

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Question and Answer Session

### John De Teliga

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

### Peter Stanley

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

### Mick Sheehan

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

### Peter Stanley

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

### Zac Issackson

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

### Peter Stanley

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

### **Zac Issackson**

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

### **General Tim Vincent**

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

### **Peter Stanley**

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

### **Craig Wilcox**

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

### **Peter Stanley**

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

### **David Horner**

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

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

### **Brigadier Chris Roberts**

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

### **Peter Stanley**

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

### **David Horner**

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

### **Peter Stanley**

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

## Endnotes

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

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