

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



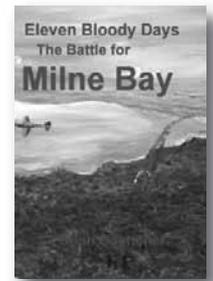
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

Eleven bloody days: the battle for Milne Bay

by Brian Boettcher

Brian Boettcher: Wahroonga NSW; 2009; 160 pp.; ISBN 978-0-646-50682-1; RRP \$26.50 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 588 BOET 2009



While much has been written about the Kokoda campaign, the equally critical concurrent battle at Milne Bay on the south-eastern tip of New Guinea in August-September 1942 has received less attention. Brian Boettcher has attempted to correct this imbalance with this, his first military history.

Boettcher explains the geographic, political and military background to the Milne Bay battle and describes the effect that General MacArthur's arrival in Australia on 17 March 1942 had on Australian-British-United States military relationships, highlighting the low priority afforded by Churchill to Australia's defence and the significant role assumed by United States forces.

Boettcher describes the main contributors to the Milne Bay battle. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) played a key role, especially the Kittyhawks of No. 75 and No. 76 Squadrons. Boettcher mentions the main airstrip (No.1 Gurney), but nothing of the under-developed No.2 strip and little about the incomplete No. 3 strip.

Artillery also played a key role, but Boettcher incorrectly refers to the 2/5th Field Regiment as the 2/3rd Field Regiment. Anti-tank gunners from 101st Anti-Tank Regiment opposed the two light Japanese tanks landed at Milne Bay; and anti-aircraft defences on the bay and No. 1 airstrip opposed the regular Japanese air raids. He does not mention the two anti-aircraft regiments, 2/3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (40 mm Bofors guns) and the 2/2nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment (3.7 inch guns).

2/5th Field Ambulance had to confront serious medical challenges – a shortage of anti-malarial drugs and protective clothing; and anti-malarial discipline initially was poor.

There was little naval support available during the battle. Apart from several small luggers, an RAAF launch, and United States Army Small Ships² (periodically), the only significant naval support was the destroyer HMAS *Arunta*. The Japanese had complete control of the bay at night with a force of light cruisers, destroyers and smaller craft. Boettcher does not address the naval transport support provided during the build-up to the battle.

The prelude to the battle is described in the context of events in the wider South West Pacific Area, including the brittle relationship between MacArthur, Blamey and Rowell, and the formation of Milne Force. Major-General Cyril Clowes took command of Milne Force on 13

August. The build-up of Australian troops continued and included the 7th Militia Brigade and the 18th Brigade. The Australian dispositions are described, but there are discrepancies in the distances quoted between key locations. There are also errors in military nomenclature that could have been avoided had there been a military reviewer of the draft.

On 25 August, the Japanese commenced landing in Milne Bay, secured a beachhead on 26 August, and then advanced along the north shore during 27-28 August. Clowes was hampered by lack of maps, poor communications with the infantry, and the need to keep troops in reserve for a potential Japanese landing on the southern shore. He received erroneous intelligence reports and found it difficult to ascertain the enemy's intentions. MacArthur, who expected "blow-by-blow" reports, compounded the problem. The final major action on 31 August at No. 3 strip is vividly portrayed and resulted in Japanese defeat. By 1 September, Australian troops were clearing the enemy from the northern shore and, for an action on 4 September, Corporal John French, 2/9th Battalion, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. The battle concluded on 6 September when the Japanese withdrew from Milne Bay.

Boettcher erroneously refers to local natives identifying Australian troops at night by feeling the Rising Sun collar badge on their uniforms. [Australian troops were not wearing winter service dress in New Guinea!] He also refers to an Australian infantry attack at 0100 hours on 3 September preceded by artillery and air support, yet had previously said the RAAF did not fly at night.

Boettcher analyses the outcomes. He emphasizes the lack of support from Britain during this phase of the war; the unhelpful role played by the High Command; and subsequent lack of recognition given to Clowes³ and, indeed, the battle. He describes the development of Milne Bay and its strategic importance following the battle; and concludes by addressing the action taken in relation to war crimes committed by the Japanese at Milne Bay.

The book may be of interest to military history novices, but it is not a suitable military history reference. It lacks important military detail, contains factual errors and typographic errors detract from its quality.

Chris Ballantine⁴

¹The book is available from the author at <http://www.battleformilnebay.com.au>.

²Boettcher's description of an incident involving one of those ships differs from that in the unit history [Ladislav Reday (2004). *The Raggle Taggle Fleet* (US Army Small Ships Association: Sydney)].

³Despite his outstanding command at Milne Bay, he was later relegated to a military backwater.

⁴Major Ballantine's father, Gunner John Ballantine, 2/3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, was at Milne Bay during the Japanese attack and passed on to him reference material and diaries covering the period.