

CHAPTER 3

AIR FIGHTING IN NORTH-WESTERN AREA, APRIL AND MAY, 1943

WHILE General MacArthur prepared a limited offensive in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, the Japanese moved menacingly on his left flank. Since late in 1942 the *5th* and *48th Japanese Divisions* had been deployed in the Timor-Ambon area north of Darwin. At Dobo, on Aru, a Japanese general had set up his headquarters and his men seemed to offer a threat to the Australian outpost at Merauke in Dutch New Guinea. Searching aircraft brought back news of much shipping activity at Ambon, where, on 20th January alone, they had seen 18 vessels in the harbour. In the arc of islands outside the mainland of Australia the enemy was developing 67 airfields, which, when finished, could accommodate about 1,500 aircraft.

While these activities did not cause alarm, the renewed possibility of a Japanese assault on the mainland had to be considered. The Australian Government was disturbed at the situation and Mr Curtin sought information on it from General MacArthur, who told him by secret telephone on 13th March that although the New Guinea-Solomons area was no longer threatened, the north-west approach through Torres Strait and North Australia was.¹

The available information about Japanese intentions seemed contradictory. A report had come from the Chinese Government to the effect that the Japanese would invade Australia near Darwin, after a feint attack towards Perth. General Headquarters received another report from the Office of Naval Intelligence, Washington, stating that an agent of "questionable reliability", had indicated that the Japanese were planning a land attack on Australia to be carried out early in 1943. On the other hand, a document which came into Admiral Nimitz' hands, dated 24th December 1942 and prepared by the chief of the Japanese naval staff, expressed the opinion that the Allies were treating the New Guinea-Solomons area merely as a holding position, while their main thrust would be made against Japan through the Timor-Arafura Sea area. If this represented the Japanese view, then their activities in the Arafura Sea could be presumed to be basically defensive.

However, in assessing the danger, these documentary sources of information seem to have been given less weight than the facts of the enemy dispositions. The Japanese had two divisions and could muster two more in the Arafura Sea-Timor area, in addition to a strong air force made up of the *23rd Flotilla* (naval air service) and Japanese army air units of the *7th Air Division (Fourth Air Army)*. An Allied General Headquarters Intelligence report of 14th March 1943 estimated that a total of 334 Japanese aircraft could be deployed in the north-western area, but a

War Cabinet Minute 2690 of 16 Mar 1943.

vital factor limiting any aggressive moves by the enemy was a growing shortage of naval and merchant shipping which would probably compel the enemy to execute any projected operation with the troops in the immediate area.

To counter an enemy attack the Allies had only nine squadrons, six of them Australian, all under the control of the R.A.A.F. in the Northern Territory, and commanded by Air Commodore Bladin, but were capable of quickly reinforcing the area from the larger air forces in New Guinea and Queensland. There were three Australian infantry brigades (3rd, 19th and 23rd) in the Northern Territory, and the 1st Armoured Division and three infantry brigades (2nd, 5th and 8th) in Western Australia. It was considered that a Japanese landing on Horn Island or on the Cape York Peninsula would be suicidal, but the enemy was capable of slowly pushing into southern Dutch New Guinea and seemed intent on occupying all this area including Merauke, where one Australian battalion, the 62nd, had been stationed since January 1943.

The likelihood of an attack on Perth was considered remote. The Japanese would need to use carrier-borne aircraft to support such a project, and the difficult supply problem that would be created made it almost impossible, if at the same time the Allies were on the offensive in New Guinea.

The Japanese did not, in fact, have a plan to invade Australia at this time. But the question whether Australia was then in imminent danger became a subject of public controversy. The Hearst chain of newspapers in America campaigned for more aircraft and aid for MacArthur. However, Major George Fielding Eliot, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, said: "The Japanese concentrations north of Australia are aimed chiefly to prevent General MacArthur and Admiral Halsey from getting set for an attack on Rabaul." Joseph Harsch of the *Christian Science Monitor* also belittled the idea that Australia was threatened. He said: "Mr Curtin is pouring out appeals with a regularity which Washington accepts as part of the calendar of fixed monthly events."² The following month he wrote: "If the Australia-MacArthur campaign for more attention to the South-West Pacific went on much longer, it was a good bet there would be rather a pointed reprimand delivered to Canberra."

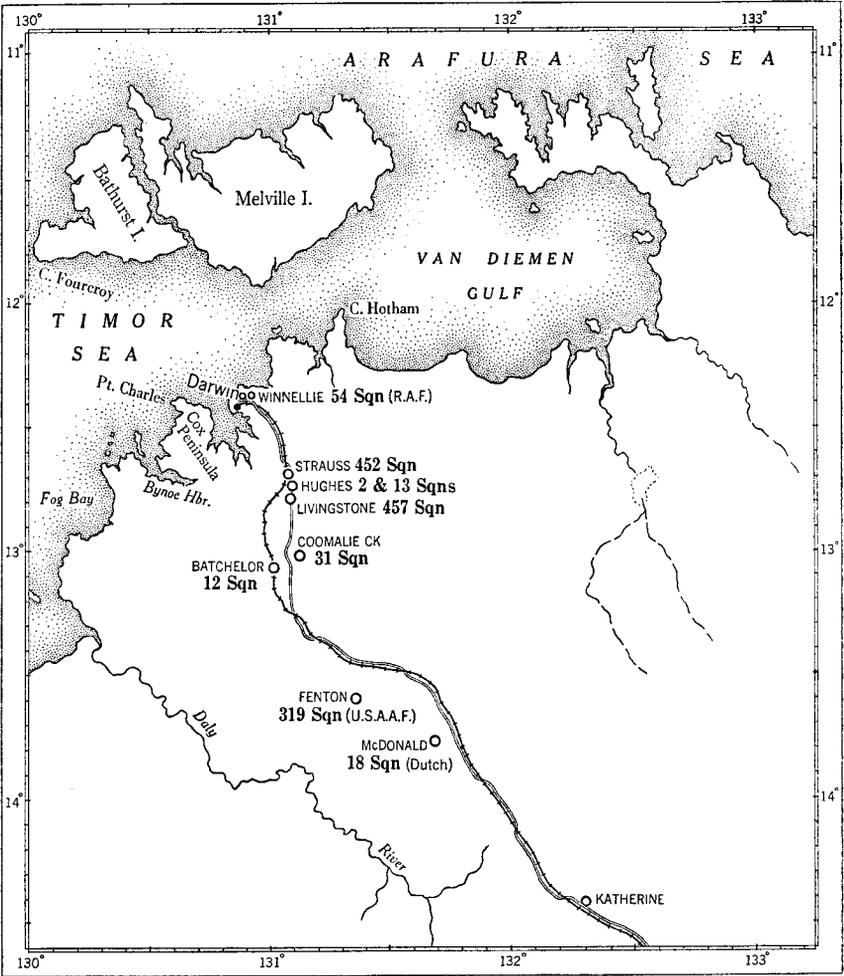
However, the threat, such as it was, of the Japanese movements did not seriously interrupt MacArthur's plans for an offensive in New Guinea. The Australian squadrons in the Northern Territory cooperated with the army in anti-invasion exercises, plans were made to reinforce Merauke and the Northern Territory, but no large-scale movement of Allied forces resulted. The reinforcement of Merauke was in any case part of the already existing plan for the offensive in New Guinea.³

Defence proposals were incorporated into the "Moultrie Plan for the Defence of Australia", issued at General Headquarters on 22nd March.

² *Argus* (Melbourne), 9 Mar 1943.

³ From January to April 1943 the 62 Bn was stationed in Merauke. During April-May 1943 11 Bde arrived (26, 31/51 Bns), 62 Bn then coming under command of 11 Bde.

This was followed by an operation instruction of 12th April which directed MacArthur's force commanders to "augment facilities and forces in and defend the Merauke-Horn Island-Thursday Island tip of Cape York Peninsula area to be known as the Torres Strait area".



MacArthur directed General Kenney to make immediate preparations for rapid grouping of squadrons in airfields of the Torres Strait area and at Millingimbi in the Northern Territory. He also had to be ready, at 12 hours' notice, to fly an Australian brigade, plus a battalion, to Merauke and his reconnaissance aircraft had to provide a 36-hour warning of hostile movements. However, until a major attack threatened, it was only necessary for him to maintain enough squadrons in the area for reconnais-

sance, destruction of minor hostile forces, and protection of naval movements and shipping. No real interruption of Allied Air Forces operations in the South-West Pacific would occur until a major attack actually threatened the Darwin-Torres Strait area. Only two R.A.A.F. squadrons were to be moved: No. 84 Squadron was ordered to proceed from Richmond to Horn Island where it was to provide patrols of Boomerang aircraft over Merauke, and No. 100, serving with No. 9 Group in New Guinea, was ordered to move from Milne Bay to Horn Island but this movement never took place. In addition, the R.A.A.F. Directorate of Works was to proceed as quickly as possible with the development of air bases at Merauke, Gove, Millingimbi, Horn Island and Jacky Jacky (Higgins Field), but again this work was to be done with existing means and with only minimum diversion from the effort elsewhere.

The squadrons that defended the Darwin area under the command of Air Commodore Bladin included one British, one Dutch, one American and six Australian squadrons, as well as a photographic-reconnaissance flight. In addition, two Catalina squadrons based on Cairns (Nos. 11 and 20) and another at Crawley, near Perth in Western Australia (a United States Navy squadron) were called on from time to time to make attacks against Japanese bases north of Darwin. The squadrons under Bladin's direct control were:

Australia

- No. 2 (Wing Commander Whyte), general-reconnaissance bombers, equipped with Hudsons, based at Hughes.
- No. 12 (Flight Lieutenant Hooper), dive bombers, equipped with Vultee Vengeances, based at Batchelor.
- No. 13 (Wing Commander Moran), general-reconnaissance bombers equipped with Hudsons, based at Hughes.
- No. 31 (Wing Commander Read), long-range fighters, equipped with Beaufighters, based at Coomalie.
- No. 452 (Squadron Leader MacDonald), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Strauss.
- No. 457 (Squadron Leader James), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Livingstone.

United Kingdom

- No. 54 (Squadron Leader Gibbs), fighters, equipped with Spitfires, based at Darwin.

United States

- No. 319 (Captain Olsen), heavy bombers, equipped with Liberators, based at Fenton.

Holland

- No. 18 (Lieut-Colonel Fiedeldij), medium bombers, equipped with Mitchells, based at McDonald, then Batchelor.

The three Spitfire squadrons were under the control of No. 1 Fighter Wing, commanded by Group Captain Walters and later by Wing Commander Caldwell. In addition there were in the area No. 44 (Radar) Wing, with its twelve radar stations, and No. 61 (Works) Wing with its

airfield constructional units, together with the medical, repair and servicing, signals, stores and other miscellaneous units which supported them.

The area was served by nine operational base units located at Groote Eylandt (No. 51), Darwin (No. 52), Batchelor (No. 53), Venn (No. 54), Birdum (No. 55), Daly Waters (No. 56), Alice Springs (No. 57), Drysdale Mission (No. 58), and Millingimbi (No. 59). There were also a number of advanced operational bases which were used by staging aircraft but which had only the barest facilities. The state of some of the more isolated air bases in the undeveloped north-west of Australia was not always satisfactory. Some of the airfields were little more than cleared stretches of ground which rain or the growth of spinifex grass frequently made unserviceable. In the wet season rivers were frequently flooded, motor vehicles were bogged on the roads and the problem of supply and maintenance became acute. At Drysdale when rain made motor traffic impossible horses were sometimes called into service. Supply was effected by air and sea as well as by army convoys, but in May 1943 the air transport squadrons of the R.A.A.F. had only thirteen aircraft for carrying out all transport responsibilities. Lack of equipment was another factor causing delays in the repairing of roads and airfields. In addition to the discomfort of excessive heat and the monotony of tinned food, the men had to put up with swarms of flies by day and mosquitoes and sand-flies by night.

No. 18 (Netherlands East Indies) Squadron was formed at Canberra in 1942. The pilots of the squadron were mainly former Dutch transport aircraft pilots, but, as the Dutch had only untrained natives as ground staff, the R.A.A.F. had to supply skilled maintenance men as well as air gunners. About 286 R.A.A.F. and 236 Netherlands East Indies men made up the squadron. Administration proved difficult because of different standards of discipline, hygiene and outlook. Although some Australians assigned to the squadron found conditions satisfactory, others asked for transfer to Australian squadrons. However, this feeling settled down on the transfer of the squadron from McDonald to Batchelor.

War in North-Western Area was basically different from that in the New Guinea theatre. It was almost entirely an air war, with raid and counter-raid. Air fights were taking place over the bases, and bombers were attacking opposing airfields, ships and barges; but no ground troops were engaged except the gunners who manned the anti-aircraft weapons.

Air Commodore Bladin's main task was to defend the north of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait area. It was a vital task because these areas lay on the flank of MacArthur's main concentrations and had to be adequately protected to ensure the success of his projected offensive. Bladin controlled air operations, but when a major attack impended, Air Vice-Marshal Bostock was to coordinate operations, because squadrons of both North-Western and North-Eastern areas would be involved in countering it.

April 1943 was a quiet month for the Spitfire squadrons which defended the Darwin area. The enemy did not send one raider against them during the month, whereas in March there had been two heavy raids, one of them by 44 aircraft which were intercepted by Spitfire pilots who destroyed seven, but not before the enemy had done considerable damage to fuel storage tanks. We know now that the *23rd Japanese Air Flotilla*, with headquarters at Kendari, in Celebes, was under orders to make monthly attacks on Darwin and Merauke, in addition to carrying out shipping searches in the Torres Strait. The Japanese Navy which controlled this flotilla evidently preferred to make heavy raids at intervals rather than send frequent small-scale attacks against Allied targets.

By contrast with the Spitfire squadrons, the Beaufighter crews of No. 31 Squadron, Mitchell crews of No. 18 Squadron, and American Liberator crews were busily engaged in attacks on air bases and shipping, while the obsolescent Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron carried out armed searches and occasional attacks. No. 13 Squadron, which was also equipped with Hudsons, flew only six sorties in April, after which it moved south to Canberra to rest and re-form after having been continuously on service since December 1941. The No. 380 (American) Bombardment Group, then arriving in Australia, had been assigned to reinforce the North-Western Area and would considerably strengthen the bombing effort of the area when it began operations.

Japanese fighter opposition was still strong in Timor, Ambon and the islands of the Arafura Sea and raiding squadrons of North-Western Area were often engaged in air fights. Because of the threat of enemy air action Bladin kept his bombers well back from the coast while the fighters were placed at Darwin or slightly inland where they could intercept incoming enemy raiders.

On 17th April three Liberators of No. 319 Squadron which bombed Ambon town were intercepted by ten enemy fighters over Ambon, but suffered only minor damage from enemy fire. The following day thirteen Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron and nine Mitchells of No. 18 attacked the Penfui airfield near Koepang on Timor. Penfui was one of the enemy's most important air bases and on 15th April 38 aircraft were seen on Timor airfields. The Hudsons, which had a shorter range than the Mitchells, found it necessary to stage in at Drysdale, the advanced base in Western Australia where, in the previous month, No. 58 Operational Base Unit had been formed under the command of Flight Lieutenant Bragg,⁴ who organised the base in the face of many difficulties.

The attack was to take place at night and it was hoped that the airfield would stand out clearly in the moonlight. The Mitchells attacked first, reaching the target just after midnight. Coming in at a height of 3,500 feet they were met by heavy anti-aircraft fire when over the target but none was hit. The first Hudson (captained by Squadron Leader Kemp⁵)

⁴ F-Lt F. L. Bragg, 262128. Comd Daly Waters OBU 1942, 58 and 55 OBU's 1943, 12 OBU 1943-44. Grazier; of Aberdeen, NSW; b. Cootamundra, NSW, 27 Oct 1902.

⁵ W Cdr K. M. Kemp, DFC, 250728. 13 and 2 Sqns; comd 463 Sqn 1945. Clerk; of Hampton Vic; b. Clifton Hill, Vic, 9 Feb 1918.

left Drysdale at 12.30 a.m. but when half an hour out his engines failed and then recovered again. There was continued engine trouble so Kemp decided to return to Drysdale where he found water in his fuel tanks. This fuel had been taken on at Drysdale. Kemp took off later, but, because of cloud, could not find the target and finally jettisoned his bombs. Meanwhile, the other twelve Hudsons reached Penfui and bombed in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire. Flying Officer Austin⁶ was told to remain over the target area at a height of 20,000 feet while the rest of the Hudsons made their bombing runs on the airfield. He flew his aircraft back and forth between Koepang and Penfui for half an hour to confuse the enemy defences. He then dropped his bombs from 19,000 feet and returned to Drysdale. In order to protect the Hudsons while they refuelled at Drysdale three Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron were sent to the base but no enemy attack developed. The bombing of Penfui appeared to be successful and all aircraft returned to base without damage.

Next day (19th April) two Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron failed to return from a mission to bomb Timuka in Dutch New Guinea and although wreckage of the two aircraft was found the cause of their loss could not be explained. The Hudsons were to stage through the base at Millingimbi before leaving the Australian coast, and they took off within four minutes of each other early in the morning. Soon afterwards several loud explosions were heard and it was considered probable that the aircraft, which were to fly in formation, had collided in the air. Accidents and the weather took a toll of aircraft. On 26th April a Beaufighter of No. 31 Squadron disappeared in bad weather during a sortie to the Aru islands.

On 24th April nine American Liberators flew to Celebes to attack aircraft on the airfield and aircraft installations at Kendari. Their bombs fell on the workshop area causing fires which could be seen at a distance of 75 miles, and it appeared they had also destroyed at least four twin-engined aircraft. Enemy fighters engaged them as they completed the bombing but inflicted only slight damage on the Liberators. Mitchells of No. 18 Squadron on a search for enemy shipping on the Timor coast were also intercepted by enemy fighters three days later. They jettisoned their bombs on a village and although the enemy fighters fired a number of bursts at them, they failed to score a hit and the Mitchells returned safely to Darwin.

The three Spitfire squadrons at Darwin had been sent from the United Kingdom for the defence of Australia as a result of negotiations between Mr Churchill and Dr Evatt in 1942. Nos. 452 and 457 were Australian squadrons formed under the Empire Air Training Scheme; No. 54 was a British squadron, and while in the Pacific was to remain a unit of the Royal Air Force with its members subject to the conditions of that force.

The Spitfire was superior to the Zero, though less manoeuvrable at low speeds than the Japanese aircraft. In straight-and-level flight and in

⁶ F-Lt J. S. Austin, DFC, 400363. 608 Sqn RAF; 32, 13 and 2 Sqns. Stock agent; of Lara, Vic; b. Melbourne, 15 May 1918. Died on active service 9 Nov 1943.

a dive, the Spitfire was faster, but the Zero could climb faster than Spitfires, Lightnings or Kittyhawks. The Zero's maximum speed was between 348 and 358 miles an hour, whereas the Spitfire had a top speed of 365. The Kittyhawk was slightly slower—343 miles an hour. It was considered unwise for Allied pilots to “dog-fight” with the Zero, and Spitfire pilots were told not to do so. The tactics recommended were a high-speed attack after which the pilot should break away by diving or spiralling until out of attacking range and then climb again for another high-speed attack.

Wing Commander Caldwell, who commanded the Spitfires in action against the Japanese, combined great bravery with capable leadership and cool confidence. Air Marshal Tedder⁷ said of him, after his service in the Middle East, that he was “a fine commander, an excellent leader and a first-class shot”. In 1941 and 1942 he was credited officially with having shot down more enemy aircraft than any other Australian flying in the Middle East or in Europe, and received rapid promotion to squadron leader, commanding No. 112 Squadron R.A.F. Caldwell laid great emphasis on gunnery, which he himself practised constantly. His view was that “a pilot who could not shoot straight might as well remain on the ground because he was useless in a fighter squadron”. The purpose of a fighter was to destroy the enemy, the means gunnery, therefore gunnery was all important. He instilled this doctrine into the minds of the men he now led and trained. “Shadow” shooting was widely adopted during training in the desert and later, when Caldwell returned to Australia, he introduced the method at No. 1 Operational Training Unit for fighters at Mildura.

Caldwell was an alert, fast-talking, quick-acting man with an exuberant confidence. It was his belief that a man must have faith in himself. If he did not he could not expect the confidence of others. He showed great aggressiveness in combat. On one occasion in the Western Desert his own aircraft was damaged and he was wounded in the face, arms and legs, yet returned to attack a Messerschmitt fighter.⁸

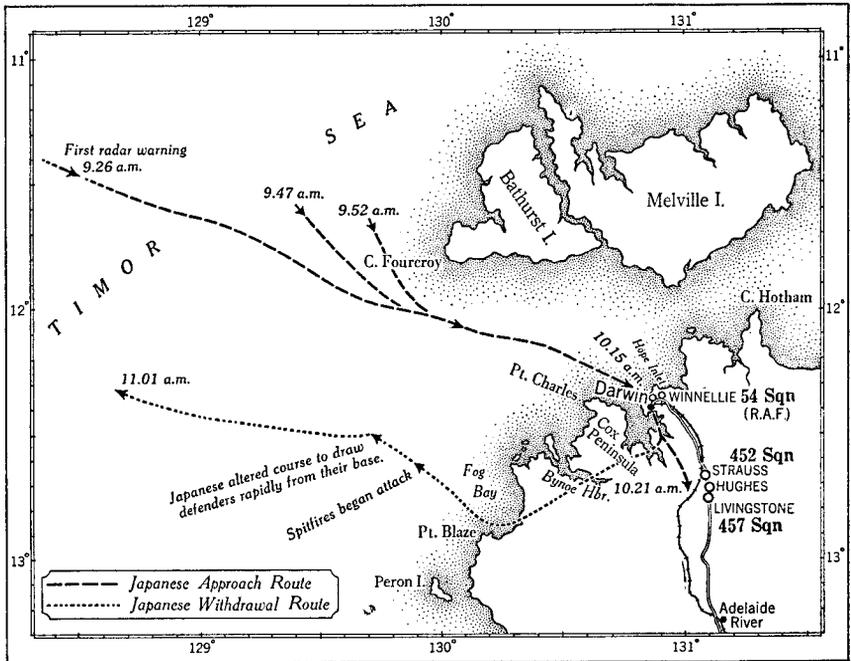
After their first engagements in February and March there had been a lull for the Spitfires. Among the 95 pilots of the fighter wing was a sprinkling of experienced men who had distinguished records in Europe and the Middle East. There were 6 fully-experienced pilots, and 37 who had had some fighter combat experience. The lull in April, during which no raiders appeared except a lone reconnaissance aircraft which escaped when attempts were made to intercept it, was not to their liking. A note of impatience is struck by the writer of No. 457 Squadron's historical report for April. It read:

This month has been a heavy strain on the patience of both air and ground crews. Lack of action and days of monotonous routine and hot weather tend

⁷ Marshal of RAF Lord Tedder, GCB. Dep AOC-in-C RAF ME 1940-41; AOC-in-C RAF ME 1941-43; Air C-in-C Medit Air Cd 1943; Dep Supreme Cdr Europe 1944-45. Regular air force off; of London; b. Glenguin, Scotland, 11 Jul 1890.

⁸ See J. Herington, *Air War Against Germany and Italy 1939-1943* (1954), p. 105, in this series.

to make the squadron personnel a little restless as there are no facilities for enjoying brief respites away from service life. The weekly cinema showings are attended by almost every member of the squadron. Aeroplane serviceability is high. A number of our pilots are enjoying seven days' home leave, which does not include travelling time.



However, within a few days of the writing of this report an eventful raid occurred. At 9.26 a.m. on Sunday, 2nd May, the radar station at Cape Fourcroy on Bathurst Island (commanded by Flying Officer Jordan⁹) recorded "plots" of enemy aircraft about 160 miles west-north-west of Darwin and immediately warned No. 5 Fighter Sector headquarters at Darwin. Further plots on the radar screen showed that the enemy machines were flying towards Darwin. Four minutes after the first news of the plot was received all Spitfire pilots off duty were ordered to the airfields. The radar station now judged that a large number of enemy aircraft were approaching and at 9.40 the controller (Wing Commander Primrose¹) ordered Nos. 54, 452 and 457 Squadrons into the air.

The three squadrons, which were based on three different airfields, were ordered to rendezvous over Hughes airfield at 10,000 feet. Primrose then directed Caldwell, as wing leader, to climb to 30,000 feet to a point

⁹ Sqn Ldr J. Jordan, 266600. Comd Cape Fourcroy Radar Stn 1943; Staff Radar Offr Southern Area 1944-45. Radio engineer; of Lismore, NSW; b. Glasgow, Scotland, 18 Jun 1903.

¹ Gp Capt T. Primrose, AFC, 260189. Comd 2 SFTS 1941; ALO Northern Territory Force HQ 1942; comd 5 Fighter Sector 1942-43, 2 Fighter Sector 1943-44, 6 and 15 Sqs and 71 Wing 1945. Solicitor; of North Sydney; b. Sydney, 15 Apr 1912.

10 miles north-east of Darwin and told him to expect a formation of 20 or more bombers, escorted by a large number of fighters then approaching at a height of 25,000 feet.² When Caldwell received this message he ordered the wing to turn right and climb as rapidly as possible into the sun. Soon afterwards he gave the controller the "tally-ho" signal. As the bombers crossed Darwin harbour they were flying at a height of 27,000 feet while the 33 Spitfires were 10 miles north-east of the town at a height of 26,000 feet. The Spitfires continued to climb but by the time they reached the same height as the bombers the Japanese fighter escorts were plainly in view 4,000 feet higher. Except that the defenders had the sun behind them, the Japanese were in the better position, and Caldwell decided that it would be unwise to attack the bombers before they had dropped their bombs. He therefore continued to climb into the sun in order to gain height over the fighters. The Darwin anti-aircraft guns then went into action and fired 219 rounds, which reached the correct height but exploded behind or to the side of the bombers causing no damage. At about 10.15 the bombers dropped 100 bombs on a line extending from the old Darwin air force station through the south-eastern part of the airfield into the bush, causing slight damage to two buildings and temporarily cutting electric light and telephone lines. One soldier was killed.

Caldwell directed No. 54 Squadron to engage the fighters and if possible to penetrate to the bombers. Then No. 457 Squadron was to fly out of the sun to attack the bombers. After this No. 457 was to climb back into the sun and the squadron leader, at his discretion, was to call on No. 452 to protect him from Japanese fighters during this withdrawal. He waited another eight minutes until the enemy aircraft which were flying down-wind and losing height were 40 miles to sea off Point Blaze. The Spitfires at 32,000 feet were at this stage 10,000 feet above the enemy fighters and 12,000 feet above the bombers.

Caldwell then ordered No. 54 Squadron, led by Gibbs, to begin the attack, and the Spitfires came hurtling down at 400 miles an hour in an almost vertical dive. The steep angle of attack was an unfamiliar method to the less experienced pilots and tended to upset their aim when they opened fire. A Zeke attacked by Gibbs was caught by surprise and went down smoking. The formations immediately broke up and dog-fights took place at about 7,000 feet, with aircraft turning figures-of-eight as pilots tried to get on each other's tails. Pulling away, Gibbs saw disturbances on the surface of the sea and one of the Spitfires spinning down. He climbed and attacked again, in the course of which one of his cannons ceased firing. Finding he had only twenty-two gallons of petrol in his tanks he then returned to base landing with only two gallons remaining.

As No. 54 Squadron dived to attack, No. 457 Squadron, as pre-arranged, dived in line-astern to attack the bombers. The angle of dive was about 70 degrees and the speed almost 400 miles an hour. (The

² The actual numbers were 18 bombers and 27 fighters.

pilots considered later that this angle was too great for manoeuvring and aiming at the enemy bombers.) The Zekes protecting the bombers turned head on toward No. 457 Squadron Spitfires, diverting their attack to such an extent that only four of the eleven penetrated to the bombers. Dog-fights with the enemy fighters followed.

After No. 457 Squadron had attacked, Caldwell led the remaining squadron, No. 452, into the battle. Diving at a steep angle he attacked a Zeke from a range of 350 yards. One of his cannons failed to fire and only ten shots came from the other causing the machine to slew. Caldwell missed the Zeke and was immediately afterwards himself attacked by another two Zekes. He dived under these but another one came up behind him. This aircraft was seen by Pilot Officer Fox³ who fired on it from above until it turned away. Fox engaged another Zeke but the enemy pilot skilfully turned his machine and scored hits on the engine of Fox's machine. Fox turned the Spitfire on its back and parachuted into the sea. He was later rescued from his rubber dinghy. Flying Officer Goldsmith, after scoring hits on a bomber which he believed he destroyed was attacked by a *Hap* and had his controls shot away. He was flung out of his machine and descended to the sea by parachute. Another pilot got an enemy aircraft in his sights but his guns had frozen and would not fire.

These are some of the incidents of a brief but furious engagement, in which the Australians claimed that 6 enemy aircraft were destroyed, 4 probably destroyed and 8 damaged. At this stage of the fight 5 Spitfires had been lost to enemy action, but the pilots of 3 were in rubber boats in the water. Two pilots had been killed. However, the enemy fighters had achieved their purpose of protecting their bombers, only one of which had been shot down.

At 10.36 a.m., sixteen minutes after the action began, Caldwell warned all pilots to check their petrol and if necessary return to base. This warning was repeated at 10.40 by Primrose. Under normal conditions all pilots would have been able to reach base but petrol had been used at a high rate during battle climbs. This factor, together with keenness and excitement in combat, an adverse wind, and the action of the pilots in circling over the water to discover the exact position of their comrades who had been shot down, led to some delaying their return to base too long. Another factor was that Caldwell, in manoeuvring for a favourable position, held his attack rather too long, which led the Spitfires to be drawn farther away from their base. However, in waiting until his whole wing was in position for attack Caldwell was following instructions. The Spitfire Wing had been criticised in a previous engagement because "sections, flights and squadrons intercepted the enemy in 'penny packets' with the result that little damage was done and they were heavily outnumbered". Caldwell was trying to avoid a piecemeal interception and in this he succeeded.

³ F-Lt K. J. Fox, 402330, 124 Sqn RAF, 452 Sqn. Salesman; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Ashfield, NSW, 12 Sep 1919.

As a result of fuel shortage 5 aircraft made forced landings before reaching airfields, but 4 of these were recovered and repaired. Three more were forced to land because of engine failure and one of these was a total loss. Two men had been killed and 8 Spitfires destroyed during the action. Another pilot (Flight Sergeant Stagg⁴) was unaccounted for but was found alive some days later.

The Japanese, after the raid, claimed they had shot down 21 Spitfires, and that only 6 of their bombers had been "hit by shells" and damaged. They were led in the air by Lieut-Commander Suzuki Minoru, commander of the 202nd Air Corps of the 23rd Air Flotilla. Both fighters and bombers flew from Penfui airfield and their objective was to bomb Darwin airfield.

The General Headquarters press announcement (Communiqué No. 386) after referring to the ground damage caused by the Japanese as being negligible, went on to say that "our own air losses were heavy". News of the fight was given wide publicity and the Japanese made propaganda use of it in broadcasts. The Melbourne *Argus* of 4th May stated: "This is the first occasion that any communiqué issued in this area has reported heavy losses." Later press references pointed out that "bad weather [a reference to the head wind which delayed the Spitfires when they turned for base] and not ace pilots helped Japan to our disadvantage in the air battle over Darwin on Sunday".⁵ But the wind on the day was only six to eight miles per hour.

These reports reached the squadrons in Darwin. The pilots resented them and Bladin asked Bostock to correct the statements. He said: "The alarmist tendency of the press and radio references was having a bad effect on the combat pilots." Many discussions and conferences took place between pilots and leaders to analyse the action and draw conclusions. One conclusion was that it was essential that Spitfires should carry a larger fuel supply. It was also concluded that it was desirable that interception of raiding aircraft should take place as early as possible. Pilots were also later issued with strict instructions not to dog-fight.

The Advisory War Council, disturbed by news of the engagement, asked the Chief of the Air Staff for a full report dealing in particular with losses due to petrol shortage and engine failure. Air Vice-Marshal Jones reported that engine failures were not due to poor maintenance but to the inexperience of pilots in handling their machines under combat conditions, and that the fuel shortages experienced by a number of pilots could "only be attributed to an error of judgment on the part of the wing leader, bearing in mind the inexperience of a number of his pilots". In reply to this criticism Caldwell claimed that all pilots were properly directed during the engagement and if they had obeyed instructions would have reached base safely.

Mr Drakeford reported to Mr Curtin that the communiqué had given information of value to the enemy and asked Curtin to point out to

⁴ F-Lt R. S. Stagg, 407915; 452 Sqn. Electrical engineer; of Underdale, SA; b. Thebarton, SA, 15 Dec 1919.

⁵ *Herald* (Melbourne), 4 May 1943.

MacArthur that a "more palliating impression should have been conveyed". But MacArthur denied that the message disclosed information of value to the enemy, adding that newspapers had criticised him claiming that "too rosy a picture is presented by the communiqués".

The air war in North-Western Area now flared up considerably. The Spitfire squadrons were on their mettle and eager to refute the belief which gained some currency in the south that they had not done well against the Japanese.

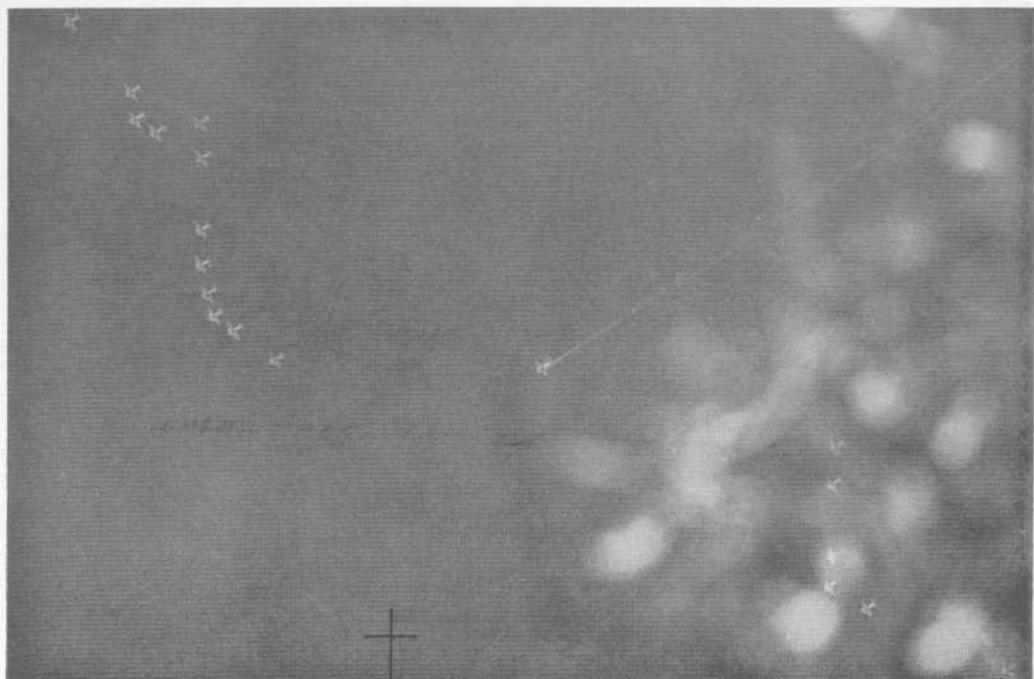
Bladin decided on immediate counter-measures and ordered No. 31 Squadron to raid the airfield at Penfui, where it was presumed (correctly) the enemy aircraft would be landing after their Darwin raid. The existence of airfield facilities at Drysdale would enable the Beaufighters to land there on their way back and refuel. Wing Commander Read led four Beaufighters (though one had to turn back soon after because of a hatch opening), taking off from Coomalie Creek just after midday on 2nd May. The Beaufighters came in at an extremely low level to attack the airfield line-abreast at 230 miles an hour. Read opened fire on two Zekes, one of which was taxi-ing from a blast-pen, and destroyed them both, probably killing the pilot of one. Another Beaufighter pilot fired on two bombers which caught fire, while another got an enemy aircraft in his sights but his guns would not fire. When the Beaufighters withdrew they were pursued out to sea by enemy fighters but after thirty minutes' pursuit the enemy broke off. The Beaufighters landed at Drysdale, refuelled and returned to Coomalie next morning.

At night on the 2nd May Bladin sent Mitchell bombers to follow up the destruction at Penfui caused by the Beaufighters. Four aircraft of No. 18 Squadron with mixed Dutch and Australian crews bombed the airfield after midnight at five-minute intervals, using flares to light the area. Three of their bombs appeared to drop and explode on buildings near the runway.

Enemy aircraft were fighting back during these counter-blows. The Beaufighters attacking Penfui on 2nd May had been intercepted, and on the 4th an enemy single-engined fighter intercepted and opened fire on a Hudson of No. 2 Squadron which was returning from a bombing mission to the Kai Islands. The same day six Liberators of No. 319 Squadron which bombed Babo airfield in Dutch New Guinea were intercepted twice. The first interception occurred over Babo itself and the second by seven fighters over Maikoor Island farther south.

The Catalinas of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons added to the weight of the bombardment effort against enemy airfields on 6th May when they attacked Babo, while Mitchells attacked Dili, in Timor, the Liberators bombed Manokwari and Kai in Dutch New Guinea, and Saumlaki, and the Beaufighters destroyed nine enemy float-planes at Taberfane, in the Aru Islands.

For some time Japanese float-planes had been intercepting Allied reconnaissance aircraft in the Aru Islands area, and the day before the



(R.A.A.F.)

Japanese Betty bombers over Fenton Field, Northern Territory, 6th July 1943. The Betty trailing smoke, and unable to keep up with its formation, has been hit in the port engine in an attack by one of the Spitfires which intercepted the raiders.



(R.A.A.F.)

An attack by Beaufighters of No. 31 Squadron on the jetty at Larat, in the Banda-Arafura Sea area, on 29th July 1943.



(Australian War Memorial.)

The 503rd American Parachute Regiment and artillerymen of the 2/4th Australian Field Regiment parachuting into the Markham Valley on 5th September 1943. The smoke-screen was intended to hide the landing from Japanese aircraft.



(R.A.A.F.)

The old Nadzab airfield; looking east, 15th November 1943.

Beaufighter attack a bomber crew had noticed several in the water at Taberfane. Bladin ordered an immediate attack by available Beaufighter aircraft. Led by Squadron Leader Savage,⁶ the Beaufighters flew to Millingimbi airfield where they stayed overnight. Next morning before sunrise they took off and flew in formation through thunderstorms to Taberfane. The float-planes were well silhouetted against the white sand of the beach and two were anchored slightly off shore when the Beaufighters arrived. Savage checked his formation and then began a dive from about 1,300 feet, opening fire with his cannon which set one of the float-planes on fire. A Japanese bullet struck Savage's machine, passing through the throttle controls and entering the fuel tank. But the self-sealing compound in the tank stopped the petrol leaking. When the Beaufighters returned for a second run they saw columns of smoke rising above the float-planes. From then on the pilots passed back and forth and destroyed nine aircraft before all cannons had stopped firing due to faults. When Savage called his flight together again one machine, piloted by Flying Officer Budd⁷, did not join him and he and his navigator were later posted missing.

The Japanese had observed the development which had taken place at Millingimbi where No. 59 Operational Base Unit was now established. The base was being used more and more as an operating base and staging airfield for the Australian squadrons. The Beaufighters had used Millingimbi in their destructive raid against float-planes and the enemy was provoked into retaliation.

On 9th May the Millingimbi radar station picked up indications of enemy aircraft approaching. This was at 10.40 a.m. and the enemy aircraft were still seventy miles off. At 11.10 seven enemy Sally-type bombers appeared and dropped "daisy cutters" on the mission, airfield and on shipping, killing a soldier, an aboriginal and ten air force men. Ten of the bombs fell on the runway which was not, however, seriously damaged. Flying Officer Delaporte,⁸ pilot of a Beaufighter based at Millingimbi on convoy-escort duty, was ordered to attempt an interception. He took off in the Beaufighter and climbed to 15,000 feet, by which time the enemy had dropped their bombs. Delaporte then attacked out of the sun, turning on to the stern of one of the Sallys. Unfortunately his cannon fired only for two seconds having become clogged with fine sand grit from the dusty, unsealed airfield. Although he chased and easily caught the slowly-moving bombers, the cannon would not fire again.

Further raids could be expected at Millingimbi so Bladin ordered six Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron to protect the base. Five of these Spitfires were ordered into the air next morning when the radar operators reported "unidentified" aircraft approaching. When the Spitfires reached a height of 14,000 feet they saw two Beaufighters which had been sent with four

⁶ Gp Capt G. W. Savage, DFC, 168. 31 Sqn; Senior Staff Offr Training, 1 Gp 1944-45; Staff Officer Operations and Training 1 TAF 1945. Regular air force offr; of Kensington Park, SA; b. Adelaide, 12 Jun 1917.

⁷ F-O W. J. C. Budd, 406971; 31 Sqn. Motor mechanic; of Guildford, WA; b. Midland Junction, WA, 22 Aug 1915. Killed in action 6 May 1943.

⁸ F-Lt D. W. B. Delaporte, 407573; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of St Peters, SA; b. St Peters, 19 Apr 1916.

others to Taberfane on what proved an abortive mission. These aircraft had caused the alarm to be sounded and the Spitfires therefore decided to return to the airfield. However, while they were coming in to land another warning was passed to the Spitfires of more "unidentified" aircraft approaching on the same course as the returning Beaufighters.

One of the Spitfires at Millingimbi (Flying Officer Hamilton's⁹) did not leave the ground. There was no system of fighter control at Millingimbi and Hamilton decided to remain on the ground and use his aircraft radio to keep in touch with the other fighters. From the radar station, which was tracing the movements of the enemy, messages were sent by telephone to the signals hut at the runways intersection. The messages were then relayed from this hut by a chain of six men to the pilot sitting in his Spitfire who passed them on to the Spitfires in the air. Six of the enemy raiding force of nine Zekes attacked the Spitfires at 9.30 a.m. while they were still climbing and not properly formed up. The Spitfires were forced to engage at the enemy's best height. A furious dog-fight ensued in which no particular tactics were used, but Pilot Officers Morse¹ and Watson² each destroyed a Zeke.

Meanwhile, the other three Zekes made a series of strafing attacks on the runway. The two Beaufighters which had caused the original alarm to be sounded had now landed and they were promptly attacked on the ground. One caught fire and was destroyed and the other damaged. Two other Beaufighters which had been assigned to convoy duty were damaged. One was attacked by the Zekes while on the ground and the other by a Hap shortly after taking off. The pilot did not realise he was being attacked until he saw tracer bullets flying past him. He then opened up his motors to full speed taking evasive action.

A damaged Spitfire (Pilot Officer Little³) landed at Millingimbi not knowing it was under strafing attack but immediately took off again when he discovered what was happening. For ten minutes between a height of 300 feet and the ground he engaged a Zeke in a furious battle of steep turns and dives. The fight ended in the Spitfire crashing into the ground. It somersaulted three or four times. Both wings and the airscrew were ripped off, yet Little escaped serious injury and walked back to the airfield three miles away.

During the raid the enemy had attacked the store ship *Maroubra*. Their cannon set the vessel on fire and it was destroyed. A Spitfire engaged an enemy float-plane which was attacking two other vessels and this aircraft crashed into the sea.

Next day another float-plane dropped a bomb aimed at a corvette as it was entering Wessel Island harbour, but missed. A Beaufighter, piloted

⁹ F-O F. D. Hamilton, 403050. 131 Sqn RAF, 457 Sqn. Insurance agent; of Thirroul, NSW; b. Thirroul, 24 Jun 1915. Killed in action 6 Jul 1943.

¹ F-Lt I. S. Morse, 403358. 91 Sqn RAF, 452 and 457 Sqn. Clerk; of Manly, NSW; b. Woy Woy, NSW, 5 Mar 1922.

² F-Lt R. W. Watson, 404714; 457 Sqn. Car salesman; of Lismore, NSW; b. Woolacombe, Devon, Eng, 17 Oct 1914.

³ F-Lt B. Little, 403521; 457 Sqn. Clerk; of Manly, NSW; b. N Sydney, 24 Jan 1921.

by Flight Lieutenant Madden,⁴ was over the corvette at the time giving cover and it attacked the float-plane. An extract from the report of the encounter reads:

Pilot gave the Beaufighter full throttle and attacked the enemy floatplane which turned east and then north, taking evasive action, and heading into the storm for cover. Beaufighter at a height of 1,000 feet made an attack between 4 and 5 o'clock, giving from 300 yards a burst which hit the engine, which burst into flames; then closed into 150 yards and gave another burst knocking large chunks out of the fuselage. Enemy floatplane went for about 300 yards and then dived into the sea in flames, falling between two ships. . . .

To the end of May Mitchells, Beaufighters, Liberators and Hudsons attacked enemy airfields within range in an attempt to drive the enemy from them and put them out of action as airfields, thereby preventing their use as jumping-off places for air attack on Australia. With the small force available, however, the elimination of these Japanese airfields could not be expected for some time. Constant patrolling at sea to ensure early warning of possible enemy surface attacks, protection of sea lanes and close escort for surface vessels were exacting tasks which consumed much of the available air strength at Bladin's disposal. All squadrons except the short-ranged Spitfires took part in these reconnaissance duties, so important to the conduct of air war in the north-western theatre.

The most favoured target of the Mitchells was the airfield at Penfui in Timor. But at times Liberators and Beaufighters joined in to bomb this important enemy base, the existence of which was a constant threat to the safety of Darwin.

On the 19th May Beaufighters and Liberators attacked the airfield. Six Beaufighters led by Flight Lieutenant Biven⁵ arrived over it at sunrise on this day. The Japanese, however, were thoroughly alert. Anti-aircraft weapons began firing heavily and enemy fighters, which were on patrol over the airfield at the time, attacked the Beaufighters immediately after they strafed and had destroyed two enemy bombers on the ground. Three of the six Beaufighters (piloted by Flying Officers Frith⁶ and Taylor⁷ and Sergeant Armstrong⁸) were lost. Two of these are believed to have crashed into the hills south of Penfui and the third into the sea after being hit by anti-aircraft fire. Zekes followed the three remaining Beaufighters for 100 miles to sea, but without getting close enough for accurate shooting. Biven arrived at base with pieces of wood in his aircraft caused by crashing through a tree.

The Liberators attacked some three hours later from a height of about 14,000 feet and their bombs all struck in the target area. They too were attacked by fighters, three of which they claimed to destroy.

⁴ Sqn Ldr J. A. Madden, 260740. 31, 38 and 32 Sqs. Engineer; of Eastwood, NSW; b. Eastwood, 4 Apr 1919.

⁵ Sqn Ldr P. E. Biven, 280775; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of North Walkerville, SA; b. Sydney, 29 Jul 1917.

⁶ F-O E. J. Frith, 420180; 31 Sqn. Motor salesman; of Lismore, NSW; b. Lismore, 18 Nov 1918. Killed in action 19 May 1943.

⁷ F-O R. MacD. Taylor, 417009; 31 Sqn. Clerk; of Rose Park, SA; b. Kingswood, SA, 20 Jun 1921. Killed in action 19 May 1943.

⁸ Sgt N. G. Armstrong, 413721; 31 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Lithgow, NSW; b. Woonona, NSW, 30 Jun 1923. Killed in action 19 May 1943.

The Beaufighters carried out a number of missions against the Langgur airfield in the Kai Islands during May. On the 17th they destroyed three enemy fighters on the ground. When they attacked this same target again on 31st May the enemy was ready for them and six Zekes attacked, causing some damage to the Beaufighters but all returned safely to Darwin after destroying two enemy machines.

On 28th May the Japanese made their third and last attack on Millingimbi airfield. Spitfires of No. 457 Squadron were on duty there and earlier warning of the attack was given, allowing six aircraft led by Flight Lieutenant Watson⁹ to gain height to meet the raiders. The Japanese force consisted of eight bombers escorted by five Zekes and they flew over the base at a height of 20,000 feet. In spite of the interception of the Spitfires the enemy bombers made four runs over the target. The Spitfires destroyed three of these, but two Spitfires with their pilots disappeared into the Arafura Sea and a third was damaged on landing.

By the end of May, after vigorous efforts by the few squadrons available, it was clear that the fight for air mastery over the Japanese bases in the islands just north of Darwin had not been won.¹ Losses on both sides had been heavy in relation to the total air crews engaged. Reinforcements of heavy bombers were now arriving in the Northern Territory, and, with the opening of MacArthur's New Guinea offensive, a new phase of the struggle was about to begin.

⁹ F-Lt P. H. Watson, DFC, 402267; 457 Sqn. Accountant; of Vacluse, NSW; b. Melbourne, 9 Feb 1915.

¹ The following table shows the increase in activity by the RAAF squadrons in North-Western Area between 1 March and the end of May 1943. A comparison of losses inflicted by Australian squadrons with those suffered from Japanese attack is also shown. The figures do not take into account aircraft lost in accidents.

Squadron	Mar	Operational Sorties Apr	May	Enemy Aircraft Destroyed Mar-May 1943	Allied Aircraft Destroyed by Enemy Action	Lost on Operations: Other Causes
No. 2	63	103	135	—	2	3
No. 18	46	57	72	2	5	2
No. 31	37	49	99	20	6	2
No. 54	30	—	59	10	1	1
No. 452	11	—	36	5	2	2
No. 457	24	—	68	9	1	3
	211	209	469	46	17	13