

**Historical Report: JPAC Incident 34
Huggins Roadblock, Sanananda Village, Northern Province
Independent State of Papua New Guinea**



by

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27 April 2015

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INDIVIDUALS ASSOCIATED

Name	Service Number	Rank	Branch of Service	Date of Loss	Status
Keating, Earl J.	34150954	Pvt	USA	5 December 1942	KIA-BNR
Klopp, John H.	34150934	Pvt	USA	5 December 1942	KIA-BNR

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND¹

On 5 December 1942, Private (Pvt) Earl J. Keating and Pvt John H. Klopp, both assigned to the Anti-Tank Company, 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Division, succumbed to fatal injuries sustained during an intense engagement with enemy forces in the vicinity of the Huggins Roadblock, a U.S. position behind Japanese lines that had been maintained since the evening of 30 November 1942. The roadblock was established astride an unimproved track through the jungle in the Australian Territory of Papua (present-day Papua New Guinea).

Beginning in July 1942, Allied ground forces—consisting of the 7th Australian Army Division and the U.S. 32d and 41st Infantry Divisions—attempted to neutralize the enemy threat to Port Moresby, the political and commercial center of Papua, in order to maintain the vital Allied communication and shipping lanes between the United States and Australia (see Figure 1).² By early November 1942, the Allied armies had isolated the Japanese to a twenty-mile long front on the northern coast of Papua, stretching from Buna to the east, Sanananda in the center, and Gona to the west. The 7th Australian Army Division was given the task of

¹ The historical background and investigation sections were compiled, unless otherwise noted, from information owned and published by the Department of Defense.

² *Papua: the Campaigns of World War II*, CMH Publication 72-7 (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, n.d.), 8-10.

capturing Gona and Sanananda, the latter situated on the coast at the end of the Soputa-Sanananda Track, or road (see Figure 2). The Australian force was augmented with elements of the 126th Infantry Regiment, 32d Infantry Division, including the men of the Anti-Tank Company. Upon arriving in Papua, this unit was hastily converted into a company of combat infantrymen.³



Figure 1. Location of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, as indicated by the red arrow, and Gona-Sanananda area circled in red.

³ Ibid.

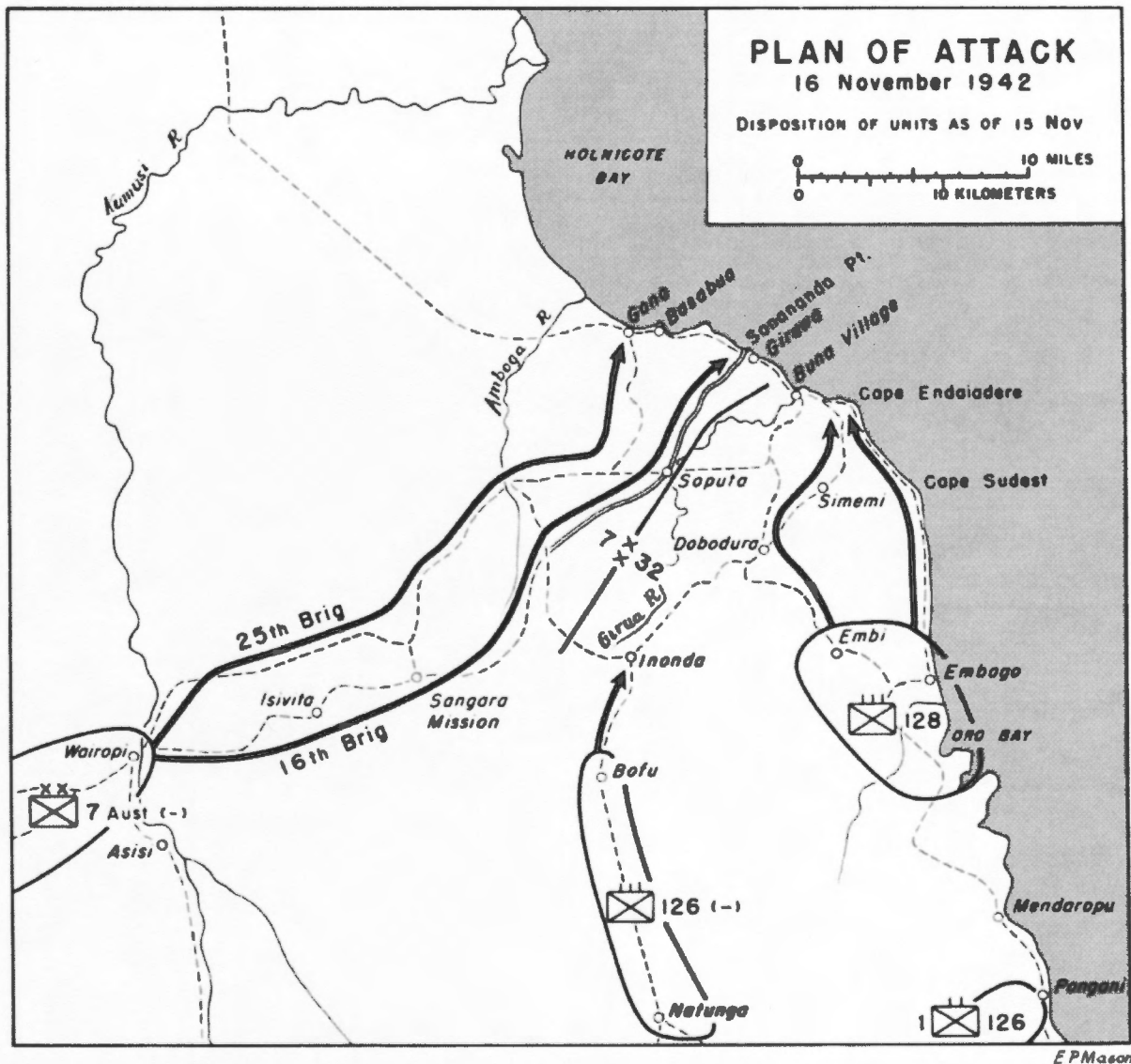


Figure 2. Plan of attack, November 1942. Image from the *United States Army in World War II, the War in the Pacific: Victory in Papua* by Samuel Milner.

On 30 November, units of the 126th Infantry Regiment including I Company, Anti-Tank Company, the machine gun section of M Company, and communication personnel from 3d Battalion Headquarters positioned themselves west of the road and moved east toward the Japanese position. According to one account “they were met from virtually all sides by hostile rifle, mortar, and machine gun fire.” The men pressed on and made their way through dense jungle and a deep swamp before finally executing a bayonet charge and killing twenty Japanese soldiers defending a “bivouac area” on the Soputa-Sanananda Track. The area, described as a “comparatively open, oval-shaped space about 250 yards long and 150 yards wide” was located

1,500 yards north of the track junction and 300 yards south of the second Japanese position up the track (see Figure 3).⁴

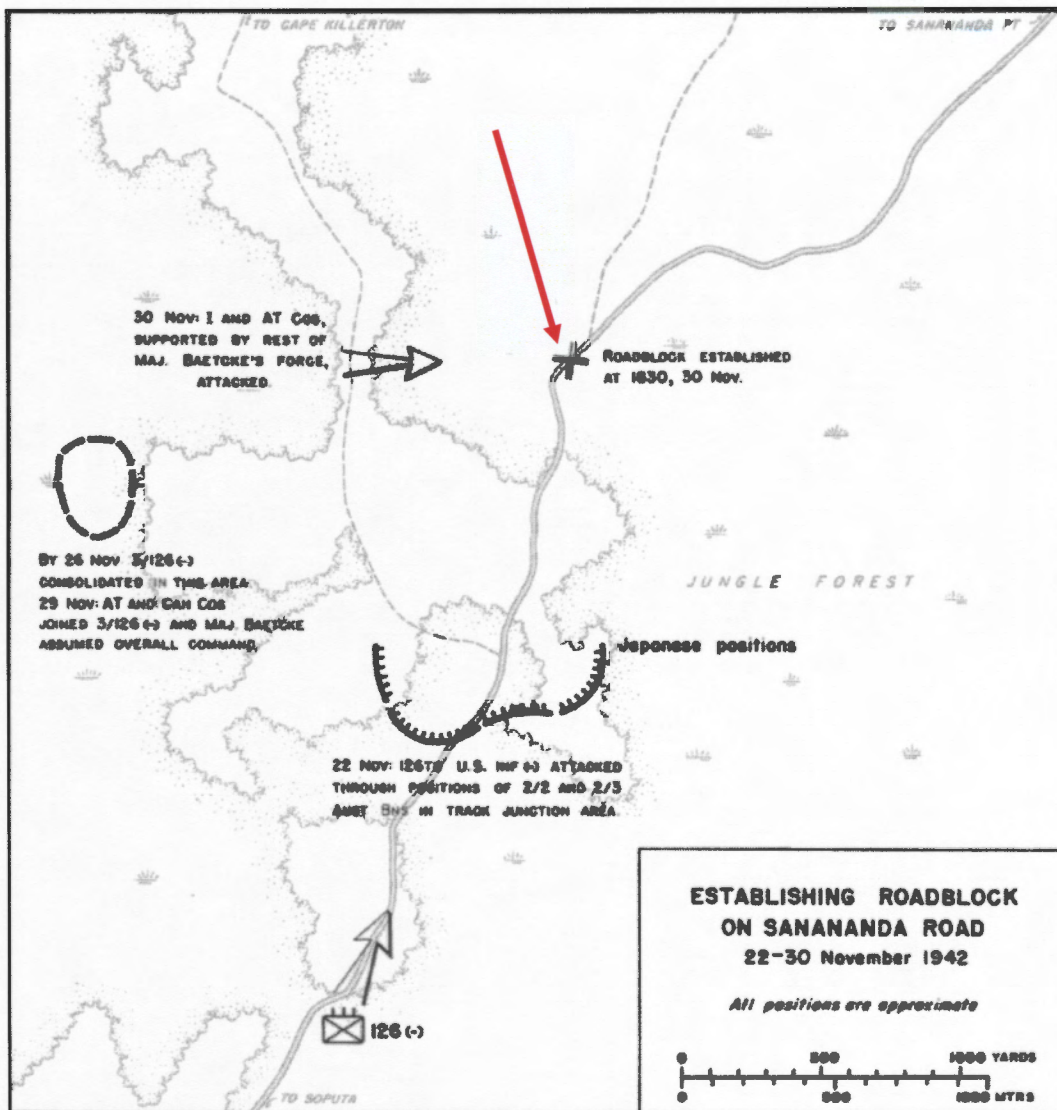


Figure 3. The position of the roadblock on the Sanananda Track, as indicated by the red arrow. Image from the *United States Army in World War II, the War in the Pacific: Victory in Papua* by Samuel Milner.

Captain (Capt) John Shirley, the commander of I Company, ordered his men to establish a "perimeter defense, approximately 350 yards in width and 450 yards in depth, astride the Track," a position which would prevent the Japanese from reinforcing their lines.⁵ The Anti-

⁴ Milner, 164.

⁵ Bernd G. Baetcke, "Subj: Statement on Soputa-Sanananda (Huggins) Roadblock, by Lt Col B. G. Baetcke," 9 July 1943, AWM 54: 581/6/6; Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

Tank Company, including Privates Klopp and Keating, reached the roadblock late on 30 November or early the following morning. Their company commander, Capt Roger Keast, was killed during the initial attempts to establish and defend the perimeter.

On the morning of 1 December, a small ammunition and ration party led by Capt Meredith M. Huggins, 3rd Battalion Headquarters Company commander, fought their way to the roadblock. Captain Huggins took command of the position later that day after Capt Shirley was killed by a sniper at approximately 1200 hours.⁶ The next day Capt Huggins wrote an urgent message to his superiors: "Shirley dead . . . 2 MG [machine gun] crews hit hard but we can't get to 'em. 20 missing [and] 10 believed dead. We are in good spirits and well dug in. We can hold till heck freezes over. Come on up."⁷ The position would come to be known as the "Huggins Roadblock" until the end of the campaign. The men hastily dug foxholes and slit trenches and prepared to defend their lines. The men from Anti-Tank Company established themselves east of the road.

The American position at the roadblock was precarious, at best. The soldiers "were subject to continuous attack from almost every direction by enemy forces that outnumbered them several times over."⁸ The fighting was intimate and nearly hand-to-hand.⁹ The Japanese attacked the roadblock constantly and came close to breaking through. According to one source, they "came so close to our trenches that our men could grab them by the ankles and pull them in."¹⁰

On 5 December the U.S. forces to the west of the roadblock and southeast of the track junction launched a simultaneous attack which resulted in heavy casualties. Of the roughly 300 men engaged, approximately 90 were either killed, wounded, or missing.¹¹ Unit records for the 126th Infantry Regiment indicate that they witnessed another coordinated attempt by the Americans to break the stalemate and get much-needed supplies to the roadblock: "following an intense mortar and artillery barrage, heavy attacks were made on all sectors and met with stiff resistance giving us only limited success." A ration party failed to make it to the perimeter and Capt Huggins was reported wounded. The unit diary for I Company, written in longhand from a position inside the perimeter, noted that on 5 December the men "fought off [a] heavy attack, inflicting many casualties to [the] enemy." The diary also noted that the roadblock was "subject to MG and sniper's fire all day."¹²

⁶ Milner, 221.

⁷ Bernd G. Baetcke, Baetcke Family Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

⁸ Milner, 219.

⁹ Milner, 224.

¹⁰ *Papua Campaign*, 65-6.

¹¹ Milner, 222. Casualties (out of 300 engaged) included two killed, 63 wounded, and 25 missing (30%).

¹² "'I' Company Journal, 126th Infantry Regiment, Buna (Papuan) Campaign, 10 November 1942 to 21 January 1943," 32d Infantry Division, World War II Operations Reports, 1940-8, Entry 427, Record Group 407: Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives at College Park, MD.

Archival documents indicate that soldiers at the roadblock buried the remains of Private Klopp and Private Keating within the Huggins Perimeter on 5 December 1942.¹³ The two infantrymen most likely succumbed to fatal injuries sustained during the fighting on that date. While a corresponding document is not available for Pvt Keating, the executive officer of the regiment completed a "Report of Death" for Pvt Klopp and listed the date of death and burial as 5 December 1942 "in [the] Huggins Area near Soputa, New Guinea."¹⁴ The constant threat of enemy attack precluded the burial of remains outside of the lines. First Lieutenant Peter Dal Ponte, who succeeded Capt Huggins as the commander of the perimeter, noted how the "disposal of wastes and the burying of dead had to be accomplished within the area."¹⁵ A war correspondent who toured the site immediately after the fighting observed a small cemetery which he described as a "roadside strip where there were a few graves marked with rough crosses" (see Figure 4).¹⁶ This practice was also continued by Australian units who subsequently occupied the perimeter during the campaign.¹⁷ Casualty reports compiled after the battle classified the two soldiers as "killed in action."¹⁸

Despite extensive searches for the remains of missing servicemen and those killed in action, American Graves Registration Service (AGRS) teams failed to locate the remains of Pvt Klopp. One investigator noted that searches in Papua, unfortunately, often failed to yield remains "due to extensive overland fighting through dense jungle, the wide dispersal of troops, intense resistance of the enemy, and the necessity of frequent hasty withdrawals." Army officials recommended that the remains of Pvt Klopp be considered "non-recoverable."¹⁹ This was approved in December 1949.²⁰

¹³ "Death Reports, Soputa-Sanananda Track, New Guinea," 2 January 1943, Battle Casualty Reports, Buna Forces, 1942-43; I Corps, Adjutant General Section, General Correspondence, 1942-45, Entry A1 339, Record Group 338: Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical, and Support Organizations (World War II and Thereafter), National Archives at College Park, MD.

¹⁴ William L. Hendrick, "Report of Death," War Department, Adjutant General's Office, *Form No. 52*, 12 January 1942, Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) for Klopp, John H., 34150934, Pvt; National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Mo.

¹⁵ Milner, 224.

¹⁶ *The Daily Inter Lake* (Kalispell, Montana), 16 January 1943, accessed via www.newspapers.com on 2 February 2015.

¹⁷ G. J. Scott, "Sketch Map: Graves of the 2/7 Australian Cavalry Regiment killed in action, Sanananda-Soputa Road, June 1943"; Australian War Memorial, Canberra. The deceased include Lieutenant John J. Prince, Trooper (Tpr) Allan Mallard, Tpr Sydney B. Morris, Tpr Francis H. Whitehouse; all are interred at the Bomana War Cemetery, Port Moresby.

¹⁸ "Battle Casualty Report No. 83, 11 January 1943," 126th Infantry Regiment, Buna Campaign Casualty Lists, 29 October 1942 to 6 September 1943, 32d Infantry Division, World War II Operations Reports, 1940-8, Entry 427, Record Group 407: Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives at College Park, MD.

¹⁹ J. W. White, "Case History for Remains Considered Non-Recoverable," 9 November 1949, Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) for Klopp, John H., 34150934, Pvt. Record Group 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

²⁰ "Non-Recoverable Case Record of Review and Approval," 19 December 1949, Officer of the Quartermaster General (OQMG) *Form 1916*, IDPF for Klopp.

In April 1943 the chaplain of the 126th Infantry Regiment wrote to the mother of Pvt Keating to express his condolences and inform her that the remains of her son were "buried in a regular U.S. Army cemetery in New Guinea, which will be his permanent resting place.... I am sure that a Catholic priest was present to bless his grave." The veracity of this information is open to question since he may not have actually seen the grave or witnessed the interment of the remains.²¹

Postwar efforts to locate the remains of Pvt Keating proved unsuccessful despite attempts by veterans of his unit to assist in the search. One reported, for example, that Pvt Keating was buried in a cemetery known as "Eichelberger Square" and could pinpoint the location if provided with a map of the Huggins Roadblock area. Army officials complied with this request, to no avail.²² Another veteran who spent over three weeks at the roadblock wrote to the Army and offered to return to Papua to help with the search because, as he put it, "I can pick out land marks that your boys would never notice, even if they had occasion to go near where we were." There is no record of the Army furnishing a reply.²³ In October 1951, Army officials approved a recommendation that the remains of Pvt Keating be considered "non-recoverable."²⁴

²¹ Stephen J. Dzienis, Letter to Cecilia Keating, 14 April 1943, Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) for Keating, Earl J., 34150954, Pvt. Record Group 92: Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD.

²² A. Kennedy, "Statement of Investigation," n.d., IDPF for Keating.

²³ Jesse L. Haley, Letter to the Quartermaster General, Department of the Army, n.d., IDPF for Keating.

²⁴ "Non Recoverable Case Record of Review and Approval," OQMG Form 1916, October 1951, IDPF for Keating.



Figure 4. “Huggins Roadblock on the Sanananda Road, New Guinea, 1943,” Roy Hodgkinson, colored crayons on paper. Note the marked graves in the foreground. Image from the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

INVESTIGATION

On 26 October 2011, Mr. Don Lewis, an Australian citizen, contacted the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and reported the discovery of identification tags belonging to Pvt Klopp and Pvt Keating.²⁵ Mr. Lewis disclosed that local villagers uncovered the ID tags and some possible remains in what was believed to be the Huggins Roadblock site.²⁶

In February and March 2012, JPAC conducted an investigation to confirm the claim that remains and identification media had been discovered in the vicinity of the Huggins Roadblock, including those of Pvt Klopp and Pvt Keating. JPAC contacted Mr. Lewis who turned over a

²⁵ Don Lewis, Electronic Site Reporting Form, sent via JPAC public website, 26 October 2011. See electronic case file for JPAC Incident 34.

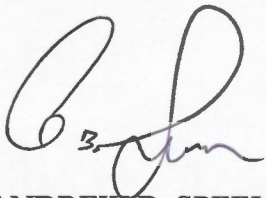
²⁶ Don Lewis, E-mail message to Rachel Phillips, 31 October 2011. See electronic case file for JPAC Incident 34.

small portion of the remains to the team archaeologist (accessioned as CIL 2012-024). Mr. Lewis explained that another individual, Mr. Coplan Tipe, was in custody of the bulk of the remains along with the identification tags. JPAC was unsuccessful in its attempts to contact Mr. Tipe. However, JPAC located another potential witness, Mr. Luke Dogari, who claimed to have been present when Mr. Tipe discovered and collected the remains. Mr. Dogari guided the JPAC team to the site where Mr. Tipe allegedly found the remains, located at the site of the Huggins Roadblock. Investigators documented the site and the JPAC archaeologist took custody of additional suspected bone fragments along with small pieces of cotton webbing and personal equipment.²⁷

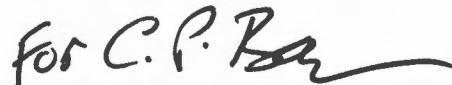
In September 2012, a JPAC Recovery Team (RT) conducting an unrelated excavation at the site of the Huggins Roadblock received additional remains and the identification tags from Mr. Tipe (CIL 2012-029).²⁸

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

The location where the remains were reportedly recovered—within the perimeter of the Huggins Roadblock—is consistent with the historical record regarding the documented location of loss and the reported burial site for the two subject soldiers. The Research and Analysis Group thus concludes that an association between Private Earl J. Keating, Private John H. Klopp, and accession CIL 2012-024 is historically feasible.



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²⁷ Andrew B. Speelhoffer, *Report of Investigation, 12-1PP, 20 February through 3 March 2012, Sanananda Track, Northern (Oro) Province, Independent State of Papua New Guinea*, 1 April 2012.

²⁸ Mindy Simonson, *Interim Search and Recovery Report, CIL 2012-027-R, an Alleged Burial Site Associated with JPAC Incident 34, Site PP-00043, Popondetta District, Oro Province, Papua New Guinea*, 8 through 14 September 2012. See also Centralized Accounting Repository and Information System (CARIS) for CIL 2012-129. Accession CIL 2012-129 was consolidated into CIL 2012-024 in November 2013.

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