

CHAPTER 13

AIR SUPPORT AT HOLLANDIA AND AITAPE

ON 7th March 1944 General MacArthur, anxious to exploit his success in the Admiralty Islands and the growing signs of enemy weakness in western New Guinea, issued instructions for landings at Hollandia and Aitape. Commanders considered such a long jump ahead something of a gamble but planning staffs promptly went to work on the details of the operation which was to bear the code name RECKLESS. General Krueger of the Sixth American Army was to coordinate the planning and command the task forces assigned.

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff gave formal approval to the operation on 12th March. In a joint directive to General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz on this day they ordered the South-West Pacific forces to complete the isolation of Rabaul and Kavieng with a minimum of forces; to launch an attack on Hollandia on the 15th April in order to establish heavy bombardment groups there for aid in the New Guinea campaign and to assist in the neutralisation of the Palaus, and, after such other operations as were feasible in preparation for support of the invasions of Palau and Mindanao, to invade Mindanao on 15th November. Truk was to be bypassed and Nimitz's forces would go into the southern Marianas on the 15th June and into the Palaus on 15th September. After these operations dates were indefinite, but MacArthur was directed to prepare a plan for the occupation of Luzon, and Nimitz a plan to occupy Formosa.

Hollandia was 500 miles west of Saidor. Establishment of his forces in this area, MacArthur had radioed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 5th March, would have wide implications. It would hopelessly isolate about 40,000 of the enemy ground forces along the New Guinea coast; would place in Allied hands aerodromes from which the land-based air forces could dominate the Vogelkop Peninsula, and hasten the advance westward by several months.

This bold move called for landings on beachheads which would be too far from the Allied airfields in the Ramu Valley for General Kenney's fighters to give continuous air cover, but the operation would be made feasible by the use of carrier-based aircraft which could give fighter protection until Kenney established his own fighter groups at Hollandia. It was for this reason that the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff had ordered Admiral Nimitz to provide this temporary carrier-based support at Hollandia and he and General MacArthur were to meet in Brisbane to prepare plans for the "coordination and mutual support" of this and other operations ordered in the directive of 12th March.

Much depended on the speed with which captured Japanese airfields could be repaired so that Allied fighter aircraft could be brought in. At Hollandia the American troops would have to push ahead against opposition for fifteen miles from the coast across hills to capture an airfield, and

it was doubtful if the United States Navy carriers would remain in the area for the ten to fifteen days needed for this advance, and the establishing of air facilities. It therefore became necessary to make a lesser landing at Aitape, 115 miles east of Hollandia. Intelligence reports indicated that there were only 500 Japanese in this area, including an airfield construction unit and anti-aircraft and signal troops. It would be possible to seize the airfield in one day and, after repairs had been made, fighters could use it to cover the Hollandia operation when the carriers had left. MacArthur therefore ordered that Aitape be occupied and fighter facilities be established there as quickly as possible in order to relieve the carriers and assist in subsequent campaigns in the Hollandia area.

The critical period of the operation would be when the carriers returned to their bases and before the land-based aircraft were firmly established. MacArthur expected strong air counter-attacks from the enemy in this period and to meet it he directed Kenney to bombard heavily the Japanese airfields in the Geelvink Bay area, the Banda Sea and at Wakde-Sarmi. General Krueger had to make plans for hurried reinforcement at Hollandia and Aitape, particularly the latter because of its nearness to the major Japanese ground forces at Wewak, where Adachi's *XVIII Army* was concentrating.

After the conferences in Brisbane between MacArthur and Nimitz at the end of March the date for the assault was fixed at 22nd April. Nimitz was to direct his Fifth Fleet to destroy or contain the Japanese fleet (part of which was in the Palaus) if it attempted to interfere. The Fifth Fleet would also attack the Palaus three weeks before the landing and then neutralise enemy airfields in the Hollandia and Wakde areas.

On 11th March the Fifth Air Force began large-scale bombing attacks in preparation for the Hollandia operation. From 11th to 16th March it dropped 1,600 tons of bombs and fired nearly 1,000,000 rounds of ammunition during attacks on the Wewak airfields. "On the 16th," Kenney wrote, "there was no target left. The runways were full of craters . . . ; hundreds of wrecked and burned-out aircraft littered the airdromes and the dispersal bays. Even the trees in the vicinity looked like gaunt skeletons, with their tops and branches gone and showing great gashes and scars from machine-gun fire and bomb fragments."¹

The next target was Hollandia itself, where the Japanese were trying to build up their air strength on three airfields. Air reconnaissance showed that the Japanese had several hundred aircraft there. On 25th March Admiral Nimitz had told MacArthur in a final conference at Brisbane that he did not want to send his carriers to Hollandia while 200 or 300 Japanese aircraft remained there ready to meet them. Kenney, who was at the conference, promised to eliminate the enemy planes by 5th April.² He said it would take his entire bomber force to do it. Kenney had just received from America a number of long-range Lightning fighters which could fly all the way to Hollandia, stay an hour, and get back to Nadzab.

¹ G. C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports*, pp. 372-3.

² Kenney, pp. 376-7.

These Lightnings would be able to counter enemy fighters which were sure to intercept bombers raiding Hollandia.

On 30th March, sixty-five Liberators, escorted by the long-range Lightnings, attacked Hollandia with fragmentation bombs doing great damage to grounded aircraft. Kenney's aircraft attacked again on the 31st and photographs taken indicated that they had inflicted much damage. On 3rd April after further heavy attacks the destruction seemed complete.

Australian airmen, who at this time were learning to fly Liberator aircraft before the formation of a number of Australian Liberator squadrons, took part in the Hollandia attack on 31st March. The Australians were flying with No. 65 Squadron of the Fifth Air Force which led three groups of Liberators over the target. The second flight of No. 65 was an R.A.A.F. flight led by Squadron Leader O'Brien. It attacked the stores and dispersal areas at Hollandia airfield at 10.30 a.m., dropping hundreds of 20-lb fragmentation and incendiary bombs from 11,000 feet. Enemy fighters attempted to attack it but Lightnings intercepted and frustrated their efforts.

Most of the R.A.A.F. crews chosen to train on Liberator aircraft had already had previous operational flying experience and after flying with American squadrons at Nadzab they were sent to take part in the operations of No. 380 Group at Darwin. In addition to bombing Hollandia the R.A.A.F. crews had also taken part in operations against Wewak, Kavieng, Tadjik airfield at Aitape and in the Admiralties.

Under the command of Admiral Spruance a powerful force of carriers, fast battleships, cruisers and destroyers of the Fifth Fleet struck the Palaus and other islands in the Carolines on 30th-31st March. They sank twenty-eight naval and merchant ships, bombed the airfields and sowed mines around the Palaus to immobilise enemy shipping. After this attack the Japanese no longer used the Palaus as a naval base, and moved their naval headquarters to Davao in the Philippines. As recorded elsewhere in this volume, Admiral Koga, the commander-in-chief of the fleet, was lost at sea on 31st March when on his way from the Palaus to Davao.

The Japanese *Fourth Air Army*, after its heavy losses at Wewak, withdrew to Hollandia on 25th March and set up its headquarters there. On 15th April it moved again to Menado in Celebes where it attempted to rally. It was the enemy's intention at this time to operate the *7th Air Division* out of Ambon and the *6th* out of Biak to stem the expected Allied advance. The *6th Air Division* suffered heavily in Kenney's attacks on Hollandia and General Itabana, its commander, was relieved of his command. Many of the aircraft were grounded because of lack of spare parts, and poor maintenance. The accident rate was high and there was a lack of pilots because of illness. Insufficient care had been taken to disperse the aircraft because it was assumed that the long immunity of Hollandia from heavy air attack would continue. Colonel Kaneko, a Japanese officer on the staff of the *Fourth Air Army*, reported that in

the period May 1943 to April 1944 no less than 50 per cent of aircraft lost were destroyed on the ground. Losses in air combat were 30 per cent and from other operational causes 20 per cent. Kaneko said, after the war, that from April 1943 onwards no more than 25 per cent of the aircraft on hand were in full operation at any one time.

In addition to the *Fourth Air Army*, with such aircraft as it still had available, the *23rd Air Flotilla* of the Japanese Navy air service continued operations in the South-West Pacific. After the capture of the Admiralty Islands Koga had ordered the flotilla to move from Kendari to Davao since it was believed likely that the Americans' next move would be to invade Mindanao. However, by April the Japanese considered that the Philippines were not immediately threatened and that the advance would continue along the north coast of New Guinea. Therefore, the *23rd Air Flotilla*, heavily reinforced (it was increased to 180 aircraft by moving units from Malaya, Japan and Truk), was sent to Sorong in western New Guinea with orders to search for and attack Allied invasion forces. The flotilla, in order to conserve its strength, was not to attack the area south-west of New Guinea, but merely to protect and man the air bases there. Some aircraft of the flotilla took part in the defence of Hollandia when Kenney made his attacks at the end of March.³

The plan of attack for operation RECKLESS called for simultaneous landings at Hollandia and Aitape. Lieut-General Robert Eichelberger was given command of the Hollandia task force and Brigadier-General Jens Doe of the Aitape one. Airfield construction work, always important in the Pacific war, was vital in the Hollandia-Aitape operation because of the great distance from the nearest Allied airfields. It was therefore essential that the engineers, with their equipment, should land with the infantry and begin work even while the guns were firing.

In March, Major-General Hugh J. Casey, chief engineer at General Headquarters, asked Wing Commander Dale, commander of No. 62 Works Wing, R.A.A.F., if he would take charge of all engineering projects in the Aitape operation. Dale accepted and was given command not only of the Australian works wing but all American engineer units assigned, including three army aviation battalions, an engineer battalion and a shore battalion.⁴ Dale's squadrons had almost completed their tasks at Nadzab where they had done excellent work not only on Newton Field, but on another airfield and in road-making, and the construction of 250 buildings.

Dale's task did not appear to be an easy one. His men had first to reach the airfield and then repair it ready for the operation of fighter aircraft the day after the landing. The lack of adequate roads, airfields, ports and other facilities in New Guinea together with the rapidity of the advance was placing a tremendous burden on the engineering resources at Mac-

³ US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol II, pp. 287-9: Capt H. Komoto.

⁴ Of the total personnel in the Hollandia-Aitape operation 41 per cent were engineers. At Aitape the proportion of engineers employed in the early stages of the operation was higher even than this figure.

Arthur's disposal. Not only was S.W.P.A. short of the engineering units needed but there were shortages of certain critical materials, such as sawn timber and roofing. Consequently construction had to be cut to its barest essentials.

Dale set up a temporary headquarters at Finschhafen alongside the headquarters of the Sixth Army.⁵ Here his force practised loading and unloading the vessels which would take them and their equipment to the beachhead. Two of the construction squadrons (Nos. 6 and 7) had been in the tropics for sixteen months without leave and although these men were tired compared with the fresher American units, they could not be relieved.

From North-Western Area, Air Vice-Marshal Cole's R.A.A.F. and American squadrons were to give indirect support to the operation. They were to "attack hostile air installations in the Arafura Sea and western New Guinea with special emphasis on airfields in the Kai Islands and the vicinity of Geelvink Bay", and also "to harass enemy installations bordering on the Timor Sea".

In the early planning of the operation No. 10 Group aircraft were given no direct part. From Cape Gloucester this group as well as No. 9 were to continue to support the operations in New Britain. General Whitehead had decided to establish one group of fighters at Aitape and three groups of fighters and one squadron of night fighters at Hollandia, but he selected Fifth Air Force squadrons. The American No. 49 Group was to go with the assault force to Aitape.

However, at the end of March, there was a change of fortune for No. 10 Group. General MacArthur signalled to General Krueger on 30th March that it would be desirable that No. 78 Wing R.A.A.F. should be substituted for the No. 49 Group. "The reason for this change of plan," he said, "is a desire to place in the Aitape and Hollandia areas the maximum number of P-40 (Kittyhawk) aircraft, which are more adapted to operate with minimum facilities." No. 49 Group (less Nos. 9 and 35 Squadrons) would follow No. 78 Wing to Hollandia as an additional group.

The news that No. 78 Wing was to take part in an amphibious operation against a reputedly defended beachhead caused a lifting of spirits in No. 10 Group. The group had suffered a setback when Kenney ordered the withdrawal of the Vengeance aircraft and the rest of the group had been left "out on a limb" at Cape Gloucester where they supported the final stages of the New Britain operations of the 1st Marine Division. These operations were unspectacular, and the opportunity of engaging in an operation directly against the enemy was keenly anticipated by both pilots and ground personnel.

Air Commodore Scherger was appointed air task commander for the Aitape operation. The ground echelons of the three Kittyhawk squadrons

⁵ His staff included Capt Howard Mullens, executive officer; W Cdr G. J. Towers (Windsor, Vic), operations officer; Sqn Ldr L. N. Jamieson, engineer officer; and Lt Aaron Kurnitsky, supply officer.

together with the men of the Australian airfield construction squadrons would follow immediately in the wake of the assault forces.

The Kittyhawks' activities at Nadzab and Cape Gloucester had, by the end of March, involved them in a high total of flying hours with the result that many machines were in need of maintenance, and, unless this work could be carried out rapidly, there would not be enough serviceable aircraft for Aitape. A conference was called at No. 10 Group to discuss the problem and Squadron Leader Taylor, commander of No. 11 Repair and Salvage Unit, was told that it was up to him to get the Kittyhawks ready in time. Taylor's unit had left the mainland equipped to handle Vengeance and Beaufort aircraft rather than Kittyhawks. Nevertheless he and his 400 men threw themselves eagerly into the task and worked two shifts of twelve hours each day. Taylor had floodlights installed for night work and he himself toured Nadzab in a jeep encouraging his men and "scrounging" spare parts to keep them employed. Brigadier-General Wurt-smith, commander of the Fifth Air Force Fighter Command, gave him twelve Allison engines and these, together with the work of his enthusiastic repair teams, enabled No. 78 Wing to make good its deficiencies in serviceable aircraft with another thirty-six machines in reserve. Scherger expected losses of up to 30 per cent of his machines during the early stages of the action and it was essential to have a reserve. During April the Kittyhawk pilots shuttled their machines back and forth between Nadzab and Cape Gloucester. At Nadzab No. 11 Repair and Salvage Unit re-conditioned twenty-eight aircraft within the month.

Meanwhile, on 8th April, at Admiral Nimitz's request, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock had been asked to provide Catalina aircraft to lay mines in the Caroline Islands. The Catalinas were to mine Woleai atoll, the aim being to prevent its use by vessels of the Japanese fleet during the Hollandia operation. Bostock directed Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons to carry out the task, and eight Catalinas from these squadrons flew independently from Cairns via Milne Bay to Manus in the Admiralty Islands, where on 13th April they moored at the American seaplane base in Lombrum Bay. Thirty-eight officers and seventy-five men of the Catalina squadrons were given quarters aboard the U.S.S. *Tangier*, *San Pablo* and *Heron*. On the night of 15th-16th April five of the aircraft took off from Manus and laid ten mines in the entrance to the Woleai atoll. Another plane developed engine trouble during take-off by which time it was too late to transfer the crew to a spare machine. An enemy float-plane took off from the airfield at Woleai and made several passes at one of the Catalinas. The captain, Squadron Leader Lawrence,⁶ took evasive action and managed to escape a long burst of tracer bullets fired by the float-plane.

Next day the water in Lombrum Bay was too rough for the Catalinas to take off, but on the night of 17th-18th April seven machines laid another ten mines in the entrance channel at Woleai. Japanese anti-aircraft guns and rifles fired on them but scored no hits. On the return flight to

⁶ Sqn Ldr D. R. Lawrence, DFC, 402164, 201, 20 and 11 Sqns; comd 11 Sqn 1945. Clerk; of Ashfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 13 Nov 1914.

Manus, however, one Catalina rose to 5,000 feet and at that altitude was passing over the American naval task force on its way to the rendezvous with MacArthur's Hollandia assault force. Anti-aircraft gunners opened fire heavily and several of the Catalina's control wires were shot away. The gun fire also made 130 holes in the mainplane but there were no casualties and the aircraft reached Manus safely where the damage was repaired by the crew of the U.S.S. *Tangier*.

Again on the night of the 18th-19th April six Catalinas flew to Woleai and dropped more mines. After sowing its mines one Catalina of No. 20 Squadron, captained by Flight Lieutenant Ham,⁷ rose from 300 feet to 2,500 feet to take photographs. It dropped a flare which exploded too soon, however, revealing the Catalina against a background of white cloud. The Japanese gunners immediately found the range of the aircraft and opened fire. One Bofors shell struck a blister and exploded killing two gunners, Sergeants Phillips⁸ and Ely,⁹ and severely wounding Flying Officer Lachal,¹ an Intelligence officer who had gone on the mission as an observer. The Catalina reached base where the damage was repaired. During these missions the Catalina captains found that the mines sometimes hung up because of faults in the release gear. One captain was forced to make eleven runs to drop his mines.

At the request of Admiral King, the British Eastern Fleet carried out an air and surface attack on northern Sumatra in mid-April with the object of pinning down Japanese air and surface forces in the Singapore area while MacArthur's forces moved in to the assault on Hollandia.²

During the month of April the Fifth Air Force had been bombarding the north New Guinea coastal bases from Madang through Hansa Bay, Aitape and Hollandia in preparation for the attack on 22nd April. On 10th April they dropped 227 tons on Hansa Bay, on the 12th 251 tons on the same target, and on the 12th 322 tons on Hollandia. The bombardment of Tadjil began on 15th April when 131 bombers dropped 180 tons in a series of attacks lasting three hours. The following day 32 aircrew and 31 aircraft were lost when low clouds and fog moved inland and blanketed the airfields at Nadzab and Gusap before aircraft which had again attacked Aitape could get back to their bases.

From 17th to 21st April the Fifth Air Force concentrated on coast defences at Hollandia, while Liberators of No. 380 Bomber Group operating from the Northern Territory hit targets farther west at Noemfoor, Uтарom, Manokwari and other airfields which the Japanese might use for launching bomber attacks.

⁷ F-Lt E. C. Ham, 23312. 20 and 11 Sqns, and 113 ASR Flight. Clerk; of East Brisbane; b. Toowoomba, Qld, 16 Dec 1921.

⁸ Sgt N. C. Phillips, 27770; 20 Sqn. Fitter and turner; of Broken Hill, NSW; b. Broken Hill, 26 Sep 1921. Killed in action 19 Apr 1944.

⁹ Sgt R. C. Ely, 419301; 20 Sqn. Cabinet maker; of Newmarket, Vic; b. Toorak, Vic, 6 Oct 1916. Killed in action 19 Apr 1944.

¹ F-O P. J. Lachal, 128264. 2/2 AA Regt AIF 1940-43; 9 and 11 Sqns. Clerk; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. South Melbourne, 12 May 1918.

² Vice Admiral the Earl of Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, 1943-1945* (1951).

On 17th April 800 R.A.A.F. men and the equipment of No. 78 Wing left Cape Gloucester on two ships en route for Aitape. They joined the main convoy which left Cape Cretin, near Finschhafen, the following day. The convoy included naval escorts, Liberty ships and escort aircraft carriers. Three landings all of similar strengths would be made (two at Hollandia and one at Aitape). The force for the Aitape landing included, in addition to the 163rd Regimental Combat Team of the 41st American Division, some 2,500 engineer and construction troops under Dale. Scherger, with Group Captain Candy,³ acting senior air staff officer of the group (in place of Group Captain Pearce, who had suffered an attack of malaria) accompanied Brigadier-General Doe on the American destroyer *Nicholas*.

The convoy, carrying 30,000 combat and service troops, was the biggest assembled in the South-West Pacific up to that time. To deceive the enemy as to the Allied objective, the convoy, after passing through Vitiaz Strait, headed due north to the Admiralty Islands. During the 19th April, while it was moving through the Bismarck Sea on the way to the Admiralties, fifty-four Kittyhawks of No. 78 Wing gave it some protection by carrying out air patrols. Ten of No. 75 Squadron's Kittyhawks, led by Squadron Leader Kinninmont, were unable to return to Cape Gloucester after carrying out this duty because of bad weather over the Cape Gloucester airfield, and were forced to land at Saidor. The weather cleared next day, however, and they returned to Cape Gloucester. Apart from this, the task of convoy protection was without incident. Off the Admiralty Islands the convoy was joined by the fast carriers of the American Fifth Fleet. The Kittyhawks and Spitfires of No. 73 Wing, operating from Momote, took over the task of convoy protection as the convoy steamed north to the Admiralties. Again there was little incident.

On 20th April the armada, comprising some eighty vessels, headed north-west from the Admiralties and during the night of 21st April the ships destined for Aitape separated from the main convoy. At dawn next day this force reached the bay near the intended point of landing. The naval escort heavily bombarded the coastline and near-by islands, while carrier-based aircraft machine-gunned the Tadjiri airfield and anti-aircraft positions from Aitape to Korako village. No enemy aircraft attempted to interfere.

At 6.45 a.m. the first wave of the assault troops landed near the Lemieng villages without opposition except for sporadic rifle and machine-gun fire. The troops were put ashore about one mile from the spot chosen by the planners, and killed or took prisoner about fifty Javanese labour coolies and several Japanese soldiers. The enemy was caught by surprise, the bombardment by the naval escorts being their first warning of the invasion. Enemy troops, who were mainly from base and service units, left their breakfasts in their hurry to get away. No defences had been

³AVM C. D. Candy, CBE. Comd 206 Sqn RAF 1941, 6(C) OTU RAF 1941-42, 1 OTU 1942-43, 71 Wing 1943, 74 Wing 1943-44; SASO 10 Gp 1944; RAAF Cd 1945. Regular air force offr; of East St Kilda, Vic; b. East St Kilda, 17 Sep 1912.

prepared and the invaders found anti-aircraft guns and rifles packed away in crates. Landing at the wrong position proved to be advantageous to the invaders because the L.S.T's were able to beach, whereas at the planned landing place they would have had to use pontoons to cross from the sand bar to the beach.

At 7 a.m. Dale, Jamieson⁴ and a small detachment of No. 13 Survey and Design Unit waded ashore with the fourth wave. They were followed a half hour later by the headquarters of No. 62 Works Wing, the main party of No. 13 Survey and Design Unit, No. 22 Medical Clearing Station and No. 7 Mobile Works Squadron, commanded by Flight Lieutenant Barlow.⁵

By noon the infantry had occupied the northern airstrip at Tadjil and the engineers began surveying and pegging. Dale found that the airfield surface was overgrown with kunai grass, only roughly graded and too short for fighter operations. Rain had begun to fall soon after the landing and this made the topsoil difficult to work. In spite of the difficulties, however, No. 7 Squadron began grading and extending the strip at 3 p.m. There was little shooting to interfere with the work. In two days American casualties were three killed and eight missing; no R.A.A.F. men were lost.

Meanwhile, at Hollandia, Nimitz's carriers had launched their aircraft at dawn to support the landings. Again the enemy had been surprised. It had been thought that the Allied landing would be costly, but the troops advanced practically unopposed after fleeing Japanese had abandoned their breakfast rice bowls. Staff estimates had expected about 14,000 enemy troops but the entire garrison was found to be only 5,000 unwilling troops who quickly melted away. No hostile naval attacks or air raids in force came from any direction. The Japanese search aircraft which patrolled the New Guinea coast did not see the convoy until after it had anchored.⁶ Operation RECKLESS had succeeded beyond the most optimistic expectations.

MacArthur's communiqué of 24th April announcing the landing stated:

Our feints over the past weeks towards Madang and Wewak apparently deceived the enemy, thus leaving the vital sector of Hollandia vulnerable and making possible our surprise movement to his rear. The operation throws a loop of envelopment around the enemy's XVIII Army dispersed along the coast of New Guinea in the Madang, Hansa Bay and Wewak sectors, similar to the Solomons and Bismarck loops of envelopment. To the east are the Australians and the Americans; to the west the Americans; to the north, the sea controlled by Allied naval forces; to the south untraversed jungle mountain ranges and, over all, Allied air mastery.

At Aitape on the 23rd further R.A.A.F. reinforcements arrived. The headquarters of No. 10 Group and No. 78 Wing landed, together with the ground staffs and equipment of Nos. 75, 78 and 80 Squadrons. No. 62 Works Wing was also reinforced on this day by the arrival of No. 5

⁴Sqn Ldr L. N. Jamieson, 263926. Comd 13 SDU 1943-44. Civil engineer; of Coogee, NSW; b. Melbourne, 20 Apr 1904.

⁵Sqn Ldr G. W. Barlow, 275708. Comd 7 Mobile Works Sqn 1944, 4 AC Sqn 1944-45. Civil engineer; of Kingaroy, Qld; b. Brisbane, 14 Mar 1904.

⁶US Bombing Survey, *Interrogations*, Vol II, p. 289: Capt Komoto.



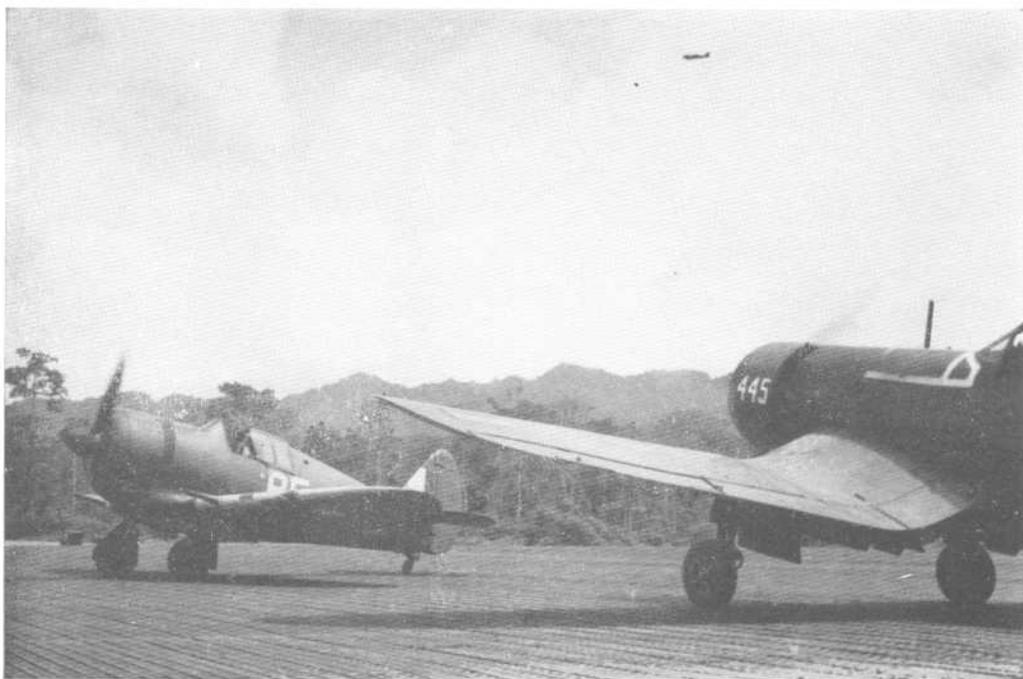
(R.A.A.F.)

The bridge across the Rangiapo River, north-east Celebes, before and after it was attacked by Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron on 27th December 1944.



(R.A.A.F.)

Australian senior officers of the combined Services after a conference at Torokina, on Bougainville Island, on 19th January 1945. Left to right: Lt-Col A. Binnie, Air Cmdre F. W. Lukis, Capt J. C. D. Esdaile, R.A.N., and Gp Capt W. L. Hely.



(R.A.A.F.)

Boomerangs of No. 5 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Torokina testing their engines in preparation for taking off to lead in a flight of R.N.Z.A.F. Corsairs on a strike against Japanese concentrations on 15th January 1945.

Works Squadron, commanded by Flight Lieutenant Edwards,⁷ No. 6 Works Squadron, commanded by Flight Lieutenant Farran,⁸ and detachments of No. 4 Works Maintenance Unit and No. 10 Works Supply Unit. The men of these units began work immediately in spite of sporadic sniper fire, but it proved impossible to get the airfield ready for use by the end of the second day. This delay did not affect the situation, however, since the expected enemy air attacks did not come. The engineers worked all night and by 8 a.m. on the 24th the fighter strip on which steel matting 100 feet wide and 3,900 feet long had been laid, was ready for use. The engineers had taken 41 hours since work began. At 9.45 a.m. two American Lightnings, one flown by Brigadier-General Wurtsmith, landed on the runway. They were the first Allied planes to use it and they were followed in the afternoon by twenty Kittyhawks of No. 78 Squadron led in by Pearce in a Beaufort. After refuelling, four of the Kittyhawks took off again and patrolled until dusk over the airfield, but without meeting any enemy. The Kittyhawk pilots who thus began operations from an airfield which had been in enemy hands two days earlier, had to operate under primitive conditions. Maintenance crews had to do their work in the open.

On 25th April twenty-three aircraft of No. 78 took off from Aitape and patrolled the beachhead at Hollandia. Aitape was difficult to work from and two of the Kittyhawks crashed when landing after the patrol but the pilots were uninjured. Next day heavy rain fell preventing the use of the airfield and impeding construction work. The first Japanese air opposition to the landing came on 27th April when, at 11 p.m., a twin-engined bomber made a surprise masthead attack in drizzling rain on a Liberty ship which, although hit on No. 5 hold, did not sink.

No. 78 had been unable to fly again until 29th April because of the weather, but that day two details of twelve aircraft patrolled over Hollandia and two details of four aircraft over Aitape. On this day Scherger called another twenty-two Kittyhawks of No. 80 Squadron forward from Cape Gloucester where the pilots had been awaiting the word to go. They joined No. 78 Squadron in patrolling over Tadj and Hollandia.

On 30th April, in addition to carrying out fifty-three patrol sorties, five aircraft went to machine-gun the villages of Kamti and Sagaro and the tracks in the area. American troops entering Kamti village next day sent a message to the R.A.A.F. telling them that, with the exception of two huts, the village had been demolished and seventy-five enemy dead had been counted there.

Meanwhile at Hollandia the Sentani and Cyclops airfields had been seized by troops of the 41st Division and thereafter ground action was limited to hunting down scattered Japanese remnants. On 27th April work had begun on the repair of Cyclops airfield and it was ready for use

⁷ Sqn Ldr J. N. Edwards, 265105. 1 Mobile Works Sqn; comd 5 Works Sqn 1943-44, 5 AC Sqn 1945. Civil engineer; of Balmoral, NSW; b. Kalgoorlie, WA, 25 Dec 1909.

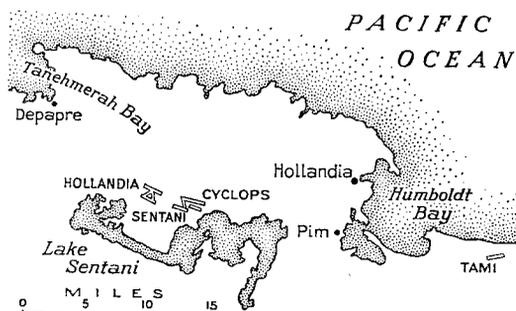
⁸ Sqn Ldr D. C. Farran, 253867. Comd 6 AC Sqn 1944-45. Civil engineer; of Horsham, Vic; b. Melbourne, 12 Apr 1907.

next day. When the ground troops had taken all three Hollandia airfields they counted a total of 340 wrecked and burnt out Japanese aircraft.⁹ The enemy had not only lost these aircraft but many others shot down in the surrounding area. Prisoners told interrogators that Allied aircraft besides destroying all the planes and petrol stocks at Hollandia had killed about 2,000 of the ground crews and other service troops.¹ By the time Hollandia was lost by the Japanese practically all the aircraft of the *6th Air Division* had been destroyed. The remainder were transferred to the *7th Air Division* with headquarters at Ambon. This division continued to operate about 100 aircraft in the western New Guinea-Celebes areas.

Supply to American troops in the Hollandia area had become difficult because of the destruction of a food dump by a Japanese bomb and also because the road between the beach at Pim and the airfields where the troops were concentrated had become impassable after heavy rains. It was necessary to drop additional food supplies by parachute until the Cyclops airfield was repaired. Kenney's transport planes shuttled back and forth from Nadzab carrying food and other supplies. The R.A.A.F. at Aitape had to keep open the air lane from Nadzab to Hollandia so that the air transports would not be molested by Japanese raiders. In the early part of May escorting these transports was one of No. 10 Group's main activities. All patrols and escort missions from Aitape were carried out without a single enemy aircraft being seen.

On 7th May sixteen Kittyhawks of No. 78 led by Squadron Leader Brydon,² flew to Hollandia taking their own rations for four days because of the critical food shortage at Hollandia. The pilots slept in hammocks under the wings of their aircraft, and five details each of eight aircraft, on each of the three following days carried out patrols over Hollandia. There were still no clashes with enemy aircraft. The Kittyhawks returned to Aitape on 10th May. Until the middle of May the Kittyhawks maintained their patrolling from Aitape and continually raided enemy motor transports and anti-aircraft positions, and fired on enemy soldiers along the coast in the Wewak area.

Wing Commander Brookes and the headquarters of No. 78 Wing moved to Cyclops on 12th and 13th May followed by the aircraft of Nos. 78



⁹ Craven and Cate (Editors), *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (1950), Vol IV, p. 598.

¹ Kenney, p. 392.

² Sqn Ldr A. H. Brydon, DFC, 578. 1 and 107 Sqns; Comd 78 Sqn 1944. Regular air force officer of Armidale, NSW; b. Armidale, 14 Apr 1921.

and 80 Squadrons. These two squadrons were then released to the operational control of the commanding officer of No. 310 Bombardment Wing of the Fifth Air Force, and were to take part in the Wakde-Biak operations then impending. No. 75 Squadron in the meantime had flown to Aitape from Cape Gloucester and was to begin operations from Tadjj.

While No. 10 Group moved with the spearhead of the Allied advance to Hollandia-Aitape, R.A.A.F. Command carried on an air war from the Northern Territory, which, though it appeared to be independent, was indirectly supporting the main New Guinea drive.

General Kenney's orders to R.A.A.F. Command for the support of the Hollandia-Aitape operations were:

1. Attack hostile air installations in the Arafura Sea and western New Guinea, with special emphasis on airfields in the Kai Islands and the vicinity of Geelvink Bay.
2. Conduct long-range bomber and mining attacks against Netherlands East Indies within range with special emphasis on Balikpapan.
3. Harass enemy installations bordering on the Timor Sea.

Tasks one and two (except the mining operations) were to be carried out by the American No. 380 Group which was still in the Northern Territory, while task three and the mining operations were assigned to the R.A.A.F. squadrons of North-Western and North-Eastern Areas.

Kenney had also planned an amphibious operation to Selaru Island some 250 miles north of Darwin. The reason behind this was the need to increase the range of bombers (both Australian and American) in the North-Western Area. The Japanese airfield on the island would be seized and fighter aircraft based there to protect it. The runway would then be extended and improved so that it could be used by bombers.

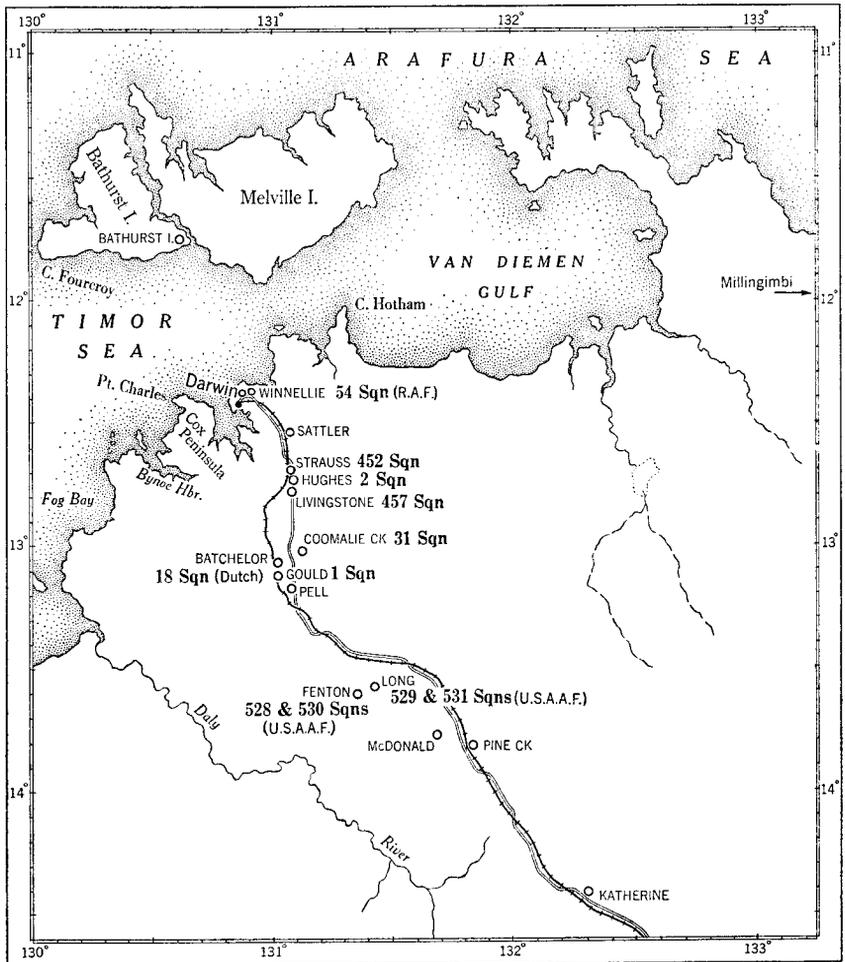
MacArthur was opposed to this operation for the time being, but told Kenney to go ahead with the planning "as he might want to carry that operation out if anything went wrong at Hollandia or the Japanese decided to put too much strength on the north coast of Dutch New Guinea for us to handle".³

Early in March Bostock had issued a tentative outline plan for the air support of the operation. The R.A.A.F. was to provide an air task force of two wings complete with ancillary units. The wings would be fighter wings, one armed with Spitfires and the other with Kittyhawks. Two additional R.A.F. Spitfire squadrons (Nos. 548 and 549) which had been formed at Strathpine, Queensland, in December 1943 and were then in training, would be sent to Darwin to release Nos. 452 and 457 Squadrons for the task force. However, by April the operation had not gone farther than the planning stage.

Kenney had been anxious also that some of the new American very-long-range bombers (the B-29, Superfortress) should be based at Darwin for the bombardment of the important Balikpapan oil refineries. He

³ Kenney, p. 384.

directed the R.A.A.F. to prepare a 10,000-foot runway at Darwin to take these machines and the work was put in hand by No. 61 Mobile Works Wing. However, in the meantime, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had decided not to allot any of the Superfortresses to the South-West Pacific. They pointed out that the Sumatran oil refineries would be a more lucrative target than Balikpapan, and, in any case, the Japanese would be cut off from oil in the Netherlands East Indies as soon as the Philippine



Islands and Formosa had been occupied by the forces under MacArthur and Nimitz. Moreover, it was considered that direct air bombardment of Japan from the Mariana Islands, which were to be seized, "will not only cause direct damage to Japan's war-making capacity, but may also

produce far-reaching effects on the Japanese public and result in a decrease in enemy air strength in combat areas in order to build up the defences of Japan proper".

General Arnold agreed with the conclusions of the U.S. Joint Chiefs. He wanted the maximum number of Superfortresses used for the strategic bombardment of Japan proper. He wrote later:

To end the war as quickly as possible, it was essential that we use such power as was available to carry out our major objective, which was to mass the maximum number of heavy bombers possible for the destruction of interior Germany, and in due course mass the maximum number of Superfortresses for the destruction of Japan. MacArthur yelled for the B-29's; Nimitz wanted the B-29's; Stilwell and Mountbatten wanted the B-29's—all for tactical purposes.⁴

In March there had been some dislocation of air effort in North-Western Area as a result of the emergency air reinforcement of Western Area following the arrival of Japanese aircraft carriers at Singapore. The effort of No. 380 Group had also been reduced when two squadrons were sent to New Guinea to support the invasion of Los Negros. However, by the end of March all squadrons had returned and settled down again. In addition, two more Australian squadrons, No. 1 (Beauforts) and No. 43 (Catalinas) had been assigned to North-Western Area control. Air Vice-Marshal Cole now had the following thirteen squadrons at his disposal, as well as No. 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit which continued to carry out vital missions over enemy airfields:⁵

Australia

- No. 1 (Squadron Leader Campbell), general-reconnaissance bombers, equipped with Beauforts, based at Gould.
- No. 2 (Squadron Leader Ingram⁶), general-reconnaissance bombers, equipped with Beauforts, based at Hughes.
- No. 31 (Wing Commander Mann), long-range fighters, equipped with Beaufighters, based at Coomalie.
- No. 43 (Wing Commander Thompson⁷), long-range minelaying, equipped with Catalinas, based in Darwin harbour.
- No. 83 (Squadron Leader Goon⁸), fighters, equipped with Boomerangs, based at Gove.
- No. 452 (Squadron Leader Spence⁹), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Strauss.
- No. 457 (Squadron Leader Trimble¹), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Livingstone.

⁴ H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission*, p. 541.

⁵ The principal appointments at NW Area headquarters at the end of March were: AVM A. T. Cole, AOC; Gp Capt A. M. Murdoch, SASO; Gp Capt M. O. Watson, SOA; Sqn Ldr S. Jamieson, Intelligence Officer. No. 1 (Fighter) Wing (which controlled Nos. 54, 452 and 457 Sqs) was commanded by Gp Capt P. Jeffrey; No. 79 Wing (controlling Nos. 1, 2, 18 and 31 Sqs) by Gp Capt C. Eaton; No. 61 Mobile Works Wing by W Cdr D. J. Rooney; and No. 380 American Gp by Lt-Col Forrest L. Brissey Jr.

⁶ W Cdr L. A. Ingram, 379, 14, 13 and 100 Sqs; comd 2 Sqn 1944. Regular air force offr; of Geelong, Vic; b. Essendon, Vic, 1 Apr 1917.

⁷ W Cdr C. F. Thompson, DFC, 260286. 20 and 11 Sqs; comd 43 Sqn 1943-44; Liaison duties 1 TAF 1944-45. Of Sydney; b. Waverley, NSW, 31 Aug 1916.

⁸ Sqn Ldr R. F. Goon, 251686. 34, 24 and 85 Sqs; comd 83 Sqn 1944-45. Flying instructor; of Essendon, Vic; b. 22 Sep 1913.

⁹ W Cdr L. T. Spence, DFC, 270839. 3 Sqn; comd 452 Sqn 1944, 8 OTU 1945. Comd 77 Sqn, Korea, 1950. Bank clerk; of Longreach, Qld; b. Bundaberg, Qld, 4 Apr 1917. Killed in action, Korea, 9 Sep 1950.

¹ Sqn Ldr T. H. Trimble, 260652. 21, 25, and 3 Sqs; RAAF Hq, Washington; comd 457 Sqn 1944-45. Clerk; of Cremorne, NSW; b. Mosman, NSW, 1 Aug 1920.

United Kingdom

No. 54 (Squadron Leader Newton²), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Darwin.

United States

No. 528 (Captain Banks), heavy bombers, equipped with Liberators, based at Fenton.

No. 529 (Captain Craig), heavy bombers, equipped with Liberators, based at Long.

No. 530 (Captain Cesario), heavy bombers, equipped with Liberators, based at Fenton.

No. 531 (Captain Seale), heavy bombers, equipped with Liberators, based at Long.

Holland

No. 18 (Lieut-Colonel te Roller), medium bombers, equipped with Mitchells, based at Batchelor.

After their return from Potshot airfield, Exmouth Gulf, the Beaufighters had been hunting for enemy vessels in the islands north of Darwin and had excellent results. On 28th March six of these aircraft, led by Squadron Leader Burlace,³ struck in the waters around Roti Island south-west of Timor. The Beaufighters flew first from Coomalie to Drysdale airfield where they refuelled and took off again for Roti, approaching at a very low altitude in the last 150 miles. At the head of Pepela Bay they discovered and immediately attacked five 30-foot prahus. One of the Beaufighters (Flight Lieutenant Fitton,⁴ pilot, and Flight Sergeant Foyle,⁵ navigator) flew so low in the attack that it struck the mast of a prahu on the beach. The Beaufighter crashed and exploded and then burst into flames, killing the crew.

On 31st March the Beaufighters again staged through the base at Drysdale to attack Tenau harbour, Timor. The Beaufighters carried 250-lb bombs with which they made an early-morning attack on an oil barge and a 500-ton vessel which was hit and left burning. This vessel was destroyed and the Beaufighters continued to pour cannon and machine-gun fire into other small vessels they found off Semau Island. On 6th April they attacked again at Semau Island setting fire to a 100-foot oil barge and destroying buildings ashore. On this mission Flying Officer Strachan's⁶ machine was hit by anti-aircraft fire and he was compelled to crash-land on Cartier Island, a tiny atoll south of Semau. He and his navigator were rescued uninjured some hours later by a Catalina.

In accordance with the general support plan for the Hollandia-Aitape assault, the bombardment effort of North-Western Area in April was directed against bases that might be used to stage enemy aircraft against

² Sqn Ldr R. B. Newton, DFC, 88464, RAF. 411 Sqn RAF; attached RAAF 1942; comd 54 Sqn RAF 1944. B. Preston, Lancs, England, 4 Jul 1915.

³ Sqn Ldr C. H. Burlace, 262044; 31 Sqn. Flying instructor; of Broadmeadow, NSW; b. Mosman, NSW, 20 Nov 1911.

⁴ F-Lt K. A. Fitton, 403730; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Kogarah, NSW; b. Kogarah, 2 Oct 1916. Killed in action 28 Mar 1944.

⁵ F-Sgt R. C. Foyle, 410970; 31 Sqn. Munition worker; of Warrnambool, Vic; b. Warrnambool, 15 May 1921. Killed in action 28 Mar 1944.

⁶ F-Lt D. B. F. Strachan, 401862; 31 and 94 Sqns. Student; of Caulfield, Vic; b. Paddington, NSW, 25 Aug 1921.

the beachheads. Before 17th April Cole was to attack mainly the Kai Islands airfields from which it would be possible for the Japanese to launch bombers against the American carrier force. From 18th to 19th April the attack was to be shifted to airfields and airfield installations at Manokwari and Babo in Dutch New Guinea, and from 20th to 24th April Noemfoor was the main target. In order that Cole would be able to keep up a maximum effort he was permitted to reduce his reconnaissance duties to a minimum.

No. 380 Group struck Langgur airfield in the Kai group on 3rd and 7th April flying a total of fifty-six sorties. After these raids Bostock signalled to Cole that examination of photographs taken afterwards showed that little or no damage had been done and that it was useless to bomb the airfields when there were no aircraft present. He directed Cole to try and destroy stores concentrations at the airfields.

Meanwhile Group Captain Eaton's No. 79 Wing were daily bombing Timor. A stream of Beauforts of No. 2 Squadron and Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron visited Koepang, Lautem, Penfui and Dili. No. 1 Squadron, after becoming partly operational on 20th March, joined in this bombardment early in April. Squadron Leader Campbell led a strike of three Beauforts of this squadron against Lautem on the night of 4th April. All three machines found the target and their bombs fell in the allotted target area. On 15th April the Beaufighters raided Su village on Timor destroying buildings with bombs and machine-gunning Japanese, some of whom were killed. Return fire from the ground hit several of the Beaufighters and one crashed into the sea forty miles south of Timor.

In company with No. 18 Squadron, No. 1 Squadron took part in a large-scale raid on Koepang that night. Two Mitchells of the Dutch squadron, carrying incendiary bombs, acted as "pathfinders", arriving over the target just after nightfall. The incendiary bombs started fires in the area, guiding the Beauforts, which had staged from Gould through Drysdale. Campbell's machine was first over Koepang after the pathfinders. He saw the fires and dropped his bombs from 7,400 feet. Ten other Beauforts of No. 1 followed him and then the remaining Mitchells bombed. Photographs taken after the attack showed that twenty-six buildings were either damaged or destroyed, including the warehouses along the foreshore.

The Liberators heavily bombed the Kai Islands on 17th April and on the 18th switched their attacks to Manokwari and Mumi airfields in Dutch New Guinea. On this day also eleven Spitfires drawn from Nos. 54, 452 and 457 Squadrons and two Beaufighters of No. 31 attacked a village on Babar Island. Group Captain Jeffrey led the operation which was the first attack on a ground target by the Spitfires from the Darwin area. The pilots left their bases at first light and flew first to the newly-constructed airstrip on Bathurst Island where they refuelled. They approached their targets at a height of fifty feet. Led by a Beaufighter, they machine-gunned huts and barges at Wetan Island then the village of Tapa and a Japanese wireless station on Babar, scoring hits which caused damage. All the aircraft returned safely without meeting any hostile fire.

Eaton planned a heavy daylight attack by the Beauforts and Mitchells against Su. For some time there had been no sign of enemy fighter aircraft in the Timor area, but to give bombers some protection in this first daylight operation, No. 31 Beaufighters were ordered to provide top cover. This raid was to be made on 19th April, three days before the landings at Hollandia and Aitape. No. 1 Squadron provided fifteen Beauforts, No. 18 provided twelve Mitchells and No. 31 provided eight Beaufighters. The object was to strike at the Su barracks and town area. The Beauforts took off from Darwin at 7.45 a.m. and an hour later rendezvoused with the Mitchells and Beaufighters. The three squadrons then flew in formation at 10,000 feet with the Beauforts leading. As they approached Su they lost height to 8,000 feet and increased speed to 170 knots. The Beauforts bombed in line astern dropping incendiary as well as high explosive bombs. Many of these were seen to fall in the buildings, tents and dump area, starting large fires. No. 18 made its bombing run at almost the same time and all their bombs fell in the town area.

On assault day at Hollandia (22nd April) the Mitchells and Beaufighters carried out a daylight raid on Dili while twenty-four Liberators of No. 380 Group bombed Noemfoor Island. Until the end of April these attacks from the Northern Territory continued to support the main New Guinea operations. The precise effect of this bombardment on the enemy could not be determined. But, as already recorded, the advance to Hollandia-Aitape was opposed by only a few small-scale raids instead of the heavy air reaction which MacArthur's commanders expected. The widespread and continual bombardment of all enemy airfields that could be used against Hollandia-Aitape probably helped to achieve this result.

Catalinas of Nos. 11, 20 and 43 Squadrons laid mines not only at Woleai in the Carolines, but also at Balikpapan, Manokwari, Kaimana and Sorong in efforts to close enemy harbours to shipping during the Hollandia-Aitape operations. No. 43, which had not previously laid mines, was assigned the difficult task of mining Balikpapan harbour; for some months before its movement to Darwin from Karumba, in early April, the squadron had been engaged in night harassing raids. Mines had been laid at Balikpapan in February of 1944 by Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons, and No. 43's task was to replenish the minefield on 20th April, two days before the Hollandia-Aitape operation.

On 17th April the American seaplane tender *Childs* laid temporary Catalina moorings in Yampi Sound in Western Australia, which was chosen as the advanced base for the operation. Boomerang fighters of No. 85 Squadron were sent north from Western Area to give fighter protection.

Six Catalinas of No. 43, led by Thompson, took off from Yampi on the afternoon of 21st April. Over Balikpapan the aircraft met unexpectedly heavy anti-aircraft fire from vessels in the harbour. Flight Sergeant Abbey's⁷ machine was hit, caught fire, and crashed in flames. Flight

⁷ F-Sgt D. G. Abbey, 410135; 20 and 43 Sqns. Draftsman; of Preston, Vic; b. Preston, 15 Nov 1920. Killed in action 21 Apr 1944.

Lieutenant Gray,⁸ captain of another Catalina, saw this crash and shortly after shrapnel struck his own aircraft tearing a hole in the hull. Shrapnel fragments ripped through the cockpit, wounding both Gray and his co-pilot (Flying Officer Seage⁹) in the arms. His crew blocked the hole in the cockpit with bedding and Gray headed back to Yampi Sound. As a result of the opposition and of the inexperience of the crews in minelaying this operation was not a success, numbers of mines being laid in the wrong places.

Arrangements for this minelaying operation included the use of Beau-fighters of No. 31 to fly well out to sea to meet the returning Catalinas and protect them on the last stage of their flight. This was done and the Catalinas therefore had fighter protection during the daylight part of their homeward flight. Gray made a skilful landing with his damaged machine at Yampi while a crash crew supported by a fire-fighting party and first-aid team stood by. As the Catalina could not remain afloat he sent it up onto a beach.

The Catalinas returned to Balikpapan on 24th and 27th April to lay more mines. Anti-aircraft fire over the harbour was slight and nearly all mines were laid in the intended positions. They also mined Sorong on 25th April and Kaimana on 27th April. One Catalina captained by Pilot Officer Rose¹ was sent to mine Manokwari on 28th April. It did not return and no further word was heard of it. The Catalinas succeeded in disrupting Japanese shipping at Balikpapan. The harbour was closed from 20th to 29th April, and a delayed-action mine sank the destroyer *Amagiri* on 23rd April.

⁸ F-Lt R. H. S. Gray, 260717; 11 and 43 Sqns. Law clerk; of Orange, NSW; b. Hughenden, Qld, 8 Apr 1915.

⁹ F-Lt J. A. Seage, 406798. 43, 11, and 20 Sqns. Clerk; of Mt Lawley, WA; b. Perth, 13 Aug 1919. Killed in action 28 Jan 1945.

¹ P-O W. N. Rose, 400939. 14 and 11 Sqns. Salesman; of Essendon, Vic; b. Brunswick, Vic, 27 May 1921. Killed in action 28 Apr 1944.