CHAPTER 9

FROM THE AIR, SEA AND LAND

THE CAPTURE OF LAE

Peter J. Dean

At 1035 on 5 September 1943 Colonel Kenneth H. Kinsler, Commanding Officer (CO) of the US 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), leapt out of his Dakota transport aircraft into combat. Within four and a half minutes some 81 transport aircraft had landed his regiment on three separate landing zones near the abandoned airfield at Nadzab, 27 kilometres from the main Japanese base in New Guinea at Lae. As Kinsler floated through the smoke screen towards the drop zone aircraft of the US Fifth Air Force bombed and strafed the surrounding area, including the villages of Gabmatzung and Gasonkek and the Markham Valley Road. Meanwhile, fighter aircraft circled lazily overhead guarding against interference from any marauding Japanese planes. This was the first and only time that a US parachute regiment would be dropped complete in one lift during the Pacific War.[1] Soon after the 503rd PIR had landed a 'volunteer' detachment from the 2/4th Australian Field Regiment with two light 25-pounder guns were also dropped over the airstrip.

As Kinsler floated through the bright New Guinea sky, the pressure of command and the burden of history weighed heavily upon him. As this operation was the first of its kind in the Pacific theatre he knew it had to be a success. But what Kinsler did not realise was that the tactical use of his regiment to help facilitate the capture of Lae would have strategic implications far beyond the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA). His success or failure would help to make or break the airborne concept in the US Army.

The pressure on the 503rd PIR came from the failure of the US parachute drops in support of Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, and Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. As a result the US Army was locked in fierce debate over the utility and effectiveness of its airborne troops. The debate was divided between those who believed the drops in Africa and Sicily had been too small to secure any meaningful success and those who believed that no more than a battalion could be landed accurately. This debate was investigated by the Swing Board, named after Major-General Joseph Swing, which convened at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, just as the 503rd PIR were making their first combat jump. The Nadzab operation 'proved to be a powerful assertion of the possibilities of large-scale airborne operations'[2] and had a major influence on the Swing Board's decision to validation the airborne concept and cement its place amongst Allied military plans around the globe.

But at 1035 on 5 September 1943 nothing could have been further from Kinsler's mind. His concern was the defence of his regiment's newly won airstrip, deep inside Japanese territory, and his focus was on the immediate security of Nadzab; the need to link up with the Australian engineers crossing the Markham River; and the preparations of the airstrip for the air-landing of two brigades of the 7th Australian Division. If this was not pressure enough Kinsler was aware that the operation was being watched by both the theatre commander, General Douglas MacArthur, and the Fifth Air Force commander, Lieutenant-General George Kenney, circling above his paratroopers in their B-17s.

Kinsler's regiment was the spearhead of the 7th Australian Division's assault. This was the western arm of the I Australian Corps double envelopment of the main Japanese defensive line at the head of the Huon Gulf. The Japanese garrison at Lae represented the greatest threat to Kinsler and his men. Their landing, however, was unopposed as the Japanese attention had been diverted elsewhere. The day before Kinsler's men made their combat drop, the US Navy's VII Amphibious Force had landed the 9th Australian Division 27 kilometres to the east of Lae and that division's lead battalions were closing in on the Busu River, their major obstacle before the town.

The capture of Lae would break open the main Japanese defensive position in New Guinea, isolate the Japanese forces fighting around Salamaua and expose both the Markham and Ramu Valleys and the Huon Peninsula for assault by the Australians. The capture of these positions in New Guinea would secure the critical Vitiaz Strait between New

Guinea and New Britain, giving the Allies access to the Bismarck Sea and tightening the noose around Rabaul, the main Japanese base in the South Pacific. From here MacArthur could start to leap-frog his way along the north coast of New Guinea towards the Philippines.

Plans and preparations

While the idea for a double envelopment of Lae by the I Australian Corps was straightforward, the planning and execution of such an operation was profoundly difficult. The plan would eventually call for the projection of forces into New Guinea via the air, sea and land. It was to be a truly joint (all three services) and combined (Australian and US) campaign.

In the way of the Australian advance were Lieutenant-General Shoge Ryoichi and his heavily dug-in garrison at Lae, as well as Lieutenant-General Nakano Hidemitsu's 51st Division operating between Lae and Salamua. As Lae was the principal base of the Japanese operations in New Guinea the Allies believed that it consisted of over 6000 troops made up of infantry from elements of the 80th, 41st and 21st Infantry Regiments, artillery from the 21st Independent Mixed Brigade, the 5th SASEBO (naval landing troops) and 14th Field Artillery Regiment as well as engineers and support troops.[3] The 51st Division's 6000 troops had been heavily engaged in stemming the 3rd (later 5th) Australian Division's advance on Salamaua (see chapter 8). They were expecting that, once this town fell, the Australians would drive on Lae with a frontal assault, possibly supported by a tactical amphibious landing like the one that the 162nd US Infantry Regiment conducted at Nassau Bay in June.

The planning for the capture of Lae (Operation Postern) was to be run by Blamey's Advanced Land headquarters (Adv LHQ) in Brisbane under the direction of the Deputy Chief of the General Staff (DCGS), Major-General Frank Berryman. Berryman was a highly experienced and gifted staff officer who had seen extensive service in the Middle East and the Pacific. He had taken over the role of DCGS during the Papuan campaign before moving forward to Port Moresby to simultaneously take on the role of chief of staff of New Guinea Force (NGF). Blamey later added to his already extensive list of jobs chief of staff of Advanced NGF HQ at the beachheads for the closing weeks of the campaign.[4]

While the concept of operations was Blamey's, the plan was Berryman's. It was his job to put Blamey's thoughts into action. Berryman pulled together a handpicked planning team at Adv LHQ and had an exceptionally detailed scale model of the Huon Peninsula and Markham Valley constructed in a room at the headquarters. The model was exact in every detail down to swamps, bends in rivers and patches of kunai grass. A replica was later constructed in Port Moresby to help with the tactical planning.

At the theatre level Berryman had to deal with MacArthur's General Headquarters (GHQ) on matters relating to the logistics of the operation (see chapter 7) and force concentration. Berryman had developed a good working relationship with his operations counterpart at GHQ, Major-General Stephen Chamberlin, but the competition for scarce resources, especially shipping, would cause a number of standoffs in the planning between these two officers and their staffs and ultimately delay the operation by more than a month.

Berryman would provide for all the detailed operational planning, while NGF HQ in Port Moresby under Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring would concentrate on the masking operation against Salamaua. Salamaua, Blamey ordered, would remain in Japanese hands until the assault on Lae was launched. NGF's other major task was the development of the ports and base areas in Papua to support the coming offensive. Tactical planning was divulged down to the divisional HQ, which would work in tandem with its US air and amphibious counterparts on the respective plans. Coordination was to be carried out through a series of conferences with Blamey, Berryman and senior commanders in the lead up to the assault.

Berryman's plan was outlined on 17 May 1943. It called for a two-phase operation. Phase I consisted of the 'seizure of the Binocular [Lae]–Exchequer [Nadzab] area', while Phase II consisted of subsequent operations in the Markham Valley and along to the coast of the Huon Peninsula to secure Madang. Initially, the focus of planning and preparations would revolve almost entirely around Phase I.

With limited fire support available from the US Navy and no carrier-based aircraft to support Phase I operations, Berryman directed that the 9th Division would provide for an 'unopposed landing... outside the range of field artillery in [Lae]'. The overland assault was allocated to the 7th Division and its role was the 'seizure and development of an airfield at Nadzab'. The line of communications for this operation would emanate from Wau via the Bulldog Road (see chapter 7) and involve the use of DUKWs (amphibious vehicles) to breach the Markham River. Berryman's plan outline did, however, recognise that 'initially maintenance [of the 7th Division] may be by air'.[5]

It soon became apparent that the supporting forces allocated by GHQ would not be sufficient for the operation. The 9th Division had been

allocated too few amphibious units and it was realised that the entire VII Amphibious Force would have to be allocated to the assault. Meanwhile Major-General George Vasey, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 7th Division, was not relishing the prospect of an advance from Wau to Lae via Nadzab. Rather than undertaking a long, arduous overland march, then a crossing of the Markham River, he proposed that one of the newly arrived US parachute battalions be used to take the abandoned airfield at Nadzab so that his entire division could then be flown in and resupplied by air. It was a brilliant and daring proposition, and Blamey, Berryman and Herring immediately recognised its promise.[6] GHQ denied the request for a parachute battalion and offered the entire regiment instead!

Air support

The decision to air-land the 7th division at Nadzab and use an entire parachute regiment was predicated on the increase of airpower in the SWPA in the lead up to the assault on Lae. The additional aircraft committed to the region at the Pacific Military Conference in March had been forthcoming so that by July two further US fighter groups and a medium bomber group had arrived in Papua. Complementing this firepower was the arrival of the 380th Heavy Bombardment Group, which had started operating out of Darwin.

By September reinforcements meant that the US Troop Carrier Wing could field 14 squadrons.[7] Due to the need to support the operations by both Australian divisions, especially the need to maintain an air bridge to Nadzab, air support over the amphibious landing could only be maintained for a limited period.[8] The slight delay on the availability of the transport aircraft to drop the 503rd PIR was yet another factor that forced the operation to be delayed from 1 August to early September.

The operation for the capture of Lae and the seizure of the Huon Peninsula was predicated on the use of airpower. Therefore, the establishment of air superiority over the operational area was a must before the operation kicked off. This requirement was made more complicated by Japanese plans. On 27 July Imperial General Headquarters had ordered Lieutenant-General Kumaichi Teramoto's Fourth Air Army from the Dutch East Indies to the Southwest Pacific. Kumaichi would command the 6th and 7th Air Divisions and the 14th Air Brigade, concentrated at Wewak to support the Eighteenth Army in New Guinea. By basing his planes at Wewak, Kumaichi would be out of range of Allied fighter planes but still able to support operations over Lae and the Huon Peninsula. This

move was a major threat to the Allied plans for Phase II of Cartwheel and MacArthur's plans thereafter to advance along the north coast of New Guinea.

The establishment of air superiority was the responsibility of Lieutenant-General George Kenney, commander of Allied Air Forces. Kenney was one of the most brilliant air force commanders of the Second World War and had made maximum use of his air force to control the airspace throughout the region. His crowning achievements so far had been the continual grinding down of Japanese airpower at Rabaul and the elimination of the Japanese attempt to reinforce New Guinea at the battle of the Bismarck Sea in March. He now faced a new threat from Wewak.

Kenney's answer to this predicament was typical of his aggressive and innovative approach to the use of airpower. After negotiating with Blamey, Berryman and GHQ, Kenney received permission to use Australian 57th/60th Militia Battalion and the US 871st Airborne Engineers to set up a secret advanced fighter base deep behind enemy lines to give his fighter planes the range to operate over Wewak. The location selected was the area around Tsili Tsili near the Watut River, some 70 kilometres (by air) north-west of Wau, and west of Lae. Not happy with the name, especially after some officers thought that it was reflective of the Fifth Air Force's harebrained scheme, Kenney decreed it would be known after the town 6 kilometres south, Marilinan. The troops arrived on 16 June and by 1 July transport aircraft were able to land on the strip and on 26 July the first fighter aircraft arrived.[9]

At the same time Kenney put in place an elaborate deception plan to give himself enough time to complete the airfield without Japanese interference. Kenney got Allied troops around Bena Bena, 85 kilometres (by air) north-west of Marilinan, to construct an airstrip in a manner that would attract the attention of the Japanese. By 10 August the Japanese Fourth Air Army had amassed over 250 aircraft at Wewak for an air counteroffensive. Kenney noted that his 'fingers by this time were getting calluses from being crossed so hard, but the Japs still showed no signs of knowing that we were building an [air]field right in their back yard'.[10]

On 14 August Kenney moved two fighter squadrons from the 35th Fighter Group into Marilinan, the same day that the first Japanese reconnaissance aircraft spotted the airfield. The following morning the Japanese struck, but they were met by US fighters who had been pre-warned by the radar site set up to cover the airfield. Over the following days

US P-39 Airacobra, P-38 Lightning and P-47 Thunderbolts battled to defend Marilinan while supplies were built up for the Allied strike.

On 17 August Kenney's offensive kicked off. Just before dawn his heavy bombers struck the Japanese airfields at Wewak; two hours later the medium bombers with heavy fighter escort arrived. This group caught the Japanese on the ground preparing for the next strike against Marilinan. Over 60 Japanese bombers and 50 fighters were caught in the ground at Borum with the lead Japanese plane halfway down the runway when the B-25 Mitchell bombers struck raining down bombs and .50 calibre machine-gun fire.

'The black day of August 17' cost the Japanese Army Air Force 100 aircraft and hundreds of air and ground crews. The Americans returned to hit the airfields the next day and pounded the Japanese air force at Wewak throughout the rest of August.[11] The attacks were crippling and every day that the campaign wore on the disparity between Allied and Japanese air-power grew. However, the strikes on Wewak were not conclusive. The Japanese retained enough air power in the region to contest the skies above the major battlefields, and as D-Day for the Lae operation approached local air superiority would go to whichever side chose to concentrate their strength at what they believed was the decisive point.

The 9th Division landing

The tactical planning for the amphibious assault had been divulged by Adv. LHQ to Major-General George Wootten's 9th Division HQ and Rear-Admiral Daniel E. Barbey's VII Amphibious Force. This planning had got off to a rather bumpy start. The original plan had been for the US 2nd Engineering Special Brigade (2ESB) to land the Australians outside of Lae. The brigade was a US Army amphibious unit designed for short-range shore-to-shore operations. However, on 16–17 June I Australian Corps HQ staff along with GOCs of 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions, Brigadier W. F. Heavy (CO 2ESB) and Captain Hudson (US Navy liaison officer at GHQ) conducted a staff exercise in Brisbane on the landing. At this conference it was realised that the nature of the operation was far beyond the capabilities of the 2ESB.

As such GHQ directed that the 2ESB come under the command of the VII Amphibious Force and that Admiral Barbey and his staff assume responsibility for both training and the operation. The problem was that 9th Division had completed all of its training with 2ESB and they were now to land in different vessels, with different crews, using different

landing techniques. Compounding these issues was the fact that a lack of shipping would mean that the division would be late arriving at their concentration point in Milne Bay leaving little time for familiarisation or rehearsals.

When the new plan was finalised between Wootten and Barbey it called for two of the 9th Division's brigades to be landed on D-Day and the third on D+1. For the assault the Australians were to be landed in waves with the first echelon of 560 troops landed from fast destroyer transports (APD), the second from 18 Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI), carrying some 3780 troops, and the third from the 2ESB to organise the beachhead.[12] From here the 2ESB and some Landing Craft, Tanks would be used to maintain the beachhead while the VII Amphibious Force were to be withdrawn to prepare for the next landing in the Cartwheel plan.

Once the VII Amphibious Force HQ was involved the plans had developed relatively smoothly. However, there was one major obstacle: the Allied Air Force. Unlike the Army and Navy, Kenney had decided not to allocate staff officers or aircraft to the training schools for the development of amphibious warfare in the SWPA and this problem was compounded when he allocated only relatively low-ranking staff officers to the planning for the 9th Division's assault. These officers were too junior to make major decisions regarding air support for the landing and soon a major rift developed over the timing of the assault.

Both Wootten and Barbey had wanted a night approach to the beaches and a landing on daybreak. Barbey required the cloak of darkness for his approach and daylight to speed the unloading of his ships and time to escape before Japanese aircraft arrived. Wootten did not want his soldiers landing in the jungle at night. The air force however would not commit fighters to the area until 0715 and thus wanted the assault delayed. Barbey ruled this out as it meant a daylight approach to the beach, forfeiting the element of surprise and exposing the troops to potentially landing under observation and fire.

With no joint commander the planning reached an impasse and the senior commanders had to bring this matter to the attention of MacArthur who decided on a compromise that pleased no one. The landing would be delayed until 0630 to allow for air cover, but no air force attack would occur to soften up the landing beaches. The air force would provide more direct support over the beaches via a combat air patrol and the navy would withdraw at 1100 rather than 1300 to protect it from air attack. In the end no one was happy, especially Wootten who could only think

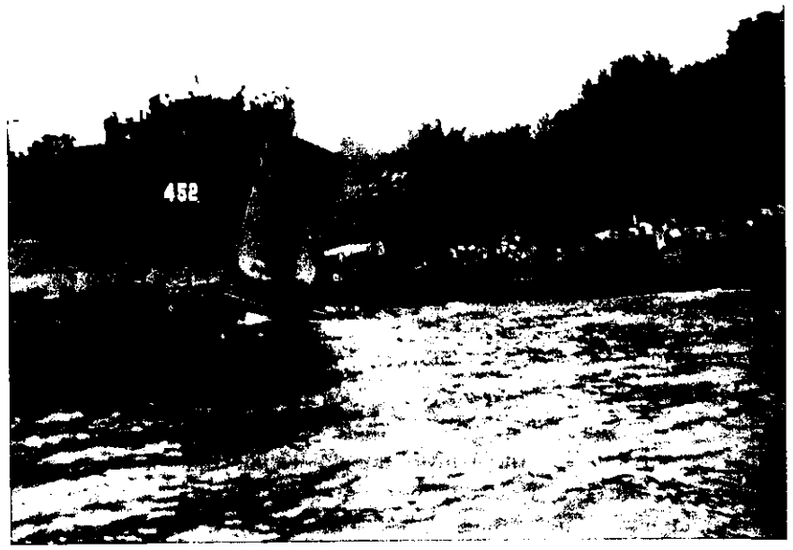
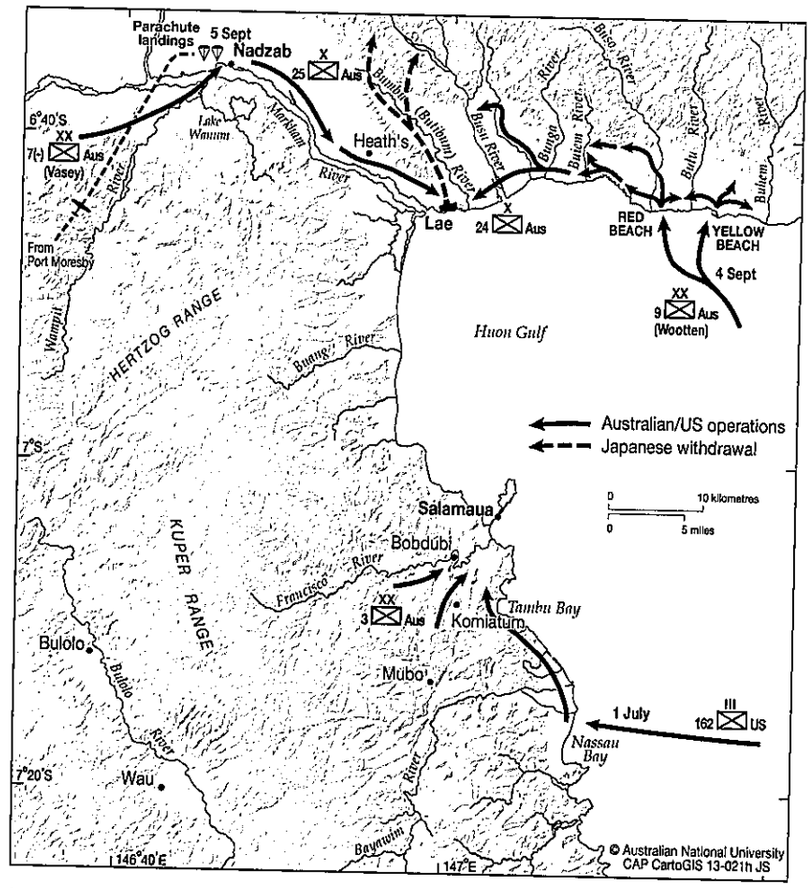


Photo 22 9th Australian Division, in the first major Australian amphibious operation since Gallipoli, lands at Lae. Landing Ships, Tank unloading on the beach outside Lae, New Guinea, 4 September 1943. (Australian War Memorial 042365)

of the four hours that he lost in unloading time and how much this would reduce the amount of supplies he could get ashore for his men.

On the evening of 3 September, nestled in the bowels of the VII Amphibious Force's transports, the 9th Division set off from Milne Bay on their way to launch the first major Australian amphibious assault since Gallipoli.[13] As dawn broke on 4 September five destroyers from the US Seventh Fleet laid down a short bombardment while the APDs lowered their boats to land the first wave. The landing proceeded smoothly and despite all expectations they met with no resistance on the beaches.

However, as the 18 LCIs nosed into shore to land almost 4000 9th Division troops, three Japanese bombers supported by six fighters streaked in from over Lae. As the troops scattered the Japanese opened up with machine guns and bombs on the beaches. One of the first bombs made a direct hit on LCI-339, tearing great chunks of steel from the main deck and flesh from the men of the 2/23rd Battalion inside. The next stick of bombs split between a row of LCIs, blowing a hole in the side



Map 17 The Australian offensives against Lae and Salamaua, September 1943

of No. 341. Amongst the carnage the 2/23rd's CO Lieutenant-Colonel Reg Wall was killed along with eight other men while another 45 were wounded. Another air raid later that afternoon would kill 34 Australian commandos and seven sailors when two Landing Ships, Tank (LSTs) were struck by torpedoes and bombs.[14]

These attacks did not halt the landing or its schedule. After four hours more than 8000 men of the 20th and 26th Brigades were ashore along with 1500 tons of supplies.[15] Onshore the troops faced only sporadic Japanese resistance and they quickly expanded the beachhead and moved inland. As soon as the protection for the landing area was complete Wootten set his troops the task of covering the 27 kilometres to Lae. The 24th

Brigade drove along the shore line protected by the 26th Brigade further inland who were in turn protected by the 2/4th Independent Company on their inland flank. The 20th Brigade, arriving on D+1, would protect the landing site.

Advancing against only a company-sized Japanese force, by 8 September the Australians had closed up on the major obstacle between the landing site and Lae, the Busu River. The river was some 700 metres wide, 1.8 metres deep and swollen by the incessant rain that had accompanied the advance over the preceding three days. It was a formidable obstacle and unless crossed quickly it would allow the Japanese force clinging to its far bank to be reinforced from Lae. The Australians had to strike hard, strike fast and strike soon, before it bogged them down for weeks. The main task of crossing the river would fall to Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Norman's 2/28th Battalion.

Norman was a sentimental and paternal commander who loved his boys and did not relish sending 700 of them across a swollen river into enemy fire, particularly when a good number of them could not swim. The latter point in particular played on his mind as the battalion had no place to ford the river, no bridging equipment or assault boat to make the crossing and the current was running at 10–12 knots. Three kilometres upstream the 26th Brigade had declared their stretch of river impassable. To not cross would endanger the entire division's advance. The 2/28th would have to go, and they would have to cross on foot.[16]

As the men prepared to advance, the battalion's veterans from the Middle East could not but help dwell on what happened just over a year before. Then, at the battle of El Alamein, the battalion had gone out on a limb after crossing another obstacle on foot – on that occasion a German minefield – and had been caught on the other side. Isolated from the rest of the brigade they had been attacked by the German Africa Korps's tanks and infantry and had been chewed to pieces. Most of the battalion had been lost in this action and the Busu River looked just as ominous.

The first attempt to get a cable across the river led to the death of the first digger to cross at the hands of some concealed Japanese infantry. Norman decided that the only place to cross was near the mouth of the river, where there was a small island halfway across. This would provide his men some protection, but it was right into the jaws of the Japanese defences. As the afternoon drifted on, the 3-inch mortars and Vickers machine guns of the battalion opened up on the far bank, and at 1730. Norman gave the order to fix bayonets and advance by column of companies in extended line. As the first company advanced:

> A dull gleam came from their bayonets ... [as they] moved forward to attempt what seemed almost impossible. Soon they were knee deep in water ... as the water deepened the torrent began to take its toll. Men were hurled towards the bar with only tin hats and weapons showing ... [soon] ... an enemy machine gun sited well back [opened fire]. From numerous points in the Kunai [grass] light machine guns opened up till at times it seemed lit by tracers ... [Japanese] mortar bombs added to the cacophony. Though men were swept away before [my] eyes ... [the] waves of companies never faltered or broke formation. There was no pause. It was a terrifying but truly magnificent spectacle to look back on ... It was a most classic example of perfect discipline and comradeship.[17]

Thirteen of Norman's men were drowned and the battalion lost 25 per cent of its equipment.[18] But the Busu was crossed and the only major obstacle between the 9th Division and Lae was overcome. With the 7th Division in their rear the Japanese at Lae started to realise that their position was fast becoming untenable.

STRIKING FROM THE SKY

While there were neither fixed Japanese defences nor a garrison at Nadzab for the troopers of the 503rd PIR to concern themselves with, the area was part of a regular Japanese patrol route. At times patrols of up to 200 Japanese had been seen in the area in the lead up to the landing, and, being only 17 kilometres from Lae, there was always the possibility of Japanese attacks on the airfield shortly after the landings.[19]

However, the Japanese had been distracted from the area by the 9th Division's landing the day before, and the arrival of the paratroopers came as a profound shock. Lieutenant-General Yoshihara Kane, then chief of staff of the Eighteenth Army, noted that when the

> large enemy transport convoy suddenly began a landing near the mouth of the Buso River [9th Australian Division] ... naturally the army had estimated that such an event would occur sooner or later, but for the front-line units it was like a peal of thunder in a clear sky. Then on the 5th huge flocks of enemy aircraft came flying over Nadzab and paratroopers began to descend, completely blotting out the sky ... while the Lae units were keeping at bay the tiger at the front gate, the wolf had appeared at the back gate.[20]

Photo 23 The landing of the 503rd US Parachute Infantry Regiment at Nadzab, New Guinea, 5 September 1943. (Australian War Memorial 128387)

The first task for the Allies at Nadzab was the rehabilitation of the airfield. That morning, as the transport aircraft carrying the 503rd PIR flew over, the 2/6th Field Company and 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion, accompanied by some 700 native carriers, emerged from their hiding place on the south bank on the Markham River and started their crossing. By 1230 they had a bridge erected, and by 1500 the bulk of the troops had crossed with the advance party, linking up with the paratroopers at 1745. The pioneers and engineers immediately got to work on burning off the kunai grass from the airstrip and preparing it to receive aircraft.

At 0940 on 6 September 1943 the first allied aircraft touched down at Nadzab. By 1100 the first transport aircraft had arrived and by the end of the day 40 planes carrying elements of the 7th Division HQ as well as the 871st US Airborne Engineering Battalion had arrived. Over the next two days a further 171 transport aircraft arrived bringing in the HQ 25th Brigade and elements of the 2/25th and 2/33rd infantry Battalions.

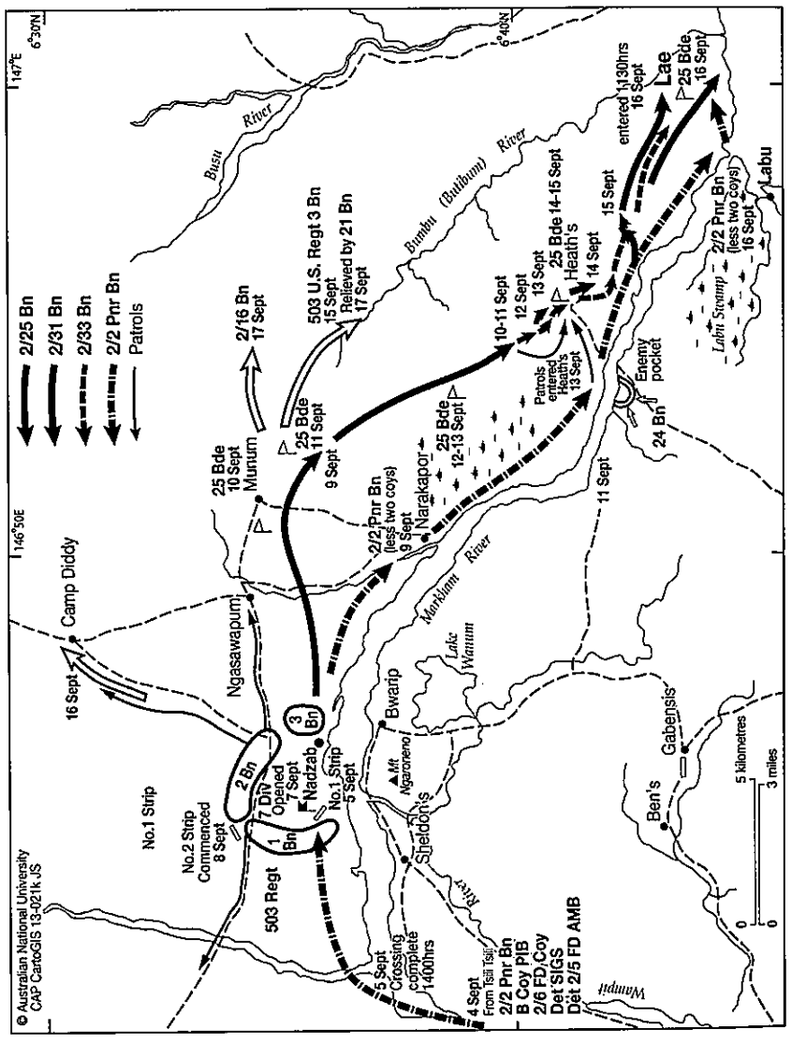
Bad weather would stop the arrival of the 7th Division's units over the next three days. On 12 September the weather cleared and the remainder of the 25th Brigade arrived. In the meantime Vasey had been busy with the troops at hand. On 9 September the leading company of the 25th Brigade advanced down the Markham Valley towards Lae meeting no resistance until the following morning when they started to receive sporadic rifle fire from Japanese outposts. On 12 September the 25th Brigade started to meet significant resistance from the Japanese and despite the poor weather hampering the build-up Vasey ordered the 25th Brigade commander, Brigadier Ken Eather, to push the rest of his troops towards Lae with the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion under command to replace the 2/31st Battalion, which had yet to arrive.[21]

As the weather cleared on 12 September the relentless build-up of the 7th Division recommenced. It was exceeding all expectations and Japanese resistance had been almost non-existent, but the air-landing of the division had not been bloodless. On 7 September a terrible accident had occurred. That morning B-24 Liberator bombers from the Fifth Air Force loaded with over 12 000 litres of fuel and four 227-kilogram bombs set off for their mission to Rabaul. At the end of Jackson's Strip sat trucks carrying men of the 2/33rd Battalion and 158th Transport Company waiting to be ferried to Nadzab. As the Australian soldiers waited the first of the Liberators roared overhead so low that 'you could have lit a smoke from . . . the exhausts'.

The second aircraft, struggling for altitude in the cold morning air, clipped a tree shearing off the port wing before crashing into another two trees and slamming into the trucks of the 2/33rd Battalion. The aircraft and its ordnance exploded. Burning aviation fuel spewed forth in all directions turning the ground to flames. Some 30 Australians were on fire and rolling on the ground, desperate to extinguish the fire. The rest of the battalion had gone to ground thinking that they were under attack. Fifteen diggers were killed outright, another 44 would die of their wounds and a further 92 were wounded. All of the crewmen from the Liberator perished. It was the greatest single loss of life in the battle for Lae.[22]

Japanese withdrawal

With the landing at Nadzab the Japanese commanders in the area realised that they would soon be cut off and surrounded by the overwhelming Allied assault if they did not act quickly. The 51st Division was pulled back from Salamaua to Lae and the slight delay between the landing of the paratroopers and the development of the airstrip had allowed the Japanese to concentrate their forces around the town. But these moves were never going to be enough to resist the Australian advance and on 8 September Nakano ordered the 51st Division and the Japanese garrison at Lae to



Map 18 7th Australian Division's assault on Nadzab and Lae, 4–16 September 1943

withdraw northwards over the Finisterre Range along the line of the Busu River via Musom and Boana. This was no easy task. The I Australian Corps was closing in, Finisterre Range was in parts 4000 metres high, and the Japanese supply system had all but broken down.

On 14 September Japanese resistance to the 7th Division was increasing and they had advanced close enough to Lae to come under fire from the entrenched Japanese artillery in the town. But in the action the day before the men of the 2/25th Battalion had routed an enemy force, capturing large amounts of equipment, including a range of documents. Amongst this stash was Nakano's order to withdraw.

The captured order soon found its way to Vasey and then up the chain of command to NGF HQ in Port Moresby. NGF HQ intelligence chief, Colonel Ken Wills, received the message and raced it down to the AIF cinema where his boss, Major-General Berryman, and the NGF General Officer C-in-C, Blamey, were enjoying a relaxing evening. Berryman showed the captured order to Blamey, who then authorised Berryman to 'send Ned [Herring] a signal telling him to block [their] escape'.[23] Berryman signalled I Australian Corps HQ at 2200 that it was 'Imperative to cut retreat, 9 Division will direct earliest not less than one battalion to each Musom and Bungalumba, 7 Division not less one battalion Boana'.[24]

By this stage Vasey had already acted vigorously on the captured order. Not wanting to weaken his advance on Lae he ordered the 21st Brigade, still in Port Moresby, forward to Nadzab and repositioned the 503rd PIR to block the line of retreat until the 21st Brigade could arrive. By now GHQ had already ordered the withdrawal of the 503rd into strategic reserve, and the 1st Battalion had returned to Port Moresby on the very day the Australians had found the captured Japanese withdrawal order. However, in light of this news Vasey was given permission to use the 3rd Battalion of the 503rd PIR until it could be replaced by the 21st Brigade. The 3rd Battalion quickly moved off the airstrip, and marched double time to the village of Yalu, 16 kilometres east of Nadzab on the Markham Valley road where they dug in. From here they were to patrol a trail on either side of a low mountain that was a possible Japanese withdrawal route.

The withdrawal order had meant that by this stage the 503rd had already clashed with the Japanese. Its first contact had occurred on 13 September. In this action B Company, 1st Battalion, had run into a fortified enemy position east of Nadzab. During the action Sergeant Edward Wojewodzic led a frontal assault on the enemy that routed them,

saving his patrol from heavy casualties. Wojewodzic though was mortally wounded in the left shoulder. He was the first US paratrooper to die in action in the Pacific.[25]

Two days later Wojewodzic's comrades in the 3rd Battalion would run into the steady stream of Japanese withdrawing from Lae. The Japanese were soon mortaring the paratrooper's position and were trying to slip past the 3rd Battalion via a nearby creek. The following morning the 3rd Battalion's CO, Lieutenant-Colonel John J. Tolson, sent out patrols. That afternoon I Company made contact with the Japanese at Log Crossing, and Tolson soon committed the rest of the battalion. As G Company moved around to flank the Japanese position Staff Sergeant Allie B. Whittington turned to see 35 Japanese moving in behind his platoon.

> Instead of seeking cover, he promptly warned his platoon leaders and opened fire on the enemy in order to provide time to prepare for the attack. His effective fire immediately killed three of the enemy and Whittington was mortally wounded at this post, his quick thinking and gallant conduct having saved his platoon from grave danger.[26]

For his actions Whittington was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Tolson's men had held back the Japanese and in the process had accounted for some 40 of the enemy. The fighting would continue for the rest of the day and throughout the night with another two paratroopers killed and two more wounded. During the night the Japanese pulled back to search for another way out of Lae.[27]

The Japanese decision to withdraw had meant that the period of 13–15 September had seen the heaviest fighting so far on the 7th Division front. While the paratroopers were attempting to cut off the Japanese retreat, the 25th Brigade was finding that the Japanese rear-guard were becoming more desperate in their attempt to slow the Australian advance. On the day of the paratrooper's first contact, the 2/25th Battalion met with incredibly strong Japanese resistance on the Markham Valley Road. The battalion had run into strong enemy resistance in an area known as Heath's Plantation and the attack by B Company was stopped by heavy fire from a concealed enemy machine-gun post that killed five members of Lieutenant R. T. C. Burns's platoon and wounded a further three. Corporal W. H. 'Billy' Richards was one of those wounded. He lay exposed to enemy fire from only 45 metres away and was bleeding copiously. At that point Private Richard Kelliher, a gardener from County Kerry Ireland who had emigrated to Brisbane in 1929,[28] noted to Private J. H. Bickle that 'I'd better go and bring him in';[29]

> suddenly, on his own initiative, and without orders [Kelliher] dashed towards the [enemy] post and hurled two grenades at it killing some of the enemy, but not all. Noting this, he then returned to his section, seized a Bren gun, again dashed forward within 30 yards of the post, and with accurate fire completely silenced it.
>
> Returning from his already gallant action Private Kelliher next requested permission to go forward again and rescue his wounded section leader. This he successfully accomplished, though under heavy fire from another position. Private Kelliher, by these actions, acted as an inspiration to everyone in his platoon and not only enabled the advance to continue, but also saved his section leader's life.[30]

One Japanese officer and eight other ranks were later found dead in the weapon pit. For his most conspicuous bravery and extreme devotion to duty in the face of heavy enemy fire, which resulted in the capture of this strong enemy position, Kelliher was awarded the Victoria Cross. It was a selfless act of bravery, made even more extraordinary by the fact that in the battalion's last campaign, and Kelliher's first and only other action, at the Beachheads battle on 12 November 1942, he had been accused by his company commander of cowardice in the face of the enemy.

Kelliher had been evacuated to Australia shortly after the 12 November 1942 incident with malaria and on return to his battalion after the campaign in Queensland accusations surfaced about his earlier conduct and he was formally charged and found guilty of 'misbehaving before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice'. The charge was eventually quashed, with the Judge Advocate General declaring that the evidence against him was based on hearsay and that he should never have been found guilty.[31] The accusation must, however, have lingered and it would most certainly have followed Kelliher to New Guinea in September 1943, especially in such a close-knit community as an infantry battalion. On 13 September 1943, however, Kelliher had proven to everyone the courage of his convictions.

While Vasey and his men were rushing to stem the Japanese withdrawal, the General Officer C-in-C I Australian Corps, Ned Herring, dithered. He had objected to Berryman's order directing the placement of individual units in his corps rather than providing for a broad directive or a mission order. He felt so affronted by this breach of protocol he rang Berryman at 0400 the following morning to complain. Blamey interjected, conceding that Berryman may have overstepped the mark, but reinforcing that 'energetic action was to be taken' in regard to the Japanese withdrawal.[32]

Photo 24 Troops of the 7th Division entering Lae along a road littered with debris from air and artillery bombardments, 16 September 1943. (Australian War Memorial 128389)

Blamey's call for action had very little effect on Herring. He had brought his legal training to bear in his approach to procedure and he expended his energy on debating command arrangements with the C-in-C rather than defeating the Japanese. It had taken him six hours after the order was sent to ring Berryman and complain and after talking to Blamey, Herring finally signalled Vasey and Wootten to move to block the Japanese retreat. However, this signal was 'diplomatically worded', and while Vasey had already taken positive action in response to the captured order, the 9th Division's GOC, George Wootten, proved as interested in the news of a Japanese retreat as his corps commander. Berryman recorded in his diary that he 'understand[s] from LOs [Liaison Officers] report that 2/24 Bn [9 Div] did not get moving until afternoon 15 September'.[33]

Berryman was misinformed. The 9th Division's report on operations for 15 September states that, 'there was no variation in the orders to the two forward brigades for their operations on this day'.[34] It was in fact not until first light on 16 September that 2/24th Battalion started to move towards Musom to attempt to cut off the Japanese retreat.[35] This delay gave the Japanese three days to continue their withdrawal after the

intelligence was confirmed and Wootten moved one less battalion to cut them off than Berryman had originally specified.

Both Herring and Wootten remained fixed on Lae. Herring had been originally ordered to 'capture' the town rather than destroy its garrison or prevent it from escaping. But with the capture of the Japanese order to withdraw, dated 8 September, it was inevitable that the Australians would easily take the town. What was now imperative was to ensure that the fleeing enemy was punished. Making little effort to destroy this force, as Herring and Wootten did, was a major mistake and as a result approximately 8000 of the Japanese garrison escaped. Nakano and his men's journey over the Finisterre Range was horrendous and casualties were heavy, but large numbers of these troops would recover to fight the Australians later in the war. When the 7th Division entered Lae on 16 September the most resistance they received was from the 9th Division's artillery who mistakenly shelled their mates. The US Fifth Air Force meanwhile accidently strafed both divisions.

The escape of the Japanese garrison had demonstrated that Ned Herring was out of his depth in an independent corps command. He had never commanded a division in action; rather, he had been promoted to command a corps in New Guinea in 1942 based on his short time commanding Northern Territory Force and his reputation for following orders to the letter. He had performed well in Papua during the Kokoda operation while he was working under very close supervision from Blamey, but he was a problematic commander when he operated more independently. Herring had struggled in his command at the beachheads in late 1942 and January 1943 and he had proven troublesome in his command of NGF during the masking operations against Salamaua. Now he had let a major Japanese force slip through his fingers. His performance during Phase II of Postern was not an improvement; he was to clash heavily with both the US Navy and senior Australian officers during the operations at Finschhafen (see chapter 11) which meant that less than a month after the fall of Lae, Blamey would replace him with Lieutenant-General Leslie Morshead. Herring would retire from the Army to become chief justice of Victoria on 10 February 1944.

THE FIRST TEAM

The victory at Lae had seen a number of 'firsts' in Australian military history and Allied operations in the Pacific. It was the first major coordinated sea, air and land assault in Australian history[36] and the first in the

SWPA; it saw the first tactical employment of parachute troops in the Pacific and it was the first combination of parachute troops and air-landing troops with an amphibious assault in the Pacific War.[37] These were all major achievements.

Most significantly the success at Lae represented a major change in operations from the 1942 campaign in Papua. In 1942 the Allies in SWPA had to fight a land campaign in a maritime environment. By 1943 their air and naval strength meant that they were able to employ what we would now call a maritime strategy. Where at Kokoda and the beachheads the Allies were forced to undertake attrition-style frontal assaults, at Lae they had implemented a classic double envelopment using manoeuvre warfare.

The operation at Lae was undertaken on the back of the masking operation at Salamaua (chapter 9). This operation had bought time for the Allies to train the assault troops, build up supplies and equipment and establish air superiority. It had taken only 12 days from the amphibious assault until the Japanese had been ejected from their main base in New Guinea. In the process it had cost the 9th Division and 7th Division 115 killed, 501 wounded and 73 missing.[38] In contrast the battle of the beachheads, fought after Kokoda to expel the Japanese from Papua, lasted 64 days and cost the Allies some 6900 casualties.[39] In the South Pacific during the middle of 1943 the battle for New Georgia had cost US ground forces 1195 dead and 4000 wounded in an operation that had lasted 67 days.[40]

The victory at Lae was 'an outstanding orchestration of the sea, land and air forces of two countries'.[41] It was such a brilliant success that Blamey was able to cancel a number of scheduled follow-on forces, including an armoured brigade, which allowed Lae to be quickly developed as a major base to support Phase II of Postern. Nadzab was also quickly developed and it eventually became the largest Allied airbase in New Guinea. From here operations would accelerate with the landing at Finschhafen brought forward and a daring plan to strike up the Markham Valley put in place. The rapid success at Lae, the low casualties and the strategic significance of this victory meant that, despite being little known, this operation stands out as one of the most successful in Australian military history.

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CHAPTER 10

Operations in the Markham and Ramu Valleys

Lachlan Grant

Each man had a look in his eyes as if he had been through hell. An official photographer took the portraits of survivors, some wounded, at Shaggy Ridge after a vicious encounter during the campaign in the Markham and Ramu Valleys. Hell, for them, had been the Finisterre Range. The name meant 'the ends of the earth', and few outsiders had entered this isolated region before the war. Although the operations in the Markham and Ramu Valleys is perhaps the least prominent or well known of the campaigns fought by the 7th Australian Division during the course of the Second World War, it featured one of the most successful commando operations of the war, as well as prolonged, bitter, close-knit fighting to capture a razorback known as Shaggy Ridge. For those who fought there, the Finisterres would never be forgotten. For some veterans of earlier campaigns in North Africa, the Middle East and Papua, it would be the Finisterres that they regarded as the toughest or the lowest point of their war.

With the successful liberation of Lae on 16 September 1943, Allied attention focused on the recapture of the entire Huon Peninsula. In unison with the planned 9th Australian Division advance along the coastline to Finschhafen and eventually Sio, the 7th Division was ordered to advance inland from Nadzab up the Markham and Ramu Valleys to Bogadjim. This would complete a pincer movement on the Japanese forces on the peninsula. It was therefore the main task of the 7th Division, in accordance with General Blamey's instructions, to prevent any Japanese encroachment down the Markham Valley and thereby protect the Allied