

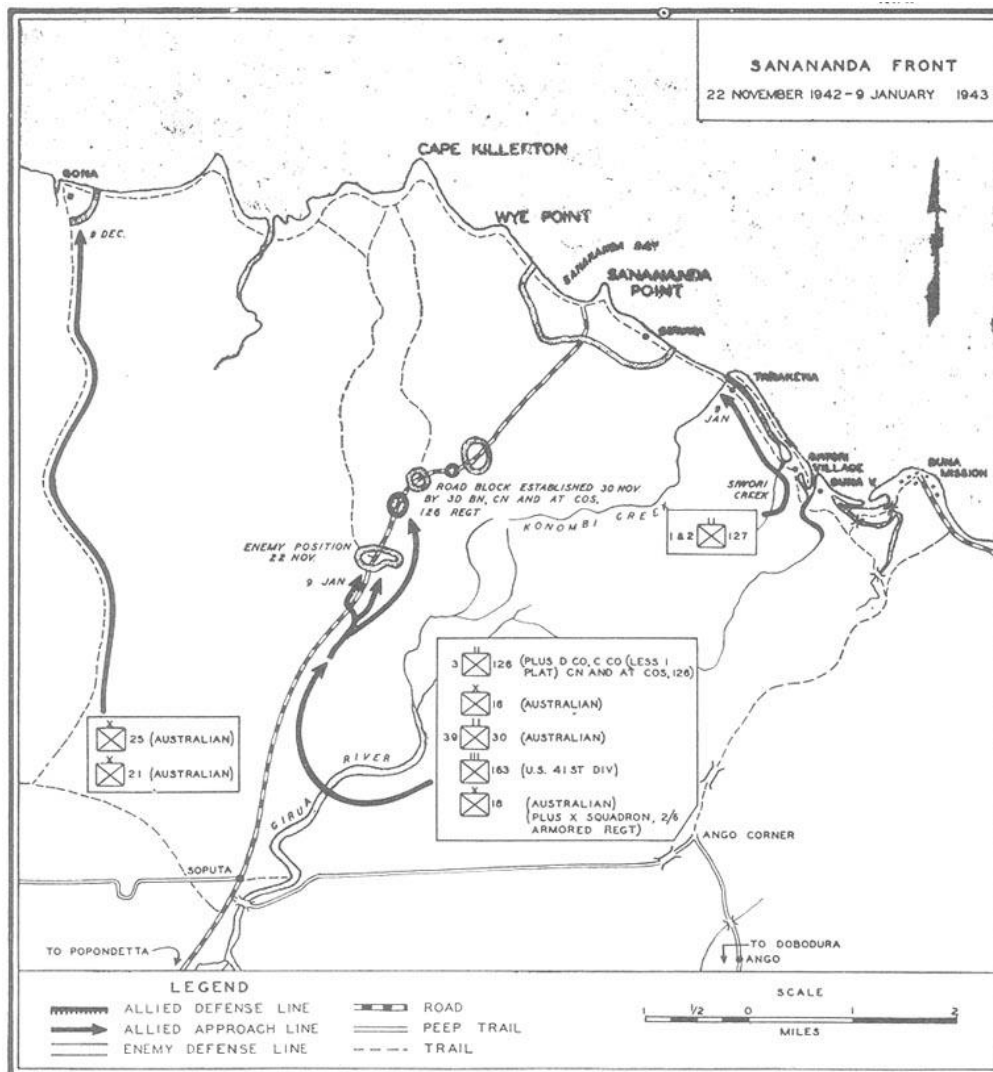
VICTORY AT THE BATTLE OF SANANANDA ROAD

PAPUA, 12-18 JANUARY 1943

By MAJ Sean VW Childs

Around 80 years ago Japanese forces withdrew across the Owen Stanley Ranges to their three well defended beachheads at Buna, Gona, and Sanananda in Papua, following their defeat by Australian forces at Kokoda (2 November 1942) and Oivi-Gorari (11 November 1942).¹ The Allied (Australian and U.S.) victory at the Battle of Sanananda Road followed their victories over the Japanese at Gona (9 December 1942) and Buna (2 January 1943).² The cost of the Allied victory at Sanananda was high.

The strategic, operational, and tactical picture



Sanananda Front. 22 November 1942 - 9 January 1943.

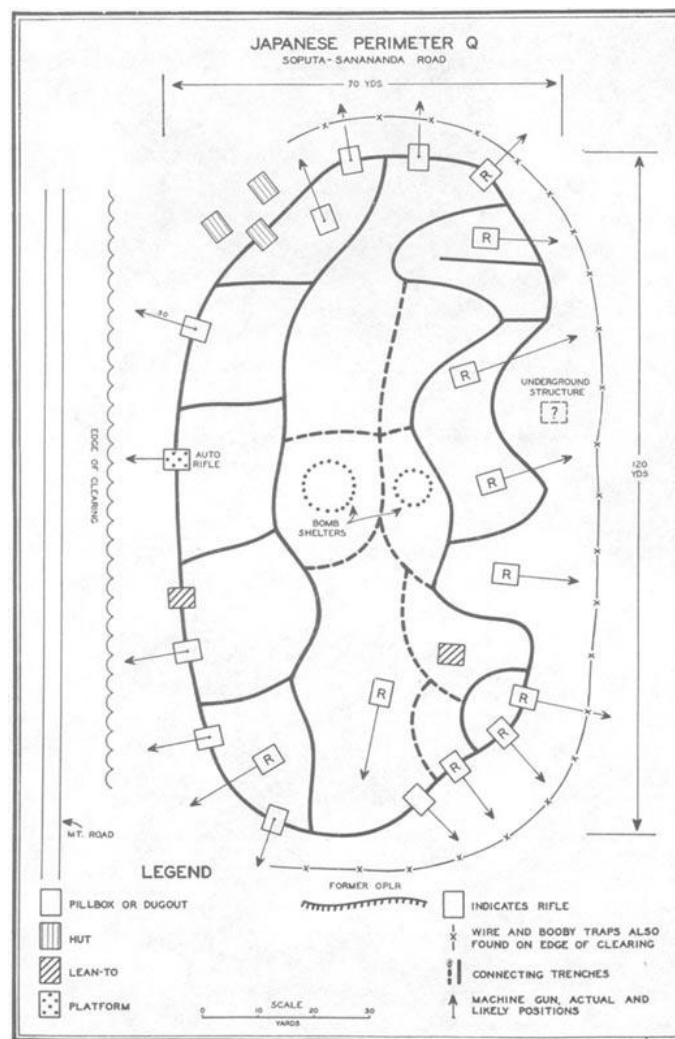
¹ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

² Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 232-234.

At the time, the strategic imperative for Allied and Japanese forces in the Southwest Pacific was control of the Solomon Sea.³ Here Japan's concern was the reinforcement and support of their beachheads from Rabaul in New Britain.⁴ For the Allies, control was necessary to supply materiel for effective land forces in Papua and New Guinea.⁵

Once the Japanese withdrew to the beachheads from where they had launched their Port Moresby offensive, the Allies sought to prevent their reinforcement and resupply, and capture the beachheads.⁶ To achieve this frontal assaults were conducted in daylight over open ground. However, in the face of repeated failures operational and tactical adaptation was the requirement.

The battle



³ Fraser, B.M. 2013. *The combat effectiveness of Australian and American infantry battalions in Papua in 1942-1943*. PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, p. 212.

⁴ Fraser, B.M. 2013. *The combat effectiveness of Australian and American infantry battalions in Papua in 1942-1943*. PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, p. 212.

⁵ Fraser, B.M. 2013. *The combat effectiveness of Australian and American infantry battalions in Papua in 1942-1943*. PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, p. 212.

⁶ Military Intelligence Division. 1945. *Papuan Campaign: The Buna-Sanananda Operation, 16 November 1942-23 January 1943*. Centre of Military History, United States Army, Washington DC.

Broadly, in November 1942, a large Japanese force fiercely defended Sanananda from well-prepared positions on the track to Sanananda.⁷ The Australian 16th Brigade's war diary notes that, "owing to the thickness of the undergrowth and the flatness of the [terrain], plus the attendant difficulties of incompatible maps, it was extremely difficult [for Allied forces] to define either... [Japanese]...positions or gain observation for artillery shoots."⁸

The 16th Brigade's advance to these positions was paused because of its casualties and sickness.⁹ The U.S. 126th Regiment came to their assistance and the advance continued, and later the Australian 30th Brigade replaced the 16th.

With the 30th's subsequent heavy losses, on 7 December operations were again suspended so that fresh units could be deployed from Port Moresby, including the Australian 18th Brigade.¹⁰

The advance to Sanananda resumed on 19 December although progress was costly and slow.¹¹ The newly arrived Australian 7th Division Cavalry Regiment suffered heavy casualties, resulting in a third halt to the operation on 21 December.¹² Their war diary records that:

"Regiment moved forward... Japanese perimeter defence proved very strong... LTCOL Logan was hit in the leg. Trooper Weston left to guard him was wounded. Trooper Suttie was also left to guard him. Through loss of blood CO subsequently passed away... Casualties suffered were heavy...."¹³

The halt allowed the U.S. 163rd Regiment and the Australian 39th Battalion to join the operation to enact a revised plan. The revision involved holding ground until Buna was overcome. The Australians were then to advance north along the track towards Sanananda Point and Cape Killerton, while simultaneously the Americans advanced along the coast from Buna.¹⁴

The attack recommenced on 12 January 1943 with the 18th Brigade pressing in on the Japanese blocking the track.¹⁵ However, their left flank's three supporting tanks were knocked out, and again the assault faltered. Tank gunner, Trooper Jim Wood recalled that, "No report was received regarding the enemies [sic] positions or strength. We were definitely told there were no A.T [anti-tank] guns against us..."¹⁶

By now, the infantry had made limited progress. Despite this, Japanese forces began withdrawing from their positions on the nights of 12 and 13 January, leaving behind their

⁷ Charlton, P. 1989. Chapter 2 "The Beachhead Battles" in *War Against Japan 1942-45*. Time Life Books, ISBN 0 949118 27 3.

⁸ *16 Infantry Brigade December 1942 War Diary*, PDF p.3. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1366180> [Accessed 17 January 2023]

⁹ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹⁰ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹¹ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹² Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹³ 7 Australian Division Cavalry Regiment War Diary, PDF pp. 48-50.

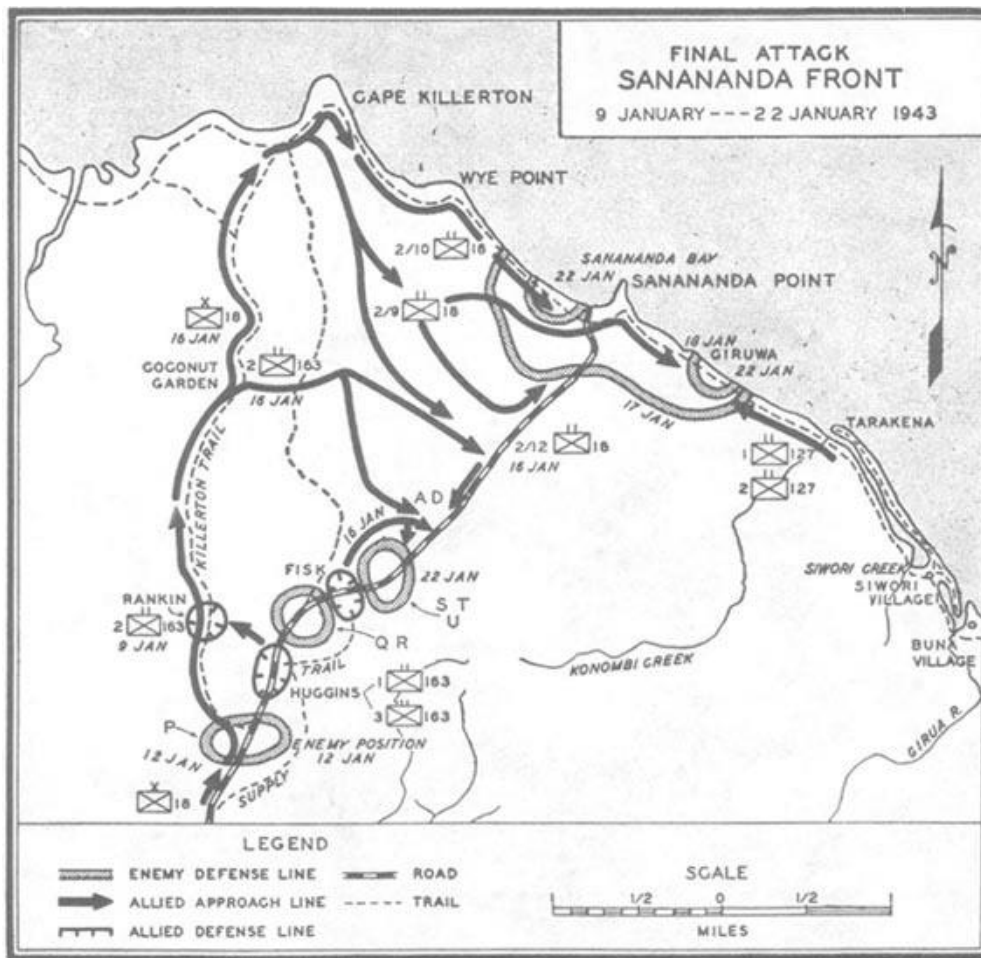
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2698547> [Accessed 17 January 2023].

¹⁴ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹⁵ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹⁶ Brune, P.F. 2004. *A bastard of a place : the Australians in Papua : Kokoda, Milne Bay, Gona, Buna, Sanananda*, [First paperback edition], p. 932.

elements that blocked the track.¹⁷ Reconnaissance patrols then reported Japanese withdrawals more broadly, and that evacuations via barges were underway.



Seizing the opportunity presented by the withdrawals, by 18 January, Australian forces reached Sanananda village.¹⁸ There remained only the encircled Japanese that blocked the track. Here, fierce fighting continued, and the main remaining Japanese force was overrun on 21 January. Final resistance was broken the next day.

The Battle of Sanananda Road resulted in around 2,100 Allied casualties; more than 1,400 (including almost 600 killed or missing) were Australian.¹⁹ Perhaps 1,500 – 1,600 Japanese died, and around 1,200 of their sick and wounded were evacuated by barge from 13–20 January. An estimated 1,000 Japanese troops escaped overland to the west of Gona.

Lesson learnt

The experience of Sanananda demonstrates the difficulty of advancing on a narrow axis against a well-concealed and determined enemy, hence the need for responsive operational adaptation and tactical innovation. The Allied forces searched for techniques and tactics to dislocate and

¹⁷ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹⁸ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

¹⁹ Coulthard-Clark, C. D. 2001. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p. 236.

dislodge the Japanese positions. Manoeuvre while in contact with a strong enemy position is challenging and demanding.²⁰

Read more in: McCarthy, D. 1959. Second World War Official Histories. *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*. Series 1 – Army (1st edition). Volume V, South West Pacific Area, First Year: Kokoda to Wau.

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²⁰ Here the author acknowledges the review and comments provided by MAJ Ian Finlayson (retired) during the drafting of this article. The context and detail of the Battle of Sanananda are difficult to distil in a short article.