

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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## THE RAAF AT THE BATTLE OF MILNE BAY

The Battle of Milne Bay, fought between Allied and Japanese forces in August-September 1942, was an important victory for the Allies. It was the first time that Japanese forces had been defeated on land, shattering the myth of Japanese invincibility built up after a succession of victories across South-East Asia. That the Allied forces at Milne Bay were predominantly Australian gave a boost to the morale of Australian servicemen and civilians alike. One of the main characteristics of the battle was the close liaison between the Army and RAAF, each arm contributing key capabilities to the eventual victory.

The Japanese intent in attacking Milne Bay was to establish an advanced operating base that could support their thrust along the Kokoda Track to Port Moresby and defend against Allied air and maritime forces operating in the regions of the Solomon and Coral Seas. The deep bay offered a well-sheltered anchorage, while the steep mountains that surrounded the area provided some security from land attack.

Importantly, the flat ground between the mountains and the water was suitable for the construction of air bases.

Fortunately, the Allies were also well aware of Milne Bay's potential, and had been moving ground troops, engineers and aircraft into the area throughout July 1942. By 24 August, the Allies had three airfields at various stages of completion, initially named Nos 1, 2 and 3 Strip. The Australian Army deployed its 7th and 18th Infantry Brigades to the area, complemented by a force of American airfield engineers—in total a force of around 8,800 personnel. The RAAF's commitment to the Milne Bay force was Nos 75 and 76 Squadrons equipped with Kittyhawk fighters, a flight of Hudson reconnaissance aircraft from No 6 Squadron, No 37 Radar Station and No

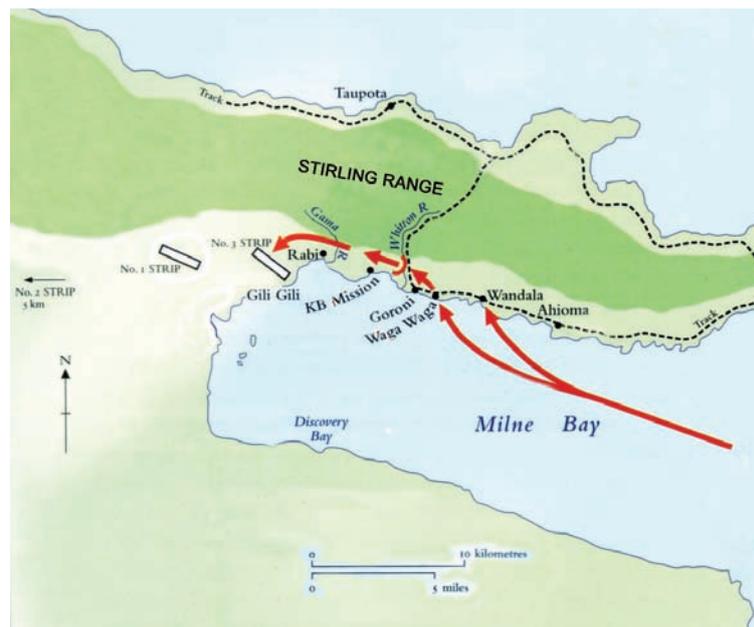
8 Fighter Control Unit. A mobile torpedo unit was also pre-positioned to cater for a future deployment of No 100 Squadron's Beaufort torpedo bombers.

The preparations by the Allies proved well justified. On 25 August, Kittyhawks of 75 Squadron attacked a force of seven Japanese landing barges that were temporarily ashore on Goodenough Island, just 100 kilometres north-west of Milne Bay. The raid was an unqualified success, with all seven barges destroyed (along with their cargoes) and the 353 marines of the Sasebo Special Naval Landing

Force left marooned. On the same day a Japanese invasion convoy of two cruisers, three destroyers, two submarines, two transport ships and various smaller vessels arrived in the area. Immediate attacks on this convoy were conducted by 6, 75 and 76 Squadrons, with additional attacks conducted by Hudsons of 32 Squadron flying from Horn Island and USAAF B-17 Flying Fortresses based at Mareeba, North Queensland.

Unfortunately bad weather made locating and targeting the ships difficult, and very early on the morning of 26 August, the Japanese were able to move into Milne Bay and begin landing troops on the northern shore.

Sunrise revealed that a beachhead consisting of a large number of troops, headquarters and supply dumps had been established between Waga Waga and Wanadala, a little over 10 kilometres east of No 3 Strip near Gili Gili. With the elements of the 61st Battalion of 7 Brigade already in contact with the Japanese, the Kittyhawks of 75 and 76 Squadrons and Hudsons of 6 Squadron immediately began strafing troop concentrations and destroyed landing barges, vehicles, and other targets. Despite this significant blow, and the resistance put up



by the Army's 7th Brigade, a Japanese force supported by two light tanks was able to advance west along a narrow strip of land between the Bay and Stirling Range towards No 3 Strip. By the night of the 27th, the Australian troops were defending the perimeter of the airfield, and it was here that the fiercest fighting took place. On the night of 31 August the Australian troops repelled three massed charges and endured constant machinegun and sniper attacks.



*Armourers of 75 Squadron fixing a bomb to a Kittyhawk at Milne Bay*

Throughout this period and in the days following, the RAAF provided close air support to the troops in contact, and maintained attacks on command centres, artillery, supplies and reinforcements that the Japanese kept pushing forward into the battle. Much of the fighting was occurring in such close proximity to the Gili Gili defences that the Kittyhawks were coming into action almost before their undercarriages were fully retracted. The close liaison between RAAF and Army commands was vital in coordinating these air attacks.

Complicating the RAAF's efforts to maintain direct support to the Army were the persistent air raids conducted by Japanese fighters and dive bombers on the airfields. To assist, Allied aircraft from the broader region also conducted attacks on the Japanese forces. This included Beaufighters from 30 Squadron in Townsville, and Beauforts from No 100 Squadron that carried out the first ever aerial torpedo attack by the RAAF just a day after deploying from Laverton, Victoria.

Of great significance to the air effort was the work carried out by the ground crews. Despite suffering

attacks by Japanese aircraft, the work of the maintenance and support personnel at the Milne Bay airfields was magnificent. Repair and maintenance work was a continuous round-the-clock operation, rectifying damage caused not just by the enemy, but by the persistent rain that found its way into fuel systems and electrical systems, and mud that tore away undercarriage components and damaged flight controls during landings. Working out in the open, under fire, and with the most basic of tools, the ground crews consistently made sufficient numbers of aircraft available to fight on every day of the battle.

The turning point of the battle came when it was appreciated by the operational commander, Major General Cyril Clowes, that the Japanese were unable to transport any forces to threaten the flanks or rear of the Australian positions. The destruction of the landing barges on Goodenough Island and in Milne Bay by the RAAF was a significant factor in limiting the Japanese to just one line of attack. Clowes was able to commit the full strength of his brigades to forcing the Japanese back to their initial landing point.

Over the night of 6-7 September the last of the Japanese troops were evacuated under the cover of a naval bombardment. They had failed in their attempt to take the Australian positions and suffered 1580 personnel killed, wounded or missing in action. The RAAF and Army had combined into an effective joint force that dealt a decisive blow on an enemy that had never before tasted defeat.

- *Optimal integration of air and land power generates an effect in the battlespace far beyond what is possible through operating independently.*
- *Ground based support is critical to the sustainment of air operations.*

*'Palm fronds, bullets and Japanese snipers were pouring down with the rain.'*

Australian soldier at Milne Bay, asked to describe the effectiveness of Kittyhawk gunfire



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