

THE FIGHTING SHIP THEY COULD NOT SCRAP

On Thursday, February 13, the R.A.N. destroyer H.M.A.S. Arunta capsized and sank 60 miles east of Broken Bay, while being towed to a Taiwan scrap yard.

The destroyer was being towed unmanned, guns spiked, by the Japanese tug, Toko Maru.

Arunta was launched from Cockatoo Dockyard in 1942 and only a few months later sank the Japanese submarine, RO33, off Port Moresby.

It fought in the savage full-scale naval battle off the Suriago Straits, leading a column of destroyers in a close-range torpedo attack on Japanese ships.

It figured in the battle of Milne Bay and the recapture of Manus, Biak, Noemfoor and other stepping-stones before taking part in the massive landing at Leyte.

Arunta later served in Korea and Malaya. Then came 11 years in reserve and final sale for scrap. Her two sister ships, Bataan and Warramunga, had already gone to the breakers' yards. But this grand old ship decided this was not for her and instead she "turned turtle".

ARUNTA ESCORTS D COY. (2/1)

The story of the Arunta capsize no doubt brought a lump to the throat of every D. Coy. (2/1) member who sailed on the M.V. Anshun from Brisbane on the 29th August, 1942, en route for Milne Bay.

After leaving Townsville on the 2nd September, the Anshun was escorted by the Arunta and on the evening of the 4th September a Japanese cruiser took up the chase.

The captain of the Arunta brought the destroyer alongside the small Chinese supply ship and informed the Captain, per medium of a megaphone, that the Jap cruiser was following them and asked what was the fastest speed he could go. The Anshun Captain replied with eight knots and was then told to clap it on and that the Arunta would move east and attempt to draw off the cruiser.

The Anshun arrived at the Gili Gili jetty, Milne Bay, on the 5th Septem-

ber and after D Coy. (2/1) had disembarked was sunk by the Japanese cruiser.

At the same time the hospital ship, Manunda, was only a mile away, but the cruiser did not harm her, even though they shone their searchlight all over the ship.

It was reported that Catalinas sighted the Jap cruiser the next day and led our bombers to her and was very smartly sunk.

THE BATTLE FOR MILNE BAY

The full story is one of high courage and human endurance; a story of unbelievably difficult conditions, of nerves and stamina strained to breaking point, of an enemy whose fanatical resistance was equalled only by his barbarism. It is a story of drama, but not of dramatics.

Much has been written of atrocities alleged to have been committed by the Japanese. Some of this was propaganda, but it has been established beyond doubt that the Japanese committed barbaric acts against our troops which branded them as the lowest order of savages. Evidence of specific cases of enemy atrocities existed, as did evidence of their barbarism.

Japanese savagery also manifested itself in the shooting of their own troops attempting to surrender, and the shooting of wounded who could not be evacuated. Japanese have posed as dead and have shot those of our men about to give honourable burial to the enemy dead.

It was easy and understandable when the Japanese triumph was at its height, and when the threat to Australia was most grave and imminent, to regard the Japanese as a super soldier. Just as Europe regarded the German when Hitler's jack-booted legions stormed across prostrate countries to the Baltic Sea, the English Channel, and the Atlantic Ocean. Of the Japanese soldier it has been said, though not in these

words, that he was the nearest thing in human form to a bush animal. That is very true. Coupled with treachery, quick cunning, and a standard of living lower than that of most domesticated animals, with slavish obedience to his superiors, an ability to withstand conditions that would appal a European, and an ideology which preferred death to surrender or capture.

But he was no superman and he was no match for Australian and American soldiers who could be trained, as he was, in the wiles and strategy of jungle warfare. If the Papuan campaign proved anything, it proved that.

PLAN TO TAKE MORESBY

To recount this history of the campaign as concisely as possible, it is necessary to recapitulate, briefly, facts relevant to the commencement of hostilities. The enemy planned to capture Port Moresby by the third or fourth week in September 1942 with a triple offensive movement from Milne Bay along the south-western coast, by naval assault of the south coast, and through the Owen Stanley Ranges.

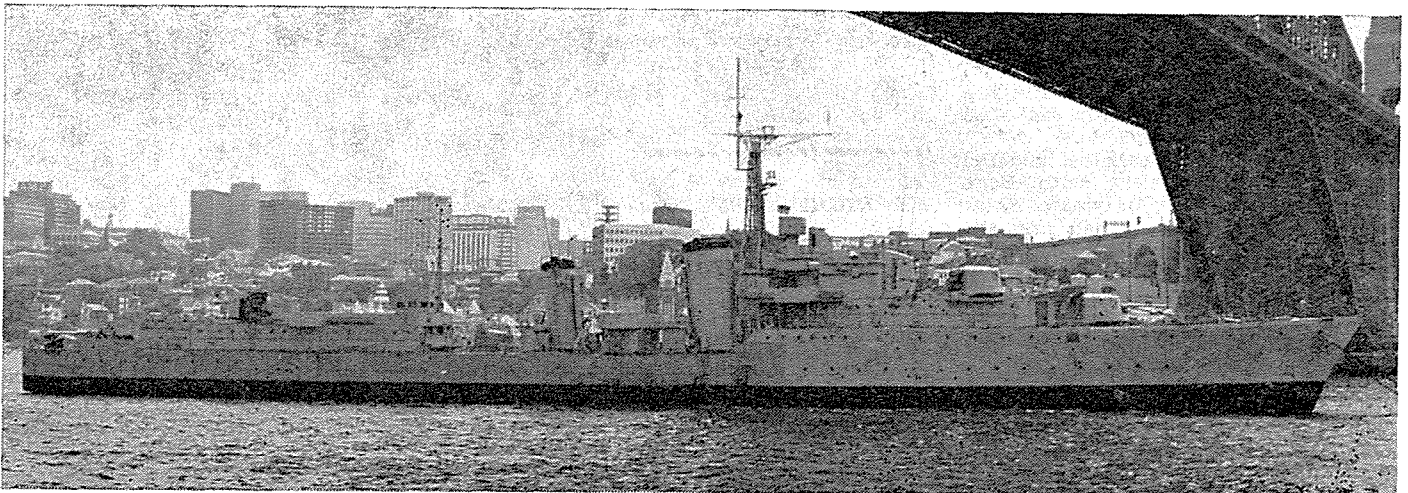
Australians smashed the Japanese landing forces at Milne Bay, American naval forces had a decisive victory in the Coral Sea in May 1942, and the battle of the Owen Stanley Ranges followed by the battle of the beach-heads completed the enemy debacle in Papua.

JAPS LAND

The enemy landed by barges on the north shore of Milne Bay near KB Mission in the early hours of the 26th of August. Our bombers attacked the enemy force during the landing operations and although they sank one ship and inflicted other damage, the majority of the Japs got ashore.

Two platoons of the 61st Battalion who were returning by ketch to Gili Gili

BELOW: The famous Tribal class destroyer H.M.A.S. Arunta passing under Sydney Harbour Bridge on the end of a tow rope to the breaker's yard at Taiwan. (Photo by courtesy "Daily Telegraph", Sydney.)



from the north-east coast of Milne Bay, ran into a concentration of enemy landing barges about this time. Troops on the leading ketch opened fire and inflicted casualties on the enemy but their craft was soon sunk. The second ketch was able to escape in the darkness.

One company of the 61st Battalion at KB Mission was in action soon after the initial Jap landing and at dawn was still holding the enemy east of the Mission.

The Japs had landed light tanks and one of these broke through our position during the night. It was immediately attacked with hand grenades and was forced to withdraw.

Next day another company of the 61st Battalion moved forward, and in the afternoon an attack by both companies, supported by artillery and aircraft, was launched. The attack made some progress but was eventually halted.

A further enemy convoy of about six ships landed more troops and supplies on the night of August 26-27 and towards dawn our troops were pushed back to Rabi, about one and a half miles west of KB Mission.

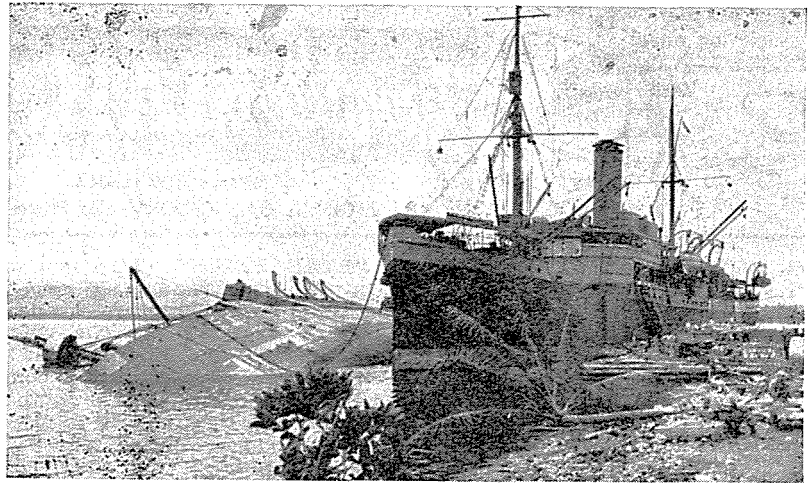
At dawn, however, the enemy withdrew eastward and the 2/10 Battalion moved forward to KB Mission which was reached late that afternoon without opposition.

The enemy heavily attacked the 2/10 Battalion with tanks, equipped with brilliant headlamps, on the night of August 27-28. The battalion held for about two hours until the Japanese, using their tanks as a spearhead, forced their way down the track, cutting the battalion in two. Our troops withdrew to the rear of No. 3 Strip, where Brigadier J. Field, with the 25th and 61st Battalions, had organised a strong defensive position. Driving on to this strip the Japs were halted by the murderous belt of fire put down by the two battalions. Several attacks were made on our position, but all were held at great cost to the enemy, and by nightfall of the 28th of August, the position remained unchanged.

A third enemy naval force arrived in Milne Bay on the night of August 29-30.

WE ADVANCE

Brigadier G. F. Wootten now commenced our advance by pushing the 2/12 Battalion east towards KB Mis-



ABOVE: The M.V. Anshun shelled and sunk by a Japanese cruiser at Milne Bay. (Aust. War Memorial photo.)

sion on the morning of August 31. Overcoming considerable opposition with much hand-to-hand fighting, the battalion surged forward and reached KB Mission by afternoon and took up positions for the night. A strong enemy counter-attack on the rear companies of the 2/12 Battalion which had been reinforced by a company of the 2/9 Battalion, was driven off in the early hours of the following morning and during that day our forces consolidated their positions. The advance continued against stiffening opposition on September 2 and about 1000 yards were gained. That night more enemy warships arrived in Milne Bay but they took no apparent offensive action. During the night the 2/12 Battalion repulsed further strong counter attacks.

The 2/9 Battalion now moved forward through the 2/12 Battalion and on September 3 launched a strong attack with artillery and air support. The opposition held until late afternoon, when our troops smashed through to gain a further 600 yards, and on the following day fought their way past Goroni, two miles east of KB Mission. On September 5 Waga Waga was reached and the main enemy opposition encountered. Our attack was held.

Enemy warships were in Milne Bay during the night of September 3-4,

and again on the night of September 5-6 when, it is believed, elements of the Jap force were embarked.

MILNE BAY

Geographically Milne Bay is shaped like a semi-ellipse. From China Strait on the East the sea flowed through an entrance approximately seven miles wide and from the West some 20 miles.

Gili Gili was near the head of the bay. Heavily wooded mountains pressed in from three sides, leaving only a narrow coastal strip, soggy with sago and mangrove swamps, bush covered except where a few coconut plantations stood in orderly rows. On the north shore the mountains came down almost to the sea leaving only a ledge which was rarely more than a mile wide and in places narrowed to a few hundred yards.

Along the coast never more than 100 yards from the sea a 12 foot track crossing many streams ran from nine or ten miles from Ahioima, through KB Mission to Rabi whence it rounded the nor' west corner of the bay and travelled to Gili Gili.

Almost the entire coastline offered suitable landing places though the mangroves of the sou' west corner of the bay would make landing operations more difficult than elsewhere. The place was notorious for torrential rains.

The defence of Milne Bay cost the Australians 373 battle casualties, of these 24 were officers, 12 officers and 149 men were either killed or missing. Of the Americans, one soldier of the 43rd Engineers was killed and two wounded in ground actions, several more were killed or wounded in air raids.

It is difficult to estimate the enemy casualties in this campaign but at a conservative figure more than 700 Japs were killed by our ground action.

What was far more important was that the enemy attack on Milne Bay, first phase of the plan to take Papua, was utterly smashed, and left the enemy without the convenient air base from which he could support his attack on Port Moresby.

—Max Herron
D Coy. 2/1

