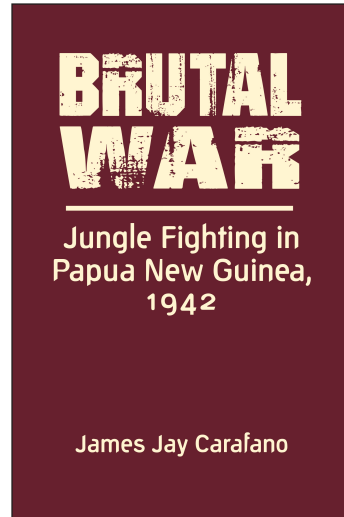


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**Brutal War:
Jungle Fighting in
Papua New Guinea,
1942**

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1

A War to Remember

BUNA, 1943—END OF THE EARTH. *“I had walked up the wrong trail and passed near a sniper’s tree,” wrote Robert Eichelberger, in a letter to his wife. “When I finally realized that the bullets were coming close to me. We all dropped quickly . . . I took a Springfield rifle. . . . I then took a typical knee firing position, held my breath, aimed low for the rise of the trajectory,” the general recalled. “Naturally, I could not miss and the man plunged downward.”*

IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA, even generals experienced the brutality of war firsthand. In modern war, men like General Robert Lawrence Eichelberger were supposed to be corporate warriors, not killers.¹ In Papua New Guinea, modern war was ancient history.

The Themes of Battle

A snowflake, a work of art, a car crash: no two are exactly alike. Such is battle.

Every terrible struggle deserves remembrance. Among the worst of war, those dark night terrors that never fade, the fighting in Papua New Guinea ought to hold a more singular place in our sleepless, troubled memories. Numerous studies describe this desperate melee in the Southwest Pacific between the United States and Australia against Japan during World War II. But, like an enigmatic statue unearthed by archaeologists, this clash of arms remains, in some ways, inscrutable.

Some of the toughest combat in the global conflict occurred during this campaign, killing as far removed from the popular image of “the

good war” as machine guns from machetes. Jungle fighting plunged men into a primitive, primordial struggle where the modes of battle seemed out of place and time. Warriors hated, suffered, and massacred like ancient Biblical tribes. Prisoners were executed, butchered, and eaten. Why would men be put to such a horrible fate in such a horrible, distant place? To answer that question, four themes offer the foundation for a renewed appreciation of this faraway and long-ago fight.

One theme situates the Papua New Guinea fighting in the context of a worldwide war. This was not a peripheral campaign. In the months after the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, implacable enemies battled for supremacy over the island via land, sea, and air—and for good reason.

When the Japanese were on the offense, their campaign threatened the security of Australia and the defense of the United States. Japanese prime minister and army general Hideki Tojo, for example, envisioned an imperium that stretched the width of the Pacific to Alaska and the coasts of Canada and the Northwest United States, a conception laid out in the “Land Disposal Plan in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” a document prepared by the War Ministry. In turn, when the Allies went on the attack, securing the island opened the way for invading Imperial Japan and ending the global cataclysm once and for all.

In tandem with another fight in the Southwest Pacific—Guadalcanal—victory in Papua New Guinea proved a crucial turning point in World War II. For that reason, there is a lot of the “big picture” and strategy in this book, explaining why the stakes of a fight in one of the most remote regions on earth was so important.

A second theme stresses the prominence of terrain. Wars are fought on dirt and salty seas, not maps. Different ground makes war different. Over the course of World War II, US forces fought in variations of five combat environments. The battles from Normandy to Germany, the European theater of operations (ETO), represented one kind of war. Fighting in the mountainous terrain of southern Europe (part of the Mediterranean theater of operations [MTO]) was another kind of battle. The US desert campaigns in North Africa (originally called the North African theater of operations) had distinctive features all their own. On the other side of the world, land combat was distinguished by either island-hopping amphibious operations, like Guadalcanal, or protracted land campaigns, such as Papua New Guinea in the Pacific theater of operations (PTO). Each kind of war has its own story to tell.

Large-scale land campaigns across vast, rugged jungle terrain like in Papua New Guinea were a particular form of combat. The terrain on

the world's second largest island dictated how battles could be fought. The goal here is to never let readers (as they reimagine for themselves the incredible trials faced by the fighters on the ground) feel far from the humid stench, oppressive heat, and constant miseries of this unfor-giving land.

An authentic retelling of war also hears all the voices on the battle-field. A conflict told from one perspective is just narrative. History lis-tens to all parties. Seeing the many sides of the fighting comprises the third theme of this history. This story gives equal weight to the US, Australian, Japanese, and Indigenous people's viewpoints.

More than 340,000 Americans that served in the theater didn't fight alone on an empty battlefield against a faceless enemy. By the end of the war about a million Australians had served in uniform; at least half fought overseas. Fighting in Papua New Guinea was their biggest and most significant contribution to the war effort. In many ways, the great jungle fight was the defining moment of the Australian experience, just as D-Day and the battles of Normandy were for Americans. Only the tragic campaign at Gallipoli during World War I stands larger in Aussies' military memory.

Meanwhile, the campaign is anything but a forgotten war in Japan—half a million fought in this campaign. Contemporary officers in the Japan Self-Defense Forces still hold Lieutenant General Hatazō Adachi, who commanded the Imperial troops in the later part of the Papua New Guinea campaign, in awe and reverence despite the fact he lost. He lost not just battles but most of his troops, starting the campaign with about 140,000 and surrendering in the end with barely 13,000 ragged, bony ghosts of an army. In Japan, the remembrance of that ser-vice and sacrifice still matters.

The story of the Papua New Guinea people also counts for much in recounting the campaign. On average, a workforce of 20,000 New Guineans supported the Allied troops during the course of operations over three years. Most carried supplies. Some fought in active ser-vice, including 800 men from the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the Royal Papuan Constabulary, who were among the first to oppose the Japanese landings in 1942. Others served the Japanese either as vol-unteers or forced labor. More were just caught in the middle. Civil-ians died (estimated at 15,000) from forced labor and abuse, as well as bombing and shelling by all sides.

These voices assembled from archival materials, personal records, and oral histories make it possible to weave many sides of the story together to form an integrated history. By choice, sharing all these perspectives makes

the tale more complicated, but after all, real war can be a complicated mess—and Papua New Guinea proved messier than most.

A fourth and final theme challenges other interpretations of the campaign, which are mostly just . . . wrong. Explanations of victory and defeat in this conflict are usually ascribed to either the decisions of generals on the one hand or the mettle of the armies fighting in Papua New Guinea on the other. In the end, neither conclusion really gets to the main point. The fact is, once high-ranking generals launched their armies into the jungle, they were as remote from the fighting as sports commentators in the broadcast booth are from the game on the field. As to the quality of the fighting men, that didn't tip the balance either. Arguably, all sides fought well given their training, equipping, resources, and numbers.

That said, due consideration is given to both the captains of war and to men in the ranks. The operational choices made by generals get a balanced assessment. There is also a lot of exploration into the character, competence, and capabilities of the fighting armies—the Australian militia, Aussie regulars, the US Army, and the Japanese forces. In particular, four specific battles are covered in great detail, with investigations into the performances of each of the combatants in action.

Still, what really favored victory in this kind of fighting was the capacity to sustain force over distance. Modern armies couldn't live off the land. When an offensive outran the means to replace, rearm, feed, and care for the troops in an immense, impenetrable jungle, they were as exposed and exhausted as a long-distance runner, far from the finish line with the pack closing in. At some point the advantage of the attacker waned as their resources stretched to the limit. Then they were more vulnerable to counterattack than they were a threat to the enemy. The peril of overreach determined who won and who died.

The chapters that follow are both thematic and chronological. They delve into the aforementioned themes but also advance the story each step of the way, from the planning for the Pacific War that started months before Pearl Harbor through the end of the campaign. Taken together, this history explains why this fight could never have been anything but a most brutal war.

Notes

1. Eichelberger, Robert L., Papers, III-5, US Army Heritage and Education Center.