

= Battle of Ratsua =

The Battle of Ratsua occurred during the Second World War and involved Australian and Japanese forces . Part of the wider Bougainville Campaign of the Pacific theatre , the battle took place in the northern sector of Bougainville between June and August 1945 . The main forces that took part in the fighting were the Australian 23rd Brigade and the Japanese 87th Naval Garrison Force .

The fighting occurred following a failed landing by Australian forces at Porton Plantation in early June , which was part of an attempt to outflank a series of strong points that the Japanese had built across the base of the Bonis Peninsula . After this , the fighting in the northern sector around Ratsua essentially became a containment action for the Australians as they concentrated their efforts and resources upon driving south towards Buin , which was the main centre of Japanese resistance on the island at the time . As a result , the situation around Ratsua remained largely static until the end of hostilities in mid @-@ August 1945 .

= = Background = =

= = = Strategic situation = = =

Japanese forces had landed on Bougainville in early 1942 , capturing it from the small force of Australians garrisoning the island . They had subsequently developed several airbases on the island , using it to conduct operations in the northern Solomon Islands and to attack the Allied lines of communication between the United States , Australia and the Southwest Pacific Area . These bases also helped protect Rabaul , the major Japanese garrison and naval base in Papua New Guinea , and throughout 1943 , Allied planners determined that Bougainville was vital for neutralising the Japanese base around Rabaul . US Marines conducted an amphibious landing at Cape Torokina , on the western coast of the island , north of Empress Augusta Bay , in November 1943 . After an initial counter @-@ attack , the US Marines had been replaced by a garrison of US Army troops who began consolidating their position around Torokina , establishing a strong perimeter . In March 1944 , the Japanese launched a heavy counter @-@ attack , which was turned back with heavy casualties . After this , the situation on Bougainville became largely static , as the Japanese focused primarily on subsistence , and the US forces chose to adopt a mainly defensive posture focused on maintaining the perimeter around Torokina .

In late 1944 , the Australian Army had assumed responsibility for Allied operations on Bougainville , replacing US troops who were subsequently redeployed to the Philippines . At the time , the Australians believed that there were only 17 @,@ 500 Japanese on the island , although in reality it was actually more than 40 @,@ 000 . Against this , the Australians deployed Lieutenant General Stanley Savige 's II Corps , consisting of the 3rd Division and the 11th Brigade in November 1944 . The troops were Militiamen , part of Australia 's reserve military , consisting of volunteers and conscripts . Although their ranks included some Second Australian Imperial Force soldiers and officers who were veterans of earlier campaigns in the Middle East and New Guinea , they were largely inexperienced having served primarily in a garrison role in Australia and New Guinea prior to their commitment to Bougainville . In December , after a period of reconnaissance and information gathering , it was decided that the Australians would pursue an aggressive campaign to clear the Japanese from Bougainville .

The campaign subsequently developed into three separate drives by the Australians , who fanned out from the main Allied base at Torokina : in the north , centre and southern parts of the island . The first actions were fought around the seizure of Pearl Ridge in late December 1944 to secure control of the east ? west avenues of approach across the island , and to prevent any possible Japanese counter @-@ attacks against Torokina . This was followed by actions in the north , where it was planned that Japanese forces would be forced into the narrow Bonis Peninsula and contained , while the main drive took place in the south , where the main Japanese forces were concentrated , with an initial drive towards Mosigetta , followed by an advance towards Buin on the coast . The

drive south subsequently resulted in several actions around Slater 's Knoll and around the Hongorai River .

= = = Preliminary moves = = =

In the northern sector of the island , in February 1945 , Major General Kesao Kijima ? commander of the Japanese 38th Independent Mixed Brigade ? had ordered a withdrawal to Numa Numa , following the fighting around Tsimba Ridge . He subsequently left a force of 1 @, @ 400 sailors drawn from the 87th Naval Garrison Force and 2 @, @ 000 civilians to hold the Bonis Peninsula . Of these civilians , about 600 were armed , although only half were trained to undertake a combat role . As their supplies dwindled , in May ? June the Japanese sailors ? under the command of Captain Eikichi Kato , the senior naval officer in Buka ? began to raid the Australian supply lines between Ruri Bay and Ratsua as they attempted to hold a position between Porton Plantation and Tarbut .

Meanwhile , Australian troops from the 11th Brigade had continued their advance north from Tsimba Ridge in April ? May , clearing up to the Soraken Peninsula , which was captured by the middle of the month by the 26th Infantry Battalion . Throughout May , the 26th had also carried out an amphibious landing on Torokori Island . Meanwhile , throughout the same time the 55th / 53rd Infantry Battalion had advanced north @-@ east " through mangrove swamps ... and rugged foothills " from the Soraken Plantation towards Pora Pora ; this was occupied by early May and from there the Australians ranged north to Ruri Bay , establishing a line across the Bonis Peninsula over a distance of 8 kilometres (5 @. @ 0 mi) . By the end of May , the Japanese fell back behind a series of fortified positions along the base of the Bonis Peninsula . The 26th Infantry Battalion subsequently replaced the 55th / 53rd , but the Australian advance came to a halt .

In an effort to break this resistance and allow the northwards advance to continue , the Australians attempted to outflank the Japanese defensive line by launching an amphibious landing at Porton Plantation on 8 June . The plan called for a reinforced company from the 31st / 51st Infantry Battalion to land behind the Japanese positions and attack from the west , while the main force consisting of the remainder of the 31st / 51st Infantry Battalion and the 26th Infantry Battalion attempted to break through from the south . Due to poor planning , inadequate resources and strong Japanese defence , the landing failed at considerable cost to Australians , and as their efforts turned towards effecting a withdrawal from the beachhead and rescuing the stranded men , the attempt by the main force to break through from Ratsua also failed as tired troops came up against strong Japanese defensive positions .

= = Battle = =

Following the failed landing by the Australians at Porton Plantation , the commander of the Australian II Corps , Savage , decided to focus the main effort of the Australian campaign upon driving south towards the Japanese garrison at Buin , where the bulk of the Japanese forces were holding out . In order to concentrate enough forces for the next phase of the operation , Savage decided that the 11th Brigade , which had been carrying the advance north , should be relieved so that it could be transferred to the south following a period of rest and reorganisation .

Nevertheless , there was still a need to maintain the pressure upon the Japanese in the north , and so the 23rd Brigade ? which had been previously operating in the central sector after being transferred from garrison duty in the Outer Islands ? was also given responsibility for the northern sector as well , relieving the 11th Brigade on 20 June . The brigade 's commander ? Brigadier Arnold Potts ? was charged with keeping the Japanese force bottled up on the Bonis Peninsula and to send out patrols towards the Buka Passage . Initially , Potts was only allowed to allocate one of his three battalions ? the 27th , under Lieutenant Colonel Alex Pope ? for the task , as the other two ? Lieutenant Colonel Harry Dunkley 's 7th Infantry Battalion and Lieutenant Colonel Lew Loughran 's 8th Infantry Battalion ? were to remain in the central sector ; however , after intelligence reports indicated that the Japanese forces in the northern sector were stronger than the Australians initially thought , he requested permission to transfer the 8th Infantry Battalion , along with a battery of

artillery from the 4th Field Regiment that was to be based on the Soraken Peninsula . Due to the requirements of the advance to the south , however , no engineer or armoured support was initially available .

This request was approved , and by 28 June the two battalions and their supporting artillery ? approximately 1 @, @ 600 troops ? were assembled , with the 8th on the left , or western side of the peninsula , the 27th on the right , and the artillery based on the Soraken Peninsula . The two battalions sent fighting patrols forward , but because of the dense terrain , the Australian line of communication was quite long and the infantry spread out over a very wide area . With each battalion occupying a 4 @, @ 000 @-@ yard (3 @, @ 700 m) front , which was twice the normal standard , security of their rear areas became difficult as the Japanese took the opportunity to disrupt the Australian logistic efforts , conducting ambushes , cutting communications and planting mines along the tracks . As the ambushes increased and casualties mounted , forward movement came to a halt , and by 21 July , the 27th Infantry Battalion reported having lost 10 men killed and 36 wounded without having gained any ground .

In light of this failure , the Australian brigade commander requested further resources to undertake a full @-@ scale offensive aimed at clearing the Japanese from the peninsula . This request was passed up to corps @-@ level , but it was denied as Savage could not afford to release assets that were being used in the drive south . Under pressure to keep casualties to a minimum following criticism in the Australian media and in Parliament regarding the necessity of the campaign , Potts formulated a plan to withdraw the 27th Infantry Battalion from the right flank around Ruri Bay , and concentrate his forces on the left flank along a 3 @, @ 000 @-@ yard (2 @, @ 700 m) front around the plantation at Buoi , to the north of Ratsua . Savage agreed to this on 22 July and the following day the 8th Infantry Battalion launched an attack against a feature known to the Australians as " Como Ridge " , which ran roughly northwest to southwest in the centre of the peninsula between Ruri Bay and Buoi Plantation . There it was believed that the Japanese were attempting to set up a forward position . The attack went in after a preliminary attack from the air , with one company attacking with two Matilda tanks from the 2 / 4th Armoured Regiment in support . Although the airstrike had been largely ineffective and both of the tanks struggled to cross the " swampy ground " , the direct fire support provided by the tanks proved decisive and the Australians took the position within 20 minutes , killing 12 Japanese .

On 24 July , the 8th Infantry Battalion launched another attack with two platoons assaulting the Japanese position known as " Base 5 " . Prior to the assault , over 900 artillery shells and mortar bombs were brought down on the Japanese positions to prepare the position for the attack , but this proved ineffective against well @-@ entrenched positions . The Australians reached their first objective , which was a small ridge in front of the main Japanese position ; however , shortly after they began receiving effective fire from concealed positions , which killed two men and wounded another in the forward section , pinning it in place .

Attempts to outflank the bunkers were answered with heavy fire from a Japanese medium machine gun and another man was killed and three more wounded . As the attack began to falter , one of the wounded , 20 @-@ year @-@ old Private Frank Partridge , who had been injured in the arm and thigh , braved the heavy fire that was being put down towards him and gathered the Bren light machine gun from the gunner who had been killed . After pouring suppressing fire onto the bunker , he discarded the Bren and regathered his rifle , before rushing towards the bunker with a grenade and killing its occupants . Partridge 's actions reinvigorated the attack and allowed the Australians to temporarily take the second Japanese position . After the wounded were recovered , the Australians withdrew having lost three men killed and five wounded . Against this eight Japanese were confirmed to have been killed . For his actions during the attack on 24 July , Partridge was awarded the Victoria Cross , the British Commonwealth 's highest military decoration . He was the last Australian to be awarded the medal during the Second World War , and was also the youngest .

Elsewhere , the Australians continued to mount patrols and ambushes . On 29 July , a platoon from the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) clashed with a similar sized force of Japanese around the junction of the Ratsua Road ? Umum Track . Two days later , after the PIB had assumed a flank security role on the eastern side of the peninsula , another patrol clashed with a party of Japanese

who had been attempting to set up an ambush near Ruri Bay . In the ensuing fight , 14 Japanese were killed ; a further 20 were killed in a firefight around the same area of 7 August . Meanwhile , on 2 August , a patrol from the 27th Infantry Battalion was sent out along the Ruri Bay Road in company with two tanks that were to act as their direct fire support . The Japanese were still active in the area , and had mined the road with a 500 lb (230 kg) bomb that they had rigged to be detonated remotely . The Australian patrol accidentally triggered the device and the resulting explosion killed three men in one of the tanks and wounded eight infantrymen following behind . On 5 August , the Australians reoccupied the position at Base 5 after encountering only slight resistance and subsequently named it " Part Ridge " . After exploiting the position , it was discovered that the Japanese had built between 43 and 60 bunkers in the area . The majority of these had been destroyed by artillery , though , and after the area had been thoroughly searched for Japanese stragglers , the Australian patrol was withdrawn from the ridge .

= = Aftermath = =

The fighting around Base 5 was the final action of the fighting in the northern sector of the island , which essentially ended in stalemate . The Australians , under pressure to limit casualties to their largely inexperienced troops , had pursued a cautious campaign and had been slow to regain the initiative in the area following the defeat at Porton Plantation . In contrast , the Japanese commander ? Kato ? had been skillful and aggressive . On 11 August , in anticipation of the capitulation of Japan following the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese cities , the order to cease offensive combat operations on Bougainville was passed to all Australian units by their commanders .

Three days later , on 15 August , the Japanese Emperor Hirohito publicly announced Japan 's unconditional surrender , effectively bringing about an end to the war . On 18 August , in the southern sector of the island the Japanese commander , General Masatane Kanda , dispatched an envoy across the flood swollen Mivo River to begin negotiations with the Australians for the surrender of the over 23 @, @ 000 Japanese soldiers left on the island , bringing about an end to the campaign . Throughout the course of the fighting on Bougainville from November 1944 to August 1945 , 526 Australians were killed , while a further 1 @, @ 572 were wounded . Approximately 8 @, @ 500 Japanese were killed in action and a further 9 @, @ 800 died from disease during this same period .