

## CHAPTER 28

### LABUAN

ON 8th May, eight days after the invasion of Tarakan Island, the fighting in Europe ended. This event, naturally, did not produce in the Pacific the tremendous sense of relief that it did in Europe. Nobody knew how long the Pacific war would go on, and among the hundreds of thousands of men still at war in the Pacific, this uncertainty robbed the occasion of much of the meaning it had in Europe.

An entry in the unit history sheet of No. 76 Squadron reflects something of the thoughts and reactions of the men in the forward areas:

There was no great outburst of enthusiasm as the approaching end had been obvious in the last few days. . . . In the evening Padre Stephenson<sup>1</sup> conducted a well-attended Thanksgiving service. As if to emphasise that the war was only half over, a bomb-laden Liberator passed over the mess on its way to deliver a cargo to some Jap base.

In early May, Lord Louis Mountbatten's campaign had culminated in the fall of Rangoon and the collapse of Japanese resistance in Burma. This news and the news of the fall of Germany came to the men and women of Japan with the thunder of bombs and the drone of hundreds of American bombers over their home islands. Their industries and cities were crumbling under a terrible bombardment, while a bitter land battle was taking place at Okinawa, almost on the doorstep of Japan proper.

The course of events in Europe had already enabled Britain to send a carrier fleet against Japan and, immediately the war ended in Europe, plans were drawn up for the transfer to the Pacific of the American Eighth Air Force, to be re-equipped with the new Superfortress bombers. In addition, land forces in the Pacific were to be reinforced with the First American Army which had fought in North Africa and from the Normandy beach-head to the heart of Germany. The Pacific theatre could now receive the entire resources of the Allied nations.

General Kenney was to command all American Army air forces in the Pacific except the Superfortresses of the Strategic Bomber Force which remained directly under General Arnold and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kenney planned to move his entire Far East Air Force into Kyushu Island if the Japanese did not surrender before they were invaded. This would leave ample room at Okinawa and the Philippines to accommodate air groups transferred from the European theatre of operations. However, by June there was still a shortage of air bases in the Pacific and this was causing a bottleneck in the deployment of air forces. The captured islands within range of Japan were overcrowded with air installations.

When hostilities in Europe ended, the Australian Government had to determine the future tasks of its army, navy and air force in the war

<sup>1</sup> Rev A. Stephenson. 61 AC Wing and 76 Sqn. Methodist minister; of Boulder, WA; b. Middlesborough, Yorkshire, Eng, 22 Oct 1901.

against Japan. Except for aircrews engaged in Europe, the Mediterranean and Burma, almost the entire Australian war effort had been devoted since 1943 to the Pacific war. While, therefore, the end of the European fighting brought great relief from the burden of war to America, Britain, Russia and other countries engaged in the European theatre, it brought little relief to Australia. This point was emphasised in a cablegram on 1st June 1945 sent by the Australian Government to its delegation at the San Francisco Conference.<sup>2</sup> The message pointed out that "there will be a considerable demobilisation of forces in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada, and New Zealand has already made certain reductions. Australia's war record entitles her to carry out an adjustment in the manpower position which, while providing for a military effort in the war against Japan which is equitable in comparison with those of other Allied countries, also enables the acute stringencies to be removed and places the civil economy on a comparable satisfactory footing to those of other countries for transition to the post-war period."

At an Advisory War Council meeting, Mr Spender said he considered it unfair that Australia should be subjected to a greater strain than other countries during the remaining phases of the war in the Pacific, and be called on to give them two years' start in post-war reconstruction. While the Government, however, strongly desired to benefit equally with other countries from the European victory, it considered it equally important that Australia should continue to play "a notable and worthy part until final victory is achieved".

The War Cabinet met on 28th May and noted the following reasons for Australia's continued participation:

- (1) Australia received considerable aid from the United States when this country was in grave danger of attack. It would probably be the desire of the Australian people that their forces should fight alongside the Americans to the end of the war as a cooperative expression of their gratitude. The American people would no doubt appreciate the spirit prompting such a desire, and it should do much to strengthen future Australian-American relations which are of paramount importance from the aspect of security in the post-war period.
- (2) The Australian forces have fought with the Americans since 1942 and formed bonds of comradeship. General Blamey says that the slogan "on to Tokyo" reflects the desire of the Australian forces to be associated with the forward offensive.
- (3) There have been criticisms that the liquidation of by-passed Japanese forces is not by itself a worthy effort for our Forces. The reasons for the non-participation in the Philippines campaign have been made clear. But with the American progress towards Japan, the operations against Borneo, the Netherlands East Indies and Malaya have assumed the nature of large-scale mopping-up campaigns. From the aspect of prestige, it is of greater importance to Australia to be associated with the drive to defeat Japan,

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<sup>2</sup> The San Francisco Conference was convened to prepare a charter of international organisation, and a court of international justice, as agreed upon first at Moscow, in October 1943, by the governments of the UK, US, the Soviet Union and China, and more definitely in February 1945 at Yalta, by Mr Churchill, President Roosevelt and Marshal Stalin, when it was announced that a United Nations conference would be called at San Francisco on 25 April.

though, for reasons of British and Australian prestige, it would be desirable to have a token force in the recapture of Malaya, in order to avenge the defeat of 1941.

With these aims in view, the War Cabinet decided that at least one division, with ancillary units, should be assigned to General MacArthur for the offensive against Japan. A token force was also to be assigned to South-East Asia to aid in the recapture of Singapore.<sup>3</sup> Other forces would continue to be assigned in New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomon Islands for neutralising or garrison duties.

The First Tactical Air Force was to continue its assignment to General MacArthur for his forward advance. In addition, another three R.A.A.F. squadrons from the European theatre were to be provided as a contribution to an R.A.F. very-long-range task force, which was to be sent to the Pacific.

Mr Forde and Dr Evatt, who had gone to the San Francisco conference, were told to convey these decisions of the Government to the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Until these authorities had decided the future strategy of the Pacific war, the Government would be in the dark and could make only tentative proposals and arrangements.

On 5th June, the War Cabinet met again and tentatively decided that the strengths of the three Services for the remainder of the war would be:

Navy: Existing strength.

Army: Reduction of operational forces to three divisions.

Air Force: Corresponding proportionate reduction to that of the army. (This could not be determined until the effect of a reduction of 50,000 for the army and the air force was apportioned and the effect of the return of personnel from overseas was worked out.)

The end of the fighting in Europe and the likelihood of a reduction of the air force contribution to the Pacific war meant that Australia had a big surplus of trained aircrews; within six months, 17,000 members of the R.A.A.F. would be repatriated from overseas. The War Cabinet therefore ordered the release of surplus airmen to civil life and the discontinuance of aircrew basic training.

On 4th July, Mr Churchill addressed a cablegram to Mr Curtin, informing him that the over-all objective in the war against Japan was to force the unconditional surrender of the Japanese and that for this purpose it might now be possible to provide a British Commonwealth force of some three to five divisions, carried in British shipping and supported by a British naval force with a small tactical air force component. He said it would be "most welcome if an Australian division would join this force, the R.A.N. form part of the naval forces involved and the R.A.A.F. squadrons part of the air component".

However, the sending of this force would have to await the opening of the Malacca Strait which was expected at the end of 1945. The Aus-

<sup>3</sup> It was found later that this proposal could not be given effect because the planning for the Malayan operation was too far advanced.

tralian Defence Committee advised the Government that Churchill's proposals appeared "unrealistic and impractical", because the force could not be made ready before April 1946, if it had to await the opening of the Strait of Malacca.

On 5th July Mr Curtin died, and on 13th July Mr Chifley<sup>4</sup> was appointed Prime Minister. Chifley, acting on the advice of the Defence Committee and his Cabinet, replied to Churchill on 20th July, drawing attention to this aspect. He said:

Your cablegram anticipates the opening of the Malacca Strait by the end of the year, and the development of a British Commonwealth Force after that date. It would, therefore, not be possible for this Force to be organised, trained and deployed before somewhere about April 1946. In the meantime, it is understood that American forces will begin the invasion of the main islands at a comparatively early date. There is also the aspect of Soviet participation which is the subject of your cablegram of 5th July. Time is therefore the essence of the contract and the essential consideration is actual participation in the main offensive against Japan.

Churchill received Chifley's message when he was conferring at Potsdam with representatives of the United States and Russia. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had already agreed in principle that a Commonwealth land, sea and air force, should take part in the main operations against Japan, and Churchill invited Chifley to appoint representatives to consult with MacArthur, whom the Combined Chiefs had just appointed to command all American ground and air forces, other than naval air forces, in the Pacific. The Government appointed General Blamey, with Air Vice-Marshal Bostock and Air Vice-Marshal Jones as air advisers.

MacArthur had placed proposals for the use of British forces before the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. His plan was that British participation should be limited to a corps of three divisions (one British, one Canadian and one Australian), the corps to be available in the objective area about March 1946, and to be employed initially as an assault reserve afloat. It was to be equipped, as far as possible, with American equipment. A small tactical air force<sup>5</sup> would be used "if possible". In London, for planning purposes, it was assumed that this force would ultimately comprise fifteen Commonwealth squadrons and it was hoped that R.A.F., R.A.A.F. and R.N.Z.A.F. units would be included. Mustang aircraft were favoured in order to ease the logistical problem. As it was probable that R.A.A.F. units would comprise the greater part of the force, an R.A.A.F. officer was likely to be appointed the commander. Mr Drakeford, on 10th August, proposed that the Australian contribution should be six squadrons of Mustangs organised into two wings. Each wing was to be complete with ancillary units. However, the end of the war on 15th August brought the problem of a task force for use in the war against Japan to a sudden end.

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<sup>4</sup> Rt Hon J. B. Chifley, MHR 1928-31, 1940-51. Min for Defence 1931, Post War Reconstruction 1942-45; Treasurer 1941-49; Prime Minister 1945-49. B. Bathurst, NSW, 22 Sep 1885. Died 12 Jun 1951.

<sup>5</sup> Cablegram, Bruce to Chifley, 2 Aug 1945.

Under the MONTCLAIR plan for the campaign in Borneo and the Indies, the capture of Balikpapan was to have been the next operation mounted after Tarakan, with the target date set at 23rd May. However, G.H.Q. postponed the Balikpapan operation, and, on 21st April, issued an operational instruction directing forces of the South-West Pacific Area to seize the Brunei Bay area of British North Borneo.

The 9th Australian Division (less the 26th Brigade) was to be the assault force. It was soon learned that elements of this division could not arrive at the staging base (Morotai) until a full week after the time set for the landing at Labuan. The invasion time had therefore to be altered to the 10th June.

The operation was to be known as OBOE 6. After a comprehensive pre-invasion air bombardment, simultaneous landings were planned on the island of Labuan, which dominates the entrance to Brunei Bay, and at Brunei on the mainland. Subsequently, operations were to be mounted by amphibious means to capture the Miri-Lutong and Seria oilfields as early as possible after the first landings.

Labuan Island is roughly triangular in shape, with the apex to the north and two large inlets in the base. The eastern inlet is Victoria Harbour, a sheltered deep-water port suitable for cruisers, destroyers and flying-boats. Labuan would provide air and fleet bases, which would complete a chain of mutually-supporting bases from which the Allies could cover the Asian coast from Singapore to Shanghai.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the move into British North Borneo would make available considerable oil and rubber resources. There was an oil-producing field at Miri and another at Seria. Crude oil from both these fields had been processed at Lutong refinery. About 50 per cent of the total pre-war production (5,730,000 barrels yearly) of Seria could be used as bunker fuel straight out of the ground.

The plan for the air side of the Labuan-Brunei Bay operation followed very closely the Tarakan plan. General Kenney allotted to R.A.A.F. Command the threefold tasks of (1) neutralising all enemy resources capable of interfering with the operation; (2) supporting the 9th Division during the assault and consolidation phases; and (3) establishing air forces on Labuan Island as soon as the airfield became available. First T.A.F. and the Thirteenth Air Force were to be used for these tasks, and Fifth Air Force was directed to lend two bomber groups (Nos. 90 and 380) to the Thirteenth Air Force for the purpose of intensifying the pre-assault bombardment in the Brunei Bay area. In addition, heavy-bomber squadrons of North-Western Area and Western Area were given the task of neutralising enemy bases which were beyond the range of the heavy bombers, both American and Australian, operating from Morotai and the Philippines. First T.A.F. was to establish at Labuan one fighter wing (comprising three squadrons of Kittyhawks—Nos. 76, 77 and 82—of No. 81 Wing); one squadron of Spitfires (No. 457 Squadron); one army-cooperation wing (No. 83); one attack wing (No. 86)—armed with Beau-

<sup>6</sup> An advanced naval base for the British Pacific Fleet was particularly desired.



(R.A.A.F.)

During the war women in the W.A.A.A.F. efficiently performed many duties in non-combatant areas, for which men would otherwise have been required, and thus made more men available for duty in forward areas. Here A.C.W's Mavis Quinn and Jean Hewens (top) and A.C.W. Patricia Mason (lower) repair the wing of a Catalina in North-Eastern Area in June 1944.



(R.A.A.F.)

Senior Sister E. Bray of the R.A.A.F. Nursing Service, attending to a wounded member of the A.I.F., who is being flown to a hospital in a rear area by the R.A.A.F. Medical Air Evacuation Unit.



(R.A.A.F.)

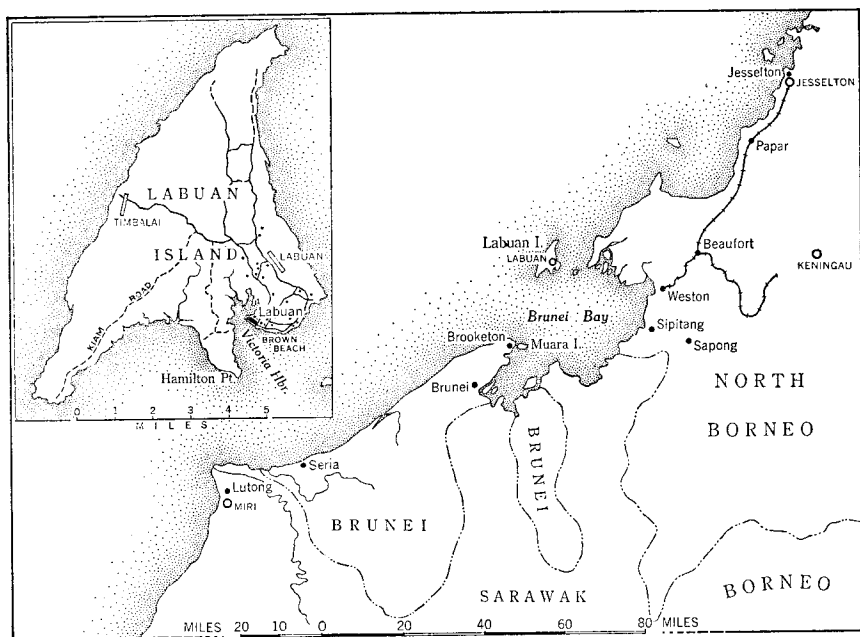
Engineers of No. 61 Airfield Construction Wing removing their gear after completing the repair of the Sepinggang airfield, Borneo, on 15th July 1945.



(R.A.A.F.)

The fighter strip at Morotai in 1945, showing four Kittyhawks returning from an offensive sweep, and many others parked closely together in the dispersal areas.

fighters and Mosquitos, in addition to search and air-sea rescue aircraft. The search aircraft were to be provided by No. 13 Squadron which was being moved from North-Western Area to Labuan for reconnaissance duties.



With the imminent fall of Okinawa and the further withdrawal of enemy air forces to the defence of the homeland, little air opposition other than sporadic night raids was expected. Limited air strength only remained in the Netherlands East Indies and South-East Asia areas. In the Netherlands East Indies there was an estimated fighting strength of not more than 29 fighters and 16 bombers; in South-East Asia, including Sumatra and French Indo-China, some 155 fighters and 28 bombers were available.

Again, surprise was not possible. The enemy would expect further landings in Borneo, but, on the other hand, would have difficulty in predicting the precise area of attack. Even if he were informed that a landing was to be made in Brunei Bay, the enemy was not in a position to benefit greatly from the knowledge because of the constant disruption of his movements by land and sea. It was estimated that about 2,500 men, mainly base and service troops, would be in the target area, under the control of the headquarters of *XXXVII Army*.

Pre-assault bombardment began early in May with a raid by a formation of the Thirteenth Air Force on Balikpapan, followed by another raid on the same target the following day. The raiders dropped their loads



on Manggar airfield. On 3rd May, the Brunei Bay area was also attacked by two flights of Lightnings, six Venturas and a squadron of Mitchells which bombed targets in Victoria town, on Labuan Island.

Targets engaged during the pre-assault bombardment phase included Balikpapan, Manggar, Sepinggang, Balan, Jesselton, Sibul, Bintulu, Kuching, Keningau, Bandjermasin, Brunei, Brooketon, Miri, Seria, Pontianak, Celebes, Singapore, Java and the Flores Islands.

After bombing Kendari, Menado and other targets in Celebes early in May, the Liberators of No. 82 Wing on 15th May struck at Manggar near Balikpapan and dropped fifteen tons of bombs, causing fires. They also dropped leaflets over the target and, on returning to base, reported a considerable number of motor vehicles on the road which led north from Balikpapan.

The main body of the Australian Liberator wing was still at Fenton in the Northern Territory. Liberators of this wing which had been used at a high rate of effort in the Tarakan phase of the Borneo campaign were flown back to Fenton by their crews for servicing. They were replaced by other aircraft which were flown up to Morotai where they began, early in May, to meet the commitments of the wing for the Labuan-Brunei operation. First T.A.F. had directed the wing to carry out bombing strikes—mainly against Celebes—and to supply air observer aircraft which were to operate from Palawan in the Philippines where arrangements were being made for them.

On 19th May Squadron Leader Bowman<sup>7</sup> led another six Liberators on a strike at Balikpapan in which bombs were dropped on a float-plane base. Two days later he led six more to attack Sepinggang airfield at Balikpapan, but could not bomb the target because of cloud, and, as an alternative, released the bombs on a barracks block, many buildings being destroyed.

On 28th May No. 82 Wing again sent six Liberators from Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons to bomb Balikpapan. Bombs from three of these aircraft fell into the sea, but the rest exploded in the target area. Anti-aircraft fire damaged one of the Liberators. On this day, heavy attacks were made as well on Balikpapan and Samarinda by the Thirteenth Air Force. Altogether, seven squadrons of Mitchells and forty-one Liberators (including those from No. 82 Wing) and two flights of Lightnings were in the attacks. The destruction of oil tanks, gun positions, and damage to airfields and buildings resulted.

From this date, until assault day at Labuan, the Australian Liberators continued to bomb targets around Balikpapan and in Celebes. There was little incident during these missions, although the crews at times reported heavy anti-aircraft fire, especially over Balikpapan.

Meanwhile, First T.A.F. Beaufighters and Kittyhawks were coming into the picture over North Borneo, operating from their new base at Sanga Sanga.

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<sup>7</sup> Sqn Ldr K. G. Bowman, 260781. 74 Wing and 21 Sqn. Grazier; of "Wargundy", Craboon, NSW; b. Craboon, 30 Jun 1916.

The original planning for Labuan-Brunei Bay had in mind the use of Tarakan as the base from which close air support would be provided. But when it became apparent that this airstrip would not be made ready in time, Sanga Sanga had been substituted. After extension of parking areas at Sanga Sanga, the three Beaufighter squadrons (Nos. 22, 30 and 31) were flown in. The Beaufighters were not employed until 3rd June. The failure at Tarakan had therefore resulted in loss of effort in the OBOE 6 operation.

On 3rd June, six Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron strafed oil tanks at Bangsal, three of which burned. They strafed oil derricks and about twenty buildings, killing one Japanese in the tower of an oil derrick. Some twenty other Japanese ran off the road into the jungle. On the same day, another six Beaufighters of No. 22 Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant McSharry,<sup>8</sup> bombed and strafed Brunei town. They dropped twelve bombs, destroying two long buildings with direct hits.

The Beaufighters and Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron were sent to attack enemy reinforcement routes in North Borneo. Intelligence reports reaching Morotai had indicated that the enemy forces were withdrawing from the east coast of Borneo and concentrating at Jesselton. Sorties carried out by the Beaufighters and Kittyhawks along these routes totalled seventy, but results of their attacks and those made by American aircraft were difficult to assess because of the heavy jungle country in which the movement was taking place. During the last five days before the landing at Brunei, the air assault reached its maximum intensity. In this period a total of 3,088 sorties was flown by the air forces engaged. Only a small proportion of these sorties was flown by First T.A.F.

Beaufighters of No. 77 Wing had been directed to supply aircraft over the objective area for any special purpose, and the commander of "support aircraft" directed them two days before the landing to provide cover for underwater demolition teams which were breaching obstacles on the beaches at Labuan in readiness for the landing operations. The Beaufighters carried out this task, accurately attacking enemy-held areas within a hundred yards of the men working on the dangerous demolition task. On the day before the landing, Liberators of the Thirteenth Air Force bombed Labuan without obtaining permission and thereby endangered the lives of the demolition teams working in the area bombed.

No. 30 Squadron lost a crew on 9th June (Flying Officer McKenzie<sup>9</sup> and Sergeant Gilfillan<sup>1</sup>). Four Beaufighters from the squadron were bombing Beaufort where they destroyed a building and damaged two others, when the aircraft piloted by McKenzie struck trees and crashed; it immediately burst into flames and other pilots reported "nil signs survivors".

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt B. J. McSharry, 404710; 22 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Mt Morgan, Qld; b. Mt Morgan, 9 Jul 1920.

<sup>9</sup> F-O G. S. McKenzie, 434178; 30 Sqn. Clerk; of Coorparoo, Qld; b. Gympie, Qld, 11 Oct 1924. Killed in action 9 Jun 1945.

<sup>1</sup> Sgt W. J. Gilfillan, 442384; 30 Sqn. Student; of Giles Corner, SA; b. North Adelaide, 7 Dec 1923. Killed in action 9 Jun 1945.

The convoy carrying the landing forces had left Morotai on 4th June. More than 6,000 R.A.A.F. men were on the transports in addition to the men of the 9th Division (less the 26th Brigade). There was no enemy air or sea interference. The convoy had an uncomfortable time in the first three nights out when tropical rainstorms lashed the decks. Stretchers and bedding became soaked and flimsy tarpaulin coverings were swept away. Soldiers and airmen presented a bedraggled, unhappy picture. Only one Japanese aircraft attempted to interfere with the landing operation. It dropped one bomb at 6 a.m. on 10th June. The bomb missed a landing craft and the lone Japanese bomber made off under a hail of anti-aircraft fire.

The opening air bombardment on the day of the assault landing was carried out by eight squadrons of Liberators—six from the Thirteenth Air Force and two from the R.A.A.F. The attack took the form of high-level bombing of the area immediately behind the beach-heads with anti-personnel bombs. Seven of the R.A.A.F. Liberators were from No. 23 Squadron and were led by Wing Commander Dunne. They had left Darwin the previous day, landing at Morotai, and then had taken off again early next morning on the Labuan strike. The other seven Liberators were from Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons. Over Sanghi Islands at 3 a.m. on the 10th, the Liberators saw numerous lights, probably from fishing boats. Shortly before 8 a.m. these Liberators attacked at Labuan, dropping their bombs from 7,000 feet. The bombing was accurate, only three of the bombs falling short of the target.

Meanwhile, the assault landing forces which had been standing off shore since first light, prepared to move in. The supporting naval force, including one light cruiser, carried out an hour's bombardment, then rocket and mortar ships raced inshore ahead of the assault waves, firing on fixed ranges, so that their fire swept inland from the beach as the craft neared the shore.

At this stage, the headquarters ship USS *Rocky Mount* which carried Air Vice-Marshal Bostock and Air Commodore Scherger, ordered the R.A.A.F. observation Liberator, which was waiting overhead, to get down and see if there was any sign of enemy resistance near the beach. None could be seen. So the landing craft set off for the beach. The first landing was made by the 24th Brigade at Hamilton Point at 10.17 a.m. and by 10.30 a.m. tanks and troops had advanced 1,500 yards inland from Brown Beach. By 11.29 p.m. they were within sight of the Labuan airfield.

Again, the Japanese, during the preliminary bombardment, had withdrawn from the beaches to more easily defensible positions farther inland. Few of the enemy could have survived if they had chosen to remain in the beach area. From the R.A.A.F. observation Liberator, which was captained by Wing Commander Bell, and carried an army liaison officer, Australian troops could be seen sauntering along roads, one group advancing towards the airfield and the other moving left towards the town.

Meanwhile, direct air support was being provided by Beaufighters of First T.A.F. and Mitchells of the Thirteenth Air Force. These aircraft had to be available on call to support the infantry when needed, but, because of the light opposition, they were not wanted, and many of them were sent to bomb secondary targets. A group of six Beaufighters from No. 31 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Read, bombed barracks and strafed a road in the afternoon. Another flight, finding no target to attack at Labuan, was sent to bomb a railway bridge at Papar and destroyed it.

Everything went without a hitch at Labuan. The operations were carried out as they were planned. Opposition was slight, so that the merit of the assault lay more in its excellent organisation than on the achievement of results against enemy forces. Scherger, with his S.A.S.O. (Murdoch) and S.O.A. (Duncan), established a command post ashore on the afternoon of assault day.

The Labuan airfield was secured by the troops by last light on 10th June and work on the airstrip began next day. Weather conditions were ideal, greatly assisting the operation.

The 20th Brigade landings at Muara Island and Brooketon on the Borneo mainland were equally successful. Muara Island was completely reconnoitred but no enemy troops were found there. Brooketon had been captured and by nightfall on the 10th the 20th Brigade had advanced 3,000 yards towards Brunei town.

On 11th June six Beaufighters, led by Squadron Leader J. C. Black, bombed and strafed enemy tunnels in areas indicated to them by the commander at Labuan. During the take-off of another flight of Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron on this day, two of the aircraft collided and crashed into the sea off Sanga Sanga. As a result, Flying Officers Cowley<sup>2</sup> and Wall<sup>3</sup> and Flight Sergeant Johnston<sup>4</sup> were killed. Warrant Officer Holmes,<sup>5</sup> the pilot of one of the Beaufighters was rescued later, suffering from slight concussion and lacerations. On the same day Flying Officer Scott<sup>6</sup> of No. 22 Squadron crashed on take-off from Sanga Sanga and was killed. A Beaufort of No. 9 Local Air Supply Unit, taking off to spray D.D.T. at Brunei Bay, also crashed on this day, killing the three members of the crew. Three other Beauforts from this unit carried on with the mission and did good work spraying the objective areas with insect-killing D.D.T.

On the third day of the operation, Beaufighters of No. 77 Wing and the Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron had to leave Sanga Sanga airfield for Morotai to make room for a group of Lightnings of the Thirteenth Air Force which was moved forward to support the invasion of Balikpapan. This was made necessary because the airfield at Tarakan, which

<sup>2</sup> F-O J. D. Cowley, 421188; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Granville, NSW; b. Granville, 15 Sep 1921. Killed in aircraft accident 11 Jun 1945.

<sup>3</sup> F-O M. J. Wall, 49326; 31 Sqn. Public servant; of Werribee, Vic; b. St Kilda, Vic, 20 Mar 1922. Killed in aircraft accident 11 Jun 1945.

<sup>4</sup> F-Sgt A. H. Johnston, 19195. 11 and 31 Sqn. Fitter; of Randwick, NSW; b. Willoughby, NSW, 14 Feb 1920. Killed in aircraft accident 11 Jun 1945.

<sup>5</sup> W-O J. K. Holmes, 411068; 31 Sqn. Auctioneer's clerk; of Tamworth, NSW; b. Toowoomba, Qld, 21 Jun 1919.

<sup>6</sup> F-O R. P. Scott, 432894; 22 Sqn. Clerk; of Punchbowl, NSW; b. Murwillumbah, NSW, 19 Jan 1925. Killed in aircraft accident 11 Jun 1945.

was originally intended for this purpose, was still not ready for use. On the fourth day at Labuan until R.A.A.F. aircraft could operate from the Labuan airfield, close support for the fighting was provided by the Thirteenth Air Force from a base on Palawan Island. However, by 17th June, two aircraft of No. 76 Squadron (piloted by the commanding officer, Squadron Leader Jones and Pilot Officer Furze<sup>7</sup>) landed their aircraft on the rough strip at Labuan. These were the first two operational aircraft to land there and next day the two pilots took off on the first operational sortie from Labuan. They met with unexpected success when they discovered two enemy aircraft on the ground at Keningau, and attacked and destroyed them.

Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron had been ordered to proceed to Labuan, arriving about six days after assault day, and on arrival to assume responsibility for day and night defence of the base. Twelve aircraft of the squadron led by Squadron Leader Watson, left Morotai en route to Labuan on 17th June, refuelled at Zamboanga and then went to Palawan. Next day they arrived at Labuan, but, because of the poor condition of the strip at this stage, two aircraft crashed on landing and were written off. On 18th June, the Spitfires and Kittyhawks took over responsibility for close air support, the Spitfires carrying out their first operational flights from Labuan on 19th June. Austers on this day also flew four sorties, assisting army operations at Labuan, Weston and Beaufort.

Japanese air reaction to the invasion of British North Borneo continued to be exceptionally weak; the enemy sent only an occasional nuisance raider. A Nick approached Labuan during the night of 13th-14th June but was intercepted and shot down by an American Black Widow night fighter. Another enemy aircraft was overhead the following night about 11 p.m. It was engaged by searchlights and anti-aircraft guns from the shore and from ships in the harbour and was seen to break up and crash into the sea.

Two Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron, which were on ground alert, were ordered into the air on the 20th when an enemy raider approached. They climbed to 13,000 feet and while circling near Sipitang village, sighted a Dinah some 1,000 feet below. Flight Lieutenant Campbell<sup>8</sup> made an attack on the enemy from below, opening fire at 250 yards and closing to 50 yards. Then Flight Lieutenant Scrimgeour<sup>9</sup> made an attack from slightly below and at the rear, opening fire at 350 yards and closing to 50 yards. When the second attack was broken off, the port engine of the Dinah was on fire, with pieces flying from it. Both pilots made further attacks and scored hits. They followed it down and saw it crash and explode on the ground fifty-five miles east of Labuan. This was No. 457 Squadron's first air combat since 1943 and boosted the spirits of the men considerably.

<sup>7</sup> P-O M. M. Furze, 13407. 36 and 76 Sqns. Motor mechanic; of Shepparton, Vic; b. Merbein, Vic, 30 Jan 1923.

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt J. G. B. Campbell, DFC, 403038. 145, 33, 601 Sqns RAF, and 457 Sq. Student; of Bellevue Hill, NSW; b. Adelaide, 17 Jan 1922.

<sup>9</sup> F-Lt S. G. Scrimgeour, 402986. 453, 24 and 457 Sqns. Clerk; of Waratah, NSW; b. Newcastle, NSW, 12 Dec 1920.

After losing control of the airfield on Labuan Island, the handful of Japanese defenders had withdrawn to a prepared defence pocket for a last-ditch stand. The pocket had been heavily attacked by artillery and naval gun fire and by low-flying Mitchell bombers on 16th June. As the Australian infantry closed in, the Japanese commanding officer decided to attempt to break out. At 10 p.m. on the night of 20th June, two raiding parties left the pocket and made for the beach area for the purpose of inflicting as many casualties and causing as much damage as possible. They achieved temporary surprise in their desperate venture and managed to kill twenty Australians in the beach area before the Australians recovered and mowed them down, killing ninety and taking one prisoner. The following day the pocket was assaulted and taken. Apart from isolated and disorganised bodies of enemy, the capture of the island was now complete.

After the initial landing and the capture of Brunei town, the 20th Brigade moved southwards towards the oilfields. A detachment of troops landed at Lutong on 23rd June and captured the Miri field. Spitfires and Kittyhawks now based on Labuan gave cover for these landings, while Wirraways of No. 4 Squadron carried out a tactical reconnaissance, having arrived that day after a two-day flight from Morotai.

By 25th June, the air echelon of No. 82 Squadron had joined Nos. 457 and 76 Squadrons at Labuan. Pilots of No. 82 Squadron began operations next morning, their first mission being a close-support attack for the 9th Division at Miri. In the afternoon of 26th June, four Kittyhawks strafed Keningau airfield, scoring hits on a fuel dump and camouflaged huts. On his first strafing run Pilot Officer Collins<sup>1</sup> of No. 76 Squadron crashed and was killed.

On the 29th June, five Kittyhawk aircraft of No. 76 Squadron, led by Squadron Leader Jones, surprised a Dinah at Keningau airfield. The engines of the Dinah were running and Japanese were aboard it and on the wing. The Kittyhawks destroyed the aircraft and killed its crew.

No. 77 Squadron aircraft arrived at Labuan on 30th June and carried out their first operation from this base on 3rd July, when the squadron bombed and strafed Keningau. On the same day Kittyhawks from Nos. 82 and 77 Squadrons and ten Spitfires from No. 457 bombed and strafed Sapong.

On 4th, 5th and 6th July, aircraft from all squadrons of No. 81 Wing, including the Spitfires, carried out intensive bombing and strafing in support of the 9th Division's operations. In these three days, no less than 230 sorties were flown by Kittyhawks, Spitfires, Wirraways and Austers.

Jones was forced to crash-land on 6th July and had a remarkable escape.

At about ten minutes to ten (he wrote) I heard a loud report, which I thought was the explosion of a hot round in my guns. Continuing the reconnaissance, I applied my motor with nil results. It was evident that I had received a hit in an

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<sup>1</sup> P-O L. Collins, 430438; 76 Sqn. Farmer; of Scoresby, Vic; b. Moreland, Vic, 10 Jan 1925. Killed in action 26 Jun 1945.

oil line which I had first thought was my guns. I immediately called up No. 3 informing him that I was baling out, thinking that the motor would last to enable me to gain more altitude (height was then 450 ft). But the engine was almost seized, so I held off on the tree tops and squashed into the trees, sinking almost gracefully. The nose dropped straight forward, luckily striking no tree trunks. I had come down so near to a road where the Japanese were that I quickly separated my dinghy and made off. I found myself shortly afterwards in a small fast-running stream in the middle of surrounding swamp and the current quickly carried me along in the dinghy which I had inflated and launched. The stream widened to about five yards and eventually led into the main river. . . . At about half past three on the 7th, I sighted two aircraft due west and signalled with my mirror, but they apparently did not see me. I sighted the aircraft again an hour later, flying north. I signalled for about fifteen minutes, when one aircraft saw my mirror flashes and turned towards me . . . as soon as the aircraft departed for base and the other remained to cover me, I immediately paddled out into the centre of the bay. Just on dark the air-sea rescue Catalina alighted, picked me up and returned me to base.

On 13th July eight Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron attacked the Riam road area, and a further four aircraft of this squadron on the same day bombed and strafed the Tengoa River area. On this latter mission, the squadron lost its second pilot since arriving at Labuan. When the flight leader (Squadron Leader Wilson<sup>2</sup>) called up after the final run over the target, Warrant Officer George<sup>3</sup> failed to report. He was not seen to crash and searches by accompanying aircraft proved fruitless. Searches continued until 19th July, when a report was received from a guerilla party that he had died of injuries.

On 23rd July, a Mosquito and two Beaufighter aircraft of No. 86 (Attack) Wing arrived at Labuan from Morotai. It was intended that the aircraft of this wing would fly to Labuan on 25th June and operate there at the rate of 1,200 hours per squadron, per month. They were to carry out rocket, bombing and strafing sweeps. However, the move forward to Labuan was constantly delayed because the airstrip was not long enough for the operation of Mosquito aircraft. The Mosquito Squadron (No. 1, commanded by Wing Commander Little<sup>4</sup>) had been trained in low-level intruder work. The other squadron of the wing (No. 93, armed with Beaufighters, and commanded by Squadron Leader Gulliver<sup>5</sup>) did not leave Kingaroy, Queensland, until 31st July. According to the R.A.A.F. Command order to First T.A.F., the wing was to be operational at Labuan on Z plus fifteen days (25th June). But No. 93 Squadron arrived in time to take part in two operations before the war ended, and No. 1 Squadron in one.

The Beaufighters of No. 93, led by Gulliver, attacked watercraft at the mouth of the Tabuan River on 7th August. Gulliver scored hits with rockets on an 800-ton vessel. The vessel was hit with a further ten rockets

<sup>2</sup> W Cdr D. L. Wilson, DFC, 260767. 23, 83 and 85 Sqs; comd 76 Sqn 1945. Cheesemaker; of Tweed River, NSW; b. Murwillumbah, NSW, 30 Nov 1916.

<sup>3</sup> W-O W. P. George, 414927; 76 Sqn. Clerk; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 6 Feb 1924. Died of injuries on 19 Jul 1945.

<sup>4</sup> W Cdr R. A. Little, DFC, 290491. 30 Sqn; comd 1 Sqn 1945. Sales manager; of South Perth, WA; b. Perth, 11 Jun 1916.

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr D. K. H. Gulliver, 270655. 22, 23 and 21 Sqs; comd 93 Sqn 1945. Insurance inspector; of Amberley, Qld; b. Maryborough, Qld, 5 Mar 1917. Killed in aircraft accident 10 Dec 1945.

from following aircraft and was considered destroyed. Immediately on leaving the target area, however, it was noticed that one Beaufighter (Flying Officer Sims<sup>6</sup> and Farrant<sup>7</sup>) was missing from the formation. They had crashed over the target and were presumed lost, but the two men, after suffering great hardships, made their way back to Labuan, arriving after the war had ended. Sims reported that he had noticed his starboard motor had oil pouring from it after attacking the target. At 200 feet the motor stopped suddenly and the aircraft "squashed" into the jungle. Both pilot and navigator escaped with minor injuries and left the scene of the crash immediately and made their way towards the coast. On 11th August their strength was failing but they met friendly Chinese, and, with the help of a 17-year-old youth of mixed Chinese, Dyak and Filipino blood, Vincent Usurga, who spoke perfect English, they escaped down a river in a sampan. They were challenged by the Japanese, who, however, were put off by being told that the boat was going to sea to catch fish for them. The sampan reached the sea on 13th August and slowly made its way up the coast to Miri, reaching an outpost of the 9th Division at 10 a.m. on 20th August.

Four Kittyhawks of No. 82 Squadron, led by Squadron Leader Schaaf,<sup>8</sup> attacked targets at Kuching on 8th August. They had a successful day on this mission when they attacked and destroyed three Oscars which were preparing to take off at the northern end of the airfield. The first Oscar had its engine running, while the other two were stationary, as if to turn into the airfield. The raid to Kuching was undertaken in spite of misgivings as to the range of the Kittyhawk. The target was 450 miles from base at Labuan and the aircraft were in the air for four hours and forty minutes, which was longer than the accepted duration of Kittyhawks.

On the same day seven Mosquitos of No. 1 Squadron strafed barges on the river at Kuching and barracks north of the river. During this operation, Squadron Leader Browne<sup>9</sup> and Flying Officer Gregson<sup>1</sup> crashed over the target and were killed.

For the support of the OBOE 6 Operation, Bostock ordered North-Western Area and Western Area to conduct long-range attacks against enemy air installations and other facilities in eastern Java and southern Celebes. In addition, North-Western Area was to continue with mine-laying operations and maintain the air blockade of the Macassar Strait, Celebes, Arafura, Timor, Banda and Flores Seas.

Night after night Catalinas took off to mine Surabaya harbour and the Banka Strait. Other Catalinas and the Liberators harassed Malang airfield in Java and the clusters of airfields in Celebes. Three Catalinas from

<sup>6</sup> F-Lt V. J. Sims, 401396. 22, 75, 23 and 93 Sqs. Tailor's cutter; of Brunswick, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 14 Jun 1917.

<sup>7</sup> F-O R. Farrant, 441616; 93 Sqn. Public servant; of Cohuna, Vic; b. Cohuna. 9 Sep 1920.

<sup>8</sup> W Cdr F. R. Schaaf, DFC, 2623. 3, 452 and 450 Sqs, 104 and 111 Fighter Sector HQ 1943-44; comd 82 Sqn 1945-47. Regular airman; of Pagewood, NSW; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 22 Jul 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Sqn Ldr R. D. Browne, 406025. 8 and 1 Sqs. Clerk; of Perth, WA; b. Claremont, WA, 2 Mar 1918. Killed in action 8 Aug 1945.

<sup>1</sup> F-O R. Gregson, 72527; 1 Sqn. Clerk; of Sydney; b. Gladesville, NSW, 12 Jun 1921. Killed in action 8 Aug 1945.



No. 20 Squadron mined Hong Kong harbour on the night of 1st June. No. 25 Squadron concentrated its night harassing of Malang.

The operations of the North-Western and Western Areas were continued in the same manner to support the final landing in the OBOE series at Balikpapan on 1st July. Between 21st and 30th June, No. 76 Wing alone flew forty sorties over eastern Java and southern Celebes to neutralise airfields within striking distance of Balikpapan, while the Allied convoys were on the way to the landing area. To assist in carrying out these raids, five Catalinas from No. 11 Squadron were temporarily attached to No. 76 Wing.

On 29th June, No. 25 Squadron attacked Java in daylight. Led by Wing Commander John Hampshire, nine Liberators from this squadron were sent to bomb Malang airfield. They took off from Corunna Downs in Western Australia at 8 a.m. and, in a tight box formation stepped down 200 feet between each element of three, bombed the airfield visually at 2.22 in the afternoon. The bomb pattern fell between the No. 1 Hangar and the barracks area at the southern side of the airfield, bracketing the main bomber strips. Interception by fighters was expected but no attempt was made and anti-aircraft fire, although encountered, burst well away from the Liberators.

The following night, Squadron Leader Rosevear led a formation of six Liberators from the same squadron to carry out harassing raids on Tanjong Perak airfield near Surabaya. On 22nd July this squadron again attacked Java in daylight, the target being the shipbuilding and harbour installations at Semarang (central Java). Hampshire again led the formation of nine Liberators which took off from Learmonth airfield. The first element of three bombed from 15,000 feet, hitting the wharf and shipbuilding area. The second element bombed in tight formation scoring excellent hits. The third, however, bombed independently. The first aircraft missed the target area, the bombs exploding in fishponds to the west. The second scored hits, while the third was forced off its intended run by the first aircraft, but also scored hits. Altogether, excellent coverage was observed and three large fires and numerous small ones were seen as they left the target area. The smoke became blacker each minute and the whole area was under a pall of smoke, visible from the southern coast of Java. This daylight mission was followed up the same evening by Catalinas of No. 76 Wing. Five of these aircraft operating from Darwin and refuelling at Broome, located the target at Semarang and bombed the dock area and shipbuilding yards. One warehouse was burned out and many other buildings damaged. A sixth Catalina failed to find the target and bombed a small township as an alternative.

By July the whole of No. 82 Wing had left North-Western Area and joined First Tactical Air Force. No. 79 Wing with its two squadrons of Mitchells (No. 2 and No. 18) had also left the area, leaving the command much depleted in strength. In addition there had been little if anything for the Spitfire pilots of No. 1 Wing to do and their morale had fallen. Not only were there no operations to carry out, but training had to be

reduced to a minimum because of the lack of Spitfires available for training purposes. However, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock informed Air Commodore Charlesworth that he proposed to move two of the Spitfire squadrons to Borneo, leaving only one at Darwin for local air defence. It was not expected that the fighter squadrons going forward under this scheme were likely to obtain air combat experience because of the scarcity of enemy fighters. However, they would be surrounded by cut-off enemy, and it would be possible to employ them in action as "attack" aircraft.

To replace No. 82 Wing at North-Western Area, Bostock was planning to bring forward another heavy bomber wing (No. 85) which had just been formed. This wing would have two newly-formed Liberator squadrons under command (Nos. 12 and 99), and, together with No. 82 Wing, would be assigned the task of neutralising all enemy bases in the Netherlands East Indies. No. 82 Wing was to be based eventually at Balikpapan and General Kenney had promised Lord Louis Mountbatten that the Australian Liberator squadrons would be made available to him to aid the operation in South-East Asia Command to recapture Singapore. Mountbatten conferred with MacArthur at Manila and Kenney, who was present, recounted in his *General Kenney Reports* the promise he made of Australian air support.<sup>2</sup> He said: "Mountbatten wanted some bombing assistance at that time, if we had any to spare. MacArthur asked me what I could do. I said the Australians had three squadrons of B-24s which would be able to operate from the Borneo fields by that time, and just before the date of the Singapore landing I could send down a couple of groups of B-24s [eight squadrons] from the Far East Air Forces for two or three days' final preparation work."

By the end of June, First T.A.F. had grown to such an extent that its manpower total was 21,893. Another 3,134 men joined the command during July, most of these being from No. 82 Wing. However, by the end of July, some 4,381 had left the command, leaving a net total of 20,646 men. Some 700 of those who left the command in July were men who had completed their tour of duty in the tropics. Numbers in this category had shown a marked increase over May and June.

The forward moves of First T.A.F. from Noemfoor Island to Morotai and then on to Tarakan and Labuan had resulted in a stringing out of units and personnel. Other contemplated moves would further disperse the command. Lines of communication with the mainland were long and the administrative units required to maintain them, and the work of garrisoning the newly-occupied areas in which enemy forces remained beyond the defence perimeters, led to a constant expansion of the command so that it had become unwieldy and lacking in essential mobility. In theory the command was a "mobile striking force" and it was intended that it should be used as such. Accordingly, it had to be freed of non-essential elements and streamlined as much as possible.

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<sup>2</sup> p. 564.

In order to free the force of its "administrative tail" and the task of carrying out garrison operations, a new static organisation was proposed. It would be formed out of elements of Northern Command and First Tactical Air Force and was to be known as No. 11 Group. The Government agreed to the proposal and the new group took over administrative control of all units on Morotai as from 30th July 1945. Its commander was Air Commodore Brownell, who had been serving as Air Officer Commanding, Western Area. Group Captain Lush<sup>3</sup> was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer and Group Captain Curnow,<sup>4</sup> Staff Officer Administration.

The initial sphere of responsibility of No. 11 Group was to include all Dutch territory north of latitude 7 degrees south and east of longitude 108 degrees east, British North Borneo and Sarawak. Air bases to be garrisoned immediately were Hollandia, Biak, Middleburg, Morotai, Labuan and Tarakan. Within its area the new group had the following responsibilities:

- (a) Local air defence duties and sea lane protection.
- (b) Support of adjacent formations and offensive operations against enemy targets within range.
- (c) Line of communication duties.

However, the group was formed too late to take over all its responsibilities before the war ended. It had, however, taken over operational control of No. 79 (Spitfire) Squadron and had directed operations of No. 82 Wing Liberators unofficially just before the end.

Initially, No. 11 Group was to consist of the following units:

- No. 11 Group Headquarters
- No. 79 Squadron
- No. 452 Squadron
- No. 457 Squadron
- No. 120 Squadron.

Operating in twos, threes and fours, Spitfires of No. 79 Squadron were out almost every day over Halmahera, throughout June, carrying out a total of 290 sorties. Small enemy watercraft were the main targets. Barges, small ships, even canoes and prahus were strafed in the daily sweeps. On 11th June, ten Spitfires, led by Squadron Leader Susans,<sup>5</sup> attacked a concentration of prahus at Obit Island off southern Halmahera. The Spitfires dropped bombs and strafed the area thoroughly.

Liberators of the R.A.A.F. and the Thirteenth Air Force Bomber Command joined the Spitfires in July and August in their attacks on Halmahera, and occasionally Beaufighters also joined in.

On 30th July, No. 11 Group took over No. 80 Wing Headquarters which ceased to function, most of its personnel being absorbed into the

<sup>3</sup> Gp Capt J. F. Lush, 254. 10 Sqn; comd 32 Sqn 1943; SO, Operations, North-Western Area 1943-44, RAAF Cmd 1944-45; SASO 11 Gp 1945. Regular air force offr; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Hawthorn, 17 Sep 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Gp Capt T. C. Curnow, 59. Comd 23 Sqn 1939, 2 EFTS 1939-40, 5 EFTS 1940-41, 224 Sqn RAF 1941-42; SASO North-Eastern Area 1943; comd 5 SFTS 1943-45; SASO 11 Gp 1945. Regular air force offr; of Brisbane; b. Ballarat, Vic, 7 Aug 1911.

<sup>5</sup> W Cdr R. T. Susans, DSO, DFC, 280760. 3 Sqn; comd 79 Sqn 1945; 80 Wing. Salesman; of Manly, NSW; b. Manly, 25 Feb 1917.

newly-formed group. That day No. 79 Squadron was ordered to carry out a sweep over Halmahera. Four Spitfires from the squadron destroyed an enemy bomber on Lolobata airfield. This success was followed up the day after when another bomber was destroyed at the same airfield. It was later learned that nine enemy fighters were located in a camouflaged revetment south of the dispersal area and were being maintained by about 600 Japanese quartered in the vicinity. A big raid was therefore planned. On 4th August, twelve Liberators of the Thirteenth Air Force, in cooperation with six Spitfires of No. 79 Squadron, attacked the area again. The Liberators dropped 175 general-purpose bombs over the target. However, no sign of the enemy planes was seen during the attack. The Spitfire squadron continued daily strikes in the Halmahera area until, on 14th August, operations were terminated by R.A.A.F. Command signals.