

CHAPTER 10

MOROTAI

(31st May 1945 to 26th June 1945)

OVERSEAS AGAIN

The unit embarked on S.S.*Swartenhondt* bound for Morotai on the 21st of May 1945. We were accommodated in the after hold between decks and ambulance stretchers were issued for sleeping. As the space was cramped and ventilation not good, permission was given to allow sleeping on the after well deck which relieved the congestion below. Meals for all troops were prepared by unit cooks under the direction of Sgt. Worboys in one small galley. Captain Bill Brand was appointed S.M.O. on board and the 10th Field Ambulance provided staff for the sick bay and an R.A.P.

The voyage from Townsville to Morotai took nine days. Passing through the reef outside Cairns we crossed the Coral Sea, sailed around the tip of New Guinea and up the north coast where we passed Oro Bay on the mainland and Ferguson, Normandy and Goodenough Islands were visible on the seaward side. Proceeding up the coast towards Finschhafen and entering the Huon Gulf we anchored off Dreger Harbour to collect mail for the crew on the 25th of May. We anchored for a short while at Finschhafen also and then proceeded north westerly along the coast of New Guinea past Madang, the Shouten group of islands, past Hollandia and anchored off Biak to take on water and pick up our escorting corvette. The remainder of the journey was across open seas, still on a north westerly course direct to Morotai.

MOROTAI

We arrived at Morotai on the 31st of May and anchored in the roadstead. The harbour was crowded with ships and landing craft of the fleet assembled for the Brunei landing, code named Oboe 6. On land already a busy well established base had been set up. The 2/4th A.G.H. was among the units established at Morotai ready to receive casualties from the various actions planned to follow on Borneo.

We were landed by L.C.T. and transported to the Sub-Area Details Camp where we were accommodated. We had been allotted a camp area in what was known as Black Camp beyond Sabatai and Captain Brand and 12 O/R's were sent there to commence work setting up camp. There was already a kitchen and shower block but otherwise the site was undeveloped. As unloading of the

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Swartenhondt was to commence that night another Officer and 8 O/R's were sent to the wharf area to receive the stores as they came off the ship and load them on to trucks for transportation to our camp site. Unloading proceeded all night with the receiving party doing six hour shifts.

The inexperienced U.S. negro personnel unloading the ship caused a number of mishaps, with some stores and even vehicles being smashed as they dropped on the wharf or even back into the hold. The camp was laid out with the knowledge that the unit would not be called on to operate while waiting at Morotai. The site was on top of an escarpment about 200 feet high and half a mile from the sea, covered with secondary growth and young coconuts but no large trees. The soil consisted of a thin layer of black sand over coral rock and explosives were needed to put down latrines.

TARAKAN

The landing on Tarakan Island had already taken place on the 1st of May but the attacking forces were up against strong opposition from well fortified and dug in enemy positions. The Japanese had plenty of time to lay mines on all sea approaches and also had heavily mined the roads and areas surrounding their defensive positions. However, by the middle of June the main opposition was over and the airfield was operational for allied aircraft by the 1st of July, 1945. As this was the planned date for landing at Balikpapan most of the softening up prior to the invasion was carried out by heavy bombers and flying boats such as Liberators and Catalinas based at Morotai. A number of these were shot down during their raids and the wrecks were evident as landing craft carrying our troops approached Balikpapan.

The repair of the airfield proved more difficult and took longer than anticipated owing to the damage done by allied bombers prior to the attack and also the proximity to the sea and the high level of the water table with the whole area becoming a quagmire at high tide. Tons and tons of filling went into the craters and there is some suggestion, whether fact or fiction, that a bulldozer is buried underneath in the mud !

LABUAN AND BRUNEI

The second phase of the Borneo campaign against Labuan and Brunei involving two Brigades of the 9th Division was in the final planning stage with troops and ships concentrated at Morotai. The convoy sailed from Morotai on the 4th of June and after an 1,100 mile journey arrived off their designated landing beaches before dawn on the 10th of June. The Brunei landings took place on three designated beaches. The opposition and consequently the casualties were light. Motor transport was possible and the invading force soon spread along

the coast road southwards occupying the main coastal towns of Tutong and Lutong. A party of Indian prisoners had been released but were all in very poor condition, mainly as a consequence of malnutrition, with more than half requiring hospitalisation.

The landing on Labuan Island took place simultaneously and was also successful and opposition light. As the troops spread inland more opposition was encountered in the vicinity of Government House and the airfield. Apart from the Labuan airfield there was a second strip on the west coast at Timbalai. Tanks were brought in to overcome any strongly defended Japanese positions, while the infantry by-passed these pockets and spread out over the island. The Timbalai airfield was the first to be captured, that at Labuan being still menaced by the by-passed pocket where all the Japanese defending force had been concentrated. Eventually by the 20th of June two parties of Japanese tried to break out but most were killed in the attempt.

Finally the opposition was overcome, the Japanese suffering 389 casualties for the whole operation whilst the Australian losses were 34 killed and 93 wounded. This area of Borneo was important to the Allies for its rich resources of rubber and oil and the use of an excellent large harbour with port facilities at Brunei Bay. In both the Tarakan and Brunei campaigns the medical facilities supplied were more than adequate. This proved to be so also at Balikpapan, a far cry from the situation at Buna - Sanananda and the beach landings at Lae and Scarlet Beach two and a half years earlier.

The assault troops now were equipped with a special M.B.D.S. (Main Beach Dressing Station) to accompany each landing force. This specialty unit had a surgical team attached. They were geared to handle and treat all casualties from the initial landing and to arrange evacuation to specially equipped landing ships with medical staff and facilities and a surgical team on board. There were two Field Ambulances and one C.C.S. at each of the Tarakan and Brunei-Labuan landings as well as the M.B.D.S. Colonel Littlejohn was at both Tarakan and Labuan, assisting surgical teams and again rendering valuable service, similar to his work at Soputa in sorting out the patients most urgently requiring surgery. A Catalina flying boat stationed in Brunei harbour was useful for evacuating seriously wounded direct to Morotai.

The final stage of the plan for the recapture of Borneo was to be the assault on Balikpapan on the east coast. There was a large oil refinery there which, prior to the softening up bombing in preparation for the landings, was still being operated by the Japanese. It was necessary that the refinery and associated pipe lines come under Allied control. The 7th Australian Division had the task of capturing this town and the 10th Field Ambulance was assigned to this force as a Corps Field Ambulance. The date set down for the landing was the 1st of

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July, the same day as the Tarakan airfield became operational. The convoy was to leave Morotai on the 26th of June. This gave the unit almost one month in Morotai for preparation.

Preparation consisted of waterproofing vehicles and certain other equipment, a practice landing and a four mile route march carrying full equipment. At last everything was ready for the order to embark.