THE FOUNDATIONS OF VICTORY: THE PACIFIC WAR 1943-1944

BEFORE FINSCHHAFEN: PREPARING, TRAINING AND EQUIPPING THE FORCES

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This chapter offers a context for the Finschhafen operations that are discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, and in particular it deals with aspects that preceded the campaign, particularly unit reconstitution defined in its widest sense of rebuilding combat-worn formations, integrating replacements, and preparing, training, and equipping them for the next battle.

In early 1943, neither Japan nor the Allies had sufficient resources, logistic support, and personnel to gain the operational advantage. Only disease thrived in the fecund rainforests and it indiscriminately ravaged both sides. The issue in northeast New Guinea was in the balance. True, Japan could not hope to match the United States and Australia in the long run, and already the two-front war in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands had strained Japanese resources to their limit. In the short term, however, the Allies had also been badly hurt during the Papuan campaign as well as the Solomons fighting and were reconstituting their casualty and disease-depleted ranks. Thousands of fresh Japanese troops were deploying from China via the Palaus to New Guinea while thousands of American reinforcements were arriving in Australia as each side was determined to regain the operational initiative. Simultaneously Australian ground troops were driving the Japanese back toward Salamaua, and Allied air power was scoring impressive victories.

It was a time of equilibrium in the Australian-American alliance as the United States depended on Australia. The Americans had neither the forces nor the equipment available and fit to move north with the mobility and celerity required. On 13 April, for example, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief, Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), informed the American Joint Chiefs of Staff that his forces would be unable to take part in future operations without a long period of rest and preparation.[1]

The side better able to reconstitute, reinforce, and replenish its forces could strike first and likely break the deadlock by tipping the strategic balance in the theatre and the operational balance on the battlefield in its favour. Like most things associated with warfare, this was much easier said than done. Operations in June 1943 at Nassau Bay were touch-and-go at a time when a single setback would have discredited MacArthur, unravelled his grandiose plans to return to the Philippines, and relegated SWPA to a backwater permanently overshadowed by the Central Pacific offensive. MacArthur's American forces had to be better prepared, better trained, and better equipped than they had been during their first encounter with the Japanese.

Warfare may be likened to a series of questions. Tactically, for instance, whether one moves left or right on the track may be a matter of life-or-death. Operationally, the place one commits one's forces and strategically one's purpose for doing so finds ultimate resolution with the subaltern or sergeant who decides which way to turn on the track. My point is that the fighting units have to get to that track prepared, trained, and equipped to make the proper decisions.

How did such an inhospitable place as northeast New Guinea become the site of a major land campaign? The simple answer is that New Guinea was in the way. In early 1942 the Japanese army had no intention of occupying New Guinea, but the imperial navy coveted the magnificent natural harbour at Rabaul, New Britain, to protect the southern approaches of Japan's major naval base at Truk in the Caroline Islands. A domino mentality then took hold, reasoning if Rabaul fell then Truk would be next. So the Japanese had to protect the approaches to Rabaul and the navy proposed they do this by seizing Port Moresby. With luck, the navy could also sever the line of communication between Australia and the United States

thereby neutralising Australia's value as a base of supply and launching pad for future allied counteroffensives. The result in May 1942 was the Battle of the Coral Sea. After that setback the Japanese navy still had to defend Rabaul and for that purpose opted to establish air bases and strongholds on the north New Guinea coast to support the army's move over the Owen Stanley Range to take Moresby by land. That too failed, ultimately culminating in a protracted slugging match from November 1942 into January 1943 for control of the Japanese air and staging base at Buna.

By January 1943 the Allies' questions, and strategically these were MacArthur's to resolve, involved the timing and location of their counterattack northward to retake the Philippines. Whereas the Japanese had needed coastal bases to advance south, any northward advance from the Australian base required advanced air and staging bases along New Guinea's north coast. Combat troops had to seize potential base areas, engineer and support troops had to develop those bases, security forces had to defend the bases, technicians and specialists had to keep the equipment at those bases running, in other words, thousands of troops were needed to carve out and sustain air and staging bases in the rugged terrain. Few would fight, but they depended on the support of many.

In March 1943 Tokyo decided to hold forward defensive positions and fight a protracted ground battle of attrition, the scenario the Allies wanted to avoid. At sea neither navy wanted to fight fleet actions in the restricted waters of the northern Solomon Sea much less force the straits between northeast New Guinea and New Britain. Besides the lack of manoeuvre room which increased the danger of being trapped by enemy surface ships or submarines, naval task forces would be within range of aerial attacks launched by land-based aircraft.

Shipping and equipment were in short supply. The Allied amphibious landing at Nassau Bay on 30 June 1943 by a reinforced US infantry battalion was a shoestring affair, but even so it exhausted available theatre sealift and forced SWPA to press captured Japanese barges into service to carry the American units and their supplies to the landing area. Somehow the Allies had to create an amphibious force, organise, train, and equip the specialised troops necessary to conduct amphibious operations as they simultaneously constructed landing craft for the seaborne campaigns that would restore mobility and manoeuvre to the theatre.

To illustrate the Allied effort, I am going to rely heavily on the US 32nd Infantry Division's experience. The 32nd was a National Guard division, that is a territorial division, called into Federal service in October 1940. Training in the United States emphasised conventional not jungle warfare tactics as the division expected to fight in the European theatre. In late December 1941, the 32nd was listed for shipment to Ireland and by February 1942 the unit was on the US east coast awaiting movement when the US War Department suddenly diverted it to Australia because of the imminent Japanese threat.[2]

The division trained initially near Adelaide where the raw winter weather made conditions unsuitable for jungle training or for that matter much realistic field training. The division later displaced to Camp Cable south of Brisbane, but the move was so disruptive that little meaningful unit training occurred before the 32nd deployed to New Guinea. Training in Australia had consisted of a great many road marches, but few if any live fire exercises because of shortages of training ammunition, training facilities, and manoeuvre ranges. Senior officers in the division felt its training would be 'greatly accelerated' and its 'combat efficiency' developed if they could obtain more ammunition for training purposes.[3] None was available. Conditioning training was no substitute for live fire and manoeuvre field training, especially for units about to go into combat for the first time. Matters were not helped by the disruption that resulted when MacArthur, acting on General Sir Thomas Blamey's suggestion, relieved the American commandant of the Joint Overseas Operational Training School in September 1942.[4] Furthermore, intelligence about the enemy was spotty, and the division, regimental, and battalion commanders pleaded in vain for more information on Japanese tactics.[5] In their ignorance, many GIs believed the Japanese would flee at the sight of American soldiers. Lieutenant-General Robert Eichelberger, the US I Corps commander, later recalled that MacArthur was eager to get American troops into action and consequently brushed aside the unpleasant fact that the 32nd was 'not really ready' to fight.[6] So the officers and men of the 32nd Division learned their profession through bitter experience by suffering almost 800 dead and 2,200 wounded fighting near Buna.

As discouraging and debilitating as the battle casualties were the 7,920 cases of illness—half from malaria, the others from dengue fever, scrub typhus, respiratory infections, exhaustion, and so forth.[7] These statistics indicate a lack of preventive medicine, and indeed medical stores, especially quinine sulfate and atabrine, were in short supply throughout the entire campaign. They also point to a poorly trained and disciplined unit that paid little heed to field sanitation. Their negligence was compounded by a chaotic logistics system. Supply lines, such as they were, became hopelessly tangled, and Japanese aircraft routinely interdicted attempts at seaborne resupply. Artillery and combat service support were nonexistent at Buna. A few platoons of engineers who joined the fighting did so without such basic tools as axes, shovels, picks, or assault boats. These items and heavy engineer equipment were supposed to follow the troops, but never did. Shore-to-shore movement to Buna degenerated into a fight between the US Army and the US Navy for control of the boat section hauling the men and supplies.[8]

The lacklustre medical record was all the more surprising considering that the medical strength of a 1942 US infantry division was 1,019 officers and men, the third largest specialty after infantry and artillery at that echelon. Medical support at Buna did not repay the manpower investment and squandered innovative developments in field medical doctrine.
By late 1942 the chief surgeon of the US Army Services of Supply (USASOS) and US forces in SWPA had developed a new 29-man self-sufficient portable hospital. Four medical officers and 25 enlisted men could carry all the unit's equipment, supplies, and rations into combat. The trade-off was that heavier medical and surgical equipment as well as supplies that could not be broken down and manhandled had to be left behind even though they would have been useful in the field. Unanticipated problems soon surfaced.

Medical supplies and equipment had to compete with ammunition, rations, and troops for scarce air cargo space on flights from the supply base at Port Moresby to the staging field at Dobodura. Cargo planes eventually hauled four tons of supplies for the three hospitals (or 68 pounds per man) to Dobodura, but because of their low priority the process took more than two weeks. The medical team then found the three attached portable hospitals too heavy to accompany the 127th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division, to Buna. So on 10-11 December the 127th went into combat without medical support.

Back at Dobodura the portable hospital team sorted medical stores and equipment and eventually put together pack frames that they carried to the lines at Buna, seven and one-half miles away, every foot along jungle tracks or through marshy coastal swamp. The delay in receiving medical supplies, the time lost in sorting them, and the difficulty in portering them overland meant the medical 'buildup accompanied the battle instead of preceding it'.[9] Not until Christmas Day 1942 did the 3rd Portable treat its first battle casualty. According to doctrine, portable hospitals were supposed to render emergency life-saving surgical care for battle casualties, not treat routine or even serious wounds that second or third echelon hospitals could safely treat. In practice the surgeons treated everything from jungle foot to gunshot wounds at Buna.[10] Throughout the campaign medical support was unavailable, misdirected, and inefficient.

The effects on the line units were predictable. The 2nd Battalion, 126th Infantry, 32nd Division, had 19 officers and 585 other ranks the day it went into combat, 2 December 1942. Seventeen days later those numbers were roughly halved to ten officers and 283 others and by 5 January 1943 the battalion mustered five officers and 154 other ranks, a less than full strength infantry company. It had received no replacements throughout the fighting because none were available cither in Papua or Australia.[11] Nor as mentioned had it received much in the way of combat service support.

The 32nd's poor combat performance and reports of battlefield cowardice coloured MacArthur's view of the division for the rest of the war. Eichelberger, however, was optimistic that the surviving veterans would form a nucleus to rebuild the shattered unit from the bottom up based on their combat experience. 'So many brave men have died or been injured, but when they return to duty there will be something solid to build on and these men have had their baptism of fire.'[12] After brief period of rest, the Division began intensive training designed to fit replacements into its ranks, pass on to them the hard-won knowledge of jungle fighting and develop the infantry-artillery teams that proved essential to success in future battles.[13]

Reconstitution

Relief of officers was and remains a standard US military practice to encourage better performance. MacArthur cabled US Army Chief of Staff, General George C Marshall, that the commander of the 32nd Division, Major-General Edwin Harding's 'desire to protect his officers caused him to excuse and explain failures rather than acknowledge the presence of such ineffectiveness'.[14] SWPA's acerbic Chief of Staff, Major-General Richard K Sutherland, later explained more bluntly that the relief 'was predicated on his [Harding's] refusal to remove certain incompetent regimental and battalion commanders'.[15] During the fighting Eichelberger discovered that the division chief of staff had falsified operational reports by claiming the Japanese had launched a major attack in order to conceal his own failure to advance. That officer's incompetence was so well known within the division that his very name became a synonym for confusion.[16]

At least one junior officer was later court martialled for cowardice in the face of the enemy, an extremely rare official admission of cowardice by the US Army. Reports of American soldiers throwing down their weapons and fleeing from battle further upset MacArthur.[17] To prevent reoccurrences, 'All commanders, in training and in battle, must ruthlessly weed out incompetent leaders, and energetically seek out new leaders in their units. Failure to be "hard-boiled" in this respect will render a unit commander, otherwise capable, impotent to achieve the results desired.'[18] By the time the 32nd reassembled at Camp Cable, Queensland, they had a new division commander and a new division chief of staff. There were also wholesale changes in command at regimental, battalion, and company level, some because of well-deserved promotions, some because of casualties, others because of the relief, fairly or otherwise, of incumbents.

Combat experience and performance became yardsticks for promotion and the 32nd commissioned liberally from its enlisted ranks to capitalise on that hard-won battlefield experience. For example, 30 enlisted men from the 126th Infantry departed on 30 June for Officer Candidate School and after graduation they returned to the regiment to lead its platoons and companies.[19] On the other hand, newly arriving junior officers and enlisted replacements were suspect. 'Too many replacements', a division staff officer later remarked, 'were higher grades so we were overloaded with master sergeants and sergeants who could not be placed in command of a rifle company or platoon because their lack of combat experience meant the men did not trust them.'[20]

Recognition and reward for combat performance became essential tools in rebuilding the unit. The 32nd's new division commander, Major-General William Gill, determined that '[t]he men had to be cured in body and mind before any effective training for renewed combat could be accomplished'.[21] For individuals who displayed conspicuous gallantry, Eichelberger or Gill or senior staff officers presided over award ceremonies and pinned decorations on veterans' uniforms. Beginning on 9 March and continuing at irregular intervals into August, nearly 13,000 decorations were handed out to members of the division.[22] One can argue that the American Army inflates awards, thus cheapening their overall value. After all, Eichelberger awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart to the disgraced chief of staff.[23] But the psychological effects of official recognition should not be underestimated. Updating Napoleon's dictum that a soldier would fight long and hard for a bit of coloured ribbon, in mid-1942 Major-General Robert C Richardson, who as General Marshall's personal representative was then inspecting SWPA, had urged MacArthur to adopt a generous policy of awards and ribbons to the men who were actually fighting. 'It costs nothing and is a marvellous stimulus to morale.'[24]

The 126th Infantry Regiment paraded for a 9 March individual awards ceremony, and the division honoured all its dead with a memorial service. Several days later it was itself cited in General Orders for its role in the Papua campaign, receiving a Distinguished Unit streamer for its regimental colours. Casualties returning to the unit received their awards for valour in mid-July, and in mid-August Gill presented the Purple Heart to 114 returning officers and men who had been wounded during the Buna fighting. Five days later 25 more soldiers received awards for valour.[25] The medals and commemorations were mostly deserved, and by publicly, officially, and repeatedly telling the soldiers that they had accomplished something important they were also the Army's way of restoring pride and unit esprit for the task ahead.

I am not suggesting for a moment that these were starry-eyed veterans anxious to have another go at the Japanese. US War Department observers pointed out that many line officers and men 'were more concerned about returning to the USA than they are about getting on with the war The general idea seems to be that they have been away long enough and it's someone else's turn.'[26] On 4 March 1942, the entire 32nd Division assembled at Camp Cable to be disabused of those notions. Gill expressed his pleasure with his new command and then told them about their future. 'This is not the end of it. It has just started. This is a mean, long job. You have to teach the recruits based on your combat experience.'[27] Friends of General Harding reported to him that, 'The speech was a fiasco ... the entire 32nd boohed [sic] him, and ... of course nothing could be done about it as one can't punish 10,000 or so men.'[28] Gill's dash of cold water may have been booed, but it also woke up the division to the reality that lay ahead of them. The training program began two days later.

Training

After 'weeding out' the incompetents, trainers had to prepare the survivors and the replacements for the next battle. The consensus among professional officers was that the division's previous training was unrealistic and unsuitable for the conditions and the enemy the troops had faced. As Eichelberger had earlier written Sutherland, 'We need corporals, sergeants, and Lieutenants with guts and training. Some have the former but the latter as I have pointed out before is sadly lacking. Marching along a road does not train men to advance into Japanese machine guns ...'[29] Training Memorandum No 3, I Corps, USAFFR, 14 February 1943, incorporated lessons learned as veterans and replacements were to be taught the techniques of scouting, patrolling, cover and concealment, night operations, combat firing, hand-to-hand combat, weapons maintenance, field sanitation, discipline and teamwork.[30] That training was necessary in such basic skills suggests the extent of the deficiencies that existed in the division's training before their experience at Buna.

Training had to be more realistic to habituate the soldiers to the sounds, noise, and confusion of warfare. To create infantry-artillery teams, for instance, the infantryman had to become accustomed to following closely behind a rolling barrage and understand his margin of safety. It was a dangerous tactic learned only through repeated battle drills. So live overhead fire by artillery and mortars became a routine part of training exercises. Machine guns, concealed snipers on flanks, and pop-up targets appearing at close range on obstacle courses added surprise while using smoke and controlled explosions gave the soldiers some sense of the shock and confusion of battle. Professional officers certainly knew these basics and one observer reported, 'I saw all these things done at the Australian Weapons School'.[31] But it was not until 1943 that American units in Australia underwent such rigorous training. Squad-level tests in such basics as scouting and patrolling evaluated small unit teamwork and progress. Field training problems became the norm for the 32nd, something the division had not conducted since the Louisiana Manoeuvres in the United States in 1940. Training was hard and the new commanders tolerated no excuses for substandard performance. When instructors pronounced a field artillery battalion's training performance unsatisfactory in their Camp Cable training area, the entire unit had to road march to I Corps Headquarters to train under the 'close supervision' of the I Corps Staff.[32] The goal was simple, yet harsh. 'The combat leader must use every means at his disposal to train his men properly before battle is joined, to bring his men into contact with the enemy in the best possible fighting trim and yet be tough minded enough to expend them unhesitatingly to achieve victory.'[33]

Replacements

MacArthur had been clamoring for expedited shipment of replacements since the fighting at Buna began, and on 21 January 1943 Marshall informed him that 4,000 fillers (2,500 infantry) had departed for Australia the previous day. Another 2,000 (1,700 infantry) would embark the first week in February.[34] During the spring and summer of 1943, the 32nd Division received 6,000 replacements. The first reached the unit on 9 March and were a mixed blessing.

Of the initial 1,486 replacements, 834 (56%) were in the lower two (of five) mental alertness categories. That percentage was excessively high because according to the statistical distribution for the 'White National Average', only 33% of the replacements should have fallen

into those lower categories.[35] A later group of about 2,500 replacements had an average Army General Classification Test (AGCT) rating of approximately 50 points when an AGCT score of 100 represented the median of all men tested and a score of 100 or over was needed to place the soldier in Classes I, II or the upper half of III.[36] Because of the drain of Class I, II, and III men for the Army Air Corps and the technical services as well as a belated recognition of the need for more infantrymen, after March 1942 the US Army assigned a higher percentage of Class IV and V men to the Infantry Branch, 35.6% of all Infantry before 1 March 1942 and 43.6% after that date.[37] The 32nd Division was seeing the results of that Army personnel policy and could do nothing about it. There were other problems with replacements and returnees.

Medical boards found some replacements 'unfit for combat service', and commanders regarded older replacements (over 38) 'as liabilities rather than assets'. Returnees from hospitals were still physically weak and unfit for full duty. Aside from wounds, the after effects of hepatitis and malaria debilitated men and forced commanders to assign them to light duties for as long as six months to achieve a full recovery. The Amphibious Training Center, for instance, reported that during the 32nd Division's training cycle the unit was as much as 30% below strength because of recurrent malaria among its ranks. 'They were useless as combat soldiers', a staff observer said. 'They came back too quickly and others who were fit we did not get back quickly.'[38]

Besides the replacement fillers, between May 1943 and January 1944, three US divisions and two regimental combat teams arrived in Australia or at Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea. The number of American troops in Australia doubled to 200,000 between July 1942 and July 1943 and passed the 300,000 mark in December 1943.[39] All of these forces had to be trained to conduct amphibious operations.

Amphibious Force

Buna had shown that overland movement through New Guinea was arduous, time-consuming, and debilitating. Terrain fragmented large units nullifying the Allies' advantages in firepower and mobility. The simplest and most direct route of advance along the New Guinea coastline was by water. It was also the most complicated militarily, requiring specialised training and equipment, specialised troops to handle shore-to-shore movement, and adequate numbers of service troops to accompany the task force into the combat zone to establish supply dumps and bases. Using combat troops for such purposes, as had to be done at Buna, was 'wasteful to the point of negligence'.[40] But service troops remained in short supply in SWPA well into 1943, forcing commanders to use infantry replacements extensively on fatigue details, labour battalions, or in provisional service units.[41] SWPA somehow had to overcome these drawbacks and simultaneously develop amphibious expertise. This became the job of Amphibious Force.

Amphibious Force, Southwest Pacific (later Seventh Amphibious Force), was established on 10 January 1943. Its commander, Rear-Admiral Daniel E Barbey, had to organise the amphibious force, train its navy and army components in amphibious operations, and move units to forward deployment areas. Training Directive of 8 February 1943 charged Seventh Amphibious Fleet with all amphibious training except that necessary for shore-to-shore operations of Special Engineer Brigades, discussed below.[42]

On 1 March 1943, Southwest Pacific Amphibious Force established Amphibious Training Command, together with a number of specialist schools, at Port Stephens where the Royal Australian Navy had an amphibious training base, with other amphibious training centres at Port Philip Bay, and Cairns.[43] Training was divided into two segments. First the command trained the division's line and staff officers from division through battalion echelon in the theory and practice of amphibious operations. The officers then rejoined their units to lead them in practice landings during four weeks of intensive training to develop battalion, regimental, brigade, and divisional combat teams. The men were taught as units to embark, proceed overseas, and land on hostile shores as Corps officers and mobile teams of instructors critiqued their performance at every step. Each unit went through a complete rehearsal before launching an operation. The 7th Division AIF was supposed to be first in the course, but its reconstitution was proceeding slower than expected so the 32nd Infantry

Division inaugurated the Amphibious Training Center between 16 June and 28 August 1943.[44] From the beginning, however, the lack of proper equipment and especially the lack of the necessary numbers and types of amphibious transports and landing craft severely handicapped the training schedule.

SWPA had received a small number LCTs and smaller landing craft in December 1942 as part of a pool of ships for use in training Army troops in amphibious techniques. Barbey, however, needed a greater variety of amphibious ships, but due to a worldwide shipping shortage they were not immediately available. The few vessels in Australia needed major overhaul, but the Australian shipyards were already overloaded and amphibious shipping had a low priority.[45] Commander-in-Chief, US Fleet, did assign LST (Landing Ship Tank) Flotilla Seven to SWPA, and its ships arrived at intervals between April and July 1943. While the larger LSTs, many loaded with smaller LCPs (Landing Craft, Personnel), were welcome, Barbey needed APAs (Amphibious Transports) or AKAs (Attack Transports) for realistic troop training. He had one dilapidated troop transport. US Fleet parted with that ship only because it leaked so much oil that enemy submarines could easily follow its oily trail to the task force.[46] Sailors made do by jury-rigging the leaky old ship into an ersatz AKA and also rigged LSTs with debarkation nets to allow troops to practise climbing up and down cargo nets from the improvised transports to the awaiting landing craft.[47] Three Australian passenger ships converted to Landing Ships, Infantry (LSI) supplemented these training devices, but during much of 1943 ships were constantly engaged both in training an average of 20,000 men per month and in moving units and supplies to operational areas. Finally a scarcity of combatant ships left officers receiving instruction in the techniques of naval gunfire support without any opportunity to direct live fire exercises with warships.[48] They would learn that difficult job on invasion beaches.

Equipment dictated tactics. Without large attack transports SWPA had to rely on beaching type ships—LSTs, LCIs, and the LCI's—to move north to New Guinea. These vessels were slow, difficult to manoeuvre, and extremely vulnerable to hostile fire. So Barbey relied on surprise and stealth for his initial landings. Landing craft put ashore at lightly defended or unguarded beaches at dawn about two hours before high tide. To maintain the element of surprise no preliminary aerial attacks and a minimum of naval gunfire support preceded the landings. Planners identified locations without strong enemy defences or strong points and used a four-hour window to land troops and equipment because the thin-skinned ships had to make a quick getaway to escape the inevitable enemy air raids.[49]

The specialised organisations and boats needed to lift troops to the landing areas came from an unlikely source. In July 1942 there were about 8,000 US Army engineers in Australia who, with the exception of combat engineers undergoing much specialised training in Australian schools, were building a base infrastructure, not training. Despite SWPA's repeated requests, the War Department sent no more engineers to the theatre that year.[50] During 1943, however, Army engineer strength increased fivefold to about 40,000 and overall engineer strength in theatre (Australian and American) more than doubled to 84,000 as various Australian Army schools provided specialised training to the American engineers. Among the reinforcements that arrived in Australia in January 1943 was the US Army 2nd Engineer Special Brigade, a unit especially created to support amphibious operations.[51]

The US Army went into the amphibious role in March 1942 when the Services of Supply (SOS), acting on War Department orders, instructed the US Army Corps of Engineers to establish an amphibious command capable of conducting shore-to-shore operations. The newly-activated unit began training in June 1942 on the east coast of the United States, where exercises soon demonstrated that shore-to-shore operations required an Army engineer shore regiment and an Army boat unit to preserve unity of command at the waterline. These specialised units, originally designated Engineer Amphibian Brigades, became Engineer Special Brigades (ESBs) in 1943 with a TO&E of slightly more than 7,100 officers and other ranks equipped with 300 landing craft. After the Allied strategic decision not to mount an amphibious assault on Nazi occupied Europe during 1942, however, no one seemed to know what to do with the ESBs. From SWPA MacArthur had complained to the War Department that shortages of light shipping, barges, and landing craft available in Australia hampered preparations for his future operations. Marshall seemed to solve both problems by sending the ESB to Australia.

Getting the troops to Australia was relatively easy, but transporting their equipment, particularly their landing craft, seemed impossible. Landing craft were bulky, awkward, and large which restricted the number of vessels that any one ship could carry. Their unusual shape and dimensions precluded stacking them in a cargo hold and any other method resulted in wasted cargo space, something no one could justify at that stage in the war. As a result in early January 1943 SWPA had only 76 landing craft on hand. The US Navy promised to send 60 landing craft and crews to MacArthur each month, but at that rate it would take more than one year to assemble enough shipping to lift a single division. A simple but brilliant solution was found—prefabricate the plywood-hulled boats in sections in the United States and ship the disassembled parts to Australia. The innovation allowed 1,000 disassembled boats to be loaded efficiently in a single ship's cargo hold.

The Navy had considered this possibility, but discarded it because there were no facilities in Australia to reassemble the dismantled boats. US Army planners remodelled a plant in Brisbane to do the work. Operated by a US Army engineer unit with the assistance of civilian specialists from US commercial ship builders such as Higgins and Chris-Craft, by March 1943 the assembly line was capable of producing 300 boats per month.[52] Brisbane was building and launching MacArthur's navy.

Meanwhile since July 1942 Major-General George Kenney had rebuilt the American Air Forces in Australia in much the same fashion as Eichelberger later reconstituted the ground units Kenney ruthlessly dismissed senior air commanders and those he deemed 'worn out air crews' or rear area 'dead wood'. Even before arriving in Australia, he was determined to fire most of the American general officers serving in Allied Air Forces. One senior officer, he remarked, 'will never realize that we are at war' while another was simply bewildered by combat operations. Besides the generals, Kenney dismissed about 40 colonels and lieutenant-colonels and one captain. Responding to a request for future duties for two of the dismissed officers, Kenney wrote, 'Have no recommendation for assignment ... unless you have vacancies for police and prison officers.'[53]

Kenney, like Eichelberger and Gill, made extensive use of awards and medals for flight crews to rebuild morale and rekindle an offensive spirit. He showed up at remote forward bases, awarding medals and giving animated pep talks to encourage air and ground crews to do more by telling them that their efforts mattered. Besides the psychological approach, his staff strengthened air base defence in the forward areas by adding better early warning systems and coordinated anti-aircraft artillery fire. They oversaw improved sanitation for purposes of malaria control in northern Australia and New Guinea and arranged for better food distribution to get variety into the men's monotonous diets. They slashed red tape and simplified spare parts requisition procedures that previously took a month to get a part from a depot 100 miles away.[54] In short, Kenney and his staff implemented numerous highly visible reforms that had an immediate, tangible, and positive effect on troops' daily existence.

Kenney streamlined command and control by eliminating layers of headquarters and duplicative administrative functions. Operations orders previously had to pass through four layers of command before reaching the air squadrons. By creating the 1st Air Task Force in March 1943, Kenney organised an advanced headquarters that was flexible in size and could be assigned specialised aircraft depending on the mission as determined by the advanced headquarters' commander. Centralised command and control at forward headquarters allowed crews to plan missions together and gave Kenney the flexibility and concentration of airpower that air commanders always boasted about but rarely achieved.[55] He was also a persistent advocate for SWPA, constantly nagging Army Air Forces commander General Henry (Hap) Arnold in Washington, DC, for more aircraft. The 5th Air Force was short 224 aircraft and in May 1943, but Kenney's energy accelerated deliveries of P-38s to June rather than the original September date. More medium bombers arrived and the rate of replacement aircraft also doubled.[56]

Like so many airmen of his generation, Kenney believed in an independent air force, and his innovations in SWPA predated, but were consistent with, Army Air Force doctrines of the air commander exercising centralised control of all available airpower. One naval officer later wrote that Kenney was 'a cocky individual, thoroughly competent in his own field and highly regarded by his men, but not interested in any phase of warfare that was not centered around an airplane, particularly a bomber'.[57] Kenney was narrowly focused, but his intensity and commitment had put together a lethal air arm by January 1943.

Intelligence

Intelligence had not performed well at Buna in 1942 and the major role it would play in the later New Guinea campaigns was not readily apparent in early 1943. The United States Army depended heavily on Australian intelligence organisations during 1942 and 1943. One thinks of the early warnings provided by coastwatchers in the islands as well as dependence on ANGAU teams in New Guinea. The American Army also relied on its Australian ally for developing expertise in signals intercept and traffic analysis of Japanese army, army air force, and naval land-based air force radio communications. Australian operators were far ahead of the arriving American intercept operators whom they taught and trained in the techniques of intercepting Kana Morse among other specialities. Cryptanalysis, at least for the ground and air forces, was a combined affair run from Central Bureau, Brisbane, where Australians and Americans deciphered the Japanese Army's Water Transport cipher in April 1943. This system carried message traffic concerning Japanese Army merchant shipping which facilitated interdiction of convoys bound for New Guinea ports. Central Bureau's work complemented that of the US Navy's Melbourne intercept and decryption facility where cryptanalysts worked Japanese mainline naval message traffic. Both centres processed and passed critical deciphered intelligence to the theatre commanders. Tactical intelligence was less adept, for major discrepancies between SWFA's American G-2 and his Australian counterpart involving methodology and assessment seriously affected the analysis of raw intelligence data and were never totally resolved, as Finschhafen would demonstrate.

Conclusion

Preparing, training, and equipping the forces during 1943 laid the groundwork for the campaigns that would take Finschhafen and points north in New Guinea in 1943 and beyond. Training never solved all the problems or answered all the questions to eliminate the inevitable surprises of combat. But it did develop commanders who displayed flexibility and innovation. They were risk takers and they trained junior officers and NCOs who were fighters. Looking backwards it is easy to suggest that it was a foregone conclusion. After all, the Japanese just could not match the Allies in material production, technology, and equipment. Such an interpretation does a disservice to the men and women who participated in those campaigns of 1943. They did not know the future as we know the past They found themselves in an uncertain present and could only look forward to an unknown future. They made do with what they had and under appalling physical and psychological conditions carried the fight to a tenacious and fanatical foe who asked no quarter and gave none. They were in the forefront of operations run on a shoestring where a single setback might have ended the campaign. For them it was a close run thing, and we should remember that as we go on to examine their lasting accomplishments at this critical juncture of the war in the Southwest Pacific.

Endnotes

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