

CHAPTER 27

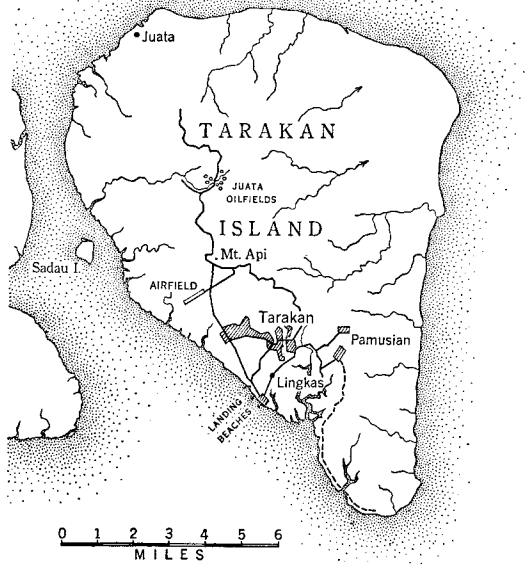
TARAKAN

ON the 21st March 1945 General MacArthur's headquarters issued Operations Instruction No. 99, which directed I Australian Corps (General Morshead) with Allied Air Forces in support, to occupy Tarakan Island on 29th April.¹ It was expected that by that time control over the Sulu Archipelago would have been established. The task was defined by a G.H.Q. staff study as follows:

Destroy hostile garrison and seize Tarakan Island off North-East Borneo; establish air elements for support of subsequent operations against Balikpapan and for protection of convoy route thereto; protect and conserve petroleum producing and processing installations and assist in re-establishment of constituted government in the area.

Tarakan is a pear-shaped island a few miles off the north-east coast of Borneo. Before the war, the oilfields on Tarakan produced 6,000,000 barrels of oil a year, and in Allied hands could become a useful oiling station. Fringed with mangrove swamps and a few sandy beaches, it had an interior of rolling wooded hills. It was Dutch territory, and a small force of Dutch troops were to take part in the operation.

In addition to having a good anchorage for shipping, Tarakan's airfield made it of considerable importance for the operations which were planned to follow. Indeed, to capture the airfield was the main reason for going into Tarakan. It might provide support for the next two operations in Borneo, one to capture Brunei Bay and the other to take Balikpapan on the east coast. That was the plan. It was known, however, that although the eastern half of the airfield had good natural drainage, the western side was swampy. For heavy duty, a considerable amount of



¹ Later changed to 1st May, to take advantage of the tide.

rock work and resurfacing and more drainage was considered necessary. The annual rainfall at Tarakan was 146 inches, and at the season when the landing was to be made, one week's fine weather was highly improbable.

General Kenney delegated the planning and direction of the air side of the operation to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, and directed him to "cause his representatives to meet with representatives of I Australian Corps, which is charged with the coordination of plans". Bostock had at his disposal for the operation, the First Tactical Air Force, and the Thirteenth and Fifth Air Forces. In addition, heavy-bomber squadrons of the R.A.A.F. based at Darwin and even as far afield as Western Australia were to be used to neutralise enemy bases which were beyond the reach of bombers based in the islands.

R.A.A.F. Command's tasks in the operation were threefold:

1. Neutralise by air attack prior to P-day (assault day) all enemy resources which were potentially capable of interfering with the success of the operation;
2. Support the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade in its operations on Tarakan;
3. Establish air forces at Tarakan as soon as the airstrip there becomes available. These air forces based on Tarakan were then to provide air support for the infantry during the "mopping-up" operations, and prepare to carry out air operations from Tarakan in support of future operations in Borneo.

The Tarakan operation would follow the familiar Allied pattern, by now also well known to the enemy, of isolating the battlefield from enemy support, neutralising hostile air and sea elements within range of the objective area, destroying troop concentrations, and covering the assault with aircraft.² Most of the preliminary bombardment would be carried out by the Thirteenth Air Force now under Major-General Wurtsmith. The Fifth Air Force, at this time, was not fully engaged to the north and would provide flights of bombers for pre-assault strikes on Tarakan.

Estimates of enemy strength before the Tarakan assault showed that there were not more than 48 fighters and 21 bombers in the whole of the Netherlands East Indies, and that there was little chance of reinforcements arriving. Japanese naval intervention was highly unlikely, and the hostile troops at Tarakan were estimated at 4,000, of whom only 1,500 were considered to be combatant troops.

It was not possible for the assault forces to achieve surprise because of the effective Japanese radar coverage of the approaches to the Borneo coast. However, this was not regarded as being of importance since the enemy's air intervention was expected to be slight or non-existent owing to his very limited means.

The First Tactical Air Force, as well as attacking targets in the pre-assault stage and providing air cover for convoys en route, was ordered

² A Japanese intelligence report outlined Allied invasion methods as follows: "It is generally estimated that the bombing of a landing point by enemy aeroplanes from the first raid generally extends over a period of from one to two months. At the beginning, reconnaissance bombing is carried out. From about twenty days prior to the landing, enemy starts his main bombing by means of numerous aeroplanes. After our military installations and airfields have been thoroughly demolished and our military strength dissipated, neutralisation bombing is further carried out to assist the landing. The landing is begun under cover of aeroplanes." (Japanese Naval General Staff, Intelligence Report, 22 Jul 1944—ATIS translation.)

to establish an air garrison at Tarakan as soon as the airfield there opened. Air Commodore Cobby had appointed Group Captain Arthur, who on 6th April had become commanding officer of No. 78 Wing, to be the Air Task Force Commander at Tarakan. Once the assault was mounted, Cobby would be responsible for all air operations in the area and he could, when necessary, call on the Thirteenth Air Force to provide aircraft for strikes or other air tasks.

Cobby had planned to use No. 81 Wing in the Tarakan operation. This wing had been in the Admiralties and Noemfoor for many months with little to do and he hoped to give them a more active role as soon as possible in Borneo. Unfortunately at the last moment he had to switch No. 78 Wing in place of No. 81 Wing, because No. 81 had been unable to get all its units forward from Noemfoor and Townsville, Queensland. The men of No. 81 Wing were somewhat upset at the change and No. 78 Wing, which had been proceeding in a leisurely manner, was given ten days in which to pack up and work out the details of their move into Tarakan.

In addition to Nos. 75, 78 and 80 Squadrons, No. 452 (Spitfire) Squadron was attached to No. 78 Wing for the Tarakan operation. No. 77 Wing (Wing Commander Read) was also included in the air garrison force; while four Auster aircraft of No. 83 Wing were to be taken along in the assault convoy and unloaded as soon as possible after the landing. It was planned that ground staffs of the squadrons concerned, together with ancillary units such as medical, stores, repair and servicing, fighter control and radar, would be transported by ships, and the squadron pilots would fly their aircraft in as soon as the airfield was ready for use.

Air strikes against airfields in Borneo, Celebes and Java began twenty days before the landing. They were provided by the Thirteenth and Fifth Air Forces as planned and by Liberators of Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons R.A.A.F., which had been transferred from Darwin to Morotai, where they came under the control of First T.A.F. The role of the bombers was long-range attacks against the Borneo-Celebes area, including the destruction of ground forces, oil storage and enemy defences on Tarakan Island. Other Liberators of these squadrons were to act in the role of air observers over the beach-head on assault day and the day after.

Fifteen Liberators of Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons, together with ground maintenance personnel, arrived at Morotai between 8th and 10th April. The remaining aircraft of these squadrons, together with No. 23 Squadron's aircraft, continued operating from the Darwin area.

The Australian Liberators were ordered to carry out operations at a rate of effort of 800 hours per squadron per month for twenty-one days. Air Commodore Charlesworth, the air officer commanding, North-Western Area, doubted whether this rate of effort could be sustained and pointed out that it was far in excess of the normal scale and that poor serviceability was to be expected when the aircraft returned to Darwin. "If the sustained effort is continued as envisaged," he said, "there will be a terrific back-log of maintenance work piled up."

Air operations against Tarakan and near-by targets on the mainland of Borneo, began on the 12th April with a raid by Lightnings of Thirteenth Air Force on gun positions at south Tarakan. The air bombardment of these Borneo targets in preparations for the Tarakan landing was an intensification of the bombardment that had been going on almost continuously since the first raid by American Liberators against Tarakan in November 1944. The frequency of attacks was gradually increased until by April 1945 they had developed into a full-scale air assault by bombers and fighter-bombers which unloaded high-explosive and napalm fire bombs and strafed every target they could find. In the Tarakan area special attention was paid to bulk storage oil tanks which could be used to provide a flow of burning oil into the landing area. All these tanks were destroyed.

During the period 10th-25th April, the Thirteenth Air Force heavy bombers, mediums and fighters flew 570 sorties to deliver 750 tons of bombs on targets in Borneo and Celebes.

The first raid by Liberators of First T.A.F. from Morotai was on the 13th April, when six aircraft from Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons, led by Group Captain Kingwell, attacked personnel areas at Tawao with demolition and fragmentation bombs. Some of the bombs went into the water, but others damaged buildings and jetties. Six fires were seen as the formation of Liberators left the target. Another six Liberators, with different crews, struck at Tawao again on the 15th April, with 75 per cent of their bombs falling on the target. Next day the Australian Liberators began their strikes on Tarakan itself. Nine aircraft raided the Pamusian Tank Farm, destroying three tanks and starting fires. The crews saw a flash of fire rising to 200 feet then subsiding. The Liberators then attacked the Lingkas Tank Farm, scoring direct hits which destroyed two large tanks. Group Captain McLean,³ who captained one of the aircraft in this operation, had to return to base early because of a fire in one of the Liberator's motors.

On 17th April Squadron Leader I. O. Black led six Liberators into an attack on a barracks area at Tarakan. They dropped forty general-purpose bombs in addition to incendiaries and fragmentation bombs. All fell in the target area, starting fires. On 18th April Tarakan was again the target for six Liberators and hits were scored on the Lingkas Tank Farm. On 20th April five Liberators attacked Manggar airfield at Balikpapan, cratering the runway, and on the following day six more of these aircraft bombed Sepinggang storage area at Balikpapan, causing fires.

While the Liberators of Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons, operating from Morotai, concentrated on Borneo targets, other Australian Liberators of No. 25 Squadron (based in Western Australia) and No. 23 Squadron (based in the Darwin area) were raiding Java and other targets in the Netherlands East Indies. No. 25 Squadron lost its first aircraft over enemy territory on 26th April when eight Liberators from this squadron, staging

³ Gp Capt D. McLean, 78. Comd RAAF Stn Pearce 1942-43, RAAF Stn Laverton 1943-44, 21 Sqn and 82 Wing 1945. Regular air force offr; of Piangil, Vic; b. Charlton, Vic, 29 Jul 1913. Killed in action 1 Jul 1945.

through Corunna Downs, set off to attack Malang airfield near Surabaya to put it out of commission during the operation against Tarakan. Squadron Leader Dennett⁴ led the eight Liberators which took off at five-minute intervals. The weather was bad over Java as well as over the alternate target, and although some of the Liberators bombed, results could not be observed because of cloud. The fifth aircraft in the mission captained by Squadron Leader Wawn⁵ sent out distress signals. Wawn called for a bearing and said he was then making for Truscott airfield. Off Sumba, Wawn informed base that he would have to land. He did so successfully but unfortunately all of the crew were captured almost immediately by Japanese soldiers and taken first to Sumbawa, later to Lombok and Bali and eventually to Batavia, where they arrived towards the end of June 1945. During their imprisonment the men, particularly Wawn, received brutal treatment, being beaten and tortured by Japanese interrogators. All members of the crew survived, however, and were released at Batavia at the end of the war.

Up to the day of the landing on 1st May, the Liberators from Darwin and Cunderdin continued to harass and bomb enemy airfields within range, particularly Malang, Den Pasar, Bingkalapa, Kendari and Ambesia. Others carried out shipping searches to blockade Macassar Strait and Celebes, Arafura, Timor, Banda and Flores Seas.

Meanwhile, the Thirteenth and Fifth Air Forces had been carrying the major burden of the pre-invasion phase of the operation. Altogether, attacks were made on Kuching, Miri, Labuan, Jesselton, Ranau, Kudat, Sandakan, Tawao, Tarakan, Sadau Island, Samarinda, Manggar, Sepinggang, Balikpapan (Borneo); Jolo (Sulu Archipelago); Tanamon, Langoan, Gorontalo, Malimpung (Celebes); and Surabaya.

The Beaufighters took part in an attack on anti-aircraft positions at Tarakan on 20th April. Six of them, from No. 31 Squadron, were assigned to suppress anti-aircraft fire while an American Mitchell took photographs, at low level, along the Tarakan waterfront. The aircraft staged overnight at Zamboanga. Next day, two of the Beaufighters were prevented from taking part because of mechanical troubles but the remaining four swept through the area and effectively restrained the enemy anti-aircraft guns. Some excellent photographs were taken by the crew of the Mitchell.

In the period from 20th to 28th April, only seven enemy aircraft were sighted over Borneo by Allied aircraft, and with one exception they were unaggressive, but in Celebes the enemy made seven interceptions and in one case an enemy fighter collided with an American Liberator which was on an armed shipping search of Macassar Strait. Both aircraft were destroyed.

As assault day approached, attacks were made on targets at Tarakan which might impede the ground troops. The priorities for attacks on these targets were (a) anti-aircraft positions; (b) supply dumps; (c) buildings

⁴ W Cdr J. E. S. Dennett, 260709. 31 Sqn; comd 25 and 102 Sqns 1945. Clerk; of Lindfield, NSW; b. Chelmer, Qld, 15 Oct 1916.

⁵ Sqn Ldr J. A. Wawn, AFC, 261720. RAAF Pacific Ferry Unit, 25 Sqn. Airline pilot; of Shoreham, Eng; b. Sydney, 28 Feb 1916.

capable of being used for military purposes; (d) warehouses; (e) possible coastal defence gun positions; and (f) oil storage installations. During the 28th and 29th April, shore defences, supply and personnel areas on Tarakan were bombed by 29 Mitchells and 11 Lightnings.

While the air forces continued their bombardment, intensive preparations were being made to prepare and load the assault convoy at Morotai. First T.A.F. units assigned to the operation prepared for it in an atmosphere of doubt and confusion. Nerves were frayed from long hours of work. There had been a lot of strain over the liquor episode and this had been followed by the attempted resignations of senior officers engaged in the operations. Just as First T.A.F. units were moving aboard ship, General Headquarters changed the sequence of the OBOE operations. It was announced that OBOE 6 had been interposed immediately after OBOE 1 instead of OBOE 2 (Balikpapan). First T.A.F. was the air task force for OBOE 6 and shipping, loadings and the air plan had to be recast at the last minute. A bare few days before he boarded the command ship *Rocky Mount*, Air Commodore Cobby knew that Air Vice-Marshal Bostock had recommended to Air Force Headquarters that not only he but also his senior operations and administrative officers should be withdrawn from the command.

Amid this confusion the squadrons packed up their equipment, returning surplus gear to dumps and destroying old files and maps. Emphasis was given to mobility. Equipment was mobile-loaded on to the vessels which would transport them to Tarakan. Vehicles had to be spray-painted and completely water-proofed so that they could be partially submerged in salt water and remain serviceable. The equipment of one of the units assigned to Tarakan (No. 114 Mobile Fighter Control Unit) did not arrive at Morotai from the mainland until the day the convoy was to sail. Moreover it had been packed low in the ship with the equipment of a repair and servicing unit on top of it.

Advanced Headquarters of First T.A.F. embarked on the 23rd April, Cobby going aboard the command ship on 26th April, and, at about 4 p.m. that day, the convoy of sixty-nine vessels, escorted by warships and with air cover aloft, left Morotai for Tarakan. The air cover on the first afternoon was satisfactory, but no dusk cover was provided. It was apparent that the Australian pilots engaged in convoy escort had been given insufficient briefing on communications and codes. Convoy cover was provided most of next day, but the timing of arrivals and reliefs was poor. However, the cover given by the Thirteenth Air Force, which took over this commitment, west of the 123rd meridian to Tarakan, was satisfactory.

Meanwhile, the operation had opened on 30th April with an unopposed landing by a small force on Sadau Island, north-west of Lingkas, to provide positions from which artillery could support the main assault next day. At the same time the Australian engineers entered Lingkas harbour to blast holes out of the underwater barrier. The engineers carried out their mission without loss, in spite of the fact that one of the smoke screens put

down by aircraft to obscure them from the shore was laid to seaward of them, as a result of which they were silhouetted against a white background until the smoke drifted inshore.

The landing was preceded by a four-day naval bombardment, and, on P-day, Mitchells, Liberators and Lightnings of the Thirteenth Air Force bombed and strafed the landing area. The landing was carried out near Lingkas on 1st May against light opposition, which consisted mainly of machine-gun and mortar fire. Casualties were small.

Australian Liberators had been scheduled to make strikes on assault day, but failed to carry out the missions. Bostock was informed that they did not carry out their commitments because they had completed the allotted number of flying hours on which maintenance was based. This failure was severely criticised by Bostock who said later:

In my opinion, it is inexcusable to allow consideration of routine maintenance procedure of this nature to preclude the employment of aeroplanes in operations in support of an assault on a beach-head.⁶

On 2nd May a Liberator of the R.A.A.F. detailed for air observation duties over Tarakan failed to show up for the same reason. "Such inflexibility of effort," stated the R.A.A.F. Command report on the operation, "is intolerable, and could have caused acute operational embarrassment had enemy ground opposition been more severe. Operations were resumed after inquiry into the cause of failure."

The 26th Brigade (of the 9th Australian Division) supported by one company of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army, quickly secured the beach-head and the jetties. There was no opposition on the beach, the enemy having withdrawn inland. Nor did the enemy air force make an appearance during the landing. This total lack of air reaction confirmed the belief that Japanese air power in the Netherlands East Indies was a spent force. Allied superiority in the air was such that a Thirteenth Air Force Mitchell was able to fly up and down the beach landing area spraying it with a solution of D.D.T. as an anti-malarial precaution for the troops that were coming ashore.

The R.A.A.F. was in trouble at Tarakan from the start. Because of the faulty loading there was considerable confusion and delay during and after the landing of the ground parties. Air-warning facilities which were to give warning of the approach of enemy aircraft, took thirty-four hours to erect and bring into operation. Relatively unessential equipment was unloaded from the landing vessels well in advance of the radar equipment. The base plate of the ground-control interception station was loaded in a different vessel from the rest of the station.

Within an hour of landing, the 2/48th Battalion struck slight opposition, while stiff resistance held up the 2/23rd Battalion on a ridge, which, however, was captured next day. Going was difficult in the airfield area because of the terrain, enemy resistance, and land mines which had been sown in great numbers. Tarakan township was occupied after two days'

⁶ RAAF Command Report, OBOE 1, p. 2.

heavy fighting, and on the 5th a patrol of the 2/24th Battalion reported that the enemy had abandoned the airfield. Work was begun immediately to clear the airfield of bombs and mines.

Four Auster aircraft of No. 16 Air Observation Post Flight were taken ashore soon after the initial landing to control artillery fire and carry out reconnaissance duties. A strip 220 yards long was prepared by army engineers for these aircraft, but it was not suitable. Flying Officer McIntyre,⁷ with Captain Ket⁸ as observer, attempted to take off on 2nd May, but the Auster crashed into an obstruction at the end of the runway and Ket died later from injuries then received, and McIntyre was injured and had to be evacuated. The Austers were then transferred to the Tarakan airfield and began operations there from 6th May.

Until the R.A.A.F. fighter squadrons were established ashore, air patrols over Tarakan were provided by the Thirteenth Air Force, which had four fighters on station during the day and two night fighters on station for dawn and dusk cover. In the original planning, the R.A.A.F. was to take over when their aircraft began operation out of the Tarakan airfield which was to be ready for use on 7th May.

Two airfield construction squadrons (Nos. 1 and 8) went ashore with the invaders on assault day to work on the airfield. They were to construct an all-weather runway 5,000 feet long and to increase the parking space to accommodate two wings and a half of Australian aircraft. The construction squadrons had ample equipment. Tractors, bulldozers, 12-yard scoops, power graders, power shovels and more than 200 motor vehicles ranging from jeeps to 25-ton low loaders, poured from the mouths of the L.S.T's. Difficulty was experienced getting the equipment ashore, but this did not delay the work, because the airfield was not taken until the evening of 5th May.

Group Captain Rooney, commanding officer of No. 61 Airfield Construction Wing, made an inspection of the airfield and found that it had been seriously damaged. In addition, it was waterlogged, and apparently had been abandoned several months earlier by the Japanese. There were mines everywhere. However, Rooney's squadrons began work on 6th May.

The Japanese shelled the strip and sent in raiding parties to cause casualties and damage. Leading Aircraftman Irvine,⁹ a guard of No. 2 Aerodrome Defence Squadron, was killed in action during a skirmish with an enemy infiltration party in the early hours of 5th May. The enemy lost three dead in this action, which took place at the rear of No. 1 Airfield Construction Squadron camp area. Mines and booby traps delayed progress and heavy rain marred the efforts of the engineers. In two days (6th and 7th May) a bomb-disposal unit of the R.A.A.F. found and defused 114 mines on the airstrip and dispersal areas. It was obvious that

⁷ F-Lt J. W. McIntyre, 422657. 5 and 4 Sqns, and 16 AOP Flight. Salesman; of Lismore, NSW; b. 23 Oct 1923.

⁸ Capt S. A. Ket, VX87771 AIF. Attached 35 Sqn, Air Liaison Section. Solicitor; of Ripponlea, Vic; b. Caulfield, Vic, 15 May 1915. Died from injuries in aircraft accident 3 May 1945.

⁹ LAC T. J. Irvine, 76794. 71, 75, 23, 22 Sqns and 2 Aerodrome Defence Sqn. Furniture remover; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 29 Nov 1907. Killed in action 5 May 1945.

the strip could not be made ready to receive the squadrons of First T.A.F. for some time, and as a result it was necessary for the Thirteenth Air Force to continue to supply air patrols in the Tarakan area.

Air Commodore Cobby established his advanced headquarters ashore, and it became partly operational on 5th May. On the same day, however, he left for Morotai. Air Commodore Scherger, his successor as air officer commanding, arrived at Morotai on 10th May and took over the command. Group Captain Murdoch¹ had already arrived to replace Group Captain Gibson as senior air staff officer, and Group Captain Duncan² arrived soon afterwards to take over the post of senior administrative officer in place of Group Captain Simms.

The Thirteenth Air Force continued to maintain fighters in the Tarakan area until 15th May. The failure to bring the Tarakan airstrip into a serviceable state by the prescribed time, forced Air Vice-Marshal Bostock to change the original plans and Beaufighters of No. 77 Wing and Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron were ordered to move to Sanga Sanga airfield in the Sulu archipelago, from where they were to provide air cover over Tarakan. No. 76 Squadron began carrying out this duty on 16th May when the commanding officer, Squadron Leader Jones, took off at 6 a.m., with Flying Officer Keritz³ in company, to patrol the island. This duty continued daily, except when weather interfered. The main party of No. 76 Squadron, comprising eighty ground staff and the air echelon, had arrived at Sanga Sanga on 15th May. No. 76 Squadron covered the Tarakan area in the morning and the Beaufighters took over the duty in the afternoon. This cover continued until the end of May with little incident. A few shots only were fired at the enemy.

While the Sanga Sanga airfield was serviceable and suitable, space was available there for only a limited number of aircraft and, in order to accommodate more, a detachment of No. 6 Airfield Construction Squadron was moved in from Morotai on 24th May. By 4th June it had extended space for one Kittyhawk squadron and three Beaufighter squadrons. The ground echelons of the Beaufighter squadrons (Nos. 22, 30 and 31), which had gone to Tarakan, were now brought over to Sanga Sanga by barges. The air echelons, which had remained at Morotai, awaiting the completion of the Tarakan airfield, flew in as space became available.

In addition to covering Tarakan, No. 76 Squadron carried out a number of attacks on Sandakan and Kudat. On 27th May thirteen Kittyhawks from the squadron, cooperating with Thirteenth Air Force aircraft and American patrol torpedo boats, helped carry out a minor assault on Sandakan, during which considerable destruction was inflicted.

¹ AVM A. M. Murdoch, CBE, 58. Comd 1 AOS 1940-41, 221 Sqn RAF 1941-42; SASO HQ Eastern Area 1943-44, HQ N-W Area 1944-45, 1 TAF 1945. Regular air force offr; of Elsternwick, Vic; b. Elsternwick, 9 Dec 1912.

² Gp Capt W. J. Duncan, OBE, 270065. Dep Dir Personal Services RAAF HQ 1941; RAAF Liaison Offr Cairo 1941-44; comd RAF Desert Supply Column 1942, RAAF Stn Richmond 1944-45; SAO 1 TAF 1945. Plantation owner; of Rabaul, NG; b. Newcastle, NSW, 4 Apr 1902.

³ Sqn Ldr W. C. Keritz, MBE, 418849; 76 Sqn. Hardware salesman; of Caulfield, Vic; b. Elsternwick, Vic, 6 Dec 1922.

Two Beaufighters encountered Japanese aircraft in the air on 29th May, the first time a Beaufighter had met the enemy in the air for eighteen months. Flight Lieutenants Madigan⁴ and Hewlett,⁵ who were patrolling over north Borneo, saw two Dinahs but although the Beaufighters scored hits with cannon shells the enemy aircraft escaped in the clouds and mountains.

Meanwhile, back at Tarakan, all the skill and energy of the construction squadron men had failed to bring the airfield into an operational state. Fifty points of rain which fell on 10th May had turned the airstrip into a quagmire. On the night of 19th May an enemy 75-mm gun shelled it, damaging an anti-aircraft post but causing no casualties. The engineers continued to work on the strip, but the shelling began again next night, and hardly a night passed without small parties of the enemy appearing on the camp perimeter. The infiltrators were usually armed with grenades, fused shells, and knives, but seldom carried small arms. Lines of fire were cleared around each camp area, and floodlights were used to light them up.

Towards the end of May, enemy aircraft began raiding Tarakan at night, dropping bombs which did not, however, damage Allied installations. A raid was carried out by three or four Jakes on 26th May. Anti-aircraft guns and searchlights engaged the raiders and the gunners claimed they hit one enemy aircraft. On the 28th, a small formation of Jakes was picked up ninety miles from base. They dropped four bombs, but caused no damage.

A large party of the enemy attempted to infiltrate to the airfield on 31st May and at midnight Sergeant Bradshaw,⁶ of No. 1 Airfield Construction Squadron, was killed by a grenade, which also seriously wounded Sergeant Russenberg.⁷ Four Japanese were killed by men of the construction squadrons during this skirmish. Work continued throughout the night, in spite of the interruptions.

Construction of the airstrip was a continual battle against very bad soil conditions, high water table and lack of suitable paving materials. Intelligence had indicated that there was sandstone available, but it had not been found, nor had any other suitable rock. From 6th June only four days without rain were required to allow the completion of formation and mat laying, but there were only two rainless days from 6th to 25th June. Continued wet weather had a depressing effect on the spirits of many of the men and they began to despair of ever completing the job. Aware of the men's despondency, Scherger sent a message praising their efforts and saying that they had achieved much to bring the airstrip to its "present state, under conditions which no engineers have yet had to face in this area".

⁴ F-Lt W. J. Madigan, DFC, 416507; 30 Sqn. Industrial chemist; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 19 Jul 1918.

⁵ F-Lt H. B. Hewlett, 404500; 30 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Darwin; b. Sydney, 31 Aug 1916.

⁶ Sgt K. G. Bradshaw, 8406; 1 Airfield Construction Sqn. Fitter's labourer; of New Town, Tas; b. Hayes, Tas, 4 Sep 1913. Killed in action 31 May 1945.

⁷ Sgt H. H. W. Russenberg, 57506; 8 Airfield Construction Sqn. Radio and electrical serviceman; of Geelong, Vic; b. Wedderburn, Vic, 18 Jan 1910.

Progress on the ground was slow, with the enemy fighting back from entrenched positions. The most determined resistance was encountered near Mt Api and the Juata oilfield. In other areas the Australians met some sharp resistance but made steady progress. Sixteen days after the landing two-thirds of the island was controlled by the 26th Brigade. Vigorous patrolling and harassing fire kept the enemy confined to limited areas. A feature of the attack on enemy strongholds was the accurate bombardment by supporting aircraft, artillery and naval units. The dropping of napalm fire bombs was effective. On one feature, where he had been strongly dug in and offering stubborn resistance, a high-explosive and napalm strike had caused the enemy to abandon his position.

By the evening of 15th June organised resistance had ended, and the enemy survivors retreated to the north and north-east. They were hunted by patrols and many were captured or killed when attempting to leave Tarakan on improvised rafts. By 31st July 1,540 Japanese dead had been counted and an additional 235 were believed to have been killed. The cost to the Australian forces was considerable. The killed totalled 225, and the wounded 629, while more than 1,000 had been evacuated as a result of illness.

Throughout the early phase of the Tarakan operation, by far the greatest proportion of First T.A.F. combat strength remained at Morotai, where it could do nothing to contribute to the success of the operation. The failure to develop an airfield was the cause. Since the operation was undertaken primarily for the purpose of establishing an airfield for use against other points in the Netherlands East Indies, Tarakan must be regarded as a failure. The fault was partly due to incorrect intelligence concerning the possibilities of developing an airfield in such a place.

Scherger, commenting on the Tarakan operation after the war, said: "It is perhaps true that OBOE 1 was a failure on the part of the R.A.A.F., but one must qualify this by saying that the task set was impossible of achievement by any air force; against this it is equally true to say that we continued to base our plans for air support of OBOES 6 (Labuan-Brunei Bay) and 2 (Balikpapan) on the operation of attack and fighter types from Tarakan, and it was quite obvious (at least to myself and those of my staff who visited there) that a satisfactory strip could never be constructed, nor indeed could a strip be made, capable of intensive use for even a short period."