Operation Postern and the Capture of Lae

A study in amphibious fires, maneuver, and logistics

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Operation Postern was an amphibious operation at Lae, New Guinea, carried out by joint and combined forces under GEN Douglas MacArthur, USA, between June and September 1943. It was the first major amphibious operation in the Southwest Pacific, and it established a pattern for subsequent operations throughout New Guinea and the Philippines. Like other early amphibious operations during World War II, such as Operation Watchtower (Guadalcanal) and Operation Torch (North Africa), Operation Postern was carried out in a contested environment where the United States and its allies did not enjoy presumptive air or maritime superiority.

The United States *did* have the advantage of well-established amphibious doctrine, *Fleet Training Publication 167* (*FTP-16.7, Landing Operations Doctrine,* (Washington, DC: U.S. Navy, 1938), which was developed and refined during the interwar period. However, this doctrine had not been tested under fire, and no Service, not even the Marine Corps, was well trained or experienced in the execution of amphibious operations. This was certainly true for the Army, Navy, and Australian forces that carried out Operation Postern. Most of these forces had to learn the doctrine for the first time and then adapt it to their particular environment. While the United States' industrial prowess certainly helped amphibious forces later in the war to achieve overmatch at places like Normandy and Okinawa, this was not the case for MacArthur's forces in 1943. During Postern, Allied forces faced top-line Japanese forces.

Operation Postern was fought on the island of New Guinea in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) (see Figure 1). Much like the geographic boundaries of today's combatant commands, Allied leaders divided up the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. ADM Chester Nimitz commanded all forces in the Pacific Ocean areas, and GEN MacArthur all those in the SWPA. Both commanders reported to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, DC, who approved major operations and made all final decisions regarding the allocation of men and materiel to each theater.

Nimitz's and MacArthur's operations followed roughly parallel axes of advance from south to north toward mainland Japan. Nimitz's forces embarked on a series of island-hopping campaigns through the major island chains of the

Figure 1. Map of Pacific and adjacent theaters. *(Figure provided by author.)*

South and Central Pacific, and were allocated the preponderance of carrier air power in the Pacific. MacArthur's forces also operated across island chains, but, for the most part, they usually operated on much larger land masses. He had fewer naval assets available to him, though his area of operations provided more opportunities for landbased air support and shore-to-shore operations.

Geography. Operation POSTERN was conducted on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea. While fighting on Iwo Jima took place over an area one-tenth the size of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Operation POSTERN played out over an area roughly the size of California (see Figure 2). The terrain and climate on New Guinea took a major toll on all combatants. The Owen Stanley Mountains run down the spine of the island and rise to 16,000 feet, while thick jungle vegetation often grows clear to the shoreline. The combination of mountainous terrain and jungle made the deployment of mass formations impossible in most places and mobility difficult everywhere. Diseases such as dengue fever, dysentery, and scrub typhus, and others, inflicted heavy casualties on both sides. In places, rainfall totals exceeded 300 inches per year, leading one veteran to remark, "It rains daily for nine months and then the monsoon starts."[1] There were no roads or railways, and supply lines were often little more than native tracks which quickly dissolved to mud in the frequent downpours. The size of the land mass, the multiplicity of military bases and outposts on both sides, and the relative parity of land, air, and maritime forces in 1943 meant that the combatants had to employ maneuver and deception if one was to gain a significant advantage over the other.

Strategic setting. Today, the U.S. victory over Japan appears as though it were inevitable, especially when accounting for American industrial capacity and the ability to replace men, ships, and airplanes on a scale not possible for the

Figure 2. Eastern New Guinea with California overlay. *(Figure provided by author.)*

Japanese. In particular, the Japanese could never recover from the severe casualties amongst their pilots, which escalated after Midway in 1942. None of this was clear in 1943, however, operations in New Guinea had the real potential of bogging down into a stalemate. At the strategic level, the SWPA ranked third on the United States' list of priorities behind Europe and the Pacific Ocean areas; consequently, many of MacArthur's requests for men and materiel during the war went unfulfilled. On the ground, the Allies held Milne Bay on the southeast tip of New Guinea and Port Moresby on the southwestern coast. In January 1943, a combined U.S. Army and Australian force seized their first objective from the Japanese on the north coast at Buna (see Figure 3). This was accomplished at a steep cost, with 8,500 Allied casualties, 27,000 cases of malaria, and 4 divisions (2 American and 2 Australian) either rendered combat ineffective or severely depleted. Before Operation POSTERN could be attempted, U.S. ground forces would need six months to recover.[2]

Despite their setbacks, the Japanese were not ready to cede the initiative.

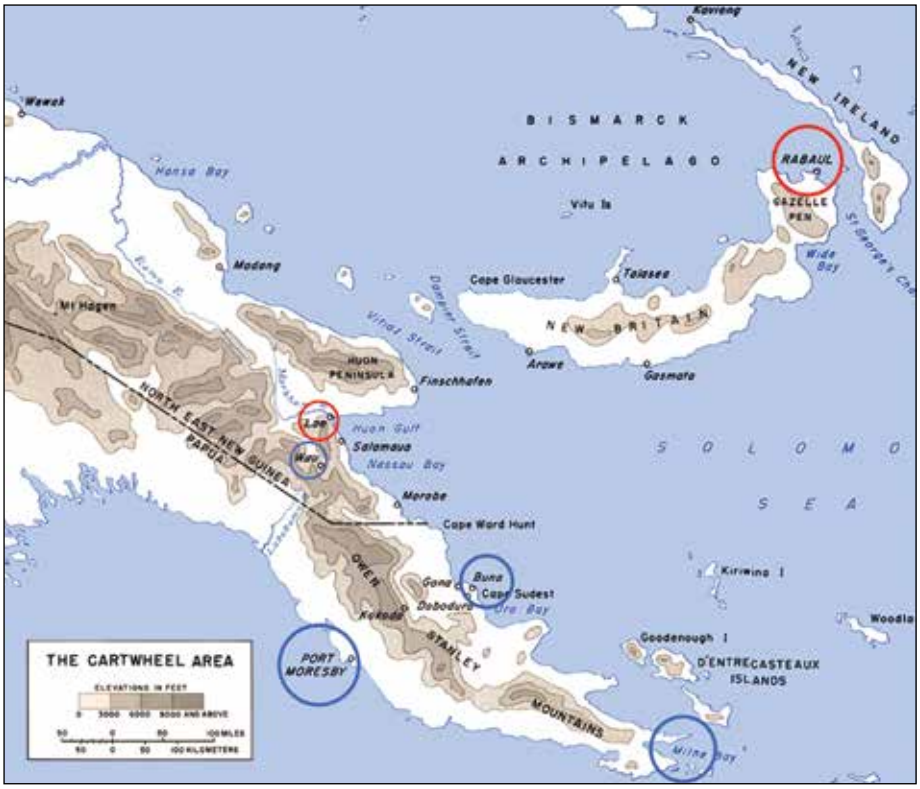

Figure 3. Key Allied (blue) and Japanese (red) bases on New Guinea and New Britain, early 1943. *(Figure provided by author.)*

Even after losing Buna, the Japanese continued to build up combat power in theater, particularly at their most important base in the region, Rabaul, on the northeastern tip of the island of New Britain. Even with losses at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal in the preceding months, the Japanese continued to hold the preponderance of air, naval, and ground strength in the Southwest Pacific. They had not abandoned plans to capture Port Moresby and were determined to turn back any Allied attempts to penetrate the so-called Bismark Barrier, extending along an east to west line running along the coasts of New Ireland, New Britain, and the north coast of New Guinea. The Japanese landed at Lae, just south of the Huon peninsula, in March 1942 and immediately began to improve the local airfield and port facilities. From Lae, the Japanese hoped to seize Wau to the southwest. Wau was held by a combined force of Australian commando units and New Guinea volunteers. If the Japanese could gain control of Wau and its airfield, they would be in a better position to support another ground offensive against Port Moresby.[3]

Both the Japanese and the Allies retained the capability to launch ground-based air strikes against each other's naval, air, and land forces and continued to do so in 1943—probing for weaknesses which would enable one side to break the stalemate and put the other on the defensive.

Logistics. That American industrial production at home led to U.S. and Allied victory abroad is an uncontested matter of historical perspective. However, this understanding overlooks the fact that long sea lines of communication had to be established and protected to ensure the equipment and supplies made in the United States found their way to servicemen in Europe and Asia.

The principle line of communications between the United States and Australia passed just east of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. In 1942 and 1943, the Japanese sought to interdict this lifeline, and the Allies were determined to protect it. This dynamic led directly to the months-long battle for Guadalcanal that immediately preceded Operation POSTERN. In addition to protecting sea lines of communication, forward logistics bases were critical to American operations in the Pacific, and this is one reason that operations in New Guinea focused on seizing harbors and airfields. These sites led to the buildup of the troops, supplies, and equipment required to leapfrog to the next objective.

In addition to men, materiel, and forward logistics bases, organization and planning were necessary to ensure the right things got to the right place at the right time. After mass disorganization and bottlenecks in the Pacific at places like Noumea, New Caledonia, early in the war, the Army established an organization known as the Joint Logistics Staff. Similar in function to a combatant command J-4, this organization operated from 1942 through the end of the war and oversaw all shipping and logistics plans in the Pacific. Logisticians at all levels in New Guinea were critical to the success of operations and carried out a variety of functions including maintenance, stevedore work, and graves registration. After the war, the Army estimated that approximately seven out of eight soldiers in New Guinea were committed to combat support or combat service support roles.[4] While the SWPA continued to rank third in priority behind Europe and the Pacific Ocean areas, MacArthur's forces were able to mount large-scale joint and combined campaigns because of an efficient strategic and operational logistics network fed by secure lines of communications to Australia, Hawaii, and the continental United States.

The Evolution of Operation POSTERN

Operation POSTERN was one of thirteen subordinate operations conducted over an eight-month period under the codename Operation CARTWHEEL. Together, the overall objective was the neutralization of the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul. POSTERN and the capture of Lae were critical to CARTWHEEL's overall success and would enable subsequent operations on New Guinea as well as control of the Vitiaz and Dampier Straits separating New Guinea and New Britain. This key maritime terrain would open the way for a drive toward the Philippines and mainland Japan.

The importance Japan placed on the region is revealed in a captured document written on 17 July 1943 and signed by Lieutenant General Hidemitsu Nakano, Commander of the Japanese 51st Division:

> The whole [sic] fate of the Japanese Empire depends upon the decision for the struggle for Lae-Salamau. These strongholds must be defended to the death. We must crush the enemy both

Coming ashore from an LCI. *(Photo provided by author.)*

Figure 4. Preliminary operations at Nassau Bay, Kiriwina, Woodlark, and New Georgia, June –August 1943. *(Figure provided by author.)*

> on land and in the air. Whatever plans to land troops he may attempt, we must destroy speedily and decisively at the water's edge. Every officer and man must develop his strength and resolution so that one man is the equal of ten.[5]

Operation POSTERN was preceded by three near simultaneous operations occurring in the SWPA and the South Pacific Area on or around 30 June 1943 (see Figure 4). Together, these operations helped set the conditions for the amphibious landing at Lae by tying up Japanese ground, air, and naval forces in the region as well as creating an important diversion close to the proposed landing area.

New Georgia. The first preliminary operation was the invasion of New Georgia in the Solomons carried out by forces under ADM William "Bull" Halsey, including U.S. Marines from the 1st Raider Regiment. This offensive, named Operation TOENAILS, occupied thousands of Japanese air, ground, and naval forces, culminating with the Allied seizure of Munda airfield on New Georgia on 5 August 1943.

Kiriwina and Woodlark. The second preliminary operation, named Operation CHRONICLE, involved the seizure of Kiriwina and Woodlark islands located northeast of Milne Bay. As a result of CHRONICLE, airfields were established on Kiriwina and Woodlark, enabling further air strikes on Rabaul and providing air cover for subsequent amphibious operations—including POSTERN.

Nassau Bay. The third preliminary operation was a shore-to-shore amphibious assault at Nassau Bay on 30 June. The landing force of 770 Army troops was delivered by a motley naval task force of 3 PT boats, 30 landing craft of various types, and 2 captured Japanese barges. The landings were conducted at night and were unopposed by the Japanese, though heavy seas caused considerable chaos and inflicted losses in landing craft and radios. Many important lessons from the Nassau Bay landing were applied later at Lae. The primary objective of the Nassau Bay operation was to create a base of operations for offensive operations against Salamaua, just to the south of Lae. If successful, a Salamau offensive would serve as an important feint, drawing Japanese forces away from the landing areas around Lae.

Opposing Forces

Allied Forces: key leaders and command relationships. MacArthur had a combined force of U.S. and Australian troops, along with a small number of Dutch forces. Allied land forces came under the overall command of Australian General Sir Thomas Blamey. For his own reasons, MacArthur was wary of placing U.S. troops under Australian command. Despite his misgivings, it was the Australians who shouldered the bulk of jungle fighting in New Guinea in 1943, it was the Australians who defeated the Japanese attempt to advance over the Owen Stanley Mountains on the Kokuda Trail from July to November 1942, and the Australians did most of the ground fighting during operations in and around Lae in September 1943.[6] Landing force operations were carried out by the Australian 9th Division commanded by Major General George Wootten. Once ashore, he coordinated his operations with the Australian 7th Division commanded by MGen George Vasey.

Wootten's counterpart on the Navy side was U.S. Navy RADM Daniel "Uncle Dan" Barbey, Commander of the 7th Amphibious Force. Barbey was a highly capable and adaptable commander who earned the trust of MacArthur, no small task for a naval officer. Barbey is not as well known as other WWII admirals such as Nimitz, Spruance, or Halsey. However, it was Barbey who carried out a greater number and variety of amphibious operations than perhaps any naval officer of WWII. Barbey's skill as a commander and tactician enabled MacArthur's most brilliant campaigns of the war and were classic examples of operational maneuver from the sea.

MacArthur's air component commander during the Lae operation was LtGen George Kenney. Kenney, like Barbey, was respected and trusted by MacArthur and served under him from 1942 through the end of the war. In addition to being in MacArthur's favor, Kenney also had the ear of the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Gen Henry "Hap" Arnold. Kenney's direct line of communications to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, through Arnold—though unconventional—proved to be of immense value to both him and MacArthur throughout the war.

The command and control structure in the SWPA differed from that utilized by the Marines and Navy during their campaigns in the Central Pacific, most notably in the way aviation was allocated and controlled. In the SWPA, the role of the 5th Air Force Commander, LtGen Kenney, was similar

RADM Daniel Barbey (second from right) and other officers, New Guinea, 1944. ***(Photo provided by author.)***

to that of a joint force air component commander. However, Kenney not only was responsible for all air operations in the SWPA, he also operationally controlled all of the aircraft. Neither the naval component commander (Barbey) nor the ground component commander (Wootten) had any aviation assets under their control. Such was not the case in the Central Pacific, where air operations were controlled by an amphibious force commander or one of his direct subordinates, who also had at their disposal all available Navy and Marine Corps aviation assets. Throughout the war, ADM Ernest King, who was dual-hatted as the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet, and the Chief of Naval Operations, argued strongly for air operations to be under the control of the amphibious force commander in all theaters. Though King and his admirals advocated strongly for this approach throughout the war, it was not adopted in Europe or the SWPA, and it is not clear that such an approach would have worked better in those theaters.[7]

Differences in the operational environment contributed to the different approaches to aviation command and control. For example, both the European and SWPA theaters were characterized by large land masses and primarily shore-to-shore amphibious operations. Air power was often the decisive factor in air, sea, and land operations, and Allied ground and naval forces almost always operated within range of land-based enemy air power. Expeditionary air bases helped set the conditions for offensive operations by providing an umbrella over advancing ground and naval forces. In Europe and the SWPA, allocating aviation assets directly to individual tactical commanders would have been more responsive for tasks such as pre-landing bombardment and close air support, but leaders in those theaters deemed it less effective and efficient than husbanding aviation assets at a higher echelon.[8] In contrast to the SWPA and European theaters, the Central Pacific consisted of small islands and atolls separated by vast ocean areas. Decisive operations were amphibious assaults launched from ships. In this environment, the amphibious force commander had a compelling need to control all supporting arms, including carrier-based air support, since land-based air support was not usually available. The well-developed and intricate Japanese defenses in the Central Pacific also made it important to provide tactical commanders with responsive close air support. Such support proved critical in Central Pacific battles such as Pelelieu.

* Air and maritime superiority in this context are defined as the degree of dominance of one force over another that permits the conduct of air or maritime operations at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by the opposing force.

Training and readiness. While the Marine Corps was the Service most prepared for amphibious operations early in the war, Army, Navy, and Australian forces in the SWPA did a remarkable job of rapidly getting up to speed, thanks in large part to the leadership of RADM Barbey. Barbey was well-schooled in the doctrine of *FTP-167*, the "amphibious bible," and was directly involved in its publication. He was by far the best commander in the SWPA to prepare both naval and ground forces for amphibious warfare. Both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and MacArthur recognized this; consequently, in February 1943, Barbey was tasked with "the conduct and coordination of all amphibious training" in the SWPA.[9]

The CARTWHEEL and POSTERN timelines were ambitious, so Barbey and his staff had no choice but to establish an aggressive training program in theater. The 7th Amphibious Force established schools in Australia and New Guinea; eventually, mobile training units were sent out to train soldiers and Sailors who could not afford to be taken off the line. The POSTERN landing force, MGen Wootten's 9th Australian Division, received training from Barbey and his staff just one month prior to the Lae landing.

Despite significant shortfalls in ships, landing craft, and other equipment, Barbey and his staff devised an intensive and remarkably thorough training program. Consisting of both classroom instruction and practical exercises, it provided instruction in areas such as beach party operations, shore party operations, naval gunfire support, air support, landing force communications, transport quartermasters, combat Loading, conduct of troops aboard amphibi-

ous ships and craft, and technique of the soldier in debarking amphibious ships and craft.[10] A lack of ships for training led to improvisations, such as logisticians using tape to simulate the dimensions of cargo spaces and thereby validate their embarkation plans.[11] The capstone event of Barbey's courses was a practice landing carried out by a regimental combat team. Serving as a form of amphibious rehearsal, these practice landings were carried out under the direction of unit officers and supervised by the 7th Amphibious Group training cadre.[12]

While all of the training was important for troops unaccustomed to amphibious operations, Barbey devoted special attention to the training of shore parties and beach parties. He had learned—as the Marine Corps and Navy did at Guadalcanal—that an inability to quickly clear the beach of vehicles and supplies could have serious, or even disastrous, consequences. In the SWPA, this mission was complicated by the fact that beach parties and shore parties fell under different chains of command. Beach parties were responsible for strictly "naval" activities, such as marking beaches, dislodging broached landing craft, and communicating with landing ships; additionally, they were under the operational control of the Navy. Shore parties were made up of Army engineers and were responsible for tasks such as clearing the beach of supplies and organizing staging areas. Army engineers also provided boat teams for shore-to-shore operations, which became a major part of SWPA amphibious operations. Barbey understood the symbiotic nature of these two groups' missions, and he immersed himself in the details of both. His direct involvement helped these two groups forge a cohesive team and improve their efficiency with every successive landing operation.*

Ships and landing craft. Amphibious ships in the modern sense, with large well decks carrying landing craft, did not exist at the time of the POSTERN landing. Most of the vessels in Barbey's 7th Amphibious Force were old and limited in terms of endurance and communications capability. Even Barbey was compelled to use a destroyer, the USS *Conygham*, as his flagship throughout POSTERN and subsequent operations. The closest thing to a modern amphibious ship in Barbey's flotilla was probably the high-speed auxiliary transport (APD), which had been converted from a World War I destroyer hull. The amphibious task force did not have amphibious tractors in its inventory, but did not have as compelling a need for them either, because they did not have to contend with coral reefs as their counterparts did in the Central Pacific. Though he struggled with acquiring sufficient quantities of ships and landing craft, RADM Barbey was able to gather together an impressive variety, including: APDs, landing ships tank (LSTs), landing crafts tank, landing ships infantry (LCIs), landing crafts mechanized, and landing crafts vehicle personnel. All of them, besides the APD, had the capability to land troops and vehicles directly ashore in the proper beach and surf conditions.

Lieutenant General Hatazo Adachi, Commander, Japanese 18th Army. ***(Photo provided by author.)***

*Modern amphibious doctrine recognizes the inseparable nature of these groups' missions, and places the Beach Party (Navy) and the Shore Party (Marine Corps) under the operational control of the commander of the Landing Force Support Party (LFSP) commander, who in turn reports to the Commander of the Landing Force (CLF).)

Even the LST, a small warship capable of berthing just over 200 troops, could do so thanks to a bow ramp and a flat keel which enabled it to beach and remain upright.

Japanese forces. In November 1942, Japan stood up the 18th Army under Lieutenant General Hatazo Adachi. Despite the loss of Buna and the ongoing battles waged in the nearby Solomons, in early 1943, Japan still held the preponderance of air, naval, and ground combat power in the Southwest Pacific as well as the important airfield and harbor at Lae. Adachi was determined to use these advantages to turn the tide in New Guinea.[13]

Having been repulsed at Wau throughout 1942, Adachi required reinforcements to overcome Wau and then press on to Port Moresby. In February 1943, Navy cryptanalysts intercepted Japanese plans to reinforce Lae via convoy from Rabaul. Alerted, the 5th Air Force began a highly successful campaign of targeting and sinking transports. It was so successful that only about 1,000 of the 6,900 soldiers destined for Lae actually made it to their destination, and those who did often had to swim ashore. While these setbacks thwarted Adachi's immediate plans in the short term, his available combat power on the eve of the Operation POSTERN was still considerable. As of 30 June 1943, Allied intelligence estimated that the Japanese had between 130,250 and 131,550 ground troops, one light cruiser, 9 to 10 destroyers, five submarines, and approximately 461 airplanes available for action.[14]

The Combined Assault to Seize Lae

Planning and reconnaissance. Operation POSTERN was under the overall command of Australian General Thomas Blamey, who assumed command of the combined "New Guinea Force" on 20 August 1943. The New Guinea Force fell under MacArthur's General Headquarters, although Blamey ultimately answered to the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin. Perhaps because of this somewhat nuanced command relationship at the top, detailed planning for POSTERN was conducted more by lateral coordination than top-

down direction. The subordinate commanders, Kenney, Barbey, and Wootten, exercised significant autonomy and discretion in their warfighting areas.

Coordination between the ground and naval component commanders and their staffs, however, was particularly close. Joint planning for the operation was conducted at Major General Wootten's headquarters at Milne Bay with officers from Barbey's staff as well as the commanders of ships, submarines, and PT boats. The 5th Air Force was represented by a junior officer observer.[15]

The concept of operations for Operation POSTERN involved a combined assault of Lae from the west by land, from the south by land, and from the east by sea (see Figure 5). The joint U.S./Australian force that landed at Nassau Bay in late June during one of POSTERN's three preliminary operations was assigned the task of conducting a diversionary attack on Salamau. No mere sideshow, this attack took place over 2 months and cost the Americans almost 800 casualties. However, the town of Salamau and its airfield were in Allied hands by September. As hoped, the Japanese diverted the bulk of their 10,000 troops in the area to Salamau instead of Lae.

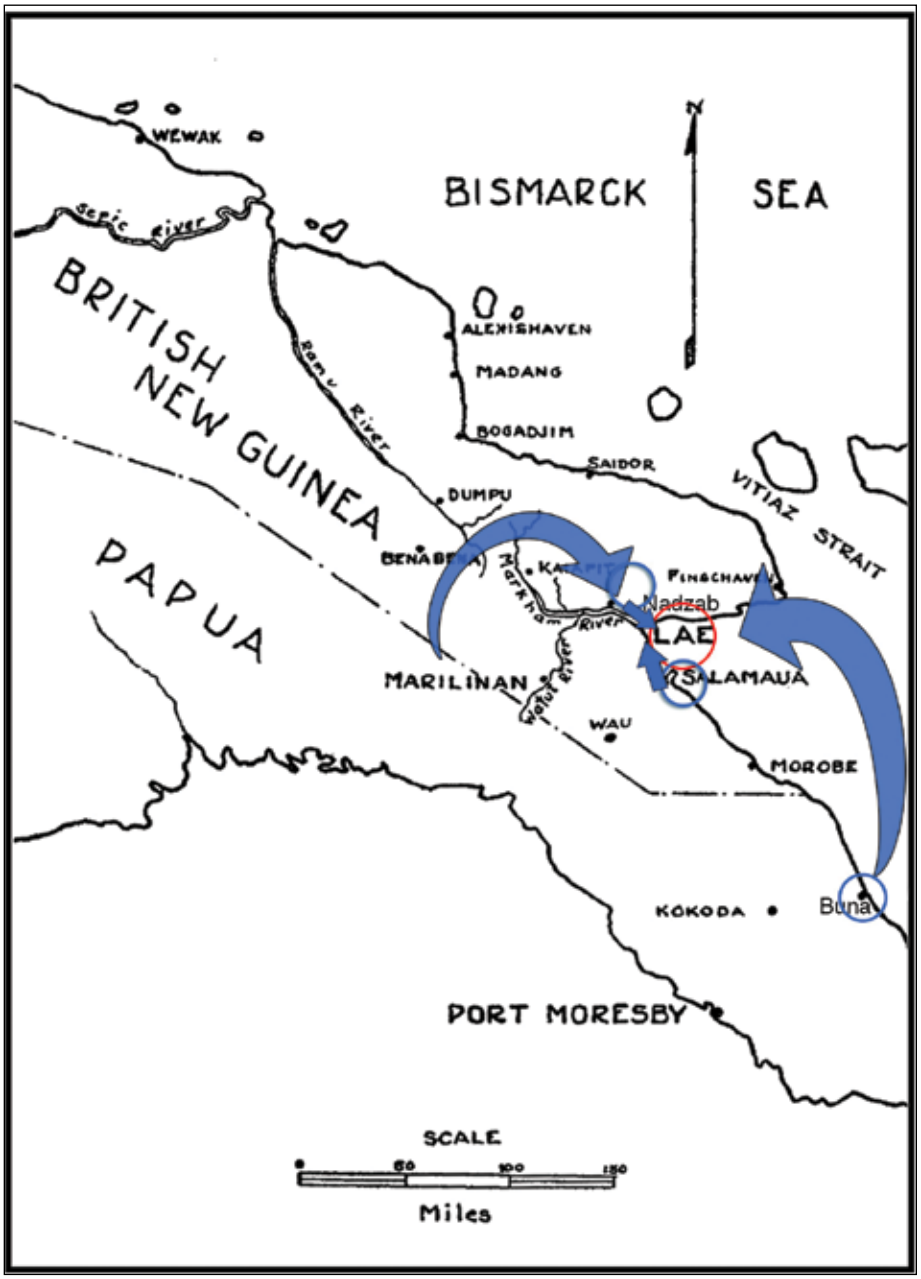

Figure 5. Concept of operations for combined assault on Lae. *(Figure provided by author.)*

The second supporting attack would begin with an assault by airborne troops onto an airfield to the west of Lae called Nadzab. The U.S. 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment would secure the airfield, enabling troops from the 7th Australian Division to flow into Nadzab via an air bridge. After consolidation at Nadzab, the 7th Division would then drive east to seize Lae in coordination with the Australian 9th Division, following its amphibious landing at Lae. Ideally, airborne operations would be synchronized with the 9th Division landing but, because of the unpredictability of the weather, a decision was made to decouple the two operations. As far as timing was concerned, simultaneous airborne and amphibious operations were a goal but not a requirement.[16]

The main effort for POSTERN was an amphibious assault at Lae conducted by Wootten's 9th Division. Ironically, it was Kenney rather than Barbey or Wootten who essentially chose the date for the landing at Lae. He recommended to MacArthur that the landings be attempted in early September to provide him time to attrite Japanese air forces and take advantage of a recurring weather pattern in the region. For two to three days each week, thick fog enveloped an area to the northwest of the landing area—including the Vitiaz Straits and southern New Britain. If the landings could be timed to coincide with this monthly "fog cover," it would greatly increase the chance of the naval task force going undetected by Japanese reconnaissance flights operating out of Rabaul.[17] MacArthur accepted the recommendation and approved a landing date in the first week of September while leaving Wootten and Barbey to work out the finer details.

The size of Wootten's landing force required that Barbey commit every one of his ships and landing craft to the operation, with no reserve and little margin for error. In this situation, it was

critically important to mitigate risk to the amphibious force. Even if Kenney's anticipated fog cover had the desired effect, Japanese air power still posed a real danger to the transports and landing force. Barbey requested continuous air cover for his force of over 40 ships, 7,800 soldiers, and 3,260 sailors during the movement to Lae. The 5th Air Force resisted, claiming a lack of capacity because of the planned airborne operations into Nadzab. In the end, MacArthur himself brokered a compromise wherein the 5th Air Force would maintain a 32-plane standby force on strip alert at Dobodura (near Buna), which would sortie in the event of an Japanese air attack.[18] The 5th Air Force would not be in position to provide the airborne with an early warning of a Japanese air attack, so Barbey improvised his own early warning system, pulling the destroyer USS *Reid* out of an antisubmarine screen and stationing it between Lae and Finschafen. Though it would be isolated and exposed, *Reid*—with its radar and fighter-director team aboard—could pick up Japanese aircraft coming from the north and alert for 5th Air Force fighters at Dobodura.[19]

Barbey also sought to mitigate risk by selecting landing areas that were largely undefended and outside of Japanese artillery range. He planned the transit of the task force at night to avoid detection by the Japanese surface fleet and ship-to-shore movement in the early morning hours to avoid any confusion caused by landing across an unfamiliar beach in the dark. Barbey placed a high priority on speed during offload operations and conducted them in an almost raid-like fashion.

Lae established a pattern which Barbey would replicate in future landings throughout New Guinea and the Philippines. He summarized his approach, stating:

> Proceed to the objective area during darkness, unload in the early hours of daylight and move out of the objective area by 1000. This [allows] more expeditious and efficient operations while substantially reducing the threat of enemy air attack.[20]

Accurate charts and information on prospective landing beaches were extremely scarce. With no reconnaissance force available to him, Barbey authorized a daring reconnaissance by one of his staff officers, CDR Charles Adair. Adair's task was to find suitable landing areas for operations against Lae and Salamau. Under constant threat of detection by Japanese ships and airplanes in the area, Adair conducted a two-part reconnaissance, first in a B-17 provided by the 5th Air Force and then in a 40-foot motor boat on loan from the Army. He investigated every inlet on the New Guinea coast up to Salamau, acquiring valuable photographs and soundings at potential landing sites.[21]

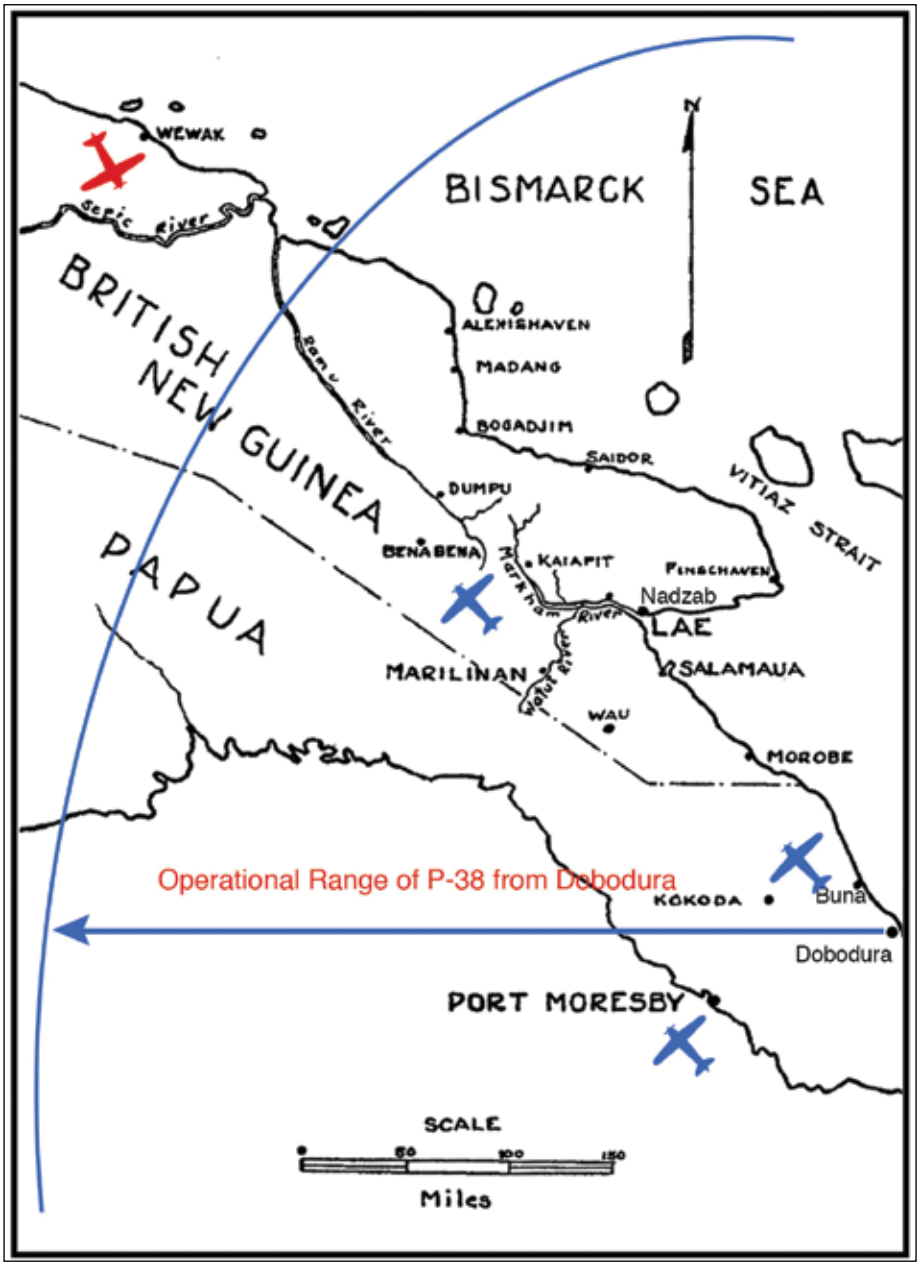

Figure 6. Wewak, Marilinan, and the operational range of P-38 from Dobodura. *(Figure provided by author.)*

Deep fires: shaping operations and the 5th Air Force. To facilitate their operations on New Guinea, the Japanese began an intense buildup of air power at Wewak along the northern coast of New Guinea. Kenney continued to send regular air strikes against Rabaul but decided that the attrition of Japanese air power at Wewak was a top priority and the best way he could help shape

the battlespace prior to an amphibious landing at Lae. His instincts were validated by captured Japanese codes, revealing that the Japanese had deployed ten flying regiments to the airfields around Wewak.[22] While Kenney had long-range bombers at Port Moresby and Dobodura that could reach Wewak, his primary fighter—the P-38—was unable to escort the bombers at the ranges involved (see Figure 6).

Kenney concluded the only way to seriously threaten the Japanese flying regiments on New Guinea would be to build an expeditionary fighter base in the mountainous interior, closer to Wewak, at a place called Marilinan. To avoid detection by the Japanese, he simultaneously approved plans for the construction of a dummy airfield to the northwest of Marilinan at Bena Bena (alternately referred to as Garoka) in a manner designed to draw Japanese interest. If Kenney could build up Marilinan before the Japanese detected it, his plan of reaching Wewak with fighter cover stood a good chance of success.

Kenney's deception plan worked just as he had hoped, with the Japanese regularly bombing the dummy airfield and, though the Japanese detected Marilinan two weeks before the Lae landing, Kenney's airmen had installed radar and were able to defend themselves with the fifteen minutes of early warning it provided. In mid-August, Kenney's forces embarked on a series of devastating air strikes against Wewak and its adjacent airfields. The Japanese lost 150 aircraft on a single day, many of them still on the ground—an event the Japanese later referred to as—"the Black Day of August 17th."[23] All told, the Japanese 4th Air Army lost three-quarters of its aircraft in just two days.[24] MacArthur's intelligence chief, GEN Charles Willoughby, later described the Wewak strikes as "unquestionably a milestone in the Pacific War," and "the first major reversal suffered by the Japanese Army Air Service in the Pacific."[25] In the short term, the strikes on Wewak paved the way for the first coordinated airborne and amphibious assault of the Pacific War two weeks later.[26]

Assault by sea, land, and air. Wootten's 9th Division troops embarked on ships from Barbey's Task Force 76 at Milne Bay on 1 September and sailed for Allied ports at Buna and Morobe, where they were joined by the U.S. Army 2d Engineer Special Brigade. The Special Brigade had capabilities similar to that of modern-day Marine Corps combat engineer, engineer support, and landing support units; they were to play a major role in the Lae operation.

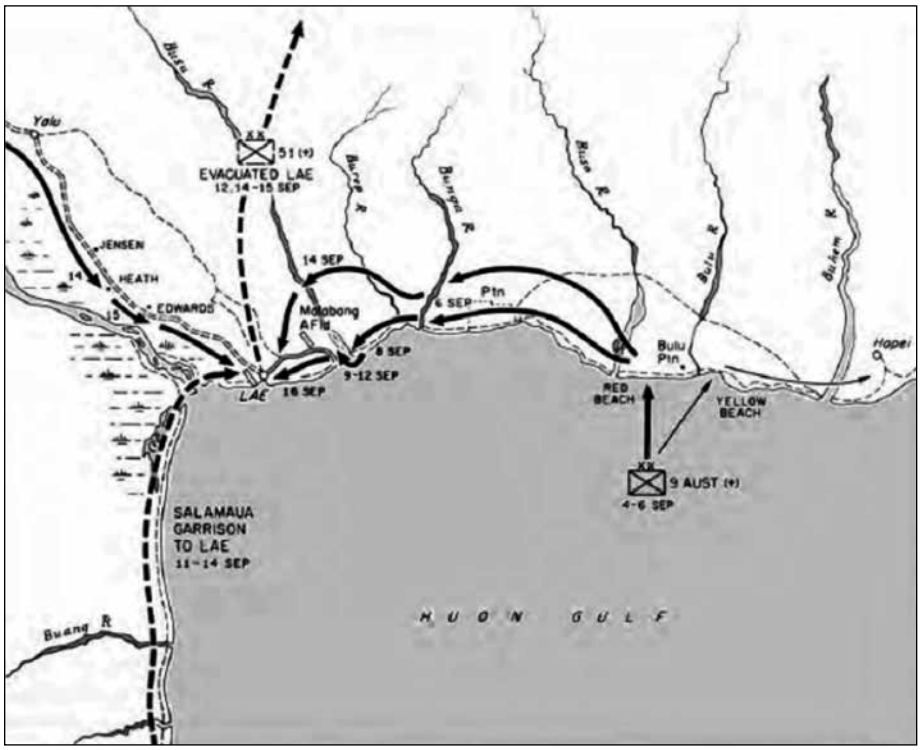

Figure 7. Combined assault of Lae and Japanese retreat. *(Figure provided by author.)*

While pre-assault fires from naval gunfire and aerial bombardment at Lae paled in comparison to the days- or weeks-long bombardments at places such as Iwo Jima and Okinawa, pre-assault fires played an important role in the Lae operation. In the Central Pacific, pre-assault fires were designed to destroy or neutralize gun emplacements and other facilities ashore. At Lae, the goals were more modest. Naval surface fires were intended to harass, deceive, or misdirect the enemy as well as knock out snipers hiding in coconut trees near the beach.[27] Two hours prior to the first waves going ashore, five destroyers laid down five-inch fires followed by strafing runs by the 5th Air Force.

The landing beaches were lightly defended, and at 0630 on 4 September, sixteen rubber boats carried the first of Wootten's troops ashore under the smoke of naval gunfire (see Figure 7). It was the first landing of Australian troops since Gallipoli in 1915. This time, their landing was unopposed, and 9th Division troops began to quickly secure the beachhead. Though resistance ashore was minimal, nearby Japanese aircraft were alerted and mounted an early morning attack. Eighteen LCIs were in the midst of offloading almost 4,000 troops when three Japanese bombers and six fighters swept in. The planes made only one pass, and, though they badly damaged two LCIs and killed a number of Sailors, the landing was not substantially impeded.

Though the offload occurred in extremely swampy terrain, the efforts of logisticians ensured a steady flow of men and equipment across the beach. The 2d Engineer Special Brigade laid down steel matting, which allowed vehicles to gain traction despite the thick mud. On the LSTs, all trucks were mobile loaded with unit supplies—even supplies that would typically be stowed in break bulk such as rations or ammunition. Though less efficient from an embarkation and

stowage perspective, it expedited the offload and enabled units to move off the beach quickly.[28] In less than four hours, more than 8,000 men and 1,500 tons of supply were offloaded. Under fire and across an undeveloped beach, this was an impressive feat by any standard.

Barbey was ashore at Wootten's command post when the USS *Reid* reported three large groups of enemy planes headed toward the flotilla from the direction of Rabaul. Fortunately, the majority of ships had departed the beach and now had the benefit of anti-air protection from destroyer escorts as well as the ability to maneuver at sea. Kenney's standby air group at Dobodura was alerted and intercepted the first wave of approximately 70 Japanese planes. Kenney's fighters brought down 23 attacking aircraft, but enough torpedo and dive bombers leaked through to do substantial damage. Barbey's flagship, the USS *Conyngham*, was slightly damaged, and two LSTs were damaged severely enough to be put out of commission for an extended period. In the following days, the Japanese air force continued to bomb resupply convoys and shore installations but was unable to stop the flow of men and materiel.[29]

Once established ashore, Wootten assumed control of the landing force from Barbey. While the command and control of air forces may have differed between major theaters, there was unanimity on the need for the landing force commander to assume control once established ashore. Wootten's 9th Division began its advance westward a few miles inland from the beach in an effort to get behind Lae and cut off the Japanese garrison, but it soon became bogged down. The 2d Engineer Special Brigade again was instrumental in keeping things moving. The unit was equipped with a reinforced boat company which had been resupplying Wootten's men at supply dumps along the coast. But after the Division's 24th Brigade lost several men in an aborted attempt to cross the Busu River near Lae, the engineers were called to assist in an opposed crossing of the river. Under cover of mist and darkness, the Special Brigade used boats to ferry the entire brigade and its weapons across the rain-swollen Busu River while under

Figure 8. Amphibious operations following Operation POSTERN. *(Figure provided by author.)*

fire from artillery, machine guns, and small arms. In the following days, they emplaced a box girder bridge across the Busu, which allowed an additional brigade, the 26th, to advance on Lae and affect a link up with Australian forces advancing from the west.[30]

Airborne operations and attack from the west. The weather over Nadzab cooperated, and the airborne assault was synchronized with the amphibious landing on 5 September. The U.S. 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment, together with the 2/4th Australian Field Regiment, landed at Nadzab after preparation fires by B-25s firing 50-caliber machine guns and dropping parachute fragmentation bombs (a precursor to cluster munitions [see Figure 8]). The airborne landing was unopposed and paratroopers quickly secured the airfield. The next morning, a C-47 brought in elements of the U.S. 871st Airborne Engineer Battalion that helped prepare the airfield for the main body, the Australian 7th Division under MGen George Vasey. After a period of consolidation, Vasey's force moved eastward out of Nadzab and toward Lae. Adachi sensed that the noose was tightening around Lae. In the Central Pacific, with no hope of retreat or escape, Japanese troops typically fought to the death. With Salamaua lost, and Lae on the verge of collapse, Adachi realized it made far more sense to withdraw his men and continue the fight elsewhere. On 11 September, he ordered an overland withdrawal to Finschafen, 50 miles to the east of Lae. Vasey's forces continued to encounter resistance by delaying forces, but by 15 September they had seized the airfield at Lae and linked up with Wootten's 26th Brigade.

The Allied pincer movement had left Adachi's forces but one avenue of escape, crossing a rugged 12,000 foot spur of the Owen Stanley mountain range. Of the 8,000 men who began the trek, only 6,000 made it to their destination. Most of the 2,000 lost were victims of starvation.[31]

Altogether, between Lae and Salamau, the Japanese lost 4,850 killed and 5,250 wounded. Over the same period, U.S. and Australian forces lost 666 killed and 2,205 wounded.[32]

POSTERN's Legacy

The success of the Lae operation allowed U.S. and Australian planners to secure additional airfields and to accelerate plans for additional amphibious landings along New Guinea's north coast as part of Operation CARTHWEEL. As at Lae, subsequent landings

were typically conducted at places where Japanese defenses were weak. Many Japanese garrisons were bypassed altogether. They were either isolated and starved out or attacked when conditions favored the Allies.

Lae also set a precedent for other operations in New Guinea and the Philippines that would involve the seizure of airfields, or "unsinkable aircraft carriers," to support operations on land and at sea. The loss of Lae, combined the with anxiety over an Allied offensive in the Central Pacific, led the Japanese to conclude in September 1943 that they were over-extended and should reconsider their overall strategy in the Pacific. As a result, they established a new defensive perimeter further north, which extended from western New Guinea, through the Carolines, and to the Marianas. While the Japanese were by no means near the end, they concluded that former strongholds such as Rabaul were now ultimately expendable. With the benefit of hindsight, many historians in the West look to Midway or Guadalcanal as the strategic turning point in the Pacific War. However, it was not until Lae that the Japanese themselves concluded that they had lost the strategic initiative. This strategic reframing was a major accomplishment that cascaded from the seizure of Lae.

For modern day Marines and Sailors, Operation POSTERN is a reminder that operating in contested environments is more than a mathematical problem involving the effective range of weapons systems such as anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles. Such threats must be accounted for with effective offensive and defensive capabilities. However, succeeding as an "inside force" will also require the effective combination of fires, maneuver, and deception to create overmatch at the point of attack. Operating in contested environments against peer adversaries will require traits displayed by POSTERN's soldiers, Sailors, and airmen such as creativity, innovation, and a willingness to accept risk. We will need professionals like RADM Barbey who understand amphibious doctrine well enough to adapt it to the particulars of their environment. Finally, POSTERN is an inspiring reminder of what a joint and combined expeditionary force operating from the sea can accomplish even under the most demanding of conditions.

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