

CHAPTER 19

AMBON AND AFTER

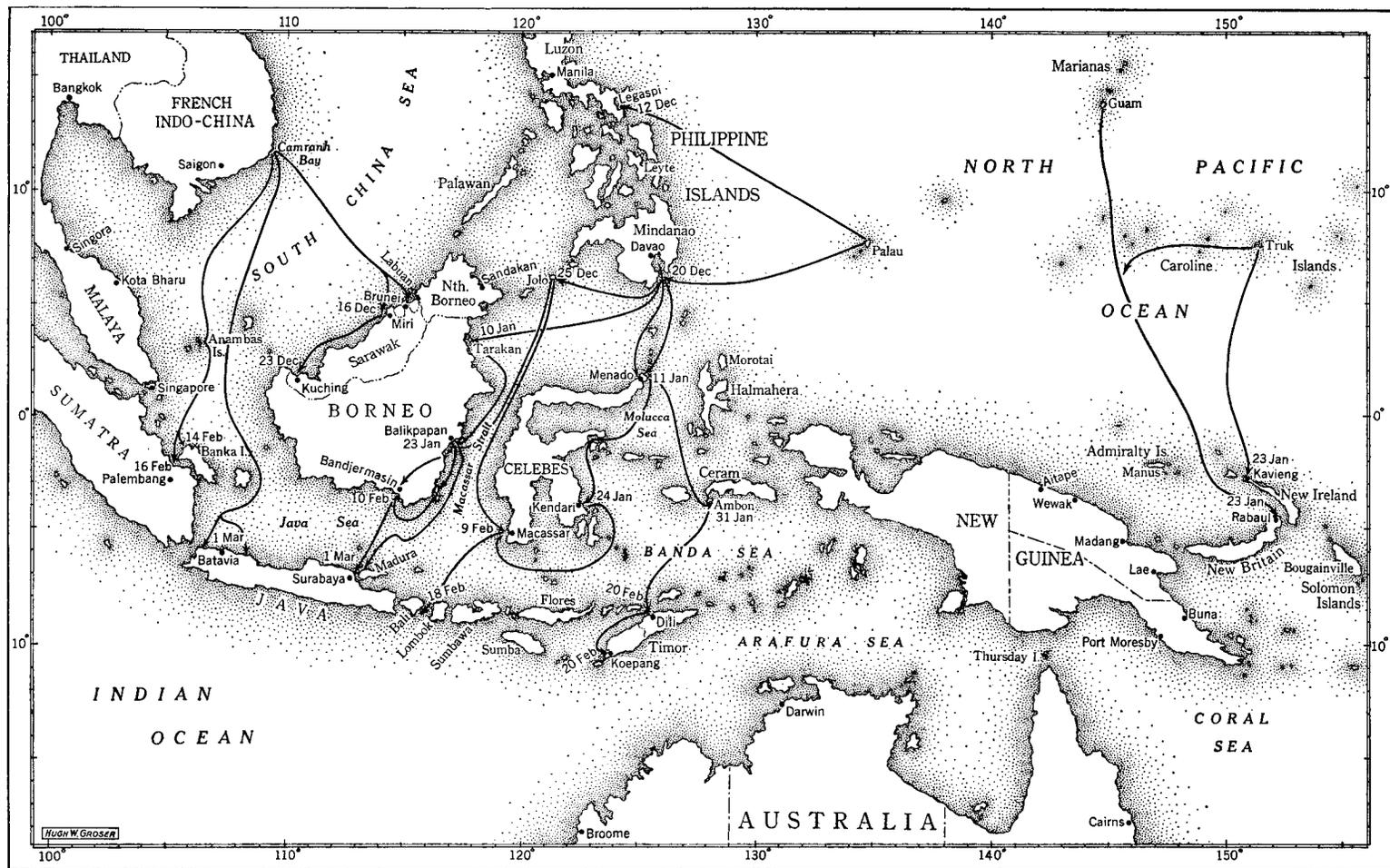
RABAUL had been occupied because, as a Japanese naval staff officer said later, not only was it a strategic point in the communications extending towards Australia, but it was within range for direct attack on Truk, the Japanese naval outpost. It also provided an excellent base for air reconnaissance to the north-east of Australia—an important zone of operations for Allied naval forces.¹

The situation confronting General Wavell had perils that increased almost daily as the enemy took quick advantage of each southward step. But to those at his headquarters, both American and Dutch, who held that the forward Allied bases so gravely threatened—Sabang, Balikpapan, Kendari and Ambon—should be reinforced, he replied by emphasising the risk in dispersing such forces as he had. His plan was to hinder the Japanese advance as best he could, with his main resources being used in an effort to hold the Darwin, Timor, Sumatra, Singapore line. While Singapore held out this was demanded of him.

Now the Japanese forces holding north Celebes on the eastern side of the Celebes Sea and the island of Tarakan on its western side were ready for such further thrusts as their air striking forces, with an additional 400 miles reach, could support. A Dutch report that the Japanese had sent emissaries to the garrison at Balikpapan pointed the way rather obviously. The coveted Dutch oil port on the east coast of Borneo had been threatened with reprisals if the oil installations there were not surrendered to the Japanese intact. Columns of dense smoke rising from the oilfields gave the Dutch garrison's bravely contemptuous answer to the enemy force which advanced south along Macassar Strait on the 21st January. The movement of this force from Tarakan had been reported to ABDA Command and 6 United States and 2 Dutch submarines moved to intercept it as did Dutch aircraft from Samarinda 2 airfield. The aircraft bombed and sank the enemy transport *Nana Maru* (6,764 tons) on the 23rd and next morning a Dutch submarine sank a second.

Meanwhile an American task force commanded by Rear-Admiral Glassford, then in Koepang Bay, Timor, for refuelling, was ordered to intercept the enemy convoy. Glassford in the light cruiser *Boise* put to sea accompanied by the light cruiser *Marblehead* and 4 destroyers. Passing through Sape Strait at the eastern extremity of Java, *Boise* struck a reef, and Glassford transferred his flag to *Marblehead* and ordered the damaged cruiser to turn back. But *Marblehead* had engine trouble and could make a speed of only 15 knots, so the destroyers were sent ahead to attack, while Glassford took the cruiser north to a fixed rendezvous 90 miles south of Balikpapan to cover the destroyers' withdrawal. When darkness

¹ Rear-Admiral Tomioka Sadatoshi, Chief (1st Section) Naval General Staff.



The Japanese advance through the Netherlands East Indies and to Rabaul

came the four destroyers moved up Macassar Strait and, evading challenges from enemy patrol ships by maintaining silence, closed on Balikpapan Harbour and found the enemy transports silhouetted by the light from the burning oilfields. In a torpedo and gunnery attack lasting about one hour, the American destroyers sank or left sinking 3 of the transports and a small patrol boat before withdrawing safely to their rendezvous. The partial success achieved by this daring attack was far from being enough to check the enemy's landing. The Dutch garrison, having done all they could, withdrew leaving the enemy in possession of the town. That was on the evening of the 24th.

The commander of the Japanese force then sent a battalion to the extreme south of Borneo to capture Bandjermasin. This they did on 10th February without serious opposition, thus adding one more pressure point for their advance and one that was almost directly north of the important Javanese seaport, Surabaya.

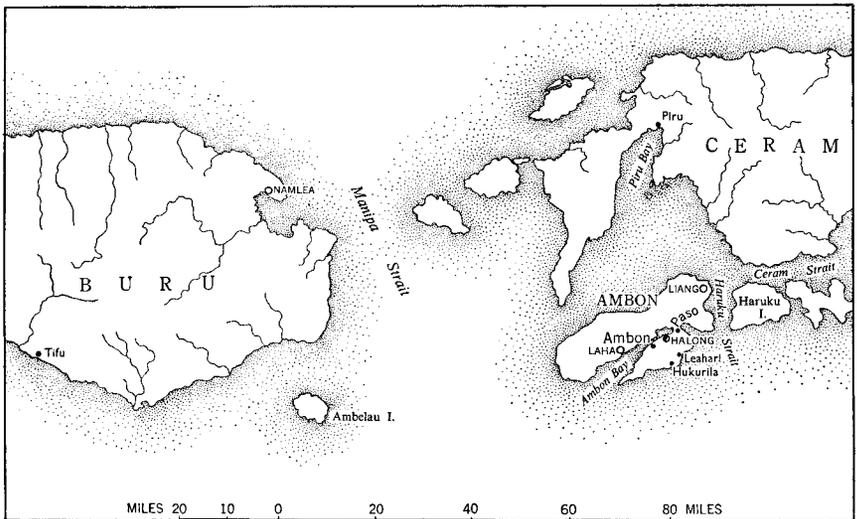
The invasion of Balikpapan had been accomplished by the Japanese force which had taken the island of Tarakan—the *56th Regimental Group*. A convoy of 16 transports had put to sea on 21st January, escorted by a light cruiser and 10 destroyers with 2 seaplane tenders (*Sanyo Maru* and *Sanuki Maru*)—the same protection that had been provided when the force had moved on Tarakan from Davao.² Added cover was to have been provided by aircraft of the *23rd Air Flotilla* also from Tarakan but these were grounded by bad weather. The night attack by the American destroyers had created confusion but had not seriously reduced the invasion forces which landed four days after the capture of Balikpapan. The *23rd Air Flotilla* had moved in on the aerodrome there and were ready once more to reach farther south.

In a simultaneous operation, Admiral Takahashi's eastern force had moved out from Menado and, on the day that the central force had taken Balikpapan, had added Kendari in the south-east Celebes to their growing series of stepping-stones to the main objectives in this area—Java and Timor. This force, the *Sasebo Combined S.N.L.F.*, had moved down from Menado in 6 transports, escorted by 8 destroyers and with the *21st Air Flotilla* as their "umbrella".

The Australian and Dutch garrisons on Ambon and Buru were now in the precise situation they had anticipated—under immediate threat without anything approaching adequate strength for either attack or defence. Some uneasiness about the morale of both the Dutch and Australian forces was indicated by two signals. One of these was a personal message from General ter Poorten to General Sturdee at Army Headquarters, Melbourne, stating that he had received a report from the Dutch commander at Ambon informing him that there was no question of any deterioration of morale among the Dutch troops. Wing Commander Scott about the same time sent a comparably reassuring message to the Central

²The *2nd Kure Special Naval Landing Force* was left at Tarakan as a garrison.

War Room, Melbourne. Both messages showed an awareness of some criticism of the forces they concerned. There was then no grave indication of failing spirits among members of the R.A.A.F. at these bases. There was, on the contrary, a clear indication of frustration caused by inability to attack the enemy effectively. It was certainly true that, as Group Captain Scherger remarked later, "morale was not high". "The men," he said, "felt that they had been 'pushed out on a limb' without anything like adequate means of carrying out offensive operations against the enemy, or of defending themselves. As the Japanese attacks developed and it



became increasingly plain that their worst fears were being realised, the morale did deteriorate further, and it was not improved by the high incidence of tropical disease."

The incidence of malaria, particularly, was causing much concern at Laha. Men were working through the day bare from the waist up and some were sleeping without mosquito nets. Of the sick evacuated about this time 99 per cent were suffering from malaria. Forty-two men were in hospital and the medical officer expected a "further fifty cases within the next week". Dysentery was also a serious medical problem. Living conditions were difficult and the food was poor in quality. There was added strain through lack of sleep because of the increasing number of false air-raid alerts at night, given by the operations room staff with warning shots and telephone calls in response to signals from the native watchers. Squadron Leader Ryland, commanding No. 13 Squadron, remarked that aircrew, already overworked, found great difficulty in getting enough proper rest. Another reason for strain was the added burden of work caused when the native labourers, adequate in strength under Dutch

control before war actually came to their islands, disappeared after the Japanese air attacks began.

A frank situation report by Air Commodore Wilson, air officer commanding the newly-formed North-Western Area, to Air Commodore Lukis, then commanding North-Eastern Area, was passed to the Chief of the Air Staff by telephone. This prompted Sir Charles Burnett to reply personally to Wilson saying that he appreciated the situation at Ambon and Buru as Wilson had outlined it and had already brought it to the notice of General Wavell. He reminded Wilson that units of the R.A.A.F. and A.I.F. were at Ambon and Buru to reinforce ABDA Command and that R.A.A.F. responsibility was restricted to administration and maintenance. A.C.H. Halong was responsible to Central War Room, Bandung, and not Central War Room, Melbourne. Burnett added that the Supreme Commander had informed him "within the last thirty-six hours" that he (Wavell) was aware of the position but was not prepared to give up an important key-point without fighting. Wavell intended visiting Ambon soon. Wilson would understand that it would be impossible for R.A.A.F. Headquarters to withdraw squadrons without Wavell's orders. The message added: "Have just been informed . . . that Ambon is being reinforced by (Dutch) Buffalo squadron from Singapore. . . ."

Scott and Ryland, having obtained permission, flew to Bandung to report the situation to Brett. Their case was that, if adequate strength in fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery could not be provided, all but small parties to maintain refuelling and rearming facilities should be withdrawn from Laha and Namlea to Darwin. General Brett admitted that reinforcements could not be provided for the bases and authorised an order for the withdrawal as proposed. After their return to Halong the necessary withdrawal plans were made. A signal from ABDA Command, dated 24th January, instructed Scott to retain only sufficient aircraft to undertake the needed reconnaissance patrols. Darwin might be used for aircraft maintenance and as a rest base for crews. If strong enemy attacks should make Laha and Namlea untenable, reconnaissance might still be operated from Koepang or Darwin. Scott was given authority to order such operations at his discretion.

Concerned at the vulnerability of the advanced bases at Babo in west New Guinea and Bula, on the north-east coast of Ceram, the Dutch command, on 25th January, ordered the destruction of supplies of aviation fuel stored there. That day Babo, which had not been used to the extent expected, was evacuated by the R.A.A.F. detachment that had been stationed there, the last aircraft to leave carrying 11 members of the ground staff to Darwin.

While the question of reinforcement or withdrawal was being reviewed, the Hudson crews were heavily engaged in both reconnaissance flights and strikes on the enemy. Six Hudsons attempted to attack enemy transports off the Celebes coast about 20 miles south of Kema on the night of 18th January, but bad weather hindered the operation and prevented

any observation of its result. A Hudson from No. 13 Squadron, captained by Flight Lieutenant Willing,³ did not return from a later reconnaissance flight over the Kema area.

After their successive attacks on the 15th and 16th the enemy had been satisfied with reconnaissance sorties over Ambon for the next five days. Though the R.A.A.F.'s strength was so low, the Japanese showed their respect by providing fighter cover for a Type-97 flying-boat that flew over the island on the 21st. That day 2 other flying-boats attacked anti-aircraft positions at Laha with machine-gun fire, and 4 enemy fighters followed in and strafed and put out of action the Essanne radio station. Further flying-boat sorties were made by the enemy on the 22nd, 23rd and 24th. The Hudsons tried interception, but their speed was not sufficient for the task, though gunfire was exchanged whenever the range permitted. Little result came from this duelling.

From the 23rd, when the Japanese resumed attacks by aircraft in formation, 17 bombers and 18 fighters bombed and strafed Ambon, Halong and Laha. Damage to aircraft and runways was slight, but about 3,000 gallons of fuel were destroyed.

Namlea, which until now had been free from attacks, had its first raid on the 24th. A flying-boat spent 20 minutes over the base, dropped four bombs and did little damage. This discovery of Namlea by the enemy was regarded as accidental—a Hudson, climbing after take-off from the base, came out of cloud and almost collided with the flying-boat which then descended below the cloud level, presumably to find out where the Hudsons had come from. For defence against such attacks Namlea's native troops had but three light anti-aircraft and a few machine-guns. There was more than a touch of irony in the fact that a fighter-control system was being installed at the base. It was never completed, which did not seem to matter much since there never was any prospect of the base having fighters to control.

The day after the discovery of Namlea by the enemy another flying-boat appeared over the airfield. All Hudsons took off. About 30 minutes later 16 twin-engined bombers in two equal formations passed overhead at high altitude. One returned at 15,000 feet, descended to 10,000 feet, bombed, and then came down and made a strafing attack. Little damage resulted. The second formation flew over Halong where 60,000 gallons of aviation fuel were destroyed and two Catalinas damaged in the attack.

To this date (25th January) Nos. 2 and 13 Squadrons had lost 13 aircraft—the return for which had been much valuable information from reconnaissance flights and damage inflicted on the enemy which, though hopelessly insufficient for the main purpose of holding their advance, was certainly considerable in relation to the size of the Hudson force and the conditions under which they operated. The enemy's consciousness of this was shown on the 26th when a strong force of Zeros came marauding

³ F-Lt M. P. Willing, 218. 14 and 13 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of New Mile End, SA; b. Fullarton, SA, 8 Mar 1918. Killed in action 19 Jan 1942.

over Laha and Namlea. The warning was too short for the Hudson crews to get their aircraft into the air and the result was costly—three destroyed on the ground at Laha and one at Namlea. One of the Hudsons, though riddled with bullet holes, was painstakingly repaired by the ground crews so that it “lived to fight another day” with the soubriquet, affectionately bestowed on it by the squadron, of “Colander Kate” or “The Flying Colander”. Later it was flown to Darwin by Flying Officer Law-Smith,⁴ one of the pilots who had engaged in duelling with the enemy flying-boats.

On this day ABDA Command signalled to A.C.H. Darwin: “Can you make available Empire flying-boats to evacuate from Laha and or Namlea? If so request you dispatch boats as soon as possible to these bases.” North-Western Area was instructed to send one flying-boat immediately and by the 29th an Empire flying-boat with Flight Lieutenant John MacL. Hampshire in command, had made two sorties to Laha. This aircraft and what Hudsons were available for the task were the only means of evacuating the R.A.A.F. from Ambon and Buru.

Several sightings of enemy warships off the north Celebes coast were reported by reconnaissance crews (one crew even reported having been fired on at long range by the forward guns of a cruiser) but about 3.30 p.m. on the 26th the crew of one Hudson sighted 22 ships—transports in convoy with a naval escort—in a position just north of the equator and to the east of Menado, moving on a south-easterly course. The crew’s assessment of this force was 13 merchant vessels, one heavy cruiser, 3 light cruisers, and 5 destroyers. There could no longer be any question that Ambon was to be invaded.

While some Hudson crews shadowed the approaching force and reported its progress through the Molucca Sea, others prepared their aircraft, stripping them of all unessential equipment, and joined the Empire flying-boat in its evacuation task. Ground crew laboured to repair one Hudson that had been damaged in landing and needed a new tail plane. They worked all night with only a shaded torch for light and in the most difficult conditions but by dawn the aircraft was ready for take-off. From each Hudson 68 gallons of fuel were drawn from the tanks leaving but a small safety margin. Tin hats, boots, capes, revolvers and all other clothing and equipment not absolutely necessary were discarded. All guns, ammunition, Very pistols and pyrotechnics were taken from the aircraft and destroyed. Flight Sergeant McEgan,⁵ one of 23 men crowded into a Hudson piloted by Flight Lieutenant Cornfoot,⁶ described the take-off and flight to Darwin later:

It took the whole length of the runway to get off. There was no flare path and only a pale moon to guide the pilot. All passengers stood for the whole journey, parked between the pilot and the second main spar of the aircraft—only one man

⁴ Sqn Ldr R. R. Law-Smith, AFC, 280733. 2, 100, 36 and 34 Sqs; comd 37 Sqn 1944-45, Deputy Director of Postings 1945-46. Solicitor; of North Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 9 Jul 1914.

⁵ W-O A. H. McEgan, 2404. SHQ Darwin and AOB Ambon. B. Kent Town, SA, 24 Jun 1914.

⁶ Sqn Ldr R. G. Cornfoot, AFC, 250630. 13, 14 Sqs, 1 OTU (RAAF Special Transport Flight) and 36 Sqn; comd 38 Sqn 1944-46. Clerk; of Toorak, Vic; b. Kew, Vic, 22 Nov 1918.

was aft of that, the air gunner, Sergeant Ducat.⁷ The journey took four and a half hours and we were glad to be relieved from our cramped positions; we were so crushed that we couldn't lift our arms.⁸

Meanwhile demolitions were being carried out by the men of Gull Force, now commanded by Lieut-Colonel Scott⁹ (the outspoken Lieut-Colonel Roach had been replaced). On the evening of the 30th two Hudsons remained, detained by Wing Commander Scott so that he would have "last minute" reconnaissance reports of the enemy invasion force, but the time had come for the last act of evacuation, and the Hudsons were being refuelled for the flight to Darwin. The pilots, Flying Officers Haythorn¹ and White² were discussing the loading when a stream of petrol was seen coming from the main fuel line of White's aircraft; the line had been shattered by an enemy bullet and the fuel was running from the tank side of the main fuel cock, which meant that all tanks would be drained. Twenty-eight officers and other ranks were waiting on the airfield to fly to Darwin. Scott revised his plans and ordered 17 of them on board the serviceable Hudson. That left eight besides the pilot, co-pilot—Flying Officer Meyer³—and himself. Haythorn took his aircraft off about midnight and Scott's party went to work on the damaged aircraft. The task was beyond them with the equipment they had. Scott, who earlier had been in telephone communication with Halong while Hampshire's flying-boat was embarking the last of the staff there, had told him to take off and said that he and the remainder of the Laha party would fly out in White's Hudson. Now he sent a radio message to Hampshire asking him whether he could return and take his party out. But the flying-boat was half-way to Darwin, and lacked the fuel to cover the additional distance. Hampshire knew also that to attempt a night landing in the mine-sown waters off Laha would be to take a very grave risk of losing his flying-boat and everyone in it. He had no course but to fly on. Earlier it had been arranged that if a R.A.A.F. party should be left behind they would endeavour to go by native boat across Piru Bay from the north side of Ambon, to Geser Island off the south-east tip of Ceram.

Wing Commander Scott's last signal, sent on the 31st, read: "All cyphers burned. Demolition completed. Known Japanese landing at Leahari and Hukurila [about 3 miles apart on the east coast of the island and 5 to 6 miles from the town]. Japanese have reached Laha from over-

⁷ F-Lt A. W. Ducat, DFM, 406327. 13 Sqn; Gunnery leader, RAAF Flight attached 45 Sqn USAAF 1944, RAAF Adv HQ 1945. Salesman; of Shenton Park, WA; b. St Kilda, Vic, 22 Apr 1913.

⁸ Pilots taking part in the evacuation included Sqn Ldr J. P. Ryland. F-Lts J. Haythorn, H. E. Birley and R. G. Cornfoot from Ambon and F-Lts R. R. Law-Smith and J. W. Finlayson from Namlea.

⁹ Col W. J. R. Scott, DSO, VX71997. (1st AIF: Maj 20 Bn.) GSO1 G Branch (Special Operations) AHQ 1941-42; comd 2/21 Bn 1942. Insurance inspector; of Killara, NSW; b. Bingara, NSW, 21 Jun 1888. Died 19 Nov 1956.

¹ F-Lt J. Haythorn, 260722. 13 and 6 Sqns. Draftsman; of Willoughby, NSW; b. Young, NSW, 23 Jan 1920. Died of injuries 4 Apr 1943.

² F-Lt W. V. D. White, DFC, 260624; 2 Sqn. Farmer; of Kenya, British East Africa, and Edgecliff, NSW; b. Inverell, NSW, 25 Oct 1913. Executed by Japanese 20 Feb 1942.

³ F-O F. N. Meyer, 290745. 21 and 13 Sqns. Assistant works manager; of Maylands, WA; b. Guilford, WA, 2 Oct 1921. Presumed dead 20 Feb 1942.

land and engagement proceeding. Will call whenever possible." A signal received in Darwin at 1 a.m. on the 31st announced that Laha radio station was about to be demolished. Just before the evacuation Scott had been using a portable transceiver to communicate with Darwin and Namlea. This equipment, concealed in a camouflaged tent, was manned by a radio operator, L.A.C. Walker,⁴ for 24 hours after the last Hudson had taken off and until its batteries were exhausted. By that time the landing places of the invasion forces, their approximate strength, and details of the R.A.A.F. staff left behind had all been transmitted to Darwin.

Inevitably the strain on the entire signals system increased in proportion to the increase in enemy activity. From the time the invasion convoy was sighted the burden became so great that aircraft—notably Hampshire's flying-boat—were used whenever possible to carry signals by safe hand to Darwin. Despite this the maintenance of communications between the A.O.C. at Darwin and the two Central War Rooms was a considerable achievement as a result largely of the good initial planning and installation work under the direction of the Director of Signals, Group Captain Wiggins.⁵

Hampshire kept the emergency rendezvous off Geser Island in his flying-boat on 12th February and again on the 15th, but without success. Scott and his party of ten were eventually posted missing. Later it was learned that the party had made their way across the hills to the north of Ambon Island with the intention of crossing by boat to Ceram, but in doing so were intercepted in Piru Bay by a Japanese patrol boat and taken prisoner.⁶

At Namlea Squadron Leader McFarlane,⁷ commanding the base, had the R.A.A.F. troops well drilled in what to do in the event of enemy action, and slit trenches had been dug throughout the camp area. In the raids there had been only one R.A.A.F. casualty—a man wounded. All ranks had emergency clothing and rations ready, packed in haversacks. The runways had been mined ready for demolition and in the last week the precaution of dispersing all but those on duty to a beach, about two miles from the airfield, had been taken. Here the sick were taken, their beds being camouflaged with mosquito nets.

Apart from visits by a single enemy flying-boat on the 27th, and again on the 30th when the airmen's quarters were damaged by bomb explosions, but without casualties, Namlea was not raided again. On the 30th Mc-

⁴ LAC L. D. Walker, 27521. RAAF SHQ Darwin and AOB Halong. Electrical mechanic; of Croydon, SA; b. Koorlinga, SA, 26 Mar 1918. Executed by Japanese 20 Feb 1942.

⁵ Gp Capt C. S. Wiggins, CBE, 1336. Director of Signals RAAF HQ 1940-42, of Communications AAF HQ 1942-43, RAAF Comd 1943-44; Director of Telecommunications and Radar, RAAF HQ 1944-45. Regular air force offr, soldier and farmer; of Melbourne; b. Mudgee, NSW, 6 Oct 1898.

As early as June 1941 Wiggins had attended a combined forces signals conference at Batavia and later inspected the bases on Timor, Ambon and Buru.

⁶ W Cdr Scott and most of his party were executed on the 20th February.

⁷ Gp Capt A. B. McFarlane, DFC, 250207. 6 Sqn; comd RAAF AOBs Ambon and Namlea 1941-42; comd RAAF Rear Party Namlea, SO Training North-Western Area and comd 2 Sqn 1942; OTLO Overseas HQ 1943-44; SO Directorate of Training and Personal Services 1944-47. Secretary, Dept of Air from 1956. Student; of Yarraville, Vic; b. Yarraville, 4 Jun 1916.

Farlane received a signal from Scott advising him that three aircraft were being sent to remove the R.A.A.F. base staff except for a demolition and maintenance party. The signal ended with the words "Allah be with you!" That night three Hudsons piloted by Flying Officers Finlayson,⁸ Law-Smith and Lamb,⁹ arrived. Finlayson's aircraft was damaged on landing when it hit the wreckage of a Hudson that had been smashed by a bomb hit. Every available man worked with the aircraft riggers to repair the damaged aircraft and to strip all three for their evacuation task.

McFarlane gathered the station staff together and called for volunteers to stay behind with him to carry out demolition work. Every man responded, so a selection was made by eliminating first the married men with families, then men with dependents; finally 7 men remained besides the base commander and Flight Lieutenant Handbury,¹ who kept the base open for last-minute reconnaissance operations and then carried out demolitions. The remainder then took off—15 in Finlayson's damaged aircraft, 22 in Lamb's, and 23 in Law-Smith's. All reached Darwin safely.

The last signal sent by McFarlane was a code sign meaning "No further traffic. Am about to immobilise station owing to proximity of enemy." With his small party he then went to work on the final stage of the demolition plan. Having destroyed everything of value to the enemy they then "went bush" and began the arduous trek of 60 miles across wild hilly country to Tifu on the south coast. Here, in defiance of superstition, they were picked up by Hampshire's flying-boat Q.A. 18-13 on the 13th February, and flown in safety to Darwin.

As indicated in Scott's last message, the enemy's assault on Ambon bifurcated. One force attacked the Dutch garrison in the region of Paso at the head of Ambon Bay and, applying their pressure from both the north and the south, overwhelmed the defenders' comparatively small force, which surrendered on the night of the 31st.

At Laha and on the peninsula to the south the men of Gull Force fought until their ammunition supply dwindled and they too were overwhelmed. On 3rd February the little force capitulated.

While the invasion of Ambon and Buru was proceeding the enemy was actively organising the next move of the force that had captured Kendari. Wavell received air reconnaissance reports on the 7th February revealing the movement of still another convoy which was sighted rounding the south-east coast of Celebes in a westerly direction. Admiral Doorman's force, then at Tjilatjap on the south coast of Java, was ordered out to engage the enemy, but before his ships could be made ready for

⁸ Sqn Ldr J. W. Finlayson, 260523. 14 Sqn, HQ North-Western Area, 74 Wing, 21 and 23 Sqns. Cost clerk; b. 4 Nov 1916.

⁹ W Cdr N. F. Lamb, 290732. 14 and 2 Sqns; Controller 8 Fighter Sector 1942-43; comd Armament Instructional Sqn, Nhill, 1944-45. Student; of Perth and Wiluna, WA; b. Subiaco, WA, 14 Feb 1916.

¹ W Cdr J. E. Handbury, AFC, 395. 6 Sqn and 1 OTU; RAAF HQ Darwin and Controller ACH Namlea 1942; Trans Pacific Air Ferry Service 1943-44; comd Heavy Bomber Replacement Training Unit 1944-45, RAAF Detachment Aust Joint Staff Mission Washington 1945. Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 25 Mar 1920.

sea further reconnaissance showed that any sortie by Doorman would be too late. The enemy ships had reached their objective, Macassar, and by the night of 8th-9th February were already putting their troops ashore. The Dutch garrison of only two companies was of little avail and had been overcome by the night of the 9th, leaving the final big centre in Celebes in possession of the enemy.

For the invasion of Ambon the enemy had taken no chances. The troops consisted of the *1st Kure Special Naval Landing Force* and *228th Regiment*, a unit that only a month earlier had taken Legaspi in southern Luzon from MacArthur's forces. In 16 transports they left Davao on 27th January, staging through Menado on the 29th. The concentration of air strength used for this phase of the enemy's campaign was impressive and, indeed, highly flattering to the limited Allied air forces opposed to them. Whereas the first air attacks on Ambon were made by Mavis flying-boats from the *21st Air Flotilla* based on Davao and Palau, and then by medium bombers of the *Kanoya Group* after the *21st Flotilla* had moved to Menado, the real "softening up" raids had been made from mid-January on by aircraft from the *2nd Carrier Division*. This division, comprising the carriers *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, had been one of the three that had jointly attacked Pearl Harbour. It had then taken part in the attack on Wake Island. After a return to its base in Japan the division was at Palau by 17th January moving down to position just north of Ceram. From here the carriers' aircraft were used to support the landing at Kendari. They left 18 bombers and 18 fighters based at Kendari before withdrawing on the 26th, the day after the arrival at the new base of the *21st Air Flotilla*. Both the carrier and land-based aircraft then joined in attacks on Ambon and Namlea.

Meanwhile the 16 transports had moved south under an escort of the light cruiser *Jintsu* and 10 destroyers and the seaplane tender *Chitose*. Cover for this force was given by the heavy cruisers *Nachi* and *Haguro* with two destroyers, and at sea this force was supplemented by the light carrier *Zuiho*, the seaplane tender *Mizuho*, minesweepers and anti-submarine craft. The troops of the *228th Regiment* went ashore in the south of Ambon Island and the naval landing force in the north. By 5th February *21st Air Flotilla* was moving in fighters, bombers and flying-boats.

For the capture of Macassar, the Japanese deployed 6 transports to carry the *Sasebo Combined S.N.L.F.* which since taking Kendari had been based there. Putting to sea on 6th February, these ships had an escort of one cruiser (*Nagara*) and 6 destroyers, covered by 2 heavy cruisers, 2 destroyers and the seaplane tenders *Chitose*, *Mizuho* and *Sanuki Maru*.

In the vast task of airfield and base development the Americans had the men, the equipment and, to use their own phrase, the "know how".

The American Chief of Staff, General Marshall, in a cable dispatched on Christmas Day 1941, had told General Brett: "The purpose is to make your command predominantly air, with the other elements limited to those needed for efficient air operations and security of bases." Brett had asked, in January, for one engineer service unit, one engineer general service regiment, three engineer aerodrome units and two engineer labour battalions.

"I am firmly convinced," Brett informed Marshall, "that it is essential to have a stable establishment in Australia prior to large-scale tactical operation." After consultations on 3rd-4th January between General Brett and the Australian Service heads, a Chief of Staffs Committee, a Joint Planning Committee (Deputy Chiefs of Staff) and a General Administrative Planning Committee were formed. Each committee comprised one representative each from the U.S.A.F.I.A., the R.A.N., Australian Army and the R.A.A.F., while a representative of the Australian Government (Mr Abbott²) presided over the Administrative Committee.

Decisions on the establishment of main bases were:

Brisbane—An air base "with a small runway" at Eagle Farm with a main workshop base near the city. Brett expected the base to prepare to service 3,000 to 4,000 aircraft.

Townsville—A fighter aircraft depot; a secondary workshop and maintenance installation; adequate defences—R.D.F., anti-aircraft and fighter units, for which an additional operational airfield would be needed in the vicinity, possibly at Charters Towers, to accommodate the bomber units and so relieve Townsville and to provide a "dispersion park" for fighter aircraft.

Darwin—An air base here was an "absolute necessity". Bathurst Island might provide a site for a fighter base.

Melbourne—A reception and replacement centre with accommodation for 8,000 to 12,000 men.

So that the whole organisation would be decentralised, four base section headquarters were established—at Darwin, Townsville, Brisbane and Melbourne.³

To coordinate and supervise all civilian effort "devoted to the construction of military defence projects", the Allied Works Council was formed in February 1942. In addition to its civil members, the Chief Engineer of U.S.A.F.I.A. (later superseded by the Chief Engineer G.H.Q., S.W.P.A.), the Director of Works, R.A.A.F., (Group Captain Knox) and the Chief Engineer of the Australian Army,⁴ were represented. The

² Hon J. P. Abbott, OBE, MC. (1st AIF: 14 Bn.) MHR 1940-49; Minister for Home Security 1941; Chairman Admin Planning Committee 1942. *Grazier*; of Wingen, NSW; b. Winchelsea, Vic, 4 Jul 1888.

³ In early March 1942 base headquarters were also established at Adelaide and Perth and in April at Sydney. These base sections were numbered thus: No. 1—Northern Territory (plus a triangle taking in portion of Queensland, the Barkly Tableland, an area round Mount Isa and the north-west "corner" of Western Australia); No. 2—the remainder of the northern half of Queensland; No. 3—southern Queensland; No. 4—Victoria; No. 5—South Australia; No. 6—Western Australia (excepting the north-west "corner"); No. 7—New South Wales.

⁴ In November 1942 the Works and Services Branch of the Department of the Interior was merged with the Council.

Council's task was to control all equipment, supplies, transport and manpower available to the Commonwealth.⁵

Uppermost in the minds of all Allied Air Headquarters at this time was the problem of reconciling the many claims for air strength, all of them urgent. The needs of ABDA Command were as acute as they could be and, with the Japanese in possession of Rabaul, the Australian claims for aircraft were increasingly urgent. The deployment of American fighter squadrons at Koepang, Ambon, Kendari, Samarinda, Surabaya and Batavia had been planned, but these were days when plans were made one day and cancelled the next. The very pressure which demanded speed in the delivery of aircraft and supplies often caused delay through confusion due, in turn, to haste. Units and their equipment were frequently separated, sometimes for considerable periods, because the means of transporting each had necessarily varied.

Inadequacy or the entire absence of tools and spare parts and inexperience in assembly added to the delays. Yet the endeavour always was to make the best use of the men and material available, as when the ground crew of an American bomber unit assembled 138 Kittyhawk fighters in 58 days, completing the task by 4th February. Partly trained American aircrew were rushed through an improvised training program. Fighter pilot training was conducted at Amberley and dive bombing at Archerfield.⁶ "Veterans" from the Philippines, in charge of the schools, found that a major problem was the limited experience of the fighter pilots who had just arrived from the United States. Their average total flying time in pursuit aircraft amounted to only about 15 hours. The accident rate was high.

Provisional fighter squadrons were formed to absorb the pilots and aircraft as they disembarked at Brisbane.⁷ The first of these squadrons (No. 17) set out from Brisbane on 16th January for Darwin en route for Java. The commander, Major Sprague, and 12 of the pilots had fought in the Philippines; the other four were second-lieutenants who had just arrived from the United States. With two Australian aircraft as guides, they made the 2,000 miles flight. All but one, which crashed on landing, reached Darwin safely by the 18th. By 25th January 13 of these aircraft had reached Surabaya after crossing the Timor Sea to Koepang—a stage on which they were escorted by an Australian flying a two-engined Beechcraft—and then flying to Sumba Island and thence to Java. Some of the pilots completed the final stages flying alone.

⁵ In April 1942, under the authority of the National Security Act, the Council formed the Civil Construction Corps, which by regulation brought into its service all men between 18 and 60 who passed a medical test and who were not already engaged in work of national and wartime importance.

⁶ Initially 15 hours' training was specified for both fighter and dive bomber pilots with 6 hours actual dive-bombing practice.

⁷ Nos. 17, 20, 3, 33 and 13 Pursuit Squadrons were formed and manned by "casual" pilots. Respectively the commanders of these units were Maj Chas. A. Sprague, Capt Wm. Lane, Jr., Capt Grant Mahoney, Maj Floyd Pell and Lt Boyd Wagner.