

Australia and Papua New Guinea – The significance of WWI and WWII

by Roy Ranney- 28/01/2025

As its nearest neighbour, Australia's task has been complex but tackled with positive determination and enthusiasm.

Pre-independence PNG was developed by the Australian Administration, by private enterprise and by the missions.

Australia also fought on PNG's behalf with the following notable Australian actions.

WWI

- 110th Anniversary of the Battle of Bitapaka, 11th September 1914 This was significant for many reasons:
 - The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (A N & M E F) was the first combined operation comprising a seaborne invasion of army and navy, raised in Australia. Units of the Royal Australian Navy escorted the force.
 - It was the first Australian action of WWI and the first action under the full command of Australia.
- It was the first time any Australian or British force fought the Germans on their own Territory.
- It was sent to seize German New Guinea and capture the German wireless station at Bitapaka. It was also tasked with dismantling the vital communication systems that supported German naval assets based in the Pacific.
- The AN&MEF secured the first surrender of WWI. It was Australia's first decisive battle and victory as a nation.
- The first decorations of WWI were awarded for action at Rabaul.
- The first Australian casualties, including six killed in action, occurred in New Guinea on 11 September 1914.
- Australia's first submarine, AE1, disappeared off the coast of Rabaul on 14 September 1914.
- Strategically it was important because there was a presence of a German fleet in the Pacific that threatened the sea lanes.

And in WWII

- The Battle of Rabaul. The capital of the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea. Rabaul, was invaded and occupied on 23 January 1942. This was the first action on what was then an Australian territory. See article [HERE](#).

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- The first shot fired in war, on Australian territory, was at Rabaul in January 1942.
- Australia's first prisoners-of-war and civilian internees taken on Australian soil. Most of these were later killed when the Japanese POW transport, Montevideo Maru, was torpedoed off the coast of the Philippines. It remains Australia's greatest maritime disaster.
- The Battle of the Coral Sea took place between May 4 – 8, 1942 in the Coral Sea, which separates Australia, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. It's relevance is:
 - First carrier-vs-carrier battle: This was the first time in history that aircraft carriers and their planes fought head-to-head in combat.
 - First naval battle without ships firing at each other: the first naval battle in which the opposing forces of surface ships at no stage sighted or fired at each other. All attacks were carried out by aircraft.
 - It is also the largest naval battle that has ever been fought off Australia's shores.
 - The Japanese were defeated for the first time in a major operation
- The battle prevented the Japanese from invading Port Moresby by sea.
- The Kokoda Campaign took place from July 21 to November 16, 1942.

The Kokoda Campaign was seen as the final line of defence between the Japanese and Australia. Kokoda, as part of the Battle for Australia, saved Australia from invasion.

The Kokoda Track is a location of national significance to Australians.

- The Battle of Wewak (December 1944 – September 1945) was an Australian offensive, aimed at destroying the last major Japanese position in the pre-war area of Australian New Guinea.
- The final Japanese surrender in PNG came on 13 September 1945, one month after VP Day on 15 August 1945. It marked the end of the war against Japan in the Pacific and the end of World War II. You can read about it [HERE](#).