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Hurricane at Biak MacArthur against the Japanese, May-August 1944

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**HURRICANE AT BIAK
MacARTHUR AGAINST THE JAPANESE
MAY - AUGUST 1944**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Marc D. Bernstein

December 1999

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ABSTRACT

HURRICANE AT BIAK MacARTHUR AGAINST THE JAPANESE MAY – AUGUST 1944

by Marc D. Bernstein

This thesis discusses the invasion and capture during mid-1944 of Biak Island, off the coast of New Guinea in the Southwest Pacific, by Allied forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur. Conduct of the Biak operation was the responsibility of the Hurricane Task Force, initially commanded by Major General Horace H. Fuller.

The island proved much more stoutly defended than anticipated, and General Fuller failed to capture Biak's vital airfields as quickly as MacArthur demanded. Under pressure, Fuller resigned and was replaced as Task Force commander by Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger. He succeeded in breaking effective Japanese resistance in less than two weeks, though the campaign officially continued for another two months.

Many lessons can be drawn from Biak, including the need for accurate intelligence and proper tactical handling of troops, the need to isolate the battlefield, and the risks commanders must take to achieve desired results. Biak was a costly operation, but a vital step in MacArthur's return to the Philippines.

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Dedicated to the survivors of Biak

**When I peruse the conquer'd fame of
heroes and the victories of mighty generals,
I do not envy the generals.**

Walt Whitman

**It is not enough to fight. It is the spirit which we
bring to the fight that decides the issue. It is morale
that wins the victory.**

George C. Marshall

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Map 1. Situation in the Pacific, 12 March 1944.
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Map 2. The Western Pacific.
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CHAPTER 1.
BACKGROUND: THE WAR IN
THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC TO MAY 1944

World War II in the Southwest Pacific started badly for General Douglas MacArthur and the Allied nations, including the United States, Britain, Australia and the Netherlands. The Japanese, who had held a League of Nations Mandate over certain territories in the Central Pacific, used these as well as the home islands and Japanese-occupied areas of the Asian mainland as a springboard for launching a rapid succession of devastating attacks against Western interests throughout the Pacific in December 1941.

Post-World War I Japanese military expansionism on the Asian continent could be traced directly to the Manchurian Railway Incident of 1931, followed by engagement in a full-fledged war against China proper beginning with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937. The Japanese war aims in general were grand but at the same time limited. Japan did not seek world domination, but rather world recognition of her new status as a major power. In particular, the Japanese militarists demanded access to the sources of vital raw materials, especially oil, that were conspicuously unavailable within Japan itself.

When the United States placed total embargoes on sales to Japan of scrap metal (1940) and oil (1941), and froze Japanese assets in the United States in 1941, war in the Pacific became inevitable. Not only were such actions perceived as an affront to Japanese honor, but the Japanese war machine could not long function without such raw materials. The United States objected to Japanese actions in both China and Indochina, and wanted to put a brake on the further extension of the Japanese empire. Japan saw

itself on a collision course with Western interests in the region, and had already begun active planning for a series of stunning military thrusts which were to take place simultaneously throughout the Pacific region. The Japanese government, and the militarists behind it, came to believe that they had no choice but to act quickly and decisively or risk the eclipse of Japan as a world power.

By the first week of December 1941, negotiations between Tokyo and Washington, largely concerning the U.S. demand for Japanese withdrawal from China, had broken down, and the Pearl Harbor attack force had already departed from the Kurile Islands. The Japanese military wanted its general Pacific offensive to go off like a “string of firecrackers,” in which both strategic and tactical surprise would be achieved and the Allies left devastated in a matter of mere hours, or at most days.¹ In order to accomplish this overall mission, the Imperial Army and Navy were willing to accept extreme risks. The Japanese would attack, in many instances, with numerically inferior forces – something that would seem to guarantee failure, according to most military textbooks. In some instances local, temporary numerical superiority in men and equipment would be achieved, but Japanese commanders, such as Lieutenant General Masaharu Homma in the Philippines, could never be sure Imperial General Headquarters would allow them to retain control of their best troops for any extended period of time.²

The attack on Pearl Harbor temporarily neutralized the U.S. Pacific Fleet as a factor opposing Japanese aims in the region, which emphasized the rapid seizure of the Philippines, Malaya, and the Netherlands East Indies. The Philippines were important because of their key position astride the vital sea lanes in the western Pacific and the

availability of Manila Bay, probably the finest anchorage in the Far East. Malaya and the East Indies were important because they contained the raw materials absolutely vital to support Japan's expansionist policies, including rubber, tin, and oil. As a result, both Malaya and the Philippines were attacked on the first day of the war, though invasion of the East Indies was delayed until January 1942. Other key locations were captured in the first weeks of conflict, including Guam, Wake Island, and Hong Kong. The Japanese Pacific offensive succeeded brilliantly, with one notable exception: the Philippines.

Following his tenure as U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Douglas MacArthur came back to the Philippines for the third time, intending to stay indefinitely while building a new Philippine Army. In 1937, he retired from the U.S. Army and subsequently became Field Marshal of the Philippine Army and chief military advisor to Philippine President Manuel Quezon.³ The status of the Philippines at that time was that of a U.S. commonwealth (like Puerto Rico), though full independence was to be granted by the mid-1940s. Thus, the Philippines constituted U.S. territory, but were essentially self-governing except for the presence of a U.S. High Commissioner and the U.S. military. The Philippine Army was a creation of MacArthur and Quezon. It would eventually consist of ten divisions (on paper) totaling 100,000 men. Only a tiny fraction of these were "regular" troops; the rest were undertrained and underequipped reservists.⁴ The backbone of the U.S. military presence in the Philippines was the U.S. Army's own Philippine Division (a regular U.S. Army division, though one which included many Filipino soldiers, who were serving in the U.S. Army, not the Philippine Army). In addition, as the war approached,

Washington sent more U.S. Army Air Corps units to the Philippines, and the U.S. Navy's small Asiatic Fleet retained an important presence in Manila Bay, as well as other locations in the western Pacific. In November 1941, the U.S. 4th Marine Regiment arrived from China.⁵

MacArthur was in a difficult position. A look at any Pacific map served to indicate the virtual impossibility of a successful U.S. defense of the Philippines in the face of a determined Japanese onslaught. The Japanese controlled Formosa, perilously close to the main Philippine island of Luzon, and were obviously engaged in building up forces for an attack somewhere to the south. The Philippines were vulnerable. The native population of about 16 million could theoretically provide a reasonably competent defense force, but MacArthur needed time to build it, and time was in short supply. Everything else was in short supply as well. Washington was simply unwilling, before the summer of 1941, to provide MacArthur with even a fraction of what he needed to create a substantial army. U.S. planning in the event of an attack (War Plan Orange) called for MacArthur to defend only Manila Bay, withdrawing to the Bataan Peninsula and the forts in the Bay (including Corregidor) and holding out for six months, the estimated time it would take for the U.S. Navy to fight its way across 5,000 miles of ocean from Hawaii and relieve the besieged defenders of the Philippines.⁶ War Plan Orange was unrealistic and defeatist – Washington knew it, and MacArthur knew it.

Though MacArthur was no longer in the U.S. Army, it was evident that he would be recalled to active duty if hostilities looked imminent. In July 1941, this happened, as MacArthur became Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army Forces Far East, a grandiose title

that belied the fact that his only command responsibilities concerned the Philippine Islands. More importantly, Washington simultaneously reversed its policy position regarding defense of the Philippines. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall informed MacArthur that he could expect further U.S. Army reinforcements as well as a very substantial beefing up of Army Air Corps capabilities in the Philippines, in particular the dispatch of significant numbers of B-17 heavy bombers for deterrence purposes and use in a projected aerial counteroffensive against Formosa and Japan proper should war begin. Washington had reversed itself largely on the basis of MacArthur's overly optimistic claims about the progress of his Philippine Army units (officially incorporated into the U.S. Army at the time MacArthur was recalled to active duty), and the new availability of the long-range heavy bombers. MacArthur believed he would be ready to repel a Japanese invasion by April 1942, and by that time, he was slated to have received from the United States a total of 165 B-17s – a substantial force indeed.⁷

The Japanese did not wait that long, however. The day the war began, MacArthur had 35 B-17s in the islands, but almost immediately lost 18 of them, caught on the ground at Clark Field in a raid launched from Formosa. MacArthur also lost the heart of his fighter capability that day, and the Japanese rapidly established air and sea superiority in the vicinity of the Philippines. In fact, a naval blockade was put in place, not to be significantly breached through the fall of Corregidor on 6 May 1942. On land, the main Japanese invasion of Luzon occurred at Lingayen Gulf on 22 December 1941. MacArthur had convinced the War Department that his “beach defense” plan should be substituted for War Plan Orange’s singular defense of Manila Bay, and had deployed his

units (and, equally important, his supplies) to contest the main Japanese landing. However, within 36 hours of the Lingayen invasion, many of MacArthur's Philippine Army units had disintegrated, and he had no choice but to declare the Orange plan to be back in effect, ordering the evacuation of his headquarters from Manila to Corregidor, and directing both the North Luzon Force and the South Luzon Force to execute a fighting withdrawal into Bataan. There was no time, however, to reposition supplies, and the troops entering Bataan found little of sustenance there.⁸ Despite the heroic defense put up by the combined Fil-American army (which actually fought the Japanese to a standstill by early February 1942), the troops on Bataan were doomed, eventually surrendering on 9 April 1942. The 13,000 personnel on Corregidor managed to hold out for nearly another four weeks, surrendering on 6 May. MacArthur, ordered out of Corregidor by President Roosevelt himself, escaped from the Japanese trap by PT boat on 11 March 1942, taking with him his wife and young son, his chief of staff (Brigadier General Richard K. Sutherland) and a handful of senior officers plus one enlisted man. Lieutenant General Jonathan Wainwright was left as the senior U.S. officer in the Philippines, and was pressured by the Japanese into surrendering the entire archipelago. But the Japanese triumph in the Philippines had taken much longer than Imperial General Headquarters had expected, and the field commander, General Homma, was never given another command.⁹

MacArthur arrived in Australia on 17 March 1942, barely evading a Japanese air raid in the vicinity of Darwin, and established his new headquarters at Melbourne on 20 March 1942 (moved forward to Brisbane exactly four months later). The Australians,

who had suffered, along with the British and Dutch, their own stinging reversals in the first months of the war (losing the entire crack 8th Imperial Force Division in Malaya), welcomed MacArthur virtually as a savior. MacArthur, however, had expected to find a substantial U.S. field force awaiting him in Australia for his drive back to the Philippines, yet discovered only about 25,000 U.S. military personnel upon his arrival in the country, none of whom belonged to ground combat units.¹⁰ MacArthur would not receive his first infantry division from the United States (the 41st Division) until the next month, and would have to make do with merely two U.S. divisions for the next full year of the war. Fortunately, he could call on the entire Australian military effort, and until 1944 the bulk of his first-line ground troops consisted of Australian soldiers (in particular the Imperial Force divisions). Though having a population of only seven million, Australia would provide a huge logistical base for MacArthur's operations as well as a substantial source of manpower at a critical time.

On 18 April 1942 (the same day the Doolittle raiders bombed Tokyo), MacArthur formally assumed his new post as Commander-in-Chief, Southwest Pacific Area (CinC, SWPA). The terms of his directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff (comprising the U.S. and British chiefs of staff) expressly forbade him from directly commanding any national force.¹¹ MacArthur was to be strictly the supreme commander in his theater. This contrasted with the arrangement for the rest of the Pacific combat zone, the Pacific Ocean Areas (POA) under the command of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. Nimitz also directly commanded the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and in the capacity answered directly to his superior in Washington, Admiral Ernest J. King, who wore two hats as both Commander-

in-Chief, United States Fleet, and Chief of Naval Operations. King could thus (theoretically, and to a limited extent in practice) issue orders directly to Nimitz, while MacArthur was obligated to take his instructions solely from the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff as a body (who had been designated by the Combined Chiefs as the exclusive agency for directing the entire war in the Pacific. Army Chief Staff George Marshall acted as the executive agent for the Joint Chiefs in dealing with MacArthur, but approval for MacArthur's operations had to come from the Joint Chiefs acting as a unanimous body, rather than from Marshall alone. In practice, Nimitz also received his directives from the Joint Chiefs, but King could nevertheless involve himself much more directly in Nimitz's activities than he could with MacArthur's, an especially noteworthy distinction with regard to operational direction of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, which remained within MacArthur's prerogative (not King's) as theater commander. Nimitz's POA was further subdivided into the North, Central, and South Pacific Areas, with Vice Admiral Robert L. Ghormley (replaced by Admiral William F. Halsey in October 1942) in direct command of the latter.¹²

MacArthur organized his theater in a predictable fashion. His General Headquarters (GHQ) for the SWPA was thoroughly dominated by U.S. Army officers in the senior staff positions, with very little attempt made to incorporate either U.S. naval officers or Australian officers into the hierarchy.¹³ Among the U.S. Army officers, the most privileged group remained those who had escaped with MacArthur from Corregidor, most notably including his chief of staff, Sutherland; his chief of intelligence (G-2), Colonel (soon to be Brigadier General) Charles A. Willoughby; and his chief

signal officer (in charge of ULTRA codebreaking in the SWPA), Brigadier General Spencer B. Akin. With regard to his field commanders, MacArthur established three subordinate headquarters: Allied Land Forces, Allied Naval Forces, and Allied Air Forces. Because of the preponderance of Australian ground units in his theater in early 1942, MacArthur had no choice but to name the senior Australian general, Thomas A. Blamey, as Commander-in-Chief, Allied Land Forces. The Allied Naval Forces and Allied Air Forces CinCs were both U.S. officers. By mid-1943, after he had specifically requested and received from the United States his senior U.S. Army field commander, Lieutenant General Walter Krueger, MacArthur developed an expedient way to exercise direct control over the principal U.S. Army field force in his theater, the U.S. Sixth Army. He merely redesignated Sixth Army as "Alamo Force," thereby removing it from the operational control of the Australian General Blamey, his erstwhile commander of Allied Land Forces.

Upon his arrival in March 1942, MacArthur thought he had detected a defeatist attitude among a number of Australian officials, and would have none of it. Enormously popular both in the United States and Australia (despite his defeat in the Philippines), he had quickly determined that the place to defend Australia was on the island of New Guinea, to the north.¹⁴ The key town of Port Moresby, on the southeast coast of Papua, was an immediate Japanese objective, and in May 1942, the Imperial Navy attempted to seize it by making an end run around the eastern tip of New Guinea with a landing force. The U.S. Navy, however, alerted by codebreaking, was waiting for the Japanese and

succeeded in turning back the invasion convoy in the Battle of the Coral Sea. The U.S. task forces involved in that encounter were under Nimitz's control, not MacArthur's.

The second Japanese attempt to grab Port Moresby would be made overland. On 22 July 1942, Imperial Army units of the South Seas Detachment landed on the north coast of Papua and began an arduous trek over the towering Owen Stanley Mountains, which form the backbone of the island of New Guinea. The South Seas Detachment, after almost incalculable hardship, succeeded in getting within sight of Port Moresby before being ordered by Imperial General Headquarters to return to the vicinity of Buna on the north coast.¹⁵ The reason offensive operations were broken off at that point was that Tokyo could not hope to maintain a battle force in the vicinity of Port Moresby at the same time it was engaged in a struggle to the death over Guadalcanal, nearly 1,000 miles due east. So the South Seas Detachment withdrew toward Buna, and with the assistance of other units in the Buna-Gona-Sanananda area on the north coast of Papua, put up a very stiff fight between November 1942 and January 1943 against the Australian 7th Imperial Force Division and the U.S. 32nd Infantry Division. By late January, the Japanese had been cleaned out of their coconut log bunkers and the Allies controlled the most important locations in Papua.

By early 1943, MacArthur had most of his winning team of field commanders in place. Lieutenant General George C. Kenney had replaced the ineffective George H. Brett as Allied Air Forces commander during the summer of 1942, and had almost singlehandedly succeeded in converting MacArthur into a true air power advocate. On the Navy side, Rear Admiral Daniel E. Barbey, who had literally written the book on

amphibious operations, established the VII Amphibious Force. His immediate boss, Vice Admiral Arthur S. Carpender (not a MacArthur favorite), was replaced later in 1943 by Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid, a battle-experienced commander much more in step with MacArthur's own outlook. U.S. ground troops were now in the highly capable hands of Lieutenant General Krueger (commanding the Sixth Army and Alamo Force) and Lieutenant General Robert L. Eichelberger (commanding the I Corps). Eichelberger, who had saved the day at Buna after the 32nd Division became bogged down in the swamps, would establish a reputation as "MacArthur's Fireman" during the campaign in the SWPA.¹⁶

With Buna taken, MacArthur's advance moved deliberately along the north coast of New Guinea, with Lae and Salamaua seized in September 1943, and Finschhafen, Cape Gloucester (on New Britain), Saidor, Sio and other locations captured in the months thereafter. By the end of February 1944, MacArthur had taken advantage of an opportunity to accelerate his advance by landing in the Admiralty Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago far to the north and west of Rabaul, the giant Japanese naval and air base on the northeast end of New Britain. These operations from mid-1943 through early 1944 were intended to isolate and neutralize the Japanese garrison at Rabaul, and were conducted in conjunction with an offensive launched by Admiral Halsey up the chain of the Solomon Islands from Guadalcanal in the southeast toward Bougainville in the northwest. For purposes of these "Cartwheel" operations aimed at Rabaul, the Joint Chiefs gave MacArthur "strategic direction" of Halsey's South Pacific forces, despite the

fact that Halsey, as Commander-in-Chief, South Pacific Area and CinC, Third Fleet, continued to report to Nimitz for administrative purposes.¹⁷

Thus, MacArthur was in operational control during this period of a much larger overall force than that constituting his permanently-assigned SWPA troop strength. As of 31 December 1943, the total strength of all U.S. forces in all the Pacific theaters was nearly 1.8 million, of which 826,672 were U.S. Army and U.S. Army Air Forces personnel. Of that, MacArthur's SWPA had only a total of 353,945 U.S. troops, of which 297,055 were Army and Army Air Forces, and 22,090 were Marines (mostly of the 1st Marine Division, which had been temporarily sent to Australia for rest and refitting after its months-long trial at Guadalcanal). But Halsey's South Pacific Area contained as many U.S. ground divisions as MacArthur's SWPA, thus effectively doubling the amount of U.S. ground combat strength under MacArthur's overall operational control through the end of the Cartwheel operations (mid-1944).¹⁸

Once the Joint Chiefs had decided to bypass, rather than invade Rabaul (August 1943), MacArthur began turning his attention toward a more rapid westward advance along the north coast of New Guinea. The quick seizure and construction of airfields in the Admiralties allowed him a significantly expanded reach for Kenney's air power. Acting on a suggestion from Brigadier General Bonner Fellers of the planning section of G-3 (the operations section of GHQ SWPA), MacArthur obtained approval from the Joint Chiefs to make a gigantic 600-mile leap along the north coast to Hollandia, in Dutch New Guinea. As Eichelberger later wrote, "It had taken us a year to advance 240 miles north from Buna – and some 2240 miles stretched ahead to Manila. The chief hope for

increasing the tempo of the advance was to lengthen our jumps rather than to increase their number.”¹⁹

Hollandia was invaded on 22 April 1944, and in that operation, for the first time, MacArthur's forces received direct carrier air support from Nimitz during a landing operation. This was necessitated by the fact that Hollandia lay beyond the range of all but the largest of Kenney's aircraft. Kenney's Fifth Air Force B-24s, for example, continued to operate from fields at Nadzab, in the Markham Valley of Northeast New Guinea, until the fields on Biak were secured in the summer of 1944. Because of poor weather conditions at Nadzab during the spring of 1944, many Fifth Air Force long-range strike missions against targets in Dutch New Guinea were cancelled. Some of the slack was taken up, however, by the 13th Air Task Force (later designated the 13th Air Force), which arrived in the Admiralties in the spring of 1944 and whose fields were not subject to the same adverse weather conditions that prevailed at Nadzab.

MacArthur was in a hurry. Convinced that Washington, and particularly the U.S. Navy, held an unreasonable grudge against him, he fought the entire war in the Southwest Pacific with one eye on the Japanese and one eye on the Joint Chiefs. Though his concerns were perhaps overblown, they were not unfounded. While under siege in the Philippines, MacArthur had been promised by Marshall that reinforcements were on the way. In reality, the limited number of reinforcements that did arrive in the western Pacific in early 1942 were diverted to Australia. From the first day of the war until Corregidor's capitulation on 6 May 1942, U.S. forces in the Philippines did not receive a

single additional man from the United States, and the amount of supplies reaching Corregidor and Bataan by submarine and seaplane was pathetically small. MacArthur was justified in feeling abandoned there, especially in light of the fact that the War Department had undergone a significant policy shift in its attitude toward defending the islands as recently as July 1941. Furthermore, Admiral King detested MacArthur and believed that the war against Japan should be principally “the Navy’s war.” He had his own ideas about how the war should be fought and what resources should be allocated toward it. He saw MacArthur as a rival and a nuisance, and had wanted the entire Pacific placed under the command of a single officer – a naval officer. Unfortunately for him, MacArthur was senior to any naval officer available for the post of Supreme Pacific commander, and therefore the Joint Chiefs had adopted a compromise, dividing the Pacific combat areas into the two major theaters – SWPA and POA. But King was absolutely determined that MacArthur would not get his hands on the Navy’s fast carriers, as indeed he did not through the end of the war (at Hollandia, the carriers had remained under Nimitz’s control).

Though MacArthur actually received (in Australia) a significant proportion of the U.S. troops sent overseas in the earliest months of the war, by late 1943 it was evident that Washington was short-changing him to some extent, perhaps figuring that the availability of Australian troops would offset any deficiencies. Willoughby, writing after the war, noted that “while MacArthur had about 12 per cent of all troops abroad in 1943, he received less than 9 per cent of supplies sent overseas from America.”²⁰ The Combined (British and American) Chiefs of Staff had decided at the entry of the United

States into the war that Europe would take priority over the Pacific in terms of the allocation of equipment and personnel. Both King and MacArthur struggled against the implications of this decision throughout the entire war, but King wanted any excess resources sent to Nimitz in the POA and MacArthur wanted them for his own theater. By the end of September 1943, the ratio of the deployment of U.S. Army forces (including USAAF) against Germany versus those deployed against Japan stood at approximately 4:3, but the buildup for the D-Day invasion of northwest Europe greatly accelerated subsequent to that date.²¹

Despite the lack of priority for his theater, MacArthur never gave up trying to pry concessions out of Washington. And George Marshall, a man whom MacArthur resented and who had himself been treated shabbily by MacArthur when the latter was Army Chief of Staff in the early 1930s, actually bent over backward to try to placate MacArthur. Marshall was in the very difficult position of trying to maintain the priority of the European war while playing MacArthur off against King in terms of the allocational priorities within the Pacific itself. It helped MacArthur's cause immensely (though he himself did not fully appreciate the fact at the time) that Marshall, not King, was the most influential member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

MacArthur was absolutely determined to return to the Philippines, and to do so as soon as possible. He once told Kenney that he would enter the Philippines on schedule, even if he were "down to one canoe paddled by Douglas MacArthur and supported by one Taylor Cub [aircraft]."²² He was willing to take gambles, even apparently reckless ones, if the potential reward were great enough. He had demonstrated this quality in his

lightning-quick seizure of the Admiralties. Kenney remarked after the war that “his staff might want to go slow but MacArthur believed in moving fast when he was winning.”²³ Nevertheless, MacArthur proved eminently capable of learning from past mistakes and adapting to new conditions. A close observer within his GHQ noted that “operations in SWPA were constrained by MacArthur’s determination that there must never be a repetition of Buna.”²⁴ Buna had been a nightmare both for the troops involved and their commanders, who had been constrained to operate under extremely adverse conditions for months. By the spring of 1944, MacArthur’s capabilities had been augmented substantially over those conditions that had prevailed more than a year earlier, but the pain of Buna remained with him (he had been so desperate at the time that upon handing the field command at Buna to Eichelberger, he told the latter to either take the place or not come back alive), Biak would prove to be another challenging test of MacArthur’s determination.

As the war moved into Dutch New Guinea, MacArthur increasingly benefited from intelligence gleaned by his own codebreaking organization, Central Bureau, which reported directly to his chief signal officer (Akin), not to his chief of intelligence (Willoughby). Knowledge of Japanese troop dispositions allowed MacArthur to act with confidence in his decision to take Hollandia. The basic planning for operations in the western half of New Guinea did not, however, rely on ULTRA intelligence obtained through codebreaking, and MacArthur’s utilization of ULTRA throughout the war remained very uneven. On the other hand, as the war progressed, the Japanese became increasingly befuddled and thrown off-balance by MacArthur’s approach to warfare. A

senior intelligence officer on the staff of the Japanese Eighth Area Army stated after the war:

This was the type of strategy we hated most. . . . The Americans, with minimum losses, attacked and seized a relatively weak area, constructed airfields and then proceeded to cut the supply lines to troops in that area. Without engaging in a large scale operation, our strong points were gradually starved out. The Japanese Army preferred direct assault, after the German fashion, but the Americans flowed into our weaker points and submerged us, just as water seeks the weakest entry to sink a ship. . . . We respected this type of strategy for its brilliance because it gained the most while losing the least.²⁵

Moreover, Japanese confusion was evident during the war itself. One of Willoughby's daily intelligence summaries in early July 1944 noted:

It appears that our actions up to the time that this estimate was prepared had indicated pretty clearly our strategical plan in certain areas – as in the Central Pacific – but in other areas, as in SWPA, our preparations had not been sufficient to indicate our future lines of action or we retained a wider choice of actions and in these cases the enemy still appears to speculate on our future plans. The obstinacy manifested in the [Japanese] statements about the need for holding on to New Guinea, was not matched by the action of his ground troops, and appears to be another manifestation of a hope rather than of a firm determination.²⁶

The future course of the Pacific war was clarified in a Joint Chiefs of Staff directive to MacArthur and Nimitz dated 12 March 1944. Its key provisions read as follows:

The JCS have decided that the most feasible approach to Formosa, Luzon and China is by way of the Marianas, the Carolines, Palau and Mindanao. These objectives are to be attained by

1. Cancellation of the Kavieng operation. [New Ireland].
2. Early completion of the occupation of the Admiralties and development of air and naval bases there.
3. Occupation of Hollandia by General MacArthur's forces on 15 April; Nimitz to furnish fast carrier and other fleet cover and support. [later delayed a week].

4. Neutralization, not capture, of Truk and other Caroline islands by Nimitz.
5. Occupation of Saipan, Tinian and Guam, starting 15 June, and the Palaus, starting 15 September, by Nimitz, with the object of controlling the eastern approaches to the Philippines and Formosa, and establishing fleet and air bases.
6. Occupation of Mindanao by MacArthur supported by the Pacific Fleet, starting 15 November, with the object of establishing air bases from which Japanese forces in the Philippines can be reduced and contained "preparatory to a further advance to Formosa, either directly or via Luzon," and mounting air strikes against enemy bases in the Netherlands East Indies.²⁷

This directive governed all operations in the Pacific until October 1944, when Mindanao was bypassed in favor of a direct assault by MacArthur's forces against Leyte, in the central Philippines. As Item 6 of the directive indicates, in the spring of 1944 no decision had yet been made as to whether Luzon would be invaded at all, though MacArthur was adamant that it should be, and in the end would prevail on the issue.

The Allies got a break at the end of March 1944, when U.S. Navy codebreakers at Pearl Harbor decrypted a signal reporting an air crash near the island of Cebu in the Philippines. Admiral Koga, who had replaced Yamamoto as Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet after the latter's death a year earlier, was killed in the crash, and his chief of staff, Vice Admiral Shigeru Fukudome, was captured by Philippine guerrillas. The Japanese occupation authorities threatened reprisals if Fukudome were not released, and the guerrillas turned him over, but retained possession of the briefcase he was carrying. In the briefcase was a copy of Koga's "Zebra Order," the Imperial Navy's plan for luring the U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive battle within range of Japanese land-based air power. The text of Koga's plan was translated and sent to U.S. naval commanders, and it

materially affected the conduct of future U.S. naval operations, particularly at the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944.²⁸ Interestingly, given the Imperial Navy's "concern for the physical security of codebooks, it is astonishing that the Japanese do not seem to have paid much mind to the capture of the Z Operation plans."²⁹ Koga's eventual replacement, Admiral Soemu Toyoda, would issue an updated version of the Z Plan, to be referred to as A-GO, in May 1944.

The disposition of Japanese military forces in late 1943 – early 1944 provided an important glimpse of Imperial General Headquarters' priorities. As of 20 October 1943, U.S. intelligence estimated an Imperial Army total troops strength of 2,234,500, but 1,662,000 of those were deployed in either China or Japan. There were 30,000 troops in Dutch New Guinea and Timor and 50,000 in eastern New Guinea. In Formosa, Hainan and the Philippines were an additional 86,000 troops, and 40,000 were deployed in the mandated islands of the Central Pacific. The total Army troop strength opposing MacArthur's advance at that time (excluding the troops in the Philippines, who were out of range) was 185,000, well under ten percent of the whole Imperial Army.³⁰ Of course, there were also substantial Imperial Navy forces in the Southwest Pacific, notably at Rabaul. But the Combined Fleet was focusing on the forthcoming major fleet encounter with Nimitz, and paid little attention to the activities of MacArthur's naval units, until the invasion of Biak in late May.

MacArthur's landing at Hollandia on 22 April 1944 caught the Japanese unprepared. Japanese troops in the vicinity put up little resistance and fled inland,

allowing MacArthur's forces an easy victory. The Japanese Eighteenth Army in Northeast New Guinea had been expecting an invasion in the vicinity of Hansa Bay, far to the east of Hollandia, and MacArthur's long jump crossed them up. But Hollandia presented some unexpected problems for MacArthur as well. The airfield sites there were simply too spongy for handling Kenney's big bombers. Additional sites would have to be obtained, and in a hurry, or MacArthur's advance toward the Philippines would bog down. Wanting to build on his momentum, MacArthur proposed to his field commanders the immediate seizure of Wakde, a small island about 120 miles west of Hollandia that was suitable for air operations. Eichelberger, in direct command at Hollandia, however, was vehemently opposed to the idea of mounting another amphibious landing before the Hollandia situation had been completely sorted out. Krueger was less vehement, but also apparently opposed MacArthur's suggestion, while Admiral Barbey, the amphibious force commander, was in favor of it.³¹ At any rate, MacArthur yielded to Eichelberger's opinion in this instance, and Wakde was not invaded until 17 May. Events would prove that MacArthur's initial impulse was the correct one, and Wakde could and should have been taken immediately. Perfect hindsight, however, was not available to MacArthur and his commanders in April 1944.

Wakde was to be an interim measure. Kenney really wanted Biak, the largest of the Schouten Islands in Geelvink Bay off the northwest coast of New Guinea and only one degree south of the equator. Biak lies about 180 miles west of Wakde and 300 miles west of Hollandia. It is also only 935 miles southeast of Davao on Mindanao, and the Japanese had three airstrips in operation on Biak by May 1944.³² Most important, Biak is

a coral island, the surface of which is rock-hard, and the best airfield site between Hollandia and Mindanao. Given the fact that MacArthur believed the purpose of his ground operations was to advance his bomb line,³³ all indications were that the next major Allied objective in the Southwest Pacific would be Biak.

Although Biak had been hit previously, the first big daylight bombing of it began on 28 April when B-24s of the 43rd and 90th Heavy Bombardment Groups (Fifth Air Force), flying from Nadzab, struck Mokmer airdrome. On 4 May, two Thirteenth Air Task Force B-24 groups based in the Admiralties temporarily took over prime responsibility for the aerial softening up of Biak. On 11 May and 17 May, the V and XIII Bomber Commands combined efforts in putting even larger numbers of raiders over the island, attacking gun emplacements, supply concentrations, and airdromes. Japanese aerial opposition over Biak was fierce through the first week of May, but then faded away entirely.³⁴ Throughout the month of May 1944, the nine B-24 squadrons of the Thirteenth focused most of their attention on the island.³⁵

Even with this pounding, of course, there remained the need to seize the island. For this purpose, MacArthur formed the Hurricane Task Force, to operate directly under the control of Krueger's Alamo Force (the U.S. Sixth Army). The Hurricane Task Force was to be commanded by Major General Horace H. Fuller, a West Point classmate of Eichelberger's and the commander of the 41st Infantry Division. Two regimental combat teams (RCTs) of the 41st – built around the 162nd Infantry and the 186th Infantry – were slated to land on Z-Day, 27 May. The 41st's third regimental combat team, built on the

163rd Infantry, had taken Wakde and would be available in reserve sometime after the initial assault.

The 41st was a former National Guard division from Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon that had been inducted into the U.S. Army on 16 September 1940, and had been the first U.S. Army division to arrive in MacArthur's theater, in April 1942. The 162nd and 163rd RCTs had seen combat before the move into Dutch New Guinea, and had acquitted themselves well. The 41st Division as a whole had been marked fit again for combat as of 1 March 1944.³⁶ Though the Hurricane Task Force was to consist of some 28,000 troops initially, with only slightly more than half in units integral to the 41st Division, that division formed its core. It would soon meet its greatest trial by fire.

Chapter 1 Notes

¹ See, generally, John H. Bradley and Jack W. Dice, The Second World War: Asia and the Pacific (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, 1984), 10-11.

² Louis Morton, The Fall of the Philippines, United States Army in World War II: The Pacific (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1953), 52-57.

³ Stanley L. Falk, "Douglas MacArthur and the War against Japan," in William M. Leary, ed., We Shall Return! MacArthur's Commanders and the Defeat of Japan 1942-1945 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 2.

⁴ Geoffrey Perret, Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life of Douglas MacArthur (New York: Random House, 1996), 186, 234.

⁵ Louis Morton, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years, United States Army in World War II (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1962), 100; Morton, The Fall of the Philippines, 49, 70.

⁶ Morton, The Fall of the Philippines, 62.

⁷ See, generally, *ibid.*, 61-67; 38-39, 42 with regard to air power in the Philippines.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 162-163, 254-257.

⁹ See, generally, John Jacob Beck, MacArthur and Wainwright (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Perret, 283-284.

¹¹ John Miller, Jr., Cartwheel: The Reduction of Rabaul, United States Army in World War II: The Pacific (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army), 4; D. M. Horner, "Blamey and MacArthur: The Problem of Coalition Warfare," in Leary, 27-28.

¹² See, generally, Bradley and Dice, 102-103; Morton, Strategy and Command, 241-263; Ronald Spector, Eagle Against the Sun (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 144-146; Ray S. Cline, Washington Command Post: The Operations Division, United States Army in World War II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1951), 379, note 5.

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- ¹³ Miller, 20-22; Perret, 287; Horner, 28.
- ¹⁴ Perret, 284-287, 296-297.
- ¹⁵ Bradley and Dice, 134-135.
- ¹⁶ See, generally, Leary; in particular, therein, Jay Luvaas and John F. Shortal, "Robert L. Eichelberger: MacArthur's Fireman," 155-177.
- ¹⁷ Spector, 186, 225; Miller, 5, 18-19.
- ¹⁸ Morton, Strategy and Command, 538-540, Tables 6 and 8.
- ¹⁹ Robert L. Eichelberger in collaboration with Milton Mackaye, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 101.
- ²⁰ Charles A. Willoughby and John Chamberlain, MacArthur 1941-1951 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 206.
- ²¹ Maurice Matloff, Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare 1943-1944, United States Army in World War II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1959), 319.
- ²² Steve Birdsall, Flying Buccaneers (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 173-174.
- ²³ George C. Kenney, General Kenney Reports: A Personal History of the Pacific War (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1987), 395.
- ²⁴ Paul P. Rogers, The Bitter Years: MacArthur and Sutherland (New York: Praeger, 1991), 37.
- ²⁵ Supreme Commander, Allied Powers, Reports of General MacArthur, Vol. I (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 59, note 29.
- ²⁶ MIS Daily Summary 835 (4/5 July 1944), MacArthur Memorial Archives (MMA), Reel 436, RG3, 5.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, New Guinea and the Marianas, March 1944 – August 1944, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 8 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 9.

²⁸ John Winton, ULTRA in the Pacific: How Breaking Japanese Codes & Cyphers Affected Naval Operations Against Japan 1941-45 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 158.

²⁹ John Prados, Combined Fleet Decoded (New York: Random House, 1995), 555.

³⁰ Bonner F. Fellers Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 2, binder, tab – “Troops.”

³¹ Jay Luvaas, ed., Dear Miss Em: General Eichelberger's War in the Pacific, 1942-1945 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 142, note 1, citing, Daniel Barbey, MacArthur's Amphibious Navy (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1969), 173.

³² Vern D. Haugland, The AAF Against Japan (New York: Harper, 1948), 219.

³³ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Air Campaigns of the Pacific War (Washington, DC: Military Analysis Division, 1947), 18.

³⁴ Birdsall, 175; Eric Hammel, ed., Air War Pacific: Chronology (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Press, 1998), 354, 362, 366.

³⁵ Haugland, loc. cit.

³⁶ Bonner F. Fellers Papers, loc. cit.

Map 3. The Schouten Islands
 [from Robert Ross Smith, The Approach to the Philippines. 281]

CHAPTER 2. PLANNING FOR THE BIAK OPERATION

The island of Biak is approximately 45 miles long by 20 miles wide. It is a formidable piece of terrain. The 41st Division history describes the physical battlefield:

The Schouten Islands are located in the north central portion of Geelvink Bay. Only a narrow channel separates Biak and Soepioir Islands, the two principal islands of the Schouten group. Biak is the easterly of the two and is the result of a series of regional uplifts of the earth's crust which brought a shallow sea floor to the surface. A coral reef made an outside border around the island. The eastern third of the island, roughly the area east of an imaginary line between Sorido Village and Korim, is bounded by an almost unbroken ridge of this narrow, terraced, coral reef, which in places rises to 330 feet on the ocean side and 160 feet on the landward side. The reef is covered with tall rain forests and frequently is made up of parallel ridges which serve as additional obstacles in terrain already quite difficult. The island has a generally flat surface, with the exception of limestone mountains in the northwest and in a small area north of Bosnek.¹

Despite having a "generally flat surface," Biak differs from other coral islands of the Pacific in having both dense tropical rain forest and a number of impressive hills.² In May 1944, it had all the makings of an infantry officer's nightmare. From numerous points within range of the coast, a defending force could rake the invaders with enfilading fire while themselves remaining well-protected and under cover. Biak was to prove a literal chamber of horrors, both for the attackers and the defenders and, as a Yank Magazine correspondent later described it, "one hundred square miles [sic] of the most useless land ever tossed up out of the sea and one of the better haunts of malaria, dysentery, yaws, tropical ulcers, mosquitoes, flies and crocodiles." But its great usefulness as an air base would shortly be proven. Nevertheless, "Biak was never a popular tourist haven. In peacetime only one European lived there."³

The impetus behind seizing Biak came from George Kenney and his deputy, Major General Ennis C. Whitehead, who commanded the Advance Echelon (ADVON) of the Fifth Air Force. Kenney had first broached the idea of taking Wakde shortly after the Hollandia landing, but he was after bigger game. As his biographer notes, “Kenney desperately needed Wakde and Biak not only to speed MacArthur’s advance to the Philippines and beat down the burgeoning Japanese air strength in western New Guinea, but also to attack Japanese air bases in the Caroline Islands in support of Nimitz’s Central Pacific advance.”⁴ Whitehead was in complete agreement. The captured fields at Hollandia could support Kenney’s B-25s, but lacked adequate drainage for handling the big B-24s during the New Guinea rainy season, which would start about 1 September.⁵ MacArthur was committed to providing long-range air support for Nimitz’s scheduled invasion of the Marianas in mid-June, and SWPA planners had come to believe that “only from Biak could all the bombing and reconnaissance missions necessary to the support of the Marianas operation be properly executed.” It was intended that at least one heavy bomber group plus some reconnaissance aircraft be operating from Biak fields before 15 June.⁶ On 9 May, MacArthur’s staff representatives, in consultation with the appropriate field commanders, set 17 May as the feasible date for capturing Wakde and 27 May as the invasion date for Biak.⁷

MacArthur’s radio traffic analysts had determined as early as March 1944 that the Japanese intended to reinforce western New Guinea. ULTRA decrypts indicated, however, that the 300 miles of coastline between Wakde and Manokwari (on the Vogelkop Peninsula at the western end of Geelvink Bay) was defended only by the

Imperial Army's 36th Infantry Division. But ULTRA also revealed that the Japanese were ahead of schedule in their airfield construction program for western New Guinea, and that they had approximately 600 operational aircraft available that could be rapidly shifted into the area.⁸ There were a total of 21 Japanese airfields within easy range of Biak and Allied intelligence estimated that the enemy could theoretically mount a minimum of 100 fighter sorties and 25 bomber sorties each day against an Allied beachhead on the island.⁹ Moreover, ULTRA reported the ominous movement of major Imperial Navy fleet units into Davao (Mindanao), located too close to western New Guinea to give MacArthur's planners much comfort.¹⁰

On the island of Biak itself, Japanese defensive preparations were well underway by May 1944. In early May, ULTRA revealed that a combat order dated 29 March 1944 had identified elements of the 36th Division's 222nd Infantry Regiment on Biak. The 222nd was a crack unit with combat experience in China, and possessed "extreme fire power and mobility."¹¹ By early May as well, Allied intelligence had come to believe that the principal enemy strength on the island was concentrated near Mokmer airdrome, and that troops once stationed in the vicinity of Bosnek, to the east, had been shifted westward into the Mokmer sector.¹²

MacArthur was nevertheless willing to accept the gamble of another amphibious operation with little time to prepare for it. His thinking was probably heavily influenced by ULTRA reports of the decimation by U.S. submarines of a series of major Japanese reinforcement convoys headed from China to western New Guinea (the so-called TAKE disaster). The principal latter-day expert on MacArthur's use of ULTRA has noted:

The failure, with heavy loss of life and equipment, of the two-division Japanese reinforcement scheme left Japanese defenses in western New Guinea weak and disorganized and underscored MacArthur's insistence on striking without delay. . . . If Biak's airfields could be taken quickly, domination of Geelvink Bay and the isolation of the 36th Division at Sarmi [near Wakde] were guaranteed. Assured by ULTRA that no organized Japanese reinforcements were imminent, MacArthur accepted greater risks by landing his troops at places where the exact deployment and number of enemy defenders was vague.¹³

At this point, it may perhaps be instructive to review the nature of planning in MacArthur's GHQ. His chief of staff, Richard K. Sutherland, described the process, shortly after the war:

We [MacArthur and Sutherland] drew up a concept of a plan, stating what we wanted to take and when we wanted to take it. We would then take this plan to our planning group who would work it over and return it to us. We would go over it again and sent it to the three major commanders: Admiral Kinkaid, Seventh Fleet; General Kenney FEAF [Far East Air Forces] and General Krueger, Sixth Army. They would each study the plan and make any suggestions or modifications. They would then send the plan back to GHQ and we would work out a final draft of the plan, incorporating those changes we thought necessary. Each of the commanders would then prepare his plan to implement and carry out his mission and to accomplish the purposes of the major plan. If all the plans agreed and there was no difference of opinion we would issue the plan to each of the commanders and a directive to be carried out. GHQ did not interfere in the planning by the major commanders except when two of the major commanders were not able to agree. This happened only perhaps twice.¹⁴

GHQ, of course, was itself governed by any existing JCS directives, and MacArthur needed approval from Washington before launching any previously unscheduled major operation. But the exact timing for seizure of Biak remained within his prerogatives. The nature of the Pacific war was such that the theater commanders

needed to retain a certain flexibility of action, as MacArthur had previously demonstrated with his lightning gamble in seizing the Admiralty Islands months ahead of schedule.

MacArthur's planners, though pressed for time, calculated that scheduling the Biak landing for ten days after the assault on Wakde would allow the amphibious shipping used at Wakde to be utilized as a supplement to the Biak invasion as well. In addition, "[S]uch a spacing of the landings would enable fighter aircraft from Wakde to cover and support the operations at Biak."¹⁵ This latter point was critical, especially with regard to the early days of the Hurricane Task Force's presence on Biak. Kenney's shortage of fully-usable forward airfields, which necessitated the Biak operation in the first place, meant that if Wakde could not be made operational quickly, the closest air support for the Biak force would have to come from Hollandia, some 300 miles distant from Biak. Writing after the war, Kenney noted:

I still wanted to keep the same pattern of our moves up to that date: (1) gain complete air control over the landing area; (2) destroy the shore defenses that might bring fire to bear against our troops while landing; and (3) maintain cover over the amphibious expedition en route, during the unloading operation, and on the way back. If we could do those things, we could boast that "the troops were going ashore with their rifles on their backs."¹⁶

In order to achieve all of these aims, Wakde would have to be very close to fully functional before 27 May.

The intelligence situation regarding enemy troops strength and dispositions on Biak itself remained muddled up to the very date of the operation. ULTRA seemed to indicate that the Biak garrison was relegated by the Japanese high command to a mere delaying action, but "collateral intelligence was sparse. The first aerial photographs were

taken on April 17, but they showed little except ugly coral terrain. U.S. Fifth Air Force fighters and bombers had struck Biak repeatedly but drew little air response or ground fire," at least after early May.¹⁷ Krueger was directly responsible for depriving his forces of adequate pre-invasion knowledge of the defenses. He later stated:

Landing ground reconnaissance teams on Biak was sure to give away our intentions so all such ideas were abandoned. Our only information of tactical value consisted of that in aerial photographs and the reports of pilots. The photographs of Biak gave us excellent information of the landing beaches, the airdromes, the general terrain and some of the defenses. It did not of course show the many caves and hidden defenses later encountered.¹⁸

Krueger also remarked that "we anticipated that water for the troops would be a serious problem."¹⁹ If so, the planners still underestimated the degree to which it would pose a real threat to the successful carrying out of the Hurricane Task Force's mission.

Willoughby's estimate of Japanese troop strength on Biak was to prove highly inaccurate. Despite the fact that an intercepted Japanese message had listed the Biak garrison's ration strength at the end of April as 10,800 men, Willoughby reckoned the total Japanese troop presence on the island before the battle at the appallingly low figure of 5,625, including 2,750 mobile combat troops (infantry) and 1,325 base defense troops (engineer and artillery units).²⁰ In reality, on 27 May there were about 12,350 total Japanese personnel on Biak, including 10,400 Army troops and 1,950 Navy. Misjudging badly, Willoughby expected the Hurricane Task Force to encounter "stubborn, but not serious, enemy resistance."²¹

The naval situation gave indications of potential future difficulties, though these concerns were initially downplayed. Admiral Kinkaid's 11 May operations plan for his

Allied Naval Forces “clearly noted that the Japanese were gathering powerful striking forces at anchorages west of the Philippines, notably Tawitawi in the Sulu Archipelago.”²² Though strong aerial reaction to an invasion was expected, “[T]he allied naval forces did not believe that the enemy would risk major fleet units in an attempt to retake Biak once a foothold had been secured.”²³

The senior Allied naval officer eventually placed in tactical command of the total Biak covering force, however, evidenced somewhat greater concern over Japanese fleet dispositions before the battle. After noting that strong enemy striking forces in a high state of readiness were present at both Tawitawi and Davao, Rear Admiral V. A. C. Crutchley, Royal Navy, observed: “Such forces could arrive off Biak Island from Tawitawi in 42 hours at 25 knots or at Wakde in 50 hours. They could arrive off Biak Island from Davao in 31 hours at 25 knots or at Wakde in 39 hours.” Crutchley was tasked to “operate within range of shore-based fighter cover during daylight. Destroy equal or inferior enemy forces encountered. In the event of the approach of a superior enemy surface force, engage in retiring action in order to draw the enemy into a favourable position for attack by our land-based bombers.”²⁴ For these purposes, Crutchley would have under his command after 1 June, one heavy cruiser, three light cruisers, and ten destroyers.²⁵

Naval bombardment of Biak began two weeks before Z-Day, the 27 May date set for the invasion. Though “it was thought possible that the Hurricane Task Force might achieve local tactical surprise as to the date and place of landing,” the 41st Division history notes that “the Japs must have known this was coming. . . . [N]o shadow of a

doubt could have remained when the Navy moved its cruisers and destroyers in close to shore two weeks prior to [Z]-day and began tossing tons of shells into the island at the rate of thirty rounds and hour, continuing this pace night and day.”²⁶ At any rate, an ULTRA intercept of a 5 May message from the Japanese 2nd Area Army (with responsibility for western New Guinea and nearby areas in the Southwest Pacific) to Tokyo “suggested that from all available evidence the Allies would soon make another landing, probably at Biak.”²⁷ In light of this information, it becomes difficult to fathom why Krueger thought he could not risk sending a ground reconnaissance team to Biak shortly before the invasion.

Air support for the Biak operation was largely the responsibility of ADVON, Fifth Air Force, and included the 3rd Attack Group, the 345th Medium Bombardment Group, and the 49th and 475th Fighter Groups, which were brought forward to Hollandia. The 308th Bomb Wing, shortly replaced by the 310th Bomb Wing, would function as the air task force headquarters for Wakde and Biak. In addition, three V Bomber Command B-24 groups, flying from Nadzab, and two XIII Bomber Command B-24 groups, flying from the Admiralties, would work over the island’s defenses. On Z-Day, the V Bomber Command B-24s were slated to hit the Japanese airfields at Manokwari, Moemi and Ransiki on the Vogelkop Peninsula, and Noemfoor Island (about 80 miles west of Biak). After that date, they were to be used in support of ground operations on Biak. The XIII Bomber Command groups were tasked with pounding the Biak defenses immediately prior to the landing on Z-Day.²⁸ In the weeks leading up to the landing, the XIII Bomber

Command groups flew the 1,600-mile round trip from fields in the Admiralties, alone dropping some 1,500 tons of bombs on Biak while losing two B-24s.²⁹

The Allied troop list for the Biak landing, produced on 27 April 1944, included 22,074 combat troops (15,100 from the 41st Division proper), and 6,506 service troops, for an Alamo Force total of 28,580. In addition, some 7,307 Allied Air Forces personnel were scheduled to land on the island during the early phases of the operation. Thus, the total number of troops slated for early movement to Biak was 35,887, not including naval units offshore.³⁰ In comparison with the numbers involved in later operations in the Philippines, it was to be only a moderately-sized invasion. But given the largely lineal pattern of MacArthur's advance, each step in the northwestward progression was crucial. A hold-up at Biak would not only prove embarrassing to MacArthur's military reputation; it might well convince Washington that the bulk of its effort should be put behind Nimitz's Central Pacific offensive, which had been launched in November 1943 and by mid-1944 was picking up steam in what appeared on the map, at least, to promise a much more direct route to Japan than MacArthur's advance aimed at the Philippines.

Chapter 2 Notes

¹ William F. McCartney, The Jungleers: A History of the 41st Infantry Division (Washington, DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1948), 102.

² Rafael Steinberg, Island Fighting (New York: Time-Life Books, 1978), 146.

³ History of the Second Engineer Special Brigade, Chapter VIII [book on-line] (accessed 3 May 1999); available from http://www.metronet.com/~rlewisjr/html/chapter_8.htm; Internet, 5.

⁴ Thomas E. Griffith, Jr., MacArthur's Airman: General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁵ Perret, 397.

⁶ Robert Ross Smith, The Approach to the Philippines, United States Army in World War II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1962), 288.

⁷ Birdsall, 174.

⁸ Edward J. Drea, MacArthur's ULTRA (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 126.

⁹ Roger E. Lawless, "The Biak Operation," Part I, Military Review 33 (May 1953): 53, 57.

¹⁰ Drea, 129.

¹¹ MIS Daily Summary 796 (26/27 May 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3 [citing MIS Daily Summary 780 (10-11 May 1944)]; MIS Daily Summary 890 (28/29 August 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3; Jack Bleakley, The Eavesdroppers (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992), 149.

¹² Smith, 285.

¹³ Drea, 131.

¹⁴ Quoted in Rogers, 72.

¹⁵ McCartney, 102.

¹⁶ Kenney, 397.

¹⁷ Drea, 135.

¹⁸ Walter Krueger, From Down Under to Nippon (Washington, DC: Zenger Publishing Co., 1979), 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

²⁰ Bleakley, 150; MIS Daily Summary 822 (21/22 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 5 [citing MIS Daily Summary 799 (29/30 May 1944)].

²¹ Drea, 135.

²² Prados, 555.

²³ Lawless, 57.

²⁴ Quoted in G. Herman Gill, Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, Australia in the 1939-1945 War (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1968), 416.

²⁵ Ibid., 425-426; Seventh Amphibious Force Operations (unpublished manuscript), Tarbuck Papers, Hoover Archives, Organization Chart, G-1.

²⁶ Smith, 285; McCartney, 103.

²⁷ Bleakley, 150.

²⁸ Birdsall, 174-175.

²⁹ Kenn C. Rust and Dana Bell, Thirteenth Air Force Story (Terre Haute, IN: Sunshine House, 1981), 32.

³⁰ GHQ SWPA, Annex I to Operations Instructions No. 51, 27 April 1944, MMA Reel 560, RG3.

CHAPTER 3. THE JAPANESE

The Japanese had first occupied Biak in early 1942, but had largely neglected its development until late 1943. The reason for this was obvious: the war up to that point was being waged far to the east and Biak remained a strategic backwater. But by late 1943, Biak was about to become a key point in the Japanese defensive network for western New Guinea, a region the Japanese viewed as critical to their entire strategic posture in the Southwest Pacific. It was decided to turn Biak into a major air base that would be within fighter range of many other Japanese fields in Dutch New Guinea. Additionally, the Japanese high command wanted to make Biak an impressive ground obstacle to any Allied westward advance. To that end, in December 1943, the 36th Division's 222nd Infantry Regiment arrived on Biak to form the backbone of the island's defense.¹

The Japanese high command, however, remained unsure about what moves MacArthur would make. After the Admiralties were seized, a Japanese intelligence estimate dated 25 March 1944 expressed doubt about whether MacArthur would move toward Palau, or continue his advance along the north coast of New Guinea.² Aside from MacArthur's own unpredictable moves, the Japanese now had to contend with Nimitz's Central Pacific offensive. Thus, while the twin Allied Pacific drives presented the Japanese with the strategic possibility of concentrating their forces against just one of the lines of advance, thereby gaining temporary local superiority, particularly against MacArthur's weak naval forces, they were also placed in a quandary about specific

Allied intentions. The temptation was great for the Japanese to spread themselves thinly across great expanses of ocean in the hope of being able to retain as much territory for as long as possible. However, this meant that the Japanese were strong virtually nowhere in the forward reaches of the Pacific, save at Rabaul on New Britain, which by 1944 had already been bypassed by the Allies (though it continued to take a terrific pounding from the air throughout the first half of 1944).

The Combined Fleet, and particularly its main striking force, the First Mobile Fleet (commanded by Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa), remained the wildcard in this situation. In early 1944, it had pulled its major fleet units out of the forward and highly exposed anchorage at Truk, in the Caroline Islands, just ahead of a devastating series of air raids by Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher's Task Force 58 of the Pacific Fleet. The Combined Fleet represented, in effect, the Japanese mobile reserve in the conduct of the Pacific war, retaining the capability of coming out to fight if the circumstances looked promising. But by 1944, the Combined Fleet was suffering the effects of the unrestrained U.S. submarine war launched against Japanese shipping. Tankers were a high priority target for U.S. submarines, and enough had already been sunk so that the Combined Fleet was largely forced back to anchorages close its sources of oil, such as Lingga Roads near Singapore. The Combined Fleet could still sortie for its long-anticipated decisive battle with the U.S. Pacific Fleet, but it was unlikely to do so in any other instance, or so Allied intelligence thought.

The Imperial Army, for its part, was engaged in a process of rearranging its command structure in the Southwest Pacific. In the autumn of 1943, the 2nd Area Army,

headquartered at Menado in the Celebes, was placed in control of the 2nd Army (directly charged with the defense of western New Guinea) and the 19th Army. Imperial General Headquarters tasked the 2nd Area Army with holding the area from 140 degrees east longitude west to Macassar Strait, and from five degrees north latitude southward. Hollandia remained within the zone of responsibility of the 8th Area Army to the east.³ On 15 April 1944, the 2nd Area Army passed from the direct control of Imperial General Headquarters to that of the Southern Army, which now had responsibility for coordinating all Army activities in the southern regions. At the same time, the 4th Air Army also passed to Southern Army's control. By the spring of 1944, the 2nd Area Army had a total of about 170,000 troops, with its component 2nd Army (headquartered at Manokwari on the Vogelkop Peninsula) consisting of 50,000 men, including the 32nd, 35th, and 36th Infantry Divisions.⁴ On Biak itself, Imperial General Headquarters expected the 222nd Regiment to defend the island until a full division could be tasked for the job.⁵

By 27 April 1944, the commander of the 2nd Area Army, Lieutenant General Korechika Anami, had concurred with his staff's unanimous estimate that Biak would be the next Allied objective after the Hollandia invasion (which had occurred on 22 April).⁶ As early as 25 March, the 2nd Area Army staff had notified 2nd Army, regarding Biak, that "with the establishment of bases in the Madang-Hansa and Admiralties Sectors, and considering his previous tactics, the enemy may be in a position to move on a large scale from Jun [sic] onwards."⁷ But the Hollandia operation came as a real shock to the Japanese. Captain H. Komoto, Imperial Navy, who was attached to the staff of the 23rd

Air Flotilla, which at one point was headquartered on Biak, recalled after the war: "The invasion of Hollandia came as a complete surprise. . . . After you invaded Hollandia. . . it was obvious that the next movement would be up to Biak, along the north coast of New Guinea instead of Palau and Mindanao as originally thought."⁸ The timing of a Biak invasion, however, was still a matter of issue. Samuel Eliot Morison has noted that "as soon as they knew about the Hollandia landings, the Japanese commanders in Davao and Manokwari, and on Biak itself, felt sure that Biak was on the Allied timetable. But they did not expect the assault to come so soon, and they were discouraged by the vacillation of Imperial Headquarters."⁹

Indeed, by this point in the war, the Japanese had little choice but to react to MacArthur's thrusts, while trying their best to anticipate his next move, but were unable to initiate matters on their own. Unknown to them at the time was the fact that MacArthur's moves, and the timing of such moves, were influenced by his reading of Japanese military communications through codebreaking. But Japanese intelligence on Allied actions remained weak. General Anami "originally thought that the Americans would bypass Sarmi [on the New Guinea mainland near Wakde] to attack Biak around May 20. When Wakde was attacked, his own intelligence services failed to alert him until thirty-six hours after the American landings."¹⁰ Nevertheless, higher headquarters were considering moving some reinforcements to Biak on short notice: "[B]y about 20 May a tentative joint plan had been drawn up between [Southwest Area Fleet and Southern Army] envisaging the transport to Biak by Southwest Area Fleet of the 2d Amphibious Brigade, then at Zamboanga, Mindanao."¹¹ This Amphibious Brigade was

an Army unit, prepositioned for rapid transport to a threatened sector, and at the time included about 2,500 deployable troops.

The Japanese had already suffered major losses in trying to reinforce Southern Army's most exposed outposts. The TAKE convoy disaster in particular was to materially affect the Japanese defense strategy for western New Guinea and Biak, specifically: "Submarines relying upon ULTRA decrypts devastated a series of Japanese reinforcement convoys sent to Palau and western New Guinea during late April and May 1944 for a loss of over 3,900 men. While surviving ships and Japanese escorts rescued another 6,800 passengers from the Take convoy, these survivors. . . arrived without their equipment." The result was that the Japanese 32nd Division arrived with just two understrength regiments, while the 35th's strength consisted of four depleted battalions.¹² The 36th Division therefore continued to constitute the main force opposing the Allied drive westward from Hollandia. A 36th Division operations order of 13 May left little doubt as to Japanese understanding of the situation: "According to reports, the enemy plans to invade this island soon. The Biak Detachment will immediately complete combat preparations." A diary entry for the same date, written by a Japanese defender on Biak, stated: "[W]e expect the enemy to attack this island by utilizing para-troopers for occupying the essential positions and then land troops under cover of strong Naval fleet."¹³

The Hollandia landing and the convoy disasters had prompted a change of thinking in the Imperial Army high command. While General Anami of the 2nd Area Army initially argued for the necessity of recapturing Hollandia, going so far as to

recommend "that a large-scale amphibious operation for its reoccupation be mounted in western New Guinea in mid-June,"¹⁴ on 2 May, the Army section of Imperial General Headquarters "redefined the primary defense line as one extending to the inner part of Geelvink Bay, Manokwari, Sorong, and Halmahera. Biak would be held as long as possible, and troops from Sarmi would be withdrawn to the island. Tokyo had written off the exposed salient at Sarmi in order to marshal its forces in western New Guinea to stand guard over the approaches to the Philippines."¹⁵ But Biak now had merely the status of an outpost, not a strategic pivot. A further redefinition of the main defensive line by Tokyo occurred a week later, in light of the full recognition of the TAKE catastrophe, confirming that the line was to run from Halmahera to Sorong, and that Biak and other strategic points forward of the line were to be sacrificed in a grand delaying action.¹⁶

In January 1944, Major General Masazumi Inada, the commander of the 2nd Field Base Force at Manokwari, had outlined the need to retain control of the Geelvink Bay area: "Geelvink Bay separates the Allied Pacific Forces [Nimitz] from the Northern Australia Bases and must be held at all costs. . . . The Allies will advance by jumps. Geelvink Bay will be the central axis of defense. . . ." ¹⁷ Now the Imperial Army was revising its plans, but the Hollandia landing only confirmed the need to accelerate defensive preparations in the Philippines while seeking to delay MacArthur's advance into western New Guinea and the Halmaheras as long as possible.¹⁸

The Imperial Navy, however, desperately needed to retain Biak's airfields in order to provide land-based air support for Operation A-GO, Admiral Toyoda's revision of Koga's Z Plan. On 11 May, Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet, now at Tawitawi, was

specifically alerted for the imminent launch of A-GO.¹⁹ If Biak were to fall into MacArthur's hands, the Allies could use its airfields to actively disrupt Japanese fleet movements and air operations implementing A-GO. The Imperial Navy intended to make a major effort to retain control of Biak.

In fact, on 3 May, the Navy Section of Imperial General Headquarters had gone so far as to direct Admiral Toyoda to issue a general warning order that the long-awaited decisive battle with the Pacific Fleet was at hand, and that it might be fought in Geelvink Bay (though previously it was believed the encounter would probably take place near Palau, or even farther north).²⁰ There is evidence that "the 2nd Area Army and the Southwest Area Fleet hoped (or perhaps even expected) that A-GO would be undertaken in the Geelvink Bay area," but it is doubtful that their feelings were shared by the staff of the Combined Fleet.²¹ A major fleet encounter off New Guinea would necessitate the rapid shifting of available naval air units, something which was later actually undertaken in defense of Biak with very adverse results for the Imperial Navy. Though the Mahanian concept of the "decisive battle" had dominated war planning and strategic thinking in the Imperial Navy, "[T]he Combined Fleet had not come out to fight since the Battle of Santa Cruz in October 1942. . . . [T]he reason for the Japanese Navy's apparent modesty during the better part of two years was its want of an air arm. Japanese carrier air groups had twice been wiped out, at Midway in 1942 and in the hopeless defense of Rabaul in 1943. . . ."²²

On Biak, Colonel Naoyuki Kuzume, commanding the Biak Detachment built around his own 222nd Infantry, prepared for the inevitable. In addition to his Army units,

he had a Formosan Special Labor Group and assorted naval base units under his tactical control for purposes of defending the island. His troops were initially well-supplied, and he would utilize his service and naval elements as auxiliary infantry, supplementing the 222nd's combat strength.²³ Kuzume's force also included a light tank company.

The Biak Detachment Operation Plan, dated 27 April 1944, and captured by the Hurricane Task Force on 25 June, described Kuzume's duties. It read, in part:

1. Policy

... The detachment will cooperate with the air force and destroy the enemy at the water's edge by swift movements.

2. Outline

... b. In case of an attack on the eastern and southern portions of island, the entire detachment, regardless of race or branch of service, will be used in combat. The airstrips will be held and the enemy destroyed at the water's edge.

... d. If a powerful enemy force has already landed, periodic attacks will be mounted from prepared positions. Small units will make use of the jungle and darkness for commando attacks.²⁴

Kuzume's specific anticipated troop dispositions were also laid out:

- a) First Battalion [222nd Infantry] was to secure key points east of the line Opiyaref Saubas (probably refers to Opiaref on S.E. coast and Sawabos on N.E. coast).
- b) Second Battalion, 222nd Infantry (less 5th Company on Noemfoor) was to secure key points along the Sorido- Bosnek Coast.
- c) Bulk of the Third Battalion was to be held in reserve.
- d) The Tank Company (apparently the 36th Divisional Unit) was to be located in the Saba Area, and be prepared to attack, should the First Battalion engage the enemy.²⁵

Kuzume's tanks were vastly inferior to the American Sherman M4A1s they were to do battle with. They were Model 95s, about a ten year-old design, and carried one 37mm cannon and two 7.7mm machine guns. The Shermans had a 75mm gun. At best,

Kuzume's tanks could hope to be effective against the U.S. infantry. The Japanese had not previously employed tanks in New Guinea, and their utility was suspect.²⁶

With the U.S landing in the Wakde-Sarmi area on 17 May, Kuzume was well aware that he was next on the list of MacArthur's targets. He had already been warned by 2nd Area Army that the Schouten Islands would be attacked. After 17 May, Kuzume went feverishly to work fortifying Biak and deploying his troops so as to ensure a protracted campaign. Moreover, he ceased all work on the Biak airdromes, preparing to make as full use as possible of all his troops in combat or combat support roles. However, he apparently made no effort to establish a defense in depth along the key road from the town of Bosnek westward to the three operating airdromes.²⁷ Due to the now extensive Allied air and naval bombardment of this Sorido-Mokmer airfield sector, on 22 May Kuzume decided to shift his defensive center of gravity westward toward the airdromes from the vicinity of Bosnek.²⁸ This was a fateful decision, because it meant the Japanese would already be well-positioned to contest Allied capture and use of the airdromes, even before a single U.S. soldier set foot on the island.

When MacArthur had landed at Wakde-Sarmi, General Anami of 2nd Area Army had once again urged Imperial General Headquarters to strengthen the defenses between Biak and Manokwari (inclusive), but his ideas had been ignored in Tokyo.²⁹ However, on 25 May, his own chief of staff, Lieutenant General Takazo Numata, flew to Biak from Menado in order to inspect Kuzume's defenses. In addition, Rear Admiral Sadatoshi Senda, commanding the 28th Naval Base Force at Manokwari, had arrived on Biak to

inspect the naval elements there. Both of these senior officers expected an imminent invasion, though neither was prepared for how soon it would actually occur.³⁰

Allied air attacks were taking a toll of the defenders' morale. Though the troops remained determined to carry out their mission of delay and denial, the pounding received from the V and XIII Bomber Commands during May 1944, building toward a crescendo just before the invasion, could not be ignored. A captured Japanese soldier later admitted: "The morale of the troops during air raids was very low. All troops feared B-25 bombers more than any other Allied airplane."³¹ Perhaps this was because Kenney had modified many of his B-25s to carry a 75mm cannon in the nose, a formidable weapon indeed, especially against exposed infantry.

By May 1944, the Imperial Army had had enough experience fighting U.S. troops to draw some important conclusions about American tactics. The 2nd Army Staff Section had issued to Kuzume in December 1943 a training document outlining the Japanese view of the U.S. Army's approach to warfare. It read, in part:

Extremely cautious and calculated tactics are a special feature of the U.S. Army. If it is apparent that the enemy [the Japanese] can be easily defeated, a bold operation is executed. . . . Therefore, the best way to thwart enemy landings is to destroy him while he is still sea-borne. The next best method is to destroy him at the water's edge.³²

The Imperial Navy, for its part, had been engaged in shifting its major fleet units toward the Philippines, from both the east and west. On 1 April, the Combined Fleet had withdrawn to Davao from the Palaus to avoid the continuation of devastating U.S. carrier air attacks that had begun with the Truk raids in mid-February. Meanwhile, other Japanese fleet units had moved forward from the vicinity of Singapore to Tawitawi in the

Sulu Archipelago, in anticipation of the decisive fleet action to come.³³ The presence of Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet at Tawitawi had been detected by the U.S. submarine Bonefish on 15 May. By 25 May, an Allied coastwatcher on Tawitawi was able to get a message through to Australia with a nearly precise count of Ozawa's force: Nine carriers, six battleships (including Yamato and Musashi, the world's largest), 11 heavy cruisers, and 30 destroyers.³⁴ Even a part of Ozawa's force would hold an overwhelming advantage over that Kinkaid could put to sea off western New Guinea. But both Ozawa and Toyoda were not preparing for an encounter with Kinkaid – they wanted to deal Nimitz a serious setback. And 27 May would mark the 39th anniversary of the Imperial Navy's destruction of the Russian czar's fleet at Tsushima, an event cherished by the entire Japanese nation.

The air situation, however, presented difficulties for both the Imperial Navy and Army. The force of naval aircraft initially allocated for Koga's Operation Z totaled 261 planes, including 153 bombers, 99 fighters, and nine reconnaissance types. The 23rd Naval Air Flotilla, then headquartered at Biak, formed the nucleus of this force.³⁵ Theoretically, it could be beefed up quickly with other aircraft drawn from outlying areas. But the Japanese naval air force had been decimated long before the spring of 1944. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey noted after the war that "by November 1943 the Japanese Naval Air Force in the New Guinea – Bismarck – Solomons area lost 70 percent of the total of their experienced pilots having between 500-600 hours' flying time and combat experience. From this loss of experience, the Japanese Naval Air Force never recovered."³⁶ Additionally, there was a lack of spare parts and generally poor

maintenance of aircraft, which resulted in an inability to move aircraft from one field to another in order to escape Allied air raids. After the war, Captain Komoto of the 23rd Air Flotilla staff admitted that, of all the airdromes potentially available to the Japanese naval air force within range of the Schouten Islands, “[P]rior to and during the Biak Campaign the only usable fields available were Babo and Sorong. Sorong was usable until the end of the campaign.”³⁷

The Japanese Army air force was in even worse shape. As the official U.S. Army historian has observed, “The 4th Air Army had never been at full strength during its operations in the Bismarck Archipelago and New Guinea areas. Its heavy combat losses were aggravated by poor equipment, inadequate aircraft maintenance, supply difficulties, and rough fields which could not be kept in repair. Its history in New Guinea was principally one of frustration.”³⁸ Certainly, after the beginning of April 1944 its effectiveness was virtually nil, as Kenney’s devastating raids on the Army fields at Hollandia, in addition to a similar operation that had been mounted against the Army fields at Wewak in 1943, had reduced Imperial Army air activity in New Guinea to a state of impotence. Moreover, for the Pacific war as a whole,

Even though the [Japanese] available aircraft strength was high, the pilot quality was gone. . . . According to Japanese records obtained after the war, by early April 1944 the Japanese Army Air Force had lost more than 95 percent of its experienced pilots having between 300-600 flying time. The over-all experience level of the Japanese Army Air Force had been reduced to 30 percent of the level existing at the start of the war.³⁹

As the date of the Biak invasion approached, the Japanese had thus taken some concrete steps to counter MacArthur’s purposes. But both the Imperial Navy and the

Imperial Army were undeniably on the strategic defensive, and Imperial General Headquarters could not quite make up its collective mind as to what it wanted to do in the Southwest Pacific. The Navy was preparing for its great showdown with the U.S. Pacific Fleet, but was very unsure of where such a showdown would actually occur. The Army was engaged in a delaying action, trying to win time to prepare its defenses in the Philippines. The air situation was so bad that by the spring of 1944, Japanese aerial opposition throughout the Pacific had practically melted away, in an effort to conserve strength for the great tests ahead. Confusion and indecisiveness reigned, but on Biak Island, Colonel Kuzume understood his mission and was prepared to do everything possible to disrupt Allied ambitions.

Chapter 3 Notes

¹ Smith, 299.

² MIS Daily Summary 835 (4/5 July 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 5.

³ Smith, 89.

⁴ Ibid., 92-93.

⁵ Drea, 123.

⁶ Ibid., 124, 258 (note 2).

⁷ Allied Translator and Interpreter Section [ATIS] Bulletin No. 1263 (15 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 3 (quoting 2nd Area Army Staff Telegram No. 262, 25 March 1944).

⁸ United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], Naval Analysis Division, Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. II (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 289.

⁹ Morison, 107.

¹⁰ Drea, 133.

¹¹ Supreme Commander, Allied Powers (SCAP), Reports of General MacArthur, Vol. II, 288.

¹² Prados, 553; Harry A. Gailey, The War in the Pacific (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 288-289.

¹³ MIS Daily Summary 816 (15/16 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 4.

¹⁴ Smith, 99.

¹⁵ Drea, 124.

¹⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷ MIS Daily Summary 885 (23/24 August 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 5 ["Outline of establishment of Dutch New Guinea bases"].

¹⁸ SCAP, Vol. I, 149, note 27.

¹⁹ Drea, 139.

²⁰ Roger E. Lawless, "The Biak Operation," Part II, Military Review 33 (June 1953): 55; Gill, 414.

²¹ Smith, 347, note 6; cf., Smith, 351.

²² Morison, 11.

²³ SCAP, Vol. II, 284; Smith, 300.

²⁴ ATIS Bulletin No. 1266 (16 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 9.

²⁵ MIS Daily Summary 837 (6/7 July 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 5.

²⁶ Nathan Prefer, MacArthur's New Guinea Campaign (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1995), 121.

²⁷ Smith, 300-301.

²⁸ SCAP, Vol. II, 284.

²⁹ Smith, 346, note 2.

³⁰ SCAP, Vol. II, 285.

³¹ MIS Daily Summary 816 (15/16 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 4.

³² ATIS Bulletin No. 1248 (11 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 5 [Training documents dated October-December 1943, captured at Bosnek 27 May 1944].

³³ Drea, 128.

³⁴ Gill, 415, note 8.

³⁵ Drea, loc. cit.

³⁶ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Air Campaigns of the Pacific War, 18.

³⁷ United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. II, 289-290.

³⁸ Smith, 95.

³⁹ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Air Campaigns of the Pacific War, 24.

Map 4. Operations on Biak, 27-31 May 1944.
[from Walter Krueger. From Down Under to Nippon. 96]

CHAPTER 4.
FIRST PHASE: UNDERESTIMATING THE ENEMY,
27 MAY – 7 JUNE

The question of achieving at least tactical surprise with the Biak landing played foremost in the minds of Allied commanders as the invasion force left Humboldt Bay (Hollandia) on 25 May. It was known that the Japanese flew regular searches as far east as Hollandia, and Rear Admiral William Fichteler, commanding the amphibious operation, expected to be detected by an enemy snoopers.¹ In fact, 24 hours before the actual landing, the invasion force was discovered by Japanese aircraft.² Later, an Australian radio intelligence unit monitoring the Japanese frequencies “intercepted a message from a Japanese airborne reconnaissance aircraft at 0500 [27 May], directed to its HQ at 23rd Air Flotilla: ‘Enemy task force sighted off Biak 0500,’ and the invasion convoy knew that they were not arriving unannounced.”³ Another intercept taken early on Z-Day indicated that Lieutenant General Numata, the Second Area Army’s chief of staff, was present on Biak. Subsequently, it was learned that Numata was most unhappy about his predicament and had sent a message to his headquarters at Menado demanding to be evacuated from the island.⁴ It turned out that Numata had been on Biak for two days, and was about to take off from Mokmer airdrome on the morning of 27 May when Allied shelling of the field prevented him from leaving. He would play an active part in the defense of Biak until 10 June.⁵

The 41st Division history recalls that “the morning of [Z]-Day was a brilliant, clear, sunny day.”⁶ Sunrise was at 0651. This condition was soon to be changed by the massive Allied air and naval bombardment. The first wave of troops headed toward

shore at 0715, slightly ahead of schedule. Both the V and XIII Bomber Commands participated in softening up targets. General Whitehead, commanding the Advance Echelon (ADVON), Fifth Air Force, had planned to use the B-24s against enemy airfields on the Vogelkop Peninsula and Noemfoor Island on Z-Day, in an effort to suppress any potential air reaction to the landings. But he changed his mind and sent them to Biak instead, where a raid at first light by 12 XIII Bomber Command B-24s against Bosnek was followed by a second wave of 25 V Bomber Command B-24s at 0700, which pulverized the landing beaches.⁷ The XIII Bomber Command B-24s continued bombing until three minutes before the landing.⁸ Just after 1100, 77 more V Bomber Command B-24s hit targets in the vicinity of the airdromes, west of Bosnek. The scheduled fighter cover, to have been provided by 348th Group P-47s, was delayed until after 1100 due to bad weather between Hollandia and Biak. Throughout the day, V Bomber Command B-25 medium bombers and A-20 light bombers covered the landing by providing on-call support to the ground troops, as well as hitting previously identified targets, with one A-20 downed by enemy antiaircraft fire.⁹

Admiral Fechteler commanded the invasion from the U.S.S. Blue Ridge, a specially-outfitted amphibious command ship only recently received by the Seventh Fleet. He had 11 destroyers in two fire support groups for direct bombardment of the landing beaches. Two covering forces, Task Force 74 under Rear Admiral Crutchley, and Task Force 75 under Rear Admiral R. S. Berkey, USN, totaled five cruisers and 10 more destroyers between them, and would alternate in providing protection for the invasion force during the first days of activity at Biak.¹⁰ (After 1 June, the two task

forces were combined and placed under Crutchley's overall command.) A 45-minute pre-landing bombardment covered the island's southern coast from the westernmost airdrome at Sorido to a point well east of Bosnek. Between them, the three U.S. light cruisers, Phoenix, Boise, and Nashville, fired 1,000 six-inch rounds into the airdrome sector, while the destroyers took care of the beaches near Bosnek.¹¹ The Assault Echelon consisted of eight LSTs (Landing Ships, Tank) towing eight LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank) loaded with tanks, artillery, and engineering equipment, plus 63 Army-crewed LVTs (Landing Vehicles, Tracked) and 25 DUKWs (amphibious trucks) transporting the first four waves of troops. Fifteen LCIs (Landing Craft, Infantry), capable of using the jetties at Bosnek, carried most of the troops to be landed on the first day.¹² The Army-manned LVTs and DUKWs were launched by the LSTs in deep water, and their crews had had little time to train for the operation. The 41st Division troops were experienced in amphibious landings, but not in using these types of vehicles, which were utilized to overcome Biak's offshore reef.¹³ A training exercise at Hollandia mounted shortly before the Biak invasion had not gone well.

The Bosnek area beaches had been selected as the landing site by General Krueger himself, who feared that the airdrome sector, which began about seven miles west of Bosnek, was too heavily defended. It was anticipated that the troops would have to move overland to reach the airdrome objectives, but pre-invasion reconnaissance photographs did not indicate there would be any undue hardship in accomplishing such a move. The pre-landing bombardment left a dense pall of smoke over the beaches, and the troops in the first few waves could not see their landing points. The first unit to hit

the shore, at 0730, was the 2nd Battalion, 186th Infantry, which landed in LVTs (otherwise known as Buffaloes). The battalion was supposed to land near Bosnek at a spot where two jetties protruded into the water. But due to a six-mile-an-hour westerly current and the poor visibility, the entire battalion actually landed in a mangrove swamp area near Mandon, about two miles west of the intended site.¹⁴ Moreover, three rocket-firing LCIs accompanying the assault “shot off their 684 rockets too soon, forcing the landing craft to travel the last 1000 yards to the beach without any fire support, except from some armored Buffaloes.”¹⁵ The 2nd Battalion moved inland until it reached the coastal road running from Bosnek to Mokmer. Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion of the 186th, which had been assigned a landing point at the western end of the beachhead, discovered that the 2nd Battalion had landed to its left, instead of to its right, as originally planned. The two battalions nevertheless organized themselves and proceeded to reach their respective initial objectives by 1200.

The 162nd Infantry had been assigned the task of taking Mokmer airdrome, the most critical early object of the entire operation. But the 162nd, which landed after the 186th, found itself to the east of the 186th's position instead of to the west of it, as had been envisioned. This necessitated that the 3rd Battalion, 162nd Infantry, pass through the 186th in its advance down the coastal road toward the airdrome. It was followed by the 2nd Battalion (less Company E) of the 162nd. Colonel Oliver P. Newman, commanding the 186th, wanted to switch missions with the 162nd, as the 41st Division had learned to do in amphibious training when landing errors of this sort occurred,¹⁶ but General Fuller insisted on his regimental commanders adhering to their assigned missions. For the

186th, that meant initially protecting the beachhead, while the 162nd advanced toward Mokmer. However, “[T]he maps with which the task force was supplied were so inaccurate that both regiments soon came upon terrain features that threw much planning out of gear.”¹⁷ Much valuable time was lost as units rearranged themselves, and it was fortunate that the Japanese defenders, who were apparently surprised by the onslaught (despite anticipating such a landing), were themselves so disorganized that very little opposition was met by the Hurricane Task Force in the first hours of the invasion. By midmorning, the Task Force’s supporting artillery was ashore and in position at Bosnek, as was Fuller’s headquarters.

The first organized Japanese resistance was encountered by the 162nd at the Parai Defile, about 7,000 yards west of Bosnek. Here, “[T]he coral ridge approaches to within forty or fifty yards of the coastline and at this point becomes a vertical coral and limestone cliff.”¹⁸ A handful of Japanese troops emplaced on the ridge was able to hold up the advance of the 162nd’s 3rd Battalion for several hours, but tanks and naval gunfire eventually drove out the defenders. While the 3rd Battalion engaged in its struggle, Company E of the 2nd Battalion had landed and moved inland, with the intent of proceeding across the ridge to protect the inland flank of the 3rd Battalion. However, the terrain proved so difficult to traverse that Company E was unable to keep up with the 3rd Battalion’s advance and had to abandon the mission. It was directed to rejoin the 2nd Battalion. By nightfall on Z-Day, the 3rd Battalion held a position midway between Mokmer Village and Parai, while the 2nd Battalion and Colonel Harold Haney’s advance

regimental command post were located at Parai jetty. The trailing 1st Battalion was near Ibdì.

The 186th Regiment had proceeded to expand the beachhead one mile east and west from Bosnek, and was probing to the north, meeting limited resistance. The unloading of equipment and supplies at the beachhead was going exceedingly well. By nightfall, 2,400 tons of bulk cargo, 12 medium tanks, 28 howitzers, and 500 vehicles had been landed.¹⁹ According to Samuel Eliot Morison, "The organization of supply points, control of vehicular traffic, and unloading of shipping at the Bosnik [sic] beaches was carried out with less confusion and congestion than in any other operation so far in New Guinea."²⁰ By 1700, when the smaller LCTs departed, "between 80 and 90 per cent of the eight LST loads had been discharged, an amount which exceeded expectations." The LSTs themselves left at 1800, returning to Humboldt Bay.²¹ An Australian, who later served on Biak, was to note: "In true American style, ice cream was served on the first day. (The Americans had this rather novel idea that although war is undoubtedly hell, they might as well enjoy it!)"²² But not every observer present was convinced that Biak was going to be a pushover. Asahel Bush of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch commented that "this is too rich a plum to be thrown away. It might be bait set out to ambush the American invaders."²³

Indeed, the Japanese air reaction, though delayed, revealed itself later on Z-Day. At 1600, eight fighters appeared low over the beachhead. They were intercepted by P-47s of the 342nd Fighter Squadron, which shot down five of them, but lost one of their own in the encounter.²⁴ But there were some troubling circumstances for the Hurricane

Task Force, and the ships off Biak, to ponder. A difference in the time of sunset at the closest respective Allied and Japanese airfields meant that Japanese aircraft could remain over Biak a half-hour longer than Allied aircraft could fly combat air patrol over the island.²⁵ Between 27 May and 3 June, the Japanese launched 10 air raids against the beachhead, and "nine were by low-flying planes which approached practically without warning."²⁶ Although these raids achieved negligible results, they portended worse, because "in a matter of a few days the air strength of the 23rd Air Flotilla was built up from 16 to some 200 aircraft."²⁷ In fact, the Japanese were able to move these additional 184 planes from outlying regions into the Vogelkop Peninsula by 1 June, a remarkably fast reaction considering the general passivity which had ruled Japanese air operations for several months.²⁸ These planes represented approximately half of the Japanese naval air force that had been based in the Marianas and Palau.²⁹ The rapid movement of these aircraft may have been prompted, in part, by a message sent jointly by General Numata and Admiral Senda, shortly after the invasion of Biak, to higher Army and Navy headquarters:

The officers and men on Biak Island are firm in their resolution to crush the enemy. However, our operations are severely restricted by the uncontested superiority of the enemy's fleet and air units. We believe that the immediate commitment of our air forces and, if possible, some fleet units would give us a splendid opportunity to turn the tide of battle in the whole Pacific area in our favor.³⁰

In a few days (late on the afternoon of 2 June), a large formation of naval aircraft flying from Sorong attacked the eight LSTs off Biak. Due to bad weather over their bases, there were no Allied fighter planes in the vicinity, so the Japanese strafed the LSTs for over an hour. The intense antiaircraft fire put up by the ships and batteries ashore,

however, succeeded in downing 12 of the estimated 54 attacking planes, and the ships sustained little damage.³¹ Nevertheless, it was a dramatic demonstration of the potential vulnerability of the Allied position at Biak. In fact, Willoughby's daily intelligence summary for 3 June noted that the Japanese air attacks marked "the strongest counter to an Allied advance since last Summer in the Solomons." The report went on to state: "Allied positions on [Biak] are likely to remain under heavy air attack until counter operations effect the neutralization of enemy bases throughout Western New Guinea."³² Ironically, however, by that point the Allies had mostly absorbed the worst of it. The Japanese air counteroffensive continued only to 8 June.³³ There were sporadic attacks after that date, including a damaging one to the U.S. destroyer Kalk on 12 June, but by the middle of the month the attention of the Imperial Navy and its air force had shifted northward.

A big part of the problem that General Kenney's airmen encountered regarding Biak, aside from unpredictable weather over Wakde, Hollandia, and Nadzab, was the fact that they were simply based too far from the scene of the action to be able to completely dominate the air over the island.³⁴ The closest operating base, Wakde, was 180 miles from Biak, and in early June itself suffered serious damage as a result of night raids by Japanese snoopers. MacArthur's forces were feeling the effects of having to operate in far forward locations without any carrier air support (such support had been supplied, of course, at Hollandia in April). It was perhaps ironic that Kenney remained a firm critic of naval air power's value.

In terms of controlling Allied fighter aircraft in the vicinity of Biak, the problem was largely solved by 31 May, when the U.S. destroyer Gillespie brought with it a specially-trained fighter-director team organized by the Fifth Air Force, designed to operate from the combat information center aboard the destroyer. This team functioned much like the Navy's own carrier-based fighter-directors, able to vector Allied fighters arriving on the scene out to meet incoming enemy aircraft. It was one of several such teams put together by the Fifth Air Force.³⁵ But one issue that remained, at least for a while, was the trigger-happy nature of U.S. Army antiaircraft gunners on Biak Island. On 28 May, a 17th Reconnaissance Group B-25 was shot down over the island by friendly fire, with the loss of all aboard.³⁶

The Japanese naval situation regarding Biak proved to be more of a mystery for Allied intelligence. A strong air reaction to the invasion had been expected, and it was a relief to know that though fierce at times, its effectiveness was limited. But the Army-dominated intelligence staffs in the SWPA continually demonstrated a misunderstanding and underestimation of the capabilities of naval power. On 31 May, Krueger's Sixth Army Intelligence Section stated flatly: "Enemy naval intervention at this stage of the (Biak) operations is impossible."³⁷ Ironically, "From 1st June onwards, Allied Intelligence, including air and submarine sightings, revealed considerable Japanese surface naval activity in the vicinity of Tawitawi, Davao and Halmahera, with indications of strong forces heading in the general direction of Biak."³⁸ Willoughby's section in GHQ knew from ULTRA that the Japanese were planning to send the Imperial Army's

2nd Amphibious Brigade from Davao to Biak, but was still reluctant to believe that the Imperial Navy was prepared to launch a naval counteroffensive toward Biak: "Instead, it was considered more probable that the combat vessels at Davao Gulf were merely preparing to take supplies or reinforcements to Halmahera or perhaps to northwestern New Guinea."³⁹ MacArthur's commanders were about to experience something of a shock.

The Imperial Navy was very concerned about Biak. Vice Admiral Matome Ugaki, at that time in command of Ozawa's battleships, noted on 27 May:

The enemy's steady advance toward the west along the northern coast of New Guinea, as I predicted, is most painful to us. Many airstrips can be built on Biak Island, and then it will be very hard for us to maintain airstrips on the western end of New Guinea. Palau will also be within his striking range, so movements of the task fleet [Ozawa's 1st Mobile Fleet] east of Mindanao will be impossible. Finally, Operation A will be made impracticable. Therefore, Biak Island is the most critical crossroad of the war.⁴⁰

After the U.S. landing, the commander of the Japanese Southwest Area Fleet, Vice Admiral Shiro Takasu, requested that Imperial General Headquarters and the Combined Fleet speed reinforcements to Biak immediately. On 29 May, Tokyo approved Toyoda's proposed reinforcement plan, to be code-named KON.⁴¹ The Combined Fleet Telegram Operational Order No. 102, dated 29 May 1944, read as follows:

The Combined Fleet plans to rapidly transport the Second Sea Mobile Brigade at Zamboanga with a part of its forces to Biak with the aim of securing the island, thus intending to seek an opportunity for Operation A by carrying out this operation and inducing the enemy task force to come out.

This operation will be named Operation Kon and its participating forces the Kon Force.

1. The day (X-Day) to penetrate into Biak is set at 3 June. (The assemblage at Davao will be made by 31 May).

2. The Sixteenth Heavy Cruiser Division commander (Sakonju) will command the force, which consists of the transporting unit (Aoba, Kinu, Uranami, Shikinami, and Itsukushima), escort unit (Fifth Heavy Cruiser Division), and indirect escorts unit (Fuso, two destroyers).
3. The Third Air Force will support the operation by attacking the north coast of New Guinea.
4. The Southwest Area Fleet will swiftly transport an army force stationed at Sorong to Manukwari [sic].
5. The Operation A forces will give necessary support to Operation Kon, while keeping a sharp watch on developments.
6. With an order of "stand by" for the decisive battle, the escort and the indirect escort forces will return to the original units.⁴²

It had been more than a year since the U.S. Seventh Fleet had encountered anything larger than an armed barge.⁴³ Fortunately for MacArthur, within three days of Combined Fleet's transmittal of the order for KON, Allied codebreakers were able to inform the high command of the Japanese intentions.⁴⁴ Though Willoughby admitted that "information concerning the enemy convoys to the north east of Halmahera is at the present time quite confusing,"⁴⁵ ULTRA was to prove invaluable in enabling Kinkaid to advise the naval task force commander (Crutchley) of the exact site on Biak where the Japanese intended to land reinforcements. Moreover, ULTRA allowed U.S. Navy PB4Ys (the Navy version of the B-24) flying from Wakde to anticipate the movements of the KON Force, thereby sighting and tracking it well before it could approach Biak.⁴⁶ As a result of being discovered so early (and not suspecting that the Imperial Navy's codes had been compromised), on the evening of 3 June Toyoda ordered that KON be suspended and that Sakonju's force return to Davao. Eight hundred troops of the 2nd Amphibious Brigade were put ashore at Sorong on 4 June.⁴⁷

On Biak itself, Japanese fortunes were somewhat better. Although a platoon of the 222nd Regiment, which was stationed on the ridges behind Bosnek, had committed suicide en masse on the morning of Z-Day, the rest of Kuzume's troops intended to put up a stiff fight. The night of 27-28 May, the Japanese launched a raid on the positions of Batteries B and C, 146th Field Artillery Battalion, in the vicinity of Ibdi, north of the coastal road.⁴⁸ Also, Company I of the 186th Regiment was harrassed by Japanese reconnaissance patrols throughout the night, while Company B of the 186th fought a one-hour battle with an enemy patrol beginning at midnight. On 28 May, the 162nd Regiment advanced as far as Mokmer Village, but was subjected to heavy mortar and machine gun fire from the cliffs above. The Japanese succeeded in pushing through to the coast, cutting off Lieutenant Colonel Archie Roosevelt's 3rd Battalion and pinning down the 2nd Battalion behind it. According to the 41st Division history, "The enemy occupied a very formidable position in the steep limestone ridge to the north of the 3rd Battalion. This ridge afforded the enemy perfect observation of Allied movements, excellent cover and concealment in the vegetation, coral caves and crevices in the ridge so that opposing fires had little effect upon him, while he was able to cover the area with devastating fire."⁴⁹

The Japanese cut all of the 3rd Battalion's wires, and only one of its radios remained in working order. The battalion was suffering heavy casualties, and the Japanese on the ridges, and in the cliff-face immediately above the battalion's position, could not be dislodged. Colonel Roosevelt (one of Teddy's sons), utilizing the only radio, desperately reported: "They're plastering hell out of us. One of my three tanks was knocked out by a lucky hit. The other two are out of gas. Send me ammunition,

blood plasma, morphine and water. It's urgent!"⁵⁰ The battalion tried to withdraw, but even that proved impossible due to the volume of enemy fire. Finally, LVTs of the 2nd Engineer Special Brigade brought in critical supplies over the beach, making use of the defilade at the base of the cliff closest to the water. After unloading the supplies, the LVTs evacuated the 3rd Battalion's wounded.

Late in the afternoon, a combination of air, naval, and ground artillery succeeded in putting enough Japanese weapons out of action to allow Roosevelt's battalion to withdraw along the beach. The movement was completed by 1830, covered by a handful of tanks. Although Roosevelt's men brought out all of their wounded and equipment, they had been badly bloodied. The 3rd Battalion took up a new position to the rear (east) of the 2nd Battalion. Back at Bosnek, Hurricane Task Force headquarters became agitated over these developments. General Krueger, at Hollandia, recalled:

In the late afternoon of the 28th General Fuller, Task Force commander, radioed me that his situation was grave and requested that he be reinforced with the 163d RCT (163d Infantry Regiment and 218th FA Battalion) and an additional engineer battalion. . . . I also directed the 503d Parachute RCT to move from the Dobodura area [in eastern New Guinea] to Hollandia in readiness for employment on Biak if that should become necessary.⁵¹

All told, casualties in the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 162nd amounted to 12.2% of the troops engaged in the first two days on the island.⁵²

There were more unpleasant surprises to come. On the 29th, the Japanese launched three independent counterattacks against the 162nd. The Japanese used tanks in support of their infantry, a new experience for MacArthur's troops, who had never encountered them before in two years of fighting in New Guinea. Soon a small-scale

tank versus tank battle developed, in which the Japanese utilized nine of their light tanks against the American Shermans. It was no contest: "The Japanese shells literally bounced off the larger American tanks. The only damage the Japanese could do was to lock the 75-mm gun of one Sherman in place with a lucky hit."⁵³ A Japanese soldier present recorded the battle:

At 0610 hrs proceeded towards Mokmer with nine tanks, one platoon of dismounted soldiers and one maintenance section. Enroute discovered by an enemy warship. . . . Subjected to continuous naval gun fire. . . . [U]pon arrival at the forked road the company's position. . . was subjected to heavy fire by MG's and Heavy Inf Mortars. Six B-25s and 10 Consolidateds [B-24s] bombed and strafed. In addition enemy tanks attacked us. The Comdr immediately concentrated our fire on the onrushing enemy tanks. The liaison tank suddenly went up in flames and tank leader Sugiyama and his men died instantly. The [Company] Comdr died after receiving severe wounds. Another tank leader Cpl Maebara was also killed. Seeing that it was a bitterly contested battle [First Platoon] Comdr [Warrant Officer] Tsubota ordered the two remaining tanks to retreat. He too was finally killed. Tank leaders of 2nd and 3rd tank of [First Platoon] retreated temporarily to the location of the airstrip where they prepared for another attack.⁵⁴

Despite the failure of the tanks, the Japanese infantry continued to press their own attack with great vigor, and the 162nd continued to take heavy casualties. At one point, the Japanese succeeded in once again cutting off the forward American troops, but a determined counterattack by two companies of the 162nd was able to break the enemy vise. By the end of the day's fighting, the 162nd alone had killed some 400 enemy troops and was able to withdraw further to a more favorable tactical position. It was now evident to Fuller that a successful attack against the airdromes could only be accomplished by occupying the high ground to the north, which would require sending a significant force over the ridges at a point well east of the Japanese positions near

Mokmer. In addition, the Japanese immediately blocking movement down the coast road would have to be cleaned out. The entire 162nd Regiment pulled back toward Mandon, covered by one platoon of Company D, 641st Tank Destroyer Battalion, which supported the movement with its 4.2-inch mortars (and destroyed the mortars after the withdrawal had been completed by sundown of 29 May). The regiment had moved eastward partly through the Parai Defile and partly through the use of the 2nd Engineer Special Brigade's amphibious craft.⁵⁵

Responding to Fuller's urgent request, Krueger ordered the 163rd RCT (less one battalion) to be transported from the Wakde-Sarmi area to Biak on 31 May, several days earlier than originally planned. By 1 June, the 163rd had arrived on the island, and Fuller prepared to resume the offensive with three RCTs. He intended to use regiments in the same way he had initially planned to use only battalions.⁵⁶ Moreover, "Now after more than fifteen months of fighting and dying in the jungles at Papua, New Guinea and Dutch New Guinea, the 41st Division was assembled as a fighting machine and was making a coordinated effort for the very first time."⁵⁷

Fuller's new plan was to leave the 163rd in defense of the beachhead, while he sent the 186th Regiment across the ridges north of Bosnek to an area that the Japanese had surveyed for another airdrome, but had not yet developed as such. On 2 June, the 186th turned westward, moving across the inland plateau with the aim of approaching the Japanese positions behind Mokmer from the north. As Krueger later informed MacArthur, "The speed of this advance was necessarily slow and troops suffered from lack of water, being limited to three canteens per man for the four-day advance in stifling

heat.”⁵⁸ The basic problem was that the farther the 186th moved from Bosnek, the more difficult it became to carry supplies from the beachhead to the forward units. Enemy opposition to the 186th’s drive was light, with the Japanese apparently concentrating on a more expected renewed American push along the coastal road or another landing in the vicinity of the airdromes. However, the 186th’s commander, Colonel Newman, “was puzzled that Fuller did not devote more engineers to building a road over the ridges, which would have considerably alleviated his logistical problems.”⁵⁹

General Krueger had sent observers from his staff to Biak after Fuller first ran into trouble. On 6 June, his observation team reported back from the island with a variety of criticisms concerning the leadership of Fuller and other commanders within the 41st Division down to company level. A major problem was that the U.S. troops simply did not know where the Japanese were located; reconnaissance was poor. The Americans tended to remain in large groups, instead of dispersing while under fire, thereby incurring otherwise avoidable casualties.⁶⁰ Additionally, the observers reported that “so few members of the task force staff had visited the front lines that General Fuller could not possibly have obtained complete and accurate information concerning the fighting.”⁶¹ Krueger seriously considered relieving Fuller and sending Robert Eichelberger to take over at Biak, but he held off at this time to watch how matters continued to play out on the island.

Despite these problems, MacArthur remained outwardly confident of an early victory, announcing it to the press on 3 June. Inwardly, however, he was beginning to get anxious about Fuller’s slow progress, realizing that his own professional reputation was

on the line, and not wanting to provide the Navy with any additional ammunition to use against him in the ongoing battle with Washington. On 5 June, MacArthur radioed Krueger:

I am becoming concerned at the failure to secure the Biak airfield. The longer this is delayed the longer our position there will be exposed to enemy air attack with possibility of heavy loss therefrom. Is the advance being pushed with sufficient determination? Our negligible ground losses would seem to indicate a failure to do so. Request your views by immediate reply.⁶²

MacArthur had taken pride that since Buna, the forces under his command had taken relatively light casualties in the advance along the north coast of New Guinea, especially in comparison with the heavy losses suffered in the Navy's Central Pacific offensive at such locations as Tarawa. His characterization of the U.S. casualties absorbed in the first week of fighting on Biak as "negligible" was not accurate, and it is evident from the tone of the above message that he was not at the time fully aware of what was taking place on the island.

Because of the unexpected slowness of Fuller's advance, the senior Allied commanders sought an immediate alternative as a forward airfield site for development. Owi Island, lying about two miles off the south shore of Biak, was selected for this purpose. Like Biak, Owi was made of coral, an ideal foundation for the construction of airstrips. It was also unoccupied and ripe for the taking. On 2 June, a company of the 163rd seized the island, though the engineers did not arrive there until 7 June (planes began making emergency landings there on the 17th). Krueger could have ordered it taken on Z-Day, but he had considered it too difficult to mount simultaneous landing operations on both Biak and Owi.⁶³ When the island was captured, U.S. Navy

construction battalions also began work on a PT boat base at nearby Mios Woendi, which became operational on 8 June.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the Owi area was heavily infested with mites carrying scrub typhus, and within a week of landing there the troops were showing symptoms of that debilitating disease. It eventually spread to Biak Island, with the result that a large number of U.S. troops became infected and were, for all practical purposes, lost to the Hurricane Task Force commander.

While the 186th Regiment made its drive westward across Biak's inland plateau, the 162nd began another advance along the coastal road toward the airfields. This time, care was taken to reconnoiter the enemy positions on the ridges to the north of the narrow coastal shelf:

The 162d patrols found that what was thought to be a single ridge was actually a series of seven sharp coral ridges, which apparently had been caused by an upheaval in the earth's surface. This entire ridge arrangement was honeycombed with small caves, holes and crevices and, though there was practically no soil covering the coral, the area was covered with a dense growth of rain forest. Two native tracks crossed the ridges just east of Ibdì but the enemy had strong positions blocking both trails.⁶⁵

The 2nd Battalion of the 162nd was temporarily attached to the 186th Regiment (as of 2 June), participating in the latter's inland advance. The Antitank Company of the 162nd (acting as a rifle company) protected the 2nd Battalion's lines of communication, while the bulk of the 162nd Regiment tried to push down the coastal road, but found its progress once again blocked by the Japanese in the vicinity of the narrow Parai Defile. On 3 June, the 3rd Battalion was forced to withdraw from the Defile by intense enemy fire. The next day, the 162nd began a three-day search for a way around the Defile. Despite strong

support from naval vessels offshore, the 162nd's overland efforts failed. Finally, on 7 June, elements of the 3rd Battalion were carried by amphibious craft to Parai Jetty, west of the Defile. The Parai Defile was not finally cleared of enemy troops until 12 June.

The 186th, meanwhile, found its going slowed more by the terrain, the heat, and lack of water than by direct enemy resistance. On 3 June, the regiment advanced 3,500 yards against only occasional sniper fire, but due to thick scrub growth that reached 12 feet in height, the visibility of the Americans was limited to about 10 yards.⁶⁶ The 186th spent the next several days searching for trails leading over the ridges toward Mokmer airdrome and moving into position at the eastern (inland) base of these ridges. Fuller was by this time under intense pressure from Krueger to move directly onto Mokmer airdrome as quickly as possible. Accordingly, Fuller ordered the 186th to proceed over the ridges and capture the drome on 6 June, but Newman, needing more time to prepare, succeeded in postponing the movement until 7 June. Newman actually objected strongly to Fuller's plan and was supported in his objection by the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Jens Doe. Their objection rested on the need to clear the ridges of Japanese before moving onto the drome. Fuller would not relent, and when Krueger's chief of staff, Brigadier General George Decker (who was present) asked Newman what would happen if the Japanese were emplaced in positions along the ridgeline overlooking Mokmer airdrome, Newman replied, "We are going to catch hell."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Newman followed orders, and the 186th moved over the ridges and directly onto Mokmer drome the morning of 7 June. The official U.S. Army history notes:

As a result of the failure of reconnaissance on 6 and 7 June to discover the Japanese positions, the 186th Infantry had lost a grand

opportunity to outflank the Japanese. . . . Instead, when it reached the beach on the 7th and turned around, the 186th Infantry found itself facing the Biak Detachment's strongest defenses. As fate would have it, the attacker had placed himself where the defender most wanted him to be. This was soon to become obvious.⁶⁸

The Japanese troops engaged on Biak were initially well-stocked with rations and ammunition, but had lost a large amount of supplies and equipment piled near Bosnek, which had been overrun by the invading forces. Naval shelling also took a toll on Kuzume's supply situation. By 29 May, his troops already had a shortage of rations and a somewhat lesser shortage of ammunition. In general, however, the Japanese circumstances on the island during the early fighting remained favorable.⁶⁹ Though General Numata, as the ranking officer present, had assumed overall command, Kuzume remained in operational control of the island's defense. The average Japanese soldier was prepared to fight to the death, though he was remarkably unaware of his own circumstances. The small number of Japanese prisoners captured by the Hurricane Task Force in the first few days of the fighting revealed under interrogation their startling belief that they were on an island near Los Angeles, California.⁷⁰

The real issue concerning the Japanese defense of Biak was whether reinforcements could be landed and employed effectively after their landing. That was a major purpose of the KON operation. Without reinforcements, Kuzume's men were a wasting asset. Because Imperial General Headquarters had already approved the movement of the Army's 2nd Amphibious Brigade to Biak well before the U.S. invasion, Numata had informed Kuzume on 26 May that reinforcements were due to arrive shortly. Because the Japanese did not expect Biak to be invaded until June, when the assault force

appeared on 27 May, Kuzume's men initially thought it was the Imperial Navy's own reinforcement convoy.⁷¹

Allied intelligence, for its part, remained in something of a quandary regarding the Japanese capability to reinforce the Biak Detachment. The G-2 Daily Summary for 27 May noted: "Photographs have revealed roughly 100 barges in the Geelvink Bay area. Considering that 73 barges can transport one infantry regiment and stores, the enemy has the means for inter-island and coastal troop movements."⁷² On the other hand, the very next day's summary stated: "[R]einforcement by barge from Manokwari is an enemy capability, but is not given a high degree of probability."⁷³ Five days later, G-2 surmised: "The possibility of reinforcing his troops on Biak remains a definite capability."⁷⁴ And on 3 June, the summary observed: "Elements of the 35th Division and possibly an independent special unit are believed available at Manokwari for such reinforcement, and photographs have previously revealed sufficient barges in Geelvink Bay to transport the equivalent of a regiment."⁷⁵ The tone of these G-2 estimates thus moved from somewhat cautious optimism in late May that the enemy would not risk running reinforcements into the island to the recognition in early June that the Japanese were likely to make a serious attempt to do so, even with strictly local assets. This latter view was undoubtedly due to the mounting of the first KON operation, which involved a much stronger naval effort than G-2 had expected.

The Japanese aim in trying to reinforce Biak was simple enough: Help Kuzume delay the Americans long enough so that the Combined Fleet could launch its A-GO operation and fight the climactic naval battle of the war against Nimitz without having to

worry about Allied aircraft operating out of Biak to disrupt their efforts. In fact, the 2nd Battalion of the Imperial Army's 221st Infantry Regiment had begun moving from Manokwari to Biak by small craft on 31 May. Two companies and the headquarters of this unit landed at Korim Bay on Biak's north coast on 4 June, and reached the combat sector north of Mokmer airdrome by 8 June.⁷⁶ They were the first reinforcements Kuzume was to receive, but not the last.

By the end of the first week in June, moreover, Admiral Toyoda had resumed the KON operation and a heavy force was once again steaming toward Biak with additional reinforcements. The order reactivating KON was issued by the Combined Fleet at 2210 on 4 June. Admiral Ugaki observed at the time: "In light of the confusion and fuss since yesterday [when KON was first canceled], their [Combined Fleet's] command of force can't be called perfect. My sympathy goes to those forces concerned, which found themselves at a loss on how to follow instructions."⁷⁷ Three days later, Ugaki would write: "As an additional order of Operation A, the task fleet [Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet] has issued its plans to attack the enemy task force with its whole fleet when the latter sticks to the northern coast of New Guinea, and also of attempting to lure them out with its elements. This is almost what I suggested before. This step may be considered quite daring, as the task fleet has taken it without consulting the Combined Fleet."⁷⁸ The Imperial Navy at this time thus exhibited a high degree of internal indecision and conflict, but continued to present a major threat to the Allied forces at and near Biak.

From the Allied perspective, even the supporting effort for Biak was not going well. A few Japanese aircraft succeeded in dropping a handful of bombs in night raids on

the Wakde airstrips between 4-7 June, with dire results for Kenney and his airmen. On the night of 5-6 June, in particular, the enemy scored, in Willoughby's words, "probably his most successful strike against an Allied field in this theater."⁷⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison was to note of that raid, "I have reason to believe that about two thirds of the planes on the island were either destroyed or damaged."⁸⁰ This effectively knocked Wakde out of the war (temporarily), greatly increasing the difficulty of Kenney's continued support for ground operations on Biak, as well as counter air missions and cover for the Allied naval forces in the vicinity of Geelvink Bay. All of this at the exact time that the enemy fleet had renewed its efforts regarding Biak. The necessarily crowded conditions on the tiny island of Wakde had nearly proved Kenney's undoing.

At sea, Admiral Crutchley was faring only slightly better. Whereas, even without Wakde, Allied air power retained a decided advantage over the Japanese in New Guinea, in a fleet action, Kinkaid's forces on their own would almost certainly be no match for what the enemy could muster. Crutchley had four cruisers and 10 destroyers at his disposal (augmented by four more U.S. destroyers on 5 June), but on 4 June Japanese aircraft attacked his force, and the light cruiser Nashville suffered damage on the waterline from a near miss. The next day, Nashville had to withdraw to Humboldt Bay for needed repairs and Crutchley's force was thus significantly weakened at a crucial hour.⁸¹ Morison comments that "the situation was ominously similar to that at Guadalcanal just before the Battle of Savo Island,"⁸² surely a circumstance that Crutchley and his men wished to avoid repeating. Fortunately for him, the Imperial Navy of June 1944 was a far cry from the superb fighting force it had been in August 1942. Yet the

threat it still posed was very real and the tension it engendered among MacArthur's naval commanders was high. This was not entirely apparent to the troops on Biak itself. As Crutchley's force steamed past the island on 4 June to do battle with the Japanese fleet, "Men lined the beaches that evening and broke into spontaneous cheers and finally went off to the mundane task of fighting the caved-up enemy on Biak. There was a feeling of relief, carelessness, and perhaps a little of mightiness."⁸³ It would be short-lived.

Chapter 4 Notes

¹ Morison, 106.

² United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. 11, 289 [Interrogation of Captain H. Komoto, IJN].

³ Bleakley, 152.

⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁵ SCAP, Vol. II, 285, note 118.

⁶ McCartney, 103.

⁷ Birdsall, 179; Hammel, 370.

⁸ Rust and Bell, 32.

⁹ Birdsall, loc. cit.; Hammel, 371.

¹⁰ Seventh Amphibious Force Operations, G-1.

¹¹ Morison, 108.

¹² Gill, 421.

¹³ Smith, 289.

¹⁴ McCartney, 103.

¹⁵ Stephen R. Taaffe, MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 144.

¹⁶ Smith, 291.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ McCartney, 103.

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- ¹⁹ Krueger, 95.
- ²⁰ Morison, 113.
- ²¹ Gill, 423.
- ²² Bleakley, 152.
- ²³ St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 28 May 1944, quoted in Taaffe, 145.
- ²⁴ See, William N. Hess, Pacific Sweep (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 165.
- ²⁵ See, Smith, 297.
- ²⁶ Krueger, 102.
- ²⁷ Morison, 122.
- ²⁸ See, Paolo E. Coletta, "Daniel E. Barbey: Amphibious Warfare Expert," in Leary, 231.
- ²⁹ United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], op. cit., 429.
- ³⁰ SCAP, Vol. II, 287.
- ³¹ See, Hammel, 375.
- ³² MIS Daily Summary 803 (2/3 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3-4.
- ³³ See, SCAP, loc. cit.
- ³⁴ See, Taaffe, 153.
- ³⁵ See, Morison, 116.
- ³⁶ See, Hammel, 372.
- ³⁷ Lawless, Part II, 52.
- ³⁸ Gill, 425.
- ³⁹ Smith, 352.

⁴⁰ Matome Ugaki, Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki 1941-1945 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 376.

⁴¹ Drea, 139.

⁴² Quoted in Ugaki, 378-379.

⁴³ Morison, 116.

⁴⁴ Drea, loc. cit.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Taaffe, loc. cit.

⁴⁶ Drea, loc. cit.; Hammel, 376.

⁴⁷ Gill, 426.

⁴⁸ Smith, 303.

⁴⁹ McCartney, 106.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Taaffe, 149-150.

⁵¹ Krueger, 95.

⁵² Krueger to MacArthur, 8 June 1944, Correspondence with Sixth Army file, MMA Reel 593, RG4, 2.

⁵³ Spector, 292.

⁵⁴ ATIS Bulletin No. 1279 (19 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 1 [From diary captured at Mokmer on 25 July 1944. Owner and unit unknown].

⁵⁵ McCartney, 107.

⁵⁶ MacArthur's New Guinea Campaign, 125.

⁵⁷ McCartney, 109.

⁵⁸ Krueger to MacArthur, 8 June 1944, loc. cit., 2.

⁵⁹ Taaffe, 159.

⁶⁰ Prefer, 157.

⁶¹ Smith, 342.

⁶² MacArthur to Krueger, 5 June 1944, MMA Reel 593, RG4.

⁶³ Lawrence J. Hickey, Warpath Across the Pacific: The Illustrated History of the 345th Bombardment Group During World War II (Boulder, CO: International Research and Publishing Corp., 1984), 164; Taaffe, 158.

⁶⁴ Prefer, 155.

⁶⁵ McCartney, 109.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Taaffe, 159.

⁶⁸ Smith, 323.

⁶⁹ SCAP, Vol. II, 287, note 126 [Numata interrogation].

⁷⁰ G-3 Monthly Summary of Operations, May 1944, MMA Reel 557, RG3.

⁷¹ Drea, 137.

⁷² MIS Daily Summary 796 (26/27 May 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3.

⁷³ MIS Daily Summary 797 (27/28 May 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3.

⁷⁴ MIS Daily Summary 802 (1/2 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3.

⁷⁵ MIS Daily Summary 803 (2/3 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 3.

⁷⁶ SCAP, Vol. II, 283 (note 113), 296 (note 152).

⁷⁷ Ugaki, 386.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 389.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Taaffe, 155.

⁸⁰ Morison, 125, note 9.

⁸¹ Gerald E. Wheeler, "Thomas C. Kinkaid: MacArthur's Master of Naval Warfare," in Leary, 127; Gill, 426-427.

⁸² Morison, 123.

⁸³ McCartney, 111.

CHAPTER 5.
SECOND PHASE:
FULLER IN HELL, 8 JUNE – 14 JUNE

Tipped off by ULTRA, Crutchley's force of cruisers and destroyers patrolled in the vicinity of Geelvink Bay on 5 June awaiting the appearance of the Japanese reinforcement convoy. Unknown to him at that time, however, the new attempt to implement KON had been delayed by the Imperial Navy's chronic fuel problems. Because no fuel was available at Sorong on the western extremity of the Vogelkop Peninsula, and three Japanese warships needed refueling, they had to make a 700-mile round-trip to Ambon, which delayed their departure for Biak until midnight of 7 June.¹ Meanwhile, Crutchley had returned to Humboldt Bay for refueling on 6 June. At nearly the same moment that Sakonju's force resumed moving toward Biak, Crutchley, now with three cruisers and 14 destroyers, departed Humboldt Bay aiming to intercept the Japanese.

Information received by Kinkaid indicated that five Japanese destroyers would attempt to run reinforcements into Biak before 8 June. Accordingly, Kinkaid ordered Crutchley to be off the expected landing point at Korim Bay on Biak's north coast by 2200 on 8 June.² But further developments were in the offing. On the afternoon of 8 June, 10 B-25s of the 17th Reconnaissance Squadron, flying from Hollandia, located a Japanese force consisting of six destroyers (three of which were towing large barges), steaming eastward about 90 miles northwest of Manokwari. This was Sakonju's Biak reinforcement unit which had left Sorong about 13 hours before.³ The ensuing encounter

was damaging to both sides. An historian of Fifth Air Force operations has dramatically described it, in part:

Luck seemed to favor the Japanese. . . . The night raid against Wakde on June 5 had damaged many aircraft, and all the 310th Wing really had was the 17th Recon Squadron. Covered by 475th Group P-38s, ten of their B-25s were sent to meet the Japanese destroyers thirty to forty miles north of Cape Waio on June 8.

As the B-25s closed in, the Japanese warships turned to the north and moved into battle formation. Major William Tennille, commander of the squadron, took his planes down in a steep dive, picking up speed as the element leaders chose their targets. Tennille selected one of the larger destroyers, which the B-25 crews thought were cruisers, and advised his planes of his choice. . . .

Tennille and his wingman opened fire but a shell smashed the entire wing from the second B-25. It slammed into the water and disintegrated in a second. Tennille was shooting his way in, the bullets splashing a foamy trail across the water, then up the sides of the ship. As the bullets spattered over the destroyer, Tennille's plane was hit and crippled but he held his course, the B-25 trailing fire.

. . . [T]he B-25, sheathed in flame, crossed the destroyer, rolled, and crashed into the sea.

Lieutenant Archie Trantham got his plane down to water level and opened the bomb bay. Strafing his way in, he and his wingman, Lieutenant Robert Beck in Sacramento Bell, ran the gauntlet. The tail gunners in both planes saw their target shudder and go under until only its outline was visible.⁴

Of the 10 B-25s, three were lost and the seven so badly damaged that they had to be withdrawn to Finschhafen in eastern New Guinea for the squadron to reform.⁵ The destroyer Harusame was sunk and three more damaged, but Sakonju continued toward Biak.

At 1440, a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft sighted Crutchley's force about 100 miles east of Biak. Sakonju did not receive the report until 1900, but it indicated that Crutchley was steaming toward him at high speed. Shortly after 2200, an American search plane reported that the Japanese were only about 60 miles west northwest of

Crutchley, proceeding eastward at 12 knots. Crutchley moved due west at 20 knots to intercept. A full moon reduced the likelihood of a surprise torpedo attack by the Japanese destroyers, a tactic employed with considerable success in the past due to the extraordinary range and accuracy of the Japanese long-lance torpedoes (which could not be matched by the Allied ships). Moreover, the Imperial Navy had already proven its outstanding capability in conducting night actions. Therefore, Crutchley approached Sakonju's force aggressively but in a highly calculated fashion, with due appreciation for the need to be able to deploy his large-caliber guns effectively. Sakonju, however, had other ideas. After the event, Crutchley observed:

The destroyers were moving out and the cruisers about to deploy when the range of the enemy from my flagship was 21,500 yards and I had every hope of bringing a simultaneous blow to bear. From that moment, the enemy turned and fled at 32 knots and all that could be done was a stern chase by the two most advanced divisions of our destroyers. It was a bitter disappointment.⁶

During the stern chase, the U.S. destroyers fired a total of 2,005 rounds of 5-inch shell, but to little effect. Only one ship, the destroyer Shiratsuyu, was hit in the action, though two of the other Japanese destroyers were slightly damaged by near misses. All five of the Japanese ships escaped, but the barges three had been towing were cut adrift. One barge was sunk by an Australian destroyer, but a small number of troops apparently succeeded in landing at Korim Bay. Most of the Japanese troops, however, who were being transported in the destroyers proper, were returned to Sorong. By 10 June, all of the Japanese ships involved in the operation, including two cruisers at Salawati that had constituted the covering force, had arrived back at Batjan Island in the Moluccas, about

240 miles west of Sorong. There, preparation would be made for a third attempt to execute KON.⁷

On Biak, Colonel Newman's 186th Regiment had moved over the ridges behind Mokmer to occupy the airdrome in a rapid action on the morning of 7 June. The advance had met no direct resistance and had completely bypassed the Japanese defensive positions along the ridgeline. Newman's men were, in the words of one writer, "like fish in a barrel,"⁸ now occupying the low ground on the airstrip itself while the enemy peered down at them from the heights. The Americans' tactical position was terrible and, to make matters worse, Newman could not be supplied overland because the supply line over the ridges was too attenuated, and the Japanese continued to block the 162nd's approach down the coastal road. He had to be supplied by amphibious craft operating over the beach. Kuzume, for his part, was determined to retake the drome. Although Newman's lead battalion had reached the beach by 0850, the Japanese, apparently surprised by the rapidity of the movement, waited an hour-and-a-half before pouring a fusillade of mortar, machine gun, and artillery fire onto the Americans. The heavy Japanese bombardment continued for some four hours before U.S. counterbattery fire succeeded in silencing a significant number of the enemy guns. The Japanese positions were hard to locate from the low ground, because so many were concealed in caves or dense undergrowth.

Due to the heavy fire, Fuller was unable to send supplies to Newman over the beach until after nightfall. The night of 7-8 June was an uneasy one for Newman's men,

as the Japanese probed the American defensive perimeter on the airdrome and mortared Newman's suspected troop dispositions. In addition,

[I]t was noted that following the mortar fire the enemy sent trained dogs to locate Allied positions. Several dogs moved to within a hundred yards of the 3rd Battalion position on the beach, south of Mokmer drome. Some of the dogs stopped and barked while others approached the outposts and, without making a sound, trotted off to the west. The enemy then advanced and built up a line behind the dogs.⁹

Kuzume faced a less-than-ideal tactical situation himself. After the 186th Regiment seized Mokmer drome, Kuzume's defenses were split into three widely separated strongholds. In the area north of Bosnek, he had his own headquarters plus the 1st Battalion of the 222nd Regiment. In the East Cave sector between that position and Mokmer, he had elements of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 222nd, plus various service units. Finally, in the very strongly held West Cave and Mokmer airdrome sector, he had the bulk of the 2nd Battalion of the 222nd, airfield construction units, other service troops, and naval troops. A postwar history compiled by MacArthur's staff (but presented from the Japanese perspective) records the following:

Lt. Gen. Takazo Numata now assumed personal command of the troops in the West Cave sector and issued orders for a final attack by all available units to retake Mokmer airfield. Just before dawn on 9 June, the attack was launched. The 2d Battalion, 222d Infantry, advanced about halfway down the airstrip before being halted by the firmly entrenched enemy. A company of naval garrison troops, attacking down the center, infiltrated completely across the airfield to reach the sea in the enemy rear, but inadequate strength made it impossible to press this advantage, and the company was forced to withdraw to the sector west of the airfield.¹⁰

The general Japanese attack failed. Despite the fact that the enemy continued to lay heavy fire on the airdrome and beach beyond it, Newman still held the area 48 hours after its initial capture. He was now being amply supplied over the beach, and had begun

to probe the high ground north of the drome. Though the Japanese continued to prevent the movement of the 162nd Regiment westward through the Parai Defile, the 3rd Battalion of that regiment had been carried around the blocking position to Parai jetty on 7 June, where it proceeded to launch an attack against the Defile from the west. The next day, the 1st Battalion of the 162nd was also moved by amphibious craft westward around the Defile. On 9 June, the 2nd Battalion of the 162nd, which had been attached to Newman's 186th Regiment, began to move eastward from Mokmer airdrome to link up with the other two battalions of the 162nd. Enemy fire from positions between Ibdi and Mokmer continued to be heavy throughout this period. After a linkage between the 186th's position at the airdrome and the 162nd's to the east was firmly established by 10 June, a new operation to clear the Japanese from the ridges north and northwest of the drome began.

By the beginning of the second week in June, General Krueger's observers on Biak were adding to the reports that had been forwarded several days earlier. Brigadier General George H. Decker, Krueger's chief of staff, noted the formidable nature of the enemy defenses, the difficulty of the terrain, and the incredible heat present on the island.¹¹ Krueger summarized the views of his observers along with his own perspective on events in a letter to MacArthur dated 8 June, which read, in part:

It appears that in the light of subsequent events the advance as made along the coastal track alone was a mistake. It would have been better had the main attack been made over the very difficult terrain west of the surveyed drome [north of Bosnek], coupled with an advance along the litoral [sic] – a plan that was finally adopted and carried out. . . . In his desire to gain Mokmer drome quickly, General Fuller took a risk that might well have been justified. His final decision to advance through the difficult terrain north of the cliffs and also along the litoral [sic] was

sound. While this advance may have seemed slow, a study of conditions under which it was made indicates that there was no undue delay. There were some instances of lack of leadership and lack of aggressiveness but they were corrected on the spot by relief of the officers concerned.

General Fuller was faced with a most difficult task. His performance was by no means perfect, and I know several officers who, I believe, might have done better, though that is not susceptible of proof. As you know, I seriously considered relieving him when his original attack failed and he had to withdraw. I am glad that I did not do so then, and feel that it would be unwarranted now when, I'm sure, he is about to accomplish his mission successfully.¹²

Krueger's optimistic tone at this point in time was further emphasized by his statement that "while the strip is still under enemy fire from Japs located to the north and west, it is expected that this resistance will be reduced without difficulty."¹³ Such optimism, however, was to prove unwarranted. The Japanese positions above Mokmer drome would be difficult to crack. Krueger continued to be goaded by MacArthur into achieving a quicker result, and Krueger duly passed on the urgency to Fuller, who inexplicably, appears to have neglected to inform his regimental commanders of the need for speed. About the increasingly tense command situation existing over Biak, MacArthur's most recent biographer has remarked: "The way combat command worked in much of the Army was to apply the lash to whoever was below you, whether he was a three-star general or a second lieutenant. That wasn't MacArthur's normal style, though, and the fact that he resorted to it now showed how much pressure he felt he was under."¹⁴

Krueger's own style was considerably more gruff than MacArthur's. In the words of Brigadier General Clovis E. Byers (General Eichelberger's I Corps chief of staff), "He [Krueger] is a scream. He can't stand to think that he has been anything but hard. Yet he

wants to be liked so much.”¹⁵ Fuller was not liking Krueger much by 8 June, and the relationship between the two men was about to take a decided turn for the worse.

At Mokmer airdrome, U.S. Army construction engineers were brought forward to the site on the night of 9-10 June. They toiled there under constant fire until 14 June, by which point they had nevertheless completed 2,300 feet of runway work necessitated by the general inadequacy of Japanese airfields and the damage that had been done both by Allied and Japanese bombardment. But enemy fire from the ridges actually increased in intensity during this period, and the engineers were forced to suspend all work on the strip until 20 June, a major setback for Fuller.¹⁶

MacArthur was not a happy man. On 9 June, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall had written him: “With the capture of Mokmer airfield I send you my personal congratulations on the Aitape-Hollandia-Maffin Bay-Biak campaign which has completely disorganized the enemy plans for the security of eastern Malaysia and has advanced the schedule of operations by many weeks.”¹⁷ But though his own communiques did not indicate it, MacArthur was well aware that he was dangerously close to missing his deadline for supporting Nimitz’s Marianas operation, which was scheduled for 15 June. One hallmark of MacArthur’s operations had always been his demand for speed. Now, though Washington seemed unaware of it, MacArthur risked serious damage to his professional reputation as well as a possibly fatal setback for his plans to liberate the Philippines as soon as possible. If Nimitz succeeded in taking the Marianas without any help from MacArthur, the Navy would likely gain further leverage in its argument for relegating MacArthur’s entire advance to a condition of strategic

irrelevance. Worse in a more immediate sense was the strong possibility, then being actively discussed in Washington, that Luzon would be bypassed entirely in favor of a direct assault on Formosa, a plan favored by both Admiral King and the Army Air Forces at that time. A continued hold-up at Biak, once Washington became aware of it, could therefore be a disastrous development, not only for MacArthur's soldierly reputation, but also for the millions of Filipinos who would be abandoned to their fate at the hands of a ruthless enemy in the name of strategic efficiency. MacArthur was determined not to allow that to happen.

Some of MacArthur's anxieties might have been allayed, had he known of the grave doubts running through the minds of his Japanese opponents by the second week of June. Admiral Matome Ugaki, commanding the battleships of Ozawa's powerful First Mobile Fleet, and soon to command the third attempt at executing KON, was no longer sanguine over the ability to contain MacArthur. On 8 June he noted, "Thus the loss of western New Guinea will spell a direct cause for defeat in this war. Even if Operation A can be materialized to attain some success, we can't think we would thus be able to stop the enemy advance at western New Guinea."¹⁸ The next day, he was even more pessimistic:

At breakfast this morning, I thought that we had no choice but to give up Biak. Further attempts to hold it against odds would only add to our losses. If the enemy insists on sending reinforcements, there is no other means but to make shuttling transport from Manokwari at night by small craft. Even if we can send more ground troops, they wouldn't be any good without air protection. Instead, we must firmly defend the Bird's Head and neck of New Guinea, and concentrate every available

plane at bases there. This is the only way I can see; there is no alternative.¹⁹

On Biak, the Imperial Navy's attitude did not go unnoticed. A prisoner of war, obviously disgruntled by the seeming abandonment of the garrison, stated to his interrogators: "The Navy . . . would rather lose men who were surrounded by the enemy than to lose a naval vessel in an effort to evacuate them."²⁰ Nevertheless, a diary captured at Mokmer on 19 June noted that as late as 13 June, "The morale of the men is high."²¹ MacArthur's postwar campaign history observes: "Prior to the unsuccessful attempt to retake Mokmer airfield on 9 June, the morale of the Biak defenders had been very high. Under the combined impact of shortage of rations and water, disease, and tactical failure, the detachment first showed signs of defeat on 9 June, and its disintegration was very rapid thereafter."²² But, "Until the enemy's sudden blow at the Marianas caused the final cancellation of the Kon Operation, the Japanese forces on Biak continued to fight with confidence that reinforcements would soon enable them to turn the tide of battle against the invaders. However, the situation had already begun to deteriorate in the closing days of May."²³

These reports indicate that although Japanese morale had slipped considerably by late in the second week of June, the defenders would fight even more tenaciously for every piece of ground on the island. This was true even despite the departure of the ranking officer until then present on Biak, Lt. Gen. Numata, who left the strongly-held West Cave position above Mokmer airdrome at 2000 on 10 June in order to return to 2nd Area Army headquarters at Menado.²⁴ It would take Numata over a week even to reach Manokwari on the Vogelkop.²⁵ The West Cave continued to be the most heavily

defended and difficult position on the island for the Americans to reduce, due to the intricate nature of the cave system. It was known to the Hurricane Task Force as "The Sumps," and its crucial location commanded the heights behind Mokmer drome. As long as Kuzume's troops remained active in this sector, the Americans could make no use of the airdrome below. The Japanese in the cave system, however, felt far from invulnerable. A captured diary belonging to a Second Lieutenant Kodaka, unit unknown, who occupied a position within the Sumps, stated in part:

The cave I am staying in is the smallest, and faces South therefore it is safe from enemy shelling, which is from the East. The back part of the cave is pitch dark even during the day and is poorly ventilated. Water leaks from overhead, but there is not enough for drinking. Should the enemy approach from above or throw in gas, we really would be in a predicament.²⁶

The continuing resistance from the West Caves proved exceptionally formidable. MacArthur's G-3 Operations Report for 13 June included the following incredible statement: "The 162nd Inf. supported by tanks renewed the attack on enemy positions northwest of Mokmer drome and advanced about 100 yards against stubborn enemy opposition."²⁷ [Emphasis added.]

In the air over the island, the Japanese reaction to the invasion had slackened somewhat by the second week of June, a result of Allied attacks on airfields, combat and operational losses, and malaria, though a number of raids continued to be mounted. On 12 June, the Japanese were able to launch a raid that resulted in the only serious damage done to an Allied warship during the entire Biak campaign, when a bomb hit the U.S. destroyer Kalk, killing 30 and wounding 40 more.²⁸ The raid had nonetheless been

intercepted by U.S. P-47s of the 342nd Fighter Squadron. A member of the squadron recalled his involvement:

We were covering the convoy off Biak when they told us a plot was coming in at 15,000 feet. . . . I turned my flight and started climbing. I spotted five Kates directly in front of us headed south. They were beginning their bombing run. We dropped our tanks and turned to the attack. I couldn't drop my right wing tank as we closed on the Kates. Grant, Overbey, and I took 1 ship each, and they burst into flames and crashed. I pulled up in a climbing turn and saw another to the right of me. A 10-degree deflection burst blew him up, and I turned on another. I closed on him, and after a short burst he fell in flames.²⁹

Japanese air power in New Guinea was indeed taking a beating, and the naval aircraft that had been shifted southward in reaction to the Biak landing would be almost totally unavailable for participation in A-GO when Nimitz finally showed his hand by invading the Marianas in mid-June. By that time, however, the Imperial Navy had decided that it would be fruitless to continue the aerial defense of New Guinea, and the remaining aircraft were removed to other locations in the Southwest Pacific.³⁰

Even as the Japanese air campaign was grinding to a close, significant elements of Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet, including the superbattleships Yamato and Musashi, were preparing to make a third effort to execute KON. This time, apparently, Toyoda was determined to see things done right. Ugaki was given command of the entire effort, and Combined Fleet issued the following directive to him:

1. Crush enemy reinforcement convoys in the Biak area, and destroy by bombardment the enemy forces on Owi Island.
2. Move the 2d Amphibious Brigade to Biak.
3. Operate so as to draw the enemy's fast carrier forces to the decisive battle area, if the situation permits.³¹

In order to accomplish these tasks, Ugaki would have under his command, in addition to the two superbattleships, two heavy cruisers and one light cruiser plus three destroyers in his Attack Division; two cruisers and four destroyers of Sakonju's Transport Unit 1; and a transport ship plus a number of minelayers, freighters, and subchasers in Transport Unit 2.³² Though somewhat short on destroyers, the presence of Yamato, Musashi, and five cruisers could easily overwhelm Crutchley's force. Ugaki assembled his force at the island of Batjan in the Moluccas, some 500 miles west of Biak. By 11 June, all of his ships were there, ready for operations.³³ But KON-3 was cancelled two days later when reports were received that Nimitz's forces had moved into the Marianas and Toyoda ordered A-GO implemented, sending all Japanese heavy fleet units northward.

It should be noted that the movements of Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet, which constituted the key striking power of Toyoda's Combined Fleet, had been continually tracked by U.S. submarines throughout the various manifestations of KON.³⁴ Making matters even worse, on 8 June, a section of the 28th Base Force's (Imperial Navy) radio unit on Biak lost some codebooks during a firefight with a U.S. patrol. This loss was not reported to Imperial General Headquarters for three weeks, after which new codes were issued, but the net effect was to hamper fleet communications.³⁵

The battle on the island between 11 and 14 June continued to present major problems for both attacker and defender. Fuller's new plan was to sweep the Japanese from their ridge positions above Mokmer drome while concurrently moving on the two

airdromes west of Mokmer (Sorido and Borokoe). It was an ambitious plan, forced by the constant prodding from higher headquarters, and it was impossible to execute. Not until late on 11 June was the existence of the Sumps (West Caves) even known by the American troops, and its significance as the linchpin of the entire Japanese position above Mokmer drome was not fully appreciated until two days later. Because of the rough terrain and tenacity of the enemy, the various U.S. battalions involved (particularly those of the 162nd Regiment) as late as 15 June were still maneuvering into position for the launch of a coordinated attack on the West Caves.³⁶ MacArthur had had enough by this time. He fired off a radio to Krueger on 14 June stating bluntly: "The situation at Biak is unsatisfactory. The strategic purpose of the operation is being jeopardized by the failure to establish without delay an operating field for aircraft."³⁷

This effectively forced Krueger's hand. Though he had earlier resisted removing Fuller from command of the Hurricane Task Force, now Krueger had no choice, and he summoned General Eichelberger to his headquarters near Hollandia on the evening of 14 June to inform the I Corps commander that he was to go to Biak early the next day and take over the operation. As Krueger envisioned it, Fuller would remain in command of the 41st Division itself, which of course formed the fighting backbone of the Task Force, and could concentrate on clearing the Japanese from their strongpoints, while Eichelberger directed the entire affair and tended to administrative issues. In Krueger's words, "I came to the conclusion that the only way to accelerate the operation was to relieve General Fuller of the burden of commanding the Task Force and have him devote his whole attention to the tactical handling of his division."³⁸

Eichelberger and his chief of staff, Byers, had been in a similar situation before – at Buna. They had taken measures this time to ensure that they were kept generally abreast of developments on Biak, despite the fact that the Hurricane Task Force – Alamo Force – GHQ chain of command and communication excluded them entirely: “Byers therefore ordered his signal officer to intercept the messages between GHQ and Sixth Army [Alamo Force] in order to win as much time as possible for making plans in the event they were sent to Biak. . . . Although Krueger and MacArthur had been considering the idea for several weeks, the first intimation that Eichelberger had directly from Krueger came at dinner on 14 June.”³⁹

The official U.S. Army history sums up the state of things on Biak as they existed that evening: “The Hurricane Task Force had failed in its principal mission – rapid seizure and repair of airfields. . . .”⁴⁰ Now Krueger had chosen to interject a new personality into a confused and desperate situation.

Chapter 5 Notes

¹ SCAP, Vol. II, 289.

² Drea, 140.

³ Gill, 429.

⁴ Birdsall, 181-182.

⁵ Ibid., 182; Griffith, 172.

⁶ Quoted in Gill, 431.

⁷ Ibid., 433-434.

⁸ Taaffe, 160.

⁹ McCartney, 114.

¹⁰ SCAP, Vol. II, 295.

¹¹ Perret, 398.

¹² Krueger to MacArthur, 8 June 1944, Correspondence with Sixth Army file, MMA Reel 593, RG4, 3-4.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Perret, 399.

¹⁵ Clovis E. Byers Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 30, 1944 Diary, entry for 11 June.

¹⁶ Krueger, 102.

¹⁷ Quoted in Taaffe, 163.

¹⁸ Ugaki, 390.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid., 391.
- ²⁰ MIS Daily Summary 816 (15/16 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 4.
- ²¹ ATIS Bulletin No. 1247 (10 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 15.
- ²² SCAP, Vol. II, 296, note 151.
- ²³ Ibid., 293.
- ²⁴ ATIS Bulletin No. 1284 (25 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 5 [Diary of Sgt. Sugawara, Regt. HQ. Captured at Mokmer 15 June].
- ²⁵ SCAP, Vol. II, 296, note 153.
- ²⁶ ATIS Bulletin No. 1274 (19 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 18.
- ²⁷ G-3 Operations Report (2400 12 June – 2400 13 June 1944), MMA Reel 554, RG3, 1.
- ²⁸ Hammel, 382; Morison, 132; Prefer, 146.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Hess, 166.
- ³⁰ See, in part, United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. II, 290 {Interrogation of Captain H. Komoto, IJN}.
- ³¹ SCAP, Vol. II, 291.
- ³² Morison, 131.
- ³³ United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], 454 [Interrogation of Captain Momochio Shimanouchi, IJN, on staff of 16th Cruiser Division].
- ³⁴ Clay Blair, Jr., Silent Victory (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), 641.
- ³⁵ Prados, 554.
- ³⁶ Lawless, Part II, 54.
- ³⁷ MacArthur to Krueger, 14 June 1944, Correspondence with Sixth Army file, MMA Reel 593, RG4.
- ³⁸ Krueger, 101.

³⁹ Luvaas, 143, note 14.

⁴⁰ Smith, 341.

Figure 1. Mokmer Pocket (Diagram). Biak.
[from William F. McCartney. The Jungleers. 108]

Figure 2. The Sumps (Diagram), Biak.
 [from William F. McCartney. *The Jungleers*. 122]

CHAPTER 6.
THIRD PHASE:
EICHELBERGER IN CHARGE,
15 JUNE – 28 JUNE

By 15 June, Kuzume's Biak Detachment had succeeded in stymieing MacArthur, although "Japanese intelligence [had been] incapable of discerning whether the next big American strike would be at northwestern New Guinea, the Palaus, or the Marianas."¹ But early on 15 June the answer became obvious when the U.S. Fifth Fleet under Vice Admiral Raymond Spruance began landing troops on Saipan in the Marianas. Despite the general failure of Japanese intelligence, Admiral Toyoda, upon first learning that U.S. minesweepers had been detected in the vicinity of the Marianas on 13 June, had permanently canceled KON and sent his major fleet units northward for the big battle with Spruance. The ensuing encounter, known as the Battle of the Philippine Sea, proved a decisive disaster for Toyoda, due to the underpreparation of his air units. After June 1944, Japanese naval air power, except for the kamikazes, would never again pose a significant threat to Allied task forces. Ironically, on 15 June, MacArthur's G-2 section listed total enemy air strength in the Southwest Pacific at 1099, the highest of the war to that date.² This was in substantial part the result of the Imperial Navy having shifted aircraft southward in response to the Biak invasion.

MacArthur's actual contribution in support of Nimitz's efforts in the Marianas was very slight. On 15 June, B-24s flying from the Admiralties bombed some targets in the Marianas,³ but Spruance had matters well in hand and the expected SWPA assistance was not needed. The reality was that MacArthur had rarely provided meaningful

assistance to campaigns in the Pacific beyond his own control. At the Coral Sea and Guadalcanal, the key Allied participants were Navy and Marine units under overall naval command, and MacArthur's SWPA forces were usually too far away and too limited in number to contribute much. On the other hand, Nimitz had provided crucial carrier support for MacArthur's Hollandia operation, and forces under Nimitz's direction would prove vitally important to MacArthur's subsequent Philippines campaign.

The difference between the respective contributions of MacArthur and Nimitz to each other's campaigns in the Pacific, however, was less a result of their respective attitudes and more a result of their respective capabilities. Though MacArthur's senior air commander, George Kenney, never missed an opportunity to disparage naval air power, the plain fact was that a number of MacArthur's most important operations simply could not have been undertaken without it, and Admiral King in Washington steadfastly refused to allow MacArthur any direct control of the vital fast carriers. In the end, success was achieved despite divided command in the Pacific, but such an arrangement was not without its difficulties, amply demonstrated in operations during the last year of the war, particularly at Leyte Gulf in October 1944.

At any rate, MacArthur's embarrassment at making such a feeble contribution in the Marianas was vastly overshadowed by his need to follow through on Biak and move northwestward toward Mindanao as quickly as possible. On 15 June, MacArthur authorized the seizing of Noemfoor Island, in Geelvink Bay about 80 miles west of Biak, in an operation designed to obtain additional forward airfields and prevent the transshipment of Japanese troops and supplies from the Vogelkop to Biak. The 503rd

Parachute RCT, which had been alerted for possible use on Biak, was instead tasked for a drop on Noemfoor, which took place on 2 July. Noemfoor proved nowhere near as difficult a campaign as Biak.

In the meantime, General Eichelberger had a new job to do, and it would not be a pleasant one. Although he had been maintaining his own distant watch on developments through unauthorized interception of higher echelon communications, his actual knowledge of the conditions on Biak remained minimal until his arrival there on 15 June. In his words, "Working as we were at Hollandia, we received absolutely no reports from Sixth Army or GHQ about how things were going at Biak. This would seem unbelievable, that a force in the field wouldn't be kept informed about what was going on in adjacent combat units, but it was a fact and it was typical, even into Japan. . . ."⁴ When Eichelberger and his chief of staff, Byers, arrived on Biak the morning of the 15th, the situation he found there was in turmoil. Fuller had no intention of accepting his own effective demotion, so he demanded immediate relief from all his responsibilities and transfer out of the SWPA. Vowing never to serve under Krueger in any capacity again, Fuller announced that he would submit his resignation to GHQ every half hour until it was accepted.⁵ MacArthur accepted the resignation on 16 June,⁶ and Fuller was replaced as 41st Division commander by his assistant commander, Jens Doe. Fuller remained on the island for several days, and on 16 June delivered the following farewell message to his troops:

To the Officers and Men of the Forty First Infantry Division:

1. I am being relieved of command for my failure to achieve the results demanded by higher authority. This is in no way a

reflection upon you or your work in this operation. I, and I alone, am to blame for this failure.

2. I have commanded the Forty First Division for better or worse for over two years and one half. During that period I have learned to respect you, to admire you, and to love you, individually and collectively. You are the finest body of men that it has been my privilege to be associated with in thirty nine years of service.
3. I part with you with many pangs of heart. I wish all of you the best of luck and God Bless You, for I love you all.

H. H. Fuller
Major General, U.S. Army
Commanding⁷

Eichelberger and Byers each had attempted to get Fuller to reconsider, but to no avail. Fuller's staff personnel were understandably upset, and the newly arrived generals let them know directly that there would be no dilly-dallying around: Byers noted in his diary entry for 15 June: "Bob and I talked to the staff and I told them if they wanted to show regard for H. F. the immediate clearing of this area would demonstrate to the world that he had been right and should not have been relieved."⁸ The truth, of course, was that Fuller had resigned, but technicalities at this point made little difference. Eichelberger, for his part, had "arrived on Biak in a foul mood. He was irked at Krueger for sending him to such a tough command on such short notice."⁹ Of all the key field commanders under MacArthur in SWPA, Eichelberger felt the most need to be openly appreciated by his superiors, and such appreciation was often in scant evidence. Krueger and Eichelberger saw each other as rivals for MacArthur's attention, and their relationship was further strained by Krueger's knowledge that Eichelberger would soon be appointed by MacArthur to command the new U.S. Eighth Army, which would see action in the

Philippines. Though Krueger wanted to have Eichelberger achieve results on Biak as quickly as possible, the former's gruff manner never failed to irritate the latter.

Eichelberger first needed to assess his situation. In Doe he had a fine field officer, but one with certain troubling characteristics. Eichelberger later stated: "I was glad to have Jens Doe again on my team. After serving with me as a colonel at Sanananda [in Papua] he had led both the Wakde and Aitape [part of the greater Hollandia operation] invasions. Doe was a great fighter; he was also a stubborn, opinionated man, and our disagreements were spirited."¹⁰ Doe had, in fact, proven to be something of a thorn in the side of Fuller, who had previously recommended that he be transferred from the 41st Division, a recommendation that Krueger had actually approved. With Fuller out of the picture, Krueger was prepared to see how Doe would handle the division, and Eichelberger subsequently recommended the appointment of Doe as permanent commander of the 41st.¹¹ Early on, however, both Eichelberger and Byers had doubts about Doe. Eichelberger discovered that Doe was out of touch with what was happening at the front, something that Eichelberger found professionally unacceptable.¹² Moreover, none of the senior officers of the Hurricane Task Force (including the regimental commanders) seemed to know the reality of the tactical situation. Where was the enemy, exactly? This was a circumstance that Eichelberger was determined to change in a hurry, through personal reconnaissance on the front lines. He later described the difficult topography and confused nature of the fighting near Mokmer drome on 17 June:

Byers and Doe and I were driven to the front, and we found we could get quite close. Nastier terrain could hardly have been found.

Behind that first ridge there were not only caves and the raw unjutting coral cliffs, but also deep ravines and tangled jungle. A G-2 officer at Doe's command post had shown us maps which presumably established where the troops were located. Things looked a good deal different after we traveled a mile and a half forward.

The 162nd was attacking with two battalions, and a third battalion had been sent on a circuitous route which was expected to deliver them in the enemy's rear. They ended in the rear all right, but it was our rear – and not the enemy's. This managed to get everybody pretty well mixed up and resulted in a dangerous American-American exchange of fire.

A young lieutenant and I climbed a steep hill to an observation post where we had a good view of the battle. Several hundred yards away and running off at an angle was a ridge which the lieutenant said Colonel Archie Roosevelt (son of the late President Theodore Roosevelt) had captured that morning. Down below, so close I could have hit the nearest one with a pebble, were a number of our tanks – all buttoned up and firing. Suddenly it became unmistakably apparent that Colonel Roosevelt's ridge had reverted to original ownership. The Japanese were pouring it on our tanks with rifles and machine guns, while 90-mm mortar fire from someplace in the rear was landing around us. The Japanese fire was understandable, but we were a little surprised when the American tanks began blazing away at us. The answer? There were Japanese caves immediately beyond us and not more than seventy-five or a hundred yards from our small, dug-in perimeter. There was plenty of noise.¹³

That same day, Eichelberger wrote to his wife: "They probably expect me to do this in a day, but this fight is a witch – if you will pardon the paraphrase. . . . This is the toughest terrain I have yet seen to fight in except at Buna."¹⁴ Eichelberger's plan for dealing with it was not complicated. The holding attack, in which one force pinned down the enemy from the front while another executed a flanking movement aimed at the enemy rear, had become essentially the U.S. Army's sole tactic.¹⁵ Fuller had been utilizing this tactic, and planned to continue using it in his renewed attack on the Japanese ridge positions above Mokmer drome. As one writer has noted, "Drawing on his experience at Buna, Eichelberger decided not to try to seize the airfields by a frontal assault. Instead, he planned to go around the Japanese positions and occupy the high

ground to their rear.”¹⁶ This differed, however, from Doe’s own plan, which called for a greater effort to be expended in a frontal assault on the West Caves.¹⁷ In discussing his first days on Biak, Eichelberger recalled:

I . . . concluded they [the regiments] did not know where they were and the situation was very obscure. I therefore ordered a day of rest and reorganization [18 June] so everybody could find out what they were doing. I then placed one battalion on the Japanese left rear, and two battalions to cut across their rear from the right. This attack took place on Monday [19 June] and it broke their backs. Jens tried to talk me out of doing it. . . . I realize I will get no credit for that fight but . . . at one time I planned every major move they made.¹⁸

Byers noted on 18 June that “Jens Doe came in to discuss our field order for Monday’s attack. Bob told him there would be no more monkey business. Simple orders and forceful execution.”¹⁹ Doe’s objections were relevant, but events were to prove him wrong. Eichelberger’s plan called for the bulk of the 186th Regiment to attack from a position northwest of the West Caves, cutting the enemy’s main supply route to the caves. Meanwhile, the 162nd Regiment would engage the West Caves position from the front and its immediate flanks. The 1st Battalion of the 186th, attacking from a position east of the caves, would provide additional pressure on the enemy rear from a compass heading almost diametrically opposed to that of the rest of the 186th. In addition, the 3rd Battalion of the 163rd Regiment would occupy Hill 320, a dominating terrain feature nearly a mile directly north of the West Caves. The remainder of the 163rd was to patrol in the vicinity of the Ibdi Pocket and the Parai Defile far to the east. On 13 June, Fuller had requested an additional regiment for Biak, and Krueger had approved dispatch of the 34th Infantry Regiment of the U.S. 24th Division. With the arrival of the 34th Infantry on 18 June, Eichelberger planned to move west near the coast and seize Borokoe and Sorido

dromes. Doe's chief complaint with these proposed operations was that the 186th Regiment's main attack was to be mounted from a position far inland, requiring considerable movement, and he "feared that the Japanese would mortar the spearheading 186th RCT to death long before it reached its objective."²⁰

The Japanese cave positions, in general, presented a huge headache for Fuller, Eichelberger, Doe and all of their subordinates. Colonel Harold Riegelman, Eichelberger's chemical warfare officer, was charged with figuring out how to neutralize the extensive cave systems. He later commented on how the Japanese used them on Biak:

Kuzume's tactics were plain enough and were well suited to the cave-pocked terrain. His men were in detachments of varying sizes depending upon the size of the caves and cave nets to which they were anchored. They broke out of these shelters for surprise attacks and then returned to their warrens. Their mortars and artillery were kept under coral cover when not in use. These tactics were harassing and costly to us. But they suffered from a weakness which indicated that they might later prove fatal to the Japs. They precluded the massing of a co-ordinated, effective striking force and invited isolation and piecemeal destruction. Judging from the evidence of plentiful stores along the coast, the caves were abundantly supplied with food, equipment, ordnance, and ammunition. Also, with radio communications. So the key to securing the airdromes was the reduction of the caves within striking distance of the coast.²¹

On 21 June, Eichelberger wrote to his wife: "The most aggravating thing I have is the fact that they have different types of guns up in caves on cliffs that remind me of the Palisades on the Hudson. They pop in and out of these, fire and then run back, and the terrain makes it almost impossible to find them."²² The difficulty in even locating the enemy was enormously frustrating to the lower echelon commanders in the field, as well. A big part of the problem was a plain lack of tactical information. On 19 June, Byers

noted: "Roosevelt's battalion after attacking valliantly [sic] for two weeks still had not advanced and knew nothing of the conditions around it."²³ This state of ignorance, after engaging the enemy for such a long period of time, is almost mind-boggling and gives a clear indication to an outsider of just how extraordinary were the conditions on the ground at Biak. Clearly, a specific formula had to be developed, in a hurry, for dealing with these caves, particularly the Sump (West Caves).

Part of the answer came from the air. Eichelberger recalled:

Colonel Bill Bowen, my operations officer, and his assistants risked their lives on tours of exploration and discovery. For several days, in unarmed Cub planes, they flew repeatedly over the Japanese positions at low altitudes until they sighted and charted the entrances to the enemy's unbelievable underworld. . . . The subjugation of the caves presented a problem new to all the commanding officers. It required improvisation, experiment, and trial-and-error tactics. On the Ibdi Caves, for instance, we tried skip-bombing by B-25s. . . . We used P-40s and A-20s to bomb and strafe the Mokmer Caves. But at The Sump it was a matter of hard, brutal fighting and persistence which won the engagement.²⁴

Ironically, the Japanese themselves had provided a ready solution to the cave problem. Biak was stockpiled with a large quantity of poison smoke candles, which would have proved deadly if utilized against the caves. The 41st Division chemical officer wanted to use them, and proposed doing to to Riegelman. In fact, Eichelberger himself engaged in a spirited debate with his staff over the same idea, and was only dissuaded from using the gas when Riegelman pointed out the unacceptability of that course of action and the distinct probability that Eichelberger would be relieved soon after higher headquarters was informed that he had used poison gas on Biak.²⁵ After the battle, Riegelman recommended the placement of smoke pots into the windward

entrances of such cave networks, but the HC and FS smokes he advised using were not classified as poison gas, though they would be lethal within enclosed spaces.²⁶

After observing attempts by infantry to reduce the cave positions at the Sump, Riegelman did devise an effective method for dealing with them. In his words,

An idea had begun to come to life. It might be a wild one, but it could hardly be worse than what we were doing. . . . The plan was not complicated. It was apparent that the cave was impervious to all calibres we could bring to bear. Its entrance defied demolition. But if a large enough charge of TNT were exploded at the entrance, perhaps the concussion would stun if not kill the defenders. In either case we could get in and destroy them.²⁷

In his post-battle report to Byers, Riegelman wrote:

The techniques of reduction of cave nets are frontal and vertical attack, envelopment, isolation, siege, and assault. The means include all ground fires capable of being laid on the target using high explosive and white phosphorous shell and grenades, air bombardment, strafing, flame throwers, gasoline demolition charges, and smoke. Tanks are employed to precede infantry, firing cannon and machine guns at point blank range.²⁸

The basic problem at Biak with simply using flamethrowers and artillery against the caves was that the networks proved too deep and the entrances too twisting for using those weapons alone. The flamethrower operators were not only vulnerable to enemy fire; they also risked flashback from the walls of many cave entrances.

The Japanese defenders of the West Caves were a determined lot, especially since Kuzume had moved his Detachment Headquarters there earlier in June. His troops of the 222nd Regiment were prepared to fight to the bitter end. But some of the other elements under his command were less committed to their own destruction. As early as 16 June, a prisoner from the 107th Airdrome Construction Unit reported "that 200 men from his unit

in a cave north of Mokmer airdrome are ready to surrender.”²⁹ Evidently, such a surrender did not take place, because as of 30 June only 19 Japanese had been taken prisoner on the island.³⁰ Moreover, as MacArthur’s campaign history indicates, “On 16 June about 700 additional reinforcements of the 2d Battalion, 219th Infantry, landed at Korim Bay. These troops did not reach the vicinity of West Cave until 23 June.”³¹ So Kuzume was getting more troops, despite the cancellation of KON.

But they were too late to make a difference. Kuzume burned the 222nd Regiment’s colors in a ceremony within the West Caves on the night of 21-22 June, and some reports were that he committed ritual suicide immediately thereafter. Better information indicates that he survived a while longer and was subsequently killed in battle, but “exhaustion of rations and water finally forced the defenders of West Cave to abandon this position on 22 June and scatter into the hills of central Biak.”³² When U.S. troops finally moved into the Sump complex on 27 June they “discovered a chamber of horrors full of decomposed and fried bodies, or their various components, and even a butcher shop for cannibalistic purposes.”³³ The latter activity marked a peculiar proclivity of the World War II Japanese military, perhaps indicating better than anything else the generally abysmal state of Japanese logistics, even at a location as initially well-stocked as Biak.

When Eichelberger’s plan to clear the ridges above Mokmer drome was launched on 19 June, he had made clear to all of his subordinates exactly what was expected of them. He later stated, “One thing I insisted upon: constant reports on the positions of battalions and companies.”³⁴ The terrain difficulties and the fluid nature of the Japanese

tactics had made this reporting an absolute necessity on Biak, as previous events had shown. But Eichelberger was far from happy with the way Doe was handling his units. On 20 June, Eichelberger noted in his diary: "Arriving back at Doe's Command Post I found that the 41st had not been doing much up the valley above Mokmer Drome. Only 2 [battalions] of the 186th fighting there. Bawled everyone out there and hope for better luck tomorrow."³⁵ His luck improved. That same day, however, he wrote to his wife that "I noticed the old tendency which I found in Papua for our troops to get very sorry for themselves and to forget what a hard time the Japanese are having. As a matter of fact, I imagine they get fifty rounds of artillery and twenty-five rounds of mortar fire for every one we get from them." He added in the same letter, "I understand that Tokyo Rose, who talks over Radio Tokyo, reported that we were about to be driven into the sea."³⁶

In reality, the airfields on and near Biak were finally about to become usable. The engineers resumed their work at Mokmer drome on 20 June, and the next day, 8th Fighter Group P-38s began operating from the strip on Owi Island and a squadron of P-40s from the 49th Fighter Group moved to Mokmer (to be followed by the rest of the 49th Group on 25 June). On the 22nd, the 49th's P-40s and B-24s of the 90th Heavy Bombardment Group began operating from Mokmer.³⁷ They were to be the first of many. Eichelberger's operations achieved results with startling rapidity, given what little had been accomplished in the first three weeks of the Biak campaign. Though Fuller must be given some of the credit for laying the groundwork, Eichelberger's contribution was necessary and cannot be overlooked. On 22 June, he wrote:

I feel personally that we have come a long way in the week I have been here and if I must pat myself on the back I feel the way we had been

fighting the Japanese would have ended in a victory for them or the fight would not have been over until next Christmas. They [the Americans] were using little nibbling attacks that would not have gotten any place.

We feel OK tonight, but I do think that the boys needed a kick in the pants and I had to give it to them.³⁸

The next day he added, "I think I have done fine, thanks to profanity, flattery, offers of rewards, threats, and Lady Luck."³⁹

With the 34th RCT's capture without trouble of Borokoe and Sorido dromes, all of the key objectives of the Hurricane Task Force had been achieved by the last week of June. But the Japanese continued to hold out in the East Caves area and the Ibdi Pocket, located between Bosnek and Mokmer. American artillery pounded the East Caves from 14 June to 23 June, followed by an attack by B-25s flying from Mokmer drome itself (only 2,500 yards from the caves) on 24 June. On 30 June, the caves were entered, and it was discovered that the Japanese who had occupied them had managed to escape, in a considerably more successful attempt than their compatriots fleeing the West Caves.⁴⁰ The Ibdi Pocket amounted to an incredibly well-fortified natural defensive position along the coastal ridge that would take longer to reduce. The 163rd RCT was charged with assaulting the Ibdi Pocket, and it is noteworthy that before the end of June the 163rd engaged in pre-dawn attacks on this position, something rarely attempted by American troops up to that point, but yielding good results.⁴¹

On the morning of 25 June, Eichelberger sent a message to Krueger stating that he had accomplished his mission on Biak and that overall command could be turned over to Doe.⁴² He did not leave the island until 28 June, but his assessment of the situation was correct. After inspecting troops in forward positions on 26 June, Eichelberger wrote his

wife, "They clear a field of fire in the jungles and it reminds me of the stories I have read of the Indian days out West."⁴³ Indeed, the suicidal Japanese stubbornness in the face of now overwhelming odds was almost beyond belief. A Japanese sergeant's diary recovered at Ibdi contained the following entry for 23 June:

Enemy guns shell us day and night. Enemy reconnaissance planes fly over us daily so we cannot expose ourselves. It was necessary for me to get everyone in our vicinity into one shelter. We are determined to fight to the end. To die is easy, but to live is difficult. I will not die till I kill one of the enemy.⁴⁴

Eichelberger noted on 27 June, "The Japanese here [at Biak] were well disciplined, fine soldiers and they had many weapons, from 20 mm rapid-fire guns to three-inch, five-inch, and six-inch guns. Again, I think I have been very lucky."⁴⁵

After his return to Hollandia from Biak at the end of June, Eichelberger was perturbed at the cool reception he received from Krueger. Eichelberger had apparently also been disappointed that only one officer from Krueger's staff was sent as an observer to Biak in the two weeks of Eichelberger's presence on the island, but perhaps this was more a sign of Krueger's respect for Eichelberger's ability than a sign of disinterest. On 30 June, Eichelberger wrote his wife: "When I talked to Walter yesterday, he was very agitated about Fuller. He thinks Fuller quit because a task force commander was put over him, but that was not the reason. He really objected strenuously to the messages he was getting from Walter."⁴⁶ Krueger may well have been concerned at that point about future repercussions of the Fuller incident, but nothing would come of it. As for Krueger's real

view of the job Eichelberger had done, a letter he sent to MacArthur on 2 July said it all:

“I am very much pleased with Eichelberger’s performance at Biak.”⁴⁷

Through 30 June, a total of 2,946 Japanese troops were killed on the island.⁴⁸

Chapter 6 Notes

- ¹ Drea, 141.
- ² MIS Daily Summary 816 (15/16 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3.
- ³ Perret, 400.
- ⁴ Quoted in Luvaas, 126.
- ⁵ Taaffe, 167.
- ⁶ Signal, MacArthur to Krueger, 16 June 1944, Correspondence with Sixth Army file, MMA Reel 593, RG4.
- ⁷ Statement by Major General Fuller, 16 June 1944, Clovis E. Byers Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 35, Folder 12 ("Miscellaneous").
- ⁸ Byers Papers, Box 30, 1944 Diary, 15 June entry.
- ⁹ Drea, 138.
- ¹⁰ Robert Eichelberger in collaboration with Milton Mackaye, Our Jungle Road to Tokyo (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 142.
- ¹¹ Ibid.; Letter, Krueger to MacArthur, 19 June 1944, Correspondence with Sixth Army file, MMA Reel 593, RG4.
- ¹² Taaffe, 170; Byers Diary, entry for 20 June 1944.
- ¹³ Eichelberger, 144-145.
- ¹⁴ Luvaas, 129.
- ¹⁵ Perret, 398.
- ¹⁶ Drea, 171.
- ¹⁷ Taaffe, 163.

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- ¹⁸ Luvaas, 132.
- ¹⁹ Byers Papers, Box 30 , 1944 Diary, 18 June entry.
- ²⁰ Taaffe, 170.
- ²¹ Harold Riegelman, "The Caves of Biak, " in Don Congdon, ed., Combat WWII Pacific (New York: Galahad Books, 1996), 494-495.
- ²² Luvaas, 134.
- ²³ Byers Papers, Box 30, 1944 Diary, entry for 19 June.
- ²⁴ Eichelberger, 149-151.
- ²⁵ Riegelman, 486, 495-496.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 493.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 491.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 492-493.
- ²⁹ MIS Daily Summary 816 (15/16 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 2.
- ³⁰ G-3 Operations Report, 2400 29 June – 2400 30 June, MMA Reel 554, RG3, 1.
- ³¹ SCAP, Vol. II, 296, note 152.
- ³² Ibid., 296.
- ³³ Taaffe, 172.
- ³⁴ Eichelberger, 147.
- ³⁵ Luvaas, 142, note 11.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 132-133.
- ³⁷ Eric Hammel, 392-393.
- ³⁸ Luvaas, 135.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lawless, Part II, 59.

⁴¹ McCartney, 130.

⁴² Luvaas, 136.

⁴³ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁴ ATIS Bulletin No. 1287 (25 July 1944), MMA Reel 476, RG3, 11 [Diary of Sgt. Shigetoshi Ito of the 57th Independent Engineer Battalion, Tanimura Unit].

⁴⁵ Luvaas, 137.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 138-139.

⁴⁷ Krueger to MacArthur, 2 July 1944, MMA Reel 593, RG4.

⁴⁸ G-3 Monthly Summary of Operations, June 1944, MMA Reel 557, RG3.

CHAPTER 7.
FINAL PHASE: MOPPING UP,
29 JUNE – 20 AUGUST

The official U.S. Army history states that “the fall of the West Caves on 27 June and the completion of mopping up operations by the 34th Infantry on 30 June marked the end of the most important phase of the Biak operation.”¹ The “mopping up” by the 34th RCT up to that point had occurred on the far left of the Hurricane Task Force’s tactical position, in the vicinity of Borokoe and Sorido airdromes. The 34th was withdrawn from the island at the end of June, and its position on the line was taken over by the 162nd. Subsequently, elements of the three remaining U.S. RCTs on Biak would operate either north or west of the 30 June main line of resistance. As of 30 June, a total of 599,310 U.S. Army troops were under MacArthur’s command in the SWPA, 27,242 of whom were on Biak.² The fact that by 30 June, there were still three RCTs on the island where originally there had been only two, and yet the overall troop level there (excluding Army Air Forces personnel) after one month of fighting closely approximated the original number landed in the early stages of the operation, indicates the high number of U.S. dead plus wounded and sick evacuated from Biak. Many of the 41st Division’s combat units were by now very understrength: “By the end of June, for example, Company F [163rd Infantry] had only 42 effectives and Company G only 65 able bodied men.”³

By late June, ULTRA had revealed that the Japanese intended to evacuate their remaining troops on Biak.⁴ This was despite their continuing efforts through 25 June to move reinforcements into the island. Between 3-12 June, about 400 troops of the 221st Infantry arrived there from Manokwari, followed by approximately 500 of the 219th

Infantry from Sorong and Noemfoor between 9-16 June, and 200 more of the 222nd Infantry from Noemfoor on 25 June.⁵ This continued trickle of reinforcements had, in fact, made the Hurricane Task Force's job more difficult, though the final result of the battle after 20 June was never in doubt.

In the meantime, Japanese air assets in New Guinea, and the entire area of the Southwest Pacific south of the Philippines, had declined precipitously by the end of June. MacArthur's G-2 section reported on 29 June that enemy "air operations by day have practically ceased."⁶ It was "estimated that Japanese air strength on New Guinea had declined from 162 aircraft on June 1st to only 37 by the end of the month."⁷ The actual number of flyable aircraft at that time was even lower, because of maintenance problems and the high rate of malaria and other tropical illnesses among the pilots. On 28 June, the 23rd Air Flotilla moved its headquarters back from Sorong on the Vogelkop to the island of Ceram, about 200 miles to the southwest near Ambon (the HQ had at one time been on Biak itself).⁸ On 11 July, the G-2 Daily Summary observed:

Retirement of enemy planes to Ceram and Halmahera is continually noted, at the same time his total forward strength, capable of intervention, is declining. Immediately available for operations is a total of 172 fighters and 88 bombers, or a maximum of about 160 planes ready for dispatch based on normal 60% serviceability. Actually, however, the enemy is utilizing along the forward line in SWPA only his strength at Ceram, an estimated 78 planes evenly divided between fighters and bombers, or less than 50 planes similarly ready for dispatch. . . . Allied strike missions are meeting interception only over Central Pacific bases Strength at Halmahera . . . has declined within several weeks to an estimated 163 planes from a total of 290.⁹

By 1 August, the Japanese estimated that they were faced with 2,950 Allied combat aircraft under MacArthur's control, while MacArthur's G-2 in return had

estimated total Japanese air strength within the SWPA at only 1029. ULTRA “revealed that 56 per cent of those were based (or soon to arrive) in the Philippines.”¹⁰ Clearly, by July the Japanese were marshaling their remaining aircraft in the hope of decisive employment in defense of MacArthur’s key strategic objectives in the Southwest Pacific.

Allied air operations in the vicinity of Geelvink Bay now focused on interdicting the movements of smaller Japanese water craft, as well as supporting ground operations on Biak and Noemfoor. One writer has noted that “during June the 310th Wing [now responsible for forward air operations in Dutch New Guinea] destroyed more than eighty barges and luggers, as well as twenty-four freighters.”¹¹ The Noemfoor landing proved to be well-advised: “Fighters based there would be able to cover bomber strikes on the Halmaheras, continuing neutralization of the Vogelkop airfields would be simplified, and any Japanese efforts to reinforce their then held base at Biak from Manokwari could be halted.”¹² Alternatively, attempts to evacuate the remnants of Kuzume’s Detachment could be impeded. With both Biak and Noemfoor in Allied hands, MacArthur would be poised to move onto the Vogelkop directly, and from there turn northwest to invade the Moluccas – the last stop before a landing on Philippine soil itself.

On Biak, the intensity of the fighting in the remaining contested sectors did not slacken. The official Army history comments: “From the 21st of June through the morning of 10 July the 146th Field Artillery Battalion alone had thrown about 20,000 105-mm. shells into the Ibdì Pocket, and at least as many rounds had been fired by 4.2-inch, 60-mm. and 81-mm. mortars.”¹³ Unlike Fuller’s earlier application of firepower,

this concentrated bombardment of known enemy positions did help to achieve a decisive outcome. Though artillery's effectiveness against cave positions was often limited, the sheer volume of it applied within a well-defined area such as the Ildi Pocket prevented much enemy freedom of movement, aside from its concussive effect and role as a morale-breaker. This was fortunate, because "the 3d Battalion, 222d Infantry, was both clever and fanatic on the defense. If holding the Ildi Pocket had had any point after 10 June, its defense as executed might well have added a significant chapter to military annals."¹⁴ The resistance there was broken at last on 22 July, after "a final devastating barrage, including artillery emplaced on Owi Island, naval bombardment, and heavy bombers, actually changed the configuration of the ground. Then the caves and pillboxes, still recognizable, were blown shut with TNT." Nevertheless, ten days earlier, some 200 Japanese troops had somehow managed to escape from the Pocket into the Biak hinterland.¹⁵

The Ildi Pocket was the last major organized Japanese stronghold on Biak, but after its fall there remained about 4,000 Japanese on the island with some fighting potential, who were still capable of causing trouble. The Hurricane Task Force would have to deal with them.¹⁶

In fact, every day the number of Japanese on Biak was declining, both as a result of attrition and the troops fleeing from the island. The 26 July G-2 summary stated that "three POW's, from the 202nd Airfield Construction Battalion, captured at Swoporbekpef (south coast Noemfoor) on 23 July, claimed they had just recently evacuated Biak by canoe. Although there have been indications of the westward escape route, Biak-

Noemfoor-Maokwari, these are among the first positive evidences of its actual use by the enemy.”¹⁷ That increasing numbers of Japanese were surrendering was a strong indication that morale had cracked, not just on Biak, but elsewhere in New Guinea as well. With the end of effective resistance on Biak, and the capture of Noemfoor, the Japanese high command was well aware that it could not hold onto the Vogelkop Peninsula and would have to make its real effort in the Philippine Islands proper. The Hollandia operation in April had marked the beginning of a new phase of the war, in which the Japanese position on New Guinea would be rapidly rolled-up (difficulties on Biak notwithstanding).

The remaining Japanese in isolated garrisons in both Northeast and Dutch New Guinea were essentially abandoned to their fate, and that fact was not entirely lost on the defenders themselves. After initially fierce opposition, it was not uncommon by the summer of 1944 for entire units to consider giving themselves up, something unheard of earlier in the war. A recent writer has noted:

One prisoner captured on Biak in July 1944 told his interrogators that the soldiers in his unit had agreed that they could not survive much longer in their given circumstances and had determined that “it would not be wrong to surrender” if they would be fed and treated well. Another noted that he and three others from his unit had made a conscious decision to surrender, believing that “it was better to suffer the consequences of surrender rather than to starve.”¹⁸

The Hurricane Task Force continued its patrolling without let-up, and between 22 July and 20 August “thoroughly combed the entire eastern half of Biak.”¹⁹ On 3 August, LCMs landed a battalion at Korim on the island’s north coast, and eventually elements of this force made contact with other troops moving northward from Sorido, destroying

isolated groups of the enemy in the process. This was followed with another battalion-sized landing on 17 August at Wardo on the southwest coast of Biak, which engaged in similar patrolling, even to the extent of sending troops onto neighboring Soepiori Island.²⁰ G-2 reported on 11 August that “remaining enemy elements on Biak are largely cut off from westward escape by the convergence of our units along the Korim-Sorido trail. . . . The plight of escapees stranded on Soepior Island for lack of water transport, and beset by hostile natives, is even worse.”²¹ Four days later, G-2 added, “The enemy’s flight, the present blockade rendering any successful escape improbable, mounting starvation, deterioration of weapons and the lack of supplies render the enemy’s elimination a matter of time only.”²² But finally, in a summary of trends covering the last 10 days of August, G-2 concluded that “it seems possible that some vestige of central military organization or control continues to function in Western Biak. The current trend of enemy activity is remindful of the familiar Japanese capability of living off the land while conducting local harassing action for an indefinite period.”²³ Though Krueger had officially terminated the Biak campaign on 20 August, it is apparent from this last assessment that GHQ anticipated the Hurricane Task Force would be engaged in mopping-up activities for a considerable period thereafter, as indeed proved to be the case.

The “vestige of central military organization or control” that may have continued functioning in western Biak is likely to have been the result of Rear Admiral Senda’s uninterrupted presence on the island, hiding in the jungle until his death in December 1944. General Numata had departed in mid-June, and Colonel Kuzume appears to have

been killed in action on 2 July north of Borokoe drome after escaping from the West Caves.²⁴ The desperate nature of Japanese circumstances was indicated, in part, during August, "when a V Bomber Command officer said he had intercepted an enemy radio message ordering an attack with chemicals."²⁵ No such attack occurred, however.

Once the airfields on Biak and Owi became operational in late June, Generals Kenney and Whitehead wasted little time in moving their aircraft forward and planning for raids against targets throughout the Dutch East Indies. By August, Whitehead had selected the Biak and Owi dromes as the principal bases for his heavy and medium bomb groups. The Fifth Air Force was now completely under his command, as Kenney had assumed the new post of Commander, Far East Air Forces, which included the newly acquired U.S. Thirteenth Air Force as well as the Fifth. Whitehead moved the headquarters of the Fifth from Nadzab to Owi on 10 August.²⁶ On 27 July, the first large-scale raid against the Halmaheras was launched.²⁷

Life for members of the Allied air units now based on Biak sometimes proved more interesting than expected. A history of the 345th Medium Bombardment Group (B-25s) records:

Never before had the 345th been located in an area where heavy combat had taken place so recently. . . . One grisly attraction at the entrance to one of the caves was a Japanese officer who had been tied upright to a stake and decapitated. Hunting for souvenirs was a dangerous business and troops from other units suffered a few casualties and killed several Japanese while poking around the caves. . . . A few Japs continued to inhabit the ridges during the entire time the 345th remained on the island, and their presence was felt in many small ways. One officer returned to his tent one evening to find that a Jap had urinated on his bedding.²⁸

An Australian, who was a member of a radio intelligence unit moved to Biak in August 1944, recalls his own observations at the end of the campaign:

Outside the perimeter there were dead Japanese bodies everywhere. It was impossible to bury them in the coral; flamethrowers were the only solution. The conditions in which they had lived were indescribable. Their field "hospitals" were disease-ridden bamboo lean-tos in which the filth was beyond belief; the wounded were just left to die.²⁹

As of 31 August, total Japanese casualties inflicted by the Hurricane Task Force amounted to 4,970 killed and 319 captured. In addition, 205 Formosan laborers had been captured. The vast majority of the surrendering troops were taken after July. U.S. casualties to 31 August totaled 530 killed, 2,570 wounded, and 54 missing.³⁰

Chapter 7 Notes

¹ Smith, 380.

² G-3 Monthly Summary, June 1944, MMA Reel 557, RG3 [U.S. Army Forces SWPA 30 June 1944 (map)].

³ Prefer, 182-183.

⁴ Drea, 141.

⁵ Lawless, Part II, 57.

⁶ MIS Daily Summary 829 (28/29 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 4.

⁷ Hickey, 168.

⁸ Hess, 168.

⁹ MIS Daily Summary 841 (10/11 July 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 1.

¹⁰ Bleakley, 162-163.

¹¹ Birdsall, 188.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Smith, 388-389.

¹⁴ Ibid., 390.

¹⁵ Lawless, Part II, 59.

¹⁶ Smith, loc. cit.

¹⁷ MIS Daily Summary 856 (25/26 July 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 3.

¹⁸ Allison B. Gilmore, You Can't Fight Tanks With Bayonets: Psychological Warfare Against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 77-78.

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- ¹⁹ Krueger, 101.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 101-102.
- ²¹ MIS Daily Summary 872 (10/11 August 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 3.
- ²² MIS Daily Summary 876 (14/15 August 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 2.
- ²³ Periodic Summary of Trends, 20/21 August – 30/31 August 1944, attached to MIS Daily Summary 893 (31 August/ 1 September 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, I.
- ²⁴ SCAP, Vol. II, 296, note 153.
- ²⁵ Haugland, 221.
- ²⁶ Donald M. Goldstein, "Ennis C. Whitehead: Aerial Tactician," in Leary, 196; Birdsall, 185; Eric Hammel, 423.
- ²⁷ Steve Birdsall, Log of the Liberators (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 191.
- ²⁸ Hickey, 173.
- ²⁹ Bleakley, 165-166.
- ³⁰ G-3 Monthly Summary, August 1944, MMA Reel 557, RG3.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION: TROUBLE AT BIAK

Biak was not a model operation. In the roughly two years between the commencement of the Buna campaign in Papua and MacArthur's return to the Philippines at Leyte Gulf in October 1944, Biak stands out (with Buna) as the most troubling of MacArthur's endeavors. As the chief analyst of the use of ULTRA in SWPA has pointed out, "MacArthur pressed ahead with the Biak invasion by accepting the hazards, as he had at the Admiralties, in order to meet his accelerated timetable for returning to the Philippines. Depending on one's view, it was either an example of strategic concerns overriding intelligence indications of potential disaster or an example of a clear strategic vision overcoming a cautious intelligence estimate."¹

There is no question but that ULTRA played a critical role concerning Biak, as it allowed Allied commanders to anticipate the enemy's moves, track his operations, and interdict his reinforcement attempts. In fact, ULTRA enabled the U.S. submarine force to disrupt Imperial General Headquarters' attempts at strategic reinforcement of the entire 2nd Area Army position regarding western New Guinea. Though MacArthur chose to disregard ULTRA's warnings of the Japanese intention to make a fight for Biak, he allowed his commanders to make full use of it once the fight was underway.² MacArthur's use of intelligence was selective and sometimes wrong, but his fierce determination combined with a certain agility of mind and operational flexibility generally enabled him to make the most of his opportunities. This was despite the fact that his own chief of intelligence, Brigadier General Charles A. Willoughby, was a

mediocre practitioner of the craft, and “the one failing of which Willoughby was never guilty was overestimation of Japanese forces.”³ As late as 22 June, Willoughby’s G-2 section still could not fully bring itself to acknowledge the size of the force it was up against on Biak. While it is now known that there were about 12,000 Japanese on the island by 27 May, after nearly four weeks of combat G-2 stated: “Allowing for the casualties mentioned above, this indicates that it was quite possible that the original enemy garrison on Biak was over 6,000 troops.”⁴

The observations of persons who were present on the island during May and June bear out the operation’s shortcomings. Brigadier General George H. Decker, Krueger’s chief of staff, who went to Biak during the early fighting, later stated, “It was really a terrible operation.”⁵ Eichelberger reflected that “Americans who fought at Biak, just off the coast of upper New Guinea, remember that sun-baked island as something as unreal and frightening as Conan Doyle’s ‘Lost World.’”⁶ An Australian who arrived there in August later wrote, however, that “during May through September 1944 it was the most important island in the SWPA.”⁷ An American military analyst, writing some years after the battle, noted that “the following circumstances were not helpful:”

1. Absence of joint planning under one roof.
2. Overworked task force units. (The 41st Infantry Division landed at Hollandia, Wakde, and Biak within the space of 6 weeks.)
3. Army operation of LVTs (landing vehicles, tracked) in an assault role. (A rehearsal uncovered serious deficiencies in forming assault waves. Communication with control vessels did not exist. There was, however, no time for further rehearsal.)
4. . . . (On [Z-Day] 20 percent of the LVTs broke down mechanically).
5. Similarly, initial engineer equipment was in poor condition. . . .
6. Maps were poor and their distribution was late.

7. The task was apparently not completely understood at the regimental level. . . . [I]t is probable that GHQ expected the fields to be operational by 10 June.
8. Inadequate intelligence.⁸

The same author would add, "A lack of co-ordination was evident until 19 June.

Although the units on Biak were constantly on the offensive, units attacked piecemeal and without apparent regard for the results possible through a complete convergence of effort. The effect of such divergent efforts frequently enabled the enemy to maneuver behind the allied force and, by traveling through the cave system, assemble sufficient forces to contain the individual attacks."⁹ Eichelberger's real contribution (at a minimum), then, was to ensure that the Hurricane Task Force effectively coordinated its operations, in addition to the necessary morale boost he provided.

Whether or not Eichelberger was "necessary" to the outcome on Biak is a debatable question. MacArthur's forces would undoubtedly have prevailed in the end, no matter who was in command, simply through weight of numbers. U.S. troops outnumbered the enemy, were substantially reinforced during the campaign, and were willing to apply tremendous amounts of firepower for long periods against both known and unknown positions. The effects of attrition gradually wore down Kuzume's force and limited its mobility. However, it cannot be denied that Eichelberger got the job done after Fuller had unquestionably failed in his primary mission: "Eichelberger returned to Hollandia on June 18, 1944, with his reputation as the theater's most capable field commander secure. It had taken him only five days to seize the three Japanese airfields and break the enemy's main line of defense."¹⁰

A close look at Fuller's performance, on the other hand, reveals substantial command problems. Though overall an excellent officer, Fuller was not the best choice for Biak. He had never commanded the entire 41st Division in a combat operation, and his leadership skills for such a job were questionable. According to Major General Joseph Swing, who was himself a renowned combat leader and commanded the 11th Airborne Division in the SWPA, "Horace Fuller was a great friend of mine. . . . He just didn't have it, if you know what I mean. It is hard to teach people how to be leaders. You got it or you haven't got it."¹¹ Fuller had led the 41st Division for two-and-a-half years, and was beloved by his men, who had performed very well earlier in combat as individually-deployed regimental combat teams. But he was a little old for divisional command (born 1886), he did not get along with his assistant division commander, Jens Doe, and he inexplicably failed to inform his regimental commanders of the need for rapidly achieving their objectives. Colonel Newman of the 186th RCT later stated:

I was never informed that there had been a deadline set for the capture of the Biak airfields, nor that there was any pressure being applied on General Fuller from higher headquarters. I only learned this after his relief. As far as I know the operation was proceeding with satisfactory speed. Had I known of the need for speed in supporting the Marianas attack I might have acted differently on several occasions.¹²

For the latter point there can be no excuse in defense of Fuller. Nevertheless, Krueger's hounding of him during the battle obviously went beyond what any self-respecting officer of Fuller's long experience could be expected to tolerate. Krueger, of course, was responding to pressure from MacArthur. Here it pays to examine the respective personal styles of the officers involved. While MacArthur was a gambler, he was not a fool. He realized that Biak needed to be taken and that he would be better off

taking it sooner rather than later. Though MacArthur ignored intelligence warnings, had he heeded them and delayed the invasion, Kuzume would have been in an even better position to deal with the Hurricane Task Force -- although the Imperial Navy would not have been able to mount KON after mid-June in any event. MacArthur knew his own objectives and his timetable and communicated his needs effectively to Krueger.

Krueger, though often unpersonable, was a highly competent officer who had been specifically requested by MacArthur to serve under him as the senior American field commander in the SWPA. While MacArthur was a gambler, Krueger was a methodical commander. But innate caution did not mean that Krueger would hesitate to relieve a subordinate who was not getting results. Krueger was tough, but he was not necessarily unfair. Because Fuller was not getting the results demanded by higher authority, a change had to be made, but Krueger apparently did not want to see Fuller entirely removed. Fuller's principal objection was to the manner in which he was being treated, and Krueger wasn't pulling any punches. But one cannot help but feel that Fuller's age and experience may well have had something significant to do with his own reaction -- there were general officers serving as U.S. Army division commanders or assistant commanders by 1944 who were more than 20 years younger than Fuller (James Gavin of the 82nd Airborne Division, for example). A younger man might well have been willing to shrug off Krueger's "abuse" and get on with the task at hand, even if it meant serving under Eichelberger.

MacArthur's latest biographer has noted, "After the battle MacArthur regained his poise and freely acknowledged the injustice Krueger had done to Fuller. He awarded

Fuller the DSM [Distinguished Service Medal], citing 'his exceptional ability and sound judgment' both before and during the battle."¹³ Yet, MacArthur had obviously been unhappy with Fuller's progress on Biak, and had discussed with Krueger the possibility of sending in Eichelberger for some two weeks before Krueger actually made his decision. MacArthur's generosity after the fact may have been merely a face-saving gesture, but either way it succeeded in dissipating any distaste Fuller may have felt for MacArthur after Biak. The personal breach between Fuller and Krueger, however, was never mended. After demanding assignment outside the SWPA, Fuller wound up as deputy chief of staff to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the supreme commander in Southeast Asia, where he performed admirably. Fuller thus appears in retrospect to have been a fine officer who was asked to do an unexpectedly dirty job at Biak and had come up short. Military history does not often deal kindly with officers who fail, but given Fuller's professional performance both before and after Biak, and the peculiar circumstances of that battle, he may well be regarded as an exception.

Fuller's West Point classmate, Eichelberger, represents an entirely different case. The very command attributes that Fuller apparently lacked were present in abundance in Eichelberger. Like Fuller, he was worshipped by his men, but Eichelberger believed in leading from the front, and he and his chief of staff, Clovis Byers, took great personal risks on Biak in order to gain a true understanding of an extremely confused situation. In many respects, Eichelberger was MacArthur's ideal field commander. Compared with Krueger, he was both innovative and something of a risk-taker, but still thorough in his preparation and willing to do what was necessary to get all information vital to the

outcome of a battle. Eichelberger's track record in the SWPA is unmatched by that of any other high-ranking field commander in that theater, as he was personally in charge when results were achieved in the two toughest battles – Buna and Biak. His subsequent performance in the Philippines also earned him high praise, including from MacArthur himself.

A key point regarding Eichelberger at both Buna and Biak concerns his willingness to break off combat entirely until he could reorganize the effort. Eichelberger's arrival on Biak coincided with Nimitz's Saipan landing on 15 June, meaning that Eichelberger did not face the same pressure as Fuller to make Biak's airdromes available in time to support Central Pacific operations. He was nevertheless under a great deal of pressure, as at Buna, to achieve results quickly so that MacArthur's own future operations would not be unnecessarily delayed. This was an especially critical issue at this juncture of the war. But overall, it must be said that, if anything, Eichelberger was a more cautious commander than MacArthur himself, as Eichelberger's objection to MacArthur's idea of grabbing Wakde immediately after Hollandia clearly indicated. Eichelberger's conflicted view of Krueger may best be summed up in a letter to his wife dated 5 July 1944: "I think he stands very high with the Big Chief [MacArthur] and I feel he has done very fine work. His disposition has grown more and more sour and his head is perhaps a bit larger. He may, like so many, become a walking bundle of pomposity. . . ."¹⁴

The whole question of the Allied approach to the war in the Pacific was once again raised by Biak: Although all the forces participating in the operation were under

MacArthur's control (unlike, for example, Hollandia), the fact that the Pacific war was being waged by two different commands operating along two distinct lines of advance violated the cardinal military principle of unity of command. The reason for this arrangement was the inability of the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy to compromise their steadfast positions on who should be an overall supreme commander for the Pacific. The Navy considered the war against Japan, for which it had prepared for decades, to be its own province, but it could not deny that MacArthur was, by far, the senior U.S. officer serving in the Pacific. Therefore, a division of responsibilities was the only answer possible from the standpoint of bureaucratic politics. During the war, this dual approach at times yielded advantages, but at other times came dangerously close to giving the game away. The best example of the latter was at Leyte Gulf in October 1944, when Halsey, operating under Nimitz's command, made a serious tactical error in large part due to lack of coordination with Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet. Biak was another case in which a division of responsibilities (between Nimitz's Marianas operations and MacArthur's in SWPA) came close to setting back the entire war effort. One prominent historian has written, "By dividing their forces the Americans had given the Japanese an opportunity to concentrate a locally superior force against one part of their advance, something the Japanese achieved at Biak."¹⁵ An even more telling commentary was made by the official U.S. Army history:

In June 1944, the Allied Forces of the Southwest Pacific Area probably had little idea how potentially dangerous the situation was at Biak, and it remained for postwar Japanese reports to reveal how narrowly greater losses and strategic delays were averted. Without doubt, success for the Japanese during KON would have seriously delayed the pace of Allied operations in the Southwest Pacific Area, if not throughout the

Pacific. The “if” connection between KON and A-GO is obvious – the success of either would have been a devilish blow. The close relation between the two operations is a striking illustration of the mutual interdependence of the Allied Southwest and Central Pacific Areas.¹⁶

MacArthur’s top amphibious commander, Rear Admiral Daniel Barbey (who was not present at Biak), later wrote:

If the Japanese had destroyed the Southwest Pacific cruiser force at Biak and gained local control of the sea, it is quite possible that MacArthur’s [sic] further advance would have been so delayed as to reorient the direction of the war in the Pacific. Undoubtedly, more consideration would then have been given to the Navy’s proposal to bypass Luzon and move directly into Formosa after capturing the Marinas [sic].¹⁷

Was Biak worth the price paid for it? Krueger evidently thought so:

Together with the successes at Noemfoor and Sansapor, the Wakde-Biak operations secured Hollandia against hostile interference, made the strong Japanese base at Manokwari on Vogelkop Peninsula useless, extended the range of Allied air forces hundreds of miles to the west and northwest, clinched Allied domination over the north coast of Netherlands New Guinea, and facilitated the neutralization of Palau. . . . The fact that eleven Japanese were slain for every American soldier killed bears eloquent testimony to the desperate nature of the resistance offered by the Japanese and to the tactical skill and initiative displayed by our troops in overcoming it.¹⁸

The truth was that Biak proved to be an extraordinarily valuable base for Kenney’s big bombers, and because of its strategic location and its initial existence as a key Japanese air center, it could not readily have been bypassed by MacArthur. Moreover, if one compares the admittedly high U.S. casualties at Biak with those suffered in the Central Pacific at Saipan and Iwo Jima (to take just two examples), MacArthur still looks highly conservative in expending the lives of his troops.

Nevertheless, the Hurricane Task Force did experience high attrition, greatly compounded by the casualties due to disease, particularly scrub typhus. The exact

casualty figures vary, depending on the source, but the G-3 Monthly Summary for September 1944 listed U.S. casualties on Biak-Soepiori through 30 September as 554 killed, 2,653 wounded, and 54 missing.¹⁹ Though the Biak operation was officially declared terminated by Krueger as of 20 August, patrolling on Biak-Soepiori continued for a considerable time thereafter, and U.S. casualties incurred during September alone totaled 24 killed and 83 wounded.²⁰ In addition, there were 6,811 non-battle casualties from disease and 423 resulting from psychoneurosis.²¹ The 41st Division did not participate in another campaign for more than six months, as it busied itself refitting and absorbing replacements on Biak before moving into the Philippines. The disastrous scrub typhus problem, originating on Owi Island, should have been anticipated but was not. In Kenney's words: "When we mentioned the place [Owi] to the natives around Biak, they told us that no one lived there as the place was 'tabu.' . . . In about ten days the troops on Owi began to develop scrub typhus. We had run into this disease several times before but now it suddenly dawned on us that in every case we had been warned by that word, but had been too dumb to understand what the natives were trying to tell us."²²

The Japanese, through 30 September 1944, had lost over 6,000 killed and nearly 1,600 captured (including Formosans) on Biak and Soepiori.²³ The Biak campaign was thus another in a long line of Japanese defeats in the Southwest Pacific dating back to the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Papuan Campaign in 1942. By mid-1944, the primary object of Imperial General Headquarters was to accomplish enough delay along the outer ring of Pacific defenses to permit the completion of preparations for defending the core of the empire, including the Philippines and the Japanese home islands. In short, the

Japanese were begrudgingly willing to trade territory for time. But time was running out for them, because by 1944 the U.S. Army Air Forces had acquired B-29 very long-range bombers in large numbers, and the U.S. Navy's submarine offensive against Japanese shipping was wreaking havoc with access to vital raw materials in the Southwest Pacific. The only hope, short of a negotiated settlement (out of the question due to the Allies' proclaimed determination to achieve unconditional surrender), was to once again strike such a crippling blow against the U.S. Pacific Fleet that large-scale operations would be delayed indefinitely. It was a vain hope, borne of desperation, but it was not illogical. MacArthur, with all of his burgeoning air and ground strength, could not land in the Philippines without the support of the Pacific Fleet – he did not have any carrier air power himself, and Kenney could not provide fighter cover from even his most forward bases south of the Philippines that would be in any way adequate for a large amphibious landing there. Kenney would have to utilize airfields to be seized on Mindanao (or Leyte, as it turned out) in order to provide the necessary aircover for further operations to the north. Therefore, MacArthur was dependent on Nimitz to a far greater extent than Nimitz was dependent on MacArthur, and the Imperial Navy, true to its Mahanian roots, chose to focus on bringing the Pacific Fleet to a final, decisive battle. This preoccupation was behind the Battle of Midway in June 1942, and it was behind the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944, in which the remaining capabilities of Japanese carrier air power were eliminated. MacArthur benefited directly from the Imperial Navy's preoccupation, because his Seventh Fleet, alone, would have been no match for a large Japanese force of battleships and cruisers, let alone one with carriers. The naval element

of MacArthur's SWPA command was always far weaker than the air and ground elements, but the enemy failed to take advantage of that fact.

Fortunately for MacArthur, the Japanese handling of their forces before and during the Biak campaign left a lot to be desired. The movement of Imperial Navy air units to western New Guinea in response to the Biak landing amounted to a total disaster. These air units were ineffective when used, and were wholly out of position to counter Nimitz's thrust into the Marianas, where they were desperately needed. Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the Air Staff Officer for CinC Combined Fleet from April 1944 until the end of the war, later stated bluntly:

The Biak Operation should have been carried out with [Japanese] Army Air Forces from the Philippines-Celebes Area. . . . During that one month period [before May] the CinC Southwest Fleet was acting as overall commander for this entire area. The CinC Southwest Fleet, being at Soerbaja [Java], had placed too much weight on the Biak Operation. . . . If Koga had been in command, or if Toyoda had taken over [as Combined Fleet CinC] immediately, I don't think this mistake would have been made.²⁴

Lack of coordination and general confusion seem to have been the hallmarks of Japanese operations at this stage of the war. The KON efforts might have succeeded had they been launched with more determination. By mid-June it was too late. Admiral Ugaki, in charge of the third KON, wrote on 13 June: "I commanded the Kon Force for only four days, yet I have no regrets at all because I did my best for its success. I only think the army must have been very much disappointed."²⁵ The Army was disappointed, but it had contributed significantly to its own disappointment by redrawing its primary defensive line in New Guinea in May and then terminating its own attempts to reinforce Biak in June. Willoughby's G-2 section noted on 27 August: "In fact, captured II Army

operation orders indicated specific cancellation of reinforcements for either area [Biak, Noemfoor] after the middle of June, although local resistance in both sectors has been suicidally stubborn. The Army's declared central axis of defense, i.e. Geelvink Bay, was thus breached and neutralized without any noticeable enemy counter-offensive effort to avert it."²⁶

On Biak itself, Colonel Kuzume largely made the most of what he had. As one recent writer has observed, "Here were the first signs of the type of defenses the Americans would face in the near future on Palau, the Philippines, and Iwo Jima. Caves, pillboxes hidden at ground level, connecting tunnels from one position to several others, all were found on Biak."²⁷ Though Kuzume's original defense plans for the island were captured in late June, their importance had been overridden by Lt. Gen. Numata's unexpected extended presence on Biak and the redeployment of units both before and after the American landing. About the island's defensive preparations, General Numata later stated:

One of the most effective stratagems employed by the forces on Biak was the emplacement of 75mm field howitzers in cave positions where they were masked from enemy observation. The naval force on the island also had a 105mm disappearing-gun battery on Hodai Mt. Overlooking the airfield sector. This was the largest calibre gun available for the defense of the island. . . . Had the enemy landing on Biak taken place three days later, the emplacement of these guns would have been completed.²⁸

But Kuzume made some important mistakes, which somewhat eased what might have otherwise been a nearly impossible task for the Americans to accomplish within any kind of reasonable timeframe. Eichelberger later wrote that "Kuzume, instead of summoning the troops out of the pockets and opposing us with a strong united force, permitted us to

reduce their positions piecemeal. I, of course, am glad he was of that mind.”²⁹ Another commentator has noted:

The battle for Biak was replete with errors. . . . Considering the importance of Biak, the Japanese air, ground, and sea commanders were amazingly remiss in security. At the island level, there was no significant beach defense on [Z-Day]. Although the island itself was stoutly defended, the Japanese had failed to set up an integrated defense system, electing instead to employ strong points. . . . [T]he ground commander on Biak was foolhardy in using his best troops in the Ibdi pocket after it had been enveloped on 10 June.³⁰

Nothing can gainsay, however, the fact that the Japanese defenders were fanatically determined to hold their ground and exacted a heavy price in yielding it. Though Kuzume may not have played all of his cards perfectly, “No better defenses were encountered throughout the entire Southwest Pacific campaign than those on Biak.”³¹

The battle for Biak Island amounted to a small episode in a very large war. It is instructive to note that of the 1,219,000 Japanese battle dead reported by U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall at the end of the war, 684,000 were killed in the SWPA and South Pacific Area (combined), while 273,000 were killed in the Central Pacific.³² With the exception of the initial Japanese drive into the Dutch East Indies (in early 1942) and the Guadalcanal Campaign (August 1942 – February 1943), virtually all of the Japanese losses in the “Southern Pacific” came at the hands of forces under MacArthur’s control. Critics of MacArthur’s indirect drive to Tokyo by way of the Philippines would do well to contemplate that fact. MacArthur not only tied down huge numbers of Japanese troops that would otherwise have been released for duty elsewhere (including in the Central Pacific), but he was highly effective in eliminating those he did

encounter from further participation in the war. Though "SWPA took 112,000 of [the] Pacific's 170,000 Army casualties,"³³ such numbers are small compared with the damage done to the enemy and the total casualties incurred by other theater commanders.

Regarding his amphibious operations specifically,

General MacArthur reported that in 112 amphibious landings in the Southwest Pacific between October, 1942, and July, 1945, there were only 235 casualties (or about two per landing) in the ship-to-shore phase. In 103 of the operations, the actual landing was achieved without a single casualty, and in almost 80 percent of the invasions, there were no casualties whatever on the entire first day of operations. This was in the face of the military principle that invading forces necessarily suffer heavy losses.³⁴

A review of these facts leads to the inescapable conclusion that MacArthur was highly efficient in his use of manpower, though the reasons for such efficiency may be open to some dispute.

At various points during the Biak campaign, Krueger's Alamo Force (U.S. Sixth Army) troops were also engaged in heavy fighting near Aitape, east of Hollandia along the Driniumor River line; in the Wakde-Sarmi area, west of Hollandia; and on Noemfoor Island in Geelvink Bay. The attention of Krueger, and MacArthur, was therefore not focused entirely on Biak during the late spring and summer of 1944. Moreover, by 15 June, Halsey's forces had effectively completed their operations in the Solomon Islands, and the troops and equipment from the South Pacific sub-theater were being redeployed to the SWPA and Central Pacific. As a result of this and other developments, MacArthur's total of U.S. Army divisions within SWPA skyrocketed from six on 31 March 1944, to 10 by 30 June 1944, to 15 by 30 September 1944, as he prepared to

reenter the Philippines.³⁵ With Biak well in hand by August, MacArthur could concentrate on the even bigger challenges that lay ahead.

Chapter 8 Notes

¹ Drea, 137.

² Ibid., 141, 151.

³ Ibid., 223.

⁴ MIS Daily Summary 822 (21/22 June 1944), MMA Reel 435, RG3, 5 [citing MIS Daily Summary 799 (29/30 May 1944)].

⁵ Quoted in Spector, 292.

⁶ Eichelberger, 135.

⁷ Bleakley, 151.

⁸ Lawless, Part I, 55-56.

⁹ Lawless, Part II, 62.

¹⁰ Jay Luvaas and John F. Shortal, "Robert L. Eichelberger: MacArthur's Fireman," in Leary, 171.

¹¹ Quoted in Taaffe, 168-169.

¹² Smith, 345.

¹³ Perret, 400.

¹⁴ Luvaas, 141.

¹⁵ Spector, 293.

¹⁶ Smith, 362.

¹⁷ Barbey, 203.

¹⁸ Krueger, 105.

¹⁹ G-3 Monthly Summary, September 1944, MMA Reel 557, RG3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Lawless, Part II, 60.

²² Kenney, 400.

²³ G-3 Monthly Summary, September 1944.

²⁴ United States Strategic Bombing Survey [Pacific], Interrogations of Japanese Officials, Vol. II, 431.

²⁵ Ugaki, 397.

²⁶ MIS Daily Summary 888 (26/27 August 1944), MMA Reel 436, RG3, 3.

²⁷ Prefer, 183.

²⁸ SCAP, Vol. II, 283, notes 111, 112.

²⁹ Eichelberger, 153.

³⁰ Lawless, *op. cit.*, 62.

³¹ Ibid.

³² War Department, General Staff, Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939 – 30 June 1945 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 1996), 202 [Report from George C. Marshall, dated 1 September 1945].

³³ Clovis E. Byers Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 35, Folder: "Important Historical General Byers," handwritten note.

³⁴ Haugland, 392.

³⁵ Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, Global Logistics and Strategy: 1943-1945, United States Army in World War II (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1968), 837 [Appendix D-4 – "Deployment of U.S. Army Divisions Overseas by Theater July 1943 – August 1945"].

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