

= Battle of Kaiapit =

The Battle of Kaiapit was an action fought in 1943 between Australian and Japanese forces in New Guinea during the Markham and Ramu Valley ? Finisterre Range campaign of World War II . Following the landings at Nadzab and at Lae , the Allies attempted to exploit their success with an advance into the upper Markham Valley , starting with Kaiapit . The Japanese intended to use Kaiapit to threaten the Allied position at Nadzab , and to create a diversion to allow the Japanese garrison at Lae time to escape .

The Australian 2 / 6th Independent Company flew in to the Markham Valley from Port Moresby in 13 USAAF C @-@ 47 Dakotas , making a difficult landing on a rough airstrip . Unaware that a much larger Japanese force was also headed for Kaiapit , the company attacked the village on 19 September to secure the area so that it could be developed into an airfield . The company then held it against a strong counterattack . During two days of fighting the Australians defeated a larger Japanese force while suffering relatively few losses .

The Australian victory at Kaiapit enabled the Australian 7th Division to be flown in to the upper Markham Valley . It accomplished the 7th Division 's primary mission , for the Japanese could no longer threaten Lae or Nadzab , where a major airbase was being developed . The victory also led to the capture of the entire Ramu Valley , which provided new forward fighter airstrips for the air war against the Japanese .

= = Background = =

= = = Geography = = =

The Markham Valley is part of a flat , elongated depression varying from 8 to 32 kilometres (5 @.@ 0 to 19 @.@ 9 mi) wide that cuts through the otherwise mountainous terrain of the interior of New Guinea , running from the mouth of the Markham River near the port of Lae , to that of the Ramu River 600 kilometres (370 mi) away . The two rivers flow in opposite directions , separated by an invisible divide about 130 kilometres (81 mi) from Lae . The area is flat and suitable for airstrips , although it is intercut by many tributaries of the two main rivers . Between the Ramu Valley and Madang lies the rugged and aptly named Finisterre Ranges .

= = = Military situation = = =

Following the landing at Nadzab , General Sir Thomas Blamey , the Allied Land Forces commander , intended to exploit his success with an advance into the upper Markham Valley , which would protect Nadzab from Japanese ground attack , and serve as a jumping off point for an overland advance into the Ramu Valley to capture airfield sites there . On 16 September 1943 ? the same day that Lae fell ? Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Herring , commander of I Corps , Major General George Alan Vasey , commander of the 7th Division , and Major General Ennis Whitehead , commander of the Advanced Echelon , Fifth Air Force , met at Whitehead 's headquarters . Whitehead wanted fighter airstrips established in the Kaiapit area by 1 November 1943 in order to bring short @-@ range fighters within range of the major Japanese base at Wewak . The 7th Division 's mission was to prevent the Japanese at Madang from using the Markham and Ramu valleys to threaten Lae or Nadzab . Vasey and Herring considered both an overland operation to capture Dumpu , and an airborne operation using paratroops of the US Army 's 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment . Blamey did not agree with their idea of capturing Dumpu first , insisting that Kaiapit be taken beforehand .

Until a road could be opened from Lae , the Kaiapit area could only be supplied by air and there were a limited number of transport aircraft . Even flying in an airborne engineer aviation battalion to improve the airstrip would have involved taking aircraft away from operations supporting the 7th Division at Nadzab . Moreover , Whitehead warned that he could not guarantee adequate air

support for both Kaiapit and the upcoming Finschhafen operation at the same time . However , Herring calculated that the 7th Division had sufficient reserves at Nadzab to allow maintenance flights to be suspended for a week or so after the capture of Kaiapit . He planned to seize Kaiapit with an overland advance from Nadzab by independent companies , the Papuan Infantry Battalion , and the 7th Division 's 21st Infantry Brigade .

Fifth Air Force commander Lieutenant General George Kenney later recalled that Colonel David W. " Photo " Hutchison , who had been the air task force commander at Marilinan and had moved over to Nadzab to take charge of air activities there , was told to work out the problem with Vasey : " I didn 't care how it was done but I wanted a good forward airdrome about a hundred miles further up the Markham Valley . Photo Hutchison and Vasey were a natural team . They both knew what I wanted and Vasey not only believed that the air force could perform miracles but that the 7th Division and the Fifth Air Force working together could do anything . "

The airstrip at Kaiapit was reconnoitred on 11 September 1943 by No. 4 Squadron RAAF , which reported that it was apparently in good condition , with the Kunai grass recently cut . Lieutenant Everette E. Frazier , USAAF , selected a level , burned @-@ off area near the Leron River , not far from Kaiapit , and landed in an L @-@ 4 Piper Cub . He determined that it would be possible to land C @-@ 47 Dakota aircraft there . On 16 September , Hutchison approved the site for Dakotas to land .

= = Prelude = =

The 2 / 6th Independent Company arrived in Port Moresby from Australia on 2 August 1943 . The unit had fought in Papua in 1942 in the Battle of Buna ? Gona and had since conducted intensive training in Queensland . The company was under the command of Captain Gordon King , who had been its second in command at Buna . King received a warning order on 12 September alerting him to prepare for the capture of Kaiapit , and had access to detailed aerial photographs of the area .

An independent company at this time had a nominal strength of 20 officers and 275 other ranks . Larger than a conventional infantry company , it was organised into three platoons , each of three sections , each of which contained two subsections . It had considerable firepower . Each subsection had a Bren light machine gun . The gunner 's two assistants carried rifles and extra 30 @-@ round Bren magazines . A sniper also carried a rifle , as did one man equipped with rifle grenades . The remaining four or five men carried Owen submachine guns . Each platoon also had a section of 2 @-@ inch mortars .

The company was self @-@ supporting , with its own engineer , signals , transport , and quartermaster sections . The signals section had a powerful but cumbersome Wireless Set No. 11 for communicating with the 7th Division . Powered by lead @-@ acid batteries which were recharged with petrol generators , it required multiple signallers to carry and the noise was liable to attract the attention of the enemy . The platoons were equipped with the new Army No. 208 Wireless Sets . These were small , portable sets developed for the communication needs of units on the move in jungle warfare . However , the 2 / 6th Independent Company had not had time to work with them operationally .

For three days in a row , the 2 / 6th Independent Company prepared to fly out from Port Moresby , only to be told that its flight had been cancelled due to bad weather . On 17 September 1943 , 13 Dakotas of the US 374th Troop Carrier Group finally took off for Leron . King flew in the lead plane , which was piloted by Captain Frank C. Church , whom Kenney described as " one of Hutchison 's ' hottest ' troop carrier pilots " . As it came in to land , King spotted patrols from the Papuan Infantry Battalion in the area .

One of the Dakotas blew a tyre touching down on the rough airstrip ; another tried to land on one wheel . Its undercarriage collapsed and it made a belly landing . The former was subsequently salvaged , but the latter was a total loss . King sent out patrols that soon located Captain J. A. Chalk 's B Company , Papuan Infantry Battalion , which was operating in the area . That evening Chalk and King received airdropped messages from Vasey instructing them to occupy Kaiapit as soon as possible , and prepare a landing strip for troop @-@ carrying aircraft . Vasey informed them that

only small Japanese parties that had escaped from Lae were in the area , and their morale was very low . Vasey flew in to Leron on 18 September to meet with King . Vasey 's orders were simple : " Go to Kaiapit quickly , clean up the Japs and inform division . "

As it happened , the Japanese commander , Major General Masutaro Nakai of the 20th Division , had ordered a sizeable force to move to Kaiapit under the command of Major Yonekura Tsuneo . Yonekura 's force included the 9th and 10th Companies of the 78th Infantry Regiment , the 5th Company of the 80th Infantry Regiment , a heavy machine @-@ gun section , a signals section and an engineer company ? a total of about 500 troops . From Kaiapit it was to threaten the Allied position at Nadzab , creating a diversion to allow the Japanese garrison at Lae time to escape . The main body left Yokopi in the Finisterre Range on 6 September but was delayed by heavy rains that forced the troops to move , soaking wet , through muddy water for much of the way . Only the advance party of this force had reached Kaiapit by 18 September , by which time Lae had already fallen . Yonekura 's main body , moving by night to avoid being sighted by Allied aircraft , was by this time no further from Kaiapit than King , but had two rivers to cross . Since both were heading for the same objective , a clash was inevitable .

= = Battle = =

King assembled his troops at Sangan , about 16 kilometres (9 @. @ 9 mi) south of Kaiapit , except for one section under Lieutenant E. F. Maxwell that had been sent ahead to scout the village . On the morning of 19 September , King set out for Kaiapit , leaving behind his quartermaster , transport and engineering sections , which would move the stores left behind at the Leron River first to Sangan and then to Kaiapit on the 20th . He took one section of Papuans with him , leaving Chalk and the rest of his men to escort the native carriers bringing up the stores .

King 's men walked for fifty minutes at a time and then rested for ten . The going was relatively easy insofar as the ground was fairly flat , but the 2 @-@ metre (6 @. @ 6 ft) high Kunai grass trapped the heat and humidity and the men were heavily loaded with ammunition . The company reached Ragitumkiap , a village within striking distance of Kaiapit , at 14 : 45 . While his men had a brief rest , King attempted to contact the large Army No. 11 Wireless Set he had left behind at Sangan ? and from there Vasey back at Nadzab ? with the new Army No. 208 Wireless Sets he had brought with him . Unfortunately , King found that their range was insufficient . He also heard shots being fired in the distance and guessed that Maxwell 's section had been discovered .

The 2 / 6th Independent Company formed up at 15 : 15 in Kunai grass about 1 @, @ 200 metres (1 @, @ 300 yd) from Kaiapit . As the company advanced it came under fire from foxholes on the edge of the village . A 2 @-@ inch mortar knocked out a light machine gun . The foxholes were outflanked and taken out with hand grenades and bayonets . The Japanese withdrew , leaving 30 dead behind . The Australians suffered two killed and seven wounded , including King , who was lightly wounded .

The company established a defensive position for the night . While they were doing so , Lieutenant D. B. Stuart , the commander of one of the Papuan platoons , arrived . They had become concerned when radio contact had been lost and he had been sent to find out what was going on . King ordered him to bring the Papuans up from Sangan with extra ammunition and the No. 11 set . At around 17 : 30 , a native appeared with a message for the Japanese commander . The paper was taken from him and he was shot when he tried to escape . Later , a Japanese patrol returned to Kaiapit , unaware that it was now in Australian hands . They were killed when they stumbled across a Bren gun position . Four more Japanese soldiers returned after midnight . One of them escaped .

Yonekura and his men had reached Kaiapit after an exhausting night march . Yonekura was aware that the Australians had reached Kaiapit but his main concern was not to be caught in the open by Allied aircraft . Spotting Australian positions in the pre @-@ dawn light , the Japanese column opened fire . A torrent of fire descended on the Australians , who replied sporadically , attempting to conserve their ammunition . Although he was running low on ammunition , King launched an immediate counter @-@ attack on the Japanese , which took them by surprise .

Lieutenant Derrick Watson 's C Platoon set out at around 06 : 15 and advanced to the edge of

Village 3 , a distance of about 200 yards (180 m) , before becoming pinned down by heavy Japanese fire . King then sent Captain Gordon Blainey 's A Platoon around the right flank , towards the high ground on Mission Hill which overlooked the battlefield . It was secured by 07 : 30 . In the meantime , some of the 2 / 6th Independent Company 's signallers and headquarters personnel gathered together what ammunition they could , and delivered it to C Platoon at around 07 : 00 . C Platoon then fixed bayonets and continued its advance .

The commander of No. 9 Section of C Platoon , Lieutenant Bob Balderstone , was nicked by a bullet , apparently fired by one of his own men . He led his section in an advance across 70 yards (64 m) of open ground , and attacked three Japanese machine gun posts with hand grenades . He was later awarded the Military Cross for his " high courage and leadership " . Lieutenant Reg Hallion led his No. 3 Section of A Platoon against the Japanese positions at the base of Mission Hill . He was killed in an attack on a machine gun post , but his section captured the position and killed twelve Japanese . By 10 : 00 , the action was over .

After the action , King 's men counted 214 Japanese bodies , and estimated that another 50 or more lay dead in the tall grass . Yonekura was among the dead . The Australians suffered 14 killed and 23 wounded . Abandoned equipment included 19 machine guns , 150 rifles , 6 grenade throwers and 12 Japanese swords .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Consolidation = = =

The 2 / 6th Independent Company had won a significant victory , but now had 23 wounded and was very low on ammunition . Frazier landed on the newly captured airstrip in his Piper Cub at 12 : 30 . He rejected the airstrip as unsuitable for Dakotas , and oversaw the preparation of a new airstrip on better ground near Mission Hill . This was still a difficult approach , as aircraft had to land upwind while avoiding Mission Hill . Although it was not known if the airstrip would be ready , Hutchison flew in for a test landing there the next day , 21 September , at 15 : 30 . He collected the wounded and flew them to Nadzab , and returned an hour later with a load of rations and ammunition . He also brought with him Brigadier Ivan Dougherty , the commander of the 21st Infantry Brigade , and his headquarters , who took charge of the area . Around 18 : 00 , six more transports arrived .

Vasey was concerned about the security of the Kaiapit area , as he believed that the Japanese were inclined to continue with a plan once it was in motion . Taking advantage of good flying weather on 22 September , 99 round trips were made between Nadzab and Kaiapit . Most of the 2 / 16th Infantry Battalion and some American engineers were flown in . The 2 / 14th Infantry Battalion and a battery of the 2 / 4th Field Regiment arrived on 25 September , and Brigadier Kenneth Eather 's 25th Infantry Brigade began to arrive two days later , freeing Dougherty to advance on Dumpu .

= = = Base development = = =

Kaiapit did not become an important airbase . By the time engineering surveys of the area had been completed , as a direct consequence of the victory at Kaiapit , Dougherty 's men had captured Gusap . There , the engineers found a well @-@ drained area with soil conditions suitable for the construction of all @-@ weather airstrips , an unobstructed air approach and a pleasant climate . It was therefore decided to limit construction at the swampy and malarial Kaiapit and concentrate on Gusap , where the US 871st , 872nd and 875th Airborne Aviation Engineer Battalions constructed ten airstrips and numerous facilities . Although some equipment was carried on the trek overland , most had to be flown in and nearly all of it was worn out by the time the work was completed . The first P @-@ 40 Kittyhawk fighter squadron began operating from Gusap in November and an all @-@ weather fighter runway was completed in January 1944 . The airstrip at Gusap " paid for itself many times over in the quantity of Japanese aircraft , equipment and personnel destroyed by Allied attack missions projected from it . "

= = = War crimes = = =

Three natives were found at Kaiapit who had been tied with rope to the uprights of a native hut and had then been bayoneted . As a result of the Moscow Declaration , the Minister for External Affairs , Dr. H. V. Evatt , commissioned a report by William Webb on war crimes committed by the Japanese . Webb took depositions from three members of the 2 / 6th Independent Company about the Kaiapit incident which formed part of his report , which was submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission in 1944 .

= = = Results = = =

The 2 / 6th Independent Company had defeated the vanguard of Nakai 's force and stopped his advance down the Markham Valley dead in its tracks . The Battle of Kaiapit accomplished Vasey 's primary mission , for the Japanese could no longer threaten Nadzab . It opened the gate to the Ramu Valley for the 21st Infantry Brigade , provided new forward fighter airstrips for the air war against the Japanese , and validated the Australian Army 's new training methods and the organisational emphasis on firepower .

Vasey later told King that " We were lucky , we were very lucky . " King countered that " if you 're inferring that what we did was luck , I don 't agree with you sir because I think we weren 't lucky , we were just bloody good . " Vasey replied that what he meant was that he , Vasey , was lucky . He confided to Herring that he felt that he had made a potentially disastrous mistake : " it is quite wrong to send out a small unit like the 2 / 6th Independent Company so far that they cannot be supported . "

The Japanese believed that they had been attacked by " an Australian force in unexpected strength " . One Japanese historian , Tanaka Kengoro , went so far as to argue that the mission of the Nakai Detachment ? to threaten Nadzab so as to draw Allied attention away from the troops escaping from Lae ? was achieved ; this argument passed over the fact that Nakai fully intended to hold Kaiapit , just as the Allies planned to secure it as a base for future operations . The Australian historian , David Dexter , concluded that the " leisurely Nakai was outwitted by the quick @-@ thinking and aggressive Vasey . " In the end , Vasey had moved faster , catching the Japanese off balance . The credit for getting to Kaiapit went first to the USAAF aircrews that managed to make a difficult landing on the rough airstrip at Leron . The 2 / 6th Independent Company proved to be the ideal unit for the mission , as it combined determined leadership with thorough training and effective firepower .

For his part in the battle , King was awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 20 January 1944 . He considered it a form of unit award , and later regretted not asking Whitehead for an American Distinguished Unit Citation , such as was awarded to D Company of the 6th Battalion , Royal Australian Regiment , for a similar action in the Battle of Long Tan in 1966 .