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"Hell was let loose": making order from confusion.

The RAN Beach Commandos at Balikpapan,

July 1945

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Australian War Memorial

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) participated in more than 20 amphibious operations in the south Pacific during the Second World War. The largest of these assaults was at Balikpapan on 1 July 1945. Indeed, it was the largest amphibious assault ever conducted by Australian troops, and it was the last major operation of the Pacific War. For weeks Balikpapan, an oil-producing centre occupied by the Japanese, on Borneo's west coast, was subjected to a massive bombardment from Allied aircraft and warships, virtually raising the town. This pre-landing bombardment was in support of the 7th Australian Infantry Division which "hit the beach" on 1 July and went onto fight a successful campaign against the Japanese.

Coming ashore in the first waves were the officers and ratings of the RAN Beach Commandos. These men were specialists, who were trained in assault techniques and were responsible for controlling the successive waves of landing craft – they helped order the confusion of a landing into an organised beachhead, and they would help the infantry defend it. They also had to work closely with the army, if they were established control of the littoral. This paper will look at the evolution of Australian's amphibious operations during the Second World War, the creation of the RAN Beach Commando and their subsequent participation in the Australian landing at Balikpapan in July 1945.

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On morning of 1 July 1945 warships from the United States (US), the Netherlands East Indies and Australia lay off the coast of Balikpapan, an oil refining centre on Borneo's south east coast. Codenamed "Oboe Two", the invasion of Balikpapan by the 7th Australian Infantry Division was the third and final phase of the Oboe operations – a series a amphibious operations conducted by the Allies liberate areas of Dutch and British territory on Borneo. For almost three weeks the coastline and area surrounding Balikpapan had been subjected to an intensive air and sea bombardment; the longest of any amphibious operation of the war and its effect was devastating.

Balikpapan had first appeared to those aboard the invasion fleet during the previous night as a dull red glow on the horizon. Dawn revealed a "terrifying scene".[1] Clouds of "black oily smoke" from the bombed oil refineries blanketed the beach, buildings lay in rubble, and fires burnt all along the coast.[2] It seemed to Lieutenant Commander William Swan, standing aboard the infantry landing ship HMAS *Westralia*, that "hell was let loose on Balikpapan".[3]

The first Australian troops landed at 0855 on three beaches: Red, Yellow, and Green, on a two brigade front just over a mile long. The second wave quickly followed, landing at 0859. Moments later a red marker, indicating the location of Red Beach to the following assault waves, was erected.[4] Despite only being ashore for a few minuets, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Beach Commandos were already at work.

Balikpapan was the last major operation conducted by the Allies during World War II, and it received a level of support that was unprecedented for a single division landing.[5] It

has often been cited as an example of the high level of expertise that Australian forces had achieved in amphibious operations by the end of the war.[6] Most work has looked at the joint and combined elements of the operation and has concentrated on the role played by Australian warships. The RAN personnel ashore who worked directly with the Australian army and liased with the US Navy, however, have received scant attention. This point has not been lost on the men themselves who have often commented upon their service as being either overlooked or forgotten.[7]

The RAN Beach Commandos were among the most highly and diversely trained Australian sailors and soldiers of the war; they helped order the confusion of a landing into an organised beachhead. As they were part of a larger army beach group, it could have been expected that the presence of the RAN Commandos may have resented or at least the subject of inter-service rivalry. But based on own its experience with amphibious landings, the Australian army strongly supported the beach commandos and promoted its role.

With no full time regular army and only a small navy, Australia did not have the ability to conduct a large amphibious operation before the war. It was only in early 1942, that senior Australian commanders began moves to establish a combined operations school and acquire landing craft.[8] But it is not until later in the year after General Douglas MacArthur informed the Australia Government and senior military commanders of his plans for a future offensive that things begin to develop in earnest. MacArthur wanted to conduct a counter attack against Rabaul, the main Japanese base in the South Pacific, with three divisions; one of which was to be Australian.[9] To train the boat crews and beach parties for Australia's three infantry landing ships necessary for such an operation, the training centre HMAS *Assault* was established on the north coast of New South Wales. A Combine Training School for Australian diggers and American GIs also was established at Toorbul in Queensland. Fortunately, the attack on Rabaul did not go ahead, but following the amphibious landings at Lae and Finschhafen in New Guinea in 1943, and after studying other Allied operations, the Australian army decided to establish a beach group to provide support necessary for amphibious operations.

The 1st Australian Beach Group was formed in December 1943. The variety of work required to perform its task is reflected in diverse variety of soldiers who formed the beach group, including: engineers, pioneers, signallers, MPs, support troops, mechanical engineers, and a small medical section – for a total of about 1,800 men including the RAN Commandos.[10]

As Ross Mallet has shown, one of the lessons learnt by the Australian army from New Guinea was the need for a naval beach party to take soundings, mark beaches and channels, and handle communications between ship and shore. It is thought that the RAN would be the best suited to perform these tasks, and liasing with the US Navy.[11]

The RAN Beach Commando was formed in January 1944 followed by another commando unit shortly afterwards were established along the same lines as Royal Navy (RN) Beach Commandos. Two months later the 2nd Australian Beach Group was raised and the army asked the navy to provide two more commandos. In November 1944 the four commandos were grouped together as the RAN Beach Unit with Commander R S Pearson who became the Senior Naval Officer Beach Unit (SNOBU).

A RAN beach commando unit consisting of 120 officers and ratings, and was about the equivalent of three US Navy beach parties. A beach commando contained a headquarters with a commander, who was the principal beachmaster, in charge of two commando units; a lieutenant commander, who was the deputy principal beachmaster, and three beach parties. Each beach party was controlled by a beachmaster, a lieutenant or lieutenant commander; two assistant beachmasters, and officers and seamen. A beach commando also included a repair and recovery section, a camp party, and a naval beach signals section. The signals section, under the command of a sub lieutenant or midshipman, included signalmen and telegraphists.[12]

During an amphibious landing the advance elements of the RAN Commando would go ashore in the first or second waves. Among the advance elements were the two assistant

beachmasters. They landed at opposite ends of the beach and carried out a quick reconnaissance of the area looking for suitable landing areas and carefully noting any obstacles in the water or on the shore. They were followed by the beachmasters and the principal beachmaster in the subsequent waves.

The beachmaster guided in the later assault waves and the beaching of the larger landing ships and craft. The principal beachmaster located his headquarters near that of the beach group so he could easily be kept up to date with the army's needs and liase with the US Navy beach parties. The navy signal section worked with the army signallers to establish communications between the sea and the shore, while the principle beachmaster.

As a beaching slot became available the principal beachmaster informed the landing craft control officer, a USN officer, who ordered the next ship to make its approach. When the ship was about 1,000 yards away the beachmaster would then guided it in over the radio. These vessels were either brought in according to the pre-arranged timetable worked out when the operation was planned or brought in after consulting the beach group commander. Depending on the beach's gradient, large pontoons were used to make an improvised ramps or docks. As for the actually unloading, that was left to the soldiers of the beach group.[13]

The average age of a sailor in the RAN Commando was early-20s. Many had already been in the RAN for several years, severing on a variety of ships, while others had some experience of combined operations after serving the RN; most had attended *Assault*. As previously mentioned, *Assault* was established as a combined operations school. Here sailors were taught general seamanship skills, instructed in navigation and pilotage, boat and landing craft handling, and flotilla work. The shore parties were also instructed on a variety of different small arms and automatic weapons, as well as being instruction in hand-to-hand combat.[14]

When the commandos moved north to join the I Australia Corps this type of training and instruction continued, and large joint and combined exercises took place along

Queensland's tropical beaches. But now the curriculum diversified to included courses usually associated with soldiering. The sailors received further weapons training from "tough New Guinea veterans", they were instructed in field engineering, and even, as they expected to be used in tropical areas, patrolling and jungle warfare. They also attended demolition courses, and were instructed on how to drive the different types of vehicles, such as jeeps, trucks, graders, and even DUKWs.[15] They were not expected to operate the vehicles, but if the drivers were wounded or killed the commandos needed to be able to move the vehicles so as to keep the beachhead cleared.

The close training made the commandos very combatable with their neighbouring army units and visa versa. It did cause, however, complicated command and administration system where responsibility was split between the army and navy. As part an "integral part" of an army beach group, the commandos were "under command" of the beach group's lieutenant colonel, with the army providing the commandos with their uniforms, weapons, vehicles, equipment, and stores. When on the beach, however, they were under the command of the SNOBU, Commander Pearson, who was also responsible for maintaining navy administration and discipline.[16]

To most observers, the RAN Commandos would have appeared to be something of a hybrid unit, one that was part navy and part army. Indeed once he had handed in his navy uniform and hammock for army jungle greens, there was little to distinguish the sailor from the a soldier – apart from his navy cap or badges of rank or rating, and the small "RAN" shoulder flash worn on each arm.[17]

In order to maintain their RAN identity, Pearson ordered that wherever possible units were to follow normal naval customs, so the men could wear beards, while the navy's white ensign was to "worn" on a suitable "mast" near a unit's headquarters.[18]

When on leave, their mixed appearance caused the commandos problems particularly from MPs who had never heard of "beach commandos".[19]Able Seaman Ernest Tyler

remembered being jeered by other servicemen as those "freaks, those army-navy freaks" ridiculed for being neither "one thing nor the other."[20]

Their greatest source of frustration and resentment though, came from a lack of action. When a liaison officer from Rear Admiral Barbey's headquarters, visited Commandos A and B in September 1944, he noted the men's fitness, general smartness and good manners, but also commented on the "the general desire of the men … to go into action".[21] The men experienced this frustration in different ways. Able Seamen Ted Jones admitted that while he enjoyed the diverse training, especially the explosive courses, that was "great fun", he and his mates become increasingly bored with the continual training.[22] Lieutenant Bernard Nelson, however, was far more critical. Nelson had previously been posted to the RN where he had participated in the Allied invasions of Italy and France. But upon his return home he could not reconcile his previous experiences with what he was doing in Australia, which he thought pointless. It was "annoying to say the least" he later remembered, "because we had little or nothing to do".[23] Pearson rightly attributed this "restlessness" among his men to the "long wait" for operations.[24]

And it *was* a long wait. Since coming out of New Guinea at the end of 1943, the I Australia Corps had been waiting and training for a role in the invasion of the Philippines. But this was not to be and war was almost over before the RAN Commando went into action. In what was first phase of the Oboe operations, Oboe One, in May an infantry brigade from the 9th Australian Infantry Division landed on the small island of Tarakan on Borneo's north east coast. Commanded by Lieutenant Commander Bernard Morris, RAN Beach Commando "B" performed its tasks well, winning it high praise, as the operation run smoothly.[25]

In the next operation, Oboe Six, the rest of the 9th Division landed on Labuan Island and Brunei Bay in British north Borneo. RAN Beach Commando A was responsible for landings on Labuan and while Commando B controlled those at Brunei Bay. Rather than following the normal procedure of the RAN Commandos selecting the landing beaches

and slots, a shared arrangement was trailed where this work would instead by done by an American Landing Ship, Tank (LST) Beaching Officer and the US Navy Beach Party with the RAN Commandos taking over responsibility for the beach later; it did not work.

The larger landing ships, such as the Landing Ship, Mediums (LSMs) and LSTs were beached between an hour and two hours behind schedule, while the LSTs were landed in the wrong order and not in accordance with requirements ashore. Some were beached before the ones carrying vehicles required for their unloading and others before the ARC mesh had been laid to enable their vehicles to cross the sand. This experiment in a shared arrangement did not work, being described as a "failure".[26]

There were no such problems at Balikpapan, however, were the landing and unloading proceeded according to plan. Lieutenant Commander Morris was again principle beachmaster with RAN Commandos B and D. The advance parties from the two units came ashore with the second wave, with a beach party at each of the three landing beaches and immediately began working. When Morris came ashore 45 minutes after "H" hour, he noted that the beachmasters had "organised their beaches well" – the shore had been survey, exists had been marked, and the area was kept "comparatively clear" of stores and equipment. They had to work effectively. In the first hour after landing more than 16,500 men were ashore and nearly a thousand vehicles. And this was only the beginning.

As the day progressed Red Beach was found not to be suitable for landing craft larger than Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) so it was closed. The two other beaches took up some of the load but only Green Beach could handle the Landing Craft, Tanks (LCTs). On Yellow Beach USN Seabees built a pontoon dock capable of handling two LSTs at once.

As the land campaign moved further inland and away from the coast and town, on 4 July Pearson and Morris inspected Balikpapan's harbour where they selected a new landing site for LSTs called Brown Beach. After six days of careful mine sweeping, on 9 July,

Brown Beach was opened to LSTs. Once this was done Morris effectively became a harbour master as he control shipping while the beachmasters also acted as pilots for the occasional "liberty ship".[27] In recognition for his and his commando's work Morris was awarded a United States Sliver Star.

The RAN Commandos at Balikpapan, and in the other Borne operations, demonstrated that Australian system devised by the Australians for joint and combined amphibious worked and was very successful. The army described their work as essential, being an "integral part of the beach group".[28] After Oboe Six demonstrated that Australian system had worked and that the RAN Commandos had the faith and support of the army, who wanted to keep the commandos in the post war structure.

But was really necessary to have a RAN unit embedded in an army unit in order for it to work? This was a topic debated at closely at the time. Pearson thought that it was certainly necessary for the navy and army units to train together closely, but was against placing the RAN Commandos under army command. As he saw it the "Commandos job is essentially a naval one and it is most embarrassing for a Principal Beachmaster to have to obey two masters, particularly when one probably does not understand the Naval problems involved."[29] Similarly, an observer at Tarakan noted that while the navy and army beach units "worked fairly well together" it was "evident that the RAN Commando will never become completely reconciled to a role under army command."[30]

Army though did not see any contradictions. Eventually the major element of an amphibious operational ashore should be under their command and that "no Army commander of any standing would over-ride a Principle Beachmaster on the technical side of his work."[31] For his own part, Morris felt that "[t]hroughout the operation excellent co-operation existed between Commander, 2nd Australian Beach Group (Colonel G H Hodgson), the DAQMG (Major Collins) and myself."[32]

What is clear though, is that the RAN Commandos are a clear example of the level of sophistication and capabilities that the RAN and Australian army had achieved when conducting amphibious operations. They also demonstrate the army's willingness to learn

for its own experience and those of others, and the versatily and adaptability of the RAN and its people. The work, training, and sacrifice of the commandos themselves, should not be forgotten.

[1] VX18229, "Seventh Australian Division at Balikpapan" in *Stand easy: after the defeat of Japan* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1945), p 175

[2] R P F Nixon, 2/25th Battalion, unpublished manuscript, p 8, Nixon papers, PR01763, Australian War Memorial (AWM), Canberra. [Unless otherwise stated, archival material is from the AWM.] Balikpapan veterans tend to all describe the power and veracity of the pre-invasion bombardment in similar ways and with similar language. Given that they would never of seen such an overwhelming display of firepower before, it is easy to understand why the barrage made such a lasting impression on them. For example also see M T Lewis, 2/7th Cavalry Commando Regiment, unpublished manuscripts, pp 4-5, Lewis papers, 3DRL/8848; Tom Kimber, 2/27th Battalion, S921

[3] "Voyage in time", unpublished manuscript, p 405, Swan papers, MSS0861. It was reported later that the navy had "hurled" an average of one shell or rocket against every 230 square yards of actual landing beach. Air strikes against Balikpapan began on 11 June, while the naval bombardment began on 27 June. In the 20 days before the assault the Balikpapan-Manggar area received 3,000 tons of bombs, more than 7,000 rockets and over 38,000 shells – shells ranging from 8inch to 3inch shells. . VX18229, "Seventh Australian Division at Balikpapan", p 175; Gavin Long, *The final campaigns* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963), p 511

[4] Seventeen assault waves, coming ashore in LCVPs landed in the first two hours of the operation, followed by the larger LCMs and LSTs. Notes on amphibious operations SWPA, report on the Balikpapan (Borneo) Operation 1 July 1945, pp 36-37 and Annex 1 to Appendix D, AWM54 item 621/7/52

[5] Vice Admiral Daniel "Uncle Dan" Barbey, Commander of the Seventh Amphibious Force was designated as Commander Balikpapan Attack Force. Rear Admiral A G Noble, commander Amphibious Group Eight, Seventh Fleet, was assigned Commander Balikpapan Attack Group, while Read Admiral R S Riggs was assigned Commander Cruiser Covering Group. Barbey's attack force consisted of more than 250 vessels. The Amphibious Task Group numbered over 120 ships, including 98 landing craft and miscellaneous vessels, and a protecting screen of ten destroyers, five destroyer escorts,

and a frigate. The group as also had a special hydrographic unit. The Cruiser Covering Group consisted of ten cruisers and 14 destroyers. The Escort Carrier Group numbered included three carriers with approximately 90 aircraft, and a screen of one destroyer and five destroyer escorts. Commander Task Group 78.2, Commander Amphibious Group Eight Seventh Fleet Action Report Balikpapan operation, June-July 1945, AWM69, item 19, p I-1; Nial Wheate and Gregory P Gilbert, "Borneo 1945 – An amphibious success story" in Gregory P Gilbert and Robert J Davitt, (eds), *Australian Maritime Issues 2005, SPC-A annual: papers in Australian Maritime Affairs no 16*, (Canberra: Sea Power Centre, 2005), p 139

[6] Wheate and Gilbert, "Borneo 1945", p 137; James Golderick, "1941-1945: World War II: The war against Japan" in David Stevens, (ed.), *The Royal Australian Navy* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), p 149; Peter Stanley, "An Oboe concerto: reflections on the Borneo Landings, 1945" in Glenn Wahlert, (ed.), *Australian army amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific: 1942-45: edited papers of the Australian army history conference held at the Australian War Memorial, 15 November 1994*, Army Doctrine Centre, 1995, p 135.

[7] Address delivered by Trevor K Lloyd, HMAS *Assault* Association papers, PR00631

[8] Ross Mallet, "Together again for the first time: the Army, the RAN and amphibious warfare 1942-45" in David Stevens and John Reeve, (eds), *Sea power ashore and in the air* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 2007), pp 118-132

[9] Landing Boats and Crews, 4 August 1942, 3DRL/6643, item 2/53 (2 of 2)

[10] Notes on functions, organization and composition of an Aust beach gp, G/175/Ops, 23 July 1944, AWM54, item 721/29/2

[11] Mallet, "Together again for the first time", p 123

[12] RAN Liaison Officer, Royal Australian Navy Beach Commandos, enclosure A, 2 October 1944, AWM54, item 721/29/20; Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), *Combined operations RAN Beach Commandos* (RAAF, 1945), appendix A

[13] "Naval Commandos land with invasion troop", *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 16 September 1944, p 20; David Stevens, "Maritime aspects of Australian amphibious operations" in Glenn Wahlert, (ed.) *Australian army amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific: 1942-45: edited papers of the Australian army history conference held at the Australian War Memorial, 15 November 1994* (Canberra: Army Doctrine Centre, 1995), pp 120–121

[14] HMAS "Assault" – first year of commission, 1 October 1943, AWM54, item ?

[15] V W Crichton, *An eventful life: the Royal Australian Naval Reserve go to war 1939 – 1945* (Mount Martha: V W Crichton, 1997), p 159; A E Jones, *Sailor & commando: a Royal Australian Navy Special Service Beach Commando 1942-1946* (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 1998), pp 44–45

[16] The army beach group was also responsible for recommendations for honours and awards. Command of RAN Beach Unit, G23/1/23, 16 January 1945, AWM54, item 505/3/6

[17] RAAF, *Combined operations RAN Beach Commandos* (RAAF, 1945), p 30

[18] Royal Australian Navy Beach Unit, Standing Orders, 1 December 1944, AWM54, item 709/28/1

[19]

[20] Ernest Tyler, 1088, AAWFA, http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/ <accessed 1 September 2007>

[21] RAN Liaison Officer, Royal Australian Navy Beach Commandos, 2 October 1944, AWM54, item 721/29/20. Such sentiments had been recorded as early as 1943 when the commander of *Assault* noted that there was a growing feeling among those there that they would be spend the rest of the war in a training establishment. Source?

[22] Jones, *Sailor & commando*, p 54 and p 46

[23] Bernard Nelson, 0572, AAWFA, http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/ <accessed 1 September 2007>

[24] SNOBU, Comments on Naval Board's letter No. 240/1/1707 (034209), AWM54, item 505/3/9

[25] Morris was recommended for an OBE for his leadership skills and good judgement display at Tarakan, but the honour was not awarded. Recommendations for Honours and Rewards. RAN Commando, 2nd Australian Beach Group, AWM54, item 391/21/3

[26] 2/4 Aust Pnr Bn Be, Beach Bn, Report on Operation Oboe 6; Principle Beachmaster, Commando "A" and "C", PBM's report on "Oboe Six", 6 July 1945, AWM54, item 619/7/32

[27] By 21 July 36,291 personnel, 5,562 vehicles, and 32,127 tonnes of stores were landed under Morris's and the commando's direction and control. Report of proceedings of RAN Beach Unit in Operation "Oboe Two", 7 Aust Division landing at Klandasan near Balikpapan south east Borneo, AWM54, item 505/10/5; Report on Operation Oboe Two, Appendix E, 7 Aust Div Operational Order – Oboe Two, AWM52, item 1/5/14

[28] Signal G0468, I Australia Corps to Land Headquarters, 18 July, 1945, AWM54, item 505/3/9

[29] SNOBU, Report of proceedings of the RAN Beach Unit in operation "Oboe Two." 7 Aust Division landing at near Balikpapan south east Borneo, 25 July 1945, AWM54, item 505/10/5

[30] Report on beach organization in Operation Oboe 1 (Tarakan), 23 June 1945, p 15, AWM54, item 617/7/33

[31] SNOBU, Report of proceedings of the RAN Beach Unit in operation "Oboe Two." 7 Aust Division landing at near Balikpapan south east Borneo, 25 July 1945, AWM54, item 505/10/5

[32] Report on operation "Oboe Two" by Principal Beachmaster "B", AWM54, item 505/10/5