

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



Issue 70, July 2007

WAU, NEW GUINEA - THE FORGOTTEN AIRLIFT

Allied guerrilla operations against Japanese forces in the Bulolo Valley of Papua New Guinea from May 1942, culminating in the Battle of Wau in January 1943, were as important to Allied victory in the South-West Pacific as the better known battles of Milne Bay and Kokoda. At Wau, air support—particularly airlift—was critical to the Allied success. Without vital airlift, the effective defence of Wau would not have been possible.

Following Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua on the north coast of New Guinea in March 1942, members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) retreated into the mountains where they conducted guerrilla operations from a base at Wau. Their only form of resupply was native carriers who brought loads through the rugged Owen Stanley Mountains from the south coast. As this trickle of supplies could barely support the small guerrilla force, no major Allied land operation was possible without a major upgrade to the surface supply line or a major airlift operation.



In order to increase the pressure on the Japanese forces around Lae and Salamaua, more troops and supplies needed to be flown in. Wau was the only secure airfield. On 22 May the airlift of the Australian 2/5th Independent Company from Port Moresby commenced. DC-3/C-47 aircraft flown by USAAF crews flew twenty sorties to Wau over four days, moving 305 troops and their equipment. American P-39 Airacobra fighters escorted the transport aircraft to protect them from attacks by Lae-based Zero fighters. Weather in the Wau area was unpredictable at best, and caused many missions to be aborted.

The 2/5th Independent Company, combined with the NGVR to form Kanga Force, conducted many successful raids against the enemy garrison at Lae-Salamaua over the next four months. Kanga Force was re-supplied principally by air, both by landings at Wau airfield and airdropping to force elements deployed at various locations south of

Salamaua. The Japanese continued to build up forces at Lae-Salamaua, moving 900 troops to within easy striking distance of Wau and Bulolo. In October the 290-man 2/7th Independent Company was airlifted from Port Moresby to Wau to strengthen Kanga Force, which intensified its raids on Japanese units.

On 10 January 1943, a Japanese naval force unloaded hundreds of troops and tonnes of supplies at Lae, despite ongoing Allied air attacks. General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander of Allied Land Forces, was concerned that the enemy intended to take Wau and moved 17th Brigade from Milne Bay to Port Moresby in preparation for transferring it to Wau. The airlift of this 2000-strong brigade into Wau began on 14 January but was limited by the availability of transport aircraft. Around ten C-47 sorties per day was the maximum that the USAAF troop carrier squadrons could provide. Again, the tropical weather reduced or stopped the airlift for days at a time. By 23 January, the number of aircraft available to the Wau

airlift increased markedly. Allied forces had succeeded in capturing the Buna-Gona area, reducing the need for airlift support to that operation, and another USAAF Troop Carrier Group with 52 C-47s had arrived at Port Moresby. From this point on, at least thirty airlift sorties per day were flown into Wau, weather permitting. USAAF P-39 fighter patrols again provided protection from enemy fighters.

The Japanese, meanwhile, had renewed their advance towards Wau. By 28 January, the Australian force had consolidated its defensive positions around Wau airfield. If the airfield was lost, resupply on a sufficient scale would be impossible and the Allied force would be in a very vulnerable position. On 29 January, the weather cooperated, enabling the last 814 troops of 17th Brigade to be flown in during a record sixty sorties. On 30 January, guns and gunners of the Australian 2/1st Field Regiment were delivered by air to Wau. Within two hours of being

unloaded from the aircraft, these guns were providing artillery support to Australian ground forces. RAAF Beaufighter aircraft of No. 30 Squadron, based in Port Moresby, provided close air support to the troops, while Wirraway aircraft of No. 4 Squadron, operating from Wau airfield, provided reconnaissance and artillery spotting for the ground units.



Arrival of 25-pounder guns on 30 January 1943

On the morning of 30 January, the Japanese began their major attack against Wau, advancing to within a few kilometres of the perimeter held by 17 Brigade. Despite some small arms rounds striking targets on the airfield, the defences held and the airfield remained usable. On 3 February the Commander of 17th Brigade was able to report that Wau airfield was now secure and enemy forces were being pushed back. Unable to take Wau from the ground, the Japanese began air attacks on 6 February when nine bombers attacked, escorted by about twenty single-engined fighters. One USAAF C47 transport was shot down by Zeros, but the enemy lost four bombers and seventeen fighters to American fighters and Australian anti-aircraft batteries.

The Allied Forces continued the airlift of troops and supplies, with army engineer companies repairing and upgrading Wau and Bulolo airfields. No. 306 Radar Station, RAAF, and the 156th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery were airlifted to Wau to augment the USAAF fighters in providing protection against Japanese air attack. The destruction of the Japanese reinforcements by Allied air attacks in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943 ensured that the enemy never again had the strength to conduct offensive operations in the Lae-Salamaua area. The Australian 15th and 29th Brigades and the American 162nd Regiment joined the 17th Brigade in hounding the Japanese all the way to the coast. Due to the difficult

terrain, much of the resupply of these units was by airdrop. The enemy retreated to Salamaua which finally fell to the Allied forces on 11 September 1943.

Over a nineteen-day period, the Wau airlift had moved approximately 2,763 troops and 817 tonnes of supplies into Wau. In the busiest four days of the battle (29 Jan-1 Feb), 247 sorties were flown into the airfield. Coordination of the overall airlift while the aircraft were airborne was the responsibility of No. 4 RAAF Fighter Sector at Port Moresby. At its peak, the airlift involved three formations each of eighteen transports, each formation protected by up to fifty fighters. As Wau airfield had only limited parking area, sequencing the aircraft to land was a vital function. On top of all this, weather often prevented aircraft from reaching Wau, on some occasions requiring a whole formation of aircraft to return to Port Moresby.

The Battle for Wau was fought in an area that was extremely difficult to resupply by surface means. Thus, the success of the Allied ground force was dependent on airlift, which in turn, depended on maintaining control of the air and effectively securing the airfield. This battle was an excellent example of a successful joint and combined operation. The rapid reassignment of airlift assets from supporting operations in the Buna-Gona area to airlifting forces into Wau shows the inherent flexibility of air power and the need to have the tasking of the airlift force prioritised at a strategic level.

- *Allied victory at Wau entailed a major joint and combined operation*
- *Rugged, jungle-covered topography made large-scale surface resupply impossible and made air power critical to success*
- *This battle was an outstanding example of cooperation and coordination between Allied ground and air forces*

“Air mobility provides a responsive means to project force and sustain expeditionary operations in conflict and other crises.”

- Air Power Manual AAP1000-D,
5th Edition, 2007



Air Power Development Centre
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: www.raaf.gov.au/airpower

