Wisconsin’s Warriors in the Pacific: the 32nd Infantry Division and Richard Bong during the Second World War

By Eric Mehnert
Capstone Advisor: Joe Orser
Cooperating Professor: John Mann
Abstract

This research paper is about Wisconsin Servicemen in the Pacific theater of World War Two from 1941-45, and how they contributed to various aspects of the war effort. The soldiers of the 32nd Infantry Division, which originated in Wisconsin, played a crucial role in halting the Japanese push towards Australia. Major Richard Bong, also from Wisconsin, shot down forty Japanese planes in his P-38 Lightning fighter and was awarded the medal of honor. Bong became a legendary war hero back home, and this paper will also examine how his fame was used to promote the war effort.

As is often the case when discussing any aspect of the Second World War, dozens of books have already been published about the American war in the Pacific theater. However, most of these books are about famous battles like those at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, or Midway. This paper will be divided into two main sections. The first section will focus on the operations conducted by the US Army’s 32nd Infantry Division on New Guinea, where they played a crucial role in stopping the Japanese advance towards Australia. To enhance the reader’s understanding of what the soldiers’ experiences were like, letters written home to Wisconsin by 32nd infantryman Archie “Red” Van Gorden will be included.

The second section is about Major Richard Bong’s career in the Army Air Corps (also known as army air force at the time), and will cover his progression from cadet all the way to major. Letters that he wrote home and newspaper articles about his exploits will be found here. Wisconsin servicemen, particularly in the early years of the war, were instrumental in various important allied victories. The significance of this research is that it ties two very different aspects of the war- air and land combat- together through a shared connection to Wisconsin.
Introduction

“Within the United States we had no field army. There existed the mere framework of about 3 1/2 square divisions… There was such a shortage in motor transportation that divisional training was impracticable. There were virtually no corps troops, almost no Army troops or GHQ special troop units, which are necessary for the functioning of the larger tactical units… As an army we were ineffective. Our equipment, modern at the conclusion of the World War, was now in a large measure obsolescent. In fact, during the post-war period, continuous paring of appropriations had reduced the Army virtually to the status of that of a third-rate power.”

That is how US Army Chief of Staff George Marshall described the state of the Army in his 1939 report to the Secretary of War. Marshall was concerned that the almost two decades of peace that America had enjoyed since the end of The Great War had crippled the nation’s ability to defend itself. Military and political leaders would realize the grave implications of this decline in September, when Nazi soldiers blitzed East across the Polish border and ignited World War Two. On the other side of the world, the Nazis’ ally Japan had been occupying China since 1937. The Japanese army had been fighting the combined forces of Chinese nationalists and communists. The Nationalists were supported by the United States, who in turn opposed the Japanese occupation of China.

In early 1941, the Japanese crossed a line by invading the French colony of Indochina, or what is now Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although much of the American public still wished to remain neutral, the federal government recognized the threat this posed to their own overseas territories. In July 1941, the United States froze Japanese assets and stopped oil exports to Japan. This abrupt loss of supply was problematic, as they did not have sufficient oil production capabilities to sustain their large navy. Imperial leadership was faced with a tough decision: they

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could either halt expansion and continue to buy oil from the US, or they could attempt to take that oil for themselves. The Japanese military had been successful up to that point in the South Pacific, but some members of imperial high command feared that continuing to do so would provoke the United States.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese Navy made an ambitious bid to cripple the US Pacific fleet with a single decisive blow. Six Japanese aircraft carriers and a sizable escort fleet crossed the Pacific ocean undetected and conducted a surprise attack on the US Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The planes from these carriers achieved total surprise, wreaking havoc on the unsuspecting fleet moored there. Six warships were sunk, over a dozen were seriously damaged, and thousands of Sailors were killed in the attack. The American public was shocked by the destruction, and outraged that there had been no declaration of war before the attack. Congress declared war on Japan the next day, and the European Axis powers two days later. Since the Germans were already occupied with the British and Soviets in Europe, the Japanese territories in the South Pacific would be the first targets of American retaliation.

This research paper will examine two key questions: “How important were Wisconsinites in the fight against the Japanese?” and “what impact did the war have on the civilians living in the state?” To answer these, this paper will refer to several primary sources. One such source is The Van Gorden Family Papers, a collection of letters written home by Archie “Red” Van Gorden. Red was a National Guardsman from Alma Center, Wisconsin before the war broke out. He was a member of the 32nd Infantry Division, the first American unit of the war to be deployed into combat. In the same collection of papers is a diary kept by Red’s father, Harry, for the duration of the war. Harry’s diary will help to show what life on the homefront was like here in Eau Claire, allowing (local) readers to compare life in the city today with how he documented
it almost eighty years ago. The other main collection of primary documents that we will look at are the Richard Bong Papers. Major Richard “Dick” Bong, an airman from Poplar, Wisconsin, shot down 40 Japanese planes during his deployment, becoming the top American ace of the war. Bong’s letters home are a window into what the war was like for airmen stationed in the Pacific. His impressive combat record also elevated him to celebrity status, and newspaper articles from the time about his exploits show how the media portrayed the war to Americans at home.

Because Major Bong and the 32nd Infantry division served in the same regions of the Pacific, at the same time, there may be some interesting parallels or differences between their accounts of the conflict. The goal here is not, however, to compare and contrast how the experiences of airmen and soldiers measure up to one another - it is to show the various impacts that Wisconsin servicemen had on the war effort. The Wisconsin men fighting in the Pacific demonstrated exceptional skill and fortitude, and they were crucial to allied success in the region - both directly through combat and indirectly by boosting morale back home.

**Historiography**

Since World War Two ended in 1945, it has become one of the most extensively written-about conflicts in human history. Among many other reasons, this popularity can be attributed to the abundance of military records that were declassified in the years following the war, as well as the millions of veterans around the world who were able to tell their stories to their friends, family, and occasionally the general public. Because of this, American military history in the Pacific during World War Two is very well-documented. Although there has been an abundance of secondary material written about the second world war after it ended, it was
difficult to track down detailed information about specific divisions outside of primary sources in
government archives.

One of the books I was able to find in those archives was *13,000 Hours: Combat History of the 32nd Infantry Division in World War II.*\(^2\) Published in 1944 while the division was still actively engaged in combat, this brief history documents the brutal combat and conditions endured by the men early in the war. It was published by the Army, and it tracks that there is some amount of bias in the text. Nevertheless, the apparent purpose for its existence is to show how tough the 32nd Infantry Division was in New Guinea, which supports the thesis of this paper pretty well.

Another, similar source I found is titled simply *The 32nd Infantry Division In World War II.*\(^3\) The spiritual successor of *13,000 Hours*, this is the first post-war history to be made of the 32nd Division’s service record. It was published by the State of Wisconsin “for the benefits of its veterans, their relatives and friends, and their successors”. The author Harold Blakeley was a general in the army during the war, but served in Africa and Europe. and did not interact with the 32nd Division at any point. His stated goal was to be as impartial as possible, aided by his lack of prior knowledge about the division. It was great to have a professional, objective history about my topic because it provided a lot of information that supported my thesis on the important role played by Wisconsin soldiers in the Pacific.

The book *Dear Mom, So We Have A War*, written in 1991 by Carl “Bud” Bong, is another of my secondary sources. Carl was Richard’s younger brother, the fifth of nine Bong

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\(^2\) 273rd Engineer Company, United States Army. *13,000 Hours: Combat History of the 32nd Infantry Division- World War II.* Published 1944. From the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. (accessed 2/27/2022).

\(^3\) Blakeley, Harold. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II.*
children. He combines personal anecdotes about their life before the war with many of the letters that Richard wrote home during the war. Carl Bong’s personal recollections about life at home during the war show the other half of the story told in Dick’s letters. Another useful part of this book were the interviews that Carl had with various servicemen that his brother had known during the war, as they shed light on Richard Bong’s personality and character. He also includes the combat reports that his brother wrote, allowing me to track when and where Dick scored his forty victories. This book shows what an extraordinary yet humble pilot Richard Bong was, which is an interesting contrast from his eventual celebrity status. This book also supported my thesis pretty well, as it repeatedly documented Maj. Bong’s extraordinary feats as a pilot. It also discussed the media attention that he received- especially once he became the highest-scoring pilot of the war.

**The 32nd Infantry Division and the Pacific War**

Before the outbreak of World War Two, the United States Army consisted of only nine full-time, professional combat divisions. The reserves consisted of National Guard units from a handful of states, totalling roughly 270,000 men. The Army Air Forces (AAF) faced a similar predicament; there were only 100,000 total air servicemen, and of that number a mere 6,000 were officers. The AAF were also undergoing significant reorganization and centralization in the months before Pearl Harbor was attacked, leaving them unprepared and short-staffed when war broke out.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor drove enlistment through the roof, and millions of men were drafted over the course of the war. By 1945, there were 91 infantry divisions consisting of over 8 million soldiers in the Army and 2.3 Million pilots and crew in the AAF, with 830,000 air officers. Growing an army that big that fast requires complex logistics, forcing the Army to
scramble. Divisions were created practically from thin air, built around a core group of experienced soldiers from an existing division. This extreme military buildup required a significant amount of money, resources, and most importantly time. Out of time and short on the rest, the Army was forced to rely on a handful of understaffed National Guard units and professional divisions to be the backbone of their combat forces. The 32nd Infantry Division, composed of guardsmen from Michigan and Wisconsin, was one of the first units called into federal service in 1940 by executive order 8551. They were deployed to Australia in May 1942, after a period of reinforcement and training in the United States.

**WWI- Origins of the Red Arrows**

The 32nd Infantry Division (not to be confused with Wisconsin’s Civil War-era 32nd Infantry Regiment) was formed in 1917, as a fusion of the 33rd Michigan and the 3rd Wisconsin National Guard Regiments. These two regiments were stationed at the Southern border in Texas during the Mexican Border Crisis of 1916, hunting for Mexican outlaw Pancho Villa under the command of General John Pershing. After failing to find the bandit for roughly a year, the Army decided to shift its focus away from the Southern border and began reorganizing in preparation

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for deployment to France. Part of that reorganization included combining the 33rd Michigan and 3rd Wisconsin into the brand-new 32nd Infantry division. The division trained at Camp MacArthur in Waco, Texas, for the remainder of 1917 and shipped out for France in Mid-January of 1918.

The 32nd infantry experienced many firsts for the Army upon their arrival in France. They were the first Americans to deploy onto German territory at Alsace on May 18, 1918. A few days later the division also suffered the first American casualty of the war when private Joseph Guyton of Evarts, Michigan, was killed by a German machine gun on May 24. Guyton also became the first American decorated for service in the war when he was posthumously awarded the Croix De Guerre with a Silver Star by his French Officers.8

The division’s “Baptism of Fire” came in late July of 1918 at the second battle of the Marne. Here, the guardsmen earned themselves a reputation for exceptionally fierce fighting, earning the title of “Les Terribles” from their French Comrades.9 This uncanny ability to reliably break through enemy lines is also where their Divisional insignia and nickname comes from- a red arrow piercing the enemy. Later on in World War Two, they would live up to this reputation.

In October 1918, the 32nd Division was transferred from French command to the First American Army under General Pershing. They had suffered almost three thousand casualties at this point, including those killed, missing, wounded, gassed, and captured.10 By the time the Armistice

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8 American forces were often placed under the command of French officers during WW1 to simplify logistics and negate any potential communication issues.
9 Blakeley, H. W. (1957). The 32d Infantry Division in World War II.
went into effect in November 1918, the Red Arrows had firmly established a legendary reputation, but at a great cost. The division suffered a total of over 6,000 casualties in the Argonne campaign.

Third-Rate Power: the 32nd Infantry On the Eve of World War II

The division remained in service after World War One (1918-1941), although like the rest of the armed forces, it was not kept at full manpower strength nor was it provided with the appropriate supplies or equipment to maintain combat readiness. This issue persisted until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, when men like Army Chief of Staff George Marshall began to voice their concerns over the state of the army.

By 1940, President Roosevelt was acutely aware of the looming threat of conflict and knew that the armed forces were dangerously under-equipped and undermanned for an overseas deployment, should the need for one arise. He passed the selective service act of 1940 in preparation for this, requiring every eligible male to register for the draft. Roosevelt also signed a total of five executive orders that same year, which activated national guard units for federal service, so that their equipment could be modernized and the men could be trained extensively.

One of these guard units was the 32nd Infantry division, composed of volunteers from Wisconsin and Michigan. Archie “Red” Van Gorden was one of the guardsmen in this division.

division.org/history/ww1/32-ww1.html. (accessed 3/23/2022) Side note: “Yanks” was common British slang for American soldiers, from “Yankee”. 
He had joined the National Guard a year before Pearl Harbor was bombed, achieving the rank of first lieutenant by 1940. Born in rural Wisconsin, Red had always been an outdoorsman and enjoyed the camping and hiking that was the core of National Guard training. When he joined the National Guard, though, it is unlikely that Red expected to be fighting halfway around the world within two years.

There was not a strong sense of urgency to prepare for war among many of the Army’s enlisted men in the year or so leading up to Pearl Harbor, despite the fact that war was raging across Europe, North Africa, and East Asia. President Roosevelt’s 1940 activation was the first indication that the United States was headed for war, and Lieutenant Van Gorden followed the rest of the Red Arrow Division to Camp Livingston in Louisiana. Here, they underwent months of field training and participated in large-scale combat maneuvers as a part of the 3rd Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Walter Krueger. The training in Louisiana transformed the 32nd Infantry Division from a loose collection of part-time soldiers into a tough and capable fighting machine. It proved even more valuable when Pearl Harbor was bombed, driving the soldiers to train harder and solidifying their resolve.

After finishing their year of training in Louisiana, the 32nd was transferred to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, arriving in February 1942. The officers were told to expect several months of reinforcement and resupply time there, followed by a transfer to Northern Ireland. Allied high command made the decision to transfer the Red Arrows to the Pacific. The new departure date, April 15, was only three weeks away, a deadline that divisional command had to

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12Krueger would be in command of the 32nd Infantry as they fought their way through the Southwest Pacific.
14Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II.* pg 20.
scramble to meet. After hurried preparations that included crossing the entire country, the division sailed out of San Francisco on April 22, 1942.

When they arrived in Australia on May 14, the 32nd Infantry was in an interesting state. The men and officers who had trained in Louisiana formed the backbone of the Division, but they had picked up a large batch of new recruits to their ranks in San Francisco. The roughly 3,000 new men from around the country had barely graduated Army basic training, leaving a wide gap between their practical experience and that of the original core of guardsmen from Michigan and Wisconsin. If the men of the division had any misgivings about their predicament, though, they did not have long to dwell on them. After a brief period of hurried jungle combat training in Adelaide, regiments of the 32nd Infantry began preparing to reinforce the Australian stronghold of Port Moresby.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Saving Port Moresby and Crossing the Owen-Stanley Range}

Located on the Southern coast of New Guinea, Port Moresby was the final bastion of Allied naval and air power defending the Australian continent. The Japanese knew that occupying the port would allow the Imperial Navy to threaten allied shipping, and the airbase there was positioned to provide air cover for a potential invasion of Australia. The first attempt the Japanese navy made to capture Port Moresby was a direct naval assault from the Coral Sea to the East, but the transport ships were forced away at the Battle of the Coral Sea. Determined to capture the port and cripple the Allies, the Japanese high command withdrew and began planning another assault. The port is securely flanked by the Owen Stanley mountain range to the North and East, making it difficult to attack by land. Not willing to have their conquest stopped by geography, Japanese commanders decided on a new offensive that would push through the

\textsuperscript{15} Blakeley, H.W. \textit{The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II}. 
mountains towards the port. The starting point for this new offensive was Buna, a tiny village on the Northeast coast of New Guinea. The plan was for soldiers to attack down the Kokoda track, a narrow mountain pass connecting Buna and Port Moresby. Winding through dense jungles at lower elevations and treacherous passes high in the Owen Stanley mountains, the track was hazardous to those on foot and completely impassable for vehicles. Both sides knew that attempting to move a large military force along it would be a logistical nightmare. The Allies had decided not to establish defensive positions around Buna for this exact reason, allowing Japanese forces to land there unopposed. After establishing a forward supply depot from which to launch their attack on Port Moresby.

Australian Army units mobilized to meet the invaders, desperately fighting to keep the Japanese from advancing towards the crucial port. Fatigue, dehydration, illness, and short supplies took a heavy toll on both them and the attacking forces, but after six and a half months
of fighting the Japanese had pushed them back to the outskirts of Port Moresby. By the time the first soldiers of the 32nd Division arrived to reinforce the Australian 7th Division, they had fallen back to positions along the Goldie River. Twenty miles away from Port Moresby, this was essentially the last line of allied defense on New Guinea.\textsuperscript{16}

The first night that the 32nd Infantry spent on the line was uneventful, but few of the men could sleep. They would not be involved in fierce fighting here, but the threat of Japanese soldiers lurking in the tall grass set them on edge at all times. The Japanese forces facing them were determined to capture the port, but their overextended supply lines were under constant harassment from allied air attacks.\textsuperscript{17} The arrival of fresh American troops proved to be too much for the battle-weary Japanese, and their advance finally ground to a halt. The port was saved for the time being, and the attacking forces began retreating down the trail.

\textsuperscript{16} 273rd Engineer Company, United States Army. \textit{13,000 Hours: Combat History of the 32nd Infantry Division- World War II.} Published 1944. From the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. (accessed 2/27/2022).
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{13,000 Hours}, pg.7
While the Australians pursued the Japanese down the Kokoda track, various parts of the 32nd Infantry Division repositioned to encircle and cut them off at Buna. The Majority of the 126th and 128th Regiments (Guard units from Michigan and Wisconsin, respectively) transferred to airfields East of Buna. One unit, the 2nd battalion of the 126th infantry regiment, embarked on a grueling march along a small trail West of the Kokoda track, called the Kapa Kapa Trail. Protecting the Australian 7th’s flank, they would use the Kapa Kapa to close in on Buna from the Northwest. The commanding officer of the battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Geerds, had a heart attack only days into the trek. Wisconsinite Herbert Smith, a Neillsville native, took command of the battalion and led them over the mountains.

The men crossing the Kapa Kapa trail suffered immensely from supply issues, and were the victims of the Division’s first aerial supply disaster. On November fifth, a plane that was supposed to deliver rations to the men crashed when a blanket (meant to soften the landing of the
air dropped supplies) got caught on its tail and sent it into the jungle.\(^{18}\) Compounding the
difficulties of starvation and perpetually miserable conditions in general was the harassment they
received from enemy forces concealed in the jungles. Nevertheless, Smith and his men pushed
on. After forty-two days, the 2nd Battalion emerged from the jungle and assumed their positions
opposite of the Japanese defenses.\(^{19}\) In an ironic twist of fate, a makeshift airfield was
established on the Northern coast of New Guinea, East of the Japanese beachhead at Buna.\(^{20}\) not
long after they began their trek through the mountains. Although they had abandoned most of
their heavy weapons and equipment along the way, these men joined the rest of the Division in
the opening attack against the Japanese around Buna.

Because the men of the 32nd Infantry were the first Americans to enter combat in the
Pacific, there were no prior experiences for them to learn from. The 126th Regiment learned how
unforgiving the environment could be as they trekked along the Kapa Kapa trail, but at that point
had not faced anything like the prepared defenses they would now have to break through. Aside
from a few weeks of light jungle training in Australia, the rest of the division had to learn
everything about jungle warfare from scratch.\(^{21}\) In spite of their exhaustion, every soldier now
facing the Japanese around Buna knew how much rested on their successful capture of the tiny
village. Unfortunately for many of them, military intelligence failed to accurately predict the
number of Japanese soldiers around the village. It was generally believed that destroying the
enemy there would be fairly straightforward, even though most of the 32nd was inexperienced in
combat and would not benefit from artillery or heavy weapon support.\(^{22}\) In his history of the

\(^{19}\) 13,000 Hours, pg. 7
\(^{21}\) 13,000 Hours, pg. 8
\(^{22}\) Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II*. pg. 54
division, General Blakeley asserted that because of the numerous handicaps placed upon the 32nd Infantry during the Buna campaign, the unit would “never again be as unstable as it was during its first fight”.23

Buna Campaign- Baptism of Fire

On November 16, 1942, the infantrymen of the 32nd began advancing towards Buna to push the Japanese off of New Guinea and end the threat to Port Moresby once and for all. That same day, eighteen carrier-based A6M ‘Zero’ fighters of the Imperial Japanese Navy decimated the supply convoy that was headed to reinforce the Division, compounding the already bleak equipment situation.24 Although this disaster initially manifested itself to the infantrymen as a

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23 Blakeley, H.W. The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II, pg. 56
24 Blakeley, H.W. The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II, pg. 60
brief delay in their advance towards Buna, they would soon see their food and ammunition supplies begin to dwindle. Nevertheless, on the morning of November 19th, they resumed the attack. While a detachment of engineers from the Wisconsin 128th infantry regiment began rushing to establish an emergency resupply airfield, the rest of the regiment marched headfirst into Japanese defenses that had been heavily reinforced during the delay. By nightfall, the 128th Infantry had managed to push the Japanese forces only three hundred yards back from their initial positions, and suffered heavy losses to do so. The jungle itself had become a second enemy to conquer, concealing the positions of pillboxes and machine gun nests. Soldiers sank to their chests in swamps, and the dense canopy of trees and vines overhead made mortars difficult to use effectively. Grenades that had been provided by the Australians became ineffective when wet, causing much anguish among the Men. One patrol of men from the 128th “threw seven grenades into a group of ten or twelve japs… only to have all the grenades fail to explode and to suffer about thirty percent casualties from return grenade fire”.  

The allied situation did not improve much over the next few days, aside from some airdropped ammunition and supplies. Although the stiff Japanese resistance and high allied casualties around Buna were obliterating the 32nd Infantry’s morale, Allied high command still believed that they could clear

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25 Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II*. pgs. 62-64
out the Japanese with a strong enough breakthrough attack. Another attack on November 26, Thanksgiving day, resulted in failure. Herbert Smith, the Niellsville native that had led his battalion along the treacherous Kapa Kapa trail, tried to find a weak spot by sneaking through dense swampland, but that failed too as there simply were not weak spots in the Japanese defenses.

It was clear by that point that a successful attack would require more support, be better organized, and unfortunately cost the allies a lot of casualties. A renewed offensive began on November 30th, and the 32nd Infantry finally achieved a measure of victory. While most of the advancing forces were pinned down at various points along the Japanese perimeter, Companies I and K of the 126th Infantry Regiment were able to push through a patch of fortified swamp and get behind the Japanese defenses. They were then able to capture and hold a Japanese camp, marking the first time that an allied unit had actually accomplished their objective in the battle.26

By the end of November, the 32nd Infantry Division had suffered 492 casualties attempting to take Buna, and had very little to show for it. MacArthur was convinced that his subordinate officers were to blame, believing that proper leadership would be enough to overcome the terrain and enemy defenses. On December second, He personally sent General Robert Eichelberger to the front with the simple orders to relieve General Harding of command and “produce results”.27 Eichelberger made many changes to divisional leadership, and notably mobilized the 127th Infantry Regiment. The 127th had deployed to the Pacific with the rest of the 32nd Infantry Division, but had not participated in combat to that point. Under Eichelberger’s

26Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II*. pgs. 72-77
27Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II*. pg 83
command, the reinforced and resupplied 32nd Division was able to gradually chip away at the Japanese defenses, inching closer to Buna with each attack.

The village was encircled on December fifth, thanks to a breakthrough by Company H of the 126th Infantry. The officer leading this assault, Staff Sergeant Herman Bottcher, had been with the 32nd Division since 1940, training in the Louisiana Maneuvers. He was promoted to Infantry Captain for his leadership. The men of the 32nd Infantry continued to grind down the Japanese defenses around the village, often targeting a single bunker at a time, and on December 14th they finally secured the small cluster of huts. Japanese forces were still scattered throughout the surrounding area, and the Red Arrows spent the remainder of 1942 clearing them out with assistance from Australian infantry and tanks. Once the Buna region was secured, the Division pushed West across the Girua River. They continued to fight hard here, and in spite of their severely depleted ranks and the fact that nearly every man in the Division was sick with some disease or another, made substantial progress. The final objective of this campaign was Sanananda Point, the final Japanese stronghold on New Guinea. Bit by bit, the Japanese defenses there were dismantled or overrun, and with each victory the allies gained momentum. The village of Giruwa was captured on January 21, 1943, marking the end of the Papuan campaign for the Red Arrows. They transferred back to Australia for a period of reinforcement, rest, and recuperation two days later.

During this time, many men of the 32nd Infantry were awarded Distinguished Service Crosses, and two received Medals of Honor. Sergeant Elmer Burr was given the Medal of Honor for jumping on a grenade and saving his Captain’s life. Sergeant Kenneth Gruennert received his

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28 Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II.* pg 91
29 Blakeley, H.W. *The 32nd Infantry Division in World War II.* pgs 92-93
30 Blakeley, pg 125.
for singlehandedly clearing two pillboxes, after which he was killed by sniper fire. Both men were from Wisconsin.31

Against formidable odds, the 32nd Infantry Division had succeeded as the first American soldiers deployed into combat. They faced an enemy force that far exceeded them in experience, and had emerged victorious in spite of numerous logistical issues and a jungle that seemed determined to stop them at every turn for the duration of the campaign. The Division had entered New Guinea with 9,825 men between its three core regiments, and by the time they were pulled off the line had suffered 2,620 men killed, missing, or wounded. Furthermore, an additional 7,336 men were listed as “sick in action”-making the total casualty number higher than the number of men initially deployed.32 As the 32nd Division trickled back to Australia, they began to receive badly-needed replacement soldiers, as well as some time to rest. From April to October of 1943, the veterans from New Guinea shared their hard-earned knowledge of jungle combat and Japanese tactics.33

By the Time the 32nd Infantry was recommitted to combat, the desperation that had characterized their initial deployment to the Pacific was no more. The strategically located island of Guadalcanal had been captured by Marines and Army forces, securing the Southeast approach to Australia and New Guinea. A Japanese troop convoy was turned back at the battle of the Bismarck Sea while attempting to reach New Guinea, and MacArthur had begun an offensive against the ground forces cut off there. The 32nd Infantry had neutralized the critical threat to Port Moresby and a potential invasion of Australia, giving the rest of the US armed forces the

31 Blakeley, pgs 104-107.
32 Blakeley, pg 127.
33 Blakeley, pgs 130-131.
time they needed to organize and strike back against the Japanese.\textsuperscript{34} The division would continue to serve with distinction and valor throughout the rest of the war, eventually logging more hours in combat than any other unit in the United States Army.

However, this paper will not discuss the campaigns following the action at Port Moresby/Buna, as doing so would be lengthy and redundant. Although the 32nd Infantry Division continued to be an important part of MacArthur’s advance through the South Pacific, the action on New Guinea was a turning point in the Pacific war. Thrust into an unfamiliar, hostile environment with no combat experience and scant training, the 32nd Infantry Division was able to halt a seemingly unstoppable Japanese advance. In doing so, the Wisconsin soldiers robbed the enemy of naval and air power, cut off supply lines to other strongholds in the region, and dashed any hopes the Japanese may have had for an invasion of the Australian continent. The various sources examined throughout this section repeatedly show that Wisconsin soldiers in the 32nd Infantry had a significant, positive impact on war effort during the Buna campaign. The 32nd Infantry’s formidable historic record in World War One certainly contributed to this, and the few officers who stayed with the unit during the interwar period were responsible for maintaining divisional pride. Training received by the division in Louisiana, praised after the war by Dwight Eisenhower for its “incalculable” benefits,\textsuperscript{35} also undoubtedly helped those who participated once they found themselves in combat. Most of the men in the 32nd Infantry who received this training were from Wisconsin or Michigan, as replacements from other states arrived last-minute before deploying. When they became trapped in the jungle without supplies, armor, or air support, the resilience and leadership of various Wisconsinites allowed the division

\textsuperscript{34} Blakeley, pg 131.
\textsuperscript{35} Blakeley, H.W. The 32d Infantry Division in World War II, pgs 11-12.
to repeatedly achieve its objectives, eventually securing total victory. If another unit had been in their place, the Japanese may have held out much longer on New Guinea.

**Major Richard Bong and The Home Front**

The monumental human achievement of powered flight, first realized by the Wright Brothers on a windswept beach in North Carolina, has captured the imaginations of countless men and women throughout history.\(^{36}\) In his 1979 book *The National Air and Space Museum*, military historian C.D.B. Bryan described the effect that various historical aircraft on display at said museum had on the guests: “Neither the Visitor’s age nor their nationality seem to matter, their eyes always reflect the excitement, the anticipation, the wonder of a child… Each person who visits the National Air and Space Museum finds themself moved by that experience in a way they may not have anticipated… and each visitor comes away from the museum with a renewed sense of awe and shared pride in these accomplishments.”\(^{37}\)

Drawn irresistibly to the skies, early pilots flew at great risk to themselves. Most were amateurs, and aircraft construction standards were much more loosely regulated than they are today. Early aircraft were extremely rudimentary, with frames made from wood and covered with cloth, which made them more fragile in rough weather and crash landings.Adding another element of danger was the fact that early pilots also frequently flew without parachutes. This was

\(^{36}\) In pop culture: footage of aerial combat, captured by cameras mounted on fighter planes in WWII, inspired the space battle scenes between X-wings and TIE fighters in *Star Wars*.

the case for a couple of reasons. Firstly, parachute packs were bulky and a pilot wearing one might not be able to fit into the already-crammed airplanes of the time. Secondly, in World War One, many pilots were not issued parachutes because they were expected to valiantly go down with their airplanes and parachutes seemed like an unnecessary cost to the military. This was predominantly a British idea, based on the naval tradition that a captain should go down with their ship. These hazards cost many pioneering aviators their lives. However, as aircraft became safer and sturdier, daring pilots were able to perform extraordinary feats inside a cockpit and secure themselves notable spots in the history books. Aviators like Charles Lindberg, the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, and Amelia Earhart, the first woman to do the same, have become icons of American folklore.

During the second world war, airpower proved to be a revolutionary influence on military doctrine and strategy. Advancements in aviation technology were made at breakneck speed, with both allied and axis powers pouring immense amounts of resources into the race for air superiority. Because aerial combat was so prevalent during the war, some of the pilots who excelled at it were elevated to celebrity status, which governments used for propaganda and morale purposes. In the US military, the title of ‘Ace’ is bestowed upon pilots who shoot down five or more enemy planes. ‘Ace of Aces’ is an even more prestigious title, bestowed upon the current highest-scoring ace in the country. Since 1945, this title has belonged to Major Richard Bong, a Wisconsin native who scored 40 kills over the South Pacific.

Richard Bong was not, however, drawn to the skies by the legendary achievements of pilots like Lindberg and Earhardt. Instead, it was President Calvin Coolidge’s mail plane that

captured Bong’s imagination. In 1928, President Calvin Coolidge set up a ‘vacation’ White House in Superior, Wisconsin. Coolidge spent that summer in a converted local schoolhouse, and among other leisure activities Fished in the nearby rivers for trout. Although he was on vacation, the President was still bound to his duties and had to have mail delivered from Washington daily via a small Navy biplane. The route the pilot took passed right over Poplar, Wisconsin, and a small farm owned by Carl and Dora Bong, Richard’s parents. Dick, as he was known to friends and family alike, was eight at the time- the oldest of nine children. Every day that summer, He would keep an eye and ear out for the small silver aircraft and excitedly call his siblings’ attention whenever he spotted it. That summer, Dick became determined to someday earn his pilot wings.

After graduating from high school in 1938, Richard Bong wasted little time fulfilling this lifelong ambition. The Army Air Corps required two years of college for enlistment, which Bong fulfilled at Superior State Teachers College. Immediately afterwards, He enrolled as a cadet in the Army Air Corps, boarding a train to Rankin Aeronautics Academy in Tulare, California in May of 1941. After three months there, Bong was transferred to the Air Corps Advanced Flying School (AFS) at Luke Field in Phoenix, Arizona. He graduated from the AFS in January 1942, performing well enough to earn himself a promotion to 2nd Lieutenant and a

42 Also called the Army Air Forces at the time, and used interchangeably with Army Air Corps by various sources. This paper will only use Air Corps exclusively for consistency, and because it sounds cooler.
job as an instructor for an additional four months. During this time, Bong demonstrated his growing skills as a pilot and as a leader.

The training that cadets in the Air Corps received was not designed to be dangerous, but occasionally the inexperienced trainees would fall prey to various hazards like fog, nighttime navigation, and storms, all of which could cause a plane to get lost and crash. Crashes seem to have been a fairly common occurrence, evidenced by the number of times that Bong mentions performing search sweeps for downed pilots in his letters home. He never appears to be particularly shaken up by the losses in the letters, but they show how unforgiving Cadet training was in the Air Corps. In one of these letters, He reported that eight cadets in a class had been killed and that thankfully none of them were cadets under his instruction.\textsuperscript{44}

Lieutenant Bong did a fine job training cadets in the months that he was stationed at Luke field, but the war effort needed him more urgently elsewhere. He was transferred once again to California for a final round of advanced fighter training, in preparation for deployment to North Africa with the 49th Pursuit Squadron. It was here that Bong was introduced to the brand new P-38 Lightning fighter. The aircraft left an excellent first impression on Bong; To quote the letter he wrote home after flying it for the first time, “WOOEY! What an airplane. That is all I can say, but that is enough”. He honed his skills in the P-38 during this last bout of training, practicing aerial combat maneuvers with the other pilots in his squadron.

Interestingly, Bong did not deploy to North Africa with the rest of the 49th Pursuit Squadron when they shipped out in July 1942. In a strange turn of events, he had been grounded after breaking Army regulations and flying over a newlywed friend’s house. Bong was concerned that he might be discharged from the army for this violation, which he didn’t mention to his family until months later when he was home on leave. Fortunately for him, three other Air Corps pilots had chosen to fly under the golden gate bridge that same day. His comparatively minor offense earned him a stern warning from

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command and a temporary suspension from flying.\textsuperscript{46} Having missed the boat to Africa, the Army sent Lieutenant Bong to Australia with a handful of other replacement pilots in September.\textsuperscript{47}

Bong’s reputation as a naturally talented aviator followed him to the Pacific, although the more veteran combat pilots had their doubts. One of these pilots was Bob McMahon, who had also enlisted in the Army Air Corps before the war. He was already an ace with eight kills by the time Bong got to the Pacific, but had spent most of the war flying the older P-40 and P-39 fighter models. The brand-new P-38s that arrived with Bong and the other replacements were faster and could climb better than the older planes, but the experienced pilots had not been impressed with its maneuverability during their limited training with the aircraft. At that point in the war, allied pilots like McMahon were facing off against the extremely agile Japanese “Zero” fighters and felt that the P-38 had not been designed to counter the Zero well.

Lieutenant Bong was quick to demonstrate what the P-38 could do in the right hands. Bob McMahon remembered a mock dogfight in which he and fellow Frank Adkins teamed up to take on Lieutenant Bong and an unnamed wingman. In his P-38, Bong surprised the two veteran pilots with remarkable agility and aggressive maneuvers that McMahon’s smaller and allegedly more agile fighter could not match.\textsuperscript{48} Competitions like this were common amongst fighter pilots in the war, who often tracked one another’s statistics as a matter of sport. Many of the American aces in the Pacific theater knew each other by name and became friends during the war.\textsuperscript{49} The elite status of aces like McMahon and Bong persisted thanks in part to newspapers back home,

\textsuperscript{46} The Golden Gate Bridge stunt often gets attributed to Lt. Bong for some reason, even though he had nothing to do with it (Dear Mom, So We Have a War).
\textsuperscript{48} Bong, Carl. Dear Mom, So We Have a War. pg. 162
\textsuperscript{49} Bong, Carl. pg. 162
which were one of the most available sources that Americans had for information about how the war was progressing.

After his final two months of training in Australia, Bong finally began to fly combat missions over New Guinea with the 9th Fighter Squadron. Based at Dobodura airfield on New Guinea, the 9th Squadron flew their P-38 fighters as bomber escorts and interceptors. On December 27, 1942, He scored the first two of his forty kills, which according to his report were a ‘Val’ dive bomber and a ‘Zeke’ (or ‘Zero’) fighter. By the eighth day of 1943, Bong was officially a fighter ace with five kills. By the end of July 1943, Lieutenant Bong had shot down sixteen enemy planes, making him the leading ace in the Army Air Corps. Although he trailed Marine pilot Joe Foss by ten kills at that point, it is undeniable that Bong was quickly making a name for himself in New Guinea and back home.

When The United States declared war on the Axis powers in 1941, newspapers were the most widespread source of information available to the average American citizen. As hundreds of thousands of men were shipped overseas to fight, their loved ones at home flocked to the papers for information. The Military, recognizing the value of popular support, allowed reporters to travel close to the front and write stories that would raise morale on the home front. As Richard Bong shot down more and more enemy planes, these reporters began to take note and His popularity grew back home.

Bong’s first appearance in a Wisconsin Newspaper was in the December 28th, 1942 edition of the LaCrosse Tribune. In a brief description of a dogfight over Buna (where the 32nd

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50Bong, Carl. pg. 175
51Bong, Carl. pg. 189
52Bong, Carl. pg. 245
Infantry Division was fighting at the time), Bong was the only P-38 pilot mentioned by name and was listed as the “high scorer” of the day. In 1943, Bong’s achievement of ace status accelerated his rise to fame. In Eau Claire, this feat was included in the Leader-Telegram’s “Today on the Homefront” section.54

In New Guinea, Bong was aware that he was in the media spotlight, as he mentions posing for photos and film reels several times in his letters home. In a letter written to his sister in July 1943, He joked about his celebrity status: “What makes you think the girls would be disappointed, anyway? They wouldn’t be if they saw me. Publicity will probably cause me some Trouble”.55 Accounts from other pilots indicate that Lieutenant Bong did not let his fame go to his head. They were often surprised when they met Bong in person, expecting a larger-than-life figure and instead finding him to be rather polite and soft-spoken.56 He had little interest in fame and publicity, repeatedly expressing displeasure at the idea of transferring home to sell war bonds.57 It is clear that he preferred flying, and excelled at it for exactly that reason.

Lieutenant Bong was promoted to the rank of Captain on August 24, and spent the rest of 1943 dutifully patrolling the South Pacific skies and shooting down more Japanese planes. In October He received a Distinguished Service Cross, bringing him to a total of four medals alongside the Silver Star, Air Medal, and Distinguished Flying Cross. Eventually, though, Bong’s fame caught up with him. When He returned from a mission on November 7th, Bong learned that he as going to be sent back to the United States on leave, both to see his family and for a publicity tour to sell war bonds. When Dick learned about this He was positively dismayed,

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56 Bong, Carl. pg. 258
57 Bong, Carl. pg. 262
writing to his mother that he had “no desire whatsoever to come home to make speeches to any
hero worshiping public”. Nevertheless, After two years in the Army Air Corps, Captain Bong
returned home on November 16, 1943. He was just in time for the deer hunting season that he
had so badly missed while overseas. He was welcomed home as a hero, and was greeted by a
crowd of reporters and members of various community organizations at his family’s
farmhouse.59

While He was on leave in the United States, Captain Bong did not get to spend as much
time with his family as he might have liked. As he had predicted, he did not like the attention
from reporters very much. While hunting bucks with his family, Dick took credit for a buck that
his father had shot so that the reporters could get their photo and leave him alone.60 He couldn’t
avoid the call of duty forever, though, and in December he was whisked off to Washington D.C.
and New York City to meet legislators and give speeches on popular radio programs. Back closer
to home in Superior, community leaders organized “Captain Richard I. Bong Day” on January
seventh, to celebrate the local boy-turned-hero and sell war bonds. Captain Bong helped raise
over 250,000 dollars in war bond pledges that day.61

While he was on leave in Wisconsin, Lieutenant Bong attended the Superior State
Teachers College homecoming dance. He had been convinced by some members of the LSL
sorority to participate in the crowning ceremony for the homecoming king and queen. One of the
sorority women he met that night was Marge Vattendahl, who he would later marry. The two hit
it off right away, and Bong spent lots of his free time visiting her in Superior.62 When He

58Richard Bong Papers. August, 1943.
59Bong, Carl. pgs. 308-309
60Bong, Carl. pg. 311
61Bong, Carl. pg. 315-316
62Bong, Carl. pg. 312
returned to New Guinea, Lt. Bong stayed in touch with Marge, eventually getting a photograph of her plastered onto the nose of his P-38. She wrote to him almost daily, according to his own letters, and by April 3, 1944, he was proposing the idea of marrying her to his mom. Less than a year later, he made good on that plan and the two were married in Superior on February 12, 1945. The wedding received substantial media attention, as was the norm for Richard Bong by that point. Thousands attended the wedding, and papers called it the “biggest ceremony Superior had ever seen.” In between the ceremony and reception, the newlywed couple appeared on a radio program to announce their marriage. The widespread enthusiastic response to Bong’s wedding shows how important the unassuming pilot from Wisconsin had become to the American people.

Upon returning to the Pacific in February 1944, Captain Bong was transferred out of the 9th Pursuit squadron and designated as a ‘freelance’ pilot along with his new wingman, Colonel Thomas “Tommy” Lynch. Lynch was another fighter ace, trailing Bong by about five kills. The pair of freelance aces flew together for three weeks and between themselves racked up an additional seven kills- three to Bong and four to Lynch. Both pilots were nearing the previous record for enemy planes shot down, set at twenty-six in the First World War by Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. It is likely that the two aces were paired together as freelancers so that one of them would be the pilot to break that record. Unfortunately, Colonel Lynch was killed after being hit by anti-aircraft fire as the pair was attacking a Japanese shipping convoy on March 8th. Lt. Bong was shaken up by Lynch’s death. According to one account given by a member of his

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63“Major Bong Married.” The Manhattan Mercury, Feb. 11, 1945. newscomwc.newspapers.com
64Bong, Carl. pg. 329
65Bong, Carl. pg. 352
ground crew, Bong’s aircraft had received substantial damage in the same engagement, and it was little more than luck that allowed him to limp back to safety.\textsuperscript{66}

In spite of the loss of his wingman, Bong continued to On April 12, 1944, Bong scored his 27th kill over New Guinea, surpassing World War One ace Eddie Rickenbacker and becoming the highest-scoring American combat pilot to that point.\textsuperscript{67} Though he was already a popular figure, breaking Rickenbacker’s record catapulted Bong’s fame to new heights. He became one of the most recognizable faces of the Pacific Theater, appearing in newsreels, photographs, and interviews with papers from across the country.\textsuperscript{68} The fame came with a promotion to major and a lot more media attention, directed both at Maj. Bong and his family back home. Never a fan of the spotlight, Dick apologized to his mom for all the trouble he feared he had just brought down on her, the rest of his family, and Marge.\textsuperscript{69} Shortly afterwards, he was sent home once again by the Army for a public relations tour and debriefing at the Pentagon.\textsuperscript{70}

Although disappointed about being grounded from combat missions once again, Major Bong was happy to go home. When he got there, of course, He was a bust man. The army sent him to Washington DC immediately to meet and be congratulated by high-ranking Air Force officials. Eddie Rickenbacker, whose record he had just broken, was one of the celebrities Maj. Bong got to meet.\textsuperscript{71} He was also sent on a tour of various Army Air Force bases to receive further gunnery instruction, which basically means learning how to lead his shots. It is interesting that he was still ordered to receive training, even after becoming the highest-scoring ace in

\textsuperscript{66}Bong, Carl. pg. 336
\textsuperscript{67}“Capt. Richard Bong Takes Top Place, Gets 27th Jap.” \textit{Leader-Telegram}, April 14, 1944.
\textsuperscript{68}Bong, Richard & Van Atta, Lee. “America’s Ace of Aces Describes First Airforce Combat Reaction.” \textit{The Knoxville Journal}, Nov. 12, 1944.
\textsuperscript{69}Bong, Carl. pg. 354
\textsuperscript{70}Bong, Carl. pg. 355
\textsuperscript{71}Bong, Carl. pg. 357
American history. He was provided a P-38 for transportation between these bases, and he managed to bring it back to Wisconsin a few times to show off.\textsuperscript{72} During his second trip home, it is evident that the Bong’s name and image had become major parts of the propaganda war effort, and were integrated into everyday life. His mom, for example, appeared with the mothers of two other high-scoring fighter aces on a WLS Chicago’s Mother’s Day program. Bong spent the summer touring the country in his P-38, and in mid-September 1944 shipped back to New Guinea.

When he returned to the Pacific, Major Bong found himself in an interesting situation. Although he was eager to fly and had received additional gunnery training while in the US, fighter command kept him out of the skies as much as they could. His status as a top ace and popularity with the American people outweighed his value as a combat pilot. If he were to be shot down, it could be a significant propaganda victory for the Japanese and would devastate the American public. General George Kenney, in charge of the South Pacific air forces, was under immense pressure from the entire chain of command to transfer Maj. Bong home before he got himself killed. Accordingly, he only sent the ace on twenty-six missions in October, November, and December combined. Even though he was flying relatively few missions, Bong was still able to rack up twelve more kills during this period, putting him at forty and setting a US Air Force record that still stands in 2022.

Shortly after he scored his fortieth kill over the Philippines, Major Bong was transferred back to the United States for good. When he arrived in San Francisco on December 31st, 1944, the first thing he did was call Marge Vattendahl to set a wedding date. They initially picked February 3rd, but accommodations for radio and newspaper reporters forced them to reschedule

\textsuperscript{72}Bong, Carl. pgs. 373-376
to the 10th. By this time, Bong was a medal of honor recipient in addition to being a legendary fighter ace, and was more popular than ever. Reporters followed him and Marge everywhere, eager to not miss a single thing that the couple did. Their wedding was a huge affair, featuring a massive cake and multiple photo-op reenactments of the ceremony. The couple spent the next months honeymooning around the country, stopping at Sequoia, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite National parks along the way and generally enjoying themselves. Marge even got the opportunity to squeeze behind her husband in the cockpit of his famous P-38.

The two newlyweds eventually settled down in California, where Dick had landed a job as a test pilot for Lockheed. He would be flying the brand-new P-80 “Shooting Star” jet fighter. He tested P-80’s through July 1945 without incident, but on August 6th his aircraft suffered a technical failure and crashed moments after takeoff, giving him no time to escape. Bong was killed immediately in the crash, and word of his death spread across the nation quickly. It was front page news the next day in papers across the United States, sharing the space with reports of the first atomic bomb falling on Hiroshima. He was only twenty four years old. Americans who had followed his career through newspaper headlines and radio interviews were devastated, and those who knew the Major personally were even more so. Today, his legacy lives on through various institutions like the Richard I. Bong Veterans Historical Center and Richard Bong memorial bridge in Superior, Wisconsin, or the Richard Bong State Recreation Area south of Milwaukee.

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73 Bong, Carl. pg. 481
74 Bong, Carl. pg. 491
Conclusion

During World War Two, soldiers and airmen from Wisconsin were critical to allied victory in the Pacific. Without the training that the 32nd Infantry division received before they were thrust onto the frontlines of New Guinea, as well as the tenacity of the soldiers from Wisconsin, The United States would not have had much of an army to fight the Japanese with. Had the 32nd Infantry Division failed to stop the Japanese advance, Japanese forces may very well have captured Port Moresby. The 32nd Infantry Division’s ability to live up to their historical reputation and break through enemy lines proved to be critical in stopping the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track, and again during the fighting for Buna. Their valor on New Guinea, in spite of a lack of experience and supplies, saved the Island and potentially the Allied war effort.

Richard Bong, for his part, is one of the most significant individuals associated with the Pacific Theater. In addition to his obvious value as an expert fighter pilot with forty kills, his celebrity status contributed to the war effort as well. His victories boosted morale on the home front, inspiring people and helping to keep the war machine running. Although he didn’t particularly enjoy all of the media attention that he received, it is undeniable that Major Bong’s fame was good for the war effort as he helped raise lots of money through war bonds. The cultural impact that he had on Wisconsin is further evident in the collective response of grief and respect that was generated when he died in 1945. Wisconsinites who answered their country’s call to defend freedom played various crucially important roles in the defeat of the Japanese, and live on in the state’s collective memory.
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