

CHAPTER 2

THE LIMITED OFFENSIVE

BY March 1943 a renewed Japanese attempt to strengthen their hold in New Guinea by seizing Wau had failed and, with Papua and Guadalcanal secure, the chief concern of the Allies was now Rabaul, the Japanese bastion in New Britain. After Casablanca, the Combined Chiefs had directed Pacific commanders to plan advances against the enemy in accordance with their over-all directive which called for the breaking of the "Bismarcks Barrier". But General MacArthur considered that no large-scale operations could be mounted immediately because the Australian and American divisions engaged in the fighting in Papua needed rest. The Allied air forces were masters in the air, but did not yet possess a great preponderance in numbers over the Japanese army and navy air forces in the area.

In a message to General Marshall on 29th January General MacArthur had said:

It is not now immediately possible to undertake a further offensive in the SWPA. I have available or in prospect for offensive combat use, two U.S. army divisions, the 1st Marine Division, and three Australian divisions. The 32nd U.S. Division, after an exhaustive campaign, is now being withdrawn to Australia to be reconstituted and rehabilitated. The 41st U.S. Division is relieving the 32nd on the north coast of New Guinea. The infantry of the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions was used exhaustively in the Papuan campaign and is now being moved to the York Peninsula to be reconstituted. The 9th Australian Division, scheduled for return from the Middle East, will go through the same process and must be completely re-equipped. The Australian militia is not of sufficient quality for employment in the offensive. It can be used only for garrison duty. I have, therefore, no troops available at this time for offensive action.¹

The air force as now constituted is not sufficient to support the offensive which is contemplated. With present strengths in medium and heavy bombardment it is possible to make an intense effort for only a short period of time. For the continuous execution of the proposed action, heavy and medium bomber strength must be greatly increased with corresponding increases in auxiliary echelons. A theoretical examination of the number of planes assigned to this area, taken in conjunction with recent comparative operational losses in our own and the enemy's air strength, might lead to the opinion that the present air strength would suffice. However, our experience in offensive operations over the enemy's territory at maximum ranges over water and through the most difficult tropical weather, provides ample substantiation that existing strength is capable of only a short intensive effort.

The great strength which Japan has already massed in the Rabaul area and the continuous flow of additional forces thereto, make this area a major Japanese stronghold to the defence of which she is at present subordinating all other efforts. Its capture, therefore, becomes so important a phase of the Pacific war as to involve concentration of our own forces for its accomplishment. This will require long preparation and great resources. If predominant strength is not assembled by us for the purpose, the attempt will certainly fail.

¹ It was not correct to say that the 9th Division, arriving from Egypt, must be "completely re-equipped" although some re-equipment was necessary. Moreover a considerable number of militia units had been employed successfully in offensive operations in Papua. Either MacArthur was wrongly informed on these points or else he was anxious to make out as strong a case as possible for reinforcements.

In his ELKTON plan of February 1943, which was based on the Casablanca directive, MacArthur estimated that the Allies would need 21 divisions and 1,800 aircraft to take Rabaul. The ELKTON plan proposed that forces of the South Pacific and South-West Pacific should seize and occupy areas of New Britain, New Ireland and New Guinea by a mutually supporting advance by way of the Solomon Islands to Kavieng and along the north coast of New Guinea to Wewak and the Admiralty Islands. These moves would be followed by a combined assault of both commands on Rabaul which would then be used as a main base for the staging of operations westwards along the New Guinea coast and thence north to the Philippine Islands. The plan provided for the building of airfields and aircraft-operating facilities for the support of this advance along a line linking Buna, Woodlark Island and Guadalcanal. Under cover of the air support and protection thus provided, amphibious forces would then establish forward bases from which Rabaul could be eliminated by combined attacks after the enemy had been reduced in strength by naval blockade and air bombardment. The air striking force for the operation would be composed, in the South-West Pacific Area, of the Fifth Air Force and the R.A.A.F. and, in the South Pacific Area, of the Thirteenth Air Force and R.N.Z.A.F. and the American naval air forces. MacArthur believed that local air mastery over the battle area was vital and that any attempt to advance into territory where air advantage rested with the enemy could not succeed.

In March the American Joint Chiefs of Staff called a military conference in Washington to decide what operations could be carried out in 1943 in the Pacific theatre. To this conference MacArthur sent General Kenney; Major-General Sutherland, his Chief of Staff; and Brigadier-General Chamberlin, his senior operations officer. At the opening of the conference, on 21st March, Admiral King told representatives of the South Pacific, Central Pacific and South-West Pacific commands that the military projects in the Mediterranean in 1943 might mean a further delay in reinforcements for the Pacific battle areas. A much greater share of aircraft production had been given to the Mediterranean and United Kingdom areas. Much of the discussion which followed at the conference hinged on the question of the forces which could be spared for the Pacific. It was clear that the forces needed for the capture of Rabaul and the preliminary operations leading up to it far exceeded what could be shipped to the area. A committee was then appointed to re-examine the operational plans prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and MacArthur to see whether smaller forces would suffice for the accomplishment of the tasks, but it decided that reductions could not be made. There was therefore no alternative to postponing the capture of Rabaul, and on 29th March the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued new orders for 1943 to the South-West Pacific and South Pacific commanders. These deleted the capture of Rabaul and called for:

1. The establishment of airfields on Kiriwina and Woodlark Islands.

2. The seizure of Lae-Salamaua-Finschhafen-Madang area and seizure and occupation of western New Britain.
3. The seizure and occupation of the Solomon Islands to include the southern portion of Bougainville.

To ensure cooperation between the South Pacific and South-West Pacific Area, the directive provided that these operations were to be carried out under the general direction of General MacArthur. With his immediate objectives now before him, MacArthur went ahead with the planning of his campaign, in consultation with Admiral Halsey (the commander of the South Pacific Area) who flew to Brisbane from Noumea for talks in the final stages of the planning.

As an early step it was decided to bring Rabaul under heavy attack from the air. This would necessitate first, improving airfields and bases already in Allied possession; second, occupying and developing additional air bases which could be obtained without having to use large forces; and third, seizing and developing airfields held by the enemy. Aircraft were to be used to gain air mastery over each enemy objective along the two axes of the advance towards Rabaul, while other aircraft struck at other enemy air bases and destroyed enemy naval forces and shipping within reach of their bases. Allied forces would then prevent the reinforcement or supply of the enemy objective under attack; land forces would be moved forward under the protection of air and naval forces to seize the objective, and then aircraft would be flown on to the captured airfields. This process was to be repeated to successive objectives and the entire movement would be protected by air attacks on Japanese air and sea bases along the general line linking Buka, Rabaul, Kavieng and Wewak so that supplies and reinforcements could not easily reach the Japanese forces under attack.

Mr Churchill and President Roosevelt met again in May, this time in Washington, and the meeting was a signal for a renewal of requests by Mr Curtin and General MacArthur for the allocation of greater forces to the Pacific. Curtin informed MacArthur that the meeting was to take place and asked him whether he would like to take the opportunity of putting the case for the South-West Pacific Area again. MacArthur considered, however, that the Pacific theatre would not be discussed except in a minor way and that there was "not the slightest chance of changing the basic decisions which had made this a secondary area". In a speech to the United States Congress on 19th May Churchill gave an undertaking that Britain would wage war in the Pacific side by side with the United States in accordance with the best strategic employment of forces. "The air war," he said, "is a major factor in the process of victory. It is agreed that we should at the earliest moment bring our joint air power to bear on military targets and the homeland of Japan."

The Washington conference approved an outline plan for the advance on Japan. This plan called on the commanders in the Pacific, Burma and China to accomplish the following aims in 1943-44:

1. Augment supplies to China via Burma.
2. Conduct air warfare in and from China.
3. Eject the Japanese from the Aleutians.
4. Seize the Marshall and Caroline Islands.
5. Conquer the Solomons, the Bismarck Archipelago and the Japanese-held parts of New Guinea.
6. Intensify activities against enemy lines of communication.

With due regard to the requirements of the main effort of the war against the European enemies, the strategy was that Japanese forces must be worn down and subjected to continuous and increasing attacks so as to prevent them strengthening their hold, and that the Allied forces must obtain positions in readiness for full-scale attacks when these could be undertaken. These decisions meant that the grand strategy of beating the enemy in Europe first, while holding the Japanese at bay in the Pacific, had been modified to some extent. The Washington conference was therefore a turning point in Pacific strategy. Confidence was now so great that the Allied Powers felt that a limited offensive could be undertaken against Japan so that, when the time came for the movement of all the fighting forces to the Pacific, the Japanese could be speedily forced to surrender. In some measure this decision was a success for those who had so strongly criticised the "beat Hitler first" policy, and Curtin and MacArthur were prominent among them.

While the future offensive was being planned hard fighting was in progress in New Guinea in the tangled mountain area between Wau and Salamaua.

Of the seven Australian squadrons in New Guinea under Air Commodore Hewitt (No. 9 Group), four were at Milne Bay and three at Port Moresby. The seven squadrons were:

MILNE BAY

- No. 6 (Squadron Leader Leer²), reconnaissance and strike, equipped with Hudsons.
- No. 75 (Squadron Leader Arthur), fighters, equipped with Kittyhawks.
- No. 77 (Squadron Leader Cresswell), fighters, equipped with Kittyhawks.
- No. 100 (Squadron Leader Hepburn³), reconnaissance and torpedo bombers, equipped with Beauforts.

PORT MORESBY

- No. 4 (Squadron Leader Allshorn), army cooperation, equipped with Wirraways.
- No. 22 (Squadron Leader K. M. Hampshire), light bombers, equipped with Bostons.
- No. 30 (Wing Commander Walker), long-range fighters, equipped with Beaufighters.

The three squadrons at Port Moresby were within easy reach of the ground fighting around Mubo and were used mainly in support of the Australian army in those operations. The fighter squadrons at Milne Bay

² W Cdr W. G. Leer, DFC, AFC, 173. Comd 6 SFTS 1941-42; 7 and 32 Sqns; comd 6 Sqn and 74 Wing 1943, 3 AOS 1944-45. Regular air force off; of Haberfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 18 Jun 1917.

³ W Cdr J. A. Hepburn, DFC, AFC, 247. 12, 13, 2 and 7 Sqns; comd 100 Sqn 1943. Regular air force off; of Warrnambool, Vic; b. Brighton, Vic, 24 Jan 1919.

gave that important Allied air and shipping base protection from raiding enemy aircraft. The Hudsons of No. 6 Squadron and the Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron were used mainly for reconnaissance over the Solomon Sea, and for attacks on enemy shipping within their range and occasionally on targets in the Huon Gulf and western New Britain.

When formed in 1942, No. 9 Group had only operational control of the squadrons in New Guinea, administrative control being exercised by North-Eastern Area, with headquarters at Townsville, Queensland. However, on 1st January 1943, No. 9 Group became a separate command and Hewitt had complete operational and administrative control of it. In February 1943, Air Force Headquarters issued orders setting up two subordinate wing headquarters within the group: No. 71 at Milne Bay and No. 73 at Port Moresby.

No. 9 Group in early 1943 was faced with a constant deficiency in personnel. It was found difficult to obtain men to replace those who had served in the tropics for their tour of fifteen months, to form new units badly needed within the group, and to fill deficiencies which existed in almost all units. In March 1943, the deficiency for the whole group was 1,072; by April it had increased to 1,575; by May to 1,695; and by June to 2,005. In these four months the total establishment of the force grew from 9,545 to 12,636 and the total strength from 8,473 to 10,631. Of the men sent up from Australia about 50 per cent were used as replacements for time-expired men, so that the actual increase in strength against deficiencies was small. The deficiency was spread out over most musterings but it was possible to carry on without serious impairment of the group's efficiency.

Milne Bay was perhaps one of the wettest and most humid places on the island. At the airfields flies, mosquitoes, millepedes, spiders and other insects made life miserable. The food available was not always palatable. From January to August 1943 the members of No. 100 Squadron lived on beans, tinned salmon and bacon, bully beef and asparagus. There was no fresh food except what could be bought from the crews of American transports or from the natives. There was a shortage of clothing. Regulations demanded the wearing of long-sleeved shirts and long trousers as protection against malarial mosquitoes. However, there were not enough long trousers to go round, so a large number of men had to wear shorts.⁴ A group of Intelligence officers working in one isolated place had to obtain replacements of boots from a salvage dump on which the boots of dead Australians and Americans had been thrown.⁵

Along the jungle trails between Wau and Mubo the 3rd Australian Division was engaged in a grim struggle in conditions of great difficulty. It was a nerve-wracking operation in jungle-clad valleys and steep ridges. Nearly all ammunition, food and equipment had to be shouldered by native carriers from Wau airfield, where transport aircraft arrived daily

⁴ Gp Capt C. S. Wiggins, Report on Conditions of Radar Stations in New Guinea.

⁵ F-Lt W. J. Heyting, Report on Visit to Port Moresby and Buna Jan 1943.

with their cargoes from Port Moresby. The Australian and American squadrons, commanded by General Whitehead, gave assistance by bombing and strafing, although the value of these activities was limited by the difficulty of seeing the enemy from the air.

The Japanese aim in New Guinea at this time was to reinforce the bases at Lae, Salamaua, Madang and Wewak and to secure the region north of the Owen Stanley Range with the ultimate object of preparing for operations in the Port Moresby area.⁶ The *51st Division* was deployed in the Lae-Salamaua area, the *20th Division* at Madang and the *41st Division* at Wewak. The *20th Division* was to advance through the Ramu and Markham Valleys to Lae and would be replaced at Madang by the *41st*. Attention was to be given to establishing land and sea routes linking the Lae-Salamaua region with Madang and Rabaul.⁷

After the destruction of their Bismarck Sea convoy in March the Japanese sent in reinforcements and supplies by barge. Continuous barge traffic was observed along the north coast of New Guinea from Madang to Finschhafen. Allied air attacks forced the enemy to confine these movements to hours of darkness.

The *51st Japanese Division* had been decisively defeated at Wau and had withdrawn its forward elements to Mubo village, which was an important outpost controlling the good track which goes to Komiatum and thence to Salamaua. Mubo is surrounded by hills and ridges, possession of which meant possession of Mubo, and the fighting centred on gaining control of these features.

Thus, on 26th April, seven Boston bombers of No. 22 Squadron operating from Ward's airfield, Port Moresby, and led by Hampshire, made an attack with bombs and machine-gun fire on a feature called the "Pimple" near Mubo. The air support was asked for after the 2/7th Battalion had failed to take the feature which was perched on a spur leading from Green Hill.

Because the country was covered by thick jungle, it was necessary for the infantry to direct the Bostons to the target by firing smoke shells on to it from a mountain gun. The Bostons bombed accurately, and the first three aircraft, led by Flight Lieutenant Sladen, made thirteen strafing runs across the area, followed by the remaining four led by Hampshire. It was expected that many casualties would be inflicted on the Japanese defenders, but they had been warned of the impending attacks and, when the Bostons appeared, they withdrew to the north of the Pimple. By the time a company of the 2/7th had moved forward to occupy the enemy's position after the attack, however, they found that the Japanese had returned again in force. The 2/7th Battalion reported later that this form of direct aid to attacking infantry was not successful and considered artillery support more satisfactory. For their own safety troops had to

⁶General Imamura, commander of the *Eighth Area Army* at Rabaul, was opposed to continuing with the forlorn hope of taking Port Moresby but he was overruled by Imperial Headquarters. (S. E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol VI, p. 136.)

⁷Lt-Col Tanaka, staff officer of the *XVIII Army* (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

withdraw too far from the enemy during the bombing, and the time taken to move forward again through mountainous jungle country allowed the enemy time to recover from the air attacks and get ready to resist the ground assault on his defences.

Hampshire led another six Bostons against the same target four days later, and, after dropping bombs, the Bostons made twenty-five strafing runs. Again army smoke signals were used to mark the enemy positions but the crews were unable to see whether their efforts were successful. In the first two days of May the Bostons made another ninety-seven runs over the enemy troops on the Pimple. Meanwhile, the Japanese had withstood four determined assaults by the 2/7th Battalion, and the constant air attack seemed to make little impression. On 9th May the Japanese countered by surrounding a company of the 2/7th, and on the following day made a vigorous bid to overwhelm it. They were thrown back, however, and forced to withdraw to their strong defences on the Pimple.

Progress was slow in the drive towards Salamaua, but there was no need for urgency. The taking of Salamaua was not regarded as being of any great value in itself, but pressure towards it was important as a means of drawing Japanese forces away from Lae, which the Allies were now planning to capture as part of the general advance towards Rabaul. Thus it was important that Salamaua should not fall before the Lae operation began. The Japanese were sending men forward from Lae to the front at Mubo thereby weakening the defence of Lae. However, campaigning in unhealthy and fatiguing conditions was sapping the strength of the Australian troops.

No. 22 Squadron which, with No. 4 Army Cooperation Squadron, carried the main burden of aiding the army on the Salamaua trail, attacked the Francisco River and Nassau Bay areas during May. On 23rd May four Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant Eddison,⁸ joined with five Bostons to attack Nassau Bay and the Duali area. The Bostons dropped bombs in and round villages while the Beaufighters fired 500 cannon and 20,000 machine-gun rounds into the villages on the bay.

The Bostons and Beaufighters of these two Australian squadrons had also extended their attacks to Japanese bases behind the battle areas. On 9th May eight Beaufighters joined ten Mitchell bombers of the Fifth Air Force on a raid to Madang where they were to attack Japanese aircraft on the airfield with cannon fire. The squadrons made a rendezvous over Saidor, which was occupied by the enemy, and, as a result of this, the enemy defences were alert when the aircraft arrived over their target. The Japanese fired heavily with anti-aircraft guns, and, just as the Beaufighters attacked the airfield, ten enemy fighter aircraft intercepted them, damaging Flying Officer Nicholson's⁹ machine. A squadron of American

⁸ F-Lt E. D. Eddison, 563; 30 Sqn. Grazier; of Canberra; b. Southampton, Hants, Eng, 5 Apr 1918. Killed in action 27 May 1943.

⁹ F-Lt K. G. Nicholson, 415044; 30 and 85 Sqns. Plumber; of Northam, WA; b. Northam, 31 Aug 1922.

fighter planes had been ordered to protect the Beaufighters and Mitchells but did not appear. The Beaufighters therefore completed one attack on the airfield and then attacked a large ship crowded with enemy troops. The Japanese fighter planes pursued the Beaufighters as far as Saidor on the way back to Moresby but were outdistanced at a speed of between 275 and 300 miles per hour.

On 24th May the Bostons carried out an early-morning raid on a wrecked ship on the beach near Lae, which, it was suspected, the Japanese were using to store supplies and unload submarines. Five aircraft, again led by Hampshire, took part in the mission, and just before dawn broke the aircraft made a gliding approach on the target, passing over the wreck from bow to stern. The Bostons attacked in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire and some of the bombs exploded on the wreck which caught fire. One of the Bostons, piloted by Flying Officer Rowell¹ with Sergeant Taylor² (gunner) and Sergeant Duncan³ (wireless operator) as his crew, did not see the target on the first run. Rowell decided to attack again alone and a searchlight from the ground illuminated his aircraft as he approached the target at 250 feet. Anti-aircraft weapons then opened fire heavily on him, killing Taylor, severely wounding Duncan and damaging the aircraft, but Rowell, by skilful handling, managed to fly it back to base.

Three days later the Beaufighters accompanied by American Mitchell and Liberator bombers attacked Lae Airfield and Jacobsen's Plantation where they were met by the Japanese with intense anti-aircraft fire from medium and light-calibre weapons. Eddison's aircraft was leading the Beaufighters across the airfield when it was hit and crashed in flames at the north-east end, killing Eddison and his navigator, Sergeant Allott.⁴ The enemy anti-aircraft barrage on that day was the most intense experienced for some time.

The enemy air force had not been idle while their ground positions round Mubo and their rear bases were being pounded by the Allied squadrons. On 17th and 18th May and 6th June large formations of bombers and fighters bombarded the Wau airfield where some casualties and damage were inflicted. In the last two weeks of June they turned their attention to the Mubo area where ground fighting had again flared up. On 20th June Wau was bombed again from the air and at 10.20 a.m. next day one Japanese aircraft dropped bombs on Guadagasal Ridge near Mubo. This was followed immediately by the bombing and strafing of near-by Mat Mat Hill. In the afternoon bombers again attacked Guadagasal, using dive and pattern-bombing tactics. Casualties were inflicted on ground forces and one bomber made a direct hit on the ammunition dump at Guadagasal. Japanese on the ground in the Mubo Valley had

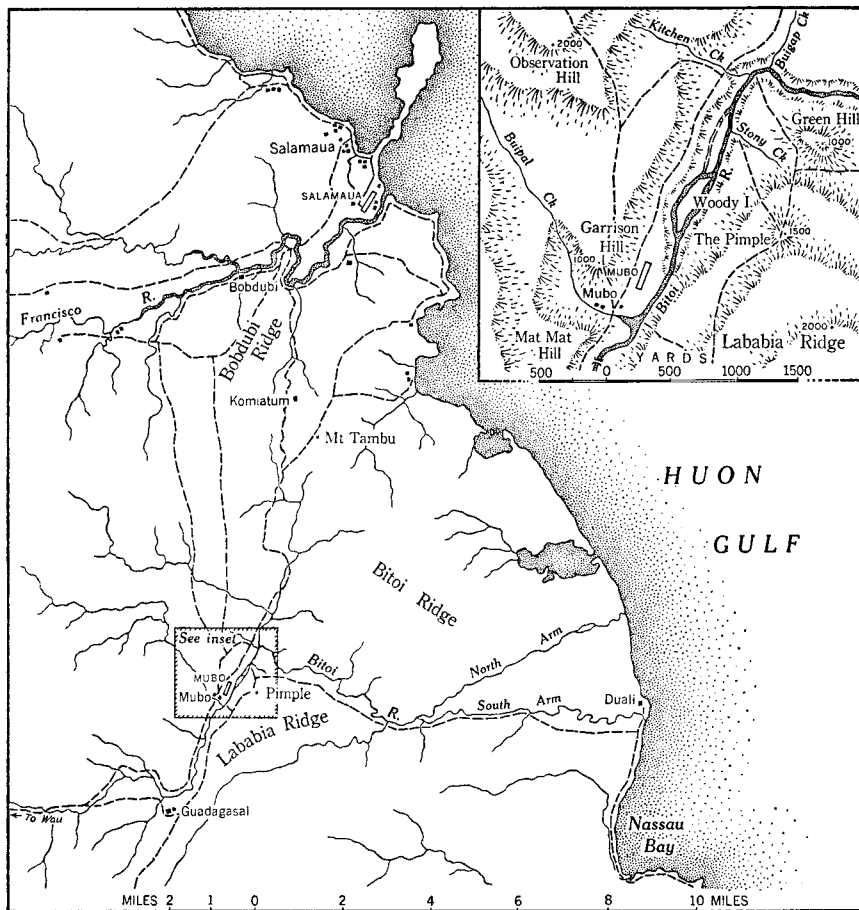
¹ F-Lt H. M. Rowell, 406958; 22 Sqn. Clerk; of Victoria Park, WA; b. Victoria Park, 31 Dec 1920.

² Sgt A. C. Taylor, 413914; 22 Sqn. Mechanical engineer; of Belmore, NSW; b. Campsie, NSW, 28 Jul 1922. Killed in action 24 May 1943.

³ F-Sgt D. O. Duncan, 401641; 22 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Melbourne, 1 Jan 1914.

⁴ Sgt R. M. Allott, 11321; 30 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Benalla, Vic; b. Albury, NSW, 29 Sep 1921. Killed in action 27 May 1943.

been seen signalling to the aircraft with red and white flags, and during the day a total of 83 enemy aircraft were over the area, although only about 45 attacked. Nevertheless, the Japanese troops were greatly heartened by this display.



By coincidence, on this day, 21st June, six Bostons of No. 22 Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant Craig,⁵ came over to attack Japanese targets in the same area. The Bostons completed their task of bombing and machine-gunning in the Kitchen Creek and Stony Creek areas without being interfered with by the Japanese aircraft which were intent on carrying out their own tasks. American Lightning fighters were at the time patrolling over Wau and the Bostons sent a radio message informing them

⁵ F-Lt H. B. Craig, DFC, 402228. 1451 and 1457 Flights RAF; 22 Sqn. Jackaroo; of Woollahra, NSW; b. Sydney, 3 Oct 1914.

of the presence of the Japanese. The Lightnings immediately flew into the area and claimed the destruction of nine Japanese aircraft.

The enemy had been reinforcing his battalions in the Mubo garrison and the following day launched a full-scale two-battalion attack on Lababia Ridge.⁶ The attack included charges with fixed bayonets and in the early stages of the action Japanese soldiers reached within ten yards of the Australian weapon pits. The Japanese continued their assaults on the following day, but were defeated and eventually retired after losing about 170 killed and wounded.⁷ The Australians had 11 men killed and 11 wounded.

Except when the weather prevented flying, the Bostons maintained their attacks on the ridges; and from time to time they dropped newspapers, magazines, tobacco and fresh bread to the forward troops. The native carrier line to the forward troops was greatly overtaxed and the army, faced with a difficult supply problem, used Wirraway aircraft of No. 4 Squadron to carry ammunition, clothing and rations, medical supplies, signal wire, 3-inch mortars and Vickers machine-guns; mails, however, were dropped only when their recovery on the ground was assured. Some inexperienced pilots on dropping missions approached the dropping ground too high and too fast, with the result that recovery was greatly reduced. It was also found necessary to limit loads to 400 pounds, because of the small runway at Wau airfield. No. 4 Squadron was performing a variety of important tasks. It provided aircraft for artillery spotting, photographic reconnaissance, tactical reconnaissance and flare-dropping. Message-dropping by Wirraways proved to be of great value.

In May General MacArthur and General Blamey decided to seize Nassau Bay near Salamaua thirty days before the planned assault on Lae and the Markham River Valley. Blamey directed the American "MacKechnie Force", which comprised the I/162nd Battalion⁸ of the 41st American Division, to carry out this task, and on 30th June, in darkness, the Americans landed at Nassau Bay, where an Australian patrol was in position. The converging of the 17th Australian Brigade, the 15th Brigade, and MacKechnie Force on Salamaua, deceived the Japanese into believing that to be the probable main objective in the area.

Meanwhile, the Fifth Air Force bombers were switched from other targets, and support of the ground forces in the Mubo-Salamaua area became their chief concern. On 7th July squadrons of Liberator and Mitchell bombers accompanied Bostons of No. 22 in heavy attacks in the area. Squadron Leader Learmonth, who had taken over command of the squadron from Hampshire (posted for duty in the United Kingdom), led seven Bostons in a morning attack on Observation Hill which was strafed with machine-gun fire. This target was also attacked by nine American Mitchells. In the afternoon six Boston crews from No. 22, four of whom

⁶ The I and II Bns of 66 Inf Regt, a total of 1,256 men against 150 of 2/6 Bn AIF.

⁷ Colonel Araki of 66 Inf Regt later admitted 41 killed and 131 wounded.

⁸ The 1st Battalion of 162nd Infantry Regiment.

had taken part in the morning raid, bombed and then machine-gunned Bobdubi Ridge. The crews could clearly see enemy slit trenches and weapon pits. The Bostons attacked again next day and on 10th July bombed troops and stores in the Komiatum area. The Japanese retaliated by flying some fifty sorties to the area but achieved little.

The American force at Nassau Bay moved slowly inland to the rear of the Japanese positions at Mubo, and on 12th July linked with the 17th Brigade. The enemy garrison at Mubo was now cut off, and on 14th July the Australian forces captured the village. The Australian and American ground forces now began the advance towards Komiatum and Mount Tambu and beyond to Salamaua. In the week 9th-16th July nearly all available aircraft of the Fifth Air Force were attacking the Japanese garrison. The tonnage of bombs dropped was raised in July to a total of 1,238 compared with 119 in June, and total missions flown were 115 compared with 38 in June.

The Australian-made Boomerang aircraft, with which No. 4 Squadron was now being equipped, began to take part in the operations at this stage. The pilots were frequently challenged by Allied anti-aircraft gunners because the Boomerangs had characteristics of speed and shape new to known Allied aircraft in the South-West Pacific. This misunderstanding of the new aircraft led to the loss of an Australian on 5th July when a Boomerang was returning to base after carrying out a reconnaissance in the Salamaua area. The aircraft passed over Nassau Bay which had been heavily raided earlier that day by Japanese aircraft. American gunners, anticipating another enemy raid, immediately opened fire with light anti-aircraft weapons. The plane was hit and crashed, killing the pilot and destroying the aircraft.

The ground troops in the Mubo operations considered that the best results in air support operations were obtained in harassing attacks on enemy bases and dumps and the disruption of his supply lines. Bombing in close support of the ground troops in heavy jungle country was difficult, and unless the targets were completely saturated by heavy bombing, the effect on enemy machine-gun posts and weapon pits was not great. Major-General Savige,⁹ commander of the 3rd Division, reported to New Guinea Force that response to requests for air support was slow. He said: "Until an air support tentacle with the necessary communications is established in forward areas quick support is not possible. Even so, with all communications working at ideal speed, owing to the distance which the support aircraft have to come (Moresby or Dobodura) from airfield to target area, a minimum of two hours would elapse from time of request to time over target, during which time the situation will have changed."

However, Japanese leaders, after the war, considered that Allied air attacks in the Lae-Salamaua campaign were effective. General Adachi,

⁹ Lt-Gen Sir Stanley Savige, KBE, CB, DSO, MC, ED. (1915-19: 24 Bn AIF and Dunsterforce.) Comd 17 Bde 1939-41; GOC 3 Div 1942-44, I Corps and NG Force 1944, II Corps 1944-45. Company director; of Melbourne; b. Morwell, Vic, 26 Jun 1890. Died 15 May 1954.

commander of the *XVIII Army*, and a number of other senior officers¹ signed a joint statement which read: "Troops were pinned down during daylight hours in air-raid shelters; there was insufficient ground to allow the dispersal of troops over a large area and therefore casualties were heavy. At Salamaua the casualties from air raids were 150. The headquarters of the *51st Division* (at Salamaua) had to be moved after receiving a direct hit. At this time Adachi was visiting the headquarters but was in a shelter. The most efficient phase of the Allied campaign was considered to be the cooperation between Allied air and ground forces."

On the 7th May General MacArthur had ordered the forces of the South Pacific to occupy New Georgia in the Solomons. While Admiral Halsey made preparations for the invasion of New Georgia, the Japanese were strengthening their defences there, building airfields at Munda, and on near-by Kolombangara Island. Halsey's aircraft repeatedly bombed enemy airfields and naval vessels in the Solomons in preparation for his advance. On the nights of the 5th-6th March and 12th-13th May the airfields on Kolombangara and New Georgia were attacked simultaneously. It was found, however, that attacks on airfields rarely put them out of commission for more than a day or two. Japanese air attacks were also frequent and heavy.

On 7th June the Japanese air commanders began an air assault against Guadalcanal with large forces of fighters and bombers. This assault culminated in a raid by an estimated 120 enemy aircraft on 16th June. They were met by 104 Allied aircraft which claimed 81 enemy for the loss of 6 Allied planes.²

The Americans increased the intensity of their air and naval attacks as the day set for the landing approached. Before dawn on 30th June American forces made landings on New Georgia. Japanese ground resistance was slight but the following day strong formations of enemy aircraft attempted to disrupt the operations at the beachhead. Two sharp naval actions, fought in Kula Gulf following the landing, were costly both to the American and Japanese forces engaged. Ground forces slowly pushed towards Munda, while aircraft delivered bombing attacks. During one of these air raids on 25th July 186 tons of bombs were dropped on Munda and the airfield was captured on 5th August. The campaign ended on 24th August with the occupation of Bairoko harbour.

Meanwhile, the Australian and American squadrons in New Guinea, operating from airfields in the Buna area (notably Dobodura), Port Moresby and Milne Bay, were attacking the enemy in the Lae-Salamaua, western New Britain and Rabaul areas with increasing momentum. Engineers had rushed ahead with the preparation of airfields on the

¹ The other officers were Lt-Gen Kato, chief of staff, *Eighth Area Army*, Rabaul; Lt-Col Tanaka, staff officer, *XVIII Army*; Lt-Col Ota, staff officer *Eighth Area Army*; and Naval Captain Sanagi, senior staff officer, *South-East Fleet*.

² Craven and Cate (Editors), *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol IV (1950), p. 218.

Dobodura plains, and this brought both Rabaul and Wewak, an important enemy base in northern New Guinea, within effective range of Mitchell bomber aircraft. The elements of the "First Air Task Force" were concentrating at Dobodura and the neutralisation of Rabaul became the main target both for American heavy and medium bombers.

The Fifth Air Force directed the R.A.A.F.'s No. 9 Group to attack enemy bases in New Britain and, in order to make this task easier, Goodenough Island was to be prepared as an advanced operating base with two independent landing fields, one for fighters and the other capable of use by heavy bombers. Goodenough is a mountainous island just north of the Papuan coast, and, although only about 16 miles in diameter, it rises to a height of 8,600 feet in the centre. At this time an Australian infantry battalion garrisoned it and two R.A.A.F. radar stations, which had been furnishing information about enemy air movements, were operating there. Two R.A.A.F. mobile works squadrons were sent to the island to prepare the required airfields and by the end of April a temporary landing field was ready for use. A sawmill was established, camps were built and a road was made from the docks to the new Vivigani airfield.

On 17th May the Vivigani airfield was used for the first time for a mission against the enemy, when six Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant Parsons,³ landed there from Gurney airfield (Milne Bay) in the afternoon and took off again at 11.15 p.m. for a night attack on the Gasmata airfields and supply dumps. The attack was successful and was repeated two days later when eight Beauforts led by Squadron Leader Smibert, again attacked Gasmata, dropping twelve tons of general purpose and incendiary bombs in the target area. One of the Beauforts (captained by Flying Officer Forrest) failed to return. The following day seven Beauforts with fighter cover provided by eight Kittyhawks of No. 77 Squadron, led by Cresswell, searched without success for the missing Beaufort. The Beauforts were ordered out on two more strikes against Gasmata before the end of May but on the first, 28th May, bad weather completely obscured the target and on 31st May only one Beaufort, piloted by Flight Sergeant Green,⁴ found Gasmata through the heavy cloud. Green attacked but could not see the result of his efforts.

After the heavy enemy air raids on Port Moresby and Milne Bay in mid-April Japanese air activity in New Guinea had tapered off. On 10th May two enemy aircraft dropped bombs at the shipping anchorage at Milne Bay and during the week 15th-21st May seventeen attacks were made, including two large-scale attacks on Wau (already referred to), five small attacks on Dobodura, three on Port Moresby and one on Milne Bay. Allied shipping was also attacked in Port Harvey, Oro Bay and Douglas Harbour where a ship was sunk and another damaged. Warnings received at Milne Bay of the approach of enemy aircraft sent Kittyhawk fighters of Nos. 75 and 77 Squadrons into the air during May and June

³ Sqn Ldr L. E. H. Parsons, DFC, 250826. 100, 8 and 7 Sqns. Draftsman; of Hobart; b. Burnie, Tas, 20 Nov 1920.

⁴ F-Lt C. R. Green, CGM, 416212. 100 and 8 Sqns. Student; of Lenswood, SA; b. Forest Range, SA, 23 Apr 1918.

but no air battles ensued, either because the enemy aircraft could not be found, or because the expected attacks did not develop. With little else to be done the Kittyhawks were used to escort transport aircraft which were flying men and supplies to Goodenough, or on reconnaissance missions. When not engaged in these tasks they carried out training exercises and flying tests.

MacArthur had assigned to the Sixth American Army the task of occupying Woodlark and Kiriwina Islands, to provide air bases to cover later stages of the ELKTON operations. As they were not defended by the Japanese they could be occupied without committing large ground forces. The landings were to be made simultaneously with the landings at Nassau Bay and New Georgia, mentioned above. The Fifth Air Force and the Australian squadrons in New Guinea were to aid the operations by providing fighter protection, air support to ground troops and weather forecasting.

A squadron of Spitfire fighters (No. 79) which had just been formed on the Australian mainland and two squadrons of Kittyhawks (Nos. 76 and 77 Squadrons) were ordered to proceed to Goodenough, while Hudsons, another Kittyhawk squadron (No. 75) and Beauforts of the R.A.A.F., operating from Milne Bay, were to provide anti-submarine patrols and protection from enemy aircraft for Allied shipping convoys carrying the assault forces. During the early stages of the operation the bombing of the enemy base at Rabaul was to be the principal objective of the Allied air forces. This target was highly important because the Japanese were expected to use aircraft to attack Milne Bay, Goodenough, Kiriwina and Woodlark in strength as soon as they became aware of Allied intentions. MacArthur believed that it would not be possible to carry out the occupation without the enemy discovering it in the early stages. As soon as Woodlark and Kiriwina were firmly established as bases General Kenney was to bring in elements of his air forces and prepare these for general support of the Lae-Salamaua, Finschhafen, Madang and western New Britain operations.

Late in May the advance party of No. 77 Squadron arrived at Goodenough and by 15th June it was ready to take part in the operation. The following day No. 76 Squadron (commanded by Squadron Leader Perrin⁵) and No. 79 (commanded by Squadron Leader Rawlinson⁶) arrived. By 15th June Hewitt had established the headquarters of No. 9 Group at Milne Bay and No. 73 Wing headquarters, commanded by Group Captain McLachlan,⁷ was set up at Goodenough to control the three R.A.A.F. fighter squadrons based at Vivigani airfield.

⁵ Gp Capt J. R. Perrin, DFC, 380. 3 Sqn; comd 5 and 24 Sdns 1942, 76 Sqn 1943; SASO Overseas HQ 1944-46. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 9 Oct 1916.

⁶ Gp Capt A. C. Rawlinson, DFC, 386. Comd 3 Sqn 1941, 79 Sqn 1943, 78 Wing 1945. Regular air force offr; of Ivanhoe, Vic; b. Fremantle, WA, 31 Jul 1918.

⁷ Air Cmdre I. D. McLachlan, DFC, 55. Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41, RAAF Stns Canberra and Laverton 1942, 73 Wing 1943, Southern Area 1944, 81 Wing 1945. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. South Yarra, Vic. 23 Jul 1911.

Apart from air support to the army in the Mubo area, the preliminary moves in MacArthur's 1943 offensive resulted in little direct contact with the enemy for the Australian squadrons during June and early July. No. 6 Squadron, equipped with Hudson aircraft (the efficiency of which was reduced by age and tropical conditions), carried out an almost daily search of the sea lanes into Milne Bay for enemy submarines and escorted the many shipping convoys that entered and left Milne Bay in this busy period. They were aided in their task by Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron and a number of Beaufort crews from No. 7 Squadron. During a reconnaissance patrol, Flying Officer Seymour,⁸ flying a Beaufort of No. 100 Squadron, discovered a small convoy of enemy vessels west of Bougainville on 25th June. He attacked one of the vessels but the bombs struck the water sixty yards from the target.

Small parties of ground troops landed at Woodlark Island on 23rd June and at Kiriwina on 24th June. They immediately began preparing for the arrival of the main parties on 30th June. The enemy did not oppose the landings and the R.A.A.F. squadrons, which were held constantly ready to meet the expected enemy air attacks, were not called on. Because of the strategic importance of the islands violent attempts by enemy aircraft and naval vessels to oppose the landings, even involving the sacrifice of suicide landing parties, were expected. But nothing happened. It was a great surprise to the eager fighter pilots who stood daily in readiness by their aircraft, that, during the entire period of the operation, enemy reaction was limited to reconnaissance and two small bombing raids on Woodlark. Most of the enemy's air activity in July was concentrated against Halsey's force in the Solomons and against the squadrons in the Darwin area. Nevertheless, General Krueger, commanding the Sixth Army, commended No. 9 Group for its efficient support of the operation. "Plans for air reconnaissance and air coverage were faithfully executed," he said.

During one of these reconnaissance missions on 12th July a Beaufort from No. 100 Squadron failed to return. Search missions were ordered but the crew was not found. It was learned later that the Beaufort had been shot down south of St George's Channel, between New Britain and New Ireland, by an American Liberator bomber of the South Pacific Command which mistook it for an enemy aircraft. When the Beaufort crashed the Americans realised it was an Australian aircraft and dropped a raft, food and flares to the crew whom they saw struggling in the water. No trace of the crew was found later although 250 flying hours were expended searching for them. On 20th July, during another of these patrols, a Beaufort, piloted by Flying Officer Anderson,⁹ discovered an enemy naval force of three cruisers and five destroyers south of Cape St George. The Beaufort was immediately attacked by four Japanese

⁸ F-Lt R. Seymour, 406879; 100 Sqn. Draftsman; of Mt Lawley, WA; b. Perth, WA, 10 Aug 1920.

⁹ F-O R. B. Anderson, 409070; 100 Sqn. Farmer; of Boneo, Vic; b. Caulfield, Vic, 19 Aug 1914. Killed in action 5 Sep 1943.



Eastern New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomons.

Zero fighters which were protecting the naval vessels. Sergeant McMahon,¹ the turret gunner, opened fire with long and short bursts and saw bullets striking one of the Zeros. Its pilot then broke off the engagement and Anderson flew in and out of the clouds for twenty minutes fighting off the three remaining Zeros before escaping. The Beaufort was damaged in the fight with bullet holes in petrol tanks, mainplane and engine nacelles and it had a punctured tyre. Nevertheless Anderson made a successful landing at his base.

By the end of July the R.A.A.F. strength in New Guinea, fed by the inflow of trained men from the mainland, had grown considerably. No. 9 Group now controlled four wings (two operational, one works, and one radio location). It had nine operational squadrons and a torpedo-bomber detachment, one transport squadron, one rescue-and-communication unit, three fighter sectors, four operational base units, two medical receiving stations, one air ambulance detachment, eleven wireless stations, and seven works units. On Goodenough Island alone its strength was 3,614 men.

Towards the end of July, after months of movement and preparation, the Australian squadrons began to carry out their primary bombing mission of the offensive, which was to attack bases in New Britain and the enemy vessels which moved along the New Britain coastline en route to New Guinea. The Japanese were reinforcing Rabaul from Truk and from Rabaul men and arms were trans-shipped by cargo vessels, barges, destroyers and submarines to bases at Gasmata, Cape Gloucester and Cape Hoskins. It was No. 9 Group's task to destroy these bases and the enemy communications leading to them.

After a preliminary reconnaissance of Gasmata airfield, carried out on 20th July by Beaufighters, led by Wing Commander Glasscock, and protected by twelve Kittyhawks of No. 77 Squadron, Hewitt on 22nd July ordered five of his squadrons out on the biggest mission by Australian aircraft up to that time. The reconnaissance had shown that the airfield was serviceable. In poor weather ten Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron, fourteen Kittyhawks from No. 77, the full strength of twenty-four Kittyhawks from No. 75 (flown from Milne Bay to Goodenough on 21st July to take part), six Bostons of No. 22 and eight Beaufighters of No. 30, totalling sixty-two aircraft, took part in this mission. Two other squadrons, Nos. 79 and 76, were standing by to protect the base at Goodenough so that seven Australian squadrons were directly or indirectly engaged. The Kittyhawks of No. 77 Squadron each carried six 40-lb. bombs with the intention of carrying out low-level bombing and strafing after the bombers had finished with the target, but they encountered heavy rain and cloud and were unable to reach Gasmata.

The Bostons of No. 22, which had been withdrawn from support of the army at Mubo, had moved from Port Moresby to Goodenough during July. Led by Learmonth, they took off at 6.44 a.m. on 22nd July from Vivigani airfield. Their bombs destroyed the wireless station building at

¹ W-O L. V. McMahon, 409934; 100 Sqn. Farmer; of Manangatang, Vic; b. Corrong Vale, Vic. 3 Nov 1918. Killed in action 5 Sep 1943.

Gasmata and they then machine-gunned the station, firing at anything that moved on the ground. The Beaufighters, which came from Milne Bay for the attack, found the Bostons still over the target area when they arrived and the delay interfered with their strafing. Clouds were then very low over Gasmata and visibility poor so they could not see the results of the attack. The Japanese replied with anti-aircraft fire and one of the Beaufighters had its wing tip blown off, but the pilot, Flying Officer Hunt,² succeeded in flying the aircraft back to Milne Bay. The Beauforts, led by Hepburn, dropped 15,000 pounds of bombs on the air-field runway in a series of low-level attacks and then strafed buildings, an aircraft on the ground and enemy machine-gun posts. Five of the ten attacking Beauforts were hit by the enemy fire, one piloted by Flight Lieutenant Woollacott,³ being considerably damaged. The Kittyhawks of No. 75 were on guard above the bombers but the enemy did not send up fighter aircraft to oppose them and the whole of the day's operations were completed without the loss of a single machine.

Four days later, on 26th July, Bostons, Beaufighters and Kittyhawks were sent out again to attack the Ring Ring plantation at Gasmata. The Beaufighters strafed the plantation homestead and the Bostons concentrated on a jetty on which they made two direct hits and then machine-gunned buildings in the area. The Kittyhawks, in addition to providing protection for the bombers, carried bombs of their own. Twenty took off from Vivigani each carrying two 30-lb incendiary and four 40-lb general-purpose bombs. Eight were forced back to their base by bad weather before they could reach the target, but the other twelve, led by Cresswell, followed the Bostons and Beaufighters and dropped all their bombs accurately. Anti-aircraft fire tore holes in several of the Kittyhawks but none crashed. With the decline of Japanese air activity, opportunities for air combat for Allied fighters had diminished in New Guinea and Australian squadron commanders were directed to use aircraft as fighter-bombers and ground strafers so that they would be more actively and usefully employed. This use of the fighter had already become common practice in the Middle East.

Also on 26th July, two Beaufighters (piloted by Flight Lieutenant Burrows⁴ and Flying Officer Mills⁵) while on armed reconnaissance in Jacquinot Bay within 100 miles of Rabaul attacked a small Japanese vessel which had been camouflaged with foliage. It was about 200 yards off shore and the Beaufighters sprayed it with machine-gun fire. The vessel increased speed and made for the shore where it ran aground. Next day the Beaufighters accompanied by four Beauforts and with a covering flight of Kittyhawks returned and again attacked this vessel and another one near by. The Beauforts dropped one bomb directly on the larger vessel and both were machine-gunned.

² F-Lt G. Hunt, 415256; 30 Sqn. Clerk; of Mt Magnet, WA; b. Kew, Vic, 9 Apr 1919.

³ F-Lt R. H. Woollacott, 407144; 100 Sqn. Building contractor; of Whyalla, SA; b. Aberdeen, SA, 8 Aug 1910. Killed in action 5 Sep 1943.

⁴ F-Lt M. W. Burrows, 260702; 30 Sqn. Clerk; of Elizabeth Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 13 Jul 1920.

⁵ F-Lt R. E. F. Mills, 415434; 30 Sqn. Civil servant; of Cottesloe, WA; b. Kew, Vic, 29 Oct 1920.

The two Catalina squadrons, Nos. 11 and 20, played a part in the New Guinea operations of April to July 1943, although they worked independently of No. 9 Group. Flying from their main base at Cairns in North Queensland they undertook the tasks of dropping mines in enemy harbours, carrying supplies to coastwatchers in enemy-held territory, and making harassing attacks at night on enemy bases. The coastwatchers were working in the Solomons, New Britain and New Ireland, and the Catalinas dropped them containers weighing about 130 pounds each with small parachutes attached, and holding equipment, stores, food, clothing and mail.

The work of the coastwatchers was of vital importance to Admiral Halsey's forces on Guadalcanal and they earned great praise for the manner in which they performed their hazardous duties. They passed information by radio about enemy airfields and aircraft sent on missions against Guadalcanal. They also organised parties to rescue American aircrews shot down in the islands and held them until they could be returned by submarines.

On the night of 26th April a Catalina of No. 11 Squadron, captained by Flight Lieutenant Clark,⁶ crashed into a hillside in Bougainville while dropping supplies to coastwatchers.

During May and June the Catalinas carried out night raids on enemy defences and airfields at Cape Gloucester and at Babo in western Dutch New Guinea. On 3rd June a large number of enemy aircraft were caught on the airfield at Babo, as they could be seen by the light of fires lit by the Catalinas' bombing attack. The Catalinas strafed the aircraft with machine-gun fire, damaging and possibly destroying at least twenty.

⁶ F-Lt W. J. Clark, 403318; 20 and 11 Sqns. Clerk; of Windsor, Qld; b. Bundaberg, Qld, 6 May 1917. Killed in action 26 Apr 1943.

Clark, F-O J. N. Potts (Launceston, Tas) and Sgt D. J. Ward (Kingsford, NSW) were killed, and the remaining six crew members (F-O's C. S. Dunn (Woollahra, NSW) and C. J. Twist (Hindmarsh, SA), Sgt F. G. T. Thompson (Henley Beach, SA) and Cpls J. Fenwick (Ipswich, Qld), R. H. A. Wettenhall (Toorak, Vic) and H. Yates (Summer Hill, NSW)) were injured. They were rescued soon after the crash by a party of Australian soldiers and natives, and taken farther inland to a coastwatchers' camp, where their injuries were treated and arrangements made for their evacuation. The Japanese were now strongly garrisoning Bougainville and the work of the coastwatchers was becoming extremely hazardous because of enemy patrols and the treachery of the natives. On 16 June an enemy force accompanied by hostile natives attacked the camp, killing Dunn, who could barely walk, and capturing Fenwick who had been badly injured in the crash. (Cpl Fenwick was later killed in an Allied bombing attack at Talili Bay, New Britain, while being moved in March 1944 with other prisoners to Watom Island.) The remaining four escaped into the rain forest and in July Wettenhall and Thompson were taken off the island by the American submarine *Guardfish*. Twist and Yates were betrayed by natives to the Japanese garrison at Numa Numa, and are believed to have died while prisoners on Bougainville.