

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

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

Alan Stephens

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Question and Answer Session

John De Teliga

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

Dr Alan Stephens

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

Major Simkin

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

Dr Alan Stephens

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

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

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

Graham Horn

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

Dr Alan Stephens

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

General Cape

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

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

Dr Alan Stephens

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

Colonel Dorney

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

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

Dr Alan Stephens

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

Endnotes

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