THE RAAF IN THE SWPA
1942–1945

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE
HISTORY CONFERENCE 1993
The RAAF in the southwest Pacific area 1942–45.

Includes index.


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THE RAAF IN THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AREA
1942-1945

The Proceedings of the
1993 RAAF History Conference

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Papers have been printed as presented by the authors, with only minor changes to achieve some consistency in layout, spelling and terminology. The transcripts of the discussions which followed papers have been edited for relevance, clarity and brevity. Copies of the edited transcripts were sent to authors for comment before publication.

As was the case last year, my thanks are due to Mr Jeff Isaacs for his splendid sketches, which this time feature some of the RAAF’s senior commanders from the SWPA. Ms Sandi Seignarack, Corporal Andrew Morgan and Mrs Sandra Di Guglielmo provided valuable administrative support; while Pilot Officer James Telfer’s contribution in supervising the conference and assisting with these proceedings was greatly appreciated.

Alan Stephens
Air Power Studies Centre
Canberra
November 1993
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Air Marshal I.B. Gration, AO, AFC, assumed the Office of Chief of the Air Staff on 2 October 1992. He graduated from the RAAF College as a pilot in 1956 and acquired operational experience in maritime, transport and instructional flying. Staff appointments included Director of Operations in Air Force Office and Director General Joint Operations and Plans in HQADF, while before being appointed CAS he was Air Commander Australia. Air Marshal Gration is a graduate of the RAAF Staff College, the Joint Services Staff College and the Royal College of Defence Studies.

Dr Chris Coulthard-Clark is a former Army officer and public servant who is presently working as a consultant on a history of Australian Defence Industries Ltd. The author of The Third Brother: the RAAF 1921-39 (1991), he has recently completed the volume of the official war history series on the RAAF's involvement in Vietnam. He is also currently working part-time on a biography of F.H. McNamara, the only Australian air VC winner of the First World War.

Dr Alan Stephens is a senior research fellow at the Air Power Studies Centre. He is the author or editor of five books and numerous articles on Australian defence and air power, including Power Plus Attitude: Ideas, Strategy and Doctrine in the Royal Australian Air Force, 1921-1991 (1992). He is currently writing an official history of the RAAF from 1946 to 1971. Dr Stephens is a former RAAF pilot whose postings included commanding officer of No. 2 Squadron in 1980-81.

Dr David Horner is the Research Officer in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. A graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, he served as a platoon commander in Vietnam in 1971. In 1981 Dr Horner was awarded the J.G. Crawford Prize, the Australian National University's most prestigious PhD research prize. From 1985 to February 1988 he was a visiting fellow in the Department of History, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy. From 1988, until he retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel towards the end of 1990, he was a member of the Directing Staff of the Joint Services Staff College. Dr Horner is the author or editor of over fourteen books on Australian military history, strategy and defence, including Crisis of Command (1978), High Command (1982), The Commanders (1984),
SAS: Phantoms of the Jungle (1989), Duty First (1990), General Vasey's War (1992) and The Gulf Commitment (1992). He has been a consultant to various television programs and has lectured widely on military history and strategic affairs.

Dr John Mordike was formerly an officer in the Australian Army. His research has concentrated on Australian Defence policy and Army history, with the publication of one book and several articles. Recently, he has turned his attention to air power studies and is now working at the RAAF Air Power Studies Centre. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and the Universities of New England and New South Wales.

Group Captain Gary Waters has been the Director of the Air Power Studies Centre since January 1993. Other postings have included RAF Advanced Staff Course and RAAF Staff College, where he served as an instructor and then Director of Air Operations Studies. In June 1989 he was posted to the newly formed Air Power Studies Centre, where he was a principal author of the AAP 1000, The Air Power Manual. From January 1990 he was the RAAF Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, where he produced two books: RAAF Air Power Doctrine: A Collection of Contemporary Essays; and The Architect of Victory: Air Campaigns for Australia. In May 1991 he was posted back to the Air Power Studies Centre, where he undertook a study of the Gulf War and produced the book Gulf Lesson One - The Value of Air Power: Doctrinal Lessons for Australia, published in June 1992. He was employed in the Directorate of Logistics Development and Planning during 1992, where his work included the book Line Honours: Logistics Lessons of the Gulf War.

Associate Professor John McCarthy has been a Teaching Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Resident Scholar at the Australian National University, Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in History at the Faculty of Military Studies, and Associate Professor at the University College, University of New South Wales. His work includes the publication of such books as Australia and Imperial Defence 1918-39, Australian War Strategy 1939-45, and A Last Call of Empire; and numerous articles on defence and foreign policy. He was the foundation President of the Association of Historians of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy and is a member of the Australian Institute of International Affairs.
Mr Jeff Isaacs has worked in the Department of Defence in Canberra for the past nine years, specialising in military art. He has illustrated many books, including Australian Defence Heritage, Canberra Sketchbook, and the Defence Force Journal 50th Anniversary series. His paintings hang in collections in Australia and overseas.
OPENING ADDRESS

Air Marshal I.B. Gration
Chief of the Air Staff

To the many visitors who actually participated in the history we are going to discuss, to the other distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the second RAAF History conference.

Some of you may recall that this time last year one of my first public tasks as Chief of the Air Staff was to open the Inaugural RAAF History Conference. It is a great pleasure for me to open the second conference today.

This year's topic is the RAAF in the Southwest Pacific Area, 1942-45. In some respects the war in the Pacific has not always received the attention it deserves in Australia, and even within the RAAF. There have been perhaps two main reasons for the focus on Europe and North Africa. First, members of all three Australian Services had been fighting on the other side of the world for two years before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Philippines and Malaya on 8 December 1941. In particular, the RAAF's major commitment in the early years of the war was to support the Empire Air Training Scheme. Under that scheme almost 27,000 Australian aircrew eventually fought over Europe. The second reason for the attention on Europe and North Africa was that under the 'Beat Hitler First' strategy, the allies inevitably gave priority to the European theatre.

The fact remains, though, that the Pacific was the area of the most immediate concern to Australia. We should not forget that even six months after the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, which we now recognise as having curtailed Japanese air and sea power in the Pacific, the Australian War Cabinet still believed that invasion was possible. For much of 1942 it was feared that Australia's national survival was at risk from the Japanese threat. That alone surely places the war in the Southwest Pacific in its rightful context.

I am personally pleased that over the past two years several important 50th anniversaries have seen a renewed public interest in the war in the Pacific. Memorial services for and discussions on the fighting in the Coral Sea and at Midway, at Milne Bay, along the Kokoda Track and in the Bismarck Sea have attracted national attention.

The RAAF played its part in all of those battles except Midway. It also played its part, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for almost four years.
in the full range of air power campaigns which contributed to the eventual victory. That victory came at the cost of great sacrifice.

By the time the war ended in August 1945, the RAAF had become an immensely powerful force. In the Pacific alone it consisted of 52 squadrons and over 130,000 personnel. Its men and women were operating the most advanced aircraft in the world, ranging from Liberators and Mitchells to Mustangs and Mosquitos.

Today's conference will discuss the following topics: the strategies which guided the RAAF's war in the Pacific; some of the major actions; and questions of command and leadership. There will also be an assessment of how the experience in the Southwest Pacific affected the post-war Air Force.

Doubtless some of the points raised by the speakers and the questioners will be contentious. I know that our speakers will welcome lively debate in the discussion periods which will follow each presentation. I would especially invite those of you who were part of this history to participate and give us the benefit of your experiences.

While on the subject of the speakers, I'd like to acknowledge in advance their support for the RAAF through the presentations they will give today.

It only remains for me to welcome all of you to this second RAAF History Conference. I look forward to your involvement in a day which I am sure will be not only enjoyable, but also make a valuable contribution to the RAAF's recorded history.
THE RAAF IN THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AREA 1942-1945: AN OVERVIEW

Chris Coulthard-Clark

This first session of today's proceedings is intended to provide the context and broader historical setting for the papers which follow, covering specific aspects of the part played by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in the Pacific War. As background, my approach is necessarily general and diverse, but still with a view to offering some useful insights to add to our understanding of the subject of this conference.

A point worth making at the outset is that Australia's involvement in air operations against Japanese forces in the Pacific began even before Japan commenced hostilities on 8 December 1941. The presence of RAAF squadrons among British forces based in Singapore and Malaya meant that Australian airmen were engaged in monitoring shipping and other military movements which preceded Japan's multi-pronged strike. This also ensured that, when the first Japanese blow against the allies fell there, 80 minutes before the attack on the United States' Pacific Fleet base at Pearl Harbor, our airmen were among the very first personnel in action. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that the subsequent 45 months of conflict leading up to the Japanese surrender is the focus of this gathering.

The fact that four RAAF squadrons (1, 8, 21 & 453) were stationed on the Malayan peninsula, comprising roughly a quarter of the British air defence forces available there, points to another important and obvious factor worth noting. The British Empire connection, if increasingly out of favour these days, then represented a powerful and significant link for Australia with the current of world events. Precisely because of that affiliation, our country had already been in a declared state of war in Europe for the previous 27 months.

Australia's participation in the effort against Germany, and - from June 1940 - Italy as well, came as a mixed blessing in terms of preparing the country's defences against a threat closer to home. It might have been expected that this circumstance would galvanise attention to the state of the forces and free up the government's purse-strings, provide a spur to expanding the structure of the three services, and at the same time present opportunities for personnel at various levels to gain practical experience of operations. Of course, many of these things did happen, though not necessarily to the extent which might have been anticipated. And there was a down side to it all.
The period of rearmament from 1935 had seen a significant expansion of the RAAF even before the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, and the actual outbreak of war certainly accelerated the development of the service. Although plans to send an air expeditionary force to Europe were abandoned in the first months of the war, two Australian squadrons had been in action (10 in the UK and 3 in the Middle East), and a relatively small number of other Australians were serving in Royal Air Force (RAF) units. Many more Australians were being swept up in the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS), or what is better known in Canada and elsewhere as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), destined to serve in RAF squadrons until such time as those units reached a proportion of Australian Manning to warrant them being designated as 'RAAF'.

Pre-occupation back in Australia with the events of the war effort in Europe was largely understandable. Anyone who has seen issues of Air Force News (the forerunner of today's RAAF News) which appeared from 22 March 1941, cannot fail to be struck by the far-away fixation of its focus. Events in the Pacific were certainly not newsworthy in the RAAF even months before Japan's entry into the war picture. Participation in the EATS had not actually produced a wartime mentality, if only because the whole business carried much of the air of a great adventure to the young men answering what John McCarthy has described as the 'last call of empire'.

The opportunities for Australian airmen to gain combat or command experience of value back here were also meagre. While Australians certainly played a part in operations over France and subsequently during the Battle of Britain, these were primarily men who had made the RAF their career choice and were not likely to become available again for their home country's service. One of the major complaints regarding Australia's involvement in the EATS is that while Australians helped make up aircrew numbers for the RAF, the scheme offered little in the way of preparing Australians for higher command. A few RAAF officers obtained senior appointments with the RAF (A.T. Cole as AOC in Northern Ireland 1942-43, F.H. McNamara in Aden 1942-45) but these were little better than tokens since the commands concerned were not operationally important.

The conclusion must be, therefore, that Australia - and specifically the RAAF - did not receive the benefits which might have accrued to it as a service in terms of readiness, refining tactics and other techniques, or acquiring a broader human experience of the effects of actual operations. It should be noted that the RAAF was worse off than either the Australian Army or the RAN, both of which can be said to have emerged battle-hardened and sharpened from their involvement in the various campaigns fought in and around the Mediterranean during 1940-41.
By comparison, the RAAF in Australia had become essentially a vast training organisation designed to meet RAF needs through the EATS. As such, the force had only a slender combat capability to meet national defence needs closer to home. Though the Minister for Air in August 1941 trumpeted a 1600 per cent increase in Australian air power since the start of the war, the reality was that this meant little in terms of combat power. This much is disclosed by the fact that, five months later, Prime Minister John Curtin told his British counterpart that the RAAF possessed no fighter or bomber aircraft at all, and just 29 Hudsons and 14 Catalina flying boats for reconnaissance purposes. The service's other aircraft were useful for nought but training.¹

Of course, it would be easy to attribute this lamentable situation as being due to achievement of complete strategic surprise by the Japanese against somnolent European powers with interests in the Pacific. There is an element of the popular press which still portrays the US, in particular, as an unsuspecting victim of Oriental perfidy. The fact is, however, that the likelihood of Japan resorting to military action in furthering its expansionist ambitions was, in the main, fully recognised and understood. There can, therefore, be no pretence that 8 December 1941 came as an unforeseen development: at most only a tactical surprise had been sprung by the Japanese.

Not only had there been a measure of planning carried out by the allies for the contingency of Japanese aggression - for example, the 'conversations' held in Singapore in February and April 1941 between the British, Dutch and Australians, with the US represented by observers - but expectations took even more specific forms as well. What are we to make of clear indications that in September 1941 Australian Army circles were privy to an assessment that a Japanese attack was at that time three to five months away?²

In the case of the RAAF, it is now well-documented that as early as 1938 Japanese forces had been posited as the most likely adversary against which Australian air capabilities should be developed. It was, in fact, the assessment by the British Air Ministry that Australian aircraft would only face cruiser-borne reconnaissance float planes of no great speed which prompted the adoption of an armed version of the Wirraway trainer as a fighter aircraft adequate for local requirements.³ This solution was - as events proved - ridiculous in view of the development by Japan, with great secrecy, of high-

¹ J. McCarthy, A Last Call of Empire, Canberra, 1988, p.62

² See my Edge of Centre, Point Cook, 1992, p.133.

performance aircraft like the Zero fighter but the thrust of the thinking behind such choices is quite clear.

Another measure of the concern felt in Australia regarding the security trends in the Pacific can be found in the measures taken to establish local manufacture of aircraft. While the steps initiated from 1936 were frequently and truthfully justified as necessary because of Australia's inability to obtain aircraft orders from the UK, owing to the demands being made on British industry to supply the RAF's rearmament needs, this was plainly not the whole story. The other part of this equation was a long-held fear in Australian circles that, without local sources of supply for a range of defence items, this country would be defenceless in the event of a Japanese military threat.

Having recognised that the Australian defence community, the RAAF included, were not unmindful of the possibility - nor even the probability - that Japan would strike in the Pacific while Britain, France and the Netherlands were pre-occupied by the course of the war in Europe, how was it that the RAAF was so unprepared for that contingency? This is an aspect probably best taken up by another of our speakers today, but for our purposes here it is sufficient to acknowledge the influence of the very senior RAF officer imported from Britain to head the RAAF as chief of the air staff (CAS). Sir Charles Burnett's interpretation of his task in Australia as being to ensure that the needs of his own service received priority in all things plainly cannot be discounted. Again we witness the distorting effects of the European theatre.

Participation in the air war over Europe had one other effect deserving of consideration here. This concerns the relative attention given in subsequent years to Australia's effort in that theatre in comparison to the Pacific. Those who would argue that the RAAF made its pre-eminent contribution to the war effort over Europe receive great comfort from the statistics. These reveal that, of the 34,000 personnel who were killed or died in all the Australian services during the Second World War, RAAF deaths accounted for 10,200 or roughly one-third. Of the casualty total, however, only some 27,000 (about 80 per cent) were battle losses, and here the RAAF accounted for 6500 (about 25 per cent).4

When we consider that 5100 of the RAAF's combat casualties were suffered in the war in Europe (some two-thirds serving with RAF Bomber Command) and only 1300 in the conflict with Japan, we begin to appreciate the relative weight of the air effort between the theatres. In fact, judged in terms of the total numbers of personnel enlisted in

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the various services during the war (216,900 in the RAAF compared with the Army's figure of 727,200 and the RAN's 48,900), one can understand the point made by Gavin Long, Australia's official historian of this conflict, when he wrote that, relatively speaking, 'in this war it was more dangerous to serve in Bomber Command than in the infantry'.

Acknowledging the fact that the RAAF suffered its worst losses in theatres and campaigns far from this country’s Pacific base does not, however, provide an accurate or fair reflection of the importance of the struggle waged closer to Australia's shores during 1942-45. We might remember the words used by General Wavell in answering criticism by Prime Minister Churchill regarding the British defence of Somaliland in August 1940. Responding to imputations that the defenders' low casualty figures were an indication of lack of vigour, Wavell remarked that 'a big butcher's bill was not necessarily evidence of good tactics' - the troops had, he said, fought very well and hard. In the same way, we should accept that personnel losses in Europe as compared to the Pacific are an inadequate measure of the strategic stakes and the effort entailed in the two RAAF campaigns.

If the state of RAAF's home combat power was unarguably low in late 1941, this then swells enormously the scale of the task achieved in expanding its forces in the Pacific to a peak strength of 182,000 personnel in August 1944. While the figure had dropped slightly by time of war's end - in anticipation of the inevitable defeat of Japan - strength still stood at 132,000 in the Pacific theatre in August 1945. These personnel were manning more than 50 air squadrons and operating 6000 aircraft (about half being operational types and the rest trainers). Australia could quite truly be said to have emerged as a major Pacific air power at the end of this war, reputedly having the fourth largest air force in the world (after the US, USSR, and UK.).

In the course of reaching such strength, the RAAF had been obliged to make a remarkable come-back from a position of marked inferiority. Along with the British forces engaged, by February 1942 Australian air units had been expelled from the Malayan peninsula by Japanese forces demonstrating superior organisation and tactics, skill and experience, and equipment. RAAF elements withdrawn in the face of

6 The Six Years War, Canberra, 1973, p.474.
8 These figures are drawn from the War Report of the Chief of the Air Staff 3 September 1939 to 31 December 1945 to the Minister for Air, pp.7, 13, and F. Doak, Royal Australian Air Force: A Brief History, Canberra, 1981.
the enemy advance were sent to Sumatra, in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), from where they could mount further resistance as part of a joint American, British, Dutch and Australian command. This effort was also quickly swept aside, so that by the first days of March the remnants of allied air forces from the main islands of what is now Indonesia, as well as bases in outlying islands at Timor and Ambon, and from the Philippines too, had fallen back on Australia.

In the course of this lightning Japanese campaign, Australian territory - and indeed the Australian mainland itself - had come under direct attack. During January the former German colonies of New Guinea and New Britain, held by Australia under League of Nations mandate, along with the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, were attacked from the air and subsequently invaded by forces landed from the sea. The important base at Rabaul had fallen on 23 January, after a valiant but quite futile defence by the small RAAF contingent of Hudsons and Wirraways.

On 19 February Australia's main northern population centre at Darwin suffered a devastating air attack, during which the RAAF station was effectively put out of action. Other air raids followed - at Broome, Derby, Katherine, Port Hedland and Wyndham - and marked the commencement of a period of more than eighteen months in which points on the Australian mainland continued to be attacked. During March and April 1942 Australian pilots of No. 75 Squadron were involved in mounting a gallant defence of Port Moresby in the face of pressure on the Australian-administered territory of Papua.

By April 1942 the allies were in the process of reorganising and regrouping, using Australia as the principal base for continuing resistance and future springboard for an eventual strike-back against the Japanese. Australia's forces were joined with American units as part of the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) command under General Douglas MacArthur, air components coming under a commander of Allied Air Forces. During the remainder of the year, a series of hard-fought actions followed which effectively stabilised the front to Australia's north: Coral Sea, the Kokoda Trail and Milne Bay, accompanied by the landing of US Marines at Guadalcanal in August and the naval battle of the same name in November.

In this phase of operations the Allied Air Forces played a part, though by no means could it be said that they provided the winning edge. The Coral Sea naval action in early May was fought out primarily by carrier-based air power, and the Marine landings in the Solomons during early August were also mainly supported by American carriers. The success of Australian ground forces fighting along the Kokoda Trail had little to do with direct air strikes, but owed quite a lot to the aerial resupply effort. Only at Milne Bay during August-September could it said that the role undertaken by RAAF Kittyhawk squadrons
played a significant part in thwarting the attempted Japanese invasion.\(^9\)

Having weathered the grim days of 1942, by the next year the prospects for the allies were looking somewhat better. Air strength between the opposing forces was more evenly balanced, but already the Japanese side was beginning to experience logistical problems due to long lines of communication and the strains on Japan's manufacturing capacity. While the Pacific theatre remained a side-show to Europe for the Americans (though understandably not the Australians), as a result of the 'Beat Hitler First' policy, nonetheless strength had increased to the point where further limited offensives against the enemy could be undertaken.

The capture during December 1942 and January 1943 of Buna and Gona, the point from which the Japanese had attempted the overland capture of Port Moresby, allowed MacArthur to contemplate operations to push the Japanese back along the northern New Guinea coastline to their bases at Lae and Salamaua. This precipitated the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 2-4 March, one of the pivotal actions in the SWPA when a Japanese convoy from Rabaul attempting to reinforce Lae was intercepted and annihilated by units of the RAAF and US 5th Air Force.\(^{10}\)

In addition to the outstanding success and awesome display of air power in the Bismarck Sea, the Allied Air Forces played a valuable and prominent part in this phase of operations. Apart from providing transport and supporting ground forces with attacks of Japanese defensive positions and supply bases, Australian and American air units flew reconnaissance sorties, and worked to restrict the enemy's capacity to resupply his own forces while suppressing Japanese air power. Much of this effort was unspectacular, involving fairly small forces (squadrons or even sections) being sent on specific missions.

By late 1943 allied forces in the Pacific were beginning to take the upper hand in operations. Japanese forces in the islands to Australia's north were finding it increasingly difficult to resist the military pressure applied against them, and this was nowhere more true than in the air. While Australia still wrestled with problems of meeting its aircraft needs through its own manufacturing resources, or through overseas supply, the Americans continued to expand their air strength while the Japanese found they could put fewer and fewer aircraft into the skies.

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By the latter half of 1944 the Americans were invading the Philippines and central Pacific islands, taking the war ever closer to the Japanese homeland itself. While the RAAF continued building its combat forces in the hope of keeping abreast of its bigger ally, establishing the 1st Tactical Air Force in October, Australia's contribution became increasingly marginalised and irrelevant. Though the 1st TAF became a huge formation, eventually numbering over 20,000 personnel, its impact on the outcome of the Pacific War is arguable.

Excluded from the drive on the Philippines, the RAAF was assigned the task of dealing with the pockets of Japanese resistance which had been bypassed in New Guinea, New Britain and elsewhere. At the same time, RAAF units equipped with Liberator bombers were taking the war to the Japanese in the occupied NEI from bases in northern Australia. In mid-1945 Australian air forces embarked on offensive action against the Japanese in Borneo, although again the importance of these operations in shaping the outcome of the war seems marginal. In the final stages of the war in the Pacific it was American air power alone which played the key role, against firstly the Philippines and then the islands of Japan, thereby enabling the final victory to be represented as purely an American affair.

In this brief and broad account of the shape of the air war in which the RAAF found itself between 1942-45, it can perhaps already be seen that there are a number of problem areas for any student of air power wishing to come to an understanding of its lessons and importance. What have historians made of this period after all, and how much attention has it received?

Regrettably, anyone using the extent of published histories on the period as a guide to its importance is probably liable to conclude that there are more profitable fields awaiting study. While the number of published books which deal with the air war in the Pacific is steadily growing, it is still true to say that the shadow cast by Bomber Command over Europe remains longer than that of, say, 1st TAF - despite the fact that the latter ranged over an operational area not less in size than the whole of Europe.

The dismal, disjointed and often small scale of the air operations undertaken - particularly in the first year or so - also induces a feeling that there is little in this experience of air war that is particularly edifying. As a writer in this area not so long ago correctly observed, the fighting in SWPA unfortunately lacks the epic qualities, if not the drama and intensity, of the Battle of Britain or the 'thousand bomber' air raids over Germany. The Japanese bombing raids on Darwin, if a
highlight in this country's history, simply cannot complete in public imagination with, for example, the German Blitz of British cities.\textsuperscript{11}

Other factors which have shaped the way we have come to view the Pacific air war stem from the apparently secondary nature of the RAAF's involvement in it. The fact that the war can be perceived as becoming from mid-1943 more of a contest between Japan and the US alone, seems to suggest that Australia's role was essentially pointless. Later today we will hear a different side to the air operations undertaken against Borneo, but within the big picture the image of Australians being diverted onto operations to the southwest of the main line of advance on Tokyo inevitably carries an impression that our forces were being sidelined.

Certainly, too, such feelings were current even at the time. In April 1945 a group of eight officers on Morotai were prompted to take the extraordinary action of attempting to resign their commissions, ostensibly in protest over the sortie rate demanded of them at a time when targets of real importance were becoming scarce. It can hardly surprise us now if members of the RAAF, as with the Army, questioned the necessity for cleaning out pockets of resistance after the major battle front had plainly moved on.

Just as an aside it might be worthwhile to draw a parallel with the experience of our New Zealand friends in the same respect. From late 1942 the RNZAF became involved in the fighting in the Solomon Islands campaign, beginning with a section of a Hudson squadron and building the following year to two Kittyhawk fighter units. The New Zealanders actually established a group headquarters to administer all RNZAF units in the South Pacific outside the home islands, and by early 1944 this had achieved a strength of over 5000 personnel. RNZAF units took part in allied attacks on Bougainville and New Britain, and from September 1944 RNZAF units in the region were formed into a New Zealand Air Task Force (ZEAIRTF) to direct air operations in the northern Solomons. By February 1945 the RNZAF strength in the Pacific islands had grown to nearly 8000 men.\textsuperscript{12} In case we are tempted to think of the RAAF's situation as somehow unique, we might reflect on the extent to which New Zealand airmen also felt sidelined, overshadowed and unappreciated.

Finally, a reader of the RAAF's story in the period 1942-45 is brought face-to-face with a quite depressing story of blighted command relationships. The saga of the personal feud between the then-CAS, Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, and the officer heading the RAAF

\textsuperscript{11} L. Edmonds, paper to the Australian War Memorial History Conference, 3-7 July 1989.

Command within Allied Air Forces, Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock, is now so well known as to be almost legendary. The disruption caused within the service by this dismal situation, in particular the sorry impression of the RAAF which was surely created within the allied command structure in existence, again may cause some of us to wonder whether there is anything useful to be learnt from such experience. By later this morning, however, we will have heard more on this aspect and hopefully had reason to revise our ideas.

Having dwelt perhaps too long on the minus column of the ledger, let me now suggest some reasons for taking more seriously the efforts and achievements of our predecessors in the RAAF during the Pacific war. For a start, even the most negative aspects of our experience in the circumstances in which Australia found itself in 1941-42 can be salutary and instructive. The lessons we learn when everything has collapsed in an ignominious heap are even more worthwhile and beneficial than those we might be inclined to derive when everything has proceeded swimmingly - if only because the incentive not to see them repeated is so much the greater.

As Australians, we may find it slightly discomforting to realise how quickly and closely we, as a nation, were brought to a state of near helplessness through reliance on the blandishments and good intentions of seemingly powerful and steadfast friends. To give recognition to this aspect is neither to decry the importance or value of either friendships or alliances for a medium-sized power such as ourselves. It is pertinent, however, to realise that, faced with the same or similar circumstances as in 1942, Australia could yet find itself in much the same position. Though 1942 caused us to substitute the US for Britain as the object of our adoration and salvation, we have yet to see the present alliance relationship tested in quite the same way. Perhaps the real lesson from it all is that we should ensure it never is.

Before bringing to a close this overview of the RAAF effort in the Pacific war, might I suggest to you that there are other aspects to this whole subject which hitherto have received scant attention, but which are deserving of far greater historical scrutiny and study. For instance, those with an interest in furthering their knowledge of the use of air power in an Australian context might with profit take a closer look at the air operations conducted from bases within Northwestern Area.

Here we find an instance where allied air forces, predominantly Australian and - no less importantly - under the command of local officers, carried out what was almost purely an air campaign. There was no question of occupying land points in Timor and other target islands, nor even of supporting friendly land operations. The forces involved were out to hurt the enemy, and the results - considering the
comparatively small forces participating - were quite astonishing. As one of the RAAF intelligence personnel assisting in the conduct of this campaign has noted, this is a case where three-quarters of a million enemy troops were first isolated, then blockaded and finally caused to largely rot away through starvation by air warfare alone.\textsuperscript{13}

Rather than representing a mere sideshow in a big land campaign, this writer contends that what is discernible is an extraordinary example of the modern theories of air power. 'Our AIF tradition is so strong and the Australian public so little acquainted with the strategic implications of air warfare that unless great care is taken the entire significance of the NWA campaign will be missed.' Not least among the factors of significance was that this was one of the few areas where the RAAF was free to run its own show, even though the US 380th Bomber Group and RAF and Canadian units were working from here by 1945.

Another remarkable aspect in which Australian airmen became involved was the mine-laying campaign carried out by RAAF Catalina aircraft operating out of Northwest Area. Under this program, conducted between about October 1944 and June 1945, enemy harbours from Surabaya, through Macassar, Manila and Laut Strait to the waters of the Gulf of Hainan off China and Hong Kong were all mined. Here was an example of the intricate utilisation of mine-laying with submarine activity and anti-shipping strikes by aircraft - all of which combined with great effect.

In presenting this general outline of events and aspects associated with Australia's role in the Pacific, I have aimed - above all else - to prick your anticipation of the sessions which are to follow. Hopefully those of you who are serving RAAF members will see good reason to view the air war in the Pacific as more than an episode of passing historical interest.

**DISCUSSION**

**Air Marshal R.G. Funnell:** Thank you Chris, an excellent paper as always. But could I take you to task on one thing, which is to do with the broad sweep of what you were talking about. You used the term 'sideshow' twice. I'll take you up on the first one.

You refer to the Pacific war as being a sideshow in the grand scheme of things. Certainly that's the way Churchill and his senior military staff viewed the Pacific war, but I don't think that was the case with the Americans. Even before America entered the war in December '41 it had been determined that, if and when they became involved, the

\textsuperscript{13} Wing Commander S. Jamieson to G. Long, 30 June 1947, AWM 93 50/2/23/76.
primary focus would be on Europe. But at the Arcadia Conference in December '41 when that focus was reaffirmed, the terminology used was something along the lines that vital interests in the Pacific were to be preserved. As far as the US Navy was concerned, I think almost all of its carriers and battleships were stationed in the Pacific. Consider also the huge amount of American air power in the Pacific; for example, the B-29s, the Super fortresses, which were never destined for the European Theatre. Throughout the war, I think American senior military staff were always pressing to have more forces allocated to the Pacific than the British would have preferred. So I don't think it was quite the sideshow for the Americans that you have suggested.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I take the point you're making, but I think Admiral King - the Commander-in-Chief of the US Navy - estimated that only about 15% of the allies' war effort was going to the Pacific Theatre, the rest went to Europe. So although the quantity of material in aggregate was large, and you're right about the proportion of carriers and types of aircraft, I think my observation about the grand strategy holds. I think the context in which I was using 'sideshow' tended to be the later period, where our forces were being left behind while the Americans advanced to the Philippines. I don't think we like to feel we were pushed into the sideshow role, but I think it's a reasonable description.

**Air Commodore D. Bowden:** Thank you for your introduction to this topic. I'm interested in the fact that you did not mention the role that radar played in these campaigns. We talk about squadrons and air power and things like that, but today it's very obvious from my perspective that the total system is what counts. That means command and control, intelligence, surveillance, and the ability of the aircrew to do their job. Was this idea of 'total' air power - of a total system - appreciated at the time? Why is it that radar, for example, doesn't get any mention as part of our developing capabilities at that time? What was the role of radar in these campaigns?

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** Could I suggest it might be more appropriate to save that, as a number of our speakers will deal with operations. I was attempting to look out over the top, to provide an overview and a theoretical framework as a lead-in to the following speakers. I certainly wasn't implying that some parts of the service were less important than others. I also didn't mention the role of women, for example, which is very politically incorrect of me these days.

**Mrs Beryl Daley:** I'm a little concerned you didn't mention the intelligence and code breaking that was so vitally important during the war.
Dr Coulthard-Clark: There's a lot of areas I could have gone into, but in a half hour talk I had to limit myself. The area I decided not to go into too far was the operational aspects because I think some of these points are sure to emerge from later papers.

Air Commodore R.V. Richardson: May I raise a broader question about intelligence. I've always been puzzled by the apparent complete lack of knowledge of Japanese technical capabilities; aircraft, ships, submarines. It almost seems as though no one had any access to Japan. I can't believe that they really were so completely closed that it was impossible to discover that they were developing aircraft, ships and submarines of that capability.

Dr Coulthard-Clark: In fact the Japanese were incredibly security conscious. For example, until allied forces off Savo Island were blasted by a Japanese striking force, we had no real idea of Japanese night fighting capabilities. Up until a few months before that, we'd actually been promulgating operational instructions suggesting that the Japanese didn't like fighting at night, they weren't good at it, they couldn't see and therefore we should seek to bring them to battle at night.

We also had no idea of the existence of the Japanese Long Lance torpedo, which was a weapon far superior to anything our navies had. The Japanese managed to screen these developments. They achieved that largely by keeping foreign military attaches in the dark. Even the Germans had restricted access up until 1941. The development of the Zero, for example, was kept under wraps. Yet there's no real excuse for our ignorance of the Zero because one of these aircraft was shot down in China. It was examined by technical experts who assessed that it had a long range since it had been accompanying bombers with a range of about 1500 miles. This information was sent to the United States, where analysts said it couldn't possibly be true and rejected it.

I think we are up against an attitude of incredible apathy, an attitude which held the Japanese in contempt to a large extent. So there were failures of intelligence and there were failures to come to grip with the realities of what was actually going on.

Group Captain H.C. Plenty: Do you have any information that about six months before the Japanese attacked, a Zero made a forced landing in China, where they were being used against the Chinese Air Force, and the information on it was sent back to the UK Air Ministry, where allegedly it was just put aside and filed. I suppose it was just dismissed, as you said. I was one of the first blokes to be greeted by the Zeros in December 1941. We had been told by British Intelligence that the Japanese had no fighter aircraft that could overtake a Hudson. To cut a long story short, the first time I was chased by Zeros, my gunner kept saying 'they're gaining on us, they're gaining
on us, more throttle, they’re still gaining on us’, until eventually of course the bullets started to go past. The point is, can you confirm that the Zero which force landed in China was examined and the information sent back to the Air Ministry? In other words, it seems that the Brits withheld some intelligence.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I’m not quite sure how information was handled within the British system. I am aware of the way it was mishandled in the American system, where there was access to the same information. Some of the Australian forces were also culpable in some respects. We actually had one of our RAAF Reserve officers serving as air adviser to Jiang Kai Check, so we were in a position to observe the Japanese performance over China. But we failed to capitalise on that intelligence windfall. Although the officer concerned, Garnet Malley, was writing back to our chief of the air staff, we did not really take advantage of a link that could have provided us with information about Japanese capabilities. The Japanese, though, held back some of their best aircraft types in China. Even though they gave a lot of their equipment a test run over China, and improved their tactics, they did not make great use of some of their best equipment. Certainly the Zero you mentioned was a great windfall which was grossly mishandled.

**Dr David Horner:** Chris, I was interested in the 'plus' side of the ledger you mentioned towards the end of your lecture. I also agree completely with your comments about the Northwestern Area. I think there are other areas of the 'plus' side you might have mentioned - and this relates to the comments of Air Commodore Bowden and Beryl Daley - and that is that a whole infrastructure was developed in Australia and the Islands during the period from 1942 to 1945. A lot of this had to be developed from scratch, and much of it would have carried over into the post-war period. Things such as the logistics of moving supplies and material to forward bases, problems of operating from remote airfields, the problems of repairing and maintaining planes in the tropics, the problems of setting up radar systems and other sorts of electronic systems. The integration of intelligence, not just the code breaking referred to by Beryl Daley, but the setting up of intelligence systems, intelligence centres around the place and so on. In that sense there is a whole range of factors which may well be put on the 'plus' side of the ledger.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I’d agree with that. I could also have mentioned the establishment of the Navy’s Coast Watcher network, which had immense intelligence value for the air forces as well. In operations in the Solomons we were receiving regular warnings of Japanese aircraft movements to attack our forces, which enabled fighters to be scrambled. I might also have mentioned the pre-war system of advanced operational bases that were established throughout the
northern islands. Again, it indicates the amount of preplanning that had gone into the possibility of a Japanese threat.

**Wing Commander Barry Sutherland:** Chris, you spoke on command and control and the Jones-Bostock affair. I think before that, General Kenney's predecessor had intended integrating his command structure with USAAF and RAAF officers in alternating layers. Kenney I believe dismissed that proposal and went his own way.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I'm getting the nod from David Horner, I'm sure that's a question he will address later this morning.

**Mr George Odgers:** I had the privilege of writing one of the official volumes of the air war. I'm very taken with the references to Rabaul. Rabaul was definitely the big strategic bastion, it stood in the way of the advance in the Pacific. South Pacific Command and Southwest Pacific Command were heading toward it in parallel drives. You come to February 1944 and two things happened. The Japanese combined fleet left Truk; and in Rabaul the last fighters - the Japanese air defence - moved out. That was the end of Rabaul. But the significant thing about that strategic victory - and it was the big one in the offensive phase of the war - was that not one shot was fired by an infantry rifleman in the victory. It was air power. There was the US 5th Air Force, there was the RAAF, there was the South Pacific Air Force, there were American carrier aircraft, and they hammered Rabaul for weeks and weeks, so that Rabaul gave up and just died.

**Wing Commander Mark Lax:** More of an observation than a question. It's interesting that we were left to mop up Japanese pockets in the southern part of the Islands, probably got as far north as Borneo, yet almost immediately the war ended in August '45, Australian air units were despatched to Japan to form part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces. Surprisingly, where the military imperative ended, the politics of the matter took over.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I take your point Mark, but I think Australia had a vested interest in making sure Japan was made to pay for what we felt we suffered during the war, and we were determined to take a leading part in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. We certainly contributed a sizeable portion of air and land units to that force, and the commander. Ultimately, when others lost interest in it and withdrew, we were the pre-eminent force.

**Sir Richard Kingsland:** I'd like to thank Dr Coulthard-Clark, particularly for mentioning the mine laying operations by Catalinas which extended into the Northern Hemisphere. These were some of the toughest operations performed in World War II. The aircraft had to fly very long distances with most of their defensive armour removed to give greater range, fly through inter-tropic fronts, and then come
down into heavily defended harbours at 50 feet and drop two very large mines carried on wing racks. One pilot here today, Bill Minty, flew many of those kinds of missions; each was a remarkable feat.

I should also like to thank Dr Coulthard-Clark for mentioning the very early days of January and February 1942, when the Japanese moved into Rabaul. At that time Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons’ Catalinas were used in the most unlikely role of bombers. In parallel, the Hudsons of No. 32 Squadron performed remarkable feats. Then 75 fighters were rushed in and were progressively wiped out. These squadrons and others did so much that in my mind it was a Battle of Britain kind of achievement; holding the line, while giving the Japanese the false impression of greater air strength.

**Flight Lieutenant Bill Minty:** I was glad to hear Chris make that statement about the mine laying. I was also glad to hear Sir Richard Kingsland make his comments. Both these statements relate to this question of the war in the Pacific being a sideshow. There were at least two exceptions to this sideshow that I know of, and my experience only related to the Catalinas. The Catalina mine laying operations moved up to within 500 nautical miles of mainland Japan and continued until June 1945. I think the point here is that the Americans appreciated that we had a high level of navigational skills and we could lay those mines with an accuracy of plus or minus 10 yards. The other point I’d make in relation to a sideshow is that some of the Catalinas brought out towards the second half of the war were fitted with wheels to operate as air-sea rescue aircraft. Those aircraft continued, not as a sideshow, but as a complement to American forces by covering the bombing operations by the Americans, standing by to pick up anyone shot down. So there’s those two instances where the RAAF continued right up to the front door step of Japan.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** Thank you. I feel thoroughly taken to task over having used the term ‘sideshow’. I will pick up on a point that you and Sir Richard Kingsland both made. That is the extraordinary improvisation that was necessary in the early days of 1942 as we had to make use of inappropriate equipment and half trained personnel. It’s worth bearing in mind that the Americans - who like to think of themselves as being so professional - were similarly improvising as they went along and were also using raw aircrews. It’s a comforting thought that we were all in the same boat; perhaps that’s where an alliance really springs from.

**Air Commodore G.H. Steege:** I was adjutant of 11 Squadron and went from Richmond to Port Moresby a couple of days after war broke out in 1939. I’d like to say a word or two about our first deployment from Australia.
I think the Australian Government was pretty sharp at that time because they grabbed a couple of Qantas flying boats with their crews, and a small number of staff from Richmond under Squadron Leader Jim Alexander. With an acetylene torch they cut a hole in the top of each of these Qantas boats at Rose Bay, and off we went to Port Moresby. I flew up in a Rapide. There wasn’t enough room on the boats for us. Those boats, with a couple of Seagulls which arrived a few days later, had the initial role of reconnaissance in the Southwest Pacific for the German raiders that they expected, and which in event proved to be there. We were also to assist Lieutenant Commander Eric Feldt - then based in Port Moresby - to set up a Coast Watcher organisation. The flying boats would go to out-lying islands and meet the Assistant District Officer or Patrol Officer or Plantation Manager and arrange to leave with him with a small radio set, and that was setting up a Coast Watcher organisation. This deployment was arranged in a matter of a week or so from the day war broke out in 1939, so it was a pretty smart move.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** You mention the use made of civil aviation resources. I recall interviewing a former Qantas captain who told me the number of times he photographed suspected Japanese locations in Thailand while flying on the England to Australia air route, in the course of an ordinary flight. Civil aviation certainly played its part, especially before and during the early stages of the war.

**Air Commodore J. McNaughtan:** Chris, could you tell us who drew the lines on the map that defined the Areas in the Pacific, and to what extent General MacArthur held supreme command beyond the Southwest Pacific Area. In looking at that area, it seems to me as though Australia was meant to fight in the Southwest Pacific Area because New Zealand was excluded, and you mentioned their operations in Truk, which was outside the Southwest.

**Dr Coulthard-Clark:** I’m not sure I’m the best person to answer that. I don’t know the politics of how the Areas were determined in the Pacific.

**Air Marshal Funnell:** With the second use of the term ‘sideshow’, I think you’re talking about mopping up operations more than anything else. I think we can examine the personality and the grand design of Douglas MacArthur in all this, because having fought some very successful combined operations in the move right across the north of the island of New Guinea, from Lae through Biak and beyond, MacArthur arrived at Morotai and, according to one of the histories, looked longingly to the north and said ‘That’s where I’m going’. He wanted to take American forces with him. He then finessed Blamey in the command stakes. He had Australians take over from American divisions in places like Bougainville, New Guinea and Morotai, and he was able to use US Forces in his recapture of the Philippines. As an
addition to all that of course, having got back to Luzon, he then was stalled by [General] Yamashita for eight months and achieved not a great deal up until the time the two atomic bombs were dropped.

Dr Coulthard-Clark: With your comments there on MacArthur’s ideas and concepts, I’m surprised you still object to the term ‘sideshow’.

Air Commodore Brendan O’Loghlin: I’d like to focus on the Japanese strategic view at this stage. What is your reading of the original documents in Tokyo as to the ultimate strategic objective, and how far did it extend? There were, of course, divided opinions between the Japanese navy and army; and different parts of the army had different views. And then there was the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, which seemed to have a Japanese Imperialist flavour but encompassed only Asia and didn’t extend much further south of that. What was the grand objective from the Japanese viewpoint?

Dr Coulthard-Clark: I think in the broader picture the Japanese objective was to seize an area of resources which would preserve it or protect it against the economic sanctions applied by the United States. It was essentially a limited war, intended to grab and hold resources before US military and industrial might could be mobilised.
RAAF OPERATIONAL COMMANDERS

Alan Stephens

This paper reviews the command experiences of eight senior RAAF officers in the Southwest Pacific Area, a process which has three main objectives. First, it is the author's opinion that the RAAF's wartime commanders are not sufficiently well-known. In military aviation, popular attention usually seems to focus on the pilots and the machines rather than those responsible for planning and conducting operations. It is, however, axiomatic that if the commanders do not succeed, then it does not matter how good the men and the machines are. Second, by looking for common threads in the backgrounds and training of the commanders concerned and reviewing their achievements, perhaps some useful conclusions about the RAAF of that era may be drawn. Finally, it is healthy for any public organisation to have the performance of its leaders constructively scrutinised.

For a review of this nature, the commanders concerned ideally should have functioned at the operational level of war; that is, at the level where they could demonstrate their skill at employing armed forces in a campaign or theatre of operations in the pursuit of strategic goals. It is only at the operational level of war that a commander can display the mastery of strategy, tactics, planning, logistics, technology, psychology and leadership that in combination win campaigns. That is not really possible here. The fact is that there was only one airman who consistently exercised command at the operational level of war in the Southwest Pacific Area, and that was the USAAF officer who answered directly to General MacArthur, General George C. Kenney. Kenney, as it happens, was a master of the operational art, but that is not the subject at issue.

The RAAF leaders discussed here all commanded major formations, such as an Operational Group (OG), a Tactical Air Force (TAF), or an Area. In general they tended to work primarily at the tactical level of war, occasionally drifting up to the operational level, as did, for example, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock when he directed the 'Oboe' operations in Borneo in 1945. That 'ceiling' on the Australians' level of command invites the first conclusion.

The tactical level of war - in this case, flying missions - was conducted by wings and squadrons. The officers in charge of those wings and

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squadrons were usually experienced pilots who were for the most part more than capable of planning and conducting the missions they were given. Further, it is often suggested that from about late-1943 onwards, the RAAF was relegated to a secondary role in the SWPA as MacArthur and his American forces swept on to the Philippines and Japan, leaving the Australians to 'mop up' bypassed Japanese forces.\(^2\) The conclusion here, therefore, is that the sometimes routine and desultory nature of the RAAF's operations may have left some of its senior commanders underemployed.

It may seem a little unfair to have drawn the first conclusion without having identified the eight commanders whose careers in the SWPA will be outlined. The officers and their relevant appointments are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officer</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J.P.J. McCauley</td>
<td>Commanding Officer RAAF, RAF Station Sembawang</td>
<td>July 1941-February 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.R.W. Scherger</td>
<td>Commanding Officer RAAF Station Darwin, Commanding Officer SASO Northwestern Area, Commanding Officer No. 10 Operational Group, Commanding Officer 1st Tactical Air Force</td>
<td>October 1941-January 1942, January 1942-April 1942, November 1943-August 1944, May 1945-October 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.M. Bladin</td>
<td>AOC Northwestern Area</td>
<td>March 1942-July 1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.H. Garing</td>
<td>SASO Northern Area, Commander No. 9 Operational Group</td>
<td>May 1941-January 1942, January 1942-August 1942, August 1942-February 1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.E. Hewitt</td>
<td>AOC No. 9 Operational Group</td>
<td>February 1943-December 1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.W.F. Lukis</td>
<td>AOC Northern Area</td>
<td>May 1941-January 1942</td>
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\(^2\) The suggestion that the RAAF was relegated to the 'mopping up' role has been made by, among others, Air Marshals Sir George Jones and Sir Valston Hancock; see Alan Stephens, *Power Plus Attitude: Ideas, Strategy and Doctrine in the RAAF, 1921-91*, AGPS, Canberra, 1992, p 57, esp. fns 19 and 20.
AOC Northeastern Area, January 1942-August 1942
- AOC No. 9 Operational Group, December 1943-April 1944
- AOC Northern Command, April 1944-1945

Air Commodore A.H. Cobby
- AOC Northeastern Area, August 1942-December 1943
- AOC No. 10 Operational Group, August 1944-October 1944
- AOC 1st Tactical Air Force, October 1944-May 1945

Air Vice-Marshal W.D. Bostock
- Chief of Staff, Allied Air Forces Headquarters, April 1942-September 1942
- AOC RAAF Command, September 1942-August 1945.

The list is not exhaustive. A strong case could be made for the inclusion of several other senior commanders, notably Air Vice-Marshal A.T. Cole as AOC Northwestern Area from July 1943 to September 1944; and his replacement, Air Commodore A.M. Charlesworth, both of whom directed some of the heaviest long-range bombing missions conducted in the theatre. Time has been the enemy in restricting this list to eight individuals, who have been chosen not only for the intrinsic interest of their personal experiences, but also to try to illustrate the full range of the RAAF's fortunes in the Southwest Pacific Area.

**Group Captain John Patrick Joseph McCauley**

Group Captain McCauley was born in Sydney on 18 March 1899. He entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1916 and graduated in 1919. After spending four years in the Army, McCauley was appointed to the RAAF as a flying officer in January 1924. Some of his more significant postings including Director of Training, CO of RAAF Station Laverton and CO of No. 1 Service Flying Training School. He attended the RAF Staff College at Andover in 1933, and was one of the few pre-war RAAF officers to hold a degree, having graduated from Melbourne University as a Bachelor of Commerce in 1936. Notwithstanding his shaky reputation within the RAAF as a pilot, McCauley qualified as a flying instructor at the RAF's Central Flying School. By June 1940 he had flown a total of 858 hours. Perhaps most importantly, he had shown himself to be an informed and thoughtful planner in an organisation which did not always value those qualities.

In June 1941, Group Captain McCauley was posted to command the RAAF unit at Sembawang, Singapore, where there were two Hudson bomber/reconnaissance squadrons and two Brewster Buffalo fighter squadrons. At the time of his appointment, McCauley felt he was
pitted by some of his colleagues, who thought he was going to a
backwater where there would be no active service. The notion that
Singapore was a backwater seemed to be shared by the RAF, who
followed a very relaxed routine: for example, there was no work after
lunch. McCauley introduced a more demanding program for the
RAAF as he sought to place the preparation for war on a more
professional basis.

Just before the war in the Pacific started, McCauley was sent to the
Middle East by the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Chief Marshal
Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, to study naval co-operation, as
Sembawang was the only base in Malaya which operated maritime
reconnaissance aircraft. McCauley did not restrict himself to
examining maritime matters, taking the opportunity to talk to Tedder,
Coningham and Embly, among others, about air warfare generally.
On his return to Singapore he submitted a report which was well
received by the AOC Far East, Air Vice-Marshal C.W.H. Pulford, RAF.

As a result of his quick look at the war in Europe, McCauley made
changes at Sembawang. Passive defence and dispersal measures were
taken, an initiative which was shortly to save lives and equipment. He
personally prepared search plans used by the RAAF Hudson
reconnaissance squadrons (Nos. 1 and 8) to patrol the maritime
approaches to Malaya in their attempt to detect any Japanese advance
from Indochina well out from the coast.

McCauley also displayed a far better appreciation of the tactical
situation and the importance of control of the air than either
Brooke-Popham or Pulford. In late December 1941, McCauley attended a
conference in Singapore and was 'amazed' to hear Brooke-Popham
state that the existing air defence forces were sufficient to 'stabilise
the position in Malaya'. McCauley tried in vain to impress on the two
RAF officers the need urgently to strengthen Singapore's fighter forces.

Like the other Commonwealth forces in Malaya, the RAAF was
stunned by the speed, skill and effectiveness of the Japanese invasion

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3 Interview, Air Marshal Sir John McCauley, TRC 121/48, 1973, NLA.

4 See J.D. Balfé, War Without Glory, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1984, pp 25-6;
E.R. (Bon) Hall, Glory in Chaos, Sembawang Association, West Coburg, 1989; and

5 Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder was AOC-in-C, Middle East; Air Vice-
Marshal Arthur Coningham was Commander, Western Desert Air Force; and Air
Commodore B.E. Embly was SASO, Desert Air Force.

6 Diary, Air Commodore J.P.J. McCauley, November 1941-February 1942. Held at
RAAF Base Richmond.
which began on 8 December 1941.7 The 'shock of the Zero' was particularly bewildering for airmen who had little knowledge of Japanese capabilities. Again like the other Commonwealth forces, those RAAF units which had been deployed forward made a rapid retreat down the Malay Peninsula to the fortress of Singapore.

Once the RAAF had regrouped at Sembawang, McCauley assumed the role of a tactical air commander. At his initiative, half the guns and ammunition were removed from the Buffalos to make them 1000 lbs lighter and hopefully more competitive with the Zeros. McCauley also urged Air Vice-Marshal Pulford - unsuccessfully - to employ Combat Air Patrols (fighter aircraft which were already airborne over the area to be defended), having noted that the Japanese bombers generally appeared over Singapore at predictable times. If the RAF commanders did not always appreciate McCauley's thinking, the commander of the Australian 8th Division, Major General H. Gordon Bennett, did, commending him for the 'excellent' arrangements made to support the land forces.8

Following the fall of Singapore and the retreat to Sumatra, McCauley commanded all Commonwealth air operations from an RAF Base known as Palembang II, where he had a force of about 90 fighter and bomber/reconnaissance aircraft, including Hurricanes, Blenheims and Hudsons. Working under the most difficult conditions, with outclassed aircraft and hopelessly inadequate support, McCauley performed admirably in maintaining morale, conducting the few offensive operations that were possible, and in saving those members of the RAAF and RAF who ultimately escaped back to Australia. He was especially effective as a tactical commander after communications with his Group headquarters was lost and he was able to act on his own initiative.9 Unlike General Bennett in Singapore, McCauley stayed until the end, being one of the last to leave Palembang II.10

Air Marshal Sir Valston Hancock has reported that when Group Captain McCauley returned exhausted from the fiasco in Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, he was both incredulous at the ease of the Japanese victory and determined not to rest until he had analysed and learned from those dramatic events.11 The results of that analysis

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7 Balfe, op. cit., pp 42-5.
8 Douglas Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, pp 195, 332.
9 See Gillison, op. cit. p 395.
10 Balfe, op. cit., p 145.
11 Interview, Air Marshal Sir Valston Hancock, TRC 121/48, NLA.
were subsequently incorporated into the RAAF's doctrine and operations in the SWPA.\textsuperscript{12}

McCauley served as DCAS from June 1942 until July 1944, when he was appointed Air Commodore Operations with the 2nd Tactical Air Force, the composite air group formed in 1943 to support the land forces in the invasion of France. His responsibilities included policy for current operations, operational requirements, airfield construction and allotment, tactics, chemical warfare, and operational records. His performance was praised by the commander of the 2nd TAF, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham.

After the war, McCauley held senior posts with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan and a number of RAAF Commands. He was appointed CAS in January 1954, a position he held until 18 March 1957. Air Marshal Sir John McCauley, KBE, CB, died on 3 February 1989, aged almost 90.

**Air Commodore Frederick Rudolph William Scherger**

Air Commodore Scherger was born in Ararat on 18 May 1904. He entered RMC in 1921 and graduated at the end of 1924, winning the King's Medal for best overall academic results. Unlike McCauley he did not serve in an Army corps, instead immediately joining the RAAF as a temporary flying officer.

Scherger was perhaps the RAAF's most notable pilot and flying instructor between the wars and was regularly assessed as 'exceptional' by his supervisors.\textsuperscript{13} He was the test pilot of the first operational aircraft ever built in Australia, the Wirraway; and had accumulated 2264 flying hours by 1939, a figure considerably greater than most of the other commanders considered in this paper. Nor was his staff training neglected, as he graduated from the RAF Staff Course in 1935.

An extrovert who loved telling jokes and would often dominate conversation, Scherger has variously been described by contemporaries as 'jolly', 'pleasant' and 'cunning'; as a 'gregarious

\textsuperscript{12} loc. cit. An interesting footnote can be added to McCauley's experience in the Malaya campaign. As CAS 12 years later, Air Marshal McCauley deferred a decision on the proposed acquisition of V-bombers for the RAAF as his preference was for new fighters, and it was doubtful whether both could be afforded. McCauley's decision angered his eventual successor, Air Marshal Scherger, but it seems probable that McCauley had not forgotten the lesson of fighting without air cover in Malaya. See Stephens, \textit{op. cit.}, pp 150-1.

\textsuperscript{13} See Harry Rayner, \textit{Scherger}, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1984, pp 24-32.
self-publicist' who was 'very popular'. Unlike many of his RAAF colleagues, he often demonstrated an affinity for the American way of doing business rather than the British.

At the outbreak of war Scherger was a wing commander. He assumed command of the RAAF in Darwin as a group captain in October 1941, only weeks before the Japanese attacks on Malaya, the Philippines and Pearl Harbor. It was a difficult post. Relations between the three services in Darwin were not good. Discipline in the RAAF was poor, and was manifest in part through numerous ground and air accidents.14 Many Air Force facilities were rudimentary, while there were few satisfactory airstrips and dispersal areas outside Darwin. The only aircraft stationed permanently in the area were 18 Wirraways (so-called 'fighters') of No. 12 Squadron, and 14 Hudson reconnaissance/bombers of No. 13 Squadron.15

It was not possible to get the modern aircraft the RAAF urgently needed, but Scherger could at least attend to the detail, which he set about with his customary drive. He had the runway at Batchelor extended and strengthened to take USAAF heavy bombers and, with a Japanese landing considered likely, issued Station defence and demolition orders. Daily bayonet fighting drills were introduced for all ground staff. The commander of the USAAF's Far East Air Force, Lieutenant General Lewis H. Brereton, visited Darwin on a survey of RAAF facilities late in 1941 and was impressed by Scherger's energy and efficiency.16

On 15 January 1942 the Air Board divided the Northern Area into the Northeastern and Northwestern Areas, with the headquarters of the former in Townsville and the latter in Darwin. Air Commodore D.E.L. Wilson was appointed AOC Northwestern Area and Scherger became his Senior Air Staff Officer. When Japanese aircraft bombed Darwin five weeks later, Wilson was absent in the Netherlands East Indies and Scherger was acting AOC.

The attack was an utter disaster for the Australian armed forces. When the full extent of the chaos became known, the government appointed a Commission of Inquiry. The Commissioner, Mr Justice Lowe, found fault with each of the services. The RAAF was criticised primarily for being poorly prepared for war; and for failing to alert the


15 James D. Rorrison, Nor the Years Contemn, Palomar Publications, Brisbane, 1992, pp 9-10.

16 Rayner, op. cit., p 43.
local air defences of the approach of possibly hostile aircraft, notwithstanding ample warning.17

Given that Scherger had to accept at least some of the blame for the RAAF's woeful performance, he emerged relatively well from the Inquiry. Justice Lowe acknowledged Scherger's efforts to regroup his force and retrieve the situation once the initial damage had been done. The Commissioner concluded that Scherger had acted with 'great courage and energy' and was 'deserving of the highest praise'.18

That conclusion helped Scherger escape the opprobrium attached to the Darwin fiasco. After several staff and training appointments in the south he became the first AOC of No. 10 Operational Group when that unit was formed in November 1943.

No. 10 OG's experience in its early months tells a good deal about the RAAF's involvement in the war in the SWPA. The Group was intended to be a mobile offensive force; to be a key element in the RAAF's attempts to play a significant role in taking the war to the enemy. But the resources Scherger was given were seriously deficient in some respects, a handicap that inevitably was going to inhibit his ability to achieve results.

The striking power of the RAAF's new 'mobile offensive force' was to come from a wing of recently acquired Vultee Vengeance dive bombers. Air defence and support would be provided by a fighter wing and maintenance and administrative units. Scherger and his staff set about bringing No. 10 OG up to operational status, a task which they accomplished in the relatively short period of four months. Yet the fact was that the Vengeances were obsolescent before they arrived. They had only been sold to the RAAF because the Americans did not want them.19 Consequently, just as Scherger declared his group operational, General Kenney ordered the withdrawal of all Vengeances from the SWPA to make room for the large numbers of more modern attack aircraft which were arriving at USAAF squadrons. Scherger's was the only command affected, as the Americans had not used the Vengeance in combat in the theatre because of its inadequacies.20

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18 Quoted in Gillison, *op. cit.* p 715.


20 Odgers, *op. cit.*, pp 197-8; and Rayner, *op. cit.*, p 73.
Scherger was not the man to succumb to adversity. His group was eventually re-equipped, and he went on to become the Air Task Force Commander during the landings at Aitape and Noemfoor in mid-1944, controlling large and complex combinations of RAAF and USAAF squadrons. He was subsequently awarded the DSO for his gallantry, courage and leadership during those actions.

A car accident removed Scherger from operational command in mid-1944. He returned to active service in May 1945, taking over the 1st Tactical Air Force at the express wish of Air Vice-Marshal Bostock. In that position he directed the RAAF forces involved in the attacks on Tarakan, Labuan and Balikpapan.

Scherger emerged from the war as one of the RAAF's most experienced operational commanders. He went on to serve as AOC RAF Air Headquarters Malaya in the early 1950s, Chief of the Air Staff from March 1957 to May 1961, and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee to June 1966. He is one of only two RAAF officers to have reached the most senior post in the Australian armed services.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Rudolph William Scherger, KBE, CB, DSO, AFC, was placed on the retired list on 18 June 1966. He died on 16 January 1984, aged 79.

**Air Commodore Francis Masson Bladin**

Like McCauley and Scherger, Air Commodore Bladin was a Duntroon graduate. Born on 26 August 1898, he attended RMC from 1917 to 1920. Following graduation he served with the British and Australian Armies before his appointment to the RAAF as a flying officer in January 1923.

Bladin's postings before the war included commands at the Flying Training School, No. 1 Squadron, and Station Headquarters, Laverton. He was a quietly efficient man whose nickname of 'Dad' reflected his concern for the welfare of his men rather than a lack of drive. As the Commanding Officer of No. 1 Squadron in the mid-1930s, he demonstrated a more imaginative approach to his duties than a number of his predecessors and successors. When he took his squadron from Laverton to Cootamundra to operate in the field for two weeks in 1934, it was the first time the unit had deployed since its establishment eight years previously. His example was not emulated by any of his successors until 1939, a fact which has led Chris Coulthard-Clark to conclude that comfortable routines were a characteristic of the prewar RAAF.

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21 Powell, op. cit., p 110.

Bladin graduated from the RAF Staff Course in 1930. During his time at Andover he became one of only a handful of RAAF officers to publish an article in a professional journal in the prewar years. By June 1940 he was a group captain and had accumulated 1742 flying hours.

As Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations) under Air Chief Marshal Burnett in early 1942, Bladin was responsible for the rapid development of the RAAF’s operational bases, as well as the implementation of plans for the development of the Empire Air Training Scheme. He established cordial relations with the Americans when they arrived in the theatre.

Air Commodore Bladin assumed command of the Northwestern Area on 25 March 1942, with his headquarters in Darwin. His main task was the air defence of the Torres Straits, the Northern Territory, and the north of Western Australia, all of which were on the flank of MacArthur’s main concentrations. It was also his job to restore the Area’s morale after the shock of the Japanese air raids.

Bladin brought good leadership skills and commonsense to the challenge. He insisted on combat training, rifle shooting and route marching for all ground crew. Construction was started on urgently needed airfields for USAAF fighters. Because he knew little of the characteristics of his main defensive weapon, the P-40 Kittyhawk fighter, or the tactics its pilots would have to employ against the Zeros, Bladin wisely delegated operational control of all air defence fighter units to the American Colonel Paul Wurtsmith.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings in his current operational knowledge, Bladin was able to provide Wurtsmith with valuable advice on the pattern of Japanese air raids.

By mid- to late-1942 circumstances in the Northwestern Area had improved. There had not been a Japanese invasion; and the allied air defence system was becoming more effective. Bladin had strengthened his disposition by dispersing his forces widely from Darwin to Daly Waters; while advanced aircraft like the Beaufighter,

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23 His article appeared in the Royal Air Force Quarterly in 1931: Coulthard-Clark, op. cit., p 445. Other RAAF officers to publish on air power were Air Marshal Williams and Air Vice-Marshal W.D. Bostock and H.N. Wrigley; see Stephens, op. cit., p 36 fn 92.


26 Gillison, op. cit., p 559.
Mitchell, Spitfire and Liberator were starting to appear, as well as more Kittyhawks.

With the balance in the air war shifting, Bladin went onto the offensive. He enjoyed a good deal of autonomy in planning attacks; indeed, he was critical of Allied Air Forces Headquarters for failing to provide sufficiently clear advice on target selection.27 Regardless of that, the results apparently pleased General MacArthur. Bladin became the first Australian to be decorated in the Pacific War by the Americans when MacArthur awarded him the Silver Star in September 1942 for gallantry in action while leading a B-17 bombing raid.28 He was later awarded the CBE for his leadership in the Northwestern Area.

Bladin's growing reputation saw him selected for service in Europe. In November 1943 he was appointed SASO of No. 38 Group, RAF, where he was involved in planning the airborne landings for 'Overlord'. His contribution brought him a commendation from his RAF superiors, and he was subsequently attached to the 2nd Tactical Air Force in Normandy, where his work on the planning staff earned him an MID.

At the time the war in the Pacific ended, the RAF was planning to deploy an airborne operations group (intended to be No. 238) to the theatre, and had approached the RAAF to release Bladin to be the commander.

Bladin was promoted to substantive air vice-marshal on 1 October 1948. His post-war jobs included Chief of Staff, Headquarters, BCOF; AOC Headquarters Eastern Area; and Air Member for Personnel. He was placed on the retired list on 16 October 1953. Air Vice-Marshal Francis Bladin, CBE, MID, Silver Star (US), died on 2 February 1978.

**Group Captain William Henry Garing**

William 'Bull' Garing was an RAAF cadet at Duntroon in 1930 when the RMC was shifted to Sydney, a move intended to save money during the height of the Depression.29 He was 20 at the time, having been born in Corryong on 26 July 1910. Along with seven other RAAF cadets, Garing did not have to go to Sydney to finish his Army training, instead transferring earlier than expected to the Air Force.

Garing's career during the 1930s was notable for the experience he gained in maritime operations. By the outbreak of war he had spent


28 The raid was against Kendari aerodrome in the Celebes.

seven years with the RAAF’s seaplane squadron at Point Cook and had flown 2029 hours. In November 1938 he had become the first person in Australia to qualify for a First Class Aircraft Navigator’s Licence. Those were significant operational qualifications in a force in which flying activities too often were unprofessional.30 The emphasis on professionalism indicated by Garing’s navigation qualification cannot be overstated: to illustrate the point, in the United Kingdom in 1938-39, 478 Bomber Command crews force-landed on exercises, having lost their way.31

Flight Lieutenant Garing was in England with No. 10 Squadron when the war in Europe started, taking delivery of the RAAF’s new Short Sunderland maritime patrol aircraft. The squadron stayed in England and went on operations, instead of returning to Australia as intended. In June 1940 Garing was awarded the DFC for engaging five German bombers which were attacking the armed merchant cruiser HMS ‘Mooltan’. Later he helped rescue 45 survivors from the refugee liner the ‘City of Benares’ six days after it was torpedoed in the North Atlantic.

On his return to Australia, Garing’s operational experience was utilised in a series of important planning posts. He played a key role in establishing operations centres, which had not previously existed in the RAAF. As Senior Air Staff Officer in Northern Area Headquarters at the end of 1941, he developed reconnaissance and attack plans for the Wirraways and Hudsons stationed in New Guinea.32 When General Kenney arrived in Australia in August 1942 to assume command of the Allied Air Forces and immediately began to make sweeping changes (he was alarmed by the ‘terrible state’ of the organisation he inherited), Garing impressed the American with his energy and intelligence.33 Kenney particularly appreciated Garing’s excellent first-hand knowledge of his territory: both men understood the importance of getting out into the field and seeing things for themselves.

One aspect of Group Captain Garing’s career as a wartime commander stands out above all others. It could be argued that the RAAF had two major successes in the Southwest Pacific Area during

30 For instances of unprofessional flying and navigational practices, see Coulthard-Clark, op. cit., pp 114-18, 200, but esp. 315-50.


32 Those aircraft were operating primarily from Port Moresby, Rabaul, Salamaua, Lae and Kavieng.

World War II, the first at Milne Bay in August 1942, and the second in the Bismarck Sea in March 1943. Garing was the RAAF commander on the scene on both occasions. Strictly speaking he was the second in charge for each battle: Air Commodore A.H. Cobby was technically in charge for Milne Bay, and Air Commodore J.E. Hewitt for the Bismarck Sea. Cobby, however, was in Townsville during Milne Bay, and Hewitt arrived in New Guinea only days before the Bismarck Sea.

The conduct of those battles will be covered in detail later in this conference by Dr John Mordike. What should be said briefly at this stage is that Group Captain Garing's inspirational leadership and expert planning made a significant contribution to victory on each occasion. Many years later, General Kenney stated that Garing made it easier for General MacArthur 'to put four stars on my [Kenney's] shoulders'.

An interesting comparison between the RAAF and USAAF approaches to operational command appointments emerges at this stage. Once General MacArthur was convinced that General Kenney was the man to run the air war in the SWPA, he kept Kenney in the theatre until the job was finished in 1945. Similarly, Kenney's two right-hand men, Brigadier Generals Ennis C. Whitehead and Paul B. Wurtsmith, stayed on until the end. By contrast, Group Captain Garing headed south after the Battle of the Bismarck Sea and filled staff and flying training posts for the remainder of the war. Perhaps his relatively junior status worked to his disadvantage when there were numerous, more senior officers waiting to fulfil wartime command ambitions. Satisfying personal ambitions was not, of course, the reason the RAAF was fighting in the SWPA.

Garing's post-war jobs included AOC Overseas HQ, London, and OC of the bases at Richmond, Point Cook and Edinburgh, before retirement on 29 July 1964. Happily, Air Commodore W.H. Garing, CBE, DFC, DSc (US), is present at this conference today.

**Air Commodore Joseph Eric Hewitt**

Joseph Eric Hewitt joined the Royal Australian Navy at the age of 13 in December 1914, having been born in Tylden on 13 April 1901. He served with the RAN until the end of 1922, when he transferred on loan to the RAAF as a flight lieutenant. The transfer became permanent in April 1928.

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34 In addition to Dr Mordike's paper, see Sir Cecil Abel, *The Battle of Milne Bay: Six Key Factors that Helped Snatch Victory from Defeat*, Unpublished Paper, Copy held at the Air Power Studies Centre.
Hewitt initially specialised in flying boat operations but, following graduation from the RAF Staff Course at Andover, commanded No. 104 bomber squadron, RAF, from 1936 to 1938. His performance there was highly praised, with his departure being described as a 'great loss' for the RAF. By 1940 he had flown 1468 hours.

Hewitt was a wing commander in 1939. Promoted to group captain, he became Director of Intelligence, Allied Air Headquarters, in July 1942, first under General Brett and then General Kenney. He filled that post effectively and was appointed to the prized position of AOC No. 9 OG on 15 February 1943, succeeding Group Captain Garing. Hewitt's tenure was to be as controversial as Garing's had been successful.

Hewitt was eager to participate fully in offensive operations, believing that unless the RAAF showed it could play its part, it would be excluded by MacArthur and Kenney from the drive against the Philippines and the Japanese homeland.35 As the strength of his group grew, Hewitt began to mount large raids. An attack by five squadrons and 62 aircraft against the enemy airfield at Gasmata on 22 July was the biggest by the RAAF to that date.36 By October No. 9 Group's Kittyhawks, Beauforts, Bostons, Catalinas and Beaufighters were ranging throughout New Guinea, bombing, strafing, patrolling and harassing the Japanese by day and night. The monthly weight of bombs dropped by the RAAF in the Pacific theatre almost doubled between May and October, primarily because of the efforts of No. 9 OG.37 Hewitt regularly flew on operations as an observer to assess the effectiveness of his command.

Shortly after Hewitt took over No. 9 OG, the enemy base at Rabaul became a principal target for the AAF, as it was the springboard for Japanese attacks against allied shipping and land forces. The drive against Rabaul intensified in September as General Kenney sought to support the advance through the islands of General MacArthur and Admiral Halsey. On 12 October, the Allied Air Forces mounted the biggest air attack to date in the Pacific, hitting Rabaul with 349 aircraft, including RAAF Beaufighters.38 Rabaul was by that time a very heavily defended area, with 260 anti-aircraft guns supplemented by weapons on ships.39 Nevertheless, Kenney continued to press, with major attacks continuing throughout October and into November.


36 Odgers, op. cit., p 35.

37 ibid, p 95. 137 tons were dropped in May and 254 in October.

38 Kenney, op. cit., p 313.

The critical moment in Hewitt’s command came on the night of 8 November. As part of the campaign against Rabaul, Hewitt had planned a major RAAF attack against shipping in the harbour using 12 Beauforts from No. 8 Squadron, armed with torpedos. Other Beauforts were to bomb nearby targets to create a diversion. Hewitt attached a great deal of his and the RAAF’s reputations to the planned raid. The results would also be important to the future of the Beauforts, which had been criticised for their mediocre performance and disappointing combat results.

An afternoon reconnaissance flight reported heavy rain in the target area and a disposition of enemy ships which indicated an attack was expected. Intense, concentrated anti-aircraft fire was likely, a disturbing prospect for the Beaufort crews. Whether those circumstances justified subsequent actions can only be a matter of speculation. Regardless of any such speculation, Hewitt was placed in an invidious position when the commanding officer of No. 8 Squadron, Wing Commander G.D. Nicholl, cancelled the raid without consulting Hewitt or the Beaufort wing leader, Wing Commander B. Pelly. After some tense discussion on the airfield at Kiriwina, Nicholl’s crew and two others - nine less than the intended 12 - volunteered to go. Any chance of achieving the hoped-for spectacular success had been lost. The crew captained by Squadron O. Price was killed.

Two days later, Hewitt posted Nicholl back to Australia. However, in an extraordinary series of events, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal Jones, reinstated Nicholl and relieved Hewitt of his command, posting him back to his previous job as Director of Intelligence at AAF Headquarters. The circumstances surrounding those events are not entirely clear, but it seems as though some months previously a group captain from No. 9 OG’s headquarters staff had submitted what amounted to an adverse report on Hewitt to RAAF Headquarters. Jones himself had been concerned by what he perceived to be the poor morale and discipline among the senior staff at No. 9 OG, so he acted on his observations and the ‘adverse’ report.

Because of the circumstances of Hewitt’s dismissal, it is appropriate to conclude this brief review of his experience in the SWPA with a range of opinions on his personality and performance.

40 Air Commodore Hewitt has reported that three days before the planned RAAF strike, 23 USN carrier-borne torpedo bombers had attacked Rabaul in broad daylight. Hewitt, op. cit., p 194. qv Kenney, op. cit., pp 318-24.

41 Hewitt, op. cit. p 194; qv Odgers, op. cit., pp 100-103.

42 Odgers, op. cit., pp 102-3; and Hewitt, op. cit., pp 88, 109, 125, 165, 203.
He was not an especially popular officer with either his contemporaries or subordinates. Adjectives used to describe him often include 'abrasive', 'cocky' and 'outspoken'. He was something of a 'parade ground' disciplinarian, an approach always likely to cause friction with wartime enlistees. An account of the ill-fated Beaufort attack against Rabaul written by Wing Commander Roy Bettens is scathingly critical of Hewitt.

Yet the balance of informed, professional opinion indicates that Hewitt was a capable, aggressive operational commander. General Kenney’s right-hand man, Lieutenant General Ennis P. Whitehead, advised his chief in August 1943 that Hewitt was doing an ‘excellent job’. Two of No. 9 OG’s most experienced wing commanders, Group Captain G.H. Steege and Wing Commander B. Pelly, considered Hewitt to be probably the best senior RAAF operational commander with whom they were associated. Hewitt’s Senior Air Staff Officer, Group Captain I.D. McLachlan, and No. 9 OG’s Armament Officer, Wing Commander A.D.J. Garrison, also commented very favourably on Hewitt’s operational leadership. It is noteworthy that Steege, McLachlan and Pelly were all veterans of the North Africa campaign; that is, they were far more experienced than most of their colleagues in the SWPA. Finally, Hewitt was extremely successful in establishing good relations with his American counterparts, a quality which was essential if the RAAF were to prosper in the theatre. On numerous occasions during 1943 Hewitt had participated in discussions at AAF HQ on the future deployment and operations of the entire AAF.

General Kenney reportedly considered Hewitt’s removal as ‘bad news’, and subsequently lost a lot of interest in the RAAF. Hewitt’s replacement, Air Commodore F.W. Lukis, was not well regarded by the Americans, and it seems no coincidence that shortly after he assumed command, Lukis started to express disappointment with the roles being allocated to his group.

Air Commodore Hewitt was later formally commended by Generals Kenney and Whitehead for his leadership and for the attacks carried out against the Rabaul area between 5-10 November 1943. There is no doubt that, in combination with the Bostock/Jones scandal, the Hewitt affair damaged the RAAF’s standing in the SWPA.


46 Odgers, op. cit., p 130.
Hewitt’s career was resurrected after the war. Promoted to air vice-marshial in 1948, he became Air Member for Personnel, where he was among other things responsible for reducing the RAAF’s wartime officer strength of about 20,000 to less than one-tenth of that number. Among those placed on the retirement list during that process was Hewitt’s successor as AOC No. 9 OG, Air Commodore Lukis.

Air Vice-Marshall J.E. Hewitt, CBE, was himself eventually placed on the retired list on 14 April 1956. He became a senior executive at the International Harvester Company, and wrote two books on his military career. The first, Adversity in Success, is the only volume published by a key RAAF participant in the SWPA that both confronts some of the problems the Air Force experienced and comments on personalities. Hewitt died on 1 November 1985.

**Air Commodore Francis William Fellowes Lukis**

Francis Lukis enlisted in the AIF at the age of 18 in December 1914, having been born in Balingup on 27 July 1896. He saw action in Egypt and Palestine with the 10th Light Horse Regiment and the 3rd Light Horse Machine Gun Squadron and was mentioned in despatches. Lukis joined No. 1 Sqn AFC on 25 February 1917. He graduated as a pilot in January 1918 and served with the squadron in Palestine. When the RAAF was formed as an independent service on 31 March 1921, Flying Officer Lukis was one of the original 21 officers.

By the start of World War II Lukis was a group captain, and had commanded Nos. 1 and 3 Squadrons, Laverton and Richmond Stations, and No. 1 Flying Training School, as well as graduating from Staff College at Andover in 1931. He had 890 flying hours in his log book.

When Northern Area was formed on 8 May 1941, Lukis was appointed AOC, responsible for organising, maintaining and developing the air defences of the whole of northern Australia and the adjacent territories. The resources available were hopelessly inadequate, especially the fighter aircraft, which amounted to only a few Wirraways. Still, Lukis impressed the commander of the USAAF’s Far East Air Force, Lieutenant General L.H. Brereton, as being ‘very

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49 Lukis was the first commander of RAAF Richmond when the station was opened in 1925.
efficient and helpful' during Brereton's visit to Australia in November 1941.50

When Japan entered the war, Northern Area was divided into Northeastern and Northwestern Areas. Air Commodore Lukis became AOC Northeastern Area, responsible for the air defence of his area and RAAF operations against Japan in New Guinea, New Britain and the adjacent islands. His headquarters remained in Townsville, while Northwestern Area's headquarters were formed in Darwin.

Lukis became Air Member for Personnel on 25 August 1942 and remained there until appointed AOC No. 9 OG in December 1943 when Air Commodore Hewitt was sacked. It is Lukis's experience with No. 9 OG that makes him significant to this paper.

The nature of Hewitt's demise meant that Lukis took over No. 9 OG under difficult circumstances. Lukis's problems were exacerbated by the fact that he was poorly regarded by the Americans. Shortly after arriving in Australia, and while Lukis was AOC Northeastern Area, General Kenney had noted in his personal diary that the Australian did not seem to 'have much on the ball' and described him as 'not so hot'.51 In February 1944, General Whitehead privately expressed serious reservations about Lukis as AOC No. 9 OG, and he and Kenney considered requesting a replacement.52 It seems no coincidence that shortly after Lukis took over the group, he started to express his disappointment with the roles the RAAF was being allocated.53

This in fact marked a turning point for the RAAF in the Pacific. For some 18 months Generals MacArthur and Kenney had observed the RAAF's two most senior officers in Australia, Air Vice-Marshal Jones and Bostock, refuse to put their service's interests before their own. They had also observed the failure of Prime Minister John Curtin and Minister for Air Arthur Drakeford to resolve the crisis of command in the RAAF. If the Americans were ever predisposed to exclude their allies from the prestige of participating in the final attacks against the Japanese homeland, then the RAAF's higher command problems made the decision easy for them. Through no real fault of his own, Air Commodore Lukis's arrival at No. 9 OG coincided with the RAAF's relegation to the 'mopping up' role.

50 Romson, op. cit., p 10.


52 ibid, Vol. 8, February 1944.

53 Odgers, op. cit., p 130.
To Lukis's credit, he argued the case for the full involvement of the RAAF with the commander of the 5th Air Force, General Whitehead. In particular, Lukis expressed his concern about the increasing restiveness of his fighter pilots, who had become underemployed as Japan's air strength rapidly declined.

Lukis tried to take the initiative by mounting large operations: for example, on 17 January 1944 he sent 32 Beauforts escorted by 33 Kittyhawks and eight Spitfires to bomb an enemy target near Lindenhafen. The formation of 73 aircraft was the biggest sent by the RAAF against a single target to that time. Yet the operation only emphasised Lukis's problem. No opposition was encountered, either from air or ground. Thus, while the Beaufort crews were gainfully employed bombing their targets, apparently to good effect, for the 41 fighter pilots the raid was just another source of frustration. No. 9 OG began to be known around the RAAF as the 'Non-Ops Group'.

In April 1944, No. 9 OG was renamed 'Northern Command'. With its headquarters at Madang, the command was consigned primarily to garrison duties in New Guinea, a role which offered little prospect of major action. Circumstances had placed Lukis in an invidious position.

A substantive group captain and acting air commodore when the war finished, Lukis was placed on the retired list in 1946 when the RAAF's officer corps was reduced by about 90 per cent from its wartime peak. The Air Board dispensed with his services ostensibly because he had not taken a role commensurate with his seniority during the war, a strange accusation to make against a man who had been Air Member for Personnel and AOC of the RAAF's most important operational group in the Southwest Pacific Area.

After his discharge, Air Commodore Lukis, CBE, MID, became the manager of Trans Australian Airlines in Canberra. He died on 18 February 1966, aged 69.

\[54 \text{loc. cit.}\]

\[55 \text{See Stephens, op. cit., p 94.}\]
Air Commodore Arthur Henry Cobby

'Harry' Cobby is one of the RAAF's greatest heroes. He was 21 when he joined the Australian Flying Corps in December 1915, having been born in Prahran on 26 August 1894. He became the AFC's leading air ace, shooting down 29 enemy aircraft and 13 balloons. Air Marshal Sir George Jones flew with Cobby over the Western Front in 1918 and learned to appreciate his qualities of natural leadership, good humour and ready wit.56

Following Cobby's exceptional exploits during World War I, he, like Lukis, became a foundation member of the Air Force on 31 March 1921. Despite two postings commanding flying units and attendance at the RAF Staff College at Andover in 1928, Cobby was not entirely satisfied in the post-war air force and resigned as a wing commander in April 1936. His total flying experience then was 1186 hours.

Cobby transferred to the Active List of the Citizen Air Force on 25 July 1940 as a group captain and was appointed Director of Recruiting at Air Force Headquarters, a position which utilised his high public profile. Soon after Air Vice-Marshal Jones became CAS in May 1942, Cobby was transferred to operational duties. From August 1942 to December 1943 he was AOC Northeastern Area, responsible for the RAAF in New Guinea. It was an important and difficult post. As late as January 1943, the Japanese were still considered capable of invading the Torres Strait area, a prospect which concerned General MacArthur because of the vital passage the Straits provided between the Coral and Arafura Seas.57 Yet Cobby's forces when he assumed command consisted of a Beaufort squadron based at Horn Island and, later, a squadron of Boomerang fighters. Reinforcements could, of course, have been sent if necessary, but the point being made about scarce and mediocre resources remains valid.

Cobby technically was responsible for RAAF operations at Milne Bay in the last week of August 1942, although in fact Group Captain Garing had moved forward once the fighting started and was personally directing operations on the scene. Nevertheless, Cobby's citation for the CBE credited him for the 'efficiency' displayed by the RAAF at Milne Bay and Buna, and in New Guinea generally. He was also awarded the George Medal during his time as AOC Northeastern Area for his bravery in rescuing two men from a crashed Catalina.

56 Air Marshal Sir George Jones, Foreword to A.H. Cobby, High Adventure, Kookaburra Publications, Dandenong, 1981; see also Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 8, pp 41-2, for similar opinions on Cobby.

57 Odgers, op. cit., p 113.
Promoted to air commodore on 1 July 1943, in December Cobby was posted as commandant of the RAAF Staff School at Mount Martha.

The RAAF continually reorganised in the Southwest Pacific to meet changing circumstances. By mid-1944 its main mobile offensive force was No. 10 OG, which had been formed in November 1943 initially as a subordinate unit of No. 9 OG. When No. 10 OG's commander, Air Commodore Scherger, was hurt in an accident, Cobby was posted in as AOC in August 1944. The group's name was changed on 25 October to the 1st Tactical Air Force to more accurately reflect its role as a mobile striking force. Unlike other formations in RAAF Command, the 1st TAF was not confined to any definite area but was, in theory, free to move wherever required.

The dichotomy between theory and practice was, however, pronounced. Cobby faced two major problems. First, the command arrangements for the 1st TAF reflected the confused arrangements which typified the RAAF in the SWPA. In a letter to Bostock, Cobby likened those arrangements to a comic opera farce, as he found himself variously responsible for different functions to five senior headquarters: RAAF Headquarters ('with a Forward Echelon thrown in for good luck'), RAAF Command, GHQ, and the Commanding General 13th Air Force.58

Second, Cobby was not given the assets he needed. The 1st TAF had been conceived as a highly mobile striking force, but it did not have any integral transport aircraft. A 'mobile' force which cannot move when it needs to is a dubious concept. All RAAF transport squadrons were controlled, incongruously, by Air Force Headquarters in Melbourne, from where Air Vice-Marshal Jones persistently refused to satisfy Cobby's requests.59 Doubtless the competition for airlift was intense and all bidders believed their causes just. Still, it is hard to see how any request could have had a higher priority than one from a commander who was actually fighting the war.

Despite those considerable handicaps, Cobby initially remained optimistic. He was particularly enthusiastic about his unit's change of name to the 1st TAF, which he hoped would indicate a closer involvement with the Americans as they pressed forward. That expectation was sharpened when a proposal was made to place the 1st TAF as an autonomous unit directly under the USAAF's 13th Air Force. Cobby's hopes regrettably were not realised.

58 ibid., p 298.

59 ibid., pp 380-2.
The fact was, General Kenney had already decided to exclude the 13th Air Force (including No. 10 OG/the 1st TAF) and RAAF Command from the planned air assault against the Philippines in October. The Australians would remain consigned to bypassed areas, a decision no number of name changes was likely to alter.

Cobby now found himself in the same situation as Lukis. There were not enough worthwhile targets in the bypassed areas, but he felt compelled to try to keep up with the Americans and press the RAAF's case. As the flying effort was maintained, a belief grew that the 1st TAF's commanders were concerned with sortie rates and flying hours rather than results. Some pilots became increasingly frustrated as they were assigned to operations they considered futile.60

Perhaps disillusioned himself, Cobby either failed to recognise the growing dissatisfaction in his command or chose to ignore it.61

Discontent reached a depressing climax on 19 April 1945, when eight prominent fighter pilots presented Cobby with identically worded resignations in an action which became known as the Morotai 'mutiny'.

An official inquiry into the affair was conducted by Mr Justice Barry, who concluded, among other things, that:

From about the beginning of January 1945 there was a widespread condition of discontent and dissatisfaction with the 1st TAF at Morotai, and the two main factors which brought about that condition were the opinions generally held about the nature of the operational activities upon which the wings were engaged and the attitude of the senior staff officers ... as that widespread condition developed and existed without his being aware of it, the AOC, 1st TAF, failed to maintain proper control over his command.62

Air Commodore Cobby and his two senior staff officers, Group Captains W.N. Gibson and R.H. Simms, were subsequently sacked; Cobby in fact sailed on the command ship for the combined assault against Tarakan on 26 April knowing that he would be replaced within days.

60 RAAF fighters shot down their last enemy aircraft in the New Guinea theatre on 10 June 1944, more than a year before the war ended. Odgers, op. cit., p 226.

61 For more background on the Morotai mutiny, see Stephens, op. cit., pp 71-2.

62 Mr Justice Barry's Report into RAAF Matters - 1945, p 198, RAAF Historical Section.
The appointment of Air Commodore A.H. Cobby, CBE, DSO, DFC (two bars), GM, MID, Medal of Freedom (USA) (Bronze Palm), was terminated on his demobilisation on 19 August 1946. Harry Cobby died prematurely at the age of 61 on Armistice day 1955.

Air Vice-Marshal William Dowling Bostock

William Bostock was a 49-year-old air vice-marshal when Japan started the war in the Pacific, having been born on 5 February 1892. He had previously served in the AIF from November 1914 to January 1917, and then as a pilot with the Royal Flying Corps, reaching the rank of lieutenant. He was assessed as a very good pilot with excellent judgment.

Bostock was among the second intake of officers into the RAAF (together with George Jones) in September 1921, with the rank of flying officer. Between the wars he held the usual kinds of operational commands in what was a very small air force: the Flying Training School, No. 3 Squadron, and RAAF Station Richmond. He completed a tour on the Air Staff of No. 1 (Light Bomber) Group, RAF, in England from July 1936 to July 1938, where he flew Demons and Wapitis. His group commander commended Bostock's sound judgment, above average professional knowledge and thorough approach to his duties. His tour was described as having been 'of the greatest assistance' to the group. Bostock's total flying experience at the end of 1937 was 1377 hours.

Unlike some of his contemporaries who seemed only to aspire to become imitation English gentlemen, Bostock showed a nice turn of independence. While a student at the RAF Staff College at Andover in 1927, he received a letter from the commandant rebuking him for sending his daughters to the wrong school and for doing his own gardening. Bostock reportedly sent the letter back to the commandant with the annotation, 'Noted and ignored'.

By the time the war started, Bostock had gained a reputation as one of the RAAF's best thinkers. He became Deputy Chief of the Air Staff under the RAF officer Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett in 1940-41, and was generally regarded as Burnett's logical successor. When acting Air Commodore George Jones surprisingly was selected as CAS, Bostock became AOC RAAF Command in September 1942, a post he held for the remainder of the war.

63 Coulthard-Clark, op. cit., p 90.

No other RAAF officer came close to matching Bostock's experience as a senior wartime operational commander. From its humble beginnings in 1942, by 1945 RAAF Command had become an immensely powerful force, with 52 squadrons operating hundreds of front-line aircraft, including Mustangs, Mosquitos and Liberators. While the relegation of the Australian forces to the mopping-up role closed-off some opportunities, Bostock nevertheless was involved in planning and conducting the full range of air campaigns, sometimes on a very large scale.

Early in 1945, General Kenney assigned complete responsibility for all air operations south of the Philippines to RAAF Command, with Bostock exercising operational control over all AAF units in the area. With his increased level of authority, Bostock became air commander for a series of major joint operations, code-named 'Oboe', to clear the Japanese out of former British and Dutch territories. General Blamey, the Commander-in-Chief of the AMF, recommended a special award of the DSO to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock for his part in the Oboe air operations, commending the RAAF's 'admirable' planning, 'thorough and complete' preparations, high order of control and ready and full co-operation. Bostock was also highly regarded by the Americans. General Kenney described him as the best qualified officer in the RAAF to handle operations; while General MacArthur stated after the war that Bostock was 'one of the world's most successful airmen' whose performance with RAAF Command had been 'superior in every respect'.

Notwithstanding his impressive operational experience and endorsements, Bostock is of course best remembered for his unedifying flight with Air Vice-Marshal Jones. Neither man emerges from the affair with credit. There is no doubt that their dispute diminished the RAAF's efforts in the Southwest Pacific Area. The historian John Robertson has concluded that the two were 'so preoccupied with their struggle that they had no time to seek to develop a strategic doctrine for the RAAF'.

If that disgraceful episode could be put aside, Bostock clearly was an intelligent, well-informed and capable operational level commander, probably the best in the RAAF.

66 Kenney, op. cit., p 80; and Stephens, op. cit., p 93.
Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was placed on the retired list against his wishes in April 1946. He was in distinguished company, joining Air Marshal Williams and Air Vice-Marshal Goble, among others. The main reason formally cited for Bostock's removal was his alleged 'lack of balance and appreciation of responsibility', an extraordinary accusation to make against a man who had been left in charge of RAAF operations for three years. Seven years below the nominal retiring age for his rank, Bostock's operational experience would seem to have given him a great deal to offer a post-war Air Force which had to restructure and meet an array of new challenges.

Following his reluctant departure, Bostock became, first, the 'Special Aviation Correspondent' for the Herald; and then the Federal Member for Indi. From both of those positions he continued to harass Air Marshal Jones, who remained as CAS until 1952. Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, CB, DSO, OBE, Croix de Guerre (Belgian), Medal of Freedom (USA) (Silver Palm), died on 28 April 1968.

**Conclusion**

There are numerous similarities in the backgrounds of the eight operational commanders reviewed in this paper. All were pilots. All were products of the pre-war Air Force, while three had flown in World War I. Seven had done their initial training with the Army (four at the Royal Military College), and one with the Navy; while seven went on to graduate from the RAF Staff College. With the exception of Scherger and Garing their flying experience by today's standards was modest for their seniority, although Cobby's record illustrates the fallacy of placing too much reliance on flying hours alone as an indicator of combat proficiency.

Like most airmen of their time, the group had no experience of modern warfare in 1939, a factor which made the experience of Hewitt and Bostock with the RAF in the mid-1930s and Garing in the European war particularly valuable.

Those generally shared experiences should not be surprising given the small size of the pre-war Air Force. In May 1939 there were 28 General Duties officers in the RAAF of the rank of wing commander and above. As Air Marshal Sir George Jones has said, the RAAF in

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69 Stephens, op. cit., p 93.

70 For more general detail on Bostock's career, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 13, pp 224-5.

71 *The RAAF List*, May 1939.
those years was an 'intimate club, in which everybody knew or was
known to each other'.

Once the war started, three factors over which the operational
commanders had little control created considerable problems for each
of them. First, there was the inferior quality of RAAF aircraft in the
early years. In 1939 the RAAF's force structure was entirely
obsolescent. The first wave of replacement aircraft did not
substantially improve matters. Air Marshal Jones described the
Buffalo and Wirraway as 'completely outclassed' in Malaya, the
Boomerang as 'second rate', and the Beaufort as 'disappointing'; while
aircraft like the Mosquito and Liberator were acquired too late for
them to be fully effective. (Here it is pertinent to note that the
Australian Secretary of Defence Sir Frederick Shedden and Air
Commodore Hewitt both believed that Jones's feud with Bostock
militated against the allocation of front-line aircraft to the RAAF.)

The second factor was the RAAF's consignment to the mopping-up role
from about late-1943 onwards, which significantly limited
opportunities.

Finally, RAAF commanders were rotated with a regularity which must
have impeded the accumulation of knowledge and experience within
the theatre which was critical to success. The exception was Air Vice-
Marshal Bostock, but he spent too much of his time fighting Air Vice-
Marshal Jones instead of the Japanese. By comparison, USAAF
Generals Kenney, Whitehead and Wurtsmith stayed in the theatre
until the job was done. Air Commodore Scherger contrasted the RAAF
approach unfavourably with that of the USAAF:

The American system was, of course, infinitely superior to ours
in that unit spirit and morale, operational efficiency and indeed
all round efficiency was increasing the whole time, whereas
under our system, personnel were constantly changing and
efficiency could not reach the highest level. It presented one
with an efficiency graph much like the edge of a serrated saw -
with an infinite number of peaks and troughs but with none of
the peaks very high.

72 Air Marshal Sir George Jones, From Private to Air Marshal, Greenhouse

73 Australian Archives, CRS A4940, C265, 22-10-51.

74 Stephens, op. cit., p 65.

75 Quoted in Odgers, op. cit., p 194.
What of the commanders themselves?

From 1942 to 1945 the RAAF's prime fighting organisation in the SWPA was its mobile striking force, represented successively by No. 9 OG, No. 10 OG and the 1st Tactical Air Force. It seems astonishing that the experience of the commanders of those organisations, as a general trend, was in direct contrast to the progress of the war. As the fortunes of the allied air forces in the SWPA rose, those of the RAAF's operational commanders fell. Garing's unqualified success was followed by Hewitt's self-styled adversity in success, Lukis's relegation to the Second XI, and Cobby's humiliating dismissal. Perhaps Scherger's performance with No. 10 OG and the 1st TAF might discount this logic of decline: his sheer force of personality was always likely to make things happen.76 However, while Scherger almost certainly would not have allowed the circumstances which triggered the Morotai 'mutiny' to develop to the extent they did, he was not able to secure a more satisfying role for the RAAF in the theatre. The common denominator in that general trend was Bostock, whose undoubted intellectual and leadership qualities were diverted far too much into his debilitating fight with Air Vice-Marshal Jones. It cannot be a coincidence that the two men not mentioned so far, McCauley and Bladin, while performing admirably in the SWPA, were by 1944 adding to their reputations in the 'real' war in Europe.

Notwithstanding that disappointing general conclusion, and taking into account the three powerful external factors mentioned above, it seems fair to conclude that the eight commanders were at the least competent; and in the cases of McCauley, Scherger, Garing, Bladin and Bostock, much more than that. Bostock, however, stands condemned by his refusal to meet Jones halfway in their dispute over the politics of command. Hewitt remains problematical, but in better circumstances might have been an outstanding, aggressive operational leader. Lukis's timing was unfortunate, as was his reputation with the Americans. It was a personal and institutional tragedy that a genuinely great figure in RAAF history like Cobby had to end his career over the Morotai 'mutiny'. In the final count he could blame no-one but himself, but there were other powerful and complex forces involved.

Forty years after World War II, Air Marshal Jones criticised General MacArthur for 'sidestepping' Australia out of the final victory over Japan and wanting all the glory for himself. In Jones's opinion, the

76 For an illuminating example of Scherger's personality, see Peter Edwards, Crises and Commitments, Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1992, pp 358-62. The section reports Scherger's startlingly forthright behaviour during discussions with the Americans over the possible commitment of Australian forces to the war in Vietnam. Scherger seems to have exceeded his brief from government.
RAAF 'could have handled the war on their own'. The evidence of this paper suggests that, if the RAAF had been left to fight the air war by itself, it would not have been let down by the general quality of its operational commanders. The question really was one of giving them satisfactory equipment, proper organisational support, and the opportunity.

**DISCUSSION**

**Group Captain H.C. Plenty:** I think we could start off by asking Air Commodore Garing to make a few comments on what has been said so far.

**Air Commodore Garing:** Doctor Stephens, I think you've covered it admirably and that's exactly as I saw it. I only met Air Vice-Marshal Bostock once, he flew into Milne Bay when the battle was just over to relieve me of command. He had sent a torpedo bomber squadron under Sam [J.R.] Balmer, to Milne Bay to attack Buka Harbour. That's a long way. I said to Sam Balmer, 'Look, can your aircraft get to Buka and back with the full load of fuel and everything else?'. He said, 'Oh yes, we've tried that out in Victoria'. I said, 'Well aircraft lose about 10% of their performance in the tropics'. So on my request he sent an aircraft up to Gasmata and back for a trial, and sure enough there wasn't enough fuel to get back. I was going to Port Moresby and I left my Operations Officer to send a message to Air Vice-Marshal Bostock to cancel the operation, which infuriated him. When he talked to Balmer, he really had egg on his face.

**Mrs Beryl Daley:** A word on the other side of the argument. Perhaps the easiest way for me is to tell you about having breakfast in Manila with Air Vice-Marshal Bostock after the Balikpapan invasion. He had just come back from Balikpapan and told me of one incident. I think it's been made clear that the RAAF was given command on that invasion. Bostock was to command the operation, able to call upon whatever forces he required from the 13th Air Force and the 5th Air Force to supplement the RAAF. The commanders went in as usual by cruiser. Bostock told me that the old man, MacArthur, paced the deck until the first wave of aeroplanes appeared. Then he sat down. It was the 5th Air Force this flight, the 13th Air Force next flight, then the 5th, the 13th, the 5th, and so on. Bostock said 'My RAAF boys didn't come'. The reason was that after the ship Bostock was on started maintaining radio silence, a message had come from the CAS in Melbourne to all RAAF forces in the area. They had overused their monthly flying time, so he grounded the RAAF. Bostock said to me, 'If I could have been a three-penny bit and fallen through a crack in the boards on the deck I would have been thankful'.

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77 *Sunday Press, 20-1-85.*
Wing Commander R.M. Hanstein: I have a very simple question. In the light of comments already made on Air Marshal Jones, as a young officer we had a nickname for him of Yellow Jones. Was there any significance in that nickname, other than possibly taking too much Aspirin?

Dr Stephens: The Bostock/Jones issue obviously is a very unhappy one for the RAAF, and I wouldn't want to dwell on it at the expense of the more positive aspects of the campaign in the Southwest Pacific. It was the case, though, that their dispute diminished the RAAF's effort. The pettiness of controlling operations by limiting maintenance hours which Beryl [Daley] mentioned, for example, was a bad business. I should mention that Air Marshal Jones had a highly distinguished record in World War I. He fought at Gallipoli as an infantryman, as a private; and by the end of the war had progressed to flying Camels on the Western Front. He ended up with something like seven victories. I think there is no question that he was a man of great integrity and moral courage. However, his appointment as CAS was a surprise. He was placed in a position he probably never especially wanted, and I don't think he was up to it. Unfortunately the RAAF was the main loser. I should add that Prime Minister Curtin and Minister for Air Drakeford have a great deal to answer for in not taking action sooner to sort out Jones and Bostock. One or both should have been sacked. At the same time, while the basic command arrangements for the RAAF were poor, I've got no doubt they could have worked with men of good will.

Mr D.J. Lancaster: I want to make two points. First - and I'm sorry to come back to the Jones/Bostock dispute - my understanding was that the intention was that Bostock would be given a position very similar to Blamey's. As early as March 1942, I think, the American Air Commander Lieutenant General Brett had decided that the office of chief of the air staff would be as it was in the Army, which was basically domestic training and administration. Jones' appointment in fact was even spoken of in terms of a temporary appointment until the office was abolished. In the end I think the minister for air put a stop to all that. The second point I want to make concerns the Morotai mutiny. My understanding is that Kenney, Cobby and Bostock all had headquarters on that island. The conditions were utterly appalling and over crowded. I think if the pilots' mutiny was seen entirely in terms of role, it might be a little bit narrow. I think they were probably a very demoralised mob at that stage.

Dr Stephens: Thanks Mick. Taking your second point, it does seem as though Morotai was a fairly depressing place towards the end of the war. Nevertheless, I would argue that the problem was one of leadership; Cobby and the others should have done something about the conditions as well as the roles.
As to the role of the CAS, General Brett - who preceded General Kenney as Commander of the Allied Air Forces in the Theatre - had intended establishing a fully integrated command system for the RAAF and USAAF. MacArthur sacked Brett, and when General Kenney arrived he wasn't keen on integration at all. I think General 'Hap' Arnold, the Commanding General of the United States Army Air Forces, was not at all pleased about the idea of Australians having formal command over USAAF units, and I think he was quite a strong influence behind Kenney's decision to have separate USAAF and RAAF commands. You mentioned Blamey's position. In about April 1942, General Brett and the Royal Air Force Chief of Staff of the RAAF, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, recommended that the RAAF Air Board be abolished. I find it astonishing that an American and a Brit could recommend that the Australian Air Board should be abolished, regardless of the logic of that decision. I think at one time there was a good chance that might have happened, but events just ran along and it all got a bit too hard in the end.

Mr George Odgers: I'd like to comment about the proposed abolishment of the Air Board. In fact it was done with the Army, and it wasn't so surprising.

Dr Stephens: I'm not saying it might not have been a bad idea, I am saying I find it astonishing that an American and a Brit can tell the Australian Government they shouldn't have an Air Board.

Mr Odgers: Anyway, that wasn't what I wanted to speak about. There's no doubt the Australian Government wanted Australia to be well represented right forward. But politics came into it. After the Battle of the Bismarck Sea the Americans were going fast up to the Philippines. But they had a number of divisions tied up in Bougainville and New Guinea. They approached the Australian Government and the Australian Command and said, 'Look, New Guinea and Bougainville are Australian territories; Australians should look after them'. All the Australian divisions were put into those areas and left the Americans free to go forward. You could say Curtin fell in to a trap, but they were Australian Territories and it was appropriate that Australians should be there. This is one factor in this 'by-passed' and 'sideshow' issue.

Dr Stephens: Yes. I would think, though, that for the question of post-war settlements and national prestige, it was important for Australia to be involved in the final attacks against the Japanese homeland; and I would have thought the RAAF would have been the obvious force to participate in that. We could have easily released a strike force to go forward without any prejudice to the garrisoning duties which were necessary in the by-passed areas.
Air Commodore G.H. Steege: I'd like to speak on two points. First, the point raised by Rod Hanstein. Air Marshal Jones had a very sallow complexion and was notable for this well before the operations of the Second World War. I think one or two of the supporters of Air Marshal Bostock - one at least in my hearing - referred to him by that name, but I think he wasn’t really referring to his complexion, he was using it unpleasantly.

My second point relates to Air Vice-Marshal Hewitt’s book, *Adversity in Success*. Like *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, there is an unexpurgated edition. I have two or three copies of Joe Hewitt’s diary which he embargoed until after his death and also only with the approval of his daughter Barbara Hewitt. I have spoken with her and I’m sure she would not mind me quoting from it [the diary]. This is Joe Hewitt’s comment about a meeting with Bostock at RAAF Command: ‘Bostock needed administrative control as well as operational control if he were to exercise effective command, but was being denied this by Jones. Bostock said to me "I want you as a friend to advise me what to do, I want it my way, Jones wants it his". I said “Bill, whatever the rights or wrongs of your point of view are, the fact remains that Jones is the chief of the air staff and as such the minister’s and the government’s air adviser. We all owe loyalty to whoever is chief of the air staff and similar situations have often occurred in the services. I suggest you go along with him, cooperate to the full. With your ability, the situation will alter drastically in two years and you will be on top of the whole RAAF situation including Jones. If you do this you will have everybody with you”. Bostock looked very hard at me for some time across the table in his room and then in a flash said, "You bugger, I believe you are right, but I can’t do it and I won’t do it". I then told him how sorry I was. I was anxious to go his way but could not do that if he could not accept Jones’ authority as CAS, but he was adamant. I left him feeling depressed about his evident bitterness. I had thought he was a bigger man. Bostock was in my opinion, far the superior of Jones in intellect and ability’.
STRATEGY AND HIGHER COMMAND

David Horner

It is impossible to gain a full understanding of the role and achievement of the RAAF in the Southwest Pacific Area between 1942 and 1945 without a close examination of both the strategy employed in the theatre and the higher command arrangements. Strategy and higher command arrangements are inevitably connected; once a commander is given a strategic mission his first step must be to put appropriate command arrangements in place to enable him to achieve that mission. As the campaign proceeds and he is given further strategic missions he might have to change the command arrangements.

The key figure in any discussion of strategy and higher command is General Douglas MacArthur, who assumed the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the Southwest Pacific Area in April 1942. Allied grand strategy was worked out by the Combined Chiefs of Staff - that is the Chiefs of Staff of Great Britain and the United States, meeting in Washington. They divided the world into theatres of war, appointed a commander for each theatre, and set down the broad strategic priorities. Under this scheme MacArthur had command of the Southwest Pacific theatre and Admiral Chester Nimitz, at Hawaii, the Pacific Ocean theatre. Over the ensuing years other theatre commanders such as Alexander, Eisenhower, Wilson and Mountbatten were appointed.

The theatre commanders received their strategic direction either directly from the Combined Chiefs, or through the British or US Chiefs of Staff. Under that scheme, MacArthur received his strategic direction through the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and since he was an Army commander, the direct line of communication was through the US Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall. Nimitz in the adjoining Pacific Ocean Area received his strategic direction through the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest King.

US military operations in the Pacific suffered because of the intense rivalry between the Army and the Navy, and the later debates as to whether to support an advance on Japan through MacArthur's or Nimitz's theatres reflected that rivalry. Within each theatre the commander-in-chief was a joint commander, with authority over assigned army, navy and air force units and, in this respect, MacArthur had one important advantage - the US Army Air Force was still nominally part of the US Army. US Army commanders like MacArthur had grown used to having air units under their command, and air commanders did not question the fact that they were
subordinate to him. MacArthur's air force commander could communicate directly with the Chief of the US Army Air Forces, General Arnold, on technical matters, but strategic direction had to come through Marshall.

MacArthur's command was further complicated by his presence in Australia, where he became the principal military adviser to the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin. Using modern-day terminology, from the US perspective MacArthur was at the operational level of war, while from the Australian perspective he was at the strategic level.

MacArthur was given operational control over all of the Australian armed forces within the Southwest Pacific Area - which included all of the Australian continent. He did not have operational control over the Australian navy, army or air force units serving in the European or other theatres.

MacArthur exercised command of his theatre through General Headquarters (GHQ SWPA) which initially was located in Melbourne and at the end of July 1942 moved to Brisbane. MacArthur had three principal subordinates. Vice-Admiral Herbert Leary, USN, was given command of the Allied Naval Forces, which included both Australian, New Zealand and US units. General Sir Thomas Blamey of the Australian Army became Commander Allied Land Forces. He was also Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces. Lieutenant-General George Brett of the US Army Air Force became commander of the Allied Air Forces. MacArthur was not happy for Blamey to command the Allied Land Forces as he intended to operate through task forces, but he was directed by Marshall in Washington to appoint Blamey.

When MacArthur arrived he found that his air commander, Brett, had been in Australia for some months. Unlike GHQ, which was staffed almost entirely by American army officers, and Land Headquarters (LHQ), which was almost completely Australian, Allied Air Headquarters had a truly combined and integrated staff - indeed the intention was to form one air force from units and staff of the two nations. Brett's chief of staff was an Australian, Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock. The operational control of the Allied Air Forces was exercised through five area commands - Northeastern, Eastern, Southern, Western and Northwestern - each commanded by an Australian. MacArthur had no confidence in Brett and saw the command of US airmen by Australians as an affront to American pride.

For the first four months of his command in Australia MacArthur's strategy was largely reactive. His land forces were deployed for the defence of Australia, and his air forces, under strength, poorly
equipped and inexperienced, carried out defensive reconnaissance patrols and tried to take the fight to the Japanese in New Guinea with only limited effect.

It was not until after the battles of the Coral Sea in May and of Midway in June 1942 that MacArthur could begin planning for an offensive. On 2 July 1942 the US Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a directive for an advance through the Solomons and New Guinea to take Rabaul. The forces of Vice-Admiral Ghormley's South Pacific Area (a sub-theatre under Nimitz's Pacific Ocean Area) were to seize Guadalcanal in the southern Solomon Islands, while MacArthur's forces moved through New Guinea.

The Japanese beat the allies to the punch and on 21 July landed on the north coast of Papua, heading for Kokoda. The South Pacific Forces landed at Guadalcanal on 7 August. Soon intense battles were raging in Papua and on and around Guadalcanal. The allies' optimistic plans for an offensive to seize Rabaul dissolved. A new campaign plan was necessary.

This was the situation when Major-General George Kenney arrived to succeed Brett as commander of the Allied Air Forces. Kenney was to become one of the great air commanders of the Second World War but an assessment of his performance is both helped and hindered by his remarkable book, General Kenney Reports, first published in 1949. Our assessment is hindered because the various mistakes and extravagant claims in the book make the reader wary of its over-all reliability. Indeed Kenney had a healthy ego and one suspects that the book was designed to enhance his own reputation. Other books about the air war concentrate on the lower level tactical fighting and those which do deal with air strategy, such as the US official history, tend to rely on Kenney's account. One is left wondering if it is indeed possible to produce an objective account of the air strategy in the theatre without accepting Kenney's story.

On the other hand, Kenney's book is an exceptionally clear exposition of the nature of the high level command of an air force. Kenney's experience was remarkable for a number of reasons. Firstly, unlike commanders such as Bomber Harris or Tooey Spaatz, his command had many dimensions - he was not just concerned with a single strategic bombing campaign. Secondly, unlike commanders such as Coningham in the Western Desert or Leigh-Mallory in Operation

1 George C. Kenney, General Kenney Reports, A Personal History of the Pacific War, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York, 1949.

Overlord, whose task was to support the operations of the land forces, Kenney had an opportunity to shape the whole manoeuvre strategy of the campaign. Thirdly, Kenney held his command for a long period - from August 1942 to the end of the war, and he had the opportunity to put into practice many of the theories and ideas he had developed during the inter-war period. He was an innovator at the technical, tactical, operational and strategic levels of war.

Kenney’s effect on the strategy took a while to develop and would depend on the arrival of more planes from America, but as soon as he arrived he began to institute fundamental organisational changes. The first was to separate the Australian and US air forces. The US air forces were grouped to form the US 5th Air Force, which was commanded by Kenney. The 5th Air Force was reorganised so that it consisted of the 5th Bomber Command, based in Townsville under the command of Brigadier-General Walker, and the 5th Fighter Command, which was not formed for some time, but which was commanded by Brigadier-General Wurtsmith. At Port Moresby Kenney formed an Advanced Echelon of the 5th Air Force under Brigadier-General Ennis Whitehead, who was given responsibility for all operations against the Japanese in the New Guinea area, including the tasking of the bombers operating out of Townsville. Whitehead operated under Kenney’s direction, but was given a large degree of latitude in deciding how he was going to carry out the missions directed from Brisbane. Kenney also formed the Air Service Command, 5th Air Force, under Brigadier-General Lincoln, and ordered the headquarters of this supply and support organisation to move forward from Melbourne to Brisbane.

The Australian air organisation also underwent wide-ranging changes. Initially Kenney grouped his Australian units under what was called Coastal Defence Command, but soon changed its name to RAAF Command. Bostock was given command of RAAF Command and was made responsible for all operations in and from Australia except for the operations from Townsville to New Guinea. Bostock exercised command through the various area commands, including the crucial Northwest Area, based at Darwin, under Air Commodore F. M. Bladin, which was responsible for the defence of that area and eventually for operations into the Netherlands East Indies.

The formation of RAAF Command and the appointment of Bostock as its commander triggered an immediate confrontation with the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, who retained responsibility for the administration of the RAAF. In Jones’s view it was an error to separate the operational and administrative command of RAAF units in Australia, and he wanted to bring RAAF Command and Bostock under his command. Bostock resisted this move and garnered the support of Kenney and MacArthur. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine the ramifications of this debilitating and
unedifying argument. However, it is worth noting that while Kenney thought that 'the feud... sometimes was a nuisance', he 'liked the situation as it was. I considered Bostock the better combat leader and field commander and I preferred Jones as the RAAF administrative and supply head'. In due course Jones stationed a liaison officer at Bostock's headquarters in Brisbane to facilitate administration and Bostock's command remained under Kenney's operational control.

It should be noted that while Kenney had largely separated the Americans and Australians, some American air units remained stationed in the Darwin area under the control of Air Commodore Bladin. Likewise, the RAAF's No. 9 Operational Group in Papua, under the command of Group Captain W. H. Garing, came under the control of Whitehead's Advanced Echelon 5th Air Force.

Leaving aside the Jones-Bostock feud within the RAAF, the command arrangements instituted by Kenney enabled him to focus his resources in a more productive way. Essentially, there were two tasks - the defence of continental Australia, which was Bostock's responsibility, and the support of the offensive in New Guinea, which was Whitehead's task.

Kenney's greatest achievement was to win the support and confidence of MacArthur. When he arrived in Brisbane he found MacArthur 'a little tired, drawn and nervous', but as a newcomer from outside of what General Rowell called the 'Philippine performing circus', Kenney was just the man to raise his confidence. Soon MacArthur began to rely on Kenney for advice on matters of overall strategy as well as conduct of the air war. More importantly, Kenney made him believe in the Air Force, whereas previously he had mistrusted it. Kenney listened to anyone who might have ideas and was prepared to use the GHQ staff to present them to MacArthur. He knew that if his plans were presented by Brigadier-General Chamberlin, MacArthur's chief of operations, as GHQ plans they might be received favourably. After several meetings with Chamberlin, Kenney would comment to his secretary, 'Chamberlin is beginning to get a bright idea'. Kenney also visited MacArthur at his hotel and would talk long into the night about operational matters.

What were these operational matters they discussed? It is tempting to look back with hindsight, and this is the danger in relying on Kenney's

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3 ibid., p. 80.
4 ibid., p. 31. Rowell to Vasey, 1 September 1942, AWM 225/2/5.
5 Mrs Beryl Daley, Kenney's secretary, to author, 24 July 1974.
book, but a letter written to General Arnold on 24 October 1942 sums up Kenney's approach. It is worth quoting a substantial part from it:

Tanks and heavy artillery can be reserved for the battlefields of Europe and Africa. They have no place in jungle warfare. The artillery in this theatre flies, the light mortar and machine guns, the rifle, tommy gun, grenade and knife are carried by men who fly to war, jump in parachutes, are carried in gliders and who land from air transports on ground which air engineers have prepared. These engineers have landed also by parachute and by glider, with airborne bulldozers, jeeps and light engineer tools... the whole operation preceded and accompanied by bombers and fighters...

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

This letter, written a month before the beginning of the grim battles at Buna, Gona and Sanananda, shows that Kenney had already appreciated that the most effective way to conduct the war was not by confronting the main Japanese land forces, but by seizing airfields, preferably in areas where the Japanese were weakest. MacArthur accepted this strategy. In essence, MacArthur's campaign for the advance from New Guinea to the Philippines became one based on a maritime strategy. However, MacArthur had only a relatively small navy. Instead, his main striking force was his air force, based on jungle airstrips rather than on aircraft carriers. The role of the army was to seize and hold the areas for the airstrips and for the naval anchorages and bases. We now know that in pursuing this strategy MacArthur was assisted by signals intelligence in selecting areas that were held lightly by the enemy.

The strategy was fine, but Kenney realised that before implementing it he had to win air superiority - or as he put it, 'there was no use talking about playing across the street until we got the Nips off our

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7 Craven and Cate, The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume Four, p. 119.
To reduce the Japanese air strength he had to attack the main Japanese base at Rabaul. After that, he could try to isolate the battlefield by intercepting Japanese shipping, and then finally he could support the ground troops. In essence, Kenney sold MacArthur a new strategy. MacArthur's principal, and all-consuming objective was to regain the Philippines. Kenney persuaded him that the intermediate objective should be to gain air superiority. In pursuit of this objective the ground forces became an adjunct to the air forces.

This approach became very obvious in 1943, but even in 1942 it was noticeable. For example, Milne Bay became important once MacArthur established airstrips there from which his planes could attack Rabaul and patrol the Solomons Sea. Because of the high Owen Stanley Range down the centre of New Guinea, over which it was difficult to fly in poor weather, MacArthur decided to build airstrips in the Buna-Dobodura area, on the north coast of Papua. In the bitter fighting of the Buna-Sanananda campaign from November 1942 to January 1943 commanders sometimes lost track of the purpose of the fighting. MacArthur, for example wanted a quick victory before the Marines achieved their victory at Guadalcanal, and he was stung by the initially poor performance of his American troops. But in the long run the purpose of the battles was not just to kill Japanese, but to gain a flat area on which airstrips could be constructed. These airstrips were crucial for the 1943 campaigns.

During the Papuan campaign the allied air forces introduced a number of concepts on which they were to build in later campaigns. These included the large-scale transport of troops, resupply by parachute and free-dropping, the construction of forward airfields in remote areas, the systematic bombing of Japanese bases and airfields, often using parachute-fragmentation bombs, and the development of techniques for attacking shipping. These concepts were to have a direct effect on the strategy of the next campaign.

Kenney also refined his command techniques. He kept his headquarters with MacArthur. When MacArthur moved to Port Moresby in November 1942 Kenney followed and remained there until MacArthur returned to Brisbane in early January 1943.

Although the strategic decisions concerning the war in the Pacific were made in Washington and implemented by the theatre commanders, it should not be supposed that it was a simple matter of Washington issuing directives. Rather, there was a process of discussion between the different levels of command. For example, at the conclusion of the Papuan campaign MacArthur sent his chief of staff, Major-General Richard Sutherland, accompanied by Kenney, to Washington to seek

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8 Kenney, *General Kenney Reports*, p. 44.
permission to mount an offensive and to request sufficient resources, particularly planes, to support the offensive.

After a major strategy conference in Washington, on 28 March 1943 the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued MacArthur with a directive which listed the following tasks:

1. The establishment of airfields on Kiriwina and Woodlark.
2. The seizure of Lae, Salamaua, Finschhafen, Madang and western New Britain (Cape Gloucester)
3. The seizure of the Solomon Islands to include the southern portion of Bougainville.

The third task was to be given to the forces of the South Pacific Area operating under MacArthur’s strategic direction.

It was now MacArthur’s task to turn this directive into a campaign plan, and this was issued on 26 April. It is worth quoting directly from the paragraph in the plan headed ‘Scheme of Maneuver’ because it shows the extent to which the strategy revolved around the air force. It read:

The general scheme of maneuver is to improve all presently occupied forward air bases; occupy and implement air bases which can be secured without committing large forces; employ air forces from these bases to soften up and to gain air superiority over the initial attack objectives along the two axes; neutralize with appropriate aviation supporting hostile air bases and destroy hostile naval forces and shipping within range; move land forces forward covered by air and naval forces to obtain first objectives (existing and potential hostile air bases) and consolidate same; displace aviation forward onto captured airfields.

This process is repeated to successive objectives, neutralizing by air action, or by air, land and sea action, intermediate hostile installations which are not objectives of immediate attack.

The entire movement will be covered by air attack on Japanese air and sea bases along the general perimeter Buka, Rabaul, Kavieng and Wewak with the objective of interrupting and denying sea supply and/or support or reinforcement of objectives under attack.

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To implement this plan MacArthur divided his force into four task forces, not counting the South Pacific Forces. The first task force was New Guinea Force, under General Blamey. This was composed mainly of Australian Army units, but included some Americans, and had the task of seizing Lae, Salamaua and the Huon Peninsula up to Madang. The second task force was New Britain Force under General Krueger. This was an American force based on the newly formed 6th Army, and had the task of seizing the islands of Kiriwina and Woodlark and the western end of New Britain. The third task force was the Allied Naval Forces, under Admiral Carpender. Its task was to support the operations of the preceding two task forces, defend forward bases, protect the lines of communication and transport the land forces for their amphibious landings. The fourth task force was the Allied Air Forces under General Kenney. Its task was to destroy enemy aircraft and shipping, support the two land task forces, support the defence of the forward bases and provide air transport for the land forces.

General Whitehead, the commander of the Advanced Echelon 5th Air Force in Port Moresby had the task of implementing these missions and he worked closely with the staff of New Guinea Force in planning the parachute landing at Nadzab and the subsequent advance by air up the Markham and into the Ramu Valley. Under his command Whitehead had the 5th Bomber Command, the 5th Fighter Command and the RAAF's No. 9 Operational Group, commanded by Air Commodore Joseph Hewitt, and consisting of seven flying squadrons. Towards the end of 1943 the RAAF formed No. 10 Operational Group, under Group Captain Scherger. It consisted of six flying squadrons and was a mobile air task force that could move forward as the allies advanced along the north coast of New Guinea.

Kenney never lost sight of his principal mission, which was to achieve air superiority. In mid-1943 the Japanese began to move a large number of aircraft to their big base at Wewak, over 600 kilometres west of the Huon Peninsula and out of range of Kenney's fighters. Kenney used ground forces to secure a forward base at a place called Tsili Tsili (or Marilinan) and meanwhile began construction of two fake airfields closer to the Japanese to deceive them about his intentions. As Kenney wrote:

I didn't even try asking the Americans for ground troops to work under my orders. Our Army thought that the Air Force was an auxiliary arm, and to put infantry under an air commander would have been unthinkable. The Aussies had had a separate Air Department for some time, so to them there was nothing wrong with the idea.\footnote{Kenney, \textit{General Kenney Reports}, p. 254.}
Kenney was able to mount a mass attack on Wewak with his bombers escorted by fighters operating from Marilinan. On 17 and 18 August 1943 Kenney's bombers destroyed more than 200 Japanese planes on the ground at Wewak.

Once air superiority had been achieved, in early September the Australian 7th Division air landed at Nadzab and the 9th Division landed by sea near Lae. The town was quickly captured and then the 7th Division moved up the Markham Valley and into the Ramu Valley. Meanwhile the 9th Division landed at Finschhafen and then was involved in the difficult fight for Sattelberg. Again the ground force's objectives were not just to take territory for its own sake or to destroy the Japanese. Rather, the mission was to seize ground for air strips and to protect the area once the airstrips had been captured. This was particularly the case with the Ramu Valley, which gave Kenney his most westerly airstrips, but it frustrated General Vasey, commander of the 7th Division, who wanted to use his main forces to push the Japanese off Shaggy Ridge.

Along with the 5th Division's capture of Salamaua, this series of operations was the most complex conducted by the Australians to that time. If we are looking for situations in Australian military history in which an Australian commander planned and conducted a large scale campaign this is perhaps the best example. Blamey was the task force commander and played a major role in planning the campaign; he was present for the major landings but handed over command to Lieutenant-General Sir Iven Mackay and then to Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead for the later stages of the campaign, which concluded with the capture of Madang in April 1944.

With this background, it is relevant to ask whether any air force officers had command responsibilities similar to Blamey's during this period. As was noted earlier, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was AOC of RAAF Command with the responsibility for the air defence of Australia. Under his command he had five areas. Northeastern Area, with its headquarters at Townsville, had four flying squadrons and was commanded by Air Commodore A. H. Cobby. Eastern Area was commanded by Air Vice-Marshals W. H. Anderson and consisted of seven squadrons spread from north of Brisbane to Nowra, south of Sydney. Southern Area, under Group Captain C. W. Pearce, had one squadron in Victoria and another in South Australia. Western Area, under Air Commodore R. J. Brownell, had its headquarters in Perth and had four squadrons, three near Perth and one at Exmouth Gulf. These four areas were primarily occupied with reconnaissance and submarine patrols.

The most important area was Northwestern Area based at Darwin. In April 1943 Air Commodore Bladin had six RAAF squadrons, one RAF squadron, one US squadron and one Dutch squadron. In July 1943
Bladin was replaced by Air Vice-Marshal A.T. Cole, and by August he had eleven squadrons - five Australian, one British, four US and one Dutch. Initially the main task of Northwestern Area was the defence of northern Australia, involving reconnaissance, protection of shipping, air defence, raids on Japanese bases and attacks on Japanese shipping. In the second half of 1943 Cole was ordered to increase his bombing activity to support the allied advance in New Guinea and by the beginning of 1944 he began changing to an offensive policy. In the sense that he had to plan and conduct his own campaign, the AOC Northwestern Area was one of the RAAF's few operational level commanders, even if the campaign was somewhat static and limited. Its limited nature is emphasised by the comments of one of Northwestern Area's outstanding wing commanders, who thought that Cole was 'a good administrator . . . a good product of World War One . . . still fought as World War One'. One official historian of the Northwestern Area observed that 'our offensive, being entirely of a hindering nature, and not immediately aimed at territorial gains, appeared to comprise more incident than plan'. In September 1944 Cole was succeeded in command by Air Commodore A. M. Charlesworth, and by this time the area was conducting raids deep into the Netherlands East Indies.

As AOC RAAF Command, Bostock, was also an operational level commander, but unlike Cole he did not have to plan and conduct an air campaign. Rather, his main operational responsibility was to transfer resources between his five areas in the face of possible enemy threats.

In New Guinea Hewitt and Scherger were only tactical level commanders. The operational level planning was carried out by Kenney and Whitehead. The relationship between Kenney and Whitehead is illustrated by a letter from Kenney to him in November 1943: 'Don't ever worry about your authority for sufficient latitude in dealing with an actual situation. I still have plenty of confidence in your judgement and expect you to use it regardless of seemingly stereotyped orders which you may get from me from time to time'.

Towards the end of 1943 No. 9 Group obtained more independence when its headquarters moved to Goodenough Island and it concentrated its attacks on Rabaul, while the rest of the 5th Air Force began to operate towards western New Guinea. As Hewitt wrote later, Kenney had decided to give the RAAF group an area of responsibility

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where it could better exercise command and operational control. 'This procedure would establish the entity of No. 9 Operational Group which would be regarded and treated as a subordinate command of the 5th Air Force'.

This change presaged a wide-ranging reorganisation of the Allied Air Forces that took place during the first six months of 1944. By early 1944 the South Pacific forces had moved north through the Solomons and had landed on Bougainville. The South Pacific forces then came under MacArthur's command, and these forces included the 13th Air Force, commanded by Major-General Street, and Air North Solomons, commanded by Major-General Mitchell of the US Marine Corps; this latter command included US navy aircraft and units from the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

By the time he finished his reorganisation, Kenney had become commander of the Far East Air Forces which included the 5th Air Force, now commanded by Whitehead, the 13th Air Force, Air North Solomons and RAAF Command under Bostock. With the main operational centre of gravity moving to the western end of New Guinea, RAAF Command was given responsibility for the Port Moresby-Milne Bay area. Air Commodore F. W. F. Lukis had succeeded Hewitt as the commander of No. 9 Group which was renamed Northern Command.

With the capture of Madang in April 1944 the Australian Army began to withdraw most of its units to Australia for rest and retraining, and the bulk of the fighting was taken over by the Americans. By this time there had been a fundamental change in MacArthur's strategy. It will be recalled that MacArthur's Directive from the Joint Chiefs had required him to capture Rabaul as part of a step-by-step approach towards the Philippines. However in August 1943 the Joint Chiefs ordered him to neutralise Rabaul and advance along the north coast of New Guinea. Of course a major part of the neutralisation of Rabaul involved the destruction of the Japanese air force there and the prevention of the arrival of new planes and crew.

As he had before the Lae-Nadzab offensive, Kenney again turned his attention to gaining air superiority and by March 1944, following a series of raids on Wewak, he had all but eliminated the Japanese air force in New Guinea. With this protection, in February 1944 MacArthur's forces took Los Negros in the Admiralties. Then, with a remarkable forward leap, in April his forces landed at Hollandia and quickly constructed new airfields. Biak was taken in May, Sansapor in June and Morotai in September. In October the Americans landed

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at Leyte in the Philippines. During this advance Scherger, the commander of No. 10 Group, acted as the air task force commander for several landings.

The key question during this period was what role MacArthur envisaged for the Australians during the Philippines operations. Both the Prime Minister, Curtin, and General Blamey argued for the inclusion of an Australian Corps, but MacArthur was loath to share the credit for recovering the former American colony. Having handed the strategic direction of the theatre over to MacArthur, the Australian government had little option but to go along with his plans.

If Australia's land force contribution now hung in the balance, the air contribution was equally uncertain. In early September Kenney dropped No. 10 Group from his current operation instructions, causing Bostock to seek 'some indication of your intentions regarding employment of this group during the next few months'. Bostock was anxious that the RAAF should not be confined to garrison duties and conferred with both Kenney's chief of staff and Curtin. Curtin agreed to a series of principles that were approved by the Advisory War Council. The main principle was that the employment of the RAAF squadrons was up to MacArthur. However, beyond that, the first requirement was to support Australian land forces. The 10th Group was to be renamed the 1st Tactical Air Force and was to be made available for operations in the advance against Japan, and mopping-up operations in other areas would only be undertaken after the other priorities were met.

At the end of September MacArthur explained to Curtin that the Australian Army would garrison New Guinea and neutralise the pockets of enemy there, while two divisions were to be kept for a later invasion of British Borneo. Since RAAF operations were tied to those of the army, the RAAF employment was resolved.

During the latter months of 1944 the 1st Tactical Air Force, commanded by Air Commodore Cobby, had its headquarters at Morotai and operated along the north coast of New Guinea and in the Netherlands East Indies. Meanwhile Northern Command had moved its headquarters to Madang and supported the operations of the First Australian Army on New Britain and in the Aitape-Wewak area. The

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16 Advisory War Council Minute No 1423, Canberra 21 September 1944, CRS A2682, item Vol VIII.

17 Notes of Discussions with the Commander-in-Chief, Southwest Pacific Area, 30 September 1944, CRS A5954, item box 3.
2nd Australian Corps on Bougainville was supported by the New Zealanders and one Australian squadron.

Since October 1944 MacArthur had applied his main effort to the fighting in and around the Philippines, and even before Leyte was cleaned up, in January 1945 his forces landed on the island of Luzon and headed for Manila. In view of the approaching operations in Borneo, Bostock proposed a change in operational responsibilities and after a conference with his senior commanders Kenney affirmed that the 5th Air Force would continue to support the US 6th Army in Luzon, while the 13th Air Force, now under General Wurtsmith, would support the US 8th Army in the southern Philippines. Bostock would establish an advanced headquarters of RAAF Command at Morotai and would take over responsibility for all operations south of the Philippines. His forces would include the 1st Tactical Air Force, soon to reach a strength of almost 22,000 men, operating from Morotai, Northern Command in New Guinea and the New Zealanders in the Solomons.

At about the same time the Minister for Air proposed that Bostock and RAAF Command be given responsibility for all operational formations outside mainland Australia and that all other operational units, except those at Darwin, return to the control of RAAF Headquarters in Melbourne. Bostock, supported by the Defence Committee, argued that no further changes should be made until the operations in Borneo had concluded and Curtin accepted this recommendation. Thus for the last five months of the war Bostock became responsible for all the operations conducted by the RAAF in the Southwest Pacific Area.

These operations included the landings at Tarakan in May 1945, at Brunei in June and Balikpapan in July. Although these operations were ordered by MacArthur and came under the general supervision of his headquarters, the detailed planning was conducted by Lieutenant-General Morshead's 1st Australian Corps and by Bostock's advanced headquarters. This was the highest level of air operational planning conducted by Australian officers in the theatre. Command of the air task force supporting the operations went to Air Commodore Scherger of the 1st Tactical Air Force; while this was a demanding task it was not really at the operational level of war.

In considering the Australian air contribution to the campaigns conducted in the Southwest Pacific Area between April 1942 and August 1945, it can be seen that only a handful of senior officers commanded at the operational level of war. The most important of these was Bostock. In my view there is a very pressing need for a study of Bostock as an air commander. At present there is no such study, and over the past twenty years when such a study has been suggested it has usually been seen in the context of the RAAF higher
command problems with a focus on the Jones-Bostock argument. If such a study of the command problems were to be written it would be valuable; it might explain why Australia did not get full value from its large wartime air force and why, as Alan Stephens has shown in his book *Power Plus Attitude*, it took so long to produce a distinctive RAAF air doctrine.

But to some extent such a study would miss the point. More value would be derived from an analysis of what sort of responsibilities Bostock had to bear. How did he go about organising his command? What sort of missions were given to him by Kenney and how did he go about achieving them? What does Bostock's experience show about the problems of commanding a national air force within a larger coalition force? How much leadership did Bostock provide for his subordinate commanders and aircrews? How much did he have to go 'cap in hand' to Kenney in search of operational opportunities?

This brings us back to the main point of this paper on strategy and higher command - both these aspects were dominated by the Americans. Australian forces might have played important roles at the tactical level, but they had little part in the higher level planning of campaigns. In this modern-day era of self reliance this skill will have to be developed. With so little experience to build on, the performance of our few operational level commanders in the Southwest Pacific Area in the Second World War is a good place to start.

**DISCUSSION**

Air Marshal R.G. Funnell: Thanks very much, I greatly enjoyed that, David. The comment I would like to make, because I think you just touched on it at the beginning of your paper, was that while all of this was occurring, to the north there was a huge series of battles being raged - Tarawa, the Marshalls, the Carolines, the Marianas, Iwo Jima, Okinawa - and there was also the tussle between Nimitz as CINCPAC and MacArthur. Those battles, in many Americans eyes, were much more significant than what was occurring in our part of the world. After all, Orange Plan, the plan devised in the between war years for the American operations against the Japanese, had employed a central Pacific strategy, and MacArthur was always battling against that.

One other point worth mentioning, I think, in these command arrangements, is that Chester Nimitz was reporting back to the CNO, Ernest King; and MacArthur to the Army chief of staff, George Marshall. It is interesting that King and Nimitz met frequently through the war while I think Marshall met with MacArthur only once. But then, again, Marshall was dealing with a national hero, and Nimitz was anything but that at the time.
Dr Homer: Could I make two comments about the broader issues. The first concerns the two theatres. I think it says something for American power that there were these two theatres running side by side, because any rational argument would suggest that from a strategic point of view you would have to choose one or the other. But because of the vast American forces which were deployed, it was possible to run two theatres simultaneously. It gave the Japanese a double punch each time. They were able to support each other to the extent that when Nimitz was attacking, the Japanese were worried about him, and then MacArthur would attack. There was at times some cooperation between the two, when Nimitz would loan his aircraft carriers to MacArthur for specific activities.

The second point is about Marshall and MacArthur. I think they met twice. The first time was when Marshall visited MacArthur in December 1943 on the way back from the Cairo conference. The second time was when they met in Hawaii in mid-1944. The point, though, is that while they did not meet very often, it should not be supposed that MacArthur went off doing his own thing without any reference to Washington. There was a huge amount of to-ing and fro-ing between his headquarters and Washington over what the next step would be. If we think in terms of neat boxes, about the strategic level of command giving directions to the operational level of command, well, it does not work that smoothly or that neatly. It was quite often the case that MacArthur would propose the next step and have it approved from Washington. The people sent to do the arguing were Kenney, because of the large air involvement in the campaign; and, secondly, MacArthur's chief of staff, Sutherland. So while MacArthur himself did not deign to make the long trip to Washington, his senior staff did.

Dr Alan Stephens: David, could you comment on the Australian War Cabinet's ability to influence the United States joint chiefs of staff in Washington.

Dr Horner: Well, I can comment very easily Alan because it was such a small amount of influence. In fact, the appeal of having MacArthur in Australia was, as one senior Australian wrote at the time, that he would be the suction pump that would get the equipment and whatever from America. In other words, the Australians recognised that they would have very little influence in Washington. It was fortunate for the first 18 months or so that Australian national strategy, as determined by the War Cabinet, happened to correspond with the strategy that MacArthur wanted to pursue and which he was willing to push with Washington. But Australia itself had little influence in Washington, although people like the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Evatt, went off to argue for various things. Where MacArthur and Curtin found themselves in agreement was over the general strategy proposed by the combined
chiefs of staff to beat Hitler first; in other words, concentrate on Europe. Neither MacArthur nor the Australian Government agreed with that. They wanted to concentrate on the Southwest Pacific Area. So they found themselves in agreement, but it was MacArthur who had the influence in Washington.

Air Marshal Funnell: Has any Australian military officer ever addressed the Australian Parliament the way MacArthur did?

Dr Horner: I suspect not. I have written elsewhere what I think of - and what Alan [Stephens] alluded to - the fact that the principal military adviser to the Australian Government was a foreign officer, invited into the War Cabinet - not just the War Cabinet but to what was called the War Conference, which was smaller than the War Cabinet. The War Conference consisted of MacArthur, Prime Minister Curtin, Secretary of Defence Shedden, and anybody else they wanted to invite, and generally that was no one. So that was the central decision making body for the war in the Southwest Pacific Area.

Flight Lieutenant Bill Minty: Mention has been made of Manus Island and the difficulties of neighbouring commands relating to each other and of Americans and Australians relating to each other. I was involved in one incident where the difficulties were not as great as has been generally described so far in this conference. When the Americans moved in to Manus Island, the fighting was still going on around Seeadler Harbour when a team of about eight or 10 Catalinas landed in Seeadler Harbour and carried out a series of operations out of Seeadler Harbour into the Caroline Islands, which was in Admiral Nimitz's area. So there was a good level of cooperation there and that was another example of the Americans letting the Australians fight alongside them right at the front line.

Air Commodore W.H. Garing: May I congratulate the speaker on a magnificent paper. On Dr Evatt, he went over to America and met President Roosevelt and demanded that we have 600 aeroplanes, and the president looked at General Marshall, I think it was, and nodded his head, 'Yes, you will get 600 aeroplanes'. We got the Vultee Vengeance dive bombers and they were the biggest set of rubbish you could ever imagine. They were never unpacked at Laverton.

Dr Horner: I am glad that Air Commodore Garing has mentioned the Vultees and Dr Evatt in the same breath, because Evatt came back so pleased with himself, that he had got these aircraft, then as it turned out they were not suitable. At a later meeting of the War Cabinet air matters were being discussed and Air Vice-Marshall Jones was present, and Evatt sidled around beside him and said, 'Don't mention the bloody Vultees or I'll break your wrist'. 
Mrs Beryl Daley: Thank you Dr Horner. It is wonderful that you have seen through the format of Kenney's book and to some of the qualities that do not show in that book. I wondered if you would like to hear a little more about the Los Negros Manus operation. This was Kenney's idea. He had a reconnaissance plane going there every day and sending back a report directly to his headquarters in Brisbane. It was in a form of code, for day after day the message came back: Washing on the line at Los Negros. Washing on the line. Every day the bombing was going on they were putting holes in the airstrip and the Japs were filling them up. And finally the message came in: No washing on the line on Los Negros and General Kenney knew that the Japanese had withdrawn to the larger island. So that was the birth, that was where the Los Negros campaign was born. The rest of it you have told, at least in the main. At the end of that campaign, MacArthur took a lot of pleasure, I am sure, in sending a message to Washington, because his instructions, as you made clear, were to defeat and occupy Rabaul. MacArthur sent the message to Washington: 'I have put the cork in the bottle' - and we no longer needed to worry about Rabaul.

Dr Horner: Yes. We talk about the cork in the bottle. One of the things that is not appreciated is that the idea of not going to Rabaul was not necessarily MacArthur's. This was something that came from the joint chiefs. The joint chiefs actually appreciated, in some ways sooner than MacArthur, that he did not need to take Rabaul. I guess Rabaul had so dominated the thinking of the people in the Southwest Pacific Area, from the time they were given their orders to take the place, that they kept looking at it. Perhaps it needed somebody who was looking at the campaign from a distance to say, 'Well, look, you do not really need to take Rabaul'. As soon as this was mentioned MacArthur seized on it and he moved very quickly, remarkably quickly, along the north coast of New Guinea, Hollandia, and so on, as I elaborated.

The Los Negros landing, the Manus Island landing, was rather unusual as they never intended to land at that time. They were going to have what MacArthur called a reconnaissance in force. In other words, have a bit of a look. And when they landed it was not so bad; there were not too many Japanese around, so they decided, okay, we will continue with this. But at the end of Los Negros there is a little island and then a causeway with a big island sticking out from it, and all the Japanese had done was moved a bit - they were all still there. It was therefore an extremely dangerous operation and one that could well have come unstuck. It was perhaps only because of the fire power that the Americans had that they were able to hang on there at Manus and eventually secure the Seeadler Harbour area. But what it did do, as Beryl [Daley] has said, is put the cork in the bottle. In other words, it meant that Rabaul was now pretty well surrounded, and so long as the Japanese were
prevented from sending planes and crews there, that would be the end of it as an offensive base. And, of course, that is the way it worked out. As we know, when the war ended there were hundreds of thousands of Japanese in that tip of New Britain; Japanese we did not have to fight.

**Air Marshal Funnell:** Applying the same reasoning then, why was Borneo necessary?

**Dr Horner:** I think Borneo was conducted for a couple of political reasons. There were different reasons for the different objectives. The idea of taking Tarakan initially was to get the airfield and oil fields there. But of course we know that when it was taken the oil fields had been destroyed. Brunei was a crazy one. Admiral King had it in his head that he wanted to keep the British fleet well away from his area, and if there was a bit of territory that was British - Brunei - they could go there. Rationally, there was no strategic reason for conducting these campaigns. Eventually Blamey realised this and went to the government and said, 'Look, there is no point landing at Balikpapan'.

You mentioned in your comments earlier, Air Marshal, about the finessing of Blamey. What happened is that MacArthur told the [Australian] government that it had to go ahead with these plans because if they didn't it would upset what he called the entire strategic plan of the joint chiefs of staff. Meanwhile he went to the joint chiefs of staff and said, 'We have got to go ahead with Borneo because the Australians have to be given a run somewhere'. In other words, he was telling different things to different people and the Australian Government, faced with the choice of either going along with Blamey or going along with MacArthur, went along with MacArthur. In my view, the operations in Borneo, Tarakan, Brunei and Balikpapan, were not necessary. However, also in my view, the operations in Bougainville and Aitape/Wewak can be justified in terms of recovering Australian land, remembering that the people who lived there, the New Guineans, were Australians to all intents and purposes, leaving aside the niceties of the fact that it was a mandate territory. There have been books written about the unnecessary war, referring to Bougainville and Aitape/Wewak. I would put the boot on the other foot; Borneo was really the unnecessary one.

**Air Commodore G.H. Steege:** Dr Horner, I would like to add my compliments to those of Air Commodore Garing on your very clear exposition of the command relationships in the Southwest Pacific. I think it should lay to rest a couple of incorrect impressions I have seen in some publications which suggest that RAAF Command had responsibility for all RAAF operations. As I understand it, and it is my view from experience with No. 9 Operational Group and No. 10
Operational Group, RAAF Command’s operational control and responsibility was in and from Australia; and that 9 and 10 Operational Groups took their command and operational direction from Advance Echelon 5th Air Force. In fact, in that period, RAAF Command should have had no association with either of those two groups. Air Vice-Marshal Bostock did turn up on one occasion on the airstrip at Kiriwina, and I briefed him on what the situation was, and he said, ‘We are going to change the name of the fighter control unit’, and I said, ‘Oh, yes’. I was not too sure at that time, as a wing commander, of the extent of the dispute between Bostock and Jones. Within a few days Air Vice-Marshal Jones turned up and he said, ‘Has Air Marshal Bostock been here?’ and I said, ‘Yes sir. He has, and we are going to change the name of 114 mobile fighter control unit’. Jones said, ‘We are not’, and that was the last time in my 18 months in the Southwest Pacific that I saw Air Marshal Bostock.

The other point I would like to comment on is the landing at Los Negros in the Admiralty Islands. There was no doubt, it was a very bitter battle for that strip. The RAAF’s No. 73 Wing’s P-40 squadrons were used, as at that stage it was a short airstrip, and the Americans had mainly gone over to Lightnings. The P-40 squadrons they had were tied up elsewhere, so for that operation 73 Wing came directly under General Squeeze Wurtsmith’s 5th Fighter Command. I landed the first P-40 on the former Japanese strip with 76 Squadron, after staging through Finschhafen. In fact we were lined up to go late one afternoon, to land in there, and an American jeep came rushing out and said, ‘Hold it. The Japanese have retaken the strip’. So we were held overnight and flew in late the following day. On that afternoon the P-40’s I had sent with the advance party went in to put up a couple of small red tents 75-100 yards apart, and if any of the pilots did not touch down between those two markers they had to go around because you did not want any prangs there. Landing there was quite interesting because there was a line of howitzers on the seaward side of the strip and they were firing over the P-40’s as we landed.

When we got there - I was with the CO of No. 76 Squadron, Squadron Leader Ian Loudon - I said, ‘We had better go up and see the commander of the task force here’. So through this pock marked and decapitated coconut plantation, through the shell holes and the Americans in their gun pits, we found Brigadier General Chase, at the north end of the short strip and he said, ‘Well, I am mighty glad to see you boys’. He said, ‘One of our fly boys flew over here and could not see anything so we thought there was nobody here’, and he said, ‘But there’s 5000 very angry Japanese’. After we had had our discussions with General Chase he said, ‘Well, the sun is going down. You will not be able to get back to the bottom end of the airstrip by dark. You will have to stay here the night’, and we
said, 'Oh, we would make it'. He said, 'No, the Japanese have been coming across the strip at night and getting into our lines with knives and knocking off people'. He said, 'We shoot at anything that moves'. So he said, 'You will stay here the night' and added, 'Somebody find these two Australian officers somewhere to sleep'. So they gave Ian Loudon and me a trench with a couple of logs over the top and we occupied that with a large crab for the evening and early in the morning and then got back to our aircraft.

But the fighting and firing was still going on from the seaward side of the Momote airstrip directly opposite the 76 Squadron dispersal area. Over the south end there was a aircraft revetment which the Japanese had put in, and a warrant officer said, 'Come across the strip and have a look at this'. Well, I was not too keen about getting too far across the other side of the strip but when we went over there there were mounds and mounds of Japanese dead, several deep. There must have been hundreds of them. It had been a Seabee machine gun position which the Japanese decided they would try to take. I could never understand why the Americans never buried those dead. They let them lie there and rot away. Whether it was to blood the United States 1st Cavalry Division and get them used to casualties, I am not sure, but those dead - hundreds of them - just lay there in the tropical heat for all the time I was at Manus until they finally disintegrated.
Air Commodore F. M. Bradish
TURNING THE JAPANESE TIDE: AIR POWER AT MILNE BAY
AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 1942

John Mordike

Introduction

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 was followed swiftly by a series of spectacular military victories. Within six months the Japanese captured Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, Burma, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines. These former colonial outposts of Britain, Holland and the United States were now counted among the imperial possessions of Emperor Hirohito. On the morning of 19 February 1942 - only four days after Singapore fell - 188 Japanese carrier-borne aircraft executed a raid on Darwin sinking eight allied vessels in the crowded harbour, the American destroyer Peary being one of the major losses. Altogether, 243 people were killed in this raid and some 350 people suffered wounds for the loss of some five to ten Japanese aircraft. Some thought it was the first move in a Japanese plan to invade the Australian mainland. Air raids on Broome and Wyndham followed and, on the last night of May, midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. It seemed that nothing could stop the Japanese thrust.

Many Australians held grave fears for national survival. With the fall of Singapore, the 8th Australian Division, totalling nearly 20,000 men, became prisoners of the Japanese. The outcome of future confrontation with the enemy was cause for some anxiety. Certainly, there could be some encouragement from the defeat of Japanese naval forces in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May and, in the following month, a more substantial defeat at Midway, but, at the time, the full impact of what seemed to be isolated victories was not fully appreciated. What troubled the minds of the allied military leadership was the extent of Japanese military achievements. Indeed, the allies laboured under a psychological disadvantage. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, writing of his experience in Burma, observed that 'we had first to convince the doubters that our object, the destruction of the Japanese Army in battle, was practicable. We had to a great extent frightened ourselves by our stories of the superman'. The Japanese Army was surrounded by what Slim called 'the spell of ... invincibility'.

This paper examines the battle at Milne Bay where air power was used in conjunction with land forces in a defensive operation against the advancing Japanese forces. This operation demonstrated the inherent flexibility of air power and its capacity to inflict devastation, emphasising its vital importance as a combat force. This alone makes the battle for Milne Bay worthy of examination. But, importantly, the battle was concerned directly with the defence of Australia and its interests. In this light it stand as a significant historical lessons for dealing with future contingencies within Australia's area of direct military interest, regardless of scale or level of conflict.

But, whatever lessons we draw from this battle, we should dwell on its historical context: we should understand the spell of invincibility surrounding the swiftly advancing enemy and recapture the mood of desperation, the uncertainty and the fear, for, in this way, we begin to understand the determination and the courage with which it was fought. Through battles like these the spell of Japanese invincibility was broken - the tide was turned - enabling the allied forces to shift from defence to offence and, eventually, to inflict a calamitous defeat on the enemy.

The Strategic Setting

Japanese plans for prosecution of the war in the Southwest Pacific started to take shape at a conference convened in Tokyo early in March 1942. Here it was agreed that Japan should enlarge its gains but just how it should be done developed into a struggle between military and naval leaders. Three alternatives were discussed: a thrust to the west against British sea power in the Indian Ocean; a southward move against Australia; and, a move east against the Pacific Fleet. The leaders of Japan's army were not enthusiastic about any of these proposals and wanted to leave any such moves to the navy, planning instead to reduce its commitment of troops in the south so that it could increase its garrisons in China and Manchuria. But the naval leaders were in a more aggressive mood. Two days after the conference, Yamamoto issued orders for the dispatch of a carrier force to destroy British naval forces around Ceylon. The naval leaders then proposed the invasion of Australia and a thrust towards Hawaii. But a reluctant army, aware of the cost in manpower and shipping for such an undertaking, reached a compromise with the navy. Together they planned to sever communications between Australia and America by driving southward and seizing New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa.²

The Japanese were well positioned to continue their advance into the Southwest Pacific. In late January, General Tomitaro Horii in command of the South Seas Force, which included the 144th Regiment and battalions of marines, had seized Rabaul at the northeastern extremity of New Britain. Two months later, a Japanese battalion had landed at Lae and another at Salamaua. A detachment of troops was also positioned at Buka Island in the Solomons. Within a few weeks Japanese forces had moved further south and had occupied Guadalcanal and Tulagi. The groundwork for their ambitious advance was nearing completion, but they were about to suffer two significant setbacks. In May, Horii's seaborne force, which planned to take Port Moresby, was halted en route in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Then, in June, Yamamoto's risky plan to destroy the American carrier fleet in actions around Midway Island and the Aleutians failed. This defeat caused the Japanese to abandon their plan to seize New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. Instead, they decided to advance overland and take Port Moresby.

The allied response to the Japanese advance was at first tentative. Certainly, time was required to organise and plan subsequent action, but underlying this response was an inaccurate strategic assessment. General Douglas MacArthur at General Headquarters and Blamey at Land Headquarters failed to appreciate the full intentions and the capability of Japanese forces in New Guinea. Blamey positioned a poorly trained militia brigade in Port Moresby in May and, one month later, compounded this error by sending another militia brigade, Brigadier John Field's 7th Australian Brigade, to Milne Bay. According to Field, MacArthur planned initially to send only one infantry battalion to Milne Bay, but Blamey's Land Headquarters convinced him that 'they'd sent enough penny packets to the islands and it was time for a self-contained fighting force. So a brigade was ... sent'. Yet Blamey, like MacArthur, still discounted the possibility of an overland advance against Port Moresby. MacArthur considered New Guinea to be a defensive bastion from which he planned to launch his offensive, in the first instance against Rabaul, New Britain and New Ireland and, subsequently, towards the Philippines or Malaya. MacArthur had not anticipated the grim fighting of the Papuan campaign in the latter half of 1942.

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3 ibid., p. 175, pp. 190-4.


The 7th Australian Brigade went to Milne Bay with the 24th Australian Field Construction Company and American engineer troops in early July and, on the 25th day of the month when they had completed one strip, the RAAF's 75 and 76 Squadrons arrived with their Kittyhawks. In early August, they were joined by a flight of 32 Squadron Hudsons, which had been detached from Horn Island. Five days later, the advance elements of another Australian infantry brigade, Brigadier George Wootten's 18th, began arriving at the new base. Brigadier John Field claimed later that he had persuaded Land Headquarters to increase the force at Milne Bay by an additional brigade. The two infantry brigades, the supporting troops and the RAAF squadrons were given the name Milne Force and Major General Cyril Clowes was appointed as the commander. Gradually, it seems, the strategic value of this base, and its defence, began to assume a new, more urgent importance.

In August 1942, the perception of the Japanese threat to New Guinea was about to change dramatically at the most senior levels of the allied forces. On 22 July the Japanese had landed forces at Buna as a first step in their land offensive over the Owen Stanley Range to Port Moresby. A few weeks later, in mid-August, they were only 80 air kilometres from their objective. And, on 4 August, four Japanese Zeros and a dive bomber, presumably conducting an armed reconnaissance, subjected the force at Milne Bay to its first air attack. One week later there was a second, more concerted attack by a force of about 12 Zeros. Yet it was not until the Japanese landed at Milne Bay in force on the night of 25-26 August that MacArthur finally realised that he must take the Japanese threat in New Guinea seriously. The next day it was decided at General Headquarters that the allied forces would have to 'fight it out in New Guinea'. The battle for Milne Bay had suddenly assumed critical significance. A Japanese victory would place extreme pressure on Port Moresby, while delivering another severe blow to allied confidence. As the senior commanders watched with deep anxiety from General Headquarters in Brisbane, the battle was fought with grim determination on the ground and in the air.

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6 D. Gillison, Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, pp. 603-5.


8 Henderson, Onward Boy Soldiers, p. 44.

9 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 607.

10 Quoted by Horner in High Command, p. 218.
The Setting

Milne Bay is located at the eastern tip of New Guinea and served as an ideal site for an aerodrome which could support the early stages of MacArthur's planned counter-offensive. The flight range to the Solomons and New Britain targets would be shortened and it provided strategic command of the D'Entrecasteaux, Trobriand and Louisiade Island groups. Operating out of Milne Bay, aircraft would have ready access to the sea approaches to Port Moresby, thus providing support for this strategically significant base. It also provided aircraft with access to the north coast of New Guinea without having to cross the Owen Stanley Range and was within striking distance of the Japanese base at Rabaul. Furthermore, it was an ideal harbour for future seaborne operations. In addition to these important strategic benefits, by late August 1942 it was imperative that Milne Bay be held because, if it fell into the enemy's hands, their hold on New Guinea would be strengthened and Port Moresby would be subjected to extreme pressure.  

The Bay itself is approximately 11 kilometres wide and 32 kilometres long. It has deep water with a narrow, shallow shelf around its perimeter, which meant that ships could gain close access to almost any part of its shore. A wharf existed at Gili Gili but elsewhere ships could easily unload onto barges, which then had a short run to land. Only in the southwest corner of the bay, where there were some mangrove swamps, would a landing operation confront some difficulty. Around the shore there was a narrow coastal belt varying in width up to a maximum of one and one half kilometres. Although at Gili Gili, the head of the Bay, the plain did broaden and extend to the west, but it was not free of dense bush. It was in this area that three air strips were built - No.1 strip, No. 2 strip and No. 3 strip. The coastal belt was covered predominantly by thick jungle and hip-deep sago swamps, interspersed with the occasional coconut plantation near coastal villages. On the northern side of the Bay, the coastal belt merged into the Stirling Range, which rose precipitously to a height of 1000 metres. On its southern flank, the Range consisted of knife-edged ridges and deep gorges, running down to the coastal strip. Between the Range and the Bay on the flat coastal strip, there was a track, about three to four metres in width, with many fords which were usually about one metre deep. This track, which was never more than about 100 metres from the sea, provided the only route along the north side of the Bay, but, at the time of the battle, it was in poor

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11 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, p. 564. For the reasons why the Milne Bay base was established see also Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 79.
condition because of excessive rain, being washed away in several places.\textsuperscript{12}

The single most significant feature of the climatology of Milne Bay was the rainfall. Annually, it amounted to 2690 millimetres. During the period of the battle at Milne Bay - late August to early September - there was heavy, almost continuous, rain which had a significant effect on men, aircraft and equipment, especially radios. Low lying land was reduced to bog and heavy transport was rendered virtually useless. No motor transport could be used to the east of No. 3 strip, which was just nearing completion. This meant that all movement of personnel along the north shore (where most of the battle would take place), the evacuation of wounded, the supply of ammunition, equipment, stores and rations had to be done by water, tasks made more difficult by the extremely limited number of small craft. Needless to say, tactical deployments by the infantry were still executed on foot which meant that troops were continually drenched and suffered from a considerable amount of trouble with their feet.

Apart from limiting mobility and adversely affecting bodily well-being, the rain introduced difficulties to the normal routine of life. One young soldier later recalled his first night at Milne Bay. He had arrived by ship on Friday 21 August and spent his first hours unloading unit equipment from the vessel. Some time after midnight, he was taken with other members of his unit to a campsite in Gili Gili plantation. 'We staggered into the waiting tents,' he wrote, 'three or four men to each, spread our rubber groundsheets on the damp ground, then a blanket, and flopped down to a sleep of utter exhaustion, ignoring the whine of mosquitoes and the rain drumming on the canvas... I awakened in the morning with my feet under water, my clothes and blanket soaked in the floodwater running past and through the tent. My lumpy kitbag pillow had kept my face dry. Sharpie cracked a miserable joke: "All mod cons, mates, including running water."

The simple task of boiling water for tea was only made possible by dousing the sodden wood liberally with petrol.\textsuperscript{13} Field latrines also filled rapidly with water, creating an added hazard to health and making life even more difficult.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{13} Henderson, \textit{Onward Bay Soldiers}, pp. 57-8.

\textsuperscript{14} Wilson, \textit{The Decisive Factor}, pp. 104-7.
Air operations were also affected by the relentless rain. It was reported that steel Marsden matting on the runway of the operational strip - No. 1 strip - was covered with at least five centimetres of mud. This not only proved hazardous for landing aircraft, when skidding and bogging were frequent, but also resulted in damage to aircraft flaps. Mud and water also interfered with the working parts of guns. Other problems arose when the aircraft became airborne. Haze, mist and a cloud cover, which descended to 1000 feet, obscured vision significantly. It was reported that it was a good day when the clouds lifted to 2000 feet and visibility was about three kilometres.15

Early Problems for the RAAF

The weather at Milne Bay affected more than air operations and equipment. The climate and rain created ideal conditions for mosquitoes to breed and malaria was endemic. After a period of three weeks, the 75 Squadron medical officer Bill Deane-Butcher reported 26 cases of malaria among his charges, a figure representing 6.5% of personnel. The high rate of this debilitating, sometimes fatal, illness was similar to that experienced in other units and, in a large number of cases, malignant tertian malaria was diagnosed.16 At the end of August, 139 members of 76 Squadron, or one-third of the unit’s personnel, had been admitted to sick quarters at some stage with the ‘most prevalent disease being malaria’.17 Milne Bay was not a healthy place for men who had come predominantly from a more temperate climate and the RAAF personnel were ill-equipped to protect their health. The men were supplied only with short sleeved shirts and shorts and their repellents and mosquito nets were unsatisfactory, placing them at considerable risk of infection not only from malaria but a number of insect-borne diseases, such as dengue fever.

Other administrative shortcomings also made life difficult for the RAAF members. A Repair and Salvage Unit had been deployed to Milne Bay, but, while unloading at Gili Gili it had lost its workshop vehicle overboard.18 This only added to other problems with the unit and Group Captain Garing, who was appointed Air Officer


16 Appendix H, Malaria in Milne Bay, Squadron Medical Officer, 1 September 42, W. Deane-Butcher, 75 Squadron, AA 1969/100/3, File 24/56/Air.

17 August 1942, No. 76 Squadron, Kittyhawks - Milne Bay Etc., Extracts from A.50, RAAF Historical Section, Russell.

18 Wilson, The Decisive Factor, p. 108.
Commanding in Milne Force on 29 August, reported that it had been despatched from Port Moresby in a 'disgraceful manner'. Although 76 Squadron had been 'very well outfitted prior to its departure from the mainland', there had been problems with equipping 75 Squadron in eastern Australia. While some attempt had been made to rectify 75 Squadron's shortcomings in Townsville, 'the final position left much to be desired'. The Operational Base Unit also had problems and it was reported that it had arrived at Milne Bay without cooking utensils, beds, transport and knives and forks. While some gear was borrowed from Army units, according to Bill Garing, it placed 'a severe strain upon the combined resources of the fighter squadrons' and resulted in a 'general lowering of living conditions for the troops on this station ...'. Such were some of the special difficulties encountered in the first few weeks at the base, but soon an increase in enemy activity in the general area quickly assumed greater urgency. But, before turning to operational matters, the issue of control of air assets at Milne Bay will be discussed.

The Issue of Control

By mid-August, Milne Force had a total strength of nearly 9500 men. Members of the Australian Army accounted for approximately 7500 men, predominantly from the two infantry brigades, and RAAF had some 660 men, mainly members of 75 Squadron, 76 Squadron and the flight of Hudsons from 32 Squadron. The remainder, about 1340 men, were American servicemen. Therefore, the Force was composed of two services and two nationalities. This duality - in both the service and the national sense - was reflected in the formal command and control arrangement for the Force.

The commander of Milne Force had some important qualifications placed on his powers. These qualifications were included in the formal command and control arrangements as they were devolved from the highest level of command at General MacArthur's General Headquarters. They were spelt out in crisp simplicity for the Allied Air Forces in a formal operation instruction issued by its Headquarters in Melbourne to the next subordinate level in the command chain - in this instance Headquarters Northeastern Area located in Townsville. Issued in May 1942 by Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, an Australian officer


20 Historical Division General Headquarters South West Pacific Area - Assessment of Allied and Enemy Strength in the Milne Bay Operations 25 August-7 September 1942, RAAF Historical Section, Russell.
who was Chief of Staff at the senior air headquarters, the instruction explained that those allied naval, military and air forces of the Southwest Pacific Area which served in the Port Moresby Area were placed under the 'operational control' of the General Officer Commanding (GOC) New Guinea Force, who at the time was Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell, a senior Australian Army Officer. However, in exercising his command, Rowell was instructed that his operational control, 'will not, except when attack is imminent or in progress, disturb the execution of the general plans of the local commanders of the Allied Air and Naval Forces and the Commanding General, United States Army Forces in Australia'. Similarly, the commander of Milne Force, who was directly responsible to GOC New Guinea Force, was instructed that the elements of his force which were not from the Australian Army did not come under his full and undivided control unless 'attack [was] imminent or in progress'.

In relation to the RAAF element of Milne Force, Headquarters Northeastern Area in Townsville was the next senior level of command in the Allied Air Forces chain and the Senior Air Staff Officer in that Headquarters, Group Captain Bill Garing, briefly explained the arrangement to Group Captain Frederick Thomas, who at that time had been appointed air liaison officer at headquarters Milne Force. Garing, an Australian officer who would become the Air Officer Commanding in Milne Force in late August, told Thomas that he 'may have to carry out orders from ... Townsville ... until enemy attack on [Milne Bay] is imminent or in progress at which stage commander Milne Force takes over'.

On one level it can be understood why the commander of Milne Force did not enjoy unqualified control of the air component of his force. It concerned the perennial question of the efficient use of air assets. The total commitment of two fighter squadrons to the defence of Milne Bay for an indefinite period could have denied a vital element of combat power to more pressing operations, say on the Kokoda track. So the command arrangements were designed to have an element of flexibility unless, as MacArthur explained in July, attack was imminent or in progress when 'the authority of the commander exercising unified command is unlimited, subject to higher authority ...'. '[The] efficient local force commanders will never over-emphasise their role but will discover ways under the leadership of the

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21 Operation Instruction No. 7/1942, 18/5/1942, AA 1969/100/3, File 1/45/AIR. Note: I have emphasised 'will not'.

22 Allied Air Headquarters to ACH Townsville, 16 July 1942, AA 1969/100/3, File 1/131/AIR.

23 Headquarters North Eastern Area to Fall River, 10 August 1942, AA 1969/100/3, File 1/131/AIR.
commander exercising unified command of composing their differences,' MacArthur continued. Likewise, the Allied Supreme Commander believed that the 'efficient officer exercising unified command will always seek [the] advice of his subordinate force commanders on matters affecting the use of their forces'.

Despite MacArthur's guidance for commanders at all levels to be cooperative and reasonable in their command relationships, problems did arise on the ground. For example, at Milne Bay some American troops resisted Brigadier Field's directions to contribute to preparations for the general defence of the area and to the defence of their own sites because they considered that they were not under his operational control until attack was imminent. As a result, when the first air raids came some of these men had no slit trenches prepared for their own safety. To make matters worse, Field reported that slit trenches which had been prepared by Australians for their own use 'were filled with Americans and my men couldn't get to their weapons'. Such behaviour was an obvious source of tension and division in a composite force, adversely affecting cohesion, morale and fighting efficiency.

There was also some lack of enthusiasm for a cooperative approach at more senior levels of command in the allied forces. Brigadier General Ralph Royce, a member of the United States Army Air Force serving in the Allied Air Forces, approached Headquarters Allied Air Forces in early August with a request that the instructions for the control of air units allocated to New Guinea Force and Milne Force be changed. Royce wanted the control of the air assets in these forces to remain with the Allied Air Forces at all times. He was quite blunt in his request. 'I believe our air commanders are perfectly competent to handle air units under all conditions,' he stated. 'These units may be jeopardised if placed under control of land force officers.'

Perhaps Royce's reasoning had been influenced by a falling-out with MacArthur. MacArthur had recently taken the decision to remove the commander of the Allied Air Forces, General George Brett, replacing him with General George Kenney. MacArthur did not have a good

24 MacArthur quoted by Wilson, The Decisive Factor, pp. 82-3.
25 D. McCarthy, Kokoda to Wau, Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Vol. V, South-West Pacific Area First Year, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1959, p. 159.
26 Brigadier J. Field quoted by Henderson, Onward Boy Soldiers, p. 44.
27 Headquarters North Eastern Area to Allied Air Force Headquarters, 10 August 1942, AA1969/100/3, File 1/45/ALR.
working relationship with Brett and it seems that Royce was also not held in high regard. On paying a formal visit to MacArthur, both men suffered the humiliation of a snub from the Supreme Commander. In this light, it seems that Royce's request to amend the conditions of operational control might have owed more to personal irritability with the senior military officer rather than the efficient use of air assets. But the American officer also found himself in bad odour with the energetic General George Kenney when he arrived in Australia. While it was clearly not the cause of his demise, within days of his request, Royce found himself en route to America to take up a training position. Royce's request did not lead to any amendment to the control arrangement but, in view of the threatening developments which would soon confront Milne Force, the alternative arrangement which Royce wanted could have had a significant impact on the outcome of the battle and is worthy of further examination.

Royce wanted the control of air assets to be taken from land force commanders because, as his request inferred, they lacked the necessary competence. But, by similar reasoning, he could also have made a case for land force commanders to be properly advised in the use of air assets, especially where they enjoyed operational control. This advice should extend beyond the actual use of aircraft in the air and also include the special measures required to keep them in an operational condition, such as the repair and maintenance of equipment and the welfare of personnel. These very issues assumed special importance at Milne Bay and highlighted a deficiency in local arrangements.

When 76 Squadron travelled by sea from Townsville to New Guinea to begin operations out of Milne Bay, it was under the temporary command of Group Captain Frederick Thomas, an Australian officer who previously had been RAAF liaison officer with Abdair Headquarters during General Wavell's brief period in Java. On arrival at Milne Bay on 25 July, the same day that 75 Squadron arrived, Thomas was appointed as air liaison officer at Milne Force Headquarters at the request of Brigadier Field. At this stage Field was the commander of the force and, clearly, wanted a senior air force officer to take control of the RAAF element at Milne Bay, undoubtedly expecting that he would help resolve certain difficulties which had arisen. Thomas later recorded that on his arrival he had found that RAAF units 'were just haphazardly placed in the area with no central

29 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 568.
30 Kenney, General Kenney Reports, pp. 40-1.
31 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 603.
co-ordination authority. The result was absolute chaos’.32 In a similar vein, Douglas Gillison, official historian for the RAAF, also noted that:

The problems of authority for air force organisation and administration at Milne Bay - the allocation of camp areas, provision of supplies and rationing - were acute and Field was too burdened with his own staff work, and too ill-equipped in terms of authority, to deal effectively with them.33

In view of such difficult administrative problems, one can only imagine how well placed Thomas was to act as air adviser to the commander on operational matters, but Gillison does not give this vital issue the attention it deserves, only commenting that Thomas 'laboured to reduce the congestion at the base and to plan air cover and air support to meet army's needs'.34 Yet it seems that this last, brief comment by Gillison cannot be taken seriously because, as historian David Wilson reveals, Thomas' involvement with Milne Force ceased on 5 August when he returned to Townsville,35 leaving the Milne Force commander without any air adviser at all. Remarkably, Gillison makes no mention of this important development.

Apart from denying the commander of Milne Force a dedicated, local authority on air matters, Thomas' departure, after only 11 days, left two fighter squadrons and their ground staffs, a radar unit, a signals section, a mobile torpedo unit (which had been established in preparation for operations by the Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron), and an operational base staff36 - all of them RAAF units totalling some 660 men - without any central point of coordination and control. And furthermore, a day after Thomas left, the flight of 32 Squadron Hudsons arrived.

Added to this highly unsatisfactory situation, it was planned to replace Thomas with a Squadron Leader,37 but he did not arrive at Milne Bay until 29 August - two weeks after Thomas' departure. Indeed, it was an irresponsible appointment on two further counts. Apart from his obvious lack of rank for such an appointment, it was

32 Group Captain F. Thomas quoted by Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 83.
35 Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 83.
37 Conference at Fall River, 7 Aug 42, No. 33 Squadron RAAF Townsville to HQ NEA Townsville, AA 1/131/AIR.
reported from Milne Bay in mid-September that the particular officer was not considered 'sufficiently experienced' to direct the operations of the squadrons operating out of the base.\(^{38}\) However, on the day of his arrival - three days after the Japanese had attacked Milne Bay - the gravity of the situation could be ignored no longer and, instead, Group Captain Garing was appointed. Garing had the seniority, the experience and the knowledge to fulfil the requirements of air officer commanding in Milne Force, but it was a belated appointment.

**The Battle Approaches**

Despite the considerable difficulties encountered during the early weeks at Milne Bay, operational requirements were the first priority. In mid-August, Allied Air Headquarters issued orders for all combat elements to be prepared for a maximum effort against enemy operations between 22 and 27 August. It was suspected that the major enemy objective would be Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, which had been seized by American forces a week earlier on 7 August. But it was also considered essential that allied forces should be ready for possible enemy landings at Goodenough Bay on the northeast coast of New Guinea, Milne Bay or Port Moresby.\(^{39}\) This advice confirmed warnings which had already been given to the air elements at Milne Bay.

Group Captain Bill Garing, who was then Senior Air Staff Officer at Headquarters Northeastern Area, had informed the RAAF units at Milne Bay some two weeks earlier that the concentration of Japanese shipping in the New Guinea area could not be ignored. Accordingly, Garing directed that the fighters at Milne Bay should be on the alert and cover the area out to the east of the Trobriand Islands and south to the Jomard Passage, 'weather and other considerations permitting'. In addition, he advised that he had directed other air assets to conduct intensive reconnaissance of the 'main assembly points but there [were] considerable gaps'. Anticipating combat, Garing then made a significant decision. 'One-third of [the] fighter force should be prepared for rapid conversion to fighter bombers,' he directed, 'in order to take action pending [the] arrival [of the] main [Japanese] striking force, should this become necessary.'\(^{40}\)

Garing followed this direction up four days later in a letter when he advised that it seemed only a matter of 'a very short time before the Japanese establish[ed] themselves in the Trobriands or Woodlark

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\(^{38}\) Nine Op Group Fall River to HQ NEA Op Group AAF Moresby, A.3 14/9, AA 1/131/AIR.


\(^{40}\) ACH Townsville to Fall River, 31 July 1942, AA 1969/100/3, File 1/131/AIR.
Island'. 'I cannot stress the importance of having, say one-third of your fighters fitted as fighter bombers,' Garing reiterated. 'It is not desirable to let the enemy come any closer than Collingwood Bay or even to occupy the Trobriands or Woodlark Island.' He concluded his letter with the worrying advice that a 'large concentration' of enemy war ships and transports had been detected in the area and that there had been a delivery of what were suspected to be medium bombers to the Japanese base at Rabaul.41

Garing's involvement from Townsville, over 1100 kilometres distant, is worthy of note because it illustrates that, despite the unfortunate deficiencies within Milne Force, control of the air asset did exist at the operational level in the way which the formal arrangements intended. And it was certainly not ineffective. Informed of the results of aerial reconnaissance by other air assets, Garing made an assessment of the likely enemy intentions and proposed a broad plan of action. In doing this, he displayed foresight, being at least two weeks ahead of Allied Air Headquarters and far more accurate in his appraisal. In particular, Garing's decision to prepare portion of the fighter force as fighter bombers was significant. He planned to attack the enemy in transit to Milne Bay, obviously reasoning that this was when the Japanese force would be most vulnerable. Few, if any, would argue otherwise because, if the enemy actually landed at Milne Bay, they could then deploy their force, making their removal far more difficult and costly in lives and equipment. If the enemy engaged Milne Force in strength, it would also be imperative that they be denied reinforcements.

41 HQ NEA to Fall River, 4 August 1942, NEA File 1/131/AIR, Milne Bay - Control of Operations, RAAF Historical Section, Russell.
Final Preparations for Battle

Major General Cyril Clowes, the commander of Milne Force during the battle, arrived at Milne Bay on 13 August. Immediately, he conducted a thorough reconnaissance with his staff. This was not completed until 18 August when work started on developing the defence plan with some urgency, for by this time it was clear that Milne Bay could probably expect an enemy attack. Three days later a formal operation instruction was issued which outlined the roles and functions for defending the area. In this instruction, the role of Milne Force was described as the 'protection and facilitation of operations of Allied Air Forces operating from and through Milne Bay'. This was to be achieved 'in conjunction with Allied Air Forces' by denying the enemy the area occupied by Milne Force and also the 'vital outlying sea, land and island area'. Clearly, Clowes perceived a key role for the RAAF Squadrons but he did not specifically allocate them tasks. Perhaps this is an indication of a lack of experience in directing air operations. Certainly, the stated role of Milne Force highlighted the requirement for a senior, dedicated air adviser in Milne Force.

Clowes was not certain of the site of the likely enemy landing but, obviously calculating that the enemy would choose to avoid the mango swamp in the southwest corner of the Bay, he decided that the most likely landing would be at the western end of the Bay or the near north shore, being followed by a thrust to take No. 3 air strip. To counter this anticipated approach, he deployed the untried militia brigade - the 7th Australian Brigade - forward to defend against an enemy advancing along the near north shore of the bay in an east-west direction. He also guarded against a possible probe from the north along tracks over the Stirling Range or, less likely, a thrust from the south which could commence with a landing at Mullins Harbour. The 7th Brigade was also given the specific task of defending the eastern-most air strip, No. 3 strip.

The risk was that Milne Bay provided any number of possible landing sites for the Japanese. Therefore, the 18th Australian Brigade, an AIF unit which had recently returned from the Middle East, was positioned to the west of Gili Gili in reserve. Hopefully, it would give Clowes the flexibility to counter attack in any direction, if found necessary. The other elements of Milne Force, including all administrative units and RAAF ground staff, were organised into defended localities for all-round defence. The determination with which Milne Force prepared to meet an attack by the Japanese was evident in the operation instruction. It emphasised that the basis of the defence 'will ... be the MAINTENANCE OF THE OFFENSIVE SPIRIT AND OFFENSIVE ACTION. A determination never to surrender, but to
fight to the last, will be inculcated in all ranks'.  

The next morning, 22 August at 0900 hours, Clowes formally assumed command of Milne Force, but, because an attack was not imminent, he still did not have unqualified operational control of the RAAF component of the force. Yet the situation was about to develop rapidly. The invasion of Milne Bay by a Japanese force was only a few days away.

Signs of increasing enemy interest were apparent next day, Sunday 23 August, when the RAAF radar unit detected three flights of unidentified aircraft over Milne Bay. While 14 Kittyhawks were in the air, only one aircraft made contact, receiving superficial damage to its fuselage from cannon fire. Anti-aircraft gunners on the ground caught a fleeting glimpse of four Zeros through the clouds. More ominous developments followed next day when an observer on Cape Nelson on the north coast of Papua reported seven enemy barges moving down the coast past Porlock Harbour in the direction of Milne Bay; apparently, they had come from the Japanese base at Buna. Clowes requested 75 and 76 Squadrons to attack the barges but, before they could react, a force of Zeros raided Milne Bay. Although several enemy fighters were engaged in aerial combat, some still managed to make strafing runs in the area of No. 1 strip, but without doing any damage.

Day 1 - 25 August

At midday on 25 August, another observer reported that the seven barges had drawn into the western coast of Goodenough Island and the occupants were ashore. Nine Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron crossed Ward Hunt Strait in two flights and, with one flight providing top cover, the other strafed the barges with withering fire from each aircraft's six .50 calibre machine guns. The barges, which were laden with equipment, were all ablaze after six runs over the target and completely destroyed. With no enemy fighters in sight, all nine pilots

42 Milne Force Operation Instruction No. 6, 21 August 1942, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25 - HQ 11 Division GS Branch (MILNE FORCE).

43 Wilson, The Decisive Factor, p. 131.

44 Serial 2, 24 August 42, 'IN' Messages - War Diary, AWM 52, 1/5/25.

45 D. McCarthy, Kokoda to Wau, p. 161.

46 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 608; Wilson, The Decisive Factor, pp. 131-5.

47 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, pp. 608-9; Serials 3 & 4, 'IN' Messages - War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
returned safely to Milne Bay having made a decisive impact on the course of the eventual land battle.

While the significance of this action was not appreciated at this stage, the former occupants of the destroyed barges - a Japanese force of some 350 men - were now stranded on Goodenough Island. There can be little doubt that, had this not happened, then the battle at Milne Bay would have been far more difficult and costly in terms of casualties. As it was later revealed, the occupants of the barges were to land on the north coast of Papua at Taupota and advance on Milne Bay over the Stirling Range. This force, under the command of Commander Tsukioka, would have posed a serious threat to the security of Milne Force. Clowes had a platoon positioned at Taupota and had decided to increase it to company strength, just over 100 men, but later changed his mind. Whether this was a result of the destruction of the barges is not clear, but, regardless, Clowes would have had to contend with an enemy advancing in strength on two fronts. With only one artillery battery in Milne Force to provide vital close support for the infantry, Clowes would have had some difficulty dealing with attacks from two directions. Certainly, the Kittyhawks could provide close support, but their effectiveness against Tsukioka's force would have been limited by the precipitous country which was characteristic of the northern approach. Therefore, the destruction of the barges was a significant blow to Japanese plans and undoubtedly influenced the outcome of the ensuing battle. Most importantly, this blow had been delivered quickly and cleanly without sustaining any Australian casualties and with no damage to equipment.

Shortly after 0900 hours on 25 August, Clowes was told that aircraft had sighted a Japanese force of three cruisers of the Yubari class, two transports of 8000 tons each, two tankers of 6000 tons each and two minesweepers. Further air reconnaissance convinced Clowes that it was the main Japanese invasion force and that it was headed for Milne Bay. Realising that attack was imminent, Clowes, in his words, 'assumed active command of all allied land and air forces in the MILNE BAY area' and placed them on alert. He also issued orders placing all administrative units including RAAF ground troops, Engineer units and American units under the command of the Brigade in whose operational area they were located. The formal structure

49 HQ 11 Division G.S. Branch - Report by Comd. Milne Force, para. 6 (d), AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
50 Serial 5, 'IN' Messages - War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
51 Serial 14, 'IN' Messages - War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
was therefore in place for Clowes to assume full command of Milne Force. Having no naval support due to the operations at Guadalcanal, Clowes then ordered the RAAF crash tender to patrol the Bay and give early warning of the entrance of enemy shipping.  

Alerted by the approach of the Japanese seaborne force, Allied Air Headquarters ordered all reserve aircraft to be prepared for maritime strike. No. 19 Bombardment Group at Mareeba in North Queensland had nine Flying Fortresses standing by and all available Mitchells and Marauders were moved to Port Moresby. But it was all to no avail. When the Flying Fortresses were despatched on their critical mission, they were unable to locate the Japanese force due to the inclement weather.  

It was the Kittyhawks and Hudsons of Milne Force which now attempted to stop the approaching force. Shortly after 1500 hours, six Kittyhawks from each squadron attacked the Japanese force with 300-pound bombs. They were accompanied by a Hudson armed with four 250-pound bombs and six 100-pound bombs. Intending to use dive-bombing techniques, the aircraft had to attack from low level because the cloud cover which had thwarted the Flying Fortress attack descended to 1300 feet. In the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire, the aircraft bombed and strafed the ships but it appears that only one bomb was a direct hit. A few of the Japanese were killed and wounded in the attacks which were mounted against the ships late that afternoon, but weather and failing light soon stopped further action. 

But for the weather and, perhaps, more experience in maritime strike operations and more suitable equipment, the battle for Milne Bay could have been decided without one Japanese soldier setting foot on land. Now, with only the Taupota landing force removed from the battle, the main enemy force approached the Bay unchecked, to the growing concern of the commanders of 75 and 76 Squadrons. It was expected that the Japanese force and its naval escort would enter the Bay under the cover of darkness. Hostile naval shelling or enemy air attacks could put the operational strip out of action, immobilising the Kittyhawks and Hudsons. Therefore, the two RAAF officers approached Clowes late that afternoon and requested his permission to fly their aircraft to Port Moresby that night. But the commander of Milne Force was not to be persuaded. 'In the circumstances I could

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52 HQ 11 Division G.S. Branch - Report by Comd. Milne Force on Operations Between 25 August and 7 September 1942, paras. 6(a), 6(b), 7, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.

53 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 609.

54 Wilson, The Decisive Factor, pp. 138-41.
not agree to their request,' he noted briefly in his report on the battle.\footnote{55 ibid., para. 8.}

The request by the RAAF officers and the military commander's response provide an insight into two different perspectives. Quite correctly, the RAAF officers reasoned that aircraft are highly vulnerable while still on the ground and, if they can be kept there, they are useless. Did Clowes understand this point of view? There can be little doubt that he did, but perhaps other priorities assumed greater importance in his mind. Under the threat of imminent invasion, Clowes probably thought it imperative to maintain immediate, personal control of all combat assets. From his perspective, the possibility that was uppermost in the minds of the pilots was a risk he was prepared to take. Such decisions will always have to be made in battle and, undoubtedly, they will be influenced not only by personalities but by the service backgrounds of commanders.

It is not hard to imagine what Brigadier Ralph Royce would have said about Clowes' decision. Air units 'may be jeopardised if placed under control of land force officers' he had said when he challenged the control arrangements for forces like Milne Force. Remarkably, this control had only been in place for a few hours when it faced its first test. Perhaps if a person like Ralph Royce had been involved, or the air assets had been American, there might have been a different outcome. But, for the RAAF officers, once Clowes had made his decision the matter was settled. And, in case anyone should think the RAAF officers were lacking in courage and simply trying to avoid battle, they would be wrong. Clowes himself certainly did not question the motives of the pilots. The very next day he wrote a personal note to Sydney Rowell at Port Moresby and mentioned the incident. 'Had no intention of letting fighters leave here,' he informed Rowell, an old class-mate from Duntroon, 'except as [a] last resort, though they were very reluctant to stay.' Then he added: 'They have done and are doing a grand job - great lot of chaps.'\footnote{56 Clowes to Rowell, 26 August 42, AWM 52 - 1/5/51 HQ New Guinea Force GS Branch.}

**Day 2 - 26 August**

A few minutes after midnight - the morning of 26 August - personnel on the RAAF crash tender reported that the enemy had entered Milne Bay and that four unidentified vessels had been sighted through the fog and darkness about 12 kilometres east of Gili Gili. At 0130 hours an enemy force was reported moving westward along the coastal track between Ahioma and KB Mission. Fifteen minutes later a force of
some 150 Japanese were in contact with a platoon of B Company, 61 Battalion, about two kilometres east of the Mission. Outnumbered, the platoon fell back.\footnote{57}

The Japanese landing had been unopposed and their immediate advance had been accomplished with speed. But they had made a costly blunder. In the darkness and the fog, they had landed just to the west of Ahioma when they had intended to land close to KB Mission. As a result, they were some four to five kilometres east of their intended point of entry. This error meant that they had no chance of seizing No. 3 strip on the first night as they had planned.\footnote{58} Now they were committed to the narrow coastal strip, channelled between the sea and the Stirling Range, only able to advance in one of two directions with ease. They could go east and withdraw from battle or advance west into the waiting Australian Brigades which were sited in depth along this axis. In taking the latter course, the Japanese also exposed themselves to artillery and, during daylight, strafing and bombing from the Kittyhawks. Both forms of close fire support could be used to optimum effect in such a situation.

During the battle, fall of shot from the 25-pounder battery was first adjusted for range by firing from the area of Gili Gili along the coast into the bay. With correct range established, a simple left adjustment then brought the shells down on the desired part of the coastal strip. This produced very effective artillery support, despite Milne Force's not possessing any survey maps of the area. Strafing was also made somewhat simpler because, while there was cover from foliage, the area was relatively flat and confined; indeed, counter to expectations, it was discovered that the enemy avoided the jungle, seldom moving more than 100 metres from tracks. With its six .50 calibre machine guns and armour protection for the pilot, the Kittyhawk was a formidable ground attack aircraft. Throughout the battle, the firepower which could be delivered by an average daily availability of 28 of these aircraft from the two squadrons was considerable, especially under the prevailing condition of air superiority.\footnote{59} It meant that the Japanese made no attacks by day and also restricted their daytime movement.\footnote{60}

\footnote{57} Serials 18, 19, 20 & 22, 'IN' Messages, War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.

\footnote{58} Henderson, \textit{Onward Boy Soldiers}, pp. 73-6.

\footnote{59} Gillison, \textit{Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942}, p. 617.

\footnote{60} Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 September 1942, G/85/22, paras. 10, 23; HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde, September 1942, Lessons From Recent Fighting, para. 10, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
But the invading force had made another blunder on that first night. Operating with speed, they had unloaded quantities of ammunition, including 500-pound aerial bombs, drums of fuel, rations, stores and equipment onto the shore at their point of landing.61 This dump, with seven beached landing craft, was exposed and vulnerable, an ideal target for air attack.

After daybreak, Colonel Legge, one of Clowes' headquarters staff, positioned himself at the RAAF operations centre to act as liaison officer between the land and air elements of Milne Force. 7 Brigade, whose B Company was still in contact with the enemy east of KB Mission, was to send Legge information on targets while he was to arrange air attack. One difficulty was the absence of surveyed maps of the area, but Clowes' staff had prepared a rough sketch map by compass and pacing with copies being made by a dye-line process in the headquarters.62 These sketch maps were sent to Legge in the RAAF operations centre.63

Obviously, in these circumstances, pilot familiarity with the local area was a bonus. Yet it seems clear from these hurried arrangements that the vital issue of cooperation between the land force and the air force had not been considered adequately. It illustrates the failure of senior officers and staff from the Army and the RAAF to establish procedures to make optimum use of the available combat power in a timely fashion. In their defence, it might be observed that active service was a novel experience for most of the participants. While effective procedures would soon be developed, on that first morning after the landing, it was clearly the enthusiasm and initiative of the pilots alone which produced the first telling blows against the invading Japanese force.

Despite a lack of information and direction, some targets were immediately obvious to the pilots through the cloud and drizzle. An armed reconnaissance patrol from 75 Squadron soon spotted and attacked the Japanese supply dump, leaving the barges and the stores in a blazing ruin. Damage was also inflicted on Japanese landing craft and transporters by aircraft from 76 Squadron. The early loss of these water-craft dented the Japanese force the use of their normal tactic of encircling by sea any resistance they met on land.64 Therefore, the enemy were committed to a narrow frontal approach and here they were vulnerable. 'During the whole day,' Clowes wrote


63 Serials 31 & 33, 'IN' Messages, War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.

64 Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 147.
in his report on the operation, 'our fighter aircraft were most active, ground strafing the area in which the JAPS had landed, and the track between that area and our forward troops.' It was an ideal situation for using aircraft in the ground attack role. 'Although it was extremely difficult for pilots to observe enemy forces owing to the dense foliage,' Clowes continued, 'it appears from reports of prisoners that many casualties were inflicted, and that the fire had a very demoralising effect on the enemy.'

During the day, another Company of 61 Battalion was moved forward to KB Mission. There it joined with B Company and, with artillery and fighter support, attacked the forward elements of the Japanese invasion force. Although some progress was made, the attack was eventually brought to a standstill.

It is not clear what methods were used to indicate targets for the aircraft during this first attack, but, throughout the battle for Milne Bay, a few techniques were tried. Certainly, the prescribed method laid down in the Manual of Direct Air Support, where it seems a white arrow was to be placed on the ground pointing in the direction of the enemy with a system of horizontal bars indicating the distance, was totally impracticable under the conditions at Milne Bay. Another method that was used involved the firing of a white Verey light in the direction of the enemy, followed by one red Verey light for each 200 metres in forward distance. One difficulty with this procedure was that the enemy had similar lights and, on at least one occasion, used their lights to confuse the pilots. It would also seem that target indication by the use of Verey lights, although obvious, would not be long-lasting. Furthermore, it consumed a considerable number of Verey lights which would have to be carried by the infantry. The method which seems to have been favoured by the infantry and the RAAF was to bracket the target on each side with a smoke round from the guns. According to Brigadier George Wootten, commander of 18 Brigade: 'This proved very effective as the smoke drifted slowly through the trees and hung about the tops and was easily sighted by planes.' He believed that the RAAF 'appear[ed] to favour this method of target identification as being practically fool proof ...'. But, whatever method was used, Wootten was undoubtedly pleased with the results. He noted that the infantry battalions operated with

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67 Report on Milne Bay, 12 October 1942, from Senior Intelligence Officer Gurney, RAAF Historical Section, Russell.
support from the artillery and 'as much close air support as could be desired'.

While the attack east of the Mission was in progress, Brigadier John Field brought 25 Battalion forward to No. 3 strip to give added support to the troops in that location. It was becoming clear that, despite their early blunders, the Japanese were not about to withdraw. They were a determined enemy. It was reported that a further enemy convoy, comprising 6 ships, was approaching the Bay.

The continued use of ships by the Japanese and the relative freedom with which they operated would become one of the major concerns for Milne Force. There was little success achieved in using air power against them. However, one encouraging encounter had occurred early that morning as the invading convoy had retired out of the Bay. A formation of Flying Fortresses, staging from Mareeba through Port Moresby, had bombed the ships, severely damaging a transporter and hitting a cruiser. 'Do wish, though, that the bombing were more effective,' Clowes wrote to Rowell, commander of New Guinea Force, that afternoon. 'How about torpedo carrying craft?,' he asked Rowell. 'Torpedos held here.' On receipt of this note, Rowell wrote to Major General George Vasey, Chief of Staff at Advanced Land Headquarters (Landops) in Brisbane, revealing his own mounting frustration: 'Again if bombers can't sink ships, what about some Navy (is there any left?) or torpedo bombers.' 'There are torpedoes at Milne Bay,' he prompted Vasey, adding with a note of sarcasm: '[B] ut all the Beauforts are apparently being kept for exhibition in Sydney.'

Throughout the battle for Milne Bay, enemy vessels would continue to enter the Bay by night, landing supplies, men and equipment and firing their guns. This would weigh heavily on the mind of Clowes, who was reluctant to commit his force in strength in case he needed to counter an enemy attack on some other front. That very night hostile naval gunfire was received in the defended areas, producing several casualties. Although he could not confirm it, Clowes wondered whether more enemy troops and supplies had been landed. On the same night, an enemy attack and attempted encirclement was also launched against the companies at KB Mission, forcing them to

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69 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 611.

withdraw to Rabi. At 0400 hours the Japanese force withdrew eastward.\textsuperscript{71}

**Day 3 - 27 August**

Group Captain Bill Garing, who was now located at Port Moresby, was vitally concerned about the situation in Milne Bay on 27 August. According to his estimation, the base could be held if no more Japanese forces were landed. 'Unless future [Japanese] transports [are] destroyed before unloading the two fighter squadrons which at present have air superiority may have to be withdrawn,' he advised Air Commodore Cobby at the newly-formed Operational Base Townsville. But the destruction of Japanese shipping posed certain problems. Garing advised that No.1 Torpedo Unit, which had 10 USN Mark 13 aircraft torpedoes, was at present immobilised because the strip was unsuitable for Marauder operation. 'If Beauforts can carry these torpedoes they should be despatched at once to load and fly them to Moresby,' he advised Cobby. If this could be accomplished, he obviously then planned to fit them to Marauders and mount maritime strike operations against the Japanese shipping. In the meantime, Garing intended to go to Milne Bay on 29 August.\textsuperscript{72} Yet, despite subsequent enquiries by Garing,\textsuperscript{73} problems surrounding the destruction of enemy shipping were never satisfactorily resolved for the Milne Bay battle. Apart from the availability of assets, the inclement weather was also a major factor limiting the use of effective maritime strike operations at this time.

Shortly after 0800 hours on the morning of 27 August, the Japanese raided Milne Bay with a force of eight dive bombers escorted by 12 Zeros in an offensive counter air operation. The object of their attack was No. 1 strip,\textsuperscript{74} but it was largely ineffective with two bombs falling harmlessly to one side of the runway and others missing altogether. The Zeros dived in several strafing attacks, setting fire to a Liberator bomber which had been forced to land some time earlier. The raiders were intercepted by six Kittyhawks from 75 Squadron with one of them being shot down and two others sustaining damage - one of these was probably destroyed.\textsuperscript{75} The operation was clearly designed to


\textsuperscript{72} Milne Bay - Appreciation of Situation, a. 845 27/8, NEA File 27/51/AIR, RAAF Historical Section - Russell.

\textsuperscript{73} ibid., Moresby Signal A 856 28/8.

\textsuperscript{74} D. McCarthy, *Kokoda to Wau*, p. 165.

\textsuperscript{75} Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, p. 611.
reduce Milne Force’s air superiority which posed a continual threat to the operations of the Japanese.

At the time of this raid, a flight of American Marauders that had been on maritime patrol in the Milne Bay area were intercepted by a number of Zeros. One Zero fell victim in this conflict, shot down by one of the Marauder crews. Two members of 75 Squadron joined the combat in their Kittyhawks and destroyed two Zeros.\(^{76}\) It seems that the Marauders failed to encounter any enemy shipping.

Meanwhile Clowes had decided that he would bring the experienced 2/10 Battalion into operation and use it to sweep through 25 and 61 Battalions and push out along the north shore, clearing it as far as Ahioma. The AIF Battalion reached KB Mission late in the afternoon of 27 August without having encountered any opposition other than some snipers. Immediately, they established a defensive perimeter in the coconut plantation at the Mission and prepared for the night.

As the light was fading, Squadron Leader Peter Turnbull, who had previously fought in the Western Desert and Syria and now commanded 76 Squadron, went in search of two enemy tanks which had been seen in the area. Accompanied by another Kittyhawk from his squadron, Turnbull’s aircraft was seen to flick on its back when manoeuvring to make a low level pass at one of the tanks. The left wing tip of his Kittyhawk had caught the top of a coconut palm.\(^{77}\) Eight days later, a patrol found his body in the wreckage of his aircraft near KB Mission.\(^{78}\) Turnbull’s loss was a serious blow to 76 Squadron and the tank escaped unscathed. It would soon become clear that, had Turnbull been successful in destroying one of the tanks, he would have made a considerable contribution to the battle.

At 2200 hours that night, the enemy launched a determined infantry attack supported by the two light tanks against 2/10 Battalion. Although slowed by the muddy conditions, the tanks were a formidable weapon against infantry. Fitted with brilliant headlights, the tanks cruised around the 2/10 Battalion position, inflicting many casualties. The infantry made attempts to destroy these tanks, but their anti-armour ‘sticky’ grenades had deteriorated in the tropical conditions. In this one action, 2/10 Battalion lost 43 men killed and 26 wounded.\(^{79}\) The fight continued for some two hours but the Australian Battalion was cut in two. One half of the Battalion then

\(^{76}\) *ibid.*, p. 611-2.

\(^{77}\) Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 155.


\(^{79}\) D. McCarthy, *Kokoda to Wau*, p. 171.
outflanked the enemy and headed into the hills, eventually rejoining the main body some three days later. The other half of the Battalion fell back, attempting to reform on the Gama River, near Rabi, but was forced further back through 25 and 61 Battalions, finally retiring to the west of No. 3 strip. Fortunately, 25 and 61 Battalions and a composite company of maintenance units and Americans, which had that day been deployed in the defence of No. 3 strip, held the aggressive Japanese push, inflicting many casualties on the enemy.80

Day 4 - 28 August

Apart from some sniping, there was little enemy activity during the day of 28 August. Therefore, there was time to regroup and make plans. In an attempt to regain the initiative, it was decided that 7 Brigade would move forward to KB Mission at dawn the next day. However, as the day progressed it was suspected that the enemy was preparing for another major attack that night in the vicinity of No. 3 strip. With the Japanese operating this close to his centre of gravity, Clowes thought it possible that small enemy parties could infiltrate his position and inflict serious damage to the aircraft at No. 1 strip. And there was another problem quickly coming to a head with the Kittyhawks. They had been used continuously since the Japanese force landed, providing close support for infantry and strafing ground targets. They were now in need of maintenance. The aircraft required comprehensive servicing and their armament was worn. One officer claimed that the Kittyhawks' guns were now more correctly considered to be .60 calibre machine guns. They had fired an estimated 100,000 rounds within a few days, the excessive mud and rain only adding to wear and tear.81 Clowes decided that the Kittyhawks would return to Port Moresby that night for a refit and servicing, but they were to return next morning if the situation permitted.82

Not all would have been pleased at the prospect of an interlude in the fighting, however brief. During the day a message had been sent to Milne Force headquarters with advice from the renowned Squadron Leader 'Bluey' Truscott. According to the message, Truscott, who had replaced Peter Turnbull as commander of 76 Squadron, had said that he 'would rather lose all his aircraft than move off and will keep his aircraft in the air as much as possible all day'.83 This was the spirit of


81 Milne Bay - Extracts From I.O.'s Report, NEA File 1/12/INTEL, RAAF Historical Section.


83 Serial 127, 'IN' Messages, War Diary, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
the RAAF pilots at Milne Bay - it is little wonder that their aircraft were now showing the signs of excessive use.

Yet it was not only the aircraft and their pilots who were in need of a rest. Since the battle had begun, armourers, riggers, fitters, engineers, drivers and messmen had joined in the almost ceaseless work of belting ammunition and manhandling bombs and fuel drums. It was demanding, tiring work in atrocious conditions of mud, rain and humidity.84 Without this dedicated effort, the aircraft would have been unable to maintain their high level of operations.

The Kittyhawks flew out to Port Moresby in the evening, leaving a tense situation at Milne Bay. However, the attack, which had been expected on the night of 28 August, did not come. It was a quiet night in the area of No. 3 strip, allowing much needed rest for infantry and ground staff.

**Day 5 - 29 August**

As he had planned two days earlier, Group Captain Bill Garing flew into Milne Bay on 29 August from Port Moresby on an inspection visit. On his arrival, however, he was handed a signal from Port Moresby telling him to remain at Milne Bay as the Air Officer Commanding and that he was act as the Army Liaison Officer.85

Garing quickly summed up the situation with the RAAF units. 'Fighter squadrons okay but other units in [a] hell of a mess,' he reported. While he was encouraged that the Kittyhawks were 'smashing Japanese wherever they appear', Garing specifically noted that there was a need for a target co-ordinating authority so that the air asset could be used to its optimum effect.86 The arrival of Group Captain Garing clearly signalled the start of more positive leadership for all of the RAAF units and more effective liaison with the land force. As historian David Wilson observed: 'Belatedly, the air force had a commander who had authority over all the elements based in the Milne Bay area' and 'he now took control of aerial operations'.87

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86 Fall River Signal A191, 1/9, NEA File 27/51/AIR, RAAF Historical Section - Russell,  
*Note: 'Fall River' was a code-name for Milne Bay.*

87 Wilson, *The Decisive Factor*, p. 164.
On the same day that Garing arrived, the two Kittyhawk squadrons flew in from Port Moresby. 'They returned as instructed,' Clowes noted tersely in his report.88

Throughout the day, patrols from 7 Brigade were in contact with the enemy. Clowes still planned to take the initiative and ordered 18 Brigade, less the battered 2/10 Battalion, to attack the enemy forces on the north shore of the Bay and take KB Mission. This was to be the first phase of operations which he intended would clear the whole of the East Cape Peninsula. But again the plans of the commander were forestalled when one of the Hudsons reported the approach a cruiser and nine destroyers. The Hudson attacked one of the destroyers, one of the bombs exploding under the stern, but the fate of the ship remains uncertain.89 It was apparent that this force was heading to Milne Bay and Clowes feared that it might be an attempt to land fresh troops on the southern or western shores of the Bay.

That night, shortly after 2300 hours, relatively light naval shelling was received from the ships which had entered the Bay, but no damage resulted. The only conclusion that Clowes could draw was that another landing was taking place, but he could not confirm it and could only guess where it might be.90

**Days 6 to 15 - 30 August to 8 September : The Advance and Victory**

On 30 August patrols from B Company, 61 Battalion, moved as far forward as KB Mission, meeting only light opposition. One of these patrols brought the welcome news that the two enemy tanks had finally succumbed to the mud and rain, being bogged and abandoned on the track to the west of Gama River.91 However, at about 0300 hours on the morning of 31 August, noise was heard in the vicinity of No. 3 strip. Flares were fired and, in the half-light, an attacking force was revealed to the east of the strip. Advancing in packed groups, the enemy suffered heavy losses as they were cut down by defenders firing across the flat strip. It was a night of fierce fighting. Three times the enemy formed up and attacked, but they were repulsed on each occasion as they met the hail of small arms fire.92

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By now, Clowes had realised that he could hold back no longer. He had decided to take the battle to the enemy and ordered 18 Brigade to start its advance along the north shore of the Bay. Clowes was now determined to join with the enemy and destroy him.

The 2/12 Battalion led the advance on 31 August, meeting strong opposition throughout the day. There was much close fighting, but step-by-step the opposition was overcome. Brigadier Wootten estimated that, even with the support of the artillery and the Kittyhawks, 'in such country an opposed advance of 3000 to 4000 yards constituted a very successful days work'. By nightfall two leading companies had reached KB Mission and the Battalion's two other companies were in reserve at Gama River. The reserve companies were also joined by two companies of 9 Battalion. As an added precaution, Clowes now deployed 7 Brigade to the north of No. 3 strip to defend against any enemy advance from the direction of Taupota.

During the night, the reserve companies at Gama River executed an immediate ambush on an enemy force estimated to be 300 strong. The enemy were moving eastwards along a track and obviously did not realise that the Australian force was close. It was an instance of the enemy being caught quite unaware and he paid heavily for the mistake. Next morning, 115 Japanese bodies were counted. The Australian losses were light.

The advance continued on 1 September with close support being given to the infantry by the fighters. The 2/12th's two companies moved forward from the Gama River, being relieved by two companies from 7 Brigade. Later that day, they reached KB Mission where they encountered sniper fire. That night, Clowes received a signal from MacArthur's General Headquarters in Brisbane telling him to expect an attack from the west and northwest against the aerodrome positions. Units were ordered to stand-to all night but no attack came. Next morning 2/12 Battalion pushed on and, by early afternoon had secured the area up to 1000 metres east of the Mission. This enabled Clowes to bring forward 2/9 Battalion from Gili Gili to the Mission by watercraft.

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93 Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 Sep 42, para. 22, G/85/22, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.


95 Gillison, Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942, p. 615.

While 2/9 Battalion was coming forward, air reconnaissance reported the approach of more enemy naval vessels. During the night, at least two of these vessels entered the Bay at about 2000 hours. Ship to shore signalling was observed but there was no shelling. Again Clowes wondered whether more men and stores had been landed.

During the same night, enemy attacks were made on the forward positions of 2/12 Battalion and also on positions at the Mission, but all were repulsed.  

Next morning, 2/9 Battalion had its first contact with the Japanese. The Battalion had taken up the advance moving through the 2/12 Battalion position, but they soon encountered heavy opposition. Close air support and artillery were used against the enemy positions and then 2/9 Battalion attacked. This met with success as night fell and the forward Battalion settled down to hold the ground for the night. But their rest was to be disturbed. Enemy naval vessels again entered the Bay and shelled the area east of KB Mission, but without injury to the Australian force. The men in the forward positions also heard the ominous sounds of enemy vessels moving inshore to an area to their front.

As day broke on 4 September, 2/9 Battalion continued the advance and soon ran into determined opposition. This set the pattern for this and the next day as the enemy resisted with greater tenacity and strength. But by now the Australian force had developed what it considered to be the most successful tactics against the enemy. During the advance, they deployed a light screen of some six men, moving 20 to 30 metres in front of the leading platoon. When the screen drew enemy fire, the remainder of the platoon manoeuvred to find the enemy's flanks, supported where necessary by another platoon from the forward company. In the early stages of the advance it was discovered that the enemy would then withdraw if an attempt was made to encircle his position. This done, the area had to be cleared of snipers who had remained behind in the tops of coconut palms as the enemy fell back. The Kittyhawks could also play a key role against these snipers. Once an area was designated for clearance, the pilots flew sortie after sortie raking the palm tops with their fire. The results were testified to by one observer on the ground.


99 Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 September 42, G/85/22, para. 21, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
who claimed that 'palm fronds, bullets and dead Japanese snipers were pouring down with the rain'.

It was a slow, dangerous advance for 2/9 Battalion with close air support and artillery grinding away at the opposition. By the evening of 5 September, the Battalion had advanced as far as Waga Waga and it was clear that they had reached the outer edge of the enemy's base. Here the Australian tactics had to be modified because the enemy no longer withdrew in the face of the advance but stayed to fight it out. When this happened the leading elements of the advancing force were withdrawn to a safe distance to permit a sustained fire program to be brought down on the enemy position with artillery, mortars and close air support. On the conclusion of this fire program, the infantry immediately pressed home the ground attack. While this attack was taking place another infantry company would flank the enemy position and attack his rear. The Australian commanders had learnt to use the full range of their combat power with great effect. And it is clear that the land force commanders had developed great respect for the potency of the air weapon. At the start of the battle, the process of cooperation between the land force and the air force was not well defined. The sudden arrival of Colonel Legge at the RAAF operations centre on the morning of 26 August and his request for sketch maps and information on targets was clearly an ad hoc arrangement implemented under the heat of battle. However, as the battle proceeded Army Liaison Officers were attached to the squadrons and they briefed pilots on their targets immediately before take-off. The procedures which were developed obviously began to produce effective results. 'Close air support given by the RAAF proved invaluable,' Brigadier George Wootten reported. 'There was much evidence to hand of the damage wrought by both bombers and ground strafing fighters.'

That night the men of 2/9 Battalion again heard the sound of enemy watercraft moving inshore to their front. But it was not until the next day that the significance of the enemy's night time activity was understood. When the advance continued at day break on 6 September, no organised opposition was encountered. Soon the members of the Battalion found themselves in what Clowes termed 'a considerable dump of stores' and by nightfall they had occupied

100 Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942*, p. 613.

101 Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 Sep 42, G/85/22, para. 21, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.


103 Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 Sep 42, G/85/22, para. 45, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.
positions in the area of Lilihoa. It was apparent that the enemy had largely withdrawn from Milne Bay during the previous night. However, the Japanese continued hostilities and again entered Milne Bay that night with a naval force. The target of their interest was the motor vessel Anshun which had been discharging equipment and ammunition at the Gili Gili wharf. After sustaining accurate naval gunfire, the Anshun rolled over and sank in the shallows.

Yet positive steps were now being taken to end the enemy’s largely unchallenged use of sea power. On the afternoon of the next day, aircraft from the two Kittyhawk squadrons combined for the first time with Australian Beaufighters and Beaufort torpedo bombers in a maritime strike operation. The six Beauforts from No. 100 Squadron had arrived at No. 1 strip on 5 September. Next day they were joined by three Beaufighters from No. 30 Squadron, the first Australian unit to be equipped with these long-range fighters. The object of the combined attack was a Japanese force consisting of a cruiser and a destroyer, which had been sighted by a Hudson crew of No. 6 Squadron when it was 17 miles from Normanby Island. The Kittyhawks flew top cover while the Hudsons led the way to the target. Initially, the Hudsons scored two near misses on the stern of the destroyer. One of the Beaufighters had crashed on take-off but the other two reached the target and drew the fire of the enemy ships while the Beauforts put in their torpedo attack, the first time the crews had fired them in combat. To their disappointment, no torpedo found its mark. However, this operation had established a model for future maritime strike operations, which, in March 1943, would be used with dramatic success in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea.

The last shots in the Battle for Milne Bay were fired by the Japanese. That night, a cruiser and destroyer - undoubtedly the objects of the afternoon’s attack - entered the Bay and shelled the base, causing several Australian casualties. It was the last time an enemy warship would return to Milne Bay. Next morning, nine enemy bombers attacked No. 1 strip but inflicted little damage. An attempt by four Kittyhawk pilots to intercept the bombers achieved no results.


106 *ibid.*, p.615-6.

107 *ibid.*, p. 616.
Conclusion

The defeat of the Japanese invasion force provided an important psychological boost for Australian and allied forces. It was an early defeat for the Japanese on land. Australian land and air power had cooperated to dent the spell of invincibility that surrounded the Japanese. Yet the victory at Milne Bay was more than a fillip to morale. It was strategically critical that Milne Bay did not fall into Japanese hands. This determined enemy had planned to mount a combined land, sea and air attack against Port Moresby once they had defeated the Australian force. With success at Milne Bay, such an outcome would have created serious problems for the security of New Guinea.

The Japanese failure to seize Milne Bay was attributable to a number of factors. It was subsequently learnt that they had landed some 1900 to 2000 troops from their naval and marine forces, thinking that an Australian force of two or three companies had been deployed to protect the air strips. Instead, they met a force of nearly 9500 men, about half of them being infantry. Undoubtedly, their lack of strength would have been less critical if they had not blundered and landed so far from the Australian centre of gravity. Speed could have given them Milne Bay. Having made this error, the Japanese paid a heavy price as a result of the Australian air superiority. From the outset the two Kittyhawk squadrons severely hampered the enemy's movements by day, subjecting him to punishing ground attack. This inflicted large casualties on the Japanese force and damaged their morale. Clowes reported that it was 'conservatively and reliably estimated' that the loss of life by the Japanese amounted to 'at least 700'. In contrast, Australian casualties amounted to some 370 men, with 161 of them losing their lives. On these terms alone, the battle for Milne Bay was an overwhelming defeat for the Japanese force. The only hope for the enemy once they were committed was to redress the balance against them by achieving air superiority themselves as well as receiving significant reinforcements. Both these courses were denied them, largely because of their concurrent involvement at Guadalcanal.

Air power was a vital component of Australian combat power at Milne Bay. Certainly, weather and lack of appropriate equipment left Milne Force to suffer the consequences of Japanese naval superiority. The interdiction of Tsukioka's force on Goodenough Island and its elimination from battle was the one shining success. However, for the battle on land, it was a different matter. Rowell told General Blamey that 'on the first day [it] was probably the decisive factor'.

108 D. McCarthy, Kokoda to Wau, p. 185.

destruction of the Japanese stores dump early on the first morning was followed quickly by relentless ground strafing of the enemy force. Yet it is clear that the formal process and structure for cooperation with the land force was not properly established at the start of the battle. As it proceeded, this was rectified. At the end of the battle, Brigadier George Wootten reported that 'close support given by the RAAF proved invaluable'.\textsuperscript{110} Brigadier John Field was equally impressed. 'Air support and the fire of our own supporting arms and weapons was of great value in attacks,' he wrote after the battle. 'It heartened our own troops and all reports proved the Jap dislike of ground strafing and artillery and mortar fire.'\textsuperscript{111} Obviously, these two infantry brigade commanders had developed a great deal of respect for the air weapon, counting it amongst the arsenal of combat power along with more familiar weapons like artillery and mortars. Milne Bay serves as an object lesson in the application of close air support and its effect. But perhaps the last words should go to Major General Cyril Clowes who said in his report on the battle:

This report would not be complete without a reference to the part played by 75 and 76 Squadrons RAAF and one flight of 6 Squadron (Hudsons) RAAF in the operations. Great credit is due in this connection. Throughout, pilots were most eager to operate in the face of most adverse weather conditions, and to do their utmost in support of the ground forces, by way of ground strafing, bombing and recce. I wish here to place on record my appreciation of the magnificent efforts on the part of our RAAF comrades. The success of the operations was in great measure due to their untiring and courageous work which has earned the admiration of all who have been associated with them.\textsuperscript{112}

The comments by these senior military commanders reflect great credit on the RAAF units which participated in the battle at Milne Bay. Therefore, the battle serves the purpose of providing a better understanding of the contribution made by former members of the service, building a sense of achievement and developing esprit de corps. But analysis of this battle can also provide insights for future operations.

\textsuperscript{110} Points Noted and Lessons Learnt in Milne Bay Ops, HQ 18 Aust Inf Bde, 12 Sep 42, G/86/22, para. 45, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.

\textsuperscript{111} HQ 7 Aust Inf Bde, September 1942, Lessons From Recent Fighting, para. 10, AWM 52, Item 1/5/25.

\textsuperscript{112} HQ 11 Division G.S. Branch, Report by Comd. Milne Force on Operations Between 25 August and 7 September 1942, para. 36 (j), AWM 52, 1/5/25.
Milne Force was a composite force comprised predominantly of military members with a senior Army officer as its commander. Given the military orthodoxy of World War II, it could hardly have been otherwise, but the stated role of Milne Force gives us cause to ponder. To repeat it, its role was the 'protection and facilitation of operations of Allied Air Forces operating from and through Milne Bay' which was to be achieved 'in conjunction with Allied Air Forces' by denying the enemy the area occupied by Milne Force and also the 'vital sea, land and island area'. From our current perspective, it might seem remarkable that the execution of this role was conceived primarily in land force terms; that the commander was an Army officer; that air force was seen as fulfilling a supporting role. It is even more remarkable that no senior air officer was appointed to Milne Force from the outset for the duration of the battle. By the standards of the Australian Defence Force of today, it is quite conceivable that the commander of Milne Force would more appropriately be a RAAF officer. This observation and its implications establish a challenge for the RAAF officers of today to learn the lessons of the battle for Milne Bay of 1942.

**Note:** The discussion on this paper follows 'Australia's Forgotten Victory: the Battle of the Bismarck Sea'. 
AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN VICTORY:
THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

Alan Stephens

General Douglas MacArthur described it as 'the decisive aerial engagement' of the war in the Southwest Pacific. The historian Lex McAulay believes it was one of World War II's 'great historical moments - a land battle fought at sea and won from the air'. With the exception of the Battle of Midway (June 1942), it involved more destruction more quickly than any other conflict between aircraft and ships during the war. It finally eliminated any likelihood that the Japanese might be able to regain the initiative in New Guinea, and subsequently invade Australia.

Yet few Australians have heard of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea.

Exactly why such a brilliant victory does not hold a pre-eminent place in Australians' knowledge of their military history is puzzling and, perhaps, disturbing.

In the past 12 months Australians have spent a great deal of time reflecting on the 50th anniversaries of those military campaigns which dominate our memories of the Second World War - Greece and Crete, Tobruk and the fall of Singapore. Like the disaster of Gallipoli from the First World War, those actions in distant lands all involved defeat (albeit often characterised as heroic). Again like Gallipoli, none of them had any immediate relevance to the defence of Australia.

Nations should not forget the young men and women who served them in war; nor should they fail to analyse disasters to try to avoid repeating them. Equally, however, it cannot be constructive to dwell excessively on failure at the expense of success.

Thus, one of the more valuable consequences of the current interest in World War II generated by the 50th anniversaries has been the attention focused on the Australian victories at Milne Bay and along the Kokoda Track in mid-1942.

Unlike the ill-conceived and poorly managed early campaigns in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Malayan Peninsula (and, in

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1 This paper was presented at the conference by Dr Mordike, who contrasted the RAAF's experiences during the Bismarck Sea battle with those at Milne Bay. The paper was written by Alan Stephens and first appeared in The Australian newspaper, with whose permission it is reproduced here.
World War I, Gallipoli), the fighting at Milne Bay and Kokoda was
directly relevant to the defence of Australia. Also unlike the earlier
campaigns, the actions in New Guinea resulted in stirring victories
rather than defeat. For those reasons alone they deserve far greater
prominence than has been the case to date.

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea similarly warrants national
acknowledgment.

Fought 50 years ago between 2-4 March 1943, just off the northeast
coast of New Guinea, the battle saw land-based aircraft from the
Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and the United States Army Air
Force (USAAF) win a devastating victory over a Japanese fleet
attempting to land urgently needed reinforcements in New Guinea. Of
the 16 Japanese ships which left their major base at Rabaul for Lae,
12 were destroyed; of the estimated 6400 enemy troops on board,
almost 3000 were killed by the allied air attacks or drowned.

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea was the last occasion on which the
Japanese tried to reinforce New Guinea with large vessels. As the
American official historians concluded, the engagement was a
'smashing setback' to the enemy's plans to hold on to Australia's
nearest neighbour.

Following their defeats at Milne Bay and along the Kokoda Track, the
Japanese had attempted to regroup at Buna, on the coast halfway
between Lae and Milne Bay. However, by January 1943 they had also
been defeated there. Allied intelligence assessed that, in response to
those reverses, the Japanese were likely to try to reinforce their
garrisons at Lae and Salamaua by sea.

It would be the task of the Allied Air Forces (AAF) to prevent that
landing.

The AAF comprised elements of the United States Army Air Force, the
RAAF, the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the Netherlands East
Indies Air Force. It was under the overall command of General
MacArthur's air commander for the Southwest Pacific Area, General
George C. Kenney, an innovative and aggressive leader with an
exceptional knowledge of the capabilities and potential of air power.

By February 1943, allied intelligence was confident that the expected
Japanese convoy would sail around the northern coast of New Britain
to Lae or Salamaua, either later that month or early in March.
General Kenney immediately began preparing for a major air assault
on the convoy. He would rely on his reconnaissance aircraft to detect
the fleet as early as possible. Long range heavy bombers from the
USAAF would then start medium altitude attacks. Once the Japanese
were within range of the AAF's potent anti-shipping strike aircraft -
the RAAF's Beaufighters, Bostons and Beauforts, and the USAAF's Mitchells and Bostons - an all-out combined attack would be mounted from medium, low and very low altitudes.

The RAAF units assigned to the expected operation belonged to No. 9 Operational Group, headed by Air Commodore J.E. Hewitt. Hewitt had, however, only recently assumed command, so the main Australian planning contribution came from his predecessor, Group Captain W.H. (Bill) Garing. An outgoing, intelligent and forceful officer who enjoyed General Kenney's confidence, Garing made a vital contribution to the conduct and success of the battle.

Before World War II, Garing had spent seven years as a pilot with the RAAF's seaplane squadron at Point Cook. When Germany invaded Poland, he was in England, taking delivery of the RAAF's new Short Sunderland maritime patrol aircraft. For his gallantry in operations in Europe, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Posted back to the Southwest Pacific Theatre in 1941, Garing raised No. 9 Operational Group in New Guinea in 1942 and directed the crucial and highly successful RAAF operations during the defence of Milne Bay and Port Moresby. At the time of the Bismarck Sea action, he was one of the few men in the AAF - Australian or American - who was an expert in maritime combat air operations.

It was Garing who convinced General Kenney of the need for a massive, combined attack against the Japanese convoy. That tactic would involve large numbers of different types of aircraft striking the convoy from different directions and at different altitudes, with exact timing. It was an operation which would demand precise coordination.

Group Captain Garing knew that relatively inexperienced aircrews would not find it easy to achieve the necessary degree of coordination. He therefore suggested to General Kenney's forward commander, General Ennis C. Whitehead, that a full-scale dress rehearsal should be held.

Whitehead saw the merit of Garing's proposal, and the American and Australian air staffs began to make arrangements for the rehearsal.

Allied planners decided that for the actual attack, the formations of aircraft would rendezvous over Cape Ward Hunt, on the coast 90 miles to the southeast of the entrance to the Huon Gulf, where it was expected the Japanese convoy would be intercepted. The rendezvous point would also provide the aircrews with their last positive navigation fix before they reached the enemy.

Overflying Cape Ward Hunt at the correct time would be vital if each element of the combined force were to make its time on target and
achieve the coordinated attack and concentration of force sought by General Kenney.

For the dress-rehearsal, Group Captain Garing instructed the aircrews to rendezvous at Cape Rodney, 90 miles south east of Port Moresby, and carry out a simulated attack on a wrecked ship in Port Moresby harbour. He and General Whitehead then observed the arrival of the formations of aircraft over the wreck from a nearby hill, noting in particular their timing.

The dress-rehearsal proved to be invaluable as a potentially disastrous error was revealed - many aircraft were up to 20 minutes late over the target. Thorough debriefings were held and the problem resolved.

During the waiting period, intensive gunnery and bombing training was also conducted against wrecked ships.

Throughout January and February, allied reconnaissance reported regular Japanese traffic between Rabaul and Lae, ranging from large surface warships to light transports and submarines. On occasions, fierce fighting took place between the vessels and RAAF and USAAF aircraft. But none of those resupply missions was large enough to strengthen the Japanese forces sufficiently for them to attempt to regain the initiative in New Guinea. The need for a major reinforcement remained.

The Japanese in fact intended reinforcing their New Guinea garrisons with about 6000 army troops and 400 marines, primarily from the 51st Infantry Division. Their soldiers were to embark at Rabaul between 23 and 27 February, with the convoy of eight destroyers and eight merchant ships scheduled to sail just before midnight on the 28th. The ships would arrive at Lae on 3 March and be back at Rabaul by 8 March. Air cover would be provided by about 40 naval and 60 army aircraft, flying out of bases in New Ireland, New Britain and New Guinea.

The convoy left on schedule and initially was favoured by poor weather, which hampered AAF reconnaissance aircraft. In the meantime, six RAAF A-20 Bostons from No. 22 Squadron attacked the airfield at Lae in an attempt to put it out of action and deny the Japanese air support.

It was not until mid-morning on 2 March that USAAF B-24 Liberators sighted the convoy. General Whitehead immediately launched eight B-17 Flying Fortresses, followed shortly afterwards by 20 more. The Fortresses attacked the convoy from 6500 feet using 1000 lb demolition bombs. Later in the day another attack was conducted by 11 B-17s. The Fortress crews claimed a large number of hits, reporting that vessels were 'burning and exploding', 'smoking and
burning amidships', and 'left sinking'. Up to three merchant ships may have been sunk.

By nightfall the enemy fleet had reached the Vitiaz Strait, which meant that on the morning of the 3rd it would be within range of the full force of AAF strike aircraft. For that attack to be successful, the precise location of the convoy had to be known at daybreak. Consequently, throughout the night, it was tracked by an RAAF Catalina flying boat from No. 11 Squadron, which occasionally dropped bombs to keep the Japanese in a state of anxiety.

Also during the night and before the planned main AAF attack, eight RAAF Beaufort torpedo bombers from No. 100 Squadron took off from Milne Bay to try to use the darkness to their advantage. Flying through heavy frontal weather, only two of the aircraft found the convoy. Neither was successful with its attack.

On the morning of 3 March 1943, the Japanese convoy was rounding the Huon Peninsula. It was now within range of the entire AAF strike force, which had been waiting for this moment for weeks.

For much of the time since the convoy had sailed from Rabaul, adverse weather had helped the Japanese to avoid detection and attack. Now, however, as the morning came, clear conditions favoured the Australian and American aircrews. Over 90 aircraft took off from Port Moresby and set heading for their rendezvous point at Cape Ward Hunt. While the strike aircraft were en route, Bostons from the RAAF's No. 22 Squadron again successfully bombed the Japanese airfield at Lae.

By 0930 the AAF formations had assembled over Cape Ward Hunt, and by 1000 the battle had started.

The Australian and American aircraft attacked in three waves and from three levels, only seconds apart.

First, 13 USAAF B-17 Flying Fortresses bombed from medium altitude, at about 7000 feet. In addition to the obvious wish to sink ships, the medium level attacks were intended to disperse the convoy, as vessels broke station to avoid bombs.

Second, 13 RAAF Beaufighters from No. 30 Squadron hit the enemy from below 500 feet, lining up on their targets as the bombs from the Flying Fortresses were exploding. With four cannons in its nose and six machine guns in its wings, the Beaufighter was the most heavily armed fighter aircraft in the world. The Australian crews' job was twofold: to suppress anti-aircraft fire, and kill ships' captains and officers on the bridges.
The Beaufighter pilots initially approached their targets at 500 feet in line astern formation. They then dived to mast-level height, set full power on their engines, changed into line abreast formation and approached their targets at 220 knots.

It seems possible that some of the Japanese captains mistook these manoeuvres for a torpedo attack, for they altered course to meet the Australians head on to present a smaller target. Instead, they made themselves better targets for strafing as, with a slight alteration of heading, the Beaufighters were now in a position to rake the ships from bow to stern. This they did, subjecting the enemy to a withering storm of cannon and machine gun fire. According to the official RAAF release at the time, 'enemy crews were slain beside their guns, deck cargo burst into flames, superstructures toppled and burned'.

With the convoy now widely dispersed and in disarray, the third wave of attackers was able to concentrate on sinking ships. Thirteen USAAF B-25 Mitchells made a medium level bombing strike, while simultaneously, a mast-level attack was made by 12 specially modified USAAF B-25C1 Mitchells - known as 'commerce destroyers' because of their heavy armament - which bombed and strafed the enemy. The B-25C1s were devastating, claiming 17 direct hits from the 37 bombs dropped. Close behind the B-25C1s, USAAF A-20 Bostons added more firepower.

Following the initial coordinated onslaught, Beaufighters, Mitchells and Bostons intermingled as they swept back and forth over the convoy, strafing and bombing the most suitable targets. Within minutes of the opening shots, the battle had turned into a rout.

The official Australian history records that at the end of the action, 'ships were listing and sinking, their superstructure smashed and blazing, and great clouds of dense black smoke [rose] into a sky where aircraft circled and dived over the confusion they had wrought among what, less than an hour earlier, had been an impressively orderly convoy'.

Above the surface battle, 28 USAAF P-38 Lightning fighters provided air defence for the allied strike force. In their combat with the Zeros which were attempting to protect the convoy, three of the Lightnings were shot down, but in turn the American pilots claimed 20 kills. Apart from those three P-38s, the only other AAF aircraft lost to enemy action during the battle was a single B-17, shot down by a Zero.

With their armament expended, the AAF aircraft returned to Port Moresby. However, there was to be no respite for the enemy. Throughout the afternoon the air attacks continued. Again, USAAF B-17s struck from medium level, this time in cooperation with USAAF
Mitchells and RAAF Bostons flying at very low level. The Bostons were led by Squadron Leader C.C. Learmonth, after whom the RAAF’s major base in northwest Australia is now named.

During this mission the Bostons were repeatedly attacked by enemy fighters. On one occasion, Flying Officer H.B. Craig was bounced by four Zeros simultaneously, but Craig audaciously turned into his enemies with his guns firing, and they broke away.

The B-17s, Mitchells and Bostons claimed at least 20 direct hits on the by-now devastated convoy, and the RAAF was credited with a definite sinking.

That was the last of the coordinated attacks. The victory had been won.

There was, however, important work still to be done. On the night of 3 March, five American motor torpedo boats slipped out of their base at Tufi and finished off one crippled ship. The next day RAAF Beaufighters and USAAF Mitchells followed up the victory at sea by inflicting severe damage on Malahang airfield near Lae, destroying numerous aircraft and ground installations. At the same time, other AAF aircraft continued to patrol the Bismarck Sea, where they found and sank one solitary and badly damaged destroyer. As the official history notes, that was 'the last that was seen of the great Japanese Lae convoy'.

But there was still a 'terrible yet essential finale' to come, one which has since created some controversy, and which confronts a central moral dilemma of war.

For several days after the battle, allied aircraft patrolled the Huon Gulf, searching for and destroying barges and rafts crowded with survivors from the sunken ships. It was grim and bloody work which many of the crews found nauseating, but as one RAAF Beaufighter pilot said, every enemy they prevented from getting ashore was one less for their Army colleagues to face.

The morality of the AAF’s action is too complex a matter to be fully examined here. Briefly, however, an analogy might be drawn with the Royal Air Force’s largely indiscriminate bombing attacks against German cities in 1940-41, which were often criticised for their alleged immorality. Speaking on that issue years after the war, the distinguished historian Dr Noble Frankland suggested that the great immorality open to Britain at the time was to lose the war against Hitler’s Germany. He argued that to have 'abandoned the only means of direct attack which we had at our disposal [air bombardment] would have been a long step in that direction'.
The same logic applied in the Southwest Pacific in March 1943. After 15 months of Japanese brutality, the great immorality open to allied commanders would have been to ignore the rights of their soldiers. It must also be remembered that as late as November 1942, the Australian War Cabinet had still feared Japanese invasion, with its frightful possibilities.

One further controversy clouded the immediate reaction to the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. On 7 March General MacArthur issued a communiqué stating that the AAF had destroyed 22 ships. Regrettably, at the time, arguments over this exaggerated claim and the exact composition of the Japanese convoy tended to divert attention from the stunning extent of the allies' victory.

In contrast to MacArthur's overstatement, Japanese radio never reported the battle. However, in a macabre footnote, two weeks after the tragedy Tokyo announced that all Japanese soldiers were to be taught to swim.

A number of RAAF aircrew were decorated following the battle. The commanding officers of Nos. 30 and 22 Squadrons, Wing Commanders B.R. Walker and K. McD. Hampshire, were both awarded the Distinguished Service Order for their leadership and fighting qualities during the New Guinea campaign. Distinguished Flying Crosses for the Bismarck Sea action were won by Squadron Leaders Learmonth and R. Little, Flight Lieutenant R. Uren, Flying Officers A. Spooner, J. Maguire and J.T. Sandford, and Pilot Officer C. Campbell. For his contribution to the success of the Allied Air Forces, Group Captain Garing was awarded an American Distinguished Service Cross in the field by General Whitehead.

The victory won by Australian and American airmen less than 500 miles north of Cape York 50 years ago was one of the most decisive in any theatre during World War II. For the loss of a handful of aircraft, the Allied Air Forces sunk 12 of 16 ships and killed almost 3000 enemy troops. The brilliantly conceived and executed operation smashed Japanese hopes of regaining the initiative in New Guinea.

To the extent that we as Australians draw on military history to help shape our national identity, we do so largely in terms of ill-considered Imperial adventures in distant lands. It would be more constructive and more relevant to our sense of nationhood if instead we contemplated the circumstances and human qualities - inspirational leadership, innovation, professional mastery, teamwork and courage - associated with the victory we shared with Americans in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943.
Sir Cecil Abel: I was born in New Guinea and have lived all my life there. I was actually in Milne Bay and had been for several weeks before the engagement which Dr Mordike has so eloquently described. I would like to draw your attention to one error. When the Japanese came into Milne Bay they were aiming not for KB Mission but for Gili Gili. I draw this from the fact that when they landed they asked the first prisoners they took, 'Where is Gili Gili?'. They obviously knew they were not at Gili Gili. They did not mention KB Mission. Coming down that coast there are two promontories which stick out; one is Goilani Point and the other which they would be aiming for would be Didiwaga which is where they intended to land, which is Gili Gili. Under normal conditions if you are coming down that coast at night, you could see the first promontory and the second way behind. But that night it was very foggy and hazy, so all they could see was that first promontory. We were told they had a local pilot on the destroyer that led that task force in and seeing this point he would say, 'That is Gili Gili', and that is why they landed where they did. Not at Gili Gili which would have been just opposite that third strip, where they intended to land, but opposite where they did land at Waga Waga. It is a minor point and it is only one of many things that happened on that occasion. I have mentioned the landing and other minor points in a paper I wrote about the battle of Milne Bay to correct some of these oversights that have not been known to people who were not there.

Another important point was the timely arrival of Group Captain, now Air Commodore, Bill Garing, whose arrival together with Brigadier Wootten's completely changed the atmosphere. The morale at Gili Gili at the headquarters was at its lowest before Brigadier Wootten arrived. One of General Clowes' staff officers came to me, knowing that I knew the area very well, and said, 'Which is the quickest way out of Milne Bay if we have to go?'. That was the atmosphere. Morale was absolutely non-existent. You have to be in a place where there is no morale or very low morale to understand what a devastating effect that has on everybody. By the same token that morale can be turned around overnight, in a matter of hours, because people suddenly feel they have got commanders who know what they are doing and can lead them to victory. That is what happened when Bill Garing and Wootten arrived. I mention these small considerations because they all contributed to an operation that could have gone either way. The night the Japanese task force landed, I happened to be at Waga Waga on the opposite side of the bay. We had had no warning of the arrival of the task force and at 11 o'clock - not midnight but 11 o'clock - that night we saw the naval bombardment; tons of flame shooting out and about six seconds later the report of the gun firing.

Dr Mordike: I want to make a point about the two brigades. The 7th Brigade was an untried militia brigade and that was John Field's
Brigade. The second brigade that came was the 18th with George Wootten; and that was an AIF brigade that had seen active service. So that is one of the reasons why you get this raise in morale; because here are tried troops who have actually been in battle in the Middle East and have come to Milne Bay. The written records show that Group Captain Bill Garing and Brigadier George Wootten were two positively motivated people, and I would agree that they made what was probably a vital contribution to morale.

Air Commodore W.H. Garing: The two RAAF squadrons in Milne Bay unquestionably turned the tide of that battle. It was won by a whisker and most battles are. The conditions under which the two squadrons operated were appalling. The runway was dreadful. When the Kittyhawks landed you could hardly see them for the mud flying over the top. The guns themselves were over a millimetre bigger in diameter. We wanted new barrels but did not get them. An order had gone in but apparently one 'i' was not dotted properly so we did not get them. You cannot imagine the lack of support. Anyway, the fellows did it and they were exhausted and so was the Army but we got away with it.

Now I can leave Milne Bay at that and go on to the battle of the Bismarck Sea which I believe was the most incredible thing. Charlie Pearce and I and a few more of us like Dick Kingsland knew a lot about maritime warfare. The Americans were so confident about their new bomb-sight that they thought they could hit anything, anywhere, anytime. But the Japanese had these marvellous binoculars. They could see the bomb doors open, they could see the bombs drop. Well, what would you do? You would turn at right angles and pour the coal on and go like hell, and when the bombs got to the water the ships were not there. And the Americans claimed hits that were not true; and some of the convoys before that had got through to Lae and it had not even dawned on them then that this was not the way to do it. Well, Dr Mordike explained how it was done and I will not elaborate on that.

The Liberator that was shot down, the wing caught fire and the captain and the crew bailed out and there they were going down in their parachutes into the Solomon Sea when Jap fighters broke off and went down and shot them in their parachutes. Now the word got out to the fighters and bombers and the result was electric. The fellows said there is no let up and from there on every Japanese - and I will say the words - had to be a dead Japanese. Now a lot of people have said that we, Black Jack Walker and I, should have been hauled up as war criminals for shooting the Japanese out of the sea. Well, we shot barges and barges were military warships. That is what they used down the coast of Malaya. Now here they were and we were supposed to let them go. Hell, if we had the whole
outcome could have changed, and that is why we went out day after
day.

Intelligence was essential for that whole operation and I cannot
emphasise that enough. I'll give you an idea. I remember Eric Feldt
coming into my office one day and saying, 'You have got friends at
Rabaul', and I said, 'I haven't you know'. He said, 'Yes, you have'. I
said, 'What are they?'. He said, 'the Anopheles mosquito'. I said, 'What
do you mean?'. He said, 'You keep those Japanese out in the slit
trenches at night and the mosquitos will do the rest'. So we used to
send a Catalina over with a load of bombs and a load of beer bottles
and cans, with a razor blade in the opening, and these things would
whistle down. Every now and again we'd drop a real bomb to stir them
up and keep them out. Now they got so rotten with malaria it held up
their attack on Lae for six weeks and it was during that six weeks that
we got the first lot of Kittyhawk fighters, No. 75 Squadron, which went
to Port Moresby with only seven hours flying experience.

Dr Mordike: I'll just mention the casualties at Milne Bay. There were
161 Australian lives lost out of Milne Force and somewhere over 700
Japanese killed.
As part of the allied plans to clear Japanese occupied territories in the Southwest Pacific, the Montclair operations were conducted. Montclair involved the reoccupation of the western Visayan-Mindanao-Borneo-Netherlands East Indies area, with the plan being prepared by G3 Planning, GHQ, on 25 February 1945.\(^1\) By 17 April 1945, a major phase of Montclair - the Victor phase - had been largely completed. The time was now set for the Oboe phase, the objectives of which 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. The original six were:

a. Oboe 1 - Tarakan Island,

b. Oboe 2 - Balikpapan,

c. Oboe 3 - Bandjermasin,

d. Oboe 4 - Surabaya (or Batavia),

e. Oboe 5 - East Netherlands East Indies, and

f. Oboe 6 - British Borneo.

In the end, Oboe 1 commenced 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 6 which centred on Labuan/Brunei Bay and Oboe 2 - Balikpapan.

The aim of this Paper is to discuss the conduct of Oboe 1. In doing so, it sets the scene with an overview of the plan, and the objective and concept of the air operation, before discussing the phases of the air campaign in the taking of Tarakan. Clear observations arise for the

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provision of air support and fighter control, both of which are discussed in some detail.

OVERVIEW

The general aim of the operation was for 26th Brigade Group of the 9th Australian Division (1st Australian Corps) to launch an assault, capture the island of Tarakan, and restore NEI authority. Naval support was provided by Task Group No 78.1, Allied Naval Forces, Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA).

RAAF Command, Allied Air Forces, was allotted the task of:

a. neutralising all enemy resources that could interfere with the success of the operation;

b. providing air protection of the assault, follow-up and resupply shipping convoys;

c. supporting 26th Brigade Group AIF during the assault and consolidation phases;

d. establishing air forces at Tarakan airfield to provide air support for 26th Brigade Group during 'mopping up' operations; and

e. carrying out air operations in support of future operations in the Borneo area.

1st TAF (RAAF) with the 13th AF (USAAF) under operational control of the Air Officer Commanding-In-Chief (AOC-in-C) RAAF Command planned and conducted the air operation. They were also supported by heavy bomber squadrons of the Northwest and Western areas of RAAF Command.

Air Commodore Cobby (Officer Commanding 1st TAF - based in Morotai) appointed Group Captain Arthur, who was Commanding Officer No. 78 Wing, to be Task Force Commander, Tarakan. No. 78

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2 Tarakan is about 25 kilometres long and 18 kilometres wide at its widest point. The island is near the Sesajap River in North East Borneo. Tarakan township has as its port, Lingkas, on the southwest coast, offering docking facilities and a harbour. The island is approximately 2000 kilometres from Darwin by air, 1400 from Singapore and 450 from Balikpapan.

3 No. 23 Squadron from Darwin, Northern Territory.

4 No. 25 Squadron from Cunderdin, Western Australia.
Wing had only 10 days to prepare\(^5\) as No. 81 Wing which was planned to be used and appeared in the Operations Instruction (No. 78/1945) could not move all its units forward from Noemfoor and Townsville in time.

The assault on Tarakan occurred on P-Day (1 May 1945).\(^6\) 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. Bases such as Sanga Sanga, Zamboanga, Samar, Palawan and Morotai were used.

While the AOC-in-C RAAF Command (Air Vice-Marshal Bostock) believed the conduct of air operations was generally satisfactory, he was concerned that incorrect action had been taken on certain occasions, particularly in relation to fighter protection of the assault shipping convoy and the employment of RAAF heavy bomber squadrons of the 1st TAF (RAAF). There were also instances of breaches of Close Air Support (CAIRS) control procedures.

Two bomber squadrons based at Morotai did not meet their commitments on 1 May because the aircraft were withdrawn from service for scheduled maintenance (as the allotted number of flying hours had been reached). The aircraft were serviceable, which led Air Vice-Marshal Bostock to write later in May 1945:

> it is inexcusable to allow consideration of routine maintenance procedure of this nature to preclude the employment of aeroplanes in operations in support of an assault on a beach head.\(^7\)

**Objective of Oboe 1**

The overall objective of Oboe 1 was:

a. to seize the airfield at Tarakan,

b. to destroy enemy forces on Tarakan Island, and

c. to re-establish the NEI civil government.\(^8\)


\(^6\) P-Day was postponed from 29 April to 1 May to take advantage of a higher tide which would lift the LSTs further onshore.


\(^8\) *ibid.*, p.4.
Because the beaches on Tarakan were soft mud the plan called for an artillery battery to be landed on Sadau Island the day before (30 April). The 13th AF lay smoke screens along the beach of Tarakan and bombed obstacles on the beach immediately prior to the assault. Naval units provided Naval Gunfire Support (NGS) and the artillery battery on Sadau Island also contributed to the clearing of obstacles. These obstacles consisted of double apron barbed wire fences and rows of vertical posts, rails and pipes.\(^9\)

**CONCEPT OF AIR OPERATIONS**

The air plan was divided into three phases:

a. Prior to P-5 (26 April), enemy airfields that could be used for staging operations were attacked, enemy sea lanes blockaded, and targets of military importance in the Objective Area (OA) destroyed.

b. During P-5 to P-Day, air operations were intensified against targets of military importance in the OA, in support of land operations (pre-assault phase) and in protection of the convoys and surface vessels.

c. On P-Day and thereafter, direct air support operations, convoy protection, fighter defence of the OA, and air observation were all carried out.

**Phase One**

Enemy-held airfields in Borneo, Celebes (now Sulawesi) and Java were attacked from P-20 until P-6 (11-25 April). These successful attacks led to the absence of enemy land-based aircraft in the OA just prior to and during the amphibious assault. The air superiority achieved by allied air forces meant that the common practice of suffering heavy casualties during amphibious assaults could be avoided.

These attacks were prosecuted by the 13th AF operating from Samar and Morotai and RAAF Nos. 21 and 24 Squadrons operating Liberators from Morotai. In addition, targets in the Tarakan area were attacked heavily by medium bombers (B-24 Liberators and B-25 Mitchells) and fighters (P-38 Lightnings) of the 13th AF prior to 26 April. Bulk storage oil tanks at Lingkas and Parnoesian (the principal

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oilfield)\textsuperscript{10} were destroyed and attacks were launched against barracks, warehouses, supply and personnel areas, radio and radar stations and gun positions.

**Phase Two**

Attacks were continued against anti-aircraft (AA) positions, supply dumps, barracks and other military buildings, warehouses, coastal defence gun positions, and other oil storage installations. Smokescreens were to be laid to cover engineers engaged in breaching the remaining obstacles on the beach. In addition to the obstacles mentioned earlier, there was also a 25 feet-wide anti-tank ditch which prevented ready access from the beach to the coastal road.\textsuperscript{11} Aircraft arrived 30 minutes late to conduct the three scheduled smoke-laying runs. Two runs were eventually conducted, which provided good cover to the engineers, but the third was made to the seaward side, resulting in engineers being silhouetted until the smoke drifted inshore.

Continual strafing and bombing of enemy positions on the beach forced the Japanese to withdraw inland from Lingkas, leaving their strongly-built pillboxes which were sited in an embankment and which provided good fortifications from which to defend the beach.

The assault convoy sailed from Morotai on 27 April, with the 1st TAF (RAAF) providing fighter cover until dusk. Despite fighter cover being requested for the dusk period as well, it was not forthcoming on that first evening. Neither was the dawn cover for 28 April provided, although it too had been ordered. Throughout the day, cover was provided but the timing of relief flights was poor and one relief experienced difficulty in locating the convoy. Provision of fighter cover improved subsequently.

Not all pilots appeared to be aware that they could be vectored to the convoy by the Fighter Director Ship (also detailed in the Operations Instruction). Moreover, RAAF pilots appeared to have been inadequately briefed as to communications procedures and IFF codes to be used.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Tarakan oil was obtained from two major fields at Pamoestan and Djoeata, and from two minor fields at Sesanip and Tjangkol.

\textsuperscript{11} The landing site of the beach at Lingkas was chosen because it was the only one of the possible landing points on Tarakan that was connected to the airfield by a road of reasonable quality.

\textsuperscript{12} Lack of punctuality of RAAF fighters, use of incorrect IFF codes, and problems with dawn and dusk cover should not have occurred as the details were specifically set out in RAAF Command Operations Instruction No 78/1945. Perhaps the fact that the information was contained as far from the front of the Instruction as Appendix H may have had some bearing.
The RAAF provided cover from Morotai to a position at longitude 125 degrees East (about 400 km). From the 123rd Meridian to Tarakan (about 600 km), the 13th AF provided fighter cover (including at dawn and dusk). This cover was reported as satisfactory in all respects.

In the main, anti-submarine patrols were provided as requested, with one minor lapse on the first day, which was caused by 'a misunderstanding of requirements'.

Phase 3

Air strikes by the 13th AF along the landing beaches on 1 May were not conducted as planned. Adverse weather prevented the aircraft from arriving on time and even with an extension granted from the Attack Force Commander, not all aircraft could be brought over the target in time. However, those that did bomb, provided excellent coverage.

Direct support aircraft arrived on station every two hours from P-Day, but on that first day, due to communications failures with the Commander Support Aircraft (CSA), not all aircraft were used. For the first three days (from the morning of P-Day to the night of P+2), 17 missions (43 sorties) were flown in direct support of ground forces. Bombs dropped included 250 lb and 500 lb General Purpose bombs and clusters of 20 lb fragmentation bombs. P-38 Lightnings, B-24 Liberators and B-25 Mitchells successfully provided direct support.

Reconnaissance

Australian Army Air Liaison Officers (ALO), specially trained in air observer duties, conducted valuable reconnaissance on the 1st and 2nd of May, flying in B-24 Liberators of the 1st TAF (RAAF). This reconnaissance provided information on the changing situation on the ground and assisted air coordinators in finding and recognising targets against which attacks had been ordered.

Direct communications between these ALOs and the Air Support Parties (ASP) would have been useful, especially in terms of ASPs displaying ground panels to mark positions of friendly ground forces.


14 The Commander Support Aircraft, whether afloat (in the Command ship USS Rocky Mount) 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.

15 An Air Support Party (comprising one officer and 11 other ranks) was allotted to each battalion headquarters. There was also one Air Support Section (comprising
On 3 May, the support air observation aircraft failed to appear as the RAAF aircraft had expended the total operational hours allocated. This inflexibility of planning ran counter to the claims of the RAAF about the flexibility of air power. The problem was rectified quickly and support air observation missions were resumed without further difficulties.

**Air Observation Post Operations**

Four Auster aircraft were to provide, at an early stage of the assault, local reconnaissance, air observation, short-range communications flights and medical evacuation. The landing at Lingkas was the first one in which an RAAF flying unit accompanied the troops ashore. Flight Lieutenant R.H. Drabsch was the Officer Commanding No. 16 AOP 83 Wing. He reported that the Austers were landed from LSTs and readied for flight within 1½ hours (under constant sniper fire). Despite this alacrity, the aircraft could not be used until a temporary strip was prepared. The first aircraft that tried to use the strip crashed, and before the strip could be finished, Tarakan airfield was captured by the allies. The remaining three aircraft were disassembled and carried to Tarakan airfield.¹⁶

**Courier Services**

RAAF Catalinas provided daily courier services between Morotai and Tarakan (about 1100 km) and Manila and Tarakan (about 1300 km). Courier services operated to the complete satisfaction of all users except on 1 May when the pilot of the Morotai-Tarakan courier reported to the wrong person over the radio. He reported to the Fighter Director instead of CSA afloat; this would appear to be another indication of poor briefings on the contents of the Operations Instruction No 78/1945.

**Combat Air Patrol**

The 13th AF provided Combat Air Patrol (CAP) over Tarakan. Four fighters were maintained on-station during the day and two provided cover during dawn and dusk. RAAF aircraft were to take over CAP duties on 7 May, but because of the unserviceability of Tarakan airfield, 13th AF continued to provide CAP until 15 May. When the RAAF assumed CAP responsibility from 15 May, they operated Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron and Beaufighters of No. 77 Wing from

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¹⁶ RAAF Historical records contain a brief report by Flight Lieutenant Drabsch on AOP operations.
Sanga Sanga, in the Sulu archipelago. Sanga Sanga was approximately 300 kilometres from Tarakan.

**DDT Spraying**

The 13th AF was tasked with the DDT spraying of 2,600 acres as an anti-malarial measure.\(^{17}\)

**AIR SUPPORT ORGANISATION**

The decision was taken that one Air Support Section (ASS) could cover both the Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF (RAAF) and Headquarters 26th Australian Infantry Brigade because both headquarters would be physically adjacent. One Air Support Party (ASP) was allocated to each of the three infantry battalions.

All direct support was controlled from the Command ship USS *Rocky Mount* and the CSA (Afloat) until 3 May, when control passed to the CSA (Ashore).\(^{18}\) The ASPs landed with the assault battalions but were unable to establish communications for more than two hours, and even then communications were not satisfactory as Army No. 108 lightweight portable HF R/T sets had to be used until the ASPs' heavier equipment could be off-loaded. Good communications were not forthcoming until the morning of the following day, once the unit's heavy equipment was ashore and became operable.

Tactical loading of ships at Morotai had been poor in that personnel and their equipment were separated during loading. The problem was compounded at Tarakan as unloading priorities were insufficient to ensure that the equipment could be provided when needed, and LSTs with some of the equipment on-board became stuck in the mud a distance from shore. As well, the anti-tank ditch on the foreshore caused further delays.

The poor tactical loading could be attributable to the late arrival of the ASS, ASPs and No. 114 Mobile Fighter Control Unit (MFCU) at Morotai which necessitated unloading and loading equipment without sorting it, or indeed even knowing if it were all reloaded for Tarakan.

Advanced Headquarters 1st TAF and Brigade Headquarters were not located together once ashore and the ASS had to function inside the Brigade Headquarters as an ASP. Delays were experienced in receiving all equipment as had happened with the three ASPs allocated to the battalion headquarters. To make matters worse, long-

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\(^{17}\) The concentration of DDT was ½ lb per acre, in the form of 5% solution in oil solvent with a 0.014% concentration of Pyrethrum added.

\(^{18}\) The CSA was provided by 13th AF, with a CSA observer provided by the RAAF.
range communications equipment of the 1st TAF's Mobile Telecommunications Unit (MTU) was not unloaded from the Headquarters ship before it departed Tarakan on 3 May, and interim communications had to be provided by No. 114 MFCU. Long-range communications were needed to link Tarakan to Palawan, Zamboanga, Leyte and Morotai.\(^1\)

ASPs were to provide regular reports on friendly ground force positions so that CSA could maintain a bomb line. As well as a target bomb line for direct air support aircraft, a bomb line was determined over which friendly troops could not cross. ASPs were kept informed by Battalion Headquarters of changes in position of forward troops. Brigade Headquarters, in conjunction with ASS, determined and advised the bomb line. Because too little information was received, CSA found it necessary to insist on maximum information on friendly forces being provided at the time of each request for direct air support.

Compounding the problem, the Brigade Commander left the headquarters ship during 1 May and ordered that only targets which were located well in advance of his troops could be attacked unless he gave specific approval. CSA was, therefore, unable to order strikes until satisfactory communications were established with Brigade Headquarters.

Once the three ASPs and the ASS obtained their own equipment, requests for direct air support were passed without difficulty, although reception was degraded during afternoons. Procedurally, the ASPs did not appear to realise the need to listen to the Support Air Observer at all times and thus the Battalion Commanders were not always provided with the best information available. A considerable amount of direct air support was prevented from being used during the first two days due to indifferent communications, both for procedural planning and equipment shortfall reasons.

Maps and Map References

Most maps used were suitable; however the map of Tarakan Island (scale 1:25,000) had grid squares sub-divided into 25 sub-squares, each marked with the appropriate letter for that square. The amount of printing obscured some of the map's detail. Subsequently, different colours were used and only occasional grid squares were sub-divided and lettered.

\(^1\) 13th AF Fighter Command was at Palawan, Commander Maritime Air Group was at Zamboanga, Headquarters 13th AF was at Leyte, and Headquarters 1st TAF was at Morotai.
ASPs passed map references in the form of six figure co-ordinates to the Headquarters ship. On board the ship, the co-ordinates had to be converted to four figures and one letter to conform to the standard system used with support aircraft.

**Equipment**

Some of the ASS and ASP equipment was not sufficiently mobile which necessitated occasional use of landlines to link the ASP to its Battalion Headquarters. Battery charging posed problems as well. The chargers were too noisy to be used at night (for fear of disclosing positions, and they interfered with night patrols) and had insufficient output to fully charge batteries during the day to compensate for power used on the many transmitters and receivers. Furthermore, the chargers themselves were difficult to maintain.

**Re-organisation Of Air Support**

As a result of problems experienced during the Tarakan operation, the RAAF subsequently reorganised the provision of air support. 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 without vehicles 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 ASS/ASP communications were essential. The new organisational structure was as follows:

a. Air Support Section (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.

b. Two Air Support Parties would be allocated on the basis of one ASP at each of the two Brigade Headquarters. The ASP would contain 17 signals personnel plus one officer.

c. 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.

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20 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.
and capable of operating for seven days without resupply, except in cases of complete breakdown or loss of two personnel.\textsuperscript{21}

**RAAF Fighter Control Organisation**

1st TAF (RAAF) had the responsibility of establishing early warning facilities in the Objective Area. This involved two radar stations and a headquarters section of MFCU (to provide the link between the radar stations and the Fighter Director Ship) being established and operational 14 hours after the landing. Subsequently, two additional stations were to be established at Sadau Island and Cape Pasir by 6 May. In addition, the communications network was to be expanded considerably to provide seven High Frequency (HF) and four Very High Frequency (VHF) channels.

As with ASS and ASP equipment, poor tactical loading of No. 114 MFCU and unloading priorities meant that non-essential equipment was unloaded well in advance of the radar stations. Moreover, the Ground Control Intercept (GCI) station equipment had been loaded on two different vessels and erection of the radar had to be delayed by one day. Technical faults compounded the problem with the GCI radar and it was not functional until 6 May.

The air warning station (the second radar) was not unloaded until late on 2 May and erection could not begin until dawn the following day. Furthermore, vehicles with radar equipment appeared to be misdirected and considerable effort was wasted in tracing the vehicles and the much-needed equipment.

Some 56 personnel of the MFCU were required ashore to erect and operate the radar equipment but were held on-board the *Titania* to form a working party. Meanwhile, surplus personnel were ashore, causing congestion. Approximately half the equipment for the two air warning radars to be erected on Sadau Island and Cape Pasir was unloaded on 4 May. The sets were meant to be operational by the 6th, but all attempts to trace the remaining equipment proved unsuccessful.

Siting of the MFCU beside the GCI station would have provided the best effect, but difficulty was experienced in doing so because of sitting priorities made by Army authorities.

No. 1 Australian Air Formation Signals Unit lay landline communications from the MFCU to Headquarters 1st TAF well before

\textsuperscript{21} In the subsequent Oboe 6 operation - Labuan Island/Brunei Bay - this structure worked particularly well.
the radar stations were established. At least, in this respect, planning and execution came together.

There was an obvious need for training of RAAF officers in beach movement, of Army personnel in matching unloading priorities for ASS/ASP to respective headquarters, and in rehearsal for setting up GCI and air warning stations. Additionally, the use of common codes and ciphers was shown to be necessary. During the first few days of the assault, the 13th AF and the ASS at Tarakan experienced difficulty in communicating due to the use of different codes and ciphers.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Advanced Headquarters, which was still part of Headquarters RAAF Command (located in Brisbane), was established at Morotai, adjacent to Headquarters 1st Australian Corps. RAAF Command (under AVM Bostock) was on the same relative command level as 1st Australian Corps (under General Morshead); and 1st TAF (under Air Commodore Cobby) was on the same relative level as 9th Australian Division (under General Wootten).

Immediately after Air Commodore Cobby established his headquarters ashore on 5 May, he left for Morotai and was replaced by Air Commodore Scherger who arrived on 10 May. Additionally, Cobby's Senior Air Staff Officer (Group Captain Gibson) and Senior Administrative Officer (Group Captain Simms) were replaced respectively by Group Captains Murdoch and Duncan.  

Planning staff at Headquarters 1st TAF remained in close contact with the Air and Administrative planning staffs of Advanced Headquarters (RAAF). RAAF resupply to the Tarakan area was handled through a RAAF staff officer attached to Advanced Land Forces Headquarters.

Post-action reports indicated the following weaknesses in administrative arrangements:

a. Initial ship loading in Australia was poor (compounded by loading around the Easter period and inadequate military control over loading).

b. Logistics supplied by units were inadequate for requirements.

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c. Orders and instructions were not produced and circulated in time to be seen by all personnel.

d. Some responsible officers did not appear to read orders and instructions that were circulated in time and hence implementation of procedures was found wanting.

e. Rehearsal for loading procedures (and unloading and subsequent erection of equipment and facilities) was not conducted.

f. Units carried too much surplus equipment and vehicles were often over-loaded or poorly loaded.

g. Unit personnel and equipment were separated in different vessels.

h. Not all commanding officers travelled with their units.

Communications

Despite several planning conferences on the use of radio signals and radar, and promulgation of clear instructions for the use of radios, RAAF aircraft tasked with providing air cover over the assault convoy still used incorrect frequencies and call signs when communicating with the convoy. As mentioned earlier, the wrong IFF code was used on at least one occasion and the first courier aircraft used the wrong frequency and call sign (and hence reported to the wrong person).

Logistics

Logistics received a 3½ page Appendix (Appendix F) to the Headquarters RAAF Command Operations Instruction No 78/1945. Despite specific detail such as 15 days initial supply of aviation POL (petrol, oils and lubricants), 25 days of motor transport POL, and 30 days supply of rations, instructions were very general.

For example, in conjunction with RAAF Headquarters, 1st TAF units were asked to provide adequate initial supply of:

a. bombs, ammunition, pyrotechnics and explosives;

b. RAAF technical and airborne supplies; and

c. RAAF non-technical, non-airborne and non-common-usage stores.

There was no further level of detail given, although this was to improve significantly in Oboes 6 and 2.
Works

The Works organisation was to provide the following:

a. a runway (5000' x 100'),

b. two alert aprons,

c. undispersed parking areas (four squadrons of fighters and one AOP flight),

d. an MFCU headquarters, and

e. a base operations building and control tower.

Later, the Works organisation was required to provide increased undispersed parking for three squadrons of attack aircraft and one squadron of Air Sea Rescue (ASR) aircraft; followed by additional parking for the staging of two fighter and two attack squadrons. In addition, various receiver and transmitter buildings, wing and squadron headquarters buildings, air stores parks, alert huts, fuel storage, bomb storage, access roads, a dry off-loading area, service aprons, a bore-siting range and an air evacuation building were to be provided.

THE AIRFIELD

RAAF aircraft were to begin operating from Tarakan airfield from 7 May. Two Airfield Construction Squadrons (ACS) were tasked with constructing the necessary works requirements listed above. Work on the airfield was delayed because the airfield itself was not captured until the evening of 5 May. It was seriously damaged, waterlogged and mined. A RAAF bomb disposal unit cleared 114 mines from the airstrip and dispersal areas during 6 and 7 May.23

Continued enemy action and sniper fire affected work on the airfield during the first few days. Then, heavy rain on 10 May and enemy shelling on 19 and 20 May slowed work on the airfield even further. The shelling was followed up on 26 and 28 May by Japanese air attacks. Continual harassment on the ground occurred nightly. Continued wet weather and a corresponding high water table, bad soil conditions, and lack of suitable paving materials conspired against the hard work of the ACS engineers.

By 6 June, the engineers required only four dry days to have the airfield serviceable. Yet, from the 6th to 25th June, there were only

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23 Odgers, op. cit., p.458.
two dry days. This inability to develop the airfield, and indeed the shortcomings of intelligence which suggested that an airfield could be developed, meant that most of the 1st TAF’s combat strength remained at Morotai and contributed far less than anticipated to the operation.

Since the primary reason for launching Oboe 1 was to establish an airfield on Tarakan, the operation would have to be regarded as a failure. The real tragedy is that as Air Commodore Scherger said, it was quite obvious ‘...that a satisfactory strip could never be constructed, nor indeed could a strip be made, capable of intensive use for even a short period’.24

**Observations**

There was almost a casualness to RAAF planning and in particular to detailed briefings on the contents of the Operations Instruction. Without doubt, any hint of ‘it will be all right on the day’, disappeared from subsequent planning of Oboes 6 and 2. The careful planning and close co-ordination required of air operations testify to the need for military services, in this case the RAAF, to ensure professional mastery. The full potential of the air environment can only be exploited through such mastery, which must provide ‘a level and depth of expertise necessary for planning, directing and executing all aspects of air power’.25 This has become a doctrinal tenet of the RAAF.

Conduct of the air operations over Tarakan revealed that it was possible to have an air force, yet not deliver effective air power on every occasion. There were many examples of this throughout the operations. The conduct of effective air operations is predicated on a complete system - not a collection of air power ‘bits and pieces’, but a complete, operable and functional system. Quite obviously, such a system can only be as strong as its weakest link. Vertical integration of the elements of air power was fundamental to success in the taking of Tarakan.26

Following on from the previous point, support must be tied to operations. The identification of operational logistics,

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26 This truism that ‘you can have an air force but exercise no air power’ was developed conceptually in Air Marshal R.G. Funnell, *Air Power and Smaller Pacific Nations-An Australian Airman’s Perspective*, an unpublished Chief of the Air Staff Paper to Asian Aerospace 90 held on 15 February 1990, pp.9-10.
communications, and infrastructure is vital. The current RAAF organisation recognises these lessons of Tarakan. A dedicated Air Defence (Radar) Wing exists - No. 41 Wing, based at Williamtown. Similarly, the RAAF maintains an Air Transportable Telecommunications Unit (ATTU) which provides tactical and temporary Communications Electronics facilities and services, and an Operational Support Unit (No. 1 OSU) which provides operational, administrative and logistics support for deployments.

There was a need to bring together all operational planning staffs for Tarakan. For example, it is apparent that 1st TAF and 13th AF did not, in a combined sense, plan convoy protection procedures, thus compounding the problems facing the Commander of the amphibious Task Group.

Commonality of procedures for both joint and combined operations could have been improved. Tarakan underscored the need to determine procedures, and to promulgate, teach, understand and rehearse them. It underscored too that rehearsal must be in realistic operational scenarios. Today, the sophistication of simulation makes operational scenarios easier and cheaper to achieve, although rehearsal is still a costly business.

Finally, perhaps the most abiding lesson to emerge from an analysis of the Tarakan operation is that all the observations listed above are related to doctrine. Doctrine is a body of fundamental principles which guide military forces in their actions. It is authoritative but requires judgment in its application. Air power doctrine across the three levels of war - strategic, operational and tactical - provides fundamental and enduring principles; distinct objectives, force capabilities, broad mission areas and operational environments; and specific weapon systems and a clear articulation of roles and tasks.28

A clear and unambiguous doctrine for the RAAF would have provided less chance for 'error' at Tarakan. Furthermore, an Australian joint doctrine would have provided for the better integration and employment of the RAAF with naval and land forces. Similarly, a combined air power doctrine would have provided for better integration of the 1st TAF and 13th AF.

27 Communications Electronics facilities and services encompasses: ground-to-ground and ground-to-air communications, navigational aids, air traffic control facilities, communications security monitoring facilities, and data and interfacing facilities.

**DISCUSSION**

**Air Commodore R.V. Richardson:** I wonder how many of us still serving would feel confident that the problems just mentioned would not occur today.

**Air Marshal I.B. Gration:** I was determined not to speak during the conference but I cannot miss the opportunity to reassure you on one point. The principal mission of the logistics system in the Air Force is to generate on-line aircraft. In peace, the aim is to preserve the asset; in war, the aim is to generate missions.

**Air Commodore Richardson:** There is a tenuous link to my generation through those Oboe operations and the Borneo area. I was with No. 77 Squadron under Wing Commander Les Reading when we went back to Labuan in 1965, which I think was the first time since the Second World War. We were engaged in operations against the Indonesians, flying across to Tarakan from Labuan along the Indonesian border.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Neville McNamara:** I don't necessarily want to add to the tale of woe that Group Captain Waters has given us on Tarakan, but a few snippets might help to complete the story. You have already mentioned the fact that we were held at Morotai for some six weeks. It was terribly frustrating as you can well imagine. I was with 75 Squadron, and when we eventually did get away we went in two waves of 12. I was in the second wave, I was a new boy and I was 'Yellow Four' right down the back. We were led by a Beaufighter and as we approached Tarakan there was a big front across the line of approach. The Beaufighter attempted to go underneath the front, but when he saw the wall of water he decided that was not the way to go and he turned and headed north and began to climb. Well, the Beaufighter climbed very well up to about 10,000 feet, and soon the Kittyhawks were strung out like Brown's cows and worrying about their fuel content. Yellow Four was trailing down the back end. Eventually the others disappeared over the horizon and I was on my own. Then the cloud got that opaque appearance that indicates there may be reasonable visibility. So I got down to sea level and sure enough there was adequate visibility there, I headed west, came out the other side in beautiful 8/8ths blue and duly landed at Tarakan. Very promptly my flight commander hopped up on the wing and said, 'Where are the rest? and I said, 'I don't have a clue'. Then they started to straggle in, and as you can well expect many were very short of fuel. One saw a PT boat and decided that was for him before he ran out of fuel and he was picked up. Two others ran out of fuel in the circuit area. One of those damaged the aircraft landing; the other made a successful dead stick landing. One Beaufighter landed on one engine; he had a mechanical problem, not a fuel problem. All in all it was a near disaster.
As was mentioned, the strip was not a particularly good one for the purposes for which it was intended. You could only take off to the west and land into the east and the saying used to be, it was one of the few airfields in the world where one end rose and fell with the tide. There was in fact a bulldozer buried underneath the strip because it just sunk to such a depth that they gave up trying to get it out. Operations generally from Tarakan were not of the nature that one would write best selling books about. We contributed as directed, of course, but by that time there was not a great deal to achieve.

**Air Commodore D. Bowden:** Many of the problems you highlighted are current today. I was ticking them off as you went down the line; thinking, yes, we are still learning the same lessons. How well were these operations documented? You said the Operation Orders are still available. If you put a staff officer through them would he say, 'Yes, this was a good Op. Order; the decisions made were based on good appreciations'. Why did we believe the runway could sustain operations? On what basis was that decision made? How good and how timely was the paperwork? Was it a well run show? Or was it, in fact, like so many activities, a bit of paper that came out at the last minute, that no-one got time to read? We have got an F-15 squadron arriving here in a day's time and as yet I have seen nothing of their Op. Order. In other words, we are still running an operation - not only our force, others - without any detailed information on what is going on. A whole F-15 squadron, no documentation. Incredible, but it is happening today.

**Group Captain Waters:** The point I would make - and George Odgers may wish to add to this - is that the Tarakan Operation Order was very detailed. The problem was, it was not circulated very well, and even when it was circulated I do not believe there was a will on the part of a lot of the commanders to go through it in detail. I think that may have happened because of the pressure of time, because some units were activated very quickly. What you do see though is a marked increase in detail in the operations instructions as you move from Oboe 1 through to Oboe 2 at Balikpapan. The interesting thing is that the after action report on Tarakan is significantly larger than the one on Labuan Island, Brunei Bay; unfortunately I cannot find the one for Balikpapan. The indications are that a lot of the lessons I raised from Tarakan were learned very quickly and corrective action was taken. The important point I want to make here is that we cannot wait until we have had one crack at it to get it right the second or third time around. You only get the one bite of the cherry and it has got to be a good bite.

**Mr George Odgers:** I handled that story for the official history and I was greatly helped by the Oboe reports put out by RAAF Command. They are quite substantial, giving all the details, the orders and the missions carried out and some of the criticisms, even the criticisms of
the Army, you know, on cooperation and joint operations. But my impression - and it is a long time since I worked on it - was that the reports were not too bad at all, particularly the Oboe 1, 2 and 6 reports by RAAF Command.

Mr Len W. Gairns: I was a B-24 pilot with No. 25 Squadron. The story Gary [Waters] has told this afternoon is the first time I have heard any of these circumstances described. At that time, 25 Squadron was based at Cunderdin, Western Australia. We had 22 crews and 19 aircraft. Then two crews were selected to operate from an alleged secret base at Marble Bar. We were to operate over Java, but we did not have a clue what our mission was from that day to this. I daresay we accepted that as true and proper in case we were shot down and tortured and somebody found out the purpose of our mission. Our orders were to stay over the target at night for four hours. Mine was the first aircraft to go over and was followed by another piloted by Col Portway. It was a nuisance raid to keep the whole of Java quiet or noisy, whichever way you look at it. We had 30 x 100 pound bombs and we would fly over three separate cities, Batavia, Surabaya, and another one starting with 'M'. We'd drop one bomb and clear off and go and do the other two cities, and then keep repeating the job. Each of these places was very heavily defended, thousands of cannons, anti-aircraft guns, dozens and dozens of search lights, many radar controlled, and it was in a sense pretty terrifying. But we did that for three nights running and then we returned to our base. Now I learn through Gary about this muck up that happened with the other squadrons who were based at Morotai or Darwin or somewhere. I think that would be Nos. 21, 23 and 24 Squadrons. Years later I was at a reunion of all the Liberator squadrons and found myself in a frightful row with other people who had never heard of 25 Squadron; they did not even know we were in the war. I recall that they said, 'Oh, you were not there', meaning Tarakan and Balikpapan. They said their orders were to go at high level and drop their bombs in sticks along the edge of the coast while the landing craft were coming in. But they could see the people below were in trouble so they went down to 100 feet above the deck and strafed the Japs and killed them all and they won the battle.

Sir Richard Kingsland: One needs a lot of detail when writing history. But at the cutting edge of forces and particularly air forces you find small units. Small units have small orderly rooms and people making records and reports usually comprise a clerk who has two fingers to operate a typewriter very, very slowly. It is very hard now to take yourself back to the days when that sort of thing existed. Today people have laptop computers and they can belt stuff off. In those days there was just a typewriter and people shied away from it because it was simply hard work.
AN OBSCURE WAR?:

John McCarthy

Objectives

In November 1943 a rare entertainment was provided for those operating from Port Moresby's Fourteen Mile strip. The final item proved the most popular. In 1968 an elegant retired general in sumptuous surroundings was seen dozing by a fire only to be awakened by a striking clock. As he leapt to his feet he clutched his head and cried 'My God, I left the 5th Air Force in New Guinea'. Wayne P. Rothgeb, then a P-38 pilot, recalled that nobody laughed. It obviously seemed to some as early as 1943 that the air war in the Southwest Pacific was likely to be forgotten.¹ What little now remains in scholarly and popular memory of the massive RAAF effort expended there 50 years ago indicates an accurate enough prediction.

Australian writing, for example, on the application of air power in the Southwest Pacific is remarkably sparse. One starts with the official histories. George Odgers, Air War Against Japan 1943-45, appeared however nearly 40 years ago while Douglas Gillison published The Royal Australian Air Force 1939-42 in 1962. Both are invaluable for detail but as with most official histories are short on controversial analysis. Air Vice-Marshall J. E. Hewitt published his diaries in 1980.² Harry Rayner's excellent biography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger appeared in 1984.³ Then there was virtually nothing analytical until 1988 when with insight and imagination Alan Powell wrote about air operations mounted from the Northern Territory and Alan Stephens provided his probing, pointed questions in 1992.⁴

Granted a general shift in social mood coupled with the Vietnam war made it most difficult to find Australian publishers for military history of any kind for almost two decades but even so that does not quite explain the almost complete neglect and particularly from 1943 to

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² Adversity in Success, South Yarra, Langate, 1980.

³ Scherger: A Biography of Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger, Canberra, AWM, 1984.

1945 of the Royal Australian Air Force in the SWPA. It is only in the last few years and sometimes with the assistance of the RAAF Museum that largely anecdotal studies are beginning to appear. As mostly ‘desk-top’ productions, however, they are neither reviewed nor distributed and thus are difficult to locate.\(^5\) One thing is certain: the analytical and scholarly study of the Royal Australian Air Force in the Southwest Pacific still awaits its historian. The same must also be said for the immediate post-war air force which comes to life and then only briefly with the Korean war. Again one turns to the work by Alan Stephens, perhaps the Scherger biography, and a small analytical attempt by the writer.\(^6\)

This paper has two objectives. Firstly it will try to suggest why the experience of the RAAF in the SWPA remains so obscure and secondly it will speculate on the impact of that experience on the service for 10 years or so after the war. A problem is obvious. Given the above it is a little like trying to build a house with insufficient bricks and a most suspect cement. The result is predictable. The structure presented will not last for long but at least it might provide somebody with something to knock down.

**An Obscure War?**

Why has the Australian air war in the Southwest Pacific been so largely forgotten? Part of an answer lies in the fact that in the Southwest Pacific nothing existed which related to the combatant’s intellectual and social heritage. Even in the Middle East with its sand and flies there was always the hope of Cairo or Alexandria, of touching a shared past, or simply just seeing recognisable human beings living an understandable existence. In the SWPA, all commonalty came with the individual mind. The huge geographical area itself was utterly obscure. As Rothgeb wrote in his diary in October 1943 ‘I don’t think anyone knows where New Guinea is’. A Liberator pilot even after


being in New Guinea found that neither he nor his crew had ever heard of Morotai.\(^7\) One should not be surprised. Accurate figures are impossible to find but it is clear that prior to the war only a very small number of Australians had any first-hand knowledge of New Guinea. Tourists were non-existent and even 20 years later the non-indigenous population of the area was only about .75% of the total.\(^8\) All was alien. As recalled in 1945, from Australia to the Philippines there were only '...a few collections of grass buildings here and there' and after Australia, living was '...in a jungle nightmare, a poisonous, lush, terrible summation of all the unknowns, all the terrors'.\(^9\) *A Heart of Darkness* quality is there but nothing that related directly to Sydney, Melbourne or perhaps anywhere inhabitable in Australia. Never afterwards reinforced, all made for the recapture of experience much more difficult. In New Guinea alone and along the Huon Gulf the air forces in some two years moved from Milne Bay to beyond Wewak. Not for those personnel, pre-war built or even the war-time dispersed stations so common in Britain and now fondly remembered by ex-aircrew. There was nothing memorable about Tsili Tsili for example, an enlarged old gold mining airstrip cut out of six to eight foot high razor sharp kuni grass in the Markham Valley and vital for the attack on Lae. It seems reasonable to doubt that a squadron reunion has ever been held there.

The climate and living conditions were also perhaps better forgotten. New Guinea itself provided arguably the worst fighting conditions in the world for infantrymen. Writing from his advanced headquarters during the battles for Gona in November 1942, General Blamey noted: 'The country is about as vile a country as any that exists'. In December he observed that a third of the Milne Bay force were malaria infected and that Buna was simply 'evil'.\(^10\) Operating and living conditions for RAAF aircrew and support staff were better but fell far beyond an acceptable standard. At Port Moresby during 1942, 75 squadron pilots often faced odds of four or five to one in an aircraft which lacked the performance to climb above an incoming attack.\(^11\) If

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they returned there was only squalor. Gastroenteritis was endemic and mosquitoes carrying dengue fever were a torment. The squadron medical officer recalls with understatement that camp conditions were 'extremely bad'. While flying, most pilots experienced severe stomach pains made worse with 'any degree of infective enteritis'. One finds a psychological need to withdraw and erase the experience. As one ex-pilot recently said:

I would never wish to go back to Moresby to that six weeks again. That was horrendous - bad conditions, bad living, and a bad situation.\textsuperscript{12}

One might think that as the war progressed conditions for aircrew improved. Morotai was considered 'not unpleasant' yet those who operated with the 1st Tactical Air Force against the strongly defended Halmahera Island with its guns and 40,000 Japanese troops came back to canvas tents, mud, bully beef and little else.\textsuperscript{13}

To use modern terminology, the SWPA lacked a marketable 'product'. Obviously there was an almost complete lack of female sexual partners. Not so, of course, elsewhere. The incidence of venereal disease among British based aircrew, and especially among officers, was higher than for other service personnel.\textsuperscript{14} The Southwest Pacific air war was itself also utterly different. A pattern emerged. Immediate priority was air strip construction and the procedure became a drill. Air cover was provided from a previous strip for the seizure of a Japanese landing area or the construction of a new one hacked from jungle. Engineers and construction units had a vital role and shared with aircrew the danger of ferocious Japanese infantry attack, the enervating climate and the shortage of fresh foods. The importance of this operation is indicated by the existence of two RAAF construction wings based at Noemfoor and Morotai by October 1944. But again, there was nobody to throw flowers, to bang on Jeeps, or to cheer once the battle was won. All, without constant vigilance melted back to jungle.

Vital though it was to success in land operations, the air transport nature of much of the SWPA air war failed, one fancies, to stir imaginations. That it was essential can be demonstrated by

\textsuperscript{12} W. Deane-Butcher, \textit{Fighter Squadron Doctor - 75 Squadron RAAF New Guinea 1942}, Privately distributed by Girneda Secretarial Services, Gordon, NSW, 1989, for camp conditions and the ex-pilot's comment.

\textsuperscript{13} George Odgers, \textit{Air War Against Japan 1943-45}, AWM, Canberra, 1968, p. 442.

examining the defence of Wau in 1943. For some six months a small Australian force had been entirely maintained by air. Opposed to a Japanese counter-attack, 2000 troops were flown in over two days. It was not an easy operation. As Blamey later reported, the 'precarious' position was caused by '...the difficulty of air transport in a mountainous area under exceptionally difficult conditions of climate'.\(^\text{15}\) A piece of verse printed in 1945 might make a point:

They knew no glory would attend their deeds,
Their breasts would never wear an honoured prize,
Nor formal voice recite the splendid screeds extolling courage in the skies.\(^\text{16}\)

Perhaps one might detect a note of some bitterness.

In the popular mind, the air war between 1939 and 1945 involved either single-seater air fighting or strategic bombing. Given the lack of substantial targets in the SWPA there was little of the latter and although at times ferocious aircraft to aircraft combat did take place, from 1943, and given massive American air superiority, air power took on an overwhelming tactical ground attack role.\(^\text{17}\) The transformation of 10 Operational Group RAAF into the 1st Tactical Air Force in October 1944 was acknowledgment. Indeed Air Vice-Marshal Bostock claimed later that he had been instructed to use the RAAF primarily as an instrument to reduce AIF casualties.\(^\text{18}\) This was done brilliantly. Attacking at low level positions or airfields defended by the highly efficient Japanese light anti-aircraft fire however was most dangerous to say nothing of the perils always inherent in the weather. Buried in the official history are a few sentences which only hint at disaster:

On 16 April 1944 32 aircrew and 31 aircraft were lost when low cloud and fog moved inland and blanketed the airfields at


\(^\text{16}\) Flt. Lt. S.V. Leslie, 'The Biscuit Bombers', in Victory Roll: The RAAF in its Sixth Year of War, Canberra, AWM, 1945, p. 47. There is a good first-hand account of transport operations in the later part of J.D. Balfe, War Without Glory, Melbourne, Macmillan, 1984.


\(^\text{18}\) Robertson & McCarthy, op. cit., Bostock to Forde, 12 July 1945, p. 426.
Nadzab and Gusap before aircraft which had again attacked Aitape could get back to their bases.¹⁹

Episodes such as this no doubt accounted for the fact that while in December 1945 only 16 RAAF aircrew were noted as missing in the European theatre, 692 were so classified in the South and Southwest Pacific.²⁰ Yet again the rewards and personal satisfaction seems to have disappeared. One American pilot found his operations 'boring, minor league jobs' with 'lethargy' pervasive throughout the unit.²¹ Given the Morotai mutiny, one can only wonder if it were worse with RAAF aircrew. As Wing Commander Gibbes who had been awarded the DSO and DFC in the Middle East, and later to be involved in that affair wrote to his wife during March-April 1945:

The Japs here are doing no harm...this tin war bores and irritates me. I have no interest in it and find it impossible to get any satisfaction from the work I am doing.²²

Again is it possible that such memories were later best avoided.

So far it has been argued that the SWPA air war remains obscure for a variety of interlocking reasons. The geographic region was unknown and the indigenous culture utterly alien to the western mind. The SWPA experience therefore was incapable of being reinforced or integrated with any other existence on return to Australia. It seems now that it is only the discovery of a western artefact and that generally a long jungle covered aircraft which stirs latent memories. Operating and living conditions also precluded sympathetic remembrance while the nature of air operations themselves did not fit the largely manufactured romantic image of masculine gladiatorial combat. For many it seemed increasingly that the RAAF had become involved in a backwater war lacking in purpose. There was, however, a further reason: the divided nature of the overall Australian air effort itself in the Second World War. The effects of this not only manifested itself in the higher command of the service but permeated the ranks of aircrew itself. When Air Vice-Marshall Jones wrote in September 1946:

The major RAAF effort during the war was the training of aircrews for the European theatre. Based on a casualty basis,

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¹⁹ Odgers, op. cit., p. 208.

²⁰ War Report, Chief of the Air Staff on the Royal Australian Air Force 3 September 1939 to 31 December 1945, Melbourne, 1946.


the RAAF effort in Europe was four times as large as that in the SWPA....23

He was hardly giving psychological support to those who had fought bravely with little recognition against a barbaric enemy in an alien world. Small wonder then that those who did not share in the supposed 'major RAAF effort' at times felt almost second rate and behaved like it.

There is sufficient oral evidence available to indicate that the treatment of aircrew returning from Europe was simply antagonistic. Posted back to Australia after completing two tours with 460 Squadron, one pilot officer recalled being 'castigated' by the then Group Captain Scherger. After an attempt to make the returned aircrew feel 'inferior in every way', Scherger was finally booted off the parade ground. This officer was glad 'to get out of the RAAF'. Another ex-member of 460 Squadron realised that those who had served only in Australia or the SWPA treated others '...like rats who had left a sinking ship'. Alex Robb, returning from a tour with Bomber Command found his treatment when he gratefully got home 'very spiteful', and he had an explanation. As he recalls:

I remember when I disembarked in Sydney that the first thing we were told was to remove the 'Australia' flashes from our shoulders or be on a charge. The RAAF out here had had none of the concentrated action we had endured but this only led to the RAAF having an inferiority complex.

Another agreed. In his view, the RAAF who had fought in the SWPA had unfulfilled ambitions and felt they had been utterly 'outstaged' by those who had been to Europe.24

The RAAF then ended the war a divided service and one is tempted to argue a disappointed one. In November 1944, Sir Frederick Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence, noted for his own information:

Some day there will be an outcry about the relatively poor RAAF effort in the Southwest Pacific in relation to the resources allotted to the air effort. It is not the personnel in the squadrons, who are magnificent, but is due to the setup, under which it has also been necessary to send senior officers to

23 Australian War Memorial, Jones Papers, 'First Tactical Air Force - Statements by Air Vice-Marshal Bostock' Chief of the Air Staff to Minister for Air, undated but c1946.
Europe to get operational experience which should have been provided in the Southwest Pacific Area.  

Shedden was right about the use of resources. With surprise one realises that in February 1944 the RAAF was holding more first line aircraft in the SWPA area than the American 5th Air Force: 2154 to 2133.25 Surely then one might expect that the command, organisation and employment of such a force must have provided a model for a sound and long-lasting post-war RAAF reconstruction and must have infused into government and service thinking alike well-considered and long-standing ideas into the use of air power to attain Australian interests. Did it, or did the Australian experience of the air war in the Southwest Pacific driven by those elements outlined above very soon gain its status of obscurity? In short, did alienation, division, disappointment and thwarted ambition work to the disadvantage of the service.

**Post-1945 and the SWPA Experience.**

In 1981 the late John Robertson came to trenchant conclusions. He argued that overall RAAF ‘...history from 1939 to 1945 did nothing to support Curtin’s pre-war claim that Australia’s defence could rest heavily on its air power’. In the SWPA in particular the RAAF ‘...did little to show Australia could rely heavily on it for her defence. The RAAF’s poor record in trying to sink enemy ships bigger than barges did not inspire confidence in its ability to repel a landing force’.26

If correct, perhaps such conclusions echo the Shedden of 1944. Perhaps too it goes some way to explain why the Labor government despite the party’s pre-war emphasis on air power down-graded the concept in 1947 and produced a Five Year Defence program which followed a previous and once opposed tradition of putting the larger share of the defence vote into the RAN and placing this service once again under Britain’s strategic direction in the event of war. It seems quite clear that the single biggest regional effort made by the RAAF failed to bring results for the service which might have been expected. Moreover, once the Menzies government took office in 1949 the SWPA experience as a factor in the post-war air force was almost completely discounted if not consigned to a continuing obscurity.

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26 Robertson, *op. cit.*, pp 122 and 214.
Post-war command of the RAAF might be first considered and then regarded as providing a contribution to this situation. There is no doubt that the vitriolic relationship which grew up between Jones and Bostock from 1942 led to the brutally forced retirement of the service's most experienced operational officer.27 Given reasonable and sensible circumstances, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock should have been considered most eligible to occupy the chief executive position and should have been offered a very senior position in the meantime. At the age of 53, however, he was shunted out of the service to become defence correspondent for the Melbourne Herald and then for 10 years a member of the House of Representatives. The Air Board itself became almost a moribund, beleaguered, defensive and restrictive body with a membership which had changed little over an eight to 10 year period.28 Although he had clearly lost the confidence of the Labor government which had been trying to replace him as CAS since 1943, Jones remained in the job for 10 years.29 It took Menzies to replace him. In 1951, the Air Ministry promised the services of Sir Donald Hardman. Hardman, excellent officer though he was with service in Southeast Asia during the war, was principally concerned with fitting the RAAF into the activities of Nato through the acquisition of British V-Bombers. The experience of the RAAF in the SWPA therefore meant little to him and one doubts if he were much aware of it.30 One conclusion might be therefore that one impact of the SWPA air war on the post-war air force was to leave the higher command of the service in virtual ruin. After fielding a force of some 53 squadrons either in the region or in support of it some six or seven years previously it was obviously considered impossible to find a single Australian officer capable of running an air force about a fifth of this size.

The influence of the SWPA air war on the command of the RAAF can therefore only be considered dismal. In 1947, however, that experience did bring to the RAAF a positive and practical appreciation of air power as a tactical instrument. The maintenance of a force which could rapidly and effectively operate with the other services became a first priority. John Curtin, wartime prime minister, when he noted '...the manner in which air power was integrated with naval and land strength to render possible a new conception of offensive

27 Stephens, op. cit., pp. 93-94 for the details of this disgraceful episode.


29 In May 1943 Shedden minuted Curtin 'What we need is a good experienced officer who will clear out the dead wood in the senior ranks of the RAAF, sort out the best men, and establish them in the right positions with the best organisation'. The attempt to find a British officer to do this job extended for almost eighteen months. See Robertson & McCarthy, op. cit., pp.347-356.

30 This at least is the impression the writer gained when he had the opportunity of talking to him in November 1968.
power in the realms of strategy, tactics and logistics' was quoted with approval. In December 1941 the RAAF had on strength designated Air Cooperation squadrons rather more as a placating gesture to the Army than for fulfilling a specific function. Such amateurish manoeuvres were out of place post-1945. In 1946 the formation of a School of Air Support was announced and in March 1947 began its first course attended by senior officers from all three services. The stated object was '...to study all aspects of air support and to promote close liaison between the three services for the efficient organisation and staff work required in combined operations'.

Renamed the School of Land/Air Warfare it moved to Williamtown in 1948 and its work developed to cover air transport of army equipment, paratroop forces, airborne troop techniques and offensive air support. The experience of occupying Nadzab had clearly not been forgotten. An expansion of activities occurred yet again in 1950. Then it was specially argued the main lesson learnt from the last war was the necessity for close cooperation and the provision of a common doctrine between the air, land and sea forces. The creation of such a school would not have been given a thought prior to the SWPA experience.

Neither would providing the RAAF with an air transport capability. By February 1944, however, the RAAF was operating 149 transport aircraft and their essential role has been noted. The 1947 air force made provision and the result was setting up 86 Transport Wing with two Dakota squadrons based at Richmond. Again its task was to work with ground forces by concentrating on airborne supply and the movement of troops to battle zones. It was the aging nature of the Dakota aircraft which contributed more than anything else to this unit's relatively short life. One Dakota squadron was taken out of service in January 1948 and although the first commitment made to the Malayan emergency was the remaining 86 Transport Wing squadron, by 1952 the RAAF was seeking government approval to buy the C-119 at a total cost of between £20/30,000,000. Early in 1953, the Malayan squadron was withdrawn and the RAAF had to turn to commercial airlines for air transport. It is difficult to know how such crews and aircraft could have been expected to operate in an environment similar to that of the SWPA and on rapidly prepared airstrips. Nevertheless, the RAAF obviously kept that experience in mind. By 1951 two airfield construction squadrons had been formed.

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32 RAAF Newsletter, No. 58, 1 March 1950.

33 Herald, 9 April 1952.
One, in fact, was working at Cocos Island, a fact deemed important because of its closeness to Jakarta.\textsuperscript{34}

Above all what drew on the Southwest Pacific experience was the creation in the 1947 five year defence program of what was regarded as a mobile task force. The pre-war concept of defending Australia's capital cities with Citizen Air Force squadrons remained but the model for the mobile force was clearly the wartime two operational groups followed by 1st Tactical Air Force. Perhaps one realisation of the war had been that Queensland was a natural Australian operational base for any striking force working in the SWPA. Three Lincoln squadrons were based at Amberley and this force was backed by 32 Mustangs stationed at Williamtown. No. 86 Transport Wing comprised part of the force together with a tactical reconnaissance squadron and a survey squadron equipped with Mosquitos. The task force was self-contained complete with its own headquarters and maintenance units. Moreover, and vitally it was to be backed by an industry capable of producing the operational aircraft required.\textsuperscript{35} It could well thus be argued that a reasonable organisational foundation had been made for the application of Australian air power in the region. This and the emphasis given to cooperation with ground forces clearly owed much to the events between 1942 and 1945 in the SWPA.

The cohesion designed for the post-war air force, however, did not last for long. The influence of the SWPA campaigns on its future development quickly withered. The process certainly began by foreign policy decisions which lay outside the control of the RAAF and outside the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that in May 1950 the policy of the Labor government was reversed and Menzies entered the Malayan commitment by detaching the transport squadron and then a Lincoln squadron. It might be argued this policy made regional sense. As Menzies himself argued, '...it had been shown in the recent war [that] Australia has a vital interest in the Malay Peninsula because of the relation of its inescapable geography and strategic facts of its security'.\textsuperscript{36}

In 1951, however, the Egyptian government repudiated the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty and Menzies announced that his government

\textsuperscript{34} Statement by the Minister, \textit{Australia in Facts and Figures}, No. 30, 1951, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{35} The difficulty of securing suitable aircraft from overseas between 1942 and 1945 has been well documented but see in particular Stephens, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 75-78. It was quickly learnt that Australia would have to be self-reliant. By August 1944 700 Beauforts had been produced and 329 Beaufighters by August 1945. When the war ended 108 Australian built Mosquitos had been delivered to the RAAF and 59 Mustangs. To 1950, the Lincoln, the Mustang and the Nene gas turbine Vampire were being delivered to the squadrons.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Current Notes on International Affairs}, 21, (1950) p. 353.
had agreed in principle to allotting forces to a proposed Middle East Command. The upshot was that by July 1952, 78 Fighter Wing went to Malta. Clearly the 'Mobile Task Force' concept based on the experience of the Southwest Pacific air war had ceased to exist.

H.G. Wells once remarked that no passion in the world equals the passion to alter someone else's draft. There is so much alteration to be done on the several interpretations of the Australian experience in the Southwest Pacific air war and its influence on the post-war RAAF offered here that hope is the passion not to alter but to entirely rewrite becomes quickly overwhelming. The need surely is for an analytical study which poses questions which could not have been asked 50 years ago. And it must be done soon. Those who took part in that experience may have stifled remembrance but it has to be reawakened before it is lost forever.

**DISCUSSION**

Unidentified: I wonder if you would care to comment on the influence of the people back on the home front. I was thinking particularly of Sir Frederick Shedden and the influence officials like him could have over some of the higher command appointments, for which we tend to blame the politicians.

Professor McCarthy: Those officials had their jobs to do, and one of them was to advise the Minister, but then it was up to the Minister to decide whether to accept that advice or not. Once again there's a huge gap in our understanding. There is no biography of Shedden. I've been trying to get a PhD student onto it.

Dr Horner: Looking through the Shedden papers as I have over the years, it's clear that there is one area where Shedden parts company with Curtin, and that is over the higher command of the Air Force. There are many cases where Shedden sides with MacArthur, thinks that what MacArthur is doing is the right thing. But he was critical of the higher command of the RAAF. It really was not good enough that whatever proposal was put forward by Curtin, Shedden or by anybody else, MacArthur seemed to have some sort of veto over it. You can blame Shedden for the problems with the RAAF's command because he's a convenient public servant to accuse, but in that particular case he seems to have lost out with the government and with MacArthur.

Professor McCarthy: I'd certainly agree with that. You could well argue there's a limit to Shedden's power.

Group Captain J.G. Sheldon: A comment on Air Chief Marshal Burnett. One legacy he tried not to leave the RAAF with was Air Vice-Marshal Jones. For the record, I believe Burnett wanted Bostock to replace him.
Professor McCarthy: You’re quite right, though there is a somewhat complicated debate. It does seem that Burnett groomed Bostock to take over from him. Alan Stephens has done some nice work on this and so has David Horner, it does seem there was a mix up with lists during the selection process..

Air Marshal S.D. Evans: John I don’t disagree with your criticism of the higher command of the RAAF during World War II, but I think you’re a bit easy on the politicians. For instance, our government saw nothing wrong with sending thousands of RAAF aircrew to the United Kingdom and letting the RAF use them as they wished, without any command of substance at all. The other thing is, I think our politicians were all for American help and for doing what they could when Australia was under threat, but when that threat faded they were less enthusiastic about sharing the costs of war. I think they have got to take some of the blame for what happened out here.

Professor McCarthy: Yes, well you’re correct of course. I think we were quite pleased to have the Americans over here. I’ve had a bit of a suspicion, though, that the real enemy didn’t turn out to be the Japanese at all, but the Americans, and their influence on our post-war world and our diplomatic interests. Curtin is a perfect case here. By 1944 Curtin is spending a good deal of his time trying to re-establish the Imperial connection. He put forward some extremely wide ranging proposals to strengthen the Commonwealth at a Prime Minister’s meeting in London in 1944. Churchill incidentally refused to attend the meeting that discussed Curtin’s proposals. I don’t think he liked Curtin terribly much after being accused of inexcusable betrayals. But I take your point. Once again it would have to be part of a larger study of air power in the Southwest Pacific.

Air Marshal R.G. Funnell: I’d like to pick up on your theme when you were quoting Bobby Gibbes’ letter, John. It seems it wasn’t only the Air Force that felt it had been left behind. I can recall the extraordinary control of the press that was exercised by the government through those years. In January 1945 the Canberra Times made a request that if any reader was aware of any Australian unit being engaged in operations of significance in the Southwest Pacific area, could he or she please contact the editor.

Professor McCarthy: Once again, wouldn’t it be interesting if a scholar could do a survey of the Australian press over this period and determine what percentage of space was devoted to what subject. In fact I was talking to my wife about this last night and she could remember her father talking about the fact that there was a jungle war out there somewhere, but most of the emphasis was still on Britain. It would be very interesting to do a press analysis.
Air Commodore W.H. Garing: Professor, I stand up with some reluctance. I found your talk very provocative. I think it was Cicero 2000 years ago who said, 'He who is born and learns nothing of history, always remains a child'. One of the lesson that I learnt was quoted a long while ago by the Duke of Wellington to the Secretary for War when he said, 'I shall see to it that no officer under my command is debarred by the futile dribbling of some quill-dipper in your Lordship's office from attending to his first duty, which is always to train and direct men under his command'. Now you talked about the two wars, one in Europe and one in the Southwest Pacific. Well I came back from the European War, nobody said thanks for what you did. Then I shoved off to the north. When I came back from New Guinea nobody met me at Melbourne and said thanks a lot. I don't regard the people who fought in Europe as inferior, or that there was rivalry between those who fought in the different theatres, be damned if I do.

Professor McCarthy: Of course you will understand that when one is speaking in a gathering like this, one always excludes the people in that gathering. One can only generalise from a few isolated comments and these comments have been made sufficiently often to me, for me to believe there is an element of truth. I know nobody in this room would ever have been involved with something so horrible.

Wing Commander J.P. O'Callaghan: Just a couple of comments on the conditions under which people operated in the Southwest Pacific. Air Commodore Garing's already mentioned the dreadful mud and the rain, and they were certainly there. There were one or two places that weren't quite as bad. Noemfoor, where I first joined 22 Squadron, was a coral island, and we use to love being there because it wasn't muddy like it was at Morotai. When you dived into a trench at Morotai it was full of mud, but you did it just for fun. I remember when I was at Noemfoor there was a chap I got to know quite well who had been at Kiriwina. He told me that the girls at Kiriwina were fantastic. So the conditions weren't always bad.

But there was one other aspect of the conditions for aircrews up there, apart from ghastly weather. If they were shot down and taken prisoner, they were given a 'most honourable' departure from this life, as happened to Flight Lieutenant Newton of our squadron, the RAAF's only VC in the Southwest Pacific, and his crewman, Flight Sergeant J. Lyon. There were others who had the benefit of that lovely departure. It was certainly something that must be considered as part of the operating environment.

Professor McCarthy: I agree, it must be one part of the study. There is an expression of people going 'tropo', and the British framed the phrase 'lack of moral fibre'. I don't know how the human mind can stand up to the strains that it was subjected to in those operating
conditions, against such a barbaric enemy. I just have utter admiration for anybody who did it, even if they only did it for a short while. I take your point, and I really do think that has to be looked at. Was there any disciplinary action taken against people who finally decided they would not operate any more? I don't know, but it must be found out, I think.
CLOSURE

Air Marshal I.B. Gration

What a fascinating day. I thought last year's conference was outstanding; this year's I think has been unique. We have had people who made the history we've discussed in the audience, and you've heard them participate very actively. I asked for that at the beginning, and I have been absolutely delighted with the way the Pacific veterans have come forward. All of us have benefited from your presence, which alone has been enough to make the day a success.

Listening to the presentations, all of which were outstanding, I thought about what the Air Force of today could do with some of the lessons which emerged. I felt confident after the morning presentations that we'd absorbed those lessons. We've put in place procedures and checks and balances to record and learn from our experiences.

Then I listened to that dreadful litany at Tarakan, and realised that nearly four years after the beginning of the war in the Southwest Pacific, the RAAF was making the same mistakes it had at the start - indeed, I think some new ones had been found. I felt unhappy enough about that, but then [Air Commodore] Dave Bowden suggested that we could have been listening to a debrief of exercises Kangaroo 89 or Kangaroo 92, because many of the same problems occurred then.

It's worthwhile considering why that is so. Codes were mentioned a few times. We've all debated the wisdom of having complex codes, of reaching a balance between the need for security against the need to get the message across. We haven't resolved that. In Kangaroo 92 we were still having difficulties using codes: people had the wrong day, they changed codes at the wrong time, they were on the wrong frequency, and so on. The cause wasn't the one implied by Gary Waters for Tarakan, that people hadn't read the instructions. For Kangaroo 92, they just didn't know how to use codes, or weren't able to apply them. That's been the case with every major exercise I've been involved with since I joined the Air Force. Why are we not learning that lesson? One of the explanations is that we are continually training new people. But the response to that should be 'OK, if the new people keep making the same mistakes then perhaps we had better change the system'.

That led me to another thought. Many times during the morning presentations we talked about organisational problems, mainly for higher command, but also down to the squadron level. Well, we've got a current solution going for that. Every two or three years, we
reorganise the Air Force. My hope is that we can coordinate the passage of one of those reorganisations with the contingency at the time, and get it right. At least we’re trying.

On a more serious note, I made some passing observations on the presentations. I thought Chris Coulthard-Clark made a good point when he mentioned the use of statistics in relation to loss rates, flying hours and so on. We really can abuse statistics, and it is very important that the people who use them to analyse history understand what is behind the figures.

That in turn prompted probably the strongest feeling I had today. The war was about people, not statistics. That’s true of every battle, every success and every failure. What we have to understand is how to get the best out of our people to ensure the right result.

Chris also mentioned that the Northwestern Area has been rather neglected and would be a worthy subject for detailed study.

Alan Stephens made some interesting comments about the rotation of senior commanders, something which may be a two-edged sword. I think the answer probably is, in peace time you try to rotate them as quickly as practicable to spread the experience; while in war you probably want to do the reverse.

David Horner mentioned the value of studying somebody like Bostock. The fight between Bostock and Jones has of course received a good deal of attention, but in concentrating on that personal conflict we have perhaps failed to learn from Bostock’s achievements as the RAAF’s most experienced operational commander.

Developing the skills of the operational commander is a continuing challenge. The RAAF’s permanent establishment at the moment has fallen to about 19,000, we haven’t been to war for quite a while, and it’s very difficult for commanders to acquire operational level experience. It’s a challenge the Air Commander Australia is addressing right now – how best to prepare officers to work at the operational level of war.

I am confident that many other valuable points will emerge as we reflect on today’s proceedings in the coming months. I am also confident that we will continue to learn from our experiences, and that our Air Force is very capable.

A conference like this depends on the behind-the-scenes efforts of many people. On your behalf I would like to thank the staff of the Air Power Studies Centre and the RAAF Staff College who put the program together.
Someone who was in front of the scenes rather than behind them who also deserves our thanks is our moderator, Air Commodore Bob Richardson.

One of the strengths of this conference was the presenters. Once again, can I ask you to thank all six for their superb papers.

Three of our speakers came from outside the Air Force. Two of them are still here, so I would like to make a small but apposite presentation to Professor John McCarthy and Doctor David Horner, a short history of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea.

Finally I should thank all of you for being here. We've had a full house, which is not only satisfying for the organisers, but also indicates the very real interest we all have in studying history in this rather painless way.

On that note I am pleased to advise that we expect the 1994 conference to take place on Thursday 20 October, and that the topic will be 'The RAAF in Europe and North Africa'.

I look forward to seeing all of you then.
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