# BORNEO – Leo Mulqueeney

The subject of my talk this evening is 'Borneo' - that wild country with the reputation of being the home of the original 'wild man'. I have broken my talk into two sections – firstly the Ninth Division's campaign in re-capturing British North Borneo from the Japanese in June / July / August 1945; and secondly a description of the country and its inhabitants as I saw them at that time.

To visualize the background to the invasion of Borneo it is necessary, I think, for me to explain that Borneo is the third largest island in the world. It has an area of approximately 289,993 square miles and is situated in that region known as the East Indies, being roughly south east of Singapore and Malaya, south and slightly west of the Philipines and is several thousand miles north west of Australia. Borneo is situated on the equator (the equator runs through the island) the climate is tropical and the country is mountainous and largely covered with rain forests. Pre-war Borneo was divided politically into the state of British North Borneo, governed under royal charter by the British North Borneo Company which received its charter in the 1870s to develop and exploit the resources of the country. It became a crown colony in 1946.

Immediately to the south and fronting the western coast was the Sultanate of Brunei, a very old established Moslem principality, normally governed by the Sultan but which was a British protectorate and is famous for its oil fields at Seria and Miri.

Further south on the same coast is the fabulous state of Sarawak which was granted as a concession to the first Rajah, Sir James Brooke, of the British East India Company's private army in 1839 by the then Sultan of Brunei for his part in defeating the Malay pirates who ravaged the seaways in that area. the state was then ruled over by his descendants until Mr Attlee's government made the state a British Crown Colony in 1946, regardless of the wishes of the population who held the Brooke family in high regard.

The southern and western parts of Borneo were part of the Netherlands East Indies empire until removed from their sphere of influence – with the aid of our then Australian Government in 1945-46. This part represents about ¾ of the total area of Borneo and is now a part of the Indonesian Republic.

Borneo was invaded and captured by the Japanese in February 1942 – about the same period that Singapore fell. Of course, the country was largely undefended and the invasion was a walk over. The Japanese immediately began to utilise Borneo's great material resources of rubber, oil, tin, etc.

In the island hopping strategy employed by General Douglas Macarthur in his recapture of the south west pacific area, Borneo was considered to be a plum ripe for the picking, as its capture would immediately help to relieve the allied shortage of raw materials such as rubber, oil, etc and thus form a base of attach on Malaya and Japan itself. From our Australian view point the most pressing reason for its recapture was the rescue of some 2,500 Australian and British prisoners of war captured in the Malayan campaign, who were known to be held in prison camps in Sandakan and other north Borneo centres. To the Ninth Australian Division, Aust. Corps, AIF, fell the task of capturing Borne.

After training in the Atherton Tablelands, the division sailed to Morotai in April. I was a troop signaller in the 2/12 Australian Field Regiment, 9th Division and sailed from Townsville on the US troopship Frederick Lykes. We were at Morotai in the Halmaheras Group when in May 1945, we got word of the land of the 26th Infantry Brigade, of our 9th Division on Tarakan, formerly a Dutch possession off the east coast.

Lurid stories came back of the Japanese stalking our men with spears and setting booby traps with 75mm shells as mines. The sad news of the gallant last stand of Tom Derrich VC was told - how he lined his platoon up shoulder to shoulder and fought it out against superior numbers of Japanese with automatic fire. Derrich was killed but his deed and his men won the day.

Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Moorhead of Tobruk fame was Corp Commander. He visited all units and gave us a pep talk on the coming action. No mention was made of the name of the country we were going to assault but I felt confident it would be Borneo. Scale models of the landing beaches and all principal features of the country were built and explained to us. After we embarked, books were issued giving details of the country and the various peoples of Borneo and their customs so we no longer had any doubts regarding our destination. Preparations for embarking were extremely well organised, all weapons – such as wireless sets were water proofed and all jeeps, lorries, guns, etc were treated for beach landings and had the regimental code numbers painted on them. The group of which I was a member sailed in the HMAS Westralia as part of the invasion convoy which was escorted by units of the American Seventh Fleet under Rear Admiral Daniel E. ……………….. It was an inspiring sight to look as far as the eye could see and observe unbroken lines of transports, store ships and war ships of all shapes and sizes steaming in convoy in a northerly direction, as we sailed up and around the north eastern coast of Borneo and passed into the Yellow Sea just south of ……………………………. - the most westerly point of the Philippines.

The 24th Infantry Brigade landed 'Brown' Beach, ……………………. Island at 9.15am on Sunday 10th June 1945. The action was a perfect 'text book' invasion 'a la' General Macarthur. The convoy had rendezvoused in Victoria Harbour at daylight and we were soon scrambling down the landing nets into the ships barges which were to take us ashore.

For several weeks prior to the invasion, leaflets had been dropped telling the native population to clear out away from the township of Victoria and then liberators of the USAF and RAAF blasted it thoroughly with 500 pounders and napalm bombs. On the day prior to the landing we received word that the underwater demolition teams had blasted lanes through the mines and underwater obstacles at the beach approaches, thus clearing channels for the waves of barges to go in to the beach. I was in a barge in the third wave and we kept circling around until the first two waves had beached. ……………………….. Troop of the 23rd Battery, 2/12th Field Regiment was equipped with the new 4.2 inch mortars in lieu of the short 25 pounders used in the Lae and …………………………… operations. The other 5 troops of our regiment had long 25 pounders. We soon got into action in support of the 2/28th Battalion and the 2/11th Commando Squadron, whilst on our right the 2/43rd Battalion forged inland to capture Government House and the airstrip which RAAF construction units immediately repaired and enlarged so that our Mustangs and Beaufighters were able to land there a few days later and use it as a base.

To digress one moment – so thorough was the covering bombardment by warships and planes that no opposition was encountered until our advance units got inland – with the exception of a bombing attack by one Japanese plane which succeeded in dropping one bomb before being put to flight by lightnings. Japanese manning machine guns on a stranded cargo ship attempted to hinder operations but the commandos soon disposed of them. HMAS Hobart and the US cruisers, Boise and Phoenix, turned on a magnificent show with their six inch guns. It seemed that ………………………….. Island was disappearing under the weight of explosives.

Immediately before the landing several American destroyers ran along parallel to the beach using their 5 inch guns to pepper everything in sight. It gave us a wonderful feeling – particularly as the Japanese were not able to hit back.

After we'd been on the island for 5 days I was sent on an …………………………… party with the 2/23rd Battalion (previously held in reserve) for the landing at Weston on the mainland. During our 5 days and nights on ………………………. we were treated to a nightly display of small arms fire including tracer going in all directions. One night a Japanese plane attempted a bombing raid but every ship in the harbour, plus the ack ack on shore threw everything at him but the kitchen sink and he was soon dazzled by searchlights and made off after dropping one or two bombs harmlessly.

On Saturday 16th June we boarded an American LST (Landing Ship Tank to you) where I made a glutton of myself drinking the Yank’s black coffee – a pleasant change after no hot drinks for a week. The next morning at daylight the ship hove to some 8 or 10 miles outside the landing place at Weston. It had been decided to have a bombardment from the cruisers but on reports from our navy that the Japanese had retreated inland this was called off. We landed at Weston from 'Buffaloes' – American tracked, propeller driven vehicles which were armoured against small arms fire and rode low in the water. Fortunately for our 'Buffaloe' the landing wasn't resisted, as it developed a mechanical fault about 500 yards off shore and would only turn around in circles leaving us a 'sitting duck'. Another 'Buffaloe' came along and took us aboard for the landing.

The village of Weston is the terminus of the railway line to Beaufort. It wasn't a very impressive place as the houses are all built out over the water – thus solving the sewerage disposal problem. The people are predominantly Malay (Moslems) and had been starved to a state of abject misery. The Japanese had confiscated all their food and would punish any one of them who ate a coconut off their own plantations. The people were in rags and tatters. Some English speaking Malays told us that if a native owned more than one shirt and pair of pants, the Japanese confiscated the balance – ostensibly to give to other Asiatics who had no shirt or pants. This was how the much vaunted 'Great East Asia Co – Prosperity Sphere' operated in practice.

On landing we immediately patrolled inland with a recce patrol from 2/23rd and spent about two weeks in the area. After that 'Beer' Troop moved by barge up the Padas River to Beaufort where our troop went into action – this time with long 25 pounders, covering the eastern approaches to Beaufort from which a perimeter defence had been set up.

Things were now more or less static and I had plenty of opportunities to look over the district. First of all it is necessary to appreciate the country for what it is – mainly virgin jungle except where rubber plantations had been established and the only public thoroughfares were by river or by railway, roads just didn't exist. The British North Borneo Railway is of one metre gauge (about 39 inches) and is 169 miles long extending from Jesselton, the capital in the north, to Beaufort and thence into the interior at Tenom and from Beaufort down to Weston, where we had landed.

The battle of Beaufort had been quite a spirited affair and it was here that Tom Starcevich of the 2/43rd Battalion won his VC by destroying 4 enemy machine gun posts during the capture of the town. The 2/23rd Battalion captured Papar on the west coast and moved northwards towards Jesselton – the capital.

Patrol clashes continued until the Armistice was signed on the 15th August and even after that several scraps occurred. Private ……………………….. of the 2/43rd was killed by snipers on the 20th August. Our main job after the Armistice on August 15th was to accept the surrender of the Japanese, disarm them and forward them to POW cages at Beaufort and thence to Paper by rail where they were better fed than our own men.

Reflecting on the invasion, it is safe to say that throughout the whole course of the war, few if any other campaigns yielded such rich prizes so quickly and cheaply for the forces employed. We contended at the time that had it been a Yank show, they would have used a division as against our 24th Brigade. The 2/12th Regiment fired something like 60,000 x 25 pounder shells during the campaign. Losses amounted to about 120 killed and about 180 wounded for a ………………. of 650 Japanese killed and many thousands captured. Concurrently with the 24th Brigade's attach on British North Borneo the 20th Brigade, supported by the 2/8th Field Regiment, invaded Brunei and captured the oil producing centres of Seria and Miri.

Thus ended the war for the 9th Division. Volunteers were soon called for, for the occupation force for Japan and many men from all units volunteered. The points system of discharge now came into force and it wasn't long until units were being broken up or amalgamated with others as their men were sent home for discharge.

To give you some idea of Borneo and its inhabitants: the original inhabitants, or aborigines, are the ………………………………….., a farming community who live mainly on the coastal areas where agriculture in the form of rice production is possible, also the Moruts, the tribesmen of the hills, and of course the Dyah head hunters. We all felt very pleased to have the Dyahs on our side. We heard they were paid a bounty on each Japanese head they brought in whilst the war was on. They were very short and of slim – almost feminine appearance with long hair which they rolled into a bun and were mighty proud of.

However the aboriginal peoples are in the minority as some 400,000 Chinese live in British North Borneo, also large numbers of Indians – principally Sikhs who were recruited in the local police forces. Last but not least the Malay people formed a large proportion of the population. These people are strict Mohammedans. In Borneo the Chinese have their own schools, as do the Malays. The Indians and native people generally attend the mission schools.

I would like to make mention of the great work done by the missionaries of the Franciscan Order from Mill Hill and London, both priests and nuns who have laboured in that area for nearly seventy years. They comprise English, Dutch, Irish and German nationals and were interned by the Japanese on their arrival in 1942. Immediately upon release by the Australians at Kuching, capital of Sarawak, where they had been interned, they insisted on returning to their missions to try and salvage something from the ruins. In most cases all their buildings – churches, schools etc, had been destroyed by the Japanese or by Allied bombing, and it was a heart rending task to get things moving again. I had the good fortune to meet many of them including Mother Rose of …………………… Convent who was portrayed in the film, 'Three Came Back', by the English actress Florence Desmond. That picture was the story of an American woman – Mrs ………………….. Newton Keith, the wife of a British Government Forestry Officer who wrote of her experiences in the prison camp at Kuching, Sarawak. Mother Rose was forced by her health to return to England after 25 years in Borneo.

Many stories were told to us in Borneo of the fortitude of the 8th Division POWs in Borneo. Some 2,500 Australian and British had been held in ……………………. and upon hearing of the 26th Brigade's attack on Tarakan, the Japanese attempted to drive them inland to Ramau in the very interior. They were treated with great brutality and only six survived the march. fortunately one of the survivors, a warrant officer, escaped and was able to give evidence in the War Guilt Trials on …………………………. Many Japanese were thus brought to justice. This 'death march' from …………………………… was one of the greatest atrocities of the war and was unfortunately our own Australian POWs.

I trust I have not bored you unduly. I could have spoken at greater length but time won't permit.

# Note

A few days after the landing on ……………………….. the RAAF Construction Squadron had cleared large areas of jungle to extend the air strip and construct roads. In doing so they uncovered tombstones and a memorial to British seamen who were killed fighting Malay pirates in the Victoria Harbour area in 1847.

One inscription reads:

Gordon Esq.  
Commander, H.M.S. 'Wolf'  
Died 6th Jan. 1847, aged 29 years

Another is in memory of the crew of the Brig HMS 'Columbine', who were killed in those operations. It contains the names of: 1 Officer, 1 Colour Sgt of Marines, 1 Sargeant, and 12 Marines killed in action, 1847.