

# **AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45**

## **CONTRIBUTORS**

**Mr Robert Deane, RFD** has had many years of experience within the Department of Defence, both as a defence civilian and as a member of the Australian Army Reserves. Before retiring, he was the Chief Research Officer for the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis. His last Army posting was as Chief Army Historian, Headquarters Training Command.

**Associate Professor John McCarthy** has been a Teaching Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Resident Scholar at the Australian National University, Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in History at the Faculty of Military Studies, and Associate Professor at the University College, University of New South Wales. His work includes the publication of such books as *Australia and Imperial Defence 1918-1939*, *Australian War Strategy*, and *A Last Call of Empire*. Professor McCarthy was the foundation President of the Association of Historians of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy and is a member of the Australian Institute of International Affairs.

**Dr David Horner** is a Fellow in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and served as a platoon commander in Vietnam. Dr Horner is one of Australia's foremost military historians and is the author or editor of over fifteen books on Australian military history, strategy and defence, including *Crisis of Command* (1978), *High Command* (1982), *The Commanders* (1984), *SAS: Phantoms of the Jungle* (1989) and *General Vasey's War* (1992). He is shortly to publish a history of Australian artillery.

**Dr Alan Stephens** is a senior research fellow at the RAAF's Air Power Studies Centre. Before joining the centre, he was principal research officer in the Australian Federal Parliament, specialising in foreign affairs and defence; prior to that, he was an RAAF pilot. Dr Stephens is the author or editor of six books and numerous articles on security and air power, including the recently published *The War in the Air: 1914-1994*. He is currently writing an official history of the RAAF from the end of the Second World War to the withdrawal from Vietnam.

**Group Captain Garry Waters** has been the Director of the Air Power Studies Centre since January 1993. He contributed to both editions of the Royal Australian Air Force publication *The Air Power Manual*, is the author or editor of six books and has written extensively on defence and air power issues.

**Mr David Stevens** has recently been appointed Director of Naval Historical Studies within the RAN's Maritime Studies Program. Before taking up this position, he had served for 20 years with the Royal Australian Navy, including time as the anti-submarine warfare officer in HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Hobart*. David holds a Masters in Strategic Studies and is currently working on his first book.

**Dr Peter Stanley** has worked at the Australian War Memorial since 1980, where he normally heads the Historical Records Section. He is presently Exhibition Curator for the Memorial's major commemorative exhibition, *1945: War and Peace*, which will open in August 1995. Dr Stanley has published widely in the field of British and Australian imperial military history, and particularly on the social history of Australian and British Indian forces.

**Mr Henry 'Jo' Gullett, AM, MC** served as an infantry NCO in the 2/6th Battalion at the Battle of Bardia in 1941, was awarded his Military Cross as a junior officer in New Guinea in 1943 and was later a company commander attached to a British battalion for the Normandy invasion. After the war, he continued to serve Australia with distinction, first as a federal liberal politician and then as Australia's Ambassador to Greece.

**Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Wahlert** graduated from the Officer Cadet School, Portsea, in 1975. He holds degrees in History and International Relations from the University of Queensland and Deakin University and is working on his second Masters degree at the University of New South Wales. At the time of the conference, he was the Assistant Director of Research and Analysis for the Australian Army.

## **Open Forum**

### **Colonel Colin Henry Grace, DSO, ED, (Retd)**

1940	Enlisted as Captain, LO HQ 7th Div Served in Middle East, Syria and El Alamein as Div LO
1944/45	As CO 2/15 Bn participated in landings at Lae, Finschhafen and Brunei (OBOE 6)

### **Major General John Raymond Broadbent, CBE, DSO, ED, (Retd)**

Feb 37	Appt LT Sydney Uni Regt
1940	LO 20 Inf Bde and regt duties 2/17 Bn Served in Middle East, Syria, Tobruk, Palestine and El Alamein
1942/43	Company Comd 2/17 Bn
1944/45	As CO 2/17 Bn participated in landings at Lae, Finschhafen and Brunei (OBOE 6) Was also Beachmaster for Finschhafen landing
1955	Comd 5 Inf Bde
1965	Comd 2 Div

### **Major General Ronald Lawrence Hughes, CBE, DSO, (Retd)**

Dec 39	Graduated from Duntroon and appt LT Aust Staff Corps
Jan 40	Darwin Mobile Force
Apr 42	GSO 3 OPS HQ 2 Aust Corps
Aug 42	Aust Staff College
Nov 42	Staff Offr Adv Land HQ, Brisbane
Feb 43	LO HQ New Guinea Force
1943/44	LO HQ 1 Aust Corps (incl LO to 162 US Regt. Landed with 162 Regt at Nassau Bay)
1945	LO HQ 1 Aust Corps for Morotai LO HQ 26 Aust Inf Bde for Tarakan Regt duty with 2/3 Bn 6 Div - Coy Comd, Wewak
1945/46	Staff Offr McArthur's HQ Tokyo
1952/53	Comd 3 RAR Korea
1967/68	Comd 1 Aust Task Force Vietnam
1975/76	Comd 1 Aust Inf Div
1977	Retired from ARA as Chief of Reserve

### **Lieutenant Robert (Jock) Scott, (Retd)**

1939	Enlisted as private soldier 29 Bn (Militia)
Apr 40	2/6 Aust Inf Bn (AIF) Rifleman Served in Middle East, Libyan campaign, Greece, Palestine and Syria
1942	Milne Bay with 2/6 Bn
1943	Wau (SGT Intelligence Sect)
Jun 43	Commissioned LT ex OCTU
1944/45	2/43 Bn 9 Div as PI Comd for Finschhafen campaign Morotai and Borneo - incl Labuan
Nov 1945	Discharged

**Major General Timothy F Cape, CB, CBE, DSO, (Retd)**

Dec 37	Appointed LT Aust Staff Corps
Mar 39	Port Moresby Defences - 13th Hvy Bty RAA
Dec 40	DAA & QMG HQ 8 MD
Feb 42	Bde Major 'Sparrow Force' Timor
Sep 42	DAAG LHQ
Oct 42	GSO 1 OPS HQ NG Force
Feb 43	GSO 1 AIR HQ 1 Aust Corps
Aug 45	GSO 1 OPS Adv Land HQ
May 54	Comdt OCS
Dec 56	Comdt Aust Staff College
Aug 72	Retired from ARA

**Major Henry 'Jo' Gullett, AM, MC, (Retd)**

1940	Enlisted as a private soldier 2/6 Bn Served in Middle East - Libya, Greece and Syria as PTE and SNCO 1943 PI Comd with 2/6th Bn New Guinea. Awarded MC
1944	Company Comd with Brit Regt for Normandy landing

## **AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45**

### **OPENING ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF Lieutenant-General John Grey**

General O'Donnell, Mr Gullett, General Officers, Director, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the inaugural Army history conference. As it is a start-point for us in terms of history conferences, you'll recognise that I hope that it does go well and that we achieve all the things that I'd like to see come out of it.

I believe that a nation that neither recognises nor has regard for its history runs the risk of relearning it; in looking forward it is vital that we remember where we have been. Bearing in mind that there are two Landing Craft Tanks that have recently come into the inventory, then I think it is very important we look at this particular topic.

I had a number of reasons for conducting an army history conference. These included a desire to demonstrate the Australian Army's commitment to the preservation, interpretation and promulgation of its history. This is a big task and one to which the Army has a substantial commitment. Through the Army History Research Grants and Publishing Scheme, Army will provide approximately \$50,000 in direct grants to various history researchers this year, and an additional \$50,000 will be used to publish the results of previous research work. Additionally, the Army Doctrine Centre has been very successful in producing its Heritage series of videos on Hamel, Kokoda and Maryang San, and is currently working on a video of the Australian Light Horse in the First World War. Their military history program has also produced some excellent books, *Gona's Gone!* being the latest, with *Largely a Gamble: Australians in Syria June – July 1941*, and the battles of Tobruk and Crete to follow.

Another reason for holding this conference, and one that is linked to the first, is my commitment to the continuing education of Army's officers. Fundamentally, the study of military history provides an officer with some perspective of the profession of arms, instils in them the values and ethos of their service, inspires loyalty and reinforces existing traditions. It also helps young officers develop and place in context professional concepts, and permits them to view current problems and issues in their proper perspective.

So why select the subject of today's conference, Australian Army Amphibious Operations in WWII. I initially chose this subject as I felt that it would provide scope for an examination of land operations in both a joint and combined operational setting. However, as I considered the subject I realised its worth as a subject in its own right.

Amphibious warfare fills an ambiguous place in Australian military history and in current Australian military doctrine. On the one hand Australia does not have a strong tradition in amphibious warfare, but on the other hand Australia has had considerable experience in amphibious operations. This disconnect between lack of tradition and our considerable experience needs some explanation. The Australian Army was formed not to fight overseas, but for the defence of the homeland. It was built around a compulsorily enlisted, part-time militia which would fight around the main population centres. For that reason, the new Australian Army did not expect that it would be involved in amphibious warfare.

It was ironic, then, that Australia's contribution to the First World War began with two amphibious operations. The first, the landing of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force on New Britain, near Rabaul, in September 1914, was a classic example of the exercise of maritime power. The Australian land forces were quite small, consisting of a battalion of infantry specially enlisted in Sydney and another small battalion of naval reservists and ex-seamen. While it is true that the expedition was ordered by Britain against the wishes of the Australian Chief of Naval Staff, nonetheless, it constituted the first expedition planned and executed by the Australian forces. It was not seen as a precedent for the future.

The second amphibious operation, the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, is far better known than the landing on New Britain. Yet when the First AIF was dispatched overseas in October 1914, there was no expectation that it would be involved in amphibious operations. After the war, the AIF was dissolved and the land defence of Australia was again put in the hands of the part-time militia. Since the militia could not serve overseas, there was no requirement for, or training in, amphibious operations.

The Australian Army's commitment in the Second World War was similar to the first. Again, we raised a special force, the Second AIF, for service with British forces in France. Again, it was diverted to operations in the Middle East. It was not involved in Gallipoli-type amphibious operations, but in 1941, it was transported by ship to Greece and evacuated under trying circumstances from Greece and Crete by the Royal Navy.

In the defence of Australia in 1941 and 1942, the Australian Army deployed formations and units to forward locations such as Timor, Ambon, New Ireland and New Britain, but did not have the maritime and air resources to back them up. It was not until the Americans arrived that a proper maritime strategy for the defence of Australia and the subsequent counter-offensive could be contemplated.

The senior Australian commanders quickly understood the maritime nature of the war in the Pacific, but since the Americans provided the bulk of the naval and air forces, inevitably they took the running. Our speakers for the rest of today will discuss the Australian amphibious operations in considerable detail so I will not do so now. However, I would like to comment on a few aspects concerning Australian operations in the South-West Pacific which might not be covered. The first concerns the minor amphibious operations carried out by the Australian 6th Division near Wewak and the Second Australian Corps on Bougainville. These operations differed from the other operations such as at Finschhafen, Tarakan and Balikpapan, in that they were conducted by relatively small formations or units in shore-to-shore operations that were designed to support land operations along the coast. In other words, the amphibious operations became part of the scheme of manoeuvre of the land commander. Because these operations were much smaller in scope than the major landings, they could be conducted and supported by mainly Australian naval and air units.

The second point to note is that the more frequently amphibious operations are conducted the more smoothly and quickly they can be mounted. However, over confidence must be avoided. In today's discussion of the successful amphibious operations we should not forget that one Australian operation came close to disaster. This was the landing of a reinforced company of the 31st/51st Infantry Battalion at Porton Plantation in northern Bougainville in May 1945. The Japanese surrounded the beachhead, and the following evening three bullet-proof landing craft beached under intense fire to take off the survivors, one of the landing craft becoming stuck on a coral reef. Two days later sixty men, including wounded, were rescued. Had the Japanese been in greater force it could have been a complete disaster.

To complete the picture of the Australian experience of amphibious operations, we should briefly consider the post-war period. Although a small regular army was formed, the main defence of Australia was to be carried out by the CMF, which in time of war would be expanded and deployed to the Middle East. That did not eventuate and instead we again found ourselves deploying troops - this time from the regular army - overseas to join with our Allies in essentially continental type commitments - Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam.

I am sure that today's discussion will bring out a wide range of lessons touching on many aspects, from the strategic through the operational to the tactical, and perhaps even the technical. And it is important that it does so; the lessons of the past are vitally important to the development of doctrine for the present. However, it seems to me that there are at least three broad reasons why a study of the Australian Army's experience of amphibious operations in the Second World War has relevance for today.

The first reason is that by their very nature amphibious operations are joint. The more we practise and develop doctrine and experience in amphibious operations the better we will be at joint warfare. Expertise at joint warfare, from the strategic right down to the tactical levels, is one area in which we in the Australian Defence Force can develop a real force multiplier, but we still have much work to do in this area.

The second reason is in the area of the operational art. In the Australian Army we have gained an excellent reputation for fighting at the tactical level. The ADF has been gaining expertise at the strategic level. But the ADF has no real experience in the planning and conduct of campaigns, although they are studied by our senior officers at the operational level. Potential campaign commanders have to learn how to use all the resources available to them - not just the resources of their own service. A senior officer conducting a land-oriented campaign has to be fully attuned to all the possibilities of using the air and naval resources placed at their disposal. They cannot afford to overlook the possibility of manoeuvring land forces from the sea. Even the Americans, with their vast experience of amphibious warfare, are now emphasising this approach in the planning and conduct of operations. If ever we have to fight in Australia, it is almost inevitable that the fighting will be near the coast, and land commanders must be ready to manoeuvre from the sea.

And finally, we must never overlook the importance of land forces even in supporting a maritime strategy. As MacArthur found in the South-West Pacific, it was necessary to have considerable land forces to support his maritime strategy. Seizing and protecting forward bases can require many men and considerable firepower.

One of the curious things about the geography of northern Australia is that the vital areas are much like islands, with the sea on one side and a stretch of desert or formidable terrain on the other. To defend this area properly, our land forces need the sorts of characteristics needed for maritime warfare; that is, they must be able to be deployed rapidly in small compact groups. They need sufficient firepower to deal with the enemy when they arrive, they need to be able to survive at the end of a tenuous logistic link, and they have to have sufficient tactical mobility to operate once they arrive in their new locations.

Amphibious operations are some of the most challenging that a military commander ever has to plan and conduct. I believe that there is much to learn from the Australian experience of these operations in the Second World War, and I look forward to the remainder of today's discussion.

I have pleasure in declaring this Military History Conference open.

Thank you.

# ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

## ***THE BALANCING ACT: THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE WAR IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC, 1944-45***

**Robert Deane**

One of the primary issues in the early planning for this inaugural Army History Conference was to ensure that Australian amphibious operations of 1944-45 were viewed in the context of Australia's participation in the total war effort and, equally important in our view, against the background of contemporary Australian public perceptions of the contribution being made by the Australian Army to the prosecution of the war.

This paper seeks to address that issue, albeit briefly. Contemporary records suggest that three major issues affected the Government's conduct of the war in this period: conflicting demands for a share of the rapidly decreasing pool of available Australian manpower; the increasingly acrimonious public and Parliamentary debate regarding the employment, equipping, organisation and senior leadership of the Australian Army; and the conflict between the Government's perception of the continued need for security through censorship and the growing public demand for prompt, accurate reporting of Australian military, particularly Australian Army, achievements in the war.

By January 1943, the Government had been forced to recognise that there was a critical shortage of manpower in all areas of the economy. From an estimated working population of 3.2 million at the end of the previous year, net enlistments had taken some 689,000 personnel including 33,000 women, with a further 173,000 being employed in war production and the Allied Works Council. Nearly a million more were employed in supplying food, clothing, transport and other services to Australian and Allied forces. Government was committed to the view that Australia's future depended upon her forces being of such a scale as to guarantee her an effective voice in the peace settlement in the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> That voice could only be guaranteed if Australian forces, especially the Australian Army, played a significant role in the future campaigns in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

Skilled labour was a critical area of shortfall with an additional 11,500 being the estimated requirement in the period between January and June 1943. But it was the vital rural sector that was of greatest concern to Australian and British governments alike.<sup>3</sup> The normal separation rates from the services were not only inadequate in number to address this concern but, in a majority of cases, the personnel were physically unsuited to the industry. The industry was not without blame either, with farmers pressing for the release of relatives and friends to return to the land as they were unwilling to pay award wages to new workers. Understandably, few were prepared to return to the land from higher paying jobs in industry even when released. Adding to the problem was the slow rate at which women were returning to civilian employment. Only 1,000 were added in 1944-45 against a target of 10,000. A high proportion of those who did join civilian industry were found to be non-effective while it was difficult to use the power of direction against those women who did not rejoin the work force. Government faced the paradox of growing unemployment queues while targets for food production were not achieved.

By mid-1943 the defeat of Germany was believed to be within sight and there was an acceptance of the view that the Allies had turned the corner in the war against Japan. After October 1943, the concerns of post-war reconstruction grew to dominate most aspects of official and private sector planning.<sup>4</sup> There is ample evidence of government concern to ensure that Australian industry was positioned to make the transfer from a war footing to peacetime production in what would be an intensely competitive arena. Equally, it was

concerned that Australia not be caught with large stocks of surplus goods when the vast British and American stockpiles were released. The release of large quantities of surplus war stocks, especially vehicles and shipping, in early 1945 in the midst of vigorous public debate over the equipping of the AIF reflected this concern, though the timing might have been more felicitous.

It was anticipated that on existing manpower levels the demand for consumer goods and housing at the end of the war, whenever that might occur, would be so far in excess of supply that Australia would face a period of very rapid inflation followed by an equally rapid and severe depression. By the early months of 1944, government was convinced that this scenario could only be averted if the conversion of manufacturing industries to meet peacetime needs and the restoration of the housing industry were already well advanced when the war ended. Moreover, care would be needed to ensure that the labour market was not overloaded with ex-servicemen lacking the necessary educational and technical skills. These views generated intense pressure for the accelerated discharge of servicemen beyond the normal discharge levels.<sup>5</sup>

From the Army perspective, it is important to remember that Curtin was known to support the long-standing Labor policy that Australia's best long-term defence could be secured by building up the RAAF to the limit of Australia's capacity, a view also argued constantly by Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Day points out, Curtin was of the view that food, together with a limited but not insignificant military effort, would be Australia's best contribution to the war effort.<sup>7</sup>

In August 1944, War Cabinet endorsed Curtin's recommendation for a reduction of 30,000 in the strength of the AMF and 15,000 in the RAAF with the gross intake of the three Services being maintained at 3,000 per month. Of the 45,000 to be released in this way, 20,000 were to be restored to essential civilian industry by the end of December 1944 and the balance by June 1945. Cabinet noted that these releases were to be in addition to normal discharges.<sup>8</sup> Dedman, Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, was soon arguing in forceful terms for an additional 40,000 to be released between December 1944 and January 1945.

Australia was not alone in facing these problems. Churchill was under enormous pressure to accelerate the return of servicemen to civilian employment and to speed the conversion of British industry from a wartime footing to ease the burden of the British population. The problem for the British government was how to provide a convincing show of military might in the Pacific and South-East Asia without deploying British servicemen. One stratagem was to offer Australia a mini-fleet of an aircraft carrier, at least one cruiser and up to six destroyers. Britain would supply the ships, Australia the crews and the support infra-structure. The proposal was strongly supported by Admiral Royle, the British head of the RAN, who championed it in War Cabinet. In the prevailing climate, such a proposal was beyond the resources available, regardless of any logistic or strategic considerations. Royle's proposal was finally rejected, but only after some heated exchange between Curtin and Royle.

The manpower problem is epitomised by the comment in a letter from the Acting Minister for the Army to the Acting Prime Minister, Forde, on 23 May 1944 that the question was whether the direct contribution of the AIF to operations in the South-West Pacific was to be reduced and the food front maintained and increased.<sup>9</sup> Butlin goes further and suggests that, by that time, there was a simple choice for government - military adventurism in the form of expeditionary forces under MacArthur's command that was likely to be of dubious military significance or preparation for the avoidance of massive unemployment after demobilisation.<sup>10</sup>

Objective consideration of the problem was not helped by the debates over the employment, equipping and senior leadership of the Australian Army that had been growing in intensity from the middle of 1944. The three issues soon became intertwined. The withdrawal of certain AIF divisions for rest and re-equipment had been announced in mid-1944 but there had been a virtual news blackout on the Army since that time. On 10 January 1945, *The Canberra Times* reported the announcement by MacArthur that the Australian Army had relieved American forces in the Solomons, British New Guinea and New Britain some three months



earlier. In its editorial that day, titled 'Personal and Missing Friends', the *Times* leads off 'Will anyone knowing the whereabouts of Australian soldiers in action in the South-West Pacific area please communicate at once with the Australian Government' and goes on to castigate the Government for failing to tell the 'Parliament and people' of the achievements of its own troops. It is perhaps the most trenchant example of a controversy waged in the major newspapers during this period. Nor was the damage purely domestic. The long absence of any report of Australian Army activity against the enemy and MacArthur's use of the term 'Allied', interpreted as meaning American, had led to public statements by American officials and members of Congress that Australia was not pulling its weight in the war.<sup>11</sup>

The question of equipment shortages surfaced in the daily papers and the Parliament in early March with correspondents and Opposition members reporting poor signals equipment, severe shortages of mechanised equipment, road building plant and, most critically, flame throwers and antitank weapons to defeat Japanese bunkers.<sup>12</sup> The effectiveness of the latter were graphically demonstrated in stories and pictures of the American campaigns currently being waged further to the north. Blamey argued publicly that flame throwers were unpredictable weapons and difficult to employ in this terrain.

The Acting Minister for the Army, Fraser, was despatched on a fact finding mission with an message from Curtin to Australian soldiers requesting them to tell him of any problems with equipment and assuring them that 'what can be done will be done'. This begs the question what should Fraser know that the Minister or the Prime Minister did not know already or that Blamey had not told government.

The employment of veteran combat soldiers to relieve American forces who had been content to contain the Japanese aroused similar passions. The general argument ran that the front line had moved north and these forces should be in the forefront of defeating the Japanese, either in Malaya or in the relief of Singapore. The press and the Opposition referred to Blamey's statement to War Council in September 1944 that no large scale offensive operations were contemplated against the by-passed Japanese which he said was an 'impotent force' and contrasted that with his contemporary advice to Government that these Japanese had to be 'eliminated' and 'completely beaten now'.<sup>13</sup>

Curtin summarised the issues in his address to the House on April 24, '... that the operations [presently undertaken by the Australian Army] should not have been undertaken in the circumstances, indeed that the operations should not have been carried out at all, but that Australian Forces should be employed in more offensive action elsewhere.' Referring to criticism that the Army should be given a major job in the front line, Curtin said that, on his return from London in June 1944, he told MacArthur that he was anxious that Australian Forces should be associated with the advance and that they should be represented in the operations against the Philippines. He said that MacArthur had requested Australia to provide two divisions for the advance but that 'our non-participation in the Philippines campaign was entirely due to the great and rapid success of the earlier phase of the operations.' Curtin repeats his statement made in the House on 22 February that Australia had a political responsibility to clear the enemy from those territories for which the Australian Government was responsible.

The debate resolved little. Curtin's speech was replete with references to assurances given by Blamey to the Government but contained little to suggest that Blamey was in fact acting to carry out the strategic plans of the Australian Government. The world shortage of shipping was blamed for any delays in the delivery of equipment without any discussion of Government moves to anticipate the obvious or to defer the release of shipping to the private sector. As for the need to eliminate the Japanese, Curtin argued that the Americans were following the same policy in the Philippines.

The attacks on Blamey and the higher organisation of the Army had been voiced in the press and in Federal Parliament on numerous occasions in this period. Central to these attacks was the alleged poor relationship between Blamey and his subordinate generals and the assertion that this was actually denying the Army the benefit of the best leadership at a critical time in

the war. Blamey further inflamed the situation by using a radio address on 15 April in support of a War Loan to attack both the Opposition and the press. The speech was seen by many as bringing his office into the political arena.

General Eisenhower was reported as saying that war correspondents should be encouraged to mention the identity of units actually in the line when these have obviously been previously identified by the enemy arguing that it improved the morale of both the troops involved and civilians at home.<sup>14</sup> The Australian Army and the Department of Public Relations appeared to operate on the opposite view. Up to the time of the landings in Borneo there was little mention of Australian Army units and still less of senior Australian Army commanders. As *The Sydney Morning Herald* pointed out, there had been only one mention of General Vasey in the preceding year and that was to announce his death in a plane crash. It goes on to argue that while every Australian was familiar with the names of subordinate British and American commanders, few could name Australian field commanders or the units they commanded.<sup>15</sup> However, the problem was not that simple. Government had agreed in 1942 that the issue of communiques on the activities of Australian forces under his command should be made by MacArthur and not by the Prime Minister. While this was consistent with practice in other theatres, there was not the subsequent amplification by national headquarters of individual achievements that occurred in Europe and North Africa. The bitter fights between some major Australian newspaper proprietors and the Minister for Public Relations, Arthur Calwell, and attacks by other ministers on war correspondents did not help Army's cause.<sup>16</sup>

The situation is best illustrated by the accounts of the landing at Tarakan. *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 May, quoting Tokyo Radio reports, announced that a famous Australian division was in action in Borneo. *The Age* the next day in a piece headed 'MacArthur silent on Borneo' said that all new information was being received from Tokyo Radio except for a report from the Netherlands agency *Antara* stating that Netherlands forces are fighting with the Australians. Finally the 9th Division is announced as the force, based on the identification of colour patches on the pugarees shown in pictures published in the *New York Times*. Melbourne's *The Age* in announcing this on 5 May carried a report from its correspondent at MacArthur's Headquarters that the identity of the AIF force had not been released 'as a result of a request by Australian authorities'.<sup>17</sup>

The early debate on equipment and the press should be contrasted with the situation in later months. Thus press reports of the fighting on Borneo and the assaults in New Guinea carry stories, quoting Army sources, announcing that the flame thrower is the most effective weapon against pill boxes and that they played a major role in the attack on Sauri on the main track leading up to the Prince Alexander Mountains. Reporting the 3rd Division landing on Balikpapan, *The Age* of 3 July reported that GHQ had provided a special press and communications boat for the over 40 press and radio correspondents enabling press and broadcasting despatches to be sent to America and Britain. GHQ issued a communique detailing the names of the divisional and brigade commanders.

But such press reports in 1944 and 1945 were relatively rare events. Even a random perusal of daily papers of the period shows the overwhelming interest that was placed on the war in Europe, followed by MacArthur's drive towards the Japanese mainland and the war in Burma. New Guinea, Borneo, Balikpapan captured a place on the front page on the day but then became short paragraphs on page three or four. The Ardennes counter-offensive, the Russian race to Budapest, Vienna and the Baltic, the release of Australian prisoners of war from German prison camps and the unfolding horror of the Nazi concentration camps were the preoccupation of Australian newspapers. Domestic issues such as the death of Roosevelt, the British elections, the Australian government's proposals to nationalise the banks and the airlines and the endless succession of strikes in Australia occupied more newsprint than the bloody battles of Bougainville and Borneo.

It should also be remembered that substantial Australian forces were still involved outside the campaigns in our immediate north. By the time of the German surrender there was a total of 16,000 RAAF personnel engaged in the war against Germany of whom 12,300 were aircrew. This should be contrasted with the Pacific at the same time where the RAAF had 14,500

aircrew out of a total strength 138,000.<sup>18</sup> The RAN participated in support of the occupation of Akyab and a larger Australian force including the cruisers *Australia* and *Shropshire*, two destroyers, two frigates and three LSI supported the landing of the American 6th Army at Lingayen Gulf on the west coast of Luzon.

Australian servicemen and women were heavily engaged in the war in all theatres in 1944 and 1945. Climate, terrain, disease and the Japanese soldier made combat in Bougainville, New Guinea and Borneo no less deadly than it had been in the dark days of 1942. But for most Australians, for the Australian Government, the threat of defeat was long since gone. Securing the best position in the peace, or before it if possible, was the real task. One could be excused if one drew the conclusion from the constant litany of strikes, the vast pilfering of war supplies on the wharves and railways, that the preoccupation of civilian Australia was to ensure that it made the most of the gravy train before it all ended. Regardless of the strategic merit of the campaigns in which the Army was involved from 1944 to the end of the war, their efforts attracted scant honour in their own country on the day. For the majority, to be in Australia then was indeed to be in the lucky country.

### Endnotes

1. War Cabinet Minute 3065 of 1 October 1943.
2. This position had been established in Defence Committee Minute of 19 August 1943.
3. Butlin, SJ, Schedvin, CB, *The War Economy, 1942-1945*, Australian War memorial, Canberra, 1977, p 349.
4. Op cit, p 366.
5. Op cit, p 680.
6. Memorandum, Shedden to Curtin, 23 March 1944, CRS A5958/305:AA.
7. Day, D, *Reluctant Nation*, Oxford University Press Australia, Melbourne, 1992, p 202.
8. War Cabinet Minutes 3691 of 4 August 1944 and 3740 of 23 August 1944. 9. Quoted in PMC Hasluck, *The Government and the People, 1942-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, p 421.
10. Butlin, op cit, p 693.
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12. *The Age*, March 23.
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## ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

### ***THE CURTIN GOVERNMENT, BRITAIN AND BORNEO***

**John McCarthy**

The Curtin Government, Britain, and Borneo. This was the topic suggested by the conference organisers. At first glance though an unlikely enough trilogy. It might be asked: what could they have in common? We are all aware that it was John Curtin as an Australian Labor Party Prime Minister who, in January 1942, told the British Conservative Party Prime Minister Winston Churchill that the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded as 'an inexcusable betrayal'. Mythology or truth tells us that John Curtin was constant in his protection of Australian interests, that it was his insistent tenacity which saw the 6th and 7th Divisions returned to Australia instead of being diverted to the Netherlands East Indies or Rangoon and to inevitable destruction or barbaric captivity. We are told how different Curtin was to Robert Menzies, an outright Empire Man who denuded Australia of any defence capability with his fulsome offer of Australian forces to fight overseas in a distant war. It was Curtin who led his government away from Britain and towards the Americans and, for that, Winston Churchill never forgave him. Small wonder, therefore, that British-Australian relations changed forever.

What then of Borneo? Relatively few Australians would have known anything about this second largest island in the world. Three quarters of it belonged to Holland, while the remainder - the states of Brunei and Sarawak, and the territory of North Borneo - came under British protection. British influence in North Borneo was the result of purely entrepreneurial capitalism. North Borneo had been administered by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company since 1881, largely for the benefit of London-based shareholders. By 1920, the company was raising revenue from local charges twice that needed for expenditure on services.<sup>1</sup>

Good business sense surely, but one might not expect John Curtin, with his democratic socialism, to have had much sympathy with protecting such a system; nor with the social values of this strange outpost of the Empire. Recruited by the company in 1939, a young Australian medical practitioner found there '... a cosy, correct but rather ethereal group'. With only seventy-five Europeans from a population of 14,000, it proved difficult to find sufficient players for good doubles tennis because some of those Europeans were 'in trade'.<sup>2</sup> An American woman married to a company employee found the significance placed on '... doing and saying the right thing' irksome. For men to be without '... coats, ties, tails, or mess jackets' at the right time was quite unthinkable.<sup>3</sup> Again, one wonders what Curtin, steeped in the Yarra Bank tradition and Australian egalitarianism, would have made of that.

At once, then, the main question: why were Australian lives lost in 1945 under an Australian Labor Government in an attempt to retake from the Japanese a Dutch colony; Brunei, a traditional sultanate; North Borneo, the virtual property of London investors who appointed their own Governor; and Sarawak, with a confused international status but a state which had been ruled by the Brooke family as Rajahs since 1842.<sup>4</sup> These territories came under either Dutch or British protection. The fact that all legal, social or military pretensions were swept aside by the Japanese early in 1942 is beginning to answer the question. To be under the protection of British or Dutch armed forces in Borneo, or anywhere else in South East Asia, was virtually a guarantee of being under no protection at all.

To defend the whole of the Netherlands East Indies, the Dutch mustered only three light cruisers, seven destroyers, fifteen submarines and barely more than two under strength divisions supported by a varied collection of second rate aircraft. In defence of Balikpapan, Dutch naval forces fought bravely but, once the Japanese landed the one weak battalion there, wisely withdrew to the jungle after destroying oil installations.<sup>5</sup>

The Japanese capture of North Borneo was even simpler. As early as December 1940, the British deemed the area indefensible. One battalion was deployed for static airfield defence and the destruction of oil facilities. Once these Indian troops made contact with the Japanese, they suffered heavy losses, while the Japanese themselves claimed that, in occupying British North Borneo, not a single battle casualty was recorded.<sup>6</sup> Disaster was to follow in Java. The *Orcades* arrived in Batavia on 17 February 1942 carrying 3,400 members of the 7th Division. On 8 March, what was left of the force surrendered and 2,700 Australians became Japanese prisoners of war.<sup>7</sup> If the Curtin government viewed British military advisers and indeed the British government with a somewhat sceptical eye, and found the United States and particularly General MacArthur more attractive, then perhaps it is not surprising. Curtin inside two years, however, came to adopt an Imperial position which would not have disgraced a perceived image of Robert Menzies. When this transition is examined, it is tempting to think that Curtin's newly acquired Imperial sentiments were another reason why Australian young men found themselves on Borneo in 1945.

The South-West Pacific Area, and consequently Australia, was made secure as the result of four allied victories: Coral Sea, Midway, Papua and Guadalcanal. Curtin officially admitted that the danger of Japanese invasion had passed. It might be churlish to suggest that quickly afterwards, the Curtin government may have realised that the Americans were no longer useful. They had, however, caused problems. In October 1943, Curtin conceded to Sir Ronald Cross, the British High Commissioner, his 'great affection and admiration' for MacArthur and remarked 'If he had been born in Australia and had gone to Duntroon, he could not have shown a higher concern for Australian interests'. But for Curtin, it was also true that the Americans were using their overwhelming military strength to gain post-war commercial advantages. As Cross was told:

We keep on getting people out here with letters saying they are President Roosevelt's personal representative who seem to be spying out the land.<sup>8</sup>

A certain element of trust did seem lacking.

A difficult truth must be acknowledged: political and economic conflicts do not stop simply because allies are engaged against a common enemy. It might also be unpalatable to recognise that political leaders will use the lives of their people in order to secure objectives seemingly far removed from direct military victory. Examples are many.

The British colony of Hong Kong had been deemed indefensible, but to be held as long as possible for the sake of prestige and to satisfy Chiang Kai-shek. Canada suffered dearly. In November 1941, nearly 2,000 of their under-trained and under-equipped troops were sent there to help achieve these objectives. Hong Kong was held valiantly for eighteen days at an overall cost of 4,500 battle casualties; some 9,000 troops were taken prisoner.<sup>9</sup> One might wonder also how many thousand Bomber Command aircrew were killed trying to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the allies were taking a serious part in the war after refusing to open a second front in 1942 or 1943. One main reason why the Australian 6th Division was committed to the disastrous campaign in Greece was spelt out by the British Chiefs of Staff Committee in February 1941:

Politically it seems to us that there would be serious disadvantages if we were to fail to help Greece. The effect on public opinion throughout the world, particularly in America, of deserting a small nation which is already engaged in a magnificent fight against one aggressor and is willing to defy another would be lamentable.<sup>10</sup>

The Division lost 320 dead while 2,030 were taken prisoner of war. Our own controversial Mandate campaigns were partly justified by General Blamey on the grounds that the areas concerned were 'Australian territory and therefore should be retaken by Australian troops'.<sup>11</sup> The military reasoning was perhaps harder to follow.



Clausewitz is right: war should be a continuation of politics. Moreover, the political influence a state can have on any post-war settlement is generally dependent on the strength and the location of the forces it can put in the field. The Curtin government realised it. In October 1943 it agreed it was:

a matter of vital importance to the future of Australia and her status at the peace table in regard to the settlement in the Pacific, that her military effort should be concentrated as far as possible in the Pacific and that it should be on a scale to guarantee her an effective voice in the peace settlement.

Wary of the massive American power which was certain to bring immense post-war benefits, the Curtin Government turned sharply back to the British Empire and to Whitehall policy makers for support. It wanted a British military presence in the South-West Pacific Area; the flirtation with the Americans was over. Never a marriage, it was more a casual, if necessary, affair.

This shift in opinion was noticed by British observers. Action was suggested. In May 1943, General RH Dewing, Head of the United Kingdom Liaison Staff, told London that American influence should be counteracted by the dispatch of at least some British troops.<sup>12</sup> A member of Dewing's staff urged an air presence: two Lancaster squadrons would be particularly useful. Australia, it was argued, should be supplied with the very best British aircraft. Otherwise the prognosis was glum: Australia would:

first be squeezed out of active participation in the theatre and then Americanised in respect of all aviation equipment. Both would have disastrous repercussions in the post-war conversations and adjustments in the Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

Curtin agreed entirely. Cross was told: 'The British should take part in the Japanese war to keep the British flag flying'. Evidence suggests that public opinion shared similar views. Captain Alan Hillgarth, Chief of Intelligence, Eastern Fleet, reported in March 1944 that the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University down to a taxi driver and factory worker were 'openly anxious for British forces to turn up to balance the Americans'.<sup>14</sup> For them to do so, however, was always going to be difficult. There was the commitment to the 'Beat Germany First' strategy and the fact that, from April 1942, the Pacific theatre of operations had been deemed an American responsibility. For discernible reasons, the American had little wish to welcome British forces. When Curtin made his one and only visit to Britain in April-May 1944, all this and more was made plain.

Rarely, if ever, has so much planning brought about so little a result as the efforts made by Britain to orchestrate its entry into the Pacific war. In May 1944, however, Curtin stressed how welcome it would be. The 'deep sense of oneness' with the United Kingdom had not been affected by the events of 1942; there was 'no variation in the outlook of Australians or in their loyalty to His Majesty the King'. The Empire was a 'civilising agent' and the 'British flag should fly in the Far East as dominantly and as early as possible'.

Churchill, though, had to make it quite clear. The Americans had made the Pacific its main theatre for naval and air forces; it possessed an amphibious lift able to accommodate twelve divisions, and all the United Kingdom could do was to regard itself as the junior partner. It was while Curtin was in London, however, that Borneo first appeared on the agenda. Churchill saw three possible courses of British action. Sumatra might be attacked; there could be an advance on MacArthur's flank as he moved towards the Formosa-Luzon-China triangle; or there could be a north Australian based attack directed at North Borneo. But all depended upon amphibious lift. In turn, this depended on American generosity. It could be withheld. As Churchill realistically, if sorrowfully, argued, this alone was 'an indication of the control they intended to exercise in the Far Eastern War'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus here was a political legacy of Britain's inability to defend its interests and possessions in 1942. Churchill himself was now determined, however, that the defeat of Japan would 'create such a position that powers both great and small would be able to enjoy what was their own'. At this point, it would be satisfying to argue a simple thesis: the OBOE operations, which naturally entailed the retaking of North Borneo, were agreed upon in London between Churchill and Curtin as a joint effort to reassert British influence in the region by the use of combined forces. Evidence alas cannot support such a view. The reason why Australian lives were lost in these operations remains elusive.

It is true that agreement was reached in October 1943 that a British Pacific Fleet should be assembled in order to sail from Australian bases. Planning for its employment was still proceeding in November 1944 when it was estimated that Australia would be called upon to provide 21,156,000 pounds sterling to keep it operational for one year.<sup>16</sup> At first glance, Brunei Bay would seem to provide an ideal harbour. But not so. The British Far Eastern Fleet, which arrived in Sydney on 12 February 1944, was destined for no such destination. Churchill, seeing its political value, was determined that it would be involved in the main action against Japan. Again, one might think that Borneo was an objective because it was a logical place from which to launch a combined offensive against Singapore. Given if only the loss of the 8th Division, Australia would certainly have had an interest in that. Berryman, Blamey's Chief of Staff, certainly thought, in January 1945, that a projected attack on Singapore was a reason for the OBOE operations.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, an Australian brigade had been nominated for such a possible operation. On 13 July 1945, however, Britain shortly told the Australian government that no Australian assistance would be required.<sup>18</sup> The action against Borneo was planned by MacArthur's staff. The British Chiefs of Staff were merely consulted but, as D Clayton James argues in his masterly biography of MacArthur, 'Up until the actual invasion of Brunei Bay, the British still thought the operation was useless.'<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, one certainty. In terms of the fighting in 1945, 1st Australian Corps, comprising the 7th and 9th Divisions, which had been training for months in the Cairns-Atherton region, were under-employed. Despite MacArthur's assurances, they had been shut out of the Philippines operation. One might argue that Borneo was a suitable backwater where the Corps might be used. An opportunity appears to have arrived in January 1945 when Berryman wrote to Blamey recounting MacArthur's views that the main assault on Japan would have to wait until more resources became available from Europe. If so, it was argued, 'then a good deal of amphibious shipping should be available for that period and GHQ are anxious to make full use of it'.<sup>20</sup> It is almost tempting to think that the operation was undertaken for this purpose.

What comes out of this brief study of the origins of the Borneo operations is that minor powers need considerable political acumen when dealing with powerful allies. On 30 June 1945, the Advisory War Council discussed the strategic importance of the Balikpapan operation. Opposition members were told that they were 'part of General MacArthur's strategic plans'. Not satisfied, the question was asked: 'what were these strategic plans'? The government clearly had no conception. All that was known was that they were being considered by the Combined Chiefs of Staff and, until such a decision was known, even an Australian indication was quite impossible.<sup>21</sup> What, of course, was being planned by MacArthur was the invasion of Java using the Australian corps. Estimates of Japanese strength vary, but by August 1945 there were possibly between 40,000 and 50,000 troops positioned in Java. The projected operation would have resulted in an Australian disaster. One commentator has remarked that the result, in fact, would have been the most tragic blood bath of the Pacific War.<sup>22</sup> One can only hope that the Australian government could have prevented that.

So why were Australian lives lost in Borneo? Firstly, they were not lost to accommodate the British or British policy. Rather, the Australian effort was directed by MacArthur. The Australian corps was inactive and therefore ought to have been employed. Surplus amphibious lift was available which made such employment possible. Borneo was supposed to lead to Java and this was part of another country's Empire. All together, when we consider the Curtin government, Britain and Borneo, a very strange episode does seem to emerge.

## Endnotes

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3. Agnes Keith, *Land Below the Wind*, London, 1939, p 54.
4. See RWH Reece, *The Name of Brooke: The End of White Rajah Rule in Sarawak*, Kuala Lumpur, 1982, Appendix for opinions on the legal status of Sarawak.
5. Major General Woodburn Kirby, (ed), *The War Against Japan*, London, 1957, Vol 1, p 298.
6. Japanese Monograph No 26, *Borneo Operations 1941-1945*, Tokyo, 1957, p 14.
7. See John Robertson and John McCarthy, *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945: A Documentary History*, St Lucia, 1985, section 15.
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21. Crs A2632, Minutes of Advisory War Council, 30 June 1945.
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## ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

### ***THE MILITARY STRATEGY AND COMMAND ASPECTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY'S AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC AREA***

**David Horner**

It is impossible to gain a full understanding of the conduct and importance of the Australian Army's amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific Area between 1942 and 1945 without considering both the strategy employed in the theatre and the higher command arrangements. Strategy and higher command arrangements are inevitably connected; once a commander is given a strategic mission his first step must be to put appropriate command arrangements in place to enable him to achieve that mission. As the campaign proceeds and he is given further strategic missions, he might have to change the command arrangements. Strategy and command are particularly important in discussing amphibious operations because they almost always involve forces of the three services, and amphibious operations are often major operations directly affecting the campaign strategy. In the South-West Pacific Area there was a further complication in that the forces of at least two countries were involved.

The key figure in any discussion of strategy and higher command is General Douglas MacArthur, who assumed the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the South-West Pacific Area in April 1942. Allied grand strategy was worked out by the Combined Chiefs of Staff—that is the Chiefs of Staff of the United Kingdom and the United States, meeting in Washington. They divided the world into theatres of war, appointed a commander for each theatre, and set down the broad strategic priorities. Under this scheme, MacArthur had command of the South-West Pacific theatre and Admiral Chester Nimitz, at Hawaii, the Pacific Ocean theatre. Over the ensuing years other theatre commanders such as Alexander, Eisenhower, Wilson and Mountbatten were appointed.

The theatre commanders received their strategic direction either directly from the Combined Chiefs, or through the British or US Chiefs of Staff. MacArthur received his strategic direction through the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and, since he was an Army commander, the direct line of communication was through the US Army Chief of Staff, General George C Marshall. Nimitz in the adjoining Pacific Ocean Area received his strategic direction through the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest King.

US military operations in the Pacific suffered because of the intense rivalry between the Army and the Navy, and the later debates as to whether to support an advance on Japan through MacArthur's or Nimitz's theatres reflected that rivalry. Within each theatre, the commander-in-chief was a joint commander, with authority over assigned army, navy and air force units and, in this respect, MacArthur had one important advantage—the US Army Air Force was still nominally part of the US Army. US Army commanders like MacArthur had grown used to having air units under their command, and air commanders did not question the fact that they were subordinate to him. MacArthur's air force commander could communicate directly with the Chief of the US Army Air Forces, General Arnold, on technical matters, but strategic direction had to come through Marshall.

On the other hand, the US Navy was loathe to place forces under MacArthur as he was an Army commander. Inevitably, the US Navy was directed to place some naval forces under MacArthur, but it was never a comfortable arrangement. While MacArthur might have described his headquarters as joint, it never was, and there were few Naval officers in the headquarters.

MacArthur's command was further complicated by his presence in Australia, where he became the principal military adviser to the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin. Using modern day Australian Defence Force terminology, from the US perspective MacArthur was at the operational level of war, while from the Australian perspective he was at the strategic level.

MacArthur was given operational control over all of the Australian armed forces within the South-West Pacific Area—which included all of the Australian continent as well as the islands to the north of Australia. He did not have operational control over the Australian navy, army or air force units serving in the European or other theatres.

MacArthur exercised command of his theatre through General Headquarters (GHQ SWPA) which initially was located in Melbourne and at the end of July 1942 moved to Brisbane. MacArthur had three principal subordinates. Vice-Admiral Herbert Leary, USN, was given command of the Allied Naval Forces, which included Australian, New Zealand and US units. General Sir Thomas Blamey of the Australian Army became Commander Allied Land Forces. He was also Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces. Lieutenant-General George Brett of the US Army Air Forces became commander of the Allied Air Forces.

MacArthur was dissatisfied with these command arrangements. In particular, he was most reluctant to place US forces under an Australian army commander, even though the Australian Army had some thirteen divisions in Australia and the Americans had two under-trained divisions. Instead, MacArthur decided to operate through task forces, but he was directed by Marshall in Washington to appoint Blamey as Commander, Allied Land Forces.

The air command arrangements were also a concern. When MacArthur arrived in Australia he found that his air commander, Brett, had been in Australia for some months. Unlike GHQ, which was staffed almost entirely by American army officers, and Land Headquarters (LHQ), which was almost completely Australian, Allied Air Headquarters had a truly combined and integrated staff—indeed the intention was to form one air force from units and staffs of the two nations. Brett's chief of staff was an Australian, Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock. Operational control of the Allied Air Forces was exercised through five area commands, each commanded by an Australian.

MacArthur had no confidence in Brett, saw the command of US airmen by Australians as an affront to American pride, and in late July 1942 he replaced Brett with Major-General George Kenney. As soon as he arrived from America, Kenney began to institute fundamental organisational changes. The first was to separate the Australian and US air forces. The US air forces were grouped to form the US Fifth Air Force, which was commanded by Kenney. At Port Moresby, Kenney formed an Advanced Echelon of the Fifth Air Force under Brigadier-General Ennis Whitehead, who was given responsibility for all operations against the Japanese in the New Guinea area. Whitehead operated under Kenney's direction, but was given a large degree of latitude in deciding how he was going to carry out the missions directed from Brisbane.

The Australian air organisation also underwent wide-ranging changes. Kenney grouped his Australian units under RAAF Command. Bostock was given command of RAAF Command and was made responsible for all operations in and from Australia except for the operations from Townsville to New Guinea.

The naval command arrangements were more straightforward. During the battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942 and in the Guadalcanal campaign in the latter half of the year, many of MacArthur's ships, including the Australian squadron, were transferred to the South Pacific Command, initially under Vice-Admiral Robert Ghormley, and later under Vice-Admiral Bill Halsey. In September 1942, MacArthur arranged for Vice-Admiral Leary to be replaced by Vice-Admiral Arthur Carpender.

By this time, the nature of the operations in the South-West Pacific had already begun to take shape. Following the victory of the US Navy at Midway in early June 1942, MacArthur had started to develop plans to capture the main Japanese stronghold at Rabaul, and he suggested to Washington that he should be given amphibious troops and naval craft for the operation. Eventually, on 2 July 1942, the Joint Chiefs decided that the South Pacific Area forces would seize the southern Solomon Islands, including Guadalcanal, MacArthur's forces would seize Lae and Salamaua on the north coast of New Guinea; and then together the forces would take Rabaul.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, amphibious operations would be the key to this strategy, but as the first step, MacArthur decided to establish an airfield at Milne Bay at the south eastern tip of Papua, followed by further airfields on the north coast of Papua.

The Japanese beat the Allies to the punch and on 21 July landed on the north coast of Papua, heading for Kokoda. The South Pacific Forces landed at Guadalcanal on 7 August, but the Japanese reacted with vigour. Soon intense battles were raging in Papua and on and around Guadalcanal. The Allies' optimistic plans for an offensive to seize Rabaul dissolved. A new campaign plan was necessary.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the Papuan campaign, which began with the Japanese advance over the Kokoda Trail. The Japanese were repulsed at Milne Bay, driven back along the Kokoda Trail, and eventually in January 1943 defeated in bitter battles at Buna, Gona and Sanananda on the north coast of Papua. These were some of the most important battles ever fought by the Australian Army, but in many ways they were incidental to MacArthur's strategy. They were fought as a reaction to a Japanese thrust; but once they were over, the territory seized became the springboard for MacArthur to continue the offensive he had planned over six months earlier.

Even if the Allies had not been surprised by the Japanese offensive in July-August 1942 they would never have been in a position to mount the offensive planned by MacArthur. At that stage, they lacked the ships, planes and trained troops. By January 1943, the ships and planes had started to arrive. However, the troops that had fought in New Guinea were exhausted and needed to be retrained. The 9th Australian Division, just returning to Australia from the Middle East, also had to be retrained. Additional US divisions were beginning to arrive in Australia, but they too would need time for training. Meanwhile, the 3rd Australian Division continued to take the fight to the Japanese between Wau and Salamaua. US and Australian planes began an extensive campaign to win air superiority and had a major victory against a Japanese convoy in the battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943.

In preparation for the coming offensives, MacArthur now began to restructure the command arrangements. It will be recalled that from the beginning he had planned to conduct his operations with task forces. During the Papuan campaign, he had arranged to have Blamey ordered to New Guinea to take command there, thereby making Blamey the commander of New Guinea Force. In effect, Blamey had become a task force commander during the campaign.

MacArthur was now determined to consolidate this command structure and, on 11 January 1943, he asked Marshall to send Lieutenant-General Walter Krueger from America 'to give the US Army the next ranking officer below General Blamey in the Allied Land Forces which is not now the case and is most necessary'.<sup>2</sup> Soon after Krueger's arrival, MacArthur formed Alamo Force to conduct the operations of the Sixth Army, which was to be commanded by Krueger. There were not yet enough troops to form a US army in Australia, but Krueger, who also commanded Alamo Force, 'realised that this arrangement would obviate placing Sixth Army under the operational control of the Allied Land Forces'.<sup>3</sup> Krueger's deputy chief of staff commented later that Alamo Force was created 'to keep the control of Sixth Army units away from General Blamey'.<sup>4</sup> This new command system was, in the word of the Australian official historian, Gavin Long, achieved 'by stealth and by the employment of subterfuges that were undignified, and at times absurd'.<sup>5</sup> One addition to Krueger's command was the 1st Marine Division which, after service in Guadalcanal, had been sent to Australia for rest and retraining.

The addition of the Marine Division gave MacArthur a formation that was trained and experienced in amphibious warfare.

MacArthur also instituted some significant changes to his naval command structure. The first of these took place in January 1943 when Rear-Admiral Daniel Barbey arrived to take command of the newly-formed Seventh Amphibious Force. Initially, he had only a small personal staff, but his task was to begin amphibious training, build up the naval amphibious force and help plan the forthcoming operations. In addition, the US Army's 2nd Engineer Special Brigade was assigned to MacArthur's command. This was a substantial organisation. It had a strength of over 7,000 men, had three boat battalions and three shore battalions, and had a considerable shore-to shore capability.<sup>6</sup>

The second change in the naval command structure was the appointment of the Chief of the Australian Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Guy Royle, as Commander South-West Pacific Sea Frontiers. Under this appointment, Royle was responsible for the close naval defence of Australia including the conduct and protection of coastal convoys around Australia.<sup>7</sup> This released the Commander Allied Naval Forces, Admiral Carpenter, to concentrate his efforts on the naval support to MacArthur's offensive. Carpenter's force was now known as the US Seventh Fleet. The arrangement was somewhat analogous to the air forces, in which Bostock was responsible for the air defence of Australia while Kenney concentrated on offensive operations in New Guinea.

In essence, MacArthur's campaign for the advance from New Guinea to the Philippines became one based on a maritime strategy. However, MacArthur had only a relatively small navy. Instead, his main striking force was his air force, based on jungle airstrips rather than on aircraft carriers. The role of the army was to seize and hold the areas for the airstrips and for the naval anchorages and bases. The role of the navy was to lift his forces forward to each new position; that is, the amphibious landings became a key part of MacArthur's strategy. We now know that in pursuing this strategy, MacArthur was assisted by signals intelligence in selecting areas that were held lightly by the enemy.

After a major strategy conference in Washington on 28 March 1943, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued MacArthur with a directive which listed the following tasks:

- The establishment of airfields on Kiriwina and Woodlark.
- The seizure of Lae, Salamaua, Finschhafen, Madang and western New Britain (Cape Gloucester).
- The seizure of the Solomon Islands to include the southern a portion of Bougainville.<sup>8</sup>

The third task was to be given to the forces of the South Pacific Area operating under MacArthur's strategic direction.

MacArthur turned this directive into a campaign plan, which was issued on 26 April 1943.<sup>9</sup> In general terms, the scheme of manoeuvre was to consist of a series of amphibious operations, and to implement this plan MacArthur divided his force into four task forces, not counting the South Pacific Forces. The first task force was New Guinea Force, under General Blamey. This was composed mainly of Australian Army units, but included some Americans, and had the task of seizing Lae, Salamaua and the Huon Peninsula up to Madang. The second task force was New Britain Force under General Krueger. This was an American force based on the newly-formed Sixth Army, and had the task of seizing the islands of Kiriwina and Woodlark and the western end of New Britain. The third task force was the Allied Naval Forces, under Admiral Carpenter. Its task was to support the operations of the preceding two task forces, defend forward bases, protect the lines of communication and transport the land forces for their amphibious landings. The fourth task force was the Allied Air Forces under General Kenney. Its task was to destroy enemy aircraft and shipping, support the two land task forces, support the defence of the forward bases and provide air transport for the land forces.

In planning these operations, MacArthur had his Headquarters in Brisbane with the Headquarters of the Naval, Land and Air commanders—Carpender, Blamey and Kenney. The Headquarters of New Guinea Force was in Port Moresby. As mentioned, Blamey was also supposed to be Commander New Guinea Force, but until he arrived, this position was filled by Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring. Also in Port Moresby was General Whitehead, the commander of Advanced Echelon Fifth Air Force, and he worked closely with the staff of New Guinea Force in planning the parachute landing at Nadzab and the subsequent advance by air up the Markham Valley and into the Ramu Valley. The Australian formation involved was the 7th Division, commanded by Major-General Vasey, and he worked directly with Whitehead in the detailed planning of the operation.

The first major amphibious landing was to be that of Alamo Force, also known as New Britain Force, on the islands of Woodlark and Kiriwina in June. The Commander of Alamo Force, General Krueger, had his headquarters at Milne Bay. Also at Milne Bay was the headquarters of the Seventh Amphibious Force, under Admiral Barbey. Krueger and Barbey worked closely in planning the Kiriwina-Woodark operation. There were considerable problems in the execution of that operation but, since there were no Japanese on the islands, the mistakes did not matter much and it was a good learning experience.

The next major amphibious operation was to be that by the 9th Australian Division at Lae in early September. The 9th Division Headquarters was established at Milne Bay and Barbey and the 9th Division commander, Major-General George Wootten, worked together developing the plan. Joint planning between Wootten and Barbey was assisted by the appointment of Brigadier Ronald Hopkins as the land forces liaison officer on Barbey's staff. Hopkins was an Australian regular officer who had been chief of staff of New Guinea Force in the latter stages of the Papuan campaign. While Herring, in Port Moresby, did his best to co-ordinate this planning, all the details could not be pulled together properly until firstly, Blamey arrived in Port Moresby on 20 August as Commander New Guinea Force, and then when MacArthur himself arrived on 26 August to take command of the whole operation.

Before we look at some of the amphibious operations that ensued, we should pause for a moment to consider how well prepared the Australian Army was for these operations. The first point to make is that despite the Gallipoli experience some 27 years earlier, the Australian Army had no culture of amphibious warfare. Between the wars, Australia had only a small Navy that was designed to cooperate with the Royal Navy. There was hardly any regular army and the part-time militia was formed for the home defence of Australia, not for overseas expeditions. Perhaps some of the Regular officers who attended British Staff Colleges learned a little about Combined Operations, but that was the limit of Australia's experience.

The 7th Division was the first formation to begin amphibious warfare training, which was undertaken at the Amphibious Warfare School set up at Port Stevens. It was staffed primarily by Australian Army and Navy personnel and men from Barbey's Amphibious Force and the US Army's 2nd Engineer Special Brigade.<sup>10</sup> Some officers and NCOs of the 9th Division had attended a British amphibious warfare school in the Middle East,<sup>11</sup> and when the division arrived in Australia, it too began amphibious training.

By contrast with the Australians, the Americans had considerable amphibious warfare expertise. Not only had the US Marines spent much time and effort between the wars on amphibious warfare, but the subject had also been considered at US Army training schools. General Krueger had spent four years on the staff of the US Navy War College, where he taught joint operations and became an advocate of unity of command.<sup>12</sup>

MacArthur, however, refused to appoint joint task force commanders for his operations. As Admiral Barbey later commented:

There, was no unity of command of the various services below General MacArthur's level, which was contrary to the principle of unified command in all operations in other combat areas. Our landings were planned and carried out on the basis of

cooperation. It was a bit unorthodox but it worked—perhaps because General MacArthur was always in the background and ready to handle any recalcitrants.<sup>13</sup>

What Barbey was referring to was the fact that while Blamey, as Commander New Guinea Force, had responsibility to land his forces at Lae and Nadzab, and secure the Huon Peninsula-Markam Valley area up to Madang, he had no actual control over the naval or air forces supporting him.

With MacArthur in command, and with good cooperation between the three services, the amphibious landing at Lae and the airborne landing at Nadzab worked smoothly. However, the command shortcomings became apparent in the Finschhafen operation which took place soon after.

The initial decision to mount a quick amphibious assault at Finschhafen was made by MacArthur and Blamey on 17 September. MacArthur wanted to use one brigade, but Blamey wanted to use two. Eventually, they agreed that the landing would be with one brigade, but that another would stand by to be used if necessary. Blamey warned the corps commander, Herring, to prepare the second brigade, but MacArthur did not warn his naval commander that he might have to move it. The first troops began to land on 22 September, and then Blamey followed MacArthur back to Brisbane, leaving Lieutenant-General Sir Iven Mackay in command of New Guinea Force.

The next day, Herring informed Barbey that he wanted to move the second brigade to Finschhafen. Barbey refused and a stand off ensued. A conference between Herring, Mackay, Kenney and Carpender in Port Moresby could not resolve the matter. Eventually Mackay had to send a cable to Blamey and MacArthur. By this time, the brigade at Finschhafen was being hard pressed and had captured a Japanese order indicating that they were going to mount a counter-attack against the Australians.

Finally, Barbey received orders from MacArthur that he was to move the second brigade to Finschhafen. In fact, one battalion was sent and it took part in the capture of Finschhafen. The dispute was caused by a number of factors. Firstly, GHQ and LHQ had made different assessments of the enemy threat. Secondly, Herring and Barbey had received contradictory instructions from their superiors. Thirdly, the problem was exacerbated by the departure of MacArthur and Blamey from New Guinea. Had he been in New Guinea, perhaps Blamey could have resolved the problem as he was Commander New Guinea Force, and Mackay was only acting in his stead. But in truth Blamey had no actual authority over the navy and ultimately the decision had to be made by MacArthur. Remarkably, in his book describing his experiences in the South-West Pacific Area, Barbey makes no mention of this incident. However, it underlined dramatically the problem of not appointing joint force commanders for amphibious operations.

With the capture of Madang in April 1944, the Australian Army began to withdraw most of its units to Australia for rest and retraining, and the bulk of the fighting was taken over by the Americans. By this time there had been a fundamental change in MacArthur's strategy. It will be recalled that MacArthur's directive from the Joint Chiefs had required him to capture Rabaul as part of a step-by-step approach towards the Philippines. However, in August 1943 the Joint Chiefs ordered him to neutralise Rabaul and advance along the north coast of New Guinea. In February 1944 MacArthur's forces took Los Negros in the Admiralties. Then, in a series of remarkable forward leaps, his forces landed at Hollandia in April, Biak in May, Sansapor in June and Morotai in September. In October, the Americans landed at Leyte in the Philippines. The Australian Army had no role in these amphibious operations although elements of the RAN took part in some landings and the RAAF was involved in several.

By the beginning of 1945, by which time MacArthur was planning the amphibious operations by the 1st Australian Corps in Borneo, the higher command structure had changed considerably. In September 1944, MacArthur destroyed the myth that Blamey had any role as Commander, Allied Land Forces when Alamo Force was dissolved and orders were given directly from GHQ to HQ Sixth Army. If the 1st Australian Corps were to be involved in the



Philippines, which was still a possibility at this stage, MacArthur planned that it would come directly under the Sixth Army.

When MacArthur had established his Headquarters at Hollandia in August 1944, Blamey had to move his advanced Headquarters there. But after the Americans landed on Leyte in October 1944, MacArthur moved his Headquarters forward to that island and never returned to Australia. Blamey's Headquarters was excluded from Leyte until January 1945 when a small liaison staff, under Blamey's chief of staff, joined MacArthur's Headquarters. The liaison staff accompanied MacArthur's Headquarters to Manila in early 1945, while Blamey's advanced Headquarters was established on the island of Morotai.

By early 1945, Blamey and the Australian government were becoming increasingly dissatisfied at the role of their forces within the South-West Pacific. As Blamey observed in February 1945, a 'feeling that we are being side-tracked is growing strong throughout the country'.<sup>14</sup> There were two crucial issues: the future role of the 1st Australian Corps and the role of Blamey as Commander Allied Land Forces.

With respect to the first issue Curtin, at Blamey's instigation, wrote to MacArthur asking what plans he had for the use of the 1st Australian Corps.<sup>15</sup> If there were no definite plans, then perhaps the Australian forces should be reduced considerably. MacArthur responded that he planned to use the Corps in Borneo and the Netherlands East Indies. Curtin also wrote to MacArthur asking about the role of the Commander Allied Land Forces. MacArthur replied bluntly that he had operated with task forces for the past eighteen months and did not mention Blamey's position as Commander Allied Land Forces at all. Curtin merely noted the reply. The Australian government had acquiesced in a situation which Blamey thought was intolerable. Curtin had been unable to disagree with Blamey about the rightness of the Australian position, but equally had been unable to be firm with MacArthur.

Just as Blamey, as Commander New Guinea Force, had been the task force commander for the landings at Lae and Finschhafen, Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead, as Commander 1st Australian Corps, was the land task force commander for the Borneo operations. Like Blamey two years earlier, Morshead had to work through cooperation with the naval and air commanders; however, there were slight changes. This time the air support was in the hands of an Australian, Air Marshal Bostock, who had command of all air operations south of the Philippines. Most of the aircraft in this area were from the RAAF or the RNZAF, but for the coming operations Kenney made the US Thirteenth Air Force available to Bostock. The detailed planning of the air support was in the hands of Air Commodore Scherger, the commander of the RAAF's 1st Tactical Air Force. In the same vein the detailed land planning was worked out by the commanders of the respective landing forces. These were Brigadier Whitehead, the commander of the 26th Brigade which landed at Tarakan, Major-General Wootten, the GOC of the 9th Division, which landed at Labuan and Brunei, and Major-General Milford, the GOC of the 7th Division, which landed at Balikpapan.

Naval support for the operations came from the Allied Naval Forces, now under Vice-Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, who had succeeded Carpender in 1943. Barbey, whose force was now called the Seventh Amphibious Fleet, was the Naval Task Force Commander for all the Borneo operations.

Inevitably, there were some problems to be resolved between the respective commanders, but I do not propose to go through these as no doubt they will be discussed in later papers. However, at a higher level, the strategic background to the Australian operations in Borneo in the last four months of the war throws additional light on the nature of the relationship between MacArthur and the Australian high command. There was one major difference between the New Guinea landings of 1943 and the Borneo landings of 1945. In the first case, the landings were an integral part of an overall military strategy which had been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the second case there was no clear, agreed and consistent military strategy.

The first operation was the capture of Tarakan in May 1945. Blamey approved the plans to capture the island as the oil fields and refinery there would be useful for the Allies, and it would be a good base to build an airfield for later operations in Borneo. However, after the landing the airfield could not be repaired in time to be used for subsequent operations and the oil facilities were too damaged to be used during the war. One month later, Australian troops landed at Brunei Bay. Later research has shown that MacArthur's and the Joint Chiefs' arguments that the British wanted a naval base at Brunei were hardly truthful.<sup>16</sup>

By this time Blamey and his senior commanders were more wary of MacArthur's proposed final landing, that by the 7th Australian Division at Balikpapan in south eastern Borneo. Neither Blamey, Morshead nor Milford could see any strategic purpose for the operation. In response to a query from the Acting Australian Prime Minister, JB Chifley, MacArthur told him that to cancel the operation 'would disorganise completely not only the immediate campaign but also the strategic plan of the Joint Chiefs of Staff'.<sup>17</sup>

This message arrived in Canberra on a Sunday and Ministers were scattered in various parts of the Commonwealth. Sir Frederick Shedden, the Secretary of the Department of Defence, drafted a reply, took it to Curtin in hospital, and MacArthur was informed that the Australian government approved the operation. What the Australians did not know was that MacArthur had told the Joint Chiefs that the Balikpapan operation was necessary because not to carry it out would 'produce grave repercussions with the Australian government and people'.<sup>18</sup> The truth was that MacArthur wanted to capture Balikpapan so that he could show the Dutch government that he had made an attempt to recover part of their territory. It was not a reason that appealed to either the Australian government or the Joint Chiefs. Following the landing, which took place on 1 July, a total of 229 Australians were killed and 634 were wounded. Japan did not surrender one minute earlier as a result of this action.

With this brief survey of the military strategy and higher command arrangements concerning the Australian amphibious operations, what general conclusions can be drawn? We have seen that MacArthur's strategy was essentially maritime. His main striking element was his air force which he stepped forward from base to base. These bases could only be taken by amphibious operations. The importance of amphibious operations can be demonstrated by some statistics. Admiral Barbey states that the South-West Pacific Area conducted almost sixty amphibious operations.<sup>19</sup> However, Dr Jeffrey Clarke, at present Acting Chief Historian of the US Army, has claimed that the US Army alone conducted eighty-eight amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific Area.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the war, the Operations Analysis Section of the US Far East Air Forces examined the casualties of all the amphibious landings, from the first landing on Goodenough Island on 22 October 1942 to the landing at Balikpapan on 1 July 1945.<sup>21</sup> The report noted that there were 113 landings. In seventy-eight of these landings there were no casualties at all in the first 24 hours. When the Americans landed with four divisions abreast at Leyte on 20 October 1944, they had 247 casualties in the first 24 hours.<sup>22</sup> In the first 24 hours at Lae, the Australians had 206 casualties, at Finschhafen, 120 casualties, and at Balikpapan, 96. These figures do not include all the shore-to-shore operations such as the landings by company groups on Bougainville in 1945 or the landing at Wewak in May 1945. One important aspect of these statistics is the low casualties, which emphasises the key point of MacArthur's strategy. That is, as I mentioned earlier, by making good use of signals intelligence MacArthur generally made sure that he landed where the Japanese were absent. Furthermore, since MacArthur in effect owned his own navy he was able to integrate amphibious operations into his strategy. In other words, in modern day terminology, he was able to manoeuvre from the sea.

At a lower level, the Australian campaign commanders had far less flexibility. When Blamey was Commander New Guinea Force he had to obtain his naval support by cooperation with the US Naval commanders. Lieutenant-General Vernon Sturdee, as GOC First Australian Army, was responsible for conducting the campaigns in Bougainville, New Britain and New Guinea in 1945, but he also was restricted because, in the main, the naval forces remained under MacArthur's command. With the limited naval forces assigned in support and with



engineer small craft, he was able to conduct small-scale 'manoeuvre from the sea' operations, such as the landing east of Wewak in coordination with the main thrust from the west, and some of the small landings on Bougainville.

I think it is fair to say that the Australian Army had to learn about amphibious operations on the run. Without detailed research, it is not possible to say whether they should have done better. However, after the Tarakan operation Barbey claimed that in conducting amphibious operations the Australian troops 'were behind the times ... unskilled, and knew little about their equipment'. MacArthur later defended the Australian operation in a letter to the Acting Australian Prime Minister, Chifley.<sup>23</sup>

Whatever way we look at it, strategy and higher command were dominated by the Americans. The Australian Army learned many lessons from the campaigns of the South-West Pacific, but mostly they were tactical lessons—how to patrol in the jungle, how to provide fire support, even, for a short while, how to conduct amphibious landings. However, few officers were involved in the command and planning of campaigns, and there was no widespread appreciation of the relative importance of the other services in the joint campaigns. The soldiers on the ground, and the officers perhaps up to brigade level, did not grasp that airpower was MacArthur's main striking force. Equally, they probably did not grasp that in a maritime strategy the ability to place troops ashore at some distance from their base was crucial to success.

Because the Americans owned the majority of the ships and planes, in this maritime environment they would always be in a position to dominate the military strategy. The lesson for Australia appears to be that if we were again to conduct a campaign in a maritime environment, we would need our own amphibious capability if we wanted to have any say over the strategy to be employed. In that sense, the strategy and higher command arrangements in the South-West Pacific still warrant close study by officers of the Australian Defence Force.

## Question and Answer Session

### John DeTeliga

I would like to point out that no amount of preparatory air bombardment is going to ensure a safe landing.

### Dr David Horner

As an infantryman who has been in action and has waited for the Air Force to come and then found that they had dropped their ordnance some several miles from where we thought the enemy was, I would be the last to suggest that air power is going to win the war, or that air power necessarily is going to win any particular battle. The point I am making here is not quite the point that you're addressing, and that is the strategy in the South-West Pacific; General MacArthur was going to defeat the Japanese with air power. You may not like it, but that actually was the strategy that he was to employ. Within that broad strategy, however, there is a most substantial role for the army. In the broader strategy that MacArthur was employing, his real striking force was the Air Force which would be maybe striking 500 or 600 miles in a different area, well away from where the troops were fighting. I am not denigrating the army, far from it. What I was getting at and what I said right at the end was, for the soldier on the ground who's fighting his battle, he has one perspective and that is fighting the immediate battle. But at the higher level MacArthur was putting his emphasis in a maritime strategy in which the striking force was the Air Force.

### Dr Peter Stanley

David, in looking at the command arrangements for the OBOE operations, you mentioned that Morshead, the commander of the 1st Australian Corps, is the task force commander. Looking at the relative documents relating to the planning of these operations, Morshead to me, comes across as the invisible man. I cannot see Morshead's influence in the planning of the operations. I see Wooten, I see Whitehead, I see Milford. Can you discuss the contribution that Morshead had?

### Dr Horner

To be honest, Peter, I do not know how much. Somebody had to do it and if you think about who was pulling it together, it has to be Morshead's Headquarters which was in Morotai—they obviously had been planning the operations. What I was trying to paint here was the broad picture without going into the detailed planning of each campaign. And the point is that, overall, it worked because of cooperation. Maybe it worked very well, but Morshead did not own the Air Force and the Navy, and this caused some problems later about which some other speakers might talk.

### Mr Staniland

I was formerly with 24th Brigade and involved in the OBOE operations. Perhaps I could answer the question that was asked as to what General Morshead's situation was in that regard. When we were planning the operation at Morotai for OBOE, Morshead had told us that the operation at Balikpapan was to be undertaken by the 9th Division less a Brigade, which was to do Tarakan. He thought that was quite impractical because he didn't think there was enough force involved to be able to do that. So what he told us was that he said to MacArthur, it's not possible for the 9th Division less a Brigade to do Balikpapan. So in fact what happened was, as you know, 7 did Balikpapan, and 9 did the Labuan operation and also Tarakan.

## **Dr Horner**

Yes that is right. What it boils down to is that the role of a commander at this level is the allocation of forces in many cases.

## **Major General Tim Vincent**

I was the Commander of 1st Corps Signals during the OBOE operations, and for that I had 55 officers and 1,150 men. I was responsible for the links between Morotai and Tarakan, Balikpapan and Labuan, not to mention the links to the Philippines for General MacArthur. At Morotai the planning was decided and in twenty four hours all the orders would be issued. Very skilled is the American operation in this regard. One of the problems that struck me, and other people no doubt too, was the actual competence of the Australians as planners and administrators. From my point of view the ordnance system that we operated was not very successful. In fact, I was informed by a British ordnance general that the failure of the Australian supply system during the Second World War was a subject of study at the Ordnance School in England; not very complimentary. I am not sure whether the failure of our ordnance was due to lack of shipping or lack of foresight.

As to the planning—I'm talking particularly about Balikpapan—I felt so badly about it that I went to see the BGS and said look, there's a gap in the fire plan. He said go away little man, better brains than yours have thought of that. The reason was that the medium guns were not to be landed in sufficient time to support the infantry should they get out of 25 pounder range. This in fact happened. And I remember seeing these medium guns of ours with their muzzles pointing to the sky on the day the war ended in Balikpapan. Pretty terrible. All in all, as our presenter said, we had a great deal to learn about amphibious operations, we had a great deal to learn about the planning, and we had a great deal to work on to make our planning, operational and functional efforts efficient. Having just returned to the Pacific from the Normandy job for the OBOE operations, I can comment that the difference in competence between the British Army and the Australian Army in this sort of thing was just magnificently broad, let me put it that way.

## **Brigadier Peter McGuinness**

David, I would just like to ask you a question on the nature of MacArthur's campaign plan. I think you said it was essentially maritime in nature and yet the focus of all the maritime operations seem to be reconnaissance, transport and support, and the objective was the seizure of land objectives like bases, the liberation of populations, the re-establishment of control or sovereignty, etc. Would you like to comment on whether it is truly a maritime campaign, or whether in fact it had elements of a continental strategy about it? You may also care to comment, perhaps, on the possible parallels between what happened then and what we might have to do in constructing a defence of Australia campaign where CGS mentioned some of the objectives are rather like islands.

## **Dr Horner**

MacArthur's campaign took place in a maritime environment. His task was to move through an area of quite some magnitude, and the actual seizing of each position in some ways was very incidental to the strategy. He did not have a big navy. The strategy was—it is my assessment of it—a maritime strategy in which the striking force was the Air Force and he replaced the aircraft carriers which he did not have with bases which he seized to base the aircraft, and he had to step them forward along the way.

There were only a few cases where he took territory for the sake of taking territory. The first case was in the Papuan campaign when he had to drive the Japanese back away from Port Moresby and drove them into the sea at Buna. Thereafter, the capturing of territory was incidental to his strategy. This does not mean that there was no role for quite large, substantial army forces. The next time in his campaign in which he started taking territory for

the sake of territory was in the Philippines where, having captured bases, he then expanded out to liberate the Philippines. He obviously had his own personal reasons for doing that, and of which some people were critical too. So in that sense it was a maritime strategy. But I think it's also fair to say, and I have said this in other gatherings, that you want to be careful about putting a template over things and just describing them purely as maritime and purely as continental. These are terms which historians like me use when we come a long afterwards and attach a label. If you had asked MacArthur, 'What's your strategy?', I doubt whether he would have said that it was a maritime strategy.

The strategy employed by Nimitz was more maritime in the sense that the bits of territory that he was taking were very small islands and he was taking them purely for one reason and one reason only, and that was to make an air base to get closer to Japan. So eventually the main attack on Japan would be by aircraft operation from bases within range. It is just that MacArthur had this extra aim, and that was to liberate the Philippines. In that area, I guess there are certain aspects of continental strategy.

Coming to Australia, I wrote up an article some time ago in which I said that we have a strategy for Australia that's essentially maritime. One of the naval writers wrote to me immediately and said that according to some definition he dug up from somewhere it was not a maritime strategy. Well I dispute that. We are not talking about definitions here, we're talking about the fact that, in the main, the idea of defending Australia is forward from Australia by maritime resources, be they ships, planes, surveillance or whatever. And our spending for the last fifteen years or so has been oriented in that direction. Therefore, I would say we have a maritime strategy for the defence of Australia. What I then go on to say is that if we learn anything from MacArthur's campaigns, we learn that within this maritime strategy—he had a very well developed one—there is a very substantial role for the army. Seizing and holding the forward bases may not be a job for one brigade, but may be, as in the case of seizing the bases in the Lae-Finschhafen area, the job of three or four divisions. For the battalion commander who is commanding a battalion within those divisions, it matters not a jot whether it is a maritime strategy or what the strategy is, the job for the battalion commander is still the same. But if we take the higher perspective, within the maritime strategy there is a very big role for the army.

Coming to our present situation, I think there is a direct correlation and that is that we have areas as the CGS said, that are like islands across the north of Australia; places that are on the Australian mainland. It seems to me that there is a role for the army in that strategy, a substantial role for it, and it needs many of the sorts of characteristics that you need for an army within a maritime strategy.

### **Major General Tim Cape**

Speaking as an ex-G1 of Land Ops at Morotai. There's been a lot of talk about Bostock and Morshead, etc, but it seems to have been forgotten in the general discussion that Headquarters LANDOPS was at Morotai and Blamey was there with a very formidable chief of staff in the form of Berryman. I think it's fair to say that while the detailed planning for the OBOE operations was done by Headquarters 1st Corps, the coordination and the contact with GHQ was all done through LANDOPS and in addition we had to keep the balance between the New Guinea operations and the Borneo operations which caused considerable difficulties at some period. So the point I wish to make is don't forget Headquarters LANDOPS being at Morotai with the Commander-in-Chief to tying the ends together.

### **Dr Horner**

In fact Berryman for most of that time was in Manila as the Chief Liaison Officer with MacArthur. Blamey had been placed in a very difficult situation here because the wiring diagrams, the way it was supposed to work, were arranged the way MacArthur wanted it. They ran directly from MacArthur's GHQ to Morshead, thereby freezing out Blamey. But anybody, as General Cape would say, who was in the same area where Blamey was would notice that Blamey's influence would inevitably be to the fore. But Blamey was not always there. He was also down in Melbourne and other places and had responsibility for the general oversight of the First Army operations in the other parts of the South-West Pacific area.

## Endnotes

1. L Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, OCMH, Washington, 1962, p 619.
2. Signal, MacArthur to Marshall, 11 January 1943, RG4, MacArthur Memorial Military Archives.
3. Walter Krueger, *From Down Under to Nippon*, Combat Forces Press, Washington, 1953, p 10.
4. Interview tapes, Papers of General George H Decker, US Army Military History Institute, Carlyle, Pennsylvania.
5. Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p 599.
6. The Engineer Special Brigade had 360 LCVs, 100 LCMs and 18 to 36 LCTs. A total of 160 small craft were required to lift one infantry brigade and 480 to lift a division. See 3DRL 6643, item 2/48, Australian War Memorial (AWM).
7. Remarkably, Royle's appointment is barely mentioned in the Naval official history. For a description of the appointment see Australian Archives, Melbourne, MP 1587, item IT296B.
8. Morton, *Strategy and Command*, p 398.
9. GHQ SWPA Elkton III Plan etc, 26 April 1943, *ibid*, p 677.
10. For correspondence about the new school see 3DRL 6643, item 2/48, AWM.
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12. Paper presented by Major George Eaton on Krueger at the US Army's Military Historians' Conference, Washington DC, 14 June 1994.
13. Daniel E Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy: Seventh Amphibious Force Operations 1943-1945*, United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland, 1969, p 59.
14. Signal, Blamey to Berryman, 17 February 1945, Blamey Papers, 3DRL6G43, item 2/43.68, AWM.
15. Curtin to MacArthur, 15 February 1945, Australian Archives (AA), Canberra, A5954, box 570.
16. See David Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939-1945*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, p 396.
17. MacArthur to Chifley, 20 May 1945, AA; A5945, box 750, file 2.
18. Signal CA 51543, MacArthur to Marshall, 12 April 1945, RG 218, CCS 383 Pacific Ocean Area (6-10-43) Sec 11, US National Archives and Records Administration.
19. Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy*, p 318.
20. Dr Jeffrey Clarke, 'Turning Point In the Pacific War: The Army and the New Guinea Campaign', at the 'World War II in the Pacific' conference, Washington DC, 10 August 1994.
21. 2D & 3D Operations Analysis Sections Headquarters, Far East Air Forces, 12 August 1945, Kenney Papers, USAF Office of Air Force History. Figures are from this source unless otherwise stated.
22. M Hamlin Cannon, *Leyte: The Return to the Philippines*, OCMH, Washington, 1954, p 78. In the first three days at Lingayen Gulf the Americans had 240 casualties: Robert Ross Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines*, OCMH, Washington, 1963, p 87.
23. Quoted in D Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, Volume II, 1941-1945, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1975, p 752.

**AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS  
IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45**

**THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE AND AMPHIBIOUS  
OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC AREA**

**Alan Stephens**

Defence analysts generally agree that joint operations constitute the most effective way to apply combat power. The Allied campaign in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) from 1942 to 1945 was a classic joint operation. While combat power was on occasions applied independently by air, land or sea forces, usually the imperative was for at least two, and more often three of those forces to work together. In the South-West Pacific there was an additional reason why joint operations were the preferred way of fighting the Japanese. The majority of actions were, in effect, amphibious—that is, inherently joint—even if technically they did not comply with the usual meaning of the term. The geography of the theatre provides the explanation.

One of the first senior officers fully to appreciate the nature of that geography and its implications for the conduct of operations was General Douglas MacArthur's air commander in the SWPA, the brilliant and aggressive General George C Kenney. In a letter dated 24 October 1942 to the commanding general of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) back in Washington, Kenney wrote:

In the Pacific theater we have a number of islands garrisoned by small forces. These islands are nothing more or less than aerodromes ... from which modern fire-power is launched. Sometimes they are true islands like Wake or Midway, sometimes they are localities on large land masses. Port Moresby, Lae and Buna are all on the island of New Guinea, but the only practicable way to get from one to the other is by air or water: they are all islands as far as warfare is concerned. Each is garrisoned by a small force and each can be taken by a small force once local air control is secured. Every time one of these islands is taken, the rear is better secured and the emplacements for the flying artillery are advanced closer and closer to Japan itself.<sup>1</sup>

Kenney's analysis was to provide the start point for MacArthur's overall campaign strategy.

This paper applies the term 'amphibious' broadly, as implied in the quote from General Kenney, an application which in turn permits an equally broad interpretation of the term 'air support'. That interpretation is, hopefully, not simply the intellectual baggage of a former bomber pilot and current Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) historian but, rather, a response based on an objective understanding of how Allied airmen did their job to make life easier for the army in the South-West Pacific. Two examples illustrate the point. First, when Australian Military Forces (AMF) soldiers landed at Tarakan, Labuan/Brunei Bay and Balikpapan in mid-1945 in the major Australian amphibious assaults of the war in the Pacific, known collectively as the OBOE operations, very few enemy aircraft were present to attack their ships or landing craft, or to kill them in the water or on the beaches. Second, the Japanese soldiers defending those garrisons and who were trying to kill Australian soldiers were in many cases severely disadvantaged by the inability of their navy to resupply them adequately over the past eighteen or so months.

The fact that the enemy lacked air support and had to endure a shortage of supplies during those Australian amphibious assaults was not attributable to the Allied aircraft and ships in direct support of the AMF during Operation OBOE, nor was it attributable solely to the intensive pre-invasion bombardment which preceded each landing. It was primarily a consequence of the highly successful interdiction campaign waged against Japanese supply lines by Allied airmen and sailors over the past three years.

That war of attrition indirectly but materially affected every Allied action in the South-West Pacific. RAAF aircraft contributed to the interdiction campaign from mid-1943 onwards when long-range Catalinas joined in what was already an effective anti-shipping campaign being conducted by the United States Navy. Mine-laying aircraft blockaded ports from China to Formosa, Hainan to Hong Kong, and French Indochina to the Netherlands East Indies. In 1944, four million tons of Japanese merchant shipping was sunk, mostly by American submarines.<sup>2</sup>

By March 1945, the campaign had reduced the total available Japanese shipping to 1.8 million tons, of which a mere 150,000 tons was outside the enemy's 'Inner Zone'. In the area of immediate interest to Australian soldiers and to this conference, according to one Japanese estimate there were periods when 40 per cent of all vessels larger than 1,000 tons which sailed into the Balikpapan-Surabaya area were being sunk or damaged by mines.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-shipping campaign was complemented by an aerial bombing campaign against Japan's infrastructure and armed forces which started in about mid-1942 and reached a devastating intensity in 1945. Heavy bombers struck targets from the Japanese home islands down to New Guinea. While it is not possible precisely to quantify how attacks in one part of a theatre affect operations 3,000 kilometres away, it is a fact that by 1945 the Japanese resupply and transport system was in chaos. RAAF squadron diaries show that in the weeks leading up to the OBOE amphibious operations, strike aircraft would patrol inter-island shipping lanes in the Borneo area for days without sighting a Japanese transport, and when they did, it was almost invariably a very small, inadequate vessel, perhaps nothing more than a stolen native canoe.<sup>4</sup> Even those pitiable craft were sunk. For most enemy soldiers, resupply was limited to whatever arrived on the occasional submarine from Japan. It is also a fact that because of that deprivation, many Japanese troops the Australians faced were malnourished, diseased and suffering from poor morale.<sup>5</sup>

To summarise thus far, a fair case could be made that by the time Australian soldiers went ashore at Tarakan, Labuan and Balikpapan, the most essential part of the accompanying air support action had been fought and won. That is not to say that the war on the ground had been won. It had not, and the Army still had a great deal of hard work and dangerous fighting to do, supported where possible by air and naval fire support and resupply. It is to say, however, that to try to separate what happened on the beaches of Borneo in mid-1945 from the air and sea war fought on occasions 3,000 kilometres and three years distant is to misunderstand the nature of air operations.

Before looking in a little detail at the Allied air forces' more immediate involvement in Australian amphibious operations, the higher organisation under which the RAAF operated from 1942 onwards should be outlined. For most of the war, Allied air assets in the South-West Pacific Area were organised as a combined force. The United States Army Air Forces, the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army Air Force and all operational elements of the RAAF were combined as the Allied Air Forces (AAF), under the overall command of Douglas MacArthur.<sup>6</sup> MacArthur in turn delegated that responsibility to his senior airman, General Kenney. Although the three air forces came under one commander and their efforts were integrated and coordinated, each retained its national organisation and national way of doing business.

The RAAF in the South-West Pacific comprised two components, one for support and the other for operations. The support component was headed by the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, who was based in Melbourne and who for most of the war was concerned primarily with raising, training and equipping the force. The operational component was itself divided into two separate groups. First, there was RAAF Command which was headed throughout the war by Air Vice-Marshal Bill Bostock, a confident and capable officer. RAAF Command consisted initially of five geographic areas on the Australian mainland, each headed by an Air Officer Commanding (AOC) who answered to Bostock. Bostock in turn answered to General Kenney for operations and to Air Vice-Marshal Jones for support. Second, RAAF Command's geographically static areas were complemented by a mobile striking force which was structured to accompany and support land forces as they moved

through the theatre. That mobile force was known initially as an Operational Group but was later renamed the 1st Tactical Air Force (TAF). Until early 1945, the 1st TAF answered directly to General Kenney, after which it was placed under RAAF Command and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock. That meant that for the OBOE operations which are the focus of this paper, the 1st TAF was part of RAAF Command. The 1st TAF had a number of commanders during the war, the most notable and capable of whom was the Duntroon graduate, Air Commodore FRW Scherger.

The principles governing the employment of the Allied air forces should also be mentioned. There are two basic methods for the employment of air forces in support of land operations. Under the first, air units are allocated directly to land forces, usually at the divisional level. In other words, the divisional commander has his own air assets to use as and when he wishes. Under the second method, the control of all air assets is centralised and support is allocated to the users by a central authority on an 'as required' basis. The Luftwaffe and the Red Air Force were examples of the first model: although both services were nominally independent, their activities and organisation were largely determined by the demands of dominant armies. Japan took that approach a step further, entering World War II with an Army Air Force and a Naval Air Force, each developed specifically to meet the needs of its parent surface force. The RAAF, as it almost invariably did, followed the Royal Air Force's lead and employed the centralised model. That approach had been demonstrated to great effect during the outstanding partnership between General Montgomery and Air Vice-Marshal Coningham in North Africa.<sup>7</sup> In the interests of being able to apply the maximum amount of force at the right time and place, the control of all British air forces was centralised under one air commander (Coningham) who, in consultation with the Commander-in-Chief, was responsible for the allocation of air resources between competing demands. Generals MacArthur and Kenney employed the same arrangement in the South-West Pacific and in the process emulated Montgomery and Coningham as one of the great air/land partnerships of the war.

Most airmen will argue that the centralised model is by far the more effective way to use what is often a scarce, high-value resource, and in principle it is. But by the time of the OBOE landings the principle did not matter. Such was the numerical and qualitative superiority of the Allied Air Forces that doctrinal niceties were largely irrelevant. Sheer weight of numbers would always compensate for any organisational deficiencies. During the actions discussed in this paper, Australian Army commanders got whatever air support they wanted, with almost no interference from Japanese air forces.

The OBOE operations were the 'most complex amphibious assaults carried out by Australians in the war'.<sup>8</sup> They were not the first major amphibious actions for any of the services; RAAF units and commanders, for example, had taken a leading role at Aitape in April 1944, as well as participating at Nadzab-Lae and Finschhafen in September/October 1943. OBOE was however the only instance in which the three Australian services commanded, planned and conducted major amphibious operations largely by themselves. Six OBOE operations were planned, but only three were completed before the war ended: OBOE One at Tarakan on 1 May 1945; OBOE Six at Brunei Bay/Labuan on 10 June; and OBOE Two at Balikpapan on 1 July. Each operation had its distinctive features, but at least as far as air action was concerned all were sufficiently similar to allow general observations to be drawn.

The first observation is that the AAF enjoyed overwhelming superiority (Table 1). By the time of OBOE One (Tarakan, 1 May 1945) Japanese air strength in the immediate area was so depleted as to be almost negligible, as Table 2 illustrates.



<b>Table 1</b> <b>1st TAF and 13th Air Force Strength 1945</b>
<p><b>1st TAF</b>            One Attack Wing (Two squadrons, 36 aircraft)            Two Fighter Wings (Six squadrons, 108 aircraft)            Two Airfield Construction Wings (Four squadrons)</p> <p><b>13th Air Force</b>            Two Heavy Bombardment Groups (64 aircraft)            One Medium Bombardment Group (52 aircraft)            Two Fighter Groups (150 aircraft)            One Photo Group            One Troop Carrier            One Low-altitude Bombardment Squadron (13 aircraft)            Two Night Fighter Squadrons (50 aircraft)            One Emergency Rescue Squadron</p> <p>Source: Odgers, pp 257, 299; Craven and Cate, Vol 5, p 324. Aircraft numbers are indicative.</p>

<b>Table 2</b> <b>Estimated Japanese Air Strength</b> <b>Tarakan, 1 May 1945</b>
18 Fighters 8 Torpedo Bombers 10 Medium Bombers 3 Reconnaissance 13 Float Planes
Source: RAAF, 1st TAF, Operation Instruction No 45/1945, 14-4-45 ,RHS.

Those forces were considered incapable of mounting large scale attacks. There was in addition some 280 Japanese aircraft stationed in French Indochina, Sumatra, Malaya, Thailand and Burma, but the likelihood of their intervention was assessed as remote, an estimate which proved correct. In the six months leading up to the OBOE landings there were only nine recorded Japanese air attacks against Allied targets in the SWPA, involving a mere 17 aircraft. During the thousands of sorties flown by the 1st TAF in the last nine months of the war, only five contacts were made with airborne enemy aircraft.<sup>9</sup> Only several enemy aircraft were sighted while the OBOE landings were in progress.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, immediately prior to the Tarakan landing, the RAAF's 1st TAF alone had seven full-strength modern fighter/attack squadrons (136 aircraft) supplemented by 15 RAAF B-24 Liberator/heavy bombers; further, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock could also call on the USAAF's Thirteenth Air Force, heavy bombers from the RAAF's Northwestern and Western Areas, and elements of the USAAF's Fifth Air Force. Australia's amphibious assault troops were supported by modern, immensely powerful air forces.

That imbalance does not mean air operations were without danger. On the contrary, Japanese ground-based anti-aircraft fire was often intense and effective and Allied aircraft losses were relatively high.

The objective of OBOE One was to seize the airfield at Tarakan, destroy the enemy forces, and restore to authority the civil government of the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>11</sup> Comparable objectives were defined for OBOEs Six and Two. OBOE One envisaged a landing on Tarakan Island by the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade Group with ancillary units under command, including two RAAF airfield construction squadrons which were given six days to make the

base capable of supporting sustained operations. General Kenney appointed Air Vice-Marshal Bostock air commander for the operation, one of the few occasions during the Second World War when an Australian was given operational control over substantial American forces.

Bostock's air plan for the OBOE landings followed the familiar Allied pattern of isolating the battlefield from enemy support, neutralising hostile air and sea support within range of the objective area, destroying troop concentrations, and covering the assault with protective aircraft.<sup>12</sup> That pattern was just as familiar to the enemy as it was to the Allied Air Forces, but because of the Allies' air supremacy there was nothing the Japanese could do except to dig in to try to minimise the extent of the fourth objective, the destruction of their troop concentrations. During the execution of the plan, a wide range of air activities was conducted: air superiority, tactical reconnaissance and photography, maritime surveillance, long-range heavy bombing attacks, close air support, army cooperation, and courier (transport) services. Also provided were less common services such as leaflet drops urging the Japanese to surrender and anti-malarial DDT spraying.

The Air Support Plan was executed in three phases. First, in the period leading up to P minus 5 day, air operations were conducted to neutralise enemy airfields, blockade sea lanes and destroy targets of military significance. Second, between P minus 5 and P day, intensified operations were carried out against targets in the landing and airfield areas; additionally, air protection was provided for convoys and surface vessels en route to Tarakan. Finally, on P day and subsequent days, air forces provided convoy protection, fighter defence of the Tarakan area and close air support.

Phase One of Bostock's air plan for the Tarakan landing graphically illustrated the depth of the air support provided by the AAF for the amphibious assaults. Pre-invasion bombing started three weeks before P day and included targets as far away as the coasts of China and French IndoChina.<sup>13</sup> Concurrent with those very long-distance raids, airfields in Borneo, the Celebes, Java and Tarakan were systematically attacked. Special attention was paid to destroying bulk storage oil tanks at Tarakan to prevent the Japanese from releasing a flow of burning oil into the landing area. All of the tanks were destroyed. The effectiveness of those Phase One raids was credited with the 'complete absence' of enemy landplanes in the Tarakan area prior to the Australian landing.<sup>14</sup>

The Phases One and Two pre-assault bombardments for OBOEs Six and Two were even more intense. Both were extraordinarily heavy; for example, for the Brunei Bay/Labuan landing, in just two days B-24 Liberator bombers dropped 204,000 pounds of bombs on Keningau Airfield alone, a massive scale of attack.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, during the second half of June, Balikpapan was hit by up to 196 Allied bombers a day in one of the heaviest air strike campaigns against a single objective in the theatre.<sup>16</sup> All told, some 4000 short tons of bombs were dropped on the Balikpapan area, a scale of attack which prompted some interesting reactions. After the war had been won, Dutch settlers returning to their oilfields complained that the damage caused by the AAF bombing was far greater than necessary.<sup>17</sup> Putting aside that somewhat ungrateful response, the background to the air strikes provides a useful lesson. In November 1943, 3500 determined, well-entrenched Japanese soldiers had inflicted heavy casualties on American forces landing at Tarawa. General Kenney had been concerned that the same thing might happen in Borneo and had accordingly instructed Bostock and the commander of the USAAF Thirteenth Air Force, General Paul Wurtsmith, to subject the landing areas to massive aerial bombardment.<sup>18</sup> In effect, at Balikpapan Kenney was substituting bombs for the lives of Australian soldiers and sailors. Seventeen assault waves subsequently landed without casualty and the total landing was made with slight casualties against positions which might have been effectively defended had they not been so badly damaged.<sup>19</sup> Generals Morshead and Milford both supported the intensity of the strikes; while Gavin Long reported that, given the strength of the Japanese positions, fortifications and heavy weapons, the Australians' low losses were largely the result of the power of their supporting arms.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to the execution of Air Vice-Marshal Bostock's air plan, those pre-invasion bombing attacks overlapped Phases One and Two. Phase Two also involved the provision of air cover over the assault convoy, a task which could never be taken lightly but which was somewhat token given the absence of enemy air forces. Finally, if necessary, immediately prior to the landings, Phase Two concluded with sustained antipersonnel attacks against areas occupied by the defending enemy forces: at Labuan Island, for example, five heavy bomber squadrons—about 60 aircraft—bombed Japanese defensive positions between D minus 45 minutes and D minus 15 minutes.<sup>21</sup>

Once the landings were in progress, Phase Three was implemented. The most important component of that phase was the provision of close air support for troops in contact with the enemy. That support was available almost on request as formations of strike aircraft were brought onto station at two hourly intervals, placed into what amounted to a 'cab rank' holding pattern, and called onto task as required.<sup>22</sup> That is a most effective method for providing air support. It is also most extravagant, but in this case the aircraft were available and there was no opposition. It was a method which, incidentally, had been used off Normandy a year earlier. Close air support strikes were made sometimes within 100 metres of the most forward position of friendly troops, often considerably assisting the Army's progress: for example, at Tarakan on 25 May, embankments by the Freda feature which were proving difficult to take were bombarded by 24 aircraft, guns and mortars, after which a company of the 2/48th Battalion went in and found 67 Japanese troops buried in the rubble; similarly, another enemy pocket which had resisted two land assaults was bombarded by 48 aircraft, after which it was taken by two platoons.<sup>23</sup> As an example of the firepower brought to bear by the air forces in such engagements, RAAF Beaufighters were armed with four 20 mm cannon, four 0.50 inch machine guns and 2,000 pounds of bombs; Kittyhawks with six 0.50 inch machine guns and one 500 pound bomb; and Liberators with ten 0.50 inch machine guns and up to 12,800 pounds of bombs.

The system used for operational control of direct air support missions at Tarakan was relatively new and encountered some problems.<sup>24</sup> Changes were made for the subsequent landings at Labuan and Balikpapan. Under the mature system, a three-tiered organisation was employed. At the highest level, when control of the amphibious landing was afloat, operational control of air forces was vested in the Support Air Controller (SAC) Afloat, who was located on the Headquarters Ship.<sup>25</sup> Once control of the landing had been transferred ashore - a decision for the Army and the Navy which did not especially concern the Air Force - that control was transferred to the SAC Ashore. The SAC Ashore's authority was eventually assumed by an Air Support Section (ASS) established within the Advanced Headquarters of the 1st Tactical Air Force, once that headquarters had landed and consolidated its organisation. Ideally the Headquarters of the 1st TAF would be collocated with the Army Headquarters.

The second tier beneath the SAC/ASS was known as an Air Support Party (ASP), one of which was attached to each Brigade Headquarters. The Air Support Parties examined and processed all Army-originated requests for air support before relaying them to the SAC/ASS. Finally, beneath the ASP there was an Air Liaison Party (ALP) with each Battalion Headquarters which performed the same function before relaying requests to the ASP.<sup>26</sup> Complementing that structure were a number of observers who might be described as operational facilitators. Specialist input came from Army Air Liaison Officers (AALOs) who had been trained as Airborne Observers and who provided a link between the two services and their different environments. ALOs provided a vital forward link between cooperating armies and air forces, acting as conduits for air intelligence from air units to Army Headquarters and for ground information from army formations to cooperating air units. During daylight hours, one AALO was airborne continuously over the battlefield, passing intelligence and specialist advice to the SAC/ASS via a discrete radio frequency. Air Liaison work involved flying at low altitude to observe the movements of both sides, a role which made the job particularly hazardous. At Balikpapan alone, two Air Liaison B-24 Liberators were shot down by ground fire inside three days, resulting in over 20 deaths.<sup>27</sup> Also over the battlefield was an RAAF Airborne Coordinator, whose role was to provide specialist air advice to the SAC/ASS. Requests for air support could be originated by forward unit commanders via their Air Liaison Party, Brigade headquarters via their Air Support Party, the Airborne Coordinator or the Air

Liaison Officer. On receipt of a request, the SAC/ASS would make the final decision and then task the most suitable strike aircraft. It was also the SAC/ASS's responsibility to coordinate fire support generally. In sum, the overall system facilitated joint army/air consideration of target priorities at all levels.

As well as setting up the close air support system, there were two other critical tasks for the air forces once the landing had taken place. Unlike the close support function, which was a joint responsibility, these were essentially single-service jobs. The first was the construction or upgrading of airfields. Before World War II, there had been no RAAF Airfield Construction Squadrons; by mid-1945 there were 10, four of which were under Air Commodore Scherger in the 1st TAP. The second task was to establish a Mobile Fighter Control Unit, complete with radars and a command and control system to provide early warning of any Japanese air attacks and to coordinate Allied fighter defences.

Land/Air operations can be a source of friction between soldiers and airmen and often provide material for lively debate at history conferences. Some problems inevitably arose during the OBOE landings. There were occasions when the combination of poor command and control, inadequate communications and inexperienced aircrews meant aircraft did not arrive on task as expected. For example, during the passage of the landing force from Morotai to Tarakan the convoy was left without fighter protection once or twice; while at other times bomber aircraft did not strike targets as tasked. Against a stronger enemy those kinds of failures might have been costly, but during OBOE they were of little consequence. There was the occasional difference between senior Army and Air Force commanders. Disagreement arose over an Army preference for the RAAF to attack close support targets by reference to grid squares rather than specific features; at Air Commodore Scherger's direction the Air Force complied with the customer's requirements.<sup>28</sup> On another occasion General Milford insisted that the 'Army commander alone' should nominate the type of aircraft, type and weight of weapons and method of attack used against targets in close proximity to troops; this time Bostock and Scherger disagreed and prevailed.<sup>29</sup>

But not too much should be made of those and similar disagreements, which were infrequent and quickly resolved. Indeed, OBOE was notable for the accord between the service leaders, a quality which is essential in joint operations. At the end of the operation General Blamey recommended Air Vice-Marshal Bostock for the award of a DSO for his efforts, commending the RAAF's 'admirable' planning, 'thorough and complete preparations', high order of control and ready and full cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

Where the RAAF did struggle was with its administrative and organisational arrangements for OBOE One especially with the preparation and loading of its landing party. The Air Force was criticised by the commander of the 26th Brigade Group, Brigadier DA Whitehead, for taking too many people and too much equipment on the assault convoy, for overloading many of its vehicles, and for failing to ensure that high priority equipment was readily accessible,<sup>31</sup> criticism which was justified. RAAF officers responsible for unloading and calling forward personnel and equipment from the beachhead suffered by comparison with the more experienced and far better trained Army Beach Group.

The biggest failure, however, was one of intelligence. A prime objective of the Tarakan operation was to secure the airfield for use as the main forward base for future OBOE air operations. Despite the Herculean efforts of airfield construction squadrons and other engineering units, the airstrip could not be brought up to a satisfactory standard in time. Poor soil conditions, the lack of suitable paving materials and a high water table left the airstrip too short, too narrow and dangerously slippery. The runway was described by one pilot as the only airstrip in the world which rose and fell with the tide. It seems probable that the RAAFs planning for Tarakan was adversely affected by leadership difficulties, as in the middle of the operation the commander of the 1st TAF, Air Commodore AH Cobby, was replaced in controversial circumstances by Air Commodore Scherger, who remained in charge for the other two landings. Responding to the criticisms from Tarakan, Scherger quickly reduced the size of his command from 22,000 men to 17,000, so that by Balikpapan the RAAF landing party amounted to only 2,000 compared to 5,000 at Tarakan.

The Australian amphibious landings at the end of the war in the South-West Pacific in some respects do not provide a good model for analysis, at least from an airman's point of view. Any conclusions drawn regarding the landings themselves should be applied with caution because of the absence of enemy air opposition. Three observations are, however, worth making.

Firstly, it should be apparent from this paper that for an airman, there is little that distinguishes an amphibious operation from any other. Decisions such as the timing of the transfer of operational control from ship to shore properly concern surface commanders a great deal, but make little difference to a force which fights over both mediums with equal facility. As long as sound joint warfare procedures are followed, there is nothing special about the air contribution to an amphibious assault. Secondly, Land/Air operations ultimately depend on a good working relationship between the commanders. Making that relationship work usually requires little more than a commitment to the joint objectives, collocated headquarters, and mutual respect for single-service expertise. Those simple but vital procedures were present during the OBOE operations, yet it is extraordinary how often their importance has to be relearned.

The final observation arises from the caveat placed on these conclusions; namely, that any general lessons from the OBOE operations should be drawn with care because of the air supremacy enjoyed by the Australian forces. There is no paradox in that statement. Allied air supremacy was not achieved by chance; and nor was it chance that Japanese soldiers opposing the Australian landings were almost totally denied resupply and reinforcement. The point here is that the successful commander of an amphibious operation is likely to be the one whose vision not only encompasses the beach, but also extends beyond the horizon.

## Question and Answer Session

### John De Teliga

I agree entirely with the very excellent presentation you have just given and I accept that as a result of the efforts of the Air Force a lot of us did stay alive. I would just like to bring it down to our level [as a private soldier]. My experience of the Air Force was an occasional and very ineffective Beaufighter which dropped an occasional 500 pound bomb a long way away and we would all give a derisive cheer.

### Dr Alan Stephens

I think, with respect, there is a parallel between your comments and the reaction of the Dutch settlers at Balikpapan when they returned. I think it is worthwhile comparing what you have said with the response of the German Land Commanders who led the Normandy defence, and the Japanese Commanders who were in the islands in 1945, and their attitude towards their total exposure to Allied Air Forces. Of course Allied pilots missed targets; it is the nature of the business. But if you look at the response, as I say, of the German ground force commanders in Normandy, of most Japanese Commanders in the South-West Pacific, they found Allied air supremacy an almost insurmountable difficulty to deal with. They could not move in the day time, they could not get re-supplied, and Allied pilots did not always miss their targets—a lot of German and Japanese soldiers were killed by strafing and bombing. So really I think you are giving an extremely narrow and unreasonable depiction.

### Major Simkin

My question relates to control of air space. Essentially, as I understand your presentation, Kenney was responsible for the air element of the campaign and Bostock was given the responsibility for the support of the OBOE Amphibious Landings. Was there a delineation in these operations where Kenney was essentially responsible for the de-targeting, and Bostock was responsive to the commander of the amphibious force, be it a naval or land commander, for all targeting priorities in what I would term the amphibious operations area?

### Dr Alan Stephens

That is a good question and the answer is not entirely clear to me from the planning documents I have examined. What I believe the situation to have been is that, as I mentioned, there was a pretty standard approach. The air plan Bostock developed was based on similar air campaign plans used by Kenney where you isolate the battlefield, etc, and gradually narrow the radius, gradually tighten the noose. My understanding is that the plan was developed by the advanced echelon of RAAF command—that was Bostock's command—in consultation with the 1st Tactical Air Force—that was Bostock and Scherger—but it then had a ruler run over it by General Kenney. Really, the Australians were still working at the tactical level. The targeting priorities would have been, in the first instance, proposed by Bostock and Scherger, but authorised by General Kenney and then sent back to Morotai to the Advanced Headquarters and the plan implemented.

Some of the bombing was, as I mentioned, 3,000 kilometres from the objective area, and was conducted by United States Army Air Force Heavy Bombers under Kenney's direct control from the Far East Air Force as well as from heavy bombers of the 13th Air Force which Kenney had allocated to Air Vice Marshal Bostock for OBOE.

At the operational level of war Kenney dominated planning. Even though Bostock, for OBOE, was nominally an operational level commander, really that had all been set and he was just filling in the tactical details, I believe.

## **Graham Horn**

You have made the comment that from an airman's point of view an amphibious target was really no different to a land target. Could you please explain that comment.

## **Dr Alan Stephens**

The execution of a particular mission will be very much shaped by the nature of the target, whether it is oil storage tanks at Balikpapan or a reinforcement convoy coming down from the north. But my point there was less about targets than about the planning and use of forces in amphibious operations. I think for surface forces—the army and the navy—very important and complex issues arise, such as where is the commander of the operation to be located and at what point does control transfer from one service to the other. The actual crossing of the beach in particular is clearly a complex and dangerous period. For the Air Force, it is just not a consideration. You just simply apply your weapons systems to the target requested by the user, and you'll have specialist units for maritime strike or land strike. But as I mentioned, the actual organisation and planning is essentially not affected.

## **General Cape**

Sorry to come again, but may I make two comments? Firstly, in relation to the allocation of resources in the early part of the New Guinea campaign. The difference between the experience that the AIF had in the Middle East and New Guinea was so fundamental, and the situation was so different in relation to communications and targeting. The first thing we discovered was that those silly soldiers who wanted to have 'penny-packets' of air power allotted to them were hopelessly out of the picture. The fundamental lesson of 1942 and 1943 in New Guinea was that all available air resources needed to be under centralised control in support of the army and planned on a truly joint basis between General Herring's Headquarters and General Whitehead's Headquarters. There is no question in my mind that the allocation of air power in penny-packets under the New Guinea circumstances would have been a disaster in Borneo.

Second comment. In relation to OBOE Six, it was implicit in what you said but I think that it is terribly important to remember, that because of the situation with the Tarakan strip, the only air support we had was basically heavy bombers. I can assure you from personal experience that the long flight to get over the target area in a B24, then doing a few hours as an airborne observer, and then heading back, was not funny. All the immediate operations in support of the landing and follow-on operations at Balikpapan were done without fighter and lighter type aircraft which made the whole situation very tricky. Thank you.

## **Dr Alan Stephens**

I think it's worth mentioning that General Cape was one of the army air liaison officers I referred to and I think the establishment of that group was one of the minor success stories of joint operations during World War II. It is instructive to look back on the strength of the RAAF, say in 1939: 250 aircraft, everyone of which was obsolescent, 3,000 people, and very primitive arrangements for controlling close air support for troops in contact. And yet by 1944, through the introduction of groups like the ALOs, I think the forces were generally operating at a quite sophisticated and certainly very effective and very good joint level of operations. It is easy to overlook the fact that this was all done in an extremely compressed time frame.

## **Colonel Dorney**

I would just like to have a few words about convoy protection. I will give the advice of my mother, 'you should never get on a ship unless you've got air superiority or at least parity'. I am referring back to the 1940s on the way to Greece with the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, and we had eight ships in the convoy and we lost two of them. We heard later that one of them had all the spare parts for the aeroplanes which we never saw in Greece anyway. And



coming away from Greece I was with the 2nd/7th Battalion on the *Costa Rica*, still without air support. And the *Costa Rica* was sunk and we had to jump onto Destroyers to get off. Now compared with that and the later operations at Finschhafen, Lae and Morotai, these later landings were a piece of cake because we had air superiority. But all I would like to leave you with is the good advice of my mother—'never go in a ship unless you've got air superiority'.

### **Dr Alan Stephens**

If I could conclude with a comment on that, and on what I think was one of the most important air contributions to amphibious operations. I think General Kenney's major task and major contribution was to convince General MacArthur of the importance of achieving air supremacy and then taking the air campaign from there. MacArthur, as you probably recall, was somewhat wary of Air Forces after his unhappy experience prior to his arrival in Australia. General Brett, I think, had not been running the air war in Australia all that well, prior to MacArthur's arrival. Kenney was very aware that he had two jobs. The first one was to convince MacArthur of his, Kenney's, absolute loyalty to MacArthur and his absolute commitment to supporting the surface campaign. And I think there was never any question in the South-West Pacific that airmen understood their role was to support that campaign. The second achievement by Kenney then, was to make that plan work; and he did it by, in the first instance, applying his forces so that convoys could sail during OBOE completely free from fear of attack by Japanese aircraft.



## Endnotes

1. Quoted in Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate (eds), *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Vol IV, 'The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan, August 1942 to July 1944', Office of Air Force History, Washington, 1983, p 119. The commander of the USAAF was General HH 'Hap' Arnold.
2. Gavin Long, *The Six Years War*, AWM and AGPS, Canberra, 1973, pp 251, 454.
3. George Odgers, *Air War Against Japan, 1943-1945*, AWM, Canberra, 1968, p 363.
4. See for example No 2 Squadron Unit History, 1945, RAAF Historical Section (RHS), Canberra.
5. Odgers, op cit, pp 336, 343.
6. Operational units of the Royal New Zealand Air Force were also incorporated into the AAF on 15 June 1944.
7. See Vincent Orange, *Coringham*, Center for Air Force History, Washington, 1992. Unfortunately the working relationship between Montgomery and Coningham deteriorated as the war progressed, victories were gained and egos inflated.
8. Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns*, AWM, Canberra, 1963, p 461.
9. Odgers, op cit, pp 498-9.
10. War Cabinet Minutes, Weekly Progress Reports by CNS, the C-in-C of the AMF and the CAS, November 1944 to June 1945, RHS.
11. RAAF Command, Report of OBOE ONE Operation, May 1945, RHS.
12. Odgers, op cit, p 452.
13. Ibid, p.454.
14. RAAF Command, Report of OBOE ONE Operation, May 1945, RHS: Long, *The Six Years War*, p 447.
15. Summary of Air Operations in Support of OBOE SIX, undated, RHS.
16. Craven and Cate, op cit, p 468.
17. Odgers, op cit, p 468.
18. George C Kenney, General Kenney Reports, Office of Air Force History, Washington, 1987, pp 556-7.
19. Odgers, op cit, p 484.
20. Long, *The Six Years War*, p 466. General Morshead was commander of 1 Australian Corps, General Milford of the 7th Australian Division.
21. Summary of Air Operations in Support of OBOE Six undated, RHS; RAAF Command, Report on OBOE Six Operation, June 1945, RHS.
22. RAAF Command, Report of OBOE One Operation, May 1945, RHS. Close support was also available from naval gunfire, field artillery and battalion mortars.
23. Long, *The Six Years War*, p 452.
24. See Nicola Baker, *More Than Little Heroes*, SDSC, Canberra, 1994, p 127.
25. Some documents refer to the SAC as the 'Commander Support Aircraft (CSA)'.  
26. Notes on Air Support Operation OBOE ONE, Adv HQ, 1 Aust Corps, 9-4-45, RHS.
27. Odgers, op cit, p 486.
28. Harry Rayner, *Scherger*, AWM, Canberra, 1984, p 89.
29. Rayner, op cit, p 91: see also Long, *The Final Campaigns*, pp.545-6.
30. CRS A5954, Box 238, Australian Archives.
31. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 450.

# ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

## ***THE LABUAN ISLAND AND BRUNEI BAY OPERATIONS*** **Gary Waters**

The Montclair operations formed part of the Allied plans to clear Japanese-occupied territories in the South-West Pacific. The operations involved the re-occupation of the western Visayan-Mindanao-Borneo-Netherlands East Indies area, with the plan being prepared on 25 February 1945.<sup>1</sup> By 17 April 1945, a major phase of Montclair—the Victor phase—had been largely completed and it was time to launch the OBOE phase. The objectives of OBOE were to seize Java, destroy enemy forces in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), re-establish the NEI government in its capital, and establish a base for subsequent operations against Japanese forces throughout the area.

Although the original intention was to conduct six distinct operations as part of the OBOE phase, only three were carried out—OBOEs One, Six and Two. OBOE One began on 1 May 1945, and although Tarakan Island was taken, the airfield on the island could not be used for extensive air operations. Use of Tarakan airfield was a fundamental assumption in planning for OBOE Six which centred on Labuan/Brunei Bay (and began on 10 June) and OBOE Two—Balikpapan (which began on 1 July). In fact, air forces were supposed to be established on Tarakan by 7 May, but due to problems in preparing the airstrip, Tarakan airfield was not available for air operations until 30 June (almost eight weeks late). Because air support for ground operations over that period could not be provided by aircraft from Tarakan, distant bases had to be used, with all the attendant difficulties that carried.

The aim of this Paper is to discuss the conduct of OBOE Six. The Paper begins with an overview of the plan, the objective and concept of the air operation, before discussing the phases of the air campaign. Clear observations arise for the provision of air support and fighter control, both of which are discussed in some detail.

Eight days after OBOE One started, the fighting in Europe ended. For the Australians in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA), the fighting still had a long way to run after 8 May. It was important that OBOE Six be completed on time as some of the assault shipping forces and ground force elements had to be released for OBOE Two—the Balikpapan operation. The Objective Area (OA) for the Labuan/Brunei Bay operation was to extend almost 300 kilometres along the north-west coast of Borneo (from Miri in the south to Jesselton<sup>2</sup> in the north). The object was to secure Labuan Island and Brunei Bay to ensure uninterrupted air and naval operations to help seize Miri-Lutong and Seria.<sup>3</sup>

The 500 square miles (1,295 square kilometres) of sheltered Brunei Bay provided the best anchorage in the area. Establishment of air and naval facilities there would complete a chain of mutually-supporting bases, some 2,500 kilometres long, which would allow Allied air and naval cover to be provided along the coast from Singapore to Shanghai. As well, Japanese overland Lines of Communication (LOCs) and escape routes into Indochina and Malaya could be interdicted. Moreover, Brunei was at the geographical centre of enemy occupied areas—including Sulawesi, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Malaya and Indochina.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the area, road infrastructure was poor, but the sea and rivers provided reasonable means of movement. Also, at low tide, the beach could be used. Labuan Island commands the northern and southern seaward entrances to Brunei Bay. The island measures 22 kilometres (north-south) by 10 kilometres (east-west). Labuan township and its port of Victoria Harbour are sited in the south-east corner of the island. Two airfields (built by the Japanese) were in the south but both had been damaged by bombing. The largest airfield offered a strip that was 4,000 metres long. The smaller airfield known as Timbalai, just five degrees from the equator, was not planned to be used by the Allies.

Fundamental to overall mission success would be the ability of the air forces to support the amphibious landings and subsequent land operations. As Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was to observe after the operation:

the conduct of air operations was generally satisfactory and it was apparent that commanders of wings and squadrons had benefited as a result of experience during the OBOE One operation.<sup>5</sup>

Bostock went on to summarise the two worst problems experienced during OBOE Six, in relation to air operations. On Z-2 (8 June), B.24 Liberators of 13th Air Force failed to obtain prior permission to bomb, which was subsequently referred to as a 'serious breach of combined operations procedures'.<sup>6</sup> The second problem arose when No 80 Wing did not provide dusk cover for the convoy because the commander of the wing decided not to mount the mission despite clear orders to do so.

On the positive side, the loading at Morotai was far more orderly than had been the case for OBOE One; although difficulties were still experienced in the OA—such as difficult beach conditions and excessive numbers of vehicles.

No 110 Mobile Fighter Control Unit (MFCU), which was at Morotai, was supposed to be attached to No 80 Wing for deployment to Labuan. However, because of depleted equipment and lack of personnel, it was unable to be deployed and No 111 MFCU deployed instead. No 111 MFCU did not arrive in Morotai until two days before the convoy departed for Labuan.

In his concluding comments in the foreword to the OBOE Six report, AVM Bostock stated that General MacArthur was delighted with the results of OBOE Six and had indicated to his senior commanders that 'the execution of the Brunei Bay operation has been flawless'.<sup>7</sup>

USN Task Group 78.1 provided the convoy. The 230 vessels sailed in different echelons (one from Tarakan, one from Leyte, and several others from Morotai), with the main echelon (consisting of 76 vessels) departing Morotai on 4 June. The main group suffered three nights of storms en route to Labuan; conditions were made worse because the majority of troops were accommodated on open decks.

MacArthur's Operation Instruction issued on 21 April listed the aims for the task force as being: to establish an advanced fleet base in Brunei Bay, to recover and protect oil and rubber resources, and to re-establish British Government control. The 1st Australian Corps (9th Division less 26th Brigade Group) was given the task.<sup>8</sup>

It was to be a three-phase operation as follows:

- Neutralise Japanese airfields so that enemy aircraft would not oppose Allied landings, and destroy defence installations in the OA .
- Conduct multiple landings on Labuan Island and near Brunei town; secure the airfield on Labuan; and, from Labuan, conduct further landings along the north-west coast to secure Brunei Bay from the north.
- Consolidate the OA; establish the advanced fleet base; conduct shore-to-shore operations south of Miri; protect and develop oil and rubber resources; and re-establish British civil administration.<sup>9</sup>

A beach 1400 metres long (code-named Brown Beach) at Hamilton Point in Victoria Harbour afforded the best site for a landing. At the same time as Brown Beach was secured, an overland assault would be needed to capture the wharves and jetties at Yellow Beach (inside the bay near Brooketon) and another amphibious landing on Muara Island (to clear Japanese troops).

For the assault on Yellow Beach, a landing would be made first at Green Beach, on the other side of the peninsula. On Muara Island, the best beach from which to operate was at Red

Beach, but first a landing would have to be made on White Beach, followed by an overland assault on Red Beach. Red Beach would provide a transshipment point for forces and equipment moving to Yellow Beach, on the mainland. All landings were to be made on Z-day, 10 June 1945.<sup>10</sup>

Enemy reaction at the amphibious landing sites was expected to be similar to that at Tarakan. Hence, Japanese forces were expected to position themselves on the high ground behind the beaches and to use mines along roads and on the airfields. Booby traps could be expected in the town areas.

Because OBOE Six posed a greater threat to Japan's LOCs with its southern bases than did OBOE One, the possibility of air attacks from French Indochina, Malaya or Sumatra was always likely. Enemy operational air strength was:<sup>11</sup>

	<b>F</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b>2EB</b>	<b>F/P</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>Total</b>
Borneo	3	-	-	8	-	11
Sulawesi	8	-	-	5	2	15
Java & Lesser Sundas	15	-	14	18	6	53
<b>Total</b>						<b>79</b>

In the area of potential support, the strengths were as follows:

	<b>F</b>	<b>SEB</b>	<b>2EB</b>	<b>F/P</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>Total</b>
French Indochina	40	-	22	14	10	86
Sumatra	70	-	-	-	5	75
Malaya, Burma, Thailand	74	15	10	9	13	121
<b>Total</b>						<b>282</b>

LEGEND: F: Fighters  
SEB: Single Engine Bombers  
2EB: Twin Engine Bombers

F/P: Float Planes  
R: Reconnaissance Aircraft

For humanitarian reasons, and to make the subsequent task of rebuilding easier, the following areas and installations were not to be attacked if possible: piers and jetties, main roads on Labuan Island, POW and internee camps, water installations, civil and military hospitals, oil producing plants at Miri and Seria, and Brunei town (unless contrary orders were given by Advanced Headquarters, RAAF Command). Notwithstanding these exclusions, if any installation or area could be used to hamper operations of the assault forces, it could be attacked.

There were also operating restrictions on aircraft. Firstly, they were to avoid low-flying over, or up and down, waters in the vicinity of friendly surface craft. Secondly, they were prohibited from attacking surface craft after 6 June unless specifically authorised by Commander Support Aircraft (CSA)<sup>12</sup> (as PT boats would be operating in the Brunei Bay area). Additionally, aircrews were advised that Naval Observation aircraft would be operating in the OA from 8 June. Also, aircrew were advised to clear and test guns only over areas not occupied by friendly forces.

The OA was divided into two sectors at the parallel 5 degrees 10 minutes North. Close support in the southern sector was provided by 13th Air Force and in the northern sector, by 1st TAF. As formations arrived to provide direct support, the flight leader reported to CSA the number and type of aircraft in the formation, their position and altitude, time available on station, and type of bombs carried.<sup>13</sup>

Aircraft would orbit specific points ('Baker' in the north, 'Easy' in the south) until directed to targets by CSA. Flight leaders reported completion of mission and results to CSA, prior to their departure from the OA. CSA (Afloat) provided coordination between air and naval strikes—suspending Naval Gunfire Support (NGS) as necessary or determining minimum altitude for aircraft attack.

Map references were to accord with the Standard Target Designator Grid (four figures and one letter). Air Support Parties (ASPs)<sup>14</sup> passed requests to CSA who, in turn, briefed the pilots. If artillery or mortar smoke was used to indicate targets, CSA would advise pilots by saying 'Splash ... seconds'.<sup>15</sup>

The reference point for fighter direction was Kuraman Island lighthouse (5 degrees 13 minutes north, 115 degrees 8 minutes east), code-named 'SARAH'. All radar contacts were reported by bearing and distance in nautical miles from 'SARAH'.

Command of all amphibious attacks rested with Commander Naval Task Force who commanded the operation until the landing force was established ashore; then command passed to the Commanding Officer of the landing force.<sup>16</sup> Transfer of command was agreed to by both commanders, all subordinate commanders were notified, and a signal was sent to Headquarters 9 Division.

General Officer Commanding (GOC) OBOE Six was Major General Wootten, Air Support was under the control of Air Vice-Marshal Bostock (AOC-in-C RAAF Command), GOC 20th Brigade was Brigadier Windeyer, GOC 24th Brigade was Brigadier Porter, and AOC 1st Tactical Air Force was Air Commodore Scherger.

The intention was that Headquarters 1st TAF would move from Morotai to Labuan and absorb the Command Post. Meanwhile, Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF would remain at Tarakan and Advanced Headquarters RAAF Command would remain at Morotai.<sup>17</sup> RAAF Command was on the same relative level as 1st Australian Corps, and 1st TAF was on the same relative level as 9th Division.

For the RAAF, 1st TAF was the main force, with Australian Commands in North Western Area<sup>18</sup> and Western Area<sup>19</sup> in support, and Northern Area in reserve (but continuing active local operations in Northern Area). 13th Air Force was placed in support of RAAF Command, and bomber groups Nos 90 and 380 from 5th Air Force were available to support 13th Air Force as necessary.<sup>20</sup> 13th Air Force retained operational control of all 13th Air Force units within the area of responsibility of RAAF Command. The whole air effort was under the direction of AOC-in-C RAAF Command. 5th Air Force bomber groups were to be used in pre-assault bombardment of Brunei Bay, while Australian heavy bomber squadrons were to neutralise enemy bases outside the range of Australian and US bombers operating from Morotai and the Philippines.

For the air campaign, three tasks were allocated to RAAF Command:<sup>21</sup> firstly, to neutralise enemy resources capable of interfering in OBOE Six; secondly, to support 9th Division during the assault and consolidation phases; and thirdly, to establish air forces on Labuan Island as soon as the airfield became available.

1st TAF was to establish at the airfield on Labuan, facilities for one fighter wing (No 81 Wing, which comprised Nos 76, 77 and 82 Squadrons of Kittyhawks); one squadron of Spitfires (No 457 Squadron); one Army cooperation wing (No 83); one attack wing (No 86—Beaufighters and Mosquitoes—as well as search aircraft of No 13 Squadron, and Air Sea Rescue aircraft).<sup>22</sup>

The air campaign was in three phases. Prior to Z-3 (7 June), air operations neutralised enemy airfields, blockaded enemy sea lanes, destroyed targets of military importance in the OA, and protected convoys en route to the OA. From Z-3 to Z-1 inclusive, air operations supported underwater demolition teams, protected naval forces in the OA, protected convoys en route to the OA, provided fighter defence of the OA, destroyed targets of military importance in the OA, and provided air observation to locate targets for Naval Gunfire Support (NGS). From Z-Day (10 June), air operations provided direct air support, convoy protection, and fighter defence of the OA.

## Phase One

(Prior to 7 June) During the pre-assault bombing phase, attacks were directed against Jesselton, Sibul, Bintulu, Kuching, Keningau, Brunei, Brooketon, Miri, Seria, and Pontianak.<sup>23</sup>

On 3 May, Victoria town on Labuan Island and Brooketon were attacked by Lightnings, Venturas and Mitchells.<sup>24</sup> Targets included buildings, barges and small shipping. Two days later the first attack (with napalm) occurred in the Miri-Seria area and on 12 May, the first attacks against targets on Muara Island were conducted (also with napalm). On the 12th, the RDF station on Labuan was destroyed by P.38 Lightnings.

On 15 May, Liberators of No 82 Wing bombed Manggar (for OBOE Two) and also dropped leaflets—their main task until then had been to strike targets in Sulawesi, such as Kendari and Menado. They were also to operate air observer aircraft from Palawan in the Philippines. In early June, Nos 21 and 24 Squadrons moved to Morotai, followed later by No 23 Squadron.<sup>25</sup> A detachment of 21 Squadron was based at Palawan (which had been captured in February) to support the Labuan Island and Brunei Bay operations.<sup>26</sup>

Targets on the north-west and north-east coasts of Borneo were attacked for 15 to 20 days prior to the landings. Priority was afforded airfields throughout the Sulawesi-Borneo area from 7 June. For two nights prior to 10 June, nine aircraft patrolled the areas.

North Western Area (NWA) and Western Area squadrons (both flying from Australia) attacked eastern Java and southern Sulawesi to support OBOE Six. NWA aircraft also laid mines and maintained an air blockade of Macassar Strait, Celebes, Arafura, Timor, Banda and Flores Seas.<sup>27</sup> The Catalinas mined Surabaya harbour and Banka Strait. Airfields at Malang (in Java) and many others on Sulawesi were attacked by Catalinas and Liberators. No 20 Squadron Catalinas mined Hong Kong harbour on the night of 1 June.

No 25 squadron, which had supported the lead up to OBOE One, did not fly at all in May due to spares and maintenance problems; not the least problem being the remoteness of Cunderdin and Corunna Downs in north-western Australia from facilities on the east coast of Australia.<sup>28</sup> In June, the squadron resumed flying in support of the Labuan and Brunei Bay landings.

1st TAF Beaufighters and Kittyhawks, flying from Sanga Sanga started operating over North Borneo. Sanga Sanga had to be used because Tarakan airfield was still not operable. Parking areas had to be extended prior to Nos 22, 30 and 31 Beaufighter Squadrons deploying to Sanga Sanga, which delayed operations.

On 3 June, six Beaufighters of No 30 Squadron strafed oil tanks at Bangsal, oil derricks and buildings, while six Beaufighters of No 22 Squadron attacked Brunei town, scoring direct hits on buildings. No 76 Squadron, operating Beaufighters and Kitty-hawks, attacked reinforcement routes near Jesselton. The effect of these attacks could not be determined due to the heavy jungle.

There should be little doubt that the preliminary air bombardment that started on 3 May was successful and contributed to the unopposed nature of the landings. A total of 507 sorties was flown in the OA.<sup>29</sup> Due to the unavailability of Tarakan and delays in establishing RAAF Beaufighters at Sanga Sanga, a 'material loss of effort' was suffered;<sup>30</sup> indeed, the Beaufighters were not able to begin operations until 3 June.

The accuracy of the air bombardment during this phase can be attested by the fact that piers and docks, which were restricted targets, were not damaged, despite the destruction of targets in their immediate vicinity. Bombing attacks extended to Pelong Rock, Brunei Town and Weston throughout May and on the 30th, the Tagai sawmill was extensively damaged. On 5 June, the runway at Timbalai was hit by Liberators. Coastal defences at Brunei Bluff were attacked on 6 June.



In the Miri-Seria area, the Miri airfield was attacked several times, as was the township. Barracks and defences at Seria and Lutong were hit and oil fires started in the refinery. Buildings at Beaufort and Kuala Belait were destroyed. Four Beaufighters destroyed a bridge over the Padas River on 4 June.

Attacks against airfields were not confined to the airstrips, but also included attacks on personnel, supply areas and other airfield facilities in the vicinity. Radar installations and nearby towns were also attacked. RAAF Liberators and 13th Air Force Liberators, Mitchells and Lightnings flew 948 sorties against airfield targets.<sup>31</sup> Another 216 sorties<sup>32</sup> were flown between 15 May and 11 June, with attacks conducted against ships, docks and waterfront areas.

Despite the difficulty in ascertaining the direct effects of bombing Japanese reinforcement areas and concentration points, the OA was not reinforced and thus the missions were deemed a success.<sup>33</sup> The area from Miri to Kudat and east to Tawao was also attacked. In all, 1,414 sorties were flown against Japanese reinforcement routes.<sup>34</sup> Pre-assault bombardment had been running from 3 May to 5 June. From 5 June, the intensity of bombing increased substantially. At the end of phase one, a total of 3,088 sorties had been flown.<sup>35</sup>

### **Phase Two (7-9 June)**

The amphibious assaults were preceded by minesweeping operations and air and naval bombardment from 7 June. Spotting for NGS was provided by a Kingfisher and six Mitchells of 13th Air Force over the Brunei area, while Beaufighters carried out similar duties over Labuan.

During phase two, air operations were well-executed, and correct reporting procedures were followed on all but two occasions. Aircraft were to be equipped with standard Target Designator Grid maps. On 7 June, the Liberator crews did not carry the standard maps and had to report to CSA in latitude and longitude, which made coordination with NGS difficult. On the next day, 13th Air Force Liberators bombed targets in the immediate vicinity of underwater demolition teams. The aircraft failed to indicate their presence and did not obtain CSA's permission to prosecute the attacks. This was in direct contravention of standing orders (referred to earlier by AVM Bostock). The after-action report indicates 'appropriate action has been taken to prevent a recurrence'.<sup>36</sup>

No 77 Wing Beaufighters provided on-call support over the OA: one task was to cover the underwater demolition teams that were clearing obstacles prior to the landing. The teams were working within 100 metres of Japanese forces who were attacked successfully by the Beaufighters.<sup>37</sup> The procedures for CSA to call in Beaufighter strikes to support the underwater demolition teams were not fully understood aboard the Advanced Headquarters ship which wasted some of the air effort. On 9 June, during a four-ship attack on Beaufort, No 30 Squadron lost a Beaufighter.<sup>38</sup>

Fighter defence of the OA by 13th Air Force Lightnings from Palawan was very good. Once the aircraft had been relieved on-station, they strafed specific targets just prior to their departure from the OA. In particular, barges and installations were attacked in this manner.

The success of the Support Air Observers was such that the after-action report remarked on their accuracy and their reliable reports, and commented that 'their presence in the area was fully justified'.<sup>39</sup> Their main tasks were to search for enemy ground movement and forces, reconnoitre reinforcement and withdrawal routes, search for enemy barges and suicide craft, and direct fighter and strike aircraft that had been diverted from previously briefed targets.

### Phase Three (From 10 June)

Simultaneous landings were made on 10 June in the Muara-Brooketon area using 20th Brigade (White Beach on Muara Island at 0915 and Green Beach on Brunei Bluff at 0918) and on Labuan Island using 24th Brigade (Brown Beach, at 0914).<sup>40</sup> The landings were unopposed. In Michael Nelmes' words: 'There was no anti-aircraft fire and almost no resistance to the landing barges'.<sup>41</sup> 2/17th Battalion crossed the peninsula from Green Beach and captured Yellow Beach at 1230.

The first air bombardment on assault day involved six 13th Air Force and two RAAF squadrons of Liberators (seven aircraft from No 23 Squadron and seven aircraft from Nos 21/24 Squadrons). The aircraft dropped anti-personnel bombs immediately behind the beach-heads. The RAAF Liberators bombed from 7,000 feet, just before 0800, with all bombs except three hitting their targets.<sup>42</sup> Due to mechanical problems with the leading bomb aimer's bombsight, one squadron was unable to bomb; however, once the problem had been rectified, the squadron bombed an alternative target. Another Liberator conducted pre-assault reconnaissance of Brown Beach to determine the extent of enemy resistance—there was none on the beach.

1st TAF Beaufighters and 13th Air Force Mitchells provided direct air support over the Australian soldiers after the landings. Aircraft maintained Combat Air Patrol (CAP) between 0800 and 1600 hours daily, in flights of six. The Beaufighters were relieved every 90 minutes and the Mitchells every two hours.

While these aircraft had been tasked to provide Close Air Support (CAIRS), the light opposition on the ground allowed the aircraft to be redirected on to secondary targets. They were used (in similar fashion to the Lightnings in phase two) to attack staging points along the Japanese reinforcement routes. For example, No 31 Squadron Beaufighters attacked barracks and roads and a railway bridge at Papar.

At no time did any aircraft leave the OA with unexpended bombs or ammunition that had been allocated for use within the OA, as had happened at Tarakan. In particular, the use of Beaufighters resulted in the destruction of railway bridges between Weston and Papar River.

The six Beaufighters of No 77 Wing that maintained standing patrols over Labuan on 10 June eliminated many pockets of resistance and were praised by the Army for 'the accuracy, effectiveness and cooperation of their work'.<sup>43</sup>

The first RAAF member ashore at Labuan was a safehand courier (just nine minutes after the assault) and at 1015, a detachment of No 5 Bomb Disposal Unit arrived to assist Army bomb disposal section in 'delousing' operations on mines, booby traps and bombs.

Air Vice-Marshal Bostock and Air Commodore Scherger were aboard the USS *Rocky Mount*. Scherger, and his two Group Captains Murdoch<sup>44</sup> and Duncan<sup>45</sup> established their command post on 10 June; the airstrip was secured that day and repair work began the next day. Weather conditions were ideal. The light opposition led the historian George Odgers to say that 'merit of the assault lay more in its excellent organisation than on the achievement of results against enemy forces'.<sup>46</sup>

From 10 June, increasing numbers of aircraft were used for direct support as ground forces met resistance on their inland march. Some attacks were conducted within 100 metres of forward positions of friendly forces, yet there were no casualties from air attack during this period. Beaufighters and Mitchells on air alert demonstrated the value of air power when closely coordinated with the ground commander's plan.

During the first three days of the landings and subsequent operations, Army Air Liaison Officers, flying in RAAF Liberators, provided a description of the battle and continual updates on enemy and Allied force dispositions.



Muara Island and Brooketon were captured on the 10th, and Brunei town was captured on the evening of 13 June. Ten days later, 2/13 Battalion landed unopposed at Lutong and occupied Miri. Several beachheads were secured subsequently at Mempakul, Sabang and Kibidang in the move towards Beaufort.<sup>47</sup> By 27 June, Beaufort had been captured by the Australians. Japanese counterattacks were repulsed and from 6 July, the Australians advanced northward, capturing Papar on the 12th.

Just before Miri was captured by 2/13 Battalion, over 100 Indian POWs were killed at Kuala Belait. Despite the capture of Miri, the Japanese were not far away and after the general surrender by Japan, another 28 civilian hostages, who were held just outside Miri, were shot.<sup>48</sup> Reports indicate that there were still others who were executed. In fact, the Japanese were forced to exhume the bodies and take them to Miri. Subsequently, a day of public mourning took place, involving an Australian Christian, a Moslem Haji, an Indian and a Chinese—such had been the diverse nature of the hostages who were executed.<sup>49</sup> Another grim tale to emerge—this time from Jesselton—was that because local Chinese had caused the death of 40 Japanese troops just outside the town, some 1,000 local inhabitants, including women and children, were massacred in retaliation.<sup>50</sup>

Naval and air opposition was always expected to be minimal to negligible, and on the ground, only 650 troops were expected on Labuan. In addition, 1,550 ground troops were expected around Seria and Miri, and 6,600 around Jesselton.<sup>51</sup> These estimates and predictions proved to be highly accurate. For example, during the landings on 10 June, only one Japanese aircraft interfered—dropping one bomb which missed a landing craft.

With the invasion of Balikpapan drawing near, 13th Air Force Lightnings had to deploy to Sanga Sanga. Thus, three days into OBOE Six, No 77 Wing Beaufighters and No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks had to move to Morotai to make room for the Lightnings. The RAAF aircraft were supposed to move to Tarakan, but it was still not ready. As a consequence, CAIRS had to be provided by 13th Air Force aircraft from Palawan Island during the fourth day. One aspect of the 13th Air Force provision of CAIRS was that the aircraft remained on ground alert at Palawan until requested by CSA to prosecute a strike.<sup>52</sup>

On 17 June, No 76 Squadron aircraft landed at Labuan and began operations the next day. The two aircraft destroyed two enemy aircraft on the ground at Keningau.<sup>53</sup> Twelve Spitfires of No 457 Squadron left Morotai on 17 June, refuelled at Zamboanga and landed at Palawan. They landed at Labuan the next day, with two crashing on the rough strip. The remaining aircraft began operations on 19 June, the same day that Auster reconnaissance aircraft provided much needed assistance to the Army operations at Labuan, Weston and Beaufort.

Six Austers of No 16 AOP (Air Observation Post) had been with the main convoy—the intention being to assemble them on the beach at Labuan, for immediate operations. They were on the beach by 1800 hours on the 10th. Work began on a temporary strip about 400 metres from the beach and the aircraft were assembled by 1600 on 11 June. Unfortunately, the 2/7th Field Company engineers were given a higher priority task than making ready an airstrip. They had to repair road surfaces that had been destroyed by retreating Japanese troops. Yet, the Army engineers were still able to prepare the strip rapidly and at 1440 hours on 12 June, the first Auster took-off.

Three RAAF personnel accompanied the assault forces at Muara Island to conduct a ground reconnaissance for an airstrip for the Austers. However, the overwhelming success of the Army in its advance to Brooketon, negated that and a site was selected and prepared at Brooketon instead. (It was ready on 11 June, after only one and a half hours work.) Austers began operations from Brooketon on the 13th. On 17 June, the Brunei strip was ready and the two Labuan Austers that were operating from Brooketon were moved to Brunei.

Japanese aircraft approached Labuan on the nights of 13-14 and 14-15 June, and both were shot down, one in air-to-air combat (by an American night fighter) and one by AA guns. On 20 June, two Spitfires of No 457 Squadron engaged in the squadron's first air combat since 1943, and shot down a Dinah, east of Labuan.<sup>54</sup> The Dinah was a Mitsubishi Ki-46 Type 100 Command Reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>55</sup>

On Labuan, the Japanese occupied bunkers, trenches and tunnels in a heavy jungle area and along a ridge. On 16 June, the positions were attacked heavily by air, naval and artillery bombardment. This continued on 17 and 18 June, until the 19th when Mitchell bombers in low-level attacks dropped Napalm and 500 pound High Explosive bombs. That night the enemy staged a break-out from their defensive positions, and mounted several suicide attacks. Before dawn on 21 June, 100 Japanese, each with an already fused aerial bomb, made their way towards the airfield and beach areas. Several skirmishes resulted, but all Japanese were either killed or captured by 0730, and by 1300 hours the remainder of the Japanese in the defensive pocket were routed. In the skirmishes at the airfield and on the beach, 14 Allied personnel were killed and 24 wounded. The enemy lost 49 killed and one wounded. In the ensuing fight in the defensive pocket, 90 more Japanese were killed.<sup>56</sup>

The landing at Lutong was made on the 23rd, and Miri field was captured that day. No 4 Squadron Wirraways had deployed to Labuan that same day and provided tactical reconnaissance, while Labuan Kittyhawks and Spitfires covered the Lutong landing. No 82 Squadron began operations from Labuan on 26 June, providing CAIRS; the same day that a Kittyhawk from No 76 Squadron was lost during a successful attack against a fuel dump and camouflaged huts at Keningau airfield. On 29 June, No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks again attacked the airfield and destroyed a Dinah, with its crew on board.

In the attack on Lutong, certain targets were prohibited from being attacked from the air. They included the Lutong oil refinery, the bridge over Miri River, wharves, public utilities, hospitals, churches and mosques. Additionally, the beaches were not to be cratered.<sup>57</sup>

No 77 Squadron aircraft arrived at Labuan on 30 June and began operations on 3 July against Keningau. That day, Kittyhawks (from Nos 77 and 82 Squadrons) and Spitfires (from No 457 Squadron) strafed and bombed Sapong. From 4-6 July, Kittyhawks, Spitfires, Wirraways and Austers (of No 81 Wing) flew 230 sorties in covering 9th Division. A successful air-sea rescue (ASR) was carried out by a Catalina on 7 July, to rescue a downed Kittyhawk pilot who had been shot down the day before.<sup>58</sup> On 13 July, No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks attacked the Riam road and Tengoa River areas—losing their second pilot since arriving at Labuan.

No 86 (Attack) Wing was due to arrive at Labuan on 25 June, but the first aircraft did not arrive until 23 July, when the lengthening of the airstrip was completed, to cater for the Wing's Mosquitoes. No 1 Squadron Mosquitoes had been trained in low-level intruder work and only took part in one operation before the war ended. No 93 Squadron Beaufighters took part in only two operations, one of which involved rocket attacks against craft at the mouth of the Tabuan River on 7 August, where one aircraft was lost.<sup>59</sup>

The extensive nature of the air effort after 10 June can be ascertained through the following statistics. On 11 June alone, 66 Lightnings, six Venturas, 14 Liberators, 18 Mitchells and 30 Beaufighters attacked OBOE Six targets. On the next day, 24 Mitchells and 36 Beaufighters prosecuted attacks. These attacks continued until 20 June, with Kittyhawks being used from the 18th and Spitfires from the 19th.<sup>60</sup>

On 8 August, No 82 Squadron Kittyhawks destroyed three Oscars<sup>61</sup> that were preparing to take off from Kuching airfield. Kuching was 750 kilometres from Labuan and the Kittyhawks were airborne for four hours forty minutes, exceeding the accepted sortie duration time.<sup>62</sup> That day, No 1 Squadron Mosquitoes strafed barges and barracks near Kuching, but lost an aircraft, with both aircrew killed. RAAF Command terminated offensive air operations on 14 August.

## Air Support

As a result of problems experienced during the Tarakan operation, the RAAF subsequently reorganised the provision of air support. Air Support Parties (ASPs) were more suitable for attachment to Brigade Headquarters rather than to Battalion Headquarters and a smaller organisation which would be capable of operating and moving on foot was needed at the battalion level. The fluidity of battle during the early stages of an assault, with the probability of frequent enemy contacts, meant that reliable and effective communications were essential. The new organisational structure was as follows:<sup>63</sup>

- Air Support Section (ASS) (as a component of the Air Formation Headquarters tasked with providing air support), would be located at the Air Formation Headquarters, which itself would be located close to the Headquarters of an Army Division. The ASS would contain 30 signals personnel plus several officers. It controlled all direct support, courier, photographic, air observer and ASR aircraft.
- Two Air Support Parties would be allocated on the basis of one ASP at each of the two Brigade Headquarters. An ASP would contain 17 signals personnel plus one officer. Officers-in-charge of ASPs would examine all requests for air support to ensure the target description was clear, bomblines were identified, and position of own troops, air-ground signals, and time-on-target were included.
- Four Air Liaison Parties (ALP) would be allocated on the basis of one ALP at each of four battalion headquarters. The ALP would consist of three signals personnel.

This structure was based on a standard tactical deployment of an Australian infantry division. The new ALPs had to be self-contained and capable of operating for seven days without resupply, except in cases of complete breakdown or loss of two personnel.<sup>64</sup>

On Labuan, the ASS was allocated to the 1st TAF control post, two ASPs (Nos 1 and 2) were allocated to 24th and 20th Brigades, respectively, and four ALPs (Nos 1 to 4) were allocated to the infantry battalions: 2/28, 2/43, 2/17 and 2/15 respectively.<sup>65</sup>

Air support requests followed the standard format, which included grid reference, target description, timing, position of friendly troops and special instructions (such as target indicators, coordinating instructions, and alternative targets). Fluorescent panels were not used to indicate bomblines, but yellow fluorescent panels were used to indicate the forward position of Australian troops. This was to prevent any confusion previously associated with complex marking arrangements.

Requests for air support were originated at battalion level and passed by the ALP to the Headquarters ship prior to the establishment of ASPs ashore. Any requests that originated below battalion level were passed to Battalion Headquarters through Army signals channels. Once the ASPs were established, the requests were directed through them, and they liaised with CSA until the ASS was established within the 1st TAF Command Post (CP). The plan was for the ASS and a Mobile Telecommunications Unit (MTU) to be established quickly and to assume control for all support requests. Although the ASS was established on time, the MTU was not sufficiently mobile; consequently establishment of control over the land-based air support net was delayed.

The ALPs proved to be a welcome addition; although calls were still made for more mobility in the ASPs, to allow them to become established more quickly. The ALPs kept the Headquarters ship informed of progress of the land battle and passed, without problem, requests for support and instructions for control.

Labuan is 40 kilometres to the north of the Brunei area. Because of distances involved, two sectors had to be established and control had to be exercised separately until 1st TAF CP was established on Labuan. Transfer of direct air support control (afloat) to control (ashore) occurred as follows:

- RAAF formation leaders reported initially to CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector - aboard USS *Rocky Mount*) and 13th Air Force formation leaders reported to CSA (Afloat, Southern Sector - aboard USS *Nashville*).
- CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector) could exercise control of all direct air support formations in the OA if necessary for coordination purposes.
- CSAs (Ashore) moved from the two Headquarters ships to the two ASPs once the ASPs became operative within the two Brigades.
- CSAs (Ashore) notified their respective ships that they were ready and direct control then passed ashore; although coordinating control still remained with CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector).
- Once ready, AOC 1st TAF assumed control of all direct air support aircraft in the OA, and coordinating control passed to CSA (Ashore), within 1st TAF CP. The two CSAs established within the ASPs were then withdrawn.

Advanced Headquarters RAAF Command (Morotai) allocated targets to 13th Air Force and 1st TAF as necessary. The initial targets were prescribed and included, on Labuan Island: Japanese defensive positions, all buildings in the town area, enemy defences that could enfilade the landing beaches, the airstrip, and radar sites and also coastal defence guns which could interfere with shipping. In the Brunei-Brunei Bluff-Muara Island area, the following targets were designated: naval stores and installations, including all buildings and any underground storage facilities; coastal defence installations and any high ground defences; and all buildings in the Brooketon town area. In addition, napalm and anti-personnel bomb attacks were prosecuted on the Brooketon beachhead area.

Before 1st TAF CP was established, the two sectors still had a dedicated communications channel (referred to as Inter-Commander Support Aeroplanes) to provide coordination between the two headquarters ships. The channel malfunctioned and close coordination was always difficult until the CP began operating.

After the assault landings, all ALPs established communications within 22 minutes (with the first communicating within only seven minutes). Notwithstanding the coordination problem mentioned above, the Headquarters ships exercised satisfactory control of all strikes until the ASPs took over. The ASP with 24th Brigade established full communications within two hours of landing.<sup>66</sup>

There was always going to be a delay with the ASP attached to 20th Brigade, due to the need to offload vehicles on Muara Island for transshipment to Brooketon. The ASP did not land until 1700 on the 10th, due to problems with the LST (first, the anchor jammed in coral and second, the LST became grounded on a sandbank). Consequently, the Air Support Officer established a limited capability to link the ALPs with the USS *Nashville* (Headquarters ship Southern Sector). The ASP finally reached Brigade Headquarters at 1600 on 11 June, and was fully operable by dawn on the following day.

Meanwhile, the ASS accompanied the Divisional Headquarters ashore at 1730 on 10 June and became operable by 0730 hours the next day—almost 24 hours ahead of the ASP in the southern sector. Due to several relocations of the divisional headquarters and consequent moves by the ASS, the ASS had to close down most of its circuits and was not re-established until 1700 hours that day. Consequently, control was not passed ashore until 1100 hours on 12 June.

Due to the problems experienced by one ASP in becoming established (as discussed above), the value of ALPs for immediate operations was clearly demonstrated. The mobility of the ALPs and indeed the redundancy that they afforded the overall system was a valuable observation for the future.

The success of the Command Post notwithstanding, there was an obvious lesson for future operations. Because frequent moves of the CP may be a regular feature of operations, such as Labuan, the ASS needed to adopt different procedures. The ASS, having set up in the first

location, should remain in operation until the CP and air support communications could be re-established in the new location. In other words, half of the ASS could remain and maintain landline communications with the CP and the other half of the ASS until they became re-established. Then the first half of the ASS could join the CP. At Labuan, the CP also established communications with Headquarters 1st TAF at Morotai.

There was an RAAF concern that not all personnel involved in air support operations understood the necessity of ALPs, ASPs and the ASS providing communications to ensure support. The concern was summarised quite dramatically as: 'Those concerned should bear in mind that a decision to delay movement of any part of the Air Support organisation is tantamount to a decision to do without Direct Air Support during the period that the Air Support organisation is inoperative'.<sup>67</sup>

Similar concerns arose over the delays experienced by No 111 MFCU, with the recommendation that 'the establishment of Fighter Control facilities ashore is a matter of urgency and the equipment of the Mobile Fighter Control Unit must be given priority to permit rapid movement when ashore'.<sup>68</sup>

One clear breakdown was in the indication of targets. Support Air Observers (SAOs) were able to recognise targets nominated by CSA, but attack aircraft sometimes had difficulty. The SAOs complained that they should have been able to communicate with the attack aircraft to relay more accurate instructions and corrections for a second run. Procedurally, it was relatively straightforward for the SAOs to do just that, but they did not know that at the time. The SAOs simply needed to obtain approval from CSA to change frequency to the Support Air Direction frequency, and they would have been in direct communication with the attack aircraft.

Transmission with CSA South experienced considerable interference at night, leading to the conclusion that a separate night frequency was needed for long-range transmission.

Eighteen strikes were directed in four days (10-13 June) by the Air Support organisation.<sup>69</sup> The Beaufighters proved to be highly accurate and exercised great care in identifying the target. The Commander of 24 Brigade passed on his personal thanks to the CO and pilots of No 22 Squadron for their CAIRS efforts.<sup>70</sup>

Ten personnel made up the Command Post Party, and once ashore moved several times until a site was allocated. As other units moved in, the CP site became too congested for any expansion or use of radio. Equipment had not arrived and the ASS was not landed until 1730 on 10 June. Thus, communications with USS *Rocky Mount* were not established until the next day. That same day, the CP/ASS moved to a more suitable site; unfortunately the site was approximately 1.5 km from 9th Division Headquarters. This meant that delays were experienced in obtaining divisional decisions on requests for air support and advice to division headquarters was delayed by up to several hours.

Senior staff officers of the CP were allocated personal call signs which improved the responsiveness of the command and control system considerably. Lack of such call signs had posed problems during OBOE One.

Recommendations that flowed from the Labuan experience were:<sup>71</sup>

- A vehicle should accompany the CP team, so that the reconnaissance party can establish a site immediately after landing.
- Additional organic transportation was required to move all the necessary equipment.
- Non-immediate personal gear should be carried in follow-up vehicles.
- Army and RAAF Headquarters should be located adjacent to one another.



## Fighter Control

1st TAF Routine Order No 10 of 20 June 45 called for reports on the move to Labuan.<sup>72</sup> Confusion was experienced during loading, caused by a lack of knowledge by Army loading authorities of the nature of the MFCU equipment. While No 9 Transportation and Movements Office (TMO) provided the loading orders as directed, some instructions were changed by the loading officer, which resulted in confusion and delays for the MFCU. For example, the loading officer ordered some equipment, which he considered to be non-essential, to be left at Morotai for a follow-up convoy. His argument was that it exceeded the limit of tonnage; however, the limit approved by No 9 TMO was sufficient to cover all of No 111 MFCU's equipment.

Some of the equipment left behind consisted of transit cases for radar, transmitting and other technical gear. This gear had been 'mobile-loaded' for the beach assault. However, if necessary, the gear could be packed in the transit cases and floated ashore; thus, the gear could be protectively packed if necessary. Similarly, the gear could be protected from the weather until it became operational. As a consequence of the transit cases being left at Morotai, some technical gear did deteriorate at Labuan due to exposure to weather and contact with salt water.

Another annoying point was that all equipment had been sorted and forwarded for loading in a specific order. Not only did the loading operation fail to maintain the order, but during the offloading, further mixing occurred. Moreover, some of the fragile equipment was damaged. The recommendation from No 111 MFCU was that unit personnel should be responsible for loading and unloading their own equipment.

Despite equipment shortages and delays in setting up at the allocated site (due to a battery of field guns temporarily occupying the MFCU site), the MFCU became operational in 'what was regarded as record time'.<sup>73</sup> However, the unit was forced to move several times before a permanent site was established.

Convoy cover was good; although bad weather prevented fighters from reaching the convoy on two days, but the 13th Air Force P.61 Black Widow nightfighters were on-station according to plan. Fighter cover over the OA was effective, but 13th Air Force had to provide more than planned due to the airfield problems being experienced by 1st TAF (inoperability of Tarakan and forced move from Sanga Sanga to Morotai).

On the first day of convoy cover operations, 1st TAF nightfighters left at 1835 without reason, despite the requirement to provide cover until 1900. On the following morning, dawn cover was provided 20 minutes late. One report indicates that bad weather then prevented 1st TAF aircraft from reaching the convoy to provide cover on subsequent occasions. The after-action report indicates that the unit commander considered that the operation would expose his Spitfires to unwarranted operational hazards, and on his own initiative disobeyed the Operations Instruction. The after-action report stated that: 'This instance of ignorance of the fundamental principles of discipline on the part of a senior officer is inexcusable'.<sup>74</sup>

The time available in the OA for 13th Air Force to neutralise enemy defences was limited; yet, all specified targets were neutralised. No 81 Wing was allotted responsibility for the air defence of the Brunei Bay area from 16 June. No 111 MFCU was responsible for issuing air raid warnings, allocating responsibilities to air and ground defences, and controlling fighters until visual contact with enemy aircraft (E/A) was made. The MFCU controller had the responsibility of coordinating all air and ground defences during daylight. At night, ground defences were permitted unrestricted attack against E/A until 'mid-point' was reached, after which RAAF night fighters could intercept.<sup>75</sup> If RAAF aircraft were unable to reach E/A in time, they would advise No 111 MFCU which would then advise ground defences to maintain their attack.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, a number of pertinent observations can be made. Alert aircraft that had completed their missions over the OA would attack targets of opportunity just prior to their departure from the OA. This demonstrated the basic understanding that having risked an aircraft and crew on a mission, it was not efficient for that aircraft to return home with unexpended weapons. The lesson of Tarakan was well-learned and at Labuan, no aircraft departed the OA with unexpended bombs or ammunition that had been allocated for use within the OA.

RAAF Beaufighters provided CAP over the landings at Labuan Island and Brunei Bay, but once the light opposition on the ground had been ascertained, the aircraft were directed on to secondary targets such as staging points along known reinforcement routes. Again, this demonstrated a flexibility of air power that saw more effective operations being conducted than those that had been planned initially. Later, small pockets of Japanese resistance were eliminated by accurate and effective air attacks.

This flexibility was demonstrated again on 10 June over Labuan, where a RAAF Liberator could not bomb its designated target due to a technical malfunction. Once the malfunction had been rectified, the aircraft attacked an alternate target. While the effects of bombing enemy forces in the jungle could not be determined, the precision of attacks around the piers and docks could be gauged. At Labuan and Brunei Bay, targets in the vicinity of piers and docks were destroyed, yet the restricted areas (piers and docks) remained unscathed. Even though bombing effectiveness could not be measured directly in jungle areas, Japanese positions, once bombed, tended not to be reinforced; hence, the bombing was deemed to be successful.

Enemy resistance on Labuan Island was met by napalm and high explosive attacks by Mitchell bombers. While these air attacks did not destroy the enemy's defensive position, it did force the Japanese to stage a break-out, and they were totally routed by Australian ground forces a little over 24 hours later.

The early bombardment (prior to the landings) was very effective, with only one enemy aircraft appearing over the landing beaches and it did not cause any damage with its bomb. The few instances of Japanese aircraft approaching during OBOE Six resulted in swift action. A US night fighter, a RAAF Spitfire and AAA claimed successes. The Spitfire 'kill' was No 457 Squadron's first air combat since 1943.

During an RAAF attack on 8 August, Kittyhawks destroyed three enemy aircraft on Kuching airfield. The attack, while important, was overshadowed by the fact that the Kittyhawks had been airborne for four hours and forty minutes, which exceeded the accepted sortie duration time. This underscores a point that aircrew are often called upon to take what may be construed as unnecessary risks. The issue that arises here is that the risk of losing aircraft and crews must be balanced against the operational value of the target.

Failure to provide convoy air cover on all occasions did not endear the air forces, especially the RAAF, to those onboard the ships in the convoy. AVM Bostock commented scathingly on one commanding officer's decision not to conduct the mission. Worse still, the CO did not advise higher authority, nor indeed, the convoy. Similarly, failure of 13th Air Force Liberators to obtain prior permission to bomb at Labuan (on 8 June) showed that problems existed with aircrew not being aware of procedures promulgated in Operations Instructions. However, the precision obtained by Beaufighters in attacking Japanese forces on the beach, who were within 100 metres of Australian underwater demolition teams, is worth noting.

The presence of ASR aircraft was welcomed by one Kittyhawk pilot who was shot down on 6 July, and rescued by a Catalina on the 7th. The importance of inspiring confidence in aircrew by providing an ASR capability has been a lesson of note from all conflicts.



Communications were again proven to be essential to minimise the 'friction of war'. Direct air support depended so much on communications and up-to-date information. Communications between ALOs and ASPs would have been beneficial, and while operations were effective and were coordinated, both coordination and effectiveness could have been improved had the Army airborne observer been in direct contact with the ASPs. Another issue worth commenting on here is that despite communications procedures and channels being laid down in operations instructions, too many mistakes occurred. It reflected a notion of 'we will fix it on the day', which is not befitting a professional force.

There was great value in having the trained Army observer airborne, as he understood the situation on the ground and was able to provide up to the minute information to CSA, to allow the CSA to better coordinate direct air support and ground force requirements. Similar value was derived from the RAAF airborne coordinator who either coordinated strike details by radio or led the strike aircraft to their targets. This is indicative of how closely controlled CAIRS and certain BAI missions need to be, to ensure effort is not wasted and friendly lives not endangered unnecessarily. The value of the Support Air Observers (or coordinators) was more pronounced in OBOE Six, which led to specific praise of their efforts in the after-action report.

Complaints were voiced after Tarakan that the Support Air Observers (SAOs) could not communicate directly with the attack aircraft, which reduced responsiveness and effectiveness. At Labuan, these same complaints were again voiced. It is amazing that it was not until after OBOE Six that the issue was clarified. Procedurally, the SAOs could communicate with the attack aircraft—they simply had to obtain approval from the CSA to change frequency to the direct air support net.

It became apparent that information of ground situations, bomblines and direct air support aircraft (formation size, weapons and time-on-target) needed to be passed continually to CSA so that a current tactical air/land picture could be maintained. This tended not to happen and CSA had to request more information continually, with the effect that information would be passed in relatively intense pulses, unnecessarily adding time pressures and undoubtedly, confusion, as large amounts of information—some routine and some priority—had to be processed in short time periods.

Despite problems with communications and information overload, as the rate of advance on the ground increased, the air support system was flexible enough for aircraft to be directed to alternative targets and handed over to different ASPs, thus gaining maximum benefit from the air effort.

Because communications posed several problems during OBOE One, planners appeared to react decisively. By the time of OBOE Six, communications orders reflected strict security guidelines, plans for jamming and deception, and an expectation that the enemy may do likewise. This did not, of course, prevent equipment from malfunctioning and so forth, but it did highlight a deliberate attempt to address the possibility of enemy-induced problems.

It seemed easier for tasks to be allocated to squadrons, rather than to mix forces. While this would have simplified procedures, it may be indicative that planners expected squadrons to have difficulty in operating too closely together. This translates to combined operations as well, where RAAF and USAAF units operated as discrete elements. Again, while this may simplify procedures, it may not be the most effective use of air assets.

As a general observation, ground forces beyond 100 metres of enemy forces under air attack were unable to capitalise on the gains from air attack. Moreover, their organic firepower could not be used in a coordinated fashion with air strikes because it was out of range. Thus, close coordination of air attack was seen to be more critical as friendly forces realised that they needed to be within 100 metres of the enemy positions that were being attacked from the air. Perhaps, the lesson from this is that if air attack is not likely to be concentrated or lethal enough to destroy or rout an enemy, it would seem more appropriate for ground forces to hold their position and 'take on' the enemy. In other words, if friendly ground forces are in a

winning position, it may not be advisable to call in air attack. However, should they be in danger of being overrun, it would seem sensible to withdraw and call in concentrated air strikes.

The resistance of enemy forces inland of Brunei Bay was more significant than had been encountered before and CAIRS missions had to be conducted within 100 metres of friendly troops. It is testament to the accuracy and overall success of the air/land organisation that there were no friendly casualties from air attack. Indeed, the whole OBOE Six operation was testament to an improved air/land coordination which had to be tied to the experience gleaned in taking Tarakan the previous month and virtually minute to minute experience from the current operation. There should be little doubt that rehearsals are a significant force multiplier. In this case, an earlier operation provided the ideal rehearsal.

The reorganisation of air support parties after Tarakan did show that the RAAF could respond at short notice to improved organisational arrangements. Formation of ALPs allowed the RAAF to be more responsive to the fluidity of the situation on the ground, and afforded greater mobility.

So successful was the Labuan-Brunei Bay operation on 10 June that the 1st TAF CP was ashore and the airfield secured that same day. When problems were experienced at Brooketon, when the second ASP was delayed in setting up, ingenuity came to the fore. The Air Support Officer established a limited capability between his ALPs and the USS *Nashville*, which allowed operations to continue for the two days until the ASP was fully operable.

Collocation of Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF and Brigade Headquarters was a continual problem. Even after the obvious lessons for collocation at Tarakan, the CP/ASS was separated from Division Headquarters by 1.5 km, which delayed requests for air support from the Division Headquarters, and delayed the passing of vital advice from the CP/ASS to the Division Headquarters. Allocation of individual call signs to CP senior staff improved responsiveness—another lesson that had been learnt from Tarakan, but this one was applied.

Site locations also posed problems at Labuan-Brunei Bay. Incredibly, the divisional headquarters relocated several times which meant that the ASS had to close down, open again, close down, and so on. Control did not pass ashore until 1100 hours on 12 June, despite the ASS being ashore by 1730 on the 10th and fully operable by 0730 on the 11th. This provided a valuable lesson for the future, such that an ASS, once set up, should remain in operation until new circuits can be established at a new location. While this would reduce capacity by one-half, it would provide access to an ASS all the time.

Even at Labuan-Brunei Bay, there was still confusion that the MFCU, the ASS, ASPs and ALPs were all fundamental to effective air support being provided. It was still not realised, even after Tarakan, that these units had to have priority in setting-up their equipment—they required rapid movement to their sites. No 11 MFCU experienced several moves during OBOE Six, and had cause to complain about loading procedures at Morotai.

## Endnotes

1. George Odgers, *Air War Against Japan 1943-1945*, Australian War Memorial, 1957, p 433.
2. Jesselton is now known as Kota Kinabalu.
3. Oil producing fields were at Miri and Seria, with a refinery at Lutong.
4. Air distances in kilometres to Brunei Bay are as follows: Balikpapan - 650, Tarakan - 300, Morotai - 1450, Sanga Sanga - 480, and Miri - 100. Road distances from Miri (in kilometres) were: to Lutong - 15, Seria - 67, and Brunei - 155.
5. Report of OBOE Six Operation, Morotai, June 1945, signed by AVM Bostock, p 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, p 3.
8. 26th Brigade Group was at Tarakan. This left 20th and 24th Brigades for OBOE Six.
9. EG Keogh, *The South- West Pacific 1941-45*, Grayflower Productions, Melbourne, 1965, p 444.
10. See the map of Labuan Island/Brunei Bay for location of all beaches.
11. Refer to Appendix B to 1st TAF Operations Order 1/1945, Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
12. The Commander Support Aircraft, whether afloat or ashore, had operational control of all aircraft in the Objective Area, and was in direct communications with all aircraft tasked with providing direct support.
13. CSAs (Afloat) were on board the command ships USS Rocky Mount (northern sector) and USS Nashville (southern sector). Once the 1st TAF Command Post, under Air Commodore Scherger, was established ashore. It assumed control of all direct support aircraft.
14. An Air Support Party was allocated to each Brigade Headquarters, and is explained in more detail later.
15. See 1st TAF Operations Order 1/1945, p 6.
16. In the Lutong landing, which occurred at 0930 on 23 June, command passed to CO 2 /13 Battalion. The Lutong landing is discussed later.
17. Headquarters RAAF Command remained in Brisbane.
18. No 23 Squadron from Darwin, Northern Territory.
19. No 25 Squadron from Cunderdin, Western Australia.
20. At this stage, the United States of America did not have a separate air force. The USAF was not formed until 1947. 5th and 13th Air Forces operated as units of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF).
21. George Odgers, p 466.
22. Ibid, pp 466-467.
23. Ibid, p 468. See both maps. Other areas were attacked, but only these listed were specifically in preparation for OBOE Six.
24. Ibid.
25. Michael V Nemes, *Tocumwal to Tarakan: Australians and the Consolidated B-24 Liberator*, Banner Books, Canberra, 1994, p 110.
26. Ibid, p 111.
27. Odgers, p 475.
28. Nemes, p 127.
29. This total comprised 208 B.24 Liberator sorties, 115 B.25 Mitchell sorties, 121 P.38 Lightning sorties, 24 Ventura sorties and 39 Beaufighter sorties. The Liberator sorties were flown by 13th Air Force and 1st TAF from Morotai and Samar; the Beaufighter sorties by the 1st TAF from Sanga Sanga airfield (southern Philippines); and the remainder by 13th Air Force aircraft from Puerto Princessa airfield on Palawan Island. See OBOE Six report, p 5, in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
30. See OBOE Six report, p 5.
31. This total comprised 635 Liberator sorties, 142 Mitchell sorties and 171 Lightning sorties. See OBOE Six report, p 5.
32. This total consisted of 171 Liberator sorties, seven Mitchell sorties, 28 Lightning sorties, eight Beaufighter sorties and two P.40 sorties.
33. The concentration of Japanese forces in Jesselton was of concern as it was felt they could threaten the capture of Labuan-Brunei Bay.
34. 223 sorties by RAAF and 13th Air Force Liberators, 70 by RAAF Beaufighters and Kittyhawks, 95 sorties by USN Venturas under operational control of 13th Air Force, and 497 Mitchell and 529 Lightning sorties by 13th Air Force.
35. 1,240 Liberator sorties, 761 Mitchell sorties, 849 Lightning sorties, 119 Ventura sorties, 69 Beaufighter sorties and 50 P.40 sorties. See OBOE Six report, p 6.
36. OBOE Six report, p 7.
37. Odgers, p 469.
38. Ibid.
39. OBOE Six report, p 7.
40. Keogh, p 452.
41. Nemes, p 111.
42. Odgers, p 470.

43. See briefing notes entitled 'Joint Operation - Brunei, Labuan', held as folio 64 in Labuan Box File. A hand-written comment indicates that General MacArthur attended the briefing.
44. Group Captain Murdoch was the Senior Air Staff Officer.
45. Group Captain Duncan was the Senior Administrative Officer.
46. Odgers, p 471.
47. Keogh, p 454.
48. Athol Moffitt, *Project Kingfisher*, Angus & Robertson, NSW, Australia, 1989, p 141.
49. Ibid, p 28.
50. Ibid, p 22.
51. Keogh, p 447.
52. Puerto Princessa airfield on Palawan Island was approximately 670 kilometres from Labuan.
53. Odgers, p 472.
54. Ibid.
55. See John Bennett, *Defeat To Victory: No 453 Squadron RAAF*, RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria, 1994, p 152.
56. The Japanese position had been heavily attacked from 16 June by artillery, naval gunfire, and Mitchell bombers operating from low level.
57. See 9th Australian Division Operation Order 4 dated 17 June 45, held RAAF Historical Section.
58. Odgers, pp 473-474.
59. The two crew members found their way to safety on 20 August. For further comments on Beaufighter operations, see Chaz Bowyer, *Beaufighters at War*, Ian Allen Ltd, UK, 1976.
60. Compiled from the OBOE Six report.
61. The Oscar was a Mitsubishi Ki-43 Type 1 Fighter. See John Bennett, p 152.
62. Odgers, p 475.
63. This structure was first promulgated on 16 May 1945. See RAAF File 311.237E dated 16 May 1945, Tarakan Box File, RAAF Historical Section, Canberra.
64. This structure worked particularly well in the OBOE Six operation.
65. For the Lutong landing, air support was organised differently. One ASP was included in the order of battle of 2/13 Battalion.
66. 24th Brigade landed at Brown Beach on Labuan Island at 0914 hours.
67. OBOE Six report, p 14.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid, p 15. The breakdown was four on 10 June, six on 11 June, six on 12 June and two on 13 June.
70. See Report from No 1 ASP, appended to the overall ASS Report on Labuan, held as folio 3 in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
71. See OBOE Six Operations: TAF Command Post, folio 39 of Labuan Box File.
72. See Report entitled OBOE Six Operation, by CO No 111 MFCU to HQ 1st TAF Command Post at Labuan, on 1 July 45. Copy held as folio 74 in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
73. Ibid, p 2.
74. OBOE Six report, p 13.
75. 'Mid-point' was a geographical position determined by Z+5 (15 June) which was used as a datum for coordinating air and ground defences.
76. The RAAF call was 'NO GO'. In cases where pilots suffered from the searchlights below, they used the call 'BLACKOUT' to cause the lights to be switched off.

# ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

## ***MARITIME ASPECTS OF AUSTRALIAN AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS***

**David Stevens**

The Australian Defence Force currently defines amphibious operations as; 'joint operations, in which land forces are landed and supported from the sea as a combat operation prepared to meet armed opposition'.<sup>1</sup> Though definitions vary, there have been during the 20th Century at least 114 major landings or assaults from the sea into hostile territory.<sup>2</sup> More than 90 of these occurred during the Second World War and over half were in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). The vast majority of all attempted assaults have been successful. Only two operations have failed so utterly that they were abandoned before reaching the landing area.<sup>3</sup> Another two were never launched, though men, materials and shipping had been assembled.<sup>4</sup> The common failing in all these four later cases was that the requirements for control of the sea and air could not be met.

The need for sea and air control highlights the joint nature of amphibious operations. Continuous cooperation is essential, and all efforts by the three individual services must be directed towards the same end. Command and control of the combined forces involved is therefore a vital factor. Exactly when, for example, does command of the assault pass from the maritime to the land commander? Who controls air support? Where are the lines of responsibility drawn during planning?

This paper will cover these questions and others by examining the maritime aspects of the Australian Army's amphibious campaigns during World War II. The special naval task being to land the army at the right place, in the right order, and provide conditions to ensure that the flow of reinforcements exceeds that of the enemy. Though their execution was similar, there were differences between the individual Australian assaults, and I will be drawing examples from several, rather than focusing on a specific landing. The paper will progress from the top down, starting with the operational planning that took place at the higher levels of command and working down to the command and control of the beachhead.

From September 1942, Rear-Admiral AS Carpender USN was General Douglas MacArthur's Commander of Allied Naval Forces in the SWPA. Under Carpender's command were units of the United States (USN), Royal Australian and Royal Netherlands Navies. Carpender received his orders from General MacArthur but received most of his ships and men from Admiral Ernest J King, the USN's Commander in Chief. Initially Carpender had little to command except submarines, and even these were only nominally his. As far as MacArthur was concerned, the campaign for New Guinea was primarily a land and air show, and in any case USN forces were fully occupied with operations around Guadalcanal. An American Army Unit, equipped with landing craft and known as the 2nd Engineer Special Brigade, had been used for small scale movements by sea, but it was soon clear that to assist his movement along the coast of New Guinea and then continue his northern offensive, MacArthur would need greater access to naval forces.<sup>5</sup>

As they gradually increased in number, Carpender's naval units were divided into separate task forces according to the specific mission assigned.<sup>6</sup> From MacArthur's viewpoint, the most important of these task forces was the Amphibious Force, commanded by Rear Admiral Daniel E (Uncle Dan) Barbey USN. Barbey had primary carriage of all amphibious operations in the SWPA. He was known as an excellent planner, an inspirational leader, and possessed of the most extraordinary organising ability.

Barbey was arguably the most knowledgeable man in the USN when it came to amphibious warfare. In the years before the war, he was one of the few officers to have taken a professional interest in landing ship design and the doctrine for their use. As a whole, the prewar USN had shown little concern for amphibious forces, and serious planning for amphibious operations did not commence until the months following Pearl Harbour. It was therefore not surprising that in 1942 Barbey found himself appointed the first head of Admiral King's amphibious warfare section, responsible for all training and procurement programs. In the short period he was in the job Barbey set in motion the massive expansion in amphibious shipping that was to soon land millions of men, and millions of tons of supplies, in Africa, Europe and the Pacific.

When Barbey assumed command of Amphibious Force SWPA in January 1943, he found an enormous task before him. His forces at first consisted of only himself and one aide.<sup>7</sup> His requirements for personnel, ships and supplies could only be met from those that could be spared from other theatres. On a global scale, the SWPA was not a particularly high priority and even when men and equipment did start to arrive, Barbey found his crews came from all walks of life. It was not unusual to find that an entire ship's company, including the officers, had never been to sea before the voyage to Australia.<sup>8</sup> In Barbey's autobiography he recalls one Officer of the Deck who thought that by zigzagging he could keep the ship out of the rays of the moon, thus avoiding being sighted by a Japanese submarine.<sup>9</sup>

Without sufficient numbers of the big amphibious transports used in other theatres, no dedicated air support, and only destroyers for naval gunfire support, Barbey and his team had to develop new techniques for amphibious operations. To begin with, the beaches chosen for assault had to be lightly defended and suitable for beaching a variety of ships and landing craft. Secondly, there needed to be a great reliance on surprise and finally, because the beaching ships had to be used both for the assault and for reinforcement, a quick turnaround was vital.<sup>10</sup>

On a professional level, Barbey got on well with MacArthur, and was not afraid to state his point of view. In one of his early calls on the General, Barbey had attempted to impress upon MacArthur what he considered the fundamentals of amphibious operations. In particular, Barbey stressed that the Navy must, 'be in full command and charge of all amphibious planning, loading and operations from departure until the beachhead had been secured'.<sup>11</sup> As will be seen shortly these points seem to have been only partially accepted. Without a unified command below MacArthur, landings in the SWPA were planned and carried out on the basis of cooperation, and it was the Army Landing Force Commander who was charged with the coordination of planning.<sup>12</sup>

All of Barbey's amphibious assaults came at the order of MacArthur through the Commander Naval Forces, either Carpender, or his replacement Admiral Thomas Kinkaid. Both Carpender and Kinkaid were firm believers in the delegation of authority and soon recognised that Barbey needed little guidance and rarely interfered in the actual conduct of his landings.

MacArthur's General Headquarters (GHQ) would begin by issuing a general directive for the next operation, providing background information, an outline plan and a detailed statement of the forces allocated and specific tasks assigned. Within the directive the Commander Naval Forces, was tasked as follows:

- in conjunction with Allied Air Forces, execute preliminary air bombardment missions within the objective areas;
- as arranged with the Landing Force Commander, transport, protect and establish the seaborne landing force ashore;
- transport supporting troops and their supplies as required by naval assault shipping;
- provide preliminary naval bombardment, naval fire support and minesweeping operations in all landing areas, as required; and
- in conjunction with Allied Air Forces, protect overwater lines of communication and destroy hostile naval elements threatening the operation.

With the directive from GHQ in hand, the next step was for the planning staffs of the Naval Attack Force Commander and Landing Force Commander to meet. The two Commanders had to agree on the exact date, hour and place of the landing, based on many factors, including the availability of troops and shipping, enemy defences and prevailing environmental conditions. In practice, most of the detailed planning devolved to their staff and the senior commanders would only get together for the major decisions. Additional naval participation in the coordination of plans, in matters such as naval gunfire, rested with the individual close support Task Force Commanders.

The requirement for Barbey, as Commander Naval Attack Force, to transport and land the assault and supporting forces, as required by the Landing Force Commander, did not always sit well with the Navy. During the amphibious movement and landing, the Commander of the Naval Attack Force was also in charge of the offensive, this command continuing until the Landing Force was established ashore. These two instructions were seen to be in conflict. The possibility existing that the Attack Force Commander could be forced to accept situations, circumstances and conditions that were unsound from the naval point of view, and yet for which he could be held directly responsible in the event of failure.<sup>13</sup>

At Balikpapan, for example, the Navy disagreed with the Army's choice of landing beach because it was in the area where Japanese defences were strongest. This choice would mean the minesweepers having to operate close under the enemy's guns while supporting warships would have to stand further offshore. Naval planners were so concerned, that at one stage the Commander of the Landing Force, was told that Balikpapan might prove to be the first unsuccessful landing in the South-West Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Navy, however, was overruled and Army opinion prevailed.

With teams inexperienced in combined operations, it is not surprising that planning was haphazard to begin with. There were also national differences in planning techniques to be overcome. Coordination between the services was particularly poor. Three weeks before the landing at Lae both the US Air Force and Navy complained that they were having considerable difficulty obtaining detailed information from the Australians on which to base their plans.<sup>15</sup> The Army and Navy meanwhile, claimed that final planning discussions were hampered because the air force had no representative 'with sufficient authority to make definite decisions'.<sup>16</sup> Finally the Army felt that: 'because the naval staff remained in their headquarters ship, ... eight miles away, intimate cooperation was not achieved, naval representation being spasmodic and uncertain at planning conferences'.<sup>17</sup>

The logistic difficulties of transporting the follow-on forces also took some time to be appreciated. New Guinea Force's first outline of the plan for the Lae landing included only the movement of the assault element of 13,000 men. The Advance Base Command, Air Force Ground echelons and other support units totalling 15,000 men, had been, according to GHQ, conveniently forgotten. With Barbey unaware of what was coming later, a real danger existed that the forward area would not be able to be maintained by his ships.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, GHQ was highly critical of the Australians, one US commentator noting: 'Judged from our standards of the preparation of combat operations orders it is elementary and incomplete'.<sup>19</sup>

The planning task grew as the war continued. During the first operations in New Guinea, Barbey had approximately 40 ships and a small personal staff. Barbey controlled the assaults from a commandeered destroyer. By the time of his later landings in the Philippines, Barbey had 100 staff, more than one thousand ships, and three separate attack groups, each commanded by a Rear Admiral with their own staff and flagship. Over the course of the war, Barbey conducted some 56 successful amphibious landings, averaging one every 13 days. Planning time varied according to the mission but was often extremely short. Three or four days to prepare plans and assemble ships and cargo was not unusual. However, as Barbey noted in at least one report, the few days available for planning did not necessarily handicap an operation. With the high number of successive operations executed his team soon became very familiar with requirements.<sup>20</sup>



The naval task force organisation used was extremely flexible and allowed individual units to be transferred easily between forces as required for a specific operation. The assault on Balikpapan provides a good example. With 257 ships, the assault force was the largest assembled in the SWPA since Lingayen Gulf, and the largest ever involving Australian troops.

Vice Admiral Barbey again exercised general naval command as Attack Force Commander and Commander Task Force 78. The Attack Force itself was split into two major components. First was the Balikpapan Attack Group, TG 78.2, commanded by one of Barbey's three deputies, Rear Admiral AG Noble USN.

TG 78.2 was made up of several units, the largest being the Transport Unit, which comprised some 90 landing ships and landing craft of all sizes. In addition, TG 78.2 had a Minesweeping Unit, Underwater Demolition Unit, its own Screening Unit of 16 destroyers and frigates, a Service Unit, and a Hydrographic Unit. A Close Support Unit, including rocket and gun-fitted landing craft, provided firepower on the beach while a Motor Torpedo Boat Unit was also temporarily attached. Most of the Task Group passed to the beaches in company as the 'assault convoy'. However, some units, notably the hydrographic ships, minesweepers and demolition teams left more than two weeks earlier to begin beach preparations.

The second component of the Attack Force was the Fire Support and Covering Group, TG 74.2, commanded by Rear Admiral RS Riggs USN. This Task Group was not a part of the Amphibious Force, being allocated by Admiral Kinkaid to Barbey, specifically for the Balikpapan operation. TG 74.2 comprised the four ships of Cruiser Division 12, augmented by the three Australian and Dutch cruisers of TG 74.1, and a separate screen of nine destroyers. The ships were then further split into individual Fire Support Units comprising one cruiser and one destroyer. Riggs was also tasked with the coordination of all naval forces in the area until the arrival of the Attack Group Commander.

Training before an operation was essential. Troops had to get used to clambering down cargo nets with full kit and boarding the waiting boats as rapidly as possible. Landing craft had to understand what they were transporting ashore and where to take it. Maintenance of a strict schedule was vital to avoid confusion. A full rehearsal was usually held a week before the landing. Common complaints after rehearsals included the light-hearted attitude of the troops, their failure to wear steel helmets and their reluctance to disembark down the nets at more than two or three at a time.<sup>21</sup> Of interest was the encouraging effect of an air attack during an actual landing, when ten men were seen to be clambering down a net simultaneously.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, it was not unusual for the troops to be loaded many days before a ship sailed for an operation, often in overcrowded and uncomfortable conditions. One Landing Ship Tank (LST)<sup>23</sup> destined for the Brunei Bay assault was loaded with 46 vehicles, 300 tons of bulk cargo and was in addition fitted out as a hospital LST. Fresh water and latrines were inadequate for the 457 troops carried and there was very little space under cover. As one observer noted:

With frequent heavy rain whilst in harbour for the six days before sailing, the cramped and uncomfortable conditions obtaining and the impossibility of getting exercise, the troops were as dispirited and disappointed body of men as seen when I joined.<sup>24</sup>

Another factor found to affect fighting performance was the weather. Even moderately rough seas invariably produced chronic seasickness in the embarked troops, many of whom had never before been to sea in small ships. After finding 50 per cent of the troops seasick before his first operation, Barbey learned to consider forecasts of sea conditions in the future.<sup>25</sup>

To ensure the conditions necessary for a successful assault and build up, local command of the sea and air had to be achieved before the landing, and maintained until forces were established ashore. Unfortunately, in most of the early amphibious operations in New Guinea, the Allied Air Forces were unable to guarantee continuous air cover, and there were insufficient naval forces to provide protection from an enemy fleet. The air threat in particular,

made planning difficult. In 1943, Barbey had only limited assets at his disposal, there was little chance of early replacements, and he was well aware of heavy future requirements.

The landing at Lae, for example, not only had to be combined with a separate air assault because of the shortage of shipping, but the beaching ships only became available 14 days before the operation. In the remaining time the ships needed to be assembled at the loading ports, operating plans distributed, rehearsals held and troops and supplies loaded.<sup>26</sup> Lae was also to be the first opposed landing for the Seventh Amphibious Force, and Barbey made it clear during planning that he wished to take few risks. He was particularly anxious to unload troops and stores quickly and get his landing ships back to the open sea as soon as possible, both for safety and so he could commence resupply. Barbey's preference for light loading brought him into conflict with the Army view, which preferred that as much materiel as possible should be landed with the initial assault. The troops naturally, did not wish to be left stranded in enemy territory without adequate supplies.<sup>27</sup>

A compromise in loading was eventually reached and to provide additional warning time Barbey stationed a destroyer 50 miles up threat to act as a radar picket. Barbey's caution proved well founded. An hour after the early morning landing began, a Japanese air attack hit one beached landing craft causing 41 casualties, while a near miss severely damaged another. Both ships had to be abandoned. However, this was not the end of Barbey's troubles. Despite the light loading of his ships, insufficient troops had been allotted to unload the bulk supplies and much work had to be done by the ship's crews. It was mid-afternoon before the last landing craft got away from the beach. Another air raid hit the second landing group and another two landing ships were damaged. Casualties this time were more severe, almost 200 killed, wounded and missing.<sup>28</sup>

A similar pattern was repeated during the second Australian landing at Finschhafen. Barbey still feared that air attacks might reduce the small number of ships he had at his disposal and wished the landing to take place by moonlight, with the ships unloaded before dawn. The Australian commanders opposed the timing because they doubted the Navy's ability to put troops ashore at the right place and in good order in darkness. A compromise time of one hour before daylight was reached by reducing the amount of supplies landed, and allocating 200 men to each of the six LSTs for unloading.<sup>29</sup> The night before the operation, reports by coastwatchers of Japanese aircraft approaching almost caused a postponement, but Barbey eventually agreed to go on.

Lack of air cover became Barbey's primary preoccupation during his 1943 landings. US Navy aircraft carriers were not, as a rule, allocated to the SWPA and Barbey was reliant on the Allied Air Forces for all air support. In several of his subsequent assaults he lost both landing ships and destroyers to enemy air attack. Barbey relayed his concerns back to Kinkaid. At a conference with MacArthur in late 1943, Kinkaid made the observation that while the Navy tried to keep a combat air patrol over an objective, the Air Force instead kept its planes on ground alert until it learned of a possible attack. MacArthur apparently agreed and assured Kinkaid that in future Barbey would have adequate air cover.<sup>30</sup> However, it was not until March 1944, during the Hollandia operations that Barbey himself at last felt planning liaison with the Air Force was satisfactory.<sup>31</sup>

By the time of the Borneo landings in 1945, the balance had swung so far away from the Japanese that assaults encountered little air and virtually no sea opposition. This occurred despite the sacrifice of surprise to allow extensive preparation of the beaches. The only hostile naval forces expected were light suicide craft and submarines. However, to be certain there could be no undetected approach by enemy forces, friendly naval aircraft provided continuous air searches while surface patrols were established on all the sea approaches to Borneo. In addition, submarines provided an offensive reconnaissance capability off distant enemy bases in Java and Singapore.

Having taken enemy interference from the sea and air into account, the next step was to turn to the landing area itself. Since enemy defences were invariably concentrated around ports, assaults were normally planned to take place on an open stretch of beach. One of the many

unique problems confronting planners in the Pacific theatres was that outside the principal ports knowledge of the coastal approaches was very poor.<sup>32</sup> Preliminary surveys by a hydrographic team were therefore vital in plotting navigational features, charting and marking sand and mud bars, rocks and coral outcrops. Hydrographic ships would also buoy and sound the assault approach channels just before the actual landing.<sup>33</sup>

Beach reconnaissance was also essential to determine details, including gradient, type of beach, enemy defences and vehicle exits. The influence of tides was an obvious difference between amphibious assaults in the Pacific and in Europe. At Normandy, the assault was made at low water to expose the German obstacles. In the SWPA, man-made obstacles were only encountered in Borneo and the assaults were usually at high water to avoid mud flats. Ships in the Pacific, therefore, had to be lightly loaded and correctly trimmed so that they would not be left stranded on a falling tide.<sup>34</sup> Again existing data on tidal range and times was usually inaccurate and had to be specially obtained.

Though often forgotten, minesweeping was one of the most difficult of operations confronting the assault preparations. Minefields were not regularly used by the Japanese in the defence of New Guinea but in Borneo they posed special problems. The approach channels to the beaches were often narrow and could be blocked with relatively few mines. A swept channel therefore had to be cleared before warships could commence bombardment, and before the assault convoy could approach.

The minefields at Balikpapan were undoubtedly the worst encountered. The mines used were a combination of Dutch, Japanese, American and Australian, and of both contact and influence types. Many of these were laid during the successful Allied offensive mining campaign that had forced the Japanese to abandon Balikpapan as an assembly port in December 1944. Unfortunately, because the strategic plan had remained flexible up to the last moment, the minelaying plan had not been integrated in the overall campaign for the theatre. The mines had been laid without sterilisers. This oversight meant that sixteen days minesweeping was required before other tasks could commence, with the minesweepers well within range of Japanese guns.<sup>35</sup> Coastal batteries, however, were only part of the problem. Strong currents, shallow depths, high tides and poor navigational markings made sweeping particularly difficult. Many of the influence mines were extremely sophisticated, fitted with ship counters, and needed up to seven sweeps to detonate. The contact mines were fitted with heavy chains and caused great losses in sweeping gear. The minesweepers suffered heavily, both from the physical dangers and the stress involved in the operation. In total, five minesweepers were sunk and 12 damaged.<sup>36</sup> Even with this effort mines remained a hazard during and after the landing and accounted for several landing craft.<sup>37</sup>

The importance of 'softening up' the landing beaches grew with each amphibious operation. For the first landings at Lae, where Allied forces were weak, surprise was vital. The five available destroyers provided only six minutes of dispersed fire.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, at Balikpapan aerial bombardment commenced 30 days before the assault while naval bombardment began two weeks later. Not surprisingly, Tokyo Radio was very soon accurately forecasting the next target for invasion.<sup>39</sup>

The naval bombardment was split into several distinct periods. At Tarakan a preliminary bombardment began three days before the landing. Targets selected being oil tanks, barracks, known gun positions, suspected wireless and radar stations, and supply areas. Cruisers were given prescribed target areas while destroyers were available at the Fire Support Commander's discretion in coordination with air strikes.<sup>40</sup> The day before the landing, bombardment shifted to direct support of obstacle breaching operations. Here harassing fire was used, ranging initially being directed onto the beach before the swimmers landed, and then afterwards lifted into the surrounding jungle at increased rates of fire. Unfortunately, at Tarakan delays clearing the minefields made it difficult to reach effective ranges and the preliminary bombardments were scaled down. Increased allowances were fired during the actual landing to compensate.<sup>41</sup>

All preparations in the landing area came under the control of the Fire Support and Covering Group Commander until the arrival of the assault convoy on invasion day. At Balikpapan the Fire Support Group combined with the detached units of the Attack Group with a joint mission to destroy enemy personnel, defences, installations and facilities by gunfire, air attack, mine-sweeping and underwater demolition.<sup>42</sup> In his report on the operation Rear-Admiral Riggs described his wide-ranging responsibilities as follows:

In addition to coordinating the minesweeping, underwater demolition work and motor torpedo boat patrols, this Task Group furnished fighter direction, coordinated bombing strikes, made aerial observations and close anti-submarine aerial patrols and directed activities of service units brought forward for fuel and ammunition replenishment.<sup>43</sup>

A few hours before the actual landing a very heavy pre-assault bombardment would be conducted against designated target areas, emphasis being placed on the destruction of enemy gun positions within 400 yards of the beach. Cruiser aircraft were allocated for spotting, though it was not unusual for the thick pall of smoke over the beaches to make observation difficult. In Borneo the assault area was gridded and bombardment directed on to the grid square rather than a specific feature. Once the initial rounds were spotted onto the designated portion of a target area the fire was distributed to cover the remainder. Scheduled fire usually ceased five minutes before the first assault wave landed but sometimes continued for 15 minutes after the landing. Fire at this stage being shifted to targets between 400 and 800 yards inland, on the flanks and creeping ahead of the advancing infantry.

The naval bombardment did not cease once the troops were ashore. Provision continued for either harassment fire, or a call for fire service against specific targets. Close command and control of the bombardment was obviously important to obtain maximum benefit. An Australian Army Bombardment Liaison Team was placed in each fire support ship before it engaged in a firing mission. Vice-Admiral Sir John Collins was later, somewhat flippantly, to write:

Having escorted the soldiers safely across the ocean and put them ashore successfully, we on the ships' bridges could relax with a cup of cocoa and await calls for fire from the bombardment liaison officer (BLO) as the troops found themselves held up and wanted gunfire support.<sup>44</sup>

The BLO ensured effective coordination between the troops ashore and the firing ship. If available, cruiser aircraft would continue to provide air spotting during daylight firing missions while night firing was controlled entirely by Shore Fire Control Parties. From the reports of the Borneo operations it seems that fire could be accurately directed to within 900/1000 yards of friendly troops. Though there would be some variation depending on gun size, single gun salvos were normally used for ranging and registration, two gun salvos for destruction and for covering assigned target areas, and four gun salvos for neutralising enemy gun batteries.

Control of all direct air support remained in the Headquarters Ship while command was afloat. Requests for direct air support missions were passed to the Headquarters Ship by the Air Support Parties at Battalions, and any resultant missions were carried out under the orders of the Commander Support Airplanes (Afloat). Fighter direction was also carried out from the Headquarters Ship.

The invasion fleet would normally arrive off the beaches just after the scheduled naval bombardment commenced and about an hour before sunrise. Though a huge range of specialised landing vessels was developed or converted for use in amphibious operations the vessels could be roughly divided into those that could reach the assault area under their own power, and those that needed to be carried in other ships. The former category included the Landing Ship Infantry (LSI)<sup>45</sup>, the Landing Ship Tank (LST) and Landing Ship Dock (LSD) and the larger Landing Craft Tank/Infantry (LCT/LCI). Minor landing craft such as landing craft assault and mechanised (LCA/LCM) and amphibians such as DUKWs and Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT) were used to transport the assaulting troops or equipment from the larger ships to the beach.

Many of the craft were improvised without official approval and therefore unique to the SWPA.<sup>46</sup> Rocket fitted LCIs (LCI(R)), used for close support deserve particular recognition. These vessels not only provided a plunging high-explosive fire, useful against pillboxes, but could also lay smoke screens and blast passages through reefs. Their fire control arrangements were simple but effective. The rockets had a fixed range of 1200 yards and the LCI would head towards the beach ahead of the first wave of assault troops, at the same speed of approach. Every 100 yards a 12 rocket salvo would be fired until the LCI itself hit the beach. The effect was devastating and usually silenced any remaining opposition fire.

The larger landing ships would normally bring the troops to a 'lowering position', six to eight miles to seaward of the beach and outside the range of coastal artillery. Here they would anchor and lower the smaller landing craft to allow troops to transfer. The landing craft would then proceed into their allocated beach in a series of waves, leaving every few minutes from a predetermined departure line as directed by a control boat. The aim was to have the first wave 500 yards off the beach four minutes before the landing time, or H-hour. The initial waves consisted of 10-20 landing craft spread out in 'echelon' or 'line of bearing' formation. A wave leader took the centre position and was the only craft fitted with radio. He was guided into the beach by flags or radio signals and the remaining craft simply followed his lead. The importance of ensuring the wave leader beached accurately is obvious.

The navigational problems of inexperienced crews trying to make a landing in the dark, on a beach surrounded by coral, were found to be too great. Assaults were, therefore, normally scheduled for first light, just before dawn. Finschhafen was a notable exception, and provides a good example of what could go wrong if the assault plan was disrupted. This landing took place in darkness and the smoke and dust from the naval bombardment obscured the beaches still further. The assault barges had difficulty determining their landing positions. The first wave swung too far south, got badly mixed up and nearly all the barges hit the coral just in front of a Japanese pillbox. One barge carried the Naval Beach Party and its leader was killed. Wave two fared no better. Wave three was half an hour late and went in under fire that should have been suppressed by the first two waves. Distracted by the fire from ashore, the larger LCIs lowered their bow ramps too soon and the first troops had to swim. The LCIs then went in closer but continued counter fire at the shore, effectively pinning down their own troops at the waters edge.<sup>47</sup>

The beach was the weakest link in an opposed landing and it was on the beach that the Army and Navy had to cooperate most closely. The Navy, through the Naval Beach Commando Organisation, was responsible for running and controlling the landing craft, and for any seamanlike work on the beaches, while the Army, through the Army Beach Group, was responsible for unloading the craft and clearing the beaches of stores. Commitment of the Naval Beach Commando was ordered by the Commander of the Attack Group, Admiral Barbey or his equivalent, but they ostensibly operated under the commander of the Army Beach Group. However, because of their different areas of expertise, both services had to be prepared to give and take orders from each other.

Despite a lack of tradition in inter-service cooperation differences were gradually ironed out and the system seems to have worked well. After Tarakan, the RANs Principal Beachmaster (PBM) had this to say about his Army counterpart:

I cannot stress too highly the complete harmony that existed throughout the operation with 2nd Australian Beach Group Commander Colonel CR Hodgson.<sup>48</sup>

Colonel Hodgson, though supportive, had a slightly different outlook:

Navy and Army Beach Control authorities worked fairly well together but it is evident that the RAN Commando will never become completely reconciled to a shore role under army command.<sup>49</sup>



The PBM was the senior naval representative on the beach. At the commencement of an assault, he would usually be in the control boat next to the departure line. The advanced elements of the Beach Commando would go ashore in the first or second assault wave and would immediately erect signs and markers to delineate the extent of the different beaches. The remainder of the Commando and the individual Beach Masters would follow in the fourth wave. As soon as possible, an Advanced Beach Group HQ would be set up in a central location with the PBM close to his Army equivalent. An extensive communications network was then set up for beach control with the Navy element alone manning up to eight different circuits.

Individual Beach Masters completed the setting up ashore, guided in the later infantry waves and then turned to control the beaching of the larger landing ships and craft. These vessels were either given a priority for unloading as part of the Army's master plan or brought in after consultation with the Beach Group Commander. If the initial assault waves had gone in correctly and the beaches were ready, the first of the LSTs would come in about one hour after the first assault wave, with additional ships following at five minute intervals. As a beaching slot became available the PBM informed the Landing Craft Control Officer afloat, who ordered the next ship in priority to weigh anchor and make its approach. When about 1000 yards out the Beach Master picked the LST up on radio and guided it in. If the beach gradient was particularly shallow these ships needed to beach on pontoons.

Keeping the operation running smoothly was not a simple matter. It was not unheard of for a crew to disappear on a sightseeing excursion while their landing craft was being unloaded. This usually resulted in either delays for follow-on craft, or the crew coming back to find their own craft high and dry on the mud.

As noted above, the Army Beach Group had sole responsibility for unloading. The time taken to unload a craft was a vital factor in the smooth operation of the beach and as the war progressed techniques developed to increase the speed. Though differences in cargo caused some variation, the 3 to 5 hours taken to unload an LST in some early exercises was reduced to less than an hour for most of the later operations.

The Brunei Bay landing was a notable exception. Here, there were no existing exits from the beach to the lateral road. There was also a severe shortage of bulldozers or other mechanical equipment to make the exits in the initial waves. This shortage created huge delays. Ninety minutes after the assault began there were seven LSTs beached with no possibility of unloading until exits could be made safe and earth ramps built to connect pontoons to the shore. Problems were compounded when the later LCTs were called in to beach with the tide rapidly going out. The LCTs found it impossible to unload because the water gap was too great and the mud too soft to allow vehicles to cross. Not until the day after the landing were the first of these craft unloaded.

Order and method of loading stores also made a great difference. The Army Beach Group needed to maintain close liaison with the Military Landing Groups to ensure the distribution of force stores and equipment in the shipping followed the landing priorities demanded. Again at Brunei Bay, there were many incidents of poor loading. One LCT took a record three days to unload because its stores had been haphazardly dumped in the craft and required sorting on a narrow pontoon causeway.<sup>50</sup> Many other stores were net loaded but once the craft had beached it proved impossible to get a crane to the piers. The piers were already dangerously listing under the weight of accumulated stores, and unloading had to be all done by hand. Even when unloading began it sometimes occurred that the wrong cargo was landed. The RAAF came in for particular criticism for requiring excessively elaborate equipment in the early stages of an assault. One report noted that 500 pound bombs and fabricated latrines should not have been classed as assault day stores.

Once the beachhead was secure, command of the operation would pass from the Attack Force Commander to the Landing Force Commander, the exact time of the transfer being agreed in consultation between the two principal Commanders, and announced to all by radio. Simultaneously, control of direct air support was meant to pass ashore from the

Headquarters ship, but in practice this was often delayed. At Tarakan, control of air activity remained afloat until 1700 on the second day after the landing, while at Brunei Bay it was the afternoon of the fifth day before control was transferred.<sup>51</sup>

With the assault completed and command transferred, direct naval support tended to diminish in visibility, though units remained available if necessary to destroy enemy surface forces or deny the movement by sea of hostile reinforcements. Commander Attack Force continued to have responsibility for the transport of Allied reinforcements and resupply until piers had been built and it was safe for these duties to be taken over by the US Army Service of Supply with civilian manned freighters.

The Fire Support and Covering Group, meanwhile, continued to provide naval gunfire support according to the speed of advance of friendly troops and other missions allocated. At Balikpapan, for example, naval gunfire continued for over a week after the landing, though only 13,850 shells were fired during this period compared to 17,250 in the opening stage. Night-time harassing fire was reportedly particularly successful. The starshell used illuminated no-mans land so effectively that the Japanese made few attempts at infiltration.<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, and perhaps because it was less visible, as the Balikpapan beachhead expanded, fire control was increasingly poorly handled. HMAS *Shropshire*, a heavy cruiser with eight inch guns, reported later that she had experienced long delays and a lack of coordination from ashore. She also reported considerable difficulty in obtaining spotting aircraft, an essential requirement for the effective use of heavy naval gunfire at long range. To *Shropshire*, it appeared that the limited number of aircraft allocated by the Army were being used for other purposes, including observation of fire from less effective five inch and 25 pounder batteries.<sup>53</sup>

To conclude, the purpose of amphibious operations is to project combat power across a sea gap. In his 56 assault landings in the SWPA, Barbey moved over a million men overwater on schedule, constantly ensuring that the Japanese were either outmanoeuvred or bypassed. From mid-1943 maritime forces were thus central to MacArthur's campaigns, playing the 'enabling' role in allowing these campaigns to take place.

Particularly during the initial operations, the failure of the three services to cooperate to the fullest extent provided conditions that could easily have led to disaster. Amphibious landings are inherently hazardous, they require thorough planning and preparation, and there is no place for inter-service bickering. However, that the operations were successful reflects great credit on the forces that were established and trained to accomplish the mission. The mistakes and problems that occurred were almost invariably the result of a failure to communicate.

Admiral Barbey had a few simple rules that appear to have stood the test of time in conducting amphibious operations. Barbey insisted upon: thorough training, simple language in operations orders, landing where the enemy was not, continuous air and naval coverage and quick unloading of only those essentials needed on a beach.<sup>54</sup> Amphibious forces are inherently flexible, and if there is a single lesson to be learnt from the amphibious operations of the past 90 years it is that, if properly prepared, an amphibious assault phase usually succeeds and at a relatively small cost.



## Question and Answer Session

### Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Wahlert

You mentioned the Beach Masters. Could you please indicate who commanded this organisation?

### David Stevens

The Navy provided the Beach Masters. The Army provided the Army Beach Group in the Borneo landings, and that was the Royal Australian Navy providing the Beach Commando. In the New Guinea landings the Americans provided the Beach organisations. They actually came under Admiral Barbey's attack group structure, and were committed by him, but they worked underneath the Army Beach Group and hence the need for cooperation between the Army and the Navy in that area.

### General Broadbent

I had an experience in relation to the landing at Scarlet Beach, Finschhafen. The manner in which we landed was very distressing. I was designated to be in charge of the Beach Administrative Area and, as I got less than four days warning before we were ashore, I could not hold an Orders Group with the heads of the administrative units. I did, however, issue them with a diagram of the proposed layout of the beach area which gave them at least some indication of where they would all be. The landing was made in the dark. The Brigadier argued about it, but it still ended up being done in the dark.

I found myself scrambling to get down to the landing barge and away we went. There were four barges from each ship, making sixteen in all. All around us it was like a great carnival, very exhilarating, and a few tail lights from our shells could be seen going in the right direction. As we got closer, the number three craft—counting off from the right—veered to the left and it continued to do so. There was no means of communicating with anybody. In effect, only the two right hand craft landed in the right place at the northern end of the beach. The subsequent happenings were these: an American naval chap, who had the lamp Red or Scarlet for the name of that beach, was on the same craft that I was on. I knew that there would be no guidance for the follow up of the first wave of LCIs, nor for the next row for that matter. I got off and more or less dragged him around because I could tell where we were despite the darkness. We searched around past the little cove that was beyond the end of the intended landing beach, along to the correct place where I got him to show the light. On the way around we passed the first wave of LCI people being landed. They could be seen in the night light, drifting in towards the shore, quite contrary to the standard requirement of run your bow up onto the beach with your anchor out the back and keep pushing forward. I do not think it was altogether their fault; they had no mark, no guidance to where to go because of this error. Just drifting in by the landing craft had further consequences; their bow was not securely on ground so the stern was floating. This meant that as the troops ran down the ramps it set in motion a rocking that 'walked' the craft back off the beach. I could see the third wave beyond drifting around and uncertain as to where they were going. We managed to shine the light in the right place, and they came in onto the correct beach. But again, they did not run their craft up sufficiently. Well, I would like to have found subsequently the Coxswain of the number three craft with my jungle studded boots on; the rest I more or less exonerated.

When they got on shore, they suddenly thought that there were snipers in the trees, which there weren't, and proceeded to open fire with all their guns. The result was that the commanding officer, who had landed in the second wave and was coming around inland, was on a little knoll some twenty or thirty yards in from the trees. He ended up with a gash across the top of his head and I have always thought that it might have been one of these Yanks. If it had been an inch lower he would have been killed. We had the comic scene of seeing the Commanding Officer with a shell dressing on and all wrapped up looking like a kid with the mumps. There is a time and place to laugh at a CO but that was not quite it.

Very fortunately, all of these soldiers matured together, soldiering for a considerable time in the Middle East. All the company commanders knew each other and with their walkie-talkies they could tell who they were and quickly sort out their positions. We had nothing of the debacle that confronted people at Gallipoli where they virtually did not know where they were and did not know where anybody else was. I was busy getting ashore and sorting out the admin units. The Yanks on the boat, and the Shore Regiment, were trying to help and had a lot of equipment pouring ashore. Well, I will leave you with the main point of all this. The beach head gets to be a very busy place and, unless you have the time to plan its development properly, all you will end up with is confusion, mayhem and a very vulnerable target.

**David Stevens**

The main point I wanted to make about New Guinea is really that it was a learning process. The New Guinea landings were the first; it is not surprising that stuff ups did occur. Landing in the dark was obviously one of the major ones.

**Major Simpkin**

Given General Broadbent's comments about landing craft coming in, and your slide of the use of pontoons, can you speak a little about how critical it was for them to use pontoons to assist landings for Australian forces? Perhaps you could then comment on the utility of pontoons today, now that we are buying LSTs.

**David Stevens**

Pontoons are essential in any form of amphibious landing, as part of your amphibious forces, because you will always come across a situation where your beach has not got the right gradient so that the ship can come in and land direct on the beach. Particularly in Borneo they found that because the beaches were muds flats and there was a huge tidal range, without pontoons nobody was going to get ashore. As I understand it, the ability to carry pontoons is being included in the requirements for the THSS's (Training and Helicopter Support Ships). I could be corrected on that. So we still have that capability today.

## Endnotes

1. *ADFP 12* Edn 1, p 1-1.
2. RN Historical Branch Paper 'Misbegotten Landings', dated 22 March 1994.
3. Planned Japanese Invasion of Port Moresby and Midway in 1942.
4. Planned Axis invasions of England (1940) and Malta (1942).
5. The Engineer Special Brigade was only equipped to move one Infantry brigade over a distance not exceeding 60 miles. See D Dexter, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, The New Guinea Offensives*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961, p 265.
6. From June 1943-January 1944 Allied Naval Forces SWPA comprised: TF 70 - Forces operating under command Allied Naval Forces, TF 71 - Forces based in West Australia including submarines, TF 72 - Submarines operating SE coast of Australia, TF 73 - Naval Air Units, TF 74 - Forces based in NW Australia, TF 76 - 7th Amphibious Force, TF 78 - Minesweepers, Southwest Pacific Sea Frontier.
7. See D Barbey, *MacArthur's Amphibious Navy*, United States Naval Institute, Annapolis Maryland, 1969, p 3.
8. *Ibid*, pp.46-49.
9. *Ibid*, p 48.
10. *Ibid*, pp 43-49.
11. P Coletta, 'Daniel Darbey Amphibious Warfare Expert', in W Leary (Ed), *We Shall Return!*, Kentucky University Press, Kentucky, 1988, p 213.
12. Barbey, *op cit*, p 59.
13. Seventh Amphibious Force FE25/A16-3 (3) of 2 June 1944 to C-In-C US Fleet, on AA(Vic) file MP1587/1/0 69E.
14. G Long, *The Final Campaigns, Australia in the War of 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p 506.
15. GHQ, SWPA memorandum dated 5 August 1943 in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 74A.
16. Dexter, *op cit*, p 279.
17. *Ibid*, p 267.
18. GHQ, SWPA memorandum dated 5 August 1943 in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 74A.
19. Memorandum Brigadier General Chamberlain to GHQ Chief of Staff dated 28 August 1943 in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 74A.
20. See for example, Commander Seventh Amphibious Force Report of the Saidor Operation, dated 3 February 1944, in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/081.
21. See Long, *op cit*, p 411 and, Rehearsal for Brown Beach Landings Operation OBOE SIX, undated on AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/0 62F.
22. 'The Assault on Brown Beach, Operation OBOE SIX, undated on AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/9/ 62F.
23. Commonly known as a 'large, slow target'.
24. Operation OBOE SIX Detailed Report, undated on AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 60A.
25. Even in recent times, this lesson has needed to be relearned The problem of inexperienced troops suffering severe sea-sickness caused weather limiting constraints for ships during Operation MORRIS DANCE. See Operation MORRIS DANCE - MHQ Report to HQADF dated 18 July 1989.
26. Barbey, *op cit*, p 74.
27. The Australian commander, Major-General Wooten, emphasised the need for at least 10 days reserve rations, See Dexter, *op cit*, p 274.
28. G Herman Gill, *RAN 1942-45, Australia in the War of 1939-45*, William Collins, Sydney, 1985, p 329.
29. EG Keogh, *South-West Pacific 1941-45*, Gray Flower Productions, Melbourne, 1965, p 316.
30. Coletta, *op cit*, p 221.
31. Barbey, *op cit*, p 161.
32. To quote just one example, the charts covering Finschhafen were found to be eleven miles in error. See Barbey, *op cit*, p 92.
33. A boat from HMAS *Lachlan* laid marking buoys within 30 yards of the landing beach two days before the assault on Brunei Bay. See Operation OBOE SIX, Report of RAN Participation, in AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/0 63.
34. At Tarakan the tidal range was three metres, at high-water there was no beach while at low-water there was 100 metres of deep, soft mud.
35. Staff History, War With Japan Vol VI, *The Advance to Japan*, Historical Section Admiralty 1956, p 177.
36. Casualties amongst the minesweeper crews amounted to 50 killed and wounded and another 10 classified 'mental cases'. See Naval Staff History, *op cit*, p 179. Of note, Barbey claimed only 272 naval casualties during the entire course of his operation, see Barbey, *op cit*, p ix.
37. Of contemporary interest is a comment made after the 1991 Gulf War by the US Amphibious Task force commander: 'Any prospect of the 17,000 embarked marines storming ashore evaporated after the 17 February mine strikes on the US ships *Princeton* and *Tripoli*'. See D Evans, 'With the Army and Air Force' in *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, June 1991.
38. Dexter, *op cit*, p 330.
39. WN Swan, *Spearheads of Invasion*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1953, p 272.

40. For example, two days before the Tarakan landing HMAS *Hobart* carried out 6 inch bombardment of target areas reported previously as containing anti-aircraft batteries. On one task, firing at a range of 19,000 yards, *Hobart* expended 37 rounds, scoring a direct hit on one gun. Operation OBOE ONE, Report of RAN participation in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 63.
41. Naval Staff History, op cit, p 171.
42. Commander TG74.2 Action Report, Close Cover and Support Group - Balikpapan, Borneo 13 June - 2 July 1945, dated 8 July 1945 in AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1 /0 60D.
43. Ibid.
44. J Collins, *As Luck Would Have It*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p 137.
45. Notably, the RAN ships *Westralia*, *Manoora* and *Kanimbla*.
46. These craft included LSTs converted to a 'first-aid' ship, water barges, 'repair ships' and 'casualty ships' and small coastal transports converted to LCT tenders, a mobile 'planning' ship and a 'post-office'.
47. Keogh, op cit, p 318.
48. Report by Principal Beachmaster 'B' dated 8 June 1945 to SNO Beach Unit on AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/0 60A.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Tarakan Campaign narrative dated 3 November 1945 in AA (Vic) file MP1587/1/0 61E and CTG 74.3 Action Report, Brunei Bay dated 20 June 1945, on AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/0 62E.
52. HMAS *Shropshire*, fired starshell at the rate of five rounds per hour. See Long, op cit, p .519.
53. Commodore J Collins, CTG 74.1 letter to CinC US Fleet dated 30 July 1915 in AA (Vic) file MP 1587/1/0 60.
54. Colletta, op cit, p 242.

# ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

## ***AN OBOE CONCERTO: REFLECTIONS ON THE BORNEO LANDINGS, 1945***

**Peter Stanley**

Within days of the 26th Australian Brigade Group's landing on Tarakan on 1 May 1945, the British Army ceased active operations not only against the Germans in Europe, but also against the Japanese in Burma.<sup>1</sup> In June, as the rest of the 9th Australian Division landed around Brunei Bay, US troops on Okinawa finally eliminated the island's Japanese defenders, while on Luzon US troops had isolated the last centre of Japanese resistance in the Philippines. Though in July AIF and AMF formations in the mandate territories continued their protracted war against Japanese and jungle, the only formation of the western Allies to be committed to battle anew was the 7th Australian Division, landing at Balikpapan.

The three Australian amphibious landings in Borneo—codenamed OBOE One, Two and Six—represented the Australian Imperial Force's final offensive operations and the war's last battles. In the time available, at ten or fifteen minutes per operation, this paper will at best offer an impression, in terms of the obvious and laboured musical analogy, three short movements, the longest being that on Balikpapan. Drawing upon the Memorial's documentary and audio-visual collections, I will describe and offer observations on the three OBOE operations. I fear that the resultant concerto will be—like much modern music—dissonant, but, I hope, worth hearing.

As we have learned today, the OBOE operations are widely regarded as having been unjustifiable and wasteful, and I will not quibble with that judgment. As a rule, I suspect single-villain explanations, and General Douglas MacArthur's ego makes a temptingly large target, but it seems fair to attribute the OBOE operations to his duplicity and mendacity. The point is made by many commentators and I will not press it, except to contribute a piece of telling evidence offered by the Australian journalist Harry Summers. MacArthur told Summers in Manila in March 1945, in discussing the possibility of an advance into Borneo, how he could, 'see no reason ... to send men to eliminate pockets that are not a threat militarily, and not even a considerable nuisance', and yet two months later apparently did precisely that.<sup>2</sup> The OBOE operations were a part of MacArthur's 'Montclair' plan, which envisaged the re-occupation of the Philippines (the 'Victor' operations) and an advance down the east coast of Borneo, landings in eastern or western Java (depending on British participation), with landings in British Borneo coming last.<sup>3</sup> MacArthur's unwillingness to employ Australian formations in worthwhile operations at the forward edge of the Allied advance to Japan led him to play the US Joints Chiefs against the gullibility of the Australian government, outmanoeuvring Blamey, himself no mean politician. Historians have largely questioned and often condemned the OBOE operations.<sup>4</sup> I recall the late John Robertson's bitter summary, that the Tarakan landing failed to achieve its aim, that the Brunei Bay landings secured a naval base which the Royal Navy, its only potential user, did not want, and that the Balikpapan landing was carried out against the wishes of the Australian Army's commander.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, criticism is inescapably based on hindsight. In that no Australian knew that or when the A-Bombs would be used, picking the moment at which the Australian Army should have decided that it had killed enough Japanese to stop is as impossible as finding the world's tallest dwarf.

As a military social historian, interested in reconstructing the nuances of attitude and action, usually of military communities whose long-dead members are unable to contest my more vivid conjecture, I seek to connect this inquiry to an awareness and analysis of military operations. Having examined primary sources on and secondary accounts of these operations, visited the places where they occurred and reflected on their significance, I offer these observations with humility but also in the hope that they may contribute to our understanding of the Borneo operations and of the force which executed them.

The objective of OBOE One, the Tarakan landing, was to 'seize and occupy [the island] ... and to establish naval and air facilities thereon to support future operations'.<sup>6</sup> It inaugurated a two-month long campaign involving bitter fighting in difficult terrain and an atrocious climate, and heavy losses. Troops of Brigadier David Whitehead's 26th Brigade Group of the 9th Australian Division landed on Red and Yellow beaches on Tarakan Island on the morning of 1 May. Most Japanese defenders, adopting tactics devised following the US landings in the central Pacific, retired inland, and the attackers were spared the heavy losses which might have been inflicted had the defenders occupied the bunkers and pillboxes along the road running parallel to the beach, named Anzac Highway. Even so, the heavy Australian casualties on Tarakan—double those suffered by the rest of the 9th Division in OBOE Six and only four short of the 7th Division's in OBOE Two the following month—aroused the concern of the Advisory War Cabinet. Sir Frederick Shedden was asked to enquire whether casualties could have been reduced by employing a stronger force. He was advised that the force allotted was 'ample', and that committing more would probably have increased rather than reduced casualties.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the landing on 1 May remains a considerable feat, both in reaching the shore and in getting off it onto the firmer ground beyond. The beaches today are beaches no longer. An entire suburb on stilts reaches far out over the stinking black mud of Lingkas Bay, but at low water you can still see the mud, crawling with hoppers and smelling strongly, lacking only the oil which drenched the 9th Division sappers crawling over the mud to blow up the obstacles on 30 April, giving the landing craft and amphibious vehicles a free run the next morning. Even more impressive was the protracted campaign which followed the landing, as the infantry and pioneer battalions and commando squadrons slowly advanced from the beaches north and east through the town, west toward the airstrip and pushed beyond both to the hills along Snag's Track. Each step entailed arduous patrolling and a series of hard fights in rugged terrain. The particular incongruity of Tarakan is that many of the hills over which the battle was fought were given girl's names: Susie, Angie, Joyce, or Freda. (The reasoning was of course, security and clarity in orders.) For me, Freda, one of the hills commanding Snag's Track, holds a special interest, because in a brief and unsuccessful fight for a knoll here that charismatic figure, Diver Derrick, VC, was killed leading a platoon of the 2/48th. A veteran of Tobruk, Alamein and Finschhafen, Derrick was mortally wounded beating off a Japanese counterattack in the early hours of 24 May, dying the following day. The futility of Derrick's death underscores the folly of the entire operation.<sup>8</sup>

It seems inescapable, then, that any landing on Tarakan was at best ill-advised and at worst negligent, on at least two grounds. Firstly, because it was an island, the Japanese garrison had nowhere to go and chose death before the dishonour of surrender; hence, the unnecessarily high cost incurred in blasting them off the hills which they held. Secondly, that though the ostensible reason for the occupation of Tarakan was the possession of its airstrip, the damage inflicted in taking it precluded its operational use for six weeks. And despite the work of two RAAF airfield construction squadrons, the first aircraft to attempt a landing—a Kittyhawk on 28 June—crashed on the still waterlogged strip. (Miles of Marsden matting laid on the strip today do duty all over the island as garden fencing.) The folly of the Tarakan landing was that the Americans had occupied the Sulu Islands earlier in 1945 (without opposition), and had constructed airstrips on them, and that for Balikpapan (for which the Tarakan strip was still not available) they were able to deploy three escort carriers to provide fighter cover and tactical air support.<sup>9</sup>

Whitehead's 26th Brigade Group met the challenge of subduing the Japanese garrison of Tarakan with persistence and skill, but recognition of their efforts should not obscure what appear to have been serious misjudgments in the planning of the operation: the failure to anticipate prolonged and tenacious Japanese resistance or the difficulties of finding and destroying the defenders in the tangled country in the island's centre. No one on Tarakan appears to have been responsible for these errors of judgment. It would appear that the selection of Tarakan was made by MacArthur's staff, and those planning the operation do not appear to have considered the difficulties posed by the defenders' likely reactions in the island's interior, or the difficulties of extirpating them. It is possible that they anticipated that the Australians would be content (as US forces had on, say, Bougainville or Morotai) with



simply establishing a defensive perimeter around the airstrip. One of the 'assumptions' of the Montclair planners at MacArthur's Headquarters was that:

the combat capability of hostile garrisons will be so reduced by lowered morale and logistic support as to permit a substantial reduction in relative assault force requirements.<sup>10</sup>

It is imperative therefore to sympathise with Whitehead's dilemma. It would have been difficult and expensive to attempt to cordon off the substantial Japanese force at large in the hills around Fukukaku, the 'combat capability' of which appeared to be in no way diminished. Australian practice was to hunt down and kill 'Japs' wherever they remained, and in view of the resistance which many offered even in extremis, the decision to exterminate them must be accepted.

Though very much still a provincial backwater, Tarakan has changed dramatically since 1945. There are few reminders of the war—bullet marked warehouses at Lingkas harbour, an overturned pill box on what is now a suburb built over Red Beach; Snag's Track is still a sandy, boggy track, overlooked by densely wooded hills. In the early morning light, it is easy to imagine the hills commanding the airstrip as the 2/24th saw them in the costly fight to secure the strip. The campaign's most powerful reminder is the memorial erected by the 9th Division's engineers at the entrance to what was once the Australian war cemetery—identical to other memorials the Division left behind in cemeteries at Tobruk and Finschhafen. Standing in the local military commander's compound, it speaks of 225 Australians who died for a prize which even at the time few coveted.

The second Borneo operation—OBOE Six —was actually a series of landings around Brunei Bay and Labuan Island in the sultanate of Brunei and what was then British North Borneo. Of the three OBOE operations, OBOE Six was the least costly and the most impressive in terms of its impact on those liberated from Japanese occupation, despite the fatuity of its ostensible purpose, 'to establish an advanced fleet base ... and to protect oil and rubber resources.'<sup>11</sup> In MacArthur's Montclair plan OBOE Six was to follow the landings on the east coast of Borneo and landings in Sarawak, but had been advanced in a vain and uninvited attempt to entice the British Pacific Fleet away from the Pacific to south-east Asian waters.

OBOE Six called for the simultaneous landing of two brigade groups on four beaches at both the northern (Labuan) and southern (Brunei) ends of Brunei Bay. Involving meticulous staff work, though practically unopposed, they reflect the 9th Division's expertise in such operations, and the largely harmonious and efficient relationship which existed between Australian and US forces at the operational level. It is not possible in this paper to deal in detail with the 20th Brigade's bold and skilful leap-frogging from Brunei Bay south along the Brunei coast, or with the 24th Brigade's seizure of Labuan Island and its advance into British North Borneo. Suffice to notice one incident in the capture of Labuan epitomising a feature of the OBOE operations, involving small but costly fights contingent on the operation rather than in pursuit of vital objectives. Within days the 2/28th and 2/43rd Battalions had occupied Labuan. As on Tarakan, the island's defenders adopted the prevailing Japanese tactic, retiring from the beaches and planning to hold or counterattack from a strong defensive position, 'the Pocket'. Anxious not to lose more men unnecessarily, the attackers bombarded the Pocket for four days, from the supporting task force, from the air and from the 9th Division's artillery. Finally, on 21 June, two companies of the 2/28th advanced along tracks through the swamps surrounding it, supported by artillery, mortars and, for the first time in the AIFs experience, 'Frog' flame-throwing Matildas. Just six of the Pocket's 200 defenders were captured, leaving the rest dead amid what a member of the 2/28th called 'the smell of death and the stench of decaying rice'—the brigade report recorded that Japanese corpses were 'so badly dismembered as to make an exact count difficult'.<sup>12</sup> The 2/28th lost seven dead and 35 wounded in the suppression of the Pocket. It could not have been left—the night before the final assault a party broke out and attacked the maintenance area around Victoria, causing 17 casualties.<sup>13</sup>



One hundred and fourteen Australians died in the operations around Brunei Bay, a relatively small proportion of the 29,000 engaged, and a cost commensurate with their effect. The Japanese occupation of British North Borneo had been harsh. Several thousand people, mostly Chinese, had died under Japanese rule, many in reprisals in the aftermath of the abortive 'double tenth' rising of October 1943, one of the few armed rebellions against Japanese rule. The people of North Borneo welcomed the return of British rule, and Australians were popular then—as they are still. Indeed, the Australian legacy in Sabah is apparent in many ways: in the rolling stock on the colony's only railway, repaired by 9th Division engineers and maintained until the 1960s by ex-diggers; in the memories of many Sabahan families (such as a taxi driver I met on Labuan, befriended by Australians as a boy in 1945 and who maintained contact with a digger from Queensland) or in the crest of the British colony of North Borneo. From 1945 until the colony's incorporation in Malaysia in 1963, the sailing vessel on the crest bore a T on its sail—representing, of course, the 'Tobruk' colour patch of the 9th Division. The Australian role in genuinely liberating Sabah should be regarded, I think, as one of the most positive outcomes of a campaign clouded by misgivings.<sup>14</sup>

Labuan holds the most impressive reminder of the OBOE landings, in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, with its thousand headstones and memorial to the missing on a neat brick loggia, all standing amid the beauty of shrubs and flowers which fail to cloak or soften what the place stands for. The headstones bear the names of British and Australian servicemen who died in operations in and around Borneo, while the names on the memorial are those of Australian and British prisoners of the Japanese, most of whom died—or rather were killed—in the protracted atrocity of the Sandakan death march, in which 2,500 died and but six survived.

Labuan is also the place where the commander of Japanese forces in north Borneo surrendered, a spot marked by an unassuming memorial, at Surrender Point, on the island's northern shore. Next to it stand two memorials erected by the Japanese. Contrary to my expectations, and to the preconceptions of many who see this imposing 'enemy' memorial, this is not a memorial only to Japanese dead. Rather, it commemorates all those Japanese and Allied servicemen, and civilians, who died in or around Borneo. You may suspect the motives of the Japanese 'South Pacific Friendship Association', which erected the memorial, but it is surely also a powerful symbol of reconciliation.

OBOE Two, the third and largest Australian operation in 1945, was launched on 1 July, against the oil port of Balikpapan, now in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Timur. Balikpapan deserves greater attention than the other two, partly because of the strength of the opposition it overcame, partly because it was carried out by Major General Edward Milford's 7th Division—perhaps the most neglected of the AIF divisions. The Balikpapan operation was intended under the Montclair plan to prepare a base for the advance into Java, and to 'conserve petroleum ... installations'. Senior Australian commanders, however, doubted that it had any genuine purpose.<sup>15</sup>

As the final operation of the war, the Balikpapan landing exemplifies the expertise in amphibious operations which the Allies had acquired by 1945. Many accounts testify to the thoroughness with which all involved were briefed. Firepower on unprecedented scale for a single division operation was directed at this stretch of coast, both in the bombardment preceding the landing and the fire plan supporting it, with over 30,000 shells or rockets landing on 1 July alone. The power of the bombardment evidently remained one of the most vivid recollections of many veterans, as indicated by the frequency with which it was mentioned by 7th Division veterans interviewed under the Memorial's Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war of 1939-45. The awe with which those involved regarded the bombardment is apparent in, for example, the recollection of Tom Kimber of the 2/27th Battalion, who 'vividly' recalled how:

As we approached the shore the warships stood off and bombarded ... Then the bombers came over and bombed the area and as we neared the landing ... there were rocket ships which stood off, I suppose 100 yards from the shore and they fired these hundreds and hundreds of rockets ... it was one great display of fire power ...<sup>16</sup>

As the 7th Division's first amphibious operation, minor errors occurred, in landing craft beaching out of position (some of the 2/10th went ashore 800 yards from their intended places) but the landing itself generally went smoothly. In this the landing's execution contrasted with its planning. Previous speakers have discussed how Australian and American army, navy and air staffs differed seriously over the location of the landings and the type and quantity of air and naval support. Suffice to notice under what difficulties interservice cooperation on the Australian side proceeded. Milford and the RAAF commander, Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock, argued before and after the operation on the methods, control and delivery of air support, while Milford complained bitterly of RAAF personnel as 'undisciplined, lacking in organisation, ... ill-dressed [and] foul mouthed'.<sup>17</sup> Nor was the impression confined to Milford: at Tarakan later that month Gavin Long recorded the dress of fifteen RAAF men he encountered consecutively and no two were dressed alike, while private records from RAAF officers on Labuan substantiate the impression of a disorganised and unharmonious force.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to span a divisional operation in fifteen minutes, but an account of the advance of Lieutenant Colonel Tom Daly's 2/10th Battalion from Red Beach to the summit of the hill codenamed Parramatta on 1 July, provides a useful impression of the landing at Balikpapan.<sup>19</sup> The advance began offshore with the naval and air bombardment. Waves of LVTs and LCVPs began the long run toward Red Beach, approaching under a naval and air bombardment giving the troops, as Daly later put it, 'anything you asked for ... Good show'.<sup>20</sup> Daly's first wave landed at 8.55 am, assembling on the beach, with Matilda tanks of the supporting 1st Armoured Regiment. Within a quarter of an hour, the 2/10th's A and C Companies had moved up the beach and across Vasey Highway<sup>21</sup>—the main road running parallel to the beach—towards Hill 87 and its continuation, Parramatta. The summit of Parramatta lies a kilometre north of Red Beach, overlooking the road running up the valley from the beach, the vital feature and the 2/10th's main objective that day.

Daly candidly reported on several problems on the ground, particularly communications breakdowns and the 'inexcusable' bogging of all the supporting tanks. The ironic consequence was that despite the massive firepower available on and off the beaches, the attack on Hill 87 occurred 'without direct or close support' and 'depended entirely ... on fire and movement'. C Company secured the summit of Hill 87 by 1240 hours. The advance on Parramatta began at 1300 hours, supported by tanks, artillery, mortars and machine-guns, which had assembled or been contacted in the meantime, and took the main feature by 1415 hours.<sup>22</sup>

The following month, the Australian official historian, Gavin Long, went over the ground of the battalion's assault on Parramatta in company with Daly and the commander of D Company, Major Francis Cook. His notes, accompanied by sketches, convey the spontaneity and impetus of the advance. Cook described men 'racing up' the slopes of Hill 87, bypassing strong points and disregarding the need to mop up. He told of tanks bogging, of weapons jamming in the sand and having to be cleared in action, and of Matilda flame-throwing tanks 'frogging' Japanese bunkers, only to discover that they contained ammunition dumps. They attributed the 2/10th's success to the leadership of their junior officers, the courage of the tanks' commander, Major Ted Ryrie of the 1st Armoured Regiment, and to 'the daring, skill and speed of the infantrymen'. (Having walked up Parramatta in July, more than anything, I admire the attackers' physical ability to run up a hill that left me as close to heat stroke as I've ever come.)<sup>23</sup>

By the evening of the first day the 2/10th were on Newcastle, a hill 600 metres beyond Parramatta, having suffered 43 casualties, including 13 dead. It ended on a tragic note when late in the afternoon, D Company was 'done over', as Daly put it, by American dive bombers, which killed three of his men, one a Tobruk veteran. 'Nothing much is being said about that', he warned Long, though to his credit Long recorded the incident in his official history.<sup>24</sup>

I regret to say that I could spend only five hours at Balikpapan, though this was longer than MacArthur's visit on the day of the landing.<sup>25</sup> I discovered that the Balikpapan of 1945 simply no longer exists. Some of the beach obstacles appear to have survived, but Vasey Highway is unrecognisable, and what had been the sandy plateau of Petersham Junction is a pleasant middle class suburb. Even in 1945 much of the advance passed through Klandasan, the Dutch suburb. Today, climbing between the beach and Parramatta entails walking through people's yards, while the summit is inaccessible, occupied by the offices of an oil company. At one end of Vasey Highway is the memorial to the 7th Division and the 229 men it lost taking Balikpapan.

Despite their vivid account of their battalion's actions, Daly and Cook were as modest as are Australian soldiers by inclination and tradition. It took Milford, the divisional commander, to remark to Long that Daly, a regular in his first action as battalion commander, was 'magnificent', and that his battalion's feat was decisive in ensuring the landing's success.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, further west, the 2/12th's CO stopped it, while the brigadier, Frederick Chilton, prepared a formal attack to overcome the resistance it encountered. Chilton's caution was apparently in character, while Daly's impetuosity reflected perhaps the career soldier's need to make a mark in what was evidently his last chance in this war. But Chilton's approach was not uncommon among other battalion and brigade commanders, anxious that their men—and especially their originals—not die unnecessarily in the war's closing months. In other campaigns, battalion commanders ordered, or at least let it be known, that originals were not to be risked getting killed at this stage.

Balikpapan differed from the other OBOE operations in that unlike Tarakan, its defenders could retreat, but unlike the Brunei Bay operations, they largely did not. The battle for Balikpapan did not end on the beaches, and for three weeks after the landing the 7th Division advanced against firm opposition. I cannot take you through even a summary of these small but costly advances, but consider what occurred on the Milford Highway, the road from Balikpapan leading to the timber town of Samarinda. Here, in the last week of July, two weeks before the war's end, battalions of the 25th Brigade were still making small and carefully prepared advances against defensive positions built around machine-guns. The 2/31st Battalion, for instance, a unit with no published unit history, lost 168 men killed or wounded in this advance, the highest casualty figures for the operation, and the AIF's last in the war. The dead included a number of the vigorous leaders who had contributed to the operation's tactical success, including Ted Ryrie, killed leading his tanks up the highway on 10 July. Their deaths are for me strikingly reminiscent of the first AIF's last battle, at Montbrehain in October 1918, in which many experienced and capable leaders were killed, perhaps seeking by example to encourage men who not unreasonably feared dying in the war's final fights. When Gavin Long interviewed Milford on VP Day, he learned that Lieutenant Colonel Ewan Robson, the 2/31st's CO was 'shaken' by his battalion's 'misfortunes, and that understandably he was 'showing signs of strain'.<sup>27</sup> Other commanders may have evaded similar strain by adopting more cautious approaches.

The Australian Army lost 681 men in the three Borneo operations—exactly ten per cent from accidents.<sup>28</sup> What are we to make of them? I suggest that both Tarakan and Balikpapan were unnecessary, though largely competently executed in the circumstances. Only the Brunei Bay landings, which both liberated an oppressed population and could have led to a viable advance down the west coast of Borneo towards the Indies, could be regarded as justifiable. But if they were strategically unjustifiable, the bastard of ego and politicking among American and Australian high command, do we simply regard them as offering the poor consolation of technical lessons in command and control and 'interoperability'?<sup>29</sup>

As a military social historian, I suggest that they offer valuable insights into the tenor of the Australian Army in the war's final months, and beyond that into the Australian people's relationship with its army in the mid-twentieth century. Even the least diligent reader of the Army magazine *Salt* or the most apathetic participant in a current affairs discussion could not avoid the message that the war was virtually over by mid-1945. (They could not, of course, have known that it would end in August, or in what circumstances, but field censorship reports make clear that all realised that the end was a matter of time.) Contemporary documents and

retrospective evidence suggest that many men—though by no means all—did not believe the OBOE operations to be worthwhile.<sup>30</sup> But the remarkable feature of the landings and the ensuing campaigns surely is that they were conducted with, as Long put it in the final sentence of his last volume, 'much the same devotion and skill that [the Australian soldier] ... had shown in the decisive battles of earlier years'.<sup>31</sup> This, at a time when any newspaper reader could have worked out that the war against Japan would be won on the beaches of Honshu rather than of Borneo. But Long did not explain why this was so: why did not Australian troops object, go slow, or even protest that they were being wasted? Questioning orders is for an army, of course, the slippery slope, and the commanders' failure to query much less protest against unjustifiable operations is not surprising. That the troops did not balk at what many regarded as unnecessary still demands explanation.

To me, their willingness to execute so flawed a strategic scheme is simultaneously a tribute and a tragedy. Contrary to the ill-informed jibes of critics and the misplaced praise of partisans, the operational units of the Australian Army in the war's final year was characteristically disciplined and proficient. Their discipline was informed by what philosophers call 'situational ethics'—a pragmatic rather than automatic obedience—and their proficiency concealed by a casual veneer, but the troops who landed on the beaches of Borneo were arguably members of the most experienced force which Australia has ever sent to war. Its ranks included men who had served through the campaigns in the Mediterranean and New Guinea, in the ranks or as junior officers, by 1945 as NCOs, company or battalion commanders or as staff officers. They include many of the well known names of the AIF, some of whom we have encountered in this paper, and who, despite the war approaching the end of its sixth year, regarded the prospect of battle with equanimity, if not enthusiasm.

Field censorship reports disclose that among Morshead's 1st Australian Corps morale improved as units staged from the unsatisfying inactivity of the Atherton Tableland to Morotai and beyond. The notebooks of Gavin Long, recorded as he toured the theatre in 1945, reflect the change. In Aitape in March 1945 he observed that:

Despite the wearying length of the war and the believed futility of this campaign, the infantiers [sic] have lost none of their go ... The old soldiers chafe [in] ... the comparative comfort of battalion headquarters; the young soldiers are keen to prove themselves.

Long went on to remark—and this to me discloses their mood—that 'The art of understatement of dangers and discomforts is highly developed'.<sup>32</sup>

This is not idle flattery: Long's notebooks, as we have seen, were candid. It describes the morale and ethos of a force which believed it was among the world's best fighting forces at the end of a world war. The 7th and 9th Divisions, and the RAN, RAAF and Allied forces supporting them tackled the tasks set them with a professionalism and vigour at which we may still marvel. Given the task of securing Freda, or the Pocket or Parramatta, they got on with the job. The tragedy was that the job was unworthy of their skills, or their lives. I'm sure that soldiers understand the sin of misusing a fine weapon, and I can think of few instances in the Second World War when the sin was as great.

But Long's observation doesn't explain why this should have been so. Nor is it possible within the compass of this paper to do so, not only because time or space forbids, but because the question has hardly been investigated. The social history of the Australian soldier in the Second World War still awaits the scrutiny which his father received for the Great War in Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* and the studies it helped to stimulate. John Barrett's *We Were There*, though a pioneering and humane piece of reportage based on an heroic survey methodology, refrains from connecting its respondents' recollections to an examination of contemporary sources.<sup>33</sup> I have previously argued that Australia's largest military campaigns are paradoxically least understood, pointing to a dearth of research on these operations and suggesting several possible directions. One of the most urgent requirements is a social history of the second AIF which amplifies and substantiates many of the leads suggested by Barrett.<sup>34</sup> I am therefore unable to provide a definitive answer to the conundrum of why this

army fought so well at this time, and will have to be content to suggest some possible explanations, all of which demand exploration through further research, and especially the attention of military social historians familiar with the psychology of soldiers.

Firstly, because it was difficult—and often undesirable—for those involved in operations to see, much less question, the overall picture: even intelligent, curious and articulate citizen soldiers must be kept in ignorance if operational security is not to be jeopardised. Secondly, because even—or especially—democratic armies resort to propaganda to justify their tasks to themselves, and troops were allowed to believe, quite misleadingly, that the OBOE campaigns would help to end the war. On Tarakan, for example, a member of a Military History Field Team recorded meeting machine-gunners whose morale was higher on Tarakan than ever before because they believed, quite incorrectly, that 'because of their advance the release of 8 Div prisoners of war would soon be a reality'.<sup>35</sup> Thirdly, because the bonds of loyalty to unit and mates impelled men to do their best irrespective of the rationality of a particular task. Fourthly, because young men—and many were very young—are disinclined to ponder the consequences of even opposed landings on a hostile shore, rating the prospect of possible death lower than the certainty of adventure, and, frankly, many relished the prospect of at last killing 'Japs'. Finally, because for all the danger, hardship and frustration of serving in any army and at the end of a long war, Australian soldiers ultimately—and rightly—believed that the cause which they served was right, and despite much reasonable cynicism and dissatisfaction, never lost that faith.

Whether their faith was entirely justified is at times questionable. Before closing, allow me a minute to lament that this OBOE concerto does not have at least another movement, one which could draw little censure, at least not on humanitarian grounds. I refer to the projected but abortive plan to use the 1st Australian Parachute Battalion to liberate the surviving prisoners of war at Sandakan. The plan was nullified, partly by the Japanese sending most of the surviving prisoners west on the notorious Sandakan death march, but also because of American reluctance to release the necessary C-47 transport aircraft. Again, it is conjectured (by Athol Moffitt in his book *Project Kingfisher*) that MacArthur forbade their use.<sup>36</sup> The Sandakan prisoners' abandonment at a time when the Allies mounted three operations, putting over 80,000 men on Borneo, remains a serious indictment of all involved in the decision.

So the three movements of the OBOE concerto remain a mixed and often discordant piece, a medley of unfinished and unharmonious melodies, an unfortunate anticlimax to the confident and largely harmonious symphonies of 1943-44. Only in the manner in which the musicians performed their parts in the piece can the listener derive a measure of satisfaction. And on that rather flat note I thank you, and invite your questions and comments.<sup>37</sup>



## Question and Answer Session

### John De Teliga

You were mentioning the Australian soldier and morale—as an old soldier I'd just like to point out that we can wait, we can do what we're told, we can fight, we can die, provided we're sure that our cause is just and also provided that our commanders are competent. Later on I'm going to get one more shot in about whether neglect, either by incompetence or otherwise, is a criminal offence. Because after all, success in battle is inversely proportional to the number of principles of war that we fail to observe, either by ignorance, incompetence, neglect or default.

### Peter Stanley

Thank you. You mentioned success in battle and I think that is the key point. The AIF in Borneo was tremendously successful in battle. The tragedy was that they were directed to the wrong battles.

### Mick Sheehan

Peter, you mentioned the enthusiasm of the troops pushing up the hill towards Balikpapan, and you wondered why they were doing it. I understand the reason is because Colonel Daly, as the CO at the time, told his battalion that if they took Balikpapan township on the first day they would have no more jobs for the whole of the campaign. So they raced ahead and they were getting so far ahead of themselves that 30th Air Force shot them up.

### Peter Stanley

I cut that out actually because of the fear of sticking it into Alan Stephens again. But that is not entirely a flippant point, Mick. One of the things that I put in the paper which I cut out for reasons of space, was that Daly's attitude towards that advance was different to those of his fellow battalion commanders in the 7th Division and even in the same Brigade. And the CO of the 2/12th—I've forgotten exactly what they encountered—but the CO of the 2/12th decided to not advance in the way that Daly did, but to stop and call for all of those supporting arms to be coordinated in order to prepare that advance. And the attitude of Daly and the 2/12th CO is dramatically different. I may be wrong, I may be rude to suggest it, but Daly was a regular in what everybody understood to be the last battle of the war. And, knowing Daly's character somewhat because he was Chairman of our council some years ago—and he was a very persuasive and charismatic figure—I wondered whether his elan on that occasion was something to do with the fact that it was his last chance to demonstrate his skills in battle. I just wonder if that's an explanation. For those who knew him perhaps.

### Zac Issackson

I knew General Daly very well indeed. I have seen a lot of him over the years. I would not think that was his motivation. He was a pretty competent professional soldier and I would not have described his motivation as you have.

### Peter Stanley

I wasn't saying that he was incompetent. I am saying that his actions demonstrated his competence.



### **Zac Issackson**

Another thing, of course, Frank Cook was an exceptional man who is also a great friend of mine. A combination of Daly and Cook was pretty significant in one battalion. I suspect this had a lot to do with it.

### **General Tim Vincent**

What you described is a situation that particularly disturbed me at the time and continues to disturb me 50 years later. Can our military and our governments present such a posture, creating such a confidence in the armed forces in this country, and the people of this country, that the nonsense of OBOE's will not be repeated? That's my particular worry today, that of my ageing decrepitude.

### **Peter Stanley**

Decrepit or not, it's a fine question and it's not one that I have an answer to.

### **Craig Wilcox**

I wonder if we can see two kinds of good reasons for the operations, reasons that we may not agree with, but sound reasons nonetheless in 1945. Were not the operations useful in the same way that Billy Hughes might have understood? When Billy Hughes was at the Versailles Conference in 1919 and he wanted to get his way, he'd simply say, 'I represent 60,000 dead'. The OBOE operations, as horrible as it is for me to say this, and I hope I don't offend anyone, but they added to the death toll which allowed Australian diplomats later on to say we represent 'X' thousand dead. I wonder if you've come across, or anyone here has come across anybody putting those kinds of arguments at the post-war conferences? I also wonder whether there is also the aspect of restoring what was considered to be legitimate rule within the Dutch and English East Indies.

### **Peter Stanley**

I defer to David Horner on both of those points because he covered the first one earlier. Nobody, I believe has put it as crassly as 'we want to add to the death toll', but there is certainly the element of adding to diplomatic leverage in the post-war settlement and to demonstrate a commitment to the global allied war effort in order to justify a place at the table. Correct me if I'm wrong, David, but that's certainly a consideration with the Australian Government.

### **David Horner**

The issue of what the Australians would be doing in the last two years of war was first raised in the middle of 1943 and the government worked through that for quite some time. And they did come to the conclusion that the purpose of the fighting had changed. In the first place, the fighting in the South-West Pacific, from the Australian point of view, was to defend Australia and to drive the Japanese back. Then that changed, and a lot of people don't quite grasp that in the latter years of the war we did fight for political purposes, that is to have a stake at the peace table. The Government, obviously, was not keen to make too much of this in their public announcements. But that was certainly the reason. Curtin found himself pulled in two directions: on one hand he realised that a lot of the fighting was not worth the loss of Australian lives; on the other hand he saw that there was this need to continue fighting, and it was for that reason that he tried to work it so that we were involved in the Philippines campaign, although, subsequently, we were not. That was the same sort of argument to an extent that was pursued with the fighting in Bougainville and New Britain and in New Guinea. We have to see, though, the fighting in Borneo in a slightly different light. That is that by this stage the war is pretty obviously going to be over fairly soon, and the Balikpapan operation is the classic in this one because it is so late in the war and it is so clear that this area has been

bypassed. You have to remember, by this stage the Americans had landed on Okinawa and in doing so had cut off the southern area from the Japanese in the Netherlands East Indies and cut them off from home. Therefore, it was clear that there was no strategic purpose for going into this area. As far as I can see, reading the documents, at this stage the argument that we had to keep fighting for a stake on the peace table, was not uppermost in the mind of the government, but simply that MacArthur said it needed to be done and MacArthur was always right so you had to go along with him. Now that might seem a rather harsh judgment, but it's my reading of the documents certainly in the Balikpapan campaign. Grim though it might be, that's certainly how I see it from looking at the documents.

#### **Brigadier Chris Roberts**

Peter, I thank you for that paper and General Vincent I think you are right in your assessment that in hindsight OBOE probably should not have happened. But I do not think it's fair to say that the war was almost finished in July 1945. We only see that from hindsight. I think we forget that the war ended so quickly and so dramatically as a result of the dropping of the atomic bomb. And I don't think we should forget that there was an Australian division as prisoners in Singapore, and that in fact the British had plans to mount invasion against Malaya and Singapore. Certainly if one looks at it in that light, then perhaps the OBOE operations were seen at the time as a precursor towards the securing of a far greater strategic price. I am not suggesting that Balikpapan and Tarakan were necessary, but certainly one way to get to Singapore was to go through Borneo. I just make that as an observation.

#### **Peter Stanley**

One can only say that MacArthur was not going to Singapore.

#### **David Horner**

I am glad that Brigadier Roberts mentioned about the fact that people were not to know that the war was going to finish so quickly. What I was referring to is the fact that strategically these areas were cut off and therefore, whatever you did in Borneo was going to have no effect on the outcome of the war. But there is another consideration where Brigadier Roberts is quite right, we were not to know that the war was going to be over so quickly and that is—continuing the same vain that I was talking about before—that we needed to be fighting to have a stake in the peace table. We therefore perceive that we needed to be involved in the invasion of Japan. The only way that we were going to be involved in the invasion of Japan is if we had troops available to be involved in that invasion. Therefore, since we were told by MacArthur that we had to use four divisions in New Britain, New Guinea and Bougainville, the only way we were going to release those troops is by actually defeating the Japanese in Bougainville and New Guinea. In other words, eliminating the need for our troops to be there. So, in respect to the fighting in Bougainville, New Britain and New Guinea—people may argue about this, but there is at least one good reason why we should have fought some of those battles and that is, get the war over there so those troops could be released. But that does not apply in Borneo where the opposite was the case. We had committed two more divisions. And having committed them made it less likely that those divisions could be used in Japan later on, should it have gone on that long. So I see two different strategic situations applying to the fighting in Borneo, to the other areas where the Australians were fighting.

#### **Peter Stanley**

I hope I'm not being too harsh on MacArthur by ascribing to his personal agenda his vanity of these operations. I wonder if there is anything to be said for the Montclair plan. Here again is the chance for someone to say a word in his defence ... Condemned by silence. I think that's about it. Thank you.

## Endnotes

1. David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: the British Army in the Second World War*, London, 1983, p 375.
2. HJ Summers, summary of interview with MacArthur, San Miguel, 3 March 1945, Long Papers, Australian War Memorial (AWM) 67, 3/385.
3. The Montclair plan approved by MacArthur is detailed in GHQ SWPA, 'Basic plan for Montclair operations', 1 March 1945 [with later amendments], Morshead Papers, AWM 3 DRL 2632/36, item 64. MacArthur's staff identified six OBOE operations, the abortive ones being OBOE Three, Bandjermasin (which was contingent on the availability of escort carriers); OBOE Four, Surabaya (or, if British forces were available, Batavia); OBOE Five, the East Netherlands East Indies. OBOE Six, directed at Brunei Bay on the planning maps accompanying the GHQ document, was to follow (undated) preliminary landings in Sarawak, and so originally must have been expected to occur late in 1945 or early 1946.
4. They include Gavin Long, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, The Final Campaigns*, Canberra, 1963, p 547, David Horner, *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945*, Sydney, 1992; Peter Charlton, *The Unnecessary War: Island Campaigns of the South-West Pacific 1944-45*, Melbourne, 1983. American official historians appear to have been less willing to criticise MacArthur.
5. John Robertson, *Australia at War, 1939-1945*, Melbourne, 1981, p 179.
6. 'Report on Operation "OBOE One" Tarakan Borneo', p 3: Berryman Papers, AWM, PR84/370, item 45.
7. Northcott to Blamey, 14 June 1945, Blamey Papers, AWM 3 DRL 6643, item, 2/100.
8. The fight for Freda is detailed in John Glenn, *Tobruk to Tarakan*, Adelaide, 1960; Murray Farquhar, *Derrick VC*, Adelaide, 1982; Frank Legg, *War Correspondent*, Adelaide, 1964. Farquhar was adjutant of the 2/48th, and Legg had been the 2/48th's RSM at Alamein, had landed with the battalion on Tarakan as an ABC war correspondent and in July returned to Tarakan to interview survivors. The action and the spot today are described in Peter Stanley, 'Sniffing the ground: Australians and Borneo, 1945, 1994' *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No 25, October 1994, pp 37-43.
9. Another of the assumptions of the Montclair plan was that 'a minimum of six escort carriers may be available for ... the initial entry into Borneo': 'Basic plan for Montclair operations', Morshead Papers, AWM 3 DRL 2632/36, item 64, p 3. Without falling prey to the fallacy that the 7th Fleet's resources were infinitely elastic, had US escort carriers been available for Tarakan (as they were for Balikpapan), the former operation need not have been mounted.
10. 'Basic plan for Montclair operations', Morshead Papers, AWM 3 DRL 2632/36, item 64, p 2.
11. 'Summary of OBOE Six operations', OBOE 6 operations', Blamey Papers, AWM 3 DRL 6643, item 2/43.682. This was, of course, not its original intention, which under the Montclair plan was simply to 'reoccupy British Borneo [and] re-establish constituted government': 'Basic plan for Montclair operations', Morshead Papers, AWM 3 DRL 2632/36, item 64, p. 17.
12. Charlie Minor, 'Action on Labuan', in *Tobruk to Borneo*: quarterly journal of the 2/28th Battalion and 24th A/Tank Coy Association, September 1952, p 9; AWM 54, 619/7/67, '24th Australian Infantry Brigade, Report on operations - British North Borneo, Labuan ...', p 27.
13. 'Military History Section - Enemy methods - suicide attack on Labuan Island 20/21 June 1945 ...'. AWM 54, 619/4/1.
14. I am grateful to Mr Joseph Tadem of the Sabah State Museum, Kola Kinabalu, who showed me successive crests of the colony in the museum's gallery dealing with Sabah's history.
15. 'Operation "OBOE Two" Notes on outline plan for landing ... by 7 Australian Division on Balikpapan-Manggar', Blamey Papers, AWM 3 DRL 6643, item 2/43.683: Horner, *High Command*, p 405, quoting correspondence in the Blamey and Berryman Papers.
16. Interview with Tom Kimber, 2/27th Battalion, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of the War of 1939-45, AWM, S921, pp 32-3. A vigorous and valuable corporate recollection of the Balikpapan landing is provided by AA (Andy) Pirie's history of the 2/5th Cavalry Commando Squadron, *Commando - double black*, Sydney, 1993, pp 415-24.
17. The arguments are summarised in Long's *The Final Campaigns*, Canberra, 1963, pp 504-6, but the record of his interview with Milford reflects the inter-service jealousy and animosity on which the planners 'apparently rational arguments' were based: Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Balikpapan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/89, p 41.
18. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Tarakan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/101, p 1; letters of Flt Lt BP Gordon, AWM 3DRL 7417 and FO S Edwards, AWM PR84/105.
19. In the presentation on which this paper is based, this was done by using a combination of photographic and documentary evidence.
20. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Balikpapan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/88, p 31.
21. Vasey Highway was named after Major General George Vasey, who had commanded the 7th Division in New Guinea and was killed in an aircraft accident in March 1945.
22. '2/10 Australian Infantry Battalion Operation report OBOE Two July 1945', AWM 54, 621/7/49. Difficulties relating to the operation as a whole are discussed in detail in 'Report on Operation OBOE Two by 7 Aust Div', Blamey Papers, AWM 3 DRL 6643, item 3/84.
23. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Balikpapan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/86, pp 10-41.

24. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 519; Frank Allchin, *Purple and Blue: the history of the 2/10th Battalion*, AIF, Adelaide, 1958, p 381-2. The incident is referred to obliquely in Wesley Frank Craven & James Lea Cate (eds), *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Vol V, The Pacific: Matterhorn to Nagasaki*, June 1944 to August 1945, Chicago, 1953, p 468. That morning the 2/12th had also mistakenly been attacked by American dive bombers, an incident which the 2/12th's history attributes to the 2/10th's impetuous advance: Alex Graeme-Evans, *Of Storms and Rainbows: the Story of the Men of the 2/12th Battalion AIF*, Hobart, 1991, Vol II, p 429.
25. Samuel Elliot Morrison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol XIII, The Liberation of the Philippines*, Boston, 1959, p 274.
26. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Balikpapan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/89, p 23.
27. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Balikpapan, August 1945, AWM 67, item 2/89, p 27.
28. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, Appendix 7, p 635.
29. Nevertheless, the OBOE operations offer such lessons in abundance. For Balikpapan, for example, see ['Planning by Task Force for amphibious operations'], Berryman Papers, AWM PR84/370, item 48, 'Notes on Amphibious Operations SWPA No 24 Report on the Balikpapan (Borneo) operations 1st July 1945', AWM 54, 621/7/52, 'Report on Operation OBOE Two by 7 Aust Div', Blamey Papers, AWM 3 DRL 6643, item 3/84 and '2/10 Australian Infantry Battalion Operation report OBOE Two July 1945', AWM 54, 621 /7/49, the latter containing critical conclusions drawn by one of the most successful battalions involved in the operation.
30. Field Censorship Company - Reports dealing with comments and complaints by troops', AWM 54, item 175/3/4. For subsequent views, see, for example, interviews conducted under the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of the War of 1939-45, AWM Harry Katekar, 2/27th Bn, S903, p 56; Norman Whitelaw, 2/2nd Field Regiment, S569, p 73; Basil Finlay, Z Special Force, S941, pp 164-6; Geoffrey Lowe, 2/12th Bn, S558, pp 84-5.
31. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 589.
32. Notebook, Gavin Long, entry, Aitape, March 1945, AWM 67, item 2/78, p 10.
33. John Barrett, *We Were There: Australian Soldiers of World War II*, Melbourne, 1987.
34. Peter Stanley, 'The green hole: exploring our neglect of the New Guinea campaigns of 1943-44', *Sabretache*, Vol XXXIV, Number 2, pp 3-9.
35. 'Tarakan interviews by NX108622, Lieut WN Prior', AWM 54, 617/7/2.
36. Athol Moffitt, *Project Kingfisher*, Sydney, 1989.
37. I am grateful to the Memorial's Director, Mr Brendon Kelson, and to the Deputy Director, Dr Michael McKernan, for their support and approval in making possible the research trip which resulted in this article, between 11 and 21 July 1994. I acknowledge with thanks comments by colleagues in the Historical Research Section of the Memorial, Anne-Mane Conde, Peter Londey, Katherine Urry and Craig Wilcox. I especially thank Mr Alec Hill, both for his recollections of OBOE Six as a soldier and his advice as a historian.

# ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

## ***A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: NORMANDY 1944<sup>1</sup>***

**Henry ('Jo') Gullett, AM, MC, ED, OM**

**Introduction by Colonel Peter Leahy,  
Director Army Research & Analysis**

Mr Gullett served as an infantry sergeant in the 2nd/6th Battalion at the battle of Bardia in 1941. He was awarded his Military Cross as a junior officer in New Guinea in 1943 and was later a company commander attached to a British battalion for the Normandy invasion. After the war, he continued to serve Australia with distinction, first as a federal liberal politician and then as Australia's Ambassador to Greece. Mr Gullett also boasts a dubious honour; he is one of the few Australians who can claim to have been shot at and wounded by Italians, Japanese and Germans alike. And, sir, we will thank you if you do not show us your scars. While today's conference is clearly focused on the Australian Army's amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific, we have asked Mr Gullett to speak to us about his personal experiences as a company commander with the British forces at Normandy. Normandy, as the biggest amphibious operation ever attempted, will provide us with some lessons for the future of amphibious operations in Australia.

### **Mr Gullett**

General Grey, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, if anyone cannot hear me please hold up their hand. There was a time when I was a Sergeant Major and I could easily make myself heard in this little theatre. But with this machinery you're never quite certain.

In the course of a long life and a varied one, I suppose I might have attended more conferences, briefings, speeches, meetings and so on than anybody else here. But I do not think I have ever attended a conference like this, where I have heard so much of interest and value clearly expressed. I think we are all in indebted to General Grey for organising this and letting us hear all these people who are authoritative on the subject and express themselves so well. They have informed us who made the decisions, why they were made and in what circumstances they were made. Decisions which sent Australians of 50 years ago all around the world, wherever there was armed conflict. I found these accounts quite fascinating. But I must tell you, frankly, that this is the end of them. Because as a soldier, I had the good fortune to serve in many theatres of war, but far from being a decision maker or a policy maker, I was not even privy to what such decisions and policies were. Some of the speakers have touched on various high level mistakes made during the war, and have referred to the disasters of Greece and Crete. I do not think they were disasters, if only because they delayed the German army from attacking Russia. However, taking part in those campaigns we had no criticism whatever to offer about either the decision to send us there or how it turned out.

As I said, I was not a decision maker in any sense, but like St Paul's centurion, I was a captain of hundreds, and hundreds of infantry at that, or a hundred at a time mostly. You did not have to be a specialist in anything to join the infantry. We were just very ordinary people. But, I must say from the start, that right throughout history no military armed engagement, large or small, no battle, no campaign, no war is decided until the infantry of the attacking forces occupy first the positions of their enemy and then their lines of communication, their ports and finally their factories and mines. Only the infantry can do that in any war, and this D-Day which I have been asked to talk about, was the first blow in Europe which told the Germans clearly that pretty soon we would be occupying their homeland.

D-Day: how did I ever come to be there? Well, allow me to explain. It was a long war, the six year war Gavin Long calls it, and by 1943 the British were running short of officers. Not generals, not field marshals, not even brigadiers, but middle ranking officers—field officers they say—of experience. The British government asked the Canadians to make some of their men available because, though they had not seen a great deal of the war, they were well selected, good types of people, and they gave them some hundreds—I think four hundred. Then they asked the Australian Government if we could provide a similar number—about four hundred. Well General Blamey—whom I did not make a habit of seeing during the war by the way, though I did meet him a number of times after—he said:

I said to them, it's all very well for the Canadians, but we've had two, three and four divisions engaged in campaigns for years now and I simply could not possibly spare anything like 100 officers, but I'll send you a handful.

And so he sent fifteen and I was lucky to be one. I will say now something about myself. The previous talkers have been absolutely factual and historical but I am going to express a few views, and they are only views about the morale and state of the nation and the outlook of men, particularly of my own generation.

Most of the Australians that were sent were under 30 years of age, but getting on towards that mark. We all had previous experience of war and most of us were rather more sophisticated soldiers, that is to say more militarily educated than most and so we were sent to appropriate planning appointments when we got to England. One of them who is here today, for example, was G1 of the 51st Highland Division, which is of course one of the most famous divisions to land there. The others filled a variety of staff positions.

The British, in my experience, were very reasonable with us and they asked me what I should do. I said that there was only one thing I could do and that I understood, and that was commanding soldiers—infantrymen—and that was what I wanted to do. So I was sent to the 8th Battalion, the Royal Scots—the first regiment of foot. This was then the oldest regiment of 'the line' in the British Army. They are referred to occasionally as Pontius Pilot's bodyguard because the legion that Pilot had in Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion was drawn largely from northern England and the Picts and Scots. But they did not like being called this because in fact their origin was as mercenaries with the French Kings in the 10th century. But anyhow, they were the oldest regiment of 'the line' in the British Army and possessed many proud traditions.

It was a warlike age; 50 years ago is a hell of a long time. For us in 1939, the Boer War was closer than the Second World War is to us today. So it is worth my while trying to say something about our general attitudes of my generation. My own family, for example, was probably typical for the period. I was the third generation of my family, born in Australia, to go abroad and fight in foreign wars, and that was by no means exceptional. We also had compulsory military training for everybody when I was a boy. You see, the Australian officer corps from which we were chosen consisted mainly of men from backgrounds like myself. While we were not all professionals, we were not entirely amateurs either. As I said, war was our background and the longer it went on the more the army engaged our loyalties and almost seemed home to us.

The first time I was wounded I came back to the same battalion. I had been commissioned while I was in hospital. At parade, the following morning after my return the Sergeant Major, who was a splendid Scotsman—first war chap too—gave me a nice salute and said 'Good morning, sir'. Then he said, 'Home again Jo'. And he meant that, for it was indeed home. Over the years it had become home and it was an essential part of our lives.

We arrived in Great Britain and I was sent to the Royal Scots, which was then commanded by a Colonel Delacombe, who later became Governor of Victoria. (This was particularly good fortune for me as, after the war, he used to ask us down to the Melbourne Cup.) We were also wounded on the same day at Normandy and I would visit him in England. I was very happy with this battalion but they did not have a role in D-Day. So, when we were visited by



General O'Connor, the Corps Commander, and he asked me how I was getting along, I said 'Very well, thank you sir, but I would like to be with a battalion that is landing on D-Day'. He laughed. He said, 'Very reasonable at your age'. So almost immediately I was sent to the 7th Battalion, Green Howards. They were encamped outside Portsmouth and the men were mostly North country miners. They had already done a campaign or two in the Western Desert, and they knew about the business of war.

I will say a word about them because they were not exactly looking forward to the campaign. Like myself, they were becoming to regard war as their life. They knew they were going to get knocked about in France and nobody looked forward to that. But a miner's life is not an easy one and they have got to rely on their mates. It is a pretty good background for soldiering in my opinion. As a matter of fact, they were all quite small men. We were weighed in our 'fighting order' so that they could calculate the weights for the landing craft and I was the second heaviest man in the company. Now I am very far from large, but of course, I was accustomed to carrying big weights in New Guinea, and I was not at all delicate. But it is still remarkable to think that out of 140 men, only the Sergeant Major was as heavy as I was.

A bit more about the British troops. All the officers in that battalion—it was a militia, or reserve, battalion—were professional regular soldiers, except myself. Fortunately, as I had other campaigns and ribbons, they all took it for granted that I was a professional soldier and I was not so foolish as to disabuse them.

First of all the briefing. We had very elaborate briefings on sand tables; beautiful big sand tables. And they were quite extensive. They went up to ten or fifteen miles inland from the coast of France, but there were no names; nothing was named and no maps were issued. We had no positive notion of where we were going to land. It was all part of a giant plan of deception. The British not only set up bogus Corps and Army Headquarters in Britain, and faked the radio communication between them to give an impression that they were landing somewhere other than Normandy, but they even went to the length of spreading false information among the Free French. The British commanders had assumed that at least some of the Free French would be captured by the Germans and, torture being what it is, the Germans would hear the story the British wanted them to hear. It was a master deception plan.

We got into these landing ships on the 4th of June and they were just big enough to carry a battalion and all its arms. Then round the boat deck there were these landing crafts that would take us from ship to shore. We were fairly crowded in the little ship, but it was not uncomfortable. There was no question of us wandering around or having a drink. You were there and you stayed there. The morning of the 5th of June saw very rough weather and, while we did not know much about what was going on—soldiers are extremely philosophical about decisions they do not have to make—we knew that it would be unlikely that we would sail on that day. But the weather improved and we did sail that night. Before first light we were off the coast of France. That was D-Day.

Once we were on these ships, by the way, we were issued with our maps. Now we could relate them to our sand tables and discovered for the first time where we were landing.

Obviously we woke up fairly early; we could not do otherwise because the noise was like nothing I have ever heard, even though I have been exposed to some fairly solid bombings and barrages before. The Royal Navy of course was behind us and were firing their shells and the scream of these things through the air over our heads had to be heard to be believed. At the same time, the sun had not yet risen and was below the horizon, but it glinted on the wings and the fuselage of the aircraft also flying overhead. And they were there in the hundreds, flying quite low it seemed, and they made a hell of a lot of noise too. Then they were bombing and machine gunning the coast. There was a certain amount of fire coming from the Normandy coast in our direction also, although not very much. Well pretty soon after that we were put in the little landing craft. They held about thirty, or roughly a platoon, and we set off towards the shore. The shore we could see very plainly as it got light. But furthermore, it was a blaze of explosions and bombs and shells and other unpleasantness. As our little

landing craft got closer to the shore we did not have to go through very much fire. I did notice that a few landing craft were hit, one or two were in trouble and were rescued by others, the survivors being collected. And in our own craft two men were wounded by bullets from the shore—of course that made no difference to anything.

As we got close to the shore we were joined by tanks. These tanks were fitted to land in two ways: some of them carried in tank landing craft and they rolled off into quite deep water and they had been fitted with giant scrims around their sides, sort of very large life jackets. They floated and propelled themselves towards the land. Others in the tank landing craft went right up until the landing craft grounded and then the bow dropped and the tanks rolled out into three, four or five feet of water. They were all, of course, waterproofed and the waterproofing was lined with an explosive fuse cord so as they got near the shore the tank commander blew all this waterproofing off and swung his gun around. Thankfully this meant that we had close tank support from the moment we landed, and of course this was very enheartening indeed.

When we landed I did not even get my feet wet because our little craft went right up to the shore. Already there was a wave or two ahead of us, not far but they were rounding up German prisoners. I should have said the beach was rather flat. It had a lot of concrete pillboxes manned by Russians whom the Nazi had conned into defending the West Wall against the allies.

After we started to move off the beach, we came across extensive minefields. Thankfully we also were supported by several flail tanks. These tanks were a fair sized tank with a revolving axle out in front to which are attached chains. As it turns, the chains beat the ground to a distance of about ten feet from the tank with the intention of detonating any antitank or anti-personnel mines. And they were effective. It must have been a horrible job. Imagine a damn great mine going off ten feet in front of your tank, time after time and quite a lot of them of course, it did not do them any good at all. But we were able to follow them through these mine fields and as a consequence we did not have any casualties.

Once off the beach we aligned our maps to the briefings we had received back in England and identified our objectives, or did so as best we could. We had not gone very far before the forward platoon sent into my Company Headquarters a number of prisoners. Leading these prisoners was a German sergeant major who was a good looking type of soldier with an iron cross. Behind him was a young German officer. The NCO came up quite closely to me—I must say I speak German—and examining my 'Australia' flashes said, 'Liebe Gott. Ein Australien!!' I replied 'Yes, that's right Sar' Major. Where did you get your iron cross? Were you with Rommel in the desert?' He said, 'Yes I was. I was at Tobruk and I was at El Alamein'. Well it is an odd thing, but in a second you know when you are going to get on with someone. But he looked at me and said, reflectively, 'Australie!' He was wearing a very nice gold watch and he took it off and handed it to me. Now this was not exactly a compliment to his knowledge of Australian soldiers and I could not help laughing about it. 'Well', I said, 'you can put your watch in your boot. We infantry soldiers don't rob each other'. He thanked me and we were getting along quite well when the German lieutenant came up to me. Now he was a tallish young man, a typical product of Hitler's propaganda. He came up to me and said, 'Heil Hitler'. And I said, 'Herr Leutnant, Heil Hitler is a little out of date from now on. You will try again. You will come up to me, you will salute in the proper manner and say good morning Herr Major'. He was thinking it over when the Sergeant Major said to him, 'He's Australian you know sir, they'll do anything'. So this fellow thought it over very quickly. He was a good soldier by his Nazi standards. Then he decided he would greet me correctly but he rather over did it. He said 'Good morning Sir! I report most obediently'. Which showed me, who knew a bit about the German Army, that he was from a military family and was still using old fashioned Prussian Guard expressions. Anyhow, we had no more trouble with him.

We pressed on, on foot, for a few miles. As I say, we were not told the names of the places we were passing through but the maps were very good. Eventually we came to a pretty decent sort of road, and our tanks were waiting there for us. We piled onto these tanks and then we drove at a fairly good rate for about five miles into France. To make five or six miles penetration on D-Day was quite something. We stopped at a town called Crevilly. There we

left the tanks and marched through the town. It was a town about as big as Yass, with a good main street. The people there were literally mad with joy as only French people can be. The old mayor was there in all his glorious ribbons. They dug up a band from somewhere, and all the pretty girls ran up and gave us glasses of wine. It was a splendid interlude.

After Crevilly, we pushed on another mile or two under the control of battalion headquarters. The country, I should say, is very pleasant—slightly hilly, orchards, little fields, hedges—not really ideal tank country and better country to defend than advance through. Anyway, we were getting along quite nicely when we ran into three Tiger tanks. They had devastating machine guns. I mean, their machine guns fired very fast indeed, and they held us up. Then some of our Shermans arrived—five of them. They quickly engaged the Tigers and one even hit a Tiger square on the turret. It must have been very unpleasant to have been inside that Tiger. But he did it no harm at all. Soon Tigers opened up and three of the Shermans were disabled very quickly.

Luckily we had with us a Naval Gunfire Support Officer who had been attached to my company since landing. He was one of those delightfully casual English characters. He came up to me and said, 'You know. I think I could shift those tanks'. I said, 'Well, it would be a great help'. In a matter of less than half minute a very big shell burst well behind the tanks. He said later that he did that deliberately as he did not want any 'drop shorts' landing among my men—very decent of him I thought. But the next shot only landed a couple of hundred yards behind the tanks. Well, the German tank commanders are not fools and they could see the form so they shoved off and we were able to advance again.

I would like to say a bit about this deception plan again. I said it was completely successful. Lately, I read a book by a splendid German Army armoured commander, Colonel, the Baron, Hans von Luck of the 21st Panzer Division. He was an experienced officer and had served with Rommel. He was Rommel's assault commander and he had under him a division or two by this time. Von Luck was, of course, a totally professional, regular soldier. They had not been anything else for generations. He says in his book that the Allies' deception plan was the vital factor in favour of the allies, and above all it deceived Hitler. Hitler insisted on holding three armoured divisions in reserve. Von Luck implored Rommel and his successors to persuade Hitler at every cost to release those armoured divisions. And he said, with great experience of war before and after, that if those divisions had been released he would certainly have been able to have smashed at least one Allied landing on D-Day, plus one. Because, you see, the weather was bad. It was not easy to get enough tanks or anything else ashore and further, the bad weather stopped exploitation by our air power, which was totally dominant.

The other bit of luck I consider the invasion had, was in Rommel being badly wounded. He was not, in historical terms, a great strategic commander, but he was a hell of a good battle commander. And his plans for the defence of Normandy, as von Luck reveals, were very thorough. I for one was very grateful that Rommel was not against us.

I would like to say something about our arms. I said how much better the German tanks were than either the British or the American models, and they were. The other thing that I thought was less forgivable was that the German machine guns were so much better than ours and, will you believe it, we were still carrying that infantile antitank rifle which would hardly stop a tractor and wears you out carrying it. Generally speaking, the German weapons were inexcusably better than ours. We were even carrying these silly pistols. I mean, that is about the least effective weapon of war that has ever been devised, in my judgment. Personally, as a matter of interest, I always carried a rifle as well.

Even in the roughest campaigns there was always a laugh here and there. My Colonel, Colonel Delecombe, he and I always got on well and we used to talk a bit about this and that. He would ask me how things were in New Guinea and Greece, and I asked him how things were in Norway, which was his first campaign. He had a lisp, and he said, 'Oh. Not too bad at all. I was billeted with a Norwegian family, thoroughly decent people. But of course, Jo, as soon as I was told we were going to Norway I took my wod, my fishing wod. A very nice wod,

a hardy wod, with my initials on it. Well', he said, 'we were with this decent Norwegian family for a few days and then we had to advance. I gave the fishing wod to the owner of the house and told him to look after it. We did advance and we got wather the worst of it and we had to fall back. Well naturally I went to pick up my wod and the house-owner said, "I'm afraid the Germans have been here and have taken your rod", I said they couldn't possibly do that, it has my initials on it. Nevertheless Jo, they had taken it'. He was horrified. He said, 'We got on the destroyer a few days after and I said to Bwigadier Money, you know sir, we'll have bloody trouble with these damn Germans, they are persons of no pwinciple whatever'. Now the hell with Belgium and Dachau and that sort of thing, but wod pinchers were another matter.

Thank you very much for listening so attentively, and I think this conference, apart from my own contribution, has been a most useful thing and I have enjoyed it. Thank you.

### **Endnotes**

1. This is a transcript from an address given by HBS Gullett at the Australian Army History Conference, 15 November 1994.

## ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

### ***DON'T DO IT - SOME ADVICE FROM VETERANS*** **Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Wahlert**

At the Army history conference, one veteran of the 9th Division's landings at Lae and Finschhafen in 1943 offered the following advice regarding amphibious operations: 'Don't do it. If you have to do it ... ensure you have overwhelming superiority [in all three environments—land, sea and air]'. This sage counsel prompted discussion at the conference on what constituted a successful amphibious landing. For example, why were the command and administrative arrangements for the OBOE operations at Tarakan Island, Brunei Bay and Balikpapan better planned, coordinated and executed than those at Lae and Finschhafen? The AIF was, of course, more experienced at amphibious operations by 1945 and had obviously learnt by their mistakes in previous landings. But experience alone did not guarantee successful landings, even in 1945, as the abortive operation at Porton Plantation proved in June of that year. What is the formula for a successful amphibious assault and what are the lessons that we can draw on how to conduct amphibious operations some fifty years after the 7th and 9th Division landings at Borneo?

To answer these questions, the author interviewed veterans of the Australian Army's amphibious operations during World War II from brigade commander down to private soldier (a list of contributors is to be found at the end of this chapter). The aim was to record their impressions of what made one landing a success and another a failure. These soldiers were not directly familiar with higher-level strategic or operational issues of the Borneo or Finschhafen campaigns. Rather, the strength of their knowledge lies in the tactical lessons they can impart; of how to 'get your battalion quickly and efficiently onto and over the beach ... after all, isn't that what amphibious operations are all about'.<sup>1</sup> This paper, therefore, is based on testimony from selected veterans examined against the principles of war they considered important at the tactical level. Despite the recognised limitations of oral history, especially after such a lengthy period has elapsed, the responses provide a unique, 'hands on' explanation of important events in the history of the Second World War.

All of those interviewed were remarkably frank, eager to help and possessed seemingly exceptional memories. While Mr Gullett's comment that '50 years ago is a hell of a long time' is certainly true, the amphibious landings that these men participated in made an indelible impression on them. Most could recall at will details of names, places, events and sequences that most younger men and women would forget after only a few years, let alone fifty. Perhaps George Tucker's explanation that 'being shot at and seeing good men—colleagues and mates—die around you has a way of sticking in your mind' accounts for the clarity of their contributions.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Maintenance of Morale**

'Morale' rated as among the most important factors a commander must consider during any operation. Those interviewed thought this especially the case for amphibious operations where the soldier is exposed to a foreign environment, the sea, and is reliant on another Service, the Navy, with which they had little exposure. Lieutenant Colonel Tucker, then commanding the 2/23rd Battalion, described 'maintaining morale in light of the very slow progress we were making' as his greatest challenge on D day at Tarakan.

Morale is an essential element of combat power and engenders courage, energy, determination and bold offensive spirit. It is promoted by good leadership, training and, to a lesser extent, by administrative and material conditions.<sup>3</sup> Morale is also influenced by a unit or formation's performance in battle. The battles of Kokoda and Milne Bay in November 1942, the first substantial successes by Australian ground forces against the Japanese, gave the

Australian Army a huge boost to morale by proving finally that the Japanese Imperial Army was not invincible. Morale and success feed off one another, the higher morale the more successful a unit, and the more successful a unit is the higher its morale is likely to be. As pointed out by Major General Broadbent, a veteran of Lae, Finschhafen and Brunei Bay, 'Nothing improves one's morale more than continuing success'.<sup>4</sup>

The complete success of the 9th Division's landing at Lae soon dispelled any misgivings the troops may have held about amphibious operations and increased their confidence for the follow-on assault at Finschhafen. The speed of these assaults and the relatively few casualties suffered by the division certainly improved morale. After Finschhafen 'the division appeared to be on a roll';<sup>5</sup> they were confident in their equipment, their commanders and their training for amphibious warfare, and were even developing a 'begrudging respect for the Navy and the Yanks'.<sup>6</sup> They were also happy to be 'on the winning side'; for too long the Australians had suffered 'morale shattering defeats' at the hands of the Japanese and were finally dealing the enemy 'the sort of blows we had been waiting years to deliver'.<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the Borneo (OBOE) operations in 1945, both the 7th and 9th Divisions were 'chewing at the bit'<sup>8</sup> to 'get at the Japs'.<sup>9</sup> Both divisions had spent about a year on the Tablelands in North Queensland re-equipping, training and receiving reinforcements:

By the time my battalion moved from Cairns to Morotai [staging area for the OBOE operations] we were all dead keen to kill Japanese and finish the war ... we'd spent over a year training in Queensland and everyone was more than happy for the change, even for combat ... As we went ashore at Tarakan morale and confidence were high; there was no question that we were going to achieve all of our objectives.<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to ensure morale was kept high, the troops were not always given accurate information. Brigadier Whitehead, for example, when addressing the 2/23rd Battalion before embarking for Tarakan, gave the impression that the assault on Tarakan, 'would be a "walkover", and the whole campaign would be over in a few days'.<sup>11</sup> But, according to George Tucker:

There were enough sceptics in my outfit to entertain serious doubts about how short an operation it would be ... I didn't need the men having unrealistic expectations about the capture of Tarakan. It was a bloody and hard fought campaign, and it certainly lasted longer than a few days.

An example of how accurately the men in the battalion judged the forthcoming action in Tarakan, despite Whitehead's promise, can be seen from the following dialogue recorded in the 2/23rd Battalion's history:

'They say it'll all be over in three or four days Lofty. It hardly seems worth going over there for such short time.' 'Look mate, the only thing I've seen short in this bloody outfit is leave, cigarettes and beer. They started off with with nine months in Tobruk and they've made bloody long distance records ever since. No. The Japs don't give up that easy. I bet they'll still be shooting at us a couple of months after we land.'<sup>12</sup>

Two other aspects had an affect on morale just before the 2/23rd went into action: delivery of mail and attendance at church services. While training at Morotai and waiting for the date to commence OBOE One, the battalion had received no mail. 'Some of the men became understandably upset'.<sup>13</sup> The battalion's mail bags were eventually located; they had been mistakenly delivered to another unit. The unit's history notes that the eventual receipt of this mail was 'an indispensable part of maintaining high morale [before going] into action'.<sup>14</sup> It is also noteworthy that the departure of the battalion's chaplain only days before Tarakan caused some disquiet among the soldiers, although a new one was appointed.<sup>15</sup> Father Bryson had served with the 2/23rd for some time and had become a member of the 'family', even among the atheists and non-believers. This is, perhaps, an indication of just how strong the sense of 'family' was in the battalion. They disliked losing valued 'family' members and were initially suspicious of newcomers.



At Brunei, John Broadbent, then commanding the 2/17th Battalion, thought that:

the high morale of the troops, not only in [his] battalion but throughout the division, was essential to the success of the operation. ... The men were fit, they'd been cooped up on the Tablelands too long, and they were extremely keen to finish the war ... as we jumped from the landing craft there was a noticeable air of excitement and optimism.

These observations are supported by Colin Grace, then commanding the 2/15th Battalion for OBOE Six. During his battalion's operations in securing Muara Island, and then supporting the 2/17th Battalion, the level of morale was noticeably high. 'The men were very enthusiastic ... there was little that would stand in their way.'

Similarly, Brigadier Chilton felt that morale in the 18th Brigade was 'extremely high' for the 7th Division's landing at Balikpapan (OBOE Two). In the 2/16th Battalion 'there was ... a great feeling of self-confidence. They were going into battle again'.<sup>16</sup> And in the 2/10th Battalion:

ably led by Lieut-Colonel Daly and staff, [it had] reached a high standard in regard to morale. The unit was exceedingly fit, trained, and ready for action. All were proud of the past history of the unit, and were fully determined to do their utmost to maintain that reputation in whatever action that might lie ahead. ... They were confident of their own ability and that of their commanders.<sup>17</sup>

At the history conference, some presenters questioned the strategic imperative of the Borneo campaign,<sup>18</sup> with the question arising of how morale in the force may have been affected by the knowledge that the OBOE operations were 'unjustifiable'. Dr Stanley said that 'contemporary documents and retrospective evidence suggest that many men—though by no means all—did not believe the OBOE operations to be worthwhile'. Interestingly, all interviewed were adamant that they believed firmly in what they were doing and that their troops were 'solidly committed to the aims and objectives of the enterprise'.<sup>19</sup> George Tucker's battalion 'believed in what they were doing and fully supported Morshead [the divisional commander]'. Major General Ron Hughes saw:

Tarakan as only one in a series of ops taking us all the way up to Malaya. Besides, the soldiers' hatred of the Japs was a major point here: to kill Japs was good for morale, and while they were doing this they couldn't have given a damn for any wider strategic considerations.<sup>20</sup>

Brigadier Chilton endorsed this view, adding that:

the soldiers were keen to get at the Japs, particularly after a year on the Tablelands and relative inactivity. ... I don't know that they really would have cared at the time whether there was any strategic point to the operation.

Others were apparently convinced that Borneo was an important key in the grand plan to close the door on the war in the Pacific. The 2/23rd Battalion's history notes that for Tarakan 'morale was high, for this was the first definite step towards the recapture of Malaya and Singapore, and the liberation of members of the 8th Division'.<sup>21</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Dorney, when asked his unit's feelings about the importance of Borneo, replied that 'we did not even think about it previous to landing, and thought it worth while after the fighting because of the early release of the POWs and the help we gave to the native population [at Brunei]'.<sup>22</sup>

In many ways, these sentiments are understandable. Soldiers must believe in their leaders and feel that their own deeds and sacrifices have some value. One cannot but help feel for them: it is hard when, as a young man, you did things you were told were brave and necessary, and that cost so many of your friend's lives, only to be told fifty years later that your effort and their sacrifice were unjustifiable.

## Leadership

Leadership has a direct affect on morale: 'If you have good officers morale is high'.<sup>23</sup> Every person interviewed had a story to tell about how essential good leadership was for amphibious operations; about how effective leadership 'carried the day' on the landing beach or was responsible for the building of such high morale in a unit that 'the men appeared fearless' in the face of opposition after landing.<sup>24</sup>

For example, soon after George Tucker's unit came ashore at Tarakan, the troops became frustrated by their slow rate of advance. They initially encountered deep mud on the beaches, then numerous mangrove swamps followed by razorback hills, heavy tropical forest and secondary growth. To make matters worse their casualties were mounting due to increasingly effective enemy fire from commanding positions just inland from the beach area. To overcome this problem and incite the battalion, Tucker made himself as visible to the troops as the enemy and the terrain allowed, even stopping 'to chat with the boys' between actions. On the beach, and later during the 2/23rd Battalion's capture of the features Milko and Hospital Ridge, he was always 'popping up unexpectedly' to hasten the advance and inspire confidence.

Tucker also indicated why he felt the men of the 2/48th Battalion at Lae and Finschhafen so admired their brigade commander, Brigadier 'Torpy' Whitehead:

[At Lae] after enduring mud, slush, mosquitoes and downpouring bloody rain the troops arrived just to the rear of Mount Lunaman. AI had been out of smokes for days, and all were at the snarling point, caused mostly by no bloody smokes [then] came the grand old man, Brigadier Whitehead, puffing away contentedly at his pipe. The aroma of good tobacco drifted to the troops ... Jim Absalom asked in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, 'What about a puff on the pipe, sir?' In a flash the brig. stopped in his stride and replied, 'What, lad, haven't you any tobacco?' On being told they had not had any for the past three days the brigadier immediately took his pouch from his pocket and, saying, 'Well here, lad, I have to keep one last pipeful', and gave the remainder to the men. In the same movement he swung around to one of his officers and asked why these men had received no issue of tobacco. The reply almost sat the brigadier on his heels. 'Tobacco is a luxury and men cannot expect luxuries up front.' In less gentle tone the brigadier told the officer: 'Luxuries! Well let me tell you that if tobacco is not up here by tomorrow you will be on the way out'. The tobacco arrived!<sup>25</sup>

Brigadier Chilton provided another example of how important the Commanding Officer is to the performance of a unit. After the 18th Brigade's operations in the Ramu Valley in late 1943, Chilton had become concerned with morale in the 2/10th Battalion. The battalion had suffered heavy casualties at both Buna and Sanananda and appeared tired: it lacked identity, the troops were unduly critical of their officers and the unit's general performance was not as high as the other battalions. Chilton approached the divisional commander, Major General Vasey, and requested a 'good officer' to assume command of the unit. Consequently, after their return to Australia in early 1944, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Daly was appointed. Daly had been the original Adjutant of the battalion and had proved a very competent Chief of Staff to Major General Milford at Salamaua. He wasted no time in improving morale in the unit. He achieved this, like Tucker in the 2/23rd, by high profile leadership. Such a high profile that it included standing on the abutments during live firing practices with his company commanders; the rationale was to prove to the troops that he had full confidence in them and their abilities. Fortunately for him, and his company commanders, he was a popular CO.

The battalion's history notes that Daly 'earned the admiration and respect of all by his administrative ability and soldierly qualities'.<sup>26</sup> According to Chilton, after a year on the Tablelands under Daly the battalion was one of the best in the division and possessed 'excellent morale'. Daly had proved a 'first-rate commander' who had turned a 'tired battalion into a first-class fighting unit in which [Chilton] had absolute confidence' as they departed for Borneo and OBOE Two. This confidence was to prove well founded during operations at Balikpapan.

## Maintaining the Momentum

All those interviewed agreed that the most crucial time for a landing force was that spent disembarking from the landing craft and getting clear of the beach: 'You are at your most vulnerable point on the beach. ... There is a clear need to get off the beach as soon as possible and secure a beach-head.'<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Daly's actions in attempting to secure the division's vital ground on the first day of fighting at Balikpapan, provides an excellent example of leadership and 'maintaining the momentum'.

During brigade orders, Brigadier Chilton had tasked the 2/10th Battalion with capturing the dominant Hill 87. It was then to exploit north along the feature nicknamed Parramatta. 'This ridge at the base of the peninsula on which Balikpapan stood dominated the entire landing beach area, and was vital ground which should be seized as soon as possible.'<sup>28</sup> To assist him in this task Daly had been promised a squadron of Matilda tanks and three Frogs (flame throwing tanks) from the 1st Armoured Regiment, direct fire support from a battery of the 2/4th Field Regiment, the fire of the USS *Cleveland's* 6-inch guns, a platoon of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion, a gun from the 2/2nd Antitank Regiment and a section of 4.2 inch mortars.

The day commenced well for the battalion. As the first wave headed for the shore at about 0830 hours on the 1st July 1945, the tempo of the naval fire onto the beach increased. 'The noise from the guns, shells and bombs was terrific, the whole area of the landing beach seemed to move under the impact of the bombardment.' As the landing craft approached the beach, 'the LCI rocket ships commenced to fire the first of the two rocket concentrations each of 4,500 rockets into the area immediately behind the landing beach [while overhead] several waves of Liberator aircraft bombed the area between Parramatta Ridge and the beach.'<sup>29</sup> So impressed were the troops at this display of massive fire power that one soldier, Private Abel, 'nearly jumped out the landing craft in his excitement and praise of the Air Force'.<sup>30</sup>

The first sign that events were not to run smoothly came with the landing of the second wave, which included the mortars and machine guns, some 800 yards off course. This caused some delay in bringing these weapons into action. Soon after, Daly received news that the USS *Cleveland* had been withdrawn. Additionally, the tanks had become bogged on the beach and the promised artillery support was unavailable. Daly faced a difficult decision: to go on without the promised fire support against a relatively well-defended position, or delay the attack until another cruiser could register its guns, and the tanks and artillery were brought on-line. 'He made the bold decision to attack immediately.'<sup>31</sup>

Both the battalion's history and Gavin Long's *The Final Campaigns* give a good description of the battle for Parramatta which raged all that day. Both highlight Daly's swift action, combined with the 'the speed and skill of the individual infantrymen',<sup>32</sup> which enabled the vital ground to be secured before the enemy could reorganise after the bombardment. It was not, however, without cost. By nightfall, the battalion had suffered 13 killed and an additional 30 wounded.

When interviewed, Sir Thomas Daly gave as his principal reason for pressing on along Parramatta without the promised support, the need:

to maintain the momentum. Chilton [the brigade commander] was continually emphasising speed: speed to stop the Japanese from recovering from the bombardment and from organising a counterattack.

Daly added that he felt he 'really had little choice. The enemy on Parramatta had a commanding view of the entire beach area. It simply had to be taken. Any delay may have imperiled the operation'. Brigadier Chilton supported Daly's assessment, adding that 'it was his [Daly's] call. The vital ground had to be taken and Daly did exactly what was expected of him. He was a first-rate battalion commander and I had absolute confidence in both him and his battalion.'

Upon reflection, Daly admits that there was more behind his decision than is apparent from the histories. Firstly, as an cavalry officer his 'early training emphasised the importance of quick, decisive action—the thrust forward'. Secondly, the division's experience in the Middle East meant that 'tanks and artillery were always nice to have but the prudent commander did not rely on them'. Finally, similar to Chilton's confidence in him, Daly had unqualified trust in the abilities of the officer whose company led the attack on Parramatta—Major Frank Cook. 'I was proud to have been bracketed with Frank', said Daly. 'He had elan and was very good at what he did. When I gave him the order to proceed with the attack, Cook's reply was simply "Right, sir." An example of the relationship of trust these two officers shared is evident in their light banter. Before Balikpapan, while in training on the Tablelands, Cook commented to Daly that he'd follow him anywhere. 'No', replied Daly. 'I'll be right behind you.'

Interestingly, the 2/10th was not the only battalion to find that their promised armoured support was bogged on the beach just as a planned attack was about to start. During its attack on the Government House area at Labuan, 'C' company, 2/28th Battalion, was ordered to advance without fire support. Again, the desire to maintain the momentum of the advance, especially on the first day of the operation, was foremost in the mind of the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Norman.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the battalion secured all its objectives by the end of that first day. Additionally, John Broadbent's 2/17th Battalion had been promised tank support for their drive on Brunei. 'It never arrived so we pushed on anyway. We had learnt at El Alamein that tanks were good if you could get them, but don't rely too heavily on them arriving in time.'

Finally, Lieutenant Colonel Tucker drew to the author's attention one additional example of 'maintaining the momentum' at a critical point in an amphibious operation. At Lae, during the landing of the 2/23rd Battalion on 4th September 1943, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Wall, and eight others from his Headquarters were killed during an enemy air attack on their landing craft. The decimation of Battalion Headquarters had the potential to cause confusion within the unit at a crucial time, the point of landing. Such confusion may have slowed the battalion's egress from the beach and delayed the brigade's advance on Lae. (Brigadier Windeyer's plan for the 20th Brigade had the 2/15th and 2/17th Battalions securing Red Beach with the 2/23rd tasked to move through them to begin the westward advance towards Lae.) Fortunately, the momentum of the battalion's advance was not affected as the Second-in-Command, Major McRae, quickly assumed command and drove the battalion forward 'without a break in its pace'. Tucker added that in situations such as this 'it was leadership and training that really counted'.<sup>34</sup>

## Training

Those who participated in the 1943 landings at Lae and Finschhafen thought, at the time of those landings, that their training had been 'quite adequate',<sup>35</sup> 'simple but effective'<sup>36</sup> or 'good—giving the troops confidence in their commanders'.<sup>37</sup> An examination of the pre-operations training is also instructive. All battalions and support troops had been given experience in various types of landing craft either on the Tablelands in Queensland or at Milne Bay just before the landing at Lae. The 2/48th Battalion, for example, arrived at Milne Bay in August 1943, where their time was 'filled with hard training in amphibious operations. Beachheads were developed, there was snap shooting on the range, assault landings were practiced ... and the hundred-and-one exercises were carried out that were necessary to prepare for the coming offensive against the Jap'.<sup>38</sup> On the 21st August the battalion even conducted a full-scale mock landing using LCTs and LCIs.

However, during the actual landings the shortcomings in the training soon became apparent. The main problem was simply that the soldiers of the 9th Division had not had adequate time, or sufficient craft, to become adept at this new form of warfare. Nor were the crews adequately trained. Lieutenant Colonel Dorney, then Second-in-Command of the 2/3rd Field Ambulance, noted that the men became quite seasick on their journey up the coast from Lae in LCVPs and, 'combined with the effects of the diesel fumes, everyone was vomiting their heart out and then dry retching for a further two hours. [They] were useless on landing for a

further one hour after that'. Later landings either used the much larger troop carriers or LSTs, requiring only a relatively shorter journey from mother ship to shore in landing craft.

Additionally, Major General Broadbent thought that the lack of training of the LCI crews at Finschhafen added to the confusion of the beach area. Waves of LCIs were landed at the wrong area of the beach, causing confusion among the troops in the darkness and delaying the securing of the beach-head. Such errors 'had the potential to jeopardise lives had the beach been defended in any genuine manner'.

In comparison to the later OBOE operations the training for Lae and Finschhafen was 'primitive and indicative of our lack of experience in how to train for amphibious warfare'.<sup>39</sup> Most of the 9th Division's troops for the Tarakan operation, for example, had received intensive amphibious operations training on the Tablelands from August 1944 to March 1945, with additional training after their arrival at Morotai, the staging area for the OBOE operations, in April. The author of the 2/7th Field Regiment's history, David Goodhart, described the Regiment's training for Tarakan as 'by far the most intensive exercises ... in which the unit had been involved in to date'.<sup>40</sup> At Labuan, the 2/28th Battalion's landing went 'so smoothly that it could have been a training exercise on Trinity Beach near Cairns'.<sup>41</sup> The 2/4th Field Regiment's training for Balikpapan included working with the Naval Bombardment Group, learning how to embus and debus the guns from the landing craft and close cooperation exercises with the 7th Division's infantry:

A good deal of time was spent getting thoroughly acquainted with the Infantry, each Battery lived with 'their' Battalion for a fortnight and vice versa, learning each other's arts and making firm friends apart from developing a mutual respect and trust for the 'other arm'.<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding the improvement in training which was evident in the lead up to the Borneo landings, mistakes and problems still occurred. At Morotai, Lieutenant Colonel Tucker was concerned that his battalion had not spent enough time training in either the Alligators (the American amphibians) or the LVTs. 'There was only two days available for us to become accustomed to these unfamiliar vehicles. This caused quite a few problems during the landing and slowed our advance on the township.' Lieutenant Colonel Dorney also struck a peculiar problem for an army unit. Prior to embarking for Labuan the 2/3rd Field Ambulance received its quota of reinforcements, 'a considerable number of whom would not bear arms'. Dorney finally convinced them of the virtue of learning to use their weapons by having one of the battalion commanders assure them that if the ambulance was attacked they would have to defend themselves. Self-preservation is a strong motivator.

But perhaps the greatest challenge to unit and formation commanders during the training phase of the OBOE operations, was boredom. The incessant and repetitive training did affect morale. As did the constant 'furphys' (rumours) which 'flew around the camps about where we were going and when'.<sup>43</sup> 'It was obvious from the pressure of training that "it's on" could have been expected at an early date ... and finally when all were trained to the eyes it was announced that it was "off"'.<sup>44</sup> By February 1945, training 'had ceased to be amusing' and the 'browned off feeling returned stronger than ever and there were many applications for discharge, transfers, and hosts of other things associated with periods of boredom'.<sup>45</sup> Units had become desperate for combat just to gain relief from the monotony of the training. 'The men were anxious to "get going" and finish "it", whatever "it" was'.<sup>46</sup>

The above sentiments about the amphibious training in late 1944 and early 1945 appear representative of those expressed in the many unit histories. However, one unit history stands out. The 2/10th Battalion, commanded by then Lieutenant Colonel Tom Daly, appears to have enjoyed its training on the Tablelands in the lead up to Balikpapan, although they had been 'at it for nearly on a year'.<sup>47</sup> The difference between the 2/10th's training, and that of many other units, appears to have been the degree of personal interest the CO took in what his battalion was doing. Daly also ensured that the battalion's training was well interspersed with an appropriate amount of recreation and free-time.



The arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Daly ... in the unit [was] followed by an increased tempo in training combined with congenial recreation, [which] dispelled any inclination to boredom ... advanced training was always interesting if strenuous at times ... Sport, entertainment and recreation had been given an important place in the life of the troops.<sup>48</sup>

Daly was also well aware that the AIF, like armies in times past, marched on its stomach and a few other staples. 'Whilst in Queensland the rations had been the best the unit had ever received. Also smokes and beer were in ample supply.'<sup>49</sup> To achieve success in training and relieve boredom, Daly stated, a commander needed a small dose of imagination, but a large slice of careful planning.

## Planning

The OBOE operations were arguably the most complex of any the operations conducted by Australian forces during the war. Certainly, they were among the best planned. For Tarakan:

The 'OBOE ONE' operational order was extensive. The paper war had grown tremendously since the days when, as in 1941, the waving of vehicle flags ... was 'operational order' enough to bring about an advance in desert column ... There were also needed massive lists of personnel ... Topography, too, became important. There were Intelligence reports, beach landing conditions, elaborately prepared US Army graphs of tides, terrain, rainfall. There were air photographs; notes on enemy dispositions, strength, morale. These things were part and parcel of amphibious ops.<sup>50</sup>

For OBOE Two at Balikpapan the operations order was a 'masterpiece of concentrated information, maps, tables, airphoto books plus everything that five years of war can give in experience'.<sup>51</sup> The availability of overwhelming fire support, artillery, ship-to-shore bombardment, armoured support and air superiority, was a relatively new experience for the Australians:

This was a new kind of war ... no doubts about air support or supplies, no lack of equipment and no fugitive feeling of being out on their own. Here was minutely planned attack in appropriate numbers on an objective the strength of which could be reasonably well assessed.<sup>52</sup>

The level of detailed briefings down to private soldier level were also extraordinary:

For example, in the 2/10th Battalion ... the country over which they would attack was studied on vertical and oblique photographs, large-scale maps on which the enemy's positions were over-printed, and on a large-scale model. Lieut-Colonel Daly ... had lectured all ranks, by companies, on the model, explaining 'the overall strategy, the object of the operation, Div tasks, tasks of other Bdes and Bns and a detailed description of the Coy tasks, fire plan and probable subsequent developments'; the men had questioned him and all were made to realise their part in the plan. ... An Intelligence centre was set up containing maps, photographs, stereoscopes, Intelligence summaries, terrain studies, etc, and was open first to NCOs and then to all ranks. It was usually full of men all day.<sup>53</sup>

Within the 2/16th Battalion the troops were 'so well briefed for the task at hand. Every man knew exactly the job to be done ... it was a grand tribute to the planning of the action'.<sup>54</sup>

Even with this level of planning the operations in Borneo were not immune from problems. One controversial aspect of the planning for OBOE One was the assessment of forces required to secure Tarakan's airfield, which was the focus of the operation. The airfield itself was not able to be prepared in time for subsequent operations as it was too affected by the tide, its base being found 'unstable' by the airfield construction engineers. However, the 26th Brigade group had suffered battle casualties of 54 officers and 840 other ranks, nearly as high as the 6th Division's casualties at Cyrenaica in early 1941. Lieutenant Colonel Tucker's 2/23rd Battalion alone suffered 159 casualties. Tucker believed the planners misjudged the forces



necessary for taking Tarakan. He felt that another brigade group, or even more supporting arms, would have reduced the total casualty figure. However, others were not so sure. Major General Hughes, then a Liaison Officer HQ 26th Brigade, felt that 'there was really no room for another brigade to operate. I'm not sure more troops would have meant fewer casualties'. Certainly the Australian Government was concerned at the casualties at Tarakan. As indicated by Dr Stanley, they asked MacArthur's Headquarters whether casualties could have been reduced by employing a stronger force. The advice received was that sufficient forces were allocated and that additional troops may only have resulted in greater casualties. Whether this was the case will probably never be known. Certainly, George Tucker will never agree with the military hierarchy on this point.

While the planning for Borneo was vastly superior to that for either Lae and Finschhafen, these earlier landings proceeded remarkably well, especially considering the level of experience the Australians had in amphibious operations by 1943. Indeed, Brigadier Windeyer's 20th Brigade's ability to plan and initiate its landing at Finschhafen all within four days was a tribute to the efficiency of all concerned.

The main problem at Lae was the level of confusion on the beach, especially after the battalions had passed through. No beach group had been formed and the command arrangements for coordinating the beach-head were non-existent. Windeyer was concerned that the improvised arrangements made for the beach-head at Lae would prove even less adequate for Finschhafen. Consequently he tasked Major General Broadbent, an experienced combat officer who was then the Second-in-Command of the 2/17th Battalion, as the Military Liaison Officer (MLO). Broadbent was allocated a staff officer, a signals element and a beach protection group. The organisation created by Broadbent for Finschhafen formed the nucleus of the beach group organisation discussed by Mr Stevens, which was used in the OBOE operations.<sup>55</sup>

Broadbent's task was to coordinate the defence of the beach, the movement of stores, the development of the beach-head, the requirements of small craft, and the control of traffic. ... quick, energetic and full of initiative, [he] proved an excellent choice, and in the succeeding days the force owed much to his drive and flair for improvisation.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to the OBOE operations, an example of poor planning and intelligence can be seen in an attempt to land a reinforced rifle company from the 31/51st Battalion at Porton Plantation in northern Bougainville in June 1945. The landing was designed to outflank an enemy position that was providing strong resistance to the 11th Brigade's attempt to secure the area. While the first wave of three rifle platoons landed successfully with no opposition, the second wave, consisting of the force's heavy weapons, reserve ammunition and supplies, grounded on a reef. The men made it ashore, however, the LCI then came under effective automatic fire forcing it to withdraw.

During the day, enemy resistance mounted and, after three attempts that night to land reinforcements and stores failed, it was decided to withdraw the 190 strong force. Captain Leslie commanded the three armoured landing craft used to withdraw the force the following afternoon. After collecting all the company from the beach two of Leslie's craft stuck fast on the reef from the weight of those on board. One eventually floated off at high tide, but the remainder, with 37 men on board, including wounded, remained stranded and exposed to enemy fire for an entire day before it could be rescued. Captain Leslie's first hand account of the operation shows that it was characterised by great heroism and bravery. Unfortunately, it also resulted in 23 Australians being either killed or captured and 106 wounded. Had the beach been more strongly defended the operation would have resulted in a much higher casualty figure.

Porton Plantation is an example of the failure of planning and intelligence and of the effects of combat fatigue on a unit. The official historian, Gavin Long, noted that 'the 11th Brigade was becoming worn out'. With one battalion member describing his unit as 'a tired depleted battalion—companies were no more than half strength and had been in forward areas continuously for four months'.<sup>57</sup>

## Coordination & Cooperation

In many ways the Borneo campaign exemplifies the level of cooperation achieved by the Australian forces in the Pacific. Most of those interviewed accepted that the level of cooperation between the Australians and the Americans, and between the Australian Services, was very good. They were particularly thankful for the US Navy's presence and the 'support of their big guns', and for the 'final presence of the RAAF in supporting the infantry'.<sup>58</sup> However, none were party to any of the higher planning considerations or meetings. Their experience was almost exclusively at the tactical level. It is, therefore, not surprising that their comments on the subject of 'cooperation and coordination' relate primarily to those issues most relevant to field officers engaged in both amphibious landings and jungle combat. Such issues included naval and air support, and the level of cooperation between the various branches of the Australian Army.

While the navy (both the Australian and the American) played a vital role in the AIF's assault landings, there was a degree of criticism of the influence they had over the planning for what was 'essentially an infantry task'.<sup>59</sup> 'We [the infantry] had to step ashore and do the fighting. Not the navy. Yet they fought to arrange things so it was most ideal for them.'<sup>60</sup> Colin Grace described how the navy always:

wanted to land us at the safest time for them: just after midnight. This was unacceptable. Can you imagine the control problems in a battalion, let alone a brigade sized group, getting off the beach and into the jungle in the dark?

In planning for Finschhafen, Admiral Barbey, the commander of the US 7th Amphibious Force, was insistent on commencing the landing in darkness as he was fearful of losing valuable amphibious resources in daylight air attacks. General Herring, commanding 1st Australian Corps, Major General Wootten, 9th Division, and Brigadier Windeyer, whose 20th Brigade was to perform the landing, strenuously opposed Barbey's plan, 'because they doubted the navy's ability to put the troops ashore in the right place and in good order in darkness'.<sup>61</sup> While a compromise was made, the 20th Brigade still commenced its assault in the dark. The result was that Windeyer's concerns were realised:

The navy failed to land the first two waves in the correct place. I was in the first wave and we landed some 500 metres too far south. Two companies of the 2/17th became mixed up with the 2/13th, and some hit coral.<sup>62</sup>

This confusion delayed the 2/17th and 2/13th Battalions whose job it was to secure the beach area. Consequently, when the 2/15th came ashore in the third wave they encountered effective enemy fire which should have been suppressed by the other battalions. This panicked the American LCI crews landing the third wave, who lowered their ramps too early leaving the disembarking infantry to swim ashore. Additionally, these same crews began firing indiscriminately into the jungle fringe of the beach 'where troops from the first wave were now moving into position. This resulted in the CO of the 2/17th being wounded'.<sup>63</sup>

Brigadier Chilton also had a 'fight with the navy' over the most suitable location for a landing at Balikpapan. The navy, concerned at the possible enemy defences at 7th Division's preferred landing site near Klandasan, favoured the beach at Manggar, some ten miles further along the coast. Chilton was adamant that such a proposal from the navy be rejected:

The navy's preferred location would have meant an overland trek for the brigade of some distance [approx 10 miles] along either a narrow beach or through dense jungle. And that would have taken us through the enemy's prepared positions and forced us to cross several rivers. We would also have had to do this without tank support, and probably without our artillery. ... I was also concerned that we would lose the naval bombardment support at any time during such a long fight.<sup>64</sup>

Other complaints about the navy involved the conditions the infantry were exposed to on the long journey from Queensland to Morotai. Lieutenant Colonel Norman, CO of the 2/28th Battalion, described the long sea journey as 'deplorable'. Citing the overcrowded conditions, the heat and poor design of some of the craft, he considered this journey the worst for the troops he had experienced during the war and 'had to be seen to be credited'.<sup>65</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Tucker had a similar 'beef with the navy and:

severely criticised conditions on board the General Buttner, which he described as appalling, and 'could only have been enforced by a captain of a ship who

(a) places no trust in troops' officers ...

(b) is himself a war neurosis case. It is considered criminal for troops to be subjected to such conditions'.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the harsh conditions the men seem to have retained their sense of humour:

I've had everything in this bloody army. I joined up—me, who's never been away from the farm—and a fellow looks me in the eyes, looks me in the ears, looks up me arse, and if that ain't embarrassed me enough he grabs me by the balls and says cough. Then before I can lift him over the ear he tells me to piss in a bottle. And now they set a mob of galahs up in front to shit in me lunch [this last comment refers to the crowded toilet arrangements on the ship taking the battalion to Morotai].<sup>67</sup>

Regarding air support, most commented that they saw very little of it during the fighting, but certainly noticed where the air force had been: 'We didn't have much contact with the RAAF after the landing, and there was no close air support as we know it today. However, the effects of the air bombardment were pretty obvious'.<sup>68</sup> Such was the level of devastation that the 20th Brigade was moved to criticise the RAAF for the 'wanton destruction' of the infrastructure at Brunei. Tom Daly also recalled a tragic incident after his battalion had succeeded in capturing Parramatta at Balikpapan. Returning to his battalion headquarters after a walk along the ridge-line, Daly saw three US Lightning fighter/bombers attack his Headquarters killing three unit members, one a Tobruk veteran.

John Broadbent's experiences at Finschhafen and Brunei gave him considerable respect for the worth of the engineers. Engineer support was essential to his battalion's advance towards Lae due to the crossing points required on the Buso River. At Tarakan, George Tucker was impressed with the obvious engineer effort that had gone in to clearing obstacles and mines from the beach area and beyond, and then maintaining the roads that were often just boggy tracks. Most, also, were full of praise for the armoured, artillery, machine gun and assault pioneer assistance they received, but classified it as 'very handy' rather than essential. All acknowledged that the assistance provided by these arms did help to reduce their casualties, but that they had been trained and used to an environment where such lavish support as they received in Borneo was unthinkable. 'We trained as a self-contained organisation and were always very happy for supporting arms to be allocated in support. However, the desert campaigns had shown us that, in the end, you could only really rely on the weapons systems available in the unit'.<sup>69</sup>

The much vaunted level of cooperation between the Services was also known to be strained at times. At Balikpapan, Milford was very critical of the RAAF, considering them lacking in discipline and 'accustomed to a high standard of comfort'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, as happened at Tarakan, the RAAF did not take kindly to suggestions from the army that they should reduce their level of stores to light scales and, consequently, the number and weight of their vehicles caused unloading problems. Similarly, the Air Commander, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, was just as critical of Milford, claiming he attempted to 'interfere with professional and technical air force aspects'. The 20th Brigade after OBOE Six were also most critical of the destruction by the air force of facilities at Brunei. Major Donald, who was responsible for loading operations for Brunei, suggested he had some difficulties with RAAF loading parties, some of whom even went on strike.<sup>71</sup>

Major General Broadbent also discussed one particularly unusual aspect relating to 'cooperation'. In Brunei his battalion had forged an interesting relationship with the Dyak tribes. The Dyaks were fiercely independent and had no love for the Japanese. Broadbent's main problem was stopping the natives from cutting off the heads of the Japanese, even after Brunei fell. In July 1945, he wrote, 'cooperation by the natives, in particular the Dyaks, has been most helpful. Many of the Dyaks have proved to be first-rate soldiers of undoubted courage with a distinct hatred for the Japs'.<sup>72</sup>

### **Administration**

'Administration' is an important principle of war and is neglected at the Commander's peril. Fortunately, for most of the Australian Army landings the administrative arrangements, while not always perfect, appeared to have worked quite well. Logistic support for Lae was 'generally haphazard, but operated well enough'.<sup>73</sup> The major problem at Lae, as for Finschhafen, was not getting the right stores to the beach, rather it was getting them from the beach to the troops. The roads, or tracks, quickly became boggy and the many rivers made transport; the forward troops were regularly deprived of some essential combat supplies. For example, the 2/28th Battalion complained at the shortage of food:

Never before, even in Tobruk, were rations in such short supply as on this approach from the Burep River to Lae. Twenty men were issued, all told, with one tin of sausages, one tin of bully beef and one tin of beans. Two pounds of tea, mostly unusable, were expected to last a hundred men for a day ... fortified with this scant tucker [we were] expected to engage the enemy at any time.<sup>74</sup>

And at Finschhafen a 'grave administrative deficiency' was discovered: stocks of 9 mm ammunition for the Owen gun had apparently not been unloaded.<sup>75</sup>

Occasionally the slotting (loading) of stores was also a problem for both Lae and Finschhafen, causing confusion and delays as the stores were unloaded on the beach. Stores would be missing or essential supplies loaded at the back of nonessential commodities. Lieutenant Colonel Costello, who was in charge of administration for the 9th Division's operations at Lae and Finschhafen, thought that there 'were very few problems that occurred that could not be sorted. There was confusion, and things didn't always go according to plan, if there was one, but the resoluteness and professionalism of the troops kept major problems to the minimum. And certainly we got better with each operation'.

The administrative planning for the OBOE operations was more thorough and efficient. LCIs carried floating reserves that could be unloaded within a 'very short time'. Yet again, the problem was not so much getting the stocks on to the beach, it was unloading and distributing them. At Tarakan the unloading of stores and equipment proved extremely difficult. There was only a very narrow space between the high water mark and the road and this had been badly damaged by the bombardment. Even at low tide the extra space created consisted entirely of thick, black mud. Although wire mesh was quickly laid by the engineers, it was not heavy enough to support the tanks and the heavy machinery, which soon bogged. On the first day of the operation, the airfield construction group was brought ashore with all its equipment. However, 'as the roads were not capable of getting them to the airfield straight off, they really cluttered up the beach area'.<sup>76</sup> Over the next three days, logs were cut for corduroy surfacing, floating causeways were established, and the American Naval Construction Battalion built two pontoon piers.

Similar problems were experienced at Balikpapan where there were delays in clearing the stores from the beach because of the terrain and the lack of suitable exit routes. Serious congestion occurred at both Tarakan and Balikpapan because troops, equipment and stores could not be moved off the narrow beaches as quickly as they were landed on it.

To exemplify some of the administrative problems encountered by the landing force, we can examine the medical arrangements made by the 2/3rd Field Ambulance. Elements of the field

ambulance, usually stretcher bearers, went ashore in the first wave with the assault troops to help establish the beach-head evacuation site. Resuscitation staff accompanied the second wave and formed the beach medical centre to handle early wounded. The CO usually landed with Brigade Headquarters, with the remainder of the ambulance arriving when the beach-head was secured.

A jeep ambulance head was quickly established as far forward in the brigade's area as possible. This was not always very far forward because of the terrain. Casualties would be carried from battalion aid posts back to the jeep ambulance head, then back to the beach area from where they were evacuated. This system generally worked well for the OBOE operations but there were specific difficulties for both Lae and Finschhafen. At Lae, the Buso River was a major obstacle and difficult to get wounded across. It was only after sometime that a barge was available to move the wounded. The beach-head at Lae was also initially very confused and frantic. At Finschhafen, the absence of naval support craft soon after landing meant that the wounded spent longer on the beach. This did not present any major difficulties, but 'greater care could have been taken in planning for the evacuation of the wounded'.<sup>77</sup>

The OBOE campaign in Borneo showed that the Australian Army had come a long way in understanding and executing amphibious operations since Lae and Finschhafen. In Borneo, the 1st Australian Corps had successfully executed complex amphibious assaults that were the largest of their kind ever conducted by Australian troops in World War II. The success of these operations is attributable to the painstaking planning, preparation and training, and to the level of cooperation and exacting coordination between all the services employed. But these operations are also a tribute to the valour and determination of the troops who executed their commander's plan, the quality of the officers under whom they served, and the leadership displayed at all levels, from junior NCO to divisional commander.

While issues such as inter-service cooperation and interoperability with Allies were vital aspects to the success at Borneo, to the men interviewed, their interest was at a much lower, 'grass roots' level. To the infantryman, amphibious operations were not that much different to any other task he had been asked to perform in New Guinea, the Middle East or in Greece. 'The only thing that seems to change is the way you get to the battle. Once there it comes down to a hard slog and fierce fighting'.<sup>78</sup> Relying on the Navy for their transport certainly irked some soldiers, but others considered it a 'damn sight better than walking'.<sup>79</sup> Even the actual landing, perhaps the most crucial part in any amphibious operations, was not particularly difficult 'provided the troops had been adequately trained and briefed, were well-led and supported, and they felt there was some sense of purpose to their task'.<sup>80</sup> These criteria are the very essence of the military art. Certainly, the landings themselves did not prove particularly difficult. Besides the Japanese, the main problems and challenges for the AIF at Lae, Finschhafen and at Borneo were the terrain, weather, disease, and the long lines of communication; perennial concerns for any force in most operations.

It should also be remembered that the Australian's success in Borneo took place in an environment of overwhelming fire supremacy over the Japanese. While not denigrating the fighting spirit of the Australian soldier, nor underestimating the tasks they performed, for the first time they had 'everything [they] wanted: equipment; fire support; full establishments; fresh, well-rested men; and good training'.<sup>81</sup> This had not always been the case. 'In many ways we were spoilt. Just as we had learnt to make do with very little, forcing us to use our initiative, along come the Yanks and hand it all to us on a platter'.<sup>82</sup> This point brings us full circle in our discussions on amphibious operations; back to the sage counsel proffered in the opening paragraph of this essay—'Don't do it. If you have to do it ... ensure you have overwhelming superiority'.



## Contributors to this Chapter

**Major General JR (John) Broadbent**, CBE, DSO, ED, was Second-in-Command of the 2/17th Battalion for Lae, Military Landing Officer (MLO) at Finschhafen and Commanding Officer of the 2/17th Battalion at Brunei (OBOE 6).

**Major General TF (Timothy) Cape**, CB, CBE, DSO, served in a succession of General Staff Officer (GSO) positions during the period of the Australian Army amphibious operations in New Guinea and Borneo. Between 1943 and 45 he was GSO 1 OPS, HQ New Guinea Force, GSO 1 AIR, HQ 1 Aust Corps, and GSO 1 OPS, Advanced Land HQ.

**Lieutenant Colonel CH (Charles) Costello**, was the senior supply officer at HQ 9th Division for the OBOE operations.

**Brigadier, Sir Frederick Chilton**, CBE, DSO, commanded the 18th Brigade for the 7th Division's operations at Balikpapan.

**Lieutenant General, Sir Thomas Daly**, KBE, CB, DSO, commanded 2/10th Battalion, 7th Division, at Balikpapan.

**Lieutenant Colonel JL (John) de Teliga**, was a private soldier with 2/2nd Battalion for Dove Bay, Wewak landing.

**Major JA (Alex) Donald**, served as the Adjutant, Service Corps, HQ 9th Division, for Tarakan and Brunei Bay operations.

**Lieutenant Colonel KJJ Dorney**, DSO, was Second In Command 2/3rd Field Ambulance for operations at Lae and Finschhafen, and was Senior Medical Officer, HQ 9th Division, and Commanding Officer, 2/3rd Field Ambulance, at Labuan.

**Colonel CH (Colin) Grace**, DSO, ED, commanded 2/15th Battalion for the landings at Lae, Finschhafen and Brunei (OBOE 6).

**Major Henry 'Jo' Gullett**, AM, MC, ED, OM, was a member of the AIF detached to a British regiment as a company commander for the D-Day landings at Normandy.

**Captain C (Craig) Horn**, AAMC, Medical Officer to 41st Australian Landing Craft Company for New Guinea landings and Labuan.

**Major General RL (Ronald) Hughes**, CBE, DSO, served as a Liaison Officer for HQ 1 AustCorps with 162 US Regiment for their landing at Nassau Bay, and with HQ 26th Aust. Brigade at Tarakan.

**Captain S (Stuart) Leslie**, Second-in-Command, 42 Aust. Landing Craft Company, RAE, for Porton Plantation landing.

**Lieutenant Colonel AJC (Arthur) Newton**, was a Staff Officer with HQ 26th Brigade, 9th Division, at Labuan.

**Lieutenant Colonel FAG (George) Tucker**, DSO, ED, was the Second-in-Command of the 2/48th Battalion for Lae and Finschhafen, and commanded 2/23rd Battalion at Tarakan.

**Lieutenant R (Jock) Scott**, was a Platoon Commander with 2/43rd Battalion, 9th Division, at Finschhafen, Morotai and Labuan.

**Captain AW (Aub) Smith**, Officer Commanding 9th Division Provost Company, Finschhafen, and Acting Divisional Assistant Provost Marshal (DAPM), HQ 9th Division, Brunei.

**Major General D (Tim) Vincent**, CB, AM, OBE, commanded 1 Aust Corps Signals at Morotai for the OBOE operations in Borneo.



## Endnotes

1. Colonel Grace, CO 2/15 Bn, Lae, Finschhafen and Brunei.
2. Lieutenant Colonel Tucker, 2IC 2/48 Bn for Lae and Finschhafen, and CO 2/23 Bn at Tarakan.
3. See *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, Australian Army publication, 1993, p 29.
4. Major General Broadbent, 2IC 2/17 Bn at Lae, Military Landing Officer for 20 Bde at Finschhafen and CO 2/17 Bn at Brunei.
5. Tucker.
6. Ibid.
7. Captain Smith, OC 9 Div Pro Coy, Finschhafen, and DAPM, HQ 9 Div, Brunei.
8. Lieutenant General Daly, CO 2/10 Bn at Balikpapan.
9. Brigadier Chilton, Commander 18 Bde, Balikpapan.
10. Tucker.
11. P Share (ed), *Mud and Blood*, history of the 2/23 Bn, Heritage Books, Melbourne, 1978, p 352.
12. Ibid.
13. Tucker.
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16. M Uren, *A Thousand Men At War: The Story of the 2/16th Battalion, AIF*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1959, p 226.
17. F Allchin, *Purple and Blue: The History of the 2/10th Battalion AIF*, Griffin Press, Adelaide, 1958, pp 365 & 372.
18. See papers by Professor McCarthy and Dr Stanley.
19. Lieutenant Colonel Newton, Staff Captain, HQ 24th 1 Bde, Labuan.
20. Major General Hughes, HQ 1 Aust Corps Liaison Officer with HQ 26 Bde at Tarakan.
21. Share, *Mud & Blood*, p 358.
22. Lieutenant Colonel Dorney, Commanding Officer, 2/3rd Field Ambulance, Labuan.
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24. Chilton.
25. JG Glenn, *Tobruk to Tarakan*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1960, pp 202-203.
26. Allchin, *Purple and Blue*, p 356.
27. Major Gullett was attached to a British regiment as a company commander for the D Day landings at Normandy.
28. G Long, Australia In the War of 1939-1945, *The Final Campaigns*, Canberra, 1963, p 511.
29. Allchin, *Purple and Blue*, p 372.
30. Ibid.
31. Long, *Final Campaigns*, p 516.
32. Ibid, p 519.
33. See P Masel, *The Second 28th*, Griffin Press, Adelaide, 1961, p 170.
34. See *Mud & Blood*, p 260.
35. Broadbent.
36. Tucker.
37. Chilton.
38. Glenn, *Tobruk to Tarakan*, p 194.
39. Grace.
40. D Goodhart, *History of the 2/7th Aust Field Regiment*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1952, p 276.
41. Masel, *The 2/28th*, p 170.
42. RL Henry, *The Story of the 2/4th Field Regiment*, Merrion Press, Melbourne, 1950, p 334.
43. Lieutenant Colonel CH Costello, senior supply officer, HQ 9th Div for OBOE operations.
44. Henry, *The Story of the 2/4th Field Regiment*, p 330.
45. Ibid, p 334.
46. Uren, *A Thousand Men At War*, p 224.
47. Chilton.
48. Allchin, *Purple & Blue*, p 364.
49. Ibid.
50. Goodhart, *History of the 2/7th Aust Field Regiment*, p 293.
51. Henry, *The Story of the 2/4th Field Regiment*, p 338.
52. Uren, *A Thousand Men At War*, p 226.
53. Long, *Final Campaigns*, p 510.
54. Uren, *A Thousand Men At War*, p 231.
55. See also D Dexter, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, The New Guinea Offensives*, Australian War Memorial. Canberra, 1961, p 450.
56. Ibid, pp 464-465.
57. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 210.
58. Newton.
59. Grace.
60. Chilton.

61. EG Keogh, *The South West Pacific: 1941-45*, Grayflower, Melbourne, 1965, p 316.
62. Broadbent.
63. Broadbent.
64. Chilton.
65. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 461.
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67. Ibid, p 354.
68. Daly.
69. Daly.
70. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 546.
71. Major Donald, Service Corps Adjutant, HQ 9th Division, Tarakan and Brunei Bay.
72. Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p 493.
73. Donald.
74. Masel, *The 2/28th*, p 200.
75. Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, p 465.
76. Tucker.
77. Dorney.
78. Costello.
79. Broadbent.
80. Major General Vincent, commander 1st Aust Corps Signals, Morotai.
81. Chilton.
82. Newton.

## ***AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45***

### **CLOSING ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF Lieutenant-General John Grey**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Let me begin by thanking, firstly, the presenters for the high quality of their presentations; secondly, our veterans—it is a privilege to have you here and to have you sharing your knowledge with us. Next, the Australian War Memorial for both providing a facility and also the encouragement for this conference. Finally, I believe it would be remiss of me if I also did not thank Colonel Peter Leahy and his staff for the work they have done in putting this history conference together.

Having said that and pondered, what should we take away with us from today? The first thing I think is the issue of command at all three levels. Firstly at the strategic level. One of the disappointing things is that, even with the benefit of history, it is still unclear exactly what the combined Chiefs of Staff actually intended in their in the overall strategy in the South-West Pacific. The points come out, but it is quite clear that we had national interests vying for authority and that we were starting to take account of what the world might look like at the end of the war. This leads to confusion when you try and narrow it down and ask, 'What, first of all, was the political intent? How was that intent converted into a military strategy and what was the strategy?'

Secondly, when you look at the operational level of war you have MacArthur, and as we heard this morning, MacArthur was viewed by the Australian Government as operating at the strategic level. But in fact he was really operating as the Theatre Commander at the operational level of war. Yet we had General Blamey with his Headquarters and his very diverse responsibilities also operating at that operational level of war. It is clear that these two commanders were not sufficiently linked.

For the OBOE operations, it is my view that General Morshead's Headquarters operated at the tactical level with the operational level decisions coming from General Blamey and General MacArthur. I think there are some important lessons for us that come out of how we structure and how we record what we do. If I cast my mind back to some of the times in Vietnam and try to trace through that war's history, it is clear that a number of us did not keep sufficient records and did not commit enough of our thoughts for history. It is perhaps ironic that at this stage, as I come towards the end of my time as CGS, I am in fact trying to record now and what the Australian Army's achievements have been over the last nearly three years. I think it's important that we do that to capture why we did things and to explain the imperatives of the time. Perhaps, with that being so, history may judge some of us more kindly.

I think it is also important to look and think of the examples we have had and to consider where we should be going with 'jointery'. To me, a very important issue from today was that the first part of jointery is properly understanding your own service. You must be an expert in your own field first to enable you to balance out the different requirements between sea, air and land operations. And it is impossible to do that unless you thoroughly understand your own service. But it is then quite clear that we do need staff and commanders with the expertise to be able to massage that together and properly weigh all of the appropriate factors. Of course, this is where the planning comes in. The need for detailed, thorough planning which is tested. Which, for amphibious operations, takes account of the sea and surface fleet, sub-surface fleet, our air flank and, of course, land operations and the crucial change between being afloat and being ashore.

We talked about surprise. It seems to me that surprise is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. If you wound the clock back when radar was first used then I am sure that people were saying also that surprise was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. It nevertheless needs to be aimed for, and when you think that we now have satellite surveillance, electronic warfare, and we also have precision guided munitions with an over the horizon capability,

then there certainly is a need for surprise. But it is going to be difficult and, clearly, to do it we are going to have to be able to exploit technology. Having a technological edge and technology was something I mentioned first thing this morning. The technological edge, I believe, is a crucial factor. You cannot achieve this edge across the entire spectrum of warfare in all three environments. You must be selective about it and of course, if you want to stay towards the leading edge of technology, there is a big price to pay in dollar terms.

Last week I was over in Western Australia and spent some time offshore with the Pilbara Regiment, which is concerned about its offshore islands, the platforms that come ashore and the important pipelines in that area. It served as an important reminder that people from Canberra clearly need to get out and understand the country and the environment that we in the Army have to operate in. It is also an eye-opener to see the growth that is going on in this country. One of the things that really concerns me is that the planners in Canberra are not keeping pace with this rate of growth. I was astonished to get out there and find the number of platforms that are now in place and have been constructed since I was last only 14 months ago. So I think it is an important thing for us to recognise that these responsibilities are there. They are responsibilities that we cannot take lightly and we need to get out and see for ourselves.

In looking at the importance of amphibious operations the points have been made today that we have had some experience. Unfortunately, I would have to say that we have lost much of the expertise, although some of the doctrines still exist. I believe that we need to do more on it. On the other hand, we have to put it in the context of overall priorities and what we can afford to do. This history conference is an important reminder to us and will also reinvigorate the process of us developing our doctrine for amphibious operations. It should lead us toward more use of our craft and our expertise in the joint arena, to train and practise to operate in this way. And I take the point that was made, that if you have an option, a number would still prefer to go by helicopter rather than across a beach. That is a command decision and it is an operational decision for the theatre commander of how we will operate. But the point is, you ought to have the options in your inventory and that is really what we are talking about.

Another point that came out very late this afternoon was that Porton Plantation operation. I said last year on a visit to the Western Front, as I stood at Fromelles, that if I had my way I would invite all commanders to visit that place. There is a place where we lost an enormous number of Australian lives yet the Australian Commanders at the time were aware that the operation was highly unlikely to succeed. To me, that reminds us that we ought to take note of history. And secondly, that commanders ought to take away the lesson of not surrounding themselves with 'yes men' and listen to field commanders who have experience. You cannot, in isolation, always be right. You need to have the wisdom of your experienced field commanders so that you can test and evaluate the planning that has been done by your staff, because ultimately it is the commander that carries the responsibility.

The final point I would like to make in terms of what we have done today, is the lesson that has come out about leadership. Quite clearly, there is a need for good leadership from each of our commanders. I said at the 11th Business Congress in Melbourne yesterday, when we were talking about leadership in the business community, that within the Army people are led and resources are managed. Commanders not only need to lead, but they need to have the respect of the men they lead and the confidence of those men. You cannot get that if you throw your headquarters together at the last minute, or your men have not trained with you under your command. Following on from that, there is a need for us to settle down some of our organisational structures and ensure that our soldiers do have the opportunity to train with their commanders and have confidence in them.

Finally, in closing, let me say that I believe this has been a successful day and that the book that will follow will enable us to establish a benchmark in terms of where we are going with amphibious operations. It is also appropriate that we run a 1995 Army History conference and I have opted for the topic of Land - Air Operations.

Thank you for attending and thank you for the enthusiastic way in which you participated.