

---

# The Round Tablette

*Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)*

---

Thursday, 10 April 2014

27:10 Volume 27 Number 10

Published by WW II History Round Table

Edited by Dr. Connie Harris

[www.mn-ww2roundtable.org](http://www.mn-ww2roundtable.org)

---

## Welcome to the April session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II

**History Round Table.** Tonight's speaker is Bruce Gamble, author of *Darkest Hour*, *Fortress Rabaul*, and *Target Rabaul*, a three volume World War II History of Rabaul, along with combat veteran's of the campaign who will discuss the attack on the stronghold.

Often overlooked, the Battle for Rabaul – Operation R to the Japanese – took place on the Island of New Britain in Australia's New Guinea Territory. It was primarily a contest for Simpson Harbor (or Bay) on the Gazelle Peninsula of the Island of New Britain in the "Bismarck Island Chain," a magnificent natural harbor. Rabaul was the main port on the Bay. Because of location near the major pre-war Japanese base at Truk in the Caroline Islands and to the Solomon Islands, and a "stepping stone" to New Guinea and Australia, As the Japanese planned their opening offensive of the Great Pacific War, "Strike South" (or the "Centrifugal Offensive" as the Allies term it), Simpson Harbor became desirable as a potential naval and logistics base.

The Australians took New Britain from the Germans in 1914, and held it after the war as a League of Nations mandate (aka colony). In 1937, volcanic eruptions covered Rabaul, the capital of the Island, in ash, but it was cleaned up, and by 1939, had department stores, a golf course, and a movie theater, some 350 buildings, and was home to about 1,000 "Europeans," 3,000 Chinese, and 6,000 natives. As war became more likely, the Australians stationed a protective force at Rabaul in late 1941.

"Lark Force" (Col. John Scanlan commanding) consisted of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Regiment (2/22), part of another battalion, a couple of unattached companies, 2 coastal guns (6"), and a "squadron" of mismatched and obsolete aircraft. These wholly inadequate forces were, as the Australian navy chief of staff put it, "hostages to fortune."

The Centrifugal Offensive focused on seizing resource rich territories in the southwest pacific, and securing the flanks of the main advance, hence the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and the seizure of Rabaul. Because the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Navy

(IJN) had very different assessments of enemy forces and preferred strategies, the Imperial General Staff (IGS) compromised by giving the IJA the advance into Malaya - Sumatra - Java (securing the right flank) and giving the IJN security on the left flank, taking out American air power in the Philippines, New Guinea, Rabaul, etc. The Pearl Harbor attack was part of Admiral Yamamoto's decision for an offensive strategy vis-à-vis the US. They would achieve all the Centrifugal Offensive's objectives by 8 March 1942 when surrender of Java, and then they began looking for new conquests.

The Battle for Rabaul began with air raids on 4 January 1942. Royal Australian Air Force "Wirraway" aircraft were too slow and lacked altitude to be effective against the IJN air attacks. Several days of on again/off again attacks had little impact on the defenders. Then, the air groups from four of Adm. Naguno's fleet carriers began air attacks on 20 January, and Col. Scanlan had his men prepare for field exercises instead of beach defense. As a result, they had inadequate rations and supplies when, defeated, they retreated into the interior of the island. Destruction of the airfield's bomb depot was bungled and the blast destroyed all the vacuum tubes in Lark Force's radios, cutting communications with Australia.

On 23 January, the Japanese landing force came over the beach, rapidly driving Lark Force from the beach, the town, and the airfield. When Scanlan commented that it was becoming an "every man for himself" fight, the men took this as an order and the retreat became a rout. It did not help that Scanlan and his staff fled the battlefield during the fighting.

Ultimately, most of the aircrews managed to make their way safely to Australian lines, but the army had no plans for evacuation and most men were killed or captured. Some 400 managed to escape on civilian. On 4 February, the Japanese massacred about 160 captives at Tor Planatation. Some 800 died when the *USS Sturgeon* sunk the *Montevideo Maru*. Over 100,000 Japanese troops and civilians occupied New Britain, including 8th Area Army, 17th and 38th Division, and separate units, including a substantial number of aircraft at fields all over the island, and also on New Ireland. The airbase was repaired and Rabaul became the key to the Japanese operations in the region.

As part of Allied OPERATION CARTWHEEL, Gen. MacArthur planned to

**If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

capture Rabaul, now the Japanese forward operating and logistics base supporting the Solomon Islands-New Guinea-Australia axis of advance. New Britain straddled operational area boundaries, complicating planning and command. Fortunately Adm. Halsey (South Pacific Area) and MacArthur “hit it off” superbly well, resulting in cooperation and a workable division of command responsibilities. In late June 1943, the first phases of CARTWHEEL began with landings on New Georgia and other small islands.

Allied air raids, supplemented by carrier-based air attacks, particularly on 20 February 1942 which left Rabaul’s air defenses crippled for a time. Raids by heavy bombers were frequent, and as Allied advances reduced the distance, medium bombers also began bombing Rabaul. Another carrier raid, to reduce the Japanese threat to the Bougainville landings, came on 5 November 1943, with complete surprise, caught 150 aircraft on the ground.

At the first QUEBEC CONFERENCE (QUADRANT 17-24 August) the Allied leadership decided that Rabaul should be bypassed, and Gen. Marshall personally ordered MacArthur to abide by this decision, one he forcefully objected to. This led to the adoption of the “island hopping” strategy that became the hallmark of the SWPAO. The decision to isolate Rabaul necessitated regular air attacks to keep the Japanese weak and in their place, and the Navy’s the highly effective submarine campaign destroyed Japanese merchant shipping.

In December 1943, 1st Marine Division landed at CAPE GLOUCESTER on the western tip of the island, seizing an airfield the Allies wanted. The landings (with the 112th Cavalry regt.) reduced the Japanese ability to interdict shipping between New Guinea and New Britain. 1st MARDIV was relieved by the army’s 40th Division which conducted operations against the Japanese and prepared for the Luzon landings. The 5th Australian Division relieved the 40th ID in November 1944. They forced the Japanese back onto the Gazelle Peninsula, and at war’s end, some 69,000 Japanese were taken prisoner.

**Further Readings:**

Bruce Gamble, *Darkest Hour: The True Story of Lark Force at Rabaul - Australia's Worst Military Disaster of World War II* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006).  
 Bruce Gamble, *Fortress Rabaul: The Battle for the Southwest Pacific, January 1942 - April 1943* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2010).  
 Bruce Gamble, *Target Rabaul: The Allied Siege of Japan's Most Infamous Stronghold, March 1943 - August 1945* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2013).  
 Eric Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).  
 Eric Bergerud, *Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).  
 George Kenney, *General Kenney Reports* (USAF:

Office of Air Force History, 1987  
 Thomas Griffith, *MacArthur's Airman: General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).  
 John Prados, *Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun* (New York: NAL CALIBER, 2012).  
 Eustace Keogh, *South West Pacific, 1941 - 1945* (Melbourne: Grayflower Publications, 1965).

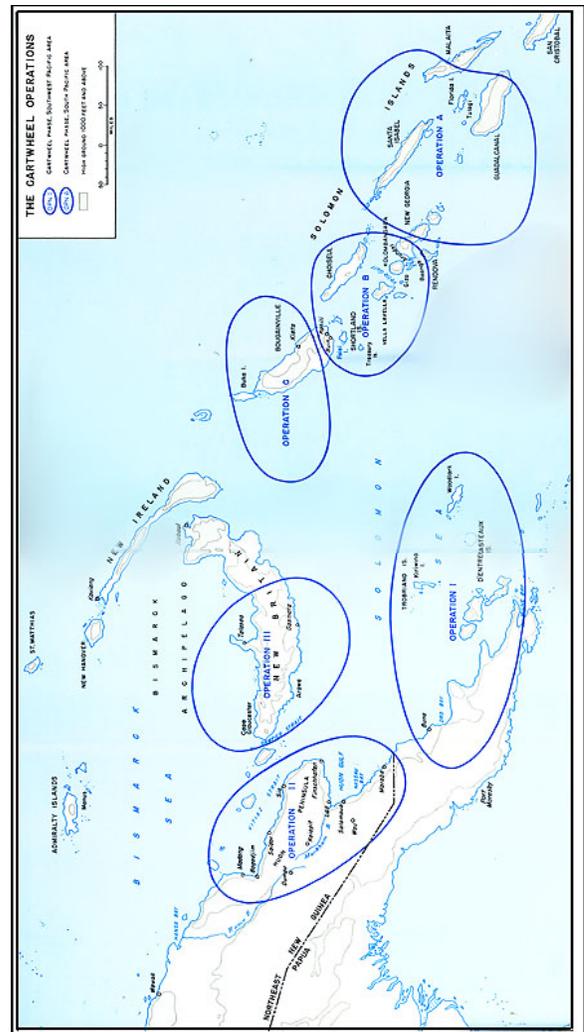
**Announcements:**

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - May 20, 2014 – *H. L. Hunley* - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)
- St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - May 19, 2014 – Battle of Mine Creek - 715-386-1268 – [rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)
- Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; [www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org](http://www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org)
- Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
- Air Show - Eden Prairie - July 19-20, 2014; <http://www.airexpo-mn.org/> - 952-746-6100
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - [crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) - 651-338-2717
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org) 651-455-6942
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org) 612-713-2523
- Friends of Ft. Snelling, [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

**Round Table Schedule 2014**

- 8 May Landing on Omaha Beach
- 10-27 May Tour of Normandy

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-



867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)