

CHAPTER 23

ASSAULT ON NEW GUINEA

IN March 1942 the Australian continent lay nakedly across the path of the Japanese southward drive. The island perimeter now held by the enemy forces was separated from Australia's northern coastline by a few hundred miles of sea. From now, until those forces had been driven back, the war in the Pacific must be fought from and over British Commonwealth territory and the adjacent seas. Since Anglo-American policy for an offensive against the Axis powers had been decided resolutely on a Europe-first basis, the best that could be expected of the Allied forces in the Pacific was to halt the Japanese forces until a major Allied offensive could be mounted. But the war was now three months old and as yet the enemy had not been held at any one point where they had exerted pressure. Two members of the New Zealand Cabinet, accompanied by the three New Zealand Chiefs of Staff, had conferred with the Australian Advisory War Council and Chiefs of Staff on 23rd February. After surveying the war situation as it concerned the Anzac Area, the Chiefs of Staff of the two Dominions jointly proposed the appointment of a Supreme Commander for all Allied forces in "an extended Anzac Area".

To hold the Japanese in check the retention and development of Port Moresby as a major base were essential, yet only at sea were the Allied forces then available strong enough to withstand any serious enemy thrust, and these naval forces were widely dispersed. The land and air forces comprised:

Army—A brigade group of troops, two 6-inch coast guns and four 3.7-inch and six 3-inch anti-aircraft guns;

Air force—Two reduced squadrons of Catalina flying-boats (six aircraft), and one reduced squadron of Hudsons (seven aircraft).¹

It is true that the Australian Chiefs of Staff considered that any seaborne assault on Port Moresby from Rabaul would be a distinctly hazardous operation for the enemy, but they had acknowledged, in an appreciation dated 27th February, that the Allied land-based forces were much below the required strength. They decided not to increase the strength of the army garrison (the brigade group was the limit allowed by the maintenance capacity at that time), but to send at least some air reinforcements and to increase the strength of the land-based air units on the mainland. Thus, unquestionably, the navy and naval aviation, formed the first line of defence.

Allied naval forces and naval aviation had, in fact, shown their hand only a week before this appreciation was made. The Anzac Squadron—when formed on 12th February it included the heavy cruisers H.M.A.S.

¹ One squadron of Kittyhawk fighters (18 aircraft) was expected to be available about 15th March.

Australia and U.S.S. *Chicago*, two light cruisers H.M.N.Z. ships *Achilles* and *Leander*, and two American destroyers—had the task of guarding the eastern approaches to Australia and New Zealand. A watch was kept for signs of an enemy force moving towards Australia from Rabaul, but at that stage it seemed to the American commanders that Samoa was a more likely objective for a Japanese expeditionary force—either from Truk or the Marshall Islands—and the Allied watch was more strictly in that direction. Even so the building of Japanese strength at Rabaul was menacing and an attack on that base was planned. For this, the Anzac Squadron was to be joined by the *Lexington* Group, a force built round the aircraft carrier of that name and commanded by Vice-Admiral Wilson Brown. On the morning of 20th February the *Lexington* Group, which had to steam 3,000 miles from Pearl Harbour, was in position to the north of the Solomons and about 350 miles east of Rabaul when the radar screen in the carrier showed unidentified aircraft. The carrier promptly sent out Grumann Wildcat fighters which encountered three enemy four-engined flying-boats, two of which were shot down. One having escaped, the position (and possibly the intention) of the American force would be known to the enemy. Later that day the *Lexington's* radar again showed aircraft, this time about 76 miles away, and soon afterwards American and Japanese carrier-borne aircraft fought their first battle. It ended with the Americans well in credit—two waves of nine enemy aircraft each, few of which escaped, were overwhelmed by the *Lexington's* Wildcat pilots, whose losses were only one pilot and two aircraft. Despite this success, Brown would have been flirting with disaster had he continued on course to Rabaul with its strong and now forewarned air units. He prudently withdrew his force.

Though the air strength actually needed to make Port Moresby a base strong enough both for effective defence of the New Guinea area and for effective offensive operations against Rabaul was at this time no more than an intention, the Chiefs of Staff, on 5th March, assessed it at 13 squadrons, thus: 4 fighter, 2 flying-boat (reconnaissance), 2 dive bomber, one torpedo bomber, 2 heavy bomber and 2 transport units. A consequential obligation would, of course, be an appropriate aerodrome construction program. Both programs called for resources not yet available and much time, and the real point of concern lay in the underlying conviction in the minds of the Chiefs of Staff that the enemy would endeavour to attack Port Moresby in the very near future—perhaps even within a week or two. They estimated that to undertake such an attack the Japanese would have a division of troops supported by about 90 bomber and fighter aircraft from Rabaul and probably the added air strength of two or three aircraft carriers.

While these top-level appreciations were being composed and plans made for future strength, the commanders in the field were assessing the situation from the point of view of the forces already there. Early in February the air officer commanding North-Eastern Area, Air Com-

modore Lukis, had quoted reports from his staff officers to warn the Air Board of the unsatisfactory state of the defences at Port Moresby. One of the most disturbing aspects, he noted, was the poor morale of the army troops. "This does not mean that the troops will not fight," he wrote, "but they cannot overlook the lack of naval, air and political support. An impression is growing rapidly that the policy of the Government is to let the garrisons at Moresby and Thursday Island go, in the same way as that at Rabaul and that no serious assistance will be given. . . ." Lukis enumerated other problems. When the R.A.A.F. required the aid of the army for the construction of aircraft dispersal bays and taxiways, the garrison commander, General Morris (with complete realism) declined to lend his limited labour capacity without first receiving an assurance that aircraft would be sent to use them and, that, when aircraft were sent, they would not be "knocked out" in the first few raids for want of protection. The need for reinforcements to relieve the Catalina crews was urgent. Some had flown as much as 200 hours in three weeks, and obviously this could not continue. The fortress guns at Port Moresby had no overhead protection from dive-bombing and machine-gunning and could be knocked out before they had fired a shot in combat, as they had been at Rabaul. The anti-aircraft batteries were also very vulnerable because they were not armed against low-flying attacks. As was to be expected the frequently-appearing word in the report was "more"—more labour strength, more works equipment, more Catalina crews, more Empire flying-boats and more evidence of active interest by the Government. "A visit by one or more senior Commonwealth ministers would be beneficial," Lukis added. There was, too, the obvious (though in this instance modestly stated) request for "a small number of fighter aircraft".

The Catalina attacks on Rabaul continued to be most frequently directed at enemy shipping in Simpson Harbour. Enemy night fighters made their first interception over Rabaul on the night of 3rd-4th February while five Catalinas were attacking. They intercepted two of the flying-boats. One of these, captained by Flying Officer Higgins, evaded the enemy aircraft by diving to 1,000 feet and flying through a smoke screen conveniently provided by an active volcano on Matupi Island which flanks Simpson Harbour. The other aircraft, with Flight Lieutenant Hemsworth as captain, was attacked while held in the beams of the searchlights. Sergeant Dick,² armourer-air gunner, who was making his first operational flight, used his two Lewis guns in the port blister to such good effect that he saw the enemy aircraft go into a spin and from reports by other crews it appeared to have crashed into the water.³ The Catalina by this time had been hit by gunfire in one propeller, the tail unit, along both wings, the port and starboard fuel tanks (which were not self-sealing), the oil tank, and the oil feed line. Hemsworth put the aircraft into an

² Sgt D. F. Dick, 13826. 20, 33 and 41 Sqns. Brass turner apprentice; of North Ballarat, Vic; b. Ballarat, 11 Oct 1922.

³ This was the first Japanese fighter claimed as shot down in aerial combat in the New Guinea campaign; officially it was counted as a "probable".

evasive dive but had to feather the damaged propeller. The bombs were jettisoned and, when only 200 feet above the water, the crew threw out all loose gear that was not essential for flight. With petrol pouring into the interior of the aircraft from a damaged fuel tank, and flying on one engine, Hemsworth succeeded in keeping the Catalina airborne for more than five hours until, still on only one engine, in darkness without the aid of a flare path, and with petrol flooding up to the catwalks, he made a perfect "let down" on to the sea at Salamaua. Knowing that by remaining at Salamaua he would risk destruction on the water by enemy aircraft, Hemsworth was content with temporary repairs which allowed him to take off with two engines. Once airborne, he had to feather the damaged propeller again, and since it was impossible to climb over the mountains he flew to Port Moresby round the coast at an altitude of only 50 feet. When the Catalina alighted safely on Port Moresby Harbour at 5 p.m. on the 4th it had spent 25 hours and a half on the single operation and for 14 hours and a half Hemsworth had flown it on one engine. Maintenance crew counted more than 100 bullet holes in the aircraft.

Though it had few aircraft, Lerew's composite Hudson squadron was heavily involved in reconnaissance and attack operations and its pilots were showing signs of operational fatigue. This fact prompted Flight Lieutenant Campbell,⁴ then attached to Port Moresby station headquarters as navigation officer, to pilot one of the Hudsons on a daylight photographic reconnaissance flight to New Britain, on 6th February.⁵ Over Rabaul the Hudson crew saw an enemy fighter take off from Lakunai aerodrome. Four minutes later this aircraft was engaging them in combat at 10,000 feet. It made two attacks, breaking off the fight after having riddled the Hudson with bullet holes. An explosive bullet had shattered Campbell's left wrist and severed the little finger; the second pilot, Pilot Officer Lauder,⁶ was seriously wounded, his left arm and leg being fractured and his right hand injured; the turret gunner, Sergeant O'Hea,⁷ who had fired 100 rounds on to the enemy aircraft at a range of about 100 yards, was severely wounded in the left leg. The fourth member of the crew, Sergeant Thomson,⁸ who was not wounded, gave first aid to his fellow crew members and then assisted Campbell in flying the aircraft. This had to be done without either altimeter or airspeed indicator, both of which had been smashed by bullets. The enemy fighter's gunfire had also hit the sea markers carried in the Hudson, exploding them so that the aircraft was filled with a dense cloud of fine aluminium powder.

Enduring the pain from his wounds and loss of blood, Campbell continued to pilot the Hudson throughout its 500 miles flight back to base,

⁴ W Cdr D. W. I. Campbell, DFC, 250528. 24 and 13 Sgns; comd 1 Sqn 1943-44, 2 Sqn 1944, 32 Sqn 1945. Clerk; of Toorak, Vic; b. Melbourne, 16 Jul 1915.

⁵ An account of this episode, written by Campbell, a poet and short story writer, appears in *Australia At Arms* (Editor, Norman Bartlett), 1955, pp. 179-88.

⁶ F-Lt J. E. Lauder, 401648; 6 Sqn. Meter tester; of Box Hill, Vic; b. Brighton, Vic, 9 Nov 1915.

⁷ F-Sgt G. A. O'Hea, 405464. 6 Sqn and 18 NEI Sqn. Bank clerk; of Kempsey, NSW; b. West Kempsey, 7 Dec 1918. Killed in action 28 Apr 1943.

⁸ F-O G. Thomson, DFM, 400573. 6 and 32 Sgns and 4 CU. Salesman; of St Kilda, Vic; b. Manchester, Eng, 8 Jul 1920. Killed in aircraft accident 3 Mar 1945.

in bad weather. When close to Port Moresby one of the self-sealing fuel tanks, which had been damaged by gunfire, opened up as Campbell brought the aircraft down to make a landing. Just as he began the approach to the runway both engines failed. Thomson, with great presence of mind, operated the auxiliary fuel or "wobble" pump in time to revive them and allow Campbell to put the Hudson down safely on the runway. When the ground crew took the aircraft over for servicing and repair they found only five gallons of fuel left in the tanks.

An indication of the immediate Japanese intention was given when, on 9th February, an enemy force was sighted off Gasmata on the southern coast of New Britain, and a landing was reported. Two transports and a destroyer were anchored inshore close to Gasmata aerodrome and four destroyers were lying just outside the harbour. That night five Hudsons from the composite squadron and three Catalinas from No. 4 Squadron attacked. Flying in bad weather the formation was broken up and one Hudson crew did not find the target. The others dropped 500-lb and 250-lb bombs, but no hits were observed. On the return flight Wing Commander Lerew, who had led the attack, landed at Salamaua where a quantity of gold bullion was loaded into his aircraft and flown to Port Moresby. Four Hudsons returned to the attack, but again without success. On the 11th three Hudsons led by Lerew, with Flight Lieutenant Pedrina and Flying Officer Gibson⁹ piloting the others, again attacked Gasmata and made the first mast-height attack on enemy shipping in the New Guinea campaign. One of the crews put four bombs across one transport directly amidships, another made a direct hit amidships on a second transport, while the third aircraft made a low-level sweep over the first transport using incendiary ammunition which set the ship on fire. Both ships were enveloped in clouds of black smoke. As the Hudsons climbed away they were intercepted by five or six enemy fighters. Pedrina's aircraft was attacked several times. His gunners shot down one of the aircraft in flames and probably destroyed another. The crew saw Gibson's aircraft, with one engine on fire and enemy fighters pursuing it, dive steeply into a hillside. Gibson and his crew—Pilot Officer Thorn,¹ and Sergeants Quail² and Coutie³—were all killed.

Lerew was just bringing his Hudson out from the attack when his second pilot, Flying Officer Watt,⁴ reported that it was on fire. While Lerew took evasive action to throw off an enemy fighter, Watt broke the window and tried to put the flames out with a hand extinguisher. When this failed and the intensity of the fire increased, Lerew ordered the crew

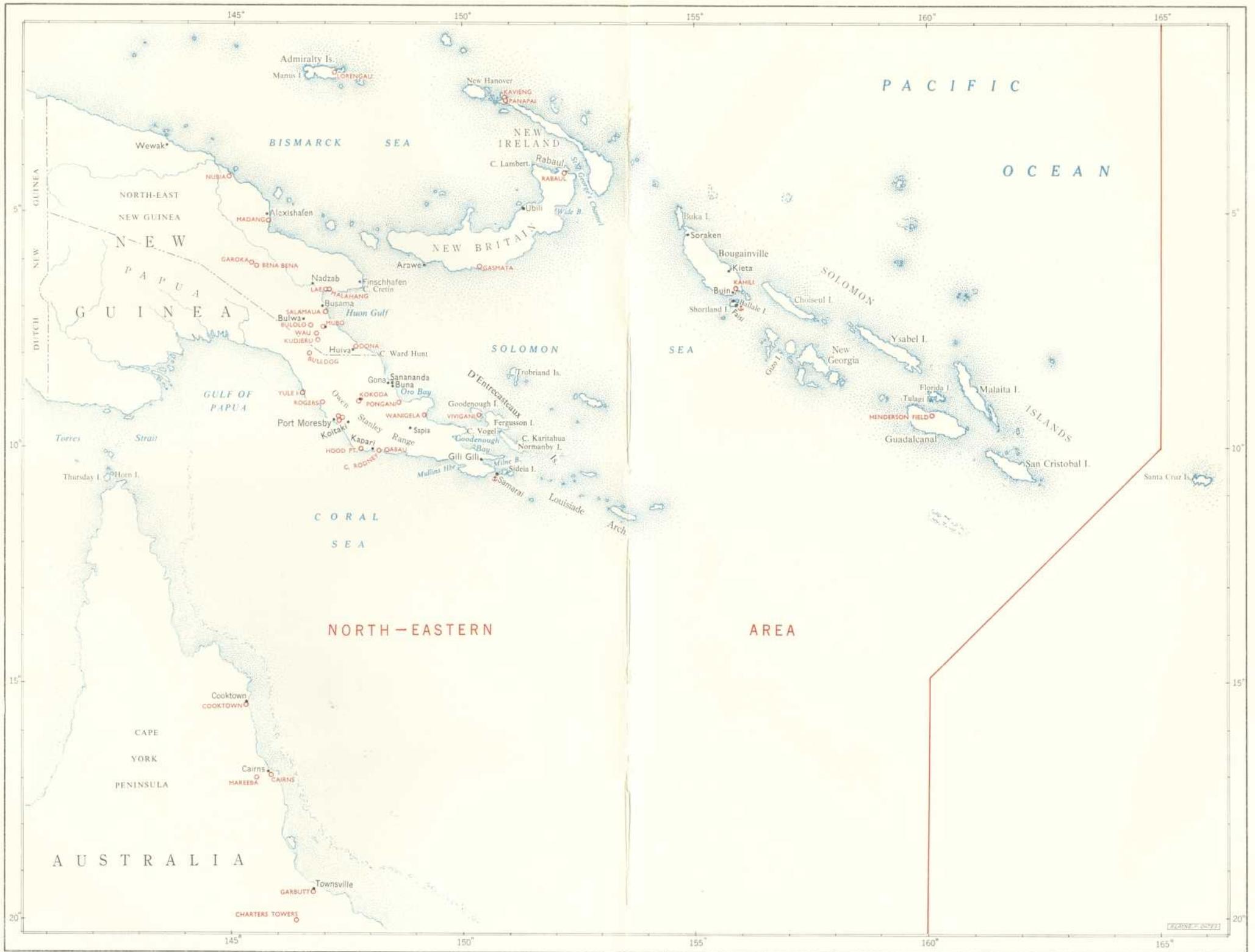
⁹ F-O G. I. Gibson, 290657. 23 and 32 Sqns. Audit clerk; of South Perth, WA; b. Perth, 23 Jan 1916. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

¹ P-O F. L. O. Thorn, 401471. 6, 23 and 32 Sqns. Clerk; of Thornbury, Vic; b. St Arnaud, Vic, 16 Aug 1912. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

² Sgt A. E. Quail, 404748. 23 and 32 Sqns. Clerk; of Biloela, Qld; b. Warren, Qld, 8 Sep 1920. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

³ Sgt B. I. Coutie, 405543. 23 and 32 Sqns. Farmer; of Brisbane; b. Melbourne, 20 Oct 1918. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

⁴ F-O W. A. J. Watt, 270846; 24 Sqn. Public servant; of Atherton, Qld; b. Gympie, Qld, 29 Apr 1912. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.



Eastern New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

to abandon the aircraft. Watt and the two other crew members, Sergeants McDonald⁵ and Henry, then moved to the rear door to bale out. As the flames reached the cockpit Lerew, using the control column as a step, climbed up and tried to force himself through the window. The Hudson went into a dive so he pulled the column back with his feet, kicked the trimming tab and, as the aircraft climbed again, pushed his way through the window and baled out. In landing he fell into a tree and was suspended above the ground by his parachute with his "Mae West" life-jacket almost choking him, but he succeeded in getting free by pulling himself up into the branches of the tree. There was no sign of any of his crew. Living off the jungle, and several times evading parties of Japanese troops, he endured hunger and exhaustion until found by some friendly natives who eventually guided him to a coastwatcher's post. Nine days after he had been officially posted missing, he arrived back at Port Moresby in a schooner. The other members of the crew were lost.

Reconnaissance showed that the Japanese forces at Rabaul were being built up in an ominous way. On 14th February the crew of a Hudson piloted by Flight Lieutenant Milne⁶ flew over Simpson Harbour and sighted an aircraft carrier, 5 other warships (believed to be 3 cruisers and 2 destroyers), 11 transports, and 9 flying-boats on the water; 3 seaplanes on the slips and 6 bombers and 8 fighters on the aerodrome. These reconnaissance flights were now almost invariably intercepted by enemy fighters several of which were claimed as probably destroyed by the Hudsons' gunners. On the 19th Pedrina's aircraft was attacked by two fighters over Arawe. The turret gunner, after firing 2,000 rounds, saw one of the attacking aircraft diving out of control. In this combat the wireless operator, Sergeant Marriner, fatally wounded, died on the return flight. The turret gunner returned with a spent bullet in one of his flying boots. One tyre on the Hudson's undercarriage had been punctured, portion of the flap cable severed and the airframe, turret and propellers had been perforated by bullets, but Pedrina brought it back and made a safe landing.

For a brief interval No. 32 Squadron had two American B-25 (Mitchell) bombers attached for reconnaissance duties and in March the unit's ground staff became hosts to the American Flying Fortresses and B-26 (Marauder) crews that staged through the Seven Mile aerodrome on operational flights, feeding the crews and refuelling and "bombing-up" the aircraft. But the first tangible evidence of substantial American aid in the defence of Port Moresby came in the form of 12 Flying Fortresses that were specifically allocated for service in the South-West Pacific. These bombers reached Townsville on 18th and 19th February. They belonged to No. 22 Bombardment and No. 88 Reconnaissance Squadrons and some of the crews had flown into Oahu while the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbour on 7th December. After operating from their Hawaiian base

⁵ Sgt K. D. McDonald, 11095. 24 and 32 Sqns. School teacher; of Mordialloc, Vic; b. Birchip, Vic, 2 Sep 1912. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

⁶ Sqn Ldr W. L. Milne, 616. 23, 24, 32 and 99 Sqns; Controller North-Eastern Area 1943, SO Training 1943-44, SA Operations 1944-45 Accountant; of Melbourne; b. Kerang, Vic. 27 Jul 1916.

for two months they had been attached to an American naval task force charged with protection of the supply route between the United States and Australia. Now based on Garbutt aerodrome, Townsville, these crews, who had to do all their own maintenance and armament work, found themselves in the anomalous position of belonging to an American naval task force with which they had no direct contact.

On 23rd February they were given their first combat task in their new area: they were ordered to attack Rabaul. Nine aircraft were assigned to the operation, the squadron's commanding officer, Major Richard H. Carmichael, leading the first flight with Squadron Leader Cohen, commanding officer of No. 11 Squadron, accompanying him to help to select targets. Two aircraft collided while taxiing to the take-off point and it was decided that only two flights (six aircraft) would undertake the mission. New to the area and not well trained in navigation the American crews were in serious difficulty when they ran into bad weather. The aircraft of the second flight encountered a severe tropical storm and two of them returned to base, but one, in which was Pilot Officer Robertson⁷ of No. 20 Squadron, and the three aircraft of the first flight pressed on and bombed shipping in Rabaul Harbour. Results were not observed: the aircraft bombed through anti-aircraft fire and, as they were completing their attack, fighters were rising to intercept them. On the return journey, over Gasmata, Zeros did attack the Fortresses, and the leading aircraft of the first flight, in which Cohen was flying, was damaged by machine-gun fire, and the wireless operator and the rear gunner were slightly wounded. All four aircraft returned safely to Port Moresby, however, where they refuelled before flying on to their home base at Townsville.

Two Catalinas were sent out from Port Moresby on the same attack. One of them failed to find the target and the other, piloted by Flying Officer Bolitho, dropped twelve 250-lb bombs in a pattern on the Vunakanau runway and building area. Though the result was very disappointing, this first combined combat mission was the beginning of an association between the R.A.A.F. and the U.S.A.A.F. that was to prove of great operational value and result in much good comradeship. For some time the most experienced of the R.A.A.F. Catalina pilots flew with the leaders of American formations to guide them in target selection and in countering enemy tactics. In fact, soon after this first attempt to strike the enemy at Rabaul, Carmichael's squadron was placed temporarily under R.A.A.F. operational control.

Meanwhile (on the 21st) the composite Hudson squadron had been named No. 32 General Reconnaissance-Bomber Squadron and Squadron Leader Kingwell⁸ was posted from No. 23 Squadron to take command. With 10 aircraft the new unit had 29 officers (12 of them Hudson captains) and 176 other ranks. It had already endured many difficulties.

⁷ F-Lt N. V. Robertson, DFC, 400046. 11 and 20 Sqns. Manufacturer; of East St Kilda, Vic; b. East St Kilda, 8 Mar 1918.

⁸ Air Cmdre D. W. Kingwell, DSO, 138. Comd 23 Sqn 1941-42, 32 Sqn 1942-43, GR School Bairnsdale, 1943-44, 74 Wing 1944, 82 Wing 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 15 June 1916.

Because the rest of the aerodrome was treacherously boggy the aircraft had to be parked along the sides of the runway. Remembering the defeat at Rabaul and fearful of losing all his aircraft on the ground in enemy air raids, Lerew had put every man to work, for "every daylight hour" as he reported, in an effort to make a dispersal area. His signals to North-Eastern Area headquarters still had the same challenging note that had already earned him disfavour with some senior officers. One read: "Urgently require large labour gang and road-making equipment . . . to avoid continued repetition of this state of unpreparedness." As an immediate dispersal precaution he was instructed to use the aerodrome at Horn Island in Torres Strait, 400 miles to the south, and was told that an endeavour would be made to give sufficient warning of proposed operations to allow the crews time to move forward to Port Moresby as required.

The timeliness of his warning was demonstrated about midday on the 24th when 10 enemy bombers made the first daylight attack on the Port Moresby base. Bombing from about 16,000 feet they blasted the squadron's camp area, wrecked all the buildings on the aerodrome, destroyed motor transport at that time irreplaceable, and a Hudson and a civil aeroplane parked on the aerodrome. An airman, AC1 Bower⁹ of No. 32 Squadron, was killed and Squadron Leader Hoddinott¹ was wounded.

Port Moresby's first air raid had come at 3 a.m. on 3rd February when about six aircraft dropped 21 bombs from 8,000 feet. Apart from one casualty, an army sergeant who was killed, the attack was virtually ineffectual. About the same time on the 5th nine flying-boats bombed the town destroying two stores and a house. On the 28th eleven bombers escorted by five Zeros attacked the Catalina base in daylight with serious result—three Catalinas were destroyed at their moorings and a fourth damaged and the flying-boat squadrons' headquarters received a direct hit. When the bombers left, the strength of the base in serviceable aircraft on immediate call was three—two Catalinas and one Hudson. The first Japanese prisoner in New Guinea was taken in this raid: a fighter pilot whose aircraft was shot down in flames, baled out and was captured. He was taken to Melbourne for interrogation and provided valuable information on the composition of the enemy forces occupying Rabaul.

The demands made on the Catalina crews of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons continued, with repeated night attacks on Rabaul and long-range reconnaissance flights. On the night of 24th February Flight Lieutenant Beaumont and his crew failed to return from a raid on Rabaul and Flying Officer Bolitho and his crew had a close call when the failure of one engine forced the flying-boat down to within 200 feet of the ground and it was saved only by jettisoning the bomb-load. On the following night, also over Rabaul, Squadron Leader Cohen used his aircraft virtually

⁹ AC1 H. C. M. Bower, 37472. 6 and 32 Sqns. Taxi driver and mechanic; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 2 Jan 1916. Killed in air raid 24 Feb 1942.

¹ Sqn Ldr R. U. Hoddinott, 250340. (1914-18: 1 LH Bde, 2nd Lt RA and RFC.) Works and Buildings Inspection RAAF Stn Port Moresby 1942; comd 4 WMU 1942-43, WTU Flemington 1943; Wing Defence Offr 62 Works Wing 1944. Grazier; of Murchison, Vic; b. San Remo, Vic, 12 Aug 1890.

as a dive bomber, releasing his twelve bombs from 1,300 feet as he dived over Toboi wharf where a ship was berthed; eight of the bombs straddled the target. Squadron Leader Chapman² flew his Catalina over the same target on the night of the 27th and started a fire, the smoke from which rose to 5,000 feet, the glare of the fire being visible 30 miles from the target area.

The increase in the enemy's air strength which had been noted on 14th February was confirmed at the end of the month when reconnaissance reports showed that the Japanese had two squadrons of flying-boats on Rabaul Harbour, one of fighters on Lakunai aerodrome, one of heavy bombers on Vunakanau aerodrome, a detachment of flying-boats at Kavieng, and one squadron of fighters on Gasmata aerodrome. Intelligence reports brought news of the imminent movement of two squadrons of heavy bombers from the Philippines-Palau area for Rabaul. All this information, linked with consistent enemy reconnaissance sorties and the scale of the raids on Port Moresby, fitted the Japanese pre-invasion pattern that experienced Allied commanders had now come to recognise. Then, on the afternoon of 7th March, the crew of a No. 32 Squadron Hudson, captained by Flying Officer Hermes,³ returning from a photographic reconnaissance, sighted five or six transports, escorted by a cruiser and four destroyers, steaming towards Lae and then about 56 miles north-east of Buna. The disadvantage the Allies suffered as a result of having their striking force based as far away as Horn Island and Townsville was heavy. By the time the first Hudson could bomb the enemy ships it was 11.35 a.m. (local time) on the 8th, and in the meantime the Japanese had put forces ashore at both Salamaua and Lae. Neither base was garrisoned to withstand invasion. The enemy ships had closed, uninterrupted, on the two anchorages in darkness. At first light both Salamaua and Lae were bombed and shelled, the bombardment achieving nothing but the destruction of a dump of petrol; there were no casualties. The Japanese troops then began to land at both points without opposition, the only Australian force being a detachment of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (a small but stout-hearted unit manned by residents of Papua and the Mandated Territory) and the staff of the R.A.A.F. radio station at Salamaua in charge of Sergeant Norman⁴ and including Warrant Officer Burke⁵ of the meteorological section. This small force engaged in what demolition was possible in the time—including the radio installations—and then withdrew into the hills towards Mubo.⁶ In little more than four

² W Cdr F. B. Chapman, DFC, 271349. 20 and 11 Sns; comd 11 Sqn 1942-43, 20 Sqn 1943. Regular air force offr; of Yanna Siding, Qld; b. Uralla, NSW, 20 Nov 1911. Killed in action 8 Mar 1943.

³ Sqn Ldr A. S. Hermes, DFC, 260803. 24, 32 Sqns and 1 PRU; Controller North-Western and Southern Areas and Instructor 1 OTU 1943; comd 1 PRU 1944, 87 Sqn 1944, RAAF Stn Camden 1945. Plantation overseer; of Rarawai, Ba, Fiji; b. Adelaide, 5 May 1912.

⁴ F-Lt D. A. Norman, 18044. RAAF Port Moresby; Offr i/c DF installation party North-Eastern Area and Directorate of RDF Services 1943-44. Draftsman; of Melbourne; b. London, England, 5 Dec 1919.

⁵ F-Lt L. E. Burke, 36525. RAAF HQ Port Moresby, 230 BU, RAAF HQ 1944-45. Meteorological officer; of Salamaua, TNG; b. Jerilderie, NSW, 25 Jul 1908.

⁶ Norman and Burke, with portable radio equipment, remained with the NGVR detachment for some time to provide their only link with Port Moresby.

hours the enemy had completed their troop landings and Lae and Salamaua had been occupied.

The first Hudson over the target, which dropped four bombs without effect, was followed by another piloted by No. 32 Squadron's commanding officer. Kingwell and his crew scored a direct hit on one transport which was on fire and listing as they left the target area. An enemy float-plane took off when the Hudson appeared but failed to intercept. Three more Hudsons followed in to attack, a near miss on one of the ships being the only observed result. Four Flying Fortresses staged from Townsville to join in the attack. One had to return because of engine trouble and the other three failed to find the target because of heavy cloud and poor visibility. Thus, apart from the success achieved by Kingwell and his crew, the enemy achieved their new bases without cost. Two days later Kingwell attacked a transport in Salamaua Harbour, scoring two near misses, and machine-gunned a naval pinnace. This crew returned that afternoon, accompanied by another Hudson piloted by Squadron Leader Sharp (previously attached to No. 24 Squadron), to bomb the runway.

Any sense of security the enemy may have gained from the fact that these attacks were rather sporadic and ineffectual was to be proved false that same day. Vice-Admiral Brown, still eager to make a carrier force strike on Rabaul, had asked for and been given an additional carrier (the *Yorktown*) and two tankers.⁷ His force had been given the task of escorting a convoy carrying 15,000 American troops which had been trans-shipped at Melbourne and were then on their way to Noumea. Thereafter it moved north to take up a position from which to attack Rabaul, but while doing so Brown learned of the Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua. With this new target offering, the question was whether the force should move into the Bismarck Sea or into the Gulf of Papua. Though the carriers' aircraft would have to cross the Owen Stanley mountains to make the attack, the Gulf of Papua offered greater security than the largely uncharted waters of the Bismarck Sea, where too the risk of air attack from Rabaul was much greater. Thus *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, escorted by four cruisers and nine destroyers, steamed undetected by the enemy to a position about 45 miles off the southern coast of Papua. Commander W. B. Ault, of the *Lexington's* air group, flew to Port Moresby for a special briefing on local geography and attack tactics and then, early on the 10th, flew his scout bomber to a position over the gap in the Owen Stanley Range through which Allied aircraft normally crossed to the north coast at between 7,000 and 8,000 feet, so avoiding the climb to about 13,000 feet that otherwise was necessary. Here, about 8.30 a.m., he "orbited" his aircraft, transmitting weather and route information to the pilots of 104 aircraft that flew in rapid succession from the carriers' flight decks.

⁷ The need for two tankers was caused by the fact that in the lighter equatorial air the aircraft required the carriers to make full speed for safe take-off and recovery. The carriers thus greatly increased their fuel consumption.

Without enemy interception these aircraft, which included a torpedo-carrying squadron from *Lexington*, swept across Papua, deluged the enemy ships in the harbours of Lae and Salamaua with bombs and torpedoes, and flew back to land on the carriers with a loss of one pilot and his aircraft. With understandable over-optimism they claimed the sinking of five transports and several warships; later information indicated that one cruiser and three destroyers had been damaged but had not sunk. The Allied blow was a double one for scarcely had the naval aircraft left the target than their place was taken by eight Flying Fortresses which had flown from Townsville. The crews of these aircraft claimed that they had left two ships sinking, four on fire, and one beached. These operations provided the most stimulating day yet experienced in Allied air operations rooms, and news of the attack prompted President Roosevelt to refer to it in a message to Mr Churchill as "the most cheering thing that had happened in the Pacific so far". But, when it was all over, though heavy blows had been struck, the total in Japanese ships sunk was only three—a converted light cruiser, a converted minesweeper and a cargo ship.⁸

Between 23rd February and the end of March, the Flying Fortresses made six raids on Rabaul, four in the Lae-Salamaua area, and one on Koepang. Bad weather and mechanical troubles restricted the weight of these strikes. Most frequently the attacks were against the most difficult of all targets—ships—and most crews lacked the experience needed to achieve accuracy in high-level bombing which, as with the R.A.A.F. attacks, was proving largely ineffective. Claims to having sunk or seriously damaged enemy vessels in high-level attacks were rarely substantiated.

A detailed report of the Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua and, for about six months thereafter, a daily record of the movement of ships to and from the two harbours and aircraft landing on and taking off from the two aerodromes was available to the Allied Command. Before the Japanese invasion of the north coast of Papua a modest and earnest young Australian named Vial⁹ had applied for a commission in the administrative and special duties branch of the R.A.A.F. His application was largely a formality for he had already been "earmarked" for service with the coastwatchers' organisation, the first qualifications for membership of which were courage and integrity.¹ When serving as an assistant

⁸ These were the losses acknowledged later by the Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee which attributed the first two to the carrier aircraft and the cargo ship jointly to the carrier planes and the Flying Fortresses.

⁹ F-Lt L. G. Vial, 253939, North-Eastern Area HQ; Coastwatchers and IO RAAF HQ 1942; Offr i/c FELO Port Moresby 1942-43, Assistant District Officer; of Rabaul and Melbourne; b. Camberwell, Vic, 28 Feb 1909. Killed in action 30 Apr 1943.

¹ The coastwatchers provided the paradox of realism originating in idealism and of resolute confidence in the face of defeat. The need for their services was greatest when the military situation was at its worst. Thus their operations were planned with cool deliberation on the assumption of enemy success and in expectation of their remaining in occupied territory to fight on single-handed except for such help as came from friendly natives. Acceptance of this specialised military attitude was well illustrated as early as August 1940 when an observation base was selected in the mountains behind Port Moresby. Here were secreted stores sufficient to maintain the head of the coastwatching organisation, Lieut-Commander Feldt, and 10 native soldiers for three months. Should the Japanese capture Port Moresby Feldt would retire to his mountain base with a teleradio as his main weapon.

district officer in the New Guinea Administration, Vial had acquired a useful knowledge of the geography and ethnography of the territory. Already, in his civil capacity, he had assisted Australians, including members of No. 24 Squadron, to escape from the Japanese at Rabaul. Sent into the hill country round Mubo, overlooking Salamaua and Lae, Vial began to fight the Japanese with radio, grid-maps and binoculars. Aided by two natives who brought him his supplies, he maintained a watching post in the hills. His task was always hazardous, for the enemy soon became aware of his radio transmission and tried vainly, by various means, to find and capture him.² His warnings, when quite often no others were being received, saved many lives and much war material from destruction by enemy raids, and they cost the enemy much through the timeliness of the Intelligence they provided for offensive operations by the Allied Air Forces.³

Horn Island's freedom from enemy air attack ended on 14th March when 8 Nell heavy bombers and 9 Zeros made a bombing and strafing raid. No. 24 Squadron, still equipped with Wirraways, was based on the aerodrome, but there was a surprise for the raiders when they were intercepted by 9 American Kittyhawks whose pilots, members of No. 49 Fighter Group, were temporarily stationed on the island. The Americans shot down two Zeros and one bomber for the loss of one of their own aircraft destroyed and one damaged. With enemy bases only 200 miles from Port Moresby it was inevitable that Allied aircrews should meet increasing Japanese fighter opposition. Well accustomed to being intercepted to the north of New Guinea, Allied crews were now finding fighters, notably Zeros, in the Port Moresby area, as when Kingwell brought a Hudson back from an attack sortie to find five Zeros waiting to strike as he was about to make his landing approach. The Hudson crew spent 40 minutes in cloud evading the enemy aircraft whose pilots then gave up the chase. On 18th March 9 Zeros were seen circling Horn and Thursday Islands. They made no attack. On the same day 11 more Zeros were sighted over the northern extremity of Cape York Peninsula.

This heavy emphasis on the need for fighter aircraft based on Port Moresby served to quicken consciousness of the garrison's weakness.

² The coastwatching organisation, as its name implied, had as one of its primary functions the reporting of enemy ship movements. The air force, however, attached very special value to its service because the watchers more often than not provided the first and sometimes the only reliable information about the movement of enemy aircraft. Watchers were deliberately posted within sight of key enemy-held aerodromes for that purpose. This added considerably to the danger of detection. The enemy, aware of the proximity of the watcher, would search for him not only with ground patrols but with aircraft which would try to obtain a bearing on his position from the teleradio transmission and then, in low-flying sweeps, rake the plotted area with gunfire in the hope of killing him or forcing him to retire.

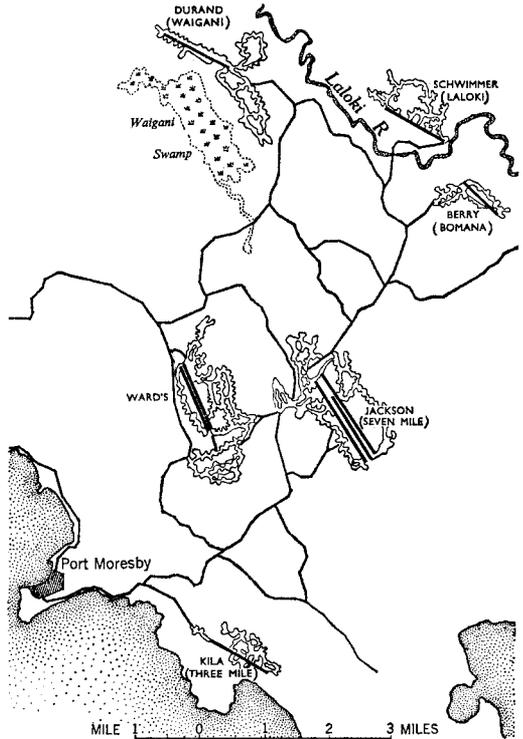
³ After 6 months' service, spent in continuous solitude, but for the visits of the natives who tended him, Vial was withdrawn to Port Moresby. After he had compiled a booklet for Allied aircrew on survival in the jungle, he was appointed officer in charge of the Port Moresby section of Far East Liaison Office, an organisation responsible for psychological warfare and engaged in distributing propaganda. Vial sometimes flew in the aircraft making the leaflet dropping sorties and it was on one such mission in a Liberator in April 1943, that he lost his life when the aircraft crashed into the jungle in the Madang-Wewak area. His body was recovered and buried at Lae. See "Golden Voiced Vial" by H. J. Manning in *Stand-To*, Nov 1958-Jan 1959, for an authoritative account of Vial's experiences as a coastwatcher.

R.A.A.F. Headquarters had been striving since early in January to secure aircraft with which to equip fighter squadrons, and for some time Port Moresby had been first on the list of bases to be so provided. A proposal to send an American squadron to that base in January had been countermanded, as already noted, because of the desperate need of the ABDA Command forces. The immediate objective then was to have three R.A.A.F. fighter squadrons of which one each would be stationed at

Port Moresby, Townsville and Sydney. It had been planned that, until these squadrons could be established, three American squadrons would be provided on loan, but American reserves in aircraft and trained pilots were not yet equal to this demand. At the end of February, however, 25 Kittyhawks were made available to the R.A.A.F. and arrangements were made immediately to establish a new fighter squadron. On 4th March No. 75 Squadron was formed at Townsville. Squadron Leader Jeffrey,⁴ a highly experienced fighter pilot who had commanded No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. in the Middle East, was placed in temporary command to direct the operational training. The Kitty-

hawks were ferried to Townsville, the first flight encountering bad weather and losing three aircraft in crashes in two of which the pilots were killed.

Such was the urgency of the need that the pilots of the new squadron had only nine days for an intensive course in fighter tactics, gunnery and the principles of fighter control. The advance party of the ground staff had preceded the squadron to Port Moresby, arriving there on the 17th. Two days later Flight Lieutenant J. F. Jackson,⁵ another pilot who had served with No. 3 Squadron in the Western Desert, was appointed to



⁴ Gp Capt P. Jeffrey, DSO, DFC, 145. Comd 3 Sqn 1940-41; W Ldr 234 Wing RAF 1941; comd RAAF Stn Bankstown, 75 and 76 Sqns, 2 OTU 1942-43, 1944-45, 1 Wing 1943-44. Regular air force officer; of Sydney; b. Tenterfield, NSW, 6 July 1913.

⁵ Sqn Ldr J. F. Jackson, DFC, 270493. 3 and 4 Sqns, comd 75 Sqn 1942. Grazier; of St George, Qld; b. Brisbane, 23 Feb 1908. Killed in action 28 Apr 1942. (The Seven Mile Drome at Port Moresby was renamed Jackson's Strip after him.)

command the unit. On the same day (the 19th) 17 Kittyhawks were flown off on their way to Port Moresby, staging by way of Cooktown and Horn Island. Jeffrey led the first flight of 4 without escort and Jackson followed leading the main force of 13. By this time the garrison at Port Moresby had become increasingly sceptical of reports that a fighter squadron would be sent for their protection and none more so than the troops manning the machine-gun posts round the aerodromes. Having now endured 16 enemy raids, these gunners regarded with understandable cynicism the prospect of the arrival of the Kittyhawks they had so often been told to expect. To their cynicism they gave a twist of wry humour by dubbing them the "Tomorrowhawks", "Neverhawks" or "Mythhawks". On the 21st, as Flight Lieutenant Turnbull⁶ led his flight of four aircraft at low level in the approach to the runway at the Seven Mile aerodrome, one of these gunners opened fire. Immediately other guns went into action and the firing continued until Turnbull had actually landed and the other three pilots had lowered their under-carriages. Three of the four aircraft were damaged, one of them so severely that it was never flown again, and Jeffrey escaped death by a margin of no more than an inch or two when a bullet ripped through the cushion behind his head.

Of the squadron's twenty-one pilots only four had been in combat. Two—Jackson and Turnbull—had flown against German and Italian aircraft in the Middle East; another, Flight Lieutenant Anderson, was a survivor from the interception of the Japanese attack on Rabaul by Wirraways of No. 24 Squadron, and the fourth, Flying Officer Woods,⁷ had served as combat pilot of a Hudson operating from Port Moresby. This lack of combat experience was not to last long; in fact, for two of them—Flying Officers Cox⁸ and Wackett⁹—no longer than one hour. Within that time a report was received that an enemy bomber was approaching Port Moresby on the routine daily reconnaissance the defenders had come to know well. Cox and Wackett were immediately ordered to intercept. Climbing through cloud they surprised the enemy aircraft at 10,000 feet. Cox made the first attack and put the bomber's port engine out of action. Wackett followed with a starboard attack and put a burst of gunfire into the other engine causing it to lose height rapidly until, at a height of about 500 feet, it exploded and crashed into the sea near the entrance, through the reef, to Port Moresby Harbour. It was a spectacular first "kill" for the squadron and, achieved so soon after their arrival and in full view of the garrison, it did much to raise the defenders' and the squadron's spirits. Wackett and Cox shared the credit equally. Port Moresby radio station "jammed" the bomber's operational frequency

⁶ Sqn Ldr P. St G. Turnbull, DFC, 481. 3 and 75 Sqns; comd 76 Sqn 1942. Regular air force offr; of Glen Innes, NSW; b. Armidale, NSW, 9 Feb 1917. Killed in action 27 Aug 1942.

⁷ Sqn Ldr J. Woods, 406064. 23, 75 Sqns, and 9 FSHQ; comd 9 FSHQ 1943. School teacher; of Claremont, WA; b. Boulder City, WA, 10 Dec 1915.

⁸ F-Lt R. M. Cox, 260706. 4 and 75 Sqns. Sharebroker's clerk; of Elizabeth Bay, NSW; b. Summer Hill, NSW, 9 Oct 1915. Killed in action 28 Apr 1942.

⁹ Sqn Ldr W. L. Wackett, 588. 24, 75 and 31 Sqns. Student; of Melbourne; b. Townsville, Qld, 19 Feb 1921. Killed in action 24 Sep 1944. Son of Sir Lawrence Wackett.

while the interception was made, to prevent the bomber's crew from giving away the secret of the arrival of No. 75 Squadron, and listeners had the satisfaction of hearing the enemy base operator calling in vain for some time after the aircraft had been destroyed.

On the 19th a photographic reconnaissance of Lae had shown 26 aircraft on the aerodrome—fighters and bombers lined up wing-tip to wing-tip along the runway. The photographs also showed a type of bomber—the Betty—that was new to the area. At 6.30 a.m. on the 22nd 9 Kittyhawks took off, 5 of them, piloted by Anderson, Cox, Woods and Flying Officer Piper¹ and the commanding officer (leader), to make a strafing attack on Lae, and four more piloted by Turnbull (leader), with Flight Lieutenant Jackson² (a brother of the squadron commander), Wackett and Sergeant Pettett³ accompanying them to provide top cover. The approach to the target was made after a diversion out over the sea, the attacking aircraft diving through cloud and sweeping over the length of the runway so low that the underside of one wing of Piper's Kittyhawk was damaged through actually striking one of the enemy planes. Since it was clear that the enemy had been completely surprised, Jackson, contrary to accepted strafing tactics, led his flight in again for a second attack, this time through dense smoke rising from burning aircraft. When the attack ended 12 aircraft were burning and 5 others had been damaged.

In the meantime the Kittyhawk pilots giving top cover had encountered three Zeros that had been flying a "standing" patrol at 10,000 feet. Wackett evaded these and dived to attack one of another formation of Zeros that were engaging the Kittyhawks that had strafed the aerodrome. As he made a beam attack one of Wackett's guns failed, and he broke away, but his engine had been hit by a burst of fire from the enemy aircraft. He dived into cloud and, as he emerged, he saw two Zeros crash in flames into the sea.⁴ When his engine failed completely, Wackett put his aircraft down on the sea about 10 miles from the shore and about midway between Lae and Salamaua. Freeing himself from the cockpit and inflating his "Mae West" life-jacket he began to swim towards the shore. He saw several sharks but avoided attracting their attention by lying quite still in the water. After about nine hours he reached the beach near a native village. Here he waited, almost exhausted, while the natives decided what they would do with him. Two natives, one of whom could speak pidgin English, then undertook to guide him to safety, Wackett learning later through an interpreter that the tribe, to which these two natives did not belong, fearing reprisals, had intended to hand

¹ F-Lt J. W. W. Piper, DFC, 250828. 24 and 75 Sqns. Controller 2 FSHQ 1942-43; 9 Ops Gp 1943; Intell duties RAAF comd 1943-45. Salesman; of Darriman, Vic; b. Armadale, Vic, 7 May 1917.

² W Cdr L. D. Jackson, DFC, 270520. 453, 23 and 75 Sqns; comd 75 Sqn 1942; Wing Leader 75, 78 and 80 Sqns 1943-44; CFI 8 OTU and comd ADHQ Madang 1945. Garage proprietor; of Surat, Qld; b. Brisbane, 24 Feb 1917.

³ F-Lt J. H. S. Pettett, 403372. 23 and 75 Sqns. 9 Mobile Fighter Sector 1942-43; AO 2 OTU 1943-45. Radio technician; of Coogee, NSW; b. Chatswood, NSW, 31 Oct 1917.

⁴ Credit for shooting down one each of these aircraft was given to Turnbull and Pettett.

him over to the Japanese. Bare-footed, he tramped through jungle and swamps, waded up streams, and climbed steep hillsides. After four days he reached Bulwa where members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles cared for him until he had recuperated sufficiently to continue his journey from Wau through Bulldog to Yule Island and eventually to Port Moresby. He had crossed Papua from the north to the south coast, covering most of the distance on foot.

In the course of the battle over Lae Flight Lieutenant Anderson, who was seen turning in to attack a Zero, was caught by the enemy's fire. He failed to return and was later posted as missing. The other Kittyhawk pilots returned safely. Their first attack on an enemy base had resulted in the destruction of 14 enemy aircraft—9 fighters and 3 bombers on the ground and 2 fighters in combat. Their losses were one of their comrades and 2 of their aircraft. Later on the same day 3 Kittyhawks were lost in a series of accidents—2 on take-off and one in landing.

Two Hudsons of No. 32 Squadron followed the Kittyhawks in to attack Lae but the bombs from one fell into the sea short of the target and those of the other could not be released owing to a mechanical fault. The crew of the first Hudson, piloted by Flight Lieutenant McDonnell, shot down a Zero after a combat in which two of their number were wounded and their aircraft damaged by the Zero's gunfire. The second Hudson, piloted by Flying Officer Hermes, was also damaged in combat with a Zero which was seen going down with smoke pouring from its engine. Four Flying Fortresses from Townsville completed the day's attacks on Lae by blowing up an ammunition dump, destroying an aircraft on the ground with a direct bomb hit and setting fire to another. The total number of enemy aircraft destroyed that day was 17, and 6 were damaged.

Next day the Japanese retaliated with their seventeenth raid on Port Moresby. About noon 19 bombers approached at high altitude and, though all available Kittyhawks were flown off to intercept, they were unable to gain sufficient altitude. The bombs fell near the runway causing little damage. Four Zeros then made a low-level attack destroying two Kittyhawks which had bogged near the runway as their pilots attempted to get them airborne. A third Kittyhawk was damaged. One of the Zeros, the pilot of which dared a second run over the aerodrome, was caught by machine-gun fire from the ground and crashed into a low hill near the aerodrome. Another Zero was damaged by ground fire and probably failed to get back to its base. On the 24th Piper shot down a lone enemy bomber over the sea south of Port Moresby, and, later in the day, when four Kittyhawks intercepted a formation of 18 bombers approaching Port Moresby, Flight Lieutenant Jackson shot down one of 3 escorting Zeros. No damage resulted from the raid and one of the bombers was hit by anti-aircraft fire and probably was lost.

Having seen the squadron so quickly established as a fighting unit, Jeffrey was transferred to the mainland leaving Squadron Leader Jackson,

already affectionately known to the pilots as "Old John", to carry the full operational and administrative burden of his appointment. The camp at the Seven Mile aerodrome was dispersed and camouflaged in a wide area of scrubby timber some distance from the runway. When not on strike sorties or squadron operations the pilots remained close to their aircraft, sharing in keeping a standing patrol over the base and ready to "scramble" when enemy aircraft were reported to be approaching.

The raid warning system at this time was elementary. A single radar direction-finding station (No. 29) had been in operation since the middle of the month, but its value was extremely limited, for the mountainous background to the base made reception from the north almost impossible and restricted its field to surveillance out to sea. Of the extensive observer-post system planned, only one section was then operating—that on the 100-miles radius, with 20 posts in the Owen Stanley Mountains. Sometimes the warning came too late to give the fighters time to gain sufficient altitude for interception, and there was, as yet, no fighter sector control. Living conditions were hard. Unvaried service rations, no amenities, total blackout every night, and a tropical climate soon combined to affect the health of the unit. On the aerodrome there was practically no "hard standing" for the aircraft, which frequently bogged in the rain-sodden ground. A section at one end of the runway, 400 yards long, was still being formed. This called for much caution in landing and taking off and, with inexperienced pilots, was the cause of accidents in which aircraft were damaged and sometimes completely wrecked.

Almost immediately, serviceability became a problem, for after only three days of operations 7 of the original 17 Kittyhawks had been destroyed, and thereafter it was a continuing struggle, with few facilities, to maintain an effective striking force. Yet the squadron had already laid the foundation for an excellent reputation in combat and its morale was strong. When North-Eastern Area Headquarters proposed that it should return to the Australian mainland, Squadron Leader Jackson, strongly supported by Wing Commander Pearce, R.A.A.F. operations officer at Port Moresby, protested emphatically and the unit remained to fight on. On 30th March the first replacement aircraft arrived—five Kittyhawks, one of which crashed on landing and was seriously damaged.

On the last day of March No. 32 Squadron had only one Hudson available at Port Moresby when a reconnaissance over Salamaua was called for. The aircraft was reported as unserviceable and, when told that the need for the flight was imperative, Kingwell insisted on flying it himself. The pilot originally selected, Flying Officer Green, insisted on accompanying him. As they completed their photographic run over the target three Zeros attacked almost simultaneously. The Hudson's gunner shot one of the Zeros down, possibly shot down a second and Kingwell possibly shot down the third with the front guns. When the attack ended 12 minutes later Kingwell had been injured by splinters of glass in his

eyes, Green had received bullet wounds in the left wrist and both thighs, and one of the air gunners, Sergeant Townshend,⁵ had been wounded in one foot. The Hudson returned and made a safe landing.⁶

Though many of the problems that confronted the Allied command early in March were common to both the North-Eastern and the North-Western Areas, there were distinctions that made the task at Darwin seem even more difficult than the one at Port Moresby. The devastation caused by the Japanese air raids on Darwin on 19th February had almost completely disorganised the equipment of the port. It had also caused such wide dispersal of the meagre air forces available that operational and administrative control had been separated, communications deranged, and maintenance, supply and construction work disrupted. To defend Darwin there were virtually no naval forces, about two-thirds of a division of infantry, two war-worn Hudson squadrons (Nos. 2 and 13), No. 12 Squadron with its Wirraways, and the nucleus of two American squadrons of Dauntless dive bombers which, like the Wirraways, were in need of reconditioning.

To protect seaborne supply services and keep the port open for light naval forces, it was estimated that 10 air squadrons were needed.⁷ The emphasis was on fighters. The Darwin Defence Committee had reported to the Central War Room on 26th February that "in view of the serious lack of air support for ground troops, every effort should be made to provide adequate fighter defence". Aircraft capable of reconnaissance and flights to Ambon and Kendari were also sought. The Australian Chiefs of Staff and the senior American staff officers, at a joint meeting on 6th March, had agreed that construction of aircraft dispersal areas in the vicinity of Darwin should be given first priority, the Australian Air Staff having strongly recommended the formation of a works squadron from trainees waiting to be called up. General control of all works in the area was centralised under the Director of Allied Works, Mr E. G. Theodore, and, while much improvement was hoped for, the limit to what could be achieved was set by the capacity of vehicles operating along the trans-continental road from the railhead at Alice Springs.

As hope of any effective Allied resistance in Java faded, the port of Broome, on the north-west coast of Australia, had attained unexpected importance. With a harbour that provided a sheltered alighting area for flying-boats and an aerodrome which, with the aid of 180 native labourers,

⁵ F-O J. V. Townshend, 406041. 14, 32, 36, 34 and 35 Sqns. Clerk; of Bassendean, WA; b. Newquay, Cornwall, Eng, 16 Oct 1916.

⁶ Examination of the biographical footnotes in this volume will give some idea of the parsimony with which decorations were awarded to members of the RAAF in the South-West Pacific. It should be taken into account that a considerable number of the decorations shown in this chapter, for example, were won overseas in 1940-41 by men whose service against great odds in the SWPA received no further recognition.

⁷ Interceptor fighter, 2; long range fighter, 1; dive bomber, 2; general reconnaissance (torpedo bomber), general reconnaissance (flying-boat), heavy bomber, army cooperation and transport, one each.

was maintained to take even heavy bombers like the Fortresses and Liberators, it was the most suitable staging point and refuelling base on the evacuation route from the south coast of Java. As such it had become a clearing station for thousands of refugees from the Netherlands East Indies and for those unarmed members of the Allied fighting Services for whom air transport could be provided. The final point of embarkation was Tjilatjap from which, at the end of February, flying-boats of the Royal Netherlands Air Force, Qantas and the R.A.A.F. were operating shuttle services to Perth. As the situation in Java became more and more critical, every aircraft available that could carry passengers over the route was brought into service and the once sleepy pearling port was transformed temporarily into one of the busiest air ports in the South-West Pacific. As many as 57 aircraft arrived at Broome in one day, and in 14 days between 7,000 and 8,000 passengers passed through the base. The strain on aircrew was severe, some of them remaining on the ground only to eat a hurried meal and make ready for take-off again as soon as their aircraft had been refuelled; one pilot even recorded 84 hours' duty without rest.

In the alighting area on the harbour there were moorings for only three flying-boats; for the rest they anchored or, as with the big Dutch Dorniers, lay on the sea-bed when the tide was low. Apart from the Qantas service which alone provided ferry craft to carry passengers to and from the shore and which had a small shore-based staff working under the direction of Captain Brain, there were no organised servicing facilities beyond the single refuelling lighter *Nicol Bay*, whose master, Captain H. Mathieson, had to rely on the flying-boat captains coming ashore and asking him for fuel. Broome's three hotels, most of the private homes, and even the school, which had been turned into messing quarters, were crowded by travellers who had to be fed and given temporary shelter. Many flying-boat passengers remained on board while their aircraft were being refuelled. In an effort to relieve the strain on the port's accommodation, an intermediate air service from Broome to Port Hedland was also operated; wounded, sick, and women and children passengers being given priority in the aircraft that operated through to Perth.

News that the Japanese invasion of Java was very near was brought to Broome on 27th February by Captain Ambrose,⁸ when he flew the Qantas flying-boat *Coriolanus* in from Tjilatjap. Another pilot, Captain Denny, then took the aircraft off on what was to be the last of the Qantas shuttle services. Soon after this flight began an order was received from the Department of Civil Aviation, which had assumed control of the civil flying services, recalling all aircraft in flight westward of Broome. Denny therefore turned back. A radio message from Tjilatjap reported that two other Qantas flying-boats—*Circe*, commanded by Captain

⁸ F-Lt L. R. Ambrose, 1392. Qantas Merchant Air Service 1940-45. Commercial pilot; of Sydney; b. Melbourne, 12 Jul 1906.

Purton,⁹ and *Corinthian*, by Captain Howard¹—were on their way to Broome. In his diary for that day Brain included these notes:

I shall not be surprised if all this activity brings an enemy raid. . . . I shall arrange to get our machines out of here as quickly as possible. Captain Howard in *Corinthian* has just arrived. . . . Purton has not shown up . . . the two machines departed within a few minutes of each other and should have been within radio contact throughout the trip. This news is ominous.²

Meanwhile Broome radio had been receiving distress signals from an American DC-3 that had left Perth on the 26th and, failing to find Broome in the darkness, had crash-landed on a beach. The aircraft had been wrecked but the crew were safe and the aircraft's radio could still be operated. *Corinthian* left for Sydney by way of Darwin, Denny having been instructed to search the coast for the missing American aircraft on his way to Darwin. He found the crew near Cape Londonderry, about 400 miles north of Broome. A search for the missing flying-boat *Circe* was made for about 500 miles to seaward on the Tjilatjap route by Captains Thomas³ and Ambrose in *Corinna* without result. Captain Purton and his aircraft were never seen again. Another Qantas flying-boat, the *Camilla*, commanded by Captain Sims, was at Wyndham en route to Broome on 2nd March when the Broome radio station received a report that the coastal steamer *Koolama* with 25 passengers, mainly waterside workers on their way to Darwin, had gone ashore to the west of Wyndham after having been bombed by enemy aircraft. Sims therefore broke his journey to Broome to pick up these passengers. Brain was now so conscious of the likelihood of an air raid that he sought to avoid having in port more than one of the company's flying-boats at a time. Sims therefore was advised not to return to Broome before 11 a.m. on 3rd March by which time the *Corinna* should have taken off for Sydney.

About 3 p.m. on 2nd March a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft appeared, made three circuits over the port at 9,000 feet and then disappeared. There were then three flying-boats moored in the harbour. Four more alighted just before dusk and nine others arrived at intervals through the night, which meant that at dawn there were 16 flying-boats moored or anchored within an area of water about one mile and a half long by three-quarters of a mile wide. The enemy reconnaissance on the previous afternoon had an obvious significance and the captains of all aircraft were warned to take off as soon after day-break as possible. Captain Mathieson and his crew in the lighter had toiled through the night refuelling three Dornier flying-boats, but the warning was not heeded by the captains of those aircraft ready for flight and only a float-plane had taken off when, about 9.20 a.m., enemy fighters swept in over

⁹ F-Lt W. B. Purton, 296. 11 and 20 Sqns and Qantas Merchant Air Service. Commercial pilot; of Sydney; b. Hobart. 15 Nov 1912. Killed in action 27 Feb 1942.

¹ F-Lt S. K. Howard, 266981. Qantas Merchant Air Service 1939-45. Commercial pilot; of Bundaberg, Qld; b. Bundaberg, 20 Jul 1902.

² E. Bennett Bremner, *Front-Line Airline* (1944), p. 90. Where it concerns civil flying-boat operations this account is largely based on this book.

³ F-Lt O. F. Y. Thomas, 266997. Qantas Merchant Air Service. Commercial pilot; of Sydney; b. 26 May 1909. Lost while flying west of Cocos Island 23 Mar 1946.

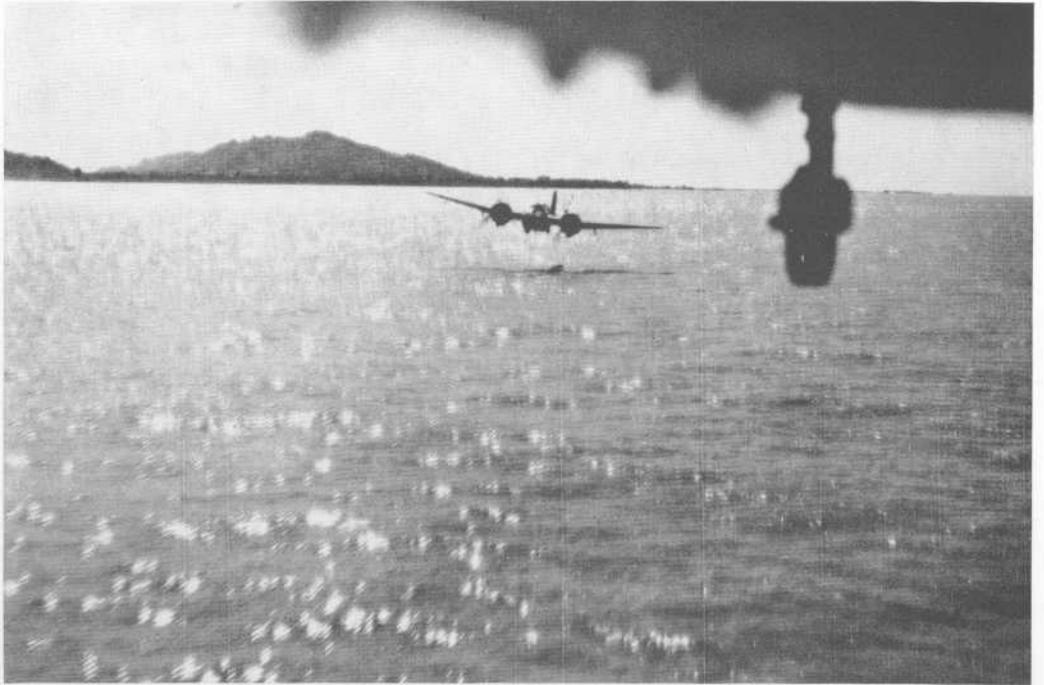
the harbour entrance to attack from low level.⁴ The raiding force probably consisted of nine Zeros, three of which circled overhead to give top cover—needlessly, as it happened—while the other six, flying in line-ahead formation, came in at a height of about 500 feet. The first indication of the raid was a burst of gunfire from the leading Zero which chose a R.A.A.F. Empire flying-boat as its first target. The captain, Flight Lieutenant Caldwell,⁵ and the second pilot were ashore at the time and the rest of the crew were in the spar compartment. As explosive bullets tore through their aircraft, Corporal Ireland⁶ rushed to the flight deck, released the rubber dinghy and jumped with it into the sea. The other crew members dived overboard and joined Ireland who had succeeded in inflating the dinghy and all escaped from the flying-boat without injury just as it burst into flames. By this time other flying-boats were either blazing at their moorings or sinking. The R.A.A.F. crew went to the aid of survivors from one of the Dutch aircraft and eventually reached the beach with thirteen in their dinghy, the normal capacity of which was five.

As the Zeros attacked, Captain Mathieson had just begun to refuel the Qantas flying-boat *Corinna* whose commander, Captain Ambrose, was ashore making final flight arrangements. Mathieson immediately cut the lighter free and pushed off and, though this was only the second flying-boat to be attacked, his vessel, with 180 drums of petrol on board, was not hit. His subsequent efforts to rescue survivors from the sea were not welcomed because of his dangerous cargo. Brain, hearing the gunfire, had run to the beach where he tried to drag a rowing-boat into the water. Weak from attacks of fever he failed until joined by Mr Malcolm Millar, a representative of the Qantas and B.O.A.C. general agents in Singapore, who had been supervising flying-boat operations from Malaya and later Java. Millar had been evacuated from Java by an American Fortress which had arrived that morning. Together he and Brain rowed out and rescued two Dutchmen who were supporting a young woman who was in a state of collapse, then a man who was holding the rescued woman's baby, and finally a Dutch boy and four men who were trying to swim ashore. By this time all the flying-boats had been attacked. By good chance the 25 passengers of the *Corinna* were still on the wharf. The Japanese pilots spared them and made no attempt to attack those who had leaped from the flying-boats into the harbour. The crew of the Qantas flying-boat, diving into the water, found an empty dinghy that had been cast loose from a lugger and with it rescued as many people from the sea as the boat would hold. Seven planes were on the aerodrome when the attack began, including two Flying Fortresses and two Liberators, one of which took off only to be shot down into the

⁴ This aircraft was from USS *Houston*. When the cruiser was engaged in her last battle the pilot of the float-plane was ordered to fly to the nearest Australian port. He reached Broome with practically no fuel left in the tanks.

⁵ Sqn Ldr K. G. Caldwell, 261491. 11, 20, 33 and 41 Sqns; Controller HQ Eastern Area 1943. Commercial pilot; of Roseville, NSW; b. 22 Jul 1911.

⁶ W-O A. B. Ireland, BEM, 6686. 11 Sqn, HQ Port Moresby and 33 Sqn. Electrical apprentice; of Sydney; b. St Andrews, Scotland, 17 Dec 1920.



(Air Ministry)

Low level attacks by R.A.F. Blenheim squadrons in Burma. In the upper photograph an aircraft of No. 34 Squadron is seen coming in to bomb a ground target on 20th October 1942. In the lower photograph an aircraft of No. 60 Squadron is levelling out for the "run in" to make a mast-head attack on a Japanese coaster off Akyab on 10th November 1942. A sprinkling of R.A.A.F. men served on both these squadrons.



(R.A.A.F.)

A radar station on the north Queensland coast camouflaged to look like the rocks among which it had been installed.



(R.A.A.F.)

A concentration of bombs falling on Japanese shipping in Rabaul Harbour on 12th August 1942.

sea in flames. Of 33 men in the aircraft only one, an American army sergeant, survived; he returned to Broome after having been in the sea for more than 30 hours. A companion, the only other man to survive the crash, was drowned when he was overcome by exhaustion.

Only 15 minutes after their first assault over the harbour, the raiders had wrecked every flying-boat, swept the aerodrome and destroyed every aircraft on it, shot down the one land plane that took off, and set course for the return flight to their base. When about 60 miles north of Broome they met a Dutch DC-3, one of the last Allied aircraft to leave Java, which happened to be carrying a valuable consignment of diamonds. The Zeros promptly shot it down into the sea. There were no survivors. The only retaliation against the Japanese attack came from a Dutch gunner who had taken a machine-gun from its mountings in an aircraft for repair. Supporting the barrel on one forearm he kept firing while the enemy aircraft were within range and, though his arm was severely burned, he was credited with having probably shot down one of the Zeros. The exact number of casualties from the raid has never been determined. The evacuation of civilians from Java was conducted with inevitable haste and later, in the war cemetery at Broome, the graves of 29 unidentified victims of the raid gave solemn proof of the absence of records listing the names of the passengers embarked in Java. It has been estimated that 70 people lost their lives, including those killed when the Liberator was shot down. Twenty-four aircraft were destroyed by the raiders. Of these 16 were lost on the harbour (2 Empire flying-boats, 3 Dutch Dorniers, 2 British and 2 American Catalinas and 7 other flying-boats); 6 were destroyed on the aerodrome (2 Fortresses, one Liberator, one R.A.A.F. and one Dutch Hudson and one Dutch DC-3); and 2 aircraft were shot down (one Liberator and one DC-3).

When the raid was over there was much confusion in the town and, as at Darwin, the impression that the raid was but a preliminary to invasion, spread rapidly. Someone started a rumour that the immediate evacuation of the town had been ordered, and, since no aircraft or ships were available, the trucks and cars owned by a company which had a contract for aerodrome construction work were used to form a land convoy. This convoy set off on the long southward journey over desert country but returned a few days later being unable to proceed because of the boggy condition of the roads. An American-manned Liberator landed from Perth with doctors and medical supplies. When taking off again this aircraft left the runway and the undercarriage was damaged. So strong was the fear of invasion that no attempt was made to repair the aircraft and it was destroyed on the assumption that it would otherwise be left to the enemy. Smoke from a ship far out at sea was immediately and wrongly taken as the first sign of the approach of an enemy invasion fleet. With an understandable fear of further raids, the staunch members of the community, who had no intention of evacuating at least at this stage, moved out of the town each morning as a safety precaution, the reasoning

being that the flight distance to be traversed by enemy aircraft was such that they would attack before midday and so leave themselves time to return to base before nightfall. Demands to the authorities for means of evacuation, troops for the defence of the port, and even for a declaration of martial law became insistent. Plans were made for the demolition of the aerodromes at Broome, Wyndham, Port Hedland, Derby and Drysdale, but the Air Board acted promptly and prevented any such action. For two weeks after the raid tension remained high, but when no further attack came and there was no sign of an invasion the town returned to a more normal state.

The first Qantas flying-boat to alight on Broome Harbour after the raid was *Camilla*, piloted by Sims who, since all the mooring buoys had been destroyed, anchored off the jetty. Only an hour had passed since the "all clear" had been given and Brain, wary of further attacks, told Sims to leave immediately for Port Hedland. Once there Sims had to wait for the full flood tide so that he could taxi up to the jetty for refuelling by the primitive method of rolling drums out along the wharf and emptying them one by one with a hand pump. The tide was not full until 2 a.m., but the risky and difficult manoeuvre was performed safely and the flying-boat was warped out into clear water again with only the moon for light. When Sims brought *Camilla* back to Broome next day the senior American officer, Lieut-Colonel Richard A. Legg, who was directing the removal by air of all American servicemen who had been flown from Java, asked that he should make a search along the coast for survivors of the *Liberator* that had been shot down. But Sims had instructions to transport to Perth wounded who had been moved for safety to Port Hedland; and Brain, Flight Lieutenant Smith⁷ (a R.A.A.F. medical officer) and three other volunteers undertook to make the search in a launch. After a dangerous and exhausting trip in which the launch, not intended for use on the open ocean, was saved from foundering in a heavy sea only by heaving spare drums of fuel overboard and bailing continuously, the party returned without having found any survivors. Aircraft wreckage, life-jackets, charred cushions and portions of burned clothing found on the beach provided grim evidence of the reason for the failure of their mission.

Almost simultaneously with the raid on Broome eight enemy fighters had attacked Wyndham, setting a petrol dump on fire and destroying a light aircraft on the ground. The steamer *Koolama*, from which Sims had picked up the passengers, had been brought alongside the Wyndham wharf. Seven hours after the raid the ship sank at her berth and while the raiders may have been responsible, it was more probably the result of damage inflicted on her in the original bombing attack.

As an outcome of the first raids on Darwin steps were taken to disperse the area and station headquarters, hitherto concentrated at R.A.A.F. Station, Darwin. On 28th February area headquarters moved to a site in

⁷ Sqn Ldr W. H. Smith, 253443. HQ North-Western Area 1942; 11 EFTS 1942-43; 32 and 6 Sqns 1943-45. Medical practitioner; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 2 Jul 1916.

the bush about a mile and a half south of the station, and on 3rd March the administrative staffs moved to Birdum to establish a rear headquarters. Next day forward headquarters moved back to a camp at the "22 Mile".

Darwin was raided again on 4th March when eight Zeros made a low-level attack on the R.A.A.F. aerodrome. A Hudson about to take off on patrol was destroyed but there were no casualties. The raid was more in the nature of an armed reconnaissance. Such operations became increasingly frequent in the next few weeks at all the coastal bases from Broome to Darwin. On the 10th ten fighters appeared over Darwin, but there was no attack and four days later reconnaissance aircraft were sighted as far south as Daly Waters. On the 16th there was a determined air attack on Darwin by 14 bombers in which two R.A.A.F. ground staff were killed and eight others and an American serviceman were wounded. Materially the raiders achieved only a direct bomb hit on the kitchen of the officers' mess and slight damage to one Hudson. Three days later seven aircraft bombed the residential area in Darwin and the naval headquarters. There were nine casualties, two of which were fatal. Then, on the 17th, No. 9 Squadron, the first of three squadrons, of No. 49 American Fighter Group, reached Darwin.⁸ The group was commanded by an experienced and forceful officer, Lieut-Colonel Paul B. Wurtsmith. This first step towards adequate air defence of Darwin was supplemented by the first Australian-built radar direction finding unit and a somewhat rudimentary fighter sector (No. 5) which was installed about one mile from the R.A.A.F. aerodrome.⁹ On the 18th Batchelor became a R.A.A.F. station with No. 12 Squadron based there with their Wirraways, while all ground staff of 2 and 13 Squadrons but those essential for servicing and operations were moved from Darwin to Daly Waters. This move entailed many physical difficulties. Conditions were as yet primitive and unhygienic, and spares and equipment scarce. These disabilities had to be endured until roads, adequate accommodation and sanitation had been provided, but though improvements were made the site remained a poor one.¹⁰

Indeed the move to Daly Waters seriously affected the efficiency and morale of the force. It separated the commanders and aircrews from the ground staffs, since most of the aircrews remained in the Darwin area about 300 miles away. The ground staff had to live in uncomfortable conditions, and had to carry out major servicing and repairs with the aircraft in the shade of gum trees. Important items of technical equipment had to be left in the open. Meanwhile all maintenance stores remained at Darwin and there also were the workshops.

However, order was being gradually restored and the greatest stimulant for restoration of morale was the sight of the American fighter aircraft patrolling the skies above.

⁸ The other two units—Nos. 7 and 8 Squadrons—reached Darwin on 6th and 15th April respectively.

⁹ The story of the development of radar in Australia is told in D. P. Mellor, *The Role of Science and Industry* (1958), Vol V in the civil series of this history, pp. 423-52.

¹⁰ Later in the year this site was abandoned as totally unsuitable for an air force station.