

Land Warfare Studies Centre

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# TESTING THE TENETS OF MANOEUVRE

Australia's First Amphibious Assault since Gallipoli

The 9th Australian Division at Lae, 4–16 September 1943

by Brigadier Chris Field

January 2012



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Comment on this paper is welcome and should be forwarded in writing to:

The Director, Land Warfare Studies Centre  
Ian Campell Road, Duntroon ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

Telephone: (02) 6265 9890

Facsimile: (02) 6265 9888

Email: <[lwsc.publications@defence.gov.au](mailto:lwsc.publications@defence.gov.au)>

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## About the Author

Chris Field is Deputy Commanding General, Force Development, Combined Joint Task Force–82. He has commanded in 1st, 2nd and 2nd/4th Battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment. He has served with the Australian Army in Malaysia, Timor Leste and Solomon Islands; Queensland Reconstruction Authority; US Army in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan; and United Nations in Israel, Syria and Lebanon. He is a graduate of the Australian Defence Force Academy; Royal Military College, Duntroon; USMC Command and Staff College and School of Advanced Warfighting; Australian Institute of Company Directors; US Army Combined/Joint Force Land Component Commander Course; and Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies.

Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.

Julian S Corbett, 1911



# Introduction

In September 1943, the 9th Australian Division, having been recalled from an arduous desert campaign in the Middle East which included the eight-month defence of Tobruk against Rommel's *Afrika Korps*, was hastily refitted, retrained and despatched northward to fight the Japanese in the dense, fetid jungles of New Guinea. Their inaugural operation was a complex amphibious landing—the 'first large-scale seaborne landing by an Australian formation since the bloody debacle at Gallipoli in April 1915'.<sup>1</sup> This was also the 'first major coordinated sea, air, and land assault in Australian history' and 'the biggest amphibious landing in the South West Pacific to that time'.<sup>2</sup> Following the landing, the division was to advance through rugged country to the major Japanese stronghold of Lae where it would link with the 7th Division to capture the town and its crucial airbases, probably in the face of stiff opposition. It was a tall order, an extraordinary task for the battered 9th and one that it achieved, unsurprisingly, with some difficulty. The challenges and complexities faced by the division and its commander, Major General George Wootten, were numerous and varied, and tested the battle skills of the soldiers and Wootten's not inconsiderable talent as a strategist to their limits. For today's Australian Defence Force (ADF) commander, this complex, multi-faceted operation contains a number of valuable lessons in manoeuvre warfare in the difficult terrain of Australia's closest neighbour that remain undiminished by the passage of time.

Contemporary ADF's commanders are guided by pertinent and well-considered doctrine, primarily Land Warfare Doctrine 1, *The Fundamentals*

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- 1 David Dexter, 'Assault on Lae and Nadzab' in *Australia in the War of 1939–1945. Series I – Army. Vol. VI: The New Guinea Offensives*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961, p. 329.
  - 2 John Coates, *Bravery above Blunder – 9th Division in New Guinea 1943–44*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 76; Peter Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars – From Waikato to Long Tan*, Pan Books, Sydney, 1971, p. 406; John Robertson and John McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy 1939–1945 – A Documentary History*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1985, p. 388.

of *Land Warfare* (LWD1). LWD 1, the Australian Army's capstone doctrine, 'provides the ... philosophical guidance for ... winning the land battle and thriving in the chaos of the 21st Century'. In recognition of the demands of the modern battlefield, LWD 1 emphasises 'highly mobile, protected, networked, trained, and educated' land forces to 'manoeuvre in the contemporary environment'.<sup>3</sup>

To support 'manoeuvre in the contemporary environment', manoeuvre theory is described in LWD 1 as a way of 'thinking about war'.<sup>4</sup> It requires the defeat of the enemy's will to fight, the shattering of the enemy's moral and physical cohesion, the creation of an expectation of defeat in the enemy's mind, the exploitation of enemy weaknesses while avoiding enemy strengths, and the protection of friendly vulnerabilities. In addition, manoeuvre theory requires the taking of calculated risks and the exploitation of chance and circumstances; war is viewed as a 'competition between opposing wills, framed by time, space, and understanding, rather than by position alone' with close combat a 'central and enduring feature'.<sup>5</sup> Both the successful application of manoeuvre theory and 'manoeuvre in the contemporary environment' are underpinned by what LWD 1 describes as the seven tenets of manoeuvre.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, these tenets are: focus on the enemy's centre of gravity, surprise, main effort, reconnaissance pull, tempo, combined arms teams, and orchestration. The details of their application will be discussed in a later section of the paper.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to enhance the ADF and the Australian Army's thinking about 'manoeuvre in the contemporary environment' by applying the seven tenets of manoeuvre to expeditionary operations and amphibious manoeuvre by the 9th Australian Division in the capture of Lae from 4 to 16 September 1943.<sup>7</sup> Second, this paper will use the historical case study of the 9th Division operation to focus ADF commanders on some of the challenges involved in expeditionary

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3 Land Warfare Doctrine 1, *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, Department of Defence, Puckapunyal, 2008, p. 2.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 45.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 45–6.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 48–51.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

operations and amphibious manoeuvre. Expeditionary operations are at the heart of the ADF's mandate, with the *Defence White Paper 2009* reiterating that Australia's 'expansive strategic geography requires an expeditionary orientation on the part of the ADF at the operational level, underpinned by requisite force projection capabilities'. The *Defence White Paper 2009* further tasks the land forces to 'undertake amphibious manoeuvre, and stabilisation and reconstruction operations in [Australia's] immediate neighbourhood'.<sup>8</sup>

Applying manoeuvre theory in accordance with LWD 1 also requires some definition of the environment in which the ADF's expeditionary and amphibious manoeuvre will occur. The *Defence White Paper 2009* describes the primary operational environment as extending:

... from the eastern Indian Ocean to the island states of Polynesia, and from the equator to the Southern Ocean. That area contains all Australian sovereign, offshore and economic territories, such as Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Christmas Island, Heard and McDonald Islands, Macquarie Island, Norfolk Island and also waters adjacent to the Australian Antarctic Territory.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, the primary operational environment includes Papua New Guinea, Australia's nearest international neighbour, with its harsh climate, rugged terrain, limited air and road access, and complex systems of people, cultures, language and communities. The *Defence White Paper 2009* asserts that Australia has a 'strategic interest' in the 'security, stability and cohesion' of its 'immediate neighbourhood' including Papua New Guinea. Papua New

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8 *Defence White Paper 2009 – Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Department of Defence, Canberra, 2009, p. 60. Land forces involve those land combat, combat support and combat service support forces (such as infantry, armour, artillery, combat engineers, and aviation) that are able to operate as combined arms teams and undertake combat in Australia's littoral environment and territory. They are also required to undertake amphibious manoeuvre, and stabilisation and reconstruction operations in the nation's immediate neighbourhood, as well as operations further afield. See *Defence White Paper 2009*, pp. 12, 42, 52, 60. Australia's 'immediate neighbourhood' is shared with Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, New Zealand and the South Pacific island states.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Guinea is thus a nation that the ADF must study and understand, even if only to facilitate the rapid provision of humanitarian assistance in time of need.<sup>10</sup> Close analysis of the 9th Division experience provides a window into the conduct of manoeuvre operations in the complex terrain of Papua New Guinea.

Any analysis of expeditionary and amphibious operations necessarily touches on the issue of capability and Australia's expeditionary and amphibious manoeuvre capability is currently the subject of Joint Project (JP) 2048. JP 2048 aims to provide the ADF with the platforms necessary to create an amphibious manoeuvre capability in support of the ADF's Future Joint Operating Concept, *Joint Operations for the 21st Century*, with various phases of the project combining to provide a multi-dimensional manoeuvre capability through aviation, landing craft and command and control facilities.<sup>11</sup> JP 2048, in combination with the direction provided in the *Defence White Paper 2009*, will herald enormous change to the ADF's operational concepts and capabilities, particularly those manoeuvre tenets at the heart of LWD 1.

This paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 provides the background and operational view of the Second World War Operation Cartwheel campaign, including the plan to capture Lae. Section 2 briefly describes operations for the approach to, and capture of Lae by the 9th Australian Division, while Section 3 applies the seven tenets of manoeuvre to the expeditionary operation and amphibious manoeuvre by the 9th Division in achieving its objective. The lessons of this operation in the use of manoeuvre and the relevance of LWD 1's seven tenets of manoeuvre to a similar modern-day operation are the focus of the discussion in the closing stages of this paper. The potential for such an operation in the future is a potent reminder that history has much to teach the modern Australian Army.

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10 Ibid., pp. 12, 16.

11 'Future Joint Operating Concept' (FJOC), *Joint Operations for the 21st Century*, Defence Materiel Organisation, Canberra, May 2007, p. 13; 'Amphibious Deployment and Sustainment – JP 2048 Phase 4 A/B', Department of Defence, <http://www.defence.gov.au/dmo/adas/jp2048ph4/>, accessed 3 September 2010; 'Joint Projects – JP 2048', *Defence Capability Plan, Public Version*, Defence Materiel Organisation, June 2009, <http://www.defence.gov.au/dmo/id/dcp/html/jp/JP2048.html>, accessed 3 September 2010.

## Section 1 – The Plan

In early September 1943, in the ‘most complex, most powerful operation to be launched in the South West Pacific theatre to that time’, Australian-led forces mounted a pincer movement to capture the Japanese New Guinea stronghold of Lae.<sup>12</sup> This pincer movement involved a combined force comprising the United States 503rd Parachute Regiment and the 7th Australian Division in an airborne/air-landing operation into Nadzab, forty kilometres to the north-west of Lae, while the 9th Australian Division conducted an amphibious assault thirty kilometres to the east of the town.<sup>13</sup> Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA), General Douglas MacArthur, sought to employ his ‘maximum airborne capacity on one [enemy] flank and his maximum amphibious capacity on the other ... to deliver a blow strong enough to make sure of early success’.<sup>14</sup> This operation was the 9th Australian Division’s first task in the dense jungles and rugged terrain of New Guinea, having returned to Australia in February 1943 from three years in the vast, featureless deserts of North Africa where their exploits at Tobruk and El Alamein had earned them a reputation as tough and courageous fighters.<sup>15</sup>

The operations by the 9th Division that led to the capture of Lae in September 1943 were just one element of the complex Operation Cartwheel which ‘involved thirteen separate and sometimes simultaneous operations over eight months’.<sup>16</sup> This phase of the operation was designed to neutralise,

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12 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 60.

13 Ibid., p. 63; Timothy Hall, *New Guinea 1942–44*, Methuen Australia, Sydney, 1981, p. 207; Alan Powell, *The Third Force – ANGAU’s New Guinea War, 1942–46*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 67; Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 406; Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 388.

14 E G Keogh, *South West Pacific, 1941–45*, Grayflower Productions, Melbourne, 1965, p. 299.

15 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 326–46.

16 John Coates, ‘The War in New Guinea 1943–44: Operations and Tactics’ in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Foundations of Victory: The Pacific War 1943–44*, Proceedings of the 2003 Chief of Army’s Military History Conference, Army History

bypass, but not capture, the island of Rabaul (in New Britain), which was the Japanese main base in the occupied SWPA.<sup>17</sup> The earlier phases of Operation Cartwheel had seen the defeat of Japanese forces in areas of Solomon Islands and Papua by US and Australian forces from late 1942.<sup>18</sup>

From Rabaul, Cartwheel switched its focus to the large Japanese base at Lae on the north coast of New Guinea at the southern end of the Huon Peninsula and close to the mouth of the Markham River. Lae had been occupied by the Japanese on 8 March 1942, developed into a major strategic base, and was now critical to the enemy war effort. Its capture would allow the Allies to further develop the town's port and the Markham Valley airfields to support subsequent operations along the north coast of New Guinea.<sup>19</sup>

On 17 May 1943, MacArthur issued a directive for the attack on Lae. Australian forces were to capture the town itself, and then continue with two simultaneous advances, one along the coast of the Huon Peninsula (9th Division) and the other inland following the Markham and Ramu Valleys (7th Division). Lae was just one operation in a complex plan that recognised the manoeuvre potential of the seas connecting Australia with the archipelago occupied by the Japanese. MacArthur sought to push his forces forward, capturing airbases such as those in the Markham Valley as they progressed, thus securing control of the sea and allowing the Allied fleet to land ground forces to secure each new base.<sup>20</sup>

David Horner argues that the 1943–44 series of operations, led by General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces, were 'the high point of Australia's experience of operational level command'

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Unit, Canberra, 2003, p. 46.

17 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 58.

18 Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 396.

19 Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 288; Hall, *New Guinea*, p. 87; Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare at Sea – Theory and Practice*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, pp. 123, 158–9; Gavin Long, *The Six Years War — Australia in the 1939–45 War*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1973, p. 175.

20 Albert Palazzo, 'Maritime Strategy and the Operations of the Australian Army' in Albert Palazzo et al, *Projecting Force, The Australian Army and Maritime Strategy*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, June 2010, p. 14.

during the Second World War.<sup>21</sup> According to Michael Evans however, Blamey's operational-level responsibilities were determined by MacArthur's broader campaign design and by the flow of American logistical resources. As a result, Evans argues, 'the US-Australian nexus at the operational level remained weak and underdeveloped for much of the South-West Pacific campaign with MacArthur setting the conditions under which Australian commanders operated'.<sup>22</sup> The structure of operations by the 9th Australian Division in the Lae area in 1943 and the integral role of US naval, air, engineering, and logistic assets certainly support Evans's thesis.

On 4 September 1943, the operation commenced with Australian-led forces mounting a pincer movement to capture Lae.<sup>23</sup> One arm of the pincer involved an airborne/air-landing operation into Nadzab forty kilometres to the north-west of Lae by the US 503rd Parachute Regiment and 7th Australian Division. At the same time, the other arm of the pincer, the 9th Australian Division, launched an amphibious assault thirty kilometres to the east of Lae.<sup>24</sup>

The 9th Division's amphibious and expeditionary operations were conducted in phases. The first phase involved the preparation for and delivery of the amphibious assault itself. The second phase saw the division advance to Lae and, in the third phase, the 9th linked with the 7th Division and secured the township. The next section of the paper examines the 9th Division's amphibious assault and expeditionary manoeuvre through analysis of each of the three phases.

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21 David Horner, *High Command – Australia and Allied Strategy 1939–1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, p. 9.

22 Michael Evans, 'The Closing of the Australian Military Mind: The ADF and Operational Art', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2008, p. 113.

23 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 60

24 *Ibid.*, p. 63; Hall, *New Guinea*, p. 207; Powell, *The Third Force*, p. 67; Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 406; Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 388.

## Section 2 – The 9th Division’s Amphibious Assault

The initial phase of the 9th Division’s assault involved preparation for and the launching of the amphibious assault itself and lasted from 1 September until 5 September when the forces effectively moved to the second phase. The amphibious task force was commanded by US Rear Admiral D E Barbey, Commander VII Amphibious Force, while Major General G F Wootten, Commander 9th Australian Division, was appointed Commander Landing Force.<sup>25</sup> The landing itself was divided into two assaults, the first launched by the 20th Brigade on 4 September 1943 at Red Beach, thirty kilometres east of Lae, on the eastern side of the mouth of the Busu River, and took an extraordinary thirty-five minutes despite the fact that it was effected under attack from Japanese aircraft. The 26th Brigade landed at Red Beach, close to Hopoi, within two hours of the 20th Brigade.<sup>26</sup> Within four hours of the initial landings the 9th Australian Division had deployed 8000 men ashore, while 1500 tons of stores, some twenty days’ supplies, had been beached.<sup>27</sup> Once ashore, the two leading brigades faced only sparse Japanese ground forces and quickly expanded the beachheads while securing the initial objectives, sentimentally code-named Bardia, Tobruk, and Benghazi.<sup>28</sup> The 24th Brigade, the divisional reserve, was held at Buna, 240 kilometres south-east of Lae, and deployed to Red Beach on 5 September.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Joint Publication 3-02, *Amphibious Operations*, US Department of Defense, 10 August 2009, [http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3\\_02.pdf](http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_02.pdf), p. xiv; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier: 22 July 1942 – 1 May 1944*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1950, pp. 130–1. See also Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 264.

26 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 332, 334; *Jungle Warfare – with the Australian Army in the South-West Pacific*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1944, pp. 72–3.

27 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 332; Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 307; Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 327.

28 Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 407.

29 Hall, *New Guinea*, p. 207; Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 337.

The second phase of the assault involved the advance to Lae from 5 to 16 September 1943. Once the 9th Division's initial objectives had been secured, Wootten was anxious to speed the advance towards Lae to prevent the Japanese preparing organised resistance east of the Busu River, which was a significant obstacle, and the Singaua Plantation, which boasted well-prepared Japanese defensive positions.<sup>30</sup> Wootten ordered an advance to Lae using three independent axes: the coastal route, which would be taken by the 24th Brigade; the inland route, some four kilometres from the coast, which would be followed by the 26th Brigade; and the northern flank protection route which fell to the 2/4th Independent Company.<sup>31</sup> The 20th Brigade was held in the vicinity of the initial amphibious objectives for almost the entire Lae operation. It was not released to advance on Lae until 11 September, some five days prior to the end of the divisional advance, when it was relieved by the 4th Militia Brigade, 5th Australian Division, which deployed by sea from Milne Bay.<sup>32</sup>

On 5 September, less than twenty-four hours after the amphibious assault, Wootten ordered both the 26th Brigade and 24th Brigade to push forward through the 20th Brigade. The advancing brigades moved west towards Lae through thick coastal country and in heavy rain and, from 5 to 7 September, encountered dogged Japanese resistance in groups up to company size. On 8 September the brigades were halted by the Busu River which posed a formidable obstacle. The river was over 700 metres wide in places, close to two metres deep and, swollen by the recent heavy rain, flowing at ten to twelve knots. A day later, both brigades remained halted, all activity centred on crossing the Busu. Wootten became alarmed at the unexpected delay, recognising that, unless the crossings were secured quickly, 'the [Japanese], knowing our situation will fortify banks and strongly oppose us'. He ordered the 26th and 24th Brigades to seize bridgeheads over the Busu River no later than first light on 10 September.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 334.

31 Ibid., p. 349; Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 309.

32 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 357.

33 Ibid., pp. 334, 350–1; Garth Pratten, 'Crossing the Busu', *Wartime*, Iss. 38, April 2007, p. 59.

Supported by artillery from the Burep River to the east, the 24th Brigade on the coastal route finally managed to cross the Busu. The 26th Brigade on the inland route suffered further delays while various bridging solutions, including folding boats and locally sourced log bridges, were tried without success. Finally, small box girders, a form of assault bridging, were employed to move the 26th across the river on 13 September after a delay of five days.<sup>34</sup> Further north, the 2/4th Independent Company could have crossed the Busu River at the Kunda Bridge, provided an alternative route for the 26th Brigade, and identified the eventual Japanese withdrawal route north from Lae as early as 8 September. However, Wootten decided to hold the company on the eastern side of the river to protect the flanks of the 24th and 26th Brigades.<sup>35</sup>

On 12 September, the 24th Brigade advanced along the coast towards Lae and encountered 'stiff resistance' and night 'infiltration [of] forward positions' by the Japanese. The 24th pushed on against stubborn opposition, capturing the Malahang Anchorage by dusk on 13 September. On the inland route, after five days of frustration, the 26th Brigade finally crossed the Busu at first light on 14 September and its lead elements were immediately engaged by the dug-in enemy. After four hours of fighting, the enemy abandoned their positions and the remainder of the 26th crossed without opposition.<sup>36</sup>

On the night of 14 September, Headquarters New Guinea Force in Port Moresby ordered battalions from the 7th and 9th Australian Divisions to break off from the advance to Lae and move to 'block the enemy's escape routes' north of the town.<sup>37</sup> Despite this apparent interference in the Buna-based I Australian Corps' coordination of operations around Lae, the 7th and 9th Divisions complied with the order. This stripped vital combat power from both divisions on the eve of the assault to capture Lae.

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34 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 362, 367. The small box girder was a small assault bridge that could be used to span gaps of up to thirty feet. It could be carried on a tank, a Churchill armoured vehicle or similar (although at Lae it was carried on trucks), and could be deployed without engineers being exposed to enemy fire. It was also used during the Normandy landings.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 361; Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 66.

36 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 368–70.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 378.

Early on the morning of 15 September, the remaining two battalions of the 26th Brigade advanced west from the Busu River crossing, quickly defeating all Japanese resistance up to the Bumbu River. The Bumbu River was the I Australian Corps designated boundary between the 7th and 9th Australian Divisions and, further south, the 24th Brigade was also ordered to advance to the Bumbu. Resistance was sporadic and both brigades reported 'passing through abandoned enemy positions'. At the same time, the 20th Brigade had been ferried across the mouth of the Busu River. With only minor skirmishing against remnant Japanese forces, the 9th Division reached the Bumbu River, about a mile and a quarter from Lae, and could have entered the town on 15 September. By dusk, the forward troops of the 7th Division had also closed on Lae and were at Cox Road Camp, about five miles from the town.<sup>38</sup>

The third phase of operations against Lae saw the 9th Division assemble along the eastern bank of the Bumbu River at 10.30 am on 16 September 1943 in preparation for an assault on the town. At the same time, a patrol from the 2/25th Battalion, 25th Brigade, 7th Division, advanced down the main road of the now deserted township.<sup>39</sup> The news that the 7th Division now occupied Lae was not relayed to I Australian Corps or the 9th Division in time to prevent Allied air force 'bombing and strafing' and a bombardment by the 9th Division artillery, effectively driving back the 7th Division patrols who were clearly fortunate to escape unscathed.<sup>40</sup> Eventually, on the afternoon of 16 September, the soldiers of both divisions met in the now liberated, albeit destroyed township.

Lae had been captured and General MacArthur's communiqué of 8 September announced that 'elements of four Japanese divisions aggregating 20,000 at the beginning are now completely enveloped with their supply lines cut'.<sup>41</sup> Blamey's telegram to the Australian Prime Minister on 16 September proclaimed that 'only battered remnant[s] [were] likely to have escaped'; this was, however, far from the truth. In fact, the main enemy garrison

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38 Ibid., pp. 379–81, 386.

39 Ibid., p. 388.

40 Ibid., p. 381; Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 407.

41 Dexter, *New Guinea Offensives*, p. 13.

had escaped north from Lae, heading for the northern Japanese bases to regroup and rejoin the fight later.<sup>42</sup> The total number of Japanese in the Lae–Salamaua area early in September was around 11,000, of whom 2200 were known casualties. An estimated 6000 Japanese escaped north from Lae and would prove themselves stubborn opponents in the future.<sup>43</sup> In the two weeks of fighting in and around Lae, the 9th Australian Division suffered 547 casualties, including 77 killed, 397 wounded and 73 missing.<sup>44</sup> Of these casualties, 206 occurred within the first twenty-four hours of the initial amphibious assault and were mainly caused by attacks from Rabaul-based Japanese aircraft.<sup>45</sup> The sum total of Australian casualties in the Lae offensive of September 1943 and the earlier fighting around Wau and Salamaua amounted to 1231 killed and 2867 wounded—as opposed to Japanese losses of around 35,000.<sup>46</sup>

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42 Dexter, p. 390; Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 327.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 392; Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 409.

44 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 392.

45 David Horner, 'The Military Strategy and Command Aspects of the Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific Area' in Glenn Wahlert (ed), *Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific: 1942–45*, Proceedings of the Australian Army History Conference, Canberra, 15 November 1994, p. 42; Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 327.

46 John Coates, *An Atlas of Australia's Wars, Vol. VII of The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 254.

## Section 3 – Applying the Seven Tenets of Manoeuvre to the 9th Division’s Operations in Lae

The Australian Army has developed significantly since the expeditionary and amphibious operations of the 9th Division in 1943. Today’s Army is guided by doctrine that is tailored to a battlespace that differs in every respect from that of the Second World War. LWD 1, *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, also describes a vastly different force to that of the New Guinea campaign in its emphasis on ‘highly mobile, protected, networked, trained, and educated’ land forces to ‘manoeuvre in the contemporary environment’.<sup>47</sup>

The modern concept of ‘manoeuvre in the contemporary environment’, as described in LWD 1, maintains the same fundamental aims as those pursued with vigour by the men of the 9th Division in 1943: defeating the enemy’s will to fight, shattering the enemy’s moral and physical cohesion, creating an expectation of defeat in the enemy’s mind, exploiting an enemy’s weaknesses, avoiding an enemy’s strengths, and protecting friendly vulnerabilities.<sup>48</sup> The ‘calculated risks’, the ‘exploitation of chance circumstances’ and the acceptance of ‘close combat as a central and enduring feature of land warfare’ espoused by LWD 1 are precisely the qualities that characterised the 9th Division’s manoeuvre warfare. Even the seven tenets of manoeuvre would not have represented a radical departure to George Wootten’s 9th Division planners in orchestrating the campaign against Lae. However, it is in the application of those tenets that the differences are evident. This section analyses the 9th Division’s expeditionary and amphibious operations in terms of their application of the seven tenets of manoeuvre outlined in LWD 1. The lessons of their application remain relevant for commanders of the ADF’s modern forces in a battlespace that shares much with that of their 9th Division counterparts.

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47 LWD 1, *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, p. 2.

48 Ibid., pp. 45–6.

The first of the manoeuvre tenets listed in LWD 1 concerns the need to focus all actions on the enemy's centre of gravity. LWD 1 defines the centre of gravity as 'that characteristic, capability or locality from which a force, nation or alliance derives its freedom of action, strength or will to fight. At the tactical level, the [centre of gravity] will often change as the battle progresses and will often be determined by the interaction of the enemy and friendly intentions'.<sup>49</sup> On 2 July 1942, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff directed that the operational-level objective for the southern Pacific campaign would be the capture of the New Britain–New Ireland–New Guinea area.<sup>50</sup> Within that area, the Japanese base of Rabaul in New Britain represented the enemy centre of gravity. In March 1943, MacArthur issued Plan Elkton outlining five major operations which culminated in the isolation and capture of Rabaul.<sup>51</sup>

The actions by the Allies during Operation Cartwheel and Plan Elkton, which included capturing Lae, Salamaua, and areas of the Solomon Islands, were all designed to indirectly attack the Japanese stronghold in Rabaul by isolating the island base. The more the Allies consolidated air and sea bases along the north coast of New Guinea, the more difficult it became for Japanese forces to operate out of Rabaul and other bases. The isolation of Rabaul also disrupted the Japanese logistic resupply of forces based in New Guinea.

At the tactical level, the I Australian Corps' centre of gravity for the Lae operation was the major Japanese base, airfield, and port that had threatened Port Moresby and Australia since its establishment in March 1942.<sup>52</sup> The capture of Lae would also enable the Allies to develop the town's port and the Markham Valley airfields to support subsequent operations along the north coast of New Guinea.

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49 Ibid., p. 48.

50 Horner, 'The Military Strategy and Command Aspects of the Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific Area', p. 30.

51 Vego, *Operational Warfare at Sea*, p. 123.

52 Robertson and McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy*, p. 388.

Lae—as the Japanese centre of gravity—was a critical capability in General Nakano’s Japanese *51st Division* and therefore the clear focus of Allied actions:

By the night of 05 September the major Allied offensive of the New Guinea campaign was in full swing. South of Lae the 5th Division was closing in on Salamaua; east of Lae the leading platoon of the 9th Division was observing the first Japanese encountered by that division; west of Lae a mixed force of paratroops, pioneers, artillerymen, engineers and Papuans was in occupation of Nadzab and awaiting the arrival of the main body of the 7th Division. Under such pressure General Nakano’s Japanese *51st Division*, already badly shaken, was likely to crack.<sup>53</sup>

For the 9th Australian Division, the centre of gravity was the Japanese artillery supporting the defence of Lae. General Wootten concentrated his efforts on dislocating and disrupting this Japanese strength by selecting an amphibious landing point ‘out of artillery range of the Lae defences’, and quickly establishing his own artillery positions on the Burep River.<sup>54</sup> Wootten considered the divisional artillery essential support for the 9th Division’s advance, particularly as naval surface fire support from the six US destroyers was not continuously available. Unfortunately, Wootten’s emphasis on the movement of the 9th Division’s artillery was, along with the flooding of the Busu River, partly responsible for the five-day delay in the 26th Brigade’s crossing of the Busu. The movement of bridging equipment competed with the artillery build-up on the Burep River despite the assessment by the 26th Brigade Commander, Brigadier Whitehead, that the limited amount of bridging equipment necessary would not affect the build-up of artillery, and

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53 Salamaua was designed as a ‘magnet to draw troops from Lae’ and the 3rd and 5th Australian Militia Divisions provided dogged fighting in the Salamaua operations which ‘facilitated the capture of Lae’. See Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 346.

54 Disruption is a direct attack that neutralises or destroys the enemy’s centre of gravity. See LWD 1, p. 48; Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 67.

that artillery was being pushed forward to do a job which could have been done with mortars.<sup>55</sup>

However, in accordance with Wootten's centre of gravity assessment, as the 9th Division advanced, the enemy hit back with artillery stationed around Lae. On 14 September enemy shelling increased and Japanese guns inflicted around fifty casualties, primarily among American amphibian engineers along the coast. Wootten countered by increasing the artillery support for the 9th Division which, by the time of the assault on Lae, comprised the fifty-two field guns (25-pounders) of the 2/12th and 2/6th Field Regiments and two medium guns (1917 model 155 mm guns) from the 2/6th Field Regiment. These guns were located on the east bank of the Burep River and at 'G' Beach.<sup>56</sup>

LWD 1 lists the second tenet of manoeuvre as surprise. Surprise is defined as a:

state of disorientation resulting from an unexpected event that degrades the enemy's ability to resist. The purpose of surprise is to force the enemy into unplanned courses of action, thereby leading them into forced and unforced errors. Surprise is only effective when friendly actions are sufficiently unexpected to directly threaten to invalidate the enemy's plan. To be unexpected, actions must be perceived by the enemy as unreasonable. An apparently unreasonable course of action can only be achieved by accepting a degree of risk. The greater the risk, the greater the surprise and greater are the potential results. Surprise, therefore, can decisively affect the outcome of combat far beyond the physical means at hand.<sup>57</sup>

Wootten's plan for the 9th Division's advance on Lae was designed to achieve surprise and, as a result, force the enemy into unplanned courses of action. His plan included a 240-kilometre amphibious assault from Buna–Morobe to the landing beaches thirty kilometres east of Lae, the forces arriving

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55 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 350, 368–9.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 368.

57 LWD 1, p. 49.

just before dawn on 4 September 1943. Wootten had requested a night amphibious assault which Admiral Barbey 'had considered impracticable' because there would be no moon. 'Wootten's request to approach during darkness and land at dawn' (0515 hours) was denied and, instead, Barbey 'substituted a six-minute pre-landing naval bombardment [which ceased when landing craft were 1200 yards from the shore] to make up for lack of surprise'.<sup>58</sup> The differing views between Wootten and Barbey on the exact timing of the amphibious assault perhaps reflect national 'lessons learnt' from previous amphibious landings. For example, post-First World War the Australian military, which had 'no culture of amphibious warfare', had largely commemorated the 1915 landings at Gallipoli as a national baptism of fire reflecting the 'perennial Australian preoccupation with national identity'.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, between the First World War and Second World War, the US military, particularly the US Marine Corps (USMC) and US Navy, had made a serious study of lessons from Gallipoli and other amphibious operations.<sup>60</sup> Among these lessons was the difficulty of a night amphibious assault as evidenced by the disjointed Anzac landings on 25 April 1915. On this basis, the USMC concluded that night amphibious landings were difficult to coordinate and execute and, therefore, for command and control purposes, daylight amphibious landings were preferred and indeed predominated in US operations during the Second World War.

Between September 1943 and July 1945, Barbey planned and conducted no fewer than fifty-six amphibious assaults in the SWPA. However, in September 1943, Barbey's VII Amphibious Force which 'consisted chiefly of sea-going landing craft but had its own escort destroyers and other fighting

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58 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 328–9; David Stephens, 'Maritime Aspects of Australian Amphibious Operations', in Glenn Wahlert (ed), *Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific: 1942–45*, Proceedings of the Australian Army History Conference, Canberra, 15 November 1994, p. 115; Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 327.

59 Horner, 'The Military Strategy and Command Aspects of the Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific Area', p. 35; Peter Stanley, 'The Green Hole: Exploring our Neglect of the New Guinea Campaigns of 1943–44', *Sabretache*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Canberra, April/June 1993, p. 6.

60 Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 3.2, *Operations Series – Amphibious Operations*, Department of Defence, Canberra, 2003, p. 4-2.

craft' was 'newly organised ... [had not] undertaken an operational task to that time' and had 'no acquaintance' with the 9th Australian Division.<sup>61</sup> Thus, on 4 September 1943, Barbey, as Commander of the Allied Task Force was, like Wootten, conducting his first amphibious assault of the Second World War.

While the amphibious assault may have initially surprised the Japanese, it is clear that surprise was lost during the twelve days it took the 9th Division to advance the thirty kilometres to Lae, including the 26th Brigade's five-day crossing of the Busu River. Two key measures of this lost surprise included the enemy decision to evacuate Salamaua from 6 September so as to rapidly reinforce the 2000 troops in Lae who comprised mostly base unit troops, such as hospitals, engineers, fixed artillery and anti-aircraft units. The second measure of lost surprise was the Japanese decision to ensure that the 'main ... garrison had escaped towards the north' along the Burep River which was the I Australian Corps designated divisional boundary between the advancing 7th Division and the 9th Division. The enemy fighting units that escaped from the Lae trap were primarily those already battered by the bitter and deliberately prolonged fighting of the Salamaua campaign.<sup>62</sup>

Wootten's operational design for the 9th Division advance was intended to maximise the division's ability to respond to any actions by the Japanese—offensive or defensive. Wootten was careful to maintain a divisional reserve at all times, retaining the 24th Brigade at Buna 240 kilometres south-east of Lae as the 9th Division's reserve during the initial landings on 4 September. The 20th Brigade remained in reserve to protect the original amphibious objective locations for the first eight days of the operation until relieved by the 4th Brigade, 5th Division. Finally, the 2/32nd Battalion (24th Brigade) and the 2/48th Battalion (26th Brigade) acted as the 9th Division's reserve, which meant that both brigades comprised only two battalions each as they advanced west to Lae. As a result, while Wootten was satisfied that the 9th Division was well equipped with a reserve to counteract any unexpected enemy action, his operational design was arguably detrimental to the

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61 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, pp. 54, 57, 59; Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 297.

62 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 391.

speed of the divisional advance and to the combat power of the 24th and 26th Brigades.

The third manoeuvre tenet listed in LWD 1 concerns the main effort, a ‘physical concentration of force or means’ which is ‘critical to the success of a plan. In most cases, creating a decisive main effort will demand the acceptance of substantial risk’ and will be ‘directed at those objectives that are most likely to defeat the enemy’s plan’. Significantly, the main effort ‘may change during a battle’.<sup>63</sup> Wootten’s main effort for the 9th Division’s manoeuvre elements for the advance on Lae was arguably the divisional artillery which, as noted earlier, was also the divisional centre of gravity.

Had Wootten designated a manoeuvre formation as the divisional main effort instead of the 9th Division’s artillery however, the challenges of crossing the Busu River may have been substantially diminished. In essence, the 9th Division’s ability to rapidly cross the formidable Busu hinged on the abilities of two lieutenant colonel battalion commanders, ‘one who grasped the challenge [of crossing the Busu] and one who did not’.<sup>64</sup> Inland, the 26th Brigade’s Lieutenant Colonel Gillespie, new to both jungle warfare and battalion command, cautiously led the 2/24th Battalion toward the Busu River and failed to cross, handing the initiative to the Japanese defenders on the far bank of the river. By contrast, on the coast, the 24th Brigade’s innovative and aggressive Lieutenant Colonel Norman, leading the 2/28th Battalion across the river under fire from enemy on the far side, crossed successfully despite the loss of thirteen lives, eighty rifles and twenty-five per cent of the battalion’s automatic weapons.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the five-day delay in the 26th Brigade’s crossing of the Busu via the inland route, Wootten did not reinforce the 24th Brigade’s successful crossing on the coastal route. As the 9th Division advanced, Wootten’s knowledge of enemy locations was probably opaque, accounting for his reluctance to change his plan with its two-brigade advance and maintenance of the divisional reserve. This reluctance to change, combined with Wootten’s focus on the movement of the divisional artillery, meant that on 13 September,

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63 LWD 1, p. 50.

64 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 63.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 63; Garth Pratten, ‘Crossing the Busu’, p. 60.

rather than reinforce the 24th Brigade's successful crossing of the Busu, he agreed to send a company from the 2/48th Battalion, 26th Brigade, through the 24th Brigade's area at the mouth of the river to form a protective perimeter on the west of the river opposite the 26th Brigade's river crossing points. Unfortunately, jungle, *kunai* and swamp slowed the 2/48th Battalion's progress and 'communications were unsure' in what became an abortive attempt to secure the 26th Brigade's bridgehead.<sup>66</sup>

The fourth tenet described in LWD 1 is reconnaissance pull which refers to 'the identification and exploitation of fleeting opportunities'. Given that 'land forces will seldom operate with comprehensive knowledge of the enemy or the environment', 'relative enemy weaknesses (physical or moral)' must be 'exploited as they are discovered'. 'In this context, all forces are also reconnaissance forces' and must be 'versatile, adaptable, agile and able to maintain their freedom of action'.<sup>67</sup> Wootten did not readily employ reconnaissance pull for the 9th Division advance to Lae. For example, as noted in discussion of the tenet of main effort, the 26th Brigade remained held up at the Busu waiting for bridging equipment instead of re-routing via the 24th Brigade's proven and secure crossing sites.

In addition, the 2/4th Independent Company could have crossed the Busu River on 10 and 11 September, and possibly early on 12 September, at the Kunda Bridge, but was held on the eastern side of the river to protect the flanks of the 24th and 26th Brigades. Had the company been permitted to cross the Busu on 10, 11 or 12 September, it could have crossed unopposed. It was not until the enemy had dug in on the far bank of the Busu River that the 2/4th Independent Company was given orders to cross. In his official history, Dexter notes that 'long-range patrolling was the specialty of an Independent Company' and, had they been permitted to patrol extensively beyond the Busu River on 10 to 12 September, when the company was 'chafing on the bit', the 2/4th would almost certainly have found the main enemy crossing of the Busu and could have disrupted the Japanese withdrawal and escape north from Lae into the Rawlinson Range.<sup>68</sup>

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66 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 367.

67 LWD 1, p. 50.

68 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 367; Powell, *The Third Force*, p. 67.

On the coast, the 24th Brigade was restricted in its freedom of action, including in its ability to provide reconnaissance pull, by Wootten's restrictions on the employment of the 2/32nd Battalion. The 2/32nd was initially an 'additional divisional reserve', but was held beyond its fulfilment of that role because Wootten was reluctant for the 2/32nd to be 'committed so soon'.<sup>69</sup> This reluctance restricted the 24th Brigade to manoeuvring with only two battalions. 'Wootten was urging Evans [24th Brigade] on faster, and Evans felt that the services of one of his battalions was being denied him'. In addition, Evans requested two inshore amphibious vessels—Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP)—from Wootten to 'move his troops in bounds along the coast and so avoid the slogging march along the coastal flats', but his request was denied. Eventually, despite restrictions from Divisional Headquarters, Evans 'arranged with the American boatmen to lend him an LCVP for a few trips which enabled him to equip the 2/28th Battalion properly again [after losing much of their equipment crossing the Busu River] and get the 2/43rd moving inland'.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the efforts of the 2/4th Independent Company and the 24th Brigade, both of which had a superior situational awareness to Wootten and possessed the ability to exploit gains following their crossing of the Busu River, the 9th Division missed significant opportunities to employ reconnaissance pull and therefore hasten the advance to Lae.

The fifth LWD 1 manoeuvre tenet is tempo, described as 'a relative measure of the abilities of each opponent to understand, decide and implement appropriate adaptations to plans, dispositions or postures'. Tempo, therefore, 'rests on versatility, adaptability and agility'. Every battle represents 'a competition to maintain superior tempo' which 'provides the initiative to the side gaining it', enabling it 'to set the conditions under which the battle is developed'.<sup>71</sup> From 5 to 7 September, in order to expedite the 9th Division's advance and generate operational tempo, Wootten moved his two lead brigades (the 24th and 26th) on separate axes of assault, protected on the flank by the 2/4th Independent Company. This plan worked well

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69 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 348.

70 Ibid., p. 363.

71 LWD 1, p. 50.

until 8 September when both brigades came to a halt at the Busu River. From that date, key issues affecting the division's tempo were largely based on competing logistics priorities which, combined with the major obstacle of the Busu, slowed the 9th Division advance and handed the initiative to the Japanese. The inability of the 9th Division to generate tempo in competition with the enemy allowed the Japanese to adapt their plans to not only oppose the 9th Division's advance, but also conduct an effective withdrawal to the north of Lae with subsequent opportunities to regroup and return to the fight. From 12 September the first of approximately 9000 Japanese withdrew from Lae to Sio on the north coast of the Huon Peninsula, arriving there in mid-October.<sup>72</sup>

The competing logistics priorities that affected the 9th Division's operational tempo included: the withdrawal of Barbey's VII Amphibious Force to Milne Bay immediately following the 9th Division's landings, despite the absence of 'competing operations in the theatre at the time'; the inability to move stores from the beaches; poor tracks in the divisional area of operations; and the high priority assigned to the movement of the 9th Division artillery. Maintaining logistic support proved extraordinarily difficult throughout the advance. The problem was not the transport of stores to the beach, rather, it was the movement of stores from the beach to the troops. The roads and tracks quickly became boggy and the many rivers made transport difficult. The forward troops were regularly deprived of essential combat supplies.<sup>73</sup>

Apart from the Japanese, the main challenges for the 9th Division's advance to Lae comprised the terrain, weather, disease, long lines of communication, and unreliable radio equipment—perennial concerns for any force in most operations. Supplies of food were a constant concern as the ration scale was patently inadequate for an operation which lasted as long as the attack on Lae. Other divisions, including the 7th that was far more experienced in jungle fighting, simply ignored or adapted the regulation ration scales to suit their needs.<sup>74</sup>

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72 Keogh, *South West Pacific*, p. 311; Powell, *The Third Force*, p. 67.

73 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 336–7, 352; Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, pp. 63, 69.

74 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 354–5. The scanty meals on which men were

Tempo was further affected and attempts to build supply dumps handicapped from 12 September by what Wootten later described as a 'most distinct reluctance on the part of the Navy to support these beaches' despite the establishment of two new beachheads, 'G' Beach and 'D' Beach. The Navy's 'reluctance' was a reaction to the threat of Japanese artillery. In the event, stores hastily dumped ashore at Red Beach were vehicle or hand-carried forward to the new beaches. It was only because the hard-working US Army small craft made three trips a night from Red Beach forward to the new beaches that the flow of supplies to the forward brigades, though inadequate, was maintained at all.<sup>75</sup>

On the night of 14 September, Headquarters New Guinea Force in Port Moresby directly interfered in I Australian Corps operations, significantly affecting the tempo of the 9th Division operations. Blamey's Chief of Staff, Major General Berryman, ordered a diversion of battalions from the 7th and 9th Divisions from the advance on Lae to 'block the enemy's escape routes' north of the town, a directive issued on the basis of a captured Japanese order for the evacuation of Lae. Berryman's order to the 7th and 9th Divisions read:

9 Div will direct earliest not less one battalion to each Musom and Bungalumba. 7 Div not less one battalion Boana. Responsibility tracks 9 Div all east, 7 Div all west of Sanem and Busu Rivers ...<sup>76</sup>

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existing each day comprised: biscuits: 1 packet per man; sugar: 3 oz per man; coffee: 2 lb per 100 men; margarine: 2 oz per man; rice: 20 lb per battalion; bully beef: 4 men per tin; beans: 6 men per tin; sausages: 10 men per tin; milk: 7 men per tin; tea: 2 lb per 100 men. All brigades in the 9th Division had protested when the ration scale had been outlined at Milne Bay. They were told that this was the scale previously used by the 7th Division in New Guinea. However, Brigadier Whitehead later wrote that 'the 7th Division had learned their lesson and the Division went into the Markham Valley operation with a ration scale completely different and much more adequate than that laid down for the 9th Division'. The scale was intended to apply only for the first few days; in fact it lasted throughout the operation.

75 Ibid., p. 362.

76 Ibid., p. 378.

In response, Wootten assigned the 2/4th Independent Company and a battalion from the 26th Brigade to secure the Kunda Bridge on the Busu River and ‘impede movement north [by] enemy parties between River Bumbu and River Busu but not prevent’. Lieutenant General Herring, Commander I Australian Corps since mid-1942, objected to this interference by Headquarters New Guinea Force, although his objections were overruled by Blamey. For Wootten and his 7th Division counterpart, Major General Vasey, this new order meant that the divisions faced a double task: capture Lae and also prevent the Japanese from escaping.<sup>77</sup> This order slowed the 9th Division’s tempo by dividing its forces and reducing its combat power just as the division closed for the final assault on Lae.

This loss of tempo exposed a flaw in the I Australian Corps operational design for the capture of Lae. The manoeuvre of two experienced Australian divisions against a Japanese force that was under pressure, poorly resourced and increasingly isolated should have taken into account, much earlier than 14 September 1943, the possibility of a Japanese escape to the north. Had this been considered earlier, the I Australian Corps operational design could have focused the 7th and 9th Divisions’ efforts on closing the eventual escape route. Instead, enemy forces slipped through the boundary between the divisions, in the area between the Bumbu and Busu Rivers. This error ensured that I Australian Corps would have to engage the Japanese forces that had escaped from Lae, and that regrouped with other Japanese forces along the north coast of New Guinea later in 1943–44.

LWD 1 lists combined arms teams as its sixth tenet of manoeuvre. A combined arms team represents:

a case-by-case mix of combat, combat support, [combat service support] and command support elements tailored to a specific combination of mission, threat and terrain. Each team aims to cover the vulnerability of one part of the force with the strength of another. [A combined arms team] also presents a dilemma for an enemy

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77 Ibid., pp. 378–9; Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars*, p. 406.

by triggering actions to protect against one threat that increases vulnerability to another.<sup>78</sup>

At the operational level, Blamey, as Commander New Guinea Force and Herring, Commander I Australian Corps, ‘had no actual control over the [US] naval or air forces’ supporting the Australian land operations.<sup>79</sup> From the US perspective, MacArthur’s operations never employed more than ‘15 percent of the American war effort’, and ‘the tasks given to MacArthur [in New Guinea] by the [US] Joint Chiefs [were] carried out by an army that was chiefly Australian, supported by chiefly American naval and air forces’.<sup>80</sup> In addition, US Navy aircraft carriers were not usually allocated to the SWPA and thus Admiral Barbey was ‘reliant on the Allied Air Forces for all air support’ including air cover for his fleet.<sup>81</sup> These complicated arrangements between Australian and US allies were coordinated by Blamey and Herring and remained largely invisible to Wootten.

As a result, the 9th Division was able to effectively fight in a coalition and combined arms environment, albeit with some limitations, particularly in terms of the availability of naval surface fire support and the coordination of air support and air tasking with land operations. The synchronisation of 9th Division operations, in a coalition and combined arms context, was remarkable given that Lae represented the 9th Division’s first operations in the New Guinea theatre. Credit for this success must be attributed to Australian and US leaders, the professionalism and competence of those at the tactical and operational levels within all three services, and the effective integration of lessons identified by Australia and the United States from earlier campaigns.

The 9th Division undertook coalition operations in a joint environment with the US Navy for the advance on Lae, including the amphibious assault, communications, movement of the divisional reserve from Buna, provision

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78 LWD 1, pp. 50–1.

79 Horner, ‘The Military Strategy and Command Aspects of the Australian Army Amphibious Operations in the South-West Pacific Area’, p. 37.

80 Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 291; William Manchester, *American Caesar – Douglas MacArthur 1880–1964*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1978, p. 328.

81 Stephens, ‘Maritime Aspects of Australian Amphibious Operations’, p. 113.

of reinforcements, logistic resupply, and naval surface fire support. US Army, Air Force and RAAF bombers and fighters bombed and strafed Lae, with one diarist describing the results of the Lae bombardments as ‘a great tonic to tired troops’.<sup>82</sup> In addition to US coalition partners, two Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) officers, eight overseers, ten police, and Papuan platoons provided reconnaissance capabilities, cultural competence, and language support to the 9th Division’s advancing brigades and the 2/4th Independent Company.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, while combined arms supported the 9th Division’s advance to Lae, much of the fighting comprised close quarter infantry battles supported by artillery and other indirect fire. Combined arms operations included Wootten’s extensive use of artillery to support the divisional advance, and the employment of engineers from the US Shore Battalion, the 532nd Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment, the 2nd Engineer Special Brigade at Red and Yellow beaches and American amphibian engineers, known as the ‘9th Division’s Navy’, along the coast. In addition, Australian engineers built and repaired supply routes and provided the bridging that enabled the 26th Brigade to cross the Busu River. Thus, it was extraordinary, given the mission and tasks of the 9th Division and the restricted terrain, that Wootten chose to employ the 2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion and 2/3rd Pioneers, much to their chagrin, exclusively as guard or labour forces.<sup>84</sup>

The final in the LWD 1 series of seven manoeuvre tenets is orchestration:

the arrangement of physical and non-physical actions to ensure their unified contribution to the mission. Orchestration requires a high level of cooperation within combined arms teams and is achieved through the disciplined application of accurate and discriminating fire, timely use of information actions, and effective integration with inter-agency elements. When lethal force is applied, it must occur

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82 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 381.

83 Ibid., pp. 346, 349, 355, 371, 379; Powell, *The Third Force*, p. 67.

84 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, pp. 326–46; Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 54.

with speed, surprise, aggression and discrimination. Orchestration necessarily involves the coordination of interagency elements.<sup>85</sup>

Given that the operation to capture Lae was the first for the 9th Division in New Guinea, inevitable friction occurred that hampered the effective orchestration of 9th Division forces and combat power. As noted earlier, the obstacle posed by the Busu River, poor logistics planning, and Wootten's cautious employment of the divisional reserve, severely disrupted the 9th Division's advance, and probably contributed to the escape of significant Japanese forces north from Lae. Despite challenges in orchestration, the divisional amphibious assault was well executed and brigade-level operations before and after the Busu River were conducted effectively, albeit against weakening and withdrawing Japanese defences.

As the 7th and 9th Divisions closed on Lae, I Australian Corps increased its efforts to coordinate and orchestrate operations. This included the employment of air assets to bomb Lae. However, due to the inevitable time lag of information on the position of forward troops advancing in the dense jungle, plus the lengthy notice required by the Air Force for the preparation of bombing and strafing, this coordination proved problematic. As a result, and as a demonstration of a culture of learning among the Australian forces, both divisional commanders requested that I Australian Corps deploy 'liaison officers' with communications to support ground-air coordination in future operations.<sup>86</sup>

The failure of I Australian Corps to designate an effective boundary between the 7th and 9th Divisions represented poor orchestration that was to have grave ramifications. The Corps boundary was the Burep River but 'no limit of advance [was] set by higher command for either division'.<sup>87</sup> This almost resulted in fratricide as 7th Division troops in Lae on 16 September were targeted by two Allied aircraft strafing runs, and artillery and small arms fire from the 9th Division. With two divisions converging on Lae from opposite directions, it was remarkable that there were so few accidents.

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85 LWD 1, p. 51.

86 Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p. 381.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 390.

Despite I Australian Corps' lack of effective guidance, careful control by forward commanders and the good sense of the troops themselves saved lives.<sup>88</sup>

The Burep River and the I Australian Corps divisional boundary effectively became a withdrawal route for the Japanese north from Lae. The explanation for this momentous error is simple: on I Australian Corps maps the Burep River was a distinct line of delineation between the advancing divisions; for the Japanese, the Burep River gave their forces a clear navigation guide north from Lae into the rugged Rawlinson Range. Thus, the nature of the I Australian Corps divisional boundary allowed the enemy freedom of movement and represented a significant Headquarters I Australian Corps' failure to effectively orchestrate the operations of the two divisions. Ultimately, the consequences of this error would see the Australians fighting the Lae-based Japanese in the bloody battles that characterised the later stages of the New Guinea campaign, with resultant lost lives and expended resources.

One final criticism of the I Australian Corps' orchestration of corps operations concerns the 'task verb' used in the 7th and 9th Divisions' orders for military operations relating to Lae. Herring's orders directed I Australian Corps to 'capture' Lae; that is to take, hold, and secure Lae for the advantages it provided as both a port and airfield. Had Herring ordered the Corps to 'destroy' the Japanese garrison in Lae, this would have included denying the Japanese a means of escape.<sup>89</sup> It is possible that, with recent memories of the bloody 'bridgehead battles' at Buna, Gona, and Sanananda, Herring may have sought to avoid another battle involving 'horrendous casualties'.<sup>90</sup> Whatever the reason, the task verb of 'capture', combined with other I Australian Corps decisions, ultimately allowed a large portion of the Japanese garrison to escape from Lae prior to the arrival of Australian forces.

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88 Ibid., p. 390; Long, *The Six Years War*, p. 331.

89 Coates, *Bravery above Blunder*, p. 68.

90 Ibid., p. 68; Garth Pratten, *Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2009, p. 219.

# Conclusion

This paper examines the role of the 9th Australian Division in that phase of Operation Cartwheel that involved the capture of the strategic Japanese base at Lae. The seven tenets of manoeuvre described in LWD 1 are applied to the division's expeditionary operations and amphibious manoeuvre from 4 to 16 September 1943 as it fought its way towards its objective. The resulting analysis of the division's operations highlights the challenges inherent in expeditionary operations and amphibious manoeuvre in Australia's immediate neighbourhood, particularly in Papua New Guinea with its dense, rugged terrain and fractured infrastructure. This analysis also aims to prepare ADF thinking in anticipation of the introduction of three classes of amphibious shipping under JP 2048.

Given that the 9th Division was conducting its inaugural operations in New Guinea following extensive service in the Middle East, having just restructured to a tropical scale division, its performance on operations in the vicinity of Lae was extraordinary. However, while the division successfully applied some aspects of the seven tenets of manoeuvre as described in LWD 1, there were clear weaknesses in its operational design. In particular, the division was significantly slowed by the Busu River which undermined the manoeuvre tenet of surprise, allowing many Japanese to escape north from Lae. The division also failed to take advantage of the tenets of main effort, reconnaissance pull, tempo, and orchestration to recover from the Busu River delays. Despite its patchy performance in the capture of Lae, there was no time for the 9th Division to rest, reorganise, rehearse, or learn from its first operation in New Guinea. Instead, on 22 September 1943, six days after the capture of Lae, the division conducted a brigade group pre-dawn amphibious landing against organised and well-prepared opposition at Finschhafen, east of Lae, on the New Guinea coast.

Modern ADF commanders have much to learn from the Second World War experiences of the 9th Division. With the imminent introduction of JP 2048's amphibious shipping and the Australian Government's requirement for the ADF to possess an 'expeditionary orientation' 'at the

operational level, underpinned by requisite force projection capabilities' combined with amphibious manoeuvre, it is not inconceivable that modern ADF commanders may be faced with similar tasks, terrain and conditions to those endured by the 9th Division in September 1943.<sup>91</sup>

The lessons of the 9th Australian Division's experience are thus crucial for the modern commander. Those lessons that concern the application of the seven tenets of manoeuvre must be recognised and understood, particularly as the tenets themselves should form the vanguard of operational design and tactical planning and execution. With manoeuvre as a warfighting philosophy permeating all aspects of the ADF's thinking, ADF commanders must take every opportunity to be better prepared than their wartime predecessors to meet the challenges of expeditionary warfighting and amphibious manoeuvre on the battlefield of the future.

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91 *Defence White Paper 2009*, p. 52.

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