

Group Captain William Henry Garing DFC RAAF

Group Captain Bill Garing was nicknamed 'Bull' for his voice, not his size. He was a small powerfully built man, from Corryong, Victoria, whose abilities resulted in his being one of the most highly qualified airmen in the RAAF. Garing won the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in July 1940, when he flew his heavy Sunderland flying boat of 10 Squadron RAAF so aggressively that he broke up a determined attack by a formation of German bombers on the SS Mooltan. When war came to New Guinea, Garing was the Senior Air Staff Officer at HQ North Eastern Area, at Townsville. During the decisive defeat of the Japanese invasion at Milne Bay, Garing took command of the RAAF units there and made it clear that there would be no retreat by the Australians. General Kenney, of the US Army Air Force, found a kindred spirit in Garing and together they worked to provide the maximum effectiveness from the weak Allied air forces.

Perhaps Garing's greatest contribution was in February 1943. From July 1942, Japanese ship convoys had successfully made the voyage from Rabaul to the north coast ports and landing places on New Guinea, despite numerous attacks by Allied aircraft. The available Australian and US land forces were exhausted after the campaigns at Kokoda, Buna, Gona and Milne Bay, but the Japanese had ample shipping and army reinforcements at Rabaul. It was well within Japanese capabilities to move fresh experienced units to New Guinea; the Allies could not do this at the time.

In January 1943, a convoy from Rabaul to Lae arrived and unloaded, then returned, despite fierce air attacks, for the loss of only one ship. After this success by the Japanese, Garing finally prevailed upon his US counterparts to gather a single powerful strike force, rather than send out small numbers as soon as a few aircraft were available. Two practice formation assemblies and simulated attack flights were made in late February 1943.

In March 1943, the next Japanese convoy to Lae was destroyed, in what became known as The Battle of the Bismarck Sea. All eight transport ships were sunk and four of the eight escorting destroyers also were sunk. The Japanese never again sent such a convoy, but were forced to rely on submarines, barges, and fast destroyers to make supply voyages. The balance of power in the region had changed; that change had been brought about by the use of concentrated air power; that concentration had been brought about by the presence, knowledge and expertise of Bill Garing RAAF.

'Bull' Garing's contribution was decisive, and recognised by Kenney in a personal inscription in Kenney's memoirs, that Garing helped Kenney receive his 'fourth star' as a US general.

Lex McAulay

Further reading:

George C. Kenney, "General Kenney Reports", Duell, Sloan & Pearce, USA, 1949.

Lex McAulay, 'Battle of the Bismarck Sea', St. Martins Press, USA, 1991 and Banner books, Australia 2009

Official history volumes of the RAAF in the Second World War.