



Borneo *1942–1945*

Australians in the Pacific War

Front cover

Men of the 2/14th Battalion come ashore at Yellow Beach, Balikpapan, from an American LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry) on 1 July 1945. (Australian War Memorial [AWM] image 110436)

Title page

Troops of the 2/23rd Battalion advance inland from Green Beach, Tarakan, on the morning of 1 May 1945. (AWM 090932)

Back cover

Matilda tanks of the 2/9th Armoured Regiment advance across Labuan Island on the day of the 9th Division's amphibious landings around the island's capital, Victoria, now Bandar Labuan, on 10 June 1945. (AWM 108867)

Metric conversions of imperial measurements quoted in this text are approximate.

ISBN 1 920720 502

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Published by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, June 2005. Second edition May 2007.

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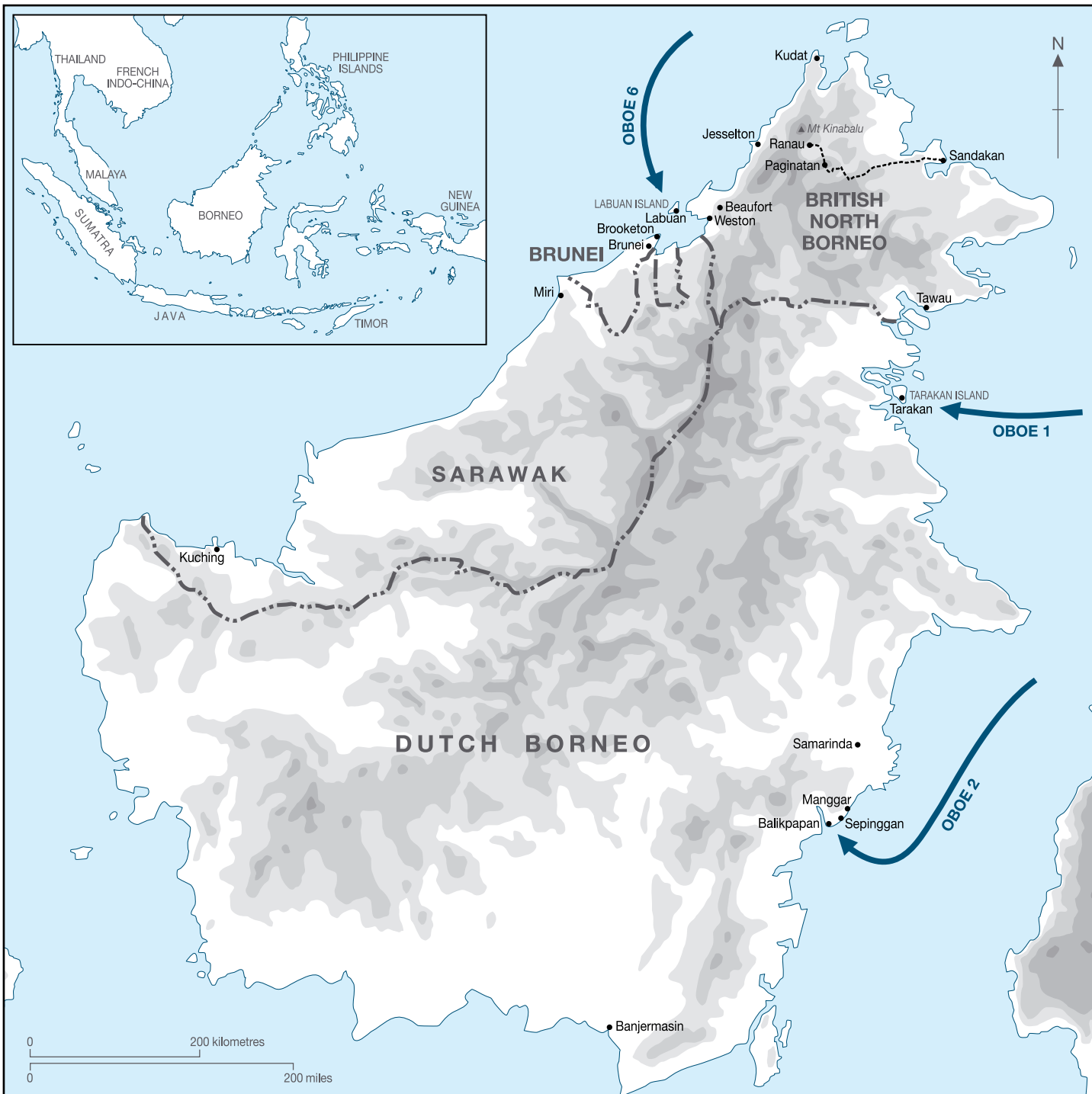
Printed on New Silk Gloss 300gsm (cover) and Euro matt Art 155gsm (inside),
by National Capital Printing

P01160 2007



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In the autumn of 1945, Australian war correspondent George Johnston had returned home after touring the battle fronts for several years. In his autobiographical novel *My Brother Jack*, Johnston recalls Melbourne as the war's final winter approaches. He senses a distinct feeling of the war drawing to an end, 'as heavy in its portent as the autumnal weather'. The novel's narrator, David Meredith, watches a parade of Australian Imperial Force troops march through the city. He describes them marching, 'not like Guardsmen, but in their big loose straight easy way, the hard brown faces under the tipped-up hats ...' The scene, it has to be said, is fictional – all the AIF formations were overseas – but Johnston catches both the mood of the time and the temper of the men. Men like these were about to embark on the three campaigns in Borneo that were to be Australia's final campaigns of World War II.

Borneo, a vast jungle-covered island lying on the equator – hot, humid, exotic – was the scene of some of Australia's most successful operations, and of great tragedy. During 1945, Australian forces totalling some 75,000 men, along with several dozen women of the nursing and medical women's services, were committed to taking part in or supporting the amphibious landings in Borneo. Others were engaged in covert operations behind enemy lines. However, for Australia, the longest and most tragic connection with Borneo begins not in 1945 but in 1942, a story that was to end in the long-drawn-out agony of Sandakan.

Sandakan

I vividly recall ... the plaintive notes of the 'Last Post' being played by a bugler at Sandakan and echoing from the surrounding jungle ... I remember companionship and friendship in times of extreme stress. I remember laughter and sadness.¹

At the outbreak of the Pacific war in December 1941, Borneo was divided between the British and Dutch empires. The southern two thirds of the island was nominally Dutch. It had substantial settlements at Tarakan, Samarinda, Balikpapan and Bandjermasin but most of the interior was trackless and virtually unknown to Europeans. The northern third was divided between three British possessions: Sarawak, in the north-west, virtually the private

property of the Brooke family, the fabled 'White Rajahs' of Kuching; the tiny Sultanate of Brunei which had once ruled the whole of Borneo but was now a British protectorate; and British North Borneo, ruled by a British company from the capital, Sandakan.

The Japanese invaded Borneo in January 1942, seeking to exploit its oil resources. The small and scattered British/Indian and Dutch defences collapsed. Japanese rule differed in each state. In Dutch Borneo, the Japanese fostered ideas of Asian solidarity. In Brunei and Sarawak, they enforced cooperation. In British North Borneo, they imposed one of the harshest occupation regimes, conscripting thousands of men and women and provoking a resistance movement that launched the 'Double Tenth' uprising in October 1943. This, one of the few rebellions anywhere against Japanese rule, was ruthlessly suppressed.

With the fall of Singapore in February 1942, more than 15,000 Australians and more than 100,000 British, Indian and locally recruited troops became prisoners of the Japanese. More were captured in the Netherlands East Indies. Regarded by their captors as expendable forced labourers, many were dispatched in work parties to other countries. Two parties were sent from Singapore to Sandakan in British North Borneo: B Force in July 1942 and E Force in April 1943, totalling some 2000 Australian and 750 British prisoners of war. Men captured in Java joined them, although few were Australian. Other prisoners of war and internees were held elsewhere in Borneo, particularly at the Batu Lintang camp at Kuching. Their experience was of harsh captivity, but they were spared the extremity to which the Sandakan prisoners were to be subjected.

The prisoners of war at Sandakan were forced to build an airstrip – hard labour in a tropical climate. Food was scarce but the prisoners could buy turtle eggs, bananas and coconuts, and grow vegetables. At first they were treated no worse than other prisoners of the Japanese. Some made contact with the resistance network and secretly operated a radio receiver. Some Australians even contrived to escape, risking execution if recaptured. One party of seven men got away, sailing to the southern Philippines and linking up with Filipino guerrillas.

By 1944 conditions had deteriorated. The radio was exposed and Captain Lionel Matthews, 8th Division Signals, and some others were arrested. Matthews was taken to Kuching, tortured and in March 1944 executed, having not betrayed his comrades. He was

posthumously awarded the George Cross. Others arrested endured interrogations and torture at Kuching or the notorious Outram Road prison in Singapore.

At Sandakan, the Japanese reacted harshly to the escape attempts and discovery of the radio. All but five officers, and a handful of other ranks, were shipped to Kuching. Conditions at Sandakan worsened. Men began to die of sickness, malnutrition and brutality – including mass beatings for no apparent reason or confinement in a tiny ‘cage’.

After the Double Tenth uprising, the Japanese feared the prisoners and local guerrillas might attempt to overwhelm the garrison. They began to weaken the prisoners, reducing rations and intensifying beatings. Early in 1945 the Japanese decided to shift the prisoners into the interior of the island. This began the episode known collectively as the ‘Sandakan death march’. In January the 455 ‘fittest’ men left on what turned out to be a 260-kilometre forced march into jungle-clad mountains. The last 536 ‘fit’ men followed in May. Those still at Sandakan were starved and mistreated, all eventually dying or murdered in and around the ruins of the burned camp.

On the marches, men wasted by malnutrition and tropical diseases who fell out were shot or bayoneted. Their unidentified bodies littered the route. The survivors – down to about 200 by late June – inhabited a rough camp at Ranau. They were further brutalised, amid conditions of degradation rarely equalled. Sick and starving men were made to carry rice bags between Paginatan and Ranau until they dropped. Those attempting to escape, such as Gunner Albert Cleary, 2/15th Field Regiment, were tortured and beaten unmercifully before dying or being killed. By late July only 32 men were alive, by early August perhaps 15. The last few men were reportedly shot.

Only six Australians, two who escaped from the marches and four from Ranau, and none of the British prisoners survived to indict their captors, many of whom were tried and convicted as war criminals.

Though not aware of the extent of the atrocity, the Allies had realised the men at Sandakan were in mortal danger. Early in 1945 a rescue mission, code-named ‘Kingfisher’, was planned. The 1st Parachute Battalion trained for the mission but it was cancelled, apparently because Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) ‘operatives’ working on the ground, behind enemy lines, in Borneo could not confirm the prisoners’ locations. By then most of the prisoners were dead.

Special forces

By early 1945 parties of Allied special forces were on the ground in Borneo. Operating under the command of the SRD, parties of mainly Australian 'operatives' landed by sea or air in small covert missions.

From late 1943, the SRD launched three main series of operations into Borneo, each given a distinctive code-name. The early 'Python' parties sought to locate indigenous supporters. Some members were captured, tortured and killed. The 'Agas' series placed parties all over northern Borneo, creating guerrilla forces to strike the Japanese from the interior. The 'Semut' operations followed, in Sarawak, Brunei, British North Borneo and northern Dutch Borneo, and by mid-1945 controlled more than a thousand guerrillas.

SRD teams were 'inserted' by submarines – British, American or Dutch – or parachuted in. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) formed 200 Flight to drop operatives and supplies deep inside enemy territory. It was a particularly hazardous business. Thirty men of this flight were killed in crashes into the mountains or seas of south-east Asia. Among them was Squadron Leader Graham Pockley, who had been one of the most proficient U-boat hunters in the Battle of the Atlantic. His Liberator and crew of ten went missing on 23 March 1945.

Major Tom Harrisson, a British member of the SRD, observed that 'an extraordinary degree of sympathy developed between Australians who had never been out of Australia before, and Kelabits [indigenous people] who had sometimes never seen a white man before'. With friendship and cooperation established, they began increasingly to strike against the Japanese. Men risked torture and execution if captured and endured the hazards of arduous jungle conditions and tropical disease far from home and help.

Some teams were able to observe and report on the plight of the prisoners of war but were not in a position to assist. Their primary mission and contribution was to prepare the way for the Allied landings which were to liberate the people of Borneo from a harsh occupation. Their success can be measured in the words of Captain William Sochon, Special Operations Executive, Semut 3: 'We had lived for six months behind the enemy's lines ... at a conservative estimate, killed 265 enemy and recaptured approximately 25,000 square miles of Sarawak ... without a single casualty to ourselves'.

Planning Oboe

I do not know why the Borneo operations were undertaken, and I do not consider that there was any real justification for undertaking them.²

By 1945, the Allies were advancing on all fronts. East of Borneo, Allied (mainly American) forces, continuing their 'island hopping' campaign, had liberated islands in the Netherlands East Indies; north, they had landed in the Philippines.

The planned Borneo operations were part of the 'Oboe' series, ordered by General Douglas MacArthur, the American Supreme Commander of Allied forces in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). They were the subject of tension between Australian and American high commands, and in the 60 years since have aroused controversy. The operations were conceived by MacArthur in 1944 as his forces neared the Philippines. He determined that, while the Philippines campaign would remain largely an American concern, Australian forces would spearhead the liberation of Borneo and Java. Forces to be employed included 1 Australian Corps, the 1st Tactical Air Force and units of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).

The Oboe operations were launched from Morotai, an island in the Moluccas recaptured in September 1944. Here was established a massive Allied base. The Australian formations which landed in Borneo were based there. Indeed many servicemen and women, mainly in headquarters and logistical support units, never reached Borneo itself. Nevertheless, they were vital for the success of the campaigns.

The landings in Borneo were intended, initially, to support ultimately a landing in Java. The plan was to secure vital areas and establish airstrips to cover this advance. Though the plan to invade Java was abandoned in April 1945, MacArthur ordered that three Oboe operations go ahead. Senior Australian commanders and War Cabinet members questioned the need for two of the landings, at Brunei Bay and Balikpapan, particularly the latter, but were mollified by MacArthur's reassurances that they were necessary. Later it became clear that he had equally misled his superiors in Washington.

Many believed MacArthur was playing a political game, 'sidelining' Australian forces to exclude them from the Philippines campaign and the anticipated invasion of Japan. He had support from the Chief of the United States Navy, Admiral Ernest King, who supported

the Brunei Bay operation partly as a way of possibly excluding the British Pacific Fleet from operations further north in the Central Pacific Area, a US Navy domain.

Because of the political manoeuvring, and the fact Borneo was far from the main thrust towards Japan, the loss of lives in the operations has remained contentious. It is said that no Australian operation in Borneo affected the outcome of the war. On the other hand, these operations liberated the people of Borneo from a harsh and oppressive occupation. They also demonstrated Australia's determination to use its armed forces in the south-east Asian region, an important area of the post-war world. It should also be remembered that early in 1945, when the Oboe operations were planned, no-one knew the war would end as it did in August. They knew only that the Japanese needed to be defeated in all the areas they occupied.

Oboe 1 – Tarakan

Here come the Aussies, to capture Tarakan
It's just the kick off, we're heading for Japan,
If you could see these grim faced men,
And their mates, the R.A.N.,
And backed up by the Air Force,
We'll capture Tarakan.³

Tarakan, an island off the east coast of Borneo, was the objective of the first operation. The plan was to capture and use its airfields to support subsequent landings. Like all the Borneo landings, it involved Australian and American warships, aircraft and personnel. The main landing force comprised Australian troops of the 26th Brigade Group, of the 9th Division, carried by American and Australian transports and protected by warships of the same navies. Australian and American aircraft supported the operation, and the landing force included a large RAAF contingent to repair the airstrip at the centre of the campaign.

On the morning of 30 April 1945, seven ships arrived off tiny Sadau Island, in the Batagau Strait, separating Tarakan from Borneo, to conduct a preliminary landing. The 2/4th Commando Squadron and a battery of the 2/7th Field Regiment landed unopposed.

They dragged field guns ashore and formed a human chain passing shells to the beach. Corporal Stan Kent, commando, remembered it as 'the hardest day's manual work we'd ever done in our lives'. The gunners supported, with high explosive and smoke shells, sappers of the 2/13th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers on mudflats off Lingkas, close to Tarakan town, breaching the beach defences ahead of the main landing next day. Lying flat in the mud, they fixed charges to wooden posts erected to block landing craft. Their commanding officer, Major John Foreman, reported that the job 'proved most exhausting' but by late afternoon 'despite continual sniping and sporadic mortar fire all gaps had been completed and marked except one'.

The landing was scheduled for the morning of 1 May 1945. Approaches had been surveyed by the frigate HMAS Lachlan. In the task force sailing from Morotai were the three Australian LSIs (Landing Ships, Infantry) HMA Ships Kanimbla, Manoora and Westralia. Their crews were experienced in amphibious landings, having carried American troops in several operations, but this was the first time they had carried Australian troops for an assault landing on foreign soil.

For most men, the date of the landing bore no particular significance. Sergeant Harry Pugsley, 2/23rd Battalion, veteran of the Huon Peninsula campaign in New Guinea, thought it ominous. More than a little superstitious, as were many soldiers, he remembered:

Heading the list of names on the War Memorial in Galston Show Grounds is that of my uncle, Horace Pugsley. He was killed on Gallipoli on May 1, 1915 ... exactly 30 years previously. History has a nasty habit of repeating itself. I was afraid ...

Harry Pugsley got through unscathed.

The task force arrived off Tarakan before dawn. There was little talk as troops ate breakfast, checked gear and looked out at the dim shoreline. Sergeant John Glenn, 2/48th Battalion:

At 7.45 am the silence was split by gun fire from the warships ... subjecting the beaches to a terrific pounding. Salvo after salvo poured into the landing area, great clumps of evil-smelling black mud erupted as pin-points of flame danced along the shore and threw up clouds of dark smoke that obliterated the coast and the burning oil tanks beyond. On nearby Sadau Island the men of the 57th Battery ... sweated at their guns as the 25-pounders joined the ... orgy of destruction. Then came the bombers ... with their

thousands of hundred-pound anti-personnel bombs. The shore became an inferno of bursting shells and bombs, the beach a complete shambles.

Only at El Alamein, nearly three years earlier, had any of the troops witnessed a bombardment of such power.

The attackers expected to capture Tarakan within two weeks. To those offshore, progress looked good. Able Seaman Allan Harrison, HMAS Barcoo, scrawled in his diary, 'The Japs have had it'. But as on other islands, the Japanese were unable to escape and fought tenaciously. The last resistance would not end for another six weeks. Brigadier David Whitehead, commanding the 26th Brigade:

[The Japanese] disputed every inch of ground, and in most cases fought it out, suffering heavy casualties before withdrawing. Such was the position along the whole Brigade front, it being necessary for each battalion to deliberately assault and capture post after post.

The campaign entailed a series of slogging attacks on Japanese positions in a tangle of jungle-clad hills in the hinterland. Each was code-named, often with an incongruous girl's name such as Susie, Angie, Faith, Helen, Freda or Margy. Troops called on air and ground support, including artillery and dropping of napalm and bombs by aircraft, ahead of each attack. Though anxious to avoid undue loss of life in a fight all realised was not crucial to the war's outcome, the Australians could not avoid heavy losses.

It is invidious to single out individuals, however one man's death on Tarakan was reported widely back home. Lieutenant Tom 'Diver' Derrick VC DCM, 2/48th Battalion, was famous for his single-handed taking of the Sattelberg mountaintop in New Guinea in late 1943 for which he had been decorated with the Victoria Cross (VC). He was on Freda when the Japanese counter-attacked before dawn on 23 May. Private Bill Snider:

The night was very quiet, the Jap could have been a thousand miles away. Those not on sentry stretched out and hoped for a few hours sleep. I was about three feet from 'Diver', who took the most exposed position across the pathway ... Around about 3.30 am a short machine-gun burst broke the silence of the night and swept our area. Diver's reaction was to sit up immediately for a quick check. To our dismay a longer burst followed.

Diver was hit in the stomach and thigh. Even so, he continued to give orders until he could be evacuated some hours later.

Derrick died the following day. Precisely two weeks earlier, another man, Corporal John Mackey, 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion, had been killed on Helen. On 12 May, advancing up a razor-backed ridgeline, Mackey charged and knocked out two machine-gun posts. He pressed on against a third but was shot dead. He was posthumously decorated with the first VC of the Borneo campaigns, his citation reading (in part):

By his exceptional bravery and complete disregard for his own life, Corporal Mackey was largely responsible for the killing of seven Japanese and the elimination of two machine-gun posts, which enabled his platoon to gain its objective ... His fearless action and outstanding courage were an inspiration to the whole battalion.

The captured Tarakan airfield, ostensibly the reason for the operation, could not be repaired in time to support the later landings. It was supposed to be operational within six days but was only partially repaired after six weeks. RAAF airfield construction personnel were meant to start work on the day after the landing but found the airfield badly damaged by bombing, waterlogged, teeming with mines and booby traps, with enemy troops holding one end. Sniper fire hindered efforts, as did enemy troops infiltrating on the night of 5 May, wounding two airmen. Over the next two days, a bomb disposal unit deloused 114 mines but rain worsened the working area. Heavy machinery became bogged, and it was found that materials to repair the strip did not exist on the island. The Japanese also targeted the airfield with sporadic artillery fire. On 21 May, a tractor was hit. Leading Aircraftman Leon Bloom, 1 Airfield Construction Squadron, described in his diary 'the natives and whites (in the lead) racing from the strip with the shells blowing up behind them'.

The last Japanese on Tarakan were killed or captured on 15 August 1945, Victory in the Pacific (VP) Day. The entire operation cost the lives of some 250 Australians. Most of the Japanese defenders were killed, though more Japanese surrendered on Tarakan than in any other Australian campaign.

Oboe 6 – Brunei Bay

To say we were scared would be an understatement, but we were joking amongst ourselves, which steadied our nerves and prevented us from thinking of the unknown at the moment we left the craft and moved on to a ... beach. We were highly trained for this work and we were very fit and young.⁴

On 10 June, the remainder of the 9th Division and supporting troops landed around Brunei Bay in north-west Borneo, seizing the island of Labuan and liberating the Sultanate of Brunei. It was the most complex amphibious operation in which Australians had participated, with landings on four beaches at both ends of Brunei Bay.

MacArthur justified the operation as a way of securing airstrips to extend air cover over the South China Sea, but it was primarily undertaken so that the US Navy could offer the Royal Navy a base – an attempt to ensure the newly arrived British Pacific Fleet operated separately from American naval forces. In fact, the British had not asked for the anchorage, and declined it. The landing's only positive outcome would be in liberating the people of Borneo, if only two months before the war's end.

Oboe 6, as its number indicates, was intended to be the last of the six operations originally anticipated. In the end, it became the second of the three carried out. The 24th Brigade was to land on Labuan and later move onto the mainland, while the 20th Brigade landed in Brunei and launched a bold advance to the oilfields of Sarawak. The landings followed the usual air and naval bombardment. Sergeant George McFarlane, 1st Beach Group:

As we stood watching, unbelievably, we were both excited and apprehensive. For me, a memorable event was a brief conversation with a young machine-gunner; he came up to me and said he was only nineteen and was afraid. The best I could do was to exude confidence and share my belief that, at that stage of the war, the army's aim was to minimize the risk of casualties ...

In all of the Borneo landings, men who had not experienced battle before made up significant proportions of units, but there was a solid core of veterans of earlier campaigns to steady the reinforcements. A seasoned campaigner, Sergeant Fred Turner, 2/43rd Battalion:

... wondered just how things would go this time. Again that cold sick apprehension, as you squat in your boat team position and watch with wonder the eager, excited movements of the 'new boys'. The Coy is made up, almost entirely, of new men now, and you wonder how they will shape.

All troops were well trained, having received battle training on Queensland's Atherton Tablelands and amphibious training at Trinity Beach, Cairns, and at Morotai.

Despite its suspect strategic inception, Oboe 6 proceeded with all the skill expected. On Labuan, the 24th Brigade advanced past the ruins of the town of Victoria and its dazed citizens to seize the airstrip and raise the Union Jack at Government House. As on Tarakan, the Japanese withdrew inland and planned to resist or counter-attack from a strong defensive position, which the Australians named 'the Pocket'. Aerial bombing and artillery fire was used against the dug-in enemy. Gunners were instructed that as there was no shortage of ammunition, they should be aggressive. A young signaller of the 2/12th Field Regiment:

We are held up by snipers again, I am writing this in a large, very muddy bomb crater. Every now and then there is a whine and pling as the sniper takes another shot. One of our OP [observation post] party was wounded in the groin this morning ... The rain is at least making things cool. Water is scarce and we are getting washing water from the craters.

While pounding of the Pocket continued, logistics troops established the base. It was quiet when, before dawn on 19 June, enemy raiding parties breached the lines and attacked American and Australian base troops. Among those who fought back was Sergeant Eric Antill, 2/1st Docks Operating Company, awarded the Military Medal for hastily organising one of the parties that staved off and mopped up the raiders.

That same day, two companies of the 2/28th Battalion, supported by artillery, mortars and 'Frog' flame-throwing Matilda tanks, moved in on the Pocket. The defenders had to be blasted and burned out of their bunkers. Just six of the 200 Japanese were captured, leaving the rest dead amid 'the smell of death and the stench of decaying rice'. The 24th Brigade reported that Japanese corpses were 'so badly dismembered as to make an exact count difficult'. The 2/28th lost seven dead and 35 wounded in suppression of the Pocket.

The rest of Labuan fell with relative ease.

After landing in Brunei, the 20th Brigade drove inland, liberating the city of Brunei (now Bandar Sari Begawan) before leap-frogging down the coast to retake the oilfields of Miri and Seria. Sappers doused burning oil wells and began restoring shattered roads and bridges. In taking these areas, Australians liberated locals and also rescued some Indian prisoners of war. Captain Cyril Huggett, 2/13th Battalion:

These fellows had suffered heavily under the Japs and were all in a bad way through the effects of malnutrition. Some had terrific tropical ulcers which were slowly eating their bodies away. The Indians told of the terrible punishment and atrocities they had received at the hands of the Japs and one fellow offered to show where six of his mates were buried without their heads ...

Australians feared for their own countrymen, including relatives and friends, in captivity.

After Labuan was secured, the 24th Brigade moved to the mainland of British North Borneo, advancing against scattered but hardly negligible resistance to liberate towns up the west coast of what is now Sabah. One objective was Beaufort. It was here, on 28 June, Private Leslie Starceвич, 2/43rd Battalion, came to the fore attacking machine-gun posts on a jungle track. Staff Sergeant Frederick Turner:

Starceвич, standing in full view of the gunners, coolly charged his magazine and then advanced upon this second post. Starceвич [has] a method of approach which in itself must be most disconcerting to an enemy. Firmly and confidently believing that he can never be hit, he walks into an enemy post preceded by a single and unbroken stream of pellets. He is quite unmoved by returning fire and stops only when the enemy has been annihilated. The enemy in this second post must have been quite unable to 'take it', for as Starceвич neared them they endeavoured to leave their foxholes, and ... were at once killed.

Starceвич was decorated with the second and final VC of the Borneo campaigns.

On 26 June, the first servicewomen arrived when nursing sisters of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) landed at Labuan airfield, on posting to the 2/1st Casualty Clearing Station. Next day, five sisters of the RAAF Nursing Service arrived. Senior Sister Joan Milliken, 5 Medical Receiving Station RAAF:

No sooner had we arrived than our theatre sister ... [was] required for a 'case' and she spent the rest of the day in the operating theatre. We had a busy time there, nursing malaria cases and burns ... and a number of theatre cases such as ruptured gastric ulcers, all requiring blood transfusions, which we hooked up to tent poles.

Flight nurses of 1 and 2 Medical Air Evacuation Transport Units RAAF also passed through, escorting wounded and sick men back to Morotai, and sometimes on to Australia.

With Labuan airstrip operational, the first fighter-bombers also arrived. This enabled air support to be stepped up from early July. Flying Officer Ken Wilkinson, 77 Squadron:

I felt good working with our own blokes, knowing that Australians were on the ground, and we were protecting them. [One] day we were sent out to have a go at a pillbox that was holding them up. And they had ... an Auster aircraft ... light artillery spotters ... directing us to the pillbox, so we went in and strafed it and destroyed it.

The 'glamour boys', pilots of Spitfire fighters, trained in aerial combat, were frustrated to be relegated to ground attack missions. Flight Lieutenant Edward 'Ted' Sly: 'The Labuan campaign was not a very satisfying conflict as far as 457 Squadron was concerned, with only one Betty bomber shot down.'

The Australians' great achievement was to liberate the people of Brunei and Sabah from a harsh Japanese occupation. Though it entailed unfortunate but unavoidable loss of civilian life – for example, Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu) was razed by bombing – the return of the Allies was regarded as warmly as anywhere in Europe. Lieutenant Colonel John Broadbent, 2/17th Battalion:

Everywhere we have been enthusiastically received by the local inhabitants irrespective of their nationality. They have all been treated harshly by the Japs and are agreeably surprised since our occupation.

Oboe 6 illustrates how good can come of folly. It cost the lives of some 115 Australians, but saved hundreds if not thousands of Borneo's people.

Oboe 2 – Balikpapan

Australian ground forces have made a third major landing on the vast island of Borneo ... It is fitting that the Seventh Australian Division, which, in July, three years ago, met and later turned back the tide ... on the historic Kokoda trail, should this same month secure what was once perhaps the most lucrative strategic target in our East Indies sector ...⁵

Oboe 2, almost the last Allied operation of the war, was against the oil port of Balikpapan in Dutch Borneo. The operation lacked any strategic purpose. Australia's Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Thomas Blamey, protested against the decision, and the War Cabinet had reservations. MacArthur affirmed that he was justified, in fulfilling his directive as Supreme Commander, SWPA, in choosing to liberate 'a Dutch town of some importance'. But it would seem the operation was a demonstration of his ego. While Balikpapan was the location of a major oil refinery, securing oil was not a part of the purpose, just as oil had not been part of the rationale for taking Tarakan or Brunei Bay. There was no reason to take Balikpapan except that MacArthur had to be obeyed. The American Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom he also deceived into approving the operation, branded it pointless.

The 7th Division and supporting troops were to land, under the cover of another massive air and naval bombardment, and seize the town and ruins of its oil refinery. For some, this would be their second, third, even fourth campaign – the 7th Division had fought in Libya, Syria, Papua and New Guinea – but, as in the other landings, many men were reinforcements. Senior officers gave pep talks, but the troops were not easily impressed. Those on board HMAS Kanimbla in Morotai harbour listened patiently as General Blamey declared they were in splendid physical condition and sure to be 'in the thick of it'. On Blamey wishing them good luck and God speed, some wag piped up, 'Aren't you coming with us?'

Victory in Europe had been achieved since the first Borneo landing, and many servicemen and women figured victory in the Pacific might not be far away. Trooper Dave Hocking, 2/6th Commando Squadron:

There was an additional strain on the nerves ... and, indeed, some men known as the '5 by 2' men who had been five years in the army with two years overseas were due to

go home and while there was no doubt everyone was getting on with the job there was that extra, fearful thought of getting killed or wounded when the show was nearly over.

Wry humour helped. Sailing from Morotai, Lieutenant Bob McRae, a new section leader in the 2/3rd Commando Squadron, observed his men huddled on deck. When asked what was going on, his men explained they had lost two section leaders killed and two wounded, and figured he was a certainty to be next. They were deciding how to dole out McRae's belongings! Within days McRae was their fifth successive lieutenant shot in battle. He was hit in the knee.

Before dawn on 1 July 1945, off Balikpapan, the naval task force was ready. As usual, Allied warships and aircraft, which together had spent several days attacking targets along the coast, now prepared to 'soften up' the landing area in accordance with a well-devised fire plan. Able Seaman Stan Nicholls, HMAS Shropshire:

Our [target] area was again designated 'Peggy' so we closed up at action stations and at 0700 [7.00 am] the order to open fire was given – we fired fifty rounds of 8" [8-inch shells] receiving excellent reports from [USS] Montpelier's spotting plane. We ceased fire to watch the awesome sight of the specially fitted rocket-firing LCIs [Landing Craft, Infantry] going into action. They absolutely blanket the beach areas with their small rocket shells. At 0800 we fired a further 150 rounds then ceased fire while the first wave of our 'AIF Swaddies' went ashore on the landing beaches.

One concern was that the Japanese might release oil into the sea and set fire to it, but this did not happen. The troops had steeled themselves for the last major Australian amphibious landing of the war. Sergeant Bill Spencer, 2/9th Battalion:

Soldiers laden with all their gear, weapons and accoutrements were scrambling down uncooperative, heaving and entangling rope netting, eventually being assisted into their landing craft by RAN crew members ... We were being manhandled unceremoniously on board the unstable assault craft, rising and dipping unevenly in the swell, and then circled to pick up our formation and head for the beach. 'Away all boats' ...

Men talked in low tones, a few cracking jokes, others disobeying orders to keep low, stealing a peek at the beaches. Those allotted to later waves watched anxiously. Malcolm Uren, unit historian, 2/16th Battalion:

How would they fare? All binoculars were trained on the 2/27th Battalion's landing area. Small green figures stepped into the water – disappeared, got up, fell down again, crawled ashore; but once ashore they went forward. The watchers could only guess whether or not they were copping it.

The landscape could be seen from some distance. Telegraphist Edward Browne, HMAS Shropshire: 'We certainly knocked over plenty of palm trees in the process'. Those stepping ashore were shocked by what this awesome display of firepower had done to the ground. Staff Sergeant Frank Perversi, C Field Security Section, described 'utter desolation ... the only living things were six shaking shell shocked monkeys clinging to each other at the top of a leafless palm trunk'. A few locals who had remained in the area later began emerging, dazed, to watch, then greet the liberators.

As the Australians pushed inland and along the coast, under oil smoke-darkened skies, they met increasing resistance. Again, commanders sought to minimise casualties. The warships were on call to bring down further fire against specific targets, as were aircraft circling overhead, armed and ready to attack. Tanks and artillery also were landed early and brought forward for employment against strong-points. If fire could not be brought to bear, sappers sealed the bunker entrances, braving enemy fire while rushing forward and hurling explosives inside.

At Manggar, 20 kilometres east of Balikpapan, was fought one of the most impressive actions. As the 2/14th Battalion advanced on 4 July, it came under very heavy fire. The 2/5th Field Regiment responded, as did the destroyer USS Eaton, directed by an officer of the 1st Australian Naval Bombardment Group accompanying the troops. Next day, Liberator bombers appeared, and more artillery and tanks arrived. After two days of pounding, the infantry seized the airfield. Major William Russell, 2/14th Battalion:

A perfect application of modern military science, using land, sea and air arms with an unhurried, calculated and deadly precision to pave the way for a final infantry assault with minimum loss ... It was a practical example of the ... theory that individual lives are more precious than all the bombs, shells and bullets a country can provide.

Inevitably, casualties mounted. Some actions cost more than others. The 2/31st Battalion, advancing up the Milford Highway, showed astonishing tenacity in the face of fierce resistance, losing 168 men killed or wounded. Altogether, Balikpapan cost some 230 Australian lives. They died in an operation lacking strategic purpose.

An ending

In the dying days of the Borneo campaigns, some of the last casualties of the war were suffered. A Kittyhawk pilot, Pilot Officer Eldred 'Ted' Quinn, 80 Squadron, was the last RAAF airman killed on a combat mission in this war. Flight Lieutenant Dean Kelly:

His aircraft was hit behind the rear engine cowling, probably by a 25-mm [shell] ... as he commenced his strafing run. I observed flames along the underside of his aircraft ... Having completed his attack, he levelled out and then turned to port and bellylanded. His aircraft skidded along the ground into the oil pumping plant, where both the aircraft and the installation burnt fiercely. There was no chance for him to escape.

Quinn was one of the more than 590 Australians who died in the Borneo campaigns. Nearly 2000 Australians had died on the island in captivity.

On 15 August 1945, Japan agreed to an unconditional surrender. VP Day was celebrated on Borneo, but warily so. Troops were instructed to stay alert. There was no guarantee Japanese garrisons would surrender, or had heard the news. No-one wanted to be the last killed.

In the days following, Australians took the surrender of Japanese across Borneo, and even out to the remote Natuna Islands, in the South China Sea. They also liberated men, women and children of different nationalities from prisoner of war and internment camps. There was nobody left alive at the Sandakan and Ranau camps. The 2/3rd Tank Attack Regiment went to Kuching, sending the freed prisoners of war and civilian internees, including children, to Labuan. Sergeant Joan Mason, Australian Army Medical Women's Service (AAMWS), 2/6th Australian General Hospital:

We were speechless, they were so emaciated ... One patient came into my ward on a stretcher and he was forty-eight pounds [22 kilograms]. He had been found on a heap of bodies. He had been thought dead, but when they were putting the bodies on the back of a truck he grunted and groaned and he was brought into the hospital. Ants had started to eat his flesh and he was unconscious for three weeks and was fed by a tube.

The condition of almost all arriving in the hospitals was deplorable – though not always this extreme. Ribs could be counted, skin was pallid and covered in sores, people shook

with malaria, were bloated by beri beri, some barely conscious, some mentally disturbed. Heartbreaking was the state of some women, including a Dutch nun, who medical staff suspected may have been violated; and small children, scared as they had no memory of the likes of clean sheets and were confronted by robust, well-fed, kind strangers intent on caring for them. Lieutenant Clarice (Clarissa) Murie, AANS, 2/1st Casualty Clearing Station:

I got this young ... Indian boy, he was only a young lad. He was terribly ill and they didn't think he was going to live ... He had had two bayonet wounds to the chest. The Japs had tried to massacre a lot of them and he had a chest full of pus. So I had to set to work on him and I had sixty other patients to look after too.

Some, who had endured so much, succumbed. Most, given first-rate medical care, kindness and better rations, recovered to be sent home.

In the Netherlands East Indies, one of the last acts of the Japanese had been to grant independence to the Indonesians. In Dutch Borneo, the Australians confronted protests by locals opposed to the return of the Dutch. While the Australian government was well disposed to nationalist aspirations, and while individual Australians were often sympathetic, the military authorities wanted to avoid clashes, as occurred in Java between British troops and nationalists. The Australians handed their areas over to the Dutch by the end of 1945, ahead of the bloody war of independence.

In British North Borneo, the role of Australians in liberating the area and starting on rebuilding was recognised when it became a British colony, and the 'T' of the 9th Division colour patches formed part of the coat of arms. It remained until Sabah became a state of the newly independent nation of Malaysia in 1963, when a more fitting national symbol supplanted it.

Australians also acknowledged the kindness of Sabahans towards prisoners of war, and assistance given to graves registration units recovering bodies from Sandakan, along the death marches route and Ranau. An Australian-British Reward Mission later located many who had offered assistance. The mission leader, an Australian, Major Harry Jackson, travelled from one end of British North Borneo (Sabah) to the other conducting his investigations. In due course, many people – men, women and children – were rewarded and publicly thanked for their courage and humanity. They included, for example, Fam Ngui

and Chai Fatt, gardeners, who hid and nursed an escaped prisoner, buried him when he died of illness and later reported his grave; and Peter Lai, a dresser in the civil hospital at Sandakan, who smuggled food and drugs to the prisoner of war camp.

Today, Australians and others remember the suffering of the prisoners of war and the contribution of the men and women who served in the Borneo campaigns. The tragedy of Sandakan and debate over the worth of the final campaigns will mean these episodes, and those who died or lived through them, will not be forgotten. Radio and television documentaries have been aired, and books written. Pilgrimages, official and private, are made to the sites of the battles, prisoner of war camps and death marches. Responsibility for the Labuan War Cemetery rests with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Here all of the Allied war dead in Borneo whose bodies could be recovered – no less than 1726, mostly prisoners of war, were ‘entirely unidentified’ – are buried and the missing commemorated. The Office of Australian War Graves provided and maintains a memorial and interpretive pavilion within the Sandakan Memorial Park.

In Australia, the military dead are inscribed on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. Other memorials have been erected, including that in the Sydney suburb of Burwood, where a Sandakan memorial was dedicated by the then Prime Minister Paul Keating whose uncle, 36-year-old Private William (Bill) Keating, 8th Division Postal Unit, died at Sandakan on 3 February 1945. On 29 May 2005, 60 years to the day after the start of the second of the Sandakan death marches, a Sandakan memorial was dedicated in the Sculpture Garden of the Australian War Memorial. Australians have also contributed a memorial stained glass window to the Anglican church of St Michael and All Angels, one of only two buildings at Sandakan to survive the war.

These activities of commemorating and honouring the war dead of Borneo affirm, as the inscription on a headstone at Labuan, requested by a grieving family, asserts: ‘Not just today, but every day, we remember.’

End Notes

- ¹ Lieutenant Max Carment, 2/15th Field Regiment, prisoner of war.
- ² Group Captain Julius Cohen, RAAF Command, interviewed by official historian George Odgers, 1946.
- ³ Song, to the tune of Lili Marlene, sung by the 2/48th Battalion, April 1945.
- ⁴ Able Seaman AE (Ted) Jones, RAN Beach Commando, 1st Beach Group.
- ⁵ General Douglas MacArthur, official communiqué, July 1945.

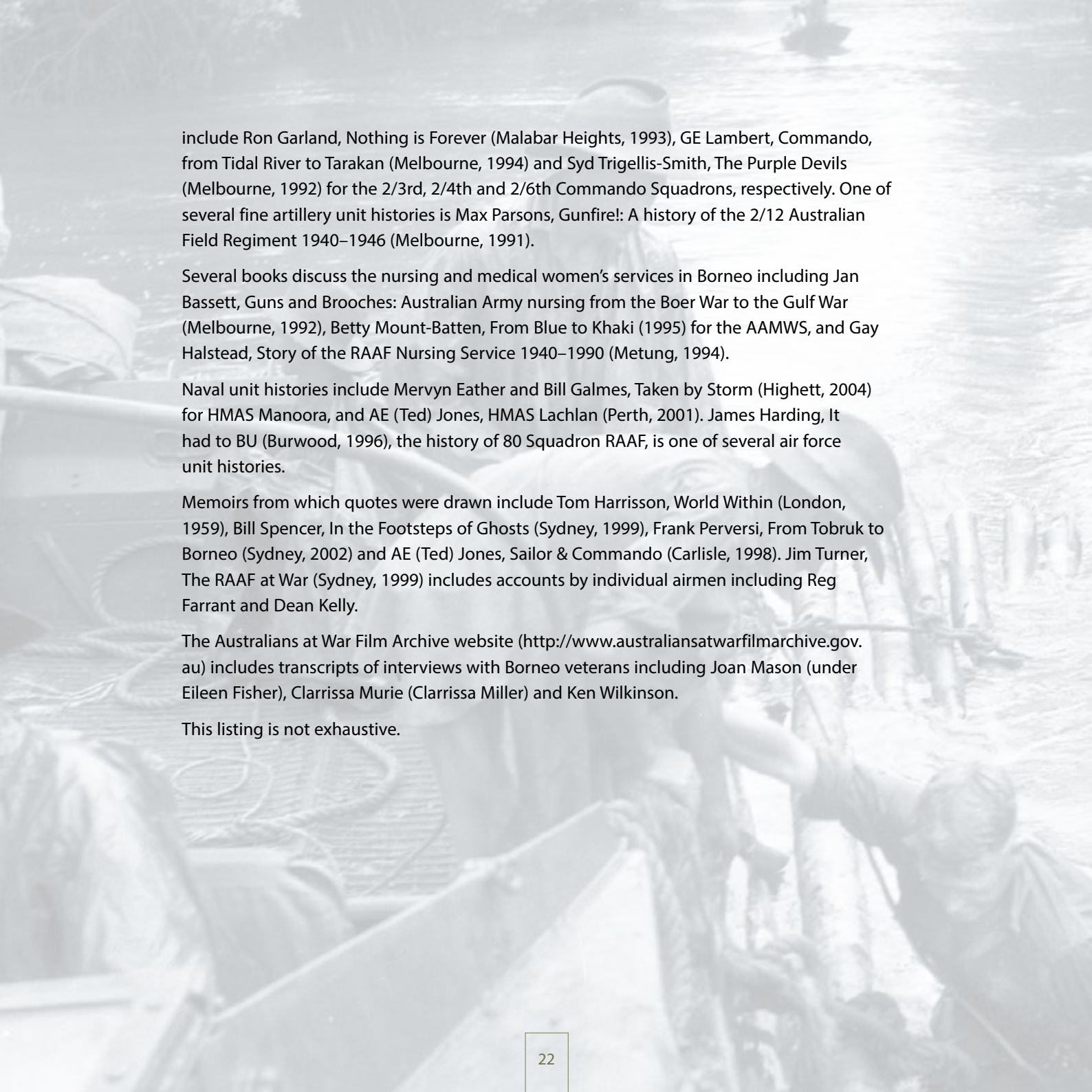
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The official history *Australia in the War of 1939–1945* has four volumes relating to Australians in Borneo. Gavin Long's *The Final Campaigns* (Canberra, 1963) deals with land operations; see also G Hermon Gill's *Royal Australian Navy 1942–1945* (Canberra, 1985) and George Odgers' *Air War against Japan 1943–1945* (Canberra, 1957). Prisoners of war are discussed in AJ Sweeting's appendix to Lionel Wigmore's *The Japanese Thrust* (Canberra, 1957).

The prisoner of war experience, especially the death marches, has been the subject of many books. Don Wall's *Sandakan: the last march* (Sydney, 1992) and the Borneo chapters of Hank Nelson's *POW: Australians under Nippon* (Sydney, 1985) are especially noteworthy. Others include Lynette Ramsay Silver's *Sandakan: a conspiracy of silence* (Burra Creek, 1999) and Kevin Smith's *Borneo: Australia's proud but tragic heritage* (Armidale, 1999). Athol Moffitt's *Project Kingfisher* (Sydney, 1989) deals with the proposed rescue attempt.

Allied special operations have been the subject of several studies, notably Alan Powell's *War by Stealth: Australians and the Allied Intelligence Bureau, 1942–1945* (Melbourne, 1996); and GB Courtney's, *Silent Feet: the history of 'Z' Special operations 1942–1945* (Melbourne, 1993). Surprisingly, perhaps, the Oboe operations have been less thoroughly dealt with. David Horner's *High Command: Australia and Allied strategy 1939–1945* (Sydney, 1992) gives a good context for Australian involvement in Borneo. The only major operational study is Peter Stanley's *Tarakan: an Australian tragedy* (Sydney, 1997).

There are a number of good unit histories including Frank Allchin, *Purple and Blue: the history of the 2/10th Battalion, AIF* (Adelaide, 1958) and Peter Donovan, *Waltzing Matildas: the men and machines of the 2/9th Armoured Regimental Group in Australia and Borneo 1941–1946* (Blackwood, 1988). Others from which quotes in this book were drawn include GH Fearnside (ed.), *Bayonets Abroad: A history of the 2/13th Battalion AIF* (Sydney, 1953), WB Russell, *The Second Fourteenth Battalion, Malcolm Uren, A thousand men at war* (Melbourne, 1959) for the 2/16th, Gordon Combe, Frank Ligertwood and Tom Gilchrist, *The Second 43rd Australian Infantry Battalion 1940–1946* (Adelaide, 1973) and John Glenn, *Tobruk, to Tarakan* (Adelaide, 1960) for the 2/48th. For army and air force engineers, see RR McNicoll, *The Royal Australian Engineers, 1919 to 1945* (Canberra, 1982) and David Wilson, *Always First: the RAAF airfield construction squadrons 1942–1974* (Canberra, 1998). Commando histories



include Ron Garland, *Nothing is Forever* (Malabar Heights, 1993), GE Lambert, *Commando*, from Tidal River to Tarakan (Melbourne, 1994) and Syd Trigellis-Smith, *The Purple Devils* (Melbourne, 1992) for the 2/3rd, 2/4th and 2/6th Commando Squadrons, respectively. One of several fine artillery unit histories is Max Parsons, *Gunfire!: A history of the 2/12 Australian Field Regiment 1940–1946* (Melbourne, 1991).

Several books discuss the nursing and medical women's services in Borneo including Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Melbourne, 1992), Betty Mount-Batten, *From Blue to Khaki* (1995) for the AAMWS, and Gay Halstead, *Story of the RAAF Nursing Service 1940–1990* (Metung, 1994).

Naval unit histories include Mervyn Eather and Bill Galmes, *Taken by Storm* (Highett, 2004) for HMAS Manoora, and AE (Ted) Jones, *HMAS Lachlan* (Perth, 2001). James Harding, *It had to be* (Burwood, 1996), the history of 80 Squadron RAAF, is one of several air force unit histories.

Memoirs from which quotes were drawn include Tom Harrisson, *World Within* (London, 1959), Bill Spencer, *In the Footsteps of Ghosts* (Sydney, 1999), Frank Perversi, *From Tobruk to Borneo* (Sydney, 2002) and AE (Ted) Jones, *Sailor & Commando* (Carlisle, 1998). Jim Turner, *The RAAF at War* (Sydney, 1999) includes accounts by individual airmen including Reg Farrant and Dean Kelly.

The Australians at War Film Archive website (<http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au>) includes transcripts of interviews with Borneo veterans including Joan Mason (under Eileen Fisher), Clarrissa Murie (Clarrissa Miller) and Ken Wilkinson.

This listing is not exhaustive.



The grave of a victim of the Sandakan death marches: a man shot near the 16-mile peg near Sandakan. The cross was erected by a Chinese gardener, a sign of the close involvement of Sabahan people in commemorating the marches' victims. (AWM 042578)



The paybook photograph of Gunner Albert Cleary, 2/15th Field Regiment, a prisoner of war sent from Singapore to Borneo. After enduring the first death march, Gunner Cleary escaped from Ranau but was recaptured. He died on 20 March 1945 after almost three weeks of torture and beatings. He has come to symbolise the suffering of the final groups of Sandakan prisoners. A memorial now stands near the site of his death at Ranau.

(AWM P02468.516)



A group portrait of members of the Semut 2 team, of the Services Reconnaissance Department, in a jungle camp on Borneo. The team, and others like it, undertook reconnaissance patrols behind enemy lines and helped to better organise, supply and lead guerrillas. (AWM P00560.001)



Members of 61 Airfield Construction Wing RAAF, a unit of the 1st Tactical Air Force, have the Tarakan operation explained to them after sailing from Morotai in the invasion fleet. The officer pointing out the areas of the landing and where the airfield was to be developed, Flight Lieutenant Elliott Burnell, had served with the AIF in North Africa and Greece before transferring to the RAAF. (AWM OG2483)



Signalman Ken Newton, RAN, of Beach Commando B, 2nd Beach Group, operating an Aldis lamp to communicate with ships during the preliminary landing on Sadau Island on 30 April 1945. This island in Batagau Strait, separating Tarakan Island and Borneo, was taken by the 2/4th Commando Squadron and a battery of the 2/7th Field Regiment. The gunners gave fire support to engineers making gaps in the beach obstacles across on Tarakan. (AWM 090863)



Sappers of the 2/13th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers on a damaged pipeline jetty after working waist deep in mud and slime to breach beach wire entanglements ahead of the main landing on Tarakan. (From left) Sappers DR Bidwell, Reginald Stevenson, Patrick Carroll, Raymond Mace, James Proctor, George Maxwell, Alexander Clydesdale and Edmond Slee. Slee was killed in action at Djoeata, Tarakan, on 1 July 1945. (AWM 090915)



Headquarters, 26th Infantry Brigade coming ashore from an American LST (Landing Ship, Tank) on Red 1 Beach, Tarakan, on 1 May 1945. Japanese installations and equipment wrecked by air attacks and naval bombardment are seen in the foreground. (AWM 090882)



Troops of the 2/23rd Battalion advance inland from Green Beach, Tarakan, on the morning of 1 May 1945. The power of the supporting Australian and American air and sea bombardment is apparent from the destruction of the oil storage tanks. (AWM 090932)



A heavily bandaged Lance Bombardier Bruce Trewin, 2/7th Field Regiment, in the surgical ward of the Main Dressing Station at the corner of Anzac and Collins Highways, Tarakan. Trewin had suffered third degree burns when the petrol in his truck burst into flames. The medical personnel just behind him are (from left) Captain Leo McMahon and Sergeant Davey, 2/11th Field Ambulance. (AWM 089600)



The burial of Lieutenant Tom 'Diver' Derrick VC DCM, 2/48th Battalion, who died of wounds on Tarakan on 24 May 1945. Derrick, who had served through Tobruk and El Alamein in North Africa and the Huon Peninsula campaign in New Guinea – for which he had been decorated with the Victoria Cross – had been mortally wounded the previous night in the fight for the hill code-named Freda. (AWM 044970)



Lance Corporal Frank Gilbert, 2/48th Battalion, lying exhausted on the roadside after carrying wounded men down from the hill code-named Sykes to an aid post for further treatment and evacuation. (AWM 089463)



Sailors on board the corvette HMAS Cowra practice gun drill on the ship's main armament, a 4-inch QF gun. The corvette had been engaged in minesweeping and convoy escorts around Tarakan and was preparing to return to Morotai. (AWM 109986)



A soldier watches as troops of the 2/17th Battalion scramble down nets slung over the side of the LSI (Landing Ship, Infantry) HMAS Kanimbla into landing craft that would carry them ashore. They were the first wave of troops ashore in Brunei during the Brunei Bay operation, Oboe 6, on 9 June 1945. (AWM 108939)



Matilda tanks of the 2/9th Armoured Regiment advance across Labuan Island on the day of the 9th Division's amphibious landings around the island's capital, Victoria (now Bandar Labuan) on 10 June 1945. (AWM 108867)



Ground crews of 21 Squadron RAAF based on Palawan Island, the Philippines, prepare a Liberator bomber for the next operation over Borneo. While the armourer at left empties spent shells from the bomber's front turret, (from left) Leading Aircraftman Fred Scoble, Corporal Leslie Matthews and Leading Aircraftman Oswald Strike carry rounds across to the aircraft for loading. (AWM OG2850)



Lieutenant John Sutherland, 2/24th Battalion, studies a map of an area on Labuan his platoon was patrolling after the Australians received reports of Japanese troops in the area. A local Chinese guide and interpreter, Lionel, working for the Civil Affairs Unit, assists the patrol with directions and advice on the area. (AWM 109679)



Men of the 2/17th Battalion perform the necessary task of searching the bodies of Japanese dead near Brunei town, 13 June 1945. (From left) Private George Creber and Lance Corporal John Creber, brothers who had enlisted in June and July 1941, respectively, survived the war and were discharged on consecutive days in March 1945. (AWM 109317)



Major Norman Cahill, 2/32nd Battalion, climbs aboard an Auster light aircraft of 16 (Air Observation Post) Flight RAAF piloted by Flight Lieutenant Greg Sherman at Labuan on 16 June 1945. They were to drop propaganda leaflets over Japanese positions. Greg Sherman returned to Borneo in 1997 with an Australian War Memorial battlefield tour and visited places he had not seen in over fifty years. (AWM 109606)



Nursing sisters of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) disembark from a RAAF Dakota to begin work at the 2/1st Casualty Clearing Station at Labuan, 26 June 1945. Other members of the AANS arrived later or were based at Morotai in the Netherlands East Indies. Members of the RAAF Nursing Service also served in or supported the campaign. (AWM 110691)



Warrant Officer Cyril Goldfinch, 2/32nd Battalion, holding his Owen gun and a sign that he was to erect to show the location of D Company, in a landing craft during one of the supplementary landings of Oboe 6, at Weston, British North Borneo, 17 June 1945.

(AWM 109611)



Civilians in Beaufort whose condition shows the harshness of the Japanese occupation of British North Borneo. The mother and her children, suffering from malnutrition, malaria and scabies, are about to be treated by a field ambulance of the 9th Division. (AWM 111823)



The celebrated 'Jeep Train', known as the Membukut Special, on the Beaufort-Jesselton railway. Engineers of the 9th Division repaired the railway, adapted jeeps to replace damaged locomotives and returned the railway to working order. (AWM 111845)



A soldier checks the condition of a section of the Beaufort-Jesselton railway line flooded by rains, ahead of the Jeep train crossing the swollen creek. Armed guards accompanied the train, and patrolled ahead whenever necessary, in case of Japanese parties infiltrating the Australian lines to attack the railway. (From the collection of Warrant Officer RH Campbell, HQ 24th Brigade)



A Beaufighter of 31 Squadron RAAF which made a forced landing, with wheels up, in a swamp near the airstrip on Tarakan. It was out of fuel and the pilot could not put down on the airstrip because 78 Wing Kittyhawks were landing. (AWM 110310)



Brigadier Selwyn (Bill) Porter, commanding the 24th Brigade, reading out the proclamation of martial law to headmen of towns and villages in the Beaufort area, British North Borneo, 6 July 1945. This proclamation was part of a smooth transition from Japanese to Australian administration, and ultimately a return to colonial government.

(From the collection of Warrant Officer RH Campbell, HQ 24th Brigade)



General Douglas MacArthur, standing behind the ladder, aboard the American cruiser USS Cleveland, watches the naval and air bombardment of Balikpapan at the start of Oboe 2, 1 July 1945. (AWM 128755)



Able Seaman Lawrence Cranwell working in the cordite room of the cruiser HMAS Shropshire during the naval bombardment of the Balikpapan township area preparatory to the Oboe 2 landings by the 7th Division. (AWM 111857)



Men of the 18th Brigade look toward Yellow Beach, Balikpapan, from landing craft in the fifth wave heading for the beach. Smoke rises from the air and sea bombardment preceding the landing of the 7th Division and supporting troops. (AWM 110415)



Men of the 2/14th Battalion come ashore at Yellow Beach, Balikpapan, from an American LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry) on 1 July 1945. Some of these men had fought in Lebanon, at Kokoda, Gona and the Markham and Ramu Valleys, including on Shaggy Ridge, before embarking on this last campaign. (AWM 110436)



Stretcher-bearers carry a wounded man back to the dressing station set up on the landing beach at Balikpapan by troops of the 2nd Beach Group. Members of this unit are also shown in the background setting up a temporary advanced headquarters to control beachhead operations. (AWM 111030)



Sappers of the 2/9th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers search for landmines to allow Matilda tanks of the 1st Armoured Regiment to go forward, a sign of the cooperation between all units essential in the Balikpapan operation. (From left) Sappers Ronald Pethers, James Maitland, Robert Thompson, Ivan Anderson and Bernard Daws. (AWM 110379)



Troops of the 2/1st Machine Gun Battalion give machine-gun support to infantry advancing along the Vasey Highway towards Reward Feature after the Balikpapan landings. Vasey Highway was named in honour of the former commander of the 7th Division, Major General George Vasey, killed in an aircraft accident in March 1945. (AWM 110829)



Gunners of the 2/4th Field Regiment in action on a 'Short' 25-pounder gun supporting the advance from Balikpapan. They were pounding Japanese positions obstructing the infantry and other troops pushing out from the beachhead. (AWM 019437)



Sappers of the 2/4th Field Company prepare to blow up pipe lines obstructing the movement of tanks supporting the advance through the oil refinery area at Balikpapan. (AWM 128776)



Representatives of the YMCA serve tea to troops of C Company, 2/12th Battalion, relaxing after ten days of fighting in the town area around Balikpapan, 10 July 1945. (AWM 111499)

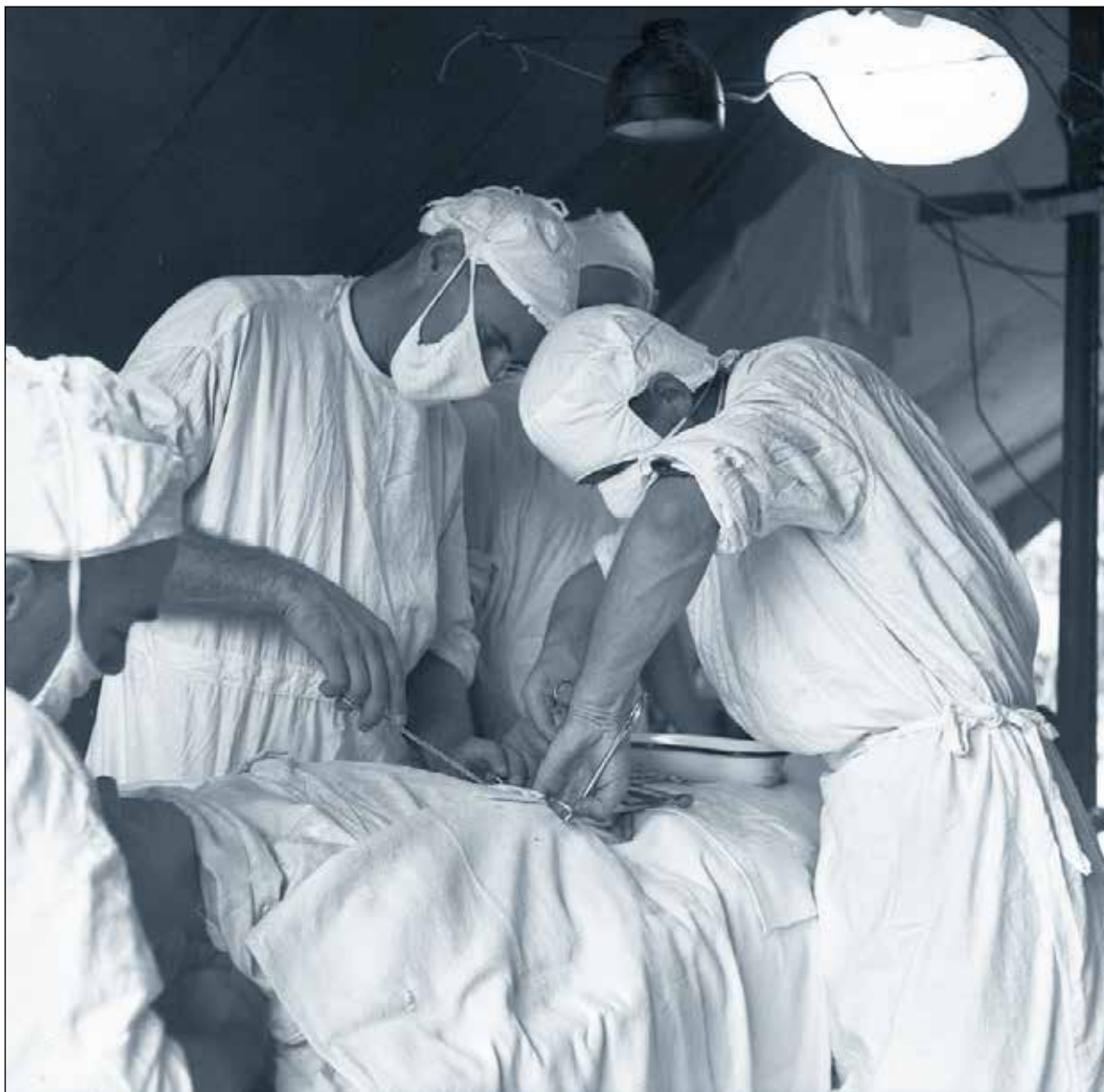


Ground staff of 452 Squadron RAAF arm a Spitfire fighter ready for action at Sepinggang airstrip, Balikpapan, on 15 July 1945. This was the first squadron based on the airstrip. It responded to a raid by Japanese aircraft and also flew ground attack operations against Japanese positions. (AWM OG3042)



Men of the 2/21st Transport Platoon, Australian Army Service Corps retrieve logs floating downstream from a Japanese sawmill near Balikpapan on 27 July 1945. They used the logs to build a ramp to assist their DUKW amphibious trucks to leave and enter the sea – an example of the improvisation traditionally expected of Australians (and many others) during war.

(AWM 112505)



Major Douglas Donald and Captain Walter Keller of the surgical team attached to the 2nd Beach Group at Balikpapan perform an abdominal operation in the operating tent of the 2/4th Field Ambulance. (AWM 112659)



Captain Clifford 'Cappy' Radford, a popular Salvation Army representative with the 7th Division, celebrates the war's end outside the Salvation Army hut at Balikpapan on 15 August 1945. Radford was later wounded in a grenade accident but survived the war.

(AWM 113724)



Survivors of a crash behind enemy lines, Flight Lieutenant Vernon Sims (centre) and Flying Officer Reginald Farrant (right), 93 Squadron RAAF, after their rescue and return to Labuan on 21 August 1945. Their Beaufighter had crashed during a rocket attack on Kuching a week before the war ended. They evaded capture and finally were rescued by a Catalina flying boat.

(AWM OG3292)



Troops, including members of the Australian Army Nursing Service and the Australian Army Medical Women's Service, at a beach and water sports carnival organised by Headquarters, 9th Division at Labuan on 23 August 1945. (AWM 114381)



Three of the six survivors of the Sandakan death marches after their escapes and rescue. (From left) Private Nelson Short, 2/18th Battalion, Warrant Officer Bill Sticpewich, 8th Division, Australian Army Service Corps, and Private Keith Botterill, Headquarters, 22nd Brigade. The other survivors were Bombardier Richard Braithwaite, 2/15th Field Regiment, Gunner Owen Campbell, 2/10th Field Regiment, and Lance Bombardier Bill Moxham, 2/15th Field Regiment. (AWM OG3553)



Mothers and children who had been interned at Kuching came aboard the corvette HMAS Kapunda for an afternoon tea party organised by the crew. Two of the sailors holding children were Petty Officer Ron Impey (left) and Ordinary Seaman Henry Smith (right).

(AWM 118701)



Major Andrew Hutson of the 2/4th Australian General Hospital treats a severely emaciated British officer in Kuching Civil Hospital more than a month after the war's end. Many prisoners of war liberated from Japanese camps were severely ill. (AWM 120404)



Japanese soldiers salute Australians of the 24th Brigade as they disembark from a punt crossing the Padas River and march to a prisoner of war compound at Beaufort, British North Borneo on 18 September 1945. (AWM 123517)



When Allied troops reached Sandakan after Japan's surrender they found the burnt-out ruins of the prisoner of war camp and the cemetery crowded with graves. The big tree, a distinctive feature of the Sandakan camp, appears in many photographs taken of this poignant site.

(AWM 120463)



Gunner DS Folkes, 2/3rd Tank Attack Regiment, assists members of the war graves unit at Sandakan who painstakingly searched the ruined camp for the remains of prisoners of war who had died or been killed and for personal items such as pay books or identity discs, which might identify the dead. (AWM 120438)



In the first of many war crimes trials held on Labuan from late 1945, Sergeant Major Sugino Tsuruo, seated between two Australian military policemen, was charged in June 1946 with responsibility for the deaths of 46 Australian, British and Indian prisoners of war.

(AWM 122765)



The Supreme Commander of Allied forces in South-East Asia Command, which assumed responsibility for Borneo after the war ended, Lord Louis Mountbatten, visited Labuan in December 1945. He met (right) Private Leslie Starcevic, recipient of the Victoria Cross for his conduct at Beaufort, and (centre) Warrant Officer Bill Sticpewich, one of the six survivors of the Sandakan death marches. (AWM 122814)



In 1947, Major Harry Jackson, leader and Australian representative on the combined Australian-British Reward Mission, travelled across Borneo to find and reward civilians who had helped prisoners of war. He recorded their testimony, including that of Balabiu, a girl who had given food to starving prisoners on the Sandakan death marches. (AWM 042565)



The Allied war cemetery at Labuan soon after its establishment, before the wooden crosses had been replaced with concrete plinths and the site had been landscaped. The cemetery is now under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. (AWM 042559)



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