

SECOND WORLD WAR RAID A PRECURSOR TO A SPECIAL OPS MODEL

The harassment by the Australia Army of Japanese occupied Salamaua

28/29 June 1942

By MAJ Sean VW Childs

The Salamaua raid by the Australian Army Kanga Force's 2/5th Independent Company and the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR), was the first offensive action on land against the Japanese invasion of New Guinea.¹ The raid resulted in the capture of sensitive Japanese information, and forced Japan's military to consume resources. It also vindicated the independent company model, a precursor to our special operations units of today, and proved the scouting worth of the NGVR.

The operational picture

The Japanese captured New Guinea's capital, Rabaul, on 23 January 1942.² Its capture allowed for a next phase of Japan's Southwest Pacific campaign, the amphibious landings on New Guinea's mainland to occupy Lae and Salamaua on 8 March 1942.³ Japan's control of these areas was seen by them as a prerequisite for the taking of Port Moresby. Lae became a major Japanese airbase, while the occupation of Salamaua helped to secure Lae.⁴

Kanga Force



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Kanga Force, Commander (Major Norman Lawrence) and staff..

¹ Bradley, P. 2008. *Commandos*, p.40. In *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series, p. 40. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

² Clark, C. 2010. *The encyclopaedia of Australia's battles*, p.199 Allen & Unwin.

³ Bradley, P. 2010. *Wau 1942 – 1943*, p.8. Australian Army Campaign Series – 6. Australian Army History Unit. Canberra.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Kanga Force formed on 23 April 1942 to command the Australian forces allocated to the Wau-Salamaua area. The force initially comprised the 2/5th Independent Company, an NGVR company⁵, and a mortar detachment from the 2/1st Independent Company.⁶ The force was tasked to patrol the Wau area and when possible to harass the enemy at Salamaua and Lae.⁷

The NGVR was a part-time Australian administered militia infantry battalion, formed in 1939 by white expatriates living in New Guinea. It became a full-time battalion from early 1942.⁸ Their collective local experience endowed them with the ability to scout.

Three Australian independent companies, based on the British commando model, had formed in Australia by October 1941.⁹ The arrival of the war in the Pacific saw five more companies created, the 2/5th forming in March 1942. The independent companies were designed to be compact, resourceful, deceptive, and hard-hitting. From the start, some questioned their ability to be effective in battle.¹⁰

The Salamaua raid

In part, the Battle of the Coral Sea (4 - 8 May 1942) forced a Japanese amphibious invasion convoy bound for Port Moresby to return to Rabaul.¹¹ Had that force landed at Port Moresby it is arguable that through overwhelming force they would have taken it. The 2/5th Independent Company had been deployed to Port Moresby in anticipation of these landings.

Now that the immediate threat to Port Moresby was temporarily removed, the 2/5th Independent Company flew to the Wau-Salamaua area on 23 May 1942, to link up with the NGVR and begin their detailed planning for the raid. The company's airlift was only the second complete Australian Army unit to go to New Guinea, and only the second airborne troops in the history of Australia to fly to their battle stations.¹²

⁵ Bradley, P. 2008. *Commandos*, p. 20. In *The Battle for Wau New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁶ 2nd AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and CMF (Citizen Military Forces) unit war diaries, 1939-45 War. AWM52 25/3/5 - 2/5 Independent Company, p.6. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1363610> [Accessed 9 June 22]

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁸ Downs, Ian. 1999. *The New Guinea Volunteer Rifles NGVR 1939-1943: A History*. Broadbeach Waters, Queensland: Pacific Press.

⁹ Wau 1942 - 1943, p.20.

¹⁰ Bradley, P. 2008. *Conclusion*, p. 241. In *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ <https://history.army.mil/brochures/new-guinea/ng.htm> [Accessed 7 June 2022]

¹² 2nd AIF (Australian Imperial Force) and CMF (Citizen Military Forces) unit war diaries, 1939-45 War. AWM52 25/3/5 - 2/5 Independent Company, p.6. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1363610> [Accessed 9 June 22]



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Troops of B Platoon, 2/5th Independent Company, leaving camp to carry out a raid on 28 June 1942. The Salamaua raid by the Australian Army Kanga Force's 2/5th Independent Company and the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) was the first offensive action on land against the Japanese invasion of New Guinea.

With the advantage of surprise and the NGVR's knowledge of the terrain, the plan saw simultaneous night attacks on seven Salamaua area targets by seven parties, each with a NGVR scout.¹³ Major objectives included the demolishing of key infrastructure sites with 'sticky bombs', and the creation of as much chaos as possible using grenades, small arms, and mortar fire.¹⁴

The successful raid resulted in the destruction of airfield infrastructure, the radio station, supply dumps¹⁵, buildings, a bridge and three vehicles.¹⁶ Amidst the confused Japanese forces, an estimated 57 to 113 were killed, while just three Australians were wounded, not seriously.

A significant outcome of the raid was the seizure of classified Japanese documents that included marked maps, orders, and code signs. Some maps revealed details of Japanese bases in the Southwest Pacific, and details of Northeastern Australia.¹⁷

¹³ Bradley, P. 2008. *Commandos*, pp. 28-30. In *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, and p.38.

¹⁵ *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*, pp. 220-221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Ultimately, the success of the harassing raid forced the Japanese to commit additional resources to Lae and Salamaua just when their maximum operational effort was required elsewhere, for example in Papua and Guadalcanal.¹⁸

The raid, considered a textbook one, was a part of what later became known as the Defence of Wau (8 March 1942 – 26 February 1943).¹⁹ The 2/5th, 2/6th and 2/7th Independent Companies, and the NGVR received Battle Honours for actions during that campaign, which the Royal Victoria Regiment inherits.²⁰

Lessons learnt

Until the raid, there was a consensus amongst Australian military commanders that the concept of independent companies was flawed.²¹ To the contrary, the havoc created by the raid and the intelligence collected validated the independent company construct, and confirmed the value of NGVR scouts. It also instilled a confidence in the Australian command in New Guinea, which put it in good stead for the long fight there yet to come.²² The 2/5th Independent Company's resounding success in the raid proved that small, potent forces that plan in detail can impact the strategic level.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁹ Bradley, P. 2008. *Conclusion*, p. 240. In *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ AAHU *Consolidated Battle Honours List*. Objective Ref: BQ37880855.

²¹ Bradley, P. 2008. *Commandos*, p.20. In *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*. Australian Army History Series. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

²² Ibid., p. 40.