

CHAPTER 18

FIRST TACTICAL AIR FORCE AND THE PHILIPPINES

THE Japanese were well aware that the Americans would invade the Philippines and, after June 1944, they began to withdraw outlying forces to that archipelago and to strengthen the garrison with reinforcements from China and Japan.¹ Before October the *Fourth Air Army*, whose headquarters were in the Philippines, received reinforcements totalling 400 aircraft from China, Japan, Singapore, Burma, the Netherlands Indies, and from as far away as Manchuria.² Units of *Fourth Air Army* were under orders to operate from Macassar and Menado against the new airfields (Wama and Pitu) under construction at Morotai in order to disrupt the coming operations against the Philippines.

Admiral Toyoda, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, expected the attack on the Philippines to come in August or September, and after consulting Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo, he was prepared to gamble on using the whole fleet in one big operation against the Americans.³ There had been an outcry at home, with people asking what the navy was doing during the Allied victories in the Pacific, but the navy was not influenced in its decisions by this public feeling; it was taking a carefully calculated risk. The army was also preparing to fight a decisive battle so as to build up the discipline and morale of the people.⁴ The army believed that the retention of the Philippines was necessary to protect the supply line through which came oil, bauxite, tin and rubber. If the supply line was cut, Japan had no hope of winning the war.⁵

The Japanese had come to the conclusion that unless they could soon achieve a decisive victory all would be lost. They must stake everything—the whole of the navy and as much of the army as they could deploy—on one big operation which they named the SHO-GO operation. It might mean a sacrificial slaughter but the risk had to be taken. An Imperial conference held at the Imperial Palace in August 1944 confirmed the SHO-GO plan and gave it political backing. The outline of action approved by the Imperial conference was: "A decisive battle will be prosecuted during the latter part of this year by displaying the fighting power of the nation's armed forces to the maximum and thus the enemy's plans will be crushed . . . in the Pacific Ocean area we will annihilate the main body of the attacking American forces . . . the nation's fighting power,

¹ Colonel Hattori, staff officer at Imperial GHQ said in an interrogation after the war: "It [Imperial GHQ] still held to the estimate that the American forces would select the Philippines as their next strategic target. It was then estimated that Formosa and the Nansei Islands would follow the Philippines in the choice for subsequent strategic targets; a direct attack upon the Japanese mainland would come after this, while an attack on the Kuriles was considered least possible." (Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo.)

² US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol II, p. 406: Colonel Kaneko.

³ US Bombing Survey, *Interrogations*, Vol II, pp. 316-17.

⁴ Lt-Gen Nukada (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

⁵ Vice-Admiral Nakazawa (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

especially air power, for the decisive battle will be reinforced speedily. For this purpose all bottlenecks of production will be eliminated. . . . We will maintain neutrality with the Soviet Union and endeavour to improve relations . . . [we will] also attempt the solution of the China problem by initiating well-directed political manoeuvres at Chungking.”⁶

While the Japanese correctly anticipated that the Americans would invade the Philippines, they could not predict where in the large archipelago the first assault landing would be made, and the Americans themselves did not make a firm decision until five weeks before the event. As late as 14th September General MacArthur’s plan was to carry out intermediate operations in the Talaud Islands and in Sarangani Bay, Mindanao, before the main attack on Leyte. The plan called for a firm foothold to be established on Mindanao Island on 15th November for the support of the main effort against Leyte and Samar which was to be mounted on 20th December.

However, in spite of the Japanese preparations, Admiral Halsey reported evidence of “extreme enemy weakness” at Leyte during strikes by his Third Fleet aircraft sent there to cover the Allied landings at Morotai and Palau. One of his pilots who had been shot down on 13th September and rescued later in the day had talked to some Filipinos who said there were only a handful of Japanese in the whole Leyte area.⁷ Halsey had therefore reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff who were then at Quebec attending the OCTAGON conference that a direct attack on Leyte appeared feasible. This would make possible the scrapping of plans to attack the Talaud Islands, Sarangani Bay and Yap Island. Nimitz had thereupon offered to make available to General MacArthur several divisions earmarked for other objectives. The Joint Chiefs then radioed MacArthur asking his views, but MacArthur was on a cruiser off Morotai and with radio silence being preserved there was no way of getting a reply from him. However, Kenney, although dubious about the accuracy of Halsey’s Intelligence report, agreed that a radio message should go to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in MacArthur’s name stating that if the XXIV Corps could be made available from the Pacific Ocean Area, he would make a landing on Leyte on 20th October. Within hours, approval for the change was given and staff officers of S.W.P.A. started working out new plans. When MacArthur arrived back from Morotai and was informed, he approved.

On 21st September 1944 General Headquarters issued Operation Instruction No. 70 for the invasion of Leyte. The target date, which was named A-day, was set at 20th October.

The Fifth Air Force was to be the air assault force, with the Thirteenth (including Air Commodore Cobby’s No. 10 Group) and R.A.A.F. Command in supporting roles only. The ground assault force was to be entirely American (Krueger’s Sixth Army), so that as far as Australian land and air forces were concerned they would have no direct part in

⁶ Colonel Hattori (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

⁷ G. C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports*, p. 431.

what was hoped would be a triumphant return of the Americans to the Philippines. There was a plan in existence to use an Australian corps (7th and 9th Divisions) in a later operation at Aparri in northern Luzon but this was only to be undertaken if American naval support could not be obtained for the Lingayen Gulf operation. It looked as though, for political reasons, G.H.Q. had adopted the principle of not allowing foreign forces to play a part in the liberation of the Philippine Islands.⁸

The air operations which prepared the invasion of the Philippines covered an enormous area and involved many different air elements of the Allied forces. While Halsey's carrier aircraft pounded Formosa and the Ryukus, the Fifth Air Force and the Thirteenth Air Force (including the Australians of No. 10 Group) hit the southern Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies. Air Commodore Charlesworth's American and Australian squadrons based in the Darwin area were also part of the forces used in this preliminary "softening-up" process. In addition, the Seventh American Air Force attacked the Bonin Islands which were only 600 miles from Japan itself and the Fourteenth American Air Force in China struck at harbours and ships on the China coast.

Meanwhile Halsey's fleet sortied from Ulithi on 6th October "to begin running interference for MacArthur's landing on Leyte".⁹ He attacked Formosa on the 12th October and the Japanese, who were alert, counter-attacked the next day. Halsey lost 89 aircraft and the American cruisers *Canberra* and *Houston* were torpedoed but not sunk. The Japanese, including many of their usually well-informed leaders, believed that their navy had at last won a glorious victory. Colonel Hattori testified after the war that even "Imperial Headquarters felt that it had dealt a crushing blow to the enemy fleet". Admiral Ozawa, however, was sceptical of the glowing accounts, and, when Toyoda learned from a naval force he sent to "annihilate Halsey" that Halsey was still very strong, he ordered the force to return.

Charlesworth's squadrons, operating far to the south with the Thirteenth Air Force, blockaded the Banda Sea between Timor and Ceram and attacked installations in the eastern Netherlands East Indies, while Cobby aided the Thirteenth Air Force in its task of neutralising the threat of enemy air attacks on the flank and the supply line to the amphibious landing on Leyte. Cobby concentrated mainly on the Vogelkop Peninsula and the Ambon-Buru Islands. For weeks before the landing on Leyte the Australian squadrons carried out daily attacks with Kittyhawks, Bostons, Liberators and Beaufighters. The intensity of these joint American-Australian air operations can be judged by the fact that in the week before the landing a total of 824 Australian Kittyhawk, Boston and Beaufighter and American Mitchell, Boston, Lightning and Thunderbolt aircraft made attacks on enemy-occupied villages and shipping in the Buru-Ceram Islands area alone, and that for the week ending 27th October

⁸ V. Haugland, in *The A.A.F. Against Japan* (1948), wrote that GHQ had adopted this principle; and in fact neither Australian army nor air force units (except non-combat units) went to the Philippines.

⁹ W. F. Halsey, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (1947), p. 204.

a total of 572 sorties were carried out against targets in the Vogelkop Peninsula. More than 300 of these sorties were by Australian Kittyhawk aircraft.

During October Bostons and Beaufighters of Group Captain Fyfe's No. 77 Wing sank twenty-four vessels, including transports and barges. In the same month, Kittyhawks of No. 75 Squadron flew a total of 1,150 hours, more than 850 of which were on operations. On 10th October, four aircraft from this squadron, after completing a mission along the coast of Ceram, ran into heavy weather at an altitude of 8,000 feet when east of Misool Island. The aircraft which were piloted by Flight Lieutenant Morrison,¹ Flight Sergeant Roberts,² Flying Officer Andrew³ and Warrant Officer Bates⁴ became separated. Coming through the clouds at 1,000 feet and unable to find the other aircraft Roberts flew to Middleburg (Dutch New Guinea) and reported them missing. Searching aircraft were sent out then and on the following days. On the 12th Andrew was seen by several aircraft from No. 80 Squadron and later in the day was rescued by a Catalina. He could give no information on the other members of the missing flight and despite repeated searches, no trace was found of them. Andrew had lost height and at 2,000 feet, being still in cloud, decided to bail out. He was slightly injured on landing, but fortunately met friendly natives who took care of him until rescued.

On the 13th October, aircraft from seven squadrons of No. 10 Group were out from Kamiri on operations. On this day, six Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron bombed Amahai airfield on Ceram. Seven bombs hit the strip and one dropped on the revetment area. The airstrip had already been thoroughly cratered by previous attacks.

Day after day during October, aircraft from R.A.A.F. squadrons were taking off from Kamiri—usually in flights of four but sometimes in squadrons. No. 82 Squadron which had just begun operations, suffered losses on the 18th October when twelve aircraft in three sections led by Wing Commander Cresswell, Squadron Leader Grace and Flying Officer Lyons⁵ went out on operations. One of the pilots (Flying Officer Weymouth⁶) crashed into the sea at the Kai Islands. It looked as though he was hit by enemy ground fire. The aircraft burst into flames on impact with the ground and the pilot was killed. Next, three aircraft returning from a watercraft sweep to Geser Island encountered bad weather and Flying Officer Bellert⁷ left the formation near Manokwari and was not seen

¹ F-Lt A. W. C. Morrison, 416186. 77, 80 and 75 Sqns. Theatrical dancer; of Prospect, SA; b. Exeter, SA, 9 May 1913. Presumed killed in action 10 Oct 1944.

² F-O M. A. Roberts, 417428; 75 Sqn. Clerk; of College Park, SA; b. St Peters, SA, 30 Dec 1923.

³ F-Lt D. E. Andrew, 403301. 22, 12 and 75 Sqns. Accountant; of Canberra; b. Emmaville, NSW, 16 Dec 1916.

⁴ W-O J. C. Bates, 409495; 75 Sqn. Wool classer; of Little River, Vic; b. Little River, 28 May 1921. Presumed killed in action 10 Oct 1944.

⁵ F-Lt I. A. Lyons, MBE, 400095. 25, 3, 82 and 77 Sqns. Journalist; of Eaglehawk, Vic; b. Bendigo, Vic, 16 Feb 1915.

⁶ F-O A. G. Weymouth, 418029. 77 and 82 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Flemington, Vic; b. Echuca, Vic, 9 Aug 1922. Killed in action 18 Oct 1944.

⁷ F-O M. A. Bellert, 404001; 82 Sqn. Aircraft mechanic; of Archerfield, Qld; b. Brisbane, 14 Nov 1916. Killed in action 18 Oct 1944.

again. The remaining pilots made their way to base safely. During a bombing mission on Utarom on the same day, Flight Lieutenant Milne⁸ of No. 76 Squadron experienced glycol trouble. He baled out 35 miles from his base and was picked up by a Catalina aircraft next day.

On 21st October, while squadrons of No. 81 Wing and Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron carried out sweeps against watercraft and dive-bombed Manokwari and Utarom airfield, the whole of No. 78 Wing dive-bombed the town of Mumi. A total of eighty-one Kittyhawk sorties was carried out against this one target. The bombing covered Mumi and Ransiki bridges and tram lines and anti-aircraft positions, bivouac areas and huts at Waren and Mumi airfields, causing some unobserved damage.

No. 82 Squadron, because most of its equipment and ground staff were still at Townsville, Queensland, awaiting transport to Noemfoor, had a difficult time carrying out the tasks allotted to it. The pilots, in addition to flying the aircraft, had to assist in bombing-up, arming and refuelling their aircraft.

Meanwhile, precipitated by MacArthur's invasion of Leyte, one of the decisive battles of the Pacific war was about to take place. At daybreak on the 20th October, the invasion convoy began to enter Leyte Gulf. For three hours, Admiral Kinkaid's Seventh Fleet battleships, cruisers and destroyers shelled the landing beaches. Only one Japanese aircraft attempted to interfere and it was shot down before it could do any harm. Then the 1st Cavalry and 24th Divisions went ashore south of Tacloban and XXIV Corps at Dulag. There was little opposition because the Japanese had withdrawn inland realising they were incapable of holding the beaches.

As early as the 17th October Admiral Toyoda had heard that the American fleet and transports were approaching Leyte. Next day a conference was called at Imperial General Headquarters and, although it still possessed only "scanty knowledge of the enemy situation", made the decision to set in motion the SHO-GO operation.⁹ The Philippines, and Leyte Island in particular, was selected as the battleground over which would be fought what the enemy believed, and believed correctly, was their last opportunity to throw in all their available forces in a decisive engagement.¹

There were a number of compelling reasons for the decision. In the first place, Imperial G.H.Q. was under the false impression that a crushing blow had just been dealt to Halsey's fleet off Formosa and that therefore the American attack on Leyte which was developing immediately after this blow, would not have such strong naval support.² Secondly, the *Fourth Air Army* which had been assigned the leading role in the SHO-GO operation was strong and in good shape. The morale of its pilots was very high and more army aircraft could be rushed to the Philippines

⁸ F-Lt K. R. Milne, 407126. 76 and 77 Sqns. Manufacturing chemist; of Brighton, SA; b. 25 Jun 1915.

⁹ Colonel Sugita (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).
US Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)*, p. 8.

¹ Colonel Hattori (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

to reinforce them. A battle at Leyte would enable the Japanese fleets to coordinate with army air units in attacks on the American fleet and transports which were to be "annihilated". Surface units could proceed through Philippine waters to the beach-head under the protective umbrella of land-based aircraft.

Only the commander of the *Fourteenth Area Army* (General Yamashita) opposed the plan. He did not want to engage the Americans at Leyte but wait until they advanced on Luzon and engage them there.³ That was the original plan agreed to in Tokyo and he did not have the ships to transport reinforcements on a large scale, nor the munitions available at Leyte. However, he was overruled by General Terauchi, commander of *Southern Army*. "Suddenly on the 22nd October," said Major Tanaka, a staff officer on the *Fourteenth Area Army* headquarters, "the following *Southern Army* order was received: '(a) a heaven-endowed opportunity to smash the arrogant enemy has arrived; (b) the *Fourteenth Area Army*, in cooperation with the naval and air forces, will destroy the enemy attacking Leyte Island, using as much military strength as possible.'⁴

For the Imperial Navy the SHO-GO operation was to be the supreme naval effort of the war. The navy had a bold and imaginative plan which involved bringing fleets from three points to converge on the American transports in Leyte Gulf. Toyoda ordered Admiral Kurita's *Second Fleet* to move from Singapore-Lingga. The *Fifth Fleet* would sortie from the Pescadores to reinforce Kurita and Admiral Ozawa's *Third Fleet* was to move down from Japan proper, in an attempt to decoy Halsey away from Leyte while Kurita went in for the kill against shipping off-shore. The three fleets would coordinate for a devastating attack on 25th October. At Brunei Bay on the 22nd October, Kurita's captains had a last conference, drank a few toasts to the Emperor, and by 10 a.m. were under way for Leyte Gulf. The die was cast.

The prize the Japanese fleet sought was the 600-odd vessels in Leyte Gulf and, to help clear the seas for the approach of the main fleet, Vice-Admiral Fukudome had authorised the first *Kamikaze* (suicide aircraft) attacks.⁵ On 21st October, three picked out H.M.A.S. *Australia* as a target. Two were shot down by anti-aircraft fire but a third crashed on the bridge, killing Captain Dechaineux,⁶ its commander.

On the morning of the 24th, 80 to 100 aircraft approached from the north-westward, but only 20 or 30 were able to penetrate to the transport area. Intelligence reports of the approach of Japanese fleet units were coming in. Sightings of naval vessels had been reported off Mindoro, off

³ Lt-Gen Nukada (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

⁴ Major Tanaka (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

⁵ *Kamikaze*, meaning "Divine Wind", was the name given to a typhoon which swept down and scattered the invasion fleet of the Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century, and thus saved Japan from imminent destruction. When the necessity again arose *Kamikaze* was quickly adapted in a modern context to inspire Japanese pilots to sacrifice themselves in suicide attacks against aircraft carriers and other shipping at Leyte.

⁶ Capt E. F. V. Dechaineux, DSC; RAN. Comd HMS's *Vivacious*, 1940, *Eglinton*, 1940, HMAS's *Warramunga*, 1942-44, *Australia*, 1944. Of Moonah, Tas; b. Launceston, Tas, 3 Oct 1902. Killed in action 21 Oct 1944.

Borneo, and off Cape Engano to the north. On the 24th Halsey had radioed Kinkaid that he was heading north with three carrier groups to deal with Ozawa's fleet. Kinkaid was relying on Halsey to take care of the Japanese fleet (Kurita) which was coming through the central Philippines along San Bernardino Strait, while he moved his whole force south to engage the Japanese *Second Fleet* which was coming through Surigao Strait between Leyte and Mindanao. Kinkaid practically wiped out this southern force early on the 25th October, but the Japanese strategy had succeeded in drawing Halsey to the north while Kurita's central force, consisting of four battleships, seven heavy cruisers and between twelve and fifteen destroyers penetrated to Leyte Gulf and engaged twelve escort carriers off the beach-head.⁷

Before arriving off Leyte, Kurita had lost the heavy cruisers *Maya* and *Atago* to American submarines, and the huge 63,000-ton battleship *Musashi*, which had 16-inch guns, was sunk by Halsey's carrier pilots on 24th October. On the 25th Admiral Kinkaid's twelve light carriers off Leyte withdrew southwards under fire from Kurita's force. "Disaster suddenly stared us in the face," wrote Kenney.⁸ But the Japanese broadsides were inaccurate. They sank one of the carriers, the *Gambier Bay*, and severely damaged others which Japanese *Kamikaze* pilots finished off later. However, Kinkaid had radioed Halsey and help was on the way. The Japanese central fleet, although within sight of victory, then withdrew. Halsey's carrier planes meanwhile had destroyed all four Japanese aircraft carriers in the northern group—the *Zuikaku*, *Chiyoda*, *Zuiho* and *Chitose*—for the loss of one American carrier, the *Princeton*.⁹ Altogether this big naval action cost the Japanese three battleships, four aircraft carriers, six heavy cruisers, five light cruisers and ten destroyers. For these catastrophic losses the Imperial Japanese Navy failed to gain any worthwhile objectives and the Combined Fleet ceased to exist as an organised force. The Japanese were now no longer a great power, and they could not stop the advance of the huge American amphibious forces.

While the Battle of Leyte Gulf proceeded, General Yamashita was able to land reinforcements at Ormoc on the west side of Leyte. The Japanese soldiers committed were an *élite* group drawn from the *Fourteenth Area Army* and bitter fighting ensued on Leyte.

On 27th October airfield construction had proceeded far enough for Lightnings of No. 49 Group to come forward from Morotai. The Fifth Air Force and the carrier aircraft hit the enemy convoys, interrupting the flow of reinforcements, hundreds of whom were drowned. The Japanese *Fourth Air Army* still had some 500 aircraft, but the quality of the pilots and their air force organisation was falling off. In part this was due to the Japanese practice of leaving trained units at the front until they were completely destroyed or cut off. This meant that training, already

⁷ Halsey was later criticised for allowing himself to be decoyed by Ozawa and thus exposing the shipping off Leyte to Kurita's force.

⁸ Kenney, p. 458.

⁹ Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee, *Japanese Naval and Merchant Shipping Losses During World War II by All Causes* (1947), p. 16.



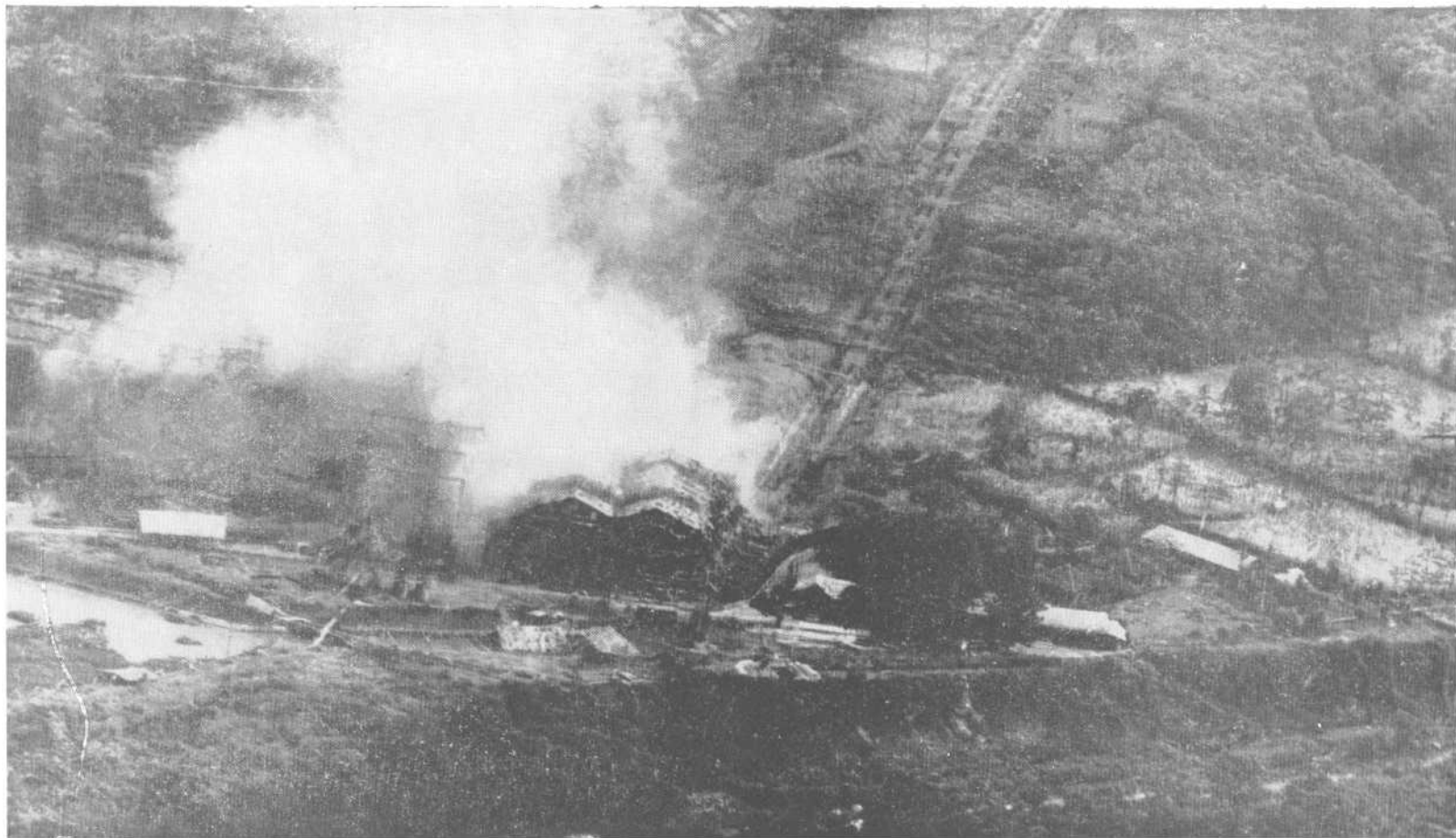
(R.A.A.F.)

No. 3 Airfield Construction Squadron at the Mindoro landing on 15th December 1944. Men of the unit are using three bulldozers to build a ramp from the beach to the open bows of an LST.



(R.A.A.F.)

Men of No. 3 Airfield Construction Squadron and two United States infantrymen at Mindoro. The Australians are left to right: L.A.C's F. Watts and J. Webster, and Sgt J. Smith.



On 5th and 8th February 1945, Liberators of No. 24 Squadron operating over 1,000 miles from their base in Western Australia bombed the Kali Konto hydro-electric power station, 50 miles south-west of Surabaya, which supplies electric power to the whole of east Java. The photograph taken during the raid of the 8th February shows the elaborate camouflage with which the Japanese tried to disguise the plant.

(R.A.A.F.)

reduced in effectiveness by a lack of petrol, did not benefit from the practical experience of the combat aircrews.

From Morotai Generals Whitehead and Streett were sending fighters and bombers over the Philippines to prevent as far as possible the enemy's *Fourth Air Army* from hitting at the beach-head at Leyte. The Japanese air attacks at Leyte were getting results. One night they destroyed all but twenty of P-38's there. The wrecks of these aircraft were pushed into the water and reinforcements rushed up from Morotai. The Japanese kept reinforcing the *Fourth Air Army* in spite of constant losses. Reinforcements were coming in from as far afield as the Netherlands East Indies, leaving a huge area without fighter protection. As a result, Kenney's airmen ranged from Morotai to Java and from New Guinea to Borneo at will, hitting airfields, communications and dumps. The numbers of aircraft operating over these areas each day was between 200 and 400 and they rarely struck fighter opposition. Air Commodore Cobby's First Tactical Air Force played a considerable part in these operations, flying hundreds of sorties each week. On 22nd October, six Bostons of No. 22 Squadron bombed Tulehu on Ambon Island and on the 29th they pattern-bombed Suli village. Four Australian aircrew were killed this day. A Beaufighter piloted by Squadron Leader Wallace¹ with Flying Officer Hider² as navigator crashed into the sea near Ambon and burst into flames on impact. On the same day twelve aircraft from No. 76 Squadron were flying in ordinary formation during practice interceptions with American Thunderbolt aircraft, the commander of which had asked No. 76 Squadron to take part in "dog fights" for the purpose of helping new pilots. The Thunderbolts were making a mock rear attack and the Kittyhawks were ordered to turn about, but one of them turned the wrong way and collided with another. One aircraft fell to pieces in the air and the other went straight into the water.

In operations during October No. 78 Wing, which included Nos. 75, 78 and 80 Squadrons, lost three aircraft from anti-aircraft fire; in addition two were damaged and four destroyed from other causes. One pilot was killed, four missing and two were rescued. Strenuous efforts were made by the wing to attack units of *II Japanese Army* based at Manokwari. In spite of their efforts, however, they met with little success because of the density of the bush along waterways and trails. The number of sorties flown by this wing showed a decline in October, because No. 81 Wing, which was becoming established at Noemfoor, was allotted some of No. 78 Wing's duties. The nearer targets were allotted to No. 81 and the more remote ones to No. 78, which undertook sweeps to the east coast of Ambon, the Haruku and Ceram Straits and the south coast of Ceram as far west as Piru township. On 31st October forty Kittyhawks from Nos. 78 and 81 Wings attacked villages and bivouac areas on the

¹ Sqn Ldr R. H. Wallace, 586. 21, 5 and 30 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of Largs Bay, SA; b. Semaphore, SA, 12 Jan 1919. Killed in action 29 Oct 1944.

² F-O R. H. Hider, 433672; 30 Sqn. School teacher; of Bexley, NSW; b. Camden, NSW, 14 Dec 1921. Killed in action 29 Oct 1944.

Vogelkop Peninsula and searched for shipping around the coast. Fires were caused during an attack on Mumi, but little shipping was sighted.

Although they were excluded from direct part in the Philippines operations during the battle for Leyte Island, First Tactical Air Force indirectly aided the over-all operations by helping to keep some 40,000 enemy troops immobilised in Halmahera, Celebes and Dutch New Guinea. General Arnold gave qualified praise to these operations in his second report to the Secretary of War: "To the extent that these operations [of the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces and the R.A.A.F.] against the Mindanao-Halmahera-Northwest Celebes-Ceram-Buru area neutralised the threat of enemy air attacks on the flank and the supply line of our amphibious landing on Leyte, they made that landing possible. Continual pounding of the enemy in Java and Borneo and of his important airdromes and concentration centres in the entire region further helped our amphibious operations on Leyte."

General Streett, by a "Letter of Instruction" directed First T.A.F. on 3rd November as follows:

Prepare to move units forward to Morotai as directed.

Base one fighter squadron at Mokmer aerodrome for the defence of Biak. The squadron to operate under the operational control of the Commanding General, Fifth Air Force.

Conduct daily sweeps for enemy shipping in the Vogelkop-Ceram-Kai Islands areas.

Continue to attack and neutralise vital installations in the Vogelkop-Eastern Ceram-Kai Islands areas.

Utilising Havocs [Boston aircraft] and Beaufighters, sweep Halmahera and northern Celebes for enemy shipping and vital installations.

Operations in the Vogelkop Peninsula area were severely restricted by bad weather during the first week in November. As a result few First T.A.F. aircraft could operate and some pilots failed to reach their targets. On 2nd November, because of the weather, only 12 Kittyhawks took part in the bombing and strafing of enemy-occupied villages. Again, on the 4th, 28 aircraft took off to bomb targets. Only 11 completed their missions and the others had to return to Kamiri without having reached their assigned targets. After several days' inactivity attacks were resumed on the Vogelkop area. A heavily loaded barge was destroyed and three barges, two schooners and a motor-launch were damaged, and direct hits were scored on the Utarom airfield on 11th November. Among the attacking pilots were three Dutchmen of No. 120 (Netherlands East Indies) Squadron who had come up from Merauke (Dutch New Guinea) to be temporarily attached to Australian Kittyhawk squadrons at Noemfoor. On the 13th November 28 R.A.A.F. Kittyhawks again bombed the Utarom airstrip, rendering it unserviceable. On the 14th attacks were made on various targets by 27 Kittyhawks, the heaviest being a mission by 12 to Doom Island. All bombs in the Doom Island strike landed in the stores and bivouac area and a fire was started.

The aircraft and pilots of No. 75 Squadron together with a nucleus of ground crews had been transferred to Biak on 2nd November where they operated from Mokmer airfield. The Americans had big concentrations of supplies and equipment at Biak, and it was essential that it should have protection from enemy raiders which might be expected to appear during the crucial operations in the Philippines. At Biak the squadron came under the control of the Fifth Air Force. However, there were no raids.

Cobby established a command at Morotai on 25th October. When First T.A.F. moved to Morotai in strength it was to take over garrison duty for the island which at this time was being carried out by the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces. The Fifth was now in the process of moving to the Philippines and the Thirteenth was to follow at a later date. On 6th November, Cobby warned Nos. 22 and 30 Squadrons to move to Morotai within seventy-two hours. They were to be used from Morotai against Halmahera and northern Celebes.

Concentrated efforts were made during the month to organise First T.A.F. at Morotai, but at every turn the commander ran into the difficulty of providing transport. Overriding priority on shipping and air transport had been given to the Philippines operations and the situation had been worsened by the fact that the Leyte operation had been brought forward two months and could not therefore take advantage of the additional shipping that would have arrived in time for the original date set for the Leyte operation.

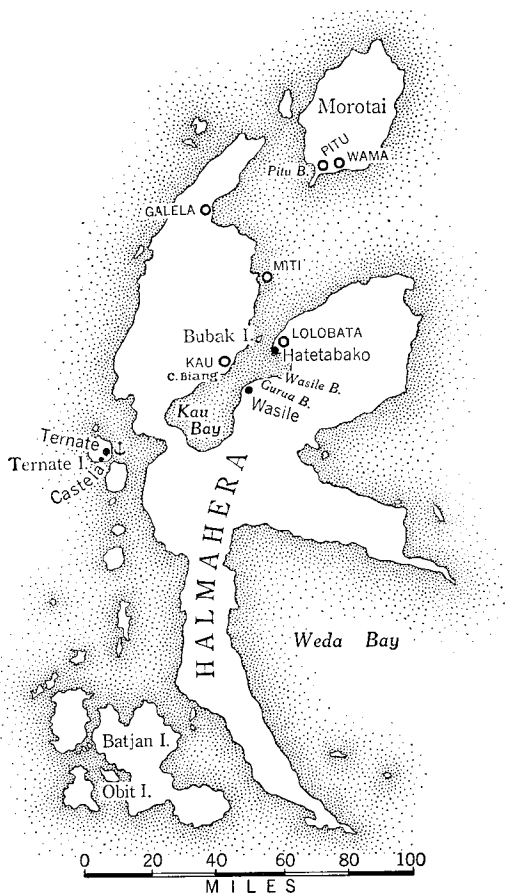
Advanced detachments of No. 77 Wing, with Nos. 22 and 30 Squadrons, arrived at Morotai on the 15th November, where they came under the command of Group Captain Brookes, temporarily in command of Advanced Headquarters, First T.A.F. On the following day twenty-one aircraft of No. 30 Squadron took off from Noemfoor and arrived at Morotai the same day. One Beaufighter crashed on take-off at the side of Kamiri airfield and burst into flames. The pilot could not be reached because of the intense heat, but rescuers pulled the navigator out and he was rushed to a medical clearing station where, however, he died two hours later. Two passengers in the aircraft crawled through a hole and escaped. Another Beaufighter blew a tyre on landing at Wama, causing the aircraft to ground loop and strike a bank at the side of the strip. It was irreparably damaged but the crew escaped injury.

On the 17th sixteen Bostons of No. 22 Squadron arrived at Morotai, and the following day Beaufighters and Bostons took off from Wama for the first time on strikes against airfields, watercraft and enemy installations in the northern Celebes. Led by Squadron Leader Woodman, Eight Bostons attacked the Sidate airfield in north-east Celebes, dropping 500-lb bombs in the revetment areas. The Bostons also attacked coastal schooners, one of which was "probably destroyed". The Beaufighter aircraft had Gorontalo airfield as a target but could not find it, and made strafing attacks on buildings and watercraft as an alternative. Both the Bostons and Beaufighters encountered anti-aircraft fire.

From late October through November the Japanese Army Air Force's *7th Air Division*, operating through Macassar in Celebes had been carrying out frequent night raids on Morotai, using flights usually of three bombers and three fighters.³ Their mission was to disrupt Allied movements at the rear during the SHO-GO operation, the land and air phases of which were now in full swing in the Philippines. Three Betty bombers even got as far as Rabaul and carried out a surprise daylight raid on Momote in the Admiralties, causing slight damage. Australian Spitfires of No. 79 Squadron were scrambled to intercept but did not see the raiders. On the same day eight bombs were dropped on Morotai, destroying one bomber. One of the raiders, a Nick, was shot down. To counter the enemy raids the R.A.A.F. and the Thirteenth Air Force carried out heavy raids on enemy airfields within range. These operations were supplemented by further missions carried out by American and Australian bombers from the Darwin area.

Halmahera Island, which lies more or less midway between New Guinea and Morotai, received considerable attention from the Thirteenth Air Force and First T.A.F. during November. Ninety-two of the Thirteenth's aircraft bombed Kau, Galela and Miti airfields on the 7th. Halmahera was a strongly-held Japanese area. Lolobata, Galela, Kau and Miti were the principal enemy personnel and supply concentrations on the island which the Japanese had fortified because they believed it would be invaded. Its neutralisation was essential to the safety of Allied lines of communication to Morotai.

On the 17th November eight Kittyhawks (four each from Nos. 78 and 80 Squadrons) were ordered to carry out a watercraft sweep in Kau Bay,



³ Major Yamaguchi (interrogation, Historical Div, GHQ, Tokyo).

but they reported seeing only one 25-foot schooner which they strafed and hit. Australian Bostons and Beaufighters operating from Morotai again attacked Celebes targets on the 20th November. Eight of the Bostons attacked Tanamon airfield leaving it unserviceable. Buildings were then strafed, six of them being set on fire. Four Beaufighters took off at noon to attack shipping from Cape Samia to Tanamon. No shipping being sighted, they made rocket attacks on buildings at Tanamon. Another four from the same squadron damaged two barges in a strafing sweep in the Menado area.

On the 22nd November, for the first time in the war, Australian aircraft struck as far north as the Philippines. Operating from Wama, eight Bostons attacked the Bunawan harbour area north of Davao, Mindanao Island. After the attack, the crews reported fires to 1,500 feet. Light anti-aircraft fire holed one of the Bostons. On the same day eight Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Thompson,⁴ on armed reconnaissance, strafed coastal targets in Davao Gulf, exploding and destroying one barge and probably destroying another. Heavy attacks were made at the same time over the Philippines by 242 American Liberators, 53 Mitchells, 121 Lightnings and 101 Thunderbolts of the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces.

All the Australian aircraft returned safely from the Philippines foray, but that same night (22nd-23rd November) a damaging blow was struck at the operational strength of First T.A.F. at Morotai by Japanese bombers which attacked the Pitu and Wama airfields. One of the nine enemy aircraft which attacked was shot down but 15 Allied aircraft were destroyed on the ground and 29 damaged. The Pitu runway was cratered, three men being killed and eight wounded. Included in the aircraft destroyed were nine Bostons of No. 22 Squadron. In spite of the fact that the Bostons were loaded with 500-lb bombs ready for operations, two Australian ground staff men courageously attempted to put out fires started during the raid.

Two nights later more enemy raiders dropped bombs on Pitu, destroying two Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron and damaging another ten. Three American aircraft were also destroyed.

Morotai was full of aircraft and the congestion on the strips was at least partly responsible for the losses during the raids. There were not enough engineers operating on the island to increase the dispersal facilities. Similar troubles were being experienced at Leyte. The light Filipino roads were breaking down under heavy traffic and engineers had to be taken off airfield construction to keep the roads open.

Although the Japanese achieved some local tactical success in their raids on Morotai, it was much too small an effort to neutralise Morotai effectively. However, it did reduce considerably the operational strength of First T.A.F. No. 22 Squadron, for example, had few serviceable aircraft left after the raids and Cobby ordered it to withdraw to Noemfoor where

⁴ W Cdr C. H. C. Thompson, AFC, 290351. Comd 30 Sqn 1944-45; 77 Wing 1945. Clerk; of Temora, NSW; b. 8 Dec 1914.

it was to be rearmed and its crews retrained with Beaufighter aircraft. This squadron was the only unit in the R.A.A.F. armed with Boston aircraft and the crews regretted changing over to Beaufighters, especially as they regarded the Bostons as a reliable aircraft with first-class handling qualities and performance. It was necessary to convert the squadron to Beaufighters, however, because there were not sufficient replacements of Boston aircraft to maintain the squadron in action. Moreover, from the point of view of supply, the change would be advantageous because it would reduce the number of different types of aircraft in First T.A.F. All three units assigned to No. 77 Wing would now be Beaufighter squadrons.

To counter the enemy's night raids on Morotai, the Allied Air Forces during November and December struck at all the airfields within reach which could be used by the enemy as bases for their attacks. At the end of November First T.A.F. Kittyhawk aircraft were striking heavily at the enemy on Halmahera. Bostons (until withdrawn to Noemfoor) and Beaufighters continued to attack northern Celebes and Halmahera, while southern Celebes was under air bombardment by heavy units of North-Western Area from Darwin. The Kittyhawk wings of First T.A.F., which had previously given most of their attention to the Vogelkop Peninsula, were now allotted additional work against targets on Halmahera. Because of the distance involved, the Kittyhawks staged in either at Middleburg or Morotai where they topped up with fuel.

The day after the damaging raid of 22nd November, eleven Kittyhawks of No. 82 Squadron dive-bombed Lolobata and Hatetabako airfields on Halmahera and twelve from No. 77 Squadron dive-bombed airfields at Galela, also on Halmahera. Bombs dropped by this latter mission exploded along the entire length of No. 2 Airstrip, leaving it unserviceable. Flight Sergeant Palme⁵ and Sergeant Smithwick⁶ were missing after the attacks on Galela. Palme was shot down in the Galela town area and Smithwick crashed into the sea fifteen miles east of the airfield. Two other aircraft were holed by anti-aircraft fire during this attack. Next day twenty-two Australian Kittyhawks attacked the same targets again. The pilots reported direct hits and noted evidence of enemy aircraft having been at the airfields.

These attacks on Halmahera continued throughout November, the Beaufighters and Bostons joining in on a reduced scale of effort when they had recovered from the losses suffered from the enemy raids on Morotai. Four Bostons landed bombs on the Hatetabako airfield on 29th November and on the same day forty-four Kittyhawks attacked this airfield as well as Galela. Both strips were left unserviceable.

Aircraft of No. 75 Squadron returned on 29th November from Biak to Noemfoor where the aircraft were serviced and bombed up ready for

⁵ F-Sgt B. A. Palme, 432562; 77 Sqn. Student; of Parramatta, NSW; b. Annandale, NSW, 16 Oct 1924. Killed in action 23 Nov 1944.

⁶ Sgt K. R. Smithwick, 431425; 77 Sqn. Cooper; of Preston, Vic; b. Northcote, Vic, 15 Jun 1925. Killed in action 23 Nov 1944.

operations. The following day twenty-one Kittyhawks led by Squadron Leader Kimpton⁷ dive-bombed and strafed Hatetabako airfield. After attacking this airfield the squadron continued on to Morotai to be refuelled and bombed-up. They then attacked the same target on the return journey to Noemfoor Island via Middleburg. They reported that the Lolobata airfield was definitely unserviceable, with twenty craters visible on the runway and dispersal areas.

In December the onslaught on Halmahera continued. Not only First T.A.F. but the Thirteenth Air Force continued to send hundreds of sorties against this target. Again staging through Morotai, forty-seven Kittyhawks of No. 78 Wing bombed Hatetabako, Miti and Galela on 1st December. The attacks took place in conjunction with concurrent attacks on the same targets by American Mitchells, Lightnings and Liberators. The Japanese were making a big effort to keep the Halmahera airfields open in spite of the terrific hammering. On 4th December, reconnaissance aircraft of Far Eastern Air Force found that No. 1 strip at Galela was serviceable. Fresh dirt had been dumped into the bomb craters on the runway which was smooth for its entire length. Anti-aircraft weapons kept up a hot fire on the raiding aircraft. Even small arms were used and aircraft were hit on practically every low-flying mission. To avoid damage, First T.A.F. squadrons adopted coordinated bombing attacks followed by low-level strafing runs from different directions simultaneously. It was found that these methods reduced the damage from ground fire.

On 9th and 10th December a total of ninety-one Australian Kittyhawks attacked Galela, Miti and Hatetabako airfields, again rendering them all unserviceable. In spite of the constant pounding of enemy airfields, however, some Japanese aircraft managed to stage in occasionally and attack Morotai.

In October there had been no shortage of targets for the squadrons operating from the Northern Territory. Indirect support for the Leyte operations proceeded with little incident. Before the landing, Liberators from No. 380 Group and No. 24 Squadron R.A.A.F. bombed targets at Ambon and in Celebes. No. 24 Squadron sent six Liberators, led by Squadron Leader Manning, to Pare Pare in southern Celebes where they bombed shipyards. All except Flying Officer Carrigan bombed the target but because of clouds results could not be determined; the bomb-bay doors of Carrigan's aircraft would not open and the flight commander directed him to drop his bombs at Atambua (Timor) on the return flight. Six more Liberators from this squadron joined squadrons of No. 380 Group in bombing Ambesia airfield in Celebes on 25th October.

Charlesworth was sending out frequent strikes against enemy shipyards in Celebes. The enemy, desperately short of shipping, was busy building wooden vessels. After the landing in the Philippine Islands, the passage of enemy shipping through the South China Sea, already subject to inter-

⁷ Sqn Ldr R. C. McD. Kimpton, DFC, 250730. 21, 5 and 77 Sqns; comd 75 Sqn 1944-45. Flour miller; of Toorak, Vic; b. Melbourne, 21 Sep 1916.

diction by submarines, would be still further constricted by land-based aircraft operating from Leyte. In view of this it was considered that the best targets remaining in the Netherlands East Indies were shipbuilding facilities and oil installations. The yards in southern Celebes having been destroyed, Bostock suggested that Charlesworth should now turn his attention to the enemy ships themselves. "An important tactical result of this strategy," he wrote, "may well be to embarrass the enemy when he endeavours to reinforce areas in the Netherlands East Indies subsequently attacked by Allied ground forces."

No. 79 Wing, now reinforced by the return to the area of No. 13 Squadron, newly-equipped with Ventura aircraft, helped to maintain heavy pressure on enemy shipping. In October Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons destroyed or damaged twenty-two freighter-barges. No. 2 Squadron also attacked Saumlaki, where the wharves were repeatedly hit by bombs. Throughout October and into November Charlesworth sent Liberators, Mitchells and Beaufighters against shipping targets.

Mitchells of Nos. 2 and 18 Squadrons obtained excellent results from shipping sweeps among the islands of the Flores-Timor group in November. They sank or damaged no fewer than 32 vessels, including four small freighters. The Japanese, who in this period were short of vessels, were using small native craft, and because of this, after due warning to the natives, the Mitchells began attacks on two-masted luggers.

On 6th November four Mitchells from No. 2 Squadron accompanied by twelve from No. 18 Squadron carried out a coordinated attack on a vessel at Waingapu, Sumba Island. Two motor vessels had been reported in the harbour by reconnaissance aircraft. No. 2 Squadron was ordered to provide four Mitchells to attack the target, and they were to stage through the newly-prepared Truscott airfield in Western Australia. The twelve Dutch Mitchells led by Major Boot were to attack Waingapu town and anti-aircraft positions from medium altitude to divert the attention of the anti-aircraft gunners as the Australian Mitchells swept in low to attack the ships.

The four Mitchell captains of No. 2 Squadron selected for the operation were Flight Lieutenants Norriss⁸ and Carter,⁹ Flying Officer Thompson¹ and Warrant Officer Leach.² At Truscott airfield, Norriss and Boot conferred and it was decided that Norriss would use his discretion about a mast-height attack, depending on the size of the target. When south of Cape Melangu, No. 18 Squadron reported seeing "a 1,000-ton motor vessel moving out from the wharf at Waingapu". While No. 18 Squadron bombed the anti-aircraft positions in the town, Norriss went in with his Mitchells at mast height, straddling the vessel, which was estimated to be of 300

⁸ Sqn Ldr P. J. Norriss, 406551; 2 Sqn. Mining plant operator; of Perth, WA; b. Perth, 27 May 1916.

⁹ F-Lt W. A. Carter, 415098; 2 Sqn. School teacher; of Claremont, WA; b. Henley Beach, SA, 11 Nov 1915.

¹ F-Lt W. F. E. Thompson, 406741. 35 and 2 Sqns. Chemist; of Fremantle, WA; b. Kalgoorlie, WA, 19 Apr 1915. Killed in action 20 Dec 1944.

² F-O J. B. Leach, 410603. 67 and 2 Sqns. Process engraver; of Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 13 Jun 1923.

tons. The last aircraft over the target reported that the ship was enveloped in smoke and it was considered that heavy damage had resulted. Norriss' aircraft was holed in the bomb-aimer's compartment. The vessel sunk was *Special Submarine Chaser No. 118* of the Japanese Navy and Japanese records after the war show that it was sunk during this attack, although at the time the Australians did not know that it had sunk and only claimed it as "severely damaged".³ The Dutch crews of No. 18 Squadron scored successes against Japanese shipping on 25th and 29th November, when they sank two small merchant vessels off the north coast of Timor. On both occasions they saw Japanese jump from the decks of the stricken vessels into the water.

The assault by North-Western Area aircraft on enemy shipping continued in December with considerable success. The major part of No. 79 Wing's effort went into attacks on shipping. The Wing claimed the destruction of four freighters and a total of 25 smaller vessels. Liberators of No. 24 Squadron also attacked shipping. They had some success on 2nd December when they found a small enemy convoy in Macassar Strait. The first bomb dropped scored a direct hit on a small freighter and it sank in one minute. Damage was also caused to another freighter and a fuel barge.

The assault on shipping in December and the results achieved are illustrated by a series of sweeps along the Sumba-Sawu-Roti Islands area from the 15th to 20th December. Four Mitchells from No. 18 Squadron attacked a 400-ton vessel with four motor vehicles on its deck near Waingapu, forcing it into shallow water. Later, four Mitchells from No. 2 Squadron destroyed the vessel by mast-height bombing and strafing. On the 16th December, a 70-ton lugger was destroyed by the Dutch pilots off Sawu. On the 18th, near Roti Island, Flying Officer Coward⁴ and his crew, of No. 2 Squadron, scored a direct hit on a 150-ton vessel which blew up. On the 20th the Dutch pilots sank a 900-ton vessel, the *Shoeki Maru* off the Schildpad Islands in the Banda Sea. A small convoy, traveling at 8 knots and comprising two motor vessels with an escorting torpedo boat had been sighted by a reconnaissance aircraft. No. 18 Squadron was ordered to attack it and they sent four Mitchells. Three of these found the convoy and shadowed it. The torpedo boat tried to get ahead of the larger vessel (*Shoeki Maru*) to cover it, while the heavily-armed smaller vessel remained at the rear. The three Mitchells, diving from 1,200 feet to mast height, attacked and scored direct hits. The bridge disappeared and the vessel caught fire. The Mitchells left it on fire from stem to stern and with the stern rising in the water. Many Japanese jumped into the water to escape the flames before the vessel sank.

In conjunction with the Thirteenth Air Force, Charlesworth was called on late in November and during December to prevent the enemy using airfields in Celebes from which the Japanese *7th Air Division* was bomb-

³ The Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee report states, however, that the weight of this vessel was estimated at only 100 tons.

⁴ F-Lt W. G. Coward, 411005; 2 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Gordon, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Sep 1919.

ing Morotai. There were some thirty-six airfields in clusters of four or five from which the Japanese could stage these attacks and it was found impossible to keep them all unserviceable by bombing. When North-Western Area Liberators bombed Kendari, the enemy would stage through Ambesia. Ambesia would then be bombed and the enemy would move back. Finally Charlesworth began sending out night-harassing raids. A Liberator staged over the Kendari airfields for five nights, dropping about 600 empty beer bottles (the sound of which is most menacing until they hit) and, at intervals, 120-lb demolition bombs. The Liberators also cratered runways and destroyed barracks areas at Ambesia, Kendari, Boro Boro and Malimpung airfields, where several grounded aircraft were believed destroyed. By the end of December the enemy had ceased sending aircraft to attack Morotai.