RAAF LIBERATORS AND LONG-RANGE STRIKES

From their base in NW Australia, RAAF Liberators on Thursday night so accurately and destructively bombed the Mendalin-Siman power station in Japanese-occupied Java that the possibility of the Japanese being able to effect repairs to this vital plant is considered remote.

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The ability to conduct long-range strike missions on adversary targets is a fundamental role of all well-balanced air forces. During World War II, wider strategic factors prevented the RAAF from developing this capability until February 1944. During that month the first of a growing fleet of B-24 Consolidated Liberators began arriving in Australia for service in Air Force colours. Arguably one of the finest long-range heavy bombers of the war, acquisition of the B-24 aircraft provided the RAAF the ability to range widely across the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) of operations attacking targets previously out of range of the medium bombers then in Australian service.

The arrival of the B-24s in Australia did not in itself immediately bestow a long-range strike capability upon the RAAF; it also required a training and development process in many ways similar to that of contemporary examples. The first Australian crews were sent to a United States Army Air Force (USAAF) B-24 operational conversion unit at Charters Towers, QLD in 1943, followed by a deployment with the 43rd Bombardment Group of the US Fifth Air Force. These crews were soon part of the relentless attacks by USAAF aircraft on Japanese held airfields and other major targets throughout New Guinea. Deployments to other B-24 USAAF units were to follow, all resulting in the RAAF gaining significant experience in operating the B-24. Many of these crews were in turn posted to the RAAF’s newly formed No 7 Operational Training Unit at Tocumwal, NSW as instructors in order to contribute to the training effort as the RAAF built its long-range bomber capability.

As the number of trained crews and available airframes increased through 1944, Nos 21, 23 and 24 Squadrons, RAAF were converted from operating the Vultee Vengeance on to B-24 long-range strike and reconnaissance aircraft. By July 1944, five months after receipt of the first B-24 into service, RAAF crews of No 24 Squadron, the first RAAF unit to be equipped with the B-24, were ready to commence operations to Australia’s north. The effects generated by the new long-range strike capability were immediate and obvious. Targets previously out of range were attacked and armed reconnaissance missions conducted over areas that had only seen minimal Air Force presence in the past. These missions resulted in the destruction of several freighters, barges and shore installations.

While contributing to the overall tactical successors of the Allied air operations in the SWPA, the real capability of the RAAF’s long-range heavy bomber was still to be utilised to its full strategic potential. This changed in January 1945, when after extensive planning and intelligence assessments, followed by two weeks of continual training, six B-24s of No 24 Squadron were dispatched on a 3700 km round trip from Truscott airfield in WA, to attack the Mendalan and Siman hydroelectric power stations at Kali Konto in occupied Java. Responsible for providing nearly half of Java’s electricity requirements and one of the largest hydroelectric power plants in the world, the strategic importance of the Mendalan and Siman
power stations was first identified through assessments carried out by the Central Intelligence Unit in Brisbane, and later through analysis of aerial reconnaissance imagery obtained by the RAAF’s No 87 Squadron. It was determined that the loss of these power stations would disrupt Japanese manufacturing, industry and military operations throughout the Java region.

The plan called for three waves of attacks, each of two aircraft, on the power stations to be conducted on 27 January 1945. The second and third waves were only to be conducted based on an assessment of the damage caused by the previous wave. As it transpired, only the first wave of attacks were made, with adverse weather causing the follow on attacks to be cancelled, although this was sufficient to put the power stations out of action, at least temporarily, with the B-24 of GPCAPT Kingwell striking the transformer yard and turbine house of the Mendalan plant, while FLTLT Kirkwood and crew damaged the generators and workshops at the Siman facility.

An interesting sidenote to Kirkwood’s post-operational report was the identification of a dummy facility constructed to the north of the Siman facility. Kirkwood noted: ‘Observation of the dummy power house north of the target showed the wall had not been continued to the ground level and that it was possible to go through and under the building.’ This attempted deception and extensive camouflage of the primary targets were the only defensive measures taken to protect the targets, with both crews reporting that no anti-aircraft fire or enemy fighter aircraft were seen. However, if the fighters known to be in Java had failed to disrupt the mission, the weather which had prevented the second and third waves from taking off nearly put paid to a successful return to base of the two B-24s and crews. Severe thunderstorms marked the return trip to Truscott, delaying the RTB by nearly two hours. On landing, Kirkwood’s port engine stopped due to fuel starvation. Post-flight inspections found only 22 litres of fuel remaining in the aircraft.

The fuel needed to reach the power stations was in fact an issue throughout the planning process. The standard fuel load of the B-24s was insufficient for the mission, however crews with experience in the RAF’s Coastal Command were aware of the B-24’s ability to carry additional fuel tanks in lieu of bombs in its rear bomb bay, while still leaving the forward bomb bay free to carry six 250-kg bombs. This inherent flexibility of the aircraft provided the key to being able to push ahead with the mission planning, and resulted in the 3700 km bombing raid becoming the longest mounted from the Australian mainland during World War II.

In the post mission debriefs it was determined that a second attack should go ahead within 24 hours; however, the weather once again prevented this plan from being executed. Instead, the target was granted a nine-day reprieve. On 5 February the second attack was launched, once again from Truscott. The key difference this time was that it was planned for four aircraft to attack simultaneously. While hits on the wider infrastructure were observed, little significant damage was achieved on the power stations themselves. Consequently, a third attack was planned and conducted on 8 February. This last attack was spectacularly successful, with good hits observed from all four aircraft on both the Mendalan and Siman power stations. With post operation analysis confirming that the power stations were now expected to be out of commission for a prolonged period of time, no further attacks were considered necessary.

The RAAF’s B-24 crews were to continue flying for the remainder of the war, carrying out attacks on Japanese garrisons, supply vessels and supporting Allied landings in Borneo. While other, smaller RAAF aircraft were able to conduct similar raids, none could achieve the reach, penetration and effect as simply or as effectively as the long-range, hard-hitting B-24 Liberators.

Key Points

- Any form of RAAF capability requires personnel, training and a complimentary support network to be operationally effective.
- The ability of air power to generate effects over a wide region from airbases remote from the theatre of operations provides a strategically effective, operationally flexible and tactically invaluable set of options to Government and Defence planning.
- Capable, long-range strike aircraft provide individually flexible platforms, which can provide a disproportionate effect in relation to the size of the fleet.