

## CHAPTER 23

### MINDORO AND LUZON

AS soon as MacArthur's forces were securely lodged ashore at Leyte, preparations began for the second phase of the operations against the Japanese in the Philippines. This was the landing on Luzon at Lingayen Gulf, followed by a drive on Manila, the capital. As a preliminary, however, and in order to provide land-based aircraft close enough to cover the ground operations on Luzon, a smaller landing was to be made on Mindoro just south of Luzon. From Mindoro Fifth Air Force aircraft would be within easy reach of Luzon. Aircraft based on Mindoro would also be in a position to assist in keeping open the line of seaborne communications through the Visayan Islands—the central islands of the archipelago.

Again the Fifth Air Force was to be the assault air force for the operation, with the Thirteenth Air Force in support, and R.A.A.F. Command continuing its garrison and air blockade assignments and protecting the flank in the Netherlands East Indies.

Although the general policy of not using Australian army and air force units directly in the Philippines was still pursued, there was an acute shortage of engineer and airfield construction strength in the South-West Pacific Area, and No. 3 Airfield Construction Squadron of the R.A.A.F. had been assigned to the Mindoro operation. The invasion of Mindoro was a risky undertaking. The greatest danger was considered to be an enemy naval counter-thrust followed by landing operations, and for this reason American naval units were to remain in the area for a week.

The airfield situation in the Philippines was causing anxiety. The airfield at Tacloban could not handle more than about 100 aircraft, while other airfields because of the muddy conditions, were developing only slowly, or had limited possibilities. The services of airfield construction engineers were much in demand, and an American Air Corps historian wrote: "The grader and the bulldozer became weapons almost as important as the plane itself and generally more useful in the campaigns, one may suppose, than the tank."

The original plan for the Mindoro operation called for a landing on 5th December. However, the stubborn resistance of the Japanese on the west side of Leyte and the slowness in the development of airfields at Leyte, from which aircraft were to cover the operation, had forced the postponement of the landing until 15th December. General Kenney expected that because of the airfield situation at Leyte it would be necessary to use Mindoro as a base for bombers, whereas he had planned to use it only as a fighter base.

On 1st November a signal arrived at First T.A.F. from Sixth Army directing No. 3 Airfield Construction Squadron R.A.A.F. to be ready to

load on four L.S.T's at Morotai on the 15th November. All engineer units except No. 14 Squadron of the R.A.A.F. were to move out of Morotai, leaving No. 14 Squadron and division engineers to complete the requirements and maintain facilities there for American and Australian squadrons.

No. 3 Construction Squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader Bouch<sup>1</sup> and had been employed at Morotai in building and maintaining airfields, taxiways and parking areas. It left Morotai on 16th November for Biak where it joined the main convoy for Leyte. Although attacked on the way by enemy torpedo bombers the convoy suffered no damage or casualties and arrived on 24th November at Leyte where it was to await onward movement to Mindoro. On this and subsequent days the squadron was subjected to air raids, but unloading was completed without casualties. Airfield construction at Leyte had been a failure. On the day the squadron arrived only two fighter airfields were in operation, and aircraft were crowded along the edge of the strips. Work had been abandoned on a third field because the road giving access to it had become impassable.

Minelaying Catalinas of No. 76 Wing operating from Darwin were called on to aid the Mindoro landing by laying mines in Manila Bay where it was hoped that enemy shipping would be bottled up. They were also to mine Balabac Strait, Borneo.

The mining of the main channel of Balabac Strait took place on the nights of 28th, 29th and 30th November when 60 British and American mines were planted.

Although Halsey's carrier planes had struck heavily at Japanese surface activity in Manila Bay, mining was considered necessary to help protect the Mindoro landing. There were difficulties in the way of this operation by slow-flying Catalinas in a strongly-defended harbour. It was flanked by the defences of Corregidor and Cavite and it was imperative that the mining be completed as rapidly as possible. The whole of the sixty mines necessary had to be dropped in one night.

No. 76 Wing could provide only 18 Catalinas for the task and another six had to be brought up from No. 11 Squadron at Rathmines. The Catalinas were to set out from Leyte on the 14th December to lay the mines, but Leyte could accommodate only twelve Catalinas. The other twelve were to be sent to Wundi Island and were to proceed to Leyte on the morning of the operation. This group would refuel, carry out the mission and return to Leyte for rest. The first group originally based at Leyte would carry out the mission, return to Leyte, refuel and proceed to Wundi. The American naval tender *Heron* was available to refuel and service the aircraft.

The minelaying operation would take the Catalinas to the centre of enemy air defence in the Philippines and was therefore hazardous from

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<sup>1</sup> Sqn Ldr A. D. Bouch, DSO, 264241. 1 Mobile Works Sqn; comd 3 Works Maintenance Unit 1942-43, 3 Mobile Works Sqn 1943-44, 3 Airfield Construction Sqn 1944-45. Civil engineer; of Kingsford, NSW; b. Strathloddon, Vic, 19 Jan 1903.

the point of view of night-fighter opposition. In order to protect the Catalinas from this danger, American Liberator bombers were to carry out diversionary raids and an American Catalina would drop "window"<sup>2</sup> to blanket enemy radar defences.

On 14th December, the commanders of Nos. 43 and 11 Squadrons briefed their crews on the route to be taken to the target, and the intelligence officer of No. 43 briefed on escape points, radar locations and the positions of anti-aircraft guns. No alternate target was assigned because the primary target was a "must".

The Catalinas began taking off at 4.30 p.m. on 14th December. They circled near Leyte until all planes were in the air and on signal from the radar-jamming plane, all Catalinas flew singly to Manila Bay. All of them found the target and made their runs with only minor difficulties. Catalinas of No. 11 Squadron experienced some small arms fire near Lake Taal and No. 43 Squadron was fired on by machine-guns and rifles from the east coast of Bataan peninsula. The crews saw heavy anti-aircraft guns open fire round Manila and Corregidor but it was not directed at the Catalinas.

There was little opposition and the Japanese had evidently had little warning of the approach of the Catalinas. This was attributed to the work of the radar-jamming aircraft and the tactics employed. The jamming succeeded to such an extent that all seventeen radar stations encountered along the route ceased transmitting as the Catalinas approached. One of the Australian aircraft (captained by Flight Lieutenant Roberts<sup>3</sup>) failed to return, and two others almost flew into mountains on their way down into the bowl-shaped bay.<sup>4</sup> With the raid completed the Catalinas made for the island of Samar where they remained in the air until a dawn landing at Leyte was possible. This was pre-arranged because the air force operations staff at Leyte would not permit night landings. Although the Catalinas carried their maximum load of fuel they were very low on fuel before dawn came, and several aircraft had to make emergency landings on the sea. Others landed at Leyte almost completely out of fuel.

Meanwhile, on 11th December, No. 3 A.C.S. had left Leyte with the Mindoro Task Force. The loading of the convoy could not be kept secret; much of the population of Leyte was aware of the impending move and on the radio "Tokyo Rose" reported, during the evening of 10th December, that the assault force was two days late and that 600 Australians were included in the operation!

The first enemy air raid on the convoy had occurred on 13th December, when the command cruiser *Nashville* was hit by a suicide dive bomber

<sup>2</sup> Window was the device of dropping bundles of thin metallised strips of tin foil over enemy territory, which, scattering in their descent, would produce myriad echoes on a radar screen, and thus obscure the echo made by an aircraft.

<sup>3</sup> F-Lt H. C. Roberts, 406368; 43 Sqn. Bank officer; of Nedlands, WA; b. Bunbury, WA, 7 Nov 1912. Killed in action 14 Dec 1944.

<sup>4</sup> Other members of Roberts' crew were: F-Lt J. H. Cox (of Canberra), F-O's F. W. Silvester (Belmore, NSW), R. C. Barbour (Nth Melbourne), and R. H. Bradstreet (West Leederville, WA); F-Sgt D. J. Albert (Auburn, NSW); and Sgts J. C. MacDonald (Balgowlah, NSW), H. S. Goodchild (Perth, WA), and J. R. Robinson (Watson's Bay, NSW).

causing heavy casualties to American personnel—some 200 were killed, including Colonel Bruce C. Hill, chief of staff of the force. A twin-engined Betty bomber was shot down by escorting Lightning aircraft, while another fell to a Corsair.

Mindoro was sighted soon after dawn on 15th December and the convoy was formed up for the landing. The events of the landing are described in the terse phrases of the diary of Squadron Leader Overend,<sup>5</sup> a staff officer of No. 61 Airfield Construction Wing, who was present. He wrote:

Up at 0400 [4 a.m.] to general quarters. Coffee and roll for breakfast. Naval guns are in action as an enemy transport is picked up by escort. It is hit within three minutes and large fire starts, lasting some hours. Then there is dead silence. Orders were received late last night for 3 Airfield Construction Squadron to go in on the first wave. After dawn, Mindoro is dead ahead and naval bombardment commences. Ships are forming into beach lines and into waves. Enemy aircraft appear low down and are held off by anti-aircraft fire. Beach markers are visible. San Jose is prominent, red roof and black stack on the sugar mill. The beach has a grass verge and the infantry are landing ankle deep. Eight LST's are moving into the shore at White Beach. Infantry are moving inland slowly across the grass flats. On the last lap as we go in, six aircraft appear directly overhead. Five are shot down by anti-aircraft fire but a sixth successfully suicide-dived into the rear LST. A second LST is also hit. Even after being shot down while in a suicide dive, the pilot attempts to complete his mission. We make a dry landing on a good beach. Survivors from damaged LST's are being brought ashore. The R.A.A.F. is being unloaded first.

All day in the hot sun the men of the squadron toiled to get equipment and supplies off as quickly as possible and dispersed inland so that the LST's could withdraw from the beach-head which was under constant air attack. Leading Aircraftman Barham,<sup>6</sup> who was helping to unload stores at Red Beach was killed and several men badly burned when an enemy aircraft attempted to crash-dive into the open door of an LST. One airman had his shirt burnt off but luckily escaped injury. Enemy raids on the beach-head were taking place at half-hourly intervals, but without respite the men unloaded bulldozers, tractors, graders, power shovels, power rollers, a big fleet of trucks, generating sets, weapon carriers and a host of other gear. By nightfall No. 3 A.C.S. had established a temporary camp in a bivouac area half a mile from their planned camp site and its equipment was spread out en route, some of it bogged down in sodden canefields.

Enemy paratroop landings were expected and the squadron was given the additional task of manning 2,500 yards of perimeter. Engine drivers and other personnel from the squadron had to undertake responsibility for the running and maintenance of railway yards and engine sheds at San Jose. They took over these duties on 17th December and also began

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr A. B. Overend, 255196. Comd 11 Works Supply Unit 1943-44; 61 Airfield Construction Wing 1944-45. Architect; of Melbourne; b. Launceston, Tas, 15 Oct 1909.

<sup>6</sup> LAC W. E. Barham, 163039. 3 Maintenance Works Sqn and 3 Airfield Construction Sqn. Labourer; of Wollongong, NSW; b. Nowra, NSW, 3 May 1927. Killed in action 15 Dec 1944. (On enlistment he had advanced his age by 2 years.)

running the electric supply and water services of the town. The men got little sleep because of the constant day and night enemy air raids. Morale, however, remained high and plant operators refused to seek cover until it was clear that the enemy were about to attack in the immediate vicinity.

Working side by side with an American engineer battalion No. 3 completed the construction of the first airfield on Mindoro on 19th December, one day ahead of the planned date. Transport aircraft landed early next day and in the afternoon the troops were elated by the arrival of American aircraft of the 8th Fighter Group.

Late in the afternoon of the 26th December, an enemy force consisting of two battleships, four cruisers and eight destroyers, accompanied by fifteen troop-carrying ships was sighted off the coast. The enemy naval force was part of the *Fifth Fleet* with headquarters in Saigon, French Indo-China, and the force had sortied across the South China Sea from Camranh Bay. American bombers, fighters and torpedo boats attacked as the enemy fleet began shelling the beach, while enemy aircraft bombed and strafed at low altitude. Every aircraft that could fly took off for the attack from the two airfields at San Jose.

Members of the R.A.A.F. construction squadron left their camp area to occupy defensive positions against an expected paratroop operation. They came under shell fire at 11 p.m. when the enemy barrage lifted to Hill Field. Australian volunteers manned trucks which they drove under heavy fire to the beach transporting bombs and moving infantry to battle stations. The enemy fleet left soon after midnight after losing one destroyer sunk and suffering heavy damage to other naval units. The Americans lost two Mitchells and 29 fighter aircraft during the engagement. Sixteen of the aircrew were picked up in emergency life-rafts next day.

Major Pat Long, an American who was at Mindoro during this engagement recounted an incident in which an unknown member of the Australian construction squadron distinguished himself by his coolness and devotion to a self-imposed duty during the Japanese naval bombardment. "When the attack commenced," said Long, "an airman walked into the operations room and asked the U.S. officer-in-charge if he could be of any help, adding that he had his bulldozer outside. His offer was readily accepted and the airman, who was hatless, proceeded to fill in the shell holes on the strip and remove crashed aircraft while shells were falling around him. He was thus instrumental in saving numbers of aircraft from crashing on the strip."

The following day, a check of No. 3 revealed that, apart from a few cases of slight "shell shock" no casualties had been suffered. A small enemy force had landed north of San Jose and another to the south of the town, but these were easily held by the American troops. The Australians went on with their construction work. Large craters in the camp area and airstrip and the presence of unexploded bombs handicapped progress, but by 30th December the construction of Elmore Field was completed within the specified time.

Mindoro's capacity as a base for air force units exceeded expectations and General Whitehead decided to build more airfields there.<sup>7</sup> He could thus bring forward more squadrons, including heavy bombardment squadrons, to Mindoro from Leyte where the airfield situation, due to boggy conditions, had proved to be inadequate for land-based aircraft needs. From this forward base the Americans struck at Luzon in force to prepare for the invasion of the island. Between September 1944 and January 1945 practically all the aircraft that the enemy sent into the Philippines had been wiped out.<sup>8</sup>

While General MacArthur's spearhead fought engagements with a desperate enemy in and around Mindoro, the Thirteenth Air Force and First T.A.F. from bases in Noemfoor and Morotai kept up a continuous onslaught against the by-passed enemy in Celebes, Halmahera and the Vogelkop peninsula. During December First T.A.F. was reinforced by the arrival at Morotai of Nos. 31 and 452 Squadrons from Darwin. No. 31's Beaufighters flew from Coomalie Creek airfield, Northern Territory, via Merauke and Noemfoor to Morotai, arriving on 7th December. This move was accomplished without incident but No. 452 Squadron which left Sattler on 16th December lost a pilot who was killed in a landing at Merauke. Weather delayed their movement from Merauke and they did not arrive at Morotai until 21st December.

Meanwhile, No. 31 Squadron on 9th December had carried out its first operation from Morotai. It was assigned a strike against Jolo Island in the Philippines. Flying at extreme range, fourteen Beaufighters, led by Squadron Leader Boyd, attacked enemy troops, stores and a jetty on the island. The crews reported hits on anti-aircraft positions, but could not see results of their attack on the waterfront and town because of smoke and dust. One of the Beaufighters was hit in the fuselage by anti-aircraft fire and another swung and was extensively damaged when landing at Morotai. On the same day Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron led by Wing Commander Thompson were over Mindanao for the purpose of attacking a radar station but the target could not be found. The area they covered seemed to be deserted and the roadways unused, so they came back without even firing their guns. Another flight from the squadron flew to Pulo Anno Island to make a rocket attack on a radar station there. However, when they arrived over the island which is midway between Morotai and Palau they found that American marines were in occupation of it and no attack was made.

During the next three days Beaufighters of both squadrons were switched to Celebes where they bombed and strafed Menado town and

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<sup>7</sup> Other strips completed by the Australian construction sqn at Mindoro before it left for Morotai to take part in the Borneo operations were "Maguire Field", 7,000 ft long and "Murtha Drome" also 7,000 ft long. The sqn also built 8 miles of main metal roads and 20 miles of branch and side roads; planned and designed a 200-ft span suspension bridge for which it put in the foundations; built hospitals, quartermasters' stores, camps, petrol dumps, washing plants, wells and water systems.

<sup>8</sup> US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol. II, p. 424: General Kawabe.

radar stations. Heavy anti-aircraft fire was encountered by four of them which attacked Langoan airfield on the 12th, and three of them were damaged. They managed, however, to destroy an enemy medium bomber on the ground.

Major-General Streett, in a determined effort to destroy enemy installations on Halmahera, directed his own and First T.A.F. squadrons to carry out a four-day blitz on them in the period 22nd-25th December. Cobby mustered a total of 384 Kittyhawk and 129 Beaufighter sorties in this operation, concentrating especially on the airfields and installations around Galela and Gurua Bay. On the first day the three squadrons of No. 81 Wing attacked Lolobata and Hatetabako. Each pilot had to be on the target at his allotted time and then get away immediately because there were so many aircraft coming in to attack the area. Several Kittyhawks were hit by anti-aircraft fire and one from No. 80 Squadron, piloted by Flight Sergeant Tothill,<sup>9</sup> flicked during a strafing run, struck trees and crashed into the bay. Australian and American aircraft were over the target all day. A total of 285 sorties were completed during which 250 tons of demolition and incendiary bombs were dropped, together with napalm fire bombs and rockets in an area measuring not more than four square miles. In addition, Streett's bombers and fighters meted out a terrific battering to all enemy staging areas in Celebes and Ceram.

In spite of this onslaught, the Japanese with extraordinary persistence still managed to run the gauntlet with single aircraft which appeared over Morotai at night to harass the Allies. Two enemy raiders were over Morotai on Christmas Eve and one was shot down by a Spitfire of the newly-arrived No. 452 Squadron. The two enemy aircraft came over at about 10 o'clock. Anti-aircraft fire and searchlights engaged the first one but did not succeed in preventing the attack and bombs were dropped. The anti-aircraft barrage prevented an attack being made on it by fighters. The second enemy plane came in immediately afterwards and Flying Officer Pretty,<sup>1</sup> disregarding the anti-aircraft fire, attacked it setting it on fire. The searchlights then lost the enemy plane but Pretty could still see it and in two further attacks sent it down in flames. The action was seen by thousands of Allied and Australian troops and cheers rang out on all sides.

Cobby was anxious to move as many as possible of his squadrons and the supporting units to Morotai but was being frustrated at every turn by the lack of transport. By 27th December he had managed to bring the whole of his Advanced Headquarters to Morotai and the air elements and operational staff of No. 78 Wing arrived on 19th and 20th December and were based on Wama airfield. But, because of the lack of adequate transport, the squadrons at Morotai were operating with a minimum of

<sup>9</sup> F-Sgt C. C. Tothill, 429003; 80 Sqn. Clerk; of Prospect, SA; b. Prospect, 6 Aug 1918. Killed in action 22 Dec 1944.

<sup>1</sup> F-O J. A. Pretty, 409220. 64 and 452 Sqns. Clerk; of West Brunswick, Vic; b. Ascot Vale, Vic, 12 Jan 1923.

staff and equipment for maintenance. They had been moved to Morotai on an air echelon basis. The squadrons could work at a high pitch of intensity for perhaps a month but if the second echelons had not arrived by the end of that period there would be insufficient maintenance and stores to keep the aircraft in the air. Writing to Bostock in December, Cobby said "lack of transport always delays the arrival of the main body and heavy equipment. The result is obvious but a cure cannot be found."<sup>2</sup>

By January, First T.A.F. had some 3,000 men at Morotai, and their activities were handicapped. The movement of men between working and living areas was difficult and bush timber for use in the erection of camp buildings could not be carted. Food was far from satisfactory there being little variety with sugar and bread frequently in short supply. Squadron reports made reference to these difficulties, and that of No. 31 Squadron noted, that "general disgust was expressed at the state of this camp site . . . squadron morale is high under the circumstances, but at present considerable frustration and bewilderment is felt by all ranks at the lack of cooperation and appreciation of difficulties". Conditions at Noemfoor, where the bulk of No. 81 Wing remained, were much better. Eggs, butter, fresh meat and even fresh potatoes were available.

Cobby had reiterated his demands for air transport, urging that it should be allotted to his control. He had said, in a letter to Bostock on 8th October, that it was a serious problem which would not permit time for protracted discussions. The urgent demands of the commander of a tactical air force, which depended on high mobility, urgent re-supply and reinforcement, could not be satisfied by schedules laid down thousands of miles away. The Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces, he said, would control their own transport, "while my command will be left with the possibility of scant consideration for forward operations".

By October of 1944 the R.A.A.F. had eight transport squadrons (Nos. 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40 and 41) all of which were equipped with Dakota aircraft except No. 37 which had Lodestars, No. 40, Sunderlands, and No. 41, Martin Mariners.

None of the Australian transport squadrons had been assigned to MacArthur's command; they were controlled by Air Force Headquarters from Melbourne. Cobby had, therefore, in November 1944, when his transport needs were critical, signalled to Air Force Headquarters asking that No. 33 Squadron should be allotted to his command and move from Milne Bay to Noemfoor. R.A.A.F. Headquarters replied that it was impossible to send No. 33 Squadron or any other transport squadron to First T.A.F. Cobby, feeling that his problem was not understood, again made strong representations, pointing out that the refusal to allot him a fixed number of air transports "precludes all possibility of planning forward moves as we will not know how many transports will be made available or when". Cobby's signal continued: "I respectfully submit no field commander can plan movement of even smallest unit under his command unless he definitely

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<sup>2</sup> AOC 1st TAF, Tactical Appreciation for Dec 1944.



knows amount of transportation media available. Situation as it now stands is that we can give no guarantee to 13 Air Force when we will be able to complete concentration or to what degree we can be operational at successive locations.”

While Cobby's difficulty could be appreciated, the move to Morotai was not now so urgent because airfield construction at Leyte had been unsatisfactory and as a result the movement forward of the Fifth Air Force had been considerably delayed. Moreover, although R.A.A.F. Headquarters controlled the transport squadrons, they could not be used exclusively for air force requirements, because the R.A.A.F. had to meet all the normal air transport needs of the Australian military and naval forces, in addition to urgent tactical requirements when requested by MacArthur's headquarters.

In December General Kenney informed Air Vice-Marshal Jones that “two operations will be mounted towards the end of the first quarter of 1945 by the Australian Imperial forces . . . in the Netherlands East Indies”. The First Tactical Air Force, he added, was to carry out the air garrison role, and in order to support it three air transport squadrons were needed in time to be operational at Morotai not later than 1st March 1945. Jones decided to send one squadron only—No. 34—to Morotai. However, in the meantime, because of the delay at Leyte, Thirteenth Air Force had a temporary surplus of air transport and Streett provided Cobby with a considerable number of Dakota lifts which enabled him to bring forward units from Darwin, Northern Territory, Noemfoor, Finschhafen and as far away as Townsville, Queensland.

In addition to the deficiencies in air transport, there was a grave shortage of shipping space to move R.A.A.F. units. In December 1944, a total of 7,465 members of the R.A.A.F. and 56,000 tons of R.A.A.F. equipment were awaiting shipment to forward areas.

Nos. 1, 2, 8, and 6 Airfield Construction Squadrons, for example, were at Sydney awaiting shipment. No. 6 was urgently needed at Jacquinot Bay, New Britain, where everything was in readiness for the construction of airfields, after the occupation of the area by Australian troops. The other three squadrons were bound for Morotai. Bostock said that the fighting efficiency of the R.A.A.F. and particularly of Northern Command was being seriously affected because of the difficulty of moving units and rear echelons forward from the mainland.

The War Cabinet considered the problem at a meeting in December and again in January and, although it made recommendations to MacArthur which, if adopted, might ease the situation, nothing concrete could be done because the shipping position throughout the Pacific was critical, and priority was being given to the operations in the Philippines.

In the first week of January 1945, another assault force of MacArthur's command gathered off Leyte Island and by 9th January it had threaded its way through the Philippines and landed on Luzon, the main island of the archipelago. Only two Japanese aircraft appeared over Lingayen

Gulf when the landing was made. By this time, the Fifth American Air Force was well established on Mindoro and in three weeks it had practically destroyed the remaining Japanese air strength in the Philippines. On 13th December, 243 aircraft had been seen at the Clark Field air centre—the main Japanese air base—but on the 11th January only thirty-four serviceable aircraft remained. The landing at Lingayen was followed by intensive Allied air activity by land and carrier-based aircraft in the Philippines, Formosa and Ryukus areas. According to Admiral Fukudome<sup>3</sup> the landing at Lingayen “was wholly unexpected on our side”. Japanese aircraft, he said, had seen the fleet off Mindoro and the belief was that the landing would be attempted around Manila Bay or points to the south “so we were taken by surprise when they appeared in Lingayen and started landing there”.

The landing had caught every major hostile force in motion except one division in the central Luzon plain. The Japanese, harassed by guerillas and attacked constantly from the air, drove north, south, east and west in confusion. They became tangled in traffic jams on the roads and generally dissipated what chance they might have had to repel the landing force.<sup>4</sup> Yamashita had one armoured division at his disposal, but American air units bombed and knocked it out of action and all other units north of Manila were driven off the roads into the mountains by bombing and strafing aircraft. Since it was abundantly clear to the Japanese Imperial Headquarters that any further aircraft sent to the archipelago would be destroyed, the flow of aircraft reinforcements ceased and enemy air defences retired to the north. From that point it was only necessary for the Americans to subdue the army garrison to complete the conquest of the Philippines.

By 22nd January, Kenney had both bombers and fighters established ashore at a new airfield at Lingayen from which he sent missions out to bomb Formosa. On 27th January the American ground forces had seized the six airfields at Clark air base. By 3rd February the 1st Cavalry Division had entered Manila, and on 23rd February it penetrated the old walled city area—the “Intrumuros”. Meanwhile paratroops had landed and seized the island fortress of Corregidor, scene of the last stand by the Americans in 1942.

Manila was the culminating action of the whole campaign of the South-West Pacific Area. In twelve months MacArthur had advanced from Saidor in New Guinea to Lingayen Gulf, Luzon—a distance of 2,300 miles—compared with a total advance of 400 miles, from Milne Bay to Saidor, in the previous two years.

For the landing at Lingayen and the ensuing operations on Luzon, the Fifth Air Force, reinforced for this operation by units of the First Marine Wing, had been the air assault force, while the Thirteenth and the R.A.A.F. had again been allotted subordinate roles as “supporting forces”.

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<sup>3</sup> US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol II, p. 506.

<sup>4</sup> General George Marshall, *Report to Secretary of War, 1943-1945*, p. 78.

In general, Allied Air Forces in the South-West Pacific had been ordered to "intensify air activities against hostile installations".

In a letter dated 5th January to the commanders of all air forces, General Kenney outlined probable operations and dispositions for the first three months of 1945. After the Luzon operations, large air forces would be established there for future operations to the north. Additional garrisons were to be established in the Visayan-Mindanao area for use in the occupation of the remainder of the Philippines, Palawan and the Sulu Archipelago, and to prepare for further operations to the south-west. Continuous support would be given from Morotai to defend flanks to the westward and to prepare for expected operations in the Netherlands East Indies. Support would be given to ground forces engaged in the occupation of New Britain and the Solomons. For the accomplishment of these tasks, Kenney proposed that his Fifth Air Force would be established in the Mindoro-Luzon area; Thirteenth Air Force in the Leyte-Samar area and later in other islands of the Visayas; the R.A.A.F. forces at Morotai, and the R.N.Z.A.F. in the Solomon Islands. Kenney stressed that the movement of all forces into position would be hindered by the limited means of transport and airfield capacity. Most airfields construction effort was being used in the forward areas of the Philippines and because of the shipping shortage, many units could not be expected to move until just before the start of operations to which they would be assigned.

While the centre of operations of South-West Pacific forces was moving forward in the Philippine Islands, First T.A.F., left far to the rear with the Thirteenth Air Force, was still maintaining a constant day-by-day air assault against by-passed enemy targets. While admitting that by-passed enemy forces had to be kept under surveillance, numbers of Australian pilots, including commanders of squadrons, began to question whether some of the targets they were sent to attack were worthwhile and to assert that the R.A.A.F. as a whole had now been assigned an unimportant role in the war.<sup>5</sup>

In the first week in January aircraft from four wings of First T.A.F. flew a total of 661 sorties against Halmahera, Celebes, Morotai and the Vogelkop area. Of these sorties No. 77 Wing flew 142; No. 78 flew 317; No. 81 flew 118; and No. 80 Wing flew 84. While MacArthur's assault convoy was en route to Lingayen Gulf, Kittyhawks of No. 78 Wing were bombing and strafing Halmahera airfields and troop concentrations. On 1st January, Nos. 78 and 80 Squadrons each sent twelve aircraft to dive-bomb No. 2 strip at Galela. A majority of the bombs landed on the strip. The following day, thirty-six Kittyhawks attacked Lolobata and nearby Hatetabako. At the same time another twelve Kittyhawks dive-bombed and strafed an area inland from Wasile Bay, while four Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron set out to destroy an aircraft reported at Galela. Not finding it they made attacks on anti-aircraft positions. On 4th January seven Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron and eleven from No. 31 bombed and strafed

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Commission, evidence.

the dispersal area at Sidate in Celebes. On the same day Kittyhawks of No. 80 Squadron scored direct hits on shipyards at Bangka Island and No. 75 Squadron strafed and hit "a possible transformer" half a mile south-west of Tanggari. After strafing runs Flying Officer Dudley<sup>6</sup> appeared to lose contact with his flight and was last seen three miles from Tondano.

On 5th January twenty-one Beaufighters together with Lightnings and Mitchells of the Thirteenth Air Force, hit the Menado area both in the morning and in the afternoon. Buildings were destroyed and fires started. The attacking aircraft used napalm fire bombs weighing 100-lb and together with the 500-lb general purpose bombs and rockets they inflicted heavy damage. Napalm or jellied petrol, made by adding a chemical powder of aluminium naphthenates to petrol, was carried in belly tanks to which an igniting fuse was fixed. The belly tank was dropped just short of the objective area from an altitude of 75 to 100 feet. The mixture ignited as the tank broke and a sheet of intense flame covered the area. The napalm tended to cling to any surface and penetrated openings, and it was found to be most useful against dug-in positions and as a general incendiary against supply dumps, buildings and motor transport.

On 9th and 10th January all available aircraft of Nos. 77 and 78 Wings were assigned to a combined naval-air task against the main bivouac and supply area near Galela village. The operation was regarded as a training exercise since the area had been neutralised. Throughout the first day of the operation a total of sixty Kittyhawks from No. 78 Wing dropped seventy-seven 250-lb bombs and thirty-eight 500-lb bombs in the target area and suffered no damage except that one Kittyhawk crashed on landing.

On 13th January Group Captain Caldwell led twelve Spitfires of No. 452 Squadron in a strafing attack on targets on the north-western tip of Halmahera. They damaged a number of barges and strafed Miti airfield where they reported work in progress and the strip serviceable. On the same day, four other Spitfires, taking off in the afternoon for an intruder patrol over Halmahera, strafed huts and a barge. Flight Sergeant Stevenson,<sup>7</sup> who was flying as No. 2 to Warrant Officer Byrne,<sup>8</sup> disappeared over Ternate Island. Stevenson's radio was not working and no explanation could therefore be given for his disappearance. However, Byrne saw the aircraft off-shore in shallow water with its tail visible but the pilot missing. Natives later supplied information on Stevenson's fate. They said he was unhurt when he landed. The headman of Castela village offered him food and shelter, but meanwhile the Japanese had been informed, and he was taken prisoner to Forte Oranje in Ternate town where he was put under guard. Stevenson died later while a prisoner.

On the same day, four pilots of No. 80 Squadron were reported missing in a ferry flight from Noemfoor to Morotai. They were: Flying Officer

<sup>6</sup> F-O U. N. Dudley, 410222; 75 Sqn. Farm labourer; of Tallygaroopna, Vic; b. Numurkah, Vic, 1 Mar 1919. Killed in action 4 Jan 1945.

<sup>7</sup> F-Sgt E. McL. Stevenson, 432589; 452 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Dubbo, NSW; b. Dubbo, 7 Nov 1924. Died while prisoner of war 14 Apr 1945.

<sup>8</sup> F-O J. R. Byrne, 412386. 129 and 452 Sqns. Farm labourer; of Mimosas, NSW; b. Young, NSW, 1 Oct 1922.

Hann,<sup>9</sup> Warrant Officer Waters,<sup>1</sup> and Flight Sergeants Parry<sup>2</sup> and King.<sup>3</sup> Weather conditions at the time were normal, but the aircraft were not fitted with belly tanks so that their time in the air was limited. Searches were made in Dutch New Guinea, Noemfoor and Halmahera, but without results. Meanwhile, Hann, King and Waters had come down off Talaud Islands, having overshoot Morotai. They were captured by the Japanese and, on 23rd March, were killed at a special ceremony. For complicity in this crime, a number of Japanese were tried after the war and executed.<sup>4</sup>

The strikes against Celebes targets continued almost daily throughout January and at the end of the month No. 31 Squadron claimed it had destroyed 64 buildings, three coastal schooners, a bridge, an anti-aircraft position and a radio installation. On 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th January, Beaufighters and Kittyhawks combined in a concentrated four-day campaign against enemy personnel areas at Tomohon and Menado. Some of the Kittyhawks were damaged by bomb splinters and a Beaufighter was holed by anti-aircraft fire. Naval depth-charges were dropped by Beaufighters in some of these attacks, but, because they had to be dropped from a high altitude, targets were not hit accurately. Moreover, it was found that there was not sufficient difference in blast effect to justify the adoption of depth-charges as an alternative to the 500-lb bomb.

The activities of No. 81 Wing which was still at Noemfoor showed a pronounced decline in January. Sorties which in December had totalled 1,055, in January had fallen to 384. Lacking worthwhile targets the squadrons of this wing trained extensively. They carried out a number of watercraft sweeps in early January and flew dawn and dusk patrols around Noemfoor. On 7th January the wing became non-operational, pending its move to Morotai, and, although the men of the squadrons lived in daily expectation of moving, it was not until the latter part of the month that the advanced headquarters was established at the new base.

As often happens in war during quiet periods or when fighting men feel they have been assigned to an inferior role, discontent began to show in First Tactical Air Force. There was a widespread feeling among pilots that they had been assigned to unspectacular drudgery, and that the lives of pilots were being endangered on military undertakings the results of which were making no great contribution to killing Japanese and winning the war. Although not stated in the phraseology of von Clausewitz' military writings, the pilots were expressing the classical military proposition that the tactical or strategic gains to be expected from any operation must not be less than the expected losses in achieving those gains.

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<sup>9</sup> F-O F. L. Hann, 411448; 80 Sqn. Shop assistant; of Hamilton, NSW; b. Cairns, Qld, 25 Nov 1919. Killed while prisoner of war 23 Mar 1945.

<sup>1</sup> W-O P. Waters, 410186; 80 Sqn. Leather merchant; of Hampton, Vic; b. Black Rock, Vic, 20 Sep 1922. Killed while prisoner of war 23 Mar 1945.

<sup>2</sup> F-Sgt R. W. Parry, 434265; 80 Sqn. Painter and decorator; of Bundaberg, Qld; b. Bundaberg, 14 Sep 1924. Missing and presumed dead 13 Jan 1945.

<sup>3</sup> F-Sgt L. N. King, 434344; 80 Sqn. Telephone mechanic; of Canberra; b. Sydney, 29 Sep 1923. Killed while prisoner of war 23 Mar 1945.

<sup>4</sup> RAAF Casualty Section Report 166/112.

No statement had been made to indicate to the Australian forces that the American staffs had decided that Australian forces should not go into the Philippines; yet the Australians very soon sensed that fact and resented it. The feeling that they were being left out of the more important operations was not confined to the Australians. Admiral Halsey had to intercede with MacArthur on behalf of the 1st Marine Air Group. Halsey said that Kenney "when not keeping it idle, was assigning it to missions far below its capacity".<sup>5</sup> In any case, by January, the Japanese *Fourth Air Army* had practically ceased to exist and neither the Fifth nor the Thirteenth Air Force was able to find much in the way of air-to-air combat.

Air Commodore Cobby was well aware that the targets offering were not very profitable. Everything within reach of Noemfoor was more or less flattened. He would have liked to see his force employed farther north in combat against enemy air forces, but he knew that the Americans had decided that since they had been thrown out of the Philippines they wished to return there without outside assistance. Moreover, when he had been appointed to command First Tactical Air Force he had been given very strong directions both from the Chief of the Air Staff and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock that he should do his utmost to cooperate smoothly with the American forces.

The Americans, when they were moving into the Philippines, were very sensitive about their long, exposed flank. This flank had to be neutralised and kept neutralised, and the reaction of the Americans to that situation was to employ saturation air raids. The American forces considered a much greater air effort to be necessary against objectives than the Australians did. They believed that the liberal employment of air power would save lives in the long run. The Thirteenth Air Force was particularly sensitive about the airfields on Halmahera and wanted a maximum effort against them.

During the advance along the northern New Guinea coast in 1944, when the Australian Kittyhawk squadrons were in the van of operations, the squadron commanders were told quite bluntly that they must maintain as high a rate of effort as the American squadrons, and, by a reorganisation of these squadrons, they had been able to reach and maintain that rate of effort. There was an ample supply of aircraft available in New Guinea at the time, but a chronic shortage of airfield space in forward areas; and any Australian squadron which could not maintain an effort comparable to that of the American squadrons could not expect to remain in the battle. The emphasis appeared to be on sorties and flying hours rather than results. By the end of 1944 the R.A.A.F. squadrons had been left far behind the main battle; yet there was a distinct tendency for a maximum output of sorties and flying hours to be maintained, even though the targets were no longer as lucrative, and some pilots were asking why they should be sent on missions where the results might mean loss of aircrew for very little damage to the enemy.

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<sup>5</sup> W. F. Halsey, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (1947), p. 231.

It was against this background that the youthful Group Captain Arthur, aged 24, arrived at Noemfoor in December to replace Group Captain Steege as commander of No. 81 Wing. He quickly came to the conclusion that the targets were not worthwhile, and that the R.A.A.F. was wasting time, endangering its people's lives and wasting bombs and ammunition. After flying on one operation Arthur cancelled the operations scheduled for the three following days, and, when asked for an explanation by First T.A.F. headquarters, replied by signal that "indications were more suitable and less expensive targets were available".

Having decided that the operations at Noemfoor were not worthwhile, he drew up an "operational balance sheet" and concluded that the only things of value to the enemy which had been destroyed were motor transport and barges, and that the wing had lost 11 men and 15 aircraft to destroy 12 barges and six motor transport. His detailed balance sheet appears on the next page.

Arthur felt strongly that something should be done to correct the situation and flew to Morotai where he obtained an interview with Air Commodore Cobby. He showed him his "balance sheet", and Cobby was sympathetic. He thanked Arthur for the figures and decided to examine the operations not only of No. 81 Wing but of Nos. 78 and 77 as well. Cobby believed that the targets "were not very payable". However, after examining the figures he did not agree with Arthur's contention that excessive losses had been sustained by the squadrons. In a tactical appreciation written to Bostock a few days later he reported: "An impression existed among units of First T.A.F. that our aircraft were taking more damage from ack-ack than the targets warranted. Such an impression is dangerous to morale and in order to dispel it, if untrue, I ordered an analysis to be made. It demonstrated that whilst flak is encountered on a high percentage of sorties, our losses are really at a very low rate." The figures, published in the First T.A.F. Intelligence Summary of 4th February, showed that one aircraft was destroyed by anti-aircraft fire in November 1944 for a total of 862 sorties. The figures for December were 2,249 sorties with two aircraft destroyed, and for January, 2,037 sorties for five destroyed. However, Arthur was concerned not with losses in relation to sorties, but losses in relation to results. In other words, was the effort worth it?

Other leaders who felt keenly that First T.A.F. was not contributing effectively to the prosecution of the war included Group Captain Caldwell, commander of No. 80 Wing; Wing Commander Cresswell, wing leader of No. 81 Wing; Wing Commander Waddy, commander of No. 80 Squadron; and Squadron Leader Grace, commander of No. 82 Squadron.

Caldwell had found that the spirits of his pilots had risen when they had first moved to Morotai from Darwin, because they hoped then that they would become engaged in air fighting, and their spirits remained up until it became evident that there would be little prospect of meeting the enemy in the air. Caldwell believed that the strafing operations his pilots carried out in lieu of air combat were not likely to produce results which

would justify the loss of aircraft. He interviewed Air Vice-Marshal Jones early in February and told him that he (Caldwell) recently "had wasted a lot of time . . . that he had not done any fighting in the air . . . and that

## 81 WING OPERATIONAL BALANCE SHEET

LIABILITIES  
(Scale of effort)

Item	Oct	Nov	Total	Dec	Total
Hours flown . . . . .	1,967	948	2,915		
Fuel consumed . . . . .	59,010	28,440	87,450		
No. of sorties . . . . .	755	370	1,125		
Bombs lbs. Ex. . . . .	241,700	186,450	428,150		
Rounds Ammo, Exp. . . . .	359,571	133,580	493,151		
A/C lost . . . . .	12	3	15		
Pilots lost . . . . .	8	3	11		
A/C damaged					
75% . . . . .	0	1	1		
50% . . . . .	1	1	2		
25% . . . . .	1	1	2		
10% . . . . .	5	5	10		

ASSETS  
(Damage inflicted on enemy)

Item	Oct	Nov	Total	Dec	Total
Aircraft destroyed . . . . .	—	—	—	—	—
" damaged (on ground)	—	—	—	—	—
Barges destroyed . . . . .	6	6	12	14	26
" damaged . . . . .	32	18	50	22	72
Fuel dumps destroyed . . . . .	16	7	23	13	36
Ammo " " . . . . .	1	2	3	1	4
Stores " " . . . . .	8	8	16	12	28
M/T destroyed . . . . .	5	1	6	4	10
Buildings destroyed . . . . .	13	4	17	14	31
<i>Details of A/C losses</i>					
Enemy action (proven)	4				
Weather . . . . .	1				
Unknown . . . . .	10				
	15				

30th December 1944  
Senior Administrative Officer  
No. 81 Wing Headquarters

future operations were unlikely to be worth while". The pilots, he said, were "brassed off" because of the inactivity.

There were other causes of complaint at Noemfoor and Morotai. Some pilots, far from being resentful of flying too much on profitless operations, complained that they did not get enough flying to do. Some resented



newspaper reports which tended to exaggerate and "glamorise" their activities. There was also some disorganisation, caused by lack of transport, which prevented the bringing together of various echelons of units. It was difficult to prepare camp areas, provide water and motor transport to move men to their places of duty. The situation was difficult in December and it became progressively worse in January, when several thousand more men of the Australian Air Force arrived at Morotai by ship without supplies or transport to maintain them.