

American forces were advancing across the Pacific in early 1945, leap-frogging Japanese island bases in their haste to come within striking distance of Japan itself. General Douglas MacArthur and Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, the commanders of the American and the Australian forces, agreed that Australia would assume responsibility for mopping up the many Japanese troops left behind.

One major Japanese base was the large island of Bougainville, at the northern end of the Solomon Islands chain in the south-west Pacific. The Australian strategy in central and north Bougainville at this time was to maintain pressure towards Numa Numa on the central eastern coast, and to drive the Japanese from the north. Japanese troops had been coming down from the northern areas to reinforce Numa Numa and the Allies hoped that a determined thrust would clear northern Bougainville right up to the Buka Passage.

The campaign began in the first week of January with the concentration of the 31st/51st Battalion at Sipaai on the west coast. The plan was to patrol inland so as to flush the Japanese troops to the coast, where they could be eliminated by a combination of infantry and artillery fire. The plan worked well, with patrols encountering the Japanese in a series of short engagements. Then on 20 January, D Company, commanded by Captain Thomas H.A. Titley, moving along a coastal track, came across a strong enemy position atop Tsimba Ridge. This steep ridge was immediately south of the Genga River and it was on this feature that the Japanese commander, Lieutenant Colonel Nakamura Shinzō, had decided to make his stand to stop the Australian advance.

Tsimba Ridge begins where a 20-metre-high cliff rises from the sea and runs east for about 200 metres before dropping much lower. The landward end of the ridge has a steep spur (which became known as The Pimple) running south-west, and between this spur and the main ridge was a relatively flat area of native gardens. South of the ridge was dense jungle and to the north, between the ridge and Genga River, was yet more jungle. Nakamura had dug trenches along the crest of the ridge with interlocking fields of fire and protected lines of communications. The expected line



Left: A 75-millimetre pack howitzer of the 2nd Mountain Battery, of the type used to support the 31st/51st Battalion in the assault on Tsimba Ridge. AWM 072309, AWM 072309

of attack was across the flat garden area; this offered attackers no cover at all, as it was covered by fire from the ridge and by Japanese artillery located just north of the mouth of the Genga.

Titley's men made a hasty attack, attempting to outflank the ridge by crossing the lower area east of the Pimple. Although unsuccessful, they managed to capture and hold the Pimple. Guns of the 2nd Mountain Battery were brought up and the ridge was shelled on 23 January, followed by an unsuccessful assault the following day.

The position appeared to be stalemated, with the well-entrenched and supplied Japanese in a strong position. The

Opposite above: Japanese autographed flag captured by Private Paul Maurer of the 31st/51st Battalion during the North Bougainville campaign. AWM RELAWM32151

Opposite below: Troops of the 31st/51st Battalion unloading stores at Sipaai. AWM 078292

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Left: Lieutenant Edward Tuckwell and the crew of a 101st Brigade Support Company 4.2-inch mortar at Tsimba Ridge. AWM 0079024

Right: Engineers from the 31st/51st Battalion building a road around the Pimple to the Genga River. AWM 079128



commanding officer of 31st/51st Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel J.L.A. Kelly, a veteran of Tobruk and El Alamein, decided on a bold move to cut the Japanese lines of communication and to divert their attention from Tsimba Ridge. On 25 January, 15 Platoon of C Company crossed the Genga 800 metres from the Pimple, north of the ridge, and established a bridgehead. Japanese reaction was swift, with the platoon fighting to hold on through the night until the remainder of the company could cross the next morning. The water was too deep to ford and so the crossing was made using rubber boats, pulled back and forth by ropes. The presence of crocodiles added a further element of danger to the operation.

The Japanese resented this incursion into "their" area. Determined assaults were unleashed against the Australians by Japanese naval forces, renowned for their fighting spirit and refusal to accept defeat. They charged the bridgehead in massed formations.

The Australians, occupying weapon pits protected by felled logs but swamped with water seeping in from the river, responded with grenades, and Bren and rifle fire. The

attacks mostly came at night and the men of the 31st/51st set up lines of booby traps to catch the Japanese as they approached. These traps consisted of grenades inside jam tins which blew up almost the instant they were touched because of their one-second fuses. The Japanese countered by advancing with long poles thrashing the jungle in front of them: this meant impending attacks could be detected by their shouting and by the sound of exploding booby traps.

The Japanese attacks have been described as "maniacal". These men appeared to care nothing for themselves and the ground in front of the Australians was soon littered with their bodies. Carrion birds soon began to feed on these, providing yet another warning for the defenders as they arose shrieking as attackers moved forward through the lines of their own dead.

The fiercest attack on the bridgehead occurred at dusk on 29 January, beginning at 5.35 pm. The attack came from both east and west simultaneously and overran three lines of booby traps. The determination of the attackers was matched by the men of C Company and the attackers were thrown back after managing to enter a weapon pit. The ferocity of the charge enabled two determined Japanese armed with swords to inflict casualties. A Bren gunner, parrying a sword slash with the butt of his weapon, had his wrist almost severed. The swordsman was shot dead; on later examination, it was found that he was a naval petty officer who had prepared for his death that day by swathing his body with clean white ceremonial bandages beneath his uniform.

C Company commander Captain A.L. "Blue" Shilton, a veteran of the Western Desert and Syrian campaigns, decided to take the offensive. Immediately after the afternoon attack had been repulsed, a





counter-attack was launched by 13 Platoon, commanded by Sergeant Eddie O'Farrell. The men rose from their muddy holes in the jungle floor and charged into the Japanese.

The Australian artillery of the 2nd Mountain Battery was then able to give protective fire to the bridgehead with their 75-millimetre pack howitzers. This, combined with the serious casualties incurred by the dusk attack on 29 January

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and the ensuing counter-attack, resulted in a scaling-down of Japanese attacks on the bridgehead. Although the position continued to be contested, the level of attacks was much lower than before. A line of communication was established by the Pioneer platoon between the Pimple and the bridgehead, enabling the movement of reinforcements and supplies.


Tsimba Ridge itself now became the focus of the battle. The men of the 31st/51st Battalion prepared to take the remainder of the ridge. To supplement the battalion's 3-inch mortars, a platoon of heavy (4.2-inch) mortars came forward, and a 75-millimetre howitzer of the 2nd Mountain Battery was secretly installed only 200 metres from the Japanese-held ridge. The gun weighed over a tonne and, even though it could be broken into sections, had to be manhandled into position – one of those extra efforts in which the gunners excelled. The noise associated with emplacing the gun was masked by fire from the mortars, and Vickers machine-gun

fire denied the Japanese observers while undergrowth was cleared. The gun fired a 6.4-kilogram high explosive projectile at a rate of fire of six rounds a minute. Maximum range was 8,680 metres and, at only 200 metres and firing over open sights, the Mountain Battery gunners presented a battle-winning advantage to the Australians. The remainder of the battery was sited further to the south, in support.

The assault on the ridge began with an artillery barrage at 8.20 am on 6 February. 10 and 11 Platoons of Captain M.N.J. Harris's B Company assembled on a start line just east of the Pimple and at "H" hour moved uphill and westward to the Japanese trenches. 12 Platoon, meanwhile, had begun a dummy advance across the native gardens – the approach expected by the Japanese – and this distracted the defenders while 10 and 11 Platoons came in on their flank and rear.

The Japanese defended fiercely to the end, and inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking Australians, despite the effective artillery cover. In all, 500 shells and bombs were fired in this assault, and the Japanese were eventually driven out of their positions except for a pocket they doggedly held on to at the western tip of the ridge overlooking the cliff. This position was subjected to mortar and artillery fire, and finally, on 9 February, an air strike by RAAF Wirraways. When the infantry went in they found the pocket deserted, save only for bodies of the dead. The entire Tsimba Ridge and the north bank of the Genga River were finally in Australian hands.

The Japanese attempt to block the Australian advance north along the western coast of Bougainville had been decisively defeated. Japanese casualties had been heavy in the campaign that lasted just over a month and a number of artillery pieces had been captured. The cost to the Australians was also heavy: 34 men had been killed and a further 91 wounded. Evacuation of casualties was a nightmare in mountainous jungle country. The battle had been fought in fierce tropical heat and rain, which resulted in constant dampness; the men had had little opportunity for rest; and it had been difficult to obtain supplies.

Nevertheless, the men of 31st/51st Battalion, AIF, had shown they were better than the best of the forces they faced, and were able to push on with the advance to the north. 

Left: Privates Robert Cross and Sidney Turner from the 31st/51st Battalion, who were both wounded at Tsimba Ridge. AWM 079032

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