

THE BATTLE OF BUNA

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During World War II, the U.S. Army experienced jungle warfare for the first time in the Battle of Buna, during the New Guinea Campaign in late 1942. Although the "firsts" of U.S. military history are usually successful and worthy of accolade, this one was neither a historical event in the traditional sense nor an overwhelming success. In the end, this battle also marked the first Allied ground force victory in the Pacific. But the jungle environment of New Guinea imposed severe restrictions and limitations upon discipline, leadership, command and control, intelligence, and logistical planning. As a result, the battle took much longer and caused far more casualties than had been expected. From this early experience, however, the military forces involved learned some valuable lessons about fighting in the jungle that they would use in subsequent battles.

During the early months of 1942, when the Japanese were on the offensive everywhere in the Southwest Pacific (Map 1), their armies seemed invincible. From 10 December 1941 to March 1942 they controlled the Philippines, Singapore, and the Netherlands East Indies. Japanese concerns then shifted to the southeast. From Rabaul in New Britain (which they occupied on 23 January 1942), they planned a two-pronged at-

tack against New Guinea. Their strategy was to gain a foothold, particularly Port Moresby, so they could control the supply lines between the United States and Australia. The Allies also realized that if the Japanese were allowed to control this port, they might use it to launch an attack on Australia, 500 miles away.

General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the Southwest Pacific Area, found the original Allied plan for the defense of Australia highly undesirable. That plan called for the sacrifice of Darwin and Northern Queensland, with the main stand against the expected Japanese invasion to be made along the Tropic of Capricorn, about 300 miles north of Brisbane.

MacArthur preferred to wage battle in New Guinea so that he could establish advance airstrips and impede the development of the Japanese bases at Lae and Salamaua. His concern for Australia's defense was to have it serve as a base for future offensives against the Japanese in New Guinea and the Bismarck-Solomon Islands. Realizing the importance of controlling Port Moresby, the Americans turned the quiet village into a vast staging base (Map 2). From there, they sent the Australians north to secure the northeastern coast of New

Guinea (Papua) in the vicinity of Gona, Sanananda, and Buna.

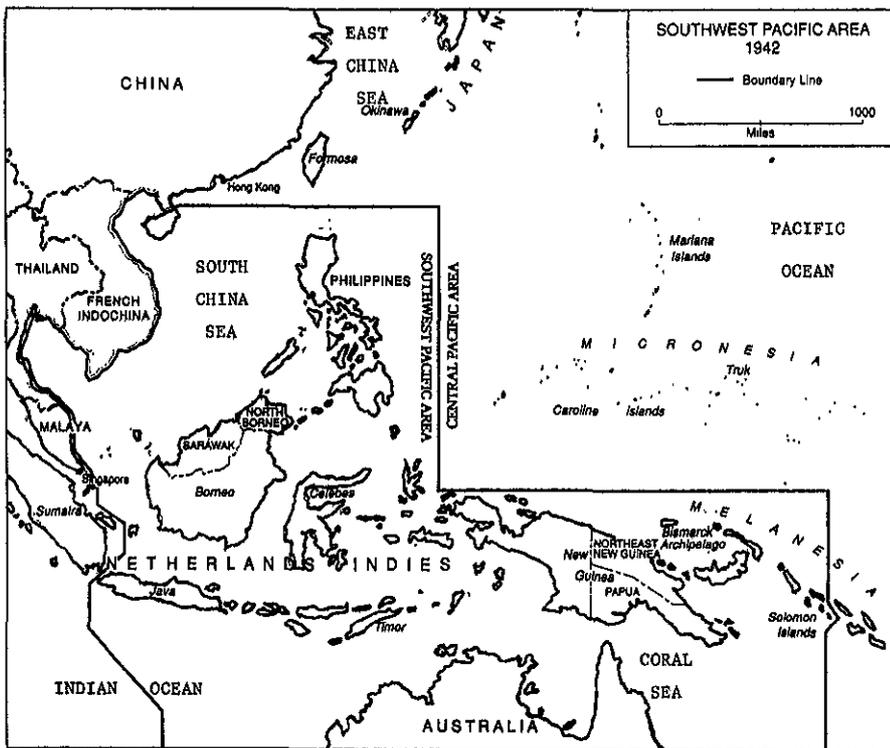
The Japanese had tried many times to gain a foothold in the Southwest Pacific. They had initially tried to secure that foothold by sea, but during the period of 5-8 May 1942, in a battle fought entirely between carrier aircraft over the Coral Sea, the Allies turned them back. The Japanese defeat at Midway on 3-6 June also influenced the situation in New Guinea. With the naval balance in the Pacific now restored and the initiative passing to the Allies, the Japanese resorted to a difficult land campaign when they renewed their efforts against Port Moresby in July 1942.

On the nights of 21-22 July a substantial Japanese force of 4,400 troops landed on Gona and within hours seized Buna, about nine miles down the coast. From this location, they received reinforcements and began their movement south along

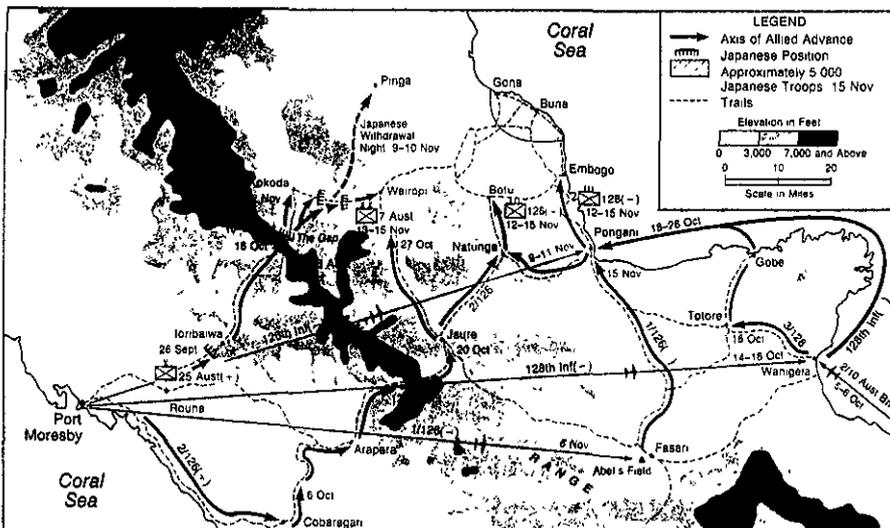
the treacherous Kokoda Trail over the Owen Stanley Mountains toward Port Moresby.

The Japanese force, now numbering 11,000 soldiers, drove the untrained Australian militia troops out of Kokoda and, on 16 September, entered Ioribaiwa, only 32 miles from Port Moresby. Because of the rugged terrain and the Allied air force's strafing and bombing of Japanese supply lines, the half-starved Japanese were forced to withdraw up the trail on 20 September 1942.

Meanwhile, in early September the United States deployed its inexperienced, poorly trained, and inadequately led 32d Infantry Division, National Guard, by air from Australia to New Guinea. Although this was the biggest airlift the United States had ever undertaken, the division's howitzers and most of its 81mm mortars were left behind, and this would prove



Map 1. Southwest Pacific Area, 1942.



Map 2. Allied advance across Owen Stanley Range, 26 September-21 November 1942. (Maps 2-5 from *America's First Battles, 1776-1965*, edited by Charles E. Heller and William A. Stoff, copyright 1986 by University Press of Kansas. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.)

to be a major handicap. Without the firepower from these weapons, the division would not be able to mass combat power at the decisive point; this, in turn, would delay a decisive victory.

Allied strategy in New Guinea now began to shift from the defensive to offensive counterattack. At this time, the Japanese made a grave mistake: Indecisive about where to focus their operational attention, they kept diverting forces from Papua toward the Battle of Guadalcanal, which was being fought at the same time. This diversion of troops allowed the Allies to build the airstrips in northern New Guinea that would be needed to transport forces from Port Moresby. While the 7th Australian Army was pushing the enemy back over the Owen Stanley Mountains, the 32d U.S. Division flew to the northern airstrip to envelop the Japanese. Because of the Japanese withdrawal toward the northern coast, it was increasingly probable that Buna would be the site of the ultimate engagement between the forces.

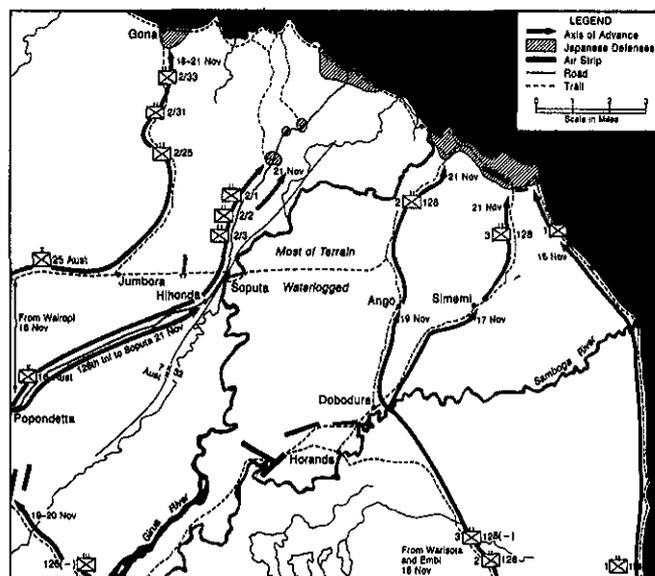
Unfortunately, the Allies initially failed to recognize some inherent difficulties with a battle at Buna and to make adjustments in their conventional ways of jungle fighting. Problems with unity of command, terrain information, and logistics—compounded by poor leadership, untrained soldiers, and a failure to apply the principles of war in a jungle environment—would prolong this three-phased battle.

The first phase consisted of a series of attacks that failed along a two-pronged assault (Map 3). The main Japanese defensive line ran from the mouth of the Girua River, a short distance west of Buna, to the Doropa Plantation, one-half mile south of Cape Endaiadere. The Japanese force consisted of the 3d Battalion, 229th Regiment, one mountain artillery battery of the 38th Division, one battery of the 47th Field Artillery Battalion, and replacements (1,600) from the 144th Regiment. Total Japanese strength was at least 6,500 men.

Both Japanese flanks were secure, and a frontal assault was possible only along two narrow and heavily fortified corridors. Two Allied task forces—the Urbana force in the west and the Warren force along the coast—which were only two or three miles apart by air, were separated on the ground by swamps and thick jungle. It took six hours to walk from one flank to the other, and during rains any messenger who was sent had to walk in water up to his hips. Any extensive movement of troops to reinforce either front took two days. On the other hand, it took the Japanese less than an hour to do the same because of a road network in their defensive area.

Southeast of the Doropa Plantation, the Warren task force made a series of attacks that failed, sustaining massive casualties in the process. This was the initial assault on the Japanese defenses at Buna that ended on 19 November 1942. The next day, the two task forces launched attacks in both the east and the west, preceded by air bombardments.

Both attacks failed. The front lines were not distinct, and the Allied bombs fell on members of the Warren force, causing friendly casualties. The Urbana force reached a point where the trail forked into Buna Village and a government plantation called "the Triangle," a patch of dry ground (measuring 50 yards by 200 yards) sticking out of the swamp.



Map 3. Closing In on the Japanese Beachhead, 16-21 November 1942.

This was destined to become the toughest defensive position for the Allies to seize on the Buna front.

By 25 November the Urbana force reached a point just west of the bridge over Entrance Creek and close to the trail. In the east, the Warren force was making a two-pronged attack on the heavily fortified bunkers in the Doropa Plantation (Map 4). To facilitate this attack, ten artillery pieces were flown in and divided among the units within the forces. The heavy fire from these 25-pounders before the attack did little to crush the Japanese defenses.

Following this contact, both fronts experienced a stalemate that continued until 30 November. By that time, the situation on the Buna front was not good for the Allies; their forces were strong in the rear but weak up front. The U.S. Army Air Force did a tremendous job of moving troops in and resupplying them by air. While air superiority now belonged to the U.S. forces, the Japanese showed that they could bring troops in by sea when they landed 1,000 reinforcements on the northern coast on 1-2 December 1942.

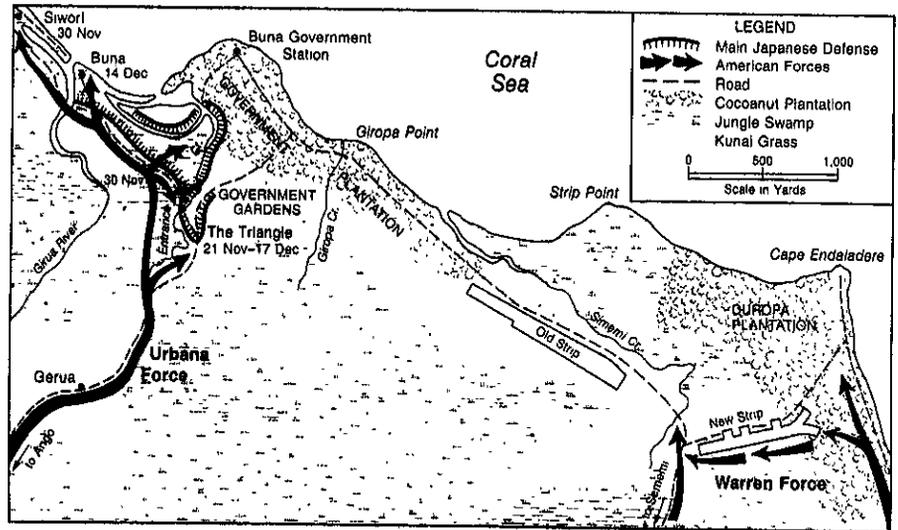
Because of the impassable ground supply routes, the U.S. forces also attempted a resupply using coastal shipping. During the early stage of the battle, enemy aircraft sank a number of small boats carrying men, supplies, and ammunition. This prompted a decision that shipping would be done only at night, but the treacherous reefs became even more dangerous in the dark than the aircraft had been in daylight. These restrictions doubled the time needed to move troops along the shallow and constricted waters.

On 30 November the Urbana force began a drive directed at Buna Village. The force, split into two elements, ended the day with its units positioned on the outskirts of the village.

In the east, the Warren force remained stalled at an Allied-controlled airstrip just south of Cape Endaiadere called "the New Strip." This led to the second phase of the battle, on 1-14 December, which consisted of reorganizing and reinforcing units along the front and capturing the village of Buna.

MacArthur called Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberg-

Map 4. American operations before Buna.



er (I Corps commander) to Port Moresby and sent him to the Buna front. Arriving to command the forces on 1 December, Eichelberger witnessed a failed attack by the Urbana force. Simultaneously, his G-2 and G-3 witnessed the failure of the Warren force in the east. It disappointed Eichelberger to see that the heat, rain, jungle stench, disease, and wounds had reduced the battalions to half strength, and that short rations (one-sixth ration per day) had left the men dispirited, discouraged, and weak.

Eichelberger also noticed that all elements of command were badly mixed. The chains of command in U.S. units were so jumbled that units from the same regiment were divided and mixed in among the two forces. The Urbana force consisted of the 2d Battalion, 128th Regiment; 2d Battalion, 126th Regiment; and 3d Battalion, 127th Regiment, while the Warren force consisted of the 1st Battalion, 128th Regiment; 3d Battalion, 128th Regiment; and 1st Battalion, 126th Regiment. This intermingling of units made it almost impossible for the task force commanders to control their units.

General Eichelberger realized, however, that his forces had made it this far and were on the brink of victory if only he could remedy the problems of low morale and poor unity of command.

General MacArthur also realized that there was a leadership problem in New Guinea. The leaders had an overly sympathetic attitude toward the hardships their men had experienced in the jungle. In addition, no steps had been taken to counter the myth of Japanese invincibility, and the leaders tended toward a general lethargy brought on by the tropics.

The leadership problems were so bad, in fact, that MacArthur fired the 32d Division commander, Major General Edwin F. Harding, and told Eichelberger to remove all officers who wouldn't fight, including regimental and battalion commanders, and to "take Buna, or do not come back alive."

On 3-4 December, Eichelberger regrouped, reorganized, and directed new commanders for the task forces on the front. The supply system was reorganized, and Bren gun carriers with Australian crews were brought up to assist in the attack on 5 December. Although the Bren guns were immobilized during the attack, by nightfall the Warren force had suc-

ceeded in gaining positions bordering the New Strip. What the Allies lacked in leadership attributes was regained when MacArthur placed Eichelberger in charge. He quickly assessed the situation and took the appropriate action, even if it meant firing high-ranking officers.

In the west, the Urbana force made the first break in the Japanese defenses along the Buna front. The force—a platoon from Company G, 2d Battalion, 126th U.S. Regiment—penetrated through to the sea, cutting Buna Village off from Buna Government Station (also called Buna Mission). This platoon maintained a defensive posture along the beach and repelled numerous Japanese counterattacks.

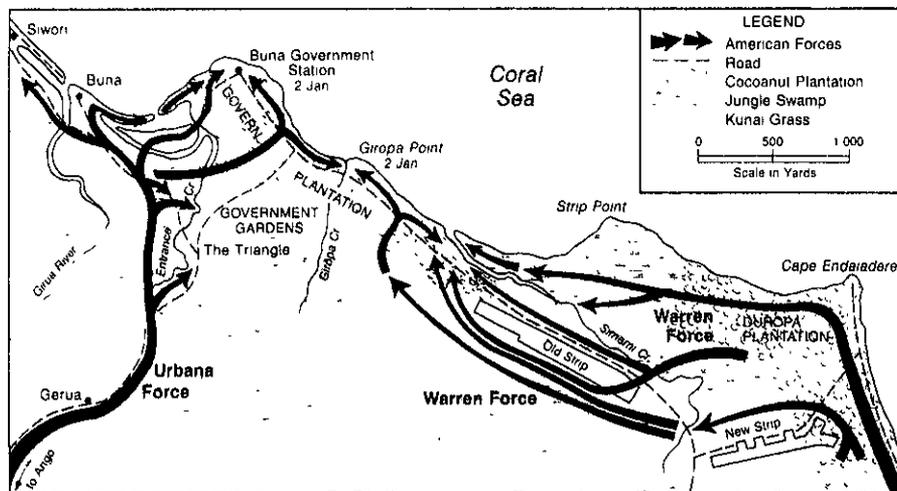
From 6 to 13 December, there was little action. The Allies continuously sent out patrols to identify enemy weaknesses. On 11 December the 3d Battalion, 127th Regiment relieved the 2d Battalion, 126th Regiment and, on 13 December 1942, launched an attack on Buna Village. In one hour, the battalion captured the village only to find the Japanese had already deserted it.

Still, the capture of Buna Village was a shot in the arm for the Allied forces. The resupply of food, ammunition, arms, and medicine improved greatly. At the same time, the Japanese forces had deteriorated through battle losses, diminishing supplies, and the failure of the expected reinforcements to arrive.

Thus began the third and final phase of the Battle of Buna. This phase consisted of the penetration, envelopment, and eventually victory at Buna. In the west, the Urbana force penetrated a coconut grove and enveloped the enemy at the Triangle on 17 December. This attack was repulsed twice on 19-20 December. The Allies decided to contain the Triangle, cross Entrance Creek, and drive to the sea 600 yards southeast of Buna Station.

Meanwhile, on the Warren front, the Allies obtained seven Stuart tanks and a brigade of Australian replacements flown in from Australia. Reinforced by the Australian battalions, the Warren force prepared for the offensive again on 18 December.

The Allies had hoped to surprise the Japanese with their use of armor. After a ten-minute armor barrage, the Warren force penetrated the northeast portion of the enemy flank and



Map 5. Lines of advance of Warren and Urbana forces, 16 December 1942–2 January 1943.

proceeded to just south of Cape Endiaderere before halting because of heavy friendly casualties.

Simultaneously, elements of the Warren force penetrated the east side of the new strip. On 20 December the force captured all the bunkers east of the 125-foot bridge covering Simemi Creek. This advance made it possible for the 2d Battalion, 10th Australian Regiment to move to a position that would enable it to encircle the enemy forces at the bridge, allowing the 1st Battalion, 126th U.S. Regiment to cross the creek. By 23 December, the Allies crossed the creek, and the Japanese defensive line that had been impenetrable since 19 November was finally penetrated.

The Warren force moved to the east end of the government plantation on 28 December 1942. The use of the armor-piercing 25-pound artillery pieces helped them in their slow and tedious "bunker-busting" tactics. In the west, the Urbana force infiltrated the government gardens by "belly-crawling" from bunker to bunker and succeeded in routing the enemy with grenades.

The Triangle, now isolated from Buna Station, was attacked by the 1st Battalion, 127th U.S. Regiment on 28 December and found to be deserted. By the end of the day, both the Warren and Urbana forces were poised to strike at the only remaining objective—Buna Station.

On 29 December the Warren force failed in a combined arms attack on Buna Station due to a lack of coordination between infantry and armor. On 1 January 1943, the Warren force, reinforced with 11 tanks and using comparatively fresh troops, attacked again and within an hour reached the seacoast southeast of Giropa Point (Map 5).

In the west, the Urbana force exploited the corridors from the coconut grove through the government gardens to the sea on 2 January by attacking northwest toward Buna Station. Simultaneously, Company H, 127th U.S. Regiment, drove northeast toward Buna Station from Musita Island. In spite of stiff enemy resistance, Companies G and H, 127th Regiment, pushed their attack. By 1600 on 2 January, enemy resistance ceased, and on 3 January the Urbana and Warren forces linked up, ending the Battle of Buna.

The significance of victory for the Allies in this battle is obvious. Denying the Japanese the use of the Papuan Penin-

sula strangled their ability to interdict Allied shipping in the Southwest Pacific. The possession of Buna enabled the Allies to maintain the initiative gained from their successes at Guadalcanal, in the Coral Sea, and on the Kokoda Trail.

Although Allied forces made many mistakes during the Battle of Buna, it is likely that the fault was not with prewar doctrine but rather with the application of that doctrine. Commanders let the new environment overwhelm them and, instead of applying the principles of war they had grown accustomed to using, they tried to reinvent the fundamentals to fit the situation. The Allies failed to mass relative combat power quickly at the decisive point. Key factors in this failure were a misconception of the enemy situation, an inability to achieve unity of command over untrained and poorly disciplined soldiers, and an inability to resupply and logistically support their units.

The strategic plan of the Allied forces—to maintain the pressure on the retreating enemy with the troops already in contact, while making a secret wide envelopment of his left flank at Buna by air-transported troops—was certainly sound. Unfortunately, the Allies' decision making process was based upon an inaccurate evaluation of the enemy situation. The intelligence information described the Japanese force—believed to be made up of support troops and combat troops already exhausted by their recent retreat over the Owen Stanley Mountains—as physically weak and low on morale. Even if the enemy situation had been properly evaluated, the scheme of maneuver probably would have been much the same. But the tactical plan of the two task forces to capture Buna, as it was originally conceived, failed for many reasons.

The difficulties of the terrain had not been fully appreciated because of inadequate maps and the inability of air reconnaissance to penetrate the jungle cover. Therefore, the movement to Buna was initially viewed as a rapid advance over trafficable terrain. This faulty estimation quickly became apparent once the units attempted to cross the mountains and ford the impenetrable swamps on the other side. When the forces saw that moving to Buna by foot would be difficult and would take too long, an airlift of troops to the northeast side of the island began.

Surprise was essential if airlifting forces was to succeed,

and some surprise was indeed achieved. A staff officer with the 144th Japanese Regiment later said that the air movement of combat troops to the doorstep of Buna took the Japanese by surprise, as they had not considered such a maneuver in their estimate of the situation. But the principle of massing forces at the decisive place and time was violated. Where commanders severely failed was in not realizing the problems before 30 November and changing their plans accordingly. This failure was due to the following considerations:

The Allied forces lacked proper training in jungle operations. What little training they had received in jungle warfare had been in the Australian mountains, which were quite different from the swamps and quagmires they encountered on the Buna battleground.

The Allies were extremely weak in scouting and patrolling skills, and in decentralized small-unit actions. Because of the inadequate use of patrols, the principle of objective was continually violated. Instead of identifying weak spots in the enemy's defensive positions, the Allies assaulted from the front, making the objective unattainable and taking many friendly casualties while attempting numerous frontal penetrations into the enemy's strong points.

On the other hand, Japanese tactics and use of the terrain delayed the Allies' estimates and actions. The enemy forces made perfect use of natural cover and concealment. They utilized the terrain to such an extent that reconnaissance patrols found it difficult to penetrate their defenses.

Staff estimates were weak in the early stages of the battle. The division rear did not establish estimates of minimum daily requirements, which caused unnecessary hardships for the troops at the front. Not all logistical failures could be blamed on transportation difficulties, however great these may have been.

In the latter stages of this battle, air transportation played an important part in the delivery of supplies and men. Without Allied air superiority, a much larger ground force would have been needed, and several more weeks would have been required to defeat the Japanese. C-47s flew in most of the 15,000

men who arrived in the Buna area. The artillery that finally arrived was all airborne, and when the 127th Regimental Combat Team arrived, it was transported to within ten miles of the front lines. By land, the trip from Port Moresby to Buna took 18 to 28 days; by air, it took 35 minutes. If the staff estimates had identified this fact earlier in the operation, many lives could have been spared, and the victory would have been won much sooner.

Mixing the units within and among the task forces hampered unity of command. No one commander initially controlled common units, and the resupply of a unit became impossible, since some regiments had their battalions split between the two task forces. It became quite evident that this lack of unity of command made it difficult for the task force commanders to know and control their units.

When General Eichelberger arrived at Buna, he made an estimate of the situation and immediately solved many of the problems that had existed in the early stages. He provided the element of dynamic leadership that the task forces needed. Upon assuming command, he had the unpopular task of ridding these forces of their lethargic, indecisive leaders and did so immediately. He also insisted that leaders make frequent trips to the front to see and be seen.

Because of Eichelberger, this long-fought battle came to a decisive end. It had taught the Allies many lessons on jungle warfare, intelligence preparation of the battlefield, logistics estimates, and the command and control of undisciplined and untrained soldiers—lessons that would enable some of the same units to succeed in battles yet to come.

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