

## CHAPTER 26

### AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST AMPHIBIOUS ATTACK— BALIKPAPAN

AT midnight on 23rd January 1942 thirteen Japanese transports, “silhouetted from seaward against the flare and glow from the burning oilfields on shore”, anchored off Balikpapan on the south-east coast of Borneo. Three hours later they were attacked with torpedoes and gunfire by the four American destroyers, *John D. Ford*, *Pope*, *Parrott* and *Paul Jones*, in the first American surface action in the Pacific campaign of the Second World War; “indeed, the first undertaken by the United States Navy since 1898”. Four of the Japanese transports were sunk, but the American attack failed to check the Japanese progress in Borneo. At dawn on 24th January they began landing at Balikpapan. “No opposition was encountered on shore, and on the 28th of the month the 23rd Air Flotilla was established on the airfields there.”<sup>1</sup>

About 7 a.m. on Sunday, 1st July 1945, the Allied assault echelon of nearly 150 ships, including the Australian L.S.I's *Manoora*, *Kanimbla* and *Westralia*, arrived at Balikpapan in the final amphibious operation of the war in the Pacific. As was so three and a half years earlier, there was the “flare and glow from the burning oilfields on shore”. “0713 Oil fire observed ashore bearing 324 degrees T. 0715 Second oil fire observed ashore bearing 318 degrees T.”<sup>2</sup> But now the tide of war had changed and was running at full flood for the Allies. There were no Japanese naval forces to contest their invasion and two hours later the first of the Australian soldiers of the 7th Division landed.

The last amphibious assault necessary to recapture the key points on the island of Borneo, and the last of the Second World War, the Balikpapan operation—OBOE TWO—was ordered for the purpose of seizing and occupying the area in order to establish naval, air and logistic facilities, and to conserve the petroleum producing and processing installations there.

Balikpapan, with an output of some 15,000,000 barrels a year was, after Palembang in Sumatra, the most productive oil port in east Asia. On the south-east coast of Borneo on Macassar Strait, approximately the same distance (220 miles) from the southernmost point of the island as Tarakan was from the northernmost, Balikpapan lay on the south-western shore of a peninsula forming the eastern side of Balikpapan Bay, a deep estuary of several rivers. From the extremity of the peninsula, on the southern tip of which the European suburb of Klandasan faced the open sea, the coast ran in a gentle curve north-east. On the narrow coastal plain some seven miles east of the peninsula's tip was the town of Sepinggang, and six miles farther to the north-east, that of Manggar. There

<sup>1</sup> *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, pp. 534-5.

<sup>2</sup> CTG.78.2 Action Report.

was an airfield at Sepinggang, and two at Manggar. The country was open around Balikpapan, with hills rising from the coastal plain to about 700 feet. Farther inland the jungle began.

F-day, as that of the Balikpapan assault was designated, was set as 1st July 1945, by Operation Instructions 103/45 issued by G.H.Q., S.W.P.A. Vice-Admiral Barbey, Commander VII Amphibious Force, was designated Commander Balikpapan Attack Force. Preliminary naval planning for the operation began early in May, when Commander Amphibious Group Eight, Seventh Fleet, Rear-Admiral Noble, was assigned Commander Balikpapan Attack Group, as Commander Task Group 78.2. Rear-Admiral R. S. Riggs, U.S.N., was appointed Commander Cruiser Covering Group as Commander Task Group 74.2. The troops for the operation were the 7th Division, I Australian Corps, at Morotai, commanded by Major-General Milford.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile army planning, after considering three possible landing places—Manggar, Sepinggang and Klandasan—had fixed upon Klandasan as the most suitable, despite some obvious disadvantages. These were the shallowness of the water and the strength of the Japanese defences. They were, in the opinion of General Milford and his brigade commanders, offset by a number of factors, including:

- (a) A successful assault against the strongest positions would considerably reduce the duration of the campaign and it was thereby hoped that casualties, which reach their highest in a long drawn out campaign which becomes a war of attrition, would be substantially reduced;
- (b) The greatest fire support is required to overcome the position of greatest strength and this condition would be fulfilled on Fox Day;
- (c) By attacking the centre of the enemy's defences some degree of disorganisation should result which might continue for some days if the attack were pressed with vigour. Japanese reaction is generally slow and it was hoped to capture the vital ground commanding the harbour before he recovered from the initial bombardment;
- (d) The early capture of Balikpapan Bay would ease the problem of supply over the beach and would be a safeguard against unfavourable weather;
- (e) A higher degree of concentration of both fire power and man power could be effected;
- (f) The full power of the force would be quickly deployed as opposed to the narrow front imposed by a coastwise advance;
- (g) Defences between Balikpapan and Manggar were sited to face the east and could more readily be overcome by an advance from the west;
- (h) Fewer engineering tasks of bridging and communications would be met on the vital first day;
- (i) The location of defences suggested that the enemy considered a landing at Klandasan would be too hazardous an undertaking and that tactical surprise (strategic surprise was not possible with the preliminary bombardment and minesweeping) might be achieved.<sup>4</sup>

The army decision was questioned by the United States naval planning team when it arrived at Morotai on 25th May. They preferred a landing

<sup>3</sup> Maj-Gen E. J. Milford, CB, CBE, DSO. CRA 7 Div 1940; MGO AHQ 1941-42; GOC 5 Div 1942-44, 7 Div 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 10 Dec 1894.

<sup>4</sup> 7 Aust Div Report on Operation Oboe Two.

at Sepinggang, or farther east, because of deeper water and weaker Japanese defences. Admiral Noble submitted a paper to General Morshead expressing the naval views, but Morshead, looking ahead to military operations on shore following the landing, ruled in favour of Milford's plan, and finally the naval team agreed to put the division ashore wherever it wished.<sup>5</sup>

The amphibious operation for the capture of Balikpapan was notable for the active and passive defences of the enemy, and the hazard of a thickly sown Allied minefield. It was notable also for the minesweeping work done, for the fine achievement of the Underwater Demolition Teams, and for the weight of the pre-landing bombardments. Before F-day, 23,767 rounds of 4.7-inch to 8-inch were fired; on F-day 11,884 rounds; and through to 7th July a further 11,158 rounds. And some 114,000 rounds of 20-mm and 40-mm were fired from automatic weapons.<sup>6</sup> "For ammunition delivered in support of a one-division landing, this beats all records. The United States Army had been calling for more and more naval gunfire support as the Pacific war progressed; now the 7th Australian Division had cashed in on these accumulated demands—and how those Aussies loved it."<sup>7</sup>

The port of Balikpapan, with its seven piers, could be entered by larger vessels only at high tide because of a sand bar, with a depth of less than four fathoms at low water, blocking the entrance. The three beaches selected for the landing—Red, Yellow and Green—were just to the east of the bay. They provided only mediocre conditions for landing craft. To seaward the beaches along some fifteen miles of coast from Klandasan to Manggar were protected by a log barricade. At the Klandasan beach area this consisted of three lines of heavy wooden posts, set five feet apart, with five feet intervals between verticals. The centre line was offset, and the posts were braced at the top with spiked double diagonal timbers. Apparently so placed to coincide with the surf line, the barricade was only about 10 to 15 yards off shore, and was thus within easy range of shore gunfire and Japanese snipers.

The beaches were well covered by many automatic weapons mounted in log and earth emplacements, and heavier installations were on higher ground farther inland. Only 100 yards or so from the landing beaches ran the coastal highway, and 400 yards farther inland was the pipeline from the oilfields to the refinery at Balikpapan. Captured documents substantiated Intelligence reports that the Japanese intended to flood oil into streams and ditches and ignite it to serve as a barrier. But this plan was never implemented, probably because the pipeline was broken. In

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<sup>5</sup> Noble, who had been naval commander at the operation for the liberation of Mindanao, from which he was released on 17th May, flew on that day to Manila for a conference with Barbey and returned in his Flagship *Wasatch* on 20th May. The coastguard cutter *Spencer* with the advance planning team from Davao arrived at Morotai on 25th May and the team commenced active planning with the army. After conferences with Commander Seventh Fleet, Commander Service Force, Seventh Fleet, Commander Motor Torpedo Boats, Seventh Fleet, and the Thirteenth Army Air Force in the Leyte area, Noble and his staff arrived at Morotai in *Wasatch* on 28th May, and immediately commenced detailed planning for the Balikpapan assault.

<sup>6</sup> CTG.78.2 Action Report.

<sup>7</sup> Morison, Vol XIII, p. 276.

addition to the foregoing obstacles to the landing was that of the mine-fields. These, which included magnetic mines, had been laid by the Dutch in 1941, by the Japanese, and by the Allies with mines dropped from aircraft. Their clearance called for sixteen days of sweeping before F-day.

Balikpapan was defended by some 3,500 regular Japanese troops, and there were apparently about 6,500 locally conscripted residents. It was reported that they had been withdrawing men from Balikpapan for some weeks before the assault, with the army personnel moving north to Samarinda and thence overland to Pontianak and Kuching, and the navy going south to Bandjermasin. At the time of the assault there were 5,000 enemy at Samarinda, 60 miles north of Balikpapan, of whom 3,000 were locally conscripted Japanese. No naval interference with the assault was expected, and none materialised. It was expected that the enemy's air attacks would be limited to sporadic raids by small flights of aircraft, and this proved to be so. Four such raids were experienced, with negligible results.

Air support for the operations was supplied by the R.A.A.F., Thirteenth Air Force, Fifth Air Force, Fleet Air Wing Ten under Commander Air Seventh Fleet, and Commander Third Fleet. The R.A.A.F. acted as co-ordinating agency for all pre-invasion strikes and close support. The original air plan was drawn up on the assumption that the R.A.A.F. could support the operation from Tarakan, but facilities there were not available in time. Because of this, Admiral Noble requested carrier support, and three escort carriers were provided by Third Fleet to support the operation during the actual landing and consolidation of the beach-head.

Naval bombardment forces used in the operation were the Cruiser Covering Group (74.2) of five cruisers and seven destroyers, including H.M.A.S. *Arunta*; 74.1, of *Shropshire*, *Hobart* and the two American destroyers *Hart* and *Metcalf*; and 74.3, of two cruisers and four destroyers. The Attack Group (78.2) of 121 ships, including H.M.A. Ships *Manoora* (Flagship of the Transport Unit), *Westralia* and *Kanimbla*, comprised 98 landing craft and miscellaneous vessels, with a screen of 10 destroyers, five destroyer-escorts and one frigate, H.M.A.S. *Gascoyne*. In addition there were a Hydrographic Unit, H.M.A.S. *Warrego* and two small craft; a Minesweeping Group; a Motor Torpedo Unit of 23 P.T's; a Demolition Unit; service, salvage and miscellaneous units; and the Escort Carrier Group (commanded by Rear-Admiral W. D. Sample), U.S. Ships *Suwannee*, *Gilbert Islands* and *Block Island*,<sup>8</sup> with a screen of one destroyer and five destroyer-escorts.

Active preparations for the OBOE Two assault began on 11th June with the start of increased bombing of the objective. This quickly mounted to air strikes of approximately 100 planes a day, carrying 1,000-lb, 500-lb, 250-lb and Napalm bombs. Also on 11th June the Minesweeping Group sailed from Morotai to rendezvous with Cruiser Division 12, U.S. Ships

<sup>8</sup> *Gilbert Islands*, *Block Island*, US aircraft carriers (1944), 11,373 tons, two 5-in guns, 30 aircraft, 19 kts.

*Montpelier* and *Denver* and four destroyers of TG.74.2, and proceed to Balikpapan. Three days after the air "softening" got under way, *Manoora*, *Westralia* and *Kanimbla* arrived at Morotai from Brunei. As an officer of *Westralia* wrote:

After over two years active duty in combined operations, we had become fairly adept at predicting the next move from evidence around us. While resting at Morotai in the middle of June 1945 after the Brunei operation we saw the Liberators returning every day from missions over Borneo's largest oil producing centre. When Tokyo Radio announced that a powerful Allied Fleet was bombarding Balikpapan we knew we were going to invade it, even before officers of the 7th Division came on board on Tuesday, 19th June, and told us.<sup>9</sup>

The Tokyo Radio announcement followed the start of minesweeping operations at Balikpapan on 15th June, when the 16 minesweepers of the minesweeping group, with the covering force, arrived at the objective. Because of the shallow water and the uncleared minefields, *Montpelier* and *Denver* and the destroyers had to remain at ranges where the neutralisation or destruction of the Japanese guns was difficult, and heavy enemy anti-aircraft fire forced Allied bombers and the cruisers' spotting aircraft to remain too high for the desired accuracy. As a result, during the first week of minesweeping, three minesweepers were damaged by enemy gunfire, and many were forced to jettison their sweeps to avoid being hit. By 24th June, however, by which time the Dutch cruiser *Tromp* and the American *Columbia* (also of 74.2) had reached Balikpapan and added their weight of gunfire, the aerial bombing and cruiser fire were making themselves felt; the spotting aircraft had improved their contribution; and enough sweeping had been done to enable destroyers to operate closer inshore. From then on minesweeping was only slightly hampered by gunfire, but mines took toll of the sweepers.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile more Australian ships were arriving at Morotai in preparation for the assault. *Warrego*, fresh from her bombardments in the Wewak area, reached Morotai on the 17th, where Commander Little joined as Commander, Hydrographic Group (CTU.78.2.17) of which the two other vessels were *YMS196*<sup>1</sup> and the American net layer *Mango* (560 tons). On 23rd June *Gascoyne* arrived, having refitted at Williamstown Dockyard, whence she sailed on 1st June. On 24th June TG.74.1, *Shropshire*, *Hobart*, *Arunta* (which had joined from the Cruiser Covering Group) and the two American destroyers, arrived at Tawitawi from Brunei.

At Morotai embarkation of troops proceeded. *Kanimbla* commenced embarking her main body at 5 p.m. on 20th June, and embarked in all 115 officers and 1,152 other ranks, including the 2/9th Battalion, and a total weight of cargo (including vehicles and guns) of 361 tons.

<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant W. N. Swan in account of the Allied landing at Balikpapan—"Our Seventh Invasion".

<sup>10</sup> In all, in the period 15th June to 7th July, three sweepers were sunk and one damaged by mines; three were damaged by gunfire; 15 sets of magnetic gear were lost; the sweepers suffered seven killed and 43 wounded; and 50 mines were swept—34 moored, 16 influence.

<sup>1</sup> *YMS196*, US motor minesweeper (1942-45), 207 tons, one 3-in gun, 13 kts.

*Westralia*'s main body was of the 2/27th Battalion, but Lieutenant Swan<sup>2</sup> recorded:

The 85 officers and 885 men of the 7th Division embarked in *Westralia* belonged to nearly 50 different units. There were men from the Royal Australian Artillery, the Royal Australian Engineers, the 2/6th and 2/11th Australian Field Companies, the 2nd Australian Beach Group, the 2nd A.A.M.C., the 2/2nd Australian Anti-Tank Regiment, the 2/7th Australian Cavalry Commando Regiment, the 2/42nd Australian Cypher Section, the 2/1st Australian Machine Gun Battalion, the 2/1st Australian Guard Regiment, the 2/6th Australian Field Ambulance, the 2/12th Australian General Hospital, the 2/1st Australian A.A. Regiment, the A.A.S.C., and many other units such as cash, postal, and provost sections. In addition were some men of the R.A.A.F. attached to the Command Post 1st Tactical Air Force Reconnaissance Party and the 1st Tactical Air Force Support Section.<sup>3</sup>

On Sunday, 24th June, the Attack Group (78.2) carried out a rehearsal of the landing on a beach near Tanjong Mira, Morotai, and returned to Morotai. At Balikpapan, the underwater demolition teams started work on 25th June, and during their operations from the 25th-28th and on the 30th, they blew a gap of 1,600 yards in the obstacles at Klandasan, and of 800 yards at Manggar. Searches revealed no beach mines. They were continuously under fire, and two of their landing craft were damaged, but in an extremely hazardous operation they suffered no casualties. Swan, in *Westralia*, told of them:

Some U.S. Army engineers from Okinawa were selected to carry out this demolition, and the story of how they did it will go down in the annals of courage. Firstly they swam ashore from little ships and inspected the barrier. Then they gained experience by blowing gaps in the barrier at Manggar. This threw the Japanese off the scent. Several days before we arrived these intrepid men swam ashore in the forenoon and demolished nearly all the barricade along the Klandasan beaches with explosives. No small arms fire greeted them; but the enemy's three-inch coastal guns opened fire at them. By the eve of the landing the posts were no longer standing, and all the troops knew.

## II

On 25th June Vice-Admiral Barbey arrived at Morotai and raised his flag in *Phoenix* as Commander Balikpapan Attack Force, but gave Admiral Noble tactical command of the operation. *Phoenix* left Morotai ahead of the Attack Force and on 29th June joined Admiral Sample's Carrier Group. Rear-Admiral Berkeley, in *Nashville*, also joined the C.V.E's (escort aircraft carriers). At 1.30 a.m. on 26th June TG.74.1, *Shropshire* wearing the broad pendant of Commodore Farncomb, with *Hobart*, *Hart*, *Metcalf* and *Arunta*, sailed from Tawitawi for Balikpapan, where they arrived on the 27th. Also on the 26th the Attack Force sailed from Morotai. At 9 a.m. the Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces, General Blamey,

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Cdr W. N. Swan, RANR and RAN. HMAS's *Doomba*, *Adelaide*, *Westralia*. Merchant navy officer; of Melbourne; b. Sydney, 18 Dec 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Gavin Long comments in *The Final Campaigns* on "the multitude of specialist units and detachments which existed at this stage of the war". The Order of Battle of the 7th Division and its supporting forces contained the names of 247 headquarters, units or detachments. (See pp. 506-7.)

with General Morshead, General Milford and Admiral Noble, inspected the troops embarked in *Manoora*, *Kanimbla* and *Westralia*. Soon after noon the assault forces began their sortie from Morotai, and at 2 p.m. this was completed and the force formed cruising disposition and proceeded. The passage, which was uneventful, was by the direct route through the Celebes Sea and down through Macassar Strait, at an average speed of 7 to 8 knots. *Warrego* was one of the convoy. The other Australian ship in the operation, *Gascoyne* (Lieutenant Peel) left Morotai at 6.45 a.m. on 27th June escorting Echelon 02-J to Balikpapan. The group comprised a mixed collection of craft towing barges, a P.T. drydock, and a floating crane, and the Australian steamer *James Cook*. Speed was in the vicinity of 3 to 4 knots.

Whilst these slower groups were occupied in what Peel described in his report as this "seemingly interminable passage to Balikpapan", Farncomb's TG.74.1 pushed ahead at 14 knots and anchored at Balikpapan soon after noon on the 27th. That afternoon *Shropshire* and *Hobart* carried out bombardments of targets in the Klandasan area, whilst the destroyers formed an A/S screen. This procedure was followed each day up to F-day, the bombardment forces and their screening destroyers retiring to sea each night. On the 28th and 30th *Hobart* provided fire cover for the underwater demolition teams, and a typical entry in her report was, on the 28th: "0845 UDT's going into beach. 1020 UDT's under fire. Increased rate of fire. 10.45 UDT's withdrawing from beach. 10.58 Reduced rate of fire to one round each two minutes. 11.35 Ammunition in dump seen to blow up as result of our fire."

On Saturday, 30th June, the Attack Force crossed the equator. "Church services were held on board. Everyone made last minute preparations. . . . The ship's crew wore their battle dress and lifebelts, and were all eager to land the Seventh," wrote Swan in *Westralia*. The O.C. Troops, Lieutenant-Colonel Picken,<sup>4</sup> issued the troops with seasick tablets. At 6 p.m. on the 30th light cruiser U.S.S. *Cleveland*<sup>5</sup> (of TG.74.2) with two destroyers escorting, arrived at Balikpapan with the Commander-in-Chief South-West Pacific, General MacArthur, embarked. Early on the Sunday morning, 1st July and F-day, those in the ships of the Attack Force caught their first glimpse of the objective in "a large fire burning on our starboard bow".

*Manoora's* troops were to land at Green Beach and the orders for that Sunday morning were:

0315 Call the Morning Watch. 0330 Morning Watchmen to breakfast. Call all personnel. 0400 All personnel to breakfast. Morning Watchmen to cruising stations. 0500 Action Stations. 0520 Recover paravanes if streamed. 0630 Synchronise watches—first time. 0635 Operational Action Stations. 0645 Prepare all boats for lowering. Lower all scrambling nets. Synchronise watches—second time. 0700 Anchor. . . . Away all boats.

<sup>4</sup> Lt-Col K. S. Picken, DSO. 2/6 and 2/7 Bns; CO 2/27 Bn 1943-45. Clerk; of East Geelong, Vic; b. Warragul, Vic, 20 Oct 1907.

<sup>5</sup> *Cleveland*, US light cruiser (1942), 10,000 tons, twelve 6-in and twelve 5-in guns, 3 aircraft, 32½ kts.

The scheduled bombardments by cruisers and destroyers of the Cruiser Covering Group, TG.74.1 and TG.74.2, commenced at 7 a.m., and Commander Green, R.A.N. liaison officer with VII Amphibious Force, recorded that "to the immense pall of smoke that already shrouded the foreshore was added the additional haze from innumerable fires and explosions". To the naval bombardment was added the aerial contribution from Liberator aircraft, with Australian and American crews.

Weather conditions for embarking troops and for their passage to shore in landing craft were not the best, there being a fresh breeze and a moderate swell. "A choppy sea," recorded Swan, "caused Lieut-Colonel Picken to feel thankful he had issued his men with seasick tablets the previous day." But the length of experience of the crews of the Australian landing ships and the rehearsal that had been carried out paid dividends, and the troops were landed on time without any unhappy incidents.

*Westralia* anchored "about seven-and-a-half miles south-east of the centre of Balikpapan city and six miles off shore. The sun rose at 7.15 and revealed a battered shore line covered by a heavy pall of smoke from fires caused by our bombs. Oil tanks in the tank farm were alight."

The first two waves of troops on all three beaches rode in on 91 amphibious vehicles (L.V.T's) brought to the landing in L.S.T's. Boats from *Westralia* were in the third, fourth and fifth waves. The first wave from *Manoora* found the swept channel "clearly defined with marker buoys; an excellent piece of work on the part of the survey vessels and minesweepers".<sup>6</sup> On its way in to the landing the wave received "unwelcome and for some minutes undivided attention from a 3-in shore gun, the projectiles from which landed uncomfortably close on both sides of the boats in column; fortunately no casualties resulted".

*Kanimbla* anchored at 7.9 a.m., and all her boat waves arrived on the line of departure, and beached at the correct time. Conditions on the beach—it was approximately high water—were favourable and no boats experienced any difficulty in retracting. All *Kanimbla's* troops were off the ship at 4 p.m., and all cargo unloaded at 4.23 p.m. Working time to unload guns and vehicles was two hours 41 minutes. "During the period the troops were on board," says the ship's report, "their conduct and behaviour was exemplary."

The first wave of assault troops landed at 8.55 a.m., five minutes early. At 9.3 a.m. the third wave landed, and reported no opposition to troops on beaches other than intermittent gun and mortar fire, which had caused no casualties. The last of the organised waves, the seventeenth, landed at 10.55.

The pre-F-day and pre-landing bombardments had prepared the way for the assault troops most efficiently. Commenting on this, Commander Green, who landed with the first wave from *Manoora*, remarked in his report:

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<sup>6</sup> Report of Wave Leader (Wave 7), first wave from *Manoora*—Lieutenant L. J. H. Cantwell.



An examination of the terrain in the vicinity of all three beaches revealed a scene of desolation that was an admirable tribute to the efficiency of our pre-landing naval bombardment and air force strikes. Dwellings which might at one time have housed snipers were either smouldering ruins or reduced to matchwood and rubble. The rockets had produced the most successful destruction of trees that I have witnessed in the landings in which I have participated. It would be no exaggeration to say that not a single tree or palm remained unscathed, and from the beach to the parallel road there was literally no arboreal cover for a sniper. Two dazed Japs were found in a concrete pill box, but for the initial 500-yard advance inland only eight more Japs were found. The foreshore was exceptionally well provided with concrete machine-gun posts and strong points, some of them so thick that direct hits from six-inch shells had not damaged them in the slightest degree.

By 11 a.m. the attackers had advanced inland about 1,000 yards against very slight opposition and with light casualties. At 11.30 General MacArthur, with Vice-Admiral Barbey, General Morshead and Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, went ashore to inspect positions. At noon troops were reported about two miles inland; and before the day ended, 10,500 assault troops, 700 vehicles and 1,950 tons of stores were landed, over very mediocre beaches, with surf three to four feet high which impeded unloading. As at the previous Borneo landings, excellent work was done by the Naval Beach Commandos, here, as at Tarakan, under the command of Lieut-Commander Morris. Major-General Milford assumed command on shore at 7 p.m., half an hour before the three Australian L.S.I's sailed for Morotai in Convoy O2-T. *Kanimbla's* report states that all boats were hoisted by 7.20 p.m. At 7.24 anchor was aweigh, and at 7.30 *Kanimbla* formed cruising disposition, the ships in company being *Manoora*, *Kanimbla*, *Westralia*, *Titania*, *Carter Hall*, escorted by the American destroyer transports *Alex Diachenko* (1,400 tons), *Liddle* and *Lloyd*.

Throughout the day the Australian ships of the Support Group, in company with their American consorts, supplied scheduled bombardments and call fire as required, and this continued on successive days after F-day, though the strength of the group was progressively reduced. On 2nd July CruDiv12 of TG.74.2, *Montpelier*, *Denver* and four destroyers left Balikpapan for Leyte. Next day Admiral Sample's Escort Carrier Group departed to rejoin Third Fleet, and TG.74.3, *Phoenix*, *Nashville* and destroyers joined the Support Group temporarily, replacing TG.74.1, *Shropshire*, *Hobart*, *Arunta* and the two American destroyers *Albert W. Grant* and *Killen*, which sailed for Tawitawi to replenish with ammunition.

Of the other Australian ships in the assault phase, *Warrego* carried out surveys and placed marker buoys off the landing beaches, and also surveyed the inner harbour. *Gascoyne* pursued her "seemingly interminable" passage with the slow-tow convoy, and finally arrived at Balikpapan in the evening of 5th July. On that day *Shropshire*, with the two American destroyers, left Tawitawi to return to Balikpapan, where they arrived at 8 a.m. on the 7th. Since replenishment ammunition was not available for them, *Hobart* and *Arunta* remained at Tawitawi. On Farncomb's

return to Balikpapan, he assumed the duties of Senior Officer of fire support ships vice Rear-Admiral Berkey who, with Task Group 74.3—*Nashville*, *Phoenix*, *Bell*, *Conner* and *Burns*—sailed for Subic Bay. The U.S. destroyer *Charrette* reported to Farncomb for fire support duty.

On the 7th there also arrived at Balikpapan from Morotai the three Australian L.S.I's, *Manoora*, *Kanimbla* and *Westralia*, with reinforcements. They disembarked their troops and equipment, and sailed that same afternoon for Morotai, thus completing their final assault operation together as part of VII Amphibious Force. On their arrival at Morotai on Tuesday, 10th July, they were allotted individual missions as troop transports, and at the end of the month the three ships were transferred from the operational command of Commander, VII Amphibious Force, to that of Commander Service Force, Seventh Fleet. It was the end of a combination which had made a notable contribution to the successful conduct of the war in the South-West Pacific Area.

On the 8th and 9th July *Shropshire* carried out bombardments as targets were found by air spotting. Few targets, however, were available for her, and this lack was commented upon unfavourably by Farncomb, who, in his Action Report, said:

The few targets allocated to H.M.A.S. *Shropshire*, the long delays and poor co-ordination experienced indicated that the officers concerned in the Division were not fully indoctrinated in the effective use of heavy Naval gunfire. This was in sharp contrast to the good use made of Naval Gunfire Support by the Ninth Division during the amphibious operations at Tarakan and Brunei Bay.

The extract from the report was forwarded in August 1945 by the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton,<sup>7</sup> to the Chief of the General Staff. Commenting thereon from Advanced Headquarters, Morotai, in October 1945 the Chief of Staff, Advanced L.H.Q., Lieutenant-General Berryman,<sup>8</sup> remarked:

It appears from the above reports [from Headquarters R.A.A., 7th Australian Division and 1st Australian Naval Bombardment Group] that every provision was made for spotting during the period in question; every effort was made to obtain, for H.M.A.S. *Shropshire*, targets which were suitable for heavy naval gunfire; the only delays seemed to have been caused, not by poor co-ordination, but by the difficulty of the spotters in finding suitable targets. The comments of the Commodore Commanding H.M.A. Squadron and the statements by 1 Aust Naval Bombardment Gp. clearly indicate a difference of opinion as to the best employment of the heavier natures of naval guns in supporting a landing. It appears there were in fact few suitable land targets for engagement by *Shropshire* and the judgment of SFCP [Shore Fire Control Party] is to be commended for not wasting naval ammunition on unsuitable targets.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton, KCB, DSO; RN. Home Fleet 1939-43; Vice-Admiral Malta and Flag Officer Central Mediterranean 1943-45; First Naval Member and Chief of Aust Naval Staff 1945-48. B. London, 31 Dec 1890. Died 22 Jun 1957. He assumed duty as First Naval Member and CNS on 29th June 1945 vice Admiral Royle. The appointment carried with it the command of the South-West Pacific Sea Frontier.

<sup>8</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Frank Berryman, KCVO, CB, CBE, DSO, GSO1 6 Div 1940-41; CRA 7 Div 1941; Deputy CGS LHQ 1942-44; comd II and I Corps during 1944; Chief of Staff Adv LHQ 1944-45. Regular soldier; b. Geelong, Vic, 11 Apr 1894.

Nevertheless, *Shropshire's* bombardments on the 8th and 9th were not, apparently, fruitless, and were of help on the 9th in the subjugation of the Frost and Brown features, the sites of the remaining Japanese artillery in the Manggar area. It was the capture of these two features at dusk on the 9th which meant that "the long fight round Manggar was over".<sup>9</sup>

*Shropshire*, which commenced her 8-inch bombardments of the enemy positions at 1 p.m. on the 9th, ceased bombarding at 6 p.m., and just after 7 p.m. weighed and proceeded, in company with U.S. destroyers *Charrette*, *Albert W. Grant* and *Killen*, to Tawitawi, "having completed participation in Balikpapan operations". With this completion *Shropshire*, in common with the other ships of the R.A.N. Squadron, completed her hostile operations in the war.

She arrived at Subic Bay from Tawitawi on 14th July and on the 19th left for Manila, where she arrived the same day. There she joined company with H.M.A.S. *Warramunga*, in which ship Commodore Collins, now recovered from the injuries he had suffered in H.M.A.S. *Australia* at Leyte in October 1944, had taken passage from Sydney. At 8 a.m. on 22nd July, in Manila, the broad pendant of Commodore Collins was hoisted in *Warramunga*. That of Commodore Farncomb was struck in *Shropshire* at sunset that day, and at the same time the broad pendant of Commodore Collins was transferred to the cruiser from *Warramunga*. On 23rd July Commodore Farncomb, his wartime service in command of the squadron completed, left by air for Sydney. That day *Shropshire* and *Warramunga* sailed to join CTF.74 (Rear-Admiral R. F. Good, U.S.N. in *San Francisco*) with the rest of the Task Force, including H.M.A. Ships *Hobart* and *Bataan* (Commander Burrell)—the latest Tribal-class destroyer to be commissioned in the Royal Australian Navy. At 5 p.m. on 26th July TF.74 entered Subic Bay. The R.A.N. Squadron, *Shropshire*, *Hobart*, *Warramunga* and *Bataan*, were still with TF.74 in Subic Bay when Japan surrendered on 15th August. *Arunta*, which had been detached from the Squadron on 11th July to proceed to Australia for refit, was in Sydney.

### III

Meanwhile in Balikpapan the R.A.N. was represented by the smaller ships. *Warrego* remained there, continuing survey work, sounding and buoying. On 12th July Commander Little piloted the Liberty ship *Julien Dubuque* in to the inner harbour, where she was successfully berthed, the first large ship to make the entry. On 16th July, having completed buoyage and sounding, *Warrego* sailed at 6 p.m. for Sydney via Morotai. She reached Sydney on 31st July and, like *Arunta*, was there when Japan surrendered.

*Gascoyne*, on her arrival at Balikpapan on 6th July, joined a patrol being carried out by American destroyers and destroyer-escorts patrolling in a semi-circle around the transport area. Some of *Gascoyne's* officers

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<sup>9</sup> Long, *The Final Campaigns*, pp. 529-30.

were driven around Balikpapan on 13th July, and Commander Peel commented that "the damage to the refineries and houses is indescribable in its completeness. The smell was not pleasant!" He remarked also in his Report of Proceedings:

The system of air raid warnings amongst the soldiery is still a little crude, and consists of a man leaning out of the R.A.A.F. Radar station and yelling to the camp below "Put your b - - - lights out." This is passed along the foreshore. Unfortunately, on one occasion the R.A.A.F. man called out "Is the b - - - tea wet yet?" and all lights were dowsed.

On 21st July H.M.A.S. *Latrobe* (Lieutenant Smith<sup>1</sup>) arrived at Balikpapan, and it was arranged that Australian corvettes should assume responsibility for the naval defence requirements of the port, and arrangements were made with N.O.I.C. Moluccas, Captain Walsh, accordingly. On 22nd July all American destroyers and destroyer-escorts left Balikpapan, and on the 23rd H.M.A.S. *Stawell* (Lieut-Commander Griffith) arrived and took over the duties of senior Australian ship, she and *Latrobe* between them carrying out the duties of guard ship.

It fell to *Gascoyne* to carry out the last of the naval bombardments in the Balikpapan area. On 26th July she proceeded up the Balikpapan River and, in support of a military force designated Buckforce, carried out indirect bombardments of Japanese-held villages, and troop concentration areas. The first series of shoots, under the direction of an Auster spotting aircraft, took place at the village of Pamaluan. The ship fired 168 rounds of 4-inch, all reported in the target area. Due to danger from anti-aircraft fire, Boomerang aircraft were used to spot for the next shoot, on a troop concentration area between the Semoi and Sepaku Rivers. The aircraft had difficulty in seeing the fall of shot, but Major Pelton,<sup>2</sup> the Bombardment Liaison Officer in *Gascoyne*, was satisfied that the area was well covered with the 49 rounds of 4-inch fired.

*Gascoyne*, at the request of the Commanding Officer of the 2/1st Pioneer Battalion, then moved farther up the river with her armed motor boat sounding ahead and landed a military patrol to inspect the village of Mentawir. This successfully carried out, *Gascoyne* bombarded with Bofors fire an area where patrols had reported Japanese and a probable machine-gun post. It was her last action against the Japanese. On Sunday, 29th July, she escorted a convoy to sea and herself proceeded to Morotai. By the end of the month, against enemy resistance described as "desperate", the 7th Division had established a perimeter including the Sambodja oilfields, 28 miles from Balikpapan.

As is remarked in *The Final Campaigns*, "the Balikpapan operation—the largest amphibious attack carried out by Australian troops—succeeded fairly swiftly". But "the Japanese, who were in well-prepared positions

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Cdr W. A. Smith, RANVR. Served RN 1940-44; comd HMAS *Latrobe* 1944-46. Of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 2 Mar 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Maj G. B. Pelton. 2/4 Fd Regt; 1 Aust Naval Bombardment Group. Insurance clerk; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 29 Dec 1913.

and well-equipped with guns and mortars, resisted with their usual fortitude and paid more than seven lives for each Australian life they took. Once again they demonstrated how a force of resolute men well dug in could delay a stronger force far more formidably armed.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Long, pp. 546-7.