

Winning the war

Douglas MacArthur and the Victory in the Pacific

Between December 1941 and February 1942, the Japanese Imperial Army raced through Southeast Asia, and conquered more territory, more quickly than any army in history.

By February 1942, the Japanese had taken the cornerstone of Australia's defence strategy, Singapore, as well as Rabaul on the northern coast of the New Britain province of Papua New Guinea, and were within sight of Port Moresby.

On February 19, Japanese bombers launched air raids on Darwin, dropping more bombs than had been dropped at Pearl Harbour; Australian PM John Curtin said this was Australia's darkest hour.

American General Douglas MacArthur was holed up on the Island of Corregidor, "The Rock", off the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, holding out against a Japanese siege under incredible odds.

Prime Minister Curtin pleaded with American President Franklin Roosevelt to evacuate MacArthur to Australia, to take command of all allied forces in the defensive and counter-attack against Japan.

Roosevelt so ordered it, and MacArthur reluctantly left his soldiers, vowing "I shall return"; once in Australia, the General forged a close relationship with the Australian PM, around a shared mission to save Australia, and the entire region, from imperial aggression (both men were equally opposed to British imperialism).

Turn defence into attack

MacArthur first strategic act, was to scrap the defeatist defensive policy devised by Lord Kitchener in WWI known as the Brisbane Line—concede the largely empty Australian territory north of a line running from Brisbane to Adelaide to the invading Japanese, and fight a rear-guard defence to defend the more populated south-east corner of the nation.

Not only did the strategy go completely against MacArthur's instincts, he recognised it as futile.

At that very moment, military scouts on the Owen Stanley ranges in PNG had reported the Japanese were advancing over the range. Because the PNG jungle is the most dense in the world, the scouts had initially thought the Japanese troops they saw were a forward scouting party. After awhile, they discerned thousands of crack Japanese troops advancing through the jungle up the mountains; what's more, they were pushing, by hand, artillery for an attack on Port Moresby.

This report convinced MacArthur that if the Japanese ever made landfall on the plains of Australia, nothing



General MacArthur shakes hands with PM Curtin who had just returned from the USA where he met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944.

would stop them.

MacArthur decided that the Owen Stanley range would be the last line of defence. To his staff, for whom the decision came completely out of the blue, and who to a man protested his decision as unworkable and completely out of the question due to the density of the jungle, MacArthur replied that that's why he chose it—if his own staff didn't expect it, neither would the Japanese! Besides, in PNG, the previously all-conquering Japanese would have two enemies— allied troops, and the jungle.

By late 1942, Australian troops, in the toughest fighting of the war, and in hellish jungle conditions, inflicted Japan's first military defeats of WWII, on the Kakoda Track, and the Battle of Milne Bay.

Leap-frogging

Following those crucial Japanese retreats, MacArthur displayed his military genius, by reversing all Japanese conquests in Southeast Asia, using his famous "leapfrogging" tactic: hitting the enemy at their weak points, cutting off their supply lines, and leaving their fortified positions to wither on the vine.

This was known as Operation Cartwheel, and was first employed at Rabaul, which the Japanese had reinforced with 100,000 crack troops, assuming MacArthur would attack there next, following his conquest of Buna and Gona.

MacArthur calculated that the Japanese would have reinforced Rabaul at the expense of bases further down the supply line, so he decided to bypass Rabaul altogether, and take Hollandia, much further west along the PNG northern coast.

Expecting an imminent assault, the Japanese troops at Rabaul reinforced the town, dug forward trenches, rolled out barbed wire, built booby traps, and waited. And waited. And waited, for an attack that never came.

The troops at Rabaul ended up sitting out the entire rest of the war, while MacArthur took position after position as he leap-frogged his way across Southeast Asia, and all the way to Japan.

When Japan surrendered, and the news was broken to the soldiers at Rabaul, many of the soldiers melted into the jungle, unable to face the shame of defeat, and their inability to fight.

By war's end, MacArthur had waged the most efficient military campaign in history, taking more territory, with the smallest loss of life, of any commander in the annals of warfare.

For example, in the Philippines campaign, he lost 820 American G.I.s, compared to 21,000 Japanese dead.

MacArthur famously said, "In war, there is no substitute for victory."