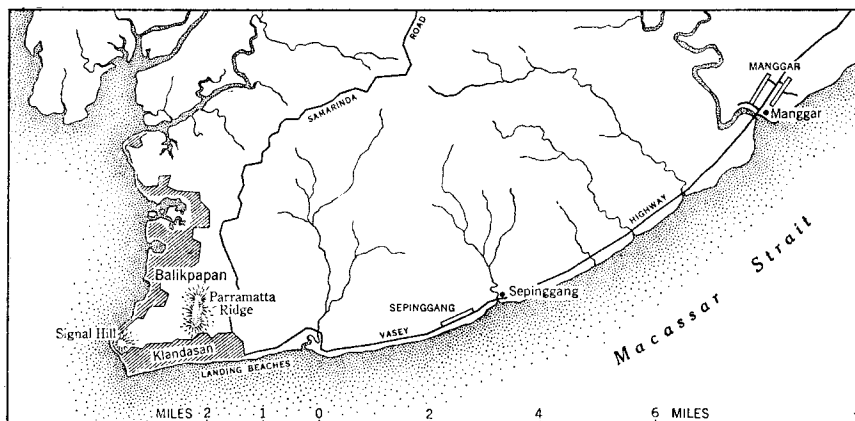


CHAPTER 29

BALIKPAPAN

OIL-RICH Balikpapan on the east coast was the next point in Borneo to be seized from the Japanese. The plan was to land there, near the built-up area, on 1st July—three weeks after the Labuan-Brunei landing and two months after the invasion of Tarakan. Once more First T.A.F. was to take part in the operation, this time in support of the 7th Australian Division, which was to be the assault force.

Balikpapan had been one of the enemy's main sources of aviation fuel. For that reason General Kenney had long been anxious to attack it. Earlier in the war he had pleaded for Superfortress bombers, which, he said, operating from Darwin, would be able to reach Balikpapan in comfort and destroy this oil-producing target. Kenney, however, did not get the Superfortresses. But in September 1944, when South-West Pacific Area forces had seized Morotai, he used this island as an advanced fighter base from which his fighters staged to escort some 280 Liberators in a series of five major attacks which did considerable damage to the installations at Balikpapan. These five raids took place between 30th September and 18th October, 1944, and were merely the beginning of a series of raids of ever-increasing intensity. With the invasion of Balikpapan now to be mounted, R.A.A.F. Command was planning further bombardments of considerable strength.



Before the war, Balikpapan had been the second-largest refining and exporting centre of petroleum in the Far East, with an annual output of 18,000,000 barrels. The oil installations were partly destroyed by the Dutch in January 1942, before they evacuated Borneo. Under the Japanese, however, reconstruction of the oil industry there had been

vigorously conducted, and by 1943 many of the refining units were working again, although at reduced capacities. Balikpapan also had excellent port facilities, and operational airfields at Manggar and Sepinggang. From these airfields, Java and Celebes were within easy bomber range.

Balikpapan, with a population of about 30,000, was a well-developed town flanked to landward by tropical rain forest. The hills come close to the water, leaving only about 400 yards between the foothills and the shore of Macassar Strait.

The General Headquarters order for the Balikpapan operation was issued on 23rd May 1945, and read:

Forces of the South-West Pacific will seize and occupy the Balikpapan, Borneo, area, establish naval, air and logistic facilities and conserve petroleum producing and processing installations therein. . . .

Task Group 78.2 was to provide the naval force, and neutralisation of hostile ground, naval and air forces was allotted to Allied Air Forces, and delegated by General Kenney to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock.

In spite of heavy Allied bombing and the fact that Balikpapan was now cut off from the Japanese homeland, the Japanese continued to operate the oilfields and to resist, both with fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft fire, the attacks by Kenney's squadrons. There were estimated to be perhaps 6,000 Japanese troops in the area and Kenney feared that if they turned their anti-aircraft guns against surface targets during the invasion there they might inflict heavy casualties. He therefore told General MacArthur that he wanted to smother the whole of the Balikpapan defence system and would make the whole of Far East Air Force available if necessary. MacArthur agreed.¹ Kenney's estimate was that it would be necessary to drop about 3,000 tons of bombs on Balikpapan to knock out all the guns. He told General Wurtsmith to confer with Air Vice-Marshal Bostock on the bombing plan.

Enemy air strength remaining in the Netherlands East Indies was estimated at not more than seventeen fighters, seventeen bombers and a number of float-planes. It was therefore assumed that the Japanese would be incapable of any sustained or large-scale air opposition during the invasion of Balikpapan. It was likely that air reaction would be limited to sporadic dawn and dusk raids, mostly on shipping and with small numbers of aircraft.

The 7th Division was to go ashore near the built-up area of Balikpapan and this made necessary the "taking out" of the buildings near the beach so as to prevent the enemy using them as protection while firing on the landing forces. It was assumed that the enemy would try to use burning oil for defence during the landing operations, and therefore all oil tanks had to be destroyed by air attack.

R.A.A.F. Command was to establish at Balikpapan within six days of the landing one fighter wing (three squadrons of Kittyhawks) and an air-sea rescue flight of Catalinas. As soon as practicable thereafter the

¹ G. C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports*, p. 556.

R.A.A.F. would establish at Balikpapan one medium-bomber wing (two squadrons of Mitchells) and one heavy-bomber wing (three squadrons of Liberators).

It was desirable that the anti-aircraft positions at Balikpapan should be destroyed before 15th June, on which date minesweeping operations were to begin. Attacks on these guns were given top priority because some of them could be turned on the minesweepers. Furthermore, if they remained in action they would prevent aircraft from carrying out low-level attacks in support of the minesweepers. For the first fifteen days of June the weather was bad and forced several large formations of bombers sent to attack these guns to turn their attacks against alternative targets. The Australian Liberators were sent to bomb Balikpapan on 12th June but the weather forced them to bomb an alternative target instead. The formation split up and went in singly to drop fragmentation bombs, all of which landed on the target area. The next day, however, thirty-three American Liberators bombed the anti-aircraft defences at Balikpapan town and at Sepinggang airfield.

In addition to three Liberator squadrons (Nos. 21, 23 and 24) and other Liberators of North-Western Area and Western Area, Bostock planned to use Beaufighters of No. 77 Wing and Kittyhawks of No. 78 Wing, reinforced by two squadrons from No. 81 Wing, in support of the operation. The Beaufighter wing was to provide two aircraft daily to strike the OBOE 2 area and the Kittyhawks were to be on air alert over the objective area and to provide air cover for the convoys moving in from Morotai. The plan was that, with the exception of the Liberators, all these aircraft would operate from Tarakan airfield, but the date on which they were to assume their duties (8th June) came and passed without the airfield there being brought to a fit state for use.

The delay over the Tarakan airfield, forced a recasting of the plan at short notice. The Thirteenth Air Force, using Lightnings from Sanga Sanga, was called on to provide fighter cover, instead of First Tactical Air Force; and the naval task force commander asked for, and was given, three American escort carriers armed with fighter aircraft. The navy was unwilling to rely solely on the Lightnings, on the ground that bad weather between Sanga Sanga and Balikpapan might prevent them getting through to the target area. The loss of the use of Tarakan airfield for the operation also forced Bostock to use Liberator aircraft operating from Morotai, Samar and Palawan, for direct air support of the assault. The use of this type of bomber, operating from bases more than 700 miles away, was unique, but there was no alternative. Altogether, Bostock had forty squadrons at his disposal for the period just before and during the landing, and, of these, twenty-five were of heavy bombers, totalling 300 aircraft.

While aircraft of No. 82 Wing pounded Balikpapan from the air, the main body of this wing had left the Northern Territory in the troopship *Louis Arguello* and was en route to Morotai. After the Balikpapan landing they were to move into the airstrips there and prepare for operations over the Netherlands East Indies.

On 15th June, twelve Australian Liberators were sent to bomb anti-aircraft positions at Balikpapan, but only six reached the target and many of the bombs from these six aircraft fell harmlessly into the sea. Between 19th and 25th June, the Australian Liberators dropped some 119 tons of bombs in and round Balikpapan. They succeeded in destroying oil installations and an anti-aircraft position and started large fires. On 27th June a total of 123 Liberators (six of them from No. 82 Wing) and seventy-three Mitchells bombed Balikpapan in a series of attacks. As assault day approached the weight of attack was shifted to the coastal defences. These defences were strong because the Japanese had regarded Balikpapan as a vital possession.

By the end of June, the first aircraft (apart from Austers) had landed on the Tarakan airfield which had at last become operational. Wing Commander Read, in a Beaufighter, was the first to land—at 10 a.m. on 28th June. He was followed by two more Beaufighters and nine Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron. A further three Beaufighters and eleven Kittyhawks arrived in the afternoon, but because of bad weather between Morotai and Tarakan were practically all out of fuel. One of the Beaufighters, completely out of fuel, crash-landed off the runway and a Kittyhawk landed too far up and overran the airstrip. Another came down in the sea but the pilot was rescued.

No. 78 Wing, with Nos. 75, 78, 80 and 452 Squadrons under its control, now began flying from Tarakan in support of the Balikpapan operation. The first mission was an attack by sixteen Kittyhawks and four Spitfires against Laban and Mensalung on 30th June. It was found impossible, however, to operate Beaufighters from the Tarakan strip, and they were withdrawn to Morotai, and took little further part in the war.

Dawn came off Balikpapan on 1st July with a red glow visible to the thousands of men who watched from an armada of 200 ships nearing the target area. It was General MacArthur's biggest amphibious operation since the landing at Lingayen in January. The thunder of guns from American, Australian and Dutch warships and the drone of heavy bombers overhead announced the beginning of operations. Just before the landing, ten squadrons of Liberators, from the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces and First Tactical Air Force, were marshalled over Balikpapan in a forty-minute air bombardment of areas near the landing beaches.

The Liberators from the Thirteenth bombed first. Twenty-four of them in formation dropped fifty tons of demolition bombs on the beach defences. Then came the Australian Liberators. They bombed between 8.10 and 8.24 a.m., just before the landing of the 7th Division. Twenty Australian Liberators took part (seven each from Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons and six from No. 23), and, led by Squadron Leader I. O. Black, they bombed from a height of between 8,000 and 6,900 feet, dropping a total of more than two hundred 500-lb bombs. Then came Liberators of No. 90 and No. 380 Groups of the Fifth Air Force. Thirty-eight of these aircraft dropped about 70 tons of bombs on priority areas near the beaches. A few minutes later Mitchells laid a smoke curtain along the rear of the

invasion beaches, covering the amphibious craft which were now racing towards the enemy across the water.

From their Liberators the crews saw the terrible hammering, not only from the air bombardment but from the shells and rockets fired into the inferno by the combined naval forces. The shoreline was blanketed with dense smoke through which tongues of flame were darting. The surface of the sea was covered with small landing craft manoeuvring as they prepared to go in, while rocket ships went into action in sweeps along the 2,000-yard landing beach. After two hours of this bombardment, the assault waves moved in towards the shore. In spite of the intense preparation, however, the enemy was still capable of resistance, although it was weak. They opened up with some ragged artillery, mortar and small arms fire. Then at 8.55 a.m. the Australian troops started to jump off the ramps of their landing craft on to the beach. So effectively had the air and naval bombardment done its work that seventeen assault waves landed without a casualty.

A scene of indescribable ruin greeted the infantrymen as they began to push inland. The oil storage tanks were almost completely destroyed, the refinery and cracking plant devastated, and large areas of houses and shops razed. A total of 441 barracks, warehouses and residential buildings were destroyed in the southern part of the town alone. There were acres of twisted steel framework. Buildings which had not been flattened were burned out, blackened and splintered. Railway tracks were torn up and oil towers were lying horizontal. The troops saw ample evidence of the strong defences the Japanese had built. There were concrete pits, strong-posts and shelters along the beach front, but the bombardment had forced the Japanese to abandon them and withdraw inland to more tenable positions.

The Dutch claimed that the bombardment at Balikpapan was carried out with excessive vigour and the damage was far greater than necessary. However, the aim had always been to ensure that the pre-assault air bombardment would enable the troops to go ashore without opposition and this had largely been achieved. Not only General Kenney but Generals Morshead and Milford² and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock expressed the view that air and naval bombardment at Balikpapan must be as heavy as possible in order to reduce casualties. The R.A.A.F. Command report on the operation pointed out that the landing was made with slight casualties against positions which could have been very effectively defended had it not been for the damage inflicted by air action. "Damage incidental to achieving this result can only be regarded as completely justified," states the R.A.A.F. Command Report.

After the landing some of the enemy coastal defence batteries could still fire. Some seventeen out of twenty-eight known 90-mm gun positions were knocked out, but the remainder were manned and used by the enemy

² Maj-Gen E. J. Milford, CB, CBE, DSO, VX12014. (1st AIF: Maj 4 AFA Bde.) CRA 7 Div 1940; MGO AHQ 1941-42; GOC 5 Div 1942-44, 7 Div 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Armadale, Vic, 10 Dec 1894.

even after many heavy bomb strikes. They proved difficult to knock out as direct hits were hard to get on well-prepared concrete and earth emplacements. Continual shelling by naval units was necessary to keep these batteries silent.

Over the beach-head, an R.A.A.F. Liberator from No. 24 Squadron, captained by Wing Commander Davies³, reported progress to the command ship U.S.S. *Wasatch*. In addition, the Liberator strafed a retreating enemy transport column. Davies' aircraft was fired on by anti-aircraft guns which the initial bombardment had failed to knock out. Anti-aircraft guns were active for days after the landing and it appeared that some of these weapons were moved from their original positions and set up in new ones along the Samarinda road after the landing had begun.

In the afternoon of assault day, the relieving air observation aircraft (another Liberator of No. 24 Squadron, captained by Group Captain McLean, the newly-appointed commanding officer of No. 82 Wing) was hit by anti-aircraft fire, badly damaged, and had to be set down in the sea. Some of the crew had managed to parachute into the sea and were picked up by surface craft, but the others, including McLean, were lost.

Fifteen minutes after the landing the Australian soldiers had penetrated 800 yards inland from the beach, thus securing the beach-head area. The 2/10th Battalion then swung to the west to attack Parramatta Ridge, a 300-foot-high feature running 1,500 yards due north—from which the enemy could command the entire Klandasan beach. The 2/10th launched attacks with Matilda tanks, artillery and heavy mortar support, and by 2.15 p.m., in spite of determined enemy opposition, had taken the ridge.

There were many calls from the army for air support during assault day. The requests were being received by R.A.A.F. air liaison and support parties which went ashore with the infantry and relayed the requests to the headquarters ships which would then call in the supporting aircraft (mainly Liberators of the Thirteenth Air Force) to attack the target indicated.

On the afternoon of the assault day Major-General Milford, commanding the 7th Division, called for an air strike for 4 p.m. He wanted the task done by dive bombers of the American Navy from the three escort carriers supporting the landing. There was a conference between Morshead, Milford, Bostock and Rear-Admiral A. G. Noble of the American 7th Amphibious Force, during which Milford urged the use of naval aircraft. Bostock opposed the use of naval aircraft, however, because, he said, the pilots did not know the terrain and because there were differences between naval- and army-support procedures. However, the Liberators which were providing close support would all have to leave for base at 4 p.m. The American Navy was keen to help so Milford arranged for them to carry out a strike. The navy planes were briefed, but disregarded their instructions and bombed into the 2/10th Battalion area, causing casualties to the troops.

³ Gp Capt A. E. L. Davies, 151. Area Sigs Offr Western Area HQ 1941-42, North-West Area 1943; 24 Sqn. Regular air force offr; of Penrith, NSW; b. Ngakawau, NZ, 22 Apr 1915.

At the end of assault day the Australians had advanced 2,000 yards and casualties amounted to 22 killed and 74 wounded. That night the Japanese sent infiltrating parties to counter-attack. Star shells illuminated the battle areas, revealing the Japanese. They clashed with Australian patrols, and at dawn next day more than 300 Japanese dead lay scattered about Parramatta Ridge.

The 2/14th Battalion advanced rapidly along Vasey Highway on 2nd July, enveloping Sepinggang airfield by 11 a.m. The airstrip was soon secured. It was badly cratered but work began immediately to repair it.

At 12.45 p.m. a Liberator of No. 24 Squadron captained by Flight Lieutenant Beattie⁴ was shot down by light anti-aircraft fire and crashed out of control in enemy territory. In addition to the crew, Captain Spry,⁵ an army observation officer, was lost. The Liberator on observation duties was flying at less than 1,000 feet at the time it was hit. This squadron lost another Liberator on air observation duties three days later. Squadron Leader Redman⁶ was the captain and he had a crew of ten R.A.A.F. airmen and also carried Captain Westgarth,⁷ an army observation officer. At 10 o'clock in the morning, while flying at a height of 200 feet two miles north of Sepinggang airfield, No. 3 engine was seen to catch fire after being hit by light enemy anti-aircraft fire, and the aircraft then exploded in mid-air. None of the crew was seen to escape by parachute and a second aircraft directed to the scene of the crash saw the wreckage burning furiously on the ground. An army patrol got to within 150 yards of the wreckage, but was unable to penetrate farther because of enemy resistance.

Auster aircraft had been taken ashore on assault day, but the temporary landing field chosen for their use was unsuitable and it was decided to wait until Sepinggang airfield was ready. It was ready by midday on 3rd July and the first Auster took off at 1 p.m. on that day.

The First T.A.F. units were late getting ashore at Balikpapan, with the result that they were twenty-four hours behind their schedule. However, this turned out to be no misfortune. It would have been impossible to move the heavy equipment along Vasey Highway to Sepinggang airfield because the highway was in a poor state with all its bridges, gutters and culverts destroyed. The squadrons of No. 61 Airfield Construction Wing were due to land on 4th July to carry out works projects at Balikpapan, but again, because of the condition of Vasey highway, landing was delayed and work began instead on 6th July. The airfield, although cratered in the centre, was good at the ends, and it looked as though it would be ready for use within about ten days of the landing. Meanwhile, the 7th Division followed up its success in taking Sepinggang by capturing the

⁴ F-Lt R. Mc. Beattie, DFM, 404228. 458, 38 and 24 Sqns. Clerk; of Gympie, Qld; b. Brisbane, 20 Aug 1920. Killed in action 2 Jul 1945.

⁵ Capt H. W. Spry, VX14362. 2/8 Fd Regt; Army observation offr, attached 24 Sqn. Salesman; of Toorak, Vic; b. Canterbury, Vic, 8 Sep 1917. Killed in action 2 Jul 1945.

⁶ Sqn Ldr J. R. W. Redman, 402395. 612 Sqn RAF, 203 Gp and 24 Sqn. Clerk; of Glebe, NSW; b. Sydney, 10 Jul 1914. Killed in action 5 Jul 1945.

⁷ Capt B. D. Westgarth. 2/5 Fd Regt; Army observation offr, attached 24 Sqn. Judge's associate; of Darling Point, NSW; b. Blayney, NSW, 1 Jan 1917. Killed in action 5 Jul 1945.

residential district of Klandasan. The entire Klandasan peninsula, including Signal Hill and the town of Balikpapan itself, had been taken by the end of the third day. Total army casualties by the fifth day amounted to 65 killed and some 350 wounded.

Balikpapan presented an extraordinary sight of ruin. It seemed that the work of reconstruction would take years. An observer wrote: "The whole place has suffered a terrific hammering, hardly a building of any description is left standing. Bomb craters, shell holes, wreckage is everywhere visible. Everything is waterlogged and soaked with oil. The oil pipes leading to the refineries have been blown up either by the bombers or by the Japanese. Trucks, jeeps and weapon carriers are all flat-out going somewhere on the roughest road in history."

During July the squadrons of No. 82 Wing at Morotai and of No. 78 Wing at Tarakan, flew a heavy program of missions over Celebes and Borneo. Indirectly these missions supported the Balikpapan operation. The Liberators concentrated on Celebes, bombing Macassar on 6th July, and Ambesia on the 7th. On 10th July, six Liberators led by Flight Lieutenant Gillespie,⁸ bombed Tabanio, near Bandjermasin, landing fifty-four bombs on the airfield. They reported, however, that the runway had been out of order before they bombed the airstrip.

No. 78 Wing divided its attention during July between strikes against enemy concentrations in north-east Borneo, especially Sandakan, and close support for the 7th Division at Balikpapan. To the Thirteenth Air Force, however, fell the major burden at Balikpapan. Using Liberators, Mitchells and Lightnings, they kept up a constant offensive against the Japanese round Balikpapan and north and south of the battle area.

On 2nd July, twenty-four Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron and Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron, operating out of Tarakan, carried out strikes on Kalabakan and Simalumong. At Simalumong, hits were scored. The Spitfires made eight strafing passes and just after finishing one of these, Flight Lieutenant Proctor⁹ of No. 452 Squadron crashed and was killed. In the mission on this day to Kalabakan, Squadron Leader Kinninmont dived so low in a strafing pass that his aircraft hit the tops of coconut trees, damaging both mainplanes of the aircraft, but he succeeded in flying his Kittyhawk back to Tarakan, where he took to his parachute over the sea and was rescued by a crash boat from the water.

On 7th July, three missions of Kittyhawks set out from Tarakan, but all of them failed to reach the target because of the weather. The pilots were endangered by the difficult weather, and Pilot Officer Gilbert¹ was forced to bale out when his aircraft spun. He was seen to parachute from his aircraft and land safely, but he died later while a prisoner in Japanese hands.

⁸ F-Lt A. F. Gillespie, 402116. 206 and 200 Sqns RAF; 21 Sqn; and 531 Sqn USAAF. Commercial pilot; of Rose Bay, NSW; b. Sydney, 21 Jun 1917.

⁹ F-Lt A. J. Proctor, 418174; 452 Sqn. Clerk; of Middle Park, Vic; b. Melbourne, 2 Sep 1921. Killed in action 2 July 1945.

¹ P-O M. A. J. Gilbert; 75 Sqn. Clerk; of Thebarton, SA; b. Hindmarsh, SA, 26 Jun 1925. Died while prisoner of war 24 Jul 1945.

On 9th July, twelve more Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron arrived at Tarakan from Morotai, bringing the unit up to full strength. The following day four Spitfires and eight Kittyhawks were assigned to a bombing and strafing attack on Tawao in conjunction with American PT boats. They destroyed two bridges and burned huts in the area. Another pilot of No. 452 Squadron (Flight Lieutenant Cullen²) was missing from this strike. He was last seen recovering from a dive-bombing run. Two days later, when dive-bombing the same target, Squadron Leader Barclay³ was hit by anti-aircraft fire but although he had to abandon his damaged aircraft, he succeeded in parachuting safely into the sea and was later picked up by a friendly launch.

By 13th July, a 3,000-foot-long runway had been prepared for use at Sepinggang and on 15th July, an American naval Catalina aircraft, followed by flights of No. 452 Squadron led by Barclay, landed on the airfield. The original planning for the Balikpapan operation called for the Spitfires to be based at Sepinggang by 7th July and remain there until relieved by No. 54 Squadron, which was to be brought in from Darwin. However, the airstrip had not been made ready by that time. No. 452 Squadron flew its first missions from Sepinggang on 15th July, when its Spitfires strafed an area where dug-in Japanese were holding up army patrols.

Back at Tarakan the planes of No. 80 Squadron had moved in from Morotai and became operational on the afternoon of 13th July. Next day, four Kittyhawks from this squadron carried out an armed reconnaissance of Redeb. On 19th July, eight Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron, eight from No. 80 Squadron and fifteen Spitfires from No. 452 Squadron flew sorties in support of the ground forces in the Balikpapan area. The Spitfires swept the waterways and rivers of upper Balikpapan Bay and their score at the end of the day was eleven barges burned or sunk. Flight Lieutenant Blumer⁴ attacked a barge on which between fifteen and twenty Japanese were being carried. His first burst at this target set off an explosion, followed by smoke and flames through which Blumer's aircraft passed. His arm was singed and the paint on his airscrew was scorched.

The Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron bombed a barracks area at Balikpapan and after finishing their mission, landed and refuelled at Sepinggang before returning to Tarakan.

The Spitfire squadron at Balikpapan continued its successful operations when four aircraft were sent out on 22nd July to attack motor transport. They destroyed four vehicles and damaged another seven.

Balikpapan was visited on the night of 22nd July by a single-engined enemy aircraft which seemed to be on a reconnaissance mission, preparatory to a raid; and, on the night of the 24th, between 8 o'clock and 10

² F-Lt N. J. Cullen, 406070. 127, 457 and 452 Sqns. Miner; of North Perth, WA; b. Capel, WA, 23 Jul 1916. Killed in action 10 Jul 1945.

³ Sqn Ldr K. M. Barclay, DFC, 407662. 79 and 66 Sqns RAF; comd 453 Sqn 1943; 457 Sqn; comd 452 Sqn 1945. Clerk; of Peterborough, SA; b. Gladstone, SA, 27 Sep 1920.

⁴ F-Lt A. G. B. Blumer, DFC, 411735. 453 Sqn, 601 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Croydon, NSW; b. Gosford, NSW, 5 May 1922.

o'clock twin-engined aircraft came over and dropped twenty-five bombs. This was the biggest air attack made by the enemy since the beginning of the Borneo campaign. Shrapnel damaged the mainplane of an R.A.A.F. Catalina during the raid.

The First T.A.F.'s 110th Mobile Fighter Control Unit picked up the approach of the enemy planes on its radar screens. Early in the morning the controller ordered a stand-by Spitfire aircraft (piloted by Flight Lieutenant King⁵) to take off and intercept. A flarepath was ordered and King became airborne and climbed to 18,000 feet. At 3.30 a.m. he saw an enemy aircraft and attacked without result, almost colliding with it. The enemy aircraft returned the fire, but without scoring hits on King's Spitfire. Shortly afterwards King saw the twin exhausts of another aircraft. He attacked immediately and shot it down in flames. King was then out of fuel and had to return to base where he "pancaked" his aircraft on the airfield. Another Spitfire, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Collyer, was sent up but made no contact with enemy aircraft.

It was thought likely that the Japanese would continue to raid Borneo on a moderate scale. It was believed that this raid was carried out by aircraft based on Java, plus several from Singapore, probably staging through the Bandjermasin airfield in south Borneo. There were fifty-five operational aircraft on the three airfields at Singapore, but because of the threat to Singapore from the north, it was not thought likely that any sizeable part of this strength would be staged south to attack Balikpapan.

On 23rd July, twelve Kittyhawks (four each from Nos. 75, 78 and 80 Squadrons) were ordered to attack the Bandjermasin fields to eliminate them as staging bases. The aircraft flew from Tarakan to Sepinggang for briefing. Six of the Kittyhawks were ordered to attack Ulin and six Tabanio. They shot up the hangars, huts and control tower at Ulin and reported that the Tabanio airstrips were unserviceable. Next day, eight Kittyhawks, led by Squadron Leader Sudlow,⁶ again bombed Ulin airfield, landing all their bombs on the intersection of No. 3 runway. They then strafed the Ulin-Bandjermasin road, hitting a steam-roller. In the afternoon Kittyhawks, led by Flight Lieutenant Hill,⁷ were sent on armed reconnaissance to Bandjermasin, but bad weather prevented them reaching the target area.

Limbang airfield across Macassar Strait from Bandjermasin was also bombed by six Liberators of No. 82 Wing, operating from Morotai. This wing lost a Liberator near Tomohon on 27th July, and another Liberator was lost four days later after another mission to Celebes, making a total of five for the month. All told forty-eight R.A.A.F. aircrew, as well as a number of army personnel, had lost their lives.

⁵ F-Lt J. C. King, 401823. 41 Sqn RAF and 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Geelong, Vic; b. St Arnaud, Vic, 18 Mar 1922.

⁶ Sqn Ldr R. P. Sudlow, 406083. 25 and 77 Sqns; comd 78 Sqn 1944-45. Shipping clerk; of Claremont, WA; b. Peppermint Grove, WA, 31 Jan 1918.

⁷ F-Lt J. D. Hill, 407792. 123, 80 and 127 Sqns RAF, and 80 Sqn RAAF. Student; of West Beach, SA; b. Rose Park, SA, 3 Feb 1919.

The Kittyhawks and Spitfires of First T.A.F. flew no fewer than 877 sorties during July from Tarakan and Sepinggang. In North Borneo they laid on a heavy series of attacks against Sandakan. This town was practically wiped out, and the Japanese in the town and near-by areas were harried daily by bombing and machine-gun fire. The general tactical plan in Borneo was to prevent the enemy consolidating positions or concentrating in any one area. First T.A.F. aircraft were used to attack any sign of concentration. Attacks were made on stores areas, keeping the enemy on the move, preventing him from growing food supplies and driving him into the jungle where he became a prey to Dyaks, who, generally speaking, were friendly to the Allies.

This policy was continued in August until the war ended. Little anti-aircraft fire was encountered except at Samarinda, where intense fire brought down Pilot Officer Quinn,⁸ of No. 80 Squadron, on 9th August. Hit by the ground fire, Quinn attempted to crash-land, but struck an oilfield pumping plant, causing his aircraft to crash and burst into flames. Quinn was one of the last of the R.A.A.F. to die in action in Borneo. The activity both of the R.A.A.F. and of the 7th and 9th Divisions eased during August. Operations were cut down because, with the expected end of hostilities, there was no further point in risking lives. That was the situation when, on 14th August, First Tactical Air Force sent out its message warning squadrons of the coming end to the long struggle:

SECRET: OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS AGAINST ENEMY CITIES LAND COMMUNICATIONS AND OTHER LAND TARGETS EXCEPT DIRECT SUPPORT FOR ALLIED GROUND FORCES IN CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY WILL CEASE UNTIL FURTHER ORDERS. RECONNAISSANCE AND PHOTO MISSIONS ANTI SHIPPING STRIKES AND FIGHTER ATTACKS AGAINST AIRBORNE ENEMY AEROPLANES WILL CONTINUE. FORCES CHARGED WITH AIR DEFENCE WILL BE ESPECIALLY ALERT.

The warning to air defences to be on the alert was to guard against the possibility that a few Japanese airmen would make suicide attacks rather than surrender; but nothing happened. The Japanese loyally obeyed the order of their Emperor.

⁸ P-O E. Quinn, 417413; 80 Sqn. Farmer; of Forreston. SA; b. Gumeracha, SA, 17 Sep 1922. Killed in action 9 Aug 1945.