

CHAPTER 11

THE BATTLE OF BUNA BEGINS: 12 – 21 NOVEMBER

By 11 November the frontline IJA force in Papua had been completely routed at Oivi-Gorari. Over the next few days a hurried and confused evacuation to the coast took place. The stragglers that emerged through the jungle represented just a fraction of the fighting strength of the proud force that had marched into the mountains with such vigour two months earlier. The about-face of Japanese fortunes was no more pronounced than in the fate of Horii himself. Wanting to find a quick way to the coast, Horii took a raft down the Kumusi River. After arriving at the mouth, he was swept out to sea and drowned.

On 16 November Australian troops crossed the Kumusi River and began an advance towards the Buna beachhead area which was just 40 miles away. This date marks the end of the Kokoda Campaign and the beginning of the Battle of Buna-Gona. At the same time American troops were advancing along the coast and on 16 November were just a few miles away from the Buna perimeter. The coastal advance was supported by luggers and small ships, which were used to transport a limited amount of heavy equipment including artillery.

Another parallel American advance was occurring a few miles inland, and on 16 November these troops had captured Dobodura. This location had excellent prospects for an airfield complex, and a company of engineers immediately set to work clearing the first landing strip.

Meanwhile the Japanese forces consolidated into three distinct beachhead areas along a coastline of about 15 miles. To the east was Buna, in the centre was Sanananda-Giruwa and to the west was Gona village. These locations were on a thin coastal strip which lay between the sea and a tidal forest swamp through which the attackers would need to approach. Japanese defensive positions had been constructed over the past several weeks and were extremely well dug in. They were occupied by around 5,500 IJA and IJN troops.

The subsequent battle unfolded in two distinct parts. From the east American troops of the 32nd Division assaulted Buna, while the Australian 7th Division force which had advanced from Kokoda (assisted by the bulk of the US 126th Regiment) attacked Gona (the 25th Brigade) and Sananada-Giruwa (the 16th Brigade). However, as will be seen the initial American advance from the east did not commence as planned.

The mid-November period also saw the last major Japanese attempt to land fresh troops on Guadalcanal to recapture Henderson Field. This led to another busy period of maritime activity in the Solomons, with the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal fought over 12-15 November. Despite significant losses, the result was an American victory which effectively secured Henderson Field.

At this time Major Bill Benn, who had so ably led the 63rd BS, was promoted to a staff position