

The opening months of 1942 were perhaps the darkest days of the Second World War for Australia, with the seemingly unstoppable advance of Imperial Japanese forces across Asia and into the Pacific. The Japanese were intent on capturing Port Moresby on the south coast of Papua and isolating the Australian mainland. As Japan's defeat in the battle of the Coral Sea prevented the capture of Port Moresby by sea, the Japanese decided to attack it by land. Landing on Papua's north coast in July 1942, Japanese forces advanced inland across the Owen Stanley Range along what would become known as the Kokoda Trail; they also landed at Milne Bay but were decisively defeated. The Japanese were eventually forced to withdraw back across the Kokoda Trail. Final bloody battles in Papua were fought on the beaches at Buna, Gona and Sanananda.

The campaign along the Kokoda Trail would become an epic feat of endurance, featuring hand-to-hand combat and many acts of individual bravery.

After Singapore fell to the Japanese Army in February 1942, the focus of the Pacific War moved closer to Australia. Japanese forces bombed Darwin and launched an attack to try to capture the capital city of Papua, Port Moresby. Australian troops battled for seven desperate months on the Kokoda Trail to protect Port Moresby. By January 1943 Australian troops had helped to defeat the Japanese forces on Papua and stop Japan's advance across the Pacific.

WHAT THE JAPANESE THOUGHT OF THE AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS:

‘In the Kokoda battle, [the Australian soldiers’] qualities of adaptability and individual initiative enabled them to show tremendous ability as fighting men in the jungle. They were superb.’

-Lieutenant-General Tsutomu Yoshihara, Chief of Staff of Japan’s South Seas Army









Why was Port Moresby important?

Port Moresby was important because any Allied attack north through New Guinea towards Rabaul required Port Moresby as a base. Similarly for any attack south towards Australia, the Japanese required Port Moresby.

Amphibious operations—the sending of armies across the sea to invade another land mass—require a base from which to prepare and launch the operation. The closer the base is to the objective the better. If it is too far away then the operation will fall short in two key requirements: First, Fighter aircraft are required to fly air cover over the invading fleet before, during and after the amphibious landing. Fighters in 1942 had a short range so needed airfields close to the objective. Secondly, transport ships must, after the invasion has occurred, constantly shuttle back and forth from the base to the landing point to provide supplies, equipment and reinforcements. If the base is too far from the landing point the turnaround time will be too great and an impossible number of ships will be required to ensure the invasion force builds up its strength more rapidly than the defenders can build up theirs.

In 1942 the Japanese were capable of launching amphibious operations in the south-west Pacific up to a maximum of 800 kilometres away from their base at Rabaul. This is also the distance from Port Moresby to a suitable invasion site in north Queensland: Cairns.

Today, Port Moresby is a peaceful place. With a thriving port, and central business district, it is nothing like it was in 1942. Then, as the main objective of the Japanese in Papua, it was bombed from the air over a hundred times. More than its airfields, storage facilities, and a fresh water supply, the Japanese desired this harbour. From here, should the Japanese so decide, their fleet could launch an invasion of Australia. Without this harbour in their hands, that was not possible. [Further into the harbour, houses on stilts crowd the shallow waters of a cove. Many houses in the coastal village have rusted roofs. A cargo ship waits nearby. Across the harbour, the sea is visible beyond the tree-clad slopes.] Allied anti-aircraft positions still lie on the surrounding hills. The wreck of the MV Macdui, sunk by air attack on 17 June 1942, can still be seen in the harbour.

JAPANESE BOMB PORT MORESBY







**PORT MORESBY, PAPUA.
1942-07-11. A MACHINE
GUN CARRIER GOES IN
TO THE ATTACK
THROUGH THICK BUSH
DURING MANOEUVRES
CARRIED OUT BY
AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY
IN THE NEW GUINEA
BUSH.**



PORT MORESBY, NEW GUINEA. 1914-08. INSCRIPTION ON VERSO: "DIGGING TRENCHES, RADIO STATION, PORT MORESBY, AUG 1914". NATIVES DIG INSIDE THE BARBED WIRE PERIMETER FENCE, WITH SANDBAGS MARKING THE LINE OF THE TRENCH. (ORIGINAL PRINT HELD IN AWM PR91/102)

**PORT MORESBY
WAS ALSO
IMPORTANT AS
EARLY AS WW1**



**PORT MORESBY, NEW
GUINEA. 1914-08.
INSCRIPTION ON VERSO:
"GROUP OF A.C. (ARMED
CONSTABULARY?) AT
RADIO STATION...AUG
1914, AWAITING
INSTRUCTIONS FIRST DAY
OF WAR, BEFORE STATION
WAS ENTRENCHED". THE
GROUP COMPRISES
EUROPEANS AS WELL AS
ARMED NATIVE
CONSTABULARY
MEMBERS (RIGHT).**

(ORIGINAL PRINT HELD IN AWM
PR91/102)

