

**THE FOUNDATIONS OF VICTORY:
THE PACIFIC WAR
1943-1944**

INTRODUCTION

Lieutenant General Peter Leahy

This is the tenth Chief of Army's Annual Military History Conference and as such is something of a landmark in the study and discussion of Australia's military history. In his address to the opening of the first conference in November 1994, the-then Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General John Grey, identified a number of reasons for launching a history conference series, reasons that seem as pertinent today as they did then. While he acknowledged generally the importance of history in the planning of future directions for the Army, it was his specific reasons that have a particular resonance today. General Grey's first reason was that he wanted to demonstrate the Australian Army's commitment to the preservation, interpretation and promulgation of its history. He went on to explain that while the Conference was one initiative, it was only one in a series of innovations, including the very successful history research grants scheme, that he was introducing to achieve this goal. Linked to this reason was his strong commitment to the continuing education of Army's officers, particularly in their understanding of their chosen profession, the profession of arms. A regular conference such as this fits in well with both those reasons, offering as it does a chance for the Army to explore topics of specific relevance to its continuing evolution, to bring in experts who could give Army a broader perspective on these topics than was regularly available and bring together Army's 'best and brightest' in an atmosphere of questioning and learning.

After ten years of conducting military history conferences, how have we done? The answer would seem to be that by all objective measures, we have succeeded in meeting General Grey's aims. The published proceedings of the conferences provide an accessible, high quality reference source for anyone interested in aspects of the Australian Army's evolution and experience. Proceedings are available in our staff colleges, service establishment libraries and more widely to the general public. Several have gone to reprint and the interest from overseas has been high for a product that is primarily about our own army. The most compelling measure of success however, is attendance. This conference is now recognised as being the largest military history conference—and probably the largest history conference—held in Australia and one of the largest regular military history conferences held worldwide. While many of the attendees are serving or former military personnel, the regular attendance by a wide range of non-army people is particularly gratifying. At a time when the profession of arms is in competition with the commercial world for recruits and when the public's impression of the army alternates between admiration for our soldiers' efforts in operational areas and concern generated by sensational media stories about misconduct or inappropriate behaviour, it is reassuring to know there is an expanding body of well-informed citizens who understand the army, its heritage and the pressures under which it operates and who value it for its contribution. I think Army has gained much from its small investment in these Military History Conferences.

Turning now to the topic of this year's conference. The subject for this year owes much to Dr Peter Stanley and his concern over the abysmal level of general understanding of the Australian Army's achievements in New Guinea, especially in the years immediately after the repulse at Imita Ridge of the Japanese land invasion via the Owen Stanleys. I think it was Peter who coined the phrase 'the Green Hole in Australia's military history'. Any perusal of any military publisher's catalogue reveals an almost complete lack of books on the New Guinea campaigns after the Kokoda campaign. Some specialist Australian publishers in recent years have attempted to fill the void but the fact remains that by comparison with scholarly works on the various European theatres and the Pacific War, the New Guinea victories are unknown and unstudied. When the extent of the Army's achievements in the years 1943-44 is understood, this lack of interest is completely inexplicable. Apart from some temporary setbacks during the course of a battle, the Australian Army was not pushed back by the Japanese Army in New Guinea after September 1942.

The campaign in New Guinea was a long, difficult and bloody affair. There is a tendency to see it as a dour slogging match between two essentially infantry forces. There is also the very British-like irony in that while the average Australian has probably heard of the Kokoda Track, a battle characterised by retreat, poor organisation and support and excessive reliance on the personal courage of the individual soldier, he or she has probably not heard of, for example, the attack on Lae 12 months later. Yet Lae was a masterpiece of planning and execution. It involved air and naval forces, paratroops and an entire air-landed division. It was only the third amphibious landing in the history of the Australian Army. And it required the closest co-operation between US and Australian forces. Apart from some unfortunate 'friendly fire' from overly enthusiastic US pilots, the whole operation went completely to plan. The battle for Lae, like so many of the battles in the campaign, deserves much closer attention, from authors seeking new and original material, from academics seeking to explain significant developments that had an impact on the conduct of the war and, indeed, from defence planners of today. As a successful exercise in complex operational planning, it is difficult to think of a better example than Lae.

But, as I have suggested, Lae was not the first example of the Japanese being defeated by an Allied force that had learned how to use the jungle to its own benefit nor was it the last. The importance of Lae as the example lies in how so many of the combat skills essential to success came together so effectively. Nine months earlier, just down the coast at Buna and Gona, many mistakes were made, in tactics, in command and coordination and in preparation. By the time of Lae, not only had many of these type of errors been eliminated in the rugged fighting in the battles around Wau and Salamaua but the Allied High Command had grown confident enough in the ability of its own troops that it was prepared to embark on an operation as complex as that employed in the capture of Lae. Which leads to the question: 'why were the Allies so confident and so effective?' As I said, it was less than 12 months since the battle-hardened Japanese had been pushing poorly trained Australian militia back from one defensive position to the next. What was it that occurred in 1942 that saw 1943 and 1944 become the years in which Japanese military power in the Southwest Pacific theatre was vanquished?

Clearly, the infantry itself learned to fight in and use the jungle to its advantage. But, that is only a small part of the renaissance. Other, equally important, innovations had to occur as well. This campaign demonstrated, probably more importantly than ever before, the central importance to campaigning of logistics. Aerial resupply and the innovative air transport of combat troops into remote localities enabled extended operations in the challenging New Guinea terrain away from the coast. Armour and artillery had to learn new skills to provide critical combat support in terrain that even a year earlier was regarded as impossible. The contribution of the medical services was a major factor in victory and one that is rarely recognised today. How many realise that during the battles for Milne Bay, Buna, Gona and Sanananda, the Australian battalions were losing hundreds every week to malaria: at its worst the losses were equivalent to a battalion each month. Sickness exceeded combat casualties by a factor of more than ten. In learning to control malaria and other jungle illnesses like scrub typhus, the medical services made a direct and enduring contribution to the Army's combat power. (Which contrasted starkly with the Japanese, for whom tropical illnesses remained a major cause of loss until the end of the campaign.) The army had to adapt, it had to absorb the experiences of others and it had to innovate. The fact that it was the Japanese who were forced to retreat from Lae, from Madang and from Wewak, is testimony to the army's capacity to absorb lessons and change its methods to adapt to new circumstances.

These are all interesting historical facts, worthy of study in their own right. But there are other reasons, of particular relevance to today's army, for promoting interest in and understanding of these old campaigns. While recent operations have well demonstrated the army's ability to fight as part of coalition forces far removed from Australia, there are other developments reminding us that our region—our own backyard, if you will—is not the benign stable strategic environment we would like. The recent announcement of Australia's participation in what will be a peace-making role in the Solomons is evidence that the army must be able to operate in our local region. How much have geophysical conditions changed in New Guinea? I would suggest not a lot. If the Australian Army had to fight there in 2004 would there be nothing to

learn from these 1943 experiences? The answer is, I think, obvious. I suggest that we would find much in common with our fathers' and grandfathers' experiences. We could draw considerable advantage from understanding and exploiting their experiences. Hopefully, we could avoid making the same mistakes. This is the big advantage understanding that the study of our history can give us-the ability to avoid making the same mistakes.

There are many threads to understanding the conduct of the campaign and the successful conversion of the allied forces into successful jungle fighters. One of the more critical issues, however, was learning to work with allies. Both the US and the Australians had to adapt to each other's ways at every level of contact. The success of the campaign is testament to how well they achieved this. This capacity is just as important today as it was in the critical years of the Pacific war.