

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

***THE GREEN HOLE RECONSIDERED***  
**Peter Stanley**

Ten years ago I published an article 'The Green Hole: exploring our neglect of the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44'.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, this conference offers an opportunity to reconsider those reflections and arguments and to discuss the ways in which Australian historians have and have not dealt with the campaigns in New Guinea.

In 1992 I began by alluding to the fact that we were in the midst of the 50th anniversary of the Second World War. We had seen the year before the commemoration of the fall of Singapore (and the bogus controversies that followed over the exaggerated so-called Wavell report into the misbehaviour of Australian troops). We saw the major pilgrimage to Papua, where Paul Keating kissed the ground at Kokoda and argued that we should be focussing on the losses and achievements of the war in our region and making less of the losses in defence of the empire in the Great War. I wondered whether in the coming year we would see much attention on the battles of 1943 in New Guinea. As it happened, we did not. 1993-1994 turned into a trough between the interest shown in 1992 in Singapore, the Coral Sea and Kokoda (though not Alamein) and the even greater peak of 1995, the year of Australia Remembers. Primed by the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Con Sciacca, Australia Remembers became a major celebration, funded by government and supported by the community. We would have to wonder whether we will again see the anniversaries of Shaggy Ridge and Sattelberg overlooked or given the acknowledgement they deserve. Certainly we can anticipate that the 60th anniversary of the war's end will be marked appropriately, though there is so far no sign that the extravaganza of Australia Remembers will be repeated in a comparable form.

I argued that in comparison to Kokoda the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44 are virtually unknown. The operations which carried Australian and American forces from the hills overlooking Salamaua in April 1943 to the capture of Madang in April 1944, are virtually unknown, summed up in vague references to 'New Guinea and the islands'. In this paper I want to argue that these campaigns have continued to be neglected, discuss the reasons for our overlooking them and to comment on the implications of our forgetfulness. Along the way I want to comment on what has and has not changed since I gave that paper 10 years ago.

**The New Guinea Campaigns**

Having defeated the Japanese attempt to take Port Moresby overland and having advanced to the north coast of Papua, MacArthur planned the series of campaigns which would take his forces closer to his strategic aim, the re-occupation of the Philippines. To achieve this the American and Australian forces in the South West Pacific Area would have to deal with the Japanese in New Guinea and New Britain.

In three campaigns, fought mostly by the Australian army supported by mixed but primarily American air and naval forces, MacArthur's forces regained New Guinea. The 3rd, part of the 6th and later the 5th Australian Divisions, drew Japanese troops towards Salamaua, the so-called 'Salamaua magnet'—fighting a series of small actions in rugged country. In September 1943 George Vasey's 7th AIF Division mostly landed by air around Nadzab, while George Woollen's 9th AIF Division landed by sea at Red Beach. Both then advanced on the great Japanese base at Lae. The 9th Division reduced the Japanese defenders of the Huon Peninsula in a series of fights around Finschhafen and Sattelberg. To cut off the Japanese retreat to the west and establish Allied air bases, the 7th Division advanced up the Markham and Ramu valleys, taking the massive Japanese position at Shaggy Ridge by January 1944.

The year-long offensives virtually destroyed the Japanese 18th Army, which lost 35,000 men. The term 'body count' belongs to the Vietnam War, but the idea was born in the intelligence reports of New Guinea Force. The Australian Army lost 1,200 killed and 2,800 wounded, with many more men evacuated sick with illnesses such as malaria and scrub typhus.

It is important to grasp the scale of these campaigns. They were among the largest and most complex fought by Australia in the Second World War. Twenty-five Australian infantry battalions participated in the operations for the capture of Lae and Salamaua, the largest number of Australian battalions to participate in a single campaign during the Second World War, and the most to see action simultaneously since the battles in the Somme valley in the summer of 1918. The naval, logistic, and particularly air support they required was immensely greater than that provided to the first AIF.

### Forgetting The War in New Guinea

My concern is not just that the Australian people generally have forgotten what their fathers and grandfathers endured in those campaigns. Rather, I want to raise the question of why the military historical community of this country—and that means us—has neglected events which on the face of it would justify more than a passing interest. My argument in 1992 was that the New Guinea campaigns are for most of us a green hole. I began by surveying briefly how they have been treated in print.

I started, of course, with David Dexter's volume of the official history, *The New Guinea Offensives*, and the naval, air and medical volumes that complemented Dexter's volume.<sup>2</sup> I acknowledged the role of unit histories. While they cumulatively represent a rich resource, illuminating the general from the experience of the particular, I suggested that their appeal was too often restricted to those who served, baffling even members of their families, who recall vaguely that Dad was in the infantry somewhere 'up in the islands'.

Of general works, I suggested that the picture was grim. I acknowledged David Horner's books, *Crisis of Command*, *High Command* and *General Vasey's War*.<sup>3</sup> I should have noted American books, such as the 'Green books' on the war in New Guinea, and Lida Mayo's *Bloody Buna*.<sup>4</sup> I was suitably dismissive of Timothy Hall's *New Guinea 1942-44*, which disposes of the last two years in about 20 error-filled pages.<sup>5</sup> I also acknowledged important and influential memoirs, such as Peter Ryan's *Fear Drive My Feet* and Frank Legg's *War Correspondent*.<sup>6</sup> Then I spent some time offering some reflections on how Australia has—or rather has not—remembered these campaigns, deploying an analysis of articles on Australian Army publications, articles, papers and grants sponsored by the Memorial to support my contention.

What do we lose by this neglect? I suggest that in the absence of a clear understanding of these events we permit the survival of an attenuated menu of images which collectively represent the war in New Guinea in the popular imagination, a compound of impressions of diggers in jungle green uniforms—'the best jungle fighters in the world'—saving Australia from invasion by beating fanatical Japs. The picture becomes a caricature. 'New Guinea' becomes a green blur, dotted with a couple of indistinct landmarks, Kokoda, Buna, Shaggy Ridge. For the Memorial, I would argue that the consequence would be that we know less and less, raising the dangerous prospect that we eventually fail to understand the significance of our collection, particularly of official records. The net result of our deepening ignorance, I need hardly emphasise, would ultimately be to diminish awareness of those whom the Memorial seeks to commemorate.

Why should New Guinea have been neglected? I suggested five reasons:

First, because the New Guinea campaigns were complex, requiring a great deal of effort to understand just what occurred, why and to what point. Speaking honestly, I asked who had not picked up *The New Guinea Offensives* only to be deterred or at least depressed to find that the New Guinea campaigns were so *detailed*.

Second, it has been suggested to me that the war in New Guinea was, compared to other operations, undramatic, lacking the highs and lows of, say, Kokoda. Perhaps David Dexter modestly presented them in a minor key, but I would suggest that the events he chronicled are hardly dull. The three month fight for Shaggy Ridge, perhaps the one New Guinea action popularly known, was a desperate affair, fought along knife-edged ridges on a one-man front. At Finschhafen a Japanese counter-attack drove between the 24th and 20th Brigades, and only the Australian ability to move reinforcements unimpeded prevented what might have been a messy reverse.

Third, and ironically, because they were by and large so successful. Historians thrive on tension, dissent, problems and failure. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that to be interesting Australia's campaigns have to involve a defeat, as in Gallipoli, a narrow victory, as in Kokoda, a victory so costly that it might have been better to have lost, as on the Western Front. British perfidy, incompetence and contempt adds zest, so perhaps the absence of British generalship itself explains our reluctance to acknowledge arguably our most successful campaigns.

Fourth, that despite their success, the New Guinea campaigns contributed little to the war's outcome. Nevertheless, they were the Australian Army's largest campaigns, and, in any case, as the persistent fascination with Gallipoli attests, there is a clear correlation between futility and historical interest; but it does not extend to New Guinea.

Fifth, because Australians were and are Eurocentric. We know—or at least care—more of D-Day than we do of our own battles. Conversely, our apathy towards Melanesia, evident today in our news coverage, carries over into an indifference to the Australian war there. And of course my observations on the 1943-1944 campaigns apply equally to those of 1945.

So it seems that the neglect of New Guinea is a part of a wider amnesia concerning the Second World War. This might appear to be a surprising claim, but is it possible that we are still fixated on Gallipoli because it relates to the perennial Australian preoccupation with national identity? Except for Kokoda, do we ignore large and important aspects of our military experience with less direct connection with impulses which have traditionally given Australian history its dynamism?

This much was, I admitted, pretty depressing. In 1992 I then moved on to discuss why it was so, and then to suggest some areas of future research to redress the deficiency. Ten years later, I want to say something more positive first, and that is to reflect on the achievements of the past decade. Since 1992 we have seen a number of welcome initiatives that collectively have left us in a much better position to understand these campaigns. It is not possible to mention everything, but I hope to suggest how much progress has, and has not, been made.

Let us begin with several genres in which Australian military history is strong. Australia has a well-established tradition in military biographies. Pre-eminent among them is David Horner's biography *Blamey*.<sup>7</sup> He emphasised Blamey's role in shaping the Australian force, presenting an unsympathetic commander in a new and fruitful light. Mention of biography is a prompt to recognise the notable achievement of Neil McDonald's biography of Damien Parer, which was crucial to my understanding of Kokoda in developing the Memorial's Second World War galleries.<sup>8</sup>

Unit histories, another Australian speciality, continue to be produced. Their importance can be underrated. However, consider that at least three engineer field companies have produced histories in the past five years. Though small in themselves, they suggest the scale of the engineer effort in New Guinea and the need to comprehend not only how the Allied forces built the infrastructure of war as they went, but also how that engineering capacity provided one of the keys to victory. It is also important to remember that we should not only be thinking of army units, but also of RAAF and RAN units. So many histories of units, particularly army units, have been published over the past decade that it is impossible to mention them all.

This is a subject that can become and remain parochial, and we need to recognise that there have been several studies of the war in south-east Asia which Australians need to be aware of if they are not to work in an Australian ghetto. Alan Levine's 1995 *The Pacific War* gives us

a good context for the Australian-American war of special interest to us.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on the war in this theatre, Stephen Taafe's *MacArthur's Jungle War* (dealing essentially with the 1944 campaign, in which Australian forces played a minor role) reminds us that other nations, and other nations' historians, have important things to say about a theatre many Australians regard as 'ours'.<sup>10</sup> For example, Ed Drea's *MacArthur's ULTRA* gives us insights into the intelligence side of the war: a book that I know John Coates used in writing his study of the Finschhafen battle, which was the product above all of an intelligence failure.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, anyone working on the air war in the south-west Pacific—and the entire war depended on airpower—needs to read Thomas Griffith's biography of George Kenney, *MacArthur's airman*.<sup>12</sup> Although both of my contributions to the scholarship on the Second World War have Australian sounding subtitles, I would argue that we need to try to resist the parochial attraction of much of Australian military history. I would suggest that despite their national subtitles their texts seek to place the Australian military effort in broader, multinational contexts. This is the case with, for example, Alan Powell's 1996 *War by Stealth*, which dealt with special operations in the theatre and canvassed the Australian, American, British and Dutch relationships.<sup>13</sup>

The war in Papua New Guinea fostered other bilateral relationships: notably with the United States and with the people of Papua New Guinea. We need to involve American perspectives and evidence in gaining a full appreciation of the major Allied power in this region. Notwithstanding the heroic efforts of the creators of the *Remembering the War in New Guinea* website, our understanding of the war's impact on the people of PNG is still not much further advanced than it was a decade ago. While both Japanese and Australian scholars have worked on their respective relationships with local groups, indigenous voices are still not readily heard.

I suggest that the literature on the war in the south-west Pacific is still uneven. Despite the relative neglect of its operational history in Australia the Kokoda campaign has attracted a further slew of books since 1992, some mediocre, such as Patrick Lindsay's *Spirit of Kokoda* others, such as Peter Brune's *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, useful reconsiderations of Australia's hardest and costliest campaign of the war.<sup>14</sup> Other campaigns in New Guinea have been less well served. Even worse, the broader relationships between the war in the islands and the war at home have been poorly served. While we now have Roy MacLeod's useful *Science and the Pacific War* and Andrew Ross's idiosyncratic but valuable *Armed and Ready*, we still do not know much more than we did 20 years ago about how the Australian industrial war effort was managed.<sup>15</sup> We do not know much more than we did when Michael McKernan published *All-In!* about the war's impact on Australians at home.<sup>16</sup> While formerly neglected subjects such as the traumatic impact of war and the experiences of war widows have been uncovered, not least through the work of Joy Damousi and Stephen Garton, and despite Melanie Oppenheimer's pioneering research, the magnitude and contribution of the vast voluntary war effort is still opaque.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge, and the greatest achievement, in understanding the history of the Pacific war is to encompass the perspective of the nation which was for our country the enemy. In 1996 the Memorial embarked on a joint undertaking funded by the Japanese Embassy which is a story of astonishing success. This, the Australia-Japan Research Project, is based in my section, run since 1996 by Steve Bullard and Peter Londey with the advice and support of a network of scholars in several countries and supported by several researchers. The AJRP's website, including the complementary website *Remembering the War in New Guinea*, constitutes the premier scholarly expression of the shared experience of the two nation's wartime encounter.<sup>18</sup>

The continuing relative dearth of secondary works on New Guinea needs to be qualified in relation to two other speakers at this conference. Mark Johnston's several books, and especially *At the Front Line* and *Fighting the Enemy*, demonstrate the contribution which a dedicated scholar can make.<sup>19</sup> *At the Front Line* enables us to comprehend the life and attitudes of the AMF, in and beyond New Guinea. *Fighting the Enemy* is a confronting and courageous study of what Australian soldiers actually thought of their adversaries. As we have seen, the results are not always comfortable, but they need to be faced. John Coates's *Bravery Above Blunder*, a study of the Huon Peninsula campaign, offers a model of what an

expert military historian, one with a command of the Australian and Allied sources, can achieve.<sup>20</sup> We look forward to Philip Bradley's complementary study of the Markham-Ramu Valley campaign, and especially on Shaggy Ridge. Another recent book is Alan Powell's study of ANGAU, the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit.<sup>21</sup> (Interestingly, one of the important realisations of one of the several conferences which the AJRP organised to bring Japanese scholars to Canberra was to learn that studies of the Japanese counterpart of ANGAU—*Minsebu*—disclosed comparable insights into the wartime management of colonial peoples.)

Out of a desire to document the story I should not overlook my own small contribution, one which shows how various elements of this network are connected. Having given a paper lambasting everyone for neglecting the South-West Pacific campaigns, I felt the obligation to contribute. In 1994 I was given the task of curating the 50th anniversary exhibition *1945: War & Peace*. As part of the research effort for that project I travelled to Borneo. Out of that encounter came my 1997 book, *Tarakan: an Australian Tragedy*.<sup>22</sup> By the time *Tarakan* appeared I was working on the major redevelopment of the Memorial's Second World War galleries, which opened in 1999 and which expressed through scale, style or substance many of the ideas I had gathered on this part of the war, including important insights gained through the AJRP.

Several PhD theses on the New Guinea campaigns have been started or completed. John Moremon has written on the neglected question of logistics, in Papua. Garth Pratten (who completed a tantalisingly brief study of the Militia in New Guinea while a Summer Vacation Scholar at the Memorial in 1995) is working on Australian battalion commanders.<sup>23</sup> Karl James at the University of Wollongong is working on the Bougainville campaign.

In 1992 I discussed the relevant sources and touched upon oral history. I will not repeat this, except to say that in 1992 I called for an attempt to collect personal sources relating to the Second World War. I am delighted to say that nine years on the Department of Veterans Affairs has funded the Caulfield oral history archive of Australians at War, a major oral history project by any standard and one that has already generated hundreds of hours of priceless and otherwise highly perishable evidence about how the war in New Guinea has been experienced and remembered.

### Suggestions for New Research

Mention of sources naturally brings us to new questions and new directions in research. Despite the progress we have seen since 1992, there remain several notable opportunities to ask fresh questions and explore novel ideas. In 1992 I offered a selection, but I am sure that many more could still be generated.

In 1992 I suggested that more work needed to be done on Australian doctrine and the tactics of jungle warfare. Despite some pioneering work by John Moremon a decade ago much more needs to be done.<sup>24</sup>

I also suggested that more work needed to be done on the history of the human impact upon and interaction with the natural environment. New Guinea offered an unfamiliar, arduous and baffling arena to an army accustomed to either the north African desert or the training camps of south-eastern Australia. Despite useful contributions, such as Chris Clark's history of the Royal Australian Survey Corps in *Australia's Military Map-makers*, we need to know more.<sup>25</sup> How did the Australian army—through the Allied Geographical Section, for example—learn about and adapt to this unfamiliar environment, from mapping its contours to coping with the effects of heat, rain and humidity on men and equipment? And how did the massive military presence affect the country, from dredging and road-building to spraying DDT?

Despite the start John Moremon has made with his thesis on the logistics of the Papuan campaign, we need to know more about the logistics of the campaigns, from the massive resources of the American landing ships to the thousands of carriers recruited by ANGAU.

Notwithstanding Ed Drea's work on *MacArthur's Ultra*, we need to know more about intelligence, especially at the tactical level. I am pleased to say that the AJRP and the Memorial are fundings large indexing project so that the vast but unwieldy holdings of ATIS records will be accessible through the Memorial's and the AJRP's website. I'm pleased to say that my colleague, Chris Clark, is at work on a study of the Bletchley Park of the SouthWest Pacific, Central Bureau.

Despite Alan Powell's book, we need to know more about the peoples of New Guinea and how they were affected by or contributed to the war. I think too that we need to learn more about inter-national and inter-service relationships in conducting the campaigns, and about the conduct and experience of battle.

That this list remains suggests that my opening contention, that the New Guinea campaigns are neglected, is still unfortunately justified.

In 1992 I suggested that we needed a hook to do for New Guinea what Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* did for the first AIF. *The Broken Years* revealed the Australia of 1914 and how the Great War changed it. We need a book which will not simply attempt to replicate—a *Broken Years* in jungle green-but which considers how characteristic aspects of the war in New Guinea shaped both the experience of serving there and post-war Australian society. I am thinking of the inherent tension between military authority and egalitarianism, the impact of observing American technological mastery, the growing Australian capacity to manage a complex military effort, the encounter with the cultures of Melanesia, and the troops' perception of the Japanese, the consequences of all of which are evident in post-war Australia. Perhaps we cannot expect such a synoptic book until we can create a foundation formed from a composite of earlier studies.

## Endnotes

1. 'The green hole: exploring our neglect of the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44', *Sabretache: Journal of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, April-June 1993, 3-11.
2. David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, Vol VI of *Australia in the War of 1939-1945* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961).
3. David Horner, *Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978); *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982); General Vasey's War (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992). 4. Lida Mayo, *Bloody Buna* (New York: Doubleday, 1974). Interestingly, a British edition distributed in Australia was sub-titled, sensationally and misleadingly, *The campaign that halted the Japanese invasion of Australia*.
5. Timothy Hall, *New Guinea, 1942-44* (Sydney: Methuen, 1981).
6. Peter Ryan, *Fear Drive My Feet* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959); Frank Legg, *War Correspondent* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1964).
7. David Horner, *Blamey: the Commander-in-Chief* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998).
8. Neil McDonald, *War Cameraman: The story of Damien Parer* (Melbourne: Lothian Books, 1994); see also Neil McDonald and Peter Bruno, *200 Shots: Damien Parer, George Silk and the Australian War in New Guinea* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998).
9. Alan Levine, *The Pacific War: Japan versus the Allies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).
10. Stephen Taafe, *MacArthur's Jungle War: the 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
11. Ed Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas), 1992.
12. Thomas Griffith, *MacArthur's Airman: George C Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1998).
13. Alan Powell, *War by Stealth Australians and the Allied Intelligence Bureau 1942-1945* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996).
14. Patrick Lindsay, *The Spirit of Kokoda* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2002); Peter Brune, *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes: from the Kokoda Trail to Gona Beach, 1942* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).
15. Roy McLeod, *Science and the Pacific War: Science and Survival in the Pacific* (London: Kluwer, 2000); Andrew Ross, *Armed and Ready: the Industrial Development and Defence of Australia 1900-1945* (Sydney: Turlon & Armstrong, 1995).
16. Michael McKernan, *All-in! Australia and the Second World War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1983).
17. Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996); Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Walcha: Ohio Productions, 2002).
18. The Australia-Japan Research Project's wealth of indexes, finding aids, guides, essays and links can be found at its website: <http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp/ajrp2.nsf/>.
19. Mark Johnston, *At the Front Line: Experiences of Australian Soldiers in World War II* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Fighting the Enemy: Australian Soldiers and their Adversaries in World War II* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
20. John Coates, *Bravery Above Blunder: the 9th Australian Division at Finschhafen* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999).
21. Alan Powell, *The Third Force ANGAU's New Guinea War, 1942-46* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2003).
22. Peter Stanley, *Tarakan: an Australian Tragedy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997). 23. Garth Pratten, *Two Seconds: the Australian Militia Experience 1941-1945* (Canberra: privately published, 1995).
24. John Moremon, 'Most deadly jungle fighters?': Australian infantry in Malaya and Papua, 1941-43', BA (Hons), University of New England, 1992.
25. Chris Coulthard-Clark, *Australia's Military Map-makers: the Royal Australian Survey Corps 1915-96* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000)