

75 years ago, the First Marine Division departed Melbourne, Australia for their second combat action. Temporarily attached to MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Command, on 26 December 1943 they landed at Cape Gloucester, on the northwest tip of New Britain. An occupation of western New Britain would eliminate any flanking threat to MacArthur's advance through Papua, the eastern province of New Guinea and would force Japanese troops to retire to Rabaul, on the other side of the island. Air Force and Naval Aviation had by this time, all but neutralized Rabaul as a major threat and the decision was made to bypass this stronghold, avoiding a bloody and protracted frontal assault. Over the past two years, the Australian and American armies had already fought many such assaults on New Guinea during the "Battle of Australia."

Ironically, during the First World War, Japan fought alongside Australia against the Germans. They ousted German colonists from New Guinea and established Australian sovereignty over Papua. At the dawn of the Second World War, Japan intended to wrest Australia from the British Commonwealth to gain uncontested control over the Pacific. Their first move, just after Pearl Harbor, was to capture Rabaul for a major naval and air base supporting operations in Australia and the Solomons. So commenced the Battle of Australia. The Japanese continued to push Australian troops out of New Britain and then Northern Papua, New Guinea, taking villages such as Buna, Salamaua and Lae where airfields were built to support their advance. The next move for Japan was to be an amphibious invasion of Port Moresby. The seaborne invasion was necessary because Port Moresby's lies on the south coast of New Guinea, which is separated from the north by a central mountain range that runs the length of the island and was thought to be impassible. Port Moresby's capture would leave Australia unprotected and open to attack. U.S. Naval Intelligence was able to surmise Japan's move against Port Moresby, prompting the Battle of the Coral Sea, our Navy's first strategic victory in carrier warfare which thwarted the amphibious invasion. Japan then resorted to a tactic they made famous at Singapore – attacking Port Moresby by the "impossible" overland route. Between August and December of 1942, while U. S. marines were fighting off successive counterattacks on Guadalcanal, the Australian Imperial Force made their stand at Port Moresby, literally with their backs to the sea.

New Guinea is the second largest island on Earth, stretching some 1500 miles. Port Moresby, on the southern coast of Papua, New Guinea was, by tropical standards, moderate in climate and served as the main base for AIF troops and aircraft. The north coast, was vastly different. An American soldier described the climate on New Guinea thus, "It rains daily for 9 months and then the monsoon begins." Terrain in Papua ranged from jungle-forested mountains to malarial swamps at the coast. 300 inches of yearly rainfall made raging torrents of mountain streams, calf-deep mud mired trails. With temperatures and humidity in the 90's, soldiers contracted Malaria, Dysentery, Dengue Fever, Scrub Typhus and a host of tropical fevers that even today have no names. The jungle reduced visibility to arm's length – opposing troops rarely saw each other. Classic maneuver warfare was impossible because troop movements had to be channeled into passable tracks through the swamps which were strongly defended by the Japanese. The costly frontal attack was the only infantry tactic available.

U. S. marines landed unopposed on Guadalcanal because Japan considered Port Moresby their main objective and kept the bulk of their troops committed to taking Australia. As the Marines took Henderson Field, the Japanese began their advance through New Guinea from Buna to Kokoda in the midst of the central mountain range and then hacked out a trail southward towards Port Moresby, which came to be known as the Kokoda Track. Unlike Singapore, where the Japanese only contended with extreme jungle conditions, they were opposed every step of the way by the AIF, fresh from fighting Rommel in North Africa, now fighting to spare their homeland from Japanese occupation.

The “Diggers” checked the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track on 16 September 1942, just 32 miles from Port Moresby. The problems of logistics that plagued the Japanese throughout the Pacific War were their undoing along the Kokoda Track. As they outran their supply train, the AIF learned to fight them on their turf, by their rules, and with little outside help. As an American, I’d love to write that the U.S. Cavalry rode in to the rescue of the AIF but in 1942, our own supply problems, lack of troops and ships and Churchill’s “Europe First” policy severely limited our ability to aid Australia. Slowly, American aircraft began arriving at Port Moresby to augment the valiant Australian air forces. This was the beginning of General George C. Kenney’s mighty 5th Air Force, later the Far East Air Force, whose patch adorns the right sleeve of my late father’s uniform. American infantry troops began arriving, comprising the U. S. Sixth Army, soon to join the AIF in the fight.

As increasing allied air power depleted irreplaceable Japanese combat pilots, interdicted Japanese shipping and harassed troop formations, the AIF began a counterattack along the Kokoda Track backed by a solid supply train over some of the worst terrain conceivable. The Kokoda Track consisted of calf-deep mud, high precipices, steep grades where long flights of “stairs” several feet high were installed. Rain fell daily swelling rivers and filling swamps. With each step along the Kokoda Track, the AIF faced a determined enemy who ceded ground only after the death of the last defender. Every tree had a sniper tied to it, every trail was covered by multiple machine gun positions. Mortars and artillery pounded the AIF but throughout the last months of 1942, the Japanese were pushed back, first to Kokoda and then to Buna. Port Moresby suffered many air raids but remained secure.

Units of the American Army began joining the fight late in 1942. The AIF schooled them well in Jungle fighting techniques and they learned the most horrible of truths in the Pacific war – the fact that Japanese soldiers refused to surrender and had to be killed. With the fall of Buna to allied troops, the Battle of Australia ended and the battle for New Guinea commenced. Throughout 1943, the AIF, augmented with U. S. Army troops, pushed the Japanese army out of Papua as far north as Saidor. Unable to maneuver around Japanese positions because of the swamps, each advance was a frontal attack, through lanes heavily defended by the Japanese. The U. S. Army took over offensive operations in January, 1944. Now furnished with sufficient landing craft and support ships, MacArthur was finally able to employ a new amphibious maneuver technique. Successive Japanese coastal strongholds would be bypassed and amphibious landings in lightly defended areas would establish bases for the next attack. The Japanese were continually confounded by MacArthur’s refusal to engage in frontal attacks on their strong points. MacArthur’s strategy spared American lives and left bypassed Japanese garrisons to starve.

So 75 years ago, as 1944 dawned, the myth of invincibility of the Japanese Army was broken. In New Guinea, the Solomons and the Gilberts, the AIF, the U. S. Army and the U. S. Marine Corps became expert jungle fighters, beating the Japanese at their own game. Our pilots gained air superiority and Naval Aviation carried the fight to the Japanese. As MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific Command fought it’s way through New Guinea, his passionate desire to liberate the Philippines was now in sight. Nimitz and the Marines, fresh from their victory in the Gilberts, were heading for the Marshall Islands, the last stop before breaching Japan’s last line of defense in the Marianas.

On Cape Gloucester, the 1st Marine Division fought rain, mud and disease as well as the Japanese until late April, 1944. Their next action would be the worst battle of the Pacific War. Australians and Americans fought together to save the continent from Japanese domination. To this day our nations remain closely bonded, a bond made stronger by the estimated 15,000 Australian war-brides brought to America in the years after the war. As America celebrated New Years, 1944, though Japan remained a formidable foe, even the worst skeptics now felt the Pacific War was winnable.