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THE FIGHT FOR NEW GUINEA DURING WORLD WAR II

Part of the Pacific World region in what often is called Oceania, New Guinea lies just south the equator about one hundred miles north of Cape York Peninsula in northeastern Australia. After Greenland, New Guinea is the second largest island in the world with a land mass of about three hundred thousand square miles. The island stretches fifteen hundred miles east to west and roughly four hundred miles north to south at its tallest point. As a lengthy physical extension from the Malaysian peninsula and its myriad islands in southeast Asia, New Guinea is an important land bridge or stepping stone between the Asian and the Australian continents. As the culturally distinct westernmost part of the Melanesian archipelagoes of the Pacific World, New Guinea is a gateway or transition zone between the southwest Pacific and southeast Asia. Since it occupies this important position just off the Great Barrier Reef region of Australia, New Guinea is central to the geographical triangle of southeast Asia to its west, the Australian continent to its south, and the south Pacific region to its east.¹

Historically, a certain backwardness has left its mark on this large strategic island. Archaic modes of transportation with limited port and storage facilities leave underdeveloped significant deposits of gold, copper, natural gas, and crude oil, and sizeable stands of timber. The extreme geographical terrain of very high mountain ranges, deep river valleys, and swampy plains, as well as the oppressive tropical climate, make advancement toward full development

¹See Christopher L. Salter, et al., *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 295, 365-369.

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nearly impossible.² The cultural divisiveness of the native populations with over seven hundred indigenous languages and very different beliefs, customs, and traditions thwarts efforts toward modern industrialization. Over sixty percent of the populace of the island's present-day political entities—Papua New Guinea in the eastern half and the Irian Jaya province of Indonesia in the western half—remain employed in small-scale agricultural occupations. Consequently, the geographical advantage of the big island as a transition zone is offset by the fact that, due to these limitations, it is a remote backwater, only an outpost.³ As such, European and Asian aggressor nations have sought to exploit the island's resources for industrial or strategic benefit.

Japanese occupation of New Guinea during World War II [hereafter, WWII] followed over one hundred years of Dutch settlement in the west and over fifty years of German and then British involvement in the east. The Netherlands still ruled Dutch New Guinea, but the Territory of Papua had passed from British to Australian control. From mid-summer 1940 through the spring of 1941, international political events, sparked by the advance of Axis troops in Europe and the Middle East, made it attractive for Japan to pursue long held ambitions for empire in

²“A large portion of the island is still unexplored, as dense rain forests, huge swamps, and rugged mountains make its interior almost inaccessible, except to native tribes.” See the article on “New Guinea” in *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, 1997 edition (Cambridge, MA: SoftKey Multimedia, 1996), n.p.

³See Simon Rigge, *War in the Outposts*, eds. Gerald Simons, et al., World War II Series (Chicago: Time-Life Books, 1980), 177-178.

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southeast Asia and the Pacific. The intended defensive perimeter for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere included New Guinea as a very important south central border with Australia.⁴ After it bombed the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces pushed aggressively through the southwest Pacific. By April 1942, their superior air and naval power softened Allied resistance to strategic amphibious landings, and this positioned the Japanese army to oust the outgunned and outnumbered Dutch and Australian forces from the island's lengthy 1,600 mile northern coastline.⁵ Australia then lay open to threat, as Japanese bombers from Rabaul on New Britain had attacked Darwin since the middle of February. A valiant and violent struggle for New Guinea and its neighboring islands transpired over the course of the next three years. The battle lines began in the southeast and gradually moved northwest along the length of the big island as the war progressed. This struggle for New Guinea by Japan and the Allies during a long series of protracted engagements represented a key shift in the overall war in the Pacific—the end of the advance of Japanese forces toward Australia and the beginning of the advance of Allied forces northward toward Japan.⁶

⁴See Charles Messenger, *World War Two Chronological Atlas: When, Where, How and Why* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989), 72-73.

⁵See Harry A. Gailey, *The War in the Pacific from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 133ff.

⁶Rigge's assessment is apropos, "Throughout the last five months of 1942 and well into 1943, under the most appalling combat conditions of the War, Australians and Americans fought back from within an eyelash of defeat to end the Japanese threat to Australia and to a vital American life line to the far Pacific. A few tireless airmen swung the balance in New Guinea, keeping the Allies supplied with food and medical necessities, while the Japanese were starving and dying of virulent jungle diseases." *War in the Outposts*, 178.

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In spite of the Pacific's reputed secondary importance to the European Theater, it is still surprising that the New Guinea campaigns of WWII have received minimal attention by historians in comparison with other Pacific island battles. As one military interpreter laments:

The campaign on New Guinea is all but forgotten except by those who served there. Battles with names like Tarawa, Saipan, and Iwo Jima overshadow it. Yet Allied operations in New Guinea were essential to the U.S. Navy's drive across the Central Pacific and to the U.S. Army's liberation of the Philippine Islands from Japanese occupation. The remorseless Allied advance along the northern New Guinea coastline toward the Philippines forced the Japanese to divert precious ships, planes, and men who might otherwise have reinforced their crumbling Central Pacific front.⁷

Drea's assessment may exaggerate the possibility of a lacunae in WWII historiography, but his viewpoint does highlight an important omission of emphasis on New Guinea.

This is specially true when the size and geography of the island, the difficult nature of the fighting, and the overall effect of key battles are seen in comparison with what frequently are viewed as weightier conflicts. For example, the Vietnam War encompassed a land area of only about 130,000 square miles or two-fifths the size of New Guinea. New Guinea's battleground, excluding air, ocean, and adjoining arenas, more than doubled that in Vietnam. In New Guinea, the harsh climate and restrictive terrain equaled or surpassed what soldiers experienced in Vietnam and made combat maneuvers slow and sometimes impossible. WWII casualties from New Guinea were higher substantially with respect to a much shorter period of fighting than in Vietnam. And in Vietnam the geopolitical changes impacted only two nations directly and many more nations indirectly. But in New Guinea the turning point in Japanese occupation directly

⁷Edward J. Drea, *New Guinea: 24 January 1943 - 31 December 1944*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, n.d.), 3.

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altered the course for many nations of southeast Asia, the southwest and central Pacific, and the continent of Australia as well. The Korean War, or “The Forgotten War,” also paled by way of comparison. But both Vietnam and Korean conflicts have been given greater importance and more attention than the New Guinea campaigns. The battle for New Guinea cannot escape the inevitable fate of lesser consideration under the larger heading of the Pacific War, or the Pacific Theater, during WWII.

General histories of WWII in the Pacific illustrate this trend toward inclusion of New Guinea as one engagement among many that are crucial to the Allied outcome against Japan. Ronald Spector’s *Eagle Against the Sun* summarily treats the capitulation of the island to the Japanese, but Spector relegates this and each successive phase of the struggle for New Guinea to an objective other than the capture of the island itself.⁸ The Japanese occupation of the island stirs Australian and American concern for “The Vital Flank” that protects Australia. The Allied counteroffensive from Port Moresby across the Owen Stanley Mountains to Gona and Buna and then to Salamaua and Lae is one of the “Routes to Rabaul.” Allied successes on New Guinea are part of many “Jungle Victories” and the overall operation named “CARTWHEEL.” Even the fierce fighting to reclaim Wewak, Aitape, Hollandia, Wakde Island, and Biak Island is subsumed under the overarching rivalry between service commands as to priority of operations and General Douglas MacArthur’s desire to return to the Philippines, i.e., “They Are Waiting for Me There.” An interconnectedness between New Guinea and its immediate south Pacific environment does

⁸Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (1984; repr., New York: Random House, 1985), 138, 150-151, 155-160, 185-190, 214-217, 285-294.

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exist. As Spector notes, “A distinguished historian of the Pacific War has observed that the close relationship between the Japanese efforts at Biak and their reaction to the Marianas invasion was ‘a striking illustration of the mutual interdependence of the Allied Southwest and Central Pacific Areas.’”⁹ But Spector’s treatment of the conflict, while faithful to his perspective “from the American point of view,” fails to sort out the action for New Guinea proper.

Dan van der Vat’s *The Pacific Campaign* recounts, as he calls it, the “stupendous error” and “classical tragedy” of Japan—“how Japan went to war and won all its objectives in short order, how it was checked and finally driven back across the Pacific.”¹⁰ New Guinea plainly is set within the framework of the larger conflict at sea, supposedly from American and Japanese viewpoints equally, but more realistically:

The rapacious and brutal Japan of the [American] generals is not equated with the United States, which did not want war yet became the avenging ‘arsenal of democracy.’ There was no comparison; there was only naked aggression met by irresistible force. No less morally than militarily, no less ethically than economically, it was a most unequal fight which Japan should never have begun.¹¹

⁹Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 293, citing Robert Ross Smith, *The Approach to the Philippines*, U.S. Army in World War II, *The War in the Pacific*, eds. Douglas Kinnard, et al. (1952; repr., Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996), 362.

¹⁰Dan van der Vat, *The Pacific Campaign: The U.S. - Japanese Naval War 1941 - 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 15.

¹¹Ibid.

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But the occupation of New Guinea is never seen as a cardinal mistake by the Japanese. For Van der Vat, New Guinea plays a lesser role that is subsidiary to the whole, although he does offer an entire chapter to “Papua and Guadalcanal.”¹²

The histories for popular consumption are little better, but a welcome exception is Rafael Steinberg’s *Island Fighting* in the Time-Life WWII series. In a work designed to present only a condensed overview, the lack of details comes as no surprise. But Steinberg’s brief volume of two hundred pages is filled with considerable text on New Guinea’s battles, like “Treadmill in Papua” (Chapter 2) and “A Painful Path for Victory [the Kokoda Track across the Owen Stanley Range]” (Chapter 3), and a number of action photographs. Aitape, Biak, Hollandia, Shaggy Ridge, Wau, Lae and Salamaua, Noemfoor Island, Nadzab, Vogelkop Peninsula, and Wakde Island all receive their due, along with Port Moresby.¹³

Better too is the emphasis given to New Guinea in Harry Gailey’s *The War in the Pacific*. Gailey gives a detailed narration of all major and many minor campaigns in the Pacific Theatre from 7 December 1941 through the summer of 1945 and nicely intermingles the different perspectives of American and Japanese military and political leaders for each of the battles.

¹²Ibid., 199ff. Van der Vat’s emphasis parallels that of Spector in seeing the campaign for Gona and Buna as a launching pad for operations against the Japanese stronghold on Rabaul. He also gives about twice the space to Guadalcanal as to the Allied advance across the Owen Stanley Range. For a similar reading, compare Leo Hirrel, *Bismarck Archipelago, 15 December 1943 - 27 November 1944*, *The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, n.d.).

¹³Rafael Steinberg, *Island Fighting*, eds. William K. Goolrick, et al., *World War II Series* (Chicago: Time-Life Books, 1978), 6-7, 19, 46-57, 58-71, 98-99, 135-136, 140-149.

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Throughout this superb synthesis, Gailey does not lose sight of the truth that diplomatic posturing and military structuring always preceded the battles, and he shows this for all levels of each campaign. Gailey assuredly believes that “military historiography since the war reflects the prewar bias of U.S. policy by focusing on events in Europe. This is not to imply that the Pacific war has been completely overlooked . . . [but] many deadly campaigns once thought to have been critical have been all but ignored.”¹⁴

The author intends to correct this oversight by omitting entirely the Asian land war—the China-Burma-India theater—and its complex geopolitical problems. This frees him to treat in more detail those battles previously neglected, such as actions in the Solomon Islands, the devastating Peleliu encounter, American and Australian engagements along the lengthy New Guinea coast, and the Allied conquest of the Philippines. The effort for New Guinea receives comprehensive evaluation in Gailey’s sections “The Tide Turns: New Guinea and Bougainville” (Chapter 8) and “Victory in New Guinea” (Chapter 10).¹⁵ The “Victory in New Guinea” chapter notably details a segment of fierce fighting commonly ignored by most historians—the Allied drive westward past Hollandia through old Dutch New Guinea to the Vogelkop Peninsula.

The most complete discussions about plans, tactics, and the execution of operations on New Guinea, however, as well as copious statistics about logistics, personnel, and supplies, come

¹⁴Gailey, *War in the Pacific*, ix.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 209ff., 271ff.

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from official postwar treatments by military experts, such as Robert Ross Smith,¹⁶ Samuel Eliot Morison,¹⁷ Samuel Milner,¹⁸ and the Australian David Dexter.¹⁹ Milner emphasizes the fight for Papua throughout 1942 and into early 1943, while Smith concentrates his attention on the battles of 1943 and 1944 along New Guinea's northwestern coast. Morison gives a concise but necessary Naval perspective, and Dexter provides an excellent narration of the efforts by Australia's army. From another point of view—that of the Army Air Forces—Richard L. Watson describes “The Papuan Campaign” and Frank Futrell relates Allied successes in “Hollandia” and the “Final Victory in New Guinea.”²⁰ The reading of official military history can be dry, and the official view may be biased. But these works remain unrivaled for copious data and precise description of events.

¹⁶Smith, *Approach to the Philippines*.

¹⁷Samuel Eliot Morison, *New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944 - August 1944*, Vol. VIII, History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953).

¹⁸Samuel Milner, *Victory in Papua*, U.S. Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, eds. Douglas Kinnard, et al. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1959). For a brief discussion of Papua, see Charles R. Anderson, *Papua, 23 July 1942 - 23 January 1943*, The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, n.d.).

¹⁹David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, Vol. 6, Australia in the War of 1939 - 45, The Army (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961).

²⁰See Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944*, Vol. 4, The Army Air Forces in World War II (1950; repr., Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1977), 92ff., 575ff., 615ff. For an overview of the Air Force role, see Gary Null, *Weapon of Denial: Air Power and the Battle for New Guinea*, The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1995).

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Several journal articles supplement the general works, and these fill in gaps on a variety of topics. These include descriptions of command and leadership,²¹ communications and intelligence,²² air operations in a jungle environment,²³ combat training,²⁴ Japanese tactics in New Guinea,²⁵ the Buna campaign,²⁶ the fighting on Biak Island,²⁷ various unit or organizational

²¹Jon T. Hoffman, "The Legacy and Lessons of the New Guinea Campaign," *Marine Corps Gazette* 77 (9/1993): 74-77; Louis Morton, "Crisis in the Pacific," *Military Review* 46 (4/1966): 12-21; Kevin C. Holzimmer, "Walter Krueger, Douglas MacArthur, and the Pacific War: The Wakde-Sarmi Campaign as a Case Study," *Journal of Military History* 59 (4/1995): 661-685.

²²Edward J. Drea, "Ultra Intelligence and General Douglas MacArthur's Leap to Hollandia, January - April, 1944," *Intelligence and National Security* [Great Britain] 5 (2/1990): 323-349; D. M. Horner, "Special Intelligence in the South-West Pacific Area in World War II," *Australian Outlook* [Australia] 32 (3/1978): 310-327.

²³Lowell W. Newton, "Jungle Airfields," *Air Power History* 42 (3/1995): 16-23; Kirk A. Lear, "American Parachute Assaults in the South West Pacific," *Air Power History* 42 (3/1995): 4-15.

²⁴John F. Shortal, "Hollandia: A Training Victory," *Military Review* 66 (5/1986): 40-48.

²⁵Akio Yuki, "Kamikaze Demolition Team," *Marine Corps Gazette* 48 (4/1964): 32-36.

²⁶Mark Sufrin, "Take Buna or Don't Come Back Alive," *American History Illustrated* 5 (7/1970): 4-10, 43-47; Tom Doherty, "Buna: The Red Arrow Division's Heart of Darkness," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 77 (2/1993-94): 109-138; Dominic J. Caraccilo, "A Leavenworth Nightmare: The Battle for Buna," *Journal of America's Military Past* 21 (1/1994): 40-56.

²⁷Kenneth J. Deacon, "Cave Warfare on Biak Island, 1944," *Military Engineer* 54 (1-2/1962): 4-6; Roger E. Lawless, "The Biak Operation," *Military Review* 33 (5/1953): 53-62.

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involvement on New Guinea,²⁸ disease and medical problems,²⁹ Australian and native soldiers,³⁰ religious groups and their involvement in the war,³¹ and a number of personal reminiscences.³²

²⁸Gregory S. Pokrass, "The Red Arrow Division in New Guinea," *Milwaukee History* 6 (3/1983): 83-91; Leo M. Myers, "The Almost Forgotten Emergency Rescue Squadrons," *Aero Album* 3 (4/1970): 2-7; Frank Hostnik and John Rury, "Michigan Medics in Action: The 107th Medical Battalion in World War II," *Michigan History* 72 (1/1988): 12-18.

²⁹Robert J. T. Joy, "Malaria in American Troops in the South and Southwest Pacific in World War II," *Medical History* [Great Britain] 43 (2/1999): 192-207; Alison Pilger, "Courage, Endurance and Initiative: Medical Evacuation from the Kokoda Tract, August - October 1942," *War & Society* [Australia] 11 (1/1993): 53-72; Bryant J. Allen, "A Bomb or a Bullet or the Bloody Flux? Population Change in the Aitape Inland, Papua New Guinea, 1941 - 1945," *Journal of Pacific History* [Australia] 18 (4/1983): 218-235.

³⁰Edward J. Drea, "'Great Patience Is Needed': America Encounters Australia, 1942," *War & Society* [Australia] 11 (1/1993): 21-51; Leo Scheps, "Chimbu Participation in the Pacific War," *Journal of Pacific History* [Australia] 30 (1/1995): 76-86; Hank Nelson, "Hold the Good Name of the Soldier: The Discipline of Papuan and New Guinea Infantry Battalions, 1940 - 1946," *Journal of Pacific History* [Australia] 15 (4/1980): 216-220.

³¹Ross MacKay, "The War Years: Methodists in Papua 1942 - 1945," *Journal of Pacific History* [Australia] 27 (1/1992): 29-43; H. N. Nelson, "Loyalties at Sword-Point: The Lutheran Missionaries in Wartime New Guinea, 1939 - 1945," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* [Australia] 24 (2/1978): 199-217.

³²John Carver Edwards, "A Yank's Time in Hell: Port Moresby in the Summer of '42," *Manuscripts* 40 (2/1988): 127-138; Sue Lynn McGuire, "'Things Are Tough All Over': An American Fighter Pilot in New Guinea," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 52 (2/1993): 113-121; Frank F. Mathias, "A Memoir is as a Memoirist Does: A Kentucky Bandsman in World War II," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 92 (3/1994): 288-304; Charles P. O'Sullivan, "Sully's Saga: Braving the Jungles of Papua-New Guinea, 1943," *Air Power History* 41 (4/1994): 4-17; Robert G. Webb, "The Pacific Odyssey of Capt. William H. Daly and the 147th Field Artillery Regiment," *South Dakota History* 23 (2/1993): 101-121; Clyde D. Gessel, "Shaping Up the Troops: A Reminiscence of World War II," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 63 (2/1995): 172-175.

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Biographies, memoirs, and oral histories typically come from top commanders, and these reminiscences serve a general usefulness. But they lack the common soldier's perspective and do not give a more balanced picture to the story. A few monographs, though, tell the history as an eyewitness account from actual combatants—sometimes haunting, sometimes humorous, but always exciting and vivid. Older works include an Army officer's memoirs,³³ a journalist's letters to his family,³⁴ a professional writer's descriptions about military life,³⁵ and an Australian correspondent's view of the harsh fighting.³⁶ More recent works relate anecdotes from a medley of troops with respect to a significant battle,³⁷ a fighter pilot's view of the New Guinea skies,³⁸ and personal diary entries from a captain in the Army Corp of Engineers.³⁹

Finally, Stephen Taaffe's recent book, *MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign*, builds upon his dissertation ("MacArthur's New Guinea Road, February - September

³³Harold Riegelman, *Caves of Biak* (New York: Dial Press, 1955).

³⁴Dallas D. Moody, *Aerial Gunner from Virginia: The Letters of Don Moody to His Family During 1944* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1950).

³⁵E. J. Kahn, Jr., *G. I. Jungle: An American Soldier in Australia and New Guinea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

³⁶George H. Johnston, *The Toughest Fighting in the World* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1943).

³⁷Lida Mayo, *Bloody Buna* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

³⁸Wayne P. Rothgeb, *New Guinea Skies: A Fighter Pilot's View of World War II* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1992).

³⁹Hyman Samuelson, *Love, War, and the 96th Engineers (Colored): The World War II New Guinea Diaries of Captain Hyman Samuelson*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

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1944) to present a unified look at the Allied movement northwest across the island to push the Japanese out of the region.⁴⁰ This work acknowledges the New Guinea War as an entity within itself, a distinct battlefield, and a tribute to the thousands who served and died there in defense of their nation's ideals. It represents a move in the right direction toward greater inclusion of New Guinea in World War II historiography.

⁴⁰Stephen R. Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

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