severely. For the weight of bombs dropped, casualties were comparatively light—one man killed and 13 wounded. A column of dense smoke rising from the burning aircraft was the tell-tale to a lesson expensively learned; the aircraft destroyed and damaged—Marauders and transports—had been parked closely together at one end of the runway, for even the Seven Mile aerodrome was still lacking in revetments. Most serious was the loss of the transports—two Dakotas destroyed and five more so seriously damaged that they had been put out of commission.

It was only very recently that air transport had begun in any substantial way to supplement the work of the over-taxed native carrier lines in supplying the Australian troops fighting in the Kokoda area. Supply dropping sorties had been made over Kagi and Efogi with some success and at a new dropping area, over two dry lake beds which had been named Myola, arrangements had been made to build up reserve stores for this most difficult campaign. The "lakes" which lay on the top of the main range to the east of Kagi were heavily grassed and clear of any obstruction. The area had been first pin-pointed from the air and then confirmed by ground reconnaissance. Rowell had readily appreciated its value for

² Lt-Gen Sir Sydney Rowell, KBE, CB. (1st AIF: 3 LH Regt 1914-15.) BGS I Aust Corps 1940-41; Deputy CGS AMF 1941-42; GOC I Corps 1942; Director Tactical Investigation War Office 1943-46; CGS 1950-54. Regular soldier; of Adelaide; b. Lockleys, SA, 15 Dec 1894,

he was only too conscious that in his battle planning a key question was not how many troops he could *move* into action against the Japanese but how many he could *maintain* in action. He was, therefore, deeply concerned over the loss of the Dakotas in the air raid of the 17th. There now was only one of these aircraft in commission. General Whitehead too appreciated how critical the situation had become and, with Rowell's strong support, he sent a signal to General Kenney requesting the urgent dispatch of replacement aircraft. The building of aircraft revetments, too, was now given top priority in the aerodrome construction program. Meanwhile efforts were made to develop supply dropping at Myola, an experimental drop having been made there on 5th August.

This effort, it was thought, would quickly build up the reserve of supplies so sorely needed. But it was Brigadier Potts,³ commander of the 21st Brigade, who was to prove that the supply situation was even more critical than either Rowell or Whitehead realised. To Potts it was of first importance to know precisely how his troops were to be supplied before he led them into battle. He therefore made an exacting personal reconnaissance from which he discovered, on 21st August, that the reserve of supplies he had been told had by now been delivered to Myola did not exist. The quantity in hand was completely inadequate and, understandably, nothing at all had been dropped since 16th August. As seen from the viewpoint of New Guinea Force Headquarters the situation was that although the

... discovery of Myola had given rise to high hopes that aircraft might be used to carry the main burden of supply, Potts had now revealed that the performance had fallen far short of hopes. Nevertheless it was clear to the men on the spot that only aircraft could save the situation for the carriers clearly could not carry the load required. General Rowell soon afterwards told General Blamey that the daily maintenance requirement of Maroubra Force was 15,000 pounds (and that of Kanga Force 5,000 pounds). To meet the Maroubra Force requirements, with native carriers on a basis of a six- to eight-day carry of a maximum of 40 pounds a native, would necessitate the use of at least 3,000 carriers, without allowing for the porterage of their own rations, wastage among them, and other possibilities. Unless this number could be greatly increased the forward force could not be strengthened nor could even the smallest reserve of supplies be built up. But Rowell wanted to build up 20 days' reserves and that would require the transport of 200,000 pounds more of rations and ammunition. Such a carry, spread over 20 days, would demand the use of at least an additional 2,000 natives and still would not allow for any increase in the strength of the force. Clearly the entire Australian operations in the Owen Stanleys would bog down completely unless effective alternative or supplementary means of supply could be found.4

Rowell had been planning on an assurance that supplies and ammunition sufficient for the needs of 2,000 men for 25 days had been delivered

³ Brig A. W. Potts, DSO, MC. (1st AIF: Capt 16 Bn.) CO 2/16 Bn 1941-42; comd 21 Bde 1942, 23 Bde 1942-45. Farmer; of Kojonup, WA; b. Peel, Isle of Man, 16 Sept 1896.

⁴D. McCarthy, South West Pacific—First Year (1959), p. 197, a volume in the army series of this history.

to Myola by 16th August. Potts had disproved this. Rowell, having confirmed Potts' statement, reported:

The closest inquiry disclosed that the rations . . . had in fact been dispatched from Moresby and it can only be assumed that, from causes unknown, they were dropped elsewhere than at Myola and were not recovered.

The immediate outcome of this situation was that Potts sought 800 carriers and was told that only 300 could be spared. He therefore did not dare to advance his brigade even as far as Myola before the supply position had been remedied. Rowell, accepting this as inevitable, ordered (on the 24th) the withdrawal of the 39th Battalion, then at Isurava, as soon as possible, so that the supply position might be eased, and gave further instructions that this unit should make no offensive movement before reserves sufficient for its needs for 30 days had been stored at Myola. Rowell's plea for replacement aircraft brought the reply from General MacArthur (through Blamey) that six Douglas Dauntless dive bombers, one Flying Fortress and two transports would be made available for service from Port Moresby. The Commander-in-Chief's message added:

With these planes it is estimated that a minimum of 20,000 pounds of supplies per day can be delivered to Kagi and Wau. There are available in Australia only thirty transport planes at the present time. Of these an average of not more than 50 per cent are available at any one time. Air supply must necessarily be considered an emergency rather than a normal means of supply. Consequently every effort should be made by the GOC, NGF, to develop other means of supply.

Even then MacArthur's message did not reveal all the complexities. Air dropping to Myola, Kagi and Wau could not provide the full answer -supplies must as yet be carried forward from those points on men's backs. There were, too, the ever-present worries caused by the weather, flying conditions and aircrew fatigue. These factors limited the number of daily flights of a single aircraft to two to Kanga Force headquarters and three to Myola. Fighter cover had to be arranged and bad weather. accident or damage and loss from enemy air attack could critically restrict air operations, as the enemy raid on the 17th had proved so drastically. But one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of the air supply problem was created by lack of information about the course of the battle. Communications with the forward troops often depended on whether runners succeeded in eluding the enemy; and in the changing fortunes of the battle, messages were often outdated before they reached headquarters. Thus late in July Australian troops who, having been forced back from Kokoda and then fought a bitter but successful action to retake it, had watched in dismay while two Allied transports bearing desperately needed reinforcements and supplies circled the aerodrome and then turned back thinking it was in enemy hands; the Australian troops were unable to remove in time the obstacles they had placed on the runway before retiring or to signal to the aircraft that they had recaptured the place.

Meanwhile Whitehead, now the senior air commander in New Guinea, had set up his headquarters with a minimum of attention to personal amenities for himself. This typified his forthright, hard-driving, single-minded outlook which he expressed verbally in the forceful precept: "The objective in war is to kill the enemy and destroy his equipment." This he had already begun to translate into action but the task had many difficulties. Working from directives received from Kenney's headquarters in Brisbane, he had to plan the detail of attacks with aircraft dispatched to him from mainland bases by General Walker who, in turn, was obliged to confine his attention to the administration of his command and prepare his aircraft for service "on call".

To give effective air combat support to the Australian troops fighting on the south-western side of the Owen Stanley Range was extremely difficult. The opposing ground forces were fighting a series of miniature but fierce battles the pattern of which was interlaced with sharp patrol clashes, encircling movements and unpredictable advances and withdrawals all of which made extremely complex the task of passing target information to the squadrons. It was hidden warfare. Fighter pilots and bomber crews quite frequently operated without any clear view of what their attacks were achieving. There was also the constant strain of flying and fighting in narrow gorges between densely jungle-clad or rock-faced and often cloud-covered mountains; among what aircrew graphically described as "clouds full of rocks".

More easily planned and carried out were attacks on enemy positions and communications on the north-eastern side of the mountains. Here, in more open country, reaching to Buna and Gona, it was possible to see results. Yet the battle itself was still in the mountains and that was where air support was urgently needed. But the profit from the suppression of the enemy's air units at Lae and Salamaua was increasingly apparent and in their operations in support of the Australian ground troops the Allied air units now held a marked superiority.

The Milne Bay base—the bay's name was quickly adopted for the Gili Gili site at its head—was still very much in its physical beginnings when its defence importance was heavily underlined by the arrival of two R.A.A.F. fighter squadrons. First to reach the base was the main party of No. 76 (Kittyhawk) Squadron which had been formed at Townsville as recently as April and which had made the voyage by sea in July under the command of Wing Commander Thomas. Thomas, who had been R.A.A.F. liaison officer with Abdair Headquarters during General Wavell's brief period of command in Java, was now to become the senior R.A.A.F. officer at Milne Bay. The squadron's aircraft were flown in to the raw jungle base on 25th July, and on the same day arrived those of No. 75 Squadron, which had taken the first impact of the Japanese air assault

⁶ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Fifth Air Force in the War Against Japan (1947), p. 75.

on New Guinea, and, now re-equipped and refreshed, was still under the command of Squadron Leader Leslie Jackson.

No. 76 Squadron had a nucleus of pilots who had returned from overseas with distinguished combat records. Squadron Leader Turnbull, who had fought in the Western Desert and Syria, was chosen as its commander. A strong and capable leader, Turnbull gained the immediate respect and admiration of the unit. Unlike No. 75, which had drawn its battleexperienced nucleus from the Middle East, No. 76 had received several pilots who had seen combat over Britain and France. It was not until shortly before the squadron moved to Milne Bay that these additional pilots arrived—Squadron Leader Truscott, Flight Lieutenant Wawn and Flying Officers Tainton⁸ and Elphick,⁹ all from No. 452 Squadron. Though it was only one year older than No. 76, No. 452 already had a considerable battle reputation, a reputation with which Truscott who, on 25th January had succeeded another notable Australian, Squadron Leader Bungey,1 as its commander, had become personally identified. On the night before Truscott and his companions arrived, the conversation in No. 76 Squadron's mess at the Weir aerodrome (a satellite of Townsville's main aerodrome, Garbutt) centred on what was known of the newcomers and particularly of Truscott. Already the unit had begun to achieve the paradox that was true of all good fighter units, a collective individualism—a tight unity among men who fly as individuals and yet learn to fight as a team. In spite of the usual high-spirited nonsense that accepted "shooting a line"—making a boast so outrageous that it was funny—there was a resentment, common in the Services, against anyone who sought personal publicity, which was classed as one of the least forgivable of human weaknesses. Judged by these standards Truscott's prospects for ready acceptance in this mess were most unpromising. Few if any of the pilots knew him personally but all had come to know of him as one of the most highly publicised members of the R.A.A.F.

Immediately before the war and even after he had joined the R.A.A.F., Truscott was a prominent football player in Melbourne and as such he had become a public idol. The period before his graduation as a pilot had been one filled with grave fears both for himself and his instructor, but he was passed as competent and was soon commissioned ahead of many of his fellow trainees, most of whom had better flying qualifications than his. Truscott's potential quality was assessed as being more than sufficient to make up for his early ineptitude as a trainee pilot. He

⁶ Sqn Ldr K. W. Truscott, DFC, 400213. Comd 452 Sqn 1942, 76 Sqn 1942-43. Clerk; of South Yarra, Vic; b. Prahran, Vic, 17 May 1916. Killed in aircraft accident 28 Mar 1943.
⁷ F-Lt C. N. Wawn, DFC, 400163. 111 and 92 Sqns RAF, 452 and 76 Sqns. Grazier; of Langkoop, Vic; b. Melbourne, 5 Nov 1910.
⁸ F-Lt E. B. Tainton, 402009. 452 Sqn, 607 Sqn RAF and 76 Sqn. Wool appraiser; of Double Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Sep 1919.

F-Lt J. R. H. Elphick, 402157. 111 Sqn RAF, 452 and 76 Sqns, 113 and 115 Air-Sea Rescue Flights. Bank clerk; of Lismore, NSW; b. Cootamundra, NSW, 28 Feb 1919.

¹W Cdr R. W. Bungey, DFC, 40042 RAF, 257414. 226, 79 and 145 Sqns RAF; comd 452 Sqn 1941, RAF Stns Shoreham and Hawkinge 1942. Regular air force offr; of Glenelg, SA; b. Fullarton, SA, 4 Oct 1914. Died 10 Jun 1943.

went on to prove this judgment to be sound; he was to achieve unusual success as a fighter pilot in the skies over Britain and France.

On his return to Australia where, in Melbourne at least, he was now doubly idolised by the public, he became a leading figure in a test case that was of interest to the whole air force and particularly to those who, like himself, were called on to surrender their higher acting rank (and the higher pay for that rank) on return from an overseas posting. Although others were equally involved, Truscott was once more the centre of public attention. So strong was the popular clamour for the restitution of acting rank held by men who had become "veterans" in combat that the Minister for Air, Mr Drakeford, ordered the retention of acting rank in such circumstances.

In those early days of its development the Milne Bay base was notable with the troops more for its heavy rainfall than for any other reason. When the Kittyhawk pilots flew in, the one completed runway, No. 1 Strip (later to be known as Gurney²) was virtually under water. Interlocking steel matting laid over its 5,000 feet length to a width of 80 feet, alone made landing possible.3 The pilots, few if any of whom had landed on such a runway, touched down with their aircraft spraying water like so many hydroplanes. On landing the aircraft skidded, often so violently that they swung off the runway and became bogged in the morass at the side of the matting. The ground staff and all others who could help laboured in deep mud, dragging out bogged aircraft to what firm ground there was and laying further sections of steel matting for taxiways to the dispersal areas among the coconut plantations. The original plans for the base had not provided for a force as large as that now being assembled, and it had been intended that initially only one fighter squadron should be based at Milne Bav.4

Despite these limitations the emphasis on air facilities was now urgent, and with the arrival on 7th August of additional American engineers, the construction of further air strips became possible.⁵ A site for No. 2 Strip was selected at Waigani to the south-west of No. 1 Strip, but its construction and use would entail considerable bridge-building and one company of the newly-arrived American troops was put to work on the preparation of No. 3 Strip, sited to the east of No. 1 with the runway laid out in a west-north-westerly direction from the bay-front to the west of Kilarbo.⁶ Wing Commander Thomas now had under his control the two fighter squadrons with their ground staffs, a radar unit (No. 37), a signals section, a mobile torpedo unit (established in preparation for operations by

² Gurney airfield was so named in commemoration of Sqn Ldr C. R. Gurney, a former Qantas flying-boat captain, who served first with No. 11 Sqn and later became commanding officer of No. 33 Squadron. He lost his life when an aircraft crashed on 3rd May 1942.

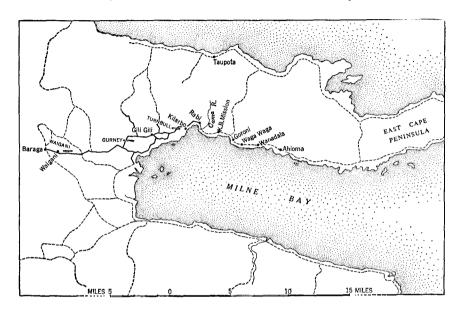
³ Known as "Marsden" matting, this American device was one of the most notable material contributions to the Allied effort in the early years of the war.

By 8th August 1942 this force—all arms and services—numbered 6,212 officers and men.

⁵ The additional engineer troops were the II Battalion, 43 US Engineer Regiment, less one company.

⁶ No. 3 Strip was later developed and named Turnbull after the commander of No. 76 Squadron.

the Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron) and an operational base staff. Camp facilities for these units were seriously inadequate but in spite of many difficulties progress was being made towards establishing the base on an operational footing. The signals unit was ready to operate point-to-point communications over the 700 miles that separated Milne Bay from Townsville but security dictated that this channel should not yet be used and



the army signals service operating through Port Moresby was preferred. This precaution, and strict instructions to pilots to maintain radio silence, probably explained the entire freedom from enemy air attack in the first two weeks of occupation. At Brigadier Field's⁷ request Thomas was appointed air liaison officer at Milne Force Headquarters, a role in which he laboured to reduce the congestion at the base and to plan air cover and air support to meet the army's needs.⁸ Army liaison officers were appointed to assist the squadrons in achieving tactical cooperation.

On the night of 25th July, the day the Kittyhawks arrived, the first "Form Green" (attack order) was received. The Kittyhawks were to take off early next morning in an endeavour to intercept the flying-boats that had raided Townsville as they were on their way back to Rabaul. The attempt was made, but there was no interception. In addition to the many tasks they wrestled with under exacting conditions in which the principal ingredients were mud, rain and intense humidity, the ground

⁷ Brig J. Field, CBE, DSO, ED. CO 2/12 Bn 1939-42; comd 7 Bde 1942-45. Mechanical engineer and university lecturer; of Hobart: b. Castlemaine, Vic. 10 Apr 1899.

⁸ The problems of authority for air force organisation and administration at Milne Bay—the allocation of camp areas, provision of supplies and rationing—were acute and Field was too burdened with his own staff work, and too ill-equipped in terms of authority, to deal effectively with them.

staff worked to provide better protection for the aircraft. Using the trunks of coconut trees that had been cleared to make the runway, they began to build splinter-proof pens round what dispersal bays there were.

The first opportunity for fighter combat came on 4th August when four Zeros and a dive bomber, presumably making an armed reconnaissance of the Allied base, ended Milne Bay's freedom from air attack. Since the radar station was not yet in full service there was practically no warning, but No. 76 Squadron had eight Kittyhawks on patrol. The Zero pilots attacked the No. 1 Strip with gunfire and succeeded in destroying one of No. 75 Squadron's aircraft on the ground. Several of the Kittyhawk pilots engaged the Zeros. Flight Lieutenant Ash⁹ of No. 76, returning from patrol, intercepted and shot down the dive bomber which crashed into the jungle. Ash thus destroyed the first enemy aircraft over Milne Bay and scored the squadron's first success in combat.

From this time on the radar station was in operation and the enemy did not again raid the base without warning. Kittyhawks took off on 7th August to attempt the interception of enemy aircraft reported over Samarai. Through inexperience five pilots of No. 76 Squadron were airborne so long in their search for the enemy that they were forced by fuel shortage to land on an emergency strip on Goodenough Island, 57 miles to the north across Ward Hunt Strait. One aircraft crashed on landing and had to be written off. Until they could be brought off the island the five pilots were kept supplied with rations dropped from the air.

Raid No. 2 occurred soon after midday on the 11th. After a warning from the radar station, Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons had between them 22 aircraft airborne to meet a force of about 12 Zeros. Although they had marked superiority in numbers the Kittyhawk squadrons paid a heavy price for the inexperience of some of their pilots. Details of the combat are somewhat confused. Two pilots from No. 75—Flying Officer Sheldon¹ and Warrant Officer Shelley2-and Flying Officer McLeod3 of No. 76, were missing when the combat ended. Flight Sergeant Inkster,4 also of 76 Squadron, lost his life after a fierce encounter while attempting to parachute at low level from his wrecked aircraft. Four Zeros were probably shot down by the Kittyhawk pilots. The squadrons were to wait almost a fortnight before the enemy returned to the attack.

The arrival on 12th August of advance parties of the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division A.I.F., under Brigadier Wootten,5 had greatly stimu-

⁹ Sqn Ldr P. H. Ash, 260771, 21, 23, 76 Sqns; 2 OTU and Fighter Sector Darwin. Company director; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Newcastle, 26 Mar 1909.

F-O M. E. Sheldon, 402256. 17 and 134 Sqns RAF and 75 Sqn. Building contractor; of Eastwood, NSW; b. Granville, NSW, 19 Nov 1914. Killed in action 11 Aug 1942.

² W-O F. P. Shelley, 40²408. 41 Sqn RAF. 45² and 75 Sqns. Bank officer; of Double Bay, NSW; b. Branxton, NSW, 8 May 1919. Killed in action 11 Aug 1942.

³ F-O A. G. Moleod, 411807; 76 Sqn. Commercial traveller; of Bexley, NSW; b. Bexley, 30 May 1918. Killed in action 11 Aug 1942.

⁴ F.Sgt G. F. Inkster, 402292. 64 Sqn RAF and 76 Sqn. Theatre operator; of Eastwood, NSW; b. Leichhardt, NSW, 3 Oct 1915. Killed in action 11 Aug 1942.

⁵ Maj-Gen Sir George Wootten, KBE, CB, DSO. (1st AIF: 1 Bn and BM 11 and 9 Inf Bdes.) CO 2/2 Bn 1939-40; comd 18 Bde 1941-43; GOC 9 Div 1943-45. Solicitor; of West Wyalong and Mosman, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 1 May 1893.

lated the Milne Bay defences, as did the announcement on the same day that Major-General Clowes⁶ had been appointed to command Milne Force which was to be augmented by Wootten's whole brigade. The appointment of Clowes, who arrived at Milne Bay on the 13th, was in keeping with the whole reorganisation of Australian Army forces in New Guinea presaged by the arrival of General Rowell at Port Moresby. By 22nd August Clowes had 8,824 army troops under his command including 1,365 Americans, principally engineer units, but only about half the total were infantry.

The sum of Intelligence reports received by General Headquarters now left no doubt that the Japanese were about to make another major assault. By 17th August there was sufficient evidence for Allied Air Headquarters to issue orders to all combat elements to prepare for a maximum effort between the 22nd and the 27th. This enemy effort, the orders stated, might be directed against the American forces in Guadalcanal, but it was essential that the Allied forces concerned should be ready for attempted enemy landings at Goodenough Bay, Milne Bay or Port Moresby. At Milne Bay, therefore, air patrols were increased and, despite the mud and other physical difficulties, modifications to convert the Kittyhawks into fighter-bombers were made in haste. The need for additional long-range armed reconnaissance aircraft for the area was emphatic and No. 6 Hudson Squadron was moved from Richmond, New South Wales, to Horn Island on 23rd August. It was placed under the immediate control of No. 9 Operational Group and under Advon (Advanced Echelon) Fifth Air Force for operational orders; a detached flight being sent immediately to Milne Bay. Reconnaissance facilities were still far from liberal and more observers were posted on outlying islands to fill the gaps in the visual warning system.

On the 24th an observer on Cape Nelson at the northern entrance to Ward Hunt Strait which separates the D'Entrecasteaux Islands from the Papuan "tailpiece", gave first warning of an amphibious operation by the Japanese. Seven enemy barges were reported to be moving down the coast past Porlock Harbour in the direction of Milne Bay. The Kittyhawk squadrons were prevented from an early attack on the barges by an enemy air raid on No. 1 Strip area. Seven Zeros made strafing runs without effect and then made off under cover of cloud. Three were believed to have been shot down.

At midday on the 25th, in response to a report that the barges had put ashore on the western coast of Goodenough Island, nine Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron crossed Ward Hunt Strait in two flights, one led by Flying Officer Piper and one by Flying Officer Atherton. While one flight acted as top cover the other flew in at low level and attacked the beached barges with gunfire. After six runs had been made over the target

⁶ Lt-Gen C. A. Clowes, CBE, DSO, MC. (1st AIF: 2 Bty and 2 Div Arty.) CRA I Corps 1940-41; GOC 1 Div 1942, NG Force and Milne Force 1942, 11 Div 1942-43; Comd Vic L of C Area 1943-45. Regular soldier; of Warwick, Qld; b. Warwick, 11 Mar 1892.

AAFHQ Operations Instruction No. 22, 17 Aug 1942.

all seven barges were blazing. The craft were about 50 feet long and 10 feet in beam, and laden with equipment. Few troops were visible. The nine Kittyhawk pilots, who had not been intercepted, all flew safely back to their base with the satisfaction of having seen a column of smoke rising 1,000 feet from the demolished enemy craft.

With the enemy's main force, now known to consist of two cruisers, three destroyers, two submarine chasers and two transports, approaching Normanby Island, all units of Milne Force were placed on the alert. Since the area was now under threat of invasion, Clowes, in keeping with his directive, assumed command of all Allied land and air forces. It remained for him to endeavour to anticipate the enemy's specific intentions. The bay itself, shaped like the blade of a spade, extends from its seven-miles-wide entrance at the very eastern extremity of Papua, in a westerly direction for about 20 miles. The main Allied base at Gili Gili was close to the north-western corner of the bay, the shores of which offered ample scope for choice in landing points, its deep waters permitting transports to stand relatively close inshore. Clowes assigned a virtually static role in the eastern sector to the inexperienced troops of the 7th Brigade and held the battle-hardened 18th Brigade in the Gili Gili-Waigani area ready for a mobile, counter-attack role.

For their part Allied Air Headquarters had ordered all reserve aircraft to be prepared for attack sorties. No. 19 Bombardment Group at Mareeba had nine Flying Fortresses standing by and all available Mitchells and Marauders were moved to Port Moresby. Even Nos. 2 and 13 Squadrons in the Darwin area were ordered to be ready to move to New Guinea if needed. One completely uncontrollable element of great importance to both the Allied and and the enemy forces was the weather. It favoured the enemy. On this critical day the heavy-bomber crews failed again to check the advance of an enemy seaborne force. Flying Fortresses sortied but their crews, unable to find the enemy ships, returned with the bombs still in their racks.

Group Captain Garing was now personally directing the operations of the R.A.A.F. squadrons which were being "bombed up" in readiness for an attack when the enemy force should come within range. At 3 p.m. on the 25th, when the Japanese convoy had reached a position just south of Normanby Island, the decision to strike was made. Six Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron led by Flying Officer Brereton attacked the convoy each dropping a 300-lb bomb but without success. The Kittyhawks were operating in company with the Hudsons the crews of which were so continuously airborne and now so competent in target finding that they were creating something of a legend.

One of the Hudson crews attacking what they took to be a corvette (probably a submarine chaser) at little more than mast-top height scored a near miss that damaged the ship which lost speed. Between 4.40 and 5.30 p.m. six Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron carrying 300-lb bombs and three more Kittyhawks from No. 75 carrying 250-lb bombs again

attacked the convoy, scoring two near misses on a transport and a direct hit on a corvette (probably the one mentioned above) which stopped and did not follow the convoy into Milne Bay. The aircraft landed by the aid of a flare-path that could be seen through the darkness and mist only when they were circling low over the runway. All the aircraft but one returned safely. The missing pilot, Flying Officer Whetters,⁸ was given up as lost, but later he was rescued from Sideia Island to the south of the entrance to Milne Bay. Two of the Hudson crews, their aircraft holed by enemy anti-aircraft fire, were unable to reach Milne Bay in the darkness and overcast. They flew on to Port Moresby, returning next day.

At 6 p.m. a Hudson of No. 6 Squadron piloted by Pilot Officer Law⁹ and another Hudson from No. 32 Squadron attacked the convoy from 100 feet. Law dropped 7 bombs the nearest of which landed 10 feet from the side of an 8,000-ton transport. Intense anti-aircraft fire of all calibres from all the ships was experienced and Law's aircraft was hit in the port fuel tank and received other shrapnel damage but returned safely to base.

Soon after midnight (the morning of the 26th) Clowes and Garing received a report that the Japanese convoy had entered Milne Bay. The report came from the crew of a R.A.A.F. crash tender which was patrolling the bay at Clowes' direction. About an hour later the defenders heard the sound of gunfire coming from seaward and, by 1.30 a.m., patrols reported that Japanese troops were landing from barges at points just to the east of the 7th Brigade's most forward positions, close to the K.B. Mission, and at other points—Waga Waga, Wanadala and Ahioma. There was little sleep for the Milne Bay defenders that night, as ground staff and aircrew slaved in the mud to prepare the Kittyhawks for the next day's battle.

Reconnaissance at first light showed that the enemy convoy had disembarked its troops and their equipment, using about fifteen powerful steel barges which now lay moored inshore at the landing points, and had dumped a large number of drums of petrol into the water just off shore where most of them still floated. Having completed their task before dawn the ships had withdrawn unimpeded, and, while it was yet dark, had vanished out to sea, once more protected by a curtain of cloud. The Japanese had landed without opposition on a narrow strip that skirted between the foot of the mountain range and the shore. There was some sporadic fighting between the Australian and Japanese forward patrols in the darkness of the early morning, but on both sides the troops were feeling their way. For the enemy that way lay westward along or in the direction of the one boggy, unformed earth road that traversed the lowlying coastal ledge. This road ran along the north shore of the bay from Ahioma, past K.B. Mission and Rabi and then turned southward round the bay's head to Gili Gili where the level land opened out somewhat. Until the Gili Gili coconut plantation area was reached, the route

F-Lt W. A. Whetters, 3403. 75, 76 and 86 Sqns; EO 2 OTU and RAAF HQ 1943-45. Regular airman; of Canterbury, NSW; b. Melbourne 5 Jul 1912.

⁹ F-Lt M. S. Law, 403933. 7, 32 and 6 Sqns. Company director; of Haberfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 19 Jul 1914.



R.A.A.F.

A Vultee Vigilance light aircraft, used as an air ambulance, being reclaimed after a forced landing at Kapari Hula, 70 miles south-east of Port Moresby. Salvage work carried out by No. 6 Repair and Salvage Unit required fitting a new airscrew and repair of a broken undercarriage and fuselage damage. Parts were taken down the coast by R.A.A.F. crash launch and were then carried to the site by Papuans, who are here seen clearing a strip whence the aircraft was flown out by P-O C. L. Dangerfield of No. 33 Squadron on 22nd December 1942.



(Australian War Memorial)

A crew of No. 4 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, Flying Officers N. B. S. Hutchinson and N. A. Jobson, resting at an advanced post during the operations against the Japanese at Buna.

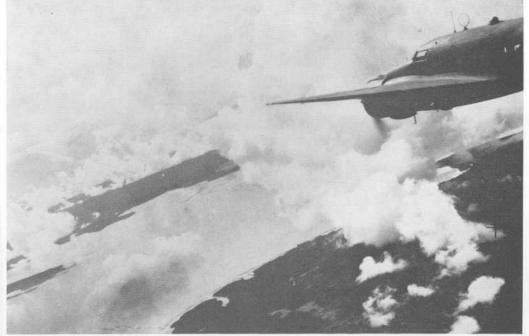


Lae airfield on 4th January 1943 from 12,600 feet. The number and variety of aircraft seen, which include Betty heavy bombers, Vals (attack bombers) and Zero fighters, and the quick repair of the runway in spite of continuous attacks, show the importance of this base to the Japanese. Many of the aircraft to the left of the runway and others in the right centre and foreground are shattered wrecks.



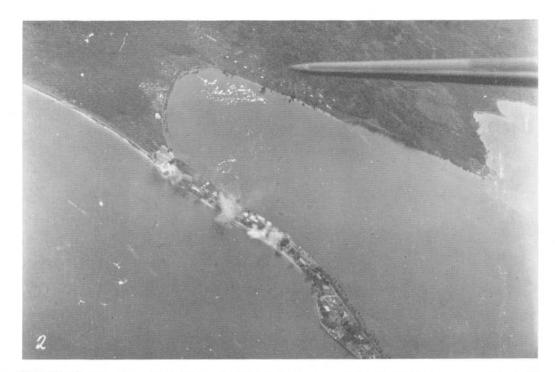
(Australian War Memorial)

A Wirraway of No. 4 Squadron blasted and set on fire by a near-miss in the Japanese raid on Wau on 6th February 1943. The crew, F-Sgt A. Rodburn and Sgt A. E. Cole, had scrambled from the aircraft and thrown themselves flat on the ground only a few seconds earlier. Cole received a minor shrapnel wound in the shoulder.



(R.A.A.F.)

A Hudson aircraft over Dobo, a Japanese float-plane base in the Aru Islands, in March 1943. During this month both Nos. 2 and 13 Squadrons, in conjunction with the Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron and the Mitchells of No. 18 (Netherlands) Squadron, made a concerted effort against Dobo and other Japanese bases in the Banda-Arafura Seas area.





(R,A,A,F,

Two attacks on Salamaua by Bostons of No. 22 Squadron early in 1943. The attack in the upper photograph carried out at the comparatively high level of 15,000 feet, on 21st January, was aimed at installations on the isthmus. The lower photograph shows the attack on 16th March, carried out at low level and led by F-Lt W. E. Newton, against stores buildings, gun emplacements and two newly installed 40,000-gallon fuel tanks which can be seen blazing under a pall of smoke. Newton was awarded the Victoria Cross for a series of such attacks at this time.

was covered for the most part by dense secondary growth. The ground was sodden from intermittent rainstorms and the drainage from the mountains that crowded close to the bay's edge.

With the target area thus defined the Kittyhawk pilots, with the Hudson crews joining in, began taking off soon after dawn. Bomb explosions and frequent bursts of cannon and machine-gun fire, joining with the roar of aircraft engines, could be heard from the runway from which the aircraft had taken off. Probably never before had squadrons been based so close to troops in action: this was airborne artillery in its most literal sense. The most immediate targets were the barges at the shore's edge. Cannon fire and bombs ripped and tore them so that all were sunk. Flight Lieutenant Yeowart flew his Hudson in a shallow dive to bomb fuel drums in the water. Two of the bombs hit the drums and started a huge fire. Piper dived his Kittyhawk at a truck the Japanese had put ashore and strafed it: it was laden with ammunition and blew up. A number of enemy troops were killed on the foreshore. Milne Force headquarters endeavoured to guide the aircraft to the targets but for the most part the results of the attacks could not be seen. Throughout the day the air barrage continued. No. 75 Squadron alone made 26 sorties in the day, each aircraft firing from 1.400 to 1.500 rounds on each sortie. Jackson led two of the five attacks and Piper led two. The destruction of the barges was assessed by Clowes as highly valuable since it prohibited the enemy from adopting the tactics, used so effectively in Malaya and elsewhere, of bypassing the defending troops in amphibious "loops" along the coast. The loss of the barges also denied their use for further ship-to-shore ferrying. That night, as the enemy pressed slowly forward, the Australian troops fell back towards Rabi.

Earlier in the day a formation of Flying Fortresses, staging from Mareeba through Port Moresby, had succeeded in finding the retiring Japanese convoy. In a bombing attack a transport was severely damaged (it was thought to have been sunk but this was not confirmed) and a cruiser also received a bomb hit but survived.

Soon after 8 a.m. on the 27th Milne Bay received its fourth air attack, this time from 8 dive bombers escorted by 12 Zeros. Two bombs fell close but harmlessly at the side of No. 1 Strip runway and the remainder burst wide of their target. Several of the Zeros dived in strafing attacks. They set fire to a Liberator bomber which had made a forced landing on the runway some time earlier but otherwise did no harm. Six of No. 75 Squadron's aircraft intercepted the raiders and Flying Officers Watson¹ and Jones² shared in shooting down one of the dive bombers, probably destroyed a second and damaged a third.

Meanwhile a flight of American Marauders that had been seeking shipping targets in the area were intercepted by a number of Zeros. One

<sup>Sqn Ldr B. D. Watson, DFC, 403084. 32 Sqn RAF and 75 Sqn; comd 457 Sqn 1944-45.
Clerk; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Strathfield, 15 Oct 1914.
Sqn Ldr P. B. Jones, DFC, 403345. 118 Sqn RAF and 75 Sqn; comd 76 Sqn 1944-45. Costing clerk; of Lindfield, NSW; b. Cremorne, NSW, 25 Nov 1920.</sup>

Marauder crew shot down one of the attackers, the Japanese pilot ditching in the sea close to the shore. Two other Zero pilots, seeing the Zero hit the sea, dived on it and opened fire apparently intending to destroy it and so prevent it from being recovered by the Australian forces. As they did so Jackson and Flight Sergeant Riddel,3 who were returning from a patrol, dived on these two Zeros and shot both of them down.4 Some time after the raid Australian ground troops in the vicinity found three Japanese dive bombers that had crashed after the air battle which thus had cost the enemy at least four dive bombers and two Zeros. The defenders had one casualty: Flight Sergeant Munro⁵ of No. 75 Squadron was killed when his Kittyhawk was shot down in combat. But the day's toll was not to be limited to Munro's death. Reports that the enemy were using tanks prompted Turnbull to make a search in the hope that air attack on them might be possible. Accompanied by Flight Lieutenant Kerville⁶ he took off about 5 p.m. and flew over the enemy positions, searching carefully wherever the jungle opened sufficiently to give useful visibility. The pilots did not detect the tanks but they did detect a detachment of Japanese troops. Turnbull immediately put his aircraft into a steep dive and Kerville saw it suddenly flick on to its back when only about 200 feet from the ground, and crash. The cause of Turnbull's death remains unexplained, a probable explanation being that he was hit by small-arms fire from the ground. Eight days later a patrol from the 2/12th Battalion found Turnbull's body in the wreckage of his aircraft near K.B. Mission. The loss of a commander of Turnbull's calibre in battle can leave a unit leaderless and dispirited or it can redouble its fighting spirit. Turnbull had led his squadron briefly but faithfully and fearlessly, always willing to take any risk he expected his pilots to take. He was mourned in the objective way men mourn when engaged in battle; in killing him the enemy had reinforced the squadron in spirit. The unit was of course in no sense leaderless. Truscott succeeded to the command in which he was promptly confirmed. His appointment passed over Squadron Leader Meehan,7 a fine flyer and senior to Truscott in rank but lacking his experience of combat operations.

Slowly falling back under the pressure of the Japanese advance the 7th Brigade troops, of whom the 61st Battalion was taking the main weight of the attack, were now much in need of relief. Clowes had been holding the 18th Brigade until the enemy's intentions should become known.

F-Lt R. G. Riddel, 404355. 66 Sqn RAF, 75 and 84 Sqns. Clerk; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 9 Jun 1919.

⁴The Japanese pilot who was shot down by the Marauder crew survived both that attack and the attacks by his fellow pilots. He was the first enemy airman taken prisoner at Milne Bay.

⁸ P-O S. Munro, 402936. 401, 72 Sqns RAF and 75 Sqn. Dairy farmer; of Grafton, NSW; b. MacLean, NSW, 1 Jun 1921. Killed in action 27 Aug 1942. Munro's promotion to P-O was actually dated 1 Oct 1942.

⁶ Sqn Ldr R. C. Kerville, 250662, 24, 75, 76 and 20 Sqns. Motor salesman; of Melbourne; b. Ascot Vale, Vic, 7 May 1914.

W Cdr W. J. Meehan, 270368. 76 Sqn; comd 75 Sqn 1942-43, 83 Sqn 1943, 86 Sqn 1943-44. Commercial pilot; of Annerley, Qld; b. Guyra, NSW, 22 Aug 1910. Killed in aircraft accident 26 Aug 1947.

Since he could neither deny them entry into the bay nor landings under cover of night at some other point or points, the availability of an adequate reserve to meet such enemy action might well be crucial. Even so he could not afford to disregard the need to reinforce the troops who were actually engaging the enemy. Early on the 27th he committed one of the 18th Brigade's battalions (the 2/10th) to their aid. That morning the Kittyhawks and Hudsons were airborne as soon as there was sufficient light and, in spite of low cloud and intermittent rain, the air bombardment of the enemy's positions was resumed.

The strain was beginning to tell on both aircraft and men. On the ground the squadron's armourers, riggers, fitters, engineers, even transport drivers and messmen joined in the almost ceaseless work of belting ammunition and manhandling bombs and fuel drums. They worked with their clothes and bodies caked in mud and sodden with sweat and rain. The forward enemy positions were now so close that the Kittyhawks were in action, it seemed, almost before their undercarriages had retracted after take-off. Though liaison with the army was excellent, perfection in these close-support operations was not possible and at least one officer with the forward troops reported: "Planes strafed enemy positions and also our own troops."

It was now clear that unless the Japanese advance was soon checked the squadron's camps would soon be under fire. The camps were therefore moved back to a position adjacent to the main army camp to the west of No. 1 Strip and the operations room was re-established at Milne Force headquarters—a difficult and hampering task. The two Services were now literally fighting as one. Enemy snipers were giving considerable trouble. Equipped with climbing irons, they scaled the tall palms, cut out the centre of the upper fronds, and so made a post from which their fire became more telling and less easily detected. The army called on the Kittyhawk pilots for aid and allotted the target area. Sortie after sortie was made over that section of the plantation. The pilots could only hope that their raking fire was effective. Army headquarters soon reassured them; they were well satisfied with the results. One observer in the area insisted that under the Kittyhawks' gunfire "palm fronds, bullets and dead Japanese snipers were pouring down with the rain".

Clowes and Garing were now concerned about the safety of the Kitty-hawks on the ground and decided late on the afternoon of the 28th that all aircraft should be flown to Port Moresby to remain there at least overnight. Twenty aircraft from No. 75 and 10 from No. 76 therefore made the 196-miles flight, one pilot, Sergeant Cowe, being killed when his aircraft, caught in dense cloud, crashed into a hill near the Seven Mile aerodrome. Next morning the squadrons moved back to Milne Bay. On the way Jackson's aircraft, which he had flown almost continuously in operations since the battle began, gave trouble and he had to crashland on the coast. With the aid of natives he succeeded in making his way back to Port Moresby three days later by canoe and lugger.

On the 29th there was some confusion among the R.A.A.F. ground staff. A party of men, with the mistaken impression that an order for the evacuation of the base had been given, followed instructions issued for such an event and set out for Mullins Harbour. They were promptly recalled.

That afternoon an enemy cruiser and eight destroyers were reported heading southward from Normanby Island. The reporting Hudson crew, captained by Squadron Leader Colquhoun, had sighted the ships through a break in the low cloud under which they had been screened. Diving through heavy anti-aircraft fire the Hudson crew attacked a destroyer. One of their bombs exploded under the ship's stern and as the overcast closed in again they withdrew, reporting the warship "believed sunk". The sinking was never confirmed.

While the battle ashore was at its most critical stage Clowes' headquarters requested the aid of the R.A.A.F. in suppressing a Japanese light mountain gun, mounted on a commanding spur, that was causing considerable trouble. Truscott and Flying Officer Crossing⁷ took off, located the gun and put it out of action with their gunfire.

Late on the night of the 29th a new and highly disturbing element was introduced into the battle. Japanese naval units, which had again sortied into Milne Bay, began bombarding the shore area. By good fortune all the shells burst harmlessly in the hills beyond the base. The crew of a R.A.A.F. crash-launch stationed in the harbour acted on instructions to move to Mullins Harbour. Manned by five men under Corporal Turner,8 the launch was making its way towards the harbour entrance when the enemy ship that had been bombarding the coast caught and held it in the beam of a searchlight. Immediately the Japanese opened fire. The fourth shell hit the launch sinking it and killing Turner and two others. The two survivors were an army signaller, Private Farrar,9 and Leading Aircraftman Donegan.¹⁰ Farrar got ashore at a point 23 miles from Gili Gili. Donegan, wounded, drifted across the bay for 18 hours. Natives saw him, helped him ashore and tended him secretly in enemy-held territory, hiding him under an up-turned canoe. Later he returned to the base.

That day the battle had continued to be fierce and indefinite, but the discovery by an Australian patrol of two Japanese tanks bogged and abandoned on the track to the west of the Gama River was heartening news for the hard-pressed troops. On the morning of the 31st the 2/12th Battalion was in action when the Japanese made a concerted attack on No. 3 Strip. After their third attempt to cross the open area in close formation they were driven back leaving a considerable number of dead.

⁷F-Lt I. E. Crossing, 406315. 5, 24, 76, 86 and 77 Sqns. Clerk; of Como, WA; b. Nedlands, WA, 17 Jan 1922.

⁸Cpl H. Turner, 11854. 11 Sqn and 43 OBU. Electrical fitter; of Croxton, Vic; b. Bradford, Eng, 6 Feb 1920. Killed in action 29 Aug 1942.

Pete N. G. Farrar, WX29006. Signalman Milne Force and 15 L of C. Window dresser; of Mt Lawley, WA; b. Subiaco, WA, 17 Jul 1920. Accidentally killed 22 Jul 1943.

10 F-Sgt J. F. Donegan, 41979. 43 OBU and 32 Sqn. Plumber; of Caulfield, Vic; b. Glenhuntly, Vic, 22 Dec 1910.

On the night of 1st September Clowes received a signal from G.H.Q. in Brisbane telling him, incorrectly, to expect attacks on the aerodrome positions from the west and north-west, supported by destroyer fire from the bay. Weary units were ordered to stand-to all night, awaiting attacks that did not come.

That day Jackson had led seven Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron in an attack on what was believed to be the Japanese headquarters to the north of Waga Waga. The jungle in the area was so dense that the pilots had no sure knowledge of the result of their assault.

Late on the afternoon of the next day a Hudson crew sighted, and for a time shadowed, several Japanese warships in the approaches to Milne Bay. With darkness approaching and the weather closing in, it was not possible to mount an attack. Enemy warships again shelled the shore defences that night. On the night of 3rd-4th September the naval bombardment was repeated but the shells fell harmlessly.

On the afternoon of the 5th the Kittyhawk pilots supplemented a heavy artillery and mortar barrage by Australian gunners. The target area was along the coastal road to the point of the Japanese landings. It was raked by repeated bombing and gunnery sorties. That night the forward troops found strong evidence that the enemy's resistance was breaking, and towards midnight Australian troops on the bay front were aware once more of the presence of enemy ships near at hand and heard the sound of boats moving between ship and shore.

Next day, apart from skirmishes with small pockets of enemy troops, the Australians moved forward without serious opposition until they reached what had obviously been the main Japanese base. They found it deserted and littered with abandoned supplies. After nightfall the bay was again the scene of great activity, the tension being heightened by the flashing of searchlights and the sound of heavy shell fire. The enemy's principal target proved to be the motor vessel Anshun which had been discharging equipment and ammunition at the Gili Gili wharf. The gunfire was accurate and the Anshun rolled over on her side and sank in the offshore shallows, leaving portion of her hull visible above the surface. Near at hand, and illuminated in keeping with International Law, lay the Australian hospital ship Manunda. The enemy ships played their searchlights on her but their gunners left her unharmed. Instead they turned their guns on shore targets, causing little material damage but inflicting a number of casualties among the army troops.

Next afternoon (the 7th) aircraft from the two Kittyhawk squadrons took part in the first attack from Milne Bay by Australian Beaufighters and Beaufort torpedo bombers. Six Beauforts from No. 100 Squadron, then based at Laverton, Victoria, had been flown to No. 1 Strip, led by the unit's commanding officer, Wing Commander Balmer. Arriving on the 5th September these aircraft had been joined next day by three Beaufighters from No. 30 Squadron, the first Australian unit to be equipped with these long-range fighters. It had been formed at Richmond,

New South Wales, on 9th March under the command of Wing Commander Walker¹ and had now been based for several weeks at Bohle River near Townsville.

A Hudson crew from No. 6 Squadron had reported sighting an enemy cruiser and destroyer 17 miles east-north-east of Cape Karitahua, on Normanby Island. Three Hudsons and 16 Kittyhawks (8 from No. 75 and 8 from No. 76 Squadron) with the Beauforts and Beaufighters were assigned to attack these ships. With the Kittyhawks flying as top cover the Hudsons led the way to the target area and scored two near misses at the stern of the destroyer. One of the Beaufighters crashed on take-off but the other two flew in to divert the warships' fire—the squadron's first combat sorties—while the Beaufort crews, who were making their first torpedo strike in combat, made their runs. None of the torpedoes found its mark. Without enemy aircraft to contend with, the Kittyhawk pilots made strafing runs over the ships, but when the attacks had ended neither vessel appeared to have suffered serious damage. Disappointed aircrew returned to Milne Bay to write down to experience this first combined operation of its kind mounted by the R.A.A.F.

That night two enemy ships—a cruiser and a destroyer (presumably those the R.A.A.F. had attacked)—entered Milne Bay and again the base was shelled, for about a quarter of an hour. There were several Australian casualties. Again the hospital ship *Manunda* was illuminated by the enemy's searchlights and again she was spared. The Japanese ships then withdrew. This withdrawal was final. Enemy warships never returned to Milne Bay. In their last sorties into the bay they had taken on board such of the remnants of their defeated land forces as could be assembled for embarkation.

As a parting shot nine enemy bombers attacked No. 1 Strip area on 8th September. They achieved little in the way of material damage but two members of No. 75 Squadron, Aircraftmen Rose² and Dowton,³ were fatally wounded while manning machine-guns in company with detachments of A.I.F. gunners who also suffered some casualties. Four Kittyhawk pilots endeavoured to intercept the enemy bombers but without result.

Thus the Japanese met their first unquestionable defeat on land. It had been delivered by a strangely mixed yet remarkably cohesive force of A.I.F., Australian militia, R.A.A.F. and American engineer troops, all of whom had cooperated well. Even so their achievement was seriously questioned by General MacArthur who, in signals through General Vasey (then Deputy Chief of the Australian General Staff), General Blamey and General Rowell, had indicated to Clowes that he had been dissatisfied by lack of detailed information on the progress of the battle and in fact

¹ Gp Capt B. R. Walker, DSO, 94. Comd 12 Sqn 1941-42, 30 Sqn 1942-43; 5 OTU 1943-44; Test pilot duties 1944; comd 1 Fighter Wing 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Adelaide; b. Lyndoch, SA, 27 Mar 1913.

² AC1 L. G. Rose, 52228, 24 and 75 Sqns. Orchardist; of Tatura, Vic; b. Tatura, 21 Nov 1923. Died of wounds 8 Sep 1942.

³ AC1 A. R. Dowton, 64948; 75 Sqn. Butcher; of Warren, NSW; b. Dubbo, NSW, 2 Apr 1922. Died of wounds 8 Sep 1942.

with the progress itself. This attitude was reflected in an ungenerous statement he made after the battle in the course of a letter to General Marshall:

The enemy's defeat at Milne Bay must not be accepted as a measure of the relative fighting capacity of the troops involved. The decisive factor was the complete surprise obtained over him by our preliminary concentration of superior forces.

One incidental but very important benefit from the battle lay in the inter-Service confidence it had inspired. The men of the R.A.A.F. found their natural pride in the A.I.F. stimulated by a new admiration that had grown out of first-hand experience. To this was added an appreciation of how good the militia troops could really be. The army had reacted in much the same way. There was a new sense of comradeship that was in happy contrast to the cynical relations between the Services noticeable about the time of the fall of Singapore. The attitude of the R.A.A.F. was crisply if somewhat chauvinistically put by a young pilot who, watching a platoon moving through the plantation area after the battle, remarked, "The Australian soldier must be the best soldier in the world. We've seen him fighting and if anyone ever tries to tell me anything different I'll punch his nose!" Clowes gave the army's point of view, more formally, but no less warmly when he wrote:

I wish here to place on record my appreciation of the magnificent efforts on the part of our R.A.A.F. comrades. The success of the operations was in a great measure due to their untiring and courageous work which has earned the admiration of all who have been associated with them here.

Rowell, in a report to General Blamey, expressed the opinion that "the action of 75 and 76 Squadrons R.A.A.F. on the first day was probably the decisive factor", a view that Clowes elaborated by stating that he was convinced it would be proved that the Kittyhawk squadrons' "incessant attacks over three successive days proved the decisive factor in the enemy's decision to re-embark what was left of his forces".

When it became clear that, for a time at least, the Japanese had been forced to suppress, if not forfeit, their Milne Bay ambitions, life for Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons took on something of a pattern. The battle had left them much to do to recover their technical balance. Seen in retrospect it seemed remarkable that men and machines had endured and accomplished what in fact they had. The average daily availability of aircraft for the two squadrons was about 28; No. 75 Squadron had been issued with new aircraft just before leaving the Australian mainland, and thus had a distinct advantage over No. 76 whose aircraft were worn by much flying training before they reached Milne Bay. The maintenance of the two squadrons' aircraft had been accomplished under conditions that could scarcely have been worse. The Kittyhawks wore out about 300 gun barrels in the course of the battle, in which they fired 196,000 rounds.⁴ The ground staff eventually were changing the barrels almost from habit.

⁴ Armourers found that the wear, accentuated by mud and grit thrown up from the runway, had increased the guns' calibre from 0.5-inch to as much as 0.6-inch

They replaced flaps damaged by the force with which water and mud were flung up from the undercarriages as aircraft took off and landed, and tyres ground down by excessive friction on the steel matting. They even changed mainplanes though they had nothing but an improvised workshop and few tools. A detachment of No. 15 Repair and Salvage Unit had been sent from Port Moresby but its staff were handicapped from the beginning: their precious workshop trailer was lost overboard while being unshipped at Gili Gili wharf. One of those chiefly responsible for what was accomplished was Flying Officer Matson,⁵ engineer officer of No. 75 Squadron, who had arrived at the base by flying-boat on 22nd July with the unit's advance party. In less than two months he had earned a reputation for tireless effort and ingenuity in overcoming technical difficulties that contributed greatly to the work total of the two squadrons during the battle.

Now that the battle was over the men of the squadrons had more time to take stock of their surroundings. The vagaries of the weather and the monotony of the food became more important. The weather was still hard to believe, as it alternated between deluge, brooding and isolating overcast, and flashes of brilliant sunshine that lit up all the unexpectedly luxuriant flower and bird life in the adjacent jungle. The rations were still tins of the inevitable bully beef, spam and "M. and V." (a composite of meat and vegetables) together with the essential ration biscuit, and little else.

Though the tension had lifted the Kittyhawk pilots continued to fly in conditions always exacting because of the weather and the enemy's counter operations. When they were not flying, eating or sleeping, most of them sat in their tents or, if on stand-by, in the operations room (itself a tent), writing letters, reading anything they could lay their hands on, or playing seemingly interminable games of "Slippery Sam" and "Rickety Kate" in which the cards became increasingly soiled by perspiration. On clear nights they would gather in groups and sing, the darkness in the coconut palms broken only by the light from a myriad of fireflies. These impromptu concerts had a boisterous good humour about them but they had, too, a deep psychological significance. Some of the songs had been imported from the R.A.F.—old and tried favourites like "The Gremlin Song" that dramatically recounted all the tricks these fabulous little creatures the "gremlins" could play on a pilot when he was "seven miles up in the heavens". But for the most part they mirrored the singers' own experiences, their needs and discontents (real or imaginary). The chief ingredients in these were beer, women, leave, and flying incidents, which made up in all a healthy enough nostalgia. Then there was derision, a favourite theme, chiefly directed against authority, with the Air Board lampooned without respect and without mercy, but extending also to Australian aircraft production, which was subjected to cruel treatment with

⁵ W Cdr W. I. Matson, MBE, 1018. 75 Sqn; Maintenance Offr 2 OTU 1942-43; comd 7 RSU 1944-45, Maintenance Wing 2 OTU 1945. Regular airman; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Essendon, Vic, 3 Jan 1902.

special emphasis on the Wirraway in which so many of them had learned to fly and the Beaufort, cynically lyricised as "The D.A.P's Pride" (D.A.P. standing for Department of Aircraft Production). Many of the songs, almost all of which were parodies, were vulgar and obscene (usually laughingly so) to a degree quite alien in the normal personal lives of most of the singers. Yet they were sung, as they had been composed, without a trace of inhibition. This lack of inhibition was a safety valve through which they were able to ease tensions imposed on them by the strain of battle.

Close at hand and mingling freely with the Kittyhawk pilots were the crews and ground staff of the detached flight from No. 6 Squadron. The Hudson crews had given remarkable service with their consistently efficient long-range reconnaissance and their determined shipping attacks. The main burden had been borne by the detached flight the crews of which were captained by Squadron Leader Colquhoun, Flight Lieutenants Robertson, Manning, Willman, Flying Officer Shore and Sergeant Stutt.9 Their ground staff had also given resolute service, their larger aircraft with greater bomb and fuel loads calling for heavy work. Bombs and fuel drums had to be manhandled from dumps that more often than not were in six or more inches of water. All the servicing was done with an intense pride in the unit and its crews. As an example, Colquhoun had the experience of six members of his ground staff competing eagerly to be allowed to take the place of a gunner who had been wounded, a problem he solved by taking each of them in turn. In August No. 6 Squadron recorded 272 hours of flying, 150 of which were spent on operational sorties. In September these totals were multiplied more than five and eight times respectively, the month's figures being; total flying hours, 1,441; operational hours, 1,211.

The commanders of all Services were now becoming sharply aware of another enemy that was inflicting far more casualties than were the Japanese—the anopheles mosquito. When Australian forces were first sent to battle stations in Papua, malaria was recognised as a problem to be countered, and first quinine and later atebrin tablets were freely issued. But few of those in authority realised soon enough the true extent of the danger, and those who did could not compete against the pressures that time and the threat of invasion imposed. Troops were trained and kitted as capacity and resources and generally accepted standards dictated, and hastened on their way to jungle stations. Much was lacking but the deficiencies would have to be made up later; the essential need was for men and weapons to meet the enemy. Tropical conditions traditionally

Sqn Ldr H. A. Robertson, 290667. 8, 14, 32 and 6 Sqns; CGI at gunnery schools 1943-45. Store manager; of Brighton, Vic; b. St Kilda, Vic, 12 Feb 1911.

⁷ Sqn Ldr M. W. Willman, 260766. 7, 32, 6 and 1 Sqns. Wool classer; of Balgowlah, NSW; b. Sydney, 4 Jun 1918.

⁸ F-Lt R. W. Shore, 411199. 7, 14, 6 and 37 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Bexley, NSW; b. Bexley, 13 Sep 1917. Killed in aircraft accident 20 Dec 1944.

F.Lt W. J. Stutt, DFC, 408536. 7, 32, 6 and 24 Sqns. Student; of Kew, Vic; b. Melbourne, 24 Jan 1918.

called for the issue of shorts and short-sleeved shirts, and thus provided the troops-army and air force-went into action. It was from Milne Bay that the first truly alarming statistics came: statistics that proved beyond doubt that the fever could reduce a fighting force almost to the point of impotence without having met the Japanese in battle.

On 21st September Airacobra pilots of Nos. 35 and 36 U.S. Fighter Squadrons flew in to No. 3 Strip to relieve the Kittyhawk pilots of Nos. 75 and 76 in much the way that the same two squadrons had flown in to Port Moresby five seemingly very long months before to relieve No. 75. The two Australian units then moved, No. 75 to Horn Island and No. 76 to North-Western Area. Three days after the arrival of the American squadrons the last elements, the ground staff of the two Kittyhawk squadrons, had put to sea.

In mid-July Lieut-General Hyakutake, commanding the XVII Army, still with his headquarters at Davao in the Philippines, ordered practically his entire force to make ready for action against the Allied forces in New Guinea. With his headquarters staff Hyakutake reached Rabaul on 24th July. On 28th July Hyakutake received orders to begin the main assault which provided for a joint thrust over the Owen Stanleys by the South Seas Force and Yazawa Force (41st Regiment) while the Kawaguchi Force (124th Regiment), supported by the Eighth Fleet, commanded by Vice-Admiral Mikawa, would make the assault on Milne Bay from where they were to strike at Port Moresby in coordination with the trans-mountain thrust. A diversion was to be made by naval forces in the Lae and Salamaua area. Meanwhile Mikawa would employ engineer troops at Buna in the construction of aerodromes and the development of a major base there. Buna was reinforced by 600 troops on 23rd July and again by 900 on the 25th-26th. Four days later the effort was repeated and, though Allied aircraft sank the transport Avatosan Maru which was carrying the remainder of Yokoyama's engineer regiment (about 260 men) most of whom reached the shore in the ship's boats, a force estimated at 2,100 was put ashore. A transport carrying supplies was forced by the Allied air attacks to retire to Rabaul as was a further convoy that made an attempt to reach Buna on the 31st. Reinforcement efforts showed better results on 13th and 14th August when, under cover of overcast weather and strong air protection, 3,100 troops were put ashore. It was then that Horii moved his main South Seas Force into action. By 21st August there were in action or ready for it on Papuan territory more than 13,000 Japanese troops.

But the main task of the XVII Army had been abruptly revised by the landing of the American Marines on Guadalcanal, Tulagi and Gavutu. This was a threat so grave that Hyakutake was ordered to make the recapture of Guadalcanal his chief objective. In this he faced many obstacles. His forces were widely dispersed—the real strength of the American assault had been gravely underestimated and Ichiki Force (II Battalion 28th Regiment), who had been recalled from their homeward voyage after the failure at Midway, and a portion of the 5th Yokosuka Naval Landing Force, who were now opposing the Americans, were insufficient for the task. Kawaguchi Force, which had been intended for the Milne Bay attack, was diverted for reinforcement at Guadalcanal. Thus the plan for the assault on Papua had been seriously upset.

Early on the morning of the 26th about 600 officers and men of the 5th Kure Naval Landing Force, the 10th Naval Labour Corps (a force of about the same numerical strength) and possibly 200 members of the 5th Sasebo Naval Landing Force, were landed on the shores of Milne Bay. But operations went awry from the beginning. A force of about 350 members of 5th Sasebo had been moved down from Buna in barges with orders to land at Taupota, on the coast of Goodenough Bay, and then move overland in a flank or rear attack on Milne Bay. This plan was disrupted when the Kittyhawk pilots wrecked their barges and stores and left them marooned on Goodenough Island. Then the main force had landed at a point farther from Gili Gili than had been planned. Throughout the 26th the attacks by the Australian fighter squadrons, supplementing the Australian land force resistance, caused casualties and confusion. Incessant rain with boggy conditions, lack of any direct support from their own air units, and the hostility of the natives increased their difficulties which, with the bogging of their tanks and the determined counter-attacks by the Australian troops, culminating in the fateful and costly Japanese assault on No. 3 Strip area, added up to defeat for the invading forces. Of the reinforcements brought in there is some doubt. One company each from the 3rd Kure and 5th Yokosuka are thought to have been put ashore on the night of 29th-30th August but this added strength (about 450) would not have been sufficient to affect the outcome of the battle at this stage. Apart from the bombardment of the defenders' positions, the main purpose of the naval movements in the bay by night was evacuation of wounded and, finally, withdrawal of as many of their troops as could be embarked. It is estimated that the Japanese casualties amounted to about three-quarters of the total force of about 2,000 officers and men landed.

How a Japanese bombing attack on the Milne Bay base was diverted to Guadalcanal on 7th August is graphically told in the battle record of Flight Petty Officer Saburo Sakai, a section leader then based at Rabaul. Sakai wrote:

Guadalcanal. A name, merely a name. We did not even know what Guadalcanal was; an island, a military base, a secret operation code name, perhaps. . . . This morning, however, our usual mission of fighter patrol, attack against Moresby, or air-to-air combat, was to be replaced with a special attack against the Rabi air base at Milne Bay, on the south end of New Guinea. . . . As we checked each other's equipment and made the final preparations for take-off, to escort the bombers which would attack Rabi, a messenger ran past us into the operations room with a radio message. . . . We listened closely . . . and every now and then could catch the words 'Guadalcanal' and 'Tulagi'. They were strange names. . . . Captain

Saito came out. 'At 0525 hours this morning,' he said, 'a powerful enemy invasion force under heavy cover attacked Lunga Roads, Guadalcanal Island. . . . The situation is extremely serious. Our naval forces operating in the Rabaul area have been ordered to engage the enemy immediately, in full strength, and to drive back the American invasion forces at any cost. . . . Our fighter units have been ordered to escort the land-based medium attack bombers which will attack enemy ships. Certain fighter groups will precede the bombers and their escorts into the battle area as challenging units to draw off the American fighter planes.'

The Japanese headquarters had issued a general order for the Milne Bay operation which read: "At the dead of night quickly complete the landing and strike the white soldiers without reserve. Unitedly smash to pieces the enemy lines and take the aerodrome by storm." For the first time the rhetoric that characterised most of the enemy's general orders had been proved completely false.

¹ Masatake Okumiya and Jiro Horikoshi with Martin Caidin, Zero (1956), pp. 180-3.