

## Case File: Milne Bay - KB Mission Battle

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### Background

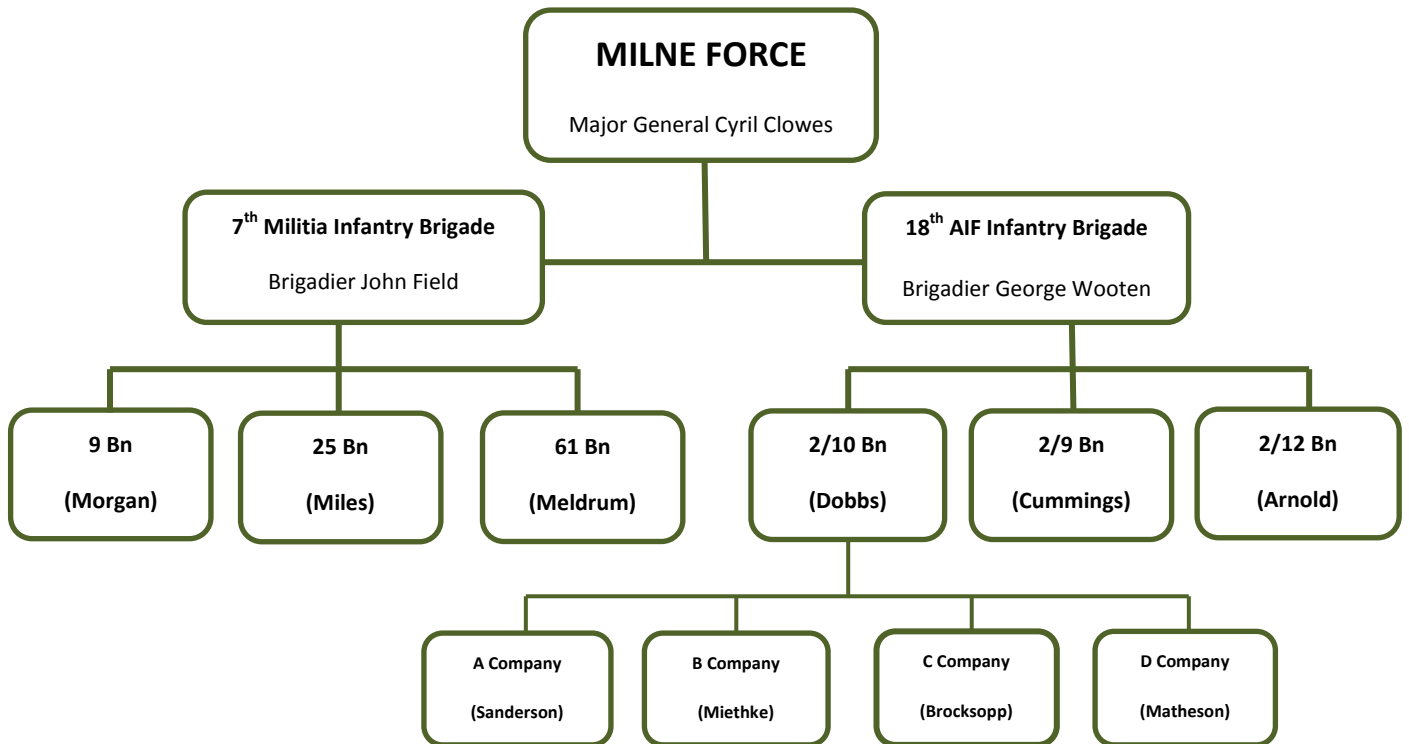
Milne Bay was the location of three Australian-American airfields that were each nearing completion. From these airfields, Japanese naval movement in the seas around Papua and northern Australia could be restricted, and air support could be made available for operations around Kokoda and the Buna/Gona area. From the Japanese point of view, the Milne Bay area offered the same strategic benefits, as well as a deep water harbour for future naval operations (including another attempt at a landing at Port Moresby).

Milne Bay was an area almost completely unsuited for military operations. The bay was shaped like a horseshoe. On either arm of the bay, mountains 4000 feet high rose abruptly from the shore. Between the mountains and the sea was a narrow coastal corridor consisting mostly of deep swamp and dense, almost impenetrable, jungle. The head of the bay (known as the *plantation area*), where some level ground existed, was the location of the three airfields.

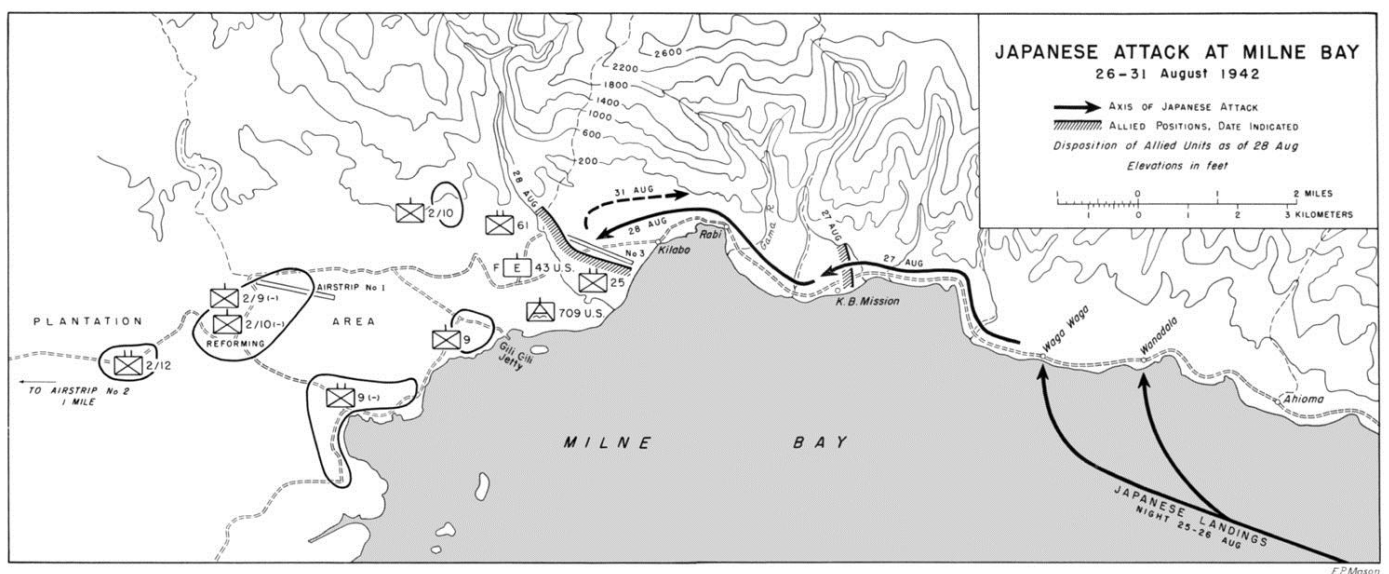


Figure 1: (left) the Milne Bay area, showing the location of the three air strips, and (right) Major General Cyril Clowes.

**Milne Force** was the Australian/American force responsible for the defence of Milne Bay. The composite force was commanded by an Australian, Major-General Cyril Clowes (50), a veteran of the First World War (he had served as a young officer at Gallipoli). Milne Force primarily consisted of two Australian infantry brigades, the inexperienced and untested 7<sup>th</sup> Militia Brigade (9<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> Battalions) and the experienced and battle ready 18<sup>th</sup> AIF Brigade (2/9<sup>th</sup>, 2/10<sup>th</sup> and 2/12<sup>th</sup> Battalions). The following diagram shows the units involved and the command structure that existed at the time:



Japanese forces under the command of Commander Shojiro Hayashi landed during the night of 25/26 August 1942 about 8-10 km east of the head of the bay on the northern shore near Waga Waga. They consisted of 1,171 men from the *Kure 5<sup>th</sup> Special Naval Landing Force (SNLF)* (612), the *16<sup>th</sup> Naval Pioneer Unit* (362), and the *Sasebo 5<sup>th</sup> SNLF* (197):



The first Australian unit to face the Japanese threat was the untried 61<sup>st</sup> Militia Battalion. Despite a spirited defence, the 61<sup>st</sup> Battalion was forced into a retreat. The position it held at the small village around **KB Mission** was reinforced by the **2/10<sup>th</sup> AIF Battalion** during the day of 27 August.

## Notable features of the Milne Bay battle

### Climate and Terrain

It had rained almost continuously for the weeks preceding the battle, and it continued to rain during it. Mountain streams had become raging torrents, and the already spongy soil in the coastal flat lands was turned into a quagmire. The single coastal track had, in many places, completely washed away; in others it resembled a mud filled river. In a few of the rubber plantations, man-made drainage systems kept the sodden morass partly at bay. Both vehicles and soldiers on foot were hindered by the inability to travel quickly or to manoeuvre widely.

The terrain was largely thick impenetrable jungle. The sea inhibited movement on one side of the coastal corridor, and the high slopes of the Stirling Range, on the northern side of the bay (covered with jungle), inhibited movement on the other. This, too, forced the battle into a tight and narrow corridor. Again, this made it difficult to move troops widely, or to manoeuvre units tactically.

### Japanese Naval Control

Due mainly to the need for much of the Allied naval forces to fight in nearby Guadalcanal, Japanese naval forces in the area went largely unchallenged. This meant that for much of the battle, Major General Clowes feared the possibility of further enemy landings along the coastline of the bay. Because of this, he could not send his entire force to meet the Japanese invasion force, in case a further landing threatened the airfields he was meant to safeguard.

### Allied Air Control

The Japanese, with their nearest air bases over 300 km away at Lae and Salamaua, could not count on any air support. The Allies, in contrast, had two RAAF *Kittyhawk* Squadrons operating from the Milne Bay airstrips, directly on the doorstep of the battlefield. The ability to send fighter planes in the air at a moment's notice gave the Australians a clear advantage. This power forced the Japanese into hiding during the day, and forced them to move only at night. Additionally, on the first day of the battle, the Japanese landing site was heavily attacked, restricting the support the Japanese troops could count on during the course of the battle.

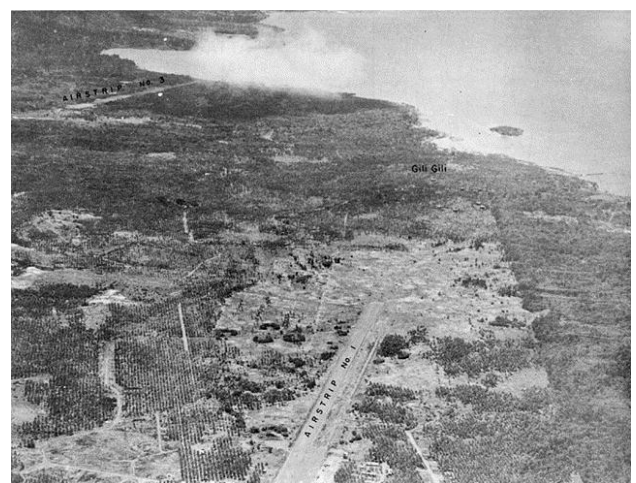


Figure 2: (left) A Curtiss P40 Kittyhawk fighter planes preparing for take-off at Milne Bay and (right) and aerial view from the head of Milne Bay looking east, with Strip 1 (Gurney Field) in the lower centre, and Strip 3 in the upper left of the image