

**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 coordinate 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 Wootten, 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.
11. David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensives*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961, p 265.
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.