

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

THE LABUAN ISLAND AND BRUNEI BAY OPERATIONS Gary Waters

The Montclair operations formed part of the Allied plans to clear Japanese-occupied territories in the South-West Pacific. The operations involved the re-occupation of the western Visayan-Mindanao-Borneo-Netherlands East Indies area, with the plan being prepared on 25 February 1945.¹ By 17 April 1945, a major phase of Montclair—the Victor phase—had been largely completed and it was time to launch the OBOE phase. The objectives of OBOE were to seize Java, destroy enemy forces in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), re-establish the NEI government in its capital, and establish a base for subsequent operations against Japanese forces throughout the area.

Although the original intention was to conduct six distinct operations as part of the OBOE phase, only three were carried out—OBOEs One, Six and Two. OBOE One began on 1 May 1945, and although Tarakan Island was taken, the airfield on the island could not be used for extensive air operations. Use of Tarakan airfield was a fundamental assumption in planning for OBOE Six which centred on Labuan/Brunei Bay (and began on 10 June) and OBOE Two—Balikpapan (which began on 1 July). In fact, air forces were supposed to be established on Tarakan by 7 May, but due to problems in preparing the airstrip, Tarakan airfield was not available for air operations until 30 June (almost eight weeks late). Because air support for ground operations over that period could not be provided by aircraft from Tarakan, distant bases had to be used, with all the attendant difficulties that carried.

The aim of this Paper is to discuss the conduct of OBOE Six. The Paper begins with an overview of the plan, the objective and concept of the air operation, before discussing the phases of the air campaign. Clear observations arise for the provision of air support and fighter control, both of which are discussed in some detail.

Eight days after OBOE One started, the fighting in Europe ended. For the Australians in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA), the fighting still had a long way to run after 8 May. It was important that OBOE Six be completed on time as some of the assault shipping forces and ground force elements had to be released for OBOE Two—the Balikpapan operation. The Objective Area (OA) for the Labuan/Brunei Bay operation was to extend almost 300 kilometres along the north-west coast of Borneo (from Miri in the south to Jesselton² in the north). The object was to secure Labuan Island and Brunei Bay to ensure uninterrupted air and naval operations to help seize Miri-Lutong and Seria.³

The 500 square miles (1,295 square kilometres) of sheltered Brunei Bay provided the best anchorage in the area. Establishment of air and naval facilities there would complete a chain of mutually-supporting bases, some 2,500 kilometres long, which would allow Allied air and naval cover to be provided along the coast from Singapore to Shanghai. As well, Japanese overland Lines of Communication (LOCs) and escape routes into Indochina and Malaya could be interdicted. Moreover, Brunei was at the geographical centre of enemy occupied areas—including Sulawesi, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Malaya and Indochina.⁴

Throughout the area, road infrastructure was poor, but the sea and rivers provided reasonable means of movement. Also, at low tide, the beach could be used. Labuan Island commands the northern and southern seaward entrances to Brunei Bay. The island measures 22 kilometres (north-south) by 10 kilometres (east-west). Labuan township and its port of Victoria Harbour are sited in the south-east corner of the island. Two airfields (built by the Japanese) were in the south but both had been damaged by bombing. The largest airfield offered a strip that was 4,000 metres long. The smaller airfield known as Timbalai, just five degrees from the equator, was not planned to be used by the Allies.

Fundamental to overall mission success would be the ability of the air forces to support the amphibious landings and subsequent land operations. As Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was to observe after the operation:

the conduct of air operations was generally satisfactory and it was apparent that commanders of wings and squadrons had benefited as a result of experience during the OBOE One operation.⁵

Bostock went on to summarise the two worst problems experienced during OBOE Six, in relation to air operations. On Z-2 (8 June), B.24 Liberators of 13th Air Force failed to obtain prior permission to bomb, which was subsequently referred to as a 'serious breach of combined operations procedures'.⁶ The second problem arose when No 80 Wing did not provide dusk cover for the convoy because the commander of the wing decided not to mount the mission despite clear orders to do so.

On the positive side, the loading at Morotai was far more orderly than had been the case for OBOE One; although difficulties were still experienced in the OA—such as difficult beach conditions and excessive numbers of vehicles.

No 110 Mobile Fighter Control Unit (MFCU), which was at Morotai, was supposed to be attached to No 80 Wing for deployment to Labuan. However, because of depleted equipment and lack of personnel, it was unable to be deployed and No 111 MFCU deployed instead. No 111 MFCU did not arrive in Morotai until two days before the convoy departed for Labuan.

In his concluding comments in the foreword to the OBOE Six report, AVM Bostock stated that General MacArthur was delighted with the results of OBOE Six and had indicated to his senior commanders that 'the execution of the Brunei Bay operation has been flawless'.⁷

USN Task Group 78.1 provided the convoy. The 230 vessels sailed in different echelons (one from Tarakan, one from Leyte, and several others from Morotai), with the main echelon (consisting of 76 vessels) departing Morotai on 4 June. The main group suffered three nights of storms en route to Labuan; conditions were made worse because the majority of troops were accommodated on open decks.

MacArthur's Operation Instruction issued on 21 April listed the aims for the task force as being: to establish an advanced fleet base in Brunei Bay, to recover and protect oil and rubber resources, and to re-establish British Government control. The 1st Australian Corps (9th Division less 26th Brigade Group) was given the task.⁸

It was to be a three-phase operation as follows:

- Neutralise Japanese airfields so that enemy aircraft would not oppose Allied landings, and destroy defence installations in the OA .
- Conduct multiple landings on Labuan Island and near Brunei town; secure the airfield on Labuan; and, from Labuan, conduct further landings along the north-west coast to secure Brunei Bay from the north.
- Consolidate the OA; establish the advanced fleet base; conduct shore-to-shore operations south of Miri; protect and develop oil and rubber resources; and re-establish British civil administration.⁹

A beach 1400 metres long (code-named Brown Beach) at Hamilton Point in Victoria Harbour afforded the best site for a landing. At the same time as Brown Beach was secured, an overland assault would be needed to capture the wharves and jetties at Yellow Beach (inside the bay near Brooketon) and another amphibious landing on Muara Island (to clear Japanese troops).

For the assault on Yellow Beach, a landing would be made first at Green Beach, on the other side of the peninsula. On Muara Island, the best beach from which to operate was at Red

Beach, but first a landing would have to be made on White Beach, followed by an overland assault on Red Beach. Red Beach would provide a transshipment point for forces and equipment moving to Yellow Beach, on the mainland. All landings were to be made on Z-day, 10 June 1945.¹⁰

Enemy reaction at the amphibious landing sites was expected to be similar to that at Tarakan. Hence, Japanese forces were expected to position themselves on the high ground behind the beaches and to use mines along roads and on the airfields. Booby traps could be expected in the town areas.

Because OBOE Six posed a greater threat to Japan's LOCs with its southern bases than did OBOE One, the possibility of air attacks from French Indochina, Malaya or Sumatra was always likely. Enemy operational air strength was:¹¹

	F	SEB	2EB	F/P	R	Total
Borneo	3	-	-	8	-	11
Sulawesi	8	-	-	5	2	15
Java & Lesser Sundas	15	-	14	18	6	53
Total						79

In the area of potential support, the strengths were as follows:

	F	SEB	2EB	F/P	R	Total
French Indochina	40	-	22	14	10	86
Sumatra	70	-	-	-	5	75
Malaya, Burma, Thailand	74	15	10	9	13	121
Total						282

LEGEND: F: Fighters
 SEB: Single Engine Bombers
 2EB: Twin Engine Bombers
 F/P: Float Planes
 R: Reconnaissance Aircraft

For humanitarian reasons, and to make the subsequent task of rebuilding easier, the following areas and installations were not to be attacked if possible: piers and jetties, main roads on Labuan Island, POW and internee camps, water installations, civil and military hospitals, oil producing plants at Miri and Seria, and Brunei town (unless contrary orders were given by Advanced Headquarters, RAAF Command). Notwithstanding these exclusions, if any installation or area could be used to hamper operations of the assault forces, it could be attacked.

There were also operating restrictions on aircraft. Firstly, they were to avoid low-flying over, or up and down, waters in the vicinity of friendly surface craft. Secondly, they were prohibited from attacking surface craft after 6 June unless specifically authorised by Commander Support Aircraft (CSA)¹² (as PT boats would be operating in the Brunei Bay area). Additionally, aircrews were advised that Naval Observation aircraft would be operating in the OA from 8 June. Also, aircrew were advised to clear and test guns only over areas not occupied by friendly forces.

The OA was divided into two sectors at the parallel 5 degrees 10 minutes North. Close support in the southern sector was provided by 13th Air Force and in the northern sector, by 1st TAF. As formations arrived to provide direct support, the flight leader reported to CSA the number and type of aircraft in the formation, their position and altitude, time available on station, and type of bombs carried.¹³

Aircraft would orbit specific points ('Baker' in the north, 'Easy' in the south) until directed to targets by CSA. Flight leaders reported completion of mission and results to CSA, prior to their departure from the OA. CSA (Afloat) provided coordination between air and naval strikes—suspending Naval Gunfire Support (NGS) as necessary or determining minimum altitude for aircraft attack.

Map references were to accord with the Standard Target Designator Grid (four figures and one letter). Air Support Parties (ASPs)¹⁴ passed requests to CSA who, in turn, briefed the pilots. If artillery or mortar smoke was used to indicate targets, CSA would advise pilots by saying 'Splash ... seconds'.¹⁵

The reference point for fighter direction was Kuraman Island lighthouse (5 degrees 13 minutes north, 115 degrees 8 minutes east), code-named 'SARAH'. All radar contacts were reported by bearing and distance in nautical miles from 'SARAH'.

Command of all amphibious attacks rested with Commander Naval Task Force who commanded the operation until the landing force was established ashore; then command passed to the Commanding Officer of the landing force.¹⁶ Transfer of command was agreed to by both commanders, all subordinate commanders were notified, and a signal was sent to Headquarters 9 Division.

General Officer Commanding (GOC) OBOE Six was Major General Wootten, Air Support was under the control of Air Vice-Marshal Bostock (AOC-in-C RAAF Command), GOC 20th Brigade was Brigadier Windeyer, GOC 24th Brigade was Brigadier Porter, and AOC 1st Tactical Air Force was Air Commodore Scherger.

The intention was that Headquarters 1st TAF would move from Morotai to Labuan and absorb the Command Post. Meanwhile, Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF would remain at Tarakan and Advanced Headquarters RAAF Command would remain at Morotai.¹⁷ RAAF Command was on the same relative level as 1st Australian Corps, and 1st TAF was on the same relative level as 9th Division.

For the RAAF, 1st TAF was the main force, with Australian Commands in North Western Area¹⁸ and Western Area¹⁹ in support, and Northern Area in reserve (but continuing active local operations in Northern Area). 13th Air Force was placed in support of RAAF Command, and bomber groups Nos 90 and 380 from 5th Air Force were available to support 13th Air Force as necessary.²⁰ 13th Air Force retained operational control of all 13th Air Force units within the area of responsibility of RAAF Command. The whole air effort was under the direction of AOC-in-C RAAF Command. 5th Air Force bomber groups were to be used in pre-assault bombardment of Brunei Bay, while Australian heavy bomber squadrons were to neutralise enemy bases outside the range of Australian and US bombers operating from Morotai and the Philippines.

For the air campaign, three tasks were allocated to RAAF Command:²¹ firstly, to neutralise enemy resources capable of interfering in OBOE Six; secondly, to support 9th Division during the assault and consolidation phases; and thirdly, to establish air forces on Labuan Island as soon as the airfield became available.

1st TAF was to establish at the airfield on Labuan, facilities for one fighter wing (No 81 Wing, which comprised Nos 76, 77 and 82 Squadrons of Kittyhawks); one squadron of Spitfires (No 457 Squadron); one Army cooperation wing (No 83); one attack wing (No 86—Beaufighters and Mosquitoes—as well as search aircraft of No 13 Squadron, and Air Sea Rescue aircraft).²²

The air campaign was in three phases. Prior to Z-3 (7 June), air operations neutralised enemy airfields, blockaded enemy sea lanes, destroyed targets of military importance in the OA, and protected convoys en route to the OA. From Z-3 to Z-1 inclusive, air operations supported underwater demolition teams, protected naval forces in the OA, protected convoys en route to the OA, provided fighter defence of the OA, destroyed targets of military importance in the OA, and provided air observation to locate targets for Naval Gunfire Support (NGS). From Z-Day (10 June), air operations provided direct air support, convoy protection, and fighter defence of the OA.

Phase One

(Prior to 7 June) During the pre-assault bombing phase, attacks were directed against Jesselton, Sibul, Bintulu, Kuching, Keningau, Brunei, Brooketon, Miri, Seria, and Pontianak.²³

On 3 May, Victoria town on Labuan Island and Brooketon were attacked by Lightnings, Venturas and Mitchells.²⁴ Targets included buildings, barges and small shipping. Two days later the first attack (with napalm) occurred in the Miri-Seria area and on 12 May, the first attacks against targets on Muara Island were conducted (also with napalm). On the 12th, the RDF station on Labuan was destroyed by P.38 Lightnings.

On 15 May, Liberators of No 82 Wing bombed Manggar (for OBOE Two) and also dropped leaflets—their main task until then had been to strike targets in Sulawesi, such as Kendari and Menado. They were also to operate air observer aircraft from Palawan in the Philippines. In early June, Nos 21 and 24 Squadrons moved to Morotai, followed later by No 23 Squadron.²⁵ A detachment of 21 Squadron was based at Palawan (which had been captured in February) to support the Labuan Island and Brunei Bay operations.²⁶

Targets on the north-west and north-east coasts of Borneo were attacked for 15 to 20 days prior to the landings. Priority was afforded airfields throughout the Sulawesi-Borneo area from 7 June. For two nights prior to 10 June, nine aircraft patrolled the areas.

North Western Area (NWA) and Western Area squadrons (both flying from Australia) attacked eastern Java and southern Sulawesi to support OBOE Six. NWA aircraft also laid mines and maintained an air blockade of Macassar Strait, Celebes, Arafura, Timor, Banda and Flores Seas.²⁷ The Catalinas mined Surabaya harbour and Banka Strait. Airfields at Malang (in Java) and many others on Sulawesi were attacked by Catalinas and Liberators. No 20 Squadron Catalinas mined Hong Kong harbour on the night of 1 June.

No 25 squadron, which had supported the lead up to OBOE One, did not fly at all in May due to spares and maintenance problems; not the least problem being the remoteness of Cunderdin and Corunna Downs in north-western Australia from facilities on the east coast of Australia.²⁸ In June, the squadron resumed flying in support of the Labuan and Brunei Bay landings.

1st TAF Beaufighters and Kittyhawks, flying from Sanga Sanga started operating over North Borneo. Sanga Sanga had to be used because Tarakan airfield was still not operable. Parking areas had to be extended prior to Nos 22, 30 and 31 Beaufighter Squadrons deploying to Sanga Sanga, which delayed operations.

On 3 June, six Beaufighters of No 30 Squadron strafed oil tanks at Bangsal, oil derricks and buildings, while six Beaufighters of No 22 Squadron attacked Brunei town, scoring direct hits on buildings. No 76 Squadron, operating Beaufighters and Kitty-hawks, attacked reinforcement routes near Jesselton. The effect of these attacks could not be determined due to the heavy jungle.

There should be little doubt that the preliminary air bombardment that started on 3 May was successful and contributed to the unopposed nature of the landings. A total of 507 sorties was flown in the OA.²⁹ Due to the unavailability of Tarakan and delays in establishing RAAF Beaufighters at Sanga Sanga, a 'material loss of effort' was suffered;³⁰ indeed, the Beaufighters were not able to begin operations until 3 June.

The accuracy of the air bombardment during this phase can be attested by the fact that piers and docks, which were restricted targets, were not damaged, despite the destruction of targets in their immediate vicinity. Bombing attacks extended to Pelong Rock, Brunei Town and Weston throughout May and on the 30th, the Tagai sawmill was extensively damaged. On 5 June, the runway at Timbalai was hit by Liberators. Coastal defences at Brunei Bluff were attacked on 6 June.

In the Miri-Seria area, the Miri airfield was attacked several times, as was the township. Barracks and defences at Seria and Lutong were hit and oil fires started in the refinery. Buildings at Beaufort and Kuala Belait were destroyed. Four Beaufighters destroyed a bridge over the Padas River on 4 June.

Attacks against airfields were not confined to the airstrips, but also included attacks on personnel, supply areas and other airfield facilities in the vicinity. Radar installations and nearby towns were also attacked. RAAF Liberators and 13th Air Force Liberators, Mitchells and Lightnings flew 948 sorties against airfield targets.³¹ Another 216 sorties³² were flown between 15 May and 11 June, with attacks conducted against ships, docks and waterfront areas.

Despite the difficulty in ascertaining the direct effects of bombing Japanese reinforcement areas and concentration points, the OA was not reinforced and thus the missions were deemed a success.³³ The area from Miri to Kudat and east to Tawao was also attacked. In all, 1,414 sorties were flown against Japanese reinforcement routes.³⁴ Pre-assault bombardment had been running from 3 May to 5 June. From 5 June, the intensity of bombing increased substantially. At the end of phase one, a total of 3,088 sorties had been flown.³⁵

Phase Two (7-9 June)

The amphibious assaults were preceded by minesweeping operations and air and naval bombardment from 7 June. Spotting for NGS was provided by a Kingfisher and six Mitchells of 13th Air Force over the Brunei area, while Beaufighters carried out similar duties over Labuan.

During phase two, air operations were well-executed, and correct reporting procedures were followed on all but two occasions. Aircraft were to be equipped with standard Target Designator Grid maps. On 7 June, the Liberator crews did not carry the standard maps and had to report to CSA in latitude and longitude, which made coordination with NGS difficult. On the next day, 13th Air Force Liberators bombed targets in the immediate vicinity of underwater demolition teams. The aircraft failed to indicate their presence and did not obtain CSA's permission to prosecute the attacks. This was in direct contravention of standing orders (referred to earlier by AVM Bostock). The after-action report indicates 'appropriate action has been taken to prevent a recurrence'.³⁶

No 77 Wing Beaufighters provided on-call support over the OA: one task was to cover the underwater demolition teams that were clearing obstacles prior to the landing. The teams were working within 100 metres of Japanese forces who were attacked successfully by the Beaufighters.³⁷ The procedures for CSA to call in Beaufighter strikes to support the underwater demolition teams were not fully understood aboard the Advanced Headquarters ship which wasted some of the air effort. On 9 June, during a four-ship attack on Beaufort, No 30 Squadron lost a Beaufighter.³⁸

Fighter defence of the OA by 13th Air Force Lightnings from Palawan was very good. Once the aircraft had been relieved on-station, they strafed specific targets just prior to their departure from the OA. In particular, barges and installations were attacked in this manner.

The success of the Support Air Observers was such that the after-action report remarked on their accuracy and their reliable reports, and commented that 'their presence in the area was fully justified'.³⁹ Their main tasks were to search for enemy ground movement and forces, reconnoitre reinforcement and withdrawal routes, search for enemy barges and suicide craft, and direct fighter and strike aircraft that had been diverted from previously briefed targets.

Phase Three (From 10 June)

Simultaneous landings were made on 10 June in the Muara-Brooketon area using 20th Brigade (White Beach on Muara Island at 0915 and Green Beach on Brunei Bluff at 0918) and on Labuan Island using 24th Brigade (Brown Beach, at 0914).⁴⁰ The landings were unopposed. In Michael Nelmes' words: 'There was no anti-aircraft fire and almost no resistance to the landing barges'.⁴¹ 2/17th Battalion crossed the peninsula from Green Beach and captured Yellow Beach at 1230.

The first air bombardment on assault day involved six 13th Air Force and two RAAF squadrons of Liberators (seven aircraft from No 23 Squadron and seven aircraft from Nos 21/24 Squadrons). The aircraft dropped anti-personnel bombs immediately behind the beach-heads. The RAAF Liberators bombed from 7,000 feet, just before 0800, with all bombs except three hitting their targets.⁴² Due to mechanical problems with the leading bomb aimer's bombsight, one squadron was unable to bomb; however, once the problem had been rectified, the squadron bombed an alternative target. Another Liberator conducted pre-assault reconnaissance of Brown Beach to determine the extent of enemy resistance—there was none on the beach.

1st TAF Beaufighters and 13th Air Force Mitchells provided direct air support over the Australian soldiers after the landings. Aircraft maintained Combat Air Patrol (CAP) between 0800 and 1600 hours daily, in flights of six. The Beaufighters were relieved every 90 minutes and the Mitchells every two hours.

While these aircraft had been tasked to provide Close Air Support (CAIRS), the light opposition on the ground allowed the aircraft to be redirected on to secondary targets. They were used (in similar fashion to the Lightnings in phase two) to attack staging points along the Japanese reinforcement routes. For example, No 31 Squadron Beaufighters attacked barracks and roads and a railway bridge at Papar.

At no time did any aircraft leave the OA with unexpended bombs or ammunition that had been allocated for use within the OA, as had happened at Tarakan. In particular, the use of Beaufighters resulted in the destruction of railway bridges between Weston and Papar River.

The six Beaufighters of No 77 Wing that maintained standing patrols over Labuan on 10 June eliminated many pockets of resistance and were praised by the Army for 'the accuracy, effectiveness and cooperation of their work'.⁴³

The first RAAF member ashore at Labuan was a safehand courier (just nine minutes after the assault) and at 1015, a detachment of No 5 Bomb Disposal Unit arrived to assist Army bomb disposal section in 'delousing' operations on mines, booby traps and bombs.

Air Vice-Marshal Bostock and Air Commodore Scherger were aboard the USS *Rocky Mount*. Scherger, and his two Group Captains Murdoch⁴⁴ and Duncan⁴⁵ established their command post on 10 June; the airstrip was secured that day and repair work began the next day. Weather conditions were ideal. The light opposition led the historian George Odgers to say that 'merit of the assault lay more in its excellent organisation than on the achievement of results against enemy forces'.⁴⁶

From 10 June, increasing numbers of aircraft were used for direct support as ground forces met resistance on their inland march. Some attacks were conducted within 100 metres of forward positions of friendly forces, yet there were no casualties from air attack during this period. Beaufighters and Mitchells on air alert demonstrated the value of air power when closely coordinated with the ground commander's plan.

During the first three days of the landings and subsequent operations, Army Air Liaison Officers, flying in RAAF Liberators, provided a description of the battle and continual updates on enemy and Allied force dispositions.

Muara Island and Brooketon were captured on the 10th, and Brunei town was captured on the evening of 13 June. Ten days later, 2/13 Battalion landed unopposed at Lutong and occupied Miri. Several beachheads were secured subsequently at Mempakul, Sabang and Kibidang in the move towards Beaufort.⁴⁷ By 27 June, Beaufort had been captured by the Australians. Japanese counterattacks were repulsed and from 6 July, the Australians advanced northward, capturing Papar on the 12th.

Just before Miri was captured by 2/13 Battalion, over 100 Indian POWs were killed at Kuala Belait. Despite the capture of Miri, the Japanese were not far away and after the general surrender by Japan, another 28 civilian hostages, who were held just outside Miri, were shot.⁴⁸ Reports indicate that there were still others who were executed. In fact, the Japanese were forced to exhume the bodies and take them to Miri. Subsequently, a day of public mourning took place, involving an Australian Christian, a Moslem Haji, an Indian and a Chinese—such had been the diverse nature of the hostages who were executed.⁴⁹ Another grim tale to emerge—this time from Jesselton—was that because local Chinese had caused the death of 40 Japanese troops just outside the town, some 1,000 local inhabitants, including women and children, were massacred in retaliation.⁵⁰

Naval and air opposition was always expected to be minimal to negligible, and on the ground, only 650 troops were expected on Labuan. In addition, 1,550 ground troops were expected around Seria and Miri, and 6,600 around Jesselton.⁵¹ These estimates and predictions proved to be highly accurate. For example, during the landings on 10 June, only one Japanese aircraft interfered—dropping one bomb which missed a landing craft.

With the invasion of Balikpapan drawing near, 13th Air Force Lightnings had to deploy to Sanga Sanga. Thus, three days into OBOE Six, No 77 Wing Beaufighters and No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks had to move to Morotai to make room for the Lightnings. The RAAF aircraft were supposed to move to Tarakan, but it was still not ready. As a consequence, CAIRS had to be provided by 13th Air Force aircraft from Palawan Island during the fourth day. One aspect of the 13th Air Force provision of CAIRS was that the aircraft remained on ground alert at Palawan until requested by CSA to prosecute a strike.⁵²

On 17 June, No 76 Squadron aircraft landed at Labuan and began operations the next day. The two aircraft destroyed two enemy aircraft on the ground at Keningau.⁵³ Twelve Spitfires of No 457 Squadron left Morotai on 17 June, refuelled at Zamboanga and landed at Palawan. They landed at Labuan the next day, with two crashing on the rough strip. The remaining aircraft began operations on 19 June, the same day that Auster reconnaissance aircraft provided much needed assistance to the Army operations at Labuan, Weston and Beaufort.

Six Austers of No 16 AOP (Air Observation Post) had been with the main convoy—the intention being to assemble them on the beach at Labuan, for immediate operations. They were on the beach by 1800 hours on the 10th. Work began on a temporary strip about 400 metres from the beach and the aircraft were assembled by 1600 on 11 June. Unfortunately, the 2/7th Field Company engineers were given a higher priority task than making ready an airstrip. They had to repair road surfaces that had been destroyed by retreating Japanese troops. Yet, the Army engineers were still able to prepare the strip rapidly and at 1440 hours on 12 June, the first Auster took-off.

Three RAAF personnel accompanied the assault forces at Muara Island to conduct a ground reconnaissance for an airstrip for the Austers. However, the overwhelming success of the Army in its advance to Brooketon, negated that and a site was selected and prepared at Brooketon instead. (It was ready on 11 June, after only one and a half hours work.) Austers began operations from Brooketon on the 13th. On 17 June, the Brunei strip was ready and the two Labuan Austers that were operating from Brooketon were moved to Brunei.

Japanese aircraft approached Labuan on the nights of 13-14 and 14-15 June, and both were shot down, one in air-to-air combat (by an American night fighter) and one by AA guns. On 20 June, two Spitfires of No 457 Squadron engaged in the squadron's first air combat since 1943, and shot down a Dinah, east of Labuan.⁵⁴ The Dinah was a Mitsubishi Ki-46 Type 100 Command Reconnaissance aircraft.⁵⁵

On Labuan, the Japanese occupied bunkers, trenches and tunnels in a heavy jungle area and along a ridge. On 16 June, the positions were attacked heavily by air, naval and artillery bombardment. This continued on 17 and 18 June, until the 19th when Mitchell bombers in low-level attacks dropped Napalm and 500 pound High Explosive bombs. That night the enemy staged a break-out from their defensive positions, and mounted several suicide attacks. Before dawn on 21 June, 100 Japanese, each with an already fused aerial bomb, made their way towards the airfield and beach areas. Several skirmishes resulted, but all Japanese were either killed or captured by 0730, and by 1300 hours the remainder of the Japanese in the defensive pocket were routed. In the skirmishes at the airfield and on the beach, 14 Allied personnel were killed and 24 wounded. The enemy lost 49 killed and one wounded. In the ensuing fight in the defensive pocket, 90 more Japanese were killed.⁵⁶

The landing at Lutong was made on the 23rd, and Miri field was captured that day. No 4 Squadron Wirraways had deployed to Labuan that same day and provided tactical reconnaissance, while Labuan Kittyhawks and Spitfires covered the Lutong landing. No 82 Squadron began operations from Labuan on 26 June, providing CAIRS; the same day that a Kittyhawk from No 76 Squadron was lost during a successful attack against a fuel dump and camouflaged huts at Keningau airfield. On 29 June, No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks again attacked the airfield and destroyed a Dinah, with its crew on board.

In the attack on Lutong, certain targets were prohibited from being attacked from the air. They included the Lutong oil refinery, the bridge over Miri River, wharves, public utilities, hospitals, churches and mosques. Additionally, the beaches were not to be cratered.⁵⁷

No 77 Squadron aircraft arrived at Labuan on 30 June and began operations on 3 July against Keningau. That day, Kittyhawks (from Nos 77 and 82 Squadrons) and Spitfires (from No 457 Squadron) strafed and bombed Sapong. From 4-6 July, Kittyhawks, Spitfires, Wirraways and Austers (of No 81 Wing) flew 230 sorties in covering 9th Division. A successful air-sea rescue (ASR) was carried out by a Catalina on 7 July, to rescue a downed Kittyhawk pilot who had been shot down the day before.⁵⁸ On 13 July, No 76 Squadron Kittyhawks attacked the Riam road and Tengoa River areas—losing their second pilot since arriving at Labuan.

No 86 (Attack) Wing was due to arrive at Labuan on 25 June, but the first aircraft did not arrive until 23 July, when the lengthening of the airstrip was completed, to cater for the Wing's Mosquitoes. No 1 Squadron Mosquitoes had been trained in low-level intruder work and only took part in one operation before the war ended. No 93 Squadron Beaufighters took part in only two operations, one of which involved rocket attacks against craft at the mouth of the Tabuan River on 7 August, where one aircraft was lost.⁵⁹

The extensive nature of the air effort after 10 June can be ascertained through the following statistics. On 11 June alone, 66 Lightnings, six Venturas, 14 Liberators, 18 Mitchells and 30 Beaufighters attacked OBOE Six targets. On the next day, 24 Mitchells and 36 Beaufighters prosecuted attacks. These attacks continued until 20 June, with Kittyhawks being used from the 18th and Spitfires from the 19th.⁶⁰

On 8 August, No 82 Squadron Kittyhawks destroyed three Oscars⁶¹ that were preparing to take off from Kuching airfield. Kuching was 750 kilometres from Labuan and the Kittyhawks were airborne for four hours forty minutes, exceeding the accepted sortie duration time.⁶² That day, No 1 Squadron Mosquitoes strafed barges and barracks near Kuching, but lost an aircraft, with both aircrew killed. RAAF Command terminated offensive air operations on 14 August.

Air Support

As a result of problems experienced during the Tarakan operation, the RAAF subsequently reorganised the provision of air support. Air Support Parties (ASPs) were more suitable for attachment to Brigade Headquarters rather than to Battalion Headquarters and a smaller organisation which would be capable of operating and moving on foot was needed at the battalion level. The fluidity of battle during the early stages of an assault, with the probability of frequent enemy contacts, meant that reliable and effective communications were essential. The new organisational structure was as follows:⁶³

- Air Support Section (ASS) (as a component of the Air Formation Headquarters tasked with providing air support), would be located at the Air Formation Headquarters, which itself would be located close to the Headquarters of an Army Division. The ASS would contain 30 signals personnel plus several officers. It controlled all direct support, courier, photographic, air observer and ASR aircraft.
- Two Air Support Parties would be allocated on the basis of one ASP at each of the two Brigade Headquarters. An ASP would contain 17 signals personnel plus one officer. Officers-in-charge of ASPs would examine all requests for air support to ensure the target description was clear, bomblines were identified, and position of own troops, air-ground signals, and time-on-target were included.
- Four Air Liaison Parties (ALP) would be allocated on the basis of one ALP at each of four battalion headquarters. The ALP would consist of three signals personnel.

This structure was based on a standard tactical deployment of an Australian infantry division. The new ALPs had to be self-contained and capable of operating for seven days without resupply, except in cases of complete breakdown or loss of two personnel.⁶⁴

On Labuan, the ASS was allocated to the 1st TAF control post, two ASPs (Nos 1 and 2) were allocated to 24th and 20th Brigades, respectively, and four ALPs (Nos 1 to 4) were allocated to the infantry battalions: 2/28, 2/43, 2/17 and 2/15 respectively.⁶⁵

Air support requests followed the standard format, which included grid reference, target description, timing, position of friendly troops and special instructions (such as target indicators, coordinating instructions, and alternative targets). Fluorescent panels were not used to indicate bomblines, but yellow fluorescent panels were used to indicate the forward position of Australian troops. This was to prevent any confusion previously associated with complex marking arrangements.

Requests for air support were originated at battalion level and passed by the ALP to the Headquarters ship prior to the establishment of ASPs ashore. Any requests that originated below battalion level were passed to Battalion Headquarters through Army signals channels. Once the ASPs were established, the requests were directed through them, and they liaised with CSA until the ASS was established within the 1st TAF Command Post (CP). The plan was for the ASS and a Mobile Telecommunications Unit (MTU) to be established quickly and to assume control for all support requests. Although the ASS was established on time, the MTU was not sufficiently mobile; consequently establishment of control over the land-based air support net was delayed.

The ALPs proved to be a welcome addition; although calls were still made for more mobility in the ASPs, to allow them to become established more quickly. The ALPs kept the Headquarters ship informed of progress of the land battle and passed, without problem, requests for support and instructions for control.

Labuan is 40 kilometres to the north of the Brunei area. Because of distances involved, two sectors had to be established and control had to be exercised separately until 1st TAF CP was established on Labuan. Transfer of direct air support control (afloat) to control (ashore) occurred as follows:

- RAAF formation leaders reported initially to CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector - aboard USS *Rocky Mount*) and 13th Air Force formation leaders reported to CSA (Afloat, Southern Sector - aboard USS *Nashville*).
- CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector) could exercise control of all direct air support formations in the OA if necessary for coordination purposes.
- CSAs (Ashore) moved from the two Headquarters ships to the two ASPs once the ASPs became operative within the two Brigades.
- CSAs (Ashore) notified their respective ships that they were ready and direct control then passed ashore; although coordinating control still remained with CSA (Afloat, Northern Sector).
- Once ready, AOC 1st TAF assumed control of all direct air support aircraft in the OA, and coordinating control passed to CSA (Ashore), within 1st TAF CP. The two CSAs established within the ASPs were then withdrawn.

Advanced Headquarters RAAF Command (Morotai) allocated targets to 13th Air Force and 1st TAF as necessary. The initial targets were prescribed and included, on Labuan Island: Japanese defensive positions, all buildings in the town area, enemy defences that could enfilade the landing beaches, the airstrip, and radar sites and also coastal defence guns which could interfere with shipping. In the Brunei-Brunei Bluff-Muara Island area, the following targets were designated: naval stores and installations, including all buildings and any underground storage facilities; coastal defence installations and any high ground defences; and all buildings in the Brooketon town area. In addition, napalm and anti-personnel bomb attacks were prosecuted on the Brooketon beachhead area.

Before 1st TAF CP was established, the two sectors still had a dedicated communications channel (referred to as Inter-Commander Support Aeroplanes) to provide coordination between the two headquarters ships. The channel malfunctioned and close coordination was always difficult until the CP began operating.

After the assault landings, all ALPs established communications within 22 minutes (with the first communicating within only seven minutes). Notwithstanding the coordination problem mentioned above, the Headquarters ships exercised satisfactory control of all strikes until the ASPs took over. The ASP with 24th Brigade established full communications within two hours of landing.⁶⁶

There was always going to be a delay with the ASP attached to 20th Brigade, due to the need to offload vehicles on Muara Island for transshipment to Brooketon. The ASP did not land until 1700 on the 10th, due to problems with the LST (first, the anchor jammed in coral and second, the LST became grounded on a sandbank). Consequently, the Air Support Officer established a limited capability to link the ALPs with the USS *Nashville* (Headquarters ship Southern Sector). The ASP finally reached Brigade Headquarters at 1600 on 11 June, and was fully operable by dawn on the following day.

Meanwhile, the ASS accompanied the Divisional Headquarters ashore at 1730 on 10 June and became operable by 0730 hours the next day—almost 24 hours ahead of the ASP in the southern sector. Due to several relocations of the divisional headquarters and consequent moves by the ASS, the ASS had to close down most of its circuits and was not re-established until 1700 hours that day. Consequently, control was not passed ashore until 1100 hours on 12 June.

Due to the problems experienced by one ASP in becoming established (as discussed above), the value of ALPs for immediate operations was clearly demonstrated. The mobility of the ALPs and indeed the redundancy that they afforded the overall system was a valuable observation for the future.

The success of the Command Post notwithstanding, there was an obvious lesson for future operations. Because frequent moves of the CP may be a regular feature of operations, such as Labuan, the ASS needed to adopt different procedures. The ASS, having set up in the first

location, should remain in operation until the CP and air support communications could be re-established in the new location. In other words, half of the ASS could remain and maintain landline communications with the CP and the other half of the ASS until they became re-established. Then the first half of the ASS could join the CP. At Labuan, the CP also established communications with Headquarters 1st TAF at Morotai.

There was an RAAF concern that not all personnel involved in air support operations understood the necessity of ALPs, ASPs and the ASS providing communications to ensure support. The concern was summarised quite dramatically as: 'Those concerned should bear in mind that a decision to delay movement of any part of the Air Support organisation is tantamount to a decision to do without Direct Air Support during the period that the Air Support organisation is inoperative'.⁶⁷

Similar concerns arose over the delays experienced by No 111 MFCU, with the recommendation that 'the establishment of Fighter Control facilities ashore is a matter of urgency and the equipment of the Mobile Fighter Control Unit must be given priority to permit rapid movement when ashore'.⁶⁸

One clear breakdown was in the indication of targets. Support Air Observers (SAOs) were able to recognise targets nominated by CSA, but attack aircraft sometimes had difficulty. The SAOs complained that they should have been able to communicate with the attack aircraft to relay more accurate instructions and corrections for a second run. Procedurally, it was relatively straightforward for the SAOs to do just that, but they did not know that at the time. The SAOs simply needed to obtain approval from CSA to change frequency to the Support Air Direction frequency, and they would have been in direct communication with the attack aircraft.

Transmission with CSA South experienced considerable interference at night, leading to the conclusion that a separate night frequency was needed for long-range transmission.

Eighteen strikes were directed in four days (10-13 June) by the Air Support organisation.⁶⁹ The Beaufighters proved to be highly accurate and exercised great care in identifying the target. The Commander of 24 Brigade passed on his personal thanks to the CO and pilots of No 22 Squadron for their CAIRS efforts.⁷⁰

Ten personnel made up the Command Post Party, and once ashore moved several times until a site was allocated. As other units moved in, the CP site became too congested for any expansion or use of radio. Equipment had not arrived and the ASS was not landed until 1730 on 10 June. Thus, communications with USS *Rocky Mount* were not established until the next day. That same day, the CP/ASS moved to a more suitable site; unfortunately the site was approximately 1.5 km from 9th Division Headquarters. This meant that delays were experienced in obtaining divisional decisions on requests for air support and advice to division headquarters was delayed by up to several hours.

Senior staff officers of the CP were allocated personal call signs which improved the responsiveness of the command and control system considerably. Lack of such call signs had posed problems during OBOE One.

Recommendations that flowed from the Labuan experience were:⁷¹

- A vehicle should accompany the CP team, so that the reconnaissance party can establish a site immediately after landing.
- Additional organic transportation was required to move all the necessary equipment.
- Non-immediate personal gear should be carried in follow-up vehicles.
- Army and RAAF Headquarters should be located adjacent to one another.

Fighter Control

1st TAF Routine Order No 10 of 20 June 45 called for reports on the move to Labuan.⁷² Confusion was experienced during loading, caused by a lack of knowledge by Army loading authorities of the nature of the MFCU equipment. While No 9 Transportation and Movements Office (TMO) provided the loading orders as directed, some instructions were changed by the loading officer, which resulted in confusion and delays for the MFCU. For example, the loading officer ordered some equipment, which he considered to be non-essential, to be left at Morotai for a follow-up convoy. His argument was that it exceeded the limit of tonnage; however, the limit approved by No 9 TMO was sufficient to cover all of No 111 MFCU's equipment.

Some of the equipment left behind consisted of transit cases for radar, transmitting and other technical gear. This gear had been 'mobile-loaded' for the beach assault. However, if necessary, the gear could be packed in the transit cases and floated ashore; thus, the gear could be protectively packed if necessary. Similarly, the gear could be protected from the weather until it became operational. As a consequence of the transit cases being left at Morotai, some technical gear did deteriorate at Labuan due to exposure to weather and contact with salt water.

Another annoying point was that all equipment had been sorted and forwarded for loading in a specific order. Not only did the loading operation fail to maintain the order, but during the offloading, further mixing occurred. Moreover, some of the fragile equipment was damaged. The recommendation from No 111 MFCU was that unit personnel should be responsible for loading and unloading their own equipment.

Despite equipment shortages and delays in setting up at the allocated site (due to a battery of field guns temporarily occupying the MFCU site), the MFCU became operational in 'what was regarded as record time'.⁷³ However, the unit was forced to move several times before a permanent site was established.

Convoy cover was good; although bad weather prevented fighters from reaching the convoy on two days, but the 13th Air Force P.61 Black Widow nightfighters were on-station according to plan. Fighter cover over the OA was effective, but 13th Air Force had to provide more than planned due to the airfield problems being experienced by 1st TAF (inoperability of Tarakan and forced move from Sanga Sanga to Morotai).

On the first day of convoy cover operations, 1st TAF nightfighters left at 1835 without reason, despite the requirement to provide cover until 1900. On the following morning, dawn cover was provided 20 minutes late. One report indicates that bad weather then prevented 1st TAF aircraft from reaching the convoy to provide cover on subsequent occasions. The after-action report indicates that the unit commander considered that the operation would expose his Spitfires to unwarranted operational hazards, and on his own initiative disobeyed the Operations Instruction. The after-action report stated that: 'This instance of ignorance of the fundamental principles of discipline on the part of a senior officer is inexcusable'.⁷⁴

The time available in the OA for 13th Air Force to neutralise enemy defences was limited; yet, all specified targets were neutralised. No 81 Wing was allotted responsibility for the air defence of the Brunei Bay area from 16 June. No 111 MFCU was responsible for issuing air raid warnings, allocating responsibilities to air and ground defences, and controlling fighters until visual contact with enemy aircraft (E/A) was made. The MFCU controller had the responsibility of coordinating all air and ground defences during daylight. At night, ground defences were permitted unrestricted attack against E/A until 'mid-point' was reached, after which RAAF night fighters could intercept.⁷⁵ If RAAF aircraft were unable to reach E/A in time, they would advise No 111 MFCU which would then advise ground defences to maintain their attack.⁷⁶

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, a number of pertinent observations can be made. Alert aircraft that had completed their missions over the OA would attack targets of opportunity just prior to their departure from the OA. This demonstrated the basic understanding that having risked an aircraft and crew on a mission, it was not efficient for that aircraft to return home with unexpended weapons. The lesson of Tarakan was well-learned and at Labuan, no aircraft departed the OA with unexpended bombs or ammunition that had been allocated for use within the OA.

RAAF Beaufighters provided CAP over the landings at Labuan Island and Brunei Bay, but once the light opposition on the ground had been ascertained, the aircraft were directed on to secondary targets such as staging points along known reinforcement routes. Again, this demonstrated a flexibility of air power that saw more effective operations being conducted than those that had been planned initially. Later, small pockets of Japanese resistance were eliminated by accurate and effective air attacks.

This flexibility was demonstrated again on 10 June over Labuan, where a RAAF Liberator could not bomb its designated target due to a technical malfunction. Once the malfunction had been rectified, the aircraft attacked an alternate target. While the effects of bombing enemy forces in the jungle could not be determined, the precision of attacks around the piers and docks could be gauged. At Labuan and Brunei Bay, targets in the vicinity of piers and docks were destroyed, yet the restricted areas (piers and docks) remained unscathed. Even though bombing effectiveness could not be measured directly in jungle areas, Japanese positions, once bombed, tended not to be reinforced; hence, the bombing was deemed to be successful.

Enemy resistance on Labuan Island was met by napalm and high explosive attacks by Mitchell bombers. While these air attacks did not destroy the enemy's defensive position, it did force the Japanese to stage a break-out, and they were totally routed by Australian ground forces a little over 24 hours later.

The early bombardment (prior to the landings) was very effective, with only one enemy aircraft appearing over the landing beaches and it did not cause any damage with its bomb. The few instances of Japanese aircraft approaching during OBOE Six resulted in swift action. A US night fighter, a RAAF Spitfire and AAA claimed successes. The Spitfire 'kill' was No 457 Squadron's first air combat since 1943.

During an RAAF attack on 8 August, Kittyhawks destroyed three enemy aircraft on Kuching airfield. The attack, while important, was overshadowed by the fact that the Kittyhawks had been airborne for four hours and forty minutes, which exceeded the accepted sortie duration time. This underscores a point that aircrew are often called upon to take what may be construed as unnecessary risks. The issue that arises here is that the risk of losing aircraft and crews must be balanced against the operational value of the target.

Failure to provide convoy air cover on all occasions did not endear the air forces, especially the RAAF, to those onboard the ships in the convoy. AVM Bostock commented scathingly on one commanding officer's decision not to conduct the mission. Worse still, the CO did not advise higher authority, nor indeed, the convoy. Similarly, failure of 13th Air Force Liberators to obtain prior permission to bomb at Labuan (on 8 June) showed that problems existed with aircrew not being aware of procedures promulgated in Operations Instructions. However, the precision obtained by Beaufighters in attacking Japanese forces on the beach, who were within 100 metres of Australian underwater demolition teams, is worth noting.

The presence of ASR aircraft was welcomed by one Kittyhawk pilot who was shot down on 6 July, and rescued by a Catalina on the 7th. The importance of inspiring confidence in aircrew by providing an ASR capability has been a lesson of note from all conflicts.

Communications were again proven to be essential to minimise the 'friction of war'. Direct air support depended so much on communications and up-to-date information. Communications between ALOs and ASPs would have been beneficial, and while operations were effective and were coordinated, both coordination and effectiveness could have been improved had the Army airborne observer been in direct contact with the ASPs. Another issue worth commenting on here is that despite communications procedures and channels being laid down in operations instructions, too many mistakes occurred. It reflected a notion of 'we will fix it on the day', which is not befitting a professional force.

There was great value in having the trained Army observer airborne, as he understood the situation on the ground and was able to provide up to the minute information to CSA, to allow the CSA to better coordinate direct air support and ground force requirements. Similar value was derived from the RAAF airborne coordinator who either coordinated strike details by radio or led the strike aircraft to their targets. This is indicative of how closely controlled CAIRS and certain BAI missions need to be, to ensure effort is not wasted and friendly lives not endangered unnecessarily. The value of the Support Air Observers (or coordinators) was more pronounced in OBOE Six, which led to specific praise of their efforts in the after-action report.

Complaints were voiced after Tarakan that the Support Air Observers (SAOs) could not communicate directly with the attack aircraft, which reduced responsiveness and effectiveness. At Labuan, these same complaints were again voiced. It is amazing that it was not until after OBOE Six that the issue was clarified. Procedurally, the SAOs could communicate with the attack aircraft—they simply had to obtain approval from the CSA to change frequency to the direct air support net.

It became apparent that information of ground situations, bomblines and direct air support aircraft (formation size, weapons and time-on-target) needed to be passed continually to CSA so that a current tactical air/land picture could be maintained. This tended not to happen and CSA had to request more information continually, with the effect that information would be passed in relatively intense pulses, unnecessarily adding time pressures and undoubtedly, confusion, as large amounts of information—some routine and some priority—had to be processed in short time periods.

Despite problems with communications and information overload, as the rate of advance on the ground increased, the air support system was flexible enough for aircraft to be directed to alternative targets and handed over to different ASPs, thus gaining maximum benefit from the air effort.

Because communications posed several problems during OBOE One, planners appeared to react decisively. By the time of OBOE Six, communications orders reflected strict security guidelines, plans for jamming and deception, and an expectation that the enemy may do likewise. This did not, of course, prevent equipment from malfunctioning and so forth, but it did highlight a deliberate attempt to address the possibility of enemy-induced problems.

It seemed easier for tasks to be allocated to squadrons, rather than to mix forces. While this would have simplified procedures, it may be indicative that planners expected squadrons to have difficulty in operating too closely together. This translates to combined operations as well, where RAAF and USAAF units operated as discrete elements. Again, while this may simplify procedures, it may not be the most effective use of air assets.

As a general observation, ground forces beyond 100 metres of enemy forces under air attack were unable to capitalise on the gains from air attack. Moreover, their organic firepower could not be used in a coordinated fashion with air strikes because it was out of range. Thus, close coordination of air attack was seen to be more critical as friendly forces realised that they needed to be within 100 metres of the enemy positions that were being attacked from the air. Perhaps, the lesson from this is that if air attack is not likely to be concentrated or lethal enough to destroy or rout an enemy, it would seem more appropriate for ground forces to hold their position and 'take on' the enemy. In other words, if friendly ground forces are in a

winning position, it may not be advisable to call in air attack. However, should they be in danger of being overrun, it would seem sensible to withdraw and call in concentrated air strikes.

The resistance of enemy forces inland of Brunei Bay was more significant than had been encountered before and CAIRS missions had to be conducted within 100 metres of friendly troops. It is testament to the accuracy and overall success of the air/land organisation that there were no friendly casualties from air attack. Indeed, the whole OBOE Six operation was testament to an improved air/land coordination which had to be tied to the experience gleaned in taking Tarakan the previous month and virtually minute to minute experience from the current operation. There should be little doubt that rehearsals are a significant force multiplier. In this case, an earlier operation provided the ideal rehearsal.

The reorganisation of air support parties after Tarakan did show that the RAAF could respond at short notice to improved organisational arrangements. Formation of ALPs allowed the RAAF to be more responsive to the fluidity of the situation on the ground, and afforded greater mobility.

So successful was the Labuan-Brunei Bay operation on 10 June that the 1st TAF CP was ashore and the airfield secured that same day. When problems were experienced at Brooketon, when the second ASP was delayed in setting up, ingenuity came to the fore. The Air Support Officer established a limited capability between his ALPs and the USS *Nashville*, which allowed operations to continue for the two days until the ASP was fully operable.

Collocation of Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF and Brigade Headquarters was a continual problem. Even after the obvious lessons for collocation at Tarakan, the CP/ASS was separated from Division Headquarters by 1.5 km, which delayed requests for air support from the Division Headquarters, and delayed the passing of vital advice from the CP/ASS to the Division Headquarters. Allocation of individual call signs to CP senior staff improved responsiveness—another lesson that had been learnt from Tarakan, but this one was applied.

Site locations also posed problems at Labuan-Brunei Bay. Incredibly, the divisional headquarters relocated several times which meant that the ASS had to close down, open again, close down, and so on. Control did not pass ashore until 1100 hours on 12 June, despite the ASS being ashore by 1730 on the 10th and fully operable by 0730 on the 11th. This provided a valuable lesson for the future, such that an ASS, once set up, should remain in operation until new circuits can be established at a new location. While this would reduce capacity by one-half, it would provide access to an ASS all the time.

Even at Labuan-Brunei Bay, there was still confusion that the MFCU, the ASS, ASPs and ALPs were all fundamental to effective air support being provided. It was still not realised, even after Tarakan, that these units had to have priority in setting-up their equipment—they required rapid movement to their sites. No 11 MFCU experienced several moves during OBOE Six, and had cause to complain about loading procedures at Morotai.

Endnotes

1. George Odgers, *Air War Against Japan 1943-1945*, Australian War Memorial, 1957, p 433.
2. Jesselton is now known as Kota Kinabalu.
3. Oil producing fields were at Miri and Seria, with a refinery at Lutong.
4. Air distances in kilometres to Brunei Bay are as follows: Balikpapan - 650, Tarakan - 300, Morotai - 1450, Sanga Sanga - 480, and Miri - 100. Road distances from Miri (in kilometres) were: to Lutong - 15, Seria - 67, and Brunei - 155.
5. Report of OBOE Six Operation, Morotai, June 1945, signed by AVM Bostock, p 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, p 3.
8. 26th Brigade Group was at Tarakan. This left 20th and 24th Brigades for OBOE Six.
9. EG Keogh, *The South- West Pacific 1941-45*, Grayflower Productions, Melbourne, 1965, p 444.
10. See the map of Labuan Island/Brunei Bay for location of all beaches.
11. Refer to Appendix B to 1st TAF Operations Order 1/1945, Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
12. The Commander Support Aircraft, whether afloat or ashore, had operational control of all aircraft in the Objective Area, and was in direct communications with all aircraft tasked with providing direct support.
13. CSAs (Afloat) were on board the command ships USS Rocky Mount (northern sector) and USS Nashville (southern sector). Once the 1st TAF Command Post, under Air Commodore Scherger, was established ashore. It assumed control of all direct support aircraft.
14. An Air Support Party was allocated to each Brigade Headquarters, and is explained in more detail later.
15. See 1st TAF Operations Order 1/1945, p 6.
16. In the Lutong landing, which occurred at 0930 on 23 June, command passed to CO 2 /13 Battalion. The Lutong landing is discussed later.
17. Headquarters RAAF Command remained in Brisbane.
18. No 23 Squadron from Darwin, Northern Territory.
19. No 25 Squadron from Cunderdin, Western Australia.
20. At this stage, the United States of America did not have a separate air force. The USAF was not formed until 1947. 5th and 13th Air Forces operated as units of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF).
21. George Odgers, p 466.
22. Ibid, pp 466-467.
23. Ibid, p 468. See both maps. Other areas were attacked, but only these listed were specifically in preparation for OBOE Six.
24. Ibid.
25. Michael V Nelmes, *Tocumwal to Tarakan: Australians and the Consolidated B-24 Liberator*, Banner Books, Canberra, 1994, p 110.
26. Ibid, p 111.
27. Odgers, p 475.
28. Nelmes, p 127.
29. This total comprised 208 B.24 Liberator sorties, 115 B.25 Mitchell sorties, 121 P.38 Lightning sorties, 24 Ventura sorties and 39 Beaufighter sorties. The Liberator sorties were flown by 13th Air Force and 1st TAF from Morotai and Samar; the Beaufighter sorties by the 1st TAF from Sanga Sanga airfield (southern Philippines); and the remainder by 13th Air Force aircraft from Puerta Princesa airfield on Palawan Island. See OBOE Six report, p 5, in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
30. See OBOE Six report, p 5.
31. This total comprised 635 Liberator sorties, 142 Mitchell sorties and 171 Lightning sorties. See OBOE Six report, p 5.
32. This total consisted of 171 Liberator sorties, seven Mitchell sorties, 28 Lightning sorties, eight Beaufighter sorties and two P.40 sorties.
33. The concentration of Japanese forces in Jesselton was of concern as it was felt they could threaten the capture of Labuan-Brunei Bay.
34. 223 sorties by RAAF and 13th Air Force Liberators, 70 by RAAF Beaufighters and Kittyhawks, 95 sorties by USN Venturas under operational control of 13th Air Force, and 497 Mitchell and 529 Lightning sorties by 13th Air Force.
35. 1,240 Liberator sorties, 761 Mitchell sorties, 849 Lightning sorties, 119 Ventura sorties, 69 Beaufighter sorties and 50 P.40 sorties. See OBOE Six report, p 6.
36. OBOE Six report, p 7.
37. Odgers, p 469.
38. Ibid.
39. OBOE Six report, p 7.
40. Keogh, p 452.
41. Nelmes, p 111.
42. Odgers, p 470.

43. See briefing notes entitled 'Joint Operation - Brunei, Labuan', held as folio 64 in Labuan Box File. A hand-written comment indicates that General MacArthur attended the briefing.
44. Group Captain Murdoch was the Senior Air Staff Officer.
45. Group Captain Duncan was the Senior Administrative Officer.
46. Odgers, p 471.
47. Keogh, p 454.
48. Athol Moffitt, *Project Kingfisher*, Angus & Robertson, NSW, Australia, 1989, p 141.
49. Ibid, p 28.
50. Ibid, p 22.
51. Keogh, p 447.
52. Puerta Princessa airfield on Palawan Island was approximately 670 kilometres from Labuan.
53. Odgers, p 472.
54. Ibid.
55. See John Bennett, *Defeat To Victory: No 453 Squadron RAAF*, RAAF Museum, Point Cook, Victoria, 1994, p 152.
56. The Japanese position had been heavily attacked from 16 June by artillery, naval gunfire, and Mitchell bombers operating from low level.
57. See 9th Australian Division Operation Order 4 dated 17 June 45, held RAAF Historical Section.
58. Odgers, pp 473-474.
59. The two crew members found their way to safety on 20 August. For further comments on Beaufighter operations, see Chaz Bowyer, *Beaufighters at War*, Ian Allen Ltd, UK, 1976.
60. Compiled from the OBOE Six report.
61. The Oscar was a Mitsubishi Ki-43 Type 1 Fighter. See John Bennett, p 152.
62. Odgers, p 475.
63. This structure was first promulgated on 16 May 1945. See RAAF File 311.237E dated 16 May 1945, Tarakan Box File, RAAF Historical Section, Canberra.
64. This structure worked particularly well in the OBOE Six operation.
65. For the Lutong landing, air support was organised differently. One ASP was included in the order of battle of 2/13 Battalion.
66. 24th Brigade landed at Brown Beach on Labuan Island at 0914 hours.
67. OBOE Six report, p 14.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid, p 15. The breakdown was four on 10 June, six on 11 June, six on 12 June and two on 13 June.
70. See Report from No 1 ASP, appended to the overall ASS Report on Labuan, held as folio 3 in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
71. See OBOE Six Operations: TAF Command Post, folio 39 of Labuan Box File.
72. See Report entitled OBOE Six Operation, by CO No 111 MFCU to HQ 1st TAF Command Post at Labuan, on 1 July 45. Copy held as folio 74 in Labuan Box File, RAAF Historical Section.
73. Ibid, p 2.
74. OBOE Six report, p 13.
75. 'Mid-point' was a geographical position determined by Z+5 (15 June) which was used as a datum for coordinating air and ground defences.
76. The RAAF call was 'NO GO'. In cases where pilots suffered from the searchlights below, they used the call 'BLACKOUT' to cause the lights to be switched off.